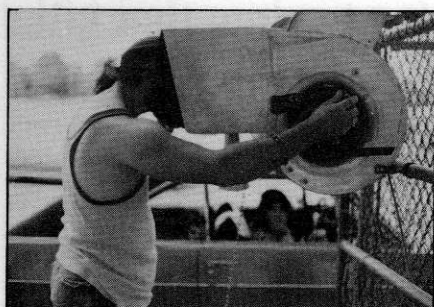


## Peep Shows Are Back

If you see a funny looking box made of scrap metal on the streets of New Haven this month, take a look inside. Peep shows have gone legit.



The place is New Haven, at the corner of Dixwell Avenue and Shelton Street. Bolted to a street sign is a strange-looking, beat-up steel box with a pump handle and peepholes. A curious passer-by stops, peers into the box, and pumps the handle. Inside is not a lewd picture, but a miniature tenement room with a figure lying on a bed. The pump operates a generator that lights a tiny ceiling light in the room and raises a window shade with a poem written on it. Hardly a conventional art experience.

The box is one of a series of viewing sculptures created by New Haven artist Robert Taplin. Starting September 19, this scenario will be repeated in nine different New Haven locations for a month. The sculpture boxes tell the story of a fictitious New Haven resident and his romance with a mysterious city woman. Each is an imaginative variation on boxes found in an urban setting—an emergency call box, a pedestrian walk sign, a pay telephone.

The sculptures are made out of flotsam and jetsam found on the street—bicycle parts, furnace blowers, glass electric meter covers, combs, and plastic flowers—all apparently useless and certainly not beautiful in the ordinary sense. But that's part of the idea. Taplin's sculptures are both of and for the city. "The romance story is just a pretext for talking about the part of the city it's in," Taplin explains, and most have drawings, models, and artifacts of the neighborhood incorporated into them.

By putting sculptures on the street, Taplin theorizes that people don't have to worry about them as works of art or make the conscious decision involved in going to a museum. The danger is that they will not even be treated as art, but will be damaged or destroyed. "Everybody we've talked to says they won't last a day on the street," Taplin says. But to discourage vandalism,



he has purposely picked materials that have no value, and is optimistic. So is the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, which gave Taplin a grant to complete the work. He'll take the sculptures down after a month and because, he emphasizes, "it's a show, an event."

One of the challenges for Taplin has been working out the mechanics of the sculptures. They are works meant to be touched, moved, used. Often the simplest effects require the most complicated machinery, and at times Taplin, with very little mechanical background, was stumped at how to make

the machinery work properly. Help often came from workers at the machine shops in the old factory building where he has his studio.

It was then that he and New York friend Dan Wolff, who contributed the poems that appear in the sculptures, decided they needed a break from major projects and began the brainstorming that led to the series. Both were interested in how the artist makes public statements and felt that many New Haven neighborhoods were suffering from the impact of the redevelopment projects and highways built during the sixties. They spent hours driving around the

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city looking for spots to inspire the sculptures. What they eventually realized was that the old city neighborhoods that had an abandoned feeling and yet still showed a spark of life were the spots that most inspired them. At places like the bus stop at Howard and Congress streets, people were out on the sidewalks and there was a sense of trying to cope with the problems of the city. The final work, a mock viewer of the sort found at lookouts, is trained on the New Haven harbor and gives distance and perspective to the artist's message.

Taplin says he isn't sure what people will make of his work. Together, the nine viewing sculptures make a statement, but be-

cause they are scattered throughout the city, the effect is fragmented. "We'll be lucky if people see more than two of them," he says. Of course, each makes its own statement, and locations of the others are listed on each to enable people to find them.

Even if many people don't see all nine sculptures, understand the overall message, or recognize the viewers as an art form—even if the worst happens and they become instant casualties of urban decay—Taplin is performing a fascinating experiment in urban art. He is trying to make an artistic statement about New Haven that is both lyrical and realistic, critical and optimistic, playful and serious. □

