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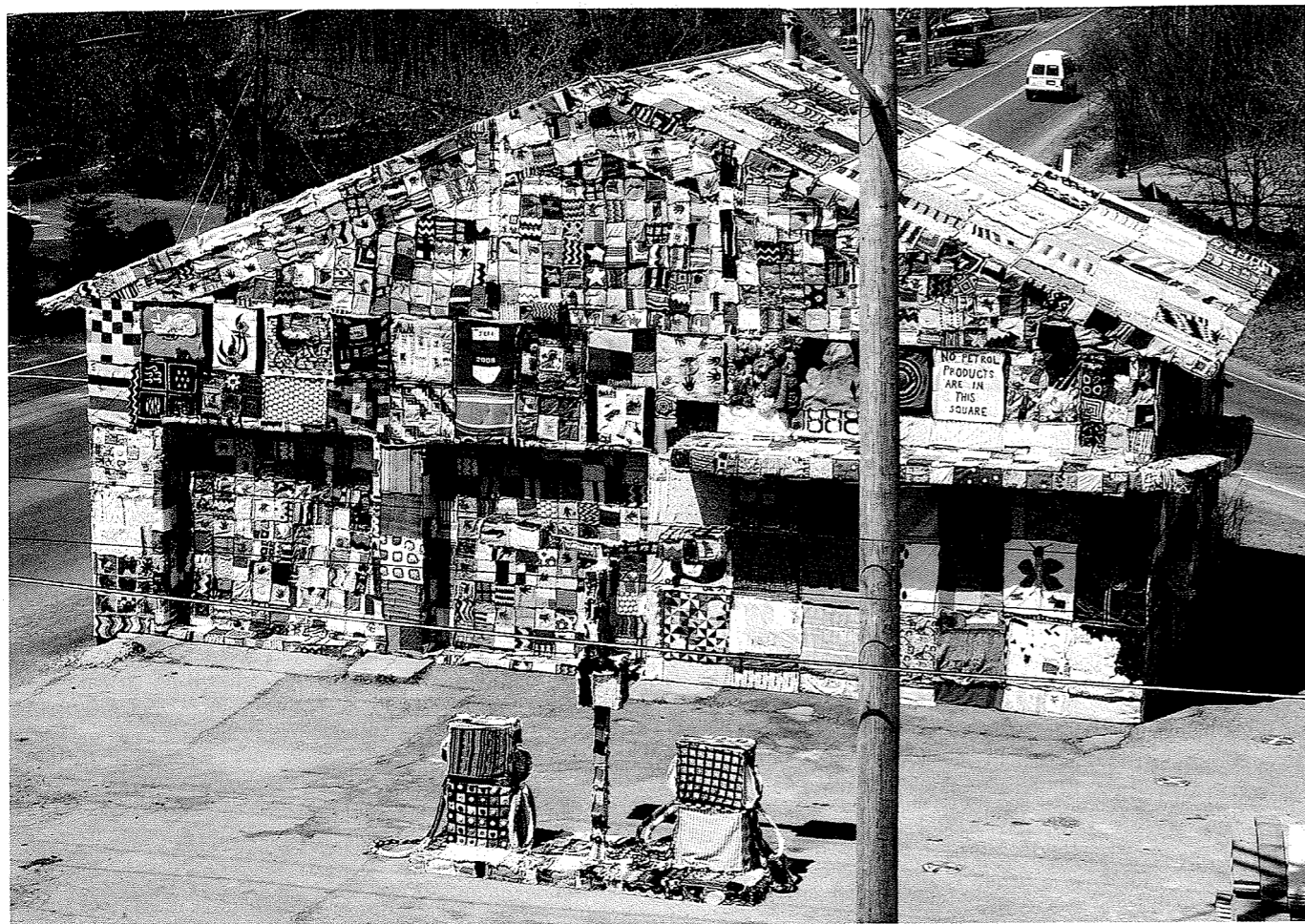
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# Gas Station Cozy

A fifty-year-old abandoned gas station might seem an unlikely site for a public art display, but it was the perfect fit for Jennifer Marsh's *World Reclamation Art Project*. by Jennifer Marsh

In July 2007, I signed a contract with the town of DeWitt, New York, and Richard Neugebauer, owner of the city's longtime abandoned gas station Nottingham Citgo No. 53. My signature marked the start of the most ambitious undertaking of my career, the *World Reclamation Art Project* (WRAP), which combined work by more than three thousand people from twenty-seven states and sixteen foreign countries to wrap the entire abandoned gas station with fiber panels. WRAP also officially launched the International Fiber Collaborative (IFC), a nonprofit organization I started, bringing together the talents of professional and student artists from around the world to create large-scale public art projects that express the social and environmental concerns of their communities.

ABOVE: The World Reclamation Art Project on display in DeWitt, New York, 2008. Photo: Cathryn Lahm.

The idea for the IFC started years earlier as I began to question my own personal studio practice. Throughout my college experience, I had worked alone in my studio, creating sculptures that ultimately left me feeling disconnected from the world around me. As that alienation simmered inside, I felt an overwhelming desire to break down the studio walls and bring my work and the work of others out into the community. I believe dreams are worth pursuing even when bureaucracies, status, and money stand in the way. I wanted to prove that, even on the lower rung of my career, I still had the power to create waves in local and national communities.

It was around this time that I took a trip to northern India to teach art and English to students at a government primary school. This was my first true cross-cultural and community-development experience. In India I became aware of all the textiles that surrounded me on the streets of New Delhi and in the mountain towns of northern India. I will always remember the bright colors and patterns of the women's saris. Textiles serve a functional purpose in Indian culture much more often than they appear as nonfunctional artwork.

In August 2007, I returned from India inspired and ready to begin coordinating WRAP, contracts in hand. I realized I'd never seen a large-scale, community-based public art project made from fiber materials and techniques, especially one that was displayed outside for several months. I knew the project would be truly unique.

I have found that most people easily identify with the handmade object. Fiber crafts are an integral part of all cultures, and people from all walks of life easily recognize and respect the genuine care taken in the creation of this work. Additionally, the use of fibers can introduce innumerable conversations of political and social importance, such as getting back to the basics and taking a step back in a world of overconsumerism. As such, fiber seemed to be the natural choice for the medium of WRAP. Participants were invited to construct panels that represented their associations and views toward our world dependency on oil; these panels would be gathered and then sewn together to wrap the entire gas station. It was extremely important to me that the materials we used for this project were accessible to people with varied incomes and resources, and I wanted participants to be able to afford to ship their sewn panels to my studio. This collaborative effort provided a forum for

talking about many issues related to our current energy crisis, such as foreign dependency, global warming, greenhouse effects, and urbanization.

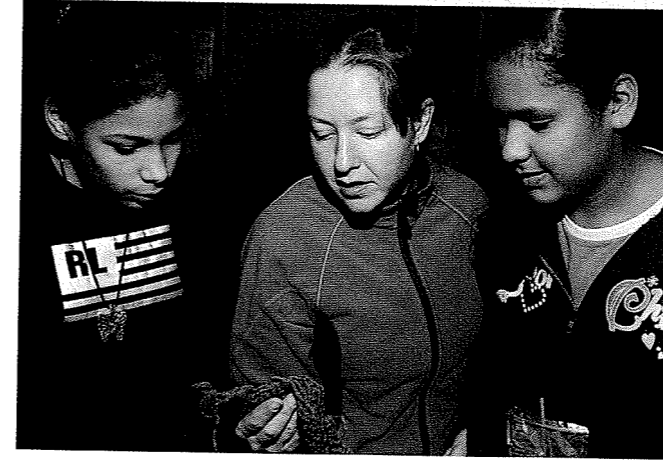
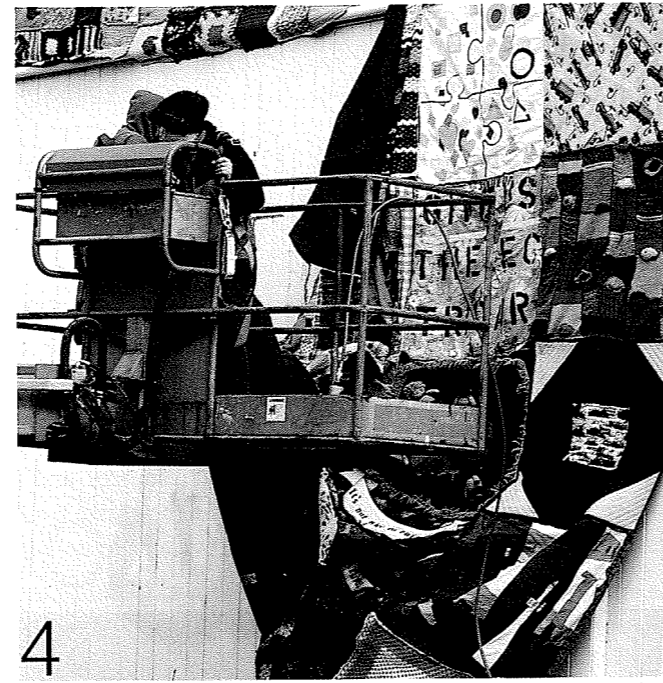
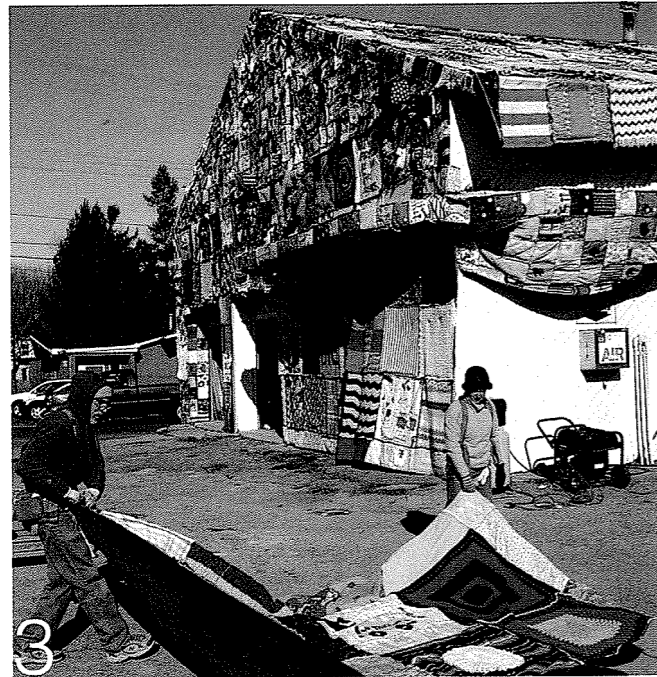
One of the most valuable tools used in the creation, coordination, and presentation of WRAP is the comprehensive website, created and managed by my father, David Marsh. This site documented information and images for all of the panels submitted, offered tips for making and shipping the artwork, and posted a calendar of submission deadlines and upcoming events. It now shares the entire story of the project with its thousands of participants, most of whom were unable to see the completed project in person, along with the rest of the world via the Internet.

With my father maintaining the website, I was able to devote my time to the creation of the art itself, first by seeking participants. I started by surfing the Web to create a database containing e-mail addresses of people who belonged to crochet, knitting, craft, and art guilds, then sent monthly e-mail newsletters to these various members to call for submissions. I also placed free ads in the back of fiber and fine-art magazines. I hosted booths at craft and art shows and gave lectures at universities and other organizations. In addition, I hosted fiber workshops, which I adjusted to meet the skill level of the students, from kindergartners to adults, at schools and recreation centers.

The perimeters of WRAP were clearly defined: the panels needed to be fiber-related, either using fiber techniques or fiber materials—or both; adult participants could submit three-foot-

BELOW LEFT: Laura Grover, *Addiction*, 2008; quilted fabric; 3' x 3'. Courtesy of the artist. BELOW: Kathryn Older, *Hope #2 The Fabric of Our Lives*, 2008; 3' x 3'. Courtesy of the artist.





OPPOSITE: 1. Jennifer sewing panels—for months—onto large sheets of canvas. Photo: Jennifer Marsh. 2. Jennifer carefully laid out all of the panels, over 3000, in a warehouse to spray them with protective water repellent before the installation. A total of fourteen gallons was used. Photo: Jennifer Marsh. 3. Pulling finished sections onto the gas station site for installation. Photo: Steve Satorie. 4. Working on the back wall of the building in the boom. Photo: Cathryn Lahm. 5. Nailing panels in place for a seamless fit. Photo: Steve Satorie. 6. Sweeping up around the station. Photo: Steve Satorie. ABOVE: Jennifer teaching a WRAP workshop with kids at Mundy Library in Syracuse, New York, 2008. Photo: Cathryn Lahm. ABOVE RIGHT: WRAP workshop with adults at the Inn Complete in Syracuse, New York, 2008. Photo: Jennifer Marsh.

square panels, and students, one-foot-square panels. Participants stitched, crocheted, knitted, painted, and collaged with an incredible variety of materials, including old clothes and even recycled plastics. Jennie Turner, a nurse in Redmond, Washington, stitched together hundreds of plastic beverage-bottle labels. Jennie had the entire nursing staff at her hospital collecting labels for months to collaboratively create her piece. Once the panels were received at my studio in Syracuse, New York, they were machine sewn together into large sections that eventually covered the entire gas station, gas pumps, garden, and lights—like a gigantic, fitted cozy. The smaller panels created by students were used to accent areas of the building, such as the gables, overhang, and garage doors, giving the design more depth and maintaining the original architectural structure of the site.

Sewing the panels together took more than three months and was unquestionably the most physically and emotionally demanding aspect of the project's construction. Fortunately, I met Cherrie Brunner, a local fiber artist, who sewed tirelessly with me. Each panel was backed with a piece of water-resistant canvas donated by Service Canvas Company Inc. This backing gave each panel strength to keep it from stretching, allowing it to maintain the shape of the building. The sewing was the product of many people's time, support, and faith in what we were doing—truly a minor miracle.

Installation of the more than three thousand fiber panels

began at the abandoned gas station on April 12. It required filing a dozen permits to drive large machines onto the property, close the street for easier access, and set up large tents in the street for the opening reception. I also secured liability insurance; rented a large forklift, scaffolding, and a forty-foot boom lift; and organized dozens of volunteers. First, all the fabric was laid out in an empty warehouse and sprayed with water repellent to protect the surface from weather. Large sections that had been sewn together were hung with industrial staple guns, and the sections lined up seamlessly to fit the shape of the building. An unveiling reception for the project was held on May 3, with hundreds in attendance. Following the reception, the Associated Press picked up a story on the event and launched it nationally and internationally. Coverage on WRAP can now be found on websites and in newspapers across the world.

As with most large-scale public works of art, funding is a major concern. The *World Art Reclamation Project* cost a total of about \$30,000, and the money came from a wide range of sources, including significant investments from my personal bank account! I am tremendously grateful to the Puffin Foundation, the Gifford Foundation, Allied Arts Foundation, and Oren Nelson from Smonerville, Tennessee, as well as the numerous individual contributors who helped to make this project a success. The enormous enthusiasm and support that people from all over the world have dedicated to the project over the last year makes me a true believer in the importance of this work. Currently, I am searching for new sponsors to fund future International Fiber Collaborative wrapping projects that continue to raise awareness and strengthen community ties. ☺

For more information about the *WRAP* project and the IFC, visit [www.internationalfibercollaborative.com](http://www.internationalfibercollaborative.com) or e-mail Jennifer Marsh at [blueangle1412@yahoo.com](mailto:blueangle1412@yahoo.com).



ON THE WEB: [fiberarts.com](http://fiberarts.com)

Read some of the stories behind the panels of the World Reclamation Art Project.