the village VOICE
Art

# Conrad Shawcross Sails the Gowanus!

## Brave brit will not be deterred by PCBs or anti-terror squad

**By Daniel Kunitz**
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Caged cool: Shawcross at Location One

Details:

**Conrad Shawcross: Control**
Location One
28 Greene Street,
212-334-3374
Through July 31

"I'm attracted to epic, mad, ambitious projects," Conrad Shawcross confesses in a quiet mumble. The British artist is soft-spoken, even diffident, yet the record bears him out: He has installed his handmade wooden *Space Trumpet*—which resembles four huge rotating megaphones—high above the atrium of the Unilever House in London; placed a sculpture of 12 spiraling, 26-foot-high wooden loops in Britain's National Maritime Museum; and constructed numerous other eccentric and beautiful Rube Goldberg machines. The *Times* of London has said that if you're a "young man who wants to be an artist," Shawcross, who turns 32 this year, is "probably the artist you want to be." His parents are the well-known writers William Shawcross, the historian and journalist, and Marina Warner, the novelist. He first gained notice in 2004, when the Saatchi Gallery bought one of his sprawling kinetic sculptures, and since then, his work has been shown in museums and galleries throughout the world.

We meet in his temporary studio at Location One, where Shawcross is completing a six-month fellowship that will culminate in his first

New York solo show. A spindly mechanical drawing machine he built stands in one corner, as if shoved aside by the wooden rowboat hogging much of the available floor space. Affixed horizontally on the gunwales is a circular wooden railing: It looks like someone glued an oversize hula hoop on the little skiff.

**What's with the boat?**

It's for a project I'm doing later in June. I'm going to row down the Gowanus Canal. This rail takes a camera, and as I row down the canal, it slowly orbits, filming a 360-degree panorama. But when you put the boat in the gallery, you replace the camera with a projector, and there's a screen on an outrigger, which then shows the footage in real-time. The projector and screen travel at the same speed as the camera went around, kind of like a lighthouse beam projecting this window into an original world. But I'm concerned about filming rights. I have this vision of a police helicopter hovering down—I'm afraid they might shoot me when they see this strange gizmo going around, thinking I'm a terrorist or something.

**And do you row?**

I do—not professionally. I sailed in the summers with my father, so I kind of know how to row and sail. Sailing is a big influence on my work. Wooden boats, in particular, which is what we sailed, probably influenced my early attraction to making things out of wood. Actually, I used to do *everything* in wood. In the last couple of years, I've really moved away from that because it's quite loaded—the materials—and I wanted to get away from that mad-inventor thing.

**You're interested in science.**

I find the lives of scientists inspiring. Einstein was a sort of poet of perception. I see imagination as very key in science—it's not just analyzing data, it's having a hunch or intuition, a way of seeing beyond what's visible. For me, it's about where philosophy and science merge.

For instance, one of my pieces, *Slow Arc Inside a Cube*, is basically a pure cube of mesh, and inside is an articulated arm that moves from one corner of the cage to the other. There's a light on the end of the arm, and as it travels, it throws out this kind of inverse shadow of the cube into the space. It was inspired by a quotation by a dead scientist named Dorothy Hodgkin, who described her discovery of the structure of pig insulin as like trying to deduce the structure of a tree by only seeing its shadow. So it's really a kind of Plato's cave analogy: the idea that visible reality is only a small crumb of what's really out there. Now, I'm making a newer version, *Slow Arc III*, for the show. It's much more technically challenging. I've got another cage, and inside is a light on an arm that will be able to move and stop at random positions. It will stop for a few seconds and produce a series of random "throws" into the space, like a series of shadow drawings.

**The "throws" are the cage-pattern in shadow?**

Yeah. I like the word "throw" because it refers to chance—like a throw of the dice—but it's also that the light is literally thrown out, and it has this element where everything just explodes from one point. A lot of my work has recently been influenced by cosmology—the Big Bang and the idea of the singularity, where everything comes from a single point, expanding out from that central nucleus.

**The other new piece in the show is based on the history of the meter?**

Yes. The meter was invented in 1799 in France, during the Revolution, and it was an attempt to get away from the Imperial system, which was based on the king's foot, or his thumb, or whatever. Now that the people were in control, they wanted to base it on something rational, so the meter is supposed to be one 10-millionth of a sector of the Earth—from the Equator to the North Pole through Paris—a 10-millionth of that distance. They actually tried to work it out back then, and they got it wrong by a few

millimeters. But the meter is still based on that measurement. I'm making an homage to that, partly inspired by *The Broken Kilometer* by Walter De Maria, which is permanently installed nearby [at 393 West Broadway]. Mine is a series of stainless-steel rods based on a sector of each of the planets. The Pluto meter is only 18 centimeters long, but Jupiter is 10 and a half meters long. They'll be the nine celestial meters, all mounted on the wall.

**And have you gotten out in the city much?**

I have, definitely. I've been to BAM and the museums. But my secret reason for being in New York is that I'm training to be a trapeze artist. I've been really obsessed with that—I had my first performance two weeks ago.