

The Metro Section

The New York Times

FRIDAY, MAY 31, 2002



Photographs by Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Anissa Mack, a performance artist, is bringing a bit of small-town America to Brooklyn, making apple pies for the public.

Take These Pies, Please

Inviting Thieves to a Window Where Art Imitates Lore

By ANDY NEWMAN

Clouds of apple scent drift across the concrete plaza, drawing young and old alike to the tiny white cottage recently sprung up in front of the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. Scrunching noses to the windowpane, they peer past the gingham curtains, as if looking back in time, to see a woman in a dotted red dress and an apron leaning over a counter and rolling out a crust.

Behind the woman, a full-size apple pie bakes in a little oven. When the pie is done, the woman opens a side window and sets it on the sill to cool.

The tableau may be an art piece. But the pie is real, and it's yours for the taking, if you dare.

Four days a week, the woman, an artist named Anissa Mack, stands in her one-room children's playhouse and bakes pies for the world.

Her installation is called "Pies for a Passerby." The idea is to see what happens when a classic image of small-town America — the swiping of a fresh pie off a windowsill, depicted everywhere from "The Little Rascals" to "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" to "The Simpsons" — comes to life and touches down in the big city.

"I'm interested in those things that move between a symbol that's really full of meaning and a cliché," said Ms. Mack, 32. "It's an idea of testing the icon and seeing how it does in practice. What does it mean that there's a real pie and a real quaint little house?"

With a recipe from Betty Crocker and a few very broad strokes — the curtains, baby-blue shutters, a wooden rolling pin with silver handles, a homemade spice rack with jars of cinnamon and nutmeg and allspice — Ms. Mack has created

Continued on Page B9

Take These Pies: A Window Where Art Imitates Lore

A little cottage in front of the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library provides a cozy setting for Ms. Mack and her Betty Crocker recipe to spring into action. Her installation is called "Pies for a Passerby."



Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Missing: One fresh-cooked apple pie, left cooling on a Brooklyn windowsill and last seen in the hands of Caya Schaan, 25.

Continued From Page B1

a cozy haven. Ms. Mack herself, with freckled face and arms, her long reddish hair in a bun, makes a convincing ur-mom.

Whatever its theoretical underpinnings, the pie piece, which is underwritten by the nonprofit Public Art Fund and runs Thursdays to Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Sundays from 1 to 4 p.m. through June 23, seems like one of the nicest performance art projects ever.

Last Friday, José Charlotten and his 7-year-old daughter, Porshe, watched the Pie Lady work with clear delight.

Porshe, who had never seen someone bake a pie, looked at the golden apple slices heaped in the pie shell and asked, "That's a french-fry pie?" Her father quickly set her straight.

"It smells wonderful," said Mr. Charlotten, 23, and ruffled her hair.

But given the something-for-nothing nature of the project, some New Yorkers smell not a pie, but a rat.

"Why would you want to steal a pie off a windowsill?" asked Shelly-Ann Brown, 17, a student at Science Skills Center High School, after Ms. Mack explained the piece to her. "There

might be something wrong with it."

A few minutes later, Caya Schaan, 25, grabbed a pie after reading about the project on a sign next to the cottage, and offered it to two little girls sitting on the library steps. They shrank from her as if she were handing out worms.

Other people seemed unable to grasp the concept of a gift bestowed randomly.

No sooner had Ms. Mack closed up shop Friday after a five-pie day, than a woman appeared at the window and demanded to know what time she had to show up the next morning to get a pie.

"I can't guarantee that you'll get a pie," Ms. Mack said.

"Why, why, if I'm No. 1?" said the woman, Anita Hagopian, of Belle Harbor, Queens.

"People really feel entitled," Ms. Mack said after Ms. Hagopian left, "and that's sort of an interesting American thing, too."

On Saturday, the script played out as originally conceived.

"An adult man ran across the plaza and stole the pie, right in front of a bunch of little kids who were waiting, and ran off," Ms. Mack said. "That was pretty satisfying, to get it the way I wanted it."