

Francis Cape

MURRAY GUY

A bench is a minimal form. A plank supported by two legs (or in some instances by four), maybe braced with crosspieces, a bench is hard and narrow, typically backless, conducive to sitting upright. Comparatively easy to build and a leveler of hierarchy, such furniture takes on particular resonance when used, as it has been for centuries, in vowed communities, where the mundane facts of simplicity and nonluxuriousness plus the lack of precedence for seated members take on symbolic value. A bench is a social sculpture, and this is why it interests Francis Cape.

Cape trained as a woodworker, and his art engages traditions of radical craft in the service of political awareness; his cabinetry- and architecture-based projects have inquired into the socialism of William Morris and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Cape's latest undertaking, "Utopian Benches," 2011–, explores the design and function of seating units in twelve intentional communities in the US. The recent show presented seventeen benches, but since beginning the series he has made twenty-four different ones, which he groups in specific arrays at different venues. Accompanying this modifiable traveling installation is an artist's book, *We Sit Together*, 2013, comprising descriptions of each community that Cape visited while researching his forms, along with measured drawings for each piece, in case readers want to convene their own chapter houses or general assemblies.

Placed in close rows, the benches as installed here felt at first like a modular set. Then the eye settled in on variations—a scalloped edge, a lathe-turned leg. The benches are of different heights. Some have distinct fronts and backs; others are reversible. There are two-seaters and others that would hold five abstemious congregants thigh-to-thigh. The floor of the Murray Guy space is made of battered blond boards, with which the benches—of honey-toned poplar streaked with a reddish grain and finished with linseed oil—were aligned. The ceiling is a grid of white-painted I beams, and natural light floods in from a big square-paned window. It isn't quite a Quaker meetinghouse. But on a hot city afternoon, this modest temple of visual commerce took on a surprising grace, a cooling hush. No one else came in while I was there. I did not sit with others, but even without a cohort of supportive fellow sitters, the sense of unfussy rigor was calming. I thought about the Rothko Chapel. Then I thought about Judd boxes, then communal tables laid with plates filled with Tiravanija curry. The peaceable convergence of heterogeneous aesthetics doesn't usher in utopia. Yet it's not wholly unrelated, either.

Granted, the project's focus is not sectarian struggle in advanced art, but the communitarian experiments from which the designs derive. These range from the Hutterites, established in Moravia in 1528 and still active today in Alberta, Canada, and elsewhere, to nineteenth-century Christian enclaves such as the Community of True Inspiration in Amana, Iowa, and the Bruderhof Community in New York. The design-minded Shakers of Hancock, Massachusetts, are among Cape's subjects. But so is the nonreligious commune at Twin Oaks in Virginia, dating from 1967 and inspired by B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. Cape's approach to this history is scrupulously factual, poised between skepticism and wistfulness. Each time the benches are installed, a program of open meetings on topics such as "the local" runs concurrently. Obviously, though, participating in such onetime, artist-instigated talks is not the same as rising as part of a group from wooden sleeping-benches at midnight every night to see if the Second Coming is at hand—as did members of the Ephrata Cloister, founded in Pennsylvania in 1732, the oldest American commune from which artifacts survive. Cape's project, in this sense, is both archival and elegiac. It is not didactic, however. He wants you to sit down, but what you meditate on is up to you—as it would not have been, quite, at Oneida or Ephrata. Nod to a neighbor if one wanders in, or read in *We Sit Together* about Shaker Sister Tabitha Babbitt, who in 1813 invented the circular saw, or watch the sun on the wall. Arise at least momentarily refreshed.

—Frances Richard



View of "Francis Cape," 2013.