Fleeting Artworks, Melting Like Sugar
Kara Walker’s Sphinx and the Tradition of Ephemeral Art

By Blake Gopnik

One of the most substantial works of art to hit New York in years was with us for only two months. This week, the final vestiges of Kara Walker’s “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby” were removed from the old sugar shed of the Domino factory in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which will make way for apartments.

The vast blocks of polystyrene foam at the heart of Ms. Walker’s sphinxlike monument have been cut up and cleaned and taken away for recycling by its supplier, the Insulation Corporation of America. The sphinx’s “skin,” coated in about 30 tons of sugar and not recyclable (or edible, after months of exposure to a leaking roof and the breath of well over 100,000 visitors) is being carried off to the dump by Action Carting. Three of the sphinx’s human-size attendants, cast in candy, had all but melted away by the show’s final weeks; 12 others, cast in plastic and coated in sugar, have been put on sale by Sikkema Jenkins gallery, as part of an edition of 15 sculptures it hopes to place in public institutions, for $100,000 to $200,000 each.

Of the sphinx sculpture itself, the left hand alone is being preserved, as Ms. Walker’s souvenir of the landmark work.

The artist was not present for the weeklong dismantling of her giant Baby and declined to be interviewed. Concerned about the emotions she’d suffer, her staff packed her off to a house in the woods. But rather than mourn the departure of her creation, Ms. Walker ought to take heart from her contribution to the grand tradition of ephemeral art. From Michelangelo to the Buddhist monks who make - and destroy - sand mandalas, artists have always been intrigued by impermanence.

In the 1960s Happenings and performances left the barest trace. By 1970, the great “land artist” Robert Smithson had created Spiral Jetty, a coil of rock and earth. Reaching out from the shores of the Great Salt Lake, it was meant to disappear and reappear at nature’s will. That same year, Smithson poured glue down an embankment near Vancouver. An artist who photographed the event wrote that “its rapid disappearance was an embrace of a state of imperfection.”

Ms. Walker’s most immediate predecessors include Tino Sehgal, who has become an art star by getting people to kiss, and calling it art, or by turning the Guggenheim Museum into a giant audience polling site. He doesn’t allow documentation of his projects; he won’t even issue a receipt to their buyers.

But the great modern artists of the early 20th century were more in love with ephemeralism.

In 1917 Duchamp presented his urinal “Fountain” to the Society of Independent Artists in New York, which refused to show it. The sculpture itself - often judged the most influential work of its century - was promptly mislaid, without any mourning from Duchamp. It was meant to exist more as a provocative gesture, lodged in art history.

Four years earlier, Kazimir Malevich, one of the first abstract artists, developed his Suprematist style designing stage sets for the futuristic Russian opera “Victory Over the Sun.” The décor was never meant to endure. Such projects’ short life allowed them to be that much more daring.

Architecture embraced ephemeralism with the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. That first world fair’s landmark was a “Crystal Palace” covered in a million square feet of plate glass; it survived only because it
was later rebuilt in a nice South Bank suburb (where it burned down in 1936). The exhibition’s heirs in other cities, including New York and Chicago, were mostly dismantled once their exhibits went home.

Food, an art that doesn’t last at all, except in memory, had touched on similar territory around the time of Napoleon. The French chef Marie-Antoinette Carême realized that he could take advantage of food’s evanescence with an unlikely marriage to architecture, the most permanent art form. His table-filling classical cityscapes and ruins, built of nougat and sweetmeats, were found awesome and confusing - were they fleeting or enduring? (They drew on the medieval tradition of “subtleties,” dinner table centerpieces made of cast and spun sugar that no lord’s feast could do without; Ms. Walker cites those as a source for her own Domino project.) The most important ephemeral tradition in Western art may be what has come to be called the “triumphal entry.” In 1635 the great Peter Paul Rubens led his Antwerp colleagues in building triumphal arches and other decorations for the grand arrival of Ferdinand, brother of Philip IV of Spain. As the scholar Eric Monin has discovered, such temporary works were accompanied by lavish fireworks, a new art form that got much of its prestige, now lost, from being short-lived. In the late 1960s Judy Chicago revived the idea of fireworks as high art with a series of “Atmospheres” that she revisited last April in Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

Even Michelangelo played an early part in creating artistic ephemera: One notably snowy day in 1494, a decade before he completed his great marble “David,” Michelangelo’s patron Piero de’ Medici commissioned him to do a kind of dry run for it, in the form of a heroic snowman. Giorgio Vasari, artist, writer and father of art history, wrote that, during the course of its tragically short life, the frozen figure was deemed “very beautiful.”

Ms. Walker may be aware of this tradition’s power. In an interview with Artnet News, she talked about how she was attracted to sugar for “its temporality, that it’s here and then it’s gone”; her sphinx, she said, was conceived to be “very temporary. I’ve been thinking a lot about ruins, things like that.”

Her “Sugar Baby” was an impressive sight, but half its impact came from the certain knowledge that it would not endure. Dare we say that, in the case of this biggest of all sweet confections, absence will make the heart grow fondant?

The work’s impermanence makes it part of the long tradition of ephemeral art.

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times