

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

# Reena Spaulings

REVUE DE PRESSE | SELECTED PRESS

## Les Inrockuptibles

### Les 5 expos à ne pas rater en décembre

#### Prière de ne pas classer

Au creux de l'hiver, il y a de quoi se réjouir. C'est la trêve, bien méritée après une rentrée passée à chasser, bon gré mal gré, la nouveauté, l'émergence, la découverte. Des mois rythmés par la course mécanique à la poursuite de ce qui va faire titrer et parler, se glisser dans le hit parade et les tops de fin d'année. Décembre donc, presque déjà trop tard pour un bilan : vient la période où l'on se donne le droit de flotter. Sans but, par pur plaisir. De revoir, de voir encore. L'exposition collective qu'accueille précisément la galerie Chantal Crousel, à Paris, répond en tous points à cela : sa liste d'artistes est intrigante parce qu'elle n'est pas immédiatement lisible. Pour cela, il va falloir aller voir : les œuvres, leur dialogue, leur mise en espace.

Car voilà, il y a des jeunes d'aujourd'hui qui voisinent avec des jeunes de la décennie précédente. Tentative de planche de tendances : c'est la décennie 00s à New York (Seth Price, Reena Spaulings, Bernadette Van-Huy) qui rencontre les kids 20s de Paris (Ethan Assouline, Lou Fauroux, Mimosa Echard). Mais on voit bien que cela ne tient pas : on ne saurait où classer ni comment ranger les autres, ces indiscipliné-es qui tous-tes ensemble pourtant font bande et meute par leurs pratiques à la fois précieuses et féroces, leurs gestes infimes et en même temps acérés.

*Tous les jours, jusqu'au 27 janvier à la galerie Chantal Crousel, à Paris*

# ARTFORUM



From left: Reena Spaulings, *Advisors* (detail), 2016, mixed media; fourteen paintings in acrylic on Dibond, each 34 x 28"; Reena Spaulings, *Latest Seascape #1*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 55 1/4 x 78 1/4"; Reena Spaulings, *Bonjour! 1-3*, 2017, oil on Dibond and mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Britta Schlier.



## Reena Spaulings

MUSEUM LUDWIG, COLOGNE

Beau Rutland

AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE of caustic yet playful teasing of the contemporary art apparatus, Reena Spaulings has been granted a retrospective—sort of. To offer some historical background for the uninitiated: In 2003, writer John Kelsey and artist Emily Sundblad opened Reena Spaulings, a gallery on New York's Lower East Side, which has since launched the careers of many influential artists. In 2004, artworks made by Kelsey and Sundblad under the moniker "Reena Spaulings" began appearing in group shows. Audiences then learned a great deal about Reena—as both artist and gallery as usually known—through the book *Reena Spaulings* (2005). Though officially authored by Bernadette Corporation—an already mythic '90s art/fashion collective of which Kelsey is a member—the narrative was infamously written by 150 individuals in B.C.'s circle. From time to time, other artists have helped contribute to Reena's artistic production.

Over the past decade, few artists or galleries in New York have continuously held the attention of the art world the way Reena Spaulings has. Blending cynicism and sincerity, Reena has offered timely responses to various issues that have long enlivened and/or bedeviled contemporary art: the artist-dealer, collaboration, self-reflexivity, market reflexivity, and the possibilities and limits of institutional critique, among others. Kelsey and Sundblad's fictional front woman has followed the path of Rosée Sétavy and then forged ahead, finding new ways to deploy the artistic alter ego as provocation and diversion; as a

trickster whose position between creator and creation destabilizes both of those constructs and the systems in which they are embedded. Every aspect of Reena Spaulings is imbued with a mimetic quality, calling into question whether her iterations of things we know—an art gallery, an art career—should be considered authentic, although nothing they do feels simulacral enough to be comfortably called *inauthentic*, either.

This ambiguity was elegantly performed in "Reena Spaulings: Her and No," organized by Anna Czerlitzki. The exhibition—a smartly installed, concise showing of just four groups of paintings—belonged to the series "Here and Now," Museum Ludwig's effort to upend the formulaic institutional approach to presenting contemporary art. With the succinct removal of two letters, "Her and No" informed the visitor of the artist's core principles of wit and contradiction. Fittingly, the presentation went wryly against the grain of the conventional institutional survey. Familiar works were included, but virtually all in the form of new versions—or, to borrow Sturtevant's preferred term, "repetitions." For instance, some viewers might have felt déjà vu contemplating the pointillist landscapes that show Herzog & de Meuron's New York condo tower 56 Leonard, which closely echo Reena's 2008 paintings of the very similar-looking New Museum. The repetitions afforded visitors the chance to see key examples of the artist's work while simultaneously providing Reena's dealers with new inventory. Reena always assumes a savvy audience, and it's safe to surmise that viewers were expected to perceive the latter benefit—an acknowledgment of market realities similar in spirit to Louise Lawler's ingenious disclosure-as-object label in her recent MOMA retrospective.

And yet, a bit perversely, the repetitions that collectors would presumably have found most enticing were not included. With its tightly edited selection of works, "Her and No" brought discipline to the artist's roving output, which seemed deceptively sober here. Aside from the recent eye-catching abstractions painted by Roombas, many of Reena's best-known works—for instance, the canvases fashioned from the sullied tablecloths of art-world dinners—were absent.

From the beginning, Reena's multifaceted identity has afforded Kelsey and Sundblad the opportunity to mine the various roles each plays within the art world (which, in Kelsey's case, includes the role of contributing editor of *Artforum*), and the degree to which any given subject is granted agency. The relationship between artist and collector was lightly mused on in *Bonjour! 1-3*, 2017, large-scale slapdash paintings that enmesh imagery loosely based on Courbet's *The Meeting* (1854) with the addition of more current signifiers like fidget spinners and a *Texte zur Kunst* journal tote bag. *Advisors*, 2016, an updated version of Reena's mid-2000s portraits of art dealers, attests to the consigliere-like status of art advisers to the museum patron, the most valued position today. Within weeks of the show's opening, one of the advisers depicted had placed "Advisors" in a notable private collection.

Ultimately, "Her and No" offered a tidy account of Reena Spaulings the artist, though it might have been a little too taciturn about the theoretical, economic, and

**Every aspect of Reena Spaulings calls into question whether her iterations of things we know—an art gallery, an art career—should be considered authentic.**

social apparatuses that Kelsey and Sundblad have thoroughly limned over the years. These complicated and messy concerns, so critical to the project that is Reena Spaulings, seem to have been reserved for discussion in the exhibition's catalogue, to be published next year—a deferred continuation of the show's dialectical maneuvers. If the exhibition's reticence was mildly frustrating to fans, it was also perfectly in keeping with the refusals and problematizations that have kept Reena's work vital and interesting all along. □

BEAU RUTLAND IS A CURATOR AND WRITER LIVING IN NEW YORK. Visit our archive at [artforum.com/inprint](http://artforum.com/inprint) to read Bennett Simpson on Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings (September 2004).

# MOUSSE

## Reena Spaulings “HER and NO” at Museum Ludwig, Cologne



Reena Spaulings “HER and NO” at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2017  
Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Britta Schlier

The name “Reena Spaulings” feels husky, with a hint of a dire edge. Notably, perfectly generic in a world of improbably literary-sounding characters, it likely lodged in readers’ consciousness on first exposure, like ambient and spiky plane-tree pollen in one’s throat. The name somehow conveys plausibility and a tell, even before one is versed in the nexus of influence and implication it spins. Established in 2004, the identity trifurcates: a novel by Bernadette Corporation, a Lower East Side and Los Angeles gallery with an enviable roster of associates, and a smartly represented artist (which is actually a collective). The book, spurred in part by John Kelsey’s translation of Michèle Bernstein’s roman à clef, *All the King’s Horses*, drew on a Hollywood-size pool of writers to evoke a city one can’t see, an “everyday group hallucination” where “double phoney has a greater reality than stones, rivers.” The artist Reena Spaulings is, like the gallery, preeminently associated with Emily Sundblad and Kelsey, but personnel clues don’t preclude the “distancing effects” and “possibilities of dis-identification that flourish as soon as we begin to operate under the sign of fiction.” Such effects and possibilities were not far on the occasion of Reena Spaulings’s first institutional collaboration with a museum. Curated by Anna Czerlitzki at the Museum Ludwig, it seems to be a painting retrospective, toggling through idioms of hazy pointillism, hegemonic portraiture, and late-epic bluster.

Nicholas Hatfull  
*Reena Spaulings “HER and NO” at Museum Ludwig, Cologne*  
Mousse Magazine, August 3, 2017.  
<https://urlr.me/tQDfb>

Discrete series, perhaps the stickiest, will be revisited and appended with further, bespoke examples. *Post Card (Köln am Rhein)* is a series of speckled, touristic views of the Dom cathedral, prompted by a card sent from Cologne by Michael Krebber. Pointillism, through no fault of its own, is a museum crowd-pleaser (as anyone who's ever tried to look at the works of Georges Seurat during a half-term school break will confirm). These works may have as much to do with enchroma tests and the narcotic reverie evoked in Paul Thek's cityscapes, with something of their hovering pretty/bleak tone. But Reena Spaulings's amiable riffing on place and palatability is a gift for tour guides. As part of an incomplete trading-card set of classic modes, this suggests a hankering to see how these works fare with such a degree of embedding. It remains to be seen, as of the time of this writing, whether or not Reena Spaulings will deploy the barks of Rex Plus motion-detector alarms that accompanied the pictures' outing at Galerie Buchholz in 2010.

"Am I cleaning a large room or a small room?" asks the iRobot Scooba 450 in the text that originally heralded the *Later Seascapes*. It turns out it's as apt a scumbler as a scrubber, when put in the ring with emulsions of simpering taste (the group's satirist nostrils were alert to the whiff of sad poetry to be snuck from mildly unexpected names in Farrow and Ball's "Estate Emulsions" range: Smoked Trout, Mouse's Back, Blazer, Eating Room Red). But not only was it able to knock out "two Schnabel-sized areas on a single battery charge," it also completed the canvas as an interior-finish-soused Ouija board, summoning the flares of J.M.W. Turner's dimming sight, as the text claims. Beyond the digital steering and rounded right-angle buffing, viewers' eyebrows will raise when it dawns that, with a pinch of good nature, these do have flashes of Turner. Butt has proven able to cash check mouth wrote, so to speak, noticeably in passages that could be magnified samples of Turner's distinctive flecks of black and white. If there is a tang of snark in the mockery of both the revered obfuscations of "late style" and the soft belly of over-formulated "zombie abstraction," that tang is leavened by diverting gestures (whose charge registered in notices of their exhibitions at Galerie Neu and Campoli Presti). Whether these are any more or less laced with meaning than the used tablecloths from the gallery dinner, stretched up as "enigmas" on other occasions, is probably up to the viewer. But if one is game, Scooba spirit-wrote a sea monster. These works may be crossover hits. In 1997, CEO "D'Antek" (Walczak?) wrote on behalf of Bernadette Corporation: "As a successful corporation, you will be a cyborg, and you will need to justify yourself with warmth."

It's not unusual for Reena Spaulings to execute a series the week prior to the vernissage, and at the Ludwig, the masterpiece best known as *Bonjour, Monsieur Courbet* will be made fresh on three large freestanding aluminum panels. Heroicizing the body language between the bohemian plein-air painter and his collector, the industrialist Alfred Bruyas, during an encounter on the outskirts of Montpellier, the original work was seen as deviant in its subject. Rendering Courbet's professional itinerary in grand style was found insufficiently demure.

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That artist, though far from deferential in his jaunty pose, was disclosing his position in a reticulated system, telling it like it was. Transposing the meeting to our own time sits compatibly with another featured series, the fourteen-piece *Advisors*. Dashed off in pitch-perfect nonchalance, these works are especially ticklish in their proposition of collective painting. Knowing that one or all of Jutta Koether, Emily Sundblad, and John Kelsey may have been involved, it's hard to silence one's twitching yen to discern authorship; the show's title, abrading the project series' tag, is *HER and NO*, steadfast in its refusal of such trivia. Ostensibly a contemporary splinter genre of the patron's commissioned portrait, these works could have appeared in *The Galleries*, Kelsey's text of lucid-dreamt premises strewn with art that resembles evaporating versions of other art. They are a little Merlin, a little Emily, a little Krebber, a little German-speaking female gallerist, a little Kelsey.



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<https://urlr.me/tQDfb>

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At the Ludwig, home to a motherlode of pops at the canon (now well-beloved fridge magnets), this survey makes an absorbing impression. It looks like Reena Spaulings is thwarting expectations and crowbarring room to shimmy by, to diligently fulfill retrospective norms. It's a new tangle in a ludic thicket of rarefaction.



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## **Les Inrockuptibles**

**Attrapez le Pokémon  
Houellebecq avec la  
mystérieuse Reena  
Spaulings !**



**A la galerie Chantal Crousel, le collectif se cachant sous le nom de Reena Spaulings réalise un portrait de la France sur le vif et s’amuse à arbitrer un match Houellebecq vs Pokémon. Confondant.**

Alors que l’exposition estivale de Michel Houellebecq au Palais de Tokyo vient de s’achever, on peut désormais l’affirmer : sa réception a été du même acabit que les ambiances qu’excellait à dépeindre l’écrivain – morne. Que les critiques et les visiteurs hexagonaux n’aient pas trouvé là de quoi faire tout un plat (préparé, réchauffé, légèrement trop salé) est pour le moins étonnant.



Comment ne pas voir en *Rester vivant* une mise en abyme aussi fascinante que glaçante d'un certain devenir-tourisme de l'art contemporain, savamment éclairé et cimaisé ? Et pourtant, l'institutionnalisation en format 2 000 mètres carrés de ce monumental selfie de l'auteur, son chien, ses maîtresses et ses clichés de vacances, reste l'une des rares expositions à s'être confrontée à un phénomène que les lettres connaissent bien, mais auquel l'art oppose encore souvent une fin de non-recevoir : l'autofiction.

Si l'on peut en effet postuler que la dématérialisation des œuvres a entraîné un retour à la mythologie du grand artiste, quelques collectifs se livrent heureusement au détricotage méthodique de cette fétichisation. Le plus flamboyant d'entre eux est new-yorkais, s'est formé en 2004 et s'appelle Reena Spaulings.

Reena croque, sur le motif

Derrière ce nom féminin vaguement batave se cache en réalité tout un bataillon d'identités gigognes. Reena Spaulings, c'est d'abord le personnage principal d'un livre écrit à plusieurs mains par un autre collectif d'artistes, Bernadette Corporation. C'est ensuite le nom d'une galerie d'art fonctionnelle, Reena Spaulings Fine Arts, sise à East Broadway. Enfin, et c'est là où nous voulons en venir, le nom désigne aussi un artiste collectif ("*au moins six mains*", nous précise-t-on) qui s'expose cette rentrée à la galerie parisienne Chantal Crousel.

Il faudrait encore préciser que l'artiste-scolopendre Reena Spaulings est peintre. Or que s'imagine-t-on que fasse le peintre lambda en voyage dans un pays étranger ? Il croque, sur le motif. Reena Spaulings, fraîchement débarquée en France, a donc fait tout cela.

Résultat : de grandes esquisses sur Dibond de Michel Houellebecq, et des plus petits formats sur toile, portraiturant les Pokémon que l'on peut attraper aux alentours de la galerie en jouant sur son téléphone à *Pokémon Go* – les nommés Weedle ou Gloom, pour être tout à fait exact.

« *Un art de plus en plus postlittéraire* »

*“Je suis absolument fan des livres de Michel Houellebecq. Je les ai tous lus”, concède l’un des membre de RS. “En fait, nous ne savions pas qu’il allait être exposé simultanément au Palais de Tokyo lorsque nous avons décidé de le peindre. Ce qui nous intéressait, et la raison pour laquelle nous voulions le faire coexister dans le même espace que Pokémon Go, c’était avant tout son image médiatique ; joindre l’esthétique de la photo d’auteur et la célébrité médiatique des écrivains, qui existe moins en art.*

*Nous nous sommes toujours intéressés aux points de jonction entre l’art et la littérature mais, actuellement, on peut se demander si l’art n’est pas en train de devenir de plus en plus postlittéraire, voire postromantique.”*

### La corruption Pokémon Go

Le Pokémon Houellebecq ne paraît alors pas si farfelu. Comme le slogan du jeu, “Attrapez-les tous”, le portrait ne vise-t-il pas, lui aussi, à “attraper” son sujet, à lui voler son âme pour le faire rentrer tout entier dans le cadre ? Alors que se brouille la frontière entre réel et virtuel, faits et fiction, l’exposition de Reena Spaulings, sous ses airs de pied de nez au monde de l’art, met le doigt sur l’une des questions les plus contemporaines de la société.

Et comme pour prouver cet état de fait, le philosophe Alain Badiou, invité de la matinale de France Inter (le vendredi 9 septembre), montait sur ses grands chevaux pour fustiger la surexposition aux images de la jeunesse. La corruption des corruptions, d’après lui ? *Pokémon Go*.

## Numéro

# Les Pokémon envahissent la Galerie Chantal Crousel

**ART** L'artiste Reena Spaulings propose à la Galerie Chantal Crousel des peintures de Pokémon... et de Michel Houellebecq. Brillant !



Vue de l'exposition, Reena Spaulings, Pont du Carrousel  
Photo : Florian Kleinefenn. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

À la **galerie Chantal Crousel**, pas besoin d'iPhone ni de réalité augmentée pour partir à la chasse aux Pokémon : les créatures de Nintendo sont en peinture sur les murs. Ces huiles sur Dibond (aluminium et polyéthylène) sont de **Reena Spaulings**. Personnage fictif imaginé par le collectif d'artistes Bernadette Corporation, Reena Spaulings signe pourtant des œuvres bien tangibles. Elle a même donné son nom à une galerie new-yorkaise en 2004 (Reena Spaulings Fine Arts). Elle incarne

Elle incarne surtout une époque où le virtuel et la fiction (et ses personnages) comptent parfois plus que la réalité. Pas étonnant que l'artiste s'intéresse à ses confrères imaginaires Pokémon, créatures qui surgissent dans les rues et produisent leurs effets partout sur la Terre (qui n'a jamais assisté à un attroupement de joueurs dans les lieux où les Pokémon rares se cachent ?).

### **Et si les artistes choisissaient leur sujet en fonction des "trend topics" de Twitter ?**



Reena Spaulings, *Wigglystuff* (2016), Peinture à l'huile sur Dibond, 100 x 130 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris  
Photo: Florian Kleinert

**L'exposition de Reena Spaulings pourrait n'être qu'une proposition cynique**, surfant sur les buzz estivaux : Pokémon Go, mais aussi Michel Houellebecq, dont elle a réalisé quelques portraits (l'écrivain avait droit aux honneurs du Palais de Tokyo cet été). Mais l'artiste est loin d'en rester à la seule reproduction visuelle des hits de l'été, même si ses tableaux aux ratures et traits enfantins – proches de certains Cy Twombly – sont formellement très réussis. Elle soulève par exemple une question passionnante sur le futur de la pratique artistique : et si les artistes choisissaient leur sujet en fonction des "trend topics" de Twitter ?

**Weedle, Grodoudou, Gloom et Michel Houellebecq sont nos Persée et Hercule modernes, nos figures mythiques contemporaines.**



Reena Spaulings, *Gloom* (2016), Peinture à l'huile sur Dibond, 100 x 130 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris  
Photo: Florian Kleinferrn

**Reena Spaulings réussit surtout à sublimer les mignonnes créatures** de Nintendo et la nonchalante célébrité Michel Houellebecq en monstres de cauchemar d'enfant. Mieux encore : elle les dépeint en personnages d'un bestiaire mythique contemporain. Weedle, Grodoudou, Gloom et Michel Houellebecq sont nos Persée et Hercule modernes. Justement, il est question de figures antiques au travers des constellations qu'a également reproduites Reena Spaulings. L'artiste a accroché au plafond de la galerie trois tableaux sur Dibond noir représentant la carte du ciel le soir du vernissage de l'exposition, le 3 septembre à Paris. Constellations mythiques d'hier (Aigle, Grande Ourse, Dragon) voisinent avec les nouvelles étoiles de notre époque...

**Toute l'exposition, en réalité, est conçue autour de l'idée très contemporaine de géolocalisation**, en l'occurrence celle de la Galerie Chantal Crousel. Les Pokémon peints sont ceux que l'on peut géolocaliser à proximité de l'espace. Et Michel Houellebecq aurait été choisi parce qu'il a été aperçu dans une rue avoisinante... tel un Pokémon rare en somme.

## LE COLLECTIF, ARTISTE CONTEMPORAIN

BÉATRICE GROSS

**Le collectif d'artistes s'impose comme une figure spécifique du développement des pratiques collectives et collaboratives depuis les années 1960. Béatrice Gross avait abordé le sujet dans l'article « Brève histoire du collectif d'artiste(s) depuis 1967 », publié dans *les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*. Ci-dessous, extraits choisis par l'auteure.**

[...] Les expositions consacrées à la figure particulière de collaboration que constituent les collectifs d'artistes, ou à la collaboration artistique en général – collectifs compris –, n'ont cessé de se multiplier, [...] témoignant de la remarquable résurgence de ce phénomène lié historiquement aux néo-avant-gardes des années 1960 et 1970. [...] Maints ouvrages et articles (au sein d'un corpus critique, notons-le, étonnamment restreint compte tenu non seulement de la réémergence récente, mais aussi de la permanence, dans l'histoire de l'art contemporain, de ces pratiques collectives particulières) interprètent le phénomène du collectif d'artistes, faisant la part belle aux créations d'ordre relationnel et éthique. [...]



The Royal Art Lodge  
*Invariably One Thing Killed the Other*, série *Starting Over*  
2008

Acrylique, papier et encre sur Isorel,  
5,08 x 5,08 cm

Court. les artistes

Page de droite, de haut en bas:  
Bernadette Corporation  
*Reena Spaulings*  
2004  
Éditions Semiotext(e)

Les Ready-Made appartiennent à  
tout le monde®  
*Publicité, Publicité (histoire de  
l'art cherche personnages...)*  
1980

Cibachrome, 154 x 119,5 cm

Frac Poitou-Charentes

© Succession Philippe Thomas

Cependant, encouragées par la multiplication de collectifs d'artistes peu enclins à l'activisme et la radicalité de certains de leurs prédécesseurs (ainsi l'approche ludique et informelle de Dearaindrop, hobbypopMUSEUM, Gelitin ou encore The Royal Art Lodge), d'autres voies interprétatives se dessinent, agitant une certaine *communauté* critique de débats houleux [...] L'investigation portant sur la nature et la signification du collectif contemporain tend alors à rejoindre celle relative au rapport des régimes politiques et esthétiques de l'art. [...]

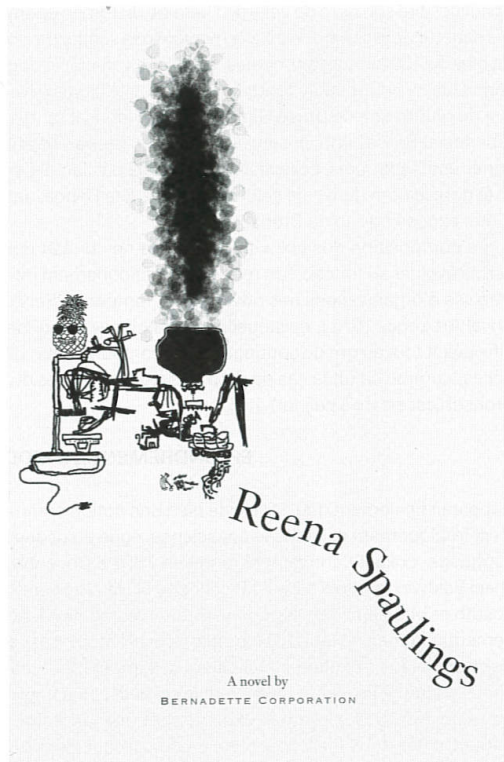
Une esthétique de la collaboration saurait-elle donner lieu, à elle seule, à une création contemporaine légitime ? Autrement dit, la nature collective revendiquée d'une œuvre suffit-elle à en justifier l'existence ? Sur fond d'une réflexion plus large sur l'autonomie de l'œuvre d'art (en un sens toujours collective), cette interrogation amène à examiner, tour à tour, la question de la composition du collectif d'artiste(s) en lien avec la performativité de son identité de groupe, les origines historiques majeures du phénomène, puis, à travers une approche typologique, les domaines et structures de production adoptés, par analogie, par ce type particulier de communauté artistique intentionnelle.

#### REDÉFINITION DE LA NOTION D'AUTEUR

Il semble d'emblée que les enjeux fondamentaux du collectif d'artiste(s) ne résident pas tant dans la simple mise en commun pragmatique de ressources et de compétences, mais bien plutôt dans la nécessaire redéfinition de la notion d'auteur accompagnant cette collectivisation déclarée des moyens de production. Ainsi, la notion formelle de signature commune apparaît comme le critère déterminant dans la distinction entre le collectif d'artiste(s) et les autres formes de collaboration artistiques : groupes, mouvements, ou collaborations temporaires ne sauraient en effet constituer des collectifs à proprement parler ; les couples d'artistes (les Becher, les Poirier, Gilbert & George), les groupes informels (les futuristes, le Bauhaus, Fluxus) et les ateliers hypertrophiés (de Damien Hirst à Jeff Koons, en passant par Takashi Murakami) ne le sont pas non plus. Dès lors, on comprend que la construction délibérée d'une identité alternative – parce que collective et impersonnelle – revient à subvertir la figure traditionnelle de l'artiste et les institutions qui l'encadrent. [...]

Avant toute chose pourtant – avant toute idéologie ou mission particulières – le collectif d'artiste(s) forme une unité de travail spécifique, qui, contrairement à ce que son nom indique, ne nécessite en rien le regroupement de plusieurs individus (c'est-à-dire d'au moins trois) : être un collectif d'artistes, c'est d'abord et avant tout se déclarer tel. Paradoxalement, le critère de composition plurielle est ainsi non seulement insuffisant, mais pas non plus nécessaire. Deux personnes, voire une seule, suffisent pour se constituer en collectif, entité dont l'identité, comme toute autre, individuelle ou plurielle, est le fruit d'une construction. Ainsi, Bernadette Corporation est l'organe collectif de John Kelsey et Emily Sundblad, Assme Vivid Astro Focus celui du Brésilien Eli Sudbrack, The Atlas Group celui de Walid Raad, Les Readymades Appartiennent à Tout le Monde celui de Philippe Thomas.

Inversement, un collectif peut décider d'assumer une identité individuelle, forcément fictive. Ainsi, le collectif new-yorkais Reena



Spaulings tire son nom de celui de l'héroïne du roman éponyme, conçu lui-même par un autre collectif, Bernadette Corporation : écrit à la manière des scripts de Hollywood, l'ouvrage est le fruit d'une chaîne de plus de 150 auteurs anonymes. Dans une variation à double-fond de la fiction auctoriale, The Bruce High Quality Foundation, fondation d'art fictive basée à New York, se présente comme « l'arbitre officiel du patrimoine de Bruce High Quality, se [consacrant] à la préservation de l'héritage du feu sculpteur social Bruce High Quality<sup>1</sup> », « art star », fictive elle aussi, du New Jersey. Ou encore, Otabenga Jones and Associates, collectif fondé en 2002 par Jamal Cyrus, Robert A. Pruitt et Otabenga Jones, artiste dont le nom dérive de celui du Pygmée Ota Benga, amené d'Afrique aux États-Unis en 1904 afin d'être exposé au zoo du Bronx.

La composition des collectifs d'artistes ne connaît donc aucune règle cardinale. Et si elle peut certes évoluer en fonction du mode de fonctionnement interne défini par chacun des collectifs – qu'il s'agisse d'organisations très ouvertes, tel Temporary Services, ou au contraire très fermées, telle The Royal Art Lodge (RAL), de laquelle, en principe, « personne n'entre, personne ne sort<sup>2</sup> » – elle se modifie avant tout au gré de contingences incontournables : désaccords ou essoufflement général, voire décès, comme ce fut le cas de deux des trois membres du collectif canadien General Idea (seul A.A. Bronson est en vie à ce jour). [...]

### EFFONDREMENT DU MODERNISME

Il apparaît finalement que, s'il existe bien une notion commune à toutes ces cellules de collaboration, c'est ironiquement celle d'une conscience aigüe du risque permanent de leur dissolution. Ainsi Art & Language, collectif conceptuel fondé en 1967 à Coventry (Royaume-Uni) par Terry Atkinson et Michael Baldwin associés à David Bainbridge et Harold Hurrell, puis rejoints en 1969 par Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth et Mel Ramsden, fut constamment animé de désaccords. Portant principalement sur les fondements mêmes de leur collaboration, ces nombreuses divergences, en l'absence d'un pôle de décision individuel régulateur et à cause de l'impératif d'unanimité de tous ses membres sous l'égide d'une signature collective, menèrent le collectif à une fragmentation du groupe et de sa branche new-yorkaise dès 1974. Comme l'expliquèrent une vingtaine d'années plus tard, en 1995, Baldwin et Ramsden (les deux membres restants du collectif, dépositaires exclusifs de ses activités, passées et présentes), ce qui constituait jusque lors « une confusion dialectiquement fructueuse devint un chaos d'individualités et de préoccupations en compétition<sup>3</sup> ». Or, ces perpétuelles dissensions se révélèrent aussi force motrice et créatrice du collectif : malgré les difficultés à analyser précisément le mode de fonctionnement de Art & Language, tant les témoignages de ses anciens membres divergent, son

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The Wooster Group  
*The Wooster Group's Version of Tennessee Williams' Vieux Carré*  
Ph. Paula Court  
© The Wooster Group

Page de droite, en bas :  
Internationale Situationniste  
Bande dessinée détournée parue dans *Internationale Situationniste*, n° 8, janvier 1963





importance décisive dans l'émergence du collectif comme nouveau type de collaboration apparaît clairement en ce qu'il fut le premier à « [éprouver] nombre des défis et limites de cette forme [de collaboration]<sup>4</sup> ». Art & Language, formation fluide qui, au plus fort de son existence, au cours des années 1970, compta une cinquantaine d'affiliés, apparaît ainsi comme le premier collectif *stricto sensu* de l'histoire de l'art : pour la première fois semble-t-il une communauté d'artistes créa collectivement, sous une signature unique et impersonnelle, mettant tous ses membres, et leurs contributions, sur un pied d'égalité.

Il n'en demeure pas moins que le phénomène contemporain de collectivisme artistique doit beaucoup à des types anciens de collaboration au sens élargi du terme, au premier titre desquels ceux suscités par les mouvements dada et surréaliste. [...] Décisive fut également, dès 1957, l'influence de l'Internationale Situationniste (IS), dont le projet révolutionnaire et les pratiques tactico-ludiques se traduisirent par une production collective et (relativement) anonyme, malgré l'omniprésence de son porte-parole et fondateur Guy Debord. [...] Il fallut toutefois attendre « l'effondrement général de l'autorité des protocoles culturels individualistes que constitue le modernisme<sup>5</sup> », comme le déclara Charles Harrison, membre de Art & Language, pour voir naître la modification de conscience artistique nécessaire à l'émergence formelle du collectif d'artistes.

Ainsi, Art & Language rejeta non seulement l'identification de l'artiste à un génie individuel, mais aussi la primauté du champ visuel, et plus particulièrement du genre pictural, en faveur de positions auctoriales hybrides et de l'incorporation du texte dans le domaine artistique. [...] Cette conception radicale de l'art et de l'artiste emprunta alors une voie impersonnelle et bureaucratique, imitant à la perfection, jusqu'au fétichisme peut-être, l'autorité des bureaucraties culturelles dominantes, stratégie qui lui vaudra la qualification – péjorative sous la plume de Benjamin H. D. Buchloh – d'« esthétique de l'administration<sup>6</sup> ». [...]

Art & Language  
Vue de l'exposition *Art & Language Uncompleted*,  
MACBA, Barcelone, 2014  
Ph. EOS-AF, Estudi Orpinell & Sánchez -  
Artesania Fotográfica



### RADICALISME SOCIAL ET POLITIQUE

Tout en rejetant la moindre notion de hiérarchisation interne, les collectifs d'artistes se soumettent, d'une manière ou d'une autre, à un certain degré d'institutionnalisation. Alors qu'une division concrète du travail peut s'opérer *de facto* entre les différents membres d'un collectif, l'identité générique du groupe comme cellule de production se rapporte souvent à des domaines ou modèles de production collective préexistants, exogènes au domaine des arts plastiques. [...]

Bien souvent néanmoins, des collectifs d'artiste(s) se réfèrent à des structures propres aux arts appliqués et aux arts vivants. À la croisée de l'art et de l'architecture, dans la mouvance des utopies psychédélics des années 1960 et 1970, les Américains de Ant Farm, les Autrichiens de Coop-Himmelb(l)au et bien d'autres créèrent des types inédits d'espaces ouverts et flexibles, à l'instar de l'*Oasis no. 7* [...] de Haus-Rucker-Co ou le *Blow-out Village* d'Archigram Group [...]. Dans le genre proprement contemporain de la performance, l'héritage du groupe Fluxus est visible dans des collectifs dont la structure s'apparente alors à celle de compagnies de théâtre, tel le légendaire Wooster Group à Soho (New York), ou de formations musicales, tels Japanther à Brooklyn, Lucky Dragons à Los Angeles, ou Section Amour à Paris. [...]

Des collectifs tels 16 Beaver Group, Critical Art Ensemble ou The Center for Land Use Interpretation, empruntent la voie d'un radicalisme social et politique proche de l'activisme – activisme qui, selon certains (au premier rang desquels l'historien Gregory Sholette), serait au fondement de toute initiative collective véritable. En ce sens, le collectif de commissaires What, How and for Whom? (WHW) à l'origine de l'exposition *Collective Creativity: Common Ideas For Life and Politics* affirme sans dé-

Klaus Pinter (Haus-Rucker-Co)

*Rooftop Oasis Structures*

1971-73

Dessin, encre sur impression offset et collage, 28,2 x 35 cm

Ph. François Laugnie

Frac Centre, Orléans



Béatrice Gross

*Le collectif, artiste contemporain*

artpress2, February—March—April, 2016, p.36-43.

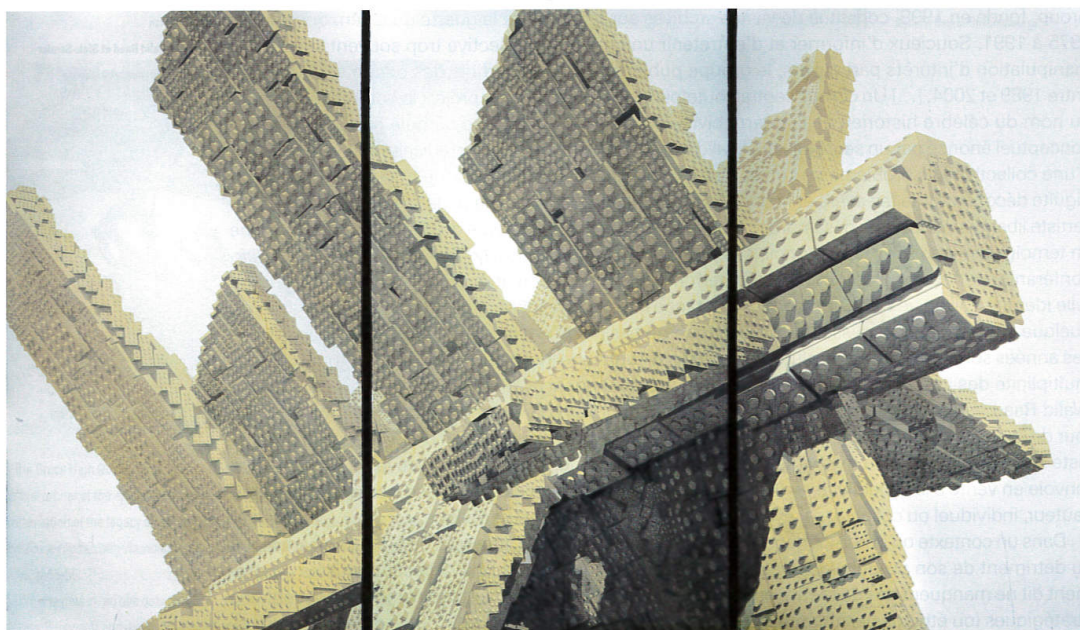
tour : « La créativité collective est non seulement une forme de résistance au système dominant de l'art et à l'appel capitaliste à la spécialisation, mais également une critique productive et performative des institutions sociales et de la politique<sup>7</sup>. » [...]

Au plus proche de ce qu'ils critiquent (à savoir le marché de l'art et ses acteurs), de nombreux collectifs se constituent en effet autour d'un programme de court-circuitage des agents traditionnels de leur promotion : galeries commerciales, fondations, musées... Ainsi, Reena Spaulings, artiste fictive à la tête du collectif du même nom, ouvrit en 2004 sa propre galerie, Reena Spaulings Fine Art. Fondée et animée par les deux membres principaux de Bernadette Corporation, auxquels viennent s'adjoindre, en fonction des projets, divers collaborateurs réguliers, la galerie expose non seulement ses productions collectives, mais aussi les travaux individuels de certains de ses contributeurs. [...]

### L'ŒUVRE PRODUIT SON AUTEUR

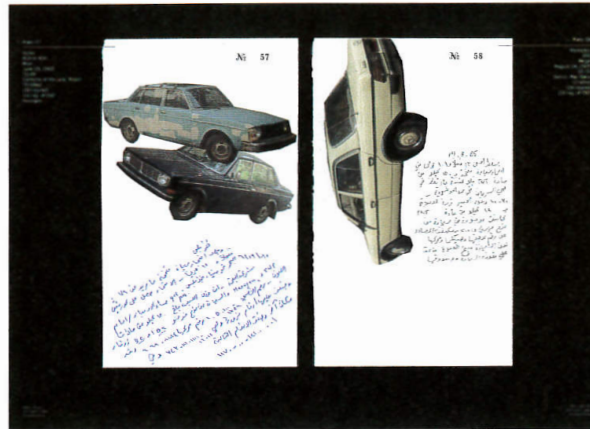
Les formes d'identification de certains collectifs d'artistes répondent parfois enfin tout simplement à des contraintes sociales et politiques extérieures, comme ce fut le cas de nombre de collectifs issus de l'ex-bloc communiste, tel le groupe cubain Los Carpinteros qui, afin de déjouer la censure, s'identifia au corps de métier artisanal des charpentiers. Dans un climat politique de surveillance et de répression généralisé, l'important pour Alexandre Arrechea, Marco Castillo Valdés et Dagoberto Rodríguez Sánchez était de se placer dans le contexte non des idées ou de l'art d'avant-garde, mais plutôt dans celui du travail manuel et des modes traditionnels de production. Depuis 1994, à l'abri de cette stratégie de camouflage, le groupe redéfinit à son tour la notion d'auteur, lui conférant une modestie

Los Carpinteros  
*Knin Lego*  
2012  
Court. Kunstmuseum, Thourne



étrangère à la figure héroïque du génie romantique et moderniste ou de l'« artiste-intellectuel » ou « artiste-manager » contemporain. Si la représentation de la structure de leur collaboration préoccupa Los Carpinteros à leurs débuts (comme l'attestent *Interior Habanero* ou *Habana Country Club*), qui, à la faveur d'une esthétique conservatrice rappelant le style colonial cubain, parvinrent à tromper la vigilance des autorités, ceux-ci décidèrent rapidement de renoncer à l'autoportrait et à la peinture, afin d'éviter deux écueils, celui d'une œuvre à portée strictement sociologique ou politique, mais également celui de la représentation problématique d'une instance auctoriale collective : « Les tableaux documentaient notre manière de travailler. Deux d'entre nous étaient toujours représentés dans l'œuvre, le troisième regardait, et peignait. Le fait que nous travaillions à trois, au sein d'un collectif, était

au commencement une déclaration d'ordre conceptuel. Ce discours était important pour nous à l'époque. Aujourd'hui, nous ne sommes plus qu'un auteur<sup>8</sup>. » Cette évolution auctoriale prit corps dans des changements concrets et formels : « Nous primes des décisions radicales, l'huile disparut complètement de nos installations. Nous continuâmes à peindre, mais seulement à l'aquarelle. Ces études devinrent progressivement plus importantes, elles devinrent notre moyen de communication et notre vivier d'idées<sup>9</sup> »... et leur œuvres gagnèrent en subtilité. L'ensemble de ces dessins dits préparatoires, ou projectifs, en ce qu'ils peuvent donner naissance à de nouveaux objets ou environnements, constituent une riche correspondance visuelle devenue décisive dans la méthodologie du groupe, laquelle vaut finalement pour elle-même, comme processus constitutif, rétroactivement, de ses producteurs : l'œuvre produit son auteur. [...]

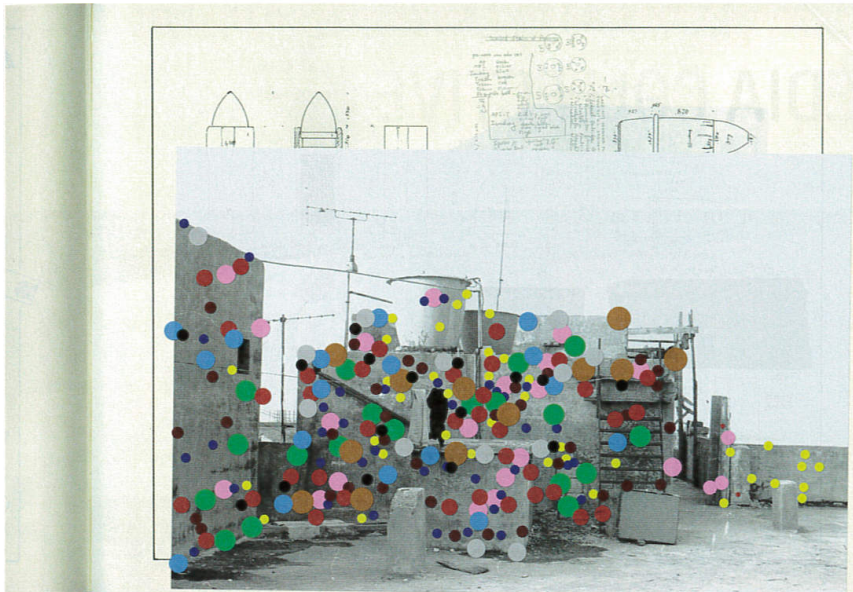


CAS-LIMITE

Dans un urgent rappel à la nécessité de concevoir l'histoire comme une production collective, l'Atlas Group, fondé en 1999, constitua de vastes archives sur le thème de la guerre du Liban, qui sévit de 1975 à 1991. Soucieux d'informer et d'entretenir une mémoire collective trop souvent sujette à la manipulation d'intérêts particuliers, le groupe publia en ligne l'ensemble des documents produits entre 1989 et 2004. [...] Un corpus central toutefois constitue la base du projet : le « dossier Fakhouri », du nom du célèbre historien de la guerre civile, nous dit-on. Le groupe déroule en réalité un récit conceptuel énoncé par un seul individu, Walid Raad, abordant de manière radicale, à travers la fiction d'une collectivité, le problème de l'unité d'une population divisée et meurtrie. Mêlant avec une ambiguïté déconcertante fait avéré et fiction, l'institutionnalisation imaginaire de sa démarche permet à l'artiste libano-américain de désamorcer, tout en se l'appropriant, l'autorité du discours officiel, comme en témoignent, non sans humour noir, ses conférences dérivées de *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, conférant une nature autant visuelle que performative à sa fiction archivale. La construction d'une telle identité collective traduit en dernière instance le caractère idéologique de tout corps d'archive, quelque impartial qu'il paraisse. Au fond, il ne s'agit pas pour l'artiste d'établir ici un bilan objectif de ces années sombres, mais bien plutôt de parvenir à ériger une instance impersonnelle porteuse de la multiplicité des voix constitutives du réel et de ses contingences. Ainsi, le collectif autodéclaré de Walid Raad réactive, avec d'autant plus de vivacité qu'il constitue un cas-limite, l'interrogation autour de la notion même d'auteur présente dans tout collectif d'artistes. Loin d'une inversion collectiviste ou sociologisante du mythe de l'individualité autonome, la collectivité fictive de l'Atlas Group renvoie en vérité à la collectivité réelle de l'œuvre contemporaine, de sa genèse à sa réception, dont l'auteur, individuel ou collectif, se révèle le producteur impersonnel et oblique.

Dans un contexte où une importance croissante est accordée au processus de production artistique au détriment de son produit, les rares investigations critiques autour du collectif d'artistes proprement dit ne manquent pas de mettre en scène de manière récurrente l'antagonisme des conceptions stratégiques (ou éthiques) et purement esthétiques ou formalistes de l'art. Toutes deux, néanmoins, semblent se rejoindre sur l'identification du collectif d'artistes en tant que structure d'avant-garde. Or, si le collectif d'artistes, suivant notre hypothèse, est bien issu de la désintégration des principes modernistes, comment saurait-il s'accommoder de cette notion de structure d'avant-garde, motif moderniste par excellence ? Nous affirmons au contraire que la simple éthique qui impose le renoncement à une signature personnelle ne saurait désormais suffire à établir une quelconque légitimité artistique. La question du collectif nous conduit alors à réactiver celle de l'évaluation critique de l'œuvre dans son rapport au réel : au fond, ce n'est pas tant la question de la genèse auctoriale de l'œuvre, mais plutôt la dialectique de l'autonomie et de l'hétéronomie de l'art, et la capacité d'une certaine création contemporaine collective à la penser *in concreto*, qui resurgit à la faveur de l'analyse historique et critique du collectif d'artistes.

The Atlas Group (1989-2004)  
*Notebook Volume 38: Already  
Been in a Lake of Fire... plate  
57/58*  
1991  
30 x 42 cm  
Court. Walid Raad et Steir-Semler  
Gallery, Beyrouth/Hambourg

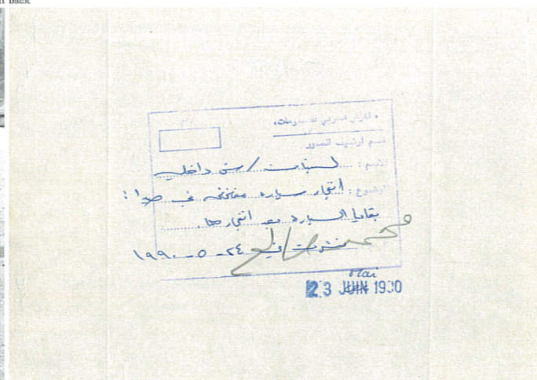


The Atlas Group (1989-2004)  
*Let's be honest, the weather  
helped (USA)*  
1998  
Court. Walid Raad et Steir-Semler  
Gallery, Beyrouth/Hambourg

The Atlas Group (1989-2004)  
*My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair:  
Engines*  
2001  
Court. Walid Raad et Steir-Semler  
Gallery, Beyrouth/Hambourg



front back



<sup>1</sup> The Bruce High Quality Foundation, «The Bruce High Quality Foundation, the official arbiter of the estate of Bruce High Quality, is dedicated to the preservation of the legacy of the late social sculptor, Bruce High Quality», dans *The Bruce High Quality Foundation Foundation and Other Ideas*, BHOQFU Press, 2008, p. 55-56.

<sup>2</sup> «No one gets in, no one gets out», cité dans «An Interview with The RAL by Wayne Baerwaldt and Joseph R. Wolin», dans *The Royal Art Lodge: Ask the Dust—dictionary of received ideas*, Drawing Center / Power Plant, 2003, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Art & Language, «We aimed to be amateurs», co-écrit avec Charles Harrison, dans Alexander Alberro et Blake Stimson (éd.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, The MIT Press, 1999, p. 448.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Gilbert, «Art & Language and the Institutional Form», dans Blake Stimson et Gregory Sholette (éd.), *Collectivism After Modernism: the Art of Social Imagination since 1945*, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Harrison, «A Guide to the Exhibition», *Art & Language in Practice*, Fundacio Antoni Tàpies, 1999, cité dans Brigit Eusterschule, *Kollektiv Kreativität / Collective Creativity*, Revolver / Archiv für Aktuelle Kunst, 2005, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, «Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions», dans *October*, vol. 55, hiver 1990, p. 105-143, où le critique qualifie les activités de Art & Language de «quêtes autoritaires d'orthodoxie» (p. 107).

<sup>7</sup> WHW, «New Outlines of the Possible», Brigit Eusterschule, *Collective Creativity*, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Los Carpinteros, entretien avec Rosa Lowinger, *Sculpture Magazine*, décembre 1999, vol. 18, no 10.

<sup>9</sup> Los Carpinteros, entretien de juillet 2003 reproduit dans *Los Carpinteros*, Institute for Research in Art/Contemporary Art Museum (Tampa) / Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (La Havane), 2003, p. 124-125.

«Brève histoire du collectif d'artiste(s) depuis 1967» a été publié dans les *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, n°111, printemps 2010. Nous remercions Jean-Pierre Criqui, rédacteur en chef des *Cahiers*, ainsi que les Éditions du Centre Pompidou d'avoir autorisé la publication de ces extraits. Le titre, le chapeau et les intertitres sont de la rédaction.

## Les Inrockuptibles

### Occupy New York

**Une vision de Big Apple déclinée sur fond de trompe-l'œil et de cartons à pizza.**

C'est une trilogie new-yorkaise qu'esquisse Reena Spaulings à la galerie Chantal Crousel. Véritable roman à elle seule, personnage de fiction inventé par le collectif Bernadette Corporation avant de se métamorphoser en galerie et de s'implanter dans le Lower East Side, Reena Spaulings incarne une nouvelle vision de l'artiste, néoconceptuelle et plurielle. Chez Chantal Crousel, histoire de brouiller encore les pistes, Reena Spaulings s'est associée à Catherine Feff, une artiste française pas vraiment identifiée dans le champ de l'art, mais vraie businesswoman, détentrice du record mondial du plus grand trompe-l'œil. Elle présente ici une vue panoramique et industrielle de New York qui sert de toile de fond, au propre comme au figuré, à toute l'exposition. Car le motif décliné par Reena Spaulings and Co est bien celui de New York. La ville d'avant le 11 Septembre, érectile et bleu limpide, mais aussi le New York de la prolifération malade et sanguinaire (la microscopique punaise de lit chromée et "punaisée" au mur, qui rappelle l'invasion massive des fameux *bed bugs* de l'été 2010). Autre image d'Epinal convoquée : celle des indignés de Wall Street brandissant leurs slogans sur des cartons à pizza. Mais ici, pas de mots d'ordre. Disparus les "99%" et les mises en cause des "banksters", ne reste que le support, les fameux cartons à pizza transformés en monochromes, recouverts de peinture à l'huile bleu nuit ou d'une émulsion orangée signée Farrow and Ball, la très hype marque de peinture anglaise.

**Claire Moulène**

**Occupy Wall Street** de Reena Spaulings, jusqu'au 14 janvier à la galerie Chantal Crousel, 10, rue Charlot, Paris III<sup>e</sup>, [www.crousel.com](http://www.crousel.com)

Courtesy galerie Chantal Crousel, photo Florian Klément



**Enigma 4 de Reena Spaulings, 2011**

Claire Moulène  
*Occupy New York*

Les Inrockuptibles, N° 840, January 4, 2012, p. 85.

# Art Since 1900

## 2010<sub>b</sub>

French artist Claire Fontaine, whose “operation” by two human assistants is itself an explicit division of labor, dramatizes the economies of art in a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida: the show marks the emergence of the avatar as a new form of artistic subjecthood.

2000–2010

Since Marcel Duchamp invented the first readymades in the teens of the twentieth century, using found and often mass-produced commodities in works of art has become as widespread as figure drawing once was for painters. There are two justifications most frequently given for presenting commodities in the place of art. First, based on often-quoted statements by Duchamp, it is said that the artist’s choice of an object is what matters in making a thing into an art work—that, by definition, artists are authorized to legitimize virtually anything as art, ranging from a bicycle wheel to a snow shovel, to take two examples from Duchamp’s oeuvre, merely by calling it so. A second justification supplements this first: commodities themselves carry powerful visual messages that may be manipulated—even “spoken”—as a ready-made symbolic language, as when Robert Rauschenberg or Andy Warhol appropriated the Coca-Cola logo as an American icon. Since the late seventies, when the question of gender’s social codes began to emerge among artists such as Cindy Sherman or Barbara Kruger, a third understanding of the readymade emerged: stereotypes were identified and re-presented as expressions of what might be called the “human readymade.” Sherman, for instance, embodied stereotypes of feminine Hollywood protagonists or supporting actresses in her *Film Stills*, while Kruger appropriated such stereotypes by utilizing found photographs as the ground for trenchant graphic texts that operated as disarming “captions.” Both artists reframed the “human readymade” in order to challenge the presumption that femininity is constituted from a menu of biologically determined attributes.

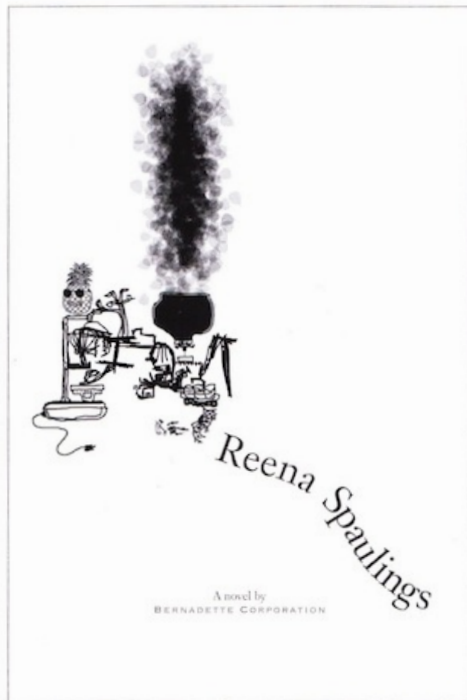
In the United States, the struggles and controversies around identity politics that characterized a good deal of art during the late eighties and nineties, and which were greatly indebted to the strategies of impersonation and appropriation pioneered by artists such as Sherman and Kruger, ultimately resulted in an effort to possess and recode such stereotypes, or alternately to express the discomfort or rage at being misrepresented, or *dispossessed*, by them. Hence the work of Adrian Piper or Lorna Simpson confronted viewers with their presumed stereotypical preconceptions about African-Americans in an effort to move beyond such ready-made characterizations. In other words, like Duchamp’s so-called nominalism, where a commodity was con-

stituted as a work of art by being named such, much of the art associated with identity politics pivoted on the authorization to *name*—in this case, to name an identity, rather than a work of art. More recently, a distinctly different strategy pertaining to personhood has emerged among artists who introduce fictional characters as readymades—or *avatars*—into a variety of real and virtual environments. Like the surrogate actors in video games also known as avatars, these artist-built characters have no essential link to an existing person or identity per se. Instead, they are remote-controlled avatars who, like their virtual cousins in the game world, may travel to places or articulate meanings that would be inaccessible to any flesh-and-blood individual. In other words, avatars “free” artists from identity, allowing them to propose forms of selfhood, or subjectivity, that may be collective, imaginary, or utopian.

### Artist Inc.

The term *corporate* is typically associated with business enterprises, but it can signify any organized group endeavor. Under the conditions of contemporary media society, corporations of every type distinguish themselves aesthetically through the adoption of “visual identities” (that is, coordinated design campaigns encompassing logos, merchandising display, and advertising), and empathically through representation by a leader or paid spokesperson. Artists who wish to de-emphasize their own individuality—and the powerful myth of artistic creativity it entails—have also formed corporate entities that function as a kind of anthropomorphic brand, or avatar. The Bernadette Corporation, for instance, is an artists’ group founded in 1994 and known for its forays into fashion, art dealing, and activism, whose flexible model of the “holding company” allows it to shuttle between the art world and politics like other collectives established in the eighties, such as ACT-UP or the Guerrilla Girls. In 2004, the Bernadette Corporation published a novel titled *Reena Spaulings*, which serves as a kind of manifesto or a general theory of avatars [1]. In it, the fictional adventures of the title character, Reena Spaulings, indicate two forms of image power: first, the capacity of images to absorb human beings into pictures through *identification*, and

▲ 1918, 1960a, 1961, 1996 ● 1960c ■ 1977 ◆ 1993c ▲ 1987



1 • (above) Bernadette Corporation, cover of *Reena Spaulings*, 2004

2 • (right, top and bottom) Reena Spaulings, "The One and Only", Sutton Lane Gallery, London, 2005  
Installation view

second, the *projection* of powerful representations into real situations in order to manipulate events.

In the opening chapter of *Reena Spaulings*, Reena, working as a guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, falls into an extended meditation on Édouard Manet's famous painting *Woman with a Parrot* (1866) hanging in the gallery where she's on duty. Over and over again, the book narrates encounters between persons and pictures where the differences between them begin to blur: "She stood up a little straighter and fixed her eyes on a Manet on the opposite wall. The woman in the painting had Reena's blank pallor and below-the-radar presence. Reena could be a Manet, one of these thinking pictures you can't see through, no matter how long you stare at them." Reena becomes precisely such a "thinking picture" when Maris Parings, a flamboyant entrepreneur, recognizes her particular brand of bohemian chic and transforms her into an underwear model, giving her new social mobility as a celebrity (that is, a human picture or avatar) and allowing her to build new communities through a delirious sequence of live and mediated representations. If Reena meets and recognizes herself as a picture in her encounter with the Manet, and *becomes* a picture in her metamorphosis into fashion model, in the third paradigm



2000-2010



The avatar as artistic strategy | 2010b 765



2000-2010

explored by *Reena Spaulings*, such personified pictures begin to operate as agents. This shift into image-agency—or the realm of the avatar—occurs most explicitly in a staged riot produced by Parings' company, *Vive la Corpse*, and titled *Cinema of the Damned* (or a *Battle on Broadway*), in which a performance starring Reena and a full cast of insurgents in the street shades into an actual riot. When images act, *Reena Spaulings* seems to assert, the fictional has real consequences as a kind of catalyst, and art attains the potential to function as politics—in other words, as an avatar.

Indeed, in 2004, the same year the novel was published, the fictional character *Reena Spaulings* began to operate as an avatar in the world—both as an art dealer, running *Reena Spaulings Gallery* in downtown New York (founded by the writer John Kelsey and the artist Emily Sundblad), and as an artist who has contributed works to group exhibitions, staged her own one-person shows, and even entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Spaulings'* art objects are sometimes produced in collaboration with gallery artists, and sometimes composed of materials drawn from the ordinary gallery "artifacts," such as guest books or tablecloths from opening dinners. In her first solo show, "The One and Only" in 2005, she introduced a powerfully iconic genre of objects: various types of flags mounted on ordinary household flagpoles [2]. The flag is of course a special kind of representation whose purpose is to assert sovereignty. By posing as a flag, the work of art reveals its unconscious imperialist drive: to claim space and demand recognition. This gesture is echoed by the flag's equally "imperializing" absorption of art's two classic media—painting as a colored surface, and sculpture as a three-dimensional object (these works even give a nod to time-based media, since the point of a flag is to move with changing currents of air). In short, *Reena Spaulings* began her public career as an artist by planting a flag: she would occupy space in the physical and informational circuits of the art world, and she would embrace as many media as possible in what *Rosalind Krauss* has called the "postmedium condition." A third impulse supplemented these first two: *Reena's* insistence on being *both* artist and art dealer. Instead of entering *into* an art world, one might say that *Reena Spaulings became* an art world.

### Breaking the division

Since the sixties a vast number of new galleries, art fairs, biennial exhibitions, and museums—often designed by celebrity architects—has emerged, causing the art world to grow so large and so spectacular that it functions as a branch of the entertainment and tourist industries. Such are the general conditions that *Bernadette Corporation*, as well as other avatars like the Paris-based *Claire Fontaine* (whose name is drawn from the well-known French notebook company *Clairefontaine*, and who is "operated" by her human assistants, *Fulvia Carnevale* and *James Thornhill*) responds to. It is no longer enough for an artist to make objects in a studio and wait passively for these works to enter the public sphere—rather, as *Reena Spaulings* implies, the entire system of



3 • Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere (Romany)*, 2010  
Emerald-green argon glass, framework, electronic transformer and cables.  
10 x 228 x 5 (37, x 897, x 17-c)

production, distribution, sales, display, and critical reception that constitutes an art world must be, as economists put it, vertically integrated. Indeed, *Claire Fontaine*, whose work often echoes that of other artists—as when she makes flags recalling the work of *Reena Spaulings*—is profoundly concerned with questions of labor. As she states in a 2006 interview with *John Kelsey*, "The division of labor is *the* fundamental problematic of our work. *Claire Fontaine* grew out of the impossibility of accepting the division between intellectual and manual work; the art world is best adapted for fleeing this sort of hierarchy." *Claire Fontaine* understands herself as a ready-made artist, but more profoundly, she explores a division of labor that increasingly characterizes globalized economic systems: the separation between manual production, which may take place in locations and cultures very remote from the intellectual labor that commands it from metropolitan centers. Indeed, her projects often acknowledge the wider geopolitical conditions of global labor, which habitually crosses national borders through migration—legal and illegal—and corporate outsourcing. In *Foreigners Everywhere* [3], for example, which was exhibited in a window in East Jerusalem in 2008, such ethnic/national division is directly enunciated, as *Claire Fontaine* recounts in a 2008 interview: "The Hebrew and Arabic translations of St Paul's sentence 'Divide the division,' or 'Divide the divided,' flash on and off in the two languages alternatively, [on neon signs] one on top of the other.... Of course, the violence of the translation is the core of our gesture: in Arabic the sentence sounds more like 'Break the division.'"

Since artists are among those few persons left (corporate or otherwise) who habitually span manual and intellectual labor in a single individual, their "mode of production" may serve as a laboratory for questioning the division of labor that characterizes global economics more broadly. Indeed, as the philosopher *Bruno Latour* has argued, in a networked world, the local and the global

are always directly connected, usually existing side-by-side (he gives train lines as an example of how even a remote station in the countryside is directly linked to a vast transportation infrastructure). Bernadette Corporation and Claire Fontaine resist displacing the mechanisms of globalization onto forces or conditions external to them: art does not *reflect* global division of labor, but rather the artist herself is formed by those divisions. It is therefore not surprising that Claire Fontaine's major 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, Florida, was titled "Economies" and included work that explicitly mined the financial relationship between the artist and her gallery. Like many specialized markets based on highly customized products, such as fashion or graphic design, the art world's economy is largely based on trust (despite the open secret that artists are often exploited economically by their galleries and that collectors are frequently slow in paying for works of art). "Economies" included a series of framed blank checks—each titled "Trust" with the name of its signatory in parentheses—issued by several of Claire Fontaine's galleries from around the world. If a collector "breaks the glass" and fills in the check, s/he destroys Fontaine's work, while simultaneously profiting from it, and perhaps bankrupting the gallery in question. Of course there is a parallel dilemma for the art dealer who would have to decide whether or not to honor the check.

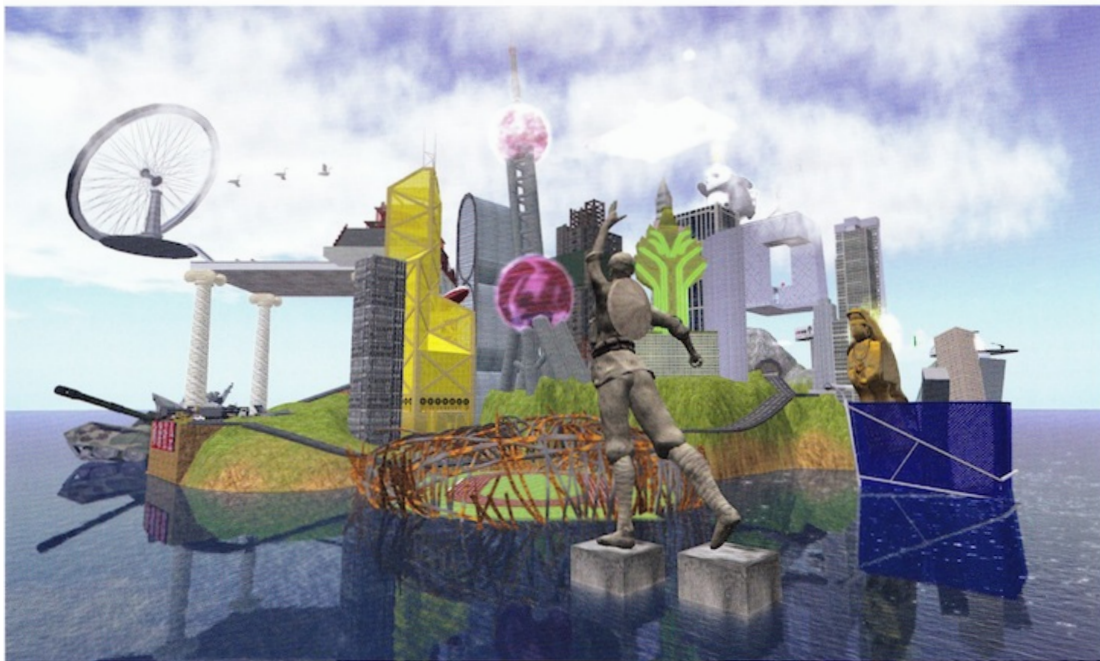
The success of an avatar lies in its capacity to operate within a particular world (it would, after all, be impossible to "see" the

global operations of a multinational corporation all at once, but it is easy to understand Claire Fontaine's allegory of *carte blanche*). Making a successful avatar thus entails inhabiting a particular world, by mastering and exhibiting its rules of behavior.

#### Enter the picture

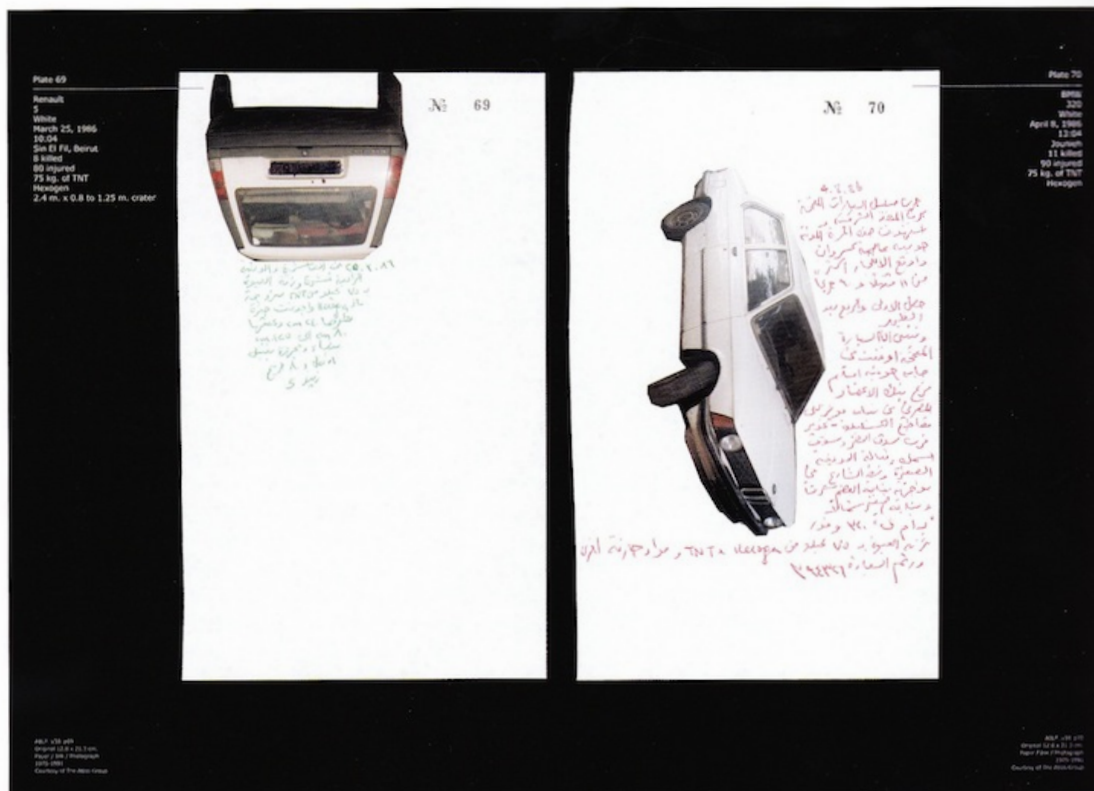
The Chinese artist Cao Fei (born 1978), for instance, has constructed a three-dimensional simulation of contemporary China—her RMB City—in Second Life, a "community" launched by the Linden Lab in 2003 that allows users (known as residents) to build and inhabit a wide range of invented environments. There is a great aesthetic difference between Bernadette Corporation and Claire Fontaine's Conceptual art-inspired techniques and the lush animations of Cao's elegiac videos set in Second Life, which recall Japanese *anime* and the worldwide culture of graphic literature and cartoons [4]. What most distinguishes Cao's art, however, is the viewer's *immersion* in her image of RMB City. The allure of Second Life, after all, is for participants to *collectively enter into a picture*: the game itself is a social experiment in how a group of "residents" drawn from all over the world may together inhabit the same virtual space. Although the prevailing atmosphere of Second Life is one of pleasurable escape—as though its residents are enjoying an island vacation—businesses, art events, and political actions have all taken root there, and a genuine economy is facilitated by the

2000–2010



4 • Cao Fei, *The Birth of RMB City*, 2009  
Second Life environment

2000-2010



5 • The Atlas Group / Walid Road, Notebook Volume 38: *Already Been in a Lake of Fire [cat.A]\_Fakhouri\_Notebooks\_38\_055-071*, 1999/2003  
Detail, from a set of nine plates, each 31.3 x 43.3 (12 1/2 x 17), edition of 7 + 1AP

game's currency, the Linden Dollar. Cao's RMB City includes several of the signature "icons" of China, ranging from a floating panda to a suspended model of Rem Koolhaas's design for the Beijing headquarters of CCTV. But here the ready-made stereotype, unlike those proffered by the artists of appropriation and identity politics, is literally inhabitable: one can navigate within it as an environment and Cao's avatar, China Tracy, does so, as if physically leading her viewers through an allegory of the recent history of China, whose physical face seems to change daily and whose citizens' identities are under massive reconstruction as well.

The videos that lead us through RMB City are very beautiful, and the avatars one sees along the way are exotic: sometimes humanoid, sometimes not, sometimes dancing alone in elegant spasms, sometimes conversing intently in intimate pairs. But perhaps the most significant aspect of Cao's RMB City project is how it represents two kinds of movement indigenous to virtual worlds: first, a smooth gliding locomotion and, second, jump cuts from one location to another. Each type of motion offers a distinct alternative for navigating within pictures—either total absorption corresponding to the fantasy of frictionless Internet surfing and

immersive gaming; or instantaneous mobility banishing gravity and space to allow for sudden movement from one unrelated site to another. In both cases, virtual space suggests a world of sovereign privilege that, in Cao's RMB City, seems intimately related to the conditions of manic real-estate development in contemporary urban China—a condition marked by the frequent presence of rotating signs proclaiming Second Life "land" for sale.

#### The authority of visual information

As familiar as these two types of virtual locomotion are, it is important to explore and understand them, for as our everyday world begins to consist more and more of digital environments of various sorts, the question of how to *cohabit an image* becomes a pressing civic duty—thus giving new meaning to art history's traditional project of interpreting visual codes. Indeed, one of the most significant contemporary tasks in an era when photographs may be presented as evidence to justify the declaration of war (as Colin Powell did at the United Nations in 2002 in his capacity as the US secretary of state), and scientists make discoveries through simu-

▲ 2009c

lated visual models, is to interpret the meaning and veracity of pictures—to develop what is called “visual literacy.” The art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has used the term “parafiction” to describe various artistic projects that address this situation by playing with the often highly charged dividing line between fantasy and documentary. Among the best known of these are projects of the Lebanese artist Walid Raad (born 1967), operating under the guise of The Atlas Group, an entity invented by Raad devoted to documenting Lebanon’s recent history.

The Atlas Group has produced three types of documents, as catalogued in their online archive: “Type A—for files that contain documents that we produced and that we attribute to named imaginary individuals or organizations. Type FD—for files that contain documents that we produced and we attribute to anonymous individuals or organizations. Type AGP—for files that contain documents that we produced and that we attribute to The Atlas Group.” In other words, The Atlas Group produced an imaginary archive that pertains to real historical events. The Fakhouri File, for instance is a series of 226 notebooks and 2 films bequeathed to The Atlas Group in 1994 by Dr. Fadi Fakhouri, “the foremost historian of the Lebanese wars.” These documents give with one hand what they take away with the other, as in “Already Been in a Lake of Fire\_Notebook Volume 38,” which includes elegant collages including cut-outs of every model of car used as a car bomb between 1975 and 1991, as well as details of the explosion and its casualties [5]. These pieces are delirious and beautiful—the cars are arrayed at different angles in what seems like a vicious parody of their imminent explosion. But while the fact of car bombings is very real, this whimsical “document” is utterly imaginary—and thus proper authorization is *taken away*. History is shown as an aesthetic folly that leads viewers to examine—somewhat queasily—their assumptions about archival truth. And the fact that images must be authorized in order to claim truth-value is made abundantly clear.

The question of authorization is even more potently at play in the work of the Yes Men, a pair of artist-activists who have successfully posed as corporate spokesmen by creating websites that look official in order to attract actual invitations to speak at business conferences or as press representatives. Their most spectacular project to date was the announcement of “Jude Finisterra” (one of the Yes Men posing as a representative of the Dow Chemical Corporation) on BBC Television, that Dow would take responsibility for the devastating Union Carbide chemical spill in Bhopal, India, in 1984, for which the company had refused responsibility since buying Union Carbide in 2001 [6]. For a few hours, the world thought that a major corporation was to do the right thing: in Bhopal victims of the disaster rejoiced in (well-founded) disbelief, and in the West, Dow’s stock price plunged, the market instantly assuming the news to be accurate. In an integrated media circuit, where news reports are drawn from other news outlets and infinitely recirculated, even a few hours were enough for the story to circle the world—and of course when the deception emerged, the



6 • The Yes Men, *Dow Does the Right Thing*, 2004  
 Performance

backlash was equally swift and decisive. As avatars, the Yes Men not only literally reshaped the speech of a corporate giant (if only for a brief moment in time), but they demonstrated the manic circulation and recirculation of information that characterizes contemporary media. Both operations pivoted on how surprisingly easy it was to *authorize* information.

The avatars under discussion here fall into three categories: the *corporate*, whose purpose is to explore how artists reorganize their labor as a “vertically integrated” art world in microcosm; the *fantastic*, in which virtual spaces offer mythic forms of freedom of movement and association; and the *interventionist*, where parafictional “counterfeits,” either archives or characters, impinge on actual events. In each case, the question of an artist’s given identity is set aside in order to imagine forms of agency that no single person, acting alone, could affect.

FURTHER READING

- The Atlas Group, *The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness is Dead: Documents from the Fakhouri File in The Atlas Group Archive* (Cologne: Walther König, 2004)
- Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004)
- Eleanor Heartney, “Life Like,” *Art in America*, vol. 96, no. 5, May 2008, pp. 164–5, p. 208
- Ruba Katrib and Tom McDonough, *Claire Fontaine: Economies* (North Miami: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010)
- Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” *October*, no. 129, Summer 2009, pp. 51–84

2000–2010

## néo-conceptuels : la redistribution des rôles

Michel Gauthier

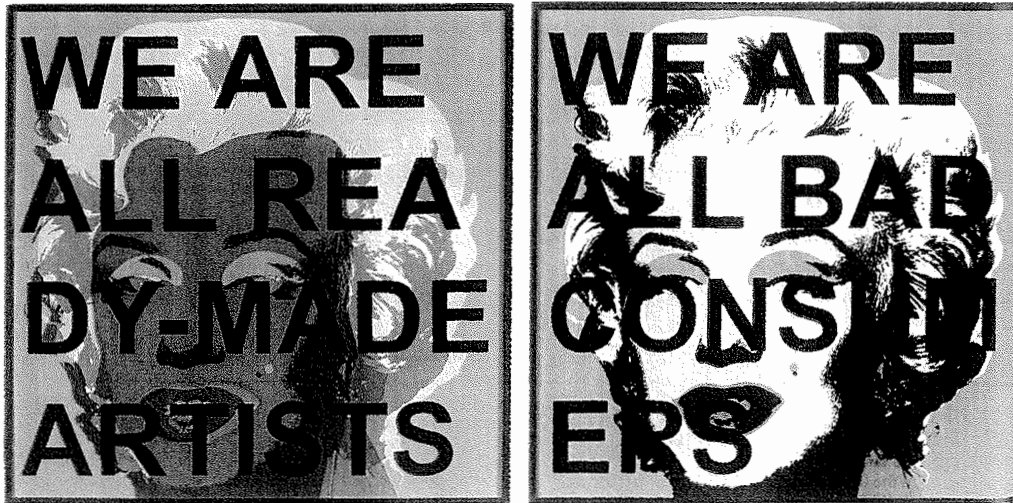
L'apparition, depuis quelques années, de certaines entités aux activités multiples, comme Reena Spaulings ou Continuous Project, donne un prolongement à la redistribution des rôles ouverte par l'art conceptuel historique, dont nombre d'artistes actuels ont choisi de rejouer ou d'examiner les propositions. Les néo-conceptuels sont souvent de nouveaux appropriationnistes.

■ On se souvient des trois propositions que Lawrence Weiner formula en 1969, occasionnant une rupture paradigmatique comme l'art n'en connaît pas si souvent : 1/ *L'œuvre peut être réalisée par l'artiste* – ce qui constituait, durant une longue période, le droit commun de la pratique artistique ; 2/ *Elle peut être réalisée par quelqu'un d'autre que l'artiste* – ce qui n'est pas loin de représenter, aujourd'hui, la situation la plus courante ; 3/ *Elle peut ne pas être réalisée* – avec laquelle s'ouvre l'âge conceptuel de l'art. Il semble que

certaines péripéties récentes conduisent à revoir la formulation de certaines de ces propositions historiques.

Ainsi la deuxième pourrait-elle s'accroître de la précision suivante : *L'œuvre peut être réalisée par quelqu'un d'autre que l'artiste, et notamment par le galeriste*. Dans une des scènes les plus fameuses du magnifique film de Jacques Demy, *les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), on voyait un galeriste, plaisamment nommé Guillaume Lancien, faire éclater au pistolet des sachets de peinture au-dessus

d'une toile vierge. Le galeriste se faisait ainsi C'est également ce qui s'est plus récemment produit avec Reena Spaulings. On connaît la galerie new-yorkaise Reena Spaulings Fine Arts, un marchand d'art comme un autre. Peu après apparut l'artiste Reena Spaulings, qui, milieu de la présente décennie, commença à exposer des œuvres – peintures, draps, nappes de table et autres tourniquets de cart postales. Si l'art ne saurait plus être autre chose qu'une marchandise – rappelons-nous le texte du carton d'invitation de la première



Claire Fontaine, « Untitled, (We are all, I & It) », 2006. Peinture, crayon, gouache, sérigraphie sur papier 2 x (91 x 91 cm) (Collection privée, Court de l'artiste, T293, Naples, galeries Air de Paris, Paris, et Chantal Crousel, Paris). Aerial painting, graphite and gouache, silkscreen on paper

Conceptual artists are  
mystics rather than rationalists.  
They leap to conclusions  
that logic cannot reach.

## Around and Beyond Neo-Conceptualism

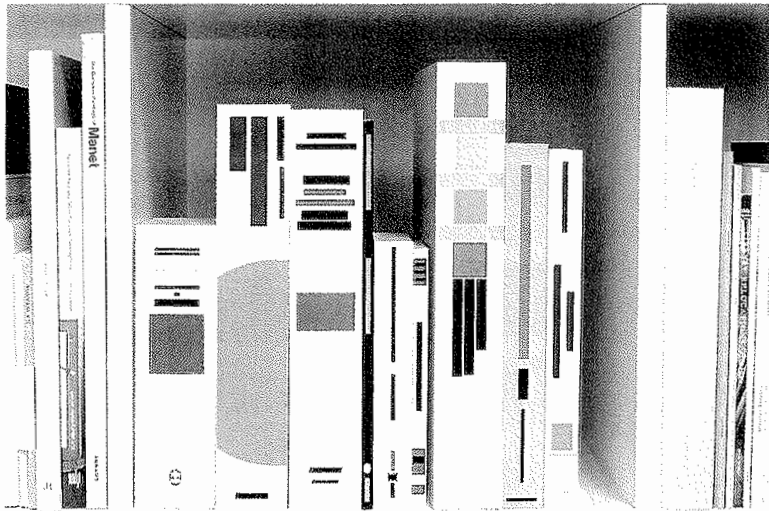
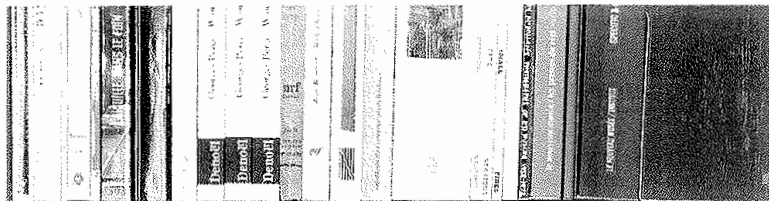
Over the past few years a number of multifarious endeavors such as Reena Spaulings and Continuous Project have taken the recasting of roles begun by historical Conceptualism to a new level. Many artists today are engaged in reappraising that current or producing new takes on it. The Neo-Conceptualists, it seems, are appropriating the appropriators.

Lawrence Weiner's famous three statements formulated in 1968 marked a paradigm shift, the kind of rupture that does not occur very often in art: "1 The artist may construct the piece." This was the rule in the practice of art for a long time. "2 The piece may be fabricated" by someone other than an artist, which comes pretty close to describing the most common situation today. "3

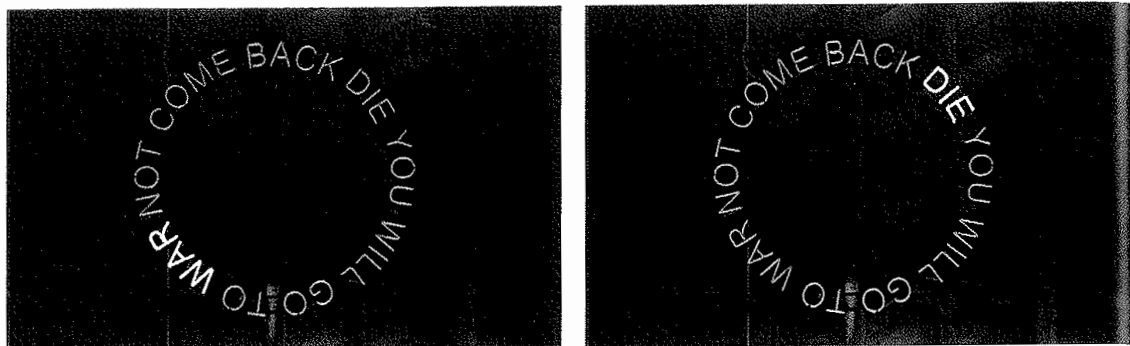
exposition, en 1964, de Marcel Broodthaers : « Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie », il apparaît pleinement légitime que, finalement, ce soit le spécialiste de la marchandise, c'est-à-dire le marchand, qui endosse le rôle de l'artiste.

### Le marchand en artiste

Sous cet angle, Reena Spaulings est une séquelle logique et réfléchie du warholisme : la récente série picturale des *Flowers* ne peut qu'évoquer celles que Warhol réalisa à partir de 1964 ; et les *Money Paintings*, toiles horizontales dont le rectangle, la composition et les couleurs évoquent les billets de banque, sont les intelligentes héritières des *Dollar Paintings* (les premières datent de 1962). Dans tous les sens de la formule, c'est une peinture de marchand à laquelle s'adonne Reena Spaulings. Avec *The Dealers* nous sont proposés des portraits à l'huile de personnalités du monde de l'art, obtenus à partir de photographies téléchargées depuis les pages *people* de sites comme celui de *Artforum*. Les *Enigmas* jouent la même partie, mais de façon encore plus critique. Cette fois, ce ne sont pas les visages des marchands et autres intermédiaires du marché de l'art qui sont figurés, mais les nappes tachées, sur lesquelles ceux-ci ont diné à l'issue de tel ou tel vernissage, que précise le cartel du tableau. Les à-côtés des à-côtés de l'art deviennent le centre du dispositif, les objets mêmes de l'exposition, en une impeccable caricature du processus de fétichisation en quoi consiste peut-être le marché de l'art et même tout marché. Le titre de ces œuvres, *Enigmas*, ne manque pas d'évoquer le « caractère énigmatique » de la marchandise dont parlait Marx dans un célèbre passage du *Capital* (1). Cette énigme tient dans la faculté qu'ont les marchandises de prendre « l'aspect d'êtres indépendants », de dissimuler les rapports sociaux qui les ont déterminées : la nappe souillée qui se transforme en une peinture abstraite, une marchandise faisant l'abstraction des relations de production qui l'ont vu naître – ici, l'offre par une galerie d'un dîner aux personnes qui, directement ou indirectement, vont permettre le commerce dudit produit – pour ne plus montrer que sa valeur. Si l'objet



Ci-dessus : Yann Sérandour. « Fantômes ». 2008. Impression numérique sur MDF. 11 éléments. Dimensions variables. (Coll. privée, Nantes. Court. gb agency, Paris). En haut à gauche, Mario Garcia Torres. « Sing Like Baldessari ». 2004. (Court. Jan Mot, Bruxelles) « Ghosts. » Digital print on MDF. Dimensions variable



Claire Fontaine « Ibis redibus non morieris in bello » 2006 Dimensions variables. Néons, lampes, programmeur électronique  
(Court. de l'artiste et galeries Air de Paris et Chantal Crousel, Paris, Ph. J. Thornhill) Neon, electronic programmer, cabling, framework, nine lamp fittings and lamps

d'art est toujours la réification de l'acte qui l'a engendré, il devient dans le cas présent la réification du procès de sa marchandisation. Quand on sait qu'avant d'être une galerie, Reena Spaulings aura été l'héroïne d'un roman écrit par Bernadette Corporation (2), un collectif figurant parmi les artistes dont les œuvres sont vendues par Reena Spaulings Fine Art, on mesure dans quels lacs la figure de l'auteur et

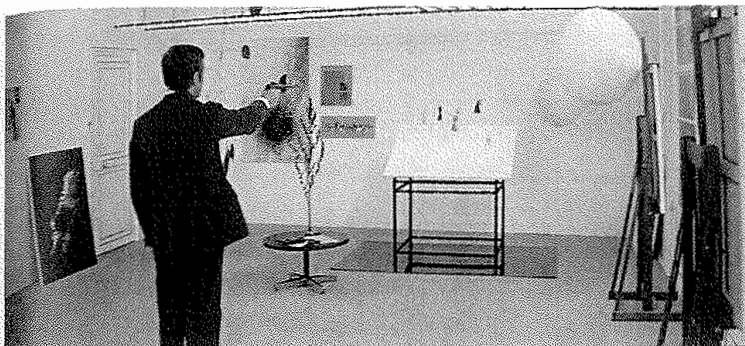
la distribution classique des rôles sur la scène de l'art peuvent alors se perdre. Et l'on songe bien sûr à l'une des œuvres les plus connues de l'agence Les ready made appartient à tout le monde<sup>9</sup>, ouverte en 1988 par Philippe Thomas (3), qui, sous le slogan publicitaire « Histoire de l'art cherche personnages », appelait à « une totale révision du droit au registre des auteurs » (*La Pétition de principe*, 1988)

Toutefois, ce ne sont pas la dimension borgésienne ou les jeux pseudonymiques à la Pessoa qui retiennent l'attention dans les activités de Reena Spaulings, mais le mime par anticipation d'un modèle d'intégration verticale qui pourrait s'emparer du monde de l'art : une même structure assurant les fonctions respectives de l'artiste, du marchand, du critique, voire du personnage de fiction. Et si « Reena Spaulings » est l'invention qui permet à quelque chose comme une collectivisation du travail artistique, de mise à distance des subjectivités et expressions individuelles de se manifester, ce nom pourrait aussi être une marque : faudrait-il se réjouir de voir les collectionneurs acheter une peinture ou une sculpture de marque, comme on acquiert une automobile Honda, un téléviseur Philips, de l'eau de toilette Christian Dior ou un cahier Clairefontaine ? Il y a dans l'art de Reena Spaulings une distance, la possibilité d'une pluralité de lectures ainsi qu'une absence de didactisme que l'on ne retrouve pas dans les productions d'une autre « artiste collective » et readymade, dont il est pourtant organiquement proche et avec laquelle il partage un certain nombre de convictions politiques : Claire Fontaine (4).

En effet, trop souvent, les réalisations de Claire Fontaine semblent simplement incarner le parti d'une certaine bien-pensance, pratiquer un business des belles causes qui n'a en réalité d'autre efficace que de donner bonne conscience à ces acteurs du monde de l'art qui tachent les nappes lors des dîners de vernissage. Une phrase tirée de *Je hais les matins*, le livre de Jean-Marc Rouillon (5), ex-membre d'Action directe, ou les mots « Palestine occupée », écrits au moyen de milliers d'allumettes enflammées le jour du vernissage à la galerie Dvir (Tel-Aviv), à la fin de 2008 (6), viendront heureusement rassurer ces maladroits convives sur le sérieux de leurs occupations. Portraits warholiens de Mao et de Marilyn, ou néons de Nauman, Claire Fontaine arraisonne telles formes léguées par l'histoire pour les lester d'un propos qui les transformera en



Continuous Project #1, Maccarone Inc., New York, May 11, 2003  
(Court. Continuous Project : Ph. W. Guyton)



« Les Demoiselles de Rochefort » de Jacques Demy (© Cine-Tamaris - 1966) Jacques Demy's film "The Young Girls of Rochefort"

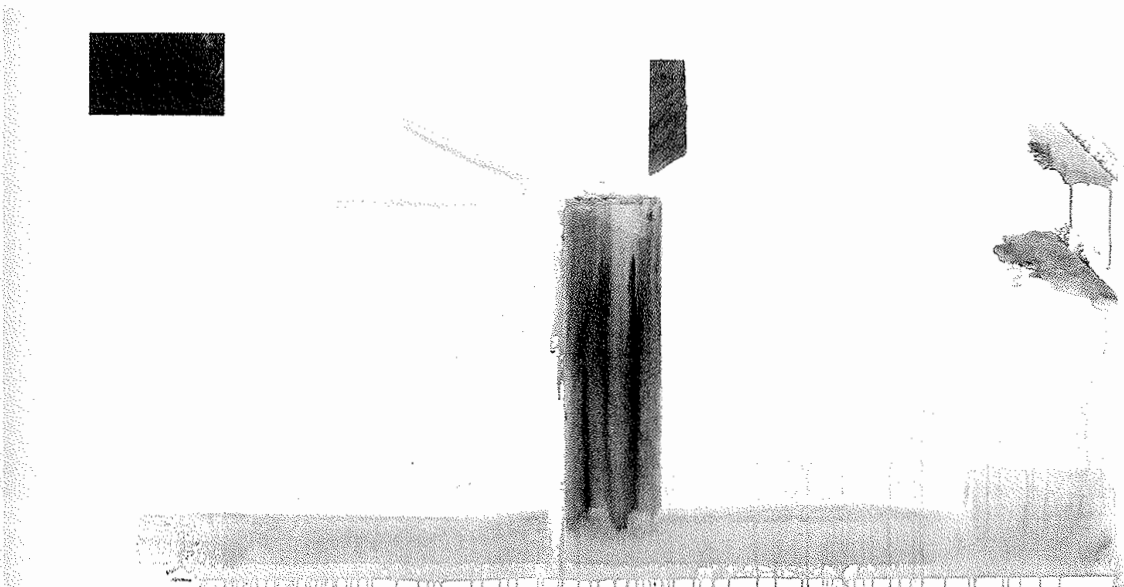
The work need not be built.”(1) With this latter statement, the conceptual period of art began. Perhaps some of these historic statements need to be reconsidered in light of recent events. The second, for instance, could be elaborated as follows: An artwork can be made by someone other than an artist, particularly an art dealer. In the famous scenes in Jacques Demy's magnificent film *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1967), an amusingly-named gallery owner, Guillaume Lancien, is seen shooting at bags of paint hanging over a blank canvas. The gallerist becoming an artist. The same thing happened more recently with Reena Spaulings. Reena Spaulings Fine Art was known as an art gallery like any other. Then came Reena Spaulings the artist, who in the middle of the

current decade began to show her own work—paintings, flags, tablecloths and other such fare. If it is no longer possible for art to be anything but a commodity—remember what Marcel Broodthaers wrote for the invitations to his first show in 1964, “I, too, asked myself ‘Why can't I sell something and become successful in life’”—it seems completely legitimate that a specialist in selling that commodity, or in other words, an art dealer, a merchant of art merchandise, should finally take on the role of artist.

#### The art dealer as artist

From that point of view, Reena Spaulings is a logical and self-conscious continuation of Andy Warhol. Her recent series of pictures called *Flowers* inevitably recalls Warhol's

similar sequence beginning in 1964. Her *Money Paintings*, horizontal canvases whose rectangle, composition and colors reference banknotes, are well thought-out heirs to the *Dollar Paintings* Warhol first made in 1962. Spaulings goes in for commodity painting figuratively and literally. *The Dealers* are oil portraits of merchants and other art world figures made from photos downloaded from the gossip columns of *Artforum* and similar Web sites. The *Enigmas* play the same game, but in an even more critical mode. This time what we see represented are not the faces of dealers and other art market middlemen but the dirty tablecloths left behind when they dined after one or another opening as specified by the painting's plaque. The perks enjoyed by people who are essentially the kibitzers of the art scene become the center of interest, the very objects of the exhibition, in an impeccable caricature of the process of fetishization that is perhaps the essence of the art market and even any market. The title of these pieces, *Enigmas*, inevitably recalls the “enigmatic character” of commodities Marx wrote about in a famous passage in *Capital*.(2) This enigma is the ability possessed by commodities to appear autonomous, to hide the social relations that have determined them. For example, a soiled tablecloth transformed into an abstract painting, a commodity in which the relations of production that created it are present only in an abstract and therefore invisible form—in this case a dinner held by a gallerist for people who



Reena Spaulings « Money Painting (50 Euro) » 2005 Technique mixte sur toile 91 x 178 cm (Court. Galerie chantal Crousel, Paris). Mixed media on canvas

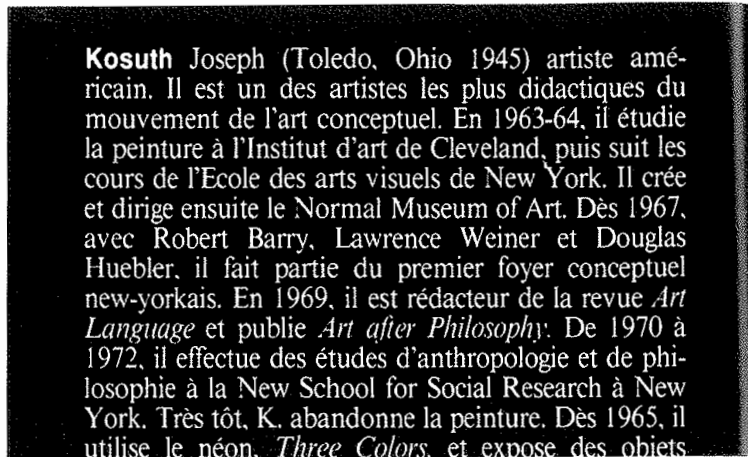


outils de communication idéologique. Et le propos savoureusement ambigu et déflationniste de 1967, « *The true artists helps the world by revealing mystic truths* », devient, en 2004, un complaisant « *The true artist products the most prestigious commodity*. »

La dévolution, ouverte par l'art conceptuel à d'autres que l'artiste, d'une partie des prérogatives qui lui appartenaient et le constat pop d'une réification marchande de l'œuvre d'art auront, dans leur articulation, conduit à l'intronisation du collectionneur – avec Philippe Thomas –, puis du galeriste – avec Reena Spaulings – en artiste.

### Logique de la reproduction

Dans les *Demoiselles de Rochefort*, le galeriste, plutôt qu'il les faisait, refaisait les œuvres. En effet, Lancien reprend les séances de tir avec lesquelles Niki de Saint Phalle est entrée dans l'histoire de l'art (7). Autrement dit, le galeriste des *Demoiselles* est l'un des tout premiers appropriationnistes, Elaine Sturtevant ne l'ayant précédé que de peu – ses premières appropriations datant de 1964 (Johns, Stella, Warhol). Sachons voir dans cet épisode de comédie musicale l'esquisse d'un rapport entre la redistribution des rôles sur la scène de l'art et la substitution d'une logique de la reproduction à celle de la production, rapport que la situation présente consacre. Depuis quelques années, la plupart des artistes qualifiés de néo-conceptuels le sont au moins autant parce que leurs travaux remettent en jeu les travaux d'artistes conceptuels antérieurs que parce

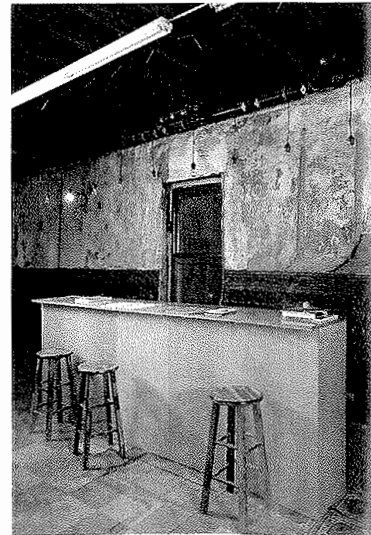
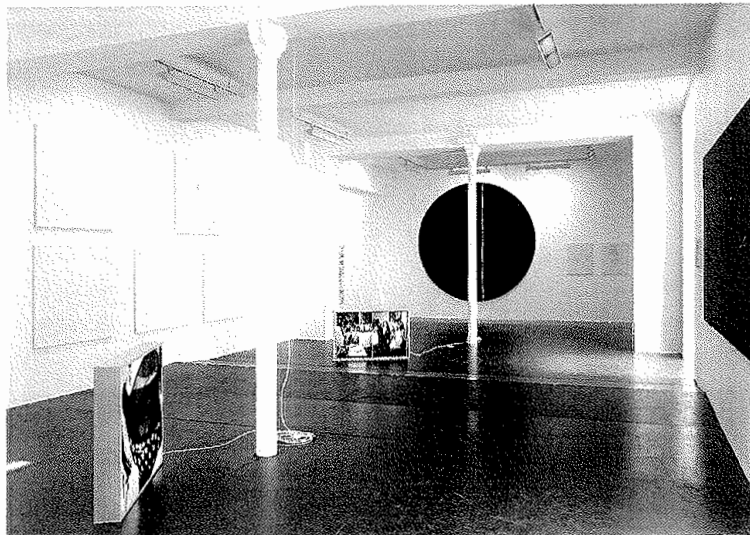


Yann Sérandour « Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Kosuth] » (détail) 2005. Tirage Lambda sur papier contrecollé sur aluminium 120 x 120 cm. (Coll. part., France, Court. gb agency, Paris) *Print on paper mounted on aluminum*

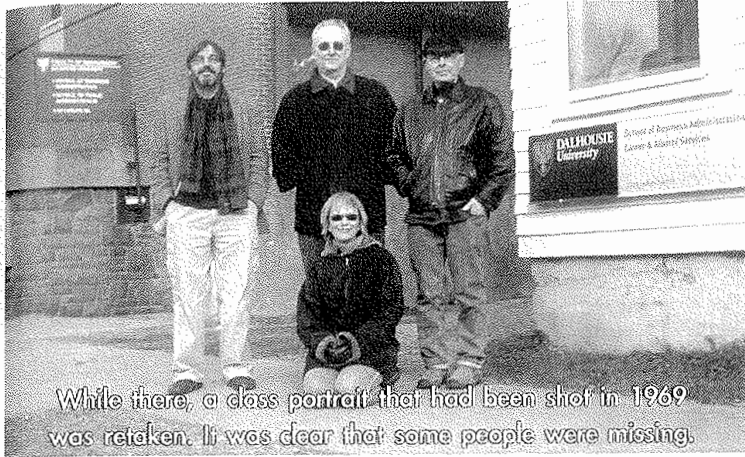
qu'ils témoigneraient d'une confiance dans les grands idéaux de l'art conceptuel historique – primat du langage, lutte contre la réification objectale.

L'exemple le plus manifeste nous en est fourni par des œuvres de Mario Garcia Torres telles que *What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax (In 36 Slides)* (2004-2006), une enquête sur une œuvre secrète de Robert Barry ou, plus encore, *Sing Like Baldessari* (2004), une version karaoké des *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1969)

de Sol LeWitt, reprenant les ajouts et les répétitions pratiqués dans *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1972), une vidéo dans laquelle John Baldessari chantonne le célèbre texte de LeWitt. Mais puisqu'avec Reena Spaulings, Bernadette Corporation ou Claire Fontaine, il était question de groupes d'artistes, il convient ici d'évoquer Continuous Project, dont les activités illustrent, elles aussi, la double dialectique du brouillage des rôles, des statuts et de l'option reproductrice. Continuous Project est un groupe



Ci-dessus Reena Spaulings. Vue de l'exposition « Courbet your enthusiasm ». Au mur, à gauche s'élève « Enigma ». 2008 dont « Enigma 14 ». Nappe provenant du dîner de vernissage de l'exposition « Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns? », organisée par Gavin Brown et Urs Fisher, à la galerie Tony Shafrazi, NY, 2008. (Court. de l'artiste et galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris ; Ph. F. Kleinfenn). *Exhibition view "Courbet your enthusiasm." Tablecloth from the dinner after the opening of "Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?", curated by Gavin Brown and Urs Fisher, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, Mr. Chow, NY* À droite Claire Fontaine. « Ibis redibus non moriens in bello » (détail). Installation à la galerie Reena Spaulings Fine Art, N.Y. 2007. (Court. de l'artiste et Reena Spaulings Fine Art) *Right. Detail of installation at Galerie Reena Spaulings Fine Art, 2007*



Mario Garcia Torres « What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax » 2004-2006 (Court galleries Jan Mot, Bruxelles, et Marian Goodman, Paris / New York)

directly or indirectly will make possible the product's circulation as a commodity—only its value remaining visible. If an art object is always a reification of the act that created it, in this case it becomes the reification of the process of its commodification.

If we add that before becoming the name of a gallery, Reena Spaulings was the protagonist of a novel written by Bernadette Corporation,(3) a group of artists whose collective work was sold by Reena Spaulings Fine Art, we get an idea of how much the figure of the author and the classic casting of roles in the theater of art can disappear into its own twists and turns. Of course this brings to mind one of the best-known pieces by the agency known as Les ready made appartiennent à tout le monde® founded in 1988 by Philippe Thomas,(4) which, under the advertising slogan "Art history seeks characters" called for "a total revision of the laws concerning authorship" (*La pétition de principe*, 1988). At any rate, what is most notable in Reena Spaulings' output is not its Borgesian dimension nor the Pessoa-like game of pseudonyms, but the forward-looking mimicking of a model of vertical integration that may take over the art world—a single organization assuming the respective functions of artist, dealer, critic and even fictional character. And if "Reena Spaulings" is an invention that makes possible something like a collectivization of the labor process of making art, a distancing of the individual subjectivities and expressions to be manifested, this name can also be a brand. Shouldn't we be happy to see collectors buy a brand-name painting or sculpture just like they would a Honda car, a Philips TV, Christian Dior eau de toilette or a Clairefontaine

notebook? Inherent in the art produced by Reena Spaulings is a distancing and the possibility of various readings, plus an absence of that didacticism found in the work of another collective readymade artist known as Claire Fountaine, with which Spaulings is organically linked and shares political convictions.(5) In fact, far too often Claire Fountaine's output seems to embody little more than fashionable political correctness, purveying a good cause in a way that in reality has no effect other than to offer a clean conscience to the art world bigwigs who stain tablecloths at opening dinners. For instance, a phrase borrowed from the book *Je hais les matins* by the ex-Action Directe member Jean-Marc Rouillon,(6) or the words "occupied Palestine" written with thousands

of matches set alight on opening day at the Dvir gallery in Tel Aviv at the end of 2008,(7) only serve to reassure those clumsy dinner guests of the seriousness of their occupations. From Warholian portraits of Mao and Marilyn Monroe to Nauman neon lights, Claire Fontaine hijacks these forms inherited from art history and loads them with a content that transforms them into ideological marketing tools. And Nauman's nicely ambiguous and deflating 1967 statement, "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" becomes, in 2004, the complacent "The true artist produces the most prestigious commodity." When these two elements—Conceptual Art's delegation to others of some of the prerogatives once enjoyed solely by the artist, and Pop Art's report on the commodification and reification of the artwork—were articulated, the result was to place first the collector—Philippe Thomas—and then the gallerist—Reena Spaulings—on the artist's throne.

#### The logic of reproduction

The gallerist figure in *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* didn't so much make art as give us remakes. Lancien revisited the firing range where Nikki de Saint Phalle shot her way into art history.(8) The gallerist in *Les Demoiselles*, in other words, was one of the earliest appropriationists. In fact, Elaine Sturtevant did her first appropriations (of Johns, Stella and Warhol) only slightly before, in 1964. In this musical comedy episode we can see the first sketching out of a relationship between the recasting of roles in art on the one hand and the substitution of a logic of reproduction for one of production on the other, a relationship now firmly established. In recent years most of the artists considered Neo-Conceptualists



Yann Sôrandour « Le Plein » 2008. Impression numérique sur papier. Dimensions variables.  
(Court gb agency, Paris, Ph R Fanuete) "The Full." Digital print on paper. Dimensions variable



Les ready-made appartient à tout le monde. « Pétition de principe ». 1988. (Coll. privée, Paris – Dépôt Collection musée d'art moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Mudam Luxembourg © Ph. C. Mosar). *Readymade belong to everybody*

comprenant la critique d'art Bettina Funcke, le graphiste Joseph Logan et les artistes Wade Guyton et Seth Price (8). Son opus initial, *Project #1* (2003), a significativement consisté en la photocopie du premier numéro de *Avalanche* (1970-76), la mythique revue new-yorkaise de Liza Bear et Willoughby Sharp. À travers cette réédition, les artistes se font-ils critiques ou la critique et le graphiste artistes appropriationnistes ? Toujours est-il que le paratexte de l'œuvre d'art qu'est sa reproduction imprimée ne semble plus être le seul contrepoint du discours critique, mais également le fond sur lequel se détache l'action figurale contemporaine. Les remarquables *Printer Drawings* (à partir de 2005) de Guyton présentent des motifs, élaborés grâce à Photoshop, qui

viennent s'imprimer sur des pages de livres où figurent des images d'œuvres d'art (9). Notre époque donne ainsi à observer le singulier et mutuel recouvrement des logiques respectives de l'art conceptuel et de l'appropriationnisme. Ainsi *le Plein* (présenté à la galerie gb agency, Paris, à la fin de 2008), papier peint panoramique de Yann Sérandour, qui donne la liste de l'ensemble des objets rassemblés pour la reconstitution, à l'occasion de l'exposition *Hors Limites*, au Centre Pompidou, en 1994, de l'œuvre de même titre d'Arman. Le concept est ici celui d'une œuvre existante. La troisième proposition, de Weiner, comme la deuxième, doit donc être complétée : *L'œuvre peut ne pas être réalisée, parce qu'elle a déjà été réalisée.* (3)



Reena Spaulings « Flower 3 » 2008 Huile et acrylique sur toile 76 x 60 cm (Court de l'artiste et Chantal Crousel, Paris . Ph F Kleinfenn) *Oil and acrylic on canvas*

(1) Karl Marx, *Le Caractère fétiche de la marchandise et son secret*, trad. de l'allemand par J. Roy, Paris, Alia, 2003

(2) Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2005. Bernadette Corporation est un collectif à géométrie variable et pluridisciplinaire, fondé en 1994, dont John Kelsey (co-directeur, avec Emily Sundblad, de la galerie Reena Spaulings Fine Art), Antek Walczak et Bernadette van Huy constituent les pivots.

(3) L'année précédente, Philippe Thomas avait ouvert à New York la maison-mère, *Readymades belong to everyone*, de l'agence française

(4) Claire Fontaine existe depuis 2004, à l'initiative de la philosophe Fúlvia Carnevale et de l'artiste James Thornhill. Reena Spaulings Fine Art est sa galerie new-yorkaise

(5) « *J'ai désappris la nuit. Il ne fait jamais nuit dans vos prisons. Nous sommes toujours sous les projecteurs au halo orange, comme sur les autoroutes belges et les parkings de supermarché* » (J.-M. Roullan, *Je hais les matins*, Denoël, 2001)

(6) Cf. *artpress* n°354, mars 2009 (ndlr)

(7) L'historien remarquera que la méthode du galeriste et celle de l'artiste ne sont pas absolument identiques puisque cette dernière, en 1961, tirait au moyen d'une carabine, non sur des sachets de peinture éclaboussant des toiles vierges, mais sur des assemblages d'objets et matériaux divers pris dans du plâtre, et dissimulant des sachets remplis de peinture qui, en éclatant sous l'impact des balles, projetaient des couleurs sur tout le relief. Aussi est-il permis de penser que Guillaume Lancien, non seulement cite les tirs de Niki de Saint Phalle, mais encore les améliore

(8) Josh Smith et Kelley Walker collaborent régulièrement avec le groupe.

(9) Sur Wade Guyton, voir l'article de Marjolaine Lévy, « Guyton/Epson: Exceed Your Vision », 20/27, n°3, 2009

Michel Gauthier vient de publier Gerwald Rockenschäub (*Neuchâtel, Ides et Calendes*), une monographie consacrée à l'artiste autrichien, et un recueil de textes, *Les Promesses du zéro* (Essais sur Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, John Armleder, Carsten Höller, Martin Creed et Tino Sehgal), Genève, Mamco/Dijon, Les presses du réel

are so labeled at least as much because their work is a replay of their Conceptualist forbearers as because of their confidence in the great ideals of historic Conceptual Art—the primacy of language and the struggle against the reification of the art object. The most obvious example of this is provided by the work of Mario Garcia Torres, for example *What Happens in Halifax Stays in Halifax (In 36 Slides)* (2004–06), an enquiry into a secret piece by Robert Barry, and even more *Sing Like Baldessari* (2004), a karaoke version of LeWitt's 1968 *Sentences on Conceptual Art* with the additions and repetitions from *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* (1972), a video in which John Baldessari

sings LeWitt's famous text. But since with Reena Spaulings, Bernadette Corporation and Claire Fontaine the subject was artists' collectives, here we should mention Continuous Project, should also be mentioned, whose activities likewise illustrate the double dialectic of the blurring of roles and statuses and the choice of reproduction over production. Continuous Project is a group whose members include the art critic Bettina Funcke, the graphic artist Joseph Logan and the artists Wade Guyton and Seth Price.<sup>(9)</sup> Their original opus, *Project # 1* (2003), rather significantly consisted of a photocopy of the first issue of *Avalanche* (1970–76), the legendary New York magazine put out by

Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp. Does this reprint turn the artists into critics or the critic and graphic artist into appropriationist artists? In any case, the paratext of an artwork, its printed reproduction, now seems to be not just the counterpoint of critical discourse, but also the background against which contemporary figural action stands out. The remarkable *Printer Drawings* Guyton initiated in 2005 present Photo-shopped motifs printed on pages from books bearing illustrations of artworks.<sup>(10)</sup> Thus our time bears witness to the singular and mutual overlapping of the logics of conceptual and appropriationist art. Take, for example, *Le Plein* (shown at gb agency, Paris, in late 2008), a digital print on a wrap-around sheet of paper by Yann Sérandour listing all of the objects assembled for the reconstitution, on the occasion of the *Hors limites* show at the Pompidou Center in 1994, of an eponymous Arman piece. The concept here is that of the already-existing artwork. Weiner's third sentence, like the second, needs to be completed: the piece need not be built because it has been already. ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff



Wade Guyton. Untitled. 2008. 17. 5 x 12. 5 cm. (Court. de l'artiste). Epson DURABrite inkjet on book page

- (1) Lawrence Weiner, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Statements*, Louis Kellner Foundation, 1968.
- (2) Karl Marx, *Collected Works, Capital*, vol. 1, New York, International Publishers, 1996.
- (3) Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings*, Boston, MIT Press, 2005. Bernadette Corporation is a multi-disciplinary, variable-membership collective founded in 1994. Pivotal members include John Kelsey (co-director, with Emily Sundblad, of Reena Spaulings Fine Art gallery), Antek Walczak and Bernadette van Huy.
- (4) The "French branch" of Readymades belong to everyone®, founded by Thomas in NYC the previous year.
- (5) Philosopher Fulvia Carnevale and artist James Thornhill started Claire Fontaine in 2004. Reena Spaulings Fine Art is its New York gallery.
- (6) Action Directe was a radical organization that carried out armed actions in the early 1980s. The citation comes from his description of life in prison: "I have forgotten what night is like. It's never dark in your prisons. We're always under orange-haloed spotlights, like the highways in Belgium and supermarket parking lots." (Jean-Marc Rouillon, *Je hais les matins*, Denoël, 2001)
- (7) See *art press* 354, March 2009.
- (8) Historians will note the difference of method: what Saint Phalle shot with a carbine in 1961 were not bags of paint that splattered all over blank canvases but assemblages of objects and materials stuck in plaster, with the paint-filled bags hidden behind them, so that the impact of the bullets made the liquid gush out over the whole three dimensional pieces. One could consider that Guillaume Lancien not only revisited her technique but improved upon it.
- (9) Josh Smith and Kelley Walker regularly work with the group.
- (10) For more on Guyton, see Marjolaine Lévy's article "Guyton/Epson: Exceed Your Vision," *20/27* no. 3, 2009.

# frieze



Left: Reena Spaulings 2004 Book Right: Got Rid of Yourself 2002 Video still  
Courtesy: The artists

## Bernadette Corporation

by Emily Pethick

Anarchy and fashion, identity, celebrity and a collaboratively written novel

Bernadette Corporation has been operating as a fictional corporation since 1994. Working from behind the blank façade of its logo, core members (John Kelsey, Antek Walczak and Bernadette van Huy) reorganize their internal structure on an *ad hoc* basis, frequently collaborating with others. They continually recast themselves in different guises, including a DIY underground *haute couture* label and the self-published magazine *Made in USA* (named after Jean-Luc Godard's 'worst film'), often working at the borders of art and fashion.

In 2001 Bernadette Corporation followed the anti-capitalist protest movement to Genoa for the demonstrations at the G8 summit. The resulting movie, *Get Rid of Yourself* (2002), centres on the accounts of the Black Bloc, a collection of activists and anarchist-affiliated groups that congregate at various events, often in order to disrupt mainstream demonstrations while preserving their anonymity with menacing black uniforms. Footage of violent clashes between armed police and activists is interspersed with glossy fashion images of 'radical noir', juxtaposing the bland passivity of high-capitalist fashion with a carnival of destruction and looting. A series of intercut vignettes feature Chloë Sevigny alone in an apartment, falteringly rehearsing statements made by the Black Bloc. Like Godard's strategy of casting of Jane Fonda in his 1973 film *Tout va bien* to popularize his post-1968 message of class struggle, Bernadette Corporation employ a well-known actor to disseminate their cause. At the same time Sevigny's slightly apathetic distance from the lines she reads serves as an acknowledgement of the limitations of an art project

that frames the radicality of others.

Recently the group have taken their foray into the realms of fiction in their collectively authored novel *Reena Spaulings* (2004), which involved the participation of over 150 anonymous writers and took three years to complete. Embracing the Hollywood studio screenwriting system, they invited a core group of writers including Jutta Koether and actor/poet Jim Fletcher to thrash out a storyline, farming out areas of the text and assigning different functions of the overall scheme. Seamlessly edited, the book is a summation of multiple experiences of, and perspectives on, its main subject, New York City, seen through the eyes of its central protagonist, Reena Spaulings – a 'material entity' dreamed out of the city, a place that is 'constantly exposed to the forces of communism'.

Reena is depicted as a continually morphing, interconnected, social, sexual being who moves through the city as it shapes her subjectivity; her body is an open, receptive, shared space, frequently coerced by others, 'a site for things to take place'. After starting out as a gallery attendant, in a series of obscure escapades she is headhunted as an underwear model, converses with Slavoj Žižek at an A-list cancer benefit Strokes concert, hobnobs with Karl Lagerfeld in ultrahip night-club Waste, discovers an addiction to loss and becomes embroiled in anarchist actions, at which point she momentarily changes her name to Marcks Engels.

The city also goes through a transformation. At one point it is devastated by a tornado that leaves behind it a trail of destruction, ripping through a gym of buff male models along the way. Spontaneous

gang violence sparks up around the city and a virtual war zone of civil unrest creeps in, a kind of hallucinatory uprising of collective unconscious desire. While Reena seems only too happy to detonate a bomb for one of her 'gang-guy' mates, one gets the feeling she is not wholly committed to the cause. With the help of her agent she eventually repackages her rebellion into the planning of a song-and-dance riot 'Battle on Broadway', proving capitalism's consistent ability to turn its own critique into fuel for its fire.

As with many of Hollywood's committee-authored leading characters, there is a lack of depth to Reena's persona. However, a literary masterpiece was never the ambition. Just as Godard sought with *Tout va bien* not only to make a political movie but also to make a movie in a political way, so this novel is more about the political connotations of the collective process of production than the final result. In the creation of a character whose 'thoughts and actions are not spanned by any author's mind' BC play a game that follows the same lines of their own quasi-corporate front and their profiling of the Black Bloc's refusal of political identity, subverting the capitalist fixation with 'individualism' and the art world's need for stardom – a literal 'getting rid of oneself'. At the same time, while BC's fictional 'incorporation' knowingly forms a sense of mystique around their activities, it also keeps their political position ambiguous. As Reena's agent Maris Parings says in the book: 'it was first of all a question of emptying out the space behind the company logo, which functions as a sort of mask or fog bank behind which anything at all, or nothing, could take place.'

# Flash Art



Nick Stillman  
*Reena Spaulings: an art brand*  
Flash Art, May—June, 2006, p.96-98.

GALERIE  
CHANTAL CROUSEL

SINCE THE "FOUNDING" of Reena Spaulings sometime in 2004 a cloud of mystery has hung over the phenomenon. Who—or what—is Reena Spaulings? Painter of legal tender, rendered in the washy style of Michael Krebber? Sovereign nation/shadowy corporation? Fictional performer of are-you-a-genius-or-are-you-an-idiot dialectic of youth culture? A New York gallery? Yes... to all.

For the record: Reena Spaulings is a New York-based fictional artist whose primary catalysts are John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad, though a fluctuating cast of collaborators—Jutta Koether and Ei Arakawa are two of them—often participates in the collective's projects. Reena Spaulings Fine Art is a tiny, shoddy gallery in Manhattan's Chinatown that Sundblad and Kelsey opened in 2004, one of a small crop of galleries in the neighborhood that eschew codified presentational strategies of its Chelsea peers. With its perpetually drawn gate and sign saying nothing very legible, Reena Spaulings never really looks open. Finally, *Reena Spaulings* is the title and protagonist of a novel written by international collective Bernadette Corporation, a group of artists, writers, and filmmakers of which Kelsey is a member. In other words, Reena Spaulings is an art world brand.

Such manufactured mystery isn't uncommon in contemporary art; no less mainstream a publication than the *New York Times* recently profiled Reena Spaulings and other collectives participating in this year's Whitney Biennial, and the author, Holland Cotter, gently critiqued the Spaulings enterprise in relation to "matters of self-promotion." The allusion was likely to Spaulings' recent exhibition of a suite of Merlin Carpenter's paintings. The pieces, all on the ground and leaning in stacks against the wall, could be handled and leafed through by any visitor, like a casual flip through a magazine. The paintings were clumsily realistic depictions of actual pages from recent art publications (including *Flash Art*) with articles about Reena Spaulings Fine Art and its exhibitions. Self-referential, sure, but the gesture neatly inverted concrete art world relationships; critics whose opinions ostensibly determine an artist's reception found an uncomfortable spotlight on their own labor. And a second relationship was flipped: Reena Spaulings herself, Carpenter's dealer in this case, was instructed by the artist to paint washy backgrounds that would serve as a background for the articles Carpenter later painted. The dealer-as-pimp, taking a 50% share of the artist's labor for cutting a deal, was transformed by Carpenter into a laborer and a collaborator—forced to earn her 50%—restructuring the hierarchical dynamic that locates 'dealer' a rung above 'artist' on the art world food chain.

Spaulings works in the same ambiguously washy painting style for her series of "Money Paintings," sloppily painted banknotes, most of which are somehow defamed. *Money Painting (Purple Dollar)* looks like an unfinished American dollar. Conspicuous blank spaces pepper the abject note, as if the printer suddenly realized his shift was over and slipped into the



From top: SETH PRICE, first solo exhibition, 2004. Installation view; JOSH SMITH, Josh Smith, 2004. Installation view. Opposite: EI ARAKAWA, *Toward A Standard Risk Architecture*, 2006. Performance documentation. All images: Courtesy Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York.

5 pm sunlight before finishing his work. *Money Painting (Dirty Euro)* is soiled with cigarette ashes. Defamation, in fact, pervades Spaulings' artistic oeuvre. In her 2005 show at Haswellediger, Spaulings showed a legion of flags, as if proclaiming herself a sovereign queen with this regal showcase of what she dubbed in an enigmatic press release "hardcore art." Flags—normally symbols of allegiance and pride—became objects of abjection in Spaulings' hands. Many were caked in cruddy black paint, several were painted with a brick pattern, and one flowed into a basin, which included a photocopy from a porn magazine.

Spaulings' two pieces in this year's Whitney Biennial are both awnings manufactured by the Chinatown signage company Eastern Color Sign. *No.2*, a blank vinyl façade of a shit brown hue sliced in two, presides

dumbly in a corner like a discarded mistake or a rough draft. When the curators conveyed that the awning would have to fit in a tight spot, Spaulings requested that the staff "do what they had to do to make it fit, for example with a saw." *Emily Fisher Lan* is a white awning mounted above the Whitney's fourth-floor elevator entrance, partially obscuring mounted text that brands the museum's fourth floor its Emily Fisher Landau Galleries, a declaration of official sponsorship by the vice-chairwoman of the museum's board. Spaulings' awning obediently replaces the text it shields, but also includes various unrelated nonsense-brands: images of crustaceans, a cell phone, a diamond, a watch—readymade logos for Chinatown's many businesses of questionable legality, black holes of capitalism in New York's 10002 zip code.



Above: REENA SPAULINGS, *Flag*, 2004. Studio view. Below from left: MERLIN CARPENTER, *Made in USA 2*, 2005. Oil and acrylic on canvas; REENA SPAULINGS, *Money Painting (Colonial Dollar)*, 2005. Mixed media on canvas, 91 x 198 cm. Courtesy Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

Each of these pieces take exalted objects/concepts — flags, museum patronage, money — and totally deflate them. Each exposes and implicitly attacks an example of capitalist structuring that, as Reena thinks to herself in *Reena Spaulings*, "...not only controls each situation but, even worse, also

tries to ensure that, most of the time, there is no situation." *Reena Spaulings* may be the best way to come to terms with the Reena Spaulings project as a machine of situation-creation. Written by a lengthy cast of Bernadette Corporation members and shifting exhilaratingly in narrative structure, the novel is a *Pierrot le Fou*-

like manifesto about ridding one's self of bourgeois values and achieving mastery over one's thoughts, using Reena's twentysomething body and brain as its vehicle. Its denouement is hardcore art epitomized, a violent citywide spectacle of violence and anarchy, all made possible by the ultimate hardcore art: a hurricane that devastates New York.

"Self-promotional" quibbles aside, the most valid criticism of Reena Spaulings may be that it's scenester stuff, that its fabricated downtown persona is a snobbish and escapist defection from the 'real world,' or at least the real art world. This is legitimate, but perhaps irrelevant to Reena Spaulings' concerns, which seem to be to vacate a space (literally and figuratively) somewhere in the dizzying halls of 21st century capitalism that accommodates poetic dissent and willful defection from real world and art world economic systems that blunt creativity (and criticism) by enveloping, branding and incorporating it. Bernadette Corporation began to blaze this path in the '90s and continues to today with its chameleon presence: as a fashion label, publishers of the confusing magazine *Made in USA*, and filmmakers. Will Reena fall prey to vultures? Maybe. After all, she *did* become a thong model in *Reena Spaulings*. But then she strategically blew the cash on nothing much at all, forcing a total refashioning of the self and making creative complacency untenable. "Is there a dream of ongoing creativity directly connected to, inclusive of all of your activities?" Reena wistfully asks fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld in *Reena Spaulings*. The potential of this dream is the essence of Reena Spaulings. ■

Nick Stillman is an artist, curator and writer. He is a curatorial advisor for P.S.1 Institute of Contemporary Art and lives in New York.

John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad are the directors of Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York. Reena Spaulings is a collective founded in 2004 in New York.

Selected solo show: 2005: "The One & Only," Haswellwediger & Co. Gallery, New York.

Selected group shows: 2006: "Make Your Own Life," ICA, Philadelphia; "Beware of a Holy Whore," Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris; Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York. 2005: "Painters Without Paintings & Paintings Without Painters," Orchard Gallery, New York; The Baltic Triennial 2005, CAC, Vilnius.



98 Flash Art MAY JUNE 2006





## **The New York Times**

### ***Art in Review; Reena Spaulings***

Reena Spaulings is a fictional artist, performer and art dealer who is making a solo debut with this show, sort of. Behind the Spaulings name stands an international array of artists assembled for the exhibition by the collective known as the Bernadette Corporation. Formed in 1994, the collective has produced films, albums, magazines and books. One of its permanent members, John Kelsey, is co-director, with Emily Sundblad, of Reena Spaulings Fine Art on the Lower East Side.

The most visible component of the Chelsea installation is a suite of handmade flags, each the same size, each of different design, none exactly commanding a salute. One is painted with solid brick patterns, another is caked with tar, a third stained with red wine. Still others are festooned with mussel shells, plastic flowers, dolls and glass tubes.

The show also includes a collaborative novel titled "Reena Spaulings," compiled from passages written by numerous contributors. And in a few weeks a new CD will appear: a version of the Velvet Underground's classic "White Light/White Heat," recorded by artists recruited by Bernadette, among them Brian Degraw, Lizzi Bougatsos, Rita Ackermann, Jutta Koether, Seth Price, and Hanna Liden and Klara Liden. The latter two are sisters, and Klara Liden's recent solo show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art was one of the best of the season so far.

Reena Spauling's Chelsea debut is, by the way, Haswellediger & Co.'s third show since it opened last fall. Each has been strange and good, and unlike anything else in the vicinity. The gallery has, so far anyway, clearly been drawing on the kind of controlled anarchy associated with Colin de Land's American Fine Arts, recently closed on West 22nd Street. Maybe that spirit will continue to spread through Chelsea. And with any luck, there goes the neighborhood.