

**Dogs and Diplomacy**

By Gareth James

***GSN: Are you familiar with the bizarre new gallery that opened recently on Grand, in place of the Dress Shop?***

*Welsh: Well, I admit that it's not what I would have expected of an art gallery, on Grand Street or not. However, I don't think that we would want to dictate to them precisely what they have to do in a business which is creative in nature.*

*For what its worth, I've been perusing our lease ...*

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Perhaps it is true of all places that serve as the site of projection for so many different desires, the desire to escape amongst them, that one cannot ever actually arrive. They function less as a terminus, than as a horizon: essential, Gadamer would say, to the construction of meaning, but neither the hare nor the tortoise will ever arrive at that point which incessantly recedes at the same rate as one hurries or limps towards it. This is like the Hollywood version of postmodernism: New York steals the idea of Modern Art, then like a heist movie where the game goes wrong and the Old Master is never seen again, lost in transit—hell, even in translation if you like—Modern Art never actually arrives at the nowhere that New York has become. Yes, let's blame New York for postmodernism – a bungled robbery.

It makes more and more sense the more you look at the art scene in New York over the past fifteen years, as it seemingly misplaces itself more and more from Uptown to the East Village to SoHo, to Chelsea, its museums getting drunk and waking up to find themselves in Bilbao, galleries getting kissed by princesses and waking up as Museums, magazine articles lost amongst adverts or vice versa, finance capital losing its way home to the factory, downtown getting lost in the Middle East ..... All of this is nonsense of course, but trying to talk to New York is a little like talking to a madman, one needs to enter into her logic, to say things which, on the face of it, make no sense, in order to reinvent communication. Enter a gallery that has in its short lived existence (it first opened its doors in January of 2004) been known variously as "The Dress Shoppe", "Reena Spaulings Fine Art", "371 Grand". Oh yes, and "Sky High Art".

While the use of names continues to shift, "Sky High Art" has been used only once: in January of 2004, after having ripped up a Michael Krebber catalogue and taped its contents on the walls for their inaugural 'exhibition', Emily Sundblad and John Kelsey invented the title on the spur of the moment to get rid of a New York Times correspondent ("a real Tony Curtis, talentless-hack style reporter pounding the beat") who refused to believe their claims that there was no gallery in the space, and insisted on

listing it in his article on the Lower East Side's burgeoning gallery scene, with or without their consent. Naming the space seems to be difficult for Sundblad and Kelsey, in part because space is a less interesting principle for them than that of time.

If we can say that psychotic effects of New York are of themselves delusionary, this does not preclude the reality that structures this imaginary condition as symptom. If the hegemonic structure of what David Harvey calls "contemporary globalization" is organized around the deterritorialization of places and production as the latest in capitalism's ongoing remaking of geography to provide the "spatial fixes" necessary to prevent capital's internal contradictions from ever being confronted, Harvey also reminds us that it is possible not just to see how the deleterious operations of finance capital were first developed in a highly specific place and time--New York during the fiscal crisis of the 70s--but even more specifically were heavily lobbied for by one corporation, the Chase Manhattan Bank, in direct response to their imperiled investments in Manhattan real-estate. In this respect then, there is a material and spatial history behind the place that Sky High Art occupies that combines both intra-artistic problems of how the artworld organizes itself here in New York with global economic problems, and these can hardly be considered incidental to the Sundblad and Kelsey's project (not least since Kelsey may be familiar to some as part of the Bernadette Corporation, whose last major project is a video "Get Rid of Yourself" which directly addresses the problems of culture and politics under globalization).

Nonetheless, Sundblad and Kelsey are adamant that the question of alternative spaces in New York has become irredeemably compromised by its part in facilitating the recuperation of subculture to 'productive' ends. "Sky High Art" was essentially a kind of Hitchcockian McGuffin. For the master of suspense (ie: the expansion of a state of intensity over a prolonged period of time), the McGuffin was of no importance in and of itself, but it was essential that it should appear to be of vital importance to the characters and the action organized around it. Hitchcock seemed to be caught between feelings of admiration and annoyance for an audience that he could never count on to stay in their proper temporal place in the narrative, always looking to guess ahead. It is not accidental that this description sounds like a description of the New York commercial artworld since its value system is so heavily biased towards getting ahead. Sky High Art maintains a similar ambivalence towards its audience. As Sundblad and Kelsey have said, they have quickly moved in four months from the anxiety of "what if nobody comes" to the problem of how to deal with the "young corpses of Friendster" who come en masse, automatons in an art scene where "time is measured by bodies".

*I don't know how I realized so quickly that we like Carol. I'd never heard anything about her until the day before, in a little gallery packed with those people who always show up at the openings of unknown painters destined to be unknown. The few ex-friends I met there were precisely the ones I would have liked never to see again. In a voice that was too loud and wanted intensely to sound worldly, the gallerist was talking about her shoes, so that an important visitor would understand she was already distancing herself from the failure she felt coming. Contrary to custom, this opening was not doubling as a cocktail party: there was nothing to drink.*

"Tous les Chevaux du Roi", Michèle Bernstein

Although Sundblad and Kelsey have stated that the project for them is one of expanding time, they depart from Hitchcock in so far as it is the possibility of expanding an intensity of "non-functionalized" time, rather than entertainment and leisure time, to which their tactics are organized. Each month, they have been publishing a chapter at a time from their own translation of Michèle Bernstein's novel "Tous les Chevaux du Roi", which doubles as a program for the forthcoming month's activities and effectively undermining the fetishization of the metaphysics of presence and the economy of the spectacle that sustains the young corpses of instrumentalized subculture. The "time of the novel" expanded to include its translation, is mobilized against the economy of time measured by bodies, presence, and spectacle. But Sundblad and Kelsey also invoke another time past when describing their project: "Sneakers" was a bar on the West Side Highway where transvestites would literally let their hair down, take a "coffee break from glamour" and all the arduous labor of maintaining identity, shoot some pool and relax. Thus, if the hack reporter found his destination difficult to arrive at, should he ever arrive, he would only find it moving away: into the past (the S.I.'s 1968 and Sneakers' 1990s), from a real space into a fiction one, and from one history to another (Bernstein barely figures at all English language histories of the S.I.).

One gallery name, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, seems to have been provisionally sifted from the others, since that is the name which is found in the monthly release of a new chapter. But this too is a fiction, as Spaulings is the name of the main protagonist of a collaboratively written novel - an ongoing Bernadette Corporation project. It is fitting then, that in a sense, the whole project begins from fictional origins: Sundblad originally took the lease on the former premises of the Swards Park Discount Dress Shoppe as an alibi to back up her application for a Business E Visa to the United States. Here we find both the spatial and the temporal at work, in the sense that the possibility of this space existing comes from the politics of space and from the attempt to finance time. The business plan that was also part of the visa application has also disappeared into fictive space, since the computer on which it was stored was stolen when the 'gallery' was broken into. But the local businesses and residents of Swards Park won't let it disappear altogether: complaints that venture is not participating in the kind of gentrification process that neighborhoods in New York have come to expect from artists and their infrastructure have been flooding into the gallery, generating ruses to give the impression of a real business art gallery, from keeping the doors open during regimented business time, tending to the façade (some of the complaints revolved around the fact that they had not replaced the Dress Shoppe's signage, hence the mirrored Robert Smithson artwork posing as brand identification) sweeping the sidewalk, and anchoring the placed-ness of the space by making available some kind of product, with at least a potential exchange value.

*... our clauses with respect to the art gallery, in hope of finding things specifically related to the gallery about which we'll be notifying them in writing. I've already notified them verbally.*

*I'm not one who issues ultimatums or threats, or makes demands on people beyond those which can be substantiated. And even then I try to deliver the message with as much finesse and sensitivity as possible.*

Discussion of the 'bizarre new gallery' shared the same subheading of "Dogs and Diplomacy" and the same munificent gaze of caring conservatism as the knotty problem of dog faeces in the real estate magazine posing as a community magazine cited at the beginning of this article. What neither the Grand Street News nor Seward Park's new manager, Mr Samuel Gladstone Welsh have yet understood, is that their expectations, clauses and leases are in effect a kind of subculture into which Reena Spaulings has escaped, in the face of the difficulties of evading the ever-increasing capacity of the art scene to instrumentalize the practices of art and of living well. As Godard once said, "It is the job of culture, to organize the death of living, which was once flourishing at our feet."