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**Klara Liden**  
still from *Bodies of Society*  
2006  
Reena Spaulings



**Klara Liden**  
still from *Paralyzed*  
2003  
Reena Spaulings



**Klara Liden**  
*Benign*  
2004  
Reena Spaulings

## THE SUBLIME IS US by Jerry Saltz

Klara Liden, June 4-July 9, 2006, at Reena Spaulings, 371 Grand Street, New York, N.Y. 10003.

The following two cursory, if cockeyed, paragraphs about the abstruse essence known as the Sublime are intended as a sort of background explanation for some of the art grouped under the rubric "relational esthetics." This useful term, coined in the mid 1990s by the French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, was meant to describe the then groundbreaking practices of artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Liam Gillick, Vanessa Beecroft and others whose work often involved what Bourriaud called "connectivity" and "interactivity."

Once upon a time humans experienced the Sublime - the buzz of it all, the terror, delight and unfathomable feelings of being alive -- from looking into fires, at cave paintings, or up at the night sky. This went on for scores of millennia, producing feelings of awe, fear, wonder or discontent. Around 1200 A.D. something happened. We began experiencing the Sublime from looking up at paintings on the ceilings of churches. Next, painting moved onto walls. There, the Sublime ran rampant for centuries. God was killed in the 18th century; in the 19th the Sublime took up residence in nature. People went into the landscape or the wild to get the old kick; sometimes they journeyed to other cultures looking for it, but that's another story. Then, the Sublime moved on. In the early 20th century it reemerged in movies. It disappeared entirely between the world wars.

Around 1947, the Sublime reappeared again, this time in, of all places, the canvases of the abstract expressionists. People felt the old rush in the skeins of Pollock and the Buddhist TVs of Rothko. Then, just as quickly, the irony of pop became the new Sublime and stayed that way for a long time. In around 1980 it slipped away again. Now it's back: *The Sublime is us*. As messy and embarrassing as it is to admit, these days lots of people get a bigger Sublime jolt from having a cup of coffee with a friend than from standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. That doesn't mean that we're God or that nature is dead, only that a certain elementary frisson is being generated from being around one another.

Which brings us back to relational esthetics. In the hands of subsequent artists a lot, but not all of the art grouped under this moniker, has become mannered. Connectivity has devolved into a neo-hippie hangout involving couches, cots, tables or some kind of shelter in which participants eat, sleep,





**Klara Liden**  
still from *550 Jamaica Ave.*  
2004  
Reena Spaulings



**Klara Liden**  
*Self-portrait*  
2004  
Reena Spaulings



Klara Liden's tower for *Do Not Cross the Line Blues* at Reena Spaulings



watch monitors or whatever. Interactivity now mostly consists of the documentation of artists doing things like interviewing others, meeting workers, etc. Too often the audience is also simply lounging around while thinking about lounging around, or they're just gawking at others. Either way, everyone is essentially telling him- or herself things they already know. Relational esthetics, once probing and complex, is becoming a cul-de-sac of fun effects, momentary experiences and comfy playhouses.

Klara Liden's current stripped-down installation at Reena Spaulings involving huts, houses and beds, as well as videos of her doing weird things, would seem to fit too neatly into this category. If it does, it does so with a seriously aggressive, contentious, even mutant edge. Liden's work is an acerbic combination of anxiety, ferocity, repression, instinct, activism, skittishness and rancor. It's almost as if she represents a turn from the contemplative and participatory group-esthetics of the 1990s to a more lone-wolf type of behavior, a mode that may, if you're lucky, allow you to glimpse the Sublime on the prowl again.

Liden's debut at this gallery two years ago was a rogue affair. Most conspicuously, along one wall there was a large cubicle built of scavenged cardboard. Somehow this nest or cubbyhole didn't feel like one of those typical art-world happenings. It was hard to know if you could go in; difficult to get into; private once you got there -- it was an unstable psychic space involving trespassing, sanctuary, display, estrangement and something feral.

In that show, one video, *Paralyzed*, featured Liden throwing herself around a Stockholm commuter train as bystanders looked on stunned. Remarkably, there was nothing Merry Prankster or hippie about it, nothing moralizing or merely smart-ass. Instead, *Paralyzed* touched on pent-up anger, helplessness and disaffection. Liden's current solo is as menacing, but more more integrated and seductive than her debut. As with the last, this show features an architectural intervention: *Do Not Cross the Line Blues* is a bunk-bed-like tower made of cut-up police barricades with a mattress of woven-together carpet strips. Climb up, lie down and look and you'll see a small monitor embedded in the ceiling. On it plays a short video, *Las Palmas*. The scene is a boardwalk after dark. Activities have wound down; passersby drift by. What starts out dreamy turns ominous. You sense you've lingered too long, that a leisure zone is turning into a danger zone. Soon you feel alone in the gallery and alone in yourself. The sublime has turned inward.

In the haunting *Bodies of Society*, Liden circles a bicycle inside an apartment. She moves around it like a jackal and a ballet dancer, all the while waving a steel rod. She taps and caresses the frame, then strikes the bike and keeps going until it's destroyed. This inner tension pervades much of Liden's work, as well as the work of a number of artists currently taking the stage. Perhaps what we're seeing is the pre-9-11 Togetherness-Sublime of relational esthetics with a post-9-11 Odious-Sublime twist.

### Front Man

By now the empty-or-full-gallery-as-exhibition-strategy is more than a half-century old. In 1938 Marcel Duchamp hung 1,200 coal bags from a gallery ceiling; four years later he filled a space with a mile





Justin Lowe's "Helter Skelter" (2006) at Oliver Kamm 5BE Gallery, installation view of the bodega entrance



Justin Lowe's "Helter Skelter" (2006) at Oliver Kamm 5BE Gallery, installation view of the ice cream truck

of string. In 1959 Yves Klein exhibited an empty gallery as art; the following year Arman filled one to the point of no entry. In 1964 Lucas Samaras arranged the contents of his entire bedroom in the Pace Gallery; Christo wrapped a whole museum five years later. Artists have put horses, donkeys, and dogs in galleries; filled spaces with dirt, bricks, cardboard, and steam; and transformed rooms into stores, shrines, and restaurants. The gesture is a standard form of institutional critique.

It's also a form of super-realism. Instead of Duane Hanson's or Ron Mueck's perfect renditions of human bodies we're treated to re-creations of real-world environments. The recent high-water marks in this genre are Michael Smith's over-the-top installations of a light-show shop and an artist's loft sale.

Into the fray comes Justin Lowe, 30, with his super-realistic version of a bodega installed in the Oliver Kamm Gallery entrance. This store is exact down to displays of newspapers, nail clippers, combs, and Corona beer. Behind the "store" is a Mister Softee truck. Beyond that is a floor covered in rolled-up clothes. The store is the best part by far and is all that's necessary. The only sour note is the press release claim that bodegas are often "fronts" for illicit activities. Sometimes they are. Mostly, they're ways for people to make a living. If Lowe's installation needs a bit more inner tension, its outer skin is impeccable.

Justin Lowe, "Helter Swelter," June 1-July 28, 2006, at Oliver Kamm 5BE Gallery, 621 West 27th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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