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ARTSEEN

Raw

Smack Mellon

April 2003

Curator Denise Carvalho organized this intriguing and well presented eleven artist group show. While the exhibition may be titled Raw, its inquiries are organized more by an observation of architecture, elevation, and geography, rather than rawness as being that which is fresh, unfinished, or imbued with a Bataillean in-your-face sense of disgust. The displayed works are calmly meditated and wholly finished spatial musings. None of the artists present objects or paintings, instead, photography, video installation, wall drawing, sound, 16 mm film, and computer terminals are employed. The artists involved are Katya Sander, Jenny Marketou, Jenny Perlin, Birgit Ramsauer, the group neuroTransmitter, Francois Bucher, Grady Gerbracht, Alex Vilar, Pia Lindman, Charlie Citron, and Sally Gutierrez. While rawness might imply a certain natural state, these artists process the notion through well-crafted technological media.

In one video projection piece with headphones, "City Game TV," artist Sally Gutierrez interviews five office workers in the World Trade Center (pre-9/11) about their relationship to their window views. Gutierrez teases out the connection between the occupant's self-image and their place in the architectural hierarchy in having a window, or better yet, a corner office. There is something soothing in the relaxed mundanity of some the interviews—the continual hushing of the air conditioning, the ant-like river tugs below. Some of the interviewees took their building elevation as a kind of beatific daily wonder—the majesty of scale; others admitted to a secret thrill of power—of being elevated above the crowds and bestowed with a godly panoptical view. In a split screen format, Gutierrez also shows some rather drab footage of the vistas below, reminiscent of public access TV, but one senses that perhaps this is a conscious turn away from the visually spectacular towards a poetics of social engagement with the artist as a self-effacing social archeologist.

In "Joe Goes Around the World," Charlie Citron presents a photo series with people from Delhi to Florida to Jerusalem to Warsaw posing with his worn out G.I. Joe doll. By changing the context for Joe in each photo, a fictive narrative is created of Joe's world-weary perambulations. At times the doll is shot in such a way as to transform him into a blurred snapshot of a real person—another pilgrim at a global landmark like the Wailing Wall. At other times, the passivity in the fate of a

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Curated and hosted by the Rail's Fiction Editor Donald Breckenridge

posable doll is brought forward, as when Joe is posed amidst a crowd of fanatical figurines of China's cultural revolution—lost in the revolutionary mob, Joe reads like an ambivalent and haggard spectator to history.

A medium size video projection piece by Pia Lindman cycles through three fixed viewpoints— the temporary World Trade Center viewing platform, Yankee Stadium, and an placeless perspective underneath the Van Wyck Expressway. Through an effect like time lapse photography, the moving elements in the scenes create trailing blurs, with crowds of people looking like cocooning swarms. The piece recalls Andreas Gursky's massive photographs, though Lindman's sense of the sublime is more dispassionate and less consciously manipulative than Gursky's. While the checklist may declare a desire to "address [the] cultural, social, political and economic conditions of the site" it instead presents a surprisingly neutral meditation on human scale in the urban environment. Incidentally, this tendency to laminate contextual meanings onto the works in the form of copious (and at times exculpatory) texts is one of my few criticisms of the show as a whole, as the texts more often separate the viewer from good works, while doing little to buttress problematic ones. Here, the immaculate structure of the stadium is investigated less than the artist's conscious remove, though this kind of vista watching is not the same as surveillance, that popular subject which predicates an interested, not disinterested, watcher.

"Upward Mobility," a giant video projection by Alex Vilar, records from behind the efforts of a man (presumably the artist) clambering atop all climbable street structures in New York and what might be London. The urgency of the person's efforts, as he launches himself at one drainpipe or low roof after another, presents the question of whether the actor is attempting to escape from the urban structure, or to symbolically dominate it by rising above it in elevation, albeit temporarily. The question is left open, for as soon as he manages to climb onto the embankment, telephone shed, or outdoor restroom kiosk, we cut instantly to the start of another climbing sequence. The artist's attitude towards partially escaping the laterally extending grid in favor of the indeterminate route of elevation is therefore not revealed. Deprived of this, we are not lead to assume anything about the vantage advantage of elevation, and this is perhaps the point.

Of all the artists, Grady Gerbracht seems to be most curious about the actual aesthetics of rawness. Installed in the compact and claustrophobically charged upstairs room, is Gerbracht's "Site & Sound for Smack Mellon." Gerbracht essentially plays the space, creating a Cagean sound basket derived from the building and its component parts. He captures the sounds of the heat blowers kicking in, the worn squeak of the bathroom paper towel dispenser, the artist's shrieks bouncing off the walls, and the sound of folding tables being dragged across the floor. This soundtrack plays from two speakers in the darkened room, while the viewer's eye is

The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice-- Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
Come to the Brooklyn Waterfront Festival.

drawn to a Neptune like disk of light in the wall, which turns out to be a door with a two inch hole bored into it and a video monitor on the other side. This peephole could perhaps be understood as the guilty pleasure of investigating the aesthetics of rawness directly with fixed images. The monitor shows a sequence of digital stills from all corners, public and private, of the Smack Mellon site. Despite a stated concern with site and systems, the piece works in a representational aspect, directing attention to small details, riffing off the building's irregular textures while creating an aesthetic impression of the roughness— in short, a multimedia picturesque. In Francois Bucher's video Museum of Mankind, an oblique connection (via Google) is made between the left wing of the Columbia (space shuttle) and the left-wing in Colombia (as in FARC). It is a strange piece, a reverie of montaged images and voiceovers, some of the themes of which appear to be eye in the sky surveillance and state control, and blasé lateral thinking/couch surfing. While intriguing, the concatenation seems unresolved. After cycling through the piece several times, it proves impossible to weave the piece into a coherent whole. Rawness here is a work in progress.

—John Hawke

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