

CUMULUS

From Overseas

IN EVERY EDITION OF PARKETT, TWO CUMULUS CLOUDS, ONE FROM OVERSEAS, THE OTHER FROM EUROPE, FLOAT OUT TO AN INTERESTED PUBLIC. THEY CONVEY INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS, ASSESSMENTS, AND MEMORABLE ENCOUNTERS—AS ENTIRELY PERSONAL PRESENTATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ISSUES.



OTRA DE VAQUEROS *Mexico City and Geneva, 2007*

CATHERINE CHEVALIER

Almost a year ago, at the end of winter, about a dozen artists¹⁾ met in Mexico City for a few weeks (in some cases a few months), in an old hotel near the capital's historic center. They had been invited by two artist collectives to take part in a residency program and an

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exhibition. One of the collectives, Perros Negros, was based in Mexico²⁾; the other, Toasting Agency, was from Paris.³⁾ “Otra de Vaqueros” (“Another One about Cowboys”—the title implied an ironic stance) unfolded in several stages, in various locations and with different groups of artists and collectives. In addition, “satellite” projects were invited to pursue their activities in additional spaces around Mexico City. In the spring, an artist edition was produced, and in June the exhibition was presented in a different version at the Centre d'édition contemporaine in Geneva (“Otra de Vaqueros (redux)").

Unlike “Localismos,” another project by Perros Negros, “Otra de Vaqueros” was not constrained by site specificity, though the context of Mexico City did exert an influence on the production of the works. Nor was it meant as an exhibition about globalization from the perspective of a Latin American country's emerging art scene, although some degree of reference to globalization was to be expected and did appear, for instance in the works of Sean Snyder and Minerva Cuevas. Rather, “Otra de Vaqueros” seemed to propose an alternative conception of the production and exhibition of art

by creating a space that, for a fleeting moment, broke away from the usual conventions. Such an approach has become rare in the present context of proliferating biennials, Documentas, and other thematic exhibitions with their identical forms of communication. One of the linchpins of the art world's current transformation into a cultural industry is precisely the way it communicates.

The residency was, for several reasons, a period of invisible production. First, its aim was not to produce works for the exhibition. From the outset, the curators had selected an existing work for the exhibition; they simply gave the artists free rein to produce more. Second, it was agreed that works produced during the residency could potentially be shown elsewhere and in different formats, in a dispersive fashion. This is

the case for Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda, who are currently presenting photographs from their stay in Mexico through the prism of an American children's book (*The Hardy Boys*) at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart.⁴⁾ Similarly, Bernadette Corporation later published a book⁵⁾ based on a scenario set, in part, in Mexico City. These examples show that the exhibition, which opened in March 2007 at the Laboratorio Arte Alameda, was only one stage in the process of art production. The entire project functioned in an organic, fragmentary way, without relying on theoretical discourses or the privileged figure of the curator-as-author. There did not appear to be common themes and practices. What brought these artists together was a certain attitude, at once critical and belligerent, occasionally vulnerable,

toward the art system, and that position was tenable only in terms of a questioning the global modalities of art production.

Some of these artists achieved this through a play on substitute identities. Forms of collective authorship and playful shifts from one identity to another allowed the artists to distance themselves, thereby giving them a greater scope of action. John Kelsey exemplifies this blurring of identity with his simultaneous involvement in both Bernadette Corporation and Reena Spaulings, as an artist and a gallery. Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill present themselves as assistants of Claire Fontaine, a reference to Franz Kafka or Robert Walser. In this instance, Bernadette Corporation assumed the identity of a painter.

In the press release, we learn that what brought these artists together may also have been their common use of "the cultural, social and political debris of the Western world."⁶⁾ Any obsolete cultural product is fodder for re-investment: films, art forms, songs, books, television images, motifs, people... This is not to be confused with the current nostalgic predilection for ruins or relics. For in the word "debris" is the idea of a prior destructive violence.

Bernadette Corporation's recent paintings, for instance, recycled movie tropes (by reproducing scratched and damaged film footage, in reference to Tony Conrad) as well as pictograms of pineapples, Kafka's drawings, and movie flyers... Reena Spaulings presented several flags made of remnants, stained tablecloths, and embroidery, each crowned with symbols of imperial power. In the center of the space were the new pieces produced during the



*BERNADETTE CORPORATION, FOUND FRUIT, 2005–2007,
acrylic on canvas, 31 1/2 x 59"/ GEFUNDENE FRUCHT,
Acryl auf Leinwand, 80,5 x 150 cm.*



REENA SPAULINGS, *MERCADO*, 2007, ceramics, stickers, napkins, gift paper, showcase, pedestal, dimensions variable /
Keramik, Aufkleber, Servietten, Geschenkpapier, Vitrine, Sockel, Masse variabel.

residency: they were made out of ceramic, a largely abandoned technique in contemporary art. Ceramic laptops (and their accessories) were placed in distressed display cases partially decorated with the kind of stickers one finds on customized high-tech devices. The laptop, that ubiquitous contemporary prosthesis, became an object with purely decorative value. From a certain angle, the viewer suddenly recognized the ceramic object's referent. In addition, the use of ceram-

ics put into play the notion of the wheel and therefore of revolution (a reference, according to the catalogue, to the mid-twentieth century revolution in ceramics through Asger Jorn and Lucio Fontana in Albisola)⁷⁾. The technique also implies taking greater risks, as could be gauged from the “debris” left over from faulty firing and on view in a display case.

Using a more familiar roster of recycled images, Sean Snyder reworked excerpts from various television pro-

grams into a film, using grotesque passages in which television became the universal vector of a unique motif: that of the cut and of symbolic castration. Inspired by the technique of montage, Minerva Cuevas's wall painting recycled an episode of seventeenth-century colonization in Mexico and spliced it with an icon of American propaganda for children, Disney's Scrooge McDuck.

In a kind of retrospective of his own work, Bruno Serralongue presented



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several series of photographs in a single frame, showing a portrait through time (1997/2006) of Sub-commandante Marcos and playing on the Zapatista leader's masked and charismatic identity. And in an installation consisting of a video about Carlos Castaneda and books by him purchased in Mexican street markets, Karl Holmqvist explored the mystic author's foray into the rituals of desubjectivation under the tutelage of Mexican shamans. The notion of authorship is blurred on discovering that Castaneda may not have authored these books and also became a shaman himself.

Where do these artists fit within the framework of recent criticism of the art system and its institutional context? They use that context merely to anchor their work in the reality of its production. It is in no way a theme, an issue, or an obstacle. Rather, the question is, "How can one create the context in which art is produced today?" This approach enabled the orchestrators of "Otra de Vaqueros" to sidestep the theoretical endgames of contextual art

and institutional critique. They reinvigorated the field of art by subjecting the figure of the artist, the curator, the mediator and, ultimately, the exhibition itself to a process of desubjectivation. "Otra de Vaqueros" was an exhibition with no fixed identity. The critical and political import of the works was intrinsic to their mode of production and therefore inherent to the works themselves. Thus, the two neon light pieces by Claire Fontaine were phonetic transcriptions of the phrase *étranger partout* (always a stranger) in two of the most widely spoken indigenous languages in Mexico City, Nahuatl and Zapotec. The works suggest the alienation and distress of native people who are estranged from their own language and feel displaced in the language of the former colonizers, a remnant of their subjugation. Similarly, with its hand-painted letters traced by a sign painter, *NAKED LIFE* evokes a resistance to the utter dispossession those words suggest.

In Geneva, in a smaller space, the question was whether that previous

experience could be relocated. The attempt was not to transport the context to a new site, but rather to recreate the conditions of production. Bruno Serralongue chose to show two photographs from a new series about the transitional landscapes of the greater Mexico City suburbs. Reena Spaulings presented the ceramic pieces differently, draping them with gift wrapping paper, a version better adapted to the Swiss context and its greater proximity to the art market. The Geneva show also included a collaborative piece resulting from an unscripted collective act: a Super 8 mm film of the Torre Latinoamericana skyscraper and a nearby building before and after nightfall, an homage to Warhol's *EMPIRE*



(1964). Dispersed and fragmented, the works reappeared in Geneva bearing the material memory of their initial production. Finally, the show included a limited edition silk-screen print made from a picture of one of the restroom doors of the Laboratorio Arte Alameda—a gate to hell, perhaps—inscribed by the artists in homage to Francis Picabia's *L'ŒIL CACODYLATE* (*The Cacodylic Eye*, 1921). The potential role of artists' signatures as fetishes is pushed to the extreme through the exhibition's change of location and the play between its visible and hidden (yet accessible) dimensions. The entire project—residency, exhibitions, editioned print—offered a radically different experience of the “production of production,”⁸⁾ whose wide-ranging impact has yet to be explored.

(Translation: Anthony Allen)

1) Artemio, Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla, Bernadette Corporation, Jay Chung & Q Takeki Maeda, Minerva Cuevas, Jeremy Deller, Claire Fontaine, Mario Garcia-Torres, Karl Holmqvist, Bruno Serralongue, Sean Snyder, Reena Spaulings.

2) Perros Negros is a collective of artists and curators consisting of Fernando Mesta, Adriana Lara, and Katya Pena Olivares.

3) Toasting Agency is a collective of curators and art critics including Eva Svennung and Alexis Vaillant. Only Eva Svennung was involved in this project.

4) Jay Chung, Q Takeki Maeda, “Hardy Boys and Gilmore Girls,” Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, 5 December, 2007 – 19 January, 2008.

5) Bernadette Corporation, *Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte* (Berlin/New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2007).

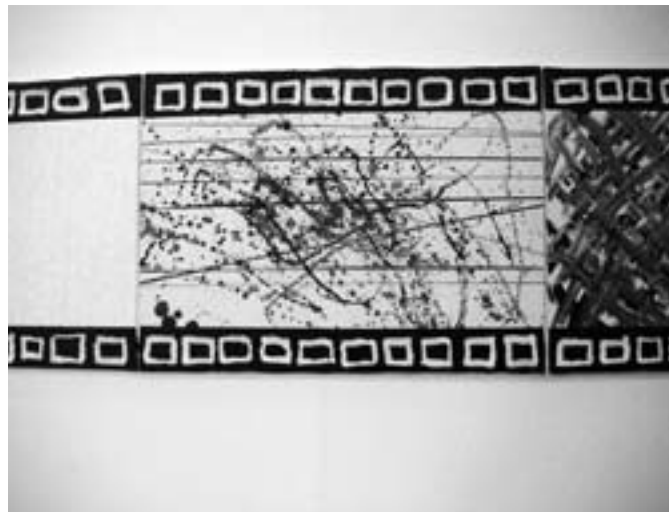
6) Press release, “Otra de Vaqueros,” March 4 – April 1, 2007, Mexico City.

7) *Otra de Vaqueros*, Perros Negros, Toasting Agency, eds. (Berlin/New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2007).

8) To use Bernadette Corporation's phrase in a passage about Godard published in the catalogue (see note 5), p. 39.



BERNADETTE CORPORATION, *PED CIN FLYERS*, 2005–2007, acrylic on canvas, 23 ³/₄ x 39 ¹/₂" / Acryl auf Leinwand, 60,5 x 100 cm.



BERNADETTE CORPORATION, *NEW F CINEMA*, 2005–2007, acrylic on canvas, 23 ¹/₂ x 31 ¹/₂", 23 ¹/₂ x 27 ¹/₂" / Acryl auf Leinwand, 60 x 80 cm, 60 x 70 cm.