

THE STATUS OF THE POLITICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

KLARTEXT!

A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS, CURATORS AND THEORETICIANS
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Bernadette Corporation

Statement

BERNADETTE CORPORATION is a flexible term...

1st try

BC is a flexible term - it can be picked up and used in whatever manner, for whatever ends, by whatever formation ...

For example, it instigated a temporary merger between itself and a group of Paris-based militants and intellectuals (le Parti Imaginaire) during the production of "Get Rid of Yourself." For its soon to be released collective novel, its organizing committee includes Jim Fletcher and Jutta Koether, and of course numerous participating writers.

In 1870-something a Paris gallerist presented the first "retrospective" of an artist – Pissarro's paintings, early up to the most recent. There was a reason for this: the gallerist wanted to sell, and he thought the early, less radical works were easier to move, and the new, more difficult works would be made more accessible if hung near the familiar, pretty ones. It was a selling concept. But the retrospective was also the art world's way of inventing and marketing, for the first time, the notion of an artist's career...making the dramatic or productive arc of a career visible and meaningful as such (in order to sell it). Pissarro was a known anarchist in his later years. The gallerist seemed to need to fit that anarchism into a certain logic that emphasized biography and development and progress. But Pissarro's anarchy destabilized and questioned those notions in the most intense way. The retrospective somehow solved that question, that intensity, reframed it.

Bernadette Corporation has never had an easy time packaging itself as an artist, in order to meet the art market's demands and expectations. The art world wants to see a productive identity and an identity that can be put easily to work (a career = steady work, work that "progresses," work that adds up to something, signature styles, photogenic personality, professional attitude, etc)... whereas BC has always worked at not only unworking identity, but at questioning the idea of work today. Its projects are not always easy to see as projects, mainly because what's emphasized in BC are processes (vs. projects). Processes we abandon ourselves to and that elaborate us, ...activity that, unlike projects, involves a questioning of a work ethic that largely goes unquestioned in the logic of capitalist accumulation or whatever. To tell the BC story is always an uneasy attempt to explain the gaps, shifts, unworkings, its own occasional boredom with itself or with the conditions it operates in, its opacity not only to the art world but often to itself... etc. There is of course also always the need to locate its origin in a certain art-fashion moment when the BC logo, for a minute or two, was sent strutting down runways... but then again (if we really need an origin) it really began somewhere else, in a nightclub in 1992 or 3. It must be possible to tell the BC story in some other way than "it was a fashion art thing, it had its moment then and now it's getting by as this or that." How to tell the art of turning away from art through fashion, and then the turning away from the fashion label through writing and video, and the turning to political discourse, some of its members departing from NYC, our novel-production, our attempts to think "communism" now, etc??? The topological processes BC has always engaged and activated under its name (which allow it to move from fashion in 96/publishing in 1999/political engagement in 2001, etc, without necessarily needing to spell out a linear

progression...a diagrammatic as opposed to a linear-narrative logic, perhaps).... Not always maintaining the heat of a hot product in order to be BC.

2nd try

What about describing BC as a poetic function rather than just a critical or interpretive one? If culture and the conditions we live and work in come at us as rhythm – not just discourse, or signs, but as rhythmized discourse and signs – our function is also often to sing these rhythms back at different speeds and tempos. Not just a question of what we have to say, but how...when... and specifically, how discourse and non-discourse are conjugated in our activities.

In Hell Frozen Over – a video of a delirious, literary discourse on Mallarmé conjugated with fashion speeds, frozen poses and blank faces plus upstate snowmobiles on the frozen lake.

In Get Rid there is an explicit attention to rhythm and musicality. The protest is viewed in musical terms at one point, and our questioning of the weak potential of event-ness under empire, and in the protest in particular, is largely a musical question. Civil war is, before anything, a question of music. The same could be said of BC's earlier interventions in fashion, and with Made in USA: how to introduce and activate other rhythms on the runway, in the pages of a magazine, in the city??? In Get Rid it was the idea of bodies and gestures, improvisation in policed/televisual time and space. But then the killing-rhythm of the beach afterwards, the human grave we landed in there was used to counteract what some saw as a romance of the event, of the riot in our film. Anyway, the question of "how to make something happen" is at once critical/interpretive and musical/poetic. BC has always tried to respond in a musical but somewhat machinic way to the deadening rhythms of commerce and urban life by excavating other rhythms within them, sometimes slowing and interrupting them – the black screen, the image/sound disjunction, the BC logo itself as a rhythmic shifter, by our various comings and goings in the art world and other places – etc. A musical-critical way of recording and playing back images and sounds, of inhabiting popular media and technologies, of picking up specific speeds in street style (with fashion) and playing them back as corporate anthems, of playing the corporate song back at off-speeds, etc.

9-11 and the declaration of this endless war were the end of Made in USA (it became extremely difficult in the wake of 9-11 to hustle the fashion ads that helped fund the magazine). Get Rid was edited in an atmosphere of increasing security measures and clamping down worldwide on the forms and methods of resistance we were dealing with in Genoa. Suddenly the techniques and energies we had been engaging were being called terroristic, and our friends were ...what...illegal combatants? uncivilized? So that moment is somehow present in the film, in its making. The editing process was also a time of considering our increasing distance from the feeling of a potential for resistance, however questionable, in the streets of the counter-summit. It was hard enough to talk about or experience civil war in the summer of 2001, but after September it seemed impossible or insane. But we continued to edit, despite the situation that always repeated back to us our impossibility or insanity or simply our bad, barbaric taste. And the spinning BC logo was superimposed over a street packed with protesters and cops and TV journalists posing as protesters, with a Fiat burning in the background. We wondered if the French government would really come through with the grant they'd awarded us to complete the film. And wondering if its debut in Paris would be allowed to happen, or if we should disguise certain voices in the film whose words might incriminate them. The BC logo, in that film, presides over all of this...these contradictions, distances, paranoias, feelings of dread and attempts to convert those back into joy. And we thought it looked good there, the logo returning there. This play on branding wasn't new for us... but now it wasn't only a branding of what wasn't "ours" (branding branding – putting our logo on Tommy Hilfiger's clothes), but a branding of both global capitalism and its discontents, both the management of those discontents and our resistance to that management, all at once. The logo stands for that desire to think resistance considering those conditions and becomes even more desubjectivizing than ever before. We put our name on, we reclaim, our very dispossession there in streets. Corporation of dead streets, corporation of fear of loss of everything, corporation of joyful embrace of streets that aren't ours and where nothing is happening but.... If BC was initially a minoritarian squatting of boom-time tropes in order to speak

them differently, here it emphasizes our squatting of ideas like communism and civil war for the same reasons. It is still a tactic of reappropriation, political now as it was before.

3rd try

We were trying to expose the idea of exposure as such, in spectacular democracy today. Exposure in the street and in the magazine. As a kind of virtuosity shared by models and by protesters alike. Also a play on the aesthetics of black... "noir radical," "radical chic." from Malevich to Zapatista Marcos. If the Black Bloc can be described as a collective elaboration of techniques of showing up without showing up, as a game of being there and not, or showing up to confuse the field of political and media representation with their chaotic anonymity and camera-smashing picturesqueness... then the fashion model too may have a radical potential lying dormant in her... who knows? What might be the black bloc version of a modeling agency, of a fashion shoot? We maybe didn't answer this but just opened the question. The fashion images bother many people on the left, who recoil at such blatant aestheticization of politics. Which is absurd, because all politics is aesthetic and vice versa... in fact, one of our intentions was to reenter and rethink politics via the aesthetics of the street protest (seeing it as the policed fashion show it was). Those images are also meant to destabilize an idea of the Black Bloc, to loosen it from wherever people are comfortable putting it, to free it up again and keep it mobile in the film (to make it function maybe as the BC identity functions in our work in general)... To keep the line between aesthetics and politics alive and problematic, rather than suppressing it and denying it.

4th try

Capitalist property relations produce and inform an idea of the human, and so-called human rights, and particular definitions of health and bodies and their limits. To be is to have. What is proper to you, what is "your own?" When we say communism we want to subvert definitions of the above. On the other hand, we are basically a community without a community, trying to put in common this no-community and call it something new/old: communism, or maybe commonism? We wonder what kinds of communism can be produced here in the heart of empire, the only "place" we have left. In the film Get Rid, there is the question of building communism (the "party") through negation: does burning a bank = building the party? What is an anti-party?