

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

!QUE BÁRBARA!

On Emily Sundblad, Albus Greenspon Gallery, New York

Emily Sundblad is a cofounder of the New York gallery Reena Spaulings. The same name also designates a fictional character who serves as cover for a number of artists. Sundblad herself is also an artist, one who collaborates in her shows with artists she represents as a gallerist. This double entanglement in the art market is an explicit issue in Sundblad's own art, which turns out to be first and foremost a direct objectivation of the artist's own person.

In her first solo show at Albus Greenspon, the artist is showing paintings in which she depicts herself and her immediate environment. The Sundblad universe, we come to understand, is stabilized by self-reference. Even though authorship is meant to be veiled, the exhibition could not in effect articulate it any more explicitly.

Reena Spaulings, the contemporary art gallery located in the Lower East Side and partially owned and operated by Emily Sundblad, started out as a fiction. Reena, nowadays sometimes a dealer and sometimes an artist, was first the protagonist of a 2005 novel coauthored by dozens (or was it hundreds? Fact checking here would diminish the quality of my argument) of people worldwide. This vast collaboration was published under the authorial umbrella of Bernadette Corporation, in turn a smaller collaborative entity, which has gallery partner John Kelsey as one of its core members. In 2003, Reena Spaulings Fine Arts ignited a migration of part of the New York art world to the Lower East Side, hence making it into a hip neighborhood and signaling its demise. Boutiques, restaurants and high rents followed, as predictable.

More importantly, at a time in which those who commodify communities and instrumentalized them by making the participants/spectators into the artwork itself, often being brought into the exhibition space, as in the so-called Relational

Esthetics, the model presented in and around the Reena Spaulings constellation proposed a new possible dialectic between the personal and the public performative positions of the dealer, the audience, the production of critical discourse, and later institutional absorption. These loose heterotopic constitutions of authorial entities, in which Sundblad is more often than not near their center, broke the submissive dialectics of mutual dependence with academic and institutional discourse implicit in the stiffness of second-generation institutional critique.

Critique ceased to be an ultimate value and a place of arrival to legitimate an artwork, being always already present at a molecular level in the perennial feedback process of collective and individual subjectivation, occurring with all the indistinguishable reverberations and negotiations of interpersonal and financial consequences. Sundblad represents some of the artists she collaborates with; and engages in producing with many who would love to be represented by her, but are not. Some collaborators belong to other neighborhoods of the culture industry, which move their goods or services through channels other than galleries: fashion, music, filmmaking. An interesting hell; a simultaneously self-constructing and destructing apparatus. The fantasies of an artwork with an internal ideological integrity submitted to outside institutional forces is debunked in this apparatus-conscious sensibility. The apparatus registers via referentiality, a space where self and other distort each other into a post-allegorical exploded multiplicity.

At the core of such a model is naturally the critique of authorship with its attendant consequences: a signature style, and the production of masterpieces, two symptoms that institutional

monument, successful experiment, and a delicate social ecology, Sundblad chose the most paradoxical way of raising the stakes instead of ossifying. With two exhibitions, or rather a two-act show, one last year in Mexico City in House of Gaga, "Si me dejas te destruyo" ("If you leave me, I will destroy you"); and another this spring in Albus Greenspon Gallery in the West Village of New York, "Que bárbara", Sundblad has gone all out as a solo artist, a position she has pursued somewhat more quietly since 2002. Moreover, she has committed to two disciplines that historically have signified individual authorship in *extremis*: singing and painting.

For the Mexican show, Sundblad exhibited an empty gallery, while her paintings were hung in the restaurant next door, which supports the gallery operation. In a wink to Kippenberger, Sundblad stated on the press release, "Unlike him, I am not a full-time painter, perhaps more of a Sunday painter, a pleasure painter". She neglected to address in writing the specter of Yves Klein. The exhibition's title commented on her own status as a dealer: "It is a quote from an interview with Gilbert and George about their dealer Konrad Fischer, who supposedly said this to the artists". The exhibition was completed with a street musical recital.

Albus Greenspon offered Sundblad the possibility of replicating the situation of using the gallery as a social arena, a service she offers to "her" artists. It is a space with its own interesting trajectory; supported for years by Mitchell Albus' modest salary as a high school teacher, it is now playing for higher monetary stakes with the arrival of a partner. The paintings on view are staged with carefully crafted "effortless" gestures: a champagne colored rug covers almost the entire

area of the gallery, but is tilted a few degrees as not to be orthogonal; on performance nights matching chairs gave it an almost Lincoln Center feeling, aided by colored spotlights focused on the floor and walls. A rubber curtain enclosed the corner where the piano is positioned; a bucket filled with wilted flowers completed the framing of the stage. Finally, a Proenza Schouler suit hangs on the back gallery wall.

The paintings catalogue the diverse positions that Sundblad has distilled from the Kippenberger-Carpenter-Koether triangle, both within the canvas and in terms of their circulation and readability. A series of most *sincere* small canvases combine floral motifs and clocks; there are framed pages of an auction catalogue that have been gesturally AI-Exed by the artist, one of which features a Reena Spaulings piece on offer. Two large abstractoid canvases testify to the desire to tackle the discipline in both a major and minor register. A NYC yellow taxi driving by a decrepit wall and some flowers, charmingly outlined à la Raoul Dufy, pay homage to Sundblad's love for New York and spring. Deliberate incompleteness, orchestrated naïveté, virtuosity, self-deprecatory market awareness and self-referentially all converge in a painting that the gallery put on auction at Simon de Pury concurrent to the show. Simultaneously a poster, an announcement and a manifesto, it depicts a young woman, possibly Sundblad herself, the edition of *The New York Times* she just read languishing in her extended arm, the painting inscribed with the exhibition place, title and time, and a list of influences directly written in her own body. Among them, Bach, Purcell, Kubrick, Kraftwerk. No loose ends in Sundblad's post-Cologne picto-referential horizon. If anything, the most successful paintings are

Emily Sundblad, Algis Greenspon Gallery,
New York, 2011, exhibition view



critique suffered from. In short, a real-time and real-space undoing of the classic trajectory from an expressive subject toward value creation. The point was not to denounce the market, but to use the gallery form, the forms that the market inflicts on subjects and objects in the transit from symbolic value to actual money, in order to produce art and a community under parameters something other than just those of the market.

Over the last decade, Reena, and Sundblad, enacted that inevitable transit toward value in synch with the Lower East Side's aforementioned gentrification. Jean-Luc Godard once said that art's permanent struggle is to resist the imperative to become culture. In recent years the gallery has fed no fewer than three artists to behemoth galleries in Chelsea, two of its artists have been on the covers of *Artforum*; and Sundblad's own

face has graced the cover of this magazine. Reena Spaulings the artist is in MoMA's collection. John Kelsey still impugns the notion of artistic production under his signature, but his writing, the mode of production that ultimately makes him an author, has just been anthologized by Sternberg Press under the title "Rich Texts" (a discarded and hilarious title alluded to this magazine: *Texte zur Kunts [sic]*). Reena Spaulings cleverly contests the position of young-artists-feeder-gallery by tweaking the program, starting on September with Stephen Willats, the British pioneer of conceptual art nearly unknown in America. Making sense of Act II is challenging, but they seem to be handling it.

In this peculiar configuration between de-territorialization and re-territorialization, suspended between absorption, contestatory

Emily Sundblad, "Oh,
Sweet Nothing", 2011



almost neoclassical in how they (re)play with the (im)possibility of a mistake at any level, from the conceptual to the gestural. It must also be noted that the survival of Sundblad the painter is not contingent to her sales record at auction or in the back room. She can always sell someone else's art.

Emily Sundblad the cabaret singer is a force of a different magnitude. The collapse of the roles of fashion and art, gallery and auction house, dealer and painter, fade as a construct in front of the concrete reality of her extraordinary performances. She is trained in techniques of Bel Canto, collaborates in the complex arrangements of the songs she chooses, rehearses and practices with the grueling discipline implied in the performing arts. She moves fluidly through the influences she overquotes everywhere else, from Scarlatti to Lotte Lenya. Often a song starts off wrong, the pianist misses a key, or Sundblad her entrance. She stops the performance to restart, addresses the audience effectively enacting and translating the perpetual rehearsal-as-act that using a gallery as a studio or production space over years has imprinted in her own mode of production. Her touching singing, and the songs she chooses, are

utterly sad. The traditional association of melancholy with artistic activity is linked to daydreaming, or wishful fantasies. Freud himself lingers in the analysis of such fantasies in his essay "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming", in which he poses that the work of art could be a continuation of infantile play in the never abandoned phantasmatic practice of the daydreamer adult. When singing in front of her community, surrounded by all the critical fetishes that guarantee the contemporaneity she so helped to define (the auctioned painting, the fashion designer product on the wall) Sundblad does produce and channel our late capitalist subject. A spectral subject of loss, beyond an author, but in perpetual need of a Real voice to return to. Dan Graham's dictum, that music is the last refuge for transcendent experience, is once again verified.

NICOLÁS GUAGNINI

Emily Sundblad, Albus Greenspon, New York, May 09–June 18, 2011.