

# The Seductive Subversion of Plausible Artworlds:

There are two different kinds of static between Philly and New York, either static cling or electroshock. Philadelphia (being mostly a college town with many BFA and MFA programs) suffers from an annual brain-talent-drain when the spring semester ends and the recent graduates realize that their student loan payments are immanent and that they will soon be screening calls from collection agencies because they can't find reasonable income within their chosen fields of study. Philly does not have the financial infrastructure to support even a fraction of its hungry and emerging artists. New York does. It's that simple.

If one wants to get a taste of folks fleeing the city, they should try to catch the outgoing Chinatown bus on a Sunday night. There, one will witness a scene of passengers struggling to get on the bus, crowded and pushing one another while screaming to their loved ones to hold onto their hands tightly. Scanning the crowd you will find small children crying silently in terror and even perhaps a transvestite brandishing a small hammer over her head claiming that the next person who pushes her is 'going to get it.' The would-be passengers are desperate and seemingly panicked as if the bus were the last interstellar spaceship to leave a planet that's about to explode.

Many recent graduates leave Philly in a similar manner. Of those that leave, some come back when they realize that the grass is not really greener, and that this city is actually a place where one can have a real art scene/community outside of the imperatives of the market. Philly is a place where artists and curators can produce conceptually ambitious projects and still be within the visibly malnourished margins of the mainstream art world.

Philadelphia has made some incursions into the New York scene, with notable local artists having shows in reputable New York commercial galleries. Philly also provides an outpost of Urban Outfitters inspired youth culture that churns out wheat paste posters and spray paint graffiti for blue chip galleries such as Deitch projects. The city of brotherly love is the farm league for the Gotham city art market.

Along side this cross-over phenomena, there are curators and artists who want to remain in the city and bring international recognition to its homegrown cultural production. There are local communities of artists who are the antenna of the region's populace that attempt to articulate what is actually happening here beyond the stereotypes

of Rocky or It's always Sunny in Philadelphia.

For some working and within or on the edges of the margins of the wider market, the struggle is worn as a badge of honor. This scrappy attitude has nestled its way into two curated projects whose organizers are attempting to historicize and delineate the social, economic and political conditions for the existence and perpetuation of the reductive dialectic of margin and center.

Sid Sachs, the curator of the Rosenwald Wolf Gallery, has been developing the *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968* for the past four years or so. In this exhibition, Sachs has re-inscribed a convincing vision of Pop art where the women who played integral roles in the scene were sidelined by the art world's emphasis on the contributions of their white male colleagues. Sachs re-contextualizes the works of these women

Another curatorial project at the Basecamp gallery is *Plausible Artworlds* organized by Scott Rigby. Like Sachs, Rigby has been developing this project for many years. Rigby presents works by artist/practitioners that have purposefully remained aloof to the larger commercial art circuit. The show is a form of research and the creation of an archive of those various resistant practices that have been popping up and persevering in many cities throughout the world. The project consists of Rigby conducting weekly skype conversations with different artists that he is interested in. *Plausible Artworlds* has a sizable online Skype following, and does not actually need to have a physical site for the participants to meet. Sitting through one of these conversations, I didn't feel like the primary audience, but only a 'residual' spectator. Many of the artists and groups presented in this project are activist and/or conceptual artists that see commerce within



in a manner that forcefully argues that they set up many of the terms and formal configurations of Pop art, and that the men in their circle borrowed their ideas as well as literally exploited their labor.

The exhibition is a strong argument that is made with minimal wall text and lots of good art. The show looks amazing, and it is refreshing to see curatorial work that allows the art to speak for itself.

Histories are written by the victors, or those that have the power, cunning and charisma to do so. The history of art is a 'history of barbarism,' and Sachs has used his resources and drive to construct a counter narrative that performs a corrective gesture in the spirit of Walter Benjamin who claims that 'in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it' and that 'Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.' Sachs is not only protecting the dead or overlooked artists by carving out a place for them in the canon, but is re-animating many of the artists' works by instigating a reconsideration of the gender struggles of the era they working, and situating it in relation to our present moment.

the gallery system as highly flawed. In response, many of the *Plausible Artworlds* participants have developed networks of alternate venues and shared ideas. Rigby sees the gallery as an event space where the participants in the show can discuss their thoughts about how to facilitate an open and inclusive shared culture.

Both of these exhibitions provide well-researched meditations on the edges of the established artworld and the highly problematic and contingent social/power relations that let a few in, and keep the rest out. Sachs makes a demand to reinsert the excluded into the canon of art history, where as Rigby reaches out to the 'tune in and drop out' art communities that are working in opposition to the dominant commercial artworld. It seems appropriate that both exhibitions are in Philadelphia due to their awareness of the permeable and shifting boundaries of the margin. It seems that the role of the *principled* outside observer has been internalized into the long-term projects of both curators. This vantage point is one of real strengths that can be drawn from working within this strange and interesting city.

-Holly Martins