

BROOKLYN RAIL

ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992–1999



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Conran's 2)*, 1992–93. Color print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy Artists Space, New York.

In July 1993, attorneys representing The Gap sent a cease and desist letter to American Fine Arts Co. A quarter-page ad for the gallery had appeared in *Artforum* depicting ART CLUB2000's *Untitled (Individuals of Style/Colin de Land)* (1993), which parodies a then-recent Gap campaign, swapping the gallery's owner, Colin de Land, for Madonna, Anthony Keidis, William Burroughs, and other counter-cultural figures who starred in the original. The lawyers claimed that "the ad begs viewer association with The Gap," with Julie Henderson Kanberg, Gap senior attorney, taking the company's critique a step further. "If you believe that the attempted satire of your [work] [sic] somehow legitimizes it," she writes, "you are mistaken."

ART CLUB2000 was a collective of precocious, 20-something Cooper Union grads, who, under the guidance of de Land, operated like the gallery's house-band, putting on an annual exhibition at American Fine Arts from the group's inception in 1992 until they disbanded, poetically, at the end of the millennium. Their work expanded upon and updated the tenets of institutional critique by also looking at the imbrication of art and advertising in the post-modern age, harping on multiple generations of their New York forbears—from The Pictures Generation to Conceptualism, from Robert Frank street photography to Hans Haacke, their former professor at Cooper—to get at the financial, social, and philosophical realities of being an artist here. Their 11 bodies of work are cheeky, knowing, cool, and ironic; qualities that also betrayed the fact that the work was born out of a contemporary commercial context, in which disaffection and alternativeness were pedaled the way Beatles bowl cuts, leather jackets, and other forms of teenage rebellion had been thoroughly commercialized in the past. Little of their work ever sold, and, by the time they called it quits, most of the members dropped the mic, pursued solo projects, became their parents (aka started teaching at Cooper), or stopped making art all together.

It was as punk as punk gets, if one has a taste for this kind of puckish spectacle, and throughout the exhibition, I often recalled a statement attributed to Brian Eno about the significance of the Velvet Underground, recalling how the band enjoyed limited exposure outside of New York, but that everyone who owned one of their records started a band. Yet, no matter my rose-tinted view, after leaving the show, I started to receive targeted ads for The Gap's 2020 "Dream the Future" campaign, in a way highlighting an ever-increasing influence on the art world from the broader commercial sphere. The ad stages what resembles a participatory art work within a white-cube gallery setting, wherein a racially diverse group of Gap-attired models hold up cards baring slogans that range from the aspirational—"connection," "hope"—to the offensively inoffensive, as when a Black model's dignified presentation of the word "empowerment" is followed by a pair of fuzzy socks, and a card scribbled with the word "cozy." In a gesture that harkens to the intentions of the original '90s campaign, the ad is scored with the song "Dream Baby Dream," originally written by the foundational New York art punk band, Suicide. Here, its desperate invocation is wrung dry by the innocuous jingle jangle of Karen O. Indeed, the cliché about tragedy becoming farce certainly applies: as if influenced by ART CLUB2000's parody more than the original campaign itself, "Dream the Future" distinctly resembles *Commingle* (1993), the group's first and best-known body of work. The heart of the piece is a series of untitled photographs, in which group members don Gap gear, and go about various fun-seeming activities, like having coffee together in a donut shop, exploring the library of *Art in America*, and, sigh, going to the movies at Angelika Film Center.



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Times Square/Gap Grunge 1)*, 1992–93. Color print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy Artists Space, New York.

Of course there are limits and shortcomings—the group didn't last forever, even programming an expiration date into their own name—but the significance of ART CLUB2000 is the way they put all the tools on display, functioning like an open source identity, and somehow losing little of their mystique. As a result, we can look at the images in *Commingle* not just in relation to The Gap's and other big brands' ongoing incursions into our rarefied realm, but also as presenting a different, somewhat democratizing, and deeply American narrative about becoming an artist: that all you need to start an art career is a few like-minded friends, and a manager. The photos may speak to the relationship between collective identity and brand affiliation, poking fun at the art world's stuffy notions of collective authorship and the idea of professional genius, but this is as indie as it gets, with bands understanding the lesson of group think, audience influence, and other lessons of critical art theory the first time they turn their Marshall stack up to 11. I think of this every time I see an untitled photograph from 1992–93 in which the group members wear Gap denim Canadian Tuxedos against the backdrop of Times Square, looking like the lost members of Nirvana or the E Street Band.

By the time ART CLUB2000 started working, the ethical questions posed by Hans Haacke or Andrea Fraser were migrating away from institutional contexts and more into the commercial arena, with artists generally asked to weather the ambiguity more than any other art world actor. And, at the same time, you would be hard pressed to see the same critiques taking place if the gallery weren't in on it. So, if The Gap ad that American Fine Arts placed in 1993 seems like sponsored content from today's vantage point, so does the premise of ART CLUB2000 in the first place, underscoring the necessity of sympathetic actors, and that every great artist, scene, or gallery depends on the presence of that one curator/writer/dealer friend who wants to tell the story. The question, then, is: What does agency actually look like in the art world? Rather than operate as an artist-run project space, wherein artists represent themselves as an institution, ART CLUB2000 effectively presented itself as a subsidiary of a private gallery, a model that should resonate today, given the extraordinary number of small galleries that show emerging work. Then as now, the power shift favors the commercial arena, with museums and the remaining non-profits often looking like rear-garde actors, there to bolster the market. How to leverage any kind of agency within a situation, in which sales is the bottom line, is posed not only by the photographs, but also by the context in which they are displayed, decorating a mock retail space complete with stacks of shoes (who knew The Gap made heels), faux-anti-theft devices, and sales principles ripped from Gap employee handbook disguised as motivational slogans. Also included are a series of untitled black and white photographs that document employee retention and discipline forms from Gap corporate. In part a critique of the professionalization of the art world, today, these images inadvertently offer a clearer criteria of employment than most art institutions, a fact especially damning as many art workers are currently seeking greater accountability, either by organizing into unions, or airing grievances on anonymous Instagram accounts.



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (What Ever Happened to the Drawing Center Planters/Proposal for Two Semi-Permanent Planters)*, 1996. Painted wood, vinyl lettering, silk flowers, mulch. Courtesy Artists Space, New York. Photo: Filip Wolak.

It can be a bit of a whack-a-mole as far as maintaining credibility within the art world. Why work at an art organization making less money, receiving fewer benefits, and where your identity and work are inextricable, when you could do the same thing in a corporate context, make more money, have clearer job prospects, leave your job at the door, and perhaps use that money to shape an organization as a donor or board member—or simply enjoy the art? Such questions of authenticity—of whether money as a motivating factor somehow diminishes the value of creative labor—are raised by three works that share the gallery's facade. In *What Ever Happened to the Drawing Center/Proposal for Two Semi-Permanent Planters and Untitled (Old Navy - November 1996)*, the gallery is made up to look like an incoming flagship, or the new location of the stalwart, SoHo-based non-profit, a brackish combination that draws out the gentrifying potential of the gallery, and the sort of inviting side of new retail. *Untitled (Stop (on in when staying at) The Mega Hotel) (all 1996)*, however, brings home the material facts of New York real estate. Originally staged outside American Fine Arts's SoHo location, this double-entendre disguised as a hotel sandwich board functions just as well in Tribeca, both protesting any ensuing development, while speaking to the art world's codependency on this environment of rampant financial growth.

Perhaps for the rich it is a question of authenticity—that wealth leads to a vacuous life, the soul of which art is presumably able to restore. For the rest of us educated participants, we can do our best to have reasonable expectations for the art world, but too often our decisions can seem to be motivated not by what's real or authentic, but rather, to stave off what's worse: losing a grip on a sense of purpose, sliding toward mediocrity, or forgoing any sense of financial security. As a result, massive blindspots might accompany our self-assessments, the motivation behind telling your Tinder date you're an artist, and not a barista—America might love a pulled-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps story, but striving for social capital is still striving for worth. That is why the images in *Working!* (1995), an exhibition that includes untitled photographs documenting group members' places of employment, feels like such a surprising anachronism today. Security at DIA, breakfast shift at a diner, art handler, video store clerk—it's comforting to know ART CLUB2000 had day jobs, too, but the reality is, you would seldom see such details included in an artist's bio today. Sure, it is fortuitous to find out that Carl Andre worked on the railways or that Sol LeWitt did security at MoMA. But to some extent, a day job is still a day job—either you would rather talk about something else, or you need to dedicate some mental and social life to maintaining your status as even a waiter in New York. *Working!*, on the other hand, offers a model in which artists attempt to recuperate the hours that take them away from their artistic work, as if temping at *Interview* magazine were part of the creative accounting that supports your artistic life, in which everything—I mean everything—is a write-off.



Installation view: ART CLUB2000: *Selected Works 1992-1999* Artists Space, New York, 2020. Courtesy Artists Space. Photo: Filip Wolak

Is there any escape? Originally displayed in an exhibition at Forde, in Geneva, *Working!* also included a series of video interviews in which gallery staff discuss their prior work history. Sadly, we learn the grass isn't always greener: one testimonial starts with a dog shitting, before a gig worker lists jobs that include pizza delivery boy and factory worker at a lens plant (he used his earnings to buy a bike, presumably so he could get to work). While *Working!* speaks to the day-to-day reality of being an artist, in projects such as *1970* (1997), ART CLUB2000 turns to the past, interviewing the likes of Henry Flynt, Vito Acconci, and other downtowners about where they were in their lives when the '60s ended. Isa Genzken's responses ought to be weirdly reassuring to any young artist (or older artist, for that matter) with radical intentions today. She wanted to join the Baader-Meinhof group, and there's a smoke-em-if-you-got-em undercurrent when she blames corruption in the art world on a lack of good sex—an otherwise outlandish statement were it not lent credibility by Niki Logis, who recalls how, as a young artist, she felt good art was like getting it on.

One way to look at ART CLUB2000 is that there was no need for escape: New York is both the center of the world, and a parochial little island, made to seem even more provincial by projects such as *Night in the City* (1995), which suggests that the group's version of events seldom took place above 14th Street. Drawing on the New York School of street photography, the series insinuates the signs of commercialization into their romantic vision of SoHo at night. Alongside the downtown skyline appears a Starbucks cup. Besides the storied cobblestone streets is Kenny Scharf's pop-up curio stand, Scharf Shack. I'm sure this was a tough pill to swallow—Giuliani was in power, and his hostile policing and draconian cultural policies were quite literally Disneyfying the city.

But as someone who cut his teeth in places like Buffalo, Portland, St. Louis, and elsewhere before arriving in New York, art that critiques the perennial SoHo fomo feels flaccid by comparison to working in places where art was utterly invisible, an entirely private—or, at least local—affair. Here we are at the limits of ART CLUB2000: sure, *Night in the City* pokes at this mythologizing impulse, suggesting that the industry—its socializing and romance—also took place during a massive, city-wide crackdown, but how many people can be in on the joke before it's just the discourse?



ART CLUB2000, *Kapputtmachen im Graz*, 1994. Printed vinyl, carpet, and boombox. Courtesy Artists Space. Photo: Filip Wolak.

Revisiting ART CLUB2000's legacy today makes me wonder what people think good art is now, and what it's supposed to do. I often wished I could turn the tables on ART CLUB2000, and interview them about the turning of the new millennium, or, perhaps more saliently, their experience of 9/11. It's easy to be nostalgic about this period in New York history. And it can be much more enjoyable to see such ethical ambiguities play out in the past, in particular, how they got out of the game before it soured, or before they were tempted to sell out. That several of the group members gave up art all together surely suggests they really meant it when they put on zombie makeup and posed for the images that became part of the show, *Night of the Living Dead Author*. But the same gesture can also be seen as a cautionary tale about artistic ambitions in the first place.

Ultimately, if ART CLUB2000 is your working model, then pay close attention to *Kapputtmachen im Graz* from their 1994 show *Esprit d'Amusement*. In a massive photo vinyl, the group stands disaffected amidst a trashed hotel room, dressed to resemble a paparazzi photo of Johnny Depp's contemporaneous arrest, after he had similarly wrecked his accommodations with Kate Moss. The work is accompanied by a boombox, and at the moment I was there, it played Sonic Youth's cover of The Carpenters' "Superstar." To some extent, the song is a synecdoche for the show: when Thurston Moore croons, "Don't you remember you told me you love me baby/You said you'd be coming back this way again baby," he comes across like some crappy ex, appealing to the good times we had together, as if his recent infidelities never happened. Don't listen to him. As with the rest of the show, *Kapputtmachen im Graz* asks us to remember the present. A present in which Sonic Youth has broken up; Johnny Depp was found guilty of battery; and no one listens to rock and roll anymore. Simply put, kill your idols. Do as ART CLUB2000 does, so long as you are willing to give it up.

-Sam Korman