

ARTFORUM

ART CLUB2000



View of "ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992-1999," 2020-21, Artists Space, New York. Reinstallation of "Commingle," 1993. Photo: Filip Wolak.

THE YEAR: 1993. The Roaring Nineties had kicked off, Royal Trux and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* ruled the airwaves, the taps ran clear with Crystal Pepsi. And in New York, a collective of undergraduates called ART CLUB2000 achieved a peculiar brand of low-key renown with a series of photographs of themselves sporting outfits from the Gap and posed in various locales around the city. The group slouched all over the tony furniture in a home-decor emporium, noshed in a doughnut shop, perused the library at the offices of *Art in America*, huddled in an East Village café around a copy of *Newsweek* whose cover bore a photo of a panda and the headline "Loved to Death." (Truly more innocent times.) They were cannily performing themselves—doing what art students were imagined to do, which is basically be young, exude cool, and work as minimally as possible. Abetting the photos' success, AC2K inadvertently prompted a legal dustup with the Gap by placing a mock "Individuals of Style" ad in *Artforum* depicting their mentor, Colin de Land, in shadowy, stylish black-and-white. The cease-and-desist hit the papers, and, cred now firmly established, AC2K members would go on to appear at a steady clip as the subjects of various style-magazine shoots and interviews all the way through December 31, 1999, when for some reason they hailed the new millennium on the cover of *Libération*, despite having disbanded earlier that year.

More important, and often overlooked, they produced art throughout the decade for a show every summer at de Land's gallery, American Fine Arts, Co., and for international presentations. The resulting body of work has been poorly surveyed—until the ensemble's current Artists Space exhibition, the first look back at their collected output (aside from the mash-up "retrodisrespective" they themselves staged in 1999 to mark their retirement). The picture that resolves is of a group that was prescient but not grandiose, outwardly mercurial but in fact consistent, mocking but earnest, dopey but analytic, Marxian nerds and downtown *bohème*—an array of contradictions that helped establish a template for numerous New York artists over the subsequent twenty-odd years.

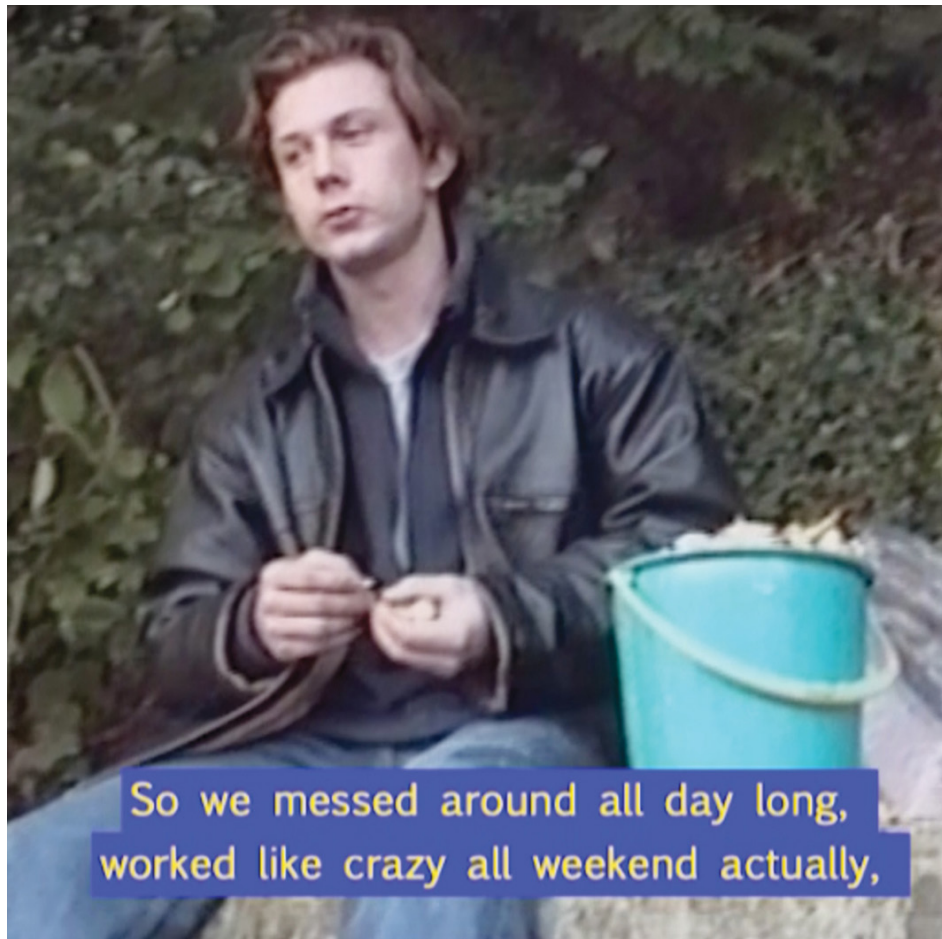


View of "ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992-1999," 2020-21, Artists Space, New York. Reinstallation of "SoHo So Long," 1996. Photo: Filip Wolak.

The show at Artists Space, matter-of-factly titled "Selected Works 1992-1999," does an excellent job of distilling each of the group's solo exhibitions into its respectively crucial components. Those 1993 Gap photographs appeared in their very first, "Commingle," which took up the clothier as a subject of pseudo-sociological investigation in a half parody, half homage directed at the methodologies of the group's critically minded Cooper Union instructors, including Doug Ashford, Douglas Crimp, Mark Dion, and Hans Haacke. At Artists Space, it receives the most elaborate re-creation. A perilous, hither-thither column of Gap shoeboxes seems to prop up the corner of one chromatic orange partitioning wall, while faux-sober gelatin silver photos capture glimpses of the store's retail environments and snippets of vaguely Orwellian Gap employee manuals. That corporatespeak also appears in wall appliqué. **EVERY CUSTOMER WILL HAVE THEIR NEEDS DETERMINED AND MERCHANDISE SUGGESTED TO MEET THOSE NEEDS**, for example, reads as the product of some end-of-history human-resources copywriter with a vicious sense of humor. "Commingle" sets up the tensions present throughout the rest of the group's oeuvre. It's clear today, if it wasn't at the time, that AC2K consistently pulled itself in opposite directions: striving to be on the one hand cool and irreverent, as was generationally appropriate, and on the other to be achieving and earnest—the class clown and the bookworm all at once.

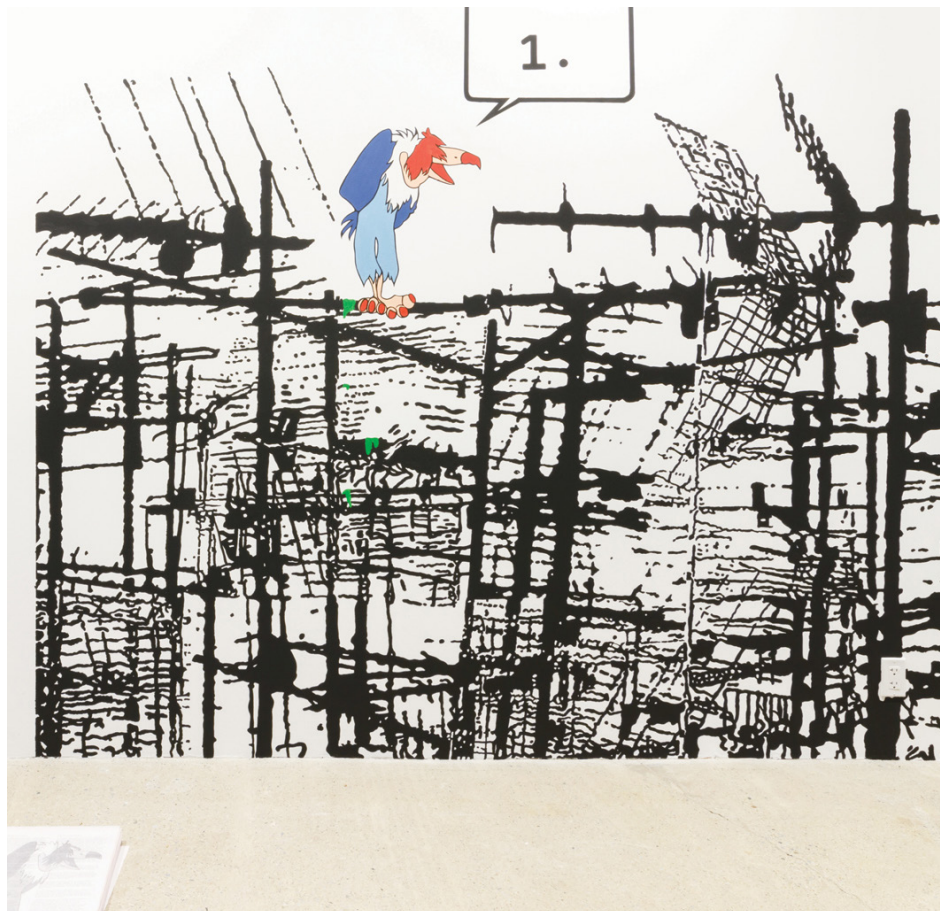
AC2K's curious pact with the notion of cachet grew out of the idea of site-specificity. New York was both their home and their ultimate topos.

These twin impulses find perhaps their quintessential expression in the 1997 exhibition "1970." To create it, the group videotaped interviews with art-world figures about the titular year and developments in the subsequent decades. After interviewing nine luminaries—Vito Acconci, Henry Flynt, Isa Genzken, Olivier Mosset, and Carolee Schneemann among them—they proceeded to display the results on nine ugly old televisions stacked like a bootleg Nam June Paik, playing all the videos simultaneously to turn their elders' testimonials into babble. This poke in the eye of seniority was, however, balanced out: The visitor could also take in the videos one at a time on a separate single-channel monitor. Shot on deliberately lousy black-and-white VHS to ape early video art, the interviews themselves are a treasure. Acconci chain-smokes, stutters occasionally, and gazes with his hideous magnetism into the camera as he articulates how what he and his peers naively saw as the revolutionary potential of Conceptual art drained away, and how the seemingly unsalable became just another gallery product. Genzken, phoning in from Germany and represented by an image of her face propped in front of the camera, discusses her youthful desire to join the Red Army Faction as well as her theory that bad sex is responsible for the miserable state of the art world. The two artists share a disdain for the scene and a desire to escape it, though Acconci acknowledges the double bind that critically minded artists are in—needing the gallery system even as they despise it. Fortunately, he says, he found architecture.



ART CLUB2000, Untitled (Cyclones at Travail), 1995, video, color, sound, 30 minutes 43 seconds.

The documentary impulse extends throughout the group's production. In 1995, for a show at Forde in Geneva, AC2K made a subdued video of the venue's young proprietors feeding swans and discussing the various jobs they had held, accompanied by moody photos of the artists' own day-job environments back in New York. More akin to "1970," the group's 1996 project "SoHo So Long" featured a sarcastic mise-en-scène, a kind of waiting room with vending machines and IKEA furniture—and a replica of Kenny Scharf's inane souvenir-peddling Scharf Shack. There, while awaiting the imminent interment of SoHo's art community, one could read the fantastic collection of interviews the group had done around the subject. AC2K talked to gallerists, critics, and collectors to produce a Xerox book full of crisply edited accounts of their relationship to the neighborhood over the years and assessments of the newly opening frontier: Chelsea. The volume (available in reprint for five dollars at Artists Space) is full of remarkably unguarded commentary and savory tidbits. A sign shouting, STOP THE MEGA HOTEL! placed outside AFA's Wooster Street digs to protest the opening of the SoHo Grand, seems just as apt stationed outside Artists Space today, though STOP THE MEGA CONDO! would be even more apropos. Either way, the sandwich board's Victorian font sardonically drives home that, in 2020 as in 1996, such complaints seem futile.



ART CLUB2000, Gli Avvoltoi (The Vultures), 1995, wall painting, printed handout. Installation view. Photo: Filip Wolak.

AC2K's prematurely au courant status has long overshadowed their work; de Land had in fact counseled against the Gap photos, arguing that they would be absorbed by the system they aimed to critique. Such absorption would of course later be if not universally embraced then almost universally accepted as inevitable in art and beyond, as a layer of irony laminated all gestures and poses. In AC2K's case, their curious pact with the notion of cachet grew out of the idea of site specificity that was emerging at the time in social practice—for example, in the work of Fraser, Haacke, et al. The twist was that they applied it to their daily lives: New York was both their home and their ultimate topos, rendered with a full range of emotions, however ironically they were at times couched. Were they performing for the glossies, or were they living the most aspirational sort of downtown lives? Compare AC2K to their peers Bernadette Corporation. If the BC of the '90s was a latter-day exemplar of Warholian business art, functioning as both a fashion label and an artists' collective, AC2K flaunted their absence of any real enterprise or entrepreneurial spirit. Both explored the possibilities and vacancies of the mediatized and branded self and mocked America's creepy relationship to youth while also capitalizing on it, but ART CLUB2000's penetrations of the media have more to tell us about local and aleatory networks—about the peculiar byways of a system that would allow this unmodelish septet to appear in *The Face* and *Dazed & Confused*, hailed as some kind of fourth-generation, post-club kid Warhol superstars. This case study of the leveraging of cultural capital, from art school to gallery to art magazine to fashion magazine and beyond, gives the work an evidentiary quality, mapping a complex chain of interactions that evokes an (immaterial) cultural geography—a slacker *Fish Story*—and yet also intersects at every turn with the obdurate materialism of gentrification and precarious labor. Ultimately, AC2K aligned less with the contemporary dandy traipsing through niche media's hall of mirrors and more with the return of the real, as Hal Foster theorized these things in 1996. Anthropologizing themselves, they were an unlikely example of the quasi-ethnographic position that their instructors had trailblazed and that so many artists continue to inhabit today.



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Zombies)*, 1998, C-print, 21 1/2 x 17 1/2".

In their last show of original work, titled "Night of the Living Dead Author" (1998), AC2K once again showed themselves to be a little ahead of the game, mashing up spooky effects with cops, capital, and the art world in a deployment of the zombie metaphor that would soon become so popular in milieus high and low. In a pseudo-Jenny Holzer LED crawl, they accused artists—including themselves—of feeding on the flesh of their predecessors to fatten their wallets. Their self-indictment lends the installation's silly photo of themselves (with de Land) gnawing on some ersatz flesh and bone a little gravitas. At Artists Space, this installation is brilliantly paired with one of two works that are to be included from the group's 1999 farewell: an imposing grim reaper pulling back a curtain, à la Charles Willson Peale's 1822 *The Artist in His Museum*. Here, he leads you into the retrospective's finale, a mural of vultures, *Gli Avvoltoi* (The Vultures), from a 1995 show in Milan. The zombies lead you to Death with his scythe, who leads you to the buzzards that will pick the leftover meat from your bones—in this case perched on an image appropriated from a Benetton ad and spewing Guy Debord in a perfectly circular, ambivalent coup de grâce.

"ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992–1999" is on view through January 30; travels to Kunsthalle Zürich, September 4–November 7.

-Domenick Ammirati