

FRIEZE

The Nostalgia for ART CLUB2000's Cool Cynicism

At Artists Space, New York, a retrospective of the collective's body of work reminisces on the punkish criticality of the 1990s



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Wooster Street/Gap Vampires)*, 1992–93, color print, 27.9 × 35.6 cm. Courtesy: the artists and Artists Space,

Encountering the work of ART CLUB2000 (AC2K) for the first time in 2021 feels a bit like someone telling you that your parents were cool when they were in their twenties. (I wasn't even born when the group was founded in 1992.) Active until 1999, the collective of seven precocious students from Cooper Union – Patterson Beckwith, Gillian Haratani, Daniel McDonald, Shannon Pultz, Sarah Rossiter, Soibian Spring and Craig Wadlin – made work that discussed and embodied New York's (and the art world's) most salient hypocrisies of the period: the commodification and gentrification of Manhattan's downtown (from SoHo to Chelsea) and the neoliberalism of the city's progressive cultural workers.

The group's current survey at Artists Space, New York, 'ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992–1999', faithfully restages eight of AC2K's 11 exhibitions in chronological order. Most of these shows were originally held at American Fine Arts, Co. (AFA), the famed alt-art gallery of Colin de Land. AFA was located at 40 Wooster Street in SoHo – just a stone's throw away from Artists Space's former and long-time home. (Today, 40 Wooster Street is listed as a 'corporate office' on Google Maps.)



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Times Square /Gap Grunge 1)*, 1992–93, color print, 27.9 × 35.6 cm. Courtesy: the artists and Artists Space, New York

In the group's most iconic photo series – originally shown in 1993 at its first exhibition, 'Commingle', at AFA – AC2K cohorts lounge around in clothes purchased from (and later returned to) Gap. There's a calculated ennui in the way the members drape their bodies languidly in *Untitled (Conran's 2)* (1992–93); an ironic posturing in how some look into the camera and others look away absentmindedly in *Untitled (Times Square / Gap Grunge 2)* (1992–93). The images were produced as a cool satire of Gap's commodified Bohemian-chic, in particular the brand's 1988 advertising campaign 'Individuals of Style', which featured portraits of cultural producers like artist Jim Dine and gallerist Leo Castelli next to Whoopi Goldberg, Spike Lee and Madonna.



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Starbucks Trash)*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 27.9 × 35.6 cm. Courtesy: the artists and Artists Space, New York

A lot of AC2K's work focused on unpacking the inherited myths of being an artist in New York. On the first floor, *Untitled (Starbucks Trash)* (1995) – a black and white photograph of a heap of rubbish with the coffeehouse company's branded cups – reminded me of Roy DeCarava's post-war photographs of New York, albeit here a fierce documentation of the gentrification. Downstairs, the photo series 'Working!' (1995) displays the desks of the office jobs the artists maintained to pay their rising rents. AC2K's use of curatorial methods – reportage, photography, installation, ethnographic analysis – sought to be critical of the orthodoxy of existing institutional critique. But, today, these methods feel paradoxically dependent on those histories to remain legible. If it were still active, the group would probably be running a meme account on Instagram.



ART CLUB2000, *Untitled (Punishing Enforcers of an Oppressive Regime)* (detail), 1998, eight printed cardboard standees, satin sashes and LED lights. Courtesy: the artists and Artists Space, New York; photography: Filip Wolak

I couldn't help but be struck by the fact that, apart from Haratani, all members of AC2K present as white. I imagine (or hope) their analyses might have been deeper and more piercing had they engaged in more interracial contact. However, elements of the work critique the liberal identity politics of the 1990s: if companies could have 'identities', what was the use of people having them? These debates feel directly relevant as we navigate our own era of identity politics amidst the performative allyship of corporate Twitter and Instagram accounts in support of Black Lives Matter.

In place of restaging the group's final exhibition, '1999 (A Retrodisrespective)', the Artists Space show features a bank of vitrines containing archival ephemera. These sketches, notes and magazine spreads point to the elements that Artists Space couldn't re-create: the social world that surrounded the work, which in some ways feels more vital than the objects themselves. I would love to have been party to some of their conversations. But what was the point of all that punkish criticality? How different are things now? The prescience of AC2K's critique lands in the wilful amnesia of an art world that seems to require a constant abundance of 'possible futures' only to smother the energy to act on any of them.

'ART CLUB2000: Selected Works 1992-1999' is on view at Artists Space, New York, through 30 January 2021.

-Simon Wu