



ArtSeen

BERNADETTE CORPORATION 2000 *Wasted Years*

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Artists Space welcomes you this fall to *2000 Wasted Years*, the first retrospective of the punk collaborative, Bernadette Corporation. BC uses the methods and materials associated with industries adjacent to the art world—including fashion, publishing, and filmmaking—to challenge suspect, high-minded, commercial, or subversive impulses within both the realm of fine art and the real world beyond. The show provides an opportunity to trace BC's zonked-out conceptual playfulness crossing media and work locations including New York, Paris, and Berlin. The collective grew out of a brief series of organized downtown art parties in 1993 and was officially formed the following year. The three current principal members are Bernadette Van-Huy, John Kelsey, and Antek Walczak, but other participants over the years have included Thuy Pham, Seth Shapiro, Rita Ackermann, Jutta Koether, and Jim Fletcher with support from the late gallerist Colin de Land.

Following this series of parties, BC created several lines of women's wear and in 1995, was officially recognized in the fashion press by magazines such as Harper's Bazaar. Morphing media—a trademark practice—BC published three issues of a magazine called *Made in USA*, between 1999 and 2001. In 2003, the group produced a mock social protest documentary, *Get Rid of Yourself*. The collectively written novel, *Reena Spaulings*, about post-9/11 life in Manhattan and an eponymous art gallery, were realized in 2005. Two other collective writing projects, a screenplay called "Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte," and an epic poem, "The Complete Poem," were produced between 2007 and 2009. Most recently, BC has embraced the art gallery as their stage, revisiting fashion, photography, publishing, and ready-mades in exhibitions at Greene Naftali in New York, Galerie Neu in Berlin, and Galerie Meyer Kainer in Vienna.

It's a tall order to legibly pack 20 years of multi-media projects by a collective whose members shift from year to year into one show. Dressing the naturally backlit classic SoHo gallery as a luxury retail store with slick display cubes, "promotional" flat screens, and an elegant black lacquer pavilion, the collaborative's legacy of well crafted, deadpan institutional satire fits. Up front, vintage videos show two of BC's 1995 ready-to-wear collections as fully realized imposter catwalk events. One of the videos, "Spring/Summer 1996 runway show" (1995), flaunts models working the runway in giant blonde beehives with flowing extensions as a send up of Pamela Anderson's character on the '90s television hit, *Baywatch*. In an adjacent vitrine, "go girl" (2010), a modified high-end Dornbracht faucet and connection hoses are artfully arranged. The fixture is etched with lines of outraged admonishments found on the Internet about a "sext" cellphone self portrait, allegedly leaked by pop super star, Rihanna.

A chirping audio track is broadcast throughout the room; it emanates from one of two, large flat screens laying face up behind glass at the back of the gallery. Visible from an angle, a brief video loop displays a smiling teenage girl saying hello. Next, she cries in response to a surprise slap in the face delivered by the boy she greets who is videotaping her from his phone. In this essential D.I.Y. reality television piece, entitled "Happy Slaps" (2011), BC appropriates a prank practiced by British teens. As a throwaway Americana still life, the image of a tipped-over jelly jar and cast off loaf of bread sits at the bottom edge of a large inkjet print. Positioned just inside the gallery's front door, "BC Lifestyle EXT" (2012) features a fashion spread styled with a nouveau New Jersey flavor.

Two elements of the exhibition feel out of character with the overall quality of BC's oeuvre, however: 12 classroom-style display boards detailing the chronology of the collective's projects seem too earnest, if not downscale. Mannequins, staged in two groups and modeling replicas of BC's outfits designed in 1996 and 1997, also read as low budget. Even the most custom mannequins, however, such as those used at Alexander McQueen's retrospective at the Met, are problematic, since clothes are an extension of our bodies and fashion is a living, moving art form. The exhibition travels to the ICA in London next spring, which will be an opportunity to restage the show's elements.



"BC Fashion Images Digital Archive", 2012. Three flatscreen monitors on plexi easels. Photos: Cris Moor (Left, Center) Mark Borthwick (Right). Installation view from Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years, Artists Space, 2012. Photographer: Daniel Pérez.

I have always liked the name, “Bernadette Corporation”—a corporate entity using an old fashioned girl’s name with saintly connotations evokes a world where there are fewer glass ceilings and better job security for artists. Filmmaker Miranda July spoke with curator Hans Ulrich Obrist on this subject in his second book of interviews, “...I sensed that the important thing was not to have a job but to have an audience, that that was where your safety and security came from, and if possible, to have a movement. If you could have a revolution, then that was some real security, especially if that could happen on a national or international level.” Movements and revolutions are often the subject of BC’s scorn, but, as revealed in this rare, “straight,” and comprehensive presentation of their work, it is clear that creating a lasting brand of their own was always on the agenda.

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Bernadette Corporation runway show for Spring/Summer 1996. Photographer: Wolfgang Tillmans.