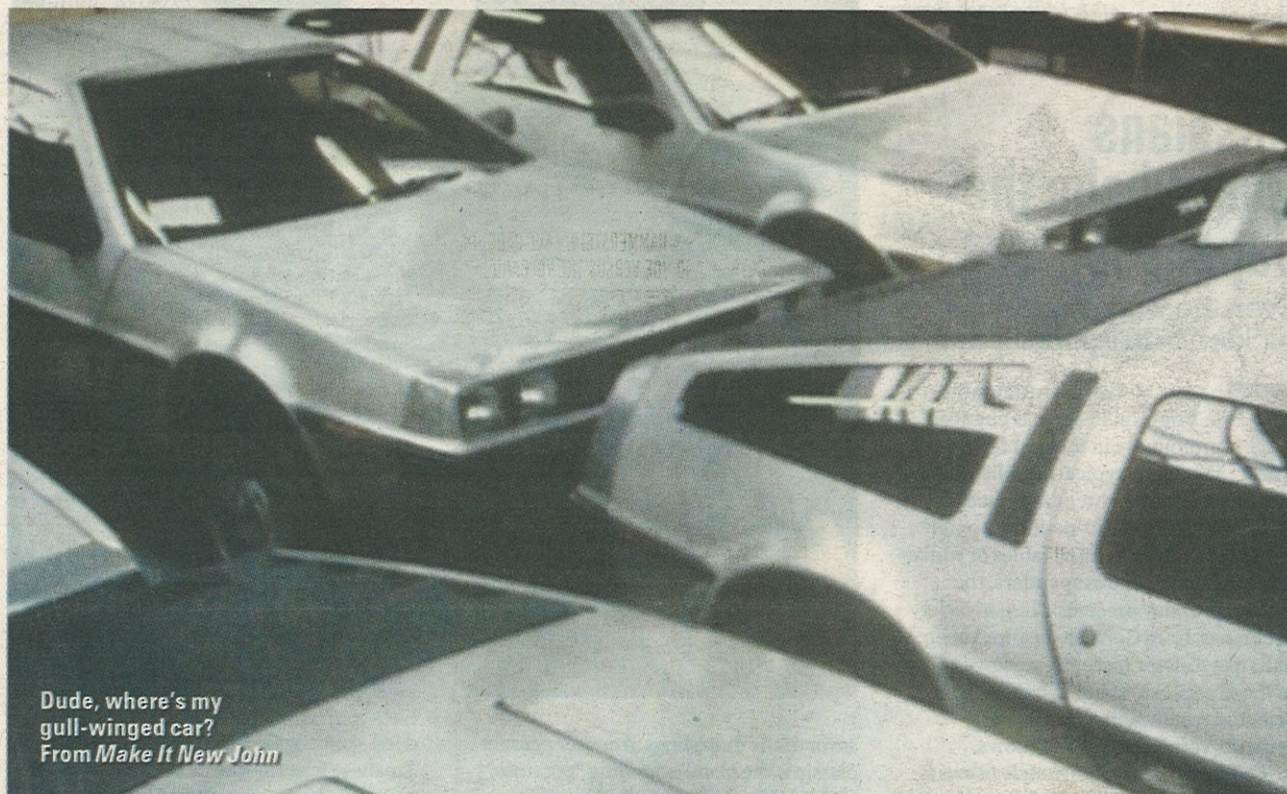


Perfect From Now On

Duncan Campbell and a post-post-punk art crew buckle up for the bumpy ride to Utopia

Art



Dude, where's my gull-winged car?
From *Make It New John*

Courtesy BBC Motion Gallery

**Bruce High Quality Foundation:
'Brucennial 2010: Miseducation'**

350 West Broadway
Through April 12

Duncan Campbell: "Make It New John"

Artists Space
38 Greene Street, 212-226-3970
Through May 1

BY MARTHA SCHWENDENER

There's a kind of utopian/dystopian strain running through South Soho right now. I use those terms sparingly, since Thomas More, 16th-century author of *Utopia*, didn't mean what we think of by a good society (slaves: no problem), and if you consult a selective bibliography of Utopian Lit compiled by the New York Public Library—a good read in itself—everyone from William Morris and Martin Buber to Ayn Rand is included. But if you think about classic utopian tropes like property, production, and aesthetics, a weird, sympathetic current runs through this trio of otherwise very different shows.

The Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001) exhibit at the Drawing Center has been up for a while and written about elsewhere, so I will mention it only briefly. But it's an amazing little exhibition. The show includes documents relating to Xenakis's career as an architect and composer—and, as one black-and-white photo attests, a Greek Resistance fighter during World War II.

Xenakis's oeuvre feels like a classic midcentury utopian enterprise. He worked in Le Corbusier's atelier from 1947 to 1959 and later composed music incorporating probability theory—a kind of perfect storm of science, society, and aesthetics. Listening to Xenakis's music on an iPod provided by the Drawing Center while examining his scores and architectural plans, which look pretty similar, you get a strong sense of the high modernist project, in which everything from buildings to music could be recruited to shape and improve the way you see, hear, and inhabit the world.

But where Xenakis's generation believed in the power of advanced culture to change society at large, the Bruce High Quality Foundation, a frisky collective of five artists, is devoted to showing how art has become an ossified, elitist, carnivalesque spectacle. (The irony, of course, is that the Bruces themselves are masters of working the spectacle's publicity machine.)

Their "Brucennial 2010: Miseducation"—which riffs on the current Whitney Biennial, in which they are actually included—is utopian in the DIY sense: infused with the notion that, even in this age of market-and-curator-created art stars, a kind of post-post-punk egalitarianism might be achieved if you simply put your mind to it (and enlist the help of your wealthier and better-connected friends).

One of the best elements of the Brucennial is the writing on its website, with

a press release boasting that the show "brings together 420 artists from 911 countries working in 666 discrete disciplines to reclaim education as part of an artist's ongoing practice beyond the principals [sic] of any one institution or experience." (For those not familiar with the number significations, I leave you to your search engine.)

The Brucennial opening coincided with "Bruceforma," a one-night affair that simultaneously spoofed and paid homage to Performa, the performance art biennial. Unlike the Whitney, or most official/institutionally sponsored events, it was non-exclusive and advertised to run until 2 a.m., although it got shut down around 11 p.m.

What's left now is a kind of after-party-cum-exhibition lodged in a raw showroom on West Broadway, a space loaned by real estate mogul and art patron Aby Rosen. Work is hung salon-style, artists' names scrawled in pencil on the wall next to their submissions. Unknown artists are mounted next to famous ones (although who outside our little art ghetto recognizes Nate Lowman, Adam McEwen, or Orly Genger?). The flattening of art-world hierarchies is underscored by the inclusion of '80s personages like David Salle, Francesco Clemente, George Condo, James Nares, critic Rene Ricard, and Julian Schnabel—folks presumably scored by Schnabel's son, Vito, who collaborated with the Bruces on the show.

Look closer, however, and you sense

within the show's laissez-faire festivalism a kind of dystopian fatalism: Culture has failed us and, despite modernist good intentions and moralizing postmodern critiques, there isn't a damn thing we can do. Maya Kishi-Anderson's bound compendium of "unpurchased art magazines" includes the subtitle "All I Have to Unlearn to Make Art." Michelle Scourtos's Molotov-cocktail-on-a-pedestal is titled "The Empire Strikes Back." Nelson Bradley's black-and-white prints—oblique, constructivist views of the World Trade towers—include a bit of banal, post-Obama euphoria text printed between: "I wanted to vote but I was all so, you know, like, whatever..." Meanwhile, a painting by Josh somebody (Brick? Burke? My failed attempts to decipher and attribute this work seem apt) consists of four registers of baroquely applied text that utterly level pop art's lukewarm, ambivalent critiques: "Stop/consumerism/kill/yourself."

Over at Artists Space, Glasgow artist Duncan Campbell traces the misguided utopian fantasy that American capitalism, transported to Northern Ireland, and with a little help from the British Labour Government, could somehow improve a society rocked by centuries of war and political occupation. The primary subject of Campbell's 50-minute film, *Make It New John*, is John DeLorean—son of Romanian immigrants to the U.S., who rose through the ranks in Detroit to become an executive at General Motors (chief engineer behind the legendary '60s Pontiac GTO muscle car)—and the deal he cut to set up a plant outside Belfast to build his own DMC-12 sports car.

Campbell combines documentary/found footage with fictional interviews in which actors play the roles of Irish car workers. Captions are virtually excluded, and there's no effort to present an easily digestible narrative, which is what separates his work from straight documentary—although parallels can be drawn with Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.* and *American Dream*, and, of course, Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*. Campbell's subject is a slippery one, though. In this context, labor isn't just labor, but divided into Catholics and Protestants, and DeLorean's "American pioneering spirit" looks creepy when he starts to describe his attempts to create "the illusion of credibility in the marketplace."

Because the DeLorean saga is a bit of actual history, I won't be spoiling it to tell you that things didn't work out, although Campbell does omit the sordid, drug-trafficking saga that DeLorean became ensnared in, and his later acquittal. What's impressive about the film is how it takes an Irish-British-American tale and allows it to expand into an exegesis on capitalism, neoliberalism, and our recent global-economic quandary. The seeds are all here: Reaganomics, Thatcherism, deregulation, the "friendly" face of globalization and its localized consequences. Campbell's version of the DeLorean tale ends with an appropriately scripted Beckettian moment. I won't give that away. But utopia, from its vantage, feels very remote.