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Burn a Debt to the Present

Author(s): Jian-Xing Too

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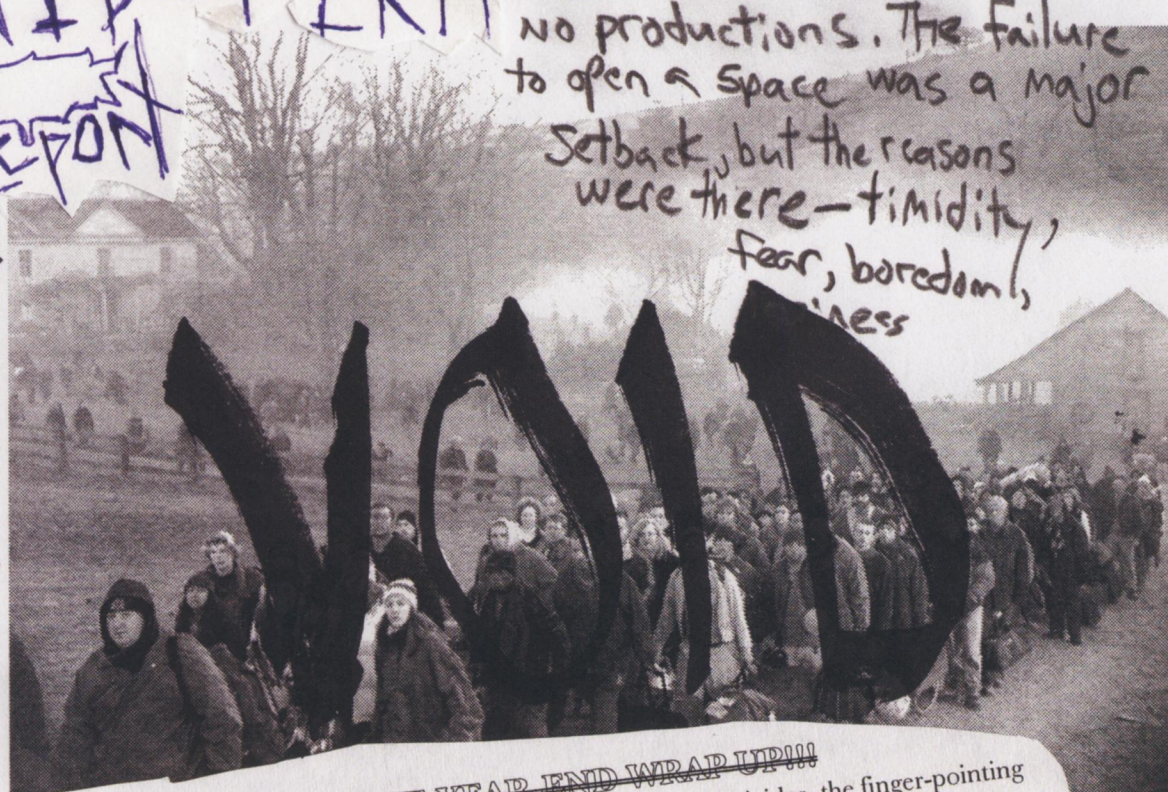


MID-TERM  
REFORM

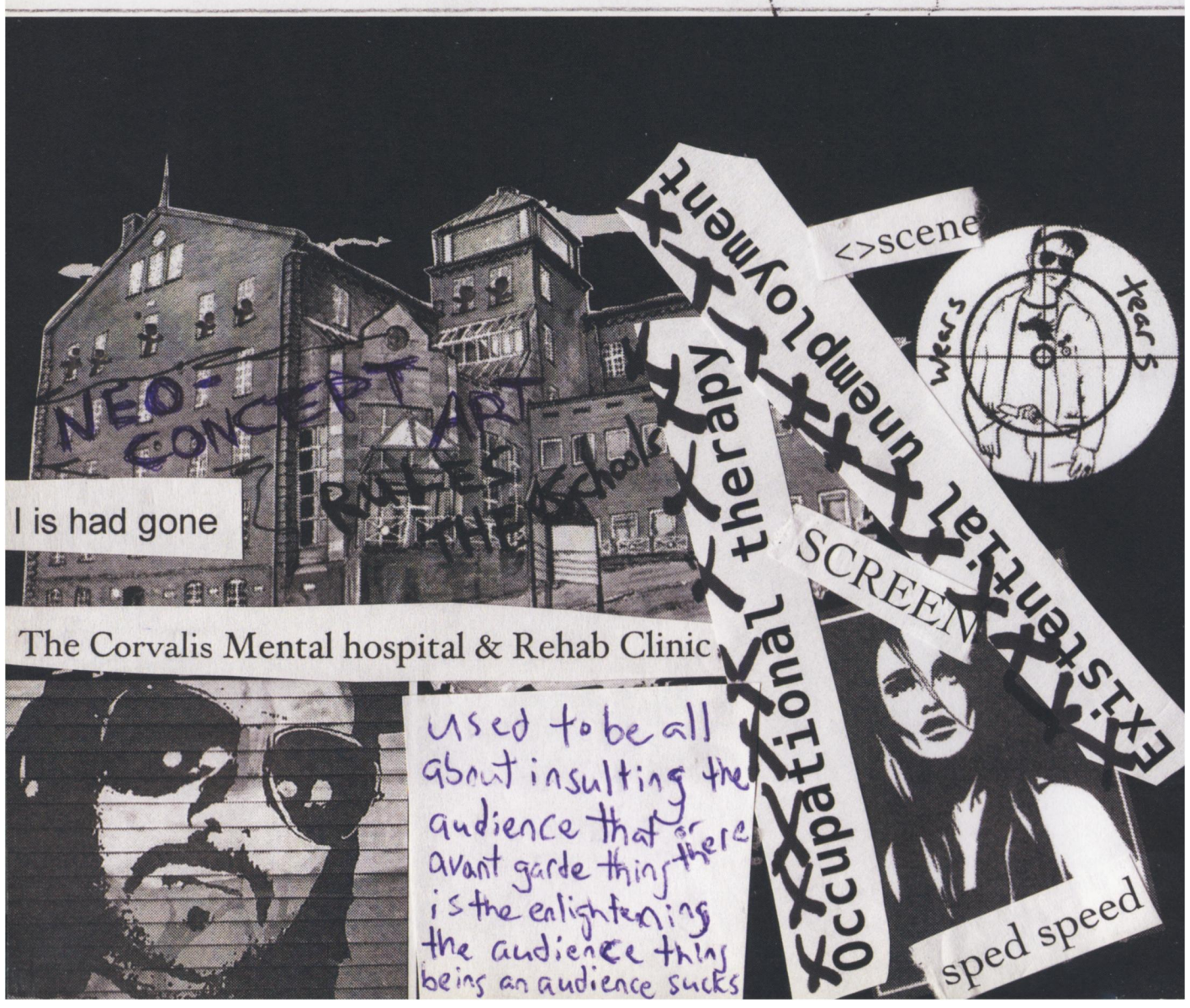
Bernadette Corporation's Pedestrian Cinema is SUFFERING, there are no ideas, no productions. The failure to open a space was a major setback, but the reasons were there - timidity, fear, boredom, mess

ANGER  
Cinema Desperately

Video Hoax



~~STAY TUNED FOR THE YEAR END WRAP UP!!!~~  
The scandals, the repossession of equipment, the evictions, the suicides, the finger-pointing



I is had gone

The Corvalis Mental hospital & Rehab Clinic

used to be all about insulting the audience that or avant garde thing there is the enlightening the audience thing being an audience sucks



Flyer Table, 2006,  
table and flyers,  
90 × 55 × 75cm  
(details)

## Burn a Debt to the Present — Jian-Xing Too

Not many artists can say that they started out their career as an organiser of parties in a nightclub (1994) and then went from designing clothes and putting on fashion shows (1995–97) to publishing a fashion/art magazine (*Made in USA*, 1999–2001), to making art videos (*Hell Frozen Over*, 2000; *Get Rid of Yourself*, 2003) and writing a novel that was published by Semiotext(e) (*Reena Spaulings*, 2004), to setting up a prolific digital-film project during a residency with the Kunst-Werke in Berlin (*Pedestrian Cinema*, 2005–06). This may have something to do with the fact that, at a time when artists are becoming increasingly professionalised, the artist in question here, Bernadette Corporation, did not go to art school. Although BC was an ‘outsider’ to the art world in terms of its background and its early projects, it was swiftly taken under the wing of important players. By 1996, Colin de Land, the legendary and unconventional New York dealer who ran American Fine Arts Co., had taken an interest in what BC was doing, as had the Paris-based curators/editors of *Purple* magazine, Olivier Zham and Elein Fleiss. By the year 2000 its work was being presented by major institutions such as the Walker Art Center in the travelling exhibition ‘Let’s Entertain’ and, since 2004, the group has really taken off, having shown at Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the ICA in Philadelphia and Kunst-Werke in Berlin that year, then Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum and Rotterdam’s Witte de With in 2005, and in the Whitney Biennial of this year. Articles on BC have proliferated.

But turn the winch back. Despite its atypical body of work, it is perhaps not just the works that are generating interest, but also BC’s structure for producing them. BC has often been described as an anonymous collective. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that while the members of BC have not always rigorously withheld their names, they have not been thrifless with them either. For example, their names openly appear in their magazine *Made in USA*, but not in the credits of their films and novel, not on their website nor in the 2004 article on BC that appeared in *Artforum* by long-time collaborator Bennett Simpson. Today, it seems they have stopped resisting having their names specified. On anonymity, BC says, ‘When we say anonymous, we don’t mean that we don’t provide our names. It is more a way of being, as opposed to the more normative way of being an “individual” – living and making work that becomes assigned to one’s own identity and to an individual subjectivity. Living and making work in a manner that merges our subjectivities is a kind of disappearance of the individual, a disappearance of the individual into a communal subjectivity. Where things are assignable to a collective subjectivity, it speaks about a condition where each individual subjectivity is marked and altered by others, and therefore not something that can be demarcated and identified.’<sup>1</sup>

Bernadette Corporation consists of John Kelsey, who joined in 1999, Bernadette Van-Huy, after whom the corporation was named in 1994, and Antek Walczak, who joined shortly after in 1995. Or rather, these three have been the principal members for the past seven years. Van-Huy explains that ‘BC was always conceived for an indeterminate number of people. It merges with other persons on different occasions, and changes its organisational and working structure. For example, with our fashion label, BC referred to not only the principal members but also to our numerous regular collaborators; with our collective novel we were a form of dozens of writers’. And, for *Get Rid of Yourself*, BC ‘temporarily merged with ... a faction of

1

Email exchange with  
Bernadette Van-Huy,  
19 June 2006.  
Subsequent remarks  
by Van-Huy are from  
same source.

post-Situationist militants'.<sup>2</sup> Oddly hierarchical, the principal members of BC are now known, while these other members remain anonymous, at least for an extended period of time. Conversely, sometimes a single core member of BC will do a project but under the collective name. Van-Huy says, 'BC is not about being a "clean" collective – where each individual contributes his/her exact percentage of work and responsibility, and gets his/her exact percentage of representative voice. [...] The mergence of our subjectivities is more messy and mixed up. Meaning that the collective voice exists in any of our voices. [...] In a collectivity, there can be no distinguishing the boundaries of any individual any longer.' BC is not all-embracing, however. It is clearly distinguished from the dealer/artist Reena Spaulings – not to be confused with the novel – who is in fact John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad.

We are seeing BC's work, particularly its videos, more and more frequently in galleries, art fairs and institutions. Most of these videos are not easy to apprehend. With their cheesy overlay effects, monotonous head-scratching endings and areas of moronic script – 'I'm c-c-c-c-cold' (*Hell Frozen Over*) – it's hard to believe that Walczak and Kelsey went to film school. With its roots in street culture, BC is certainly an excellent un-learner of academia. And yet it adds more layers of difficulty precisely through academia. It is not happenstance that *Hell Frozen Over* features a reading of Mallarmé by Sylvère Lotringer, professor of French literature and philosophy at Columbia and general editor of *Semiotext(e)*. There is a layering of dumbness, incisiveness and savvyness that can come across as cynical, pretentious mockery. But perhaps it would be an error to look at the work without seeing BC's boundary-breaking structure as an important part of it. In 'Corporate Responsibility and the Swine We Are', a mock guide to setting up a corporation and the closest thing you'll get to a manifesto, 'd'Antek' writes: 'So you go looking for centres of power and only find corporations and corporate culture. These corporations (bands of people forming a bodiless/flexible entity in order to do whatever they want – *and not be liable*) dictate the products in the marketplace and influence the general economy of daily life. If corporations are so powerful that they can *cause the winds to blow sideways*, then it might be possible to rethink the totality of the present system from the perspective of how your corporation is structured. While you were once dedicated to producing "loaded" products, you might take it up a level by enacting "loaded" modes of production.'<sup>3</sup> And the trying aspect of their videos may be explained by the advice that follows: 'Take it up many levels, change patterns of brutality by encouraging negative business practices – sketchy follow-up, worthwhile delays, mysterious gaps in information – that force factors of patience into the market while trying to dispel anger and cruelty from client expectations.'



Judging from publications such as this year's Whitney Biennial catalogue or Jeffrey Deitch's *Live Through This: New York in the Year 2005*, it would be more than safe to say that collective practice, obscured identity in all of its forms and the fusing of art with non-art domains are the thing today. Repeatedly told that this is radical, we often fail to remember that it was only during a relatively brief period of high modernism that art did not fuse with other domains, and tend to forget that figures such as Kurt Schwitters – who made collages and installations, ran a renowned advertising agency, designed typefaces, founded the Circle of New Advertising Designers, wrote poetry, composed and performed sound works, published a magazine and named most of his work 'Merz', which was derived from the German bank Commerzbank. In any case, that seems to be the 'present' we are indebted to in order to provide the art world with a pulse on our time. And Bernadette Corporation is one of the groups who have been working over the past decade to shape this 'present'. What is more difficult is to get past the currency of BC in the art world and construe what its project really is, to discern exactly how its uses of the collective, anonymity and crossovers into other fields differ from those of the past. The historical figure that BC has clearly referred to on more than one occasion is Stéphane Mallarmé. A translation of passages from Mallarmé's fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode* published in BC's fashion/art magazine *Made in USA*<sup>4</sup> may be BC's most incisive

*Get Rid of Yourself*, 2003, video, 60min (stills)

2  
Bennet Simpson, 'Techniques of Today', *Artforum*, September 2004. Also available from [www.bernadettecorporation.com](http://www.bernadettecorporation.com)

3  
Bernadette Corporation, 'Corporate Responsibility and the Swine We Are', *Purple Prose*, no.12, Summer 1997. d'Antek is presumably Antek Walczak. Emphasis on 'and not be liable' my own

4  
Spring/Summer 2000, introduction and translation by John Kelsey, pp.38–34









# Reena Spaulings

A novel by

BERNADETTE CORPORATION

project. As pointed out in BC's introduction, in 1874, with the emergence of a new consumer culture, the poet Mallarmé became the editor of *La Dernière Mode* as well as the writer of all the articles, which he signed under a set of female pseudonyms. Taking the fashion magazine as a pivotal point, however, Mallarmé was going from being a published poet to being a fashion critic, whereas BC was going from being a fashion designer to being a fashion editor. This hierarchical move in an opposite direction from Mallarmé's brings to mind examples from more recent history.

The work for which BC is best known is the film *Get Rid of Yourself*, which has been touted as an activist work. The film is set in New York post 9/11, in Genoa during the G8 protests, at a fashion shoot, a beach area, at a creek with dead fish in it and in a kitchen. The militant post-Situationist group with whom BC merged to make this film is Tiqqun, a French group of philosophers that is affiliated with no political credo except the Imaginary Party, of which it has named itself the 'conscious organ'. Appropriately, Tiqqun is fiercely attached to its anonymity, which makes people 'hear' things about them instead of know things about them. I've heard, for example, that its 'ringleader' makes it a matter of principle to steal everything and is particularly good at stealing huge, heavy objects. That this group might be considered part of BC, even if temporarily, suggests that Bennett Simpson's claim that BC's filmmaking echoes the political documentary practice of Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki is unsound; this briefly reorganised BC would appear to be more interested in playing with and off the notion of messy political action.<sup>5</sup> *Get Rid of Yourself* rejects not only the notion of documentary but also its form and techniques, preferring goofy computer-graphic effects of mirroring, overlay, infinity loops and sound-and-visual distortion patterns. It may be BC's most polished film, but it remains true to the corporation in that it is purposely trashy, on both technical and aesthetic grounds.<sup>6</sup> As the film gives various accounts of masked bands of rioters, one of whom is a woman explaining her tactics for smashing up, stealing and burning things, what comes to mind are the masked Guerilla Girls, disruptive heirs of the sprawling Art Workers Coalition, as well as the destructive actions of the Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG) who would stage fights and whose founder, Jean Toche, was arrested and banned for life from entering American museums after releasing cockroaches onto a banquet table at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

But sequences of the film have 'It Girl' Chloë Sevigny struggling to learn the words of the rioters as if it were a script, which makes one wonder if the Black Bloc accounts were not scripted to begin with. Here, Sevigny is enchantingly beautiful in a dumb-actress kind of a way. She may be a personality who does not shy away from controversial roles, but the way BC has edited her bumbling attempts into the video makes any sort of militant position that *Get Rid of Yourself* could potentially contain vanish with a poof. *Get Rid of Yourself* may have something more to do with Daniel Bosser's book *Philippe Thomas décline son identité*. In 1987 Philippe Thomas gave an artist's lecture, standard in its presentation of his work's theoretical implications and whatnot at the Centre Pompidou. Upon exiting the auditorium, however, the audience found a table presenting the aforementioned book, which purported to be a transcript of the lecture that had only just ended. The book revealed that every seemingly spontaneous word or action in Thomas's lecture was in fact scripted in advance, such as Thomas clearing his throat, reaching for a glass of water, or comments from two people in the audience and his responses to them.<sup>7</sup> This aspect of unveiling an illusory performance meets up with *Get Rid of Yourself*. BC differs, of course, in that it hasn't got just any performer, it has Chloë Sevigny.

*Philippe Thomas décline son identité* was paired with the element of obscured authorship. Its author, Daniel Bosser, is not the person who wrote the book but the person who paid for it. As with all of Philippe Thomas's work, the buyer buys both the work and its authorship. Thomas operated under the name 'readymades belong to everyone®', a public relations agency he founded in 1985, and this book is the only piece in which his name is anywhere to be found. His second book, *Insights*, came out in 1989 and its author is Laura Carpenter. Written as a journal, it recounts the setting up of his agency in a New York gallery for the duration of an exhibition. This first-person narrative brings to mind *Why I Got Into Art: Vaseline Muses* by Anonymous. Published in 1991, this book is the work of Mike Kelley. The attribution

5  
B. Simpson, *op. cit.*

6  
I say 'purposely' trashy because films such as Antek Walczak's *Occupational Hazard* demonstrate an ability to appropriate specific tropes of film, in terms of filming, editing and script. On all these counts, *Occupational Hazard* is completely convincing as a soap opera. *Get Rid of Yourself* is not convincing as a political documentary, and that does not seem to be BC's aim.

7  
See Raphael Rubinstein, 'The Ventriloquist: Philippe Thomas', *Art in America*, May 2001

'by Anonymous' was undoubtedly an ironic riposte to the catchword of the time: transgression. Though sometimes indispensable, it is obvious that anonymity is the safest route to take if one wants to break the rules, whatever they may be. All the same, it would appear that, as anonymous writers, artists are scared to loosen their grip on the word 'I'. BC's novel, *Reena Spaulings*, is interesting not just because it is the product of a 'stable' of writers who worked on it simultaneously, but also for its editorial decision to exploit the constant shift in gear between 'she' and 'I', both of whom are seen from a host of viewpoints that slide in and out of each other to create what the authors call a 'generic and perfect' result.<sup>8</sup> The novel is indeed the one place where Bernadette Corporation truly succeeded in getting rid of itself and, along with it, the general artist's urge to break out into a first-person tenor when it comes to publishing a book that obscures his/her claim to authorship. It would seem, however, that John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad have stolen Reena Spaulings back by taking her name for their gallery – what's more, they did so just before the novel came out. After stepping up a hierarchical rung of influence from artists to dealers, they appropriated Reena Spaulings a second time to become artists again. All this, all at once. Still, we get the feeling that business means business. So Reena Spaulings does not represent Reena Spaulings. She leaves that to Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris after having her first solo show at Haswellediger & Co. in New York exactly a year after starting her gallery in January 2004. As for Bernadette Corporation, it finds its fair share in this double-heist insofar as it is represented by Reena Spauling – not just in the Lower East Side but also at the likes of Art Basel – ever since the closing of its previous gallery, American Fine Arts Co. And let's not forget that John Kelsey is a part of Bernadette Corporation as well as its dealer. It would appear that everyone has found him or her self again.

There is a great, ongoing history dating back to the 1910s, as well as some isolated earlier instances, of artists taking on a second role as dealer, as well as critic, curator, collector and editor. More ubiquitous than ever today, this repeated appropriation of power and influence has been essential not only for extending the confines of what is considered art or an artist's role, but also for taking a good hard look at the beast that makes art art. The ever-present question, however, is to what degree does adopting positions of power entail critical resistance and enable the development of more worthy definitions of art, and to what degree is it an act of opportunism? Another interesting example of French art practice from the 1980s is *Présence Panchounette*, which consisted of an unknown number of members who flirted with the decorative and the frivolous. Though they kept their anonymity pretty tight, it is almost certain that the critic Jacques Soullilliou was part of the group. With his writings on *Présence Panchounette* unsuccessfully concealing that something's awry, it would appear that his criticism was part of the project. A third 1980s instance in France is the Yoon-Ja and Paul Devatour Collection, founded in 1985. Having established a collection of sixteen artists whom they actively promoted, it turned out that all of the works were done by the Devatour couple themselves. The pseudonyms ranged from Gladys Clover (the woman who sought fame through billboards) to Claude Lantier (the painter/protagonist in Zola's *The Masterpiece*) to less obvious references. Each of the sixteen artists took on specific styles, strategies and concerns, each more generic than the other. The idea of the readymade artist was fully present here. Several giveaways are scattered throughout *Générique, vers une solidarité opérationnelle*, the catalogue to an exhibition of the Devatour Collection. Featuring texts by Nicolas Bourriaud, Eric Troncy, Olivier Zahm and a dozen other well-known and less-known French curators and critics, the book is laced with texts by the fictional critic and theoretician Maria Wutz, Jorge Luis Borges's author/character Pierre Menard and others, but the reader is put in a position of hesitation, reluctant to venture too many guesses lest it simply be a curator or critic he/she has never heard of. So BC supplies its own dealer, as *Présence Panchounette* supplied its own critic, as the Devatours supplied their own collectors and the occasional catalogue writer.

Related to the idea of having a gallery is the idea of having a corporation. For what is a gallery if not a business? Perhaps it's a bit smaller than a corporation and typically focused on an individual dealer instead of a collective entity, but both

Cover of Anonymous  
(Mike Kelley), *Why I  
Got Into Art: Vaseline  
Muses*, Cologne:  
Jablonka Galerie,  
1991

8  
Preface of Bernadette  
Corporation, *Reena  
Spaulings*, New York:  
Semiotext(e), 2004



# Why I Got Into Art

*by*

*Anonymous*



are necessarily more impressive and convincing than the lone unknown artist. The faux-trademark name 'readymades belong to everyone®' clearly resonates with BC's interest in corporate branding. Maybe it is not so surprising that there would be resonance between the boom of the 1980s and our ultra-capitalist times. An earlier example, however, would be the Vancouver-based N.E. Thing Co. founded by Ingrid and Iain Baxter in 1966. The name N.E. Thing Co. suggests that what mattered was precisely not a name, but a corporate posture. Being from the 1960s, its work took the form of multiples, listings in the telephone directory, conceptual photography often recording a performative gesture, and installations such as the one, in 1969, that turned the lobby of the National Gallery of Canada into a working corporate office and turned museum guards into company security. That same year, GAAG started a fight in the lobby of MoMA, leaving behind a pool of blood and papers demanding the resignation of the Rockefellers from the museum's board. But while people might applaud after such a performance, with its recognisable beginning and end, it would be difficult for anybody to feel



inclined to clap upon seeing N.E. Thing Co. at work. All the same, their prolonged and orderly take-over of the museum was indeed a performance, as was the act of 'readymades belong to everyone®' setting up shop in a gallery, temporarily kicking out the gallery business. Here BC differs. As Walczak has points out, BC did not pretend or take on the posture of setting up a fashion label nor publish a magazine or novel as a work of art; BC simply did it.<sup>9</sup> The opening chapter of *Reena Spaulings* is set in a museum, but instead of protesting against or hijacking the institution, Reena and Bernadette are daydreaming, trendsetting museum guards. This seems indicative of BC's stance on institutional critique. Reena's saving grace is that she has pretensions to being disruptive outside of the museum. Let's hope she will be.

'Retrospective', 2005,  
installation view  
at Witte de With,  
Rotterdam

9  
Conversation with  
Antek Walczak,  
8 May 2006