

ETC



## 42nd Street event

*The 42nd Street Art Project*, West 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. July 8-October 31, 1993

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Numéro 24, novembre 1993, février 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36136ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (imprimé)

1923-3205 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Kaplan, S. (1993). Compte rendu de [42nd Street event / *The 42nd Street Art Project*, West 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. July 8-October 31, 1993]. *ETC*, (24), 56–58.

## NEW YORK

*The 42nd Street Art Project, West 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. July 8-October 31, 1993*

"Sloppy thinking gets worse over time."

Men to that, Jenny Holzer. Spelled out in large plastic letters on a derelict theater marquee which once advertised porn and kung fu films, this text—a Holzer "truism" of the early 80s—has been resurrected as part of the 42nd Street Art Project, a public art effort that is itself such a testament to sloppy thinking and cynical expedience it almost makes us nostalgic for the street hustlers, dope peddlers, cheap sex and tawdry entertainments that have gained Times Square its infamous reputation.

Times Square. 42nd Street. The Deuce. Home to pimps, hookers, junkies, teenage runaways. Home to the homeless. A 24-hour sex and drug marketplace. Adult video. XXX fuck films. Massage parlors. Three-card monte dealers. Con men working their scams. Hoodlums and thieves. Drugs of every description, for every compulsion, in every orifice. Coexisting with the more legitimate entertainments of the neighborhood—the Broadway stage, the after-theater restaurants, the delis, the touristy souvenir and camera shops—is a murky, filthy, sleaze and tease subculture, New York's preeminent red light district, with much of the activity centering on the heart of the Deuce, West 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. And despite the fact that 20 million tourists descend on Times Square each year, at least some of whom are searching for true kink, the city is obviously ashamed of its squalid tenderloin.

For many years, the city fathers have been trying to do something about the Deuce, to tear it down and replace it with a cleaner, healthier, more acceptable environment. Each decade brings its own particular urban renewal fantasy to bear on the problem. In the disco, glam rock, leisure suited 70s, a \$150 million hotel was the centerpiece of a large entertainment and retail center that would have replaced the Deuce with the midtown version of a suburban mall. This plan was never able to raise the requisite funding. In the venture capitalist, junk bond 80s, the building of huge commercial towers containing over four million square feet of new office space was accepted as the solution to recapitalize and rehabilitate the neighborhood. The real estate market crash of the late 80s pulled the rug out from under this proposal. It seemed that whatever plan was put forward to raise a new Times Square over the cesspool of the Deuce, fate would intervene and prevent it from co-ming to fruition. Some sort of weirdly depraved angel was standing guard over this hustler's paradise.

To make matters worse, two thirds of the properties on West 42nd Street have already been condemned and their tenants evicted, due to the untiring efforts of the New York State Urban Development Corporation to clear the decks for the proposed office towers. With no immediate real estate solution in sight, the Deuce has, for the last year and a half, been a ghost town of boarded up storefronts and derelict turn-of-the-century theaters. No one was happy, and no one was looking good, particularly the folks at the 42nd Street Development Project of The UDC.

But look! In the distance! Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's Superart to the rescue! Into the vacuum of the Deuce, while plans were again being formulated, while the city was going back to the drawing board and constructing yet another version of rehabilitation for Times Square, what better interim measure than the quick importation of art? Art to tread the still waters. Art to fill the emptiness inside. More importantly, art to hide the emptiness outside: the vacant storefront display windows, bare theater marquees, unused poster vitrines, lonely roll-down security gates and fallow commercial billboard spaces. A new coat of paint for an old can of worms. Bread and circuses for the tourists. Diversion for the masses. Cultural camouflage for a neighborhood in transition. Or, as stated in a UDC press release, an indication of "the renewed potential of this famous street as a destination for entertainment and exciting cultural experiences." Because when all else fails, an appeal to "potential" can still be made.

So the UDC approached Creative Time, Inc., the twenty-year-old non-profit organization that has previously sponsored artists' projects in such arcane settings as the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage and the Battery Park City landfill, to work something out for Times Square. With the collaboration of the noted postmodern design firm M&Co. and the participation of The New 42nd Street Inc., a group established to restore and recreate the old, historic theaters of the Deuce, Creative Time curated the 42nd Street Art Project.

Artists have been the stalking horses of real estate interests before, to the point where the true locus of the *avant garde* seems not *avant* some fabled aesthetic revolution but rather *avant* the bulldozers. Look at the experience of SoHo and the East Village. Artists move into a marginal neighborhood in search of cheap rents. They improve the neighborhood, making it more attractive to other urban professionals: lawyers, doctors, accountants. As the neighborhood gentrifies, the very artists who made its overnight success possible are often forced out of their





PHOTO: SHANE NEWMARK / 42ND STREET DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Tibor Kalman and Scott Stowell of M & Co., *Everybody*, 1993.

lofts and apartments. They can no longer afford the brave new world they helped create.

The situation in Times Square is a bit different. Artists are not moving in. It is only their artworks that are taking up temporary residence. And artists are not the unwitting pawns of real estate speculators. Here they are willing accomplices. Still, there is in the 42nd Street Art Project the unhealthy aura of a show organized not on aesthetic criteria but with certain political and economic considerations paramount. Showcasing the street without foregrounding any meaningful critical questions regarding its redevelopment. Making easy rather than challenging curatorial choices that might rock the boat. Favoring the decorative over the thought-provoking, to make the show more immediately accessible to a non-art public. Curation by committee, a guarantee that no single, overarching vision will emerge to give the show strength and continuity. Cuteness before substance. Demographics before excellence. A roundup of the usual suspects, often represented by decade-old work. These criteria are not necessarily evil. They merely result in mediocrity. A mediocrity of choices. A mediocrity of juxtapositions. Worst of all, a general feeling of lameness and insipidity that does not do justice to the participating artists, whose work, in many cases, has looked much better in other contexts.

Allow me to voice a disclaimer, before I discuss some of the work. The 42nd Street Art Project is not the sort of show I would ordinarily review. Had my editor not particularly requested coverage, I would undoubtedly have left it alone, understanding that public art is one of those things best ignored unless you have something really good to say about it. I certainly don't want to be the big bad wolf, and coming down hard on public art is a sure way to look mean. Mean and downright cussed, like taking a stick to a tail-wagging dog. Educational, multicultural, non-profit and anti-elitist, the endeavor of public art is so drenched in correct liberal pieties, so overtly well intentioned, so eager

to please, it just about jumps in your lap and begs —no, demands— to be loved. Public art, personified, is like the protagonist of a Phil Ochs song from the 60s, who first enumerates his many good works and enlightened sensibility, and then breaks into the alarmingly insistent refrain: "So love me, love me, love me, I'm a liberal."

Does public art have a greater need to be loved than its brothers and sisters in the private sector of galleries and museums? Certainly, public art is more convinced of its nobility of purpose and selfless agenda, its liberal propensity to place people before profits and serve the needs of the many rather than any aesthetic elite. This protective liberal halo can also cloak mediocrity, and in the case of the 42nd Street Art Project, pluralism and mediocrity seem to march hand in hand. The multi-organizational origins of the Project feed directly into a Chinese menu, something for everybody curatorial stance: one from column A, one from column B, and so on, until all bases are covered, and no one can be accused of missing a beat. For example: one attention-getting storefront mural, composed entirely of colored bicycle reflectors, recalling motifs from pattern painting and folk art; one lady graffiti artist lending her ghetto social realism to a couple of metal security gates; one cutesy but educational (safe sex) window display featuring costumes made from condoms; a facade of painted showgirl silhouettes and similarly whimsical cheap glitz by a famous fashion designer; and, just in case the piquant diversity of the show is still not apparent, a giant yellow sign designed by M & Co., which screams "EVERYBODY" across the square in huge black letters.

Luckily, a small number of projects on 42nd Street go beyond this "aren't artists nice, fun people and don't they do the most interesting things" school of curating. Liz Diller and Ric Scofidio, a team of conceptual architects who often work in the performing and visual arts, have done themselves proud with *Soft Sell*, a piece that tells us something about the nature of compulsion and yearning



driven to distraction by late capitalist consumer culture. It also comments biting on the Deuce's propensity for tease and sleaze, for hucksterism on the most elemental level, and on the compelling urge to gentrify Times Square. As we pass under the marquee of the Rialto Theater at 205 West 42nd Street, we notice a really big female mouth — huge, glistening red lips that don't stint on lipstick—projected from the interior onto the glass doors of the lobby. The mouth moves. It talks to us, through a speaker mounted in the abandoned cashiers' booth. In a sultry, smug tone, it offers us many things for sale. "Hey you," it says, "wanna buy a sure thing? Hey you, wanna buy a new lifestyle?" Or, for that matter, a winning ticket? a place in the sun? a piece of the action? a sucker to take the fall? Printed on the doors are the words *Shameless, Sinful, Savage* and *Scandalous*, words that have often been used to describe the Deuce. But paired with each, displayed on white gift boxes, and periodically visible, are the antonyms *Discreet, Innocent, Genteel* and *Virtuous*. Diller and Scofidio are indulging in flip flop, commenting on reversibility: the reversibility of moral condemnation; the reversibility of property values in a soon-to-be-sanitized Times Square; and the role language plays in inaugurating change.

Another piece that seems to know what it is doing on the Deuce is the installation by Karen Finley in the empty Papaya World on the corner of 42nd Street and Seventh Avenue. Painted on the long inside wall, but visible through the plate glass, is a large watercolor mural of an idealized nuclear family —mother, father and child— all covered with large red splotches, which are actually the lesions of a rare form of skin cancer, Kaposi's sarcoma, which has become more prevalent during the AIDS epidemic. The handpainted text surrounding these figures is shrill and intense, the hysterical prose of self infatuation: "I am a necklace of rubies, garnets and amethyst... I am a speckled wild cat with a coat of rare beauty... Lollipops of cherry and grape adorn me." Finley's installation, entitled *Positive Attitude*, is a species of the ecstatic stigmatic, a startling phenomenon that goes way over the top of everyday experience to push for some ultimate transcendence. The religious ecstatic stigmatic would manifest the wounds of Christ on his or her body as a declaration of true faith. Finley's interpretation, showing off the stigmata of AIDS, and indulging in an incomprehensible apotheosis of these wounds, reaches out in terror and pain to the possibilities of a superwordly compassion.

A longtime resident of the Times Square area, Jane Dickson is a veteran painter of lower class subjects: amusement arcades, spectral street corners. At 212 West 42nd Street, she has mounted an installation called *The Bride*,

homage to both Marcel Duchamp (*Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*) and Cinderella. Executing an arch turn on the old hooker/wife dichotomy, Dickson fills the windows with backlit watercolor on vellum paintings of bridal shop mannequins, their self-contented poses in stark contrast to the former porn shop that once used the space, Adult Video World. Through a locked glass door, you can still see the empty jack-off booths. A stairway (to heaven?), lined with fluorescent tubes and mismatched pairs of women's shoes, ascends to a mezzanine, on which a motorized, life-size bridal gown, made of iridescent mylar, slowly rotates in the spotlights, shedding rainbowed glints of color into the prevailing murk. Dickson seems to make no overt judgment regarding the old vs. the new Times Square, the hooker vs. the bride. Like Diller and Scofidio, she is poised on the reversible cusp between sinful and innocent, scandalous and virtuous.

Sculptors John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres have done live plaster casting in the South Bronx for over a decade, a modest, forthright and effective way of integrating art into the community. People from the neighborhood drop by, sometimes sitting for a portrait or photograph, sometimes becoming the subject of a life casting, which becomes a three-dimensional, painted sculpture, either free standing or hung on the wall. In this way, the studio becomes a mirror of its immediate human environment of homeboys, dealers, shopkeepers, mothers, auto mechanics, street people, whatever. Ahearn and Torres have relocated their activity downtown, creating a neighborhood art workshop in the former Blimpies sandwich shop at 219 West 42nd Street. The one and only art project on the Deuce that establishes an immediate physical interplay with its audience, the workshop is also a continually evolving exhibition of this interaction. So while the UDC and its kindred spirits hastily plan various alternative futures for Times Square, Ahearn and Torres are committed to exploring what exists, right now, on the Deuce.

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