

# RAMBLAS

## contemporary art talk

May 27, 2009

### I CAN'T GO ON. I'LL GO ON. OUR LITERAL SPEED AT GALLERY 400 by Claudine Isé

Sometimes I think that art writers, before launching into a review of this or that exhibition, should overshare in the manner that's fashionable today and note the mood they were in whilst viewing the show in question. Such status updates would function as a form of disclaimer by revealing the external (or are they internal?) factors that may insidiously affect the reviewer's state of mind. Today, mine would have been:

plagued by a gnawing hunger  
headachey  
really need to pee (unsmiley face)

Who can say how this physical discomfort may have affected my take on Gallery 400's *Our Literal Speed: Events in the Vicinity of Art and History* exhibition, but I'll tell ya, I thought the show was a hoot. Just to clarify, I'm talking about the exhibition that's up through July 4th, not the conference events that already took place over the April 30th weekend, which I couldn't attend. The exhibition is not a documentation of those weekend events but is pretty much a discrete thing-in-itself, although its conceptual links to the conference are obvious. Both exhibition and conference bill themselves as

a kind of 'media pop opera' or 'administrative gesamtkunstwerk' that includes fluid and/or jagged transitions among scholarly presentations, panel discussions, artist's talks, performances, and an art exhibition within an academic conference. . . . The project offers a temporary laboratory in which a concerned public can investigate non-formulaic, experientially vibrant and theoretically precise responses to the modes of distribution, consumption, and circulation that drive contemporary art.

It seems fairly clear that everyone involved was in it for the laughs (such as they are), while at the same time being perfectly serious. One of the exhibition's central visual conceits is that of the performance and the stage, with academicians and other arts professionals as the role-playing performers. But what we see in the gallery are empty and disembodied stages, while audiences (when shown) appear bored or distracted as they observe something that's been obscured from our own view. The audience in Sharon Hayes' single channel video *10 Minutes of Collective Activity*, for example, fidget and yawn as they listen to an



archival audiotape of Connecticut senator Abraham Ribicoff's controversial 1968 speech to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in which Ribicoff nominated George McGovern for President while violent street protests erupted outside.

Even the people who are onstage appear alienated from the proceedings. Jackson Pollock Bar's *Picasso/Braque 1989* (2009), which is described as an "installed theory installation," reenacts a panel discussion with the art historians Edward Fry, Yves Alain Bois, Rosalind Kraus and Leo Steinberg that took place twenty years ago during the *Picasso and Braque* exhibition at MoMA. The video and (barely audible) audio tracks are out of sync, because the voice

track—based on an edited transcript of the original 1989 discussion—was recorded by one group of people and then acted out by a different group who essentially lipsynced the recorded discussion, giving voice and gesture to the text in puppet-like fashion. (The woman who performs Rosalind Krauss as a snippy, hair-flipping drama queen is hilarious, stealing the show when she apes lines like, "Your interpretation is wrong!" and "I find this repellent!" Ah, theory humor. You gotta love it.)



Critic Jan Verwoert (who's a dead-ringer for a certain parodic ex-SNL character) checks his cell phone while presiding over the mock-trial in Hila Peleg's 100 minute dvd, *A Crime Against Art* (2007). Peleg's film is based on a staged trial at an art fair in Madrid,

which was itself fashioned after Andre Breton's mock trials of the 1920's and 30's. The idea is that an art crime has been committed, and there are "experts" and "witnesses" who take the stand to testify, but no one can get at exactly what the crime is, or who's responsible. A stream of familiar buzzwords flow from the mouths of these critics and curators-cum-performers, like old friends from high school who you once thought were cool, but seem sort of sad and adrift now, twenty years later: words like 'agency,' 'strategical' (yep), 'opacity,' 'reification,' 'criticality.' My head was starting to ache from it all, but then again it could

have been the hunger. I took off the headphones before Verwoert rendered a decision of guilt or innocence, but not before taking note of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies director Maria Lind's bright red fingernail polish. Did she get them done just for the trial, I wondered, or do they always look that nice?

A sense of the gamely absurd, of Beckettian tragicomedy, hangs over *Our Literal Speed*. I had initially thought it might not be worth it to see the show if all "the good stuff"—i.e. the live events—had already happened, but I now think I saw this exhibition under exactly the right conditions: several weeks after all the talks, events, and parties were over, in a gallery that was empty of live bodies (save for my own and those of a few staff members). My pounding headache and desperate need for food and coffee finally drove me from the gallery, but poor Rosalind, Jan and Maria were forced to remain there, their discursive performances replayed over and over in an endless loop, like Beckett's pantsless Estragon and his pal Vladimir, still out there somewhere waiting for Godot.

**Estragon:** I can't go on like this.

**Vladimir:** That's what you think.

*Through July 4th, 2009 at Gallery 400.*

