

MAY 2004



ISSUE HOME

LOCAL

EXPRESS

ART

ARTSEEN

BOOKS

MUSIC

DANCE

FILM

THEATER

FICTION

POETRY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEARCH ALL ISSUES

ARCHIVES



ARTISTS NEED TO CREATE ON THE SAME SCALE THAT SOCIETY HAS THE CAPACITY TO DESTROY

#MIAMI RAIL



A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER  
"From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, nothing ever comes out straight!"

ART

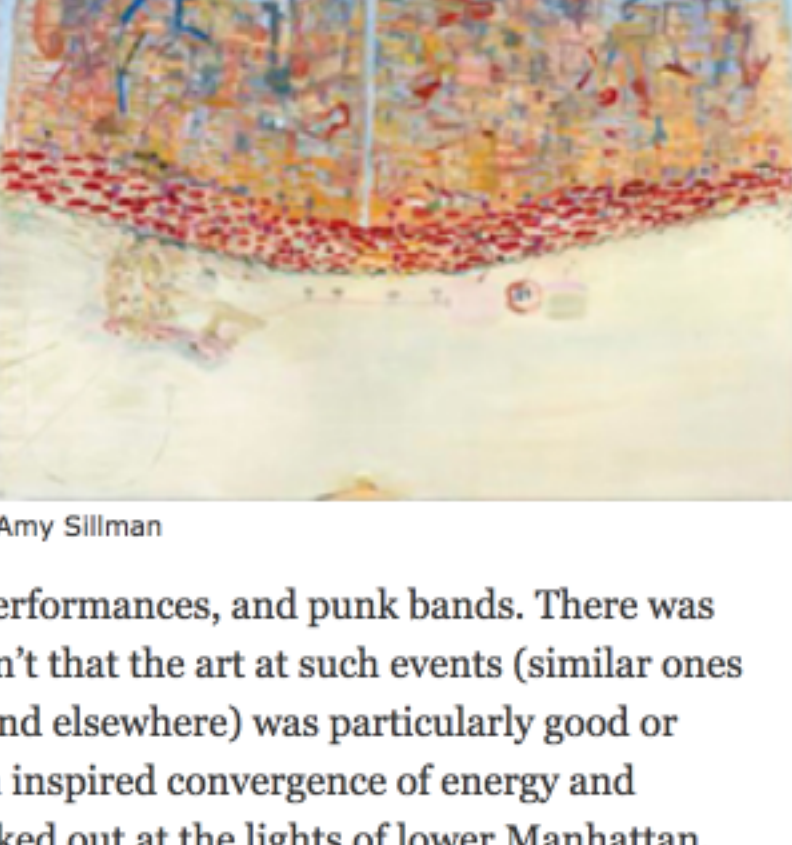
MAY 1ST, 2004

# Open House: Working in Brooklyn

by Daniel Baird

## Brooklyn Museum Through August 15, 2004

Late one night in the fall of 1990, I got into a cab with friends on Delancey Street and rode up over the magnificent and at that time sinister Williamsburg Bridge and then down to the waterfront. A cavernous brick building on the river had been rigged for electricity and transformed into a space for a fugitive, one-night art event and party: there were chaotic, junky installations, kinetic sculptures, performances, and punk bands. There was drinking and dancing until dawn. It wasn't that the art at such events (similar ones happened later at the Mustard Factory and elsewhere) was particularly good or expressed a movement, but there was an inspired convergence of energy and freedom and pleasure. Although one looked out at the lights of lower Manhattan, Williamsburg felt remote, a necessary refuge.



Amy Sillman

There was drinking and dancing until dawn. It wasn't that the art at such events (similar ones happened later at the Mustard Factory and elsewhere) was particularly good or expressed a movement, but there was an inspired convergence of energy and freedom and pleasure. Although one looked out at the lights of lower Manhattan, Williamsburg felt remote, a necessary refuge.

Artists began moving to Brooklyn in force in the 1980s, and more in the 1990s in search of cheap space to live and work, and perhaps to find a sense of the alternative community that had vanished from Soho and the East Village. Arriving at the opening of *Open House: Working in Brooklyn* on April 17 at the Brooklyn Museum, with its luminous new pavilion designed by James Stewart Polshek, which literally cascades out from the late nineteenth-century museum's neoclassical architecture, I had the sense that Brooklyn, a place where probably more serious art is made per capita than anywhere else in the world, was finally receiving well-deserved institutional acknowledgement. Museum Director Arnold Lehman was there in a dark business suit, shaking hands at the door.

I went to *Working in Brooklyn* with fairly specific expectations. In 2000, *Greater New York* at P.S. 1 overshadowed that year's Whitney Biennial, which unlike the 2004 edition, contained some significant work by the likes of Shirin Neshat and Sarah Sze. I had hoped that, compared with this year's sleek and lovely Biennial liberated from anything resembling vision, *Working In Brooklyn* would offer a raw, risk-taking, creatively urgent alternative. This turned out to be a nostalgic delusion. Despite the flowing spaces of the Brooklyn Museum's new renovation, the 200 artists and 300 plus works included in *Working In Brooklyn* are, for the most part, randomly jammed into the museum's fourth and fifth floors, and hung and lit in a way that is either incompetent or merely negligent. While one can only pity the grinding tour of studio visits Chief Curator of Contemporary Art Charlotta Kotik and Assistant Curator Tumelo Mosaka suffered in preparing this exhibit, in the end exhausting footwork does not replace vision and judgment: the only curatorial principle in evidence in *Working In Brooklyn* is demographic and statistical. In their enthusiasm to market the idea of the Brooklyn arts community, the curators fail to assert a point of view, and this is compounded by what is clearly an institutional decision not to devote adequate resources to the exhibit. In the congested alleys of *Working In Brooklyn*, good and bad art meld together without distinction.

This is not to say that there is not excellent art in *Working In Brooklyn* —on the contrary. Louise Belcourt's "Hedge Painting #3" (2003), for instance, distills two curving hedge-like forms, one blue and one red, into shining, enigmatic shapes whose compressed, erotic anxiety is palpable. The oozing and pulling webs and shards in Bruce Pearson's "Encyclopedia 2" (2003) are less psychodelic than toxic, as though fragments of words are surfacing from a chemical bog. While Amy Sillman's oil paintings often feel static when compared with her works on paper, "Cart" (2002), like similar pieces on view in the Whitney Biennial, has an awkward, sensuous, noodling lyricism reminiscent of Guston's early abstractions. The collages Fred Tomaselli displayed at James Cohan Gallery last year and again at the Biennial were so slick that they seemed pure exercises in decorative technique, so it was a pleasure to see a work like "Natural Selection" (2000), where the cruder, more eclectic aspects of his style are in the foreground. Following Peter Halley's work of the 1980s, many artists have become interested in the geometry and politics of systems, whether urban or informational. Unlike more predictable treatments of the subject, as in Danielle Tegeader's drawings, the swarming, overlapping lines of Steven Charles's bright and wildly kinetic paintings suggest information overload and infrastructure breakdown.

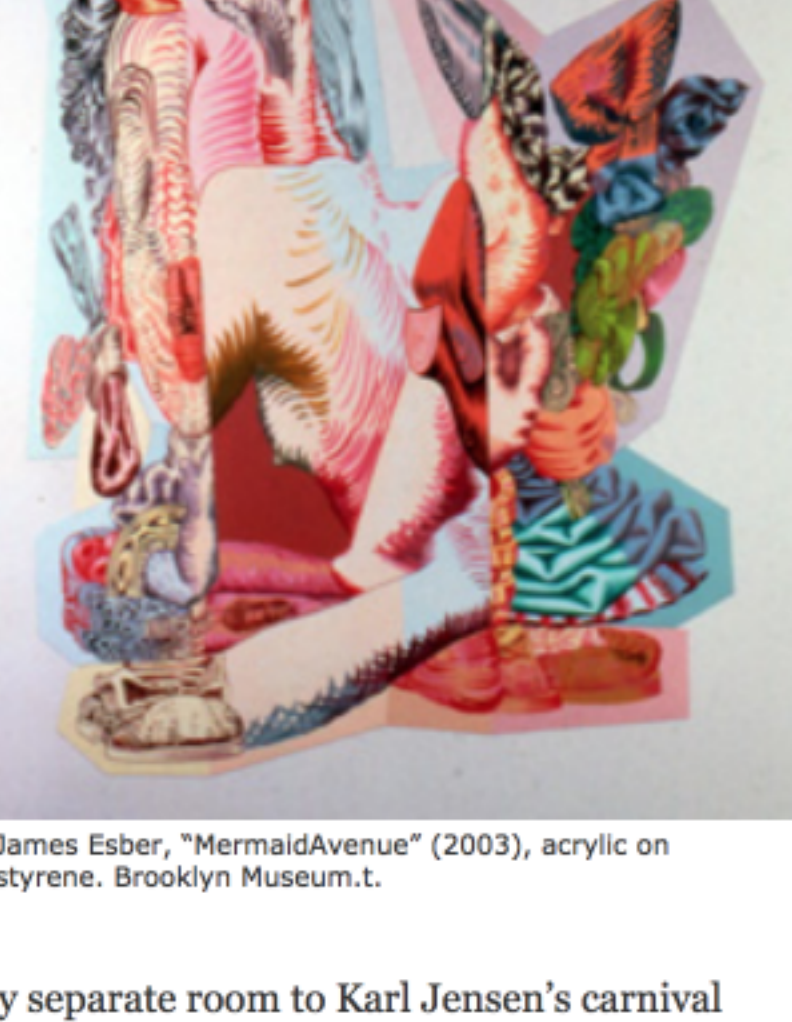


Louise Belcourt, "Hedge Painting #3" (2003), oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

*Working in Brooklyn* is heavy on painting and drawing, and not all of it is strong. In "Babel" (2003) and "Battlefield No. 3" (2003), Jane Fine creates a pastiche of cartoon illustration and the biomorphic surrealism of Masson and Matta, but her work lacks the lyricism of the latter, and the vulgar, corrosive violence of the former. Her paintings are eager to please, aesthetically and politically, without exhibiting authentic vigor or commitment. Carey Maxon's crazy watercolor "Cornering (for Hugh Brown, Jr.)" (2003) is more evocative of our society's disorder and predilection for violence, as is Amanda Trager's blunt word painting, "The Sadness of Life" (2001). The cute, Victorian fussiness of works like Amy Cutler's "Sweepers" (2002) has a stunted brittleness devoid of critical edge, and the teenage girl bedroom aesthetic of Marty Ackley's "Little Room" (2002) withholds the libido-fueled teen death drive which might make it interesting: both artists, like Jane Fine, seem more invested in stylistic posture than searching vision. The efficient draftsmanship and biomorphism of Angela Wyman's "SDL: Glimpse" (2002) and James Esber's "Mermaid Avenue" (2003) are too easy to be genuinely playful and tend toward the purely illustrative. Compare this work with the more visceral and creepy magic of Xiomara De Oliver "Parlor" (2002), or the odd buoyancy of Christopher Knowles's "Cardinals in Flight" (2000). On the other hand, one of the exhibit's more surprising pieces is Danica Phelps's "Integrating Sex into Everyday Life" (2003), shown last fall at LFL Gallery. Phelps is known for her compulsive list-making drawings, and here she makes lurid sexual fantasy as much a part of everyday functioning as shopping. Her drawings of twisted, gaping lovers, evoking the decadent style of Egon Schiele, have an obsessive, pornographic morbidity.

The lack of ambition in the photography and video in *Working In Brooklyn* is glaring, but there are a few qualified exceptions. The intricate, warping patterns Sebastian Bremer draws onto his photographs of bored teenagers look like hallucinated spiderwebs closing in. Doug and Mike Stam's black, spreading tree, an inkjet print on paper titled "Structure of Thought #1" (2001), is gothic and haunted. Although her video piece at the Whitney Biennial suffered from cloying over-installation, with its pile of bean bag chairs for the viewers to lounge about in, Sue De Beer's video still "Hans und Grete" (2002), a girl with a hollow, averted stare on her bed with a gnashing dog drawn on the headboard, a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels and a pack of cigarettes beside her, is at once smoldering, desolate, and tender. And the green corridor in Lisa Kereszi's "Ticket Window" (2002) makes the image both expectant and poisonous. The photography which falls flat does so not because it is outright bad, but because it rehearses predictable gestures and emotions: Katy Grannan's image of a topeless swimmer and her attentive pit bull on the banks of a creek in Pennsylvania, and Jonathan Grassi's amusingly staged image of a man falling on a lawn at night, his shadow streaming out from him, both suffer from this. In addition, Emily Jacir's photograph of a checkpoint in Bethlehem is of considerably less interest than the more performative, conceptual project on view at the Whitney Biennial. And the piece by Collier Schorr, an aerial photo of wrestlers with a rope dangling down like a noose from above, is among the least interesting from her recent exhibit at 303 Gallery: Schorr is at her best when she is fantasizing about alien male bodies, glistening with sweat, through Baroque chiaroscuro painting.

The works that suffer most from the lack of space allotted to *Working in Brooklyn* are sculpture and multi-media installations. Christoph Draeger can be a disturbing and courageous artist, but the jigsaw puzzle pieces included in the exhibit are at best peripheral to the main thrust of his work. After several landmark exhibitions at Pierogi 2000 over the past few years, the significance of Ward Shelley's idiosyncratic habitations and performances is beginning to be acknowledged, but his contribution to *Working In Brooklyn*, a multimedia piece entitled "Vendor" (2003), feels pushed into a corner, leaving the viewer no room to think and breath. Yet the curators inexplicably decided to devote an entirely separate room to Karl Jensen's carnival temple held up by steel monkeys, "Pulpit" (2002), a work that is neither original nor emotionally potent, especially when compared with similar work, like the huge, sad wooden circus sets by the late Margaret Kilgallen.



James Esber, "Mermaid Avenue" (2003), acrylic on styrene. Brooklyn Museum.

Rina Banerjee's enormous wall installation with descending, encrusted I.V. tubes was one of the highlights of the 2002 Whitney Biennial. "A Stranger Is in Our Paradise" (2002), while more modest and lyrical, is still an affecting piece: it hangs from the ceiling, sheltered by an umbrella, feathers, glass tubes, and toys cascading over an ornate ceremonial box and onto the floor. Related to Sarah Sze's practice, Banerjee is more generous and clunky, less aestheticized, so that the eclectic accumulations of found things take on greater autonomous weight. Dan Devine's "Material from Grasshopper Brains Can Self-Assemble into Computer Sensors" (2003-2004) continues his eccentric and slightly paranoid exploration of the magic of military technology and surveillance systems, but it is so delicate it nearly gets lost hanging in a great hoop from the ceiling; too distanced to convey the opaque beauty of its clusters of hanging gemstones. With a major work in the contemporary wing of the Metropolitan Museum, the art of Leonardo Drew is hardly news, but his large vitrines (which resemble those in old natural history museums) filled with a crinkled rubble of objects cast in paper, turn the vast accumulations of objects which characterize our hyper-consumer society into artifacts that are sensuous and even haunting. In Joe Amrhein's beautiful "Arch" (2003), found poetry, brightly lettered in gold leaf and enamel on staggered sheets of mylar, arranged to form an arch, has the good fortune of being installed slightly outside the show's main galleries. There is space enough to pause undistracted beneath it, and read Amrhein's strange concatenations of words, like "oscillating ambiguity" and "reromanticization." Also noteworthy is the usually dry Rachel Harrison's "Sphinx" (2002), in which a big absurd hot pink Styrofoam rock—a queer and formless philosopher's stone—is set on a wooden pedestal behind a wall on the other side of which is a photograph of a nun. While the curators scattered works arbitrarily throughout the Brooklyn Museum's permanent collection, *Working In Brooklyn* almost completely lacks inventive use of the museum space itself. A modest exception to this is David Shapiro's "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (2003-2004), in which a passage from the sentimental novel of the same title is printed on lengths of PVC pipe that wind down the stairwell.

Louise Bourgeois's two death heads from 2002, made from faded, ragged tapestries wrapped around aluminum, are savage, terrifying, and luxuriant, their toothless mouth-holes emitting silent screams. Though inevitably less ferocious, Elana Herzog's threadbare Chenille bedspread stapled to the wall has a sumptuous melancholy, its patterns revealed by unraveling and disintegration. Bourgeois's and Herzog's different evocations of nostalgia, luxury, decay, and terror seem appropriate to this moment in time; one can almost see worms eating through these works.



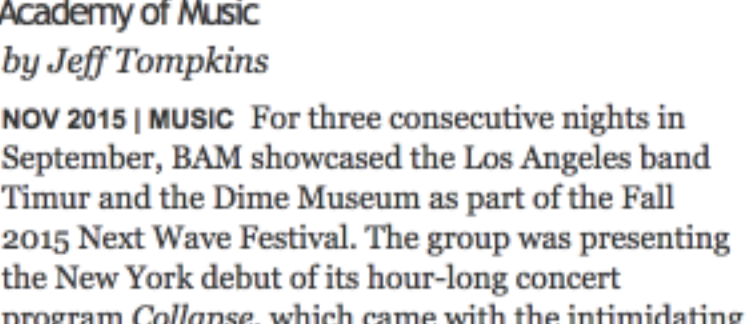
Louise Bourgeois, "Untitled" (2002), tapestry and aluminum. Brooklyn Museum.

An exhibit like *Working In Brooklyn* was, in a way, long in coming and sadly inevitable. For over a decade now, the "Brooklyn art scene" has gradually achieved cult status, and was ripe for being used as a promotional tool for something like, say, the expensive new renovation of the Brooklyn Museum. But unlike other seminal moments in recent art history, we now live and work in an art world that is wholly international and which almost aggressively lacks a common ideology or aesthetic. This is, I think, a good thing overall, but it puts in question the relevance of this kind of large exhibition which lacks an underlying theme. *Working in Brooklyn* attempts to embrace the arts community, but it is not a community that is in dire need of embracing, and at the end of the day, art is not really about community at all. An exhibit about the art itself, not a sentimentalized and false fantasy about community, would have required a much smaller show, and it would have forced the curators to make stark choices and take real risks. Instead, the museum assembled a show that is less about art than about the idea of making art. *Working In Brooklyn* has given rise to much talk about the maturing of the Brooklyn art world. Yet surely maturity implies, not camaraderie and self-congratulation, but higher standards and real critical and curatorial assessment. There are many fine artists and works in *Working In Brooklyn*, and there are many exciting shows implied there; but the exhibit that was actually mounted is undistinguished, and for that reason ultimately safe.

### CONTRIBUTOR

Daniel Baird

### RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



THINGS FALL APART:  
Timur and the Dime Museum at the Brooklyn Academy of Music  
by Jeff Tompkins

NOV 2015 | MUSIC  
For three consecutive nights in September, BAM showcased the Los Angeles band Timurlane and the Dime Museum as part of the Fall 2015 Next Wave Festival. The group was presenting the New York debut of its hour-long concert program *Collapse*, which came with the intimidating subtitle "A Post-Ecological Requiem."



Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*  
by John Domini

OCT 2017 | BOOKS  
The most notable risk is the cutting-edge contemporaneity. The denouement of *Golden House* unfolds pretty much as the moment we read it, in later 2017, and its tragic climax the previous fall has a lot to do with the tragedy of the last election.

### INDIALOGUE



Tanya Barfield:  
On the Space-Time Continuum  
by Kathryn Walat

FEB 2015 | THEATER  
*Bright Half Life* begins with a timeless concept: soul mates, "an idea that may or may not exist," according to the exuberant deliberations of Erica, as she stands in a hallway, proposing marriage outside the apartment of her ex-girlfriend Vicky.

FROM THE PUBLISHER'S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Dear Friends and Readers,  
by Phong Bui

JUL-AUG 2017 | BOOKS  
"A utopia is not a portrait of the real world, of the actual political or social order. It exists at no moment of time and at no point in space; it is "nowhere." But just such a conception of a nowhere has stood the test and proved its strength in the development of the modern world."

### ADVERTISEMENTS



Connections:69  
Being Bodies  
Read dangerously



Alex Katz  
Through December 12  
Ralph Shoneman Institute  
475 W. 127th Street, NY, NY 10027



2017 Annual  
Affiliates Exhibition  
FIRST STREET GALLERY  
December 8-23



MISSONI  
blue yellow red purple  
Jonas Mekas



CLOSE THE GAP  
BETWEEN SCHOOLS &  
STUDIO PRACTICE  
Continuum Academy of Art



MA Critical Theory  
and the Arts  
ARTS PROJECT SPACE  
WINTER 2015



Jonas Mekas  
Again, again it all comes back to me  
In my gimpas



New Cadmium-Free  
late edition 2003 performance, last  
titled, by one of the Best in the  
World  
Liquities, STONE UP HERE FOR A CUPPER'S



THEATERLAB  
A Held Posture



SEEKING  
EXECUTIVE  
DIRECTOR  
poetry project  
WWW.POETRYPROJECT.ORG

Get the Rail delivered to your doorstep.  
Start Your Subscription Today!