

# Bernadette Corporation



Galerie Neu, Berlin, Germany

In their various activities and guises, Bernadette Corporation are preoccupied with the ways in which personal identity is compromised, either voluntarily through an artist's desire for public recognition, or unwittingly, through the appropriation of art by corporate culture. Their own identities, and those of their subjects, are constantly moving targets. In 2004, they published *Reena Spaulings*, a novel written by a committee of collaborators, and they have exhibited photographs of androgynous models – with their interchangeable faces – alongside a long lyric poem, arguably the essential art form of undiluted subjectivity (*The Complete Poem*, 2009). Is this a self-reflexive game? A token gesture of resistance that has already been assimilated by the system it intends to outwit?

Satirically resisting the domestication of their work, in their most recent exhibition, 'A Haven for the Soul', Bernadette Corporation accentuated the plush minimalism of Galerie Neu's space. Chrome bathroom fittings – taps, handles, jets and shower heads – in the sleek designs found in upmarket homes, were built into the walls or displayed on plinths and shelves. Each was monogrammed 'BC', and engraved with anonymous comments culled from the Internet in response to a series of leaked nude mobile-phone photographs of the pop star Rihanna. The steel and platinum fittings transform the gallery into a Ballardian cell with an air of high-tech entropy: three 'infrared basin mixers' emerge from a wooden panel lying askew on the floor (*sexy as fk [Trébuchet]*, 2010) while plumbing pipes issue from a tap laid on a shelf, like a robot arm with its nerve ends spilling out (*go girl, Media Hot and Cold*, 2010). The fittings are pitched as commodities, reducing the gallery they occupy to a showroom of luxury household goods, but the reflecting chrome surfaces of these tools of self-ablution also function as mirrors, recalling the traditional *vanitas* image.

Bernadette Corporation interrogate the way self-image is distorted and distended into media images – how monologue morphs into collective babble. Hardback books of collections of Internet

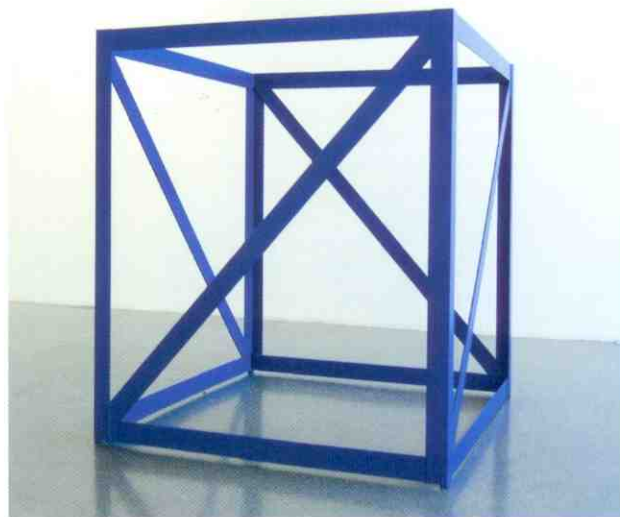
chatter were arranged on shelves, each titled after a classic text, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (1956), F. Scott Fitzgerald's essay 'The Crack-Up' (1945). Self-published by the artists, they could be described as examples of 'vanity publishing'. The comments on Rihanna are illiterate and puerile, rendered in the language of blogging, with its conventional abbreviations ('LOL', 'OMG', etc.). They are also dirty in both senses of the word, scatological and prurient: '(12-May-2009) I want to see her shit in my face.' The gallery was cast as a cleansing anteroom, a metaphor for what a white cube can do for an art work: sanctify and assign pedigree while cleansing it of its murky studio auras and scents and priming it for sale.

In *The Earth's Tarry Dreams of Insurrection Against the Sun* (2010), two upended television monitors leaning against each other showed black smoke – real dirt – billowing into the sky, news footage of the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Here, and across the show, Bernadette Corporation drew their correspondences too neatly: plumbing accessories in conjunction with a plumbing disaster (one definition of the spill); hygiene against pollution; vanity engendering *vanitas*; authorial identity subverted by self-image-buffing products; polished steel sullied by expletives printed on its underside (another pun). Look how readily the notion of 'luxury household goods' presents itself as a reductive definition of art objects. A weakness for glib binaries is a sign of sentimentality, however knowingly it is indulged. Bernadette Corporation may be vigilant in their wish to avoid becoming the dupes of culture industry consumption, but their work is coercively submissive to interpretation. They play hard to get while leaving all their knots easy to unravel.

Only the pervading tone of comic absurdity relieved this coyly didactic note. Two plinths were placed in the dead centre of the space, each occupied by the same elegantly curved tap, but facing in opposite directions, as though they were engaged in a moronic dialogue that their inscriptions were translating for us (*Oh snizzap!!!*, 2010, and *TOTED IN THE AIR*, 2010). Martin Amis said of John Self, the uncouth and uncontrollable protagonist of his comic novel, *Money* (1984) – a caricature of pop-cultural excess – that he is the face we see in the mirror when we lock the bathroom door behind us. *Money* heralded the burgeoning era of international celebrity culture; its lurid Postmodern promiscuity masks a deeply moral novel. The title of this exhibition, 'A Haven for the Soul', suggests Victorian-era religious values. Despite the obvious irony, the title is apt. This was a moralistic show, an old-fashioned elegy to transience, populated by desperate, disembodied voices crying out of some location-less wilderness in the digital ether. A hymn to lost subjectivity, it is a bathroom mirror in which nobody ever appears.

Mark Prince

# Rasheed Araeen



Rasheed Araeen  
*First Structure*  
1966-7  
Painted steel  
1.4x1.4x1.4 m

Aicon Gallery, London, UK

Writing in 1967, Lucy Lippard pronounced Minimalism – what she was then calling 'post-geometric art' – a 'virgin birth'. The early sculptures of Pakistani-born British artist Rasheed Araeen, however, which take superficially comparable routes to those of his American contemporaries (though he didn't come to know them until later), are only too aware of their conception. Trained as a civil engineer in the 1950s, the latticed window grilles Araeen designed as a young man in Karachi are echoed again and again in the crisscrossing diagonals of the modular units he went on to produce as an artist. While he is from the same generation of Karachi-born Nasreen Mohamedi, whose pristine works on graph paper suggest abstracted landscapes, those of Araeen – who had no formal training as an artist – are nothing more rarefied than grubby technical drawings of heavy girders. It's hard to fit his work into the standard narratives of Minimalism. After a while, the differences between Araeen and his contemporaries become more striking than the similarities: unlike the production-line precision of Donald Judd *et al* or the car-culture finishes of the West Coast Minimalists, his wooden and metal modules were usually hand-assembled, never quite perfect and often intended to be rearranged by the unwashed hands of passers-by.

Titled 'Before and Beyond Minimalism: Drawings, Paintings, Sculpture and Concepts, 1959-74', this engaging survey of Araeen's early work at Aicon Gallery focused on the years before and after his move to London in 1964, where his first encounter with the works of Anthony Caro, Philip King and others influenced his decision to abandon painting for sculpture. While Caro's use of heavy-duty industrial materials was certainly important for his early development – such as *Sculpture No.1* (1968), a symmetrical configuration of four painted I-beams on the floor – Araeen has described his move →

Bernadette Corporation  
*her shit*  
2010  
Engraved  
single-lever basin  
mixer  
17x18x17 cm

# In the Balance

to serial composition as a reaction against the hierarchical compositions of the older generation. Araeen is often talked about as a British Minimalist but, as curator Niru Ratnam notes in his accompanying essay, this is an awkward label, in that it overlooks both his technical training in Pakistan and the increasingly radical politics he adopted in the '70s, not to mention his activities as a writer and editor (Araeen founded *Black Phoenix* in 1978 and *Third Text* in 1987). (I'm hoping that this later work will be the subject of another Aicon show.) There are subtle (but significant) formal differences too. While he uses the open cube structure as his basic unit, it differs from that of Sol LeWitt in that each face is bisected by a diagonal strut (as in *Char Yar*, 1968). This creates a lattice - an engineer's elegant solution to a minimal, structurally stable form.

Aside from the earliest I-beam floor-pieces, Araeen's work from this period is marked not by heavy industry but by a sense of play: the drawings that he made shortly before moving to London - overlapping, organic squiggles that work up and down the paper - were apparently inspired by hula-hooping children ('Series A', 1961 and 'Series B', 1962). He later sought to introduce participation into his Minimalist vocabulary, with what he called 'Structures': brightly coloured modular forms which viewers could reconfigure and that were often left in public spaces. For 'Chakras' (1969), 16 orange disks were floated in St Katharine's Docks in East London, eventually floating down the Thames - documentation was shown here, alongside reconstructions of the disks made for his 1987 show at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham.

The variousness of Araeen's different activities - demonstrated by this compact survey - perhaps accounts for the only sporadic interest that institutions in the UK seem to have taken in him (his last solo show here was in 1996 at the Serpentine). Early next year his work will be shown alongside Caro and King in 'Modern British Sculpture' at the Royal Academy, a setting that I hope won't smooth off Araeen's spikiness to make for a comfortable fit.

**Sam Thorne**

Peter Dombrovski  
*Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Southwest Tasmania*  
1979  
C-type print  
64x41 cm



Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia

'In the Balance: Art for a Changing World' was presented as an exhibition about the environment: specifically, the plight of Australia's waterways (such as the Murray Darling Basin), the history of environmental activism (with a focus on Tasmania), the impact of human practices on oceans and land (like Cape York) and the ways artists encourage societal change. For the most part, the 30 artists and collectives included here successfully demonstrated the extent to which the environment has become politicized, and how specific concerns regarding wildlife, ecology and biodiversity have been packaged under the single, generalized slogan of 'Save the environment!'

It is a neat coincidence that 'In the Balance' opened the weekend Australia went to the polls to elect a new government, returning a hung parliament - the first in 70 years. With the major parties in limbo, a Green Party MP and four independents - one from Tasmania (the birth place of the Australian Greens movement) and three from rural Australia - became the kingmakers. While eventually siding with Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Labor, it was clear that environmental issues were key in their negotiations. (If you doubt how strongly Australians feel about the environment, then remember that former prime minister Kevin Rudd was ousted following his failed bids to push through a carbon emissions trading scheme and a tax for the mammoth mining corporations making a fortune from natural resources in Australia.)

Similar prompts for political change were echoed in the Wilderness Society's 1980s publicity material produced to support the campaign against the Franklin River Dam project, displayed as part of 'In the Balance'. Tasmanian photographer Peter Dombrovski's work, *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Southwest Tasmania* (1979), is the focal point of this material. Used to illustrate posters (which were displayed in frames at the Museum of Contemporary Art), pamphlets and magazine covers, the image celebrates the very best of the Romantic landscape tradition: the photo shows the river as pristine and wild. When paired with the slogan 'Mr Fraser won't save it. Your vote can', it became a symbol that precipitated the downfall of Malcolm Fraser's Liberal Government.

Some collectives did particularly well embracing the term 'eco-art'. Victoria-based Artist as Family, for example, grew a productive cottage vegetable garden (*Food Forest*, 2010) on the grounds of an inner-city Sydney church, as an ode to William Blake's *Garden of Love* (1794). Amy Francheschini and San Francisco-based design-art collective FutureFarmers (the designers of the Twitter logo) made a prosaic construction out of plywood that was intended as a solar-power still using compost to create engine-ready bio-fuel (*Sunshine Still*, 2010). It seemed to founder in its functional purpose, but showed their urban eco-ideology well.

Rasheed Araeen  
*'Before and Beyond Minimalism: Drawings, Paintings, Sculpture and Concepts, 1959-74'*  
2010  
Installation view

