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ARTSEEN

Next Section

The Breakaway Republic of Bushwick

by Hrag Vartanian

Author Bio
Print

Bushwick Open Studios 2008

In last month's *Rail*, artist/critic James Kalm shined a bright light on the long history of Brooklyn, and Williamsburg in particular, as a creative force in the city's artistic life. He generously lumped Bushwick and Greenpoint together as a sort of "Greater Williamsburg." The problem is that the



A view of the merchandise on sale at Bushwick's new Factory Fresh gallery.

Williamsburg empire isn't always a benevolent one—evictions and luxury condos being the main culprits—and consequently Bushwick is starting to look like a breakaway republic poised to usurp its western neighbor's crown as the city's artistic laboratory.

This year's Bushwick Open Studios (bos) could be the turning point of what feels like an eternal march eastward of hipsters and artists looking for affordable places to live, work and play. bos 2008 included hundreds of artists exhibiting in over a hundred venues in a huge swathe territory that began in Williamsburg's own backyard near the Montrose Avenue L station to the line's tenth stop into Brooklyn, Halsey.

If last year's bos was a somewhat sleepy affair, this year I started to sense, after almost eight years of familiarity with the Bushwick scene, the stirrings of a communal energy. In two full days of viewing I was surprised that I was able to cover only 60% of the venues. I also became very aware that, with time and concentration in short supply, installations have a natural advantage over smaller works, just as they do at art fairs. The daunting task of viewing hundreds of works feels more rewarding when an artist has made an effort to mount a real show, rather than simply put up a selection of drawings.

Brave New World

Like in all new republics, a flag is a must. As if to declare a new land with new ideas, Graham Corell-Allen planted a series of flags on mounds of dirt as part of his "Distribution Pit Liberation" intervention (2008) at a privately owned, abandoned construction site between McKibben, Bogart and Boerum Streets. Originally paraded a few weeks earlier in a local festival, the red, white and green banners were the only overt signs of Corell-Allen's manipulation of the site. Holes in the surrounding chain-link fence were also provided by the artist, although there was no clear indication of what action to take as a viewer interested in experiencing the work. But the bos website informs us that, "Participants were invited to access the presumed off-limits 'vacant' site at their own risk." Corell-Allen conceived of similar imaginary geographies as part of his "Visionary Crosswalks" show at Bushwick's Pocket Utopia gallery last year. In those pieces, like "Distribution Pit Liberation" the viewer's participation was what completed the performance. If you aren't up for anything, his works seems to ask, what the hell are you doing here?

If disorientation (or reorientation) is a common thread in Corell-Allen's work, the Lair Collective did its best to make their home installation, bizarrely titled "Punctuated Equilibrium v. 2.0: American Chimera," in the basement of a four-story walk-up equally ambiguous. While a Central American family played on the stoop, a doe-eyed resident opened the gate to let me in—I think I was the first visitor.

Inside, 3D glasses were offered in a bowl and, after putting them on, I walked through room after room, tripping on sparkly colors and lights, past mannequins with painted bikinis, neon-colored columns and hallways decked out in aquatic themes.

In one room, a 20-something swaddled in bubble wrap and wearing gym socks, a tennis headband and sunglasses, played keyboard music I can't for the life of me remember. Behind him was a xylophone-like wall piece, and silver lame covered the oddly-angled room. In one corner a snowy television hummed. The combined elements evoked the idea of a "safe room," protected from the world outside.

What You See Is...

If I needed to cite a theme or common thread uniting some of the best work this year, it would be "packaging." It seems as if the pressure of fitting into the commercial gallery scene is getting to these artists. I wasn't terribly surprised to find this anxiety so prevalent in the work, having spoken to many struggling artists who love making art but seem crippled by the ambition to succeed in a market afflicted with adhd. I guess it was inevitable that the stresses of everyday life would bubble to the surface as artists feel pushed ever further and further away from the supposed center of the New York art scene, Manhattan.

Ann Oren's "The Factory" (2008) is a two-channel video projection improvised into a one-channel work for bos. Intrigued by its strange shadow play, reminiscent of Paul Chan, I watched as small figures (all Oren)—projected from above onto a large sheet of paper on the floor—carry packages and envelopes from four open boxes, which are turned on their side, anchoring the corners of the paper. A foreperson (also Oren) haphazardly directs the workers' actions through a bullhorn. Even if they occasionally goofed off in an act of defiance, their actions still felt automated.

"I think it's ironic that these industrial buildings once manufactured products and now artists have inhabited them and we are creating things like an assembly line...sending them out into the world," Oren told me during my visit. The metaphor captured the zeitgeist. If Andy Warhol's Factory was about creativity and testing limits, this newer reality was tempered by the need to create products that sell. Oren's workers were pulling objects seemingly out of nowhere and leaving them strewn about.

Across Grattan Street, we find Andrew Robinson, an artist who works primarily in ceramic. Last year, he worked on large wall pieces that hung on hooks or sticks screwed into the wall. In addition to ceramic, the objects were rubber, wood and metal. This year a large crate, its lid swung open, was propped up against the wall. A drawer-like compartment held packing foam molded to accommodate real and imaginary objects. This industrial cabinet of curiosities (wunderkammer) perfectly captured the difficulty of making things fit.

Near the Morgan Avenue L stop, at the center of the fast-growing downtown of the Bushwick scene, Lori Kirkbride assembled a colorful wall of resin-covered price tags. Designed to fill a whole gallery, Kirkbride explained that her installation, Tag Sale, was conceived to be sold as a buyer wished...one...twenty...a whole wall. Each manila tag was spotted, splashed or swiped with vivid hues that resonated in unison. "I thought a thousand would be enough," she told me. "But I think to fill a space like my studio I'd need thousands more."

Another artist, Mary Hill, created an oddity that was, in retrospect, one of the most peculiar and original on display. "Eight Oranges and an Eastern Oyster" was indeed composed of eight oranges and an oyster with white industrial paint poured over each. The unmonumentality of the smooth surfaces was alluring and remarkably sensuous even in its minimalist trappings. The spheres (and flatter mollusk) looked as if they were covered in a blanket of snow, serene in their simplicity. More defiant than the commercial-looking work, they seemed more about mood and sensibility than the commodification of fruit

If marketing (another word for packaging, really) were a recurring theme, at Factory Fresh, the latest gallery to enter the Bushwick scene, art and anxiety were indistinguishable. Conceived by the pair of street artists working under the name of Skewville, this latest art shop—following in the footsteps of Claes Oldenburg's Store of the 1960s and Keith Haring's Pop Shop of the 1980s—turned a former bodega into a factory outlet, wallpapered and filled with works exclaiming in block letters, "Half off, hype, buy now" or "Readily Available." The objects on sale were not particularly fetching but the overall message was clear: "get it while it's hot."

What those two days in Bushwick seemed to prove was that the neighborhood is experiencing a salient moment. If living in the neighborhood once felt like an urban exile, today it's starting to feel like a form of prescience.

Print

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Hrag Vartanian is a writer and art critic who writes regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail* and blogs at hragvartanian.com, where 200 photos from bos 2008 are posted.



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| LOCAL | EXPRESS |
| ART | ARTSEEN |
| BOOKS | MUSIC |
| DANCE | FILM |
| THEATER | FICTION |
| POETRY | STREETS |
| LASTWORDS | CONTENTS |

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