

The Paris– Brooklyn Exchange

The *Paris/Brooklyn Exchange* involves 18 galleries and extends over a two month period with nine galleries participating in each country. *The Paris in Brooklyn* segment of the show opened on Friday, April 26, and will continue through June 2nd. The Exchange signals a break from the trend of international survey

shows like the Venice Biennial for a deeper level of cultural and artistic dialogue that becomes impossible at the dehumanizing level of the grand spectacle.

The participating galleries in Williamsburg are Schroeder/Romero, Roebing Hall, Pierogi, Parker's Box, Momena Art@Four Walls, Star 67, and Plus Ultra. The larger Brooklyn arts community is represented by Southfirst: Art in Greenpoint, Smack Mellon in DUMBO, and The Brooklyn Museum of Art. While Pierogi and Roebing Hall represent the most well known and professional of the participating galleries in Williamsburg, the Exchange has helped highlight the maturation of spaces like Schroeder/Romero, which has existed in various incarnations for nearly ten years. Plus Ultra, Parker's Box, and Star 67 are relative new comers to Williamsburg, but they have shown promise and established strong reputations over the last two to three years. Momena, a non-profit space on Berry, was already booked with a show, but was able to show an exchange artist at Four Walls, an experimental garage space slightly off the beaten path. The level of cooperation throughout the American galleries is remarkable enough, except that it represents only half of the equation.

Starting June 6th, Galerie Ann Barrault, Galerie Les Filles Du Calvaire, Galerie Bernard Jordan, Galerie Michel Rein, Galerie Chez Valentin, Galerie Anton

Weller, Algeria Eric Dupont, Espace Huit Novembre, and Espace Paul Ricard will show over 45 Brooklyn artists. The event itself was an idea of Claire Ollier's that grew out of a dialogue with Alun Williams and Lisa Schroeder. The individual shows were organized via email and telephone between the partner galleries. At a time when the art world operates quantitatively at the international level there is a refreshing intimacy to the process of the Exchange.

Throughout is a range of cultural transmission often diffused at the big shows. In this case, the artists, the galleries, and the audiences are brought together at the emerging level where new possibilities exist. Paris has arrived in New York, except the Parisians have bypassed the expanding Chelsea scene for the experimental, open atmosphere of Brooklyn. The art exchange is a positive byproduct of a disappointing Stockholm Art Fair, where Parker's Box director Alun Williams and Lisa Schroeder of Schroeder/Romero represented their respective galleries. According to Alun, "we were brought there to give the thing an international edge, but there really wasn't a whole lot going on except for the Parisian booths." Alun and Lisa struck up a dialogue with French curators and owners from three galleries of the Marais quarter of Paris. Alun described the Stockholm affair as disappointing, first since the Parisians and the Americans were surrounded by rigid Scandinavian Abstraction, second because of the negative attention their own booths seemed to attract. "We called ourselves the dancing bears," he said, explaining the feeling of having tours of Scandinavians told that the work was "underground." Alun suggested that there was something condescending about the whole affair.

This feeling of being in what Alun called a "ghetto" brought the two isolated groups into a discussion about contemporary art. An impulse to exchange the contemporary artwork supported by both groups blossomed. On the French side, gallery owner Christine Ollier was largely responsible for the idea of the galleries exchanging artwork and artists. The Exchange, then, is an attempt to bring the type of contemporary art being made in both Brooklyn and

Paris to the attention of the art world. The Marais quarter of Paris has not been covered the way London has, nor have the contemporary artists received the amount of reviews as their London counterparts. Mika Pollack, co-owner of Southfirst: Art, summed up the lack of attention afforded contemporary art in Paris, saying "you can't really name any hot, young Parisian artists." Of course she could name the more established Parisians, but her statement echoed a familiar sentiment. The Exchange may well begin to shift the focus off the isle and onto the continent, and now there ought to be greater curiosity about Paris.

The exchange also succeeds in affirming Brooklyn's reputation as the more experimental and open scene in New York. In a recent *Village Voice* diagnosis of the art world, Jerry Saltz implies that Williamsburg isn't doing anything different than Chelsea. Despite the buzz over Williamsburg, it hasn't translated into an active collector base or a solid reputation for a majority of the galleries. Pierogi seems to gather most of the spotlight for its activity in the area,

which has a positive and negative effect on its peers by garnering attention and casting a long shadow. While Saltz may be right in pointing out the sterilizing effects of the commercialization of Chelsea, Williamsburg still retains a marginal relationship with the art world, a relationship based mainly on supposition. The Paris/Brooklyn exchange is a big undertaking for the smaller scene, yet it has produced promising results for an experiment conducted on a shoe-string budget.

The event kicked off with a reception for the incoming Parisians on the Tuesday prior to the opening. There on the sidewalk, a Parisian artist who shall remain anonymous referred to his gallery owner as "money." Although humorous, it evidenced the different levels of support for art between America and France. It shouldn't be surprising really, but the reality of it is a stinging reminder of the cold relationship between art and governmental support in America. Where the French Embassy and The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided money in support of the transportation costs for the largely commercial enterprise, only a non-profit gallery like Momena would be eligible for government funding, and non-profit funding is not easily won. Some galleries remain for-profit because of the time consuming work of filling out mountains of paperwork. This particular cultural disparity is visible at the bottom of the exhibition announcement, where there are few visible American sponsors.

A transatlantic art exchange is an expensive proposition. Besides funding the exchange of artwork, two artists from each gallery were fully funded to fly overseas. Williams explained that they were able to pull an estimated 60,000 dollars together in funding, mainly from the French side. It was up to the participants to fund anything beyond the base capital. For example, Roebbing Hall was able to afford to transport the large paintings on display. Each gallery seems to have operated within their financial range successfully, as the shows opened together on Friday. The democratic approach to the show allowed a range of Brooklyn galleries to participate instead of only the galleries with the necessary financial means. All of the French gallery owners were present or represented at the openings.

Alun described the face-to-face dialogue as more exciting and promising than the original, impersonal arrangements. The potential for further exchange and cooperation grows as the gallery owners discussed the impending exhibitions, and it doesn't end with the galleries. The benefits of the exchange for the artists are way beyond recognition and attention. By actually coming to Brooklyn as part of the exchange the Parisian artists were able to experience the art here first hand and open dialogues with local artists who share similar concerns. This isn't hype at all. Some of the Parisians have never been to New York to see the Museums and the raw energy of the contemporary scene. One artist who benefited from this beyond measure is Isabelle Levenez. According to the press release she has developed a following in Paris, but is relatively unknown here. The Exchange was her first opportunity to come to America, and not only is her show

generating strong approval here, she was offered a six month residency in New York. Mika Pollack called it "a life changing experience." The Friday opening of *Paris in Brooklyn* appears to have been a complete success, with crowded galleries and busy streets. The overall exhibition does not disappoint; rather, it

feels like a first collaboration. The galleries worked from slides and photographs without the benefit of studio visits. The art spans contemporary concerns from site-specific installation to intimate, personal narratives exemplifying the vigor of contemporary art in Paris. This effect outweighs any unevenness between the shows.

Highlights include Olga Boldyreff's simple, participatory wall drawings made from yards of hand knit, tricotin yarn at Star 67. The tricotin drawings of apparel are presented along with the packaging that comes with instructions and materials to reinstall the piece. The artist also knits the yarn with strangers in public places. These humorous exchanges are documented in a book on display at the gallery desk. At first cute, the layers of activity suggest a grander vision of a social process.

At Fourwalls, Nicolas Moulin presents a video projection of still photographs of a version of Paris devoid of any human presence beyond the starkly edited architecture and the information systems of the roadways. The nothingness is compounded by an eerie soundtrack in the dim, garage-like gallery. The effect calls to mind the subtle use of digital washing in *Amelie*, where Paris is idealized into a fairy tale city. Here Moulin eradicates humanity, leaving behind two competing aesthetics, Romantic Parisian architecture and the stark passageways of modernity. At Parker's Box two irreverent artists share a common space. Saadane Afif presents a cultural riff on Franco-American relations with his installation of spinning disco balls on the floor, a French flag composed of thrift store t-shirts emblazoned with the coca-cola logo, and a delicate orchid. The installation and the pieces bear separate titles, including "*Fuck with my mind...*" Fabien Verschaere's black and white wall paintings evoke a similar sentiment as a pig in a priest's frock floats among a strange universe of chimeras. His second piece, *75 drawings*, presents a group of spare watercolors of an equally odd world that are at once elegant and vulgar with a style that recalls storybook illustrations. Isabelle Levenez presents a compelling wall and video installation. The work deals with the artists memories of childhood in France as a Catholic.

The artist's early encounters with sexuality are coupled with the punitive nature of pedagogy. A sentence scrawled repeatedly across the main gallery wall like a grade school punishment reminds both artist and viewer that childhood memories should not allowed to be erased by time. The multiple narrative roles that the artist assumes create a deeply resonating work that avoids easy identification. The predominant theme of red carries through the different representational threads providing structure to the difficult subject matter. At once playful and disconcerting, the show is one of the strongest in the Exchange.

At the Schroeder/Romero Gallery is an impressive show of contemporary photography. What remains in mind are Phillipe Calandre's narrative photographs of a funeral where people slowly then suddenly join the deceased. Unlike other slick, aluminum mounted photographs in the show, Calandre surrounds the images with an awkward purple film and wood frames. The balancing act of dark humor and empathy conveys the emotional and temporal complexity of loss in an understandably flat-footed way. The rest of the photography presented is good but doesn't have the spark of Calandre's series, though Christophe Muaberrret's comes close. His lonely, daytime photographs of seaside resort nightclubs have the effect of an inadvertent flip of the house lights at a party where the clarity can be deeply disturbing. They are perhaps not about what is revealed externally, but the self-awareness of what might be happening internally.

The *Paris in Brooklyn Exchange* is up for a month, and should provide even seasoned gallery visitors with a startling experience that contemporary art is alive and well in Paris, at least in the Marais. Like Muaberrret's photos, the vitality of the exchange and its potential for stimulating artistic growth should provide evidence against Jerry Saltz's *Babylon*. The *Exchange* is also a blueprint offering a way to create an international exhibition that bypasses static quantity for dynamic quality. Its egalitarian methodology offers those who cannot easily afford a jaunt to Europe or America a different means of 'seeing the world'.

—William Powhida