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Christian Philipp Müller**WORKS****SELECTED TEXTS****BIOGRAPHY****BIBLIOGRAPHY****"The Condition of Bohemia" (2012)**

From: Dealing With--Some Texts, Images, and Thoughts Related to American Fine Arts, Co., ed. Valérie Knoll, Hannes Loichinger, and Magnus Schäfer (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 39–42.

- James Meyer

Bohemia is a romantic notion, developing in European urban centers during the first half of the nineteenth century.[1] It is a condition of exteriority, a physical and discursive site outside the parameters of the social, the acceptable, the status quo; yet it is, dialectically, the center's obverse, produced and necessitated by it. Bohemia — insofar as the term could be used to describe a site of display — is historically and materially specific: Gustave Courbet's pavilion at the World's Fair of 1855, Kurt Schwitter's "Merzbau" (1933), Claes Oldenburg's "Store" (1961), and 1980s East Village are not mutually reducible. Nevertheless, each of these sites set itself up as oppositional, a challenge to an hegemonic framework of reception — in Courbet's time, the salon; in Oldenburg's, the "white cube" galleries of Fifty-Seventh Street; and in the early 1980s, SoHo. In all of these cases, the will to marginality — as it has come to seem in retrospect — was a will for the center: Courbet's "Burial at Ornans" would hang in the Louvre; Oldenburg came to be considered a contemporary master; and the East Village galleries folded or returned to SoHo, a few of its artists achieving a momentary canonization.

That a structure of oppositionality/assimilation and marginality/centrality has conditioned the production and reception of serious art since the mid-nineteenth century is an old theme. What is surprising, perhaps, is to observe the repetition of this formula (as if it were almost a historical necessity) in the form of the contemporary gallery and its contextual relations. In a post-recession, postmodern SoHo, American Fine Arts, Co. still aspires to the condition of bohemia. How is this condition characterized, and how it is produced? What is this artist's role in this situation? These are, for me, the salient questions explored in the installation "Interpellations" by Christian Philipp Müller.

As Müller demonstrates, American Fine Arts, Co. is not listed in the Gallery Guide or in the "SoHo" or "Culture" sections of travel manuals; it advertises solely in Artforum. After it moved to its new location at 22 Wooster Street last summer, the gallery went without a sign for several months. Moreover, it is located at the lower end of the gallery district, next to a lumber supply store and across from a parking lot, at the transition between SoHo and the hardware zone of Canal Street. In short, American Fine Arts, Co. is hard to find. The difficulty of locating the

gallery is a metaphor for the "difficulty" of the work displayed there: it is a gallery for the initiate, the aficionado of the conceptual; a gallery that seeks to pose questions rather than merely offering up commodities. Its name simulates those of established uptown galleries (for example, the 57th Street establishment Associated American Artists). Yet, as Müller suggests, at American Fine Arts, Co. much of the work is not American, is not fine, it is not always clearly legible as art. Its shows are often ignored by those journalistic critics who, in recent years, have favored the latest waves of Body Expressionism and Scatter-Pop, in which they might locate authorial feeling and authenticity-practices that bear the whiff of a fashionable political odor without engaging actual material conditions, much less questions of praxis. (In contrast, the textual and photo-documentation work shown at American Fine Arts, Co. updates the Conceptualist critique of the studio-made, Expressionist object). The support for practice follows the lead of such critics: collectors of analytical work, while committed, are few. Moreover, as with the original wave of Conceptualism of the late 1960s, much of this support is directed from Europe (the reasons for this are too complex to discuss here). In late capitalism, when practice is increasingly subject to the logic of the commodity, when everything is supposedly commodifiable (as such writers as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard argued, perhaps more persuasively, during the 1980s) American Fine Arts, Co. hovers on the edge of a precipice, steering clear, like an army's front or avant-garde, of its own oblivion. (Of course, among downtown galleries and alternative spaces, it is hardly alone in this respect). Müller's interpellations of the gallery's address in guidebooks in the present show bespeaks his desire to secure it — and his own practice — greater attention and support. For the position of a willed marginality, he has discovered, despite the criticality it might confer, has a personal cost.

Why "bohemia" as opposed to "avant-garde"? Both terms imply a position of marginality, of opposition or critique, yet they are differently inflected: if an avant-gardist mode implies a will to shock, to expose, to tear down and build anew, if it is often accompanied, in its classic moments (Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism) by a declarative manifesto, bohemia is softer, less formulated, more a lifestyle or behavior than aesthetic program. It is the cultivation of a poetic sensibility, an irresponsible dilettantism; an afternoon whittled away over a newspaper; an ashtray with smoking cigarette; dusty rooms; old furniture; ill-fitting clothes; a cultivation of disorder, unfinish; a love of popular and serious culture simultaneously; a slacker, youthful demeanor.

For some time now, the artists of American Fine Arts, Co. have reflected on what I am calling the bohemian ambience of the gallery as cultivated by its proprietor, Colin de Land. In "Another Kind of Pragmatism," Andrea Fraser analyzed the self-consciously unself-conscious decor of de Land's previous space at 40 Wooster Street, a jumble of found furniture, odd knick-knacks, etc., which he summed up as "a whole bricolage kind of thing." [2] Müller's first show at the gallery, also in 1992, focused less on de Land's decorating techniques than on the intersection of his lifestyle and business practice. Covering the walls with wooden wainscoting and soft, elegant lamps in simulation of a turn-of-the-century Viennese coffee house, Müller thematized de Land's practice of serving homemade cappuccino to guests — a menu of works and services provided by the gallery, written by de Land, was offered at the front desk. For Müller, business, in de Land's sense, is a leisurely cafe activity, a simultaneous consumption of coffee and commodities. (He was perhaps not aware, at the time, the extent to which the serving of coffee to clients is standard practice in New York blue-chip galleries as well, where it is less a

metaphor of relaxation than hard business). In the back office, a bookcase — actually a rectangular solid covered with wallpaper representing books — highlighted Müller's function in American Fine Arts, Co.'s stable. The American-made wallpaper represented the spines of European classics exclusively: stateside authors were not admitted into designer Richard Neas's conception of literary culture. Inserting catalogs of his own shows in strategically placed slots, Müller represented himself as the latest European export for SoHo's consumption.

Bohemianism, as suggested, for all its self-positioning as oppositionality, is structurally dependent on a center it would displace, a center in which it would in turn be absorbed. Once at the geographical extreme of SoHo — the "rough," southern edge, to which it moved during the 1980s in search of comparatively lower rents — American Fine Arts, Co. now finds itself in the new, with-it lower SoHo district that has emerged in the past five years, near the cluster of restaurants and cafes at the corner of Broome Street and West Broadway, and the rows of galleries that have recently occupied lower Wooster, Greene, and Mercer Streets. During the height of this transformation, the gallery moved south, from 40 to 22 Wooster Street at the edge of the hardware district. Suspended at SoHo's edge, American Fine Arts, Co. and other, nearby innovative spaces provide the mode of recreation (gallery hopping) and the ambiance of downtown hipness essential to SoHo's identity. In the maps presented in "Interpellations," Müller traces the choreography of the SoHo visitor, who may choose from a menu of art galleries, boutiques, furniture shops, and restaurants in a simultaneous pursuit of culture and sensual satisfaction. (This interest in a moving, sited body, a body that must contend with institutional borders and topographies, and the identities and relations they produce, is longstanding for Müller.) As Müller suggests, in maintaining a physical and intellectual edge, American Fine Arts, Co. necessarily participates in the gentrification of the remaining messy zones of downtown real estate. At a time when fewer and fewer artists can actually afford to live in the artist's district, stockbrokers and lawyers seeking an alternative identity, or a dwelling convenient to Wall Street, are increasingly the inhabitants of SoHo and Tribeca lofts. (The writings of Rosalyn Deutsche have documented the art-generated transformation of the East Village during the 1980s.) Yet, this process is not an irreversible transformation of bohemia into the Upper East Side. Taste, Müller suggests, can only be multiple, reflecting divisions of class, education, gender, race, sexual orientation, and the subjective self. The feet of the SoHo visitor lead in all number of directions, pursuing the satisfaction of different tastes. There are those who lunch at expensive restaurants and those who grab three-dollar sandwiches at SoHo Gourmet; those who shop for clothes at Comme des Garçons and those who frequent Canal Jeans. Each of us, faced with this heterogeneous, circumscribed menu of choices, negotiates our way through these streets, separating our tastes and identities from those of others, when, gazing down at the Gallery Guide, we enter one gallery as opposed to another (we seek distinction, as Pierre Bourdieu would say). Müller's analysis, then, is not reducible to that vein of Marxist critique that would perceive the interaction of artists and developers, bohemia and the bourgeoisie, the alternative and the blue-chip gallery as merely exploitative, unidirectional. (The artist stakes out a new neighborhood; the original inhabitants leave due to high rents; the artists are in turn turned out; the bourgeoisie ends up controlling everything.) This is part of the story of SoHo, a story that continues to unfold. Rather, Müller presents these relations as dialectical, inevitable: just as bohemia's identity and material existence are tied to capital by an umbilical cord of gold (as Clement Greenberg once observed with characteristic bluntness), so capital requires bohemia for innovation and renewal: in Courbet's time, as in our own, in industrial or late capitalism, they exist in a structure of mutuality and dependence.

Notes

This text was part of the 1994 exhibition "Interpellations" by Christian Philipp Müller at AFA and was published in German as "Die Bedingung von Boheme." *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 18 (May 1995): 77-81. The substantially revised translation in this book is based on the translation by Jürgen Blasius from 1995.

Andrea Fraser. "Another Kind of Pragmatism," *Forum International*. no. 11 (January/ February 1992): 64. See also the reprint in this book.