

ETC



New York. Summer nits and bits The non-opening of the Guggenheim

Steven Kaplan

Number 20, November 1992, February 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35993ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kaplan, S. (1992). Review of [New York. Summer nits and bits : the non-opening of the Guggenheim]. *ETC*, (20), 47–50.

ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

NEW YORK

SUMMER NITS AND BITS

The non-opening of the Guggenheim

As June rolled around, it became painfully obvious that no one in New York was waiting with bated breath for the reopening of the Guggenheim Museum later that month. Despite plans for a frenetic, five-day schedule of dinners and receptions, despite remodeled and expanded galleries on upper Fifth Avenue and a new, hopefully hip mini branch downtown (several floors of a loft building in SoHo), despite a wedding for minimalist fluorescent-meister Dan Flavin in the Frank Lloyd Wright rotunda – in other words, despite all attempts at overorchestrated bombast designed to awe the viewer, stroke and satiate the multinational corporate sponsors, and generally provide an apotheosis of state-of-the-art art management under the aegis of networked institutional wealth – despite these assiduous preparations, the Guggenheim's imminent reopening produced no heightened public expectancy, no gushing salivations commensurate with the apparent self importance of the museum. It remained a curiously neutral, insular event, a party thrown by the museum, for the museum, and in the museum, with no aesthetic fallout and no soul: lots of money and lots of well manicured infrastructure, but no spiritual core.

In fact, aside from wondering whether the actual physical reconstruction would be completed by showtime (it wasn't, and only one floor of the SoHo mini-branch was opened for the opening), the major response of New York's art community was to demonstrate against the Guggenheim's paternalistic curatorial choices, as organisations such as the Guerilla Girls, Women's Action Coalition, and Godzilla (an Asian artists' collective) gathered in strength outside the downtown opening to oppose the mainly white, male (and, might I add, deceased) constituency of that exhibition: Brancusi, Kandinsky, Beuys, Robert Ryman, and Carl Andre, with Louise Bourgeois thrown in as a clearly perceived token gesture, a sop to feminist sensibilities. Not that Bourgeois does not merit inclusion in such a show; it is the transparent political expediency of the Guggenheim's gesture, and not the quality of the artist's work, that is being held up to scrutiny. The chant of "Hey hey, ho ho, white male culture has got

to go!" resounded mightily through the canyons of SoHo, as many potential attendees of the opening swelled the ranks of the demonstrators, aware that the real show was not inside but out in the street.

I was out in the street too, in tacit support of the demonstration, but also because this was the role the Guggenheim had chosen for me. As June rolled around, it became painfully obvious that the Public Affronts Department had forgotten me during the two years the museum had been closed for renovation, despite the fact that I had been receiving Guggenheim press releases, press cards and invitations to openings throughout the 80s. When I called to rectify the situation, I was told that I would be sent proper press materials immediately. After waiting for over three weeks, I called the museum back, only to be told that I was not on their accredited press list, and would I kindly send them some press clippings to prove my worthiness. After wondering aloud why I was not asked to send clippings some three weeks earlier, if this were indeed necessary, I then mailed off my article on the 1991 Whitney Biennial (ETC MONTRÉAL, no. 15), assuming that the mugwumps at the Guggenheim might be interested in my evaluation of a sister institution. A week passed. No word. The press opening was only days away. I called back and left several messages. None was returned. I was finally able to rouse a functionary, who specified that my application for press credentials was denied on the technicality that the Biennial article was published over six months previously, six months apparently being the arbitrary cutoff point for legitimacy. After wondering aloud why I was not previously informed of this technicality, and why no one from the museum had attempted to contact me with notice of this technicality after receiving my material, I indicated to the functionary that I had more recent writing, but had elected to send them the Biennial review since it was of an exhibition at another museum. I also outlined the history of misinformation, broken promises and arbitrariness that I had suffered in my recent dealings with the Guggenheim Public Affronts Department. Needless to say, the call did not end cordially.

I take time to describe the above not just for the satisfaction of airing a personal grievance, but to give some indication of the institutional arrogance and attitude copping that trickled from the highest echelons of Guggenheim decision making down to the lowliest Public Affronts peon. In their exalted posts of power, the Guggenheim board, and particularly director Thomas Krens (he of MASS MOCA and other would-be juggernauts of art capital), seem to have grossly miscalculated the spirit of the age, the needs and expectations of the current generation of artists. The Guggenheim's posture is so tired, so old. Still lost in the excesses of art hype, in unabashed and unashamed institutional muscle flexing, and in the arrogant display that remains the worst legacy of the Reagan 80s, Krens and co. seem, laughably, to belong to the distant past. Nothing is quite so pathetic as this parade of dinosaurs, surveying their kingdom, trumpeting their institutional privilege, oblivious to changing times and to the emptiness and banality of their pumped-up vanity.

Normally, I would not consider reviewing an exhibition to which I had not been invited, and which I have still not seen. But art is really beside the point here, isn't it? Art would just get in the way. Not in recent memory has the aura of a museum opening been so decidedly unaesthetic, has the art been so obviously a pawn in the hands of the players, a bit of window dressing to accessorize, legitimize and camouflage the naked imperatives of power. As Peter Schjeldahl noted in his Village Voice review of the Guggenheim opening: "Those in and of the New York art audience must understand that this temple of Mammon has very little to do with us." (July 7, 1992, page 86).

Such being the case, I would like to offer you an art review, dear reader, the only review of their opening exhibition permitted me by the Guggenheim, and the only review that seems appropriate under the circumstances:



ARTKARDS®

On a lighter and certainly more enjoyable note is Artkards®, arch brainchild of Steve Ausbury and Todd Alden in their corporate guise as The Conceptual Clearinghouse Ltd., an edition of over 100 cards of artists, dealers, critics and collectors that wryly apes the format of baseball cards to comment on the cult of personality, the blatant careerism, and the intense commodification of the contemporary New York art world. For sale in packs of 15 for \$15 at the New Museum's Art Mall exhibition and in selected downtown galleries, the cards offer a photo of the artist on the front together with the gallery "team" that he or she plays on. On the back, instead of batting averages, RBIs, MVP listings and other stats, we find a short c. v. of the artist, a capsule biography, some career highlights, and often a pertinent quotation. In a moment of profound self revelation, dealer Jay Gorney admits "I'm amazed the world is letting me do this," while artist Richard Prince confesses "If you don't like your own pictures, and you like someone else's better, well, take theirs."

Buy them! Sell them! Trade them! Collect them all! And if a buck a card seems a little steep, please remember that we're talking about art here. Originally designed as a selling prop for bubblegum, the baseball card quickly became the main attraction, spawning imitators among other sports, as well as branching out into monster movie cards, Star Trek cards, Batman cards, and mass murderer/serial killer cards (generally sold *sans* gum). Now, if normal folks out there can enjoy trading, let's say, two Sons of Sam for one Jeffrey Dahmer, who's to deny the art world its own little *frissons*. Like one Larry



MATHEW BARNEY

Artist

Born: San Francisco, CA, 1967
School: Yale University, BA, 1989
Lives: New York, NY

Mathew really scored big in 1991 when he appeared in the cover article of *Artforum* - shortly before his first one-person show in New York! Critics who could barely stand the anticipation (see Roberta Smith, *Artkards* #51 and Jerry Saltz, *Artkards* #52) gushed and gushed again over the 24-year-old erotic gladiator, spilling the kind of panegyric ink reserved for only the momentous (and annual) emergence of a Super Rookie. Transforming Beuys' formula "art=capital" into "art=sports" at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, Mathew's athletics became aesthetics (and vice-versa). Barely two years out of Yale, *Artkards* salutes the unfolded *phenom* for satisfying a collective desire: to scout out, discover, and beat the drum for the next, young American Rookie!

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1991 Stuart Regen Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York, NY
S. F. Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA

In honor of: Mathew's penetrating exploits, *Artkards* takes this opportunity to retire the unused *Artkards* #000 from the *Artkards* 1992 series *avant la lettre!*



Gagosian for an Andrew Crispo and a player to be maimed later.

Probably the reason that I find Artkards® so hilarious, iconoclast that I am, and such an on-target assessment of the contemporary milieu, is the deft way in which it punctures pomposity, deflates attitude, and reduces major questions of art historical discourse to a couple of sentences on the back of a piece of cardboard, in a format that is decidedly street, pop and prole. Quite frankly, I find both the proud vulgarity and the reductivist impulse underlying these cards to be irresistible.

By the way, I have an extra Matthew Barney (pictured here, front and back) and I'm looking for a Mike Kelley. Anybody wanna swap?

William T. Vollmann

In the past five years, this extraordinarily prolific young writer - he's 33 years old - has published seven books (three of them in 1992), so it's no one's fault but my own that I just started reading him this summer. And while I generally hope to "discover" underground writers through barroom conversations and the bohemian oral grapevine, my introduction to him on the pages of *Esquire*, the *New York Times* Book Review and *Detail* magazine make it apparent that Vollmann's star is on the rise. He is currently poised on the cusp, about to break through from minor cult to major cult figure. Anything I can do to aid and abet this transition is all right by me.

Not that Vollmann is an easy read. He has stories to tell, but he will tell them his way, which is not the way of the bestseller. His prose, while visionary and often spellbindingly clairvoyant, can also be dense, obscure, and convoluted. His sense of

time and place is fluid and (purposefully) anachronistic, mixing the contemporary with the historical, in a promodern *mélange* that teases and illuminates but is often confusing. The scale of his ambition tends towards massive tomes, meganovels that overwhelm through their sheer, sprawling length, their relentless experimentation, their bifurcating, multifaceted points of view, their obvious erudition and painstaking research (apparent in the text, but often supplemented in the form of footnotes, maps and charts, appendices, and layers and layers of glossaries).

Vollmann's literary adventures are testament to his fierce imagination and his uncompromising moral stance. They also reach far afield in time and space. His first novel, *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1988), completed while he was still working as a programmer in Silicon Valley, before he started writing fulltime, is a futurist fable that has earned favorable comparison with Thomas Pynchon and William Burroughs. Part mordant critique of the politics of technology in the age of computers, part coming-of-age adventure story, part conspiracy caper, part abrasive satire of the genre conventions surrounding the historical novel, this vast, demented book (over 600 pages - Vollmann has never taken well to editing) recounts a fearsome struggle for world domination between the inventors of electricity (man) and the insect kingdom. Featuring a cast of thousands, including a human protagonist named Bug and a praying mantis who tends bar in Oregon, and with illustrations by Vollmann, *Angels* is a book that takes chances, extends itself to the breaking point, and doesn't mind tripping and falling flat on its face in public. Somewhat uneven in its exposition, often difficult to get through, this first effort is nonetheless lit with a nocturnal emission of unholy light, and is alluringly vehement in its obsessions.

His second book, a spectrum of shorter pieces entitled *The Rainbow Stories* (1989), and weighing in at a scant 540 pages, is primarily based on interviews Vollmann conducted with the marginal, disenfranchised types he got to know in the Tenderloin, San Francisco's skid row: prostitutes, pimps, skinheads, junkies, vagrants, the homeless. His attitude to these underdogs is refreshingly devoid of both condescension and pathos, and also without the slavish *nostalgie pour la boue* that often shades notes

from the underground written by the college educated.

While not identifying with his marginals to the point of sublimation, Vollmann clearly admires them for their confrontation with life, for their physical grace, for the matter-of-fact bravery that is a daily part of survival. He hides his admiration and essential compassion behind a wry, sardonic wit, as, for example, in the interspersed footnotes of *Ladies and Red Lights*, which list the prices he paid whores for their time and conversation (page 134: "For an additional fifty cents, I learned that spaghetti is Brandi's favorite food.") And after spending several months with the Nazi skins to research "The White Knights", he allows them to read the text and prints some of their comments at the end ("Dude, I want to talk to you about your story," screamed Bootwoman Marisa very rapidly, "because it fucking sucks!"). Vollmann's take on the new journalism-cum-literature is a two-way street between writer and subject. Sometimes the subject gets the last word.

The Rainbow Stories extend beyond the Tenderloin to embrace blood sacrifices in ancient Babylon, thug bands choking their victims on the plains of Kurdistan, and Survival Research Laboratories, a group of artist/technicians based in San Francisco, who construct machines that are unleashed to perform rituals of death, dismemberment and destruction.

Vollmann's current project is a sequence of seven novels (which he hopes to complete by age 40 or 45), a self-described "symbolic history" of the European settlement of North America, the confrontation of white men with native, indigenous cultures. The first of these "Seven Dreams" is *The Ice Shirt* (1990), set during the Norse voyages of exploration and their landing on the fertile, wooded shores of Vinland (probably part of eastern Canada or New England) circa 1000 A. D. Employing both Inuit creation myths and several medieval Norse prose epics as source material, *Ice Shirt* digresses and enlarges on the grisly feuds and supernatural horrors that chased refugees like Eirik the Red from Norway to Iceland and hence to Greenland and beyond. It centers on the character of Eirik's illegitimate daughter Freydis, whose jealous thirst for power infects the Norse settlement on Vinland the Good with the seeds of rapacity and exploitation, eventually doom-

ing the colony to extinction.

The suggestion that, from its very outset, the seeds of our continental history were fertilized with cruelty and injustice is a serious and unforgiving theme. But since it is Vollmann, we should expect some witty leavening of this hard tack. It is his conceit to tell the tale through the all-seeing eyes of one William the Blind, a cynical, wisecracking bard who introduces the novel and interjects his irreverence throughout. Undoubtedly commenting on the serious astigmatism that has afflicted him since childhood, Vollmann has his blind bard caution us, in the preface, that the saga to follow might be somewhat compromised in its veracity: "Readers are warned that the sketch-maps and boundaries here are provisional, approximate, unreliable and wrong. Nonetheless, I have furnished them, for as my text is no more than a pack of lies they can do no harm."

Vollmann's most recent novel, *Fathers and Crows*, has just been released by Viking. It retains his alter ego, William the Blind, as the omniscient if compromised narrator. This volume should be of special interest to readers of this magazine, as it chronicles the colonization of New France during the first half of the 17th century: the settling of Quebec and Montreal; the relations of the early French hunters and trappers with surrounding tribes of Huron, Micmac, Algonquin, and the mighty Iroquois confederation; the explorations of Samuel de Champlain; the coming of the black-robed Jesuits: their mission of conversion; their battles of faith along the St. Lawrence and its tributaries; and the Mohawk Saint Catherine Tekakwitha. The convoluted narrative swirls and eddies around selected moments in time, backtracks, then rushes forward, and includes enough grisly descriptions of death and disease – the frigid winters, the outbreak of smallpox – to make the highly colored narratives of Boston historian Francis Parkman read like – well, like a simple stroll in the woods.

Fathers and Crows clocks in at 989 pages, including six glossaries, notes on sources, and an exhaustive chronology. I hope to have finished it by the time you read this article.

STEVEN KAPLAN