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REALITY CHECK: DAVID ROBBINS' ICE CREAM SOCIAL

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Let be be finale of seem

The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Wallace Stevens

The last decade was replete with artwork that had a utopian tendency while aligning itself with the promise of a new sociality. Like the proponents of the New Economy, an ever-more genial artworld fell in with the idea that one could replace conflict and ideological struggle with cooperation, because, among other compelling reasons, conflict was unpleasurable and unprofitable. This shift paralleled the marketing of “connectivity” and “interactivity” in the information technology industry in a business-sector move that seemed – ironically and surprisingly – to fulfill at some delay the promise of Marshall McLuhan’s global village, even if this village at times appeared more like a global shopping mall.¹ A full account of the critical support structure for this artistic tendency is impossible, but a partial account would have to mention the seminal theorization

of the “relational aesthetic” by Nicolas Bourriaud and related work treating artists’ production of social space by Lars Bang Larsen – ideas that resonated with practices as diverse as those of Michael Elmgreen & Ingar Dragset, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo, Phillippe Parreno, and Rikrit Tiravanija. Together, this “relational” work and theory operated under the aegis of a broadly Deleuzian cosmology of flow and rhizomatic connection, while the emergence of the relational artists themselves paralleled the formation of a class of real-life information workers (think: agents, managers, curators) channeling and shaping the symbolic ether.

Fast-forward a few years, and the world has altered considerably. With an information economy that has turned out to be in a large measure a bubble, a rogue superpower engaged in a cycle of war and occupation, and the exposure of corporate cultures that once seemed to embody the idealized new sociality, what is one to make of the relational *pax artistica*? This question is especially pressing now that the language of flow and connectivity appears too aesthetic a view of a world that is visibly underpinned by violence as well as by rigid if disguised deep structures. With hindsight one can see that the aestheticization of “flow” and “connection” operated as a rationalization – and, what’s more, a rationalization that is possible only from a privileged position, at once disembodied and elevated. After all, who worships the flow or celebrates the rhizomatic web when grounded on the front lines of a battlefield or in the depths of a sweatshop?

To look at a representative if offbeat relational work of this period by David Robbins provides an opportunity to consider these questions anew. This is particularly true insofar as Robbins’ take on the social aesthetic, realized in his decade-long practice of Ice Cream Socials, can stand for an American offshoot of the social art that has existed and been supported more fully in Europe.² The chapter from his *Ice Cream Social* novella excerpted in this issue of *Trouble*

presents a fictional (but more or less factual) version of Robbins' first undertaking in this area: an actual event in New York City that he staged in the popular American ice cream chain store Baskin-Robbins in 1993. Published five years after the event, the fictional account would later, in a way typical of Robbins' working method, go on to provide a template for actual Socials realized in London (2002) and Des Moines (2003). This fourth chapter in the book opens with protagonist Mark Baskin, the author's double, developing a plan for a new kind of abstract painting. It will be a painting that, without the heroic baggage of most abstract work, is instead "programmed" by a certain experience that resides in it as a "memory" (cybernetic overtones are intended). Baskin's solution is to contextualize the painting in an event that is both named after and based on the end-of-the-week gatherings over ice cream that are a mainstay of small-town American social life. Thus is born the "Ice Cream Social" event that from its first incarnation, with several dozen invited guests assembled in the dead of winter, had many features that make it a representative example of 1990s social art: a group brought together under the aegis of art, a cross-over between art and entertainment, work mixed with pleasure, and networking replacing working.

What is distinctive, however, about Robbins' take on social art is twofold. First, his Ice Cream Socials are consistently informed by a specific national culture. In contrast to the eclectic internationalism of most relational art, Robbins mines his own culture to the point of presenting a caricatured, even mythical Americanness which touches upon P. T. Barnum (an early champion of "innocent and rational amusements" in America) and Abner Doubleday (the alleged inventor of baseball) as well as the mysterious but undoubtedly American invention of the ice cream cone. The result is a deep rootedness to Robbins' Ice Cream Social practice that in some ways runs contrary to the universalist premises of the global village.

The second distinguishing characteristic of the Ice Cream Social events is the genre they derive from, comedy (in the archaic sense that has more to do with the staging social union than with humor), and how that genre relates to the broader culture. The comedy in question is at once highly artificial, overtly theatrical, and stagy. Like Ben Jonson's drama, to which Robbins' work may be compared because of its emotional dryness, the Ice Cream Social events operate in a context of social and political problems that they acknowledge but also keep at bay (including the problems of intolerance and the dumbing-down of entertainment culture).³ This 'comic' character it is also part of what is most American about Robbins' take on the social aesthetic, providing its point of contact with the American mainstream. Comedy's hold on the American imagination extends from such fictional tropes as the cliché of cinematic happy endings to the American invention of the television sitcom genre and even into real life with the dramatizations of social bonds that are found in a sacrosanct treatment of (heterosexual) marriage and obsession with the image of a perfectly functioning suburban community.

The distinctively American – which is also to say insular – aspects of Ice Cream Social were very much in evidence when Robbins staged his most recent version of the event at the Des Moines Art Center in Des Moines, Iowa. One of his first ideas was to accompany the event with a brief scene, performed by local actors, from his upcoming *Ice Cream Social* screenplay in which First Lady Dolly Madison hosts a party for both American and European aristocrats in the White House. In the course of the scene, her American guests end up defending an inclusive and tolerant society based on the equality of pleasures, while the Europeans, clearly out-argued, resist the idea. This preliminary idea was soon replaced by another theatrical performance, based on the book chapter reprinted here, in which the formation of a community is played out in a more neutral way. Yet signifiers of American life with its blithe artificiality and quaintly surreal

qualities were still present in the event – in such details as brochures printed with P. T. Barnum fonts and commemorative U.S. flag refrigerator magnets as well as in the setting: the Midwestern modernism of the Des Moines Art Center’s lobby. The event, which was conceived to have a “TV” feel, took place at the end of a politically heated week of European protests against the G8 Summit in Geneva and global protests against the Bechtel Corporation’s interests in Iraq. Most of this was in no way present in the air at during the Ice Cream Social or for that matter in the representative American city where it took place. Hence the epigraph for this essay, “Let be be finale of seem,” from Wallace Stevens’ *Emperor of Ice Cream*, a poem about the lusty celebrations at a wake, may be an apt motto not only for Robbins’ Ice Cream Social but also for a culture that filters its experiences (including death) and carries for its actions (including empire building) under the sign of comedy. The “seeming” in question, though often in sharp contrast to the reality of the world we inhabit is at least secured overtly and honestly by our best artists – in Stevens by fiat and in Robbins by an evidently constructed and boldly artificial drama.

The difference between the relation aesthetic as Robbins practices it and the practices that early achieved international recognition may be characterized as a difference between something that bears the not-so-ordinary stamp of comedy in a world-wide context versus something that must negotiate a much more treacherous course through a mainstream ideology in America that informs our television, marketing, and (more generally) business culture. Keeping one’s head in the latter context is not far from alligator wrestling, and it is something that Robbins does with great skill. His Ice Cream Social inhabits American culture like a virus, twisting its components in surprising ways so that the most patriotic iconography – including flags – ends up being deployed in a way that makes it hard to distinguish between patriotism and backhanded homage. Perhaps the challenge presented by a very powerful mainstream explains why Robbins’ Ice

Cream Social, arguably the defining American relational work, comes to critical attention so late, while its existence at all is secured by its sophistication as well as its relatively un-naive approach to the ideals of the global village.

¹ Bennett Simpson, "Specific Spectacles: Art & Entertainment," *Artext* no. 71 (November 2000-December 2001): 70-77.

² Robbins appears to have developed his practice independently and without being aware of or influenced by comparable work by other artists.

³ Comedy is central to Robbins thinking about contemporary art and to his own art practice. He has identified and explored an area that he identifies as "concrete comedy," which will form the subject of an upcoming book-length study.