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Rancourt/Yatsuk

KATE WERBLE GALLERY



Rancourt/Yatsuk, *Black Diamond*, 2011.
Performance view, October 27, 2011. Buddy Budansky (Justin Rancourt).

The commodity promises so very much. It beats a drum of necessity—fulfilling real requirements for food, housing, and clothing—yet it sings a cloying song of desires beyond need, converting ineffable longings into cold, hard cash on the barrelhead. Justin Rancourt and Chuck Yatsuk's recent performances, including the ninety-minute live action *Black Diamond*, 2011, explore the commodity's interpellation of subjects as buyers, probing the gap between its claims of pleasure and contentment and the struggle to find an identity outside of consumption. The show is about a pyramid scheme and its cast of huckster salesmen (con artists, really). Rancourt and Yatsuk enact roles of slick and not-so-slick promoters of a multilevel marketing scheme—the business model associated with Tupperware or neighborhood Avon cosmetics sales parties—that hawks "Omega Club Amazon Blend" açai drinks that will change your life and make you rich beyond your wildest imaginings. It's an appropriate time to give audience members a lesson in the mechanics of manipulation; just a few blocks downtown, the protesters at Occupy Wall Street have been attempting to pull away the veil of neoliberalism's hypnotic suggestion that if you fail in this economy, it's your own damn fault.

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For the past several years, the duo have staged similar performances and installations about capitalism's compulsion to make a quick buck and ride the wave of boom times, riptide of the bust be damned. In a previous work, *Phase IV*, 2008–2009, they drew on the history of predatory real estate speculators in their native Florida, building a version of a cheapo tract model home at Art in General in Manhattan (full disclosure: I invited them) and populating it with a down-on-his-heels real estate shark and his cost-cutting construction crew. The model home had all the amenities of a brand-new tract house, but the perks were all facade—the sales office for the tract was outfitted with fake marble and chintzy plastic fixtures, while the back area was a deteriorated shamble covered in ripped plastic tarps bordering a swamp. Likewise, in 2010 they staged a series of performances, also at Kate Werble Gallery, about self-help speakers and the subgenre of management workshops that use mantric repetition and hypnosis to compel clients to “direct-response” action (e.g., “Write the check NOW!”).

Their performances exhibit scarily persuasive acting, with tag-team patter familiar from all sorts of get-rich-quick audience manipulations, from time-share resort schemes to “going fast” QVC-product sales. *Black Diamond* features a basic rags-to-riches narrative of overcoming personal adversity by internalizing marketing slogans, coupled with a mesmerizing light-and-sound show and hyperbolic testimonials from former losers moving their way up the Ponzi ladder to “Black Diamond” status. The show begins with a meet and greet, the business-suited actors giving confident handshakes and upper-arm squeezes to the assembling “guests” while providing cocktails from a delicious “Amazon Blend” that the audience soon learns has life-altering properties. As the lights dim and audience members take their seats before a projection of a huge rotating diamond casting glittery shards of light through the space, the two artists present a narrative—the story of “you,” first at rock-bottom and broke, then moving through an epiphany of your “unlimited income potential,” and, finally, crowned king of the world when you’re on “the private jet to Bora-Bora.” Rancourt and Yatsuk stage a kind of gonzo aesthetics, an immersive environment that demonstrates the total absorption the culture of the “Omega Club” demands. But beyond immersion lies faith: the blind faith of the desperate ready to believe that self-actualization through financial success is the miracle that will allow them to overcome social determinants such as poverty or a lack of education. Rancourt, as Buddy Budansky, the head promoter/CEO of Omega Club, performs the condescending familiarity of the rich to the plebes, a kind of “Don’t you hate it when your limo is late?” blather of privilege. But Rancourt’s Svengali-like exertions as the charismatic face of the brand, and Yatsuk’s convincing take as a recent convert willing to bet it all to be in the “Omega Family,” reveals just how hard entrepreneurial stratagems in capitalist economies must work to part the poor or the feckless from their cash.

—Eva Díaz

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