

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

The Contagious Retrospective: Q+A with Bernadette Corporation

by [kayla guthrie](#) 09/05/12

Artist collective Bernadette Corporation fuses commercial iconography with an activist attitude. Comprising three core members, Bernadette Van-Huy, John Kelsey and Antek Walczak, BC often enlists collaborators and hired professionals—such as artists, writers, stylists, and photographers—to produce work under their ersatz brand name. Through this combination of group authorship and slick formatting, the collective weaves tales and images of exotic, blank beauty, revealing what results when the usually hidden networks of expertise which create and deliver our culture's dreams and images through the circuits of public media are put in the service of art or poetry, rather than business.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Bernadette Corporation. From the series *Ars Nova*, 2009. Digital inkjet print. Photographer: David Vasiljevic. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery ; Clothing and styling: Bernadette Corporation. Photographer: Cris Moor ;

Since its inception in 1994, BC has created an eponymous women's wear label operating in New York between 1995 and 1998; a fashion magazine, *Made in USA*, featuring interviews, letters, and poems; films (*Get Rid of Yourself*, *Pedestrian Cinema*, *The BC Corporate Story*) a novel (*Reena Spaulings*, Semiotext(e)/Native Agents, 2005); and a screenplay (*Eine Pinot Grigio*, *Bitte*, Sternberg Press, 2007). Throughout these seemingly disparate projects the artists link youth culture, urbanism, direct action protest, and economic disparity in a hallucinatory fashionable vision.

All three artists sat down with *A.i.A.* earlier this summer, as preparations began for "2000 Wasted Years," their retrospective opening Sept. 8 at Artists Space. The showcase seems both premature and long overdue for BC's still emerging, ever-morphing practice.

KAYLA GUTHRIE How did the Bernadette Corporation retrospective come about?

BERNADETTE CORPORATION It was [Artists Space director and curator] Stefan Kalmár's idea. It was proposed to us. It was first mentioned about a year ago, but we just started working on it.

GUTHRIE Without revealing too much, what can you say about your plans for displaying works? I heard you were inspired by flagship stores.

BC That was an older idea. The new idea is more like an immersive PDF or something like that. We're working with a designer, which we've never done before. Right now, as we speak, he's coming up with a design proposal for the show. We gave him some input about the content and our basic concept about how to mediate it here, and now we're just waiting to see what he comes up with.

GUTHRIE Your practice has been described as "trying to approach what is most open in an event." What are these "most open" places in the "event" of an exhibition?

BC Do you mean an exhibition as an event?

GUTHRIE Or as a site, perhaps.

BC I don't see anything open about an exhibition site, that's sort of taking things too abstractly... But this is the first time Bernadette Corporation has ever been treated historically, so there's a kind of opening. We're still trying to find a way of presenting ourselves as an historical entity, and considering how much of us can and can't be captured in a retrospective image.

GUTHRIE A lot of your work involves the idea of youth. A retrospective, since it traditionally marks the completion of an early stage in an artist's career, seems to "out" BC definitively as artists, who age and mature, rather than a fashion company, or other faceless brand which could remain forever young.

BC That's the main thing we're trying to work out: what our attitude toward a retrospective should be and how much effort it will take to escape the trap of it. For us, it's just another way of making a new image.

GUTHRIE Do you have special events, new products, or collaborations planned?

BC Nothing confirmed. We haven't really been making new work, so much as finding new ways of presenting old work. But that's new work too, I guess.

Getting back briefly to your previous question about the openness of an exhibition, one thing you could say is maybe we share a kind of attitude with Green Day.

GUTHRIE The band?

BC Yeah. In the sense that we don't care if we piss off die-hard fans who might say that we're going into the maws of commercialism, identity and fixedness. Green Day notoriously played a show, after they had decided to embrace pop punk, at a DIY space in Oakland, and got bottles thrown at them. We're not afraid of that; we're kind of into that. The fact that they went on to do something on Broadway is actually impressive. So, that's another response to the question of what the difference is from the past to now, and what it means to be under the microscope. Because the process is not only about dealing with our history, it's also even

things like doing interviews, which we haven't done before. Well, not like this.

GUTHRIE You're drawing parallels between the process of staging a retrospective, and Green Day's shift from a select audience to a wider public. It seems that the re-staging of your past work essentially involves a shift in your identity as artists—which, in the past, has been tightly controlled by yourselves in the various statements, texts and articles issued by the group. I'm curious about how this discourse you created relates to the exhibition title, "2000 Wasted Years"?

BC It's from the title of a [Bernadette Corporation] text written in the late '90s for *Purple Prose*, something that was a kind of founding text of BC, or one of the first texts coming out of BC, anyway. I think the full title was "Corporate Responsibility And The Swine We Are, 2000 Wasted Years." The millennium was coming up around then and everybody was thinking about it.

GUTHRIE When your work is written about, words and phrases come up such as opacity, whatever, ambivalence, vagueness, haphazard, flexibility, and slipperiness of intent. I was wondering if you might possibly brainstorm or list some words that would describe BC's intentions, or how you see your intentions today.

BC It's hard to speak about our intentions at this moment because we're not planning anything for the future. I think in the past, those words were part of our intentions. They're tied to this discourse that was being produced by Bernadette Corporation, or which we were involved with, in the early 2000s. If anything, those were words that were floated by us and then taken up. Maybe this is the place to take up the question of how does that work and how do things change? Already this exhibition is going in a direction different from what those words mean.

GUTHRIE Could we talk about your Pedestrian Cinema project? It's been described as your way of transitioning to galleries, and I'm curious about how you think it failed, as you say, or how you, revisited the claim of Godard, who "discovered that cinema was dead."

BC It still isn't finished, that project. A screenplay came out of it, which was published.

GUTHRIE *Eine Pinot Grigio, Bitte* [Sternberg Press, 2007], right? So it was a productive failure.

BC Well, the film never got made. No one bought it.

GUTHRIE The description of your 2003 film *Get Rid of Yourself* explains that it makes use of "seductive contagion" in its method of presentation. Do you care to describe or discuss the character of seductive contagion?

BC That's an idea that came out of Black Bloc anarchism, which was about social contagion techniques, like riot-style techniques as a kind of viral behavior.

GUTHRIE Contagion is a technical term, then?

BC I remember hearing the word "contagion" a lot in France. The opposite of that is purity, and perhaps one thing that Bernadette Corporation has consistently been against is certain ideas of purity, especially aesthetic purity. You see this happen frequently in places, for example, like the art world, which is quite heterogeneous and everything's got its own place, but with everybody in their places. Styles are defined by purity, maybe it's a particular way of handling material, say, or references and so forth. And contagion is, in a sense, the opposite of that purity. Perhaps the way we were hearing that term thrown around back at that time, in the early 2000s and during the [G8 Global Summit], was also against a purity in the mentality of the anarchists, who'd claim that anti-capitalism is this way, this way, this way, and this way, which makes it into a rather fixed, static notion. We were always interested in breaking that in some way.

Green Day, too, were against that kind of purity. "Seductive contagion," then, is the attitude that, well, in spite of all the rigid definitions in your aesthetic world that you've used to make this life bearable, you could maybe see going over into the opposite territory.

GUTHRIE That seems like a pretty lonely place to be, where Green Day is.

BC I don't know, they're probably in the Bahamas right now. Or wait, maybe it's not the right season for the Bahamas. Wait, Access Hollywood is a lonely place?

GUTHRIE It could be! Speaking of anarchism and direct action protest, that touches on the theme of chaos which one could say runs through all of your work. What is your current thinking on chaos or risk? How might it factor into your brand strategy, as it were?

BC I think we let it seep in. We don't try to fortify ourselves or our positions. By not fortifying, we stay open to it.