

# ART CLUB2000

## Selected Works 1992–1999

18.09.2021–16.01.2022

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“Art Club2000, an artists’ collective active during the 1990s, was made up of eight enterprising art school undergraduates: Craig Wadlin, Soibian Spring, Sarah Rossiter, William Rollins, Shannon Pultz, Danny McDonald, Gillian Haratani and Patterson Beckwith, who made art and produced exhibitions – two activities they understood as having separate implications. When the group began they were studying at the Cooper Union – a tuition-free institution in New York’s East Village – with teachers such as Hans Haacke and Mark Dion, meaning that although the members were exposed to the extreme capitalism of the city, they were also allowed enough distance to appreciate its effects. Art Club2000, with its precocity, became a unique clash of commodity fetishism and institutional critique.”

Jackie McAllister (*Afterall* 22, 2009)

ART CLUB2000 *Selected Works 1992-1999* is the first comprehensive presentation of the legendary New York collective ART CLUB2000 (or AC2K), founded in 1992. Developed by Artists Space in New York and exhibited there last year, the exhibition now unites AC2K’s entire production and conception of art for the first time in Europe. Although few people viewed them at the time, their exhibitions are now considered legendary and avant-garde. Instead of committing themselves to pursuing individual careers, or branding and pigeonholing themselves, AC2K pursued an anti-capitalist art that remained fluid, political and activist, yet equally funny, sincere, outrageous and caustic.

Between 1992 and 1999, AC2K developed an oeuvre that is not made up of individual works – in the sense of a collection of artworks. It consists, as succinct and banal as it may sound, of exhibitions. AC2K used the medium of the exhibition to address, criticise and parody the role of the artist, social changes, real estate development and their own conflicted relations to contemporary life. The result was a portrait of a time of upheaval and an increasingly gentrifying art world.

As both observers and participants they made experiences visible that soon proved to be radical and global: namely, the sense of living in a time in which everything is ceaselessly commercialised and further exploited; the feeling that in a matter of seconds everything authentically creative is transformed into a product and an advertising message; and that every gesture, no matter how radically conceived, immediately dissolves in the maelstrom of irony and gain and is only read as an opportunity to increase profit. It was a development that rapidly became visible in Europe as well. This was particularly obvious in the case of Oliviero Toscani’s advertising campaign for United Colors of Benetton. His infamous advertising campaign led to heated discussions and endless debates about ethics, commerce and aesthetics. The city of New York and the art world in particular took on a leading role in this regard and became a symbol and a case study of how everything was inexorably being transformed into commodity values: buildings, streets and neighbourhoods. AC2K celebrated these circumstances and rebelled against them without being able or willing to escape the toxic ambivalence of the new, gentrified world order. There was (apparently) no outside anymore, art was a mass product like Gap clothing, the artists were perceived as competitive producers as art mutated into a «practice».

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AC2K thus traced developments in which they themselves were entangled. Their exhibitions spoke of being young (the members were in their early 20s at the formation of the group) and of the search for artistic identity, of shared authorship, possible alternatives and the behaviour of their own generation, Generation X. They addressed peer and milieu pressure, self-exploitative marketing, the cult of youth and youth culture and the pleasure of (increasingly difficult) subversion.

AC2K's project began in 1992 with a series of meetings and discussions initiated by legendary and unpredictable art dealer Colin de Land, leading to their first exhibition in 1993 at his New York gallery American Fine Arts, Co. With his oversight, support and input the members of AC2K began to develop and realise annual exhibitions. After the first (of seven) exhibitions at American Fine Arts, Co. in 1993, ART CLUB2000 was chosen as the group's official name. Inherent in the moniker was an announcement of its own demise, the promise to disband at the turn of the millennium. The determination to make art and develop everything together was primary to the process. The principle of cooperation pre-empted any aspiration or desire to make «one's own» art. Thus, the exhibitions became unruly and often theatrical structures in which the most diverse aesthetic and critical approaches came into play and were tested. This determined the choices of media (photography, video, performance, sculpture, journalism and mural painting), but also artistic genres and language. One thus encounters documentary films, research projects, forays into journalism and «garbology», murals, installation art and sculpture, appropriation and interior design interventions such as the imitation of a Gap store. This desire to experiment led the group to address issues that are still urgent today: examining identity, seeking a common social and political position, self-determination (or not) and the desire for a bohemian lifestyle.

The Exhibition:

ART CLUB2000 *Selected Works 1992-1999* unites nine exhibitions and an archive.

*Commingle*

American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1993

*Commingle* (1993) is in part a remake of a Gap shop and its merchandising and display aesthetic. The point of departure is the then contemporary marketing of youthful lifestyles by the American clothing chain Gap Inc. This appeared in part through the advertising campaign «Individuals of Style». Star photographers like Annie Leibovitz and Steven Meisel portrayed a who's-who of the art and culture world in highly styled black and white images: Spike Lee, Joan Didion, William Burroughs, Madonna, Anthony Kiedis, Jim Dine and the gallery owner Leo Castelli. Suddenly, artists who until recently had been considered antisocial outsiders were the centre of attention in the service of a multinational brand. The advertising was concomitant to the opening of a Gap shop in 1988 on St. Mark's Place, in the then still disreputable (and artist-inhabited) East Village. «Individuals of Style» interwove art, advertising and commerce for all to see – to gentrify a Manhattan neighbourhood. The Gap's target clientele was the demographic to which the members of AC2K belonged, and this is precisely what *Commingle* addresses in an affirmative, ambivalent and parodic manner.

For the photo series realised for *Commingle*, AC2K went to the Gap, stocked up on clothes and photographed themselves in matching Gap looks at various iconic locations in New York: in Times Square, in bed at the Paramount Hotel

designed by Ian Schrager and Philippe Starck, in a Conran furniture shop, having a pyjama party at the Angelika Film Center, in the *Art in America* library or in a '90s coffee shop. When the work was completed, they brought the clothes back to the Gap availing themselves of the company's no-hassle return policy. In *Commingle*, AC2K appropriated the Gap's culture and, in DIY style, played out the message that the Gap sent its customers: absolute individuality (being an artist) while simultaneously maintaining a collective attitude to life. In short, artistic freedom is combined with market conformity and staged authenticity to increase sales and profits. In their attempts to investigate the Gap's corporate culture, they applied for jobs there and went to libraries, but ran into dead ends at both. In order to learn more about the Gap, AC2K finally employed the research methods of garbology. They went fishing in the company's rubbish containers for paperwork that they then exhibited: employee handbooks with instructions on how to prevent shoplifting; job applications; customer service logs and sales reports; as well as unpublished information on company activities. *Commingle* was and is an apt and caustic portrait of a moment – and as an exhibition it described another important development: that exhibitions and museums, be they in galleries, MoMA or any Kunstmuseum, increasingly resembled commercial stores.

The *Commingle* exhibition was preceded by an imitation Gap ad featuring a portrait of gallery owner and AC2K mentor Colin de Land, shot in the «Individuals of Style» manner. After the publication of this ad in the American art magazine *Artforum*, Gap Inc. faxed a cease-and-desist letter to American Fine Arts, Co. and threatened to sue – gaining AC2K attention and press.

### *Clear*

American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1994

The second exhibition, *Clear* (1994), further explored the interweaving of fashion, identity, art and branding. When *Vogue* staged a fashion shoot in their art school's painting studios, they picked up on the trend and started photographing themselves in the minimal and functional Bauhaus-inspired interiors of Cooper Union. Here the cool minimalism of the «supermodel» era met young artists' alternative punk and grunge styles, to suck the blood of energy and credibility – and make the students proud at the same time. For the *Clear* exhibition, the gallery walls were painted in green screen and blue screen chromakey tones. These colours are used in film and television to retroactively insert any conceivable background: weather maps, action scenes, disasters or street cred and authenticity, such as the «art school» background. In the 1990s, the feeling grew that everything was mere surface, as content became just another form of packaging (or background). In another gesture of protest (and recycling) the members demolished the entrance wall in the gallery on which they placed the words Art Club2000. A miniature drum kit, also emblazoned with «Art Club 2000,» was placed under a spotlight in a small room by itself in reference, homage and remembrance of commercialised indie rock culture, as well as antecedent British «pose band» artists of the 1970s.

### *Night in the City*

American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1995

1995's *Night in the City* was staged in a low-rent museum-like style. The walls were beige and the photographs were framed in a classic, timeless manner, shot in the style of famous images of New York by Alfred Stieglitz, Berenice Abbott, Weegee and Roy DeCarava. In these black and white images, AC2K continued

the tradition of New York street photography to document various contemporary urban settings, including street trash outside a Starbucks, skateboarders at the Astor Place Cube, the Scharf Schak, a cyber cafe, people in line outside the cinema to see Larry Clark and Harmony Korine's film *Kids*, or an «I ♥ New York» paper coffee cup. With *Night in the City*, AC2K began to recycle their own history as artists, producers and curators. This is how postmodernism had played it and how the fashion and music industries were currently parsing the trope: the revival of the revival of the revival. The song *Institutionalised* by thrash metal band Suicidal Tendencies (not exhibited here in Zürich) played at the push of a button.

*Kaputtmachen in Graz*  
Grazer Kunstverein, Graz, 1994

After the first show at American Fine Arts, Co. attracted significant attention, AC2K was invited to exhibit internationally, starting in 1994. Removed from their local context and without the active participation of de Land, the group entered a critical phase of experimentation and self-discovery. For the group exhibition *Esprit d'Amusement* at the Grazer Kunstverein, the collective produced *Kaputtmachen in Graz*, a large-scale photograph of themselves in a trashed hotel room. The scene shows the members as if they were a grunge band on tour. *Kaputtmachen in Graz* referred to a press image of actor Johnny Depp in handcuffs, after his arrest for vandalising a hotel room in New York's luxury The Mark Hotel (where he had been staying with Kate Moss). The collective pose here in Johnny-Depp-as-grunge style was meant to parody the expectations a European audience might have of an *Artforum*-hyped group of young artists: hip, cool, New York artists are coming to Graz! A CD player ran an endless loop of German pop music.

*Jackie McAllister*  
Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, 1995

AC2K continued their play with expectations, clichés and artistic identity in 1995 with *Jackie McAllister* at Transmission Gallery, an independent artist-run exhibition space in Glasgow. For *Jackie McAllister*, the collective adopted the role of artist-curator and conceived the exhibition as an illustration of Jackie McAllister's life and art. The Scottish-American artist lived in New York City and was a close collaborator and friend of both AC2K and Colin de Land. AC2K brought original artworks by McAllister to Glasgow, as well as slides and documentation of his work, a selection of his books, a work by Martin Kippenberger from his collection (a signed box of Scottish biscuits) and two Super 8 films. One film featured McAllister in New York City talking about his work and youth in Glasgow, the other featured an interview with fellow Glasgow artist Douglas Gordon. The McAllister clan tartan and McAllister's signature were painted on the entry wall in large black letters.

*Working!*  
Forde, Geneva, 1995

The exhibition *Working!* took place in 1995 in the artist-run space Forde in Geneva. It consisted of an office environment with a table, office chairs, wall paintings, a coffee machine and a video monitor with a stuffed seagull perched on top. The collective produced a video in which members of Forde described the invisible and occasionally absurd labour that supported their artistic and curatorial

endeavours. They each recounted their entire job histories while feeding stale bread to swans. This was accompanied by a selection of photographs showing the New York working environments of AC2K members and their friends, from Dia Art Foundation to the offices of the magazine *Art in America* and the Bowery Bar. The exhibition became an ambivalent and sobering commentary on the working conditions of artists, their dependence on part-time jobs and the simultaneous professionalisation of life as an artist.

*SoHo So Long*

American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1996

With *SoHo So Long*, AC2K pushed their journalistic, documentary approach further to interrogate profound and lasting urban transformation caused by the art economy. The exhibition was dedicated to documenting the changing economic conditions that led galleries to move from the increasingly unaffordable SoHo neighbourhood to under-developed Chelsea. To highlight this change, the collective conducted 27 interviews with New York City gallery owners, critics and collectors, which they then published in a simple photocopied book. A large light box à la Jeff Wall or Mariko Mori contained a photo featuring prominent art dealers such as Matthew Marks, Pat Hearn and Carol Greene who would soon set the tone for the New York art world. Like an improvised waiting room, vending machines and cheap furniture were placed in the space so that the visitors could read the interviews while sitting down. This arrangement was supplemented and expanded with «leftovers» from SoHo. These included an ersatz replica of the legendary Scharf Schak (Kenny Scharf's art kiosk\* in Soho), covered-up windows announcing the imminent arrival of a fictitious Old Navy shop, labelled planter boxes inspired by The Drawing Center (an established SoHo art institution across the street) and a sandwich board that read «STOP (On In While Staying At) THE MEGA HOTEL», a parody of contemporaneous «N.I.M.B.Y.» protests about the large new Soho Grand Hotel by wealthy local loft-dwellers.

\*«And a shack is just what it's called: the Scharf Shack. It's the latest endeavor of the artist Kenny Scharf. As a member of the 1980's East Village gang that included such characters as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mr. Scharf has always blurred the line between art and collectibles in his work. The shack sells everything from t-shirts (\$18) and postcards (50 cents) to Swatch watches (\$80) and backpacks featuring the faces of Mr. Scharf's well-known cast of Jetson-like characters (\$45).» (Carol Vogel, *The New York Times*, 4 August 1995)

*1970*

American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1997

*1970* further investigated a «disappearing» New York City and especially the myth that artists somehow always survive, that crass professionalisation will not harm them and that their survival is divorced from the difficult search for housing, work and studios. To this end, AC2K researched and excavated the city's art life and the legendary forms it took in 1970. The group conducted video interviews with a selection of artists who were still active and immediately accessible to them: Alex Katz, Isa Genzken, Henry Flynt, Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, Les Levine, Simon Cerigo, Niki Logis and Olivier Mosset. Each artist was interviewed on the subject of «1970». Their statements were presented as a cacophony of voices on vintage television sets – alluding to *Media Burn*, 1975, by Ant Farm and Nam June Paik's video walls from the Soho loft era. A separate television allowed visitors to watch the interviews individually.

*Night of the Living Dead Author*  
American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1998

In their penultimate exhibition, made in collaboration with their mentor Colin de Land, AC2K explored power and authority: *Night of the Living Dead Author*. They were particularly interested in how power and authority gained legitimacy through repeated, reproducible forms. The decade was drawing to a close and Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, intensified his repressive campaign for more «quality of life», enforcing «cabaret laws» banning dancing in bars, raids on nightclubs, displacement of the homeless, criminalisation of petty offences such as drinking in public, subway fare evasion, etc. In collective conversations and discussions, the members of AC2K fell upon the question: «What is a cop?» This resulted in a phalanx of eight identical life-size cardboard policemen looking at the viewer with red LED eyes and wearing sashes with the text «PUNISHING ENFORCER OF AN OPPRESSIVE REGIME». Adjacent ran a red LED ticker sign, Jenny Holzer style, the text commenting in a laconic, critical manner on the work of contemporary artists including Sherrie Levine, Vanessa Beecroft, Matthew Barney, Mark Dion and ART CLUB2000 itself. Two Mies van der Rohe stools, placed in front for viewers, were borrowed from Leo Castelli's gallery, to signify success, museality and authority. *Night of the Living Dead Author* embodied criticism of posturing critique and was flooded with the sounds of teeth-gnashing and groaning zombies as if it were a chamber of horrors.

*Milanarian*  
Galleria Facsimilie, Milan, 1995

For the *Milanarian* exhibition at Galleria Facsimile in Milan, AC2K produced *Gli Avvoltoi* (The Vultures, 1995), a mural in response to Silvio Berlusconi's first campaign for election as Prime Minister. His eventual victory was in part the result of a massive advertising offensive set in motion through his media empire. The mural shows a dense tangle of television aerials, a motif that originated in an advertisement for United Colors of Benetton that ran during Berlusconi's campaign. Displayed throughout Italy, this image referred to the intertwining of politics, advertising and business. Cartoon vultures from Disney's *The Jungle Book*, scavengers and symbols of decay, shit in Benetton brand green from above and on the antennae. From their beaks emerge speech bubbles with numbers referring to statements on the spectacle by Guy Debord, Lucy Lippard and others. In *Milanarian*, AC2K illustrated the complicity between spectacle and politics, commerce and art making, critical theory, activism and marketing.

*1999, A Retrodisrespective*  
American Fine Arts, Co., New York City, 1999

This exhibition is not on display here at Kunsthalle Zürich. It was the last exhibition before the collective's dissolution and the final step towards self-immolation. In the form of a salon hang (or carefully arranged rubbish heap), *1999, A Retrodisrespective* brought together all the collective's efforts since 1992. At Artists Space in New York City, an extensive selection of documents from the AC2K archive was shown in place of *1999, A Retrodisrespective*, and this is now on display at Kunsthalle Zürich. These ephemera, props, correspondence, photographs, documentation and research material are intended to further illustrate AC2K's methods, exhibition practice and collective authorship.

With warm thanks to all the artists of ART CLUB2000 and Jay Sanders and Stella Cilman of Artists Space, New York City.

This text is based on the exhibition guide from Artists Space, New York.

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed

Family afternoons: 24 October, 7 November, 21 November, 5 December and 16 January. With kids, teens and families we explore the exhibition in a playful way. These family workshops take place between 3–5pm.

Exhibition tours most Thursday evenings at 6pm, see Kunsthalle Zürich website for details.

Please consult our website for up-to-date information on events and workshops: [www.kunsthallezurich.ch](http://www.kunsthallezurich.ch)

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