



JACOB GALLAGHER-ROSS

## BABES IN THE WOODS

### *Big Art Group's* SOS

The financial catastrophe of September 2008 was caused by a crisis of representation. As the new century's housing bubble inflated, replacing the 1990s infotech boom, mortgage-backed securities traded at ludicrous prices reflecting irrational exuberance, rather than real-world worth. Speculators bet on the ahistorical assumption that real estate prices would rise forever. Compounding this promiscuous abstraction, vertiginously leveraged banks were borrowing and investing with massive sums only tangentially related to amounts on deposit. Monetary systems already vaporous enough melted further into the air; signifiers of value peeled away from their signifieds; signs of economic worth fled far from economic meaning. Even at the time of this writing, in fall 2009, some financial institutions remain uncertain how much money they actually lost—their account books slowly poisoned from within by toxic assets.

Presented at New York's the Kitchen in March 2009, as the aftermath of the credit cataclysm continued to convulse the nation, Big Art Group's *SOS* stages the theatrical equivalent of the financial crisis, a conflagration of the society of spectacles. The housing bubble, the company suggests, was a symptom of a more dangerous, and ongoing, process of inflation. *SOS* depicts an unmoored culture in which signs can only be exchanged for other signs, every radical gesture is already a marketing strategy, and "realness" is a value that arrives prepackaged for sale. Big Art Group suggests that, in addition to its gapped balance sheets, today's America also has a reality deficit, an addiction to ever-increasing levels of abstraction. *SOS* revs America's culture of headlong consumption to fever pitch, suggesting that renewal is possible only through destruction (the company has said on their Web site that the piece is their version of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*: a ritual of revival through sacrifice).

The set for *SOS* resembles a television studio, ready for broadcasting. In the foreground, a row of video cameras faces the stage—standing between the actors and the audience—surrounded by white light deflectors on tripods, neutral studio backdrops, and miscellaneous props. Taped sightlines traverse the floor. Video projectors hum in

Big Art Group's *SOS*,  
New York, 2009.  
Photo:  
Caden Manson



*SOS*, New York,  
2009. Photo:  
Dan Hansell

the foreground. An imposing array of screens—six huge blank rectangles—crowds the stage. Throughout the piece, the screens display constant visual counterpoint: live-feed footage from the onstage action, doctored video sequences that place the actors in a range of cinematic situations from car chases to “Third World” garbage dumps, and an overpowering sound-and-light show that mixes advertising jargon with radical political sloganeering in pulsing neon colors.

*SOS* cuts between two main plotlines. In the first, actors in cuddly stuffed-animal costumes—a wolf, a bear, a deer, a rabbit, a raccoon—wander terrified through the woods trying to find their way home (they look like fugitives from a theme park). The plush suits are mounted with tiny video cameras on slim, protruding metallic arms, strange appendages that send shaky pseudo-documentary images of the actors’ fearful faces, peeping out beneath furry headpieces, to the screens overhead. (Since *The Blair Witch Project*, this ruse has become a commonplace of cinematic “authenticity”—grainy footage, sloppy camera angles, and flashlight illumination, as signs of fidelity to reality.)

These beasts are denatured, they’ve forgotten how to survive in the wild, or even what wilderness looks and smells like; exclaiming their terror in deliberately saccharine squeals, they’re unable to locate water, don’t know how to find food. The predicament of the hapless fur balls is uncomfortably close to that of any American consumer—we buy shrink-wrapped organic produce in sterile grocery emporiums without any awareness of its origin or the labor involved in growing it, paying with credit cards that tally

personal debt in the memory banks of distant Web servers. Here and elsewhere, the company's satire is also autobiography: if we had to forage for ourselves, most of us would starve. Here the company also mocks the perennial American desire to return to nature—a reflexive response to a lifestyle divorced from it—whether by eating locally grown food or living off the land in a survivalist camp. The longing for the natural world, for wholeness, unity with unmediated woodsy authenticity, is rendered as fuzzy kitsch, impossible to conceive of except in cartoon clichés—ecology has been Disneyfied. In a posteverything society, *SOS* suggests, we can think of “nature” only in sentimentalized commodity terms.

Things go from bad to worse in this Hanna-Barbera–Hobbesian state of nature: the Raccoon freezes to death, the Deer and the Wolf engage in some s&M–inflected predator-prey role-playing—interspecies carnality tinged with violence. As the motley pack's hysteria reaches paranoid heights, they collectively eviscerate the Rabbit in an eerie sacrificial ritual, hoping to divine the correct route home in her spilled guts: “Tell us where to go, show us the way out of here!” the Deer shrieks to the Rabbit's exposed intestines. The carnivore-versus-herbivore dynamic of these sections recalls the disastrous symbiosis of high-risk borrowers and ruthless lenders that fed the economic crisis—the sparring competition between creatures as they jockey to lead the pack resembles the harsh Darwinian ethos of American capitalism's food chain.

In the piece's second plot, a group of commando makeover artists in jumped-up drag called the “realness liberation front” prepare a revolution that is also a reality television show called “*Realness*.”<sup>®</sup> In their television studio–cum-laboratory, the vamp guerrillas—clad in trash-glamorous versions of revolutionary chic, RuPaul meets FARC—race, in caffeinated succession, through the entire repertoire of film and television's plotlines, as though trying to exhaust the library of mass entertainment. “FAMILY DRAMA KITCHEN SINK” or “ROMANTIC COMEDY HAIR SALON” proclaim the projected captions that introduce each satiric sequence; the actors offer the sketchiest outline of a tried-and-tested scenario—squalling kids in a car, hunting mutants in a postapocalyptic wasteland—relying on their media-savvy audience to fill in the associative gaps. Laying familiar plots and genres end to end, *SOS* points out how the mass media, taken together, create a comprehensive copy of reality, a virtual *gesamtkunstwerk*; our society has a filmic corollary, a prefabricated point of reference, for every situation, experience, and emotion. Revolution, meanwhile, has been so entirely commodified that every possible piece of oppositional rhetoric has probably already been used to sell cars, and new products promise new identities in the language of radical social transformation. At several points in the piece, projections of insurrectionary political statements alternate with advertising-type blandishments in garishly colored type that moves so inassimilably fast that the differing discourses smear together—becoming visually as well as rhetorically indistinguishable. The grafting together of campy bitchiness (à la *What Not to Wear*) with radical sloganeering reminds us that omniverous capitalism is capable of devouring any oppositional stance. Camp, once a way of maintaining distance

from commodity culture by ironically appreciating its discarded junk, has become just another way to consume—ratifying where it once lampooned.

In between the cuddly creatures and the preening partisans, brief interstitial sequences pit two motormouthed superconsumers against each other in a hipness contest that reveals how deeply the languages and values of advertising and corporate culture have penetrated American life and speech. Capitalism has sunk to the molecular level, infiltrated our DNA. They brandish outlandish objects—brand-new, essential consumer products!—as live-capture camera work inserts them into swirling parody ad-landscapes onscreen, like glossy photo spreads set in motion. Hot dogs and hamburgers rotate around their heads in psychedelic orbits, and nachos assume a hallucinatory vividness, as the two pose, grin, and wink like good spokesmodels. Their delirious discourse is replete with deformed brand identities and strange conjunctions of matter and marketing:

I want designer high fashion ultra luxury label everything! I want all my cells in my body to be replaced by a fashion house mega-merger branded bone graft spinal plasma replacement designed by the new winner of USAmerica's Next Top Project Super Runway Chef! I wanna have genetic therapy and my fancy parts expressed by genes from Dolce and Rihanna and melamine pigmentation by Chanel and hair pattern baldness in ringworm effect by Vidal Fructis and hangnail scurvy by L'Oreo and body hair doormats by Calvin Kors Ford for the House of Evil Saint Le Wrong.

Being in at the beginning of the latest consumer trend is to be united with the forward rush of capitalist culture, in sync with the mutating zeitgeist; new products do not serve desires or experiences, they are the only means to create them. The pair are so thoroughly plugged in that contemplating disconnecting from pop culture's closed circuits induces unfathomable panic. These talking heads long to be swept up and sublimated into pure, bodiless representation, to have fashion and pop culture grafted into their very flesh and bone. Breathlessly anticipating each fresh lifestyle augmentation, the characters are lost in a history-less, context-less, continuous present. In one of the production's most discomfitingly indelible scenes, the filming of a music video—one of pop culture's basic units of exchange—becomes a sinister spectacle of desubstantiation, as the fleshly performer before us, fetchingly cross-clad in windblown red dress and blond curls, seems to vanish into the flat perfection of the processed image projected above, his voice filtered and harmonized with the booming electronic track beneath it.

The constant displacement of the actors' presence—they are here before us, there on one or several screens, their voices everywhere in the theater's wraparound sound rig—is actually a form of realism for an age when most of us, willingly or not, lead life on parallel tracks. Even if you don't deliberately dabble in the Internet's more extreme versions of secondary existence, pictures of the party you went to the other night will very likely appear the next morning on Facebook. Amazon.com keeps a running record





of your buying habits, and sometimes offers surprisingly apt suggestions for further reading. But these Web representations can shape reality in surprising ways. You find that your memories of the party are suddenly refracted through Facebook's pictorial record; you buy the book you didn't know you wanted from Amazon.

Most of the objects of *SOS*'s social satire are familiar—we are accustomed to lamenting the vapidness of mass culture and the voracious profit motives of late capitalism. What is startling and revelatory about the piece is the velocity and virtuosity of the actors' delivery, and the overwhelming sensory surfeit of every onstage moment, as live-feed projections race around the umpteen screens, neon slogans flash in lurid alternating colors—electric blue, livid yellow—and electronically enlarged sounds thrum and roar. Even as *SOS* lampoons the stimulation glut of media culture, it also delivers similar rewards, ravishing the senses with light, color, and sound. All the guilty pleasures of the gaudy apparatus of consumer culture are temporarily divorced from mercantile ends and rendered as a delicious kaleidoscope of gratuitous sensation. Working against this technical razzle-dazzle are the deliberately amateurish methods employed to construct the Realness Liberation Front's media scenarios. Onscreen, a particular setting—the garbage dump, for example—looks convincing enough, especially with the characters digitally superimposed over it. But the sight of an actor holding up a tatty cardboard backdrop to the camera, exposing the slapdash means of production, immediately vitiates the filmic fiction.

*SOS*, Montreal,  
2009. Photo:  
Caden Manson

Because there is always too much to see and hear, spectators are forced to select their stimuli. Should we be directing our attention to the gargantuan eyes, mouth, and hands that the roving cameras have amputated from the performers onstage—scattering them across several screens to create a gargantuan composite figure—or parsing the gap between this grotesque jigsaw effigy and its living source material onstage? The camera wizardry often distracts from the performers' live presences, but this is precisely the point. Just as the company's two addled shopaholics long to be swept up into the utopian world of advertising, our own eyes drift to the false proximity proffered by the flashing screens—we, too, are guilty of preferring slick images to material realities. Similarly, when scintillating projected catchphrases bombard the retina, are we meant to submit the flashing premises to ideological analysis or surrender to the play of visually pleasing hues? This constant category confusion is entirely germane to *SOS*'s amphetamine-paced critique—our overinformed society baffles scrutiny with sensory surfeit, manufacturing consent with easy-to-purchase luxuries. But critical spectatorship can be an art, the piece attests—one with political uses. *SOS* trains its audience in a kind of strategic looking and listening that outwits the informational excess of the event. Tactically tuning out is as important as focusing in; spectators must sort *SOS*'s overabundance of data, building an interpretation based on selective perception. A formalist distance from media culture's constant entreaties, the company suggests, can provide the analytical space necessary for critique.

Onstage, the performers display a mastery over their material that productively countermands the piece's pessimistic vision of a culture pitched to overwhelm. The actors show themselves capable of surfing reams of complicated text, of leaping expertly from live-feed enactment of movie clichés to filming karaoke music videos. Their style of performance suggests a style of political engagement: by mastering media culture's repertoire of emotional and sensory snares, it is possible to preserve ironic distance from capitalism's endless permutations. Pop knowledge can inoculate as well as anaesthetize. (Unlike their peers in the Wooster Group or Nature Theater of Oklahoma, the company does not employ electronic memory—iPods or other digital prompters—to cue their fast-pitched recitations. The piece's difficult text has been mastered by human virtuosity—just as the company demands that its audience pore over *SOS*'s complex artistic structure.)

When the “blackout” hinted at by the two chatterboxes finally arrives, it begins a concluding sequence that turns the show's satirical methods inside out. Instead of presenting sinister versions of familiar cultural objects, stretching irony into grotesquery, the company now uses kitsch materials to create a spectacle that defies any attempt to place it within the comfortable realm of the seen-before—a surprise for even the jaded eyes of the twenty-first-century viewer. Amid a thick fog cut with glaring lights, the actors don full-body costumes made up of hundreds of slender, linked, multicolored balloons—looking like ambulatory trees from some extraterrestrial forest. As they begin

joyously wrestling with each other—causing an aleatory chorus of balloon pops—a nightmarish apparition rears out of the haze. It takes a stunned minute to recognize this chimera as an agglomeration of stitched-together festive inflatables—Frosty the Snowman, Santa Claus, a grinning Halloween skull, and other less-identifiable chunks of air-filled plastic. Weirdly tilting and listing in time with the gusting of a compressed air pump, this Frankenstein’s Monster of kitsch looms amid the actors’ apocalyptic combat, deflating into a heap of lifeless tissue as the battle concludes. Hollow consumer icons have been reduced to a mound of slack rubble.



We have witnessed an eschatological event, but *SOS*'s debris doesn't settle easily in the mind. The sentimental temptation is to see the material realities of theater and the human body triumphantly reasserting themselves, trumping the layered representations and displacements of the video screens. But the actors, cloaked entirely in their fantastic regalia, are oddly effaced presences—no longer divided between screens, but no longer exactly human either. With this finale Big Art Group intimates that if the bubble of the Society of Spectacles—perhaps a second meaning of *SOS*'s title, along with its plea for help—ever truly pops, whatever rough beast emerges from the rubble will not necessarily be the one we want or expect. Like the company's fuzzy fugitives, we've wandered too far from home to find our way back without pain.

*SOS*, New York,  
2009. Photo:  
Dan Hansell