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Rainbows to No Place: Société Réaliste and the Ayn Rand Apocalypse

by **David Markus** on October 12, 2013

Installation view, "A rough guide to Hell" by Société Réaliste at P! (photo by Naho Kubota)

> There is no way out of entanglement. The only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and for the rest to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required, no longer by good upbringing, but by the shame of still having air to breathe, in hell.
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> —*T.W. Adorno,* **Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life**

The 1949 King Vidor **film adaptation** of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* centers on a headstrong New York architect named Howard Roark, who, at grave risk to his architectural practice, spends his days proffering sleek modernist designs to a society mired in its taste for tawdry neoclassicism. When, early on in the film, Roark encounters his impoverished, disillusioned and half-mad former mentor, he is warned about the costs of impudence: "May god bless you Howard, you're on your way into hell."

Roark never descends to the depths of perdition experienced by his mentor. Buoyed by his faith in the platitudes of Randian individualism, he lifts himself out of the pits of financial ruin and into the rarefied air of architectural greatness. There is nevertheless more wisdom to the old man's words than either can appreciate. *The Fountainhead*, whose script Rand penned on the condition that not a word would be altered, is a turgid love song to the sociopathic limits of modernism's mythos. Rand's New York is one in which in which domestic terrorism is the legal and heroic recourse against public housing projects that diverge from their original design (Roark ends up dynamiting his own building), and where the world's tallest skyscraper serves no purpose other than to posthumously restore its bankroller's manhood with the salve of architectural genius. The metropolis Howard Roark helps re-imagine is not a place to be collectively inhabited but a monument to phallic petulance and Promethean conquest. It is a vision altogether infernal in its own right. If only it were confined to the Randian universe.

When the headline of a *New York Times* article on what is slated to be the tallest residential building in the country reads, **"Another Tower for the New York Skyline,"** it reflects an essential truth about the city: like other **"high-end products"** New York has increasingly become something that is more to be admired at a remove than enjoyed in person. Thanks to an unprecedented collusion between starchitects, megalomaniacal developers and the state legislature, which has extended **tax subsidies** to those least in need of them, the world's most famous skyline has received a multibillion-dollar makeover during the past few years. New York's homeless population has just reached **levels not seen since the Great Depression**; meanwhile, a wave of non-resident investment purchasers has made the daily occupancy rates at some of the city's most eye-catching and luxurious buildings resemble those of beach resorts in hurricane season.

In this context, it is a testament to the Franco-Hungarian art cooperative **Société Réaliste**'s commitment to realism that it chooses to title its first New York exhibition, held at P! on the Lower East Side, *A rough guide to Hell.* The centerpiece of this multidimensional installation (curated by Niels Van Tomme and P! director Prem Krishnamurthy) is a timely meditation on the triumph of what, following Walter Benjamin in "**The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**," we might classify as "optical" architecture: in this case an architecture that not only obtrudes upon the "tactile" experience of ordinary habitual use, but one that has been literally *disinhabited*. Société Réaliste's single-channel video work "The Fountainhead" (2010) offers a silent version of Vidor's 1949 film in which every human being has been digitally removed from the picture. The protagonists of the 111-minute-long work are a series of office desks, modern couches, swooping staircases, and, of course, penthouse views of New York's beloved skyline.

Société Réaliste, "The Fountainhead (2010), film still

This is by no means a loss to the film, which pairs Rand's stultifyingly didactic melodrama with low points in the careers of Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. A soulless but cinematographically adept piece of cinema, Vidor's film was already an ironic affirmation of André Bazin's assertion, in "Theater and Cinema: Part Two," that the actor, in cinema, is aesthetically secondary to "decor and editing." Société Réaliste has merely elevated to an absolute the modernist to highlight the traits specific to a given medium.

In so doing it has allowed the work's underlying ideology to achieve its crypto-nihilistic endpoint. Of the man who once belonged to this vanished civilization, the urban dwellings of which lie before us like a photo-spread in Architectural Digest, we may say, as Roark does in his climactic ode to the mythical creative type: "His work was his only goal. His work, not those who used it; his creation, not the benefits others derived from it." Ultimately, "he served nothing and no-one." We might add that the colossal city he strove to establish was effectively "no place," *ou topos*: the only utopia at the end of the Randian rainbow. Indeed, deprived of people, the urban landscape depicted in *The Fountainhead* begins to resemble a set on a Hollywood soundstage, which, as it turns out, it is.

Of course the fact that this ideal metropolis is nothing more than a fairytale — and a nightmarish one at that — has not dissuaded the "unbridled individual" from vying for its real estate. In a work titled "Laissez-faire City" (2013), Société Réaliste replicates an advertisement that ran in an issue

of *The Economist* in 1995, a year of particularly magical thinking, given that it was also the year the World Wide Web went mainstream. The self-described "impressive group of free market individuals" behind the ad proposes the founding of a new metropolis set on 100 square miles of land in Costa Rica. Self-governed, the city would be "based on the ideals and principles of Ayn Rand," whose *Atlas Shrugged* — the apparent inspiration for their plan — is cited as a work of "prophetic genius."

The selling price Société Réaliste has attached to this work is just over sixty-two thousand dollars: the present-day cost of republishing the ad in *The Economist*. As a work of historical irony, its impact hangs suspended between the willful forgetfulness that threatens to swallow the economic crash of 2008 and a more widespread recognition that, for most American urbanites, the laissez faire city is one — **or rather *two*** — in which we have already been living for too long. Staring at this advertisement, which features an Art Deco rendering of Rand alongside a miniature city skyline, it is difficult not to indulge in one's own utopian fantasy: that someone buys the ad, republishes it, and the "impressive" individuals likely to be attracted by such a proposal fly south in droves.

On the awning outside P!'s Broome Street storefront, Société Réaliste has erected a permanent installation. In black letters against a red background we read: "*lasciate ogne stranezza voi ch'intrate* [abandon all strangeness ye who enter here]." The work borrows from words famously engraved outside the gates of hell in Dante's *Inferno* (in Dante, the line reads "abandon all hope…"). In the catalogue for its 2012 exhibition "empire, state, building," co-produced by Paris's Jeu de Paume and Budapest's Ludwig Múzeum, Société Réaliste associates this phrase with the false concern it detects in systems of governance that profess a cosmopolitanism belied by restrictive and assimilative immigration policies. As former residents of Hungary, a nation once cut off from the West, the members of Société Réaliste have the European Union in mind as their most immediate model. Against the backdrop of New York City, however, the appropriation of Dante's phrase more readily appears as a mocking jab at the hospitality extended — with no acknowledgement of its conditionality — to "the homeless, the tempest tossed" on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

Exterior of P! with awning in media police typeface by Société Réaliste (photo by Naho Kubota)

The injunction to abandon strangeness might also provoke reflection on the work's specific urban context. Since the New Museum took up residency on a stretch of the Bowery formerly known as Skid Row, the area has undergone rapid gentrification under the ever-ambiguous guise of urban renewal. While cultural institutions sometimes provide space for reflection on socio-economic issues, they also contribute to rising rent prices and the displacement that results therefrom. The crop of new galleries that has sprung up in the area, P! among them, is undoubtedly implicated in this process; and while it is a gesture of good faith — indeed, of hospitality — to the surrounding neighborhood that P! lists its business information in Chinese on its storefront window, it also makes one cognizant of the transformation undergone by this section of Chinatown into, for better or worse, a relic of its former self.

The typeface that appears on P!'s awning was created by Société Réaliste and is presented as a work unto itself. It is downloadable from P!'s website during the show's run and also appears on wall labels throughout the exhibition. Created by splicing together the logotypes of world newspapers, it comprises a contradictory patchwork of modern and gothic scripts. It may be going too far, however, to call it "strange." Though it serves as a composite of widely varying cultures and political persuasions, it also evokes the homogenization that is, after all, intrinsic to most typography. Its range of letters is restricted to those of the Roman alphabet, and its individual pieces, diverse as they seem, congeal into a legible assemblage. The font's title, "media police," enforces the impression that this work continues Société Réaliste's critique of the restrictiveness inherent to many of the most exalted partners of "freedom": the free press, economic liberalism and its globalization, and the City of New York, whose mantel of diversity is maintained under the watch of a vast police force notorious for targeting minorities.

The neutralization of political-cultural discord recurs as a theme in "Circle of Errors" (2013). This work, which covers a large swath of the exhibition's wall space, comprises a series of fake computer error messages — e.g. "Precise Mutation," "Restricted Hospitality," "Imagination is Fatal" — printed in white "media police" against a background of varying shades of gray. Collectively, these sometimes humorous, sometimes menacing phrases evoke the auto-censorship and velvet handcuffs that bind us to systems of control and thwart our impulses to break from prevailing discourses.

As a guide to the corridors of a living hell, Société Réaliste's exhibition is rough to say the least. Like an ant on a Möbius strip, one finds oneself cycling between alternating faces of torment: sociopathic Randian utopianism and the restricted heterogeneity of liberal political enclosures. No exit is provided, except through the gallery's door.

The members of Société Réaliste are Cynics sensu stricto. In their writings they make repeated mention of the philosophical vagabond Diogenes of Sinope, one of the founders of the cynical tradition, who would seem to typify their rejection of any but the most radical forms of cosmopolitanism. Famously, when asked by Alexander the Great if there was any favor the conquering hero could do for him, the philosopher responded, "Stand out of my light." Somewhere on the Bowery, amid the few halfway houses that still remain, the shadow of a modern edifice grows long.

A Rough Guide to Hell by Société Réaliste *continues at P! (334 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) until October 27.*

Tagged as: **Ayn Rand**, **King Vidor**, **P!**, **Société Réaliste**