

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Friedman Benda Curator on Turning Excessive Partying Into an Art Show

by Ashton Cooper

Published: July 16, 2013



Ena Swansea, "It was late but they were not tired at all," 2013 (detail)

Courtesy of Friedman Benda

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Nan Goldin, "Bea In Our Bathroom,"
1972

Already featured in ARTINFO's Best Summer Group Show Titles post, **Friedman Benda** gallery's upcoming exhibition "And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music" promises to be a summer show like no other. For the duration of the show, curator **Thorsten Albertz** is turning the gallery into a "run-down nightclub" that will replicate a Studio 54 atmosphere. At the Tuesday, July 16 opening, a bouncer will check IDs at the door for the 18-and-over show, a DJ will spin an appropriately bacchanalian set, and drag queens will populate the gallery. Oh, and Albertz is also mounting a show that includes works by **Andy Warhol**, **Nan Goldin**, **Andreas Gursky**, and commissioned pieces like an **Agathe Snow** disco ball mobile and a huge **Ena Swansea** club scene painting. Albertz gave ARTINFO a tour of the under-construction gallery (it was in the process of being painted a glittering gold) and sat down with us to discuss the inspiration behind turning a gallery into a nightclub.

The exhibition title is taken from a Nietzsche quote. Why did you choose that?

Actually a funny coincidence. The first title was pretty bland—"People of the Night." And then we turned it into "Excess." But one day Marc Benda, the owner of the gallery, came back and he said "Megan Fox has a tattoo that says 'And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.'" And we said 'Why do you know that?' But, apparently, he read it in an article and he mentioned it to me and I thought, 'It's fantastic.'"

How did the idea for the show come about? Why nightlife?

Basically, number one is we wanted to do a summer show that is fun for everybody, that shows artworks that we had in our collection, plus we could bring in a couple of special commissions. We looked at our inventory and we found a couple of Nan Goldin works, we found Andreas Gursky's "Love Parade" and the works that we found all had this idea of partying. The second reason is, I wanted to create a show where I could turn the experience of a show into something special rather than just walking into a white cube gallery with white walls and artworks.

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How do you think the whole nightclub environment will change the way visitors experience and interact with the art?

I hope that it creates more immediacy. I think that a lot of times the white wall creates some sort of boundary between an artwork that hangs there and the viewer. By bridging the gap between the artwork and the experience of seeing the artwork, it triggers a more immediate reaction to it. When you look at the artworks that we have, some of them are just fun, easy to understand, some of them are a little bit more conceptual, some of them are very provocative. If you look at the Cecily Brown [work] that we are showing, it's basically a series of blowjob drawings. Wolfgang Tillmans's is "Spitting on Dick" which is very offensive.

Right. An artist like Nan Goldin has a somewhat obvious connection to youth culture and nightlife, but what about "Spitting On Dick?" How does that piece fit in to the nightlife theme?

Excessive partying is always connoted with excessive use of alcohol, excessive use of drugs, and eventually also sex. And whether or not we like the idea or we want to talk about it, sex is something that happens most of the time after the nightclub experience. Letting go of inhibitions is also something that is very intrinsic to the idea of partying. I think Wolfgang Tillmans, with his piece, embodies this idea of letting go of inhibition. Basically, opening up his pants and spitting on his dick.

The gallery also commissioned an Agathe Snow piece, which puts a disco ball in the middle of the gallery, turning it into a faux-nightclub.

Yes. It was a wonderful coincidence that Agathe approached me and said, "I want to suggest a mobile for the show and I want to include a disco ball." I said "Agathe, that's actually fantastic, because the whole time I had the idea of trying to turn the gallery into a nightclub situation." I think a lot of people in New York are bored by just walking into another white cube show with objects on the wall. My environment that I have created for the gallery is the idea of a run-down club. The gallery will be painted in a gold color, there will be partitioning walls, and some of the walls will be smashed in. For the opening event, it goes so far that there will be a doorwoman at the gallery door, you have to show your ID, and if you are 21 years or older you will get a wristband. You come into

the gallery and it is lit in different colors, the artworks are lit in white, there will be a DJ, and there will be drag queens to entertain.

Are you going for an '80s nightclub feel?

I don't know if it's '80s, but I am going for an experience of a different kind in a gallery space. You could even say it's a late '70s feeling because the opening piece is a Studio 54 painting by Andy Warhol, which kind of sets the tone for the show. Artists have always been inspired by partying. Studio 54 is such an iconic place and that is something I wanted to create.

Right. In addition to Studio 54, other places like the Cedar Street Tavern and Max's Kansas City played a key role in creating artist communities for particular art movements and groups of people. Do you think anything comparable exists today?

Unfortunately no.

Why do you think that is?

I think the reason why these places existed is because artists lived off of each other, they bounced ideas off of each other and they needed the proximity of space to do so. Nowadays, with the Internet you don't really need that anymore.

I know you are talking about transforming the white walls, but it's interesting how the gallery can be a place of exclusivity, while, in many ways, the nightclub is very much the same thing. Are you worried that having a doorwoman is going to make people nervous to come in?

It's possible. Very true. I think every environment that we live in today is regulated by customs and rituals. The way we walk into a gallery in the art mode is very different to when we go out and party. Partying is also very much ritualized. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that nightlife is the part where we actually are truest to ourselves because we let go of inhibitions that regulate our daily lives.

Are you hoping people will do that at the opening?

Yes. I hope so.

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Will there be any surprises at the opening?

Expect the unexpected. Actually, by now I am getting a little nervous about my show. It will be very different from what you have seen in most of the other shows. I will put things together that have never been shown together. Either some people will think “This is super trash and this shouldn’t have been done” or they will say, “Wow this is actually very courageous, somebody showed artworks differently.”

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