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Outside White Box gallery, Apr. 28, 2006



Rejected applications posted at White Box during Woolloo Productions' *AsylumNYC*



Inside White Box gallery during the final day of *AsylumNYC*



The rules to the *AsylumNYC* contest

INANE ASYLUM by Ben Davis

Wooloo Productions, "AsylumNYC," Apr. 24-Apr. 29, 2006, at White Box, 525 West 26th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Wooloo Productions -- the Berlin-based art collective behind last week's *AsylumNYC* performance at White Box gallery -- has been focused on immigrant rights for some time. In the past, the group has helped launch a website (www.asylumhome.net) that serves as a sort of Myspace.com for asylum seekers, while the application period for those interested in participating in the New York performance opened way back in February. The fact that *AsylumNYC* coincided with the lead-up to the massive May Day demonstrations for immigrant rights is, in fact, a coincidence.

Wooloo has a penchant for performances that wed art to activist gestures. The group was last seen in New York in a 2004 project staged simultaneously at Artists Space and a public forum outside of Cape Town. Every time viewers engaged with interactive artworks at either of the two locations, money was donated towards the building of an AIDS info kiosk in South Africa, while visitors in New York got a cup of South African wine.

AsylumNYC, on the other hand, had more of a game-show flavor, something like "Survivor: Chelsea." Ten foreign-born artists seeking "creative asylum" (a rare status granted to a handful of cultural-capital-rich supplicants each year) were locked into the cavernous White Box space for five days. Each was allotted a cot and a small square of bare floor, demarcated by masking tape. A list of rules, posted on a whiteboard, banned participants from speaking languages other than English, talking to other contestants and leaving their spaces without permission. (Participants were required to hold up sheets of paper with question marks on them if they wanted to speak with a guard.)

Members of the Wooloo team, clad in Star Trek-style uniforms, monitored the participants and graded them on three areas: the quality of the art they were able to produce; their interactions with visitors; and their fidelity to the constraints of the game. At the end of the week, the winner got the services of an immigration lawyer.

The ten young, photogenic participants were selected from some 235 applications from non-U.S. artists (a selection of the rejected applications was posted in the entry corridor at White Box).

According to a representative from the group, the final selection was calculated to reflect the pattern of immigration to the U.S.: a majority from Latin America, a handful from Europe and one from Japan (quite obviously ducking thorny questions about immigration from the Middle East, Africa or mainland Asia).

One participant, Antonio O'Connell Perez Rubio from Mexico, was accepted but denied entry to the U.S. He was represented in the space by a wall covered with printouts demanding "CREATIVE ASYLUM FOR ANTONIO!" as well as a copy of his passport and a letter he had written outlining his case, displayed atop his unrolled



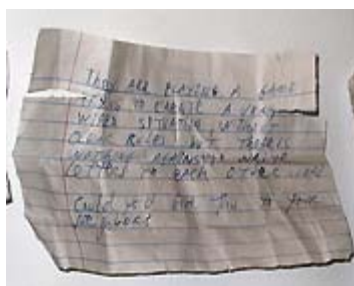
Sergio Zevallos calls for a guard, as Nao Matsumoto [right] puts finishing touches on his sculpture



Passport and letter from Antonio O'Connell Perez Rubio, displayed at White Box during *AsylumNYC*



Dusanka Komnenic with her project



Note written by *AsylumNYC* participants, confiscated by members of Wooloo Productions

cot. A second participant, the Nigeria-born, Canada-based Isoje Chou, decided not to come, sending a suitcase as her statement. "Normally an immigrant arrives without luggage," explained a bemused Wooloo member. "Here, the luggage arrives without the immigrant."

Those who actually participated, however, were thrust into a deliberately Kafkaesque situation. A wall near the entrance displaying a selection of notes, passed between the participants but soon confiscated by the guards, gave a sense of the confusion and sometimes frustration that the artists felt in the early phases of the lock-in. Eventually, however, it was discovered that, while the artists themselves were not allowed to bring in materials, they were permitted to ask visitors to fetch them objects or even assist them. By the end, the space swarmed with makeshift art projects.

Thus, Brazilian photographer Ilana Bessler managed to cover her wall with 8½ x 11 notebook sheets, each with a pen drawing of a simplified face. Meanwhile, her neighbor, Japanese sculptor Nao Matsumoto, was able to erect an installation incorporating a take-out food menu and stacked bricks of ramen noodles. Colombian Maria Camila Sanjines created an elaborate graph on the wall, using three different colors of tape -- black, red and blue -- to diagram the relations between the artists, guards and visitors within the *AsylumNYC* project itself.

Others took the performative element of the context as inspiration. Venezuelan Valeria Cordero staged a mock gallery opening complete with wine for her impromptu installation, while, according to the guards, German Sergio Zevallos took the opportunity to execute several performances that involved massage and make-out sessions with visitors. Dusanka Komnenic from Serbia and Montenegro, normally a figurative painter, got hold of some tape, made herself a striped prison uniform and decided to play with the rules of the game by extending the boundaries of her space in a Daniel Buren-like pattern of stripes, allowing her to make it to the exit for a cigarette.

The performance concluded on Friday evening as Wooloo representatives Martin Rosengaard and Sixten Kai Nielsen stood on a platform at the center of the space, giving each of the participants a chance to testify to the motley crew of assembled press about what they had learned (a Wooloo cameraperson holding a video recorder close to their faces gave the scene a vaguely manipulative air), before announcing that there would, in fact, be two winners, one "political," one "artistic": the former, the absent Antonio O'Connell; the latter, rule-bending Dusanka Komnenic.

The dual decision seems only fitting. Beneath the surface of the project, an obvious but unspoken tension lurks. On the one hand, *AsylumNYC*, like the group's Artists Space performance before it, asks viewers to judge it by its will to do a good deed. On the other, it rests on the sensationalism of the Santiago Sierra-like stunt of duplicating oppression in order to call attention to it, putting a bunch of hopeful young people through a blatantly gratuitous ordeal. ("This is going to affect my work in the future," Camila Sanjines joked during the press conference, hitting one of the few minor notes in the otherwise self-congratulatory affair, "in the sense that I need therapy.") The project's good-naturedness cuts against its impact as a sensation, while its hunger for larger media impact makes palpable what a token gesture it is.

Ultimately, this split personality flows from the contradictions of art-world liberalism in general, which ties its politics to the statements of intellectuals and the benevolence of elites -- rather than any living connection to a mass movement. What could expose this better than the idea of staging an elaborate competition "calling attention" to the



Wooloo Productions members Martin Rosengaard [left] and Sixten Kai Nielsen, reading a letter from an admirer

plight of immigrants when millions of people are literally marching in the streets demanding their rights? If it "calls attention" to anything, it's that this kind of social-gesture-art is the height of gentleman's activism, with no meaningful relation to on-the-ground politics.

When we look back on 2006, I am certain that among the most powerful images of the year will be pictures of Monday's giant May Day demonstrations, but probably not images of this show. If the art world wants politics, it knows where to find it.

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Nao Matsumoto's testifies about his experience, filmed by a Wooloo Productions crewmember



AsylumNYC winner Dusanka Komnenic addresses the press