

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

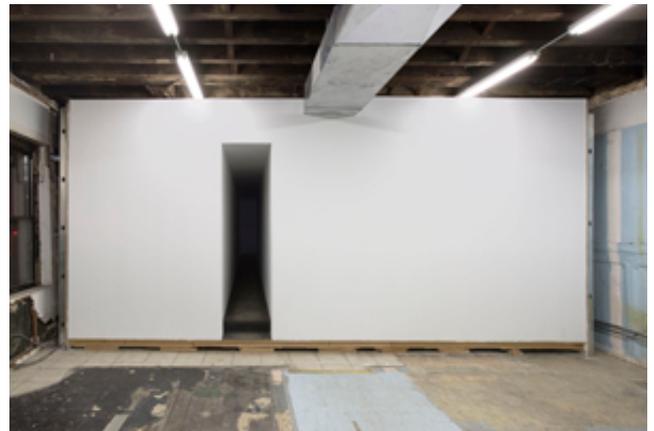
## Klara Liden *Elda för kråkorna*

by Becky Brown

### Reena Spaulings Fine Art February 3 - March 9, 2008

Passing fruit stands, fish markets, discount souvenir shops and several Chinatown bus depots, I identify Reena Spaulings Fine Art by an address on an awning and a buzzer labeled “gallery 2nd floor”—the only sign of its existence. I climb a dingy staircase, half-consciously noticing a rust-stained mosaic detail on the landing: a trace of the building’s previous life.

Pushing open the door into Klara Liden’s exhibition *Elda för kråkorna* (a common Swedish saying meaning “heating the crows” or the wasting of human energy and resources), my eye is first drawn to the variously colored patches of ‘50s-era linoleum and half-done paint jobs under my feet, all peeling away to reveal the raw wooden flooring beneath. This patchwork effect is matched by the walls, contrasting ornate molding with chipped and incomplete coats of paint, exposed pipes and missing chunks of plaster. Could this be the art? I observe that I am in the company of two (I presume) gallery attendants: a woman circling the space and a man at a computer, stationed behind a partition that looks more like a bar than a front desk. Behind me on the left is a stack of broken-down cardboard boxes, a vacuum cleaner, a piece of rolling luggage, a lion statuette and several buckets. Only after the woman seats herself at a cluttered round table to my right—a scene that more closely resembles a friend’s apartment than an art gallery—do I focus my attention on what I assume is the central piece of art on view: a large white structure filling the entire width of the gallery and most of its height, raised slightly on a wooden platform. Its immaculate surface, in stark contrast with the rest of the space, makes it a literal white cube—modified to fit its surroundings—and a narrow, open doorway leads us inside.



Klara Liden, *Elda för kråkorna*, (2008). Installation view: sheetrock, aluminum, studs, cardboard, tarpaper, mesh, couch, night light, seeds, lettuce, pigeons.

In *Notes on the Gallery Space*, Brian O’Doherty identifies the “white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th century art.” Liden’s use of this image, then, carries a heavier weight of reference than, say, the figure, the landscape or the abstract gesture. So how does this work position the white cube?

Clutching my purse close to my body, I pass through the doorway and down a long, dark corridor. I finally emerge into small room containing a plush black leather loveseat and a single 5-inch fluorescent light bulb, which hangs on the wall vertically at eye level. I experience a sense of satisfaction (this is clearly the “finish line” of the exhibition) followed by a feeling of “this is it?” Perhaps I am expecting a greater visual or visceral reward for my trouble: I have passed through a virtual obstacle course to get here, and expect to find the hallowed (art) object at the end of my path. But this exhibition is enacting a different set of dynamics, and after a brief period of adjustment, I begin to relish the bare simplicity, privacy and comfort of my new environment. I become grateful to Liden for carving out this space—a refuge from the chaos and tension of the outside world, even of the “gallery foyer” at the other end of the corridor. Sunken into the couch, I have begun to feel very much “at home” when I hear the sound of footsteps in the hall. Another person enters, and we share an awkward glance as he hovers uncomfortably for a few seconds, nods in my direction and leaves: it is clear that I have already taken ownership of this space and he has become a kind of intruder.

Liden’s primary subject, it seems, is space itself: how it is defined and distributed, and who is empowered (or stripped of power) as a result. When do barriers between public and private space become blurred and how does this affect the allocation of power? In Liden’s earlier video *Paralyzed* (2003), she is seen engaged in outlandish acrobatics (jumping, dancing, removing articles of clothing) on a Stockholm subway car, accompanied by raucous music. In *550 Jamaica Avenue* (2004), she breaks into an apartment in Brooklyn containing a lifetime’s accumulation of stuff but apparently no human occupant. We see a shirtless, genderless figure from behind (Liden herself) riding an exercise bike and playing the piano—activities one might do at home, only this is someone else’s home. Here, she is the intruder, but would we know this if we did not read the press release? Liden exposes a world defined by various compartmentalized spaces, each with its own set of rules to be followed and roles to be played. How and why are these rules established? What happens when we break them? And where does the highly contested gallery space, O’Doherty’s white cube, fit in alongside other determined spaces—the subway car, the home, the church, the courtroom, etc.?

When I return to the gallery for a second visit, knowing now what to expect, I walk confidently through the hallway and plop down onto the couch—like coming home. Moments later, I hear the sound of footsteps again, and two smiling women burst into the room. They cheerfully ask, “Who are you? Are you part of the piece?” to which I respond with a smile, “No; but in a way, yes.” They remark that the couch looks awfully comfortable, and I move over to make room for them. Suddenly I am in an intimate space with two strangers, laughing and trading stories. I muse over what changed between my first

experience and this one—various psychological and social factors were likely at play—but the key point is that Liden has made these dynamics flexible. In a world where our behavior is strictly regulated from one space to the next, she has created an environment where the order is rapidly changing.

---

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Becky Brown is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.