

**BERNADETTE  
CORPORATION**

**BY  
COUNTERSUBJECT**

# **SUBJECT- ANNIHILATED**

Spanning writing, sculpture, video, installations, image-making, performative acts, and fashion, Bernadette Corporation has built a legacy that subverts the hierarchies in the industry of cultural production. Many critics and curators have tried to dissect the group's work. Here, another collective investigates the group's dialectical, antagonistic stance towards the subject.



Andy Warhol, John Palmer  
*Empire*, 1964  
 16mm, black and white, silent  
 Original film elements preserved by The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Reena Spaulings and Claire Fontaine, Bernadette Corporation  
*Imperio*, 2007 (still)  
 Super 8 transferred to DVD  
 20 minutes  
 Courtesy the artists and Greene Naftali, New York

Three logos grace the surface of a high-performance, iridescent, composite-leather, purple basketball. One is from the ball's technical manufacturer, the American sporting goods corporation Spalding. One is from the ball's commissioner, or publisher, or marketer, the American streetwear corporation Supreme. One is from the ball's author, or artist, or co-creator, the American fine-art corporation Bernadette Corporation. The three emblems co-exist on the same spherical surface as an inscription is scratched with hand-written typography. It reads: "The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin."

The basketball in question, as many of the works of Bernadette Corporation, has a duplicitous (to say the least!) meaning. The basketball in question, as many of the works of Bernadette Corporation, sits in between satire and participation: satire towards the mechanisms of representation of capitalism, while being self-aware of both the artist's and the work's participation within it. The basketball in question juggles (it's a basketball after all!) between its classification as the subject, and as the object.

"The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin." The statement reads pretty axiomatic, a characteristic that permeates Bernadette Corporation's body of work since its inception in 1994 in New York. The collective – founded by Bernadette Van-Huy and joined by several members throughout the years, until its current formation involving John Kelsey and Jim Fletcher – has worked across a variety of media, from making clothes, images, and performative acts, to writing, sculpture, video, and installations. Axiomatic is a denominator of the corporate voice. In brand expression documents, statements are produced by strategists, copywriters, and creative directors to influence and direct a brand's language toward unquestionability, toward the truth. In a similar manner, Bernadette Corporation's intentions and conceptual-heavy strategies of signification resulted in artworks that are open enough to be inclusive, but always axiomatic: always speaking an unquestionable truth; *their* truth; and eventually, *the* truth. As any corporation, especially those operating at the turn of the century, reminiscent of the "Just Do It" mystique, their language implied a certain degree of profoundness and solemnity – assertive, not assumptive – that *must* be taken to be true. Believe in what you say and people will believe in you.

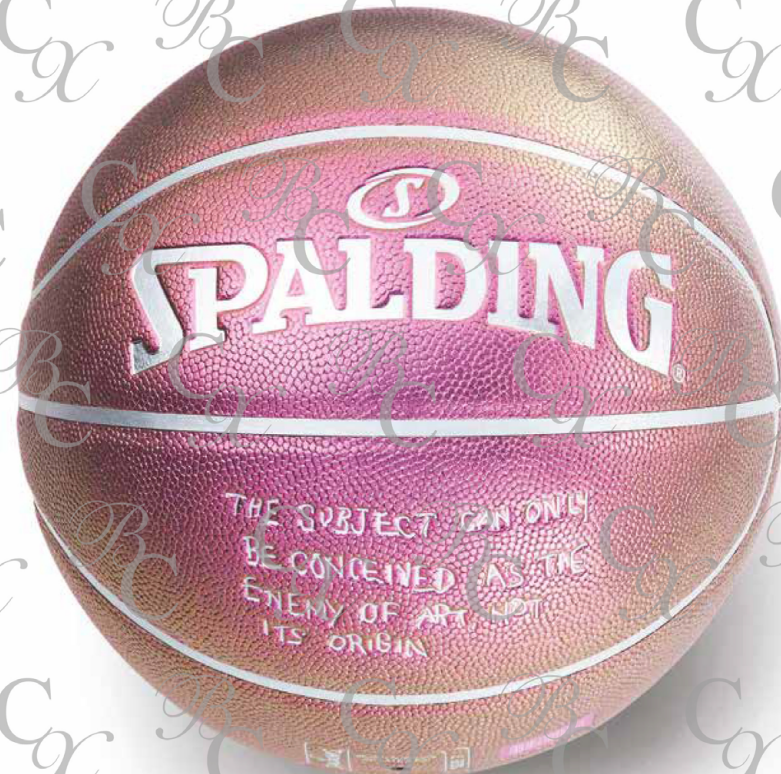
People believed all sorts of things about Bernadette Corporation. And Bernadette Corporation believed all sorts of

things about themselves. "We call ourselves a corporation because corporations are everywhere, and it impresses people..." they declared in a statement accompanying the release of *Made in USA*, a fashion magazine initiated by the artists in 1999, "pretending we are business people while we sleep all day like cats." Again, an axiomatic stance formalizes the collective under a precise structural configuration, that of the corporation, that of a depersonalized entity that annihilates the subject and communicates as an object.

"The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin." As in the artist, first-person narrator, creator, individual, or self can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin. If the subject is the enemy of art, then what is its ally? Bernadette Corporation's work suggests that multiplicity always wins over singularity: multiplicity of media, of meaning, of form, of bodies, of authors, of contexts, of cultures, and so on; and it implies that multiplicity can be achieved through de-personalization, reaching universality, or, again, the axiomatic truth. The mechanism of constructing an artist group identity through the language of the corporate is somehow a first step towards the annihilation of the subject, and it is, in fact, also the first "fine-art" work produced by the collective: *The BC Corporate Story*, 1997. In the 8-minute video, a corporate-accent voice over narrates the origin story of the group appropriating the style and form of induction videos screened for company employees to instill corporate culture. The work acts as the formal establishment, a contract, for a new way of making art, the genesis of an ultra-aware artist group responding to the cultural present, signed and stamped with a "BC" logo.

To remind us again of the annihilation of the subject as a founding predicament of the now, a 2003 video, again adopting the axiomatic register in its title, commands us to *Get Rid of Yourself*, yes, that is the title. If the title was not enough, it comprises 64 minutes of footage from the Genoa G8 riots mixed with original scenes of Chloë Sevigny re-enacting some of the language extracted from the protest's clips. The video, in its culture-jamming premises (a very-90s trend), not only sets to anti-document the nascent activist forces in Europe in the 2000s, as many critics have noted, but more so, it depicts how the power of the individual is useless compared to that of the crowd. In what could be read as an approximation, also given the politically-charged context of this specific work, the mechanisms of ideology, or of subversion against ideology, come off as akin to those of subculture, a social arena where individualities





Bernadette Corporation, *Untitled*, 2023 (S/S 2023 Supreme Collaboration)  
Basketball, 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (21.6 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm)  
(Front view)  
Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed

Bernadette Corporation, *Untitled*, 2023 (S/S 2023 Supreme Collaboration)  
Basketball, 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (21.6 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm)  
(Rear view)  
Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed



aggregate and operate through a set of shared, understandable, and actionable codes in ethical and aesthetical patterns.

If in *Get Rid of Yourself* the question of depersonalization is addressed through a critique of power, institutions, and their aestheticization, in *Imperio* (2007), the same battle against the self, the subject, and the author is carried on through an act of appropriation. The video sees a collaboration between three artist collectives, Reena Spaulings—a fictional persona created by Bernadette Corporation in the eponymous novel assembled through a process of collective writing (self, annihilated again)—Claire Fontaine, a feminist, conceptual artist, founded in Paris in 2004 by Fulvia Carnevale and James Thornhill, and of course Bernadette Corporation itself. The 20-minute, Super-8 (transferred to DVD) silent film resembles another Super-8, 8-hour-5-minute silent film from 1964. New York City, and its Empire State Building, are the stars of both films. One is made by a group. One is made by one, single, artist. Or, rather, one artist who is implicitly the star of his own film, the subject. In bootlegging Warhol's *Empire*, the triumvirate of artist collectives-slash-corporations-slash-fictional-figures repurposes the dominant narrative of an iconic film with formally no narrative. Although the point of view cinematographically suggests a subjective gaze of the building-aka-main character (the camera points at it as if the director would), the film reforms the dependency between the subject and the object of that gaze. In Warhol's *Empire*, it is Warhol (subject) who's looking at the building (object). In the megagroup's *Imperio*, it is Warhol's *Empire* (subject) that looks at the building (object).

Subject, fuck off! Or, "The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin." And what if the strategy to successfully annihilate the self is to appropriate that of others? Models, bodies, fabrics, garments, lights, photographers, make-up, the image... Prerogatives of the abstraction of the self. Tools to "get rid of yourself." (Disclaimer: BC's fashion practice is, at this stage, a topic we are not going to discuss, due to the author's lack of technical knowledge or head-space. Apologies, but there are better essays on BC's fashion work by better fashion-slash-art-critics that I'd recommend reading in case that's your vibe).

Images. A lot has been written about Bernadette Corporation's image-making practice. A lot has been published, by the same magazines we still read and write for today. A lot has been editorialized by outlets that still today define our culture (or try to). Do people still read magazines? It's not important. What's important is to be part of

that. Just like BC, with their "infiltrations" in now-established titles like *Purple* or *Dazed*, we try to hijack platforms for our own sake.

Personal note: Although I should de-personalize, I do my job, mainly, because of BC. The axiomatic voice worked for me. I write, intellectualize, read, produce, disseminate, and make money out of paradigms that were put in place before me. I engage and disengage accordingly. I create or disrupt accordingly. I'm grateful. I'm respectful. I'm humbled. And when I do so as a collective, we do it more. We (see, I can do it!) build the unbuilt. We critique the dominant. We avoid categorization. We avoid the myth of content in favor of context. We avoid the myth of content (subject) in favor of context (object).

Three logos grace the surface of a high-performance, iridescent, composite-leather, purple basketball. The basketball in question exists in this world as a duplicitous object. The basketball in question exists as a mass-disseminated commodity sold through the Supreme e-commerce and at the same time is included in the latest solo exhibition of Bernadette Corporation at Greene Naftali in 2023. In the first social arena, the basketball in question is presented as the output of a collaboration between an obscure artist collective and a prominent New York skate brand, retailing for a hundred dollars first-hand, and around three hundred second-hand. In the second social arena, things do not retail. Things are not purchased, but acquired. Things are collected. Things are elevated to truth by value. But things, in this case, are the same. But things, in this case, can bring a 17-year-old hectic hypebeast and a storied art collector on the same level. But things, in this case, are both artwork and commodity. But things, in this case, are complicated. In this case, things are axiomatic: "The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin" is printed on every basketball, either in the seasonal drop of a streetwear brand, or in an artwork presented in a New York City-standard gallery show. But, in this case, things are depersonalized. In this case, things are so depersonalized that, when the object (basketball) inhabits two very different and disparate dimensions simultaneously, it imposes itself as an object of power. A medium of ubiquitousness, the basketball acquires meaning in both the mass-market streetwear elite and the major global fine-art connoisseurs.

The subject could never!

"The subject can only be conceived as the enemy of art, not its origin."