

Dear New York, Here's Your Novel

A collective post 9/11 impression by the Bernadette Corporation
TEXT Jens Pacholsky ([goon magazine](#))

A city is not an entity. It can not be realised as a whole or even by a single person's glimpse. A city is always the sum of a collective experience by a million people. A city is defined by the perspectives of its inhabitants that are themselves influenced by the aspects of their own life careers. It's a subject not an object.

The collective Bernadette Corporation takes this principal for serious. Their book »*Reena Spaulings*« is a book about New York City, a whole bunch of independent artists and authors has contributed to. The Corporation makes it a secret how this book was written and who is behind all that, though. The only lead is a rumour about 24 writers and the structure of the text itself showing a quite strong corporation. »*Reena Spaulings*« wasn't written in the classic avant-garde form of Exquisite Corpse knitting together various contributions by pure association, independence and luck. Despite varying styles and aspects discussed the book appears homogeneous and keeps its central thread developing chronological without ignoring past events. One clue that the Bernadette Corporation inherits artists and painters gives the book's title that is obviously referencing the well-known New York Modern Art gallery *Reena Spaulings Fine Art*, as well as the repeated drifts into the world of colours and paintings the figures pass while travelling and performing themselves in New York. At the same moment and most significantly »*Reena Spaulings*« is not only an art book but a book about the city itself. The text tells and collages a story of its characters living in this unfathomable city but also manifests the fantastic and cruel world of New York itself in every character. The city gushes out of every space in-between the letters, all the way through sex, violence, passion and disembodiment, the artistic aspects of acting, terrorism or Reena Spaulings' butt.

»I think about my shoulder muscles, which all on their own decide from day to day if they will appear masculine or somewhat feminine, the different shades of my body, the relative white of my thighs, my ass, my stomach, the darker shade of my shins, arms and back, the splotchier bothered skin of my face, hands and feet. [...] I think about the nook of bad spirits the crevice between my dresser and some stackable plastic storage units, which I have unconsciously made into the bad energy ghetto, the bad part of town of my room where I put soiled rags, my liquor bottles (both empty and full), my cigarettes and ashtrays (when I am trying to quit), plastic bags, and whatever else I prefer to hide from myself.«

The American Dream Of Self Destruction

Reena Spaulings is a nobody. That's the situation this avalanche is taking off. In its chaos theory dynamics the protagonists have to keep their head above the flood or have to drown. Reena Spaulings is a low profile character, who is working as a guard in a New York museum, drifting through New York's flood day in day out. On an insider party at the »*Waste*« club she meets the eccentric but "With a nose for the trendy" Maris, who is looking for models for a new underwear campaign. Reena has this slim sort of a body with a minimum of femininity, just perfect for the heroin-like look, this trashy, emancipated sex appeal of non-existence. Within a few weeks Reena becomes the celebrated supermodel, with her butt all over the house fronts. The nobody becomes a somebody to everybody. Something Reena never wanted to be and that she is fighting against by all means now. *»'My' ass. That whole idea. Like voting. Sacrosanct. Very personal. Very one. (Don't be hateful). How mortifying it is to be embarrassed! To be one, a singleton. Better to be a simpleton (less than one), or more than one (Legion), but not one. Be zero, a true hole (trou), a place holder.«* The disembodiment of self and all values becomes the solution.

The unintended pace of this American Dream slips into an unpredictable maelstrom when a violent hurricane hits New York. The chaos left becomes the trigger for a chaos that is to

come. The hurricane leaves New York in a state of shock, civil disobedience and incomprehension, a state of existential angst that can not be calmed – neither by a Homeland Security nor by patriotism and pride. The existential angst busts out into a vortex of anarchy and a Broadway riot musical called » Battle on Broadway« staged by Reena and Maris. It is an orchestrated riot filled with destruction for the sake of it, in whose wake Reena drops a bomb for the love for loss and the desire for an end. Just like James Dean in »Rebel without a Cause«, Reena Spaulings looses the grip out of an inner, inexplicable but self-indulgent drive.

»Time for search, for more loss. [...] Reena was all too happy to plant and detonate a book bomb built by her friend Clovis. She took her rigged copy of James Michener's 'Iberia' to the Prada store in Soho as Clovis had directed, but they were shooting an advertisement in there and were closed, so she took it to the Juice Bar next door and let her rip after ordering a wheat grass and ginger.«

In the end of this traumatic roller coaster trip there's nothing left than the final bang. On the bottom of the vortex Reena hits the solid ground that is covered by here spilled beer, just to celebrate her decadent desire of self destruction for the sake of the following recovering. *»The thing is, we have never loved the world so much as at these moments that we are restored to it.«* Reena Spaulings is the big city, that swung herself up in glamorous self-laceration, turning faster and faster, until a massive storm from outside hit the Twin Towers and brought down the everlasting high. Until this massive blast took away the ground beneath their feet but also gave back a self-indulgent reasoning for consolidation. The hurricane is the electric shock into a heart, that is searching for life, that wants to feel itself ones again after living along without taking notice. The collapse comes unexpected but desired, and everybody knows how to take their advantages.

Patchwork of One's Self

In this context the narration of »Reena Spauling« is just as fast, incalculable and free of valuation as the Moloch of New York is ruling over its inhabitants and their destinies. Illogical turns, breaks and developments that sometimes intertwine by only a very distant connection are embedded in a language that has stripped off any pathos, and has exchanged words against immediate pictures. »Reena Spaulings« as a book about New York is not a single book but a collage of many books, a sprint through a scattered library. There's nothing like a single book about New York.

»Seattle was a book I used to read over and over and I knew it was all about me, an open heart reading itself in the fog by the sea. New York is an entire library of books about everything and everybody. Reading here is work, and behind every book-filled room is another room of books and reading never ends. After work I ride to the disco. The disco is expensive. Ride, idiot. Get the hormones going.«

Sometimes it reads like William S. Burroughs' »Naked Lunch« when the incomprehensible articulates itself in chaotic sentence cut-ups. The structure of a collective book where many different styles and perspectives on New York clash, reinforces the idea of loose puzzle pieces, that sometimes fill the gaps easily and sometimes take up a lot of energy to be brought together. Nonetheless, these single sentences and the bulk of puzzle pieces connected by force dissect and complete a city's picture and its culture that is scattered, searching for itself and for an outlet of its frustration, hope and aggression.

Self Destruction Of The American Dream

The Bernadette Corporation compose a New York that is full of lies and dreams but also lost any illusions. It's a picture of a city full of possibilities that is not allowing any change, biting itself in the tail. *»What a person wants deep down is to change, but change today is a problem, in this city that neutralizes change by putting it constantly to work and absorbing ist effects.«*

This New York is fascinating and revolting in its schizophrenia of high and mighty arrogance, dirt and chaos. It's a city still fighting and burying the aftermath of 9/11 under a

dull state of shock. With this, »*Reena Spaulings*« dissects the repressed truth this event had brought up – the grotesque, desperation and psychology of a culture, that is blocked and suffocated by its decadence and self-indulgence just like the roman empire has been before its fall. And it should not be read as North America only, though it's quite easy to take this turn.

»As for the order under which we lived, everyone knew what it was: Empire was staring you in the face. That a dying social system had no other justification for its arbitrary nature but its absurd determination – its senile determination – to simply last.«

:: Bernadette Corporation: Reena Spaulings (Semiotext(e)/MIT Press)