

Sara Greenberger Rafferty *BANANAS*, Vlatka Horvat *Or Some Other Time*

by Shane McAdams

The Kitchen: January 9 – March 7, 2009

It is somewhat unclear whether the exhibitions by Vlatka Horvat and Sara Greenberger Rafferty at the Kitchen were conceived as separate shows, or as independent efforts that, as curated by Matthew Lyons, just happen to work well together. When I set out for the hallowed performance art space, I planned to write some words in passing about Horvat's *Or Some Other Time*, but after seeing how well it resonated with Rafferty's *BANANAS*, this would have seemed as wrong-headed as adopting only one of a set of twins.

For a show with almost no trace of the human figure, it is surprising how much Rafferty's work relies on the suggestion of the body for its effect. Occupying the main gallery on the second floor, the implied "subjects" in Rafferty's sculptures and photographs can be discerned only by the tools and spaces that define them: sanitarium chairs indicate an absent psychiatric patient; kitchen utensils imply a cook; numerous allusions to stand-up comedy evoke a comedian, and all of these props collectively suggest the looming presence of the artist, or rather, "the Artist," "the Patient," "the



Installation shots of *BANANAS* and *Or Some Other Time*, at the Kitchen.
Photo by Adam Reich

Cook," and "the Comedian." Rafferty's work explores how complex individuals are reduced to roles, roles to artifacts, and artifacts to linguistic symbols of a visceral, emotional reality. In this chain of signification, she explodes objective meaning and replaces it with absurdity and innuendo, underscoring the potential for language games and slippages to dampen, transfer and distort how we parse the world.

"Waiter," one of a series of C-prints depicting the spotlight stage of a stand-up comedy club, features a solitary, anthropomorphized can of soup with a popped lid who functions as both the comic and the joke: "Waiter! There's a fly in my soup..." Reminiscent of Martha Rosler's 1975 "Semiotics of the Kitchen," Rafferty employs culturally suggestive imagery such as bananas, kitchen utensils, and, in several works, eggs, to highlight the associations, contexts and classes of meaning acting upon a single site or work of art. In the case of the egg, she ushers it from the notion of an "egg on the face" of a performer, to symbols of female domesticity and fertility, to a send-up of "the Kitchen" as a misnomer for an art and performance space.

Around the far wall, in the Kitchen's south gallery, Vlatka Horvat's *Or Some Other Time* takes on many of the same ideas as Rafferty with a greater emphasis on how the viewer's body negotiates the works within the architecture of the gallery. Horvat's work is also concerned with how an object can exist within multiple levels of attribution, even as its circumstantial context privileges a single purpose or definition. Her ideas are clearly addressed with a Gouresque absurdity in three related pieces: "Floor Chair," "Ladder," and "Wall Fan." Each is unambiguous in its practical or primary function; however, she has dramatically embellished each in order to render it useless as a tool, which encourages the viewer to relate to it sculpturally. "Wall Fan" is literally that: a fan that has been embedded into the wall, rotating slowly, like a pared-down Jean Tinguely kinetic sculpture, forcing the viewer to reevaluate his or her relationship to the gallery, to the sculptural object, and, because of its titular declaration, to its domestic function when it isn't moonlighting as a piece of art. Other works such as "Table Forest" delve into the issue in more complex ways. Not as sculpturally punchy as the aforementioned works, it deftly lays out the nature-versus-culture problem at the heart of both exhibitions. A standard folding card table is vertically impregnated by a 4 x 8-foot piece of Masonite covered with an inkjet print of a postcard-worthy pine forest. Nature intersects culture here, literally and figuratively, and your fake wood-paneled card table will never seem the same again. "Horizon," perhaps the most memorable work in either show, is simply a horizontally repeated image of a grove of fir trees reflected in a lake. The frieze of dark trees reads as an EKG or seismographic image, running along the wall for about six feet before lazily corkscrewing to the floor in a heap. Like the rest of Horvat's works it plays havoc on viewer's expectations, but in this case with an unmatched formal grace.

Working in such a Wittgensteinian vein, artists like Rafferty and Horvat should take care that their relativistic exploration of language and meaning doesn't get lost under all the layers of Meta. The press release describes Horvat's spaces as "sites of delusion, collapse, and fragmentation." We, and they, are fortunate that all their deconstruction is available to the viewer to be pieced back together into something relevant. Work that is simply disjointed or arbitrary or fragmented is not necessarily the same as work that is about those ideas. But it's a moot point here since both have done well to pick images and symbols whose roles on the greater stage of meaning are multiple and distinct. In fact, standing in the middle of the Kitchen, their clarity led me into a daydream about how an object's manifold linguistic designations affect the way information is disseminated and absorbed. I recalled a news clip where a politician, interrogated by reporters about the sub-prime mortgage debacle, blamed a "culture of greed." In the midst of Rafferty's show, I imagined the bloodthirsty mob of reporters immediately setting off after the specter of personified Greed with pitchforks and hoes as the politician slips inconspicuously into the night, like an egg-faced comedian on a banana peel.