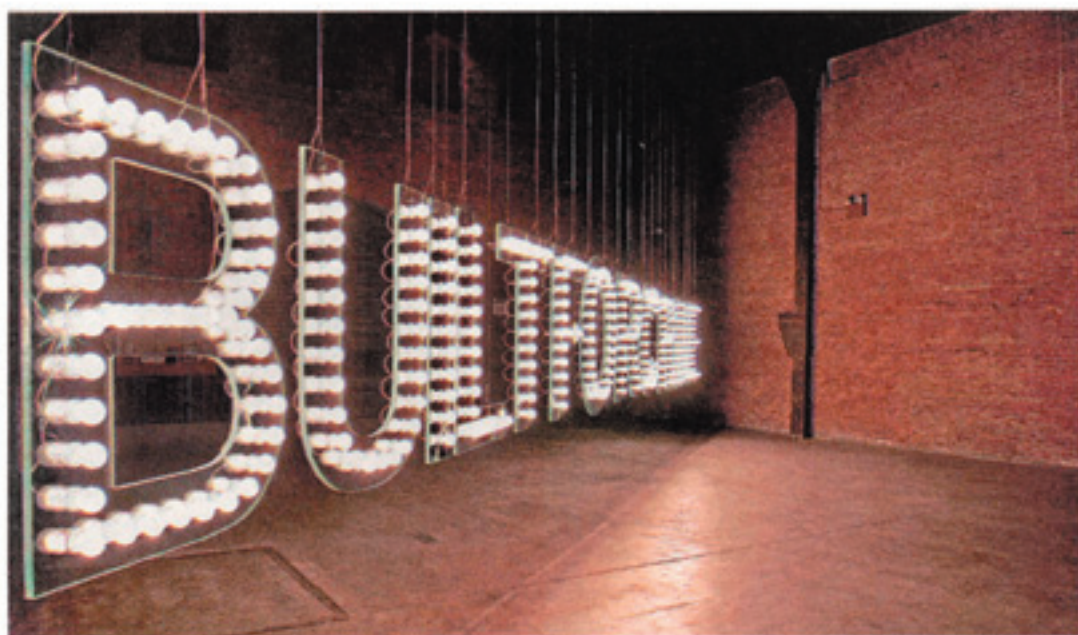


# The New York Times

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## WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE



Joe Fornsabao for The New York Times

### Who Needs Objects? Rev Up the Flashing Sign, and Run the Video

In an object-craving moment in American art — has there ever really not been one? — it's good to see SculptureCenter go a little way in the other direction. Its winter lineup of nine installations includes video, sound, a zine, two light shows and a mural. It may be worth noting that the most object-intensive work is also the least interesting.

**HOLLAND  
COTTER**

**ART  
REVIEW**

The observation isn't worth much. The debate over object vs. content, form vs. idea, is tired. Everybody appreciates well-made things. But skill is far from being the only, or even primary, criterion for what makes art art. If substantial ideas are brewing, any package, tight or loose, that delivers them effectively is the right one.

"Built for Crime," part of Monica Bonvicini's installation at SculptureCenter in Queens.

There are plenty of ideas and all kinds of packaging at SculptureCenter just now.

The artist with top billing is the Italian-born, Berlin-based Monica Bonvicini. Much admired in Europe, she has never quite broken the ice in New York. And with everyone here so giddy with success these days, her time may still have to wait.

Now in her early 40s, she has always cast a critical eye on the cultural drive toward consumption and power, epitomized for her in architecture. We spend fortunes building it, then spend more fortunes filling it, the fashionable filler of the moment being art. But at whose expense are those fortunes being made and spent? What is art's role in the top-down food chain?

Few people — certainly few in the art industry — are interested in being pestered by such drearily old-hat Marxist questions. Ms. Bonvicini probably knows this, but she gets some fun out of

asking them anyway. Her strong suit is being obstructive and annoying.

In a group show at P.S. 1 a few years ago she filled a gallery with a gale-force wind generated by high-power industrial fans. Visitors scurried through. Wind ruins hairdos. At SculptureCenter, she has a 40-foot-long version of what looks like old-time advertising marquees spelling out the phrase "Built for Crime" in flashing lights. The lights are blinding. You can't look at the piece for long.

Not that any of this is novel. Lots of artists flash lights. Many, beginning with Barbara Kruger in the 1970s, have combined words, consumerist politics and commercial graphics. But where Ms. Kruger's art was ideologically pointed and polemical, Ms. Bonvicini's is not, or only ambiguously so, and its ambiguity is what's distinctive about. "Built for Crime" might describe architecture, or capitalism, or the big, expen-

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# Who Needs Objects? Rev Up the Flashing Sign, and Play the Video

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sive sculpture itself. It's hard to say.

A lot of new work is like this. An installation by the young Norwegian-born artist Gardar Eide Einarsson, in a room of the main gallery, is an example. Mr. Einarsson is best known for his painting of words and symbols associated with underground social groups like skaters, rock musicians and street artists. A graffiti phrase in his pictures may look spontaneous, but it's actually a meticulously executed reproduction of someone else's expressive improvisation. How Mr. Einarsson relates to the original, and the rebel culture that produced it, is left unclear.

At SculptureCenter he has a room to himself. He has covered its walls with an all-over stenciled pattern of cyclone fencing, placed a plain stainless-steel bench in the middle of the space and hung a single photograph of a boarded-up mosque on the wall.

Obviously there's all kinds of "content" in the air: detainment, destruction, religion. But the installation conveys a funny kind of blankness. Where we think we're going to get political art, we start to see design. The fencing patterns look like wall-

paper, the bench like Modernist furniture, with the photo adding a piquant dab of color. Everything is loaded, but no shots are fired: no statements issued, opinions offered, directions given. You are invited to be bewildered.

Mr. Einarsson's piece is one of eight commissioned by SculptureCenter for its annual In Practice

## Art can be found at the bottom of the stairs, or even in the storeroom.

Projects series, which is organized by Sarina Basta. The other seven, by other artists, are installed in the narrow tunnels that run through the basement of a building that was originally designed as a power plant but actually used as a trolley repair shop.

A group of small sculptures and prints by an artist who goes by the name Alex Arcadia are clustered at the bottom of the basement stairs. Slick and logo-bearing, they are meant to be examples of a product line called BrightShinyFuture that Mr. Arcadia has invented as a take-off on corporate globalism. As such,

they fall within the dystopian picture that Ms. Bonvicini and Mr. Einarsson have set up, but too neatly.

Sculptures by Amy O'Neill present a different problem. Based on the forms of cages she saw in a ruined petting zoo near her childhood home in Pennsylvania, they look out of place in the cavelike underground setting, as if they were in storage. They need space and light, or something, to take on life.

By contrast underground is just the place for Karen Yasinsky's stop-motion puppet animation "La Nuit," based on Jean Vigo's classic surrealist film "L'Atalante." Using hand-made dolls as actors, Ms. Yasinsky makes a romantic tale look like a twitchy cartoon emanating from the subconscious. Expressions of sexual longing look like seizures. The film is short, funny and creepy.

Two other artists also turn the mysteriously sepulchral basement location to their advantage. Karin Schneider uses a short section of tunnel as a kind of multipurpose exhibition space: a screening room, a painting gallery, and a theater for eye-tormenting light-show displays. She has also covered the back wall with a sheet of clear plastic to give a view into SculptureCenter's storage area, which, in the sight-altering atmosphere she has created, assumes the allure of Tutankhamen's tomb.

Lucy Raven, co-editor of an audio-magazine called The Relay Project, makes her New York exhibition de-



Karin Schneider's installation incorporates the center's storage area.



Fia Backstrom's installation includes a video titled "Domestic Affairs."





Photographs by Joe Fornabai for The New York Times

Part of "Ethereic Projection," the installation by Garrett Ricciardi and Ross Cisneros at SculptureCenter.

but with a multilayered documentary installation about copper mining in the American Southwest. Mesmerizingly episodic, the piece weaves together references to technology, labor, mineral wealth and ecological damage but turns what might have been a political tract into a critical meditation on the American industrial landscape, as fact and poetic symbol.

A variation on the same landscape figures in "Ethereic Projection," a film by Garrett Ricciardi and Ross Cisneros. Mixing extended shots of snowy New England forests — Mr. Cisneros lives on a farm in New Hampshire — with computer-generated images of roller-coaster rides among alpine peaks, it somehow brings environmental activism, social communalism, the American sublime and Werner Herzog together in a haunting combination. I have no idea what the film is exactly about, if it is exactly about anything, but it has been replaying in my mind for days.

I save for last an installation by Fia Backstrom titled "Art Politiquement Engagé" because it distills so much of the elusive spirit of the other work. Ms. Backstrom, who was born in Stockholm, seems to be a constant

presence in the New York art world these days but difficult to pin down.

Although she makes object-type things — broadsides, posters, tapes and so on — most are byproducts of organizational activities that she either initiates or participates in. Crosses between conferences, performances, readings and parties, they add up to a new variation on event-based art.

Despite these collaborative engagements, much of her work is based on skeptical scrutiny of the very phenomenon of collectivism as a social, political and aesthetic mode. Her SculptureCenter installation, which refers to activist politics of the past as well as art world communalism in the present, is very much in this mode. Is her work nonpolitical? Apolitical? Post-political? Cryptopolitical? Take your choice.

Its bottom-line impulse seems to be to keep all ideology unstable and to treat all forms of power — including the art industry — with suspicion. To do so an artist has to travel light, stay alert and keep her tracks covered, a healthy way to go.