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## Star-Studded Cast

NEW YORK 11.03.09



Left: Delusional Downtown Diva Isabel Halley, artist Kembra Pfahler, and Delusional Downtown Diva Lena Dunham. Right: Artist Rob Pruitt. (Photos: Roger Kisby)

"WHEN I HEARD ABOUT Rob Pruitt Presents: *The First Annual Art Awards*, I thought it was a joke" was a sentiment I heard several times amid the glamorous crowd sipping champagne last Thursday at the Guggenheim. It felt like a scene in a Woody Allen movie (as does most of my life). Sponsored by Calvin Klein and featuring a bona fide—though teensy—red carpet (where Yvonne Force and Doreen Remen of the Art Production Fund fussed delightedly in front of the cameras), one felt the frisson of history in the making that people of yore must have sensed at the advent of the Golden Globes (a model for the festivities, according to presenter Matthew Higgs). Or social commentary like *The Gong Show*. I must confess, thanks to Pruitt's unprecedented breadth of vision, I broke my red-carpet cherry, holding his steady hand while I did my best impression of a deer in headlights (and rued privately that I hadn't combed out my hair since I scrambled out of my apartment with a wet head. Damn!). But enough about *moi*. The whole event hit the perfect head-scratchingly "meta" note.

Indeed, it was the cool lunch table of the art world celebrating itself. The well-executed, Academy Awards-like event tried its best to twit its own insiderness—and muddy the waters between players and wannabes—with MCs the Delusional Downtown Divas. Videos featuring these "three art brats trying hard to be effortless" as they attempt to crash "the art scene" were the ceremony's connective tissue. The trio of "kids who grew up stealing pretzels from Leo Castelli's kitchen" (quaint!) now "bunk together in Peter Halley's TriBeCa loft" as they work their family contacts and their "delusory" entitlement to art-world validation as their shtick—a self-reflexive loop significantly enhanced by this swanky gig, no doubt—to the dismay of equally ambitious though less well-connected wannabes everywhere.



Left: Critic Jerry Saltz with Art Production Fund's Yvonne Force Villareal. Right: Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector with artist Maurizio Cattelan. (Photo: Roger Kisby)

Anyway. It's hard to imagine anyone other than Pruitt who could put his name on a shindig like this and manage not to make it about his ego. With his twinkly, human-size penguin tableaux waddling up the ramp behind the podium to playfully echo the dressed-up crowd and his deft casting choices, Pruitt's first go at founding a tradition felt strikingly inclusive. Even if no women were nominated as Writer of the Year, the ladies were well represented elsewhere: Joan Jonas (in a fierce white bob) received a Lifetime Achievement Award; Mary Heilmann relished her Artist of the Year moment and crowed "I own this place!" like a champ in a Pucci-esque sheath. In keeping with the star-fucker theme (an implicit tribute to Warhol's superstars), the best intervention into the archive was the Rob Pruitt Award to Cynthia Plaster Caster—the gal who raised groupieness to Art through her oeuvre of plaster-cast famous-rockers penises. She even toted along her Jimi Hendrix "trophy" like a fashion accessory, waving the plaster member overhead as she received her award:

"I'm a show-off and a name-dropper. That's what groupies are known for. This here is Jimi Hendrix"—waves him overhead to cheers from the classy crowd—"not at full capacity!"

Pruitt suggested this would be a good night to cast him: "My penis has never been bigger." (More cheers.)

"I wanna thank you, doll, very much," beamed Cynthia. "I am really excited about adding your large or small penis to my collection. I dedicate this to Frank Zappa—he called celebrity dicks an art form. Stay hard!"



Left: Artist Cynthia Plaster Caster. (Photo: Roger Kisby) Right: Kylie Minogue and James Franco. (Photo: Linda Yablonsky)

The smattering of “real” celebrities like Kylie Minogue, Julianne Moore, and the *Twilight* guy seemed oddly superfluous. “A key moment to me was Klaus [Biesenbach] getting down on his knee to Kylie,” I overheard. “How proud our little art world was to have a few fairly minor celebrities presenting. James Franco waiting in his car outside, not really wanting to mingle with art-world types before he comes in and almost flubs his three lines. Pretty obvious how absurd [pathetic?] any idea of parity with the big cultural heavyweights like film, TV, and music is . . .”

Upstaging the “pros,” my favorite presenter couple was Kembra Pfahler (of the Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black)—attired in her birthday suit, pasty blue body paint, a humongous matted black wig, and blacked-out teeth—and her “date,” Jeffrey Deitch, who, as always, looked dapper and pleased as punch. Pfahler was the perfect foil for the entire room. It was hilarious to watch the postapocalyptic apparition table-hopping like a weird nude Muppet.

I mistook *New York Times* style writer David Colman for Jack Pierson: “Everyone does that.” Colman himself has a disorder where he can’t remember anybody’s name, so he calls them “Steve” or “Wendy.” “The ‘Steves’ never mind,” he marveled in a natty burnt-sienna suit perfectly set off by a teal velvet bow tie. *Artforum’s* Knight Landesman, too, sported deep-persimmon-colored haberdashery. While I’m usually bored by men’s fashion, yet another inspired look was a chap from the Met with flowing white hair, fabulously turned out in plum velvet. When I wasn’t checking everyone out or reading along with the teleprompter that scripted every bit of patter, I would gaze up in wonder at the Modern Icon that spiraled overhead and seemed to entomb us in its belly like tables full of Jonahs, schmoozing away in this Frank Lloyd Wright–designed whale of Art World Prestige. “The museum belongs to everyone and no one,” noted Kaspar König (in the tribute video for his Lifetime Achievement Award).



Left: Curator Cay Sophie Rabinowitz and Museum Ludwig director Kasper König (left) with dealer Jessie Washburne-Harris. (Photo: Ruth Root) Right: Francisco Costa, artist Ryan Trecartin, and Julianne Moore. (Photo: Roger Kisby).

As Calvin Klein Collection New Artist of the Year, Ryan Trecartin bounded up to “thank my parents and Elizabeth Dee. It’s more than just a dealer,” he gushed. “I mean, I love it!” Eyes were rolling. The person next to me received a text: “Tell me Ryan Trecartin did not just win!” “The art world is so fragmented,” mused an artist at my table. “If they’re making this like the Oscars, it’s weird to make the art world seem centralized when it’s not. . . . And the awards are based on [just] this year . . .”

Someone else gave me the whole megillah about how controversial some people found the event. People “voting against their friends—with their consent—to spare them the embarrassment of receiving such an award . . .”

“What happened to the art world?” asked another observer. “If they can’t simultaneously mock and partake of a cultural phenomenon [like awards shows]—what’s the F-ing point? The question to ask is, What took so long?”

— Rhonda Lieberman

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