

THE REAL DEAL

The Unassuming Doyenne of New York's
Experimental Art World:

EMILY SUNDBLAD

BY ALEXIS SWERDLOFF
PHOTOGRAPHED BY LEIGH JOHNSON

Fumihiko "Charlie Brown" Hayashi of The Last Gallery, Javier Peres of Peres Projects and Emily Sundblad of Reena Spaulings -- three dealers from Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York, respectively -- do a lot more than provide gallery space. They act as cheerleaders, mentors and drinking buddies to the artists they represent. Committed to keeping business authentic even during troubled times and maintaining a vision large enough to embrace the most subversive acts and radical ideas, they are THE REAL DEAL.

At first glance, it's hard to imagine that the soft-spoken artist and gallerist Emily Sundblad, clad in a white T-shirt with a tan sweater knotted around her shoulders, blonde hair up in a barrette, was once a self-described punk kid. "In high school, I had green hair for a long time, and it was shaved on the sides," she says in her delicate Swedish lilt. But it's this mix of a little bit sensible and a little bit freaky that has put Sundblad on a perch atop the New York experimental art world, as co-helmer of Reena Spaulings Fine Art, one of the premiere small galleries in New York and a prominent artist in her own right. "I think the whole punk thing was really important for me, and I really think it still informs what I do -- the whole DIY ethos. Not necessarily in an aesthetic way, but definitely in a philosophical way."

Sundblad, now 32, spent her formative years in Dalsjöfors and Stockholm. Then, at 18, she made for London, which seemed like "the natural place" to escape. In between internships at fashion magazines and nights dancing till the wee hours of the morning, she met fellow Swede and photographer Hanna Liden. "We decided we needed to do something, and we applied to college here in New York," Sundblad says. A month-long exploratory stay at the Chelsea Hotel later, the two got an apartment in Williamsburg and enrolled at Parsons, where Sundblad studied fine art and Liden photography. Upon graduating in 2002, Sundblad and Liden landed a gig curating a group show at Priska C. Juschka Fine Art (which Holland Cotter raved about in the *New York Times*), but Sundblad needed a way to stay in the country. So she started a business in the cheapest space she could find: a storefront on far-east Grand Street. In the beginning, Sundblad says, "there was no business plan, there was no manifesto -- there was just this space." And at that point, she recalls, "New York seemed to need more experimental gallery spaces, and there were so many artists we knew who didn't have places to exhibit." Sundblad and her boyfriend John Kelsey (a member of the fictional corporation/art collaborative Bernadette Corporation) got to work.

Throughout 2004, Sundblad and Kelsey steadily put on performances (musical, dance, conceptual), art shows (their first featured ripped-up pieces of Michael Krebber catalogues taped to the walls), and parties, essentially creating a clubhouse where their friends could convene -- and occasionally wreak havoc. Such underground endeavors are difficult to maintain in this city, and after a *New York Times* reporter kept coming by, asking what this curious space was called, Sundblad and Kelsey decided on a name: Reena Spaulings. According to Sundblad, the name originated in the fact that "Neither John nor I wanted to use our names, so we let this fictional woman Reena Spaulings, a character in a book that was being written by the Bernadette Corporation at the time, be the stand-in. We thought she sounded kind of glamorous and trashy at the same time."

The gallery, which moved in 2006 from Grand Street to a former brothel on East Broadway, is home to a slew of internationally recognized artists, including Klara Liden (Hanna's sister), Seth Price, K8 Hardy, Jutta Koether and Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon. Then there's "Reena Spaulings" herself, the *nom d'art* of Sundblad and a rotating roster of collaborators. In 2006 "she" was invited to participate at the Whitney Biennial. "In its best form, she's an extension of our gallery practice," Sundblad says, who is insistent that Reena Spaulings is not a "collective," but more of an "umbrella" or a "brand," as the collaborators involved in her output are constantly changing. Whatever or whoever she is, Reena Spaulings has been very busy recently, with solo shows last year at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis and Paris's Galerie Chantal Crousel. In the months ahead, she'll be part of a group show at the Tate Modern and will have a solo show at Sutton Lane Gallery in Brussels. Finally, there's Reena Spaulings in her iteration as a bluegrass band, consisting of Sundblad and various downtown theater types who play their country-tinged tunes around town at venues like Joe's Pub, the Whitney and BAM.

For a relentless multitasker like Sundblad -- who also shows paintings under her own name, collaborates on video projects with Amy Granat, creates performance pieces with the group Grand Openings and fronts a Swedish synth band -- keeping everything in order and running smoothly is paramount. Which is not to say that she doesn't, in the spirit of her old punk-rock days, appreciate a little anarchy, too.

"For one of my favorite shows [at Reena Spaulings], Klara Liden invited pigeons to fly in and take over the gallery," she says. "It was really extreme -- we even had to feed the pigeons. For a month it was just us and the pigeons and that was how it was. It just was... totally different."

Hair/Makeup: **Khela Tyson** @khelatyson.com using Chanel.

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