

CROY NIELSEN

SEX AND THE CITY

Thomas Bayrle, Julia Benjamin, Allison Katz, Bodys Isek Kingelez, R.Lyon and Jessie Stead, Miriam Visaczki, Madelon Vriesendorp, Philadelphia Wireman

Organized by Sebastian Black

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When I was a very young man I bought a scratch off lottery ticket from The Big Tomato, a greasy spoon in great grey Poughkeepsie. I bought it at the counter by the front door and looked it over while I ate my eggs and hash. The fun side of the ticket was pink and turquoise with garish dollar symbols arranged in a grid and a suggestive backdrop of light pink squiggles. The reverse was plain old white beneath a predatory lease agreement worth of teeny tiny letters. "What are my expectations here?" I thought, perplexed by the weirdly mysterious stakes of such highly circumscribed play and by my newly blooming self perception.

When my bill came I used the handle of my fork to scrape away at the gummy surface. I got three 7's and my jackpot was 10 dollars. For a moment I felt the small freedom of breaking even and it reminded me of those mid-air regrets that hang around above cold swimming pools. I lay the ticket down with my check instead of cash and left in search of a less impeachable pastime.

To know a thing usually means to know its parts. A known thing must be divisible by other nameable things. However to be certain that the nameable parts of a thing are in fact the innate characteristics of that thing and not our own muddled impressions that thing must first be divided from us, which is to say, it must first be made into a thing. From this vantage knowledge begins to resemble a mechanism for distinguishing subjects from objects before it ever begins the business of ordering either category's constituents.

So what can it mean when people say "I know such and such a city like the back of my hand?" Are New York, or Berlin, or less plausibly Poughkeepsie all just so much knuckle, freckle, and nibbled cuticle? Do they not add up to more than a sum of the parts: buildings, pipes, people, poodles?

To know a city it ought to be absorbed not excised, personified not objectified. It has been said that knowledge of a city isn't obtained so much as conjured. This is because like a city knowledge itself resembles a set of ever changing and changeable processes, a burbling co-production of the subjects and objects that populate a given space. Maybe when professing familiarity with a place from now on we ought to say "I know such and such city like the front of my hand." Perhaps in so doing we make explicit what artists have known implicitly all along, that knowledge is situated within an interface, that it percolates and awaits the haptic aptitude of our fingertips, the slick prickling of our palms.