

SI

Swiss Institute/
Contemporary Art

SPIKE

Spike Art Magazine
Adina Glickstein
Irena Haiduk: *Cabaret Économique*

“CABARET ÉCONOMIQUE” AT SWISS INSTITUTE, NEW YORK

by Adina Glickstein



What did you get for Valentine's Day? Some New Yorkers were treated to a unique blend of sexual energy and frustration in Irena Haiduk's "Cabaret Économique", performed as part of her current show at the Swiss Institute.

102 Franklin St. Front 1
New York NY 10013

info@swissinstitute.net
swissinstitute.net

Tel +1 212 925 2035
Fax +1 212 925 2040

For *REMASTER*, her first solo show in New York, Irena Haiduk transformed the two-story Swiss Institute into a pair of theatrical stage-sets. As I wandered into the downstairs mise-en-scene, I was immediately allayed by the soft pink light and soothing hum permeating the pastel interior. Upstairs, in contrast, is all lucite and black latex: a sexy and slightly sinister offset to the womblike amphitheater on the lower floor, eerily empty when I was there in the after-lunch lull of a Wednesday afternoon. Over the exhibition's run, these static spaces become activated by various encounters, both official and not. One guest, a retired modern dancer of my mother's generation, struck a contrapposto pose and stood enraptured by her reflection in the mirrored floor while I was there.

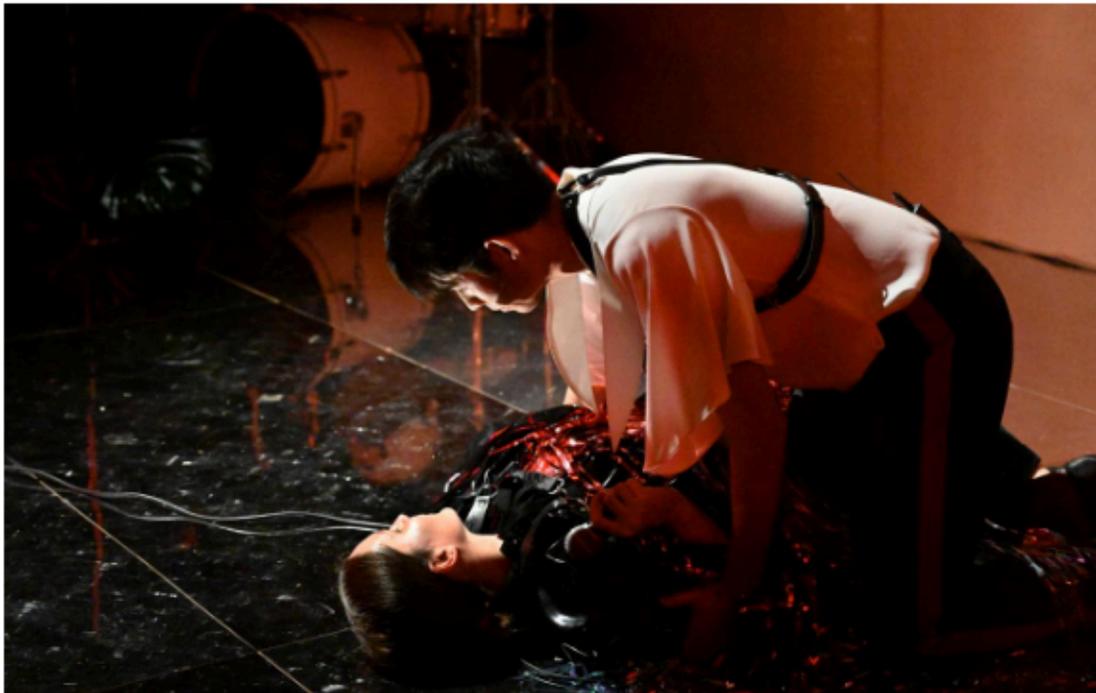
Drawing in corporate LARP, setbuilding, and performance, Haiduk's practice explores alternatives to image-obsession. Despite all its optical puns and luscious surface textures, *REMASTER* fits well within this lineage: the real meat of the work comes from shared presence in the space, with the staged performances offering a way outside of the purely visual, toward a new configurations of the senses. In lieu of the standard bio that would accompany such an exhibition, Haiduk offers a seven-page treatise in favor of non-visual traditions – of knowing through feeling and speaking.



Enter Haiduk's version of a cabaret, which opened on Valentines Day, no less. At the show's premiere I found myself packed into a corner of the downstairs theatre set, pressing my very alone and single body up against the exhibition's back wall. Rainstorm noises begin, as others start to file in and fill the space, taking their places on a row of benches that look like stone at first, but turned out to be quite cushy. Once full, the space feels rather small – an intimate character that I come to resent in the "Cabaret Économique's" more confrontational moments (which are most of them).

The evening's overture, in the style of Haiduk's prior *Seductive Exacting Realism*, features a procession of umbrella-bearing women standing perfectly erect as they step in time with the drumbeats of a Christian Schmitz-fronted live band. Dean Kissick emerges, taking center stage behind a mic decked in birds of paradise. Handling the mic like he's James Dean but with major emcee sadboy energy, Dean moans, waxing angsty about the emotional rainstorm these umbrella-clad women seem to evade: "Where do I find joy I seek, where so many happy people live? CABARET!"

Haiduk welcomes us all as "filthy rats" and like the hypothetical spectator in Althusser's episode about interpellation, I feel both perceived and addressed as rodent. A program of readings and dance numbers follows. Kissick descends on the "dirty, dirty" audience with a feather duster, heeding Haiduk's iron-handed direction. He is routinely positioned as her punching bag/love interest throughout the night. The two of them circle each other like boxers in tinsel-trimmed bondage harnesses, Kissick flinging jokes, and Irena, insults. "Where do mermaids like to shop? *Net a Porter!*" During the intermission, they degrade one another, audibly, backstage.



One of several musical interludes involves an acrobatic pas de deux, where one performer whips another, whose outstretched body is placed around a wheeled dolly so that submissive lunges her body into the audience. Everyone's movements are so feline and mechanical that I don't notice that one "dancer" is a mannequin until her pelvis comes unplugged from the rest of her body, a catsuit-clad accordion expanding and contracting as she's skated across the shiny floor of the space.

With one arm encased in a mangled bear paw, Haiduk takes the mic and recounts a tale of animal abuse. Just like an Ulrike Ottinger heroine, she's cruel but irresistible, so everyone heeds her injunctions and the show clomps along to the beat of our masochistic delight: the valentines fantasy of getting topped by Irena Haiduk. People who have studied under her tell me she teaches without a syllabus, you just take it from her as she goes along – doing what she says whenever she says to do it, because her expertise defies schematic organization. For one ballad in "Cabaret Économique," she takes to the stage with deadpan intensity: "I WILL KILL MYSELF OVER YOUR DEAD BODY IF YOU FUCK ANYBODY BUT ME." Irena, we would never dream of it. Rounding out the night, Kissick coos to her:

"I want to/go down on you/in the Swiss/Institute".

Adina Glickstein is a writer and critic based in New York.

Up until March 20, Irena Haiduk's *REMASTER*