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Duke Riley's Insane Triumph

By JERRY SALTZ | August 14, 2009



The battlefield before the mayhem Photo by Frantz Vincent



Procession of gladiators, Riley's *Those About to Die Salute You*

I had witnessed something special, and also glimpsed one of the ways that artists from everywhere are taking matters into their own hands and righting the ship that is the New York art world.

After months of preparation and with scores of participants and unending support from the underdog host institution the Queens Museum (who either got every type of permit in the book or violated every city code imaginable), artist Duke Riley pulled off one of the finest performance events in recent memory, his own demented simulacra of a "Naumachia." What's a "Naumachia?" In ancient Greek it literally means "naval combat." Leave it to the Roman emperors, however, to have gotten really gory with it. Mock naval battles were held in flooded basins with real prisoners who were condemned to death. Participants saluted the emperor with the famous, "Morituri te salutant" ("those who are about to die salute

There were tossed tomatoes aplenty, although the one that smashed me in the shoulder within minutes of the event's commencement I never saw coming. As I wiped off the runny residue, togas and robes fluttered, dancers dressed as Roman vixens writhed on floating platforms, Black Sabbath's "War Pig" blasted over loudspeakers, passenger jets roared overhead, and spectators jeered and cheered as leaky boats made of what looked like reeds and junk foundered in shallow water, rammed one another, and fired watermelon cannonballs in every direction.

The spectacle was Duke Riley's spectacular [Those About to Die Salute You](#), billed as a Naumachia — a live Roman naval battle; the place, a flooded pool on the World's Fair grounds in Flushing Meadows Corona Park; the scene, a gigantic blowout/fraternity food fight by way of a Roman toga party, *Apocalypse Now*, the Crusades, and a Happening. By 9:00 p.m., half an hour after the mayhem began, all that remained were sinking ships, floating spears, hundreds of revelers in the basin, and a burning boat firing off sky rockets.



"Here comes the pig boat" Photo by Frantz Vincent

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY



Brooklyn Museum fends off Staten Island Photo by Frantz Vincent



Brooklyn Museum team with artist Duke Riley (at right)



Art critics Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith Photo posted by museumnerd (<http://twitpic.com/dshs1>)

you"). Then the doomed died.

Last night in Queens, participants merely got messy and wet. The combatants, outfitted in different colored robes, represented different borough museums. Red was the Queens Museum; yellow, the Bronx Museum; blue, the Brooklyn Museum; and green, El Museo del Barrio. My money was on the fierce-looking Queens team from the start. After a reedy-voiced announcer revved up the crowd and the boats all entered the faux lake, the battle began. Immediately, the folks from the Bronx made a noble effort to capsize the Queens fighters. But then Brooklyn snuck up on their flank and did them in. At that point, the mighty Queens ship initiated a daring mid-lake boarding maneuver, jumping aboard the Brooklyn boat, hauling toga-clad soldiers off the decks. Next, the Queens mariners jumped into the water and overturned the vessel. Out of nowhere, after the appearance of sundry pirate dinghies and one zebra-striped kayaker, a large replica of the Staten Island Ferry oared in and somehow fell apart. Soon, a giant galleon, part Disney and part amusement-park ride, entered the moat, representing El Museo del Barrio. I don't know what happened then, but somehow Queens got the best of everyone. A weird battleship entered, was set on fire, and began exploding, as the thousands in attendance danced, cheered, and rocked to Queen's "We Are the Champions."

Riley's squirrely genius, obsession with all things nautical, and his personal acts of public piracy are exactly what the art world needs right now. Last night was a perfect example of an artist taking matters into his own hands while an institution gave him more than enough rope to hang himself. Riley has been building up to this triumph for a while. In 2005, as the art world solemnly gathered at a West Side pier to witness a reenactment of Robert Smithson's famous Floating Island, all of a sudden, "after months of planning, days of reconnaissance, and hours of alcohol consumption," Riley and a cohort clamored aboard the island. Of course, they had to almost immediately scamper off as the U.S. Coast Guard chased them (they were captured). Soon after, Riley attracted the attention of the Coast Guard again when his homemade submarine, straight out of Jules Verne, got too close to the Queen Mary 2 in Brooklyn Harbor. As I walked with the crowds, under the gigantic utopian globe that dominates Flushing Meadows, I knew that the more wild cards like Riley that

get into the mix, the less homogenized the art world will be. And we all know nature hates sameness.