

SEPTEMBER 2006

ARTnews

China's Art Market Boom



What's So Funny About Performance Art

Russia's Latest Museum Scandal

Louise Bourgeois ■ Jeff Koons ■ Paul McCarthy



Hitting a Sour Note

"People eat, text, and do their makeup while driving in the bike lane," sang the Complaints Choir of Chicago.

"There is always a tall man standing in front of me," lamented Helsinki's choir. "I want my money back," bel-lowed Birmingham, England's. Watching videos of these performances, an audience of especially peevis New Yorkers cheered. They were members of the newly founded Complaints Choir of New York gathered at the Mehanata Bulgarian Bar downtown for their first rehearsal. As **Alan Licht**, the choir's conductor, composer, and lyricist, led the group in some warm-up scales—"Bellyaching, bellyaching," they sang in the cadence of "Frère Jacques"—the sweltering, dark bar seemed to put everyone in the right mood. "I should've gone to the beach," griped choir coordinator **Marc Nasdor**. Organized by the nonprofit arts outfit New Wilderness Foundation, the choir is a spin-off of groups formed by Finnish artist **Tellervo Kalleinen** and German artist **Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen**—Kalleinen's husband and sometime collaborator.

"We want to make a truly collective experience out of the complaints of individual people," said Kalleinen, who visited the rehearsal with Kochta-Kalleinen to share their expertise. Since 2003 the couple has formed complaints choirs in six cities around the world. Videos of these performances are included in the show "Arctic Hysteria: New Art from Finland," on view at P.S.1 in Queens through the 15th of this month. In each city they put up flyers solicit-

ing gripes from the locals, some of whom join the choir and help write the song. "Anybody can take part," Kalleinen told the group. "And it's free. It would be crazy to charge for complaining."

In the Finnish language, "complaints choir" is an expression used to tease constant kvetchers. "We take ourselves so seriously," said Kalleinen. After the artists organized the first choir in Birmingham, their performance video became a hit on YouTube. Fans wrote to the artists for tips on forming their own choirs, and from Jerusalem to Penn State, recordings began popping up on the site. Next year the Chicago-based punk record label Smog Veil will release a feature-length Complaints Choir documentary.

Like the choirs, Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen's other collaborative projects often take the form of large-scale participatory performances based on the yearnings and dissatisfactions of real people. They're currently working on "I Love My Job," a series of short films that stage revenge fantasies solicited from Swedish professionals. The project, produced by the Göteborg Konsthall, will premiere later this year.

The New York choir, which at press time was preparing for an August debut at P.S.1's Warm Up music series, generated 500-odd complaints. By and large, they found, New Yorkers complained about other people. ("College students vomit on my doorstep"; "My boyfriend always gets a little pee on the floor.") People in Saint Petersburg worried about unrequited love,



and in Chicago 50 percent of the complaints were about traffic, Kochta-Kalleinen recalled. "There's always a certain proudness of people in their complaints culture," he said. "The media in Budapest got really upset that this was not a Hungarian invention." —Lamar Clarkson

Complaints choirs perform in, from top, Saint Petersburg, Helsinki, and Chicago.