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Sweet Dreams: A Party for Julian Schnabel at the Domino Sugar Factory

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As far as repurposed spaces go, the Domino Sugar Factory, nestled beneath the Brooklyn half of the Williamsburg Bridge, airs on the side of unfinished. The building was a beautiful long column of tangled concrete and glass with a high arched ceiling that let in beams of light from the setting sun. The air inside was—let's say ripe. The guests, who had gathered in this strange backdrop for a dinner thrown by the nonprofit arts organization Creative Time in honor of the artist Julian Schnabel, were all trying to place it. "Vinegar." "A foot." "Garbage dump." Mr. Schnabel's friend Laurie Anderson probably had the most correct description with "this old factory smell."



It wasn't without a certain charm, as if the very expensive party—Creative Time's president, Anne Pasternak, said the organization had raised \$1.1 million before anyone had even finished eating chef Mario Batali's salad course—were also an illegal squatter.

"You are the first people ever to wine and dine legally at the Domino Sugar Factory," Ms. Pasternak told the room, perched atop a stage. ("I always like to be first, you know," she told me earlier.) "Thank you for making my dream come true!"

Everyone mostly ignored the giant inflatable rats that were set up across the street in protest of Two Trees, a management company that took over development after the factory closed in 2004. They hired the private contractor New York Insulation to remove asbestos from the building. Protestors were zipping

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themselves into clear plastic HazMat suits, the kind used in asbestos abatement, handing out fake party announcement cards that read:

NY Insulation

- Has received hundreds of citations for violating NYS and NYC asbestos regulations
- Has been barred from doing public work in NYS for wage theft and lying to government officials.

Is this the type of company that you would hire?



It didn't exactly scream "let's party!" But their presence went almost entirely unspoken. Guests had Julian Schnabel on their minds.

Inside the factory, he'd installed massive paintings on fabric that had been cut into the shape of a square cross. (One of the blobs of white paint, I couldn't help but notice, looked conspicuously rat-like.) In the back, there were tall, bulbous white sculptures that were reminiscent of the free form shapes of the paintings.

"How did you make them?" the artist and art dealer Tony Shafrazi asked Mr. Schnabel.

"I made them with my fucking hands," he said. "With wood and chicken wire and a fucking axe."

I thanked Mr. Schnabel for having had me at his home the month before, when I was writing a profile of him.

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“It could have been better,” he said of the article, smiling rather kindly. “All the quotes. Quotes are so—1971. So Walter Benjamin. Just write about what you feel. Write about what matters to you.”

He left it at that.



Dick Cavett—like, the Dick Cavett, Dick Cavett Show Dick Cavett—was something of the night’s keynote speaker.

“I’m a fan of Julian Schnabel,” he said from the stage, “and not everyone can say that.”

The mostly art world crowd seemed unimpressed by his presence (“Who’s Dick Cavett?” the person sitting next to me said), and they chattered on as he talked. “I tried to imagine myself writing Julian roast jokes. I thought of one just now and wrote it down. Julian Schnabel is to art what Dick Cheney is to ethics—”

Stella Schnabel, the artist’s daughter, jumped up and seized the microphone. She asked people to have a “modicum of respect.”

“What were your exact words?” Mr. Cavett said. “Shut the fuck up?” Everyone clapped. “I have to be somewhere,” he continued. “So I want to thank you. Julian and I agreed once that we both subscribe to Gore Vidal’s edict: ‘Success is not enough. One’s friends must fail.’”

Mr. Schnabel was introduced, and as he marched slowly from his seat, an eerie hush fell over the room.

“I’m amazed how quiet it is all of a sudden,” Mr. Schnabel said, taking the stage. He was wearing a

dark suit with a white shirt, wearing the collar outside of the jacket like a ’70s gangster. “You would have done much better to listen to Dick,” he said ominously. A pause to let that set in, then, cheerfully, “This building’s amazing, isn’t it? It just seemed like such an opportunity to put in some paintings, and there’s some sculpture over there you can look at.”

He’s a rotund man, barrel chested with one of the most famous living egos, but he somewhat shyly faced off to the side as he talked, microphone in hand.

“What an opportunity I’ve had to just make art and have a family and to live in what I think is the center of the world,” he said.

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