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We, the People, Too  
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John Haber  
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Topics: Corporations Are People Too,  
Winkleman Gallery

“Corporations are people, my friend.” When Mitt Romney insists on it, he does more than express Republican ideals—and his own inability to act fully human. He also supplies the theme for a group show, at Winkleman through February 11. Maybe he explains, too, why the show’s images are so, well, impersonal.

“Corporations Are People Too” could make you downright nostalgic for corporate abuse. It starts long before the latest primary, with classic photography by

Berenice Abbott, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, and Louis Faurer. Abbott finds precisionist beauty in a coffee factory, while Hine and Lange shift perspective to workers. Faurer even allows them to enjoy themselves, on a drive through Times Square, with the top down. Is that a corporation in the back seat? If so, it is the last time corporations here take the back seat to anyone. Corporations aside, people after that are in short supply. In Phillip Toledano’s photos, they vanished long ago, although one would hardly know it. Cubicles look much the same in bankrupt offices as in yours, give or take the pencils shot through drop ceiling tiles. Yes, Ian Davis lends a board meeting or an act of CPR the look of a Soviet party rally, with a flat painting style to match. Yet the stately boardrooms in Jacqueline Hassink’s photographs omit even the empty suits. Chris Dorland’s blurry silkscreen Hilton and stylized logos serve as signs of alien life.

Yevgeniy Fiks does hear back from individuals, in response to his donating Lenin’s *Imperialism* to their corporate libraries. (If you are looking to borrow it, it bears the subtitle *The Highest Form of Capitalism*.) Much of the humor lies in their personalized responses, which pointedly avoid questions of content. Most often, they say that their companies simply do not *have* libraries. If by now you are ready to give a corporation a big hug, Kota Ezawa’s painted L. L. Bean catalog could make anyone want to shop online. And that points to an interesting problem for the show—and for art.

Corporate personhood is, alas, long-settled law—in a limited sense that I could not explain for you while staying awake. It is also just one pillar of *Citizens United v. FEC*, the 2010 Court decision that unleashed a flood of campaign spending and gave Romney’s point new and bitter relevance. The Court also relied on the ideas of money as speech, freedom of association, and absolute freedom of speech. But think

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about it. Taken together, do these mean that a wealthy collector is really an artist? Do they mean that a corporate collection is necessarily a museum?

Come to think of it, maybe yes. It amounts to many a postmodern critique of art institutions and arts funding—starting well before Jeffrey Deitch took over LA MOCA, the New Museum sold out to the Joannou collection, or the New York Public Library unloaded a great American landscape to Wal-Mart as, in time, the core of a new museum. This show means to continue that critique, but it could fall victim to it, too. In fact, if you (heaven forbid) are a corporation, you may have want to respond along with those librarians. (People do, you know.) Big business, you may want to object, is a big subject, and can a small group show treat it fairly?

What connects early modern empathy to corporate identity? And what exactly runs through these works—other than the obvious lesson that corporate interiors and logos have creative designers? Most of all, could the whole idea of an impersonal corporation mask personal and corporate responsibility? In the real world, people occupy those boardrooms, mostly without saluting, and they make fateful decisions. Even Fik's humor comes at the expense of individuals, who are, after all, underlings. I can only say in defense that group shows are people, too, and this one has a creative design all its own.