

ALICE NEEL'S SOIRÉE

(After an Alice Neel Exhibition)

She greets us at the top of the stairs,
not nude but naked, her flesh
bulking forward as she heaves
herself up from the striped chair.
Her cheeks are pink but she's not blushing.
Unashamed of her Mother Hubbard body,
she looks right at us through
the only thing she's wearing (glasses)
as she invites us to take off our clothes.

We feel a little square for not complying
until we see that most of the other guests
are dressed, although a good third
are wandering around in the buff,
including a bemused and foul-smelling fellow
who seems to have a couple of extra
penises strapped to his pelvis
and claims to be writing an oral
history of the universe.

It's an odd mix: curators, artists, family,
neighbors, street people, transvestites,
and one Fuller Brush Man with a boyish
chipmunky look, whose blue bow tie
matches his eyes. He's got a few samples
in his breast pocket, and as he pulls one out
I notice the numbers tattooed to his wrist.
Nearby, someone clearly crazy, with scarlet ears,
writhes in an armchair, snarling. I give him

a wide berth. There are a few big names: Warhol
appears to be meditating with his shirt off,
his serene expression a sharp
contrast with the long scars that crisscross
his abdomen below his woman's breasts.
There's Meyer Schapiro, wrinkled down
to his eyelids but still lively. And there's

the porn star Annie Sprinkle, sporting,
among other accoutrements, a padlock in her vagina.

I hear someone say Allen Ginsberg
might show up. Meanwhile, I keep
almost recognizing people then blurting
the wrong names, but most of them
don't seem to mind—except for one,
a curator from the Met, who gets bitchy
when I ask if he's Truman Capote.
The Wall Street tycoon (face shadowed with green)
looks a little like Harold Bloom.

Alice waddles through the room, holding
a paintbrush like a wand, or as if
she were the nonchalant conductor
of this human symphony.
She's put on a blue dress: "I was beginning
to feel like so much meat," she says
to a woman wearing nothing
but a huge blue hat and pink panties.
"But you of course are a glorious creature."

Then I see Frank O'Hara from across the room,
his nose in profile like a small cliff, unmistakable,
his eyes wide in a blue trance and the lilacs
behind him seeming to crown his head,
and I rush over to him as to an old friend
and tell him how much I've always wanted to meet him,
and when he turns toward me I'm not sure
if he's smiling or grimacing until he says,
"Well, what on earth has taken you so long?"

- Jeffrey Harrison