

“Institutional Wellbeing: An olfactory plan for Grafisch Atelier Utrecht and Centrum Beeldende Kunst Utrecht”

History

Past as present context

“Institutional Wellbeing: An olfactory plan for *Grafisch Atelier Utrecht* and *Centrum Beeldende Kunst Utrecht*” has been produced under the auspices of *c pronounced /k/*, a subsidiary of *Contraposto Home Décor*, Brian Goeltzenleuchter’s more established art/company.

Contraposto focuses upon questions of distribution and value, using e commerce to distribute “home accents” candles, soaps, bird feeders in the shapes of so called ‘high culture’ objects, western and non western from Michelangelo’s *David Head Soap* to the more recent *Unpacking Iraq* series .

The *Contraposto* web site deploys two voices to add value and validity to the objects promoted. One voice borrows the assertive style of marketing, an unadulterated adulation proposing that the superiority of the product over the so called ‘original’, encouraging us to rethink the relationship of material to meaning whilst at the same time undercutting the romantic myth of the ‘creator genius’. We are confronted also with the voice of a sales representative who encourages us to market the products ourselves. This voice treats the reader as an insider, obliging critics and writers to acknowledge the role they necessarily play in market.

The ideas revealed by this work are difficult, theoretical, rigorous: in order to avoid the alienation which too frequently results from rhetorical claims of objectivity, Goeltzenleuchter deploys humor in order to fix the work within the domain of ‘practice’ and maintain a clear distance from ‘theory’.

Thus, for example, the marketing voice describes the development of his “Genre Series” line of home fragrances Fauvism, Cubism, Impressionism etc. as “ideally suited to provincial museums needing to fill gaps in their collections”, whilst we, as presumed sales representatives, are cautioned to “avoid selling more than two fragrances at a time to private buyers as their homes might begin to smell like a museum”.

Description

subject as object

c pronounced /k/ is described by Goeltzenleuchter as the ‘boutique’ wing of *Contraposto*; as such it is the creator and distributor of limited editions ideally suited to the ‘institutional’ context.

Institutional Wellbeing: An olfactory plan for Grafisch Atelier Utrecht and Centrum Beeldende Kunst Utrecht consists of a series of interventions leading to what I shall call an ‘accumulation’, appropriately presented to the public in the form of an *opening*.

We are confronted with expensively produced, large-scale serigraphs. These prints depict charts described by Goeltzenleuchter as “wellness profiles”. These profiles are derived from his company’s research into the strengths and weaknesses, compatibilities and points of friction between individuals working in the newly merged institutions *Grafisch Atelier Utrecht* and *Centrum Beeldende Kunst Utrecht*.

The “wellness profiles” re-work *Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man* to include a series of surrounding bands: olfactory stimulation, perception, consciousness, life, meaning and power. Locating these zones in a pseudo-scientific chart helps reveal the specious relationships between the elements, undercutting the kind of ‘new age’ spirituality implied. Although each of these terms may indeed be understood to ‘surround’ the individual, their representation as at once literal and absolute perversely yields an almost medieval representation of a hierarchy that moves rigidly outward from body to soul. That the representation of the body is here an analytical drawing by a Renaissance artist/scientist produces a delicious play between art and knowledge whilst at the same time neatly refusing the notion of originality through explicit intertextual visualization.

Within the organization, individuals have had their “wellbeing” tested using the entirely spurious process Goeltzenleuchter calls “Applied Kinesiology”. The process involves testing arbitrary physical reactions to certain olfactory stimuli basil, pepper, eucalyptus, rosemary, cedar etc. by requesting the ‘patient’ to hold the stimuli to their solar plexus while extending their other arm outward in an effort to resist downward pressure administered by Goeltzenleuchter. The strength of their reaction was recorded and analyzed to assess the strengthening effect of the stimulant.

A leaked internal memorandum gives access to the artist’s own language: “It is crucial that every member of the work force participates in a comprehensive diagnostic process, from



which a personal wellness profile will be created. Based on wellness profile data, environmental fragrances will be designed, distributed and used by all in the workforce to encourage personal and institutional wellbeing”¹.

Each employee, then, is given a personalized fragrance (contained in an understated keychain format for maximum accessibility designed to accentuate their strengths leading to “empowerment”.

Once again, the leaked memo reveals how Goeltzenleuchter proposes that these fragrances be used by the individual employee:

“The following 8ml sprayers are to be used in your workplace daily. The olfactory blend is potent, so one spray every hour should be sufficient. However, if you are in a staff meeting and it is necessary...”².

A second level of analysis has been used to combine these individual results and generate fragrances designed to give “power” to each of the merging institutions. These are the fragrances presented to the public at the opening.

Participation

inside the opening

At the opening, profiles are installed over hand-screened wallpaper bearing the *c pronounced /k/* logo. Each of these elements is made with inks responsive to black light with which the space is flooded. Models bearing skin-acidity measurers and sheets of high-quality blotting paper embossed with the *c pronounced /k/* logo for testing purposes flirt with willing consumers. The relationship is slight but scintillating, empty yet satisfying.

Two fragrance editions are available to the participating consumer; one hundred elegantly labeled plastic bottles containing a delicious blend of the two fragrances derived from the research displayed in the prints or, for those desiring more absolute control of their corporate experience and those who value exclusivity and materiality alike, ten cast aluminum bottles with separated chambers and duel spray controls offer the most sophisticated option to members of the appropriate market segment, assuring the greatest possible engagement for those in the highest income brackets.

In case the consumer feels inadequate to the object of their desire, a DJ spins new cultural mixtures for their aural gratification, carefully disguising corporate greed in the guise of a culture

so popular that we may all experience the intense privilege of exclusive inclusion. Guy Debord has a hard on in heaven. Those of us in Utrecht feel so hip it hurts.

Thinking

object as subject

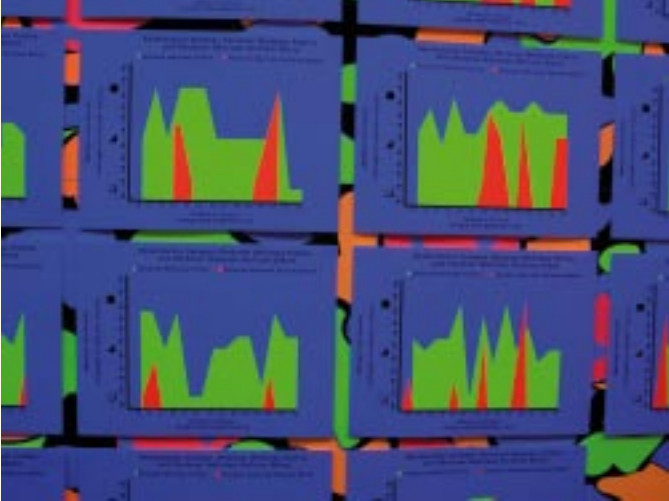
Goeltzenleuchter’s enterprise may be located within the conceptual tradition of art making; its refusal to be “art” whilst presenting itself as such effecting an othered parallel with that tradition’s refusal to be either physical or aesthetic. Goeltzenleuchter describes his practice as “idea art” as the term “conceptual”, when used as a historical label rather than an ideological category, is too narrow to include a practice which seeks to subvert its pretext by recuperating its resonances through distribution. The relationship, then, is an agonistic one predicated upon a jealous desire for differentiation.

Goeltzenleuchter’s work has received attention, often glibly dismissive, from both sides of the equation whose balance it seeks to question. The art/academic/theory category is traditionally held in a position of dominance in an intellectual economy over the (business/marketing/sales) term which, paradoxically, stands in clear dominance within a fiscal economy. This practice disrupts both but denies neither.

The equivocal character of Goeltzenleuchter’s practice is at once its center, its focus, its subject and its revelatory force. His insistence upon interstices might seem oppressive, yet its authority is always diffused through humor – a characteristic which nonetheless offends the all too protestant tradition of conceptual practice with which it seeks to negotiate. Ambivalence is not a possible response to satire however equivocal particularly where that same complacency is the seam which is in question. Whichever edge the spectator occupies, pressure to jump into the disquieting abyss is equally applied. As Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*, it is not the abyss which induces vertigo, it is our desire to jump.

Goeltzenleuchter’s profoundly anti romantic gesture functions, as Kruger so rightly suggests, because the viewer “invests in the divinity of the masterpiece”³. Without emotional investment, the pressure applied would have no power to subvert.

This is a true invitation into the abyss not because it over turns our privileging of either the shamanistic romantic model nor because of its recontextualization of the commercial model but



rather because here the sublime is not sublimated but sold, sold in a context which emerges as the same as its conventional location – the temple of art.

Bataille has suggested that Museums are the final resting places of culture⁴ and not, as is more commonly assumed, the medium which permits culture to continue its dynamic processes of signification for future audiences. Goeltzenleuchter indirectly reveals that the Museum is, in our culture, a vehicle for distribution which seeks to “add value” to itself, not the work it claims to represent, and that as such it must be understood as a commercial vehicle, a tool in the market of corporate identities.

We begin to see how radical Goeltzenleuchter’s practice may really be as we recognize that it deploys the tools of the academy against the distributing mechanisms of its own ideas to relocate value outside those systems which it has traditionally used to ensure “objective” evaluation of itself.

Buchloh’s “The Aesthetics of Administration”⁵ offers a similar critique of conceptual art but his strategy is ultimately inadequate as the nominal rigor of the theory he deploys is reduced to the same condition of self-serving measurements – the devil known in business as “instrument” against which he argues. Goeltzenleuchter, on the other hand uses such administrative models openly but in the ironic mode such that the transparent deployment of the most repugnant instruments for assessment yield an outcome as poetic as it is open. The gentle touch with which this is achieved is not biting or bitter but far more disruptively, sincere. The product is actual and effective. It may be marketed both with and without irony as it is as practical in effect as it is satirical in affect.

If we take Goeltzenleuchter’s work to be conceptual, the illegal moment of comedy is also the moment of revelation; if we take it to be aesthetic then the moment of actualization is also the moment at which we hate ourselves for investing such an unworthy product with the divine. This second moment is in turn complicated by its display in a context we believe to be inappropriate to the representation of commodity but which we intuitively understand to be perfectly suited to that purpose. Warhol understood this and in deference Goeltzenleuchter makes his pretext explicit by hanging his “wellness profiles” over screen-printed wallpaper, embossed with the company logo just as Warhol installed his electric chair series over wallpaper inscribed with a repeating cow motif.⁶

The product itself – the element of this project which is performative rather than performed, the limited edition perfume,

is editioned in such a way as to raise related questions about value and the multiple about how process alters market and of course also about the political conventions of corporatism and museum alike all the while rebuking the notion that the visual arts should be primarily plastic by insisting upon the dominance of the olfactory in his proposed resolution of conflicting corporate and personal identities.

The sensuality of this response is in direct opposition to the tradition of anti aestheticism in conceptual practice and the editioning of the two series of products – 100 blended fragrances in plastic bottles and 10 dual fragrance mixers in aluminum bottles for the high-end consumer) opens so many paradoxical questions for those versed in the art tradition I hardly know how to begin identifying a center to whose periphery we might refer.

Every element of the work opens into new spaces of equivocation – each of which has been both effected and represented – a paradox which disrupts the conventional separations of logos and zographous, itself in turn so clearly inflected with the inversion of high and low cultures that audiences accustomed to theorizing broader categories of visual culture find themselves under pressure at their most expansive edge.

The subversion most likely to ‘derange’ those coming from an art background is the slick, graphic quality of the finished product, accompanied as it is with an upscale marketing dance masquerading as “performance”. There is a commercial identity only, *c pronounced /k/*, a reflexively empty signifier which stands without reference to any truth, which asserts itself without cause and which nonetheless engenders desire without reference to any other element of the project. It is an advertisement for itself, a signifier without a signified yet it is at the same time fully actualized, absolutely yet subordinated to its function as representation.

In spite of its visuality, its materiality, its olfactory sensuality, the entire project is structured through narrative; dependant for its genesis upon an elaborate “back story”. In one last moment of playful perversity let me point out that this narrative is, in fact, not fictional...

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⁶ In 1966 Warhol exhibited the cow wallpaper for the first time at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Since that time it has traveled to numerous venues.

⁴ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: the Writings of Georges Bataille*, MIT, 1992 (first published in Gallimard, Paris, 1972)

⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions” in *October*, Vol. 55, Winter, 1990, pp. 103-143.

¹ Internal Memorandum between *c pronounced /k/* and GAU/CBK (source withheld)

² *Ibid*

³ Barbara Kruger, (American, born 1945), *Untitled (You Invest in the Divinity of the Masterpiece)*, 1982. Photostat, 71 3/4 x 45 5/8” (182.2 x 115.8 cm), permanent collection, MoMa, NYC.