

gerald matt in discussion with assume vivid astro focus

GM: I am assuming that it is most correct to address you as you in the plural (instead of the singular). Are the answers I will receive to my questions be joint answers, or will one of you take turns speaking once and then the other? Does one of you speak for everyone?

avaf: We will all of us will bring in our insights to form one written voice. It may be that just one of us talking or it may be a combination of our voices, depending on the question.

GM: How does decision-making work in a collective? Can everything actually be discussed and always resolved with consensus?

avaf: It's less about consensus, and more about trust and admiration. We trust each other and admire the one another's visions. Sometimes, one of us brings up an idea that is contrary to what the others were thinking, but it is accepted out of admiration anyway. That presents us with new roads and ways of seeing the work to us. We are not control freaks and, in fact, we like change and challenges. There is no master mind who tells the others what we will go for. So, whenever we are faced with a situation of decision-making, we will either go for the most reasonable option, or for the change-- for what we haven't done yet. As the work is composed of so many different layers, there is room for various decisions.

GM: Particularly in the 20th century, the role of the author was heavily discussed. Post-structuralists, such as Michel Foucault or Roland Barthes, have even announced the death of the author, and thereby - as it were - generated the birth of the reader. With a multiple authorship, does the accent shift from an over-powerful author in favor of the recipient?

avaf: We truly wish that was true. We think though that this shift is a bit more complicated to happen than just questioning authorship. It is also related to the way the institutions usually work. Our projects are particularly affected by this relationship, because whatever we bring to a space is made specifically for it. There is a lot of self-censorship and paranoia concerning lawsuits from the institutions side nowadays, that end up in many ways shaping artists' projects. For us in fact, the biggest challenge is always the institution, which constantly brings obstacles whenever we want to shift the power to the recipient. We are frequently asked to rearrange/change our ideas. It's not that we bring put a finished and self-contained painting that is ready and closed in itself to the space and just hang it up. What we do is closely related to the relationship with the institution and its space. We see its best and its worse sides. And what is interesting about this is that this is some sort of history that is never talked about. There is no outlet for these raw ideas that are reshaped by the institution. We also feel disconnected from the press, which is another big challenge for us. The press is always referencing to you in comparison to a recent past, and it can never neutralize itself from history. It's as if the past is always necessary to understand the present. We would like to propose a test to challenge writers and critics to refrain from

relating an artist to any past, and to talk about the work from a present point of view. We feel that these relations to the past are easy and create a biased the approach to your work in a very biased way. For this reason, the new is never seen. And this oppressive relation, to both the institution and the press, ends up shaping the way the viewer experiences your work. But to stress your point, our butch queen realness with a twist in pastel colors video program is, indeed, closely related to the issue of empowering the viewer. Probably, the main reason for us behind creating bqrwtpc is to share knowledge. Knowledge is power, power for creating and directing of your own life. bqrwtpc offers a comment on the inaccessibility of these video pieces. TV programs, like Soul Train, or music videos by people like Klaus Nomi were never released on video, or are have been out of print for many years. A good section of this program is based on constant ongoing internet-based research to find bootleg copies of these materials through eBay, yahoo groups, and on-line community and /discussion groups. So, we are presenting our own research, a research that is, in fact, available to all viewers as well. You just need internet access. In this way, we expect to bring knowledge to the public and entice them to make do their own research on the materials they feel most connected with. To some extent, collectiveness and anonymity are also a way of questioning such notions, such as, biography, intention, inspiration, responsibility, and copyright.

GM: Where did does the name assume vivid astro focus come from? What is the history of assume vivid astro focus? How long have you existed?

avaf: avaf should always be referred to in lower case. One of our members was once taken aback by another a guy named ASTRO, a make-up artist who lives in New York. At first, we were fascinated by the broad range of usage and mass media connections to the name ASTRO: astroboy, astrology, astroturf, astronaut, astroflight, astromovers. We were already looking for a new pseudonym at that moment, and thought ASTRO was would be a good project name for us. Then, we went with another early incarnation as superastrolab, but that was too much like the band Stereolab, and it was too hip. We wanted something that would be harder to remember and definitely something long, a name like Exploding Plastic Inevitable. We also wanted a name that didn't have any cutesy meaning when abbreviated. Around that same time, there was this record cover show happening at Exit Art in New York called Cover Me, which we had all visited and loved. It was more than just the cover designs and images: we were also intrigued by the words, the bands names, and the album's titles. We then decided to go back to the show and write down every single word that would appeal to us with no reference to where it was coming from, so we could completely disconnect the word from its origin. That's when avaf was born, sometime around mid - 2001. A few years later, a friend gave us a book on Throbbing Gristle (TG) and we were able to track down the possible roots of two of the words we chose to use. TG's collection of rare tracks was entitled "Assume Power Focus". Music is, indeed, some sort of a symbol for our activities. avaf became NOT an entity, NOT a character, but a project name. We wanted to use a pseudonym (which we all had used before in different ways and places), so people could focus on the work and not on our personalities. We are not interested in the whole star fuckers scene. We want to live a simple life and hang out with simple people like us. We want to be contaminated by other people. We want to have

friends. We believe in generosity and equality, in sharing and inclusiveness. How many people are in the collective varies according to the projects we are involved with. For that reason, there is no sense in showing our faces, and that's why we always wear masks. And, by the way, we want to have different pseudonyms for each different project we produce. We recently started doing this with absorb viral attack fantasy. The next one will be: a very anxious feeling and alucinete vadia arregaa o foco.

GM: How do you decide on your selection of motifs for your wallpaper?

avaf: The decision-making process varies. The wallpapers are a compilation of elements we call DECALS, elements we are working with at a specific time. First, a few words on the "decals": our idea is that whoever purchases them, would ultimately be able ultimately to create their own wallpaper by combining different elements. These "decals" can also be printed by these people on whatever substrate or in whatever size they want. The "decals" can be applied to plexiglas, foam, Xerox, paper mask, a t-shirt, a puzzle, a print, or simply a sticker. We believe that no one is better than the collector to decide on which substrate they should be printed. In this way, the collector also has some power over the work, as s/he can manufacture it according to the dialogs s/he would like to establish with other pieces in his/her collection. If the display of the collection is based on, let's say sculptures, s/he can produce the "decal" in a more sculptural manner, let's say. That's his/her choice. But, coming back to your question.. In regards to the Tom Cruising wallpaper series, for instance,. We wanted to develop a wallpaper to wrap the interior of our installation at the MoCA L.A. for this show called Ecstasy, curated by Paul Schimmel. We spent two months living in L.A. One of our concerns for this show was to bring gay politics into the work. We were disgusted by recent news of a teenage gay couple being hung in Iran, and by the extreme right-wing promotion for rallies against gay marriage and "sodomy" in the States. We wanted to talk about freedom and repression. In L.A., we were also constantly being bombarded by news on Tom Cruise, his fundamentalist Scientology faith, and the assumptions he is a closeted gay man. We also wanted to pay a tribute to groups like the Cockettes, a performance group of from late '60s, early '70s based in San Francisco, composed mostly of bearded gay guys who would cross dress and live in a community. Based on this, we decided to create this iconic figure, Tom Cruising, a Tom Cruise gone drag as the center piece of that the wallpaper and the environment we were creating. At the same time, this installation was also an homage to the history of clubs and dance music and their close relationship to the birth of gays rights, at least in America. Clubs were not just simply hedonistic heavens, but spaces for unity within that community. We were also fascinated by pictures of contortionists and the weird sort of sexuality that they emanate. Then we decided to compile images on the internet of contortionists from the Internet and make drawings of them in different positions, and we made them all bearded and hairy. We created this one figure, The Hair Cutter, a symbol, for us, of the repression of hair within gay culture, mostly American, against hair, usually spread through gay porn where models are shaved head to toe. Based on this, we made drawings of all these hairy guys with sections of their bodies shaved, as if a result of a confrontation with the Hair Cutter. We added a noose to the design of Tom Cruising I (the wallpaper title) to relate to the two Iranian guys that were beaten and hung in public. We started compiling images of protest

graffiti that we found on the street against Bush and made drawings of them as well. Bush was also added to the wallpaper with canned beans being poured on his head to show the state of his brains. We are usually interested in the local graffiti of the cities we go to, and always take tons of pix of them. And L.A. has a very interesting scene of street wall drawings/graffiti scene. Some of these graffiti and wall drawings were also incorporated in Tom Cruising I. We are very interested in artists, like Antonio Lopez and General Idea, and images related to their works also made became part of it to TC I. But at the same time, the wallpaper is not created just as a piece in itself, but as a comment on a given space. Its design and proportions are determined by the dimensions of the first wall it was ever exhibited onto, by the way the viewer comes into the space we are working with, by the other elements that are part of the installation, and by existing architectural elements, such as, doorways and columns. So, its conception and choice of elements is also determined by architecture.

GM: Precisely the wallpapers mix abstract and figurative forms with figurative ones. They overlap into each other, mutually condition, and generate one another. What is the relationship between abstraction and configuration? What significance does ornament have in your works?

avaf: We approach the conception of our installations and also the conception of the wallpapers themselves in a similar way we approach music. In our opinion, music is the media that is the closest to perfection, in terms of reaching the viewer and transmitting ideas. We envy music's power. The way we deal with our installations is, from our point of view, music-like. The way music reaches out to people is very corporeal. It elicits an immediate reaction. Your body can even transmit music (like Laurie Anderson's 1977 Handphone Table project). Music uses our bodies as an instrument of its manifestation; it becomes personified through our bodies. This link between the corporeal and sensorial realms interests us. Music is also universal, and easily transmittable and shareable. Music changes people's lives. This is also related to your previous idea in regards to the recipient. In this sense, the relation between abstract and figurative elements is like composing a song; one of the elements is enriched, contradicted, enhanced, hidden, juxtaposed, and clashed against the other. But we do believe in the abstracted reception of the work, even if we deal with figurative elements and that, in our view, is related to music's reception. There's an abstract absorption/understanding of music (it is ethereal, it is not an object) that is universal, and somehow we want to attain that with abstract and figurative images. That might be related with to growing up with foreign music and not understanding the lyrics, and where the words then became pure melody.

GM: Technically, how are the wallpapers made?

avaf: Most wallpapers we make start with drawings on acetate that are scanned, cleaned up, and sharpened in Photoshop. These elements are then turned into vectors, and we work on coloring them in Illustrator, where we also work on the composition of the wallpaper piece. As a vector file, the wallpaper is free from the constraints of pixel-based works. Once turned into vector, a work can be blown up to whatever size without losing resolution. Some other wallpapers are Photoshop files, and are a mixture of appropriated and original

imagery also mixed with vector elements. Once ready, the wallpaper file is sent to a bureau office that produces billboards or giant digital prints. We call them wallpapers, but they are in fact vinyl prints. We started making what we call "wallpapers," because of the Felix Gonzales-Torres billboard pieces, and in fact we see them in fact more as landscapes rather than as actual wallpaper. There is no repeated motif (with the exception of the first wallpaper we ever produced), and it's not sold in rolls.

GM: Could you please explain your artistic concept for the project space of the Kunsthalle Wien? The barricading of the space or the windows is a practice that you already realized in a similar way in your last exhibition in Japan.

avaf: Well, first we had to deal with the budget limitations that your institution presented to us, and the huge space we were given. That is a dichotomy we usually need to face when dealing with institutions. They have little money, but big spaces and want something that is popular and that will please and attract their public. Generally our projects are expensive, because we deal with existing spaces and their given dimensions. There are also so many different layers in our installations. One important characteristic of avaf projects, though, is that they are not entirely high-tech. We like to have a rough edge to the installations we produce. We like to deal with technology, but don't want to be sleek at all. We want to show how technology is accessible in the western world we live in, and how that can be used as tool of expression and creativity. Through dealing with smaller budgets, we realized it was a great opportunity to make this rough edge even more evident in the work and to juxtapose it to the faux sleekness of our wallpapers. In this way, we can somehow bring our wallpapers back to the origin of the real media they come from (billboard prints). At the same time, a great source of inspiration, as we said before, is the graffiti street culture. There is some sort of empowerment in this activity that relates to the way we see our work. Also, a city like New York has been passing in through a serious process of gentrification, and many neighbourhoods are completely changing; whole blocks of older buildings are being torn down to give make room for yuppie high rises and hotels. In the transitional moment of this change, barricades of cheap/resused/trashed plywood panels are put up to conceal these construction sites-- (that they should, in fact, be called destruction sites). The local community usually reacts to them with graffiti and plastering them with posters and slogans. At the same time, these reused plywood panels are reminiscent of other destruction sites and the reaction of other communities. We felt that having such a central space in the city of Vienna, that we somehow needed somehow to offer it back to the public and transform the Kunsthalle into a raw space that could be overtaken by local artists, musicians, performers, and students. Just like as if we were squatting the Kunsthalle, or as if it had been sacked. That's when we proposed the space to be working on an open-call basis for the local community to transform it into either into a space of performance or protest. We expect people to be graffitiing on top of our works, putting up announcements of their own events, bring their friends to play music together, or just have a beer and watch the bqrwtpc video program.

GM: You create all-encompassing art works. In your shows, alongside architectonic interventions and wallpapers, there is are often music and film/video programmes. How did this

situation arise?

avaf: The wallpapers are one of our the tools we use to involve the viewer in a conceptual / sensorial experience. One important element for us in our projects is the possibility through installation to create a space, through installation, in which many layers of ideas and actions are possible. We see the installation as a space of diversity and multiplicity. Our wallpapers were always conceived according to a the space given to us, and since the very beginning, there has been some degree of public participation. Because the wallpapers are always so related to a specific space, architecture gradually became more and more present in the work. It was just only natural from that moment on to provide a space and/or performance that would envelop and activate the viewer and be activated by it and/or performance. It is a process whereby the viewer/artwork relationship is altered or even reversed in some way: instead of the viewer looking at a wall, we wanted a wall to literally absorb the viewer --- and the most obvious way to achieve this was for the picture to acquire its missing third dimension, i.e. to evolve from a two-dimension piece to a three-dimension entity, either by "giving birth" to free-standing sculptures or by becoming a sculpture itself. A fourth dimension, time, is rendered, for instance, through inflated balloons that expire within a few days, through one-shot performances on the day of the opening, and, of course, through the fact that some pieces are destroyed after each show. Thoughts about architecture bring us closer to the viewer. The public needs to be the master of architecture and to mold it according to their needs and dreams. Our growing relationship to architecture has also made avaf projects more ephemeral. A lot of our installations are simply destroyed after the show comes down. We are also really interested in this reminiscence, in this memory of space.

GM: Femininity plays a major role in your work; there is Carla, the reference figure and muse, then there are repeated allusions to and portrayals of female genitalia, porno queens, and naked women...

avaf: We would rather call it **HYPER FEMININITY**. In reality, most of the feminine images we use in our projects are, in fact, transgender images. We are interested in the concept of hyper realness and the legendary, that are intrinsic to vogue communities in the States (in fact the bqrwtpc video program's name is a combination of different categories from vogue balls' competitions and are an homage to them. The video program is punctuated by scenes of vogue ball competitions). These communities mostly consist of non-privileged gay African-Americans and Latinos. As Guy Trebay expressed well in his article "Legends of the Ball: Paris is Still Burning": "Among the ball children, there is no greater honorific than 'legendary', a status for which no fixed standard exists. A legend might be a man or a woman or a transgendered person or a butch dyke or a femme queen. A legend might be a brilliant voguer or somebody whose cross-sex impersonations inspire awe. Once attained, legendary status is never revocable. That legends are invisible to the eyes of the larger world causes no great concern at the balls, where they not only lived on but are forged anew.'" (The Village Voice, January 12-18, 2000) . We are interested in the creation of this legendary muse, some sort of a contemporary archetype of Hyper Femininity, an explosion of sexuality that transgender people impersonate so well. At the

same time, transgendered persons are on the edges of society and are subject to many cultural taboos and criminalization. So, these symbols of Hyper Feminism that we use in our works are also symbols of transgression for us.

GM: You issue long "to do" lists. Your works include references to pop and high culture. In a certain way, you are also collectors. Your works demand a great deal of research. Are there archives where you file your knowledge and document your ideas?

avaf: Our To Do Lists are one example of these files. We make To Do Lists everyday, lists of production we need to follow for a certain show, lists of people we need to thank for helping us and gifts to be sent to them, friends we need to call, things somebody else told you us we should look at or listen to, etc. We used to release To Do Lists statements related to shows we were working on. These lists/statements were a compilation of different daily To Do Lists from previous months. We are obsessed with information and we want to share this information. The TDLs also serve as a guide for things we are looking at and researching and, in a way, they offer that knowledge to the viewer and work in a in a similar manner as that of the bqrwtpc video program. We are indeed avid collectors, but our collections grow inside a certain project we are working on. At a times, we can collect images of home improvement, for instance, but then we move on to collecting picture discs, heavy metal magazines, or home made DVDs documenting different vogue balls in America. These collections are always according to a specific project we are working on. For instance, in 2004, we were developing a series of collaborations with L.A. band/artist duo Los Super Elegantes. We collaborated on a song together and we wanted to release a picture disc with it. Then, we decided to start collecting picture discs and bidding on them on eBay. In a few months, we had a nice small archive of old picture discs that served us as database of what people had done with that media in the past. Nevertheless, the idea of making a picture disc with LSE was never realized, so we ended up transforming the picture discs into paper masks that we wore at the opening of another avaf project for Miami collector Rosa de la Cruz. Since we wanted to keep our anonymity in such a heavy-handed art world event, we decided to distribute the masks to conceal people's faces and our own. Intentions inside our projects (like the collection urge) can mutate according to situations and opportunities and be turned into other ideas. That is closely related to the way we approach knowledge. The thread of knowledge for us is infinite, and our necessity for it is never completely fulfilled. And we want to share that with the public, to somehow spread our obsession to the viewer.

GM: I know your sources of inspiration are very diverse. Are there any artists that you are particularly interested in at the moment?

avaf: This is a tough question. Our interest in other people's works varies a lot over time, and it also varies according to the different projects we are working with. In the past, our interest has shifted from Oyvind Fahlstrom to Ed Ruscha, Ettore Sottsass to Kenny Scharf, Urs Fischer to Vaginal Davis. General Idea seems to be the one inspiration that has accompanied us for the longest time. We still, in fact, want to work with them in the near future (well or at least with AA Bronson, who is the only surviving member). We started

doing that for our project for Rosa de la Cruz, when avaf served as art advisors to her and made her buy GI's AIDS wallpaper piece from the 80's. The wallpaper was used as part of our installation for Rosa de la Cruz. Vaginal too is another artist we are still waiting for the perfect opportunity to work together with. We tried in the past, but the institution we were dealing with then blocked it. Vaginal is very controversial on her own, and we think the museum was already filled with controversies surrounding our project.

GM: You counter the easy digestibility and user-friendliness of, one could almost say, an aesthetics that makes use of the surface, with a thoroughly political approach, which just precisely ventilates the lack of hierarchy of in the production and reception of art. In your installation in MOCA, Bush and Pope Benedict XVI crop up . . .

avaf: We feel like this question was answered previously...

GM: What are your projects and plans for the future?

avaf: We would like to keep on working on the bqrwtpc video program, to incorporate more and more materials from different sources, countries and eras, and make it at least 100 hours long. We would like to concentrate on making music and just do that for a while and release a White Label (anonymous) picture disc album. We would like to work with dancers, AIDS activists, local communities, and protesters. Soon we will be releasing the first avaf book for which we will be appropriating Maurizio Cattelan's Permanent Food magazine style and concept. Maybe we should also release a book of our proposals before they were edited/censored by the institutions.