

Attempts to position brands "*on the edge*" and associate them with "*youth culture*" lead companies to fuse their retail spaces with gallery-like exhibitions.

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ART IN RETAIL

Curators **Sebastien Agneessens**, of the *Diesel Denim Gallery* in New York and **Jeremy Bailey**, of the *Nike Presto Showroom* in Toronto, discuss their experiences and offer perspectives on how to successfully fold Art into Branding.

A HALF EMPTY ROUND-TABLE MODERATED BY MARTY SPELLERBERG

Marty Spellerberg: Can you describe the briefs you were asked to fulfill? Why did these companies want art in their stores and what you were expected to provide for them?

Jeremy Bailey: Well, Presto was defined as a "retail showroom;" a place where you can go look at the product but you'd have to go down the street to buy it. It was open for two and a half months during which we mounted 4 shows. In addition to the art, there was a very large music component with live bands four nights a week and roving street teams with DJs and break-dancers that busted out of vans all over the place.

My initial budget was around 4k for everything (artist fees, materials, invites, paint, food, etc.). There was no budget for staff, but I managed to bring on a co-curator, Shanan Kurtz, who would work for zero. We decided this was going to be an opportunity.

Nike wanted to reach the unreachable, the trend setting cool elite that knows shit from chic. They wanted a piece of cool. I was expected to provide Art "street cred." We created four exciting shows, with four themes or materials that related to the project manifesto, er... tagline, "expression through movement - movement equals happiness;"

that would elevate the showroom above its original intent as wall decoration, and deliver shows my peers would be excited about seeing.

Sebastien Agneessens: Jeremy, how much I understand you! So many companies choose art as a pretext to produce "hip" events, to attract a "cool" artsy audience. And they believe putting up artwork on a white wall will be just fine for that purpose. They cherish the Art world for its shell, nothing more.

This trend of "Art in Retail" or "Art in corporate communication programs" will get more and more important, and I'm just scared most companies will simply use it as a "piece of cool."

JB: The problem is, your average marketing manager doesn't understand the Art world. If a company could just understand the simple variable of context, and... **CONT'D A6**

FACING PAGE: (*top*) OPENING FOR *THE RETAIL EXPERIMENT* BY **TRONIC & JEAN-PHILIPPE BAERT** AT THE DIESEL DENIM GALLERY; (*left*) *PUBLIC FIGURES COLLECTION* BY **CLINT GRIFFIN** & (*right*) *FAMOUS RICH WHITE DUDES* BY **TAKASHI OKAMOTO**, BOTH AT NIKE PRESTO





A6 CONT'D A2 ...the fact that postmodernism started, like, 30 years ago, they'd have a cultural revolution on their hands! I have an article in which Presto was mentioned as being an example of companies doing art; another was some Austin Mini thing where you go around the world looking for lost art treasures or some shit! Can you believe that?

SA: I am lucky enough that things are different with Diesel. I admire the irony of its advertising campaigns, some of which could be considered Art projects, and they are also involved in several other cultural projects, such as the U-Music festival, the ITS fashion competition, and their little Pocko books.

I contacted them at the beginning of the year regarding their Diesel Denim Gallery, a space positioned between the retail store and the art gallery, which they had just opened. I felt it could be interesting to curate exhibitions there, as long as we kept Diesel's ironic twist, acknowledged the retail aspect of the space, and built up a complete new story for each exhibition.

We act as a regular gallery in the sense that Diesel produces the shows and gets a commission on the artwork

sold. We do not want to speak about denim at all, we do not want to mention Diesel through the artwork and the space does not feature any logo of any sort.

MS: What was the public reaction like? When guests walked into the space, was there first impression "this looks like a shop" or "this looks like a gallery?"

JB: People were very confused. Not many really understood what it was. I found it pretty interesting that they needed to be told in order to be at ease.

SA: I must say that we have been positively surprised by the turnout at the Diesel shows, especially because we didn't publicize them much. The crowds at *Trav'lin' All Alone* and *The Retail Experiment* openings were nuts a mix of New York downtown people, mostly artists and designers.

JB: We had a lot of negative reaction to Presto, but I think a lot of it, especially initially, was caused by misinformation. A lot of people thought that none of the



(top) PATRONS OUTSIDE NIKE PRESTO, SUMMER 2002; (bottom) ERIN ZIMMERMAN, AT NIKE PRESTO



artists were aware they were working for Nike, which, of course, was bullshit.

Besides being vandalized daily, there was a giant protest called "Opresto," where a couple hundred people threw fruit at the building and made big speeches, including our local government rep Olivia Chow (who has since cancelled 3 meetings with us).

Some people felt artists were being wooed by the devil's money, and that they needed to be educated about what they had gotten themselves into. This made me FURIOUS! I wasn't at the space full-time, but I did catch a few episodes where "concerned citizens" were berating our staff with words of wisdom about "what's best for artists." Worse was when this attitude extended to the actual art community; it wasn't unfamiliar for me to go out to an opening and meet people who were completely disgusted at the whole idea, but had never even visited the space themselves.

I think people were mostly bandwagoning, rather than actually paying attention to the projects we were putting on. They couldn't see, or wouldn't admit, that we were involved in a dialogue about the very thing they

proactively decided was wrong.

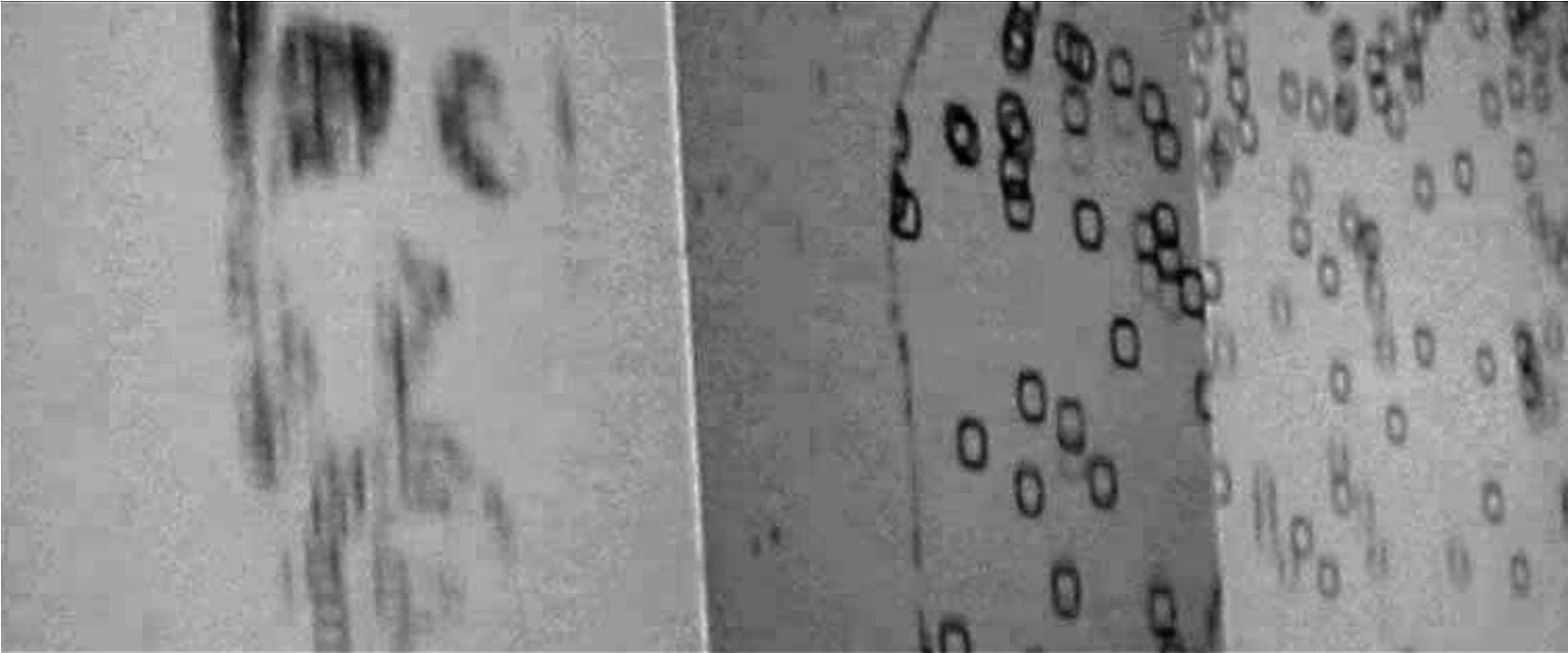
That said, there were many people I met who visited and were impressed with the ideas being expressed within the space. That appreciated the context for what it was. Key word: visited!

SA: We put on a show called "The Retail Experiment," which was an interactive multimedia installation by Tronic and Jean-Philippe Baert through which customers were photographed and projected in real time in the space. As they appeared on the walls, a morphing process literally transformed them into babies!

It was a joke about buying youth through shopping, and also a naïve critique about what marketing agencies call "retail experience," which consists in staging retail environments aiming at immersing customers in a given "brand universe."

JB: How did the audience respond to having their image appropriated by a retail space? Did you get any guff from people that didn't get the parody?

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SA: Well, all the shows are developed to be site-specific. We know we're proposing a show for a retail space, even if it is a special one, so we try to think about what can work out. At the end of the day, the majority of the people who show up at the Diesel Denim Gallery come to get a new pair of jeans. Our role is really to divert their attention, more or less subtly, to some kind of art or message.

The advantage of such a set-up is that it is a real-life situation, with "real" people, not just from the New York art world. So yes, it is a challenge to get everyone's full attention, but that's also what makes it interesting.

MS: Jeremy, how interested were you in showing critique? How interested was Nike?

JB: I was very interested and wanted each show to reflect the context of the space. This is not the way Nike works though.

Largely they didn't care what went up as long as it fit that simple tagline and didn't make Nike "look stupid," but that was pretty much impossible considering they had so little knowledge of curatorial process. They're ability to understand the larger issues was hindered by their lack of personal experience with art. That said, they did the right thing in not trying to pretend they knew what was best, by keeping things on a level they did understand, I believe they upheld certain ideals they would otherwise not have been capable of maintaining.

The final show I put up, *Easy Living*, was the most overtly upfront about the context. Because of all the political pressure I was able to do a lot; I told them it was important to confront the issues and they sort-of listened. The show was a series of installations in a confined subspace of a larger retail space, but also an invasion of "private spaces."

For example, we had a piece by Eric Quebral that was a mannequin modeling both the Presto product and a couple pieces of luggage shaped like crucifix. Each bag had a Presto tag that was altered to show a childhood image of the artist and contact information for point of sale.

It blew me away that they let us brand the crucifix! But, get this, the mannequin was originally an authentic Nike retail mannequin, but it was pulled because it was "too valuable" to be in the space!

In the end I have to give Nike a lot of credit for being so brave. They really did allow a lot of freedom and broke a tremendous amount of new ground for a company in their position.

SA: Critiques don't have to be calls for a revolution, but can just be statements of how bizarre our world is; if you can make people think about it, that's already a victory. But I understand it can be more difficult with companies like Nike, Levi's, or Gap, even though they would be the first ones to need some kind of reinvention in their stores.

I feel that our time is blurring many givens we had about art. Because artwork has switched from one kind, aesthetic values, to series, new media, social critiques; because frontiers between artists and designers are sometimes disappearing, what is the right place to show art now? Where it gets attention and respect, definitely. But limiting it to museums and galleries gets only a very small audience. For me, new and unexpected venues are welcome.

JB: You're absolutely right; things are definitely moving away from the gallery setting. Everyone wants to influence or inform that elusive "general public;" though I sometimes fear the general public will never "get it."

I once had someone drape a napkin over an LCD monitor I'd had mounted on the window at their table... Staff at another show once swapped video art for extreme sports highlights... Patrons and staff at Presto didn't think things we're "exciting" enough when I programmed the space minimally, and then "loved it" when the tiny room was covered from floor to ceiling. The only factor seemed to be how much stuff was up, not how focused and well presented the show was.

SA: You've got a point here, even if I've never had my videos swapped out for some extreme sports! Catching the attention of people on some deep social issues when they just want to grab a beer with their buddies is a challenge. But, it's our job to defend artists and protect the integrity of their works.

MS: How far do you think these kinds of venues will develop?

SA: I think all these corporate programs we're talking about are great for artists who produce projects rather



than individual pieces for sale. For many web or installation artists whose work is not for sale, corporate sponsorship is indeed one way to go.

JB: It won't be long before artists, more and more of whom are engaged in an isolated dialogue about commercial space and capitalism, realize there are better places than public institutions in which to engage such ideas. The idea of context and site specific installation should eventually hit people over the head AGAIN and maybe then they'll consider breaking free from the white walls.

SA: But commercial galleries will obviously remain a crucial element of the art world's economy. They are here to build the career and reputation of artists, whereas companies usually work with an artist at a given moment and are great for instant publicity. But they are not involved in what the artists will become one year from that moment.

MS: Have any advice for companies considering these sorts of projects? What are common stumbling blocks?

SA: Quite often, companies feel that the artists they work with should produce work related to their products. Absolut did that in the 80s and 90s... Enough! Instead, they should ask curators to choose work maybe related to the spirit of the brand, and for sure work which makes sense with the function of the space where it's to be shown. This leads to more creativity and hence more amazement and inspiration among the audience.

I believe the most important factor for the success of these programs is an open mind from the client, and the commitment to respect and support the message the artists and the curators want to convey.

JB: Let the artists do whatever they want! Even if it makes you look bad, it will actually make you look really good! Get it? You're not an evil superforce trying to dictate the thoughts of shopping drones!

MS: What other companies do you think it'd be interesting to curate for?

SA: I'm now working on an exhibition calendar for the whole coming year, which may then travel to the Denim Galleries in Tokyo and Osaka. But apart from Diesel, I don't know...

Man, I feel so lucky! Please let me stick to Diesel! Maybe something in Prada's new SoHo space?

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JB: Diesel sounds nice, but I'd really like to do work for someone more controversial, a GAP or McDonalds... these guys have the historical controversy power to blow the entire art world to hell...

Commercially supported art is the new Dada! Hehe!

SA: Dada 1.2: It's not better, but it's newer, so it can't be worse! Hey Jeremy, should we propose to curate a show in a Target superstore?■

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