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 Chaumont restaurant Etienne Marcel in lijst elke
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**A CREATIVE COLLABORATIVE – ASSUME
 VIVID ASTRO FOCUS – IS INTENT ON
 TAKING CELEBRITY OUT OF ART, ASSIMI-
 LATING EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW
 AND GENERATING RELENTLESSLY LAYERED
 ENVIRONMENTS THAT SPREAD THE LOVE.**

TEXT BY SHONQUIS MORENO
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY [TK]

GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

‘2. Keep collecting coloring books from eBay. Look for: H.R. Pufnstuf, American Wildflowers, Space: 1999, New Kids on the Block, Flipper, Jaws, Hart to Hart, Moonlighting, The Incredible Hulk, American Architecture, Chips, Prismatic Designs, Bugaloos;’ – From avaf To Do List III

In his caffeinated, stream-of-consciousness ‘to do’ lists for each project, the founder of New York-based art collaborative assume vivid astro focus (avaf) catalogues a catholic and highly eclectic range of research topics that influence the work of the group. These topics leap from The Six Million Dollar Man, Lazlo Maholo-Nagy, Pierre Huyghe, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Dada and Aubrey Beardsley to Devo, U.K. artist Selfish Cunt, Memphis-movement mover and shaker Ettore Sottsass, and Land Art. One early list juxtaposes Flipper and Jaws, set apart by the mere breath of a comma. Each enumerated item is separated from its neighbour not by a full stop but by a semicolon; even when full stops do appear, there is no sense of a jolting halt, only a reluctant pause. The teeming, Kool-Aid-coloured brain that generates these lists is that of Rio-born artist Eli Sudbrack. Sudbrack, who closes his emails with ‘love, eli’, demonstrates a combination of transparency and opacity that seems alternately naive and savvy. Because his intention was to make avaf a rubric for collective creativity, he will no doubt be disappointed (once again) to see his name published here. It is difficult, however, to talk about avaf without talking about Sudbrack, because he is not just one of the avaf artists; he is the group’s curator and producer, hand-picking his collaborators and choosing other artists’ work to show within avaf pieces. Despite the reluctant centrality of the group’s founder, work by avaf is increasingly the product of an ever-shifting roster of artists and a synthesis of innumerable high and lowbrow influences. Readily recognizable for its flat colour, visual overload and pop culture references, the work includes, but is by no means limited to, wall-size installations and wallpapers that do not repeat, erotic prints and prints of chandeliers, videos, stickers, decals, tattoos and entire interiors that sometimes resemble a 1960s animation brought to life. (Think montages of Yellow Submarine with hard edges and soft porn.)

The recipe for avaf visuals is elaborately interleaved and consists of elements that begin life as pencil

sketches, silk-screen prints, tears from magazines or books, swatches of fabric, printouts from Google image searches, photographs, Xeroxes of doodles – all scanned into avaf’s electronic image archive. Plucking these graphic scraps from the computer library, avaf collaborators work each image mercilessly, overdrawing by hand or in Photoshop and Illustrator. Even though a lot of figurative elements are used, avaf artists sometimes layer (or ‘frankenstein,’ as one artist put it) them into abstraction. It’s a process in which the artist takes diverse parts and gives them a synergistic new whole.

The same is done with people. Powerful in most of us, the compulsion to connect to others (and connect others to one another) becomes a monomania in Sudbrack. He mixes creative people – VJs, DJs, musicians, painters, sculptors, graphic designers, carpenters, tattoo artists – sometimes working with them in the studio, sometimes emailing imagery back and forth, sometimes selecting a finished piece, old or new, to pull into an avaf show. The degree of collaboration, the number of collaborators and the nature of the collaboration changes constantly. Sudbrack, who determines the starting point of all three, considers the publication of his name a failure of the work. It is tempting, despite the prettiness of avaf pieces, to suspect that this is the most intriguing question asked by the collaborations: do we need to talk about the artist to talk about the art? For Sudbrack, at least, both the starting point and authorship are irrelevant; the process of research, collaboration and accretion is everything.

‘10. Wallpaper: Reference: Renaissance Unicorn Tapestry from Musée du Moyen Age, Cluny, Paris: millefleurs background on red, old and new. The red background should be a deep shade that is both attractive and difficult to look at. Make everything look really busy, tight and overwhelming.’ – From avaf To Do List III

The title of avaf’s buttwallpaper – a collection of pencil-sketched vignettes that could have come from a chinoiserie pattern if it depicted a more conventionally banal subject – speaks eloquently for itself. Even when avaf uses only a small section of a room (and eschews nudity), its wallpapers are so exuberant that they escape themselves, and the

wall. Using a severe perspective or wrapping a corner of the room, they create the illusion that the wall can be walked into or that a fantasy world is bleeding through ceiling and floor. In fact, the work builds its own room within the room but without being imposed on it. The group produces wallpapers for specific interiors, their patterns determined in part by the architecture of the exhibition space. Sudbrack avoids patterns that repeat; he wants the compositions to conform to existing or imposed architectural elements. ‘I’ve always thought of architecture and design as necessary knowledge for every person,’ he says. ‘These practices are ever-present in our lives and even dictate them. People should be able to model space according to their needs and not become part of a gentrified, globalized society that is always trying to flatten us towards one general view, one general behaviour, one Starbucks coffee. Architecture and design are interesting political terrains that are not explored enough; instead they are made expensive and unapproachable.’ The opposite of precious, avaf prints are destroyed in the process of disassembly, since they are usually printed on self-adhesive vinyl, like a sticker, as either a photo or a grainier billboard print. For this reason, collectors buy not just a physical piece but its digital file and have the right to reprint at will. Always, the images are combined in rococo excess. ‘For me, the overload represents the amount of knowledge I want to absorb,’ says Sudbrack. ‘It’s the amount of information, or really a fraction of it, that interests or is available to me. The “to do” lists are a good example of that. In a way, they are about obsession – to not forget anything – but also about some kind of naiveté in thinking I could ever absorb it all.’

‘8. Work on skylight project and graffiti topiary for MacCarren swimming pool renovation. Document most graffitis at the pool and make drawings of them. Trace water and sea motifs from Tibetan Thangka paintings and draw sea life (octopus, fish, algae, etc.). Mix all that together;’ – From avaf To Do List III

For collector Rosa de la Cruz, avaf created an artificial garden of wallpapers; decals mounted on plywood, sintra board or Plexiglas; and elements that might be sculpture, seating, lighting, performance space or all four.

The project, along with two more recent shows at the Tate and the Frieze Art Fair in London, demonstrates avaf’s thoughtful, interventionist take on architecture. Originally, the installation was to be a roller disco – avaf likes to create spaces that are ‘activated’ either by viewers or performances – but the client balked. It included a contoured grey wall on wheels called Inverted K (William Morris) and a white spiral staircase that had also been installed at the 2004 Whitney Biennial. At the top of the stair, visitors discovered more artwork and a fresh perspective on the room and building. Sudbrack also cut into the wall to expose three sealed windows, and then designed a wallpaper based on the incision. ‘For me, many avaf pieces hint at this stupid dichotomy between art and design and furniture and architecture,’ says Sudbrack. ‘We would definitely like these boundaries to be blurred, of course. We don’t trust the fact that all these practices are contained in their safe, separated havens. But the truth is that artwork is usually trapped in art environments that, stupidly, still demand respect and impose restrictions or censorship for fear of lawsuits and paranoid health and safety issues. At the same time, there’s freedom to conceive whatever you want to conceive without needing to follow market or industrial demands. Nevertheless, you end up speaking to a restricted crowd of people. And that has been bugging me more and more.’

‘16. Next music video: use bootleg version of Yoko Ono’s Walking on Thin Ice...Work on it and extend ‘AiAiAiAiAi’ section almost infinitely.’ – From avaf To Do List III

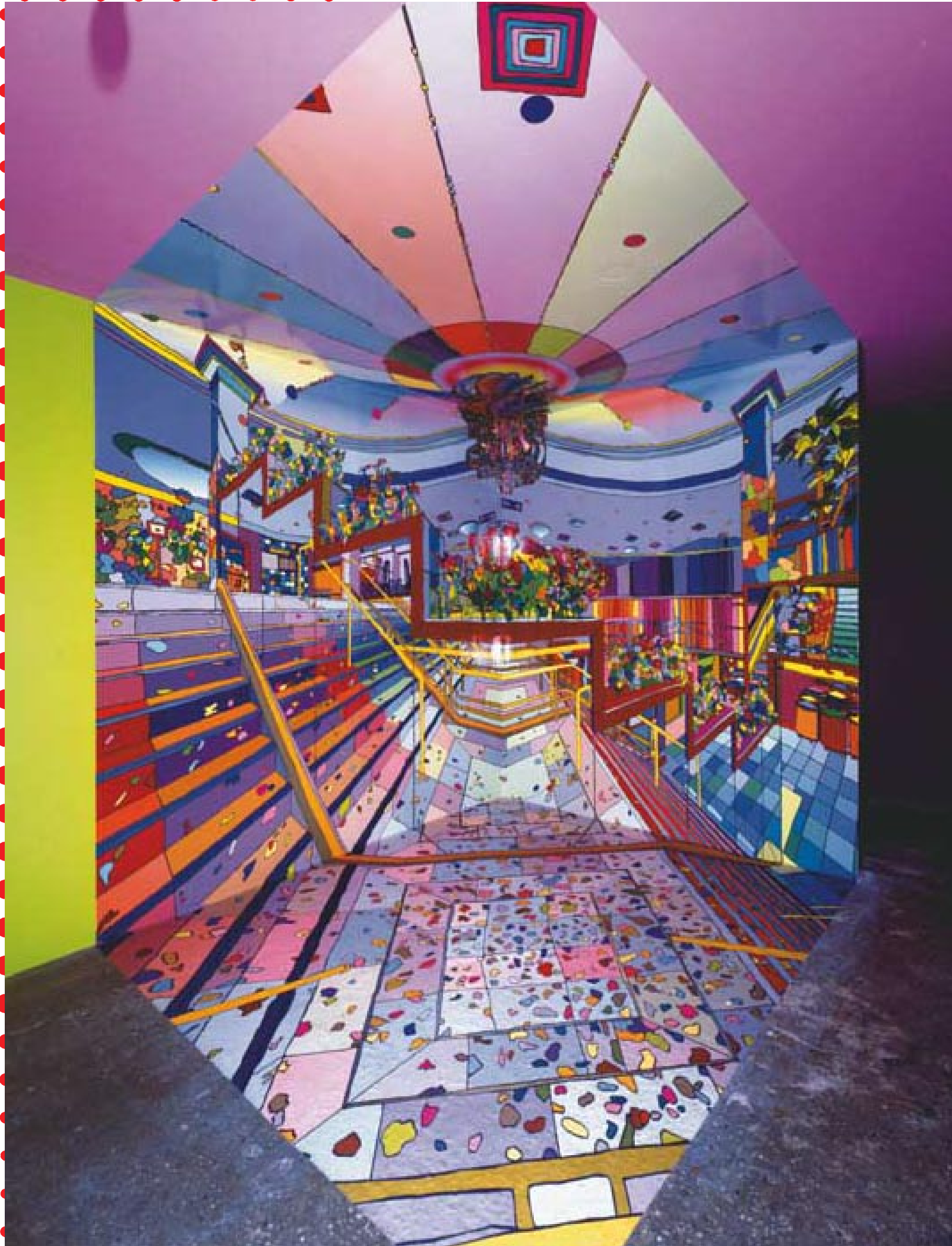
Set outdoors, assume vivid astro focus IX was a project installed in Central Park last summer; it consisted of a large sticker that formed a skating ‘rink’ affixed to the asphalt and a DJ booth that could accommodate skaters’ equipment and fold up for nightly storage. ‘Besides always making eye-popping, thoroughly researched nerd cathedrals out of cultural detritus and art-historical grabs, Eli is a great mover of people,’ says New York curator Katherine Grayson who worked with avaf on a 2003 show at Deitch Gallery that included two site-specific wallpapers, a neon sign that read ‘Contagious’ and a tattoo parlour. ‘The Central Park sticker, in particular, was so successful because he took this weird community and made them this great community-building piece that celebrated their colourful

weird exuberance. It made everyone feel good and he meant it.’

Sudbrack is a sincere man and a gay man who, being both Brazilian and astute, describes America as puritanical. In 1999, several years after earning a film degree in his native country, influenced by the work of Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin, he moved to New York to study photography at the International Center of Photography. ‘For me, Eli is the total cultural experience,’ says artist Aleksandra Mir, whose work was folded into the de la Cruz project. ‘Always energizing and madly intense, he feeds off and gives to his friends at 10,000 miles an hour. I admire how desperate he is to reach the logical conclusion of anything he has initiated, even if it means banging his head into the wall of the typical client, who is always turned on by his energy in the beginning but eventually restricts his madness due to all sorts of bureaucracy and safety regulations. An artist of his intensity certainly needs to be tamed, but I’ll trade the rhetoric of any scared client for one hour in Eli Sudbrack’s maxed-out presence any day.’

The superlatives abound. Even Sudbrack will confess to having an inordinately optimistic bent that is evident in the pseudonym: ‘The reason I use “assume vivid astro focus” is this Utopian idea that it’s advantageous for other people to actually “assume” avaf’s perspective,’ he says. ‘I want other people to be avaf. I want people to contaminate other people. Genius is in all of us.’

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