It's these psychedelic works bursting with ecstatic images and vivid colors that Assume Vind Astro Focus (AVAF) is best known for. Emerging in the New York art scene and seemingly out of nowhere in the early 2000s, they quickly became associated with the globe through their bold, graphic images. But sometimes their work may seem mysteriously random and one can't help but wonder what they are really trying to communicate? And with the video and performance elements, what effects are they trying to bring about? We asked Eli Sudbrack, the central figure of the team who recently relocated to Berlin after many years in New York, to guide us through the psyche behind their work.

Eli Sudbrack and Peter de Bode

In Early Contact
Slate, 2012
Lithograph with aquatint and An-Park Duarte
Slate, 2012
India ink on Japanese paper
105 x 80 cm

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The works of AVAM have such a strong visual impact. What do you think is needed to create an impactful image?

ES: That's not easy to say, but I think it's something abstract. In the beginning it's usually very abstract, even if it has a more political side, a very specific question or theme to it. And I think actually, the visual impact is not necessarily achieved just by the actual visuals but it's very much linked to the more internal experience.

What's the most impactful visual work you've ever seen?

ES: This one piece by Laurie Anderson that I saw at a group show at a not-for-profit gallery in Sao Paulo that's no longer there. This is a great example of what I was just saying. I can't remember the title. The piece looked like it was just a table and a chair. But when you approach the table, you see those instructions on the table saying “sit down and put your elbows on the table, and once you put the elbows on the table put your hands on your ear.” And the moment you put your hands on your ear, you actually start hearing music through your hands! That was one of the most impactful “visual” experiences I've ever had, because it was this explosion of abstraction of a very powerful energy coming through my body. It was just a wooden table and wooden chair. But the visual impact of it was the result of that physical interaction with it.

How do you think your Brazilian background has influenced your current work?

ES: What I can say is that it's part of it, but not the only background in the picture. People look at our work and tend to think, “Oh, it's the carnivalesque,” which I think is quite superficial. It's not just that. Since 2005, I've been working with another guy, Christophe, a friend of mine. So the colors and everything else, it's also Christophe's because he's so much a part of this nowadays as I am.

You used to be based in New York but now are settled in Berlin. What was the reason behind your relocation to Berlin?

ES: Around 2005, I started disconnecting from New York City. I started realizing that I needed something else. And I spent almost two years away. I was in London for six months, I was in Paris, and I was in India again. Then last year I went back to New York because I was doing this project at Delos Studios. But as soon as the project was done we had two other projects lined up already; one in Rome and another one, a solo show, in Berlin. I haven't been to Berlin in three years, and when I came here to do this project I had the feeling it could potentially be a city I could live in. I have always lived in big cities. I grew up in Rio, I lived in Sao Paulo then I lived in New York. All these cities are very over-populated and very energized, which I love. I get a lot of energy out of that and also inspiration somehow. But I needed a more relaxing time, and space, where I could have more creative connection with people that will be more related to communal existence, which is important to my work.

Whether it's a graphic print or a sculpture design like installation, many of your pieces use this collage-style technique that incorporates a bunch of different materials. How did you arrive at this current style?

ES: When I was probably less than five years old, there was this magazine called Disneyland and it was my favorite. Then my mother would read the magazine and in a few hours I'd be done, and it was very frustrating because I would have to wait another month for the next one to come out. And my father taught me this thing of cutting the images out and then mapping them on cardboard to make my own scenes with those figures. Then after I was seven, I started reading DC and Marvel comics and I would cut the super-heroes and the buildings from them. The wallpaper that we make is very much related to that. I think. And I guess it's very much related to the way Christophe and I perceive things. I feel like I'm constantly being bombarded by inspiring things, like a conversation with a friend or seeing a sunset, looking for something I've heard about on the Internet. And we have this belief that all these things can actually be transcended somehow at the same time. We can have all these different layers of knowledge and expression and that somehow passes though whatever we create. We believe in this multi-layered existence.
What was the piece of your own work that served as sort of a turning point in your artistic career or expression?

It was the Central Park piece we did in 2004 for the Public Art Fund (see p.14). We covered the skate rink in the park with this huge sticker. That was homage to those people who have been skating in the Central Park area since the 80s. You know, they always had a problem with the government. For example, I think the then mayor Rudy Giuliani in the beginning of the 90s tried to outlaw them because they were playing music on the public space. When we first proposed the project, the city didn’t want to let it happen at all. It happened because somehow that year the Public Art Fund project became part of the Whitney Biennial, which was being sponsored by current mayor. So then they had to accept it. But they tried everything to prevent it from happening. Finally they would park the city trucks on top of the stickers, and damaged it, of course it was a moment in which we could have followed a more slick presence, a more Takashi Murakami-like, Andy Warhol way, because that’s what people wanted from us somehow. But at that point, we decided that’s not what we wanted to do. We wanted to reach out to a broader world than the art world. Professionally yeah, maybe the Delteil show in 2003 made us known. But the Central Park project was the first project we did in a real public space. And dealing with the people who are not related to the art world and doing something with that sort of political approach in an existing community was very important for us. It changed everything.

What is your perception of the art scene today?

For the past few years, Christophe and I have been questioning a lot our relationship with the art world, because we think the art system is so restrictive in terms of the people that you reach through it. Usually it’s very difficult to deal with the market system, because what we do is hardly object-oriented as we don’t come out with something that can actually be sold. And I don’t like this privileging that the art world people usually have that seems to say they are better than everybody else. There’s so much judgment inside the art world, and people inside that world put so many obstacles in the way of the outside world, which is something that really bothers me.

Finally, please share some of the things that you always try to maintain when working on the visual?

This takes me back to the question we’ve been thinking a lot about, why is it so important to have this sort of performance element to what we do and why, for instance, music and dance are such important, inspiring elements for us? We have this sort of very immediate connection with music. You listen to music and there is something something being transmitted through your whole body, and you can have this sort of corporeal expression and dance to the music. And it feels pretty much part of your body. And I think this immediate reaction to whatever is presented to you in that moment is very interesting. Music is not visual. It is very abstract, this sort of transmission of ideas of energy, like I was saying earlier. And that is very similar to what we want to do through our images, throughout the installations that we make, somehow be able to adapt what you do with music with a visual and transport this energy in abstraction to whoever is visiting our show.
Public Art Fun!
Installation in Central Park, New York, sponsored by the New York City Parks Department in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA, 1999

Photo: Andrea Kana, Rome
assume vivid astro focus
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