





of the traditional, of comfort, of prejudice, of repression, of identity.”

Initially, avaf insisted on absolute anonymity for all involved. The participants wore masks in public, and also handed them out to exhibition visitors. This idea was abandoned when they discovered that their mysterious identity was being fetishized in critical responses to their work – they had no interest in a Banksy-like manipulation of the celebrity game. But avaf continued to destabilize their own agency, in multiple ways. They generated large-scale graphic works, then distributed the digital files so that the images could be adapted by others. In an interview for this article, Sudbrack told me that he once heard secondhand about an avaf installation staged in Naples by the Italian shoe designer and art collector Ernesto Esposito. Sudbrack had no idea the show was going to happen, but he was thrilled. From 2005 through 2016, Sudbrack’s principal collaborator was French artist Christophe Hamaide-Pierson. Today they both work, separately and simultaneously, as assume vivid astro focus. Even that name, seemingly the only constant in this complicated author-function, is treated as fungible. In the titles of works, when signing off emails, and at seemingly every other opportunity, the artists substitute innumerable avaf aliases – *a very anxious feeling, aimez vous avec ferveur, always*

*vomit after formalities, or (self-parodically) acronyms validate artsy fartsies.*

As one might expect, the artworks generated from this complex situation are highly variable in format and content. Working in many mediums – painting, video, performance, installation art, neon, and more – avaf seems as indiscriminately omnivorous as a search engine. Yet you wouldn’t mistake one of their creations for anything else. Everything made under the avaf banner has a maximalist aesthetic, usually with high-contrast, colliding, sometimes overlaid patterns. The effect is somewhat akin to that of 1980s postmodernism – Neo-Geo painting and the deconstructivist graphics of magazines like *i-D* and *Emigre* – but the pieces are even more energized, every surface densely populated with visual incident. Their immersive installations are particularly intense, resembling Op art-influenced discos; whenever possible, such works are actually used for dance parties, one way to “assure the viewer’s surrender,” as Sudbrack says, “turning the public into one with our environments.” And even without celebrants, avaf’s colors are already a riot, a hyper-artificial palette. (For a few years, the collective’s preferred tool was an alcohol-based paint marker favored by graffiti artists, Krink K-60.) The hues seem to have jumped off a luminous flat-screen into real space. Transgender individuals make regular appearances, presiding like goddesses over this fluid aesthetic realm.



View of avaf 8, an installation at the Skate Circle in Central Park, part of the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

**IF ALL THIS SOUNDS REMARKABLY** prescient, you’re not wrong. Years prior to the rise of social media, avaf’s works anticipated viral memes in their infectiousness and malleability. The two most active members managed cross-continental collaboration (Hamaide-Pierson in Paris, Sudbrack in New York and São Paulo) without the help of Zoom or Skype. Long before the advent of NFTs, they were thinking of their work as a virtual type of intellectual property.

Avaf artists have also often been purposely indiscriminate in their means of production, sometimes employing craft-based processes, at others pushing right to the limits of technical possibility. In their early breakout work for the 2004 Whitney Biennial, they took the Skate Circle, a public roller-dance area in Central Park, for a canvas to which they applied an enormous printed vinyl “floor sticker,” a common application nowadays for large-scale projects but quite experimental at the time. They became conversant with digital design tools in the process and, for the past five years, almost every subsequent concept has derived from a single high-resolution file. Originally developed for a mask in the shape of a cat’s face, the design has been “remixed” into wallpaper, paintings, tapestries, and patterns for footwear; in effect, the image is like a digital archaeological site that avaf has been sifting through for new finds.

This past summer, the Tibor de Nagy Gallery presented avaf’s first exhibition in New York City in seven years. The show “Hairy What? Hairy How?” was atypical for them, beginning with its non-acronymic title. (It was an allusion, of course, to one of avaf’s acknowledged predecessors, the Hairy Who –



View of the installation *House of Chroma: announcing victory as failure*, at the 2019 Roskilde Festival, Denmark. Previous page, view of the exhibition “Hairy What? Hairy How?,” 2021, at Tibor de Nagy, New York.





View of the exhibition “*aqui volvemos adornos frivolos*,” 2008, at Peres Projects, Berlin.



Assume vivid astro focus: *Deep Sea Visitor with a Purse Overlooking Green Corals and Bromelia, Flying Fish and Centipede (Snake Lipstick)*, 2021, acrylic and oil on corrugated duplex cardboard, 15¼ by 9½ inches.

the late 1960s Chicago-based group of Imagist painters). Visually, the presentation seemed to explode out into the street, thanks to the first-floor gallery’s big picture window. There were paintings large and small, all based on samples from the cat-mask pattern. At first the images seemed purely abstract, in the manner of works by Sonia Delaunay, perhaps, or Shirley Jaffe (whose ravishing geometric compositions are also shown at Tibor de Nagy). A moment’s examination, however, revealed another layer of imagery: comical phallic shapes barely hidden in the lush polychromatic jungle. This was a recognizable avaf touch, as was the woolen fringe extending from the larger works, which expanded the colorful shapes into glam theatrical gestures. These paintings were definitely dressed to go out. In a further whimsical maneuver, the larger ones were mounted on ratcheted armatures, rather like the undercarriage of a deck chair, so that they could be tilted at various angles. One painting was set in the middle of the gallery like a table awaiting cocktails, its fringe hanging to the floor.

Despite these many playful aspects, the show marked a departure from the all-in, immersive quality of the typical avaf experience. Since 2013, partly in response to the strain of long-term collaboration on projects that entail intense production effort, Sudbrack and Hamaide-Pierson have begun to devote more of their considerable

energies to studio-based painting, even developing a system of some five hundred custom acrylic colors that Sudbrack thinks of as a “personal avaf Pantone.”

Yet the artists have hardly gone straight. The exhibition at Tibor de Nagy was just another refraction of their polymorphous, performative practice. The immediate pre-pandemic precedent for these works, in fact, was literally a celebration: the 2019 Roskilde Festival in Denmark. For the Nordic surroundings, avaf – on this occasion, the acronym for *announcing victory as failure* – programmed the dome-shaped House of Chroma with a trans-fusion of Brazilian street carnival, drag ball, and spoken word performance, all in the service of queerness and political critique. (“Often I think art should free itself from institutional environments,” Sudbrack has written, “and reinvent itself solely as a social project.”) A signature element of the ritualistic scenography was a set of “dancing tapestries,” with long multicolored tassels that spin into mesmerizing shapes when activated. Hybridizing craft, painting, and kinetic art, these works remind us that sophisticated abstraction was achieved in textiles many centuries before it emerged in European painting. Avaf’s tapestries also fly the flag for decorativeness and theatricality, refuting the marginalization of those categories.

Two decades in, assume vivid astro focus still emanate a youthful exuberance in all their activities. This winter, they’ll participate in the Thailand Biennale, reprising a set of skateboarding ramps that they first realized in Rio in 2016. They are also doing their first purely curatorial project, a “posthumous collaboration” with the queer textile artists Norberto Nicola and Jacques Douchez, which will open at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo in December. Wherever they go next on their global itinerary, they’ll be bringing the party with them, for avaf’s project is perhaps understood as one long extended celebration, a raucous wake for the death of the author. In an art world starved for visual pleasure and newly motivated to embrace diversity, what could be more welcome than their brand of art: inclusive, hedonistic, and (I’m sure they’d want me to put it this way) *as vibrant as fuck*. ●

GLENN ADAMSON is a curator and writer whose most recent book is *Craft: An American History* (2021).

#### ON THE CALENDAR

Works by assume vivid astro focus in the Thailand Biennale, Korat Province, Dec. 18, 2021–Mar. 31, 2022.