

2006

## **HUMOBISTEN: A CONCEPTUAL INTRODUCTION**

### **1. THE NAME: A DILEMMA?**

First things first. Let us start with philosophy: Humobism. “Most of the trouble in the world has been caused by folks who can’t mind their own business”, William S. Burroughs wrote in a famous essay. They can’t, “because they have no business of their own to mind, any more than a small pox virus has”. There’s only one solution to deal with this: ‘Mobism’ – ‘Mind Your Own Businessism’. “If the right to mind one’s own business is recognized”, Burroughs continues, “the whole shit position is untenable, and Hell hath no more vociferous fury than an endangered parasite’s”. Okay, one secret concept of the Humobisten has been revealed here. Mobism should not be identified completely with ‘DIY’ – ‘Do It Yourself’, that post-punk anarchist attitude of musicians, artists and activists who tried to do their own thing in the eighties and nineties, by refusing to be mediated by record companies, museums, galleries and political parties. In their ‘Hard Pop’ video (2001) The Humobisten have paid tribute to this movement – this is why *Volkskrant* journalist Fred de Vries has labelled them as ‘eigendingers’ (‘ownthingsers’).

‘DIY’ is certainly an essential aspect of Mobism, however, as a way of life Mobism moves beyond that concept. Burroughs distilled his notion of Mobism from his sympathy for the tribal skills of pirates, maroons, mafia families, drug users and homosexuals, able to organise themselves collectively under severe and repressive conditions in order to survive and to mind their own business. As a consequence, they offered others the right to mind their own business. But should we define the Humobisten as political radicals or post-Situationist activists? Calling all artists to retreat from the art world and to become invisible? I do not think so. But they love radical art history: they did the art work for a Situationism Convention, organised by Worm at Las Palmas Rotterdam (2004) and supported ‘anarchitect’ Lebbeus Woods by producing *Sonic Spocht* (2004), a soundtrack for The Hermitage, Wood’s only sculpture, recently unveiled at the Nederlands Architectuur Instituut at Rotterdam.

Translated to the art community and the Humobisten, Mobism should be understood here as a schizoid position: it begs to be free from being identified by art history and artistic disciplines (“We did it our way”) and begs for the right to have access to the art community as well (“Let us in on our own terms, please”). The Humobisten love to make fun of the seriousness that crawls up the art discourse pretty quickly, however, at the same time they love art passionately. That is why they had to transform the notion of Mobism and inject it with a dose of humour: Humobism. By doing so they not only peeled off the grim political skin in order to wrap it gently in softer materials, they liberated themselves from history: radical and serious notions and practices like Situationism, punk rock, anarchism, violence, porn and conceptual art are stolen from their historical contexts and dragged into their private playground, located at the Van Speykstraat in Rotterdam. In other words, they love radicalism, but not seriously. Like the aliens in Sun Ra’s cult movie *Space Is The Place* (1973), The Humobisten are a

friendly bunch and they come in peace. It is not a coincidence that their favourite colour is white - they love to paint their faces white while performing. Examples can be found in *Come Ask Me For A Dance* (2003) and in a recent series for VPRO TV's *Villa Achterbuurt, De Kunstenaars* (2004-2005). White is the colour of peace and the colour of innocence. These guys are serious pranksters.

## 2. THE DUO: A SMART DRUG

The Humobisten are a duo. There's nothing wrong with that. According to Andy Warhol "two is a crowd" – so being a Humobist is being part of a crowd. There have been many illustrious duo's within the worlds of art (Gilbert & George), humour (Laurel & Hardy) and Mobism (Burroughs & Gysin). But there has been only one Dutch duo that combined all mentioned domains: Cherry Duyns & Armando ('Herenleed'). If I have to compare the Humobisten with another duo, it has got to be them. That fine blend of humour and seriousness, naivety and realism, poetry and art, performance and play - so characteristic for Herenleed in the 1970's, is also present in the works of the Humobisten. (Is it a coincidence that Armando teamed up with the Situationists during the sixties? And is it a coincidence the Humobisten are Herenleed collectors? Don't you think *Come Ask Me For A Dance* resembles that alienated innocence of Herenleed performances? Don't the Humobisten love poetry as much as Duyns & Armando did?)

An exciting aspect of being a duo is the transformation of work in favour of play. Another duo, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, once remarked: "We don't work, we negotiate". Work is replaced by a constant interplay, by an endless 'in-between' – or 'interzone' as Burroughs would call it, where creativity is said to flourish and ideas get intertwined with other ideas, without knowing where they came from or where they are heading for. I think all art works of the Humobisten are interzones: they offer porous openings and open endings – their works really form an oeuvre, or better, an attempt to form one. What is left is a chain of thoughts; a map of alleys, short cuts, cul-de-sacs, roundabouts and u-turns – perhaps desperately longing for highways, but still giving shape to a map.

Asking them about partnership, this is one of their answers – it really sounds like interplay: "We both start with ideas, sometimes with radical ideas...these ideas start to battle or get transformed along the way...they change constantly...then something emerges, usually without the radical starting points – so both our views get lost in something else". Being a duo is always about creating 'something else'. Like the hilarious video *Porn Droid* (2003). When the Humobisten started to think about a serious contribution for the Rotterdam edition of *Robodock* (2003) - a low tech, post-punk, pseudo-robotic theatre festival, rooted in the squatters movement and breathing the spirit of *Burning Man* - they finally came up with a hard core porn movie in which two androids are copulating passionately. A kind of Laurel & Hardy slapstick in outer space. In its utter innocence, the video shocked the political correct organisation of *Robodock*, who tried to ban the video from the festival. Unintentionally the dismantling of radicalism – so typical for the Humobisten – was reversed: plain slapstick turned in radicalism – in 'something else'.

A duo also functions as a cover up operation: individual flaws and weaknesses can be eliminated very easily. There is no doubt: the individual qualities and aspirations of

the Humobisten are very different. To combine them within one endeavour is not only a fruitful discovery, the combination functions as a dose of Viagra as well. By operating as a duo, Humobist projects are always guaranteed to have speed, humour, strangeness, colour and sound. There is no time to indulge in individual fascinations, nor do we find out if there are any. The same argument goes for most of their art works: we are entertained and fascinated by their velocity, however, it does prevent us from discovering hidden layers or theoretical presumptions. In fact, I found only one. I will get back to this issue later.

Their appearances are very different too: the Humobisten really are a kind of Laurel & Hardy of the local art scene – when performing, there seems to be a serious guy and a funny guy. No offence. And hey, you need a cast like this if your performances are meant to be funny too. It must be cool to hang out with these guys.

### **3. POPMODERNISM: FOUNTAIN OF LIFE**

Being children of the 1990's, the inescapable presence of pop culture in Humobist projects may not come as a surprise. It is very easy to spot the influence of hip hop and punk rock culture, of street art and stand up poetry, of skateboarding and urban fashion. One aspect that ties the Humobisten together is 'sonic fiction', a beautiful notion borrowed from Kodwo Eshun to describe that whole cultural environment of musicians, bands, labels, records, sleeves, stores, pictures, video's, song titles, deejays, clubs and anything else related to it. Within Humobist projects there are always stories about sound and music: sometimes as events (Knakendisco, 2001-2004), sometimes as soundtracks (Sonic Spocht, 2004), sometimes as parodies (Humobiza, 2005), but also as serious sonic experiments like The Split Song Show (2004).

I especially liked the degree of alienation accomplished by The Split Song Show. Two rock bands are teamed up on stage (Nighttown at Rotterdam), separated from each other by a wall and performing the same song at the same time. However, only one band is actually playing, the other is imitating the performance and lip sinking the song. The audience is hardly able to figure out which band is playing. During the next song the roles of both bands are reversed. Again, I could not figure out the deeper artistic meaning of the performance, but I was struck by the strength of the images and by the total weirdness of the concept. Humobiza, performed live by the Humobisten at Holo Deck in Groningen with a guest appearance by Der Versucher, offers the same kind of alienating event - perhaps not as strong as The Split Song Show, however much more funny. Humobiza parodies that popular brand of Ibiza club house music. First of all: the tune is well made, danceable, and makes fun of Ibiza house from within the genre. Next the performance. The posse is lined up behind three microphones and when the silly song starts – pre-recorded, the Humobisten & Der Versucher turn out to be just decorum: they just stand there, do not even pretend to lip sink or dance; they are just there. Then the video. Behind them there is a screen, projecting a video in which two silly types, masked with horse heads - probably bought in a carnival store, dance just as silly to this silly fake Ibiza house tune. When the camera fades out, we find out that the Humobisten are dancing in front of a closed and neglected beach pavilion in Hoek van Holland. It is not even summer. Suddenly the Ibiza house experience has become more than just

a parody – it is also a wonderful sketch of poor Dutch soberness, lack of grandeur, Nordic weather and sublimated tropical fantasies.

Another highlight was the invention of the ‘Knakendisco’ [‘the 50 Cent Disco’], a frequently returning dance night in a variety of local venues. By charging only a very small entrance fee, the Humobisten added a new low profile event to Rotterdam’s cultural infrastructure. Perhaps they wanted to criticise hip expensive clubs, I do not know, but in any case they revealed themselves as urban ‘DIY-entrepreneurs’. For them this is a very important issue: concerned with upgrading cultural life in Rotterdam they welcome new cultural developments and criticise the current city council policy of promoting large scale activities and denouncing small scale activities. Their promotion of strong cultural layers of ‘humus’ is well-known throughout Rotterdam.

Within the setting of sonic fiction, clubs and venues the Humobisten are perhaps at their best. Here they obey to a classic rule of public art: you do not only create a piece of art, you have to find a specific audience for it as well. A public that understands your works, the hidden layers or criticisms expressed in them and thus is enabled to value the artistic, cultural or social content it gets confronted with. Coming from a variety of pop cultures, dominated by closely defined ranks and files and outspoken notions of quality, the Humobisten might reach the conclusion that they exactly know where to find that audience. But do art institutes know where to find the Humobisten and how to value their Humobism?

#### **4. DEMOCRATIC ELITISM: THE PEOPLE & THE BEATS**

Are you still with us? When discussing the absence of theoretical presumptions, I promised to get back to this question. Although it is hard to track explicit theoretical content, since possible hints are overshadowed by velocity and humour, I did find an interesting dogma that is never subjected to humour, irony or hurry. Here the Humobisten are very serious. Within the content of their website, in interviews and in some of their works, they act as militant defenders of ‘conceptual art’. Like it is an endangered species in need of protection. It is not clear why they do this, why they pick out conceptual art, and what they exactly mean by conceptual art. Sure, they are fans of Wim T. Schippers and Gilbert & George. So am I, but I do not feel the urge to defend a certain phase in the history of the arts. I think the Humobisten identify themselves as conceptual artists. But are they? And does this knowledge make their work better or does it make me understand their motives more properly? I do not want to get caught in the web of classification and identification here, so I skip the questions, okay?

Anyway, there is something solid down there in Humobism. Let us illuminate this idea by taking a closer look to two Humobist projects: Everyone... (2000-2001) and Art is Arrogant (2004). I think both projects are among the best autonomous art projects the Humobisten have done in their five year existence and both exactly explain what Humobism stands for. I came in touch with the Humobisten when they launched their ‘Everyone’-series: Everyone Can Be Famous, Everyone Can Be A Designer, Everyone Can Communicate and Everyone Can Stop A Riot are the projects I recall. They were a great piece of art: beautifully designed posters, digital prints and typography; wonderful photography and fashion design; and finally an unforgettable

introduction to this typical duo. Looking back, 'Everyone' meant 'the making of the Humobisten'. Linking Andy Warhol, William Burroughs and the Situationists, this campaign challenged the professionalism, division of labour and nepotism of the art world in a jolly old avant-garde fashion. It also celebrated the post-eighties 'DIY'-desire to produce art autonomously, that is unmediated by art institutes and curators. It was an overt manifesto about Mobism and a romantic believe in the possibilities of unleashed creativity. And it was funny too. And touchingly innocent – 'Everyone Should Love The Humobisten'.

Several years later, in 2004, they presented a new piece of art, a large window sticker at Showroom Mama in Rotterdam, challenging and criticising the growing aversion against the arts as expressed by the city council. The shop window read: "Kunst is arrogant en dat willen we graag zo houden" ["Art is arrogant – let's keep it that way"]. The unveiling was a public, communal and hilarious event: thousands of small 'post its' were glued on the window and a giggling audience was invited to take them away. At first sight there seems to be an ideological gap between 'Everybody' and 'Art is Arrogant' – democracy is replaced by elitism. However, from the view point of Mobism and the sub cultural roots of the Humobisten, there might be no contradiction at all. Face it: all art is elitist, all cultures driven by skills are elitist. Art, like humour, distinguishes us as human beings from animals since we love folks who are better in something than others. We love elites: it is cool to watch Dr. Octagon ranting his outer space raps, since he is a better rapper than most others; we admire Van Gogh as he is way beyond the average painter; it is great to witness skaters do their tricks at the Westblaak park, since we – simple citizens - have enough trouble riding our bikes; reading William Burroughs is an almost sacred experience – compared to him my writing efforts seem those of an illiterate. Therefore all arts are elitist, that is arrogant, to use a 'schizoid' phrase, so typical of the Humobisten.

Perhaps Chuck D was right: "Power to the people and the beats". Within the ranks and files of subcultures, of Mobist groups, everyone indeed can be a designer or an artist: it is the elite that sets the standards of quality and it is the 'people' that decide whether someone is excellent or lacking the skills to challenge or battle with the elite. Within Mobism, there is no contradiction between arrogance or elitism and democracy. 'Art is Arrogant' and 'Everyone Can Be A Designer' are sides of the same coin – glued together in a variety of Humobist projects. I think this is an interesting position: the Humobisten serve two masters - 'DIY'-culture with its own internal, pseudo-tribal merits and universal art history as well. Here we reach our point of departure again: "Dear Ms. Art, I know we do it our way, but let us in anyway". To bridge this gap they do not use an overt political theory, they present their ideas as a mixture of art and humour.

That is why the Humobisten are full blown public artists, ready to take that last leap into the funnel of universal art institutes and discourses, without betraying their singular audiences as they are inherently part of their art works. There is no power without beats. To cut this story short, let us paraphrase William Burroughs: you get to know a Humobist when you see one. So go out and see them live – later you might regret you didn't.

