

This page intentionally left blank



Sascha Mikloweit, Fresh Office Decoration (FOD) (2016)

Text by Jan Sieber

Art makes order from chaos.
Clarity from obscurity.
Something from nothing.
(Sometimes nothing from something.)¹

Looking back at the two Berlin Biennales of 2012 and 2016, one might think that there is a dividing line between political activism and post-internet aestheticism in contemporary art. Certainly this holds true for the level of political ambition and social engagement, as well as theoretical and critical discourse. Remember, on the one hand, Artur Żmijewski, the curator of the Berlin Biennale 7, emphatically underlining the focal point of his show: the political effectiveness of art, art seizing the power of politics, art becoming a tool for political action and social change.² On the other hand, think of the smug invitation of DIS, the curatorial team of the Berlin Biennale 9, to just bluntly enjoy the fictions of the present and follow the play of the pleasure principle.³ Reality making versus reality reproducing. However, on another level, one finds a secret affinity between the BB7 and the BB9. They both, unwillingly or not, proposed that the artworks they presented are just that: this political action or that commercial website, this political statement or that open physical workout session. What you experience is what you get. They both reduced art to being a mere tool (for politics or for commerce), and they both shared the jargon of immediacy, presentness, and directness.

To this, only seeming, division between politics and aestheticism in contemporary art, Mikloweit's *Fresh Office Decoration (FOD)* adds another historical threat that runs from Conceptual Art and new design of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, to contemporary commodity culture and aestheticization of politics.

1 Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, 2012. *U.S. Embassy in Berlin Germany*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.fapeglobal.org/projects/art-in-new-embassies/us-embassy-in-berlin-germany>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].

2 Zmijewski, A., 2012. *Berlin Biennale für Zeitgenössische Politik*. [online] Available at: <<http://blog.berlinbiennale.de/en/allgemein-en/7th-berlin-biennale-for-contemporary-politics-by-artur-zmijewski-27718>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].

3 Berlin Biennale 9, 2016. *The present in drag*. [online] Available at: <<http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/the-present-in-drag-2>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].



Figure 1

Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing #1256: Five Pointed Stars* (2004) (installed 2008), photograph by Werner Huthmacher, Berlin.

FOD's starting point in this historical trajectory is Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing #1256: Five Pointed Stars*, a large-scale mural for the glass encased entrance of the U.S. Embassy in Berlin (Fig. 1). The publicly visible diptych consists of two five-pointed stars, one in black and white, the other in vibrant colours. As a gift of the artist to *FAPE*, the *Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies*, an 'organization dedicated to enhancing the image of the United States abroad through the installation of permanent works of American art in embassies around the world',⁴ it was first installed in February 2008 by a team from Sol LeWitt's studio. The *Five Pointed Star* was part of a strategy of *FAPE*, designed by The Kavelman Group, 'to enhance its Board capacity, strengthen its program development capabilities, and raise its public profile in order to meet the organization's expanded scope of work',⁵ in other words, to enhance the growth of *FAPE*'s capital. This strategy, which incorporated the recruitment of the rich and powerful political and financial U.S. elite into *FAPE*'s board, was such an overwhelming success that in 2010, at an award ceremony for diplomacy through the arts presented by *FAPE*, former U.S. foreign secretary Hillary Clinton proudly proclaimed that 'artworks help reveal the American spirit and story without taking a political stand', and congratulated the donors and artists of *FAPE*, 'you're just brightening up the day of some of our people around the world'.⁶

4 Kavelmangroup, 2012. *Case study: Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.kavelmangroup.com/case-studies/foundation-for-art-and-preservation-in-embassies>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].

5 *ibid.*

6 *ibid.*



Figure 2

Sascha Mikloweit, *Fresh Office Decoration (FOD)* (2016), detail: digital photomontage, photographed by Amanda Holmes, Berlin.

The more aesthetic dimension of LeWitt's *Five Pointed Stars* is explained by curator, artist, and writer Robert Storr, casually posing in front of the artwork in a video for *FAPE*'s website: 'It becomes a way of catching your eye, drawing you into this environment, drawing you towards this building, and also interacting with the architecture, because all around it of course are other kinds of abstractions: the grid of these windows, the paving patterns outside the building and so on. This becomes a kind of magnetic center in a constellation of other systems of grids and lines and curves.'⁷ Clinton and Storr are certainly right. LeWitt's *Five Pointed Star* is a good example for how well the institutionalized tradition of modernist art can be built into the aestheticization of (U.S. foreign) politics, interacting with the architecture of its system, becoming the blinding attraction in a constellation of global cultural, financial and geopolitical imperialism. This function also manifests itself in the fact that the *Five Pointed Star* was realized with funding provided by billionaire Ronald S. Lauder, former president and today – next to David Rockefeller – an honorary chairman of the board at New York's *Museum of Modern Art*.

7 FAPE, 2012. U.S. Embassy in Berlin Germany. [video online] Available at: <<http://www.fapeglobal.org/projects/art-in-new-embassies/us-embassy-in-berlin-germany>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].



Figure 3
Sascha Mikloweit, Fresh Office Decoration (FOD) (2016),
photographed by Amanda Holmes, Berlin.



Figure 4
(FOD) detail: REIMA aerosol dispenser 'pfft',
photographed by Amanda Holmes, Berlin.

But rather, it is Lauder's former activity as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO policy in the Defense Ministry of the U.S. government in the early 1980s, which informs FOD's own cannibalistic appropriation of the *Five Pointed Star*. Only upon close inspection, the framed image in FOD's tableau (Fig. 2) reveals itself as a digital photomontage – the coloring of the right star altered to present the colors of the GWOTEM, the *Global War on Terrorism Expedition Medal* – established by Executive Order 13289, signed by George W. Bush⁸ and awarded to soldiers of the U.S. Armed Forces participating in the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism, starting with Enduring Freedom (2001, Afghanistan), Iraqi Freedom (2003, Iraq) and beyond.⁹ The *Five Pointed Star*, on one side representing the success story of American art and 'reveal[ing] the American spirit and story without taking a political stand',¹⁰ is flipped over to become a signifier for the cultural, economic, and military hegemony of the U.S. state. From LeWitt's *Five Pointed Star*, the grey in grey of this hegemonic regime spills over onto the wall of the white cube. The flat surface of the CMYK-rasterized and enlarged gray of the American embassy convolutes into the form of a cut-up fragment of a so-called *Superposter*¹¹ – mimicking the colorful and happy world of today's large-scale commercial advertising in public space, increasingly conquering the surfaces of our cities and landscapes (Fig 3.). At the far end of this colorful-greyish surface, diametrically opposed to LeWitt's *Five Pointed Star*, we find the inconspicuous device of an aerosol dispenser. With the deadly precision of intervals of ten minutes, the white box releases – with the sound of a short and silent 'pfft' – an almost unnoticeable odor from its aperture into the room (Fig. 4).

According to its manufacturer REIMA, its application in offices promises the greatest effects:

'Who is not familiar with the afternoon dip? Motivation and attention go down and a cup of coffee is not always enough to keep you going. Scientific research has proven that air without oxygen [sic] in offices has a significant influence on performance, motivation and creativity of employees. But there is an easy solution: the right scent composition in the office improves the overall working environment.'

-
- 8 The Institute of Heraldry, 2016. *Campaign Service Medals*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/CatalogHeraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=15312&CategoryId=4&grp=4&menu=Decorations%20and%20Medals&ps=24&p=0&hilite=GWOTEM>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].
- 9 As of information from June 2015 'Servicemembers must be assigned, attached, or mobilized to a unit participating in designated operations for 30 consecutive days or 60 nonconsecutive days [...] in the 54 countries or 10 sea areas named in AR 600-8-22. Headquarters Department of the Army, 2015. *Army Regulation 600-8-22: Military Awards*. [online] Available at: <http://ec.militarytimes.com/static/pdfs/r600_8_22.pdf> [Accessed 19 July 2016].
- 10 Kavelmangroup, 2012. *Case study: Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.kavelmangroup.com/case-studies/foundation-for-art-and-preservation-in-embassies>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].
- 11 The 'Superposter' (40/1) is the largest German standard billboard format. At 20 square metres, it is 2.2 times larger than the widespread 18/1 standard billboard in use. Out-of-home Media GmbH, 2016. *Gestatten, mein Name ist Superposter – Mit mir kommen Sie ganz groß raus*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.superposter.de/das-superposter>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].



Figure 5
Sascha Mikloweit, *Fresh Office Decoration (FOD)* (2016), size: 5260mm x 888.6mm, photographed by Amanda Holmes, Berlin.

It will significantly reduce stress and improve performance during the day. By carefully selecting specific scents your employees will feel much more motivated.⁹

These odors neutralize, prevent, eliminate, and simultaneously create, enhance, increase, and improve – a store ‘doesn’t feel like a store, but like a home’,¹⁰ work does not feel like work, but like pleasure, submission does not feel like submission, but like freedom. *FOD* readily adopts this kind of aestheticization of work and transposes it into the art world. The ideal spectator (just like the ideal consumer) is neither a contemplating nor a distracted one, but a being whose body is the site of mechanisms of internalized control and increased performance and efficiency.

This tableau of mechanisms of aestheticization – of politics, of commodities, of work – is lit up by two parallel tubular neon lights cutting through the flat surface and casting the tableau in a dazzling, cold light of 6,500 Kelvin (Fig. 5). One is brutally repelled, yet at the same time strangely attracted, even ensnared, by the blinding brightness of the striplights’ glow. In time, the two

9 REIMA, 2013 *Applications*. [online] Available at: <<http://www.duftmarketing.de/en/applications.html>> [Accessed 19 July 2016].

10 *ibid.*



Figure 6
Fresh Office Decoration (FOD) (2016),
detailed view with fly, photographed by
Amanda Holmes, Berlin.

bright tubes imprint themselves on the retina of the artificially stimulated spectator, and with every blink of an eye, spread across the entire wall to form a white, floating grid structure.

The interplay between the flickering colorful surface, the subliminal stimulating odor and the fluctuating neon grid creates a vertiginous perceptual experience, simultaneously capturing and disorientating. But then, moving closer in on the flickering flat surface, indulging in the ineluctable presence of the bright, cold neon light, one notices small shadows buzzing over the colorful wall, congregating close to the neon lights – black flies, in all sizes, their hairy bodies shimmering in blues and greens (Fig. 6).

In this moment of disgust and sudden sobriety, *FOD* allegorically offers a simple truth. We, like insects to the light, are irresistibly drawn to what we believe awaits us in the blinding light of contemporary commodity culture and representations of nationalist ideologies. The shiny surfaces of capitalism and its politics, where a store doesn't feel like a store, but like a home, work not like work, but like pleasure, submission not like submission, but like freedom – behind them there awaits only death and decay, the empty desert of the real.

If *Fresh Office Decoration (FOD)*, at first sight, presents itself as commodified office-aesthetics, it reveals itself as a *Kippfigur* (ambiguous figure), flipping over and offering a critique of the commodification and instrumentalization of art in commodity culture, neoliberal work settings and representations of nationalist ideologies. But it holds itself in suspense, oscillating between affirmation and critique, playing along and passing a judgment upon the game. Like the notorious duck-rabbit, *FOD* is an unstable object, always tipping over from one perspective to the other, back and forth. It does not unite these contradictory terms, but marks the split between them, through which they are connected in an impossible relation, art and *Verkunstung* (artification), autonomy and instrumentalization, aestheticism and political representation. *FOD* is neither/nor, but a paradox, staging the paradoxical existence of art under capitalism.

Jan Sieber is a teaching and research assistant in cultural theory as well as history and theory of art, architecture and design in the 19th and 20th century at the University of the Arts Berlin.

Sascha Mikloweit trained in fine art in Düsseldorf, Münster and at Central Saint Martins, London. Based in Berlin, Germany.