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An interview with Dee Hibbert-Jones and Nomi Talisman ***Yaelle Amir***

Weighed down by feelings of powerlessness in the wake of current global affairs, Dee Hibbert-Jones and Nomi Talisman set out to construct a response that interacts with both the realm of art and the everyday. Psychological Prosthetics, as its title discloses, is an artificial solution to the inner-working of our mind. A physical manifestation of the saying 'emotional baggage,' the project directly addresses feelings of apathy, guilt, shame, helplessness, outrage, and depression through a line of seductively-designed mobile products. In employing calculated marketing tactics, Hibbert-Jones and Talisman exploit the universal concept of 'retail therapy,' and our blind dependency on instant medical solutions. The duo traveled to three regions (Europe, the Middle East, and the United States) to

proffer the merchandise to random visitors to galleries and street passersby, in hopes of facilitating dialogue about personal emotional distress and degrees of national accountability. In effect, the targeted issues cannot simply be resolved with fetishized goods--perhaps only slightly alleviated. The project's true significance lies in its ability to transcend borders and localities, thus confronting us with the very existence of our anguish. Rather than raising awareness to a collective state, Hibbert-Jones and Talisman shine the light on the individual, and force one to acknowledge the root of our troubled state.





Public Intervention, Gare Du Nord, Paris, France, 2005

Yaelle Amir: How did this project come about? Was it out of your own personal need to find a solution for the 'baggage' you found yourself carrying around, with nowhere to 'place' it?

Nomi Talisman: We were looking at our own emotional baggage, but we were also interested in the ways other people talk about their emotional baggage. We've noticed in conversations about this topic that people frequently move between discussions about internal feelings and external problems--political and personal reality become all mixed up together. We wanted to construct a project that would instigate a dialogue about these private and public feelings and allow us to examine how these feelings are handled by the public. Of course we were also interested in the way commodities are offered as a "fix" for these complex feelings. By using marketing methods, lab coats, and a range of products -- we housed the project in a way that we hope is humorous and yet also serious, complex and

interesting to others. The project is a vehicle to access this range of ideas. We want to start a discussion about both public and private emotional feelings and how individuals choose to help soothe or fix these feelings.

YA: What kind of services were you offering?

Dee Hibbert-Jones: There are a range of products and services that we take to the streets and offer to people. We offer to custom design a suitcase to house your emotional baggage -- you answer our questionnaire with questions such as: How big is your emotional baggage can it fit in a backpack, do you need a hand truck, or a moving company? is it toxic, explosive? Do you share it with others? Does it get smaller if you share it, or larger? How do you get rid of it?

We also offer a line of products such as the PP Band Aid that repairs apathy and bandages shame -- this is an actual band aid which we offer as a metaphoric bandage; our 30 second Rant Recorder activates outrage -- you can scream into it for 30 seconds, then play it back or erase your rants. The PP Lean on Me



L: Charles De Gaulle, Airpost, France, 2005, R: Corporate suitcase, 2007, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago

offers an opportunity to lean back and control your anxiety through a series of resin forms, shaped for your body to lean on. We use all of these as ways to start conversations with the public about emotional baggage and to narrow the gap between private feelings and public lives.

YA: Do the objects mediate experience? I can see that they function in several different ways -- do they activate, calm, or silence? Do they really work?

NT: Ours is a dualistic conversation; we are questioning normal standards of behavior when we offer the public the 30 Second Rant Recorder to activate outrage. In our invitation lies an assumption that it is normal to hide outrage, but we are also implying that there are reasons to be outraged in the present moment--so the project functions on two levels simultaneously. This is why we came up with PP Band Aid to repair apathy and bandage shame, offering the antithesis as an option. Part of any therapeutic process is to highlight the problems in order to help heal. We play with this duality -- are we healing the individual or the culture?

DHJ: Nomi nicely avoided the question if the objects

REALLY work. Several are electronic and they do function as electronic devices, you can scream into the Rant Recorder and actually record 30 seconds of outrage... what you do with it we leave up to you.... they are Psychological Prosthetics after all...they function in the mind.

YA: Did you feel the medical persona you assumed allowed you to earn people's trust more quickly, or rather be more wary of you?

DHJ: Strangers will tell anything to a woman in a lab coat! Actually, the responses have been hugely varied -- from satirical "of course you're going to sell me something!" - to earnest. I have had people tell me about their suicide attempts, feelings of despair, that only their friends can handle their baggage, and others who talk to me about political expectations. The range is overwhelming.

YA: You touch upon a unique blend of artistic practices with this work--from explorations of the object as commodity, to video work, to interventionist practices, to more conceptual practices of repair, critique and irony. Your handling of visual and verbal language is particularly complex. Can you comment on



Intervention. Hyde Park, Chicago, IL. 2007

these choices, most especially on the reasons for the commercial packaging of the project?

DHJ: Because the project is not often read as art, it allows us to engage on a whole other level with the public, who take the time to talk with us and engage us much more seriously because they see us as a commercial enterprise. We use commercial language specifically to explore the perception that commerce offers freedom, and that you can buy emotional happiness.

NT: Recently, Rebecca Zorach from the University of Chicago wrote about "the cunning corporate seduction" of our project. She said that most people are so thoroughly accustomed to being sold something that they willingly accept our handouts, demonstrations and samples without question. We are able to "sneak our point across" as she puts it.

YA: So there is a satiric side to the project?

NT: Absolutely!

DHJ: We are serious about allowing individuals the opportunity to talk with us about emotional health and happiness and just as serious about the humor in and spoof of corporate consumption in the project.

YA: You have taken Psychological Prosthetics to galleries and streets all over Europe, the US, and Israel, and it is currently on view in Chicago---why did you travel this project? Why not stay at home?

NT: We began thinking of the project by considering ourselves as field researchers, literally putting us in the role of explorers, travelers. And as emotional tourists, in exposing ourselves by asking others about their own emotional baggage.

DHJ: We are also interested in exploring the boundaries of public and private, self and other -- what better



Intervention. Tel Aviv, Israel, 2005

place to do this than outside of home? We began by presenting the project as an export "Straight from the States."

NT: There is a certain irony in that, since we are both from somewhere else: Dee is from the UK, I'm originally from Israel -- so in fact we took the project back to our places of origin, but marketed it as an export from the US.

YA: You traveled to very different countries--I cannot imagine that the political 'baggage' in Basel is as daunting as it was in Israel, or the US...Was the nature of the national political climate reflected in the local encounters, or does this serve as an example of a global attitude--the universal response to a seductive commodity?

DHJ: The range of responses to the project and the degree of openness was so utterly different depending on the place -- Israelis came up to ask us what we were doing, then openly began to debate and disagree, the Swiss were much less willing to stop, the British accused us of calling them crazy (two teenagers) and an old lady

suggested she was feeling fine and that we should save our products for those who really need them. While we were in Israel, the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip was just about to take place. Everyone in support of the withdrawal was wearing blue, and those against were wearing orange. These are the two colors of our objects (although we had no idea about this before we arrived), so it gave us a strong starting point from which to begin conversations.

I think all emotional baggage is, of course, relative. This is where Nomi and I disagreed about our tag line: "Helping you handle your baggage in difficult times" was my idea, she wanted in "political times" because she believes that all times are difficult.

Yaelle Amir is a freelance writer and curator who divides her time between San Francisco and New York.