

"Kids: Don't try this at home"

When Motherboard were invited to participate in the recent exhibition "Stunt Club" we decided to pass this opportunity over to a talented group of 14-year-old boys from Oslo who operate under the name of PSG (Project Stupido Grande). With the help of simple video equipment they initiate and produce impulsive video stunts in best Jackass style. These stunts frequently result in injuries such as burns, broken arms and legs and consequent hospital visits.

Kee Damslor, Axel Hjelme, Knut Joner and Seppo Steggell, alias PSG, are all pupils of class 9B, Uranienborg School, and came together as a video production team as part of a school project.

On Sunday 3 March 2002 PSG debuted as artists at Kunstnernes Hus (the artists house), Oslo, with a presentation of approximately 45 minutes of video. This screening was followed by a debate concerning the ethical and artistic aspects of these activities, where the implications of TV channels' extreme productions labeled "Kids: Don't try this at home" were also questioned. We called this event "Motherboard Offspring", and public attendance exceeded expectations, mainly consisting of about seventy youngsters with a splattering of adults.

PSG can be seen as part of a western phenomenon, one of many groups of self-organized, media-savvy youngsters who have been inspired by the homemade prankster esthetics of TV productions such as Jackass. A typical Jackass program contains pranks, stunts and hoaxes which are executed in either public /civic space, or private/domestic spaces.

The antics that occur in public spaces speculate on the reactions of the general public as either witnesses to a spectacle, or as unsuspecting participants in the acts themselves. The portrayal of the kicks that the Jackassers derive from their pranks, as well as the censored faces of the involved public suggesting that they have not been asked if they want to appear on TV, sets Jackass apart from earlier TV programs of a similar nature such as Candid Camera. Jackass projects a roguish, young rebelish disrespect for authority and control.

The private, or domestic scenes have a Big Brother feeling about them, except that Big Brother is not at home. The group subjects each other to banal pranks and toilet humor. The feeling projected through the TV screen is a peer-to-peer, sibling-like camaraderie of fun and games. The fact that they show each other in humiliating situations as a result of practical jokes played on each other suggests that they do not consider themselves smarter, or more aloof than the unsuspecting victims of the general public.

The Jackassers also perform virtuoso feats on skateboards, snowboards, roller blades, bicycles, etc, which confirm that, despite all the tomfoolery, they are in fact skilled athletes. However, unlike athletes performing in formalized sports events (which some of the Jackassers do as well) they define their own rules and challenges using both urban and rural locations as obstacle courses, or by constructing their own. Even though the challenges may seem absurd, they never the less push their physical and psychological boundaries to the limit.

The Jackassers travel around the world performing their pranks, and a typical program is a menagerie of video clips hopping from one location to the next, and back again: from inner city urban locations, to suburbia, and more exclusive ski resort-type places. Wherever they happen to be, they do not change the way they behave. They are constant Jackasses operating on the edge of the norm of everything but their own TV show.

PSG reproduce Jackass almost identically with regards to the stunts they perform and the style of filming and editing. I say almost because while their videos initially appear to be replications of something they have seen on TV, they are also infused with references of their immediate situation - as youngsters living in a peripheral Northern city who mainly receive impressions of the rest of the world through the media image projected of it.

A young person growing up in Oslo lives in close proximity to rural areas of forests and fjords that are often snow-covered during the winter months. An off-piste snowboarding excursion is only a tram ride away: much cheaper than going to the cinema. So winter sports, which are an expensive, exotic commodity for people living elsewhere, are almost second nature to some of these youngsters. This means that PSG doesn't have to travel to create a feeling of troubadorial ubiquity, as the Jackassers do. They have exotic "nature" on their city doorsteps.

Both skate- and snowboarding have been glorified by advertising companies to promote branded products - clothes, shoes, etc, but it is more a specific lifestyle that is branded rather than the actual products. The lifestyle depicted in adverts starring skate- and snowboarders is that of the independent young person, on the one hand creating the illusion of "coolness" of poor inner city existencies - the street savvy individual surviving in the urban jungle - and on the other, the romantic notion of the young rebel in a symbiotic relationship with nature. An assimilation between rich and poor is created in the media image, reflected in the similarities of choice of music, dress codes, etc, stemming from the commodification of street fashion and attitude.

The main intention of TV companies is to please their advertisers. They are more concerned with capturing and holding the attention of their viewers in order to promote brands rather than communicating the content of the program. TV wants passive subjects who act only with their remote controls and credit cards. But programs such as Jackass have, by default, succeeded in reversing this passivity by inadvertently stimulating young people into acts of creativity that take them away from the TV set.

Through a trick of the tail, PSG assimilates notions of life that have been force-fed to them through media with their own life situation. Simple acts of localized absurdity (such as snowboarding in the city, presenting Japanese tourists visiting Oslo

with dead fish, and running almost naked through Frogner Park in the winter) reveal something of their backgrounds - and a little about how they think people from other countries regard Norwegians. PSG spend their pocket money on typical Norwegian products, like vanilla sauce and chocolate pudding, which they consume until they throw up. They choose to use "rødgrøt" (red porridge) made by Tine as fake blood rather than using Heinz Ketchup. They also muck around with titles, credits, poster-like texts and video processing and editing techniques to suit their own demises. In this way they not only take an ironical standpoint to themselves, but also make fun of their heroes, the Jackassers.

One woman who participated in the Offspring debate insisted that PSG engaged in nothing more than childish copycat activities, void of creativity or artistry. Though PSG may not consciously reflect over what they do, or consider it as Art, by their impulsive actions they show that they understand the context in which they act. They are part of a culture of samplists, where the notion of the "original", or the "authentic" is irrelevant. Just as Jackass sample and modify ideas from earlier TV shows, PSG in turn sample and modify elements from Jackass in order to tell their own story. The only way that you could say that this practice is uncreative is if you don't understand the context in which it is situated. Moving on one step further, the fact that PSG was presented within the framework of an art exhibition in one of Norway's most prestigious galleries also renders the question of whether the PSG productions are art or not also irrelevant. By placing PSG within the context of Stunt Club, PSG become more than just the sum of their video productions themselves. With regards to being childish, PSG were quick to point out that,

"Hey! We are children!"

PSG are privileged kids from the best side of town with access to computers and video equipment. They spend their free time in self-organized group activities rather than taking part in organized after school activities. They use the city and the surrounding area as their playground rather than areas commodified as entertainment spaces that define how they shall behave and how they should spend their money. They frequently get hurt, or injured, and sometimes have to go to hospital because of these injuries. However, these injuries do not exceed those of a 14-year-old engaged in organized sports activities, such as downhill skiing or football (though they are sometimes of a different nature). Having seen her child throw up on vanilla sauce, and then eat more of it and throw up again, one parent who attend the Motherboard Offspring event commented,

"My son can no longer complain about eating food he doesn't like, or say he feels sick as an excuse for not going to school. He has shown me what his limits are."

I'd like to return to the question of the implications of TV channels' extreme productions bearing the label "Kids, don't try this at home" by asking what it actually means today? (I remember stories of kids meeting fatal ends trying to copy the Six Million Dollar Man when I was a teenager in the seventies. Here the seduction was about having extra-human abilities that were used to overthrow the bad guys. The Jackass role model depicts regular people performing challenging acts, apparently just for the hell of it, while subverting normal conditioned patterns of behavior wherever they happen to be.) Should the kids try THIS at school instead? - which is, in effect what PSG does as they produce their videos as part of a school project? Should the kids try THIS on the streets instead, because if they try it at home they'll get into trouble with their parents? By telling the kids not to try THIS at home, are they using reverse psychology, and encouraging the kids to try THIS anyway? Or is it a paranoid statement by an older generation of media personalities concerned that their livelihood will be taken over by a younger generation who can do it better?

The bottom line is probably that while the Jackass team may not want kids to injure themselves, the TV companies are more concerned about getting sued when kids are injured in what could be seen as a direct result of their shows. In any case, whatever the reason, it is an empty warning. If kids have access to the appropriate tools they will tell their stories through the same media that has told them stories since they were born. They will not only tell stories, but will enter into a dialogue with, and opposition to, the media that has increasingly influenced the way they view the world. They will have the guts and the tools to speak back to Big Brother.

As co-director of Motherboard, and mother to one of the PSG crew, I felt extremely proud to present PSG at Stunt Club in the context of art, and also proud to hear these young people argue for themselves in the follow-up debate. Stunt Club had a mission to show art that is subversive, extreme, and that challenges the limits of what art may and may not be about. Several of the artists were engaged in activities considered taboo - body piercing, self-mutilation, exhibiting a drug-addicted transvestite as a spectacle. It was these events that got the most media attention. Ironically - or should I say, as usual - the media portrayal of these works stripped them of any artistic value they may have originally possessed and turned them into public spectacles by playing on the mere shock value of the pieces. I saw one artist on TV trying to convince me (the viewer) that he was manipulating the media through his work, which, in the light of the achievements of groups such as PSG, seems incredibly naive.

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