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Administrative art: a fascination for office supplies
Hagar van der Knijff

Introduction

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When I was young, we had a computer room on the first floor of the house I lived in with my father, mother, sister and brother. It was a MS-DOS computer and the first one we owned. Under the desk the computer was on, there was a chest of drawers on wheels. I remember I opened it often, intrigued by the tools that were in. They were my father's. I remember there were pens, pencils, mechanical pencils, rulers, staples, staplers, hole punchers and stencils.

Two years ago, my parents moved to a new house and while helping them to put everything in boxes, I stumbled upon the drawer and the tools again. With a renewed appreciation for these kinds of tools, I asked my father if I could borrow his stencils.

I was always interested in the graphic tools that were around in the house when I grew up. As my father was trained as an electro technician — where he learned to draw installation drawings — his stencils, pens and other drawing tools were to be found in the computer room. After an internship at PTT (the state-owned Postal, Telegraph and Telephony Company, nowadays privatized and called KPN[®]) he was hired and today, 40 years later, he is still working there. I am very proud of that. Also, the state-owned PTT was beautifully designed: Wim Crowel designed stamps I still remember from when I was young.



PTT Stamp booklet 44B, designed by Wim Crowel, 1992

As a Graphic Design student, I got into a new acquaintance with these graphic tools. As I was struggling finding my voice in the department, I found comfort in stencils, carbon paper, tape and plastic folders. By using them and respecting their limits, by following the tool, some of my freedom was taken, which paradoxically made me feel more free to make. I don't like my freehand circles, but when I use a stencil to make a circle, I often do.

The circle I make with a stencil can be very wide or long, it can consist of two half circles slightly shifted on top of each other — it doesn't matter, it is clear it is made with a stencil (and I chose how I used this stencil). Or, when I want to write a small note to someone, I often dislike my sharp, ballpoint, handwritten words on a white paper. I then use a piece of Carbon paper to copy my message onto a new paper. Using the carbon, my message will be visually more rough. And also, it is not just my handwriting, it is partly something that is not me and out of my control. By using these office supplies, I created a toolset for myself. It became a toolset I often use and feel more and more confident with. Every time I see a stationery store, I allow myself to take a look and to buy some office supplies.

My favourite stationery store 'nibo'

My favorite stationery store is 'nibo'. It is short for Jaap NieuweBOer, the owner of this sole proprietorship⁵. Located at Frederik Hendrikstraat 114 in Amsterdam, it is 1.2 km from my house. I have known nibo since 2018, when my design teacher told me about it. Since then, I have only visited nibo three times. In the summer, the shop could be closed for a couple of weeks. Also, the range of products in nibo won't change that much. What I like most about nibo is the paper and the office supplies

that are there for a while. If you spend some time there, you will always find something beautiful at the bottom or in between other things.

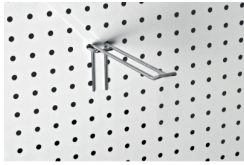
Graphic Design students of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie are mentioned by Jaap Nieuweboer in a short, very nice interview by Sanne van de Goor and Henk Laloli: "Sometimes they come into the store and after an hour come out again, they have found all kinds of things that I already didn't know I had!"⁶ I wondered who these people were. When I talk about nibo with classmates, none of them seem to go there.


Founded in the 20s by his father Godefriedus van der Wens, through the years and the digitalization, a lot has been changed in the range of products of nibo. But, even though the store is daily replenished (at least at the time of the interview, in 2011), nibo stayed true to the old assortment, unlike other stationery stores.⁵

From outside, a blend of yellow and white light (it reminds me of the color of old insert covers, discolored transparent plastic), white cupboards that remember me of the material I had in my teenage built-in wardrobe and products in green, orange and yellow, the gradient of these colors I remember from primary school. Lights in the cupboards light up the products on the top shelves. Just behind the big shopwindow, a couple of hole punchers with a handle. Some A4-papers are hanging on the shop window. It reminds me a bit of a warehouse and of the small, a bit old-fashioned hardware stores you can still find in Amsterdam.

Going inside nibo

When I open the door, my eyes focus through the glass of the door to see the first corner on the right. This is my favorite part of the store. Here, stencils and rulers are hanging. From what I remember, the wall has this system:



Metal wall system with chrome hooks 


It is a metal wall, covered in high gloss paint (I always like high gloss better than silk gloss, I think it is nice because it goes well with a more strict and modernist interest I also have, even though sometimes I am afraid it becomes shiny). The wall has a dotted pattern and looks like the game board of Battlefield. The hooks are in chrome.

I like this system because it is solid and playful at the same time. I imagine the movement of the hook along the grid, creating a shape together with other hooks, the grid wall almost functioning as a stencil itself. It makes me think of a book one of my teachers in basic year once recommended to me. It is called ‘Support Structures’ by Céline Condorelli. In this book, Condorelli argues for an integration of the role of display (the support), within what is considered ‘the work (of art)’. In her words, displaying is intrinsic to artistic production. Also, according to Condorelli, the used material speaks volumes. ²¹ It “attempts to restore attention

to one of the neglected, yet crucial modes through which we apprehend and shape the world”.

I can very much relate to this idea in my own artistic practice. Lately, my fascination for office supplies translate into works of art I make in which office supplies are visually present. As a precondition, the office supplies always have a supporting, functional role. They will never be the center of the work, as I don’t want to suggest office supplies are artworks and at the same time you can’t imagine the work without them. As an example, my last work is a collection of cut-outs of old works I made in five years at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, combined with a new drawing and one other visual element (a bright, yellow circle, made with a circle cutter) held together by a paper clamp. The cut-outs I use are related to different courses of teachers at the Rietveld Academie.



Hagar van der Knijff, collection of cut-outs held together by a paper clamp 

The newly made drawing is based on Kanye West's 'Waves' from the album 'The Life of Pablo', which I was listening to last summer. I wrote 'waves' with my left hand and an Edding 3000 permanent marker. I am right-handed and I am using my left hand as a tool because I have less control in this way (just like using the carbon and the stencils). The plastic was a leftover I cut in this size after I wrote on it. Under this, bright yellow glaze paper from paper store Vlieger in Amsterdam in the shape of a circle. That summer I just got a Japanese circle cutter. Under this circle, a fragment of a work I made for a course by Paul Gangloff in Precourse at the Rietveld Academie. Under this a fragment of Python generated lyrics in a course by Will Holder in the first year of Graphic Design. Then a sheet of IBO, the paper by Irma Boom, just enough transparent to show the final work, which is a fragment of a publication I made with Max Kessel in second year of Graphic Design. The clamp I bought at Vlieger as well. I prefer this one over the ones having a black clamp. I think these are more classy.

I see this work as a documentation of (daily) life, with everything having the same importance, held together by a clamp, fragile as it is. You could say the paper clamp is practical. In this way it can be hung easily, at the same time it suggests something administrative, which is supporting this work also on a conceptual level.

Looking at nibo's metal wall again, I wouldn't love this part of the store much without the structure the stencils are hanging from. Even though I love stencils in general. For me, they very much belong together and one needs the other to be complete. What intrigues me as well about this metal wall, is that a hook

can be removed at any time, and it would be impossible to see where it was before. Just like the paper clamp in my own work it can be removed and there will be no traces. For both my fickle taste and reasons motivated by sustainability, it is something I look for.

Then I focus on the plastic stencils, looking for the brands engraved in — or printed on top of them. Some have old white stickers with prices in Guilder (the Dutch currency before Euro, until 2002), they are at least 19 years old and I mostly like those ones immediately. The ones I am interested in, are hanging in a thick, plastic folder with a so-called 'sombbrero hat'™ like in this Scotch tape packaging. I have searched forever for websites explaining about these openings but there is not a single trustworthy website having information about this.



Scotch Wall-Safe Tape in packaging having a sombrero hat cutout

I am intrigued by the transparency and the colors of the plastic of the stencils. I think the colors didn't really change over time. They still have a 70s look by being either orange, yellow, green, blue, brown, gray or white. Some stencils — they don't have any brand engraved or printed on top of them — are packed in a thin,

cheap looking plastic. I once bought one of these and I have always regretted it. I can not unsee the low quality of it any longer, even though I probably bought it for a reason.

Nowadays, I try to avoid buying plastic, unless it is recycled or it can be recycled. But when buying office supplies, I don't really follow this rule. Maybe because I mostly buy 'old' office supplies, hopefully made in a better way back in the time (at least durable, since they are still in good condition today). I wonder if the cheap looking plastic is indeed of a different quality than the old, decent looking stencils I like. It could be, in the time the decent looking stencils were made, plastic simply had a different value. It was a relatively new material and the environmental damage of it was something not being discussed yet. I wonder if I like these stencils more because they (seem to) have a better quality of plastic or because they were made in a time in which plastic was more precious.

I walk along the stencils, walk past a showcase filled with pens, staplers and calculators at my right side, and arrive at the section with staples, paperclips, fasteners, archive binders and elastics. They are on display on white shelves, separated from each other by a little plexiglass or transparent plastic wall (made by hand quite some years ago, I think). I like how simple — and at the same time so well made and handy — these staples, paperclips, fasteners, archivers and elastics are. I especially like the design of the paperclip and I am asking myself why there are about 100 pieces in one packaging. Do you really need that much? Is it simply a leftover of a time of mass production, a time without digital folders to keep your files together in?

In 2011, Jaap Nieuweboer had the feeling that there was more attention for authentic products and the sustainable use of it.¹⁶ I wonder if the mass-produced paperclip will in future come in smaller amounts for that reason. Or maybe, looking at the large selection of nicely colored, old paper boxes filled with paperclips but also staples, the supply that was produced in the past will never be finished.

Just before I move on, I notice a pack that says 'butterfly clips'. I open it and a paperclip having the shape of a butterfly shows up. The pack says this specific type of clip can hold a bigger pile of paper. I wonder if I would like to add this to my toolset and ask myself whether it contributes anything to this. I am not sure about these, since they seem to have lost the simplicity of the paperclip a bit and I already have such a great amount of paperclips I will never finish or use before I die.

Thinking of this, there is an American conceptual artist called David Hammons who was criticizing — amongst other things — material lust and made a classification of snowballs on a blanket just like it were several packs of staples in a stationery store. During his performance 'Bliz-aard Ball Sale I' (here captured on camera by Dawoud Bey, 1983), in East Village New York, Hammons sold snowballs as luxury goods. At the same location, 30 years later, a historically free art school began charging tuition.¹⁷ By selling these snowballs, that you could make yourself just around the corner and soon would melt, Hammons made a counterproposal to the art world and material lust. Clearly, for Hammons, it is not about selling the snowballs, but about defining art. In his performance there weren't office supplies involved, but it didn't involve any conventional presentation and



David Hammons selling snowballs in East Village New York, 1983

Photo by Dawoud Bey ∞

therefore you could say it was almost an *administrative* work of art, stripped of all decorations. Just like the paperclip is simply holding together some papers.

Conceptual Art was described by Benjamin Buchloh as “The postwar period’s most rigorous investigation of the conventions of pictorial and sculptural presentation and a critique of the traditional paradigms of visuality”.

As Buchloh was explaining it; by dismantling the discourse of both the ‘studio’ and the production/consumption of the time, and their inherent conventions of visuality, an aesthetic of administration was established. The definition of the aesthetic was determined by, among other things, an administrative style of the material presentation. □ Which I think means the Conceptual Artist left the conventional space of a studio to work at and refused to contribute to the consumer society and this resulted in an administrative style.

In ‘Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’, Buchloh adds that in the 60s, a newly established postwar middle class came into being. The social identity of this class was one of merely administering labor and administering production — instead of producing — and the distribution of commodities. It became the most common and powerful social class of postwar society. □

Another American artist linked to Conceptualism is Sol LeWitt (1928). He described how a conceptual artist would aim mostly to inform viewers, instead to enthrall them with the beauty of a certain piece of art. To illustrate how he sees making art, LeWitt uses the metaphor of a performance of daily bureaucratic tasks □:

“The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information. ... He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions *merely as a clerk cataloging the results of his premise* (italics added).” □

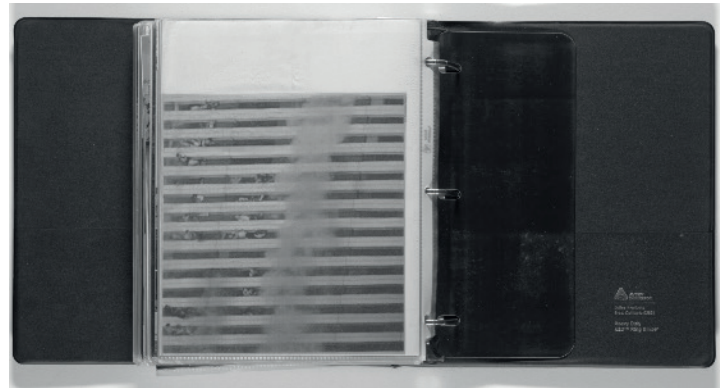
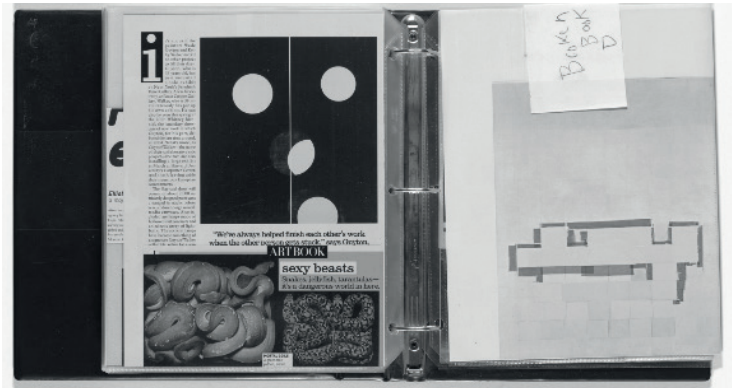
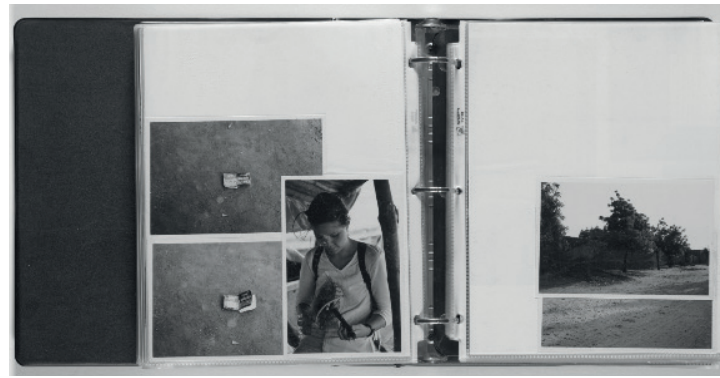
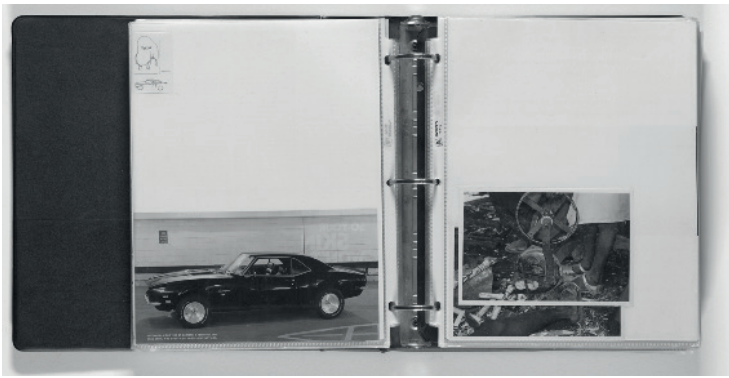
At the envelope and the file folders, I look up. I take down one of the boxes from the top shelf. It looks like an old, well made box, this is how they probably packed office supplies in the past, and I hope it will be plastic covers. I have a really nice PVC cover of Leitz at home, it is in a very good condition. The PVC is thick and has a pattern that reminds me of the pattern in old glass doors.



Leitz PVC cover 4053 embossing and labeling window ³⁶

There is a small labeling window at the right bottom. Left from this, ‘Leitz 4053’ and ‘made in germany’ is embossed. The carrying capacity is enlarged by a particular closing at the bottom that has embossed ‘mit großen Fassungsvermögen’ (with large capacity).

It makes me think of the plastic sleeves in the notebooks I saw of American video artist Arthur Jafa at Julia Stoschek Collection in Berlin in 2018. It was an Avery, black, three-ring notebook



Arthur Jafa, Untitled notebook, 1990–2007 TM

showing the by Jafa collected hundreds of image cut-outs, arranged in plastic sleeves.

I remember myself sitting at the table at which Jafa's notebooks were arranged. It was the first time I would see Jafa's work. I remember browsing through several of his notebooks, touching the soft, shiny plastic, looking at the imagery on top of a white A4 paper. These images, Arthur Jafa has been collecting for decades. Coming from magazines, newspapers, books or films, he is saving them in notebooks. The imagery is inspiring his video work, and apparently he also brings the notebooks out to share with friends.¹ It seems like, also for Jafa, the notebook (office supplies) has a very functional and supporting use, namely to show but also share his imagery. The notebooks seem to have a conceptual value. As the imagery is part of his daily life but also his work, the notebooks seem to support this by their administrative, documenting appearance.

In the box I took from the top shelf there is Durable Pocketfix, adhesive covers in different sizes. The instruction shows them applied in waiting rooms and on the side of shelving units in archives. The plastic feels thick and, indeed, durable. I like them, I like the quality of the plastic and the option of writing something on the label, but I don't see why I need it, it is too defined what it is for, so I close the box and put it back at the top.

Then, on my left, almost on the floor, something I never paid attention to before in this place: paper. When I talked again about nibo with the teacher that introduced me to the place, she said she would always get nice papers of nibo when she was still studying at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie.

A gray/green pile of papers catches my attention. It is wrapped in a thin, soft and loose plastic and comes with a thin, little white paper inside that say: 'NIBO PAPERS' in caps and with a shadow (PAPERS is outlined), 'flying colors' and 'WOOD FREE OFFSET GRAY/GREEN' and '250 GR/M2 A4 25 VEL (sheet)'. The '25' is crossed and a '37' is handwritten on top of it.

I wonder where the paper comes from. The owner once told me, in the past he would visit a paper factory in the east of Europe, his (then) wife came from an East-European country. In the interview Jaap Nieuweboer explains how digitalization has changed the paper offer as well. Once, he once he took over the entire household effect of a bankrupt printing company, but the special paper that was part of it, is slowly running out.²

While I am taking my time to look at everything carefully — Nieuweboer explicitly told me to take as much time as I need, even though his two friends (and maybe neighbors) in front of the shop seem to find it strange — Nieuweboer has two clients. One of them just found out about the store and asks how long Nieuweboer is running the store. For both of the clients, Nieuweboer didn't have what they were searching for. They went out and I feel sad for Nieuweboer, imagining this would happen more often and would be a consequence of staying true to the old assortment. One of the customers even explicitly tells Nieuweboer she is going to his competitor. But then I remember myself the interview in which Nieuweboer tells he has little financial concerns, because of owning this place.²

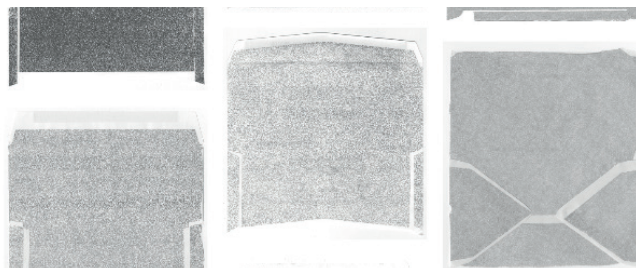
I look forward and have a beautiful view, a bit comparable to the view from outside. In the right corner, a gray, metal, paper cutting

machine, surrounded by related tools, paper and cardboard and a white (high gloss) shelving unit behind it. In the back a white storage system with white shelves. On them, opened packages of paper, some colored cardboard and a small amount of books. At the top of my view, a curved mirror in which I see the beautiful colors of the papers and folders in the store in combination with the white wardrobes, the nice lightning and me.

I turn left, walk along an old Dymo label writer, something I once would love to have, and see white shelves for larger papers. If I remember right, it is A2. Under this, white plexiglass disks separate eight colors of crepe paper and different kinds of plastic foils. Underneath this, is the best part of this corner. Here you can find many different types of papers, most of them seem a bit old, having a quality and color you don't see elsewhere. A deep, bright orange, a beautiful, classic brown (the one I remember, again, from primary school), papers with patterns that remind me of the inside of envelopes having sensitive information inside, called security envelopes. Mostly, the pattern is in black, blue or grey. I never bought this before, but if I would, I would buy it to support/add a layer to a work I am working on. It would end up in a folder and I would think of it one day and cut a piece out of it.

It is important to me to use the aesthetic of office supplies as a *support* of my work, not the work itself. I realized this by looking at the work of American artist Cindy Bernard. Bernard exhibited her work '1-75 Security Envelope Grid' in the 1989 Whitney Biennial, in which she used blown-up images of the patterns from the inside of security envelopes³. I don't want to include the imagery, because I don't like them. With these

images, Bernard is asking the viewer to pause and pay attention to an, in her words, 'under appreciated act of choosing'⁴. Even though in general, I understand the need to pause and everyday life is something I am much inspired by, I wouldn't use the aesthetics of office supplies in this way. Bernard's blown-up images center the aesthetic of office supplies and by doing this, it feels to me I should take something from her work. It feels like I am looking at something that I do recognize but I (realize I) took for granted. When artworks are pointing the finger like this, I lose my interest. I think there is much more beauty in a subtle use of materials that hint towards something in a supporting way.



Beautiful collection of insides of security envelopes from an anonymous collector³

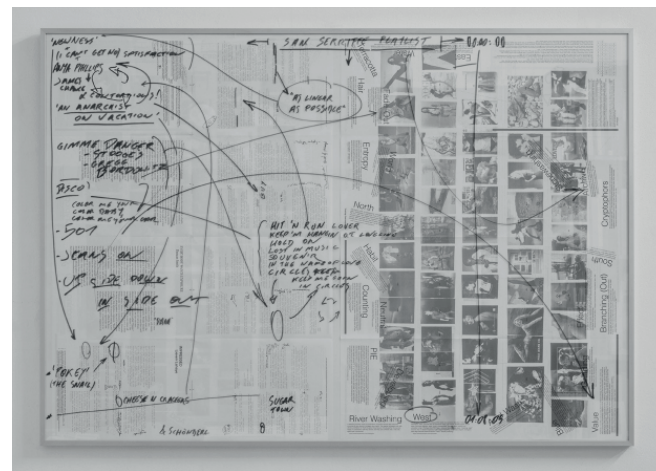
Sometimes the papers are a bit dirty, sometimes there is just one left. I noticed some silver papers at the bottom, and some large sheets of stickers (a white one as well, it almost turned into beige). Then I see a really nice orange and green paper. It looks like placard paper, but I think this is more glossy and has more of a grain. The backside is white. I know it is hard to find this quality of paper nowadays. I would like to sit down and look at every single sheet that is in here.

Instead I walk past the paper and I arrive at the receipt books with carbon paper. I am not interested in the receipt books, since they are too specific, except for the carbon paper itself. I once bought a folder with ten sheets of blue carbon paper, thinking I would need that much. I cut a piece out of the first sheet to use for some drawings and some small notes, the other 9 sheets I never touched. Even though the office supplies are mostly objects for everyday use, I am really careful with them. A couple of months ago, I bought a transparent, brown, Scotch/3M tape holder in an art supply store. On my way home, I hit my bag, including the tape holder, against a pole along the street. It is glued, but it is possible I will replace it with a new one. I rather keep my tape at home, to prevent dust and dirt from sticking to the side of it. My stencils I clean after I use them. Possibly, I just copied my father who kept his stencils carefully in the plastic cover and was a bit hesitant to lend me these, even though he would never use them again.

Also, at home I feel like a curator of a group of office supplies, placing them carefully at the right spot in my house. Still, I don't like to consider them as artistic objects. I think I place them carefully in my house because I appreciate their straightforward aesthetic, the appearance of the objects that is mirroring their daily, simple use that I like so much about them.

Next to the receipt books, in a white wardrobe, a grid made from wood to showcase pens and pencils. Every box has a label on the front of the shelf that says the brand, the type of pencil and the thickness. Some pens and pencils are still in a paper box. With the exception of pens or pencils that have a special quality (when they add something) — for example, not so long ago I bought

my first whiteboard marker, I allowed myself after seeing this work by Lieven Lahaye — I don't buy any new ones since I am worried about the amount of pens I already have. It makes me think of a strategy drawing made in an office.

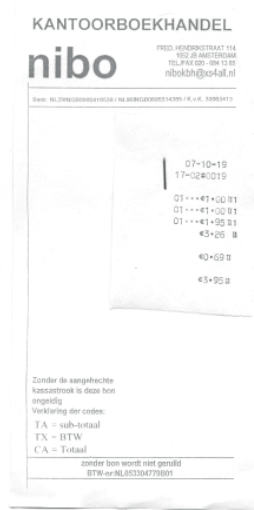


Catalog issue 17, part of a serial publication 'Catalog' about cataloging, written by Lieven Lahaye and designed by Ott Metusala, photo taken by Anu Vahtra ¹⁴

Under them there is one shelf with correction fluid and some lost office supplies. Under this, a drawer unit with six drawers, some of them having a number in Helvetica typeface on them.

I end up at the cash register, where Jaap Nieuweboer would write me a receipt I will always keep. A smaller receipt from a cash register that is probably here as long as nibo exists, sums up

the prices of the products and is stapled to the receipt paper with the imprint of nibo.



nibo receipt (printed in bright blue) ²⁶

Looking at the staple, I think of the clamp that holds my collection of cut-outs. Even though my fascination for office supplies translates into a certain functionality and has an administrative nature just as in Conceptual Art, there is one, substantial difference. Other than Conceptual Art, that is concerned with a certain premise instead of the resulting artwork, I am much concerned with the aesthetics of the office supplies I am using in my work. The composition of the materials and the cutouts in the work

with the clamp, I thought about for a long time. I tried out many things, even with cut-outs in different materials or on different paper.

One thing I was sure of was the transparency of the different layers. I think this physical transparency is resulting from a longing for transparency in general. The lack of this in museums or galleries, with a, often, hard to read wall text, I have a hard time understanding. Even though I think nowadays institutions are becoming more and more aware of both physical and intellectual accessibility, I often find it hard to enter the work of artists, simply because of a difficult wall text. Also, I have been studying for five years at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and I have been to many Studium Generale lectures, and still I feel a bit uneducated every time I visit one. A lot of references I don't know and a lot of words of a language I don't speak. I don't want people to feel like this, don't want to pretend I am not making mistakes, don't want to exclude people by using words I don't know the definition of. This is why I would like to radiate transparency in my physical work as well.

Looking at the staple, I think of its simplicity, of its everyday use. There is a sincerity in it, just like the clamp, the snowballs, the plastic sleeves, they all seem to come with a certain honesty. This is of great importance to me, also while being at Rietveld Academie. I think I say to some people I don't really like graduation shows (also other art academies in the Netherlands), since they are showing works that are often very much finished and polished. While studying at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, I am a bit afraid to say this, because why would I stay if I don't like the final show of students studying at the same art academy?

But I think I just rather look at unfinished work, my classmates' processes, when they are still a bit unsure, possibly throw something out some other people really loved. Still open to choose for other directions, or to go back to something made before.

Looking at the staple, I think about the conversations I had with my thesis supervisor, still not sure to call it an essay or a thesis. In the mountains of Brezovica (1,5 hours from Kosovo, on a 6-week trip with Wthe graduation year of Graphic Design), during our first meeting, I told both supervisors I wanted to write about office supplies. The subject would offer many possibilities but how would I approach it, what would be in it for the reader? Even though I wanted to write about something I consider as open, sincere, transparent and close to me, I couldn't start writing. Only 10 days before the final deadline I started. Now I am here, writing an essay I sometimes like, sometimes don't, depending on the day. I am thinking of our last conversation about the conclusion. How I should try to integrate it more and continue the style of the rest of the essay. And I wonder if I did it well.

Looking at the staple, I would like to go back to a nice memory of a couple of months ago. I was having a beer with a dear friend in a bar in the east of Amsterdam, when she asked me to present her the subject of my essay. By that time I had had many presentations at my friend's houses, at my family, often listened to and followed by a silence I interrupted by saying it's still in process. As I was talking, I felt it was the first coherent presentation of my concept, immediately followed by my friends' conclusion of what I was describing to her: Administrative art.

Thank you Louis, David, Guus, Anouk, Katha, Rieneke

Print run: 8

Paper: Plakaatpapier 90g; UPM Sol Gloss 90g; glossy paper from a Gallery writing pad and unknown, light gray/brown paper, both found in nibo; transparant PVC sheets, 0.3mm

Typefaces: Times New Roman, Wingdings

Printed by: High end printer, Gerrit Rietveld Academie

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Photographs made with a Minolta 125 Riva Zoom, during two visits in nibo, just before closing time.