

## Wooster Enterprises

CHURNER AND CHURNER

It's a pathetic scene. Painful, even. In 1930s Paris, Marcel Duchamp hawks his Rotoreliefs from a booth at the Inventors' Fair. "Like a smiling salesgirl," Henri-Pierre Roché would recall. Obviously, Duchamp won't be the last artist to test the strategic and commercial potential of modeling artwork as everyday retail merchandise. The cash register rings through Claes Oldenburg's "The Store," 1961, Keith Haring's 1986–2005 Pop Shop, Christine Hill's *Volksboutique*, 1996–, and Superflex's *Guaraná Power*, 2004– (to say nothing of certain Louis Vuitton collaborations). But what a disheartening precedent. Here Duchamp fashions himself as entrepreneur—and not a single sale.

Skip to 1977, to the annual National Stationery Show in New York. Jaime Davidovich occupies the single chair at a booth draped in black and blandly labeled "Wooster Enterprises," a monochrome blip among

pastel greetings and neon tufts of hair. (Troll dolls were big that year.) Davidovich's wares consist of dry witticisms: a note card bearing the photographic image of a foot that slips into an envelope emblazoned with a shoe, a pad of paper with the phrase "I hate to write" scribbled repeatedly across its surface in faint gray. The deadpan eccentricity attracts buyers, and Davidovich studiously records their orders.

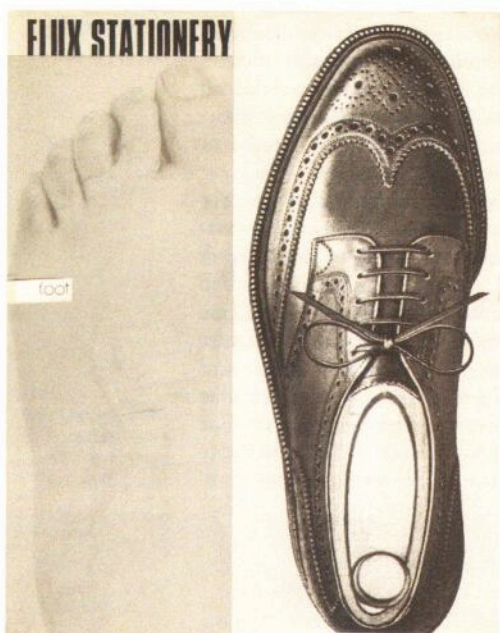
Wooster Enterprises, the subject of this retrospective exhibition, was a short-lived stationery business incorporated by Davidovich and his then wife Judith Henry in 1976. In addition to selling their own original products, they marketed items by Fluxus "chairman" George Maciunas, whose principle of "functionalism" informed their design sensibility. According to functionalism, objects should point to their

own material construction and social purpose: hence, Maciunas's "hand" note card for a "glove" envelope, or Henry's writing pad overlaid with the image of a crumpled paper sheet. As was often the case with Fluxus, droll wit masked serious intent; Davidovich and Henry conceived of Wooster Enterprises as an affront to the dissimulating, anodyne style popularized by Milton Glaser ("I ♥ New York").

The exhibition opened with Wooster Enterprises' product line displayed in a glass showcase, a commercial vernacular jarringly out of place at the center of a gallery. Equally striking, however, were the photocopied invoices lining the walls. The pairing suggests that Wooster Enterprises had two components—paper goods, but also *paperwork*. Maciunas had pioneered the model of distributing artworks as low-cost multiples in the 1960s, through the Fluxshop on Canal Street and the Flux Mail-Order Warehouse. Like Duchamp at the Inventors' Fair, however, Maciunas couldn't make a sale. By contrast, Wooster Enterprises achieved relative success by contracting directly with department stores and novelty shops. Davidovich had the gumption to march into Bloomingdale's, traveling case in hand; Henry possessed the diligence to attend to the bookkeeping.

Wooster Enterprises, then, revises the stipulations for the artist-as-merchant: Devise everyday goods with a conceptual surplus—be they

George Maciunas, *Foot in Shoe*, 1973–77, offset print on paper, 10½ x 8½". From "Wooster Enterprises."



Rotoreliefs or functionalist stationery—but then deploy sufficient savvy to smuggle them into commerce. Davidovich's and Henry's knack for the latter ensured their demise. Stores kept reordering stock but never paid their bills, so the cash flow for further printing dried up. Unable to obtain a bank loan and unwilling to parcel out their stake to investors, Davidovich and Henry shuttered the business in 1978. The crux of their dilemma holds true today, regardless of the market: Even when artists make sales, they can't always collect.

—*Colby Chamberlain*