Advertiser: Calvin Klein  
Agency: In-house  
Rating: 0 stars

Publicity monster turns on Klein

By Bob Garfield

It wasn't the half-supine jailbait with no panties on.  
It wasn't the four naked fashion models of various sexes entwined like a can of night crawlers.  
It wasn't the shower scene with the dripping male model and the strategically placed jacket sleeve of, shall we say, stone-washed denim.  
It wasn't even the 60-square-foot underwear crotch with male body part in water-soaked relief over Times Square.

As often as Calvin Klein crossed the line demarcating taste and decency over the past 15 years, it is only now that he has gone utterly beyond the pale. In his latest effort to raise eyebrows and hackles and yet another bonanza of free publicity, he has gone beyond gratuitousness, beyond titillation, beyond vulgarity to the very core of our moral sensibilities.

Calvin Klein Inc. and in-house agency CRK have produced the most profoundly disturbing campaign in TV history--with the look, texture and nauseating salaciousness of child pornography--and at long last it is too much.

The cynical genius of calculated outrage is finally running in terror from the publicity monster of his own creation, withdrawing the campaign amid declarations of shock, shock that "some people are taking away a different perception of the ads" than what CK putatively intended. But, of course--like the ads themselves--such limp apologia are not to be believed.

"You have a lovely body," says an unseen, middle-aged interviewer from the back of a makeshift, rumpus room set. The background is cheap weldwood paneling, the only prop a stepladder on a soiled carpet. The subject is a long-haired teen-age boy in a pair of black CK jeans and a black vest, but no shirt.
"Mmm hmm," the boy agrees.
"Do you like your body?" the older man asks.
"Yeah, I like it."

"Mm hmm. Would you like to see something improved on it?"
"No, I like . . . I like it the way it is."

"[Chuckling] You do?"
"I don't need . . . you know, I don't need all that."
"You don't need to improve it, huh?"

"Uh uh."

"Well," the interviewer says, leeringly, "those jeans look reeeeeeal good on you."

The low-production values and audition format apparently mimic the scenario of chickenhawk porn in which children, being interviewed by the unseen "director," are coaxed to disrobe . . . and whatever else. This campaign stops short of full nudity and sex acts, but--with boy and girl models alike--it hews to the kiddie porn formula.

"Are you strong?" the older man asks a young James Dean clone in another spot.

"I like to think so."

"Do you think you could rip that shirt off of you [And the kid does]."

"That's a nice body. Do you work out?"

"Mmm hmm."

"[Chuckling] Yeah, I can tell."

The same narrator tries to get a young girl named Karen to dance. She refuses. But a young boy--he looks all of 14--is happy to "mosh" for the grown-up. It is all just too perverse. What is being sold here? Jeans, or outtakes from the John Wayne Gacy Video Library?

Among those objecting to this campaign are the Rev. Donald Wildmon, the sanctimonious, self-appointed arbiter of American moral values. But one need scarcely be a zealot or a prig to find these commercials--and the indefensible decision by MTV and others to air them--irredeemably repugnant. It is one thing to toy with the nation's libido, as Calvin Klein has been doing for the better part of two decades. And it is bad enough to glorify and fan the flames of
adolescent sexuality. But to portray children as sex toys parading before adults is the line that cannot be crossed.

It is plainly repulsive, and if the out-of-control monster should destroy its shrinking master, there will be no wails of grief heard from here.

Tell Bob Garfield what you think through the Ad Age Bulletin Board on Prodigy, or by Prodigy e-mail at EFPB35A@prodigy.com.

Copyright September 1995 Crain Communications Inc.