

Where it's Happening At Last!

Billboard Society

- As an important contributor to that powerful visual culture, the designer is finally at the centre of what's happening. Now wonder his confidence is on the increase. His territory is growing even larger. More and more is being asked of him as well. To prevent his work from being swallowed up in the ubiquitous soup of images, analysis and reflection are indispensable. On the other hand, he no longer needs to be so apprehensive that his public will fail to understand. The visual literacy of the average viewer has now become fairly developed. A number of Dutch designers are adopting this role with gusto. Studios such as DEPT and 75B have created work that serves as a trademark, distinguishing itself with the direct effect of logo-like, instantaneous messages that arouse immediate enthusiasm and curiosity. -

The Designer as Artist

- For a long time, fine artists stood several rungs higher on the hierarchical ladder than the so-called functional or applied artists. Designers therefore envied them. They were, after all, free of restrictions and made autonomous work. The situation is now reversed. The fine arts and its artists have become isolated. They now envy the designers their relationship with their public and their (real or imagined) contact with the user. As a result, the position of the designer has become a more attractive one. Designers are also approached as artists. 75B was asked to paint a skating rink, SYB to respond to the work of cartoon artist Dick Bruna. Consequently, design becomes a new arm of the fine arts - or is it the other way around? Designers set their own rules. They create, when needed, their own context for their work and operate in the art world. For their part, the art world adores it. Clever ideas-with-a-twist are 'in'. Moreover, with the increased commercialisation of society as a whole, designers have another advantage over other artists and the fine arts circles. Designers are generally far more adept with the media and possess the capacity for thinking in strategic terms. -

Interaction

- Actively involving people, reaching different target groups and generating input - this is what interactive approach is all about. It is giving and taking for all parties concerned, and it was with this motivation that 75B set up their colouring book project. Whoever coloured in the specially designed colouring books that 75B themselves distributed, was asked to send the book back to them for a final exhibition. It was interesting to see how each person filled in the same images differently. Printed matter becomes a two-way street. -

Acid Wit

-The wry humour in Dutch graphic design is the same as the famous Dutch painting of the Golden Age. There seems to be a lot to laugh about, but it always hurts a little. Jokes have a sharp edge, because there are always double meanings and morals involved. Instead of big-eyed elves and gnomes, the pictures in 75B's colouring books are intended to involve children in the controversies of their times. They have themes such as homosexuality and commercialism. The municipal shields that 75B designed for Rotterdam 2001, Cultural Capital of Europe, are completely comprised of trademarks and logos. -

Culture as Research & Development

-Audacious Dutch design is high in cultural content. The majority of the work selected for this book was produced for the arts and culture sector. Here, designers are permitted the greatest freedom and enjoy the most respect. The moment the norms that apply here are let loose on assignments for business and industry, not much is left over. It seems a rather weak position when the interesting developments take place in the protected niches of the subsidised cultural circuit - and within that, mostly in the sub-niches of the smaller cultural institutions. The experiments are therefore small in scale, enacted in the margins where the coast is clear for the designers. In some cases, as with 75B's colouring book project and DEPT's plastic bags-with-a-statement, it was even possible for projects of the designers' own making to be realised thanks to a maecenas who finances them. As is more often the case in Dutch design, however, the weakness is also the strength. By giving experimental designers and small studios carte blanche in helping determine its identity, the cultural world often sticks its neck out and consequently plays the pioneer role. Many of the big commercial studios follow these developments with Argus-eyed interest and quickly reap the profits by quoting and copying to their hearts' content. The cultural sector thus serves as a research & development laboratory. There is tremendous potential here. Whether it will be picked up by conservative corporate culture in the Netherlands or elsewhere does not only depend on the designers. The time is ripe. Now on to the work. -

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