



Calendars for Mart Spruijt printing house, 1972/73

Van Toorn utilized this everyday, promotional object as a communication device to call out complexity to users. Images were not the typical “selling” ideal, featuring instead the everyday and sometimes troubled nature of the world.

“Everything is possible, you can quote everything, you can use every style, but where are the arguments that are really contributing to a fundamental change in our social conditions?”

I talk to Jan van Toorn

“Jan van Toorn is one of the most distinguished and provocative figures in an exceptional generation of Dutch graphic designers. Van Toorn’s social and political concerns, and his way of talking about them, set him apart.”—Rick Poynor. Jan’s critical approach resonates strongly with the concerns of my own thesis, and I had the opportunity to ask him more.

Christina: From what I know of your work, you are invested in using graphic design as a critical tool. You have been writing about design for over 40 years, and I wonder how many of the issues you address have changed. In 1994 you wrote *Design and Reflexivity*. You made many points about the power and issues within the industry of visual communication. You point out the duality between a “common-sense”, utilitarian approach to design and attempts at renewing the established vocabularies; and that these lines are blurring but that “official design continues to be characterized by aesthetic compulsiveness and/ or by a patriarchal fixation on reproductive ordering.” I would like to consider how this translates to contemporary conditions in design practice. Could you elaborate on “aesthetic compulsiveness and/ or by a patriarchal fixation on reproductive ordering”?

Jan: My ideas about communication design as a socio-cultural engagement in essence did not change much since the mid nineteen seventies. But the radical changes of the social-economic conditions, globalization, mass-media, digitalization etc., etc. of course ensured that my horizon in thought and action significantly adjusted and broadened over time. Most important perhaps is that communication design being more and more indispensable and successful in the service economy became instrumental, serving private interest and consumption, lost its collective public commitment. As a result of this accommodation to vested interests and post-modern belief communication design developed a visual, spatial, digital etc. language use that is heavily influenced by the pragmatism and managerial ideology of commerce, finance, politics and media. This to say, that design’s language hardly produces any knowledge

today. It limits itself strategically, methodologically, substantially and aesthetically; using only a small part of the wealth of vocabularies we as human beings share outside the realm of the institutional world. Social/relational design for example, in spite of its commitment, most of the time unnecessarily confines itself to the abstractions of its own universe assuming that process-based technology produces meaningful design, while it in fact refers to the rationality of the system and form itself. Even so-called post-critical designers limit themselves (well-read and fast thinkers as they are) to you could call formal aesthetic activism. A kind of overall short-sightedness which keeps our critical notions as human beings separated from our professional habits and language use, from its communicative role and its workings in social and symbolic reality. Caught in the classic and formal concept of communication,* believing that content and form speak for themselves, design’s social engagement lost its capacity to find words articulating collective values and to develop tools for more substantive ways of expression. Now that the mass media have breathless attention-grabbing coverage it is necessary on the one hand to invest in the understanding of design’s role and nature of cultural production to restores solidarity with the audience; and on the other hand to work on an editorial approach and methodology as a basis for a more profound visual language use. So what to do? How to liberate communication design from this type of flawed social/public responsibility, from its ‘aesthetic compulsiveness’ and its apparently inevitable decorative role?

Although you mention “aesthetic compulsiveness” in the previous argument, I can’t help but respond to the irreverent but beautiful aesthetic of your work and how it evokes a sense of critical play—this is a key aspect of my work as well. Beyond your aesthetic gesture, you say you are seeking a

“dialogic” relationship with the viewer. This term immediately resonated for me. In Design’s Delight you explain:

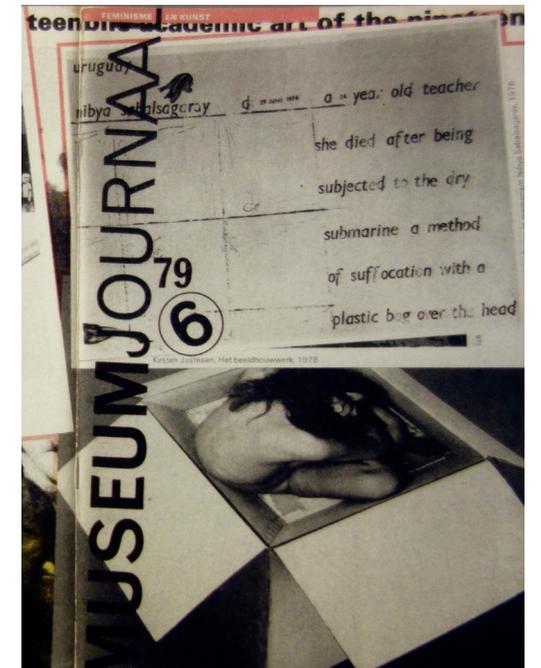
“Unlike the classic form of visual communication, the dialogic approach is a connective model of visual rhetoric with a polemic nature and polyphonic visual form. A storytelling structure that seeks to reveal the opposing elements of the message and opts for active interpretation by the spectator.”

“...the reflexive (or dialogic) approach of the critical realist, who questions the production conditions and symbolic conditions of the spectator and of himself with the intention of declassifying the consciousness and imagination that they both share and replacing them with alternative, inconsistent images and information that invite the spectators and readers to engage in active interpretation, based on their own history and background.”

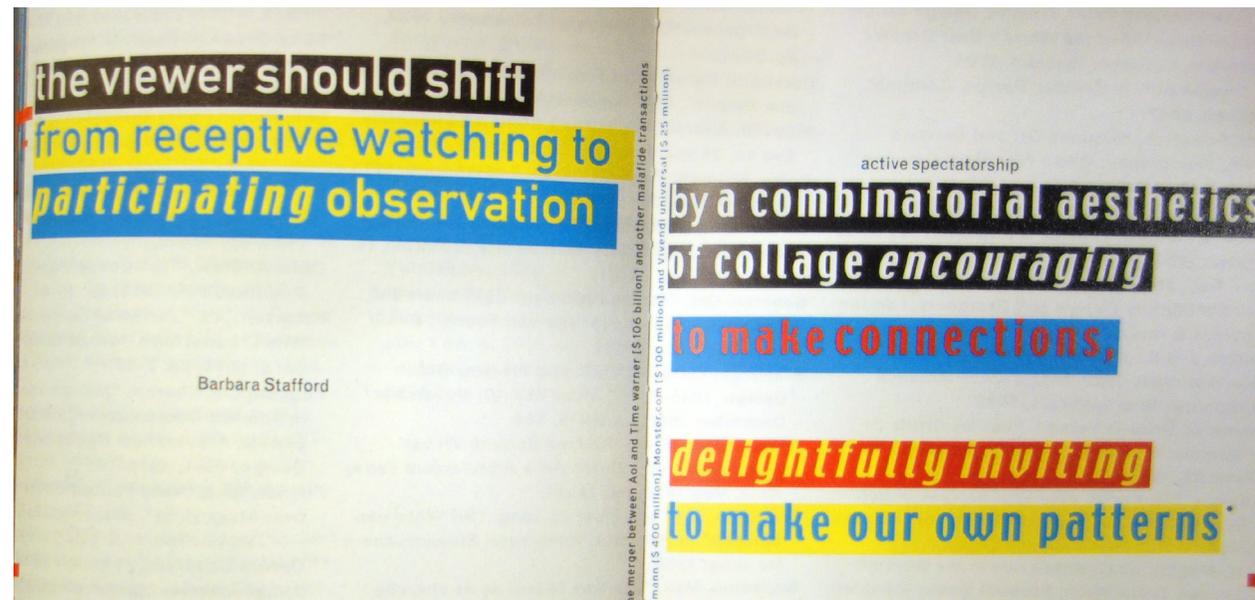
Can you tell me more about “polemic nature”, “symbolic conditions” and “declassifying the consciousness”? By “their own history and background” do you mean outside of the prevalent social constructs of media or systematized perspectives? In my own work I am interested in instigating questions rather than answers, and invite viewers to locate themselves in the complexity of the condition I am calling out—conditions typically created by patriarchal norms. I wonder if this is congruent with your idea of dialogic.

The dialogic tradition subverts the assumption that human communication is transparent and at the same time questions the one-dimensional narrative of the classical concept’s harmonious, illusive style as a reliable window at the world. In the case of communication design it strives to re-adapt and rebuild the public and substantive tradition of editorial design (of visual journalism), and to revive its story-telling, figurative language use. A practice in which the descriptive and the normative, fact and fiction, reason

and emotion come together in the making of a narrative in stories that solicit the viewer to experience, to explore, interpret. To this end the dialogic work deploys myriad strategies that disrupt our relation to established regimes and conventions resulting in a dynamic (open/dialogic) structure of the message, that is kept together by the ‘plane of consistency’ of the maker, i.e. a recognizable mentality of the ‘author’, as a subjective unity of vision, content and form. In reaction to the virtual realism of the spectacle dominating mainstream media, which prevents a meaningful use of word and image, my focus is on the textual, visual and other practices that further more complex and argumentative forms of communication and foregrounds the constructed nature of messages in order to solicit the active interpretation of the viewer/reader. That is why the emphasis is on the potentialities and richness of the ‘reflexive tradition’ or dialogic method, trying to recuperate the specificity of its projective and emancipatory practice. Taking the social workings of the message as a starting point it focuses on the editing and making process, introducing a working method that structures the collecting and editing of information in a way that lays the foundation for the staging and the mise-en-scene of the aesthetics - an aesthetics grounded in the multiple sensory tracks of human communication, of commonly shared human experience. To be clear: communication design is not about style, but about content and the working of form. Cultural production results from intellectual independence as a basic condition; style is not interesting in itself because the message is an argument.



Museumjournaal, vol. 24 no. 6 cover front and back, November 1979. Jan Van Toorn used complex and controversial imagery in an institutional publication, asserting that the public are critical thinkers who will engage with less passive materials, while disrupting the idea of a museum and what it should be for the public.



Design's Delight, 2004. detail.