

Choreographer of Letters, Servant of Text, Illustrator

Gert Dooreman Fights Banality

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Crowned with a Henry Van de Velde Award in 2015 for his entire career, a string of exhibitions to his name revealing his oeuvre in its full glory, set down in a monumental reprinted and revised book with the simple, proud title *Dooreman* (Lannoo, Tielt, 2015): this might put one in mind of a career end, but Dooreman abhors the idea, along with the feeling that he has been placed in a velvet pantheon. He still has so much to do.

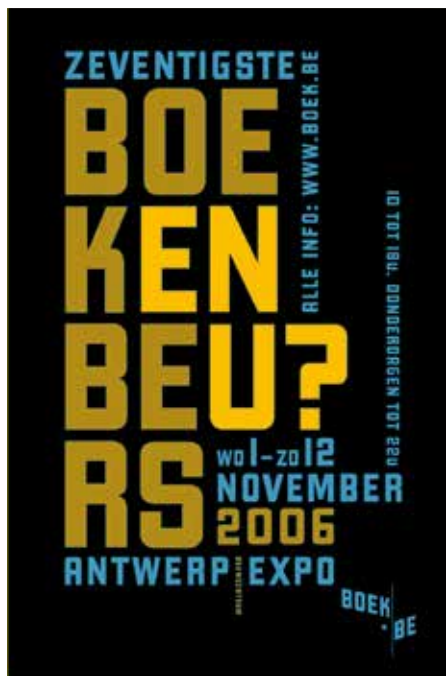
So many accolades and laurel wreaths for a graphic designer in Flanders cannot be taken for granted, though. The craft still has a lower profile here than in places such as the Netherlands or Switzerland. In the 1980s and 1990s aesthete Gert Dooreman dealt a firm blow to the Flemish world of graphic design and typography, more or less singlehandedly, then patched up his victim himself and sent it off in a completely different direction, declaring war on banality and mediocrity, or at least what he saw as such. That was quite something. Infamous for being difficult and headstrong – as well as for his self-doubt – he rarely compromised, which sometimes caused friction.

Nonetheless, in many ways Dooreman prefers the sidelines. Designing books, posters and other printed materials is, after all, hardly a job for a crowd pleaser. 'Adaptor of text, image, texture and colour, in service of the message of others,' as Jan Middendorp describes Gert Dooreman in the monograph dedicated to him. Is Dooreman's primary ambition to polish up and take pride in the creations of others? Yes and no. Yes, of course, letters must support the content, but no, it's not just craftsmanship. It is much more than that. 'From the start Dooreman would come up with a concept for himself, then endure sweat and tears to fulfil that self-inflicted expectation. The short circuit of this apparent contradiction supplied the nuclear energy for a production of unbridled high quality, with no equal in Flanders at the time,' writer Tom Lanoye fittingly notes. Dooreman sees himself as an artist *pur sang*. Initially he wanted to become an illustrator, and that influence has stayed with him. 'People tend to see my illustrations as a kind of youthful lapse and I have to keep on telling them it's not true, that I'm really an illustrator who happens to design, not a designer who used to draw as a hobby,' he has already let slip, slightly irritably.

Things have worked out somewhat differently. The drawing and illustrating gradually faded into the background. Dooreman in fact acquired fame bit by

bit with his posters and the house styles he developed for theatre companies and museums such as NT Gent or the Nieuwpoorttheater, Theater Antigone (Kortrijk), the Dr Guislain Museum in Ghent, the Beursschouwburg theatre in Brussels, the Blauwe Maandag theatre company (herald of the theatre revival in Flanders in the 1980s and '90s) or the Toneelhuis in Antwerp. He grew to be one of Flanders' most famous designers of book covers, with designs for Tom Lanoye, followed by countless other authors (from Saskia De Coster and Jeroen Olyslaegers to JMH Berckmans and Koen Peeters) and publishers (from Kritak, Prometheus and Meulenhoff/Manteau to Het Balanseer and Polis), in turn acquiring imitators and disciples. They copied him, only to wrench themselves free or cautiously push him off his throne.

His teacher Ever Meulen sums it up succinctly in *Dooreman*: 'He had an innate feel for the right spacing, between the lines too. He picked out the most elegant lower case letters and combined them with strong capitals. His page layouts were the most beautiful in the country.' This may well have been music to Dooreman's ears, as he recently decreed in *de Volkskrant*, 'A strong typographical image on the cover of a collection of poetry says so much more than some atmospheric snapshot or other.' Dooreman has designed around 1,500 book covers so far.





Frivolity

Gert Dooreman (b. 1958) originally comes from the region of Kempen. Born in Herentals, in 1958, he ended up studying in Ghent, which became his definitive biotope, the great sprawling provincial city to which he took like a duck to water. Artistically, too, he put down roots in Ghent, albeit preferring to take cover in his studio after a while.

Dooreman's parents initially wanted him to study architecture, so he followed a 3-year preparatory course at art school, after which he spent a year studying animation and three years studying graphic design. Ghent was a cultural melting pot at the time and Dooreman found himself in exactly the right circles. The artists' café De Groene Kikker turned out to be an ideal breeding ground, with an inner circle including figures such as author Tom Lanoye, photographer Michiel Hendryckx, musician Peter Vermeersch, theatre producer Arne Sierens and architect Maarten Van Severen. 'We started up music groups and a magazine... It was all very boyish. ...In the early 1980s, Ghent's cultural life was booming. The Vooruit Arts Centre opened, we organised exhibitions, it was unstoppable. The presence of Jan Hoet was an important part of that. There was a great deal going on. Much of it dreadfully ugly, to be honest. The 1980s were a dramatic time for design, a terrible time, but I don't think what we did was dreadfully ugly.' (Magazine Knack)

Dooreman hastily formed a long-term duo with photographer Michiel Hendryckx, producing work which included book covers for André van Halewyck's publishing company Kritak. He no longer needed to sign on, as he was earning

money 'respectably'. Soon it became clear that a drawing was not the solution to every cover, so photos were added to the mix and before he knew it he was a graphic designer, although typographical 'jazzing up' of photos was never really his thing; he was better with drawings.

Tom Lanoye's collection of 'satirical critiques' *Rozegeur en maneschijn* (Rose Scent and Moonshine, 1983) can be considered Dooreman's first 'official' cover. It led to a continuous collaboration with the writer, whom Dooreman already immensely admired, a cooperative process only briefly interrupted since then. Dooreman created Lanoye's house style, designed in close consultation with the author, forever etched into the collective graphical memory. The two began by creating a cartoon strip together based on the police inspector Gino Spatelli, but this ran aground in the embryonic phase, something which continues to niggle at both of them. Highlights of their collaboration are the striking posters for the cycle of plays 'Ten Oorlog' (To War) produced by the Blauwe Maandag theatre company (also presented in book form), the spectacular banner for Antwerp World Book Capital on the Boerentoren skyscraper (2004, a poem by Lanoye as city poet), the book collection 'Lanoye Hard Gemaakt' (hardbacks of Lanoye's early work) and the cover of the novel *Sprakeloos* (Speechless, 2009).

Dooreman also produced bold work for Bert Bakker in Amsterdam. In the 1980s publishers still often imposed a straitjacket on the designer, leaving little room for divergence, but Dooreman gradually wriggled out of that and might be credited with designers subsequently receiving carte blanche. At the same time, he initially continued to produce his illustration work, with a range of clients including the newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*, as well as *Playboy*, sometimes in collaboration with Erik Meynen. He continued with that combination for fifteen years, until 1997, when – after a couple of disillusioning experiences – he abruptly stopped drawing.

Meanwhile he had long become better known as a graphic designer. Posters for the Blauwe Maandag company and the Beursschouwburg theatre broadened his horizons. 'The Blauwe Maandag posters often presented strik-



BLAUWE MAANDAG COMPAGNIE

TEN OORLOG

DE DOORLICHTING MET ROBBERT, DESINGEL, DOTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG

AFLEVERING I **IN DE NAAM VAN DE VADER EN DE ZOOH**
RICHAAR DEUZIEME - HENDRIK VIER

AFLEVERING II **ZIE DE DIENSTMAAG DES HEREN**
HENDRIK DE VIJFDEN - MARGARETHA DI NAPOLI

AFLEVERING III **EN VERLOS ONS VAN HET KWADE**
EDWAAR THE KING - RISJAAN MODDERFOKKER DEN DERDE

LANOYE, PERCEVAL NAAR SHAKESPEARE / THE WARS OF THE ROSES
BOEKDRUKKERIE: BRACK LIJST: BACHOLI DRIETREK: VANDENBUSSCHE
MET: BEKS, DE WACHTEN, DEGLEIN, DEGLEIN, DOTTERMANS,
HELDENBERGH, LÖW, OPRUUCK, PEETERS, SEYNAEVE,
SMITS, VAN DEN EYNDE, VAN KAAM, VAN VLIET

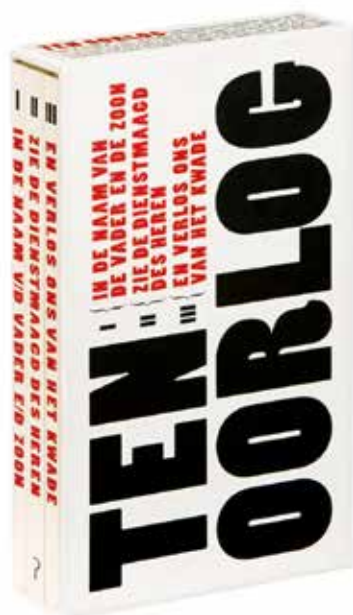
VOORUIT CENT
 9 t/m 22 NOVEMBER 97
 28 JANUARI t/m 1 MAART 98 TEL. 00432020

DESINGEL ANTWERPEN
 27 NOVEMBER t/m 29 DECEMBER 97 TEL. 002482020

ROTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG
 7 JANUARI t/m 24 JANUARI 98 TEL. 008432020

WEEKDAGEN: 1 AFLEVERING PER AVOND
WEEKEND: ALLE AFLEVERINGEN OP 1 DAG

MET DE STEDE BLAUWE MAANDAG COMPAGNIE EN ROTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG EN DESINGEL ANTWERPEN
© 1997 ROTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG / DE ROTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG / ROTTERDAMSE SCHOUWBURG



ing photos for which I devised letters, but with some hesitation so as not to obscure the image,' he commented in *Het Nieuwsblad*. Later he took the bull by the horns, resolutely producing overwhelming typographical masterpieces. Eventually 'Dooremans' could be found everywhere in the cultural world and in bookshops, yes even on postage stamps (for instance for a series commemorating Expo 58). Ever more flamboyant, he left his graphical mark, with inventive lettering, perfect line spacing and designs which exuded balance and a light frivolity, in spite of resulting from painstaking measuring and fitting work. When everything falls into place after lots of shifting about (or indeed the lack thereof), he sees it as a gift. 'You recognise a Dooreman when you see it, even if those from the 1980s are completely different from those from the 1990s or the twenty-first century. Dooreman is a chameleon', says Sam De Graeve in *Dooreman*.

The poetry of measurement

So does Dooreman transform so often? What is the key to the persuasive power of his designs? An important clue must lie in the fact that the graphic designer labels himself an 'autodidact'. From the start of his career, he wanted to know all the ins and outs of letters and the finishing touches of the craft. Pushing typography to the max – that was Dooreman's ultimate goal. He has always documented his work frenetically. Jan Middendorp recognises this: 'Self-taught graphic designers seem to feel more of a drive to support their creative work

with historical and theoretical studies, to document their work in detail, than their certified colleagues. Dooreman takes this to the extreme. He is constantly in the process of self-study; every step is shored up with new knowledge and skill.' Dooreman toiled away in Ghent University Library, or busily collected old magazines and journals such as *Simplicissimus*, the German satirical magazine published between 1896 and 1944. His studio, where he sees himself as a 'lab technician', is a treasure trove of endless paper paraphernalia. Dooreman's designs emanate the entirety of printing history. Somehow typesetting must have been in his blood: his grandfather had a printing business, where Dooreman was allowed to nose around as a small child. Dooreman has gradually promoted letters to ingenious chess pieces, expressive elements, *much* more than a set of tools. To him good, precise lettering is no less than 'the poetry of measurement', hence the exceptional importance he attaches to spacing. He has rehabilitated fonts such as Gill Sans and Perpetua and worked miracles with Prague designer František Štorm's fonts. He makes the lettering his own, presenting a new take on the nineteenth-century wooden characters and greedily mining the period of the industrial revolution. Not surprisingly, Dooreman felt a certain aversion to the arrival of the computer, which completely turned the design industry on its head, although it later turned out to be his 'true instrument', as Tom Lanoye put it, 'his real biotope, his palette, his mastery'.

Focused doubt

Dooreman is well known among his entourage for his doubts, as is his life partner, children's writer and illustrator Gerda Dendooven. Perhaps that is what makes her the perfect witness of his sometimes turbulent thinking process, as he has also concocted countless book designs and covers for her work. 'Working with Dooreman is an extremely professional process but it's also exhausting: the man has a faster-than-average brain and is more demanding than your



everyday perfectionist. He is also a master at coming up with relevant issues, only to declare them irrelevant again with the same certainty.' Dooreman tends to deny this tortuous process, pointing to his rapid work pace: 'If I were a compulsive doubter, I would never have worked so much. Adrenaline works fast and my pace is rapid. I can design a book cover, an advert and two illustrations in a day. When I have my doubts, I'm focused about it. But I manage to be both subjective and objective. Sometimes I take a turning into the woods and follow a path. Sometimes I end up in a swamp, but I've always left a path of pebbles behind on my computer. I can always get back,' he said in an interview in *De Morgen*. 'Fundamental doubt alongside unshakeable self-confidence,' was how Tom Lanoye summed up his attitude.

It is also worth noting that Dooreman is colour blind. That means he has to keep a handle on his palette one way or another. 'His palette is on the austere side: lots of black, red, grey and off-white, plenty of earthy colours, the occasional bright but generally tasteful standout. He's no magician when it comes to colour,' says Jan Middendorp. Of course, 'In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister,' ('The master shows himself first in confinement') as Goethe put it. After all, have there not been deaf composers and orators with speech impediments, as Dooreman pointed out in 2005 in response to the commonly asked question as to how colour blindness affected his work? 'I know how to handle colours. I'm very familiar with the grey values, so I know the characters of the colours really well. I have to work hard for it, unlike others, who are surrounded with colours like children in a sweet shop. I can't combine twelve colours. I stick to three. That's become my rule: if my design can't stand up to that, it's no good.'

It might be considered remarkable that Dooreman apparently does not read the books he designs at all – if he did, it would make his work pace well nigh impossible, of course. In that respect he differs from Dick Bruna, who claimed



that he really read every book in the Zwart Beertje series for which he designed covers. In any case, Dooreman is well aware of the tension between the discreet interior design and the attention-seeking character of the cover, which he prefers to design collaboratively. 'They're two different disciplines. The interior demands a high zen-content. It has to be balanced and harmonious, so that you barely notice it. The cover is a law unto itself. It just has to stand out.'

The illustrator seizes the moment

If you run through Dooreman's fantastic productions of the last thirty years, you see steady quality with many highs and remarkably few lows. There is an unmistakable evolution towards powerful, authoritative typography and transcendence of the Zeitgeist (more conspicuously presented in the early designs, despite the resistance to the ugliness of the 1980s). Dooreman needs less and less to achieve the desired effect. He avoids garishness; it is the architecture of his letters that has to do the work, which has also grown more timeless. You will not find gratuitous aesthetics in Dooreman's work. Letters must support the content. Craftsmanship is essential in making the leap from typographical balance to art. His colour palette might be modest, but he finds other ways of achieving contrast. In one case he opts for a modest letter, in another for extraversion and exuberance. Sometimes we find elements recycled from the Russian constructivism of the interbellum – Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko or El Lissitzky – mainly in designs for Lanoye, especially 'De Boerentoren schrijft' ('The Boerentoren writes') and the posters of the Blauwe Maandag company. Nevertheless, it seems that Dooreman has achieved the greatest unity in his book covers for publishers Meulenhoff/Manteau and the later De Bezige Bij Antwerpen, where the designs are frivolous and inventive with a purified quality. When photos enter the mix, Dooreman clearly has a little more trouble making his mark. Which book fair poster is his most beautiful so far? Undoubtedly that of 2006, Dooreman's signature, a poster of letter building blocks.

Is Dooreman now consecrated, lionised and neatly canonised? Apparently not. But what direction will he take next? The designer has countless plans on the go and currently allows his new assistant Stijn Dams to knit extensions seamlessly onto his own style. 'The old excitement has gone, I'm done with books,' Dooreman confessed in *Knack*. 'I work seven days a week, up to sixteen hours a day. I'm gradually becoming saturated.' Perhaps the freedom of illustration is beckoning again. The revised version of the monograph about Dooreman noted the increased share of his work devoted to drawing and illustration – a small atonement, observing the unmistakable influence of Honoré Daumier, Hans Holbein and Egon Schiele, as well as the better cartoon strips. These are illustrations with a tendency towards caricature, full of pointy enlargements. As *De Standaard* once wrote, 'Dooreman is the choreographer of his characters. In every illustration there is a swirl, a twist, a flourish. The illustrator knows the precise moment to strike.' From choreographer of letters to elegant characters: it is possible to return to one's roots. He also dreams of furniture design. Well then, the ultimate Dooreman cabinet, how would that look? ■