WUNDERKAMMER

Carte blanche à la graphiste

MARTAN BANTJES

Du 2 juillet au 5 octobre 2014

mudac
WUNDERKAMMER
CARTE BLANCHE TO GRAPHIC DESIGNER MARIAN BANTJES
2 July – 5 October 2014

PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY 1 JULY AT 10.30 A.M.
IN THE PRESENCE OF MARIAN BANTJES

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SOMMAIRE
Press release p. 3
About Marian Bantjes p. 4
Themes and selected projects p. 5-12
Practical information p. 13
Available visuals p. 14-15

Description: Every year, Marian Bantjes sends Valentines cards to her friends and customers. In 2010, she produced about 500 different cards from laser-cut reclaimed Christmas cards.
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CARTE BLANCHE TO GRAPHIC DESIGNER MARIAN BANTJES

2 July – 5 October 2014

For its thirteenth designer carte blanche, the mudac has given over two rooms to Marian Bantjes, who describes herself as a graphic artist. From 2 July to 5 October 2014, she will be transforming the museum’s ground floor into a cabinet of curiosities revealing some of her most recent work.

She is «one of the most innovative typographers working today,» according to Stefan Sagmeister, who was himself invited to stage a carte blanche in 2011. Born in Canada in 1963, and currently living and working on a small island near Vancouver, Marian Bantjes says she fell into graphic design by accident; she is now one of its most prominent and influential exponents. She worked as a book typesetter for 10 years, then ran her own design studio from 1994 to 2003, before dedicating herself full-time to developing her own very personal and experimental style of visual communication. Bringing together typography and the decorative arts, she readily combines natural materials and hand work with the most up-to-date computer techniques.

Marian Bantjes draws inspiration from art deco, rococo, pop art, romanticism and gothic styles, juxtaposing them in unexpected ways to create a coherent visual universe. «I am indeniably playful,» she says (I Wonder, 2010). Her carte blanche, inspired by her recent monograph Pretty Pictures, leaves us in no doubt. Visitors are invited to wander through a golden-walled labyrinth and discover her inventive works made of crystallised sugar, pasta, embroidery and metal. A large part of the exhibition is devoted to Valentine’s Day, and her longstanding resolution to send out cards annually for 14th February, rather than Christmas, which has given rise to a new creation every year: original graphical compositions, calligraphy from old postcards and reclaimed fan letters to the actor Robert Wagner are just some of the examples.

Marian Bantjes has an affinity with the fantastical, which makes its presence felt throughout the exhibition, in its graphical design elements, which she created, and in the German title she chose to give it.
ABOUT MARIAN BANTJES

Bantjes and graphic design

“One day she went into a bookshop to get some change for her bus fare, and happened to see an advertisement for a job at Hartley & Marks, a publishing house. This advertisement, which she discovered by chance, turned into ten years’ experience,” notes her friend Debbie Millman in “Designer&design: Marian Bantjes”. After ten years in Vancouver, where Marian learnt the basics of typesetting and design, in 1994 she decided to set up her own graphic design agency, with a business partner. In 2003, she changed direction. She dropped everything to try a new experience, opting to follow her passion rather than the money. She settled into a house overlooking the ocean on Bowen Island, off the coast of Vancouver, built her current life as a “graphic artist” and “met the challenge she had set herself.”

The style of Marian Bantjes

She loves letters, and loves to illuminate them. She prefers hand-written letters, and with them she creates an entire universe of marvellous interlaced, multi-coloured, dynamic figures. She happily uses all manner of materials to enhance her letters: sugar, flowers, pasta, cake decorations, etc. With her love for old-fashioned correspondence, she reclaims letters and postcards and continues the tradition with a project she launched almost ten years ago, the “Valentine’s Cards”, a series of personalised cards sent out for Valentine’s Day. “No digital archive, photo, print, copy or facsimile can have the power of an original artifact that was owned by the person to whom it was connected. That is the reason we have museums and archives, because we inevitably want to go back to the source,” she writes in “I Wonder”.

In demand

For ten years, Marian Bantjes has worked with many top graphic designers, including Stefan Sagmeister (who had carte blanche at the mudac in 2011), Rick Valicenti and Michael Bierut, and a number of prestigious publications including IDEA (Japan), Eye (UK), Wallpaper, Creative Review (UK), Azure (Canada), Communication Arts (USA), Print (USA), +81 (Japan), 2+3D (Poland), Form (Germany) and étapes (Paris). She has had two solo exhibitions of her work (2009 in San Luis Obispo, USA and 2011 in Toronto, Canada for “I Wonder”), and since 2006 has taken part in almost one hundred conferences and events around the world. In 2008 she was made a member of the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI).

“Pretty Pictures”

Shortly before she was invited to stage a carte blanche at the mudac, Marian Bantjes brought out a major monograph on her work, entitled “Pretty Pictures”, which provides a chronological summary of her creations and their conception. It took her a year to compile more than 800 images that she produced between 2003 and 2013, and to share the creative process behind them, regardless of whether they were accepted or refused. It also includes her Valentines, an alphabet made of flowers, a project for Neil Young, her designs for chairs and boats, magazine covers, and posters for one of her favourite bands, The National. Like her Wunderkammer, which was designed especially for the mudac, “Pretty Pictures” gives an insight into Marian Bantjes’ personality - funny, demanding, curious, innovative and inspiring.

Carte blanche on golden walls

Marian Bantjes’ first design decision for her personal exhibition at the mudac was to choose the theme of a cabinet of curiosities with gold-painted walls. Against this background, which reflects her constant sense of wonder, she has arranged her works so as to create a universe that is simultaneously exuberant and intimate, dense and generous. The artist was also attached to the idea of creating a maze, where every new turn reveals a new aspect of her work. This is how her Valentines project is presented, showing several years’ creations including postcards, hearts made of flowers and mysterious letters. There is also a selection of projects she undertook between 2005 and 2013 for various clients, regardless of whether they were accepted.

Books

“Pretty Pictures”, Metropolis (USA), Thames & Hudson (UK) 2013
“I Wonder”, The Monacelli Press (USA), Thames & Hudson (UK), 2010
“Designer&design: Marian Bantjes”, Pyramyd, 2007 (in French)
THEMES AND SELECTED PROJECTS

All texts by Marian Bantjes

ON ORNAMENT

“While my work is quite varied in style, the one thing that ties all the work together is ornament. The function of ornament is generally to add beauty, but it can also hold information in itself. The style of ornament sends a signal of time, place and feel; the ornament may contain words or illustrations to the text, or tell its own story. When executed with skill, it fills us with wonder because we are faced with the evidence of human time (and sometimes madness!), and we struggle to understand how it could have been achieved. I have found that a surprising number of people with modernist ideals are still drawn to pretty things. Ornament is seductive.”

Marian Bantjes, Sorrow, installation (flowers) at Chicago Design Museum, 2013
ON PATTERNS

“While ornament can be endlessly random, it is most often structured within patterns and repetition. In this, it draws us in like a kaleidoscope. We are dazzled by the initial detail and then compelled to explore further. I’m fascinated by patterns both simple and complex. I’m particularly interested in variable patterns that use a basic form of repetition but vary throughout the whole piece. Patterns are systems comprised of units that connect to create more, unexpected patterns within them. They are both mathematical and visually magical.”

Marian Bantjes, Sustainability, poster for Winterhouse / Stora Enso, vector art, 2007
Image © Marian Bantjes (below: detail)

William Drenttel & Jessica Helfand of Winterhouse hired me to create one of a series of posters for the paper company, Stora Enso. It contains two variable repeating patterns and a whole bunch of archival photos (mostly from the Library of Congress). It’s about time, families and preserving things for generations. This piece is now part of the permanent collection of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, in New York.

Marian Bantjes, Obsession, illustration for Varoom made from stickers, 2014.
ON LETTERING

“One of the things I really like about working with text, is that there is already a logic there and a form that needs to be worked with. It’s a kind of restraint. It is easier to work with pure visuals, to make random shapes and compositions, but when you need to incorporate letterforms it requires a lot more planning, which appeals to me. People get confused and think I am a calligrapher, which I am not, or that I design fonts. A typeface is necessarily a complete alphabet, numbers, punctuation, etc. required to make text. The ‘font’ is the delivery system that allows other people to use it. While I have one font to my name (“Restraint”), it is a font primarily of ornaments. What I do is work with a few words (like a headline) and create custom lettering of those words only, for that occasion. I plan the letterforms and draw them. If there are many words, I might just handwrite them, but I would hesitate to call this “calligraphy”.

Marian Bantjes, Before my Memory Goes, for AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale), vector art, 2011.


Marian Bantjes, I want it all, peony petals, 2006.
ON WRITING

“I have been writing, in one form or another, for most of my life. When the time comes to make something that is not an assignment where I am given the words, it becomes necessary to find something to say. The act of writing for artwork is both a great joy and a great pressure. When you embellish words with art, it raises them up to a level of importance and it is easy to make the words sound trite or overinflated in doing so. It is difficult to find something to say that is worthy of the honour of being treated in this way. But I will be damned if I am going to make an alphabet poster, or waste my time on words that are not worthwhile.”

Marian Bantjes, Valentines '09, pen & ink

For the Valentines ‘09, Marian Bantjes wrote four different fragments of a letter, so that each person that received one would be intrigued and confused at first, before finding in it something for them.
ON STRUCTURE

“I got my start in the ’80s as a book typesetter, and I can only assume that the rigours of book design and logic are what gave me my love of visual structure. For me there is also a joy in “figuring things out”. To be completely organic without structure would be too easy, and those pieces of mine that are completely free-form are my least favourite. But more often that not, what may appear at first to be “organic” will reveal an underlying structure, and the more you see it, the more appealing it is. Lettering comes with its own structure that can be used or broken as I see fit. Alignment, intersections and multiples thrill me.”


The different inks make the poster look different in daylight, in the dark and under black light.
ON MATERIALS

“People often ask me where I get my inspiration from. The answer is always the same: Anywhere, any thing, any time. Something in a grocery store can give me an idea for colour; cityscapes can give me ideas for form, and many of my inspired moments come from materials I find or think of. Deciding to work with a material is part of a moment of advancement, but how the material affects the work is the most surprising and interesting part. Sometimes it is so difficult I vow never to work with it again, other times I see multiple possibilities and plan more projects with the same materials. For most of my career my work has been about 50% digital (vector) to 50% handmade. But lately I have discovered that being away from the computer is much more pleasant and I expect that ratio to change dramatically.”

Marian Bantjes,
Lost Child, for Varoom, embroidery made from My Little Pony hair, 2014

Marian Bantjes, Empathy Penny, vector art and copper, 2009

«Todd Falkowsky of Motherbrand put together this project to make a series of pressed pennies by Canadian designers. He chose me, Douglas Coupland, Burton Kramer and Paul Butler to come up with designs. In the penny machine, you put in a penny and another coin (a $2 'toonie' in our case), choose a design, and you get your penny back, pressed with the new design. In thinking of what one would like as a keepsake, to perhaps carry around with you, I liked the idea of 'empathy' as a constant reminder. In the design, I was interested in putting the ‘round’ back into the squished penny. This is one of my all-time favourites.» Marian Bantjes, in Pretty Pictures, 2013

Marian Bantjes, The 00’s, title page for New York Magazine, ballpoint pen on aluminium foil, 2009
ON DRAWING

"Most of my work begins with drawing: I am unable to plan or properly think without putting pencil to paper. But often, it ends with drawing as well. There is nothing so satisfying or relaxing as sitting and drawing: pencil, coloured pencils, pen and ink. The creation of form and light, and the complete control I feel like in no other medium gives me the utmost satisfaction."

Marian Bantjes, *How are you?*, ballpoint pen, 2005


«R-Wines, from Australia, wanted a poster with the names of all of their suppliers to give to them as a present. I drew 30 grapes, of different varieties (who knew they were so colourful?) each hiding a letter of the alphabet. But then I had to place them to make the names, a total of approximately 2,130 grapes.» Marian Bantjes
“As a graphic artist working primarily in a commercial/public space, I am trying to bring some kind of joy or delight or intrigue to the viewer. Most of the design we see on a daily basis is completely without happiness. My goal is to make something that captures a person’s interest and hold it; that makes them somehow feel glad that they saw it. It has nothing to do with selling a client’s message or anything like that, just to have a joyful response unconnected to anything other than the art itself. A successful connection is if I can stop them, make them pay attention, make them think, and make them see something differently. I try to entrap them with what could loosely be termed “beauty”, but then I want them to do a double-take and realize that there’s something else there.”


Every year, Marian Bantjes sends Valentines cards to her friends and customers. In 2012, she collected hundreds of old postcards that she then overprinted with a design containing the message: «From me, wherever I am, wherever you are». 
PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Press conference  Tuesday 1 July 2014 at 10.30

Opening  tuesday 1 July 2014 from 18.00

Dates & hours  2 July – 5 October 2014
   July-August: Monday-Sunday 11.00 - 18.00
   September-October: Tuesday-Sunday 11.00 - 18.00
   Open on every bank holiday

Guided tour  Tuesday 2 September 2014 at 12.15

Children workshops  Arabesques and other illuminations
   Children aged 8-13
   Immerse yourself in the enchanting universe of graphic artist Marian Bantjes and her
   illustrations, created from endlessly repeating multi-coloured motifs. Make a kaleidoscope
   that will help you to design your own arabesques.
   Wednesday 3 September from 2 to 4 p.m.

   Say it with flowers!
   Children aged 8-13
   Green fingers optional! Come and help write out the words of this phrase using real
   flowers. The result of this joint project with Land-Art will remain on display outside the
   museum... until the elements reclaim it!
   Wednesday 17 September from 2 to 4 p.m.

   Price CHF 10.-
   Reservation essential: 021 315 25 30 or info@mudac.ch.

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          Login: presse2014 / images201
AVAILABLE VISUALS

Marian Bantjes, Before my Memory Goes, for AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale), vector art, 2011.

Marian Bantjes, Sorrow, installation (flowers) at Chicago Design Museum, 2013

Marian Bantjes, Honour, image from the book / Wonder, created from pasta.

Marian Bantjes, Sons and Lovers, illustration for the cover of the book Sons and Lovers de D.H. Lawrence for Penguin Books, oil paints, 2010

Marian Bantjes, The National (Wiltern), poster for The National, vector art, 2010

Marian Bantjes, The National (Orpheum), poster for The National, vector art printed on mirrored surface, 2011


left: poster, right: detail

Marian Bantjes, Christmas Card Valentines, laser-cut Christmas cards, 2010

Marian Bantjes, Sustainability, poster for Winterhouse / Stora Enso, vector art, 2007


Every work : © Marian Bantjes

Marian Bantjes, *Empathy Penny*, vector art and copper, 2009

Marian Bantjes, *Lost Child*, for *Varoom*, embroidery made from My Little Pony hair, 2014

Marian Bantjes, *How are you?*, ballpoint pen, 2005


Marian Bantjes, *The 00’s*, title page for *New York Magazine*, ballpoint pen on aluminium foil, 2009


Art director: Richard Turley

Marian Bantjes, *Valentines 2009*, pen and ink

Marian Bantjes, *I want it all*, peony petals, 2006

Marian Bantjes, *Hallowe’en 05*, vector art, 2005