

Designing against populism or redefining design approaches

Annelys de Vet @ Integrated 2009, 22 October 2009

Nearly a year ago, I started my job as head of the design department at the Sandberg Institute. The students sat around a table and took turns introducing themselves. Strikingly, most of them began with some variation of “I am not a graphic designer,” followed by a summary of all the things they did do. The term ‘graphic design’ seems to be attached to a definition that is stuck in the last century. This conversation illustrates that the profession is changing significantly. Design today forms a discourse and doesn’t so much exist as a book, poster or stamp; as a medium – it exists first of all in the media. The meaning doesn’t lie anymore in the design itself but mainly in its relationship with its environment – in the context. In this lecture I’ll illustrate what this notion has meant for my own design practice.

Media society

In the Prensela Lecture 2009, the Dutch philosopher Henk Oosterling called today’s society a media society*: “Media have long since ceased to be things that we have made ourselves and are thus totally under our control. Media create their own worlds, and we learn to live in them. They are changing from form/function into content/message. TV has changed from an information medium into a pleasurable substance and finally into a necessary resource. The mobile phone is not solely a communication and information medium; it too is a necessary resource. The medium is indeed the message. But the media are not merely packaging, nor are they pure format. In all their ubiquity, the media are a discourse. Media society is our environment, the space in which we act.”

I constantly wonder what my relationship should be to this ‘media society’, in which populism determines the tone, and increasingly the content, of public and political debates. It’s a society in which fear influences our opinions and decisions. A society in which 40% of the Dutch population agrees with the ideas of the far-right-wing politician Geert Wilders, who derives his political power solely from being quoted in the media. It’s a society in which residents of communities with hardly any immigrants, such as the Dutch town of Volendam, harbour the greatest fear of them. It’s a society that turns its back on the former Yugoslavia out of disgust at its recent past, in spite of the fact that the region is indisputably part of Europe, and it’s being made impossible for countries like Serbia to join the EU, with the Netherlands emphatically voting no. Meanwhile, Israel, in spite of systematically ignoring UN resolutions, violating international agreements and waging a terrifying war at the beginning of this year in the Gaza Strip, and thanks to extremely clever press agencies and agents, they can still rely on support from the EU, with the Netherlands once again as the most outspoken voice.

As a citizen in this society, I am cautious, and as a designer I feel compelled to be critical. It is in this context that I would like to talk to you about graphic design, and in particular about designing as a public business.

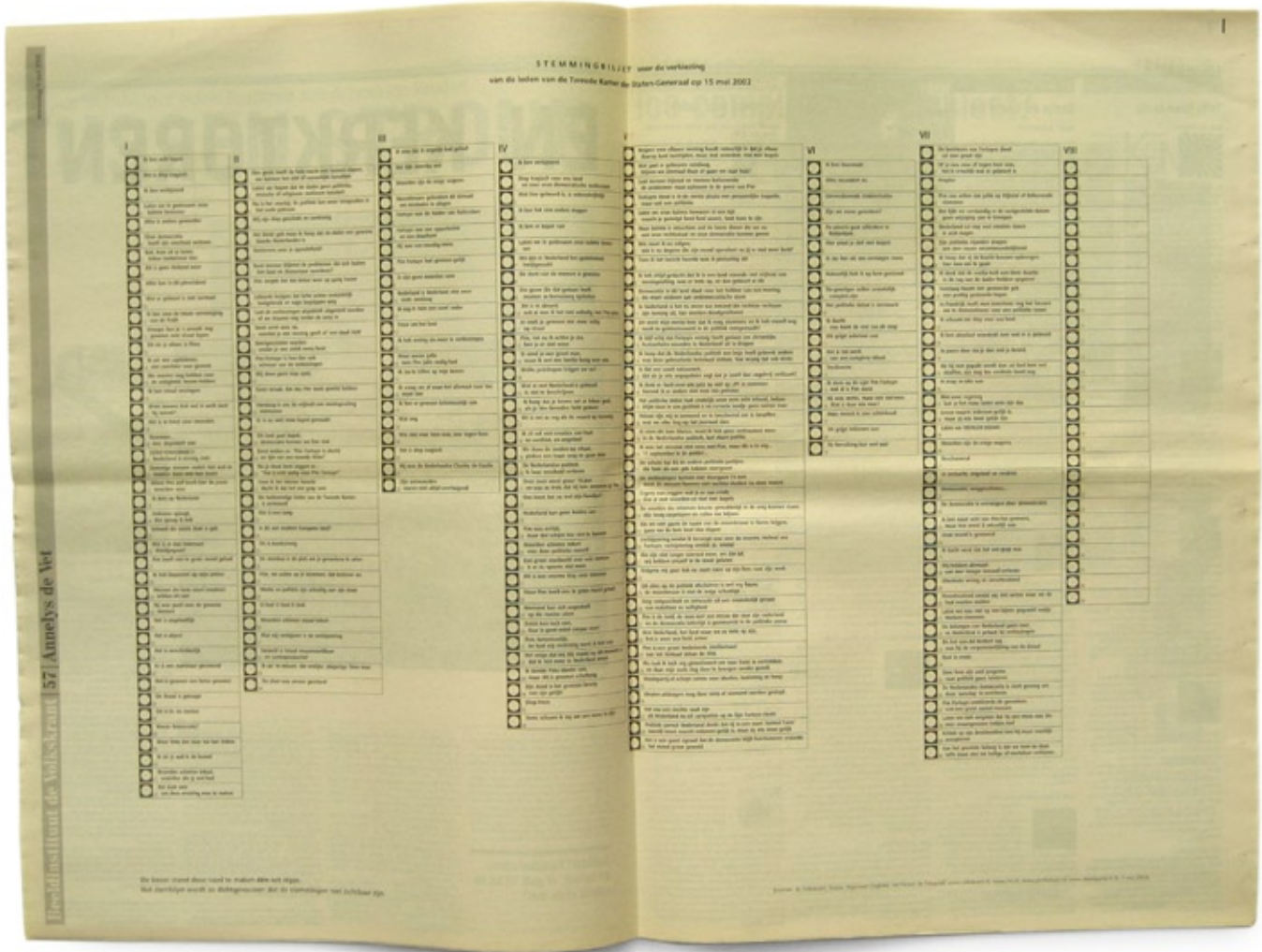
The ‘mood ballot’

A week and a half before the 2002 Dutch national election, the populist politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered. The country was upset, and the media were full of opinions and emotions. There were calls to postpone the election out of fears that it would be too heavily influenced by emotion.

Two days after the murder, on 8 May, I designed a page for the national newspaper De Volkskrant. The lay-out is based on our national STEMBILJET, or voting form, but it’s called the STEMMINGBILJET. ‘Stem’ in Dutch means ‘to vote’, and a small change makes it ‘stemming’, which means ‘mood’. The page shows an inventory of statements and emotions that appeared in the media the day after the murder; they came from citizens as well as politicians and journalists. The result was a richly variegated inventory that reflected an incomprehensible piece of news.

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Dasein als design, of: moet design de wereld redden? by Henk Oosterling
Prensela lezing 2009, 1 april 2009.
Original quote: “Media zijn allang geen dingen meer die wij helemaal onder controle hebben omdat we ze zelf hebben gemaakt. Media scheppen hun eigen werelden en wij leren daar in leven. Ze worden van vorm/functie tot content/message. De TV is van een informatiemedium, via een genotsmiddel, een bestaansmiddel geworden. Het mobieltje is niet louter communicatie- en informatiemedium, het is een bestaansmiddel. Inderdaad ‘the medium is the message’. Maar de media zijn niet de verpakking of louter format. De media zijn in al hun vanzelfsprekendheid een discours. De mediasamenleving is ons milieu, onze handelingsruimte.”



STEMMINGBILJET voor de verkiezing van de leden van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal op 15 mei 2002
MOOD BALLOT for the election of the members of the House of Parliament on May 15th, 2002 Middle spread art section national newspaper *De Volkskrant*, 8th may 2002

There were sentences like:

- I'm stunned
- It's too sad for words
- Jesus!! The Netherlands is seriously sick
- Only Pim has the right words for this
- It sounds crazy but I hope the killer was a white Dutchman
- We will not stand aside
- It's unsettling because we don't know where to lay the blame
- Let's not vote for a random assortment of people
- The interests of the Netherlands come first, and elections are good for the Netherlands
- Let's not forget that he was a person with some extremely unpleasant qualities
- It is of the utmost importance that we do not declare him a saint or a martyr after this cowardly act

Exactly one week later, the national election took place, using an official voting form, of course. The extent to which moods influenced the election results cannot be determined, but it is a fact that Pim Fortuyn's party took power together with the centre democrats and centre right. The coalition they formed was the shortest-lived cabinet since the Second World War; it fell after 86 days.

Between the lines

Until the last century, the church – and second of all, politics – were the institutions with the most influence on our collective morality and ethics. Today, that authority is shifting to the media. The media help to determine how we give meaning to the world. The boundaries between truth and lies, and above all between good and evil, have become more diffuse – the financial crisis speaks volumes about this.

The Dutch Public Prosecution Service (Openbaar Ministerie in Dutch) represents the interests of society and is traditionally the highest guardian of public order in the country. It investigates crimes, prosecutes offenders, and ensures that sentences are carried out. The Government Building Agency invited me to create a work for a new Public Prosecution Service building in Lelystad. I made a wall of 21 illuminated niches containing short phrases. It's located in the room where lawyers and their clients wait to go before the judge.



Architecture Dutch Public Prosecution Service ('Openbaar Ministerie'), Lelystad (NL) 2007. Architect: Hootsmans Architectuurbureau



'Tussen de Regels' ('In between the lines'), installation by Annelys de Vet for Dutch Public Prosecution Service, Lelystad (NL) 2007

The language of the legal code leaves as little room as possible for interpretation; the phrases of this work do the opposite. Without getting too abstract, they refer to social processes and movements in our society as well as in the media. They read almost like news headlines.

The wall shows sentences like:

- DE MANTRA VAN DE KRANTEKOP / *THE MANTRA OF THE HEADLINES*
- DE ILLUSIE VAN WAARHEID / *THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH*
- DE SUGGESTIE VAN MACHT / *THE SUGGESTION IN POWER*
- DE VLUCHTIGHEID VAN DE MASSA / *THE VOLATILITY OF MASS*
- HET NARCISME VAN DE MEERDERHEID / *THE NARCISM OF THE MAJORITY*
- DE SNELHEID VAN MENING / *THE SPEED OF OPINION*
- DE ECHO VAN STILTE / *THE ECHO OF SILENCE*
- DE IRRATIONALITEIT VAN DE ACTUALITEIT / *THE IRRATIONALITY OF ACTUALITY*
- HET NIEMAND VAN IEDEREEN / *THE NOBODY OF EVERYBODY*
- DE CONDITIE VAN VRIJHEID / *THE CONDITION OF FREEDOM*



The public role of the graphic designer

Like the media influence our collective moral, design has become part of our collective memory. It helps to determine the manner in which society as a whole expresses itself. Can you design images that have a constructive effect on society's perceptions? Can a design be critical and sustainable, and at the same time optimistic? Does a designer have a responsibility to do so?

I put these questions to my students at the Design Academy Eindhoven (I used to be a teacher there). The questions served as the starting point for a series of posters, flags and discussions. The process was so interesting that we ended up making a book: *The public role of the graphic designer*.

For the project, which we called 'New Images for the Netherlands', the students looked for images that expressed what Dutch society currently stands for. Then they used these images to make posters that were displayed in almost 200 outdoor-advertising light boxes around Eindhoven for three weeks. The project used graphic design to deliver cultural commentary.



De publieke zaak van de grafisch ontwerper *The public role of the graphic designer*. Publication made with students Design Academy Eindhoven, published by Annelys de Vet, 2006



Subjective atlas of Palestine Publication made with Palestinian artists and designers, initiated by ICCO and Annelys de Vet, published by 010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2007

The Subjective Atlas of Palestine

The media often show us such powerful and complex images of a subject, an event or a nation that those images become like our own experiences. Reality seems to coincide with them. But nothing could be further from the truth. Still, we need images in order to feel connected to a place, a country, a community or a people. Take Palestine: we know this country – which is not allowed to be a country – chiefly through the media.

Palestinians are almost always associated with terrorism. This greatly distances them from us, and as a consequence we find it difficult to identify with them. They remain a 'they', and seldom become a 'we'. This problem was what motivated my attempt to capture the human experience of life on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. I asked thirty Palestinian artists, designers and students to represent 'their' Palestine, based on personal interests and daily experiences. In this way we tried to sketch a picture of humanity from the inside out – an image we can identify with, and thereby feel involved.

Without a doubt, this book is political; at the same time, it makes no statements about cause, blame or solution. If the reader sees these things implied, that is another matter.



'Twelve ways to eat chickpeas', Suleiiman Mansour



'Color correction', Yazan Khalil



'Palestinian Dress #2', Mohamad Yaqubi



'Beautiful Palestine', Majdi Hadid



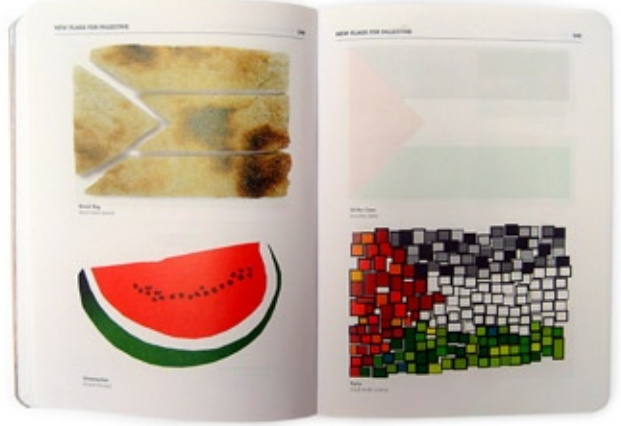
'My father's Palestinian Nationality', Baha Bouhkary



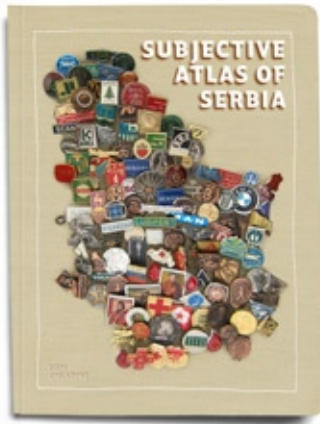
'Documents that I needed to travel outside Palestine', Majdi Hadid



'Letter to prisoner Abu Salah', Tayseer Barakat



'New flags for Palestine'



The Subjective Atlas of Serbia

For years, the Serbian capital, Belgrade, was regarded as the epicentre of war and aggression. No one wanted war, but every individual was forced to deal with it and to relate to it. Today Serbia has 10 million residents, and every one of them has his or her own ideas about history, identity and the future. Identity is in fact an extremely loaded concept – after all, wars have been fought over it.

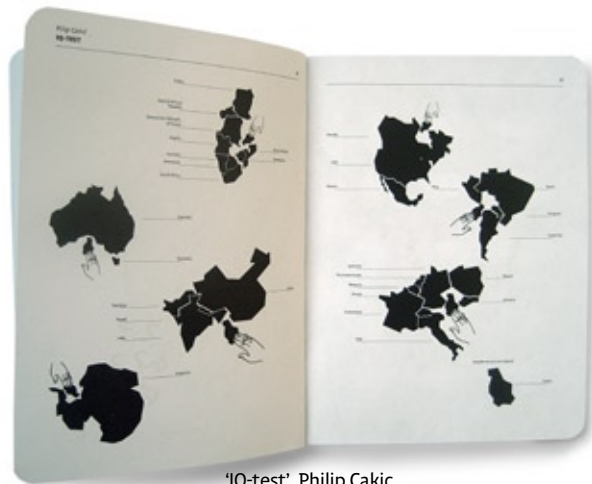
In November of last year, I went to Belgrade to make a book called *The Subjective Atlas of Serbia* with about 30 artists and designers. Again, the artists and designers, Serbian ones this time, attempted to create personal representations of daily life. Their own direct involvement was the starting point for the development of genuinely alternative images. All our conversations about the work went straight to the soul of the society, partly because of the sum of all the plans and intentions. One participant said: "I don't know what personal is, what I am, who I am, what Serbia is. All the borders change continually; everything changes from day to day. Nationality, identity – I don't know, I don't know what that is."

Subjective atlas of Serbia Publication made with Serbian artists and designers, initiated by De Balie, Dom Omladine and Annelys de Vet. Published by Dom Omladine (Belgrade), 2009

The unconventional images in this atlas provide a different and mostly new insight into a country with a problematically fragmented identity. By representing cultural identity in this way, the atlas serves as a means of understanding contemporary Serbian society.



'Maps of Serbia'



'IQ-test', Philip Cacic



'Mixed memories', Marija Kovac



'My room is our room', Vuk Kuzmanovic



'Heritage', Miroslav Malovic



'I am not my country's mistakes', Iva Spanovic / 'Alternative flags for Serbia'



'Nieuwe beelden voor Nederland', exhibition @ Design Academy Eindhoven, 15-24 march 2006



De Architect, june 2006



Afformatie, 23 march 2006



Graduation catalogue Design Academy Eindhoven, october 2006



Étapes (F), March 2007



Creatie, oktober 2006

Retrospective meaning

For me and for other people directly involved, at least, the projects were exceptionally inspiring, and thereby successful in themselves. But the obvious question is, how much effect did they have on image formation in the Netherlands, Palestine and Serbia, let alone on other fields, such as legal judgement and international agreements? Which passers-by stopped to look at the posters? Did the representation of Palestine change in our media? Whose opinions about Serbia have changed, and did you read more about this region lately?

If you look at the books' print runs – 1,500 for *The public role of the graphic designer*, 3,000 for the *Subjective Atlas of Palestine*, 2,000 for the *Subjective Atlas of Serbia* – and compare them with, say, the average number of viewers for the Dutch TV talk show *Pauw and Witteman*, which is around a million a day, then you might well wonder: why go to all that trouble?

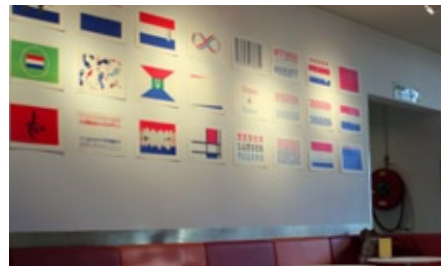
Naturally, I would be utterly naive if I believed anything had changed in people's perceptions of the aforementioned countries. And yet... Do these projects perhaps take on meaning today for you, 900 critical students and designers? Will you remember it? Could it be that the work generates more meaning as story and discourse than the original context the projects were created for? Can the design of a book be seen as a way to open dialogue rather than the final product of a designer? The following images will illustrate what I mean.



Shop window Nijhof & Lee, Amsterdam, september 2006



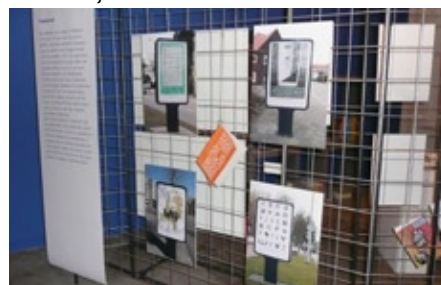
J. Ruijgrok and L. Manders rising the flag @ De Balie Amsterdam, 3 september 2006



Exhibition @ VU Amsterdam, Griffioen, 24 november 2006 to 11 januari 2007



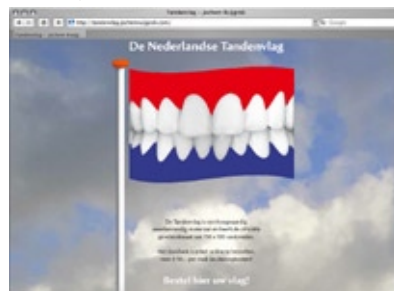
Exhibition @ TU Eindhoven, 6 to 22 november 2006



Exhibition at 'onderwijsmuseum' in Rotterdam, november/december 2008



Debate on national identity by Kosmopolis, Grote Kerk van Amsterdam, 28 september 2007



<http://tandenvlag.jochemruijgrok.com>



Flags for sale as postcards in souvenir shop A'dam

SUBJECTIVE ATLAS OF PALESTINE



www.subjectiveatlasofpalestine.info

Is it the reproduction that gives meaning to the original? And what could that mean for design strategies? For the Subjective atlas of Palestine and the Subjective atlas of Serbia it became a contentious notion, and both books are published without copyright. Attached to the books is a website where you can download the pdf of the book and people are free to use the images in different contexts. This led to a great 'second life' of both atlases, where the atlas indeed works as a discourse.



Items magazine, #3/4, may/august 2007



Cover ZemZem, magazine about the Middle East, may 2008



Poster exhibition 'Palestine week' @ The University of North Carolina with work from atlas



Dumbo Feather, Australian Magazine, autumn 2008



NRC Handelsblad, 26 september 2007



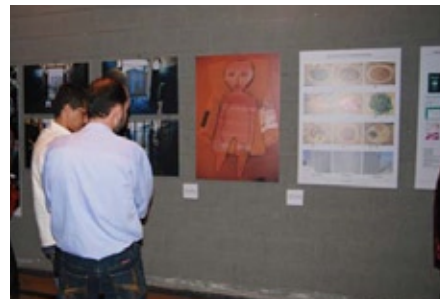
Adbusters, August 2008



Catalogue Best Designed Books 2007, June 2008



Nox, magazine for men, issue 30, October 2007



'Colour Siege', exhibition in Gaza, October 2008



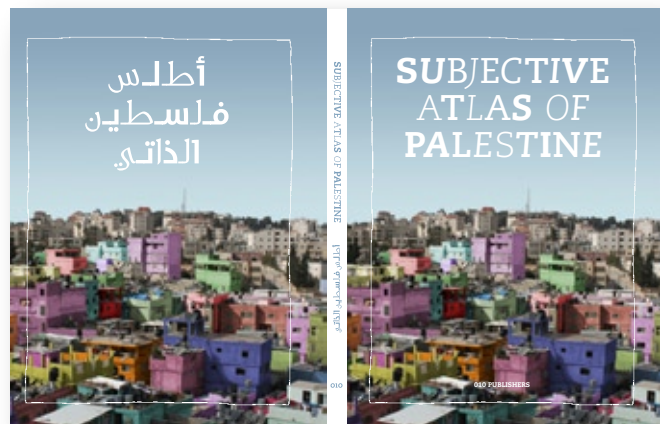
Exhibition Best Designed Books 2007 @ Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, June 2008



Skin magazine, volume 2 issue 7, October 2007



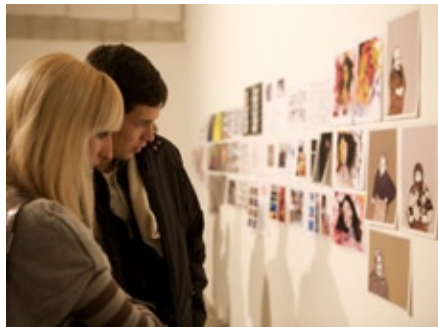
Eigen Huis en Interieur, februari 2008



Arab version, 2008 (the Palestinian contributors made their own bi-lingual version, which is also used by President Abbas as a relational gift)



www.subjectiveatlasofserbia.info



Exhibition of results workshop 'Subjective atlas of Serbia', Dom Omladine (Belgrade), 28 november 2008



Presentation 'Subjective atlas of Serbia' in De Balie, 17 april 2009



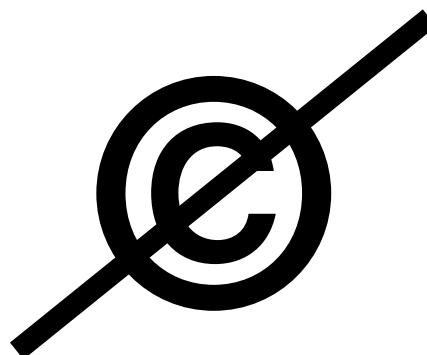
Volume Magazine, April 2009



Public discourse

The fact that you are now sitting silently in your seats has to do with the fact that I am up here talking on stage. But I'm up here speaking because you are there listening; I'm talking about my work because Hugo Puttaert invited me to. We are all here because De Singel has offered us the opportunity. My honorarium is being paid out of your admission fees. Whose presentation is this?

In the media-society we now live in, I believe designing is no longer about shaping information, but about how to deal with information. It is not the medium that is the message, but the mentality that's transmitted. So the point is not to find solutions and answers but to identify problems and ask questions. Do you agree?



[translation: Laura Martz]