Jurriaan Schrofer (1926-1990): grafisch ontwerper, fotoboekenpionier, art director, docent, kunstbestuurder en omgevingskunstenaar

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Summary

Jurriaan Schrofer (1926-1990) was a graphic designer, but his career is evidence that he had a very broad view of the profession. His work included alphabets, books, magazines, brochures, advertisements, trademarks and house styles, signage, calendars, diaries, postage stamps, record sleeves, and posters. He also created three-dimensional objects, silk-screen prints, and other works of art, and he became a manager and consultant in the world of art and design. Schrofer was always seeking new adventures and he was continually adopting new roles. His versatility took him to just about every corner of art and business.

As the son of an artist, he was introduced to culture at an early age and that background was reinforced in his education as a pupil of Kees Boeke’s ‘children’s community,’ De Werkplaats. After the Second World War Schrofer got a job with Dick Elffers, who was looking for an assistant. Elffers was considered to be a top designer. He had charisma as well as artistic and organizational talents. Schrofer’s second apprenticeship as a designer followed – between 1952 and 1955 – when he worked in Dirk Meijer’s printing and publishing business in Wormerveer. Meijer was a quality printer who considered design important, and encouraged new developments. Schrofer mastered new skills: printing techniques, dealing with diverse clients, and working on a wide variety of design assignments. A lot of the work was produced for public relations purposes, but Meijer offered a broad range of services to his clients. As Meijer’s business expanded, Schrofer became a PR consultant, a compiler of photo books, and co-director of Meijer’s publishing branch. All this took place during the post-war reconstruction and industrialization of the Netherlands: an optimistic time in which graphic design was seen as a modern, forward-looking profession.

In 1955, when Schrofer set out on his own as a freelancer, he concentrated on making photo books, the best known example being the visual narrative Een liefdesgeschiedenis in St. Germain des Prés (published as Love on the Left Bank) by the photographer Ed van der Elsken. He moved into the role of director (in the cinematic sense) and entrepreneur, becoming enthused by the construction of visual narratives. He explored the relatively new and popular medium of photo books in every possible way, and became known as a pioneer in this field. Through these assignments he established a name as an editorial designer: one who determines the relationship between the text and the images and puts his signature on the contents of a publication. Schrofer has been influenced by film making, but the photo book is a book genre in its own right. Among the many terms used for photo books as pictorial narratives, the term essay seems most relevant. Schrofer’s main source of inspiration was the exhibition The Family of Man.

In addition to his work for companies and photographers he was awarded cultural assignments by publishers, museums, theater companies, and the aesthetic design department of the Dutch Post, Telegraph and Telephone company (PTT). These clients can be considered as patrons of a culture of graphic design since they actively contributed to the prestige and cultural value of design. In 1959 Schrofer joined the editorial team at the architecture journal Forum, a soapbox for ‘angry young architects’ such as Aldo van Eyck. He shared their vision of an inclusive modernism, and he was strongly influenced by the philosophical and poetic, yet assertive, rhetoric of the Forum and its avant-garde ideas. In the early 1960s, he was just as outspoken in his own circle – giving critical lectures that often caused uproar amongst his colleagues in the designers’ association, the GKf. And he insisted on a debate within the GKf about the role of the graphic designer. Schrofer advocated a human approach in communication in contrast to colleagues such as Wim Crouwel, who was an ardent believer in Swiss modernism, a systematic approach and information design.

Schrofer encouraged discussion and – as a member of the board of the GKf – pushed for a fusion with the ‘advertising boys.’ This was a significant change of course: the GKf had
been strongly connected with the Dutch Resistance and the art world. Persuaded by Schrofer, the association opened its doors for designers and illustrators who earned their daily bread in the commercial world. He treated sacred cows irreverently, and questioned dogmas. An iconoclast in relation to the ethic of the GKf, but also the intellectual in the group, he wanted to strengthen the theoretical basis of the profession and build bridges between art and advertising. He performed these roles with verve, using his verbal and analytical abilities. These talents gave him greater influence and authority as a designer, and would define his career. New roles lay ahead and new worlds were opening up. Schrofer became involved with the NPO, a large advertising agency that concentrated on image-making for companies and government institutions. Here he demonstrated that he was able to help clients plan their strategies, campaigns, and advertisements. He also encouraged young talent, by using his position as creative director to set up a number of design competitions.

In the 1970s, Schrofer had considerable influence on public art policy. He was working at the Total Design agency, but managing and advising in the arts became more important. He became completely engrossed in commissioned art and environmental art – art that shapes the built environment – an expanding field at the time. In his favorite role, that of chairman, he shuttled back and forth between government officials, policy makers and artists. In workgroups, committees, boards and organizations he promoted change, creativity and experimentation. There were also new directions in his work. He moved into three dimensions, with alternative interpretations of signage and works of art in and on buildings.

Schrofer’s last position was director of the Academy for Fine Arts in Arnhem. Since the 1960s he had been active as a teacher at the night school of the Amsterdam Rietveld Academy. During this period ideas about design education changed, and Schrofer contributed to these changes. He stressed the individual and his creativity as well as a socially relevant role for the designer, and his intellectual development. Students valued his lessons. However, his career as academy director ended in tragedy. The staff opposed his ideas for change and he became ill. Nevertheless his extracurricular program with lectures and projects on various modern art forms was highly successful.

Influenced by op art and geometric abstraction, Schrofer experimented with moving typography, perspective, abstracted alphabets, patterns, and structures. With a dedication that bordered on obsession, he researched the spatiality of the flat surface. His compositions of letters, give a new meaning to ornamentation. They were all produced by hand, but anticipated the potential of the computer. Then he dedicated himself entirely to craftsmanlike art. In his studio he created modest, poetic letter sculptures, which added yet another dimension to his career, that of a visual artist.

Schrofer’s work has been treated thematically in chapters: PR work for companies, photo books, work for the cultural sector, advertising, spatial work and art management, teaching, and experiments. In these chapters specific object genres are defined and discussed. But graphic design as a developing practice and profession is an important theme throughout the whole book too. Schrofer was highly active in the designers’ association GKf, a group of artists and graphic designers which constitute a field with its own habitus. Their autonomous attitude established a specific culture of graphic design even though changes occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. The visual analysis and description of Schrofer’s work are combined with reconstructions of the contexts in which he functioned as a designer and as a manager. Interaction is central: the clients, genres, profession and fields are interrelated and Schrofer is related to all of them. He presented himself as a bohemian and romantic, but he was also a business-like organizer who approached problems analytical and intellectually. He oscillated between emotion and rationality. Schrofer was a mediator and a team player, but he liked to have overall control. He embodies the dual nature of graphic design: an artistic practice and a service activity.