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### Irma Boom: Autonomously assigned

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# Irma Boom

## Autonomously Assigned

MATHIEU LOMMEN

¶ Irma Boom is a serious maker of books, but not a crafts-person. The focus is clearly on the industrially produced edition. As she puts it, “I don’t design villas; I’m more concerned with social housing.” Nonetheless, what she does should interest the readers of *Parenthesis*, because she is doing some of the deepest thinking about books that is taking place today, and because her work influences serious designers working in many fields. If none of that is enough, you should know that paper sample books are her favorite bedtime reading.

Irma Boom prefers to design books that she herself also authors, or where she plays a role regarding the content that goes beyond the image editing. Her two volumes of *Nederlandse postzegels 87+88* (1988) were her first breakthrough. These were stamp catalogs for the state-owned postal service. She demanded, and got, plenty of space to go deeper into her chosen theme of “inspiration.” The personal freedom as designer—up until then limited to posters and covers—now had a sizable mass-produced book as a canvas. Rules of readability are provocatively violated: these postmodern catalogs on translucent paper tend toward autonomous design, while their function as a reference work becomes secondary. They reaped both praise and scorn. “A brilliant failure,” reckoned the jury of the Best Dutch Book Designs. Only in the mid-1990s would ideas about the “designer as author” really pay off.

Though she wants to be an author of her books, she also wants to have a client, whom she dubs a “commissioner.” Both the designer and the commissioner must maintain a critical attitude for a project to succeed. One favorite client was Paul van Vlissingen, then the president of the Dutch multinational SHV. There was an instant chemistry between them. From 1991 until his death in 2006, she worked with him almost continuously on one or more projects.

The SHV anniversary book of 1996 is the undisputed highlight of this cooperation. Van Vlissingen once said of their book projects: “It is unproductive for the client to give strict instructions as to how the finished product should look. And of course that often happens with entrepreneurs, because they are used to giving instructions and not very used to being contradicted. But you won’t get anywhere if you hold

onto the idea of it being a management project rather than an art project” (*Ontwerper & opdrachtgever*, 2005). It was a relationship based on mutual trust: with the contract for the project, Boom and art historian Johan Pijnappel were given carte blanche.

This anniversary book—celebrating the firm’s 100th year—was created when digital developments in the graphics industry were gathering speed. Yet for this work, which was so extensive (2,136 pages!) that no computer could handle it as a whole, she made a paste-up. For five years she worked with Pijnappel on the “Think Book,” its hidden title. The first three-and-a-half years were devoted exclusively to research. The book, in an English and a Chinese edition, was intended only for shareholders. (What would a fair trade price have been?) In reverse chronological order, Boom and Pijnappel tell the history of the Dutch multinational. There were no restrictions within the company regarding access to documents. It is a nonacademic story thanks to the use of varied archival materials, from corporate reports and minutes to



MATHIEU LOMMEN

Irma Boom



ABOVE: Two volumes of *Nederlandse postzegels 87+88*.

BELOW: *SHV*. Edited by Irma Boom, Johan Pijnappel. Utrecht: SHV Holdings, 1996.

photos and advertisements. To show the subjectivity of this history, Boom provided the photos from a type of video filter. This book, developed during the rise of the Internet, has no page numbers, and is meant to be browsed rather than read in linear fashion. It also contains some hidden graphic surprises: the title, die-cut into the front board covered with white linen, becomes visible only after prolonged use, and there are slogans to be read in the watermarks.

When book folk look at Boom's work, the one that always produces a gasp when the slide is projected is another big book, the one she did for Chanel: *N°5 Culture Chanel*. The Parisian fashion house commissioned this 2013 book on the famous perfume (which Boom herself has worn since the age of 14). It is one of her most rigorous conceptual works. She wanted to make something "almost non-existent, yet very present" (Irma Boom: *The Architecture of the Book*). All the images and quotes are realized through embossed printing. The result is a solidly white, entirely ink-free book about a perfume, which has a synesthetic effect. Partly in order not to damage the fragile sheets, she opted for a simple paperbound finish and

uncut edges. These give the publication a certain intimacy and a loose, fleeting quality. She convinced Chanel to keep the price low. It is a "democratic multiple."

She still works on several projects at once. She seems to need the excitement of keeping different plates spinning simultaneously in the air. Only through assignments is an ongoing exploration of the industrially manufactured book possible. Obviously, one job offers more space to experiment than another. Her explorations involve paper and finishing, but equally size and weight, color and typography, tactility and smell. In a certain sense she works, like an artist, on a body of ideas. So over a long period there have been a number of monochromatic or near-monochromatic books, such as the black *Africa Revisited* of 2001, the white *Sheila Hicks* (2006), the yellow *James, Jennifer, Georgina Are the Butlers* (2010), and the red *Irma Boom: Biography in Books* (2010).

The reprint of the last is an investigation into the significance of size in book design. This revised edition appeared in 2013 in two versions: one, again, a mini format, now just over two inches long and weighing two ounces, and—for once



as a limited edition—in a monumental XXL size, standing some 18 inches tall and weighing in at more than 16 pounds. The result is to two completely different reading and viewing experiences.

At the beginning of her career, Boom was notorious for the extreme length of her lines and her typographic experiments, which made reading her texts difficult. Now, her typography is accessible and almost austere. She obviously has a soft spot for often-strict Swiss typography. Concerning type choice, for years now Irma Boom Office has preferred Plan-tin, based on the Monotype serif face of 1914, and Neuzeit S, based on the Stempel/Linotype sans serif face from 1928. Both fonts look robust and businesslike. She has even had Neuzeit S expanded with additional diacritical marks. Boom likes the fact that this font is available only in a normal and a bold version, with no italics: the restriction enforces clear graphic choices.

The physical exploration of the book edge is another trademark. The thick SHV book of 1996 shows when fanned slightly in one direction a tulip field on the fore edge and in the other a poem, creating a spectacular effect. It is a printed version of the double fore-edge painting from the hand-press period. Over five inches thick, the Sheila Hicks book is cut with a frayed texture, an allusion to the selvages of the reproduced textile work. Form and content are as one and each copy is unique (plagiarism was inevitable but without the context would have yielded only a gimmick). Along the nearly 900 pages of the 2009 collection overview *Every Thing Design*, the more expressive working title “Wertewandel” runs over the three cut edges (silk screen) and the back (offset). This feature encourages the reader handle this catalog as an object. Boom’s work is often so exceptional in shape and production that her editorial structuring inputs can sometimes be overlooked.

Although a small number of Boom’s books are exclusively printed and not widely available, her explicit preference is for works produced in large editions for a public audience. She also wants all her books to be produced entirely by machine. At various times she has resolutely rejected a proposed solution for a graphics problem that would require a manual intervention. Instead, she continually pushes technical limits, and the printers and binders who work with her know this. She prefers her books to be produced in Amsterdam or somewhere nearby. Few designers guide the production of their work so carefully, even to the factory floor. “It just needs to be better” is one of her catchphrases, reflecting her drive to get the most out of herself and others. Occasionally, she crosses the boundaries of mainstream machine production. So the Sheila Hicks book, reprinted several times, is cut by hand, but Boom remains mysterious on how exactly this happens. In her eyes, the book is too much associated with craftsmanship, and she has a pronounced dislike of that.

Inspiration comes mainly from the world of the visual



BETTINA NEUMANN

*Every thing design: the collections of the Museum für Gestaltung, Zürich.* Concept and image by Irma Boom; edited by Christian Brändle and Verena Formanek. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009.

arts. Her work has an undeniable kinship with minimalist art, with the zero-related Nul and Fluxus movements that have attracted her since her time at art school. The reduction of the personal, the fundamental principle that her works must be mechanically produced, the penchant for monochrome (she hates book jackets with pictures), and the sculptural aspect of her books: all these factors are closely related to assumptions within those movements. Artists like Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, Jan Schoonhoven, and especially Ellsworth Kelly are important to her. Daan van Golden has been a hero since, at age 12, she saw him for the first time at the Lochem Pop Festival.

For her retrospectives in 2010 (Amsterdam) and 2013 (Paris), Boom also showed some favorite books from her private library, including the Kelly monograph with text by John Coplans from 1971, and the 1969 catalog *Kunst der sechziger Jahre*, a striking design by Wolf Vostell. This Fluxus artist asked for the active participation of the viewer in his personal work with decollage, and he did the same with graphic design in this catalog. Related to the Fluxus movement is the work of Dieter Roth. Boom admires his artist’s books made up of found comics and coloring books, whose pages have been manipulated by punching holes. While academy courses for book design often pay much attention to typographic detail, Irma Boom aims to rejuvenate the mass-produced book as a total concept. It is not surprising that her inspiration comes largely from outside the relatively traditional book world.  This has been adapted and shortened by the editor from a limited-distribution booklet published on the occasion of the Johannes Vermeer Prijs in 2014.

# PARENTHESIS 29

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