

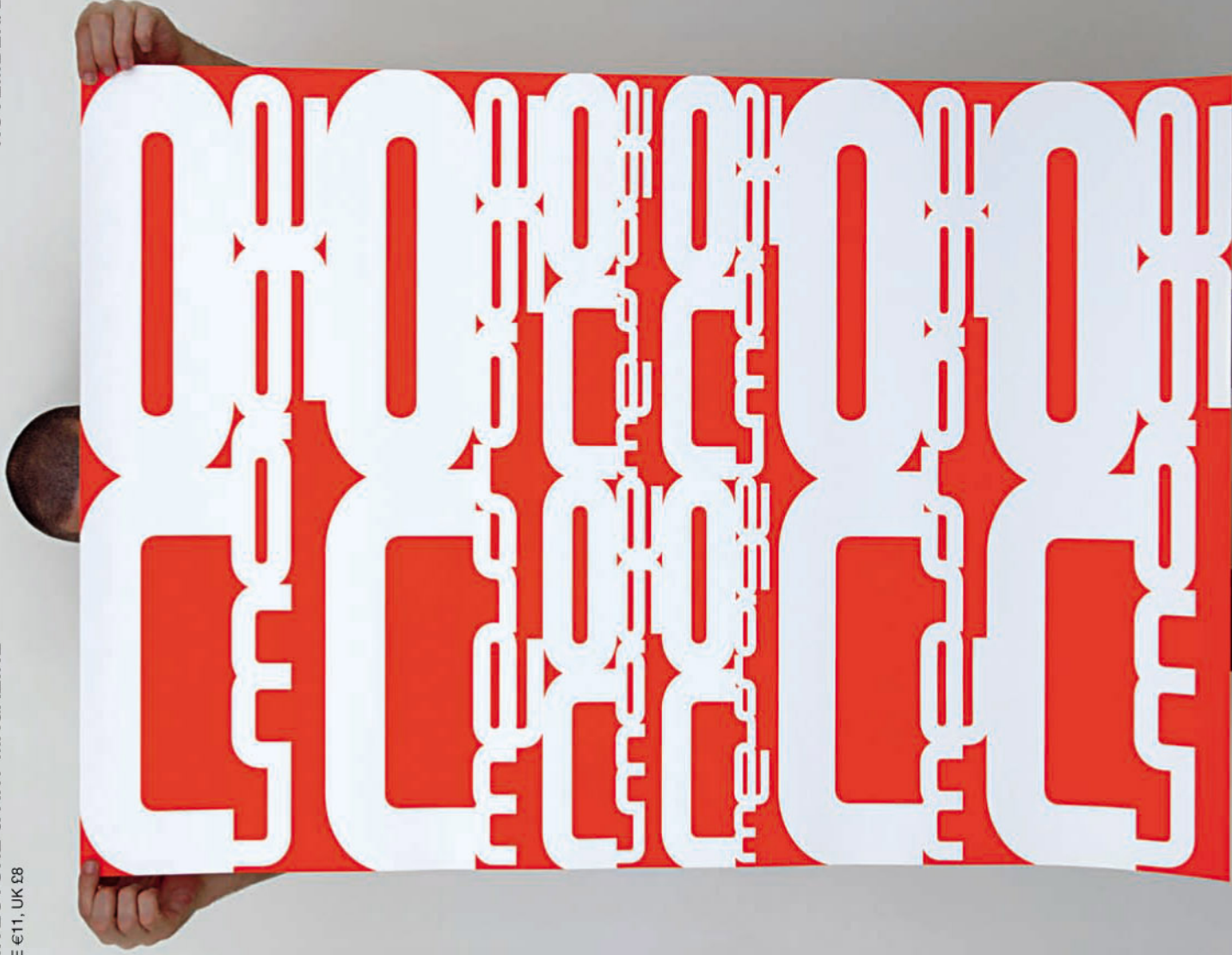


RAM N°4

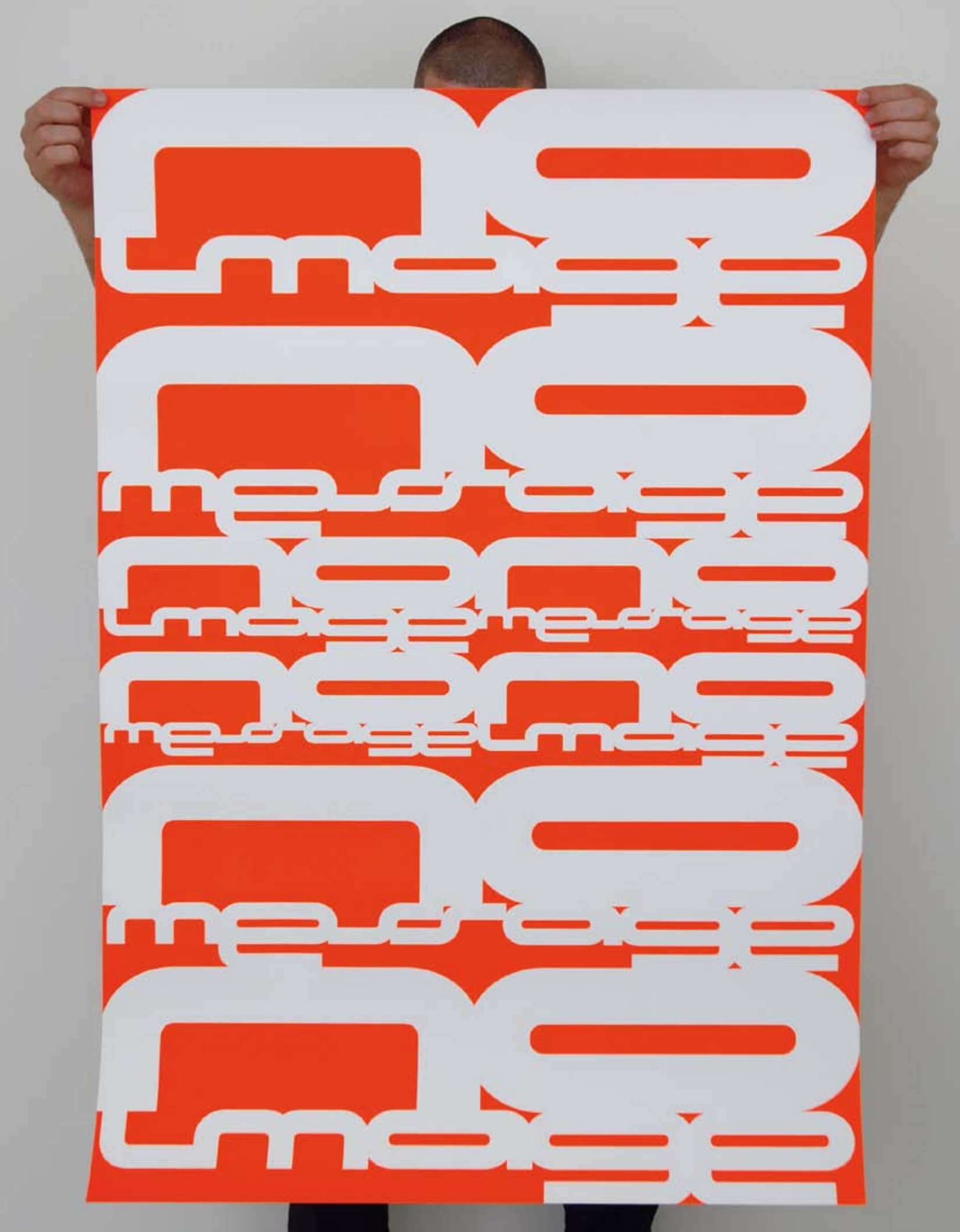
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Drawing songlines

THE GRAPHIC WORK OF MARTIJN SANDBERG

As elaborate or subversive as the works of the Dutch graphic artist Martijn Sandberg may be, there's always room for wordplay, pun and fun. Even better: it's the puns that have made them subversive. Puns that breathe the wild spirit of rap, punk and rock 'n' roll.

Max Borka and Siegrid Demyttenaere paid a visit to his Amsterdam studio.

'Heidi Productions', reads the nameplate next to a doorbell on the heavy gate of number 15 Leidekkerssteeg, right in the middle of Amsterdam's sleazy red-light district. The message is hardly subtle, but we decide to ignore temptation, and push the button next to Martijn Sandberg's name. The gate opens on an alley, in which one of the wonder boys of Dutch graphic design has his studio, one floor up, with a view on a brick wall and a wash line. Inside, his studio is immaculately white, as neutral as the grey walls of the kidney-shaped school building on the roofed-over central square of the Singelland College in the Dutch village of Drachten, which he was recently asked to decorate. And his contribution to this project is yet another illustration of the use of highly personalised language in a public space.

Team 4 Architects of Groningen designed the college. A two-storey building, it incorporates a reception desk and dispensing counter that open on to a piazza, where students gather at every free moment, with chairs and tables randomly scattered about. Some of the students might be oblivious, but Sandberg left them a message on the outside walls of the building. A simple message, expressed in two and three-word slogans, taken from pop songs, and covering the building all around. But Sandberg doesn't make it easy; it takes effort to decipher them, if one notices them at all. It's all down to the choice of typeface or font. Neutral, with letters that are composed by an anonymous digital series of dots, with clear references to Braille, but also to acne, says Sandberg, who regularly bursts out in laughter while describing his job.

KEVIN AYERS

'Sleep all Day, Party all Night, Forever Young, Never Grow Old', are some of the messages that adorn the college. Poignant, popular phrases that immediately trigger associations with the songs of Bob

Opposite page:
Martijn Sandberg
 holding his fluorescent
 'No Image No Message' poster.
Photo: Allard Van der Hoek.
This page:
 'We're Only In It For The Money',
 coin produced by
 the Royal Dutch Mint.
Photo: Tom Haartsen.



Dylan, Kevin Ayers or Pete Townsend. Sandberg compares it to graffiti: three words, a simple quote and a whole world opens up. It's not only the content and meaning that convinced him to favour these phrases over others. They also had to be the right length to cover the entire circumference of the edifice, enabling the beginning and end to touch and create a loop. It reveals another aspect of Sandberg's obsession with music: the rhythmic repetition of a lyric, sampled ad infinitum – as he calls it.

One feels almost tempted to compare his method to Aboriginal Songlines, the people's guideline through time, that basically only exists in the mind, but is translated in mysterious dotted patterns when visualised. Time is vital to Sandberg's work, not only because he teaches the students to reverse its laws, by sleeping all day, and remaining forever young, but also because it takes time to read and understand his texts, written in self-created, highly personal and abstract fonts. So powerful is the image, pictorial and ornamental, that the barely legible omen or mene tekel behind it can only be decoded upon careful inspection, if at all. 'One is constantly flooded with information,' says Sandberg, 'instant information, without any filtering. I want to stretch that moment of confrontation, also by inviting the reader to complete the message. He has to punch through the surface, towards the deep. On the other hand, one also has to stand back a little bit on the school's playground, to be able to read the message. It asks for more attention, more time than one is usually prepared to give an artwork – literally.'

JOHN AND YOKO

I Want More Space is another piece that demands distance. Commissioned by OGA Amsterdam as the award for the architecture and public housing Zuiderkerprijs 2004, an almost illegible message is perforated by laser on aluminium panels and based on a typographic dot raster. The letters fill the entire surface and seem to bump against the square frame. It claims more physical space than it actually oc-

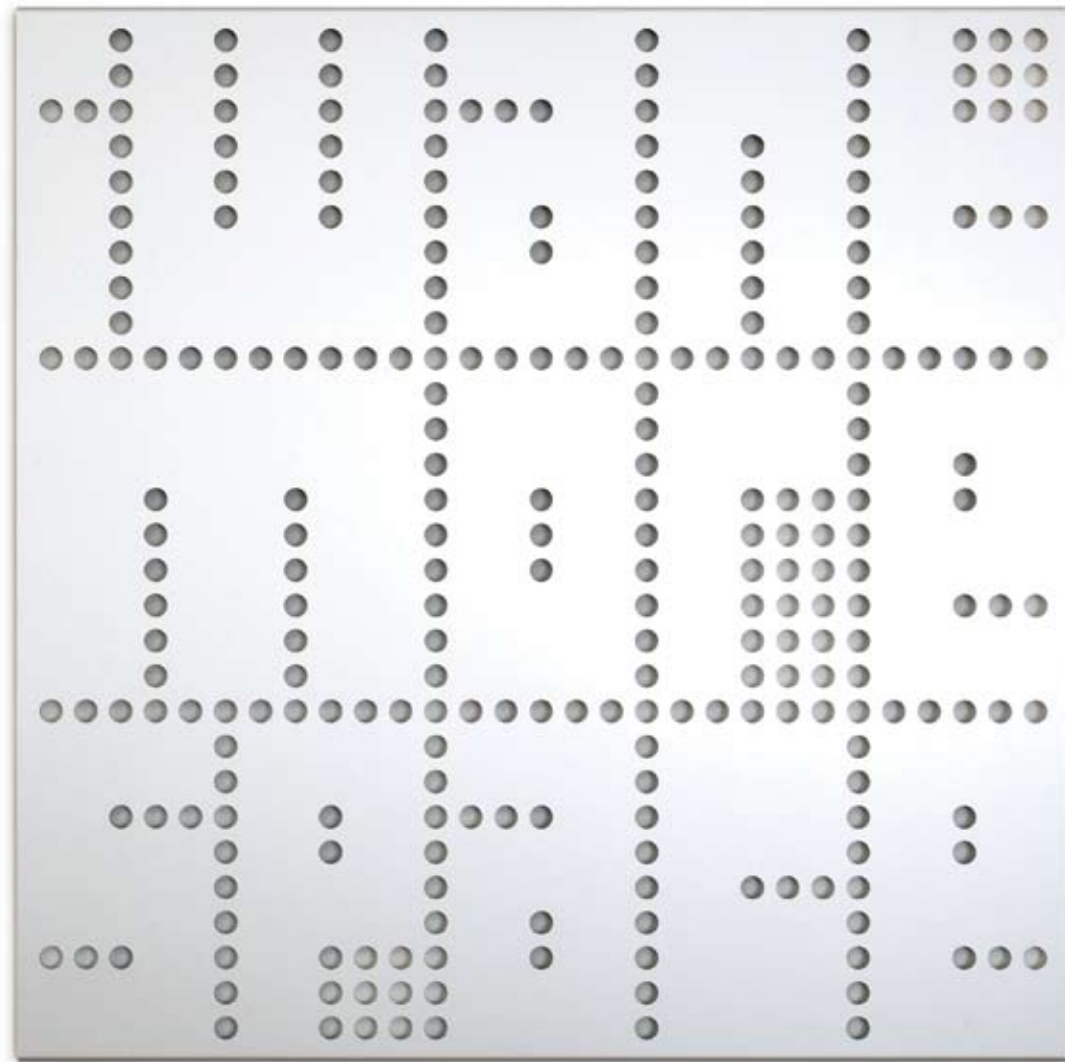
cupies, fighting the confines of its environment, as the perceived image becoming sharper as the viewer moves away. While distance might not be so key to the No Image No Message series, demand for thoughtful scrutiny is. Sandberg made this inscription part of the architecture when he was asked to do the interior of Pizzart's café in Fribourg, Switzerland. In the narrow oblong space, the floor, ceiling, counter and two long tables are integrated in one single construction: a long strip of black and white tiles that forms a continuous loop, that only discloses its hidden No Image No Message meaning to the attentive. Far from limiting himself to walls or the traditional canvas, Sandberg also sought to remix this work and make it part of the public realm: silk screening the slogan in fluorescent on a poster and hanging it on 50 backlit city information panels in Haarlem; creating wastepaper baskets with the posters; reproducing the slogan on silver plastic bags and printing it full page in the arts supplement of a newspaper.

The artist's public force was also evident in Power to the People (2000). Situated at Hoofddorplein, one of the omnipresent, but generally fairly unobtrusive transformer stations, Sandberg was commissioned by the AFK (Amsterdams Fonds voor de kunst) to turn the location into a work of art. Attaching aluminium panels to the station's exterior, Sandberg created a typographic design with yellow-coloured letters, which changed in intensity during the day as a result of the influence of daylight. When darkness fell, the effect of street lighting or the headlights of passing cars caused the letters to light up brightly. The fact that passers-by enhanced the visibility of the text only emphasised its meaning. And while Power To The People refers literally to the function of the building, it inevitably brings to mind the famous John and Yoko song.

ZAPPAESQUE

The tension between image and text, the personal public dialogue and the intended illegibility and hermetic form of an often very political message - democratic, punk, anarchic even - are all elements that

Above and opposite:
Forever Young, Sandberg was commissioned by the OSG Singelland College to apply his graphic approach to its cafeteria space.
Photos: Allard van der Hoek



I want More Space
 Commissioned by OGA Amsterdam as the award for the architecture & public housing award, Zuiderkerprijs 2004. The almost illegible message is perforated by laser on aluminium panels.
 Photo: Allard van der Hoek.

Business Stamps 2005
 Sandberg's business stamp for the Dutch Post uses an intelligent typographic grid and plays with stamp's perforation to form the design.
 Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere.



give Sandberg's work its unique strength. And while Pretty Vacant might be another slogan utilised, Sandberg is not missing anything in the irony stakes. After he had his own coin produced by the Royal Dutch Mint, with the Zappaesque inscription 'We're Only in it For The Money', a commission by the Social Insurance Bank in the city of Zaandam saw him create an artwork by integrating a number of them in a circular loop on the floor.

Sandberg's canvas spreads wide. His design for two of Dutch Post's business stamps will be issued on no less than 70m copies. The design arose by translating the stamp perforation through from the edge 'from outside to inside'. Consequently, the diameter of the points that form a grid on the stamp and their mutual distance is implemented through from this perforation, while the grid also defines the typography and organisation. A stamp is proof of payment. Moreover, the size can be compared to a coin and the points on the stamp's typographic grid also act as a miniaturised depiction of a coin, while the red-copper and nickel colours, inspired by the euro coins, also reinforce the commercial aspect of the stamps. The 'nihilist' look, as one critic called it, was far from being appreciated by everybody. But it is a dislike that is well to the liking of Sandberg, whose aim is that his stamps – like many of his other works - embrace the effects of a Trojan Horse. #

Power To The People
 Illuminating the area around the Hoofddorpplein transformer station in Amsterdam, the typographic design turns the location into a work of art. The piece was commissioned by AFK in collaboration with Stadsdeel Amsterdam Oud Zuid.
 Photo: Frank Kok.

Martijn Sandberg made an artists contribution especially for DAMn°4 on pages 158-159, Whatever.