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## Floating

Recently, I discovered the flyer's entry into the domain of cultural history when I got lost in a web museum completely devoted to The Flyer. I even came across a flyer I created myself. During the late seventies and early eighties I organised several concerts for some small clubs and regularly created flyers. These, being a cheap but very efficient way of marketing, could easily be handed out or placed in shops and establishments. My particular flyer announced the performance of a Berlin band called 'Einsturzende Neubauten', accompanied by another Berlin band 'Sprung aus den Wolken' in January 1982. Club No.90 in Oisterwijk was the club I worked for at the time. My typography was solely based on fonts and symbols decorating the double single 'Kalte Sterne' (1981) and the first album 'Kollaps' (1981). Simple, but efficient, at a glance one could see this was about 'Einsturzende Neubauten' (at least if you were familiar with the post-punk iconography).

I have a vague recollection of making flyers and never got any aesthetic pleasure out of the designing process. Not one of my personally created flyers made it to my personal archive. I considered its existence a necessity, just a fleeting part of pop culture: a useful publicity tool and imperative to fill up a hall and cover costs. Within the scope of *Flyer'dam* my fascination for the phenomenon grew. Several minutes I kept staring at the Neubauten flyer and was amazed at the dedication that I had apparently put in designing this mini flyer (mini-placard). I wondered how it ended up in the hands of a British collector.

And what about the name of this medium? Flyer. Is there actually a proper Dutch name for this communication tool? I can't even remember whether this name was in use when I was making flyers. It is very tempting to look for an equivalent in order to understand this phenomenon. Unfortunately, the word flyer can't be translated literally: Flyer in Dutch is "vlieger" – in English: "kite". However, there are some notions linked to the pamphlet, forerunner of the flyer, such as handbills or leaflets. Contrary to the flyer with its expressive nature and emphasis on visual identity, the pamphlet focuses on text, message and meaning. With the word "leaflet" we touch the heart of the matter, because just as a leaf flies through the air, it does justice to the volatility of this medium, for the flyer is circulated on a wide scale but only a small amount ends up in a pocket or a bag. The major part is scattered in public spaces, where wind degrades it to litter. Often, a gloomy fate awaits the flyer. Maybe the use of the word "floater" here is not so strange.

This "floater" has a rather short history. Not surprisingly so, since its existence is related to the digital revolution of the last century. Thanks to the swift spreading of desktop publishing, the possibility to design flyers became available to everyone. Pre-digital print-work was not only expensive and labour-intensive but also a professional working environment was needed. The old mimeograph was sufficient for (making) messages and pamphlets,

but not always a good choice with regards to the expressive and colourful nature of the flyer. Therefore, the photocopier was the perfect solution. My flyers too were hand-written and subsequently reproduced by the photocopier. This machine developed quickly.

In February 1974 Piet Schreuders wrote an article in Dutch pop magazine *Aloha* called “Long live the Xerox”, in which he praised the unprecedented possibilities of the copy machine. Three years earlier he started the first Dutch photocopied magazine called *De Wolkenkrabber*, which counted twenty pages and twenty memberships. It turned out to be a time-consuming and expensive undertaking, “yes, that was an expensive period”. In 1966 he created his first flyers. “I lived in The Hague and regularly drove my bike to the public library at the Bilderdijkstraat, because it had a machine that could make negative prints reduced in size. When you copied this print again you would get a positive – even more reduced in size print”.

Since 1972 more and more public places got their own copiers. Meanwhile Schreuders was living in Amsterdam. He patiently explained to readers of *Aloha* where to make their own photocopies and how much it would cost them. This way the reader could calculate the costs of their own flyer or paper. The music library had one (a Rank Xerox 422, “it would make good large, black ink copies, even though it worked on coins that cost thirty cents”). At the Information Bureau there was also one (an AGFA-machine, “which worked on quarters and made grey copies that smelled good”). The same machine was located on the second floor of the Bijenkorf. The Institute for press-science at the Old Turfmarkt had at their disposal “the most ridiculous system of all: pink pieces of paper were placed around the original and then you had to copy the copy again. I don’t remember exactly, but it was laughable”. Subsequently the University library had two cheap Xerox machines (the Rank Xerox Drum 1R90002 and the Rank Xerox Developer 5R90015), “the glass where you put the original on was bent”. At last he found a machine at the Pedagogic Didactic Institute at the Prinsengracht. “This one even copied pictures almost flawless, whereas the imprint of lines could not be discerned from the real ones”.

In his Amsterdam summary Schreuder counted seven copy machines, which were available to the public. The flyer was born. A year later, in San Francisco, The Thumbback Bugle was founded, a creative agency, that still exists, whom were the first to specialise in the design and spreading of flyers. Artists, gays, activists and pop musicians in this hip, left-wing student town created a tight union: The Residents, Monte Cazazza, Tuxedo Moon, Flipper and the Dead Kennedys, just to name a few acts, were the face of the “belle époque” of San Francisco, as Blaine L. Reiniger of Tuxedo Moon used to call this ultraliberal period. After the double murder on progressive mayor George Moscone and gay counsellor Harvey Milk the cultural climate cooled down fast. Tuxedo Moon went into hiding and moved to Rotterdam.

In the context of art and pop music the flyer became one of the most important [communication] means of communication. The flyer became the pounding heart of the “Do It Yourself-culture”. Punk and post-punk were as

successful as they were because of their revolutionary new forms of marketing: flyers, posters and fanzines pushed this subculture to unknown heights. World-wide the copy machine was producing full swing, screen printing companies were working extra hours and graffiti changed the cities into notice boards free of charge. The flyer flourished in this climate: it grew into a vital form of freedom of speech for everyone trying to find the public domain, but didn't have the money or interest to use regular forms of advertising like placing adds in papers, magazines or using radio and/or television. Around 1990 a network of copy shops was spun around the entire youth culture.

In the second half of the eighties in the last century the digital revolution reinforced this development. It was the end of the Xerox era and the beginning of the Quark Xpress era. At ever greater speed new designs enter the market. Everyone with little computer skill could very quickly design their own flyers. Besides that, continuously cheaper digital printing techniques, made the copy machine to a prehistoric phenomenon. Also the music changed dramatically: digital and electronic dance music took over the analogue pop music with their guitars and drums. In *Flyer'dam* the emphasis is on the digital flyer: the flyer transformed from a somewhat obscure, often black and white medium of the pop circuit into a colourful mass medium for clubs, parties and events. The composers of this book consider the breakthrough of house and techno as a crucial factor in the explosive growth of flyers in the cultural landscape.

Despite the often glossy character of the new flyer, not much of the original character of the flyer changed. The flyer still distinguishes itself by its love of "narrow casting": that is, produced for people that share the same fascination. The flyer became an experimental garden where one could experiment with new visual cultures. Which iconography and which colours give expression to house? What visual language belongs to techno, jungle, gabber, reggae, drum & bass, 2-step, hip hop, urban or lounge? The flyer belongs to the domain of "sonic fiction", to borrow a name from Kodwo Eshun, the philosopher of electronic music. If music emphasises the instrumental character and [it] doesn't add any words or singing, as is done in most electronic dance music, the surrounding visual language on record covers or flyers becomes more important. With the absence of language, says Eshun, a visual route is imperative: it is the visual culture that has to tempt the consumer to take part in a party or festival. The flyer captures the sound in ink and paint.

The flyer communicates a code, an atmosphere, an identity or a fascination. In a flash the viewer has to be able to decipher the code and determine to put it in his pocket. People that have done a lot of street promotion know that many people don't want to [take] accept the flyer because they can't or don't want to decipher the code. A flyer to an Urban party – with a lot of gold, bright red and green in the design – is recognizable from a great distance. Also a hardcore or gabber-flyer – with black skulls on acid – provides an immediate identity, that leaves no room for guessing. It is this aspect that makes the flyer

so fascinating: even if you stay at home, you can't get any closer to the sound and identity of a club or party.

Since the punk and postpunk era little or nothing has changed to the ventilated times on the flyer. Almost without exception a flyer announces a nocturnal event: often you read "23.00h – 05.00h". Or: "Afterparty starts at 01.30h". The flyer is the medium of the night. During the heydays of urban culture, around the turn of the century, dozens of promoters populated the Lijnbaan in Rotterdam after closing hours. Between nine and twelve they were handing out flyers like crazy, to try and win customers for their parties starting later that evening. Late night visitors of the Lijnbaan would walk through a sea of paper that was left behind. *flyer'dam* might as well have had the title *Messydam* or *Litterdam*. The night also refers to the realm of ecstasy: alcohol, drugs and psychedelics are welcomed heartily. The flyer often offers codes that give away an ecstatic preference. The Rasta colours green-yellow-red propagate the use of marihuana; the skulls on hardcore flyers show a predilection for speed and LSD; the smileys of the house era smile on acid and XTC. Here again the flyer is a handy guide in the nocturnal maze of clubs, music genres, parties and desirable ecstasies.

What changed in the cause of years, was the increased status of the flyer as a communication tool and an artistic challenge. The inherent and often individual chosen disorder of the photocopy era was replaced by clever examples of graphic design, often created by art academy students or emerging designers. Of course these students already played a role in the days of The Thumbback Bugle and punk, but in the digital era the flyer became a grateful platform for young graphic designers to show off their talent. For free or for very little money you could show what you were capable off. De flyer became a public job interview and played an important role in the curriculum vitae of the designer. Nowadays the flyer is part of the domain of branding and advertising and the communication strategy of the pop culture is part of every self-respecting graphic education. "Branding is the most beautiful gift pop culture ever produced", writes Wally Olins in *On Brand* (2003). "Brands and logo's have removed themselves further and further away from their commercial origin, through which their social-cultural meaning has become enormous". Also the other way around flyers influenced the commercial domain and were used for getting young consumers to buy products.

With great expectation I am looking forward to *Flyer'dam*, which not only presents the historical and artistic development of the Rotterdam flyer, but also maps the sonic landscape, populated by parties, clubs, events and festivals, which in the last decade gave sound and colour to the City on the Maas. In the nineties of the last century – the heart of *Flyer'dam* – Rotterdam was the dance and urban capital of Holland. And the flyer was its logo and gateway. If one so chooses to produce a book about this landscape, one correctly chooses for the phenomenon of the flyer, because it's impossible to get any closer to the sound of Rotterdam.

