



Onsite [at] OCAD U

2011

Marian Bantjes: I Wonder [Exhibition Catalogue]

Smith, Lisa Deanne

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MARIAN BANTJES

I Wonder

March 2 to June 5, 2011



COVERS: I WONDER, 2010
FULL COLOUR PLUS GOLD
HARDCOVER BOOK

LEFT: I WANT IT ALL, 2006
FLOWER PEDALS

RIGHT: VALENTINES, 2010
VECTOR/LASERCUT

About the Artist

Marian Bantjes' work has been published worldwide, and is in the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum (Smithsonian). She has lectured throughout the United States and around the world, including South Africa, Argentina, Norway, France and New Zealand. In 2010, she spoke at the renowned TED Conference in Long Beach, California. In 2008, she was accepted as a member of the international design organization Alliance Graphique Internationale. Her new book, *I Wonder*, was released in November 2010 by Monacelli Press.

Events

PUBLIC LECTURE BY MARIAN BANTJES

Tuesday, March 1, 6:30 p.m.

OPENING RECEPTION

Wednesday, March 2, 7 to 9 p.m.

CURATOR'S TOUR

WITH LISA DEANNE SMITH

Thursday, March 10, 6:30 p.m.

GALLERY TOUR WITH KEITH RUSHTON

Co-Chair of Graphic Design at OCAD University

Thursday, April 7, 6:30 p.m.

GALLERY TOUR WITH RACHEL GOTLIEB

Design Curator and co-author of *Design in Canada:*

Fifty Years from Teakettles to Task Chairs

Thursday, May 5, 6:30 p.m.

Admission to the gallery and all related events is free.

ONSITE [AT] OCAD U
100 McCaul Street, Level 2
416-977-6000 Ext. 265
www.ocad.ca/onsite

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday, noon to 6 p.m.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Charles Reeve, Curator, OCAD University for his support and expertise, The Maharam Design Studio for their patronage in regards to Bantjes' wall coverings and fabric, Oldouz Moslemian for designing and producing the bean bag chairs for this exhibition, Aisa Ljubijankic and Tammy Fuoco for quick administrative assistance and especially to Marian Bantjes for her invigorating practice and generous collaboration.

For more information about Onsite [at] OCAD U, please go to our website www.ocad.ca/onsite or visit us on Facebook.

Design by Patricia Pastén
OCAD U Marketing & Communications

maharam

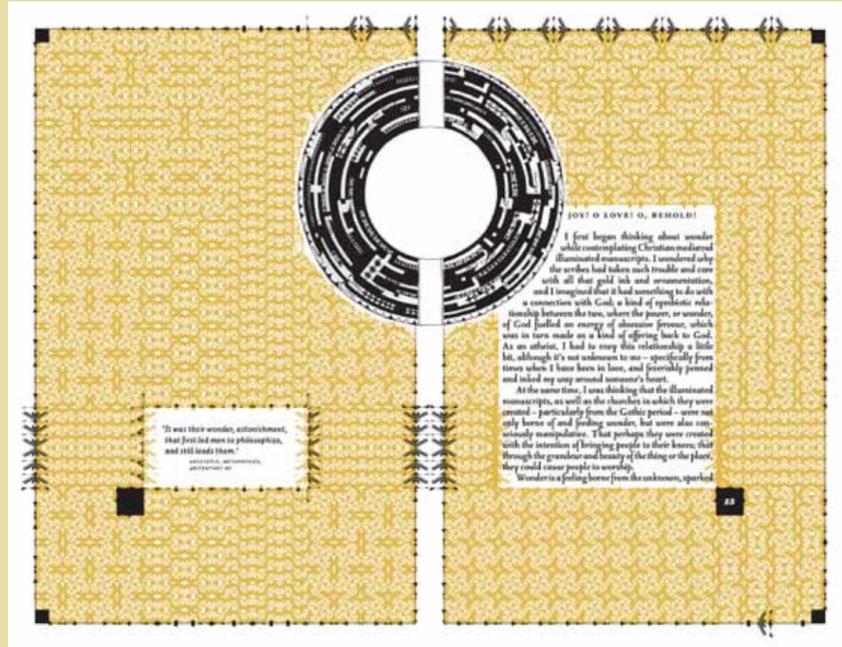
ONTARIO
COLLEGE
OF ART &
DESIGN

MARIAN BANTJES

I Wonder

March 2 to June 5, 2011

“These days I call myself a graphic artist. So where my work as a graphic designer was to follow strategy, my work now follows my heart and my interests with the guidance of my ego to create work that is mutually beneficial to myself and a client. Now this is heresy in the design world. The ego is not supposed to be involved in graphic design but I find that for myself, without exception, the more I deal with the work as something of my own, as something that is personal, the more successful it is as something that is compelling, interesting and sustaining. So I exist somewhat outside of the mainstream of design thinking. Where others might look at measurable results, I tend to be interested in more ethereal qualities like does it bring joy, is there a sense of wonder and does it evoke curiosity?”

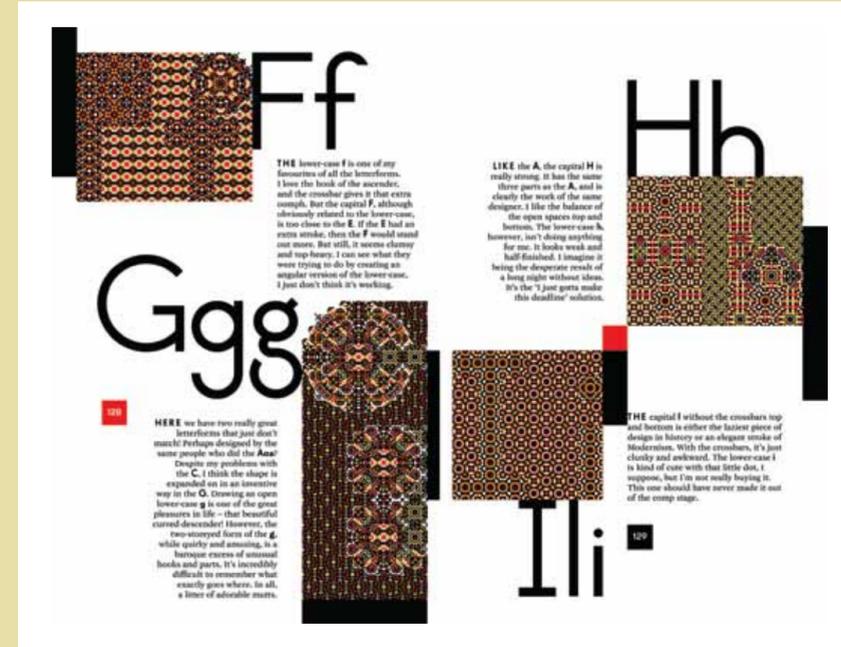


Fortunately for us, after building a strong foundation in design, Marian Bantjes became frustrated by its norms. Having put in ten years of traditional book typesetting and nine years of running a successful design firm, she needed to challenge herself to do what she loves.

The heart of this endeavour is a search for opportunities to turn ordinary things — things that seem easy to understand — into surprising things. For example, her new book, *I Wonder*, initially struck me as a 21st century illuminated manuscript.² Smart and opulent, with elaborate illustrations, an abundance of gold leaf and ornate fonts, her book uses text and image to discuss design, often in a personal manner. But it also goes beyond that. A slow reading of *I Wonder* reveals the letters to be more than text and the images to be more than illustration.

Its cover, its embossed fabric and the weight of its pages invite the reader to ponder its message — the physicality is crucial, and couldn't be experienced on-line. *I Wonder* captures Bantjes' diverse concerns — design, art, writing, intellectual and experiential knowledge, complexity, structure, systems, patterns, craftsmanship, unusual materials, joy, wonder and curiosity. It dares us to consider the possibility that ornament can enhance content rather than diminish it.

Similar impulses drive Bantjes' valentine series, which began in 2005 with an intricate line drawing of a pink heart. The letters and image are drawn in vein-like lines that feed into the heart, creating two focused areas that resemble ovaries. The text reads, "Everything I Do, I Do



LEFT, RIGHT & BOTTOM: I WONDER, 2010 SPREADS FROM BOOK

For Love.” The following year she created a hand-lettered poster in fiery red, difficult to decipher at first that read “True Heart.” In 2007 she created 150 individually drawn personalized valentines — a labour that no doubt mirrored the experience of love by being intense and heartwarming on one hand, but challenging and repetitive on the other. Another year she wrote a text-based valentine in the form of a love letter. Each of the four versions began and ended in the middle of a sentence, personal in tone despite the fact that they could have been to any of her friends; “...you've never really been sure of this, but I can assure you that this quirk you're so self-conscious of is intensely endearing. Just please accept that this piece of you escapes...” Building on the desire to create an experience for the viewer, this exhibition premieres a sound piece in which Bantjes, with characteristic warmth, reads these love letters out loud. Last year she had 500 intricate vector-drawn valentines laser cut from used Christmas cards, each image different. Bantjes works towards awe as obsessively for her friends as she does for her clients, combining her craftsmanship and design skill with her surprising willingness to work exhaustively on labours of love.

“I am very interested in wonder in design as an impetus to inquiry,” she says, and *I Wonder* follows this interest by examining the politics of ornamentation from Aristotle to Adolf Loos to today. Much of 20th century modernism treats ornament as a crime against truth and nature. Although deeply respectful of Modernist design in architecture, furniture and graphics, Bantjes states, “To follow the Modernist ideal, if all objects and materials are immediately evident, if function achieves perfection in, say, the perfect

“To say ‘I wonder’ is to say ‘I question; I ask.’ The mind seeks. Sometimes it finds answers, sometimes it does not. We need wonder in order to keep moving and growing — to stay alive in the world. It gives us meaning and, in fact makes us human.”

fork or the functional building, then there is little room to wonder, to seek and change. What is to wonder at when everything you see and use is completely evident, including its manufacture? Furthermore, to restrict function to physical use is to ignore the spiritual properties that can be experienced in things, and to deny imagination and pleasure as necessary properties in the enjoyment of life.”³

“I WANT IT ALL,” exclaims a work by Bantjes, and perhaps this exclamation emphasizes her most admirable quality — that she explores and questions everything. How should we spend our time? What matters in design today? Can materials transform? What is it to honour? Can life and design be one? Is play important? Can I remember? Is a book just a book? Can I surprise? “Does it bring joy?” she asks. “Is there a sense of wonder? Does it evoke curiosity?” Her holistic approach to life and work is a refreshing departure from the influence on our culture of Cartesian dualism, specialization and capitalism.

— Lisa Deanne Smith

- ENDNOTES
- 1 Marian Bantjes in her 2010 TED Talk, Intrinsic Beauty by Design, http://www.ted.com/talks/marian_bantjes_intrinsic_beauty_by_design.html
 - 2 Steven Heller, *New York Times*, December 1, 2010, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/01/graphic-content-marian-bantjes-illuminated/>
 - 3 Marian Bantjes, *I Wonder* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010) 23.
 - 4 Marian Bantjes in her 2010 TED Talk, Intrinsic Beauty by Design, http://www.ted.com/talks/marian_bantjes_intrinsic_beauty_by_design.html
 - 5 Marian Bantjes, *I Wonder* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2010) 30.