

Bye-bye swarm intelligence, mastery is the order of the day

This is not a »trend study« as announced by *form* – *Special Issue* (March/April 2008). Nobody was interviewed, no focus groups were invited, objectivity was not the aim. It is a summary of an editorial designer's observations.

It is simply the entire text and the complete layout of an interview between Berit Liedtke (*form*) and Horst Moser. The complete text did not fit in with the page planning of the latest *form* and the article was published only on condition that reference was made to the unbridged text.

The subject is visual language and specifically, visual language on magazine covers. Those who wish to use the hollow word »trends« are at liberty to do so.

form: Your design office independent Medien-Design devises customer magazines for companies like Allianz, Caritas, Leica or Siemens. You are also art director of several German publishing companies and have an impressive collection of international magazines. What is it, in your view, that distinguishes the design of a magazine or book from that of a corporate publishing magazine? Especially as regards visual language and visual aesthetics.

Horst Moser: There isn't really a difference. Or not in the ideal case. After all, an outstanding corporate magazine has the same high standards and follows the same rules as a newsstand title. In other words, the journalistic designer has to succeed in attracting attention in the cacophonous concert of the media, which are all crying out »Read ME!«. And the same rules apply to everyone. If redundancy is all you can deliver, you'll be ignored. If you are content with déjà vu you can hardly expect an enthusiastic response. I have written a book on the subject of editorial design with the title *Surprise me*. That is the key. How can you surprise people? Certainly by breaking taboos, by being cheeky, by being brash, by means of pornography and aggression. Most advertisers fall into this trap. But the effect has to serve the cause. A picture that gets its message across at first glance will attract attention. If you work with pictures that shock, the reaction needs to take a positive turn. Anything else is art for art's sake. In other words, it has nothing to do with communication.

The corporate magazines have long since shed their image of the small-time-trader magazine. The best designers work for »customer« magazines, and the outstanding corporate magazines are the equals of the best newsstand titles, and sometimes even more than a match for them. A few years ago I received an award from the German Professional Photographers' Association in the photographic magazine category for the *Leica World* magazine I design. There were whispers that this category only came up once every ten years because it would be unreasonable to award the prize to the same magazine every time. This is acknowledgment of the inferiority of »independent« newsstand magazines to »company magazines«.

The average standard of customer magazines is now quite high. They employ good magazine makers, first-class designers, photographers and illustrators. But the content and design concepts have become so much of a muchness, it's embarrassing. If you want to extricate yourself from this imbroglio you need to do many things differently as a matter of principle. A few months ago I experienced this very same scenario. I was commissioned to redesign the *Forum MLP* magazine. I copied all the prize winners out of the customer magazine yearbook, and analysed what they had in common, which was easy enough. There are shamefully few types of design, inside as well as outside. I put these characteristics together and, as an experiment, in most cases did exactly the opposite of what is usual. So, if the logo was at the top, I moved it to the middle or to the bottom. I changed rectangular logo labels into round ones. I turned small headlines into large headlines, uniform font sizes into ones that varied. If the agreement was to use colour photography on the cover I had it done in black and white. If all the designers used photos, I commissioned typography.

To start with, I had these different design specifications done without imposing any controls, like the automatist writing of the Surrealists. And would you believe it, the result was fascinating. We could never have got such results if we had done it deliberately. We are all too caught up with the unspoken rules of the age we live in.

(A detailed description of the redesign of *Forum MLP* will be published soon at www.cpwissen.de, in the new *cpwissen facts* magazine, as well as here.)

form: How can something abstract like a company philosophy be illustrated visually in a corporate publishing project?

Horst Moser: Let me once again mention the example of *Leica World*. For a few months now, there has been a new strategy that attaches a great deal of importance to digital photography. But, before that, the motto was: we manufacture robust, analog cameras that are ideal for photojournalism, and our aim is photography on paper. We designed the magazine to these specifications: the best possible lithography and the very best printing techniques for presenting photographs on paper. And, thanks to the brilliance of Dieter Kirchner, we were successful, as can be seen from the numerous international awards. Part of the company philosophy was also to emphasise the classical brand values on the one hand, and, on the other, to introduce young photographers to Leica. So the magazine mix consisted of portfolios of the classics of photography and the avant-garde. To achieve the highest quality in all fields, as far as possible we only published exclusive material (texts and photographs).

form: What are your criteria for selecting pictures as art director? How do you go about looking for a suitable picture? Do you commission a certain photographer, do you take photographs yourself or do you use the services of a photo agency?

Horst Moser: You have already mentioned all the sources we use. But, whenever possible, I attempt to create new images. My large archive often comes in useful here. Last week, for example, I had to illustrate a story about the changed image of doctors. The subject was the responsible patient and the doctor's loss of authority as a consequence. Then I remembered the picture of the so-called "demigods in white", which I was familiar with from illustrations for novels in the glossy magazines of the 1950s like *Quick*, *Stern* or *Neue Revue*. I wanted to use this cliché to open the story on an antagonistic note, and I was lucky to find the appropriate examples. As I could not think of any other sources, the archive once again proved its worth. Unfortunately there is no subject catalogue for this material, which means that I am the only one able to find anything. But in March 2008 all the scattered archives will be brought together in a hall 400 metres square. Then we can put them in order systematically for the first time.

form: You have been working in the field of editorial design for a long time – what is it that makes a good cover picture?

Horst Moser: How many cover pictures can you commit to memory? How many covers can you recall? One hundred? Two hundred? I have more than a thousand in my head. But this is, after all, part of my job.

No matter how many it is, only the memorable ones have a certain quality. This point I consider to be a major criterion. These covers have attracted attention, they have been understood and they have left an impression. The graphic artists who designed these titles have reached their readers and fulfilled their function as mediators. In other words, they have made the reader open the magazine and look for topics of interest in the table of contents. After that, it is up to the author to show whether he can fulfil their expectations.

form: How have the title pictures changed in recent years?

Horst Moser: There are phases when innovation can be very sluggish. The years after 2000 brought about enormous changes. To start with, after all the drivel about the end of print had ceased, there were more magazines being published than ever. Digital production has had a great impact on design. And now that the rule of the technicians and their cheap effects has ended, the leadership has been taken over by an increasing number of designers who know how to use the full orchestra of digital instruments. The many experimental independent magazines had a strong formative influence on aesthetics, something which the titles put out by the major publishing houses would never have been able to do. All the design rules for title pages have been broken. There has not been such a strong wave of change since the magazine experiments of the Dadaists and Constructivists.

form: You say you can remember more than a thousand covers. Could you give me an example of one that turned out exceptionally well?

Horst Moser: To start with, you need to make a distinction between covers like those of most lifestyle magazines, that have a purely decorative, eye-catching function, or – and this is much more difficult – covers that illustrate a specific topic. Typical examples in this category would be *Brandeins*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, *Der Spiegel* and *Stern*. Time and again, Holger Windfuhr, that lone wolf of *Wirtschaftswoche*, shows a greater wealth of ideas than the cover teams of *Stern* and *Spiegel*. I remember particularly well the covers where he integrated the logo into the title idea.

I am only too familiar with the discussions about the sanctity of the logo from my own experience and I envy him because I have never succeeded in pushing this sacrilege through. Although this is not quite true: I managed to do it just once, with the anniversary issue of *Leica World*. But that was nothing spectacular. Instead of the normal logo, you had »10 years of Leica World« set in the same typeface but spread across the entire width of the cover. Incidentally, it is not a question of whether you have the courage to do such a thing. The 'surprise-me' principle calls for repeated and deliberate provocation, hence the element of surprise. What is courageous, or even death-defying, is, I think, repeating the same thing over and over again. This is, after all, the greatest risk, because ultimately there is the danger that you might not be noticed at all and go under.

form: What is it that destines a particular photograph for a magazine cover? What makes it a good title PICTURE?

Horst Moser: Any attempt to set up rules about this, to formulate recipes, is doomed to failure. We are talking about originality and suggestion. A good cover photo is one that breaks the rules. Not in the manner of the Dadaists by running amok. Of course this grabs people's attention but not the kind that can be transformed constructively into interest. The magazine boom of recent years has vastly expanded the scope for experimentation in cover design for the independents, i.e. the magazines that are not put out by the major publishing houses. And not only in terms of photographic style – although, here too, the repertoire has grown enormously and covers everything from the most trivial trash to the highest level of professionalism – but also in aesthetic terms. We are seeing completely new motifs, bold divisions of space and computer-assisted pictures that have left the kindergarten level of the 1990s far behind.

form: In your reply to the question about the way in which covers have changed in recent years you talk of the independent magazines that have had a strong formative influence on magazine aesthetics to this very day. Could you give us a few examples here as well?

Horst Moser: In 2006 the European independent scene met up for the first time at the Colophon conference in Luxembourg. Mike Koedinger and Jeremie Lesley brought a few hundred magazine makers together. The conference will be continued in 2009 and its importance for magazine design cannot be overestimated. This scene is so vibrant and contrasts sharply with the torpor and helplessness of most of the established publishing houses and their pot-boilers, whose sole concern is to fill the space between the adverts for purposes of product placement to the gracious satisfaction of their advertising customers.

But you asked me to give you some examples. Off the top of my head, without searching too much, the magazines that come to mind are: *Quart* from Austria, *WAD* (we're different) from France, *Dummy*, *Blaadje*, *Eyemazing*, the Dutch train magazine *Rails* and *Zembla*, the last of these now sadly no longer with us.

form: What are the current trends in editorial design? Key words here are individualisation, customising. Take, for example, the current issue of *Cicero* magazine ...

Horst Moser: I don't even like to think about it. *Cicero* is a monstrosity. Having set his sights on stimulating political culture and on modelling his magazine on the great American examples, Mr. Weimer's efforts in no way square up to his claim – he who would so much like to see Christianity once again having a greater – an even greater – impact on our lives. He does have some rather bizarre ideas, I'll grant you, for example, counting how often »intellectuals« appear in the media, only then to award Harald Schmidt – the poor guy will have doubled up – first place in the temple of great minds. But what we want to talk about here is design. It didn't take him long to dispose of Jim Rakete as a black and white portrait photographer again. A pity, a great pity. Instead, it's the freelance artists who are allowed to paint the cover picture. This is an absolute minefield. There are a few good examples. I remember the *Vogue* issue by Salvador Dalí, the *Verve* magazine with original lithography by Picasso, Ferenc Papp's *Cash Flow* with Arnulf Rainer and the *SZ Magazin* with its artists' issues, *USSR in Construction* with Rodchenko and there are a few others as well. But this is really not an easy discipline. *Cicero* has furnished positive proof that the outcome of this kind of exercise can be the most appalling trash. These grotesquely embarrassing artists' covers will forever serve as a warning, loud and clear, to the »Kunsch« copycats.

And now 160,000 unique specimens of photo covers. From the technical point of view a commendable achievement. But woe betide the times in which the intellectuals are so glaringly inferior to the technicians. It's not about individualisation, as your question implies. It's about surrogates, cheap tricks. Just like the galloping mania to beautify everything by using pointless embossing techniques, layers of frosting and matt-gloss effects, all of which are usually pure decoration, without rhyme or reason, simply because it is no longer expensive. In *The Last Days of Mankind*, Karl Kraus called bibliophilism, which is related in character, an obscenity worse than the bombardment of a cathedral.

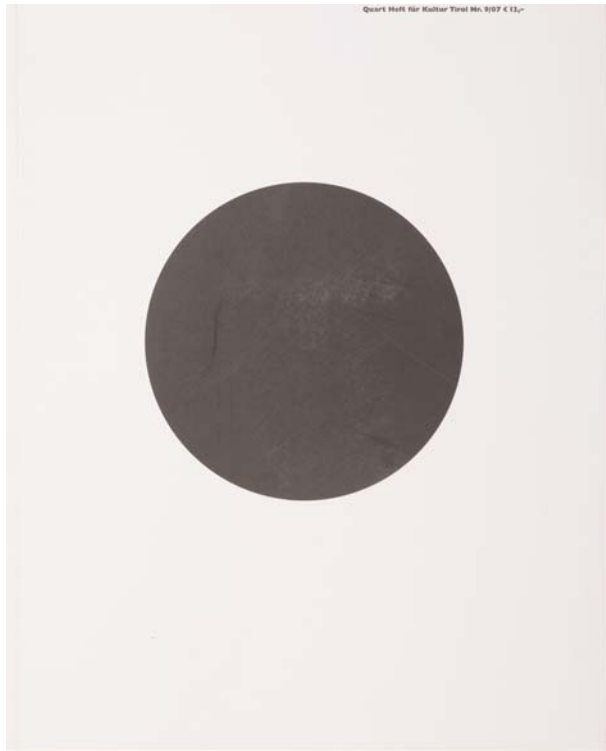
form: Do you think the current do-it-yourself aesthetics propagated on Internet portals like Flickr or YouTube have influenced professional photography? If so, how? Also, with magazine covers in mind.

Horst Moser: Everything has a lasting reciprocal effect on everything else. But aspiring to the level of amateurs is not my aim; if he has not degenerated to the mentality of a mercenary, the intelligent designer should instead strive for perfection. Clearly amateurs, who, correctly translated are, after all, »lovers«, can be a source of inspiration. Picasso, who achieved perfection at an early age, spent his life attempting to regain the unsophistication of children. But in the field of graphic design, an applied discipline, whose actual aim is not the end in itself, there is a full orchestra at hand and it requires a lot of practice to put together a successful ensemble of photography, typography, illustration, colour, composition and rhythm. After all, do-it-yourself aesthetics, manifesting itself not only in printed T-shirts and all kinds of hand-crafted textiles, but also in typography, mainly expresses a great unease about slick instant offers. Karl Marx's dream, namely that the means of production should not be allowed to accumulate in the hands of a few exploiters, has come true. But this does not detract from my scepticism about swarm intelligence, seeing that, ultimately, do-it-yourself design is equally stereotyped.

A brief phenomenology of current cover design

We can observe a progressive tendency towards the atomisation of the target groups of the magazine market. This is leading to an erosion of design rules so far applicable. In order to stand out from the rest, the visual messages and their contents are encoded in increasingly more radical forms. Those unable to decode the signals are automatically excluded from the communities. The phenomenology of visual forms of representation has many facets and it is possible to observe the most varied forms coexisting. Interesting contrasting pairs are classical analog photography and artificial digital pictorial worlds. Postmodernist citation strategies can be found in the mannerisms of traditional cover design, but with an understated breaking of rules and harmonies (*Fantastic Man, Kid's Wear*). The innovative pictorial worlds of the 20s and 30s – Dada, Surrealism and collage – have been included in the repertoire (*Vogue Hommes, Livraison*). Romanticism and shock (*WAD, OjodePez*) in peaceful harmony. Handmade pictures, in response to slick digitalism, are allowing the drawing to penetrate many fields (*Nico, PNG*). There is a dynamism about the innovative leaps that is astonishing and no end in sight to the magazine boom. The magazine covers are conquering the hearts of the most diverse readers (*Ad!dict, Blaadje*).

geometry cold and living

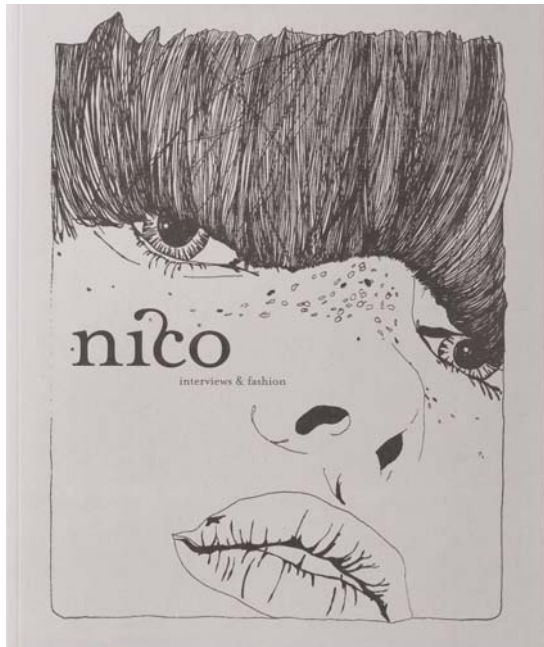


Quart Heft für Kultur Tirol
Österreich, 09/2007
Visuell-editorisches Basiskonzept: Walter Pamminer
Grafikdesign: spector cut+paste, Helmut Völter, Circus
Cover: Martina Steckholzer



A Magazine N°6
Belgien, 2007
Curated by Veronique Branquinho
Artdirector: Paul Boudens
Cover: Paul Boudens

drawings in black and white and colour



NICO
Luxemburg, Sommer 2007
Creative Director: Mike Koedinger
Artdirection: Elisa Kern, Guido Kröger
Coverillustration: Christina K.



Flaunt N°80 / Consider This
USA, Dez. 2006/Jan. 2007
Artdirector: Lee Corbin
Cover: Markus Klinko & Indrani, Cover Art: Kay Ruane



PNG (Persona Non Grata) N°73
Deutschland, 3/2007
Gestaltung: Markus Wustmann
Coverillustration: P. M. Hoffmann

the naked body as a medium for sex and violence



VICE MAGAZINE – THE PHOTO ISSUE, Vol. 2 N°7
England, Aug. 2004
Editor: Andy Capper
Coverfoto: Terry Richardson

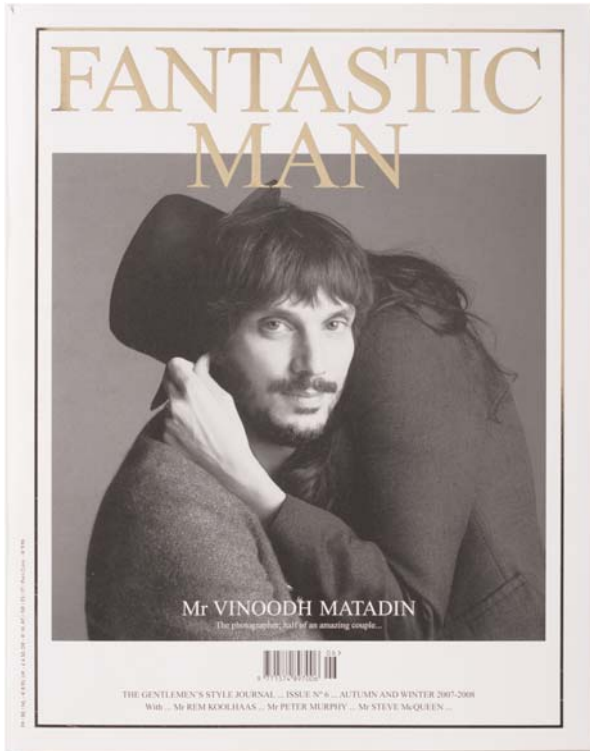


ZERO N°96
Spanien, 2007
Editorial Director: Urbano Hidalgo
Coverfoto: Joan Crisol

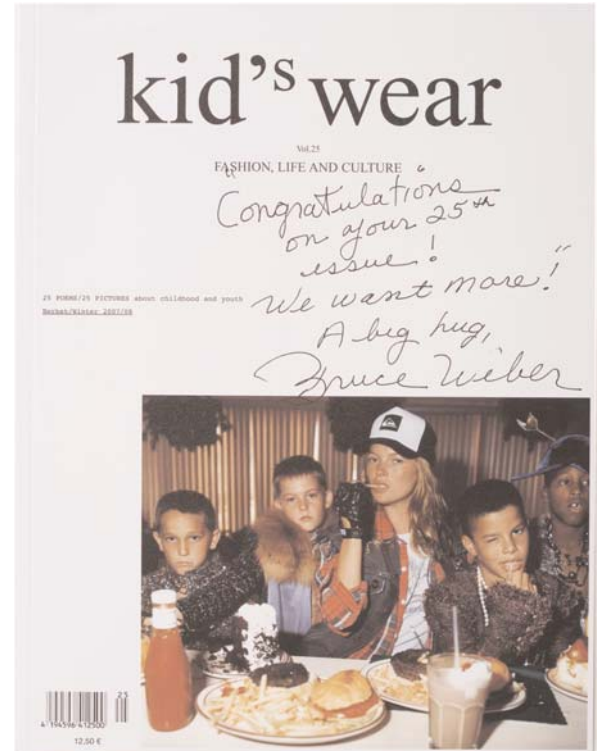


ROJO / EGAL
Spanien, (ohne Jahresangabe)
Artdirector: David Quiles Guilló, Alejandra Raschkes,
Maria Ana Moura
Cover: Boris Hoppek

classical mannerisms



FANTASTIC MAN
Niederlande, Herbst/Winter 2007/08
Artdirector: Jop van Bennekom
Coverfoto: Inez van Lamsweerde, Vinoodh Matadin



kid's wear
Deutschland, Herbst/Winter 2007/08
Artdirection: Mike Meiré
Coverfoto: Bruce Weber

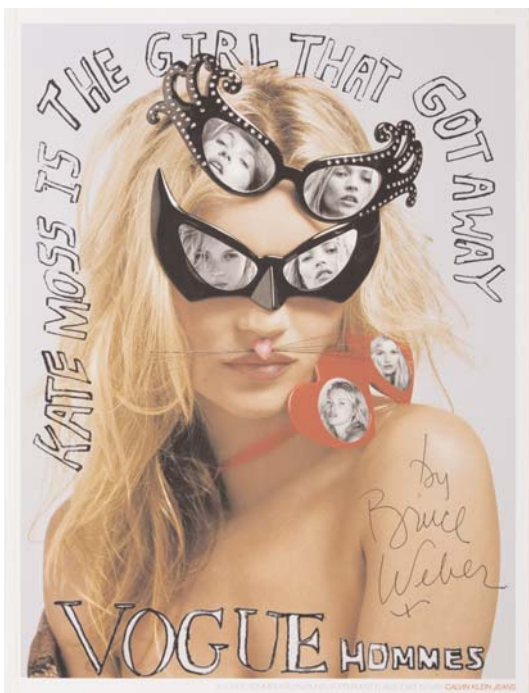
surrealism and collage



Livraison N°2 – Exchange Issue
Schweden, 2006/2007
Artdirection: Henrik Timonen, Johan Sandberg
Cover: Bela Borsodi

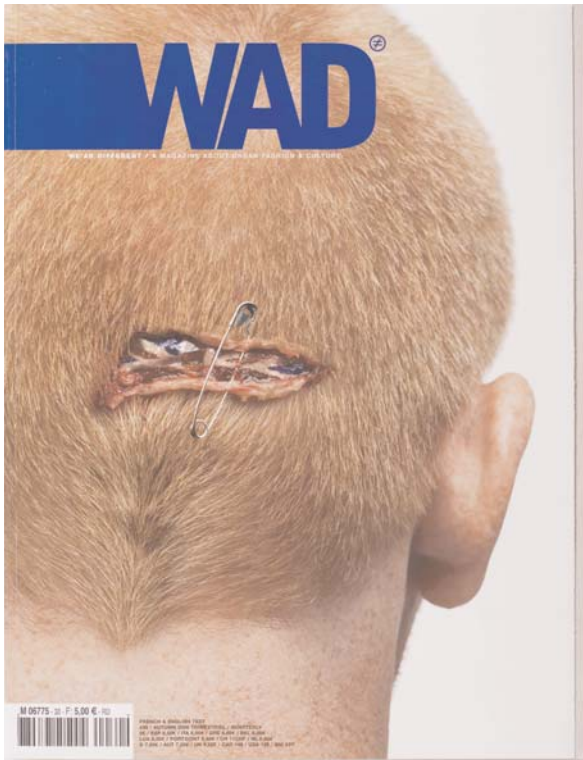


brand eins
Deutschland, März 2007
Artdirector: Mike Meiré
Cover: Judith Affolter, Annett Bourquin, Manu Burg-
hart/Illustration u.v.m.



Vogue Hommes International Supplement
Frankreich, 09/2006
Creative Director: Bruno Danto
Coverfoto: Bruce Weber

shock



WAD (We´ar different)
Frankreich, Herbst 2006
Artdirection: Mari Pietarinen, Stéphanie Buisseret-Morvan,
Coverfoto: Benoit Mauduech



OjodePez N°10
Spanien, 200
Artdirection: MANUEL&Co.
Photo Editor: Barbara Stauss
Coverfoto: Nina Berman

portrait



OjodePez N°3
Spanien, (ohne Jahresangabe)
Artdirector: Álex Carrasco
Coverfoto: Sven Ehmann



Flaunt N°81 / Testes '07
USA, Febr. 2007
Artdirector: Lee Corbin
Coverfoto: Michael Muller, Cover Art: Dan Colen

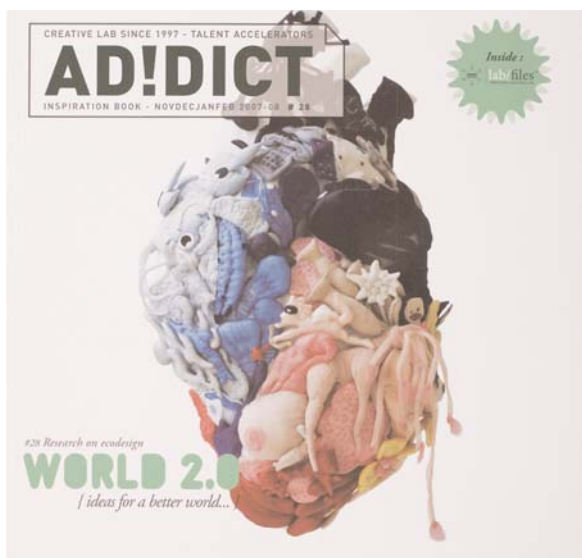
artificial bodies, new hearts



WeAr global magazine
Deutschland, 1/2007
Artdirector: Alexander Lipsius
Coverillustration: Marie Blanco Hendrickx



Blaadje
Niederlande, Juni 2006
Artdirector: Pieter Schol
Cover: ANP/Phototake



Ad!dict
Belgien, Nov./Dez./Jan./Febr. 2007/08
Creative Director: Jan Van Mol
Cover: Studio Up

A Turkish magazine stands for the newcomers in quality magazine design: Turkey, Russia, China



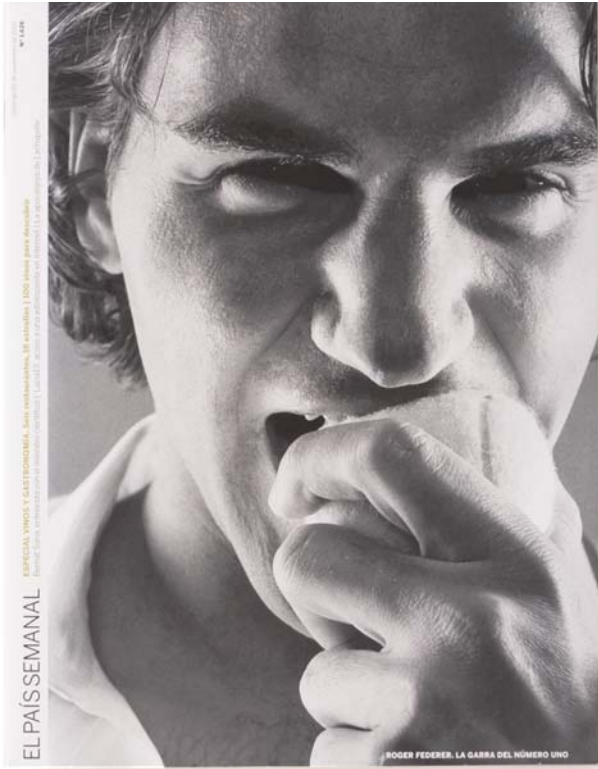
PLATO

Türkei, Jan./März 2006

Artdirector: Yusuf Taktak, Nusret Polat

Cover: Gilles Barbier

classic (analog) photography in co-existence with digital image creations



EL PAÍS SEMANAL
Spanien, Nov. 2007
Director: Jesús Ceberio, Pedro García Guillén
Coverfoto: Gérard Giaume

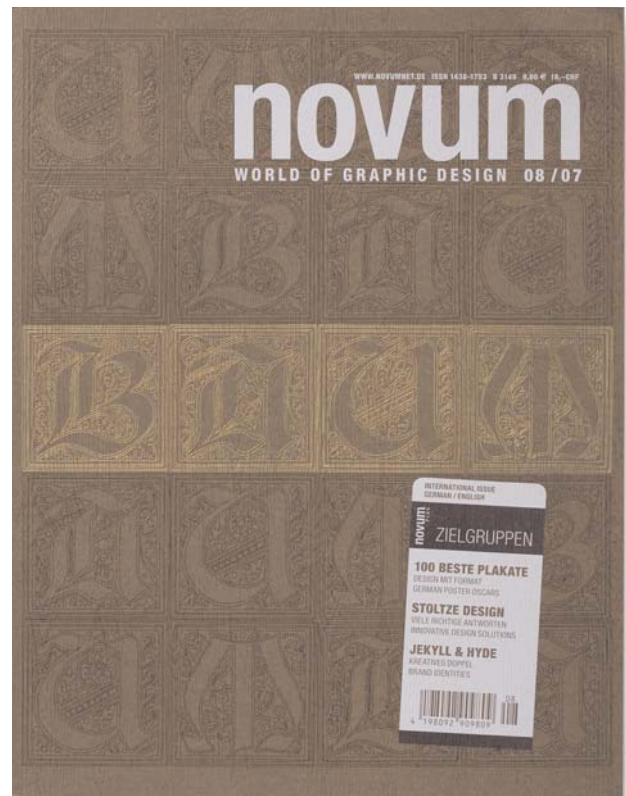


ROJO / LUND
Spanien, (ohne Jahresangabe)
Design: David Quiles Guilló, Alejandra Raschkes,
María Ana Moura
Cover: Simen Johan

nostalgic ornamentalism



IdN International designers Network
Hongkong, Vol°14, N°2
Artdirection: Jonathan Ng
Grafikdesign: Andey Yiu



novum
Deutschland, 8/07
Artdirector: Oliver Klyne
Cover: Marco Bölling