

MAGIC EYE

Known for her intricate blends of type and texture, **Hansje van Halem** believes that originality can often be found in complexity

HANSJE VAN HALEM _ Passionate about typography, book design and print in all its forms, Hansje van Halem has run her own studio in Amsterdam since 2003. She also works digitally, creating intricate typographic experiments that explore the tension between a systematic approach, legibility, and irregularity, as well as lecturing and leading creative workshops. www.hansje.net

■ WORDS: Nick Carson PHOTOGRAPHY: Isabella Rozendaal



Fascinated by the interplay between pattern, texture and typography, Hansje van Halem has developed a distinctive style that bridges the gap between digital and print to suit her needs – she's as comfortable generating striking visuals with code as she is experimenting with screenprint and Riso.

The Dutch designer will cross the border to Belgium in November to speak at Antwerp's Us By Night festival – to whet your appetite, we chatted to van Halem about the style and substance of her work...

Textures and geometric patterns are a major part of your work. How did you develop your technique? The first time I drew textures was when I tested my Wacom tablet in

2002. It was a new phenomenon – having my hand draw 'inside' the computer was mesmerising.

For years, I drew manually on the computer. Click by click, stroke by stroke, I created letters, and sometimes wandered off and let the texture of the letters grow into a pattern. A digital handicraft.

It was during a holiday that I grabbed a fineliner to draw. I'd been drawing digitally for six years, and was in need of more organic forms. After scanning the drawings, I was able to organise them on the computer. I missed the editing options that I had when drawing digitally, like changing the stroke or connecting open lines.

How do you choose the right tools for the job – do you stay up to date with the latest developments?

For a while, I went for all the tools that were presented: I counted the days until the Wacom Inkling (2011) was released – a ballpoint that kept track of its strokes by a tracking device. Or the Cintiq (2012), where I could draw directly on the screen. Both turned out to disappoint me. On the other hand, I had got used to hand-eye coordination being separated by drawing on my tablet.

My Illustrator skills improved. Rather than drawing 100 lines, I could generate them using the effects provided. For years, I explored the limits of the software, adding external plug-ins to save time and provide me with more options.

Currently, I've had one of my type treatments – for which I would follow an labour intensive recipe in Illustrator – written as a Python script in Drawbot by programmer Just van Rossum. By altering the parameters and running the script, I get the artwork. I can even render it as an animation.

Walk us through the relationship between the patterns you create,

and your letterforms. What role do systems and automation play here?

I offered to design the posters for a series of exhibitions by artist-led organisation Galerie Block C. Over the course of 18 posters – first screenprinted, later Riso printed – I've explored different combinations of typography and background.

I've always had difficulty with placing text over a background. And only placing letters on a piece of paper seems empty to me. A logical consequence is to merge background and typography into one.

One approach for that is to try and find a system for it. Dividing the paper into squares; cutting the letters into halves; cutting letter shapes out of a grid; morphing shapes and/or connecting lines. Contrast, stroke width, line density and colour all have to co-operate to fool the eye into reading letters.

When I only create patterns, the game still has to follow similar rules, but which shape has to be read is not predetermined because no one should recognise a letter shape in it. Still, I'd like the eye to get confused, and want to establish some kind of colour and shape definition.

Your typography is often warped, distorted and quite abstract. How important is legibility?

Legibility is key! I never make typographic work to be illegible, but I do like to play with it. If my type treatment is too legible, then I consider it to be overdone or under designed. Then I have to emphasise the structure, loosen the density or reinvent a different treatment. When I embrace the fact that legibility stops, an abstract pattern begins.

I love to play with distance: the fact that something looks abstract from up close, and legible from further away, keeps puzzling me.

I was talking to my good friend and designer Michiel Schuurman, who is a great influence. Recently

Below: Hansje van Halem creates the exhibition posters for artist-run Galerie Block C "as a gift to the gallery". She uses the artist's name as a shape for experimenting with background and type.



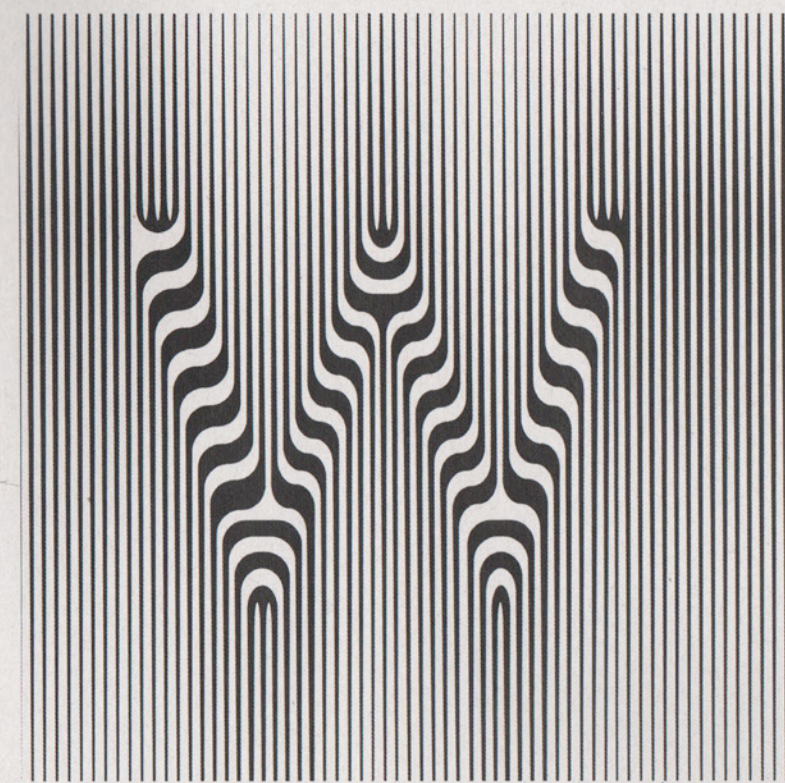
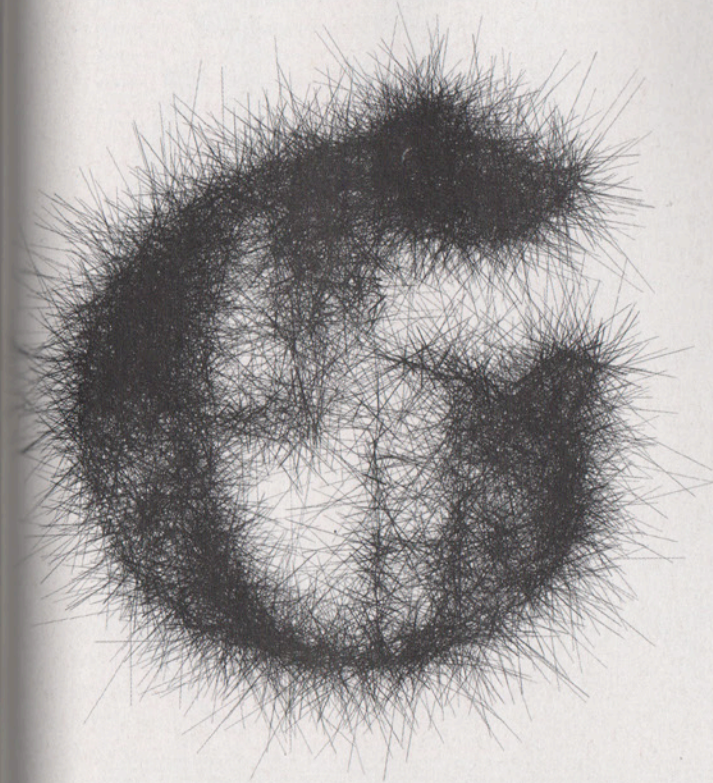
Above and left: More of van Halem's posters for Galerie Block C. The artists don't see the designs until they return from the printers.



Left: van Halem created vector drawings and renderings for the cover of broadcasting company vpro's TV guide.

Above: A logo treatment for the oldest Dutch literary magazine, De Gids.

Above right: van Halem's gift for her boyfriend, a vector drawing using the first letter of his name, has led to other projects and collaborations.



■ we discussed that maybe we make work that's so complex because that's the only way we know to be original. That feels true at this moment.

We want to be smarter than our software, because software is accessible to any designer. We cannot get away with using an obvious software effect. To stand out, we have to use it in such a way that it cannot be recognised.

Your colour palettes are bright but simple, with just two or three colours. To what extent are they dictated by production methods as well as aesthetic preference? For years, I only worked in black and white. I was convinced that paper was white, and typography was black. But when I started to design hardcover clothbound books, it turned out that white linen did not work well because it gets dirty easily.

I started picking colours from the factory swatches, and had great joy in combining them with coloured foil print. Also, I started using my type experiments for screenprinted posters for a gallery. Similar to picking linen, I picked coloured paper to screenprint on.

Because I was printing the posters myself, two or three layers

was about the maximum I could handle in one day. I needed contrast between the coloured paper and ink, otherwise the lines disappear and I can never create anything legible.

I still tend to start in black and white. It's the highest contrast, and makes images pop. To vary things – or because clients ask for it – I do try to design in colour, but adding colour to a black-and-white design is hard for me. It demands a different treatment of contrast and legibility.

Your books Sketchbook and Sketch Cahier feature rejected and unfinished work, as well as failed experiments. Why is this?

I've developed a design process that involves a lot of trial and error. Making as many sketches as possible to investigate possibilities is very time-consuming, but also allows me to step over clichés and fine-tune happy accidents. When working towards one single end result for a commission, of course a lot of these options get left unfinished.

Whenever I tried to clean out my backups, I kept finding potential starting points. By turning that computer document into book pages, I thought I was over and done with these open ends. But

after publishing the 448-page book representing 10 years of sketches, they became a new starting point.

On the one hand, this is a good way to start at a higher level – saving time, without losing design quality. By showing rough material, light starting points and attempts, it can also help stimulate different kinds of commissioners.

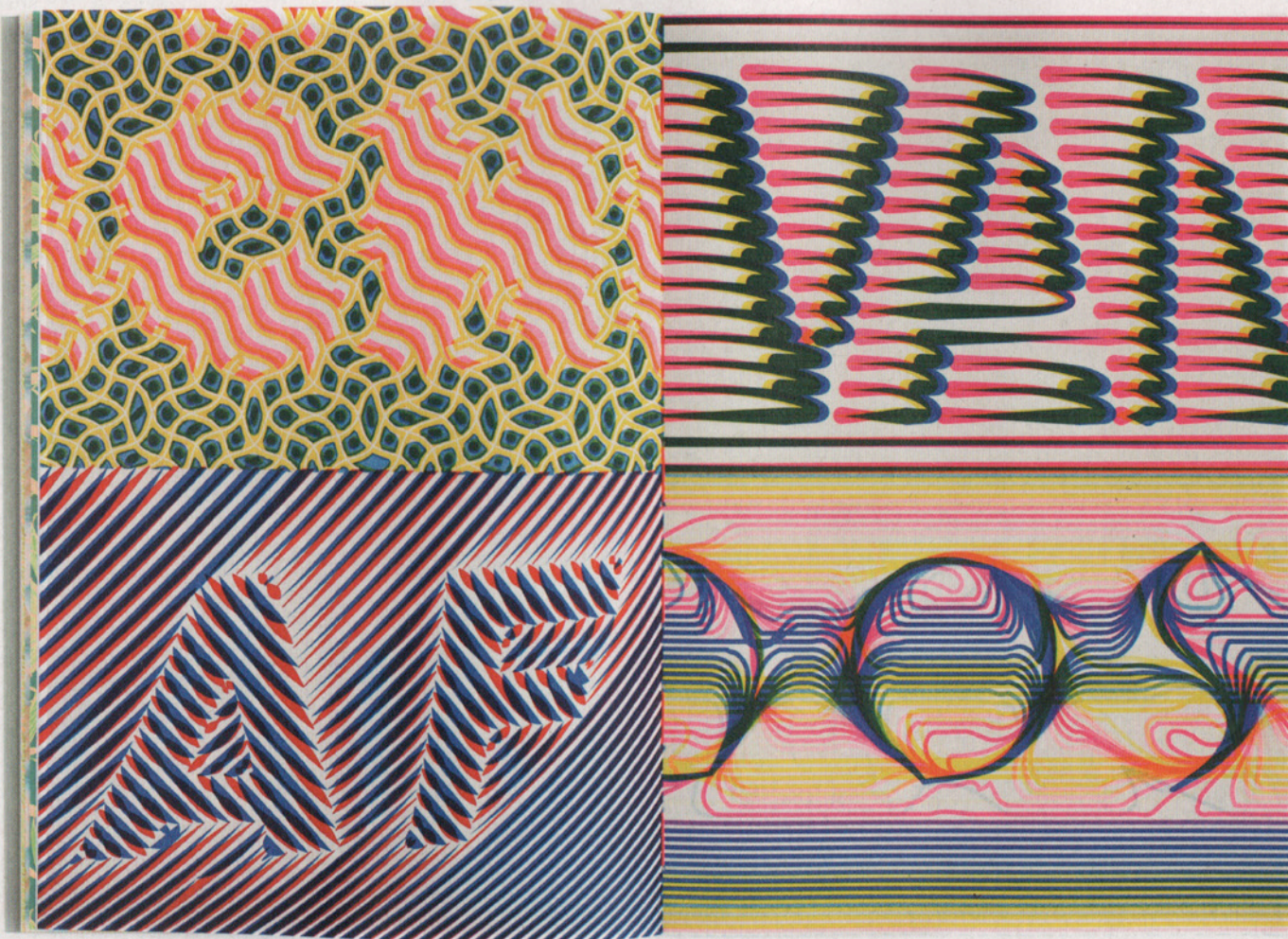
So instead of book design commissions, I began to be asked for typographic illustration work, and even approached by architects. It turned out to be really interesting to explore potential that had not already been used.

Can you give any examples of personal experiments that have led to commissioned work?

When I fell in love with my current boyfriend, I could not concentrate on work – so I decided to design the first letter of his name.

As commissioned assignments came in, I continued to work on this type system. I used it for a magazine cover, a notebook series, and Nike knocked on my door twice asking me to use this 'W for W' type sample as a starting point for artwork.

Over the different assignments, the treatment evolved. Currently



it is maturing in the identity that we're making for the Dutch music festival Lowlands.

The drawing system is turned into a Python-based DrawBot script by Just van Rossum. In this script, text or vector images serve as inputs, and a rendered vector image of animation comes out of the DrawBot script. I thought it would save us time, but it turns out it just provides more options. I love it, and wish I could work like this more!

What is it about print that still gets you excited, and how do you ensure you get the most from the medium? What I like about print first of all is the print run. The fact that you can make multiples still is magical to me.

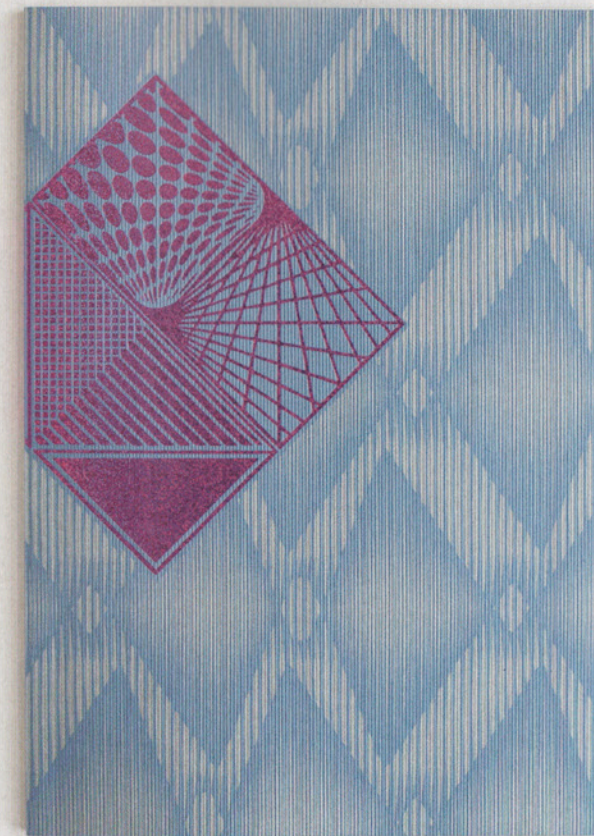
But secondly – and even more importantly – is the fact that you can change the material. You can change its texture, weight, shape, and tactility. I experienced the same when working with metal.

The idea for my publication 'Ill' came about as I was designing endpapers for publishing house Uitgeverij De Buitenkant – some for books I had designed, but also for ones I hadn't. We began trading pattern designs for printed paper.

For reprints, the publisher would surprise me with colour combinations that I could never have imagined. For Ill, the printer/publisher and I decided to reprint patterns we'd made, and let him pick the colours.

About half the publication is printed in 28 Pantone colours, the backsides of the paper are digital print, and there's one smashing Riso print spread in the book.

What approach do you take in your creative workshops? I mainly try to introduce students to the design method that has



been very fruitful for me – creating as many failures, mistakes and experiments as you can, without feeling miserable.

I encourage students to avoid making miniature pencil drawings as mock-ups for a real thing. I try to show them that failures are not mistakes, but material. I try to teach them to be creative in their mistakes, and to try to make as many different ones as you can. Sketching time is time to explore, discover, be unsafe, experiment. It really is about quantity over quality!

After a while, you can analyse your sketches, and try to sort them into categories that are visually connected, or were born out of the same intentions. Maybe you discover three or four directions out of a hundred sketches.

My advice is not to look at what you were trying to achieve, but at what is actually on the table. Consider their value, and their potential. There must be two or three directions that make you wonder, 'What would happen if I continue with this?'

Look at things for what they are, and not what you want them to represent. It works for me! □

Above and opposite: Ill consists of various reprints from van Halem's conserved print plates. The printer chose the colours to "surprise" her.

BE INSPIRED AT US BY NIGHT

Curator Rizon Parein reveals what to expect at the Antwerp event, where van Halem is speaking in November

01 AN INNOVATIVE EVENT FORMAT

Last year, OFFF By Night transformed a cavernous warehouse space in Antwerp into a bustling hub of food, fun and flashing screens, where the talks finished at midnight every night. "It was a wild guess that turned out to be a huge success," says Rizon Parein. "We're adding more games, more massive LED screens, dirty green lasers, light installations... think Blade Runner."

02 A THEME PARK FOR CREATIVITY

"We see our event as a platform for creatives to plug into. It's not an ego show – it's a theme park for creativity," declares Parein. "We're one big family who share interests and are up for a party. It was a challenge to build a new lineup to match last year's fireworks, but so much fun."

03 A WORLD-CLASS SPEAKER LINE-UP

"Artists I'm looking forward to? All of them, otherwise I wouldn't ask them," smiles Parein. "But I have invited a few of my old-school graffiti heroes, like Mode 2 – what this guy's done for the graffiti scene you can't imagine."

Find out more and buy tickets now at: www.usbynight.be