

THE OFFICE AND THE ORGASM: THE MONOPRINTS OF KAREL MARTENS

The first visual artifact by Karel Martens to catch my eye was the cover of a Dutch architecture journal called *Oase*. In schismatic, isolationist times,

I already found the magazine's theme of "crossing boundaries" and "transcultural practices" refreshing. The bold figure of Martens's design added a layer of optimism: two overlapping pieces of what looked like transparent Meccano—one red, one green, both apparently punched with holes, as if ready for construction—created a bold argyll diamond against the white background.

BY NICK CURRIE



There was a sense of yin and yang, of possible futures, things to be built, the appeal of materials, the complementary attraction of opposites. Where the primary figures crossed, a muddy olive green suggested they might be viewfoils made of cellulose acetate, the colored plastic laid on old-fashioned overhead projectors for classroom demonstrations. I noted something sensual in the design, and something didactic.

Googling Martens, the next thing I saw was a video profile on Vimeo of the veteran designer filmed at Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem, the Netherlands. **Cheerfully unboxing selected highlights of his career in graphic design, Martens spoke of his interest in optical illusions, his use of abstraction, and his discovery that designs unrelated to a publication's themes can attain relevance by osmosis, sponging up the appropriate meanings like a Rorschach blot.**

I then embarked on a Google image search spree, downloading dozens of appealing pictures of Martens's work. I particularly liked a series of letterpress monoprints recently shown at New York's P! storefront gallery. Many of the images came from a *New York Times* magazine feature on Martens.

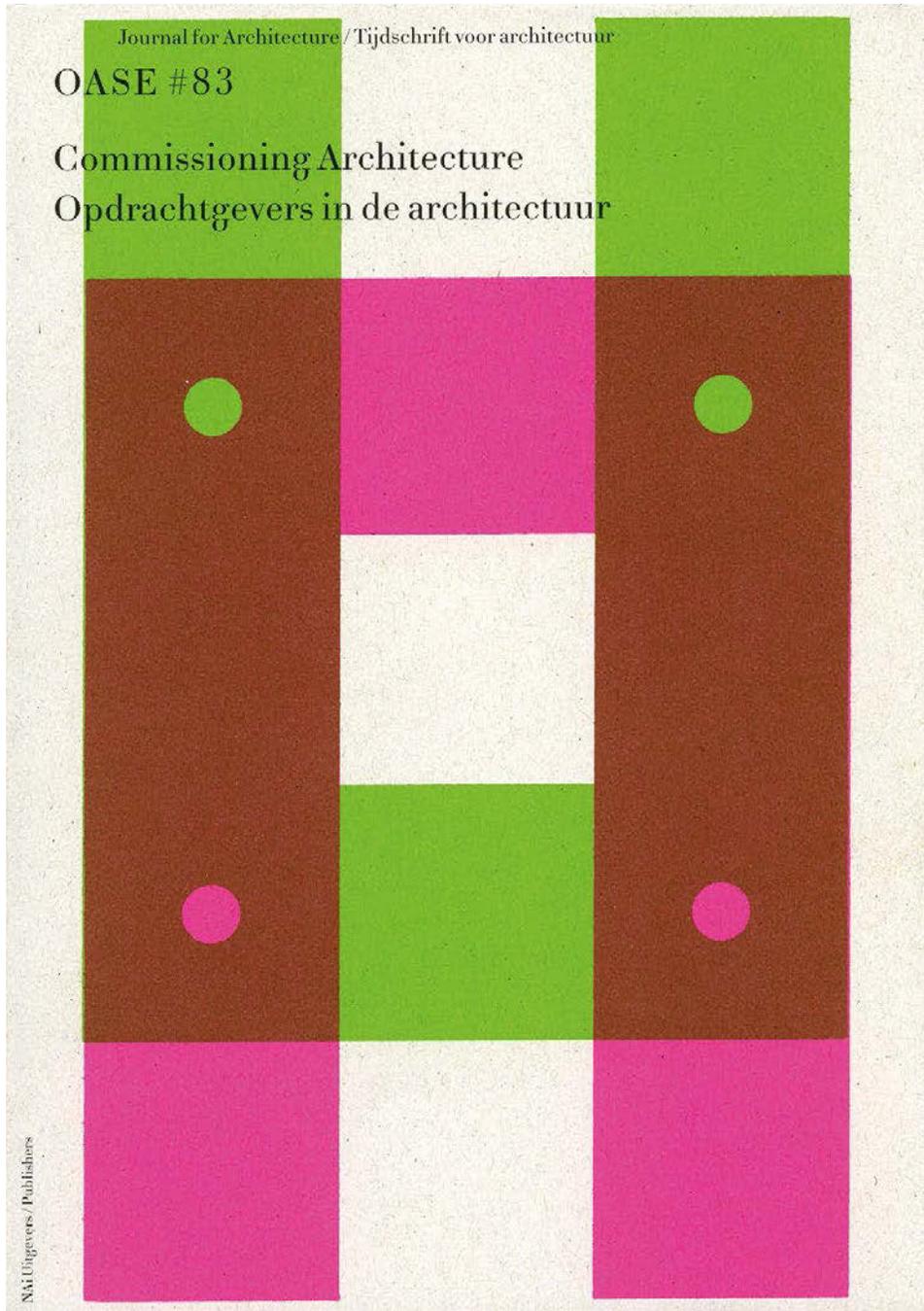
My first impulse was to upload a bunch of them to my Tumblr page, without commentary. But surely I could add a dimension? I happened to be reading Ted Morgan's excellent William S. Burroughs biography *Literary Outlaw* (1988) at the time. Morgan depicts a writer on a mission—via drugs, anthropology, sex, scandal, and the half-lit sleaze of liminal "interzones"—to get back in touch with an enchanted cosmology, imposing a brightly colored pre-Enlightenment state of mind on the mercilessly stark grid of modernity. Burroughs wanted to revive soul at all costs—even if the human soul turned out to be stupid, lazy, and evil.

Burroughs's writing—and, less successfully, his life—was structured around a vivid dramatization of the tension between pleasure and control systems. Eros and Thanatos, you could say, or Dionysus and Apollo. No one was more aware than Burroughs of how attempts to escape the dead hand of control (via drugs, sex, lawlessness, statelessness, and art) can all too easily lead us into even

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Mousse
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Opposite - *Icon Viewer*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and P!, New York. Photo: Sebastian Bach

Above - Karel Martens with Aagje Martens and Werkplaats Typografie, Cover design for OASE #83, 2010. Courtesy: the artist

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Karel Martens: Recent Work installation view at P!, New York, 2016.
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greater deadness, as we descend into addiction, making prisons of our boltholes. By the same token, no one since the Marquis de Sade and Franz Kafka has seen so clearly the irrationality at the core of bureaucratic systems of control. Burroughs lived out these contradictions in his life: his financial freedom came from a private income supplied by a family made rich by adding machines.

So—like a contestant in a *New Yorker* cartoon competition—I set to scribbling new captions. Karel Martens’s monoprints made me think about Burroughs, but also Max Weber, and his ideas about disenchantment. Drawing on the legacy of the Romantic poet Friedrich Schiller, Weber described how the destruction of the “enchanted garden” of premodern society had both positive and negative aspects: when we modernized, bureaucratized, and secularized European society we exchanged a kind of childish enchantment—and perhaps a deep understanding of our own irrational natures—for things like security, predictability, and control.

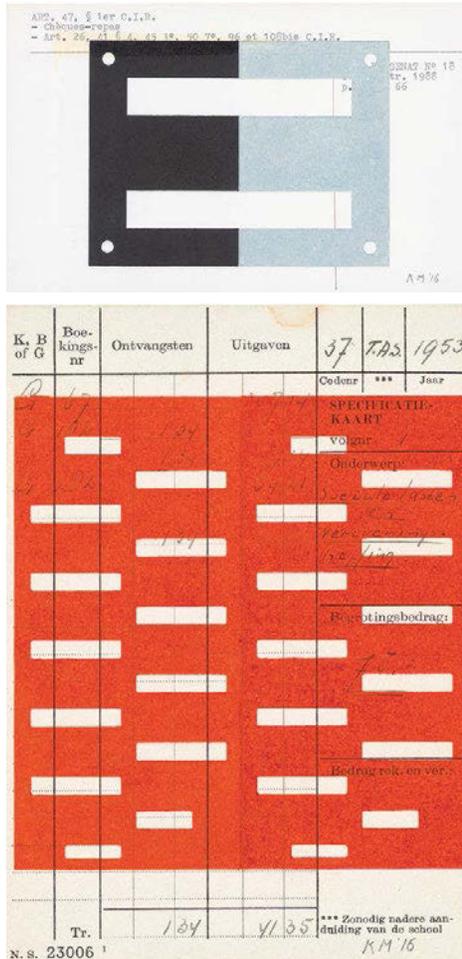
Art has a way of connecting us back to the enchanted, the primitive, the instinctual, the uncontrolled. Rather than taking sides in the struggle between discipline and sensuality, art simply dramatizes the tension in a compelling way. For a designer, the relationships—and the divided loyalties—become more complex. The dilemma of the graphic designer in capitalism—tasked with giving an appealing face to things that may be anything but—is in fact the dilemma of the human being in capitalism. How do we negotiate that tense standoff between control and pleasure? How do we work and also play? To what extent should we inject deep human values into a system that seems less and less humane? We have to get these things right when we design our lives.

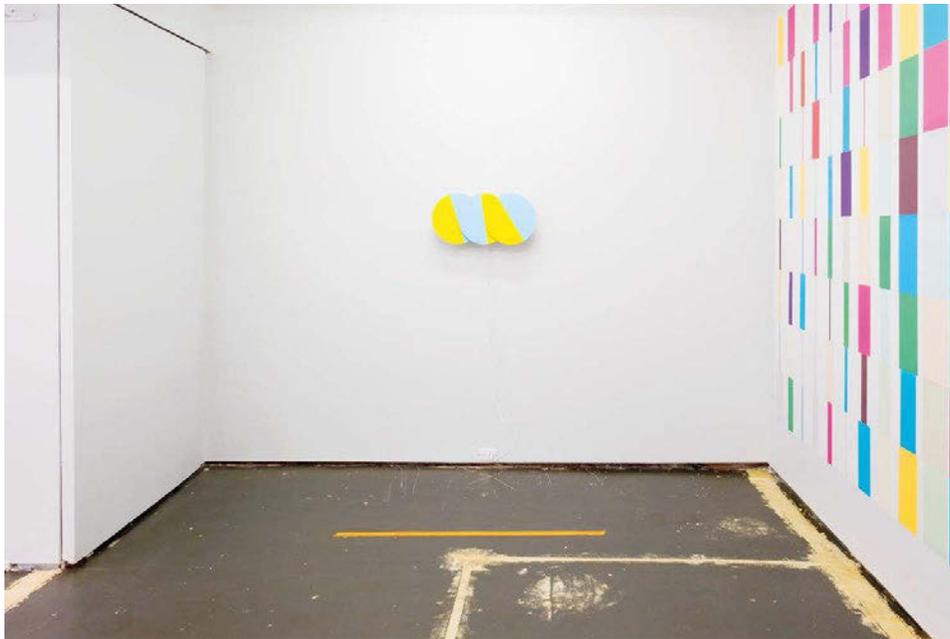
As well as Max Weber, I thought of course of late Sigmund Freud, who told us (in 1930’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*) that human instinct and advanced civilization were never going to reach an easy truce. The orgasm and the office were incompatible. The more optimistic Wilhelm Reich later tried to cure society with orgasms (Burroughs, fascinated by his ideas, built an orgone accumulator in his Tangier garden). “The office” took its revenge: Reich’s books were burned, his accumulators were destroyed, and the psychoanalyst died in prison. Freud had apparently been right after all. As Albert Camus put it: “Today the imbecile is king, and I call ‘imbecile’ anyone who is afraid of coming.”

More liberal times followed; in the 1960s, the office and the orgasm seemed almost reconciled. The sun shone, people took acid, colors grew more intense. In the United States, Charles and Ray Eames worked for IBM. In Italy, Ettore Sottsass brought gorgeous colors to the business machines of Olivetti. Burroughs the writer became as famous as Burroughs the adding machine. Later, inspired by the 1960s, Steve Jobs would launch his transparent colored computer, the iMac, with the Rolling Stones’ version of Arthur Lee’s song “She Comes in Colors.”

When I look at the letterpress mono-prints of Karel Martens, it’s this 1960s thaw that I recognize, and this typically 1960s association of color with orgasm. Martens’s colors are intensely pleasurable, gorgeously sensual. His Dutchness counts for a great deal, for Dutchness means, stereotypically, both instrumentalization and liberalization. The world we live in—ordered by time management, efficient business machines, global containerized freight—is an extrapolation of the Anglo-Dutch capitalism of the colonial age in which peoples still in the stage of “enchantment” were ruthlessly exploited by peoples already in the age of industrial modernity. Yet Holland still seems (in the architecture of Rem Koolhaas, for instance) like a kind of laboratory for a more liberal—or at least libertarian—version of capitalism.

As Max Weber points out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), it is above all Protestants (like the Dutch) who





Karel Martens: Recent Work installation views at P!, New York, 2016.
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have methodically disenchanting the world. And this is the background to Martens's monoprints. He uses old index cards and other official records as his basic background—things he's found on the streets, imbued with the values of his culture. Explaining his use of one particular card, he told the *New York Times*: "It's a specification card for income and expenditure. It makes me think of my father, who entered his costs into a similar ledger book every day."

Who better than the sons, the scions of this deathly Protestant revolution, to free us from it? Burroughs used his insider's understanding of the processes of excessive, deadening control to evade them, and re-enchanted his own personal model of the world. Perhaps, in the same way, the Dutch can show us the way out of the industrial-instrumental hell they helped create?

Martens's card index monotypes remind me of the work of other artists I love for their color—Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, David Batchelor. But while their work certainly plays on the same tensions between structure and sensuality (Kelly, inspired by late Henri Matisse, daubed and collaged his way across pages from newspapers, and Batchelor has superimposed primary color on the austere pages of *October* magazine), I think Martens's use of—and love of—printed materials makes his work particularly resonant.

Martens is a working graphic designer. As such, he has work he makes on commission for clients (publishers, institutions) and work he makes for his own pleasure (experiments, obsessions, dabblings). Inevitably, one influences the other. The monoprints are a personal sideline, but have filtered through to the paid work.

The recent reappraisal of Martens's work goes back to a 2012 exhibition inaugurating New York's P! storefront gallery. Curator (and fellow graphic designer) Prem Krishnamurthy invited Martens to join a group show. Four years later came a highly successful solo survey of recent work. Krishnamurthy is particularly drawn to work that crosses the borders between art and design. As he told the Walker Art Center blog, Krishnamurthy almost found his curatorial feeling for the monoprints becoming, itself, deadeningly bureaucratic: "I began to shuffle them around in order to achieve the

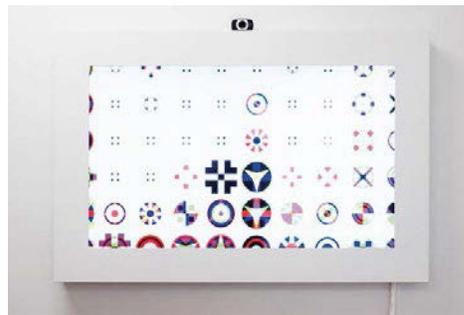
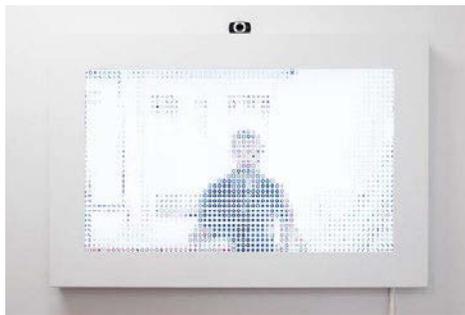
layered blocks. He uses abstract, semi-mechanical shapes. A recurrent motif looks like a metal tube frame for a glass-topped table with machine-drilled screw holes.

As we drift from image to image, we can imagine Martens dumpster diving in garbage sheds behind insurance offices, see him crate-digging in the moldy basement archives of libraries. "These ones are good because they mix blue biro and IBM Selectric typewriting," he may well be saying to himself. "A blob of red will work well here." His love for filtered versions of the twentieth century is as strong as our own; modernity is our antiquity. Receding from us, getting smaller, it becomes noticeably more cute, even enchanted. Its angles soften. We begin to forget what was pain and what was pleasure.

The cards feature Dutch writing, machine printed with annotations in clerical pen script. The sans-serif faces are already retro. Perhaps a verse from W. H. Auden's poem "The Fall of Rome" pops into our heads:

Caesar's double-bed is warm
As an unimportant clerk
Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK
On a pink official form.

Karel Martens's monoprints summon, for me, an almost impossible but incredibly beautiful world, a place where control and sensuality coexist in the same visual plane, where you love your work, where the circle is squared and the square circled, where the present and the past are simultaneous, where you can have your cake and eat it, too. In that place color sits happily in a grid, and the desires of the office coexist with the logic of orgasm. We're far from it, but that doesn't mean we can't imagine it.



perfect sequence. I was attempting to account for their size, color, formal relationships, and other variables. After a while, Karel said, "Prem, it's done. Don't worry so much about it. They'll all look good next to each other."

There's an inherent appeal in a series that rings changes on a theme. Looking at the Martens monoprints, and knowing that this is a side project made for his own interest rather than a commission, we can enjoy constructing a speculative narrative for the origins of the work. He's a commercial designer whose daily contact with materials can play into more personal projects. He likes bright colors in

Icon Viewer, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and P!, New York. Photo: Sebastian Bach