



KURT ANDERSEN

From the ridiculous to the sublime, uh, my ... my ... the ... your next speaker is, if I were a designer, I think would be one of my fantasy models. She ... she paid her dues and then decided to do what she wanted, and it seems nothing else. She ... she was a typesetter for a decade, for almost another decade a design ... designer of other people's things. And four years ago she decided to simply pursue her own artistic and typographic interests, nay, obsessions, and lives and works on a little island near Vancouver in Canada.

But that does not mean she's a recluse. Uh, she has worked with Stefan Sagmeister, Michael Bierut, Saks Fifth Avenue, Y&R, the "Guardian" of London, "Wallpaper" magazine, "Wired" magazine, the "New York Times" books division Print magazine, she has her own blog, called "Speak Up". But she is a proud graphic artist. Please welcome Marian Bantjes.

(CHEERING) / (APPLAUSE)

MARIAN BANTJES

Howdy. (Laughs) Thanks, Kurt. We are okay. I want you to bear with me with my graphics here. I began writing this piece about Next while I was in an airplane, suspended between point A and point B, somewhere over the United States, and it occurred to me that the idea of Next is this point of suspension. It's an anticipation of the future with a string tied to the past.

And as with all things time related, that is, in the time that we experience, the past, present and future are fused together in an interminable lock of memory and imagination. When I remember about the past makes me who I am in this moment. And what I imagine about my future directs my actions. But anything at any time can change my course forever. Some unforeseen event, some chance encounter, some unimagined Next-ness. Sometimes this looks like Fate. And sometimes it looks like inspiration.

Now while we tend to put romantic notion on the idea of Fate, the idea that something was meant to be, we actually spend a lot of our time trying to circumvent a prescribed future, to plan our own course and choose our own destiny. Inspiration is the forge of Next, it's the fire that propels us forward in new directions, but inspiration is not something you can plan, or even expect. It comes suddenly, sometimes fleetingly, and sometimes without our ever knowing it was there at all.

Inspiration can announce itself to us in a Technicolor flash, or it can seep in through unseen cracks and ... and fissures in our consciousness. However it arrives, it is what allows us to extend ourselves beyond the template of the known and to forge intrepidly into the unknown.

Over a year ago I was asked to make a visual map of all of my significant artistic influences. Oddly enough, I had never looked at my life this way before. I had never tried to find those key moments, those ... those flashes of inspiration which informed my current artistic state. It begins with three memories from my childhood. A rose patterned wallpaper from a friend's room, which I remember studying intently, to find the edges of the pattern. A

Leonardo da Vinci knot, which also held me in fascination for long periods of time. And an Alphonse Mucha Poster, which hung by our telephone throughout my childhood. Were these things, which I remember being deeply interested in, the seeds of my unimagined Next-Ness?

Or do I view them only with the knowledge of who I've become after the fact? What other artifacts have I selectively ignored? In fact, there's no way of knowing if my memories influence by present, or if my present influences my memories. (Pause)

The next major influence, then as a book typesetter. Now how I came to be a book typesetter was not through any great interest in letter forms, or even a deep love of publishing, but someone thought it would, an ad had been strategically placed in a book for help wanted at a publishing firm, with the logical thought that whoever saw it would be interested in books. But I saw the ad when I went in to the store to get change for the bus. So what was that? A moment of fate, or is my career built on an accident?

And what was the luck involved, that it was no ordinary publishing company, but was in fact, Hartley and Marks, the company which eventually published Robert Bringhurst's, "The Elements of Typographic Style". Unwittingly, I had walked into a snare, but whether it had been set for me, I will never know. If someone else had answered that ad, would she now be me? And if hadn't needed change for the bus, would I still have somehow found my way here?

For the map of artistic influences, I took a second look at this part of my life, when I became entangled with letter forms, and I remembered as well the extensive traveling I did during that time. It's not that I've ever forgotten it as a life influence, but my knowledge of myself in the present was jolted by these memories. India, with its abundance of carved wood and stone, the fading ornate tilework, pattern and color. Indonesia's wacked out deities, rich in detail and form, and endlessly carved temples.

Thailand's temples, a pile of ornamental glitter. Egypt, and Kenya, my first Muslim countries, their script so beautiful and strange, and of course the mathematical patterning. Italy and Paris, with an assault of the baroque, rococo, Gothic, Art Nouveau and Style Liberte. And Barcelona has massive gates of twisted iron, and of course Goudi, his incredible towers of the Segrada Família, tilework and anthropomorphic forms.

In the arts, the architecture, the vibrancy of the street, and the exposure to different cultures, suddenly I saw many parallels to my current work and interests. In fact it now seems idiotic that I would ever have been surprised by this. But we are influenced by things all the time, even though we often only recognize them when we look back.

In the '80s, I started to paint, with a fascination for patterns, and in the '90s I started print making. The act of editioning didn't interest me, and while I'm enlivened by the visual aspect of repetitive work, I'm bored by ... by the act of repetition. So I started making patterns of ... which change. Varying the patterns kept me attentive. In the prints, I would

make many versions of the same print, but I'd change the colors between prints, and allowed also just for plate separations and color mutations.

These are then assembled into larger pieces made of the smaller variable parts. Predictable patterns with unpredictable nuances. But this interest in patterns and ornaments, and these experiments, were happening essentially in my private life. In 1994, I had left my job as a typesetter and I started a design business. Sorry, I need to pause. (Laughs)

I worked as a designer from '94 to 2003. Nine years of work produced hundreds of relatively unremarkable brochures, posters, ads, banners, menus, logos and business cards. My work was good, sometimes it was very good. My typographic skills, my writing and ability to communicate, even my artwork and photography served me well. My art fell aside, bursting forth only in brief moments for my own company material. Glimpses of Next, like gem stones in a garbage pile.

And then, suddenly, in retrospect, but excruciatingly slowly at the time, I willed myself a new existence. For the first time I consciously created my own Next. I'd become disillusioned with my life as a designer, and I walked away from it, sold it to my partner, and started over with nothing but an idea of who I wanted to become. In popular terms, I followed my heart, but in reality I was desperate, and I was dying, and I had no choice.

My new work seemed to spring forth from nowhere, but obviously my penchant for ornament and pattern and letter forms was well rooted. I just started making things. And while praise was quick, money was slow. I gave myself a year to start making money, and when that year was up without a single penny earned, I borrowed money and gave myself another six months. And then, people started hiring me. A lot. It was like I went from zero to 60 in three seconds flat, and I still don't know what kind of car I'm driving.

I know I like to fuse the past and the present. I did the pixel thing for a while. A lot of ornament, and I'm deeply into letter forms. I also love to write. What most people don't get is that I have a deep love of modernism, believe it or not, and I'm fanatical about structure, and again surprisingly, logic. But I don't like to make things easy, particularly not for myself. In complexity, structure and typography, many things can and do spring forth.

I sometimes create messages of hope, buried secrets and sly jokes that only I get. And I get obsessive and sometimes funny and poignant and sad. But through all of this I had no plan, certainly no business plan, no goals beyond wanting to make a living do something I enjoy, and being appreciated for my efforts. Which is really all anyone can ask for. And I achieved that goal, and I far, far exceeded that goal.

If you had told me four years ago that I would be working with Stefan Sagmeister, Rick Valicenti, Michael Bierut, Bill Drenttel, Saks Fifth Avenue. That I would do the cover of "Print" magazine and "Wallpaper". That in the fall of 2007 I would be speaking on the main fucking stage of the National AIGA Conference in Denver.

(APPLAUSE) / (CHEERING)

I would have said, no way! How will I do that? I never foresaw or planned any of this. I won't go so far as to say that it just happened to me, because I did work for it. But I frequently feel like that line from the Talking Heads' song, "This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful life. How did I get here?" (Sighs)

(CHEERING) / (APPLAUSE)

And of course there is always the burning question of, what next.

A personal mania for Next-ness can sometimes be destructive. We live our lives on the run from Next to Next to Next. Next is both in front of us and chasing us at the same time. We live poised between regret and hope, nostalgia and fear.

There is looking forward and then there is the agonizing about the look forward. How do I keep up with technology and trends? How do I ensure my livelihood and relevance? Will I make my mark in history and be remembered and immortalized for all time in the next Design Annual, or the next book, or the next exhibit at the Cooper Hewitt? And the worst of all, can I create Next?

These are terrible, terrible thoughts which often served to make us insecure and unhappy, and to ignore what we have right now in this moment. The quest for Next causes us to not pay attention to the only reality we can possibly know, or ever appreciate, which is the present. Now I am not particularly Zen. I have a lot of trouble being in the moment. But I do have this thing that I like as often as I can remember, and that is to think, here I am. I don't have a cold or a headache. None of my limbs hurt. In fact, I have no particular pain or discomfort. Physically, my body is functioning pretty well today. So I revel in the absence of misery.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Now I'm learning to extend that to my surroundings. Here I am. I have a comfortable home, which is warm and dry. I live in a peaceful country, Canada, in a place ...

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER) / (APPLAUSE)

... that is very safe. It's green and beautiful, except ... and quiet, except for the sound of the stream behind my house and the birds in the forest. I am very, very lucky. I enjoy my work and I work with great people. Some of my clients are big and some of them are small, but none of them are troublesome or irritating or people who I wish would just go away, which is more than I can say of my design business five years ago.

So when I think about what's Next for me, of course I have the fears that all this will come crashing to the ground in a backlash. And the backlash comes to everyone. Well, everyone except Michael Bierut.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

So I am aware of, and yet completely unprepared, for that. And I worry about being typecast, and being used as a human clip art machine. And I worry about being thrown out with the bath water of this mania of regurgitated flourishes that we currently find ourselves in. I worry about my status, while at the same time trying to keep my ego in check.

And ultimately, I have no idea if I've reached the pinnacle, or if this is just the beginning of some great adventure. And it's not that I don't have hopes or plans or schemes or ideas for how my career might plausibly pan out, because of course I do. But when I imagine what's Next for me, I'm learning to check it against the present, to try to reme- ... to measure a potential future against my very pleasant reality of now.

It is difficult to remove the anticipation, worrying, remembrance, regret, wishing and hoping. To remove the yearning, and focus on the reality of the moment that we are in. (Pause) Recognizing happiness. Recognizing it and understanding what makes it. What makes me happy. And then figuring out how to maintain that. What's Next for me is to keep in motion, keep modulating the pattern of my life, and at the same time just try not to fuck it up.

So the challenge is to find the balance between constructing our future and accepting that we can not construct our future. I think inspiration is the key. It's unexpectedness is what makes it so wonderful. If I could be aware of what inspires me, and follow it to wherever it leads, I think my Next will be far better served than if I attempt to plot my course in the wake of yearning for things that I don't have, because I will never have all the things that I wish to have. And I will never be the person that I wish to be.

But if I can follow that path of inspiration as it lights up, I will find my way to the best unintended, unexpected Next. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE) / (CHEERING)

KURT ANDERSEN

That was fantastic. So maybe inspiration is just like, uh, forcing yourself to fall in love promiscuously.

MARIAN BANTJES

Yes. (Laughs) You know, only you shouldn't have to force yourself ... (Overlap)

KURT ANDERSEN

Well, allow yourself. I guess. (Overlap)

MARIAN BANTJES

Allow.

KURT ANDERSEN

Uh, as you were talking, I was so interested in ... in ... in that moment, you know, when you ... when you, as an act of will turned yourself into what you have been these last few years. Over the last 29 years, did you have a ... a notion of this is what I want to be next? This is what I want to be next? I want to leave typesetting, I'm going to be a designer? Or the grand vision of you today?

MARIAN BANTJES

No. No ...

KURT ANDERSEN

Not at all? (Overlap)

MARIAN BANTJES

... I didn't. I ... I ... I really ... I fell into the job of typesetting. Uh, becoming a designer was a ... a sort of foolish, whimsical decision that happened over a muffin in a cafe.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

MARIAN BANTJES

Uh, I ... I mean, I think when I was a designer, I started to have a vision of ... of, you know, the kind of designer that I wanted to be, but without a great deal of knowledge, I mean that's a whole other topic. Uh, I just ... I got ... I got ... I ... really I just got to that point of desperation. I got ... I ... I ... I kind of had a midlife crisis at the age of 40, and I ... and I got to this point where I realized that I didn't want to be on my death bed, uh, thinking ...

KURT ANDERSEN

Coulda, shoulda ... (Overlap)

MARIAN BANTJES

Yeah, could I ... should I ... you know, I wish I had done something, and so I just decided to do it and, uh, I was very, very fortunate that it ... that it worked out for me.

KURT ANDERSEN

After the year in which you earned nothing ...

MARIAN BANTJES

Yeah.

KURT ANDERSEN

... and then gave yourself six months, in the, as you say, life is so much serendipity, maybe ... or what if you'd earned a hundred bucks in the next six months? What ... what would have happened?

MARIAN BANTJES

If I ... if I didn't ... (Overlap)

KURT ANDERSEN

If it hadn't worked out? If you hadn't gone to ... (Overlap)

MARIAN BANTJES

Uh, I was ... I was preparing to get a job, like a ... like a normal person. (Laughs) I was, I actually ... I actually did go to a job interview at some point during that, and ... and you know, as a graphic designer, and I didn't feel too good about it, but I was prepared that, you know, that if ... if I, you know, completely ran out of money and it wasn't working, I would ... I would just ... I would go back to what I'd been doing before, and say, okay, I ... I gave it my best shot and ... and it didn't work.

KURT ANDERSEN

Did you have other experiences in your life, either professionally or otherwise, of that kind of leaping off and taking a risk?

MARIAN BANTJES

Uh, personally I have done that, not to the best effects. But professionally, no. I had always let things happen to me before. I had always just kind of ... it ... I ... I let something else lead my life, and that's why, when I say I ... that was the first time I ... I sort of constructed my own Next-ness, that was the first time I said, I am now going to do this thing. Like, I am going to take that leap. That was the first time.

KURT ANDERSEN

And it's worked out pretty swimmingly.

MARIAN BANTJES

Yeah.

KURT ANDERSEN

Uh, does that make you inclined to do that again? When you, for instance, when you talk about the fear of being typecast, do you think either kind of in a career sense or in a ... in a seeking new sources of inspiration, creative sense, to say, okay, I'm going to do this thing that they'll be so shocked that Marian Bantjes did that?

MARIAN BANTJES

I'm always kind of trying to do that. I'm always, I ... I ... I mean, I have so many interests that are kind of beyond the work that I've become known for, and I'm always, you know, sort of trying to ... trying to push it a little further. I may sort of actually be coming to a point, either right now or very soon, where I'm going to have to, uh, make some kind of distinctive ... take some kind of distinctive risk, and I don't know, you know, what that's going to be or when or how, but I ... but I am kind of feeling, I am kind of feeling that I ... I may have another leap into the unknown coming, (Laughs), like really soon. But I don't know.

KURT ANDERSEN

The next 48 hours or no ... (Overlap)

MARIAN BANTJES

No, no, not in the next 48 hours. (Laughs)

KURT ANDERSEN

And ... and this ... and this is because you feel that just in a kind of abstract sense?

MARIAN BANTJES

Yeah, I had a period this past summer where I was asked to a lot of work that was just no longer interesting to me, and it was a warning signal to me that I have to, you know, I have to keep moving, and I might have ... I have to ... might have to do it some sort of drastic way, but I don't know.

KURT ANDERSEN

Like a shark. As Woody Allen said, keep moving or you die.

MARIAN BANTJES

Right! (Laughs)

KURT ANDERSEN

Uh, well, good luck with it.

MARIAN BANTJES

Thank you.

KURT ANDERSEN

Marian, thanks very much.

MARIAN BANTJES

Actually.