

FAXINATIE / FAXINATION

Interview: **Jack Meijers**. Translation: **Martin Cleaver**.

These days, the fax machine is resting in peace in the churchyard of nostalgic technology.

Just imagine: it's 1992...

For more than six years, paper spewed out of the machine. Between February 1992 and April 1999, Hans Wolf and André Thijssen faxed each other almost daily. They shared and duplicated their fascination for the puzzling, curious image. The image that was always more a question mark than an exclamation mark. Day in, day out, they played with expectations, thumbing their noses at the decoders, the sifters, the clarifiers of meaning. Of their extensive fax correspondence, 4030 A4 sheets have been preserved. For this book, they selected 634 sheets from a metre and a half of folders. Saved from the claws of oblivion, the ink not yet faded.

The beginning of the end was heralded on 20 April 1999. The new-fangled mode of communicating text and image bear the old way of messaging to its grave on the penultimate page of this book.

'Don't you like email anymore, have you got stuck in traffic for two days, are you ill or is your computer under the weather?'

That sigh goes unanswered. At least in this anthology, because from 20 April 1999, the fax machine no longer mused on gibberish as typewriters had also done.

The archaic way of sending documents by fax was then ripe for the Communication Museum.

That also affected Hans Wolf and André Thijssen, the makers, initiators and compilers of these 634 pages, selected from the metre and a half pile of thirty-one folders containing 4030 faxes. They were exchanged between February 1992 and April 1999. Six whole years.

Fortunately one of them copied everything meticulously onto paper. Because the original thermic imaging paper would have ruthlessly bleached and wiped every word and every illustration within a couple of years.

I remember how, in December 1987 - incredibly late - I became acquainted with the phenomenon of the fax. The mail room at the former headquarters of VNU publishers, by the Ceylonpoort in Haarlem, called the editorial desk where I worked to say there was a fax waiting for me. I don't remember the contents of the message. I do remember my incredulity about this form of paper-based pneumatic dispatch. Sensational! Stunning! In the academic circles I had frequented up till then, written or typed comments were always delivered in sealed envelopes with a postage stamp. With one or two days delay. But this... this was instant excitement! Only now, in writing these words, have I found out that the fax machine was already age old. Its origins date back to the invention of the copy telegraph, for which the Scottish clockmaker Alexander Bain applied for a patent in 1843.

Bain's early invention concerned a machine with a needle that traced a message stamped on a metal sheet line by line. Where the needle touches the metal, an electric signal was sent to the receiver along a wire. At the receiving end, a reproduction of the original emerged. Specially treated paper was coloured where electricity passed through the original paper. It didn't make Bain a millionaire. The inventor of the first fax machine didn't even build a prototype. It was 1851 before Frederick Bakewell presented an operational fax machine at the World Exhibition in London. About ten years later, the first commercial facsimile machine was put into service. And it was only one hundred years later, in the mid-20th century, that the American Western Union started installing its tele-fax machine in offices and newspapers. By using the telephone network, prints were made on thermal paper by the machine at the other end. The real breakthrough came some time later. In the 1960s, the Xerox Company improved the principle. So the fax machine did not blossom for long. Forty years at the most. What is left is a fading memory: the digital fax sent as a PDF attachment.

Never again the sound of squeaking 14.4Kbps modem tones at the other end of the line when you accidentally key in the fax number instead of the phone number.
 Never again the determined wheezing and coughing at the receiving end when he did have the right number.
 Never again the impatience and excitement by the fax machine as a text or drawing reveals itself line by line in ink.

In 2017, the fax machine is condemned to the graveyard of nostalgic technology: alongside the telegraph, the magnetic tape and the floppy disk.

For more than six years, their exchanges formed a continual motivation to discover images that are out of kilter and wrong-foot viewers. A quarter of a century after the start of their fax correspondence, Hans Wolf and André Thijssen have opened the archives and compiled snippets from their exchange of images in a book. We talk to the faxers, in summer 2017, on Binnenkadijk in Amsterdam. 'For a long time, we thought it was a private chat. Too obscure for others.'

The espresso machine protests, grinding and steaming. The high-pitched sound is vaguely reminiscent of the sounds on the phone line when he tried to send a fax in the last century. Just imagine: it is 1992.

HW 'Yes, the sound! That's part of it, for the receiver too, as a signal that something is about to roll out... Anyone sending or picking up an email these days has to do without that. I still think that's a pity. That imperfection and technological inadequacy is part of its charm.'

AT 'Did you know there's a program so you can mimic the sound of an old-fashioned typewriter? The letters are also not quite even, just the way they used to be. And at the end of each line, you have to sweep your arm from right to left just the way you did to return the carriage.'

HW 'I delayed using the computer for a long time and carried on working on a sturdy typewriter until the early 1990s.'

AT 'When Hans worked as art director for the magazine *Blad* published by VNU, we occasionally communicated on a business level by fax. E-mail was already possible, but was still in its infancy.'

It sounds as if we're talking about the prehistory of digital communication. Yet it's only 25 years ago.

HW 'I remember the sceptical reactions from all kinds of people who were studying the digital future for the publishing house. "This will never work!", they called. Well, things worked out differently.'

AT 'I knew from the start that it was going to be interesting. As a creator of images, I had to make use of the Paintbox. My ideas about how the supplied image should look went further than the technical possibilities at that time. It never worked out the way I saw it in my head. The Quantel Paintbox came closest. The machine cost 1200 guilders an hour. You had the programmer who operated the machine included in the price. I was looking forward to having a machine which would let me do it all myself. That was going to be the Macintosh.'

HW 'You were always more interested in technology, processing the image. Because you had to make things. That all passed me by a little. I was primarily interested in the successful combination of text and image.'

How did you compress 4030 faxes into a final selection of 634 pages?

AT 'I'm sure this book could easily have been twice the size. We set out looking for the most intriguing images, ones we still find fascinating.'

Was there a concrete reason to make a selection of the correspondence at this point in time?

AT 'A group of us meets up occasionally to exchange interesting things. During one of our book-club evenings, the pile of fax folders was standing here on the ground. Erik Kessels (founder of the KesselsKramer bureau, an adman, publisher and collector, JM) was curious and looked into a couple of the folders. "Why don't you publish this?", he wanted to know.'

HW 'It was the first time we realised that maybe more people would be interested in the pilot paper. Until then we had always regarded it as a private chat.'

AT 'As an experiment, I put a few pages on Facebook. I immediately got enthusiastic responses.'

Back to the beginning of your contact, in the early 1990s.

HW 'The very first faxes have been lost.'

The thermal paper had a very limited lifespan?

HW 'At first I kept them for a while. But when they faded, I threw them away. A whole box had become completely illegible. Fortunately, André pretty soon started making photocopies of what rolled out at his end on thermal paper. He conserved and archived them all neatly.'

AT 'In the early 1990s, Hans worked as art director for the VNU magazine BLAD about magazines. At a certain point he approached me with a commission for a cover. It was soon clear that we shared a fascination for unusual images.'

HW 'At home, I kept a box full of old archive photographs. I had rescued them from the paper shredder. And André kept piles of newspapers from which he could cut out the craziest things. Since then I've started doing that too.'

AT 'If I see an interesting image now, I don't cut it out, I immediately make a screenshot.'

HW 'Paper still appeals to me.'

AT 'The digital newspaper has advantages. You don't see two pages at once: the other side no longer shows through on the front.'

HW 'I have a weakness for the rather inferior way of printing that often provides beautiful effects in black-and-white.'

'I just waded through a pile of Volkskrant daily papers,' we read on page 187. Not everything you collected comes from newspapers. The source material is extensive: magazines, commercial folders, street scenes, postcards and typographical finds. It also many antiquarian books and curious faded reference work such as "Chirurgie und Operationslehre", "Gibt es Sex nach dem Tode?" and "Photograph your injuries at once". You both draw on the familiar and old (Spaarnestad Foto Archief) and lean on the carelessness of others ('I once liberated this from the rubbish bin of a photographer). Other frequent discoveries: art books.

HW 'In the second-hand book-stores in Amsterdam, Van Genneep and de Slegte, I found the most amazing books for next to nothing in the 1990s. Strange things getting dusty on the shelf. No one wanted them, but we did!'

AT 'Hans regularly sent me tips for books. "This picture comes from a book that has been marked down to ten guilders."

Alongside monographs about well-known 'image makers' like Gary Winogrand, David Lynch, Joel-Peter Witkin, Stefan Sagmeister, Tibor Kalman, you refer to works with titles like 'The Scientific Image', 'Time Life Light and Vision' and 'Inventories and Transformations'.

The capacity for wonder is great and not tied to a specific place or time (Picabia, Tony Cragg, Robert Longo, Kurt Schwitters, Nick Waplington). The fax also reveals recent and obscure finds: 'Found! Eligio Marrigotti, a portrait photographer from Pesaro'.

AT 'In this book, the images are 99.9 percent the work of others. It's not our intention to strut around in borrowed plumage. Many of them are anonymous. You often have to guess about a credit or the name of the maker. Where we were able to trace their names, we put them in the list of people to whom we owe our gratitude.'

Sometimes the image is not complete. There are our own illustrations (Wiener Blut) and photographs ('I shot this wall on celluloid near Wall Street'). Sometimes you intervene, adapt something ready-made, choose a strange crop, use collage techniques or maximise the grain on the copy machine.

It usually starts with an unknown news photo which you can easily miss. Anonymous creations or images doomed to be forgotten. Until your eye falls on them.'

HW 'When I got to the office in the morning, the first thing I did was send a fax to André. During the day I usually didn't have time.'

AT 'For me, it was generally the last thing I did. Before I went to bed at night, I prepared a fax for Hans.'

The total correspondence comprises 4030 faxes. Counting holidays, weekends and interruptions, that's more than two a day over the course of six years.

AT 'There was no specific limit. If I sent a fax and found something else a little later, that didn't stop me. I soon found out what was interesting. But again: for a long time, we thought it was just our private interest. Too obscure for others. The enthusiastic reactions to my Facebook pages surprised me.'

A long time ago, K. Schippers wrote a two-line poem, later known under the title 'At Loosdrecht':

'If this were Ireland / I would pay more attention.'

Also his poem 'The discovery'

'If you look / around you well / you see that everything / is coloured'

Could be a motto for this collection.

Just like skippers, you are first and foremost observant. You seek amazement in images that are hidden among other images. At first sight: very ordinary or the opposite: extreme. On further reflection, puzzling, significant and intriguing. Hans rights somewhere: 'We see interesting things in things that are not interesting.'

AT 'If I walk along the street with Hans, we regularly exchange glances of understanding. Motivated by a futility. We don't even need to express them, but: we registered it.'

The images in this book are rarely unequivocal.

AT 'Puzzling things are by definition more interesting than clear ones. An image that explains everything is extremely boring. But if an image leaves anything to the imagination... If you have to ask people who created a mysterious image for an explanation (What am I looking at?) then you're on the wrong track. As soon as you explain what you see, boredom lurks. Truly fascinating images either leave you cold or will be understood.'

HW 'Basically, a text should only increase the mystery. In newspapers and magazines, you obviously bear in mind the people you're making it for. But that does not automatically mean that you always have to give in. It's okay to make people think. Most media are scared of mystery. You want a high circulation, so everything has to be crystal clear.'

AT 'How often have I had to say to clients: "We're really not making Donald Duck!" We were doing this in the first instance for ourselves, so we didn't have to worry about whether we were going too far.'

The correspondence that developed between you in the course of 1992, focused on images. Gradually the commentary became more extensive, free and personal. Sometimes there is no link whatsoever between the image and the accompanying captions or explanations. On occasions, there is only text. Text that is simultaneously

visual. These found fragments generally zoom in on the art of looking: 'What are you really looking at when you listen to the radio?'

Household comments are juxtaposed with literary meanderings and explorations of the image. Reading between the lines, the words are a logbook of what was engrossing the correspondents professionally at the time. Contact with graphic designers, illustrators, photographers and comic-strip artists like Stephen Doyle, Matt Mahurin, Charles Burns, Conrad Botes, Tibor Kalman, Stefan Sagmeister and David Carson pass by, as to diary notes and minor concerns. Occasionally you find space for an in memoriam (Basquiat, Dennis Potter).

AT 'It's about physical inconveniences or irritations resulting from everyday activities. Sometimes it gets pretty personal.'

'I feel the flu coming on, I hope it doesn't get worse this evening.'

'I don't really like travelling at all.'

'On Saturday afternoon, our dog suddenly had a pretty severe heart attack.'

'I was called yesterday evening by an old friend of ours – just turned 50 – who had a stroke some time ago and has now lost most of his memory.' / 'Sometimes things happened you can't understand, they are too gruesome to make jokes about and make it difficult to stay optimistic. Comfort is then all you can offer.'

The texts, personal observations, confessions or critical notes accompanying the images are also often interesting. In resolute block capitals (also typed at the end), the correspondents do their best to formulate their conclusions succinctly.

AT 'In theory, we could have communicated without words.'

HW 'The texts were never the starting point...'

AT '...but it had to be worthwhile to look at and read it.'

The spirit of the era leads through the printing ink. (Politicians) Van Mierlo, Kok, Lubbers, Berlusconi with De Haane, Suharto, Juan Carlos and a still young Hillary Clinton make the front pages. The Balkans are ablaze, South Africa awakens and there is flooding in Wales. The everyday portion of world news against the backdrop of a strange newspaper photograph.

HW 'I doubt if the remarkable, peculiar, strange things that strike us in a newspaper photo were also seen and intended by the editor who selected the picture. I don't think so. That's why it's also nice to discover such things. Newspapers just happened to be made primarily by journalists. They read more than they look at images. We aren't looking for pictures that quickly tell you how things are.'

AT 'You can think up your own story.'

Bizarre and absurd things are never far away, There's plenty of Ripley's Believe It or Not. A stunted pair of Siamese twins, the woman with the mule face and a pair of bulging eyes. Strange and intemperate. Welcome to the Cabinet of Curiosities!

AT 'I could almost say: welcome to the world of Hans and André.'

On 1 June 1995, Hans wonders: 'Why are gruesome photos always so beautiful?'

HW 'I wonder why it's interesting if you come across such an image? Because here, in reality, you rarely come across them anymore. People are startled by them. And that's why newspapers and magazines prefer not to burn their fingers.'

War and violence leave their tracks in the faxes. For instance the ironic explanation: 'It's sad, but indeed: in order to get your visual kicks, a disaster has to happen now and then...'

It is swarming with deformities, tumours, quirks of nature, strange heads and limbs. Some bodies are so eroded, they almost become form.

HW 'In that case it is no longer a human being.'

Another motive is formed by photos of nature in which nature takes an abstract turn. A swarm of starlings turns into a pointillist painting.

The tragic undertone of some photos is reflected in sardonic formulations focusing on the sad and disastrous.

Beside a 'little man, what now?' photo (Director Sam Wolf of the potato trader Wolf & Wolf is confronted with a potato mountain), Hans Wolf notes: 'This relative has the right end of the stick. At least he has something to sell.'

The photo of a man with a lifelong stoop transformed into a greetings card: 'Happy Christmas!!'

A newspaper page filled with funeral announcements and one birth announcement earns the caption 'one page with one living and one dead man' and hence reflects an earthly valley of tears.

There is plenty of misery, but laughter shines through the grey veil.

Frivolous initiatives and the strange reverse side of the news are both embraced. An Oldtimer Caravan Club event in Park Duinrell and a cheerful accordion orchestra do not escape notice in the fax traffic. A strange report (topical or historic) can also be a suitable motivation. The images not necessarily obscure.

AT 'We never shirked the corny.'

Strange combinations, curious sporting moments and strange symbols aim to make the recipient laugh. Duck with three feet, the eye of the octopus, the sheep with eight feet and other fringe phenomena from the animal kingdom show that it's difficult to tell humour and tragedy apart.

And in the meantime, the machine is always hungry. It seems insatiable.

Although an empty sheet occasionally disappears into the input side: 'Cold turkey' from the iconoclasm.

A missed fax increases the worry.

'The fax rang serenely at 9.30 am. Was that you?'

Occasionally the quality (sharpness, legibility) of a sent fax is debated.

'I reckon an engineer should crawl under your machine.' New acquisition results in jubilation.

'Your faxes look brilliant on my new equipment.'

AT 'If a sheet of text gets caught in the machine at an angle, it became completely illegible and turned into form.'

HW 'The nature of the image could change through the clumsy fax reproduction. I think it's a pity that something like that no longer exists. It is, of course, ridiculous to do it that way now. But my main objection: everything is so perfect...'

Beside an advertisement for Paul Smith, we read: 'It's a pity you can't see the colour.'

HW 'The fax and the photocopy machine translated everything that was originally in colour into black-and-white...'

Occasionally one fax provoked another. It could turn into a fad. Action = reaction.

AT 'It was never the intention, but it happened. We tried to avoid any straitjacket.'

The uncompromising approach to the correspondence could unexpectedly lead to consternation. For a long time, Hans received his faxes as a 'guest' on the fax machine of editorial offices or management secretariat. When a colleague intercepted a fax with two sets of genitals, she expressed her confusion/discussed with a sticky note. Hans returns the original fax from André, now with a Post-it comment from his colleague: 'I'm pretty easy going, but is this really necessary?'

The interest in aberrant images seems to have increased in recent years. Does the Internet function as a platform for the strange and bizarre?

HW 'I think that most people on Facebook and Instagram are one-sidedly interested in "beauty".'

The word 'faxination' was soon coined and motivated the title of this book. 'Shared Faxination is Double Faxination', we read.

Is that thread through the correspondence spun through a desire to surprise the recipient on the other end of the fax?

HW 'There are different ways to look. Take Hans Aarsman. As a photo detective, he tries to solve a photograph. In his weekly column in the Volkskrant, he searches for meaning: 'What do I see? And what do I think it means?'

AT 'We know and analyse anything or solve anything. Let the mystery grow.'

HW 'There are things you shouldn't want to understand. You have to leave them be.'

'What on earth is the point of fax post?' A fax asks the big question. But this isn't followed by a satisfactory answer.

For more than six years, these exchanges are a continuous motivation to discover images that are out of step and wrong-foot the viewer.

This book broadens the circle of viewers, appeals to the human brain to 'imagine' the selected faxes. Those who want to know how this works exactly should leave through to page 46. A drawing makes it crystal clear.

But the faxes probably don't offer 'any guidance for the day'. They remain 'picture puzzles'.

HW 'If it's up to us, the images are more question marks than exclamation marks.'

The word 'fax' is an abbreviation of the Latin 'facsimile': an accurate copy. These fax correspondents are not interested in the copy, but in the new image. The fax as original, to boost the imagination.

Until that moment, April 1999, when it was suddenly all over. Enter e-mail, exit fax.

AT 'Well, almost. There are still doctors who fax their prescriptions to the chemists in illegible handwriting.'

André Thijssen (Vlaardingen, 1948) is an autonomous and applied artist. He has worked on commission for e.g. Vrij Nederland, Carp, Avenue, BLAD over bladen, NRC Handelsblad, De Volkskrant, Het Parool, Holland Festival, Esquire Magazine, New York Magazine, The Atlantic Monthly and Ray Gun Magazine. His work has been put on show at museums in the Netherlands and abroad. He published the books *Fringe Phenomena 1 + 2* (2010), *Fringe Phenomena 3* (2013) and *AMS* (2015). There's more André Thijssen on <http://www.andrethijssen.com>

Hans Wolf (Utrecht, 1937) started his education at the Royal Academy for the Visual Arts in the Hague and worked as a designer for the publisher Zomer & Keuning. He has worked for magazines like *De Spiegel*, *Prinses* and *Ouders van Nu*. Then he started working for the VNU (later Sanoma) where he was, in turn, art director for the magazines *Viva*, *Panorama*, *Margriet*, *Marie Claire* and *BLAD* about magazines.

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AT/HW