

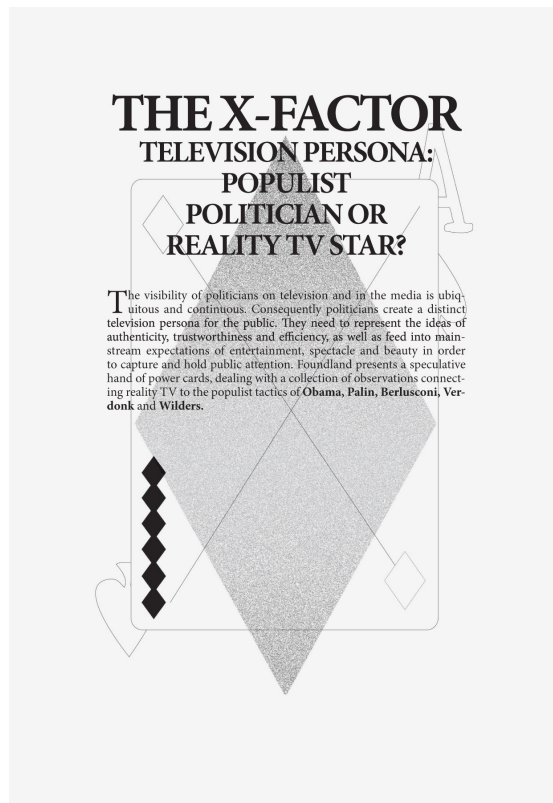
The X-Factor

Foundland Collective

Artist contribution – January 17, 2011

The graphic design and research collective Foundland (Ghalia Elsrakbi, Lauren Alexander and Dirk Vis) conducts research from within political and social developments through graphic design. They translate complex issues in Dutch society into accessible communications products, such as posters and installations. The editors of *Open* have asked them to make a special contribution because of their research into populism.

Documentation



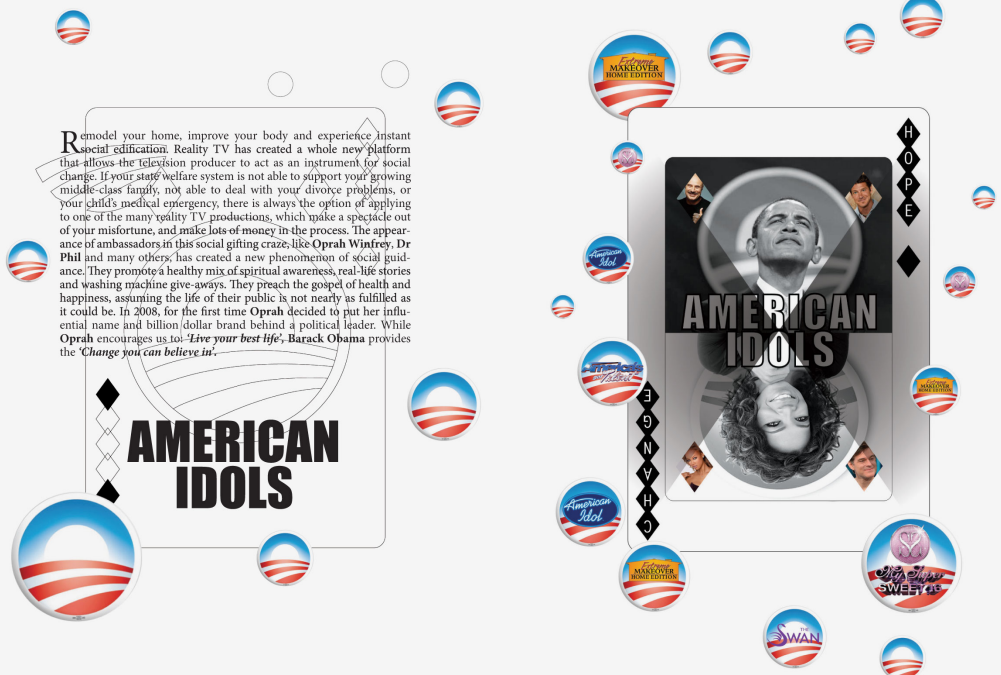
"TRONISTA" THE BACHELOR

Ace of Spades Berlusconi rules without consensus and on his own terms. He represents an exaggerated, stereotypical male figure, typified by his attitude towards women. He enlists support by behaving inappropriately, appealing to a specific macho character of the Italian male. Even in political speeches he reveals a naughty-boy nature in disregard of the rules, which can count on popular appeal and draw him closer to his public. In 2006 he went as far as selecting former topless model and showgirl Mara Carfagna to serve in his parliament as 'Minister of Equal Opportunities'. Like an episode of Temptation Island, the affairs, cheats and mistresses of the alpha male are played out under the media spotlight. Money, sex and champagne are an explosive erotic game show on television. However radical or scandalous his behaviour, Ace of Spades continues to come out on top.



Remodel your home, improve your body and experience instant social edification. Reality TV has created a whole new platform that allows the television producer to act as an instrument for social change. If your state welfare system is not able to support your growing middle-class family, not able to deal with your divorce problems, or your child's medical emergency, there is always the option of applying to one of the many reality TV productions, which make a spectacle out of your misfortune, and make lots of money in the process. The appearance of ambassadors in this social gifting craze like Oprah Winfrey, Dr Phil and many others, has created a new phenomenon of social guidance. They promote a healthy mix of spiritual awareness, real-life stories and washing machine give-aways. They preach the gospel of health and happiness, assuming the life of their public is not nearly as fulfilled as it could be. In 2008, for the first time Oprah decided to put her influential name and billion dollar brand behind a political leader. While Oprah encourages us to 'Live your best life', Barack Obama provides the 'Change you can believe in'.

AMERICAN IDOLS





Guns, pencil skirts and snowmobile racing, all draped in a shiny American flag. The self-proclaimed 'hockey mom', John McCain's Republican presidential running-mate Sarah Palin, was used in the 2008 American election run-up in a calculated populist attempt to outshine the Democrats. It was hoped that her strong female presence would lure female conservative voters away from Hillary Clinton. She represents the Alaskan girl next door who married her high school sweetheart (and attends his snowmobile racing contests on weekends). In personality she is the stereotype of a conservative, Christian Republican who also has the charm of being a beautiful, slender woman in the Republican political arena, hence her nickname 'Bible Spice'. She is undoubtedly ditsy and naive, but her unflinching confidence allows her to carry her own and she has been known to voice her outspoken opinions sometimes to the detriment of the Republican campaign message. For this reason, John McCain fondly, and rather condescendingly, described these moments as Sarah Palin 'going rogue'. Not altogether coincidentally this became the title of Palin's new biographical bestseller. She embodies a combination of attributes of the all-American woman, to whom the average middle-class folks can relate. She can dress up to sell her political ideas or dress down to be a mom or a wife, the perfect beauty pageant winner.



FEAR FACTOR

Inciting fear and suspense grips a reality TV audience. Think Fear Factor, Rescue 911, Crime 360 and in the Netherlands, 'Sporloos' and 'Opsporing Verzocht'. In 2009 a reality TV programme called 'De Inbreker' (The Burglar) was introduced on the AVRO broadcasting network illustrating how easy it was to break into the regular Dutch home. The programme contestants were instructed on how best to secure their home and possessions and were then subjected to a surprise break-in to test the effectiveness of their burglar proofing. Such programmes convince an audience that they are under threat, even in a country that is particularly safe, like the Netherlands. Politicians employ much the same simplistic methods to convince their most vulnerable public that they are under continual external threat. The introduction and reproduction of a phantom enemy is ever-present in political campaigns.

Rita Verdonk used a trashy and ridiculously overacted scenario for her latest campaign promotion for her rightwing party 'Trots op Nederland' (March 2010 elections). Literally re-enacting crime as it supposedly occurs on Dutch streets. Her use of music, amateur actors and scenario resembles low-budget reality TV programmes like Rescue 911. The campaign video was widely ridiculed in the media, and was not very effective judging by the results of the June 2010 parliamentary elections.

Geert Wilders in his latest campaign video combines his invasive, brutal personality, which can be compared with 'Terror Jaap' from 'De Gouden Kool' with a more serious blend of imagery and manipulated facts, in order to elicit fear. In his 'Partij Voor de Vrijheid' promotion video he uses ordinary stock footage of Dutch Muslims in combination with airplanes landing at Schiphol airport to conjure a fantasy tale of Muslim invasion, infiltrating and destroying Dutch culture. Unlike Verdonk, his simplistic and crude approach functions as effective propaganda which a large number of scared Dutch people are all too eager to take in.

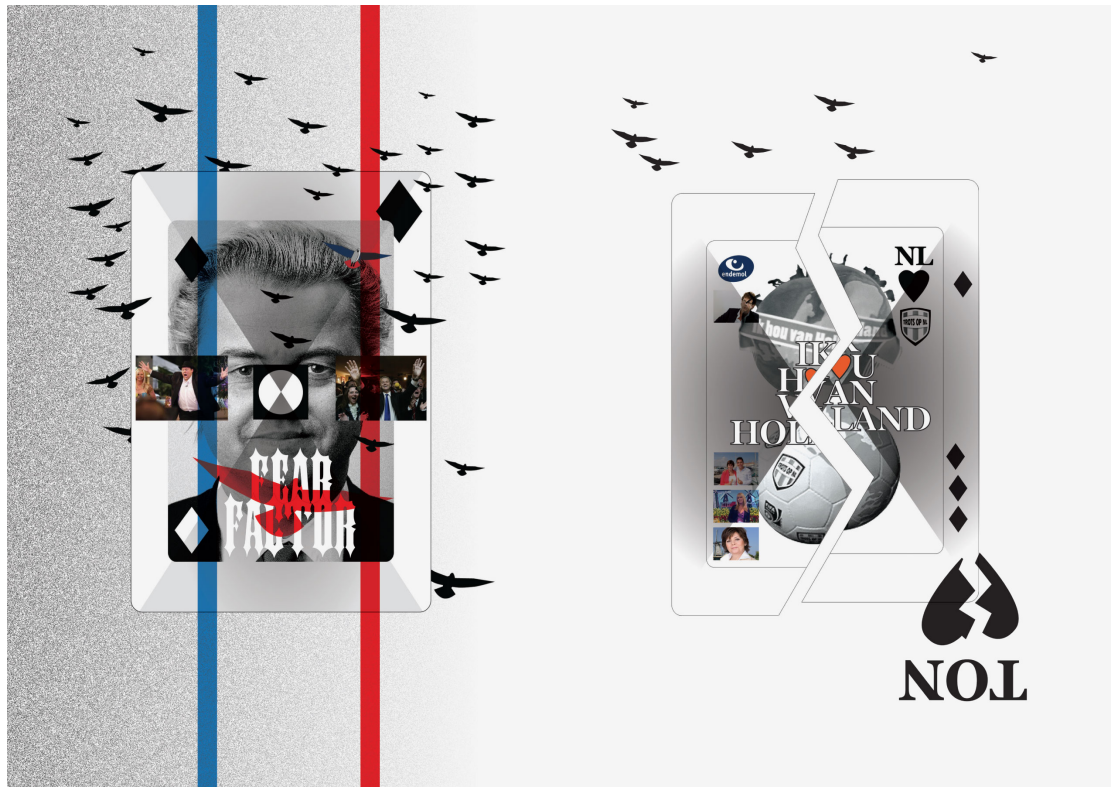
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Tulips, windmills, cheese, cows and clogs. One cliché precedes the next. Nationalistic TV game shows, like 'Ik hou van Holland' (I love Holland) bundle all clichés of the Netherlands into one package, and ask Dutch celebrities to qualify their Dutchness by answering trivial questions about their culture, harrowing down and redefining Dutch identity in the process. The logo of the television programme presents Holland as the only country on the globe, epitomizing a self-centred sense of nationalism. Linda de Mol, the Dutch blond cliché, presents the programme. Linda happens to be the sister of John de Mol, founder of Endemol, one of the largest reality TV production companies in the world. In 2008 it was made public that John de Mol had sponsored the political campaign of 'Trots op Nederland', the right-wing, populist party led by Rita Verdonk. Recently Berlusconi's Mediaset added Endemol to its media empire.

In much the same way as the game show 'Ik hou van Holland', Rita Verdonk's party 'Trots op Nederland' uses well known national symbols to appropriate Dutch identity. Identifying what is 'Dutch' means disqualifying the un-Dutch. The facade of a nationalistic political campaign, and perhaps also that of a game show, masks the manifestation of a growing resentment against the Other.

IK HOU VAN HOLLAND



Foundland Collective (Ghalia Elsrakbi, SYR and Lauren Alexander, ZAR) is a design, research and art practice, based between Cairo, Egypt and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Since its inception in 2009, the collective have focused on critical analysis of topics related to political and place branding, manifesting their speculations and ideas through visual and written manifestations, exhibitions and publications. See further: www.foundland.info.

Tags

Aesthetics, Democracy, Design, Image

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