

SHOE'S CALLIGRAFFITI

A WORD IS AN IMAGE

For me as a kid of the German Ruhrarea the european beginnings of the graffitiscene were a long time in the early 80ies in Dortmund. But as far as this, it is in the graffitiscene only a restricted subjective point of view. So when I've seen the Dutch "Kroonjuwelen" Video several years ago, with its kind of a punk graffiti scene in the end of the 70tys painting Amsterdam - my personal history was re-written. It remembers me generally more on a streetart-thing then graffiti-graffiti, but lately if you see over and over tagged walls and pieces of NYC-writers painted, you have to recognize that in Amsterdam happened something great for real.



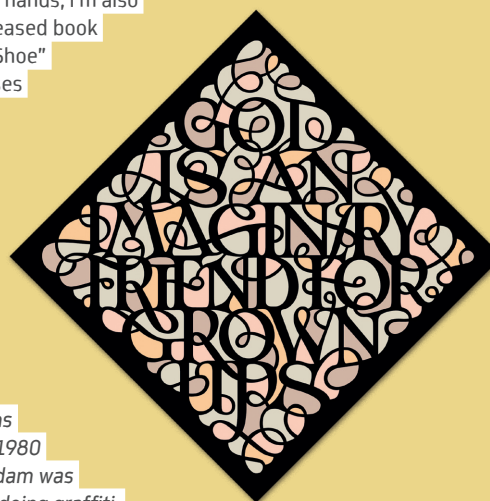
Calligraffiti limited edition box set



Exhibit 2007

So one of the first writers there was SHOE. He's born as Niels Meulman 1967 in Amsterdam. In the 80's SHOE formed the United Street Artists alongside Delta, Joker, Jezis and Jaz, as well as the Crime Time Kings with Bando from Paris and Mode2 at that time from London. Today he's an internationally known artist, designer and art director.

We reported several issues ago about an exhibition named "Calligraffiti" which happened in 2007 with contributions from graffiti pioneer and graphic artist Eric Haze and sneaker retailer Patta. So while I'm finishing the layout for the magazine, you are holding in your hands, I'm also trying to review SHOE's fresh released book "Calligraffiti: The Graphic Art of Shoe" which shows his art form that fuses calligraphy and graffiti. That's why I took the chance also, to point out some questions to him.



Hey Niels! Let's have a look at a time called back in the days. You already tagged walls in the late 70ties. At that time I've seen that punk graffiti thing going on in Amsterdam. What have been your influences?

Yes, the first Shoe tags are from 1979. We'd steal those small spray cans of fluorescent car paint and tag the old center of our city. Especially in 1980 with the squatting riots and the crowning of queen Beatrix, old Amsterdam was in complete anarchy. A wonderful environment for a kid growing up and doing graffiti. Before I had seen any subway graffiti from New York my biggest influence was Dr. Rat. After my first visit to New York in 1982 and noticing graffiti in galleries and museums my biggest influence was Dondi. He really was a kind of a mentor when I first started to do New York styles. Sadly they are both dead.



Did you ever got busted or were your "shoes" always faster?

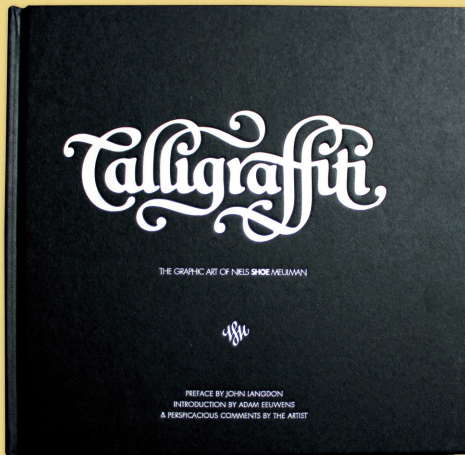
Oh man, I got caught so many times. I used to be proud of the fact that I had seen almost all (20+) Amsterdam's police stations on the inside. Back then, they would make you spend a night in jail and sometimes you'd get a fine. My ,shoes' were actually pretty fast (I used to play baseball) but I was just taking these ridiculous risks. When I look at some old pieces I sometimes wonder how I could have done those super dangerous spots.

So what about the Crime Time Kings – how come that you have been involved in this first international crew?

Basically it was like this in the early eighties: In Amsterdam you had us, the United Street Artists. In London The Chrome Angelz and in Paris the Bomb Squad 2. Bando united us all in Crime Time.



SHOE & HAZE



How did you start turning it into biz? And tell us for sure first about "Happy Family".

In the eighties Amsterdam walls were pretty badly bombed (Ego, Dr. Air, Mano, Trip, etc) but our crew appeared a lot in the media because we were doing it differently, bigger and more colorful. It was a real 'happy' story for newspapers, magazines and tv. All the doom and 'no future' made way to a more optimistic (read: opportunistic) state of mind. I was determined to become a designer and my crewmate Joker was a real businessman about it. He always said he wanted to be a millionaire with a swimming pool before 25. Ahah! Anyway, we had this mob-type scheme where we would tell shop-owners and housing projects that we could paint their walls for money or we fuck everything up with tags. Plus if the USA painted the wall, nobody would fuck with it. Also around that time we did some paintings for the infamous chain of coffee shops called the Happy Family (and the Bulldog). The owners were some of the toughest criminals around, moving huge amounts of dope all over the world. We would go for a drive with one guy in his BMW. Then he would point at spots, saying: 'There? Can we have one there?' And we would say 'Sure. 500 guilders'. That night on that spot it would say 'Happy Family'. The dolphins costed extra. Ahah!

Tell us more about your professional works. You worked e.g. for BBDO and MTV Europe.

What is your experience in these fields?

In a nutshell it went like this: The graffiti turned into a business but that ended when I was 20 because I had to join the military service. After 14 months of sabotaging the Dutch army I got a job as assistant to Anthon Beeke, who taught me the graphic design trade. After 3 years of working very closely with this diverse autodidact from Amsterdam (like me) I started my second business: Caulfield & Tensing. We had many employees and pioneered in design, websites and advertising. We sold the place, including ourselves to BBDO in 1999. There I worked as an art director for 2,5 years, creating campaigns for huge accounts. My third company, Unruly, tried to do marketing, but on my terms. That worked for a while but when my business partner decided to become a cop (really) I felt I was ready to become what I never dared to call myself: an artist.



Nowadays your work can be seen in Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art? From street fame to museums, what is your basic attitude on this?

Actually the work in those museums is more graphic design related. Dutch Design, you know. My Calligraffiti still needs to grow before it can really be picked up by the art world.



You did commercial calligraphy work for e.g. Bols Genever. Did you learned it in a professional way? When did you named the term Calligraffiti. Did you planed it than as a concept?

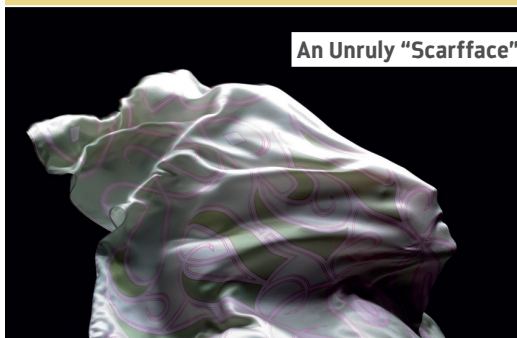
When I moved away from the commercial world I went to New York for a while. Together with Eric Haze I started experimenting with inks and brushes. The idea of Japanese calligraphy really appealed to me. One word on a piece of paper. Very direct. An ode to (letter) forms. Meanwhile I also kept doing words (logo's) for reproduction. To me those two are within the same realm. And for that realm to exist it needed a name. I really like naming things.

I'm a huge fan of that 1979 live action video of Dr. Rat. Did he invented this Calligraffiti style, or where would you say are the related roots?

I think I had seen that great video in the eighties - I think it's by Rogier van der Ploeg-, and I have a feeling that it stuck with me unconsciously. My first Shoe that wasn't a tag, had these gothic letters. That was in 1982.



His first Calligraffiti in Amsterdam 1982



An Unruly "Scarface"

What about Unruly – why silk scarves? By the way I love the "Scarface" pictures we had in our mag, issues ago – is this your work too?

The Unruly scarves are a side project. I'm not a fashion designer but like fashion, so silk scarves seemed like a nice product to create. I art directed all the Unruly photo shoots. They are done by befriended photographers that I met during my advertising years.

When I opened your new book yesterday the first thing I noticed was the missing space type on page 11. Haha. Dear reader: Forget that. It's really a fucking good book. Okay, I know a lot of your works, but often it was setting a question mark to me. Now the books gives me the answers and the last pages were the most interesting for me. What's your relationship to Adam Eeuwens, who wrote the introduction for the book? Ahah!. That missing space was one of the first things that I noticed too. Damn! Anyway, I'm glad that the book succeeded in giving some background to the work. In my head everything has a natural place but that isn't always clear to the viewer. The one-liners and quotes on the spreads can sort of point you in a direction and the index in the back shows a bit more of what the hell I'm talking about. Adam Eeuwens and I spend two weeks creating a rough outline. He then went back to Los Angeles to write the essay and I started designing the book and writing the index. I know Adam has been a good friend since the nineties when he was still living in Amsterdam. We've done numerous publication projects together.



Your last words in the book are "save the planet – kill yourself". Now you get the chance to give us some more positive last words and some on your future plans?

Well, what I'm saying there is, 'Stop making me feel guilty for living!' But it was meant to be funny too, I am really a very optimistic person.

A few weeks ago I stumbled onto this text: Everything is amazing and nobody's happy. That line has the same kind of power. It's deep and light at the same time. In the future I will try to keep uniting more opposites with more Calligraffiti.

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Check out:
www.nielsshoemeulman.com
www.calligraffiti.nl
www.unruly.nl

