Election posters

By: Lies Ros
- edited by Mark van Dongen
- translated by Kiko Luijten

Rob Schröder and I had already worked in ‘politics’ for years as designers. In case of party politics especially for the CPN (Communistische Partij Nederland – Communist Party Netherlands), because we supported the party’s points of view, and because we got the opportunity – although mostly after lengthy discussions – to design posters in relative freedom, with important statements from the party program as their topic. We came to the insight that we would be addressing a public that had already thought about the state of society and wanted a change (in a progressive way) and who would be addressed in posters that were not unambiguous. So, no politician’s faces or posters with only a party number (in Holland every party gets a number during the elections – as do the politicians). So at the CPN we got the possibility to design a campaign based on content. Our goal was to strengthen the party program based on the idea: People are capable to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions.

When we were asked to work on a campaign for ‘klein links’ (the cooperation of some small leftist parties) in the European elections of 1984, we were very enthusiastic. Not only because this cooperation offered us new political perspectives (even if it was for something as obscure as the European elections), but also because we expected we would be prolonging a way of working and designing as we developed with the CPN.

12 March 1984
We sat at L. until ten, then went back to Rob, who just came back from school. The rest of the night we tried to think of things for the co-operating Radical Green parties.

11 April 1984
Worked on sketches for the five European election posters. We only got the slogans last week, by phone, which are hopelessly advertisement-like. (1. Europe toxic free – Green Progressive Agreement (Name of the co-operation of the small leftist parties) – naturally. 2. Europe nuclear weapon free – GPA – disarmingly. 3. 25 Hours – GPA – that works. 4. No racism – GPA. 5. ♂ ♂ ♂ - GPA – side by side.)
This weekend Rob and I thought of images on these themes. At 6:15 pm we went to Hoogte Katdijk with all our designs – some mediocre, but some very good – where some people gathered to judge all the work. It skipped my mind that they invited more people to make designs. Some unemployed from Groningen, who made some embarrassingly bad work and acted quite pathetically.

Because they were not professional – and we are – they deserved a chance at work more than we did. They came from a green point of view, and their work was cliché, substantively insufficient and typographically foolish, so much that I was actually insulted that the committee was seriously talking about these designs. I suddenly realized why I had become a CPN member and not one of the PPR or PSP (Dutch radical and socialistic parties). It was terrible, this organizing committee had never even thought about translating content and
ideas into a visual campaign. Rob maintained himself well. He pointed out, that only with a content-driven campaign people would take notice, because in general they couldn’t care less about something as the European elections. I had to leave at 7:30 pm. Swiftly, in between things, they told us that our program cover design would not be used.

12 April 1984
At the Amstelburg I walked into Hein Verkerk, who told me about how the evening had ended. They postponed their decision and wanted two more extensively worked out propositions on Monday. Indecisive assholes. I had asked Willem Vleeschouwer if his daughter of eight would be prepared to pose for our Europe nuclear weapons free poster. He and his daughter arrived at 5 pm. At ‘Stop the N-bomb’ I borrowed the book about Hiroshima and made an enlarged copy of the small girl with the burned face. Willem’s daughter held this picture in her hands in front of her face. This worked incredibly well.

20 April 1984
Telephone call, that, following our worked-out sketches on Europe nuclear weapons free and 25 hours, they choose us. Started making pictures of hands, like crazy – we need 25 of all sorts of hands, black, whites, to fulfill the 25 Hours poster.

20 April 10984
I called numerous people to ask if they would be willing to model in our no racism poster, but no success. Of course it is not a very rewarding topic – as a model you will be in the picture, angry looking, with a white bastard standing on your head, very much posing as the oppressed. We are not satisfied with our poster with a cow. This cow, for the toxic free poster is not good. He doesn’t look in the camera and he’s too small. Fortunately Frank has a friend who has a cow; he is prepared to make a picture this weekend.

24 April 1984
We brought the first two pictures to the printer. Next we developed the pictures of Frank’s friend’s cow (in had been quite hard to get the cow out of the stable) and Eline, who we found prepared to pose after quite a hassle. Got some pizza’s and worked late. The cow design turned out to be a pain in the ass, and the result was not that good in my opinion. Rob also struggled with the no racism poster, but contrary to me (I went home at 1 am) he finished it. Nonetheless, the organizing committee wanted to see all the posters, so we had to get the two posters that were already at the printer. How troublesome are these people, they already saw and approved these two first posters.

25 April 1984
Finished the cow poster and made a first sketch for the side by side poster. At 3:15 pm to the PSP building to show the first series to the gathering leftist groups. What we were confronted with there exceeded every expectation. We would not have kept to the typographical agreements, which were that all texts were supposed to be diagonal. We explained all we could that we could not make any typographical agreements, because that would be at the expense of the quality of the poster, but they did not get it. The only people that did understand that they had a unique series of posters in front of them based on the party program were the NCP people. One of the Greens saw this as an opportunity to bring up the other designers again. Rob and I were on the verge of walking out angry and telling
them good luck with dealing with their business themselves. But of course this has no use at all. However the frustration of working and working for weeks at an end surfaced quite extensively. The anti-racism poster caused the biggest controversy. It showed so clearly what racism is about, that they were probably afraid that this would not work for them. And above all, they blamed us for making unclear posters, while it was the slogans that were insufficiently communicating. With the side by side slogan we had even tried to give this non-political statement a historical dimension. We took a photo of Pauline with a sash from 1900: ‘Constitutional equality for men and women’, besides a photograph of a lady taking part in a female strike: ‘I strike against abortion laws’. The PPR chairman claimed, as if he had been part of the women movement for years, that abortion was not the issue anymore; today it was economical independency. ‘Besides: the lady did not like she would be voting for these small leftist parties.’ Complete contempt for our work. If only we would’ve asked money, maybe the frustration would’ve been less and the appreciation probably bigger. In our professional career of ten years we had never, ever worked with clients this ignorant and troublesome. Three posters could go to the printer; two have to be done over. So we worked in the evening. Again this stupid cow, so this one can go to the printer in the morning as well. Rob venomously dug into a new anti-racism poster again; he printed new pictures of Eline, which were beautiful photographical experiments, but would not, however, result in a usable poster. In the end he used only part of a picture, a beautiful poster, but most of the strong content was gone. With only a small break we worked until 1 am.

7 May 1984
Made a draft of the side by side poster and brought the past Europe posters to the printer. At the end of the afternoon Rob and I designed a fantastic list number poster: a six, built up from torn pieces of the other posters. This went so quickly and well, we did not have to work late.

8 May 1984
Dropped the number poster of at the PSP-office. Once back, Gijs Bax called to let us know that our last poster was rejected and that they would let somebody else make a new one; one put together from old advertisements. I was dumbfounded. This morning I told them that the names of the parties on the poster could be enhanced; but the reason to reject our design was because the names were not big enough on the poster. This is the moment when I started cursing, although it was useless to do this towards Gijs Bax: he is not the one rejecting the poster and he did do his best to help us. ‘They are crazy’ and bunch of amateurs’ – their one – and only – campaign thought was the idea of unity: And besides our only instruction was to make a number poster that looked like the other five posters. The rest of the afternoon I was incredibly bad mood. When Rob called me from the museum and I told him the news he almost exploded. He called them and demanded a meeting and threatened we would otherwise retract all our posters from the printer. It didn’t work, they had another meeting, which lasted an hour and a half, but they decided to stick to their decision. At that moment it was up to us to decide if we would indeed retract our posters or not. In the end this did seem very resentful and childish, and above all, all the hard work would have been in vain.
We must have been incredibly stupid to work for this good cause without being paid. We can’t claim anything anywhere because we did not formally put thins down on paper. We did
not realize that we would need to put things on paper, because we knew one or two

tremendously reliable persons within these groups. But of course these are not the people

making the decisions – we understand now. So, we were dumped. Dumped by the people

we trusted to be our political hope for the future. Oh, it makes me so angry, and averse of

politics. Our reason to get involved in making these posters was this beautiful fact that these

small leftist parties would finally be joining forces. But politicians have lately been doing

their best to let me loose all my motivation. And this has nothing to do with getting older.

Older anyway, but mostly unwiser.