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Alphabetum VIII Gebareniconen Ruud Janssen

Exhibition: **By appointment** + 09.06.2021 tot 22.08.2021

Location: West Den Haag in the former American embassy, Lange Voorhout 102, The Hague
More information: www.westdenhaag.nl

With 26 handstands it is possible to present the alphabet. Yet how does one capture the immense variation of the hand shapes of gestures and signs? Every sign, moreover, has a movement, however small. In the exhibition Alphabetum VIII 'Gebareniconen' ('Sign icons') of sign language researcher Ruud Janssen we see, by ways of panels, video and sculpture, the nuances and challenges in capturing silent language in a spatial sense.

If a random person would be asked about what language is, they will probably quickly come up with associations regarding letters, alphabets and writing. This indeed belongs to a form of language, however one that is mainly derived from sound. With the exception of iconographic writing systems that incorporate image, such as Chinese characters. Nevertheless, the basis of language is not necessarily connected to literacy. After all, communication is not only verbal.

Language is not just letters, sounds or writing. It is initially dependent upon the senses, after which notation systems develop that opt to capture the communicable message and try to make it 'readable'. There have been different useful and valuable notation systems that mapped the non-verbal elements of speech, such as the phonetic symbols in Visible Speech (1867) of Melville Bell, or William Stokoe with the first notation system for American Sign Language (ASL) in 1965. But it is still a complex issue.

Janssen's model of Sign icons is an attempt to summarise space, movement, beginning, ending, changing positions, expression, hands and body in an icon, an image, and subsequently provide a sign script that can stand on its own, without being a derivative of another script. He takes the visitor by the hand, along the development and recording of sign language from a historical, theoretical and formal viewpoint. How to translate an idea to a visual concept, to something that can be 'read', whether it be through sight, touch, or other senses? Fitting with the Alphabetum, the exhibition is a crossover between language, theory and esthetics.

Ruud Janssen (1951) studied graphic and typographic design at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and was still a student of renowned letter designer Gerrit Noordzij. He entered, in fact coincidentally, the world of the deaf and their sign language after an assignment to photograph hands. When he came into contact with it in the early 1980's, sign language did not officially exist according to the director of a deaf institute. In 1985 Janssen, together with Tony Bloem, founded 'Vi-taal' and 'De Gebarenwinkel', a design agency for visual communication and specialised in sign language. Among other activities, they partnered with ten museums in The Hague to launch ten films in sign language for the videoproject 'Haagse Kunstgrepen' (2012), advised policy makers and produced dozens of publications such as 'Gebarentaal' (2005), 'Handalfabet' (1986) and 'Foei, Poes!' (1988) to bring attention to the Dutch sign language across different age groups.

The Alphabetum is a space where the formative and formal aspects of language can be explored. The ambition of the Alphabetum is to show that these two characteristics of written language are much more connected than is generally acknowledged. A letter is a letter because we recognize it as a letter; and because we recognize it as a letter it is a letter.

If you have any questions, please contact MJ Sondeijker: marie-jose@westdenhaag.nl or (0)70.3925359

The former American embassy 'Onze Ambassade' is managed by ANNA Vastgoed & Cultuur and Art Institute West Den Haag. The program of West is supported by the municipality of The Hague and the Mondriaan Fund.