

JUXTAPOZ

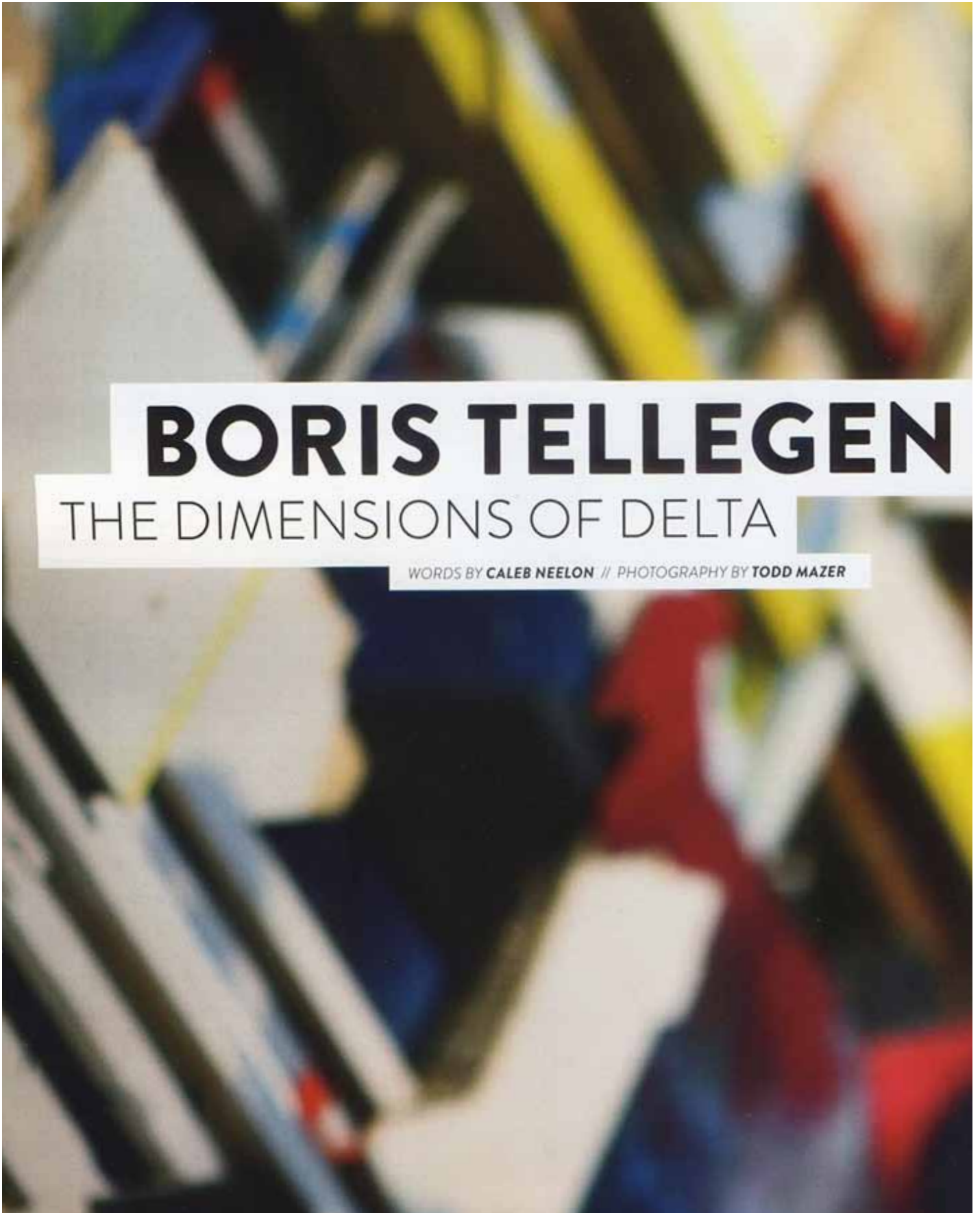
Art & Culture

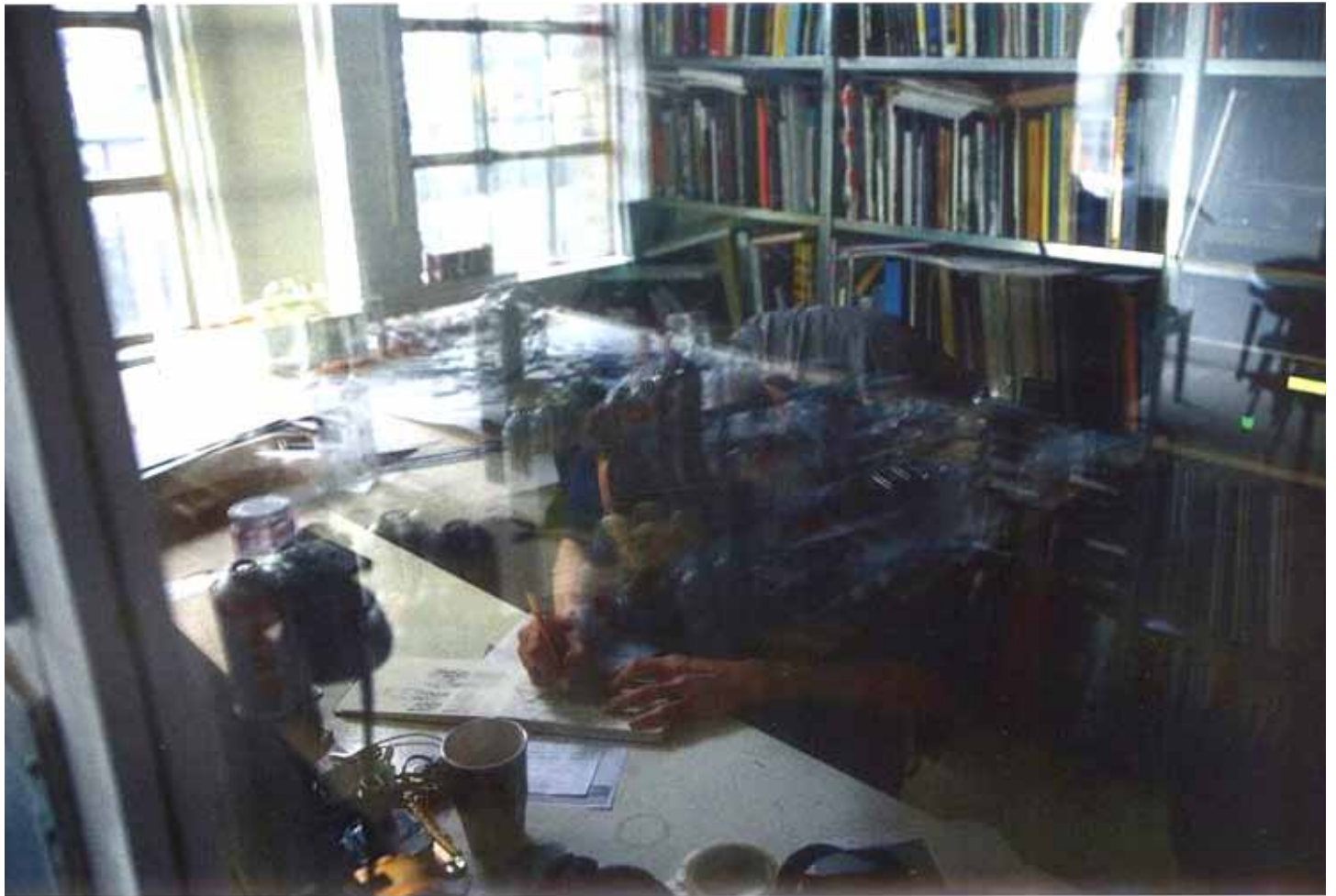
#197 mars 2016

BORIS TELLEGEN

THE DIMENSIONS OF DELTA

WORDS BY CALEB NEELON // PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD MAZER





GRAFFITI WAS ALL OVER AMSTERDAM IN THE LATE

1970s and early 1980s, mostly in the ska and punk traditions, with names like Dr. Rat, Ego, Walking Joint, Tarantula, and Dr. Air. When the New York City style arrived, aside for the odd piece in town by QUIK or ZEPHYR, much of what people saw up close was on canvas and in a gallery—in particular Yaki Kornblit's, who began to show New York graffiti writers like DONDI, and crucially, Henry Chalfant's photos of painted trains in 1983. For Boris Tellegen, a young teenager born in 1968, it was exciting, rough-edged, and he and his friends began to dive in as much as they could:

Boris grew up in a creative family, his mother constantly drawing, painting and making things. His father, Toon Tellegen, was a doctor by day, and in the evenings, Boris remembered him as "always behind a typewriter," authoring poetry and children's literature of wide renown in the Netherlands and beyond. But as Boris recalls, "I wasn't really into drawing until I started writing in 1983 and had to draw letters. Just before I started writing, I was beginning to show interest in samplers, keyboards and photography as well.

But all those hobbies got completely pushed aside by the game of writing."

A 1984 trip to New York City blew things wide open for the sixteen-year-old. For one, he went with his father, who recalled, "I do not remember his activities as a graffiti writer as something starting suddenly. I became gradually aware of it, but in the beginning, mostly as an observer of graffiti, not yet an active writer. This changed after we spent a week in New York in the '80s, sitting on the platforms of the subways, watching 'whole trains' pass by, and going to a Hall of Fame somewhere uptown on the West Side." By this time, Boris had taken the name DELTA and dove into drawing and painting, appreciating the support his parents expressed. "They understood the joy I had with writing, and figured that it wasn't too bad, despite being involved in non-legal activities."

European graffiti grew out of a three-city connection between London, Paris and Amsterdam. Artists such as SHOE and MODE2, among others, would gather at the Paris home of BANDOO, who is another story, to be sure, but two



items bear note for the moment. The first is that he was an absolute wizard of lettering. DELTA states the widely-held opinion that "BANDO's influence on us in Amsterdam and Europe cannot be overestimated." The other is in the department of small innovations that had wide impact, like a petite photocopier at his home in Paris. BANDO's frequent painting partner, the Amsterdam-based SHOE, remembers, "We would sketch our outlines for the night with hard, sharp pencils in our books. But since we, of course, would never take a sketchbook to go paint, we made photocopies."

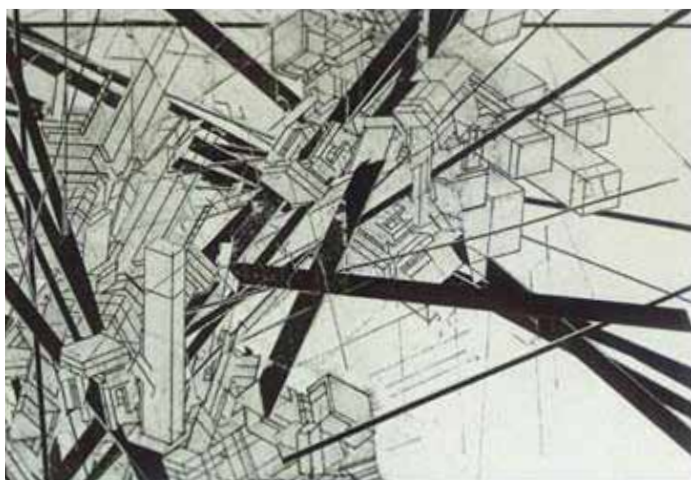
"Color copiers weren't around then, I think," continues DELTA, "and color marker-filled drawings would become grey clouds after copying. Sharp pencil sketches, however, would even look better after a run through a machine."

Since there was no internet in the mid-'80s, no graffiti magazines, and no books containing European graffiti, the best hope for a young European graffiti writer to learn from the best was to somehow get a hold of the sketchbook of one of those leading writers of the day—BANDO, SHOE,

MODE2, DELTA, and a handful of others. "We would all have tons of black books each and we would either draw in each other's now and then, or make copies of particular sketches for each other," BANDO explains. Nobody's quite sure exactly how it happened, but at some point, a pile of photocopied sketches by those leading artists began to circulate among graffiti writers hot on their heels. SHOE's best guess is his memory of painting a legal wall in Amsterdam in 1986. "Other writers would ask to see my book, then quickly Xeroxed all the outlines in a copy shop around the corner and returned the book to me." A small black market emerged. "I think they went for a few guilders [dollars] per sheet!" The pile of Xeroxes was never formally organized, of course, and other writers tacked their own sketches onto the pile and added tiny tags among the white spaces of famous writers' sketches. Even as the original coveted sketches deteriorated, they just kept looking better and provided a distinct blueprint for European style.

By 1991, DELTA was in his early twenties and studying Industrial Design at Delft University of Technology. "I didn't

above
Delta in studio
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Photos by Todd Mazer



DELTA
De Fein studio
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Photo by Todd Mazer

feel like doing art academy," he explains. "I never thought of becoming an artist. That's just something that gradually happened." He soon realized that a design firm probably wasn't what he wanted either. "After an internship at a company, I realized I wanted to be self employed, not being very fond of company culture." Since he was learning to think dimensionally, he applied that to graffiti, something he dove into after a short hiatus. At the time, Amsterdam's graffiti scene leapt forward to an era of great, individual styles and freedom of experimentation. It certainly helped that for several years, starting in 1991, the Amsterdam subway was the first system to be just as much of a glorious graffiti-covered mess as New York's

Up to that point, graffiti almost always had flat letters, even a 3D piece would only "raise" the letters as flat and parallel to the wall or train. The dimensional work of DELTA, who also used the name MESS and others in the early 1990s, would raise the letters in irregular ways that jumped toward the viewer in different angles. While there had been precedent going back to the early 1970s, what DELTA and others were

doing was a leap. A lot of the pieces were very technical, legal, and used the dozens of shades of blues, greens and other colors that European spray paint companies were offering, this being the first time companies had made spray paint with artists in mind. But DELTA painted in ways that a graffiti writer still had to love: illegally, sometimes on trains, in a raw way, with no characters or backgrounds, and with drips of whatever-I-have-on-hand color schemes.

By 1995, the subway system was back to clean and not as much fun. It made sense, then, for DELTA to take his work from the illusion of three dimensions to actual three dimensions. "When I started trying out pieces on canvas, I had difficulty with backgrounds. Actually, when doing pieces, I hated backgrounds. At some point, I tried out doing a piece on wood and then cutting it out." By the mid-1990s, he was looking an awful lot like an artist. He stripped out the loud colors of graffiti and gave the form even further refinement. "When you are a writer, you use whatever paint you can get your hands on. That's how it used to be, anyways. Color is something I only like to use in basic shades—a strong blue, yellow, red, maybe





Flowers 2
Mixed media collage
2019

Untitled
Litho 12.50" x 18.50"
2019



above right)
Sheet aluminum sculpture
at 'Yoda' Building
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2012

above left)
"Asphale" sculpture
Charleroi, Belgium
2014

aesthetic allure. Broken chunks of drywall, torn foam core, and corrugated wall board don't pull us in, but for him it was an issue of contrast. "Messy and clean work fine for me," he says, "Although with graffiti pieces back then, it might not have been very intentional. There are many guys out there that could work much cleaner. It's amazing to see somebody do a perfectly clean outline exactly where it is supposed to be; to do long straight lines, or to do a perfect circle. I am glad, though, that it was not something needed to do good pieces. To the contrary, maybe if you were really good with technique, it was a handicap, maybe too tempting to use it all the time. With the work I do now, it comes down to contrast again. Sloppy vs. clean. Clean works only well if there is some sloppy next to it."

The tension between sloppy and clean is one of the most interesting aspects of DELTA's work, especially with larger sculptural and architectural projects where he is one of a number of people working on a project to be experienced as a whole. A large portion of DELTA's creative output today is in providing sculpture, often with a functional aspect, for

new construction, or a textural flourish or embellishment on a new building. In that sense, it's his job to provide the sloppy on otherwise clean projects developed by other architects and landscape designers. "Working with people who are good at what they do is inspiring," he says. "I am always trying to find a way to adopt their skills a little bit and see if they can be used for my own work. Leaching!" It's certainly a remarkable ability for an artist to be able to move from the complete autonomy of the studio to the rigid parameters set by architects, structural engineers, fabricators and clients. About his many creative pursuits, DELTA puts it simply: "I like limitations. It's good to be pushed outside your comfort zone. I mean, I hate it, as it hurts to try to think of something new, but it's good. It exercises your brain."

Sometimes, that exercise looks and feels a lot like play, and play sometimes means taking out one's old toys and using them in new ways. In the early 2000s, DELTA had an old analog photocopier and had been asked by friends at the techno record label Deisn if he'd like to do some



album cover art for a new label called Ann Aimee. "I started copying and dissecting my drawings for the first time," he remembers. "And I found out, by doing this, that I came up with shapes I would not think of when drawing. After a while, I stacked so many pieces of sketchings on top of each other that it became formless, with a texture." With that, the photocopier helped birth a new direction and body of work.

Of course, we are also living in the golden age of graffiti painted by men and women in their forties. DELTA decided he'd paint some freight cars in Amsterdam. "I started doing them as a 'Why not? Let's enjoy ourselves' thing, but they became a sort of workout for me. I am drawing less and less these days, and doing pieces on them forced me to come up with new outlines, as I didn't want to be repetitive. I like the surface a lot. It's good metal, flat, at the right height, no ladders or chairs needed. Besides, they get seen a lot. I get a lot of response on them. I did 80 last year, tried to do 100, but work got in the way. Although, I shouldn't say that, as I treat them like work. They are part of the arsenal. Is that the right word?" Working with the barest of materials, white latex

paint and a can of black spray paint, these freights were a way to write graffiti at a level of illegality comfortable for a father in his mid-forties, but as he explains, "They represent the worst in energy transport: coal. I think they will fade out quickly. I expect them to be gone in a few years or so."

If and when they do, it's hard not to see DELTA finding another outlet and the name still multiplying. The writer in him is so foundational, even if the majority of his work of the last two decades has moved into terrain so unusual and individual that the roots are hard to see. Fall of 2016 will see a major show of his at the MIMA—Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art—a new venue opening this year in Brussels. "The show I will be doing will be a sort of retrospective. I am very excited."

And, for now, the last words go to his father, Toon Tellegen: "I am very proud of him."

JUZ

delatagallery.com

