



ABOVE: Tomi Vollaushchek (left) and Agathe Jacquillat (right) taking time out at their new office in Clerkenwell, London. It's a step up from their previous lodgings, and namesake, in Notting Hill. "You guessed it, the flat number was 33," says Vollaushchek





fl@33



Since they met at the RCA in 1999, the multi-lingual, multi-national and multi-disciplinary Agathe Jacquillat and Tomi Vollauchek have become designers sans frontières. Mark Penfold meets the design team selling its work, and squirrels, to an international audience

for clued-up clients including the Young Vic theatre, Sacla and MTV, FL@33 produces work that speaks of an unfettered mind. Agathe Jacquillat and Tomi Vollauchek aren't forcing the multi-X approach – promising fresh and interesting solutions, they strive to avoid stereotyping their work.

It's strange then that the agency has given its online retail experiment the name Stereohype. This is an outlet for self-commissioned work in the form of creative T-shirts, cards, prints, toys and books. You name it, FL@33 can do it.

Although the team has recently moved to more salubrious lodgings in Clerkenwell, London, until last year the office was based in a flat in Notting Hill. "And, you guessed it, the flat number was 33," explains Tomi Vollauchek. Hence the name.

That, of course, is the short answer. "The extended one," Vollauchek continues, "is a never-ending story about how difficult it is to have an @ sign in a company name. We love the number, but we don't know what

we were thinking when we came up with the @ sign." Jacquillat interjects: "When we changed our partnership to a limited company in 2005, we considered dropping the @." In the end, the pair relented because, after all, "It's got character." But, she laments, "You wouldn't believe the amount of typos in our mail addresses."

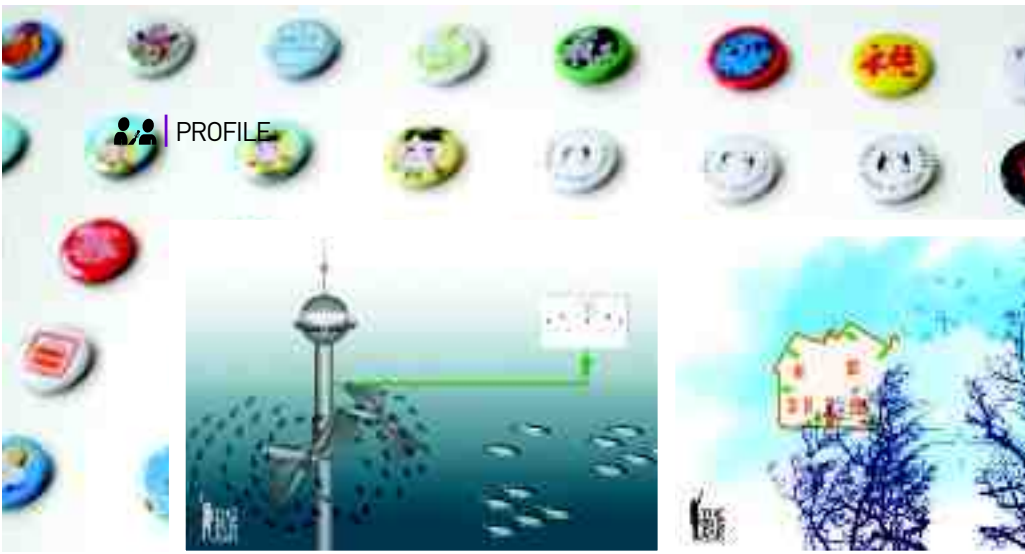
KEEPING IT FRESH

FL@33 isn't afraid of diversity, so much so that its website proclaims that the studio is multi-specialised. The fashion for specialisation that seems to have taken over the rest of the professional world is thankfully less evident in design. "We consider it very fashionable to offer a wide range of different creative approaches, techniques and media," says Vollauchek.

And, as Jacquillat points out, it's not just the media that is kept fluid: "FL@33's mission is to create a professional, vibrant, fresh and artistic body of work," she says. To achieve that, the agency must keep a balance between commissioned and self-initiated projects and publications. Vollauchek likes to keep things interesting: "It's more challenging to do motion graphics today, a visual identity tomorrow, a poster the day after and a custom typeface afterwards."

There's a knock-on effect in terms of style, which many aspire to but few





PROFILE



ABOVE: Some of the 15 illustrations produced with Friends of the Earth's creative director Martha Sakellariou for FOTE's 2006 climate-change campaign

RIGHT: *Animated Acoustic Typefaces* mini CD-ROM, featuring the fonts *unfolded*, *binary* and *delayed*. All were created between 1999 and 2001

LEFT AND BELOW: Designs for *200% Cotton*, the T-shirt graphics book from Laurence King Publishing



actually manage. "We're trying very hard not to become associated with one or two styles or projects," says Jacquillat. "Instead, we try to develop new, intriguing concepts and/or imagery whenever time allows and appropriate projects come along."

INTERNATIONAL INTEREST

Although they try to avoid visual habits, the international flavour is an important part of the studio's make-up. Jacquillat hails from France, while Vollauschek is of Austro-Hungarian extraction. In some cases, Jacquillat is quick to acknowledge, this has been the clincher: "We wouldn't, for instance, have worked for some of our Paris and Frankfurt-based clients otherwise."

You can expect continental clients to enjoy consorting with native speakers, but Jacquillat notes

another more interesting trend: "Even UK-based clients often mention that they appreciate a slightly more European/international perspective and approach," she says. "We like it when international clients approach us from all corners of the earth having spotted our website or published works," adds Vollauschek. But this pleasure is often mediated electronically. "Very often we don't actually get to meet these clients. It's briefed and finished off conveniently via email and FTP"

International or otherwise, Jacquillat is clear on the kind of clients she likes to work with: "We like clients who appreciate what we do and re-commission us because they trust us and believe that we will exceed their expectations," she says. "Our relationships are usually straightforward. Depending on the project, we are given either complete freedom

and/or enjoy very close communication to help develop the most appropriate results."

And that's the key to FL@33: appropriate results. "If, for instance, a visual experiment is promising but doesn't communicate the particular subject as well as another one, we will always put forward the stronger communication," says Vollauschek. "Most of our clients encourage us to present slightly edgier ideas – sometimes it's surprising how far we and our clients can push in relation to initial expectations."

FL@33 released a book in February this year, a monograph entitled *Design & Designer 033* –



LEFT: Flower Hunting in Congo: an illustration for the summer 2004 issue of *BlackBook* magazine in New York

RIGHT: Illustration for the book *Graphic Poetry* – a Wig-01 project published by Viction:ary. Poem by Barbara Hilal, London, 2004



“We will always put forward the stronger communication... Most of our clients encourage us to present slightly edgier ideas – sometimes it’s surprising how far we can push in relation to initial expectations” TOMI VOLLAUSCHEK

FL@33. “We had a solo exhibition in Paris from December 2004 until January 2005,” says Vollauschek. The opening night introduced FL@33 to one of those unseen clients, Paris-based graphic design magazine *étapes*, which had been a FL@33 collaborator since 2001. Six months later and the FL@33 monograph arrived back from the printers, but the process was far from smooth. “In 2002 – a year after we set up FL@33 – we were originally approached by a London-based publisher to sign us for a FL@33 book. It was a major follow-up of our *Trans-form* project,” Jacquillat remembers.

“We agreed, and had already worked on this project for at least six months when the publisher ran into financial difficulties,” she continues. The project was canned. FL@33 continued to think

about releasing a monograph from that point and, now that it’s been published by Pyramid Editions, Jacquillat and Vollauschek think there’s room for another. “We still have a vast amount of these self-initiated unreleased projects in our drawers.”

BRANCHING OUT

“It was a fantastic way for us to put our first projects aside, get them out of our system and move on,” says Jacquillat of the creative side-effects of the FL@33 book. These two are fond of moving on, of diversifying into products, toys and anything else that comes along.

“For us it started as a side-project, an expensive hobby,” Vollauschek says about the

PROFILE



ABOVE: Artwork for the ‘Butterflies in my stomach’ T-shirt and Stereohype squirrel illustration, both created at FL@33’s London studio in 2004



STEREOHYPE.COM

FL@33’S ONLINE SHOP LIVES UP TO THE HYPE

In October 2004 FL@33 launched graphic art and fashion boutique *stereohype.com*. Aside from FL@33 products, the site now provides an e-commerce outlet for the likes of Vaughan Oliver, Deanne Cheuk and Rinzen, and regular competitions give emerging and established artists, illustrators and designers the chance to promote their talent and to get their artworks produced and featured.

Two things sparked the creation of Stereohype. One was a website called *bzzzpeek.com*, says Vollauschek, “an online collection of ‘onomatopoeia’ from around the world.” A *New York Times* article in June 2005 catapulted the number of daily visitors to *bzzzpeek.com* from around 2,000 to 15,000 per day. “That’s when we realised the power of the internet.”

Vollauschek continues: “We were also working on the book design for *200% Cotton – New T-Shirt Graphics* in early 2004.” The fact that the book featured FL@33 shirts also set the duo thinking about an online shop. This flourished from a personal store into a platform for design from around the world.

“Stereohype is finally covering its own costs,” says Vollauschek. It even generates a little extra cash, allowing plans for the future. “We’re increasingly trying to add to our list of international wholesale/resellers.” Stereohype also plans to organise design competitions and encourage students to enter.

URL www.stereohype.com



RIGHT: Two-inch Qee for Toy2r. One of 20 competition winners in Design-A-Qee UK 2004



FL@33 Q&A

THE CREATIVES REVEAL THEIR INSPIRATIONS



AGATHE JACQUILLAT

JOB TITLE: Co-founder, studio/project manager, creative director, art director, designer, illustrator, programmer, receptionist, accountant and Tomi's assistant.

FROM: Paris, France

INSPIRED BY: Nature in general, and trees in particular. I simply love walking in dark forests.

FAVOURITE DESIGNER: I appreciate the work of plenty of young designers, but none in particular.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: The *Creative Review* cover commission, a phone call from MTV networks/VH1 and a commission for lots of motion graphics (even though they pulled the plug on the show – but hopefully after paying us), two radio interview invitations within two days for our bzzzpeek.com project back in June 2005, and, last but not least, our FL@33 book release.



TOMI VOLLAUSCHEK

JOB TITLE: Co-founder, studio/project manager, creative director, art director, designer, illustrator, programmer, receptionist, accountant and Agathe's assistant.

FROM: Frankfurt, Germany

INSPIRED BY: It could be anything really from music, futuristic and visionary ideas and concepts, to a little flower pushing its way through the tarmac.

FAVOURITE DESIGNERS: There are so many, including Ray and Charles Eames (for the best lounge chair ever), László Moholy-Nagy (for his Licht-Raum-Modulator) and Vaughan Oliver.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: The publication of our monograph, and the fact that we increasingly discover that new clients approach us because of recommendations. Also, articles in non-design publications, such as the *New York Times*.

range of products the studio now sells via its Stereohype brand and website. "It certainly is a completely different and probably riskier way of doing business," he admits, "but the immediate response to new products is truly fascinating. As much as we enjoy working with our clients, it's great to have the increasing chance to work on self-initiated projects: to produce, publish and sell them directly to an international audience."

Other branch-outs – exhibitions, for example – end up costing them money. "We love to visit exhibitions, but find organising them ourselves

exhibitions. They are an ideal way to meet potential collaborators and supporters."

Check out the Stereohype website and before long you start to notice a preponderance of tree-loving rodents. Is FL@33 obsessed? "Yep, I

"The immediate response to new products is truly fascinating. It's great to have the increasing chance to work on self-initiated projects: to produce, publish and sell them directly to an international audience" AGATHE JACQUILLAT

extremely tiring and usually very expensive," says Vollauscsek. But this aspect of creative life is a labour of love, one which Jacquillat at least intends to persevere with: "If we had more time and opportunities, we would certainly organise more

suppose we are," Vollauscsek admits. The obsession started when the European duo were working on the visual language and introductory T-shirt for Stereohype. "That's when we came up with the first squirrel illustration." The Stereohype customer-base



ABOVE: Sequential images showing how to write FL@33. "We don't know what we were thinking when we came up with the @ sign," says Vollauschek.

responded well to squirrel postcards, T-shirts and tags, so FL@33 continued to feature squirrels in its second collection, launched in autumn 2005. The introductory squirrel tee remains a bestseller.

WORKING PHILOSOPHY

From the squirrel tee to 'power of three', we move on to the FL@33 working ethos, which Jacquillat says is loosely based on "the balance of intellect, skill and emotion – a very helpful philosophy we first heard about at the RCA." The power of three isn't a strict rule, though, says Vollauschek: "We always encourage spontaneous and purely visual experimentation." This, he says, often helps in the unearthing of intriguing starting points. "It's more like a guideline we try to keep in mind."

So, faced with a brief, and keeping that guide in mind, how does FL@33 generate ideas? "We usually come up with a series of possibilities," says Jacquillat. "Tomi and I then boil it down to the most promising one each." Those two ideas form starting points for further discussions and visual experiments. "It's ping-pong from then on really."

"I don't think anybody would be interested to know how our ideas originate," says Vollauschek, "but I often have initial ideas while having a relaxing shower or, even more weirdly, while checking the content of the fridge for snacks." Don't try this at home.

Find out more about FL@33 and its work by visiting www.flat33.com

THE ESSENTIAL FL@33

KEY PROJECTS THAT RESULTED IN FL@33'S CREATIVE AND COMMERCIAL GROWTH



NUMBER ONE | TRANS-FORM

FL@33's first self-initiated publication, *Trans-form* magazine, dealt in loving technicolour with the ever-so-glamorous subject of tower cranes. "It was also our first product to be featured in the international press and was sold in shops such as Magma, Tate Modern, Colette and Centre George Pompidou," says Tomi Vollauschek.



NUMBER TWO | ROYAL FESTIVAL HALL CLASSICAL MUSIC CAMPAIGN 2002/03

The Royal Festival Hall project represented an important breakthrough moment for FL@33. "They were the first client to approach us after they saw a copy of *Trans-form* magazine," Vollauschek explains. Their rationale was simple: "If we can make tower cranes look intriguing and beautiful, we could do the same for other subjects."



NUMBER THREE | BZZZPEEK.COM

bzzzpeek.com is FL@33's "online collection of 'onomatopoeia' from around the world." Using sound recordings from native speakers imitating the sounds of animals and vehicles, this fun project had an unexpected impact, peaking at 15,000 visitors a day. "It was the first time we actually managed to get a direct reaction from a non-art and design audience," Vollauschek remembers.



NUMBER FOUR | PENCIL SCULPTURE ILLUSTRATION SERIES

Pencils for eyes? You have to hand it to FL@33, its ideas are first rate. This piece was another foundational moment. "It's another example of a self-initiated experiment that resulted in future commissions," says Vollauschek. "We love to do front covers. *Creative Review* was one of the first we did and it brought us clients such as MTV and VH1."



NUMBER FIVE | STEREOHYPE.COM

"Stereohype is our beloved new sister company," says Vollauschek. "It's an ambitious project, but one with huge potential. It's an expensive hobby too, but hopefully a future source of proper income that will make the workload worthwhile." Financial benefits aside, "It's a pleasure to create an entire visual language and apply it across all kinds of media."