

It looks like a newsletter run off at the local copy shop – and that’s intentional – but a little magazine from Amsterdam with the funny name of *Butt* is a big deal, at least in gay circles. And it just got a lot bigger. Turning five this year, the pink-paged, self-styled “fag mag” has been made into a book, a best-of collection of the quarterly’s cheekiest interviews and images called, naturally, *Butt Book*.

Perhaps best described as smut for the smart set, or homoerotic with an edge, *Butt* is the brainchild of its thirtysomething editors Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom. A pre-blog hybrid of filth, fun and fashion for gay men, *Butt* is, by turns, camp and serious, exhibitionist and erudite, scandalous and stylish.

One minute you could be reading a straightforward interview between the fashion design duo Viktor & Rolf and the singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright (who, as a result, became the “voice” of the designers’ new cologne) and the next minute you could be gazing, with equal parts horror and humour, at the contorted twists and turns of someone engaged in auto-fellatio.

At 560 pages, *Butt Book* (Taschen, £16.99) is no small endeavour, yet it succeeds in living up to the reputation that preceded it, while keeping the homemade, and certainly homemade, appeal of the original. Complete with previously unpublished material and reader submissions – lots of grainy pre- and post-coital self-portraits – from all over the world, the tome delivers precisely what the subtitle promises: “Adventures in 21st century gay subculture”. As if the cover image of a man sitting coily on a kitchen counter wearing only white sneakers and underwear pulled to his knees didn’t clue you in.

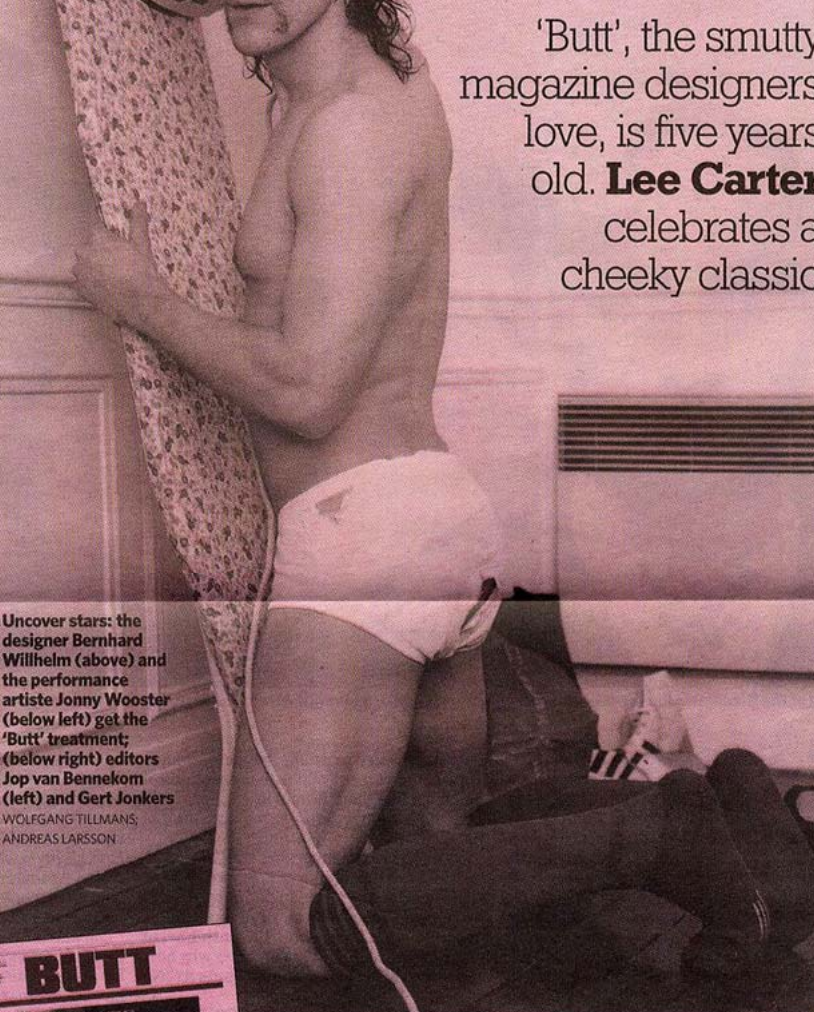
What, then, constitutes the best of *Butt*? In brief, Marc Jacobs recalling his nights spent at punk clubs as a 15-year-old “chicken” (issue No 7); John Waters ruminating on the conjoined terms “husbear” and “significant otter” (No 13); and Michael Stipe opening up about his first sexual experience – at the age of seven, no less (No 9). Out of their briefs are the Scissor Sisters vocalist Jake Shears, the New York writer Mike Albo, Casey Spooner from Fischerspooner (who’s been granted a recurring interview), and the experimental musicians behind Matmos.

Then there’s an assortment of gay artists, hairdressers, designers, directors, poets, florists, dancers and the occasional famous relative (Christopher Ciccone, for one). In the non-hierarchical world of *Butt*, the same loving attention is lavished on, for example, a porn actor from Long Island and a particularly well-endowed Brazilian hustler living in Paris.

Clearly, anything goes with *Butt*, but what you won’t find is flamboyant rainbow flag-waving. “It’s not that I’m against homosexuals getting married or adopting children,” explains Jonkers, in typical Dutch deadpan, “but we’re not looking for a common ground among gays. We feel that being gay has become too political. Everything we read focuses on being accepted – gay marriage, adoption, adultery between partners, where we go on holidays. Personal stories have disappeared from the picture. We want to get personal again.”

And personal is indeed what they got when, in 2001, *Butt* debuted with a story on the fashion designer Bernhard Wilhelm, photographed in the buff by the Turner Prize-winning Wolfgang Tillmans. In the question-and-answer report, he’s asked if he

Bottoms up!



‘Butt’, the smutty magazine designers love, is five years old. **Lee Carter** celebrates a cheeky classic

Uncover stars: the designer Bernhard Wilhelm (above) and the performance artiste Jonny Wooster (below left) get the ‘Butt’ treatment; (below right) editors Jop van Bennekom (left) and Gert Jonkers (right) with Wolfgang Tillmans and Andreas Larsson



‘I am against shame. We want to encourage people to talk more openly about sex’



has ever used whipped cream, and whether he panicked when he had his first wet dream. Tongues wagged at the crude little magazine that put the fun back in sex, or at least sex talk, and a cult following of devoted *Butt*-heads was immediately born.

Tillmans remains a contributing editor, and scores of bold-faced names

have lent their talents, from the Dior Homme designer Hedi Slimane and fashion photographer Inez van Lamsweerde (a fellow Netherlander who shoots for *Vogue* and *Visionaire*) to rising-star artist Terence Koh (aka Asianpunkboy), and the film-maker Bruce LaBruce. To the latter, “*Butt* harkens back to a tradition of avant-

garde gay aesthetics that has become lost in the current era of homosexual mainstreaming and assimilation”.

Butt’s latest coup (also in the book) is an interview with Helmut Lang, in which the recently resigned and otherwise hermetic Austrian-American designer avoids direct fashion talk, instead discussing his farm in

New York, where he’s been spending a lot of time writing in his diary. And because it’s *Butt*, he submitted so-called self-portraits in which he photographed his feet propped up against a backdrop of male porn. He is asked questions ranging from the provocatively mundane (What time do you get up in the morning? “Early”) to the downright obscene (If you could design your own genitals, what would they look like? “I have no need to redesign”).

It’s this refreshingly blunt vulgarity that Jonkers, formerly the fashion editor of the largest Dutch daily newspaper (and once a country and western singer who, for a time, lived in Nashville), hopes will “encourage people to talk about sex more openly. Shame is boring. I’m against shame. What I find strange about the gay scene is we’re not supposed to talk very much.”

True, there’s a sense of intelligent conversation going on beneath the scandalous surface of *Butt*. “When we started,” Jonkers adds, “we didn’t think it would last more than four issues. We thought we would just talk to some homosexuals, write it down and take their pictures. But, 17 issues later, we realised it became something more, a kind of anthropological study of gays in the first part of the 21st century. We didn’t do any market research, but I think the magazine laid bare a network of gay men who didn’t have a platform.”

“*Butt* makes being gay more interesting,” agrees van Bennekom, who is responsible for *Butt*’s signature low-tech design. “It’s like having a one-night stand, then talking about it over breakfast.”

Fashion advertisers, too, have responded to *Butt*’s cheeky appeal, including Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Dior Homme and Helmut Lang, as well as some more progressive art galleries and, most recently, American Apparel, the newest stockist where *Butt* can be found (although, for Japanese outlets, it will need to be wrapped, because of an odd law prohibiting any image of pubic hair).

If you’re wondering whether the *Butt* boys themselves bare all, they do. “Terry Richardson took a picture of me naked for the book,” Jonkers says. “I went to the studio in a pair of shorts. He took one photo of me from the back and said it would look better without the shorts. It’s not called what it is for nothing.”

Yet, while *Butt* is about dressing down, or undressing altogether, its new brother magazine is about dressing up. Launched last year, *Fantastic Man* is a “gentlemen’s style journal” aimed at gay and straight men alike. It’s a big surprise to learn that the fashion glossy has come from the same minds that gave us *Butt*.

Yet, if we’ve learnt anything, it’s that those minds are nothing if not unpredictable. *Fantastic Man*’s cover stars have included Rupert Everett, Giles Deacon and the Yves Saint Laurent designer Stefano Pilati, each mention of their name preceded with “Mr” to show that this is where men receive, ironically, formal treatment.

The publication this month of *Butt Book* will spread their message through the vast distribution channels of Taschen, publishers of high-end art books. Though the *Butt* staff, small as it is, have done an admirable job in distributing the magazine when regular outlets considered it too pornographic – and porn distributors not pornographic enough – the chance has come for the world to join the pink invasion from Amsterdam.

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