

BUTT vs. Frontiers

Dutch editors with a penchant for long headlines talk with the editor-in-chief of this magazine about the perils of gay media

BY ALEXANDER CHO

FOR THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNABASHEDLY SEXY, pink-papered Dutch gay magazine *BUTT*, art-house publisher Taschen released a 560-page book of some of the publication's best stories and interviews. From Wolfgang Tillmans flirting with Michael Stipe in a London hotel room to coeditor Jop van Bennekom getting debriefed by an expert ass masseur on the qualities of his asshole, the magazine's frank take on gay male life, art, and sex has been winning over readers on both sides of the Atlantic since its first issue. We phoned coeditors van Bennekom and Gert Jonkers in Amsterdam.

FRONTIERS: I was reading Bruce LaBruce's introduction in your book, and one thing that struck me was his quote: "*BUTT* fills a hole." In the U.S., there's an idea of gay publishing, at least on a national level, and there's a kind of crisis now. There's the question, is a mainstream, national gay magazine something that people are picking up? And then there's *BUTT*, which is not mainstream, but is a gay magazine that is vibrant and important. Where do you think that *BUTT* falls in that spectrum?

JOP VAN BENNEKOM: I think that when we started the magazine, we very deliberately didn't want to make a bridge to the straight world, or the world of fashion, or lifestyle, or to some kind of established gay industry. So in that respect, it started also as a magazine that would kind of turn us on, as men. It's men-only, for instance; it's gay-only. We don't do straight models on the cover, or in photo series. So it's a very restrictive kind of world. Which is kind of the appeal, because we don't have the intention to represent the whole gay world. We're just difficult because that's a trap that most gay clubs, gay bars, gay magazines fall into—they can't be specific because they serve a larger community. I think we created, with the magazine, our own little community. And there are also people who contribute to the magazine. It's almost like a

Especially in the earlier days, a lot of the magazine was about highlighting people who were friends of *BUTT*, an inside group. And in an interview in the book, you talk about how it was difficult or intimidating to start up a gay magazine being in the Netherlands, not necessarily at a nexus in the gay publishing industry.

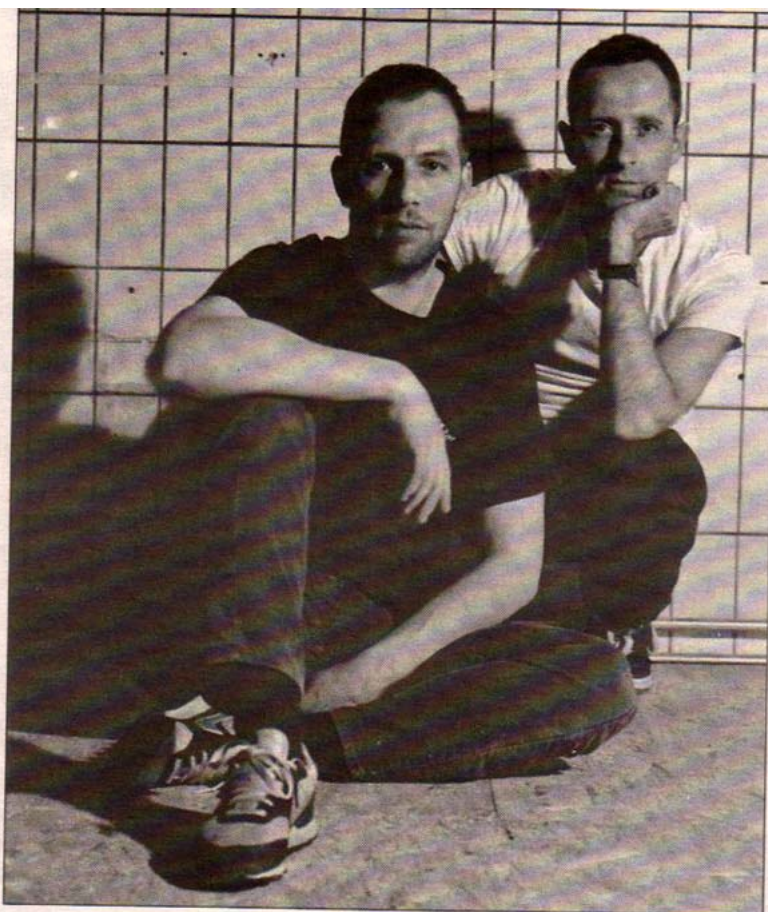
In the beginning it was really difficult to generate content, because we literally didn't know very many people in the gay world. So we had to make a lot of contacts.

How did you go about convincing people about what it was?
Oh, that was really difficult, especially in the gay world.

When they're not used to a magazine called *BUTT*.

Especially in the gay and lesbian bookstores. They were like, where should we give this magazine a place? It's not porn, but it's not glossy, it's not free—it's expensive. And what we did was just drove to the stores, ourselves, in the Netherlands. We just started with like 10 stores or 15 stores. It's still not being distributed by a big distributor, simply because they're not interested. And we are also not interested in having a whole wide distribution, where you could get the magazine everywhere—I was actually just saying this to somebody, an American, and I said that I also find it good that people have to search a little bit to find it, and the guy said, "Oh, that's such a European perspective." I find it special; people know very specifically where to pick up the magazine. And I kind of like that.

I think people respond to that. They understand that you're curating this thing for them that's very special, that's not something that you'll find anywhere else.



ANDREAS LARSSON

every interview kind of starts with, "So, what's wrong with other gay media?" which was also your first question in a way. But it's not like we ever meant this magazine to be completely oppositional, but much more as a vehicle for something we found interesting and sexy ourselves.

I was paging through a recent issue and there was a photo essay by Helmut Lang. Was there ever a point when you sat back and realized, "Holy shit, this is bigger than I thought it was going to be"?

We had a few of them. We did a party a year and a half or two years ago, and it was like such a big line outside, and such a hysterical kind of atmosphere, and we thought, "Oh wow, what's going on?" And we also had a very good lineup—we had Malcom McLaren DJing and Casey Spooner performing, and Wolfgang Tillmans DJing, and the Pet Shop Boys were there. That was a moment when we said, "Oh wow, what's happening?" Because we are still just making the magazine here in our basement studio in Amsterdam.

I think one of the driving forces of any magazine—whether or not it's conscious—is that it presents an idea of a lifestyle, or an idea of the way that people think. And I think that BUTT does that as well. I think there's this unbridled gay celebration that goes on, and I'm not talking about rainbow flags, but just sex, and gay, and men, and there. I wonder if that's something that you could call aspirational or voyeuristic?

GERT JONKERS: I think that it's voyeuristic in the sense that it's always nice to hear stories of other people, and other conversations. I think the magazine is a reflection of the life we also live. In that sense, it's not aspirational—we really want things to be true, at least in its shamelessness, honesty to yourself, what you're interested in, what you'd like to do, and feel happy about it, that you want to do that, regardless of what is expected of you by society, or the wrong friends, or what kind of standards they lay on you. I would say that we should be shameless about things—I mean, shame is such a boring thing.

I love how in some of your recent reader's letters sections, people write in and tell you that they're using the magazine to get laid. Not, like, responding to an ad—but that someone sees someone reading it on a train and it becomes this cultural and sexual touchstone. How do you feel about that?

It's great. It's more than you could ever hope for. If you could bring people together—who doesn't want to do that?