

# MIND MATTERS

A WARRIOR FOR AESTHETICS IN BUSINESS SAYS SENSIBILITY HAS NO BORDERS

STORY HELEN TRINCA PHOTOGRAPHY THOMAS VANHAUTE

JAN VAN MOL is doing something as prosaic as driving to his Brussels office when he takes the call from AFR BOSS. But tomorrow he will be on the road to Milan for the furniture fair and in a few weeks he flies to Australia for a conference on thinking.

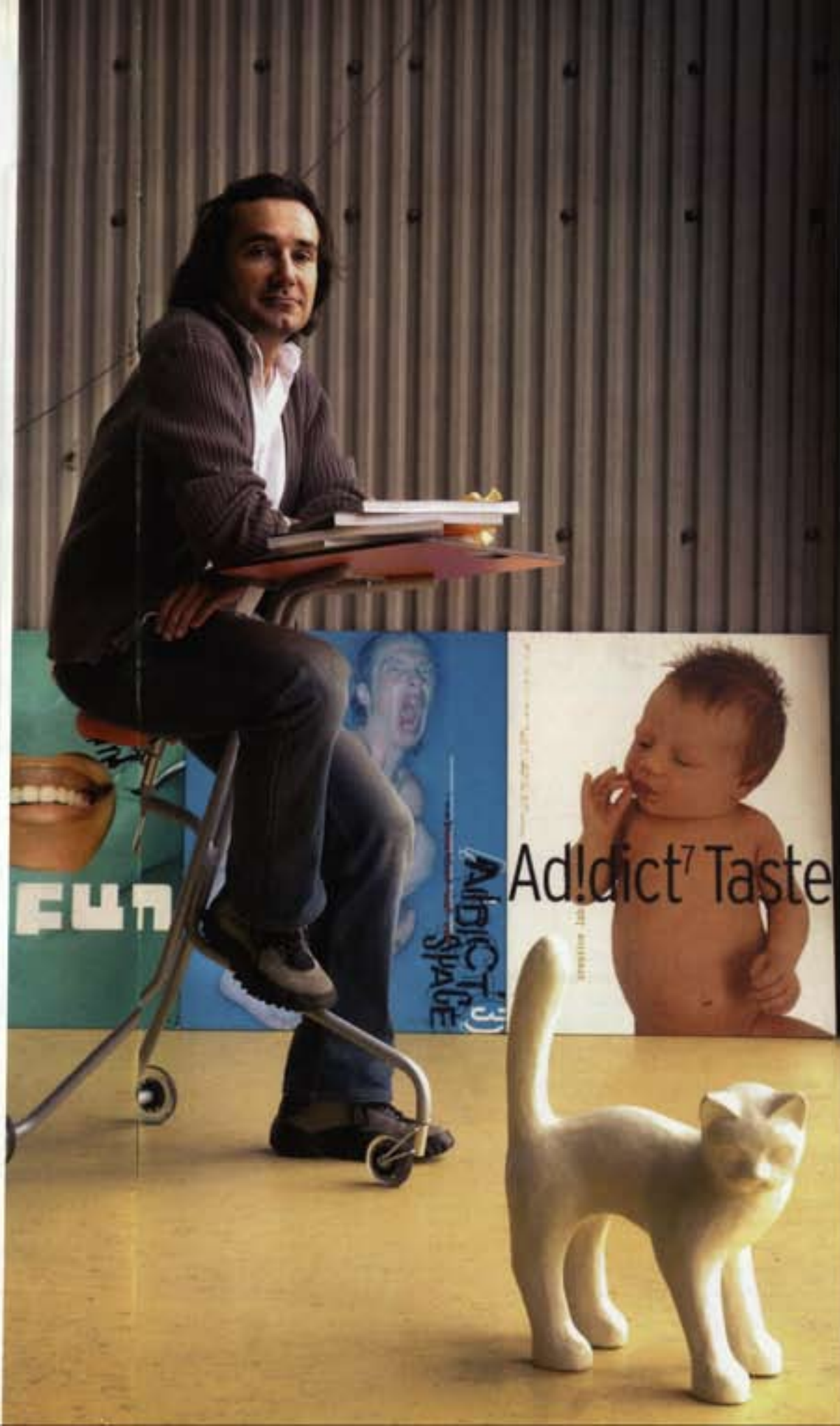
Appropriate for a man who runs a virtual branding house that links 4000 "creatives" around the world.

"I don't want to be linked to any frontier," says the engineer turned ad-man turned global brand guru. Sure he operates out of Brussels and Antwerp, now sites for great experimentation in fashion and design. But there are similar clusters of creativity in areas such as Bilbao in Spain and New York, New York as well as Melbourne, Australia, he says. The new world is about a global sensibility – not one contained by national or ethnic borders.

Van Mol is certainly doing his bit to break down the walls. The interactive Ad!dict Creative Lab is an internet-based community and think-tank which feeds work to clients ranging from BMW to Nike.

People such as Bruce Mau in Canada and Dutch-born Rem Koolhaas are in the same space when it comes to design, aesthetics and the regeneration of areas. Full on and funky, yet deeply serious about the process. But Van Mol's linkage of 4000 people from more than 30 disciplines (think photographers, cooks, musicians, architects et al) gives his work that global feel.

The Lab draws on the 4000 for specific branding or consulting jobs but at any one time the operatives are engaged in a range of projects using a range of media. Van Mol's philosophy is that advertising and branding cannot be separated from the process of design. A decade or so back, when, having worked unhappily as an engineer, he retrained in design and then launched his own advertising agency, he was unimpressed when told that the design of a product was "none of my business". At that stage, his agency was working in Belgium for the Korean carmaker Daewoo. He figured Daewoo had a marketing problem because the car's



seats were too small for the strapping Europeans. He told the company, which promptly put him in his place – as marketer not engineer.

The incident prompted Van Mol to go it alone with Ad!dict Lab, which now produces books and a magazine, has gallery space for exhibitions and offers creative exercises for paying clients. The latter include the "inspiration shower" which is about stimulating clients to think for themselves and "creative X-rays", which offer more detailed solutions to problems. An example: BMW once produced 20,000 motorbikes with roofs (that's right) and then found it hard to sell them. Ad!dict marshalled thinkers around the world and came up with solutions that involved rethinking the communication, the design of the bike and even the organisation of the company.

Van Mol has also been involved in rebranding cities (one of the hot new ideas that people such as "creative cities" man Richard Florida has popularised), and has worked with the cities of Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Kortrijk in Belgium.

He says one of the big problems with the way companies manage their marketing is the lack of communication inside the walls: "Most of the organisations are not coherent enough. There are different organisations within each organisation and they don't talk to one another."

The Lab is certainly edgy – a recent project involved (breakable) ceramic, see-through drink cans to house a Chinese-inspired "wellness" drink – but does it all come together in the harsh commercial world? Van Mol insists that the wide-ranging processes and the commitment to move outside the mainstream pay off in the end. He says the Lab is committed to three key points: the cross-fertilisation of ideas; a strong aesthetic; and an ethical underpinning.

It's a philosophy that has some interesting outcomes. A couple of years back, the Italian-based fashion company Diesel used Indian themes in its collection. Van Mol argued Diesel could not simply colonise Indian concepts but must involve Indian designers and thinkers. So he went to India and worked with locals on a separate collection which Diesel also commissioned. He counts it a triumph of the borderless world. ♦

Jan Van Mol will speak at the 12th International Conference on Thinking in Melbourne from July 4-8. Details at [www.thinkingconference.com](http://www.thinkingconference.com)