

The woman who  
shapes meaning  
HOW MIRIAM VAN DER LUBBE  
(VAN EIJK & VAN DER  
LUBBE) CONTRIBUTES TO  
BRINGING THE DISCUSSION  
ABOUT CHANGES IN MOBILITY  
TO A SOCIAL LEVEL

TEXT: MARKUS FRENZL

In actual fact Miriam van der Lubbe isn't the least bit interested in cars. Yet perhaps the three vehicle concepts for Volvo, which she has presented since 2014 together with her partner Niels van Eijk, have benefitted from precisely this approach to the topic, open and without preconceptions. After all, the ideas the pair have come up with for the designs of their "Experience in Motion" trilogy go far beyond the usual concept cars.

Miriam van der Lubbe was born in 1972 and studied at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, as well as Amsterdam's Sandberg Institute and the Design Academy in Eindhoven, from which she graduated in 1995. Since 1998 she has been collaborating with Niels van Eijk, who likewise studied at the Eindhoven Design Academy during the nineties – a time in which the conceptual approach of this design school made it a global sensation. Now van der Lubbe sees a challenge in taking the concept-heavy approach and carrying it through to reality.

The concepts and spatial ideas the pair develop for cultural institutions or businesses therefore always attempt to demonstrate specific approaches, change ways of behaving or explore future perspectives. Here it is important to them to reveal to the customer elements of potential he or she does not yet see. For them, it's not simply about creating another chair or another space, but rather a new meaning and genuine innovations. "Where a project is not about any real meaning, any real sense", explains van der Lubbe, "then we refuse it". The fact that Swedish automobile manufacturer Volvo gave the Dutch designers entirely free rein is therefore testament to an interest in the search for a new meaning for driving and the

mobility of the future. The first step for van Eijk and van der Lubbe involved extensive research and an examination of the heritage of the brand. The pair visited factories in Sweden and spoke with as many of the manufacturer's employees as possible. The 200 employees in the design department were initially a shock for van der Lubbe – what could her little team possibly have to tell them? But soon the pair recognized that their detachment from automobile design was actually an advantage. For their concept cars, they turned their attention to social issues: What do people actually need when driving a car? How will mobility develop in the near future?

What surprised van der Lubbe and van Eijk most in their research was that, in their view, the transformation among automobile manufacturers still primarily reflected the technology, yet did not represent real changes for use and for people. Many technical innovations reduced active driving, according to van der Lubbe, but on the other hand permitted new aspects for passengers in the sense of a human, "low-tech" quality. When it comes to exhibiting a concept car at an automotive show, the idea is generally to pack in as many high-tech features as possible. The designers, however, wanted to head in an entirely different direction and demonstrate new individual, social and human aspects.

They therefore developed not one concept car, but three, all dedicated to the potential of contrary aspects of the auto-motive future and rethinking it. For each of the concepts, which they named "Contact", "The Fun of Driving" and "Outward Looking", they designed the outer shell, the interior and accompanying everyday objects such as bags or scarves. The aim was to use their trusted benchmark to permit a close re-

ference to the concepts, foster an examination of the future of motoring and prevent an overly rapid rejection of provocative ideas.

#### A cooking pot in the car

With the concept for the "Contact" design, van der Lubbe and van Eijk worked on the premise that technology would take over the driving completely. What the user gets back from this is space. Some time is still needed for the bridging of certain distances; a journey of hundreds of kilometers within several seconds is something we can't expect to see in the near future. But how can you make best use of your time in a car that you no longer have to drive? – The two designers focused entirely on the social aspect of travel, the opportunity to exchange ideas and to communicate, to delve deeply into a topic and to develop ideas and resolve problems. From the outside, therefore, "Contact" is an entirely closed, indeed almost isolated vehicle from which you cannot see out.

The outer material of the car consists of a closed "soft-shell" mantle made of fabric into which images from the company's history are woven with thin metal thread. In the interior, all the seats are directed towards one another. Wood is used here in striking contrast to the outer high-tech shell. The cast-iron cooking pot which they developed as a product for this concept car is meant to be deliberately provocative here: What is a cookpot doing in a car? At the same time it is supposed to be a symbol for the idea of spending a lot of time together, refining ideas and in doing so reaching a carefully considered result.

#### A vehicle as a fashion statement

With the second concept car, "The Fun of Driving", the pair reacted to the concern that the fun of driving, which is



"THE FUN OF DRIVING"  
 FOR VOLVO BY VAN EIJK & VAN DER LUBBE  
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"OUTWARD LOOKING" – THE CAR AS ARCHITECTURE  
 FOR VOLVO BY VAN EIJK & VAN DER LUBBE  
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still very important to a lot of people, will be lost if technology takes over the driving.

While Miriam van der Lubbe was working on the project she tried driving a car that already takes over many tasks previously in the hands of the driver, and in doing so she noticed how bored she was on a one-hour journey, and indeed how dangerous the tiredness is that overcomes you when you no longer have anything to do in the car. Since pleasure in driving is an individual experience, the concept of this car is not designed for exchange, but merely for one or two people who want to get from A to B as quickly as possible. Their gaze is directed at the road, not at their surroundings. The users steer the car themselves, and the technology only steps in when hazardous situations arise. Since the car is more closely related to the identity of the users than in the two other concepts, it also blends more closely with them. Van der

Lubbe and van Eijk dedicated the vehicle concept to the theme of fashion: It is finished entirely in leather and becomes a bespoke item of clothing that the driver puts on. In the interior, a joystick manifests the enjoyment of driving. Alongside scarves and a bag, the designers also created a piece of jewelry for this concept which, when worn by the driver, becomes part of their personality and the car key of the future. If this important piece of jewelry is given to someone else in order to lend that person the car, then it represents a special gift.

**The car blends with the surroundings** With the third concept, "Outward Looking", the two designers' focus was less on the social components and more on the incorporation of the surroundings. "The invention of the car changed the world", says van der Lubbe. "Now that the car is changing, the world is changing once again." In the architecture they reference with this concept,

they see the central questions of society addressed. The concept car therefore consists of three architectural volumes which point in three different directions. On the outside, the car is entirely mirrored in order to merge with its surroundings. In the interior passengers can stand, sit or lie; windows permit views out in all directions, regardless of the driving direction.

"With the entire project our aim was to open up the discussion for 'normal people' too." It is therefore unimportant to van der Lubbe whether people like the designs or not; what is important to her is that the discussion about the change in mobility and individual transport is finally conducted from a "human" perspective too. "The automotive industry always believes it is entirely user-centered. I don't think that's really the case. Most of the new ideas are always oriented very much towards technology, but I believe that this is something that won't interest people any more in 20



"CONTACT"  
FOR VOLVO BY VAN EIJK & VAN DER LUBBE  
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years' time." Younger people in particular already see the iPhone or social media as more important for their identity than ownership of a car, Lubbe goes on to say. And although the automotive industry is wise to these developments, it is hard for it to react to them, she claims. At the same time there is enormous potential for the industry to play an important role in the public space.

For Miriam van der Lubbe there is no question that the vehicle landscape, indeed the entire world of motoring, will change fundamentally over the next twenty years. The technological approaches for these profound changes are already available, she says, but what's currently problematic here is actually implementing them. Rules and regulations still stand in the way of the transformation, according to Lubbe. "Why, for example, does a car still have external mirrors? With all the technology these have long become superfluous, but the rules still dictate this

should be the case. That's simply laughable! Why are transport regulations the same as they were 100 years ago? That's absurd!"

One of the most surprising aspects for the two designers during the eighteen-month-long project was the fact that their discussions with Dutch political bodies uncovered no concept for how society should develop with regard to transport and mobility. Everybody beavers away from their own particular perspective, they explain, but there is no team that combines the brightest minds in the various disciplines which can then develop a vision of where the future of mobility is headed. Only once this is achieved, says van der Lubbe, will it be possible to come up with sensible solutions to environmental issues, legal questions and regulations.

So if you ask the designer about her view of the future of individual transport, she is unequivocal: The idea of

individual transport will not survive in the form it currently takes. A small group will perhaps still focus on driving themselves, but there is a fundamental need to finally address the social impacts of technological developments in the area of mobility, she says. This demands planned action on a political level, but also an openness to the new possibilities within the automotive industry. The way this transformation might impact on the appearance of our cars has been demonstrated in exaggerated form in the concepts of van der Lubbe and van Eijk. And it's safe to say that with a cooking pot in the car, bespoke leather bodywork and self-driving, mirrored cubes, their aim of triggering discussion about the motoring of the future has been achieved.