

2006 Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation Daniel van der Velden



Members of the Unimark International studio, Milan, 1966 Courtesy Rochester Institute of Technology Vignelli Center for Design Archives

whaling as a punishable crime. It is a way to dissociate the ship and its crew from their true intentions. This is, I think, comparable and analogous to what is at risk of happening in art and design practices today. That risk is that we start naming them research practices while what's going on below the surface is business as usual. Not every practice is a research. On the other hand: not every research is a practice. If we want to describe how design practice at present *tends towards research*, or defines conditions for it, one way to start is by looking at what it is designers are doing, and how they bring their interests and their obsessions into the work they do, and how their working methods are changing, and how, in fact, all-embracing definitions of design practice are increasingly hard to draw. It is still quite normal to assume that actually, designers are pragmatists and all they want to do is solve problems. ¶ But under the



HMS Argus, with "razzle dazzle" warship camouflage, 1918



HMS Mauretania, with "razzle dazzle" warship camouflage, 1918

Introductory Remarks to Research on Research III Symposium

The unpleasant picture shown here is important for a number of reasons. Ecological, environmental and ethical ones—yet just one of those reasons concerns us today. What are we looking at? In fact, the picture's taken from aboard one of the ships of an organization called Sea Shepherd. Sea Shepherd is a radical conservation society, founded by Paul Watson, a co-founder of Greenpeace. Sea Shepherd, contrary to Greenpeace, when it encounters a ship hunting for whales, it will warn once, and upon ignorance of that warning, will attempt to disable it. And that's what is about to happen here. This picture was taken while Sea Shepherd was pursuing a Japanese whaling fleet in the Southern Ocean. The targeted ship was the *Nisshin Maru*. It was the last remaining one of the so-called factory ships. These ships are used to process whales into canned meat while at sea. Now since commercial whaling is forbidden, the Japanese had tried to do something to prevent their mothership, the *Nisshin Maru*, from being targeted by the international treaties. They had painted a text on the ship's side. The text read: Research. Now I would wholeheartedly agree if you would claim that this is far from the ideal way to start today's symposium about graphic design. However, what I want to isolate from the case just outlined is the particular usage that the term "Research" is getting here. It is of course used as a sign or logo that lets the ship, its crew, and its fleet, be *exempt* from rules and laws that define commercial



Sea Shepherd M/Y Robert Hunter trails Japanese whaling fleet's factory ship, the *Nisshin Maru*, in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary off the coast of Antarctica, February 9, 2007 Photo: Sea Shepherd Conservation Society



Total Design studio portrait featuring Wim Crowell (front left), 1982 ©Total Design Photo: Paul Huf/MAI Courtesy Unit Editions

influence of the information revolution, graphic design is set adrift and has begun finding new mandates and possibilities: simply because the computer has brought typesetting into the designer's studio, and that computer has email in it and is connected to the internet, many different faculties of and in designers are potentially being activated and developed. ¶ For example, many graphic designers nowadays are writers and work extensively with forms of discourse and written exchange as part of shaping practice. The works they produce visually, as designers in the classical sense, cannot be seen independently from these writings. In that, they are not unlike some of their avant-garde predecessors from the modernist movements. ¶ Some designers have changed what used to be the common design practice of stealing from each other's work: they have started *referencing* their visual sources instead, which is indeed a meaningful departure from the implicit notion of competition and appropriation that underpin design as a fashion and trade. ¶ The agency of designers in other fields than their own craft, results in many designers being invited into their context with a clean sheet, no agenda, a *carte blanche*. ¶ Here, in a way, they can design their own role from scratch. Rather than being asked to serve a pre-defined objective, designers often become wildcards, chameleons, adaptively changing color by the minute. Solving a traditional design problem is just one out of many roles that the designer is performing simultaneously. ¶ One of the other consequences of our changing tools is that we can set up a studio now anywhere we want. There is no need to be contained within the four walls of an expensive metropolitan office space stuffed with Vitra chairs. ¶ Many examples of cutting edge design are now being produced by collectives and entities who are not studios in the classical sense, and who operate from the unlikelyst of places, often mobile, sometimes unglamorous, and even at times from remote natural resorts where life is still good and affordable. ¶ Other designers have started expanding their skills to formulate models and speculative scenarios. As such, they are bringing design thinking into areas off-limits to the strictly *productive* reach of what it is designers do, into a more *strategic* understanding of what design might become. ¶ But just like the commercial whaling Research shown here entails a risk, so does what I just briefly spoke about. The manifold positions which designers find themselves capable of occupying, eventually bring the risk that there's no time left to actually make work. We may become so incredibly smart that we will be left in between all our knowledge-intensive networking activities with nothing to show. ¶ Let this never happen. Do research. Make work. And let's talk about it. —Daniel van der Velden, Jan van Eyck Academie, 2007

“Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the labor involved in this production immaterial labor—that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication.”
—Toni Negri & Michael Hardt, *Empire*, 2000

Does your desire for Dior shoes, Comme des Garçons clothes, an Apple iPod, and a Nespresso machine come from need? Is design necessary? Is it credible when a designer starts talking about need, the moment he arrives home from a weekend of shopping in Paris? Can you survive without lifestyle magazines? Can you live without a fax machine that sends an SMS to the supplier whenever the toner needs replacing? Is it necessary to drive a car in which, for safety, nearly all the driver’s bodily functions have been taken over by the computer—while the driver, at a cruising speed of 170 kilometres per hour, is lulled to sleep by the artificial atmosphere in his control cabin with tilting keyboard, gesture-driven navigation, television, and Internet service?

We no longer have any desire for design that is driven by need. Something less prestigious than a “designed” object can do the same thing for less money. The Porsche Cayenne brings you home, but any car will do the same thing, certainly less expensively and probably just as quickly. But who remembers the first book, the first table, the first house, the first airplane? All these inventions went through a prototype phase, to a more or less fully developed model, which subsequently became design. Invention and a design represent different stages of a technological development, but unfortunately, these concepts are being confused with one another. If the design is in fact the aesthetic refinement of an invention, then there is room for debate about what the “design problem” is. Many designers still use the term “problem-solving” as a non-defined description of their task. But what is the problem? Is it scientific? Is it social? Is it aesthetic? Is the problem the list of prerequisites? Or is the problem the fact that there is no problem?

Design is added value. En masse, designers throw themselves into desires instead of needs. There is nothing wrong with admitting as much. Konstantin Grcic, Rodolfo Dordoni, and Philippe Starck are found in *Wallpaper* boutiques, not in Aldi supermarkets. Unvaryingly, the poorest families—for they are always around—are still living with secondhand settees in grey, postwar neighborhoods, in a total absence of design. Orchestration of “third-world” design assembled for the cameras cannot

escape the image of the world in poverty having to make do without the luxury gadgets that are so typical of contemporary design. The hope that some designers still cherish, of being commissioned to work from the perspective of objective need, is in vain. Design only generates longing. The problem is the problem of luxury.

Graphic design

There is one discipline in which, less than ever before, the definition of the problem and the solution are bound to a scientific, technical, or even just a factual state of affairs. That discipline is graphic design—or visual communications. Even Paul Mijksenaar cannot deny the fact that passengers still manage to find their flights in airports where he did not design the airport signposting. Meanwhile, the letter type that he developed for Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport is also the airport’s logo. In graphic design, every “problem” is coloured by the desire for identity on the part of the client. They are the problems and the solutions of the game of rhetoric, expectations, and opinions. The graphic designer, therefore, has to be good at political maneuvering.

The effect of this depends, among other things, on his position in regard to his client. What has historically come to be referred to as “important graphic design” was often produced by designers whose clients considered them as equals. See, for example, Piet Zwart, Herbert Bayer, Paul Rand, Wim Crowel, and Massimo Vignelli, all designers who worked for cultural organisations as well as for commercial enterprises.

Today, an “important graphic design” is one generated by the designer himself, a commentary in the margins of visual culture. Sometimes the design represents a generous client. More often, it is a completely isolated, individual act, for which the designer mobilized the facilities at his disposal, as Wim Crowel once did with his studio. It always concerns designs that have removed themselves from the usual commission structure and its fixed role definitions. The designer does not solve the other person’s problems, but becomes his own author.¹

As a parallel to this, innovating designers pull away from the world of companies and corporations, logos and house styles. Their place is taken over by communications managers, marketing experts and, for some ten years now, design managers, engaged on behalf of the client to direct the design process. The design manager does what the designers also want to do—determine the overall line. In contrast to the “total design” of the past, there is now the dispirited mandate of the “look and feel”—

a term that catches designers in the web of endless manipulating of the dimensions of form, colour, and feeling.

It is not so strange that a branch of graphic design has evolved that no longer hangs around waiting for an assignment, but instead takes action on its own accord. It has polarized into the “willing to work,” who often have little or no control over their own positions, and the “out of work,” who, with little economic support beyond re-channelled subsidies or grants, work on innovation for the sake of innovation.

Designing as factory work

In the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, Annette Nijs, cultural spokesperson for the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy), wrote, “We are making a turn, away from the assembly line to the laboratory and the design studios, from the working class to the creative class (estimates vary from 30% to 45% of the professional population).”²

According to a study by the TNO, the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, the major portion of economic worth derived from design (about € 2.6 billion in 2001) is from visual communications.³ Can a designer, if he is in fact seen by the VVD politician as the successor to the factory worker, still encompass the strategic distinction that Alvin Lustig, Milton Glaser, Gert Dumbar, Peter Saville, and Paula Scher made in the meeting rooms of their respective clients? Is a designer someone who thinks up ideas, designs, produces, and sells, or someone who holds a mouse and drags objects across a computer screen?

If designers are labourers, then their labour can be purchased at the lowest possible price. The real designer then becomes his own client. Emancipation works two ways. Why should designers have the arrogance to call themselves author, editor in chief, client, and initiator, if the client is not allowed to do the same? Only the price remains to be settled, and that happens wherever it is at its lowest. Parallel developments here find their logical end: the retreat of the innovative designer away from corporate culture and the client’s increasing control over the design.

Designing and negativity

In recent years, the graphic designer has shown himself as—what has he not shown himself to be? Artist, editor, author, initiator, skillful rhetorician, architect....⁴ The designer is his own client, who, like Narcissus, admires himself in the mirror of the design books and magazines, but he

is also the designer who does things besides designing, and consequently further advances his profession.

The ambition of the designer always leads beyond his discipline and his official mandate, without this above-and-beyond having a diploma or even a name of its own. Still, it is remarkable that design, as an intrinsic activity, as an objective in itself, enjoys far less respect than the combination of design and one or more other specialisms. A pioneering designer does more than just design—and it is precisely this that gives design meaning. Willem Sandberg was a graphic designer, but he was also the director of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum (for which he did his most famous work, in the combined role of designer and his own client). Wim Crowel was a graphic designer, but also a model, a politician, stylist, and later, also a museum director.

Is the title of “designer” so specific that every escape from it becomes world headlines? No, it is not that. The title is not even regulated: anyone can call himself a designer. It is something else. The title of “designer” is not specifically defined, but negatively defined. The title of designer exists by way of what it excludes.

Designers have an enormous vocabulary at their disposal, all to describe what they are not, what they do not do, and what they cannot do. Beatrice Warde, who worked in-house for the Monotype Corporation when she wrote her famous epistle, “The Crystal Goblet,” impressed on designers the fact that their work is not art, even though today it is exhibited in almost every museum.⁵ Many a designer’s tale for a client or the public begins with a description of what has not been made. In the Dutch design magazine *Items*, critic Ewan Lentjes wrote that designers are not thinkers, even though their primary task is thorough reflection on the work they do.⁶ Making art without making art, doing by not doing, contemplating without thinking: *less is more in die Beschränkung zeigt sich der Meister; kill your darlings*. Add to this, the long-term obsession with invisibility and absence. Sometimes it is self-censorship, sometimes disinterest, but it is always negative. The cause is undoubtedly deference or modesty. Designers often consider themselves very noble in their through-thick-and-thin work ethic, their noblesse oblige.

Graphic design is still not developing a vocabulary, and hence has not begun developing an itinerary to deepen a profession that has indeed now been around for a while. This became very clear in October of 2005, when the book presentation for *Dutch Resource* took place in Paris, at an evening

devoted to Dutch design, organized by the Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem, who published the book. The French designers who attended praised “typography at this level,” as though it were an exhibition of flower arrangements, whereas the entire textual content of the book had been compiled by the designers at Werkplaats Typografie, and there was more to speak about than just the beautiful letter type. At the presentation, it was this search for depth and substance for which there was no interest and most of all, no vocabulary. One attending master among the Parisian designers, who rose to fame in the 1970s and 1980s, did not have a good word to say about the design climate and the ever-increasing commercialization. He dismissed out of hand a suggestion that this could be referred to as a “European” situation. Although commercialization is a worldwide phenomenon, for him, the fight against it was specifically French.

Design as knowledge

Despite the interesting depth in graphic design, its vocabulary is made up of negative terms. This frequently turns meetings of more than three practitioners of this noble profession into soporific testimonies of professional frustration. The dialectic between client and designer, the tension between giving and taking and negotiating is threatened with extinction, because both designer and client avoid the confrontation. The former becomes an autonomous genius and the latter an autocratic “initiator” for freelancers offering their services. We have already talked about need. Instead of giving the wrong answers, design should instead begin asking interesting questions.

In the future, design might have to assume the role of “developer” if it wants to be taken seriously. The Netherlands still enjoys a grants system. Internationally, things are not so rosy. Denying this fact would be the same as saying, “I have enough money, so poverty does not exist.” The market conditions that are beginning to seep into the Netherlands, France, and the rest of Europe are already the norm for the rest of the world.

Consequently, the knowledge economy—the competitive advantage, according to Annette Nijs, the VVD politician—will quickly become a thing of the past, if holding a mouse proves cheaper in Beijing than in the west of Holland. The true investment is the investment in design itself, as a discipline that conducts research and generates knowledge—knowledge that makes it possible to seriously participate in discussions that are not about design. Let this be knowledge that no one has asked for, in which the designer is without the handhold of an

assignment, a framework of conditions, his deference, without anyone to pat him on the shoulder or upbraid him. Let the designer take on the debate with the institutions, the brand names or the political parties, without it all being about getting the job or having the job fail. Let designers do some serious reading and writing of their own. Let designers offer the surplus value, the uselessness and the authorship of their profession to the world, to politics, to society.

But do not let designers just become walking encyclopaedias, adorned with such titles as “master,” “doctor,” or “professor,” their qualifications dependent on a framed certificate hanging on the wall. Let there be a design practice in which the hypothesis—the proposal—has higher esteem than need and justification.

In 1972, for the catalogue for the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Emilio Ambasz wrote about two contradictory directions in architecture: “The first attitude involves a commitment to design as a problem-solving activity, capable of formulating, in physical terms, solutions to problems encountered in the natural and socio-cultural milieu. The opposite attitude, which we may call one of counter-design, chooses instead to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social and political involvement as a way of bringing about structural changes in our society.”⁷

With the removal of need and the commissioned assignment as an inseparable duo, the door is open to new paths. The designer must use this freedom, for once, not to design something else, but to redesign himself. ■

Originally published in *Metropolis M* 2, April/May 2006.

Notes

1. See also Camiel van Winkel, *Het primaat van de zichtbaarheid* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), 177.
2. *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 February 2006.
3. The TNO report, *Vormgeving in de Creatieve Economie*, January 2005, can be found at www.premsele.org.
4. From the jury report for the 2003 Rotterdam Design Award: “More or less all the positions that designers have taken in recent years have passed revue: the designer as artist, the designer as technocrat, the designer as editor, as director, as a servant for the public cause, as comedian, as critic and as theorist.”
5. Beatrice Warde, “The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should Be Invisible,” in *The Crystal Goblet, Sixteen Essays on Typography* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956).
6. Ewan Lentjes, “Ontwerpers zijn geen denkers,” in *Items* 6, 2003.
7. Peter Lang, “Superstudio’s Last Stand, 1972–1978,” in *Superstudio: The Middelburg Lectures*, ed. Valentijn Byvanck (Middelburg, the Netherlands: Zeeuws Museum, 2005), 46.