In the second half of 1997, some three years after the idea had first been discussed, the Werkplaats Typografie made a beginning of sorts. Karel Martens and Wigger Biema shifted home offices to an empty building in provincial Arnhem whose previous incarnations included a local radio station and theater college and whose rough form and gawky charm were ideal to realize their mental sketch of a new kind of school. Officially affiliated with the town’s main art college (the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Arnhem), yet physically detached, the impetus derived from a gradual disenchantment with their practical involvement in existing Dutch postgraduate programs. These increasingly tended to be either overwhelmingly fine art- or theory-based. Both lacked essential grounding in real work. Karel and Wigger’s aim was nothing as grand as pioneering; merely a shared conclusion that the workshop format (with equal emphasis on work and shop) was the obvious environment in which to practice advanced design education. Given this premise, the open plan of both architecture and attitude was both deliberate and vital.
The Meriplans’s introductory pamphlet was loaded with what would become typical Meriplans issues and contradictions: sixteen sober pages of black and orange 9/12 pt. Janson Text on uncoated off-white stock that told everything and nothing about the piece. Just as actual work tells more than flat reproductions of graphic design ever can, a visit to the building and a meeting with the people was always going to be the only way of really finding out. The necessary informality of this (ed)venture demands a lot more chemistry — a connection, a feeling — than most of its counterpart graphic design institutions. The brochure is a reluctant go-between — a dubious compromise — and if all this seems like ridiculous detail, well, it is. But somehow the Meriplans is all about considering this ridiculous detail, fostering some permanently critical attitude that infects everything, including the work.

In the current context of Dutch design where college prospectuses and related publications are overfunded and overdesigned, the neutrality of the Meriplans pamphlet consciously mirrors the empty potential of the building. Year after year, design/industry/modernism. And the content — manifests mesoerauding as synopsis — reads like late night inspiration put through the official college filter. In many ways this object was more a catalyst — and a means of making ideas concrete — than a concerted attempt to publicize, particularly since it was only distributed in the most haphazard way. But this word-of-mouth and friend-to-friend acquisition shouldn’t be interpreted as ellipsis, which, in its case, is as far as possible from the intended spirit. Rather, it is due to what is at best practical cautiousness and at worst, tax disorganization.

So the pamphlet was the birth certificate, but in many ways it was already laid out and out of date. The account you are now reading is the unoffical companion piece, intended to redress the balance and update: some verbal Polaresminus, visual house-movie skills and a pile of work to document our first eight months.

In the New Year there were four of us: by spring, six; and at the end of summer hopefully ten. After that, filled up for the foreseeable future. The first couple of months were dominated by building refurbishment, sourcing furniture and technology. Little work islands appeared in the large studio space, shifting every couple of weeks with a spaghetti of wires and extension cables, gradually joining as new tables arrived from the metalwork department. The two-cup maximum Krups coffee machine was our glue for a while, a common meeting point. Conception by alcohol perhaps, but the birth wascaffeine-fueled, and splitting the expresso bill was our first formal agreement. And all the time there was a wired sense of opportunity as this corner of Arnhem in a corner of Holland in a corner of Europe and the excitement of being there at the beginning, occupying a space and filling it with ideas. Developments seemed slow, but always necessary for the eventual bloom, knowing that this incubation period would establish many lifelong aspects of the Meriplans’s character.

The Meriplans is almost impossible to explain to anyone back home. Studying or working? Well, both. The emphasis is on learning rather than teaching, I say, but receive blank looks. There are no formal lessons, nothing approaching classes. No do-real work — acquired personally or through the school itself (and hopefully this will happen more as we become established) — together or alone, depending on the size and nature of the job. Everyone is free to comment on ideas and proposals. Payment (if at all) is divided between ourselves and the institution; half the money earned goes back into running the building.

Then the next question is always why not just get a proper job? and the reason has something to do with the value of working in an environment of mutual respect. In — and most of my friends — experience, this is a rare luxury. Increasingly, it seems that most young designers covet the position of art director, essentially doing less practical and more supervisory work (and earning more money). It’s no coincidence that the designers we appreciate most are those who will always continue working hands-on, simply because they enjoy designing. That’s why they did it in the first place. It’s hard to imagine anyone here operating in a traditionally hierarchical studio setup, and in this instance the pamphlet is accurate in its description of the Meriplans as bridge between tertiary education and personal practice. A twilight zone between school and work. The loose set-up and collective familiarity across projects allows us to leave — to teach, to attend events, to work elsewhere, to holiday — whilst others babysit jobs and check proofs. To the casual observer this place appears to operate much as any other design studio. The work is tangible, but the education invisible.

Most schools begin with a structure, as vessels to be filled with students (read: customers). Here we started with some space and people, and the structure evolved organically, molded to the collective character of the time. Humility and the ability to change one’s mind are characteristics generally overlooked in favor of hardline and outspoken design/designers, but false starts are important. Our first eight months have been full of them: cleaning rosters, a collective calendar, a Chef de Bureau to look after supplies, regular work crits, housekeeping meetings — all quietly disrupted and forgotten when they became impractical; or an intended website — postponed in lieu of further research and inspiration. It’s a survival of the fittest ideas. If they’re good, they happen. The 4 ft. orange steel letters on the roof took a good six months to realize, but they appeared in the end, and still look as elegantly ridiculous as the original sketch.
Workplaces. Workshop. Werkstatt. Across translation, the term has proletarian connotations (usually paper hats; long hours). Typography. Typography. Typographic (lead type; lead machinery; ink-covered hands). The name is a deliberate allusion, reclaiming the terms and reinterpreting the same spirit in a digital context, adopting a determined out-of-time arrogance. We may theorize, or undertake experimental projects, but only commissioned work creates the correct sense of requiredness (to quote the pamphlets) and is always central. Furthermore, there is no official qualification, no certificate. If you want a degree, run the party line, design one yourself. In this spirit, the name is a statement, but it also misleading: we have clean hands; we deal with image as much as type.

And what do we call ourselves? Students seems fundamentally wrong. Participants comes close but is still way too formal. Similarly vague is the relationship between Karel and Nijger (to complicate further, Karel taught Nijger 18 years previously) and the rest of us Workshops in a two-way teaching setup — some conscious acknowledgement that postgraduate education should move beyond the idea of a teacher who stands disseminating knowledge before a group of students. Instead, the generation gap is a tool; a starting point for discussion. Experience deserves respect but is equal to the value of naivete. Karel and Nijger freely admit to learning as much from us; initiating the Werkplants was a means of becoming students again themselves — not only in obvious terms of learning new technologies, but also assimilating new attitudes and approaches. We are collectively grounded in fine art, multimedia, and various other design disciplines, as well.

Friends in design studios bemoan the lack of discussion about work. The shock of withdrawal from the intense debate of group crits into a world of deadlines leaves a gap, an absence of communication in the communication industry. Accordingly, the awareness and discussion of process is all-important here, and the approach is always fundamentally relaxed; design that remains permanently critical, unsure and questioning for as long as possible. It’s an understanding that the best design thinking comes in one of two periods; initial post-brief design-in-the-bath intuition, and final pressured all-night decision-making. This constant willingness to doubt, rethink and change retains that elusive freshness that only comes with genuine interest in the job. Wrong roads and false trails are anything but wasted time. Only by pursuing an idea wholeheartedly — whether eventually found good or bad — is it possible to observe and understand what is right or wrong with it. Doing is the key. This is school.

**Eye to function with greater speed, ease and confidence at a larger, more abstract level of visual judgment.** Learning how to look is a kind of trickle-up effect, and if you look hard enough here, similar attention (sometimes bordering on obsession) is evident in a number of furrowing features throughout the building: a quotation in white lettering on a high pane of glass; an old PTI telephone sign perched almost out of sight at the top of the fuse box; retro salt and pepper pots from a trip to London on the kitchen table; a wasp’s nest next to the photocopier found between two walls during refurbishment; some bold peacecocks feathers on the studio cupboards; five rubber hoops marking an invisible trajectory on apparently random existing wall hooks. Temporary or otherwise, all became part of the furniture and an unconscious bank of graphic inspiration.

**Friends come and spend a few days,** bringing their recent work for discussion and adding an outside perspective to our current projects, eating and drinking, drawing some inspiration and leaving a mark. Other assorted visitors arrive and make pleasant noises about the building. Prospective students appear, disappear, and sometimes return. Clients take up temporary residence to collaborate on projects, altering the dynamic for a while. We started having lunch together. People tend to speak more slowly (if not at all), so it’s the best time to absorb Dutch — or the day’s dominant language — by osmosis. Recently, conversation has tended to swing between two subjects: the quality of bread available in town (debate between solid German Obeiberger and airy Swiss-French crossover Bignon), and computer viruses that have plagued us over the past month, wiping out one hard disk and scaring a few others. Lunch has fast become the focal point of the day, with clients and acquaintances turning up suspiciously close to noon, and has excluded the need for any other kind of weekly housekeeping meeting, being the only time guaranteed to find everyone in the same place at the same time. Ideas are chewed over, work is discussed, and occasionally stuck on the wall for comment.

**Traces of design history exist without looting.** We like timeliness — work that could have been done either days or decades ago and still feels right; inevitability without dullness, when the final form appears to be the only natural solution. It’s easy to recognize kindred spirits in both work and environment. Artists, designers and writers who crop up around the place and in conversation include Gill, Sandberg, Müller-Brockmann, Broads, Kaelhaus, Mau, Potter, Hollis, Dylan, Meiner, Elliman, Kirsch, Froshag, Nikhede, Herrman, Mevin & van Dauven, Manders, van Bennemek. In no particular order; chronology is not important, though context always is. History is treated as a library rather than a museum, and this attitude prefers a collection of well-designed books rather than books about good design.
Music is essential to the Workshop; some kind of blood, and to such an extent that Wigger considered adding something like "a more-than-average interest in music" to the brochure's participant requirements. Three different CDs are often playing very loudly and simultaneously through the building. Furthermore, a hideaway annex houses a miniature recording studio, temporarily dislocated from England. Music is recorded for imminent release, and treated as any other design project, with similar interests — in the site-specific, the found, the chance, the vernacular — infesting the sound as much as the graphics. More concrete crossover experiments (reading local texts over improvised music — aural typographies) are intended, and following the production chaos of the current architectural biography book — the Workshop's biggest commission so far — Karel swears he is giving up design to become a folk singer.

The cavernous basement has been the prospector’s but as yet unrealized venue for a darkroom, underground band rehearsal room, student living quarters, and guest lecture bedroom. Instead, it currently houses the leisure facilities: one unstable exercise bike; one rusting frame with no wheels; one ping-pong table which, in the month since it arrived, has become an important fixture — games providing regular release from screen fatigue. For the time being, however, the space remains unhampered potential, an idea waiting to happen.

With equal space for Dutch, English, and German in the brochure, the Workshop was always democratic and international in scope. Commissions from different countries or involving multilingual text double as practical language education. Few problems arise in everyday communication thanks to the general Dutch fluency in English, but things become significantly more difficult when discussing graphic work in detail. Our blackboard currently retains an inventory of adjectives required during initial proposals for the design of a new British art newspaper. Alternatively, Karel often resorts to communicating visual objects by anamotopoeia. Nchanger! Nchanger! Nchanger! ... Nchanger! A kind of verbal-graphic counterpart.