

GRAPHIC DESIGN
AND THE EDGES OF
COMMON SENSE

Thinking about Design
Through the Conflicting
Approaches of Wim Crouwel
and Jan van Toorn

CONTENTS

Introduction
Background
The Debate
Two Approaches
Conclusions
Bibliography

TUOMAS KORTTEINEN, BA Thesis, 2015
Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture
Department of Media, Degree Programme in Graphic Design

Tekijä Tuomas Kortteinen

Työn nimi Graphic Design and the Edges of Common Sense. Thinking about design through the conflicting approaches of Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn

Laitos Media

Koulutusohjelma Graafinen suunnittelu

Vuosi 2015

Sivumäärä 39

Kieli englanti

Tiivistelmä

This thesis is an attempt to define two contrasting approaches to graphic design practice and explain the reasoning behind their differing perspectives.

The starting point and main subject matter is the public debate between Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn that occurred in 1972 and continued in different forms for the following decade. The point of departure for the thesis is that public debates in general, and this one in particular, offer an invaluable view of the implicit assumptions that frame the conceptual approaches to graphic design of participants.

Beginning from a description of the two designers, their careers and a summary of the debate, the thesis extracts two archetypal approaches to graphic design. These approaches are based on the views of Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn, and see graphic design as either service provision & problem solving (Crouwel), or critical enquiry and the subversion of common sense (van Toorn).

The service provision approach sees graphic design as a professional activity whose goal is to communicate briefs of different kinds effectively and transparently. The critical enquiry approach, on the other hand, sees graphic design as an activity of practical intellectuals and calls for a fundamental reassessment and repositioning of graphic design practice in relation to the state, media and corporate interests – without losing sight of its dependence on them.

The argument explored in the thesis is that these views are not simple binary oppositions, but share a conceptual environment that sees form, content and context as elemental concepts of the practice. In addition, the critique of the critical enquiry approach towards service provision is a direct consequence of the inadequacies of the latter's ability to deal with professional and social crises that it inevitably leads to.

Avainsanat graphic design, wim crouwel, jan van toorn, service provision, critical enquiry, theory

"The development of my design practice started from a guiding, utopian ideal. It was necessary to create a sense of order amidst the world's immense visual chaos - this, I felt, was the preeminent task of designers. [...] Everything you saw around you cried out that personal expression had to be fought. [...] In other words, you were after sweeping minimalism to create as much room as possible for interpretation. It was highly important to foster visual calm."

.

"I am constantly looking for a structure to control and order chaos, but I will immediately reverse any order I find and turn it into chaos. Our experience of reality becomes an impoverished one if all would be neatly ordered and verifiable. Chaos is a crucial given that constantly reminds of of an irrational and emotional experience of reality, one that is hard to indicate through verbal means alone. I consider it my task to open such tensions and make them visible."

INTRODUCTION

Public debates between two differing points of view hold a remarkable importance in the history of graphic design. However, in the past half a century, they have been as few as they've been important. For a discipline so focused on form-making and knowledge that is more tacit than analytical, verbalising one's views into a coherent whole and then defending them on a public forum has been relatively uncommon, and for many practitioners, outside of their skill-sets or comfort zones.

The times such arguments have taken place have, however, offered a crucial window into the minds of participating designers.¹ By forcing them to outline and elaborate on their views and practices, these debates have helped codify ideological stances that now belong to the canon of graphic design. They've also allowed us to get a glance at the implicit assumptions of *what graphic design is* or *what graphic designers do* that underlie the more narrow points being debated, such as what is appropriate book typography, or what is the role of self-expression within a commissioned design project. Examining these assumptions can provide ample ground for future inquiry, debate and critique, thus providing new practitioners with a constellation of established approaches, among which they can, hopefully, find their own.

What is essential here is that through examining impassioned writing about graphic design it is possible to gain knowledge that is unattainable by – and of a different quality than – the most common form of graphic design history, which seems to concentrate on the designed objects themselves, as well as on designers' own, self-congratulatory explanations of their own work. It is those rare occasions when a practitioner is confronted by a radically differing approach and forced to publicly react and respond when one begins to see gleaming edifices fracture into meaningful differences.

This essay is the story about a debate that took place in Amsterdam, in November of 1972. It is important, because it crystallises two very different attitudes to graphic design that, despite being grounded in a particular historical setting, embody something still prevalent in the way graphic designers

approach their discipline. The debate occurred between two well-established Dutch graphic designers, Wim Crowel and Jan van Toorn, both in high-points of their respective careers. It has gone on to gain "mythic proportions" as a match between two "ideological adversaries", "when vital issues burst into flame", but has mostly been confined to the Dutch speaking sphere of graphic design². However, thanks to an audio recording of the event discovered by Dingenus de Vrie and a publication of an English translation in 2015, its details can now be discovered and discussed by a wider group of interested parties.

On 9 November 1972, in "a smoky, noisy, and packed" auditorium of the Museum Fodor, Crowel and van Toorn engaged in a heated conversation concerning their differing approaches to graphic design, the discipline's social role, and the role of the designer. The debate did not stop there, but went on until the early 1980s, with both written and designed responses and provocations. November 9th 1972 was, nonetheless, the time both were in the same room, in front of an audience of several hundred peers and contemporaries, ready and willing to engage each other in length and detail.³

At the time both Crowel and van Toorn were well-established and respected: both had designed considerable public projects, particularly for museums and cultural clients, and were well-received by critics. However, their approaches and attitudes to graphic design were worlds apart⁴. Where Crowel was the "engineer", van Toorn was the "artist"; where Crowel aimed at "transparency", van Toorn aimed for "noise"; and where Crowel approaches briefs "objectively", van Toorn did so with "sensitive subjectivity". The dichotomy between the two has been said to represent the "classic antagonism between [...] the graphic designer as a service provider versus the designer who is more intent on personal expression"⁵.

It might seem odd to spend time and effort examining an exchange of views that took place, at the time of writing this, over 40 years ago. While the debate is without a doubt important as a part of design history in the traditional sense, the argument this essay wishes to convey is that its relevancy has proved to be of a remarkably resilient kind. In fact, it is my aim to show that the arguments put forth by Crowel and van Toorn embody two archetypal approaches to the concept of graphic design that

continue to hold considerable explanatory power when applied in contemporary contexts. In other words, the debate is not simply a historical curiosity of the Dutch design community's zeitgeist in the 70s, or a footnote in the biographies of two influential designers, but a prescient concentrate of conflicting views still faced and subscribed to by graphic design practitioners today.

Graphic design is, sadly, heavily lacking in theory of its own, thus necessitating the use of theories of other disciplines as tools for sense-making⁶. Or, as Ian Lynam put it:

Because of the dearth of graphic design books that substantially explore the potential of graphic design, it is normal that veteran graphic designers seek the art and architecture sections of bookstores. And by "potential," I am referring to expanded forms of discourse (conscientiously abstaining from either the term "theory" or the term "practice" in this lone instance—graphic design publishing is, and has always been, overburdened with practice-oriented writing and not enough theory). There is nearly nothing being produced in the current moment in the way of graphic design theory. In short, there is a void.⁷

This essay is my modest attempt at exploring that potential. The exploration is conducted by starting off from a very common sense formulation of graphic design (Crouwel's), juxtaposing that with a far more slippery one (van Toorn's) and then analysing their relationship. The structure of the essay is as follows:

- in *Background*, I map out the background of the debate by taking a look at the respective careers of both Crouwel and Van Toorn.
- in *The Debate*, I concentrate on the debate itself by summarising the key arguments put forth.
- in *Two Approaches*, I continue by defining two conceptual approaches to graphic design based on the views expressed by Crouwel and van Toorn.
- in *Conclusions*, I further elaborate on the mutual relationship between the two approaches, and outline implications for current discussions on graphic design.

Lastly, it is my hope that examining a debate such as the one between Crouwel and van Toorn could provide the reader with hope that debates can be read adjudicatively and be valuable forms of communication. In an era where participating in discussions on social media feels more like an obligation than a privilege, it often seems that the essential property and consequence of all debates is the descent into toxic trolling or self-congratulation.

1. In addition to the Crouwel/van Toorn debate introduced in this essay, two other notable occasions are the debates between Max Bill and Jan Tschichold in the 1940s (see e.g. *Max Bill/Jan Tschichold. La querelle typographique des modernes* by Hans Rudolf Bosshard, Editions B42, 2014), and that between Robin Kinross and Jeffrey Keedy in the 1990s (see *Fellow Readers* by Robin Kinross in the book *Unjustified texts: perspectives on typography*, Hyphen Press 2003 and Jeffrey Keedy's response *Zombie Modernism* in *Emigre* 34, 1995).
2. Uncredited introduction in Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 13
3. *Ibid.*, 47-48
4. Rick Poynor refers to Crouwel as van Toorn's "principal ideological adversary" and "other". See Poynor 2013, 80 & 99
5. Uncredited introduction in Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 13
6. In its crudest sense, this might involve taking texts from other disciplines, search-replacing "architecture" or "sculpture" with "graphic design", and seeing what happens. It can also be followed in a more sensitive way way of Michael Rock in his essays *Designer as Author* and *Fuck Content*.
7. Lynam 2015, 19

BACKGROUND

To make better sense of the debate that follows, it is fruitful to give some context by going over the major points of both Crouwel's and van Toorn's careers. As this essay is not, in its essence, a description of the design work of either Crouwel or van Toorn, the following is not meant as a definitive or a conclusive overview.¹

Wim Crouwel

Born in Groningen in 1928, Crouwel studied fine arts with a focus on abstract painting at Academie Minerva in Groningen. In 1952 he relocated to Amsterdam and, unable to support himself with art, found employment designing exhibitions for the polymath Dick Elffers. Whilst working for Elffers, he took evening classes in design at the Institute of Arts and Crafts (currently known as the Gerrit Rietveld Academie).² In 1955 he started his first design office with partner Kho Liang Ie, an interior designer³, and in 1963 co-founded Total Design, which became one of the most influential design studios of the 60s and the 70s. Whilst evolving into a large studio with multiple design teams, its aesthetic still remains most synonymous with Crouwel.

During the 1950s and early 60s, Crouwel was exposed to and greatly inspired by the work of the post-war Swiss modernists, such as Max Bill, Karl Gerstner and Josef Müller-Brockmann⁴, who favoured the use of grids, sans-serif typefaces (in a very limited range of cuts and type sizes) and, first and foremost, a systematic and mathematical approach to graphic design. In practice this resulted in design which strived for simplicity, order and clarity; universality, neutrality and anonymity for the designer⁵.

This approach was especially prevalent in the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany, also the academic home of Anthony Froshaug, a designer and a writer Crouwel also cites as an important influence⁶, and whose views he paraphrases in the 1972 debate at Fodor⁷. Today, Froshaug is perhaps best known for his 1967 essay proclaiming that grids are by definition implicit in the concept of typography, at least as it was understood in the

days before PostScript: that the standardisation required by a typographic system of the mechanical kind implies modular relations between the elements of that system:

*In order that letters, characters, may be arranged in lines, line upon line, for printing, each letter must be of the same depth or body-size as its neighbours, irrespective of its individual width: the vertical dimension (y in Cartesian coordinates) is critical. If, as seems historically probable, Gutenberg's invention was that of the adjustable type-mould, tolerant of characters of differing widths, intolerant of divergence in body-size, this invention acted as a vertical grid upon the setting, the forme, the page.*⁸

The fascination of and submission to grids came to define Crouwel as a designer. He used grids in all of the posters and catalogues of the Stedelijk Museum, while the explicit design principle of Total Design was the introduction of grids for all clients⁹.

The exact types of grids Crouwel became known for owe heavily to the work of Karl Gerstner and the assertions of his 1964 essay *Designing Programmes*. Gerstner favoured dividing the page in ways that enables typesetting and image layout in differing numbers of columns, all within the same grid structure. For Crouwel this meant "that you can be flexible so that one catalogue is not like another, but you could see they are a family, and related to each other."¹⁰

Crouwel has written passionately of his discovery of a paragon of the Gerstnerian approach, the 1957 experimental novel *Schiff nach Europa*, written by Markus Kutter and designed by Gerstner himself. A story about a sea voyage from New York to Europe, the book consists of several different types of texts - traditional narrative, drama, conversation and monologue - which are all staged within the same modular grid structure:

In the year [Schiff nach Europa] was published I designed, among other items, the posters and catalogues for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, a museum of modern art. I still did not use a fixed grid for my typography in those years, the design of the

*pages was a matter of balance by the eye. [...] The encounter of this book at that specific moment was one of the most important guiding eye openers for me to find my way.*¹¹

Crouwel's unparalleled level of commitment to grids - and perhaps the reason his use of them is still today seen by some as paradoxically personal and distinctive¹² - is exemplified by his unwillingness to compromise, even at times when "sticking to the grid" produced solutions that were aesthetically inferior. Discussing his work for the Stedelijk Museum in the 1960s with Tony Brook in 2011, Crouwel stated:

*There is another thing - if you are so strict in your vision about how typography should be done - that it should always be done within these grids and with all these specific typefaces - you come to a moment when you think, well, this page fits into my system, but it could be much nicer if I shifted it a little bit visually. Aesthetically, it could be better if I didn't stick to my grid. But the grid was number one for me. So I never let myself go for [an] aesthetic reason - and sometimes that was difficult. Sometimes I thought, why not cheat this thing a little bit, and shift it a little bit and then it becomes nicer. Then I always prevented myself from doing that.*¹³

Whilst one might imagine that such a grid-heavy attitude would result in design work that renders the designer invisible - as was the proclaimed objective of the post-war modernists - the majority of Crouwel's work has managed to remain distinctive and recognisable. This is not only because of his acute "sensitivity for colour and form"¹⁴, but because of the way his typographic experiments in grid-based lettering and type design seemingly departed from the commitment he claimed Total Design to pioneer - that "everything should be straightforward and informative"¹⁵. Many of the posters for the Stedelijk in the late 60s, such as for the exhibitions *Visuele communicatie Nederland* in 1969 or *Claes Oldengurg* in 1970, feature display type that is anything but straightforward or neutral, even if it is still based on a grid. Even more so, Crouwel's 1967 experimental typeface, the *New Alphabet*, based on forms ideally suited for the cathode ray tube displays of the time, is almost singular in the history of graphic design for its disregard for legibility and pursuit of technology inspired abstraction:

Did it bother you that you had created a typeface that couldn't be very easily read? It seems to contradict the Total Design philosophy of clarity?

-This didn't matter to me. I loved the whole abstract feeling of it, and I wanted to make all the letters the same width so that they don't only line up in one direction, but in all directions, which made it completely unreadable.¹⁶

What is significant in both of Crowel's responses quoted above is that his proclaimed, surface-level commitments to straightforward communication and clarity seem to be resting on an even deeper commitment to aesthetic purism. Despite his lamentations on the dominance of an overly artistic approach and a preoccupation with styling among designers¹⁷, he was himself more concerned with pure form than with client-oriented problem solving - and more of an artist than the service-provider he paints himself to be.

In the early 1970s, Crowel's primary commitment to purely formal considerations became even more visible when, as a result of a larger cultural shift, design as an activity that provides a public service came to mean not only a commitment to a client, but also to a social and cultural context in which the work took place. His peculiar abhorrence at blurring the borders between disciplines and placing design in a social context will be explored in much more detail further in this essay, but for now it will suffice to quote his retrospective 1990 article *Op een afstand* (*From a distance*):

I have to admit that in the 1970s I grew quite confused about the shift in our educational system, from training a craft and skills to the development of a socio-critical state of mind. [...] Instead of a critical attitude regarding students' achievements, a spirit of freedom, equality and brotherhood prevailed - an excessive tolerance.¹⁸

Crowel left Total Design in 1985, after which he concentrated on teaching and directing the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. He has been a sporadic freelance designer and consultant since 1993.¹⁹

Jan van Toorn

Four years younger than Wim Crowel, Jan van Toorn was born in 1932 in Tiel. After failing his final year at secondary school in 1949, he decided not to return, and found employment in the offset printing firm Mulder & Zoon. While there he did hand-lettering and made illustrations for books, packaging and ceramic transfers. At the same time, from 1950-53, he took evening classes at the Institute of Arts and Crafts.²⁰

Van Toorn went freelance in 1957, designing at first mostly packaging and calendars. From the mid 60s onwards, he began to focus on editorial design, designing the periodical *Range* for the Philips corporation, the annual report for the city of Amsterdam, as well as other image-heavy pieces of corporate literature²¹. This gave him a sound grounding in constructing visual narratives with extensive image editing: given the often, at-first-glance dry subject matter of the publications, it was up to him to “winkl[e] out visual clues from the text”²², “contrast[...] the irrational with the rational, the symbolic with the analytical”²³ and animate the images into a narrative sequence that was more meaningful than just informative.²⁴

The focus on “visual editing” and bringing fore “the narrative nature of information” has come to define van Toorn as a designer²⁵. Van Toorn’s way of doing this was, however, already in the early-to-mid-60s coupled with not letting solely the client determine the nature of that narrative. In 1964, he stated:

*[I]t is extremely difficult to get out from under the atmosphere determined by clients, and to be yourself and hold on to it. This requires some struggle... Even when the director or the man in charge of publicity is positive, somehow the whole company system, with its salesmen, purchasing agents, and its historical-psychological structure, will put pressure on you. The point is being able to break it. Nice when they realise you were right all along.*²⁶

From the late 1960s onwards, van Toorn’s wilful subversion of the client’s intentions was combined with a visual articulation of his strongly Marxist political views. He did this first with visual means that were altogether traditional, as in the 1968

annual report of city of Amsterdam (*Stedelijk Jaarverslag Amsterdam*), where he included a 10-page photo-essay of the protests and riots connected to the Provo movement, despite resistance from the client²⁷. In later projects, starting from the *Drukkeerweekblad en Autolijn* and the catalogues van Toorn designed for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven²⁸ from 1968 onwards, van Toorn was also able to include the designed object itself in his field of subversion²⁹. This was done by resisting any kind of systematic approach to typography or layout, refraining from the urge to commit to any kind of *house style* and disregarding perfection, by “throw[ing] out something with a certain measure of guts”³⁰.

Another key aspect of van Toorn’s design approach was the way he combined images into a visual whole in ways that were not, at first glance, intuitive, rational or expected. Instead, it was left for the viewer or reader to determine how the images connected to each other, and why they were there. The best – and perhaps most well known – examples of work of this kind are the calendars he designed for the printer Mart.Spruijt from 1970 to 1977³¹. In them he mixed genres from snapshots to news photos, explored techniques of collage and photo-montage, and juxtaposed photos of celebrities, politicians, guerrillas, unknown citizens and landscapes – often with perplexing results. His approach elevated the calendars into essayistic pieces of editorial design that, while still perfectly functional items of information design, constructed an austere and enigmatic counter-reality out of pieces of the everyday.

One of van Toorn’s key insights was that the quintessential objects graphic design produces (such as books, posters and identities) are altogether different from the objects produced by most other design disciplines, particularly ones with a history connected to the concept of the art-industry (the Finnish word *taideteollisuus* is perhaps more descriptive). To use Norman Potter’s³² example, a book is altogether different in its properties compared to the garden spade. A book has a symbolic dimension – it can be “read” in ways which the spade cannot. The spade is not part of the public sphere, at least in the same way as the book. Thus the design of book can be imbued with an *intellectual proposition*³³ that goes beyond its functional properties, and that it would be perhaps inane to attach to a spade.

Van Toorn's aim to subvert and disrupt was inspired and informed by his reading of philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Luc Godard and the German poet and theoretician Hans Magnus Enzensberger³⁴. In addition, he felt that for design merely to take "the world as it is and in all the different ways it appears" was an inadequate, liberal position, one which betrayed the true potential of design:³⁵

*I began to see that the sender-receiver model of communication was too limited and that dogmatic views were not going to lead us anywhere. I also realised that dealing with facts influences your view and that dialectics is essential for communication.*³⁶

Instead, a design object and the designer had to adopt a sceptical attitude and a critical position towards the facts that it aimed to communicate³⁷. To be able to achieve this, he turned to the thinkers. From Brecht he took the concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt*, a strategy of problematising the familiar by way of "distancing", by making it conspicuous and unexpected. This forces the viewer to make decisions and become an active interpreter of the events, thus being able to surpass the communicative potential of a mere reproduction of everyday reality. Van Toorn combined a Brechtian approach with Enzensberger's concept of emancipatory media, a way of understanding mediated communication in a way that demands the articulation and visualisation of the necessarily manipulated nature of all media, and encourages decentralisation and autonomy among democratic manipulator-citizens.³⁸

*There is no such thing as unmanipulated writing, filming and broadcasting. The question, then, is not whether the media are manipulated or not, but who manipulates them. A revolutionary design need not cause the manipulators to vanish; indeed, it ought to turn everyone into manipulators.*³⁹

For strategy, van Toorn turned to Godard and his reflexive forms of film-making: "narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions, and stylistic virtuositities."⁴⁰

The way these theories affected van Toorn's concept of graphic design will be further elaborated on in more detail in the chapter *Two Approaches*. What is essential for now is that he

found it paramount to strive towards an open-ended solution, if that noun can be applied here: an attitude to design that aims to disrupt the smoothness and self-sufficiency that most designed objects embody, and make tangible both the manipulatedness and irrationality of our experience of reality.⁴¹

As might be expected, an attitude of this kind was not without its drawbacks. During the 1970s, van Toorn continued to produce editorial and exhibition design work, though mainly for the cultural sector⁴². This was because, as Wim Crowel rightly pointed out in the debate described in the next chapter, van Toorn's way of designing has a "limited range", meaning that it requires a high-level of visual literacy, patience and wilful engagement to make sense of. There was, however, an abundance of cultural work to be done in the Netherlands in the 1970s, and van Toorn produced some prolific work during these years, always remaining a freelancer.⁴³

The situation radically changed in the 1980s, with severe cut-backs on cultural institutions and a neoliberal cultural atmosphere openly hostile to the socialist values of van Toorn⁴⁴. He found solace in an increased commitment to teaching⁴⁵, working as the head of the multimedia department of the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam from 1987-89 and as an associate professor at the Rhode Island School of Design. Then, from 1989 to 1998 he worked as the director of the Jan van Eyck Academy, a postgraduate centre for art, design and theory, in Maastricht⁴⁶.

Van Toorn's tenure at Jan van Eyck enabled him to further articulate and build upon his views on design, especially on the question of how to implement his theoretical ideas in day-to-day design practice. His explorations took the form of essays, publications and "dialogic" photo-montages, most of which are gathered in the 2006 monograph *design's delight*⁴⁷. The ideas animating the essays of that monograph are further explored in the chapter *Two Approaches*. Van Toorn continues to teach today.

1. For the reader interested in the design work of Crowel and van Toorn, the following publications are suggested.

- 'Wim Crowel: mode en module', by Frederike Huygen and Hugues

Boekrad. Dutch only. Extensive English review by Hyphen Press:
https://hyphenpress.co.uk/journal/article/wim_crouwel_mode_en_module_a_review

- 'Wim Crouwel: A Graphic Odyssey', edited by Tony Brook & Adrian Shaughnessy. Catalogue for the exhibition 'Wim Crouwel: A Graphic Odyssey' at the Design Museum, London, 30 March - 3 July 2011
 - Idea Magazine no. 323: Wim Crouwel
 - 'Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice', by Rick Poynor
 - 'Design's delight: method and means of a dialogic approach.', by Jan van Toorn.
 - 'And/Or. On the Contradiction in the Work of Jan Van Toorn', by Els Kuijpers.
2. Huygen 2015, 169
 3. Brook & Shaughnessy 2011, 70
 4. Ibid, 69
 5. Eg., Huygen 2015, 51-52
 6. Ibid.
 7. Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 34. See also Crouwel 1990, as well as the following chapter on the debate
 8. Froshaug 1967, 187.
 9. Brook & Shaughnessy 2011, 69, 71-72
 10. Ibid., 70.
 11. Crouwel 2011, 32.
 12. See for example the conversation between Experimental Jetset and Metahaven in the October 2011 issue of *Print* (Metahaven 2011a).
 13. Brook & Shaughnessy 2011, 70
 14. Huygen 2015, 53
 15. Brook & Shaughnessy 2011, 72
 16. Ibid., 73
 17. Crouwel 1990
 18. Crouwel 1990.
 19. Muroga 2007, 10
 20. Poynor 2013, 81-82. Interestingly, Crouwel attended evening classes at the same school around the same time.
 21. Eg., a 1968 issue of *Sikkens Varia*, a journal by the Sikkens paint company, and the Christmas issue of the *Drukkersweekblad en Autolijn*, a co-publication of the Federation of Master Printers and the Netherlands Photo-engravers Association, also 1968. See Poynor 2013, 82-88
 22. Ibid., 83
 23. Rolf Mager, Jan van Toorn bouwt verder aan de imago van Philips' Telecommunicatie Industrie," *Ariadne* 16 (1965), 1014-1016. Quoted in Huygen 2015, 55-56
 24. Poynor 2013, 82-88
 25. Huygen 2015, 55; Poynor 2013, 82
 26. Anonymous, "Jan van Toorn ontwerper: Wij zijn er niet voor het genoegen van de industrie," *Revue der Reclame* 24, 1964. Quoted from Huygen 2015, 55.
 27. Poynor 2013, 85-86

28. For who Crouwel had produced work of a very different kind a ten or so years earlier.
29. Ibid., 88-90
30. Mager 1964, 1016. Quoted in Huygen 2015, 58
31. Poynor 2013, 97
32. Potter 2002, 31
33. Ibid., 60
34. Poynor 2014, 95-96; Huygen 2015, 57-58
35. Poynor 2013, 87
36. Quoted in Huygen 2015, 57-58
37. Poynor 2013, 87
38. Ibid., 95-96.
39. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien", *Kursbuch* #20, 1970. English translation in Jetteke Bolten-Rempt, "Jan van Toorn, Medium + Message", *Dutch Art + Architecture Today* #19, 1986. Quoted from Poynor 2013, 95.
40. Ibid., 95-97
41. Ibid., 90 & 97.
42. Ibid., 110
43. Ibid., 111-120
44. Ibid., 112-113
45. Van Toorn had been teaching graphic design in the Gerrit Rietveld Academie from 1968 to 1985.
46. Ibid., 121
47. See Van Toorn 2006.

THE DEBATE

In November of 1972 the Museum Fodor organised an exhibition of Jan van Toorn's work, consisting mostly of calendars, posters and catalogues. As the Fodor was an annex of the Stedelijk Museum, it was Wim Crouwel, the in-house graphic designer of the Stedelijk, who was to design the catalogue for the exhibition. It was during the design process of the catalogue that the decision was made to have to the two engage in a public debate.¹

Several hundred people came to listen to the pair and, according to Paul Mijksenaar, often interrupted the debate with cries of "bullshit", "crap" or "lies"².

What follows here is a summary of the arguments made, in an order that loosely reflects the progression of the debate³.

Crouwel begins by making a dichotomy of approaches that a designer might take when responding to a brief. A designer may take either an *analytical approach*, which aims at "a maximally objective message"⁴, refrains from visual experimentation without a solid reason, and positions the designer themselves professionally. For Crouwel, this professionalism means viewing the designer as a specialist, with a very specific skill-set. This skill-set then both grants them professional autonomy and mandates an unwillingness to "engage in specialties that are not his". Or, as opposed to the analytical, a designer might opt for a *spontaneous approach*, which aims at pleasing current opinion by trendy visual means, embraces experimentation and attempts to contribute to the brief in ways that are outside the designer's skill-set. In Crouwel's view the results of the spontaneous view are necessarily short-lived, when designers ought to work towards "lasting value and longevity" that presents the content "as neutrally as possible".

Van Toorn takes up Crouwel's dichotomy, but refuses to admit that anyone could truly adopt the position of the neutral intermediary, as entailed by Crouwel's analytical approach. Instead, van Toorn posits, the graphic means a designer works with can never be applied neutrally. The reason their application can never be objective is because they are grounded in a social context - that the means themselves have meaning

that exists outside the technological/professional sphere of design - and because the designer themselves cannot exist outside that social context. Thus it is vital for graphic design to start asking what happens to the relationship between form and content when those means - the tools with which form is created - are conceptualised as having dimensions that surpass the purely formal or the purely aesthetic.

Crouwel, however, is wary of van Toorn's view. While van Toorn agrees with Crouwel in seeing the designer as an intermediary of sorts, and claims graphic design ought to make it easier for readers and viewers to form views of their own, he always paradoxically asserts his own views in his work - "takes a position between sender and receiver".

This makes van Toorn flesh out his earlier argument: according to him, design - here understood purely as the aggregate of applied graphic means, as separate from the entire designed object - has inevitable content of its own. It has emotional value, specific features, and most importantly, it is addressed to someone. These are aspects that give the design (as defined above) a social identity, one which appears different depending on the viewer. This design-content is, consequently, something else entirely than the content of the brief. The "double duty" of the designer is then to take into consideration both of these types of content - and this is where his or her subjective considerations come into play. Van Toorn goes on, accusing Crouwel's use of "universal" graphic means as counterproductive in terms of communicating anything, since in his case the identity of the design-content is always the same.

JvT: What your approach does is basically confirm existing patterns. This is not serving communication - it is conditioning human behaviour.⁵

Crouwel counters by proposing that a consequence of the subjective approach - always asserting one's own social and political considerations into the design - is that the designer can only work for and with clients he or she completely agrees with, i.e., whose vision is politically and ethically in harmony with the designer's. Although subjective design may at times have a deep reach, it has a very limited range. The objective or analytical approach, on the other hand, is able to contribute to

society on a much wider range. Through engaging other specialists in an active dialogue during the design process, the objective approach may also extend its reach in ways that the subjective approach is incapable of.

Furthermore, Crowel crucially points out that there is no conceptual necessity that the subjective approach yields a body of work that is in any way more varied than the one he promotes:⁶

*WC: Subjective design leads to results that in my view seem just as overblown or that are even uniform as well, except they are uniform in the short run compared to things that also come across as uniform in the long run.*⁷

The two points made by Crowel are ones van Toorn is unable to answer without diverging into demands for "sensitivity" from the designer. There is sense in his call for sensitivity though, as his subjective approach at least allows for the possibility for a varied array of design responses. Crowel, on the other hand, is proud of his uniformity, yet he is unable to counter van Toorn's accusation of conditioning responses and overlooking the importance of an identity.

How van Toorn can reply, then, is to critique the extent of the reach Crowel's objective approach is capable of, even with his "ongoing conversation" between specialities. According to van Toorn, "general human experience [...] spans more territory than that covered by the rational disciplines"⁸. Thus even a conversation of the specialities championed by Crowel is incapable of relating to the unquantifiable "human dimension", or to the push and pull of varied vested interests, public and private opinion. This makes the position of the designer as intermediary, both a professional practitioner and a human being, a challenging one: how to mediate this tension with the graphic means at the designer's disposal? Van Toorn paraphrases Bertolt Brecht:

*Jvt: You're standing there, and still you're playing a role. You shouldn't want to deny this ambiguity. Engage with it!*⁹

Designers shouldn't try to be artists, Crouwel retorts, and definitely should not hijack functional objects to tell stories of their own. He mentions van Toorn's calendars for Mart.Spruijt as an example:

WC: In my view it is nonsense to use a calendar as a vehicle for such stories, even when they interest many others, myself included. I consider a calendar an object in which you can express time as an element - an object such as a clock.¹⁰

This innocent seeming assertion brings the debate closer to a fundamental distinction between the two, and reveals why the debate cannot end in a mutual understanding. This is because their concepts of graphic design, and views of its goals, differ so fundamentally. To Crouwel the reaches van Toorn tries to aim for with his calendars are *nonsense*, pure and simple. Crouwel sees the goal of graphic design as the optimisation of the designed object and its functional properties, with tools that are specific to the discipline.

WC: Graphic design consists of a process of ordering for the benefit of the clarity and transparency of information.¹¹

The [client] gives me the briefing and I am the one who, as typographer, as designer, takes a service-oriented stance in trying to translate his story to the public. For this is something [the client] himself cannot do.¹²

But for van Toorn, graphic design is something altogether different. He uses adjectives such as *adventurous* and *ambiguous* when describing how designers ought to relate their professional potential - "creating order with a twist". In the debate Van Toorn is not as straight-forward as Crouwel in his conceptualisation of graphic design, but does point out major weak points in Crouwel's formulation, that give direction towards his own definition of the discipline. In addition to the one's mentioned earlier, a major one is that the optimisation Crouwel advocates is in fact influenced by the history of the graphic means used, and the human habits they are connected to. As an example, despite their inherently mathematical quality, grids are inescapably connected to our history of reading. This means that Crouwel's coveted optimisation cannot be attained by

pure calculations, but has to take into consideration the more fuzzy and slippery body of human behaviour, its cultural contexts and histories.

What is more, when objective design attempts to address everyone, it in reality fails to address anyone. This becomes evident when the objective approach is presented with a struggle with distinct sides¹³. In this situation a clean, perfectly designed outcome becomes something absolutely no one can identify with, and thus is without value. It doesn't connect to the "general human experience" of any parties involved.

What makes this point even more powerful for van Toorn, as is detailed in the following chapter, is the fact that for him these struggles are a necessary component of any design project and of social life in general. Thus the mediation the designer engages in is most importantly taken up in making those struggles clear in the designed object.

Aftermath

The debate re-emerged two years later, when Crouwel decided to re-design van Toorn's Mart.Spruijt calendar of 1973/74. He simplified van Toorn's choice of seven different typefaces to one, and eliminated all "redundant" rules and frames, saying "I embarked on my quest for answers because your work is too fascinating to be simply dismissed".¹⁴

In 1978, van Toorn and Jean Leering, his partner from the Van Abbemuseum, published an issue of *Documentaires*, a publication of the printer Lecturis. In it they discuss the concept of the museum and that of "museological communication" in ways that could be easily understood as euphemisms for graphic design in general.¹⁵ This is evident when they pose the following rhetorical questions (just replace *museum* with *designer*):

Jvt & Jens Leering: *As a museum, do you intend to act as a means for the public to forge its own independent opinions, or does the museum position itself with respect to the public as an unquestionable authority to whom this task of choice and selection has been relegated on the grounds of its expertise?*¹⁶

Crouwel, understanding the jibe, used the subsequent issue to reply:

*What we're talking about here is information that should be as objective as possible, for the benefit of all people interested, without any other aim than to inform.*¹⁷

Crouwel also accused van Toorn of creating unnecessary confusion in making the reader "plough through repetitive imagery"; thus "the reader is forced to rescue his own story from these meaningless and fashionable images"¹⁸.

Their final one-on-one came in 1980, when van Toorn published a text in the art magazine *Quad* encouraging designers to engage in the use of "recognizable traces of redundancy", i.e. on existing visual conventions and codes. According to van Toorn, a collage of recontextualised visual codes makes the everyday visual environment suddenly conspicuous and opens up new possibilities of interpretation for the reader.¹⁹

Abhorring this open call for a surge of visual noise, Crouwel is quick to use the following issue of *Quad* to point out that van Toorn is in danger of not communicating anything²⁰. This is in fact the same offense van Toorn accused Crouwel of earlier, during the debate in *Fodor*, although this goes unnoticed for Crouwel. In this case, however, the reason for the non-communication would be the opposite. If Crouwel's objectivity is so transparent and sterile it fails to address anyone, van Toorn's subjective stance results in the same, for it is too dependant on the reader's knowledge of visual codes and training in interpreting texts.

-
1. Huygen 2015, 14-15. The catalogue itself is a curious amalgam of Crouwel and van Toorn. The covers were designed by Crouwel (a grid of pink dots on a bright red background with a grid-based logo), while the inside fold-out was by van Toorn (photos and a note about how graphic design loses all meaning when it's derived of its content).
 2. Paul Mijksenaar, "'n Rodeo voor ontwerpers," *GVM Bulletin*, 9 Feb 1973. Quoted in Huygen 2015, 47.
 3. See Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 19-44

4. Both Crouwel and van Toorn use terms like *subjective* and *objective* in a free, idiosyncratic fashion, and deducing what is actually meant by the terms is at times difficult. Both use the term they despise as a straw man, while the one they will relate to is most often used as only the negation of its opposite. In other words, when Crouwel says *objective*, he tends to use it in the sense of *not subjective*. This inverse applies for van Toorn.
5. Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 29.
6. This is something that became painstakingly obvious in the 1990s, with scores of graphic designers all making subjective, "radical" work of minimal aesthetic variance.
7. Ibid., 30
8. Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 28
9. Ibid., 31
10. Ibid., 33
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 37-38.
13. Two telling examples that both Crouwel and van Toorn refer to are the designs of two sets of protest banners/posters from 1968: those of Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm and those of the Paris '68 riots. The students at Ulm demonstrated against the closure of the school, carrying banners with all lowercase Helvetica, set ragged-right. The Paris posters, on the other hand, were hand-drawn with crude illustrations, shouting Marxist slogans. For van Toorn, the Ulm graphics were the result of "systematic ordering *ad absurdum*"; for Crouwel, the Paris ones were "obvious cases of amateurism. Not a single one has any value. See Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 34-35.
14. Poynor 2013, 102.
15. Ibid.
16. Jan van Toorn & Jens Leering, "Vormgeving in Functie van Museale Overdracht", 2-3. Quoted from Poynor 2013, 103.
17. Wim Crouwel, "De Vormgeving en het Museum", in "Om de Kunst", *Documentaires* 8, 1978, 15. Quoted from Poynor 2013, 103 & 108.
18. Poynor 2013, 108
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

TWO APPROACHES

I will now articulate two very different conceptual approaches to graphic design. The first one is based on the views of Wim Crowel, the second one on the views of Jan van Toorn. When I say they are *based*, it must be noted that these definitions cannot be said to be ones that either Crowel or van Toorn would or could whole-heartedly agree with. On the contrary, they might - probably ought - to have many objections to the views presented here. What my goal is, then, is to use the views of van Toorn and Crowel as starting points, as subject matter, for the formulation of two distinct perspectives on graphic design that I feel frame some of the intrinsic issues and sore points the discipline is struggling with. They are still heavily indebted to both practitioners, and could not exist without them.

I will first focus on Wim Crowel's idea of graphic design as professional service provision for communication, and then on Jan van Toorn's idea of graphic design as a field of mediating critical enquiry, with emancipatory and existential aims. The latter sub-chapter is openly critical of the notions put forth in the former: this is to simultaneously give a description of the relationship that exists between the two. In order to properly make sense of the prickly stance of van Toorn, the text is also heavily informed by his 1993 essay "Thinking the Visual"¹.

Graphic Design as Service Provision & Problem Solving

How might one summarise an approach to graphic design based on the views of Wim Crowel? To begin with, it is something that is very much founded on common sense considerations, on observations made by practicing professionals at work. As such, it takes as given many aspects of the existing social environment where graphic design practice takes place. This makes it both quite easily understandable and open to criticism, as is later evident.

Viewed as service provision and problem solving, graphic design is first and foremost a professional activity: it is something that is best left to professionals and something that requires a

considerable amount of skill and craftsmanship. Secondly, it is a professional activity that exists to provide a service, to do something others without the skills of the trade are unable to do. This service is provided primarily to a client, whose briefs are translated to designed objects, experiences, and such, and secondarily to the public sphere, for it is in the interests of everyone to enjoy clear, efficient and considered communication.

The essential nature of this service provision is to solve problems. Most of the time these problems are derived from the client and the brief (how to communicate this-and-this to this-and-this-group in the best way possible) as a list of demands or goals, which are then translated into a body of visual solutions – *a design concept*. It is a common trope of the service provision approach to remark that the first round of problem solving occurs already here, in framing and articulating the brief, and that the second round – questions relating to how to translate these demands into visual solutions – occurs only after the inherent problems in the articulation of the brief are solved:

Graphic designers very often begin with a false brief from their client which will need to be taken right back to its origins before design (in the ordinary sense) can begin.[...] A root concept will have to be mutually understood and discussed, and the design can part far from an initial briefing.²

Yet for the designer, the problems they have to conquer span the entire design process, from making sense of the brief to the minutiae of typesetting. The faculties vital to this process are found in the combination of analytical thinking and craft skills³. The former solves problems by organising and translating the client's brief into a coherent, understandable body of parts, the latter in finding suitable avenues for its realisation⁴. What is suitable, then, is most often a compromise between what is striking and what is economical, and as such the economical calculus becomes a part of the faculties.

The importance of organising (as an opposite to "artistry") is a long-standing point of departure for many in the history of 20th century design & architecture. See for example Le Corbusier in 1938:

*Architecture is organization. You are an organizer, not a drawing-board stylist.*⁵

Crouwel clearly is of the same opinion, even if the actuality of this approach might indicate something else:

*I have great affection for the artist, but at the same time, I do not claim to be one – I do not have as much freedom as an artist.*⁶

*The moment when visual arts starts to grow dominant in applied art & design, the work seems no longer about finding an expression for the topic but rather about expressing one's self.*⁷

How are the necessary faculties, analytical thinking and craft skills, to be applied in order to “find expression for the topic”? In Crouwel’s case, the two are used in very much the same way. Yet he makes sure to note that despite being inspired by technical innovations, he abhors the notion of “being led by technology to such a degree that I’ve ever become an extension of the machine.” This calls to mind Eric Gill’s distinction, as described by Jyrki Siukonen⁸, between tool and machine: a tool is something that adapts to the way a person uses it, a machine, on the other hand, something that makes the person adapt to it.

It is then the analytical thinking that must do the driving. The job of the analysis, both in articulating the brief and finding expression for it, is to begin from general assessments and head towards the irreducible; to break the body into cellular or atomic units. After a consideration of which units are required, they are combined in ways that establish a principle, and to build a structure⁹. Principles established in this manner are something that the designer can follow, extrapolate on and multiply endlessly if needed. Thus when one follows this method, almost without intention a *design style* is born, yet it is not essentially an aesthetic one. Instead, it is based on a rational methodology that derives its power from what Josef Müller-Brockmann described as the “aesthetic quality of mathematical thinking”: of breaking things apart, determining the necessary parts and pieces, and rebuilding it back up again, all in “logical” little steps.¹⁰ This does not imply that process is in any way mechanical, since the steps described – analysis,

curating the elements and their synthesis – all imply and include a certain amount of creativity. The limit of that creativity is not that the “logical” steps taken between them need to be logical in the strict formal sense. The steps can well be associative or based on some other mutual relationship – what is of the essence is that they are explicable to the client.

What can we then say of the quality of the designed entity that is the result of such a method? In the days of Crowell, at least the following: there could not be anything other than what is necessary. The elimination of elements superfluous to the goal of the service – communicating the message as transparently as possible – was of the highest importance. The content was to be kept at a certain distance and done justice to. In terms owing to the now happily outdated transmission model of communication, the target was the minimisation of *noise*. In other words, the design was to be geared to “create a sense of order amidst the world’s immense visual chaos”¹¹.

Even though the strict modernist ideal demanding subdued and austere solutions is now of the past, the idea of eliminating the superfluous has not altogether disappeared. Instead what has changed is how designers as problem solvers determine *that which is superfluous*. Contemporary designers often end up with solutions that are nothing like the ones idealised by Crowell, Gerstner or Müller-Brockmann, with a multitude of graphic means, filters and effects used. What remains in the contemporary version of graphic design as service provision is the notion that *every designed element has to have a reason to be there, and that reason must serve the communicative aim of the client and the brief*. Thus that which was earlier deemed superfluous might nowadays be viewed as important or even vital – but only on the necessary condition of being explicable and in support of the overarching *design concept*, as well as the client’s brief.

The redefinition of the superfluous then has major implications for both noise and chaos. If the superfluous results in noise, and a cacophony of noises in chaos, what happens when the superfluous is no longer a purely visual category? Noise is transformed from visual clutter to anything interfering with the design concept, and chaos becomes the sum total of all that is exterior to the clients’ wants and needs.

Despite the relative clarity and common-sense of the service provision approach, one might think this quite a bleak vision. Some might claim that defining graphic design this way is an act of submission in part of the designer: that submitting themselves to the will of the client denies both graphic design practitioners and the discipline itself any autonomy. This is partly true, as there are undeniable elements of submission in accepting that the primary concern of graphic design is in the articulation and translation of other people's activities and aspirations – that it is a second-order discipline of sorts. A conclusion such as this often leads to anxiousness and disillusionment among young practitioners, as is illustrated by this quote from the Aalto BA thesis of Jaakko Pietiläinen:

*Suddenly I was in the middle of a professional crisis. My thoughts travelled down depressed paths: When a film director makes a film, I will make the credits. When an engineer invents something that improves human life, I will design the packaging. When an author constructs an entire world for her readers, I will decide the font and the cover. Can there be a profession more inane?*¹²

Even with such a desolate view of the reality of graphic design as service provision, all is not necessarily lost, as we can learn from Crowel. For him, it was exactly the professionalism he so strongly advocated that, at least in the 1960s and 70s, managed to make his submission only a partial one. He was a trained professional with a very specific expertise, with method and skills to match. Through his professionalism Crowel was able to legitimately claim to have answers to questions the client didn't – or wasn't even aware of – thus granting him a sense of autonomy within that limited range. He was providing a service, but that service was one based on rational principles, scientific findings and technological innovations he was in command of. While rejecting the "dictatorship in design, as happens in advertising"¹³, Crowel was no doubt content with the way his sleek professional ethos and rational, scientific and technological method shielded him from the whims of clients.

So when Crowel claims during the debate that designers, by entering into specialities that are not theirs, "run the risk of resorting to an amateurish contribution to the problem at hand"¹⁴, it is my strong suspicion that it is not only because

he is vexed by designers trying their hand at politics, but also because he is afraid of what would happen to his professional gravitas if any amateur could suddenly try their hand in graphic design and think it worthwhile. In effect, Crouwel is not so much protecting other graphic designers from embarrassment than his own expertise from inflation.

But then, if in our time the professionalism of graphic designers is no longer tied to a similar notion expertise (when everyone has PhotoShop), how are the chances of survival of this limited autonomy affected?

Graphic Design as Critical Enquiry & Subversion of Common Sense

How could a conceptual approach to graphic design be construed that won't take the client's brief as its alpha and omega, and instead emphasises the intrinsically public and symbolic dimensions of the discipline?

To begin with, a concept of graphic design based on the views of Jan van Toorn views the designer not as a professional, but as a "practical intellectual"¹⁵. As an individual engaged both in thinking and making, her or his thinking is "a construct of notions and arguments which enables [her or him] - as a person, as a social being and as a professional - to deal with the complexity of the world we live in"¹⁶. As such, the practical intellectual is not simply a detached observer confined to the realm of self-contained aesthetic considerations, but deeply connected to and affected by social reality.

Another key difference to the service provision concept of graphic design is in how this social reality - the world around us as we experience it - is defined. In accepting the client's brief, their list of demands, as the *essential* point of reference for future design work, the service provision approach comes to implicitly endorse the prevailing status quo in creating a stable environment, which the design work is then predicated upon. Thus the designers' only true progressive goal becomes the elevation of taste.

Conversely, the practical intellectual described by van Toorn sees our reality as a stage, not unlike that of the theatre. This stage is always in flux, and is being shaped by dynamic forces large and small. In order to engage those forces, the practical intellectual will have "to accept the inequalities of power amidst which we operate, and accept the world as a disharmonious constantly unstable reality"¹⁷. The inequalities of power are of course contingent and mutative, but in the case of graphic design it is vital to concentrate on the matters at hand, particularly the prevailing production relations ¹⁸ – something van Toorn characterises as the "neo-liberal world order"¹⁹ and the power of money, bureaucracy and mass media ²⁰.

Furthermore, the result of these inequalities of power – the weighted dynamics of private, public, corporate and institutional interests – is the creation of a rift between the image of reality and reality as such. The rift presents itself as the *spectacle*, as defined by Guy Debord in his 1967 book *La Société du spectacle*:

*The spectacle, understood in its totality, is simultaneously the result and project of the of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, its added decoration. It is heart of the unrealism of the real society. In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, advertisement or direct consumption of entertainments, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. The form and the content of the spectacle are identically the total justification of the conditions and the ends of the existing system. The spectacle is also the permanent presence of this justification, to the extent that it occupies the principal part of the time lived outside of modern production.*²¹

For van Toorn, graphic design is both ideally and tragically situated in relation to the spectacle. It is, like any other public activity, serving as a theatrical substitute for any sort of interaction of a more essential kind that might have non-virtual consequences for the status quo²². In ways that differ from many other public activities, however, graphic design is

intrinsically connected to the spectacle. The popularity and clout it has aggregated is a result of the potency of graphic design in maintaining and reinforcing said spectacle:

*[Graphic design] plays an essential role in the organisation of production and stimulates the distribution of this production by articulating the form of goods and messages. Through its relationships with the organised interests of the economy, the state and the media, design also contributes to the cultural staging which intervenes with all aspects of social and cultural life.*²³

In embracing – or failing to critically reflect on – the role of graphic design in this context, its role as a mediator between public and private interest, as an agent of social and cultural mobility, has been lost²⁴. Instead, designers have been left to experiment and play around on the level of visual syntax (and it is here where Crowel's limited autonomy is located), producing "messages with an endless variety of forms and an utterly conventional message"²⁵.

This is then the situation we are stuck with – but what are graphic designers as practical intellectuals to do? Prompted by a "crisis in making"²⁶, a situation in which all there is to do is to experiment with syntax (prompting frustration not unlike the kind described by Pietiläinen in the preceding chapter), designers ought to assume a critical perspective. What this perspective in effect targets is the disruption of the current, spectacle-infused reality with discordant voices: "an in-depth and permanent critical debate"²⁷, which hopefully results in small scale truly democratic spaces²⁸, "with public arguments and negotiations to the formation of will, of norms and values outside the realms of economy, disciplines and state"²⁹. In other words, in disrupting the spectacle and creating a dialogue, a window of opportunity for significant social and cultural mobility opens. For van Toorn and proponents of his approach this is clearly beneficial, not only from the point of view of the professional, who manages to escape the crisis in making, but also from the point of view of the person and social being.

In order to succeed in this disruption, designers must reposition themselves “beyond the interpretation of profession, commerce and state”³⁰. This means turning to theory for strategies of action. In addition to the tools van Toorn adapted from Brecht, Enzensberger and Godard (see chapter on *Background*), he introduces the concept of the *maker*, based on the writings of the American poet W.H. Auden. Instead of reinforcing the accepted concept of reality by restricting public debate to the traditional view of the world, graphic design as *making* ought to “constantly question and reformulate the structural elements which make up the cultural concept of reality: an innovation that criticises the components of the cultural order by partly dissolving the conventional conception of reality and finding new ‘subversive’ connections”³¹.

What this means for graphic design practice is that the experimentation and subversion previously confined to the level of visual form (the design-content mentioned in the chapter on *The Debate*) must be extended to the semantic content (the brief) in order to make design potent enough to disrupt the accepted, numbing view of reality³². What these experiments and subversions happen to be is of course dependant on the designer and the normative stance she or he decides to assume: it is exactly this what van Toorn means when he speaks of the necessarily *subjective* aspect of design during the debate. But it is vital here to emphasise that *only* through these normative, subjective interruptions and experiments can the designed object attain any chances of addressing anyone in a way that doesn’t preemptively condition and program their response.

However, it must be noted that the experiments and subversions do not in any way *need* to be critical of the brief itself. On the contrary, most of van Toorn’s own design work has been done with clients that are very sympathetic to his goals. What needs to be subverted then, is the smoothness and normalcy of the designed object and the communication process.

This brings us conveniently to the question that remains: *By what mechanism* does the disruption of the spectacle take place? The notion of the subversion of the *process* of communication, alluded to in the previous paragraph, points us towards the answer. Coupled together, the visual and normative acts of subjective subversion/experimentation and the familiarity and

normalcy the viewer-reader expects, create tension both at the level of content and of form. This tension breaks open and demystifies the designed object. It enables the designed object to be experienced as an argument; as a consequence of very distinct set of production relations. The tension overrides the self-containedness and one-directional nature of conventional communication and allows the viewer/reader to perceive the inherently manipulatory character of the designed object.³³ And when the argumentative and manipulatory character of the designed object is revealed, the viewer-reader is “consciously or unconsciously [...] invited to engage in active interpretation”³⁴.

Thus the result is very much like the one propagated by Brecht in his epic theatre. Paraphrasing Poyner:³⁵ if Brecht’s theatre transformed the passive spectator into an active observer, van Toorn’s graphic design aims to transform the viewer-reader from a consumer into an active participant in a dialogue, that when multiplied will result in the creation of discourse-centred concept of democracy.

-
1. van Toorn 1993
 2. Potter 2002, 53.
 3. Craft skills most often appear as technological or technical expertise, but in fact rest on a foundation of form, colour and typography and thus are easily transferable from one technology to another
 4. *Realisation* here is understood as everything that ranges from choosing the appropriate medium to considerations of appropriate tracking of text. In other words, realisation is the application of graphic means to considered surfaces
 5. Le Corbusier, “If I Had to teach you architecture”, *Focus* #1, 1938. Quoted from Potter 2002, 6.
 6. Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 32
 7. Crouwel 1990. Quoted from Huygen 2015, 54
 8. Siukonen 2011, 29
 9. For a more contemporary example, see the *Double Diamond* model of the design process: <https://vimeo.com/28504529>
 10. This might also be the reason why so many proponents of an approach of this kind get anxious when asked why their work looks like someone else’s: the way it *looks* is less important the questions and analysis that led to it looking that way. For Müller-Brockmann’s as well as Karl Gerstner’s remarks on qualities

of analytical thinking, see Michael Rock's "Designer as Author", published in *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users*, Rizzoli 2013.

11. Crouwel 1990, cited in Huygen 2015, 53.
12. Pietiläinen 2012, 2. Translation from Finnish by myself, italics by the author.
13. Huygen 2015, 54.
14. Crouwel & van Toorn 2015, 22.
15. van Toorn 1993, 32
16. Ibid., 27
17. Ibid., 31.
18. Ibid., 27
19. Van Toorn 2006, cover.
20. Van Toorn 1993, 27
21. Debord 1970, thesis 6
22. Van Toorn 1993, 32
23. Ibid., 28.
24. Ibid., 28
25. Ibid., 29
26. Ibid., 32
27. Ibid., 29
28. Ibid., 34.
29. Ibid., 31
30. Ibid., 34
31. Ibid., 31
32. Ibid., 33
33. Ibid., 33-34
34. Ibid.
35. Poynor 2013, 96.

CONCLUSIONS

If the heft of the theoretical argument in the preceding chapter felt a bit bulky, consider the following analogy between graphic design and cooking. The following quote is attributed to Ikko Tanaka, though the exact source remains unknown:

Design is an ephemeral art similar to cooking, in that it requires the highest levels of ingenuity and technique. As an agent of transient processes, the designer shares the same fate as the chef who stands on the corner of the kitchen watching his guests' reactions to his culinary creations, and feeling satisfied and disappointed by turns. No matter how much effort and pain got into the production process, unless people are instinctively surprised and pleased by one's efforts, unconditional failure is the result for both the chef and the designer.

What kind of chefs would Crowel and van Toorn – or any adherents of the approaches defined in the previous chapter – be like? Poynor¹ notes that Crowel would undoubtedly co-sign Tanaka's analogy, with added emphasis on the instinctive part: the diner does not necessarily need to know or understand what goes on in the kitchen to enjoy the meal. But what would a van Toornian dining experience, or then again restaurant, look like? According to Poynor², enjoying a meal is of course perfectly possible without any awareness of the underlying processes that make the meal possible. The necessary condition of that enjoyment is, though, that the diner can pay for it. Thus in this streamlined process the meal is rendered a product, and the diner a consumer – a terminus of a myriad of production relations related to the cultivation, transportation and preparation of the ingredients³. For van Toorn, making these production relations and their intrinsic tensions visible in the dining experience would then be essential. It is perhaps not possible to transform the world into one where meals are no longer consumer products – but the meal itself and the experience of its enjoyment ought to make its commodified and artificial nature tangible, even if it does coat the enjoyment with some unease.

It is then perhaps best to explore the possible affinities between the two concepts. This seems at first glance a peculiar notion, as much of the preceding essay has been about spelling out their differences and critique towards each other. Though both concepts make use of similar terms, they tend to define them in completely opposite ways. For example: if Crowel advocates creating distance between designer and content, van Toorn believes in creating distance between content and reader; if Crowel advocates transparency as the minimisation of the designer's intrusion to the message, van Toorn believes in maximising the transparency of the cultural and social sphere where both the message and the design take place.

Even without going into the more or less tautological notion of "graphic design as visual communication", the two approaches conceptualise graphic design in similar ways in three key aspects. The first is the existence of the brief. The service provision approach and critical enquiry one might give the brief completely different importance and stature, but neither can dispute its existence as a necessary condition for graphic design practice. For the service providers, this might be self-evident, but even for the critical enquirers it is undeniable: without the brief the mediating nature of graphic design (between the individual/private and the collective/public) is lost. This does not mean that there cannot be further subversive developments in conceptualising the brief in speculative ways⁴, but without the existence of the semantic level of "content" (that is to be interfered with and commented on), even the critical designer is left with nothing but inconsequential formal explorations that bring them right back to the *crisis in making* discussed earlier.

The second similarity is the importance of *craft* and going beyond visual solutions that the majority of practicing professionals are content with. Unfortunately this essay is too limited to deal extensively with the concept of craft or craftsmanship, but for our current purposes is perhaps sufficient to note that, according to Richard Sennett, it is characterised by an "experimental rhythm of problem solving and problem finding"⁵. What is important and shared here is that, despite divergent goals and conceptual environments, both the service providers and critical enquirers depend on the on-going problematisation of the *means* they use to attain their goals. It

does not matter that the particular kinds of visual solutions deemed ideal or fruitful might be completely different, but that there must exist an experimentation that takes place *within* the work itself. Even the problem solving Crowel engages in this dynamic, though only on the level of grid-based explorations of form. And adamant as he is in calling for the use of trusted and true means, he still cordons off an area for experimentation for himself (as seen in his utopian type experiments), though it only exists within the larger confines of those trusted and true means.

The third aspect in which the service providers and critical enquires share common ground is in the value given to the designed object as the end result and the criteria by which success and failure are to be measured. As Norman Potter posits:

*[The designer's] work stands or falls by the objective qualities of an outcome.*⁶

This need not, naturally, imply a quantitative measurement (and we need not take the "objective" in Potter's assertion too literally), but even for Jan van Toorn, "ideas must ultimately prove themselves in practice"⁷. Thus theoretical rigour is without value if it is unable to make visible "our critical positions as professionals [...] in day-to-day practice"⁸.

The characterisation of these similarities brings us back to the key argument of this essay. Parts of it, I hope, are by now evident to the reader, but perhaps it is best so summarise.

Firstly, despite the debate, despite the enmity so clearly visible in the turns of phrase of Crowel and van Toorn, graphic design as service provision and graphic design as critical enquiry are not simple binary opposites or antipodes of each other. In other words, it is not true to claim that they give inverse answers to the same simplistic questions ("Should a design brief be answered objectively or subjectively?") but that their mutual relationship is of a much more nuanced and intriguing variety. What they share is the division of the conceptual design environment into form (design), content (brief), and context (designed object). Where they diverge is how the practice of graphic design is positioned in relation to

them. In short, though they share an environment, the landscapes are very different. The approaches cover different ground and attempt different things.

Secondly, the concept of graphic design as critical enquiry and subversion of common sense is a consequence and a critique of the service provision approach, brought on by the crises many practitioners are stuck with. These are not solely crises one experiences as a designer, such as the *crisis in making* discussed earlier, but crises one experiences as a person and as a social being. Here the expression of being *stuck* is particularly descriptive, and is illustrated superbly by Adam Curtis' analysis of the popularity of the first two seasons of the TV show *Mad Men*:

*In Mad Men we watch a group of people who live in a prosperous society that offers happiness and order like never before in history and yet are full of anxiety and unease. They feel there is something more, something beyond. And they feel stuck. I think we are fascinated because we have a lurking feeling that we are living in a very similar time. A time that, despite all the great forces of history whirling around in the world outside, somehow feels stuck. And above all has no real vision of the future.*⁹

Framed by an abundance of such feelings, the service provision approach is experienced by many – including myself – as being utterly inconsequential. At its best, it is about merely curating “a concept of reality we experience daily to be unacceptable”¹⁰. As a consequence and critique of these shortcomings, graphic design as critical enquiry subverts notions of common sense, both from the point of view of the discipline itself as well as from that of the viewer-reader. It does the former by providing unintuitive but compelling answers to questions of *what graphic design is* or *what, in fact, graphic designers do*. It does the latter by confronting the viewer/reader with ambiguous, argumentative objects that stretch the limits of the expected.

The hopeful result of all this is that both the designer and the viewer-reader are suddenly forced to *make sense* of the situation – and to realise that they themselves have the power to make conspicuous the edges of common sense keeping us stuck.

I can only end with a quote from the Deterritorial Support Group: *Design is vaporous but has remarkable effects. Like chlorine!*¹¹

1. Poynor 2013, 108
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See e.g. Metahaven's speculative identities.
5. Sennett 2008, 26
6. Potter 2002, 96
7. Poynor 2013, 123
8. Van Toorn 1993, 30
9. Curtis 2010.
10. Van Toorn 1993, 35
11. Metahaven 2011b, 69

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books and articles

Brook, Tony & Shaughnessy, Adrian (eds.) 2011. *Wim Crowel: A Graphic Odyssey*. London, UK: Unit editions.

Crouwel, Wim 1990. "Op een afstand", in Koosje Sierman (ed.), *Grafische vormgeving verhoudt zich tot beeldende kunst*, 23-85. Eindhoven, the Netherlands: Lecturis. Partial English translation appears in Huygen, Frederike 2015. "The Debate in Context" (see below).

Crouwel, Wim 2011. "An Important Encounter", in *Back Cover #4*, 32. Paris, France: Editions B42.

Crouwel, Wim & van Toorn, Jan 2015. *The Debate: The Legendary Context of Two Giants of Graphic Design*, translated by Ton Brouwers. New York, USA: Monacelli Press. Originally published in 2008 as *Crouwel-Van Toorn: het debat*. Eindhoven, the Netherlands: (Z)00 producties.

Debord, Guy 1970. *The Society of the Spectacle*, translated by Fredy Perlman. Detroit, USA: Black & Red. Originally published in 1967 as *La Société du spectacle*. Paris, France: Buchet Chastel.

Froshaug, Anthony 1967. "Typography is a grid", in Kinross Robin (ed.), 2000, *Anthony Froshaug. Typography and texts*, 187-190. London, UK: Hyphen Press.

Huygen, Frederike 2015. "The Debate in Context", in Crouwel & van Toorn, 2015, *The Debate: The Legendary Context of Two Giants of Graphic Design*, 45-76. New York, USA: Monacelli Press.

Lynam, Ian 2015. "Weddings", in Lynam, Ian, 2015, *Parting it Out: Writings on Graphic Design*, 17-21. Niigata, Japan: Wordshape.

Metahaven 2011a. "Autoreply: Modernism. A conversation with Experimental JetSet", in *Print* 65.5 (2011), 53-55.

Metahaven 2011b. "Cloud Communism. A conversation with Deterritorial Support Group", in *Print* 65.5 (2011), 67-69.

Muroga, Kiyonori, 2007. "Wim Crouwel's adventures into the experimental worlds", in *Idea* 323, Vol. 55, Issue 4, 3-131.

Pietiläinen, Jaakko. *Vaatimaton ehdotus* (BA thesis). Helsinki, Finland: Aalto University.

Potter, Norman 2002. *What is a designer: things, places, messages*. 4th edition, originally published in 1969. London, UK: Hyphen Press.

Poynor, Rick 2013. *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: nai 010 publishers.

Sennett, Richard 2008. *The Craftsman*. New Haven, USA; London UK: Yale University Press.

Siukonen, Jyrki 2011. *Vasara ja hiljaisuus*. Helsinki, Finland: Kuvataideakatemia.

van Toorn, Jan 1993. "thinking the visual", in van Toorn, Jan, 2006, *design's delight*, 27-35. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: 010 publishers.

van Toorn, Jan 2006. *design's delight*. Rotterdam, the Netherlands: 010 publishers.

Websites

Curtis, Adam 2010. *Madison Avenue. Experiments in the Laboratory of Consumerism*. London, UK: BBC.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/2010/08/madison_avenue.html
1 (16.10.2015)

Design Council, 2011. *The Design Process*.
<https://vimeo.com/28504529> (15.10.2015)

Rock, Michael 1996. *Designer As Author*. New York, USA: 2 x 4.
<http://2x4.org/ideas/22/designer-as-author/> (10.10.2015)