WIM CROUWEL

THE CROUWEL — VAN TOORN DEBATE TRANSCRIPT NOVEMBER 9, 1972 MUSEUM FODOR, AMSTERDAM

JAN VAN TOORN

JAN VAN TOORN

Jan Van Toorn (b. 1932, Tiel) studied graphic design at the Amsterdam School of Printing and the Institute of Arts and Crafts (later Gerrit Rietveld Academie). He has been a freelance designer in visual communication since 1957. The emotional charge of Van Toorn's designs stems from his interest in investigating visual meaning and the social role of the profession. His radical practice and pedagogy have been highly influential on succeeding generations of designers. Van Toorn has taught graphic design and visual communication at numerous academies and universities in The Netherlands and abroad, including Gerrit Rietveld Academie, the Department of Architecture at Eindhoven Technical University, and Rhode Island School of Design. From 1991 until 1998 he was director of the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, transforming it into an international postgraduate center for fine art, design and theory. In 1997, he organized the influential conference Design Beyond Design: Critical Reflection and the Practice of Visual Communication, devoted to the discrepancy between the sociocultural and symbolic realities of the information economy. He was the first recipient of the Piet Zwart prize in 1985, and received Doctor Honoris Causa from the Royal College of Art in 2011. Van Toorn lives and works in Amsterdam.

VAN
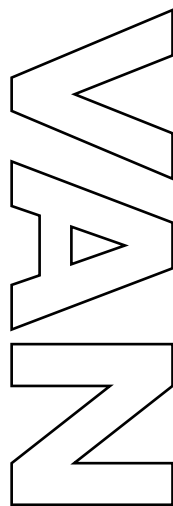
WIM CROUWEL

Wim Crouwel (b. 1928, Groningen) is a polymath design practitioner, educator, and museum director. He trained at Academy Minerva and the Institute of Arts and Crafts (later Gerrit Rietveld Academie), and began his career as an abstract painter. After joining an exhibition design firm, he was exposed to the possibilities of graphic design, and in 1954 started his practice as a freelance designer in Amsterdam. Inspired by Swiss design, the emerging International Style, and the principles of abstract art, Crouwel pursued clarity and simplicity in design, and embarked on experiments with letterforms and graphic systems, and a rigorous examination of the grid. In 1963, Crouwel cofounded Total Design, the first multidisciplinary design studio in the Netherlands, which was to become a dominant force in Dutch design. Presaging the era of digital typesetting, he designed the legendary typeface New Alphabet (1967), employing a matrix within which letterforms were constructed as units on a grid. In 1980, Crouwel left Total Design to be a full-time professor, and in 1985 he accepted the appointment of director of the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Crouwel's considerable contributions to the cultural life of the Netherlands and to the field of graphic design have been recognized in numerous prizes and awards, including the British OBE, Knight of the Order of the Dutch Lion, Officer of the Order of Orange Nassau, the BKVB Funds Oeuvre Award, and Doctor Honoris Causa from Delft University.

WIM CROUWEL

My first remark is a generalizing one. When as a designer you respond to a topical social or cultural pattern, this may give rise to, first, an analytical approach, in order to arrive at an objective participation in a process of communication; this is an approach, in my view, of lasting value and longevity. And, second, it may give rise to a spontaneous approach that strongly appeals to current opinion and therefore has powerful communicative effects. But I believe this is a short-lived communication.

In my opinion, these are the two things that move us, and I would like to clarify them. Designer A, who favors the analytical approach to arrive at a maximally objective message, will be inclined to make use of solidly tested means only and will not be easily tempted to experiment for the sake of novelty. For this reason, he is also likely to end up in a place that is sometimes characterized as rather dry. By contrast, Designer B is more likely to make use of trendy means, and he will not reject experiments in order to arrive at new results.

Further, Designer A will be inclined to position himself professionally, without surrendering his sense of responsibility vis-à-vis society, and therefore he will refrain from engaging in specialties that are not his. Through his specific work, he will provide a contribution to the problem articulated. I think that Designer B, based on his large sense of responsibility towards society, will tend to become so absorbed by the problem posed that he enters into specialties that are not his. He runs the risk of wasting his expertise by resorting to an amateurish contribution to the problem at hand.

Our colleagues know which
side I'm on, for I believe that as
a designer I must never stand
between the message and
its recipient. Instead, I try to
present the issue as neutrally
as possible.

JAN VAN TOORN

I think that as a specialization graphic design, just like other forms of design, has begun to fall short under the pressure of industrial developments in our society and all their various consequences. The designer falls short not only because through his use of form he programs rather than informs, but also because he no longer questions his goal and responsibility. His design influences and conditions users, rather than supporting its content.

I start from more or less the same two types of designers as Wim. But what you call the analytical designer, I call the technologist-designer, because he works with methods derived from technology and science. The analytical strand, of which you are a characteristic exponent, is determined by a technological-organizational attitude. I do not believe that

a designer can adopt, as you put it, the position of neutral intermediary. The acts you perform take place through you, and you are a subjective link. But you deny this subjectivity, meaning; you view your occupation as a purely neutral one.

Wim says that he uses a particular graphic means as a neutral thing, but in my view it is always used subjectively. Its use, after all, has social meaning. It has a social goal and that is why it is subjective. It is there that your influence lies, be it your personal influence or your influence as a group. It all depends on how you use your means.

Those in graphic design, just like people in other specialties, are inclined not only to exaggerate their own value, but also to start seeing their dealings and their means as a goal in itself, thus losing sight

of the actual goal. This is why I
once again looked up what you
wrote in the 1961 Christmas
issue.[1] The first thing you say
there about design is that form
is determined by content. But
in the remainder of this short
article I do not read a single
word on the relation between
content and form, yet there
is an awful lot about formal
lishing industries options,
techniques, and technology,
so about means in (p. 112).
general. But today, I feel, the
relationship between form
and content is in fact highly
relevant. It is perhaps more so
than in 1961, for it comes with
a responsibility. And maybe
we should be adventurous
in facing the challenge,
without perhaps sufficiently
knowing the means we have
at our disposal.

1. The Christmas issue of Drukkers weekblad en Autolijn, a weekly
trade publication for the printing and publishing industries (p. 112).

WIM CROUWEL

When you say that my approach is technological and observe that I constantly talk about technology, this is an effect of my fondness for technology. I was at times strongly influenced by technical innovations. But I do not have the sense of being led by technology to such a degree that I've ever become an extension of the machine. Technology is a source of wonder to me, and I have long believed that it would be able to free us from a great many difficulties.

After all, the amount of information fired at people has grown so large that it can no longer be processed. In this predicament a particular technology may offer a solution, if you apply it well. To apply technology well, I once made a proposal for a new basic alphabet. And this implied larger freedom for the designer than before, when alphabets were forced upon us and handed down to us from the Renaissance, the baroque, and neoclassicism.

To be sure, the designer has freedom, but it also comes with certain formal restrictions. Formal restrictions can be stretched according to your needs. So when I show admiration for technology, this does not automatically lead to technological work.

I would like to cite a recent statement by Jan, from the newspaper: "The function of a graphic designer is to convey information. This should happen in a way that makes it possible for the reader or viewer to arrive at a view of his own, rather than imposing the mind-set of the messenger."

When Jan says that design is a subjective activity, he adopts—as a designer—the

role of intermediary. I'm afraid, however, to adopt such a subjective role, and rather try to take an objective stance.

At first glance, Jan van Toorn, as he put it in the newspaper quote, views the designer as a coordinator who, without defining views of his own, merely provides assistance in realizing some communication of information. But this is not the case with Jan, because he does not operate without taking a position in between sender and receiver. Jan quite consciously participates subjectively in that process.

JAN VAN TOORN

Let us first briefly talk about this subjectivity. In my view, there are two important issues. To convey content does not mean that the design itself does not represent particular values. Any design has a certain content, an emotional value. It has specific features. It has a clear goal. You have to convey something to somebody. Perhaps a political conviction, perhaps only a report on a meeting. Any design is addressed to someone. The double duty of the messenger, the designer, is to convey the content without interfering with it. On the other hand, there is the designer's inescapable input and subjectivity. You cannot deny this dialectic, and you should rather see it as an advantage.

You are afraid of it, and you used the word "fear." You do not want to inflict harm onto either the content or the identity [of the message), which is why you always design in the same way—this, at least, is what I think your work will show over a longer period. By giving the same design response in all situations, you produce work of great uniformity, in which any sense of identity is lost. In my opinion, however, identity is a most essential feature of all human contact, including the communication of any kind of message.

WIM CROUWEL

I agree with you when you say that you can never step outside of yourself. As the designer of the message, you stand in between the sender and the receiver. And when I claim to be afraid to put myself in between them, that is because I feel it's never productive for me to add a vision of my own on top of it. I believe you can separate the two.

When a designer works for a political party or wants to promote his own political convictions, he goes at it in a very subjective way, because he then chooses a perspective. He will shape this perspective through his own personal input in order to get his point across as optimally as possible. This implies that a designer should only do work that he can fully agree with. Well, it is impossible for me to concur with that position. In particular with regard to work involving a political dimension, I say: "It's okay to do it subjectively." But then you run the risk of ending up with a rather narrow range of assignments.

When you take a position like mine, I say: "Guys, I do not want to contribute to what the man says, because I want to be able to offer my services as a designer in a wider area." After all, when as a designer I adopt a subjective position and I'm constantly aware of it, this is automatically visible in my designs. However, this is possible in specific cases only, and not in a very broad area, or you risk lapsing into that amateurism I mentioned previously, something I do not believe in. At the time I had an extensive conversation with René about a program aimed at doing something about educational materials for developing countries.[2] In this context, one designer felt motivated to immerse himself completely in the problem

of educational materials, and subsequently he began to design based on that knowledge. My response would be: Come on, boys, stop it! You go too far as a designer. This is something you really shouldn't do, because in this instance you'd better engage an educational specialist to supply the specific know-how. You are the designer, and you shouldn't come anywhere near that specific know-how. Instead, based on your knowhow, you start tackling the problem from your professional attitude and approach, after you've been given a thorough briefing. And this is the part someone else should stay away from, because this is your territory. Of course there has to be an ongoing conversation, unquestionably, but I strongly believe in specialties. I fear, then, that for instance standard typography, meaning book typography, cannot be done by someone who adopts such a subjective stance, for a book, any book, will never become a better one just through its typography. Never ever. Even the admirable achievement of the Nieuwe Zakelijkheid, a typography that follows the text closely and emphasizes it, is way too subjective to my taste already.[3] I find it altogether wrong. But let me not exaggerate the word "subjective." But let me not exaggerate the word "subjective." The subjective designer has a much more limited scope of work, and he'd better accept it. His talents will never be done full justice while there is a demand for designers in many more domains.

3. The Nieuwe Zakelijkheid (New Objectivity) is a term used in the Netherlands for modernism and functionalism in architecture and design in the interwar years.

JAN VAN TOORN

First let me address your specialties and the reference to the New Objectivity. A specialist attitude such as yours, whereby you get in touch with other disciplines but do not want to immerse yourself in their backgrounds and expect to be briefed, produces a proxy. You create a disconnect, whereas there are in fact connections. Moreover, general human experience, which can't be reduced to a single operational denominator, spans more territory than that covered by the rational disciplines. Still it is quite possible to approach, to come nearer to such a human dimension, and this is something you ignore.

The designer should approach his vocation from the angle of the artist and the origin of his métier, and from an industrial-technological angle. For me, however, it is not relevant at all to articulate the different methods and their corresponding means. It is about one's attitude regarding social relations. This is what should be center stage, but you see it only once in a while.

You impose your design on others and level everything. You were at the forefront, and now our country is inundated by waves of trademarks and house styles and everything looks the same. Yet there are challenger's as well, and they come from designers who take a much more sensitive approach. To me, your approach is not relevant, and in my view you should not propagate it as the only possible solution for a number of communication problems, because it's not true. What your approach does is basically confirm existing patterns. This is not serving communication—it is conditioning human behavior.

WIM CROUWEL

I think you're right on many points, and it would sadden me if a designer's contribution came across as a pulp of uniform corporate identity programs. When you Work on a company's or organization's identity, the package of demands you analyze proves to be the same in most cases. I translate "responding subjectively to it" as: "when I am cheerful, I respond in yellow, and when I am dejected I respond in blue." Frankly, I don't believe in it. After all, the communication of many businesses and organizations and the information on which you collaborate tend to be quite similar, and it is not necessary to disguise this fact or to put a gloss on it.

Subjective design leads to results that in my view seem just as overblown or that are even uniform as well, except that they are uniform in the short run compared to the things that also come across as uniform in the long run. The latest Spruijt calendar by Van Toorn is as pretentious as a piece of so-called good design, or as a clean piece of design.[4]

4. Here Crouwel uses the actual English phrase, "good design" (p. 123).

JAN VAN TOORN

A client's package of demands is rational, and you can sum it up straightforwardly in a list of points. But how identity is determined is not the same every time, nor are you a neutral intermediary.

Several weeks ago I read an article by Brecht about the epic theater. He writes about being an actor.[5] You're standing there, and still you're playing a role. You shouldn't want to deny this ambiguity. Engage with it! It will not truly function until you manage to find the right balance. I suspect that you need to train yourself in it, but in my view you should not try to evade it.

My calendar for Spruijt is an experiment and a thing to look at, not a thing to read. It does have order, yet it is order with a twist to it. You continue to feel that something's happening. And with a calendar that is fine, while in the case of

typography you might not do it. In typography you will perhaps be more cautious to break rules because there are so many of them. But in fine art, experiments have been done for centuries, and perhaps we should pick up more from that tradition and use more from it.

5. German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956).

WIM CROUWEL

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. Many designers are living with the dilemma of wanting to be a visual artist rather than a good graphic designer.

Let me go back to that calendar and your issue of identity. You state that it is possible to list everything neatly in the package of demands and clarify it all, but that identity cannot be made intelligible. But scientists in psychology and philosophy are looking for it; they in fact try to quantify identity, so that it becomes comprehensible. The same is true in aesthetics, which is perhaps one step further along. Notably Max Bense is quite far already in developing quantification methods, for all elements of aesthetics, so that these things can be applied better and in a more goal-oriented fashion.[6]

Your calendar, Jan, your story about it is fine. But that calendar is not a vehicle for selling your story, or is it? That cannot be the motivation for making a calendar, can it? You would be better off publishing it in a book. In my view it is nonsense to use a calendar as a vehicle for such stories, even when they interest you and 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.

6. German philosopher in aesthetics and semiology Max Bense (1910-1990), who taught at Ulm in the 1950s.

JAN VAN TOORN

Grids are highly effective for conveying a message, but that is merely a starting point. You should not promote their use as the only way of design, or the only solution for arriving at great communication for the future.

WIM CROUWEL

You say that I promote grids as the one true thing. I say that graphic design consists of a process of ordering for the benefit of the clarity and transparency of information. This needs to be founded on particular principles, because clarity and transparency on their own do not lead to quality information. There has to be an underlying principle as well.

My basic principles may have been characterized at times as subjective, but to me they are objective. When I depart from modular structures, then this is an underlying principle to me. These structures can be simple, but they can also be extremely complex. And I believe that design-not just graphic design, but also spatial design, architecture, and industrial design—benefits from a cellular approach, from a highly structural approach.

Typography, for instance, is a preeminent example of such a process of ordering. Every form or shape in typography that wants to be more is one form too many. As a typographer you merely arrange information clearly so as to convey it in an easily readable way. That a clear arrangement may lead to incredible monotony is not at issue here, what matters is that you order things according to a specific point of view, from a basic principle. This is what determines form, and such form might well lead to a style as well.

In my view, typography does not have to be determined by tradition and history at all. It is time, I believe, that we throw overboard all those dos and don'ts that have kept typography in a straightjacket for so long. When as an alternative I advocate my structural approach, my cellular approach, which culminates in the use of grids for typography or spatial grids for architecture, I really have a different idea in mind.

Wim Crouwel at Museum Fodor, by Wilco Geuren, 1972, Courtesy of The Monacelli Press.

JAN VAN TOORN

By traditional form I mean what you refer to as something determined by tradition. It does not so much pertain to style, but to our way of reading, the way of reading we have grown accustomed to. It does not just emerge out of the blue, but has a history. It is a case of historically determined human behavior. And you cannot simply act as if it doesn't exist.

Working with grids, it seems to me, is a tremendous refinement of our tools, but it is not essential and only of interest to fellow professionals. We saw where systematic ordering ad absurdum leads us in the protests against the closing of the Hochschule in Ulm: banners with perfectly clean typography.[7] But in this way of protesting you do not see any identification with those vou address, and this is a crucial problem for which a designer has to find a solution.

7. By 1967 the Ulm School of Design was financially troubled and beset by faculty conflicts; some faculty members departed and the curriculum was scaled back. In 1968 the regional parliament in Bonn withdrew all funding to the school, forcing the institution's closure amid student and faculty protests.

WIM CROUWEL

Jan. I don't believe in that at all. The lively concern of these people and their involvement—their *angehauchtheit,* as they call it in Germany—is equal to that of people who protest in more amateurish ways. Look at Paris '68![8] The posters they made there are all obvious cases of amateurism; not a single one of them has any value. Not one of them is a good piece of design that tries to convey an idea. It is all clumsy work that comes across as sweet, pleasant, full of feeling, but not as tough. Good designers could have conveyed the content much more strongly and this could have brought the movement more success.

8. Dramatic period of civil unrest, massive general strikes, and the Occupation of universities and factories across France.

JAN VAN TOORN

Why then did those designers
fail to contribute? Because
they are incapable of giving
adequate answers. So all that
remains is amateurism. The
people in our profession have
no answers.

Jan van Toorn at Museum Fodor, by
Wilco Geuren, 1972, Courtesy of
The Monacelli Press.

WIM CROUWEL

Jan, before the break let's briefly return to the typography in the catalogs we make for museums. I have always taken the view that these catalogs should have a kind of magazine format, because they need to tell the museum's story, rather than that of the artist. For this reason, they should be recognizable in their design as coming from an institution that takes a specific stance vis-à-vis contemporary art.

This has led to catalogs of which people said: "We can't recognize the artist in it." But the artist was present in the reproductions, and I have nothing to add to his story. The artist's own story, when conveyed clearly and in a readable fashion by means of well placed illustrations according to a certain principle, should be so powerful that he is always stronger than me.

What I add to it is at most the specific objective of the museum involved.

In your catalogs for the Van Abbemuseum I recognize first and foremost the voice of Jan van Toorn, while that of the artist becomes perceptible only if I put in some more effort. As "pieces of art" these are great contributions to what is currently possible in free typography, but they are outright unreadable.[9] I simply get stuck.

9. Crouwel again uses the English phrase here.

JAN VAN TOORN

At the Van Abbemuseum we wanted to do things differently. Our museum was not something that needed to be gold; at stake was a program made by people and also one that evolves. This policy, which is discernible in its exhibitions and activities, had to be center stage, not the institution. Through their activities and connections, the staff determines the museum's identity. And this does not take place while I sit at home thinking up designs. Usually we [the director and I] have a conversation, if possible with artists joining in a joint discussion in which I am not told how I should do something, but in which we look at the historical considerations that should be in the catalog. It is a matter of seeking an identity collectively, a concern I then try to respond to, using the tools of my profession.
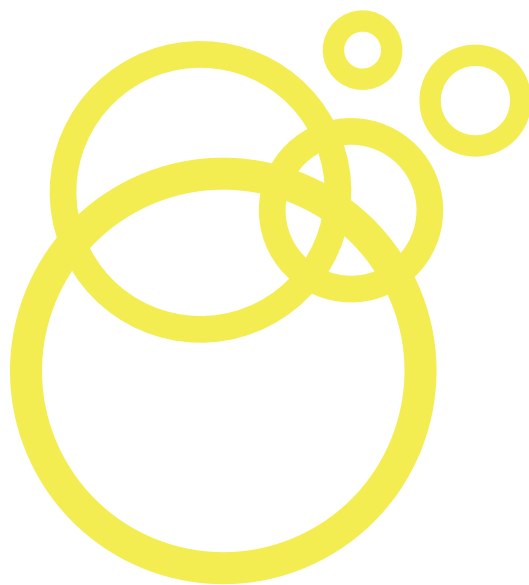
WIM CROUWEL

Recently I had an interesting experience in the context of the catalog for Jan Dibbets. As a conceptual artist he conveys a number of incredibly clear thoughts through his work. I am deeply impressed by it, and therefore I love working on such catalogs. And when you love the work so dearly, you feel inclined to add your own story. But that story is in fact my story, my testimony of this affection. Well, Jan Dibbets immediately rapped me on the knuckles. He said: "Just listen to me, boy, you are standing in between me and the public here. Would you please refrain from doing that. Please, position that line straight again." This confirmed, I felt, what I usually in fact try to do in my work.

Dibbets tells his story. He 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 Jan Dibbets himself cannot do.

JAN VAN TOORN

True, he cannot do that, but he does have thoughts about it. I also designed an exhibition for Dibbets. We sat together with a group of people, and he told us what activities he planned to organize in the museum. He has clear views about it, and it is then up to me to find a stance or attitude. Just as the museum had to try and answer questions or find a spot in the museum where Jan could operate. The same applies to me, for the activities involved are part of a collective endeavor rather than just my own. At one point these culminate not in all sorts of separate pieces but in something that results from a shared mind-set.

WIM CROUWEL

I believe I shouldn't say much
more. It is my conviction that
you yourself play a large role in
this process and that you
are the last person to create
something together
with the artist. It is the artist
who creates and brings
things into being.

JAN VAN TOORN

Dibbets has been very preoccupied with that catalog indeed. That has never been an issue of contention between us. On the contrary. Other artists tell me as well that they think my posters are great and that they recognize their own mind-set in them.

AFTER
A
SHORT
BREAK

JAN VAN TOORN

It is not a matter of whether you feel closer to your work's recipient or not. What matters is the question: What has to be done? What kind of function does your work have? Which factors determine contact between people? Can we learn more about that? After all, human beings have been conditioned in part.

WIM CROUWEL

Human beings are able to
recognize themselves better in
typography that relies on very
simple, transparent principles
that define the matter clearly,
without veiling or obscuring
it, rather than on the basis of
Jan's much more subjective
story. This is why I believe that
what Jan claims to do is not in
fact what he does.

SPEAKER (UNKNOWN)

What are the things you choose as a human being and as a designer with your specific capabilities? For God's sake, choose the right objective and cut down on consumption. Don't work for any other lousy business. It does not make a hell of a difference whatsoever whether it is a museum or a peanut butter company, or some margarine producer located in the far corner of the country. The choice involved is a much more essential one. What matters is the effective attack on the social structures that prevail today. We should make a choice, but not one for the industry or capitalism, because that is pointless. All night the discussion has been about nice places, such as museums, but not about work in less attractive corners such as Shell Oil and the like. At issue is a much more fundamental choice. This has not yet been addressed. Let us talk about that.

RENÉ DE JONG

I would like to narrow down the conversation somewhat, not because of a lack of problems to discuss, but because it is a discussion that we all have been in many times within numerous fields and in many places, namely: if you want to change the world, where should you begin?
Talking about taking a socially committed stand in its ultimate implications seems to be a big story about which strategy or tactics you use to achieve social change. What is far more interesting to me is this: if you share the view that your profession is also a means
For bringing about changes in society, you should start talking about how you can do so as an individual while belonging to a professional group. Which means need to be developed? Which assignments should you accept? Should you be actively looking for specific assignments or not? It is one thing to go look for work as a designer in places where social relevancy would be useful; it's another thing to not walk away from the places where you do work.

WIM CROUWEL

These two people claim that they find such commitment, or such a concept of commitment, much more important to discuss tonight than that which we originally had in mind. As if we have to put our social commitment into words. But when someone asks me how I being the person I am, wish to put my talent at the service of society, I don't mind articulating it. I am not afraid to do so, not at all in fact.

I believe that if you follow the tendency that I sense from the question about commitment, ninety percent of our colleagues would have to be advised to leave their profession. In fact, this is something I keep telling my students. I say to them, "Above all, make sure you know what you are doing. If this is incompatible with what you aspire to do, get out of it today and rather embark on a study such as political science or philosophy or psychology; or go into politics, because from there you have much more influence on people and you may achieve whatever you aspire faster than through our vocation."

After all, our clout is incredibly limited. Politicians in parliament can respond directly to our society and introduce bills that our government may subsequently implement. We do not find ourselves on that side. I'm not a politician, and I also made a conscious decision to stay away from that world. I love my profession, and I try to make a contribution from there.