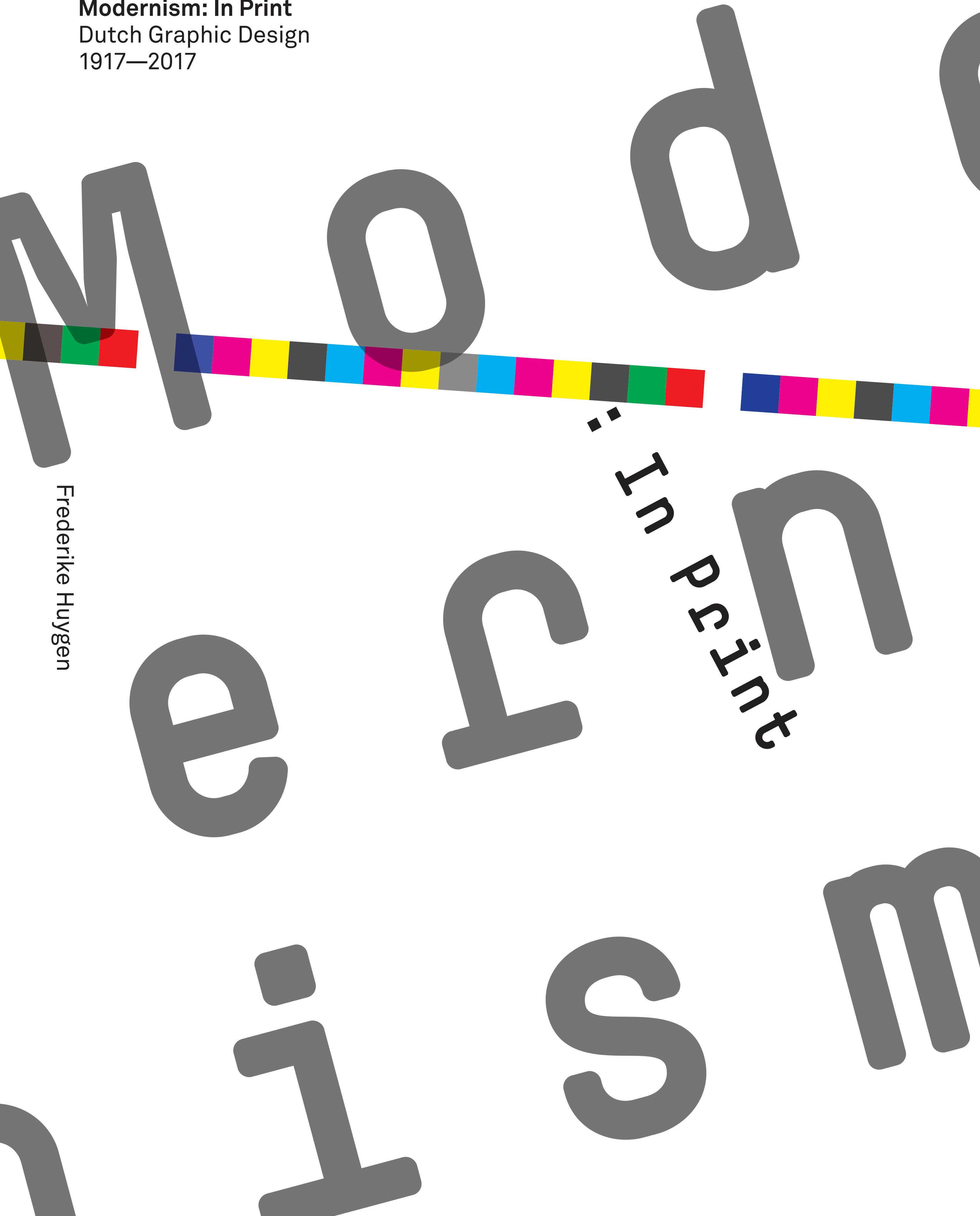
Modernism: In Print
Dutch Graphic Design
1917—2017



This publication coincides with the exhibition *Modernism: in print* at the Special Collections facility of the University of Amsterdam, curated by Mathieu Lommen.

Modernism: In Print

Dutch Graphic Design
1917—2017

Frederike Huygen

Lecturis

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Introduction

For many readers a single name will be enough to summon up a picture of modernism: the Bauhaus. Mentioning the renowned German art school evokes a style of clean lines and geometric shapes, functionalist design methods inspired by industrialization and the machine, a passion for everything new and progressive, and ideals for a better world. The image of this institution is that of a revolutionary change taking place there around 1925 which influenced the rest of the world, suffusing the thinking and aesthetics of generations to come. Its ground-breaking impact as a cradle of the avant garde and a bulwark of modernism seems beyond doubt. The Bauhaus, besides being a symbol, has become a cliché.

In the field of design, modernism has several strands of meaning which are already present in the picture just described. It subsumes an aesthetic (a style and a form vocabulary), a design method (working from basic elements, functional analysis and the precept "form follows function"), an ideology, and an ethic. The chief hallmark of this movement is that its adherents consciously sought renewal and a breach with tradition.[1] Various synonyms for modernism were in use in the 1920s and 1930s, including the New Objectivity, the Dutch *Nieuwe Bouwen* or "New Building", the New Typography and the New Photography. The term "modernism" originated in the mid 19th century with reference to new movements in religion. Around the same time, the French poet Charles Baudelaire popularized the term *modernité* as a designation of all that was contemporary. From 1890 to 1940, modernity and the processes of modernization constituted the frame of reference to which intellectuals, artists, architects and designers sought to relate. Industrialization, commercialization, science, technology, urbanization, massification, emancipation, individualism, democratization and countless other new phenomena called for new answers.

Some authors aggregate the entire period under the heading of modernism, while others restrict the term to the inter-war period. For some, it encompasses all the "isms" – futurism, expressionism, dadaism, constructivism, neoplasticism (De Stijl) and surrealism – while for others it excludes anything figurative, decorative or ornamental. Any definition that aims to be exact seems easier to grasp, but soon turns out to be too restrictive. In 1936, the influential art historian Nikolaus Pevsner wrote of the Modern Movement, declaring it "the genuine and adequate style of our century."[2] The modern style, he held, was universal, timeless, functional, rational, mechanical and abstract/geometrical. He considered the Modern Movement to have begun in 1914, and to stand in opposition to ornament, organic forms, craft and fantasy. Pevsner's book is considered the first on modern design, although it relates more to architecture than to product design and graphic design is not even mentioned. His book marked the inception of design history: Pevsner's vision prevailed until some way into the 1970s and the mark he left on the history of design is beyond question.

Thinking in opposites (rational/romantic, constructive/decorative, abstraction/expression, innovation/tradition, progressive/conservative) is rampant in design history, but this kind of categorization is primarily stylistic and an oversimplification.[3] It skirts, for example, the facts that functionalism existed prior to the modern movement, that William Morris had already argued for a social design ethic in the 19th century, that art nouveau was distinctly innovative and non-traditional, and that the modern movement was by no means anti-aesthetic, unromantic or devoid of decorative tendencies. There are moreover quite a few discrepancies between the proclamations of artists, architects and designers, and what they did in practice. The reality is less cut and dried.

The term modernism has been a topic of continual discussion, and the rise of postmodernism has unleashed a further stream of new interpretations. Moreover, its meaning differs according to the discipline – in fine art, architecture, literature etc. The term "international style" (or the "international typographic style") is also used in connection with design. It refers mainly to the continued application of the modernist idiom and approach after World War II, along with the rise of corporate house styles and Swiss design. This was not a simple linear or evolutionary process, however, but a complicated field of groups, atmospheres and reactions, within which changes and contradictions occurred.

Piet Zwart, leaf from the *Drukkerij Trio* advertising book, 1930. Anthon Beeke, poster Holland Festival, 1995.

Here, I will take my lead from the interpretation favoured by Walter Adamson. In his book *Embattled Avant-Gardes* (2007), he uses the term "design modernism", which centres around the relation between art and mass commodity culture. Artists were concerned about the banality of commerce and sought to counterbalance it. Their view was that the artist or designer could not fulfil a meaningful role towards society if production was primarily driven by selling and marketing. They claimed a position and aimed to reunite art with the public domain. This definition of modernism, coupled to the notion of breaking away from tradition, may be considered the ideology that the design profession has upheld for over 100 years. It presents an unbroken line both in practice and in the discourse about design. But the pursuit of autonomy cannot be separated from the professional position of the designer, which differs per person and in time. What is more, modernism is itself subject to continual reformulation. The concept dominates the discourse on graphic design but institutions, designers, critics and historians repeatedly construct it differently in texts and debates.[4] The question is hence not so much what modernism is, exactly, but how it is seen. It is a complex phenomenon.

An overview of Dutch modernist graphic design has to start with certain assumptions. What counts as Dutch? Does it mean everything that is has been made in this country, everything that is used here, or everything that is produced by Dutch designers?[5] In this book, it refers to everything made here, and all the design work that has played a part in the design climate and the ongoing discussion concerning it. Modernism has always been a highly international phenomenon, so Dutch design cannot stand alone. This book is therefore about "Dutch design", although its objective is not to distil some quintessential Dutch character. Sources of inspiration have been the articles and studies of Javier Gimeno Martinez, Joep Leerssen and Joana Meroz, all of whom have shown that cultural identity is not a question of some or other essence or truth, but a result of characterization, perception and constructions. It is a matter of various perceptions and stories existing about Dutch graphic design and modernism, which may or may not change.

This book comprises three reflective essays on the periods 1920-1940/45, 1945-1990 and 1990-present, each period giving rise to different questions. It also presents a rich visual image drawn from the extensive Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam and from the design archives kept there.

This book is an overview, but not one with an ambition to offer an all-embracing design history. Rather, it offers a selection which does not pretend to represent all the "important" designers, but which aims to interrogate the canon by also showing other less well-known examples. The last chapter, in particular, cannot have a definitive character since Dutch graphic design from recent decades has not yet been properly described or evaluated.

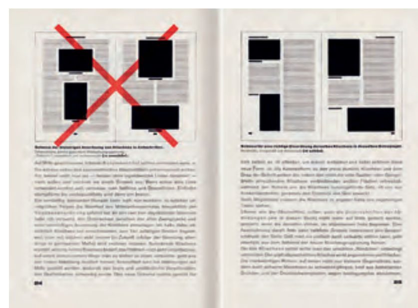
International poster exhibition, 1939, Stedelijk
Museum Amsterdam, designed by Sandberg.

The New Typography and Elemental Design

The issues of *Merz* (1924) and *Typographische Mitteilungen* (1925) about the New Typography and a spread from Jan Tschichold's book *Die neue Typographie* 1928. El Lissitzky, program sheet for the electro-mechanical show *Victory Over the Sun*, 1921; *Vešč Objet Gegenstand,* magazine, 1922.

In 1923, the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy published a programmatic text titled "Die neue Typographie" (The New Typography) in a Bauhaus book.[1] He argued that printed matter should be determined exclusively by optical and psychological laws, and saw the potential of intensive photography use in conjunction with expressive typography. To sum up, he advocated clear communication in an intense form. Two aspirations coincided here: the exact objectivity of rules and of photography, and a free typography. Two years later he published a sequel coupling the desirability of a contemporary graphic design to a vision of the future of communication.[2] Mechanization, new printing and reproduction techniques, and new communication media such as radio and film must lead on the one hand to clarity, conciseness and functionality, and on the other to a dynamic new visual-optical design style. This he termed "typophoto".

Moholy-Nagy was not alone in this area. Central Europe saw the publication of a whole stream of manifestos in this period, and the terms "new typography", "elemental typography" and "typophoto" spread rapidly.[3] Initially they were diffused through artists' magazines, but the ideas came to the attention of printers chiefly through the designer Jan Tschichold, who in 1928 set down the principles in a practical and theoretical manual *Die neue Typographie*. Tschichold also provided a historical background of the movement. In the Netherlands, the New Typography found resonance in particular with three figures, Gerard Kiljan, Paul Schuitema and Piet Zwart, who are now considered pioneers of modern graphic design.



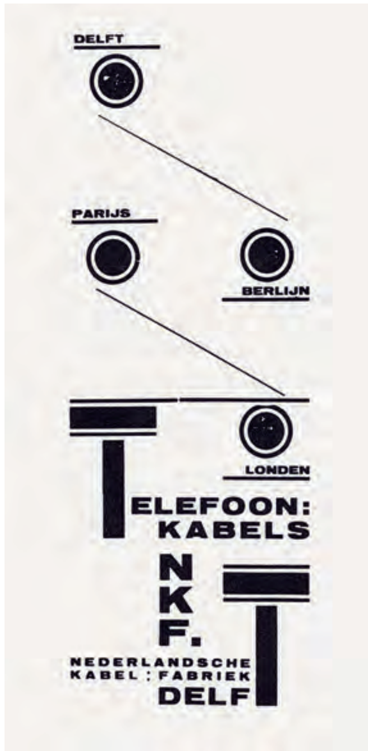
Advertising work by Piet Zwart as illustrated in *De Reclame*, 1924: a card for Vickers House, ca. 1922, and an advertisement for NKF cable works. Brochure for PTT air mail/ *Amsterdam-Batavia*, 1929, Piet Zwart. Cover of Zwart's manifesto, 1930, made for the printers Trio.

Piet Zwart, Paul Schuitema and Gerard Kiljan

Typography is a tool for communicating in a clear, visually intense form, composed of straight lines, simple geometrical forms, primary colours and plain letters, without resorting to purely decorative effects: it was in these terms that, in late 1925, the Dutch periodical *De Reclame* (Advertising) introduced the Bauhaus approach to graphic design in the Netherlands.[4] The magazine had already presented the work of Piet Zwart the previous year. Not only was this the earliest publication on Zwart's graphic design, but the article included what we may regard as his first manifesto: "These ideas about advertising bear no connection to 'art'. They are merely bussinesslike (but not humdrum) products, in which an attempt is made to treat the typographic means also as a goal, in relation to the promotional idea. The typographic means (letters, lines, shapes) are not subsidiary to the advertisement. They are not misused as a promotional anecdote like a rebus on a bag from the cigar shop. They simply present a suggestive form. The aim is not 'the beautiful' but expression!"[5]

The visual expression of the idea through typography was central to Zwart, as evidenced by the illustrated examples. The graphic elements in the advertisements for the Dutch electric cable manufacturer NKF – lines and dots or circles – refer to the linearity of the cables and to their cross sections. The "rubber flooring in strip form" promoted on the advertising card for Vickers House/ Laga is literally reflected in the blocks and bands composed using brass rule and printed in red and black.

Zwart subsequently wrote two manifestos, unpublished, which emphasized the visual dynamic, elemental typography


DELFT
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DELF

N.V. DRUKKERIJ TRIO DEN HAAG

Gerard Kiljan, invitation for Inventa heaters, 1926; display card for Junker & Ruh stoves, 1927. Paul Schuitema, advertisement and booklet for Van Berkel scales, ca. 1927. Kiljan, announcement card for Filmliga, 1933.

and high-contrast composition.[6] He disparaged the past, along with aesthetics, beauty and personal preferences. In "Van oude tot nieuwe typografie" (From Old to New Typography), a 1930 account of the New Typography, he assigned the present time a "typographic countenance" characterized by an asymmetrically placed flush left-justified lower case text forming an integral, dynamic composition with the photographs. Imagination and dynamics were however no less important than economy, standardization and reduction (a single simple sans serif typeface). To Zwart, printed matter in all its forms was moreover one of the most active means "towards the development and elevation of the masses." It served mankind, stimulated social change and would facilitate a mass culture, although this was only possible if its form was consonant with the spirit of the time.

He repeated his statements in 1937 in a manifesto-like article, "The Typographic Countenance of Today and Functional Typography", which did appear in print.[7] He wrote of city traffic as an example of the radical change taking place, and condemned anything that resisted progress in severe and explicit terms: pathetic typography, antiquated typefaces, dull books, fashionably decorative printed matter and primitive newspapers. Symmetry was stupid and boring. There were no reactions to this text and it may be wondered whether it exerted any influence at all. The magazine in which it appeared, *Prisma der Kunsten*, was marginal in circulation and Zwart's views were by then far from new and perhaps even outdated.

Together with Schuitema and Kiljan, Zwart championed typophoto and photography in advertising during the 1930s. As lecturers at the art schools in The

Exhibition about De Jong printers at
the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1962,
designed by Wim Crouwel.

Dick Elffers, *Weerbare democratie* (Stalwart Democracy), 1946, poster for an exhibition about the resistance during World War II. Wim Brusse, brochure *Hallo jonge vriend* (Hello, Young Friend), 1946, for Dutch State Mines. Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, page from a commemorative book on the printer Frans Duwaer who was executed during the war due to his resistance activities, 1945. Wil Sandberg, *Open oog* (Open Eye), 1946, magazine devoted to new cultural beginnings; catalogue *Kunst en kind* (Art and the Child), 1948, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

The trend towards a more illustrative graphic design continued into the 1940s and 50s. The typophoto was continued in photo books and illustrated magazines, as well as in the Nazi propaganda during the occupation of the Netherlands in World War II. The propaganda included, for example, books and magazines by Hamer Publishers to promote the Greater German Cultural Community.[1] Photo books memorializing the War started appearing after the Liberation and this genre became very popular.

In advertising circles, The New Objectivity was now regarded as outdated, a passing fad.[2] However, Hans Jaffé of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum still saw modern design in 1950 as the child of fine art, with De Stijl and Hendrik Werkman as its progenitors. He associated it with the New Objectivity (commercial posters) and Expressionism (cultural posters).[3] He saw Piet Zwart and Otto Treumann as representing the former, in contrast to Dick Elffers and Wil Sandberg. Jaffé projected his view of geometrical and lyrical abstraction onto applied art. He related everything to the laboratory of the designer, fine art, although not much real abstraction was yet evident in the examples he chose.

The question of whether graphic design is an art form, and what position the designer takes with respect to art, remain central in today's discourse. Along with the position of the profession, the designer's autonomy (independence, freedom, experiment, relation to the client) and his social role, these issues are relevant to the concept of modernism. A complicating factor is the dualistic nature of graphic design. On the one hand it is subservient, functional and businesslike, while on the other it is expressive and personal; in short it is both cultural and commercial. There are

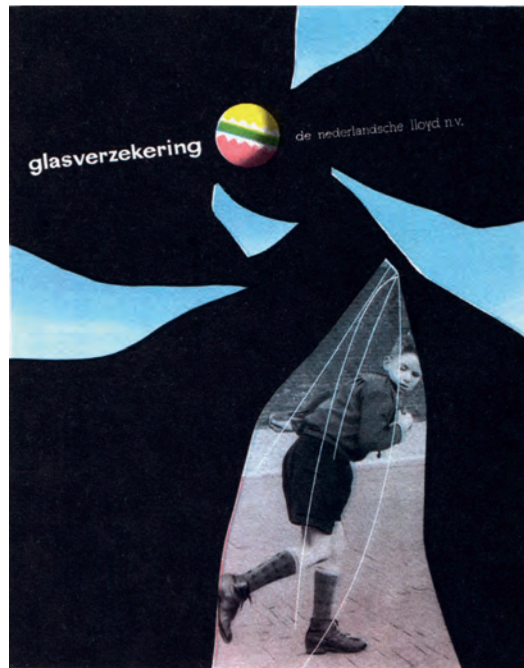
HALLO
JONGE
VRIEND

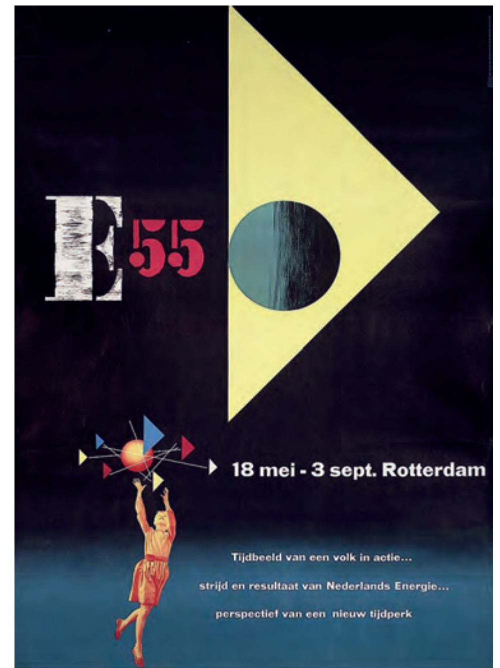
open oog

A B C D E
F G H I J
K L M O
P Q R
U V

no 52
KIND
kunst en kind

Two posters by Kees van Roemburg (VRI member) for glass insurance (undated), and for the exhibition E55, 1955. Sandberg, poster *Wonen en wonen* (Living), 1954, Stedelijk Museum. Otto Treumann, poster design for Kriterion cinema, 1945. Wim Brusse, letterheads, 1950s, for a school and an arts federation; catalogue *Wandtapijten* (Wall Tapestries), 1954, Stedelijk Museum.





moreover significant differences between genres, and it is questionable whether posters, business gifts, photo books, advertisements and house styles can all be measured with the same yardstick. Modernism has continued to resist strict demarcation after World War II and must therefore still be treated as a complex phenomenon.

Who were the players in the graphic design field just after the war? Paul Schuitema turned his attention to film in the 1930s but continued teaching at the art school in The Hague, as did Gerard Kiljan. Piet Zwart remained active as an all round designer and continued working on graphic design for the Bruynzeel firm, but concentrated above all on industrial design. Wim Brusse, Dick Elffers and Wil Sandberg were the designers esteemed by the younger generation. Otto Treumann, Jan Bons, Jurriaan Schrofer and Wim Crouwel enjoyed a growing reputation.

The graphic designer's role was still subject to discussion at the start of the 1950s, but he was quickly recognized as an indispensable link between the client and the printer. He was moreover the one who oversaw the task in hand in its entirety, and was in a position to ensure the quality and cachet of the result: "Designing is something that in principle one can not learn; a design is in essence a thought, a vision, a brainwave."[4] The status of the designer rose thanks to the professional associations GKf (founded during the war) and VRI (founded just after the liberation) which issued guidelines and tables of fees.[5] Freelancers were in the majority in the GKf, where selection for quality and mentality by ballotage resulted in an elite membership which saw itself as the vanguard.[6] Many of them shared a past in the wartime resistance, and accordingly an

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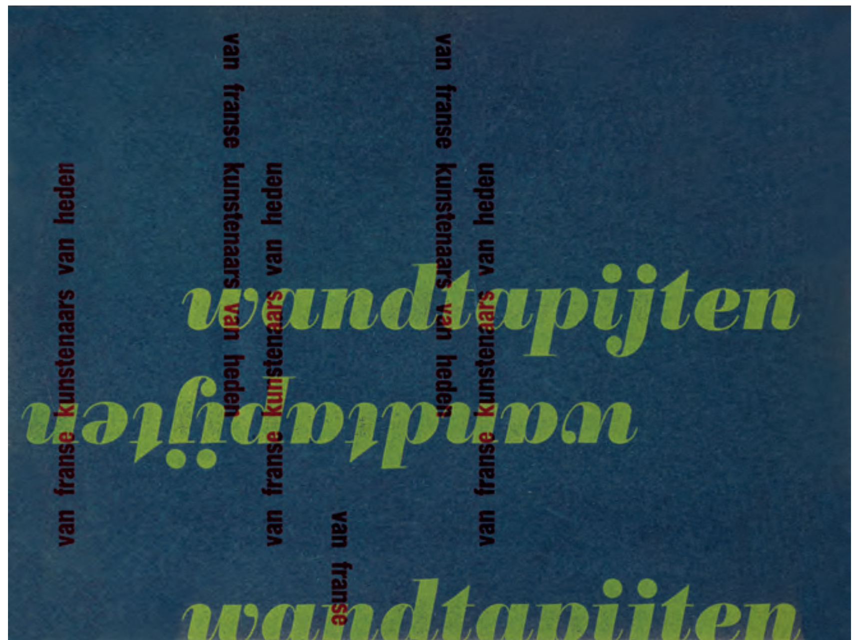
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van franse kunstenaars van heden

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grafici en tekenaars

Otto Treumann, design for an advertisement for Van Houten chocolate, 1948. Jan Bons, posters for Job cigarette paper, 1947, and *VIM*, 1948. Benno Wissing, poster *Rotterdam 1950* and sculpture in De Lijnbaan (street in Rotterdam), 1950. Treumann, poster design and poster for Jaarbeurs (trade fair), Utrecht 1950; poster designs for the 50th Jaarbeurs (trade fair), Utrecht, 1948.

attitude of exceptional independence and self-reliance. They defended their right to artistic freedom and individual vision.

In 1955, the critic and designer Dick Dooijes described the GKf as follows: "They do indeed put their work at the service of advertising, but in doing so they take the view that advertising will not be well served unless they can vouch with their whole personality for every piece of work they make. Into their labours, they pour all their creativity, craftsmanship and knowledge of graphic techniques. They set the highest standard for themselves, thereby claiming entitlement to reject any concession to outdated or faulty ideas held by their clients or by the presumed public taste. Moreover they are sharply aware that the graphic designer bears, as someone who shapes the visible outside world, a significant degree of cultural responsibility."[7]

The VRI had less pretensions and counted among its members many illustrators as well as designers employed by advertising agencies. Agency designers elaborated the concepts devised by copywriters, and their sole contact was generally with the account executive who supervised the project in hand. The freelancer, on the other hand, had direct contact with the client, control of the whole process and more authority. VRI designers were seen as more commercial, the illustrative work falls outside the canon, and most of the members are now forgotten.

The postwar reconstruction and industrialization were favourable for freelance designers and design agencies, and the growing welfare of the 1960s did the rest. New genres, in which the input of the creative designer was highly prized, included corporate PR (e.g. brochures and house magazines), house styles, annual reports and calendars. Elffers made painterly

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10 augustus
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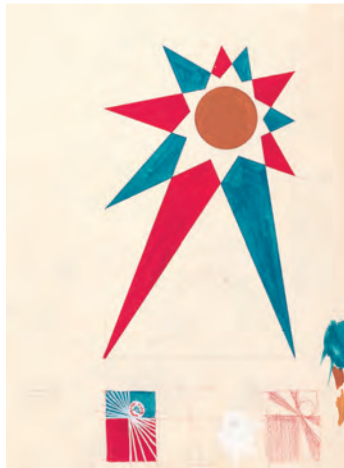


March 21st -30th 1950
Ŭtrecht
54th Royal Netherlands Industries Fair
International

50

50

Poster about the work of Daphne Duijvelshoff-van Peski and and her Total Design team (Marcel Speller, Reynoud Homan) for the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum between 1978 and 1986.

1990 and Further

Modernism staged a comeback around 1990. The critic Carel Kuitenbrouwer drew attention to a form of neo-modernism that he termed “the new sobriety”.[1] “The pendulum appears to be swinging away from the ‘postmodern’ movement of Hard Werken and Dumbar and going in a neo-functionalist direction.” He saw the revived interest in simplicity and clarity as a reaction against a world of trends, fashion and lifestyles. But at the same time he spoke of an exciting design landscape full of variation, diversity and a wide range of individual designers.

Others too noted the diversity and experimentation – “a fantastic feast of graphics” – and highly personal signature styles.[2] So the pluriformity still existed everywhere, although a number of designers reacted explicitly against postmodernism. Mevis & Van Deursen stated, “We have adopted a much simpler form, which springs more directly from the idea, as an answer to the attention to form of – for example – Hard Werken or Studio Dumbar in the eighties.”[3] The agency De Designpolitie aimed to offer a counterweight to the widespread “rubbish” that they saw: “We wish to present ourselves as conceptual graphic designers with a huge penchant for clarity, as well as for a high communicative value”[4] Anthon Beeke also reverted to a very basic design style as a reaction to the visual hubbub.

The multiplicity of styles and forms associated with postmodernism was extolled, but on the other hand it was condemned to superficiality. The volumes of the magazine *Items* from 1990 to 2005 show a profusion of graphic design, full of busy detail, layers, ornaments and low-culture elements, in collages and assemblages. Anything was allowed but it all looked the same. Terms like “image culture” and the visual overload of the information society

Melle Hammer, booklet *Confetti*, 1991.
Mevis & Van Deursen, *Best Book Designs* catalogue, 1988.

Roelof Mulder, book *Oceaan Coalities*, 1993. Anthon Beeke, poster *Dick Bruna*, 2000, Centraal Museum Utrecht; poster *Stem* (Vote), 1995.

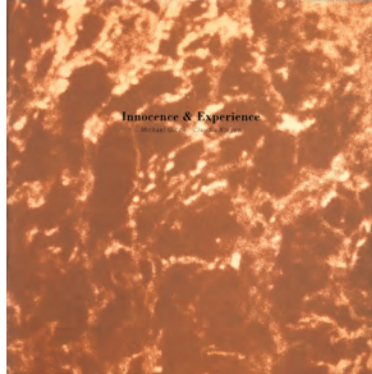
The studio Joseph Plateau, named after a 19th century Belgian physicist who researched visual perception, was founded in 1989 by Eliane Beyer, Wouter van Eijck, Peter Kingma and Rolf Toxopeus. Poster for Crea Theatre, 1995-96; poster Iran manifestation, 1989.

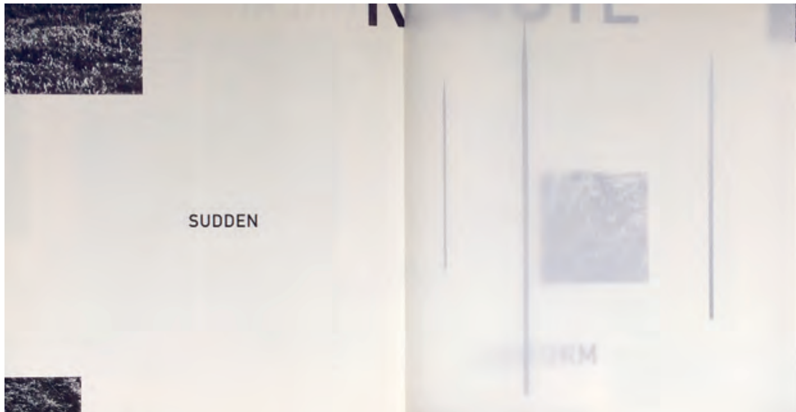
abounded, but serious discussions of postmodernism were lacking. The superabundance was partly due to the new design tool everyone was using: the computer. It is also apparent that many clients sought a youthful freshness, and that advertising seemed joined at the hip with design. The combination of all these factors yielded a single impression – that of fun. The volatility received yet a further impulse from the rise of the internet.

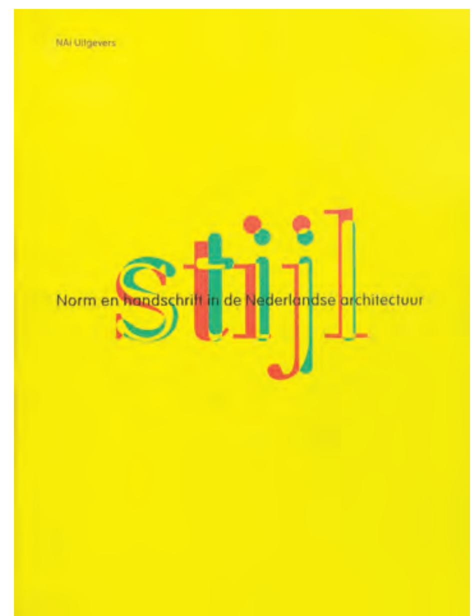
Many designers deliberately turned their backs on style. Jaap van Triest declared that he was averse to styles; Aap Designers said, “we don’t have a style, we have a mentality”; the collective Joseph Plateau did not wish for a style, and Thonik similarly avoided any association with trends or styles.[5] On the one hand simplicity was promoted as a new style in itself, and on the other hand designers shunned the term style in order to be taken seriously and to indicate that they worked from content and not from form.

At the same time, according to Kuitenbrouwer, there were designers who still had to free themselves from the yoke of Total Design. This was despite the fact that the studio’s design output had, with the influence of computer use, become very playful and decorative.[6] Younger designers who had started their own practice after a training period at Total Design tended to focus on vernacular, ugliness or content. There were also ex-Total Design employees who took the modernist heritage of the studio with them and started their own practices, such as Arlette Brouwers and Reynoud Homan. The designer Karel Martens, who was clearly inspired by modernism, also continued to play a significant role (for example as a teacher) and Lex Reitsma was a model for some designers. In reality there were thus continuities and breaches, various generational

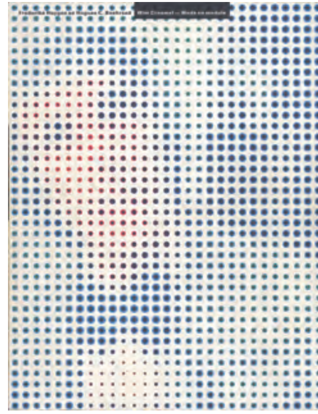
Book *Innocence & Experience*, 1993;
De boom van Jules Verne magazine, 1993;
book *Stijl* (Style), 1993.







Karel Martens started a design practice in 1961 working for publishers. From 1975 to 1981, he designed books and journals for Socialist Publishers Nijmegen (SUN) and he lectured at art schools. In 1998 he was a co-founder of Werkplaats Typografie, Arnhem. Jaap van Triest designed with Martens the books *Wim Crouwel mode en module* (1997) and *Karel Martens Printed Matter* (1996/2010).

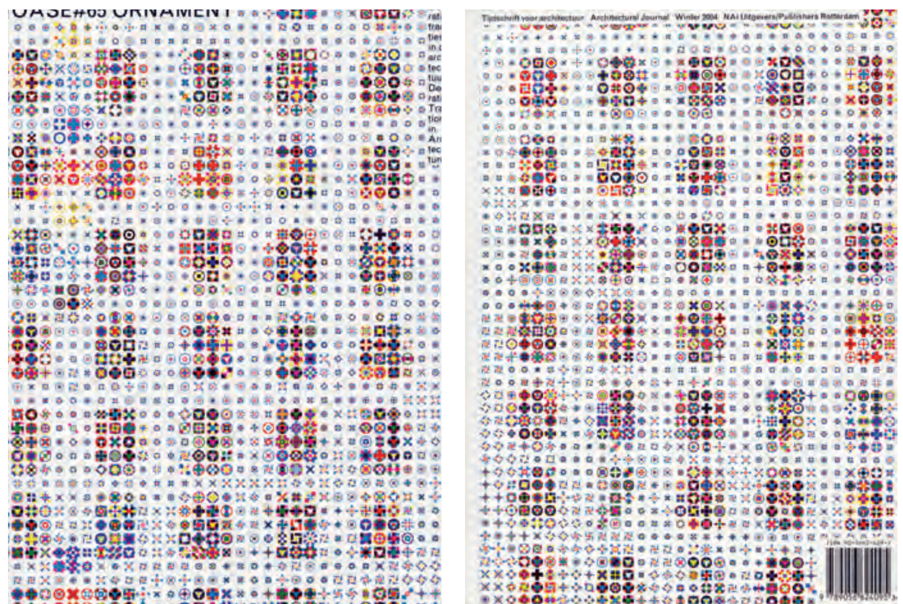


perspectives, and new trends and discoveries. Modernism was now valued in a different light: it was no longer laden with negative connotations, so it could accommodate new content and meanings. In the work of young designers it was appreciated as up-to-date, fresh and hip. Thonik, for example, described its own work as "happy modernism".

Mentality, concept and blurred boundaries
Not having or wanting a style, but a mentality and working from the concept: these two terms, mentality and concept, dominated the discourse for a short while. Was the graphic design world in need of new terms for old phenomena, or was this a way of sidestepping the heavily charged, problematic terms modernism and post-modernism? Other terms such as autonomous design, free design and conceptual design were in vogue although often ill-defined.[7] *Mentalitäten* (1995), which catalogued a selection of Rotterdam Design Prize exhibits, treated modernism on the one hand as a typically Dutch tradition, while on the other celebrating some distinct mavericks. "'Mentalities' implies that the designers are generally inclined to resist that [dominant design] culture by their actions and attitudes, rather than to offer a new cultural concept springing from a broader vision."[8] The dominant frame in this publication was thus still modernism and reactions to modernism, a continuous line and a succession of individual answers.

The term "concept" seemed clearer, for it often meant the same as "the idea" or "the essence" when used in the advertising world as a basis for campaigns. The term "conceptual design" however suggested something of more content and depth on account of its association with conceptual art. Conceptual might refer to the designer's interpretation or rendering of

The journal of architecture *OASE*, designed by Karel Martens since 1990 in collaboration with current and former students, became a playground for experimentation, with each issue treated differently. Issue 65 with Felix Weigand 2004, issue 69 with Layla Tweedie-Cullen 2006, issue 71 with Aagje Martens 2006.



OASE #69
Posities
Positions
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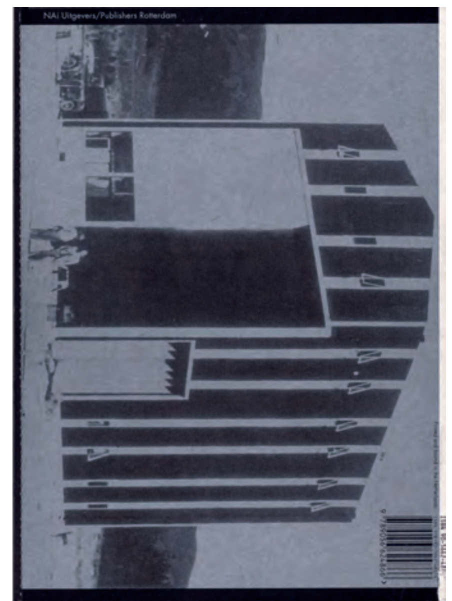

Tijdschrift voor architectuur / Journal for Architecture

OASE 71

Stedelijke formatie & collectieve ruimten

Urban Formation & Collective Spaces

	Tom Avermaete, Fransje Hooimeijer, Lara Schrijver		
003	Redactioneel	002	Editorial
	Paul Meurs		
007	Sampa's solids	012	Sampa's solids
	Lara Schrijver		
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055	Wat is collectief?	054	What is Collective?
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073	Over Bigness en de stad	072	On Bigness and the City
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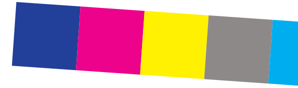

This book explores modernism in Dutch graphic design of the 20th Century with an emphasis on the varied aspects and meanings of the term modernism. Its publication coincides with an exhibition at the Special Collections facility of the University of Amsterdam. The book comprises three reflective essays, on the periods 1920–1940/45, 1945–1990 and 1990–present.

Modernism: In Print presents a comprehensive picture of the subject, drawn from the collection and the design archives of Special Collections. It interrogates the canon by including some less well-known examples of graphic design work.

The concept of modernism dominates the discourse on graphic design. This book aims to recognize its often underestimated complexity.

Text in English and Dutch.

Frederike Huygen is a Dutch design historian who has written many articles and books on the subject, including monographs on Wim Crouwel and Jurriaan Schrofer.

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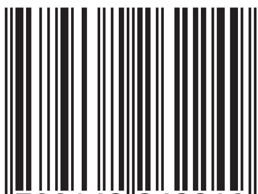
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