Crouwelism
January 2003

Conversation with Wim Crouwel
Graphic Magazine, April 2003

In the beginning of 2003, we were approached by Sebastian Campos, art director of UK design magazine Graphic (not to be confused with Grafik, another UK design magazine). Sebastian wanted to set up a meeting between us and Mr. Wim Crouwel, in order to publish the resulting conversation in the first issue of Graphic. This meeting took place in January 2003, in our studio, and it turned out to be a very pleasant afternoon. It was the first time we met Wim Crouwel, and we were instantly taken with this personality; he's an enormously charming and erudite man.

Shown here is the resulting conversation. In retrospect, both the editing and the translation seem a bit awkward, but having said that, we do think the following text is a good representation of how the conversation went. It goes without saying that, in the three years that followed after this interview, some of our views might have changed slightly. But that seems only natural.

00.
Wim Crouwel in conversation with Experimental Jetset
Date: January 7th, 2003
Location: Experimental Jetset studio, Amsterdam
Background music: 'TNT' by Tortoise (repeat mode), interrupted, once in a while, by the sound of a telephone ringing

WC: Wim Crouwel
EJ: Experimental Jetset
01.
EJ: Our favourite teacher at the Rietveld Academy (Amsterdam) was Linda van Deursen. The most important thing she imparted to us was a certain mentality, a state of mind. She never romanticized graphic design or tried to create an aura of mystery around it. She has a totally no-nonsense attitude.

WC: And to think, that was at a time when self-expression became very important. That's something in my opinion that the academies were not in the least responsible for. It started in the 1970s, when the academies emancipated themselves from the Bauhaus model with its Vorkurs [first year at the academy, ed.] and its whole systematic teaching structure was jettisoned outright. At the Academy in Enschede, the Netherlands (AKI), the introductory year at the time was expanded to three preparatory years in which the students were let loose completely. There was a strong emphasis on individual development. The work was less important than the approach to the work. From that moment, there was a situation in which the individual attitude exceeded the critical point and became pure self-expression. I think that the work of someone like Irma Boom is a good example of this. I find her work fantastic and very spiritual, but take for example the biography of Otto Treumann she composed: that is in fact a book about her, not Otto Treumann.

EJ: Actually, we do not make a distinction between self-expressive and applied; every manifestation is a form of self-expression, however much applied. And, to be honest, we do not consider Irma Boom and Linda van Deursen to be complete opposites as designers.

WC: Oh, don't you? How interesting. I think they're so different from each other.

EJ: We envision the dividing line as running in a different direction. On the one side you have designers like Linda and Irma, whose designs contain strong inner logic, either conceptually or aesthetically. These are designs that have a healthy, dialectical relationship to society; designs that aren't just representations of assumed target audiences. On the other side of the dividing line you have those who create designs generally intended to address target audiences; affirmative designs, that totally dissolve into visual culture.

WC: Are you talking about advertising agencies?

EJ: As well. But increasingly more designers are preoccupied with these kinds of marketing concepts. And we find that a pity.

WC: For whom do you make your creations? Yourselves, or the public?

EJ: We don't really see that division. In our opinion, target-audience-based approaches do not automatically result in more functional designs. Designs that have a sort of built-in resistance, a certain stubbornness, could very well be the ones that function the best in a society, in the way that a grain of sand can produce a pearl in an oyster.

WC: Nevertheless, I think that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The heart of the matter is to create intelligent and self-confident designs focused on a target group, without being outsmarted by that target group.

02.

WC: I really like what advertising agencies such as Kessels/Kramer are doing. Interesting things are happening in all sorts of areas, both on the commercial side and in the cultural sector. But in contrast to the commercial side, the cultural sector allows the designer carte blanche, obviously.

EJ: In our view, the exact opposite is currently the case. The role of the designer at ad agencies is actually quite free of restraints. This type of agency is usually divided into two camps: the creative section and the business section. The agency extends a relatively large chunk of autonomy to the designers. They have complete freedom to launch ideas; and then, as if drawing from a 'lucky dip', the business side pulls out a few ideas, which they may or may not use. At a small design agency like ours, however, this division does not exist. The business and creative aspects coalesce completely. As designers, we have very short lines of communication with our clients. That is another reason why we never work for advertising agencies: in advertising there are excess filters between the designer and the client. A superfluous layer of middlemen, which results in a great deal of interference.

WC: What you are specifically referring to are the large, old-style advertising agencies. To me, the modern, smaller agencies seem to be organized differently.

EJ: In fact, it's that old-style function of advertising that appeals to us much more: that the potential users of a product are informed from the point of the intrinsic characteristics of that product. Advertising now is heavily focused on projecting an image onto a product from outside the product itself. We really dislike that side of advertising.

WC: That is the old discussion that I have encountered a great many times. As a designer you want to be informative, yet in advertising they think far more in terms of atmosphere and mood. Take my experiences with Nutricia, for example, where I designed packaging and advertisements a long time ago. I was taken on a guided tour of the factory where evaporated coffee-milk was produced and was immediately fascinated by the hygienic working methods and the technology that was used: the gigantic stainless-steel kettles for heating milk to various temperatures. I wanted to show that process in my advertisements. But they would have no such thing! I was told that they might as well just shut down the factory if I did that. They wanted ads showing people enjoying coffee at special moments and ads about the rich colour that their product imparted to coffee. And, there is no changing that way of thinking. So perhaps it is true that designers ought not to get involved with that. It's probably better to leave those activities to others.

03.
WC: And yet I wonder to what extent you've gone too far in terms of self-expression with a project like 'Kelly 1:1'. There wasn't actually a brief in that case, or was there?

EJ: Lisette Smits, the curator of Casco Projects [an exhibition space in Utrecht, the Netherlands, ed.], approached us with a request to make an installation. In that sense, it was a pure design assignment for us. Because in these cases, there is always a context that you can respond to as a designer, whether that context is a space or a certain theme. We see all the installations that we've made in the last few years for numerous exhibition spaces as essentially nothing different from our graphic assignments: they're still solutions for problems based on specific points of departure and limitations.

WC: I still think that you are treading the shadowy zone between applied work and liberal arts. It's awfully close to self-expression. But if I were presented with a similar request then perhaps I would take the assignment on as well.

04.
EJ: The harshest and at the same time most unjustified criticism we have ever had to endure came during a lecture we gave last year at the Werkplaats Typografie [a post-graduate programme for graphic design in Arnhem, the Netherlands, ed.]. The teachers at the Werkplaats attacked us in a rather unexpectedly scathing manner. Our work was labelled anti-intellectual and anti-ideological. We were accused of doing nothing more than fussing around with a kind of modish styling.

WC: Then they must not have examined your work at all well. Or in any case they clearly didn't understand it. There is most definitely an idea behind your work.

EJ: Their intention was to project their cultural-pessimistic vision of the world onto our work at whatever cost. Their behavior was outright ill-mannered: the teachers walked in and out of the lecture as if they were completely uninterested. The general atmosphere was one of intense rancour towards anything that came out of Amsterdam. A kind of provincial inferiority complex. And this despite the fact that we arrived totally open and above board. It was an utter letdown.

WC: Yet unpleasant confrontations such as this can do us the world of good. You always finish stronger. I had a similar confrontation with Piet Schreuders: during a symposium at the Rietveld Academy he tore up a poster I had designed.

EJ: It's at moments like these that you realize how close cultural pessimism is to cultural barbarism. They are in essence the same. This couldn't have been clearer to us than in Arnhem.

05.

WC: Yet I can see where a lot of criticism of younger designers comes from. I despise nostalgia, but that doesn't stop me from thinking back to 1950s. We all had the feeling that we were working towards a goal: the postwar reconstruction. We wanted to make the world better. A kind of utopian idealism. It's hard not to get the feeling that today's generation of designers is chiefly occupied with themselves. And then when you talk to these designers, this appears rather often not to be the case at all, not at all.

EJ: What you're talking about now is postwar modernism. Perhaps the situation today resembles more prewar modernism. That was a totally divergent situation: marginal movements, splinter groups, manifestos, opposing utopias. In our opinion, we've reached a similar situation. Looking at the designers around us and at our students we notice that everyone is in fact quite idealistic, very ideologic, despite of what the critics say. But everyone has their own approach. We do agree there is certainly not a common movement.

WC: Exactly, there is no common movement. And maybe that's the problem that so many designers of my generation have with today's situation. What Piet Zwart, Jan Tschichold and Paul Schuitema did was so incredibly profound, and so seminal to the twentieth century. The postmodernism that followed was in contrast so loathsome. We really felt it to be morally reprehensible; it was a moral issue for us.

EJ: Postmodernism is something with which we have absolutely no affinity, no connection. What we have nevertheless drawn from postmodernism is the realization that there are no objective, neutral or universal values. But that does not discourage us from pursuing those values; that is our modernist inheritance. In the end, we've actually arrived at something of a synthesis of modernism and postmodernism; working with a utopia in mind, while being fully aware that we will never achieve that utopia. The ultimate idealism.

06.

WC: At the time, what we mainly tried to do was create timeless work. Years later, I realized that timeless designs simply do not exist. You are always a child of your time. You can date all the work I've done, sometimes right down to the year.

EJ: But the two things are not mutually exclusive! Some things can be dated so clearly that they are elevated to become icons of their time. In that capacity, they become timeless. Time capsules, in a way.

WC: That is yet another kind of timelessness.

EJ: Other designs remain timeless because they preserve their own context so well. It's possible to uncover both the original formulation of the problem and the ultimate solution from those designs. Like an answer in which the question is repeated.

WC: And signature. A signature is always right there in front of you, regardless of the context. If I can see who made a poster, for example, I find that fantastic!