



THE DEBATE

THE LEGENDARY CONTEST
OF
TWO GIANTS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

FOREWORD BY
RICK POYNOR

THE DEBATE



THE LEGENDARY CONTEST OF TWO GIANTS OF
GRAPHIC DESIGN

WIM CROUWEL • JAN VAN TOORN

Foreword by
RICK POYNOR

Essays by
FREDERIKE HUYGEN
and
DINGENUS VAN DE VRIE

THE MONACELLI PRESS

COPYRIGHT

© 2015 The Monacelli Press

Foreword copyright © 2015 Rick Poynor

"The Debate in Context" © 2015 Frederike Huygen

"Practice" © 2015 Dingenus van de Vrie

ILLUSTRATIONS

© 2015 Wim Crouwel

© 2015 Jan van Toorn

Originally published in the Netherlands in 2008 by [Z]OO Producties

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED, STORED
IN A RETRIEVAL SYSTEM, OR TRANSMITTED IN ANY FORM, BY ANY MEANS,
INCLUDING MECHANICAL, ELECTRIC, PHOTOCOPYING, RECORDING OR OTHER-
WISE, WITHOUT THE PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Crouwel-van Toorn. English

The debate : the legendary contest of two giants of graphic design

Wim Crouwel, Jan van Toorn; foreword by Rick Poynor;

essays by Frederike Huygen and Dingenus van de Vrie;

translation by Ton Brouwers.

– First American edition.

pages cm

Translation of: Crouwel-van Toorn: het Debat. Eindhoven:

(Z)OO producties, 2008.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58093-412-1 (hardback)

1. Graphic arts. I. Crouwel, Wim. II. Toorn, Jan van, 1932- III. Title

NC997.C7513 2015 741.6092'2--dc23 2014034088

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First American edition

PRINTED IN

China

www.monacellipress.com

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Rick Poynor 7

INTRODUCTION 13

THE DEBATE

Transcript 19

THE DEBATE IN CONTEXT

Frederike Huygen 45

PRACTICE

Dingenus van de Vrie 77

ILLUSTRATIONS 105

THE DEBATE

THE DEBATE



THE LEGENDARY CONTEST OF TWO GIANTS OF
GRAPHIC DESIGN

WIM CROUWEL • JAN VAN TOORN

Foreword by
RICK POYNOR

Essays by
FREDERIKE HUYGEN
and
DINGENUS VAN DE VRIE

THE MONACELLI PRESS

COPYRIGHT

© 2015 The Monacelli Press

Foreword copyright © 2015 Rick Poynor

"The Debate in Context" © 2015 Frederike Huygen

"Practice" © 2015 Dingenus van de Vrie

ILLUSTRATIONS

© 2015 Wim Crouwel

© 2015 Jan van Toorn

Originally published in the Netherlands in 2008 by [Z]OO Producties

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED, STORED
IN A RETRIEVAL SYSTEM, OR TRANSMITTED IN ANY FORM, BY ANY MEANS,
INCLUDING MECHANICAL, ELECTRIC, PHOTOCOPYING, RECORDING OR OTHER-
WISE, WITHOUT THE PRIOR WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Crouwel-van Toorn. English

The debate : the legendary contest of two giants of graphic design

Wim Crouwel, Jan van Toorn; foreword by Rick Poynor;

essays by Frederike Huygen and Dingenus van de Vrie;

translation by Ton Brouwers.

– First American edition.

pages cm

Translation of: Crouwel-van Toorn: het Debat. Eindhoven:

(Z)OO producties, 2008.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-58093-412-1 (hardback)

1. Graphic arts. I. Crouwel, Wim. II. Toorn, Jan van, 1932- III. Title

NC997.C7513 2015 741.6092'2--dc23 2014034088

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First American edition

PRINTED IN

China

www.monacellipress.com

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Rick Poynor 7

INTRODUCTION 13

THE DEBATE

Transcript 19

THE DEBATE IN CONTEXT

Frederike Huygen 45

PRACTICE

Dingenus van de Vrie 77

ILLUSTRATIONS 105

FOREWORD

The appearance of this book in English is a significant moment in the study of graphic design. For Dutch designers, the public debate in Amsterdam, in 1972, between two leading figures, Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn, has long been seen as one of those pivotal moments in the history of a profession, when vital issues burst into flame and become a focus for discussion. Even for the Dutch, though, except for those present at the time, the debate was little more than folklore until the belated publication of the edited transcript in 2008.

Only the most attentive English-speaking followers of Dutch graphic design would be aware of any of this. In 1983, some tantalizing extracts from the debate surfaced in English translation in *Ontwerp: Total Design*, a dual-language monograph about the company co-founded and captained to greatness by Crouwel. But this book, long out of print, has become a rare object in its own right. Now, at last, we can find out what this plain-speaking pair of design legends had to say to each other, though we do this in a world where the battle lines are not so easy to draw—today the notion of aggressively challenging someone else's views is apt to make many

of us uncomfortable. Pluralism, a willingness to accept that there are plenty of ways of doing design, or anything else, and many equally valid outcomes, has become our constitutional preference.

Even in less accommodating times, such debates between two designers prepared to hammer it out in public, in the presence of their colleagues, have been exceptional, and whenever they happened, they were remembered. One famous exchange took place in the 1940s between Max Bill and Jan Tschichold, following a lecture by Tschichold in which he outlined the limits of the New Typography for the design of books. Bill saw this as an unacceptable retreat into convention, and in an eight-page broadside published in the Swiss design press strongly objected to the use of centered type over modernist asymmetry. Tschichold leapt to the attack in another article, brandishing his credentials as a professional typographer—Bill was an architect and painter, and in Tschichold's view merely an amateur with type. Historians are still mulling over the finer points of this contest.

In 1989, an even more impassioned clash occurred when Tibor Kalman of the New York City design company M&Co laid into Joe Duffy, head of the Duffy Design Group in Minneapolis, at an AIGA design conference in San Antonio, Texas. Kalman took issue with an ad in the *Wall Street Journal* promoting the services of the Michael Peters/Duffy Design Groups and criticized Duffy as a prime example of how design had become

overcommercialized. After an unsatisfactory debate at the conference, *Print* magazine restaged and recorded the entire shooting match in its offices. Kalman was cantankerous, Duffy kept his cool, and the result was a draw.

Now that English speakers can read the debate between Crouwel and Van Toorn, we see that it is similarly unresolved because—and here I show my own pluralist colors—it never could be. If we reduce the two men's arguments to their most elementary form (the nuanced version can be studied in the transcript), then Crouwel believes that it is the graphic designer's sacred duty to present what the client, as message-maker, wants to say, and to do this as clearly and objectively as possible. The designer has no reason or justification to become personally involved in the message, imposing his vision between sender and receiver; to do so will inevitably cloud and confuse that message and make it harder for the viewer to understand.

For Van Toorn, this technician-like posture of detachment is an illusion. He argues that there can be no such thing as an objective message and no neutrality on the part of the designer, because any act of design, in which the designer takes the role of intermediary, will introduce an element of subjectivity. Since this is the case, the designer should explicitly acknowledge and make use of the opportunity to construct and critique design's social meaning. For the designer to take this course, rather than hiding behind a mask of neutrality, both

engages and liberates the viewer. Once the designer acknowledges that subjective intervention is inevitable, it is natural to want to work for clients whose content accords with the designer's personal concerns and convictions. Crouwel rejects this narrowing down of possible design clients, while Van Toorn sees Crouwel's uniformity of graphic outcome as a restriction of conceptual and aesthetic possibilities.

As we can now see, few projects by either designer were mentioned in the course of the debate, which inclines toward an abstract representation of the issues. In their encounters over the following decade, Crouwel tended to draw attention to work by Van Toorn that he disliked—here he describes a calendar for the printer Spruijt as “overblown”—rather than Van Toorn singling out Crouwel's work for comment. An illuminating moment of comparison arises when they consider projects they have carried out separately for Jan Dibbets, a Dutch conceptual artist, but this is cut short by a break in the discussion. For both designers, the largely unstated background to the debate lies in their work on catalogs and posters for major Dutch museums, Crouwel for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Van Toorn for the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Despite Crouwel's complaints about Van Toorn's indulgence, the cultural sector is one area in which designers might reasonably expect to be permitted a high degree of latitude in interpretation. Van Toorn worked mainly for cultural clients, though, and he doesn't explain in the debate how his techniques could be applied in more

quotidian forms of design for business purposes. Could Total Design's corporate identities for companies and organizations ever have been conceived with a similar degree of subjectivity and freedom?

The lack of a clear outcome and the feeling that the issues remain up in the air don't make this debate any less informative or interesting. With unusual explicitness, Crouwel and Van Toorn chart the essential and enduring conditions that arise in design work. There is always a spectrum of possible positions, depending on the nature of the task and the motivations of the designer. Any designer will need to occupy a position (or a series of positions) on the scale between the extremes proposed by Crouwel and Van Toorn—the fundamentally political nature of Van Toorn's critique became more obvious as the 1970s progressed. What Crouwel and Van Toorn did have in common, though, was an unwavering commitment to the rightness of their respective analysis and practice. Now in their eighties, as friendly colleagues, they still hold fast to the principles that shaped two very different bodies of work, both of the greatest interest to later designers.

In no sense does it belittle Crouwel and Van Toorn's achievements to point out that, regardless of how they tried to rationalize their strategies, the pair were irreconcilable in temperament and fundamentally opposed in taste, a factor that shouldn't be overlooked. Quite clearly, they could have argued their cases forever without coming to an agreement or changing each other's

minds in the slightest. Their historic dialogue encourages us to think through the issues, propelled by the realization that they matter just as much today as they did in 1972. By weighing up the arguments, designers will find out where they want to stand.

Rick Poyner

INTRODUCTION

Over forty years ago, on a night in 1972 that was to take on mythic proportions, Dutch graphic designers Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn engaged in a public debate about their views and tenets. Titus Yocarini, then director of the professional organization of Dutch graphic designers (Grafisch Vormgevers Nederland, GVN), made an audio recording of that debate and the discussion that followed. Several years ago, this recording was recovered by curator and graphic designer Dingenus van de Vrie, and this constituted the occasion for a publication in Dutch in 2008, now translated into English.

It is exciting to be able to witness the verbal battle between two grand masters of design when they were young, but the other reason for publishing it is that the arguments of both gentlemen have perfectly withstood the test of time. Wim Crouwel and Jan van Toorn can be seen as representatives of two opposed schools of graphic design: the rational approach versus the personal approach. They represent the classical antagonism between the engineer and the artist, the graphic designer as a service provider versus the designer who is more intent on personal expression. During those years, from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, social