

# HACKING THE SURFACE

Beartz Garado

HACKING THE SURFACE — Graphic design strategies to subvert the status-quo

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Graphic design strategies to subvert the status-quo

Jan van Toorn and Metahaven

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HACKING THE SURFACE  
Master Thesis

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The work of Jan van Toorn and Metahaven (Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden) appeared to me with such dense visual complexity that it was impossible not to feel perplexed. As a graphic design student, it was mandatory to, at some point, become familiar with these two big names in the field. They were indeed masters in their practice regarding the creation of impactful visual compositions. I remember once a friend telling me, as if making a confession, that he sometimes "stole" from Metahaven. Their aesthetical accomplishments were passing on to the students aiming to achieve a similar mastery. Nevertheless, I didn't really understand what these designers were trying to communicate. It was not what I had been taught about design.

Inside of the academic world of the School of Fine Arts of Lisbon, after finishing a bachelor engaged in a strong modernist "brainwash" set under the umbrella of designers such as Josef Müller-Brockmann<sup>1</sup> or Jan Tschichold,<sup>2</sup> the practice of Jan van Toorn and Metahaven seemed confusing and not understandable.

What was the message? And where was it?

Jan van Toorn and Metahaven were not only designers, they were what I will risk to call “design superstars” in the graphic design field. Designers that teach, write, speak publicly about their work... and are known amongst a wide generation of students and academics.

These graphic designers were holding high positions in the university context and had managed to become two of the most significant and influential Dutch graphic designers. The relation between the two seemed obvious – they were often mentioned in the same articles, on the same thesis, sharing the stage on the same conferences... Looking, for instance, at Rick Poynor’s article entitled “The fall and rise of Dutch design,” it is possible to see an example of this meeting point. According to Poynor, Metahaven’s practice has an aim to create a layer that resists easy assimilation, being the closest in attitude to Jan van Toorn’s works.<sup>3</sup>

But what kind of attitude is Poynor referring to?

If compared to what is said by a designer such as Tschichold, it is easier to understand what

this position is about. Tschichold says:

“Nobody should forget that typography<sup>4</sup> is the least free of all the arts. None other serves to such a degree. It cannot free itself without losing its purpose. It is more strongly bound than any other art to meaningful conventions and the more typographers heed these the better their work will be.”<sup>5</sup>

The purpose Tschichold refers to is one that believes that graphic design is tied to the delivery of a message in the shortest and most efficient manner.<sup>6</sup> This cannot be said to be aimed by Jan van Toorn or Metahaven. To create a layer that resists easy assimilation is an attitude that, from the beginning, subverts this notion of efficient communication.

“As Tony Fry puts it, “[design] either serves or subverts the status-quo.”<sup>7</sup>

As seen in Tschichold’s book *Die neue Typographie*, released in 1928, the designer engaged in producing a set of rules for the design practice such as defining standardised paper sizes for all printed matter, layout rules

or condemning all typefaces that were not sans-serif. Although his composition was proposing something new regarding aesthetics, the system presented didn't go against the conventions in terms of content. Design would continue to function as a practice set in order to easily convey information.

Jan van Toorn and Metahaven, on the other hand, face this by turning their backs to easy assimilation, assuming design as a tool to subvert this passive condition.

<sup>1</sup> Müller-Brockmann aim at conveying a universal graphic expression by the usage of a grid-based design that would exclude illustration or subjective feeling. In: Megs, Philip B. & Alston W. Purvis (2012) *History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. p.381

<sup>2</sup> Tschichold hold as his main objective to work on functional design by the most straightforward means. In: Megs, Philip B. & Alston W. Purvis (2012) *History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. p.337

<sup>3</sup> Poynor, R. (2014). *The fall and rise of Dutch design*. [online] Available at: <https://www.creativebloq.com/graphic-design/fall-and-rise-dutch-design-21410643> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>4</sup> The word Typography was often used by Tschichold in an expanded meaning: Graphic Design.

<sup>5</sup> Tschichold, J. (1973) *Typographie ist eine Kunst für sich*. In: Burke, C. (2007) *Active Literature. Jan Tschichold and New Typography*. London: Hyphen Press. p.307

<sup>6</sup> Megs, Philip B. & Alston W. Purvis (2012) *History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. p.337

<sup>7</sup> Fry, T. (2007) *Book review: The Archeworks Papers*. In: Brown, B. et al. (Ed.) (2007) *Design Issues; Volume 23, Number 3*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p.88-92

“Design is a means by which contemporary reality is structured, packaged, delivered to our doors, and imbued with an exciting air of rightness and normality. So where does that leave the designer that takes the view that design, as a means of public communication, should be more about than providing promotional endorsement for our current version of reality?”<sup>1</sup>

(Rick Poynor, 2008, *Critical Practice*)

On formulating this question, Rick Poynor carefully sets reality as a concept under a “current version.” Reality should be understood, for the purpose of this Memoir, as the perceived structure of society generally taken for granted<sup>2</sup> on its spatio-temporal context, based on it’s socio-cultural constructs.

What is perceived as reality today is permeated by the commodities of capital, integrated in what Guy Debord calls a “Society of the Spectacle” in his homonymous book. Within the spectacle of reality “the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are

projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality.”<sup>3</sup> This notion recognizes the spectacle as capital (i.e. commodities), and images as its vehicle.

The composition of the spectacle saturates to the point where “(...) we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity.”<sup>4</sup> This leads to the ever more real acknowledgement of what was thought to be depth is actually surface, melting signifier and signified.<sup>5</sup> Surface is, seen in a totalizing sense, the tissue of “real unreality.”<sup>6</sup>

Baudrillard then builds upon Debord’s theory, but rather than seeing the society of the spectacle as a negative process of self-reflexivity, he sees it as an overall simulation with no original in which everything is permeated. The spectacle of reality is for Baudrillard what he calls an “hyperreal,” without a site-specific referent.<sup>7</sup> This means that there is no distinction between what is real and what is not. “Hyperreality” is reality. Embedded in an hyperreality, surface is no longer a reflexion of reality, but reality itself.

In the Baudrillard’s words:

“Today the scene and mirror have given way to a screen and a network. There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding (...) the surrounding universe and our very bodies are becoming monitoring screens.”<sup>8</sup>

Although surface may be disregarded as a projection of what is outside (because there is no outside), but rather seen as part of the construction of the totalizing reality, it still generates, and is shaped by images – the vehicles of commodities and commodities themselves.

From a graphic designer’s perspective, the production of surface is “equivalent to the production of space; surface in the generic sense means flat space to display. (...) [It] is folded out in order to produce value, while it is folded in to secure it.”<sup>9</sup>

For the graphic designer, surface is the vehicle par excellence to intervene on this notion of a totalizing unreality.

In a time when surface shapes territory, it is important to understand how designers, as professional generators of surface, can not only manage to contribute to the shape of the spectacle of commodities but above all engage in creating alternative narratives within the current mediated reality: the status-quo.<sup>10</sup>

The choice of doing a comparative study between Jan van Toorn and Metahaven's work<sup>11</sup> was drawn from a curiosity regarding two approaches that assume this mediated reality as a starting point and graphic design as a practice that composes it. Practices that stand together against the idea of design as an agent for objective information.<sup>12</sup>

Note: The following content must be assumed as a reading from the point of view of a western graphic designer and therefore biased concerning a socio-cultural background and context.

<sup>1</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.79

<sup>2</sup> These kind of generalizations, from here onward, should be understood as the response to what is habitual or familiar within a socio-cultural and spatio-temporal context. As presented by Victor Shklovsky, when something becomes habitual and familiar, it effectively becomes an acceptable component of our perceived reality. [In: Buwert, P. (2016) *Defamiliarization, Brecht and Criticality in Graphic Design*. In: Laranjo, F. (Ed.) (2016) *Modes of Criticism 2 – Critique of Method*. Porto: Modes of Criticism. p. 25-38] Jointly to this notion should be considered expressions such as "common understanding", "conventionally accepted", "established order" or "status-quo."

<sup>3</sup> Debord, G. (2002) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Canberra: Treason Press. p.11

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.12

<sup>5</sup> Ward, J. (2001) *Weimar Surfaces, Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. p.4

<sup>6</sup> Debord, G. (2002) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Canberra: Treason Press. p.6

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1988) *Simulacra and Simulations*. In: Poster, M. (Ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. (2001) Stanford: Stanford University Press. p.166

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, J. (2012) *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Los Angeles: Semiotext. p.20

<sup>9</sup> Kruk, V. and Daniel van der Velden. (2008) *White Night Before A Manifesto*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. [online] Available at: <http://frontdeskapparatus.com/files/015.pdf> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this study is not to fully understand each work presented in detail and on behalf of what is said to be the intention of their designers, but to try to find some subversive methods by firstly looking at them.

<sup>12</sup> This idea is well described by Wim Crowel, an advocate of this kind of practice that Van Toorn opposed to. Crowel says: "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" In: Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.103-104

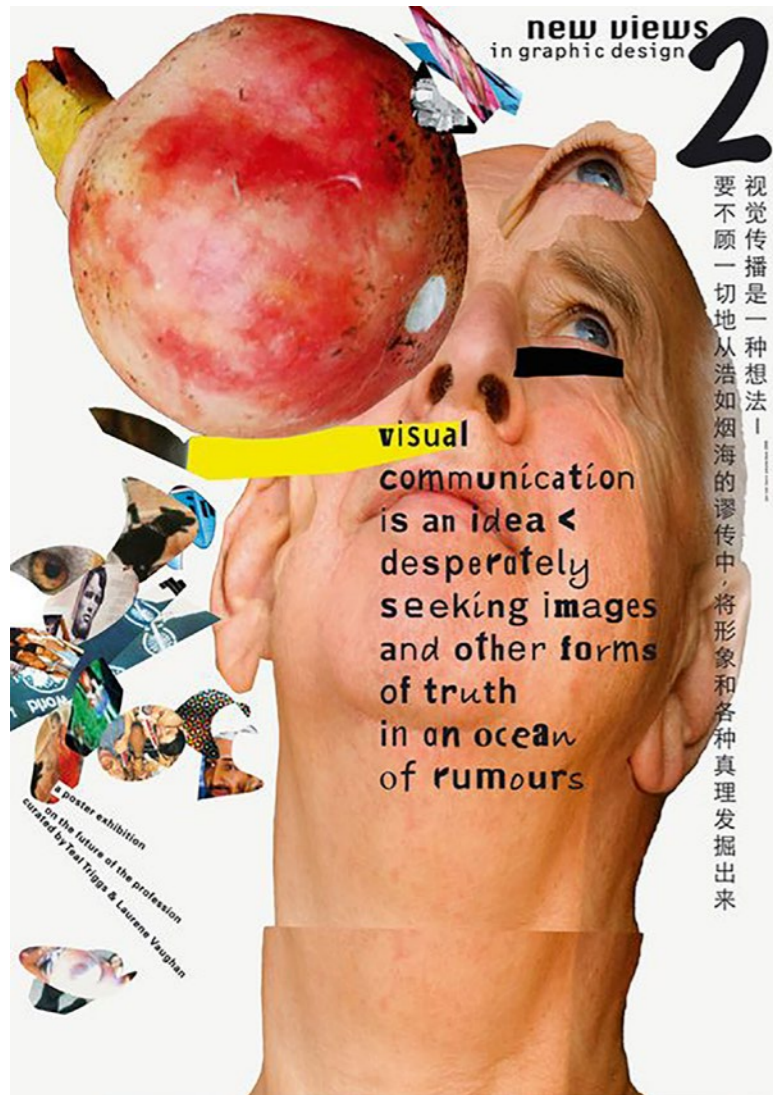
A graphic designer often faces the commitment of customizing surface that is itself already a means of communication. This is what is mentioned here as a “surface standard.” James Goggin calls this customizable platforms the “readymade formats” of graphic design. To name a few, these could be posters, currency, passports or fruit labels. As mentioned by Goggin, the named platforms can be used to deploy self-publishing while achieving an ominous legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Equally, Jan van Toorn and Metahaven have often assumed these readymade formats.

Looking at the posters “New Views 2” (A) by Jan van Toorn and “Utrecht Manifest” (B) by Metahaven, one of the first things that is noticed is the different mediums used within the frame, the technology gap.

(A)

*New Views 2*  
2008  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



(B)

*Utrecht Manifest (1 of many)*  
2009  
Designed by Metahaven

INFILTRATE SURFACE STANDARDS





The first appears to be very craftmade<sup>2</sup>, revealing a rough cut that could have been made by a clumsy x-acto or a pair of scissors. The elements are overlapped and seem to be glued on top of each other. A handwritten number "2" on the top right adds to the manual look. An old face is shown with no prejudice as the center of the poster.

The second shows a computer-like aesthetics framed with the looks of a digital interface maneuver. It overlays elements but rather than a handmade collage, as seen on the previous poster, this uses digitally added shadows, transparencies and sharp angular edges. It also features an handwritten "signature", but drawn with a digital pen. After looking for a few minutes, it is possible to understand the apparently clumsy scratches neatly placed over each other on top of the poster. It reads "UM", two letters displayed over 10 times on the poster in different formats. A face is revealed on the back of a glass, blurry as if imprisoned by a digitally added glass.

Both posters reveal the medium used to compose them. The time gap between the two (2008-2009) doesn't make the different

technical output coherent by, for instance, mirroring the technically available tools from the time the designs were made. But looking at the age gap between the members of the studios, it becomes understandable.

Jan van Toorn (b. 1932) started to work in the 70's.<sup>3</sup> At that time, Metahaven's founders barely knew how to walk. Initially self styled as "design think tank"<sup>4</sup>, the collective was started in 2007<sup>5</sup> by Vinca Kruk (b. 1980) and Daniel van der Velden (b. 1971),<sup>6</sup> 37 years after Jan van Toorn. They represent different generations, and therefore, different technical means of work.

Overcoming the visual way the posters appear to the audience, the first question that comes to mind is "what is this about?" Posters are generally assumed as platforms that display information. On a first glance, neither poster is informing and both appear to be leading the audience nowhere.

Van Toorn's poster has a quote about visual communication. That is one of the first things that is possible to read on the poster. Added to it, it reads "New Views in Graphic Design 2." The quote is a comment on visual

communication and works to put in motion the written idea. Alternatively, Metahaven's poster reads, at great cost, apparently unconnected words such as "unforeseen magic", "erase identity" or "social design" and the persistently placed "UM."

This mirrors the subversive character of their designs that from the first stance challenge the readymade formats of design. Appropriating the platform of the poster, the designers add their self-publishing ideas on the first plan.

But this self-publishing approach is used with different intentions in the two posters.

Jan van Toorn spent his life theoretically enlightening strong purposes on the way he thought the graphic design message should be conveyed and trying to mirror these intentions in his work. One of his main purposes was the pursuit of the liberation of the reader.<sup>7</sup>

The poster depicts this intention, being used to advocate for a reflexive practise in visual communication.

Although being also strongly theoretical informed, Metahaven don't present themselves as much as prophets of how a graphic

designer should be. Their work, at the time committed to developing design as a critical practice (i.e. critical design),<sup>8</sup> presents itself as highly engaged in the digital era and invested in making counter-environments.<sup>9</sup>

The design and strategy<sup>10</sup> used in the "Utrecht Manifest" poster were that "the communication was not conducted in a pure representative way but was an integrated content driven by the event, which resulted in a different approach (...) taking on the role of intermediary more than a classic media agency which sends out an unambiguous message."<sup>11</sup> This kind of approach reveals the intention of creating counter environments by using design as a counterforce to the traditional "authoritative" media. The poster is used as a research tool for probing new modes of exchange.

Equally, the two approaches seem to hold in low regard the poster's potential as a mere vehicle for easily share information.

Both strategies put self-publishing tactics at the expense of informing. But even so, the two posters are still meant to lead somewhere apart from adding a commentating layer.

On this point, they mostly fail.

Jan van Toorn's poster was meant to inform about an exhibition of posters called "New Views 2" on the future of the profession.<sup>12</sup> This information is mentioned at the bottom left of the poster in small typography. It is hardly seen.

The "UM" at Metahavens poster means "Utrecht Manifest", the name of the Design Biennial for Social Design that it is announcing. This information is presented in small typography, centred in the top of the poster.

On the Utrecht Manifest's website, it is written that "(...) Metahaven's referential tactics of branding the event in a self-critical way and challenging visitors to exercise their influence on Utrecht Manifest's social media did not so much result in broadening the Biennial's reach as in narrowing it to the more active recipients of its messages."<sup>13</sup>

Only the most curious would go through all the layers of information until realizing that the poster was also announcing the event of a Biennial. This transforms the poster in a kind of counter platform, subverting it's generally

assumed status, but on the expense of only reaching a small curious elite.

This way of interfering with the platform and message is a privilege not many professionals have.

If we look at message carriers such as truck drivers or mailman for instance, we notice that often these people are not aware of the message they are carrying. In case any of these professionals has concerns on the content of the message, they can oppose to it by quitting the job or stopping the delivery. The message itself could not be changed or manipulated by the truck driver or the mailman, but only by confrontations from the outside such as opposition or boycott.

The same can't be said about the designer, that takes part on the structural surface that allows letters to circulate, such as envelopes or stamps.

Postage stamps are inherently celebratory,<sup>14</sup> conventionally used as a glorification.

(C)

Three Politicians  
1980  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



(D)

Blackmail (6 of many)  
2008  
Designed by Metahaven



The "Three Politicians" stamps designed by Jan van Toorn (C) don't seem to go far from this idea. Designed for the Dutch post office, the PPT, these were entitled to celebrate the three founding fathers of contemporary Dutch politics. Namely, these were an advocate of conservative christian politics, a revolutionary and founder of the Social Democratic Party and the co-founder and leader of the Conservative Liberal Party, mentioned in chronological order.<sup>15</sup>

The layout is coherent, accessing a similar order of elements that is immediately perceived as a series, holding the same typology of graphical elements and display. This conveys the idea of a side by side, a parallel between the three stamps. Each of them showcases the face and name of one of the founders of the political parties holding power at the House of Representatives; the chair of the Speaker of the House; the word "Nederland"; the value of the stamp and a different colour palette. The chair on the background represents the position that the party held in the Dutch parliament in the 1980s, situated accordingly. The colours are associated to their political position.

Respectively, light orange and blue is used for the conservative, red for the socialist and the national colours for the liberal.

The size and value of the numbers representing the value of the stamps increases according to the time in which they exercised power, the latest being the higher. The thickness of the font of the socialist stamp seems to be a more personal intervention.<sup>16</sup> Set in bold type, it doesn't seem to fit any other reasoning.

Despite the interesting layering of information, holding a narrative with "unexpected layers of meaning and a personal point of view,"<sup>17</sup> these complexities act mostly as an illustration of the established order.

Apparently holding up to the status-quo of what is expected from a commemorative stamp, the stamps don't seem to be claiming for something else than to host and celebrate the 3 politicians. The layout is all too similar and steady.

The "Blackmail" series (D) by Metahaven seem to propose something more bold.

They propose a series of frames that include the word "Europa." Inside the frames they place different images that seem to refer to Europe. A rectangle with a colour gradient overlays the framed images, as if claiming that they are part of an archive, already owned, like a branding. The images presented are not clear at a first glance, but contrast with the almost universally recognized unit of commemoration that is a postage stamp.<sup>18</sup>

Inside the frames are set images of rain drops on glasses under a grey sky, of strikes, toll roads, a border wall overlaid with a logotype that celebrates the "European year of equal opportunities for all", a monument overlaid with an image of dices being played, a series of manifestation posters in french mentioning minorities, calling for solidarity and featuring the logotype of the french National Confederation of Labour (CNT-F, a french anarcho-syndicalist union), amongst others. There is no value printed on the surface of any of the Stamps.

It seems like Europe is framing those scenarios. The images are a critique, setting a tone of disappointment towards a Europe

that is not celebratory, but the scenario of a tragedy.

The distressing images act like a sabotage of the inherent character of celebration endorsed by stamps. The subversion of this function belittles the assumption of stamps to frame pleasant scenarios of acclaimed public figures. Similarly to the posters presented before, they add a commentary.

But if on the posters the commentating layer was added at the expense of informing, the stamps still function the same way. People buy the stamps, perhaps think about the commentary pointed out by the unusual appropriation of the space, and send their mail. The commentary is attached to the surface rather than playing on the usage of it.

The graphic designer is someone who is in contact with the message from within. Taking or not a participative part in the verbal trait of the content developed, the designer can examine and edit the message holding account of it in a personal and ethical way. On the "Blackmail" project, this is done by associating the word with images that

illustrate it. The existence of a creative agency involved on the delivery of a message assigns the designer the responsibility of the message's soft power, as revealed on this work by Metahaven.<sup>19</sup>

In a conception of reality composed by commodities shaped by images, it is important to understand that designers, as professional developers of messages embedded in images, enrol in an activity that produces soft power. The designers acknowledgement of this depends on how they routinely practice their activity.

Designers that believe in impersonal "professionalism", assuming their role as deliverers of messages, decide (deliberately or not) to undertake the client's soft power tool, giving up their personal faculties.<sup>20</sup> Designers that assume it, can edit it according to a personal belief.

Rick Poynor, following this line of thought, encourages designers to engage on these skills with "full consciousness (and clean conscience)" as a privilege in which "the key thing is to recognize the reality of soft

power and make a good use of it."<sup>21</sup>

On "Blackmail", despite the sabotage being a rather interesting way of subversion, the message seems quite hard to grasp on a first glance. It doesn't necessarily generate a response from the public. To "europe" is added the perplexity of the verge of a conflict, and the possibility of starting a conversation.

Looking back at Jan van Toorn's "Three stamps", there is a twist. Putting it in a practical context, here is what would happen:

To send a letter, one needs a stamp. Amongst the available stamps for sale there are three with a similar layout, but featuring different elements. A Christian Catholic, a Socialist and a Liberal's faces. They hold different prices. Respectively, the first costs 45c, the second 50c and the third 60c. On a first stance it seems unfair that the parties are already coined with lower or higher values. Stamps are surface value, they represent how much is paid for them, and depending on that amount, one is allowed certain facilities, such as the weight of what it is allowed to send inside the package or the distance it is allowed to reach.

It is possible to buy many stamps that cost less instead of one that holds a higher price. It is also possible to pay for the most expensive stamp although the package doesn't cost that much.

So facing the three stamps and their prices, how would you pay for the cost of your letter? Which stamps would you choose to buy? Which political party would you add to your message?

The most subversive role of these stamps seems to be the interaction assigned to them. When purchasing the stamps, one is obliged to choose a political party. This refers to the act and responsibility of voting.

Designers are designing surface,<sup>22</sup> shaping social reality. Through surface, they are deeply involved in the processes of habitualization in contemporary life,<sup>23</sup> thus, responsible for its action. Peter Buwert suggests "Defamiliarization."

Drawn from the Russian term "ostranenie", coined by Victor Shklovsky in 1917, defamiliarization creates a friction with

the automated responses to the established order, opening possibilities for awareness of the status-quo of this behaviours.

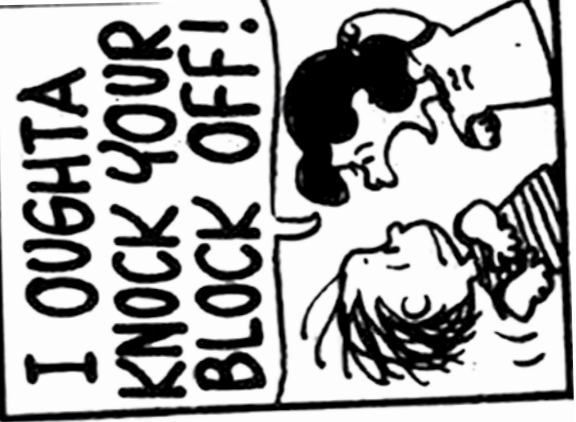
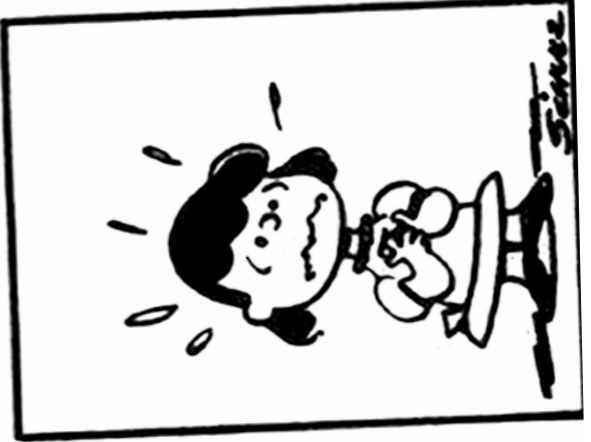
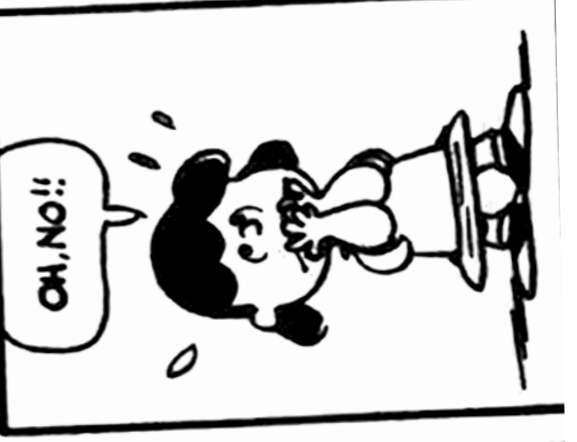
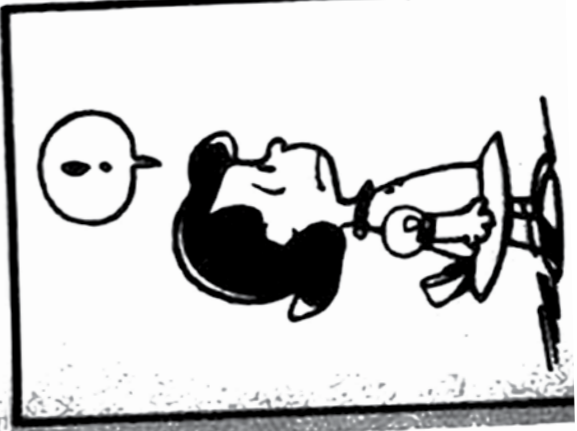
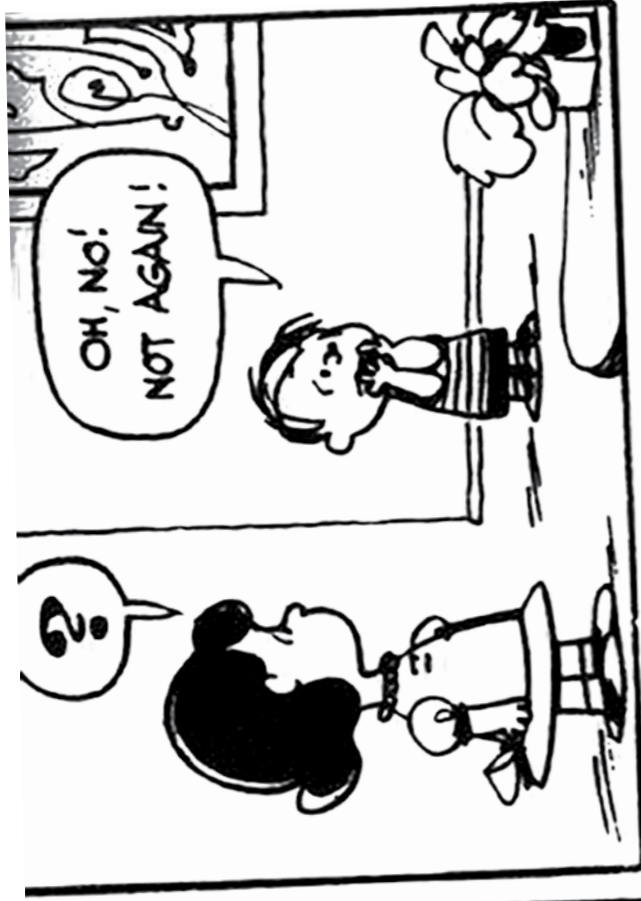
To explain this, Buwert shows a Schulz cartoon strip (E). In it, Linus, the main character, becomes aware of his tongue. He says that he can't stop thinking about it, and how very uncomfortable it is.

As suggested on the cartoon, defamiliarization is when something unquestioned and familiar becomes unfamiliar. Buwert says:

"Recognition of the two components of this dynamic – the significant twin powers of habitualization and defamiliarization – is vital to the pursuit of criticality within design, or indeed any other area of human endeavour."<sup>24</sup>

Rather than smoothing the way we interact, surface can create this kind of friction that leads to disorientation and consequently awareness. The design infiltrates the established platforms and the automatic assumptions hosted by these templates.





Both strategies presented on the stamps play with defamiliarization. "Blackmail" does it by making a commentary and challenging the social value of the surface. Even the name "Blackmail" evokes this kind of challenge. The "Three Politicians" series does it mostly by making the user acknowledge its everyday interactions and social responsibility.

A banknote, like a stamp, represents currency. It is also a platform whose function doesn't change if the layout makes it understandable as a banknote. As a platform, it can be customized without losing its function.

The banknotes proposed by Jan van Toorn (F) and the banknote proposal by Metahaven (G) are once more using the platform to add a commentary.

One of the sides of Jan van Toorn's 100f banknote features images that represent the role of the government, the public sector and economic policy. On the other side of the same banknote, a hand over a lawbook. The 25f banknote, because of being of a lower value, deals with resources, the means of production and commodities (the raw products of industry).



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On the other side, a handshake that appears to be between a businessman and a worker. It follows the following logics: One side shows the structure of the economic system using a pragmatic approach. The second side demystifies the hidden pacts that (often) lie behind it.

Jan van Toorn makes use of this surface standard (the banknote) to reveal the treats of the economic system, referencing the medium – the subject is money itself. Hold by a solid structure that makes the platform (banknotes) recognizable, Van Toorn infiltrates and poisons the message by revealing the distribution of power in the economic system. The images are clear and discrete, making use of the *clin d'oeil* to add the comment, rather than by confrontation.

Similarly to the approach seen on Metahaven's "Blackmail" stamps, the banknotes propose us to reflect on a topic. The banknote as a critique of itself, uncovering its mischievous quality.

On the "Extra Euro" banknote by Metahaven, the studio uses the settled layout of a 500€ Dutch banknote and hacks it by proposing

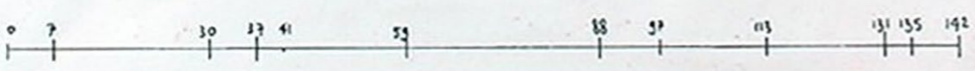
(F)

Dutch banknotes 25f; 100f (recto/verso) (2 of many)  
1986  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



waternummer  
schraalwatermerk

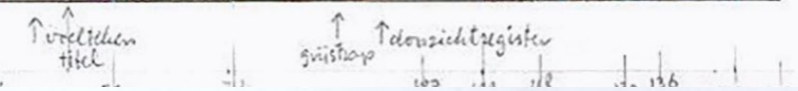
voelklein  
grijschap  
donzichtregister



naaldruis  
iris druis



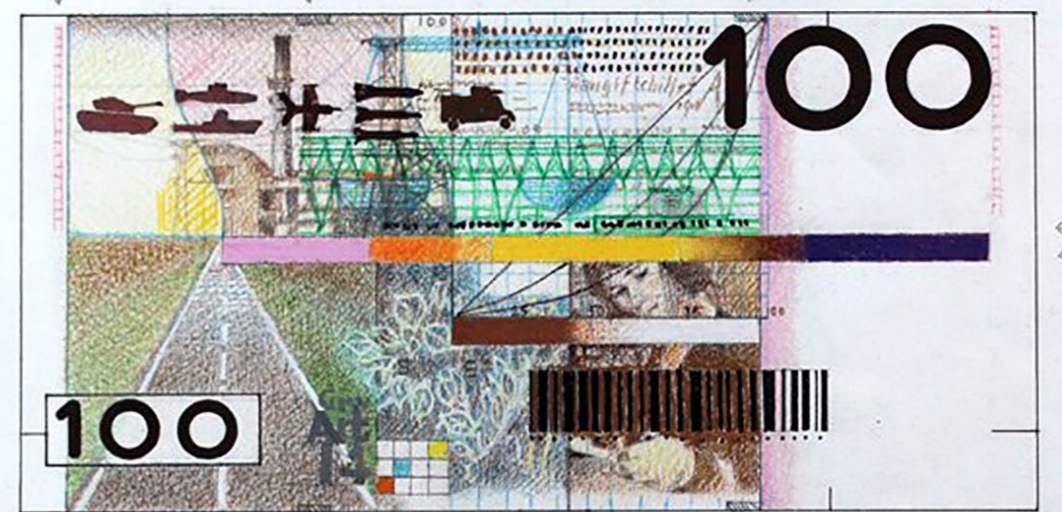
druckregister  
iris druis  
waternummer



mitelen  
druckregister  
mitelen

iris  
microkint  
hoelchraal  
mitelen

metamerie  
donzichtregister



staaf  
inter  
rang  
fook  
inter  
acc  
iris  
bo

mitelen  
metamerie  
bw  
Ayt.  
if  
donzichtregister  
mitelen



kleur  
ouden

uif

(G)

Extra Euro 500€ (recto/verso)  
2011  
Designed by Metahaven



a commentary. Rather than proposing a new banknote, Metahaven suggest a subversion of the existing one. The added information presents the commemoration of "Belgium's status of world record holder for state without government, effective June 1, 2011."

On one side of the banknote it reads "Beyond Belgium" and "Extra Euro." These seem to be printed using a stencil technique, as if going over the classical 500€ banknote from Belgium. A yellow and blue spray are used for this purpose, perhaps as a reference to Europe. Inside of "Extra Euro" it's possible to perceive a depth. There is something inside the letters, a black and white space that contains the words "Extra City."

Looking at the other side of it is possible to see that it is actually exactly the same side of the 500€ banknote. Instead of showing the back side, turning the note around visually leads to another layer of the same note. This contains the words "Extra City." "Extra City" was what was written in the depth of the "Extra Euro" typeface on the other side. Perhaps this was the depth suggested from the other face of the banknote. The hacking

shows new dimensions of the same surface, contradicting the logics of a recto/verso.

This side is almost fully covered by a red layer. It also contains a quote suggesting the commemoration proposed. On top of all of this, the information is locked under a platform of white tubes as if inside a cage that covers all the graphic elements. The typeface used on both sides resembles the one frequently used by subcultures such as black metal. The assemblage of the elements and the verbal trait climaxes on a joke. The design, a proposal dated from 2011, was making a reference to the end of the Belgium crisis (2007–2011). If "Blackmail" was showing disappointment towards Europe, here Metahaven uses the joke as a strategy.

As said by Metahaven:

"[Jokes] are among the cheapest goods we all have access to; they don't cost anything, and they work (...) like laughs [they] are contagious, even if their intention is deadly serious."<sup>25</sup>

A joke is a disruption of the order that is useful as negating the form of legitimate rational debate as naturally presumed.<sup>26</sup> The design overlaid to the european 500€ banknote negates its formal legitimacy.

The usage of the joke is another way allowing for a disruptive relation to established norms and conventions. This is another variation on how editing content and infiltrating a surface can allow for adding a commentary that may generate discussion and awareness regarding a specific socio-political context.

The examples mentioned so far move from a reproductive order of design to a commentating one, generating a practice that engages in finding places within the established surface standards of graphic design to add a commentary.

As van Toorn puts it:

"All cultures have communicative forms of fiction that refer to their own fictitiousness in resistance to the established symbolic order. 'To this end,' Robert Stam writes, 'they deploy myriad

strategies – narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions, stylistic virtuositities. They share a playful, parodic, and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions."<sup>27</sup>

Acknowledging the hyperreality, these myriad strategies allow graphic designers to create proposals that resist to the cultural fictitiousness of the established order by proposing counter-fictions that subvert the previous.

But it is hard to find sponsors that accept to work with these kind of design approach that wishes to subvert the established order. These strategies are not necessarily pleasing.

The "defamiliarization" strategy proposes a friction to the habitualization to what is familiar. By habitualizing to a certain order life becomes easier, decreasing the confusion and tension of the unfamiliar. These subversive methods bring back the tension of having to develop new responses due to the newness caused by the counter-fiction. When using jokes, the subversion of the status-quo

functions as a disruptive entertainment.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, it becomes more noticeable. Even so, and as previously mentioned, in order to become effective, the joke is useful as negating the naturally presumed order. Although it can be a way of reaching a broader audience, this negation (i.e. confrontation) is scarcely accepted by institutions.

Upon having introduced a social security system, the social democrat politician Willem Drees became a national hero for many in the Netherlands. On the sequence of that event, the Dutch PTT decided to release a centenary stamp commemorating the former minister's 100th birthday.

The first proposal (H) presented by Jan van Toorn featured an official photography of Drees laying in the dunes after playing a ball game with his family. This was rejected by the office of the prime minister as inappropriate. According to them, its informal character was not worthy as a representation of a prime minister of such stature.

The second proposal (I) conveys a much more conventional image, an official photography of Drees entering the parliament. Here the author managed to maintain the structure of the previous proposal.

Although the main playful commentary (the joke) was lost, van Toorn still managed to add a small subversion and commentary by using a typeface that resembled a grocery priced label, as had already been presented in the former design.<sup>29</sup>

When Jan van Toorn proposed the usage of the joke, in 1986, with the usage of Drees at the dunes, it was rejected. What was accepted was the second proposal, that barely challenges the status-quo. But even if the subversion is small, Van Toorn sees this achievement as a positive change saying: "what I succeeded in was to stay away from the formal that you still see in England, or in Holland."<sup>30</sup>

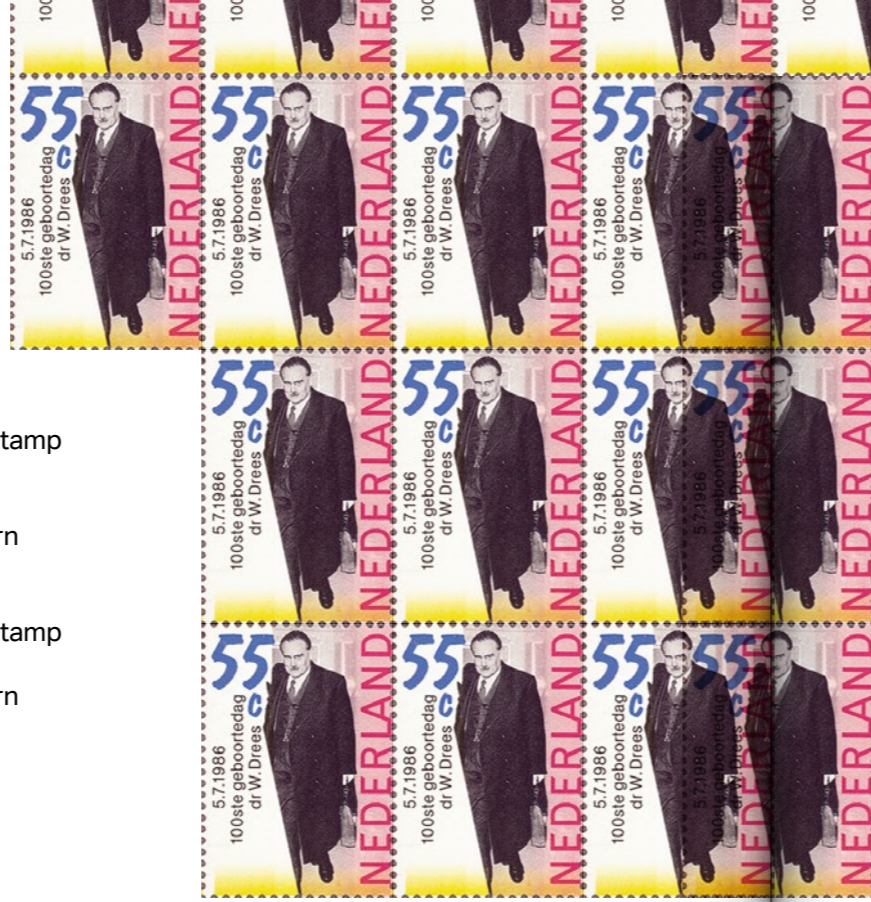
This was mentioned in the conference "Curating Reality – New Tools for Investigative Journalism." In this conference Jan van Toorn suggests to evaluate design works according to a method that he built with the purpose of

(H)



Willem Drees Centenary stamp  
(first proposal)  
1986  
Designed by Jan van Toorn

Willem Drees Centenary stamp  
1986  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



First and second proposal of the Willem Drees Centenary  
stamp placed inside of The Intellectual Gearbox diagram.  
2012  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



(I)  
(J)



being aware of the “political and substantial” of the value of the work.

He calls this method “The Intellectual Gearbox.” He further explains that “The Intellectual Gearbox” is a form of metaphor to work on a critical and emancipatory agenda. It works as a diagram in which the works are placed according to how they can be considered “classical/conventional”, “moderate” or “radical”,<sup>31</sup> being the “radical” one his choice par excellence. Under this scheme Van Toorn puts the first Drees proposal close to “radical” and the second close to “moderate.”<sup>32</sup> (J)

This proposal sees a positive scenario of finding a way to create radically engaged alternatives for graphic design. But when presenting his own works within the chart, one notices that most of Jan van Toorn projects are sponsored by institutions. The most closely bound to a commercially bound sponsor was the Mart.Spruijt, a commercial printer in Amsterdam that Van Toorn used to work with and at some point proposed a collaboration.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, looking back at the sponsors of the works presented on this essay so far, it is noticed that most of the disruptive proposals are either for institutions such as the Dutch PTT or museums. The banknotes proposal for the De Nederlandsche Bank was not accepted,<sup>34</sup> ending up on an anthology<sup>35</sup> about Jan van Toorn’s work. The banknote proposed by Metahaven was part of the project “Extra Everything”, a speculative design<sup>36</sup> contribution to the exhibition “Museum of Display”<sup>37</sup> (that later was not actually shown there).

To be able to work within this kind of institutions is an extremely privileged milieu that very few designers have the chance to be part of.



<sup>1</sup> Goggin, J. (2009) *Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design's Expansive Scope by Its Quotidian Activities*. In: Blauvelt, A. and Lupton, E. (Ed.) (2012) *Graphic design: Now in production*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center. p.55

<sup>2</sup> Jan van Toorn worked a lot with collage, a technique that started to be revealed by artists like Braque and Picasso from 1912. This one particularly reminds of the Dadaist Collage, especially the ones made by Hannah Höch or John Heartfield. Despite this formal resemblance, from this period, Van Toorn was particularly drawn to the work (formally and theoretically) of El Lissitzky. It is even possible to find quotes by the artist on his works. One example would be the quote "I am against the harmony of the page", featured on the Mart.Spruijt calendar from 1976/77. In: Meggs, Philip B. and Alston W. Purvis (2012) *History of Graphic Design*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. p.258 & Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.167

<sup>3</sup> Although Van Toorn started to work with graphic means from an early age and attended what would be the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, he considers himself as a "late starter" due to the fact that his mature ideas only started to be revealed in his designs in his late thirties, around the 1970s. It was only by this time that he considered that his ideas about design were fully formulated. In: Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.80

<sup>4</sup> Poynor, R. (2009) *Borderline*. [online] Available at: <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/borderline> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Although the duo started to collaborate as researchers in 2004 during a research project, it was only by 2007 that Kruk and Van der Velden were working together full-time as Metahaven. In: Saxelby, R. (2016) *Metahaven Is Breaking The Propaganda Machine* [online] Available at: <http://www.thefader.com/2016/05/06/metahaven-the-sprawl-propaganda-interview> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>6</sup> Metahaven had as a third partner the architect Gon Zifroni, between 2007-2010. [online] Available at: <http://egs.edu/faculty/metahaven> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>7</sup> Webb, C. (2015) *Inter Rupt*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: [http://christinawebb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Webb\\_thesis-interview-VanToorn.pdf](http://christinawebb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Webb_thesis-interview-VanToorn.pdf) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>8</sup> As argued by Francisco Laranjo the term "critical design" in relation to graphic design is vague and subjective and was popularized by the traveling exhibition "Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design" and by Metahaven, among others. In: Laranjo, F. (2014) *Critical Graphic Design: Critical of What?* [online] Available at: <http://modesofcriticism.org/critical-graphic-design/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>9</sup> Wiesenberger, R. (2014) *Metahaven: Somewhere Near You, Soon* [online] Available at: <https://032c.com/metahaven-somewhere-near-you-soon/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>10</sup> Made in partnership with "Deneuve", a cultural communication agency.

<sup>11</sup> De Neef, T. (2009) *Utrecht Manifest #3* [online] Available at: <http://deneuve.nl/2009/10/09/communicatie-utrecht-manifest/> [accessed July 2018].

<sup>12</sup> (2009) [online] Available at: <http://www.gutenberg-intermedia.de/en/jan-van-toorn/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>13</sup> (2014) *Utrecht Manifest 3. Modelling the Social* [online] Available at: <http://www.utrechtmanifest.nl/utrecht-manifest-3/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>14</sup> The "Penny Black" (1840), was the first officially recognized (in the UK by the Queen Victoria) postage stamp. It hold an illustration of the torso of the Queen Victoria commemorating her visit to the City of London in November 1837. Since then postage stamps have mostly followed this legacy

of celebratory platforms. In: (2017) *The Penny Black* [online] Available at: <https://www.postalmuseum.org/discover/collections/penny-black/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>15</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.109-110

<sup>16</sup> As someone that supported left inclined movements such as the "Provo", a counterculture movement that happen in the mid sixties, it is likely that Van Toorn would favour the socialist from the three political groups represented.

<sup>17</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.110

<sup>18</sup> Vishmidt, M., Van der Velden, D. and Kruk, V. (Ed.) (2010) *Uncorporate Identity*. Baden: Lars Muller. p. 572

<sup>19</sup> Soft Power refers to the usage of assets that produce attraction which often lead to consent regarding an idea. In: Nye, J. (2004) *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs. p.6

<sup>20</sup> Poynor, R., Van der Velden, D. & Douglas, N. (2012) *Design as Politics: Power and Shadow*. London: Royal College of Art. p.02

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kruk, V. and Daniel van Der Velden. (2008) *White Night Before A Manifesto*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. [PDF file] [online] Available at: <http://frontdeskapparatus.com/files/015.pdf> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>23</sup> Buwert, P. (2016) *Defamiliarization, Brecht and Criticality in Graphic Design*. In: Laranjo, F. (Ed.) (2016) *Modes of Criticism 2 – Critique of Method*. Porto: Modes of Criticism. p. 26

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kruk, V. and Daniel van Der Velden. (2013) *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: <http://theorytuesdays.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Can-Jokes-Bring-Down-Governments-Metahaven.pdf> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>26</sup> Peters, A. (2012) 'Criticize the Old World in Content and Advocate a New One in Form.' *Metahaven in Conversation with Aaron Peters*. [online] Available at: <http://mthvn.tumblr.com/post/47975414145/aaronpetersmetahaven> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>27</sup> Van Toorn, J. (1995) *Design and Reflexivity*. [PDF file] [online] <https://designopendata.wordpress.com/portfolio/design-and-reflexivity-1994-jan-van-toorn/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>28</sup> Disruptive entertainment is meant to refer to how it captures the audience's attention and interest but due to it's critical status and commentating agency, still allowing them to argue with the subject matter. A disruptive entertainment rather than a "pure" entertainment. Jan van Toorn was not at ease with the notion of entertainment regarding his practice. When the designer and educator Katherine McCoy referred to his proposal of a "dialogic design" saying that these elements can be added as "challenge, gaming and play", Van Toorn answered that it was not realistic to hope for participation in the media for those "who have no voice." His aim, he said, was more substantial than to add an extra zip of entertainment. On the other hand, Metahaven hold an ongoing research on "Jokes" that includes their book "Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design, Politics" in which they explore the power of jokes (a highly entertaining force) as "an open-source weapon of politics." In: Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.123-124 and Kruk, V. and Daniel van Der Velden. (2013). *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: [http://grcd3010-f17.studiojunglecat.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Metahaven\\_CanJokesBringDownGovernments\\_Jokes-Design.pdf](http://grcd3010-f17.studiojunglecat.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Metahaven_CanJokesBringDownGovernments_Jokes-Design.pdf) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>29</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.203

<sup>30</sup> Van Toorn, J. (2012) *Curating Reality - New Tools for Investigative Journalism* [Vimeo file] [online] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/37674321> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>31</sup> This implies an understanding of the works that doesn't only consider the designs on the level of syntax but extended to pragmatics and semantics. In: Van Toorn, J. (2006) *Design's Delight*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.33-34

<sup>32</sup> Van Toorn, J. (2012) *Curating Reality* [Vimeo file] [online] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/37674321> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>33</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.82

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that the banknotes were the second choice after the chosen proposal. In: Laranjo, F. [Modes of Criticism] (2015) *It's Important to Add That This Design Fell at the Last Hurdle against the Chosen Proposal. Still Dense and Provocative 30 Years Later*. [Twitter post] [online] Available at: [twitter.com/modescriticism/status/674288198869217282](https://twitter.com/modescriticism/status/674288198869217282) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>35</sup> The book "Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice", edited by Jan van Toorn and Rick Poynor.

<sup>36</sup> Metahaven also go under names such as 'speculative design' and 'design fiction', that are argued as interchangeable alternatives for the term "critical design." The tendency to use such terms increased exponentially after the release of "Speculative Everything" (2013), a book by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in which Metahaven are mentioned. In: Laranjo, F. (2015) *Critical Everything* [online] Available at: <http://modesofcriticism.org/critical-everything/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>37</sup> "Museum of Display" was the second episode of a series presented at Extra City, a 'Kunsthal' (art space) in Antwerp. It looked at definitions of 'art' and the 'institution' within the scenario of a fictional museum. In: (2011). *Museum of Display* [online] Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/35556/museum-of-display/> [accessed July 2018]

Even trying to wriggle in between institutional sponsors, the chances of finding open arms to subversive proposals can be more or less scarce depending on the socio-political context.

In the course of the 80's, with Ronald Reagan as American president and Margaret Thatcher as British prime minister, the international mood was changing. Under a neo-liberal socio-economical context, the progressivist left-inclined cultural sector of the 70's was hostile. The Netherlands were affected by this international scenario, resulting on fewer opportunities to develop radical work. Even under these circumstances, one of Jan van Toorn's most notable works emerged at this time.

Between 1981 and 1985 Van Toorn designed a set of seven posters for a series of exhibitions called "Men and Environment" (K) for the De Beyerd visual arts center in Breda. For this purpose Van Toorn used a regular sized poster on top of which was built a similar graphic framework for all the seven posters.



The frame was composed by a television image of Sophia Loren and her son placed on the top left and bottom right of the rectangle. The image was printed using different techniques that reminded of the Warholian repetition.<sup>1</sup> By referring back to Andy Warhol's works such as the "Marilyn Diptych" from 1962, the critique to consumption was immanent.

Because of being a sequence, it also allowed Van Toorn to do a critique based on these characteristics. Each poster refers back to the previous one and the whole series works as a visual essay in referentiality. On the 5th poster, something happens. A second image of Sophia and her son is the center of the Poster, framed inside of her own frame. A stripe ripped paper containing the eyes of the actress overlays this second picture of Loren, seemingly attempting to call for attention for the importance of the sight. This gets more evident with the quote added on top of it, where it reads "Je ne cherche pas, je trouve" [I do not search, I find] by Pablo Picasso. It is a revealing moment on the series, in which the author enhances the message and the importance of the "ways of seeing".<sup>2</sup>

REUSE (UNRELATED) SURFACE

The image of Sophia and her son, like a modern *pietà* of the consumerist culture was not linked to what was presented on the exhibition in the sense that it was not part of the images that integrated it. It was used as a commentary to the way images were consumed. By reusing an unrelated but mediatic figure, he was subverting the way a poster for a museum conventionally functioned (and still mostly does), generally as an informative platform referring to the content presented with the utmost accuracy.

Through showing something unrelated, Van Toorn seems to be also challenging the veracity of visual communication. The usage of a mediatic symbol of mass consumption that is not part of the exhibition highlighted the way the public blindly follows these images. This subverts the way we perceive images, generally as trustworthy visual sources, and creates a defamiliarization towards the order. It "uneducates" the habitualized way in which images are consumed.

Another example of a symbol of mass consumption appropriated and reused can be seen on a proposal<sup>3</sup> designed by Metahaven.

(L)

Wikileaks logotype  
(proposal)  
2010  
Designed by Metahaven

**WIKILEAKS®**

The suggestion of a new image for Wikileaks, the non-profit whistleblower organisation, included a logotype that contained an existing logotype inside (L). Apart from all the letters of the word "Wikileaks", inside of it was included the logotype of IKEA, the Swedish Furniture retail company. It could seem unrelated. Why would the organization use the company's name on it? On a first stance, it adds a similar comment to the one presented by Van Toorn on the posters, referring to the power hold by such images as attention grabbing gears.

Daniel van der Velden said:

"We found out that the word 'IKEA' was impregnated on the word wikileaks and it's funny because they have this love/hate relationship... wiki... wiki... wiki... Wikealeaks, Wikileaks."<sup>4</sup>

Although played on like a joke the usage of a renowned brand intertwined with the organisation doesn't happen by chance. There is a dynamics of power hold by the boldness of the IKEA logotype against the rest of the word, a tension. The word "IKEA" is clearly stronger, bold and in uppercase. On a first glance it takes

all of the attention to a point where the rest of the word is barely readable. The renowned brand is being used to refer to the country in which it was founded. Metahaven play with the idea of nation states represented by brands. IKEA has become the face of a country, Sweden. Sweden has been an opposing force to the Wikileaks project. The logo proposed exercises a lot of visual pressure. This power relation addresses the real tension between the organisation and the country.

The apparently unrelated surface is not added haphazardly, but choosing images that are recognized by a big audience due to their iterant presence in the mass media. Consequently, these generate an extra attention from the public. Who in the western world didn't know who Sophia Loren was in 1989!? The *pietà-like* mediacy would certainly call for a wider audience than any of the other images used. And who doesn't know what "IKEA" stands for today!?

By using the Italian internationally known actress Sophia, Van Toorn was playing a visual "clickbaiting,"<sup>5</sup> using the attraction to this figure as a way to call for an audience.



The same happens with the usage of the IKEA logotype.

Yet, as Rick Poyner points out regarding the "Men and Environment" series, the usage of the actress can result just as an element of alienated redundancy. Looking at a few commentaries on the Design Observer<sup>6</sup> article containing the Wikileaks image proposal, it is possible to witness a few misunderstanding mixed with complaints such as:

"Haha! Have they got any idea about brand identity?! What on earth has IKEA got to do with Wikileaks. It's as if they've gone, I...K...E...A! Look you can spell IKEA from Wikileaks...now that's a gem if ever I've seen one."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, some other users seem to get the message clear, as seen below:

"The link between IKEA and Wikileaks is obvious. IKEA is Sweden's flagship brand and retailer around the world. And Sweden has an interesting relationship with Wikileaks (especially considering 'The Swedish Perspective').

Anyone following the story knows what I mean. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, google 'Sweden' and 'Wikileaks.'"<sup>8</sup>

The usage of this image interplay between a mediatic endorsement and a commenting agency separates the audience in at least two parts: Those who "get it" and those who don't.

By reusing images that already have an attention grabbing effect, it can fail on accomplishing the awareness to the stress it is commenting upon and be taken as an easy and tasteless way of getting attention with no effect other than "causing spectacle" and broadening the audience.

From another point of view, using the image reference to report on the power of the media or remind of an international newsworthy conflict makes use of design as a journalistic approach. This second however, due to its complexity requires an interpretation and consequently will reach only the most informed audience. As mentioned on the commentary on Design Observer concerning the Wikileaks logo, "anyone following the story knows what

I mean." The audience needs to be following the conflict to understand the reference, or be curious about it by, say, questioning what such logotype was doing there.

This kind of disruptive design is not only a privileged practice, but also works for an elite. Despite the good intentions involved, it excludes a big portion of the public that will not "get it."

This explores design as a practice in between presentation and representation, using a journalistic perspective. Such perspective refers to an idea presented by Van Toorn in which the designer describes his practice as visual journalism. This "rather than making conclusive claims and thereby shutting down dialogue on an issue (...) open up new spaces for debate in relation to their precisely curated subject matter."<sup>9</sup> Design must act as an in between mediator.

Van Toorn says:

"For me the question is how we as mediators should make use of the actual media situation now that we have

the new tools of media production, and how to inform and liberate, say, the people, the audience, from false notions of coma state and media."<sup>10</sup>

This notion of liberating the audience seems naive. Following the soft power previously mentioned, any added visual commentary will be biased according to the designer's point of view and necessarily exercise influence on the way the audience receives it. This doesn't mean that it is not worthy to propose to the designer to take such a stance. As encouraged by Rick Poynor, designers should make use of their soft power skills.

Van Toorn follows the previous thinking saying that the aim would be to raise political awareness in the audience that contributes again to the knowledge of the world and the formation of opinion.

Amidst an informed or curious audience, the designer's practice can act like an "emancipatory form of media." This term is used by Hans Magnus Enzenberg.<sup>11</sup> The author discerns between repressive and emancipatory media. The first is characterized

as a practice that is centralized: a single server, and many receivers. It isolates the receiver, that passively consumes the information. The second is seen as a decentralized practice: approaching the receiver as a potential sender. It aims at generating discussion on the subject matter presented, through encouraging interaction and feedback.<sup>12</sup>

Enzenberg assumes that the medium is a manipulator, suggesting that everyone should play a part in the manipulation. This demands, on the design level, that the manipulation is revealed.

On the poster series "Men and Environment" this revelation is made through the technique, using handwriting and a messy collage that unravels the intervention. On the Wikileaks proposal it avails from the IKEA logotype to reveal that the content is staged.

In a landmark of graphic design, a debate between Van Toorn and Wim Crouwel,<sup>13</sup> the second, referring to Van Toorn's designs, mentions that it was quite possible to enjoy a wonderful meal without being aware of all the cooking activities going on in the kitschen.

This is precisely where the difference between repressive and emancipatory media lays. The former allows for a pleasurable consumption, however, the diner will get no wiser about the processes that lay behind it.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, by knowing that the food went through a cooking process, one can participate and question it's manipulation. As Van Toorn remarks, one can only gain from knowing what he/she is eating.<sup>15</sup>

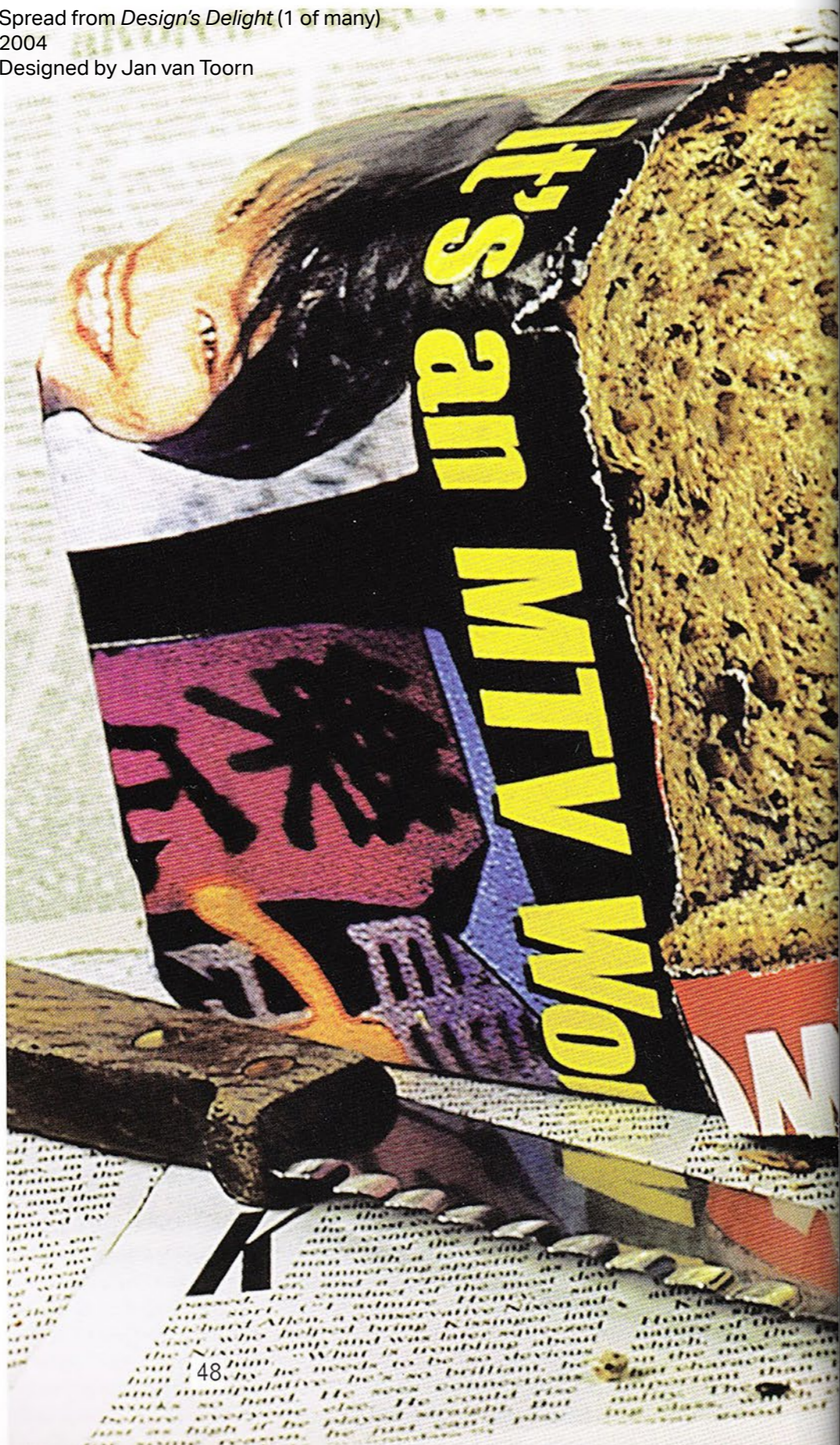
In the end these methods culminate in variants of visual journalism exploring storytelling and visual communication. The practices are often translated in essays, visual essays and production of knowledge.

Looking at the main books by the studios, it is seen that both Jan van Toorn and Metahaven seem interested in exploring these subversive tactics but on different levels.

On "Design Delights", (M) Jan van Toorn works on experimental strategies of communication focusing on how design can operate. On the book he applies it's dialogic<sup>16</sup> strategie on visual essays along with his writings where he assumes his role as a prophet of the discipline.

There is already under way a massive centralization of control through the [de facto or de jure] definition of the major elements of the information and communication power structure: Hollywood, Microsoft, IBM, AT&T and so forth. The new communication technologies, which hold out the promise of a new democracy and new social equality, have in fact created new lines of inequality and exclusion, both within the dominant countries and especially outside them.\*

Spread from *Design's Delight* (1 of many)  
2004  
Designed by Jan van Toorn



Design beyond design. 1997



It focuses on using storytelling with the aim of creating contradictions by opposing elements. It aims at hosting the spectator in a complex ambience composed by multiple images overlaid and deformed that allow for an active interpretation. One of these approaches can be seen on the spread 48-49 (M), in which Van Toorn reuses found images and quotes from different sources to build a visual metaphor. The result is read as a joke to comment on the power structures of communication.

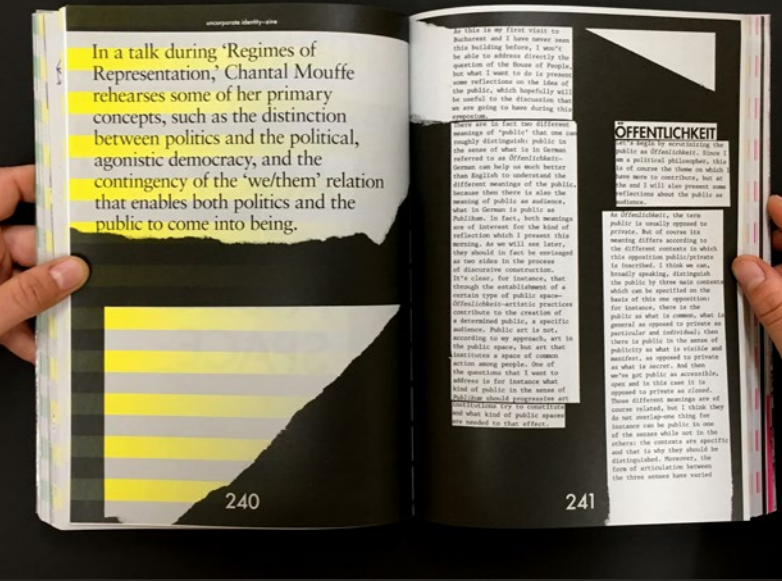
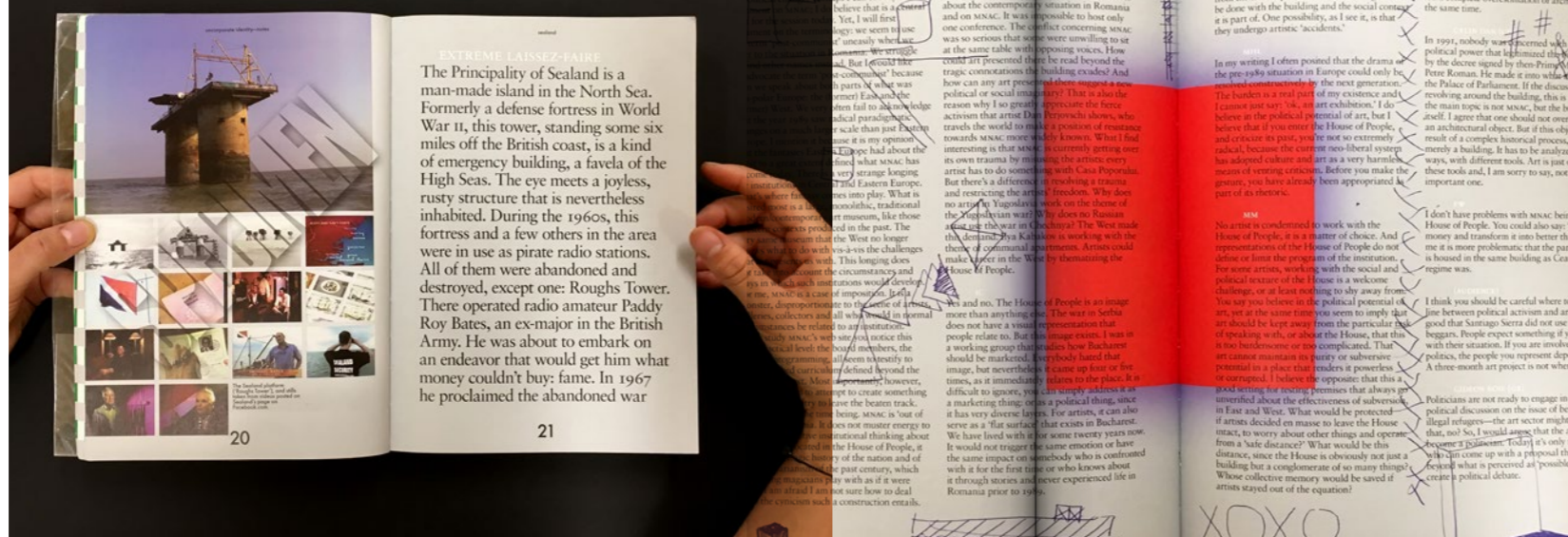
Metahaven use design as a research tool that translates into essays analysing the way images hold power. As mentioned on the press release at the Art Forum regarding their exhibition that opens this month, "Using design as a form of investigation, Metahaven have addressed the inter-operations of information networks, platform infrastructure and political geographies. (...) Metahaven collapse the aesthetic and analytic, combining expressive graphic and textual layers with poetic and cinematic elements."<sup>17</sup> Instead of developing an ideology for the design practice, they work on design strategies as a way to understand and question politics. They focus on how the

new medium, specially the Internet surface's distribution of power is affecting the way we inhabit society. The outcome is often achieved through writing combined with practice, as seen on "Uncorporate Identity."

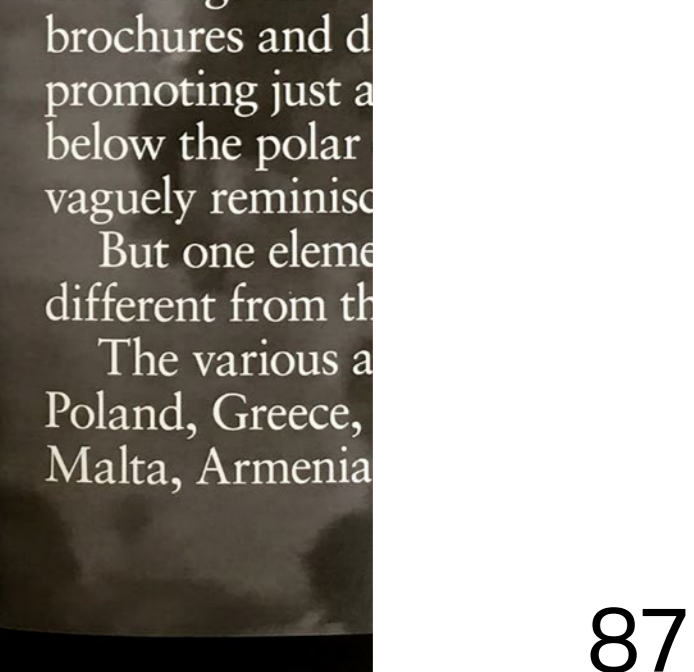
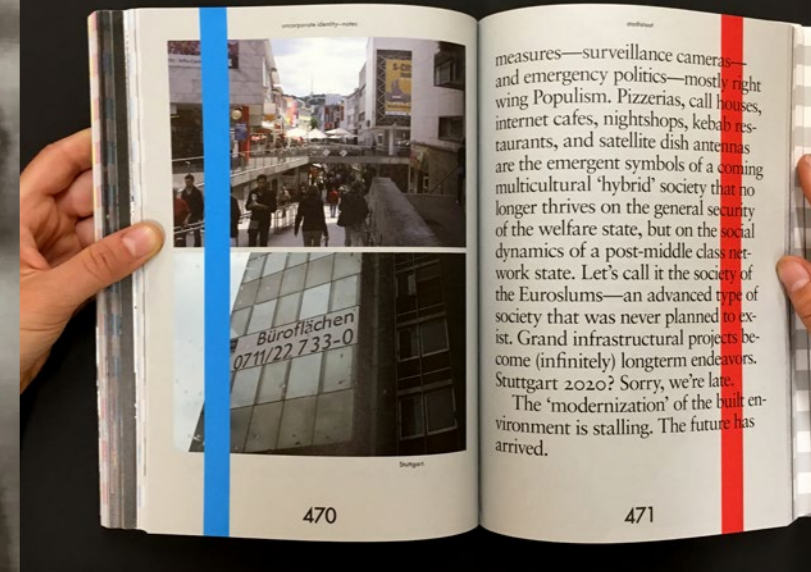
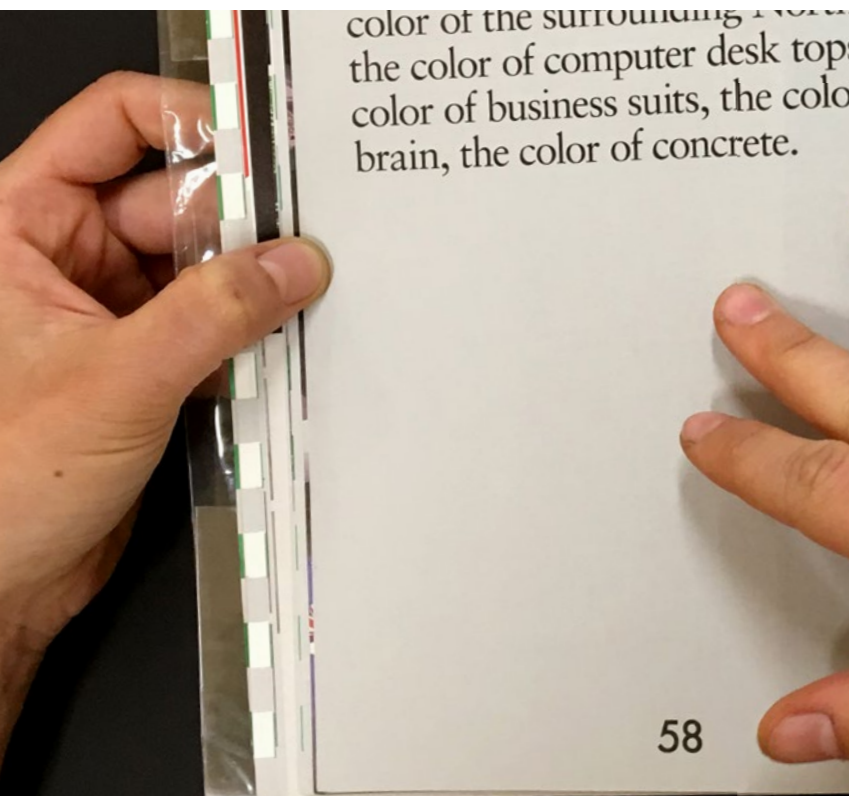
The book presents essays and visual essays with a more conventional layout than Van Toorn's "Design's Delight." The approach is less radical than Van Toorn's on the level of form. The layout (N) shows their projects and essays from them and from other contributors in a classical way, in the sense that it doesn't challenge the generally accepted way of how a book is presented. In one chapter the text is placed inside torn paper, in another colored stripes are placed on the sides of the pages, a third holds a colored red shape with a blue shadow on every page along with sketches apparently made by a blue "bic" pen.

The graphic interplay, divided by chapters that infiltrate one another occasionally, seems less likely to be generating a commentary or challenging the conventions of the classical layout. It engages in exploring the space of the spreads but is often perceived as an entertaining illustration.

(N)



Spreads and details from *Uncorporate Identity* (6 of many)  
2010  
Designed by Metahaven



86

87

However, the truly subversive strategies are shown in the projects, mostly enquire based and responding to no "real" client.

These practices are highly useful in the academic world, exploring possibilities for the discipline through researching on the way communication functions today making use of the graphic designers expertise.

The privilege of producing this kind of work is not only for the authors. Although not fully available online and with books published in limited editions scarcely reachable, their practice still reaches the new generations of designers through the academy and the institutions.

Van der Velden, one of the Metahaven founders, was a student at the Jan van Eyck Academie during the time Van Toorn was a director,<sup>18</sup> inevitably being in contact with his design approach and theory. It would not be possible to neglect this influence on his current approach.

Further on "heritage" we can see the work of a student from Daniel van der Velden, Noortje van Eekelen. As written by Poynor:

"(...) a student from the course [where Van der Velden was a tutor], Noortje van Eekelen, pulled off a truly noteworthy feat when her graduation project, 'The Spectacle of the Tragedy', was published by news organisations around the world, from the New York Times to Le Monde to the Daily Mail."<sup>19</sup>

This led Van Eekelen to create a platform for design and journalism with the aim of promoting interdisciplinary collaboration between the artistic and journalistic field, opening up more possibilities in the design field.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.112-113

<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase John Berger's homonymous book

<sup>3</sup> The proposal of the new image designed by the studio was presented at the "I Don't Know Where I'm Going But I Want To Be There" conference that took place in Amsterdam in 2010. In: Drenttel, W. (2010) *Wikileaks: Design Proposals by Metahaven*. [online] Available at: <https://designobserver.com/feature/wikileaks-design-proposals-by-metahaven/23608> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>4</sup> Van der Velden, D. (2010) *I Don't Know Where I'm Going But I Want To Be There* [Vimeo file] [online] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/18088132> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>5</sup> Drawn from an Internet context, a clickbait is a content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

<sup>6</sup> Design Observer ([designobserver.com](http://designobserver.com)) is a website devoted to provide a range of design related content such as essays, articles, reviews, blog posts and peer reviewed scholarship.

<sup>7</sup> Commentary added by a user that goes under the name "Emil Tin" (2011) In: Drenttel, W. (2010). *Wikileaks: Design Proposals by Metahaven*. [online] Available at: <https://designobserver.com/feature/wikileaks-design-proposals-by-metahaven/23608> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>8</sup> Commentary added by a user that goes under the name "Ced Lapa." Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Buwert, P. (2016) Defamiliarization, Brecht and Criticality in Graphic Design. In: Laranjo, F. (Ed.) (2016) *Modes of Criticism 2 – Critique of Method*. Porto: Modes of Criticism. p. 25-38

<sup>10</sup> Van Toorn, J. (2012) *Curating Reality - New Tools for Investigative Journalism*. [Vimeo file] [online] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/37674321> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>11</sup> Jan van Toorn was particularly taken by the poet and cultural critics ideas regarding the media and used them to inform his design practice. In: Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.95

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Seen as a landmark of graphic design and of Jan van Toorn's career, "The Debate" was a discussion that happen in 1972 between him and his foremost contender, Wim Crouwel. "The Debate" focused on commenting design for museums, leading Van Toorn and Crowel to discuss topics such as design education, the social relevance of the field, expressive freedom in the composition and the designers relationship with visual arts. In: Crouwel, W. H., Jan van Toorn, Rick Poynor, Frederike Huygen, Dingenus Van De. Vrie, and Ton Brouwers. (2015) *The Debate: The Legendary Contest of Two Giants of Graphic Design: Wim Crouwel, Jan van Toorn*. New York, NY: Monacelli Press. p. 48

<sup>14</sup> Poynor, R. and Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.108

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Dialogic", a name Van Toorn used along the years to define his approach to design that is described as a "social strategy that 'aims to involve spectators in the communication in a recognisable and critical manner and thus to offer them counter-images dealing with reality" In: Laranjo, F. (2014) *Five strategies tabled in Eindhoven*. [online] Available at: <http://modesofcriticism.org/staging-the-message/> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>17</sup> Hindle, B. and Evan, M. (2018) *Metahaven. Version History*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: [https://www.artforum.com/uploads/guide.004/id28443/press\\_release.pdf](https://www.artforum.com/uploads/guide.004/id28443/press_release.pdf) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>18</sup> Poynor, R. & Van Toorn, J. (2008) *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. p.127

<sup>19</sup> Poynor, R. (2014) *The fall and rise of Dutch design*. [online] Available at: <https://www.creativebloq.com/graphic-design/fall-and-rise-dutch-design-21410643> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>20</sup> In 2016 Van Eekelen started ACED (<https://aced.site/>). After finishing the MA diploma in Design from the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam, Noortje Van Eekelen worked in the journalistic field. Apart from the ACED, the designer is currently working as a lecturer at the MA Information Design at Design Academy Eindhoven, amongst others. In: [online] Available at: <http://www.noortjevaneeekelen.nl/about> [accessed July 2018]



VAN  
☺



In Metahaven's book "Can jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design, Politics", published in 2016, it reads:

"(...) Van Toorn's work would be a pre-interactive form of "linkbaiting;"<sup>1</sup> in the absence of links to click on, the designer already combined different target images into a single collage. Was Van Toorn indeed Rickrolling his audience, avant la lettre?"<sup>2</sup>

The term "rickrolling" refers to an Internet prank containing an hyperlink<sup>3</sup> suggesting to lead to a page but that upon clicking, ends up leading to an unexpected unrelated platform (different from the one suggested by the hyperlink). It means having been hacked and knowing it.<sup>4</sup>

When using Sophia Loren and her son on the posters to an exhibition that was not related to the actress, Van Toorn was building up to different expectations from the ones they would encounter did they decide to actually go to the exhibition and not verify the subject matter. Even on a first glance, for the ones that were captured by the mediatic image,

the outcome could be disappointing, not really addressing to Loren. The response to the bait did not result on a related reward. From this outcome Jan van Toorn adds a critique to the way we consume images and uses the prank as a hack, a surprise.

This is seen in other works. When Van Toorn proposed the usage of a barcode on the banknotes for the De Nederlandsche Bank, he uses a Metalanguage.<sup>5</sup> A barcode is printed on the banknote. It serves as a reminder of the consumerism adjacent to the banknotes and the idea of "buying money." He uses a playful prank. The barcode does not serve to be scanned, it is not to be used. The outcome is disappointing (but dimly funny).

With the emergence of hyperlinks and the Internet, the surface became interactive. The pre-interactive prank played by using Loren's image or the barcode could possibly take a different shape with the usage of the hyperlink.

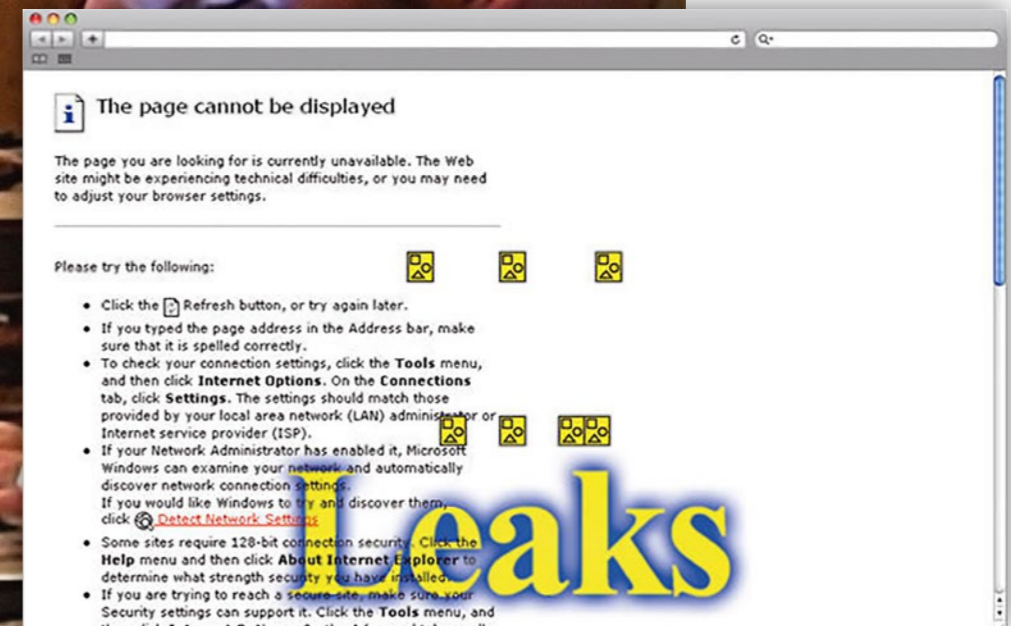
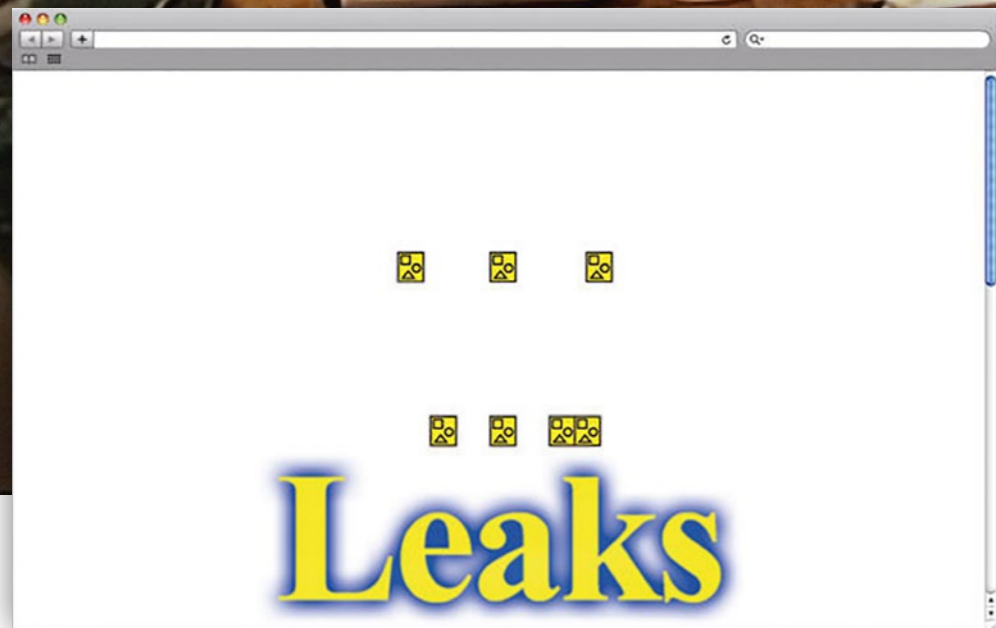
When Metahaven proposed the Wikileaks logotype, amongst other elements, they also proposed a website (O). The website was a webpage that conveyed "presence revealed

through absence – a link to a domain of which the license has been revoked."<sup>6</sup> When clicking on the hyperlink with the wikileaks domain, the user would be led to a webpage showing the template of the "Page Cannot Be Displayed" Error overlayed by the Wikileaks logo.<sup>7</sup>

The unavailable page reveals that the license for the domain had been revoked. The Error page shows the message that the website is "experiencing technical difficulties", but doesn't reveal why.

The platform is a commentary rather than something to be used. It reveals the struggle that the organization faces to try to find a host to be able to exist on the level of public domain. It reports the conflict through the hack in the shape of a prank. Similarly to the "Sophia Loren effect", it also plays with a thin line between disappointment/surprise/joke/frustration/... But appropriating the structure of the digital surface and using the link to play the "rickrolling."

(0)



Wikileaks website  
 (proposal)  
 2010  
 Designed by Metahaven

A similar strategy seems to be used on Holly Herndon's "Interference" video clip (P). As soon as the (youtube hosted) film starts playing, a window<sup>8</sup> pops up from the bottom. It appears on the same place as the advertisements featured in the digital platform usually do.

The frame doesn't contain advertising but an horizontal gradient from red to grey. It also includes a small cross on the top right as seen on the regular advertisements popping on the platform. This cross is usually interactive and is available for users to close the advertisement. Facing this frame, the instinct of a frequent youtube user would be to close it as soon as it appears. But it is of no use to attempt to click on it to close the digital window, because it is embedded on the film – It is not a real digital window. The click would therefore hit the film frame. As a result, and according to the youtube platform interaction settings, to click on the film frame would cause the film to pause.

It is again a prank, a "rickrolling." It relates to the barcode used by Jan van Toorn on the sense that an element that usually responds

to interaction is boycotted, disappointing the expectations had on it. As a commentary, it refers to the automatic interactions exercised on the digital medium. These techniques refer back to Jan van Toorn as an evolution of the exploration of subversive graphic design practices adapted to the new medium.

One doesn't need to look too closely to understand that these techniques are undeniably entertaining. However there is a thin line to be walked between creating a space for the perception of alternative possibilities and opening up spaces for criticality (i.e. defamiliarization) or merely producing a mildly amusing distracting entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

As a designer, the key point is to be able to use the entertainment while maintaining the spectator in possession of his capacities outside of what is being presented. By motivating a feedback that calls upon the audience's judgements considering external inputs, it escapes from designing pure entertainment.

(P)

Holly Herndon's *Interference* videoclip  
(frame on youtube platform)  
2015  
Designed by Metahaven

Holly Herndon - Interference [Official Video]



to be really honest



▶ ⏪ 🔊 0:08 / 5:18



Considering the notion of hyperreality this would allow the spectator to create responses based on a broader overall interference than focusing on one source. The audience will still be entertained by the all embracing spectacle but targeted by different inputs, avoiding mental anaesthetisation. This opposes to design as a pre-packaged experience. It also relates to the Enzenberg suggestion on the emancipatory media that sees the receiver is a potential sender.

This can be seen as a generative entertainment. Through Brecht's<sup>10</sup> explanation of the difference between the "dramatic theater" and what he wishes to accomplish with the *Verfremdungseffekt*<sup>11</sup> (i.e. V-effect or A-effect) utilising the 'epic' theatre, this idea of a generative spectacle can be understood:

"The dramatic theatre's spectator says:  
Yes I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh."

The epic theatre's spectator says:  
I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh"<sup>12</sup>

Brecht suggests that the spectator should be emotionally disconnected, therefore able to do a more analytical evaluation, nor completely drawn onto the play.

The usage of the prank as a way to hack necessarily holds an emotional outcome: the surprise. However the surprise combined with shock carries a different weight. As an emotion, it stops acting like most – as an emotional captive through empathetic identification. It subverts the authority of a certain automatism through shock, disrupting the status-quo and therefore allowing for the defamiliarization.

A prank is a surprise with a disruptive effect. This effect is witnessed in works such as the window of the "Interference" video clip.

Looking at it thoroughly, this specific subversion adds a quite simple commentary that can even be perceived only on a subconscious level. Even if not conveying a rational analysis on the commentary added to the subversion, it stimulates the user's awareness about the way he/she automatically behaves online.

But a prank played twice is certainly not as effective as it is the first time. Not only it loses the surprise effect, it will also most likely lose the chance to get people's attention towards the subject matter (in the case of design, the added commentary).

These techniques are quickly acquired back by the surface and expire.

On "PSYOP: An Anthology," a newly released magazine (October 2018) showcasing Metahaven's work along the years, it reads that Metahaven's practice traces a shift from studying the vehicle of communication to identifying the ideological causes and effects of disinformation.<sup>13</sup> Communication and its perception keeps changing. For this reason it is necessary to keep the legacy of designers

that read these changes and explore their possibilities. But as previously mentioned, the opportunities to pursue such quest seem to scarce.

Maybe that is why 6 years later the studio self-defines their practice as Design, Film and Art.<sup>14</sup>

When Van der Velden assumed that he holds a privileged status due to being able to work in Amsterdam, he also puts it in perspective, saying that "The market conditions that are beginning to seep into the Netherlands, France, and the rest of Europe are already the norm for the rest of the world."<sup>15</sup>

Strategically, facing the market conditions, to expand the practice seems like a smart move. Along their career, Metahaven has often worked for small Galleries. Concerning film, they started to explore the moving image using vimeo or youtube.<sup>16</sup>

In 2012 Daniel van der Velden, endorsing design as a form of social engagement, emphasizes the importance of a design that transcends disciplines saying that "Design truly becomes interesting when it moves across

the boundaries of the discipline (...) [when] the meaning or message can interest people that are completely outside the boundaries of design (...)"<sup>17</sup>

A video clip for a pop star could move across these boundaries. But although Holly Herndon is immensely talented, the composer can hardly be considered a pop star in the conventional sense. Like Metahaven, she is a micro pop star, a popstar within a niche that will hardly move much beyond its audience "reach."

Now Metahaven's practice is also showcased in museums and featured in film festivals. This doesn't necessarily increase a lot the audience's "reach", but it moves it to a context close to art and film.

In this way they are moving across the boundaries of the discipline, however, still working for an elitist niche. Morphologically, the adding of "art and film" shift seems justified by this aim and as a way to infiltrate institutions that sponsor other practices that are not design, playing a *clin d'oeil* to bureaucratic procedures. From the point of

view of the designer's practice, the scenario is not the same. By adding "film", for instance, the collective invalidates such activity to be claimed as an autonomous design practice, but setting it as an extra. It seems unnecessary and even disappointing.

Metahaven's work on the surface is unparalleled. Either applied to screens, scarves, t-shirts, books, film... Their insights are both formal and theoretical groundbreaking. In the words of Karen Archey:

"Appointing terms to phenomena that are so new that we do not have words for them yet (...) When a medium, term, or genre doesn't yet exist, you better believe Metahaven are going to invent it."<sup>18</sup>

This is witnessed on their newly released magazine, "PSYOP: An Anthology", that features their most recent insights while presenting their works.

However, despite the content, the exhibition "Metahaven: Earth" that opened this month (October 2018) at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam reveals to be conventional in terms



of form. Using mostly screens and punctually surrounding the space of the many rooms by objects they produced (such as scarves, t-shirts or a carpet), it creates an ambience that seems quite flat. When it comes to surpass the surface of a single medium, Metahaven's approach seems less engaged and radical. Even the "Interference" video clip seems to give way to the platforms of the museum. Set on a small television with two headphones on the sides, it completely misses some of the critical properties it held on the youtube platform. Because it is not hosted by the youtube platform, it makes the disruptive method of the window, for instance, nule.

Nevertheless, even if the design of the exhibition seems close to a slightly elaborate showroom, it is still a valuable alternative to show how design can engage in an expanded practice. It is still fascinating to dive into Metahaven's transition into moving image. If this way of infiltrating institutions allow designers to present the kind of disruptive work they are presenting now outside the academical world with recognized merit, it should certainly be endorsed.

<sup>1</sup> (on a website) "Linkbaiting" is the practice of crafting content (usually a headline or title) that is chosen to attract other content producers to find it. The purpose is increasing the number of people accessing the website, consequently improving its performance in search results.

<sup>2</sup> Kruk, V. and Van Der Velden, D. (2013) *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: [http://grcd3010-f17.studiojunglecat.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Metahaven\\_CanJokesBringDownGovernments\\_Jokes-Design.pdf](http://grcd3010-f17.studiojunglecat.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Metahaven_CanJokesBringDownGovernments_Jokes-Design.pdf) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>3</sup> (on a website) A "hyperlink" is a link from a hypertext document to another location, activated by clicking, tapping or hovering on a highlighted word or image.

<sup>4</sup> Kruk, V. and Van Der Velden, D. (2013) *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics*. [PDF file] [online] Available at: <http://theorytuesdays.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Can-Jokes-Bring-Down-Governments-Metahaven.pdf> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>5</sup> A "Metalanguage" uses a language of reference denoting something of a higher or second-order kind.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Velden, D. (2010) *I Don't Know Where I'm Going But I Want To Be There* [Vimeo file] [online] Available at: <https://vimeo.com/18088132> [accessed July 2018]

<sup>7</sup> The logotype used on this proposal is a second version proposed by the studio that did not contain the "IKEA" logotype but the word "leaks" only.

<sup>8</sup> (on computing) a framed area on a display screen for viewing information.

<sup>9</sup> Buwert, P. (2016) *Defamiliarization, Brecht and Criticality in Graphic Design*. In: Laranjo, F. (Ed.) (2016) *Modes of Criticism 2 – Critique of Method*. Porto: Modes of Criticism. p. 25 – 38

<sup>10</sup> Brecht was a great reference to Jan van Toorn and exercised great influence in his "Dialogic" practice. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Thought especially for theater, this approach prevents the audience from losing itself completely in the narrative, instead making them a conscious critical observer. In: Brecht, B. (1935) *Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?* In: Willett, J. (Ed.) (1977) *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang. p.71

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Archey, K. and Metahaven (2018) *PSYOP: An Anthology*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. p.17

<sup>14</sup> This is how their tumblr page (<http://mthvn.tumblr.com/>) "about" section is described. On an interview for the International Film Festival Rotterdam this year (02/2018), Van der Velden refers to their practice as "Originally designers. Now we are filmmakers and artists, as well" In: Van der Velden, D., Schroder, R. and Kruk, V. (2018) *Tiger Talk #5 - Rob Schroder* [Youtube file] [online] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=39&v=1e1hurvBTh4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=39&v=1e1hurvBTh4) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>15</sup> Van der Velden, D. (2006) *Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation*. In: Blauvelt, A., and Lupton, E. (Ed.) (2012) *Graphic design: Now in production*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center. p.18

<sup>16</sup> Metahaven's first moving-image work was "Black Transparency," that they made available on vimeo. The video clip "Home", released on youtube, is among Metahaven's first forays into moving image. In: Museum label for Metahaven. (2018) *Home and Interference*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum. [Metahaven: Earth]

<sup>17</sup> Van der Velden, D. and Van Eekelen, N. (2012) *Interview with Daniel van der Velden*. In: Van Eekelen, N. (2012). *Design and social engagement: Evaluating the role of the designer* [PDF file] [online] Available at:

[http://noortje.thespectacleofthetragedy.net/articles/Van\\_Eekelen\\_2012\\_Design\\_and\\_social\\_engagement.pdf](http://noortje.thespectacleofthetragedy.net/articles/Van_Eekelen_2012_Design_and_social_engagement.pdf) [accessed July 2018]

<sup>18</sup> Archey, K. (Narrator) (2018) *Opening of 'Metahaven: Earth'*. Live performance in Netherlands, Amsterdam.

The design hacking practices by Jan van Toorn and Metahaven are unfolding alternatives to the conventionally accepted as the graphic design narrative. The studios have been two leading forces on this quest. Both uncover a range of possible ways of subverting the status-quo by hacking the surface of graphic design on different levels and shapes, some of which were shown along these pages.

As Van der Velden once said, "in order to carry things out, you have to comply with standards." Their works don't only hack the surface of what is generally accepted as standard graphic design, subverting it's commonly accepted qualities. On another dimension, they also hack the standard bureaucratic surface of the institutional systems to find sponsors for their subversive practices.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Jan van Toorn and Metahaven, being brought up in the Netherlands played a big part on the possibility to explore graphic design out of merely commercial constraints and being closely bound to such sponsors. Van Toorn had the benefit of having been brought up in a young generation of artists and designers subsidised by the Dutch grants

and therefore being able to receive subsidies for non-market oriented projects.

For Metahaven there was a similar privilege. When Kruk and Van der Velden started the studio they were engaged in research projects sponsored by the Jan van Eyck Academie, which was where they started their first collaboration.<sup>2</sup> As Van der Velden puts it:

“The Netherlands still enjoys a grants system. Internationally, things are not so rosy. Denying this fact would be the same as saying, ‘I have enough money, so poverty does not exist.’”<sup>3</sup>

Inboard the academy or working for institutions, designers might have the chance to make projects in which the outcome is not necessarily revenue. This allows them to create proposals that challenge the status-quo of graphic design and its preconceived ideas and categorizations.

But as a practice that challenges the status-quo, it has to be peripheral.

The combination of factors such as who sponsors + who has the privilege to work on the field + who gets to reach such designs + who profits from the subversive character of these designs, makes it a very elitist scene.

Often, as witnessed, the result ends up in archives, writings and exhibitions that spread mostly in the academic environment. Sometimes, it punctually goes out of these constraints, but not too far (such as on the “Interference” video clip or the “Three Stamps”). Nevertheless, the legacy keeps on generating possibilities, *bouche à oreille*, teacher to student, that carry the quest.

Due to the how the foundation of these practices defeat graphic design’s assumptions, often traversing what seems to be the limits of the discipline, they can be perceived as an art practice.

As James Goggin point’s out, graphic design’s ambiguous position as an “in between discipline” allows graphic designers to infiltrate and use systems from other disciplines when desired. He further explains how this expanded scope, “a gray area and meeting point”,

can be used as way to work in a broader field that avoids constraints and allows to speak to a wider audience.<sup>4</sup>

Terms such as “critical design” or “speculative design” have emerged. Morphologically, these help to define strategies that are useful to reveal new possibilities within design. However, these are important mainly in design theory. For the designer that does not hold the privilege to commit to a full time practise that goes under these small umbrellas, the prefixes and suffixes narrow the practice in a sort of pigeonholing. They limit rather than opening for possibilities.

As an alternative to leave the designation of the field to free the designer from constraints associated with the discipline, it is key is to challenge the assumptions behind the word. It is important now to push the design (which contains graphic design) practice and overcome the prejudice affiliated to it. This includes assuming its possibilities to explore new mediums, but preferably not at the expense of its core.

It is important to continue to find design strategies that challenge the status-quo by activating the context in which it has been produced. Design that criticizes its context by creating disruptive narratives. Design that generates a dialogue from the audience, encouraging interaction and feedback.

With the changing language of the field, the designer should assume its expanded practice.<sup>5</sup> If there is a new term to be defined, that could be Van der Velden’s suggestion in the early days, a “progressive graphic design.”<sup>6</sup> A name that reads the discipline as a broad field, allowing it to keep generating new possibilities. Design that goes beyond status-quo, that moves beyond pleasing aesthetics and conveying information. Design with a critical eye at the very center of the practice. Design with a critical eye at the very center of it’s reach.

<sup>1</sup> There are graphic design movements that use subversion based on confrontation instead of using the established systems. One example is the subvertising. Played by groups such as Public Ad Campaign, Brandalism, Special Patrol Group or Dr. D, the self entitled "subvertising community" acts over pre existing advertisement, subverting either "(...) the original adverts or the sites of outdoor advertising (or both)." In: Raoul, V. (2017) *Advertising Shits in Your Head: Strategies for Resistance*. London: Dog Section Press. p.47

<sup>2</sup> Their first collaboration was the "Sealand Identity Project", started by Daniel van der Velden at the Jan van Eyck Academie in 2003. Prior to this Van der Velden had run a graphic design studio with Maureen Mooren, whose work included the re-design of the architecture journal Archis (later called Volume) in 2001. In: (2018) *Metahaven*. [online] Available at: <http://egs.edu/faculty/metahaven> [accessed July 2018]

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<sup>4</sup> Goggin, J. (2009) *Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design's Expansive Scope by Its Quotidian Activities*. In: Blauvelt, A. and Lupton, E. (Ed.) (2012) *Graphic design: Now in production*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center. p.55

<sup>5</sup> This does not exclude the importance of holding a specialized degree as foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Velden, D. (2015) *Soft Machines* [Youtube file] [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uxQb0PsCnA> [accessed July 2018]

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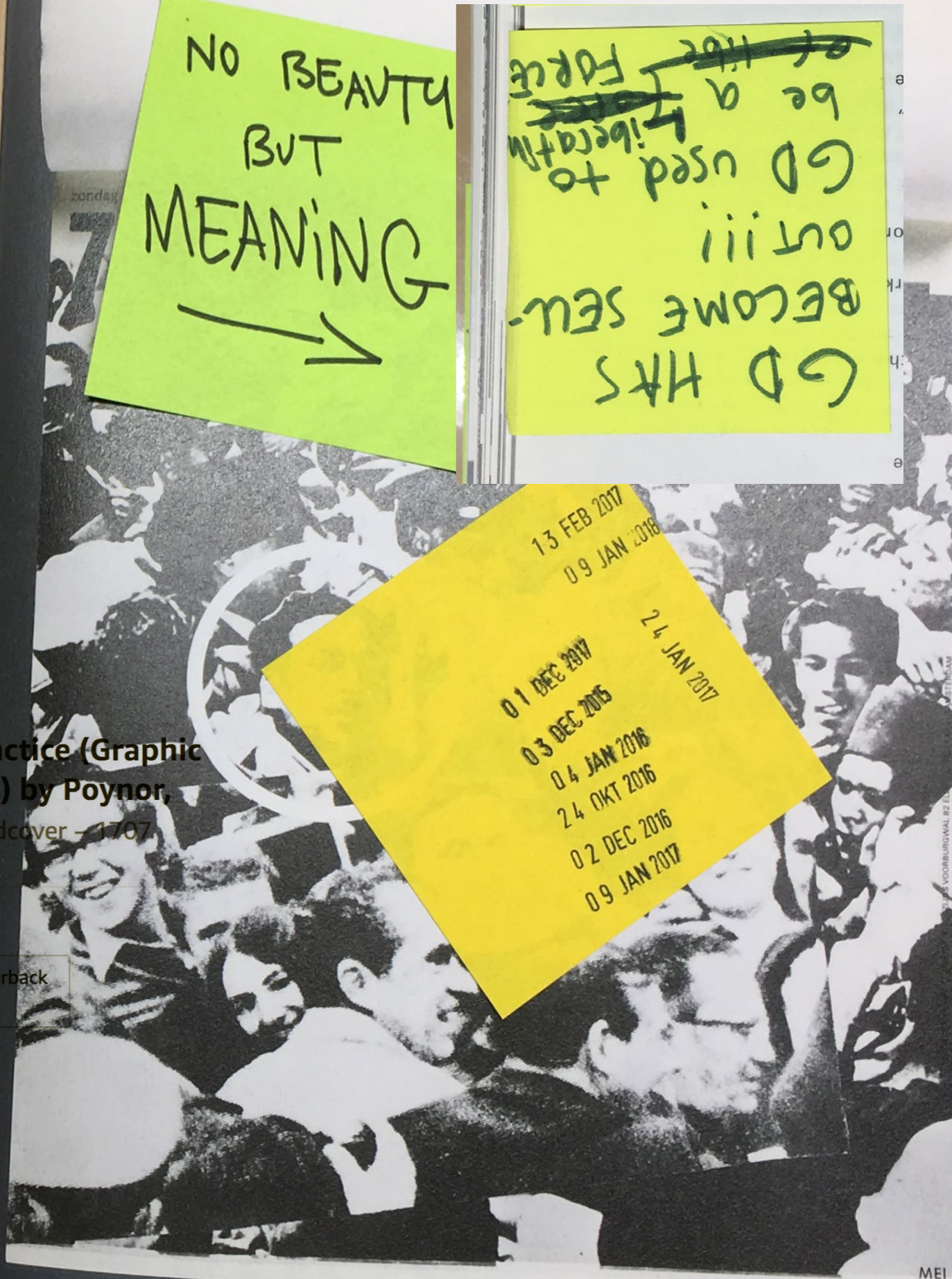
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