



periode

Opdracht typografie & druktechnieken

01-08

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03-04 *Toel. ex*

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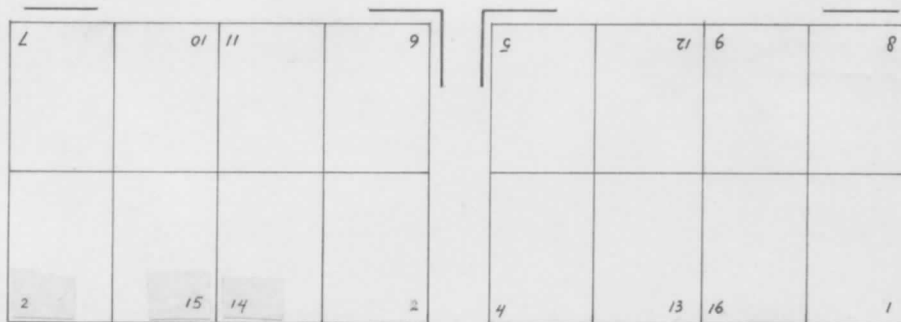
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04-01

Een portret in woord en beeld van je i d o o l
Samenstelling, ontwerp, werktekening en uitvoering.
Schrijf of citeer voor deze hommage een tekst van
minimaal 1000 aanslagen. Deze tekst behoort gecombineerd
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Voor het geval de tekst en/of illustratie(s) niet van
jezelf zijn behoort de bron vermeld te worden.
Vermeld in het katern naast de tekst 'Drukkerij HKA, 1992'
ook je naam.

Meest gebruikelijke inslagschema voor
een vorm van zestien pagina's:



EXTRA SPECIAAL

Voor iedere les in het komende trimester, een tekening
naar de natuur. Op A4 formaat. Voorzien van je naam en
datum. Techniek vrij. Te beginnen met een zelfportret.

Veel plezier 01.08.92 Karel Martens

After graduating from the school of art at Arnhem in 1961, Karel Martens was conscripted (like every Dutch male of 18-plus years) for national service. For no apparent reason he was assigned to be trained as an education petty officer, a teacher – instructing soldiers what to do in certain situations. It quickly became clear, to both KM and his superiors, that he wasn't suitable for this assignment.¹ Of course KM is now a renowned teacher of graphic design; he has been a teacher to hundreds of students over 38 years – and still going. This incidental piece of information reminds me that in design schools there exists a tentative difference between giving instructions to students and responding to their work. As a teacher myself I've often struggled, doubted and worried about the difference between these two activities.

KM – who after graduating also began his practice as a freelance graphic designer – was reassigned to the army's welfare/propaganda office in The Hague. This placement turned out to be much more suitable for him, among a collection of marginal-sounding characters spending their day doing things they weren't really interested in. During downtime in the office, with access to drawing and printing materials, KM made the dot-raster spoon prints on envelope paper that are reproduced at the beginning of *Printed Matter*.² Meanwhile KM was learning and developing valuable typographic strategies at the publishing house Van Loghum Slaterus, run by Jan and Bep van Tricht: he learnt on the job.

From his own education at art school KM's cites his formative teachers as the artists Adam Roskam and Henk Peeters. Peeters was a member of the Nul group of artists, which 'emphasised the human value of industrial and organic materials', Roskam practised more 'traditional values': painting and making woodcuts.³ These influences would provide the conceptual and ideological realities at the back of KM's future commissioned and free work. Already practical, material and conceptual interests interacted, assuming a kind of purpose in the work.

In 1977, after 16 years of freelance practice and at the invitation of Jan Vermeulen, KM began to teach part-time in the Arnhem Academy of Art. In his new position of 'printing workshop master' it is reported that KM beguiled students with his 'somewhat nervous response to decisive matters like choosing paper and format, paper colour, available type, printing colour', in combination with his 'curious and investigative mind, use of improvisation [in] getting what he considered the proper response [to an assignment]'.⁴

Naturally KM was 'incredibly nervous' to begin teaching, yet his answer to this condition couldn't be more open – rather than taking what could be considered a defensive or comfortable attitude with his already significant experience as a graphic designer. At this time it was rare to have a teacher who was also a practitioner; 'certified teacher' and 'practising teacher' were more demarcated.

KM's first assignment was the task of typesetting a month of the calendar year. Assisted by Jan Keurhorst (the workshop's technician) the result was a bound collection of contributions using various printing techniques available in the school's workshop, including a month – typeset all in Futura – by KM. Even though a

1. Conversation with Karel Martens, 26 November 2014.

2. Karel Martens: *Printed Matter / Drukwerk*, Hyphen Press, 1996.

3. Paul Elliman, 'The world as a printing surface' in *Counterprint*, Hyphen Press, 2008, p.13. See also Robin Kinross, 'Karel Martens: work in progress', in *Karel Martens: Printed Matter / Drukwerk*, pp.12–15.

4. Jaap van Triest, one of KM's first Arnhem students and a regular collaborator, in an email to me, 9 January 2015.

calendar can be considered an archetypal graphic design assignment – visually, it incorporates principles of organised time, space, productivity and continuity – it is interesting to remember that this format became subject of a formal argument between Jan van Toorn and Wim Crouwel in 1973/4 about the position and duty of the graphic designer in relation to commissioned work and society at large.

In 1984 a significant KM-assisted initiative from the graphic design department, with Hans Brand and Stephan Saaltink, was published. 'Opvattingen over typografie' ('Views on typography') was a box filled with 10 small publications by students about the work of 10 Dutch graphic designers. Each response constitutes various arrangements of a 50 x 70 cm printed sheet to represent a summary of their chosen designer's typographic work. The variety of responses to this restriction in materials shows a light touch in teaching. The 'Opvattingen' publication is perhaps formed by the thinking of the extracurricular 'studium generale' (General Studies Programme) initiated by the designer Jurriaan Schrofer – then director of the Arnhem academy – as well as the taught approaches of the design department. Schrofer's 'studium generale' was a programme based on, among other things, 'acquiring experiences' – presenting a productive and interesting headway into the history and theory of arts in the Netherlands at the time, as well as a practical model for design research.⁵ On a more personal note, KM himself recounts that this period marked a palpable split in the teaching of graphic design in schools, creating a greater distinction between high to lower forms. It is this shift that clearly leads to how we experience design education in art academies today.

Looking through a box in KM's studio, mostly comprised of typewritten assignments dated between 1979 and 1993, from his time at the Arnhem academy, I see a set of practical and archetypal graphic design assignments (calendars, record covers, stationery sets, various typesetting exercises, book design) that rarely exceed half a sheet of A4 in length. Sometimes signed off with the encouragement 'enjoy' or the provocation 'make something exceptional!', the assignments never use theoretical references; they are all variations on exercises with printed formats, text and image, and layout. Liberties can be taken with the content, but if the student does not desire this freedom then content is given. The assignments dates are usually playfully typed somewhere in the margins. In this collection is also a precise hand-drawn diagram of the dimensions, folding pattern and printable surface of a 50 x 70 cm offset printed sheet, a significant demonstration of the 'DNA' of KM's approach to practical/material matters.⁶

As an addition to an assignment of 1992 there is a curious ('extra speciaal') request for a drawing gleaned from 'nature' to be brought each week to class, the first being a self-portrait.⁷ A few of these portraits are also part of the box's contents. Simultaneously weird and heart-warming, these raw portraits of past students (some of whom have gone on to be well-known designers) are somewhat confronting. Time, expectation, attempt and practice are joined in them. The last time I had this feeling was looking in awe at mummified bodies in Cairo's national history museum. That they are kept here in this box is touching and illustrates to me how much KM cares about his students.

5. Frederike Huygen, Jurriaan Schrofer, Valiz, 2013, p.303.

6. I am grateful to Stuart Bailey for this term, which I paraphrase from his observation regarding an early work by the British graphic designer Richard Hollis.

7. See page 6 of this publication.

In 1994 KM left Arnhem for Maastricht to take a position in the design department at the Jan Van Eyck Academie, which at the time was under the determined direction of Jan van Toorn. KM would be connected to the department for a period of 3 years, where he would be introduced to many visiting lecturers and participants, often coming from overseas. The JVE was also the place where KM learned to use a computer, sometimes getting lessons from the participants themselves. KM's approach to the computer has led to many digital-based works that use computer software in ways for which it was not originally intended: circumventing the many decisive operations built into them.

1997 proved a significant year in KM's teaching story. He began as visiting teacher at Yale University School of Art in New Haven; his class is the first one that new students take, at the start of their first term. The Werkplaats Typografie also opened in that year. This was a return to a more applied kind of teaching, through the designing of commissioned artefacts – real assignments. As a consequence the WT was open all year-round. Further, KM and his co-founder and co-director, Wigger Bierma, established their studios at the WT – an arrangement that before long proved unworkable. One of the first assignments that KM brought to the WT was his own, the architecture journal Oase; from then on he would design each issue either with a student of the WT or his daughter Aagje.

KM and Wigger Bierma, a former student of his, founded the WT in connection with the Arnhem Academy of Art, which had been looking for a postgraduate, specialist study to add to its programme. The first years of the WT were informal also in terms of admission. In 1996 Stuart Bailey, the WT's inaugural student, had requested an apprenticeship with KM; this not being possible at the time he invited Bailey to come to the WT the following year. Christine Alberts, a graduate of the jewellery department at the Rietveld Academy was the school's second student – invited by Bierma after she had become intrigued by KM's design of Oase. Thirdly, Patrick Coppens, a graduate artist living in Arnhem, was looking for a place where he could work with others (it didn't really matter if it was design or not, or even if it was a school or not) and heard about the WT from Batia Suter – an artist who had an interest in making books and who would join the following year. Apart from Bailey, it was a rather atypical bunch of initial students for a school for (typo) graphic design. This unorthodox approach to intake echoes through the list of WT alumni, and characterises a type of student that applies to the school.

Considering this lack of a formal application procedure, I have to think again about KM as a teacher and am reminded of a slight observation by Patrick Coppens during a conversation – that KM might teach with the idea of turning 'designers into artists' [not that his goal is to turn 'someone' into 'something']. This observation had its antithesis in the personality and approach of Bierma, a teacher (perhaps in a true sense) who was more interested in turning 'artists into designers'.⁸ Coppens went on to suggest that KM was more an inspirational teacher, teaching by example: a teacher who asks for – and is interested in – your opinion. By sharing in the thinking and decision-making processes in which KM himself is embroiled nothing is hidden.

8. Conversation with Patrick Coppens, 8 January 2015.

Perhaps transmission of process and idea is more effective in this way? In an applied discipline like design, it certainly makes sense.

In Bierma's more classical approach to typographic design, in contrast to KM's more free – modernist – approach, I imagine a stimulating environment for learning. This shows itself in the radicalism of the earliest work produced in the fledgling school. The tensions of such a contrast, while on many levels productive, eventually led to a reorganisation of the WT programme in 2002, with the Amsterdam-based graphic designer Armand Mevis being appointed as the new director of the school, while KM continued his duties as a teacher.

7. One of the problems is that an artist must always extend, over-extend, him or herself, recovering what is not visible, doing it the hard way, working in the dark; groping, fumbling about. Colleges tend to be places of artificial light, and teaching, however cannily progressive, tends to be within the grasp of the teacher, not outside it ...
8. There are also people whose gift it is to teach creatively with a deep understanding of the task ...⁹

As well as reminding me of the fragile condition of studying, this extract from a letter by Norman Potter to Paddy Kitchen offers a case study of how a student might be faced with KM as a teacher. If teaching creatively is a 'gift' then it also goes that not everyone can be a good teacher and that good teaching, perhaps, is a trait that comes naturally. While I observe, and certainly experience, my own work as within KM's reach, I can also acknowledge the freedoms implied through his approach. Perhaps he would rather you be an artist than a designer, a fireman than a designer, a 'whatever' than a designer, and this is an exciting and confronting position from which to approach working as one. KM is a teacher who can see you 'fumbling, groping about' and offer support, in the forms of (sometimes stern) advice, asking a simple question, taking over a working document, or demonstrating something on paper. While never alleviating immediate struggle and embarrassment – his approach can make clearer certain aspects of a work which can easily become hidden in the murk of applied learning.

During the writing of this text I've emailed with and spoken to a selection of KM's former students about how he has affected them as a teacher. The many responses I have received form a strong undercurrent to this collection of words and have influenced the text. The overall sense of these statements is somehow abstract, hard to grasp, but generally 'glowing'. It is clear, though, that KM has been a formative teacher for many students. Many follow in his footsteps, towards independent practice and/or free work, not necessarily in the discipline of design. This is a particular gauge of his influence and a reason why a student might be attracted to a teacher like KM in the first place.

'The duties (of a designer) remain the same, but the answer is always different.'¹⁰

This formulation reminds me that KM teaches by example. In the 2 mm grid of OASE, while strict (and at first intimidating), a designer can discover a sense of freedom hidden in its complexity.

9. Norman Potter, 'On academies and workshops', in his *Models & Constructs*, Hyphen Press, 1990, p.58.

10. Conversation with Karel Martens, 26 November 2014.

There are his clear preferences for things, small details and forms. Or, through his infectious curiosity, his evaluation of the cultural and natural world and its systems – in which we are all somehow embroiled. Even ‘talking to yourself is part of a design process’ is a typical KM provocation.¹¹ To learn from KM is to embrace a free way of thinking. Through observation, reflection and practice a student can discover the incentive to take responsibility, look for their own methods and solutions, and orientate themselves towards society: producing work that highlights contingency yet can be communicative within those terms.

Remembering KM’s graphic memory, as a student himself, of the optical effect produced by passing a grid of beanpoles in a moving train between Arnhem and Nijmegen,¹² or his fascination with printing colours, their combination and overlapping: these things offer a lesson in the possibilities of perpetually working on something over a long period of time – whether it is needed, or not – to arrive at deep and inviting work through deceptively simple, personal, observation. Here, details form paradigms (not rules) that can ultimately prove useful in taking a position towards things, whether conceptual or material. In an applied discipline like design KM’s approach offers a useful strategy to a student: to begin working with things that are tangible, small, weird – even seemingly insignificant – can be more effective than relying on generalised approaches. A method where the active approach is about opening up and not narrowing down.

In the early stages of preparing for this text KM left the WT. In leaving he lamented that this new reality of not teaching regularly felt like a form of amputation.¹³ This rather grisly simile alerted me to the importance of the student to KM – to his practice and more. That we, as students, might comprise a kind of ‘body part’ of KM gives me a broader feeling of connection – and strangely enough – of independence, together. Which leads me to think that teaching and being taught is more of an exchange than we might otherwise be led to believe. Perhaps this is something that can only be shared, not taught.

11. Henk-Jan Panneman
in an email to me,
15 January 2015.

12. Described by Paul
Elliman in ‘The world as
a printing surface’,
Counterprint, p.14.

13. Conversation
with Karel Martens,
17 November 2014.