

After Nijhof & Lee

The Designer as
Author
Producer
Activist
Entrepreneur
Curator
Collaborator
Editor
Architect
Archivist

Epsom in Surrey, an affluent commuter town nestled between the outskirts of Zone 6 and the M25, has not had a dedicated bookshop since Waterstone's closed its doors in 2012. It is therefore not without irony that the remaining collection of Nijhof & Lee, the specialist and much-celebrated Graphic Design Bookshop in Amsterdam¹, was transported to University for the Creative Arts in Epsom last winter through the night by a courier company from Hungary on their weekly run to the UK.

A month earlier, acting on word of mouth and more than a bit of serendipity, I had travelled to Amsterdam to pack up the collection. Since the shop's closure, many of the books had resided in a small but immaculate workshop adjacent to the Nieuwmarkt. Email dialogues containing images and fragmented lists could not quite prepare for what was to come, for the sheer quantity — or astounding quality — of design books organised meticulously on metal racking. Rare type specimens, issues of out of date magazines and publications sat alongside work from Crouwel, Sandberg, Schrofer, van Toorn. The collection took three of us two days to pack. Every few items something would spark an anecdote from the hospitable and benevolent Warren Lee; the content of the book, where it was purchased from, or whom it had belonged to. Crossovers between the different items were apparent, for example, the full set of the Japanese magazine from the 1960s and 1970s appropriately entitled *Graphic Design* was gifted to the couple by Pieter Brattinga, the Dutch Graphic Designer and editor of *Kwadraat-Bladen*.² Sheets of his letterhead, on a blue quadrille paper, are still interspersed between many of the issues. Regrettably, by the second day, surprises were becoming commonplace and I am not sure that much more than an eyebrow was raised as a signed Marc Chagall book found its way into the box.

Unpacking throughout the Christmas holiday, books were repositioned onto shelves in approximately the same order as they had been packed. There is an ordered disorder to the collection, with Warren insistent that the books are uncatalogued — yet many instinctive groupings emerged, with logical anomalies such as Sandberg's *nu 2* residing not with the other Sandberg catalogues but with the other issues of *Kwaadraat Bladen* that it was originally designed for. Here the significance of the overall publication was deemed more important than the individual designer, a political positioning in itself and one which is in step with Sandberg's design ethos. Stedelijk catalogues were organised alphabetically by exhibition, with handwritten

¹ The shop occupied a corner of the Staalstraat from 1988—2011, owned and run by Frank Nijhof and Warren Lee. It lives on as part of the *Bijzondere Collecties* (Special Collections) at the University of Amsterdam.

² *Kwadraat-Bladen* (1955—1974) was a Dutch Journal edited by Pieter Brattinga, each edition an experimentation of print and production methods by a different designer.

dividers and separate shelves for Crouwel (top) and Sandberg (bottom). It is here that it is easy to question whether this is the pointless elevation of pieces of paper, or the preservation of something larger than the sum of its parts. Notes and inscriptions become informative, even voyeuristic.

Several interlocking cardboard boxes (that could have only be designed with the finesse and adeptness of the Dutch, rendering the endless rolls of parcel tape that I had packed useless) remain stacked on top of the racking, labelled 'WARREN LEE PERSONAL COLLECTION' in his steady and precise uppercase hand. These contain invites, letters written to the shop after an enlightening visit, Christmas cards, and perhaps most significantly, edition-upon-edition of self-published pieces of work from hopeful (and often student) designers submitted in the hope of selling their work. The varying quality of these is an aside, as collectively they capture a moment in graphic design production from the late 1980s onwards when student designers had the tools readily available to reproduce at little cost.

As disciplinary boundaries move and shift, the scope of archives has expanded rapidly over the preceding couple of decades (with Derrida to thank for noting that 'nothing is less clear today than the word archive').³ However, the notion of the archive is on one hand seemingly at odds with the pervasive mode of contemporary graphic design practice; to share, to contribute, to interact, to hack, to collaborate, and to critique. If the term 'implies a collection of documents; often any collection',⁴ then this is clearly such. However, what I believe to be the most significant and comprehensive collection Dutch Graphic Design in the UK, is currently housed within a working Graphic Design Department with students and staff dipping in and out to make use of the content. Georges Perec, the Oulipian writer (whose day job was appropriately as an archivist in the Neurophysiological Research Laboratory in Paris), states the advantages of this with more grace than I can when he discusses how systems of absolute order do not admit space for the unexpected, as 'all utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the miscellaneous. Everything has been set in order and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place.'⁵ Despite the finite nature of the collection, it could be argued that it need not remain static. Once catalogued, archives risk becoming redundant, the reader or researcher is no longer able to draw new relationships between the material⁶. I would hope for our students to enter the room where the collection is housed and be able to browse- an activity fast becoming obsolete in a culture where to research online you are but a record of your past searches, with increasingly tailored responses served up in riposte. And with all of the back issues of *Emigre* to get through, who needs a Waterstones?

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³ Derrida, J. and Prenowitz, E. (1998) *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

⁴ Iredale, D. (1973) *Enjoying Archives: What They Are, Where to Find Them, How to Use Them*. United Kingdom: David & Charles

⁵ Perec, G. (2008) *Think/Classify in Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Edited by John Sturrock. London: Penguin Group (USA).

⁶ Bailey, S. and Miessen, M. (2013) *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*. Scottsdale, AZ, United States: Sternberg Press.