

I want to be a Dutch graphic designer.

The work of contemporary Dutch designers, featured in books like *HD: Holland Design New Graphics* and *The New Handmade Graphics*, is appealing partially because it is not overly polished. The design ideas at work are generally accessible, not buried under so much style as to seem arbitrary, or so locked in to function that they become inscrutable. The best of contemporary work from the Netherlands presents graphic design as an open and ongoing creative and intellectual pursuit, not merely a means of emphatically solving visual problems. Ideally I'd like to be able to produce this kind of work in America and have other people see it, but this work flows out of an economic and social context so different from my own that it is hard to imagine getting there from here.

Many reasons are given for the inventiveness of Dutch graphic design. One is the long tradition of visual art and specifically the printing arts in Holland. In his article *Official Anarchy* Max Bruinsma argues that a strong typographic tradition combined with extended economic prosperity has created a class of wealthy clients who consider original graphic design to be a critical part of their success. Graphic designers in the Netherlands also enjoy a level of financial support from their government and their society that frees them up to be more adventurous in their work.

A great deal of Dutch design work is funded by the Dutch government directly through *projectsubsidie* grants or through government grants administered by institutions such as the Mondriaan Foundation. Publications are often funded by the government as well through grants called *publicatiesubsidie*. Dutch designers can apply for general support grants called *werkbeurs* or travel grants called *reisbeurs*. The government even gives grants known as *startstipendium* to help young designers start their own studios. One of these grants helped Armand Mevis and Linda van Deursen open their own studio straight out of school, where they initiated and continue to inspire much of the "meta-modernist" design described above.

Agencies of the Dutch government also commission a great deal of innovative graphic design. The Dutch Royal Telecom (KPN), for example has long been one of the most respect-

ed graphic design clients in the world. Book designer Irma Boom worked for the government printing office, where she produced challenging publications on the government's behalf. Civic projects such as stamps and currency have consistently been entrusted to young and/or unconventional graphic designers as well.

All of this stands in stark contrast to the context of American graphic design which is situated almost entirely in the private sector. The identity of the graphic designer in America is so tied to commercial work and advertising that public institutions are wary of supporting it, particularly with such limited resources allocated for arts funding in general. Not since the days of the Works Projects Administration has the American government promoted good design in any substantial way. As a result, innovative designers have had to make more precipitous compromises with the commercial world. Ed Fella, for example, spent most of his career making car advertisements in Detroit before he had the luxury of focusing his own work.

The social and institutional support in Holland extends to design education as well. The website for the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam reads, 'The tuition fees for the academic year 2003-2004 have been legally fixed at € 1,445 [\$1626].' LEGALLY FIXED! A year of undergraduate design training at a comparable school in America averages around \$17,000 a year, and graduate tuition is \$20,000. This is even more alarming when you consider that academia has been the only institution in American society that has consistently supported innovation in graphic design.

Now, I am no economist. Alan Greenspan could probably explain how all this has stifled the Dutch economy, discouraged foreign investment and so on. But there is no denying that the paradigm is good for graphic design. So what can we do here in the U.S.A. to be more Dutch? We can advocate for economic and social reform and actively participate in movements for social change. But reforming American culture and society could take a while. In the meantime, it may be more rewarding to reform our way of reading graphic design work - when we examine graphic design as a process which inscribes economic and social context, it becomes not only an open creative process but an open conversation with the world beyond design.