On Print and Provo, the City and Movement

Experimental Jetset



Interview and introduction by
Clair Gunther and Max Moorhead

Two years before Paris was shaken by the events of '68, an overlooked movement reached its zenith in Amsterdam. Although it would only last from 1965-1967, Provo, a loose collective of anarchists and artists, would permanently alter the political makeup of the Netherlands.

Provo set its sights on the outmoded authoritarian structures governing the city. In the movement's infancy, its founders believed any action against structural authority was necessary, even if failure was inevitable. The movement would become successful in not only capturing the public imagination, but fusing many urban disaffected groups — unorganized and non-unionized construction workers, the antiwar movement, environmental activists, and artists of all kinds. Over a short span of time, the Provos radically altered the political and social mores of the Netherlands, laying the groundwork for Amsterdam's decriminalization of sex work and drug possession, and halting plans to prioritize automobiles — forever making Amsterdam a haven for bicyclists, leftists, and free spirited travellers.

The Provos were heavily inspired by Johan Huizinga's concept of the "playful human", from his work *Homo Ludens* (1938). They incorporated games, and many of the Provo's tactics took on a playful and festive attitude. Movements around the world took note of the Provos' success, and the influence '60s Amsterdam had on American culture is still understated. While many Americans today credit liberal policies for the Netherlands' ease of life, drug decriminalization, and prioritization of bicycles, we wanted to look back at this moment of collective imagination to acknowledge Provo — an anarchist movement — as the true root of Amsterdam's reputation as a free thinking city.

We spoke with Experimental Jetset, a Dutch collective of artists, widely known for their graphic design. They've organized numerous exhibitions of Provo material, conducted interviews about Provo, and incorporated Provo's motifs in their work. In their book *Superstructures* (Roma Publications, 2021), Experimental Jetset looks at four movements within cities: Constructivism, the Situationist International, Provo, and the Post-Punk explosion. As Woodbine is an experiment in communal life and autonomy within the city, we wanted to discuss the role of the city at large. We spoke to them about some of the contradictions of working as designers in today's market, and reflected on how and why Provo was able to mount an effective movement in the center of a major city.

The era in which you formed was within the so-called "End of History," when Capitalism seemingly had no end, as well as the early days of the internet and globalism. How did these changes affect your artistic vision?

It's funny, within graphic design circles, the idea of 'The End of History' manifested itself mainly as 'The End of Print'. After all, both books – Fukuyama's 'The End of History', and Carson's 'The End of Print' – were published around the same time.

And, indeed, when we entered the graphic design department of the Rietveld Academie, back in 1992, printed matter was officially declared dead. Everybody knew that graphic design would soon be over. The first contours of the internet and other digital/online media were visible, and rendered the whole house of graphic design obsolete.

So somehow we just took over this abandoned house called 'graphic design', and we could basically do with it whatever we wanted. It really felt as if we were squatting an obsolete discipline. It was an empty space, ready to be filled with absolutely anything. We don't remember if we ever had lessons in 'lay-out' or 'typography' during that period at the Rietveld – at that time, the main focus was video and photography. We were U-Matic warriors.

Students were filling the corridors with installations, organizing shows and hosting vegetarian restaurants in nearby squats, like Vrieshuis Amerika, and were VJ-ing in local clubs like the Roxy – it was all considered part of our practice, all part of 'graphic design', as we understood it.

The idea of taking this discipline, 'graphic design', and filling it until it bursts, very much comes from this squatting mentality. Graphic design was a disbanded, neglected discipline – we somehow felt the obligation to occupy it, to make it our own, to redefine it, to 'hack' it, so to speak.

This trans-disciplinary (or better said, non-disciplinary, or even anti-disciplinary) space had a tremendous impact on us. But paradoxically, within this "post-print" atmosphere, we felt the need to take a look at printed matter again – to refocus on the materiality of the printed object itself. Intuitively, we felt that the only way forward was to take a look at printed matter again. We believed this new-found materialism was inherently political, but always struggled with the right words to describe its political dimension.

It was much later, in 2007 (10 years after we graduated), when we came across an essay which formulated crystal-clear what we wanted to say all along. That essay was Régis Debray's 'Socialism and Print' and in it, Debray shows how the two 'endings' (the end of history, and the end of print) are ultimately connected. In that sense, it's actually quite a pessimistic essay – for Debray, socialism as a project is a by-product of the printing press, and as such, part of a graphic phase, which Debray dubs 'the graphosphere'. For Debray, the 'graphospehere,' and with it, socialism, ended with the fall of the Berlin wall, making space for the 'videosphere' (Debray's way of describing post-modernism, basically) . In other words, the end of print and the end of socialism are the same thing – for Debray, that is.

When we stumbled upon Debray's essay we immediately understood that we could also read it in a more

optimistic way (we're always quite interested in the notion of 'reading against the grain' – going against the author's original intentions). So we figured, if the end of print automatically means the end of socialism, wouldn't that also mean that a revival of print could potentially lead to a revival of socialism? If the logic works one way, why couldn't it also work the other way around?

It's perhaps an overly naive and optimistic way of reasoning. Then again, in his essay, Debray himself stated that "the greatest modernizers inaugurate their career with a backward leap, and a renaissance proceeds through a return to the past, a recycling, and hence a revolution. [...] Behind the 're' of reformation, republic or revolution, there is a hand flicking through the pages of a book, from the end back to the beginning".

So there might be hope after all.You should also keep in mind that we spent our childhood years in the late-modernist, socialist-democratic landscape of The Netherlands in the 1970s, so we grew up in a time when existing socialism still seemed within reach, only a few blocks away. This whole utopia was shattered by the end of the 80s, when The Netherlands started to move away from its Scandinavia-style welfare state model, and shifted more towards the Anglo-American neo-liberal sphere. So we experienced the gradual privatization and liberalization of The Netherlands first-hand, and we are still trying to make sense of this slow-motion car crash.

We feel that the way in which we refer, in our practice as Experimental Jetset, to the graphic language of our childhood years – the structuralism of designers such as Wim Crouwel in the 1970s, etc. – is our own way to deal with that experience. In that sense, our practice is a very autobiographical project.

It's also an almost occult, esoteric gesture – by still referring to the graphic language of social-democracy, we try to somehow conjure up these ghosts from the past, and hope they become the spectres of the future again. If nothing else, it's our personal way to keep a certain memory alive.

You say in *Superstructures* (Roma Publications, 2021) that the city can function as a metaphorical printing press, and that magazines were distributed in the streets as part of Provo. How do you see printed matter in an era of online dissemination of ideas? How can printed matter still be used among radical groups?

In our view, print is still the most public medium. If a poster is hanging in the street, it is seen by every passerby in more or less the same way. Sure, the interpretation of the poster will differ from person to person – but by and large, the poster itself will appear in roughly the same way to every viewer, regardless of their class, race, gender, age, personal preferences, etc.

This is different on the internet, where websites and pages conform themselves instantly to cater to the personal tastes and preferences of the individual viewer. Google search results change from person to person, the advertisements that clutter online profiles are specifically targeted toward the viewer, etc.. This makes the online environment ultimately an individualistic, isolated experience, despite the promise of "being connected."

It also makes most online activity a somewhat undialectical affair, as you only will be confronted with stimuli that are algorithmically curated for you, based on what large corporations (such as Facebook and Google) expect you to want to see.

Look for example at the way algorithmic companies such as Cambridge Analytica have helped both Brexit and the rise of Trump, and it seems clear that these kinds of online infrastructures are ultimately creating isolated 'bubbles' – feeding identity politics, conspiracy theories, and echo chamber ideologies. One-dimensional places, where you only hear what you want to hear.

Whereas, within the context of the street, you will be confronted with information that is not specifically intended for you – posters you might not immediately understand, slogans you might disagree with (or not), kiosks carrying newspapers that are not necessarily tailored toward your specific lifestyle, book stalls displaying books expressing conflicting opinions. A place where, to speak with Benjamin, "even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word), puts on a face, and this face resembles that of the sentence standing next to it. In this way, every truth points manifestly to its opposite. Truth becomes something living; it lives solely in the rhythm by which statement and counter-statement displace each other, in order to think each other".

In our view, it is this notion of print culture within the urban environment that offers the most dialectical, and therefore most left-wing experience.

And that's what we ultimately find so interesting about the Provo movement – they really understood the way in which the city could be used as an infrastructure for (graphic) language. Through slogans, signs, smoke signals, posters, pamphlets, happenings, magazines, graffiti, etc., they really managed to turn the streets and canals of Amsterdam into a communication network.

One reason we've been drawn to your work is your focus on texts and printed matter within radical movements. How do you see the relationship between theory and practice embodied by the poster, pamphlet, etc?

Well, you could say that graphic design (as a discipline) is in itself a perfect example of 'praxis' – it's a field that basically exists in the overlap between theory and practice, always trying to break down the barriers between intellectual labour and manual labour, between art and the everyday, between object and subject.

And let's not forget – theory is always encountered through a graphic interface. Whether it is through books, magazines, pamphlets or manifestos – ideas have to be materialized as things, as tangible objects, in order to exist, to be spread, and to be saved. (Even lectures rely on graphic devices – scripts, transcripts, notes, slides, etc.). And ideas are always shaped by these graphic formats, in the same way that graphic formats are shaped by these ideas. The format of the manifesto demands a different rhetoric (and thus a different way of thinking) than a column does, or an essay, or a footnote.

A concrete example of the way in which the graphic format of the manifesto shapes its content can be found in Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto*, from 1918, which is basically the proto-modernist template for manifestos:

> *"To put out a manifesto you must want ABC, to fulminate against 1-2-3. To fly into a rage, to conquer and disseminate little ABCs and big ABCs, to sign, shout, swear. To organise prose into a form of absolute and irrefutable evidence, to prove your non-plus-ultra, etc."*

It perfectly illustrates the fact that the format and the rhetoric cannot be separated from each other – the medium is always part of the message.

So it's logical that radical movements (whether avant-garde collectives, modernist tendencies, counter-cultural groups, etc.) have a vested interest in their graphic output. Most of these movements indeed have utopian ideals that revolve around the synthesis of art and the everyday, and the union of theory and practice. So the first test of these ideals is indeed their own graphic interface. The manifesto is the hand-held proof of a utopia to come.



Robert Jasper Grootveld's repeated arrests for vandalizing tobacco advertisements with a "K" for Kanker (Cancer) was an initial flashpoint, one of the sparks of what would eventually explode into spontaneous, city-wide riots in '66. During the height of conflict, protestors targeted the Telegraaf, a conservative, law-and-order newspaper, burning their stock of paper and destroying their offices and delivery trucks. Both these events could be seen as actions against graphic design. In your work we see a lot of reverence for design movements of the past. Do you ever feel the opposite, a need to wreck and vandalize existing design? How do you balance that impulse with your appreciation for the medium?

To be honest, we don't know if we would refer to RJG's actions as 'anti-design'. In a way, the act of scribbling those K's on a poster seems like a very basic act of graphic art – a typographic intervention in the public space. After all, if putting letters on a piece of paper isn't graphic design, then what is?

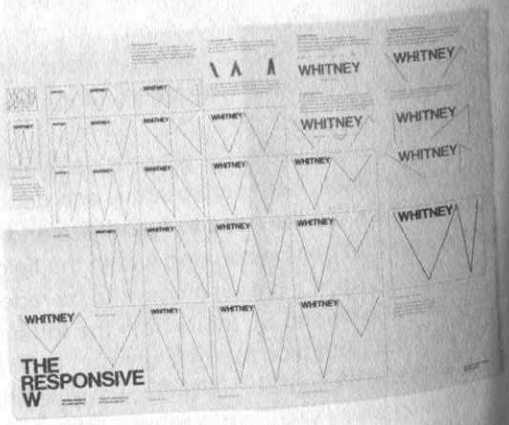
We believe that even the riots surrounding the Telegraaf ultimately have a graphic dimension. At a certain point, the protesters confiscated large rolls of empty printing paper from the newspaper offices, and rolled them out in the streets of Amsterdam. Looking at pictures from that event , you see people walking on top of these long strips of paper, basically imprinting the paper with their footprints. A very graphic happening, not only turning the city into a giant printing press, but also redefining walking as a form of printing.

We feel that the whole idea of graphic design already carries, within itself, both constructive and deconstructive possibilities. So the need to "vandalize and wreck" is something that can be situated within the field of graphic design itself – it doesn't have to be redefined as an external element. So for us both the tobacco poster, and the graffiti on top of it, are part of the same graphic sphere. It's a dialogue between opposites, but it's still taking place within the material infrastructure that we refer to as graphic design.

In fact, we always felt it should be possible to read the word 'design' as 'de-sign' (as in: un-sign, or non-sign). After all, we shouldn't forget that the word 'design' shares, with words such as 'décollage', 'deconstruction' and 'destruction', the prefix 'de-'. A prefix that is mainly used to indicate processes of reversal and negation. In that sense, we believe that the word 'design' (when read as 'de-sign') already carries, within its spelling, the possibility of the reversal, or negation, of the sign.

So we feel this "need to wreck and vandalize", or at least, to deconstruct and destruct, is already apparent in our work, in a somewhat sublimated, cryptic way perhaps, but it's still there.

Take for example the graphic language we developed in 2012 for the Whitney Museum, where the W-shaped line, 'the Responsive W', literally becomes a crack on the surface of the poster. Brecht once said that art shouldn't be a mirror, but a hammer, and in the case of the graphic language of the Whitney, we took the hammer to the mirror. Or at least, we tried.



Graphic design tends to reduce ideas to their most punchy, memorable form. This helps concepts spread quickly, like a political slogan, but can fall short when tackling complex issues. How can design point towards deeper understanding?

This is a good question indeed. And we agree, a political slogan is in itself not so different from an advertising slogan. And if propaganda is just advertising, can it be called revolutionary at all? It sort of explains the love/hate relationship we have with the idea of propaganda.

That's why we are mainly interested in the sort of propaganda that also questions its own role as such. Propaganda that somehow negates its own authority. Propaganda that doesn't just offer some sort of image or illusion, but also shows the reader/viewer just how this image is constructed, offering a way out of the illusion. We are always searching for this 'Brechtian' dimension, not only in our own work, but also in the work of others. We somehow feel that a piece of graphic design should clearly show its own material construction – enabling the reader/viewer to deconstruct it, to reconstruct it, to question it, to recognize it as a subjective voice, and not as some sort of god-given truth.

Three years ago, we wrote a short piece for a Spanish activist design group, Un Mundo Feliz, as a contribution to their monograph (published by Hoaki Books, 2021). They specifically asked us to reflect on the notion of the 'revolutionary sign' – you might find it interesting to read the mini-essay we pieced together:

In his manifesto 'Anti-Tendenz Kunst' ('Against Engaged Art', 1923), Theo van Doesburg states that "there is no fundamental difference between a portrait

of Napoleon, and a portrait of Trotsky" – no matter how revolutionary the subject, it is the notion of portraiture itself that will render the painting bourgeois. In his essay 'The Aesthetic Dimension' (1977), Herbert Marcuse suggests something similar – it is not the message that makes a work of art revolutionary, but the way in which that message is delivered. And we agree.

To revolve is to turn – and thus, a revolutionary sign should always turn towards (and into) itself, reflecting on its own function as a sign, revealing its own materiality, deconstructing its own message. Critical propaganda should first and foremost be critical of itself, sabotaging its own strategies, denouncing its own authority. And the word 'activist' in 'activist art' should not refer to the activism of the artist, but to the ability of art to activate the viewer – encouraging the viewer not to consume a message in a passive way, but instead to engage with the piece of art in an active way. The goal shouldn't be to change opinions, but to radically change ways of seeing and thinking.

A revolutionary sign should be able to push and pull at the same time – it should deliver a message, while at



the same time destabilizing the way of delivery. It should be both a sign and an anti-sign. The sign should be designed, and de-signed.



Going back to the subject of Provo – our favorite piece of propaganda is still the mimeographed poster ("March 10: Day of Anarchy") that the Provo-affiliated cartoonist Bernard Willem Holtrop designed in 1966 to announce the protests against the royal wedding procession of Princess Beatrix and Claus von Amsberg. Although the message itself seems pretty straight-forward, we always admired the self-referential, almost Brechtian, gesture of flipping the letter A.

Sure, the mirrored letter A obviously (and perfectly) symbolizes the notion of anarchy – but it's not hard to see in the mirrored A also a reflection of the notion of printing itself. After all, most techniques of printing (whether it's mimeograph, letterpress, offprint, or screenprint) involve processes in which images are either mirrored, turned upside-down or made negative. In that sense, this poster also represents the contrarian nature of printing itself.

The Provos were successful at shifting the collective imagination. Graphic design, at least in New York, is mostly an advertising tool, serving the consumerist status quo. Can graphic design be separated from the logic of advertising, and expand the collective imagination rather than confining it?

Well, it's hard to separate anything from the logic of capitalism – and the printing press (and with it, graphic design) is no exception. After all, one might argue that the book is indeed the first mass-produced commodity, and that the Gutenberg press paved the way for the model of the factory.

At the same time, as Debray wrote, it was also the printing press that created and organized the original critique against capitalism. The first manifestations of socialism came from the graphic sphere – that early milieu of printers, typographers, librarians, publicists. In fact, the word 'socialism' itself was invented by a typographer. In the words of Debray, "socialism was born with a printers' docket around its neck".

So the printing press can be seen both as an emblem of capitalism, and a critique against capitalism. This situates the printer (and its modern heir, the graphic designer) in the midst of the capitalist paradox – working within the capitalist system, while also dreaming of a way out of it. Living both within the spectacle and against it.

In that sense, it's safe to describe graphic designers as the true "children of Marx and Coca-Cola" (to quote Godard). It's a paradoxical discipline, full of contradictions and ambiguities. But we still believe, naively, perhaps, that capitalism can only be attacked from its own paradoxes, and not necessarily from *without*. You could even argue that graphic design is essentially

a 'hypocritical' discipline – but if that's true, then at least let us embrace the notion of hypocrisy as a strength, and not as a weakness. As CrimeThink wrote (in their excellent 'Days of War, Nights of Love', from 2000):

> *"Let us not claim to be innocent, let us not claim to be pure or right. But let us proclaim proudly that we are hypocrites, that we will stop at nothing, not even hypocrisy, in our struggle to take control of our lives. In this age when it is impossible to avoid being a part of the system we strive against, only blatant hypocrisy is truly subversive".*

As much as we hate the advertising industry (and indeed, we have always refused to work for advertising agencies), we do think that ultimately, graphic design can be both. It can work from within the deepest bowels of capitalism, while still expanding the collective imagination. For better or worse, graphic design will always exist in a perpetual state of "all of the above".

And when we say this, we are also talking about ourselves, and our own practice. Although there are commissions we immediately reject as a studio (for example, as long-time vegans, we would never ever work for the meat industry), we would also never describe ourselves as an 'ethical' graphic design studio. We are too aware that we are operating from within capitalism (from the belly of the beast, so to speak), and we are perfectly honest about that. We aren't squeaky-clean, we are no puritans, and our hands certainly aren't spotless. We make mistakes, we are weak, we are human, and sometimes we simply need the money.

But again, we do feel that capitalism as a system can only be attacked from the inside. After all, Marx and Engels loathed the escapism of the British utopian communes who fancied themselves outside of capitalism, and outside of the city. In contrast, Marx and Engels situated the revolutionary subject, the worker, right in the middle of the city, and in the middle of capitalism. And that's where we operate as well.

So here we are, with all our ideals and beliefs, with our interest in modernist movements and radical politics, trying to navigate the paradoxes and contradictions of capitalism – and it's certainly not easy. Everything we do, we do "for better or worse," as you never completely know if you are doing the right thing or not. But still, we try, we really do. In the end, we can only hope to live up to the words of the great Marshall Berman (from 'All That is Solid Melts into Air', 1982):

> *"To be modern is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air.*
>
> *To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythms one's own, to drift within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows".*

We're curious to know more about Simon Vinkenoog's role in Provo and the Dutch literary world. He seems to have been a prolific writer and journalist, and yet he's not well known in America. He was at the center of many networks; someone who brought people together. Do you think it has become harder to form these networks as the internet becomes the medium for connection and cities are gentrified? I ask in part because the cities in 'Superstructures' have all changed rapidly, and this is something we think about a lot in New York, and part of the work of the Woodbine collective is forming networks.

When researching the Dutch counter-culture, you'll bump into the name Vinkenoog again and again. He was indeed a pivotal figure, a true spider in the web of avant-gardes – tirelessly connecting people, movements, and whole generations. He was a well-known published poet, so he also functioned as a sort of gateway between subcultures and mainstream culture. And because he worked in Paris for a while, for UNESCO, he also had many international contacts.
There are many ways in which Vinkenoog can be connected to Provo. For one, he was co-organizer of 'Open the Grave', which was officially the first 'happening' (in the Fluxus sense of the word) that took place in Amsterdam. Although this event took place in 1962, so three years before Provo, 'Open het Graf' kept on resonating within Provo circles long after that. In fact, it was during 'Open het Graf' that Robert Jasper Grootveld and Bart Huges launched their 'Gnot sign' (the apple-shaped symbol that represented the idea of Amsterdam as 'Magick Center'). This symbol was later appropriated by the Provos, and used as the movement's unofficial 'logo'.

Vinkenoog was also the head of the Amsterdam branch of Sigma (the network started by the Scottish Situationist

and beat poet Alexander Trocchi) – an organization that always seemed present within the periphery of Provo.

He introduced Constant Nieuwenhuys to Provo – which sort of underlines his role as an intergenerational connector. After all, the Provos were basically teenage kids, ultra-young anarchists roaming the streets of Amsterdam. A person like Constant, who was in his 40s by then, and already a veteran of both Cobra and the Situationists, must have looked like a dinosaur to them. But still, Vinkenoog made the connection, and it immediately clicked, and Constant's notion of 'New Babylon' became an important part of the Provo narrative.

Vinkenoog had a good eye for people, and as we write this, we suddenly realize that the name 'Vinkenoog' actually means 'finch's eye'. And indeed, he had a bird's eye view, a broad view of what was happening everywhere, a clear vision of the whole landscape of movements and subcultures.

Even within the Dutch context, his legacy still deserves more recognition. Within the mainstream media, he is often reduced to a caricature of a hippie, with a strong focus on his pro-cannabis activism. While we certainly feel he is much more interesting than that.

As a small personal anecdote, regarding Vinkenoog's international contacts... A while ago, we were reading a paperback ('Love Sex Fear Death' by Timothy Wyllie, on the Process Church of Final Judgment, a satanic cult from the '60s. And even there, in that book, Vinkenoog's name suddenly pops up: it was his house where members of the Process stayed when they visited Amsterdam. The book was such an unexpected place to come across his name – we laughed out loud when we read it.

As for the last part of your question – whether networks (such as Vinkenoog's subcultural network) are harder to form nowadays because of the shift from the city to the internet... That's quite a large question, and it's hard to wrap our heads around it now, we need some more time to chew on it.Intuitively, we do feel that there is some sort of connection (or 'homology', to speak with Raymond Williams) between the city as a spatial network, and the movement as a subcultural network. Both these entities, the city and the movement, are material infrastructures for the distribution of information, of knowledge, of language – and, other than internet, both these networks manifest themselves 'in real life', as physical bodies and systems.

What's also interesting is that both these entities, the city and the movement, are models of each other. The city becomes an emblem for the movement, the movement becomes an emblem for the city. This can be seen clearly in the way the Provo movement used the Gnotsign as their 'logo'. For the Provos, the apple-like sign stood for the town of Amsterdam – a little map of the city, where the outline symbolized the system of canals, the stem symbolized the Amstel river, and the dot symbolized Spui square, where most of the happenings took place.

We always thought this was such a fitting gesture – that Provo, a movement that was shaped by the city (and that shaped the city in return) used an abstracted city map as their signature. To us, it really shows how deeply the two are connected.