



# EMIGRE UNTITLED II

\$ 7.95

## INCUBATION OF A WORKSHOP

By Stuart Bailey

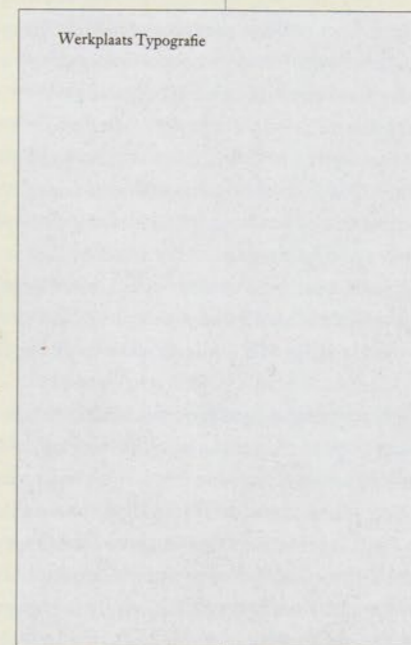
Karel Martens has been working as an independent graphic designer since 1981. Alongside commissioned work, he also pursues personal interests through experimental projects. He has received commissions from various publishers, museums, architects, government organizations and the Royal PTT Netherlands. He has previously taught at the Arnhem College of Art, more recently at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam, and is currently a visiting professor at the University of Utrecht.

Wigger Bierma has been working as an independent graphic designer since 1981. He has received commissions from the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the Kröller-Müller Museum Otterlo, the Royal PTT Netherlands, the Amsterdam Art Fund, the Origin, Hermen Huisman Foundation, Amersfoort, publishing firms and various government organizations. He has previously taught at the Arnhem College of Art, and currently teaches typography at the Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam.

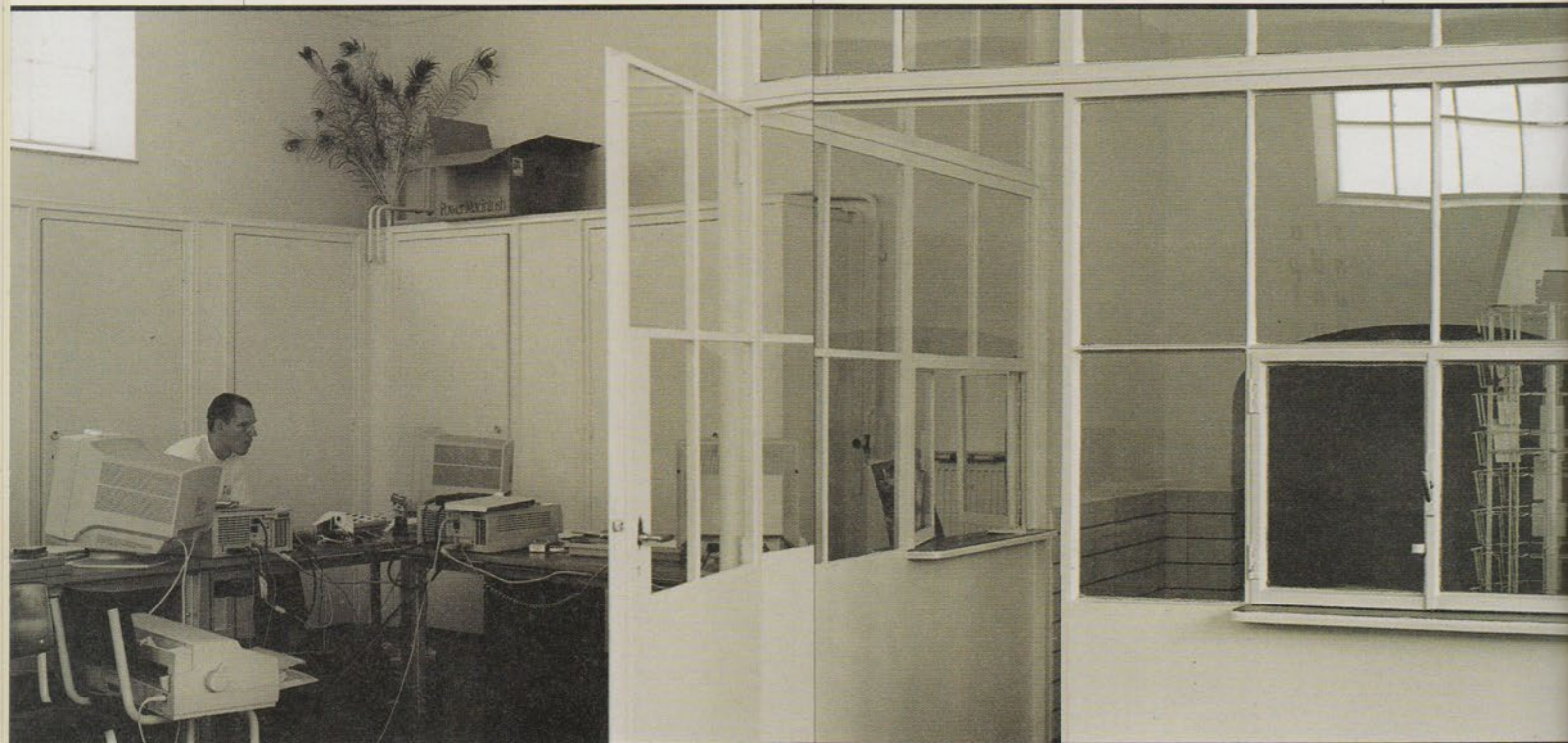
In the second half of 1997, some three years after the idea had first been discussed, the *Werkplaats Typografie* made a beginning of sorts. Karel Martens and Wigger Bierma shifted home offices to an empty building in provincial Arnhem whose previous incarnations included a local radio station and theater college and whose rough form and gawky charm were ideal to realize their mental sketch of a new kind of school. Officially affiliated with the town's main art college (the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Arnhem), yet physically detached, the impetus derived from a gradual disenchantment with their practical involvement in existing Dutch postgraduate programs. These increasingly tended to be either overwhelmingly fine art- or theory-based. Both lacked essential grounding in real work. Karel and Wigger's aim was nothing as grand as pioneering; merely a shared conclusion that the workshop format (with equal emphasis on *work* and *shop*) was the obvious environment in which to practice advanced design education. Given this premise, the open plan of both architecture and attitude was both deliberate and vital.

### TYPEFACES USED IN THIS ARTICLE:

Running heads and folios set in 7 point Tarzana Narrow Bold Italic. Tracking 20.  
Headline set in 18 point Tarzana Narrow Bold Italic. Tracking 20.  
By line set in 10 point Tarzana Wide Bold Italic. Tracking 20.  
Feature article set in 10/12 point Tarzana Narrow Bold and Bold Italic. Tracking 5.



Cover *Werkplaats Typografie* pamphlet.



*The Werkplaats's introductory pamphlet* was loaded with what would become typical Werkplaats issues and contradictions: sixteen sober pages of black and orange 9/12 pt. Janson Text on uncoated off-white stock that told everything and nothing about the place. Just as actual work tells more than flat reproductions of graphic design ever can, a visit to the building and a meeting with the people was always going to be the only way of really finding out. The necessary informality of this (ad)venture demands a lot more chemistry – a connection, a feeling – than most of its counterpart graphic design institutions. The brochure is a reluctant go-between – a dubious compromise – and if all this seems like ridiculous detail, well, it is. But somehow the Werkplaats is all about considering this ridiculous detail, fostering some permanently critical attitude that infects everything, including the work.

*In the current context* of Dutch design where college prospectuses and related publications are overfunded and overdesigned, the neutrality of the Werkplaats pamphlet consciously mirrors the empty potential of the building. Year zero design; humane modernism. And the content – manifesto masquerading as synopsis – reads like late night inspiration put through the official college filter. In many ways this object was more a catalyst – and a means of making ideas concrete – than a concerted attempt to publicize, particularly since it was only distributed in the most haphazard way. But this word-of-mouth and friend-to-friend acquisition shouldn't be interpreted as elitism, which is about as far as possible from the intended spirit. Rather, it is due to what is at best practical cautiousness and at worst, lax disorganization.

So the pamphlet was the birth certificate, but in many ways it was already lopsided and out of date. The account you are now reading is the unofficial companion piece, intended to redress the balance and update; some verbal Polaroids, visual home-movie stills and a pile of work to document our first eight months.

*In the New Year there were four of us;* by spring, six; and at the end of summer hopefully ten. After that, filled up for the foreseeable future. The first couple of months were dominated by building refurbishment, scavenging furniture and technology. Little work islands appeared in the large studio space, shifting every couple of weeks with a spaghetti of wires and extension cables, gradually joining as new tables arrived from the metal work department. The two-cup maximum Krups coffee machine was our glue for a while, a common meeting point. Conception by alcohol perhaps, but the birth was caffeine-fueled, and splitting the espresso bill was our first formal agreement. And all the time there was a wired sense of opportunity on this corner of Arnhem in a corner of Holland in a corner of Europe and the excitement of being there at the beginning, occupying a space and

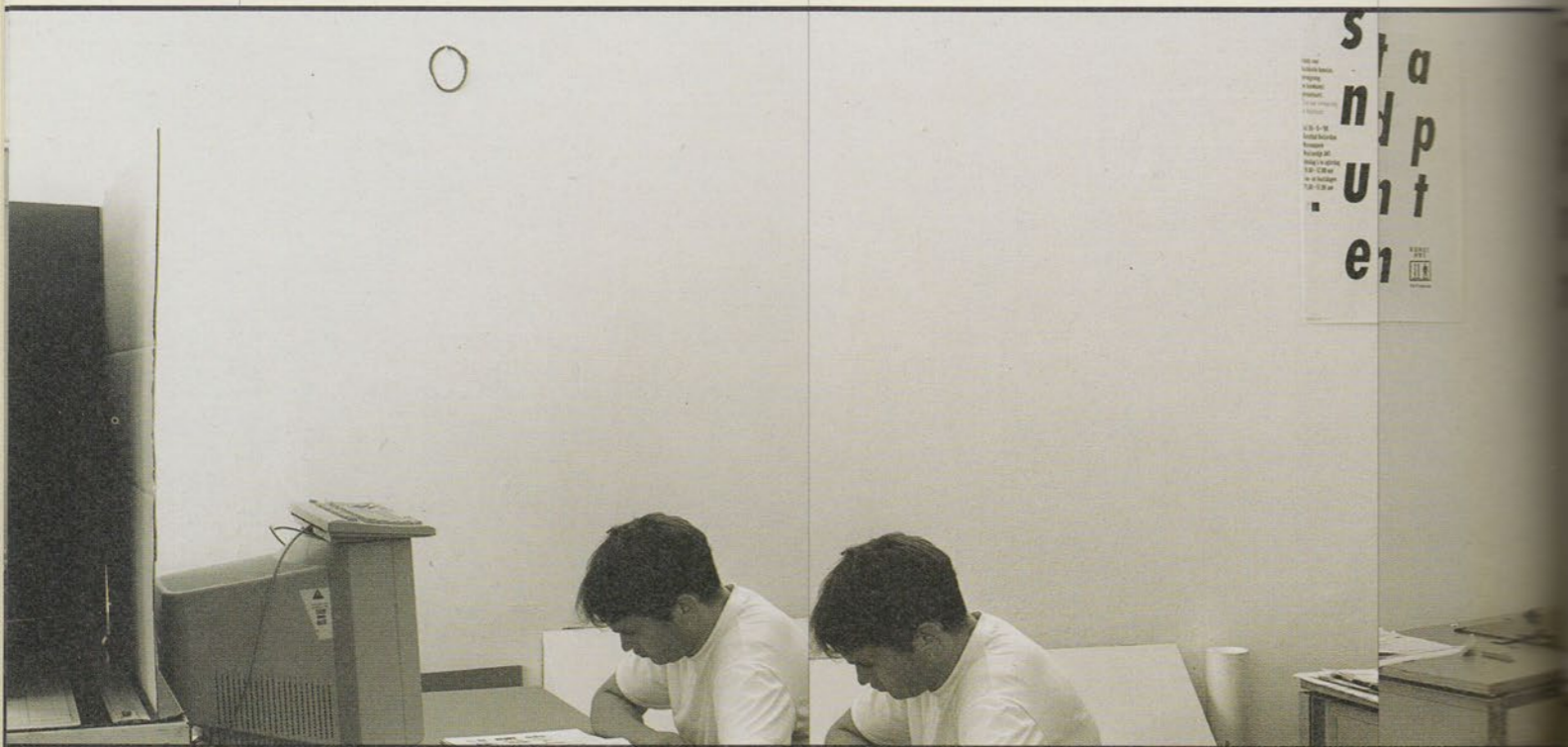


filling it with ideas. Developments seemed slow, but always necessary for the eventual bloom, knowing that this incubation period would establish many lifelong aspects of the Werkplaats's character.

*The Werkplaats is almost impossible to explain* to anyone back home. Studying or working? Well, both. *The emphasis is on learning rather than teaching*, I say, but receive blank looks. There are no formal lessons, nothing approaching classes. We do real work – acquired personally or through the school itself (and hopefully this will happen more as we become established) – together or alone, depending on the size and nature of the job. Everyone is free to comment on ideas and proposals. Payment (if at all) is divided between ourselves and the institution; half the money earned goes back into running the building.

Then the next question is always *Why not just get a proper job?* and the reason has something to do with the value of working in an environment of mutual respect. In my – and most of my friends' – experience, this is a rare luxury. Increasingly, it seems that most young designers covet the position of art director, essentially doing less practical and more supervisory work (and earning more money). It's no coincidence that the designers we appreciate most are those who will always continue working hands-on, simply because they enjoy designing. That's why they did it in the first place. It's hard to imagine anyone here operating in a traditionally hierarchical studio setup, and in this instance the pamphlet is accurate in its description of the Werkplaats as bridge between tertiary education and *personal practice*. A twilight zone between school and work. The loose set-up and collective familiarity across projects allows us to leave – to teach, to attend events, to work elsewhere, to holiday – whilst others babysit jobs and check proofs. To the casual observer this place appears to operate much as any other design studio. The work is tangible, but the education is invisible.

*Most schools begin with a structure*, as vessels to be filled with students (read: customers). Here we started with some space and people, and the structure evolved organically, molded to the collective character of the time. Humility and the ability to change one's mind are characteristics generally overlooked in favor of hard-line and outspoken design/designers, but false starts are important. Our first eight months have been full of them: cleaning rotas, a collective calendar, a Chef de Bureau to look after supplies, regular work crits, housekeeping meetings – all quietly disrupted and forgotten when they become impractical; or an intended website – postponed in lieu of further research and inspiration. It's a survival of the fittest ideas. If they're good, they happen. The 4 ft. orange steel letters on the roof took a good six months to realize, but they appeared in the end, and still look as elegantly ridiculous as the original sketch.



**Werkplaats. Workshop. Werkstätte.** Across translation, the term has proletarian connotations (overalls; paper hats; long hours) *Typografie. Typography. Typographie* (lead type; loud machinery; ink-covered hands). The name is a deliberate allusion, reclaiming the terms and reinterpreting the same spirit in a digital context, adopting a determinedly out-of-time arrogance. We may theorize, or undertake experimental projects, but only commissioned work creates the *correct sense of requiredness* (to quote the pamphlet) and is always central. Furthermore, there is no official qualification, no certificate. *If you want a degree, runs the party line, design one yourself.* In this spirit, the name is a statement, but it also misleads: we have clean hands; we deal with image as much as type.

**And what do we call ourselves?** *Students* seems fundamentally wrong. *Participants* comes close but is still way too formal. Similarly vague is the relationship between Karel and Wigger (to complicate further, Karel taught Wigger 18 years previously) and the rest of us *Workshopees* in a two-way teaching setup – some conscious acknowledgement that postgraduate education should move beyond the idea of a teacher who stands disseminating knowledge before a group of students. Instead, the generation gap is a tool; a starting point for discussion. Experience deserves respect but is equal to the value of naivete. Karel and Wigger freely admit to learning as much from us; initiating the *Werkplaats* was a means of becoming students again themselves – not only in obvious terms of learning new technologies, but also assimilating new attitudes and approaches. We are collectively grounded in fine art, multimedia, and various other design disciplines, as well as typography. Friends in design studios bemoan the lack of discussion about work. The shock of withdrawal from the intense debate of group crits into a world of deadlines leaves a gap, an absence of communication in the communication industry. Accordingly, the awareness and discussion of process is all-important here, and the approach is always fundamentally relaxed; design that remains permanently critical, unsure and questioning for as long as possible. It's an understanding that the best design thinking comes in one of two periods; initial post-brief design-in-the-bath intuition, and final pressured up-all-night decision-making. This constant willingness to doubt, rethink and change retains that elusive freshness that only comes with genuine interest in the job. Wrong roads and false trails are anything but wasted time. Only by pursuing an idea *wholeheartedly* – whether eventually deemed good or bad – is it possible to observe and understand what is right or wrong with it. *Doing* is the key. *This* is school.

**Attending to detail** – the spacing between letter, full stop, quotation mark and footnote number – trains the



eye to function with greater speed, ease and confidence at a larger, more abstract level of visual judgment. Learning how to look is a kind of trickle-up effect, and if you look hard enough here, similar attention (sometimes bordering on obsession) is evident in a number of jarring features throughout the building: a quotation in white lettering on a high pane of glass; an old PTT telephon sign perched almost out of sight on the top of the fuse box; retro salt and pepper pots from a trip to London on the kitchen table; a wasp's nest next to the photocopier found between two walls during refurbishment; some bald peacock's feathers on the studio cupboards; five rubber hoops marking an invisible trajectory on apparently random existing wall hooks. Temporary or otherwise, all become part of the furniture and an unconscious bank of graphic inspiration.

**Friends come and spend a few days**, bringing their recent work for discussion and adding an outside perspective to our current projects, eating and drinking, drawing some inspiration and leaving a mark. Other assorted visitors arrive and make pleasant noises about the building. Prospective students appear, disappear, and sometimes return. Clients take up temporary residence to collaborate on projects, altering the dynamic for a while. We started having lunch together. People tend to speak more slowly (if not as clearly), so it's the best time to absorb Dutch – or the day's dominant language – by osmosis. Recently, conversation has tended to swing between two subjects: the quality of bread available in town (debate between solid German *Oberlander* and airy Swiss-French crossover *Bignou*), and computer viruses that have plagued us over the past month, wiping out one hard disk and scarring a few others. Lunch has fast become the focal point of the day, with clients and acquaintances turning up suspiciously close to noon, and has excluded the need for any other kind of weekly housekeeping meeting, being the only time guaranteed to find everyone in the same place at the same time. Ideas are chewed over, work is discussed, and occasionally stuck on the wall for comment.

**Traces of design history** exist without looming. We like timelessness – work that could have been done either days or decades ago and still feels right; inevitability without dullness, when the final form appears to be the only natural solution. It's easy to recognize kindred spirits in both work and environment. Artists, designers and writers who crop up around the place and in conversation include Gill, Sandberg, Müller, Crouwel, Brodsky, Koolhaus, Mau, Potter, Hollis, Dylan, Weiner, Elliman, Kinross, Froshaug, Nikkels, Werkman, Mevis & van Deursen, Manders, van Bennekom. In no particular order; chronology is not important, though context always is. History is treated as a library rather than a museum, and this attitude prefers a collection of well-designed books rather than books about good design.

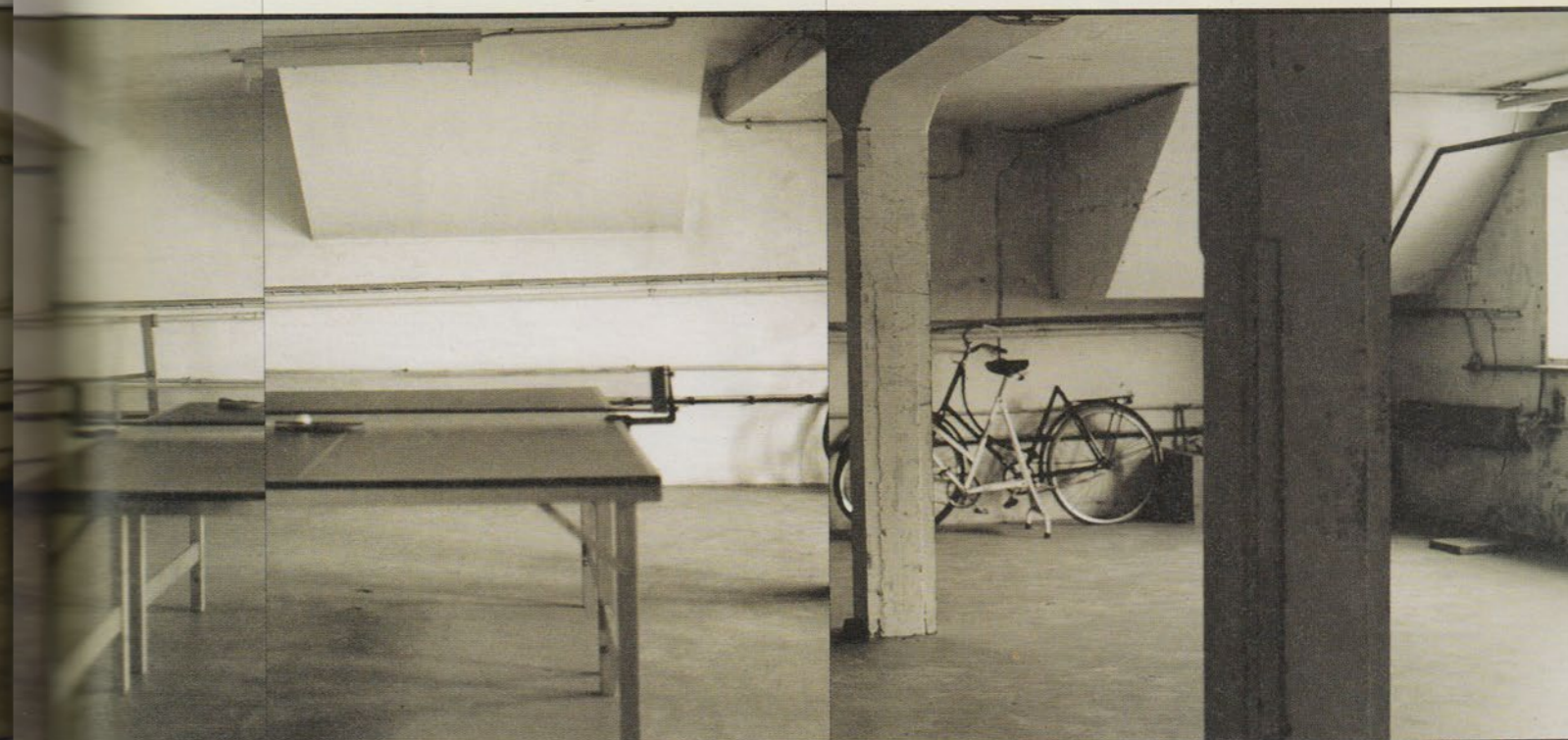


Drugstore White Magic for Lovers, Lou Reed The Blue Mask, Michael Nyman The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, Arvo Pärt Arbor, Liszt Late Piano Music, Primal Scream Screamadelica, Henry Purcell The King's Consort / Robert King, The Beatles Rubber Soul, The Band of Holy Joy Positively Spooked, Moonshake Dirty and Divine, Sonic Youth Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star, Keneckie At the Club, Money Mark Push the Button, Bach 3 Sonatas for Clavier and Violin, The Velvet Underground and Nico The Velvet Underground and Nico, Verdi Il Traviatore, Beck Odelay, Bach Violin Sonatas and Partitas, Bueno Vista Social Club, Laurie Anderson Bright Red, Pavement Spanted and Enchanted, Conjure Music for the Texts of Ishmael Reed, Schubert Winterreise, Bob Dylan Highway 61 Revisited, Ravi Shankar Chants of India, Bach Complete Cantatas, Chet Baker With Strings, Ry Cooder Paris, Texas - Original Motion Picture Soundtrack, Elvis Costello and the Brodsky Quartet The Juliet Letters, Debussy/Franck/Ravel Violinsonaten, Bob Dylan Blonde on Blonde, Chet Baker Strollin', Fat Boy Slim The Rockafeller Skank, Laurie Anderson Big Science, Philip Glass Einstein on the Beach, Cornershop When I Was Born for the 7th Time, Haydn Cello Concertos, Bach Kleine Präludien, The Blue Aeroplanes Beatsongs, Bob Dylan Blood on the Tracks, Randy Newman Good Old Boys, Souled American Flubber, Finley Quayle Maverick a Strike, Lou Reed New York, The Charlatans Melting Pot, Schubert Streichquartette D87/D783/D809, Haydn Six Sonatas for Violin and Viola, Bob Dylan Time Out of Mind, Simeon ten Holt Canto Ostinato, Radiohead OK Computer, JJ Cale Troubadour, Broadcast Work and Non-Work, Chet Baker The Best of Chet Baker Sings, Idlewild Captain, Tindersticks Tindersticks, Chet Baker Chet in Paris Vol. 2, Schubert Piano Trio no. 2 D28, Belle and Sebastian If You're Feeling Sinister, Chet Baker Trio Someday My Prince Will Come, Jack Pioneer Soundtracks, Bob Dylan Desire, Henry Mulligan & Astor Piazzolla Reunion Cumbre, Super Furry Animals Ice Hockey Hair EP, Television Marquee Moon, Lou Reed Set the Twilight Reeling, Bob Dylan Good As I Been to You, JJ Cale 5, Stevie Wonder Songs in the Key of Life, Chet Baker Chet in Paris Vol. 1, Bach Die Kunst der Fuge, Saint Etienne Too Young to Die, Schubert Piano Trios, The Cardigans Life, Bob Dylan John Wesley Harding, Stravinsky Le Sacre du Printemps, Neil Young Decade

**Music is essential to the Werkplaats;** some kind of blood, and to such an extent that Wigger considered adding something like "a more-than-average interest in music" to the brochure's participant requirements. Three different CDs are often playing very loudly and simultaneously through the building. Furthermore, a hideaway annex houses a miniature recording studio, temporarily dislocated from England. Music is recorded for imminent release, and treated as any other design project, with similar interests – in the site-specific, the found, the chance, the vernacular – infecting the sound as much as the graphics. More concrete crossover experiments (reading local texts over improvised music – aural typographies?) are intended, and following the production chaos of the current architectural biography book – the Werkplaats' biggest commission so far – Karel swears he is giving up design to become a folk singer.

**The cavernous basement** has been the prospective but as yet unrealized venue for a darkroom, underground band rehearsal room, student living quarters, and guest lecturer bedroom. Instead, it currently houses the leisure facilities: one unstable exercise bike; one rusting frame with no wheels; one ping-pong table which, in the month since it arrived, has become an important fixture – games providing regular release from screen fatigue. For the time being, however, the space remains unharnessed potential, an idea waiting to happen.

**With equal space** for Dutch, English and German in the brochure, the Werkplaats was always democratic and international in scope. Commissions from different countries or involving multilingual text double as practical language education. Few problems arise in everyday communication thanks to the general Dutch fluency in English, but things become significantly more difficult when discussing graphic work in detail. Our blackboard currently retains an inventory of adjectives required during initial proposals for the design of a new British art newspaper. Alternatively, Karel often resorts to communicating visual abstracts by onomatopoeia. Nchung! Nchung! Nchung! Nchung! ... **Nchung!** A kind of verbal-graphic esperanto.



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|------------------|--------------|
| Aanstellerig     | Affected     |
| Aarzelend        | Holding back |
| Behaagziek       | Coquettish   |
| Braaf            | Decent       |
| Brutaal          | Pert         |
| Deemoedig        | Humble       |
| Eigenwijs        | Conceited    |
| Helder           | Bright       |
| Kloten           | Balls        |
| Noodzakelijkheid | Necessity    |
| Stevig           | Robust       |
| Streng           | Severe       |
| Vanzelfsprekend  | Natural      |

**There is a diversion of attention** away from the materialistic idea of finished work (so far still meaning the printed piece). To reiterate, *Process – to design rather than a design* – is the focus. Here we could have chronologically presented eight months worth of rough proposals, printed matter and work-in-progress; the illustrations a quarter of their original size unless otherwise indicated, but we'd rather you came and picked them up, felt the materials and saw the colours. Work goes on the shelf for later reference or formal re-evaluation; not finished as such, just marking the specific constraints and cut-off point, but still rich in possibility and potential for discussion.

**It's becoming increasingly evident why certain people are here,** but harder to explain the link. Some common affinity to the visually rough, simple, bold, instinctive and committed; well-made things, always beginning with the content. Walls are gradually covered with ephemera: objects and odd scraps from the street, items sent from friends, obscure images, letters, color combinations, prints and photographs. All have a strong sense of a borrowing, recycling, or sampling atmosphere and character from the outside world. "Beautiful" is a term used regularly, but as interchangeable with "bold," "shocking," "powerful." The fundamental intention, however, is always to make things that *matter* and *connect*. Consider this an open invitation.