

# **If there is no truth, Dutch design it.**

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*Dutch culture:  
Negotiating truth.*

All around the world, that is to say in those parts where devices have become a reminder of critical awareness, Dutch design is celebrated. What is the background from which this particular kind of design arises? And why is it so relevant in this moment of time? In a short exploration I hope to show how Dutch design is related to the principals of democracy and the network society. And if you were to ask: can you learn Dutch design? My answer would be: most likely, but not by imitating!

Holland is a small country on the seaside of Europe. It could as well have been a part of Germany or France, but it achieved independence as one of the many small countries on the continent. What was the identity that kept it alive in between the strong European cultures?

Holland is situated in the delta of the rivers Rhine, Maas and Schelde. Which has the huge hinterland in both Germany and France. The land is by origin marshy and wet and to keep it dry it has to be surrounded by dikes and milled. These two geographic properties, trade and impoldering, determined the cultural conditions. There were hardly good opportunities for agriculture, and no sources for industry, but a perfect situation for trade. The reclaimed land had to be maintained by dragging the sleets and guarding the dikes. A duty everyone had to fulfil. If only one of the farmers failed or sabotaged the task, land would be sea again. This particular situation lead necessarily to one of the first democratic systems. Everyone had to be kept satisfied to continue the cooperation. And there they are, trade and democracy, the two reasons for a negotiating culture.

For reason of rhetoric exaggeration one might say German culture is one of precise production where the French is one of prestigious projects. And in-between Holland tries to survive by negotiation which has by definition no defined standard or truth. An industrial product can be made optimal, prestige can be made absolute, but in trade is no summit, it is just a matter of whatever both parties agree on. The art of negotiation is to see opportunities and reframe the reality in order to meet each other.

And so Holland became a middle class country, liberal, without a strong central government, open-minded and tolerant. Interrelated individuals in a self-made land. No need for external meaning, but dealing with water. Water was both the common enemy and the facilitation of opportunities. No adoration of any ideal but carefully concerning threats and

blessings of reality.

*Dutch art and design:  
Representation of  
reality.*

If you visit Amsterdam you will find yourself in a well-organized labyrinth. The centre of town is not a palace or cathedral, but a dam. A barrier in the river that organizes the water drainage and leaves a void in the city open for trade. The canals surround this place and function as both drainage and transport system. Alongside the canals the houses of trades men are situated. Narrow and deep, with large windows to let the light enter even in the back of the house.

Now this picture is metaphorical for the Dutch society. There is no central power, instead the centre is void and the power is in the money. And this money is abstract, shared and dynamic. There is an absence of power in a static personalized reality. Sure, the Netherlands is a kingdom and has been religious for a long time, but both king and pope have never been accepted as powerful or beyond daily-life-reality, they are considered to be just normal people with a particular function as long as it lasts. This mentality explains a lot about Dutch art. In Holland art is not in service of power, but a sign of possession. There is no central court of selected best, but a big quantity of average. Rows of houses are repetitively set alongside and filled with possessions: Mirrors, maps and paintings. These paintings are not representing another reality, a meaningful history or a heroic ancestor, but they are just reflecting daily-life in portrait, landscape and still life. You won't find so much tapestries or wall-covering decorative patterns. It's more about mirrors, maps and paintings put in a framework to make it a product that can be bought and sold.

Dutch art is the art of observation and rearrangement. As Aaron Betsky puts it: 'seeing is knowing is making'. It is mapping out and reframing reality, to reveal hidden forms. It is a representation of nothing less than just reality but with its critical awareness it shows hidden structures. And this often coincides with humour or a nude bluntness.

Later on we will see how Dutch arts can blossom whenever there is an aversion towards afixed authority or ideology.

*New frames of mind to  
understand the absence  
of truth:  
Seeing is knowing is  
making.*

The key to the formula 'seeing is knowing is making' is surprisingly the word 'is'. It comprises the simultaneousness of seeing, knowing and making. The whole process occurs in a dynamic context where a participating action goes together with a reflective interpretation.

To fully understand this logic, new frames of mind has to be opened. The conventional artistic approach of starting from the scratch in order to invent an optimal expression of truth already has been fading. The functionalistic approach of determining the problem and solving it with expertise is no longer applicable too. Instead we have to anticipate the context

and relate to the multiplicity of reality. In a coexistence of options we are urged to put forward a scenario as an act of involvement. As Michiel Riedijk says: 'Every new commission demands to evoke an image of a world that we don't know yet'. To illustrate this mind-shift I remember how I discovered the world of electricity.

As a child I always wondered how it was possible that the very moment you turned the switch, the light goes on. How could it be that it took no time at all for the signal to travel through the wire from the switch to the bulb? My father offered me a suggestion: It might not be a signal rushing like a ball through the wire. What if the wire is full of balls. The first one that will consequently move all the balls, including the last one. The switch could be a controller, and thus the light goes on instantaneously when you stop interrupting of the flow of electricity.

*Information processing:  
the metaphor of current  
society.*

These kind of new mental frameworks become more relevant in the Network society, where no longer the objects are situated in fixed relations. Network implies the awareness of a multilayered web of potential relations. This notion is especially valid for the processing of information, which evolved in the transition from Knowledge society into Network society.

When I was a student we had no reference images. There was no internet and magazines were very expensive. All that we knew, we obtained from the teacher, he showed the necessary knowledge in a slide-show, or when we visited musea. So we had to reproduce it by memory, very often mixed with a lot of fantasy. If we were asked to do a research we started blank, we had no clue what the subject was about. So we went to the only library, read the entire one book about the subject and integrated that data to complete our understanding. Step by step we were building up our comprehension. Contradictions had to be sorted out. In my youth there was a huge discussion on the origination of the earth. Evolution or creation, one had to be wrong; otherwise we could not proceed in developing our established knowledge.

With the increasing transparency of information the authority of expertise became more disputable. The audience became critical and selected the source of information or countered received knowledge by asking for a second opinion. Truth appeared to be more relative and dependent on the context. And although the expert has the specialized knowledge, he might be fixated and narrow-minded while the client has an overview of the conditions in the particular case. As is said: 'An old patient is better than a new doctor'.

Look at the difference with my son, he is drowning in information. He already has a slight awareness of everything that happens in the world, like a web of potential knowledge. When you raise a subject he immediately opens his web and starts playing with a possible reasoning. When he reads a text, he just scans it with the intention to release the particular point that is needed in this current circumstance. The rest is only glanced at and added to the web of potentials. His web of potential knowledge is multilayered and full of controversies, and he navigates through it according to the circumstances. This is no longer a matter of getting the facts, but selecting the options. It is no longer a matter of good and bad but of fun or boring. And part of fun is the tension of contradiction!

Knowledge is no longer a possession of somebody; it is available for everyone. It has no status in itself as long as it is not performed. In the Knowledge society, certain views had, for a certain period, won the discussion and attained reputation. In the Network society it is not a matter of being accepted as right, but of being in or out. When a view is part of the discussion it is in, it is kept alive and fun. In the discourse there is no broadcaster and receiver, no winner or loser, but only participants. Real participation implies two things: you take part in and you are part of. Whatever you do or say, your presence influences the circumstances

*Participating reality:  
inviting the presence.*

One might have noticed the similarities in the description of Dutch culture and the network society. It is striking that the scanning of information, the navigating on the web and the copy-pasting of options are closely related to the overlap of seeing, knowing and making. This matching of attitudes most likely has been the beneficial circumstance for the recent success of Dutch design.

In my reflection three notions are important in this attitude: 'interpretation', 'evocation' and 'participation'.

Applied to the process of design these notions slowly become the alternative of the common phases: analyses, concept and design. The innovation lies in the flexible, simultaneous, and down-to-earth handling. Badly executed it might lead to a superficial imitation for short fun. Understood well it will lead to the opening up of new perspectives paying a contribution to the ongoing facilitation of new possibilities. May we all be invited to be present.