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DEAR MINISTER

Your reply to my first letter was enthusiastically received in the mail room of the Palace of Typographic Masonry. I'm glad to know that when I discussed the role of graphic design in our public space and collective visual memory, I was actually telling you something you weren't yet aware of. Rest assured: you aren't the only one!

For example, a lot of people haven't heard of the aesthetic idealist Jean François van Royen, who entered the employment of the Postal, Telegraph and Telephone Service in 1904. Mr Van Royen was fascinated by the printed arts, and was far from impressed by what the State had produced so far: "Let's stick to three words: the State's printed paper is ugly, ugly, ugly—in other words, ugly on three counts: in its typefaces, typesetting and paper." Convinced that art could be used to uplift the masses, Van Royen sought out some of the leading artists and designers of his day and used his influence to improve the service's printed materials. After he passed away in 1942, the Postal Service set up a dedicated Department of Aesthetic Design in his spirit. Driven by a firm belief in the salutary effects of design, the Department strove to commission designs that were special, poetic, innovative or alienating and that contributed to the development and visualisation of new values and new ideas.

While 'salutary' may be overegging it a bit, representing individuals, expressing emotions, depicting society's political and economic structure remains a serious business. After all, isn't an open-minded and critical public of fundamental importance for any democracy? At which point a visual communication that invites dialogue becomes a basic condition. In my experience, obstacles actually stimulate creativity: resistance and setbacks force us to give more thought to something. A certain degree of disorder tends to make us less complacent. That's why complexity shouldn't be swept under the carpet; unsettling elements removed from view. Rather, everything should play a distinct role in the representation of a variegated societal landscape. Surely, a society immersed in a diversity of opinions, forms and ideas will gradually adopt a healthy spirit of tolerance? And this—in addition to a critical and creative spirit—is one of the cornerstones of an active democracy!

Let's go back to Van Royen and the Department of Aesthetic Design for a moment: they literally set an example. After the Second World War, there was a growing awareness in our country that formative design was to the benefit of society. Public sector players like government ministries, the central bank, universities and research institutes, museums and other cultural organisations gave graphic designers the freedom to shape their communications. The spirit of openness and democratisation of the 1960s threw open the doors of these institutions to the 'opposition'. Designers could incorporate the voices of the citizens around them in their poetic designs. You might say that the representation of society was built from the bottom up, in a process of active exchange.

This created a distinctive design culture, which gave our country a unique look and feel: I'm sure you remember the lower case phone book, the poetic bank notes, the eminently legible signs at the airport and the provocative theatre posters. Graphic design offered new, alternate windows on the world, which were imbued with a unifying symbolism and played a formative role in the development of a spirit of community. Despite statements to the contrary, there was such a thing as a national identity: a diverse landscape covered with a broad palette of visual languages—from anarchic and unsettling to clear and immediate, from dreamlike and poetic to understated and functional. With all sorts of interaction between high-brow and low-brow. A pluralist and exceptionally colourful and characteristic collection.

In the 1980s, our country was widely seen as a mecca of graphic design. The Netherlands was internationally acclaimed for this fertile paradise, since the extent to which a culture leaves scope for imaginary innovation is one of the factors determining its overall dynamism. It comes as no surprise that in the same period, the Netherlands was also seen as a trailblazer in the field of active citizenship. Seems hard to believe nowadays, but that's what happened!

Yours sincerely,
The Governor of the Palace of Typographic Masonry

