✸✸ DEAR FRIEND,

A short note beforehand.

On March 3rd 2022, Sandra Nuut and Ott Kagovere invited me to write this letter. It was day 8 of the war, the Russian war against Ukraine. Today is day 28. Not a single day, not a single hour passes in which I do not think of the innocent people in Ukraine dying, fleeing, fighting for their country. Despite anything seeming meaningless in light of the war, I will try to phrase some thoughts about graphic design education, post-graduate life and ideas about the word 'political'.

Dear Friend, I don't remember your name; it's likely that I never knew. I don't remember your gender or appearance either, which is strange, because it is something that usually sticks easier than names. But I remember a question you asked me, and I have thought about it often since your visit. You asked me if my work was political.

I am no prophet writing that the word 'political' itself doesn't carry a moral value. Anything is political. It's interesting, though, that being political is associated with something positive in our Western academic context. It stands for progressiveness, voicing our values, initiating change. In Russia, where we met, the word is rather associated with terms like corruption, propaganda, fines, prison and other such negative connotations.

You came to Moscow in the summer of 2019 together with your fellow students and your teachers from Hamburg, despite the (already very bad) political situation in Russia. I showed you a compilation of video recorded interviews that I had conducted with my students, in which they talk about their education system, future prospects and their family circumstances. The differences to what we, as Western residents, are used to, are vast, as you will remember. At some point the conversation shifted, and you asked me about *my* work. You asked me if *my* work was political. I was confused and embarrassed at the same time. What was my work? Probably not the teaching and the interviews I had shown?

I pretended that I knew what was meant with the question, when in fact I didn't. I suddenly felt awkward because I didn't have a stack of artist books to show, or an exhibition I curated, or a range of cutting edge websites. Was I a graphic designer at all?

I quickly answered 'No'. A blurry explanation followed about how I started to find interest in unplanned details, the oddities of implemented designs, the discrepancies between the design and the execution and so on…

No matter how blurry the argument, it revealed to me my instilled belief about a political attitude having to be manifested in form. That in our profession criticality somehow needs to materialise in the design itself. Where did this perception of mine come from? I suspect from my education. In 2008 I graduated from the Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam—an experimental and free space that urged me to express my thoughts and opinions through my work. I was encouraged to do and say whatever I wanted, and I made good use of it. I left the academy with the impression that I had the potential to instill my beliefs in any project given to me. That I could, through the sheer force of my own will and unique talent, change the politics of life around me.

The reality couldn't have been removed further from this image. For many years I worked in London as a freelancer, designing for large corporations that did not care a dime for the well being of myself nor any other contributor in the long chain of production. Instead most of the time and money was invested in marketing, looming powerfully over all design decisions.

I can be terribly slow at understanding the world around me. As such it took me many years to rid myself of the presumption that graphic design contains within itself any moral or ethical guides that operate independently from its social or economic context. Graphic design is not moral, it is not ethical. It is a job.

It took me so long to understand this simple fact, that in my role as a teacher I continued to perpetuate the idea of a game-changing designer. I encouraged students to express their beliefs through their work and aim to become 'independent designers', never really defining what that would entail, especially for their financial future. Now I think that it is this combination which is completely nonsensical. There is no independence, no liberation without others. And I believe that education must stop promoting—directly or indirectly through their teaching staff, which will always function as a role model—the idea of the designer flying solo.

You must have graduated by now. Probably you know how hard it is to find interesting work for graphic designers. Work that means something to us, that we can identify with, that stimulates us intellectually and that is able to pay our bills.

Since I teach much less nowadays, and hence have less of a stable income, I was faced with making a decision about how to continue my design practice. I took the decision to work only with and for people whose agenda I identify with. I am allowed to do that because my partner pays most of the bills, so I am under no pressure to take on *any* job. I work for the local neighbourhood centre to announce movie screenings, I make brochures for political foundations, or lend my skills to otherwise social (and sometimes artistic) projects that I can stand behind. I made that decision, and I was able to make it because I had the privilege to do so. Any design that is not corporate is a luxury which most designers cannot afford, whether it is for economic reasons, sociopolitical ones or both.

Today I would still answer you that my work is not political. Not more than yoghurt packaging in the supermarket. I realised though that the politics of design are important to me, and that in order to find my place as a graphic designer, I need to stop thinking of myself as a graphic designer, but rather as a human being whose working life is formed by the social and economic forces around me.

Please write to me about your thoughts. I am terribly curious what your question was actually aimed at back then.

SINCERELY! CLAUDIA DOMS