# IAN ANDERSON

(Cover picture)
**Moonbuilding 2703 AD**
Artist: The Orb
Format: CD
Label: Kompakt
Year: 2015

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**Core creative / identity**
Client: Sheffield Doc/Fest
Year: 2009

# Ian Anderson of The Designers Republic on why rules need to be broken. In conversation with Afsaneh Angelina Rafii

Ian Anderson journeyed into design by way of the music scene in Sheffield back in the 80s, designing flyers and record-sleeves for bands that were in his orbit. He set up his design studio The Designers Republic (tDR) with Nick Phillips in 1986 and established something of a signature brash style which soon attracted bigger clients like Kiss, Orange, Coca-Cola, helping him establish a two-decade strong design history, examples of which are held in the permanent collections of the MoMA in NY and V&A in London. In 2009, things took a darker turn and Anderson was faced with closing his studio. A year later, he was able to buy back tDR's name and has been reviving its anti-establishment design aesthetic ever since.

**Design at its core is about solving a particular problem, but you have also talked about the importance of the narrative that stems from that initial point. Do you have to be drawn to the particular narrative of a brand to be able to work for them? Your work fulfils a function, but it does feel very opinionated.**

You need to be able to understand and empathise with a brand narrative, or with a client to be able to create the narrative, and with an audience to be able to communicate the brand in such a way that they understand and gain a sense of ownership.

**When you take on a new project is there something specific that draws you in, that you search for?**

I'm looking for opportunity and challenge. Maybe the opportunity is to explore something creative, something new, or to build new relationships (with clients), to reach new audiences; the chance to do something different, to solve new problems in new ways... a voyage of discovery with likeminded people or people sympathetic to or excited by the way we work.

**What is your earliest design memory, you didn't consciously seek out design to study it as a subject-matter, yet you were very much of an autodidact interested in the process of creation? Do you have a clear first memory of where that love came from?**

I don't remember an epiphany of sorts but as a boy I spent a lot of time 'designing' flags and football kits, and drawing imaginary maps which seem to have more relevance in hindsight now that I'm doing what I do. I also remember an Andy Warhol book given to me randomly by my aunt which I was fascinated by. Robert Hughes's "Shock of The New" book and TV series was probably the first time I found some constructive focus on visual arts, a box to put my disparate ideas and interests in to. Designing fanzines and posters for my band in the late 70s was probably the first example of applying creativity to something tangible, and I remember a definite sense from then of being interested in audience and response, of provoking dialogue. That was probably more important to me, even then, than what the design 'looked like' per se.

**Where does one get the confidence, to then turn it into a business?**

I don't know. For me it just happened that way. I am confident enough to think that even though I'm not always right, my thinking and aesthetic can be key in a creative situation, whether I'm working with or across a client on a project.

**Do you think provocation always leads to dialogue or what qualities do you think are needed in the "spectator" in order to be willing to engage? Do you think shock factor has value in design?**

I think there's a difference between provocation, in terms of shock value, to get any response, and the considered provoking of a dialogue with a targeted audience to prompt a desired outcome. If shock has a value in the context of 'communication by any means necessary' then it's valid.

**Since your design process emanated from a desire to create, to think creatively about a concept, did you ever feel like you were at odds with the more practical side of design, which is to ultimately provide answers?**

**Warp Records logo**
Client: Warp Records
Year: 1989

**Syro**
Artist: Aphex Twin
Format: Limited edition vinyl album perspex box set
Label: Warp Records
Year: 2014

**Further Complications**
Artist: Jarvis Cocker
Format: Vinyl LP
Photography: Rankin
Year: 2009





**Kiss**
Artist: Age of Chance
Format: 12" vinyl single
Label: FON
Year: 1986

**Sheath**
Artist: LFO
Format: CD
Label: Warp Records
Year: 2003



"I think there's a difference between provocation, in terms of shock value, to get any response, and the considered provoking of a dialogue with a targeted audience to prompt a desired outcome. If shock has a value in the context of 'communication by any means necessary' then it's valid."

**Angrymahn screenprint**
Client: TDR™
Year: 2015

I don't agree that the job of design is to provide answers. Why would you think that? The aim of design is to provoke a response, to create dialogue. In that sense the best answers are questions.

**Well, I think the purpose of design is to find solutions to a problem. So, in a way I think that can be perceived as answers.**

I don't think solutions equate to answers per se. The solution to a client's problem may be to ask different questions of an audience than the client asks of a designer. My point is that questions are often more likely to provoke a response. If there is a product, say, Detergent X, we're more likely to reach the desired outcome of greater brand awareness / buy in and therefore more sales if we ask the question 'Why does Detergent X wash whiter?' than the simpler 'Detergent X washes whiter'. A question rents more headspace in the audience's mind and allows them to own the answer that suits them — people are more likely to act on their own ideas than others.

**But I am more interested to know why you don't agree and what you mean exactly when you say the best answers are questions. Can you give me an example, of how raising "more questions" is fulfilling the designers' purpose?**

What do you perceive as the designer's purpose? I think it's to communicate ideas and create connections; to inspire and entertain. We are filters and we are communicators — the purpose of the aesthetics we employ should be to improve the communication (richness of experiences not just legibility etc.)

**Potentially though, there is not just one answer to be found, in that case besides fulfilling a purpose, what makes good design stand out in your opinion?**

Good design can be seen as a two-phase process. At least it is at TDR™. The first phase is the science of understanding and analysis of a problem, at any level, asking questions and formulating a solution, identifying a target audience and defining a desired outcome.

The second phase is what most young designers think of as graphic design, the communication of the solution.

In a sense, design only needs to 'look good' to better communicate the solution, to engage the audience and deliver the desired outcome.

There are times when the best design solution is not something I find aesthetically pleasing, subjectively. Designers often make the mistake that audiences aspire to the designer's own aesthetic. So, although it sounds simplistic, I think the best designs are those that do the job they were intended to do.

**How do you think starting in the world of music, shaped what you created?**

From being around 12 or 13 I've been an obsessive music consumer and collector. I didn't study design, but I spent a couple of hours every afternoon in David's Records in a new town called Bracknell where I went to school. The Designers Republic started designing record sleeves, not designing per se. In that sense everything we've done has been informed to a degree by how bands (as brands) are promoted and how music is packaged.

Having managed bands and worked in that respect in the music industry I have a better understanding of what design for music needs to achieve, and how, and why. Ironically, I worked, and still work to the maxim that a record sleeve can be anything other than a record sleeve design — it's an idea cropped and freeze-framed into the format size rather than, say, a 12" square populated by visuals. It followed that if this were true, then the non-music work we did or do should be like a record sleeve...

One thing that comes out of all this, is a sense of time based creative. We worked to the idea that a three-and-a-half-minute single should be sleeved in a design that takes three and a half minutes to interact with, where as an album cover should take longer to consume. This translates to non-music work in terms of understanding the nature of the intended interaction with an audience and how that can direct an outcome.

**At the time, the music scene you were involved with had a counter-culture flair, did you ever feel like the work you were doing for more corporate clients was less principled in nature?**

You can see it that way, but I don't. In terms of morals and principles and how they inform who we work with, and why, and when, I think it's important that people draw a line somewhere, that we aren't purely mercenary without conscience. Where each of us draws the line is a personal thing.

I don't think its universally true that the music scene, counter culture or top 40, is inherently more principled than people in the corporate world. Often, it's a question of scale, some global clients have impressive environmental policies, because they can afford to... some smaller, 'cooler' clients are greedier but just not as good at accumulating and ring-fencing money...

**It's interesting that corporate clients can sometimes actually provide you with more freedom than smaller clients. Why do you think that is?**

Sometimes smaller clients, typically in music and arts, are closer to their own projects, investing more of themselves creatively and emotionally, and therefore, naturally, more protective and possessive of the process and outcome. A lot of 'smaller' clients we work with are passionate in what they

do rather than being expert at how to do it — we all learn how to bring up our children as we go along.

Corporate clients tend to be populated by experienced professional people who understand the benefit of creating freedom for creatives within their system while having no personal creative axe to grind. Such people tend to search out creatives who can create amazing campaigns, even if it's because it makes them look good. Owning the idea doesn't get them a promotion...

**I read somewhere that you said philosophy was an important element in your journey to design because it taught you to convince someone that what is black is actually white. One of the challenges of a design studio is to convince a client that what you have come up with is the right way forward, and clients are often asked to swallow their pride, so how do you go about convincing clients that black is in fact white?**

It helps if the client wants black to be white.

**Disco-Tech (A Week in 9 Hours) club event press advertising**
Client: Gatecrasher
Year: 2000
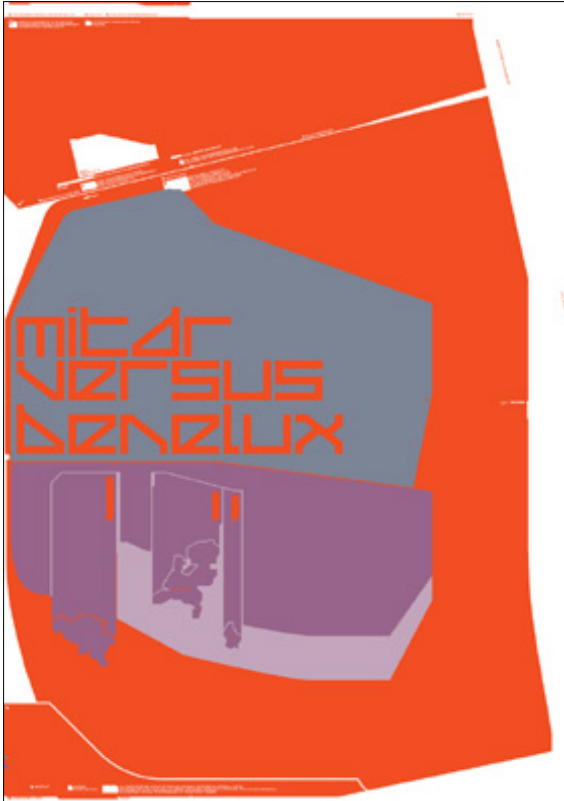
**miTDR™ versus Benelux**
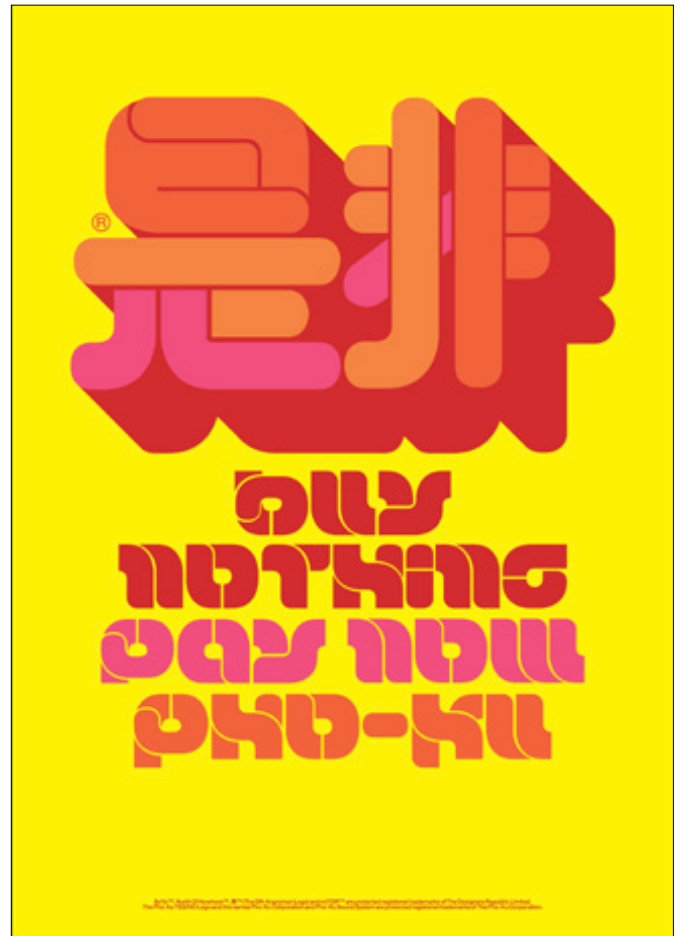Format: A3 litho print, created for TDR™ talk at T–Hype Rotterdam Terminal
Client: TDR™
Year: 1998

**Project: Buy Nothing Pay Now Pho-Ku print**
Client: TDR™ / Pho-Ku Corporation
Year: 1997 (this version redeveloped 1999
for Pho-Ku Corporation corporate identity)

**DR-Sissy™ Hakata doll**
Format: Clay figure, edition of 300
Client: TDR™
Hakata artisan: Yoshimasa Matsuo
Original 3D Sissy design: Nicky Westcott
Year: 2004

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**Atoms Vectors Pixels Ghosts™, S1 Artspace, Sheffield**
Year: 2012

**I wanted to understand if you feel like you need to spend time convincing a client or sort of nudging them towards seeing the solution that you have shaped through your eyes. Or is it usually a case of the design speaking for itself, and working as an 'aha' moment?**

Every relationship with a client is different because we're dealing with people not generic organisations. At one end of the scale some prefer hand-holding through the design process (especially if the people we're working with have to explain or justify creative's decisions to other people in their organisation)— they need to know how the creative will work for them in achieving their ambition. At the other end of the spectrum are those clients predisposed to be amazed by what is put in front of them, people who are more likely to trust our experience, people who are decision makers in their side of the process, and people who understand the best decision they can make is to work with 'the right designer' and allow them freedom to do what it is they were commissioned for in the first place. To be fair, not so many people working at corporate clients have the luxury of making independent decisions like that.

Of course, we creatives live for the 'aha' moment but ultimately it's always about people — clients are people, the audience is people and designers are people so really it's about balance and chemistry.

**Conversely have you ever been convinced by a client that the solution you came up with was actually not the right fit?**

I'm always open to the possibility.

**Do you think being outside of London was important in shaping the work that you did? (I mean apart from the practical aspect of having started out designing for local bands.) And do you believe that nowadays you really have to move outside of the big cities to find unique and fresh talent?**

Wherever (and whenever) we are in time and space, in the 'real' world or in the ones and zeros of the ether, defines our experience and shapes what we do with it, and how we express it, and why. Wherever we are is funda-mentally important to whatever, and whoever we are.
I'll never know how my work, life would be shaped if I'd been in London so it's

not something that I waste too much time thinking about. Fresh talent can be found anywhere but it's still true to say that the more talented gradu-ates, young talent in the UK gravitates towards London because, of course, the streets are paved with gold. What we can say, and see, is that it can work if you don't gravitate to London... there's more of a choice now.

**NY, London and Paris have become so expensive that it is no longer sustainable or affordable for young creatives who are now emerging more in "secondary" cities.**

Absolutely true. But the bright lights are always an attraction for young people, which is as it should be.

**A famous graphic designer once said that you need to know about graphic design history to be able to go beyond and break the rules, for someone who sort of stumbled into the scene, what's your take on what it takes to make relevant work, work that stands above the fray?**

I think ignoring what famous graphic designers who make those kinds of statements is a good start. We were

tagged as rule breakers. The reality is that we didn't know the rules when we started, and quickly realised that we didn't need rules other people had written. Design isn't a set of rules we need to tick box to create effective communication. I missed the meeting where it was decided that rules were important. Things that are written in concrete quickly turn to stone.

**Work by tDR is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum, is that particularly meaningful to you?**

Not really. I mean it gives me a bit of a buzz, but I'm more interested in the work existing in the context for and in which it was created and appreciated by the target audience. I can't say that I don't want establishment acceptance but it's not something I aspire to. I like that some people like some of what I do.

**Is your personal aesthetic rooted in futurism or nostalgia?**

From the past comes the future.

**You have always been a very political person, when you look around you today, what do you find most revolting in the way the pop culture and the creative industries have evolved?**

There will always be an issue when creativity is driven by people driven by money. The problem is essentially that creative people understand the need to work with people more expert in business than they are, while business people think they ARE creative. It's also true to say that it is the job of creatives to find solutions to these issues and work around them, even if it's only, or at least primarily, for their own sanity.

**If you were to think of design as the creative canvas of consumerism, is this the best time to be a designer?**

Not if your ambition is to be original. The languages of marketing and consumerism feel set in a gloop of platitudes and clichés right now. There's so much potential to do something different rather than doing the same thing differently but the downside of global reach means the ambition now is too often consensus. There's a sense of 'if it isn't broken

don't fix it' — for me it's a question of 'if it isn't broken, break it'. The wheel wasn't invented by the people happy pushing square rocks around.

**What was the most important lesson you learned when you were faced with saving the name of your company from its own ashes and find the strength to rebuild?**

Somewhere between 'Be Careful What You Wish For' and 'Never Give Up, Never Surrender' :-)

**What do you passionately fantasize about redesigning?**

Whatever comes next...

**Art direction and design of Echo City at the British Pavilion,**
**10th Venice Biennale for Architecture**
Client: British Council
Year: 2007

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**Environmental graphics for Moshi Moshi Sushi, Canary Wharf, London**
Format: 30m-long banner
Client: Moshi Moshi Sushi
Architects: Branson Coates Architecture
Year: 2008

**Coca-Cola Love Being**
Format: Graphics for limited edition alubottle
Client: The Coca-Cola Company (Global), Atlanta/M5 Project
Year: 2006

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