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Scenes of Constant Creation

Re-Designing Design as a Critical Practice

Oliver Klimpel (London/Leipzig)

It's been a rather long wait. But finally, design might emerge again, as a – to some commentators unlikely – candidate to invigorate the debate about how relations between various modes of cultural production cannot only be distributed, but also articulated. In this, a renewed critical faculty of design could prove instrumental.

Of course, this optimism might be surprising. Hadn't design always be associated with tight affiliations to a) the client and hence b) the market – conditions considered to be suffocating any autonomous thought, too close to provide a platform that might allow for a perspective of sovereignty? Or so at least some thought.

Shadows and Reflections

Myths of this sort have existed because the powers of design had been, somewhat mistakenly, interlocked with a Modernist set of values. This conception centred around the affirmative role of the designer as an advocate of progress through technology and wider distribution. After campaigning for this kind of design, which would eventually impact on the demographic by mostly sheer quantity, design would find itself being defined by iconic qualities and a restricted idea of function. In other words: in the public reception design would qualify for cultural acceptance through the refinement of functional symbols and attempts to make the world legible – and add comfort in use. Yet in an interview – accompanying a recent exhibition of the product-designer Dieter Rams^[1] of Braun-fame at London's Design Museum – a colleague of Rams, Richard Sapper, quipped, that if a successful design solution to a problem was found, it would be often (and wrongly [ed.]) applied to all other situations as well. A particular German method, Sapper suggested.^[2] This comment points furthermore towards the consequences of the stronghold modernity had held on design. Various implications for its operations within aesthetically enhanced production in market economies are the result.

An upgraded review of various Modernist programmes, like the Bauhaus and its successor Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm^[3], in mainstream culture is, at least for this country, a necessary evil. It seems crucial, since it is now hardly possible to disengage this idea of design from the cultural make-up of Germany. Its powerful reflections are still gleaming – alongside the confidence of a German car

industry that has been making dominant contributions towards the pride of this nation, which was previously, and still is in other countries, fed by traditional national symbols[4]. A reliance on raised standards of manufacturing and design became soon substitute – in the disguise of a myth of German engineering and *clean* and apolitical, *design-driven*, optimism. Today, it might seem populist in itself to shift critique to *old and battered* Pre- / Post-war Modernism again, and perhaps rightly so. If it didn't look so defiantly influential in the public eye, and more importantly, in educational programming in German design colleges and universities, it needn't further attack. We could easily move onto more pressing discussions.

It is important to understand that not a heritage of formal and political rigidity has been hindering design ever since, as Post-Modernism suggested, but the ignorance and insincerity of its engagement with real life and real situations. Plus the ill-fated attempts to establish a discipline's status by distancing it from its relations to various realities – through ideas of the universal in symbolic and functional form. Maybe, some designers had felt torn between the awe-inspiring hypnotic qualities of fine art, and a handful of well-publicised iconic monoliths of their architectural peers. One can easily lose one's footing in the shaken ambivalence of the relational field of design – and perhaps should, frequently. Professionalism stands too often tragically in the way of refocusing or the occasionally deliberate deconstruction of values and ideologies.

The Publication of Ideas

A fresh wave of Post-Modern referentiality allowed merely for some distance and a shift of Modernist attitudes in design. The ambiguous price to pay for this liberalisation seemed to be a default use of an ironic rhetoric and, in many cases, a further disconnection from the equation of cause and effect. Nevertheless, developments of the mid-90s did, indeed, prove catalytic for the rite-of-passage of graphics and typography. The visual excess in which a late-adolescent graphic design discipline tried to naively reconcile 30-year-old ideas of linguistically-driven philosophy with a digital revolution produced a shake-up and a plethora of contradictions. We remind ourselves of the works of Why-Not-Associates, April Greiman, Jonathan Barnbrook, Designer's Republic and others of that first digital generation.[5] Undoubtedly, the contained contradictions were key in the development of ideas that eventually formed a new criticality. They started with a critique of the frivolities of graphic texture. The thrills of the use of full-colour images seemed to fade. The motto of English designer Daniel Eatock epitomized this approach: "Say YES to fun & function & NO to seductive imagery & colour!"[6] Formal experimentations were falling out of favour. Graphic originality that challenged viewers only on the level of its graphic anatomy seemed less challenging. The argument of early digital deconstruction in revealing the process of reading by rendering elements illegible didn't provide a critical strategy anymore.

A new resourcefulness and intelligence seems now not only to tap into current themes within the wider discourse in society, but is driven by a sincere investigation into design processes. Constituting the promise for the potency of design are its inherent lines of inquiry. But it is, particularly what Tom Holert has called the "Entgrenzung" (*dislimitation, de-bordering*) of practice and discourse of design that is so promising.[7] It might create the conditions for a renewal of a faculty of design, which I

would like to call *the publication of ideas*. The decision of designers to excavate another, modern conceptual rigorousness has, of course, implications for the understanding of economies and production too. The *publication of ideas* is central to the understanding of design. It connects the knowledge about formatting and distributing with a manifestation of a finding, or information. Hence it connects on one hand a more traditional skill of finding forms that carry thought – without being bound to any particular media or format. *Publication* means here a mode that is liberated from the restraints of media or institutions; it describes the facilitation of a process of framing, making accessible and distribution, all simultaneously. This form of *publication* can be applied to a wealth of thoughts and information, of various degrees of complexities and potentials. However, its capacity seems to be particularly appropriate when these forms of contents are aligned with *ideas*, in the sense Arthur O Lovejoy [8] used the term. Small or big concepts, compounds of directed thought that are linked to a particular time and context in which they are articulating a form of innovative response that is transferable or is triggering a new line of action or inquiry. A *publication of ideas* is freeing ideas and conceptual arguments from traditional media-bound reading. And if it were only for a moment, design becomes a springboard that lifts ideas into a *display-like situation*. In this elevated constellation access to ideas is profoundly altered. We can therefore say, that a refined perception and the active process in its engagement are describing pivotal moments in this act of access through *publication*.

Design as a tactical and syntactical tool is providing a grammar of distribution: in relation to the visual and structural editing of contents – and to the complex production lines and intertwined processes of design decision-making and manufacturing. Various strands of information and narrative are configured and brought into a context in which they will eventually meet and encounter their audience. Consequently, the critical management of editing and formatting is as much an intrinsic part of design, as is to contemplate and facilitate the moment of contact for these messages.

In this respect it seems very telling that we can clearly identify the format of the exhibition as one of the key arenas in which this discourse is currently played out. The topic of the exhibition has been the beneficiary of great interest. Waves of publications and accompanying conferences have tried to assess the format and produce a contemporary and critical outline of the exhibition. Most of these arguments are academic and discourse-driven, shining practical examples are minorities. If a contextual knowledge for a paradigm shift can be seen as given, the courageous realisation of innovative formats and discursive exhibitions is still limping a bit. Furthermore, the activity of curating itself has been subject of a scrutinizing debate. In the process the notion of the *Curatorial* with an extended definition of its processes and core skills – and a wider frame of competence – has been produced.[9] The *Curatorial* is, of course, not merely circulating around exhibition-making, and yet, might be able to provide new angles to think the exhibition as a critical practice.

Arenas of Negotiations

Historically, exhibitions have been scenes of hegemonic battles for decision supremacy. Culprits of these schemes can be found in all disciplines: artists, curators, designers, architects, educators etc. A renewed interest in this format might be down to the realisation of its too frequent failures, which one could convincingly link to the stifling realities of institutional power-play, economical dependencies to

markets and insurers, and the occasional lack of inspirational *strategies of argument* or contact. In any case, the exhibition and its making have emerged as a territory of strategic importance, in particularly since it represents a model scenario for other narrative environments too. Its programming and the logistics of its contents are representing the multi-layered planes of practical inquiry. The complexities of an exhibition's production are a direct reflexion of the complexities and relationships within story-telling and the rhetorical interplay between images, text, other components and their arrangements.

The core from which design operates is one of unapologetic practice. Unlike "editorial" practices, such as curating, design is in itself inevitably and strongly linked to the physical manifestations it produces. Nevertheless, it is crucial to realize that this process of making, of visual thinking and thinking in creation, is, in its make-up, inseparable from discourse. Hence, we can say that decision-making in design draws permanently from the ability to produce translations. Furthermore, when a *display-like situation* is created through forms of *publication*, a structural argument is made through design, which could be portrait as an unstable configuration drawing equally from theory and practice. Rather than been discouraged by a potential loss of meaning during the process of translation, the translations of design excel since they make the very process of the transformation visible and an integral part of its legibility and, subsequently, consumption.

But if there were, indeed, various methods of thinking and producing that compete for power in the arena of the exhibition, what consequences could we expect? It seems crucial to invest rather fully into processes and methodologies, than in Machiavellian strategies for dominance. Yes, vertical, hierarchical structures in the institutional mind will still have their effects on the making of exhibition projects. Yes, power symbolized by salaries or budgets at one's disposal will still have influence. And yes, schemes of various gratuitous nature, like personal legacy and other forms of self-publication, will remain realities. If understandings in the fields, which are to collaborate on exhibitions have moved closer to one-another and have, in fact, overlapped, the question is, which benefits could arise from these shared areas and be the result of double densities? Do we need new means of describing these relationships or do we merely need to reframe? What modes of generating contents jointly are relevant in this context? The articulation and communication of concepts represent a complex situation that frequently produces misunderstandings – sometimes useful, sometimes very distracting. Could models, which suggest a stronger interactive, social element, be of assistance in this exchange? There are alternative terms that are orbiting around the notion of curating. "Programming" for instance. One found in the performing arts, in (physical) theatre, puts the emphasis slightly differently: "to devise". It describes a clearly collaborative effort to create a play, usually in an ensemble setting, together with a director or playwright. Interestingly, it is form of shared authorship. Here, in the different set-up of theatre rehearsals, a group of professionals with different roles are pursuing propositions, testing and the refinement of a narrative. It could be worthwhile to (re-)connect similar elements in this practise with already existing methods of *prototyping* in design. The concrete visualisation or manifestation of situations often produces insights that cannot be forecast otherwise. By producing model situations, not only architectural maquettes, efforts of discourse and practice could be synchronized and forms tested that provide us with real scenarios to navigate in the concourse of "tame and wicked problems" of exhibitions, to use a term by Horst Rittel. [\[10\]](#)

Adjustments to a Practice

Of course, it is still valid to assume that design is predominantly engaged in the investigation of articulating concepts through physical presences, in graphic or 3dimensional realms, and that we interact with through various modes and relationships and processes. And yet we can make out a paradigm-shift, which broadens the scope of design dramatically beyond this notion. In all these laid-out relationships we can identify attempts to re-connect design with the emancipatory impetus it once had. The trappings of design as a universal attitude are well-acknowledged: the immensely immersive quality of the discipline with its multiple formats and economies: architecture, fashion, graphics, product design, suggest a reading of life as a permanent design exercise. The realisations of design as a powerful idea: “from a spoon to [an entire] city”, a phrase circulating at the Ulm college.[\[11\]](#) Synchronized efforts of corporate identities and brand strategies have not only documented some misunderstandings of design, but also produced some fiercely intelligent applications of visual strategies and thinking. Achievements of sustained effect or even profound change were always more on the agenda of the commercial sector than a liberal connoisseurship of mere graphic delight. A methodical realisation of design as a non-mystical entity surfaced in these spheres. To engage with processes of mediation between people and things, transfer of knowledge or alteration of use of public spaces have become important concerns of the re-designed designer. In this focus they have found a new optimism. In doing so designers rekindle their relationship with the utilitarian side of utopia within design that seemed completely lost.

It turns out that a topic that strongly connects with many of these discussed themes – publishing, exhibiting, empowering via design – is the notion of learning itself. A pristine idea of an activity so strong and universal and with implications for most parts of a living and dynamic society, and yet a thing so engrained in practice. Life-long learning: a wonderful beacon of enlightenment. But what forms could make promising attempts that the joys and benefits of learning don't get lost? In which inspirational arrangement could learning be the frame for social interaction with a purpose? Questions about learning are fundamental enough to be discussed in a scholarly fashion. And still they must encounter real situations – in order to mean something and produce moments in which ideals of learning can truly shine, and progress. Let me, therefore, finally tell you about a very practical, *educational situation* I have recently worked on. I devised a set-up and have realized this concept with my students from the Klasse für System-Design at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig for college-internal sessions with students from the 1st year. The tables of teaching are turned – and hierarchies are altered. We called it “Speed-Teaching” since it borrows the key mechanics from the speed-dating format: my students (3rd, 4th or 5th years) would have the, yet unknown, newcomers sitting opposite them. One-to-one, face-to-face. At this occasion tables, and chairs, would be arranged in either a long line, or alternatively, in a circular setting. In 5-minute intervals each student would talk to the person facing him about his chosen and very specific topic, teach a method, devise an exercise. Then a sound would mark the end of the 5 minutes and the 1st-year-students would move in clockwise direction to the next seat. One of the key purposes of this project is the transfer of knowledge from person to person, from student to student. Transfer of really useful or insightful things about design, graphics, the internal workings and the players of the college. In short: pieces of information, it takes each student a couple of years to accumulate. The topics are developed by the “student-teachers” and prior to the event jointly adjusted to produce a diverse and inspirational selection of different approaches for the guests to encounter. Some of them are of a context-sensitive nature, supplying insider information

about the college or in-official workshops opening times or idiosyncrasies of the personal, others offered unashamedly practical advice to a precise micro-typographical situation – which are the right quotation marks to use? – or technical IT insights, or introduce a personal selection of key literature in visual culture, or offer a quick exercise on a manual or vocal skill, or facilitate a chat about a specific topic between “teacher” and “student”. Since the set-up involves only student-to-student-teaching the strategy is to, occasionally, make good use of the fact, that we did cut out the middle-man, the “official” tutor, and teach things a member of teaching staff wouldn’t know too much about, but the students would. What useful information could take a guest with him after that session? What comes across as an entertaining format of student interaction is at the core a purposefully self-edited *publication* of knowledge through the frame and presentation of design (students). The charming multiplicity of the offering is only superseded by the utter resourcefulness of this setting. The “teacher” must permanently assess his potential – and his shortcomings: a light-hearted attempt towards the equality of minds and the emancipation of learning.[\[12\]](#)

We are witnessing the further development of established discourses of practice. This practice is made up of various strands of enquiry: enquiries that draw from solid research, believe equally in the flexible and constant qualities of the design discipline and invest in higher frequencies into speculative, not result-driven forms of formal and discursive debate. And, although, the designers have moved slightly away again from the allure of the art-inspired idea of the ingenious designer-persona and towards a sense of approach and policies of making, it is, of course, individual paths and their outcome that provide inspirational commentary.

A picking-up of historical threads, is what we are seeing, of threads that had seemingly moved out of the picture, but only momentarily. It is Modernist maverick designers from the past, who made trespassing their signature, like exhibition designer Frederick Kiesler[\[13\]](#), graphic and product designer Bruno Munari [\[14\]](#), or architects Buckminster Fuller[\[15\]](#) and Cedric Price[\[16\]](#), that have become the poster-boys for the new generation – and with them a renewal of the application of design as a method, or “*doubt, delight and change*” [\[17\]](#), as Price had put it so fittingly.

Oliver Klimpel (born 1973 in Dresden) is designer and author commuting between his London-based design studio and Leipzig, where he had been appointed Professor for System-Design at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig in 2008. In his projects, which range from exhibition designs, identities, publications and architecturally related concepts, i.e. for TATE Modern and TATE Britain, he applies a critical and concept-driven approach that sees design as a method of cultural enquiry.

[1] Turning 78 this May, Dieter Rams is a true giant of product design. With his elegant and minimal consumer products he has epitomized what is seen as best in German product design and is, for the very same reasons, internationally admired. He had overseen Braun product lines for about 30 years. His “Ten Principles of Good Design”:

*“Good design is innovative.
Good design makes a product useful.
Good design is aesthetic.
Good design makes a product understandable.
Good design is unobtrusive.
Good design is honest.
Good design is long-lasting.
Good design is thorough down to the last detail.
Good design is environmentally friendly.
Good design is as little design as possible.”*

[2] No-one seems more qualified to be seen as a contemporary of Rams than Richard Sapper, born in the very same year, 1932. Nevertheless, they stand for quite contrary positions. Sapper represents a shift towards the more flamboyant, less purist and ideological take on functionality in product design in Post-War times. Milano-based since the 50s, he is associated with a formal language that broke free of the constraints of his German peers. His “Titio” table lamp for Artemide (1972) can easily be considered one of Post-Modernism’s iconic objects – and one of the most commercially successful ones. (Less and More – The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams, Design Museum London, 18 November 2009 – 9 March 2010)

[3] Tucked away in rural Southern Germany the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (HfG Ulm) made a substantial contribution to Post-War Modernism. The college was set up 1953 by the surviving sibling of the Scholl resistance-fighters Hans and Sophie, Inge, her graphic-designer husband Otl Aicher (1922-1991) and the artist and Bauhaus-graduate Max Bill (1908-1994), its first rector, and lasted for a mere 15 years. The internal debates about the functions of art and design and the increased influence of science in design practice and ideology reflected both progressive themes in the international Modernist movement as well as political reactions to Germany’s recent Nazi past and attempts to draw practical conclusions from these events.

[4] Unlike many other countries, Germany has been out of practice in the use of certain symbols and rituals of the traditional nation state: in reaction to its tainted 3rd-Reich-past the country has more or less refrained from displays of national pride through presentations by the armed forces. Also, unlike other European countries, signs of public mourning for fallen German servicemen, who had been sent to Post-Cold-War conflicts since the end 90s, had been hardly visible and provided less of a populist channel to cope with the uncertainties of national identity and ideas of citizenship.

[5] “Computer-aided” graphics eventually did what the Basel-based German Wolfgang Weingart had anticipated in his manually produced poster designs of the 70s and early 80s: a multi-layered clash of textures, images and text that questioned conventional ideas of legibility and message. Whereas Weingart had used layers of montaged film to design his screen-printed posters, often in the idiosyncratic “Welt-Format”, the first wave of experimental digital graphic-designers made use of software, which allowed effects of a similar overlapping and merging of various planes. London-based Why-Not-Associates and Jonathan Barnbrook, Designer’s Republic from Sheffield and the Californian April Greiman were all featured in Rick Poyner’s book that was instrumental in promoting the new technology as a platform for the “cutting edge”: “Typography Now: The Next Wave”. (Booth-Clibborn, 1991)

[6] Daniel Eatock (born 1975), who had been working with Andrew Blauvelt in the in-house graphics department at the Walker Art Center after graduating from the Royal College of Art London in 1998, has been one of key proponent of a process-driven design that draws from a conceptual and Structuralist heritage in art, and yet connected it firmly with the craft and practice of graphic design. His utilitarian form-like Christmas and greeting cards and the felt-tip pen colour chart combined playfulness with economies of production. Other graphic designers of that generation, and recent graduates, have developed their very own approaches, still having their eyes firmly on an integrity of process, the making of it and the potential of a social context: James Goggin, Sarah de Bondt, Jon Hares, Laurent Benner, Abake, Stewart Bailey, Europa, Apfel and others.

[7] p 101ff, Tom Holert: "Design and Nervousness", in: Texte Zur Kunst, "Design", Ausgabe 72 / December 2008

[8] Arthur Lovejoy, "The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea" (1936)

[9] The term "the Curatorial" has been introduced in this context by the Swedish curator and art critic Maria Lind, who had been director of the Moderna Museet Stockholm and of the Munich Kunstverein and is now director of the graduate programme at the Centre of Curatorial Studies at Bard College, N.Y.

[10] Besides introducing the method of Issue-Based-Information-System (IBIS) to the methodology of design processes, the Berlin-born mathematician Horst Rittel (1930–1990) also described astutely a dilemma of problem-solving by distinguishing between "wicked and tame problems" – acknowledging that the first of the two is requiring a bespoke way of tackling at every occurrence. His influential paper was published whilst he was working at Berkeley in the 1970s. However, almost 20 years earlier, Rittel had been a teacher at HfG in Ulm and was, with his background, one of the key tutors promoting a more scientific approach within the design process. (p 155–169, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning", Horst W J Rittel and Melvin M Webber, in: Working Papers from the Urban and Regional Development, University of California-Berkeley, 1973)

[11] This might be a paraphrased version of a line in Max Bill's speech at the Richtfest of the HfG Ulm on 5 July 1954, in which he talked of design, from "a coffee cup to housing."

[12] see: Jacques Rancière, "The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation" (1991)

[13] Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) had put his name firmly on the map with a 1924 exhibition about new theatre technology in Vienna, which he had both curated and designed. Later he created many exhibition displays for New York's MOMA and was responsible for Peggy Guggenheim seminal "Art of this Century"-Salon in 1942. His designs differed substantially from the standard procession-like set-up of a show, which we still find today, as they tried to actively involve the visitors in the exhibition experience. Drawing from these processes Kiesler developed profound theoretical ideas and manifestos around "Correalism" and "Continuity" and the theme of the exhibition.

[14] Bruno Munari (1907–1998), an artist and designer received early inspiration through contact with the Futurist movement. Working for a big part of his life as a graphic designer, Munari moved effortlessly between disciplines and 2- or 3-dimensions and proved a true Renaissance man, who put curiosity and humour at the centre of his thoughtful and practical inquiries.

[15] The architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), mostly known for his geodesic dome, shared a similar sense of experiment and exploration (as a child he had visited a Frobelian kindergarten). Besides pursuing his own holistic and engineer-oriented concept of design, he also wrote not only the famous book "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth" (1969) but also collaborated on "I Seem to be Verb" (1970), which was conceived together with Jerome Agel and the graphic designer Quentin Fiore, the latter had previously partnered up with the Texan cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan to create the infamous "The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects" (1967).

[16] Architect and educator Cedric Price (1934–2003) had long resisted the idea for a book. But in 1984 colleagues at the Architectural Association London (AA) had finally convinced him to put together what was eventually called "The Square Book". It compiled a range of mostly unrealised architectural projects by this English eccentric. Famously, his "Fun Palace" (1961), a concept for a flexible performing arts complex for his theatre director friend Joan Littlewood has provided lasting inspiration, not at least to Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano's Pompidou Centre (1977). Price's instructions for the "Fun Palace" users read as follows: "Choose what you want to do – or watch someone else doing it. Learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery, or just listen to your favorite tune. Dance, talk or be lifted up to where you can see how other people make things work. Sit out over space with a drink and tune in to what's happening elsewhere in the city. Try starting a riot or beginning a painting – or just lie back and stare at the sky"

[17] Cedric Price, "Cedric Price: Works II", AA Press, 1984, republished as "The Square Book" (Wiley-Academy, 2003)