

What is Design?

The practices presented in this review raise the question of what design is. Indeed the approaches taken by these designers may often resemble artistic practices or writing practices. Design, as Adam Nathaniel Furman reminds us in his interview, is a word that is open-ended enough to accept many different conceptions.

"Part of the reason why design can be used in this arbitrary manner is that it has never cohered into a unified profession, such as law, medicine or architecture, where a licence or similar qualification is required to practise, with standards established and protected by self-regulating institutions, and use of the professional descriptor limited to those who have gained admittance through regulated procedures. Instead, design has splintered into ever-greater subdivisions of practice without any overarching concept or organisation, and so can be appropriated by anyone"¹.

None of the designers in this issue defines design globally; each one speaks about his own point of view, without denying their own subjectivity: "My approach to design is this one", "I explore a kind of design like this," or "I've understood design this way." These discourses are never totalising or defining. They are oriented, with a personal and subjective approach, on a specific subject of investigation, and in a defined space of work.

It seems pertinent to us to point out this characteristic, since, when all is said and done, this is what design is made of. No clear definition has ever been shared by the entire field, whether this exercise has been attempted from a methodological (design is a specific method of creation), technical (design is the bridge between technique and society), academic (design is a specific mode of learning), or even sensitive (design is a way of seeing) or process-oriented (design is the system of a project) point of view. The functionality of objects, which used to determine it, isn't shared neither. The emergence of critical design, managerial design, machine design, body design, bio-design, amateur design or fiction design renders all of these definitions null and void.

We could say that design is 'the creative act for life', which is the widest definition possible, but this would then be to deny that the other creative fields, such as art or architecture are "for life" as well, and on the other hand to deny that disciplines that study life such as history, sociology, or ethnography are made of creative acts too. Or, it would mean that design is everything, that it encompasses architecture, the arts, social science and the engineering sciences, which seems to us a little pretentious and counter-productive, since if it is everything, then it is nothing. It is no longer a clear field, is no longer integrated into a context, and is no longer structured. This definition is no more valid than the others, in the end. Of course, this absence of a common definition is extremely important for design. It assures dynamism and constant renewal of the subjects, media, and concepts that designers develop. A fixed definition of design would limit the exploration of new spaces for application and reflection. Design is therefore always localised, always specific. It makes no generalities. It is made up of particularities, of specific examples.

If we cannot give design a definition and, as a consequence, any delimitation, we can nevertheless look at what design is; that is to say, what constitutes and structures it. Rather than trying to define it, which would mean circumscribing it – a losing battle – we could attempt to embark on a *designography*.

Practices, Nothing But Practices

So what do we know about design? What can we describe in an objective and common way?

The first element is the players: it is possible to know who is a designer and who is not. Even if certain doubts may come up with regard to crafts or amateur practices, designers define themselves as such and so we can identify them. The second element it is possible to pinpoint is influences, or relations. In fact, designers' productions and discourses are regularly made by citing, whether in an explicit or implicit way, the work of other designers. There is thus a network constructed in the world of design, through influences, reactions, answers, copies or transformations of precedent works. Finally, a third element that can be seen is the sensibility of design when dealing with evolutions in the fields that surround it. Design explores, exploits, transforms, makes tangible, and transgresses advances in the sciences such as biology, chemistry, or physics; but it is also strongly influenced by the social sciences like sociology, ethnography, art history or the history of performing arts. Or even the history of techniques or contemporary philosophy. Lastly, it has a similar appetite for science fiction, cinema, video games, conspiracy theories and blogs. All of these subjects, and all of these fields, are territories that design ingests, digests and transmits in new forms.

So to summarise, we can define the players, the interactions between players, and their relation with their environment, without ever being able to define the whole of design, neither in its circumscription, nor in its specificity with regard to other disciplines.

The truth is, design is a swarm.

It is made up of a myriad of players, who possess the interactions between them, react to their immediate environments, all of these interactions transforming the whole in dynamics and directions which are specific yet whose forms are never fixed, whose limits are never defined. The entire throng is always in retraction/expansion and connection/detachment. This image

of the swarm enables us to conceive of a whole, in the form of a system of function rather than a set structure. Design is just specific practico-theories; it is never the application of a general theory to a specific practice. Nor is it the application of a general practice to a specific theory. Design is a school of fish. It reacts to its environment and it explores territories.

From Example To Paradigm

This type of swarming relationship is ultimately characterized by a unitary interaction, from one to one and not from one to a group. If we think about this, it's fairly obvious: designers are influenced by a handful of other creators and take up, and make good use of, the practices that they consider to be pertinent or interesting. There is, therefore, a unitary construction, which can have more or less impact on the whole, but which spreads from one practice to another as a chain. And well, that is exactly the relationship that Giorgio Agamben describes when he talks about the notion of Paradigm.

In his conference entitled, "What is a Paradigm?" Agamben actually dissociates two different meanings for this term. In order to describe them, Agamben makes reference to the work of Thomas Kuhn, who, in the context of the reprinting of his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* expands on these two meanings. In one case, the paradigm constitutes "what the members of a certain scientific community have in common, that is to say, the whole of techniques, patents and values shared by the members of the community"². This definition encompasses therefore not only a scientific community's value systems, but also its systems of exchange and method. If we transfer it to the sphere of creation, then a paradigm represents all of the discourses, values, operating modes and modes of representation that an artistic discipline has in common to make dialogue and understanding possible.

In the case of design, it is obvious that we possess these paradigms. The productions presented by the designers who have been invited to contribute to this review propose modifications to these paradigms, by way of the formats and subjects. However, (and the responses in the interviews bear this out) we cannot, under this definition, speak about a new paradigm. The discourses, tools and principles of presentation have always evolved, ever since the birth of design. There has been no clean break, but only continual transformations. In this sense, there is no *revolutionary* paradigm; it is always and only *evolutionary*.

But the second definition looks a lot more fertile: "*In the second sense, the paradigm is a single element of a whole, say for instance Newton's Principia, which, acting as a common model or an example, stands for the explicit rules and thus defines a coherent tradition of investigation. (...) The paradigm is in this sense just an example, a single phenomenon, a singularity, which can be repeated and thus acquires the capability of tacitly modeling the behavior and the practice of scientists*"³.

When applied to the creative disciplines, this concerns a particular practice which, repeated, taken up and interpreted, progressively becomes a paradigm, acquiring its value as an example. In this case, we enter into the domain of networks, clusters, systems. We're not talking about an ensemble, but rather shared particularities. In light of what we put forward in the beginning, it seems to us that design is paradigmatic; it functions and structures itself in this specific form.

Therefore, the question of whether the particular practices presented in this review are the design of tomorrow is a *non-question*. The question should be asked about their capacity to become paradigm; that is, to know whether these approaches can influence the way design is practiced and thought about in the future. The objective of presenting these practices is therefore not motivated by a desire to criticise more traditional practices, involving functional, everyday objects. Rather, the idea is to open traditional practices up to more complex sensibilities, while staying within the sphere of use and the context of commerce.

History and Future

This way of conceiving design enables us to approach the delicate question of design history. As a matter of fact, since none of the protagonists can agree on a common definition of design, it is extremely difficult to separate out what is, or what is not part of the history of design. Some will say that the Homo sapiens' flint rocks were the first design objects. Others will defend conventional forms, like chairs, and will consider the Egyptian thrones. Still others will look to Da Vinci as the first designer, as he imagined techniques which are now applied to current uses. And still others will see design as being connected to modernity, and agree with Pevsner, who names Morris as the instigator of design (whereas he himself was a fervent defender of craft techniques and medieval collective systems). Some will only consider industrial design and will tend toward Bauhaus and the Werkbund, its first iteration (while putting aside at the same time all complexity in the ideas of the Bauhaus). And so it goes for all of the historical facts that follow: which are the practices that can be considered design and which are the ones that cannot? Can the manuals on the optimisation of everyday gestures in the 19th century be considered design? If so, should we be searching for the origin of 'Rules of conduct' manuals in order to understand the history of our field?

As Tony Fry so pertinently points out, the issue of the history of design, as a discipline, is traditionally built on famous objects by designers of the 20th century. This is a material vision, pragmatic and modern, which he considers to be limited⁴. It is also possible to adopt a semiotic relationship to the history of design: to identify and compare the uses of the word "design", starting with its first appearance in the 19th century. But once again, this does not seem pertinent to drawing up a history of design. The word "technique" appears in the 18th century, as introduced by D'Alembert, yet the philosophy of techniques goes back to Plato, and the history of techniques goes back to the beginnings of Man.

The objective here is not to propose a new history of design, but rather to reveal a few elements that could be problematic when one is faced with this undertaking. Exactly as with the history of technique, it is very difficult to define design solely

through its objects, or only through its protagonists. It is harder still to define it through conditions that have nothing to do with their results. The political, social, economic or mythical reasons and implications should be integrated, but cannot in any case be treated globally.

Therefore, we think that, just as design is something that works from one to one, it is possible to approach the history of design in the form of "phyla" or descent lines, as Deleuze and Guattari did. This implies, in the *modus operandi*, adopting an ethnographical approach to the networks that cross disciplines and temporalities. Developing investigative leads, building relations, following filiations. Searching out the origins of the manuals of 'Rules of good conduct', the different social significations of candy, questioning the concept of comfort through the ages and in different spaces, the notion of free time, following the concept of repetition from industry to serial killers, and in this way, putting together maps of consistencies that will inevitably connect sciences, techniques, social relationships, beliefs, conventions and inhabitants. Some trails have already been blazed, but there are plenty of paths still to be travelled.

What we have here is a job to be done, not only in order to invent our past, but also to get acquainted with our future.

Emile De Visscher

Translated from French by Patricia Chen.