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Visual self-satisfaction that is almost universal

DESIGN FOUNDATIONS HAVE INTERESTS THAT ARE RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE CURRENTLY DICTATED BY THE MARKET. IT IS PRECISELY FOR THIS REASON THAT DESIGN CAN BE A CIVIL ALTERNATIVE USED ONCE AGAIN TO INCITE THE REAL INTEREST OF REAL PEOPLE INSTEAD OF THE FINANCIAL INTERESTS OF A SELECT FEW. IT IS ALSO ABOUT UNDERSTANDING RESPONSIBILITY AND THE POSSIBILITIES THIS DISCIPLINE HAS ON OFFER. THE FOREMOST TASK IS THE RE-POLITICISATION OF DESIGN, WHICH FIRST QUESTIONS THE COMMISSION AND, IN THE BEST OF CASES, THEN MAKES IT EVOLVE TOWARDS THE RESOLUTION OF REAL PROBLEMS.

"Write a text on design and politics for me". This request reminds me of Le Petit Prince (The Little Prince): "Draw an elephant for me that has been swallowed by a snake". So I set about writing and representing "that which adults are no longer able to distinguish". I was describing a strange planet where machines produced astronomical quantities of identical objects. Since these objects could not be piled up in the same place, they were spread around the whole surface of the planet. After they had been spread around, beings dressed all in black tried to evolve their shape. They designed these new objects under the high command of agents charged with product distribution strategy. If the beings dressed in black strove to render them more appealing and useful, the agents only worried about distributing them across the land. They appeared to be at war against other strategists connected to other machines. It must be said that overall, the whole thing seemed to work. With each new change, however superficial, the inhabitants of the planet seemed to forget the things they already had before rushing on to the next new thing. If we look closer, we can however see that this little game was not as natural as it seemed. In order to persuade the inhabitants of the planet, known as "consumers", ever larger amounts of money were spent on publicity. Repetitive signs multiplied into infinity around the world using the most diverse of media tracked down each inhabitant to persuade them to acquire the new object. One can wonder whether the inhabitants of this

planet were truly happy. They seemed, one may deduce, to find pleasure in acquiring these new objects. However, such joy only lasted a moment. It was felt that very quickly a new need would make itself felt and that this succession of pleasures and desires did not really bring happiness. And besides, in order to establish an objective portrait of the planet, it should be said that not everybody had access to these objects. Strangely, in certain parts of the globe, some seemed to have the opportunity to possess an abundance of beautiful objects while in other parts, consumers were found totally destitute. Could they even be called ¨consumers¨? They tried to get into the areas where the first group lived, but were roughly chased away. The first group, on the other hand, was fully entitled to go and relax and tan themselves in the countries of the second group. However unfair this neo-liberal planet was, it seemed to bother almost nobody. The consumer continued to selfishly consume the most useless of products without giving a care to their unhappy neighbours, or to future generations. A strange world indeed! I will not go any further with this story in order instead to dedicate myself more directly to the relationship between this useless discipline known as ¨design¨ and politics.

Apoliticism and everyone for himself:

On first sight, and the way it is understood by the majority magazines and a number of my colleagues, the notion of design is light years away from the remotest notion of politics. ¨Could one imagine an activity that is more apolitical than that of creating the ideal form, to conceive an original and functional object, a pleasant and contemporary space, the best fitting and most attractive clothing, the most seductive and recognisable brand, the most supple and intelligent of high-technology material, the most ergonomic and progressive of interactive systems?¨ At the risk of being a killjoy, it seems necessary to put these proclamations of innocence into context, in the interests of the discipline itself. I am aware that criticising this position risks appearing to be difficult. Our selfish neo-liberal society brilliantly cultivates mistrust of all things public and even more so all forms of social, political and even ecological criticism. Everyone quite innocently just does his or her own thing in their own little corner.

All these examples of individualism taken together dangerously and irreparably heat up the earth, deplete energy resources, leaving nothing for future generations, contributing to ever more scandalous social injustice and to the brutalisation of society. Yet nobody is responsible. Everything is for the best in the best of all worlds, leave us alone, and besides ¨if there is one activity that creates happiness, then it is design¨. In order to shake up this heap of certainties and intellectual comfort, some explanatory detours seem necessary. We have to unearth both the responsibility and the possibilities of this discipline.

Design and transformation:

The first detour concerns the definition itself of the term ¨design¨. We need to remember that it came indirectly from old Italian. Before the 17th century, ¨disegno¨ meant both design and purpose. Representation, giving shape, is linked in this word to intent, to a project and the anticipation of a result based on the identification of a problem to be resolved. In this sense, the design project could be defined by its systematic attachment to an intention to transform. ¨No design without transformation¨ is an aspect of design that should not be evaluated independently of the analysis of the quality of the transformation that it creates. By way of analogy, the mathematician conceiving the atomic bomb could certainly say that he was apolitical. Those calculations did not, of themselves, have warlike intentions, but the results of research and transformations brought about were profoundly political. There is no shortage of debate among scientists to determine the different inventors that were responsible for that harmful and dangerous technology. Today, they carry on in plenty of other areas where ethics and the interests of human beings opposed developments in science. Indeed, to a less tangible degree, design actively participates in society and brings with it the responsibility of direct and indirect effects of the transformation that it generates. Thus, to take a simple example, it is difficult to dissociate the making up of a page of a book or a poster from its content. A beautiful layout will not make up for a dubious message. The ecological and social consequences of objects that have been conceived stem quite naturally from a responsibility which is certainly shared by their creator.

The Italian designer Enzo Mari frequently mentions the responsibility of the designer compared with the social ethics of manufacturing the designed object. A top-design sports shoe will leave a macabre aftertaste when it is discovered that it has been made by exploited Indonesian workers, including underage children. I myself would go further in raising the semantic responsibility of the designer.

But let us first return to the specifics of design compared with other disciplines that face questions of transformation. We know that design covers diverse and varied fields. Objects, signs, images, visual languages, materials, spaces, processes, events and - why not? - hairstyling and haircutting fall under the category of design. The importance of transformations brought into play and their consequences for society diverge radically, of course. What links together these activities, however, and what constitutes the basis of the specific attitude within the discipline is most certainly a link between the project and the user and beyond him or her, with all the people affected by the process of transformation. In developing his project, the designer therefore seeks to qualify the interaction between the human and the non-human thing he is developing. Unlike advertising and other marketing strategies, the designer does not look to influence humans, to play with the unconscious mind or try to standardise cultural behaviour in order to sell products. On the contrary, he focuses on optimising his project, automatically showing respect for the person who shows an awareness for it, will consider him to be aware and responsible and therefore capable of appreciating his proposition for a long time. Sentimentally attached to his or her creation, the designer can only rejoice at the support of the user which he will hope to lift up rather than lower. In this area, mocking the users can only end in mediocrity. The closer he feels to the person for whom his project is aimed, the more he can escape from generalities and that appalling logic of the common denominator. The more he is able to individualise his project, give it context, the more the user will show interest. At its base and in its un-subjugated form, design therefore represents interests that are radically different from those of marketing as exercised today, unfortunately, and including in the public domain. As I understand design, it

constitutes a worthy civil alternative where genuine interest in the human element and society is moved down in terms of priority compared with the financial interests of a few.

Design and dissatisfaction:

A second detour seems necessary here to delve deeper into this point. It can be considered as the origin of this useless activity known as design. The link is often made between this discipline and the development of the industrial age and to the question of the conception and mass distribution of identical manufactured objects. This modernist vision seems to me to be too limited and too centred on Judeo-Christian culture. If the profession of the designer as someone who is autonomous has perhaps emerged in this pre-industrial age, design itself long preceded it. Design exists in all forms in society. It is not even a style, nor the consequence of a form of society. Every kind of society has developed its own design depending on its culture, rites and needs. The consumption society at its advanced stage relies on design for its economic subsistence. Design takes on a major significance that is often artificial. The natural process, consisting of determining a problem and then working out a suitable change to resolve it, giving it shape, is often found to be reversed in our society. The constant need for new form to drive sales puts the process of transformation more and more out of line with the real problems of our planet and its inhabitants.

But let's get back to the start... Like Vilém Flüsser, I prefer to place the origin of design at the moment when our ancestors acquired the exceptional ability to transform the tools they needed to maximise their efficiency. Let us try to go back to that moment when Homo Sapiens, dissatisfied with the quality of stones that nature offered him, decided to intervene. Over the millennia, like any other animal, he used a stone each time that he needed one. An initial development consisted in retaining high-quality stones after using them. But the fundamental evolutionary step, symbolising the debut of design, took place when man acquired the capacity to anticipate the consequences of the forms that he developed upon the future use of the object. This ability was born of a profound dissa-

tisfaction with a given state which gave rise to analysis of the problem and search for a solution. This dissatisfaction with what existed constituted the necessary design impulse and more generally for creativity and progress is the motor of this design now completely enslaved by marketing? I sometimes doubt it. We find ourselves instead in a kind of generalised self-satisfaction, in which the human is completely forgotten, where complex end strategies are the beneficiaries without any real interest apart from financial. The main grounds for dissatisfaction and the driver of change seem today to fall within the financial dimension. Is this sufficient to make up a sustainable society?

Design and credibility:

Let's go back to our flint stones, the symbol of the origins of design, and to that dissatisfaction with what nature had to offer. What an act to improve what the gods had produced. What energy - no longer being satisfied with the caves that had been the good fortune of so many generations, but instead to construct shelters, imagining them, anticipating their presence by the project. To also conceive other tools which effectively extend the hand, transportable containers enabling contents to be placed in them, signals for communication, clothes for protection. Visiting archaeological museums demonstrates to us that self-satisfaction did not set in after the first flint had been carved. The object was permanently re-worked, refined, improved, embellished. Continually dissatisfied, obsessed with that desire to improve further the object and its use, the craftsmen-designer increasingly tried to go beyond the impossible and replace the gods.

We should note that as inventions gradually progressed, so society reacted. Almost systematically and even if it sometimes took time, the new took the place of what had existed beforehand. For everyone, the old would become outdated, naff and unattractive, and would no longer function. In this sense, design constitutes a formidable tool for bringing credibility, or the opposite. The invention of one community would be envied by others. Forced by the progress of their neighbours and in order not to disappear under their weight of their power and

appeal, other communities had to react. Whether they, in turn, invented something even more effective or they adapted the new technique but without it appearing like a simple copy, they integrated signals into their own culture. A reading of history focusing on these formidable competitions between different cultures - on the level of technical progress as well as the productions and the signalling systems that allowed this to be transcribed opens up to us an important reading code on the role of design in our society from the show and the image. This credibility factor often remains highly under-estimated.

Design and society:

The role of design, such as it has come to be described, occupies an essential role in certain periods of history, and less important in others. Equally, its importance varies by country. Certain isolated communities have satisfied themselves for thousands of years with the same level of development. Their craftsmen do not undertake transformation. They are content to make identical reproductions of what has already been invented, many years previously. No need to design in that case. On the other hand, other societies, notably under Judeo-Christian influence, are found almost constantly to be researching and developing. In contact with other cultures, in this fierce competition between them, trying to enrich and develop their power through exchange and war, these societies cultivate the quality of that interaction between human and non-human whether for reasons connected to war, or representation of power, or culture or more simply to the well-being of everybody or part of its population. Sometimes the driver for an evolutionary step, at the cutting edge of creativity must sometimes integrate external evolutions and adapt. "My Name is Red", the book by Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, demonstrates with a high degree of relevance, the importance of these communities of artists and artisan-designers and their movement from one country to another, depending on the needs of different societies.

It could be said that a dialogue or rather symbiosis was established at certain times between the community of designers

and society. These periods can be characterised as progressive, humanist and ambitious.

The demands for quality, the move away from the simply utilitarian, respect and desire for transformation by certain people are found interacting with the objectives of the community. On the other hand, the satisfaction of the designer will grow and exceed the framework of the creative act when he feels that the society in which he is trying to act is only concerned with security, economic war, exclusion, regulation, police and profit. He will become desperate when he thinks that gossip, racism, small-mindedness, bureaucracy, censure and authoritarianism dominate the objectives of governments. He will no longer succeed in giving the best of himself when he feels like this, that the quality of his work is not appreciated for its true value, that demands are no longer found in meetings, that he alone is obliged to determine the objectives. He will feel very alone when he realises that the sponsor refuses to take risks with innovations, that he does not wish to invest in the means and the long-term, that he is selfishly acting under personal strategies that have nothing to with the project, that he forgets the interests of users of other involved citizens, that he is only looking for a superficial transformation to give himself credibility or to improve his profit. He will rebel or will silently submit, thinking of earning his crust, while design becomes a simple media pretext, a deception.

Here the question is asked about the capacity of design to raise the level of the assignment without breaking with the head of the project. Does the designer possess the means to change so that he better respond to the real problems of today? I would not want to ignore the pressures on designers when facing sponsors who wish to subjugate design and treat it as a mere service. However, questioning the assignment seems to constitute the minimum act of resistance. Carried out in a constructive manner, this enables objectives to appear clearly and in the best of cases to allow it to evolve towards genuine problems. Anyway, the beginning of the design process should always rest on such questioning and on the understanding of the elements in play. A response without looking into what lies behind the requests, constitutes in my opinion the beginning

of a submissive attitude which I refuse to take. Not because I do not accept submission but because such a position is generally prejudicial both for the project and for design in general. Some people believe that the political question is being tackled rather late. They must be confusing resistance with politics. In attempting to show the interaction between society and design, and responsibility for it, it seems to me that this is fundamentally about politics. The question of resistance or, to put it another way, the consistent attitude of making oneself the chief inventor with regard to the problem, seems to me of course essential. But I would hope before finishing this chapter to have removed the impression of maligning the sponsors. In reality, it is nothing. On the contrary, I consider the role of sponsor to be essential as well: beforehand, for preparing the process of transformation; during, to work with the designer; and afterwards, to guarantee the acceptance and durability of the project and protect it from possible external and internal attacks from reactionaries. Each transformation requires time to settle in. A good sponsor will know how to take account of this difficult period. Many do so and I have had the opportunity of meeting some very good sponsors. Equally, I have also met the opposite. Certain periods give me the impression that society in general, blocked by fear, is incapable of cultivating this type of difficult passage and therefore everything simply opens up to what is contemporary and to progress.

Design and context:

The majority of the preceding text is devoted to demonstrating the political dimension in design in relation to development in society. It is now time to deal with the potential political attitude of the designer. As with all or most citizens, he has an opinion, a sensitivity, he gets offended by certain circumstances and reacts to certain injustices. It would be false to consider that this human dimension would not then be present in the creative process. On the contrary, if one wishes to extract design from this aesthetic, interchangeable and without knowing who dominates it today, design must be given back its character, its content and difference. Through critical and engaged confrontation with the specifics of the problem,

the designer enters into the creative process assessing the real differences in the situation. Two pernicious sicknesses to constantly watch out for: Wanting to resolve problems in general through the specific problem he must tackle; and considering himself as a brilliant inventor when adapting his work to circumstances of the assignment. Each of these largely generalised attitudes comes when all is said and done from what is interchangeable and from what is decontextual. It seems to me to be urgent regarding our overall society that design should cultivate the specificity of situations. This difference will increasingly arise as a consequence of specific financial, legal, geological, climactic, social or cultural featu-res. To do the same will constitute an easy way out. To specify it will require effort. But how do we specify without someone else being able to imitate this specificity. In the future, design could play a driving role here. Working on contextual transfor-mation seems to me to become an urgent need for our disci-pline. This attitude does not give globalisation justification, but it confronts the essential question of the quality of this global society. This will irredeemably happen through a constructive relationship between that which comes from elsewhere, uni-form and global, and that which constitutes the real peculia-rity of the here and now. Research into local specific qualities, non-selfish, not closed in on themselves, knowing how to express the differences while contributing to the subsistence of the planet seems to me to constitute an important objective design in the 21st century.

Design and resistance:

In the interests of the user who represents during the develo-pment process of the project, the designer cannot of course detach himself from the question of material and semantic pollution and from the over-consumption of energy, a central theme for qualitative subsistence on our planet. Likewise, on this point the designer will probably on occasion have to get into conflict with the exponential logic of marketing and certain selfish interests of the sponsor. His role will include awareness and search for alternatives. In certain cases this attitude, which could be considered conscious or political, could mean that the project evolves fundamentally. Clearly,

the introduction of such a consideration does not simplify the process but constructively develops the approach that could hardly be criticised.

There are obviously other aspects that are relevant to politics. Sometimes they constitute completely secondary parts of the project, but their correct handling is based on the quality of that interaction between the human and his environment. Let us take as an example the choice of language about known objects to illustrate the minute political subjects present in the daily life of the designer. The English language, not to call it "globish" is, then, the standarising element that in general also represents the easy way out. Our towns and public spaces should therefore today be considered as multicultural spaces. Languages mix and this multilingual expression must find its integrating visual nature. The designer will succeed relatively easily in convincing those to whom he speaks to preserve the language of the country against English. It will be harder to express multilingualism and the diversity of cul-tures. For the designer, to propose the most convincing way that will enable this expression.

It can be seen clearly that the attitude of the designer before sponsors who are un-sensitised will consist in proposing so-lutions and opening the debate if that means that the proposal implies a challenge, which is far from true in the majority of cases. Very often, during presentations, we see reactions such as: "Now then! We hadn't thought about this... the truth is that yes, the proposition is interesting" The reaction would never have been the same if the presentation was limited to a briefing note or a speech.

This point seems to me to be essential, and could constitu-te a form of conclusion. The designer has the ability to give credible shape to the political question. In a society where image is a basic power, it possesses the force to be able to launch a proposition. Its principal role within the framework of daily work above all consists of giving shape within the project to humanist intentions which he develops with the aim of transforming qualifies principally the interaction between human and the proposition. If certain sponsors feel irritated

by these initiatives, the majority of them appreciate seeing that the question of form remains linked to the essence of the problem and to the important aspect of content. They will be happy to have a partner who is capable of bringing substance to the project.

On the other hand, and I will not go further on this essential aspect, the designer can act as a "revealer" who shows that which cannot be seen. His visual sensibility enables that which Is rendered invisible to our eyes to be seen. The activities of the Organisation of Doctors of the world who have offered

high-technology design tents for homeless people living in the streets of Paris seems to me to be a good example.

The Children of Don Quijote who have taken action in improving the effectiveness of this visualisation work. Design can bring credibility to mute words, give shape to attractive representations to those who wish to reject conservative forces. It can help with expression by offering tools and images to communities who do not have access to communication media. Lastly, it can politically militate with its own means. That is to say, with the force of image.