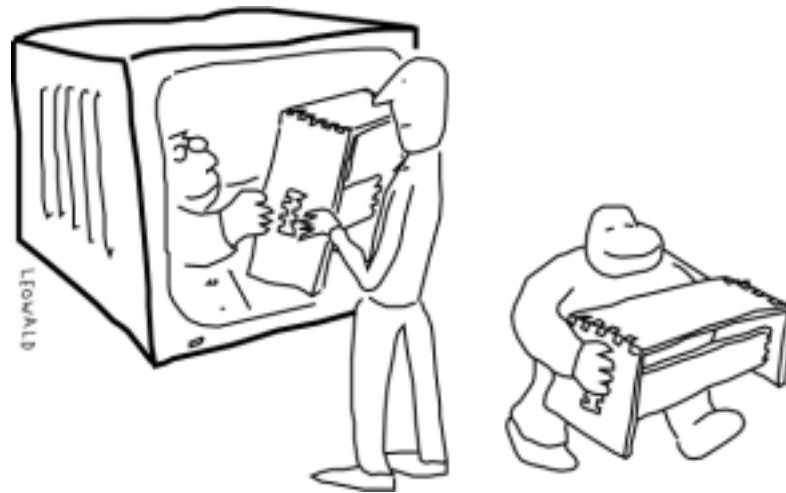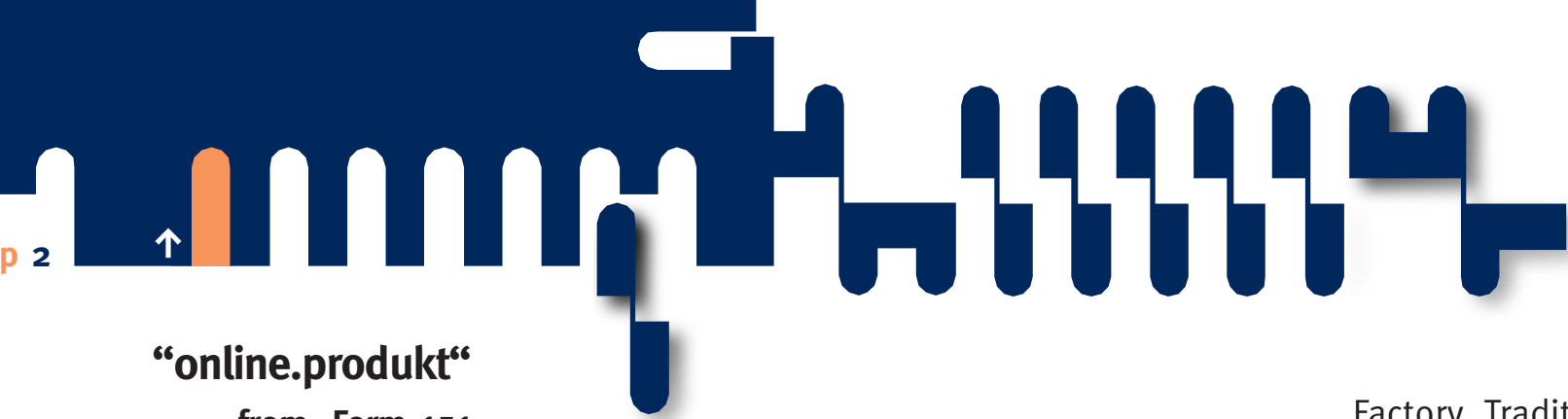## "online.produkt"

from: Form 151

With "online.produkt" in the Internet. the possibilities of the "virtual production" are being tested.

Rummaging the Internet for design, you can come across a web-site of a company called "online.produkt". This company self-confidently describes itself as a virtual company, as the first Product-Publisher. You will also find the model of an interactive user interface called Product-Finder and an illustrated hyper-text glossary where all these new terms are being explained. Finally you can download a dxf-file onto your own computer: Geometrical data of the famous Ulm stool, created with a CAD-program and modified for CNC-production.

The use of these data for the average net surfer seems questionable on first glance - who, after all, has a CNC-router in his basement? It logically follows that the sense of this virtual offer can rather be found in theoretical discussion. Working through the web-page it becomes clear: "online.produkt" is the planning game of a group of students at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach (Offenbach Design School). 14 prospective product designers worked in the summer term '95 under Professor Jochen Gros on the task of correlating existing models and thesis on design in the age of the data networks with practical experiences.

"online.produkt"

The hypothesis of future virtual production, formulated by Jochen Gros **(1)**, is a condensate of his own works on the effects of information technology on design **(2)** and the book The Virtual Corporation by the American economists William H. Davidow and Michael S. Malone **(3)**.

It is based upon the following idea: Interlaced information systems turn product development into an interactive process between customer and producer. The customer becomes co-producer or prosumer, the manufacturer or designer becomes a Product-Publisher. This process is supported by multi-media programmes, Product-Finders which offer orientation in a new multitude of possibilities. At the same time an interlaced CAD/CAM system enables you to develop a virtual product which only exists as a data product on the screen and which can be materialised at any place with the corresponding CAM-equipment, a so-called Techno-Factory. Traditional factories become mainly suppliers of semifinished products and black box-like functional groups; the retail trade mutates into Product-Galleries which exhibit samples and materials.

A number of advantages are evident: Transportation shifts from the real motorway to the data highway. The customer's wish for individual products could be fulfilled at low costs. The concept of the production-compatible form comes into play again: However, this argument from the times of the Werkbund now demands products which can be produced preferably in one go by CNC-machines, out of flat board for example. Its effect is a restriction on the freedom of design which needs to be counterbalanced by advantages. Turning this complex model real, in practice, seemed difficult - Jochen Gros therefore suggested to his students to found a Product-Publisher.

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In order to offer a platform for this experiment, the C -Lab for computer technology at the Offenbach Design College organised a conference on 17 and 18 July 1995: From the good to the virtual form.
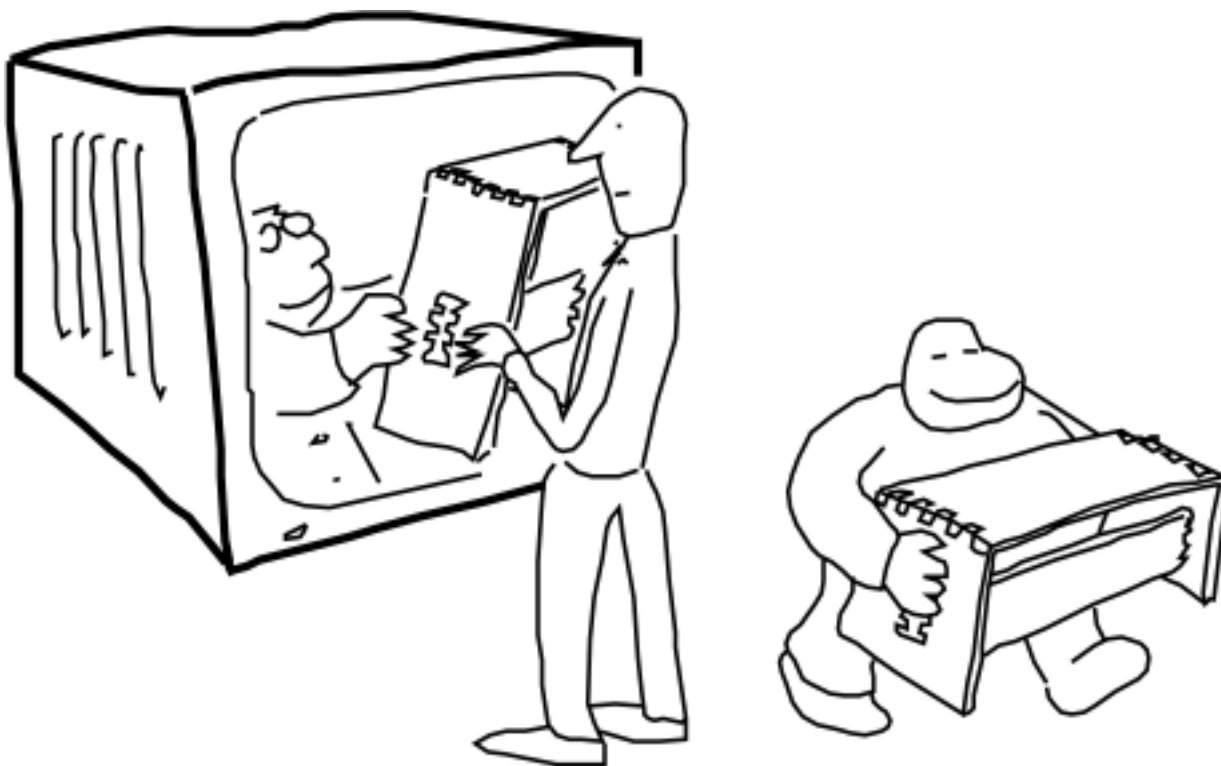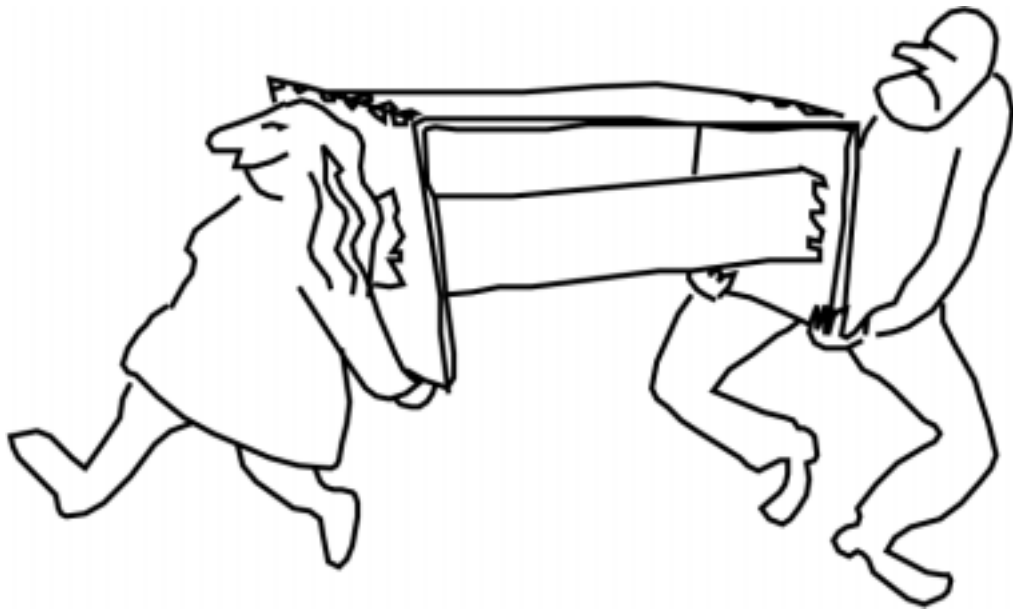

A team of 14 students worked on putting a theoretical concept into action. The task of defining the context and filling terms with meaning established itself of being of equal importance to the actual work on the company concept. The following method of working proved itself. The students invented a story of origin for every term in order to build a bridge from the future scenario back to a familiar situation in the present. Thus several possible origins of the technofactory emerged: a craft company which added a CNC-machine to its machinery, CNC-production departments of the industry which became independent profit centres, or even subcultural neighbourhood workshops.

The outcome was the presentation of "online.produkt" with text and illustrations at an exhibition. They now aimed at being able to demonstrate as many elements as possible in a working state for the time of the conference. Therefore the first virtual product of the company program was the beforementioned Ulm Stool. In order to make individualize it, "online.produkt" offered the conference

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Design School in the field of CNC wood working, put itself at their disposal figuring as a decentral production unit with roots in the craft trade. The Stuttgart furnishings store Magazin cleared some space for "online.produkt" which was turned into a Product-Gallery equipped with stool, internet-terminal and notice boards.

To speculate on the possibilities of the Internet is one thing - to use it another. Some illusions of speed and interactive multi-media

guests to change size and proportion of the design - it thus became a multifunctional piece of furniture, from plant pillar to garden bench. The Wissner company - a manufacturer of CNC-routers who gave live demonstrations of its machines at the conference - took on the role of the Techno-Factory. The interior fitting company Harich from Albstadt in Swabia, an experienced partner of the Offenbach

sketches by (c) Stefan Leowald

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Literature:

1. Jochen Gros;
"Virtuelle Alternativen?"
in: Dagmar Steffen (Hg.);
"Welche Dinge braucht
der Mensch?"
Giessen: Anabas-Verlag 1995

2. Jochen Gros;
"High-Tech-Avantgarde"
(1), (2), (3)
in: form 117-I-1987, 118-II-
1987, 119-III-1987

3. The Virtual Corporation
William H. Davidow und
Micheal S. Malone
Harper Collins, New York 1992

possibilities have been dispersed by collapsing telephone lines and crashing www-servers. However, one thing crystallised: The electronic media created even at the college a new basis for interdisciplinary co-operation as can be demonstrated with the illustrations by Stefan Leowald, student of visual communication at the Offenbach Design School, which he created on the graphics tablet.
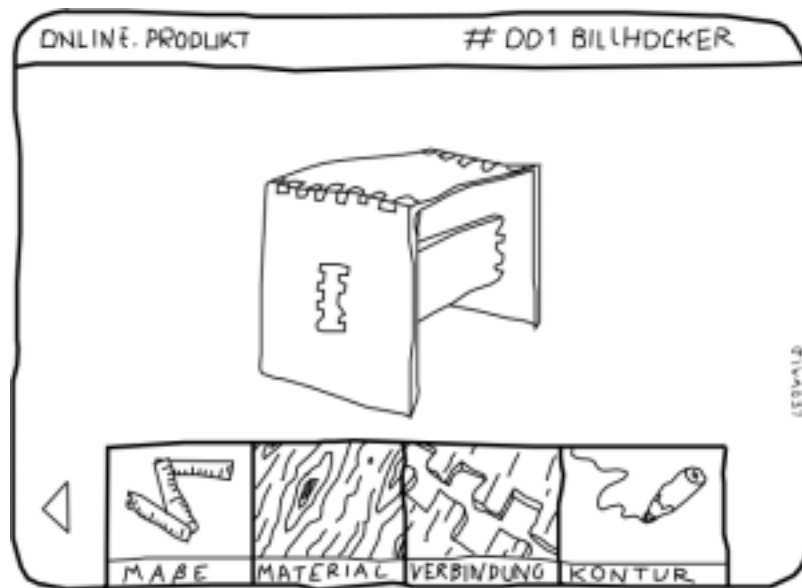
Technically, the virtual production can already work - the experiences made with "online.produkt" confirm this statement by Jochen Gros. However, the need for explanation of the model and the lack of evidence show: There is not only a lack of products which are compatible with the model, but there are also other open questions: Where, for example, are the markets for virtual products? What exactly are the advantages for the customer and what price will he be prepared to pay for them? What exactly means individualisation and how will product identities be created in the future? The students of the coming terms at the Offenbach Design Schoolwill not run out of seminar themes for quite some time.