Some Virtues of Design

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Note

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An unfashionable term

Dealing with virtues today provokes associations with outdated issues, covered with mould, dry greyness - what in German we call *moralingesättigt* (saturated with moral appeals). The supposed outdatedness, the supposed loss of contact with the real stuff of the present world fulfils occasionally a role as a candidate of benevolent - or not that benevolent - dismissal. It seems to have become a pet theme in publications, particularly in the US, that deal with the future, especially information technology and management. Hardly

Gui Bonsiepe   Some Virtues of Design   NOV 02 1998   2

one can open an issue or attend a meeting in which there is not an open or oblique reference to Europe as being off-the-track. The issue, of course, is not a supposed lack of dynamics and of competence in innovation, but a barely camouflaged appetite for an imperial design that considers everything deviant from the one-dimensional dream as an offence.

Confronted with an aggressive missionarism of competition *ad ultranza* that pretends to have found in itself the measure of the world and for the world, one might ask, with what kind of social phantasy we deal that puts competition and fighting at the centre of society? What I am questioning is not only the ambition of any universal scheme, whoever is purporting it, but the divergence between advanced information technology and atrophy of sociocultural imagination.

I chose to focus on the issue of virtues of design when I was reading - once again - the *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* by Italo Calvino. As is known, he finished only five out of a plan of six memos before he died. In this remarkable small volume he speaks about the values he would like to see maintained and brought into the next millennium as far as literature is concerned. These shared values he calls virtues. Taking his approach as starting point I want to talk about the shared values of design for the next millennium.

V

Virtues =

common shared values

One Virtue: Lightness
The *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* include:

Lightness,

Quickness,

Exactitude,

Visibility,

Multiplicity and

Consistency.

Without wanting to push the issue, several of these values for literature can be - with due corrections - transferred to the domain of design. A literal transfer certainly would be naive and inappropriate. But parallels and affinities seem to exist. For instance, when Calvino defines

Lightness as the attempt to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language,

are there not analogies in the field of design? Lightness in design might be a virtue to be maintained, especially when we reflect on material and energy flows and their impact on the environment and when we

Humour Wit

Elegance

One
Virtue of Design

L

Lightness

confront the mundane issue of congested lines cloaked with digital trash in the Net. When later on he refers to the

> "sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing … that what many consider to be the vitality of the times - noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring - belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars",

Calvino, Italo, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium.* Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press 1988. p. 12.

lightness acquires a critical dimension and dissipates wrong associations of easy going aloofness and superficiality.

Definitely I would include under the term Lightness the notions of

humour,
wit and
elegance

for which we have particularly in Italian design so well known examples (e.g. **Castiglioni's** tractor seat mounted on a flat elastic steel profile); or to take an example from the host country, the graphic design of the passport for the citizens of this country. These examples represent the virtue of Lightness in design.

Virtue of Design

Intellectuality
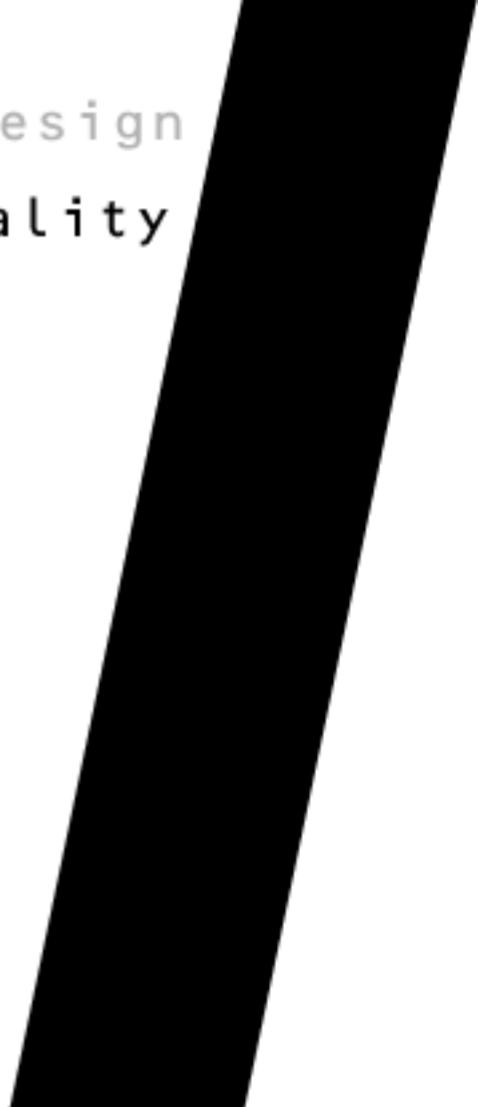
Readiness
to question
orthodoxies

One Virtue: Intellectuality

On occasion of the Aspen Congress 1989, dedicated to Italian Design, Ettore Sottsass surprised the audience by presenting himself - quite naturally I would say - as an intellectual and cultural operator. Only an Italian or a French can say that. Italy and France are two countries in which the notion of intellectual does not produce a lifting of the eye brows and a climate of suspect. In Germany, in the US and I assume also in the Netherlands the world "intellectual" carries negative overtones and certainly many of the practising design professionals would accept but with reluctance the self-interpretation as intellectuals. Rather they would say, that they are practitioners and they want to distance themselves from the neighbourhood of the intellectual; they do not share Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, who uses his technical competence within social institutions like private companies or public administration.

Intellectuals are - rightly or wrongly - characterised as wordsmiths because they play a decisive role in shaping the discourse of domains - political, cultural, scientific and technological. In the field of design, intellectual formation has not a strong history, because design education grew out of craft training with a deep mistrust against anything theoretical.

Recently however we can observe some promising signs of a shift away

from an indifferent, if not openly hostile attitude towards an interest in articulation and theoretical issues.

Designers start to write, particularly graphic designers - for me a promising symptom to overcome a period of collective muteness of the profession. Design and writing about design are not longer seen as a sterile and mutually exclusive opposites. On the contrary, a design historian in the year 2050 who looks back at the design scenery at the end of the 20th century might be surprised about the binarism between action

and contemplation. In two generations this opposition might appear as out-of-date as for us the debate about types between **Muthesius** and **van der Velde** nine decades ago.

Intellectuals have repeatedly reflected about their role in society. The most salient characteristic seems to me the stamina to

reveal contradictions, to **rock** the boat of selfcomplacency, to **compare** what **is** to that what **could** be, and in particular to **ask** for the legitimisation of power.

This is a business that is not whole-wholeheartedly welcome to the powers that be, whatever they are and wherever they are.

I do not want to heroise the role of the intellectual, and even less I want to overestimate his possibilities of influence, above all in the field of design. Neither I do want to stylise him or her into a permanent resentful protester driven by the drive of "being against". But I would not like to see this ingredient of a **critical stance in the design culture** missing or abolished. An antidote to intellectual acquiescence does not only seem to me desirable, but indispensable if one wants to avoid the danger of falling into the trap of indifference and accommodation.

As second conclusion, I would like to see maintained **Intellectuality** as a virtue of design in the next century:

readiness and courage to put into question
the orthodoxies,
conventions,

traditions,
agreed-upon canons of design
- and not only of design.

That is not only a verbal enterprise, an enterprise that works through the formulation of texts, an enterprise of linguistic competence of a critical mind. The designer acting as designer, that is, with the tools of his profession, faces the particular challenge to of an **operational critique**. In other words, she or he faces the challenge not to remain in critical distance to and above reality, but to get involved in and intervene in reality through design actions, that open new or different opportunities for action.

Public domain

One Virtue: Concern for the Public Domain

The Netherlands possess a great tradition in civic virtues that manifests itself in the care for the public domain. A foreigner visiting the Netherlands is struck by the attention given to detail in such simple every-day objects as an address label for post parcels or a time table for trains. Moreover he is struck by the apparent *Selbstverständlichkeit* with which caring for the public domain is taken for granted and considered one of the noble tasks and outright obligations of public administration. This care for details and quality of public service is a result of a political commitment that might be traced back to the civic history of this country. Certainly it is not the result of a single short term action, but rather the outcome of a steady practice rooted in the political body of Netherlands society.

Politics is the domain in which the members of a society decide in what kind of society they want to live. Politics thus goes far beyond political parties. Care for the public domain, though a profoundly political commitment, is at the same time transpolitical insofar it exceeds - or better should exceed - the interests of the government in turn.

As the third design virtue in the future I would like to see maintained the concern for the Public Domain, and this all the more so when registering the

almost delirious onslaught on

everything public that seems to be a generalised

credo of the **predominant economic pet model**.

One does well to recall that the socially devastating effects of unrestricted private interests have to be counterbalanced by public interests in any society that claims to be called democratic and that deserves that label. The tendency towards Third-Worldization even of richer economies with a **programmatic binary system** of a small group of haves and a majority of have-nots is a phenomenon that casts shadows on the

future and raises some doubts about the reason in the brains of the people that find utter wisdom and desirability in such delacerating scheme of social organisation.

One
Virtue of Design

Otherness

One Virtue: Otherness

As fourth virtue I mention Otherness, or better concern for Otherness. This issue is linked to the discussion about

Self and Identity, about Presentation and Representation.

It plays a strong role in discussions about feminism, gender roles, race and ethnic diversity. It has virulent political implications because it is rooted in the question of **autonomy**, i.e. the

power to

participate in the determination of one's own future.

This leads us to put into focus the - as **Edward Said** formulated it -

blithe indifference to a good three-quarters of reality.

Today design and design discourse reflect the interests of the dominating economies that under the banner of globalization are engaged in the process of modelling the world according to their hegemonic interests and imagery. **Globalization** as a new **economic fundamentalism** is the name for the actual planetary project or drift, a process that seems to advance with inexorable ruthlessness, like an objective force passing over the heads of individuals, governments and societies.

Tapping the conceptual repertoire of anthropological discourse,

globalization

can be interpreted as an attempt to incorporate Otherness

and to subject Otherness.

That might not be to everybody's taste. It should not come as a surprise that the victims of this process that euphemistically and cynically are labelled with the term "social costs" resist the attempt of incorpora-

tion and prefer to enter with better preparation the arena. When fight and competition are the order of the day or the supposed inexorable divine imperative that not to accept would be quixotesque romanticism, one might agree; but the entrance conditions into the arena should be less distorted.

So my fourth virtue of design is respect for Otherness, leaving behind the racist distinction between developed and underdeveloped countries. This virtue implies the acceptance of other design cultures and its inherent values. It definitely requires a

critical stance against ethnocentric messianic visions of whatever type, European,

North American or Asian. This virtue can counteract the propensity to focus exclusively on the one quarter of humanity that according to international statistics forms part of the industrialised rich economies.

Visuality
thinking in terms of images

One Virtue: Visuality

As an equivalent to **Italo Calvino's** virtue of Visibility, I take Visuality in the field of design. He characterises visibility as "*thinking* in terms of images". That is an assessment with radical implications, because in our culture thinking is associated with linguistic competence, with dealing with texts, whereas the visual domain is put into the subaltern role of quacks, trickery, treachery, superficiality, shallowness, appearance, *Schein, blosser Schein*, something not to be trusted, that is, the opposite of macho-style thinking, at best a second-rate kind of thinking, but definitely an intellectual nullity.
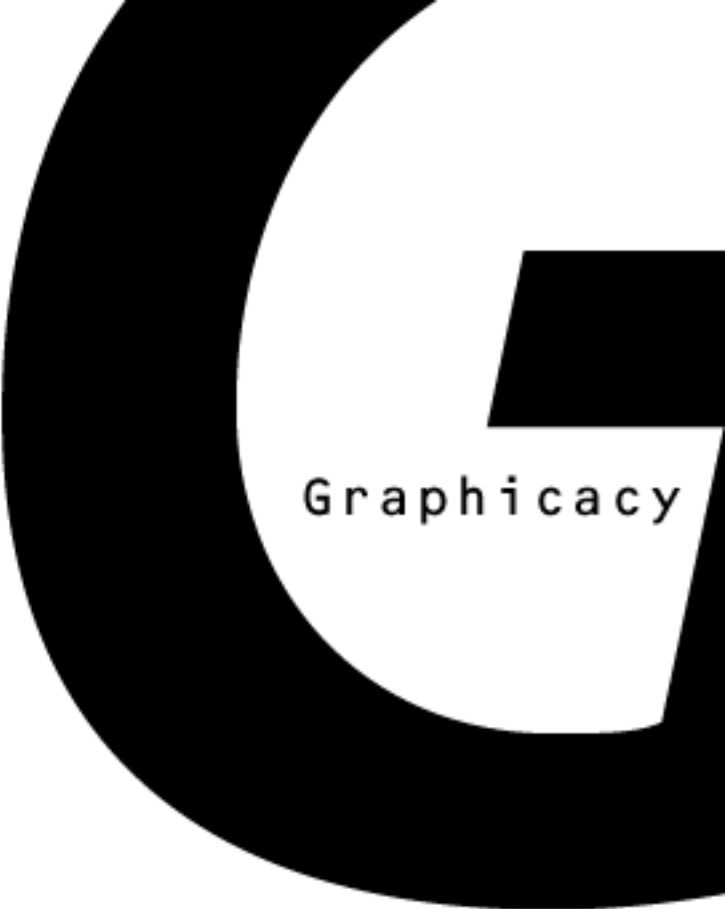
The denigration of vision and visuality has its philosophical origins in **Plato's** well known cave simile. We can call this deep linguistic bias against visuality and its cognitive potential the

"imperialism of the word".

The possibility that the visual domain has cognitive power and is not a simple subordinate or corollary to text has been perceived sometimes, but it never got a strong foothold in our educational system and has been filtered out in academe where mastery of texts is institutionally consolidated. Nobody would doubt that literacy is a prerequisite for higher learning, but graphicacy as it has been called - the competence in dealing with images - is far from being recognised as a competence of equal importance. That might change in the future, putting an end to visual illiteracy that is disfiguring and disbalancing university education everywhere, producing masses of visually, and thus aesthetically atrophied graduates.

There are symptoms of change provoked by technological innovations. I refer to the process of digitalization. In increasing degree sciences and cognition depend on the

power of the visual domain, of images and visualization, not in the traditional

Graphicacy

The competence in dealing with images

ancillary role of providing illustrations for the higher glory of texts, but in its own right. The still fledged imaging science is a new branch that deals with the multifaceted phenomena were images are not taken as examples of mimesis, but in which images reveal realities that are not accessible through words and texts.

The theory of post-structuralists based in the assumption that reality is a "text" that has to be "read", that architecture is a "text", that cities are "texts", that our designed environment is a "text" to be deciphered by the master decoders, will have to be revised. This

text-fundamentalism

has to be relativised by showing that the deeply-engrained predominance of the word in judaeo-christian tradition (In the Beginning there was the Word, *Im Anfang war das Wort*) is now starting to be technologically undermined and that its claim of the word as the exclusive and predominant domain of cognition is simply that: a claim that today shows signs of corrosion.

The antivisualism, the logocentrism counts with a long and strong tradition that - save a few exceptions - has passed with olympic indifference over the visual domain. Therefore a change will not occur from one year to the next; the shift might stretch over a period of generations.

For design undreamt, radically new possibilities open up. But so far, apart from dispersed initiatives to tap the potential of design for visual cognition, the profession of graphic designers pursues well-trodden tracks. Here then is the challenge for design education to explore this new domain and to loosen the strong association between graphic design and sales promotion - from detergents to political candidates.
We do not have yet a name for this new domain that would correspond to imaging science. Perhaps in the future the notion of "image design" or "visualisation" will become popular, though I would prefer the term

information design,

because the binarism between word and picture should be avoided. The emerging field of information design

Literacy

The competence in dealing with words

Cognition
as a domain of visuality

Visuality
as a domain of cognition

would not only require a considerable collective effort to get outlined and established as a promising field of expertise, it would furthermore contribute to a problem-oriented approach to design issues that differs from the self-centred design approach that gained attractiveness in the eighties.

The fifth virtue then I would like to see maintained and increased in the next millennium I call Visuality. Let me quote a scholar of visuality to reinforce my argument:

"The history of the general move towards visualization thus has broad intellectual and practical implications for the conduct and the theory of the humanities, the physical and biological sciences, and the social sciences- indeed, for all forms of education, from top to bottom."

Stafford, Barbara Maria, *Good Looking - Essays on the Virtues of Images*. Cambridge/London: MIT Press 1996. p. 23.

Theory

One Virtue: Theory

Coming to an end of this panoramic tour into the domain of virtues let me now have a look at the question of design theory - a question that is related to the general issue of

<div align="right">

design discourse and
design research.

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As I have argued elsewhere I do not see any future for the design profession if within the next years we don't overhaul all our design education programmes and open an

institutional place for design theory.

There are two reasons for this declaration:

first, every professional practice takes place in front of a theoretical background; that holds even for practice styles that vehemently deny any theoretical involvement.

Second, professions that do not produce new knowledge do not have a future in technologically dynamic societies.

Therefore design theory should and - according to my assessment of the future - must become part of our educational programmes. Design theory still leads a marginal existence. It is considered pastime of some eccentrics in academic settings protected from the harsh realities of professional practice in the labour market. That is a somewhat biased view that does not reveal particular perspicuous vision.

Theory is not a virtue. But

concern and cultivation of Theoretical Interests

is a virtue that I would not only like to see continued into the next millennium, but

brought to full blossoming. ■