interview with **Gui Bonsiepe**
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Gui Bonsiepe is an esteemed intellectual in his seventies. The professor seems small in his bright yellow winter coat (November in Dunedin). 'As sharp as a razor' boasts my boss Thomas Bley, and he's not kidding.

Bonsiepe's credential's include professorial roles at HfG at Ulm, Germany, and at the School of Applied Science in Kōln (Cologne). He is fluent in various languages, an author of books and essays since the mid 1970s, an excellent communicator, a vastly experienced design consultant, lobbyist, future gazer, critic and social commentator. Much of Gui's work has been in politically turbulent Latin America, at times a less than comfortable place for teachers and academics. The main purpose of his visit here was to review the growing programme of Design Studies at the University of Otago, and to share his wisdom with staff. Gui's partner Silvia Fernandez (a design mind and educator in her own right) also spent the post-exams week in the department, guiding a group of students through 'Public Works', a fresh and challenging conceptual design project.

In discussion with Gui, several themes consistently arise. He is an earnest, passionate advocate of design and of ways to help better understand design. He is not cynical. But he lucidly asserts, in a good-natured way, that in design, professional practice is years ahead of academia, design students are too often attracted to courses by misconceptions of glamour and a mystification of 'the creative', and that in traditional hierarchies of higher learning, design barely rates ('one step above the janitor'). Gui explains the importance of designers grounding their work in high standards of practice and current discourse. To enjoy a sustainable and meaningful future, good design must develop in a way that synthesises ideas from economics and industry.

Gui's shared insights are relevant here. In New Zealand, we have recently seen a proliferation of tertiary design schools and courses: design contributes to a booming education industry. Our media and popular mythologies continue largely to deal with design as an add-on function, often relegated to backslapping blokey DIY and clichéd blather about number eight wire. And our government rightfully acknowledges design as a potential economic growth factor eg. via funding allocations, the appointment of a Design Taskforce. The concrete implications of such initiatives are still unclear.

Gui spoke with Alex Gilks about conceptions of 'design' and their relationships with industry and education.

You said you didn't like to use the term 'theory' in design too often. Why is that?

Because it's so loaded with heavy assumptions. For this reason I rather prefer the notion of 'design discourse': texts, speculations, reflections about the domain of design in all its manifestations. A theory is something more organised, or it may become the end result of a strong design discourse.

Would you say that *design* discourse in particular is something lacking in a kind of certainty?

I would say it is in this regard that the area of design differs from other domains of human knowledge and action. Our discourse is rather weak still. This makes us very vulnerable, and we know that a strong profession is a profession that has a strong discourse. And we do not have that yet. For this reason I am preaching the necessity that we get involved in creating for and participating in this discourse.

So other professional areas which have a strong discourse ... would there be good examples in, say, business?

Business, computer sciences, information technology. All these well-grounded disciplines have a discourse and live in this discourse. And if I want to participate in a discourse I have of course to be literate – I have to read and be conversant in it, otherwise I have to shut up. Or just listen.

Is this in any way a self-conscious thing in design practice or in design academia, this notion of discourse being required to increase? Is that a perception of design shared by other industries, or is it more of an inward-looking phenomenon?

Discourse is particularly linked to the educational and academic domain, though every profession lives in a universe of discourse by itself. It may be more explicit, or less so. I am afraid that we are still on the less explicit side. Take our lack of precise terminology, which is an indicator – how many verbal distinctions a profession has in order to reflect or think about a certain issue. I would say we are still in the beginning stage. Our design language is quite poor. I can buy a dictionary of computer terms, it is a thick book. 'Design' – how many terms do we have. We come up with fifty, perhaps hundreds.

And then we start borrowing from other disciplines?

Exactly.

Is it difficult to persuade people in professional design practice of the importance of a design discourse?

Unfortunately. And for this reason I avoid the word 'theory', because there is this dangerous and obnoxious positioning of 'theory' and 'practice'. I think the with the word 'discourse' we will find more

acceptance in the professional field. There is an easier entrance if we talk about design discourse and invite professionals to participate in this discourse, instead of coming with a kind of theoretical doctrine that is pushed onto the shoulders of practitioners.

So we need to be wary of alienating those in design practice?
Yes. And vice-versa.

Audiovisualistics?
This is a term that came about around ten years ago. It's a new domain or discipline that deals with rhetorical phenomena in film, TV and new media. We have the dimensions of time, sound, music, movement and interaction. This is very different from classical rhetoric, where we either have only language, or, in the case of advertisements for instance, we have the combination of static texts with static images. This domain of audiovisualistics I think is a very promising area of research, in which you draw on many other disciplines such as linguistics, film theory, TV and all this new media theory. But his is rather a new field, there is no book on it so far.

When talking about the importance of research, you were asked about the perceived distrust of the visual in academia. Would you agree that this idea is used by designers as a crutch?
No. The sciences, to a great extent, are code-based disciplines, that is, they work with texts – written words and so forth. So there is some kind of built-in distrust of the visual domain of all this picture stuff, which is considered something superficial, something decorative. Now however, due to digital media, we see branches of science which are heavily dependent on pictures and picture-making. So the visual domain which has been sometimes almost dismissed as far as cognitive credibility is concerned, is now slowly increasing. And this I think is a very promising sign, particularly for designers, because we are rightly or wrongly involved in the visual domain in some aesthetic and perceptual distinctions. We manage these variables, or at least should manage them, so I see the bridge between sciences and design, visual design, in particular. Some people of course claim that they see the loss or decline of the book and all this stuff in the face of the domination by pictures, but I think this is an unjustified fear, and I think we will get to a more balanced view in higher education, and a conviviality between word culture and image culture.

There's this sort of new-education ideal of the teacher as 'coach', which you alluded to yesterday ... and the concept of students as 'knowledge producers' instead of 'knowledge consumers'. Now this can be a difficult concept to develop practically, particularly at undergraduate level, due to things like large populations of students at design schools and universities. What might be some good strategies for approaching this problem?
The number or quantity issue of students that are in a course – I would say that the solution is to create seminars in which there is a limited number of students, let's say 25 to 30, and the students that participate in these seminars are obliged to produce some new knowledge in this team. This does not mean, as in school, to make comment on a book or on something somebody has written. No. To produce some new knowledge you see, but from a design perspective. This is different. It can be done, it's not a mysterious thing. Of course you cannot do it with 200 in a seminar, but this is counter-productive. So then, it would require one to organise facilities that provide for 25 or 30 students maximum. And, it is important too that teachers and tutors who give project courses also should be stimulated to give a so-called 'theoretical seminar'. This is quite demanding of them, because it requires a re-thinking of what they are doing as a teacher. Some people might not feel very comfortable with this idea, but I think it is the way for the future of design educators.

So it's not enough just to teach?
No, I wouldn't say so. The university has this fantastic chance to be an open space for experimentation. Which very often you cannot do under the constraints of professional work for industry or clients.

We seem paradoxical at times because we love to embrace the idea of free thinking, yet the university has so many rules with regard to how departments coordinate their learning.
Yes. This is the intrinsic danger of any institution, that it becomes too rigid, and too rule-oriented. This is something mortal and counter-productive. The university should be a place of experimentation ... in which you inevitably will also commit errors. But so what?

Is it a fair assertion that a lot of the discourse in strategic design is based around the theory of 3D design, and product design in particular, as opposed to, say, communication design?
No I wouldn't say so. The classical distinction between 3D world and 2D world of communication and product design, this strict division becomes less and less, let's say, defendable, and becomes more and more permeable. People are sometimes migrating from one area to the next one you see. Take a particular example. Interface design has components from industrial design and from communication design. Traditional divisions between areas become obsolete. They have organisational value, but in practice it doesn't work.

How better to define design for government policy makers, or how to engender a better understanding of ways of integrating design in social areas?
What we could do is make short-term seminars for upper groups of decision-makers to explain to them, with clear cases, what design is about and what design is not about. I'm afraid that sometimes there's a certain confusion about this very wishy-washy concept 'design' which is a kind of joker that serves to explain anything. Like 'globalisation' does or does not. This is a challenge: to educate the decision-makers as to, 'What is the essence and what is the value and what are the tools of design? What does it serve and what doesn't it serve?'

Are you optimistic about the ability of design professions to work beyond that layer of corporate endeavour, to do things like influence government policy and society for the better?
Why not? If we want to consolidate design as a serious activity – culturally, economically and socially – we will be forced to establish this more rigorous discourse, and almost a kind of – I am very careful using this term – evangelist attitude. Later it becomes established practice and then we won't discuss it any more, it will become accepted. Nobody would today doubt the importance of a finance or accounting department. Design still is in this transition period, in which it is often considered a kind of external extravagance, which you can do or not do. For this reason, the notion of design as 'added value' is so misleading, because it presumes that you can have an object that is without design, to which you can 'add' something. But no, it *is* design by itself, whether it is bad design, this is another question.

You've had a fascinating life and professional life. I noticed that you were reluctant to talk about your personal life. Is the cult of personality in design something you are wary of?
I am not a judge of what colleagues are doing or not doing. But for myself, I am not keen on this approach to design, of putting designers in the limelight. I can understand the motives that force some colleagues to take on these self-promoting roles – okay they do it, and they make their business from it, fine. In teaching to my students, I usually tell them, 'be wary of gurus and of stars' [laughs].

Can you tell us about your book?
Unfortunately there are very few texts of mine available in the English language. My publications, the majority of books, have been published

either in Spanish or Italian or Portuguese, one in German [I ususally write them in German but then I translate immediately into another language]. This book, *Interface as an Approach to Design*, it was published as an academic edition, because you cannot find a publisher who pays the translation costs, which is the most expensive part. If you don't guarantee a minumum sales of, let's say, ten to twenty thousand copies, then the editor doesn't even allow you past his secretary! So the Jan van Eyck Academy took the chance and said, 'Look, let's make it 1500, special edition, and get this book printed in English.' It is not a systematic book, as in the first one I wrote, *Theory and Practice of Industrial Design* [1975, Italy]. It is a collection of articles reflecting on some changes we have experienced, particularly during this period of digitalisation. Which I consider a break, of similar importance to Gutenberg's invention of movable type. It is really a radical change. It opens enormous possibilities for our teaching, and of course for the profession. On the other hand, I have always tried to link my work to a social and political context, and I have reflected on it. This explains how the very unstable situations, particularly in Latin America, have on the one hand been a source of rich experience, but also a source of a lot of failure. Many of my projects simply failed [laughs]. I learn from the failures. I take them as an inevitable part of professional practice. You cannot have a life composed of victories, of fine polished pearls.

If I could change tack, to static design and some older ideas ... Otto Neurath and the ideals of the ISOTYPE Institute, communication design for educating society ...

I have a high respect of Otto Neurath and his approach. He was perhaps one of the founding fathers of what we today call information design. He wanted to inform the public about certain issues in economics and society and so on. However, with the approach he took later on with the ISOTYPES and pictograms and so on, I think he did not take into account the context-dependence of these icons. The dream of a universal picture-language is, I think, a pipe dream.

What about the notion then of the sociological, educational impulse? Teaching people about the matters of the state, this kind of thing. Do you see those kinds of ideals or that kind of spirit in any kind of contemporary design?

I have spent most of my working life in third world countries. I experienced these much more than working in the centre. On the political and cultural importance of design, I would say: wherever you are working, in whatever context you are working, the final aim of your activity should be the increase of autonomy. And the diminution of domination. This is of course an old dream, and very easily classified as modernist. Okay, I admit this is part of the modern project, which I consider unfinished. It's still an imperative which we have to deal with.
I think the modern project is still in discussion, despite some claims by post-modernists that this is a past period, with some Utopian ideals which have been shown to be unviable. I don't share this opinion, and as I told you, it's an ethical obligation of a designer to work for the autonomy of his client, his user, the culture and the bigger context.

Are we seeing the development of a larger area of study within design that's 'information design'?

I would say that information design is a new discipline, and I mentioned earlier Otto Neurath as one of the forerunners or founding fathers ... I think with information technology and explosion of the production facilities of information, these new production possibilities and facilities have brought one issue into the foreground – that information has to be *designed*. It is not something like data. Every product has to be designed, and the same applies to information. For this reason I consider the term 'graphic design' a little out of date. Because it is linked to a particular kind of technology – printing. I wonder if it is so useful to use labels for professions that come from a *technology*, because technologies become obsolete. I would say graphic design has this traditional burden. It's not by chance that the notion of information

design turns up and it becomes a discipline, and there are books about it and courses about it. It is considered a new domain which differs somehow from traditional graphic design education, insofar as, in information design the preoccupation and the dealing with *content* is mandatory, inevitable. This is the challenge then for students, it poses some intellectual or cognitive challenges, we must deal with *meaning*. I'm afraid that traditional graphic courses do not care so much for this domain. I wouldn't say they don't do it, but it's not so much their concern.

Which sort of steers us to the idea of fundamentals, which you spoke about yesterday, and the lack of fundamentals ... you were talking about knowledge. What about skills – do you recognise fundamental skills in design?

I would say skills are inevitable. But I would not, particularly at university level, give a skill-oriented course. You take Photoshop. A fantastic tool for image manipulation. You have to learn this, it takes skills. All these digital tools have to be learnt. This part of your package of skills you cannot do without. But the question then turns up, what do you do with these skills? Because the danger is, if you fix yourself mainly on skills, you become an operator, and this I think designers should avoid. I would never ground a profession on skills, because tomorrow we have another product, something new; all your knowledge and skills can become obselete from one day to the next. This brings us then to the issue you mentioned of fundamentals. I rather prefer to use the term from Christophe Alexander – 'patterns'. Patterns are recurrent situations. For instance, let's say a pattern would be 'How Products are Standing'. Many products have a base where they are standing. The typology of how they are standing – this is a set of patterns. Or folding patterns, how you can diminish the volume of a product by folding. These are I think phenomena which are context-independent, and their duration of life-usefulness is longer than [learning] which is skill-based. And these patterns we have to teach, because they become long-term staple issues. And fundamentals are exactly that which has a certain [not longevity but] it's not just changing day-to-day.

Do you have a favourite New Zealand design yet?

I have a favourite New Zealand material. This is the textile mixture of merino wool, silk and possum. This is a fantastic material. I hope that in the future I have a chance to look a little bit more into detail, and become aquainted with the local design scene.

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