

ALL
POSSIBLE
VISIONS

On Speculation

JON SUEDA

The premise of *All Possible Futures* originated in 2003 over a dinner conversation in den Haag, the Netherlands, with the Slovakian designer Peter Bil'ak. Peter had just come from client meetings and told me about several projects he'd presented that he was quite excited about, but unfortunately they had all been rejected. One proposal had been to the agricultural ministry Het Natuurloket. For their official stationery system, he'd presented a database-driven graphic identity instead of a standard logo. The template for each new piece of institutional correspondence would begin with entering the zip code of the addressee into a database, which would generate a printed-out list of all the flora and fauna in that area, aligned flush-left, in his typeface Fedra Sans. Thus, each recipient of printed material from Het Natuurloket would receive a unique description of their local agricultural makeup in addition to the other content of the missive.

Even in the most progressive-minded graphic design country in the world, this proposal was a radical questioning of many accepted rules regarding graphic identity. There was no standard, recognisable 'mark' that all designed materials would bear. The identity was very understated, with minimal graphic components and all the text printed in black at the same point size. And last, and maybe most undermining, was the fact that the technology for this kind of automated database-driven identity didn't yet exist.

At the time, this conversation was both fascinating and troubling to me. It was fascinating because Peter was not allowing technological limitations to interrupt his concepts. Instead of offering the client a pragmatic solution – in other words, starting with a compromise based on what was possible – his proposal created yet another problem, a speculation on what an identity could be, based on some future condition. It was troubling in that his project, which might have broken new conceptual and technical ground in the design of identities, would never be seen, and thus never enter the larger discourse of graphic design.

I began to catalogue similar conversations with other friends and colleagues. I started to wonder: What if all these lost explorations built on speculation and uncertain ground could be made visible to the public and critically discussed? What would graphic design look like if our

discipline supported such speculative practices as a legitimate area of enquiry?

But first, to map out the term ‘speculative’ in a broader context:

In finance, speculation means an investment involving higher-than-normal risk in order to obtain a higher-than-normal reward. Risk is viewed as an opportunity. Through researching and understanding the market, a speculator can foresee a potential increase in the value of a product. They can then buy stocks in that commodity while the price is low. If the projection holds true, they will enjoy a great profit. If it's wrong, they can lose big.

This high-risk, high-reward model doesn't translate well to graphic design. Traditionally, our discipline's commission structure is based on providing multiple proposals to a client for a single project at a predetermined fee. If a 'risky' proposal is offered, most sensible designers always pair it with at least one that is firmly based in 'reality'. Thus, our clients and the market have effectively trained us to always offer a built-in safety net. For our part, it is rare when a project ends in complete cessation of negotiations, so the problem is not that exploring risky ideas ever really puts a project, or a client relationship, at stake. It is just that we have come to take for granted that we will rarely be rewarded for taking chances.

In writing, the term ‘speculative fiction’ is an all-encompassing classification for texts describing a reality different from the world we live in today. It includes fantasy, horror, supernatural, superhero, utopian, dystopian, apocalyptic, postapocalyptic, and science fiction writing. In addition to alternate versions of our own reality, speculative fiction can explore worlds we've never heard of, populated by beings that have never existed. The premise these writers base their stories on is the simple question, ‘What if?’

This approach parallels many ‘visionary’ or ‘paper’ architecture practices where the designs are never really intended to be built. Rather, they represent idealistic, impractical, or utopian imaginings of the future. They are described by the architecture critic Jonathon Keats as an ‘alternate reality that we can visit to escape the built-in assumptions of our everyday environment.’¹ As anticipations of future social or

political conditions, they may be aspirational or cautionary, and, importantly to the context of this discussion, they are fully embraced by the architecture community and our larger society as valuable – even necessary – theoretical pursuits. Designers such as Lebbeus Woods, Archigram, Archizoom, Superstudio, Future Systems, Buckminster Fuller, Zaha Hadid, and many others have built highly visible careers designing not for today but for tomorrow.

In graphic design and advertising, by contrast, ‘spec work’ (short for ‘speculative work’) has come to have distinctly derogatory connotations. Technically the term describes any project created for a client, real or imagined, without a predetermined fee. Most designers will tell you that spec work devalues the profession: it drives wages down below industry standards; its competitive nature (with many firms competing for the same commission) forestalls fruitful client-designer interaction and often yields unsuccessful results; and the (usually) compressed schedules don't allow for adequate research, resulting in solutions that are aesthetically or theoretically empty.

But I would argue that all of this is largely based on an antiquated model of practice wherein it's assumed that a graphic designer needs an external stimulus – a client – to present a problem to be solved before the creative process can begin and anything can be made. It also echoes the language of the ‘business model’ mindset, which aims to deliver value to customers, entice customers to pay for value, and convert those payments into profits. In contrast, many graphic design practices today operate more along the lines of an artistic, or even academic, model. It has become quite common for them to work autonomously, initiating their own projects and expanding their responsibilities beyond design to writing, editing, conceptualising, directing, curating, engineering, programming, researching and performing. A single firm or practitioner today can execute work for traditional commercial clients at the same time that they are working far more theoretically or hypothetically on other projects. This can only enrich the field, as it expands the scope of what constitutes real work beyond the realm of the practical, the realistic, the useful.

The works in *All Possible Futures* embody a wide range of approaches to the idea of speculation. They encompass everything from self-generated provocations to experimental work created ‘in parallel’ with client-based projects to unique situations where commissions have been tackled with a high level of autonomy and critical investigation. They highlight different levels of visibility and public-ness within the graphic design process. Some projects were made for clients and exist in a real-world context, while others might otherwise have gone unnoticed: failed proposals, formal experiments, sketches, incomplete thoughts. In the spirit of the show’s title, the exhibition itself shifts and evolves over the course of the visitor’s experience. Some works are traces of pieces. Others must be manipulated or engaged with in order to become fully apparent.

Ed Fella, a humorously self-proclaimed ‘exit-level’ designer who is currently in his 70s, proves that speculative graphic design is not a new phenomenon. He has created experimental, noncommissioned art, illustration, and graphic design work since he first became a practising commercial artist. He is best known for his ornate reworkings of historic and vernacular lettering styles; he first began this body of work in the late 1950s while working for a Detroit agency. He and his colleagues were encouraged to use their downtime to create what they called samples, which were in essence experimental efforts that pushed various design and illustration styles beyond accepted levels. Fella says that the goal of these efforts was explicitly to comment on and expand established formal aesthetic standards.

For much of his professional career, Fella led a kind of dual life, working by day on automotive and health-care ads while in his own time creating an alternate body of work that dealt with completely different, and highly experimental, concerns. Until he decided to earn his MFA at Cranbrook Academy of Art when he was in his mid-50s, these latter endeavours were hardly known, although he had been a regular visitor to the programme for more than a decade, inspiring students with the ‘other’ work he was producing. He says, though, that ‘The early Bauhaus ideology always claimed that the two were really the same: one “functional” and the other

“pure.”’ In *All Possible Futures*, Fella shows *Potential Design for Bygone Eras*, a series of collages and sketches created over the past 20 years that confronts his past and future. He describes it as a design methodology situated in the present but using (or reworking) bygone eras as a pretend ‘future’. The project itself is a total contradiction, but to Fella, that’s what gives it potential to lead to so many interesting ‘formal speculations and mixed-up possibilities’.

The studio doing the most to translate the concept of ‘visionary architecture’ into the field of graphic design is undoubtedly Metahaven. Founders Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden take a critical, research-based approach to graphic design, creating self-directed artifacts that are meant to provoke discussion and critical enquiry regarding current political and social issues. These speculative design projects are made for, but often never used by, (usually imagined) clients such as WikiLeaks and Sealand. Van der Velden describes them as ‘proto-functional’, meaning that they are in their earliest stages of materialisation and still without a context to bring them into the world. Kruk says, ‘We are interested in what happens if you ignore the usual optimisation process when creating designed objects – when you don’t interrupt concepts to comply with reality but keep going, not simplifying but complicating.’² To *All Possible Futures*, Metahaven contributes a film from its 2013 exhibition *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*, a project that questions ‘how information is organised globally and what role the concept of transparency occupies within it.’³

Dexter Sinister’s typeface *Meta-the-difference-between-the-2-Font-4-D*, made in 2010 and featured in *All Possible Futures*, remained speculative until it was adopted by Kadist Art Foundation for its graphic identity in 2013. David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey, the designer/artist duo, maintain a practice that encompasses designing, editing, publishing, distributing, and other activities. As with many of their projects, this one draws inspiration from the past. The logotype is derived from Meta Font, a computer typography system programmed by Donald Knuth in 1979. For Kadist’s identity, the font has been modified to have a time-based component,

and Dexter Sinister has actually signed a contract with the foundation to house and use this evolving/mutating font as its identity for 10 years. The software slowly changes the form of the typeface using five structural variables, and will produce a time-specific mark or usable font any time Kadist requests one. While corporations in the United States might rebrand every five or 50 years depending on their marketing departments' recommendations, the final paragraph of Kadist's contract reflects a quite different attitude toward the lifespan of graphic identities:

Further, on signing and initiating this 10-year license, KADIST ART FOUNDATION asserts an up-front commitment to allowing this eventual process to run its course, without excessive concern as to the form of the logo at any particular moment, and with willful disregard to the winds of fashion or the mandates of technology, but instead, to pledge and bond itself to the principle that slowness and attention are their own rewards.

In 2014, more than a decade after my dinner with Peter Bil'ak, the landscape of graphic design has dramatically evolved. Many of his concepts that 'might have been' have actually been realised by himself or others. When I first visited the topic of speculative graphic design in 2008 in *Task Newsletter* 2, I interviewed a handful of designers who seemed to be working in this mode and asked them if they considered their work speculative. Many of them, such as the notable 'critical design' duo Dunne and Raby, answered with an emphatic and positive 'yes'.

In the exhibition catalogue for *All Possible Futures*, my editorial intent was to pick up the conversation where the *Task Newsletter* discussion had left off, but I was surprised to get quite different reactions from my interviewees. Many of them were critical of the term 'speculative' and explained the various reasons why they regard this kind of work as problematic. Willem Henri Lucas noted being 'surprised and slightly annoyed by all these "new" terms for things or situations that have always been there.' Experimental Jetset took issue with the very idea that *anything* can be speculative, since 'speculation will always result in something real: a real thought, a real sketch, a real model. It will always

stay within the borders of reality, of language, of the world.' In their new commission for *All Possible Futures*, Experimental Jetset designed a button that takes the title of Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle* and replaces 'spectacle' with 'speculative', expressing their feeling that, 'In our view, the speculative exists on the same level as the spectacular: this whole floating sphere of illusions, false images, inflated signs, projections. Which is exactly the sphere we've tried to oppose all throughout our practice.'

In attempting to assemble an exhibition on this subject, my research sometimes felt like an archaeological excavation. After all, much of this work doesn't live on anyone's website, since graphic designers regard their public portfolio as a space for documenting completed projects. In some cases, *All Possible Futures* facilitated the culmination of incomplete projects that had consumed years of work but were currently buried in flat files or deep in hard-drive storage. A special section in the exhibition is dedicated to projects such as Bil'ak's *Het Natuurloket*, a fascinating work that remains unrealised but deserving of celebration and discussion in the larger discourses of our field.

Coincidentally, but, I think, significantly, several other exhibitions with similar concerns are going on at the same time as *All Possible Futures*. *Futures Project* is taking place at the Center for the Living Arts in Mobile, Alabama, and *Dis-sident Futures* is happening here in San Francisco at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Recently, *Past Futures, Present Futures* was at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York, and *Radical Speculation: Design as Film* was at the Black Cinema House in Chicago. What are the reasons for this resurgent interest in speculative practices? In graphic design specifically, are we sensing some kind of imminent implosion of our ever-expanding world of rampant branding, customisable everything, crowd-sourced design, mobile apps, style-mongering blog feeds, cloud technology, data farming, on-demand publishing, social media, and so on (and so on and so on)?

As I look over all the material in the show and my many conversations with the designers making this work, I realise that this hot-and-cold attitude toward speculation – alter-

nately embracing its creative potential and rejecting its validity as a productive concept – is itself deeply embedded in graphic design practice. Just as the meaning of ‘speculation’ has varied across disciplines and eras, so has graphic design itself. We designers are engaged in activity that is at once ubiquitous and incredibly easy for the layperson to overlook. We have a huge impact on society – indeed, the very essence of what we do involves shaping the meaning of words and images to communicate messages – but this is a highly unstable process that cannot easily be measured and does not always yield the outcome that was intended.

The definition of our discipline is constantly shifting and expanding, but I think Bil'ak may have captured its essence as eloquently as any of us can:

I suppose most creative work is by its very definition speculative. It is formed on a basis of incomplete information, involves intuition, and explores new areas, which means it also runs the risk of not always delivering what it promises. So, yes, I do think we engage in the creative process with slightly unpredictable results.⁴

My intention is that *All Possible Futures* asks more questions than it definitively answers. I hope it will function as a porthole into a universe of highly sophisticated work that has been striving to find a way out into the world.

Notes

1. Jonathon Keats, 'Funnel Cities and Towns on Feet? How to Live with the Visionary Architecture of Walter Jonas and Archigram', Forbes.com (November 2012). Accessible at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathonkeats/2012/11/27/funnel-cities-and-towns-on-feet-how-to-live-with-the-visionary-architecture-of-walter-jonas-and-archigram/>.
2. Emmet Byrne, 'Products of Our Imagination', *Task Newsletter* 2 (2008).
3. Metahaven, 'Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance', Bureau Europa (2013). Accessible at http://www.bureau-europa.nl/en/manifestations/black_transparency_the_right_to_know_in_the_age_of_mass_surveillance/.
4. Peter Bil'ak, quoted in Jon Sueda, 'All Possible Futures', *Task Newsletter* 2 (2008).

Questions on Speculative Graphic Design Practice

EXPERIMENTAL JETSET
ED FELLER
JÜRGEN LEHMANN
WILLEM HENKEL LUCAS
SUKHNI SINGH WILHELM
WEST GROUP

- *Questions on Speculative Graphic Design Practice* is a sequel to a set of interviews that went by the same name as this exhibition, published in *Task Newsletter 2* in 2008. The piece revolved around six graphic design studios and a particular ‘speculative’ project that each one produced. This dialogue was supplemented by a conversation with the notable ‘critical design’ duo Dunne and Raby, who design artifacts that ‘stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry, and the public about the social, cultural, and ethical implications of existing and emerging technologies.’¹

In 2014, this revised set of interview questions is intended to reexamine the same themes. My aim is not to reinforce the content of the original, but to interrogate it and all of the information gathered in my research before and since. This time around, the new group of interviewees are practising in different contexts, in different parts of the world, at different points in their careers. Some are colleagues with whom I've had conversations and debates over the decades, and others are design practices with which I only recently became familiar. All of them share common attitudes, yet each speaks their own language, with specific distinctions and biases. The intent of these questions is to get a deeper understanding of 'speculative' graphic design practices and the various positions and orientations designers are taking today.

Note

1. <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/biography>

WHAT DOES THE TERM 'SPECULATIVE' MEAN TO YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE?

Experimental Jetset, Amsterdam—We realise that some designers and artists are doing really interesting (and brilliant) stuff under the umbrella of ‘speculative design’ (Metahaven comes to mind, obviously), and we do confess we always feel a slight tingle of excitement when concepts such as ‘design fiction’ and ‘speculative realism’ are brought up. But, other than that, we have to admit we’ve always very much disliked that word, ‘speculative’. It just has too many negative connotations to us: spec work, financial speculation, et cetera.

Politically, we have always been highly influenced by the Amsterdam squat scene of the 1970s and 1980s – and, within that particular idiom, the figure of the *spekulant* (in English, the ‘speculator’) was the absolute devil. It represented the real estate broker, the person who somehow made a profit from the vacancy of houses. Within the narrative of the squat scene, there was a strong dichotomy between the symbolic, speculative value of the building (as channelled by the real estate broker), and the actual, material use of the building (as practised by the squatters). And although we have never been squatters ourselves, that scene certainly has been an inspiration to us, and we still strongly sympathise with it. So it’s no wonder that we feel a certain suspicion when we are confronted with the word ‘speculation’. To us, it represents something we have always opposed.

You could also argue that it is exactly the practice of speculation that got us all into the current economic crisis. ‘Wild West capitalism’, financial gambling, stock brokerages,

banking for profit, and so on. To us, the notion of speculation is intrinsically linked to the whole concept of neoliberalism.

We realise that your use of the term is completely different. But, still, we might just be a bit too materialist (in the Marxist sense of the word) to get excited about it. We like our environment to be clearly grounded in some sort of material base, and the moment things start to ‘float’ is the moment we get suspicious. Our whole practice is based on this idea of going against the illusory power of the image by revealing the material proportions of the object. So it is only logical that this notion of the ‘speculative’, as something that only exists as an illusion, doesn’t fit well with our way of working and thinking.

Maybe we simply don’t believe in the speculative, in general. In our view, something is either real or it isn’t. A sketch, a proposal, a plan, a scale model – we see these things as real, not speculative at all. Between the sketch and the finished drawing, we see no gradients of realness’. A sketch is a real sketch in the same way that a finished drawing is a real finished drawing.

Which reminds us of proposition 5.61 of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world. Logic pervades the world: The limits of the world are also its limits. So, we cannot say, in logic, ‘The world has this in it, and this, but not that.’ For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well. We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say, either.¹

In other words, for Wittgenstein, something either exists in the world or it doesn’t exist at all, and in the latter case we can’t even speak about it. Or, at least, that’s how we interpret his quote: as an argument against the speculative. ‘We cannot think what we cannot think’ – so there’s no such thing as ‘pure’ speculation. Speculation will always result in something real: a real thought, a real sketch, a real model. It will always stay within the borders of reality, of language, of the world.

But, apart from these more philosophical considerations, when it comes down to it, we simply don't believe that this notion of the speculative automatically has some sort of subversive or redeeming dimension. True, in some circles, 'the speculative' is used almost synonymously with 'the critical' (which happens to be another word we're quite wary of). But, in our view, the speculative exists on the same level as the spectacular: this whole floating sphere of illusions, false images, inflated signs, projections. Which is exactly the sphere we've tried to oppose all throughout our practice.

Guy Debord's critique of the spectacular was famously titled *The Society of the Spectacle*. Come to think of it, we now find ourselves in something very similar: the society of the speculative. Having said that, we know we shouldn't be too judgmental about this whole notion of the speculative. Nowadays, it might indeed be speculative projects that can give designers some sort of breathing space in an economic and political environment that is becoming increasingly tight and hostile.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C K Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1922).

Ed Fella, Los Angeles—I worked as a commercial artist in Detroit from the late 1950s to the late 1980s, a 30-year period during which I always had a lot of downtime. We were encouraged to fill that with what were called 'samples', which consisted of speculative or experimental work, which meant pushing the various design and illustration styles up a step or two from the norm, or doing 'studio promotion' pieces, where the same opportunities existed. The subject of this sort of work was sometimes a commentary on various aspects of the formal aesthetics of the work itself and the many styles that were then in use. In the 1970s I started doing design work for arts organisations and artist collectives, of which I frequently was also a member. Hence the beginning of the 11 x 17 announcement fliers of the mid-1980s.

Jürg Lehni, Zurich—I generally struggle to find a simple explanation that describes my practice, and I often revert to the analogy of wearing different hats. My interests relate to

computer technology in its many facets: be it the abstract world of software engineering and architecture, technology and software as catalysts for aesthetic or cultural change, or the poetic potential of the gestures of technology, both preexisting and purposely created.

Engaging creatively with a field this broad requires a flexibility in the work methods to be applied. Working speculatively means questioning preexisting structures, attempting to create new ones, testing ideas, and accepting failure as part of the process. It requires an ability to put on the hat of the researcher, the engineer, the designer, or the artist – all modes of working that at times can be mutually exclusive.

Defining any presented work as a snapshot in time, rather than something in its final state, has helped keep projects alive, and helped keep dynamic the dialogue and questions that their existence encourages.

Willem Henri Lucas, Amsterdam/Los Angeles—I am always slightly surprised and slightly annoyed by all these 'new' terms for things or situations that have always existed. Graphic design as a profession has of course developed a wide variety of practices and approaches, but in general I think there is still a lot of confusion about how it is perceived.

In my 30-plus years of practising design, I slowly shaped my practice into a very specific and limited way of working, basically by trying things out and finding what fits and what doesn't, or by embracing my limits and flaws. It took quite some time to understand my own design process, but more important was realising *how* my design practice could underline what I found important in my personal life and beliefs.

I have always been committed to looking at my design practice as a body of work, very similar to an artist's practice (as opposed to a random selection of projects decided by clients who choose to work with me). This means that I carefully and actively consider what and whom to work for, so that my work captures the subject matter of my personal interests at a certain period in time. To be honest, I discovered that I got very depressed and physically unwell designing things for clients I had no connection with, or whose message I was strongly against, politically or otherwise.

If speculative work looks into the imaginary future, then it is not of my interest. If anything, I need my work to be positioned in the *now*. It is highly influenced by what is happening in my surroundings and by current societal issues. It has more to do with me shaping my life and documenting this through my work.

The term ‘speculative work’ is connected to our design process (personal ways or methods of working), and the attitude and position one chooses to take as a designer. For example, I was raised and educated with the idea of function before form, which made me embrace a very practical approach to design at a time when the function of design was considered to be ‘problem solving’. This approach could be the opposite of speculative work.

After graduation, however, my work and research quickly moved into an area where the work was supposed to raise specific questions in the mind of the viewer, and therefore ‘create an awareness’ without any given answers. I also experienced that the only way to do this was to personally get involved, and not only visualise the voice of my client, but add my own storytelling and personal beliefs to the communication. The designer-as-author approach was something I was educated with in the Netherlands. We were encouraged as designers not just to give form to content, but to be involved in content making as coeditors and coauthors.

That shift in work was marked by two very important moments in my professional career. The first was my introduction to semiotics (for instance the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce), which gave me precise knowledge about the way I intuitively communicate through imagery. Peirce’s analytical methods became a great tool for discussing and analysing work both in my own head, and in class with my students. The second moment was when I went back to school 10 years after I graduated, and started my post-academic studies at the Sandberg Institute, dealing with new proposals for war monuments. Even though I had done several projects for nonprofit organisations (for example dealing with domestic violence, AIDS, and HIV information for COC, the largest gay organisation in the Netherlands), this was the first time I felt a huge responsibility for any

(visual) message I would send out into the world. Working on subject matter that was so much bigger than my own life made a huge impact and changed my practice completely.

So, if not the practical approach to a design project, but an approach that supports or underlines a personal belief, a statement, a context, or even an argument, added to the subject matter: would that be the speculative part of the approach?

Also interesting is to look at how that term is used in the commercial, ad agency world, to mean a non-practical approach that is based on imagination and considered out-of-the-box, or labelled as ‘crazy ideas’. And non-paid, mind you. Because clients will only pay you for reality. In my opinion, every design project needs to try to be innovative and refreshing and new in storytelling. Therefore, we always start with our imagination, and no matter how crazy those first ideas are, they can shape (as in, build a foundation for decisions about form) the practical end result. To me, this is a very essential part of my design process.

Sulki and Min, Seoul—If ‘speculative’ is defined as ‘hypothetical’, then anything we do as designers is speculative until it’s actually realised. If we as graphic designers are in the business of communication, then our work can remain speculative even after its realisation, because often we never know for sure if the work has actually succeeded in communicating intended meanings. We want to believe it has, but often it remains as a mere belief, supported by unreliable peer opinions and limited feedback. In that sense, our graphic design practice is usually speculative from beginning to end.

Zak Group, London—For Zak Group, speculation is a mode of creative thought. A speculative approach is about seeking out new issues or looking for areas in which a particular way of doing or thinking has become dated and is in need of reexamination. Creativity is most often associated with the extraordinary, but for us, creativity in the production of culture is also about the banal and everyday, for instance how we communicate our ideas, how we manage our studio and how we budget our time and resources. Our studio is itself a

speculation on the possibility for graphic design to actively contribute to the production of culture. We see the possibilities for creative speculation in not only how culture looks, but how it comes about. While we work as graphic designers, we are also constantly searching for disciplinary contradictions so that we can attempt to understand them and speculate upon their future.

Question #2

ONE COULD SAY THAT THE WORK IN THIS EXHIBITION REPRESENTS A PARALLEL UNIVERSE, DESIGNERS WHO PRACTISE ON THE MARGINS OF THE PROFESSION, MAKING WORK WHICH MIGHT ONLY EXIST BECAUSE THEY WERE PROACTIVE ABOUT INITIATING IT. DOES THIS PARALLEL UNIVERSE EXIST?

EJ—It's interesting. Reading your question, we suddenly remembered our own situation after graduation. We actually

come from a zine background. When we were studying at the Rietveld Academy, we were publishing our own fanzines, posters, T-shirts, et cetera. And even before we went to art school, we were involved in creating mini-comics, mix tapes and mail art. So you could say that we are products of exactly the sort of parallel universe you talk about.

Right after graduation, something happened that changed our way of thinking about this whole notion of the parallel universe. We came across an interview in *Emigre* in which a graphic design group said something to the extent of, ‘It’s great that we produce our own little zines, so that we don’t have to bother our “real” clients with our creativity.’ (Now, we are paraphrasing this from memory, so we might have completely misquoted it. But, as we remember, this was more or less the way it was said.)

This sentence was quite an eye-opener. A shock. We suddenly realised the danger of a certain kind of self-publishing – the kind that functions as some sort of external outlet for creativity, as a way to redirect creativity to where it can do the least ‘harm’, so to speak. And from the moment we came across that quote, we abruptly ceased our practice as self-publishers and decided to fully focus on assignments.

In other words, we tried to stay away from the model of the ‘schizophrenic’ designer, the designer carrying two portfolios: a portfolio with ‘free’ projects (‘for fun’), and a portfolio with ‘corporate’ projects (‘for money’). To us, this model was, and still is, an absolute nightmare. We want to drive our creativity exactly to the place where it can do the most harm, so to speak. In all our projects, we absolutely ‘bother our clients with our creativity’, as often and as relentlessly as possible.

During those years after graduation, we were often thinking about a sort of Hitchcockian model. Hitchcock didn’t distinguish between films ‘for fun’ and ‘for money’. Rather, he managed to inject his subversive creativity directly into the heart of the Hollywood movie industry, and exercise his authorship right there. This model has always been an example to us, especially at the beginning of our practice.

Sixteen years down the line, we have softened up a bit, and think about it in a less dogmatic way. We now realise that every designer has to find their own way to organise their

practice, even if that means artificially compartmentalising one’s practice into ‘self-initiated’ and ‘client-driven’ work. The current situation (economically, politically, et cetera) is so bad, we totally understand that some designers feel the need to create some sort of parallel universe, just to stay sane.

As for our own way to stay sane, we would describe our current position as follows:

It may sound absurd, but we really regard all our projects as self-initiated, whether they involve clients or not. The way we see it, the moment we consciously make a choice to involve ourselves in a project (for example, by saying yes to an assignment), we are, in fact, initiating it. That makes everything that we do self-initiated (or maybe ‘self-inflicted’ is a better word).

We see none of our work as ‘free’, in the sense that we really don’t believe that there is such a thing as a project that’s completely free of restrictions, free of limitations, free of specifications. After all, there is always a given context to respond to, a series of parameters to work within, a set of circumstances to react to. This set of circumstances might include a client or not, but in the bigger picture, that’s not even important, in the sense that it doesn’t make the project less or more ‘free’.

So, while we see none of our projects as ‘free’, we do see our own role within these assignments as ‘free’ in the sense that, even within the most limited circumstances, we always have a certain freedom of choice. We always have the freedom to quit an assignment (which is one of the most reassuring securities that one has as a designer). Sure, quitting an assignment automatically means a loss of income. But, ultimately, we do have that choice, however hard it might be.

In short: the assignment is never free, the designer is always free. (We know, it’s an almost existential position, to be condemned to freedom and all that jazz.)

EF—You could say so, but on the other hand, the early Bauhaus ideology always claimed that the two were really the same, one ‘functional’ and the other ‘pure’. Personally, I always considered myself a simple, old-fashioned ‘artist’, (and, during my early years, a ‘commercial artist’) but the

reality is that now I'm a 'graphic designer' because that's the way the culture sees or frames it, and I'm OK with it. Actually rather proud of it!

Some recent projects of 'potential design' and 'counter-factual painting' rather jokingly play on those ideas of how our culture defines art or design practice.

JL—This is a delicate discussion, since the field of design is very broad. In its simplest form, it serves a purpose, solves a problem, is at the people's service by simplifying things and getting out of their way as much as it can. It also is a field with a lot of history – one that has experienced a whole lot of change induced by cultural and technological advances in the last few decades, but for some reason does not seem to trigger nearly as much theoretical work as related disciplines such as architecture or art.

Design can be used to manipulate, to misinform, to establish power, or to work against preexisting structures. It is one of the ingredients in the bigger cultural discourse, and to me it seems only logical that a certain percentage of practising designers will eventually move on to other, more theoretical or speculative, endeavours. There is nothing wrong with using graphic design (or computer programming, for that matter) as the starting point for a journey that eventually leads us to a more free-form artistic practice. Whether the established institutions will accept this journey as meaningful or valuable is another question, as graphic design suffers a bit from a reputation as being fast-paced, surface- and style-based, with little depth.

WHL—As I mentioned before, I think every designer slowly finds his or her way of working. I don't think of my practice as unique. I feel extremely fortunate to have shifted the idea of my clients into my collaborators (so that I choose them, instead of the other way around). The idea of making a living in design has shifted to making enough money to live from my teaching, so I can design pro bono or by trade. This created circumstances in which I do not have to compromise, and I am able to use my design practice in a way that is focused on personal growth, research, and, above all, personal interest.

But the conclusions of all my self- or co-initiated projects are always design products that are 'real'. They are books that end up in bookshops, posters that one can find on walls. And they are as valid as any other design product that enters the market created through other means or more commercial practices. I definitely believe they overlap and inform one another.

S&M—There may be a community, or communities, of designers who cross the disciplinary borders more often than others do, but a 'parallel universe' may sound too good for their reality. It certainly doesn't apply to our practice, which is in fact quite muddled, and we don't see ourselves working on the margins. Maybe it's that the margins are not so clearly defined in the first place, but, more pertinently, we don't really care where our work is located. Sometimes we may cross certain lines, sometimes we may stay within them, but most times we just don't think about them. The area in which we practise may appear marginal on a larger map of the profession, but to us it's the centre of the universe and there is no other universe where we can exist simultaneously. In short, the 'parallel universe' may be observable from a bird's-eye view, but we're too close to the ground to make any meaningful distinction.

ZG—Framing these projects as a 'parallel universe' risks dividing speculative thought from the day-to-day practice of graphic design – limiting rather than expanding the practice of design. We think that speculative approaches should be more fully integrated within the practice of graphic design rather than being separated into dedicated spaces. Our graphic design and art direction of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale serves as our contribution to *All Possible Futures* and is representative of our attempt to fuse the applied and the speculative. In this commissioned project, we questioned how an identity can take an active role in the editorial and curatorial programmes of the institutions we work with.

In our studio, we work on both commissioned and self-directed projects without making much differentiation, these projects can take shape as a book, a website, an

exhibition or an identity system. In using the strengths and skills available to graphic design we see the studio as a platform through which we can expand the notion of design production to encompass activities such as publishing, editing, writing, curating and exhibition making, even within commissioned projects.

DESIGN CAN BE A WAY TO SOLVE A PROBLEM, TO VISUALISE COMPLEX INFORMATION. A CRITICAL TOOL TO PROVOKE DEBATE, AND PROMOTE AESTHETIC AND SOCIAL VALUES. THESE RESPONSIBILITIES SEEM TO BE EVER EXPANDING. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT SHOULD THE PRIMARY ROLE OF A DESIGNER BE TODAY? AND IN THE FUTURE?

EJ—We find it hard to define what the role of the designer *should* be. We have always disliked this tradition of designers dictating to other designers how to work and how to think. In all our interviews, we have always tried to emphasise that our views are strictly personal. We never want to force our beliefs onto other designers. So we only can talk about what we see as our own role, today as well as in the future.

The role we try to fulfill – or, better said, the obligation we feel – is to design in such a way that the reader (or viewer, or spectator) is constantly aware of the fact that he or she is looking at something human-made: an object that is made by humans, and thus can also be changed by humans. We want to contribute to the constructed, material environment around us, but not without also creating some sort of awareness that this environment is just that: material and constructed.

At a very concrete level, in our day-to-day practice (if there is such a thing), this basically means that we want to break the spell of the image and continuously reveal the fact that a printed object is ‘just’ ink on paper – nothing more, but certainly nothing less. The graphic identity we recently designed for the Whitney Museum of American Art is a good example of that. It basically consists of a zigzag line occupying the available space within any given format. The zigzag is effectively emphasising the material proportions of the designed object. The zigzag breaks the spell of the image, emphasising the thing-ness of the design. Or, at least, that was our intention.

In our view, this role, this obligation, will become more and more relevant in the coming years. As we enter a future that seems more and more detached from the notion of a material base (a good example of this detachment would be the phenomenon of the Cloud), we think it’s good that at least a couple of people will try to keep things grounded. Just a handful of village idiots (we are talking about ourselves here) who, instead of pointing to the sky, are pointing at the ground.

EF—Well, of course, all those things, and who can deny their increasing importance in an ever more difficult and complex world? Designers should make themselves aware of these

issues and also of the latest discussions and conjectures surrounding them in the larger political, social, and academic culture, and not only as they relate to the (our) profession. It requires studious effort and serious contemplation, but the ever-wider role of the designer also includes the responsibility to do so, and I imagine the future will even require it.

All this is obvious, and I’ve probably belaboured it. So, on the other hand, there should also be room for pure, aesthetic, self-indulgent speculation with formal non-alignments, experimental accidental play, and the testing of pure nonsense with amusing arty pretensions. That is to say, we shouldn’t omit from the coming future digital ‘paradise’ that little bit of ‘just for the hell of it’ of whatever is left, and hope it might, by some serendipity, not only mean, but add, something!

JL—I don’t think there is such a thing as a main role anymore, if there ever was. One could see design as a type of education, a set of skills that is acquired and trains the mind and perception in a certain way. This is purely a starting point, though, from which designers can and should expand in all kind of directions: publishing, editing, the creation of software services, new business models, et cetera. If anything, I would encourage the training of interdisciplinary work methods in design education, as this will be hugely valuable in future markets.

Coming from a Swiss tradition, I do see value in keeping alive a certain attitude toward craft. This is easy to overlook sometimes, since the actual skill of making something might disappear in all the fast-paced layering of information, with dissemination happening almost exclusively online.

WHL—Oh, I don’t believe in preaching to others. To each his own. I can only make these decisions for myself. The only thing that I would emphasise to my current students is to find a passion and interest in whatever area fits them. Add an incredible amount of *joy* to this, and then there is this other thing that is really important to me, *integrity*. Hm, I am preaching after all. You can argue that my work is a lot about myself and how I want to be perceived as a person. It is as if every project is a self-portrait, which in itself sounds

extremely narcissistic. It's a weird balancing act, creating this platform that is as good for the other – your collaborator(s) – as it is for yourself. That said, about our role in society, I wish for myself and any other designer to always explore and encourage critical thinking, and to experiment and explore critical form making. In general we should always try to push the boundaries of this profession.

S&M—We agree that the role of a graphic designer has been expanding. It may also mean that the identity has been stretching, like a pancake. Does it mean a loss of depth, too? In our imagination, it's quite possible that another set of differentiations and specialisations may follow the period of expanding. Then – and only then – we'll have to worry about the role of a designer. But even then, would you stop solving problems if the primary role has somehow been proved to be provocation? Can't we at least choose two?

ZG—Every designer must find their own way of working, so it is impossible to say what role a designer should take. In general, more originality and specificity in design practices would be a good thing.

Though we are usually hired as graphic designers, in many projects our role can be closer to that of an editor, reader, advisor or architect. For example in the recent exhibition *After Year Zero* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the curator hired us to develop the exhibition architecture. While we may take on other responsibilities, it remains clear to us that we are doing so as graphic designers where our role is to mediate ideas and knowledge. We feel that we can have a much larger impact as designers when we think beyond the conventional boundaries of our discipline. Recently we have been conceiving our approach of contributing to the formulation of ideas alongside our collaborators, rather than packaging already formulated ideas, as a way of giving shape to culture.

Question #4

In many cases, speculative projects are self-initiated efforts (sometimes with little visibility), proposals within academic contexts, provocations, or sometimes unrealised enquiries. How do you define the 'realisation' of a design idea or concept?

EJ—As we already argued in our answer to your first question: theoretically speaking, ideas and concepts are already real, in and of themselves. A sketch is a real sketch, in the same way that a finished drawing is a real drawing. In theory, they both possess the same degree of realness.

On a more practical level, however, and in our day-to-day practice (whatever that may be), we would say that something is realised the moment it is multiplied – when it is printed, or published online, or made public in some way. In a short text we recently wrote ('Socialism as a Graphic Language', which appeared in volume 1 of *EP*, published last year by Sternberg Press), we described the act of multiplication as 'the movement from one to many, from solitude to multitude, and from the individual to the collective.' So, that sounds pretty real to us. Or, at least, real enough.

EF—It starts with my immediate physical space where a project is actually conceived and made and I'm the first to access it. (As Barnett Newman famously said, 'I paint so I have something to look at.') And it goes from there to anyone who happens by. But, after that, I am responsible for getting it into the larger world through whatever connections there are (or that I might have) to do so, be they professional, academic, media-based, or whatever else offers an interest or outlet for my speculations. It starts with my confidence in them and ends with my cooperation in the process that gives them visibility. The rest is open to the regard of the work itself. I can't control it, but I can at least believe that, 'If you build it they will come!' Which also defines it, because somebody gets it and/or has an interest in it.

JL—Most of my works and projects take the form of open platforms and are therefore long-term efforts that grow and change. They are, perhaps, never fully finished. Usually I consider a work done when I start to lose interest and feel the urge to move on.

WHL—No concept or idea is good if it can't be made into work that clearly expresses and communicates that concept or idea. However grand an idea, be it metaphorical or philosophical, it needs to be translated in a manner that seems completely natural to the subject matter. It has to fit like a glove.

The environment one creates for a certain topic needs to read to the viewer as great referential sources – a context

that will add to the content. For example the ways in which images reveal themselves to the viewer in a publication by folding pages a certain way could slowly reveal added meaning as to what these images are about. I am never worried about whether viewers pick up on all these signifiers at once. I am actually more pleased if it slowly makes sense to them. And even if it goes entirely unnoticed, it should at least not have prevented easy access to the content.

S&M—We mentioned the ever-present speculative nature of graphic design practice. Perhaps ironically, it becomes less pervasive in self-initiated projects. We might create, say, a work to be shown in a gallery that happened to take the form of a book. And let's say that the work is the *idea* itself, and the physical object that may look like a book is simply a means to render the idea. For us, there would be nothing speculative as far as the work's ontological status is concerned. It only becomes speculative when you take the work as a hypothetical book, a 'concept' book, a yet-to-be-realised book. The work as an idea – and the idea as a work – may be many things, but it would not be speculative. For us, it would be a fully realised work.

ZG—Realisation and execution are very different. An idea that can be explained or demonstrated is already partly realised. Material production, printing, programming and fabrication is another kind of realisation, and the reception, debate and discussion is a third kind of realisation. If the first stage and either of the latter two of these stages is achieved, we consider the project to be realised.

With the introduction of Google AdSense, Google's mission statement does not centre around an antitrust but around an all-inclusive neutrality where there are no more boundaries and the company's plans and modes of engagement are encompassing and global.

With the AdSense program, Google has created a monopoly in which every user click provides value to the company. The next stage will be the commercialisation of the ever-widening search market and adding an even greater value to the company's software, making it a