

WHO CAN AFFORD TO BE CRITICAL?

...

WHAT CAN CRITICALITY AFFORD?

*An inquiry into
what we can't do by ourselves, as designers;
and into
what we might be able to do together, as people*

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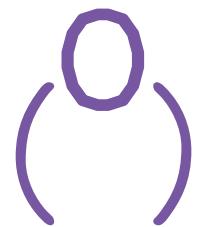
ABSTRACT

Among certain design institutions (mostly located in Europe, the US and the UK), a certain outlook upon the field started to take shape. It has been given many names, but here we'll call it *Critical Design*. This outlook perceives design as more than a service for the market: it aims to show that designers can also be agents of powerful social and political change, beyond the boundaries of the commercial client-commission setting. Designers no longer solve problems, but rather frame them. We shoulder the responsibility of raising awareness about the world's issues. We are provocateurs.

These apparently productive developments beg, however, some questioning. Who can afford to do this type of critical work? How does it set a standard for the remaining 99% of designers who must work for clients in order to pay their bills, many times bound by unregulated working conditions? Or is that even those who do critical work are sometimes equally precarious? Beyond asking what this discourse on criticality does to *us*, designers, we must also ask: what can it really do to the *world*? Are our critical projects changing anything or are they, ironically, doing the opposite and keeping the status quo? What are the limits of awareness-raising? Who has their awareness raised, through which visual and material means, within which spaces?

This thesis aims to question the understanding of what political power contemporary designers hold. Instead of focusing on individual critical practices that can quickly fall into echo chambers, should we rather try to look for political agency in other capacities? Maybe not as designers, but as workers, as citizens, as activists...simply, as *people*?

CRITICAL DISCOURSES



Introduction

CIRCLING AROUND THE CRITICAL

I enrolled in a Communication Design bachelors blindly. I had never heard of it. I had been treading through an oppressing, rigid path in the STEMs field for the past three years of high school, and the escape that a so-called “creative” field posed was alluring. I had no idea what graphic designers did — even though I dealt with and consumed objects designed by them daily.

When I was 17, in my final year of high school, I underwent a vocational assessment — one of those intensive tests where, at the end, you are told what it is that you do best and show more enjoyment doing. My top scores leaned more to the arts and humanities, instead of the sciences. It only confirmed something I already suspected: I should change my path. But where to? The psychologist who interpreted the results for me whispered a suggestion: *“You know a degree which combines the visual arts and reading, writing and communicating? It’s called Communication Design, and there’s a nice faculty where they teach it here in Lisbon, FBAUL (Faculty of Fine-Arts of Lisbon).”* I was dumbfounded. I had never considered the existence of such a thing. He asked *“Do you know what it is that Communication Designers do?”* The only thing that came to my mind: *“Hm...the billboards you see on the highway?”*

Even though I started my bachelors having almost no clue of what Graphic or Communication Design was, I finished it thinking that design was everything, everywhere. From the nowhere of invisibility to the nowhere of omnipresence, design’s culture seems to stride between these non-places. It behaves like a force that is barely recognized by most people even though it shapes their lives. This cognitive dissonance is everywhere within the field, with designers claiming that *“everything is design”* and *“everyone can be a designer”* while at the same time trying to protect their profession from the gig economy, from platforms where you can order a poster online for 5 euros, from the menace of technological automation

and from amateurs — those with no professional training who can become equally as good as formally trained designers, given the ubiquity of online tools, tutorials and softwares.

At FBAUL, me and my colleagues benefited from quite experimental studio courses throughout the three years, where we could explore mediums such as sound, photography, video and installation art, while simultaneously having theoretical courses that aided conceptual thinking. We would both produce and design our content, content which would very often aim at various social, political and cultural issues. These social concerns were always present and we were encouraged to pursue them in our works, many times disregarding ideas of "good form" or "good design" in favor of a more thorough conceptual research, in favor of a pertinent message. This pleased me, given that I was (and still am) quite passionate about social justice. So, to learn that I could do that through design itself was like unearthing a treasure. I could be political, I could be critical!

Thinking in retrospect, Communication Design at FBAUL, like many other European design programmes, seems predicated on the third mode of criticality that Ramia Mazé ascribes to design practice on her contribution for the publication *The Reader* (2009).¹ In the text, Mazé proposes three different modes of criticality within design. The first is an individual designer's criticism towards their own personal practice. The second relates to criticism towards design in general, to its methods, culture, frameworks and dogmas. Then, the third mode relates to when design addresses urgent social and political issues.

(Ø)
Included in the *Iasis Forum for Design and Critical Practice*, which also gave rise to the exhibition *Forms of Inquiry* (2007) at London's Architectural Association.

Here, in contrast to the previous modes, design itself isn't so much the object of criticism as it is the vector through which this criticism is directed elsewhere. We can witness this framework at play in a whole gamut of recent approaches, sporting names like *Social Design*, *Speculative Design*, *Design Activism*, *Design Fiction*, *Contextual Design*, all of which could fit under the umbrella of this third modality.

A similar formulation to Mazé's definition can be found when Els Kuijpers talks about *productivism*, in her proposal for a spectrum of strategies within communication design.² Kuijpers puts forward a set of five nomenclatures — *functionalism*, *formalism*, *informalism*, *productivism* and *dialogism* — which she argues are not "meant as a historical classification of styles with distinguished ideological positions but as a flexible scale in which the designer constantly shifts — depending on the circumstances." Productivism, according to Kuijpers, "puts communication design at the service of a social programme aimed at bringing about change in society."

The object of this thesis (or at least its starting point) is defined along these lines, and I will call it *Critical Design*.³ In the context of this text, I'll talk about it as a container for all those approaches that — following Kuijpers' and Mazé's definitions — aim to use design as a vector for social critique and social change, and see the designer as a political actor. Under this banner I could include many instances, for example, most of the projects produced within schools such as the Design Academy Eindhoven or the Sandberg Instituut's Design Department (as well as their pedagogical

(A)
Kuijpers, E. (2016). *Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning Production* in Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3 — Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. pp. 19.

(B)
Critical Design was coined by product design duo Dunne and Raby in the late 90s. They define it as follows: "Critical Design uses speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life. (...) It is more of an attitude than anything else, a position rather than a method." Throughout this thesis, the usage of Critical Design will encompass this definition but also Mazé's and Kuijpers' contributions to defining this critical shift we're witnessing within design discourse.

ethos)⁴; design studios such as Metahaven or Dunne & Raby; events like the *Forms of Inquiry* exhibition or the Istanbul Design Biennales; publications like Keller Easterling's *Medium Design*; or micro-polemics such as the ones that stemmed from the *Republic of Salvation* project at MoMA's *Design and Violence* exhibition. All the instances mentioned above have in common a view of design as an emancipated discipline which is capable of doing something beyond its commercial boundaries. They share the common trait of trying to exit the usual model of *design as a service*, veering away from the demands of the market in search of a greater social good. They do so by stemming from research programmes, from funds and grants, from positions within the academia — either as student, tutor or researcher — or just as the result of an "independent" practice (as in, independent from clients, financed by the designer). However, these approaches circulate not necessarily outside the market, but instead on an exclusive market of their own. In their eager criticism of the outside world's workings, these projects often forget to examine what are the socio-economic conditions that enable their own existence in the first place — that enable the existence of such a thing as Critical Design. Where do these projects circulate? What makes them circulate in certain spaces but not others? What kind of audience do they gather? How are they financed? Who gets to engage with them? What does that engagement lead to? Does it lead to anything?

④

I could include others such as RCA's former master programme Design Interactions; UAL's MA Graphic Media Design; Yale School of Art's Graphic Design MFA; KASK's Autonomous Design BA + MA; etc.

WHO CAN AFFORD TO BE CRITICAL? WHAT CAN CRITICALITY AFFORD?

I finished my bachelors with a "Speculative Design" project: a fiction that proposed an alternative reality where humanity had evolved to become a collective hivemind. This was a group project, done with my friends Inês and Vítor. As our degree came to a close, the anxieties started to pile up. As proud as we were of our project, when we looked at the maximalist aesthetics, cloudy lyrical language and the art installation medium it used, we couldn't help but pose two simple but grave questions: "*what can something like this really do to the world?*" and "*how can someone make a living doing projects like this?*" Still, today, I believe the essence of these questions — as simplistic and naive as they were — is one worth pursuing. I believe it's within these two questions that we can find the two barriers Critical Design faces: on one hand, the relevance that it can have to society and on the other hand, the feasibility of its practice for each designer, in such a precarious field. By reworking those two questions a bit, I arrived at the interrogations that guide this thesis: "*Who can afford to be critical? And what can criticality afford?*"

Asking two questions allows me to conduct a dual analysis. The first interrogation highlights matters of privilege: why is Critical Design exclusive to a minority of designers who can conduct self-initiated, independent, critical projects, while the great majority of the profession doesn't have the choice to do so, as they depend on a client, company or agency who pays for their labor? The second question focuses on the impact that critical discourses on design have upon the real world, outside of the profession — and also on where that urge to impact the world comes from. Does Critical Design exist because designers want to use their skills to enact progressive social and political change? Or are there other historical contingencies that can explain this almost philanthropic drive? Some form of hidden (or better, unconscious) agenda?

It then becomes clear that an age-old concern regarding *what we can do to the world as designers* is what fuels this thesis. If we can do something, will it be through Critical Design projects that aim to target social and political issues? Or will it be through a different way of being critical, maybe one more aligned with Mazé's first and second modes, where criticality is directed towards design itself, in hopes that by reflecting on its own mechanisms we might understand how they already impact the world — a *critical practice of design*, which is different from Critical Design? Or is it that even through such a critical practice our agency is very limited? What is the relation between *design's power* and the *designer's agency*? What if instead of discussing how to impact society with our designs, we discussed how we can impact our own world — our own field, one teeming with competition, precariousness and professional insecurity (of which Critical Design itself might be a symptom)?



(fig. 1)

A Sonic The Hedgehog meme, which originally read “*There is no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism*”, edited so as to quote designer Desmond Wong who adapted the saying to the context of graphic design practice.

(0.5)

Preamble

CRITICALITY FOR EVERYONE

IS IT POSSIBLE? OR DESIRABLE?

The idea that design has an impact upon the world is quite hard to dismiss today. Designed objects, messages, environments and processes are all around us. Sitting in a room, I'm enveloped by design. The building I'm in was designed, as well as the chair I'm sitting in, the laptop I'm working on, the table upon which the laptop sits, the lights which illuminate my room, the smartphone I just picked up, the interfaces it displays, the endless stream of data it depends upon, the architecture of the internet through which they flow. Design — and thus, designers — are involved in the proliferation of these *things*.

Thinking about responsibility seems, thus, unavoidable. Designers must shoulder the burden of "*maakbaarheid*" (en: makeability), which is "*the idea that we are living in a world that can be understood by people, interpreted by people, and thus can also be consciously shaped by people*,"⁵ to quote Dutch graphic design studio Experimental Jetset. This potential of the world to be shaped, when activated, becomes design itself: the act of shaping. It's the same burden that the upcoming notion of *Ontological Design* places upon us. *Ontological Design* relates to the human condition as one that is inseparable from design. It signifies "*a double movement — we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us*."⁶

For now, let's accept these burdens. So, if designers are to be made aware that their very professional activity is connected not only to politics, but to the shaping of the human being itself, how should that awareness come about if these discussions are presently inaccessible to the majority of our professional class? Even more so, how should they act upon that awareness? When only an elite is capable of engaging with them — capable as in, able to *afford*? When such discussions circulate only

⁵
Experimental Jetset. (2008). *Design and Ideology*. Retrieved November 28, 2021 from <https://www.jetset.nl/archive/design-ideology>

⁶
Willis, A. M. (2006). *Ontological Designing*. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 4(2), 69–92. <https://doi.org/10.2752/144871306x13966268131514>

within museums, galleries, biennales, academic publications (or publications written by designers clearly marketed to other designers) or within certain design schools?

Design education, as it is taught right now in most schools all over the world, is still preparing designers to simply serve the market, to aid innovation and economic progress — it provides a service for the industry. 99% of designers are engaged in this dynamic. If we (who are the 1% who had the privilege to enjoy a different, *critical*, education) acknowledge that this is the present reality, should we find a way to democratize criticality and to make it part of the quotidian service jobs of most designers? To bring it out of academia, out of exhibitions, and into the life of those who are doing corporate logos or packaging labels? How can we make all designers aware that design is an ontological, ideological, political process and have them act on that awareness, so that real changes can be brought about? *Criticality for everyone: Is it possible? Or even, desirable?*

This last question becomes the operative vehicle that will guide this thesis. I will present three answers which will constitute the three main chapters, each one building upon the last, updating my own thought process and returning to our initial doubts so we can keep looking at them from different points of view. First, we'll start with a hopeful tone and answer with "yes, it is possible and desirable." Still, in order to do so, we have to leave *Critical Design* and search for a *critical practice of design*. Secondly, let's dive into what has been recently called *Design Nihilism* and debunk the previous argumentation by answering with "no, it's not possible:" there's no hope for us to engage politically with the world through design. Finally, the last chapter builds upon the previous one and argues that "maybe not, but that's ok, because it might also not be desirable" — because even though it is not through design itself that we can act upon the world, that doesn't mean we can't act in other ways. It will explore what other agencies are available to us beyond design. What are we, beyond being designers? Why has design enclosed all of our identities, including our political ones?

(1)

*Q: Criticality for everyone
— is it possible? And desirable?*

A: Yes!

FROM “CRITICAL DESIGN” TO A CRITICAL PRACTICE OF DESIGN

“Critique — and today many designers are rightly critical of the developments in society — is not only a question of content or theme, but also of approach, of visual re/presentation.”

— Els Kuijpers,
Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning (2016)

(A) CRITICAL DESIGN

What in this thesis I call “Critical Design” is in fact a conglomerate of many positions that have appeared throughout diverse chronologies and geographies. I do recognize the dangers of engaging with such a totalitarian, all-encompassing concept. However, its usage serves mostly to hold under the same banner all those approaches that steer away from commercial design work, veering into the realm of the social, predicated on an idea of *design as research* rather than *design as a service*.

In his recent book *Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design and How to Escape From It*, Ruben Pater traces the lineages of a few different ideological frameworks which I’m grouping under Critical Design, namely Speculative Design and Social Design. By doing that, Pater is essentially mapping out the many instances through which graphic designers have tried to exit capitalism. This thesis deals with this same escape — not only about how it has been theorized and practiced, but also, ultimately, how it has failed to succeed every time.

We can trace those urges of escape back to the very genesis of the profession, to the pioneer of the Art and Crafts movement, William Morris. Influenced by the writings of John Ruskin and nearing the end of a career “rich in the paradoxes of an anti-capitalist design practice,”⁷ Morris founded Kelmscott Press in 1891. Through the press, he hoped to restore the aesthetic unity of the book and bring back value to craftsmanship and ornamentation in a society which was undergoing rapid industrialization. He tried to employ highly skilled craftspeople at higher than average wages,

(7)
Brown, J. Dakota (2019).
Typography, Automation and the Division of Labor - A Brief History. Chicago: Other Forms.
p. 4.

countering the contemporary tendency towards the rationalization of productivity and the splitting of tasks — the division of labor which heralded a new era of capitalist exploitation, where each craftsman executes only one step in a chain of production instead of practicing their art as a whole. However, even though Morris put his socialist principles in practice through Kelmscott Press, his methods rendered books that were way beyond the range of affordability of the lower classes. Morris eventually lamented that he was trapped in “*ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.*”⁸

Probably the most famous precedent of anti-capitalism in design discourse is the 1964 *First Things First* manifesto, published by Ken Garland and signed by 20 other practitioners. In the manifesto, designers speak out against consumerism and advertising, advocating for a redirection of our efforts towards ‘ethically good’ design: “*There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications.*”⁹ But, as Ruben Pater notes, the criteria to define these objects as more ethical — more worthy of the designer’s skills — than ads for consumer goods is unclear:

*Upon closer inspection a division between ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ design doesn’t hold up. Magazines are cited as ‘good’ examples, but don’t these often function as product catalogues with journalism in between? (...) Is a logo for a museum or an NGO also not a form of selling art or philanthropy?*¹⁰

(8)
Lethaby, W. R. (1935). *Philip Webb and his work*. London: Oxford University Press. pp. 94-5.

(9)
Pater, R. (2021). *Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design and How to Escape From It*. Amsterdam: Valiz. pp. 205.

(10)
Garland, K. (1964). *First Things First*. London: Goodwin Press Ltd.

We could mention many other historical instances of anti-capitalism in design discourse, such as Victor Papanek’s *Design for the Real World*,¹¹ first published in 1985, which is seen as the necessary textbook for approaches such as Social Design; Italian (anti-)architecture collective Superstudio’s work and Adolfo Natalini’s famous quote — “*If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design*”¹² — as well as the 1999 version of the *First Things First* manifesto. All these instances sketch a movement towards a critical outlook on design, one that has been running parallel to the still pervasive mainstream notion of design as a service for the market.

Then, as we arrive to the end of the century, we see the term Critical Design first appear in Anthony Dunne’s book *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design* (1999), published by the Royal College of Art in London. It was precisely at RCA, where Dunne and Fiona Raby lectured at the Design Interactions programme, that the agenda of Critical Design was first pushed forward.¹³ And as such, long held concerns within the field — about the complicity of design with market capitalism, about its social potentialities and about its legitimacy as an intellectual discipline based on research rather than ‘just craft’ — found their home in this new concept. At the same time, parallel efforts emerged in other design circles, for example Emigré magazine, the debates around the *designer as author*, the *designer as editor* and the so-called *subterranean modernism*.

(11)
A recent exhibition at Vitra Design Museum called *Victor Papanek: The Politics of Design* celebrated 50 years of the publication of *Design for the Real World*. A set of practitioners made use of the occasion to take a look back at Papanek’s work, critiquing some of his views, namely the way he downplayed the role of women and LGBTQ+ people. Some of this examples are *The Politics of Display: Review of Vitra Design*

(12)
Lang, P., & Menking, W. (2003). *Superstudio: Life without Objects*. Skira.

(13)
Ward, M. (2019, August 28). *Critical about Critical and Speculative Design*. SpeculativeEdu. Retrieved November 9, 2021, from <https://speculativeedu.eu/critical-about-critical-and-speculative-design/>

In 2010, Dunne & Raby published *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming*, where they updated (or rebranded?) the notion of Critical Design under the banner of Speculative Design. They define Critical Design as the usage of “speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions, and givens about the role products play in everyday life”¹⁴ and Speculative Design as having the goal to “open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called wicked problems, to create spaces for discussion and debate about alternative ways of being, and to inspire and encourage people’s imaginations to flow freely.”¹⁵

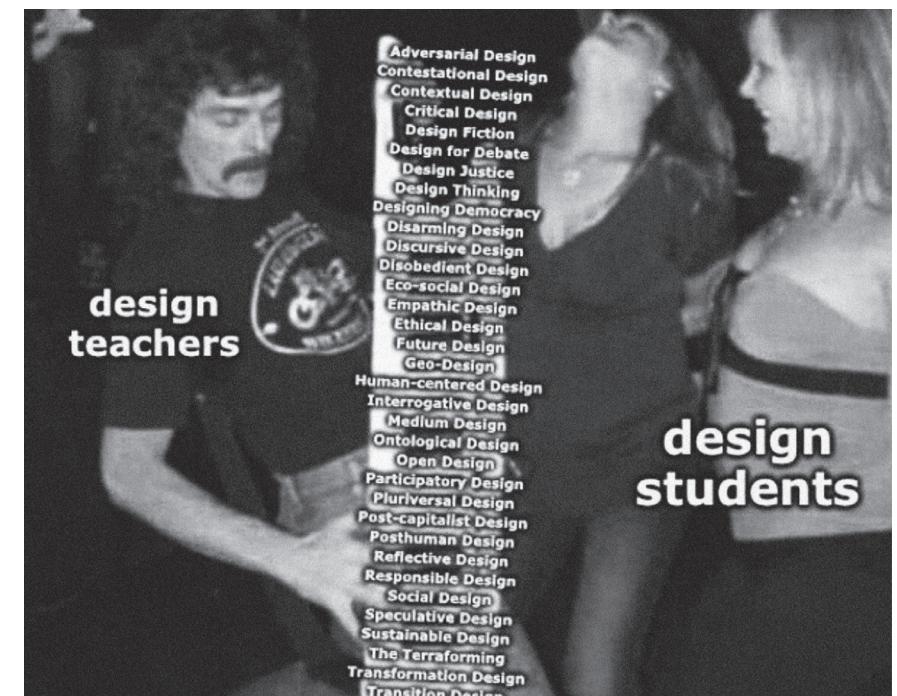
Throughout the past two decades, these ethics have made their way well into quite a handful of schools, museums and institutions, mostly situated in the Global North. Many terminologies have flourished which share similar ideologies to that of Critical Design: *Participatory Design, Design Fiction, Adversarial Design, Discursive Design, Ethical Design, Disobedient Design, Medium Design, Social Design, Design Activism, Contextual Design, Geo-Design, etc.* Some of them exist primarily as the names of academic programmes, some others only inside the specific practice of the authors which proposed them, and others, yet, try to establish schools of thought to be embraced by more designers.

(14)

Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2013).
Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming.
Chicago: The MIT Press. pp. 34.

(15)

Ibid. p.2

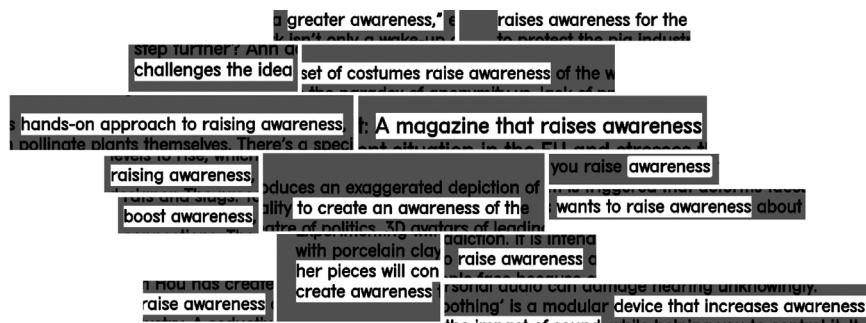


(fig. 2)

A meme by @neuroticarsehole which depicts “design students” fascinated by the many novel design approaches that design schools and teachers present them.

CRITIQUING THE CRITICAL

So what is the aim of Critical Design? What is it for? In their website's FAQs, Dunne and Raby answer this question with the following: "*Mainly to make us think. But also raising awareness, exposing assumptions, provoking action, sparking debate (...)*"¹⁶ Indeed, a key component of many of these approaches became that of raising awareness, the sparking of the debate, the fomentation of thought — a myriad of possible formulations that align design more with provocation than with the mere provision of a service. We can witness this just by browsing through the graduate projects of this school and reading their synopsis. Such a shift — from *design as a service* to *design as provocation* — doesn't happen in a historical vacuum: It appears as a reaction against the solutionism with which the field is historically aligned, as part of the heritage of Modernism. Critical Design understands that it is not new products or technologies that will bring about any kind of change. Rather, it places its faith in some form of social critique. Instead of proposing solutions, Critical Design projects aim to direct attention towards pressing political, social and environmental issues in order to generate discussions around them.



(fig. 3)
A collage made from excerpts
of DAE Graduate Projects'
descriptions.

(16)
Dunne, A., & Raby, F. (2007). *Critical Design FAQ*. Dunne & Raby. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandrby/13/o>

So, what do we do to the world, as Critical Designers? We raise awareness. However, this begs a plethora of questions. Awareness of what? Who is made aware, through which means? Are those means inclusive, accessible? Or are they perpetuating systemic power imbalances even when they come from a place of good intentions? What effect does it have when you're made aware of something you have no possibility to change — when you have no agency?

The case against mere awareness raising is best put forward by Matthew Kiem, part of the decolonising design group, who have been very vocal regarding Speculative/Critical Design (sometimes abbreviated as SCD). In a Medium article called */s a Decolonial SCD possible?*, Kiem writes:

As we and many others have observed, this pretense to be ‘fostering debate and discussion’ has always been an idealised but delayed object of SCD (...) SCD has always been grounded in a liberal pluralist understanding of the political, in which the production of discourse was prioritised as sufficient in itself, to the exclusion of decision, disagreement, and position taking.¹⁷

Kiem's argument is that Critical Design projects often withdraw from furthering the debate they claim to have ignited. They set no real possibilities for actually organizing and doing something beyond making the audience 'be aware of' the subject they present. How this awareness is achieved and what is to be done with it are questions which escape scrutiny. For Kiem, Critical Design is a fundamentally liberal position: different views are allowed, as long as no real antagonism to the status quo is engendered.

(17)
Kiem, M. (2014, September 17). *Is a decolonial SCD possible?* Medium. Retrieved November 2021, from <https://medium.com/mattkiem/is-a-decolonial-scd-possible-30db8675b82a>

These views also circulate inside spaces such as museums, galleries and the academia — institutions that were created for and by Western intellectual middle classes. This is another factor which keeps them from promoting any sort of real change, as Brazilian designers Luiza Prado and Pedro Oliveira, also part of the decolonising design group, point out. They write that any Speculative Critical Design should not fear a dialogue "*with the so-called 'mass culture' or 'mainstream' so often neglected and avoided through the use of purposefully cryptic language.*"¹⁸ This avoidance of the mainstream, of confronting the "outside", might be in itself a mechanism to keep certain privileges unchecked. It allows for the circulation of a humanitarian, philanthropist discourse that is still grounded in the differences of power between the active, charitable actors who *do good* and those passive subjects who *receive it* — differences that are oriented along lines of race, class, gender and ability.

Kiem's and Oliveira and Prado's articles are only two instances of a series of reactions to the project *Republic of Salvation* by Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta, which was exhibited at MoMA's *Design and Violence* show in 2013. A reflection on the project, which "*contemplated on what could happen if our society were confronted with food shortages and famine*", was written by John Thackara and published on the exhibition website. A (heated) online debate ensued,¹⁹ mainly because, as Oliveira and Prado wrote, the dystopia proposed by the project "*is happening to us, right now.*"²⁰ Many people, not only in the poorest Global South countries but also in wealthy ones, already have their diets "*shaped along class and racialised lines through urban design*

⁽¹⁸⁾
Oliveira, P., & Prado, L. (2015, April 22). *Futuristic Gizmos, Conservative Ideals. Modes of Criticism*. Retrieved November 15, 2021, from <https://modesofcriticism.org/futuristic-gizmos-conservative-ideals/>

⁽¹⁹⁾
Thackara, J. (2014, January 8). *Republic of Salvation* (Michael Burton and Michiko Nitta). *Design and Violence*. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/designandviolence/republic-of-salvation-michael-burton-and-michiko-nitta/>

⁽²⁰⁾
Oliveira, P., & Prado, L. (2014, February 4). *Questioning the "critical" in Speculative & Critical Design*. Medium. Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://medium.com/parede/questioning-the-critical-in-speculative-critical-design-5a355cac2ca4>

and management, prices, food stamps, income management etc.", as Kiem notes in the comment section. The point they were putting forward is that Speculative Design projects many times propose dystopias which are already realities to many, or utopias which could only become a reality to a select few.

Another criticism that the decolonising design group has put forward is how Critical Design, or any terminology of similar formulation, is *a priori* vacuous, given that all designing is a social, political, ontological activity. Enclosing a specific field of 'Critical Design' is foreclosing the possibilities for all design to be critical. In a conversation about design activism, Pedro Oliveira said:

*I cannot help but think that it is a mode of engagement with design that is already at its very enunciation an empty signifier: do you need to name yourself a 'design activist' or do 'design activism' work to participate in the political, as if this were a practice politically distinct (and distant) from design itself?*²¹

Their point unmasks these concepts as "*a form of identification that stands as placeholder for identity.*"²² I brand myself as a critical designer because this enunciates a novel position, it differentiates me from the rest of the field, the field of "just" design. We end up performing politics for the sake of furthering our careers instead of actually fostering long term engagement with situated topics and issues. Simultaneously, the language of briefs, projects, timelines and goals, common in design, is transferred to situations which can't and shouldn't be briefed.

⁽²¹⁾
decolonising design (2017). *Design Activism: a conversation by decolonising design*. in Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3: Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

⁽²²⁾
Ibid.

Under the banner of such projects, the essential conditions of marginalized communities are kept in place, as designers extract value and knowledge from them without actually contributing to material changes to their quality of life. They are 'othered' even further and Critical Design reveals itself as an extractive practice.

◊ TOWARDS A CRITICAL PRACTICE OF DESIGN

Such criticisms set the ground for the shift this chapter is arguing for: we must abandon Critical Design, not only because it is predicated on western intellectual elitism, liberal pluralism and because it keeps in place dynamics of oppression but also because its existence is ultimately detrimental to the field: it is saying that criticality can only exist for a handful of practitioners, who (can afford to) call themselves Critical Designers, which is ultimately excluding all design from being critical.

The matter of affordability is key and still hasn't been directly addressed in this thesis. These projects exit the *design as service* model and are usually financed through means other than client commissions. They are commonly backed by state or private funds and grants, or stem from personal means of finance, either by the maintenance of another job (a commercial practice of design, a position in teaching or even a part-time job in an unrelated field) or by being able to count on previously accumulated family wealth. Being able to work in a critical manner thus becomes a privilege. Only a small percentage of designers can fit within the aforementioned contexts. What about designers living in countries with little to zero support for the arts and culture? What about countries where, even though a prolific galore of funds exist, the criteria, bureaucracy and procedures necessary to apply for them exclude many designers from the get go? What about those who have to dedicate all of their time to a traditional, commercial design job? Who just can't afford to work in Critical Design

projects, or else they won't have food on their table? How does criticality live there?

An answer could be found, perhaps, by leaving the ultimately conservative notion of *Critical Design* towards a *critical practice of design*. A critical practice of design foresees criticality as existing within the *working methods* of the designer, rather than just as *critical content*. It opens up the possibilities for designers to work critically even when they can't act as authors, editors and producers of their own content. Even when they can't choose to take on social and political issues. It is a stance which supposedly could help us answer "*Who can afford to be critical?*" with "*Everyone! Every designer!*"

Francisco Laranjo, in his PhD thesis *Design as criticism: methods for a critical graphic design practice*, distinguishes Critical Design from Critical Practice in the following manner:

*Critical design is an emerging field with particular methods (such as speculation and design fiction) and aiming at debate, research and emancipation. Critical practice is the conscious articulation of the personal, disciplinary and public dimensions of design over a long period of time, providing a critique of the context and conditions in which design is produced and its effect on society, with particular attention to the public sphere.*²³

Laranjo sketches this distinction based on the work of Dutch designer Jan van Toorn and the book *Critical Practice* (2008) by Rick Poynor about his oeuvre. The book posed exactly the same question that this thesis does — is it possible to democratize criticality and make it part of the traditional client-oriented work

²³
Laranjo, F. (2017). *Design as criticism: methods for a critical graphic design practice*. PhD thesis, University of the Arts London. pp. 59.

that most designers have to engage with? Can everyone afford to be critical? As Poynor writes: “*Leaving aside overt forms of graphic protest, is it possible (was it ever possible?) to embed an alternative or contrary way of thinking in the everyday commercial practice of design?*”²⁴ This is indeed what van Toorn tried to do in his work. He advocated for an *operationalisation of means*,²⁵ which Els Kuijpers clarifies as meaning “*a method of working that binds thinking to acting*,” which is where criticality lies, instead of in “*the political subject as such*.²⁶

A critical practice of design must be sustained through a long period of time, and its critical character derives not necessarily from the content it communicates but rather from the method through which it is practiced. Laranjo, after van Toorn, argues that a critical practice of design must consider three dimensions: personal, professional and public. We can see this same formulation in the already discussed modes of criticality that Ramia Mazé proposes: first, reflecting on one’s own practice; secondly, reflecting on the field; thirdly, reflecting on the world outside of the field.

It’s also productive to bring back Kuijpers’ previously mentioned *Spectrum of Design Strategies*, which arose from an exhibition about the work of van Toorn at the Van Abbemuseum. We’ve mentioned Productivism, which I aligned with Critical Design previously in this text.²⁷ However, a critical practice of design is closer to what Kuijpers describes as *Dialogism*, which is an

(24) Poynor, R., van Toorn, J. (2008). *Critical Practice: Jan Van Toorn*. Macmillan Publishers.

(25) van Toorn, J. (2016). *Operationalising the Means: Communication Design as Critical Practice*. in Laranjo, F. (2016). *Modes of Criticism 2 - Critique of Method*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

(26) Kuijpers, E. (2016). *Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning Production* in Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3 - Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. pp. 10.

(27) Upon interviewing Els, I understood it is not possible to ascribe so closely the notion of Productivism to Critical Design as a whole. She actually aligns some Critical Design projects more with her notion of *Formalism* — a spectacle of form, but lacking in conveying any message through that form.

“*aesthetic system and moral value in one*,” and a “*reflexive, social strategy*” that “*aims to involve spectators in the communication in a recognisable and critical manner*.²⁸ The design isn’t seen as static, but rather as a sort of “*open work*” which enables interpretation and subjectivity from the spectator to intervene in the communication process.

So, again, let’s return to the question: what do we do to the world, now not as Critical Designers, but as critical practitioners of design? Well, we are aware of how “*every language, and visual language is no exception – not only produces the subject/consciousness but also reproduces the ideology inherent in it, that is, the dominant frame of mind or regime of truth*.²⁹ We are aware of how our design is inherently political from the get go, and thus we work critically. Our work, in turn, acts upon the world according to our own critical agenda.

This brings an understanding of *design-as-politics*, imbuing the designer with tremendous power in the shaping of our lived reality. On one hand, this leads us to diagnose that designers, endowed with this great power, are just simply directing it to the wrong endeavors, misusing their skills by not engaging critically with what they are doing (“*With great power comes great responsibility*”), and on the other hand, it also points towards hopefulness, because if designers have that much power then there’s surely a way to direct it into enacting progressive political change.

(28) Kuijpers, E. (2016). *Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning Production* in Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3 - Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. pp. 19.

(29) Kuijpers, E. & van Toorn, J. (2014). *Strategies in Communication Design – Staging and Rhetorics in the Work of Jan van Toorn*. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum. p. 3.

These notions are what the next chapter aims to challenge. It will show how an increasing number of practitioners don't see such an idealistic way of working as being feasible. It will try to explain this disillusion by showing that talking about design's power is not the same as talking about the designer's power — and that investing in the idea of a responsible, ethical practice can be misleading.

DESIGN NIHILISM: THERE IS NO HOPE

(2)

*Q: Criticality for everyone
— is it possible?*

A: No.

“coding is shit
graphic design is shit
all I want is revenge”

— found on a sticker circulating online, unknown author

The last chapter argued that in order for designers to have some sort of political agency through their work, we should abandon Critical Design and look for a critical practice of design. Through that way of working, designers would be able to influence an audience even when they're working for a client, because the hidden agenda behind their method directs the design either for or against a dominant ideology. By orienting their work towards subverting the undesirable ideologies in place, designers could thus make a difference, given that it is their work which shapes the world. A critical practice of design is not only desirable but even necessary, if we are to ever change our present conditions.

This, however, begs a plethora of questions. What does a critical practice of design look like? How practically different is it from a non-critical work? Can the audience tell the difference? Or is it only clear for the (critical) designers crowd? How exactly does it enable subjectivity and interpretation? Can it actually do something to the world, as *politics*? If it is not necessarily form or content which matter but rather *method*, how is the audience supposed to experience the method if (graphic/communication) design articulates itself through visual form? Even if there's an explanation, an answer to this question, is it not that the work already failed in doing what it set out to do by itself, if we have to explain it? When we have to explain something that should wield its power unexplained — what power really does it have, then?

I don't necessarily have the answers to these questions and I don't think this thesis will bring them. Instead of taking upon such a tall order, in this chapter I want to describe the feeling of not having the answers: the feeling of not knowing what you can do as a designer, or even the sense of doubt regarding whether you can do anything at all. The idea that design, by itself, can't change anything is one of the facets of what some have termed *design nihilism* — a disillusionment towards "design for social good" paired with an awareness of how it is deeply imbricated with capitalism.

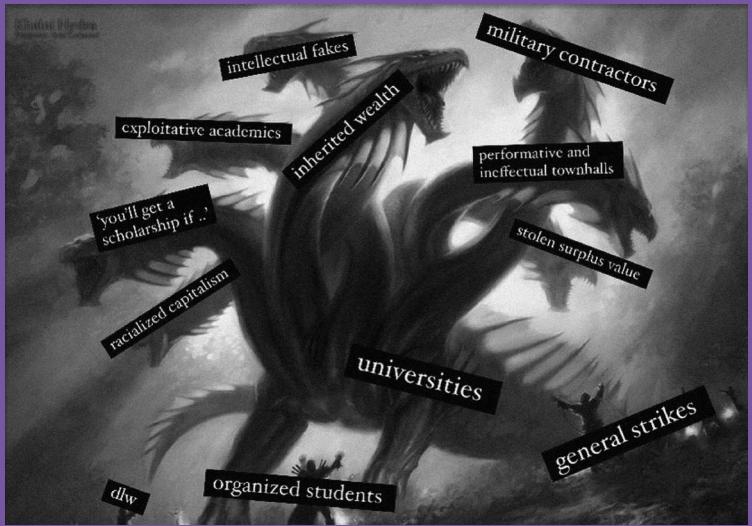
While the previous chapter proposed a more hopeful path, saying “yes, a critical practice is possible and desirable,” this one will try to give platform to the growing hopelessness that plagues many young, precarious designers — including myself. It will aim to show how those who fall into design nihilism are not so much avoiding their responsibility but rather reacting to phenomena around them: the accelerated appropriation of “radical” aesthetics by capitalism (section A) and the ubiquity of a discourse that privileges individual responsibility (section B). Finally, picking on the issue of responsibility, it will question just how powerful designers really are today, and what it means to discern the *power* of a structure from the *agency* of a subject (section C).

^(A) DESIGN NIHILISM, SEMIOTIC COLLAPSE AND THE URGE TO JUST VIBE

The design nihilist discourse flourishes mainly on digital platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, stemming primarily from the field of graphic design. It expresses itself through memes, stories and tweets. The most striking example is the account @neuroticarsehole, but other pages such as @bluefoamdust or @dankloydwright (the latter focusing on architectural discourse) could also be included within it. Alongside them, many other accounts that make fun of avantgarde design schools in The Netherlands have appeared, such as one for the Sandberg Instituut (@sad_berg_covid_memes), for Werkplaats Typografie (@werkplaatsellectuals), for WdKA (@wdka.teachermemes) and even for DAE (@de_sad_academy).



^(fig. 4)
@neuroticarsehole's account's logo reads
“SAD”, which stands for “Strategies of
Aesthetic Discrimination”



dank.lloyd.wright Weekly reminder that capitalism has no inherent aesthetic meaning outside of return or loss on investment. A building cannot ward off capitalism through beauty or uniqueness; capitalism has no eyes, only intestines. A building is subsumed into capitalism not through the tools of production, but through human relations of labour and exchange.

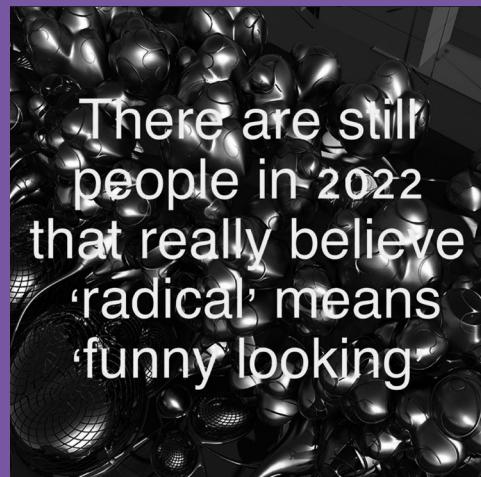
4

IN THIS LECTURE I AIM TO SHOW THAT DESIGNERS CAN TAKE HOLD OF, DISMANTLE, AND REWIRE SOME OF THE... WAIT, WHAT THE FUCK AM I SAYING? THIS DOESNT MAKE ANY SENSE. ITS ALL FINALLY CLICKING THAT ALL OF THIS DISCOURSE AROUND DESIGN AND CAPITALISM IS AN INSIDIOUS WAY FOR THE STATUS QUO TO REMAIN INTACT. THE IMAGE OF REFORM REMAINS ON THE SURFACE WHILE NO ACTUAL STRUCTURAL WORK IS DONE TO THE INSTITUTIONS WE COMPRIZE. ITS CAPITALISM TOLERATING A LITTLE ANTI-CAPITALISM, AS A TREAT, IN AN EFFORT TO SUSTAIN ITSELF AS LONG AS POSSIBLE... OH SHIT, WAS I UNMUTED THIS WHOLE TIME? I THOUGHT I WAS TALKING TO MYSELF

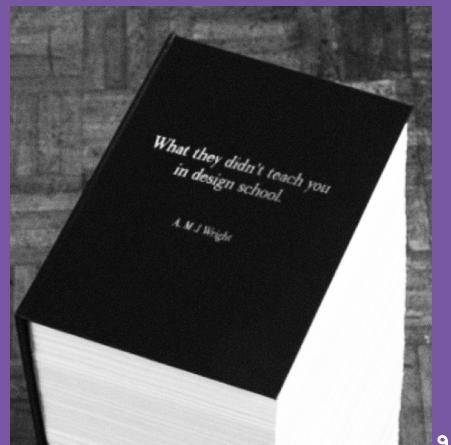
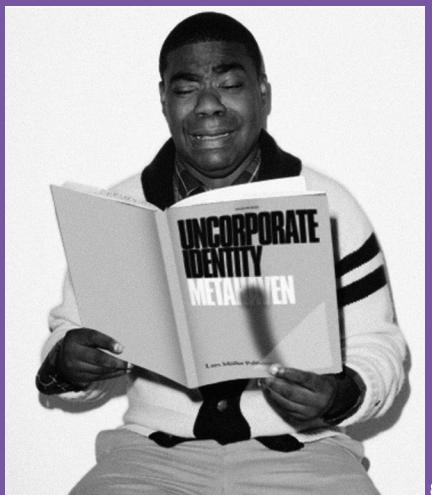
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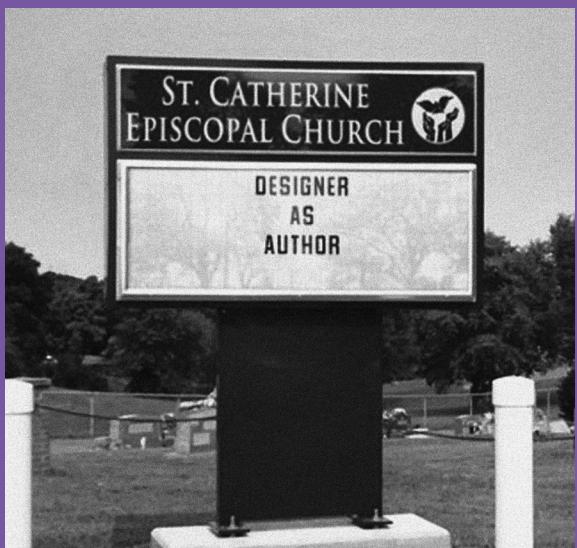


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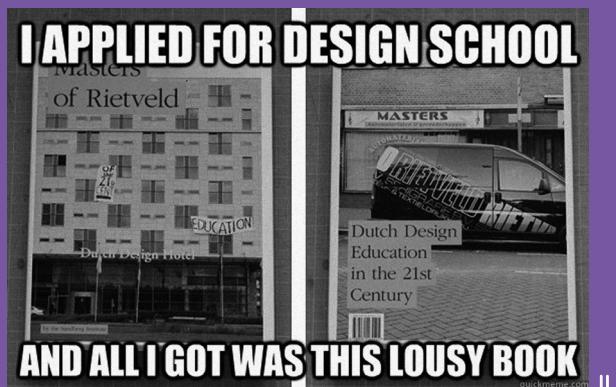


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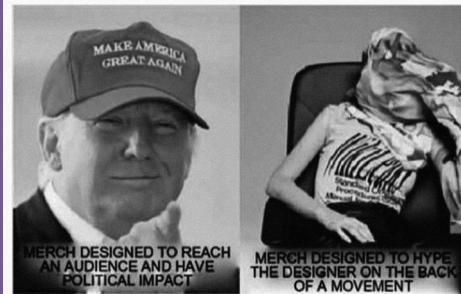
Designer A S

Administration Support, Barista,
Bartender, Busser, Cashier, Customer Service
Representative, **Cook**, **Credit Controller**,
Data Entry Clerk, **Event Promoter**,
Delivery Driver, **FAST FOOD**
ATTENDANT, Fast Food Chain
Crew Member, Fitness Trainer,
Inbound Call Center Representative,
Labourer, Mail Sorter, Office Clerk,
Payroll / Expenses Assistant, Pick-
Packer, Mail Carrier, Receptionist,
Sales Floor Team Member, **Sandwich**
Artist, **Telemarketer**, Telephone Marketing
Researcher, **Valet**, Wait-staff

Generously Funded Zero Hour Reading Explores
Multi-Disciplinary Room Inquiry Self- the 'mise en
Critical Unskilled Initiated Exploitation abime' of the
Praxis Reflexive Benefits designer itself

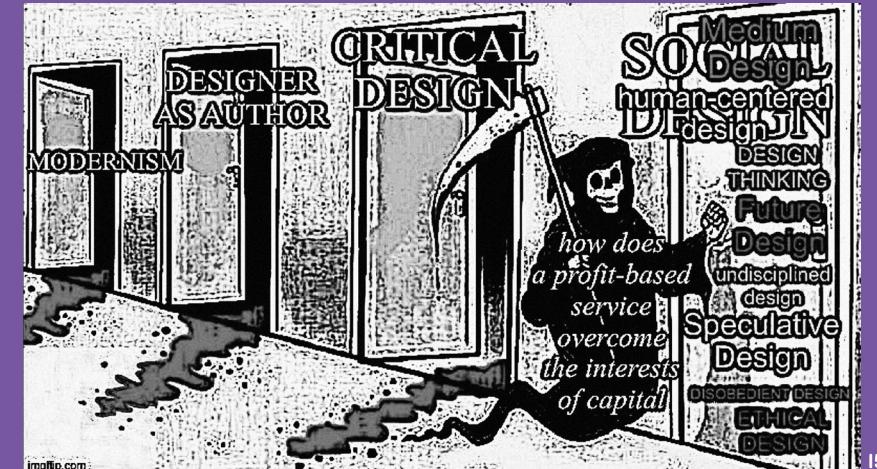
12

CLIENT DRIVEN VS DESIGNER AS AUTHOR

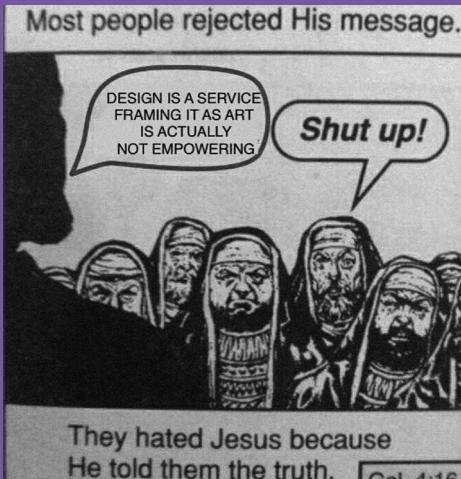


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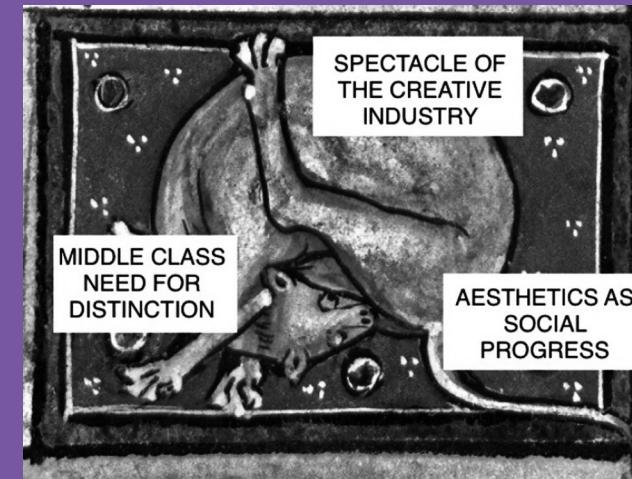
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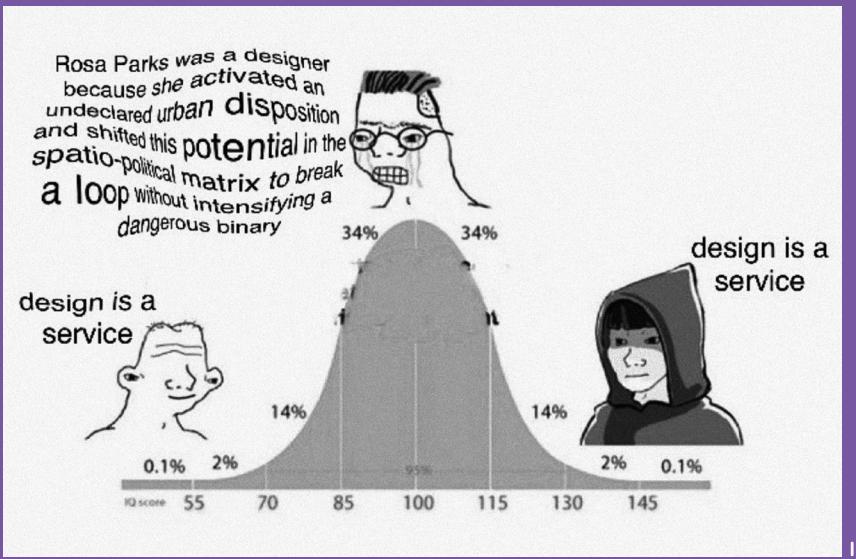
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FORM HAS NO MEANING IN THIS GAME OF PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE



*New Times
Require
New
Typefaces*

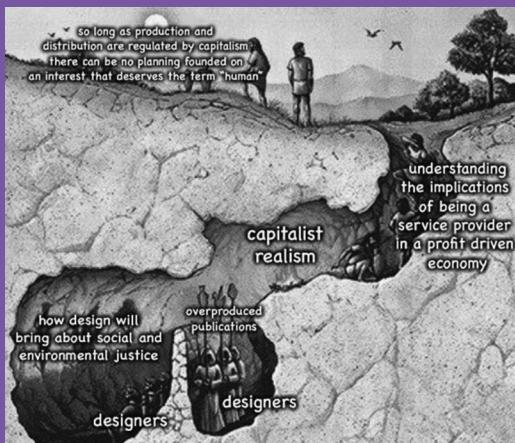
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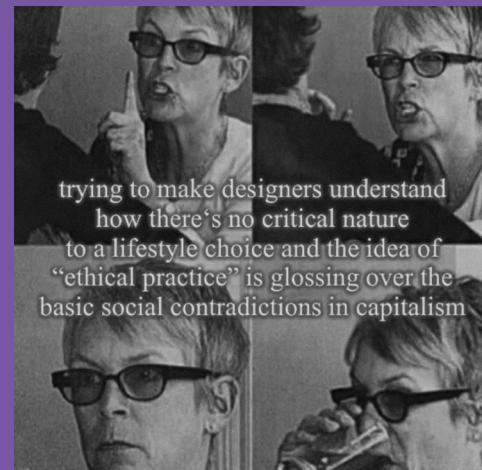
18

DESIGN DISCOURSE behaves parasitically towards all other forces. It has no conviction, but rather makes use of all convictions provided they can be harnessed to promote CAREERS. It seeks to read desires from people's MINDS in order to give them back as IDEAS of gratification, in which THEORIES (...) are embedded. Indeed, each DESIGN THEORY (...) resembles the cultural distinction. (...) DESIGN DISCOURSE tries to latch itself onto people's elementary act of self-affirmation.

19



20



21

GEOGRAPHIC DESIGN
Adversarial Design
Contestational Design
Critical Design
Design Fiction
Design for Debate
Design Justice
Design Thinking
Disarming Design
Discursive Design
Disobedient Design
Eco-Social Design
Empathic Design
Ethical Design
Future Design
Human-Centered Design

THE TERRAFORMING
Interrogative Design
Medium Design
Ontological Design
Open Design
Participatory Design
Pluriversal Design
Post-Capitalist Design
Posthuman Design
Reflective Design
Responsible Design
Social Design
Speculative Design
Transformation Design
Transition Design
Undisciplined Design

22

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC DESIGN
Adversarial Design
Autonomous Design
Contestational Design
Critical Design
Design Fiction
Design for Debate
Design Justice
Design Thinking
Disarming Design
Discursive Design
Disobedient Design
Eco-Social Design
Empathic Design
Ethical Design
Future Design
Human-Centered Design

IDEOLOGY
Interrogative Design
Life-Centred Design
Medium Design
Ontological Design
Open Design
Participatory Design
Pluriversal Design
Post-Capitalist Design
Posthuman Design
Reflective Design
Responsible Design
Social Design
Speculative Design
Transformation Design
Transition Design
Undisciplined Design

maintains and
legitimizes
shapes
mode of
production

THE TERRAFORMING
Interrogative Design
Medium Design
Ontological Design
Open Design
Participatory Design
Pluriversal Design
Post-Capitalist Design
Posthuman Design
Reflective Design
Responsible Design
Social Design
Speculative Design
Transformation Design
Transition Design
Undisciplined Design

23

As a term, “*design nihilism*” is not exactly gaining traction and its origins are murky. I’m using it mainly for practical purposes, in order to name a set of feelings, takes and arguments that have been sprouting (mainly online) for a few years already.

Designer and researcher Silvio Lorusso, who has been looking at this same phenomenon used the term a few times. He defines it as the feeling that “*design is useless*.³⁰ Against the notion that designers are powerful and can act positively upon the world (they just choose not to), the design nihilist discourse posits that we should look first at what constrains our capacity to act. The idea of *acting* really is the crux of the question: design nihilism also describes the feeling that designers don’t have much agency through design itself.

For most precarious designers, refusing or accepting projects is rarely an option. Under capitalism, the choice to take upon a content or context that isn’t commercial is ultimately tied to a privilege of sorts — and even then, there’s no “outside.” Even Critical Design projects circulate within a market, even if it seems very different from the one it tries to escape from. And not even a critical practice of design, concerned with method and its visual articulation, can serve as an answer. Once you accept a project, if you want to care about the political, ethical and social implications of such a job, then your method and your choice of materials or aesthetics rarely matter. They can’t do much. Once again, content and context impose themselves. What meaning does it have that I chose an unsymmetrical alignment, meant to represent queerness, if I’m doing so in a project for a corporation which has anti-LGBTQ ties?

³⁰⁾

Lorusso, S. [@silvio_lorusso]. (2020, March 15). “I suspect that much of the “design nihilism” (*design is useless, etc.*) felt by several students and practitioners derives from this kind of approach” [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/silvio_lorusso/status/1239178274238017536.

This tweet followed a thread started by Ruben Pater regarding DAE’s Geo-Design exhibition centered around Covid-19.



colleen @colleentie · 13 de ago de 2020

there is no way to make an “anti capitalist aesthetic.” it does not exist. not all art or design has to be political, but when engaging in political design, what is 95% of the importance is the *content* of it. to focus on our annoyed feelings abt the aesthetics misses the point



colleen @colleentie · 13 de ago de 2020

what we are seeing is something v interesting. capital always co-opts revolutionary words, movements and aesthetics for profit and neutralization. rn, ppl are using more corporate aesthetics to push forward radical content. that is the point worth expanding and interrogating imo

1

45

270

↑

(fig. 5)

Tweets by designer and illustrator Colleen Tighe.

This disillusionment towards what (graphic) design (as form, as visual articulation) can do, is one facet of this discourse. Designer Danielle Aubert said the following, on a conversation around labor and design for AIGA in May 2021:

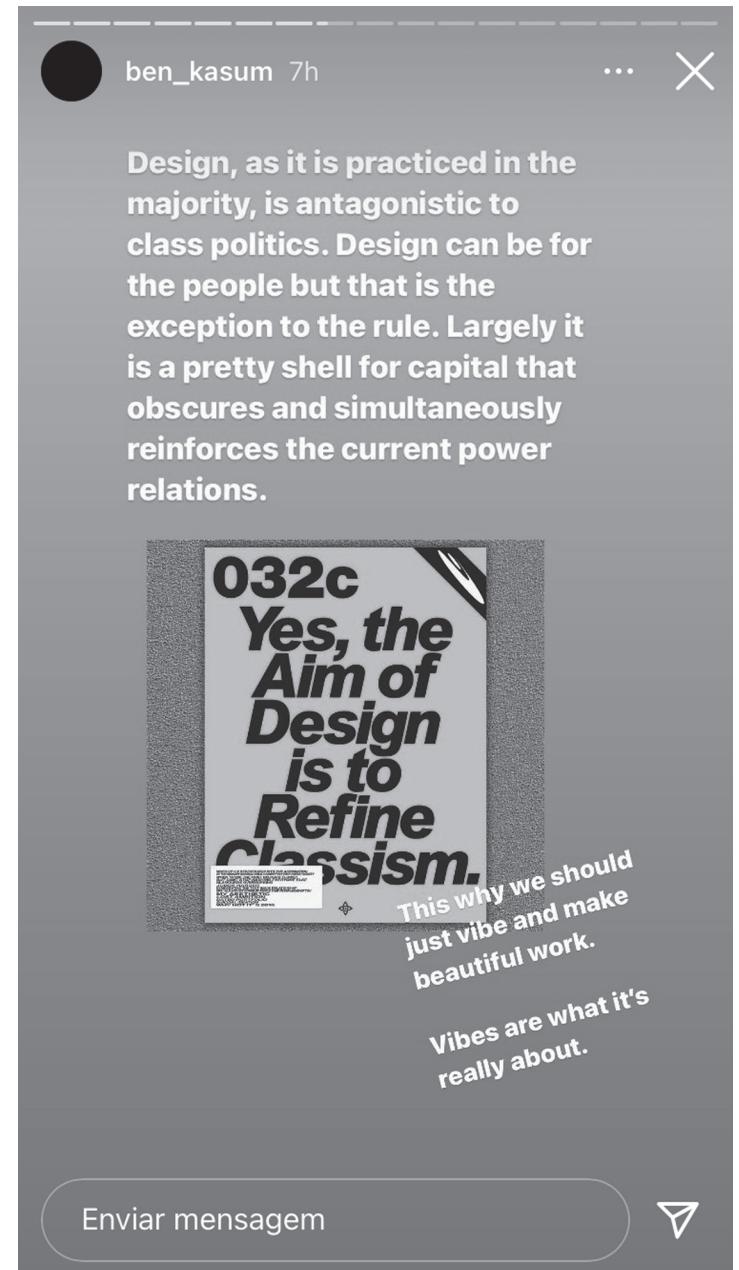
I have gotten pretty cynical about the political potential of form—in grad school we would use Times New Roman and Arial, which are democratically accessible fonts. But it just gets appropriated by Urban Outfitters or whatever within 10 minutes of you putting it out. There’s a way in which form communicates class and reinforces class; whether we want it to or not, these sorts of political forms just become another way to circulate and support these systems.³¹

(31)

Aubert, D. in Bhatt, S. (2021, May

13). If “labor is entitled to all it creates,” where does that leave graphic design? Eye on Design. Retrieved December 26, 2021, from <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/if-labor-is-entitled-to-all-it-creates-where-does-that-leave-graphic-design/>

In the same vein as Aubert, Los Angeles based designer Ben Kasum posted the following stories on Instagram:





Both Aubert and Kasum are concerned about how easily radical aesthetics — if we can even assume that an aesthetic can be inherently radical — are appropriated by corporate forces. While this cynicism is characteristic of our present moment, it is definitely not new. Back in 1999, design critic Rick Poynor wrote about this same issue in his review of the *First Things First Manifesto 2000*: “designers seriously seem to believe that formal innovations alone are somehow able to effect progressive change in the nature and content of the message communicated. Exactly how, no one ever manages to explain.”³² This commentary by Poynor concerns the co-optation of “radical” postmodern experimentations by the advertising industry in the 90s. At the time, it became marketable to be “cool,” to “break the rules.” Thus, marginal aesthetics which sought to do exactly that — break the rules of Modernism — were quickly appropriated into the world of business. Poynor is critiquing how many designers, even after this happened, would still advocate for the power of design to enact some sort of positive effect on society.

The appropriation of subcultural aesthetics by capitalism did not subside in the decades to come. In fact, it only accelerated further. So, the young designers of today are even more keen to reject the idea of an inherently revolutionary form, as they witness this appropriation happen at increasingly faster paces, accelerated by social media platforms and streaming services. So, against believing in form as something full of political potential that must be critically articulated, we arrive at its extreme opposite: a stance which sees aesthetics as completely arbitrary. Kasum’s stories exemplify this, threatening us with a possible thesis that would probably be better than this one: “*Vibe as praxis: Towards aesthetic agency amidst semiotic collapse.*”

³²
Poynor, R. (1999). *First Things First Revisited*.
Emigre. Retrieved November 24, 2021, from <https://www.emigre.com/Essays/Magazine/FirstThingsFirstRevisited>

To talk about a semiotic collapse is to talk about a feeling of meaninglessness, in both the existential and the aesthetic sense. If any form, any visual articulation, as (meta-post-)ironic as it might be, can be co-opted by capitalism, then there's no hope that any kind of progressive change will be brought forward by (graphic) design *itself*. There's no hope of a critical design, of a critical practice of design. In 1981, Stuart Hall wrote:

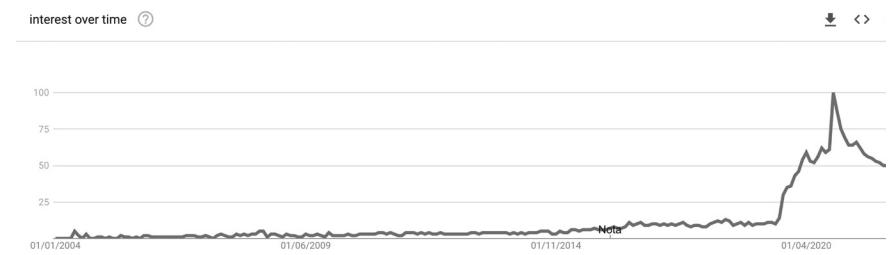
*The meaning of a cultural form and its place of position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. This year's radical symbol or slogan will be neutralised into next year's fashion; the year after, it will be the object of a profound cultural nostalgia. Today's rebel folksinger ends up, tomorrow, on the cover of The Observer colour magazine. The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate. What matters is not the intrinsic or historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in cultural relations: to put it bluntly and in an oversimplified form — what counts is the class struggle in and over culture. Almost every fixed inventory will betray us. Is the novel a 'bourgeois' form? The answer can only be historically provisional: When? Which novels? For whom? Under what conditions?*³³

No form has inherent political meaning. What counts is the class struggle in and over culture. Of course, Hall's quote can be taken in a hopeful light — if the struggle is ongoing, then there's still hope. But as of now, the ruling class is winning. The victories of capitalism are tiring and make us want to give up. This quickly slides into Kasum's rant: "Vibes are what it's really about."

(³³)
Hall, S. (1994). *Deconstructing the Popular. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 442–53.

This disillusionment brings hopelessness, but also catharsis: *There's nothing we can do, so let's just enjoy beautiful things and moments while we can*. This semiotic crisis brings release from trying to do (and to design) things that have meaning.

I'd argue that Kasum's stance is part of a generational shift in mentality. Faced with 'capitalist realism' and the prospects of climate collapse happening in our lifetimes, Gen Z struggles to imagine a future for them. This leads to both radicalization into more direct ways of acting on one hand and, on the other hand, to psychological coping mechanisms such as the idea of 'vibes', or 'vibing' — a word which has seen a surge in popularity since 2019. To 'just vibe' means to engage in an almost epicureanist attitude towards life, where all that matters is an enjoyment of the simple pleasures of the present moment. It appears as a consequence of the hyper awareness of how all systems around us are failing, of how the narratives of progress and growth are illusory. Job insecurity, precariousness and climate anxiety hover over us, and thus, the answer seems to be: *escape the challenges and just vibe*. We reject productivity and reject the totality of work over our lives, given that having a career seems pointless.



(fig. 6)
Interest over the word "vibing", from 2004 until the present (source: Google Analytics).

With young designers educated in certain avantgarde schools, this mentality can fuel a reaction against the Critical Design discourse, a discourse which still believes that an individual designer's practice can bring forth political change. If Critical Design is the

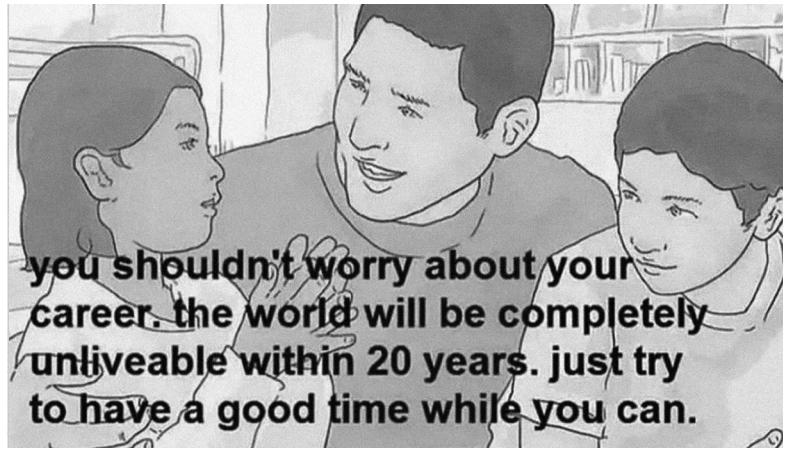


fig. 7)

Memes which speak to the idea of "just vibing"

hobby of a privileged few, if the relevance of a critical method is diluted when working inside the capitalist system, and if critical form is always vulnerable to appropriation, then the average designer is rendered almost powerless. Thus, faced with the complexity of the systems in which they are embedded (and feel compelled to act upon), designers turn instead against what made them believe they could do something in the first place — that they had power: the Critical Design discourse and the institutions which purport it. The questioning of this power, and thus, the responsibility that supposedly comes with it, is what the remaining sections of this chapter will tackle.

⁽³⁾ AN INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

As we've discussed before, there's a shift happening in design practice and education which is explicit if we look at a handful of schools in Europe, UK and the US (where we can easily include the Design Academy Eindhoven). Before, designers were taught based on a framework that presented *design as a service*. The goal was to prepare the student for commercial work, to solve problems when asked to by a client. But now, in an increasing number of institutions, we see design being taught more as framing, mediation and articulation of problems (or even as the raising of new problems) rather than as the engineering of solutions.

It's the *research turn* — as Lorusso calls it — where "*a student is encouraged, implicitly or explicitly, to become not a technical expert that solves problems, but a cultural producer.*"³⁴ Whether

³⁴

Lorusso, S. (2021, November 15). *Notes on Design Populism. Entrepreeciat.* Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://networkcultures.org/entrepreeciat/notes-on-design-populism/>

it's through *Critical Design* or a *critical practice of design*, whether it's through older approaches like *Social Design* or more recent, hip ones such as *Undisciplined Design*, there's always a common element. Beyond an attempt to escape traditional commercial work, all these approaches share a focus on the social and political role of the designer. As such, willingly or unwillingly, this shift ends up responsibilizing the designer, striving to make us aware of the power we hold. At first glance, this turn seems to be essentially a noble call for designers to hold themselves accountable, abandoning the myth of neutrality and universality. (However we can also see it as the discipline itself trying to change how the world perceives its value, trying to achieve legitimacy. We'll expand on this latter aspect and the historical reasons for it in the next chapter.)

For now, let's focus on the consequences of this discourse for how we conceptualize the role of the designer, today. A small twitter discussion^(fig. 8) between the already mentioned meme account @neuroticarsehole and designer and researcher Chris Lee can serve as our departure point to dive into the issue of responsibility. The context is a tweet by Ruben Pater which reads "*What design can do for Europe*", showing the comparison between a clean, friendly Eurostar image from Reuters and another image taken by him in the Paris Nord station, with electric fences and razor wire. The tweet seemed to suggest that Pater was framing military grade security architecture as a design problem — the discussion that followed was predicated on this assumption. However, Pater later clarified in the comments that his indication of design's action here was in the fabrication of a polished, PR-friendly image (the one taken from Reuters) that hides the realities of migration and border control. However, the usefulness of this discussion for my argument still stands, because no matter what was designed here, be it the fence or the image, it is Pater's *ascription* of design that begs analysis: he was doing so in order to show how the designer is responsible for what we are seeing.

neuroticarsehole @neuroticarsehol ...

idk but i always find it weird framing this kind of stuff as design .. AS IF designers actually made the decision to put a fence there? it's just hubris?

Ruben Pater @unlisted_roots · 18 de out de 2019

What design can do for Europe.

First image is a press image of Eurostar from Reuters.

Second and third photo taken by me at Paris Nord station. There is electric fencing with razor wire around the tracks, military grade security.

chris_lee @chrislee_uu · 18 de out de 2019

Em resposta a @neuroticarsehol

If not the decision makers, then at least complicit. Or depends on who is meant by designer. One could say that the decision maker is the designer, and the designer-who-went-to-design-school is the labor/instrument.

neuroticarsehole @neuroticarsehol · 18 de out de 2019

100% agree designers are complicit. It's just that there's nothing the designer as designer can do to correct capitalism. A designer could decline working for bad clients but that's a question of conscience (and privilege), not design.

chris_lee @chrislee_uu · 18 de out de 2019

Sure. But we're totally screwed if the precondition for response is if it will annihilate, or correct capitalism. Besides, identifying such things as design has the marks them as contingent, setting it up as vulnerable. There's more options besides refusal.

chris_lee @chrislee_uu · 18 de out de 2019

*marks them as contingent and vulnerable

(fig. 8)

Twitter discussion between @neuroticarsehole and Chris Lee based on a tweet by Ruben Pater.

In reaction to that, the point that @neuroticarsehole was putting forward shows a skepticism towards Pater's stance: against the responsibility of the designer as an individual. They were raising questions about what "design can do," as Pater wrote. Could the designer — either the one who designed the fences, their placement, or who doctored the Reuters image which hides them — really have had any kind of decision-making power in such a situation? Of course they could turn down work for a client with which they don't agree with morally — but that is a matter of privilege, of *affording* to turn it down. Chris Lee answered saying that refusal isn't the only option, and that by marking something as design, we mark it as contingent, as vulnerable. This is hinting at a common adage in design discourse: if a thing was made in a certain way, it can be made differently. And it is the designer who has the power to remake — and the responsibility to act on that power.

And then what? What are the consequences that this discourse has in practice? What do we do after we mark something as contingent, as vulnerable, as contestable? Who can take action upon this contingency that was set up? What can a single designer do regarding military grade security? In this situation, how much agency did the designer have while working inside of Reuters, which had a clear agenda in mind? If one designer refused to create this image the way Reuters wanted, wouldn't they just simply hire another person to do it? Through design *itself*, the designer holds no power here.

A discourse centered on the responsibilization of the individual designer inevitably promotes the idea of responsible design objects, and vice versa. But what are the consequences of thinking about design's power while centering the single object and the single designer? Such a binary way of thinking disregards how context and environment preclude the possibilities of a designed thing behaving responsibly, or critically, upon the world. Design historian Glenn Adamson writes: "*by the time something is designed, it is usually too late to determine its political effect.*

Commodities are principally the outcome of power relations, not the cause of them."³⁵ Focusing on the politics of design quickly falls onto focusing on the politics of the designer, while forgetting the politics *outside* of the designer which constrain them.

(3) DESIGN'S POWER / THE DESIGNER'S AGENCY

We've seen how (critical) design discourse puts a lot of emphasis on the power that design supposedly has to promote any kind of change. The power of design, in turn, produces a powerful subject, the designer. This subject needs to be made aware of the power it holds in order to act *responsibly* (in other words, critically). However, we've also seen how a growing number of practitioners are struggling with this notion, claiming that they're not that powerful after all, and that their design cannot enact any kind of productive change. Some of them turn instead to an arbitrary, epicurean, nihilistic view of design: anything goes, nothing really matters.

What seems to be happening, in fact, is a conflation of two distinct ideas: confusing the power of design with the agency of designers. To say that design is powerful isn't the same as saying that designers are too — and this, I would argue, is one of the main problems of the discourse around criticality in design. Such a notion is put forth by Silvio Lorusso in the first part of his recent inquiry into *Design and Power* for the Other Worlds online magazine. This whole chapter, and especially this section, draws heavily from his writing and conclusions.

⁽³⁵⁾
Adamson, G. (2021). *The Communist Designer, the Fascist Furniture Dealer, and the Politics of Design*. The Nation, February 20, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/enzo-mari-ikea-design/>.

⁽³⁶⁾
Lorusso, S. (2021). *Design and Power - Part 1*. in Other Worlds #4.

When we talk about design's power, we are talking today about a structure which is larger than ourselves. "Design has a lot of power that is still untapped and unexplored",³⁷ says Paola Antonelli. Bruce Mau writes "Design has emerged as one of the world's most powerful forces."³⁸ Indeed, this discourse might be correct when it identifies the pervasiveness of design in every action, thing or decision we engage in nowadays. In that sense, design, as a structure, is immensely powerful. However, this doesn't mean that this power translates to the individual designer.

A similar conception is put forward by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism*, when analyzing the paper *The Subject Supposed to Recycle* by Campbell Jones, where the author goes in detail about the famous imperative that "everyone is supposed to recycle:"

In making recycling the responsibility of 'everyone', structure contracts out its responsibility to consumers, by itself receding into invisibility. (...) Instead of saying that everyone - i.e. every one - is responsible for climate change, we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that's the very problem. The cause of eco-catastrophe is an impersonal structure which, even though it is capable of producing all manner of effects, is precisely not a subject capable of exercising responsibility. The required subject - a collective subject - does not exist, yet the crisis, like all the other global crises we're now facing, demands that it be constructed.³⁹

(37)
Antonelli, P. (2019). "MoMA curator: 'Humanity will become extinct. We need to design an elegant ending'". Interview by Suzanne LaBarre. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90280777/moma-curator-we-will-become-extinct-we-need-to-design-an-elegant-ending>.

(38)
Mau, B. & Institute Without Boundaries. (2004). *Massive Change* (British First ed.). Phaidon Press.

(39)
Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: There Is No Alternative*. Zero Books.

designacademyeindhoven "DAE has produced a generation of designers who believe they have the power to make a difference"

(fig. 9)

Recent instagram post by DAE (1.03.2022).

Similarly to the "everyone is supposed to recycle" discourse, the "power of design" discourse contracts out responsibility onto individual designers. On the one hand, it aims to show to the outside world the relevance of design in hopes that society at large will recognize it. But on the other hand, it is usually a narrative which circulates within "the bubble," in books written by designers and consumed by designers. It is not necessarily raising the world's awareness about design. Rather, it strikes us, and it does so with double effect: it inflates our egos and fuels our hubris, while simultaneously setting the bar extremely high for the tasks that should be occupying us, in sharp contrast with the daily jobs which pay our bills. We should be, as Lorusso writes, engaging "directly with the megamachine, the hyperobject, the Stack... with Capital itself."⁴⁰ Anything less than that is an avoidance of the responsibility⁴¹ that our power entails.

But to talk about *power* isn't the same as talking about *agency*. Agency relates to the capacity of a given agent to exert its influence and make free choices in relation to a structure which constrains them. Borrowing these concepts from Sociology is helpful to then understand that designers operate within a system which chains them to multiple forces — to a structure. So, design as a world-encompassing system might be powerful, but when we talk about designers as individuals, we should rather discuss not their power but their agency: given certain constraints, what can they actually do? Maybe not that much.

(40)
Lorusso, S. (2020, December 7). *No Problem: Design School as Promise*. Entreprenariat. Retrieved November 26, 2021, from <https://networkcultures.org/entrepreneur/no-problem-design/>

(41)
In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler refers to the focus on individual ethical responsibility as a phenomenon in itself which she calls 'responsibilization'.

And what are we talking about when we talk about structure, about constraints? To illustrate this, Lorusso points out the example of the Gillette razor, as discussed by dutch philosopher Koert van Mensvoort:

*Obviously many designers and engineers have been involved in the creation of many razors over the years. [...] but what more are these creators of the individual models than little cogs in the perpetuating Gillette Company? Calling them engineers and designers is arguably too much credit for the work they do, as they merely sketch the next razor model, of which one can already predict the 'innovative' new properties [...] It's not like they are in a position to think deeply on the meaning and origins of shaving, in order to reinvent this ancient ritual. Like bees in a beehive their work is determined by the logic of the larger structure.*⁴²

This brings us back to the notion of Ontological Design, already mentioned in this thesis. Lorusso cleverly remarks how the Ontological Design discourse seems to imply that there is an equal relationship between creator and object, expressed by formulations like "*the world we design, designs us back.*"⁴³ However, this is not necessarily true, because even though this suggests that we are as active in the designing of our environment as we are designed by it, "*the environment's capacity to 'design' us is stronger than the one that we, as individuals, have to design it.*"⁴⁴

⁴²
van Mensvoort, K., and Jan Grievink, H. (2015). *Next Nature: Nature Changes Along With Us*. Barcelona: Actar

⁴³
Laranjo, F. (2017). *Design as criticism: methods for a critical graphic design practice*. PhD thesis, University of the Arts London. pp. 20.

⁴⁴
Lorusso, S. (2021). *Design and Power - Part I. in Other Worlds* #4.

While this seems complex, this ontological constraint is also related to a very palpable matter: designers are a tool of industry. They are workers providing services, and thus they must respond to the demands of their bosses, employers or clients. That is their environment, to which they must abide if they want to eat and pay rent. Designers are usually "*too low in the power structure*"⁴⁵ to bring any kind of change into our realities through their intentions. Their intentions very rarely align with a position of authority where they can hold a grip upon most of the decision-making. The dream of a Critical Design is to counter this lack of power, propagating the image of a designer whose role concentrates all roles (creating content, editing, designing and producing) — an independent author(ity) divorced from the demands of the market. Designer and researcher J. Dakota Brown, a key reference of mine for the next chapter, writes:

*The critical design discourse was built by full-time designers, many of whom balanced their work responsibilities with academic careers and publishing projects. Designers have attempted, through sheer will, to reinvent themselves as theorists and critics. But as long as they are at work, they are constrained by social forces over which they have little control—and which they have, unfortunately, shown little interest in grasping.*⁴⁶

This wish for independence from the market, for a social role of the designer, for a practice which is critical, is, as we've seen in this chapter, increasingly fading away for many of us. It's revealing itself to be mostly an illusion, one which nevertheless persists in many academic circles — perhaps because they're inhabited by the same scholars whose careers depend on sustaining such discourses.

Ibid.

⁴⁵

⁴⁶
Brown, J. D. (2019). *The Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy*. Chicago: Green Lantern Press. pp. 19.

So, amidst semiotic collapse and the appropriation of any aesthetic by capitalism; with the knowledge that we, as designers, are mere cogs in a larger structure which renders us powerless; with the awareness that no individual practice of design can bring about any kind of change: what agencies are left to us, as designers?

Maybe the problem is exactly that last part — “as designers.” We've been focusing all along on what design can or can't do, on what designers can or can't do. But there is a world beyond this discipline. The last chapter of this thesis will aim to argue against the enclosure of our (political, personal) identities by design, and how to look for agency in another capacities that aren't defined by our job.

POLITICS BEYOND DESIGN

(3)

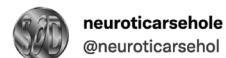
*Q: Criticality for everyone
— is it possible?*

A: Maybe not, but that's ok :)

“the critical project, as I see it, does not rely
on autonomy *for* the profession, but on autonomy *from* it.”

— J. Dakota Brown,
The Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy (2019)

The previous chapter argued against hope — against hoping that a critical practice of design is possible. It tried to show how it fails to actually do something to the world, and the reasons for such a failure. Seems like quite a pessimistic stance, right? It might be, yes, but it depends on which terms we see it. Is this failure so problematic after all? I believe it isn't. The failure of a critical design might be more of a tragedy for us, who were once fascinated by its prospects, than for the outside world which it never truly reached.



neuroticarsehole
@neuroticarsehol

...

ME: MAYBE DESIGN IS A JOB JUST LIKE ANY OTHER
JOB

YOU: OMG DESIGN NIHILISM

(fig. 10)
Tweet by @neuroticarsehole.

Instead of thinking about whether we can do something as designers, this chapter starts by considering what design has done to us. Its premise is inspired by a quote by J. Dakota Brown, a designer and researcher who was very kind to speak to me last summer and to whom I owe the ethics that guide this section. Brown writes: “*The critical project, as I see it, does not rely on autonomy for the profession, but autonomy from it.*”⁴⁷ Following Brown, I will argue that we can be political actors beyond our profession, *beyond design*. To arrive at such a conclusion, we must first analyze how design came to enclose our identities (sections A and B) and our capacities to act as political subjects (section C). Then, I’ll argue that the present discourse of our discipline made us forget how first and foremost we are workers (section D), and that as workers we might be able to find other collective agencies beyond our individual practices (section E).

⁴⁷
Brown, J. D. (2019). *The Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy*. Chicago: Green Lantern Press. pp. 21.

⁴ DESIGN PANISM

It is a capitalist technique to make us identify first and foremost with our job. This is especially true (and dangerous) in the field of design, as it can dissolve and engulf all other human activities. If Fisher can speak of a *capitalist realism*, in which capitalism forecloses the horizons of a different future, I propose that designers can also speak of a *design realism* (or *design panism*,⁴⁸ following Lorusso): the feeling that everything we do, consume, read, watch and think is *designerly*.⁴⁹ Going for a walk? You're designing a path. Walking becomes a design activity. Cooking? You're making active choices into what ingredients you're using, and applying a method so as to create an outcome. Food is design. Gardening? Curating an environment so as to produce an aesthetic vision. Garden design. Writing? Writing is design, you're associating content and directing narratives. Merely existing on this Earth? It's design, ontological design. We're designing all the time. Every action is a practice of design. *There is no alternative.*

I'm not so much interested in understanding if these things are or aren't design, but rather in analyzing how this phenomenon of ascribing a designerly quality to disparate human activities has impacted our own perception of ourselves as professionals. For so long, the maxim "*do what you love*" has functioned as ubiquitous career advice. However, this adage has dangerous consequences for many professionals, including creative workers, as "*the narrative that artists will create solely for the love of it—a fact that might be true if all humans had the stability and the free time and resources with which to do so—is used to justify a variety of exploitative practices*,"⁵⁰ as Sarah Jaffe argues in her book *Work Won't Love You Back* (2021). With the current state

⁽⁴⁸⁾
Lorusso, S. (2021, March 28). *Design Panism: A Timeline*. Entreprefariat. Retrieved December 17, 2021, from <https://networkcultures.org/entreprefariat/design-panism-a-timeline/>

⁽⁴⁹⁾
Cross, N. (1982). *Designerly ways of knowing*. In: *Design Studies*, 3(4)

⁽⁵⁰⁾
Jaffe, S. (2021). *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*. Bold Type Books.

of design discourse, this becomes a double threat: Design is my job. But design is also everything. So, if design is everything, it is also what I love to do outside of my job. Design is there when I'm cooking, when I'm gardening, when I'm writing, when I'm reading. Our whole identities end up becoming our work as designers, simultaneously spoiling things we once did for leisure with the drudgery of constant intellectual labor (thinking: "oh, how can this feed my design practice?") and breaking healthy barriers between our careers and our private lives.

The way design colonizes other areas and disciplines is seen by Lorusso as a "*repudiation of histories*"⁴⁸ — once something becomes design, it loses its own historic specificities and traditions. Think about how Speculative Design became a buzzword that's thrown around lightly. Many of its proponents may not be aware of how "*speculation*" itself carries a genealogy from literature, finance and philosophy.⁴⁹ Whatever is added as a prefix behind "Design" ends up diluted. Sociologist Ruha Benjamin, especially concerned with racial issues, also feels like the subsuming of activism to the methods of design tramples empowerment: "*Maybe what we must demand is not liberatory designs but just plain old liberation. Too retro, perhaps?*"⁵⁰ Her ironic remark, "too retro", is the crux of the question: from *retro* to *cool*, what matters is no longer a material understanding of design but rather an attitudinal one. Design becomes an attitude, the fabrication of a cool, catchy, novel way of engaging with the world, rather than a set of graspable skills such as knowing how to print, to draw letterforms, to layout. Those hard skills are now devalued in the avantgarde design context. What matters is to be able to speculate, to be critical, to "*dissect complex entanglements*" as we can read in the description of Design Academy Eindhoven's new Geo Design MA programme.

⁽⁵¹⁾
Lorusso, S. (2021, April 6). *Ghostly Design*. Entreprefariat. Retrieved January 30, 2022, from <https://networkcultures.org/entreprefariat/ghostly-design/>

⁽⁵²⁾
Mitropoulos, A. (2017). *Continuous Rebranding*. Laranjo, F. (2017). *Modes of Criticism 3 - Design and Democracy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. pp. 19.

⁽⁵³⁾
Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Medford, MA: Polity

⁴ THE ATTITUDINAL SHIFT

This attitudinal shift of design translates into the attitudinal shift of designers. Lorusso points out that “*Deskilling, which is another name for superficial overskilling (knowing a little bit of everything), goes hand in hand with softskilling. The designer is not anymore an expert of craft, process and method, but an expert of mediation, articulation and framing.*”⁵⁴ Interestingly enough, this description could be applied both to the entrepreneurs of Silicon Valley and to the Critical Design crowd of Design Academy. I would argue that the sublimation of design into an attitude is what fueled both the corporate-friendly Design Thinking and the myriad of Critical Design-ish terminologies, from Medium Design to Lyrical Design.

How did this *lingua franca* come to exist and permeate our vision of design? It might be helpful to return to a phenomenon that we’ve already discussed in the previous chapter: how, in the 90s, marginal graphic experiments, aimed at breaking the rules of Modernism, were quickly appropriated by the very corporate world they aimed to subvert. As they started featuring in ads, packaging and visual branding, it was clear that capitalism itself was transforming into a new, more deceitful form: one which engulfs all which is opposed to its rule.

These ethics of rule-breaking are aligned with what french sociologist Eve Chiapello calls the *artist critique*⁵⁵: a critique of capitalism based on the romantic figure of the “artist,” the lone, creative genius, a free soul who struggles and rebels against the status quo. Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*,⁵⁵ argue that this critique emerged out of the

libertarian spirit of the late 60s, especially the student uprisings of May ‘68. By the 90s, management gurus understood that instead of fighting this crowd, they could actually learn from them. They started evangelizing for a new kind of corporate culture, one which also “broke the rules”, aligned with creativity, flexibility, disruptive innovation, flattened hierarchies and individual mobility. Offices should no longer be boring, but rather playful. Routines should be flexible. Direct hierarchical control should disappear (or rather, become opaque). The image of the artist became useful to rebrand the business world and shapeshift its bureaucracies into more dissimulated, creative forms. This new spirit of capitalism, called by many neoliberalism, ravaged behind this alluring mask, cutting on the power of unions, rolling back long-term job security and singing the triumph of individual freedom as a cultural imperative along with a fetishization of creativity.

And what about the designer? In the same vein, we can argue that the spirit of the “*artist critique*” was also present within design forums ever since the discourse appeared in the 60s. Once more, these discussions resurfaced during the 90s, with designers debating if they couldn’t aim for higher, more creative purposes, if they had to be stuck obeying a boss, a client. What if designers could be artists, what if they could be authors? The *designer as author* discourse emerged, and its ethics of editorial independence, freedom from capital and a focus on the intellectual surplus that the field can bring, would end up feeding the already mentioned *research turn*, and thus the appearance of *Critical Design*. As Francisco Laranjo notes, there are many similarities between the discourse around Critical Design and the *designer as author* stance, with the main difference being “*the particular goal (and methods) of addressing societal, political and cultural issues, namely shifting from the designer as author to the designer as researcher.*”⁵⁶

⁵⁴
Lorusso, S. (2020, December 7). *No Problem: Design School as Promise*. Entrepreecaria. Retrieved December 18, 2021, from <https://networkcultures.org/entrepreecaria/no-problem-design/>

⁵⁵
Chiapello, E. (2004). *Evolution and co-optation*. Third Text, 18(6), 585–594. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992643-18-6-585>.

⁵⁵
Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2018). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso.

⁵⁶
Laranjo, F. (2017). *Design as criticism: methods for a critical graphic design practice*. PhD thesis, University of the Arts London. pp. 51.

But even the goal of addressing socio-political issues can be traced back to the cultural imperative that neoliberalism birthed: an individualization of responsibility for changing the dire conditions the world is in. This responsibility, as we've seen, finds its locus within the individual practice of the (critical) designer. It is us (each *one* of us) who are responsible for enacting change with our work. This is also part of what it means for design to have become an attitude — an attitude of humanitarian aid, a mentality that if we all do our best, we will change the world.

The attitudinal shift is what allows for design panism, for design's capacity to glue itself to anything that exists, but also for the shapeshifting of the designer itself into an expert on *soft skills*: interpersonal capacities like the ability to cooperate, to communicate, to employ critical thinking, to mediate — the imperatives we might hear at a start-up meeting, but also at an introductory week at DAE. As such, today, more than possessing a set of hard skills, it is primarily asked of designers to embody an attitude, a unique, critical outlook upon the world, a *practice*. One of such soft skills is a sort of proactive optimism, a willingness to make things better, a kind of hope — hope that design can be redirected as a tool of positive social change or critique. The irony is that even if we're critical of the outside world, we must stay optimistic regarding design itself. "*You don't believe in design.*" "*Where's the design in your project?*" "*You should trust design more.*" are some of the remarks I've heard so far. Of course, it is no surprise one would hear such things inside a design school. But I believe this kind of optimism, of hope, can quickly turn into hubris — into believing that design by itself can do much more than what it actually can. In the absence of God, we've created Design, and we must believe in it.

(5) SYSTEMIC CHANGE!

As design dematerialized into an attitude, it became a mode of engaging with the world — in other words, a *politics*. So, if before we saw how it enclosed our private identities, colonizing even what we do for leisure, here we'll see how it incorporated our public and political identities as well. This is very clear when we look at the hubristic gaze that this discourse employs. This god's-eye view, a souvenir from Modernism, materializes today in claims that design and designers can engage in "*systemic change*." Designer and researcher Dan Hill argues for such a thing in his book *Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary* (2012).⁵⁷ The synopsis reads: "*Strategic design is about applying the principles of traditional design to 'big picture' systemic challenges.*"⁵⁸ Of course, the discussion around systemic political change is necessary today more than ever. But it is also important to understand how such pressure is offloaded onto the individual designer, as we've seen before with the *Subject Supposed to Recycle* example Mark Fisher brings us. Who is the designer who is in place to do such a thing as systemic change? Who is the designer that can sit at the table among the upper echelons of power? When does authority (decision-making, reserved for those at the top, who decide what is to be made) coincide with practical execution (the work of those who are at the bottom, the tools, the designers)?

Hill extends this thinking to neoliberalism itself: "*We can even think of the ideologies at play at any time as being a result of, or a manifestation of, design decisions. The dominant market-oriented neoliberal hegemony across much of western society, for instance, had to be actively inculcated.*"⁵⁹ While this might be true, the scale of design Hill talks about here is very far away from the scale of design we are usually engaged in — this "we" including both the

⁵⁷
Fun fact: I quoted Hill's book in my application video for DAE.

⁵⁸
Hill, D. (2012). *Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary*. Strelka Press.

⁵⁹
Ibid. pp. 104.

DARK MATTER AND TROJAN HORSES

A STRATEGIC DESIGN VOCABULARY

DAN HILL

(fig. 11)

Cover of *Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary* by Dan Hill, published by Strelka Press and designed by Metahaven.

service designer doing packaging labels or the critical designer doing a research project on deep sea mining at Het Nieuwe Instituut. Even if we train our systemic *thinking* (and that is, for sure, one of the biggest qualities that the critical design approach brings) our idea of *action* is still predicated on individuality. We should "practice design at the level of systems,"⁶⁰ but each to their own devices, each with their own individual practice: It is my design practice, my project, that will help subvert these dynamics. Once more, Poynor's words seem useful: Exactly how, no one ever manages to explain.



neuroticarsehole
@neuroticarsehol

...

WHY KEEP GOING WITH THE MODERNIST MYTH OF DESIGNERS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY & SOCIAL JUSTICE ? HOW DO YOU "PRACTICE DESIGN AT THE LEVEL OF SYSTEMS" ?

If designers don't think about and practice design at the level of systems and put politics at the core of what they do—with climate crisis, fascism, racism, xenophobia—when we realise that we don't have any other option, there will be no future at all.

9:42 AM · 20 de mar de 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

(fig. 12)

Tweets by @neuroticarsehole contesting a quote from Francisco Laranjo's text *Graphic Design Systems, and the Systems of Graphic Design*.

⁶⁰

Laranjo, F. (2020, September 24). *Graphic Design Systems, and the Systems of Graphic Design. Modes of Criticism*. Retrieved December 18, 2021, from <https://modesofcriticism.org/graphic-design-systems/>

Another famous example of “*designing at the level of systems*,” which lately has been the object of scrutiny in social media, is architect and Yale professor Keller Easterling’s book *Medium Design*.⁶¹ The author argues that “*designers can take hold of, dismantle, and rewire some of the abusive structures of capital*.”⁶² Easterling also jumps on the bandwagon to assert that “*everyone is a designer*” not necessarily of objects but of environments. She argues that we all design our way out of undesirable situations in our daily life. Her bold claim is that this design methodology can also be applied to political struggles. This can be done “*by manipulating an interplay of physical contours that are also expressing limits, capacities, and values*,” because “*space embodies so many undeclared potentials that can reduce violence and create value through new arrangements – none of which need to go out of their way to exacerbate the violence of a political fight*.”⁶³ The abstraction of Easterling’s writing isn’t relieved even when she gives practical examples, for example when she calls activist Rosa Parks a designer by saying that she “*activated an undeclared urban disposition, and she shifted this potential in the spatio-political matrix to break a loop without intensifying a dangerous binary*.”⁶⁴

Writer and designer R. A. Hawley critiques Easterling’s medium design while also linking it to design thinking. Hawley writes: “*where design thinking is primarily focused on process, Easterling appears interested in design as a kind of political theory — or rather, a theory by which ‘design’ transcends politics, rendering it obsolete.*”⁶⁵ Easterling tries to present medium design as a salve

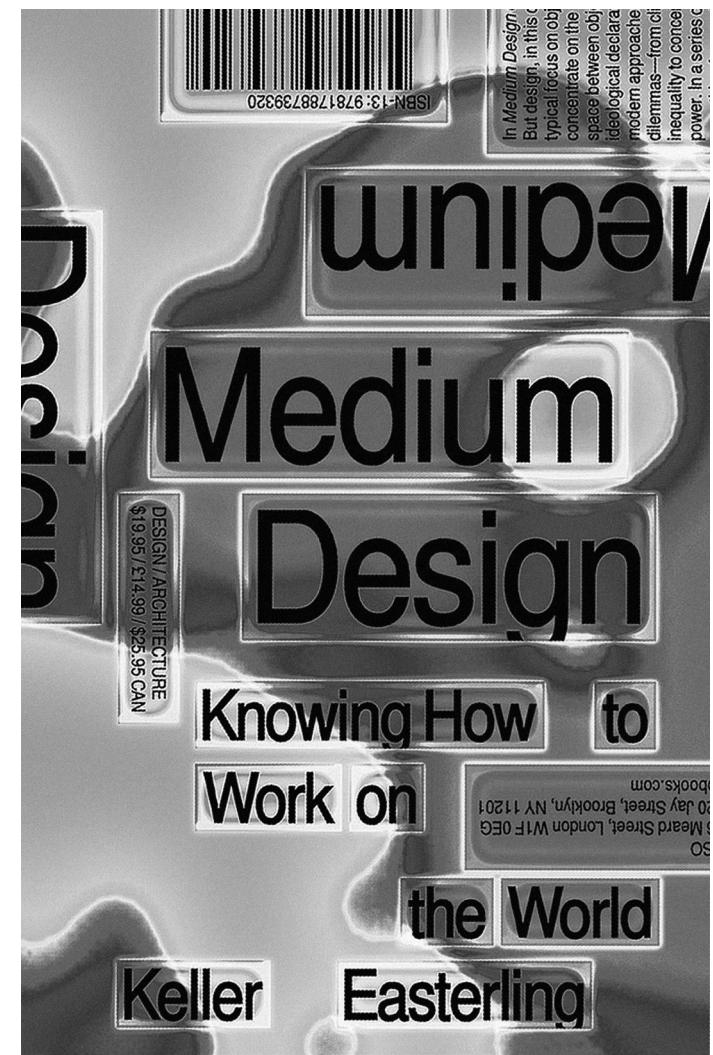
⁽⁶¹⁾
Easterling, K. (2021). *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World*. Verso

⁽⁶²⁾
Easterling, K. (2021, January 18). *On Political Temperament. The Double Negative*. Retrieved December 19, 2021, from <http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/2021/01/on-political-temperament-keller-easterling/>

⁽⁶³⁾
Ibid.

⁽⁶⁴⁾
Easterling, K. (2021). *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World*. Verso. pp.135-136.

⁽⁶⁵⁾
Hawley, R. A. (2021, March 25). *Middle Management. Real Life*. Retrieved January 2, 2022, from <https://reallifemag.com/middle-management/>



(fig. 13)
Cover of *Medium Design* by Keller Easterling, published by Verso.

against the outdated notions of ideology or activism, which only seem to breed violence. Those are not cool, not sophisticated. Design is. So, political struggles are now to be solved through design. Hawley is very direct when they argue that “*perhaps it’s most helpful to think of medium design and design thinking as (...) one larger design-as-politics worldview — one that is willfully ignorant and fundamentally centrist.*”⁶⁶ Design-as-politics implies that it is through design itself that any sort of political change can be achieved, because design transcends politics — like a God who can act from above.

But history has reminded us, time and time again, that as much as design tries to escape capitalism and subvert it by itself, wanting to bring about any kind of productive change, it ends up failing. William Morris, one of the figures with whom I started this thesis, already knew this. It is society itself which needs to change, and only then can maybe a different design exist, a design *otherwise*. It is not a different design that will bring a different society.

The *design-as-politics* discourse has the dire consequence of making us believe that if we are to act politically upon the world, then we must do so through design. But if, as we’ve seen up until now, it is not design itself that will bring about social and political change, then what agencies are we left with? I believe that by rethinking our roles not as individual creatives or as authors but rather simply as workers, we could find that there might still be agencies left for us to explore. In order to explore these agencies, we must first recover the figure that will enable them: *the designer as worker*.

⁶⁶

Ibid.

DESIGNERS CAN TAKE HOLD OF, DISMANTLE, AND REWIRE SOME OF THE ABUSIVE STRUCTURES OF CAPITAL

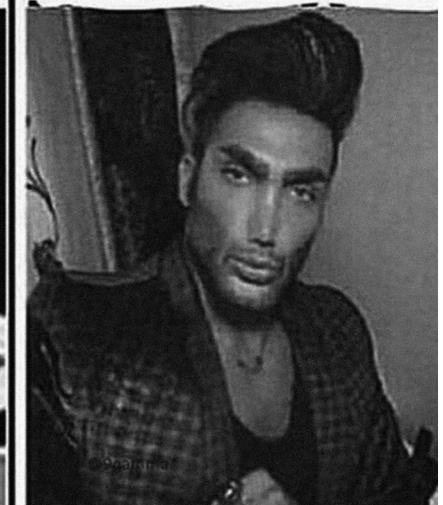


fig. 14)

Meme by @neuroticarsehole contesting Keller Easterling’s stance by using a quote from Swiss sociologist Lucius Burckhardt.

(4) THE DESIGNER AS WORKER

Writer Marianela D'Aprile also wrote against Easterling's *Medium Design* in her piece *Not Everything is "Architecture."* The author argues that the implications of Easterling's discourse have little consequence for the outside world. However, she notes that it does have consequences for the field itself, for "*the hordes of architects who enter the workforce indoctrinated into thinking that just because they look at the world with some kind of critical eye, they are radicals.*"⁶⁷ D'Aprile's remarks are positioned in the field of architecture, but they ring true for (critical) designers as well. She continues:

*"That they are above and beyond politics, that they can opt out of reality—which is full of struggle between two classes of people, those who have to sell their labor to survive and those who buy that labor—in favor of their projections of what the world is. In actuality, they cannot do this. They, like most people, are workers. They have to sell their labor, rarefied and mired in intellect as its form may be, to survive."*⁶⁸

Design-as-politics posits that designers can forsake a deeper understanding of political struggle because their capacities as designers endow them with a special way of acting upon the world. However, designers forget that in most cases, they are bound by the very political struggle they aim to transcend: class struggle. D'Aprile's stance is very close to what J. Dakota Brown writes: "*(...) as long as [designers] are at work, they are constrained by social forces over which they have little control—and which they have, unfortunately, shown little interest in grasping.*"⁶⁹

⁶⁷⁾

D'Aprile, M. (2021, January 26). *Not Everything Is "Architecture."* Common Edge. Retrieved December 19, 2021, from <https://commonedge.org/not-everything-is-architecture/>

⁶⁸⁾

Ibid.

⁶⁹⁾

Brown, J. D. (2019). *The Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy.* Chicago: Green Lantern Press. pp. 19.

Following these authors, I'd argue that the discourses around criticality and authorship in design are guilty not only of being self-indulgent and inconsequential for the "outside world" but also ultimately blinding for us, designers, as they damage the way we relate to our profession, to each other and to the broader fight we could be engaging with. These discourses help create a separation between designers and other working-class people. By branding the designer as an author, as a researcher, as a critical agent, we forget how, first and foremost, designers are also workers. They are bound by an essential condition — that they must sell their labor to survive — which thwarts their capacities to act meaningfully or ethically within their job.

So, how do we recover the designer as worker? In the first place, we should ask: Why is the current identity of our profession so far removed from its actual labor reality? Why are designers so engaged in trying to brand themselves as anything but workers? Why do we think we are so special? And why are we so confused when it comes to our class position? Designer Jack Henrie Fisher argues that, in the context of graphic design, one factor might be that "*there are different genealogies*"⁷⁰ to our identities. To understand the point at which we arrived today, it might be important to unpack those genealogies and the way some of those become part of the design canon while others were marginalized. Fisher identifies them as follows: "*On the one hand we can trace our professional origins to printers who were often politically radical members of working class movements. On the other hand, we clearly come out of management, whose job it is to discipline the working class.*"⁷¹

⁷⁰⁾

Fisher, J. H. in Bhatt, S. (2021, May 13). *If "labor is entitled to all it creates," where does that leave graphic design?* Eye on Design. Retrieved December 26, 2021, from <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/if-labor-is-entitled-to-all-it-creates-where-does-that-leave-graphic-design/>

⁷¹⁾

Ibid.

What does Fisher mean? Still in the context of graphic design, and departing from a study of the legacy of journeyman printers during the 20th century, J. Dakota Brown has written about how these genealogies — one aligned with management and another with the working class — were split from each other. This split is tied to how capitalism's rampant profits are dependent on a standardized division of labor, "a gradual transfer of control and planning from the factory floor to management."⁷² In his text *Typography, Automation and the Division of Labor* (2019), the author traces this forgotten history. He has researched extensively the ITU (International Typographical Union), established in 1852, which was one of the biggest and oldest unions in the US, and one through which printers could hold immense power over their bosses. Brown notes that the kind of power they held in those days is in no way comparable with the power we, as graphic designers, hold today. In the late 19th to early 20th century, information circulated almost exclusively through newspapers, thus "*print workers held a strategic position in the circulation of public discourse, which was simply not possible without them.*"⁷³ Journeyman printers also dealt with a roll of tasks that extended beyond printing itself: typesetting, composing page layouts and even sometimes writing. Through strikes, printers could withhold their labor from the print shop owners and weaponize the major financial impacts they would cause in their favor. However, three essential technological shifts trampled this secured, powerful position and paved the way for the existence of the contemporary graphic designer, one that tries to align itself more to management than to the working class.

The first of those was the invention of the Linotype in 1886, which mechanized the previously manual assembly of each word and line. This allowed for major reductions of labor costs,

(72)
Brown, J. D. (2019). *Typography, Automation and the Division of Labor*. Chicago: Open Forms.
Ibid. p. 7.
p. 3.



(fig. 15)
Insignia of the International
Typographical Union.

granting print shops an advantage in the competition for greater profits. Layoffs and slashed hours were the expected results, which the ITU managed to fight off by securing jurisdiction over Linotype machines in certain key locations, as well as pushing for shorter work days and encouraging early retirements. After this initial struggle, typesetting employment stabilized and the ITU became one of the most powerful unions in the United States. However, a second shift would undermine this status: the introduction of technologies such as teletypesetting (with encoded tape replacing human typists) and phototypesetting (making typesetting a photochemical process which allowed for a more pleasant integration of text and image). Once more, the ITU tried to hold back these advancements by forging new contracts forbidding teletypesetting machines, but in the 70s, the machines had already “crept into areas of the industry with low union representation.”⁷⁴ The adoption of this technology paved the way for computer systems which turned typesetting into word processing. As Brown notes, “a centuries old gap separating writing and printing was beginning to close—and this gap had been the very ground on which the ITU stood.”⁷⁵ The union ended up being dismantled in 1986.

The introduction of these computer systems, specifically Apple’s Macintosh in 1984, is what constitutes the third shift. This innovation simplified the complex sequence of processes that printing implied up until the 70s, which involved many hands beyond the designer’s, who often could only give approximate directions regarding their vision of the project. Up until that moment, variables of spacing, size, weight, color density and image placement were subject to interpretation by groups of workers who would execute the job according to the given indications.

(74)

Ibid. pp. 26.

(75)

Ibid. pp. 27.

However, “much of the period’s modernist-influenced design left the impression that it was the product of a singular, detached mind.”⁷⁶ The introduction of the Macintosh allowed for the centralization of such cumbersome processes into the hands of a single designer. That, along with the publishing of Philip Meggs’ *History of Graphic Design* in 1983,⁷⁷ solidified graphic design history as one made up of singular (cis, hetero, male) geniuses and their achievements.

Thus, in graphic design, an identification with the managerial class — those who have the power to decide, to rule, to change — ends up becoming entangled with authorship⁷⁸, given that we celebrate a history of individuals and their creations while the process behind such creations, and the workers needed to conduct it, is sidelined. This canon forsakes the margins of the center it creates: not only the role of anonymous workers, of women, collectives and unions, but also the interaction between the social, political and technological contexts which surround the usually celebrated actors. Technological advancements, when studied, are accepted as the natural facts of “progress,” when in fact their inculcation was always an effort to standardize and divide labor, making it cheaper or automating it altogether, at the expense of the livelihoods of many workers and their families. The solidification of this history happens at the expense of forgetting what links us to the working class. As such, we identify as intellectuals, as researchers, as the harbingers of change, once again trying to get closer to the top floor, to management, to decision-making. So, as much as we can trace back our identity to the printer-laborers who unionized under

(76)

Ibid. pp. 28.

(77)

My tutor, journalist, writer and art historian Gert Staal, commented on this bit with the following: “Just this single book? Could it be that the writing of (graphic) design’s history was mainly outsourced to art historians who used the canon of the artistic, stylistic development they knew from the visual arts to understand and describe the history of design?”

(78)

And regarding this matter, Staal remarks how “authorship was something designers could present as their unique feature when they tried to enter the boardrooms of their upmarket clients. A rhetoric (mysticism) they expected would be admired (not understood!) by those who decided about commissions and budgets. Authorship implied visibility; the worker was by definition anonymous.”

the ITU, we can also say that the modern conception of the “graphic designer” was “*inaugurated as a profession in order to break deadlocks between management and labor.*”⁸⁰

Today, far from the romanticized narratives of star designers, most graphic designers are actually precarious workers who, similarly to their print trade predecessors, are haunted by technological innovations such as the ubiquity of design software, gig economy apps like Fiverr or TaskRabbit, and the menace of artificial intelligence. Silvio Lorusso diagnoses this democratization of design tools as one component of a process of “*deprofessionalization.*”⁸¹ As designers understand that they don’t hold more expert knowledge than any amateur, they try to place themselves in an arena where they can still hold power, which is the realm of cultural production. They try to become — or at least brand themselves as — intellectuals, authors, researchers. This is the previously mentioned attitudinal shift, where value is displaced from hard skills to soft skills. Designers try to reach an “escape velocity” that will allow them to break free from capitalism into a safe haven, into a place where they can prove their worth. Through this lens — one informed by an historical account of labor and technology — we can re-examine the emergence of the *designer as author, as researcher* and later Critical Design and its many variants. What becomes clear is that, structurally, these efforts are less about the designer wanting to act upon the world and more about hoping the world will still recognize some value in the designer: *Hey, I’m still valuable! I can rework systems, reframe concepts, mediate narratives!*

⁽⁸⁰⁾

Fisher, J. H. in Bhatt, S. (2021, May 13). If “labor is entitled to all it creates,” where does that leave graphic design? Eye on Design. Retrieved December 26, 2021, from <https://eyondesign.aiga.org/if-labor-is-entitled-to-all-it-creates-where-does-that-leave-graphic-design/>

⁽⁸¹⁾

Lorusso, S. (2021, November 3). 6 Theses on the Deprofessionalization of Design. Entreprecariat. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://networkcultures.org/entreprecariat/6-theses-on-the-deprofessionalization-of-design/>

Designer Darin Buzon writes: “*So long as designers believe themselves in a separate ‘creative’ class, inequality is exacerbated, class consciousness is further erased, and solidarity between all working-class people is undermined.*”⁸² In order to avoid this, maybe we would all benefit from a rethinking of design history curriculums: a shift in discourse that would decenter the *designer as author*, and recenter the *designer as worker*. Of course, the labor landscape has changed radically from the time of the ITU printers, and we cannot compare our conditions to the ones they faced. The nature of our work today is fundamentally different. This must be acknowledged, and we must not fall onto simplifying the myriad kinds of designers that work today into the category of the proletariat. A designer earning 5 euros per poster, working on the Fiver platform, might have something in common with the Critical Designer practitioner who teaches and writes theory, but a lot more sets them apart than binds them together. Their class interests might even be contradictory.

Trying to explain UNIONISING to these DESIGNERS be like...

^(fig. 16)

Meme by @neuroticarsehole.

⁽⁸²⁾

Buzon, D. (2021, December 13). *Design Thinking is a Rebrand for White Supremacy.* Medium. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://dabuzon.medium.com/design-thinking-is-a-rebrand-for-white-supremacy-b3d3aa55831>

(E) POLITICS BEYOND DESIGN

Reorienting our own perspective of our profession towards an identification with the working class isn't just an end in itself. I believe we must do so because it is by finding ourselves in a broader struggle that we might find a more meaningful way to engage politically with the world. If we learn to identify not primarily as designers, in the sense of individual creatives who are in charge of putting forward their unique vision, but as workers who are bound by many constraints, we might find that through admitting this individual weakness, we can find collective strength.

This final section argues that we can be political beyond design. We don't have to be political *through* our work. But this doesn't mean that we can't be political *about* our work — quite the contrary. Please also note that I'm not necessarily refusing the idea that all design is an ideological process, as Kuijpers, Laranjo and van Toorn would say. I still believe that politics reside inevitably in what we do as designers. However, I don't believe it is through this daily, individual practice of design that we will be capable of bringing some sort of change to our present conditions. Design, by itself, will not trample systemic racism, patriarchy and misogyny or deeply ingrained homophobia. It will not stop climate change, or undo the modern/colonial matrix of power, or destroy the nature/culture divide. It will not undo the epistemological heritage of the Enlightenment nor the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. It won't hold the ruling class accountable. It won't hack Capitalism.

Instead of letting the urgency of enacting systemic change paralyze us, we can try to have a positive impact in other, more local and humble ways. As my friend Serra says, "*we could first clean our own house before we try to clean the street.*" If we understand that we can be political agents outside of design, we can then learn about how politics work beyond it, how a major social structure constrains us — how we're precarious, atomized,

individualistic, competitive professionals — and ponder upon whether collective forms of action could benefit us. Can designers ever unionize? Who is this *us*? How do we define a collective?

A few recent initiatives have worked on imagining forms of collective agency for designers. UK-based collective *Evening Class*, founded in 2016, started researching unionizing and made their findings public in an event they held in 2018, called *What could a union do for Graphic Design?* They intended to "*identify the intersectional aspects of different forms of creative employment, in order to form an active community able to hold employers to account.*"⁸³ They researched other unions, both current and past, as well as co-ops, and arrived at the conclusion that "*the structures of specialized trade or craft-based unions don't provide the best blueprint for a designers union today.*"⁸⁴ As such, they researched contemporary grassroots unions that targeted the ever-changing conditions of the gig economy and aimed to represent workers from platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo.

In the process, they talked to many designers, mostly self-employed and freelancers, and identified many issues. The workers they spoke to didn't have much knowledge about basic employment rights, financial literacy, nor any standards for wages and working conditions. They talked about how they don't enjoy sick paid leave and also little protection and legal aid. They complained of unpaid internships and unpaid overtime, of doing pitches for free, of not enjoying the protection of legally-binding contracts, of the ubiquity of casual, verbal agreements with clients. They also stated how lonely and isolated they would feel and the emotional toll of having to compete with peers and friends. A lack of appreciation of creative work as real work was also identified.

⁸³
Evening Class. (2018, June 14). *What could a Union do for Graphic Design?* Retrieved December 29, 2021, from <https://evening-class.org/posts/what-could-a-union-do-for-graphic-design>

⁸⁴
Drumm, P. (2018, July 6). *This is What Starting a Design "Union" Looks Like.* Eye on Design. Retrieved January 12, 2022, from <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/this-is-what-starting-a-design-union-looks-like/>

Do you know your employment rights?

WHAT

How should we begin surveying our working conditions?

COULD

What can we learn from past attempts at unionising creative work?

A 2018 PART OF ANTIUNIVERSITY

How can you strike when you're self-employed?

UNION

What are our shared demands across creative disciplines?

DO FOR

What existing unions could designers join?

GRAPHIC

What is a workers' co-operative?

DESIGN?

Thursday 14th June, 7.00—9.30pm

Evening Class: 48 Aberfeldy St, London E14 0NU

(fig. 17)

Flyer for Evening Class's event "What Could a Union Do For Graphic Design?", designed by Christopher Lacy.

These are things that might ring true for most of us who are working or have already worked as independent workers.

The organizers also found out how expensive and complex it is to build a union from scratch. One of the designers behind the initiative, Christopher Lacy, said that "*it's almost like setting up an institution: you need money, certain affiliations, political clout.*"⁸⁵ Even so, their whole research led to a fruitful conclusion. Instead of starting a whole new union, they managed to set up a branch for Designers and Creative Workers inside of an already existing union, the UVW (United Voices of the World). The UVW is "*part of a new crop of grassroots, "bottom-up" organizations that aren't sector-specific, that are set up to respond quickly to issues that arise, and that tend to represent gig economy and nontraditional jobs.*"⁸⁶



(fig. 18)

Members of the Designer + Cultural Workers branch at the United Voices of the World.

(85)

Ibid.

(86)

Ibid.

Thinking about unionizing is one way through which designers could possibly take on a political role without having to do so through design itself. However, through our work as designers, some of us might also be able to support other political efforts. This is different from talking about *design-as-politics*, where it is assumed that design itself holds an inherent capacity of acting upon social issues. No — this is a *design in the service of politics*. R. A. Hawley concludes their review of Easterling's Medium Design with this very same stance:

I even wholeheartedly agree with the assertion that “everyone is a designer,” a phrase I first heard not while reading Medium Design or taking a design thinking class, but rather, at a socialist meeting, where people of differing skill sets had gathered to develop techniques for making propaganda. There was no design-as-politics to be found there, but rather, design in service of politics.⁸⁷

One way designers can do so is by offering their skills to support already existing collectives, groups and unions which might need their technical expertise.⁸⁸ It might seem too practical. But I'd argue that there's more honesty in that than in loftily posing that "*designers can take hold of, dismantle, and rewire some of the abusive structures of capital.*" A direct engagement with political causes is of course nothing new in design history. Graphic design rose in tandem with political propaganda — the political poster has been one of the most examined and discussed objects inside of our discipline. However, the present discourse which focuses too much on the politics of the objects itself demands that these posters enact some sort of change by themselves, and blames them when

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Hawley, R. A. (2021, March 25). Middle Management. Real Life. Retrieved January 2, 2022, from <https://reallifemag.com/middle-management/>

⁸⁸⁾

Precedents for this way of acting can be found in the strategy of the Wild Plakken collective, which were former students of Jan van Toorn at Rietveld Academy Amsterdam in the late 70s. Francisco Laranjo, in his PhD thesis, also uses the Wild Plakken collective as an example

to illustrate a way of thinking that is opposed to van Toorn's ethics: "*This highlights another relevant division in criticality in graphic design: that of maintaining intellectual distance from the subject and supporting and participating in existing political movements.*"

they don't. "*Posters won't save the world*", in fact. But, as we've seen, a notion of *design-as-politics* also won't enact any kind of change. So, a poster — or any other traditional design object — might not save the world, but it can help a certain localized community achieve a certain goal, communicate a message, ignite a campaign. I'm aware that there is nothing "new" about what I'm saying. But maybe the problem is exactly that we expect novelty — every year introducing a new design concept around which we gather, marveling at how it expands our imagination of the discipline. Always asserting "*new ground without being able to measure its distance from what already exists.*"⁸⁹

It is important to be aware of the power dynamics that such a "helping out" presupposes. As Ruben Pater notes, "*If designers choose to work with a community, being or becoming part of that community is necessary to engage with reciprocal forms of aid.*"⁹⁰ Otherwise, we might fall into the trap of vacuous philanthropism, enacted only for the sake of branding the designer as an activist while the community is subjugated, seeing the importance of their own knowledges minimized by an intervention from the outside. Productive examples of how this is being done in practice in this day and age are brought forward by collectives such as *Common Knowledge*, *Cooperativa de Diseño* and the *Autonomous Design Group*. Beyond doing work that is socially engaged, all these collectives are transparent about the way they organize, make decisions, run their finances, afford to do what they do and negotiate their privileges.

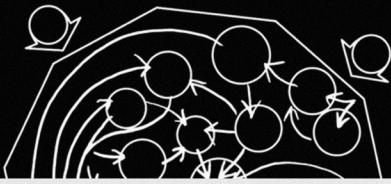
Common Knowledge is a UK-based worker cooperative that is engaged in designing digital tools for direct action and grassroots organizing. They try to create platforms that exist beyond the monopoly of the tech giants, enabling activist organizations

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Brown, J. D. (2019). *The Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy*. Chicago: Green Lantern Press. pp. 19.

⁹⁰⁾

Pater, R. (2021). *Caps Lock: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design and How to Escape From It*. Amsterdam: Valiz. pp. 438.



Working directly with workers and their
organisers, we map and document actions
that make radical change possible.

CATEGORY
PROJECT

ORGANISATION
GAME WORKER SOLIDARITY PROJECT

DATE
12.2021

Game Worker Solidarity Project

The Game Worker Solidarity Project maps and documents collective movements by game workers striving to improve their working conditions.

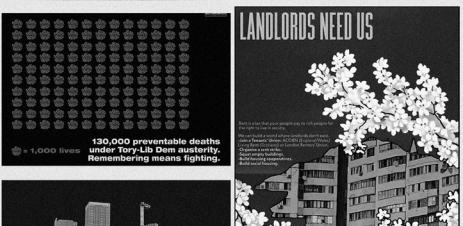
The site is a living resource full of tactics, materials and ideas, plotted geographically and chronologically. You can search the archive by location, type of action, company or union. Anyone can submit an action to the archive, access the full dataset or contribute to the project.

Identity design by Shauna Buckley.

AUTONOMOUS
DESIGN GROUP

[Designs](#) [About](#) [Sightings](#) [Prints & Stickers](#) [Contact](#)

Click on posters to see more on the same theme



1 2 3



Common Knowledge
Autonomous Design Group
3 Workshop conducted by Cooperativa de Diseño

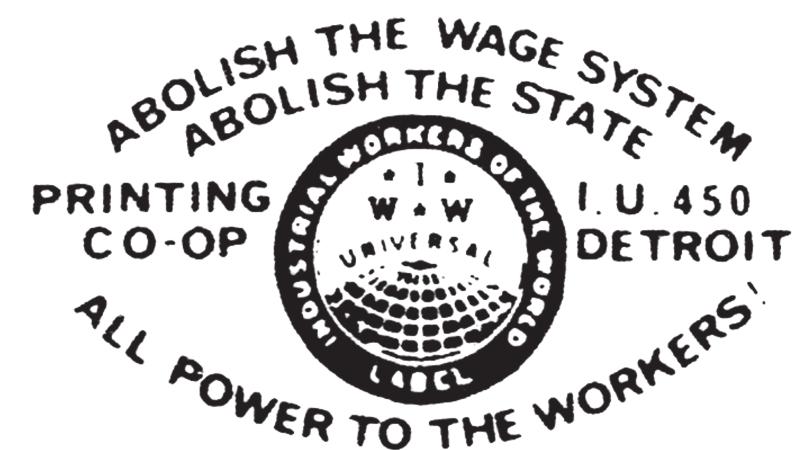
such as Nurses United, Progressive International, London Renters Union and the previously mentioned UVW. This co-op tries to engage in user-centered design research in a way that really involves the community, allowing it to contribute to the process and make decisions in the most meaningful way to them. Another co-op is the Cooperativa de Diseño, which is exclusively run by women. Situated in Buenos Aires, their work consists of branding, product design, website, films and workshops — not for commercial clients but rather for social movements who require such services. They credit all their work collectively, decide everything based on discussing and reaching consensus and try to practice an horizontal hierarchy, even when it is often challenging. In a similar vein, the Autonomous Design Group is a “*design collective using art for liberation, against capitalism and authoritarianism.*”⁹¹ They design posters, symbols, identities, images and illustrations which are then distributed for free under an open-source modality, so that anyone can use them for any purpose, anywhere, and edit them as they wish. They want to question the idea of the individual artist and state that all their designs are produced collectively.⁹²

Precedents for what these collectives are doing can be found, for example, in the work of the *Detroit Printing Co-op*, extensively researched by designer Danielle Aubert. Active between 1970 and 1980, they were essentially a group of radical leftist friends who bought an industrial printer from a closing print shop and used it to print, over the course of ten years, tens of thousands of books, pamphlets, posters, and brochures.⁹³ They printed the poetry magazine *riverrun*, the magazine *Radical America* which was the journal of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

⁽⁹¹⁾
Autonomous Design Group. (n.d.). *About | Autonomous Design Group*. ADG. Retrieved December 30, 2021, from <https://www.weareadg.org/about>

⁽⁹²⁾
Benson, L. (2021, September 10). *The Anonymous Design Collective Out to Change the Visual Language of Protest*. ELEPHANT. Retrieved December 30, 2021, from <https://elephant.art/autonomous-design-group-design-collective-change-visual-language-protest-03022020/>

⁽⁹³⁾
Aubert, D. (2019). *The Detroit Printing Co-op*. Danielle Aubert. Retrieved December 30, 2021, from <https://danielleaubert.info/index.php/projects/the-detroit-printing-co-op/>



(fig. 20)
The union bug that the Detroit Co-op printed in all their materials.

and also the first English translation of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. All those who worked at the co-op did so for free — free in the sense of seeing graphic design and printing beyond the system of wage labor, seeing it instead as “*a craft with revolutionary potential.*”⁹⁴ A little insignia called a “union bug” (which read “Abolish the wage system! Abolish the state! All power to the workers!”) was printed in all documents, stating that their publications were created from union labor. As Aubert writes, “*the Co-op was a collective effort of people who came together free from exploitation by the wage system.*”⁹⁵

In my home country, Portugal, designer Sofia Rocha e Silva is leading what, on the surface, might seem less radical, but is of utmost relevance for the community of self-employed graphic

⁽⁹⁴⁾
Aubert, D. (2020, September 7). *The Detroit Printing Co-op Showed the Revolutionary Potential of Design*. Eye on Design. Retrieved December 30, 2021, from <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/in-the-1970s-the-detroit-printing-co-op-showed-the-revolutionary-potential-of-design/>

⁽⁹⁵⁾

designers of the region. Rocha e Silva started the project Dica do Freelancer (en: *The Freelancer's Tip*) in early 2020, as the pandemic hit. The project is essentially run through her Instagram page and has expanded into podcasts and a series of online courses. The purpose is to educate fellow designers and creative workers about the intricacies of creative work, financial management, budgets and taxes. In most design schools in Portugal there is little to no discussion about the professional reality of working as a designer, especially as a freelancer. Sofia had been in a co-op which she started with friends in her hometown of Vila Real and worked as a freelancer herself. She always had a special liking for finance, and wanted to share the knowledge she had gathered with a larger public: things such as declaring one's earnings to the state, filling out forms for social security and how to make budgets for clients. We usually sneer at these things as boring details, but they nevertheless consume time, resources and energy. It might seem like Sofia is merely accepting the logic of our current economic system instead of questioning it — she works "within the system," yes. However, I believe that the radicalness of her project is found in her willingness to educate designers about usually unspoken subjects, so that as long as we are at work, we can do so with an awareness of the labor dynamics that bind us.



(fig. 2)

Some of the content we can find on Sofia's instagram page
@sofiarochaesilva: What happens if one forgets to submit the Quarterly Social Security declaration; a simulation of a client budget based on how much you'll have to pay in taxes; how to find an hourly rate, her cat, etc.

To conclude this chapter and sum up the ethos behind all of these collectives, I'll leave a quote from Jack Henrie Fisher, where he talks about the work of the well known Richard Hollis:

I remember seeing a work presentation that Richard Hollis gave in The Netherlands. Something that was remarkable to me about Richard was that as he was talking about projects and about his graphic design and rehearsing some anecdotes, his political commitments just naturally, almost accidentally, showed through. He worked with different unions and for Pluto Press, and there was a definite left wing theme in the content of his work then. This was in contrast to some of the other graphic design presentations we saw that day in which certain Dutch designers ended up theorizing their own practice of graphic design as something with this inherent agency that could intervene in larger political issues, that the form of their design had a sort of political agency. Whereas with Hollis, the political commitment was something separate. He just happened to be left-wing, his graphic design didn't give him special political powers.⁹⁶

Either by acting upon our own field — through maybe unionizing and sharing resources about creative labor — or by acting upon the world outside of it — using our design skills to help, in a practical way, any initiative which might need them — I've tried to argue how there are still pathways for engaging politically with the world around us, not through our own individual practice but perhaps through communal ways of working with other colleagues, organizers and activists.

⁹⁶

Fisher, J.H. in Bhatt, S. (2021, May 13). If "labor is entitled to all it creates," where does that leave graphic design? Eye on Design. Retrieved December 26, 2021, from <https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/if-labor-is-entitled-to-all-it-creates-where-does-that-leave-graphic-design/>

BEING TOGETHER

(4)

Conclusion

“We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love.”

— Silvia Federici
Wages Against Housework (1975)

When I found graphic design, I felt like I had found what I was made to do. I had encountered a field where I could work creatively. I could work with images and words, but also with other mediums, because design didn't have to be constrained to the static, two dimensional plane anymore. Moving images, installations, sound pieces, performance, writing — all of that could be *designerly*. And then I discovered that, for my design projects, I could (and should) also research and gather theoretical knowledge: I could dive into theory, lean into sociology, philosophy and cultural studies. I could even produce the content of my own projects! On top of all that, I could direct such skills to bring about awareness on many social and political topics, something that was very dear to me.

As time passed, I found out that engaging with these different activities through my work as a designer would not be totally possible — I would not be able to afford to do it while living and working in Portugal. Simultaneously, as design engulfed all of these dimensions, it stripped them from their essence, robbing me from my fascination for them. I would no longer draw with innocent pleasure for the sake of having fun, would no longer read without thinking how it could add to the theoretical framework for yet another design project. A feeling of discomfort started to develop, and today I can say what it amounted to: even as I saw design *become* more and more things, I simultaneously understood just how much less I was actually able to *do*, as a designer myself. This doing, the notion of acting, of agency, became central for me. *What can I do, as a designer?*

My growing discomfort gradually transformed into disillusion. I lost interest in most things, arriving finally at a hopelessness towards what design can do to the world — at *design-as-politics*. And as I lost hope in design-as-politics, I lost hope in both *design* and *politics*. How can we ever change the conditions we're in, if we are so limited as designers? If, when doing "critical" design, it ends up circulating always within the same spaces? If, outside of "critical" design, I have to engage in a regular service job in

which I am pushing commodities, contributing to the violence of capitalism? If there are no inherently revolutionary aesthetics? If every visual or material articulation ends up being appropriated into the system? If the prospect of a socially engaged design is false, do I really want to be a designer?

This thesis ended up constituting almost a therapy session in which I started to learn how to make peace with design again. Most of all, I learned how to make peace with what design can and can't do. And as I'm learning to let go of *design-as-politics*, of design as a programme or method for engaging critically with the world, I am rediscovering that I can still design, and that I can still engage with the world. We don't have to always tie those two together. Losing hope in *design-as-politics* doesn't mean you have to lose hope in design or in politics. Design is my job — one I might love, like or even just have because I have to make a living. And to be political is a human condition, something embedded into all of us. We can discuss, act, move, debate, upset, disturb, organize. Thus, we don't have to be political through our work if we can't afford to do so. We should understand that there are other ways for us to engage with politics, beyond our job, beyond design.⁹⁷ As J. Dakota Brown suggests, that might be the true critical project.

It must be noted that "debunking" *design-as-politics* doesn't necessarily mean that design is apolitical. I subscribe to the notion that the process of design is always bound to a certain ideological context. There's no neutrality and no universal design language. And indeed, design, as a system which permeates our lives, is powerful. What I'm arguing for is simply that even if design is powerful that doesn't mean that the individual designer can exert

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And if design is so intertwined with capitalism that continuing to engage with the profession feels like a deep betrayal of one's values, then maybe the ultimate radical stance is to stop being a designer altogether. Maybe I'll become a nurse? A biologist?

A nature conservationist? This is half irony, half truthful questioning. Even so, if I stop designing, many others will continue doing so. Once more, the specter of individual responsibilization makes an appearance.

power through their own design practice, by itself. In the context of one's practice, claiming power, claiming criticality or claiming political agency will, more often than not, be about personal positioning rather than about truly upsetting the system.

Indeed, all the questions with which I started this thesis — "*Who can afford to be critical?*", "*What can criticality afford?*" and even "*Criticality for everyone: is it possible? And desirable?*" — were just different ways of asking: What power do I hold? What power can anyone hold? Arriving at the end of this process, I conclude that the problem is the figure of the I, the figure of every one. Maybe a better question would be "*What power do we hold, together?*" This new question is the conclusion of this journey, where we traveled from the myth of the individual power of the designer towards the possibility of building collective strength for creative workers. However, it is also important to note that identifying as workers and building power as such within capitalism might not be the bottom line. It might be the bottom line of this thesis, but perhaps not of the essential rethinking we should be doing: discussing the very nature of work, questioning the demands of employability and how work itself can be (and is) another cage which encloses our beings. As Silvia Federici says, let's "*call work what is work, so we might rediscover what is love*" — so we might rediscover what makes us people, first and foremost, and not designers, or even workers.

As I write these words, I'm preparing to take the next step of this research journey: I want to start a series of group meetings to discuss all these issues together with my fellow Design Academy friends and colleagues. The goal is to investigate what collective agencies we, as designers who are creative workers, are left with. As the saying goes, I'm trying to *put the money where my mouth is*, giving away the total ownership of my project and investing instead in attempting to build a commons of sorts. My project won't just be mine, it will be of those who will talk with me in the coming months. I would be lying if I said I'm not at least a bit afraid of doing so, for it is so easy to be in control when you are by yourself, but the moment you start sharing, real challenges appear.

That is why we should not fetishize collectivity as an end in itself, or accept it blindly. We must actively work through this notion, recover it from the ashes of our individualistic common sense, and understand how to practice it. Collectivity can take many shapes: organizing, unionizing, commoning, cooperating, solidarity, interdependence, mutual aid, or even just having dinner with friends. None of these things exist without at least some tension, and their fostering is not necessarily a pacific activity. We must deal with openness, disagreement, and unpredictability, and we must be aware of the intersections of social identities such as race, gender, sexuality and ability and how they place ourselves in different positions within any given collective formation. But, even if it looks daunting, I believe we must try. And to answer this last question, “*What power do we hold, together?*”, we first need to do exactly that: truly be together, with all that it entails.

INTERVIEWS

Throughout this thesis, we travelled from different theoretical positions. In the last part of this book, I wanted to give voice to some of the people whose writings, works or ideas I used to drive my argument forward. These conversations are ordered according to the structure of the thesis. First, we started by believing in the agency that designers can have as critical practitioners — a position we can now hear directly from Els Kuijpers. Secondly, we dived into hopelessness, specifically questioning the radical agency that graphic designers can have through visual form, as something so easy to appropriate — a stance brought by Ben Kasum. Afterwards, we arrived at a stance that, instead of solving whether or not we have agency through design, rather proposes that we look for ways to break free from its enclosure of our identities — to define it as a profession, not as a way of being in the world, not as a politics. In that way, we might be able to lend our skills to help certain people do relevant political work — as Gemma Copeland does within Common Knowledge — or to look inwards into our own (usually precarious, unregulated, uncertain) professional context, and identify what needs to be done so we can enjoy better working conditions — as Sofia Rocha e Silva does with her project *The Freelancer's Tip*.

“I have realistic dreams about the world”
a conversation with Els Kuijpers
(7.01.2022)

In the beginning of January, I talked with curator, design researcher, critic and teacher Els Kuijpers, the author of a text that became a key reference for the first chapter of this thesis: *Style? Strategy! On Communication Design as Meaning Production*. Our conversation was centered partially around this same text, which guided us into the heart of her work: a *hope* that we can still find ways to enact our agency, even under tight social and economic constraints. Indeed, this conversation very much circled around the idea of hope. And I believe that if there is hope that we can do something as designers, it will be as Els proposes: through the hard work of articulating together our thinking and our acting in a conscious way, embedding it into how we deal with form as graphic designers, always asking “*What is it that my work is doing in the world?*”

My thesis ended up flirting with a stance with which Els would certainly disagree, based on a hopelessness regarding what design *can’t* do and what power we *don’t* have. However, during this conversation, Els constantly pulled me closer to reconsidering this position, to think once again not only about what we can do but about the fact that we must do it anyhow, even in difficult, unfree times. As I transcribed and edited this talk, I kept thinking that the thesis I just wrote (which makes the strong point of arguing against the discourse around “*the power of design*”) might simply be the crystallization of a certain mindset I have now, which is shared by some of my colleagues; the product of current conditions, which might change, and in time, allow me to come back closer to the ideas that Kuijpers so fervently proposes. Because, if there’s hope for true newness, for a true rethinking of how we can act in the world with our work, it will be through the kind of critical practice that Els and the late designer Jan van Toorn propose.

Afonso Matos
 I see *Critical Design* as an umbrella term, so not only in the sense that comes from when Dunne & Raby coined it but also from all these similar approaches that propose similar things. They all seem predicated on trying to exit the "*design as a service*" model. So, most Critical Design projects are usually financed through means other than client commissions (funds, grants, personal means of finance such as income from other jobs, from a position in academia, etc). And the absence of the client, I think, allows for a strong authorship/editorial role to come through, so the designer can be both the author and the editor, and really have full ownership over content and form. This ends up aligning the outcome sometimes more to contemporary art than to design, at least from a formal point of view, if you look at it — the aesthetics it employs, or the way it communicates. It has an interesting aspect to it, which is the subjectivity, but at the same time, how well is that articulated? Such a thing also usually implies that the circulation of Critical Design projects is limited: it is bound to museums, art galleries, biennales, academic institutions, graduation shows. It loses its public commitment, ironically, even though it concerns itself with usually very pertinent social issues. Which is what I feel also in Design Academy or in many graduate shows: there are very interesting social issues and research being done by committed students, by us, by my peers. But then, they fall into a project that only lives there and doesn't have any consequence beyond the graduate show. And now, moving to a *critical practice of design*, I think that's a different concept from Critical Design, in

the sense that it implies a mode of engagement with our work that can exist even when we're under a commission setting, as I was saying before; even when we must abide to a set of constraints that a client or a boss impose over us, even when we can't choose the content of our work (because most of the times you can't). It implies that we still have some agency in the middle of a structure which binds us. So when I asked, for my thesis, "*Who can afford to be critical?*", I believe a critical practice of design would allow us to answer that with "*Everyone! Every designer can employ criticality in their work because, no matter what kind of setting we are under, we can bind a way of thinking with our way of acting that allows us to put our agenda forward!*" So I would like you to maybe explain to me a bit more how can we, designers, as workers which are financially dependent on others that pay for our labor, and under this prism of class — how can we still enact such critical agency, how do you see it coming through?

Els Kuijpers

How can we designers, as workers, which are financially dependent on others to pay for our labor, enact such critical agency? My first remark, without even going through all of those lines, seeing this bold question at the end: I think this is always the same problem, in my view. Thinking of the designer I knew so well, Jan van Toorn...they say we come from a different generation. As the two of us do. You come from a different generation. Still, I would say that even though the conditions he faced in his day maybe were different, I would say that, as a human being, whether as a designer (or as me, trained from an artistic perspective), it's exactly the same. He grew up in what

you could call a period of high functionalism, propagating *design as a service*, ending up somewhere terribly in total design. You know, totalizing every aspect of life. He quickly understood, I would say, that there was a hunch in the practice, in the living, in living his life. So I think his purpose wasn't to "*do this critically*"... he deployed his outlook upon the work he did, which was design. So what I'm saying here is: I think that, as a human being, you always face conditions outside that you have to deal with. And dealing with the things you're confronted with, and how you do that, critically or affirmatively — I would say that is what a human is. We're talking about the human species. So, thinking of Jan, thinking of my own take on humanity, I would say we're a *practical animal*, more than a *thinking animal*. Or that we have a very specific relation between thinking and practice. So, I'm referring to this because the whole idea about criticality comes from awareness. It's culture. It's not practice. So, what is criticality? Bottom line is: it's the joy of wonder. Of course you have to find ways to articulate that. So, maybe, *Critical Design. Critical practice?* Yes, critical practice, I understand that as something...

AM

...that points to a different kind of outlook, that centers more in the actual doing, in the practicing of the thing, more than just the thing?

EK

Yes, absolutely. More the event, not the object. At least that's how it somehow started for me. *Conceptualizing* — it's fine, it's absolutely necessary. You could say that design is an idea. But an idea is simply not enough. Now, how do you practice our ideas? The political aspect of design is to look at how your ideas *behave*. Or: to make sure your products behave according to your inten-

tions. That is political. I think the political, in a more general way, is: *what can you do in order to make things change?*

AM

In the sense of, what can your doing do, maybe...?

EK

Yes, exactly. What your doing produces. What kind of effects your doing produces. So, again referring to Jan, his books are referring to a delight. It's a delight, I would say, to be able to grasp and to work on that, even if you are not well paid for it. Sorry, I'm not propagating that...I mean, I'm constantly in a lack of money. I need money, we need money. We all do. We are all part of this system. So I'm not propagating that. Still, if you want or need something, you do it anyway.

(...)

And I somehow have a feeling that real criticality is always this swing against the tide. And that's because we're talking about power. There are always these conditions — let's call it the status quo — that want to keep it this way. We take things for granted, and then you're allowed to do a little bit in the margins. So again, I'm not propagating this idea, especially, if you're thinking of the discourse of "*Oh, you have to be poor like a writer*," you know? I'm against that kind of stereotypes. I need money too — of course I need money. But for me, personally, even though there's this feeling that we're living in a very unfree world, under strict conditions, I think to remain human in suffocating times is still important — and I'm talking about me, personally — but I think it goes for many of us...

AM

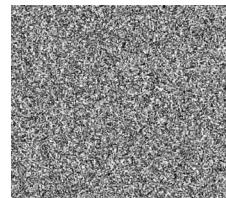
Yes, it does. I also think it is linked to one of the last questions that I have. I think we can jump into that one.

Which is this idea of thinking about this dream of criticality as something that's predicated always on ourselves, or in our individual stance, which in itself is something that has power: understanding that we might not change the whole world, but we can at least make peace with our limitations and see what we can do locally. And in that sense, the aims of a *critical practice*, in the way that you talk about and that van Toorn talks about, are more interesting and more humble than the prospects of the *Critical Design* discourse, in how it claims to be able to "enact systemic change" or to "provoke thought" or to "raise awareness." But then the methods through which that awareness is raised or how that awareness will lead to systemic change or to systemic rethinking are not examined carefully.

EK

I have dreams about the world — who has not? And I really think we should somehow work on it realistically. What I was saying about this personal stance is that I'm trying, in difficult situations — and I consider the situation very difficult today — to find a reason to act, anyhow. In design there is the spectator, the reader. And that's very important: the whole perspective of your reader, whether it's one person or a public, an audience, state, situation, or context. Communication is not just between you and me, there is a third party involved. Your view of communication can be very complicated and there are many people thinking about it, of course. When you talk about this idea of functionality, this service provider, it comes from the fifties and sixties, from functionalist design. That goes hand in hand with a take on communication coming from the idea of the mass: there is a sender and a receiver, without any noise.

And then you realize that, for instance, what they consider to be noise in the system — coming from the Second World War, you know, from Morse — they considered noise something irrelevant. Well, I think noise, stuttering, doubting, detouring, can be very interesting to us — it can be very productive. So what I'm saying now



(fig. 1)
Noise.

is: be aware of the concepts you use. There are many ideas about communication coming from all kinds of directions and a variety of disciplinary fields. And, for instance, communication is studied by a whole bunch of philosophers, among others the influential philosophy of language. But it's important, whatever concept you use, — Wittgenstein's language play for instance, or Stuart Hall's ideas on culture, or a Russian constructivist concept from the early twenties dealing with perception — you always should be aware of the frame of mind in which that concept, those ideas, occur. Being critical first of all means taking into account this frame, the existing regime of truth, in order to deal with it. I think that is very different from many cultural practices today. I see many critical designers - and for sure I understand that - but it somehow seems they do not have a method any more to cope with their criticism — not able to perform it in a productive way. That is our problem. Thinking is part of practice — we are not very used to that. Theory...we consider as something opposed to practice: the mind separated from life. Which is some-

how silly ... I am teaching 'theory' — strange word in our curriculum — at an art school, so at least what we do is to try to think it over when you study the...

AM

...The nature of communication.

EK

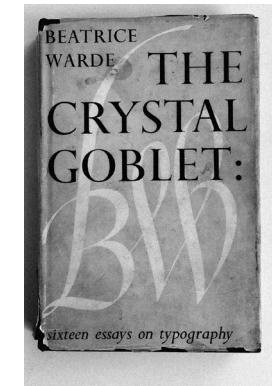
For somebody like van Toorn, it started in thinking about media, about design as a medium or mediation, the designer as mediator. Taking that into account, what does it mean to produce in the media — I think that it is still lacking today. Even if designs look rich, and decorative — many designs function as functionality did. Following a service-providing logic, the designer is not a factor or a determinant in the process. It's neutral. And thinking about media theory — well, actually, not thinking but actually experiencing it, you realize: it's not easy. It's not a neutral thing. My mediation cannot be, fundamentally, something neutral. Again, this is related to this whole idea of practice as an activity related to the human being as an active being, with active organs.

AM

...As someone that can engage in dialogue, that can engage in communication as a total activity that always involves noise as an active element that we can't just discard, and has been discarded at least in the traditional design discourse. We want communication to be clear. The whole idea of the *Crystal Goblet*, how typography must be read in the most direct way possible...

EK

I recognize that of course, Beatrice Warde, yes. But in my view, what we actually see is that this position is somehow turned upside down. Subjectivity now, instead of ob-



(fig. 2)

Beatrice Warde argued on her 1930 essay that good typography should be invisible to the reader and not impose form over content.

jectivity once. It's the other side of the same coin. So I think it is more or less the same. Everybody's talking about subjectivity. And there starts a discourse which is even worse, I would say, than that of the sixties, where at least the ethos of functionalism is trying to do something for the people, for the common cause, for the experience we share, the situation we are in. At least I would say it's a strong ethos, although it's limited. But what you see now — it's completely powerless design. Without any teeth — not real power. So it's absolutely not related to a...

AM

...Public commitment, to acknowledging design existing as something that will be experienced by others.

EK

By others, yes. We think of communication as *me talking to you*. But there is, in this public responsibility, an idea of democracy. And that is more than just me talking to you. But why is it so difficult that somehow we stick to this same structure? Well, I'll give you one possible answer to why we're stuck in this dichotomy of form and con-

tent. They're opposed, somehow, but they should translate to each other...and how do we do it? First, I would say that *form and meaning* is a little bit more precise than *form and content*. But what I'm saying here is that that is somehow structured in the mind, in the way we think — the mental categories. And because it's very difficult to not think this way, to rethink it in another structure...

AM

...Questioning your own mind structure, your own lines of thinking that we are used to and that basically make up your usual thought process, which is not only yours, but is socially constructed. So, we all are used to thinking in binary ways: "*so, if we are thinking about form, let's disregard content, if we're thinking about content, let's disregard form*" and it seems to stride between those two poles, without perhaps an understanding that it's not there that the criticality lies or that the agency lies.

EK

I think we cannot solve it if we do not see beyond this specific idealist way of thinking. I don't think it's absolutely wrong, but I don't think it's easy to rethink this problem, to reconnect to reality, within these categorical structures. Well, yeah, you could start reading Kant...

AM

Yes, it comes from The Enlightenment...

EK

Of course not to blame The Enlightenment, it's wonderful — very important too. It brought us so much. That's not my point. Again, criticality is always something of, let's say, pros and cons. I think that communication is answering. It's not just "*I'm against*."

(…)

I was trying to find other traditions of thinking or other ways of being in the world, other than just the dominant, idealist way of being in the world. There is something at least different from this idealist take (idealistic in a philosophical way). There are other schools or currents of thought that maybe are more concerned with the *doing*, with practice.

AM

But do you think that this idealist way of thinking is also tied to design's grandeur, of how it wants to act upon the world in a certain way? The whole idea that still underlies design and comes, in a certain way, from Modernism is that we *can* act, we *can* do. And sometimes I feel that we don't discuss what we *can't* do. How can we not act? How can we step back from acting? Or, why should we maybe not act in certain situations? Or, why *can't* we act, even if we want to?

EK

Yes, those are very interesting questions, I recognize that...

AM

Because, for example, an idealist school of thought would maybe be very different from...Well, I don't have any philosophical backing to aid the claim that I'm going to make, but...For example, there's been a very recent trend in social media of designers that in reaction to this whole discourse of "*we have to act, we have to change, we have to do something,*" have taken an almost kind of apathetic take on design to say that, "*well, we can't do much. Whether through individual practice, or by raising awareness, our agency is so limited*" and thus they take on a very

epicureanist stance in which they just say "*Let's just experience the world and do something beautiful because design can just be beautiful.*" And I don't know if it's wrong or if it's correct. But I think it's a reaction that's part of the zeitgeist that is coming up.

EK

I understand the reaction — but I think it's more of the same, I'm sorry. So, before, you had a strong social commitment. And then there is the reaction: "*oh, we don't believe in it anymore.*" So, I still think, looking at the world, that we really need to find another, a third way. So of course, I understand that maybe you don't believe in it any more. I see these tides. But I think we should dig deeper or further. May be we can dig deeper than culture – identity – only. At least I tell you my strategy, if that helps. What you hear me saying here, Afonso, comes from a person that struggles continually. We have all these questions still circling around. So, for instance, this is why I came up with this *Spectrum of Strategies*. What I did was create a view on the field of design that shows cultural products in their behaviour. When I talk about the *field*, I take the term from Bourdieu, okay? This notion of field that is connected to mentality. So for this publication, for this exhibition, I created an ahistorical view on design. You see that in each category there are productions from different times. History is not a determining factor in this spectrum. I think you could see it as the strategies a designer should be able to exploit within different conditions. And in this spectrum you see how I look at the production in design: I've looked at how the work behaves. *Behavior*.

AM

In that spectrum, do you see more productivity coming from a certain direction rather than other? Or do you feel

that they should all be balanced equally throughout the practice of one's life? How do you feel regarding them?

EK

First of all, I would say, as somebody working in the study of design, I make categories out of what I see happening. And, there I see a combination, for instance here [in Functionalism], between Jan Tschichold and Mevis & Van Deursen. So I'm not saying that all the production of Armand Mevis and Linda van Deursen is Functional. Far from. I'm saying that in this particular work, in this particular time, they share features that make an association with Tschichold possible. So I would say the common feature in this particular case is that they lack any content here. There is no content. So that's how I try to understand what I see, from the perspective of behavior. I'm not a designer, and I look at those products and then they have a meaning for me. Some of those things, of those productions, they make me act. Some others, not at all. There are things that are telling me much more than other things. See, when I think in this last category, Dialogism, that is where I see that *form equates (=) content*, or, more strongly: *form as power*. So, form not as an aesthetic extra, as a decorative surplus or so. No. The way you deal with the form on the basis of your agenda, and how you work with it, more and more — that makes it powerful. If I compare, for example, Dialogism with Functionalism, I think this Functionalism is many times very poor - formalist. Since it works as consumption. Take Piet Zwart – wonderful, skilled designer of course, But that is not my point – or not completely. It is the *working* – the social working that is of interest to me. In that respect you could say that Zwart's work is sometimes propagandistic. Tschichold, the early one from the 20s as the later one in the 50's: more or less the same working –

**SPECTRUM OF
DESIGN STRATEGIES**
Els Kuijpers

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and Van Abbemuseum (NL).

FUNCTIONALISM sees the design process as instrumental: it is a procedural activity aimed at problem-solving, in which information is passed on transparently and is given form on the basis of analysis of function. Convinced that technology and form can be deployed in a value-free way, it adopts a rational design methodology based on a linear view of communication. It does so to organise the production of the message in an efficient way. At the same time the socio-political dimension of the design process is reduced by the conceptual orientation of the model of communication and the abstract, uniform visual language in which it addresses us.

FORMALISM celebrates the aesthetic form as liberation from the modernist dogma 'form follows function' and the uniform functionalist style to which it paradoxically leads. At the same time formalist design borrows the

18

model of standard production and fixed organisational principles from functionalism but hides them from sight by means of a large wealth of forms – which explains its popularity. In this way form is detached from content in a decorative laissez faire at the expense of meaning, and the ethical position of the engineer is supplanted by the aesthetic one of the author, whose identity increasingly comes to determine that of the product.

INFORMALISM opposes the aestheticisation of everyday life by art and design and therefore breaks with that professional design that deploys communication as an instrument for enforcing control and discipline. This mentality seeks a way out of the social structures in crisis and the related network of power relations. The nature of informal language use is radically open: it is socially driven and draws on the everyday in numerous

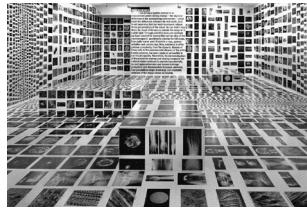
popular variants and dialects, abandoning the schooled, stylistic predilections or principles of idiom of the autonomously developed aesthetic domains. It is reflected in a multiplicity of integrated cultural expressions and actions in everyday life that admit of different possible interpretations or readings.

PRODUCTIVISM puts communication design at the service of a social programme aimed at bringing about change in society. Content-driven productivism breaks with the politically naïve idea of design as a non-ideological form of communication, in which it sees a danger, but often fails to relate its own practice to the theoretically grounded critique. It makes use of many idioms of form and high tech, often spectacularly applied, but without any purposive intervention or manipulation of them that would be evidence of clear insight into its own action in the socio-economic reality, many messages are depoliticised. Productivism therefore offers spectators and readers not enough realistic alternatives to the status quo that it is criticising.

DIALOGISM sees communication design as an aesthetic system and moral practice in one, in which not only utilitarian factors (material, production, function), but also politico-economic and socio-cultural aspects are involved, as well as the consequences for behaviour and use. This integral approach adopts a view of communication based on democratic reciprocity and solidarity. The reflexive, social strategy of dialogism aims to involve spectators in the communication in a recognisable and critical manner and thus to offer them counter-images dealing with reality. The use of a stratified, pluri-form use of visual language targets the full breadth of our intellectual and sensorial capacities.

19

even if it looks very different. Look at Bruce Mau's exhibition: the grid of it is more or less the same as a historical functionalist exhibition from the 50's, producing the same limited 'use'.



(fig. 3)

Bruce Mau's *Massive Change* exhibition is one of the examples Kuijpers uses to illustrate Functionalism.

AM

Dialogism — I was very interested in that one. I was, for example, looking at the previous model, Productivism, which comes exactly before and this parallel immediately popped in my mind between the kind of Critical Design discourse, as a discourse that we can align with the productivist ideas of social change or of enacting change upon the world, which are, I think, similar to what you are proposing. But then, the actual kind of socio-economic conditions that surround those projects and that allow them to exist are not examined, or they don't really offer a possible pathway forward for the reader, for the spectator to act. It's like they just excuse themselves from furthering the debate, even though they just proposed it. And I think that's something totally different regarding the prospects of Dialogism, which might not have the grandeur of thinking about driving productive change upon the world, but maybe it is linked to an understanding that

in each context, in each moment, or throughout one's practice, one's lifetime, there are many opportunities to enact change in a progressive way or to commit ourselves to at least upsetting certain conditions that are around us. Do you see this connection that I'm making? Do you recognize yourself in it, in this kind of association?

EK

So, this Productivism is coming from history, from the former Soviet Union — I borrowed the term. Here you could say that culture (or cultural practices; literature, art) turned into a stage of what we could call a cultural industry somehow. At the same time, I'm trying to avoid this standardized classification, trying to find in this tradition at least the genuine try to do something. And at the same time you see, in their form, that those are very different examples. But I try somehow to sympathize with the try. But if I look at those examples, they are unconvincing, really, in their form. Metahaven is probably a very good example. Sympathizing completely with their ideas, their commitment somehow — I guess they're wonderful designers. I'm not talking about good or right. But it's just not that convincing, I think. Great, interesting ideas. But to me, it remains demonstrative in character: something is void, something is lacking here. Again, I'm trying to provoke a bit, too, because of course, they are so famous and I am so curious. I think I understand what they are trying to do, but I think the outcome is, strangely enough, *disciplining*. It does not enable to open up. A bit like Hito Steyerl. She is that artist that everybody talks about these days, that is so interesting. An yes, the discourse is very interesting, relevant. But at the same time, if I look at her work, it reads like a good analysis of our situation today. But I need more. More than this horrifying discourse

in which I'm stuck, a passive victim of. So now, what to do? What to do about it? We need form. We need form to explore the medium you have at your disposal, to go very deep, to make it powerful. I would say that is not a very modest agenda.

AM

It's a difficult but noble one!

EK

So my hopes are big, although I realize that even with time, talent or creativity, maybe even more is needed, when the conditions of our life are so tight now. Maybe we should take small steps now, when larger steps are not possible in design, and when times are opening up again — and let's hope for that — we can take...

AM

...bolder steps.

EK

It really is a pleasure for me to have this exchange with students. It's BA, and it is wonderful and encouraging. I see this overall current of people highly interested in philosophy, in ideas. They are very interested in great ideas, speculative thinking, monumental theory. But then again: how to practice those, sometimes amazing, ideas? It is absolutely not trained at our schools, rooted in vocational training. It's not taught that. I'm afraid we're losing that capacity, as if it's something from applied arts, something negative: "oh, it's only applied." This notion, which is cultural too, that the ideas which are in our minds are more important than the material conditions we live in. So there is really something I notice all the time. We are in this discourse of research, and there's nothing wrong if you want to go deep with your ideas. But as a designer, I would say: What's in it for you, in design? What do you need from design, what do

we, your audience, need and get from design? How should it behave that we can recognize and cope with the world? Many of my students act as if they have no agency. It comes from High theory and I think that's very problematic. If there is no agency at all — you lie down in your coffin and be dead.

AM

This idea of agency is also very much key to what I've been thinking about. Sometimes I very quickly fall for this same discourse of "*I have no agency. Where does my agency lie?*" I very much see what you're talking about, but I also feel that from the other side, it's so easy for us culturally, as a generation to fall into the hopelessness of "*I have no agency.*" And what I'm always trying to push myself into thinking is that there's always agency, I feel. But sometimes I think that agency doesn't have to live just directly *at work* or at odds with our work. We can also be agents of change beyond our job or to work in ways that are not linked to the way we earn money. Because sometimes the design discourse can very quickly subsume politics all unto itself, as if design equates politics. And I believe that all design is political and all design is ideological, yes, but going from that to thinking that it is through design that you can act, that you can put forth a politics or an ideology... I think it's a different notion. How do you feel about that? Can you highlight a different way of thinking for me? Because sometimes I feel that it's okay for us to just commit to something that pays for our basic needs. That doesn't mean that in that job I can't be a critical practitioner or at least try to, in all the ways I can, to bind the way I think with the way I act. But if I fail in doing that, or if I feel

that I am not committing to my personal values in the way I'm working, I don't think that should be seen as a failure or as a tragedy. It should be seen as a condition of the context. And beyond that context, there are other contexts in which I can act. Do you relate to that in a way?

EK

Somewhat I think that agency, the ability to act, is just something to acknowledge. Whatever you do, you act. Whether you have this kind of job or that kind of job. We live in very unequal times. I'm not denying that, but I'm thinking: what are the things you can do within your context to really address that? And I think, again, in this field of design, there are millions of sources — as you can see in the spectrum — to deploy very intensely. It matters, I would say, how you deal with this *ars combinatoria*, this combination of things. For example, text and image — the one first definition I learned about design. But then it matters: What does it produce? How to communicate to make it meaningful, to bring change about? I think, for instance, that Design Academy was *the school*. It was highly successful in Holland. It was the academy that really did the job. It turned objectivity into subjectivity. There was this tradition of having these exhibitions with the graduate work in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It was wonderful of course. I tried to follow these exhibitions, and again, I would store all of them within Formalism. It is the exuberance of form, but it's completely decorative. So it's not *form as power*, it's just *form as decoration*.

AM

Would you not store them under Productivism, for at least trying to challenge some kind of socio-political issues that they try to put forward in a certain way? To be productive to so-

society in a way? Or maybe both, maybe both Productivism and Formalism? I don't know?

EK

This is the circulation of wonderful, well articulate form, but nothing more, I'm afraid. The content, the message, is not dealt with. And Productivism, somehow, is the other way round. So maybe you see, as others did as well, in Productivism, the role of these political issues. But I would, going into Dialogism, say that there you find a way of narrating that is already very political. I would say that all the examples under Dialogism have a political agenda in a very specific way... So, I think you also asked about the Tom Lanoye website, and why I included it in Dialogism?



(fig. 4)

Writer Tom Lanoye's website circa 2016.

AM

Yes, I didn't quite understand...

EK

One reason is to stress that the basis for these categories is not style as such. I thought about this example of Lanoye because his website is not a specialist website. It's opposed to this idea that "*We are all victims, we need design, we need help*."

AM

It's vernacular, in a way? It's part of the common visual vocabulary he had...

EK

Yes, so when you use the word *vernacular*, it resonates with those who say "Oh, it's *non-design*." Okay, we tend to label it like that. It is stepping on non-design, although not as an aesthetic category, but rather as an intention that it is not necessarily coming from the field of design. It's saying "*Go away, I don't need a designer to make this typography for me*." So I would call it not so much non-design. I would talk about it in terms of informality. As a human being, you're perfectly able to design, to articulate. So I think it veers away from this professionalism and specialism, away from the cultural industries. It's one of our biggest industries in Holland these days, but it's based on the idea that ordinary people cannot pronounce, they cannot articulate. So, this informality is about stepping away from the bubble of the design field only. There's a whole life around it. And I think Tom Lanoye, he knows that.

AM

Yes, because I was really curious to understand if it was made by a designer or not. I had a suspicion that you were pointing towards that, but I still had to confirm, because it was really a curious example for me.

EK

For me, it's informality. And informality has something to do with life activity, with a life form. Because then you realize that many times design is a controlling profession. I would say that's the same problem we accuse the functionalists of — it's disciplining. And why is that? Because they thought there was a "*good form*." The good form to be educated — with authority of course. It was for sure an idealist project — but with capitalism the idealist agenda was lost...

AM

It's still the same way of thinking.

EK

Yes. And it's the same way of doing. It's totalizing, uniformizing. And again, I have a feeling that especially in this time — and that goes for the academy I teach in as well — we are so obsessed with a very specific idea of research. Many times, social research. But still, I think it's more important that we are trying — again, that's what I tried to do with the spectrum — to understand: What do I see? Great idea, but... what do I actually see? What is the nature of the conduct of cultural products? That's the training we should try to develop.

AM

Did you ever feel the need to explain your placement of the examples, or to write down what you were telling me about placing one or the other? Or did you just make a conscious choice of saying: "*I'm going to put this here without explaining*?"

EK

I think whatever clarification, whatever explaining needs, is how this field relates to the economic and the social. But I think the proof is in the pudding, the proof is in the work. For example, we don't have many publishing houses in Holland anymore, unfortunately. We were quite good in publishing, because the design field was too. So the quality of publishing was wonderful in Holland. And now we have a few publishing houses, only a few left. And the ones that are, I would say, in culture, constantly produce all kinds of ideas but again, good ideas are not good enough. The analysis, the explanation... They not always really help so much, I would say. Give me a good design, Afonso, so I can move...

AM
I'll try!

EK

Because I really think that really will, probably, make us move. Make us go beyond the given stereotypes. We are under a total stasis, we are stuck, we cannot move anymore. We need to develop beyond the given stereotypical...

AM

...oppositional frameworks that we are bound to...

EK

Yes. And I think that's a hope I have. I see that as something you can never let go of. If you do that, then you must do something else in life. I think, for myself, that if there is a freedom in the West, it's this freedom. To think it differently, to think it in a different way, to do it in a different way that makes us think: "*oh, wait a minute, I never thought about this!*" Yes, of course, and now, take it further. Somehow I have this idea that we're back in the old days of representation one to one. You know, with realism, with products mirroring what's happening in reality. How can we, like Alice in Wonderland, step through the looking glass? How can we step away from our binaries?

AM

How does it still affect you, like in your day to day life as a practitioner? Or as a teacher? These kinds of questions? Because right now for me, as I'm starting my career, fresh off the bachelors coming into a masters, I'm already plagued by these things. And then I listen to Simon [Davies] tell me: "*You know, I'm much older than you, but these questions continue to be here for me.*" And you already told me they're here for you still. It keeps com-

ing up when you teach, when you look at your students, how do you relate to that? How do you feel, day to day?

EK

I love the talk. I like to communicate, this exchange — you probably didn't miss that point. I think communication is fundamental. And maybe that's a word I used already, but I don't believe in generations. So there is something that some of you can relate to, whatever age you are, and some others not at all. So it's the best job to do. I'm interested in this field, I'm interested in what it enables, opens up.

AM

What exactly is it that you teach? The name of the class?

EK

Well, it's very general, this word, we call my class Theory. (...) I am not always in a position of asking my superiors what they actually mean with theory. I would rather say: let's work on a *theory of practice*. That, I think, is very needed. And that is a paradox. That's why it's so difficult to get results in this practical country, this very pragmatic country. We do all kinds of things. But actually thinking about what we do and what it brings into the social, what it brings into society...we don't think about that that much. So this is my point. Let's try to articulate what the effects of your production are. What do you actually bring about? That is an ethical responsibility. To articulate your choices in cultural productions, to see the effects of your choices... Behavior. Again, that is what I am interested in. How does cultural work behave? What does it affect? How does it make us change? That is not enough addressed, I am afraid.

AM

The duality of the same old...

EK

The addressivity: what you do for me, what the effect of your product is for me, as part of your audience — that is not considered. That is not taken into account. I think that is something at the heart of my 'theory'.

A pretty book isn't so much of a threat

a conversation with Ben Kasum

(17.01.2022)

Ben Kasum is an Los Angeles based graphic designer and art director that I've been following on Instagram for quite some time. His posts, shares and stories seemed to echo with the very same feelings I had regarding the discipline and the discourse, even though I'm on the other side of the globe. So I invited him for a call. Our conversation ended up being just a chat between two equally worried colleagues. Thematically, the talk centered itself a lot on how issues of image, of aesthetics and representation (in the end, of design) seem to distract ourselves from a material understanding of the systemic problems we face. At the same time, while listening to it, I do recognize that we can sound like we are altogether disregarding what is many times called *identity politics*. Identity politics are also the *politics of the image*: of who is seen, who can be seen, and who is made invisible. This was one anxiety I had while writing my thesis, and this small introduction to our conversation seems to be the right place to voice it: a fear that I was forsaking a true intersectional analysis of the problem at hand by focusing too much on class, finance and labor, while overlooking the complications that race, gender, sexuality and ability bring into the mix.

Reviewing our talk, this fear surfaces once again and makes me want to further my research in a way that accounts for these different dimensions of oppression in a more engaged manner. Still, the point we tried to make here is that if we stop our activism at visuality, representation and visibility, it will be insufficient. And that is the danger of Critical Design. A focus on the actual material redistribution of resources, of land (in the case of colonialism), of changing policies and the functioning of institutions is also key, beyond just "*raising awareness*." Saying this also doesn't devalue the importance of fighting for a reshaping of our collective visual culture beyond the western canons. A true intersectional politics should have space for fighting on all these fronts, both in the realm of images, representation, awareness — of how we can *see* a different world — and also in the realm of materiality — of how we can *make* a different world.

Afonso Matos
 I really want to talk to you about how we perceive design as visual articulation, or design as form, as having some kind of inherent power or inherent force. When you posted those stories about this idea of the "semiotic collapse", I was like, "whoa, this is an interesting idea!" And my interpretation of it was: We are living in these times where we witness the accelerated appropriation of any kind of aesthetic. It can be as quick as in one week's time. So we live in this mood of disillusionment: what's the value of doing some kind of "*radical graphic design*" if next week it's going to be appropriated? So, do you think there's an inherently political form? For example, a queer typography or a decolonial aesthetics? Is there an inherently queer idea of typography, is there any inherently leftist layout, or something of the sort?

"Vibe as praxis: Towards aesthetic agency amidst semiotic collapse"

(fig. 1)

Ben posted a story on Instagram with this title for a hypothetical thesis of his.

Ben Kasum

That's a really good question to ask. I think part of why I love Critical Design is that it is critical and we do need to be critical of the things around us, and there's not enough of that. But I also think we need to look critically at Critical Design. Is it accomplishing what we want? I'm definitely not an expert. I don't work in that world — but I hope, because I'm an outsider, that I can provide a critical perspective. I have friends who are in that world and they feel "*I'm making a difference because of this.*" I think there is

a need to uphold this belief to protect the ego. So, first of all, I want to say: I think [Critical Design] is really well-intentioned. So my critique is not whether it's based on good intentions. It's whether it's successful, or *as successful as* other methods. In regards to these questions...is there a queer typography? Is there a decolonial or anti-capitalist aesthetic? And I think in that regard we can go deeper into different worldviews. This is somewhat a question of an idealist(aesthetic) versus materialist worldview. And of course I think we should bring to the forefront different aesthetics, we should question where we develop our sense of beauty from. But I think that the problem of colonialism is mostly a material problem. It's not primarily an aesthetic problem. Colonies are physical colonies of land.

AM

It's not a metaphor...

BK

Yeah, so...I think there are good aspects of it. But the problem of colonization is not just an aesthetic problem. It's perhaps more a material problem of extracting resources and wealth, oil and crops. It's a labor problem. Graphic design has a somewhat bourgeois, middle class conception of colonialism. I think the creative class in America is relatively well off compared to the rest of the world, that is to say those working in the corporate sector. This make us detached from a lot of the problems of the world. We only conceive of problems through Instagram slideshows. It reminds me of Baudrillard, of Simulacra and Simulation. The map has taken over the territory. We've sacrificed the real at the altar of the image and what we are left with is a simulation. It really struck me at the Whitney Biennial a few years back, in New York, how we had supposedly the most progressive biennial ever, there were so many people of color, so many

A pretty book isn't much of a threat — Ben Kasum

women, so many queer artists and I really appreciated that. But if you look at how the Whitney is funded...it's like literally by weapons manufacturers. And that's being used as a tax write off. So, yes, there is a positive aspect of championing these people of color, and the work can be critical and question things. But, underneath that...they're almost acting like an aesthetic shield for these larger oppressive systems.



(fig. 2)

"Warren B. Kanders, vice chairman of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art (...) is also the majority owner and CEO of Safariland, a company that manufactures 'defence products', like the tear gas used by American immigration authorities at the US-Mexico border."

from

"Can a Museum for 'Progressive Artists' Have an Arms-Manufacturer Vice-Chairman?"
by Cody Delistraty.

AM

It's kind of like the issue of representation, which is so in the forefront of our cultural conversations right now. Like, representation matters, of course. It's important because we have been building an aesthetic sense that's mainly white, Eurocentric and cisnormative. And of course, we need to first see — like, visually see — a different world, before we arrive at that different world. But at the same time, the amount of focus that's put on rep-

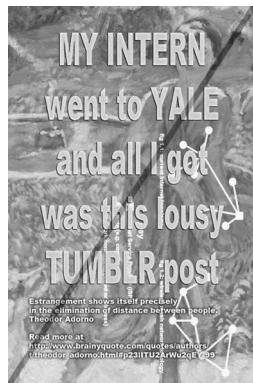
resentation as if it's an end in itself, as if it will, by itself, make us arrive where we want...I think representation just isn't capable of enacting change by itself because, as you were saying, it ends up diluted. If, for example, if I'm trying in my work to use some kind of queer way of thinking that results in representing my design in a different way, but the company I work for is supporting, I don't know, an anti-LGBTQ lobby or something like that — what's the purpose of my individual action? I think it also boils down a lot to this idea of individual responsibility, which is something that comes out of the neoliberal cultural imperative.

BK

Yeah. Agreed. And of course we should try to be moral and ethical with our decisions, but it's very difficult as precarity is getting worse and worse for young people in general. So it's a privileged position to make that choice. A lot of people would love to buy organic food or ethically made things, but a lot of people are just struggling to get by, never mind making the right decision. If you have the money, it's a good choice. But that just leaves your action within that frame of the market, of consumption. It's an individual's consumer choice as compared to a systemic collectivist solution. Fighting for representation is, of course, a good goal. We should see different cultures and especially people who have been discriminated against. We should be able to see their work and see them in the public eye. But if our idea of problem solving stops at representation and if, like you said, representation becomes a whole new goal in itself, it can even distract from other issues. It can be sort of tokenizing. We see that one image of progress and we think "Problem solved" but the problems are much larger than aesthetics.

(...)

I mean, the idea that problems could be solved aesthetically is a really interesting idea. I remember in 2012 looking at the work that was coming out of Yale, Sandberg, Strelka, Eindhoven. A lot of the Netherlands. Seeing the gradients, the stretched type, I thought “*no one can appropriate this, this is so great, this is crazy!*” And probably two or three years later, you see it in Urban Outfitters, and it’s just completely normal. In 2012 it was completely radical, like, “*No one’s ever going to like this. We’re really disrupting the system.*” And then, by 2016, it just became completely normal. Even Nike started to adopt this aesthetic for some of their smaller campaigns. Suddenly the 4 years later one of the largest corporations has adopted these supposedly radical aesthetics. So are aesthetics



(fig.3)

Poster/meme by Jaakko Pallasvuo.

sustainable as a revolutionary praxis? I don’t think so. I think that they can be a starting point to reel people in, and bring people towards something larger or more impactful. But I think they’re also dangerous because they can be distracting. You can stop at the aesthetics and –

AM

- and be like, “*Okay, the work is done.*”

BK

Yeah. It’s a double sided sword. They’re seductive and they can lure people in, but they can also distract.

AM

And that’s something that I feel a lot here. People think that their work stops at the design project that they present in June or October, and then some of them might make a practice out of it. They might start getting all these grants for research projects, getting inside of the system — which is a way of living, which I’m not judging at all. I mean, that’s fine for them if they can do it. But sometimes I feel like you might end up in a dangerous position of just exploiting, sometimes, the real struggles of marginalized communities for the sake of your design project. Especially if you don’t really understand where you situate yourself and who are you doing that for? Because, in the end, you’ll be doing that for careerism, for your career, so you can keep doing what you’re doing. It’s about keeping up the status quo. Your status quo and the systemic status quo in a sense.

BK

I want to say that I think Critical Design is *somewhat* effective. But is it the most effective solution? Should we rethink it a bit? I’ve done a lot of free design for different activist movements and groups and I’ve received grants and residencies for critically oriented design projects. (that I don’t put in a portfolio) and I got a bit disheartened because, if you think of, let’s say: There’s some place that doesn’t have access to clean water, is it more effective to have someone with an MFA design a pretty book about it? Or is it more effective to just find a way for them to have clean water? And I would have a lot more fun designing a pretty book [laughs]

but it might be more effective to do the other thing. Awareness is *a* problem. But I really don’t think that it is *the* problem. We know that there are so many problems. But it’s about actually distributing the resources. I don’t believe people in power want to do that because it might actually disrupt the balances of power instead of just gesturing towards equality. Like, a pretty book is not so much of a threat to the systems of power. Which I think is why they encourage and even fund these types of projects. Furthermore, the aesthetics and language of Critical Design are so opaque that only people with MFA’s or degrees in critical theory can understand it. So it goes over a lot of people’s heads. It just looks like a cool design.

AM

Or not even that...sometimes it’s just an ugly design, for some people! [laughs]

BK

Yeah, or an ugly design. (...) I think that part of Critical Design’s interest is making a difference. Developing awareness, critiquing structures of power. But a big, unspoken part of Critical Design’s interest is in sustaining itself. These professors don’t want to be out of a job. They have to legitimize what they’re doing. And I’m not saying that we should fire the professors. These designers are usually not making a ton of money. They need to validate what they’re doing and show that it’s important. I’m not trying to put any designers doing critical work in a precarious situation, but we do have this incentive to stay in the medium. You’re spending two years doing a degree, you’re spending money, you’re taking a break from work. So we have this really strong bias to tell ourselves that what we’re doing is important. I think it is important. I think it is effective. But how effective? Are there any other ways?

(...)

AM

I was reading this text [J. Dakota Brown’s *Typography, Automation, and the Division of Labor: A Brief History*] about our labor history, about what predates the position of the graphic designer as a solidified profession. And it was linking the technical anxiety that we feel today as graphic designers, haunted by software democratization, to the anxieties that printers felt back in the day when technological innovations were setting back what they were managing to earn by fighting with the power that they had through unionizing. There were a lot of technological breakthroughs that undermined that power. So the author argued that graphic design was inaugurated as a way to break deadlocks between production and management. And thus our contemporary position as graphic designers does not benefit from the amount of power of the manager, but also not the power that the printers could hold upon the management because they had a solidified labor relationship. We’re these free floating agents that don’t really know what kind of agencies we have — not through our work (as in aesthetics, design), but also not through organizing. We don’t know how to organize. And I don’t know if you have any experience or any thoughts about organizing in graphic design or in the creative industry, or if that’s in discussion or conversation that happens in your medium?

BK

I’m sort of pessimistic about it. Not to say it should never happen, I just think currently at this point in history, especially in the United States, I think there is this big rethinking and restructuring about how we go about this and what are our goals.

In terms of specifically organizing within design, I think it's very difficult. And I think you pointed out why, and that's because designers are in this weird position, where their position as a graphic designer is almost antagonistic to class politics. Where most of my job is creating a pretty shell...I'm doing PR for global capital, for finance, for tech. In regards to class position, designers are slightly above printers, like you mentioned. Therefore, we don't understand material conditions in the way that many working class people do. We're stuck behind a computer and we live in a world of images. We focus on aesthetics versus policy, or systemic change. We focus on aesthetic change, or representation, and I think that's the designer's weakness. One thing I want to say: are you familiar with the discourse of—I've been hearing it a lot in the past year or two—this idea of the PMC, the professional managerial class?

AM
I'm not really familiar with that.

BK

I used to view class as: working class and owning class. But it's gotten a lot more complex and there's a lot of layers in between. There is a strong discourse as of late as to where that line is drawn. Are graphic designers more like the printers, the blue collar workers, the manual laborers? Or are we more pulled towards the top? I feel that within design, we aspire to be at the top. We want to replace the current power structure with a more progressive ruling class, rather than rethinking this relationship as a whole.

AM
It's more the aspiration of being at the top than the actual being, right? And I don't really know the context for the United States because I think it's very different actually, in terms of employ-

ment. If I tell you about the context in Portugal, it's very precarious. In the sense of, Critical Design is just not a thing, and even "just" designers, designers who have a studio, they don't just have a studio...probably all of them need to have another job, or they're teachers, or they have to do something else. The ones that just do it, they are inside agencies, inside companies, or they have a corporate job doing graphic design or UX or web design.

BK

Definitely, our hands are tied. We need to choose between precarity or a stable living wage. That's what I do. Because I have \$100,000 of loans from art school and I have to pay them off, and living in a city is expensive. Being able to practice Critical Design can come from a position of financial security which distorts your view on problems in the world. Alternatively, you are in a financially unstable position which limits ability for honest critique since you are dependent on funding from various institutions.

(...)

Where are you trying to take your thesis right now? Are you trying to propose solutions? Are you more just trying to point out weaknesses of Critical Design?

AM

Yeah, I think mostly what I've been doing is pointing out weaknesses. Like I said, the big question is: Criticality for everyone, is it possible and desirable? Can all designers engage in Critical Design? Is that even possible or is that even desirable? And if I jump straight to the conclusion... I basically ended up saying that if we can't afford to be critical in our work, in design, we can still be critical outside of it. We don't have to be defined

by our profession. So that's my final statement: we can identify as something beyond designers. We can identify as citizens, as people, as workers and look for agency in different ways. So while the first two chapters are really concerned about what we can or can't do as designers, the last chapter says: I'm not trying to solve this. It posits that there's a world beyond design, there's a world beyond our work. We should actually fight against the enclosure of our identities by design. Because nowadays, everything is design(ed), and that might be true, but that doesn't mean that I can do a lot as a designer individually.

BK

Yeah, I think that's a solid next step. And then we can see where that goes from there...I think sadly the downfall of a lot of radical movements is that we end up adopting the languages of oppressive structures before. And, like you said, when you only see yourself as a designer...you don't see yourself as a worker, you don't see yourself as a citizen, as an activist. By not being able to conceive of ourselves outside of workers or consumers, we have mentally trapped ourselves in that sort of capitalist mindset. I think there has to be some sort of material, structural, systemic changes. Because anyone can say, "*I'm a worker, I'm a citizen.*"

(...)

Designers are everything and nothing at the same time. I work with the writers, I work with the photographers, I work with the strategists, I work with the programmers, I work with the scientists. And then I bring it all together. So it's hard. I guess we can edit what goes together and try to change it a bit. We're everything and, in some ways, nothing.

AM

But I think it also became that way. Like it kind of sublimated into this discipline that's concerned with mediation, framing, with getting things together. But before it was very much grounded on actually knowing very well how to draw typography, knowing very well how to layout a book, very much based on hard skills, on craft. And now it sublimated into the soft skills of mediation, framing, getting different perspectives together.

BK

That's a really good observation, I think. I wonder if part of that — like you mentioned, the shift from thinking of yourself as a designer to more than that, as a citizen, as a worker, etc. I wonder if part of that too is shifting that perception from, like you said, someone who frames and is a mediator, back to thinking of design as a hard skill, as labor.

AM

As a materially grounded profession.

BK

It's so confusing too, because everything I do is on the computer and I just send JPEGs and PDFs to people and it's really hard to see, I think, the materiality. I think our view is a bit warped, whereas someone who is a printer might see things a bit differently.

AM

But how are the labor relations in your workplace, do you feel comfortable about it? Like, the hierarchies? The way things are dealt with, in terms of your workload?

BK

Yeah, I'm pretty lucky and that's why I've

stayed at my studio for a long time. I feel like it's a very happy medium. I work more than I would like. I don't get paid quite as much as I would like. But everyone would like to work less. Everyone would like to get paid more. So I feel relatively fairly compensated, except that I know that the only reason that designers get a job is because their labor is sold for more than they're paid, and that's how a company makes a profit. So aside from that, and within that framework, I feel pretty good. It's one of the better studios I could work at. But, you know, like, I'm not a co-owner of the company. I think that would be cool. Maybe more design collectives or cooperatives could be a solution. People talk about unionization, but I think the discussion about unionization within the design community is a bit confused, because some people view unionization as completely detached from labor. There's a part of me that wants to dedicate myself to change, to make more meaningful critical work, and then... But yeah, I feel pretty good about my workplace. I'm pretty happy there.

(...)

I thought romantically that maybe one day I'll start a studio, co-operative, with four or five of my friends and we will all be co-owners...but yeah...In a vacuum, it's a strong idea. But then we live in the reality of real estate prices being so difficult. Compared to our parents' generation, it's double, triple for a home or a rent. And we have to make sacrifices — usually selling out to corporations to keep a sense of dignity in how you live.

(...)

AM

I think both of us are in this kind of position where we still see a lot of value in a lot of things. But at the same time, we are very disillusioned with a lot of those same things. And it's not really a com-

fortable place to sit in! You don't really get any kind of closure. Or maybe I'm suffering more through it because I'm actually, like, writing a thesis.

BK

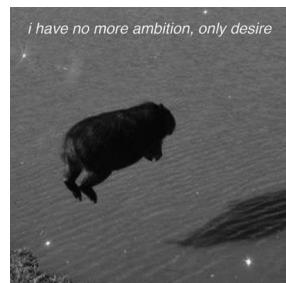
That's your full time deal. [laughter]

AM

...which is maybe a bit different from you, because you actually have a job that's occupying a good portion of your life, your daily routine. But still, we can't help but have them, I think, in a way. And yeah, it's weird. I've just been, you know, plagued by it.

BK

Yeah, it's a very difficult place to be. And I share that pain. There's that part of me that wants to just vibe out and just make beautiful, meaningless work.



(fig. 5)
Meme by @aidenarata

AM

But even that stance about vibing out, about meaninglessness, I think that's super curious. Because — and I was talking the other day about that with my friends — every time you're making a design, you're making active choices into doing something and not doing all the other options that you could have done. You're choosing one color

and not all the others. And those options have to be based on something, which is believing that it's best suited for that context or purpose. And in this "Critical Design world", I think those choices usually fall upon what you're talking about in the project and the social or political impact that it can have. Like, "*well I'm not going to use Helvetica because it represents the problematic ideals of Modernism. I'm going to use, a free open-source font made by a woman designer*" and thinking that it is in that act of choice that you are upsetting a certain politics. Sometimes this is where the discussion stops. It's curious because you have to make decisions based on something to do this kind of work. And in this Critical Design world, they're usually based on thinking that such decision will be relevant for the final *acting* of that object upon the world, for how the object *behaves*. And sometimes it might have some relevance, but some other times I think it just doesn't come through to the reader or to the spectator or to the audience. Like, who's going to open a book and understand that I used this typography and not other because of this or that? Where is it productive? Like, I'm always struggling with this kind of stuff. You do feel like sometimes nothing means anything and that we should just do meaningless work that looks cool.

BK

It's really difficult and in some ways, maybe this is really dumb or egotistical, but maybe just making incredibly shallow aesthetic work can be the starting point. As in: in order to start something new, maybe the old thing has to collapse. I think I see a few people in the art world, maybe not in the design world, almost acting that way.

I don't know if you're familiar with Ryder Rippis? He's half designer half artist. Mostly his work is a sort of performance art. He usually enrages people over various controversial acts. He tricked the internet into thinking he was behind the C.I.A. rebrand and everyone had to publicly denounce him. Many people in tech denounced him without a shred of irony, not realizing that they are actively working with C.I.A.. People in the art world also denounced him while being funded by chemical weapons manufacturers. He might be a bit nihilistic or just like the controversy but I think he mostly points out hypocrisy or points out how immaterial and sentimental aesthetics are. We view these aesthetics as so powerful, but they're not so powerful and we need to escape from that idea.

AM

Yeah, where do we draw the line? How can we ascribe agency, and say, "*Yeah, this aesthetic, this design, is really doing it, it did what it's supposed to do!*" How do you ascribe that? How can you even say or imagine that your work has an inherent political meaning or that it will do what you were supposed to do? It's very hubristic, in a way, to think that.

BK

It's almost like this magical or mystical style of thinking, right? Like, there's this image and things will come out of it. Which is sort of cool! But it's funny because religion isn't a big thing now. "*Oh, why would you pray? Why would you do this?*" But then, like...

AM

...You believe in design.

BK

You see a symbol of something and it's like, "*oh, it's going to jump out of the page and*

hurt me," you know? And I do think imagery is powerful. I really do. It's just that it's so easily recuperated and co-opted.

AM

That's the thing. There's this book by a Portuguese design critic, Mário Moura, called "*A Força da Forma*", which is a nice pun in portuguese. In English it's translated as "*The Power of Form*." So he's saying, basically, that each form in itself has a history, it carries precedents, it carries all these different historical backgrounds. So, even when it's recuperated by an opposing ideology, it still does carry a strength. However, I don't know if he is necessarily saying that it is *through* form that designers can have power and wield their political power. I think actually it's more about saying that form has more power over us than we imagine, in the sense that we sometimes feel that we are in control of our design and that we are in control of the aesthetics we employ, because "*Oh, I don't go on Pinterest, I don't look at references, I'm not trendy like the others*", but still you are part of the zeitgeist. You're part of certain contemporary movements. You communicate with your peers. You still are informed by the visual context around you. So, you can't just say that you're divorced from the current aesthetic reality. You are part of it. And as designers, we are very quick to sneer at trendiness like, "*oh, those are trendy graphics*." But I mean, if they are trendy, that's for a reason. And we should just analyze why. Is it problematic? Was it recuperated from somewhere else? Still, it is what it is. And maybe it just doesn't matter so much because if it looks good, and I like it, and you like it as well, then...

BK

Yeah, but there is some reason that we like it or find it appealing. Right now, right now I see here, with the seventies look coming up...and I'm like, why are we so attracted to this? I don't know, I'm trying to figure that out. But it's weird because the seventies and the end of the sixties, it was the "vibe out" period. Where a lot of movements failed and people were just like, "*Peace and love. I'm just going to vibe out*." I think that there is this sort of nihilism, in a way. I think Trump had a big impact, aesthetically, for a lot of people. So we see a sort of escapism into this weird hippie fantasy world.

AM

It's fascinating to actually think where things come from. What are the precedents for this?

BK

Definitely, It's fascinating to think where these forms come from. I don't have a degree in Critical Design but I'm definitely invested in the discourse. At the end of the day I really care about these issues and any critique I have is not to put down well-intentioned designers. It comes from a desire for us to be honest with ourselves and to be successful in making changes for the better.

“The anarchy of the everyday”
a conversation with Gemma Copeland
(20.01.2022)

Gemma Copeland is part of *Common Knowledge*, a co-op which designs digital tools for activist groups. She also participated in *Evening Class*, a UK-based collective which investigates ideas of the commons, unionizing and postcapitalist desire. I wanted to talk to her because her work seems to be more about *design at the service of politics* rather than *design-as-politics*. Our conversation quickly dived into the details of how they work, how they collaborate with clients, how they manage their finances, how the cooperative model functions and how they balance security and usability when choosing digital tools to work with. I found it quite refreshing to not discuss abstract theoretical ideas, but rather the practicalities of how Common Knowledge concretely helps people and organizations, serving their purposes and still finding a way to earn a living from doing so.

Afonso Matos

So, this first question is tied to the distinction between *design-as-politics* or *design in the service of politics*. And I would like to ask you: how do you position yourselves regarding this conundrum of design in relation to politics? Where do you see the power of design in the work that you do?

Gemma Copeland

I think that how you described it is pretty spot on. It's more like, design is the stuff that I can do which is something that these kinds of groups need. So it's a lot of forming collaborative relationships with people, listening to what they actually need, what their goals are, rather than deciding it from the outside. And obviously there is a lot of collaboration. Both parties bring something to the table. But we're not doing it in a vacuum. It's not a “*oh, I think that this rent strike campaign needs a poster because that will look good in my portfolio*” kind of thing. And I still call myself

a designer when I introduce myself to people, but the reality is that the amount of straight up graphic design that I do every day is actually very small. So, then it starts to get into this well-trodden area of: What is design anyway? Is it the artifacts? Is it the process? I think that a lot of my work is talking to people. So, designing conversations or workshops or doing things that enable them to come to design conclusions rather than this kind of top down approach of: "oh, you need this."

AM

I find that aspect of coming together and listening to be something that's quite important and also very lacking, especially in situations where you're very focused on your individual practice — like "*it's my project, I have full control over it.*" How do you feel when you're giving over that control? How do you enable those conversations and how do you draw conclusions from them? Can you tell me more about the process?

GC

Not everyone's like this, but I've never been the kind of designer that is like "*Oh, I need to put my individual stamp on the things and be, like, a design hero.*" I always found it much more interesting to be in collaboration with people, when the design result is emergent from that. I really learned to love this back when I was living in The Hague and I was working at a studio that does lots of generative design. The kind of thing where you're setting conditions, but then seeing where the process takes you. And it's way more interesting than just coming up with ideas and executing them. So I've never been that fussy about having much control over my designs.

AM

And how do you design those tools, those interactions, those meetings? Like, an organization comes to you and then what happens? How do you make them come to a certain kind of conclusion? The decision making process about what's going on, about the tool you're going to design, it's very collaborative, right? How does that process usually go? I bet it's very different each time.

GC

Yes, it definitely depends on the people that we're working with. A lot of it is about relationship-building, building trust, before we're even getting to the point where we're designing an app or an identity or anything like that. I always like to start with a workshop with as many people from their side as possible, and we then work through various different things. Sometimes the reaction to some of the questions we ask is just "*how is this relevant?*" Because we talk about the whole thing, not just the website. So we ask: What is your campaign strategy? What is the wider context? We don't want to know just who the users of the site are, but also we're trying to understand their whole worlds and really immerse ourselves in them. So I definitely think that is the first step. And it also gives you a kind of understanding of who the people are and what kind of stuff they respond to and what they care about. And then, in terms of generating designs, it's a bit more back and forth. With some projects, we've used the design sprint methodology, where it's literally non-designers in the room doing wireframes, and then I, because I have technical knowledge, will make the prototype. But really it's their design, because they designed the UX. So in that sense, then I'm more like a technician or someone who guides them through the process and also helps them execute it.

AM

That's nice. And people are up for that? They are engaged in the process?

GC

Yeah, totally. There's definitely an element of having to coax some people into it. Some people will be like "*Oh, I can't draw, I'm not a designer, blah blah blah.*" So you have to gradually convince people that they are able to do it.

AM

That also goes with another question, which is: People, organizations — do they come to you, to Common Knowledge, already knowing what you're doing? Or do you sometimes reach out to people? How's the process of getting new projects?

GC

When we first started, it was much more about getting in contact with some people that we really wanted to work with, but now it's much more people coming to us because they've heard of us or someone's told them. But yeah, some of the first projects we did were a result of literally talking to people for a year and having meetings and being like "*We really want to work with you, we really like what you're doing.*" And then you'll be in the back of their heads and then something will come up and they'll be like "*Oh cool, we can get those guys to do it.*" So yeah, it's a long game.

AM

Yeah. But it's interesting because sometimes it is by playing in the long run that we see more productive efforts. In contexts where you're rushing to make a project in three or four months and then present it, there really isn't much of a long term commitment with a certain subject.

GC

Yeah. So, this is year three and we're super happy that a lot of our clients are repeated people. We've been working with them for a couple of years now. And it means that you can go much deeper. I think the thing we struggle with most is having to work within quite small projects and not being inside academia where we can spend ages thinking about another thing, and also not being in a well-paid consultancy where there's loads of money and we can just relax. So at least, when you have people working with us over a number of years then we don't have to do all the groundwork before we actually go into a job.

AM

Also, now that you raised the question of how you support yourself, I would also like to ask about how Common Knowledge works financially. How do you afford to do that kind of work? As in, are the commissions paid usually or do you also do free work? Is the Co-op supporting itself financially?

GC

We just live off the Common Knowledge work. So it is self-sustaining in that sense. And I mean, it's actually fairly boring in terms of the finances. It's like a pretty standard studio model: we get paid for consultancy work. We definitely give discounted rates to people who need it. And we'll do free work sometimes or we'll work for many more days than it is actually being paid for. So, financially, it's a bit up and down. But I think we're doing pretty well. The first couple of years, I think, for any design studio, are pretty rocky. So I'm proud that doing this, specifically working within activism, has been okay. And we have got a couple of grants over the years, which has helped us a lot. But even that is not such a windfall as it seems. It's not free money. You

Some of the projects that Common Knowledge has developed.
Information retrieved from their website, commonknowledge.coop

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Game Worker Solidarity project. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Analysis, Organise!, Submit Action, Data, and About. Below the navigation is a search bar and a filter section with dropdowns for Country, Category, Company, and Union, along with a 'Search' button. The main content area features a large world map with grey dots representing movement data. To the right, a large heading says '97 actions'. Underneath, there are two news items: one from December 2021 about video game workers forming a union in North America, and another from September 2021 about Activision Blizzard workers going on strike. Both items include a small thumbnail image and a link to the original source.

— The Game Worker Solidarity Project maps and documents collective movements by game workers striving to improve their working conditions.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the StopWatch website. The header includes the organization's name and links for About, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Donate. Below the header is a large graphic featuring a cartoon character holding a sign that reads 'GET JUSTICE' and 'NO JUSTICE NO PEACE'. The main title 'Research and action for fair and accountable policing' is displayed prominently. The page features several sections: 'Support' (gather stories and thoughts), 'Research' (working with facts and figures), 'Advice' (providing assistance for stop and search cases), and 'Projects' (listing various campaigns). A sidebar on the left contains a map of the UK with a red dot indicating the location of the campaign. At the bottom, there are links for 'Stop and search: your rights' and a note about officer identification.

— Website for StopWatch, an organization which campaigns against the over-policing of marginalised communities, with a primary focus on stop and search.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Airlift project. The header includes links for DUSTBOXES, OBSERVATIONS, ANALYSIS, STORIES, ABOUT, and SIGN IN. The main content area is titled 'Airlift' and discusses air pollution as a planetary health emergency. It explains that the platform allows users to set up citizen-led monitoring projects. Below this are four sections: 'DUSTBOXES' (reviewing dustbox data), 'OBSERVATIONS' (gathering evidence), 'ANALYSIS' (exploring data to identify air pollution problems), and 'STORIES' (sharing data). To the right is a map of a city area with various locations marked and colored according to air quality levels. A legend at the bottom right shows a color scale for PM2.5 concentration: N/A, 0-5, 5-10, 10-25, 25-50, and 50+.

— New platform for Airlift, a project by Citizen Sense. It allows local groups to document observations and data from air quality monitors, and collect these into data stories.



— Visual identity for Green New Deal Rising, a movement of young people fighting for climate justice. In collaboration with the Autonomous Design Group, mentioned previously in this thesis.

have to still do so much for it. You have to write the application, you have to write the report at the end.

AM

It's also labor in the end, actually going through the application process.

GC

Yeah, so, in the first year we were trying to apply for loads of grants because we thought that we would mainly get funded that way, and this would be mainly a research thing. And then, kind of coincidentally, we got some consultancy work and we were like "*Oh, actually it's, it's actually way easier to run a consultancy practice than like a research practice.*" So I think we want to get somewhere where it's a bit more hybrid: grants and consultancy. So, a bit less consultancy, but. But we'll see.

AM

So what interested you in the format of the co-operative? Because I also usually work with two colleagues of mine and we're here together, we came from Portugal together. And when we talk about formalizing our collective, we talk about all these different formats. Should we open a business, should we open a co-op? But we still haven't had enough time to research that... So, what interested you in the co-operative model?

GC

Well, firstly, you should definitely become a co-op, with those other two. I just love it so much. I mean, what interested me originally...I heard about it from a friend when I was still working at a design studio in London because she had started working at this space called Space For, which is an incubator of co-ops. She got involved in one and she would tell me about them and

I'd be like "*Oh my God, that sounds interesting!*" Because, at the time, I was just really sick of having a boss. But I was at this crossroads where I was like, "*I don't know what to do, because I never want to be solo.*" I tried doing freelance in studios, and I didn't really like that. I didn't have a solo practice. I wanted to be with other people. So, co-ops just seemed like the way to go. And I think all the principles are so spot on! There are seven cooperative principles, and I love them. Also we're part of a wider network: one of those principles is being in collaboration with other co-ops. And that's been one of the most fulfilling things. We are in constant contact and we get support from these other co-ops and learn from each other by working with each other. So, that's also been great. It's just being in the formation of running as a studio, agency or collective, but doing it in a completely horizontal, nonhierarchical way.

AM

And I also imagine that this kind of horizontality might also entail some work of shifting around, in terms of who needs more help right now or who needs more support. For example, this person is in a more precarious situation right now for some reason, so you have this awareness of how to navigate work with them differently, how to sense the different power levels? I mean, when you're friends, it almost comes through naturally. That's also how I work with my friends. So I think that's also one of the values of working collaboratively or in a horizontal way, which is being aware of the privileges that each person has and the kind of attention that each person needs.

GC

Totally, yeah. There's this book called *Going Horizontal*, and it's really interesting

GC

Yeah, totally. And not just other creative workers. Within UVW you have so many different sectors now and so. For example, you get help from the legal workers...So it's good being part of this network of all these different branches.

AM

Nice! So, let's skip to another kind of question, which would also be more directed to design. Because usually, you design digital tools in the sense of... you do a lot of websites, right? But what other kind of tools have you designed that are not just websites?

GC

Yeah, we also want to do less websites. I work a couple of days a week — it is through Common Knowledge — but I work with another organization called Zetkin. So we have been collaborating for the whole time that we've been around, because we met them during the 2019 General Election in the UK. So that's a platform for organizing activism. And you can do loads of different things on it. Like a huge part of it is that they take this approach of relational organizing. So it's all about who the people in your organization are. So for example, UVW uses Zetkin now, as well as a bunch of political parties, etc. So yeah, it's like a tool for understanding who your membership is, mapping different areas, organizing, canvassing. We're doing a feature at the moment that it's, like, a casework for unions. So that's a huge part of it, doing that platform. And then apart from that, we sometimes do small things. Recently we did a Chrome plugin for Uber drivers, and that was a collaboration with another union as well. So you can install this plugin and then go to your Uber, log in, and it analyzes your payslips and tells you the real costs, like, are you getting more or less than minimum

wage? It's a small thing. And then we also do quite a bit of just working with already existing tools. So not necessarily building stuff from scratch, but again, putting it in a digital infrastructure for a new organization, so they can communicate securely. So that will be us advising them what to use, or making automations between different services. So it's kind of a mix. But yeah, we're definitely not designing and building everything from scratch. Also because it's not the most economical thing.

AM

Yeah, of course. And between the five of you, do you split tasks, clearly? Like, are there people that are more into the actual like programming and coding, people who are more into UX/UI? Is it evenly split? Do you, sometimes, share tasks?

GC

The other four are developers and I'm the only one that's a designer. But then, one of the developers quite likes doing user research and wireframing. So we kind of share those jobs sometimes. And then, all the other stuff, outside of those professions, we share amongst us. Like, managing the co-op, meeting with people, doing administrative work, etc.

AM

Yeah, nice. And you were also telling me about sometimes using already existing tools or trying to advise people on how to use some platforms and maybe not others. How do you try to navigate the technological status quo, the surveillance apparatus that many platforms place over their users. How do you counter it?

GC

It's really hard. We actually wrote an essay

about it, for a publication which I can send you. Basically it's always kind of a tradeoff. Like, at the moment we're working with a really security focused organization looking at border violence. And we're advising them on digital infrastructure. But the most security conscious tools generally have the worst user experiences. And then when you're trying to teach a group of people, these tools are kind of clunky and they don't do everything. So you're always making those tradeoffs. It's always a balancing act, I guess. One of the things we've agreed with this group is perhaps that all internal infrastructure, where they're going to be doing secure things, talking to each other about confidential information, names of people that they're working with — that should be hyper secure. Even the server should be located in Switzerland, and all that. But then with the website that we're doing for them, maybe we go for a bigger, standard server. Just because if you pay for the super private server, it's so much money and so much more difficult. So yeah, I think unfortunately there's not an app — unless it's like Signal, which is really well designed, works for everyone, is super secret, etc — there's not that many tools out there that are really good at security and also have all the other things you need.

AM

I'd love to read that one essay! I think I asked everything that I wanted to ask. It was really nice talking to you Gemma.

We all want to be part of the core
a conversation with Sofia Rocha e Silva
(27.12.2021)

In December 2021 I talked with Portuguese designer Sofia Rocha e Silva, who's at the forefront of an Instagram-based project called A Dica do Freelancer (EN: *The Freelancer's Tip*). There, Sofia shares resources meant to educate designers and freelancers about accountancy, financial literacy, budgets and creative work. I find great value in her project because it serves a very practical purpose, especially for young graduates whose education completely sidelined matters of labor and survival in the world of work.

Our conversation meandered around many different subjects, but it surprisingly hit interesting corners such as the value of working in a geographically smaller scale, related to her design practice which is situated in the interior of Portugal, a region that faces enormous challenges due to population exodus towards the big city centers in the litoral — something I could relate to as someone from a small town in the interior as well. We also talked about design education, the separation of our private life from our work, the enclosure of the commons of creativity and culture by the “creative industries” and how the myth that all design work is creative work can be ultimately misleading. We all want to be part of the core, to be creatives, but there isn't space for everyone.

Afonso Matos

The way I interpret the stance your project takes is like... Since we do have to work within the market and have a job, let's accept that fact — but let's do it in the healthiest way possible, being aware of the labor dynamics which bind us and the rights we have as workers, which is something that is not talked about in our medium. So, what made you start this project? Was it something with intention or not so much?

Sofia Rocha e Silva

When I started there wasn't exactly an intention for it to become the project it is today. It didn't have the same shape. I just decided I was going to post some tips. We were in the middle of the pandemic, I was out of jobs... So I had a lot of free time and decided to start sharing tips. Also because I don't think I ever had a design project of my own. I never really felt confident to do that.

AM
Even in college...?

SRS

In college I always struggled a lot with the fact that I didn't have a specific style, which is something that in the Fine Arts Faculty [of Porto] was not openly, but still clearly, valued. And I never discovered mine. Also, a lot of the design projects you see on Instagram live very much from image and not so much from text. And I think much better through text than through images. And the fact that these posts live beyond imagery freed me from that pressure. The first post I did was about budgets and I got feedback right away, so I decided to continue. In retrospect, I was a bit distressed because I had never had a personal project. I had a co-op that I shared with several people. I had projects but always together with someone else. But I didn't have anything that was mine alone. And I didn't know what that was going to be. I had no idea.

AM
So it came about as something that started to solidify....

SRS

Yes, it was slowly solidifying. One thing that used to get me really mad was, "Oh, you guys are creative, you don't care about accounting." And that pisses me off, putting

us in a box. At some point I realized that people put me in that box because I didn't tell them not to do that either. But okay, to answer your question: there was no plan.

AM

Okay, but then it was a body of knowledge that, because you had been working in the field for a while now, you decided to start sharing? Do you think you have a little above average knowledge on accounting issues? Was it knowledge that you already had and now you are sharing more openly?

SRS

I had this cooperative with some friends. There were as many as seventeen of us. And I believe very much in cooperativism and in the cooperative way of working. I ran that cooperative for five years, so I learned a lot about invoicing and taxes. It's not the same thing because we operated formally as a business. But it kind of accelerated that initial process, which is filled with confusion. You have that moment of: "*Wait a minute. What do you mean? When do I have to pay for this? And how?*" and I was upset that I couldn't get a concrete answer. I couldn't understand it. But it's that classic learning curve, because from the moment it makes sense, everything starts to make sense. And yes, then when I started sharing, it was very much on the basis of my experience. Then I started reading about it as well and following other things. Also because there was also this responsibility of spreading information that was correct and I committed to that.

AM

And what kind of content did you feel that people were more looking for? Or something that you really felt, "*Okay, this is making numbers*" and therefore it indicated to you that something in our profession, in our education, or in

our community is really lacking?

SRS

The pricing and budgeting part, no doubt. Because it exists in that intersection between accounting — because there is the tax part and all that — and the part of the reality of creative work. Also because there is no formula for that. And because there is no formula, we also have to clarify these doubts. But beyond that, maybe the part about taxes, specifically Social Security more than others. Usually they're basic things, not very complex doubts. I mostly get questions coming from people who want to start and don't know how.

AM

We feel that way too, personally. My colleagues and I came out of college and we didn't have a "parachute." People leave university helpless, without any kind of notion of how they're going to get started. And I also think that's where the value of your initiative comes in, that it really ends up being a huge help for people who are just starting out.

SRS

When we go to university and then graduate, our habitat is very restricted. We live with designers, we don't live with accountants. And when you leave it, you have no one to turn to. You are not going to pay for an accountant because you don't have that kind of money. You're not going to make that choice most of the time, even if there are cheaper accountants. So you feel a little bit helpless because your network, which often supports you in many things, can't support you in that.

AM

What would you do differently in design education if you had the opportunity to teach? Your platform already

has an almost pedagogical component, even if that was not the intention. But what was your reality like regarding receiving this knowledge, during college? And what would you do differently if you could teach? Or would you even like to?

SRS

I think I'm good at teaching, even! But I don't know if that will happen. I have no idea. Maybe. In university I took Design Management, and there is a certain expectation that this discipline will bring many tools that will be very useful to us. In my case, there was a commendable attempt by our professor at the time to bring in some studios to talk about how they manage their work. It had potential for sure. And I think it was something I would do if I taught that course. However, out of five or six studios that went there, only one talked about pricing. Only one really talked about management. The others talked about the creative process. But even the one that talked about management gave us some very bad examples. It was the *Bolos Quentes* studio, that did the communication for [music festival] *Milhões de Festa*. The example they gave us of how they managed the accounts and all that, in the end resulted in a rate of 8 euros per hour.

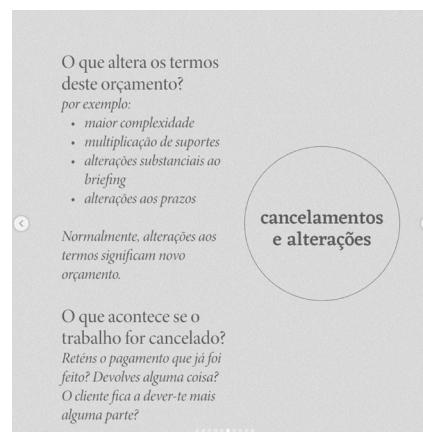
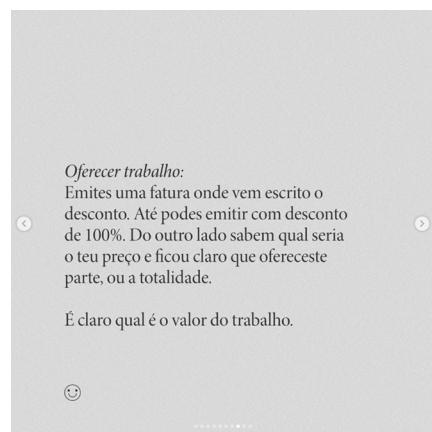
AM

Uff...

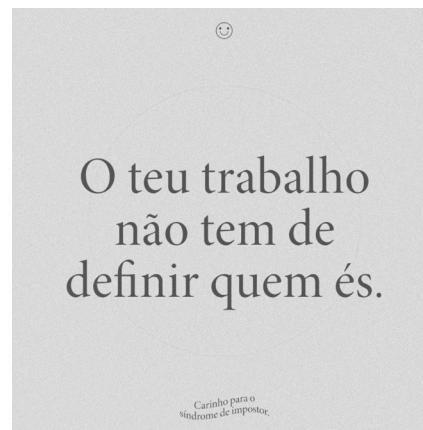
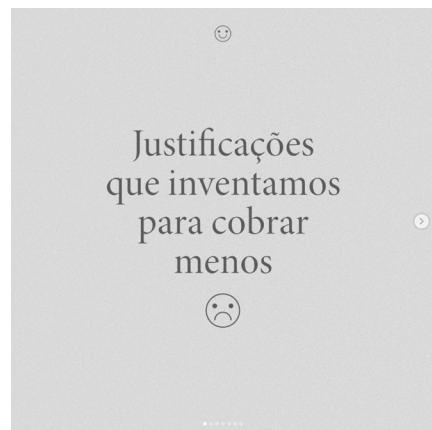
SRS

And when you present that to a class of designers who don't know anything about pricing, it can be a little tricky. Because we don't have the tools to figure out whether that's high or low. We don't. So it was like a saving buoy was thrown at us... You hold on to it. Suddenly you have something very concrete there that can help. But it's a little dangerous to give that example, because

Some examples of posts that Sofia shares on her Instagram.

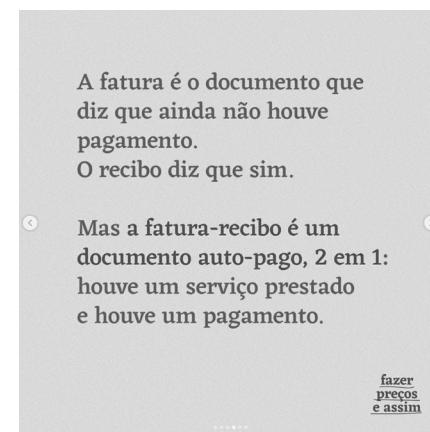


— This post was about the differences between working for free or doing free work, setting boundaries and understanding why you are doing it and if you're doing it, make your reasoning for that clear so that the client understands it is your decision to do so, not that your work is worth 0€.



— Here, Sofia tries to debunk the various myths we tell ourselves to justify asking less money from a client.

— She also posts certain “inspirational” quotes or simple sentences about creative work. This one is also something I’ve tried to argue for in this thesis: “Your work does not define who you are”



— This post highlighted the differences between an invoice and an invoice-receipt.



— Here, Sofia shares facts and resources about IRS (Personal Income Tax) retention and invoicing softwares.



— “Why register the time I spend doing each project?” Here, Sofia shares tips on why it’s useful to keep track of how long you take to work on a certain task or job.



— Separating your work from your leisure time as a freelancer can be hard. Here, she reminds us that “Being free doesn’t mean that you are available.”

eight euros is very low. But it was praiseworthy because he was the only one who talked to us about money. And I remember that for all of us it was a very striking lesson. No one had ever talked to us about money be-



(fig.2)

Life saving buoy = the most basic conversation about finance while you're studying graphic design in Portugal

fore. Other than that, we made a budget and timelines. Last year I went to review this hypothetical budget, which we made as a group, and since we didn't feel as professional as the studios that had gone there, we were making 6 or 7 euros an hour... Because we felt that a comparison was necessary. So, if it were me teaching this course: the sharing part is very good, so I'd keep that. Also because many teachers — as we were talking about at the beginning — don't have that real world experience. And they don't have to pretend that they do. So they can bring in other people who have it to present that, not least because there are a variety of ways to manage and show budgets. So I would keep that part. And then I would try to pass on the idea that making a budget is not a formula. There is a whole global logic of thinking about pricing that is transversal to the self-employed and to employees. You have to be able to figure out the value of your work, even if you don't have to make a budget. So that part of Design Management falls short because it focuses on a formula to make a budget for one day working for a client. But it should be more than that. It

should be: how do you go to a job interview and know that the salary that you are being offered is a valid and fair offer? What does it include? What is retention? I think I would do everything more along those lines, of a global notion. But then you're at a university, you have to have assessment instruments. But that's another conversation.

AM

Yeah, it's very much about democratizing financial literacy. How do we make these issues comfortable to talk about? Why is it a taboo to talk about these issues of how we value our work? Do you feel a little bit of that resistance too?

SRS

In reality I try to push people a lot. Even here in Vila Real, with the people I work with, I like to talk about money. I like to know how much other people are charging for a project, and the like. Because this helps a lot to understand my place here in this small local universe of ours.

AM

You work there a lot, in Vila Real, don't you? Are most of your clients from there?

SRS

Yes, yes. I started working here in the studio with Renato, who was my classmate in high school, so we also grew a lot together as designers. And he ended up specializing in designing wine labels. Vila Real is in a privileged place for that kind of market. So, since there are many companies that tended to hire in Lisbon or Porto, and now started to value the fact that they can contact local designers, we end up being a bet on the local as well. And also many of our clients are small producers for whom it makes no sense to look for designers out-

side the region. So yes, the clients end up being very much from here. I never really had that ambition of going abroad and having well-known international clients. That never really appealed to me. Also, I understand very well what you were saying in the beginning because I also came to Vila Real a little bit upset with the design world. When you're in Porto and all those design events are happening, you see that the same people are always there and everything is always in the same bubble...it ends up restricted to a small universe. It didn't make sense for me to belong to that world of designers anymore. I knew that very early on in University. Even though I didn't know what I wanted, I knew I didn't want that: that studio life and belonging to that bubble in Porto. I always felt diminished, and it's a feeling I couldn't control. I always felt that I didn't belong there. So I ended up working in other areas and it took me a long time to feel more confident with my design work. And that delay, that growth, I feel like it paid off and ended up being contemporary with this project I started.



(fig.3)

Vila Real is a portuguese city with a population of around 50 000 people.

AM

But that question of location is interesting too, because more and more I also feel that I would like to work in a more localized or situated manner. In the sense of: Maybe there's this group of people around me, in the

sense of neighborhood, city or district, who need these services and I have some experience that can be useful for them. I see more and more interest there than in trying to be part of a bubble that thinks it is subverting systems and deconstructing ideologies but then is actually very insular. Basically, maybe what you can really do is, in a very practical, basic and material way, help someone who needs your service. And that's already valid.

SRS

Yes, the intervention ends up having another dimension. I don't feel this so much with design, because this part of the wine labels ends up being more commercial, but maybe more so in the cooperative. The cooperative had to become a company because we needed to make things more serious (we were a bit idealistic when we created the cooperative). But when we created it we were very passionate and we worked a lot here. But we did a lot for very little. The city ended up beating us. You can't go on like this forever. But I still like being part of the city and that's why I teach at the Senior University and all that...because you end up having a different type of intervention.

AM

I would also love to do something of that kind here in Portalegre but, even though it's a very beautiful city, it is getting more and more deserted and nothing happens around here....

SRS

Desertification is a huge problem. Here in the region there are municipalities losing 20% of population every year. And it is a lot. Vila Real scores at around 4%.

AM

20% is a lot.

SRS

It's super scary. Because in five years time it's 100%.

AM

Alentejo suffers a lot from that too... Now maybe we could talk more generally about creative work. You said that your PhD is related to this theme too? I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about it first? What have you been researching?

SRS

My theme has to do with the creative ecosystem here in the Douro region. It has to do with understanding the state of the creative industries in the region and thinking about what potential this has for a low density area. And also how can this be thought out in a more careful way than what has been done in the cities? Looking at what we have learned from the big cities in terms of the uncritical application of all that kind of cultural and creative policies. How can this be done in a more localized way? But maybe we can move forward with the questions that you have next.

AM

Right, yes...I wanted to talk about this issue of the enclosure of creativity by work. We often feel that the dream is to actually have a creative job and we, as designers, cherish that very much. That is, we always wanted to have a job where we could have an outlet for our creativity, because we have something inside of us, something we like to do and therefore we want to earn a living by doing that. But I also increasingly think we should question the narrative that all creativity should be enclosed by the logic of work. And I feel that that is very dangerous sometimes in what we do as designers. We feel that everything

we do has to be related to design, and so what is left for us to do leisurely, outside of design or outside of our work? Can we still be creative outside of what we are working on?

SRS

I have suffered more from this problem in the past...But I think it's always very difficult to draw that line between the personal and the professional. Because it's that talk of: all hobbies have to be monetized and therefore they stop being hobbies. There's been a lot of talk about that now, for example, you have this new notion of *polywork*, which is the scariest thing ever, which is people who supposedly have multiple jobs and turn that into a lifestyle. That's a bit of a dangerous notion. It's hard to create those buffer activities. I think leisure, where you're doing something *just for the sake of doing it*, is very difficult for us. Although in commercial design we don't really do projects for the sake of doing them. That connection is more direct, for example, in illustrators who lose the love for drawing because it becomes too much work. In designers, this relationship is more complex, because, as you were saying, everything around us at a given moment is design.

AM

Exactly, but that discourse can also be dangerous, the one of "*everything is design*." And it's true that everything is design but then, where do you as a designer, individually, find yourself there?

SRS

And designers have this history of lumping everything together. There are people who include the history of the alphabet in the history of design and others who don't. We aggregate various disciplines and say it's called design. But I'm always a fan of: when you're not able to naturally watch a movie without thinking about your work, or you

can't get free time or something — you really have to force yourself to do that. Because if that's gone, it's not going to come back naturally. If you used to love to draw and now you never do it just for the sake of it, you have to force yourself to sit down one day and draw for even one hour, aimlessly. We've always been sold that idea that we can have the job we want and do what we like and all that. And you have that in Richard Florida's *creative class*, which he divides into three groups, but specially into two main subgroups, which are the *core* and the *creative professionals*. We all want to be in the core. We all want to do that super creative work. But then the reality is that there are many, many designers and many so-called creative professions that are just technical. They are in the area of creativity but that doesn't mean...

AM

...that you have some agency in your work, that you have many options...

SRS

Exactly. And that can be a disappointment for a lot of people. A while back I taught a course for people who wanted to be freelancers. There were several similar narratives among the participants, but there were two people in particular: one of them said that in the job she was in, she felt her creativity slowly dying...and we are talking about a person who was younger than me. And another one, an older lady, who had a salaried job and was a fashion designer too who had her own brand, got very emotional. She was telling that — and it was a very intense moment — she felt that she wasn't doing enough, and that she had much more to give than that. And you could see that it had to do with her ideas, with idealism, with what she wanted to leave in the world. She is a person who already has a job, already has her own brand, has two daughters, and

she feels she is not doing enough! What do you mean she is not? It's an emotional thing: people feeling let down.

AM

It's a pain to feel that we are wasting our life's time in jobs that don't fulfill us creatively. You get stuck in boring, mechanical tasks. But maybe one way to deal with that pain, which is something I also try to say in my thesis, is to realize that maybe that creativity can still exist in our lives, but outside of our work. I can try to find my purpose again as someone who identifies himself as creative, or identifies himself as being interested in doing a series of creative activities, while realizing that I have a job that may be a bit mechanical. But right now a large part of everybody's job in the world is like that. Most jobs are not creative. Maybe the real fight should be a fight for decent conditions *within* that job, so that it allows us to enjoy the time *outside* of it as fully as possible. To enjoy time with the people we love and to do the things we love, whether they are creative or not, activism, political involvement, or something else.

SRS

You know I was thinking about that the other day. I have a friend who had a very ambitious project that she started in 2015: an opera. She wrote a booklet of an opera, got together with a friend who was a composer, and the opera premiered last week. And I was watching the show and I was thinking: as a designer, I don't feel that it's ever possible for me to create something like that, you know?

AM

This romantic idea of creation, right? Of the masterpiece.

SRS

Yes, of creation. Exactly. And it got me thinking about that because, it's not that I have that desire exactly, but in terms of creative apotheosis...I think we designers always stick more to the earthly realm.

AM

It's a specter that almost unconsciously haunts us, because we are always doing things for other people, always in the sense of serving someone else, within the procedures that a client gives us...

SRS

Maybe we are a little bit thirsty for that as designers. And that's where the *designer as an author*, who is after this possibility, comes from.

AM

Yes, I also talk a little bit about that in the thesis. But okay, moving on a little bit with the questions: I had another topic here to talk about, which is about the creative industries themselves. About how we accept this dogma of the "creative industries," which is something that is now part of a mainstream, corporate discourse, but didn't exist in the 70's or 60's. It's something that from the 80's or 90's onwards started to become common, and it's an interesting change to consider. Especially because it shows a shift in the way we see creativity today, as something that used to be seen as part of the commons, but now we see it as something privatized. Like, "*I am creative. This design object is creative. I'm doing something creative for money, in other words, my work is creative.*" I don't know if you have a position on that, if you deal well with the fact that creativity is subjugated to the market and to capitalist dynamics, or if that's bothering you?

SRS

I guess at the design level it doesn't really bother me. What I am more bothered about is that the creative industries have kind of swallowed the cultural industries and a lot of creative areas that in their genesis should be public. Art, theater, dance, all of that. And there, it upsets me more. In design, not so much. But it is a dilemma of the creative industries in general. There was this bifurcation between cultural industries and creative industries, where one thing became associated with leftist cultural policies and subsidies, and the other to a more positivist idea of the market, of productivity. This latter aspect especially bothers me, because the path doesn't seem very bright for the culture sector. Creativity and creative industries end up being words that are going to get a bit tarnished in the coming years. Every time I mention it on Instagram, there comes someone saying, "*But everyone is creative! But plumbers are creative too!*" So those are two words that are going to be tarnished, and that's going to have negative consequences, especially for the cultural part, which takes a lot by the wayside. If you think about it, the Fine Arts Faculty, at least in Porto, it always has the smallest budget, because the University doesn't bring any profit. But that's it, it's not supposed to make a profit! It's not supposed to. In the coming years the situation will get worse and maybe then there will be a serious debate about the public side of culture, because everyone should have access to culture. But if we go down that road, everyone should also have access to design.

AM

Maybe just one last question? I'd like to talk to you about this issue of unionization. Do you think it would be something productive to do in Portugal? There isn't a culture of unionization in design in general or in the creative in-

dustries. But there have been some initiatives, for example in the UK, where this collective called *Evening Class* researched the need to start a union and they actually founded one for creative workers and designers in the UK within a larger structure, the United Voices of the World. And I think that's interesting, because it's based on realizing that we are also workers and we are under a set of conditions that we can't individually fight against on our own. Still, it's very complicated to guide a fight for your rights as a freelancer. Sometimes we don't even know what it means to even talk of a fight for our rights as freelancers. I'd like to hear your perspective: What do you think about that, what are the pros and cons, do you think it makes sense?

SRS

I guess I'm not informed enough about that. On that one in the UK, how do they navigate the issue of there being so much difference between freelance designers and designers for hire? That would be one of my questions. Because in terms of problem representation, they're kind of different problems. So I'm a little skeptical, actually. I think I have little confidence in designers in Portugal, in terms of our organizational capacity. Also because now there is a designers' association and there have been two others before... and the problem I see is always that people have very different priorities as professionals. Maybe if it was something very focused, only in a very specific area... but even then design areas themselves have very different problems between them and will have very different challenges from now on, even in terms of sustainability and all that. So, they are going to need different answers. When we talk about product designers and graphic designers, in itself, it's already quite different. I think the most

heated debate about this in Portugal was at the time when people were talking about the Order of Designers. And again and again there are people, when I share things about pricing, who text me saying "*There should have been an Order of Designers so we can set a price!*"

AM

And what is your opinion regarding this question of the Order?

SRS

I guess I'm not informed enough about everything that could happen. But regarding price fixing, I am completely against it. Not least because people who are in favor of the Order usually have two goals: The first is to fix the price in a table. And the other is to prevent amateurs from doing design. And this last one, to me, is the most problematic of all. Because if you follow that logic, well, there are so many bad designers with degrees! It's not a degree that should be a criteria. And then what would be the argument for preventing access to the profession? We are not like architects, lawyers or doctors. So I find that part problematic, especially when it comes to pricing. Obviously, if you have clients who don't accept your price because they say it's always high, and as a result you're left working with very low prices, you're in a complicated situation, in a vicious circle. But it's not the amateur's fault. Nor is a table with a fixed price going to solve this at all. Brazil has a table and the Brazilian designers I know, at least, don't use it. It might be useful to have a baseline idea but no more than that. But yes, I believe that good things would come from this, from unionizing. But I can't think of common problems at this moment — or, more than that, I think bridging different problems is possible but it takes effort, and I don't see that effort coming up...

AM

Yes, that's really the big challenge. Finding out what the common problems are.

SRS

Because these issues, of prices and of access to the profession, end up being very divisive. And then you have another one, in the case of the Order in particular, if it followed the model of, for example, the Order of Architects, which would be the internships for the Order. If we set up an Order of Designers, that translates into an annual fee that you must pay to be part of the Order and then only those who are part of the Order really are, formally, designers and can practice. And, so there could be hundreds of free internships a year. So I don't think it's a good idea, but that's another matter altogether. Maybe a union would be a little different.

AM

Yes, I think they come from different perspectives maybe. I associate the idea of the Order very much to gatekeeping: "*I belong, you don't.*" But a union, I think, comes from a more grassroots idea of feeling the need to identify a series of common problems and realize that it can be useful to collectively organize and fight for them in common.

SRS

It's just that it's difficult to find common problems that are neither the problems of the self-employed, nor the problems of the precarious employees, and that are specifically the problems of designers. One of them may be related to remote working platforms and to doing design work on them. Because although Uber and so on are already being regulated, in terms of creative freelance design there's not much protection. So it could be around that...I don't know...

AM

I think it might even involve finding common grounds with other creative workers. Instead of just thinking about the problems that designers have, what are the problems of the precarious employees, and also the self-employed, what do we all have in common that makes us want to unionize?

SRS

I can only think of the bad things, but it is more associated with the Order...[laughs]

AM

Okay, thank you for your time Sofia!

SRS

I hope this was helpful!

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WHO CAN AFFORD TO BE CRITICAL?
WHAT CAN CRITICALITY AFFORD?

*An inquiry into what we can't do by ourselves, as designers
and into what we might be able to do together, as people*

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