

Introduction

ANALYSIS OF A SHIFT

Top Design (Programme)

The first issue of a publication on design must be not only engaging but also committed. The goal is not to shock, but rather to reveal another facet of this field, to open the way to difference. The theme as well as the choice of designers for this first opus is therefore purposely situated on the cutting edge, the summit, and questions the relationships that we have to objects and the act of creating. Design is currently exploring new territories; its *paradigm* is being modified. In this first issue of *Obliquite*, we are going to tackle one of these territories, referred to successively as narrative design, semantic design, and performative design (not *design fiction*, but we'll get back to this). The objective will be to show, through the different contributions, that these practices aren't isolated; they influence the entire field, and they slip in everywhere, prolific, complex and subtle.

While Marguerite Humeau makes 'respiratory' installations, Judith Seng transforms herself into a contemporary dance choreographer. Whereas Tim Miller has volunteers rehearse passing a job interview, Benjamin Loyauté arranges for postcards to be sent to Syrians cut off from the world. As for Raphaël Pluinage, he is learning to 'outsmart' algorithms, while Adam Nathaniel Furman locks himself up in a room for three months to create modern totems. And Commonplace Studio photographs museum visitors.

These designers clearly do not limit themselves to objects. They integrate other areas, using performance, discourse, history or memory. Each one

in his own way creates hybridisations which, although *à priori* heteroclite, proceed from a similar process of reflection. Each one of them starts with considerations that are perfectly inherent to the field of design (use, signification, comprehensibility of the material world) and parachutes them into other forms, other aesthetic modalities. Even if the formats used are a break with what could be considered 'normal' or 'classic', each one of these practices comes from a reflection on design, what it implies and what it means. The question of whether these practices are 'design' or not, judging by their form, is thus not meaningful. The central questions are related to design, are produced by designers, and are presented in contexts specific to the design field (design galleries, design events, design museums, design stores). The term *field* is to be considered in its magnetic sense not agricultural: we apprehend it as turbulent, contagious and perturbing, and it can therefore have an impact on other fields, such as fine arts or theatre. But it is still pertinent, from our point of view, to analyse it and to put it into perspective from a space relating to the conception of daily life.

Function Has Disappeared (Semantic)

From an analytical point of view, it is particularly interesting to make designers write, because it forces us to acknowledge the specific semiology of the terms they use. It is clear that language, beyond its expressive/communicative function, constitutes the way we think; it structures our practice. Decoding the language of designers enables us to discern concepts, analyse issues inherent to the field, and build our own culture from it.

If we examine the texts, a first point becomes obvious: none of the designers talk about function. The form/function dichotomy, so omnipresent in design's historical and founding texts, is totally absent. Should we conclude that the functionalist paradigm in design is dead?

Another vocabulary element is notably missing from all of these texts: value judgments. Design has always been associated with a discourse filled with moralising words: beautiful, good, affordable, real. From Morris to Morrison, by way of Rahms or Ive, classical design history is full of profoundly ambivalent positivist justifications, and what's more, vis-à-vis the economic, social, political or environmental impacts of their activities. This is not the place to discuss these impacts, even less to denounce them, but it would be fairly simple to demonstrate the paradoxical difference between what these designers say, and the effects of their productions.

In this volume, design is no longer said to be 'good', 'beautiful', or 'real' - concepts we consider to be profoundly associated with 'modernism'. There is no talk of progress, no bold humanism, or individualist programmes. The theses are more subtle. Our daily lives are fabrications; they are based on interpersonal relationships, historical constructions, and political considerations that involve technologies, mediators, institutions, savoir faire, beliefs, and scientific facts. The work of designers is thus built around all these elements, so as to embrace and highlight complexity, make it visible, and to persist, rather than simplifying or denying it.

Reality, Medium, Works

Although there are a few major omissions in the semiotics used, we can also take a look at the newcomers. Three principal types can be identified: on the one hand, the question of Reality vs. Fiction is often brought up. On the other hand, the question of medium and its experimental character. Finally, there is the question of generation of content: what forms and beliefs exist with regard to our everyday lives.

The first point concerns the real and its absence, an omnipresent preoccupation in the present review. All of the designers agree that the concept of reality is no longer applicable at the present time, as it has become too complex to define and delineate. Even so, pure fiction cannot replace it, as it is not totally isolated either: fiction still interlocks with real facts. Citing Baudrillard, for example, the question of simulacra and simulations is an integral part of certain discourses. Others make reference to Deleuze or Latour to build their arguments. The work of these designers in all evidence plays on the reality/fiction complex. This is precisely why we cannot give it the label 'design fiction' without characterising it here with just a part of what it's about: its objective isn't to 'make' projective fictions, but rather to connect narrations and realities, to highlight the profoundly inseparable character of both. These designers speak in the present tense, not the future; they speak about our world, not utopias, dystopias or uchronias. They don't make projections. They experiment.

The second point that will be thoroughly examined is the medium of expression. It is regularly argued that as a

consequence of multiplying, perverting and pushing the type of medium used to extremes, designers treat their subject of exploration in a more complete and complex manner. Films, performances, installations, sculptures, games, systems, manuals... are all forms that can be happily substituted for more 'classical' objects. This perfusion of formats could appear to be escapism, but if one follows the train of thought, it is actually rather a logical outcome. Let's take for example the English designer, Tim Miller, who started by wondering about the political and social signification of the object, with the idea that even an object can become the receptacle of contradictory significations. His design practice gradually tended to turn toward the design of more and more universal objects, finally preferring, in fact, to play with the number of uses and meanings involved in his productions.

Objects represent us; they condition us as much as we choose them. Taking this idea to the extreme, he decided to tackle the most universal, interpersonal and conditioning thing that exists: language. His practice, while maintaining its stated purpose, no longer expresses itself in a functional object. It takes the performative form. In other words, Miller organises staged scenes around a narrative. He proposes the creation of his "social image" through language, does "self design" through discourse. If objects are interpersonal vectors, then language is the quintessential object. If objects define us with regard to others, then language is the most powerful object. The logic of this shift can be found in the work of each of the designers chosen for this publication.

These experiments involve another specific point about these works: iteration. When the objective is to do

tests and set up experiments, the nature of the work changes. We no longer talk about a project for a client, with a final concrete solution. The idea would be, on the other hand, to put into place a continual exploration, which becomes a concrete form at different moments, in different formats, in different places. Judith Seng has already made five different iterations of her choreographic exploration, *Acting Things*. And Marguerite Humeau has developed five vocal systems of extinct beings in the series *Proposal for Resuscitating Prehistoric Creatures*.

The locations, sponsors, and contexts involve different forms, but each iteration is an integral part of the work. Which also explains the pertinence of the written word, whose aim is not just to explain, but to become another implementation of the same work, a different format that constitutes a proposition of the exploration in its own right. What one could call 'the different and successive results' of the work of these designers, in other words, their works (or *Opus* - in Greek: "work, activity" - that is to say, the process, in the sense of to strive, to act, to take action, and not a set of objectified elements) are not in reality final answers. They are points of concretisations of their discourses, clues, traces, given moments.

Still, there is the central question of who produces; and as a consequence of how they are produced, the objects, the know-how or the representations in our everyday lives. Is it the ritual that creates the form? Is it science that defines our beliefs? Is it the discourse that defines our personalities? Are algorithms what define our everyday existences? Does memory define our future? To each of these constantly reiterated questions, the designers outline

possible solutions, while often bringing other actors into the picture. Tim Miller's performances, Raphael Pluvinage's games, Marguerite Humeau's installations, or Benjamin Loyauté's staged scenes call for the participation, each time, of non-designers (respectively: actors, children, scientists and Syrian families). The designers position themselves therefore as 'stage directors', or 'revealers'. They put conditions into place for the construction of forms, of beliefs, or narrative, the resulting form being anything but 'set'. As Pierre Sterckx so rightly says, "It's not a question of form, definitely not. Rather it's a story of formations"¹.

Addressing the Everyday

To summarise these positions, we can say that the designers presented here no longer concentrate on the function of an object in the service of Man in an objective, simplified way. They take a step back from the use of things to examine instead what is secondary in the object: the discourse, beliefs and rituals around them. But if they address what is secondary, have they lost the primary objective? One might think, and not without reason, that these practices are detached from life, have become figures of style, an art-artifice, far from everyday existence. One might criticise these approaches as being a form of self-referential isolation, that they address only specialists, and produce a kind of design in and of itself, for oneself.

But if we really think about it, isn't the monomaniacal obsession of the designer who designs chairs his whole life much more self-referential than these designers who deal with people cut off from the world,

employment techniques or algorithms? Aren't techniques of narration, of consciousness-raising and manipulation more present and more influential in our lives than the shape of such or such an object? In our techno-commercial, all-business world, all marketing services as well as any investment banker, knows perfectly well that value no longer comes from the object per se, but rather from the beliefs that surround it. Storytelling and brand images have much more value than the product, in the end. The market value of a company is no longer calculated in sales or turnover, but rather in its rating by investors, who base their appreciations on bets rather than on needs.

Objects are removed from their productive value; they are indexed on narrative values. Making people think that this or that company has an important historical past, or that it is particularly invested in environmental solutions, whether it be true or false, doesn't matter; essentially, it just has to be credible. Managerial, ecological or information scandals, whether based on fact or invented, have an impact on the real values of activities and our lives. Marketing services know this perfectly well; investors, managers, consulting firms, and advertising companies know it too. We designers were without a doubt the last of the dinosaurs, thinking that a well-made object is an object that sells well.

Of course this question deserves to be debated at length, but for the present occasion, we postulate that the approach set out here is not marginal. It strikes at the very heart of our way of living. It concerns what really influences our daily choices. By treating them like icons, rendering them visible when they are hidden, attacking the

myths that they create, divulging their interpersonal and interdisciplinary character, the designers expose or go against narratives that are, after all, already omnipresent. They work to reveal what surrounds us. They use the plastic aspect of political, institutional, industrial and economic systems for raw material.

The Example Of The Last Century

To end this introduction, it seems like a good idea to put these practices back into a historical context. The aforementioned practices go from a functionalist paradigm to a narrative paradigm, from moral to experimental, from standard format to a very wide diversity of formats. Has this type of transformation ever happened in history before now? Of course, this is almost exactly the same kind of reversal that took place in art in the beginning of the 20th century with the avant-gardes. To back up this comparison, we are going to rely on a text by Marc Le Bot, called *Art/Design*, which goes back to the conceptual modifications of avant-garde art.

The question of formats is easy to compare. Indeed, the artistic avant-garde's first particularity is that it abandons the time-honored and favourite medium: the painting. DADA, Duchamp, and the Surrealists broke the classical form of artistic action wide open, exploring new formats, adding installations, manuals, performance, games or viewer participation to the sphere of the work of art, like the designers in this publication, who in a similar way, quit making furniture. The abandonment of humanist discourse is also present. As a matter of fact, Marc Le Bot confirms that the

artistic avant-garde at the beginning of the 20th century, "broke with humanist ideology"² which was still in effect in social art. Whereas the art of the period's function was to protest against the "inhumanity of the system by exposing the spectacle of the ravages of industrialisation"³, avant-garde art "wants to cooperate, in its role as organiser of the collective imagination, in the transformation of social relations"⁴. It becomes more experimental than critical.

Lastly, Le Bot argues that the avant-garde and the abandoning of classical artistic technique is nothing but a reaction, an appropriation of the tools and myths that are taking over the world at the time. "The machine is perceived as being a combination of serial elements whose arrangement is due exclusively to pure scientific reasoning. Therefore, what a fraction of the avant-garde says is that art must take this way of thinking, abstractly defined by the mind, as a model, and that in this way, it would be thoroughly human"⁵. As the machine has an impact on life, society, the institutions and power structures, art must take a hold of it, render it comprehensible and go against it. In approaching it, art becomes "human" in this way, and strives to work on what is at its core.

Today, design is no longer confronted with the birth of the machine. It is now confronted with information, narrative techniques, marketing, and a global society of spectacle. But rather than rejecting the whole thing, and appealing in its creations to a form of truth or reality, it takes these narrative techniques, divulges them, and uses them for its own purposes. This then means passing from a system of social justification for production in a

context of marketing lies (admittedly a particularly ambivalent justification), to a system of construction and the revelation of an alternative spectacle, a non-marketable Storytelling, a creation of know-how and shifted beliefs with regard to economic and institutional systems of information.

We won't go any further in this comparison which deserves to be further developed. If we nevertheless wish to mention it, it's to enable us to imagine what shifts could be made in the field of design in the 21st century. As a matter of fact, the artistic avant-gardes are characterised by two things: they were recognised much later, once art history could place them in a modern continuity; and they had a considerable impact on the generations of artists that followed, asking questions which are still relevant today. If our intuition turns out to be even a little justified, then so will this narrative design, which will require a re-reading and inclusion in a history of ideas by the theoreticians in the field. And it will modify how design is thought about and practiced in the century to come.

1. STERCKX, Pierre. *Le Devenir-cochon de Wim Delvoye*. Bruxelles: La Lettre Volée, 2007, p.6

2. LE BOT, Marc. "Art/design". In: JOLLANT-KNEEBONE, Françoise (ed.). *La Critique en design : contribution à une anthologie*. Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 2003, p.222 (Critiques d'art)

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p.228