

Jan van Toorn

Design and Reflexivity

Designers in the “information industry” increasingly conform to the neo-liberal concepts of the present socio-economic circumstances. This leaves little room for a social engagement which attempts to unite the private interests of the information combines and collective objectives.

The consequence of this mental adjustment to the hegemonies of the communicative relationships is that design, despite what are frequently well-intentioned ethical starting-points, has become generalized and rudimentary in its substantive and instrumental choices, and naive in its thinking about its own public role. In my contribution I argue, following in the footsteps of Félix Guattari, for a “mental ecology,” for a multidimensional realistic reflexivity, which makes possible the recuperation of a practice consisting of more effective oppositional strategies.

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mines the nature of the message, there is a primacy of the relation over being. In other words, it is the bodies which think, not the minds. The constraint of incorporation produces corporations, which are these intermediary bodies and these institutions of knowledge, abiding by norms and formulating norms known as schools, churches, parties, associations, debating societies, etc.

– Régis Debray, 1994

Criticism is not an innocent discipline,
and has never been.

..

The moment when a material or intellectual practice begins to “think itself,” to take itself as an object of intellectual inquiry, is clearly of dominant significance in the development of that practice; it will certainly never be the same again. What thrusts such a practice into self-reflexiveness is not merely an internal pressure, but the complex unity it forms with adjacent discourses.

– Terry Eagleton, 1975/76

– Terry Eagleton, 1985

Valid critical judgment is the fruit not of spiritual dissociation but of an energetic



SONY

the given facts that appear ...
the positive index of truth are in fact
the negation of truth ... Truth can only be established
their destruction.

Every professional practice operates in a state of schizophrenia, in a situation full of inescapable contradictions. So too communicative design, which traditionally views its own action as serving the public interest, but which is engaged at the same time in the private interests of clients and media. To secure its existence, design, like other practical intellectual professions, must constantly strive to neutralize these inherent conflicts of interest by developing a mediating concept aimed at consensus. This always comes down to a reconciliation with the present state of social relations; in other words, to accepting the world image of the established order as the context for its own action.

By continually smoothing over the conflicts in the production relationships, design, in cooperation with other disciplines, has developed a practical and conceptual coherence which has afforded it representational and institutional power in the mass media. In this manner it legitimizes itself in the eyes of the established social order, which in turn is confirmed and legitimized by the contributions which design makes to symbolic production. It is this image of reality, in particular of the social world, which, pressured by the market economy, no longer has room for emancipatory engagement as a foundation for critical practice.

Design has thus become imprisoned in a fiction which does not respond to factual reality beyond the representations of the culture industry and its communicative monopoly. In principle, this intellectual impotence is still expressed in dualistic, product-oriented action and thought: on the one hand there is the individual's attempt to renew the vocabulary – out of resistance to the social integration of the profession; on the other there is the intention to arrive at universal and utilitarian soberness of expression – within the existing symbolic and institutional order. Although the lines separating these two extremes are becoming blurred (as a consequence of post-modernist thinking and ongoing market differentiation), official design continues to be characterized by aesthetic compulsiveness and/or by a patriarchal fixation on reproductive ordering.

The social orientation of our action as designers is no longer as simple as that. We seem happy enough to earn

Designers must come to reflect upon the functions they serve, and on the potentially hazardous implications of those functions. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin wrote that humankind's "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."

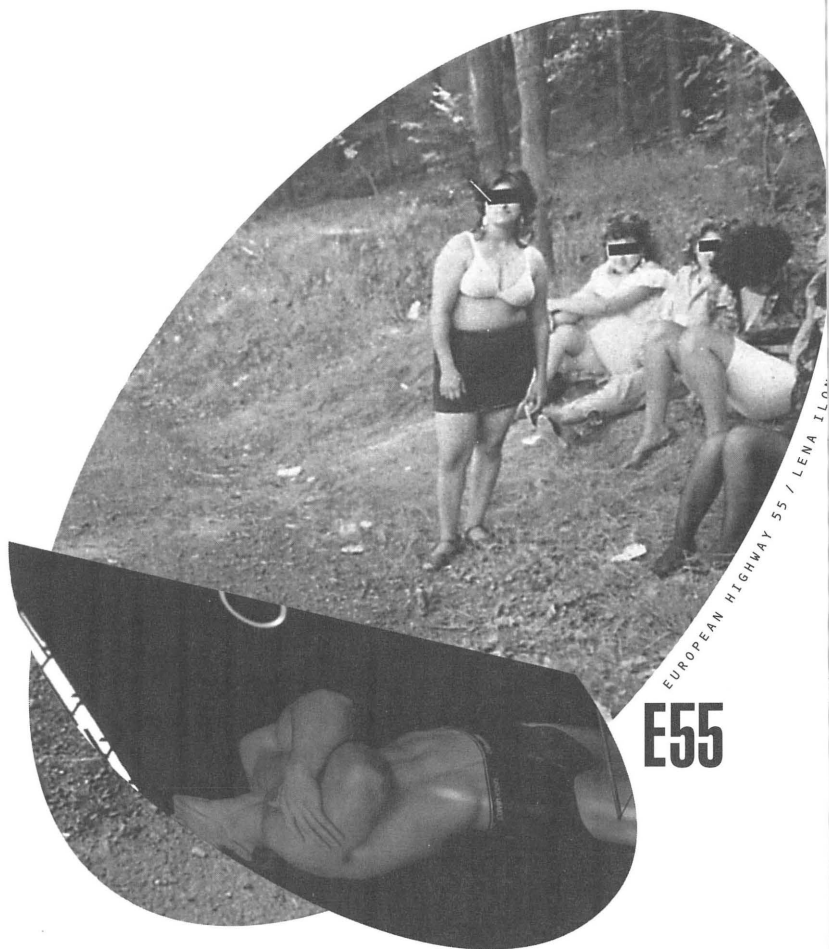
– Stuart Ewen, 1990

form of an “illocutionary force” but ... is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it, i.e., in the very structure of the field in which belief is produced and reproduced.

– Pierre Bourdieu, 1991

our living in blind freedom, leading to vulgarization and simplification of our reflective and critical traditions.

That is why it is time to apply our imaginative power once again to how we deal with communicative reality.



The job facing the cultural intellectual is therefore not to accept the politics of identity given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components.

Edward Said, 1993

Symbolic productions represent the social position and mentality of the elites which create and disseminate them. As ideological instruments, they serve private interests which are preferably presented as universal ones. The dominant culture does not serve to integrate the ruling classes only, however; “it also contributes,” as Pierre Bourdieu describes it, “to the fictitious integration of society as a whole, and thus to the apathy (false consciousness) of the dominated classes; and finally, it contributes to the legitimation of the established order by establishing distinctions (hierarchies) and legitimating these distinctions.”¹ Consequently, the dominant culture forces all other cultures to define themselves in its symbolism, this being the instrument of knowledge and communication. This communicative dependency is particularly evident in the “solutions” which the dominant culture proposes for the social, economic and political problems of what is defined as the “periphery” – of those who do not (yet) belong.

By definition, the confrontation between reality and symbolic representation is uncertain. An uncertainty that has now become undoubtedly painful, since, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, the experience of reality has disappeared “behind the mediating hyperreality of the simulacrum.” This progressive staging of everyday life gives rise to great tension between ethics and symbolism, because of the dissonance between the moral intentions related to reality and the generalizations and distinctions of established cultural production.

For an independent and oppositional cultural production, another conceptual space must be created which lies beyond the destruction of direct experience by the simulacrum of institutional culture. The point is not to create a specific alternative in the form of a new dogma as opposed to the spiritual space of the institutions. On the contrary, the point is to arrive at a “mental ecology”² which makes it possible for mediating intellectuals, like designers, to leave the beaten path, to organize their opposition and to articulate that in the mediated display. This is only possible by adopting a radically different position with respect to the production relationships – by exposing the variety of interests and disciplinary edifices in the message, commented on and held together by the mediator’s “plane of consistency.”³

Take a map, not a tracing.... What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented towards an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency.... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1980

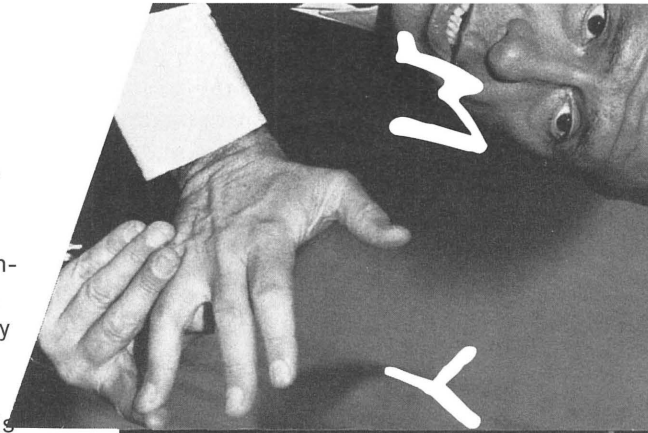
- 1 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 163-170.
- 2 Guattari, Félix. 1993. “Postmodernism & Ethical Abdications,” in *Profile*, 39. Australia Council for the Arts, 11-13.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 506-508.

For me, as a filmmaker, admitting that you are stammering, that you are half blind, that you can read

– Jean-Luc Godard, 1975

There are two positions in the mass media. The first says that if something works, it is correct.... This idea is the enemy of our concept. On the other hand, you have a principle of authenticity. Enlightened narration accepts authenticity. I do not continually try to make general concepts that control the individual; rather I let something retain its own genuineness.... There follows from this a number of organizational principles.... In the structuring of a particular work, that is, in an aesthetic method.

– Alexander Kluge, 1986/1987



SILVIO BERLUSCONI

but not write, is, in our everyday framework to respond more honestly to this famous question of communication.



Opportunities for renewed engagement must be sought in initiatives creating new public polarities, according to Félix Guattari, in “*untying the bonds of language*” and “*[opening] up new social, analytical and aesthetic practices.*”⁴ This will only come about within the context of a political approach which, unlike the dominant neo-liberal form of capitalism, is directed at real social problems. If we are to break through the existing communicative order, this “*outside thought*”⁵ should also reverberate in the way in which designers interpret the theme and program of the client. In other words, the designer must take on an oppositional stance, implying a departure from the circle of common sense cultural representation. This is an important notion, because the point is no longer to question whether the message is true, but whether it works as an argument – one which manifests itself more or less explicitly in the message, in relation to the conditions under which it was produced and under which it is disseminated.

Such activity is based on a multidimensional, complementary way of thinking with an essentially different attitude to viewers and readers. It imposes a complementary structure on the work as well, an assemblage which is expressed both in content and in form. The essence of this approach, however, is that through the critical orientation of its products, the reflexive mentality raises questions among the public which stimulate a more active way of dealing with reality. In this manner it may contribute to a process which allows us to formulate our own needs, interest and desires, and resist the fascination with the endless fragmented and aesthetized varieties created by the corporate culture of commerce, state, media and “attendant” disciplines.

Not surprisingly, institutions and galleries are often resistant to products which question generally held opinions and tastes.... But the peculiar dialectics of consciousness, ... and given the relative lack of uniformity of interests within the culture industry and among its consumers, nevertheless promote the surfacing of such critical works.... With this modicum of openness, wherever suitable, the [galleries'] promotional resources should be used without hesitation for a critique of the dominant system of beliefs while employing the very mechanisms of that system.

Hans Haacke, 1977

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Guattari, Félix. 1993. “Postmodernisme & Ethical Abdications,” in *Profile*, 39. Australia Council for the Arts, 11-13.

5

Michel Foucault.

The more it becomes clear that architecture is a total impossibility today, the more exciting I find it. I have a great aversion to architecture in the classical sense, but now that this kind of architecture has become entirely impossible, I am excited to involve myself in it again It is indeed schizophrenic. Our work is a battle against architecture in the form of architecture. — Rem Koolhaas, 1994

Architecture

es and clichés, fragments that have piled against ruins.
destroyed firstly to expose what it is in reality: a heap of rubbish of stereo-
e result of concrete social and economic relations. The specious illu-
ons of harmony and unity in the bourgeois notion of culture should be
e should not look at cultural archetypes as timeless essences, but as
Walter Benjamin

Remains concentrated in the products and services of media-cultural combines. That control can be challenged and lessened only by political means.

Theories that ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual's message transformational capability present little threat to the maintenance of the established order.

— Herbert Schiller, 1989

1980



TR. O.G. 12. TRIVOLI. A. BYA. PLO. LEADERS. GEORGE HABASH. HRWATIME. GADDAFI.
HRAFAT. AHMAD GEBRIL. AEW HJAD. PR. MINISTER. JALLOUD G.S. U.P.I.

The challenge for anti-illusionist fictions is how to respect the fabulating impulse, how to revel in the joys of storytelling and the delights of artifice, while maintaining a certain intellectual distance from the story. The subversive pleasure generated by a Cervantes, a Brecht, or a Godard consists in telling stories while comically undermining their authority. The enemy to do away with, after all, is not fiction but socially generated illusion; not stories but alienated dreams.

Robert Stam, 1992

Goal is to raise a critical attitude, raise questions about reality, curiosity.

Despite the symbolically indeterminable nature of culture, communicative design, as reflexive practice, must be realistic in its social ambitions. In the midst of a multiplicity of factors too numerous to take stock of, all of which influence the product, the aim is to arrive at a working method which produces commentaries, rather than confirming self-referential fictions. Design will have to get used to viewing substance, program and style as ideological constructions, as expressions of restricted choices which only show a small sliver of reality in mediation. The inevitable consequence is that the formulation of messages continues to refer to the fundamental uneasiness between symbolic infinity and the real world.

This mentality demands a major investment in practical discourse in those fields and situations where experience and insight can be acquired through work. This is important not only because it is necessary to struggle against design in the form of design, echoing Rem Koolhaas's statement about architecture,⁶ but also because partners are required with the same operational options. It is furthermore of public interest to acquaint a wider audience with forms of communication contributing to more independent and radical democratic shaping of opinion.

Moving from a reproductive order to a commenting one, operative criticism can make use of a long reflexive practice. All cultures have communicative forms of fiction which refer to their own fictitiousness in resistance to the established symbolic order. "To this end," Robert Stam writes, "they deploy myriad strategies - narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions, stylistic virtuosités. They share a playful, parodic and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions. They demystify fictions, and our naive faith in fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions!"⁷ This behavior alone constitutes a continuous "ecological" process for qualitative survival in social and natural reality.

6

Koolhaas, Rem. 1994. "De ontplooiing van de architectuur," in *De Architect*, 25. The Hague: Ten Haagen en Stam, 16-25.

7

Stam, Robert. 1992. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean Luc Godard*. New York: Columbia University Press, xi.

Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden." It is more rewarding - and more difficult - to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapunctually, about others than only about "us."
- Edward Said, 1993

