

# SHARE THIS BOOK

Critical perspectives and dialogues about design and sustainability

Ramía Mazé, Lisa Olausson, Matilda Plöjel, Johan Redström, Christina Zetterlund

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# Introductions

Ramia Mazé, Johan Redström, Christina Zetterlund

This book stems from a need for critical reflection on the foundations of design in the light of current societal challenges. It emanates from a discussion of how sustainability is formulated in relation to design and how fundamental concepts in understanding design may (or may not) help us to address such challenges. We inquire into the basic concept of 'form' in design—and the limitations it places on redefining design today. Since such concepts are deeply rooted in institutionalized definitions of the field, we explore alternative notions of the design object and query roles for design in sustainable development. This story is not told as a history, nor does it propound a new theory or a formula for practice. Instead, in this book, it unfolds as an interweaving of theoretical, historical, and practical perspectives that, cumulatively, critique and reconfigure the field of design as we see it.

Throughout its history, design has been contested. Arguments and counterarguments have been made on the basis of taste, quality, making, function, consumption, production, politics, and more. Today, sustainability entails profound reconsideration. The contestability of design prompts those of us who study and do design to consider how we define—and change—the field. One way of examining the evolution of the field is to look at art history, which has traditionally described a sequence of stylistic periods succeeding one another that cumulatively add up to a history. Following this dialectic logic of evolution, every artistic practice and its associated worldview is, at some point, challenged and replaced by something new and different, like in the movement of a pendulum swinging back and forth over time. However, in this view, what is new still depends on the old—history becomes a prerequisite for understanding the most recent addition. Accordingly, what is added must be understood in relation to what existed before, and history becomes necessary for understanding the new as design, as belonging to the same story. Sometimes, however, there arises a need to critically reflect on the foundations upon which such narratives are built—to look not just at the positions of the pendulum but at the pendulum itself.

In design, changes in means and modes of production and consumption have inspired significant investigations of basic perspectives and concepts. While design styles certainly change over time, forms of production and consumption tend to remain more stable. The historical relation of design to industry implies that the field is itself deeply embedded in prevalent modes of production and consumption. However, from time to time, this foundation also changes. Consider the emergence of particular economic, technical, and cultural conditions during the Industrial

Revolution, for example, and the call for a new aesthetic and ethic from which 'industrial design' emerged. Today, contemporary global challenges such as sustainable development present a set of new conditions. Reflecting on its industrial heritage and associated logics of mass production, consumer culture and (unsustainable) material and resource consumption, industrial design advances critiques and raises questions about what comes next. This is a critical time in design practice and its future—'critical' both in the sense of a heartfelt imperative to address societal and environmental crisis and in a reflexivity about the foundations and definitions of the field.

### Formulating critique

'Critique' is, of course, a broad, elusive concept. One obvious reference is to 'critical theory'. In *Traditional and Critical Theory*, Max Horkheimer stresses the relation of the subject and the object and the historicity of this relation.<sup>1</sup> Critical theory entails, as Moishe Postone notes, "an immanent analysis of capitalism's intrinsic contradictions, thereby uncovering the growing discrepancy between what is and what could be".<sup>2</sup> It is a critique directed towards a given order in the process of formulating an alternative. Critique could be, as expressed by Michel Foucault in 'What is Critique?', a process of desubjugation toward the autonomy of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Introducing the element of risk in her response to Foucault, Judith Butler defines critique as going beyond given systems, norms that form a subject, which has a potentially destabilizing effect in relation to the subject. By exceeding "the forms that are already more or less in operation and underway", critique is a "disobedience to the principles by which one is formed, then virtue becomes the practice by which the self forms itself in desubjugation, which is to say that it risks its deformation as a subject".<sup>4</sup> In our view, design can be part of a process of critique, for example, the way this book analyses and questions institutionalized concepts and practices of design. Such critique positions design differently and within wider contexts of meaning-making. In this, design becomes part of reflecting on, as well as (re)formulating, societal and historical conditions. Design is understood as both a set of practices that may be critiqued and an instrument in a broader critique.

Historically, critical theory has also provided an important point of reference for the design profession. A certain interaction between the two is exemplified at HfG Ulm, as Thomas Maldonado remarked, "Although my own cultural orientation was strongly marked at that time by Neopositivism...the presence of Adorno, ...and later also Habermas, led me to examine the relationship between industrial culture and the culture industry, and to undertake a critical investigation of the role played by 'design' in between these two realities".<sup>5</sup> A more recent example of a project similar to Maldonado's can be found in Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby's notion of 'critical design':

**But all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view, or way of seeing and understanding reality. Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design... The latter rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values.<sup>6</sup>**

A range of alternative definitions of design, amended as 'critical', 'conceptual', 'radical', or 'adversarial', also confront intellectual and ideological foundations.<sup>7</sup> A particular style, norm, or ideal is thereby exposed in relation to wider society and historical conditions. Further, and through the aesthetics, materials, and methods of design practice, this critique may be given forms that enter into other institutional practices and social discourses.

## FORMS OF SUSTAINABILITY

This book is comprised of three main, authored sections, which present different trajectories through a shared inquiry into notions of 'form' and 'critical practice' in design. Considered together, these perspectives weave into a complex whole. This suggests how quite different and often separate discussions necessarily become interwoven in confronting a challenge like sustainable development, which requires a substantial rethinking of the foundations, histories, and roles of design. Further, we reconfigure relations between what might normally be called, and separated as, 'theory' and 'practice'. As outlined above, we understand design 'practice' as ideological, manifesting a particular worldview (and set of theories) in design roles and objects. At the same time, design 'theory' emerges as a practice, as institutionalized ways of making concepts and definitions, for example, in terminologies, exhibits, and archives. Thus, the boundaries between theory and practice begin to blur, revealing that the boundaries and relations between 'theory' and 'practice' are constructed and historically contingent. The imperative to reconsider design today is expressed not only in the arguments made in this book but in how the whole is woven out of different perspectives and in new constellations of theoretical and practical approaches.

### Conceptual cores

To 'do design' differently, we need to take into account a range of issues involved. Along with issues in making design, there are those involved in its articulation, communication, and documentation—and how these are all connected. Societal and environmental challenges imply that design practice must change, but it is perhaps less obvious to what extent such change must also come at the level of foundational aesthetic concepts. In his article, Johan Redström queries concepts



of 'form' with respect to how our prevalent visual notion of form supports (or does not support) our understanding and addressing issues related to sustainability. Specifically, it is an inquiry into stabilizing mechanisms at the level of foundational concepts that prevent us from fully taking on this challenge.

Tracing our current understanding of form back to the beginnings of industrial design and early Modernism, Redström's article aims at understanding why certain ideas about form have remained remarkably intact despite the significant changes in design over the past decades. Briefly introducing how different areas of artistic practice employ correspondingly differing notions of form, he argues that any given notion of form is partly co-defined by a set of associated acts of perceiving and appreciating form. These assemblages are composed of articulations of certain (artistic) expressions, sets of acts in which these expressions emerge, and a range of material, social, and other aspects that provide the wider context in which these articulations and acts take place. These are referred to as 'form-acts'.

The thrust of this argument is that we cannot articulate a new theory of form without also embodying in it new practices of perceiving, nor can we find conceptual support for new (artistic) expressions in form-acts where these new expressions we are searching for do not clearly emerge. This has critical implications for how design can respond to the call for sustainable development. Since central aspects of what it means to be sustainable will not emerge in these form-acts, our current visual notion of form will not fully support design practice in changing towards sustainability.

### Beyond institutionalized practice

The aesthetic principle discussed above is confirmed in a large number of design institutions—it has become the institutionalized definition of design. For example, a majority of applied art and design museums presuppose it in their definition of the historical object. In this way, huge investments are made by nation-states in a particular concept of design, investments not just in a selection of objects and a specific understanding of design but also in norms of good taste and definitions of national identities. As identities change and norms are challenged, institutionalized practices in the discipline of design history today are being questioned. This involves exposing the construction of the norms and identities encapsulated in institutionalized design narratives and discussing how and why these normative practices have been formulated and in what way they play into current societies. Through this process, design studies are reaching far beyond traditional disciplinary borders.

However, because a traditional concept of design is still represented in the collections of applied art and design museums, one might argue that it is difficult to formulate

alternative routes. Following this argument, museums' displays of their collections constitute a good example of how new formulations are negotiated in relation to existing definitions, how the new is added and negotiated in relation to the old. New practices are understood through and within the framework of existing ones. Further, definitions of design are not just represented in the selection of objects but also in how they are displayed. New practices, therefore, must also conform to a narrative formulated for older ways of doing and interpreting design.

In her article, Christina Zetterlund analyses how definitions of design are made and presented through exhibitions. She questions traditional notions of the design object, both how they are formulated and how they are portrayed through exhibitions, arguing that a broader understanding of design also requires a change in how design is interpreted through exhibitions. Zetterlund's article begins with the definition of the design object as found in design and applied art museums, where the object is very much defined as a physical form and material. From here she explores alternative understandings and how they could be communicated through exhibition formats. A series of examples are presented largely from her own curatorial practice along with other cases.

#### Political dimensions

Sustainable design poses yet another example of a practice that seems to imply more than a simple addition or amendment to the word 'design'. 'Sustainable design' implies the un-sustainable. Previous or other formulations of design, even the status quo—design simply unamended—are thrown into sharp relief. Sustainable design is not about any possible design but design that is preferred, desired, and differentiated according to certain terms. How these differentiations are made, in relation to whom or what, entails a range of political dimensions in design. Sustainability may be motivated by those attempting to maintain influence and relevance in a rapidly changing environment, for example, or it may be the frontline for rallying those attempting to gain recognition and shift the balance of power towards previously marginalized interests. Just as 'good design' has been part of constructing certain norms of taste and identity in Western design history, formulations of sustainable design are constructed in ways that advance certain groups, values, and futures. As sustainable design becomes increasingly institutionalized—in commissions for design work, criteria for design competitions, educational curricula, and museums—it becomes increasingly important to identify its politics.

In her article, Ramia Mazé examines the political dimensions of design in relation to some of its roles in sustainable development. Aligned with governmental policies aimed at 'greening' consumption, for example, design has been engaged to more effectively communicate and encourage a reduction in household electricity, fuel, and water consumption. As a result, design takes on the role of mediating

consumers' access and control over resources, of instrumentalizing policy through graphic, product, and interactive forms. Form makes tangible certain values and terms of sustainability that are put into the hands, homes, and lives of those with diverse and potentially divergent values and norms. Another role for design is to represent and advocate on behalf of social practices such as bike shares and car pools, collaborative ownership of products and property, urban gardens and food co-ops, refurbishment, retrofitting, and 'upcycling' initiatives. These roles exemplify how design operates within a sort of everyday 'micropolitics'—in the first case, mediating relations between resource providers and consumers, in the second case, amplifying alternatives to dominant modes of production and consumption. Aligned with larger discourses and policies of sustainable development, design is enmeshed in the politics of establishing or contesting how sustainability may be defined, by whom, and in what ways it becomes practiced, normalized, and institutionalized. Given the expanding and political roles of design, Mazé outlines a series of new questions for critical practices of design.

The amendment of design with the word 'sustainable' opens a space to explore what kinds of alternatives and futures might be implied for the field. The change cannot be reduced to style, just as definitions of design cannot be reduced to visual form or physical objects. Nor does it merely improve upon, reform, or solve the problems caused by (unamended) design, and (unsustainable) logics of mass production and market consumption. Indeed, as exemplified in Mazé's article, practitioners are experimenting with radical alternatives, such as collaborative and open-source processes (rather than proprietary production and designer authorship) and recycling and sharing economies (rather than primary market consumption and its economies of scale). Besides and beyond sustainability, these examples resonate with other reformulations of design practice today, such 'critical' practices of design. Such design may look more like art, social work, pedagogy, or activism but may also be understood as design amended and reformulated from within. As such, design is not only positioned in opposition but as potential futures of the evolving field.

## DIALOGUES

Staged as a dialogue around notions of form, this book is a result of our research, which has unfolded over the course of several years. Together we have gathered thoughts and materials through workshops, seminars, and field trips to reflect on the state of design discourse in relation to current issues such as sustainability, consumption, institutionalized practices, and definitions of design. In the book, we share this process and invite further inquiry.

The main content of the book consists of three authored articles. In each section, there is a dialogue between text and image, theory and practice, and argument and

experiment, in which photographic, graphic, facsimile, or other materials act not as illustrations but as arguments in another (designed) form. Our collaboration and dialogue are alluded to in these sections and made explicit in the form of a final transcribed conversation. This book also instantiates an extensive dialogue with the book designers, who have been engaged in the conceptual as well as practical aspects of the project. The form of the book—its content, format, and sequence—as well as the printing techniques, materials, and binding have been developed in collaboration with the authors and in response to the textual and visual materials.

By making our perspectives interact with each other, our ambition has been to critically reflect on a complex whole extending beyond our normal academic or disciplinary comfort zones. The shared space resulting from this collaborative inquiry has then been the basis for each of us articulating not a description or summary of the experiences gained but a trajectory across this space to exemplify its potential.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book has been produced within the project Forms of Sustainability, which was funded by the Swedish Research Council (project number 2008-2257) between 2009 and 2011. Led by the Interactive Institute and Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, the project inquires into conceptions of 'form' in light of the contemporary social and environmental challenges posed by sustainability. Investigating intersections between critical practice and sustainable design, material culture and design history, the project has aimed to develop theories and methods relevant to design practitioners, researchers, teachers, and students. The project builds on experiences from a series of previous design research programs, such as Static! and Switch! (funded by the Swedish Energy Agency), the resulting international touring exhibition, Visual Voltage (commissioned by the Swedish Institute), and a series of cultural and curatorial projects involving the design community and the public such as DESIGN ACT, Tumult (Gustavsberg Konsthall, 2009) and Conversation in, about and with a Sofa (Arkitekturmuseum, 2011).

The book is the outcome of a series of seminars and workshops held among the contributors over the past three years, which have been staged as a dialogue around notions of form. This was developed from the perspectives of the different contributors and their disciplinary backgrounds, including design theory, history, and various related practices. The dialogue, continued in the form of this book, includes co-authored texts and a transcribed conversation as well as links within and between individually authored articles. Each article is itself an experiment in relations between theory and practice, in the form of dialogue between text and image, in which photographic, graphic, facsimile, or other materials act not as illustrations but as arguments in another (designed) form. The book instantiates an extensive collaboration with the book designer, who has been involved in the conceptual as well as practical development of the project. The form of the book—its contents,

format, and sequence—as well as printing techniques, materials, and binding instantiate the ongoing dialogue around 'form' and 'sustainability' that has taken place throughout the project.

### Interactive Institute

The Interactive Institute is a Swedish IT and design research institute. Investigating people's future needs and potential through experimental and participatory processes, the institute aims to improve everyday life for a creative and sustainable society. Research results include concepts, products, services, and strategic advice to corporations and public organizations. Results are published and exhibited worldwide and implemented through commissioned work, license agreements, and spin-off companies.

### Konstfack

Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design is the largest arts and design school in Sweden, with undergraduate and master's programmes in the arts, crafts, design, and teacher education. Konstfack's vision is to create new knowledge and play a leading role, nationally and internationally, in artistic education and research as well as in the professional development of artistic subjects and practitioners. Founded in 1844, the college has some 900 students and some 200 faculty and staff.

## BIOGRAPHIES OF BOOK CONTRIBUTORS

### Ramia Mazé

is a design researcher, leader, and educator specializing in participatory and critical methodologies. At the Interactive Institute in Sweden, she has been involved in interdisciplinary and international research projects in sustainable design, smart materials, interactive architecture, and tactical media. Her current research project is Designing Social Innovation, developed with the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in the US, and she recently completed the collaborative project and book *DESIGN ACT: Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press/laspis, 2011). She teaches courses and lectures widely,

including at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design. Previously, she worked as a designer at MetaDesign and Philips Electronics. Her background is in interaction design, computer-related design and architecture, in which she received a PhD from Malmö University, an MA from the Royal College of Art in London, and a BA from Columbia University in the US.

Lisa Olausson

is a graphic designer who has run her own practice based in Stockholm, Sweden, for the last ten years. Her work is primarily print-based and focused on arts projects in Scandinavia and the UK. Olausson is also a founding member of the design group Medium, in which her practice has expanded to include larger-scale collaborative projects with a focus on public space, architecture, and design theory. Clients include Moderna Museet, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Norsk Form. Recent projects include the exhibition *Building Blocks* (produced together with Färgfabriken and shown in Stockholm, Oslo, and Berlin), and the publication *Work, Work, Work: A Reader on Art and Labour* (Berlin: Sternberg/laspis, 2012). She holds an MA in communication design from the Royal College of Art in London and a BA from Central St. Martins. Her work has been featured in *Form* magazine, *Creative Review* and *The Guardian*.

Johan Redström

is a professor of design at the Umeå Institute of Design at Umeå University in Sweden. Combining philosophical and artistic approaches, his research focuses on experimental design and critical practice. He is the project leader of Forms of Sustainability (funded by the Swedish Research Council, 2009–11). Further research projects include Static! (funded by the Swedish Energy Agency, 2004–06), IT+Textiles (funded by VINNOVA, 2001–04), and Slow Technology (1999–2001). He has previously been a studio director at the Interactive Institute, an adjunct professor at the School of Textiles at the University of Borås, Sweden, and an associate research professor at the Center for Design Research at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, Denmark. He received

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Christina Zetterlund

is a craft and design historian working as a professor in craft history and theory at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, Sweden. She is active as a freelance curator and writer in the area of craft and design. Recent projects include Conversation in, about, and with a Sofa, with the craft artist Pontus Lindvall for the event 48 Hours produced by the Swedish Museum of Architecture, and Tumult: A Dialogue on Craft in Movement, an exhibition and book resulting from an extended collaboration with Gustavsbergs Konsthall and the craft group We Work In a Fragile Material. She received her PhD in art history at Uppsala University in Sweden in 2003. She has also worked as a curator at the Röhsska Museum of Fashion, Design and Decorative Arts in Gothenburg and as a special advisor in design to the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications.

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# Form-Acts: A critique of conceptual cores

Johan Redström

Design has developed to a significant extent in response to the needs of others. Indeed, the very idea of being of service to others lies at the heart of much design; to design is to design for someone—a client, an intended user.<sup>1</sup> Historically, entire areas of design have emerged as a response to new individual and societal needs and desires. Quite often, such responses have been in relation to a set of possibilities opened up by someone/something else—as in how ‘industrial design’ emerged as a response to the possibility of mass consumption opened up by mass production, ‘interaction design’ as a response to information technologies, or ‘sustainable design’ as a response to sustainable global development.

In some ways, the development of the current family of design disciplines can be described as an evolution by addition. This evolution by addition should probably not be understood in terms of simple causal connections between emerging needs and new design opportunities, since it is also likely the result of a certain mindset. As such, this is not just a question of the making of ‘new’ things (in the broad sense of the word ‘things’) but of relations to the logic of mass production and mass consumption, a logic where continuous additions of the new are essential, conceptually as well as materially.

While the principle of addition certainly is a most effective strategy in dealing with new (kinds of) problems, there are also more troublesome aspects to this approach, since it has a tendency to hide what is left untouched behind all that is new. The strategy of model years in the auto industry may serve as an illustration: while this year’s car looks different from last year’s model, it may well be the very same machine. “For the process which seems, according to the graph of technical progress, to animate the whole system is still fixed and stable in itself. ...everything is transformed and yet nothing changes”,<sup>2</sup> as Jean Baudrillard noted. What if this applies not only to product models and series but also to more fundamental perspectives?

‘Sustainable design’ is an interesting example. Following the logic of addition, the obvious response to the call for sustainable development

would be to develop a new kind or area of design that addresses the issues raised—but the question is what parts of existing design domains should be challenged? Using the basic logic of its predecessors, it is much easier for such a new design area to look for new ways of essentially continuing as before than to ask more fundamental questions. Returning to the car example, it is easier to request new, more efficient vehicles than to even question the way we use them. Tracking the technology that made the design possible in the first place, we locate the issue in the product, and as a result we look for refined technologies, new products, rather than asking critical questions about consumption habits.

Essentially, this logic of addition implies that we tend to look for additions that do not really require something else to be taken away. However, the family of design practices will perhaps not successfully respond to sustainable development by breeding a new member with such expertise in sustainable design. As Tony Fry argues, design acts not only to open up certain futures but, in so doing, also terminate others.<sup>3</sup> Because of this 'defuturing', the issue of sustainability must be located within existing practices, not just in new, complementary ones. Here, the evolution by addition approach breaks down.

Clearly, design moves very fluidly and quickly on the surface of change, but at times it also seems to retain a stable core, well protected beneath. This text is an attempt to discuss the possible existence of such conservative mechanisms pertaining to the notion of 'form' in design. Thus, my ambition is not to present a new definition of form but to look into what is perhaps our most dominant one. The basic question is quite simple: why is it that certain concepts in design, such as form, have changed so little when design—both its practice and purpose—has changed so much?

## Time

Because of the issues outlined above, I will use sustainable design as a starting point. Given the complexity of sustainable development, I will use a very simple idea to try to drill down into what may be hidden beneath. Admittedly, the result will

also be very narrow and restricted—but, like a drill core from a geological investigation, it could tell us something about the layers below. The idea I will use to drill down into form is time. Even without going into detail about what sustainable development could eventually imply for design, we can assume that time will be involved, whether we express it as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs",<sup>4</sup> as "a means to secure and maintain a qualitative condition of being over time",<sup>5</sup> or as something else.

Looking at the issue of sustainable development, time enters through the practices that designed things are part of. Taking energy consumption as an example, the question of consumption is not just a question of how much energy a given device needs to work properly but also of how to use it. No matter how much we reduce a car's fuel consumption, issues related to driving habits still remain; from the perspective of sustainability, these become just two sides of the same problem. Further, sustainability requires us to think of actual use before and after since the consequences of use, of consumption, are not just here and now but present at every stage in the life of an object. The energy I use when I drive the car is not nearly all the energy used during the car's life cycle—for instance, many of its material components require huge amounts of energy to be produced. Indeed, energy consumption is just one part of the overall impact of the product.

Even the static product has an implied, *designed*, temporality: all designed things exist in and over time; the static object also has a lifespan that includes not only a period of unfolding use but also a pre-history of production and of how its materials became part of it as well as an afterlife (for an interesting example, consider Kate Fletcher's study of fashion and textiles<sup>6</sup>). This is not to say that all things have to exist for a long time to be sustainable but simply that existence, in the sense that designs also exist, is a spatio-temporal phenomenon.

In what follows, I will use time and the temporality implied by sustainability to drill down into some seemingly fossilized layers of what 'form' is in design.<sup>7</sup>

## FORM

With respect to theory and conceptual foundations, there are strong echoes of design's historical relations to art.<sup>8</sup> Not only have concepts and frameworks historically been inherited down through the hierarchical tree of arts from the 'fine' arts trunk to the 'applied' and the 'decorative' branches; so too has a certain division of labour between practice and theory. Drawing a firm line between expression and interpretation, 'expression' becomes the province of practice, of individual artists and unique artworks while 'interpretation' becomes the domain of interpreting and writing the history of such individuals and objects, incorporating artist and artwork in a narrative of aesthetic development.

This division of labour between theory and practice, a professionalization of articulating critical reflections on one hand and a mastery of the doings and makings on the other, presents us with a certain problem. A design process oscillates between acts of expressing and acts of interpreting, between making moves and reflecting on their implications, as we iteratively move between proposing solutions and trying to deepen our understanding of what the problem really is. It is simply not possible to separate thinking (cf. *theoria*) and doing (cf. *praxis*) in such a process. This is not a process where basic concepts such as form, material, function, use, or method enter only at the end—as others critique and interpret what has already been created—nor is it a process where descriptions of what to create come first and practical making simply follows afterwards.

To further complicate matters regarding relations between theory and practice in design, the notion of theory itself is somewhat difficult to deal with. Theory, more generally considered, typically has elements of both description and prediction. To use a naïve example: as we look at nature and try to come up with a theory of why certain phenomena occur, we will, if we are successful, arrive at something that applies to both the past and the future. Indeed, a key reason for developing theory in science is to be able to predict what will happen, to discover laws governing behaviours. Now, in design, this is somewhat different, as we are

not necessarily trying to understand what is but what could be. In a sense, the very purpose of the design process creates a rupture between theory understood as contemplation of what exists and theory understood as speculation about what might happen in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the formation of basic concepts in design, this exposes a certain problem when it comes to how concepts such as form have developed through the division of labour between 'theorists' and 'practitioners': if design theory is primarily developed for the purpose of interpreting and narrating design histories, then a key characteristic of the resulting concepts will be that they act to support the stability and continuity necessary for creating such narratives and descriptions.

There is nothing strange about this; it is just a consequence of what we are looking for—a glue that allows us to bind things together over both space and time. However, if we forget that these conceptual frameworks have evolved to fulfil this need and start to think that they are equally relevant and applicable for any other purpose as well, then we have a problem. For instance, to what extent can we assume that conceptual foundations that were developed to support historical narratives of stability and continuity are also ideal support for efforts to initiate change? What were meant as de-scriptions interpreting a history of events then become pre-scriptions for selected futures.

With this in mind, there are reasons for looking closer at notions such as form in design. From a historical point of view, form was given a central role in the beginnings of industrial design through its prominence in articulating conceptual frames of the discipline.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, even today design is sometimes described as 'form giving'. Interestingly, while 'form' is widely used, the concept itself is rarely fully explained or properly defined. It appears as if we think it is perfectly safe to assume we all know what it is. That is in itself a good reason for closer examination. However, the most critical question is perhaps not what a concept of form is, but what it *does* to design. To determine that, we need to look into examples of how it is used.

## Timeless

One way to start this investigation is by looking at examples of how the notion of form is put to work in descriptions and explanations of what design is about. For this, a basic textbook is often a very useful resource. While the book *Thinking: Objects: Contemporary Approaches to Product Design* by Tim Parsons does not offer any definition or description of what form is, the first chapter, called 'Perception', offers a section on 'Reading Form', which "deals with our perception of form and some of the tools designers use to imbue their products with meaning".<sup>11</sup> Referring to design semiotics as "a field of which few product designers are fully aware, yet ... one that all, to some degree, operate within", Parsons states that "products communicate to us through visual language. Like spoken and written words and sentences, this language can be split into units and studied". In statements such as these, it is quite clear that form is something visual, and that this visuality can be understood as a compositional system for creating meaning. The essential visual character of form becomes perhaps even clearer when more problematic issues are highlighted, as when Parsons remarks: "form has become a tool some designers are using to generate recognition for themselves as brands. By feeding the press with images of consistently similar-looking products designed for different manufacturers, they define a set of forms that become identified as their own".<sup>12</sup>

Although these remarks were taken from a rather recent textbook on product design, the ideas have been present in design since its conception in schools such as the Bauhaus. Whereas design semiotics and product semantics emerged strongly in the 1980s, the basic notion of a visual language is much older. Let us compare some examples. In the paper 'Product Semantics: Exploring the Symbolic Qualities of Form', Klaus Krippendorff and Reinhart Butter<sup>13</sup> argue that "In its broadest sense, design is the conscious creation of forms to serve human needs. It sharply contrasts with the habitual reproduction of forms".<sup>14</sup> Further, they argue that "Just as a journalist creates informative messages from a vocabulary of terms, so could a designer be thought of as having a repertoire of forms at his disposal with which he creates

arrangements that can be understood as a whole in their essential parts and that are usable by a receiver because of this communicated understanding."<sup>15</sup>

Now, let us turn to one of the teachers at the Basic Course at the Bauhaus, Gyorgy Kepes, who wrote in 1938:

**As the eye is the agent of conveying all impressions to the mind, the achieving of visual communication requires a fundamental knowledge of the means of visual expression. Development of this knowledge will generate a genuine 'language of the eye,' whose 'sentences' are created images and whose elements are the basic signs, line, plane, halftone gradation, colour, etc.**<sup>16</sup>

Whereas specific formulations certainly have evolved over time, it is clear that some of these ideas have remained remarkably intact through the history of design. In looking for the roots of these ideas, certain notions about composition, meaning, and communication seem to interact with a perspective that privileges the visual. How the two come together is quite clearly stated in Kepes' *Language of Vision*, in which he wrote:

**To perceive a visual image implies the beholder's participation in a process of organization.... Here is a basic discipline of forming, that is, thinking in terms of structure, a discipline of utmost importance in the chaos of our formless world. Plastic arts, the optimum forms of the language of vision, are, therefore, an invaluable educational medium.**

**Visual language must be readjusted, however, to meet its historical challenge of educating man to a contemporary standard, and of helping him to think in terms of form.**<sup>17</sup>

For the present discussion, what is most interesting is not the Modernist ideals that were both challenged and abandoned since then, but rather the parts that are still with us. Though political ideals have changed and the design professions have changed, there are strong historical traces left in how we think about form and other basic concepts. One way this is expressed can be seen

in how new perspectives on design are presented. Consider, for instance, how the UK Design Council's RED initiative framed 'transformation design': "Shaping behaviour rather than form. Design has historically focused on the 'giving of form' whether two or three dimensional. Transformation design demands a shaping of behaviour—behaviour of systems, interactive platforms and people's roles and responsibilities."<sup>18</sup> Not only is form referred to as something two- or three-dimensional; it is also used to expose a contrast between what used to be and what is to come.

Similar examples can be found in many places where the focus is on a shift from one understanding of design to another; the first chapter of Andrea Branzi's *The Hot House: Italian New Wave Design* is called 'From Form to Reform';<sup>19</sup> C. Thomas Mitchell's book *Redefining Designing* has the subtitle *From Form to Experience*,<sup>20</sup> just to mention a few. Another illustration is the notion of 'formlessness'; as discussed by Jamer Hunt: "To explore the formlessness of design is not necessarily to forgo form altogether, which would be impossible. Everything perceptible has some form to it. What distinguishes this approach is the abandonment of form as the first principle of design success. Instead, designers are venturing into the muddier regions of design's impact on our social life."<sup>21</sup>

Such ways of referring to form when articulating a shift go as far as HfG Ulm and its relation to its Bauhaus predecessor, as can be seen in this reflection by Otl Aicher:

**Is design an applied art, in which case it is to be found in the elements of the square, the triangle, and the circle; or is it a discipline that draws its criteria from the tasks it has to perform, from use, from making, and from technology?...The Bauhaus never resolved this conflict, nor could it, so long as the word art had not been rid of its sacred aura, so long as people remained wedded to an uncritical platonist faith in pure forms as cosmic principles.**<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the tension between static visual form and a concern for other expressions can already be seen in the works of those at the Bauhaus itself, such as László Moholy-Nagy. Sybil Moholy-Nagy writes:

**But in spite of seemingly countless variations, around 1944 the light modulator came to an end as part of Moholy's development from form to motion and from pigment to light. Because even the light modulator remained a static painting, no matter how dynamic its composition. The spectator was still compelled to view it passively like any other work of art born from the Greek tradition.**<sup>23</sup>

While there is always a need to distance new perspectives from previous ones when proposing something new, there is also a hint of a struggle with basic concepts here: why is it so hard to evolve the meaning of form as well? Why is form used to describe what is old rather than re-defined to instead include what is new? Sanford Kwinter provides one clue:

**True formalism, most of us imagine, has been under siege for nearly as long as it has occupied—and for the most part, merited—the forefront of rigorous analysis in the arts and the inexact sciences....The poverty of what is today collectively referred to by the misnomer 'formalism,' is more than anything else the result of a sloppy conflation of the notion of 'form' with that of 'object!'**<sup>24</sup>

It is not too far off the mark to say that form, in design, is a concept that received much of its central meaning and role from how industrial design was first framed during early Modernism. Further, it seems this notion has very strong ties to the visual fine arts (such as painting, primarily), and that, despite criticism, it remains very present in many discussions of what design is and does (including how it is part of articulations about how new approaches to design differ from previous ones). To understand the workings of this concept in design practice, I suggest we therefore need to address these issues. First, I will take a look into other, equally valid, notions of form so that the specificity of this visual understanding will stand out more clearly. Second, I will examine how this visual understanding is continuously enforced in order to determine why it has been so hard for the concept to evolve over time. Finally, I will try to address the issue of why it will not do to simply leave 'form' behind and not talk about it.

## OTHER FORMS

Let us now compare this predominantly visual notion of form in design with other notions of form developed in relation to other kinds of artistic expression. In music theory, form is as central as it is in design theory. And like in design theory, it concerns issues of composition and how the basic material one works with is structured. Defining 'form' as the "shape of a musical composition as defined by all its pitches, rhythms, dynamics, and timbres", Don Michael Randel writes the following about 'sonata form' in *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*: "The most characteristic movement form in instrumental music from the Classical period to the 20th century....Sonata form is best viewed not as a rigid, prescriptive mold, but rather as a flexible and imaginative intersection of modulation, the thematic process, and numerous other elements. The basis for sonata form is the open modulatory plan of binary form".<sup>25</sup>

Turning to the development of popular music, an important 'form' can be found in the music stemming from Tin Pan Alley, a nickname for the place in New York where many of the music publishing houses were located in the 1920s. During this time, composers such as Irving Berlin and George Gershwin developed a form called 'AABA' or the '32-bar form', which became the basic form for thousands of songs, such as 'Over the Rainbow' (written by Harold Arlen and Edgar Yipsel 'Yip' Harburg in 1939). Since the 1960s, however, most pop musicians have relied on some version of the 'verse-chorus form' in crafting their songs.

Much like in design, a certain knowledge about form is central not just in analysis or theory but in practice and performance as well. Consider how form is used in the following:

**In many contexts, form in the sense of loose abstraction is in part prescriptive. That is, the composer or performer may consciously work within established forms. In many such contexts, however, originality on the part of the composer or performer is expected and prized in the handling of even the most well-defined forms, and forms may be gradually redefined or cease to be cultivated altogether as a result.**<sup>26</sup>

This is not entirely different from what it could be like to work with the form of a chair.

Turning to literature, we find yet other notions of form. In her description of a 'transactional theory', Louise Michelle Rosenblatt makes the following distinctions:

**The distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading is crucial to this dynamic approach. Such a distinction is tacitly present, for example, in the various categories that have often been suggested for such basic concepts as 'form' or 'structure' or 'unity'. For example, 'external form' and 'internal form' are sometimes used to distinguish between the results of systematic analysis of syntax, rhyme, metrics, or diction, on the one hand, and, on the other, the substance, the themes, the events, embodied in the work. 'Formal structure' and 'nonformal structure' are used to make a similar distinction.**<sup>27</sup>

Further, as in music, there is also a plethora of more or less fixed forms. One illustration could be the Japanese haiku, which—somewhat like musical forms such as the twelve-bar blues—has a fixed basic structure based on three lines with five, seven and five syllables respectively. The sonnet is another historical example, defined by the Encyclopædia Britannica as a "fixed verse form of Italian origin consisting of 14 lines that are typically five-foot iambics rhyming according to a prescribed scheme". Further, it states that the "sonnet is unique among poetic forms in Western literature in that it has retained its appeal for major poets for five centuries. The form seems to have originated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century among the Sicilian school of court poets, who were influenced by the love poetry of Provençal troubadours".<sup>28</sup>

As artists ventured into the domains of performance, event, and process, there came a need to develop new concepts to account for such expressions and extend the vocabulary of art criticism. One such example is 'relational aesthetics', as introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud: "Relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art, this would imply the statement of an origin and a destination, but a theory of form".<sup>29</sup> This notion of relational form is clearly related to certain developments in artistic practice:

We judge a work through its plastic or visual form. The most common criticism to do with new artistic practices consists, moreover, in denying them any 'formal effectiveness', or in singling out their shortcomings in the 'formal resolution'. In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of 'formations' rather than 'forms'. Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise.... What was yesterday regarded as formless or 'informal' is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, we could continue to look into different areas of artistic expression and find correspondingly different notions of form. Given that different domains employ different notions of form, what are the basic reasons for choosing one understanding of form over another? It depends, at least in part, on how the artistic expression in question has been cultivated and institutionalized over time.

## FORM-ACTS

Tracing the roots of form through history, we will at some point end up in Greece. As Sanford Kwinter noted: "The form-problem, from the time of the pre-Socratics to the late 20th century is, in fact, an almost unbroken concern with the mechanisms of formation, the processes by which discernible patterns come to dissociate themselves from a less finely ordered field".<sup>31</sup> However, while Otl Aicher referred to Plato's ideal forms in his critique of the Bauhaus, it is probably Aristotle's use of the concept that is most interesting to us here—not least because of his interest in understanding mechanisms of change in living organisms.

Both form and matter are used to address a range of different philosophical problems in Aristotle's writings. For the present discussion, we could take a simplified version of his notion of 'form' as the way 'matter' builds something, that which makes something into what it is:

We are in the habit of recognizing, as one determinate kind of what is, substance, and that in several senses, (a) in the sense of matter or that which in itself is not 'a this', and (b) in the sense of form or essence, which is that precisely in virtue of which a thing is called 'a this', and thirdly (c) in the sense of that which is compounded of both (a) and (b).<sup>32</sup>

With respect to the 'discernible patterns' referred to above by Kwinter, Aristotle used 'form' to explain how we are able to perceive the world: "By a 'sense' is meant what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter."<sup>33</sup> The basic idea is quite ingenious: since we cannot have houses, animals, etc. inside our heads, what happens as we perceive them is that our senses take in their 'form' (thus, literally, *in-form-ation*).

While this understanding of perception is no longer valid, it tells us something important, since it maintains that there is a relation between what form refers to and what it is to perceive it. One key to understanding the relation between a certain notion of form and a given act of perceiving lies in this notion of 'discernible patterns' or 'sensible forms' referred to above: the question is not only what form something has, but what *sensible* form it has. In other words, what 'form' refers to is not only determined by the perceived object *per se*, but in a very concrete sense co-determined by the ways in which it is experienced, by the specific acts of perception involved.

Since it is now clear that there are many different ways of approaching some-thing, such relational aspects of form become quite important, since it implies that any given notion of form not only refers to a certain kind of structure or composition but also to an associated act of perceiving. So, when I refer to the 'form' of a square, I am not only talking about squares *per se* (unless I am referring to it as Plato would), but also about a certain act of perceiving, i.e. of *seeing*, squares. However, if I say that this film is based on a circle, you would probably think of a temporally circular or repetitive structure with no obvious beginning and end, rather than something that literally *looks* like a circle all the time.



To generalize, whereas form refers to the way matter builds a thing (whether a painting or a piece of music), it does so with respect to *that which emerges in the associated acts of perception and appreciation*. My intention is to be precise here, but this proposition may need a bit of explanation. 'Associated acts of perception' refers to the acts that one would normally expect in connection with the artistic genre in question, such as reading a book, listening to music, or looking at a painting, that is, the acts privileged by the practices constituting the context of the object. Now, 'that which emerges' refers to what stands out, what expressions emerge, as we experience the object through these acts.<sup>34</sup> 'Object' here refers to that which is experienced, be it a book, a painting, a performance, etc., and thus not necessarily a physical object such as a product.

Within stable, *established*, domains of artistic practice, we need not notice this relational aspect of a certain notion of form, since it is quite clear which acts of appreciation are privileged. Indeed, there is typically little else to do in a traditional art museum than to look at the paintings or silently listen to the music at the concert hall. It is only when what emerges in such established acts of appreciation does not match what seems to be the focus of the artistic expression that we might question these acts. This is, for instance, why Bourriaud proposed new notions as a response to changes in artistic practice: "Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise".<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps the most important implication of the argument that a definition of form is in part made through certain acts of appreciation is that form is therefore not only a matter of detached reflection, of concepts we use in interpretation, but something very physical embedded in practice, in how we do things. A given definition of 'form' enters the situation not (only) through an analysis of an object but more immediately through experience, through the way we approach it. This is especially evident in cases where an entire environment has been designed to enable certain refined acts of

perceiving artistic expressions, such as in the traditional art museum or concert hall. It is also evident in art that explores the borders of such established acts. An interesting example is the work of Marina Abramović. Her performance 'Lips of Thomas' (1975) includes pushing her body to its limits through acts such as:

**I break the glass with my right hand.**

**I cut a five pointed star on my stomach with a razor blade.**

**I violently whip myself until I no longer feel any pain.**<sup>36</sup>

This proceeds up to a point where the audience, despite the context of the art gallery, can no longer remain spectators but have to take action, themselves becoming actors. This is not an example of how one notion of form might replace another. Rather, ethical concerns, by moral necessity, take over. Considered an artistic expression, however, it breaks the expected bond between form and act, between an artwork and the expected act of perceiving it. In her analysis of 'Lips of Thomas', Erika Fischer-Lichte suggests that Abramović creates a situation of suspension "between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives":

**Traditionally, the role of a gallery visitor or theatregoer is defined as that of either an observer or spectator. Gallery visitors observe the exhibited works from varying distances without usually touching them. Theatregoers watch the plot unfold on stage, possibly with strong feelings of empathy, but refrain from interfering....In contrast, the rules of everyday life call for immediate intervention if someone threatens to hurt themselves or another person—unless, perhaps, this means risking one's own life. Which rule should the audience apply in Abramović's performance? She very obviously inflicted real injuries on herself and was determined to continue her self-torture. Had she done this in any other public place, the spectators would probably not have hesitated long before intervening.**<sup>37</sup>

This is an interesting example of how far we, the audience, are able to go before we question the relevance of the given act of perceiving the art-

work. Throughout history, there are numerous examples of artistic expressions that move between, or make simultaneous use of, different established contexts and their typical acts of perceiving art,<sup>38</sup> but what makes works such as 'Lips of Thomas' interesting is how it explores fringes where there are no alternative established acts one can turn to within the institutionalized context of the museum. Here, there is no escape from the suspension between aesthetic and ethical concerns. As such, it also exposes the power of these conventions and how much it takes to challenge them.

Elaborating on how form is about the expressions that emerge in certain acts of perception and appreciation, I have proposed that any given notion of form is partly defined by a set of associated acts. I will refer to this more relational notion of form made up of combinations of concept(s) and practice(s) as 'form-acts' in order to emphasize this relation of co-dependence. These form-acts could be considered a kind of assemblage composed of articulations of certain expressions and sets of acts in which these expressions emerge,<sup>39</sup> "a site at which a discursive formation intersects with material practices", to use Jonathan Crary's words.<sup>40</sup> Such assemblages cannot be taken apart into components called theory or practice, since we cannot articulate a new theory of form without the concrete acts of perception that will make such form emerge. This also implies that we, in principle, will not find sufficient conceptual support for new (artistic) expressions in notions of form that are already inherently tied to certain acts of perceiving in which these new expressions do not clearly emerge.

## IMAGE AS DEFINITION

So far, I have argued that—despite propositions for design to move from form to something else and despite the term design being used for a range of quite diverse practices—the visual or plastic notion of form remains central in much design thinking and doing. Introducing the notion of 'form-acts', I argued that such a visual notion of form presupposes certain ways of, literally, looking at design. To understand why it seems so hard to evolve our understanding of form, even though both its practice and purpose have changed substantially since

the Bauhaus, let us therefore analyse the concrete acts of this form-act assemblage to see whether—and if so, how—they might work to fossilize 'form'.

The way of 'looking' at art, a passive view of a static object—which Moholy-Nagy characterized as "to view it passively like any other work of art born from the Greek tradition"<sup>41</sup>—seems to be something that design (through intimate relations to painting and the fine arts at places like the Bauhaus) embedded in its notion of form. This is not to say that it was the people at the Bauhaus who explicitly made these acts central to their notion of form (and thus, by extension, ours), but rather that the broader context of (visual) fine arts and art theory at the time seemed to have had a certain influence. In fact, as in the case of the quote from Moholy-Nagy above, it seems that even people at that time had issues with this context. Wassily Kandinsky also raised such issues in relation to painting: "The tendency to overlook the time element in painting today still persists, revealing clearly the superficiality of prevailing art theory, which noisily rejects any scientific basis."<sup>42</sup>

For a more contemporary example of how we still seem to struggle with similar issues, consider Jonathan Hill's discussion of the influence of the Barcelona Pavilion by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Stating that "Ironically, an architect's experience of architecture is more akin to the contemplation of the art object than the occupation of a building",<sup>43</sup> Hill argues that "Architects are primarily interested in form, a condition reinforced by the architectural photograph".<sup>44</sup>

**The [Barcelona] Pavilion is so open to different forms of use because it is physically specific but functionally non-specific. Consequently, rather than permanently empty, the seductive spatiality and materiality of the Pavilion is waiting to be filled...The Barcelona Pavilion is not the same as its photograph. It is an icon of twentieth-century architecture for the wrong reasons, not because it is a building with a subtle and suggestive programme but precisely because it existed as a photograph and could not be occupied. Between 1930 and 1986, while the Pavilion did not exist, it was probably the most copied building of the twentieth century.**<sup>45</sup>

According to Hill, "The major currency in contemporary architecture is the image, the photograph not the building".<sup>46</sup> Obviously, there are many other views on the state of architecture, but the main point here is how form emerges in this description: as something visual, something that is "reinforced by the architectural photograph".

This suggests what is perhaps the most important way in which this visual notion of form is continuously reinforced: through the images that come to *define* what a given design is. To think of an image as a kind of definition is different from thinking of it as documentation.<sup>47</sup> Of course, we understand that it is an image *of* something, but it has something of the character of a definition in how it brings forth certain aspects of what is being depicted. We can compare it to how we define what something is by pointing to an instance of it: pointing to a lamp, we say "this is a 'lamp'"; showing someone an image of our design, we say "this is 'the design'". The act of pointing to something using an image, however, is slightly different from how we would ourselves point to an object in front of us. For example, its point of view is fixed, its expression is an abstraction (*vis-à-vis* the depicted object<sup>48</sup>); whereas the actual thing depicted by the photograph might be used, touched, and turned, etc., the image remains static regardless of one's own actions or reactions. Consider the difference between walking at its actual site as someone tells you "this is the Barcelona Pavilion" and reading a book and looking at a black and white image with the caption 'The Barcelona Pavilion'.

While an image may be created with the intention of documenting something, its dissemination may change its function as the images take over and become the dominant mode of experiencing and understanding the design. This is not necessarily an accidental process, and there are numerous examples of how this can be put into effect: food packaging is one area, growing online shopping another. Consider buying food at a supermarket: many products come in non-transparent packages with colourful images depicting the contents quite remotely from what we actually find when we open it up.<sup>49</sup> Or consider buying clothes online: only looks matter since trying the garment on is not yet a possibility unless we actually order it. In

advertisement, this abstraction is essential: we do not desire documentation of someone else's consumption; we want something that we can project ourselves into (and if there are people in the image, they had better be merely stand-ins for ourselves). Indeed, many of the objects that we might long for or purchase we have only ever seen as images. As Guy Debord noted: "The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."<sup>50</sup>

With the 'image', we get a definition where temporal unfolding has been removed. Asking the question "Why do archaeologists see architecture as perfect and complete instances of idea-objects, when their discipline is defined by its time-depth?",<sup>51</sup> Leslie McFadyen provides an interesting illustration:

**Archaeologists draw to better understand the things that are there in front of them, what it is they see, but in that process the drawing depicts more than the archaeologists [sic] own designed intentions: it becomes the medium of an original design and so looks like the intentions of someone else....There is a real legacy here, and the plan has taken on an iconic status in archaeological accounts as if its graphic detail creates reality at a higher level of realism than the archaeological evidence itself....Perhaps more misleading, is that time is frozen, and every architectural feature exists at the same time on the surface of the page....Description has broken away from action and has become the explanation of something else.<sup>52</sup>**

This is an intriguing example of the tension between, on one hand, a deep time structure where the object studied has undergone substantial changes over long periods of time and a static notion of form on the other hand, as well as the removal of unfolding time in order to create an image (in this case a drawing) that defines what the object is. The result is an image-definition of a kind of object that never actually existed in such form with features of a building that seemingly exists alongside but never actually co-existed.

Now, if it is possible to consider images as a kind of ostensive definition in design discourse, we can also trace another problem with respect to challenging prevalent perspectives. Wittgenstein used a series of everyday examples to critique the idea of foundational ostensive definitions. However, his examples also expose another important problem relevant to the ideas discussed in this text.

**So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a colour-word to me the ostensive definition “That is called ‘sepia’” will help me to understand the word—And you can say this, so long as you do not forget that all sorts of problems attach to the words ‘to know’ or ‘to be clear’. One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing’s name. But what does one have to know?<sup>53</sup>**

To understand what the name called out is a name *for*, we already need to know what property of the thing being pointed at is being referred to. Pointing to two nuts on the table and saying “This is ‘two’”, how do you understand that it is the number of nuts I am pointing to, and not their colour, what kind of objects they are, their individual names, etc.?

Now, if we think about this problem in the context of using images in design to point to ‘new’ kinds of properties or perspectives, we realize that this will be very difficult, if it is possible at all: how could I point to a picture of a design and ask “What do you think about this form?”—and *not* have you respond to the static visual expression of the depicted object the way we already think about form? To what extent could I present a new notion of form using images more or less the same way images are already used in design discourse? And how would I know that you actually understand that I am not pointing to what we already call ‘form’ but to something else? There are ways of doing this, of exploring diverse notions of form while still using images as part of the communication—but if we are looking for mechanisms behind a fossilization of form, the image-turned-definition is a strong contender.

In a letter from 1935, Moholy-Nagy made a seemingly related observation:

**I have been back to the Stedelijk Museum time and again, and I know it now: my paintings are not yet ripe for mass exhibition...There are hardly any people yet who want to see the tentative worth of this new language. They’ll complain about monotony; they’ll scorn the repetition of the same form and color problem in new combinations. Nowadays visual gratifications have to come fast like the response of a jukebox, or the click of an amateur camera.**

**This is bitter because the real purpose of exhibiting my pictures is to make the spectator grow slowly as I grew in painting them. What a long way to go! Most people I watched at the exhibition looked like oxen.<sup>54</sup>**

There are many implications of an image becoming a ‘definition’ of a design. In terms of fossilizing form, it is not only how such a definition removes temporal unfolding that is problematic. Perhaps even more so is its fixation of perspective, i.e. how it enforces the act of perceiving an object as a matter of passive observation from a distance. As such, it continuously enforces a certain way of literally looking at objects perhaps inherited from a fine arts context at the time when places like the Bauhaus were created. Accordingly, the way an ‘image’ shifts from ‘documentation’ to ‘definition’ seemingly has had a strong stabilizing effect on the conceptual foundations of design, by means of its reduction of the possibility to transform the form-act in question.

## CONSEQUENCES

To summarize, I have argued that the notion of ‘form’ that we typically still find in design can be traced back to the beginnings of industrial design and early Modernism. Through this historical context, it inherited features from artistic practice, at that time and in general, and from certain perspectives of the fine arts in particular. This seems to have been a somewhat uneasy relation from the start, with certain conceptual struggles already present in the writings of people at the Bauhaus.

Obviously, much in terms of both theory and practice has evolved since then, but there are also matters that seem to have remained intact.

Discussing different areas of artistic expression and their correspondingly differing notions of form, I have argued that any notion of 'form' is partly defined by a set of associated acts, that is, that certain concrete acts of perceiving are implied by the notion of 'sensible forms'. I have used the term 'form-acts' to describe this more relational notion of form made up by combinations of concept(s) and practice(s). These 'form-acts' can be considered a kind of assemblages composed of articulations of certain expressions, sets of acts in which these expressions emerge, and a range of material, social, and other aspects that provide the wider context of where these articulations and acts take place. This implies that we cannot articulate a new theory of form without also opening up new practices of perceiving (cf. Christina Zetterlund's discussion of different exhibition formats in this book). Thus, one of the aims has been to describe why we cannot find conceptual support for new (artistic) expressions in form-acts in which these new expressions we are searching for *do not emerge*.

Naturally, artistic practice can advance beyond certain concepts of form, and there are certainly many alternatives to the views presented here. However, in searching for reasons why design has such difficulties evolving certain parts of its core, it may be important to look for mechanisms causing such fossilization. For instance, design is more or less always the design of some-*thing* for some-*one*, whether a client or an intended user, which inevitably creates a need to continuously communicate and collaborate among participants and other stakeholders. Explicitly or implicitly, this communication makes use of basic concepts such as form, not just verbally but also through the use of sketches, images, models, prototypes, etc.—and the acts through which we approach and perceive such artefacts. If we then add to this the mass dissemination of images in design magazines, literature, and other media as well as the exhibition formats, shop windows, etc. that make use of the very same acts of literally looking at design, it is clear that there is a significant infrastructure continuously enforcing these form-acts. Given this

complexity as well as the massive presence and thus influence of the form-acts discussed above, it is not feasible to think that we will escape the conservation of 'form' unless we explicitly address these issues.

Taking a step back to look at the core extracted from this drilling process, there are reasons implied for thinking that current conceptions of form in design will not support us in successfully addressing the issue of sustainability. To put it simply: central aspects of what it means to be sustainable—to exist over time—do not emerge in the form-acts that currently dominate design discourse. We need to understand more about the relation between form and image and how to break free from the image as definition in design. To be able to address sustainable development, to address what changes over time, we need to shift to a more time-based design practice. The traditional visual, spatial, notion of form does not support such a shift. On the contrary, it may even prevent it.

## IMAGES OF THE ENERGY CURTAIN

This is a collection of images of the Energy Curtain, one of the design examples created in the research programme *Staticl*, which was carried out at the Interactive Institute from 2004 to 2006. It is an investigation of what images we make, what images are distributed, and what images gain traction in communicating this kind of design.

*Staticl* was an exploration of the aesthetics of energy consumption in everyday life. Working with the redesign of everyday objects, the ambition was to explore whether and how design can foster awareness and critical reflection in and through the use of objects. With the Energy Curtain, we explored relations between energy, technology and textile materials, crafting a tangible exercise in making trade-offs between conserving and consuming energy. With solar panels on the outside and LED-lit fibre optics woven into the fabric on the inside, the curtain charges its batteries as the sun shines on it in order to light up later in the dark. Thus, to use it, one needs to decide whether to keep the curtain raised and enjoy the light now or keep it lowered and charge it in order to have light later. Importantly, the design is all about the interpretation and implications of our 'normal' interaction with a curtain: to physically control the light in a room. Thus, material qualities, including the experience of touching the textile and the physical manipulation of the object, were central.

Design examples from *Staticl*, including the Energy Curtain, have been used in a range of contexts. Shortly after the programme was completed, the curtain was used as part of a domestication study in Finland, where a number of families lived with it for several months (Routarinne and Redström, 2007). It was also widely exhibited, for instance as part of *Visual Voltage*, an exhibition commissioned by the Swedish Institute, on global tour from 2008 to 2010.

Given the importance of materiality, interaction and what happens in and through use over time, it is relevant to ask to what extent such issues

are present in the different ways this project has been communicated. Whereas eighteen people lived with the curtain, thus experiencing it the way it was intended—in and through use over time—about 165,570 people visited the *Visual Voltage* exhibition (De Geer and Kärr, 2011). However, although exhibition visitors could see the curtain (and a video about its use), they could not actually touch it since it was contained in a glass case to prevent it from being damaged. Thus, the tactile experience of interacting with the curtain was eliminated. In addition, according to a statistical analysis, about 147.5 million people encountered the exhibition through various media (this number includes many instances where the curtain was not featured), an experience even further removed from the project's intended materiality.

What images are reproduced, and which fade away?

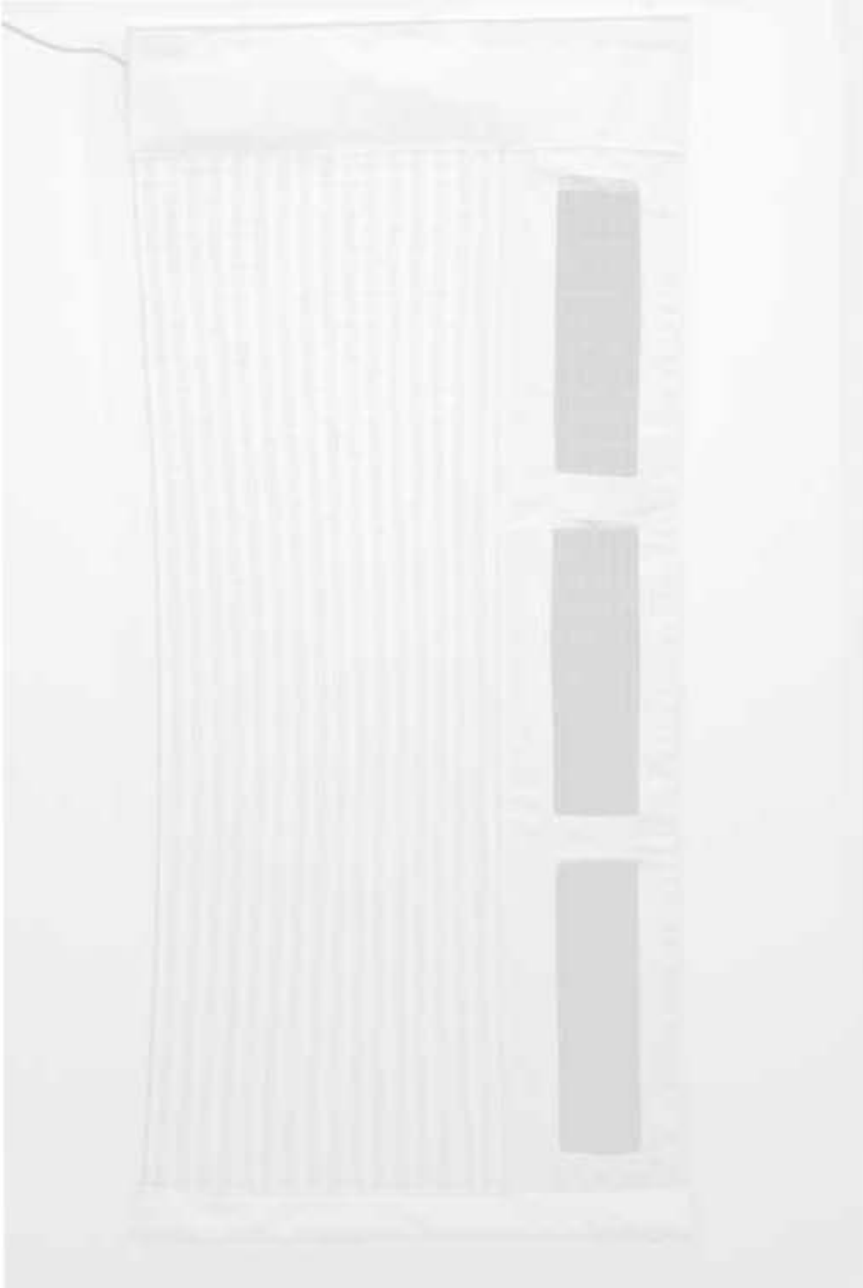
\* The Energy Curtain was made by Anders Ernevi, Margot Jacobs, Ramia Mazé, Carolin Müller, Johan Redström and Linda Worbin. Tina Finnäs was part of the *Visual Voltage* team.

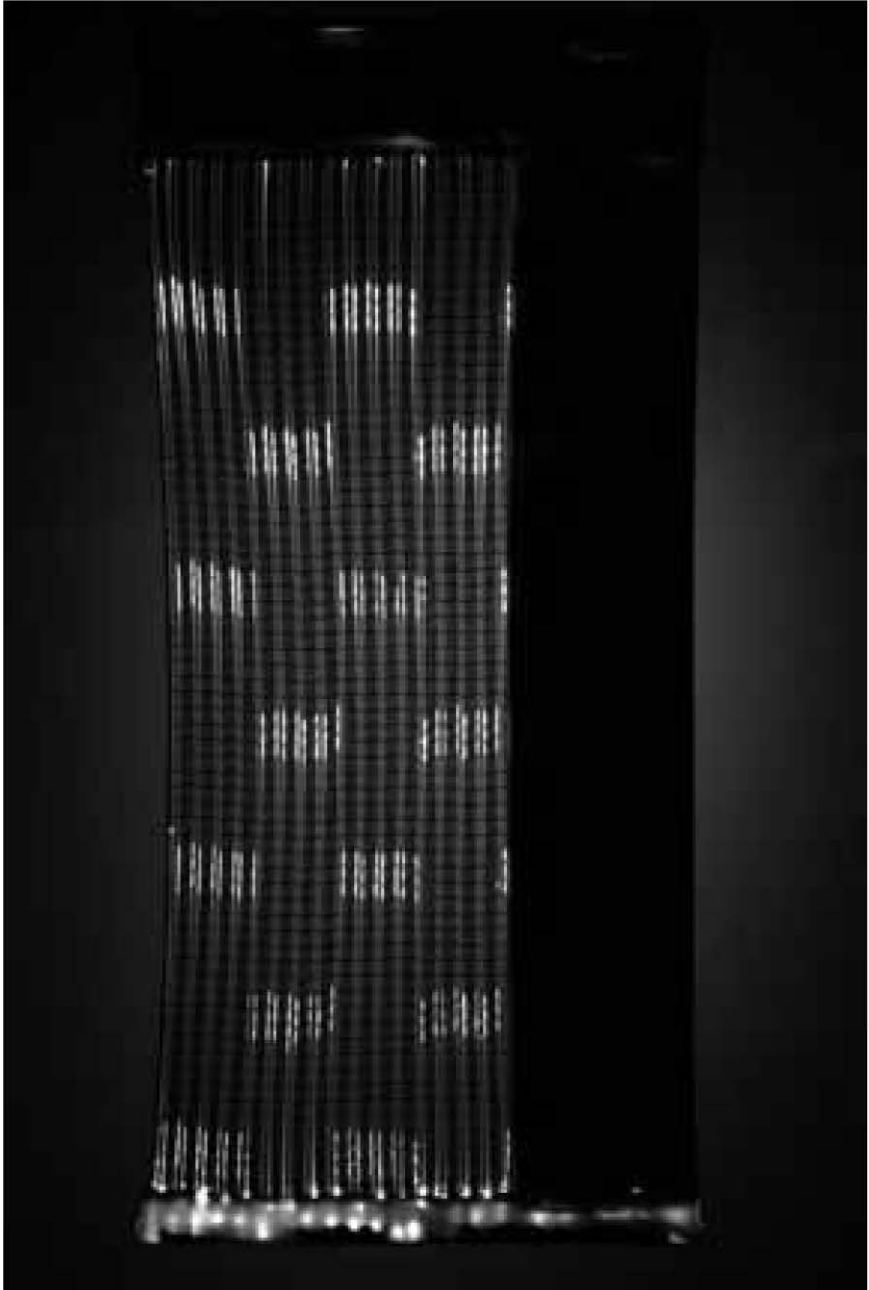
ENERGY CURTAIN • →

































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2. Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Objects', in John Thackara (ed.), *Design after Modernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 182.
3. Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).
4. United Nations, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: General Assembly Resolution 42/187*, 11 December 1987.
5. Fry, *Design Futuring*, 43.
6. Kate Fletcher, *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (London: Earthscan, 2008).
7. This is not to say that there are no such more temporally oriented ideas already in the literature; on the contrary, there are quite a few (e.g. Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Towards a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), or Johan Redström, 'On Technology as Material in Design', in Anne-Marie Willis (ed.), *Design Philosophy Paper: Collection Two* (Ravensbourne: Team D/E/S Publications), 31–42).
8. For instance, Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), and Christina Zetterlund, 'Just Decoration? Ideology and Design in Early Twentieth Century Sweden', in Kjetil Fallan (ed.), *Scandinavian Design: Alternative Histories* (Oxford: Berg, 2012).
9. Gilles Deleuze's opening remark in *Difference and Repetition*: "the first book in which I tried to 'do philosophy'", is relevant also here: "There is a great difference between writing history of philosophy and writing philosophy. In the one case, we study the arrows or the tools of a great thinker, the trophies and the prey, the continents discovered. In the other case, we trim our own arrows, or gather those which seem to us the finest in order to try to send them in other directions" (Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), xiii f).
10. This can be seen, for instance, in the naming of publications and organizations, such as *Die Form*, the periodical published by the Deutscher Werkbund, or Svensk Form—the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design.
11. Tim Parsons, *Thinking: Objects: Contemporary Approaches to Product Design* (Lausanne: AVA Books, 2009), 32.
12. Parsons, *Thinking: Objects*, 44.
13. Klaus Krippendorff and Reinhart Butter, 'Product Semantics: Exploring the Symbolic Qualities of Form', *Innovation, Spring* (1984), 4.
14. Krippendorff and Butter, *Innovation*, 4.
15. Krippendorff and Butter, *Innovation*, 5.
16. Gyorgy Kepes, Education of the Eye, in Hans Maria Wingler (ed.), *Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), 197.
17. Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (New York: Dover, 1995), 13.
18. Colin Burns, Hilary Cottam, Chris Vanstone, Jennie Winhall, *Transformation Design: Red Paper 02* (London: The Design Council, 2006), 26.
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26. Randel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 329.
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28. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, s. v. "sonnet" accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/554519/sonnet/554519supinfo/Supplemental-Information>.
29. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleassance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2002), 19.
30. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 21.
31. Sanford Kwinter, 'Who's Afraid of Formalism?', *Any Magazine* 7/8 (1994), 65.
32. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J.A. Smith, Book 2, Ch. 1. Available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>.
33. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J.A. Smith, Book 2, Ch. 12. Available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>.
34. To illustrate, consider looking at a car versus driving it on a race course. In looking at the car, visual properties such as curves, proportions, geometries, etc. will dominate; in driving the car hard on the race track, visual impressions will still be prominent in the overall experience of the situation, but the car itself will primarily express itself to us through behaviours felt as forces on our body as we accelerate, break, turn, etc. So a remark such as 'being balanced' would probably refer to quite different things in the two cases: e.g. geometrical proportions in the first, responsiveness and predictability in the second.
35. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleassance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du reel, 2002), 21.

36. Marina Abramović and Klaus Peter Biesenbach, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 196.
37. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 12.
38. There are, for instance, many examples at the intersections between theatrical performance and music. For example, Karlheinz Stockhausen used the term 'scenic music' to describe works such as 'Licht' (1977–2003): "Well, Licht is, I think, scenic music in so far as the actors are the notes of the score; better what I call the limbs of the formula. They're proportions and movements and what we see then represented by human bodies and their actions is a transformation into the visual of what is musically composed. So my protagonists are these musical forms, and these forms could be represented visually in many different ways. So I think one scenic realisation is just one version of what is written in the score. This I call 'scenic'. If the musical proportions are composed that way that they can be transformed into the visual perception." (Stockhausen, interview in Ken Hollings, 'Lost in the Stars: Karlheinz Stockhausen', *Wire*, 184 (June 1999).)
39. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari state that "This is the double articulation face-hand, gesture-word, and the reciprocal presupposition between the two. This is the first division of every assemblage: it is simultaneously and inseparably a machinic assemblage and an assemblage of enunciation. In each case, it is necessary to ascertain both what is said and what is done". (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 555.)
40. Jonathan Crary, 'Techniques of the Observer', *October*, 45 (Summer, 1988), 31.
41. Sybil Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 216.
42. Wassily Kandinsky, *Point to Line to Plane*, trans. Howard Dearstyne and Hilla Rebay (New York: Guggenheim Foundation, 1947), 35. There is also
- a relevant note in the preface by one of the translators, Hilla Rebay: "Contrary to the static form-ideal of painting which prevailed in the past millennium, where the subjective object was immediately perceived as a whole and graphically recorded by the intellect, always directed objectively earthward, the moving form-ideal of today sets into motion the eye in any desired direction of the rhythmic non-objective creation." Hilla Rebay in Kandinsky, *Point to Line to Plane*, 11.
43. Jonathan Hill, 'An Other Architect', in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (London: Routledge, 1998), 144.
44. Hill, *Occupying Architecture*, 150.
45. Hill, *Occupying Architecture*, 139.
46. Hill, *Occupying Architecture*, 137.
47. Importantly, this is not about photography *per se*, nor is it about visual culture in general, but simply about *how* images turn into a kind of definitions in design.
48. An interesting historical example is the role of black and white photography in architecture.
49. Johan Redström, 'Defining Moments', in Wendy Gunn and Jared Donovan (eds.), *Design and Anthropology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).
50. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 5.
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53. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (eds and trans), 4th edition (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 30.
54. Letter reprinted in Sybil Moholy-Nagy, *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 111.

LEND

THIS

BOOK





# Beyond institutionalized practice: Exhibition as a way of understanding craft and design

Christina Zetterlund

This is a text given a specific form, set within a particular context. You are reading it while sitting or standing; perhaps you are on a train or in a library. You may be comfortable where you are. Or it may be a noisy environment; there may even be a strong odour that makes it difficult for you to focus on the written words. These are all aspects that will influence your reading and understanding of this article. If you are used to academic writing, this will probably contribute to your comfort in reading this text, while for those who lack the experience, the layout of this text could be an obstacle. These kinds of academic texts constitute a large part of my everyday world, so I usually do not reflect upon their materiality since it has become normalized to me. Therefore I rarely consider these kinds of texts as part of a specific academic material culture that I have been trained to access.

I would like you to consider as you read: where do you find design here? Is it in the layout? Is it in your interaction with the text? Or is it in how the reading situation is set up? Or is it perhaps in none of these aspects or all of them? Is it even interesting to ask the question of definition? Maybe not. Yet definitions are constantly being made. In this article I will analyse one such defining practice, the exhibition, and how it can be reformulated in a direction that would allow a more pluralistic concept and even give room for criticality. Craft and design exhibitions have an influence on how craft and design is understood. Exhibitions are a medium that usually serves as a way to reflect upon, contextualize, and discuss craft and design. An exhibition invites people to an interaction beyond the private everyday use of a product. By at least nominally inviting a wider audience, this medium is an important way to communicate craft and design to viewers. It is usually craft and design objects perceived as 'interesting enough' that are potential exhibition material. Therefore these exhibitions and objects have also been the subject of extensive writing about craft and

design in newspapers and lifestyle magazines. The definition of craft and design is thus spread beyond the people who actually visited the exhibition. Moreover, the museum exhibition, which has been vital in communicating the history of design to a wider audience, contributes to institutionalizing the field of craft and design. Museum galleries, with their display of collections, thus constitute a negotiation of how craft and design is understood and what definition is institutionalized.

Therefore I will start by examining how applied art or decorative art museums display history mainly through objects in their collection. This form of exhibition is an interface between how the field of craft and design has been understood as represented by objects in collections and how these collected notions translate into the current understanding as represented in the gallery. I will discuss how the object on display is defined by the choice of narrative and mode of display. This discussion will begin with *The Röhsska Museum's Design History: From 1851 to the Present Day* [Röhsska museets formhistoria 1851 till idag], an exhibition I helped organize between 2002 and 2004 while working as a curator at the Röhsska Museum, the design and decorative art museum in Gothenburg, Sweden. Starting with this example, I will discuss cases found in craft, applied art and design exhibition. These examples are largely from my own curatorial practice, but I will also include other curatorial formulations.

In my curatorial practice, I have been interested in challenging a traditional position that privileges form and visibility in the definition of craft and design. My starting point, the history of design at the Röhsska Museum, to a large extent represents this traditional mode of display. I will explore several different routes from here and end by suggesting an alternative that puts forward a radical curatorial proposition inspired by Bertolt Brecht's writings on 'epic theatre'. In art, curatorial alternatives to the institutionalized white cube have been widely formulated, but this discussion does not have the same resonance in the field of craft and design. One obvious reason for this is, of course, that craft and design does not rely on the gallery space as art does. However, the irony is that the gallery space has been made crucial for exhibiting craft and design. With this dependence, exhibiting has in many cases sacrificed its unique potential while emphasizing a certain definition of the craft and design object. The alternative formulated in this text will allow other positions to be developed and discussed. It is an alternative that suggests a definition of craft and design that goes beyond visual objects that decorate capitalism and allow elusive, contradictory everyday life to be lived, examined, and critically investigated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Highmore introduces the concept of 'design culture' as a broader platform since design is 'a crucial area where a whole range of inquiries could come together'. Ben Highmore, *The Design Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

## Institutionalized practice—*The Röhsska Museum's Design History: From 1851 to the Present Day*

As indicated by its name, *The Röhsska Museum's Design History: 1851 to the Present Day* is an exhibition displaying objects dating between 1851 and 2003 [Fig. 1–4]. I will discuss how its narrative is presented and then how the exhibition displays a definition of craft and design. In many ways this is an exhibition subscribing to the most institutionalized exhibition practice in the field. The history of design at the Röhsska Museum began in the neo styles of the late 19th century. The museum subscribed to a traditional art historical notion of history meandering through a narrative, in which styles and ideas about the present succeed one another in linear fashion.<sup>2</sup>

This mode of display originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both in art and applied art museums, and is a common practice that demonstrates the institutionalized relation between art and decorative art and subsequently design as well. It contains a definition of the object that relies on art. Around the turn of the 20th century, there was a shift to an even greater emphasis on quality rather than quantity. One influential formulation of this change in decorative art museums is found in the introduction by Justus Brinckmann, director of the Hamburg Museum for Arts and Craft [Hamburgische Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe] to its *Guide to the Hamburg Museum for Arts and Craft* [Führer durch das Hamburgische Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe]. Brinckmann called for a significant change in the perception of the applied arts in museums.<sup>3</sup> This change would oust the old material-based system, originally formulated by the German architect Gottfried Semper in 1852, from its prominent position.<sup>4</sup> By Brinckmann's time, the Semperian system was being criticized for lack of context. This deficiency resulted in applied arts students examining museum collections and failing to make independent, or even original, interpretations of the objects exhibited. A greater emphasis was now placed on the individual artist's own subjective, creative capability. According to Brinckmann, this context could be provided by not fearing the natural environment of the objects.<sup>5</sup> The objects should not be presented as specimens packed together and sorted according to material but placed alongside objects used in the same period. Brinckmann was very influential in Sweden. When the country's first applied art museum, Röhsska, was founded, the Hamburg Museum served as a strong reference.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design* (London: Pluto, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Justus Brinckmann, *Führer durch das Hamburgische Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe* (Leipzig: E.A. Seeman, 1894).

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried Semper, *The Ideal Museum: Practical Art in Metals and Hard Materials* (Vienna: Schlebrügge Editor, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Brinckmann (1894), vii.

<sup>6</sup> Sixten Strömbom, 'Röhsska konstslöjdmuseet i Göteborg', *Ord och bild* (1918), 139 f.; Axel Romdahl, 'Vårt första konstslöjdmuseum', *Svenska Slöjdföreningens Tidskrift*, (1916), 112 ff.

Another important reference in developing modern display is, of course, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. A modern or even modernist method of display was already evident in their first design exhibition, *Machine Art*, in 1934. Largely anonymous everyday objects such as clear glass test tubes, large springs, and a ball bearing were put on pedestals. A large propeller blade was hung on the wall. It was an aesthetically pleasing display emphasizing the visual consumption of objects. Mass-produced objects were now presented in relation to art or even as art. Therefore form, in the narrowest sense of the word, was the only context that the museum presented. Any other reading was ignored. Following this modernist method of display, unruly everyday life, from which the objects originated, was blocked out. By the mid-20th century, MoMA's influence was evident both in how gallery displays were organized and in the content allowed to contemporary mass-produced objects, far more than before.

This emphasis on a qualitative selection alongside the supremacy of visuality was also present in the Röhsska exhibition on the history of design. It was perhaps not as minimalistic as the *Machine Art* show, since the displays placed a greater emphasis on visual cultures rather than single objects. Each section of the exhibition was contextualized in short texts. To give one example, a small section called *AEG* showcased the collaboration between that company and the architect Peter Behrens, with four objects displayed as an example. In the text, the foundation of the Werkbund was given as the context; it is noted that Peter Behrens was hired in 1907 and would subsequently be responsible for the visual profile of the company. Visuality is determined here to be the realm of the designer. Following the *AEG* section is *The Home Exhibition*, displaying the Werkbund's influence in Sweden in the early 20th century. Form follows form. Very little is given outside this context.

The Röhsska exhibition follows a visual trope that, with some variation, has become the convention in applied art museums. Another version is found in Berlin's Museum of Decorative Arts [Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum]. Behrens' kettle for AEG is also displayed here, placed in a glass vitrine. Since there are few objects on each shelf, this enables the viewer to engage with every single object. The kettle is shown alongside other objects in metal such as a hairdryer, a toaster and metal bowls. This section is followed by another one displaying design in plastic materials. There is a brief reference here to the old material-based Semperian system, which has been used in tandem with new ones since the turn of the 19th century. Yet another version of the same theme is found at the British decorative art museum the Victoria and Albert Museum. It presents the AEG kettle within a traditional art-historical framework. It is found in a section with the heading *Designers' Responses to Mechanisation*. Note that it is the designer response, not the companies or any other aspect of society, that is put forward in the heading. Among the objects presented under the same heading are a photograph, *Abstraction, Porch, Shadow*, by Paul Strand; a print, *Minesweepers in Port*, by Edward Alexander Wadsworth; a book, *La fin du monde*, designed by Ferdinand Léger; and a

magazine, *Dadaphone*, edited by Tristan Tzara. Even though the Victoria and Albert Museum does not place as much focus on the individual object as the German museum does, a specific visual narrative is still being told. This is a story where the historical object on display is defined by aspects such as the designer, form, and material.

One reason for the choice of narrative could be found in the historical proximity of the applied art museum and the art museum. This liaison is evident at the Victoria and Albert Museum in exhibitions where design, craft, and applied art are placed alongside an entire gallery displaying sculptures. As in the art museum, the narrative gives prominence to the designer/crafter/artist and the features of the physical object, which are frequently described in terms of how forms are handled and sorted by style. As I argue above, this emphasizes visibility in the interaction with the object, a visibility that corresponds to the white cube that is not simply a method of display that grew out of easel painting formulating an ideal space of art but an ideology in which the Eye and the Spectator have supremacy.<sup>7</sup> Johan Redström gives a fine account in this book of what is found in design and applied art museums by comparing this regime of visibility with a snapshot, a still from a disparate situation, one that moves from being a ‘documentation’ to a kind of ‘definition’ of what something is since few alternatives to this definition are presented.<sup>8</sup>

## Questioning institutionalized practice

This traditional narrative of design history has been called into question over the past few decades. The British design historian Judy Attfield has called it a history of ‘good design’. She argues that, within the traditional design historical perspective, there has been a ‘cult of good design’ focused on aesthetics, visibility, and taste. As a result, design has become a label given to a specific set of objects, and therefore a vast quantity of artefacts has been omitted.<sup>9</sup> In other words, objects defined as ‘interesting enough’ are judged, according to Attfield, based on visual parameters relative to a given culture of taste that is classified as ‘good design’.

Attfield’s observation is made in relation to a reformulation and questioning of design history writing that became evident in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Johan Redström, ‘Form-Acts’, in this book, 26–27 and endnote 47.

<sup>9</sup> Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Walker (1989); Cheryl Buckley, ‘Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design’, and Clive Dilnot, ‘The State of Design History, Part 1: Mapping the Field’, in Victor Margolin (ed.), *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Oxford: Berg, 2010).

The limitations of the traditional perspective were also fairly apparent in the creation of the Röhsska exhibition. One difficulty in renegotiating the design-historical object at applied art and design museums is the traditional notion that is present in the collections. At the time the Röhsska exhibition was being organized, new perspectives had found their way into the collections to only a limited extent. Therefore objects such as an early Apple computer were borrowed from the collections of the Technical Museum [Tekniska museet] in Stockholm. A Gestetner duplicator, one of Raymond Loewy's first design assignments, was found at Göteborg City Museum in Gothenburg. These museums had a different order than at the applied art museums and another collecting practice, in which art had not constituted a parameter. This expansion of the museum's scope is also reflected in the Italian design historian Maddalena Dalla Mura's plea for an expanded notion of the design museum in her article 'Design in Museums: Towards an Integrative Approach'. She puts forward the science museum as an institution with objects and narratives relevant to the design discourse.<sup>11</sup> The case of science museums is especially interesting in the context of this article. There has been a closer relationship to this material in the practice of decorative art museums. The Victoria and Albert Museum, the mothership of all applied art museums, used to cohabit with what is today the Science Museum as the South Kensington Museum in London. In the late 19th century, the latter collection was divorced from the 'art division'. During the divorce process, a committee was formed to propose the direction of what was to become the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was to be defined as a 'Museum of Applied Art' concentrating on the artistic side of commodity production, not a 'Museum of Manufacturers' dealing with commerce.<sup>12</sup> This is interesting since it indicates a negotiation of how the area was to be understood. As Dalla Mura's article shows, the artistic side of commodity production does not have as great a defining role in design history writing as it was made to have a hundred years ago. Still, it is very much present in the way design and applied art museums exhibit their objects.

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<sup>11</sup> Maddalena Dalla Mura, 'Design in Museums: Towards an Integrative Approach', *Journal of Design History*, 3 (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Board of Education, The Victoria and Albert Museum (Art Division), *Report of the Committee of Re-arrangement*, adopted 29 July 1908, 19. See also memorandum by Mr Cecil Smith in the minutes of the Tenth Meeting, held on Wednesday, 20 May 1908, *Minutes of the Committee on Re-arrangement* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1908).

It is obviously difficult to define what could be called an art position in applied art museums. This argument would presuppose a definition of art, something very difficult, even impossible, to do. Yet, as Judy Attfield argues, the art or aesthetic quality at an applied art museum is defined by concepts such as visuality, a quality found in the physical object. However, art is not a singularity. And given the institutionalized historical liaison, it might be fruitful to explore the concept of art somewhat further. In the widely read *One Place after Another*, Miwon Kwon, an art historian and curator from the United States, suggests a deaestheticization and dematerialization of art. She identifies “a withdrawal of visual pleasure” and in doing so questions a key component ascribed to art.<sup>13</sup> Kwon defines an art where ‘work’ no longer aims to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewer’s critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of their viewing.<sup>14</sup> Instead, attention is directed towards the institutional framework of art that is “historically located and culturally determined” and does not encapsulate “universal standards”.<sup>15</sup> Kwon recognizes a growing interest among artists to go beyond institutional boundaries, with art practices that engage with ‘the outside world’ and ‘everyday life’.<sup>16</sup> She examines an art that is not just site-sensitive but temporal and generated by the work. Kwon challenges visuality and the physical objects as essential components of art. However, Juliane Rebentisch does not define this border-crossing as attacking the autonomy of art, only its ‘objectivist misconception’.<sup>17</sup> Both Kwon and Rebentisch suggest a broadened concept of art far beyond the object-based one found in design and applied art museums. Therefore any alliance with art could not explain the traditional mode of display since contemporary art goes far beyond a definition based on form and object.

As is evident in Kwon’s reasoning, art can be as much about a temporal existence, a process and the ideological conditions of the everyday world as about a physical visuality. Along with change in the practice of art comes change in curating, a change in which the boundaries between artist and curator are starting to blur somewhat. In *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, Paul O’Neill identifies a development

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<sup>13</sup> Miwon Kwon *One Place after Another* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 24.

<sup>14</sup> Kwon (2004), 24.

<sup>15</sup> Kwon (2004), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Kwon (2004), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 139.



during the 1990s in which curatorial practice was established as potential space for critique. This was a shift in curatorial practice that had begun in the 1980s from “curating as an administrative, caring, mediating activity towards that of curating as a creative activity more akin to a form of artistic practice”.<sup>18</sup> This is clearly a contested claim but a change analogous to that in art emphasizing temporality and site consciousness.<sup>19</sup> However, changes in curatorial practice were apparent as early as the 1960s and 1970s under the heading of ‘institutional critique’, propelled by artists such as Louise Lawler, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke.<sup>20</sup> While the curatorial and artistic practice expanded, there remained a strong relation to institutions such as the museum or gallery.

As noted above, there is no single identity of art on which to base the definition of an object. Reservations similar to those found in the field of art could be discerned in the field of craft and design. Craft and design questions the supremacy of form and visuality and allows site-sensitive meaning-making processes. The discomfort that site-sensitive art had with a traditional concept of art and the mode of display could be transferred to the field of critical craft and design since they shared a move away from the hegemony of the visual towards an expanded object that was open to critical discourses. The display of craft in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Röhsska Museum’s exhibition on the history of design provides evidence of the problem. Craft was placed under the heading *Politics and Craft* [Politik och hantverk], providing an early example of critical practice that expands the notion of the object beyond form and visuality. This was a time when craft was developing into a platform for critical discourse that went beyond the making of the object in a specific material. In conforming with the given narrative mode in the Röhsska exhibition, this section was squeezed between one section discussing changes in advertising occurring in the late 1960s and another displaying postmodernism in design. As noted above, the craft displayed in the *Politics and Craft* section was found to a limited extent in the ‘handling of shapes and material’ but also in an investigative mode and a critique of the current state of things. The context is as much the material of these objects as is textile or clay. In the

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<sup>18</sup> Paul O’Neill, ‘The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse’, in Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (eds), *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007), 14.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Carolee Thea, *On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2010), especially the interview with Charles Esche.

<sup>20</sup> Andrea Fraser, ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’, *Artforum*, September 2005.

exhibition, this expanded practice was negotiated in relation to the traditional definition of the historical object. The single object, the piece in the collection, was made to carry the narrative. As the story was told in the Röhsska display, the critical aspect of this craft would probably be difficult for some of the audience to fully understand. Grasping this story would require knowledge about the period since very little was given in the narrative. Yet without this context, the definition of craft displayed in *Politics and Craft* puts the emphasis on the handling of shapes and material and not the radically reformulated object. It is clear how effective the traditional notion has been in defining the object in how this period has been interpreted—an interpretation that calls for a revision in display practice. In *Nationalencyklopedin*, the preeminent encyclopaedia in Sweden, it is stated under the heading ‘craft’ [konsthantverk] that:

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Swedish craft was struck by crisis. Some crafters did not find it meaningful to create ‘useless’ things. Instead they started to make independent objects with a clear community-oriented message. Others felt they had lost their purpose. After denial, unrest, and commitment, craft made a comeback in the 1980s. Personal expression and internationalization are clearly evident phenomena. The precious and exclusive are once again viable.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from this quotation that the author perceives ‘community orientation’ as a sign of crisis, given that ‘personal expression’, visuality, and precious and exclusive materials are instead what is supposed to define craft. The craft of the 1980s as described above would fit comfortably with the definition of historical object as displayed in Röhsska’s exhibition on design history. This difficulty or limitation is not just applicable in the ‘crisis-stricken craft’ but is a wider issue that goes beyond this specific practice. The interpretation of critical craft expressed in Sweden in the late 1990s provides evidence of these shortcomings. In the late 1990s craft was once again formulated as a platform for critical investigation. But it was described as something unique, as something with few Swedish predecessors. Still, it is clear that there are commonalities between the generations in their definition of the object.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Konsthantverk’, *Nationalencyklopedin*, 11 (Höganäs: Bokförlaget Bra Böcker, 1993), 272 (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> Christina Zetterlund, *Craft in Dialogue 2003–2006: Craft is Handmade Communication* (Stockholm: Konstnärsnämnden, 2006).

## Staging critical practice—*Tumult*

The shortcomings of the institutionalized definition of the object and modes of display in dealing with critical practice were the starting point for the *Tumult* project that I initiated in 2008 [Fig. 5–7]. The aim was to try alternative methods of displaying the expanded craft object, to find a way of staging an exhibition that would allow for the site-sensitive context, beyond it simply being mentioned in texts. The investigation was carried out in collaboration with Gustavsbergs Konsthall and the craft collective We Work in a Fragile Material [WWIAFM]. This set-up was one such alternative since interpretive power was distributed in a way that mirrored to some extent the questions raised in contemporary critical craft practice. This, of course, is also an aspect found in contemporary art curating. In the process, seminars were organized in which notions of craft and writing history were analysed and physically challenged in workshops. The process led up to a show at Gustavsbergs Konsthall, which staged two exhibitions in dialogue, one showing WWIAFM, current craft practitioners, and the other an interpretation of critical crafts of the 1970s.

WWIAFM wound up materializing an investigation of the decoration that they subsequently showed at Gustavsbergs Konsthall. The notion of decorative has traditionally been seen as low status, associated with femininity and the domestic. Craft has historically been categorized under the heading ‘decorative art’. ‘The decorative’ gave references to the everyday, to ‘practical art’. As a result, craft was not included in the traditionally higher status of fine or liberal arts. By critically analysing this concept, WWIAFM explored something unique to craft in relation to art. Yet at the same time they investigated how material cultures are categorized, by moving ‘the decorative’ far from its typical form as a small, contained ornament. They built a gigantic wooden structure that was then attacked by paintballs as a decorative act. Negotiating the expanded object was also evident in the name, *It is the result that counts* [Det är resultatet som räknas], that WWIAFM gave to the final piece.

*It is the result that counts* was set in dialogue with a section staging craft from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Instead of putting a row of objects on display with explanatory texts, this section was presented as a dialogue with current notions which was given as much presence as the physical objects. The narrative of the expanded craft object was told through this mix. The 1970s section of *Tumult* was arranged as a 2009 version of a ‘screen exhibition’, the most current mode of display at the time, since it allowed the

mixing of numerous images with several texts on screens, which corresponded well with the political and often didactic purpose of making exhibitions.<sup>23</sup> In *Tumult* the physical craft objects were made to be part of this screen exhibition displaying images, quotes, newspaper articles, and exhibition material of the time alongside physical objects from the 1970s. There were no additional texts. All the material displayed was retrieved during the period leading up to the exhibition, a process that included dialogues with people who were active in formulating the craft of this period. This was their interpretation of their history. The books, articles, exhibitions, world events, projects, happenings, and debates that they defined as being important were collected and included as part of the exhibition. No hierarchical difference was made between the different media, thus suggesting equal importance for the mode of display, the clippings, quotes, images, and physical craft objects, thereby suggesting the expanded object. I would argue that the curatorial questions raised in *Tumult* and the notion of the expanded object are not about specific practices but about the choice of narrative and defining the historical object.

## The Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things: A plurality of dialogues

A good example of change in the object being applicable not just to specific practices but as part of a broader question is found at Berlin's Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things [Werkbundarchiv—Museum der Dinge] [Fig. 8–10]. Unlike Della Mura's argument, which looks beyond the applied art museum for an alternative, the Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things remains within the discourse but formulates a radical alternative. The museum defines itself as changing 'the monological narrative' mode found in most design/decorative art museums. Instead they emphasize dialogues in their mode of display. The alternative formulated by the Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things involves not just how the display is done but also how it is interpreted, with the museum visitor transformed into a producer of meaning rather than a consumer of a single narrative.

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<sup>23</sup> Christina Zetterlund, 'Tumult—dialog om ett konsthantverk i rörelse', in Malin Grumstedt, Agneta Linton, and Christina Zetterlund (eds), *Tumult—dialog om ett konsthantverk i rörelse* (Gustavsberg: Gustavsbergs Konsthall, 2009).

Dialogue is apparent in the very name of the museum. By calling it the Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things, a relation is created between the general concept of ‘thing’ and the specific narrative of the Werkbund that defines and limits the scope of the ‘thing’ discourse.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the museum places the Werkbund in the elusive everyday world rather than in a history of good design, like in applied art museums. What interests the museum is not so much the objects as such, but rather how they perform within a given product culture, how they affect, enable, and change material meaning-making.<sup>25</sup>

The Museum of Things stages a dialogue of understanding design and applied art within an art framework and a wider culture-historical context. As a result, they not only broaden the narrative of the Werkbund but also offer a bold suggestion for how to define and stage objects in design history. The main gallery of the museum is filled with a display of the Werkbund Archive collection. This narrative is presented under the heading *The Struggle of the Thing—The Werkbund between Claims and the Everyday* [Kampf der Dinge—Der Deutscher Werkbund zwischen Anspruch und Alltag]. The room is dominated by generic cabinets or rather cupboards displaying a majority of the objects. These cupboards are far from traditional museum vitrines, which highlight valuable objects and are designed to maximize visual access. Instead the Museum of Thing’s cases underline the ‘thing’ perspective by calling to mind cabinets that might be found in a typical sitting room rather than in a museum. The vitrines are stacked with objects, staging a stark contrast with the way Werkbund objects were displayed in Berlin’s Kunstgewerbemuseum. Instead, the Museum of Things’s method of display suggests a flea market or an old shop.

*The Struggle of the Thing* is told through two different narrative modes. One focuses on the Werkbund objects; the other is an

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<sup>24</sup> Conversation with Renate Flagmeier, 16 May 2011. In this conversation Ms Flagmeier refers to a lecture by Bruno Latour (Bruno Latour, *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design*, Keynote lecture for the *Networks of Design* meeting of the Design History Society, Falmouth, Cornwall, 3 September 2008). See also Judy Attfield (2000), 9, for a discussion on ‘things’ in relation to design.

<sup>25</sup> Conversation with Renate Flagmeier, 16 May 2011, <http://www.museumderdinge.de>, Werkbundarchive—Museum der Dinge, *Kampf der Dinge* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 2008).

open storage space running along one of the gallery walls. The first gives not a conventional chronological history showing ‘the whole story’ of the Werkbund but rather a history told in what could be called ‘a conceptual manner’, with Werkbund-related themes. In 2011, *Black and White* [Schwarz-weiß] was one of the first themes, corresponding with a Werkbund rhetoric that often worked in oppositions, such as good and bad taste, modern and antiquated, and so on. Some themes have an obvious connection to the Werkbund narrative, such as *The Werkbund Firm/Technical Products* [Der Werkbund-Firmen/technische Produkte] and *The German Museum for Arts in Trade and Craft* [Deutsches Museum für Kunst in Handel und Gewerbe]. Others are indirectly linked to the discourse of the Werkbund such as *Souvenirs*, a culture of taste that did not appeal to the Werkbund, and *New Power and Machinery Form* [Neue Kraft und Maschinenform], which corresponds to modernity and the industrial age. The latter shows how the new source of power, electricity, changed people’s ways of living, created new product categories and gave rise to new decorative patterns. Radio sets, hair dryers, electric ironing boards, and electric plugs are all squeezed into the cupboard. A number of dialogues are created under this theme. Generic toasters are placed next to one with an aesthetically pleasing, or ‘designed’, cover. A pot is decorated with electric cables as a motif. We can see here how a porcelain cup was shaped as an electrical insulator. Further dialogues are created in relation to the open storage cabinets, with one cupboard completely packed with different insulators. Among the many insulators is a salt and pepper shaker designed by Konstantin Grcic. One has to look carefully to find this shaker, since it is not specifically marked. Next to the cabinet packed with insulators is one filled with electrical devices and next to this is another one filled with mechanical devices. The Werkbund narrative is thus put in relation to a wide variety of things and material cultures.

Neither the Werkbund objects nor Werkbund designers are given a prominent position in the narrative found in *The Struggle of the Thing*. There is a small sign next to some Werkbund objects noting the name of the designer and year of production. Other Werkbund objects lack this kind of information. In still other cases, a non-

Werkbund object is singled out with a sign. The scattered use of signs highlights certain products as much as it emphasizes the absence of signs. As a result, it demonstrates the culture of assigning the name of a designer to products. Because the room suggests many different readings, this culture becomes one among many ways of relating to things. Werkbund products are not given a specific status, a choice that makes their position negotiable within material cultures. It is only in one specific culture, a certain kind of design culture displayed at design and applied art museums, that this has been given clear prominence. If you are part of this culture, this reading is open to you in *The Struggle of the Thing*; if not, there will be many other possible stories and potential histories of the Werkbund.

There is no clear, absolute distinction between the different narrative modes since the objects can move between them. This destabilizes interpretation since there is very little to indicate what I am supposed to look at or how I am supposed to look at the display apart from my own way of relating to what I see. The ‘monological’ narrative that *The Struggle of the Thing* set out to change has a single given narrative that visitors are supposed to consume. The exhibition provides resistance to this form of consumption and upgrades visitors to co-producer since they have numerous possible narratives as ways to access the objects. Potential histories from various perspectives are also made possible, with stories and groups not previously given a voice in the traditional Werkbund narrative.<sup>26</sup> There is no hierarchy in the narrative, no ultimate starting point from which to access the collection on display. *The Struggle of the Thing* displays a multitude of historical narratives on design and everyday cultures. These stories are considered to create a dialogue but could also be seen as conflicting. This invites visitors to produce several interpretations rather than consuming a single, intended narrative.

## Beyond visibility: *Conversation in, about, and with a Sofa*

A broad definition of the object was also the starting point for the contribution *Conversation in, about, and with a Sofa* [Samtal i, om och med en Soffa] to the Stockholm Architecture Museum [Arkitekturmuseet] project

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Löwy, *Reading Walter Benjamin's On the Concept of History*, transl. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005).

*48 Hours*, which I organized together with the Swedish craft artist Pontus Lindvall [Fig. 11–13]. The project staged a dialogue with the museum institution in order to suggest possible future directions.<sup>27</sup> By emphasizing a material discourse as well as blurring the boundaries of the objects exhibited, we wanted to move beyond the exhibition as a visual practice.

Our contribution started with a rustic sofa from the 1970s made of turned pine and covered in clear, shiny varnish. The piece was typical of its period but not something normally found in a design or applied art museum. Its rustic shape was designed to evoke the wooden sofas of Swedish peasants, a format or definition of traditional Swedishness formulated at the turn of the 19th century. The sofa was not a question of a remake, nor simply an imitation of style. It was a free interpretation that involved an idea of a rustic Swedish past that had been ascribed to this style. The sofa thus staged a dialogue between what has been considered typically peasant, as Swedish heritage, and 1970s furniture making. It was placed among several pieces of furniture included in a dialogue on this question created by Pontus Lindvall. All the furniture was grouped together, thus generating not just a visual but also a material discussion of objects embracing notions of craft, history, and to some extent Swedishness. A further confrontation with the exhibition as visual practice was staged by asking people to join us for tea, coffee, biscuits, and a discussion about topics such as how we can relate today to the rustic version of Swedish history implied by the sofa, craft, and staging craft exhibitions. People did join us. And the furniture was there for everyone to use. Someone slept on the sofa; others used the table to read.

One piece in particular is interesting in this context, the litter bin created by Lindvall [Fig 14–16]. It is a good example of how he works in a dialogue with material cultures. The litter bin is created in a dialogue with a simple paper version of the kind usually found at a convention centre. In the process of making his interpretation of this litter bin, Lindvall did not have one in front of him. Instead, he created it from his own notion, his own idea of litter bins. With some difficulty, he painted the top, which usually holds a black plastic bag. This process took some time, since it was difficult to find the typical colour of an actual plastic bag. Lindvall made the litter bin black as a decorative gesture.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://arkitekturmuseetlive.se/48t/>, accessed 7 November 2011.



Pontus Lindvall created a dialogue with an object that is seldom noticed. It simply sits there at a convention centre, filling a practical function. It is an object that constitutes what Judy Attfield defines as ‘a silent and unnoticed part of our physical surroundings’.<sup>28</sup> Lindvall’s litter bin is his subjective interpretation of this silent, everyday object. The litter bin was originally made as part of Lindvall’s contribution to the exhibition *Hands on Movement – Crafted Form in Dialogue* [Den handfasta rörelsen – Formhantverk i dialog] at Stockholm’s Liljevalchs Art Gallery in 2009. He filled a room in the gallery with colourful handcrafted lamps that meandered organically from the roof and spread throughout the room. The litter bin was placed in the room as a sidekick to the lamps in order to emphasize the place, the ideological construction of the gallery space. In doing so, Lindvall wanted to call attention to and demonstrate the discomfort of craft in this ‘supposedly neutral space’.<sup>29</sup> The litter bin was put there to blur the boundaries between understanding the room as an art space and a less ordered everyday world. It did the job. As they looked at the lamps, visitors threw garbage into the pieces placed on the floor.

The queer nature of the litter bin continued in the following display. One particularly interesting instance is when the Swedish design group De fyra used it for an interior at a design fair in Stockholm. One morning it was gone from their interior. After a couple of days it was back again. One can assume that it was collected during the night to be emptied along with the other litter bins at the convention centre. Someone probably noticed that it was different and put it back. The litter bin slid between being perceived as ‘craft’ and as an ordinary, everyday object. The same thing happened at the Architecture Museum, where the litter bin was removed from our corner and placed by the public coffee stand.

Lindvall’s litter bin suggests a thought-provoking definition of craft while generating radical new ideas about craft curating, ideas that go beyond understanding craft within the institutionalized framework of art. As an in-between object, the litter bin stages several challenges. Not dependent on the art institution yet not produced as an ordinary, everyday object, it proposes something else. It goes beyond the avant-

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<sup>28</sup> Attfield (2000), 14.

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Pontus Lindvall, 20 December 2011.

garde gesture of overcoming the ‘great divide’ between art and the everyday.<sup>30</sup> Here is an act that, transplanted to curating, would suggest something different from the examples above. As a result, an alternative is suggested in order to add a perspective rather than replace existing ones. This proposal contributes to the diversity of how craft and design can be staged and understood.

## Communicative situations

When one takes a closer look, ‘the everyday’ could be as intricate a concept as ‘art’. In *Everyday Life and Culture Theory* Ben Highmore investigates this difficult area. In Highmore’s view, experiences of the everyday can be a sanctuary, bewilder or give pleasure. They can delight or depress. But Highmore also emphasizes the elusiveness of the everyday given that “its special quality might be its lack of qualities. It might be, precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive”.<sup>31</sup> But to treat ‘the everyday’ as “a realm of experience unavailable for representation or reflection is to condemn it to silence”. In most situations where we try to describe the everyday, it is transformed.<sup>32</sup> Highmore notes the difficulty of capturing it. If the everyday is “seen as a flow, then any attempt to arrest it, to apprehend it, to scrutinize it, will be problematic”. The everyday “will necessarily exceed attempts to apprehend it”.<sup>33</sup> This statement comes close to the ideas presented by Yuriko Saito in her book *Everyday Aesthetics*. According to Saito, given the lack of an institutional framework of art, our aesthetic interactions with everyday objects are more unpredictable, or free, if you will.<sup>34</sup> How can this freedom be achieved without the institutionalized gaze of the art institution? Can the everyday be ‘seen’ without framing it and thereby losing its elusive fluid quality? That is, can craft and design still be placed in an everyday world and at the same time stage a commentary or investigatory job?

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<sup>30</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), and Rose-Carol Washton Long, ‘From Metaphysics to Material Culture’, in Kathleen James-Chakraborty (ed.), *Bauhaus Culture: From Weimar to the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006). Ben Highmore gives a good depiction of how surrealism relates to everyday life; Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Culture Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 45 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Highmore (2002), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Highmore (2002), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Highmore (2002), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Using the formulations of Bertolt Brecht, I would like to end this article by briefly suggesting a form of staging craft and design in the fluidity of the everyday. This proposal has yet to be tested and needs to be developed further. Creating something that I have chosen to call a ‘communicative situation’ would allow investigation as well as a platform for discussion. What I want to introduce here is a way of thinking inspired by Brecht rather than a literal exegesis of the German writer. In reading Brecht, I find formulations that are useful in forming the ‘communicative situation’.

An obvious starting point is one of Brecht’s perhaps most well-known concepts, ‘the alienation effect’. The alienation effect is “turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected”.<sup>35</sup> Fredric Jameson reminds us in his reading of Brecht of the Russian formalist notion of ‘making strange’ to make us look at an object with new eyes, as something other that familiarity prevents us from seeing. This moves it out of, as Jameson puts it, a “kind of perceptual numbness”.<sup>36</sup>

In the project *As Found*, the creative studio Medium worked with this notion of the overlooked, of everyday material meaning-making [Fig. 17–18]. One aspect of *As Found* portrays decorative situations in the everyday landscape. They show how the asphalt mending of sidewalks creates decorative patterns and how temporary solutions to practical problems result in a carefully formed wooden handle on a barrack or a gate for a wooden fence given an eye-catching curve. These portraits make us aware of what happens in the noisy streets as we run to our next errand. It is a decoration that is not pre-planned. Medium moves these captured views from out of a ‘perceptual numbness’ and makes us take notice of the unusual in the usual. Medium suggests a potential reading, an understanding that goes beyond simply making us see the object, but what is actually planned and who makes these decisions as well.

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<sup>35</sup> Brecht (1964), 143.

<sup>36</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 2000), 39.

It is vital in the 'communicative situation' that the object perform the tasks of its day job while acting as part of a broader investigation. In doing its day job, it is just as important that the object not be so blatant that it also works the night shift, providing a potential reading. Like Pontus Lindvall's litter bin, it should fill its typical everyday function but also be an investigation of the everyday world. The communicative situation is therefore a potential reading and not an ascribed one. According to Brecht, alienation prevents the audience from "losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor", and as a consequence this makes them into what could be described as a 'consciously critical observer'.<sup>37</sup> That is, the audience is not a passive consumer. By creating objects or situations with a potential distortion, there is an opportunity to create a moment of observation, of engagement, or even to create a 'consciously critical observer', as in the case of the litter bin, which was close enough to being taken as an ordinary object but strange enough that this acceptance did not last. It was created to achieve this effect, 'to be seen', to be noticed and not just to perform a practical function. This ties in with another of Brecht's formulations. The actor in what Brecht calls 'the epic theatre' should not perform in such a way that the audience imagines watching something 'real' as in traditional Western theatre. He finds an alternative in Chinese theatre, where the actor is aware that he (the actor suggested by Brecht is always a he) is being watched and does not pretend that there is a fourth wall and no audience looking.

It is in the staging, in the making, that a difference is made. Creating a 'communicative situation' must be done with an awareness of being watched, that the object acts. The possible alternative reading resides in this awareness. It is not about enabling a seamless or unconscious engagement with the object, offering a product as a 'silent server', solving a problem. Instead, it is about making several conscious readings possible. This could involve bringing out the construction of meaning-making in a specific situation, and

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<sup>37</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91; Walter Benjamin, *Essays on Brecht* (Staffanstorp: Cavefors, 1971), 17.

consequently showing what makes this process possible and how it is made or—in those parts of the world with mass consumption—that it is made. In making this possible, the communicative situation gives space for criticality since it would not just show the construction but also what makes it possible. It displays, as Brecht's concept of the alienation effect suggests, not just how an object is made but also by what, thus opening up prospects for discussion and perhaps even change.<sup>38</sup> The communicative situation is created in an on-going everyday activity rather than a specific institutionalized framework. As a result, there is potential for investigation and questioning in relation to, or rather, within everyday life. As craft and design objects are both historically and currently found in varied everyday practices, there is a unique opportunity not just to say something about craft and design but also about how meaning is made in a material world and how hierarchies and norms provide and sustain the framework of such production. By stepping outside institutionalized frameworks, the communicative situation goes beyond the curatorial examples discussed above.

For instance, this materiality could be about how the design of a text is inscribed in a specific reading culture which constitutes certain practices and refers to particular systems. As an example, 'academic' texts refer to a discourse of knowledge with certain assumptions and, in many cases, a challenging relation to 'practice', be it craft, design, or art. Conforming with this discourse of knowledge are structures that are generally overlooked in the reading. The text is very seldom 'seen' here. It is not put forward as something material; it is simply read. The 'communicative situation' here would suggest a position beyond a 'perceptual numbness' and investigate what kind of academic institutions have a system to access this discourse of knowledge.

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin (1971), 89.

<p>TEXT TEMPLATES FROM COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE STOCKHOLM REGION</p> <p>p. 49 University College of Arts, Crafts and Design [Konstfack] No template</p> <p>pp. 50–51 Södertörn University [Södertörns Högskola] 'Revised Uppsala template' Template in use since 2010 Formatted by P Lindblom and J Robson</p> <p>pp. 52–53 Stockholm University [Stockholms Universitet] Template in use since 2009 Formatted by M Fathli/ G McWilliams and F Ljunggren</p> <p>p. 54 Royal Institute of Art [Kungliga Konsthögskolan] No template</p> <p>p. 55 Stockholm School of Theology [Teologiska högskolan Stockholm] No template</p> <p>pp. 56–57 KTH Royal Institute of Technology [Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan] According to 'Suggestions for formatting your thesis' ['Tips för utformning av inlägga']. No information available on how long it has been in use or whom it has been formatted by.</p> <p>p. 58 Swedish National Defence College [Försvarshögskolan] No template</p> <p>p. 59 University College of Opera [Operahögskolan] No template</p>	<p>pp. 60–61 Karolinska Institutet Template in use since 2004 Formatted by University library staff and A Bruhn</p> <p>p. 62 Teaterhögskolan No template</p> <p>p. 63 Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH) [Kungliga Musikhögskolan i Stockholm] No template</p> <p>p. 64 Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences [Gymnastik- och idrottshögskolan] No template</p> <p>p. 65 University of Dance and Circus [Dans och Cirkushögskolan] No template</p> <p>pp. 66–67 Stockholm School of Economics [Handelshögskolan] Template in use since 2011 Formatted by Intellecta</p> <p>p. 68 Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts [Dramatiska institutet] No template</p> <p>* The templates were collected during 2010–2011. There may, of course, have been some alterations since.</p> <p>** The 'No template' version is based on an InDesign default document using Times typesize 12pt, leading 14.4pt.</p> <p>← • pp. 49–68</p>
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Fig. 1–4. *The Röhsska Museum's Design History: From 1851 to the Present Day*, Röhsska Museum, Gothenburg, 2004–.



1. Photo: Ola Kjelbye



2. Photo: Mikael Lamngård, Röhsska Museum



3. Photo: Mikael Lammgård, Röhsska Museum



4. Photo: Mikael Lammgård, Röhsska Museum



Fig. 5-7. *Tumult*, Gustavsbergs Konsthall, Gustavsberg, 2009.



5. Photo: Gustavsbergs Konsthall



6. Photo: Gustavsbergs Konsthall



7. Photo: Fina Sundqvist

Fig. 8–10. The Struggle of the Thing, The Werkbund Archive—Museum of Things, Berlin.



8.



9.



10.

Fig. 11–12. *Conversation in, about, and with a Sofa*, 48 Hours, Architecture Museum, Stockholm, 2011.



11. Photo: Pontus Lindvall



12. Photo: Pontus Lindvall

Fig. 13. *Conversation in, about, and with a Sofa*, 48 Hours, Architecture Museum, Stockholm, 2011.  
Fig. 14. Pontus Lindvall, *Litter bin*, *Crafted Form in Dialogue*, Liljevalchs, Stockholm, 2007.



13. Photo: Pontus Lindvall



14. Photo: Pontus Lindvall

Fig. 15. Pontus Lindvall, Litter bin, De fyra interior design for Stockholm International Fair, Ballroom Blitz Café at Formex & Textile Exhibition, Stockholm, 2007.

Fig. 16. Pontus Lindvall, Litter bins at a convention centre.



15. Photo: De fyra



16. Photo: De fyra

Fig. 17–18. Medium, *As Found*.



17.



18.



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SWAP

THIS

BOOK



# Who is sustainable? Querying the politics of sustainable design practices

Ramia Mazé

Design, formulated as a discipline concerned with form and problem-solving, may seem preoccupied with matters other than those of politics and the political. Traced through a history of the fine arts, for example, the concerns of design include aesthetic expression and material form. As a liberal art, design is arguably a discipline that synthesizes knowledge from across the natural and social sciences and applies it to solving complex technical and social problems. These dimensions of design are apparent in its expanding roles in sustainable development—for example, in expressing life cycle information about products, changing energy consumption behavior, rethinking transportation or food services, and steering decision-making processes in communities or companies. Amended as 'sustainable,' design is repositioned from being part of the problem of unsustainable development. However, preoccupied with forms or solutions, design is not always attentive to its political dimensions. How, by, and for whom sustainability is formulated are political questions to be discussed within discourses and practices of sustainable development—and sustainable design.

Such questions are at stake in critical studies and critical practices of design. Reflecting here on design examples from my own work and that of others, I articulate a series of such questions inspired by critical theory and political philosophy. These open a discussion of the roles of design in sustainable consumption and sustainable communities, in which it is profoundly implicated in the reorganization of everyday life. Combining reflections and examples, the graphic form of this article reflects an interweaving of theory and practice, the materiality of academia and the criticality of design.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AS A POLITICAL MATTER

Resonant in the rallying call *Our Common Future* of the Brundtland report,<sup>1</sup> sustainability has been framed as a common ground within political parties, across party lines, and among nation-states. Environmental issues join up disparate positions and identities among liberals, and experiences of nature and ecological niches generate issues

# OUR COMMON FUTURE

DEBATING COSMOPOLITICS

edited by Daniele Archibugi



VERSO



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of common concern across political parties and socio-economic classes.<sup>2</sup> Hippies and hunters can agree, for example, on certain policy framings of wilderness preservation. Sustainability on a global scale has been articulated as the terms of discourse and policy and through a number of multinational declarations, such as the Rio Summit two decades ago, and coalitions from the early Club of Rome to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which included Gro Harlem Brundtland and the twenty-one world leaders who formulated the Brundtland report in planetary terms. Indeed the WCED can be understood as an example of 'cosmopolitical' governance, as theorized by Daniele Archibugi among others,<sup>3</sup> which seeks more than accord within and across states, rather a supranational political body, a world parliament, endowed with the power of legislation, administration, and enforcement. With such accord, it might seem as if the remaining challenge of sustainability is simply to work out the details.<sup>4</sup> Sustainability, as argued by Erik Swyngedouw and other political philosophers, is paradigmatic of the contemporary politics of consensus on a global scale.<sup>5</sup> Despite the revolutionary potential of the Club of Rome and the Brundtland report, struggles to change underlying structures or to reduce inequities are foreclosed in 'post-political' sustainable development discourse, in which the focus is on narrowing the gap between ideals and applications, between policy declarations and the design of implementations.

Sustainability, however, is fundamentally characterized by controversies. In academic discourses, for example, the topic of 'nature' itself, and its relation to culture, is widely contested in terms of how the object of study is defined in disciplines across the natural and social sciences and, indeed, the social construction of the methods and practices of study within the disciplines, as long debated in the so-called 'science wars'.<sup>6</sup> 'Sustainability' is evoked in multiple and competing ways in public discourse. For example, romantic and transcendentalist strands emphasize the intrinsic and moral value of nature that must be protected and 'shepherded,' 'environmental justice' movements argue that nature is not just 'out there' as wilderness but manifested as everyday environmental hazards and inequities in access to resources, and

'eco-modernists' advocate reform of industrialized society through governance and technologies. Sustainable development involves theories and practices that are socially constructed and enacted in relation to different ontological or ideological positions, historical moments, geographic, and socio-economic locations. Embedded in the politics of knowledge and the everyday practical politics in which power is played out, sustainability involves struggles between those maintaining and gaining influence and resources and other, subaltern, or as yet unformulated social groups. Struggles are set within a pluricentric society wherein resources and agency are distributed across many actors and at many levels, and in which interests are often in competition at a time of rapid globalization, conflicts over diminishing resources, and rising risk factors. Sustainable development involves a range of political questions about who benefits, who gains, and who loses. As a result, sustainability is inevitably, and essentially, a matter of *the political*.

By 'the political,' I do not focus here on macropolitical notions, centered on inter- or intra-national relations, state sovereignty over a people, or organized party politics. In political philosophy, the political is a concept concerned with distinctions among people and groups, the relational formation and contestation of identities, subjectivities, and collectivities that are fundamental to the human condition. While some theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, view the political as a space of freedom and public deliberation, others, such as Chantal Mouffe, posit conflict and antagonism as the political condition.<sup>7</sup> 'Politics' refers to the practices and structures through which a particular social order is established, the hegemony of one group over another, an 'us' privileged or subordinate to a 'them.' "What I call 'politics,'" Mouffe articulates, "...is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to a certain order....Politics is always about the establishment, the reproduction, or the deconstruction of a hegemony, one that is always in relation to a potentially counter-hegemonic order."<sup>8</sup> Sustainable development can be understood as a political endeavor. We could ask, for example, who is (or is not) included in the 'our' of *Our Common Future*, given profound inequities between

those in the West and the Global South, and those with, or without, control over resources and decisions in a society, community, or family. Sustainable development involves a politics of differentiating and privileging particular discourses and practices, individuals and groups, the hegemony of one future over others.

### The political and (sustainable) design

The political matter of sustainability is also a matter for design, since design increasingly takes on roles in sustainable development. Design for sustainable consumption, for example, is applied to reduce domestic (over)consumption of energy, water, and other resources. For sustainable communities, design represents certain practices and interests in negotiations over civic priorities and futures. In these roles, which are further discussed in this article, design is engaged in mediating how and by whom resources are accessed and controlled, for example, and which or whose interests are made visible. These design roles are thus entangled in the political dimensions of sustainability, in relations among human and non-human entities in which not all are equal. For example, responsibilities have shifted from (trans)national and industrial entities to localities and individuals without equivalent shifts in the power to decide what should be done and by whom. Nor are rights and agency spread evenly, for example, as women and others disproportionately affected by resource scarcity are underrepresented in civic forums.<sup>9</sup> Changing energy consumption and steering sustainable futures are more than matters of technology and policy—profound changes to the social organization of everyday life are at stake. Just as sustainable development is a political matter, so are the forms and solutions of design. In response, I argue for critical studies and practices of (sustainable) design.

In this article, examination of the political conditions puts relations into the foreground, or how distinctions and social order are (re)produced within the discourses and practices of sustainable consumption and sustainable communities. Consumption and communities include, for example, those individuals or groups that have access to resources such as energy and those that do not,

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those with different consumption practices competing for limited resources and those with different opportunities or abilities to change. Critical social theories support analysis of such distinctions, for example, given that categories of class, gender, or race relate to differences in access and control within a society, community, or family. Practices and discourses around hygiene, sanitation, and propriety can be understood as gendered and racialized, with the materiality of everyday life being the site of struggles over identity and difference.<sup>10</sup> Policies and designs around energy consumption represent what is 'sustainable,' 'good,' and 'proper' and include or exclude certain groups or individuals, such as native-born or immigrants, small or large families, city or suburban dwellers.<sup>11</sup> Referring to the work of Michel Foucault and other philosophers, we can understand the politics of sustainable development as instituted by government, for example, through laws or, more informally, through other means of governing the conduct of people in their everyday lives. In terms of 'micropolitics,' we can question the role of design within the dispersed practices and knowledge that govern 'private institutions' such as households, families, and even bodies.

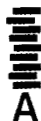
Sustainable development and design involves the reorganization of everyday life towards particular and normative ends, for example (sustainable) consumption and (sustainable) communities. A post-political approach might merely try to smooth over the politics of this, to solve a problem assuming a consensus or to resolve a conflict. Instead, I explore the political dimensions of design roles in sustainable development by asking a series of questions inspired by critical theory and political philosophy. Formulated through a series of questions framed in terms of 'we' and 'other' relations, I reflect upon how design takes part in the (re)production of social order. These questions are lenses for reflecting upon a series of projects, including examples of practice-based design research in which I have participated. *Static!* and *Switch!* were situated as conceptual and critical design practices in the domain of energy consumption. These were conducted as collaborative and interdisciplinary, constituted by a series of projects evolving from and conducted by people with diverse expertise, interests, and interpretations.

The DESIGN ACT book is produced by Iaspis in collaboration with the Interactive Institute,  
co-published by Sternberg Press in 2011. Editors: Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé



Static! Designing for energy awareness

Ramia Mazé



Sustainable Living & Working

David Keyson's Inauguration Symposium

My reflections here are retrospective—this article introduces a new discussion of these projects, from my subjective perspective and through the lenses of my inquiry into the politics of sustainable design. In order to reflect more broadly, I also refer to several examples of sustainability-related critical practices by other designers, architects, and artists. Featured in the project and book *DESIGN ACT*,<sup>12</sup> these examples are inserted, literally, as pages from that book accompanied by comments in captions.

This article combines theoretical reflections and practical examples—I have drawn upon resources from both academia and design, that is, books and projects. The graphic layout attempts to express the materiality of academic discourse (the visuality and tactility of books) as well as the criticality of design projects (the ideas and politics behind the images). Theory and practice, critical studies and critical practices, are thus interwoven in the form of the article.

## DESIGN AND POLITICS OF (SUSTAINABLE) CONSUMPTION

As a service profession to industry, design has historically been part of creating consumer desire for products that consume resources such as energy, water, and fuel. Indeed, the first industrial designs of electric kettles, toasters, and irons by Peter Behrens, commissioned by the German electricity company AEG, were intended to increase energy demand in households.<sup>13</sup> Nowadays, domestic consumption of energy is so common as to seem invisible. It is not often in the foreground of attention or available to sensory perception, typically accessed through meters hidden away and periodic bills to the head of household. This, among other issues, motivated *Static!*,<sup>14</sup> in which everyday domestic artefacts were designed to materialize energy and to prompt reflection. A substantial genre of design practice and research has developed, in which the focus is on designing for change in energy consumption. Design for 'sustainable consumption' focuses on resource-consumptive practices in everyday life and how these may be shaped by design, for example, in the form of information campaigns promoting



change in attitudes or behavior, product designs that encourage energy-conserving ways of using the product, and computer-based visualizations of individual or household consumption.<sup>15</sup> While previous concern in sustainable design has focused on product life cycles, this genre expands design focus to *lifestyles*—from 'good' (sustainable) products to 'good' (sustainable) consumer behavior.<sup>16</sup> As a response to a history of producing increased material and resource consumption, design is repositioned to reform or reduce such consumption.

This role for design is well-situated within the sustainable development discourse, particularly in relation to a socio-technical extension of the 'eco-modernization' discourse.<sup>17</sup> This has been a largely technocratic discourse focused on the reform or, to borrow a term from Arthur Mol and Gert Spaargaren, the 'superindustrialization'<sup>18</sup> of existing production systems and technologies. This is reflected in the 'clean production' paradigm, which operates through mechanisms such as life cycle assessment and third-party certification standards (LEED, Green Seal, Sweden's *Bra Miljöval*, etc.) of products. Technical optimization on the production side has been rapidly outpaced by consumer behavior and demographic factors, however, and the discourse has shifted to include 'sustainable consumption.' This extends clean production paradigms—consumption is a phase in life cycle assessment, for example. However, it is often measured only at the 'point-of-purchase,' perpetuating a macroeconomic bias of traditional consumer research that fails to account for, among other things, limits to or reversals of change in ongoing 'micro' practices of consumption.<sup>19</sup> In response, approaches are expanding more deeply into the *social* contexts and practices of ordinary consumption in households, workplaces, and communities.<sup>20</sup>

Within this wider shift in responsibility for sustainability from producers to consumers, designed artefacts are increasingly understood as instrumental. Hence, the expansion of design for sustainable consumption practices—for designers, this repositions design away from being part of the (over)consumption problem. For those in policy and industry, design implements their sustainability objectives in the everyday life of consumers,

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as norms around clean, efficient, and reduced resource consumption. Such reforms and solutions have political dimensions, which may also be analyzed and altered by design.

### Social norms – and forms

As instruments of policy, design engages a kind of micropolitics around resource consumption in everyday life. The power of the state emanates, literally, from electric wires and water pipes, sockets and faucets, bills and eco-products, which mediate consumer access to and control over resources. In her history of water provision and 'wish images' of modernization, for example, Maria Kaika reveals flows of social control over regions and households in Greece, including the reproduction of gendered norms of consumption.<sup>21</sup> Designed infrastructures and artefacts are more than technical forms—they mediate political power.<sup>22</sup> This is another kind of power than that exerted by state institutions, which operate mainly through the logics of laws, influence, prestige, authority, and money. Through 'disciplinary power,' as theorized by Foucault, norms are produced and controlled through forms such as architectural structures, public displays, surveillance practices, and recording techniques.<sup>23</sup> In such forms, discipline is exerted through "programs, strategies, tactics, devices, calculations, negotiations, intrigues, persuasions, seductions aimed at the 'conduct of the conduct' of individuals, groups, populations—and indeed oneself,"<sup>24</sup> as Andrew Barry puts it. Households, families, and even bodies are micropolitical institutions, as they perform, reproduce, or resist norms embodied in particular forms. The macropolitical order of the state is, at least in part, built up from a complex network of socio-technical artefacts—and their micropolitics.

One way in which design manifests its political conditions—and potentially its politics—is through representations. Making something visible makes it political.<sup>25</sup> For example, monitoring, naming, and depicting air as 'smog' in London created and mobilized groups in society, in ways that were not intended by those originally involved, as Barry discusses. In *Static!*, our premise was that electricity has become taken so much for granted that its (over)consumption has almost become invisible.

To take the question of representations a bit further, I could pose a further question: *In what ways might representations align a 'we' with, or against, others?* In this question, focus is on the relational nature of the political, in which there may be a struggle around replacing a particular hegemony, or set of norms, with another. The New Beauty Council (NBC) was formed to contest the norms of the original Beauty Council [Skönhetsrådet], a government agency responsible for regulating the order of public space in Stockholm. NBC is represented by a graphic identity and website that nearly duplicate those of the municipal institution. Made visible in this form, it publicizes the aesthetic and environmental concerns it shares with the official council—but the resemblance ends here. NBC takes up conflicts between aesthetic and environmental concerns, as well as other concerns such as health and poverty. For example, the presence (or absence) of recycling containers, urban farming, or public shelters in areas of historical preservation raises questions about which, or whose, values take priority. Merely realigning aesthetic and environmental norms (for example, through more beautiful bins, farms, or benches) would not solve more fundamental societal problematics. Instead, NBC redesigns modes of political representation. Whereas council decisions are made behind closed doors, for example, NBC's public forums include those from very different social locations. Green Walks and the Safe Slut carnival destabilize the 'normal' social order by involving the public directly in other, or others', experiences of the city. These informal and performative modes could be understood as a politics of counter-representation or, at least, counter to traditional forms of representational politics.<sup>27</sup> Varieties of 'us/them' relations are evident—but it is not about merely replacing the hegemony of the original council or aesthetic with environmental concerns. Multiple concerns and conflicts are visible, in ways that cross gender, class, ethnic, and other lines without negating differences.

NEW BEAUTY COUNCIL • →

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## NEW BEAUTY COUNCIL

by Annika Enqvist, Anna Kharkina, Thérèse Kristiansson and Kristoffer Svenberg (SE) 2008

*Public events for staging a dialog about the city and its 'publics'.*

“The citizens of a city might have different opinions of good & bad, beautiful & ugly, fun or boring, but they have one thing in common—the public space. At odds or finding a consensus, the public realm is a stage for constant negotiation.” Thus the ‘New Beauty Council’ (NBC) introduces its mission to inquire into public space through the introduction of new perspectives and public discussion. The official ‘Council for the Protection of the Beauty of Stockholm’, or Stockholms skönhetsråd, is charged with representing aesthetic and environmental concerns within the city government and urban development. NBC is a project concerned with similar areas of interest—but operating through the curation of public events and art projects that include people and perspectives that are usually left out. The NBC ‘Changed Perspectives’ were a series of public discussions including urban developers, architects, homeless, and queer activists. The public NBC ‘City Walks’ reveal alternative histories and ways of experiencing the urban. Drawing on feminist theory and cultural studies, NBC investigates how architecture is charged with authority—and how its design and planning can be opened up by staging dialog and debate across policy and business, cultural actors, and the general public.

### LINKS

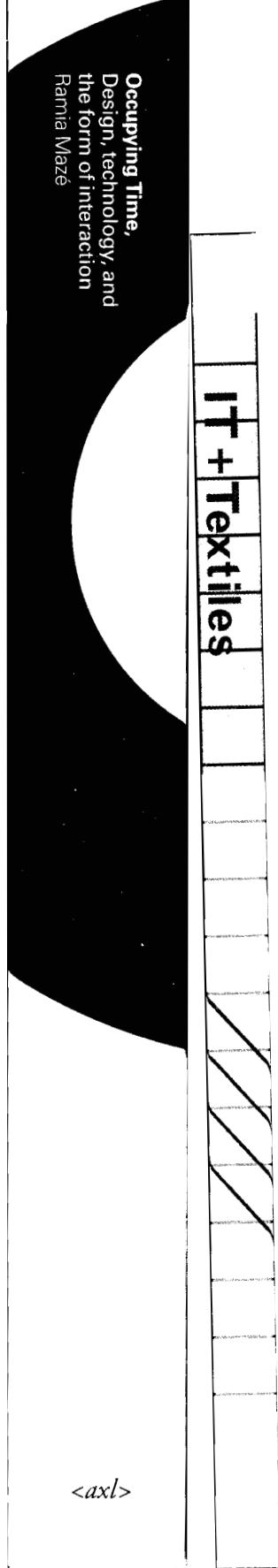
→ [newbeautycouncil.org](http://newbeautycouncil.org)

Photo: ‘New Beauty Council’



Through various visual, audible, and tangible forms, electricity was materialized to make it more, or again, apparent. The Static! Disappearing-Pattern Tiles and Flower Lamp change form, for example, to reflect electricity consumption over time.<sup>26</sup> Here, change in electricity consumption is coupled with particular forms—the Tiles' graphic decoration (dis/ appearing pattern) and the Lamp's product shape (which blooms/wilts). 'Good' (reduced or decreasing) consumption is signaled by 'good' design, or particular aesthetic conventions of taste or beauty. In reflecting on the political dimensions of these, I could ask: *In what ways might these representations posit a 'we'?* In the hands and homes of consumers, these designs make the sustainability of individuals' practices visible to them, within and as a household, and even to neighbors. Making electricity consumption visible also makes visible a 'we' as sustainable or unsustainable consumers as well as a process of becoming more sustainable. The category of 'we' as 'sustainable consumers' is privileged through forms intended to persuade those who might identify with or aspire to 'good' design. This is an example of how design could implement the political norms of sustainable consumption through representations that elicit, affirm, and reward particular identifications.

Within the genre of design for sustainable consumption, micropolitical dimensions involve ordering 'good behavior' and 'proper conduct.' Aligned with the eco-modernization discourse, attention is focused on changing norms in the existing system of production and consumption. At the 'point-of-purchase' in a store, for example, 'clean' production is represented as life cycle information or eco-labeling. At home, energy and water consumed can be tracked by technologies, such as smart meters in the building or built-in sensors, and visualized through software applications and displays built into products. Considerable attention has been given to the form of such visualizations, which may range from statistical or complex presentations to abstract or simplified representations, from attention-grabbing foreground designs to those that recede ambiently into the background, from basic or 'neutral' designs to those intended to educate, persuade, incentivize, or even coerce perceptions and behavior. Indeed, such design can be thought of not only in terms of physical ergonomics, or how



Occupying Time,  
Design, technology, and  
the form of interaction  
Ramia Mazé

IT + Textiles

<axl>

forms are designed to 'fit' people's bodies and sensory capacities, but also cognitive and emotional ergonomics.<sup>28</sup> Interactive forms involve time, the design of sequences of interaction in which information displays respond to users, anticipating, inviting, and incentivizing certain behavioral patterns.<sup>29</sup> Such continuous feedback entails that consumers may learn the consequences of their actions, which feed forward into their future actions. Beyond merely making visible a particular object of concern, such designs can be understood to include the design of ongoing processes of regulation, affirmation, and reinforcement of particular behavioral norms. As, literally, a disciplinary practice, design is thus complicit in producing "docile and useful bodies"<sup>30</sup> in Foucault's terms. Making 'good' energy consumption visible is part of how people begin to self-discipline, to internalize the norms prescribed by policy and inscribed in forms by design.

In processes of ongoing interactions with design representations, however, sustainability cannot be decided once and for all but is continually negotiated. In the Static! Energy Curtain, we explored making energy visible in a way that required ongoing reflection and daily, hands-on action. The Curtain collects and stores sunlight during the day, which is made visible as light at night.<sup>31</sup> It requires ongoing interaction and a conscious trade-off between saving energy (closing the Curtain to collect energy) or spending it (leaving the Curtain open). Interaction has consequences—indeed, the cyclical transformation of energy through the self-sustaining object depends upon it. Further interactions emerged in a study of the Curtain installed for several weeks in Finnish households. In one instance, the darkness of the winter days, made doubly visible by a lack of light in the Curtain, heightened the depressed seasonal mood. Indeed, some 'cheated' by using another lamp to power the solar cells. In several cases, the Curtain prompted rearrangements in the home, since it was moved around along with, and in relation to, other lamps and furnishings. I could ask: *How is a 'we' negotiated, maintained, and evolved?* As revealed in the study, what is understood as 'good' or 'proper' is open to interpretation. The designed program of interaction with the Curtain was continually negotiated within/across seasons, on an individual/family basis, and in relation to

Redrawing a political frontier does not mean a return to old frontiers or a political design established only ever in opposition behind an immovable barricade. Yet nor does it mean affirming and enforcing the politics of eco-modernization premised on 'win-win' futures within the current logics and technologies of industrialized production. To take the question of representations negotiated through interactions a bit further, I could ask the question: *In what ways could design take part in the (de)construction of a social order?* PeopleProduct123 subverts modes of production. It makes visible the working conditions of global corporations producing consumer products and deploys do-it-yourself tactics to open distribution of this product information. Anyone can download alternative labels, which display facts about the pay rates, working hours, labor conditions, and living standards of workers in South America or Southeast Asia. Positioned explicitly as 'anti-advertising,' this can be understood as anti-capitalist, along the long-established political frontier of class struggle and labor rights. But this takes place and is transformed through a new set of interactions—information is open-sourced through post-industrial technologies, for example. Environmental information is included, drawing new alliances across different struggles. Rather than opposition manifested from behind a picket line outside a store, retail contexts become a site for making visible and negotiating conflicting interests. Reconfigured as producers of information rather than as a passive mass subject to persuasion, consumers are understood as capable of political dissent and negotiation.

PEOPLEPRODUCT123 • →

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## PEOPLEPRODUCT123 by Anti-Advertising Agency (US) 2007

*Activist design and intervention to raise humanitarian issues.*

People Products brings you the most up-to-date information on the people who make the products we use every day in the form of easy-to-use package labels and stickers. The project aims to reconnect labor and products through images and stories about producers. This improved packaging is placed in stores using a technique called 'shopdropping', the opposite of shoplifting, in which items are clandestinely left in retail environments. An easy way for everyone to become involved in market advertising, People Products can be downloaded to your home computer, printed in color and black and white, and assembled for placement in corner stores, supermarkets, hardware stores—practically any place you buy products. 'PeopleProducts123' has held several 'shopdropping' workshops in arts organizations (Eyebeam in New York), a local Kinko's or public library in small towns in Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

### LINKS

→ [peopleproducts123.com/about](http://peopleproducts123.com/about)

→ [antiadvertisingagency.com](http://antiadvertisingagency.com)

Photo: Steve Lambert

\$4.59

\$4.69

Soft 75 Watts

4 light Bulbs  
From Bihar,  
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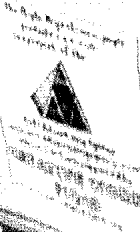
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(or  
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Many thanks  
to  
Int'l Labor  
Rights Fund

[www.intlrights.org](http://www.intlrights.org);  
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[www.nlcw.org](http://www.nlcw.org)



*Boy, Bihar, India*  
This boy works in a factory in Bihar, India producing light bulbs. He plans to sell his and his work will help improve the lives of many people in Bihar.

white 100  
longer life

\$5.19



changing arrangements and climates inside/outside the home. The 'political frontier,'<sup>32</sup> to borrow a term from Chantal Mouffe, of (un)sustainability is continually drawn and redrawn. Nor is it a matter of one politics of sustainability designed to get others in line, but of an ongoing struggle among multiple norms, interpretations, and experiences.

### Design as (de)constructing norms of consumption

While sustainable consumption tends to focus on technocratic approaches to regulating and reducing consumption, questions of 'how to change' and 'change by whom' remain.<sup>33</sup> A design role in this might be positioned as means (how) to get consumers (who) to change. Design, understood as an instrument of disciplinary power, is thus positioned to resolve policy directives to reduce resource consumption. Indeed, the growing genre of design for sustainable consumption explores how design can regulate, reinforce, and persuade consumers with respect to particular norms of consumption. Design representations and interactions are developed that mediate consumers' access and control over resources in particular ways, enabling and disabling 'good' consumption practices that become normalized into embodied habit and everyday life. In this genre, the effects, or effectiveness, of design are often evaluated through 'usability' tests of prototypes. Designs are assessed in terms of how people are able to use them to perform an intended action or how well the design 'fits' its political purpose. Failure to achieve 'proper conduct' may be attributed to 'bad design' or 'mis-use,' and subsequent attention tends to focus attention back on improving the design. A relevant question for this approach might be: *How could representations be designed to improve the 'fit' between consumer behavior and policy targets for reduced resource consumption?*

However, there are more questions that are relevant. Asking *In what ways could these representations posit a 'we'?*, I can reflect upon those targeted by a particular sustainability policy or design. For example, the Static! Tiles and Lamp presume particular households and types of consumers, reinforcing existing aesthetic norms by coupling them to new (sustainability) norms. This question

## User Behavior and Technology Development

Peter-Paul Verbeek and  
Adriaan Slob (Eds.)



**MAKING FUTURES**

**Wangel**

**IRADICAL  
THINKERS**

**THE RETURN OF THE POLITICAL**

opens a space for exploring how people might identify with being sustainable, 'sustainable consumers' as represented by a particular design, and how this process of identification confirms existing, other, or new identities and norms. If a 'we' is presumed by design, asking *In what ways could representations align a 'we' with or against others?* would query how a particular identification is constituted, which identifications are excluded or not yet formed. The New Beauty Council, for example, opposes the social order embodied by a particular institution, staging situations in which multiple under-represented interests not only stand in opposition but interact and form new alignments. This question opens up thinking about further approaches, from those that represent a singular 'we' to a range of possible identifications, alignments, and disjunctures within and across 'us/them' categories. These questions of representation expand the focus from 'form' as only an aesthetic or technical matter to a political matter, in which social order is (re)produced through selecting and staging forms of relation among individuals and groups.

Further questions are raised as such micropolitical relations come to the fore. Asking *How is a 'we' negotiated, maintained, and evolved?*, I can begin to reflect upon how individuals and groups engage in normative formulations of sustainability and design forms. In the study of the Static! Curtain, for example, the issue of 'fit' was not only about a light function or energy behavior but the artefact as mobilized within domestic arrangements, emotional states, and family dynamics. This question opens up an exploration of ongoing processes of people fitting artefacts into their social practices on their terms, in which conceptions of 'we' and 'sustainability' are open-ended. Asking *In what ways could design take part in the (de)construction of a social order?* is another way of querying how 'form' might 'fit' particular purposes. In this formulation, however, I can reflect more widely on a range of representations, practices, norms, and people, along with their agency, against, with, and through design. In PeopleProduct<sup>123</sup>, artefacts are repackaged, literally re-presented, in ways that question the normativity of a given representation and reconfigure an established order governing producer-consumer relations. This

question opens up an exploration of the range of those for and by whom representations might be deployed. Articulating in various ways how 'us/them' relations might be queried, this series of questions enables further inquiry into 'who' might be affirmed, aligned, represented, and mobilized within an expanded understanding of form as a political matter.

## DESIGN AND POLITICS OF (SUSTAINABLE) COMMUNITIES

Querying some micropolitics of design for consumption practices problematizes sustainable development as policy from the top to be implemented into everyday life by design. Indeed, rather than top-down command-and-control policy approaches, sustainability governance in Europe has moved in recent decades toward more 'interactive' and 'grounded' policy-making and planning. Barry argues that the interweaving of technocratic social policies, technoscience discourses, and communication technologies is networking societies in ways that may be increasingly, and literally, interactive. From a micropolitical perspective, this suggests the potential for more feedback—and also resistance—to policies by a range of others than those that may typically be assumed or targeted in policies and designs. Focus is also expanding from questions of 'how' to 'who' in sustainable consumption discourse, given the failings of previous approaches, which tended to presume a 'we,' to 'black-box' consumers as an undifferentiated and passive category.<sup>34</sup> Sociological theories and studies of consumption challenge the idea that more information and/or incentives lead to the 'right' choices—presumptions of which may seem to be haunted by the shadow of modernity's idealized rational man, his grand narratives, universal values, and culture-free behavior. Social practice theories, for example, treat consumption as constituted by everyday practices that are deeply rooted in heterogeneous social, cultural, historical, and geographic conditions. Terms such as 'consumer-citizen'<sup>35</sup> articulate overlapping identities and political agency, prompting reconsideration of the role of policies and designs in relation to social practices that are also, explicitly, politically located.

KRUEGER  
GIBBS

EZIO MANZINI  
FRANÇOIS JÉGOU

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PARADOX

sustainable everyday  
SCENARIOS OF URBAN LIFE



GUILFORD

SMART  
library

Unruly Practices

Fraser

Polity

Communities, and citizens, are targeted in further approaches to the governance of sustainable development. One example is the Sustainable Communities program, which has localized spatial planning of newly-built and renewed settlements in the UK. This is a logical extension of 'big society' policies, involving the devolution (or, as some argue, abdication) of responsibilities previously held to be those of 'big government' and 'big market.' Sustainable Communities are positioned as pro-growth strategies to (re)develop the economies of particular places within their environmental 'limits to growth,' to balance development policies with constraints such as resource availability, infrastructure constraints, climate suitability, and renewability of brownfield sites. In the spirit of a 'new regionalism,' the particularities of local ecologies, geographies, and resources are explicitly accounted for, along with 'community-led development.'<sup>36</sup> New roles for design are emerging in such development. For example, 'service design' is engaged in local provision of public or social services such as healthcare, education and transportation.<sup>37</sup> Design for 'creative communities' amplifies practices such as collective transportation, community-supported agriculture, elective eco-communities, and sharing economies around products, property, and food co-ops.<sup>38</sup> For sustainable communities, emphasis is on co-production and participation. Citizens and groups are directly involved—as initiators, leaders, representatives, developers, and implementers—rather than only as consumers of policies and designs.

#### Forms of life

'Grounded' policies and designs are embedded in localities, including a diversity of social and ecological relations—and micropolitics. Design might be generally understood to involve the selection and staging of social relations, of affirming, aligning, representing, and mobilizing individuals and social groups, as discussed in the previous section. Co- and participatory design explicitly involve methods and formats for the social processes around design development. Foucault's 'disciplinary power' is useful for querying the micropolitics of design and the social, and his notion of 'bio-power' is useful to extend this to ecological relations.<sup>39</sup> Bio-power concerns the reproduction and regulation of biological life—indeed, life has become inseparable

from those technologies that regulate it, Donna Haraway argues.<sup>40</sup> Humans and other organisms have become hybrids through genetic, medical, and other designed technologies, an argument that has been extended to hybrid geographies by Sarah Whatmore.<sup>41</sup> Design is entangled in bio-power relations and thus the political dimensions of bodies, ecologies, and geographies. Just as formulations of 'who' involve distinctions and norms, so do relations to other entities. An example from North American environmentalist discourses is that of nature 'out there'—'the big outside' defended by Sierra Club 'eco-warriors.' This formulation, premised on notions of segregation, preservation, and restriction, can take on racialized overtones that have provoked violent confrontations among environmentalists and property rights, social justice, and minority groups.<sup>42</sup> Extending an inquiry into design in social relations, we might also consider how design is involved in relations among even more diverse others.

Continuing the discussion of design representations, Switch!<sup>43</sup> queried design as interventions in socio-technical ecologies. Switch! Symbiots<sup>44</sup> is another example of making energy consumption visible within such ecologies. Inspired by concepts of 'symbiosis,' we explored interactions ranging among the mutualistic, parasitic, and commensal, which are pathologies describing 'the living together of unlike organisms' in biology and botany. Symbiotic relations were lenses for speculating on urban life as ecosystemic competition among individuals, families, neighbors, and non-human entities over finite energy resources. Reinterpreting practices and places around Stockholm, a crosswalk, building facade and shared lawn were developed as scenarios of competition. Images of these, in the genre of hyperreal art photography, fueled discussions with neighborhood residents. Politically 'correct' answers were elicited to our questions "Do you know how much energy your neighbors consume?," "What about energy in common?," and "Whose responsibility is it?"—"We have only one Earth."—but also internal conflicts, social tensions among different types of households, and perceptions of injustice in public systems providing services. In retrospect, I could pose a political question of Symbiots: *How are others brought in relation to a 'we'?* Instead of reducing energy to an

Financial collapse in Argentina in the early 2000s triggered crises in political institutions. Civil disobedience, self-management, and related practices such as assembling and bartering were part of restructuring the public sphere. In the context of further ecological crises—flash floods in Buenos Aires—a project was spurred to collect citizens' solutions in a handbook and to empower inhabitants in urban planning and crisis management. Inundacion!<sup>45</sup> was developed as a 'board game' for people to gather around and to interact physically with the political dimensions of ecological crises. Through physical representations, three phases of game play worked through interests and priorities, solutions and conflicts, analysis and reflection. I could pose the question *How are identities reformulated through such relations?* In opposition to the authorities and experts typically charged with urban planning, the game and its heterodox procedures highlighted local knowledge and informal expertise as well as building skills and collaboration. Indeed, floods might also be understood as political actors, toppling not only physical structures but institutional barriers and political hierarchies as well. The crises entailed that the public sphere could not be about leaving differences aside to reach a consensus but about voicing and visualizing conflicts to restructure the social order along different lines. Conflicts, rather than avoided, were integral in the game to identifying alternative approaches, solutions, and actors rather than those of institutionalized politics or professional establishments. Perhaps this is an example of how, in Whatmore's words, "outside(r)s' of various orderings of social life take shape as counter-sites in the fabric of the modern city."<sup>46</sup>

INUNDACION! • →

design-act.se/archive →

## INUNDACION! by m7red (AR) 2000

*Board game designed to project disaster scenarios.* 'Inundacion!' was developed to explore the possibilities opened up by an urban disaster. It began as a self-initiated project in response to a minor flood in Buenos Aires, and it evolved in the form of a board game through workshops and exhibitions as public attention increasingly focused both on erratic weather due to global warming and urban disaster. The goal of the game is to create a participatory environment to discuss urban planning and the fabric of urban society catalyzed by catastrophic flooding. Twenty players typically play over the course of three to four day workshops and move through three phases of play. In the first phase, roles are assigned and narrative for the disaster established. In the second, roles and agendas for various characters interact, create conflict and propose solutions. The third phase is reflective, providing a space for analysis and discussion.

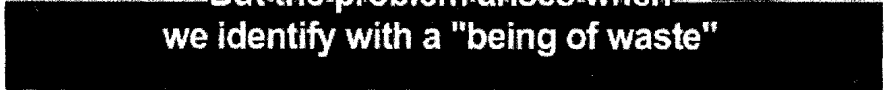
### LINKS

- [mediamatic.net/page/80769/en](http://mediamatic.net/page/80769/en)
- [m7inundacion.blogspot.com/](http://m7inundacion.blogspot.com/)
- [m7redes.blogspot.com/](http://m7redes.blogspot.com/)

Photo: m7red



**But the problem arises when  
we identify with a "being of waste"**



issue of rewarding (or punishing) consumers, the project explores the issue of who is sustained, who is the 'we' that benefits and survives. The photos and responses evoke the more complex nature of 'good' consumption, 'ideal' society, and 'domesticated' nature. Issues of class, generation gaps, and public/private interests are evoked, but not at a distance or in militant opposition. The interests and survival of others are not 'out there' but, rather, close to home, in mundane actions and among those encountered everyday.

Community-based governance and design are grounded in 'local,' 'indigenous,' or 'traditional' knowledge. Such knowledge is bound up in socio-ecological relations—knowing about water and animals is bound up in land-based practices; for example, food, energy, and waste are embedded in domestic practices. Ezio Manzini and Anna Meroni speak of '*ipso facto* design' and 'diffuse design ability,' which emerge from practices on the ground, literally from the bottom up, in which the design role is merely to amplify the inventiveness of already 'creative communities.'<sup>47</sup> However, such socio-ecological practices may not be recognized within formal politics and civic forums, where they may be repressed or capitalized on by others.<sup>48</sup> The problematics of political representation has been taken up in a variety of ways, including Bruno Latour's formulations of a 'parliament of things' that includes not only human but non-human entities.<sup>49</sup> However, not everyone or everything can be included or be equal on the same terms.<sup>50</sup> Edgar Pieterse, in contrast, argues for direct action through 'practice-oriented interventions' on the ground and with those that are un- or underrepresented in formal politics. In his proposition of revolution through 'radical incrementalism,' 'radical' does not refer to a technocratic notion of speed or scale of bottom-up change but to radical political thought that refutes consensus-driven politics. Crossing formal and informal political spheres, he emphasizes "the symbolic domain where competing discourses clash and morph into new imaginaries about the city."<sup>51</sup> Such issues resonate in participatory design traditions, in which design representations, including artefacts, images and stories, structure social processes in which conflicts are articulated as part of reformulating a given practice, policy, or design.<sup>52</sup>

Harding,  
editor

The Postcolonial Science  
and Technology Studies Reader

Duke

City Futures

EDGAR PIETERSE



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As rooted in communities, however, user-centered and participatory design can be incremental in both the degree of change and the (political) nature of change.<sup>53</sup> Switch! Energy Futures<sup>54</sup> was a reaction to design 'visions of the future.' These often envision only incremental changes to otherwise unaltered Western lifestyles or, alternatively, eco-topias of silver-bullet technologies, which fail to imagine outside the current organization of society and to problematize the full range of those who may be affected. Energy Futures incorporated methods from futures studies, such as scanning practices of energy consumption to build future scenarios, and role-playing potential lifestyles in these scenarios. We thereby attended to differences among practices, multiple (including extreme) scenarios, and disruptions and adaptations of lifestyles. We crafted a series of design artefacts for transitions to possible futures that speculated on changes in belief systems and political ideologies, relations to nature and to one's own body, work, and leisure. Further, and including a more affective engagement (rather than only rational deliberation), we staged an event with architects, engineers, and educators, in which these futures were made tangible in ways that evoked physical and emotional as well as professional reflections. I could ask, *How are outsides formulated and represented?* Indeed, 'futurity,' as the most clearly drawn 'outside' to our current social-ecological order, is perhaps the most radical frontier for exploring the micropolitics of design.<sup>55</sup> Inspired by the concept of 'radical incrementalism,' Switch! made tangible how diverse socio-ecological practices could suggest very different futures.

As sustainability governance is distributed, for example, within communities, there is potential for new ways of ordering social and ecological relations. This involves questions not only of how to do this but who is involved, has agency, is included or excluded, a micropolitics of relations exacerbated at a time of rising risk factors and increasing competition over diminishing resources. Not all participate or benefit equally in the construction and reproduction of either traditional or newly-introduced practices. Environmental change and risks, like forms of knowledge, are not evenly spread through or across communities. This is reflected in disparities between the West and the

The atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) is a non-profit organization that produces self-managed architecture. EcoBox was built as a series of gardening plots, which occupied a wasteland between railway tracks in an area with a low-income population from different cultural and family backgrounds, including undocumented people. Many of the first people to garden were local children, and others joined over time, bringing new interests manifested in new-built modules such as a library and DIY center. A common space was created in response to common interests as well as conflicts. I in turn could ask, *In what ways is design constructed by, or through, social ordering?* Doina Petrescu, a founder of aaa, reflects: "It was very difficult to manage all the conflicts. But I really believe that a democratic model is based on conflict dynamics. We have also experienced, in managing this project, that it is very difficult to keep up with conflicts that are unsolved...And there are conflicts because, being the only open collective space in the area, all the problems of the area were made visible, they came out in this place. Because people didn't have other places to go and express themselves, they would come here. We also had drug problems. But, again, because they were made visible, it was possible to have a discussion about them. At a certain moment, we supplemented the basic activity of gardening with other things, like projecting a series of documentaries on everyday life politics. We did this in the garden. There were open-air projections with the documentary filmmakers that generated serious debates, in which the inhabitants felt like experts and were entitled to ask questions or to speak about their experiences."<sup>56</sup> Eventually, and by design, people from the community took over the project and managed it based on their (different) ideas.

ECOBX • →



design-act.se/archive →

## ECOBX

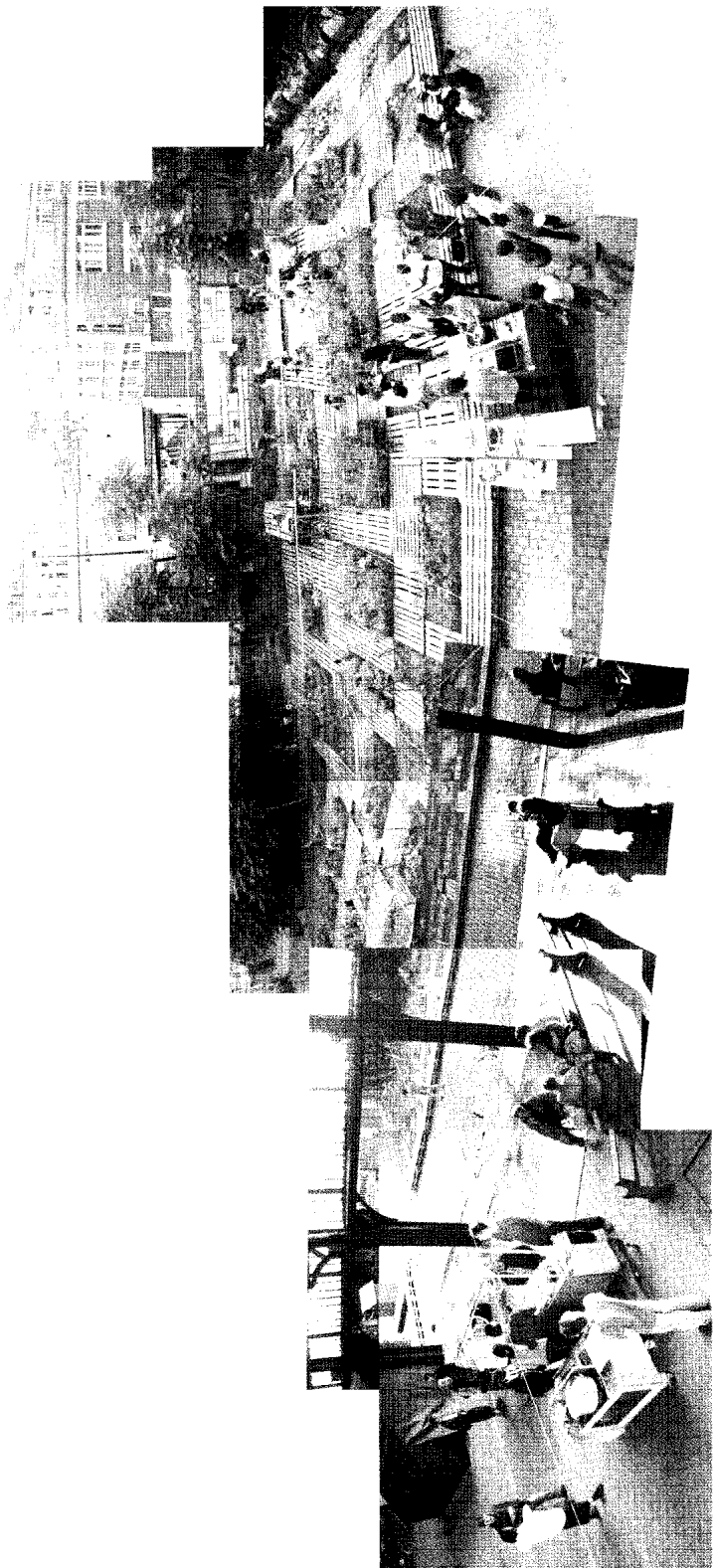
by atelier d'architecture autogérée (FR) 2001

*Self-managed eeo-urban network.* The 'EcoBox' is the initial project within a series of self-managed projects in the La Chapelle area of northern Paris which encourages residents to gain access to and critically transform misused or underused spaces. These projects actively involved municipal stakeholders to emphasize a flexible use of space and aim to preserve urban 'biodiversity' by encouraging the co-existence of a wide range of life-styles and living practices. atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) began this process by establishing a temporary garden constructed out of recycled materials. The garden, 'EcoBox', has progressively extended into a platform for urban criticism and creativity, which is curated by the aaa members, residents and external collaborators and which catalyses activities at a local and translocal level. 'EcoBox's principles of self-management have been furthered developed in the project 'Le 56 / Eco-Interstice' by aaa.

### LINKS

→ [urbantactics.org](http://urbantactics.org)

Photo: Doina Petrescu/aaa

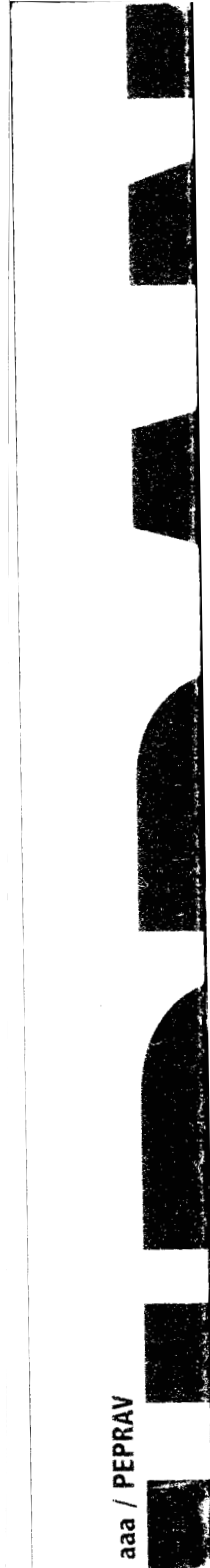


Global South but also within every community, where there are differences in who has access and control over air, land, water, and other resources as well who suffers from scarcity and pollution. Environmental justice movements thus argue that environmental sustainability cannot be separated from social sustainability. The environment is understood as another area in which discrimination is affected and reproduced.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, social justice comes to the fore in such movements, with self-determination and sovereignty instituted through recognizing differences—"not just the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression"<sup>58</sup>—as Iris Marion Young articulates. A radical politics of sustainability—and design—would seek to make explicit the variety of those people and entities involved, lest their knowledge and their rights remain invisible. It is not frontiers of inclusion/exclusion but suppression altogether that can erupt in violence within a society or act out upon the environment.

Design as ordering  
(non)human communities

Design is implicated in the politics of sustainable development, in which attention has shifted from producers to consumers and from the state to citizens. As discussed in public discourses around sustainable development, this shift may variably be interpreted as failings of 'big government' or 'big market,' of capitalism or nationalism. Further, it may be debated whether, for consumers and citizens, this shift represents the devolution of responsibilities or redistribution of rights. These are also questions for design, and some of the micropolitics of these are raised here. As discussed, design for sustainable consumption and communities takes part in implementing this shift and in formulating what it means for consumers and citizens. The role of design might be positioned as a means (how) to get consumers/citizens (who) to change—for example, as discussed in the previous section, *How could representations be designed to improve the 'fit' between consumer behavior and policy targets for reduced resource consumption?* But this is not the only relevant question. Designers presume and select consumers to target, confirming or challenging existing

YOUNG JUSTICE AND THE POLITICS OF difference



social norms. Design representations appeal to processes of identification and behavior change and steer them towards particular ends, which are continually negotiated in people's everyday lives. Understood as more than form, as more than simply a means to an end, the role of design is formulated as (re)producing social relations, of affirming, aligning, representing, and mobilizing individuals and groups. Reflecting the micropolitical dimensions raised by asking questions about 'who,' the question becomes *In what ways could design take part in the (de)construction of a social order?*

To the extent that design takes part in sustainable consumption or sustainable communities, it is always, already, implicated in the politics of these discourses. Just as there may be different kinds of consumption and communities, there are also different ways of doing design, even within the particular (sustainable) consumption and communities that are discussed here. Here, the question of form—'how' design is done—is important. By crafting forms according to certain aesthetic norms, for example, design affirms or counters normative cultural ideas or institutions, as investigated in the Static! Tiles and Lamp and by the New Beauty Council. Design forms can constrain or encourage interpretation by others, as in the Static! Curtain. Indeed, design may be open-sourced so as to be appropriated by others, as in PeopleProduct123, as active forms of engagement or activism in relation to systems of production and consumption. Design representations can make complex or abstract ideas available to the senses as well as the imagination. In Switch! Symbiots, for example, alternative realities are vividly depicted, where ecosystemic logics and survival are paramount, and in Energy Futures, diverse futures embodying radical change are made tangible in the here and now to stimulate personal and professional engagement. Design representations can become platforms for other forms of knowledge to become explicit, recognized, and established, as in Inundacion!, or for conflicts to be expressed and confronted collectively, as in EcoBox. In these, the aesthetics, functionality, technology, and production of form are important—'how' form engages consumers/citizens in different ways.

The political question of design is always, therefore, also a question of 'who.' By asking questions such as how 'we' is formulated, for example, I can reflect upon how individuals and groups are selected and staged as 'sustainable consumers' by design representations and in designed processes. By asking questions about 'others' and 'outsides,' such formulations are understood as being developed in relation to a variety of other formulations, entities, and potentials. Asking *How are others brought in relation to a 'we'?*, for example, I can reflect upon how design representations may change relations to those that might otherwise seem very different from oneself. In Switch! Symbiots, relations to other family types, classes, ages, or species might be mutual, commensal, parasitic, or at least open to reflection and discussion. Asking *How are identities reformulated through such relations?* queries the potential for the nature of such relations to reconfigure how individuals and groups formulate themselves. For those involved in Inundacion!, for example, ruptures in relations to the state and to nature were conditions for processes in which people came to see their own expertise in new ways and in which new capacities were developed in groups of citizens. Asking *How are outsides formulated and represented?*, I can reflect upon potentials of relating to very different or distant realities. For example, Switch! Energy Futures scenarios stimulated self-reflection on the feasibility and desirability of one's own lifestyle, worldview and future in relation to a variety of others.

Asking *In what ways is design constructed by, or through, social ordering?*, we can reflect upon design within spatially and temporally complex processes of social and ecological change. For example, while nothing except for the site was known or planned in advance, EcoBox took form as different people came along. The project was produced through their interactions with materials found or brought, through interactions with one other and in relation to different issues, and through interactions in relation to emerging social protocols and roles. Built and biological forms, social norms and stratifications, took shape over time. While the project is a kind of social-ecological microcosm, its micropolitical dimensions do not stop at the edge of the site, nor would they if it

were to disappear. The project is part of larger and longer-term subjective and collective processes. It also has macropolitical resonances—by seeding others, it spread in a 'trans-local' way, and by sparking exchange with municipal planners, its effects were scaled up. Among participants, sites and scales of operation, EcoBox illustrates how design can operate in a kind of 'political diagonal,' in which different 'life models' are drawn in or across existing political systems.<sup>59</sup> As more-than-form, any design could be analyzed in terms of such political effects. Further, its practices could be directed toward the kinds of radical, disruptive, and catalytic social movements that would be needed to profoundly change the flow of resources in society.

## POLITICALLY ENGAGED DESIGN

Sustainable development is not just a matter of narrowing the gap between theory and application, between policy declarations and the design of implementations. There are competing and potentially conflicting formulations of what constitutes 'sustainability.' While eco-modernists, for example, might focus on reforming traditional industry through clean production and green consumption, environmental justice advocates might oppose the industrial systems that have historically produced not only pollution but social injustice. Different sustainability discourses cannot simply be resolved but are rooted in different ontological or ideological positions, historical moments, geographic, and socio-economic locations. Rather than a post-political approach, which might disregard contradictions and presume consensus, examining the political dimensions involves recognizing differences in positions and asymmetries in relations. Nor is sustainability implemented in the everyday lives of those who can be neatly categorized as consumers or citizens. Consumption and communities are heterogeneous, involving those engaged in diverse and deeply-rooted social practices, which are represented and institutionalized in different ways and to different extents. Which discourses and practices are included and prioritized in formulations of sustainability, how, by, and for whom are political questions. These

questions are played out in various ways, including in macropolitical debates at global summits, the formal politics of local elections, and the informal micropolitics of everyday life.

Design can take on many roles in sustainable development—and its politics. At the macropolitical level, for example, design may be commissioned for the UN Environment Program, a Green Party, or political action; by companies implementing corporate social responsibility programs, product developers applying environmental certification standards, or cities implementing Rio Local Agenda programs. Micropolitical roles of design, the focus of discussion here, involve instituting discourses and practices of sustainability deeply in the everyday life of consumers and citizens. In this, the role of design surpasses that of giving form to sustainability messages or solving specific problems. Embedded in the intimate spaces and embodied routines of everyday life, design mediates access to and control over resources, and it shapes how people identify and comply with particular ways of living. In enduring forms, including extended interactions with interactive products, design represents ideals and (re)produces behaviors that become 'normalized' into bodily and social practices. In selecting and staging particular forms of relation within households and communities, design is part of (de)constructing social norms and 'life models' in society. Design is thus complicit in how sustainability is formulated, by, and for whom it becomes practiced, normalized, and institutionalized.

Inquiry into how design operates in the micropolitics of everyday life opens up opportunities for discussing how things could be otherwise. Indeed, sustainability is about changing the status quo, about instituting alternative discourses and practices to those that have long been hegemonic in society and in design. Along with alternatives in 'how to change,' there remains the question of 'change by whom,' in which there are more discourses and practices than those of policy-makers or designers. Consumer products, for example, may be (un)sustainable not only in how they are designed and produced but in how they are consumed. Sustainable consumption is constituted by consumer practices involving many more products,

norms, and other historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Design may 'discipline' behavior in more sustainable ways; however, this takes place in relation to diverse forms and factors that constrain and are constrained by one another that may never entirely 'fit' each other. Nor are existing or other practices necessarily unsustainable. Design for sustainable communities, for example, might amplify ways of living or using resources evolved in relation to local ecologies. Such practices may embody new approaches to sustainability that may not be recognized in regulated standards or official policies, or they may explicitly oppose and resist co-option by industrial production and institutionalized politics.

Amending 'design' with 'sustainable' is already a political act. The formulation 'sustainable design' recognizes that there are different ways of doing design (its political conditions), in which there is a preference and a taking of sides (politics). But the political dimensions do not end with that choice and getting on with business as usual. It is not simply, or at least not only, about replacing clients in the corporate sector for private-sector commissions or about privileging certain forms and solutions over others. As discussed in relation to consumption and communities, sustainability is always and continually at stake, as forms and solutions continue to be negotiated in everyday life (and a range of other politics besides those of policy and design). Something that might be a solution for someone in some place at a given time may generate problems for others, elsewhere, or later on. Just as we should continue to query 'who' is presumed in *Our Common Planet*, we must continually query the 'hows' and 'whos' of sustainable policies and designs. For example, we might continue to query the role of design in identifying and shaping social processes of identification, subjectivization, alignment, and collectivization in everyday life. Such issues surface through the questions that I have posed in this article around the terms 'we' and 'other.' These terms are not meant to polarize or reinforce old 'political frontiers.' Beyond the initial choice and taking of sides—(un)sustainable design, for instance—it is an attempt to inquire further, to open up, rather than to foreclose, critical reflection on the nuances and dynamics of design in everyday micropolitics.

Such questions (among many others) are at stake in critical studies and practices of (sustainable) design. Indeed, one role of critical social theory is to examine the politics of everyday life, to reveal how a particular social order is constructed. Theoretical analysis renders the everyday in ways that show how a social order privileges certain norms, values, entities, over others. Normativity—the domination of one over another—is not wrong *per se*. Indeed, as I would argue, inspired by Mouffe, conflict and antagonism are fundamental to the human condition, inherent in any socially constructed order. However, how a particular norm is formulated, by and for whom, are the kinds of questions explored as political theory interrogates these dynamics more explicitly, for example through analyses of 'disciplinary' or 'bio-power' in (re)producing social order and hegemonies. Further, normative social theories, such as feminist, postcolonial, or environmental theories, explicitly explore how things could be otherwise. In practice, theory is not neutral—in naming and framing, for example, it takes issue with something in ways that may destabilize how things were before. Further, in exploring how things could be otherwise, it activates new possibilities for thought and action. In not only analyzing but activating, theory and practice blur, just as theorizing design could activate other practices of design, as may be implied in various ways throughout this book.

Conversely, other ways of practicing design require that we rethink and theorize otherwise. From within *Static!* and *Switch!*, for example, new ideas and questions arose. In attempting to do design differently, we looked for alternative ways of formulating design, reaching out not just to methods and techniques but also to theories from other fields, including the social sciences, humanities, environmental studies, and the arts. The project examples included in this article from the *DESIGN ACT* book represent still other ways of doing design. Challenging how we might think about the environment and its socio-political dimensions, such practitioners query the ideas and ideologies, the theories and normativities, in their own work and, by extension or implication, in design and society. This is not design, amended, but continuing business as usual or producing the usual forms. Nor is this design reforming or solving the problems caused

by (unamended) design and (unsustainable) logics of mass production and market consumption. Alternative social orders and 'life models,' of design and of society, are implied in their collaborative and open-source processes (rather than proprietary production and designer authorship) and recycling and sharing economies (rather than primary market consumption and its economies of scale). Such design may look more like art, social work, pedagogy, or activism, but it may also be understood as design, reformulated in theory and in practice, from within. As 'critical' or 'political,' such practices are not only positioned in opposition to but as perhaps necessary alternatives and potential futures of design.

*DESIGN ACT REFLECTION BY  
MAGNUS ERICSON AND RAMIA MAZÉ*

*DESIGN ACT Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today* is a cultural project and book that highlights contemporary design practices that engage in societal and political issues. Magnus Ericson and I presented *DESIGN ACT* in one of the final seminars for the project, which is reprinted as a 'Reflection' in the *DESIGN ACT* book. As a transcript of our presentation from the seminar, this is a dialog between us as well as our institutions, and we also relate to the projects of other seminar presenters along with the design projects and practices involved. We argue that design practitioners engage both practically and ideologically in societal and political issues. This suggests the potential of movements toward design as 'critical practice.' The criticality evident in the projects exemplifies a kind of discourse that does not originate in history or theory departments, but which evolves and emerges from within design activity and activism.

*DESIGN ACT* was produced by Iaspis, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual Arts, in collaboration with the Interactive Institute, in 2009–11. It was initiated and managed by myself and Magnus Ericson, the project manager at Iaspis charged with developing its activities in the fields of design, crafts, and architecture. The book collects and elaborates upon the project examples collected in the *DESIGN ACT* archive and public events. I have selected a few examples for further discussion from the perspective of this article and part of a dialog between Magnus Ericson and me that concluded the project and the book. Those examples and dialog excerpts are inserted here—as pages within this article—which are from the *DESIGN ACT* book designed by Johanna Lewengard.

← • pp. 90–91, 94–95, 100–101, 104–105

*DESIGN ACT REFLECTION* • →

# Reflection

## by Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé

This text, originally prepared and enacted as a dialog, functions for the purposes of this publication as a reflection on our experiences and learnings during the DESIGN ACT project. It is a revised version of our presentation notes for Seminar 4, which starts with our introduction to the seminar as a whole and follows with our own presentation. It concludes with acknowledgements expanded to accompany this publication—the publication itself is further discussed in the ‘Introduction’ and ‘About’ sections.

Forums and formats for discussion play a vital role in understanding the changing definition of design and the role of designers today. DESIGN ACT Seminar 4 on 16 June, 2010, focused on platforms that have been experimenting with how to host such discussion. The seminar featured presentations of three design-related platforms, each representing different institutional models and premises, media and formats, audiences and impacts. DESIGN ACT was itself one of the platforms presented, given the opportunity to elaborate and reflect upon how it had developed over a year. After the presentations, a panel discussion took up questions with relevance for those active in curating, interpreting, promoting, critiquing and practicing in relation to alternative conceptions of contemporary design.

Those presenting at the seminar have been involved in exploring and expanding conceptions about design. Claire Catterall started her career at London’s Design Museum in the early ’90s, then operated as an independent curator responsible for a number of experimental exhibitions, and is now curator at Somerset



House's Embankment Gallery. Régine Debatty's influential blog 'we-make-money-not-art.com' explores new frontiers of design, she speaks, curates and writes widely about how artists, hackers and interaction designers (mis)use technology. The moderator, Staffan Lundgren, initiated the publishing house AXL Books, is on the editorial board of *SITE* magazine and a project coordinator at the School of Architecture at the Royal Institute of Technology here in Stockholm.

Ramia Mazé (RM): Practitioners are often most interested in what design can do—how it can be applied and the impacts it might achieve. Another important (and political) question is what design is—how it is defined and recognized—which is a critical issue in this seminar. Institutions play an important role in defining experiences and conceptions of design, including those held by designers. Design educations, exhibitions, associations and cultural forums (as examples of some kinds of institutions) develop and disseminate particular ideas about what design is about, its objects and objectives, conditioning the expectations of potential clients and audiences of design as well as the self-perception and professional definition held by designers.

As contemporary design is changing, so must the relevant platforms for debating and participating in such change. This implies that we also need to examine the forums and formats for design discourse—and, at least in design, perhaps to create or reinvent these. Unlike the more established fields of art and architecture, design lacks a substantial discursive history and critical terms for reflecting upon its conditions, practices and roles in society. This has been a motivation for DESIGN ACT, which is a discussion about the changing role of design, on the basis of practice 'in

the field', and with practitioners who have a stake in the consequences. Today, we are glad to have the opportunity to discuss and reflect, with you, on how we might think, talk – and do! – in relation to the broader issues involved in developing such platforms.

Magnus Ericson (ME): This seminar is a part of the series of public events that have been arranged within the DESIGN ACT project, and, as Ramia mentioned, it aims to highlight different platforms for discussing and possibly redefining what design can be about. DESIGN ACT in itself is intended as one such platform – and, with a self-reflective approach, we will present the project. We hope this can open for reflecting with the other presenters during the discussion on some of the questions that have been on our mind, such as: What new paradigms might be necessary within an expanding or changing view of contemporary design? What are the conditions and concerns of platforms for design discourse? What roles do associated sites, structures, media and institutions play? What is the role of practitioners? What can be learned from other disciplines?

DESIGN ACT started in different ways, but always with the idea of dialog ... A dialog between myself and Ramia, with our slightly different backgrounds and perspectives on design and critical practice. And a dialog between Iaspis and the Interactive Institute and their respective missions – Iaspis' to create international exchange for practitioners within art, design and architecture, and the Interactive Institute's development of new roles for art and design within technology research. This led to an idea to structure the project around different kinds of dialogs – among practitioners, communities and disciplines – to create a critical discussion around contemporary design practice engaged in social and political issues.

Another example is a discussion among practitioners about the form of their own practice as a critique. Doina Petrescu spoke in an interview about a kind of 'micro' practice. This was in terms both of an efficient size for their particular architectural practice but, also, a kind of ideological position in relation to prevailing models of authority and politics. And, in the 'live' interviews at Experimenta-Design, David Reinfurt talked about 9/11 as one catalyst for Dexter Sinister, his practice started together with Stuart Bailey, which is also a critique of large-scale, mainstream book publishing that tends to produce particular kinds of projects, as well as environmental offsets. These are two of the many who are reflecting on how to set up and how to run their (perhaps 'micro') practice as a critical response to a particular social context or historical moment.

We couldn't have programmed DESIGN ACT in relation to such issues in advance—these emerged only through doing the project. But we did anticipate the possibility of the unexpected—hence, the open-ended structure of the project. This is evident in the design of the archive—presentations were evolved with slightly different depths, some with a short text and image, others with more extensive presentations or interviews. Relations between and across projects can be made via hyperlinks in the 'Dialog' section, as such connections emerge over time.

In the seminar presentation, a series of themes emerging across DESIGN ACT examples and events were discussed. These were a preliminary version of themes that have since been developed in more depth, which are presented in the 'HOW' section of this publication as 'tactics'.

ME: The DESIGN ACT archive was built up over time. Over the course of the series of public events, as Ramia explained. But, even more fundamentally, through a network that recommended the projects and practitioners for the archive and for the events. We started with a core group of invited people, 'experts' in relevant topics, disciplines and countries. This group of experts has slowly been expanded throughout the project—at first, mainly in Sweden, then, later, more international. For us, this was a curatorial model that would surpass our own knowledge and networks in the field, to learn and expand from peers expert in other areas. I would like to take the opportunity to thank these experts who have contributed to the project in this way!

While the dialog that we aimed to create in the seminars was among practitioners, experts also included curators, educators, critics, historians, etc. In different ways, we also set up a dialog among these perspectives. For example, we developed a track within the project as a discussion with Helena Mattsson and Christina Zetterlund, who have expertise in architectural, design and craft history. While the project examples in the online archive are mainly contemporary, this track explored relations between current and historical issues in design, which took the form of project examples from different periods, described in terms of identified or potential relations to DESIGN ACT issues. Also, several of the public events were moderated by guests, or 'provocateurs', often from the expert group, who brought in complementary perspectives from academic, museum or international contexts. These dialogs take place in the panel discussions, which have been filmed along with the practitioner presentations and added to the online archive.

RM: In DESIGN ACT, we have been developing a platform for design practitioners to reflect upon their own practice,

to question the boundaries around their discipline, and how to use their practice and discipline to take on larger ideas about society and politics. This returns me to the notion of 'criticism from within' – that is, how designers, through the materials, processes, operations, and products of their practice – can question, critique and change notions of what design is and what it can do. One of the reactions to certain failings of modernism, and its manifestos, was the separation of theory, history and practice in architectural education, intended to increase the rigor and accountability in the discipline. But another consequence of these 'silos' is that design critique tends to be done by historians and theoreticians, leaving practitioners merely to apply, implement, or decorate. In contrast, and in the spirit of 'criticism from within', we've tried to curate a kind of infrastructure for designers to be reflective, to critique, to discuss and build relations, themes and maybe even theories across their own and others' practices. In this, the discourse builds up from a basis in practice, across practices, across design disciplines and, through the experts and provocateurs, across history and theory as well.

Here, it should be clear that I'm not talking about 'critical design', which is a kind of niche topic within product design, but a much wider and deeper notion of 'critical practice' that links to the kinds of criticality that are discussed within architecture and art. One thing that has emerged as especially important for me through the course of DESIGN ACT is an understanding of different varieties and precedents of 'criticality'. In an event on 12 December, 2009, for example, Peter Lang and Fiona Raby traced certain ideas from '60s radical and anti-design movements like Superstudio and Archizoom. But Peter (and his col-

laborators in Stalker) and Dunne & Raby have, from related starting points, developed very different forms of practice and very different approaches even to rather similar issues.

In Seminar 3, a discussion arose about where critical practice can take place—Helena Mattson traced a history of designers working within companies and public organizations in building the Swedish welfare state, Ana Betancour pointed to activist strategies of opposition and tools for demonstration and protest, and Tor Lindstrand discussed playful and performative strategies for intervention in many different contexts. These diverse perspectives, contextualized by different histories and politics, start to sketch an important backdrop—genres and geneologies, if you like—of critical practices in design.

The potential, for me, is that these kinds of dialog—designers reflecting on their practice, sharing knowledge and experiences with others, and discovering new relations and ideas as a consequence—can be understood as more than dialog. More than the sum of the parts, or stories of individual projects, but a kind of platform on which might build up a critical mass of ideas that reconfigure how we think of design today. Maybe this suggests a kind of intellectual and ideological discourse that doesn't originate in history or theory departments, that isn't defined by the 'official' institutions looking at design from the outside, but which has origins in and builds up on the basis of dialog amongst designers. This reworking of the basis and platforms for design discourse might change how we think about teaching and displaying design (in various institutionalized forms), including writing alternative histories of design.

ME: Now, we may ask ourselves, what if we would start all over again, or bring it to another level, or another context? What have we learnt, and what would we like to do differently?

One thing, which we've discussed a lot, is how to approach and structure this platform. For example, there are certain trade-offs between depth and breadth. Especially as we, in DESIGN ACT, work across design disciplines and expert areas, we try to have an accessible language and a broad range of examples, which means that we may not be able to go deeply into a particular example, history or idea. If the starting point isn't in a single discipline, or country, or even in a chronology, our challenge is in identifying the strong links that can connect projects and practices. Can it be themes? Can it be a (or more than one) platform?

RM: This is especially relevant as various design-related disciplines becomes more 'professional' and 'academic', as we see in Sweden and other places with the development of higher education and professional associations. As history, theory and practice develop deeper roots and specialization, what kinds of platforms are needed to foster dialog/discourse among practitioners and across the disciplines? Is this a job for institutionalized contexts like museums and publishers, or is it possible to create and curate other forms – platforms? Especially in the area of socially and politically engaged design, perhaps we need to seek those that are more ad-hoc, open-source, agile, participatory and potentially viral.

ME: In raising these issues, and approaching DESIGN ACT as one such platform, we hope to contribute to expanding the definition of contemporary design and to suggest what it might take to curate and develop a basis for this redefining. In this, we

## ENDNOTES

1. Gro Harlem Bruntland (chairman), *Our Common Future: The World Commission on Environment and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) •84.
2. See Susan Clayton and Susan Opatow (eds), *Identity and the Natural Environment: The Psychological Significance of Nature* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003).
3. For example, see Daniele Archibugi (ed.), *Debating Cosmopolitics* (New York: Verso, 2003) •84, and Isabelle Stengers, 'The Cosmopolitan Proposal', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, US: MIT Press, 2005), 994–1003.
4. For example, Scott Campbell, 'Green Cities, Growing Cities, Just Cities?', *Journal of the American Planning Association* 62 (1996), 296–312.
5. Erik Swynedouw, 'Impossible "Sustainability" and the Postpolitical Condition', in Rob Krueger and David Gibbs (eds), *The Sustainable Development Paradox: Urban Political Economy in the United States and Europe* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007), 13–36 •98.
6. For different perspectives on the issues see, for example, Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, *Contested Natures* (Lancaster, UK: Sage, 1998); David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997); John Hannigan, *Environmental Sociology: A Social Constructionist Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1995).
7. For further discussion of these and their relation to theories of 'agonism,' see Chantal Mouffe, 'Agonism and Public Space', in Daniel van der Velden and Vinca Kruk (eds), *Uncorporate Identity* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2010); Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993) •96. Mouffe's own position is developed based on her reading of Carl Schmitt as well as Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of 'hegemony,' which refers to the maintenance of one social group's dominance over subordinate groups. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is accomplished through relations of consent and coercion, not only through state-civil society relations but also in the explicitly material terms ranging from state institutions such as fortresses to 'private institutions' such as systems regulating the home. Such everyday forms of rule are the starting point for Michel Foucault's concepts of governmentality and micropolitics.
8. Chantal Mouffe, interviewed by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden Joseph, and Thomas Keenan, 'Every Form of Art has a Political Dimension', *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001), 99: 98–125.
9. See, for example, Susan Buckingham, 'Microgeographies and Microruptures: The Politics of Gender in the Theory and Practice of Sustainability', in Krueger and Gibbs, *The Sustainable Development Paradox*, 66–94 •98; Karin Bäckstrand, 'Civic Science for Sustainability: Reframing the Role of Experts, Policy-makers and Citizens in Environmental Governance', in Sandra Harding (ed.), *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2011), 439–458 •102.
10. For examples, see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, US: MIT Press, 1995); George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). This issue is briefly mentioned in Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003) •86. Seyla Benhabib, Drucilla Cornell, and Elizabeth Grosz theorize the politics of difference not as rhetorical struggles but as struggles in the form of materialities of everyday living.
11. Relevant studies include Karin Bradley, *Just Environments: Politicising Sustainable Urban Development*, Ph.D. diss. (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, 2009) •86; Gun Hedlund and Karin Perman, 'The Heating, Especially Warm Water, is Exceptionally High in this Area.', in *Proceedings of the Nordic Conference on Consumer Research* (Gothenburg, Sweden: May 30 – June 1, 2012); Phil Macnaghten and John Urry, 'Nature as Countryside', in *Contested Natures* (London: Sage, 1998).
12. *DESIGN ACT* was initiated and produced by Iaspis, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual Arts, in collaboration with the Interactive Institute, in 2009–11. As a platform, *DESIGN ACT* identifies, presents, and discusses examples of 'socially and politically engaged' design practices. It operates through an international network of contributors, an online archive of project examples, and a series of public events. Project managers: Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé; Project coordinator: Sara Teleman; Research assistant: Natasha Marie Llorens; Graphic and website design: Friendly Matters with Johanna Lewengard and Fredrik Sterner, and programming by Jens Almström. See Magnus Ericson and Ramia Mazé (eds), *DESIGN ACT: Socially and Politically Engaged Design Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press/Iaspis, 2011) •90–91, 94–95, 100–101, 104–105, 111–118.
13. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: Design and Society from Wedgwood to IBM* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
14. Static! is a design research program carried out by the Interactive Institute, funded primarily by the Swedish Energy Agency, in 2004–06. Static! explores design for increasing energy awareness. Familiar furnishings were reinterpreted to investigate the 'aesthetics of energy as material in design' and 'reflective use.' Within these programmatic themes, Static! was carried out through a series of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects in smaller teams. The result is a repertoire of design examples in the form of prototypes, conceptual design proposals, and use scenarios, which are a platform for communication and discussion with users and designers. Project lead: Christina Öhman; Research directors: Sara Ilstedt Hjelm, Ramia Mazé, and Johan Redström; Contributors and other credits at [www.tii.se/static](http://www.tii.se/static). See Ramia Mazé (ed.), *Static! Designing for Energy Awareness* (Stockholm: Arvinius Förlag, 2010) •87.
15. For examples, see Carl DiSalvo, Phoebe Sengers, and Hörn Brynjarsdóttir, 'Mapping the Landscape of Sustainable HCI', in *Proceedings of the Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (New York: ACM Press, 2010); David Keyson and Shauna Jin (eds), *Designing for Sustainable Living and Working* (Delft: VSSD, 2010) •87; Kerstin Sylwan and Johanna Stål, *Energi: Hur design kan göra skillnad* (Stockholm: Camino/Svensk Form, 2008); Peter-Paul Verbeek and Adriaan Slob (eds), *User Behavior and Technology Development* (Berlin: Springer, 2006) •96.



16. See Ramia Mazé, Judith Gregory, and Johan Redström, 'Social Sustainability: A Design Research Approach to Sustainable Development', in *Proceedings of the World Conference on Design Research* (Delft: October 31–November 4, 2011).

17. For a brief presentation, see Fred Buttel, 'Ecological Modernization as Social Theory', *Geoforum* 31 (2000), 57–65.

18. Arthur Mol and Gert Spaargaren, 'Environment, Modernity and the Risk Society', *International Sociology* 8 (1993), 431–459.

19. See Eivind Stø, Harald Throne-Holst, Pål Strandbakken, and Gunnar Vittersø, 'A Multi-Dimensional Approach to the Study of Consumption in Modern Societies and the Potentials for Radical Sustainable Changes', in *Proceedings of Perspectives on Radical Changes to Sustainable Consumption and Production* (Copenhagen: April 20–21, 2003); Kate Power and Oksana Mont, 'Dispelling the Myths about Consumption Behavior', in *Proceedings of ERSCP-EMSU* (Delft, The Netherlands: October 25–29, 2010).

20. For example, see Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand, and Jack Ingram, *The Design of Everyday Life* (London: Berg, 2007) •88.

21. Maria Kaika, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Kaika theorizes the term 'wish images' from Walter Benjamin.

22. For example, see Michael Ekers and Alex Loftus, 'The Power of Water: Developing Dialogues between Foucault and Gramsci', *Environment and Planning* 26, 4 (2008), 698–718.

23. For example, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995) •88. These aspects of Foucault's work have been widely discussed in the fields of cultural geography, urban planning, architecture history, and science and technology studies.

24. Andrew Barry, *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (London: Athlone Press, 2001), 6 •88.

25. Representation, as a practice of naming and depicting, has a long lineage in feminist and postcolonial

theories. Gayatri Spivak (in Hartley), for example, theorizes representation as depiction, through which peasants can form a picture of themselves as a class. Judith Butler, for example, argues that 'gender' and 'sex' are normative categories (rather than biological fact). These categories are socially (re)produced, 'disciplined,' as bodies perform practices in which differences between he/she or you/I are continually reproduced and recognized. Naming can be understood as a political act. Through "speech acts that bring into being that which they name," Butler argues for making these subjects of discourse, such that they may destabilize existing or install new ontological or political conditions. See George Hartley, *The Abyss of Representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2003); Judith Butler, 'Gender as Performance', interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, *Radical Philosophy*, 67 (1994), 32: 32–39.

26. The Static! Disappearing-Pattern Tiles feature a feminine, floral pattern common in middle-class homes in Sweden, which fades depending on the duration and temperature of a shower. The shape of the Flower Lamp references familiar Modernist forms and blooms to reflect decreasing trends in household electricity consumption and wilts with increases. Its shape and size are suited to a prominent place in the home, such as the dining room, where it is visible to the whole family (rather than the energy bill presented to the head of household) and, as we discovered in installing the prototype for a photoshoot, where its state of blooming/wilting or good/bad consumption is readily visible to neighbors and passers-by. These Static! projects were created in collaboration with Front Design (Sofia Lagerkvist, Charlotte von der Lancken, Anna Lindgren, and Katja Sävström with Spets and Göran Nordahl). See Mazé (ed.), *Static!* •87.

27. Alberto Moreiras, for example, argues that a subaltern political and analytic stance is to be 'counter-representational,' to insist on the impossibility of representation. This is an argument developed in relation to other populist stances, in which scholars or others may claim to 'represent the people' in ways that effect violence on the marginalized or excluded Moreiras, 'A Storm Blowing from Paradise: Negative Globality and Critical Regionalism', in Ileana Rodriguez (ed.),

*The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2001), 81–110.

28. For example, see Langdon Winner, 'Political Ergonomics', in Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (eds), *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 146–170.

29. I have developed this argument more extensively in Ramia Mazé, *Occupying Time: Design, Technology and the Form of Interaction* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2007) •92.

30. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202–3 •88.

31. The outside of the Static! Energy Curtain has solar cells and the inside is woven with fiberoptics. Sun shining in during the day is collected by the solar cells and stored in batteries. When night falls, the stored solar energy is used to distribute light through the optical fibers, creating a soft nightlight. The Curtain's users must make a choice—whether to open the curtain and enjoy the daylight or close it and save energy for later. The mundane act of opening or closing the Curtain embodies the trade-off between consuming or conserving energy. The Energy Curtain was created by Anders Ernevi, Margot Jacobs, Ramia Mazé, Carolin Müller, Johan Redström, and Linda Worbin. The evaluation was led by Sara Routarinne. See Mazé, *Static!* •87; Ernevi et al., 'The Energy Curtain: Energy Awareness' in Johan Redström, Maria Redström and Ramia Mazé (eds), *IT+Textiles* (Helsinki: IT Press/Edita, 2005), 91–97 •92; Sara Routarinne and Johan Redström, 'Domestication as Design Intervention', in *Proceedings of the Nordic Design Research Conference* (Stockholm: Konstfack / NORDES, 2007).

32. "The view of citizenship that I want to put forward...recognizes that every definition of a 'we' implies the delimitation of a 'frontier' and the designation of a 'them.' That definition of a 'we' always takes place, then, in a context of diversity and conflict," Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), 84 •96.

33. These terms are inspired by those articulated by Josefín Wangel in her analysis of backcasting studies for sustainable development. For example, she argues, "Secondly, through not

addressing the questions of *how to change and change by whom* in an explicit and explorative way, social structures and agency become represented only implicitly and/or are maintained according to the status quo." See Wangel, 'Exploring Social Structures and Agency in Backcasting Studies for Sustainable Development', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 78 (2011), 872: 872–882, reprinted in Wangel, *Making Futures: On Targets, Measures and Governance in Backcasting and Planning*, Ph.D. diss. (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, 2012) •96.

34. For a summary of this shift and 'social practice' theories, see Annelise de Jong and Ramia Mazé, 'Cultures of Sustainability: "Ways of Doing" Cooking', in *Proceedings of ERSCP–EMSU* (Delft, The Netherlands: 2010).

35. Gert Spaargaren, Susan Martens, and Theo Beckers discuss "citizen-consumers as knowledgeable and capable actors," arguing that "the question is not if there are any sustainable technologies available, but whether or not these technologies are actually adopted and applied by citizen-consumers in the context of their daily lives....We are interested in the social conditions governing sustainability transitions within designated social practices," in 'Sustainable Technologies and Everyday Life', in Verbeek and Slob (eds), *User Behavior and Technology Development*, 112–113: 107–118 •96.

36. See Mike Raco, 'Spatial Policy, Sustainability, and State Restructuring', in Krueger and Gibbs, *Sustainable Development Paradox*, 214–237 •98. A Dutch approach to decentralized and multi-level governance for sustainable development is discussed by Derk Loorbach and Jan Rotmans, 'Managing Transitions for Sustainable Development', in Xander Olsthoorn and Anna J. Wieczorek (eds), *Understanding Industrial Transformation* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2006), 187–206.

37. See, for example, Anna Meroni and Daniela Sangiorgi, *Design for Services* (Aldershot, UK: Gower Publishing, 2011); Guy Julier, 'Political Economies of Design', in *Proceedings of the Nordic Design Research Conference* (Helsinki: NORDES, 2011).

38. See Ezio Manzini and François Jégou (eds), *Sustainable Everyday*:

*Scenarios of Urban Life* (Milan: Edizioni Ambiente, 2003) •98; Meroni, Anna (ed.), *Creative Communities: People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Torino, Italy: Edizioni POLI.design, 2007).

39. Bio-power is elaborated in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, [1976] 1998), in which population, health, urban life, and sexuality are theorized as the objects of power and knowledge, as resources to be administered, cultivated, and controlled by practices of counting, analyzing, predicting, and prescribing. See also Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1989) •98.

40. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).

41. Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Sage, 2002).

42. Jake Kosek, 'Purity and Pollution: Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties', in Richard Peet and Michael Watts (eds), *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

43. Switch! is a design research program carried out by the Interactive Institute, funded primarily by the Swedish Energy Agency, in 2008–10. Switch! investigates energy issues in terms of 'critical practice' and 'everyday ecologies.' Through design interventions that disrupt existing—and introduce new—values in particular situations, the aim was to influence the perceptions and practices of consumers and stakeholders. Under these programmatic themes, Static! was carried out through a series of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects in smaller teams. The result is a repertoire of design examples in the form of prototypes and conceptual design proposals. Project lead: Ramia Mazé. See Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström, 'Switch! Energy Ecologies in Everyday Life', *International Journal of Design 2*, 3 (2008), 55–70.

44. Symbiots take the form of a photo series in the genre of contemporary hyperreal art photography. Three situations are depicted: a street cinema that arises to provide a traffic-stopping

experience for locals collaborating to save energy, public streetlights that spotlight the private balconies of energy conservationists, and a common mini-golf course that is built up through competition among house-proud neighbors. Forms and functions in these situations are imagined to be those of a 'symbiot' living off energy from the local electricity grid, surfacing in ways that lure people out of their private habitats and away from their energy-consuming habits. Intended for gallery exhibition, the photos were also used to illustrate posters distributed in town and in interviews with neighborhood residents. The Switch! Symbiots team included Jenny Bergström, Ramia Mazé, Johan Redström, and Anna Vallgård with photography by Olivia Jeczmyk and Bildinstitutet. See Bergström, Mazé, Redström, and Vallgård, 'Symbiots: Conceptual Interventions into Energy Systems', in *Proceedings of the Nordic Design Research Conference* (Oslo: NORDES, 2009).

45. See also Mauricio Corbalan, 'Interview with Mauricio Corbalan by Magnus Ericson', in Ericson and Mazé, *DESIGN ACT*, 245–260 •87.

46. Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*, 13.

47. Manzini and Jégou, *Sustainable Everyday*; Meroni, *Creative Communities* •98.

48. Local knowledge and skills arise within spheres of activity characterized by gender, socio-economic and class stratifications. The politics of community practices have been theorized within environmental justice discourses—see Peet and Watts for a discussion and case studies "far from the mythic community of tree-hugging, unified, undifferentiated women articulating alternative subaltern knowledges for an alternative development," *Liberation Ecologies*, 24. For further discussion and cases, see Helen Appleton, Maria Fernandez, Catherine Hill, and Consuelo Quiroz, 'Gender and Indigenous Knowledge', in Harding (ed.), *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*, 211–224 •102.

49. See, for example, Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik', in Latour and Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 14–31.

50. See, for example, Isabelle Stengers, 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal', in Latour and Weibel, *Making Things Public*, 994–1003. In terms of political representation, Iris Marion Young argues that deliberative models of democracy and communication embody Western (and often male) biases, and Carole Pateman (in Mouffe) shows how classical theories of democracy were based upon the exclusion of women. See Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) •106; Mouffe, *Return of the Political* •96. Feminist critiques of Latourian actor-network theory include a discussion of primacy of "the efficacy of (quasi)objects" over the "affectivity of (body)subjects;" see Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*, 161.

51. Edgar Pieterse, *City Futures: Confronting the Crisis of Urban Development* (London: Zed, 2008), 172 •102.

52. The Scandinavian tradition of participatory design, for example, which developed historically out of trade union struggles for a more equal work environment, involves processes of joint decision-making, mutual learning, and co-development of policies and designs among those with different expertise, capacities, and power in organizations. Accordingly, relations between (rather than only within) particular groups come to the fore, with design explicitly involved not only in practical but political matters. It was not just a matter of improving a particular policy or design but of reforming a culture of 'collective agreement' or even of negotiating 'legislative conflicts.' For this discussion, as well as a reformulation of design in light of radical political philosophy and practice-based research with women activists in Iran and Sweden, see Mahmoud Keshavarz, *Forms of Resistance: The Political and Re-situated Design*, MFA thesis (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2011), and Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé, 'Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research' (forthcoming).

53. For a variety of related discussions, see Maj Munch Andersen and Arnold Tukker (eds), *Proceedings of the Workshop of the Sustainable Consumption Research Exchange* (Copenhagen: SCORE!, 2006).

54. Based on energy forecasts and social trends drawn from futures studies, Switch! Energy Futures revisits

familiar urban and domestic artefacts in light of potentially emerging behaviors, beliefs, and politics. Countering both the incremental reforms of user-centered design and the utopias and dystopias of concept design and visionary architecture, the project investigates the design of transitions between the familiar now and extreme futures. A series of (re)designed artefacts (fore)tell stories of potential everyday social and city life—these include Socket Bombs, Power Forecast, Future Tradition, Voluntary Blackouts and Umbilical Cord. Drawing on workshop methods from participatory and critical design, these were embedded in a scripted performance debating possible and preferred futures. So far, this has been staged as an event in a gallery setting, which opened up ways of thinking and talking among stakeholders about (un)desirable futures of electricity consumption. See Mazé and Redström, 'Switch!'

55. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); Mazé, *Occupying Time* •92.

56. Doina Petrescu, 'Reflections on Practice: An Interview with Doina Petrescu by Ramia Mazé', in Ericson and Mazé, *DESIGN ACT*, 95: 83–101 •87.

57. See Dorceta Taylor, 'The Rise of the Environmental Justice Paradigm: Injustice Framing and the Social Construction of Environmental Discourses', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43 (2000), 508–580.

58. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), 47 •106.

59. See Anne Querrien, Doina Petrescu, and Constantin Petcou, 'What Makes a Biopolitical Place? A Discussion with Antonio Negri', in atelier d'architecture autogérée (ed.), *Urban Act: A Handbook for Alternative Practice* (Paris: aaa-PEPRAV European Platform for Research and Action on the City, 2007), 290–299 •106.

SELL

THIS

BOOK



# Concluding dialogue

Ramia Mazé, Matilda Plöjel, Johan Redström, Christina Zetterlund

This book has questioned institutionalized practice from different perspectives. What do we think motivates this?

Johan Redström:

I think I would have two responses to that. My general response would be that research in academia is meant to be a kind of laboratory or place for experimentation. There should be time, an opportunity for reflection. But there are two kinds of reflection, I think what Donald Schön called 'single' and 'double' loops. The single loop is more or less what you always do when you do things, when you make something and reflect on the consequences. It allows you to improve what you are doing. That is a normal way of doing things. But then there are other ways of reflecting that are not just about 'can I do this better?' but rather 'am I doing the right thing?'. This is the double loop, when you question what you are up to. I think academia and research need to be a place for doing this.

My more specific answer, then, would be that there are many indications that we are not doing the right thing, that we are not really addressing the whole problem that we think we are dealing with. In general, it seems like there is a need for new directions.

Ramia Mazé:

Johan, you situate the question of institutions in terms of academia, and academia looks different and plays different roles in different societies. In Europe, in Sweden, for example, there is Konstfack, where we recently celebrated 150 years as a school of arts, crafts, and design. But it can seem as if longstanding boundaries within and between schools have locked us into specific ways of thinking about things, locked us into established methods and materials or siloed us into disciplines. There are some educational programs or hybrid institutes that bridge these, but many design schools are struggling to figure out how they relate to other, more established

fields of knowledge. Sustainability, for example, suggests links to the sciences, policy, and perhaps management, which can be difficult for design to make because of how academia has been institutionalized.

Design education looks very different elsewhere, as does thinking about sustainability. At the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology, for example, we just celebrated 75 years since its founding as the 'New Bauhaus'. And it is amongst the oldest in the US. Depending on how you frame the question, the situation in the US can work well, because design can be very agile. There is less higher education in design, many non-academic design practices, and a lot of unaccredited institutions that rise and fall every few years to address new questions and experiment with new roles for design in society. In different schools, various graduate programs in 'social innovation' have recently been launched, and many informal institutions oriented around 'social change'. These are set up to cross disciplines, even as post-disciplinary approaches, and, as with all education programs in the US, students pay a lot to go there, which also sets up certain expectations about the role of the institution. But there is a lack of theoretical foundations, which can be a basis for rigor in the field as well as validity towards other fields.

There have also been struggles around integrating sustainability in design education in the US—indeed, around dealing with sustainability in general. Here, in Europe and in Sweden, sustainability has been present and prioritized for a long time. In fact, 2012 is Stockholm+40, the 40th anniversary of the first UN conference on the environment—this led, 20 years later, to the Rio Earth Summit and, now, the Rio+20 conference, which is taking place this week.

Speaking from here and now, sustainability is integrated at many levels in society. However, in the US, sustainability has not developed in the same way, or even from a central or policy perspective. Today, for example, it is often part of bottom-up reactions to economic (and social) crises, folded into topics like 'social innovation'. So there are very different ways in which design—and sustainability—are formulated and institutionalized.

Christina Zetterlund:

I think from my perspective, being a historian, I have an approach to this kind of questioning that is based on a view of design that is material meaning-making in the everyday world. Design being enmeshed in people's lives reflects numerous ways of organizing the everyday world. Design and writing its history both have a radical potential, but this potential is lost in how design has been institutionalized and invested in by institutions such as museums. Here instead design studies have been about a certain everyday world or even someone's everyday life. In my view, there is an interesting friction here since traditional practice encapsulates certain norms. By showing how these norms are constructed, I think it is possible to say something beyond design and talk about how aspects of our society are organized. In this questioning, I also think it is important to find alternatives and in that way expand possible routes for describing and interpreting design, for talking with and about groups and societies. If we do not take on this challenge, I think design risks ending up as a pointless endeavour that is just 'nice' and a concern for a very limited group.

Matilda Plöjel:

As I worked on the book, and thought about and researched how or whether I could make it a bit more sustainable, it became quite obvious that we spend a lot of our energy on justifying our practice the way it is and always has been. As long as we use certified paper or tell a good story about our product, we can just carry on like before. It has been hard to find new questions and new answers. What I would really need is help to rethink and question the questions, not help to feel good about what I am already doing.

Johan Redström:

I think this is why what Ramia said is so important. This questioning has a lot to do with looking for a different set of relations to the 'outside' world, including new questions that were not there before. Values and perspectives that were once excluded now have to be included. I think that this is the real challenge for many established institutions. Their everyday life depends on the relations and issues that they have made 'theirs'. Who gets to say what about what and when? If you change those relations, what is left?

Christina Zetterlund:

I do not think it is just a question of inclusion. I think it is about pulling up roots.

Ramia Mazé:

Yes, the issue of how to relate to roots, to where you are located, to what came before, is clearly apparent in approaches to sustainable development. In Western Europe, the discourse has really been about retrofitting our existing patterns of production and consumption. We try to reform them, to clean them up, to 'green' them through storytelling around life cycles and more enduring consumer products. We invest in greening existing infrastructures and 'clean tech'. While we retrofit, countries in other parts of the world, like India and Brazil, are inventing their institutions. As long as they are able to do this on their own terms, rather than only on our institutionalized ones, there is huge potential in starting from a different basis and in terms of different worldviews and priorities. There are really exciting formulations—inventions—of what design can be.

We have collected our research and questions in a book.

How do we think about experimenting with the format and design of the book?

Matilda Plöjel:

I would like to know why you wanted to make a traditional printed book.

Ramia Mazé:

There are many ways to influence discourse. We could have done this as a blog or through the 'twitterverse'. We could have published only in peer-reviewed journals. To gain respect in some disciplines, in fact, this kind of publishing is necessary. However, in this book, we have chosen to do something more independent and specially crafted, both as a process and as a final product. We presume that a discourse exists—that there are libraries, educational programs, museums, and bookshops that will accept this book as an academic and/or design book. As a result, we enter the discourse in a way that would not be possible for a blog. And along with the existing discourse, I think we are hoping to mobilize other discourses, new audiences...

Johan Redström:

It is also important that this book is not the only outcome of the overall project. There have been talks, seminars, workshops, and exhibitions; there are papers in journals and other books. There is a range of different activities. I think, for this specific book, part of the interest is relating to very conservative and established ways of disseminating ideas and knowledge. The challenge of doing that and at the same time trying to critically investigate both content and form is an interesting project in itself. To me, this book has as much the character of an exhibition as it has the character of documentation.

Christina Zetterlund:

I agree. All through the project, we have been publishing our work under other themes and in other journals. As a result, we have been disseminating in different systems. But this project has entailed our coming together from different perspectives that do not meet that often. Moreover, books are an old institutionalized practice that

is part of our field, in terms of reading but also in terms of designing texts and making books. In producing a book, we also call this kind of making into question, which is something Lisa Olausson and I are doing by investigating text templates at all the colleges and universities in the Stockholm region. Our examination has shown the schools where text is a common tool and part of self-understanding in the educational programme and the schools where text is not as present. Placing that investigation in the context of this book, in my article we wanted to make a 'communicative situation' by researching the materiality of the practice of academic texts.

I also want to add another aspect. When we talk about a book, I think it is necessary to consider what a book is and does. You see it either as a finalized object or as a platform for doing different things. We have had a process into the book, but you can also have a process out of the book. The book collects something that could be a platform for seminars, discussions, for going somewhere else with the proposition of the book in the same way an exhibition does.

Ramia Mazé:

This book is an experiment. We make a proposition in the form of the book that these perspectives need to be joined together, that we need these disciplines, multiple disciplines, speaking together, to deal with the issues at hand. It cannot only be about siloed disciplines developing and validating themselves. Of course, it is not obvious what an interdisciplinary discourse such as this should look like. This is a kind of experiment to see what could be done. In this way, we are not just making publicity about what design is, or what it can do for other disciplines. We are experimenting with doing discourse amongst ourselves, our disciplines, and trying to generate a new audience. This requires multiple languages—or forms. Perhaps new languages are necessary to create relations among those who do not necessarily talk to one another or speak the same language.



Johan Redström:

For those of us who are so used to working in academic contexts, where disciplines decide the basic formats, how results are disseminated etc., this is an opportunity to see what happens when our ideas are brought together, to see the differences and similarities between different approaches within a shared frame.

Matilda Plöjel:

I think the new formats that allow anyone to immediately comment on a text, edit, add new contexts etc. are very interesting. However, if you want to put forward a strong proposition, the slower, more rigid book format may sometimes be a better option since it offers you a space to test, edit, and present your arguments without interruption in a controlled sequence.

Christina Zetterlund:

There is also an aspect of creating discourse inside and outside academia—something that you touched on, Ramia. What you contribute to this, Matilda, is adding an interesting proposition. You suggest that is not just about how the texts are constructed but also how one thinks about the book that adds a layer to what we can say and how we can say it.

Ramia Mazé:

Yes, and it is not just about discourse with an audience but about various kinds of conversations and experiments during the process of making the book. Matilda, haven't you been involved in some interesting discussions with the printer? Perhaps there is a kind of discourse in the making, which is also about the larger system.

Matilda Plöjel:

Academic templates, thoughtfully designed or not, give texts a touch of seriousness—you immediately recognize it as a serious text. If you gave those kind of texts a more individual and elaborated design, I am not sure they would be considered as serious. It is interesting that these issues are not really discussed.

Christina Zetterlund:

Yes, and in some academic fields, we are trained to think this way and not experiment with what

design can do relative to your argument. And you get trained to not see them; this is just something you read.

Johan Redström:

In academia we are used to reading and writing texts of given lengths, such as conference papers, journal papers, book chapters, etc. Unconsciously, you learn how to structure your ideas and argue in relation to these established formats. That is really a material part of doing research like this. Sometimes it is important to expose these structures and templates.

Matilda Plöjel:

I think we had an interesting discussion, Ramia, when we talked about illustrating the reference literature in your text. The spines emphasize that there is a material practice to all theory; it is a design practice.

EXTENDED COLOPHON  
(OR WHY SHARE THIS BOOK)  
Matilda Plöjel

I was commissioned to design a sustainable book. When I joined the project, a decision had been made that the book should be traditionally printed and distributed, so my investigations have focused on what can be done within the existing system. There was no ‘green policy’ for the processes of editing and designing the book. However, when we had face-to-face meetings, most travel involved was by train. Travel by airplane and car was carbon-offset.

When I started to look around for advice on how to go about sustainable book design, the information I initially found was typically (but not always<sup>1</sup>) either highly specialized technical or academic articles or over-simplified checklists. On one hand, I needed information that was easy to grasp to get an overview and, on the other hand, very detailed information that was specific to this book. It was frequently suggested that I do a Life Cycle Analysis (LCA). I found this was much easier said than done and, if you want to do it properly, you actually need to be a qualified expert. Another complex aspect of LCA, which I considered at great length and discussed with Lisa Olausson and Apokalyps Labotek, is the question of when a designer’s responsibility in a product’s life cycle starts and when it ends.

I learned a great deal during my research into the specifics of sustainable book design, for example how books are recycled, but I also received confirmation on choices that I would have made anyway. Designing this book was a lot about common sense, and the advice for sustainability turned out to be similar to that for a book designed on a tight budget: try to save paper, plates, and ink; avoid unnecessary additional materials; and reduce print runs.

In hindsight, I can see that I probably wasted a lot of time with some of my research. Had I instead spent the time switching over to greener electricity for my office, I would probably have reduced the overall footprint of the book much more.

I found it difficult to keep a macro perspective on sustainability in the project in general while at the same time trying to make better micro decisions.

The closer the book came to printing, the harder it became to keep to these green ambitions, and I had to make compromises. Sometimes they were for quality reasons, sometimes because of practical circumstances, and sometimes because I realized I should have made different decisions much, much earlier in the process.

INTERIM PAGES

A real eye-opener was finding an article from the Centre for Sustainable Communications (CESC) at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm entitled ‘Books from an environmental perspective—Part 1’.<sup>2</sup> It became clear to me that, while it is obviously important to try to make responsible design decisions, a book designed as a sustainable object is only part of the story. The article notes that “In addition to paper production, consumer-related activities were major contributors to the total environmental impact of paper books”.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, it mentions activities like choosing to walk to the bookstore instead of driving, or, if ordering the book online, choosing standard postal service. It also argues that “The impact per book read can be significantly decreased by sharing books with others”.<sup>4</sup>

This is the reason why Lisa Olausson and I thought it was important to add the interim pages, a friendly reminder that all our actions matter—not just our actions as designers but our actions as consumers. On these pages we chose to focus on the sharing aspect, offering four simple ways of putting this statement into practice, because, at the end of the day, sustainability pretty much boils down to each of our everyday behaviours.

← • INTERIM PAGES 15, 47, 81, 123

## FORMAT

Using as little paper as possible is one of the biggest factors determining the environmental impact of a book. The format of this book (166×237 mm) is a slight adjustment to the standard format of 164×240 mm, with each sheet used optimally and allowing 32 pages per sheet. This book has 128 pages, which is exactly 4 sheets. The binding allows us to change the page count by as few as two pages at a time, but paper consumption would only be affected if 16 pages were added or, preferably, subtracted. One frequent piece of advice is to maximize the use of the page to save paper (but, at the same time, not use too much ink on each page, since it makes the paper harder to de-ink when recycled).

## TYPE

Theinhardt Light and Regular, François Rappo 2009, Optimo. Numbers adjusted for this book by Thomas Hirter. Balloon (BT), Max R. Kaufmann, 1939, published by Bitstream.

In researching sustainable typography, I came across quite a few articles on eco-fonts that were insufficiently researched as well as articles claiming to have found the most sustainable—i.e. ink-saving—font. I chose to focus on fonts available in light cuts. Initially, I experimented with making an ultra-thin version of an existing typeface, but it would have required too many press proofs and was ruled out. Thomas Hirter suggested the font Thienhardt.

## PAPER

Cyclus Offset, 140/300gsm. Dalum Papir AS, Arjowiggins, retailed by Antalis.

Most researchers now seem to agree that paper is one of the biggest environmental factors in book design. The general recommendations are: use uncoated paper and as thin a paper as possible; use Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)<sup>5</sup> certified paper or post-consumer waste (PCW) recycled paper,<sup>6</sup> and minimize transport. But which paper is actually better varies considerably from project to project.

Finding two candidates was easy; it would either be Munken Lynx (Munkedalsbruk, Munkedal, Sweden, Arctic paper) 100% FSC or Cyclus Offset (Dalum Papir, Odense, Denmark, Arjowiggins) 100% PCW. But choosing between the two was more difficult.

There are environmental declarations and certifications for papers, mills, and manufacturers. But even when papers use the same declaration system, for example Paper Profile,<sup>7</sup> and the analysis is made and presented in a standardized way, it is quite complicated to compare and draw conclusions from the information; significant factors are not taken into consideration. Not to mention, how should I compare different certificates and can they be trusted?

For example I used the WWF Check Your Paper,<sup>8</sup> and the WWF paper buying guide, and certificates from the mills to compare paper. Cyclus Offset was slightly better in every test and the declarations I found, but Munken Lynx would mean less transport from the mill to the printer.

At one point, it looked like I had to compare sea transport from Portugal to the west coast of Sweden with Euro 5<sup>9</sup> lorry transport from Denmark to Gothenburg. Faced with this, I realized I needed help to get an overview and decided to speak to people outside the paper industry. I was advised that if the papers I was choosing from were, as far as I could judge, equal from a sustainability perspective, then it was a 'political' decision: did I, or those commissioning the book, want to support FSC or recycled paper?

I started to look at what environmental organizations had to say about FSC versus recycled paper from post-consumer waste. Even if FSC is recommended as a green choice, there is growing criticism of the organization. For instance, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and the Friends of the Earth have withdrawn from FSC. During my research, I got the impression that FSC is a strong *brand* while 'recycled paper' is an imprecise *term* and that FSC is very good at promoting itself and being represented in the right communities. Recycled paper is not repre-

sented by one single organization or one single logo, and there are still quite a few outdated myths attached to it. Reading articles from different perspectives on paper production, both by the industry and by environmental groups, finally convinced me of the importance of starting to use the 'urban forest' instead of virgin fibre.

A few weeks before going to print, I got a call from the printer informing me that Arjowiggins had decided to close the mill in Dalum and to produce Cyclus in France instead. We found out that Antalis still had some Cyclus Offset from Dalum in stock, but the only weight still available in the format we needed (102×72 cm) was 140 gsm. Given the situation, I had to accept this compromise.

#### PRINTING AND BINDING

Printografen AB, Halmstad, Sweden 2012

For books with print runs larger than 100 copies at a time, offset is the only realistic option. For the last ten years, I've worked with Björn Tillman at Printografen in Halmstad. Tillman is a true book lover and is wholeheartedly committed to every project and challenge. Most printing houses in Sweden follow the ISO<sup>10</sup> standard and are Svanen<sup>11</sup> certified. Many have also chosen green energy and are part of the REPA<sup>12</sup> waste programme. Printografen fulfilled all these criteria, and they also have a policy of ordering paper and ink once a week to minimize transport. But, just as important, Tillman was willing to help me get an overview of the production process and see how we could make green improvements.

#### Proofing

It is common green advice to use only digital proofing (PDF). Of course this makes sense, but what should be avoided by all means (for both economic and sustainable reasons) is to have to reprint because of a mistake. Normally, my proofing process includes one press proof to make sure that images etc. will print properly, which is an important step to produce quality, avoid nasty surprises, dare to try new things and keep the printer's waste to a minimum when

printing the actual job. In this case, at a very early stage, I sent the printer a few samples that I wanted to proof and, when there was a job in the printing machine with enough waste margins on the sheet, the printer would add my samples. However, once I had an overview of all the material for the book, I realized that we were taking a considerable risk sending the material to print having only judged it on-screen. This time there was no way to use the waste margin 'trick'.

#### Plates and ink

Printing in one colour means minimizing the number of plates used. Most plates available in Sweden are produced in Asia and shipped to Europe by sea. Printografen use AGFA Energy Lite Pro distributed by lorry from Belgium to retailers. The printer investigated whether there were any realistic green options like recycled plates or greener transport available—but had no luck.

Using one of the standard four CMYK colours (instead of choosing a spot colour) eliminates an extra cleaning of the machine. Printografen use Epple Print Power ink, which is based on 85–90% vegetable oils and 10–15% mineral oils, and is Svanen certified. However, there are standard inks available based on 100% vegetable oils. In this case, use of the more sustainable ink had to be compared with the sustainability impact of cleaning the machine and extra transport. The printer also pointed out that the printing machines, plates, and inks are all components in a chain, specifically chosen to work well together—in other words, to produce the best results with as little ink and printer's waste as possible. So the lesson I learned was that ink and plate should be considered together when the printer is first chosen.

#### Drying time

Especially when printing on uncoated paper, there is a risk of smudging. To avoid this, the normal procedure is to run the sheets an extra time in the machine and coat them with a powder that binds the ink to the paper. Tillman suggested that we could skip this step by letting the printed sheets dry for an extra two days before sending them to the bookbinder.

## Binding

The book needed a cover to protect the contents—a torn book in a store means return shipment. To minimize the use of material, a soft cover was the best solution. Avoiding glue meant that the book had to be bound using only thread. One of the many green bonuses with this solution was that it could only be made by hand. This binding also makes it a very recycle-friendly book—just cut away the thread and recycle it with regular paper waste.

Avoiding plastic meant no lamination or shrink wrapping, but a cover made of uncoated paper can easily get dirty and needs extra protection during transport. The paper for the book was sold in a package that contained more sheets than would be necessary for our print run, so we used the remaining paper to make the wrapping.

Normally, the printer has to print a substantial number of extra sheets to cover for the ones that are wasted in all the steps of binding and trimming (when adjusting the machines, etc). Because of the binding, we could keep this to an absolute minimum.

## PRINT RUN

The aim should obviously be a realistic print run, in this case 600 copies. Books should not simply fill warehouse shelves; there should be enough copies without having to reprint. The book will also be available as a free PDF.

## PUBLISHED BY AXL BOOKS, 2013

[www.axlbooks.com](http://www.axlbooks.com), [info@axlbooks.com](mailto:info@axlbooks.com)

We started out by contacting several mid-sized international publishers, but since green solutions for binding etc. proved to be incompatible with larger sales organizations we had to drop this route for publication. Instead a smaller but brave and forward-thinking Stockholm-based publisher, Axl Books, decided to take on the book. It was not possible to find any green alternatives for distribution, which is a major setback in sustainability for the book.

## DESIGN

Graphic design: Matilda Plöjel; Graphic design pp. 49–80: Lisa Olausson; Typography: Thomas Hirter; Proofreading: Susan Long; Photography and images: As credited

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## ENDNOTES

1. *Lovely as a Tree* [http://www.lovelyasatree.com.Recently Discovered Tips for Ecological Graphic Design by Sara De Bondt and Chris Svensson](http://www.lovelyasatree.com.Recently%20Discovered%20Tips%20for%20Ecological%20Graphic%20Design%20by%20Sara%20De%20Bondt%20and%20Chris%20Svensson) [http://www.themetapress.org/pdfs/Eco\\_Tips.pdf](http://www.themetapress.org/pdfs/Eco_Tips.pdf).
2. 'Books from an environmental perspective – Part 1: Environmental impacts of paper books sold in traditional and internet bookshops'. Clara Borggren, Åsa Moberg and Göran Finnveden, *International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment*, 16 (2011), 138–147.
3. *Ibid.*, 128, 143.
4. *Ibid.*, 138.
5. [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)
6. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paper\\_recycling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paper_recycling)
7. <http://www.paperprofile.com>
8. <http://checkyourpaper.panda.org>
9. A European emission standard that defines the acceptable limits for exhaust emissions of new vehicles sold in EU member states.
10. <http://www.iso.org>
11. <http://www.svanen.se>
12. <http://www.repa.se>

This is a critical time in design. Concepts and practices of design are changing in response to historical developments in the modes of industrial design production and consumption. Indeed, the imperative of more sustainable development requires profound reconsideration of design today. Theoretical foundations and professional definitions are at stake, with consequences for institutions such as museums and universities as well as for future practitioners. This is 'critical' on many levels, from the urgent need to address societal and environmental issues to the reflexivity required to think and do design differently.

This book traces the consequences of sustainability for concepts and practices of design. Our basic questions concern whether fundamental concepts that have become institutionalized in design may (or may not) be adequate for addressing contemporary challenges. The book is composed of three main, authored sections, which present different trajectories through a shared inquiry into notions of 'form' and 'critical practice' in design. In each section, there is a dialogue between text and image—theory and practice, argument and experiment—in which photographic, graphic, facsimile, or other materials act not as illustrations but as arguments in another (designed) form. Each argument interweaves theoretical, historical and practical perspectives that, cumulatively, critique and reconfigure design as we see it.