

# An A to Z of Contemporary Design<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 2001, Hal Foster wrote his paper “The ABCs of Contemporary Design\*” (Foster, 2002a) as a supplement (part glossary, part guide) to his book *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (Foster, 2002b). Foster’s ABCs paper paints design as being a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption. Foster claims that critical reflection is outdated, which means design is a consumption-based system and as such design’s role is largely to feed capitalism, let it flourish, and meet the demands of the masses. Over a decade on from Foster’s critical analysis of design, however, it appears that design is in the middle of yet another series of crises (Bremner and Rodgers, 2013) ranging from disciplinary challenges where the profession of design appears to be struggling with its identity, to epistemological and conceptual challenges where the zeitgeist of design thinking and the widespread democratization of the discipline would have us believe that “we are all designers”, and where the remit of design is expanding into ever more far flung areas that cover communications, services, interactions and strategies. It seems timely and fitting, therefore, that we need a new examination of the contemporary world of design. This assessment of contemporary design is apposite given that we currently inhabit a world that we have all combined to create that is seriously unprepared to deal with the mounting crises we face. Collectively, we are destroying some of the most important features of society that we claim to hold most dear (*i.e.* our planet, our society, and our spirit). Our ecological crisis, wherein we continue to deplete and degrade our natural capital on a massive scale, using up the equivalent of 1.5 planets to meet our current consumption has resulted in one third of our agricultural land disappearing over the last 40 years, which will inevitably lead to food supply crises and an anticipated doubling of food prices by 2030 (Emmott, 2013). Our present social crisis sees nearly 2.5 billion people on our planet living in abject poverty (UNHDR, 2007). There have been many successes at lifting people out of poverty, but this figure has not changed much over the past few decades (Therborn, 2012). Furthermore, the world is currently in a spiritual crisis where, according to World Health Organization (WHO) statistics, 3 times as many people die from suicide as die from homicide or in wars. These global dimensions are collectively creating results that nobody wants and may well constitute the most significant failure of our time. Building on Foster’s ABC template, the authors present a new critical insight from A to Z into the current design situation where issues of professionalism in design, the global financial meltdown, and the rapid adoption of digital technologies have all modified the models of design thought and action. We suggest readers see this paper as a development of Foster’s original supplement.

## A is for Alterplurality

A portmanteau of “alternative” and “disciplinarity”, “alterplurality” is the condition contemporary design finds itself in (Rodgers and Bremner, 2011). The fluid, evolving muddle of practice that regularly cross, exceed and alter historical disciplinary and conceptual boundaries has resulted in research, education, and practice that is constantly shifting, creating, contesting and negotiating new terrains of opportunities and re-shaping the boundaries of design. This is because globalisation and the proliferation of the digital has resulted in connections that are no longer “amid”, cannot be measured “across”, nor encompass a “whole” system, which has generated an “other” dimension (Bourriaud, 2009), or as we propose an “alternative disciplinarity” – an “alterplurality” that does not rely on historic disciplines of design as the boundaries of our understanding and has been superseded by a boundless space/time. The digital has modified the models of design thought and action, and as a result research and practice should transform from a convention domesticated by the academy to a reaction to globalisation that is yet to be disciplined.

## B is for Before

To imagine a start for design it is necessary to think of what was before design — not the after that has become the focus of all design thought, action and increasing amounts of media. One way to see the necessity of this before is through late-night television infomercials that are populated with transformational products and processes dramatised by before and after images of magically transfigured people. Similarly, prime time television is increasingly full of competitions to transform the most bodily, spatially, socially, anti-socially, and so on, in the fastest time. And every episode is interlaced with before images because to know where the

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2001, Hal Foster wrote his paper “The ABCs of Contemporary Design\*” as a supplement (part glossary, part guide) to his book *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*. We suggest readers see this paper as a much more focused view of the disciplines of design than Foster’s ABCs supplement.

'contestant' is going you need to know where they were before. Transformational TV takes a path resembling the design formula known as value analysis, where products are given differentiating makeovers in a process vaguely disguised as gap-in-the-market opportunism. The values analysed are price points and manufacturing costs with the aim of going one price lower than competitors. The comparison between body makeover and design doesn't stop at product analogies; the same transformational TV is so saturated with digitally enhanced images of rejuvenation they transport graphic design from a means of reification to almost miraculous deification. Design is not only designing the transformational products, which are not the real product of the infomercials. The real product is the body that is being designed, confirming Joanne Finkelstein's proposition that we have left the era of the production of goods and services and entered the era of self-production (Finkelstein, 1991). So it is easy to see that for design to function, every after effect has to be preceded by a before.

### **C is for Charter**

Once upon a time it was commonplace that designers would routinely write manifestos and sign up to far-reaching and ambitious charters. A famous example is the Munich Design Charter of 1990 where the likes of Dieter Rams, Ettore Sottsass, Javier Mariscal, Andrea Branzi, Daniel Weil, Ezio Manzini, Alberto Meda, Philipp Thonet, Alessandro Mendini, Mario Bellini, Denis Santachiara, Stefan Marzano, Marco Zanini, Michele De Lucchi amongst several others proclaimed that a new dimension of design was needed to measure our quality of life no less (Rams *et al.*, 1991). The signatories of the Charter met in Munich on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 1990 and came to a number of conclusions about the fundamental role to be played by design in the future Europe, and the historical role played by design in the major choices open to society and in the elaboration of the developmental models of modern societies. The signatories reminded us that: "European design is a balance between technological and humanistic aspects of culture... [which] has always aimed to make the industrialized world both human and habitable, as well as to generate a better quality of life within artificial environments." Design, they stated: "...has always been deeply concerned with all parts of contemporary life: with economy as well as ecology, with traffic and communication, with products and services, with technology and innovation, with culture and civilization, with sociological, psychological, medical, physical, environmental, and political issues, and with all forms of social organization [and] Given its complexity, design has thus meant working on history, on the present, and on the future." (Rams *et al.*, 1991)

### **D is for Derivative**

When Dieter Rams wryly suggested that Apple had only done one thing he had not – to get people to queue for their products – at first it seemed he was simply accepting the sincere tribute in Jonathan Ive's admission that he derived the design for Apple products from Rams (Warman, 2011). But more significantly Rams, at the time glad for the renewed exploration of his influential product design, was in fact ridiculing Ive's derivation. He seemed to be asking - if all Apple could do that was different was get people to queue - then how is that good design? Considering Rams' possible experience of Germany at the time of his birth, getting people to line up could never be good design. The irony in Rams comment makes apparent the shallowness of applauding Apple's derivative products. But derivation, always such a pejorative term in design parlance, now seems to be sanctified (it earned Ive a Knighthood). And it occurs at a significant time. The downgrade of the financial stocks of designers coincides with the 'financialisation' of the global economy that has turned all exchanges into a product the financial sector dubbed the derivative. Even financial experts seem unable to describe what the derivative is and how it works, but the general impression is that the derivative is a form of insurance against change—change up or down in a share price. If Rams' comment about the uselessness of derivatives is ironic then for the design profession, historically predicated on the project of change, and dependent on work from the global flow of capital that is now dependent on insuring against change, this is potentially a terminal development.

### **E is for Ecologies**

During the lost years of sustaining the unsustainable since the Munich Design Charter situated design within three inescapable ecologies other ecologies have been exposed, which we identify as:

***The ecology of the sentimental – in the era of digital reproductivity everything is misrepresented.*** The digital is generating the design of an 'other' world where, under the weight of digital flows, the project has become to archive 'what-was'. This is a sentimental project producing a future that tries to preserve a past.

***The ecology of the idea – in the era of infinite perspectives ideas have no place.*** With the introduction of digital technologies, not only in the area of design, but also in the traditional ways of manufacture and

representation, digitisation has consigned design into a loop of imitative images. Change has now become a virtual world full of images of here-and-now, and the abundance of images in the digital flows that might refer to the possible future scenarios of our imaginings are now the floating images of no-place that is everywhere.

**The ecology of the conditional – in the era of the qualified we need to be undisciplined.** To be undisciplined is as much a way of doing things as it is a departure from ways of doing things. But it is conditional on not worrying about what historic disciplines say is “proper” work.

**The ecology of disruption – in the era of global crises we must disrupt what we have sustained for too long.** We don’t have all the answers – but we will find the people who do. We propose a physical sketching approach in design; an approach that privileges action before words. Moreover, we believe (like David Pye (1978) has suggested) that nothing is ever really finished. We advocate a heteroclitic attitude to the dominant one-size-fits-all, Fordist assembly-line style of design (<http://designdisruptiongroup.wordpress.com/>).

### **F is for Fit**

Fit, the dictionary tells us, can mean to be in agreement with or in harmony with. Christopher Alexander in his seminal work, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, suggested that “good design” is the elimination of “misfit” (Alexander, 1971). Thus, design should always strive to achieve good fit between **form** (that which the designer typically has control over) and **context** (everything that places demands on the form). **Fitness** is the minimum condition for design products, services and systems. When we speak of design, the real object of discussion is not the form alone, but the ensemble comprising the form and its context. Generally speaking, however, we are unable to provide an adequate and complete description of the context we are dealing with in the contemporary world. The fields of the contexts we need to deal with in the modern designed world cannot be described and dealt with in an objective fashion in the same way as say scientific and mathematics problems can. There is no theory for dealing with the super complex, multi-faceted phenomena one encounters in contemporary urban situations, for example. Usually, we are attempting to achieve “fit” in situations that we simply do not understand (*see Knowing*).

### **G is for Global Tools**

The Italian Radical Design construct Global Tools was launched in 1973 as a “system of laboratories for propagation of the use of natural and technological materials and relative modes of conduct [...]” with the goal of “stimulating the free development of individual creativity” (Global Tools, 1973). According to Gianni Pettena (2011), Global Tools was created to investigate mass creativity in the leisure society. But this never actually got off the ground, and its failure brought with it the awareness that liberating society from work by new technologies was illusory. This sobering moment in the history of design hasn’t stopped the periodic pronouncement of the advent of mass creativity and liberation from traditional forms of work, as typified in concepts like the Whole Earth Catalogue, or exemplified by the dot-com dream, or Web 2.0, or the digital superhighway, or the codification of the creative industries, or social networking, or social enterprise.. All of these predictions failed to learn from the Global Tools experiment. Global Tools explored the links between creativity and technology to liberate a society enslaved to work. However, it appears these days creativity and technology are being realigned again to liberate successive generations of designers from the possibility of work by enslaving them to the new creative industries of self-employed precariousness.

### **H is for Hybrid**

Design just like Fine Art before it has undergone something of a major transformation in recent years. Design, too, has refocused its lens to privilege ideas over aesthetics. As such, today, design can be anything. Bruno Latour famously claimed that: “...*design has been expanding ferociously from the design of objects that we use on a daily basis to cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes, political systems, the way we produce food, to the way we travel, build cars and clone sheep*” (Latour, 2008). Moreover, if you study how design is celebrated nowadays by the likes of the UK’s Design Council then its “winners” routinely range from things like drugs that enhance sexual performance (Viagra) to business software. Stuart MacDonald (2012) describes this new creative landscape as a “*post-modern soup*” in which cultural, economic, social and educational issues are swimming and where “*mongrel*” or “*hybrid*” institutions will flourish. But if design can be anything then it can also be nothing and this perhaps is the biggest challenge that design now faces? As the title of Arthur Danto’s essay (Danto, 1998) goes (if we substitute the word ‘art’ for ‘design’), “After the End of Design” what does it mean when Design can be anything?

### **I is for Interpassivity**

The phenomenon of interactive design and the gamut of interactive products that we so longingly cherish show no signs of abating any time soon. Our digits are sore from pressing, swiping, squeezing, and double-clicking apps and virtual buttons that remind us how busy we are (or need to be), where we are, and how many calories we are burning. Yet the majority of these interactions are all a bit one-sided. Slavoj Žižek has coined the term “interpassivity” to describe this pseudo-exchange (Žižek, 1997). In Žižek’s view, interactive objects largely cannibalise our enjoyment of life. Žižek views most of this interactivity as interpassivity. Žižek asks whether the necessary obverse of interacting with the object instead of just passively following the show, not the situation in which the object itself takes from me, deprives me of, my own passive reaction of satisfaction (or mourning or laughter), so that it is the object itself which “*enjoys the show*” instead of me, relieving me of the superego duty to enjoy myself? Is “*to be relieved of one’s enjoyment*” not a meaningless paradox, at best a euphemism for simply being deprived of it? Is all of this so-called interactivity not interpassivity? Truly innovative design requires a consequential and meaningful exchange that stimulates, provokes or questions its audience. Only then can design redeem itself from the ubiquity of thoughtless mechanical interaction, and return cognitive sovereignty to the individual. If the designed object, space or experience does not then it is merely entertainment that exploits magical novelty to achieve false consciousness (West, 2010).

### **J is for Junkspace**

Rem Koolhaas’ visceral and rampantly analytical essay “Junkspace” (Koolhaas, 2002) proclaims: “*If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.*” Koolhaas provocatively declares that the environment we have created, a product of the modern project, is not full with wonderful examples of modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course. Modernization had a rational program - to share the blessings of science, universally, but Junkspace is its apotheosis. One can already witness the remains of Junkspace in the making with the decline of retail shopping and the rise in online shopping. Online shopping figures will soon surpass retail shopping and once giant shopping malls will inevitably become steel and glass dinosaurs. Casinos will also be transferred online, if they haven’t already done so. We will then be left with giant carcasses of buildings that have no purpose, they will be nothing but Junkspace left on our planet. Junkspace is a cautionary tale for us all. Like Koolhaas, Franco Berardi, aka “Bifo” informs us (*see Zzz...*) that we have created a world that is seriously ill prepared to deal with the mounting environmental, social, economic, and spiritual crises we face because we have based our ways of life on the identification of energy and good, have an overriding obsession with accumulation, property, and greed, and strive for continual expansion and social well-being (Berardi, 2010). We continue to design and build when it is not needed. Koolhaas suggests we are not letting our cities breathe. As such we should cease our obsession with growth, globalization, money and greed and our creation of a world that nobody really wants.

### **K is for Knowing**

All design should emanate from a point of not knowing. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, is attributed to have said that: “*The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.*” This resonates well with Kenya Hara’s notion of *Exformation* described in his book, “*Designing Design*”, where he makes clear that *Exformation* doesn’t mean making known, but understanding how little we know (Hara, 2007). If we can recognize that we know so little, a method for finding out how little we know will become clear to us as well. Kenya Hara believes that comprehension and recognition of the unknown is a necessary for the beginning of any design project. *Exformation* should be considered the direct opposite to the familiar information, meaning exploration of the unknown. Hara emphasizes how our lives are full of wonders and the unknown, and as a race we need to constantly wake up and consider new perspectives. He believes that “known” and “understood” are both horrible concepts, which usually means that your works (designs) have nothing new to offer the world. Alternatively, to succeed Kenya Hara suggests, one has to look for the unknown consciously.

### **L is for Learning**

With the 1972 publication of *Learning from Las Vegas* (Venturi *et al.*, 1972) the idea of learning about the artificial world by observation was brought home, much as several years earlier Ed Ruscha (Miller, 1988) had “*brought back the news*” in his self-published books of photographs of amongst other things in and around Los Angeles gas stations, parking lots, swimming pools, and various small fires. Now we are being seduced not to learn from the world around us but from the digital sphere surrounding us. Also, the digital technologies that facilitate the networks that facilitate participatory culture that, in turn, facilitate the abundance of digital flows call into question the historic relationship between production and consumption. While we were once

consumers at the end of the great chains of production it appears to be generally accepted that the new digital flows have licensed us all to be producers as well. This has signified a change of purpose for the design school from instructing production to producing entrepreneurs who will fill the digital with design. Learning has also gone digital in the booming form of massive open online courses (mooc).. Because subjects are free they must also be worthless (which doesn't mean useless) and they can be free because the content is redundant. Instead of scrambling to compete with a worthless and redundant thing called the subject, design education can give these away and get on to learning about being together in massive numbers and proximity on a populous world expressing its limits.

### **M is for Modern**

In just the same way we joke about how prosaic it is that every popular song of the twentieth century is about love (in, over, lost etc...), it is not too much of a stretch to conclude that virtually every sentence written or spoken about design includes the word modern, and/or its synonyms (new, innovative, cool, etc...). After all, design is generally only concerned with what-might-become., not what-is and even less interested in what-was. So modern makes its way into the design dialogue to illustrate how both design and designers are ahead of trends, needs, desires etc... But modern also describes a project that design signed up to when it was realized that change was taking place and was beginning to transform the world. The project of change proposed a perfect question for young design – what type of world do we want? The answer to this question became the 'modern project' and it was predicated on the notion that because we can imagine change, change will take place, animated by an increasingly sophisticated industrial and technological infrastructure. At the same time as the modern project was articulated its eventual outcome became obvious — the totally artificial world — and how design was going to get us to this result demanded that we ask of every project 'what type of world do we want?' The answer to this question has only two dimensions – it is infinite in possibilities, and design laid claim to the infinitely possible, and it demands that we be infinitely responsible. Not surprisingly, design has been slower to lay claim to the infinite responsibilities of the modern project, but they are inescapable and ignoring them weakens design by the day...

### **N is for Nothing**

Whereas once none of us were involved in the production of anything, it was nothing to imagine consuming everything. Now, courtesy of the digital, we are all involved in the project of producing nothing, but that 'nothing' is consuming every imagining. Instead of projecting 'what-might-become', the digital is producing the design of an 'other' world where the project is to archive 'what-was'. And it is taking more and more of our time to produce and consume this project. Once upon a time design was a serious project, and that project was to persuade us to produce a better world. Given this new digital project, instead of persuading a system of production might we now need to persuade ourselves that we can imagine a world in which we want to live? And it is at this time in these changed conditions in which we find the dissolving of the discipline of design.

### **O is for Orbit**

On a day in 2007 it is generally accepted that the planet shifted from rural to urban and that by mid-century 75% of the world's population will live in cities. Counter to urban concentration millions of people all over the world are being forced to migrate from urban areas due to war or terrorism, or the design of infrastructure for an Olympics or World Cup. Also evident recently is a desire for exodus from the overcrowded urbanised planet. The Dutch organization Mars One is aiming to send a crew to Mars in 2022. There will be no coming back, and the company received 200,000 applications for crew (John, 2013). Prior to this one-way odyssey the space program has been designed for return and the need to orbit is the starting point. For example, the international space station is in stationary orbit. Also, the global flow of capital plus the military, communications, and entertainment industries are entirely dependent on orbiting satellites. Before Mars One there have been only a few probes designed to travel without orbit in the hope they will collide with extraterrestrial intelligence and the cryptic illustrations on the spacecraft will deliver much needed intelligence. The prospective demand to be onboard Mars One highlights the need for this intelligence because it signals a serious flaw in the burgeoning number of designs for the planet-as-city. The project for design is not what will be the look of the future city, but how will we live together.

### **P is for Perfect(ion)**

Designers never achieve perfection nor should they even attempt to do so. It is a pointless pursuit. David Pye eloquently convinced us of this ridiculous notion in his wonderful book *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*

(Pye, 1978). We are exposed to the products, systems, services, and spaces of design all day long. There is hardly anything in our daily lives that has not been designed. However, most of these useful things do useless things that no one wants them to do. For example, who wants a car that gets too hot? Or a car that regularly wears out its tyres? Or a car that makes a noise and smells? As Pye suggests: *"The concept of function in design... might be worth a little attention if things ever worked. It is, however, obvious that they do not."* He goes on: *"Nothing we design or make ever really works. We can always say what it ought to do, but that it never does."* Planes occasionally fail, our computers crash regularly, our trains break down, our dinner table should be impervious to scratches and be self-cleaning – but they are not of course, and our motor cars, refrigerators, air conditioning units, and homes all consume valuable resources like a hungry animal. *"Never..."*, Pye declares, *"...do we achieve a satisfactory performance... [but] If we cannot have our way in performance we will have it in appearance."* (Pye, 1978).

### **Q is for Quotidian**

The idea and practice of the everyday is now a vast field of scholarship rescued from almost obscurity by French sociologists and with its recovery the word quotidian came back into usage. When used now it implies commonplace, ordinary, and humdrum daily travails. Quotidian does not appear to apply to uncommon, abnormal, and exciting daily happenings. The difference reveals an historic paradox in the activities of design, for so long applied to make the common uncommon, and the normal different and it caused design real anxiety. As early as 1964 in his *First Things First* text Ken Garland questioned why we applaud *"...the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, beforeshave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons"* (Garland, 1964). Reprinted in 2000 to protest the same anxieties the second manifesto questioned why design was *"...helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse."* If such a harmless word as quotidian (viz everyday) sets up such a divisive discourse – common versus uncommon – this signals a warning about how the designed is designing design (Willis, 2007).

### **R is for Royalties**

Design in the contemporary commercial realm is in a state of financial meltdown. Economically, the design industry and designers are in crisis. The royalty rates designers used to rely on from the sales of their mass-produced goods have disappeared. The over-inflated annual carnivals of design at events such as the Milano Salone, London Design Week and the Biennales in Miami and Beijing show the latest designed products but no one apart from incredibly wealthy patrons and galleries are buying the designers' efforts. Manufacturing and production is drying up (McGuirk, 2011). In the endless exhibition halls at the Rho Pero fairgrounds in Milan, 2,700 furniture brands exhibited their wares over half a million square metres. Many of these prototypes are produced by designers for free in the hope they will make their money back in royalties. Only the lucky few ever do. One young designer, who has five items in production with a respected Italian manufacturer – no small achievement, said: "My royalty cheque last year came to €600. Half a month's rent." It is not uncommon for manufacturers to commission exciting young talents to populate their exhibition stands with eye-catching pieces that never hit the market. They may be widely published, win awards and earn the brand a reputation for innovation – and still not go into production. In that case, the designer won't make a penny. Most of the time they don't even get advances. "Ah, but think of the exposure, the PR value", the manufacturers argue. As the British designer Ilse Crawford puts it: "Designers often end up being voluntary workers for millionaires." The demise of royalty income streams for designers comes at a time when there is an enormous boom in design festivals across Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Australasia. Globalisation and the digitisation of designed goods and services have resulted in a plethora of offerings but in turn have led to a reduction in the actual goods that we wish to own. Furthermore, the global production of designers is incessant and supply exceeds demand at an astonishing level. Rem Koolhaas, in his diatribe *Junkspace*, presented a formula for the excess of architects graduating from architectural courses by concluding that through the concept of *Junkspace* every architect is working on the same project. It is funny but true!

### **S is for Serious**

Design is a serious profession, but one could be forgiven for forgetting this. We are told by Donald A. Norman (and others) in the Epilogue to his book *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* that we are all designers, yet Dieter Rams, has stated that he is *"...troubled by the devaluing of the word design"* and that he finds himself *"...now being somewhat embarrassed to be called a designer."* (Warman, 2011). To combat the

devalued meaning, Dieter Rams suggests treating the discipline of design seriously, understanding that design “is not simply an adjective to place in front of a product’s name to somehow artificially enhance its value.” As a signatory to the “The Munich Design Charter,” Rams knows design’s responsibilities in all parts of contemporary life. Rams knows that design must concern itself with “...economy as well as ecology, with traffic and communication, with products and services, with technology and innovation, with culture and civilization, with sociological, psychological, medical, physical, environmental, and political issues, and with all forms of social organization.” It is unfortunate and depressing that, now, 20 years later Rams needs to remind us again “...that design is a serious profession, and for our future welfare we need to take the profession of design seriously....”

### **T is for Talent**

In Bern, Switzerland, in 1969 Harold Szeemann produced the exhibition “When Attitudes Become Form” (Szeemann, 1969). His exhibition has been so influential in the story of art that in 2013 it was faithfully reproduced in Venice sponsored by the Prada Foundation (Fondazione Prada, 2013). And in 1983 its influence was invoked in a critique of art education by Thierry De Duve, who reversed the word order in his essay titled “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond” (de Duve, 1994). In this essay de Duve reviews the evolution of art education in the twentieth century and describes what happened to talent. Historically talent resided in the few and required skill, but the Bauhaus replaced talent with creativity, which they imagined was universal and could be applied to any medium for its expression – hence everyone could be an artist (and more recently a designer). Talent was coupled with skill, that could be acquired, leading to the mastery of a medium, whereas in the Bauhaus creativity applied to any medium produced invention (that eventually became just novelty). Superseding the modern was the post-modern where ‘critical attitude’ replaced creativity, but rapidly degenerated into artistic ‘pose’, and simply required a ‘signifying practice’ to convey its form in a soup of referentiality and replication. With the loss of talent and skill as the origins of practice, and due to the Bauhaus imprint, creativity has been universally applied to any medium. And because the digital is now a cosmic accelerating medium, everyone is a producer in a world in which the relationship between talent to making has been transformed into digitally reproduced serial variability where quite possibly everything is already designed (*see Derivative*).

### **U is for Utopia**

According to Marshall McLuhan print gave us the single city and electronic media the global village (McLuhan, 1964). Today the planetary urban crisis is commonly called the global city. The global city appears to illustrate the limits of our capacity to imagine the city of the future, and adds urgency to the inescapable project of being together in unprecedented numbers and proximity. And the project of being together in this urbanised scenario is driving us to change the entire terrain of thought and action about design. Where once ideas drove change, change now appears to be split between two projects whose temporal dimensions govern the notion of the ‘future’. One project is the busy sharing of the world-as-found in images lodged in the clouds, and counter to this digital reconstruction of the here-and-now, is the revival of projections of what-might-become depicted in the boom in digital imagery of fantasy cities. In order to now imagine a place in the future it has become necessary to navigate the competing time frames of the digital cataloguing of the past and the digital reproductivity of the future. It might still be possible to span this temporal disjuncture by reviving the historic schematic of the island utopia, keeping in mind that utopia does is not about an ideal location but about the location of ideas. And rather than continue to view the urban as a space for conditioning, it is imperative to explore utopia to project scenarios now affecting the conditions of everyone everywhere, on the one island we share.

### **V is for Vaffanculo**

Enzo Mari, one of the most thoughtful and intellectually provocative Italian designers of the late 20th century, in his famous **Vaffanculo** talk defined creativity as the door of hell (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X49crKOX9Js>). In this talk, Mari draws a straight line on a blackboard with a piece of chalk from left to right. At the right end of the line Mari states: “...lies the maximum known quality – individuals such as Bach, Mozart, Piero della Francesca, etc...” At the start of the chalk line on the left, exclaims Mari, “...lies the student of today.” Mari pronounces that the student “...wants to get there [the right hand end of the line]...” He [the student] will work hard all his life, but he doesn't make it [he stops half way]. It's very hard to reach those [Bach, Mozart, Piero della Francesca, etc...]. Someone will say 'poor guy, he is really incapable'... I don't know. I say that even the student that arrives only half way does something good. But what

*do we teach in our design schools today? What do our pseudo-artists teach? Freedom, creativity... There is no word more obscene and unhealthy than the word creativity. We don't say anymore 'go and work hard and gain that', that's the reality. It's the only reality we have. We say that we are creative. Like this... like this... [Mari scribbles on the blackboard]... We produce the nothingness... The shit with the word creativity."* Mari reserves some of his more stinging criticism for the annual lavish Milan Furniture Fair when he says: *"The Salone del Mobile is standing on a word that I think is the gate of hell – 'creativity'. All of these idiots decide to make the creative world. What is the problem today? Everyone is looking to patent something - a spider, an ant run, a fart, only to have his five minutes of advertising in total ignorance. But the problem today is to eliminate 99% of this stuff... look at them one by one and say Vaffanculo, Vaffanculo, Vaffanculo!!!"* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2T\\_1SQHIQk#t=04m29s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2T_1SQHIQk#t=04m29s))

### **W is for Winning**

Over the last fifty years or so the Olympics has brought winning into the living rooms of everyone with a television. About the time it came to our attention that cities were gambling first millions to win the right to host an Olympics then billions to stage the games, television started to perceive profit in winning as a genre. Already very familiar with games shows where contestants won prizes, television started to structure programs where contestants won on-going participation, immunity, lifelines, and other ruses resulting first in winning opportunities, then eventually just winning celebrity. What television first called reality TV – scenes captured by a camera that is simply turned on then designed into drama via editing – has become more accurately described as structured reality – the designing precedes the reality. Design in this sense follows from Flusser's definition of substituting the fake for the real (Flusser, 1995). Two attractions drive this mockery of the real – we seem to have an insatiable appetite for failure (of others), and failure comes cheap (in terms of production costs). So we have witnessed the design of a lengthening list of winning singers, dancers, cooks, chefs, renovators, gardeners, dog handlers, artists, etc. And most paradoxical of all, the design of winning designers. That reality can be structured to fake winning begs the question of winning itself – is all winning designed (and what about the winning athlete)? What structured reality television might be revealing is not necessarily the presence of talent and creativity, but that all entertainment, and possibly all of culture, is being enhanced by design. If so, design must ask itself is this a legacy it really wants?

### **X is for Xenophile**

As lover of all things foreign the xenophile casts light on the booming world of travel and tourism where the world is starting to take on the appearance of something like a resort; the sort of place where we are all tourists in each others worlds – some travel, others accommodate, and then the roles reverse; the sort of place that is different from all other places, but different by design. With the mere mention of the word 'resort' you have already imagined what this future resort will look like, simultaneously light and dark, colourful and grey, paradoxically relaxing and exciting, exotic and familiar – the usual stuff. Already each year 1.5 billion people travel by aeroplane with approximately four million people in the air on any one day, so the love all things foreign is not calling for the design of more resorts, in all probability we might already be in a resort that is called design. And if we are now in our own 'design resort', and apparently comfortable in it, perhaps we should be concerned whether design might still be able to illustrate possible scenarios for getting back to the future we know we have to face. That is if we admit to concern about the future—and not the future that is the usual tele-visual stuff of gorgeous or apocalyptic images; technological redemption or drowning damnation; miniaturisation and mass entertainment; or a future of seamless communications that only accelerates our search for someone to talk to.

### **Y is for Young**

Beatrice Colomina wrote recently *"Architecture pedagogy has become stale. Schools spin old wheels as if something is happening but so little is going on. Students wait for a sense of activist engagement with a rapidly evolving world but graduate before it happens."* (Colomina et al., 2012). Being young and undergoing some form of design education is now more a test of patience than ability to learn. Much has been said about the young, their impatience, their disregard for history, their obsession with the digital archive of the here-and-now (implying carelessness for a future), and their sense of entitlement whenever they engage with the world. So having to commit years to learn something is for most students unbelievable. Disappointingly for anyone inside design education it is not that hard to believe Schools spinning their wheels for years. And if both student and institution confront the learning experience in diverging time zones, can a sense of activist engagement unite them? The answer is obvious but not straightforward. It is obvious there is no time to waste



engaging with the problems of global stewardship, but it is clear that young designers will configure their stewardship very differently. Young designers will be wise to ignore the classical design of the past and its universal laws of competition, production, perfection, distribution etc. and activate the possibility of the design of new living models for a planet revealing its limits.

### **Z is for Zzz...**

**ZZZ...** we are exhausted! Franco "Bifo" Berardi points out that the notion of exhaustion has always been anathema to the discourse of modernity, the Faustian drive to immortality, and the endless thirst for economic growth and profit (Berardi, 2010). Writing within a European context, Berardi posits that our future will not be driven by energy, but by slowness, withdrawal, and exhaustion. He reminds us that we were first advised of the finite physical resources of the planet when the Club of Rome commissioned *The Limits to Growth* over 40 years ago in 1972 (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). Now, we have created a world that is seriously unprepared to deal with the mounting crises we face such as environmental, social, economic, and spiritual issues because we have based our ways of life on the identification of energy and good, have an overriding obsession with accumulation, property, and greed, and strive for continual expansion and social well-being. Berardi suggests if we were to embrace a "creative consciousness of exhaustion" then this would mark the beginning of a massive abandonment of competition, consumerist drive, and dependence on work. Perhaps design should abandon its obsession with solving problems and instead look once more at shaping and making meaning of a contemporary world that nobody wants.

### **References**

- Alexander, C., *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1971.
- Berardi, F. 'Bifo', "Exhaustion and Senile Utopia of the Coming European Insurrection", *e-flux journal*, 21, December, 2010, pp. 1-8.
- Bourriaud, N., *Altermodern*, Tate Publishing, London, 2009.
- Bremner, C. and Rodgers, P.A., "Design without Discipline", *Design Issues*, Vol. 29, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 4-13.
- Colomina, B., Choi, E., Gonzalez Galan, I. and Meister, A.M., "Radical Pedagogies in Architectural Education", *The Architecture Review*, 28 September 2012, <http://www.architectural-review.com/essays/radical-pedagogies-in-architectural-education/8636066.article>
- Danto, A.C., *After the End of Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998.
- de Duve, T., "When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond" in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context*, (ed. Stephen Foster and Nicholas de Ville), John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 1994, pp. 19-31.
- Emmott, S., *10 Billion*, Penguin, London, 2013.
- Finkelstein, J., *The Fashioned Self*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1991.
- Flusser, V., "On the Word Design: An Etymological Essay," *Design Issues*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1995, pp. 50-53.
- Fondazione Prada, *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, Ca' Corner della Regina, Venice, 2013.
- Foster, H., "The ABCs of Contemporary Design", *OCTOBER*, Vol. 100, Spring 2002a, pp. 191-199.
- Foster, H., *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, Verso, London and New York, 2002b.
- Garland, K., *First Things First*, 1964.
- "Global Tools," document no. 1, January 1973, cited in Gianni Pettena, *Radicals*, Accessed 21 June 2011 <http://www.giannipettena.it/inglese/opere/eopere.htm>
- Hara, K., *Designing Design*, Lars Muller Verlag, Zurich, 2007.
- John, O., "78,000 People Apply for One-Way Trip to Mars", *Time Newsfeed*, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/05/09/78000-people-apply-for-one-way-trip-to-mars/>  
Accessed 12 May 2013
- Koolhaas, R., "Junkspace," *OCTOBER*, Vol. 100, Spring 2002, pp. 175-190.
- Latour, B., "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Towards a Philosophy of Design (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)" *Keynote Lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society, Falmouth, Cornwall, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2008*.
- MacDonald, S., *Designs on Democracy: Architecture and Design in Scotland Post Devolution*, Zero Books, England, 2012.
- McGuirk, J., "Designs for Life Won't Make you a Living: *The 50th Milan Furniture Fair was Crawling with Millionaires – But are Designers being Exploited by Having to Make Work for Free?*" [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Monday 18 April 2011 17.40 BST

McLuhan, M., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1964.

Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. and Behrens III., W.W., *Limits to Growth*, Universe Books, New York, 1972.

Miller, J., "The Mnemonic Book: Ed Ruscha's Fugitive Publications," *Parkett*, 18, 1988, pp. 66–79.

Pettena, G., *Radicals*, Accessed 21 June 2011 <http://www.giannipettena.it/inglese/opere/eopere.htm>

Pye, D., *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*, The Herbert Press, London, 1978.

Rams, D., *et al.*, "The Munich Design Charter," *Design Issues*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1991, pp. 74-77.

Rodgers, P.A. and Bremner, C., "Alterplinary—Alternative Disciplinarity," *Studies in Material Thinking*, 6, December, 2011, pp. 1-16.

Szeemann, H., *When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Berne, Switzerland, 1969.

Therborn, G. Class in the 21st Century, *New Left Review*, 78, Nov. – Dec. 2012, pp. 29.

United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR), *United Nations Development Program*, November 27, 2007.

Venturi, R., Scott Brown, D. and Izenour, S., *Learning from Las Vegas*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1972.

Matt Warman, "Dieter Rams: Apple has Achieved Something I Never Did", *The Telegraph*, 7 June, 2011, Accessed 21 June 2011 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/apple/8555503/Dieter-Rams-Apple-has-achieved-something-i-never-did.html>

West, D., "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Interaction" In Paul Rodgers and Michael Smyth *Digital Blur: Creative Practice at the Boundaries of Architecture, Design and Art*, Libri Publishers, Oxford, 2010, pp. 224-230.

Willis, A.M., "Ontological designing—laying the ground," in *Design Philosophy Papers: Collection Three*, (ed. Anne-Marie Willis), Ravensbourne Qld, Team D/E/S, 2007.

World Health Organization, *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary*, WHO, Geneva, 2002.

Žižek, S., *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, London, 1997.

## Biographies

**Paul Rodgers** is Professor of Design Issues at Northumbria University, UK. He has had a distinguished and extensive career in design research. Prior to joining Northumbria University in 2009, he was Reader in Design at Edinburgh Napier University (1999–2009) and a postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge's Engineering Design Centre (1996–1999). He has over 20 years' of experience in product design research and has led several research projects for Research Councils in the UK and design projects funded by the Scottish Government and The Lighthouse (Scotland's National Centre for Architecture, Design and the City). He is the author of more than 130 papers and 8 books, including *The Routledge Companion to Design Research* (2014). With Craig Bremner, he has recently been commissioned by Bloomsbury/Berg Publishers, London to write a new book entitled "*Design School: Education, Research and Practice Beyond Disciplines*, which will be published in 2016. His current research explores the discipline of design and how disruptive design interventions can enact positive change in health and social care and elsewhere.

**Craig Bremner** is jointly Professor of Design at Charles Sturt University and the University of Southern Denmark. Prior to this he was Professor in Design Pedagogy at Northumbria University, UK, and before that Professor of Design at the University of Canberra, where he was also Dean of the Faculty of Design & Architecture. He holds a BA in Literature (UWA), a Masters in Design (Domus Academy, Milan) and a PhD (RMIT). His research deals with developing methods to discover how and why we don't know much about the experience of design, as well as finding ways to clarify the reason why "not-knowing" is an essential and valuable beginning point of practice. Some applications of his research methods have traced the experience of living in Glasgow, using banks and driving motorcars. In his private practice he has curated design exhibitions in Australia, the USA, and Japan, and he has worked as a designer in Italy, Scotland and Australia.

## Addresses for Correspondence

### Professor Paul Rodgers

Northumbria University, Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences,  
City Campus East, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST, UK.

Tel: +44 191 227 4111

Email: [paul.rodgers@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:paul.rodgers@northumbria.ac.uk)

**Professor Craig Bremner**

School of Communication & Creative Industries

Charles Sturt University

Tel: +61 2 6933 4370

Email: [cbremner@csu.edu.au](mailto:cbremner@csu.edu.au)

Institute for Technology and Innovation

University of Southern Denmark

Tel: +45 93 50 70 59

Email: [cbre@iti.sdu.dk](mailto:cbre@iti.sdu.dk)