

HYPERCONTEMPORARY - A NEW HUMAN ERA WITHOUT DESIGNERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that in the Hyper Contemporary world the word Design has changed from its Modern meaning to a meaningless generalist designation of human activities detached from its ethical and aesthetical initial vows. This erosion affects essentially a powerful modernist institution: The Designer. The paladin of the Modern World shrank and multiplied into to myriads of professionals specialized in producing bits (and some times bytes) and pieces of the artificial. Consequently, another institution suffering from an acute crisis is The Design School also under the fire of University standards. Concordantly Design Museums proliferate showing Design as something from the past. From the Adorno's existential condition of "living-on" characterized as being "traumatic", "spectral", "no synchronous" and "incongruent" the paper describes how Design and the Designers fit in these sub-conditions enhanced by the Hyper Contemporary condition of global convexity.

Keywords: Hyper contemporary, Social Philosophy, Defuturing, Art and Design

1 INTRODUCTION

Historians divided the human history in periods of an identifiable regularity. Pre History, Antiquity, middle Ages, Modern... These regularities dealt with the humans' relation with themselves as societies and cultures and with the unknown to be known (the gods and the sciences). These regularities were mirrored on the material culture, both in artefacts as in masterpieces, corresponding to consistent stylistic developments.

In the early days of the nineteen-century, Hegel defined his Age as the Age of Modernity: Modern finally autonomous from Ancient, Modern, modern enough to define itself as an existential paradigm. The Modern Age was thus divided in two periods: Early Modern and Modernity. Marking the change, there it was: A human political calamity able to change the worldviews: the French Revolution. Industrialization helped to enhance the cult of novelty so dear to modernization. Siegfried Giedion's (1948/1969) monumental "Mechanization Takes Command" gives account of the shift in the industry regarding movement and its impact in material culture. Mass production and the New prepared the appearance of the Designer. From the Early Modern period, Design as a word and as a concept evolved in this habitat and was consolidated by Modernism. This was also the age of the heroic designer, a demiurgic being capable of (re)generating a new world by vision. Soon Modernism and Modern reached a crisis. In texts like Adolfo Casais Monteiro's, "The Ideia of Modernity" (1956/2007) A Post-Modernity was announced in the late 50's, early 60's.

Remarkably, in this period, after the World War II, the word Design colonised the world outside the English speaking countries.

This period also witnessed the growing and overwhelming presence of "the Contemporary". Post Modernity summoned every Time in to our Time. Also the growth of worldwide systems of instantaneous communications enhanced this overpowering of the contemporary as "what is really happening this very second".

The attacks on the Twin Towers in September 11, 2001 showed clearly that something more powerful than Modern was beginning: The Post Modern had evolved to a Hyper-Contemporary condition. The Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury in order to describe post war Beirut first used the word in 2005. A state of ruins seems to metaphorically describe also the permanent flux of communication interrupted and focused, from time to time, into catastrophes, natural and human-made. Hyper Contemporary is directly linked with catastrophes. The precedent Izmir EAD 07 international conference acknowledged this fact: Dealing with the Catastrophe, facing it, anticipating and overcoming it, was the main theme of the conference because it is dominant in our existential paradigm and thus relevant for Design. The

present conference underlines the vital role of convexity for the existence of such new era. Instantaneous relations rely on connexity. Connecting, plugging, clicking, editing seem to give form to networks instead of giving form to works. Connexity seems also to be part of the Hyper-Contemporary existential paradigm.

2 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HYPERCONTEMPORARY ERA

It is difficult to write about the idea of Design in 2008 without still dealing with the 9/11 2001 and its outcomes. It is also difficult to deal with the idea of art without thinking about the same occurrence. Being Design the proper place of artificiality, it is challenging to talk about it and that event. Finally, being the artifice the realm of communication there are also questions raised by the catastrophe of the century, so far... Remember that other catastrophes marked the change in Eras.

Clive Dilnot has been stressing the idea that we live in the *Antroposcene* (DILNOT, 2005, p.42); a new geological era following the Pleistocene and the Holocene, a third era in Quaternary period. Like any other era, a fossil layer will confirm ours (!). The beings of the Future that will study such period, beholding so many compressed shattered bodies and buildings, would ask themselves what kind of catastrophe the Earth suffered in those years.

In the final chapter of *Design and Crime (and other Diatribes)*, Hal Foster (2002, p. 143) comment on 1993 Gabriel Orozco's, *Island within an Island* (fig.1):

“(...) “Orozco often wins critical pleasures from the otherwise painful ironies of dislocation and dispersal. After the events of 11 September 2001 this work of subversive mimicry has also taken a new meaning as an image of remembrance, of coming-after and living-on.” (FOSTER, p.143)



Figure 1 Gabriel Orozco, “Island within an Island”, photograph, 1993 in FOSTER, Hal, *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* London, New York: Verso, 2002

This condition has been previously defined by Foster, following Adorno, as “traumatic”, “spectral”, “no synchronous” and “incongruent”. (FOSTER, p. 130)

There is an irrevocable condition linking the Culture as contemporarily expressed and Design that has being progressively neglected. This condition can be read and is transmitted by Design as a pivot between Art and the larger domain of Mass Culture. At least, it was in the Modernist golden days. Reading the signs from this pivoting we can diagnose a situation of “end of Time” or at least “change of Time”. We can say that we live, since 2001 in a state of war that is not confined to the violent explosions and shooting but is far more general. This condition tends to erase the Designer as was defined by Modernism.



Figure 2 Art Spiegelman, “The New Yorker” Magazine, cover, September 24, 2001

3 THE TRAUMATIC CONDITION OF THE DESIGNER

Regarding Design and our time of wars and of dismay, in 1999, Tony Fry left a warning that “War exist in real time, simulated time and electronic time, the time of the pulse, the wave. (...) War as set loose of a technology of the invasion of the instant, the future, the image, the language, mind, spaces of every day life, and the very environment of our-being-in-the world.”(FRY, 1999, P.53)

Fry compared war in its normal sense to the un-sustainability of the planet greatly based and generated by the conjunction of Marketing and Design especially. Fry could not foresee the 9/11 attacks. He was concerned with the rhetoric of progress that relied in Design to be entirely fulfilled. The “war” caused by the lack of sustainability of some ways of life (which might really be the same war as the “war against terrorism”) resumed to be the world’s major concern, giving credit to Fry’s plea for *Defuturing* as a new design philosophy. One of the rhetoric aspects of the attacks is the “warning”. Bin Laden changed from the “I’ve been warning you” to the “I did warn you” after the attack. From the side of the ‘good’, Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* (GUGENHEIM, 2006) uses the same rhetorical devise. Let’s hope that he wouldn’t have to use the first one. But a new design philosophy may conduct to a non-design philosophy, at least referring to a Design as a modernist activity. This no-design philosophy is stressed by contemporary issues like sustainability. Designers should de-design themselves in order to achieve sustainable systems.

Clive Dilnot, in his recent “Ethics? Design?”(p. 127-138) underlines the importance of recovering the dignity of the public domain. Dilnot’s inspiration came from Gui Bonsiepe:

“As the third design virtue in the future, I would like to see maintained the concern for the public domain, and this all the more so when registering the almost delirious onslaught on everything public that seems to be a generalized credo of the predominant economic paradigm” (BONSIEPE, 1997, p.107)

The public domain is and must be connected with the role of art and artistic directions as the last fortress of public interest. Dilnot reflects upon this need, working Agamben’s notions about art and going further explaining how design being NOT art must stand with one foot in poetics and the other on ethics. But he also stresses the traumatic experience of the holocaust as linked to Design in for no other reasons, at least because of its relation with the failure of modernity.

Designers have consequently a double traumatic condition because of their linkage to technological killing as to an un-sustainable economic growth.

4 THE SPECTRAL CONDITON OF THE DESIGNER

One can say that the full poetic existence would be, still, the place were the public domain as a space for human dignity can be satisfied.

As we have seen, some of the functions of design are part of the ongoing slide towards the actual state of war. In this sense, the interrogation present in the title of this paper is, in fact, an alert. The decisive modern designer seems to have vanished and the leading role of design in modern times is not evident. Demiurgic characters such as Buckminster Fuller, Le Corbusier or Frank Lloyd Wright seem to be impossible now. Total Design, from the city to the object seems almost preposterous and the “Grand Architecture” reveals itself not in saving the world but in designing the boldest of the Museums.

Also the pressure of a hypothetical Science of Design posited by Herbert Simon erased progressively some designer’s skills as specifically design skills such as intuition, cultural background, and sketching, drawing and the ability to engage in apparently idle conversation. Also Design and designers suffer from the confusion with the human ability to foresee and prepare for production some form of organized matter with formal features and a specific educated way of doing so. The intromission of engineering skills, the intrusion of sociological or psychological analysis as dominating the design process contributed also to ‘phantomize’ the Designer. The designer as an intuitive artistic character is almost concealed in shame. Once more there is a call of the instant and the hyper-contemporary behind this erasure. An artist designer requires time of maturation. (Intuition is nothing but undercover culture). The cut-paste and edited design solutions easily available by accessing rapidly to other production erase the individual designer in favor of a connected community of forms and systems of forms available contemporarily, instantly.

5 THE NONSYNCHRONOUS CONDITION OF DESIGN

It seems not to have been much progress since Victor Margolin stated that “we clearly need a new discipline of design studies” (MARGOLIN; 1989, p.5). Margolin asked for aggregation and organization of knowledge about Design in order to create a new scholar able to sustain design education. “Design Discourse” seemed a good starting point. The discipline of Design studies should have and be founded in discourse. After almost 20 years, Design seems to have arrived to the public recognition as an academic field and universal acceptance as a word. A growing number of doctoral programs, research conferences, journals and scholars reflecting the existence of such domain of Studies that being discursive is not projectual. Margolin argued that there is no doubt about what a Medicine Scholar should offer in order to be useful for the field. On the contrary, a scattered world of design activities pulverized to the point of myriads of design “something” had some difficulty in defining itself in order to define its own scholarship. Medicine is quite a good example because it is also ramified in several domains of expertise. Also because not all professions or activities related with healing people are Medicine. There is a social border between nursing and medicine instituted precisely in the division of tasks in work. Also, the medical scientists have their own orbit but lots of doctors engage in research while practicing medicine. In fact, the evolution and consistency of Medicine depends on reports and papers about new ways of practicing Medicine. This gives a sort of synchronicity to practice and research in medicine that is not apparent in Design. The lack of synchronicity is both a symptom and a reaction. Once more, the Hyper Contemporary contributes to detach the practicing designer from “Design Studies” and “Design Studies” tend to engage in self reference outside the practice.

Like Medicine, Design relies on a culture of observation that is mostly an interpretation device. One must not forget that Design derived from a Drawing meaning activity and not from an activity based in any other interpretation device. Drawing seems to have vanished from the core of Design. Also, Design as a profession was instituted by the arrival of art production strategies to the production of everyday-life objects. All this is erased if we consider all production as resulting from Design. There is no core culture of observation to be researched and taught. At the outside limit, in the professional world, the activities are so different that hardly can be helped by something called “Design Studies”.

6 THE INCONGRUENT CONDITION OF DESIGN

In a book published in 1995 quite meaningfully entitled “Conversations Before Time”, Susan Gablik interviewed artists, art critics and art theorists. Apparently one of the questions underlying the book is the possibility of the autonomy of aesthetics or a fatal engagement of art capable of destroying it as such. In Arthur C. Danto’s interview, Gablik asks if the end of Art History, as he has put it, didn’t correspond, in fact, to the end of the western civilization itself. Danto answered that he thought Art to be quite “powerless to solve any serious problems of the world.”(GABLIK, p. 278)

At the first sight, we could say about Design exactly the opposite. Design should be able to solve a lot of serious problems of the world. At least, this was its modernist promise. Born as Art affiliated or as applied art, by loosing the art in itself, in the process and in the relation with the users/perceivers, Design as art would be powerless facing “the serious problems of the world”. But could Design (as not Art) solve any serious problems of the world?

By encompassing so many activities of the artificial, Design faces the incongruence inherent to all the human made things.

Naomi Klein (2002) has been defining a way to fight this war from the good side in a guerilla strategy. The Benetton commercial strategy and progressively many others react and embed the social and the political concerns in brand and identity but the Logics of profit still uses largely Design as part of a general situation of mischief and consumerism seduction. Design is not innocent in both sides of the war and, as a concept, is clearly incongruent. Tony Fry (1999) and Clive Dilnot (2005) very extensively wrote about this incongruent condition.

In March 1877 the Rhode Island School of Design was incorporated by the RI General Assembly. The purposes of the school were set in very simple ‘commandments’. The first was: “First: The instruction of artisans in drawing, painting, modeling, and designing, that they may successfully apply the principles of Art to the requirements of trade and manufacture.”(RISD web site)

Applying the principles of Art to Trade and Manufacture gave Design a consistency that was enough to create institutions called “Design Schools”. The principles of Art applied to trade and manufacture gave Design congruence between the aims of the society and the teaching institutions.

Little by little the confusion between Design as a discipline or a profession and design any kind of activity that changes situations into preferred ones culminated by Herbert Simon’s definition started to multiply the principles not related to Art to trade and manufacture.

As usual we should go back to the educational drawing board, to the schools. We would risk saying that there is no school in the world that do not address the problems of sustainability and social responsibility of the Designer. But are they properly addressing the issue of Art principles. Will the design school save the Designer?

7 CONCLUSION

Will the design schools continue to be Design Schools?

Well this is something to answer in the future. Like many other academic disciplines Design lives-on in a Hyper Contemporary Age, traumatic, spectral, nonsynchronous and incongruent. The notion of creative industries is moving ahead pressed also by the virtual. In a great number of Schools, Drawing was lost in the process. The Designer apparently lost a unique way of observation and of being a particular actor. The Hyper Contemporary shattered also drawing and sketching. Also, in some situations, Art seems an undesired guest. With no core what Design School will mean?

Regarding this matter it would be wise to recover the social importance of Art education since the Florentine Academy of *Disegno* in the 16th century as, for instance, Hans Peter Schwarz did in the inaugural book for the new Zurich University of the Arts (Schwarz, 2007).

In fact we must ask what a designer will be, as someone proposed by a “Design School”.

Gradually, the issue of Design Research has been instilled as the new heart of these institutions.

Recently I was part of a group called CURE, Cumulus Research, constituted inside the Cumulus Association that gathers more the 140 Art, Design & Media Academic Institutions. In a meeting held in Swäbisch Gmünd, May 2007, Thomas S. Rasmussen from the Denmark Designskole the convener of the group, Meredith Davis from North Carolina State University, Sharon Poggenpohl from the Hong Kong Polytechnic, Yryänä Levanto from the University of the Arts, Helsinki, and I from IADE, Lisbon, prepared a set of actions destined to frame what could be Design Research. It was clear that from our American Colleagues the issues were mostly related with PhDs whilst the Europeans are accustomed to research as part of EU or National funded projects. But apart this, I would say that Design research is at risk of being much more of standard research at the cost of what may characterize Design. One year later, after a general query to the schools, in St. Etienne in meeting convened by Luisa Collina from Politecnico Milano and Marjolin Brussaard from the Utrecht School of the Arts the group CURE was merged with another working group of the same organization: PREDesign (Practice, Research, Design). In this meeting it was possible to identify the possibility of a Design Research, as defined by peers, nearer to its own Artistic affiliation.

In most of the participants minds was underlying the conviction that if the Designer will not be presented to society as the Artist for everyday life, and that Design Research should be thought from that position, will be diluted by the traumatic, spectral nonsynchronous and incongruent condition of our age.

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