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Manufacturing contemporary reality

The author argues that we need to deliberate on the current consumer system, based on the perishable nature of objects, which forms part of a culture in permanent transformation and contends that design can be a useful critical tool in this process.

"It is no exaggeration to say that designers are engaged in nothing less than the manufacture of contemporary reality. Today, we live and breathe design. Few of the experiences we value at home, at leisure, in the city or the mall are free of its alchemical touch. We have absorbed design so deeply into ourselves that we no longer recognize the myriad ways in which it prompts, cajoles, disturbs, and excites us. It's completely natural. It's just the way things are."[1] A quote from Rick Poynor—one of the most influential design critics of the last ten years—to begin a brief review of some of the ideas that have marked contemporary design practice. As a starting point, Poynor's words indicate an awareness among some designers (not all, it has to be said) that design is something more than a profession; they believe that any content—and by content they mean not only what is found in a text, but also the content that exists in each object—is always influenced by design, insofar as it helps us to understand, perceive or feel it. At a time when the actual performance of different products does not vary greatly, only design can make them different in the eyes of the consumer. This is its real power; in fact, some designers believe that design is no longer a one-way relationship or a simple customer service, and feel themselves to be responsible (this ties in with the old social theory of design, but with new goals) for creating a "new culture of contemplation", as Marcus Field[2] says of the most advanced British designers.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that an old manifesto by British designer Ken Garland[3] has been resurrected or that in 1999 some leading contemporary exponents of design theory and practice put their names to the *First Things First Manifesto 2000*[4], which opposed a vision of design that was almost exclusively engaged with marketing, brand development and advertising.
Criticised for its utopian vision, the manifesto nonetheless voiced an attitude where design is seen not only as a way of communicating messages, but also of exploring intellectual, social and cultural questions.
Perhaps for this reason too, there has been a shift in focus from the final product to the process of execution. An increasingly significant number of young designers are placing more value on the process than on the final result. This breaks with the traditional conception of design in which it was precisely the mass-produced industrial object, perfectly finished and launched on the market, which gave meaning to the designer's profession, setting designers apart from artists.

For a new generation of designers that emerged in the 1990s, design is a process of imagining, representing and testing, which is repeated until an acceptable or satisfactory

response is achieved. This is the thinking, for example, of Ole Lund and Jan Nielsen from Denmark and the well-known British group, Tomato.
As Lund and Nielsen say: "design may not be art, but it is something which has to be approached with an artist's passion, groping around for the light until you find what is hidden. Design is a process of knowledge and creation. Our strategies and aesthetics of creation are a process of pendular reflection and expression"[5].
Tomato view the process as a journey: "It's a question of moving, searching, becoming involved, transforming. It is not a linear journey towards a fixed point, but a journey in a circle, which explores and draws a map with the possibilities that arise along the way. We are here, we are no longer over there or over there: this is what it is, where do we go? From this moment to the next, from the centre to the periphery and back where we started and again, re-encountering, remembering, showing, finding…
The process is still alive. We become human by thinking, acting, re-thinking, accepting or rejecting. We need to apply our ideas to our methods. We are people, the idea is the process, the act is the process"[6].
And in this journey the work is viewed as a map under construction which takes shape as one advances within it. But the map is open—reversible, constantly alterable—and can be conceived as a work of art built as a political action or as a reflection; It is not limited to copying the territory; instead it tries to create a new reality resulting in a specific or abstract map which, in turn, cancels itself out, suggesting another map.

Like conceptual art, the work becomes an act or idea, a process in itself, and the procedures used are actually the recognition of that process.
And this idea that work —the object, the piece of communication, etc. — is the evidence of the process (the process of the process) which is revealed in itself and informs the processes that accompany it, is producing artefacts which show the various states they have passed through before completion. We now see products emerging that display the different steps involved in their construction, including mistakes and indecisions (admittedly this is only true of design that is not targeted at the mass market).
The object, then, no longer exists in itself, but in reference to the act of making and is always informed by the cultural and philosophical context in which it has been created. It is an object which seeks to reflect the creative battle of the person who planned it, showing what is in the human mind and outside its control. And in this creative battle there has also been a confrontation between what is one's own, personal, and what is foreign, the external world. In design, this confrontation is difficult to resolve, because the discipline has always been determined by the existence of a final user and a technological process that is essential for industrial production and this means that the designer's voice is lost.
This was also the feature that characterised design and differentiated it from art or craftwork. And it is here that the debate on the limits and the breaking of those limits begins, a debate which is crucial for a generation of designers who question the neutrality of their presence and their role as authors. They feel it is impossible not to have a personal viewpoint, precisely when many customers are looking for a particular vision, even a name, for their product or service.

But let us return to the process-driven vision of design, which yields artefacts whose form reveals the entire process; objects in which the designer has tried to include the project

experience, but also the experience of the future user. They exalt the moment, something which takes shape in pictures and objects that are shown in a state of transition, transmitting to the reader-spectator-user a sensation that what he or she is seeing or using will possibly not be the same the next time, because it is a product that is not definitively resolved; it demands the intervention of that user to be complete.

And in opposition to a design based on the excellence of the materials, they employ poor, simple, ecological, recyclable and recycled raw materials, which gradually take shape as they are used. There is a quest for interactivity: the designer wants the user to take up the open process and continue it with his or her action, giving life to artefacts that do not need to celebrate the technique or the technology, but instead pose questions, although no answers; not "how do you do it?" so much as "how do you feel?"

Some have seen all these ideas as a symptom of a lack of professionalism, a justification for the "anything goes" approach or an overly romantic vision[7]. However, in an era when technology can offer perfect finishes, they reflect one particular stance regarding a situation which many designers consider to be critical not only for design, but for society and culture in general.

In a world where everything is marketable and marketed, some designers are trying to resolve the tension between the unlimited production of items, mostly unnecessary, the ecological problems that this poses and traditional social role of the designer as a mediator between the user and the technology.

They have adopted a position which may be the consequence of a critical stance already begun in the 1990s, when designers such as Tibor Kalman and Karrie Jacobs[8] argued that people no longer buy objects for their function, but to define what each one is; for some people these artefacts represent their complete ideological framework, a kind of philosophy or religion.

In a world dominated by large corporations, Kalman and Jacobs consider that the designer is obliged to fight for the balance between corporate culture and real culture, and it is in this area that the designer has something to say, since design—which can be found anywhere—impregnates real culture.

And because it is everywhere and can influence culture, it must have rather less style and rather more content. For new designers in the current system of objects, this is the only way of achieving significance and value in relationships of exchange previously resolved in terms of a productivity that demanded style. If the designer wants to impact culture, then he or she must get inside things, go to the processes, which is where the meaning and the value are contained.

In a society where the only thing that matters are the final results, championing what is incomplete and not for sale—the sketches, the models, etc.— represents an alternative way of conceiving a design which is trying to free itself (to a great extent, at least) from its merely mercantile side, just as art tried to do several decades ago.

These ideas may be debatable, but in any case the present system, based on the obsolescence of the objects within a society and a culture which is continuously being transformed, requires reflection, and this way of viewing design offers a useful tool of criticism.

And having begun this text with a quote, I would like to end it with another, from Gillian Crampton, which summarises the task for designers now, but also in the future: "It is up to designers to champion meaning over function; people over technology[9]".

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] POYNOR, R. "First Things First, a Brief History" in *Adbusters* No. 27, Autumn 1999. Cited in BIERUT, M.; DRENTTEL, W.; HELLER, S. *Looking Closer 4*, New York: Allworth Press, 2002, p. 6.
[2] FIELD, M. "From Luddites to Love. A Brief History of Design" in *Exhibition Catalogue - Lost and Found*, London: The British Council, 1999, pp. 48-61.
[3] In 1964 Ken Garland published his "First Things First" manifesto, of which 400 copies were distributed. The document, co-authored by Anthony Froshaug and Edward Wright had a great impact on the leading professionals of the time.
[4] They included Jonathan Barnbrook, Nick Bell, Andrew Blauvelt, Hans Bockting, Irma Boom, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Max Bruinsma, etc.
[5] Talk given at the Escola Elisava, Barcelona 27 March 2003.
[6] TOMATO *Process; a tomato project*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1996, s.p.
[7] This vision of design especially disturbs more anonymous designers who see its practitioners as an élite which has climbed so high that it can afford to have these "artistic" flings. Nor are they favourably looked on by more traditional artists, who see them as invading the territory which has always been their own.
[8] See YELAVICH, S. (ed.): *The Edge of the Millennium. An International Critique of Architecture, Urban Planning, Product and Communication Design*, New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1993.
[9] Quoted by CULLEN, M. "Future Teach" in STEVEN, S. (ed.): *The Education of a Graphic Designer,* New York: Allworth Press, 1998, p. 31.