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Design Exhibited

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A conversation about design exhibitions, language and the visibility of production. Part 1

Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln, Sarah Owens
April 2012 – February 2013

Does the activity of exhibiting resemble the process of assigning meaning in language? By showing cultural artefacts of different authors, one necessarily makes links. If an exhibition is presented to an audience and retold in conversation, its spatial choreography gives rise to a syntax. Experience and perception are translated into linguistic expression. Thus, the act of exhibiting has close ties with the communicative activity of organizing the show, and with texts and discussions. Design then adds an action-based level to this communicative dimension — actions which, as one walks through the exhibition space, are at least imaginable, and in some cases actually performed there. Grammars of absence always point to something else. Something that is more or less distant or only conceivable as a loose association — between the physical encounter with what is present and the linguistic or action-based links of what is absent. The following digital pages have been marked by stamps of heavy

thinking — almost in a literal sense. Mamiko Otsubos' elbow prints, ***Untitled (Portal Stamps)*** 2012, probably originate from their support of a heavy head leaning over a desk. Their weighty presence recalls an absent mind. In 2010, the artist also produced a special table ***(Portal)*** that was already equipped with the same elbow marks on its surface — as if it would call for this very immaterial way of use.

I don't like discursive exhibitions, by which I mean shows where a readymade discourse is presented to me, dictating a set of instructions for discussion. And now we're publishing a magazine issue called ***Design Exhibited,*** that is supposed to be something like an exhibition and, at the same time, a discourse on exhibition praxis. I had the same kind of creeping doubts in 2010 when I visited the ***Design Real*** exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London.
A promising name, I thought at the time. And remarkable that the organizers found it necessary to qualify «design» with the adjective «real», suggesting that design as a discipline is no longer generally thought to possess especially strong roots in reality. But I think this is an example of a misunderstanding often linked with the word «real» as an adjective.

Konstantin Grcic,
Tido von Oppeln, Burkhard Meltzer

Design Real

Tido von Oppeln: In your *Black²* exhibition in Rome (2010), you showed a selection of black objects. Could you explain your choices and the concept of the exhibition?

Konstantin Grcic: The idea for *Black²* was linked to my experience at the Serpentine Gallery, where I was invited to curate a design exhibition in 2009. The resulting *Design Real* project was very interesting, but the tight timeframe and limited funds made it a big challenge. In spite of these conditions we wanted to address complex issues. The exhibition in Rome was basically a reaction to this experience. In Rome, I concentrated on observing a phenomenon in a very focussed manner with a very simple concept.

For art historians, Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) marks the beginning of modernism and abstraction. It's seen as a key work, something that doesn't really exist in design. I was interested in this form — that's not derived from nature but created by humans. It is thousands of years old and still valid today. A square might be the simplest possible shape, but it can also appear elegant or modern. The black square was never a fashion that later disappeared. It's a form that runs seamlessly through the whole of human history and the production of objects. Instead of presenting the one valid design exhibition, I just wanted to contribute this angle to a specific discussion. The theme seemed almost too simple to make an exhibition out of, but it worked very well as a spatial format.

Burkhard Meltzer: Is there a functional dimension to this shape, or do you see it in purely formal terms?

Konstantin Grcic: Square objects do indeed have an important functional aspect: they stand on flat surfaces and don't roll away. Another aspect is the relationship between object and room. And rooms, at least in our cultures, are usually square or rectangular. A rectangular piece of furniture clearly relates to a floor plan. Le Corbusier's *Grande Confort* (1928) for example, is both a space and a cube in the space. Most tables are rectangular and thus rectangular objects in the space, but the tabletop is a space for objects that can be related to it. I don't want to say that all objects should be rectangular, but it is interesting that this form works so well.

Tido von Oppeln: Is the fact that objects have specific shapes and affect the space important for you in general? When I ask this, I'm thinking about the *Design Real* show at the Serpentine Gallery that we've already mentioned.

Konstantin Grcic: If you think in the format of an exhibition, there's a debate about the content: What do you want to show? What do you want to say? And then you start collecting material. There comes a point, which is hard to define clearly, when the themes and the objects merge into the image of an exhibition.
As a curator, I'm not only the pragmatic scholar who selects things according to their order or relevance. I put exhibitions together as three-dimensional pictures. When related to other exhibits, objects that might not be so important gain relevance. Of course, this means that exhibitions take on a highly subjective intuitive quality. Depending on the given architecture of the venue, you define the show's trajectory and rhythm. This interests

me as a designer, of course, even if that activity is related primarily to interaction with ordinary things: How does an object function in use? Or how does an exhibition function when used by the viewer? I think there are many points in common.

Burkhard Meltzer: What I found very unusual in this project was the encyclopaedic use of terms. Above the specific mask that surely has a brand name was simply the word «MASK». As if we were being presented with the archetype of this object.

Konstantin Grcic: That was a key point of this exhibition. I didn't want to claim that this mask is one I consider to be typical. On the contrary, I wanted to be provocative and point out that this term may not fit our notion of what a mask is. Initially, I wanted to have no labels at all, that's something one sees more often in art exhibitions. An artist exhibiting in a gallery can be very free in their approach to providing information about the work. In design exhibitions, there's an almost compulsive need to be informative. It acts as a kind of justification: Why is this important? Why is it good? Why is it here, in a museum, on a plinth?
I thought it would be interesting to remove this level and to put things on display as if they were just beautiful objects that work as an ensemble. And then there was another level, a website, that provided plenty of information about each object, more than one could ever fit on a wall label. Generic terms like «MASK» and «HELMET» created a link and defined the structure of the website. It worked very well.

Burkhard Meltzer: I'd like to come back to the idea of the exhibition as a statement. *Design Real* strikes me as the antithesis of what we've seen in the context of art and design in recent years, such as the *Wouldn't it be nice… wishful thinking in art and design* project initiated by Emily King in 2008. In contrast to this, your project at the Serpentine Gallery refers to a concept of reality and focuses attention on technical function.

Konstantin Grcic: When the Serpentine gallery approached me with the idea of a design exhibition, I thought right away that this is an easy trap to fall into: art spaces showing design that has a particular affinity to art. There have been some very good shows in this vein, but I didn't think it was interesting for the Serpentine. I wanted to go in the opposite direction and say: «We're showing actual, real, industrial products. Hence the name.» I only included things from the last ten years in the selection. The individual exhibits were shown with no explanation, letting them be just objects. A robot, for example, is a purely functional thing. At the same time, a great deal of design goes into making it — but it's a kind of design that's oriented primarily towards performance and technology. As a three-dimensional object, however, the robot is also a great sculpture. And it was fun placing this object in a space where people usually encounter sculptures. Next to the object was just a label saying «ROBOT». On the exhibition website, you could also find out that this beautiful object performs an entirely unglamorous task in the service of industry. I wanted things that are actually quite ordinary to be taken out of context and put on a white plinth, where they are suddenly viewed as exalted forms.
On the other hand, the website reminded people that however beautiful a given object may be, it is real and it is used. I intended the exhibition to make a very positive statement: How sculptural design can appear, how advanced design is, how much incredible stuff design produces.

Burkhard Meltzer: Were there sharp reactions from the professional art or design worlds?

Konstantin Grcic: Interestingly, the design scene took a very critical view of the show, calling it incomplete or remote. Whereas people who have nothing to do with design were often enthusiastic because they saw things they did not expect. This was an audience that came to the exhibition without expectations and made discoveries: among other things, the notion that everything we take for granted has its own evolution and that there are interesting links between things we are familiar with and other things. This causes a fundamental shift in perception, you start seeing the world with different eyes and your understanding of it changes. I think this is very positive, I'm optimistic. Showing how beautiful and valuable, diverse, creative and inventive the world we build ourselves is. And how deserving of protection. And how important it is to deal intelligently with these possibilities. The third group of visitors at the Serpentine were those who normally see art shows there. Their reactions were split equally between positive and negative.

Tido von Oppeln: We've already talked briefly about «critical design». In contrast to this, your show at the Serpentine Gallery stood for something one sees less often at the moment, with objects presented and perceived primarily in their aesthetic form and not in a historical context or as references to a social or political theme. I also like the fact that it's not about borrowing from arts and crafts as is often the case when art venues show design or when design museums try a more free-form approach. I think the gesture of the Serpentine show is important because it constitutes a clear statement from the design perspective.

Burkhard Meltzer: Especially since the objects in question are products of an industrial process. The industrial aspect and the technical aspect were strongly emphasized. This is something that's more often seen in historical photographs and illustrations from the 1950s, where the pictures also radiate a strong feeling of optimism.

Konstantin Grcic: Yes, that was much criticized, beginning with the accusation that this was a very masculine way of looking at things. But it *was* a highly subjective viewpoint. For me, it was important to say how relevant industry is to us. All of the products we showed are good examples of what companies do, how they produce, how they manage their resources, thus actually setting a good example. Unfortunately, industry is still subject to widespread criticism — as a globalizing force that pollutes the air, guzzles resources, etc. In connection with industry, design is commonly understood as something that just makes products more expensive

Konstantin Grcic, *Design Real*
Exhibition views,
Serpentine Gallery, 2009/2010

and prevents them from working. I'm oversimplifying, of course, but these opinions and prejudices do exist. And I wanted to show that there are also incredibly good developments. One cannot deny the importance of industry, and thus the importance of promoting good industry, meaning good products and good companies.

Burkhard Meltzer: Besides your work in industry and for various businesses, you're also active in the gallery context.

Konstantin Grcic: Yes, with Galerie Kreo. But my main focus is certainly on industrial commissions. Free projects for the gallery are often a challenge, to find the right theme, as it's not about creating «design that looks a bit nicer» to fit in a gallery. The gallery offers scope for experimentation. One example is the show I did at Kreo in the spring of last year. The idea for the varnished tables was derived from an industrial context. Many sports products are full of graphics, functioning via what is suggested by what is written on them. Furniture almost never does this, furniture is pure and simple. I once pitched the idea to a furniture company, but they were unable to realize it. So the gallery gave me a chance to try it out. Now that we have this experience, I also hope we may one day be able to discuss it with an industrial partner, because I still think it's interesting. Design for galleries isn't totally disconnected from our work for industry, then. In fact, experiments and creative freedoms also generate stimuli and ideas in industrial projects. In the days before the design market, showing small editions or prototypes in galleries played an important part in the development of individual designers, and thus in design history. In the 1960s, for example, Ettore Sottsass exhibited ceramics that were very important to his research into colour and form. In those days, the designer's work was not contaminated by the promise of being lucrative. Designers worked on their own initiative, on a small scale, in partnership with someone who was able to provide space or a little money. In the last decade, the whole structure of work and earning money has somehow been thrown out of joint. Now, the motivation is to make money, and to do so relatively fast and with less resistance than in an industrial context. I don't think any of this helps design. It just serves a market. To avoid any misunderstandings here: I have nothing against design in galleries, as long as the motive for the work remains a certain interest in design.

Tido von Oppeln: Certain criticisms also play a part here, for example that the processes are so drawn-out and that developing things costs so much money, which means that decisions are more difficult to make. With a small edition for a gallery, one can be bolder. In this light, one could even say that the tables we just talked about are critical design.

Konstantin Grcic: Absolutely, yes. The idea was always meant seriously. It's not just a game. I used this gallery project to try out a specific idea that originally came from an industrial context — for myself, but also for the discourse. Now it's possible to talk about it and say whether or not it worked, whether it's any good or not. And that takes the discussion forward. It helps me move forward, but maybe other designers, too or a company that picks up the idea.

Burkhard Meltzer: Have you ever designed an object that was intended explicitly for an exhibition context?

Konstantin Grcic: Not really. But there is another example that doesn't directly answer your question but that is related. Maybe you know *Landen* (2007), an object I designed for Vitra Edition. In the 1980s, Vitra Edition was very important for design discourse and for the designers and architects who were invited to contribute. Around four years ago, Vitra tried to reconnect with this history, inviting designers to work on new editions. I found it a difficult task, as the context had changed so much over the years. As a designer, one could simply no longer work in the same unbiased way as you could in the late 1980s. Ron Arad, Sottsass and Gehry used the editions mainly as a forum for experimentation. The objects and pieces of furniture were personal statements that didn't speculate on any kind of market value. The collector's market as we know it today didn't exist back then. Editions were a zone of artistic and experimental freedom outside the industry. Today, this freedom has been replaced by the promise of making big money fast. Maximum collector value is already being factored into the design, so it's no longer about the design or making a statement, but about purely monetary value. Designers often speculate on the collector, the idea that the object will one day find itself in a collector's house alongside artworks. In this context, *Landen* was a kind of refusal. With its size and roughness, it resisted being collected as a decorative accessory. As a piece of furniture, it was intended more for outdoors, where it should be used and get dirty, eventually beginning to rust. That's what I wanted. Not a single person bought it. But today, there's a *Landen* on the lawn in front of the Vitra Haus in Weil am Rhein, where it can be used by visitors. Finally, then, my wish was fulfilled.

February 2012

A conversation. Part 2

Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln, Sarah Owens.

Of course, an object is always real, be it an art object or a product on the shelf in a supermarket. It is not the object's property of being real that is at stake here, but the way it is perceived. It is less about what is on show than about what it stands for. The design selected by Konstantin Grcic, as curator of the ***Design Real*** exhibition stands for links to reality in design — as opposed to other conceivable design exhibitions that might have more of a narrative or fictional focus.

At a venue like the Serpentine Gallery that usually shows art, people seem to have become especially suspicious of design's links to reality. But what is the basis for this mistrust? Was design not once generally known as a force that shapes reality, or at least anticipates it? In the exhibition, the main emphasis was on the reality of industrial production. Some objects were presented as mere fragments of a product, such as the elegantly curved taillight of a Volvo station wagon. By contrast, a hundred-dollar laptop for children, the LIKEaBIKE, and a megaphone could be linked at first glance with the practical forms of reality. Most surfaces in the show were hi-tech plastics and many smaller objects were presented on plinths. With its approach to presentation, this sculpture park was slightly reminiscent of old-fashioned archaeological displays. Some of the products I had already come across in use, but the way they were displayed made those I didn't know seem even stranger. For precisely such moments of cluelessness, the exhibition design provided help in the form of the language of use. Each object was labelled with a category in capital letters: TAIL LIGHT, COMPUTER, TOY. Simple as it may sound, this gave those walking through the exhibition the feeling of learning a new language. A language in which one may already have amassed quite a large passive vocabulary, but which one can no longer, or not yet, speak fluently. This language of objects was even given a room of its own in the show, full of simple categories and plenty of detailed information accessible on e-books. In spite of all this state-of-the-art technology, however, the exhibition somehow felt strangely old-fashioned. Does this mark the return of a kind of self-celebrating enthusiasm for technology and industry that is more familiar to us from books on the history of modernist design?

Mamiko Otsubo

Untitled (Portal Stamps), 2013

Mamiko Otsubo, *Portal in use*, 2012

Urs Lehni, Sarah Owens

The exhibition as a medium of production

Urs Lehni: I think it's problematic if the situation in a public space is merely simulated or duplicated in the museum. These cases require a set of interventions that allow the work to be experienced in a different way. The same applies to exhibitions of books. Of course it may sometimes make sense to use a vitrine, but this would sabotage the basic idea. In my view, the best way to exhibit books is in a bookcase.

Sarah Owens: That allows people to touch the books and leaf through them, and supports a direct experience of the book's materiality. If the book is in a vitrine, aspects such as the paper quality or printing technique become far more difficult to identify.

Urs Lehni: It's an issue I've dealt with recently after being awarded this year's *INFORM Award* by Leipzig's Museum of Contemporary Art. There was no obligation to produce an exhibition, but those awarded during the last few years chose to do so, most recently Zak Kyes, who also tried to work with this problem. His theme was collaboration in the broadest sense and as a first step, he devised a set of rules together with the exhibition architect Jesko Fezer that defined what was and was not allowed in the exhibition. One of these rules stated that no books could be exhibited. Since eighty or ninety percent of Zak's work consists of books, they had to find a compromise. The result was overly intellectual in my view — certain characteristics that I appreciate in graphic design were corrupted by an excessive intellectualization and referentialization. When I was talking to the people in Leipzig and they showed me the exhibition space, I did have a few ideas for things I could do. But it was a very laborious way of approaching the issue. Finally, instead of an exhibition, I suggested that I could design a new website for the gallery. This would be my contribution, and they agreed.

Sarah Owens: One could say that an exhibition can never do justice to graphic design because it will always cause functional aspects to recede into the background. When transferred to a museum, applied graphic design becomes something artificial, it can't act or take effect in the environment for which it was intended.

Urs Lehni: I think there are only certain themes one can address in an exhibition. We faced the same question when the Museum of Design in Zurich offered Lehni/Trüeb a space in the *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design* exhibition (2012). We then tried to put the way we work up for discussion. In the broadest sense, it's about how one deals with conditions of production now that everything is available to everyone. There are now people who create their own tools or modify certain machines and processes in order to appropriate them. Such approaches also cross the boundaries between disciplines. Everything is set up within a hypothetical space to illustrate a question we consider very current in design.

Sarah Owens: The *Pick Me Up* design fair at Somerset House in London tries something similar, although without the element of critique. There, graphic design is primarily for sale, but they also provide rooms for individual designers or studios to produce pieces on site. Visitors can then experience how designers work.

Urs Lehni: It's a topic that is currently very prevalent. Almost all of the really interesting initiatives by designers in a museum environment in recent years have included at least a partial focus on the production process, or even placed it centre stage. For the show *Wouldn't it be nice… wishful thinking in art and design* in Geneva (2008) for example, Dexter Sinister wrote, designed and printed a new issue of *Dot Dot Dot*. It then starts being more about the process as a whole than the production of a result that belongs in a museum. It's an attempt to repurpose the space and to view the exhibition as a productive medium rather than a purely representative one.

Sarah Owens: Perhaps this approach is able to come closer to the true essence of graphic design than a presentation behind glass?

Urs Lehni: Last year we went to the Herb Lubalin Study Center in New York. It's in a basement, two small rooms where two people work. And there are a few plan chests that one can freely open and close, and browse in. It's not an exhibition in the usual sense, but it allows the works to be experienced differently. In theory, something could also be damaged. At a museum, this experience is always somewhat indirect. The projects by Werkplaats are also interesting: on the one hand, they aim to present themselves as a school, on the other hand, they publish books. During the past three or four years, they tried to create a setting at the New York Art Book Fair that offers very direct access. In the first year, they cooperated with James Goggin to set up a kind of production line. Visitors could choose their favourite pages from a stock of Werkplaats publications spanning the last decade, and take home their own specific piece of printed matter. In 2010, their project was called the *Mary Shelley Facsimile Library*, here they photocopied and installed reference works referred to by students in their own work. Visitors could then add links to additional materials. The idea was that of a growing bibliography and an indexed Werkplaats reference system.

Sarah Owens: The activity of calling oneself into question seems to be more marked in graphic design than in other design disciplines. Which is why we may be more willing to engage with ambiguous exhibition formats.

Urs Lehni: The problem is that as long as criticism only takes place in a hermetic space, it's pointless, however incisive it is. This is why I'm more interested, for instance, in the works of Cornel Windlin, not least because they have become rare in the public space. In 2001, I worked with him for the Schauspielhaus and he had made a three-part poster for Luc Bondy's production of Martin Crimp's *The Country*. The first part had the play's title on a red background; the second part had the name of the venue on a blue background; and the third showed a film still from a rehearsal with a man hiding his face in his hands. Above this image stood the name of the main sponsor «Credit Suisse», I'm not sure how he managed to get away with this! I also have the feeling that one must take care to ensure that what is produced under the label of «critical independent graphic design» actually has an audience.

Sarah Owens: Otherwise your impact is limited to a circle of people who all have the same opinion.

Urs Lehni: Metahaven deal with this very well. They constantly process their experiences in texts, publications and materials, which they then use as a basis for discussion. At the same time, their book *Uncorporate Identity* is produced by a major publisher with a large print run. They always try to reach a very wide audience, which I think is great.

Sarah Owens: With regard to large-scale exhibitions of design, it seems that works are shown in a museum so that they may be, in a sense, «consecrated» and granted entry into the official design canon, which in turn confers value on them. Once this has happened, these pieces are repeatedly exhibited and included in publications, whereas work emerging from the margins of the discipline has a lower profile.

Urs Lehni: Yes, that's precisely the problem. These exhibitions are completely hermetic, already in the way they are conceived. An interesting example is the *Swiss Federal Design Award*, a show that provides an overview of various disciplines. Here, the staging of the material takes on a strange importance and each time I'm annoyed by the way a single concept is imposed on fifteen totally different pieces of work. The only thing they have in common is that they all ended up in the same show as the result of a competition. Of course the pieces should be presented, but the relationship between the pieces and the way they are displayed is always completely out of kilter.

Sarah Owens: With exhibitions that come across so strongly as a unified whole, I often no longer feel like engaging with each work separately. The

features peculiar to the individual projects are almost drowned out by the way they are staged.

Urs Lehni: The exhibition for *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books* competition, in contrast is very good, if only because of the decision to display every book entered, which regularly vexes certain designers. Because you take part in order to win and the exhibition will also show that you haven't won. But this approach also opens up a space for questions, as visitors will rightly ask: «Why did this book win a prize and not that one?» It suddenly allows for a necessary openness.

Sarah Owens: But it's especially in historically framed exhibitions of graphic design that the reduction to specific figures or stylistic periods leads to the loss of many aspects, where in fact posters and books are much more multi-layered. They are not produced in a vacuum, but subject to socio-cultural, political and economic influences. In addition, there are other artefacts, such as industrial products, which one could set into relation with graphic design.

Urs Lehni: German-speaking countries also seem to pay less attention to the historiography of our field. There is some type of reflection, of course, but rather than being conducted by a separate profession, it is also done internally, possibly even through making. In my view, this is a very good thing. I tell those students of mine who occasionally feel disillusioned since there are so many graphic designers, that the good thing about our field is the great scope it offers for defining oneself, and that it is also possible to benefit from things being unclear. And that it enables you to consider something while making it.

Sarah Owens: Yes, and furthermore allows you control over where to go next. I was originally trained as a graphic designer and then went on to study design history, and many of my fellow students came from entirely different fields. They looked at design from the viewpoint of their own discipline and it was difficult to explain to them that a designer creates statements mainly by making something. Therefore it might be helpful to possess a personal experience of designing, or at least to have engaged deeply with it. On the other hand, an outside view can also be very important.

Urs Lehni: In the United Kingdom, for example, there seems to be more of a discussion on a theoretical level that also includes prominent voices. When these topics come up in Germany or Switzerland, it's always a formal matter. I've been thinking that one should just start a magazine on this. *Dot Dot Dot* was always extremely good. The early issues were more interested in formal aspects, but it then developed a thematic complex of its own, from which one could always draw conclusions for visual design.

Sarah Owens: And what do you think of the idea of describing a publication as an exhibition? The idea that a book is not edited and designed, but «curated»?

Urs Lehni: It makes me cringe. Essentially, that's what any halfway intelligent graphic designer does with every book. To varying degrees of radicality, of course, but even a textbook requires the designer to bring out the main points, to package information and make decisions. I wouldn't say that a book can be viewed as an exhibition space, because I don't really think it is one. But at the same time, books absolutely do have the ability to become «works» themselves. With Rollo Press, for example, I often try to make books that are also «works». These are often commissions, and with them we try to somehow realize a work of art or narrative in book form. Also, there's no institution telling us how it should be done. So we can say: we will only discuss with the artist, and will work only in a manner that suits us. Ideally, the resulting book possesses a radicality similar to that of the exhibition.

Sarah Owens: It's also worth asking whether calling the graphic designer a curator can be illuminating in any way, possibly as it can teach us something about the design process? Or is it just a label, an attempt to re-legitimize the activity of the designer?

Urs Lehni: The idea is so imprecise that I'd advise against using it in any case. The more curators there are, the less one knows what it is that they do. When I worked with Lex Trüb on designing books about Marc Camille Chaimowicz and Peter Saville for the Migros Museum, the aim was to make a work that has a right to exist beyond the exhibition business. Rather than just producing more fodder for the art industry, we wanted to make publications that have value beyond that. The fact that such publications are even possible within an institutional cooperation is a sign of progress. At the same time this has existed since the 60s — or for example in Martin Kippenberger's work. Some of these publications were remarkably radical and the results are absolutely autonomous works, as reflected in the prices they now command.

Sarah Owens: Basically then, the idea of the graphic designer as curator says little more than that the content was carefully selected.

Urs Lehni: This person also virtually has power over what he or she selects. The editor of a book or magazine, or the picture editor at a newspaper do exactly the same thing, but we don't call it «curating».

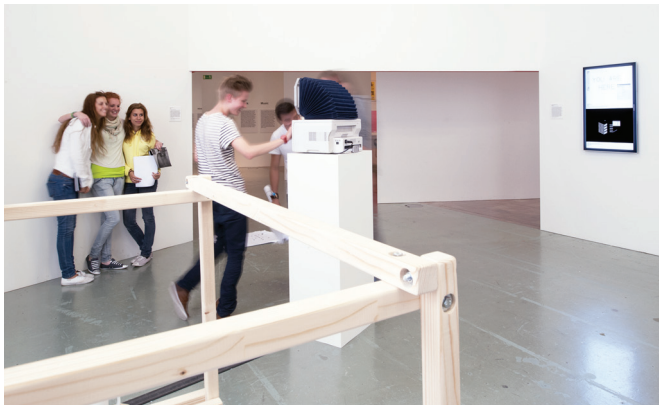
Sarah Owens: When I talk to my students about how they view their role as designers, it's often clear that they see themselves as mediators, as people who transform something so that others may understand it. This task may be part of what one considers curating, but the mediating activity described by the students appears more neutral. They see themselves more as filters that screen out and adapt information to make something more comprehensible. Whereas a curator is more of an authority.

Urs Lehni: Nowadays the curator has become almost more important that the artist whose work is being shown, and this is a reversal that has not taken place in our field. Ideally, the mediating filter should be invisible. For me, the most fascinating graphic designers are those who, apparently with a minimum of intervention, have found a twist that conveys the content in such a way that it works extremely well.

Sarah Owens: Thus avoiding grand gestures…

Urs Lehni: It's a marginal position. Perhaps many people wish it were so. But in the graphic design business entirely different rules apply, of course.

April 2012



Jürg Lehni, Urs Lehni, Rafael Koch
Things To Do, exhibition views,
Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 2012

Urs Lehni, Lex Trüb,
Pages from: Marc Camille Chaimowicz,
The World of Interiors, Zürich 2008

A conversation. Part 3

Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln, Sarah Owens

Is the concept of reality in design being narrowed down here to *Mechanization Takes Command* (Siegfried Giedion) or a new *Machine Age* (Reyner Banham)? Or to the sense of utility embodied in the *Gute Form* (Max Bill)?

It would take the focussed motivation of someone beginning a language course to follow such an exhibition concept, or a persistent belief in design as a reality-shaping and life-improving force. In general, design exhibitions today accord a prominent place to modes of production. Often, the way something is manufactured — how much, by whom, under which conditions — is even the central theme. Urs Lehni underlines this trend in an interview, although less in connection with product design than with the visual design of publications. Production processes seem to be more important in current design exhibitions than «results» in the form of products. But can this be of any interest at all in the context of design as a discipline?

I think there has always been a basic interest in production processes, as design objects are usually mass-manufactured. But in visual communication in particular, the exploration of conditions of production has attained a new importance, due to the fact that many of the design tools used by professional graphic designers — such as layout and image processing programmes — are now also available to non-experts. This situation calls for the discipline to redefine its own self-image, a process that can be conducted, among others, in the form of an exhibition. Moreover, the theme of production may actually be more appropriate to the short life of graphic works than their conservation, which contradicts it. When a conserved object is displayed anew (such as a poster announcing a concert that has long since taken place) formal criteria come to the fore, while its original use can only be conveyed indirectly.

Exhibitions of Z33 (Hasselt, Belgium),
installation views selected by Jan Boelen

Archetypes of Display

Makoto Azuma,
Frozen Pine – Shiki1, 2010
Exhibition views from
Alter Nature, 2010

Helmut Stallaerts,
Triptych Prophecy and Pan-Optic, 2009
Exhibition views from *Werk NU*, 2009

StudioJob,
Silverware for Bisazza, 2007
Installation view

Laurent Liefooghe,
The WoonMachine, 2010
Exhibition views from *Design by Performance,* 2010

Explorations

Michael Cross,
The Bridge, 2008
Installation view

Numen for Use,
NET, 2011
Installation view

Unfold & Tim Knapen,
L'Artisan Electronique/ Lawrence Malstaf, 2010
Exhibition view from
Design by Performance,
2010

Marie Sester,
Architecture of Fear,
2011
Exhibition view from
ACCES, 2011

Structured Spaces

Esther Stocker,
Based on a Grid, 2012
Exhibition view from
Mind the System,
Find the Gap, 2012

Krijn de Koning,
Superstories, 2009
Installation view

Frederic Geurts
Aluminumplaat, 2009
Exhibition view from
(un)balanced, 2009–2010

Text on Show

Ives Maes, Dora Garcia,
Fahrenheit 451', 2008
Exhibition view from
The Great Exhibition Part 1: EUROPE, 2008–2009

Christiane Hogner,
Card house construction,
2009
Exhibition view from
Werk NU, 2009

Stephanie Syjuco,
FreeTexts, 2012
Exhibition view from
Mind the System,
Find the Gap, 2012

Exhibition view from
Mind the System,
Find the Gap, 2012

Stephanie Syjuco,
FreeTexts, 2012
Exhibition view from
Mind the System,
Find the Gap, 2012

Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln, Sarah Owens

Exhibiting design in the same way as art also strikes me as a makeshift solution from the early history of design exhibitions. Although it could also be a deliberate attempt to distance these objects from their use value — so that they can be collected, contemplated and discussed. In contrast, turning away from representation and addressing production allows current design exhibitions to hypothetically question or conceptually reinterpret both the objects and the exhibition venue itself.

Is this not simply a case of strategies from conceptual art being adopted in a different context? One can certainly draw parallels to works of conceptual art from the late sixties that abandoned the concept of the artwork as a clearly defined art-historical genre and easily transported commodity, in favour of a questioning of its conditions of production. One new factor in the context of design today, however, is the anchoring of design works and their creators in the «real» context of an economy of consumer goods and services.

Of course, highlighting «making» as the act of production has entirely different implications in the fields of art and design. Art «opens

up» its discipline to everyday life and society — as in the critique that emerged in the 1960s — that opposed art as an end in itself. This was an attack on the dialectic that had arisen between the secured and established autonomy of art, the institutions contributing to this autonomy, and the resulting distance between art and «real life». Design is, of course at an entirely different point in this debate: here, when production processes are discussed, it is to be understood more as a critique of the «real» production conditions (conceived of in classical economic terms). Industrial goods also symbolize alienation, but more in terms of the material culture they represent. Products are criticized for reducing customers to consumers, and for being commodities that transport nothing except for consumption and the need for more. Traces of manufacturing or usage are often not welcome in consumer products. Critical Design is thus often an attempt, within the framework of a presentation, to make the product relevant to individuals, reconnecting it to personal life experience; by means of a critically conceived product. Since this also takes place in the exhibition space, it extends the current definition of design, and thus also the definition of what constitutes a work of design.

By dealing with these issues, the exhibition *Designing Critical Design*, curated by Jan Boelen at Z33 in Hasselt, Belgium (2007), provided a starting point for many young designers for discussing alternatives to design practice. Though there was already a market for «one-offs« and prototypes, critical design offered a meaning to many non-commercial objects that came from within design, but did not possess any market goals.

Tobias Madison,
Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln

Socially Awkward

Burkhard Meltzer: Your work has often featured a particular aesthetic that's hard to define. So we tried approaching it from a different angle, asking ourselves: what is something that would never appear?

Tobias Madison: The form is always just camouflage, it's totally irrelevant. I see my work as a structure of thought or process, and when it's time to do an exhibition then something just has to be rendered out. Sometimes it looks good, and other times it just looks like whatever. Often I want to protect ideas, not to communicate them at all, so then I make sure it looks really good.

Burkhard Meltzer: «Looks really good», meaning that it has a surface that is very present?

Tobias Madison: Yes, in my last projects I made that the central theme. For the Haubrok Collection in Berlin, I used two sculptures of mine owned by the collection, two plant vitrines, as the basis for a series of party dresses. The exhibition was an attack on the idea that a work that has been sold, positioned and integrated into art history should now stand for a certain idea. The party dress series was meant to give the works new roles. I have a long-standing interest in Japanese fashion design and a lot of that flowed into these dresses. In some cases, I just directly borrowed details from various dresses by Issey Miyake that I own. The dresses stood for specific stereotypes one might adopt in a semi-professional, semi-private situation. One figure spoke about itself, about its own production. Another was more sexy, in a very blatant way. Another was too «slick» — the kind of elegance that hinders communication from the outset. Another was rather «socially awkward», and stood in a different room. The figures were wooden crates on which photographs of the plant vitrines were attached. I also made a film with Fatuma Osman, who performed for a camera team in a dress I designed for her specially. The dress had a green and blue print for a kind of screen test. Her body was played off against itself, it became a protagonist in the demonstration of an effect, a very expensive test image. In dialogue with this image, Fatuma and I wrote a text that could be heard as a recording in the gallery. We spoke about our relationship as friends and collaborators, but at the same time, every sentence altered the relationship implied by the text.

Burkhard Meltzer: Has your interest in fashion in recent years been strongly related to the body? Japanese fashion designers in particular, such as Yohji Yamamoto have helped to break down the stereotypical male image in the European dress code.

Tobias Madison: The gender question is highly relevant. I am very critical of the macho characters who populate the cultural milieu with their performance-based, male-dominated notions of cultural work. The degree to which success within art is measured in terms of male attributes is quite tragic. The women who hold their own in the art market, like Kerstin Brätsch or Ida Ekblad, are always tough, the kind of woman who can drink through the night with a bunch of men. There are quite unreal ideas about how a woman is supposed to function within the art system, which cause other women, who I consider brilliant artists, to fail. Because they refuse to accept this role.

Tido von Oppeln: But is this critique aimed against a peculiar image of the artist, whether male or female, or is it actually against this male dominance?

Tobias Madison: Exactly this issue was one of Fatuma's and my main concerns. Her dress was very androgynous, and the film was about blurring lines, but you can see that she's a woman. We wanted to talk about what it means if a halfway successful young artist works with her in an exhibition (she's not an artist but an art historian). Our sound piece was arranged in such a way that she can speak freely about this. It was a kind of barter, as I was allowed to use the test image of her body in the show.

Burkhard Meltzer: Were the audience aware of the fact that she's an art historian?

Tobias Madison: The text was written in such a way that any form of relationship existing between the two of us was redefined with each text fragment, constantly changing. At the beginning it's transpersonal, then very distanced, then analytical.

Burkhard Meltzer: What struck me about your exhibition *Feedback* (2012) at Karma International was this aspect of «I'm doing something with my friends», this extreme interlinking of friendship and work.

Tobias Madison: That's the tragic thing about our times.

Burkhard Meltzer: Like your *Bora Bora Structure for Malmö* (2010)?

Tobias Madison: Or the motif of the child's playground in general. Playgrounds are often equipped with equipment designed to let children work off their energy. The climbing rope included in *Bora Bora Structure for Malmö* is something that appears to call on people to participate, yes. With the *Bora Bora* structures I was actually more interested in the relationship between myself and Kaspar (Müller) and the way our joint work functions. It's a critique of our work, of the way everything takes place on the level of formal analysis, of our status as «connoisseurs of the precise use of aesthetics». We play different formal analyses off against one another. In the case of the *Bora Bora Structure for Malmö*, for example, it was a relationship between two materials. In various cultures, bamboo stands for different forms of happiness or fertility, but it's also an extremely solid building material that's used in relatively conventional ways. It also transports a certain longing for the exotic. And the climbing rope promotes such an exotic situation.

Burkhard Meltzer: If we turn that round, then the climbing rope acts as advertising for the recompense that's supposed to come after working. The exhibition gives the impression of perfect happiness, because you're collaborating with a friend; two spheres becoming one. When I think of the materials and colours, they convey an almost unbearable optimism. Is this intended as the polar opposite of your situation as an artist? Or would you say your work is about mirroring a situation in which such polar opposites don't exist?

Tobias Madison: There is certainly an underlying critique of late-capitalist conditions where every social relationship can be «cashed in» and every form of work is detached from its monetary value. I actually built the exhibition out of a show by Emanuel Rossetti and Kaspar Müller. To a certain extent, it's based on my own situation. I run a cinema in Zurich (AP News) and I work there a lot. I see my role as an artist not as some guy who produces something, but as someone who creates a situation in which, among other things, something can but definitely doesn't have to be produced. But then I have to do an exhibition, and I see no reason to do an exhibition at the moment, I'm running this cinema. So I just tried to take the ideas that currently surround me and which I find convincing and set them in motion, or animate them, as in the case of the exhibition. On the one hand, I use my friends in the show, but I also present them: «These are my friends and I think their work is the best and I only want to work with them.» It's also very hermetic. What I refer to in the exhibition as «the work» is what happens between the people in the video while they produce the work, between Kaspar Müller and Emanuel Rosetti or between myself and Jan Vorisek. At the same time, the exhibition attacks the idea of a gallery programme that can turn friendships or networks into money.

Burkhard Meltzer: Some of your work plays with specific visual identities, for example the *Yes I Can!* (2009) project with the Radisson flags resembling corporate communications.

Tobias Madison: Yes, what interested me about these slogans was the way they attacked that — the labelling of artworks — as the flag was only used as a basis to negotiate a relationship within which to work cooperatively. So the work addresses the relationship between commission and cooperation, or hospitality.

Tido von Oppeln: Design also has a social function. People surround themselves with things, and these things create an aesthetic setting that has an effect on people, just as the person affects the thing. For the exhibition *Hydrate + Perform* at the Swiss Institute (2010) you worked with specific interiors or materials from such interiors. Is this one reason why materials play a role in your work? Because they create a link to specific aesthetics for living?

Tobias Madison: For me, that's one of the interesting aspects of design, but I always use such things in both directions — to point to specific ways of living, but also as forces, so that something else remains hidden. Form is a weapon that cannot be argued with. If you situate yourself very precisely within the language of form, there's nothing anyone can say against it. In some cases, this is used to reconstruct a capitalist logic. Apple, for example, operates exclusively via form, but it also promotes extreme systematic control.

Tido von Oppeln: Using one to hide the other.

Tobias Madison: Yes. Form is actually a language that one speaks better than those who invented the language. If you view the market as the creator of a formal language, and if you then adopt this language and speak it better than the market or the end user, then you acquire a certain power. Because you are also able to redefine the idiom. A few days ago, I read a book by Byung-Chul Han on Shanzhai products. It's a rather crude analysis of the question of originality and reproducibility in countries shaped by Buddhism, and it talks about products like a fake iPhone or fake televisions. These products are actually superior to the originals because they were developed on the basis of the original, but we view them as weaker because they are «trashy» designs. The interesting thing is that these products simply refuse the idea that quality exists. Which is why I'm interested in anarcho-capitalism, a system that takes root within capitalism but refuses to accept its parameters.

Burkhard Meltzer: Would you describe your own role in dealing with capitalism in the same way?

Tobias Madison: Sometimes, not always. As soon as it becomes possible to describe my role, I try to change it. Perhaps that corresponds to such a role.

Tido von Oppeln: In very general terms, the empowerment of art over design is also a plausible aim. Artistic praxis struggles to free itself, so to speak, from the aesthetic of the consumer world by developing a superior command of its formal language. What we see in art is thus a kind of «super-design».

April 2012

Exhibition view from *TCCA, NEW THEATER 2012–2013, APN Research, autoslides #1–3, shindisi home videos, the deleted scene, a fanzine as a museum/a museum as a fanzine, cut-out bin/apnegative, sci-fi sounds from the alienated kitchen, OOO &&& LLL, hc r 1*, organised by Emanuel Rossetti and Tobias Madison, Kunsthalle Bern, 2012

Tobias Madison, *Bora Bora Structure for Malmö,* 2010, Installation view, Johan Berggren Gallery, Malmö, 2010

Burkhard Meltzer, Tido von Oppeln, Sarah Owens

In the interview included in this issue, Tobias Madison refers to product aesthetics as a language, seeing it as a challenge to understand and successfully apply this aesthetic in his artistic practice:

«Form is actually a language that one (as an artist) speaks better than the people who originally invented it. If you view the market as the creator of a formal language, and if you then adopt this language and speak it better than the market or the end user, then you acquire a certain power. Because you are also able to redefine the idiom.»

Here, Madison explicitly links language and form, at the same time as describing art's possibilities for criticism, even if we must assume that this criticism is addressed less to industrial products and more to the quality of art as a commodity.

The *Design Real* show in 2010 was set up as a counter-model to the exhibition space in the art autonomy machine, as an example of a world-changing (and in many cases world-improving) force. The same year, as curator of the *Black²* group show, Konstantin Grcic referred to what is probably one of the most famous paintings of the twentieth century, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). Grcic took this Suprematist gesture — not as a point of departure for breaking with tradition — but as the founding moment of a genealogy of modern design. Could Malevich's «end of art» be seen as the beginning of a new line in the tradition of design? For Grcic, the black square stands for a design principle in the spirit of reduction, minimalism and stability; a totally rectangular, monochrome plane.

The enthusiasm for design exhibitions announced as «sculptural» are displayed as «limited editions» — in design galleries or at the Design Miami fair — has noticeably cooled off in recent years. Especially in the context of art exhibitions, the main emphasis is more on the context in which design is used and the «cultural meaning» generated by this usage. From a more general cultural-theoretical perspective, both art and design work «on the forms of inhabiting a cultural sphere», as Kathrin Busch writes in the *Power of Things* (IMAGE, 2008). Even in exhibition contexts, the audience's conventions and habits of usage are never totally suspended.

Exhibitions that try to create an exemplary and inhabitable setting can be considered as cultural practices of usage in their own right. Here, unlike in the case of an autonomous object in the isolated sense, the emergence of a work depends on the cultural meaning of the exhibition context. And the cultural meaning of the work on show only develops with the idea of its use; in the future, in the past, or as proposed within the exhibition situation itself. Ever since the lavish presentations of industrial products in large-scale exhibitions in the nineteenth century, exhibition contexts have established themselves not only as alienating autonomy machines, but also as a «form of dwelling», as a moment whose «cultural meaning» can only be accessed in connection with the various contexts of usage.

Biographies

Jan Boelen (1967) is a Belgian critic and curator of contemporary art and design exhibitions. He studied product design at the Media & Design Academie (KHLim) in Genk, Belgium. He is the founding director of Z33, House for Contemporary Art in Hasselt, Belgium. He also chairs the Flemish committee for Architecture and Design and has been curating exhibitions and projects for Manifesta 9 (2012, Limburg). After teaching in the Bachelors Department Man and Well Being, Jan Boelen has been head of the Master Department Social Design at Design Academy Eindhoven (NL) since 2010.

Konstantin Grcic (1965) studied at the Royal College of Art in London from 1988 to 1990, after completing a carpenter's apprenticeship. He subsequently founded Konstantin Grcic Industrial Design in 1991 and has since developed furniture, products and lamps for several design companies. He has also worked as a curator of numerous exhibitions focusing on design as a concept of modernity and industrial form: 2000 *Goethe/Grcic*, exhibition of Goethe's quotidian objects; Casa di Goethe, Rome, Italy, 2009; *Design Real*, Serpentine Gallery, London, UK, 2010; *Comfort*; Biennale Internationale Design, Saint-Etienne, France, 2010; Black^2, Istituto Svizzero, Rome, Italy. Exhibition design for the German Pavilion at 13th International Architecture Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia 2012.

Urs Lehni (1974) graduated in graphics in 1999 from the Hochschule für Kunst und Gestaltung, Lucerne, Switzerland. Since 2001 he has mainly designed books for a large number of cultural institutions, and collaborated with Lex Trueb on the Lehni-Trueb Studio, which has received acclaim for its work on several occasions. Apart from his professional activities, Urs has continued to realise his own projects, such as the «Rollo Press» printing and publishing project (2008). Urs lectures occasionally in workshops at various colleges of art and design at home and abroad.

Tobias Madison (1985) is an artist based in Zurich. He is founder of AP-News cinema and project space (Zurich). With Emanuel Rosetti, Dan Solbach and Daniel Baumann, he initiated the fanzine *Used Future* as well as the project space New Jerseyy (Basel). Madison has exhibited at the Swiss Institute (New York, 2010), Kunstverein Munich (2010), Konsthall Charlottenburg (Kopenhagen, 2011), Kunsthalle Zurich (2013), among other institutions and galleries.

Burkhard Meltzer (1979) was part of the curatorial team at Neue Kunst Halle St. Gallen (2003–07). Since 2006 he has been working as a lecturer at Zurich University of the Arts, and as a freelance curator. He has initiated several research projects on contemporary arts perspective of design at the Institute of Critical Theory. He co-edited an anthology on this research topic, *It's Not a Garden Table* (2011). As a writer, he publishes regularly in magazines including *kunstbulletin*, Frieze and books on issues in contemporary art. Meltzer lives in Zurich.

Tido von Oppeln (1974), is a cultural theorist from Berlin living in Zurich. Since 2002, he has been part the board of the Werkbundarchiv — Museum der Dinge, Berlin. He has been working as a writer and curator, as well as being involved since 2005 in various shows on design, art, and architecture at the Werkbundarchiv, the Vitra Design Museum, and MARTa Herford. He is a regular contributor to the Belgian art, architecture, and design magazine DAMN. Since 2009 he is lecturing on design theory and history in Lucerne, Zurich, and Potsdam and is taking part in several research projects on contemporary arts perspective of design at the Institute of Critical Theory at the Zurich University of the Arts. Co-Editor of an anthology of this research topic: *It's Not a Garden Table*, Zurich 2011.

Mamiko Otsubo (1974) lives and works in New York. She earned a degree in Economics from UC San Diego before studying Fine Art at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. She holds an MFA from Yale University. Otsubo has participated in group shows at venues including Artists Space (2006), Sculpture Center (2007), Daniel Reich Gallery (2007), and Room East (2012) in New York. Her first solo show in Europe took place in 2006 at Galerie Mark Müller (Zurich). In 2011, Otsubo was invited by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston as Brown Foundation Fellow at Maison Dora Maar in Ménerbes, France. This summer, she has been invited to be a resident at Statens Værksteder for Kunst in Copenhagen in preparation for a show Rønnebæksholm to open in Spring of 2014. Her solo show at Lullin + Ferrari in Zurich will open Fall of 2013.

Sarah Owens (1977) is a graphic designer, design historian and design theorist. She currently co-directs the Bachelor's degree programme in Visual Communication at Zurich University of the Arts, where she has been teaching design theory since 2009. She is a graduate of the University of Reading and the Royal College of Art in London, and in 2009 was a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. Her research and writing focuses on graphic communication, popular culture, and the social and philosophical aspects of design.

Photo Credits

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31 — Tobias Madison, *Bora Bora Structure for Malmö,* 2010, Installation view, Johan Berggren Gallery, Malmö, 2010, Courtesy the artist and Karma International

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