

# limited language: rewriting design

responding to a feedback culture



Colin Davies, Monika Parrinder

# **limited language: rewriting design**

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This book is set in Monotype Grotesque (captions and references), Berling (body text) and Monoikos (all headers). Oskar Karlin designed Monoikos specifically for this book. The typeface is based upon Monaco in 10pt which was used on the original Limited Language website.

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[www.dezeenaarharderwijk.nl](http://www.dezeenaarharderwijk.nl)  
Commissioned by SKOR Foundation Art and Public Space.

The Dutch coastline at the Oosterscheldekering in Zeeland is streamed live (with sound) to patients at the St. Jansdal Hospital in Harderwijk, The Netherlands. Every five minutes a film still is archived online and patients receive a weekly postcard of images shot during the previous week.

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## The Limited Language project

### *In brief...*

The original idea, which ignited the Limited Language project, was to create a brand that used the Web as a platform for generating writing about visual communication. The idea of the brand in this context was a deliberate conceit – to explore how words, like images, are commodities.

Cutting, pasting and recycling are all properties of contemporary image culture and are present in the way we generate ideas. Thoughts and conversations are cut and pasted from one context to the next, taking on a new significance in each. Limited Language aims to capture this as a working process for new writing.

Anyone can be part of Limited Language by responding to trigger articles. We encourage people to recycle comments in their own research, as we collage them into our own writing. Any comment eventually used is credited.

### *In detail...*

We began writing under the guise of Limited Language in London in 2005, as two lecturers/practitioners in visual culture and theory.

We were searching for a way to engage with visual culture, largely one in which image is read as text. We were aware that the words we wrote with, in many ways, shared the same outcomes as images. To us, words and images have the same systems, same structures, same fetish and commodity value: you can buy and sell words, ideas and criticism as you might a Picasso, a bag of chips or pornography. Sometimes, of course, that's a Citroën Picasso.

What we became increasingly conscious of was the way that, although some might talk of the possibilities of language as unlimited – of the procession of images, simulacra, as unending – to us, Language is Limited in two respects. First, the vocabulary of postmodernism; its flattening of critical positions into an atonal mantra of relativism – where high and low culture lose their magnetic North and become one and the same. The second is in the visual realm, where increasingly our worlds are shaped by sound bites, lists made up of top tens, anthologies, page layouts – communication concertinaed into byte size representations via sms messaging, the looped voice mail, a scrolling message board, or the chat room – where text and image are brought together in an online stream of emoticons and fcuk©ing abuse.

From this starting point, we decided that our subject should be *process*. And, if we were



to write about the creative process, then we should at least explore how processes from within design culture (a culture of recycling and mash-ups etc.) inspire collaboration and cross-media/cross-disciplinary practice and by extension new ways of generating and distributing writing about process.

Limited Language is an attempt to weave these modes back into a framework – a narrative to be used, re-used and again recycled. Not, we promise, just another rehash of the remix though – a cop out, to fill media space – but here we re-use and recycle as a deliberate technique because to revisit concepts in different contexts, at different times is to enrich, expand and hopefully capture the serendipity of creative process.

On the website, designed by Oskar Karlin, we decided to invite practitioners and critics to post essays on subjects from their area of discipline or expertise, with relevance to issues of 'process'. The aim became to explore how ideas and processes transfer across disciplines. This idea informed the Web design, whereby we run three concurrent articles at once, allowing readers to read/comment across debates.

The articles posted on the site are not intended to be 'finished' (although many are) but rather, provide ideas and questions which allow responses to integrate with the original text. These responses often take on a life of their own: existing articles may divide and multiply... paragraphs from one topic may be isolated to

generate new thinking elsewhere. Our remit always intended to go beyond a traditional design blog, where discussion is an end in itself.

The Web here – immersive, responsive, collaborative – becomes a useful mode of facilitating research. In turn, this becomes synthesised and redistributed through print publishing: from journal articles, published lectures to this book. (But the book is a starting place, every article ends with an URL for the conversation to continue!)

Our writing on one topic migrates from the Web to print, via lecture halls, and back again. It is an ongoing 'collaborative' process. Just as walking down the street is as much about the mutterings and the conversation that you hear as it is about what you see, we use this feedback culture to construct our critique. This critique focuses in particular on the process and experience of design, visual culture and the everyday. In Photoshop you can't save to print unless you have 'flattened' the layers. We don't aim to flatten, but to produce a lamination of outputs, a composite for use and resale.

## Book methodology

### *Which design audience?*

We started out by looking at visual communication but any demarcation between practice disciplines was soon corrupted and the site came to occupy the in-between space of process and practice: how we craft/create/discuss/think/reinvent.

We write about art, design, architecture, sonic and visual cultures and practitioners from all these disciplines have contributed writing to the site too – some of which we have included in this book.

### *What is feedback culture?*

Feedback culture is one of the cultural spin-offs of the Web 2.0 inspired velvet revolution in cultural agency, where design increasingly facilitates, rather than simply providing bounded social practices in communication.

Whilst many get themselves into (post-modern) knots discussing the true benefits of these cultural changes; websites such as Twitter and Facebook are changing how the world is perceived and how we perceive ourselves within it.

Increasingly the image has been side-stepped by 140 digit tweets and downloaded MP3s – screen based culture is fast being eclipsed by touch-screen tactility.

Everyday, through screens, keyboards, wireless networks and Bluetooth accessories we are performing agents in a feedback culture.

We have taken the responses from the Limited Language site as our starting place. Sometimes it has been a simple passing-of-the-baton where we write on a subject and the responses have carried on in the same vein – maybe fleshing out more detail or giving a more mappable path – but equally tied to the original writing or response.

We do not agree with everything written by others under the Limited Language banner but, rather, enjoy the serendipitous path it might inspire us to follow.

Many of these journeys can be found in the writing in this book.

### *Structure of the book*

The book is organised into chapters which do not follow disciplinary lines but coalesce around certain themes that have emerged as recurrent concerns over the years. The book layout is divided into two columns. The first, in black, is a starter article which has already appeared on the Limited Language website or elsewhere and which has tended to frame some sort of question or provocation. The second column, in colour, is our reflective response. This reframes the question in relation to some of the feedback received on the site (whilst taking into account its new context and changing events since originally posted).

The starter articles comprise both our own writing, and writers and practitioners we asked to contribute to the Limited Language site. The book can only cover a small proportion of the writing published on the site over the years and we are equally indebted and inspired by those not appearing within these pages.

We had no absolute criteria for selecting material for the book but have tried to choose the articles that captured certain themes and investigations regarding practice and process. In the end it can only be an arbitrary selection to try and give a feel of the ongoing Limited Language project.

The responses to the starter articles are not only re-realised in our own writing but we attempt to explore the thinking process through the practical work, which has always inspired us (although the work is never physi-

cally represented on the Limited Language site: each article in the book ends with an URL for you to return to the Limited Language site.

We decided upon a text only website to provide a focus on words (and thinking) as apposed to image/colour/text: the predominant blog format is image/text...image/text etc.

On the site we have made use of hyperlinks to allow readers to go off elsewhere to feed the need for images and the physical realm!

As design historians, this book seeks to revisit old work as much as new, and to explore how it materialises, and focus on its making. To this end we show sketches where possible, to try and capture work in progress.

We're interested in what designers are doing and try to make sense of it in a wider context: its relationship between disciplines is as important as its cultural ramifications.

Beyond the book... the Limited Language Web-platform will capture how our reflections here coalesce in a feedback culture: readers of the book can post onto the Limited Language website – providing a point of departure for new discussions in an on-going process.

Each chapter's opening spread includes keywords that we have identified as critical moorings to the proceeding essays. In brackets, we have shown their Google hit rates when added to the word 'design'. This is of course ever changing, but it gives an idea of what is out there.



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## Critical moments

The problem with design / What voice can design have?

Design in crisis / Too much history

Patronising Prada / Critical effects

Love/hate / Base and superstructure

Shock and awe: the politics of production / The process of consumption

Multiverso / Embodied information

This chapter explores how design can have its own voice:  
from politics to violence; methodology to consumerism.

### Keywords

History (217,000,000)

Marxism (550,000)

Problem solving (10,800,000)

Violence (24,300,000)

Keywords and their Google hit rate in conjunction with the word design.





## The problem with design

In *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*,<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai comments on how the West is increasingly dominated by a fear of the lone bomber with explosives strapped to their chest. Surely, a more rational fear would be the panic of spotting the lone designer with a portfolio, packed with high problem-solving principles strapped to their chest.

Problem solving, the methodological bedrock of design, is the semantic key to a designer's belief that they are in a position to change society. Social problems and design form a symbiotic relationship, something politicians and cultural commentators alike find alluring.<sup>2</sup> The 'designer as cultural-mediator', has an established history in Britain: from the *Great Exhibition* in 1851 to the *Festival of Britain* in 1951.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the designer's role as cultural mediator has evolved into the 'problem-solving' or 'social-engineering' conception of design we witness today.

The trouble with problem solving is its contingency. The problem could be anything: global warming, social housing, over-consumption or even 'the Jewish problem'. Indeed, the scar of the Holocaust is incised, in part, by the work of designers who (often unintentionally) created the blueprints for mass killing; drew up plans for the work camps, rationalised and set the train timetables and so on. Today, it should be remembered that one person's problem is another's home or fight for freedom or means of transport.

Much contemporary design has taken on the role of cultural beautician or plastic surgeon, providing a global parlour plied with consumer goods, manicured with good intentions; all plucked from a repository of modernist thinking. It's like 1980s Alessi<sup>4</sup> with a social conscience. In *Wallpaper*\*<sup>5</sup> magazine, Dieter Rams (the influential designer for the German consumer electronics manufacturer Braun), listed the Ten Commandments

## What voice can design have?

The original article took issue with the figure of the designer as already expert problem-solver with their oft-quoted claims for social responsibility. Design and social responsibility aren't directly linked. They are part of a matrix of historically situated relationships between people, contexts and media in which design is embedded. An ironic (?) take on this thinking can be seen in a T-shirt that says *Design will save the world*. A counterpoint to this thinking was on show at the Compostmodern 09 conference hosted by AIGA, the professional association for design in America, with its aim to 'connect the dots' on design and social responsibility. Here, inventor Saul Griffith's presentation started with the image; *Design won't save the world. Go volunteer in a soup kitchen you....*

Replies on the Limited Language website, to *The problem with design*, were less polemic, more ponderous than the sloganeering above; the equivalent, perhaps, of answering the question 'What voice can design have?' with more questions. This has provided us with the opportunity, here, to explore what's at stake in the shift from design authors and outcomes to design process.

This isn't to deny design a voice, but re-cast it as one process, amongst others, of asking questions about the world. If, as Nigel Cross suggests, there is a 'designerly way of knowing',<sup>1</sup> then what would be a designerly way of asking questions?

An alternative to the black-clad designer with his problem-solving principles of grids and typographic layouts comes from Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.<sup>2</sup> From the top of the World Trade Center, where the viewpoint that transforms the city into a rational layout is an illusion, De



T-shirt by Osika LLC for  
Artefacture (2008).



Text from a presentation by inventor Saul Griffith at the AIGA conference Compostmodern 09, as it appeared on several Internet blog sites in Spring 2009.  
[http://bit.ly/saul\\_griffith](http://bit.ly/saul_griffith)  
<http://bit.ly/compostmodern09>



of good design: at number 4, 'Good design helps a product be understood' and at number 6, 'Good design is honest'. Here, fashionably repackaged, is the old Modernist dichotomy: design's *raison d'être* of moral instruction alongside its decorative, consumptive self.

Pick at the stitches and you find the dilemma for all design: its relationship to commodity and the dialectical tensions between use and life-function. Every design will add to the flow, creating an ever-greater distance between actual use and the symbolic order it falls within: an upturned box, a picnic table, an IKEA table, a Habitat table, a John Lewis table, a Heal's table, a Marcel Breuer table etc. The list expands to become a series of eBay 'tags'. Likewise, non-branded trainers and anti-globalisation T-shirts validate the system they intend to critique.

In a modern capitalist world, where the route to social influence is pock-marked with the fallout of political spin and unrealistic assumptions of design's public impact, design's dilemma is this: what voice can design have?

Design needs to go beyond the rhetoric of manifestos (which have become the bored patter of fingertips on the table while you wait for the next big idea to come along). Design needs to be a series of small ideas – mini explosions, eureka moments – which atomise and settle in unexpected places. A few immediately come to mind such as the paradigmatic and well publicised work of architectural collectives like British *FAT* (which stands for Fashion, Architecture and Taste) and *muf* (a group of architects and artists) and product designers like Dutch Droog design. One could also add Swedish Front Design and graphic designers like the French *M/M* (Paris). Altogether, they present work of different and often opposing stances as to how design should live in the world. All their work is more about the 'process of design' than problem solving alone.

Back in 2000, Droog's *Do Create* collection included a metal armchair that owners bashed into shape with

Certeau's voyeur emerges, a pedestrian, on the street. The street becomes the opposing 'other' of the view atop the building. 'Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye' the walker experiences the city without preconceptions, which makes him receptive to chance and possibility. For this, the pedestrian (and our designer) needs a multitude of tactics as evinced from the details of everyday life. This experience of the street is analogous to the notion of process in design.

The ways in which these alternative images of 'the designer' translate into design thinking (and real people!) was teased out in replies to the article on the Limited Language website...

One reply quoted Matthias Hillner,<sup>3</sup> head of the Studio for Virtual Typography, commenting that: '[a] problem with design education...is that it ignores the accompanying questions...', and then continued: 'It's not the camera that determines the perspective, it's basically where you position yourself and where you are looking. If you have the capability to orientate yourself and determine your position you have a very good start.'

And yet... James Souttar points out a tension between old Western ideals and design: 'Isn't the "problem with design"...that "designing" wasn't enough for designers. We had to be political activists, cultural commentators, conceptual artists... people with an intellectual agenda, not just an aesthetic one.'

Whilst design can't be situated outside a larger network of visual discourses, what's instrumental is the way this is conceptualised. Social responsibility in modernist European/American design has coalesced around specific, morally neutral tags: design for charity, the environment and so on. (The if-you-do-a-film-about-the-Holocaust-you're-guaranteed-an-Oscar line of thought<sup>4</sup>.)

But neutral design is an illusion. Even irresponsible, in that it can't be held to account. Anne Bush proposes 'social response-ability'. This would involve responding in dialogue with each project or scenario, rather than acting on pre-set ideas about socially responsible design.

In the most fundamental sense, then, responsibility is the ability to respond. It is not just the willingness to act, but also the ability to understand one's actions.<sup>5</sup>

This goes further than orientating oneself to ask: From where am I speaking? To whom? And with what bias? What can my tools do? And crucially, what can't they do? This is less about the abstract idea of social responsibility and more about an embedded practice that is ethical and accountable.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, again... for Souttar, the problem with postmodern Western design – exacerbated by its binge on French philosophy – is that its context might already be bankrupt. Instead he looks to a Latin Renaissance, specifically in typography. 'No philosophy, no cultural theory, no more fucking head-stuff, but just sheer passion and fascination for type, and a willingness to play and explore, without the constant fear of crossing the ill-defined boundary between layered irony and simple naivety. And really the Latins show us the simple answer to "the problem with design (in the Anglophone world)": it has no soul.'<sup>III</sup>

A reply to Souttar counters that this is 'a rather clichéd view that non-western (currently Latin) = soul = passionate'.<sup>IV</sup>

So, what is soul? It would seem to be a deep level of human engagement with the world around it: for instance, demanding not just instinctual answers, but real questions. We might find soul in graffiti on the streets of São Paulo<sup>7</sup>... But, can't it be found anywhere where need is spoken with an authentic voice?

Take just two examples... *Jugaad*, is a free-standing shade canopy, made out of discarded oil cans, in the Indian village of Rajokri on the outskirts of New Delhi. This was built over a period of three months by ninety members of the village, led by Sanjeev Shankar, whose interdisciplinary work draws on practices across art, craft, design research and architecture. *Jugaad* is a Hindi term for attaining any objective using available resources at hand and, in this project, both cooking oil and repurposing are central to Indian culture. Shankar

a sledgehammer and a rubber-lined (hence unbreakable) porcelain vase that gained character the more it was dropped or smashed against a wall. Here, Droog was investigating process, rather than commenting on a global condition of violence. But they are equally likely to engage in 'changing the world': *Urban Play*, implemented from 2007 and on, has been described as 'an international project... [that] believes that street-level inventiveness, energy and innovation is the future of creativity in the city... [c]reated as a catalyst to inspire creativity in the public domain...' Droog are interested in new materials and the cross-fertilisation of technologies and processes. For them, design is quintessentially a temporal phenomenon, a 'moving forward'.

FAT's architectural work such as *The Blue House*, a house/office/apartment finished in 2004, is always technologically precise and cognate, but the overall impression is filmic. It is a collage of the visual objet d'art of urban experience, remixed and presented back to us. The FAT methodology is the antithesis of the New Urbanism movement, which uses the paucity of ideas in much contemporary architecture to validate old thinking, old architectural forms and class divisions. New Urbanists say their gated communities are in response to the needs of occupants, unlike the top-down ideologies of the 1950s and 1960s modernist building programmes. FAT and muf respond differently to the same criticism. Their work is designed to grow from the middle; it's about communication and engages in participatory workshops with the local community. muf's small-scale urban design projects are another example of this working ethic. Design needs to reflect the mores of its times rather than produce a banal B-movie of an imagined community.

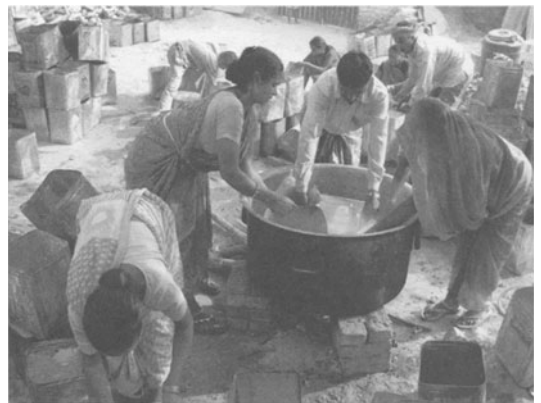
Networking and a cross-fertilisation in methodology between the digital and analogue worlds (different to inter-disciplinary practice) will become increasingly important to design thinking, be it MySpace or the more tangible network of projects in inner city areas across the world. Good design develops incrementally and, in a



*Jugaad*, a public art project with Sanjeev Shankar (2008).  
Photograph by Sundeep Bal.



A can lid being cut off.  
Photograph by Sanjeev Shankar.

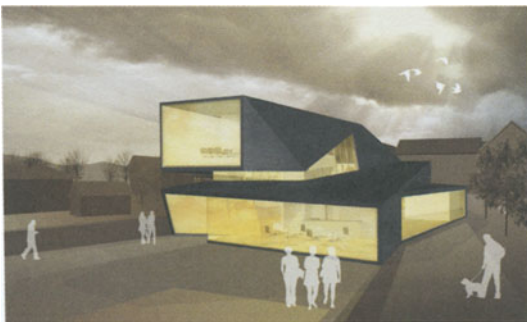


Cans being cleaned in big communal vessels.  
Photograph by Sanjeev Shankar.





The Fantastic Norway caravan.



Brønnøy Kunstbase, Norway. An arena for contemporary art for the last public space in the village of Brønnøysund, proposed following workshops with the local community by Fantastic Norway (ongoing).

globalised community, good design projects bounce off other ones. In these small explosions of technical nous and creative spirit we see the materialisation of social concerns; environmental issues, globalisation, consumerism, ethics etc. But, not as doctrinaire monoliths, rather as small-scale, individual investigations into contemporary culture.

What if a designer's social responsibility (should they feel the need) was to ask questions rather than emphasise problem solving... What if designers were to stop making simplistic overtures to saving the world... What if they were to stop the mantra for socially-responsible design that ignores the issues of religion, politics and personal taste... What if they were to stop telling consumers that the choice of one design over another equates to sound ethical/political judgement...

If only designers could stop measuring the impact of design solely on how big the problem is. Instead, wouldn't it be better if they focused on how important the question is?

See further images here  
[www.limitedlanguage.org/images](http://www.limitedlanguage.org/images)

#### References

- 1 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 2 Robert Levit & Ellen Levy, 'Design will save the world!' in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2006.
- 3 Or, in Britain, perhaps even going back to the first design schools founded in the 1830s.
- 4 The Alessi design collection gave us the iconic designs of the 'Juicy Salif Citrus Squeezer' by Philippe Starck and the Bird Whistle Kettle by Michael Graves amongst others.
- 5 *Wallpaper\** 103, guest-edited by Dieter Rams, September 2007.

reflects: 'Initial resistance in the village to work with an outsider and explore the discarded oil can, a common symbol of "waste", was an important challenge... Global issues of environment, sustainability and recycling can inspire [people] only if they are linked to their daily lifestyle. Through deep human level engagement, there was a gradual change in perception and...gradually, the entire community was inspired... The fabrication process and vision of *Jugaad* became an integral part of village life and its people.'<sup>8</sup>

Fantastic Norway is a group of architects whose red caravan – which travels around from town to town as an open-door, working office – embodies the idea of the socially responsive, 'public architect'. In each scenario, they find out through a 'mapping process' what projects are needed and how they might come about; in interaction with local residents, traditions, media-outlets, politicians and planning processes (all facilitated by serving waffles!). Erlend Blakstad Haffner suggests that 'People don't necessarily know what they need. But this process helps them find the right arenas and forms, through architecture, to politically anchor them.'<sup>9</sup>

This isn't instrumental (top-down) but 'dialogical' design. More colloquially, we might call it reciprocal: where there is genuine dialogue and people's particularities and feedback are looped into the process. No 'Big Idea', no one-size-fits-all and no designer as author. Instead design in this mode is project-specific, experimental, open and value comes at any point. It takes its thrust from collective wisdom,<sup>10</sup> which isn't solely attainable from 'expert' knowledge. This is a recognition that the world is complex and that no one person or discipline can solve its problems.

Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination*,<sup>11</sup> suggests that the dialogic work is in a reciprocal relationship with other work, informing and continually informed by it. Dialogically, you can never have closure. The act of appropriation cannot be complete. This transcends any idea of design being evaluated

in terms of impact or contextualised in terms of movements. Instead, it's to continually trace and re-trace design shifts as increments.

For Bakhtin, the dialogic has an imagination. As does the term project, as verb, where the etymology of ject is the act of throwing forwards.<sup>12</sup> Design's voice projects into a continuum of critique, consumption, and contribution. What can design's voice contribute to the social imagination?

See full responses + carry on the conversation here  
[http://tiny.cc/chapter1\\_1](http://tiny.cc/chapter1_1)

#### Reader credits

- I and another 17/03/2008
- II James Souttar 20/03/2008
- III James Souttar 20/03/2008
- IV and another 20/03/2008

#### References

- 1 Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007).
- 2 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 153.
- 3 Matthias Hillner as quoted on [www.knowyourvalues.com](http://www.knowyourvalues.com), 2008. See: Matthias Hillner, *Basics Type: Virtual Typography* (AVA Publishing, 2009).
- 4 Kate Winslet parodied herself by saying this in *Extras* (dir. Ricky Gervais & Stephen Merchant, 2005) and later won the 2009 Oscar for Best Actress for *The Reader*.
- 5 Anne Bush, 'Beyond Pro Bono Work' in Steven Heller and Veronique Vienne, *Citizen Designer* (New York: Allworth, 2003), 30.
- 6 See Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991).
- 7 See, for instance, François Chastanet, 'Pichação' in *Eye* 56, Vol. 14, Summer 2005, 40-47. This is an account of the blackletter forms of the São Paulo 'pichação' graffiti movement, through which the dispossessed differentiate themselves from political anti-dictatorship slogans and integrate their own identity into the Brazilian urban fabric.
- 8 <http://sanjeevshankar.com>
- 9 Email exchange (2009), <http://fantasticnorway.no>
- 10 See Charles Leadbetter, *We Think* (London: Profile, 2008).
- 11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin; London: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- 12 See also Wolfgang Jones, 'Design, Ethics and Systems-thinking' in Paivi Tahkokallio and Susann Vihma (eds.), *Design: Pleasure or Responsibility* (Helsinki: UIAH 1994), 42-53.



## Design in crisis

At first sight, all branches of design seem to be prospering. Design activities all over the world are increasing exponentially, filling the sky with bright new stars. Design reacts to technology faster than art, and this is very conspicuous as regards to the digital developments that have been taking place ever since the mid-1970s.

Designers have been involved in this digital revolution from its very beginning and actively influenced its development. This was not a fringe culture, but an integral part of the digital revolution. They created the mouse, the window, the button and the Web's visual experience. Whereas art is still trying to comprehend the video innovation, design determined the way in which people work and act in the cybernetic world. But at the same time design is going through a crisis. Grey clouds gather beneath its wings – ethical issues related to consumerism, pollution and the exhaustion of raw materials as opposed to temptation, the creation of endless collections and the sterility of renovation. Design finds itself coveted by new disciplines that boast of dealing with 'aesthetics'. The weak flutter which began with plastic surgery to correct damages after accidents or war, gradually becomes 'redesigning the human body' for capricious aesthetic reasons. Standard operations, such as nose jobs or skin grafts are replaced by new interventions that include 'overhauling' the body and cosmetic surgery. The physician no longer heals. (S)he 'creates'. The intention is more to design than to cure. 'Body designer' or 'appearance designer' are more correct terms to define these professionals, and they are closer in their intention to fashion designers and hair stylists than they care to believe.

See further images here  
[www.limitedlanguage.org/images](http://www.limitedlanguage.org/images)

## Too much history

Design and history are shackled, if not synonymous: design suffers from either too much history or too little. Design is (often) subordinate to art, in part because of a lack of sanctioned history, but equally is kept in its place by a connection to the historical passage of Consumerism and Capitalism.

Design has historians but, it could be argued, lacks a Giorgio Vasari or a Clement Greenberg<sup>1</sup> – critics whom act as ensigns – or, even, a distinct avant-gardism to forge an intellectual separation from capitalism: without this, design is marooned.

Ezri Tarazi, an Israeli industrial designer, in his article, spies a crisis in design because of its unanchored nature. Its very popularity in recent times has refloated it upon the public consciousness but without the proper coordinates to whence it came, it will remain a ghost ship. Design, for Tarazi, is becoming splintered. It is creating a collection of surface incisions where the intention is more to design than to cure.

As we write, the notion of a crisis is becoming increasingly frequent fodder in contemporary design – for instance, [Design] Crisis at the 2009 Milan Furniture Fair which explored the relationship between creativity and crisis. One exhibit was *Spamghetto*,<sup>2</sup> a visually baroque wall covering which recycles junk-email, 'in order to turn the ugly spam into a beautiful wallpaper...'. *Spamghetto* makes visible a contemporary problem and repurposes it to another end. But it also brings a broader question to mind: can we design ourselves out of a crisis beyond simply making the ugly beautiful?<sup>3</sup>

In responding to Tarazi's dilemma – to design or to cure? – replies to the post addressed design's heritage as part of the

problem. As James Souttar suggests, certainly the 1960s inherited a design culture moulded as a 'product of modernism – [in] an era when there was a popular appetite for grandiose personal visions, and for being led'.<sup>1</sup> A modernism of Taylorism and Ford Motor Company, '[o]bsessed with utility, efficiency and rationality',<sup>2</sup> inspired production lines as much as it inspired the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier. It was also a modernism bloated by the victors of World War Two: the USA.

It is the diaspora of European thinkers and practitioners who went to America during and after the war, many staying on long after appeasement, who, to this day, influence how design is critically assessed and, in many cases, the creative process itself. Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm – under the leadership of Max Horkheimer – arrived at Columbia University, finding themselves in the eye of the approaching pop-culture storm. The Frankfurt School, as they were collectively known (referring to their original academic institution), began to assess the cultures of Europe from the vantage point of the USA. They provided the cross-disciplinarity in critical investigation which informs liberal arts education today: a mix of sociology; philosophy; psychoanalysis and anthropology. Commodity became the new enemy.

Ever since this period, in the cross hairs of much critical thinking is the predatory role of commodity. Design is the most visible foot soldier in the advancement of a modern material culture. Design, technically and aesthetically, develops for the most part unimpeded by the counter flows of avant-garde movements. Avant-gardism periodically self-audited its advances during the same period; a check and balance of politics and aesthetics.

The consumer culture born in the 1960s (reaching its nadir in the 1990s) amplified the voice of disciplines from photography to graphic arts, product design to architecture.

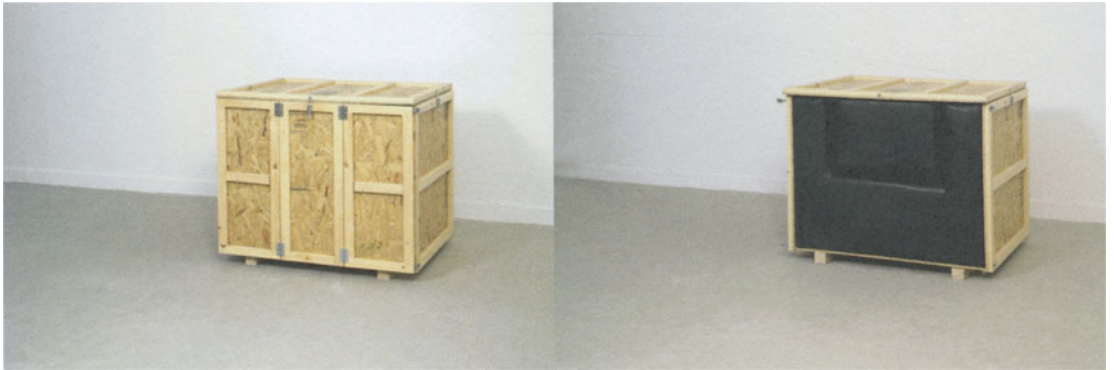
But today, there is an irony in design activities increasing exponentially because, by and large, it is driven by the postmodern



*Spamghetto*: junk wallpaper covering by To Do. Technical Partner: Jannelli & Volpi (2009). If consumers provide the dimensions of their room, To Do's software can produce a wallpaper design that 'wraps' around objects, such as windows or pictures.







*Moving* by Ezri Tarazi (2005).  
Photograph by Studio Warhaftig Venezian.



rupture of high and low culture (if indeed this split ever really occurred outside of certain philosophical discourse). Essentially, this link to consumerism negated the cognitive thrust of design and designers which underpins Tarazi's original post.

An important conceptual framework, first taken up by the Frankfurt School, and since used in sociology and cultural studies, is that of kitsch. Kitsch is an important conduit between the worlds of art and design. When Tarazi suggests that 'design finds itself coveted by new disciplines that boast of dealing with "aesthetics", kitsch is influential. Here, we are arguing kitsch on an economic level not a postmodern 'Oh that's so kitsch' level!

Design, historically, is written up as part of the mechanics of modern taste formation. It is a component of a fashion industry of surface and simulacra. Sewn into the very sinews of this relationship is the notion of kitsch. The intellectual and cultural formations (and interactions) with kitsch act as a catalyst in how design is understood, consumed and to some extent, created. As one commentator observes by the late 19th century: 'Kitsch was the only art of the period which involved unconditionally almost the whole of society.'<sup>4</sup>

It's the very reproducibility of design which both provided an everyday language of visual form whilst equally acting as an opiate to dull the senses, attaching it to the dangers of kitsch (...picture Philippe Starck's gold-plated machine gun lamps?...). You can see how design fits the bill when Clement Greenberg explains that: 'Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time.'<sup>5</sup>

But what is embedded within this notion of the commercial and the kitsch is the intrinsic power of popularity; pop culture. Design provides a readily available, literally off the