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Running head: OUT OF FOCUS

Out of focus

The limits of a borderline profession

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Abstract

The elusive chimaera “design” has been, in turn, an idea, a plan, a purpose, a sketch, a process, the result of a process, the core of a profession and the core of emerging professions… As such, the concept of what design is will remain contradictory and resist to be ever determined in the absolute: the limitations of design are those that are imposed by who define them. On an abstract level, there is no fear and boundaries; but then, stretching the term to verge on the all-encompassing for a political agenda, the design profession and its research community is already instrumental for disentitling it of relevance: positioning design as the panacea for all problems afflicting the world. If design and design research will ever mature, the reflections on it have to be put into a context: if there can ever be a design science – as long as it remains a science of the artificial, linked to human activity – it will be irredeemably linked to a field of application. Otherwise, it will lead to cursory outcomes of shallow depth, promoting a process of mere scientification and aggrandisation.

Keywords: ***Industrial Design, Design Profession, Design Research, Design Thinking, Design History***

Design?

The term has been, in turn, an idea, a plan, a purpose, a sketch, a process, the result of a process, the core of a profession and the core of emerging professions… Looking at definitions (Côrte-Real, 2010), putting it into a historic context (Heskett, 2001), making a semantic analysis (Flusser, 1999) amounts to the same conclusion: the scope of the term design is so wide that it irremediably possesses internal, incurable, contradictions. These contradictions are so large indeed, that it is chimerical to speak of boundaries. As will be shown in a first part, virtually everything is design. The good news is this: do not fear, good folk, as the only monsters are those in the mind of their creators. A more problematic issue is: can we do whatever we want? Or, to put it in another way, how can we do research on design (i.e. does it make sense to have a bunch of people, us, studying whatever pleases us to call design?), can we teach design, can we speak of design in a way that could show some epistemic and instrumental progress? Or do we continue to proceed in this myopic state that seems to afflict the design professions as they oscillate between the desire for *influence*, *significance* and *permanence*?

As will be exposed below, this need not be. One can accept the "different voices" (Alvesson, 2002) but researchers, lecturers or practitioners who are engaged in reflection on design, must explain their own boundaries. The current terminology surrounding the field – *design thinking*, *design futuring*, *critical design*, *experience design*, *systems design*, *transformation design, etc.* – reveals that the problem lies not so much in that designers are afraid of crossing boundaries – but rather to stay within them, if they want to reclaim ownership of their terminology and professions. Some examples put forward here shows the real dangers of not trying.

Perpetual re-definitions…

Virtually every word in any language has its share of nuances, ambiguities and contradictions. Nevertheless, most of them can be framed into some floating boundaries, unless one wants to play with the extremes in an artistic, poetic or sarcastic fashion. It is also not the case for design.

A false issue?

It is important to avoid the first stumbling block: that of analysing *design* at the linguistic level in order to find or deny boundaries. For example, *design* denotes both an action, and a result of this action. The origin of this amalgamation may seem interesting at first sight as one could presume that unveiling this would give some stability, a basis to go forward, or, on the contrary, to show that there is no stability: does the noun originally derive from the verb - *deverbal noun* - which would imply a focus on the process, or does the verb derive from the noun - *denominal* verb? But it is a generic

linguistic problem and it may turn out that it is more interesting to investigate noun and verb both came from the same root (Don, 2003; Marantz, 1997). This is also quite common for the so-called episodic nouns, which stand for the reification of an episode of a process (see Taylor, 1996, p. 243; citing Langacker, 1991, p. 24); other examples are *creation*, *constitution*, *conception* (in French), *Konstruktion* (in German) to name a few related words. It is even common by large to have these double meanings in other circumstances: a noun may be linked to its location or its purpose (*shelter* is connoted with protection), etc. The point is that most words are *polysemic*.

Moreover, *design* like any term or sign is transforming itself by use (cf. de Saussure, 1916). It is just to contemplate the different definitions of design through time (Côrte-Real, 2010). Many words are far away from their *original* meaning: shall one conclude that there are no boundaries – as words are shaped and re-shaped by their users and can never be tamed? Or that there is always a definition at any given time?

Boundlessness…

No, the issue lies in that the current conceptualisations on design make it pretty much everything. We will just take Simon's definition of design to make our point (Simon, 1996). "Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones." With that sentence, Simon (Simon, 1996) covers a large part of the human activity, and this was indeed his goal to nearly equal design with every possible problem solving. Losing one's keys and devising courses of action to find them is designing, developing schemes for a sustainable future is designing.

That leaves but a few areas of human activity out of design. Automatic activities are excluded. So are algorithmic activities: activities for which the courses of action need not be devised or are devised automatically. These are not problematic – as nobody is making claim for including them as design activities anyway. But there is a more troublesome exclusion though: it concerns that of industrial design.

Most industrial designers (in the traditional sense) would indeed not recognise themselves in that definition: how the thousands of designed chairs have lead to changing existing situations into preferred ones? First, *preferred* - by whom? Not especially for the designer: designing a chair that might be successful will change the designer's situation for the better, but the argument is far-fetched and somewhat inaccurate. The designer in that case would *design the idea of designing chair*, not the chair itself. Then there is the client. But the designer does not design a plan of action for the client, on

the contrary the client has designed its own plan of action: hiring a designer. Finally, there is the final customer. The designed chair might certainly please some potential consumers. But still, can the designer always consider the *existing situation* of these unknown potential customers and from that aiming at making their life better?

Simon had probably some more techno-economical considerations when he wrote his text; industrial design was probably not on his mind (Wängelin, 2010). Consequently, it is necessary to alter Simon's definition of design, if one wants to include industrial design. Then again, it is also not possible to easily discard Simon's definition of design as it fits quite well technical, scientific, economic, and everyday-life areas of human activities. One possible alteration is to include creative human activities that are not completely goal-oriented. In that case though, the design activity becomes quite overlapping with those of art and literature. How to distinguish design in that case? It is not quite possible; especially when one remembers that this separation has been more societal than logical (Flusser, 1999).

So be it, just by conjoining Simon's definition and the activity of industrial design, design represents in a nutshell all primate, non-algorithmic activities. Where is the unknown, what are the threats, what are the crises, what are these monsters lurking in the dark - and where is that darkness? Design is no longer specific enough to have any boundaries worth searching. Trying to define design at a high conceptual level is as problematic as asking: What is philosophy? What is science? What is art? What is innovation? Does it really matter? With terms as broad as that of design, it is unavoidable to have contradictions in the different definitions found and developed.

Great expectations?

In the absolute, design has no boundaries. Does it mean that "anything goes", that everybody can make the definition of design one's own as there is no referential points? Is a landmark with no boundary condemned to anarchy?

Design is not the first field in which this issue has occurred. There are still philosophers of science after Feyerabend, there are still literary and social sciences after Derrida. That much is true, we live in a rhizomatic society, there is no longer just one expert, but a multitude of voices contributing to the knowledge base (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). How to deal with it? First, it seems a truism in regard to what has been developed above, but important to emphasize: it is necessary to accept that everybody is free to set boundaries and that nobody can claim property on the word *design*, even if some disciplines

benefit from the advantage of being denominated after this term. Second, it is precisely by showing these different voices in one's speech about design, and by positioning oneself in them (Alvesson, 2002) that one can avoid chaos. Those who speak of design must set their own boundaries *and* give the keys for the understanding of their arguments to the listeners.

These are not empty words. For example, the many so-called crises in design – recurring so often that they are virtually continuous (see e.g. Cross, 1981; Giard, 1990) – and the questions of boundaries, are actually not that of the concept of design, but of the profession of industrial design. What are the specificities of it, what claims can be made? Some are reluctant to changes and ask: "can we please have our name back?" (Burns et al., 2006, p. 25) Others on the contrary may overlook some of the specificities of their professions and include in their activity all that encompasses design, that is, ultimately, *everything*. Most of the time, however, the boundaries are not set. This opens the path for a pouring of opinions, peremptory claims, opens the place for prophets and gurus. In the next section, two typical examples are illustrated: the designer as world saver and the designer as cue ball of vested market interests.

Again, the chimaera *design* escapes definition; it is an infinitely malleable term, arbitrarily defined according to desired agendas or beliefs, subject to the ever-changing fluctuations of the zeitgeist. Therefore, the discussion of design in the absolute remains linked to cursory political, religious or historic concepts – or, in order to be meaningful, must be tied to a concrete field of application or task at hand. In that sense, one could say that designers have always been *Schrödinger's cats* – inside and outside of boundaries, until we take a closer look. On that basis, we want to conjure up two prominent apparitions that continue to haunt the hollowing carcass of design.

A: Dark green - bright green?

For some time now, design practitioners and theorists are inclined to framing design as the *panacea* en route to solving the multitudinous problems afflicting the world. Various proponents have expressed their legitimate concerns about the state of the world in relation to the excesses of the capitalist mode of production and consumption. Viewed through the lens of societal criticism, courageous propositions such as the reformulation of the design activity as *redirective practice* (Fry, 2008) or persuasive calls to reformat the world through *massive change* (Mau, Leonard & Institute Without Boundaries, 2004) and Bruce Sterling's *worldchanging* blog have emerged. Unfortunately, either Fry's quasi-theological or the Bruces' positivistic argumentations are verging on dealing design the *carte blanche* for some rather diffuse notion of world improvement.

According to Fry, the *original sin*, committed by designers, appears to be their engagement in world-making. The *viator mundi* (traveller of nature) of the Middle Ages, became *faber mundi* (creator of lifeworlds). In being instrumental for the materialisation of man made artefacts – no matter how well-meaning designers act within the prevailing system of production and consumption, they become guilty of prolonging the evils of the world. Accrediting designers with such *Faustian* role (Maldonado, 2007), singling them out as the key actors in *defuturing* our future is, putting it mildly, a presumptuous argumentation, marginalising the highly complex interplay of other societal actors and driving forces that contribute to the present and future condition of our environment. Moreover, seeking refuge in *un-designing*, in the alleged *dematerialisation* of the world (Hopf, 2009), would mean to either deny homo sapiens' predisposition to delegate tasks to ever new and complex artefacts (Latour, 2005; Nye 2006) or overlook that the concept of ownership and accumulation of artefacts will remain central in the creation of identity, ascertaining subjects of their own significance (Baudrillard, 1968).

In theology, a system wherein an elite that is *in the know* advocates a normative influence of the few on the many is called a religion – in psychology *groupthink*. The authoritarian verve with which concepts such as *design futuring* or *redirective practice* are argued for bears an uncanny resemblance to the notion that design can leverage social change Jeremy Bentham proposed in his Panopticon concept or Langdon Winner's view that designed artefacts are infused with a sociological or political agenda (Joerges, 1999). So far, all prescriptive agendas – from Adolf Loos' moral aesthetic imperatives to infamous modernist town planning and architecture – that hoped to *infect culture* and *ameliorate the populace* through design have failed. In any case; Fry and likeminded protagonists in the academic design circuit are selling old wine in new skins, namely a contemporised repackaging of Kant's categorical imperative. It is unfortunate, that from their many relevant socio-political analyses only rather commonsensical conclusions are drawn.

Such visions of the role of design, well-intended as they are, underestimate the real distribution of power on a local and global scale, accrediting designers with an epic – almost demiurgic – role (Maldonado, 2007) on par with that of politicians, lobbyists or financial leaders – and the voter... In the light of the highly respectable goals many designers like to associate themselves with, we may ask: Where were the designers when financial speculators severely damaged many national economies, the ensuing social costs being offloaded to each individual citizen via increased taxation and cutbacks to public services? Where were the designers when the Chinese government secured long-term access to core commodities, negotiating dubious agreements with African dictators? Where were the designers when global leaders failed once more to reach even the most minimal agreement to attenuate climate change? The reality is: capturing the phlegmatic mainstream and turning it into a critical mass, sustaining activism that could rock the seats of power, seems to be demoted on the priority lists many

design scholars and practitioners keep emitting. Whereas artists like Joseph Beuys, Tania Bruguera or Ai Weiwei, to name just a few, have long since acted as public commentators or activists, flagging critical socio-cultural regressions and perversions, designers appear to be firmly engaged in a rather self-referential discourse.

Saving the world by design overestimates the skills (in matter of process) and the influences (in matter of results) of industrial designers or architects for that matter. Sure enough, any artefact has an impact on our social and societal life (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). But the nexus of causalities and consequences between designers, artefacts, consumers, economy and the Earth is not so straightforward; if one considers whether it is more beneficial to design a counter-top bread-baking machine, have local supermarkets offer a bread delivery service, or rebuilding the community bakery – highly complex socio-economic interdependencies must be analysed for a qualified answer, if there ever can be one (Hopf, 2009). Social planning, as Simon had showed, is extremely complex (Simon, 1996). Examples of social projects undertaken by designers and architects are numerous: Buckminster Fuller (1965)'s 10-year programme aimed at eliminating poverty by help of design; design communities achievements can be found in (Toker, 2007); the real influence of the artefact has to be put into perspective: "Art, proliferated through industry, could, it was believed, substantially change life. However, the artist-designer as change-master of modern society has been theoretically idealized, but little realized in practice." (Heskett, 2001, p. 23). Before presenting new ambitious futures for students and practitioners, one needs to discuss the very specificities of the profession and the ones of others. Otherwise such initiatives will always be praised and raised by peers but will never escape the gravitational pull of the design community.

B: Design, art - design-art?

In the last decade, an arranged marriage took place between art and design; the New Yorker magazine suspected whether "the gift shop is taking over the museum" (Collins, 2007). From Maarten Baas, who chars Gerrit Rietveld's *Zig-Zag* or *Red and Blue* chairs with a gas torch to produce his trademark *Smoke* furniture – to Julia Lohmann, whose *Cowbench Antonia* is literally shaped like a cow's torso upholstered in cow-hide; from the *Design Miami/Basel*, an *Art Basel* spin-off – to the *Design Art London*; astute gallery owners and curators are feeding an ever growing number of *hermaphrodites* – designs designed to be art – into the international art market.

Editions or *multiples* are not new, having been adopted for the dealing with – and dissemination or democratisation of – art ever since. In case of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, the earliest one-piece ready-made, the Arturo Schwarz gallery in Milan was licensed to sell an edition of eight. In the 70s,

Joseph Beuys authorised high volume editions – in case of *So kann die Parteiendiktatur überwunden werden* 10000 bags were produced – to literally let his socio-economic ideas be carried into the mainstream. Allan McCollum, whose entire work is an open-ended inquiry into seriality and multiplicity, licenses multiples of his *Visible Markers* that are manufactured in large quantities and sold as unlimited edition.

Whereas industrial designers are, on the whole, concerned with mass-production, design-artists adopt a rather *haute-couture*, a high fashion mode of working, But, unlike an Avenue Montaigne dress or Savile Row *bespoke* suit, design-art one-offs and editions are aimed rather squarely at the discerning collector on the lookout for a niche from which to source novel elements for *identity building*. In that sense, design-art is not unlike the ubiquitous designer-kitchen which rather serves as a *conversation piece* for the cognoscenti than as an everyday piece of interior architecture. Exclusive one-offs or prototypical series of products of relatively low complexity, such as domestic furniture, have always been a suitable canvas on which designers painted their visions of future aesthetics and technology. However, where artists have since ever been pushing the border of the imaginable and executable into new territories; in the case of design-art, the opportunity to devise conceptually or technologically pioneering contributions is by and large missed.

Galleries, auction houses and art fair organisers enlist design as an accomplice to expand their established business models on the one hand, sourcing new potential customers from yet unexploited audiences on the other. Design-art editions and one-offs are offered as yet affordable promising investment vehicles for collectors of lesser wealth, for whom the price level of contemporary art has accelerated beyond reach. For designers, mingling with the arts has become a clever approach to charge their work with the sublime. Tapping the methods and value system of the international art market serves as an ingenious strategy to occupy the hilltops of the contemporary aesthetic terrain, a means to aim for instant canonisation – and increased market value.

Whether the flush of design-art is nothing but a flamboyant *design emission* or – as Charles Eames once put it in an interview concerning design and art (Neuhart & Neuhart, 1989) – will eventually be judged having lasting artistic qualities, remains to be seen. One can daresay that design-art is yet another spectacle (Debord, 1995), a symptom of *Lammas growth* of fully commodified western societies.

Conclusion

Ever since an estimated two million years ago, when *Homo Habilis* began to fashion stone tools, humans have been engaged in design; no profession or movement can make exclusive claims to it and, authoritatively and absolutely define its contour.

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