

Design and Democracy

Note

This is a slightly abbreviated translation of the Spanish acceptance speech of the honorary doctorate by the Metropolitan University of Technology, Santiago de Chile, June 2005.

Gui Bonsiepe

I shall present a few thoughts about the relation between democracy and design, about the relation between critical humanism and operational humanism. This issue leads to the question of the role of technology and industrialization as a procedure for democratizing the consumption of goods and services, and finally to the ambivalent role of esthetics as the domain of freedom and manipulation.

The main theme of my lecture is thus the relation between design – in the sense of projecting – and autonomy. My reflections are open-ended and do not pretend to give quick and immediate answers. The university – still – offers a space to pursue these questions that will not generally be addressed-in professional practice with its pressures and contingencies.

Taking a look at the present design discourse one notes a surprising – and I would say alarming – absence of questioning design activities. Concepts like branding, competitiveness, globalization, comparative advantages, life-style design, differentiation, strategic design, fun design, emotion design, experience design, and smart design prevail in design magazines and the – all too few – books about design. Sometimes one gets the impression that a designer aspiring to two minutes of fame feels obliged to invent a new label for setting herself or himself apart from the rest of what professional service offers. I leave aside coffee table books on design that abound in pictures and exempt the reader from intellectual efforts. The issue of design and democracy doesn't enjoy popularity – apart from a few laudable exceptions.

If we look at the social history of the meaning of the term »design« we note on the one side a popularization, that is a horizontal extension, and on the other side a contraction, that is a vertical reduction. The architectural critic Witold Rybczynski recently commented on this phenomenon: »Not so long ago, the term »designer« described someone like Eliot Noyes, who was responsible for the IBM Selectric typewriter in the 1960s, or Henry Dreyfuss, whose clients included Lockheed Aircraft and Bell Telephone Company ... or Dieter Rams, who created a range of austere-looking, but very practical products for the German company Braun. Today, »designer« is more likely to bring to mind Ralph Lauren or Giorgio Armani, that is, a fashion designer.

While fashion designers usually start as couturiers, they - or at least their names - are often associated with a wide variety of consumer products, including cosmetics, perfume, luggage, home furnishings, even house paint. As a result, »design« is popularly identified with packaging: the housing of a computer monitor, the barrel of a pen, a frame for eyeglasses.«(1)

More and more design moved away from the idea of »intelligent problem solving« (James Dyson) and drew nearer to the ephemeral, fashionable and quickly obsolete, to formal-aesthetic play, to the boutiqueization of the universe of products of everyday life. For this reason design today is often identified with expensive, exquisite, not particularly practical, funny and formally pushed, colorful objects. The hypertrophy of fashion aspects is accompanied and increased by the media with their voracious appetite for novelties. Design has become thus a media event – and we have a considerable number of publications that serve as resonance boxes for this process. Even design centers are exposed to the complicity of the media running the risk of failing to reach their original objective: to make a difference between design as intelligent problem solving and styling. After all it is a question of a renaissance of the tradition of the Good Design Movement, but with different foci and interests. The advocates of Good Design pursued socio-pedagogical objectives, the Life Style Centers of today pursue exclusively commercial and marketing aims to provide orientation for consumption patterns of a new – or not that new – social segment of global character, that can be labeled with the phrase: »We made it.«

The world of everyday products and messages, of material and semiotic artifacts has met – with rare exceptions – in cultural discourse (and this includes the academic discourse) a climate of benign indifference that has its roots in classical culture in the medieval age when the first universities in the Occident were founded. This academic tradition did not take note of the domain of design (in the sense of project) in any of its disciplines. However, in the process of industrialization one could no longer close ones eyes to technology and technical artifacts that more and more made their presence felt in everyday life. But the leading ideal continued to be cognitive character in the form of the creation of new knowledge. Never design achieved to establish itself as parallel leading ideal. This fact explains the difficulties of integrating design education in the institutions of higher learning with their own traditions and criteria of excellence. This becomes evident in doctoral programs in design that favor the production of discursive results and don't concede projects the same value or recognition as the production of texts. The sciences approach reality from the perspective of cognition, of what can be known, whereas the design disciplines approach reality from the perspective of projectability, of what can be designed. These are different perspectives, and it may be hoped that in the future they will transmute into complementary perspectives. So far design has tried to build bridges to the

domain of the sciences, but not vice versa. We can speculate that in the future design may become a basic discipline for all scientific areas. But this Copernican turn in the university system might take generations if not centuries. Only the creation of radically new universities can shorten this process. But the decision space of government institutions is limited due to the weight of academic traditions and due to the bureaucratization with emphasis on formal procedures of approbation (title fetishism). Therefore the new university will probably be created outside of established structures.

Relating design activities to the sciences should not be misinterpreted as a claim of a scientific design or as an attempt to transform design into a science. It would be foolish to design an ashtray with scientific knowledge. But it would not be foolish – and even mandatory – to tap scientific knowledge when designing a milk package with a minimal ecological footprint. It is no longer feasible to limit the notion of design to design disciplines such as architecture, industrial design or communication design because scientists are also designing. When a group of agricultural scientists develops a new sweet from the carob bean that contains important vitamins for school children, we have a clear example of a design activity. (2)

Now I want to focus on the central issue of my lecture: the relation between democracy and design. Indeed during the last years the notion of democracy has been exposed to a process of wear and tear so that it is advisable to use it with care. When looking at the international scene we cannot avoid stating that in the name of democracy colonialist invasions, bombardments, genocides, ethnical cleaning operations, torture, and breaking international laws have been – and are - committed, almost with impunity, at least for the moment. The invoice for this lack of humanity is not known. Future generations will probably have to carry the burden. With democracy these operations have nothing in common.

According to the neoliberal understanding, democracy is synonymous with the predominance of the market as an exclusive and almost sanctified institution for governing all relations within and between societies. So we face questions: How can the notion of democracy be recovered? How can the notion of democracy gain credibility again? How one can avoid the risk of being exposed to the arrogant and condescending attitude of the centers of power that consider democracy as nothing more than a tranquilizer for public opinion in order to continue undisturbed with business as usual?

I am using a simple interpretation of the term »democracy« in the sense of participation so that dominated citizens transform themselves into subjects opening a space for self-determination,

and that means a space for a project of one's own accord. Formulated differently: democracy reaches farther than the formal right to vote, similarly the notion of freedom reaches farther than the possibility to choose between a hundred varieties of cellular telephones or a flight to Orlando to visit the Epcot Center or to Paris to look at paintings in the Louvre.

I favor a substantial, and thus less formal, concept of democracy as the reduction of heteronomy, i.e. domination by external forces. It is no secret that this interpretation fits into the tradition of the Enlightenment that has been criticized so intensively by amongst others Jean-Francois Lyotard when he announced the end of the grand narratives. I do not agree with this approach or other postmodern variants. Without a utopian element, another world is not possible and would remain the expression of a pious ethereal wish without concrete consequences. Without a utopian ingredient, residual though it may be, heteronomy cannot be reduced. For this reason the renunciation of the project of enlightenment seems to me the expression of a quietist, if not conservative attitude – an attitude of surrender that no designer should be tempted to cherish.

In order to illustrate the necessity to reduce heteronomy I am using a contribution from a linguist, a specialist in comparative literature – Edward Said, who died last year. He characterizes in an exemplary manner the essence of humanism, of a humanist attitude. As a philologue he limits the humanist attitude to the domain of language and history: »Humanism is the exertion of one's faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret, and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages and other histories.« (3) But we can extend this interpretation to other areas too. Certainly the intentions of the author will not be bent when transferring his characterization of humanism – with corresponding adjustments – to design. Design humanism would be the exercise of design activities in order to interpret the needs of social groups and to develop viable emancipatory proposals in the form of material and semiotic artifacts. Why emancipatory? Because humanism implies the reduction of domination. In the field of design it means to focus also on the excluded, the discriminated, and economically less favored groups as they are called in economist jargon, which amounts to the majority of the population of this planet. I want to make it clear that I don't propagate a universalistic attitude according to the pattern of design for the world. Also I want to make it clear that this claim should not be interpreted as the expression of a naive idealism, supposedly out of touch with reality. On the contrary, each profession should face this uncomfortable question, not only the profession of designers. It would be an error to take this claim as the expression of a normative request of how a designer - exposed to the pressure of the market and the antinomies between reality and what could be reality – should act today. The intention is more modest, that is to foster a critical consciousness when facing the enormous imbalance between the centers of

power and the people submitted to these powers. Because the imbalance is deeply undemocratic insofar as it negates participation. It treats human beings as mere instances in the process of objectivization (*Verdinglichung*) and commodification.

Here we come to the role of the market and the role of design in the market. In a recently published book, the economist Kenneth Galbraith analyses the function of the concept of the market that according to him is nothing more than a smokescreen for not talking openly about capitalism – a term that not in all social classes and in all countries enjoys a high rating on the popularity scale. Galbraith inserts design in the context of techniques of corporations for gaining and consolidating power: »Product innovation and modification is a major economic function, and no significant manufacturer introduces a new product without cultivating the consumer demand for it. Or forgoes efforts to influence and sustain the demand for an existing product. Here enters the world of advertising and salesmanship, of television, of consumer manipulation. Thus an impairment of consumer and market sovereignty. In the real world, the producing firm and the industry go far to set the prices and establish the demand, employing to this end monopoly, oligopoly, product design and differentiation, advertising, other sales and trade promotion.« (4)

Galbraith criticizes the use of the term »market« as an anonymous and impersonal institution and insists instead on talking about corporate power. Against this use of design – after all a tool for domination – stands the intent not to remain fixed exclusively on the aspects of power and of the anonymous market. In this contradiction design practice is unfolding and resisting a harmonizing discourse that is camouflaging the contradictions. One can deny the contradictions, but one cannot bypass them.

The issue of manipulation has a long tradition in design discourse, especially in advertising. I remember a popular book that at its time provoked a wide resonance, *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard (1957). But one should be on one's guard against a critique with declamatory character that merely denounces. More differentiation is required. Manipulation and design share one point of contact: appearance. We design, amongst others and certainly not only, appearances. For this reason I once characterized the designer as a strategist of appearances, that is phenomena that we perceive through our senses, above all visual senses, but also tactile and auditory senses. Appearances lead us to the issue of aesthetics – an ambivalent concept. On the one side aesthetics represents the domain of freedom, of play – and some authors claim that we are only free when we play; on the other side aesthetics opens the access to manipulation, that is the increase of outer directed behavior. When designing products and semiotic artifacts we want

to seduce, that is foster a positive – or according to context, negative – predisposition towards a product and sign combination. Depending on intentions design leans more to one pole or the other, more to autonomy or more to heteronomy.

At this point I want to insert a few reflections on technology. The term technology in general is understood as the universe of artifacts and procedures for producing merchandises with which companies fill the stage of everyday practice. Technology implies hardware and software – and software implies the notion of design as a facet of technology that cannot be dispensed with. Here in Latin America we face the problem of technology policy and industrialization policy. Research on these issues reveals interesting details about progress and set-backs. But these seem to me to favor a reductionist interpretation of technology. Only in exceptional cases texts mention the question of what is done with technology. The question for the design of products remains unanswered. This presents a weak point without wanting to underestimate the efforts by historians. But one cannot defend them against the reproach of being blind to the dimension of design, the dimension of projects, or at least of facing this dimension with indifference. The motives for industrialization include the wish to diversify exports and not to remain an exporting economy of commodities without added value. But behind this plausible argument is hidden another generally not explicitly formulated motif. I am referring to the idea that apart from the growth of the GNP, industrialization is the only possibility for democratizing consumption to provide for a broad sector of the population access to the world of products and services in the different areas of everyday life: health, housing, education, sports, transport, work to mention only a few.

However to mention today the role of government in promoting industrialization can appear almost as an offense of good manners. The role of public intervention has been demonized with one exception, paying the debt of a bankrupt privatized service. In that case public resources are welcome, thus reinforcing the idea that politics is the appropriation of public goods for private purposes. But when the history of industrialization and technology of this subcontinent will once be written, one shall see with clarity that the role of government has been decisive, though the detractors of the public sector with their belligerent voices have belittled its function and contributions. If we look at the recent history of Argentina – a country that until a few years ago followed in subservient manner the impositions of the International Monetary Fund and that in a moment of delirium enthusiastically praised its »carnal relationships« with the leading military and economic power – then we see that this country didn't fare very well with this policy of relentless privatization and reduction of government presence. This process plunged a great part of the population into a situation of poverty unknown until then, and led to an income

concentration with the corresponding bipolarization of the society divided in two groups: the excluded and the included. Privatization in this context is synonymous with de-democratization because the victims of this process have never been asked whether they approved the credits and sales of public property that led the country into bankruptcy. Relentless privatization and reduction of the role of government, the unconditional opening of the economy for imports initiated a process of de-industrialization of Argentina, thus destroying the foundations for productive work, including work for industrial designers.

The industrialization policies in various countries in which I have participated, above all Chile, Argentina and Brazil concentrated exclusively on hardware, leaving the communication and information industries untouched. Today the constellation has changed radically. An updated industrialization policy would need to include the information sector of the economy, for which graphic design and information design can provide essential contributions. Here new problems show up that confront designers with cognitive demands that in design education programs generally are not taken into consideration. The expanding process of digitalization fostered a design current which claims that today the important design questions are essentially of symbolic character. As second argument for the semanticization of products – and thus for semantization of the designer's work – miniaturization is mentioned, made possible by printed circuits and cheap chips. These do not allow us to see how the products are working – functions become invisible. Therefore the designer's task would consist in rendering these invisible functions visible. Though it would be blind to deny the communication and symbolic aspects of products, their role should not be overvalued as some authors do. Between the alternative to put a nail into a wall with a hammer or the symbolic value of a hammer, the choice is clear. The material base of products with their visual, tactile and auditive conformation provides the firm base for the designer's work.

With concern, one can observe the growth of a generation of designers that obsessively focuses on symbolic aspects of products and their equivalents in the market – branding and self branding – and that doesn't know anymore how to classify joints. The search for a balance between the instrumental/operational aspects of technical objects and their semantic aspects constitutes the core of the designer's work, without privileging one or the other domain. As the historian Raimonda Riccini writes: "The polarity between the instrumental and symbolic dimension, between internal structure and external structure is a typical property of artifacts, insofar as they are tools and simultaneously carriers of values and meanings. Designers face the task to mediate between these two polarities, by designing the form of products as result of an interaction with the sociotechnical process.« (5)

It is revealing that Riccini does not speak of the form of products and their interaction with functions, that is the affordances, but that she alludes to sociotechnical development. In this way she avoids the outdated debate about form and function. The once secure foundations for arriving at the configuration of products have been dissolved today – if ever they existed. It would be naive to presuppose the existence of a canon of deterministic rules. He who defends such a canon, commits the error of essentializing Platonic forms. At the same time it would be equally naive to claim an limitless fickleness of forms that would arise from demiurgic actions of a handful of creatively inspired designers. We face here a paradox. To design means to deal with paradoxes and contradictions. In a society plagued by contradictions design too is affected them. It might be convenient to remember the dictum of Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Notes

(1)

Rybczynski, Witold. »*How Things Work*«. *New York Review of Books*, vol LII, number 10, June 9, 2005, 49-51.

(2)

<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2005/05/09/sociedad/s-03101.htm>

Crean un nuevo alimento para escolares en base a algarroba.

Monday, 09.05.2005

(3)

Said, Edward W. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Columbia University Press, New York 2003. pg 28.

(4)

Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Economics of Innocent Fraud*. Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 2004, pg 7.

(5)

Riccini, Raimonda. »*Design e teorie degli oggetti*«. *il verri*, n° 27 - febbraio 2005, 48-57).