Yellow Submarines – Design against Normality and Information

Michael Erlhoff

Two years ago today, our friend and companion, the great Michael Erlhoff, passed away. A date that reminds us once again how sorely we miss him and how happy and grateful we are at the same time to have had the opportunity to follow his thoughts, listen to his stories, enjoy his humour and be infected by his wealth of ideas. Much of this can still be found today in his numerous and inspirational writings, and can also be found in compressed form in his text "Yellow Submarines – Design Against Normality and Information", which he wrote for my book "Design (&) Activism" (2019), a copy of which I was able to hand over to him at our last personal meeting shortly before his passing. One thing is certain: Michael's words remain and keep our memories of him alive. At the same time, they continue to drive us to understand what design is and what it can do. This was always Erlhoff's main concern. And it still is. Tom Bieling

Some preliminary remarks

Design, or what we call design today, has always been a very important part of political articulation and protest. But, design has also always been an important part of all kinds of governmental or economic power because authorities always need signs to express and to explain their power and status in hierarchical societies: Costumes, buildings, flags, interiors, crowns, even gestures and behaviour etc. And, on the other hand, there have always been the signs related to protest: the uniforms of liberation armies, pamphlets by rebelling farmers, communication devices of 19th century democratic movements, and, closer to our present concept of design, all the activities of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the political statements of Dada and Surrealism, the activism of resistance or the Situationists and 1968 activism.

That is: the role of design in social and political movements has always been ambivalent and it has been impossible to simply associate design either with the inhumane or with the humanistic and ethical side.

By the way, some artists (in those days there were no designers) of the early Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1920s obviously knew about this ambiguity and tried out some new ways of explaining protest and rebellion. For example, one night they smeared red paint on all the plants in several public parks in Moscow in order to change the landscape architecture into symbols of the revolution. But, in contrast to authoritarian gestures of building monuments, the artists had used a type of paint that would be washed away by the rain. After a few days, the red paint in the parks was gone, but it stayed in people's minds. Or: being forced by the Leninist bureaucracy to create public sculptures of the heroes of the revolution, the artists used a material that was not waterproof: it is easy to imagine what these public sculptures, meant to be lasting monuments, would look like after some really rainy days. The government immediately set up wooden barricades to block the view onto those naturally destroyed, and now very bizarre-looking, sculptures. (Useless, because in the Russian winter, people needed wood to make fires, and so they regarded the wooden barricades as a perfect resource.)

As refreshing as this kind of subversive design might have been, we also have to be aware of the fact that there were times when design was indeed more helpful in supporting authoritarian, inhumane and racist governments, in particular the Italian Fascists and the German National Socialists. And this happened during a time when design was still young, when an awareness of

design had yet to fully establish itself. The Bauhaus already existed before 1933 and had changed the political and social perception of design. Some of the Bauhaus people (in particular Mies van der Rohe, Herbert Bayer and Ernst Neuffert) actually worked for the Nazi government. Indeed, the German National Socialist politicians, or at least some of them, were highly aware of the intrinsic competences of design and used them in various ways: again, there were uniforms, banners and flags, there were weapons and city planning, but there was also language, there were gestures and the organisation and ornamentalisation of human crowds, or the system for marking the Jewish population. All of this was a result of design – of corporate design or branding, of communication design, product design and even service design.

Design can be very cruel or can be an accessory to depress, ruin and kill people – and well-designed guns may kill better and faster.

This had to be stated as a kind of introduction to this essay in order to avoid misunderstandings and to criticise a mere heroic attitude regarding the role of design as social and as a tool of activism.

Normal normality and informed information

No doubt, design is inevitably social. Firstly, because it is only realised when it is used (probably the most significant difference between radically useless fine arts and design). And secondly, because everything we tend to call 'normal' is designed: the pavement we walk on, the shoes made for walking, the traffic signs guiding us through the traffic, the GPS system moving us around the globe, smartphones and laptops, the trees alongside avenues, our spectacles sharpening our view, glasses for drinking wine, books, magazines and Twitter, the sounds surrounding us, the tactile structures, the smells of objects and in shopping malls. Simply everything is designed, even the layouts of parliaments and courts.

But there's even more: each governmental law and regulation is published via design, institutions or companies use design for their publications, each news item comes to us by design. And each piece of information is shaping us 'in form'. Indeed, to be informed means to be brought into a specific form (design) somebody or something wants us to be in. And we are never asked whether we like that form or whether we would prefer something else.

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'Normal' does not simply happen: it is the result of norms, rules and regulations. But, as normal is normal, it cannot be avoided; even worse, when we take normal as normal we do not question it, do not think about it and do not criticise it. It is just normal.

Nevertheless, this normality is a result of design because institutions, governments and companies use design to change abstract instructions into visible, tangible and usable instructions so that human beings can follow them, even if we are not aware of doing so.

However, we do it constantly, day in and day out: when we use our cars or bicycles, when we dress in certain ways (belonging to a specific social status), when we drink or eat, when we walk and when we communicate. Communication, a category designers often use as a kind of neutral or even enthusiastic term, is a very good example of the restrictions designed by design. The Latin origin of the word explains what everybody should know: communication derives from com meaning together, from moenia meaning wall, and from ire meaning to walk. Hence, the term 'communication' exactly explains that it relates to all those who are walking inside the same walls (of a city or other community), and the word precisely states that communication is always exclusive as only those who know the signs and follow the rules are part of the community. Guaranteed by communication design.

This also means that even in a social situation that seems to offer some kind of diversity, there is regulation and control – and the agent of control is design. It is impossible to escape, or to deny, the existence of regulations because anti-regulation also needs regulations, or is hijacked by very many rules. Within the perspective just described, design has acted as a service, and the designer has been seen as a servant of industry, capital and the authorities.

This is exactly how companies and governments saw design in the early days: only as a service. In the era of industrialisation, products were of poor quality (because there was no longer a direct connection between customers and producers as had been the case before and the market had become anonymous). Therefore, a new form of creativity was needed that would improve product quality or acceptance. This gave rise to the arts & crafts movement in the second part of the 19th century, a forerunner of design that would encourage the professional development of what we call design today. Through this movement, it became obvious that there was a need for design services, but, at the same time, there was a rather limited view of design: it

was not about inventing and constructing all kinds of products, but only about making products more usable and attractive.

However, the relationship between master (traditionally the authorities and the capital) and slave (design) is more complicated, because, by working for the master, the slave quickly and somehow secretly starts to learn the masters' methods, categories and qualities. As that includes the opportunity, or indeed necessity, to emancipate oneself, the slave learns to fight against the master.

And that was exactly what happened in the context of design during the last 150 or so years: design has become one of the powerful and essential factors in the economy and also in social life. Design no longer has to follow and to formulate the rules and regulations prescribed by companies and other authorities: it can invent them itself.

Nevertheless, this still means to construct both normality and information, to give rules and regulations visible and tangible forms that enable us to follow them easily. Maybe one could say that design has invented more interesting or even more humane rules and regulations, but to invent rules still means to control behaviour, understanding, social conditions, and the ways we live our lives. Design has changed, but it has not improved within the concept of a more humane or social situation.

Even worse perhaps: as design is no longer just the master´s voice, it might now help to better conceal the existence of controlling concepts, and, by so doing, it could be even more authoritarian. At least, it is quite obvious that hardly anyone in design talks about or criticises the so-called 'normal'.

Unnormal and Disinformation

There is no reason to be pessimistic. But, if one wants to argue about social design and about design for activism, we first of all have to understand what is political and what is social. Everything else will only end up in euphoric nonsense (at best accompanied by catharsis). Hopefully, the above reflections on the problem of normality and information might help.

Maybe it needs one more idea at least: talking about normality (and information) only moves across the surface – and this is far removed from the intellectual and academic attitude of trying to grasp what one believes to be important, which is what is regarded as depth. This kind of people (forced by academic institutions and by gestures of intellectualism) always want to know

what is behind something, e.g. what is behind a painting. And they do not like the serious and only true answer: the wall. Time to recall an expression by the philosopher Ernst Bloch: "the banality of depth", and also a statement by the composer Feruccio Busoni: "Depth gains broadness and tries to reach this by heaviness". Indeed – and this is not only true for design – we have to observe, to analyse and to work with the surface. That is: with what is called normal.

Any serious political analysis has to describe the power, brutality and authoritarian dimension of the normal. Political and social activism, therefore, has to find ways of explaining the normal to people as not normal, as something that is designed. And everything that is designed is not fixed, but can be and has to be changed. Therefore, radical design offers open possibilities for social life.

It is not so difficult to demonstrate the power of the (designed) normal and, by so doing, to experience the quality of changing normality. Just take three of those red and white, or black and yellow, traffic cones, put them in the centre of a one-way street in your city, near to where another street branches off – and you will see that all cars will turn into the other street (even taxis and the police). Or, have four of five people wear one of those orange or red jackets that official traffic regulators usually wear and you will be able to stop or disrupt both car and pedestrian traffic. Put a "closed" sign on a door and nobody will touch it. More complicated, but not too difficult either, is changing the electronic displays at tram stops – very effective, as the people standing on the platform, waiting and looking at the displays, will suddenly start talking to each other, they will laugh or will be embarrassed and will definitely have a different experience of time. Do some legal hacking like, for example, the design agency Mindshare Denmark did: they wanted to change the common image of "beautiful women" into realistic pictures of female beauty. You will notice that this can encourage people to change.

Ask somebody who has just finished talking loudly into their smartphone (as many people do): Excuse me, but who is this Peter you called lazy and stupid? Or use anagrams and palindromes (e.g. "dogma – I am god" or "Red Dot – Der Tod") to broaden the horizon of words and, by so doing, question words and phrases and put them into new perspectives. Don't follow instructions, forget your GPS and Google maps and enjoy getting lost, just follow another person and explore new areas. Buy something in a supermarket, but give the money to a homeless person in the street and not to the supermarket. Play the sound of a river in a pedestrian zone or have the

scent of beautiful flowers waft through a public toilet. Change the surface of stairs or handles. Debunk stupid racist arguments and expose the idiocy of those blaming and pursuing refugees. Demystify capitalism and the capitalist normality. And try to love confusion and blur.

All of the aforementioned is, of course, deeply related to design. Analyse the many fakes in the history of the natural sciences and also in the humanities and observe the effects of these fakes. You could regard those activities as deriving from design and as productive design.

This kind of activism has sometimes been adopted by far-right, racist or even terrorist movements and people. In some countries 'trumping up' has almost become a standard practice used by politicians and by people employing petty bourgeois actions. Mr Trump likes to produce fakes, in Germany the AfD (officially Alternative for Deutschland, de facto Away from Democracy) is based on similar nonsense, and too many elected governments in Europe and other parts of the world are following similar stupidities. They live from fake news, ideologies and other lies.

Of course, this could be depressing for all those trying to shake up normality with the goal of emancipation. But this image is wrong because those nationalists, racists and simple capitalists who preach authoritarian relics still believe, and try to make everybody else believe, that those rules and attitudes are normal. They attempt to convince people of this normality with the aim of secretly controlling them.

As Kurt Schwitters explained nearly 100 years ago: not the protest against normality is chaotic, normality is. Of course, when protesting against norms, normality and the normal, we have to be careful to understand the empirical situation, our critique of the normal must be very precise and we have to use design in its complexity, use its incredible competences for real, serious and joyful and analytical confrontation in order to explain the nonsense of the normal, to explain this as experiences and to open up the structures, enabling people to understand and to criticise that which is regarded as given, but which could be and has to be changed.

There is no reason for pessimism: design offers the chance of optimism, supported by many examples of qualified protest by design. The most convincing example for this can be found when observing people interacting with 'the normal' because, in many of these interactions, people change the rules and regulations, but most of the time, they are not aware of this. Just think of how often people change or extend the function of objects, signs or

services when using them. In everyday life, people don't always use chairs for sitting: they use them as coatracks or ladders. Newspapers are not only read: they are used to protect people from the rain or to kill flies. The list could go on. These things do not happen intentionally and they are not some kind of official protest – but people act like this and we should tell them what they are really doing by this non-intentional design.

No doubt, there are also many brilliant examples for smart protests that use and confuse normality. Probably the most convincing one within the last few years was the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong: the activists blocked the main street in the centre of Hong Kong Island, bringing to a halt all the normal traffic and movement in the city. The activists also used normal materials in a kind of non-intentional design to build barricades or to construct stairs across the railings separating the two lanes of the street. They not only cleaned the nearby public toilets (totally opposed to the nature of normal use) but also put perfume, shampoo and lotion in the rooms so that the public toilets could be used as a kind of nice bathroom. There were study corners, the possibility to exhibit printouts from the Internet, a stage with microphones for spontaneous talks and public discussions – and the many activists just lived there, had breakfast, lunch and dinner and listened to music. They simply changed the normal in order to be able to live there.

One more explanation of the specific qualities of intentional misunderstandings and mistakes, showing the quality of design in confusing the normal: *"While you were weaving compliments, something useful could have happened."* (J.W.v.Goethe)

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