TEXT 4

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# ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PRESENT: AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR CONSCIOUSLY DESIGNING (FOR) OUR FUTURE

Designers are a productive sector of society who think up new things, visualise them and materialise them, and thereby mould our future. Besides their work of directly creating form, they also significantly engage in a more far-reaching, circumspect, critical manner with the context of objects, with the interactions between humans and objects, and with technological and sociocultural parameters. The active observation of our environment from different perspectives is the basis for a holistic, future-oriented, societally relevant design practice. Analysing what is is just as important a component of design as engaging in a synthesis to create something new.

We live today in a highly networked world. New technological developments are occurring at a furious pace, and goods are being manufactured in globalised processes. We accept many things as just inevitably part and parcel of our society; we learn how to deal with systems and rules, and we internalise and automate them in our actions in order to be able to function at all in this context—and, ultimately, in order to be able to have an identity and to belong to society. Thus, it happens that we are able to function well in our environment and can learn to fit into it. However, we also learn not to ask too many questions, not to assume that we can shape things ourselves. Instead we conform, and thereby underestimate the scope of the decisions that we take as designers. And this means we underestimate the responsibility that we bear.

This essay argues that critical curiosity is important in everyday life, and that it is important to observe things and systems precisely, for such observations can be the basis of relevant, topical design in an age of increasingly complex, globalised consumer offerings.

Conscious, prudent design needs to be founded on precise, critical observations, both up close and from a distance. Only those aspects that we ourselves perceive, that we can name and that we can categorise can be consciously designed. In order to grasp this potential, we have to forget ourselves to a certain extent. We have to set former patterns of thinking aside, and assess things from new perspectives.

We have to be able to look at a product without bias and without reservations or expectations, as if it were something enigmatic, freshly excavated from a different time. Observing foreign things almost automatically triggers in us a sense of pleasure in guessing their meaning and contexts. We become curious; we can perhaps recognise patterns from a distance, deduce theories about their cultural significance, or can extrapolate their capabilities and rituals.

Why, then, do we in contrast accept so many things in our present time as simply given? What would it mean for industrial design if we were to analyse things, objects, customs, etc. with the same archaeological eagerness? Not blind to the everyday, but with fresh eyes, trying to grasp and formulate what an object tells us about our culture, and what we in turn can tell through it and do with it. This would be important, because nothing says as much about a society as our everyday utensils. In his book *Vom Stand der Dinge* (The State of Things), Vilém Flusser writes that observing the artefacts of *homo faber* is far more revealing than looking at paintings or suchlike from any epoch; we should "investigate manufactured products to get to the human beings themselves."[1]

In his book *Weltentwerfen* (Designing Worlds), Friedrich van Borries explains the cultural and political entanglements of seemingly harmless objects such as a salt cellar.[2] If we begin to look at things as if they were new to us, and if we try to deduce everything that they can tell us about our culture, then it becomes clear that every individual object is political, not just those projects that are explicitly ecological or political; and it becomes clear that design also always has a political dimension. In order to process these parameters consciously according to our own ideas, we as designers have to engage with the cultural context beyond the object, with material and product cycles, and with human/object interactions. And we have to be able to deduce social and ecological implications from all this.

If we look at the mass of consumer goods in our immediate environment in this particu-

[1] Vilém Flusser, *Vom Stand der Dinge* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2019), 76 (translated from German).

[2] Friedrich von Borries, *Weltentwerfen: Eine politische Designtheorie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 10.

lar context—such as the 405 different handsaws that are available on the website Galaxus [1]—then what does this flood of things for sale tell us about our relationship with consumer goods and how we treat them? Which of the many aspects of a product are deducible for everyone on the outside or are praised, and which aspects remain hidden? What arguments are used to sell them to us? Who buys these goods, and how will they be used? Do we need them all?

An electric drill, for example, is used on average for just 13 minutes of its whole lifetime. [2] Who has managed to convince us to buy all these things, to own them and to store them at home? How many irons, pasta machines and vacuum cleaners are to be found on any 500 square metres of urban living space? Does our consumer behaviour today make sense at all? Or, rather: for whom does it make sense?

There are alternatives to our consumer behaviour today. Sharing rarely used everyday objects, for example, has great potential, especially in densely populated urban areas. Such alternative user scenarios and offerings could influence future purchasing decisions to such an extent that consumers put more emphasis on the longevity and reparability of objects than on the price, because they will be used more often and longer in the context of shared use, and because individuals will not need to have as many possessions. Instead, they will invest in things that they use often themselves, and thus need in good quality.

It is with this scenario in mind that "Pumpipumpe—a Sharing Community" has since 2012 been engaged in sharing everyday equipment, and thus campaigning for more sustainable patterns of consumption and for more social interaction in our otherwise often anonymous urban neighbourhoods. [3] It is a simple, effective solution that makes our many "lonely" pieces of equipment visible above and beyond all barriers of age and language, because it has refrained from choosing the digital methods that would seem natural today. Instead, it has resorted to using letterboxes. These offer a vast, existing infrastructure network. They were constructed

[1] "Online-Shop zeigt seine Produktvielfalt," *Persönlich*, accessed May 6, 2019. http://www.persoenlich.com/kategorie-werbung/online-shop-zeigt-seine-produktevielfalt.

[2] Laura Selz, "Die Welt in Zahlen," *brand eins* 4 (2012).

[3] Pumpipumpe, about, accessed January 10, 2020, http://www.pumpipumpe.ch/about.

to receive letters and parcels, but letterboxes can also be regarded as a personal, public interface and can be used as a highly local means of communication. This is why they are at the heart of the project. Stickers on letterboxes—in open sight, every day—tell neighbours what one has and what one is prepared to lend out. Today, over 24,000 households across Europe are offering equipment on loan, which means that many more times this number of objects are being made accessible to neighbours in a way that is visible, usable, and free of charge. It means sharing instead of owning everything cheaply oneself—which generally means using things rarely, and then throwing them away because we have not considered any scenarios in which these objects might circulate.

FIG.1 P.375

FIG.2 P.375

A documentary film was released in the year 2010 entitled *The Light Bulb Conspiracy,* which offered insights into the planned obsolescence of many consumer goods (including goods that are not even cheap). For example, it tells of the 100th birthday of an electric light bulb in a fire station in the United States. It was obviously manufactured before engineers began to be paid to find ways to reduce the lifespan of an electric light bulb filament so that customers would have to buy new ones.

The intentionally shortened lifespan of electric light bulbs and other objects is a means for us to observe at first hand our capitalistic economic system that is founded on growth. But many people do not find it at all strange to have to buy new light bulbs every few years. The same applies to printers, tights, etc.

In the spirit of an archaeological engagement with our current world of things, we ought to keep asking ourselves what some future society might say about our readiness to invest great energy and finite resources in the mass development, mass design, mass production, mass purchase, and mass ownership of objects such as electric drills, despite their being used for only a few minutes before being disposed of (and often being just thrown away instead of being recycled in some fashion). Back in 1971, Victor Papanek

already described this manner of engaging with consumer goods as "Our Kleenex Culture." [VI.V/4/X.I.A]

[VI.V/4/X.I.A] Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 86–101.

Do we as designers want to serve this market? (and, in a best-case scenario from a mercantile perspective, thereby merely increase turnover?) And what would an electric drill look like, that by contrast would be a long-life, reparable, recyclable object? Who would own it, who would use it (and how) in order for these valuable resources to be utilised efficiently and sustainably? The electric drill is a tangible example. In our globalised, digitised world in which things are becoming increasingly harder to grasp (in a literal sense), there are naturally products that are far more inscrutable in nature. Today, goods and services (both digital and analog) are produced in a complex fashion, and have become a kind of "black box" for the users. This means that people are becoming more and more blind as consumers. Even when we try, it is difficult to comprehend and grasp the many things that are so close to us every day. And design plays a fundamental role in all this. Just compare a Fairphone with an iPhone, for example. The technological components of the Fairphone are arranged so that they can be replaced by anyone, and this is also obvious externally, but the iPhone remains closed off and opaque. Its manufacturer has not intended its customers to be able to repair it themselves. Individual components cannot be replaced by new ones. The individual device is not intended to be developed further or renewed, but to be completely replaced by another at some future date.

FIG.3 P.375

Yet, even producers find it difficult to keep an overview of things. In contrast to a society of self-providers, groups of specialists in ever smaller specialist areas (when compared to the overall operational procedures of development and production) are employed who only ever have fragments of the final product in their hands. In this context, designers can ultimately become docile embellishers of dubious new objects.

And yet designers could demand an important role today, more than ever before. Their speciality is not just one specific field, for they have a kind of overall competence. They have to act

FIG.1

FIG.2

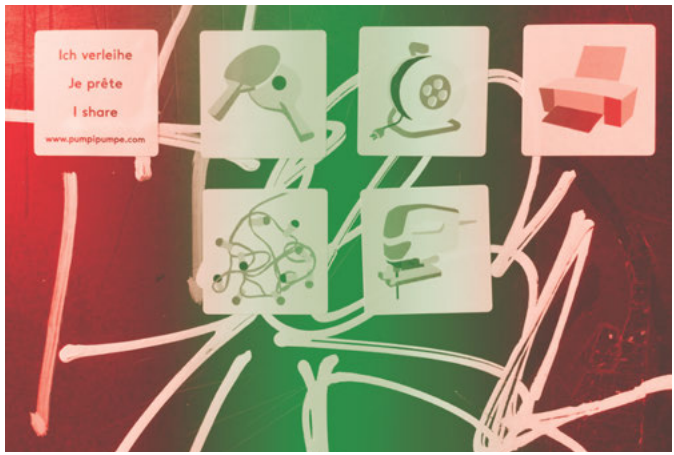
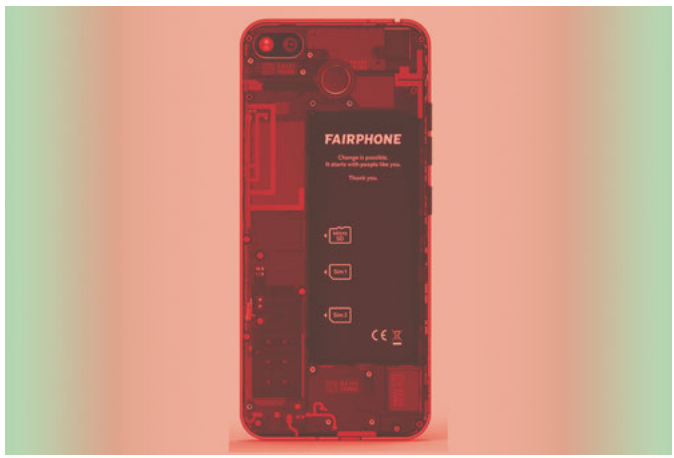



FIG.3



at interfaces, skilfully and consciously adopting and shifting perspectives in order to create new connections, exploring potential in in-between areas, questioning what might otherwise appear self-evident, and deriving disruptive, innovative approaches as a result.

But we designers can do more than that. If we consciously design as many factors as possible, we can also make these elements appear deducible and comprehensible. We can design objects and services to help communicate an underlying attitude and relevant contexts. We can empower the consumer to understand these meanings. We can involve all users in recognising the political, ethical and cultural significance of things. And we can ultimately empower ourselves and our culture to achieve a better understanding of our consumer goods.

From 2017 to 2019, the design studio Formafantasma carried out a large-scale study entitled "Ore Stream" in collaboration with NGV Australia and the Triennale di Milano. They wanted to find out how we engage with components of electronic equipment, because they believed that this is the refuse sector that is growing the quickest all over the world. [1] They rolled out the topic in various media, looking at it from different perspectives, and brought everything together on an accessible platform on the Internet. They were keen to make accessible their analysis and reflections on the significance of today's production methods in the electronic equipment sector, and also wanted to show how designers can be important actors in developing strategies to cope responsibly with our resources. Part of their work involved presenting concrete design strategies for making reparability and recyclability directly obvious in objects themselves. They thereby demonstrated the central importance of analysis and applied research in industrial design, as well as the potential for incorporating designers in the early phases of such projects. Here, design strategies can help to reduce waste, encourage repairs, and make people aware of more efficient recycling processes.

In order to comprehend and to utilise the full scope of design, it is important for us design-

[1] Studio Formafantasma, Ore Streams, accessed January 28, 2020, http://www.orestreams.com.

ers to focus our view of the world more acutely while engaging in our usual, formal design activities. We must construct a holistic understanding of things from different perspectives. We have to be able to deconstruct objects, circumstances and tendencies in a kind of archaeology of the present, learning to break them down into their individual, variable elements and getting to the bottom of things. We have to comprehend everything as a designable space, as a mass that we can shape. We have to look at things and developments with an inquiring, critical, ethical mindset. Design is not a marketing instrument, but a political tool.

We can and must question all things and systems. What is their meaning? What do they imply? What do they tell us about ourselves? What do they do to us as consumers and owners of things? As users of services? As parts of systems and cultures ourselves? And what do we do with them?

Furthermore: what is the impact of these questions on industrial design? It means at the very least that this attitude, this aspiration, is not compatible with the expectations of many commercial clients that we should simply be able to produce a beautiful, sexy packaging for a product that they have already developed or a technology that already functions. Their stance means that many of the strengths and competences of design are lost. We designers are wanted to wrap things up, not to co-develop them. We are supposed to beautify things and beautify the world (at least enough for a first glance) instead of engaging in a coherent, sustainable act of design (which would naturally also incorporate aesthetics). It lies in our own responsibility to apply our understanding of design, and our own convictions as to its value, with an attitude towards the state of the world today so that we may engage with ever more problems and address their potential.



While this approach to design is (still) rare in the commercial world, it is all the more important that it should be practised in an academic context.

We are engaged in tandem projects comprising student projects in the Design and Tech-

nology Lab—an interdisciplinary collaboration platform between Industrial Design at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and the Department of Mechanical Engineering at ETH Zurich. These are concerned with testing precisely these ideas, with partners from the practical world and the world of research working together. The students learn to devote themselves to problems as an interdisciplinary team of designers and engineers, and endeavour to engage in a joint dialogue from the very outset. This is resulting in exciting research questions and innovative solutions. They are coming up with ideas that are fundamentally different from what would be the case if designers were only brought in towards the end of development. This offers an opportunity for us to demonstrate to partners in the practical and research fields that design possesses a multifaceted potential for creating innovative processes. And it is an opportunity to take ideas from an academic context and apply them in practice.

Ultimately, however, the fundamental issue is what the world in which we want to live should look like. And how we, as consumers, designers and manufacturers, and as human beings in society, can consciously work to improve it.

Or, as Lucius Burkhardt asks in his *Spaziergangwissenschaft* (The Science of Strollology): "How do you actually decide what to change in your environment? We have a mirror situation here: on the one side, humans act on the environment. On the other, the altered environment acts in turn on humans."[1]

[1] Martin Schmitz, "Querfeldein denken mit Lucius Burckhardt 1: Von der Urbanismuskritik zur Spaziergangswissenschaft," *Deutschlandfunk,* June 14, 2015, accessed January 28, 2020, http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/querfeldein-denken-mit-lucius-burckhardt-1-3-von-der.1184.de.html?dram:article_id=319584 (translated from German).

# EVERY INDIVIDUAL OBJECT IS POLITICAL

INDIVIDUAL



POLITICAL