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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DESIGN

The concept of identity is popular at present. It is used in very different contexts, and criticised just as often. It is complex, ambiguous, yet relevant. How can it be made fruitful for design? What aspects are of importance in this process? To what extent might identities be self-chosen, and when are these assigned from the outside instead? What distinguishes design projects with regard to the topic of identity?

Questions of identity are being discussed everywhere at the moment. For example, gender identities have come into focus in the last two years on account of the #MeToo debate. The many rape accusations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein triggered a wave of protests that have had an international impact. Many sectors of society have begun to take proper note of discrimination against women. In Switzerland, the women's strike of June 2019 caused a stir. The relevance of this topic can also be seen at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). More bachelor theses than ever took this as their main theme in 2019. People have also begun to take a wider view of the whole spectrum of gender and sexual orientation, including the concerns of the LGBTI community.

Another aspect of this topic is national identity. This already became significant after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Right-wing parties such as the AFD in Germany, the Front National in France (today called "Rassemblement National") and the Lega in Italy are enjoying success at the ballot box. Populists today claim to be pursuing "identity politics" instead of referring simply to their nation or their specific origins.

The refugees who came to Europe in 2015 and 2016 from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia are confronted with the existential question as to how to reconcile the cultural identity of their country of origin with that of their new home. They are welcomed by many Europeans, but others have been afraid of their impact (and still are). These problems are acute because the European Union has still not managed to regulate the admission of refugees, with countries such as Hungary and Poland refusing point blank to accept any equitable distribution mechanism.

This list of identity topics could be expanded at will. It is clear that today's discussions about different concepts of identity are not just urgent and complex, but also ambivalent.

For me, the connection to design is the primary issue—in the sense of designing for a future society. To this end, I shall concentrate here on the concept of cultural identity, which is also considered to be synonymous with a collective or social identity. This means factoring out issues of personal identity that might, for example, be psychological in nature. The sociologist Erving Goffman differentiates between them as follows:

> "By 'social identity,' I mean the broad social categories (and the organisations and groups that function like categories) to which an individual can belong and be seen as belonging: age group, sex, class, regiment, and so forth. By 'personal identity,' I mean the unique organic continuity imputed to each individual, as determined by distinguishing attributes such as name and appearance, and elaborated by means of knowledge about their biography and social attributes—knowledge which comes to be organised around their distinguishing marks."

In design, we have to deal with societal issues, even though we live in a "society of singularities" (Andreas Reckwitz)—or perhaps precisely for

Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222.

Heike Delitz, *Kollektive Identitäten* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 33 (translated from German).

For more information on the topic of gender, see the chapter by Larissa Holaschke in the present volume.

Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1971), 189.

that reason. One important aspect of design is that it is aimed at a target group, a collective, whether it comprises three people or thousands.

Personal and cultural identity are linked. In the case of design, the personal identity of the designer is of great importance. Often, biographical experiences are the very starting point of design actions. However, these experiences only assume significance when they are also relevant to others. From the perspective of design, we are dealing not just with groups, but with their cultural character. "Anyone who asks about collective identity is usually interested in political logic or the classification of individuals. Anyone who asks about cultural identity tends to be interested in the degree to which rituals, artefacts, texts or media have an impact on forming the collective." These formats can be design products, but this is not necessarily the case. However, the design of brand identity only plays a marginal role in all this. It is an important field of design, but is a topic all of its own.

One core aspect of identity is that it is a construct (this is also a fact that argues against all nationalist concepts of identity). It is imaginary and has to be recreated time and again. The cultural scholar Stuart Hall has summed this up as follows:

> "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."

This means that identity is designed, and that design is here confronted with specific issues, tasks and problems; this, too, is important to consider.

If identity is constructed, then this also implies that it is not meaningful to conceive of it too narrowly, or to try and codify it precisely. For this reason, the publicist Carolin Emcke offers a rather weak definition of collective identities as "communities that share certain practices and convictions." The sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann speaks of a fragile consensus with regard to identity, and lists three points: its subjective construction, its relationship to concrete reality, and the relationship of the individual to a counterpart.

The fact that identity is not simply "there," but has to be redesigned constantly, whether consciously or subconsciously, results in a specific relationship between identity and time. History (or histories) are essential the process of constructing identity. We have to tell ourselves how Switzerland became what it is today (for example), and what this means for the future.

Even the very concept of identity has to be perceived in historical terms. Kaufmann writes: "Identity has only achieved fame because it has become uncertain." It is easy to comprehend that people a hundred years ago were born into a specific class that predetermined their lives, their career paths and their geographical situation. Today, however, we in Central Europe have many opportunities open to us, and this places us under constant pressure to make decisions; this in turn causes uncertainty for us. We are challenged to design our own identity, but this in itself often pushes us into a state of crisis. In this context, it is important to reflect on the relationship between personal and collective identity. This phenomenon can be seen as an outcome of the postmodern age.

So what types of identity are we dealing with here? National and

Kaufmann, *Die Erfindung des Ich*, 62 (translated from German).

Carolin Emcke, *Kollektive Identitäten: Sozialphilosophische Grundlagen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2018), 14 (translated from German).

Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Die Erfindung des Ich: Eine Theorie der Identität* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005), 41.

religious identities are just as important as ethnicity, gender and class. Age, health and sexual orientation also play a role. This list can be expanded in all directions. What's more, these identities can overlap—in individuals, this is described as "intersectionality."

Carolin Emcke differentiates between "groups that have emerged through mutual recognition and whose members attain a sense of belonging on the basis of individual conviction, and groups […] that have arisen through attribution, though those who are classed as belonging to them do not wish to be associated with them." [別] Some thus have the privilege of being able to choose their identity, while others have to cope with the identity assigned to them from outside. By differentiating between positive and injurious descriptions, Emcke underlines the political aspect of cultural identity. She emphasises the fact that these attributions are also always a question of power, and she warns against equating similarity with equality. While identities are constructs, they often have a very concrete impact, as we can see from the discrimination suffered by different groups. Often, an engagement with cultural identity can be an emancipatory project that can lead to individual experiences. For example, this is the case when women promote equal opportunity issues, and when organisations for the disabled campaign for them to have a say in things.

Design is by its very nature constructive. Its endeavours to create for the future and to make new, better things mean that it inevitably has to engage with the concept of identity. The abovementioned aspects— the relationship to a group, cultural character, constructedness, necessity, a historical perspective and a specific attitude—all illustrate the fecundity

Emcke, Kollektive Identitäten, 8 (translated from German).

of this concept for design. The use of design can make complex contexts perceptible by the senses, and can help them to achieve a public impact.

In the area of specialisation "Trends & Identity" at ZHdK, engaging with identity plays a special role, as the name itself suggests. There have been projects on this topic for many years. Current bachelor projects, for example, include one on the representation of "people of colour" in Switzerland, and one on gender activism in Kosovo. However, projects on the commercial design of identities have also been studied in classes in this area of specialisation. For example, we have investigated the company histories of the shoe manufacturer Bally and the Globus department store, and have taken these as a basis for designing marketing campaigns, products and events.

While I have up to now been considering why identity can be a fruitful topic for design, I shall now examine the characteristics necessary for design projects that engage with "identity." To whom should they be addressed, and how? The issue at hand is one of representation, so they should be aimed at a public, and should try wherever possible to combine objects, image and text in order to create concrete, vivid statements and to convey complex relationships within a single context. And they should possess sensual qualities so that they can have a lasting impact on their audience. These might be product worlds that include packaging, advertising and the selling situation as well as the actual product, or exhibitions and documentary films that can also contextualise complex relationships. Or they might be magazines, which I have chosen as my specific example here. These are a suitable medium be-

FIG.1   Zurich University of the Arts, Bachelor Style & Design: bunt, p.4 , 2010.
               (Model: Matthias Brückner)
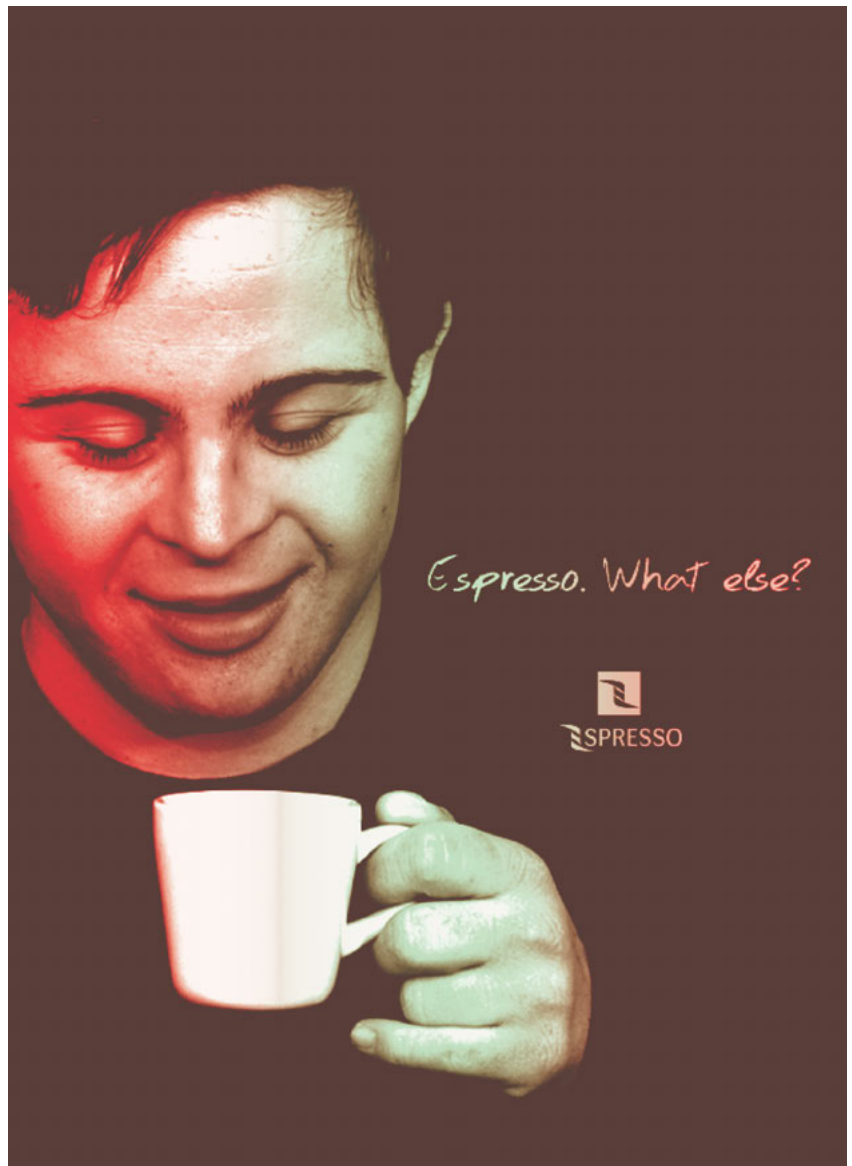
cause they can serve to depict a lifestyle—in other words, they can provide the aesthetic foil for a cultural identity; and by combining texts and series of images, they also appeal to the senses and are entertaining. As a countermovement to digitisation (or perhaps as a complement to it), magazines are also once more acquiring great importance, as was demonstrated in a master thesis featuring a trend study and a bachelor thesis about opening a shop for magazines in Zurich in the summer of 2019. The study specialisation Trends & Identity (which until 2018 was called a "Bachelor in Style & Design, Master Trends and Master Event") has featured magazine projects for years. For example, every year the students design an issue of the magazine *Swissfuture* for the Swiss Society for Futures Studies, or students choose a magazine format for their bachelor thesis. I shall now present two examples from these classes in greater detail.

The first case is a contribution to *Transhelvetica*, a monothematic travel magazine from Zurich that is exclusively devoted to Switzerland. It thus upholds a Swiss identity, albeit rather tongue in cheek, as England and Mexico can also occasionally be found here. The topic of issue No. 39 was "Courage," and to this end, students in their 5th semester in 2016, under the direction of Basil Rogger and Andrea Mettler and in collaboration with the photographer Sven German, devised an "inspiration" section corresponding to the "benchmarks of Transhelvetica (travelling, Switzerland, surprises, class, humour)." ⊗⟨⊗ They invented the balloonist Joséphine Marti, supposedly born in Bern in 1939, an idiosyncratic, independent Swiss travel pioneer. Her (invented) archives and biography formed the basis for travel

⊗⟨⊗ *Transhelvetica* 39, "Mut" (February 2017): 34.

tips to very different places such as the motorway service station Würenlos or the Hotel Regina in Mürren. The series of images used in the article comprised both balloonist photos and objects from her archives that were "authenticated" by an auction house.

Biographical fiction and real places here merged to create a Swiss identity, sprinkled with unusual details. Traditional values were brought up to date by a feminist approach. The objects of the protagonist served to authenticate her biography and provided a unique pictorial language. The balloon pictures were borrowed from the family of a student and then manipulated using Photoshop. Here, something that was already known was told in a new guise, and a certain societal attitude was conveyed in an entertaining fashion.

In contrast to "Swiss" as a recognised, positive identity, being disabled is an ostracising identity, according to the differentiation of Carolin Emcke. This concept is an outside attribution, and the "disabled" are made to "become" thus. The goal of a teaching project organised in 2010 was to create a visibility campaign for March 21st, World Down Syndrome Day. This date was chosen because people with Down syndrome have a third copy of the 21st chromosome. The idea emerged of "hacking" a magazine that would normally be devoted to supposedly "famous" people, and to use it to convey an image of a more inclusive society. So *Bunte*, a German illustrated magazine with a high readership, became *bunt* ("brightly coloured"). The columns in the magazine were retained, and it offered 20 pages of articles on culture, fashion, health and travelling. The models and the people whose portraits appear were mostly actors from the HORA Theatre. This unique Zurich institution—supported by the Züri-

werk Foundation—is the only theatre in Switzerland for people with cognitive impairments. Many members of the ensemble have Down syndrome. The project wanted to place them centre-stage, to talk about their fashion preferences and to interview them like "stars"; it was led by Eva Wandeler and me (shortly afterwards, HORA actually became world famous with its production "Disabled Theater"). This aim was summed up in a picture that was a fake Nespresso advert. Instead of George Clooney, it featured HORA's actor Matthias Brücker. A mainstream medium was thus hacked here in an act of subversive affirmation in order to give greater visibility to people with Down syndrome. The feedback on the issue was very good, and the collaboration between the students and the actors was of great benefit to everyone; our liaison person was Giancarlo Marinucci.

FIG.1
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Both projects here offered a mixture of fiction and reality. In very different ways, they created and designed new identities. Designing the content was important in each case; the texts had a decisive function, as they offered an opportunity to offer precise, unambiguous statements. They were joined by a detailed visual world that was credible and entertaining to look at. An emancipated Swiss lady balloonist and a star with Down syndrome as a brand ambassador were both embedded in specific contexts—each offering a vivid example of alternative identities. Humour also played an important role in each case. It is only through this cooperation between content and form that alternative perspectives can be perceived with the senses. It is important here to reflect very carefully on one's own position, otherwise one runs the risk of confirming stereotypes and clichés instead of opening up new vistas. The commercial aspect is also vital—in this case, the scope of coverage: because only if a product has enough buyers can you disseminate the approach bound up with it.

Does design here create a new form of knowledge? These examples demonstrate how design engages with identities and can thereby alter our perspective of them. By linking up with disciplines such as the cultural sciences, history and sociology, design's sensitisation to processes of exclusion and approval can help it to make desirable futures accessible and conceivable; we can thereby design exciting, provocative cultural identities, create offers of identification or use fictions to make change appear possible. There is certainly no lack of urgent questions for us to engage with—such as equality of the genders or how to deal with the new rightwing movements mentioned above.

DESIGN CAN MAKE COMPLEX CONTEXTS PERCEPTIBLE BY THE SENSES