TEXT 5

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# MORE GENDER—MORE DESIGN? GENDER-SENSITIVE DESIGN FOR THE SOCIETY OF TODAY

Female pleasure, the "new fathers," girlboss, manbun, marriage for all, the third sex, unisex toilets, the gender-fluid generation, millennial pink, non-binary: concepts such as these all signify the dissolution of binary gender models as part of the overall gender shift. [143] The impact of all this is by no means restricted to women, transgender people or heterosexuals, but is changing all society and signifies a global shift that is creating new role models, transforming working environments and permeating life plans. Gender roles are being questioned and are losing their fixed obligations. Gender categories are being newly negotiated along a whole spectrum of possibilities that allows for a multitude of nuances. What's more, the opportunities offered by the Internet and virtual reality have opened up a space in which new concepts of gender can be tried and tested. Games offer a field for experimentation to test new gender images and roles, while social networks are no longer simply restricted to two options for gender, but are creating multiple possibilities for identification. For example, Facebook offers its users 60 gender categories to describe themselves in the German-speaking world, and no less than 71 in Great Britain. [144] New discourses are emerging, as are new markets and a great deal of freedom for design. Target groups such as "male" and "female" are becoming less important. Individual needs are coming into focus, and the new constructs of identity demand an up-to-date design language. [145]

If we look at the design items in our everyday lives, however, we can barely see any evidence of this societal shift. Many everyday objects are not just marketed differently for men and women, but are also designed differently. This applies—for example—to razors, shower gels and household appliances, for which traditional roles continue to be reproduced that have manifested themselves in these same objects. Angular, dark-blue or silver-grey bottles of shower gel are labelled "for men"; they feature recesses for a better grip, promise 3-in-1 multifunctionality and offer energy, stamina and a 24-hour effect. For women, however, we find shower emulsions in delicate pastels in organically formed, round bottles in imitation mother-of-pearl colourings that awaken associations of jewellery and evoke desires involving care, moisture and protection. However, the current range of products seems to offer nothing for the career woman who might want her early-morning shower experience to imbue her with a sense of decisiveness, nor for the sensitive man who desires care and protection after having looked after the kids. [146]

It is in everyday things such as a shower gel that we see clearly how gender is closely linked to the identities of products and advertising materials. The prevailing relations between men and women can be deduced from everyday things. We only need to compare a white, round hand blender with a black-and-green, robust electric

[143] Megatrends denote social structural changes: deep, sustainable currents that change society and the economy in the long term and last for decades. See "Megatrends," Zukunftsinstitut, accessed October 31, 2019, http://zukunftsinstitut.de/index.php?id=137.

[144] The multiple choices offered by Facebook make it clear that certain concepts might at first glance mean one and the same thing, but that attributions of identity go beyond them; we all strive for a positive attribution of identity through which we can express diversity in our sense of self, and how we differ from others. We would like to be able to name that with which we self-identify.

[145] We should note here that the gender shift is developing not just one-dimensionally, but that every trend also engenders a countertrend. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman uses the concept of "Retrotopia" to describe a yearning for a yesterday that has supposedly been tried and tested. Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017). Traditional gender roles can blossom and create a sense of orientation and stability in a world that is becoming ever more complex. It is out of the fear that existing power relations may be shifting that gender discrimination continues to occur, and is even becoming more prominent in certain sections of society. This trend finds design expression in men's beards, barbershops, heritage magazines and craft beers.

drill for us to realise the gender connotations that lie behind both of them. They prove that the design of everyday objects reflects many gender clichés, and that these in turn embody implicit power relationships. It is thus a matter of urgency that we reflect upon gender in design in order to question the roles of women, men, and the whole gender spectrum, and to consider the impositions they involve.

As designers, how then should we act in order to do justice to these shifts in power and gender relationships in society, and in order to make our own contribution to the equality of all genders? The product language, the gender preferences for product segments and their users, the designers themselves, the marketing and development departments of a company—these all present parameters that influence design both consciously and unconsciously. An approach that involves a rethinking of gender relationships through the medium of design can offer great freedom of manoeuvre; however, up to now, only the extremes of the spectrum have been explored. Between these extremes, new opportunities are emerging, and we can play with them to our heart's content. The scope for action in the field of design goes far beyond employing design elements such as pink or blue, plastic or metal, organic or angular. Above and beyond the conscious gendering of products—which is done through the explicit targeting of male or female users—gendered design also takes place subconsciously. If designers are to have a real impact, then they have to ask questions about everyday design practice. In the following, I shall look at ten design questions that we can ask ourselves in everyday practice, in order for us not to (re-)produce stereotypical gender roles, but instead to design gender-sensitive constructs of identity.

Such instances of product differentiation do not necessarily run counter to a resource-friendly attitude, because this does not in itself mean that there will be a general increase in the volume of products. The product segment that up to now has demonstrated hardly any divergence from the norm, but instead merely offers the perfidiously stereotypical "male" and "female" options, offers scope for a variety of ways to address target groups; up to now, there have been many products that all use the same attributes.

Karin Ehrnberger, Minna Räsänen, and Sara Ilstedt, "Visualising Gender Norms in Design: Meet the Mega Hurricane Mixer and the Drill Dolphia," *International Journal of Design* 6, no. 3 (2012): 85–98, accessed January 16, 2020: http://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/viewFile/1070/530.

Victor Papanek, *Design für die reale Welt: Anleitungen für eine humane Ökologie und sozialen Wandel* (Vienna: Springer, 2009).

## PINK STINKS!?

Princesses, ballet and Barbies. The colour pink is associated with femininity, stands for gender clichés and sexism, and fabricates an artificial division between the sexes. If we look at the phenomenon of pinkification, we can observe that it has intensified in recent decades. However, that was not always the case. Even in the 1920s, textile companies marketed pink as "little red," which was suitable for boys. Red was the colour of blood and war and was traditionally a male colour. Today, however, pink is no longer just "girlish pink": the stain remover "Vanish" uses a pink colour code to set itself off from competitor products and thereby achieves an aggressive, garish, artificial impact. Inexpensive items in the Coop supermarket range are marketed under the label "Prix Garantie" and are intended to appear striking on account of their magenta colour that highlights their cheap price. "Cool Down Pink" is the colour that the Swiss colour designer Daniela Späth uses in prison cells in order to try and calm down allegedly aggressive inmates. So pink "stinks" only when it is associated with passive, clichéd roles such as serving, help-

ing, nursing and being pretty, but not with heroic, pugnacious, redeeming role models.

## CAN DESIGN CHANGE ROLE MODELS?

The vacuum-cleaner manufacturer Dyson has been responsible for innovation on the market not just by abandoning the dust bag, but by bringing about a fundamental change to the traditional role of the vacuuming woman at the same time. By means of innovation, technical-sounding product language, and details with male connotations (such as a dust container cover modelled after a 12-cylinder engine, or a handle resembling a gun trigger), this manufacturer has made a product attractive to men that was long regarded as something female. This has led to a shift in existing roles. The impact of design in this case was considerable. Using innovation and a formal language that straddles car manufacturing, science fiction and space travel, Dyson has managed to set itself apart from old-fashioned gender concepts.

We might nevertheless ask how meaningful it is to carry out a 180° shift from one role model to another. As just one option among many, a product like the Dyson vacuum cleaner is an expression of societal change, and offers differentiated identification possibilities for people who want to make the variety of our society visible.

## UNISEX—DESIGN FOR ALL?

Designers and brands are today developing a sensitivity to binary gender stereotypes. They are thus designing for a growing product segment that is no longer oriented along binary, gender-specific codes, but is being expanded by unisex solutions. However, even if this guiding principle in design seems reasonable and attractive, we have to question it. Already back in 1971, Victor Papanek's book *Design for the Real World* criticised an understanding of design that worked according to a "one-size-fits-all" principle. Papanek believed that the social and ecological challenges of the time could only be solved by a design practice that was critical, and that placed the users themselves at its heart. In contrast to the approach of industrial product design, which stood for mass production and standardisation, Papanek proposed a human-based design approach in which design was not just a tool for increasing turnover through aestheticisation or stylisation, but a means to change society. So what unisex designs actually create is something that urgently needs to be scrutinised.

"Uni" really means "one gender," and reduces products to a *single* model. If we look closer at unisex clothes, then we can see that the basic cut is conceived for a man, with these clothes simply being adjusted for use by women—e.g. by adding a belt around the waist or by pulling up the sleeves. Conversely, we never find skirts, dresses or tunics under the "unisex" label. This proves that the "unisex" design approach is primarily intended to counter a female accentuation in design or marketing. So for a society like ours that has far more than one gender, "unisex" cannot be a true reflection of it. Neither men, women, nor the whole spectrum of genders between them would like to be reduced to a single gender.

## CAN WE ACHIEVE "NEUTRAL" DESIGN?

Besides binary gendered products, there are more and more attempts today to free products completely from any gender-specific connotations. De-

signers who follow this principle will orient themselves towards concepts such as "gender-neutral," "no-sex" or "agender," and will design packaging using typefaces, colours and forms that are intended to awaken a sense of *neutrality*. This approach can be expressed in a visual language that comes across as something scaled-down and abstract—such as in using white as the central colour, bottles of brown glass or a geometric structure. Such products can appear beautifully designed, but they come across as frightful in their approach to identities. They are straightforward, create references to clinical aesthetics, or are characterised by historical references that are ultimately not free from gender either, but are always based on certain role models. Above and beyond this, the expression "gender-neutral" is actually misleading. We might describe a visual language as "neutral" if it unites both masculine and feminine design qualities in it—in other words, if it is androgynous. If we want to design something neutral, we have to ask what kind of person we are imagining in this moment. But we will find that we only design for androgynous people in the rarest of cases.

## IS THE STANDARD MASCULINE, FEMININE OR NEUTRAL?

The sans-serif grotesque typeface Helvetica is one of the most widely used typefaces in the world, and is utilised as a kind of "standard." It is the internationally most popular typeface for car number plates, metro maps and sight tests, and we can find it on all kinds of neon advertising and signs telling us what we may or may not do. [VII] Helvetica embodies an ideal of objectivity, and has the reputation of being "the" neutral typeface. Its crisp, clean profile makes it also seem unobtrusively modern.

However, we should put our observational habits to the test using this Helvetica typeface. If ornamental, frilly, decorative typefaces tend to be regarded as feminine, then their more straight-lined counterpart ought to be queried for its supposedly "neutral" characteristics. Nor should we fail to take into consideration the fact that classical Swiss typography was exclusively dominated by men. Even the very first examples of Helvetica were the work of the graphic designer Max Miedinger in collaboration with Eduard Hoffmann back in the 1950s. Design will always also reveal the values and societal blueprints of its designers. Just how much "neutrality" is actually to be found in Helvetica?

## MORE MONEY, LESS GENDER?

We designers are often faced with the question as to why we are still talking about gendered products today, given that there seems to be a broad selection of alternatives on the (design) market. Brands such as Aesop, which uses a design reminiscent of traditional pharmacy aesthetics, are dismantling the gender attributions of their products; eco-brands such as the detergent manufacturer Ecover know how to design things in a way that is sensitive and respectful towards gender issues; and if we look at the palette of products available among kitchen appliances, then gender coding seems to be truly passé. However, all these products have one characteristic in common: gender-sensitive design is more expensive. Besides ideas and concepts about gender, products also reflect issues of status, educational level and power. But isn't it high time today that we start design-

[VII] See Barbara Basting, "Superstar und schlichte Type: 50 Jahre Helvetica," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 19, 2010, accessed October 31, 2019, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/50-jahre-helvetica-superstar-und-schlichte-type-1.913126.

ing gender-sensitive products not just for a wealthy, educated, design-savvy class, but for our wider society?

## HOW CAN IDENTITIES BE DEFINED OTHER THAN THROUGH GENDER?

Let's imagine arranging everyday and lifestyle products along the gender spectrum, with floral, pink sanitary towels at one end and a shower gel bottle at the other end that's the colour of dark-brown shoe polish. The things that will strike us as being seemingly non-gendered will be, say, yellow herbal sweets, a turquoise bottle of "Hawaiian" hydrating lotion, or a blue "Quöllfrisch" beer can with its picture of a Swiss mountain panorama. We might want to assume at first sight that these can serve as appropriate examples of gender-sensitive design because their product identities are not associated with the obvious gender categories. However, we have to be careful here, as when identities are constructed beyond matters of gendering, they are often just referring to other stereotypes. This one plays with cultural identity, that one with charged stereotypes of what is "genuine," classical or exotic; and this makes them no less problematical.

## WHAT RESPONSIBILITY DO DESIGNERS HAVE?

Often, it's not the designers who are responsible for the appearance of a product, but the marketing department. Marketing decisions always stand in a relationship of interdependence with design. Designers have multiple possibilities to intervene in the relationship between the product and its user: through formal, aesthetic criteria (such as shape, colour or material), through employing symbols, metaphors or analogies, and also through functions, structures, hierarchies or the volume of information presented. They should see themselves not merely as "assistants to fulfilment," but should be aware of their influence on design processes. It is they who decide whether something should be pink, small, round, soft, devoid of technical functions or made of plastic; but they are also responsible for what they design. Using design, a world can be designed in which there is room for pink things that are also gigantic, angular, hard, innovative and sustainable.

## WHO DESIGNS DESIGN?

How many exceptional designers do you know, and how many of them are women? Women are in fact underrepresented in certain design fields—such as graphic design and product design, and certain initiatives have been set up to make us aware of this, such as "Ladies, Wine & Design," "Notamuse," "Depatriarchise design," "common-interest," "The 3% Movement" and "Women Who Design." There is a lack of role models for young women designers, and this also has an impact on the use of everyday objects and even the furniture we sit on. Women are responsible for a large portion of consumer spending, but only a small proportion of creative and art directors in advertising and communication agencies are actually women. We find women designers primarily in the "soft" segment of the sector, such as textile, jewellery and fashion design. Many of our everyday consumer goods have been designed by men. This is especially concerning when—for example—crash-test dummies are used that are supposed to ensure everyone's safety, but that have in fact been modelled solely on the male anatomy; or when health apps offer

See Friedrich von Borries, *Weltentwerfen: Eine politische Designtheorie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016).

tracking programmes that ignore a woman's menstrual cycle. Both these examples prove that people of different genders must be involved in design and development processes. Diversity will only come into being in the world we design when the design process involves designers of all genders and from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, age groups, faiths and creeds and of various abilities and disabilities.

## WHAT MIGHT GENDER-SENSITIVE DESIGN MEAN?

Muslim sportswomen have to cope with performance problems on account of wearing a traditional hijab. This prompted the sportswear company Nike to develop the *Nike Pro Hijab* in collaboration with professional sportswomen who are also Muslim. This thin, single-ply polyester fabric is breathable and functions reliably as a second skin; it does not slip, and guarantees the necessary covering. This sport hijab makes it easier for Muslim women to participate in public sporting events. Even though the Western world tends to perceive this product as a sign of oppression towards women, it nevertheless means Muslim women can practise sports in public. Precisely because it specifically addresses the needs of Muslim women—a group that is underrepresented in both our everyday culture and in our design culture—it enables the integration of Muslim women in professional sports, and makes diversity visible.

We can find gendering in all manner of design details, and the cases we have discussed here address only a few of the different issues involved in the topic of gender in design. However, they already show that the solution is not to be found simply through establishing a guiding principle, but that gender equality can only be achieved in our designed world when various approaches are used to present the multiple identity constructs that are emerging as a result of the gender shift, and can make them visible and tangible. If we are to remain in line with societal changes, we should not simply adopt an "option for everyone" that standardises and generalises, and that refuses to consider individual concepts of identity. Instead, it is more appropriate for us to design many, varied options, as we are not designing for either "the" woman or "the" man, nor any one thing between them, but for an endlessly broad spectrum of gender identities that we should be able to make visible through design.

One good comparison is skin colour. If we want to design a sticking plaster, a hearing aid or pantyhose in a discreet "nude" colour, we can only achieve this if we offer users a broad spectrum of skin colour variations. Just like the discourse about how our society cannot be represented by a single skin colour, we also have to take our designing power seriously when it comes to gender identities. Our everyday world has always been designed in connection with a particular time, a particular context and particular usage practices, and these very aspects have always been reflected in the world itself. Creating our everyday world is a process that is changeable and designable, and invites us not to reproduce old patterns, but to design gender-sensitive, future-oriented identities. We have to practise variety if we are to design in a gender-sensitive manner for our society.

# THE DESIGN OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS REFLECTS MANY GENDER CLICHÉS