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When there is meaning in design? Two dimensions of the practice of designing (communication)

It is difficult to provide a comprehensive account of the practice of designing, the goal of which is, on the one hand, to focus and direct end users within the complex space of codes, signs and brands, and, on the other, to trigger managed irritation in order to gain their attention within a highly competitive market of references, in accordance with the strict framework of rules and principles which stabilise the predictability of the outcomes of a design operation. It is this unpredictability and the undefined nature of the content of the process of designing – the design process itself follows an iron-clad cause-and-effect logic[1] – that determines its value and dynamics for the creative sector, and for creative processes in general, in terms of innovation and progress. When including design practice within the doctrine of designing communication, the operating stability of which is an outcome of the assumptions of the most current theories of communication, society, and perception, one needs to completely challenge the notion of an artificial creative process, or successful communication as the outcome of a process is always unpredictable from the point of view of the consequences of design actions and achievements. The notion of transmission (of data, information, or knowledge) within the dimension of communication activities is elegant and clear, yet it cannot be applied directly in design practice – mainly because this article adopts the assumptions of the constructivist theory of communication, which should be reduced to negotiating references.[2] Designers and theoreticians of design are

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1   M. Wszołek, *Reklama – operacjonalizacja pojęcia*, Wydawnictwo Libron, Krakow 2015.

2   M. Fleischer, *Communication design, czyli Projektowanie komunikacji (lub odwrotnie)*, Primum Verbum, Łódź 2010.

focused on the attempt to devise the rules of high efficiency communication, which assume not so much predictability as a circular process of negotiating and control over the outcomes of the design process. It is not possible to assume what the design outcome will be, yet that scope can be controlled in an empirical manner. High efficiency communication mostly assumes actions which can be reduced to clear and comprehensively designed design activities, which are free of contradiction. In that sense, the essence of the circular design process, the consequences of the executive scope of which constitute the basis for evaluating activities and those which are the basis for further activities, ensures limited predictability of actions within the long term, and surely indicates the possibility of controlling communication activities within the long and short term. Even though it would be difficult to imagine an instruction manual for the content and scope of the design process from the point of view of such notions as innovation, progress, or creativity, it is possible to outline the rules and principles on which one should focus during the design process – not to ensure the predictability of the outcomes of a design process, but for profiling and clarity of actions. The design principles which I shall discuss in this article on the one hand ensure adequate points of reference to the design practice considering the scope of application of the constructivist theory of communication, and, on the other, define the framework points of the process of creation, which are offered by market entities, e.g. advertising agencies, and design studios. It is difficult to refer to those principles in a critical manner, mainly because they do not intervene in the design practice, but they ensure a certain level of ideation of the manifestation of the creative sector. Regardless of whether the focus of design efforts is managed irritation or focus and direction, the presented design principles offer a major point of reference for the fulfilment of the basic paradigmatic *problem – solution* relation.

Design practice is close to the system of science, in terms of the discovery mode, i.e. of observation and understanding of the design problem not from the perspective of a participant (though this perspective is often necessary within the process of verifying the problem) but of an observer, for whom the manifestations of the system define the mode of its operation, which is to be studied. There is no place for an evaluation or assessment of the system from the point of view of the system. In this article, instead of the widely applied model strategies in the form of design rules, I would like to propose a description of design practices in reference to two dimensions of design functions. I am not referring to the function of a design as such but the superior goal for which a design is fulfilled. The main axis to be used in this case is the indication of the nature of a design, considering the assumptions of the discipline and the related principles of design work – the latter shall differ depending on whether the object of designing is the focus-direction dimension or whether the task of the project is to draw attention by

means of managed communication irritation. Therefore, I would like to establish a basic division within the design practice in reference to those two dimensions, i.e. the focus-direction dimension and the irritation dimension. In the case of the former approach, the practice of the design process should mainly concentrate on focussing a participant in communication within the complex world of codes, signs, and brands, the outcome of which is, as it should be, direction within a systemic frame. Such design work pragmatically refers to the principle of function in design. In doctrinal terms this was framed by Krzysztof Lenk in his catalogue of student works in Information Design:

> To present phenomena and processes not noticeable with the naked eye. Explain how complicated devices work or how events develop so that their essence is understandable for every recipient. Lead by the hand, step by step, when assembly a cabinet, in the stroll through labyrinth of a city when sightseeing, or when learning the various functions hidden in a cellular telephone.[3]

Designing in that approach becomes an instruction manual for social reality; the main points of reference within design practices are: (1) a clear and distinct definition of the design goal and of the strategy for fulfilling the solution, (2) the development of implementation monitoring tools, (3) a definition of interest groups so that the implementation does not preclude the end user from participation, (4) the construction of solutions considering the connectivity of communication systems within the proposed solutions, (5) the consideration within design practices of the issues associated with geographical, climate, and cultural differences, (6) the definition of the systemic costs of a design, including the social and corporate relevance of the design, and (7) approving reference to the scientific achievements within the scope relevant for the project being fulfilled. It would seem that such an approach to designing might block creativity and ingenuity. However, quite the opposite is the case. The above-mentioned principles are mainly supposed to channel the design process in terms of its approximate nature. The goal of a design is for it to adequately develop in terms of its focus on the end user who can smoothly apply the outcomes of the design. In the case of the irritative dimension of designing, the opportunities for develop solutions are focussed on the managed irritation of communication to grasp attention – it is the (recipient's) attention that becomes the basic currency of that dimension of design. It is all about attracting attention through the irritation of communication itself, the goal of which might be to provoke the recipients to think, tear them away from their comfort zone, or draw their attention to a problem. The irritative dimension of designing is applicable

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[3] K. Lenk, *Krótkie teksty o sztuce projektowania*, Wydawnictwo Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2011, p. 1 [unless indicated otherwise, all quotations in English were translated from Polish].

mainly in designing experiences, for which the adequate aspects include: the world of experiences, the atmospheric quality of communication, and the discoursive nature of language. From the market point of view, that area of designing consists of such design areas as advertising and branding. Therefore, the main goal of designing is to control communication to draw attention–in that sense, a design achievement cannot be later specified from the level of a medium. It is only the intellectual effort of a recipient that indicates the value of an implementation, the way it stands out from a backdrop of *communicational competition*. In that approach it is difficult to offer a clear list of rules of creative/irritative operations, unless one were to consider that list to consist of such notions as: creativity, surprise, performance, provocation, market application of disruption[4], etc.

George Lois, an American designer of Greek descent, offered an interesting description of the irritative dimension of design practice. His approach, with particular consideration of advertising, is a kind of a revolution in thinking inclined towards cultural provocation. For Lois, only those designs possess a raison d'etre which stand out from the competition due to the unconventional nature of their form, rather than their content. His point was mainly to skilfully provoke and stimulate the minds of the audience (broadly considered). If, for example, an advertisement distinguishes itself from other advertisements by virtue of its form and content, it is impossible in the communication of the advertisement itself to omit the product or service which it advertises. Lois' main thought was for the advertised product or service to fit the manifestations of cultural systems, to be a part of those. He assigned a completely new status to designing, i.e. of a cultural provocateur, for which e.g. advertising was a goal in itself. The product or service were mere reasons for doing communication:

> Great graphic and verbal communication depends on understanding and adapting to the culture, anticipating the culture, criticizing changes in the culture, and hel-ping to change the culture (…) So if you're young person with an entrepreneurial spirit who aspires to succeed, not only in business, but if life, your mission is not to sedate, but to awaken, to disturb, to communicate, to command, to instigate and even to provoke.[5]

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4   Cf. TBWA: "We start with disruption at the core of everything we do. Disruption is a tool for change and an agent for growth: a working methodology and a life-view philosophy. Disruption is the art of asking better questions, challenging conventional wisdom and overturning assumptions and prejudices that get in the way of imagining new possibilities and visionary ideas. Disruption is not limited to marketing and communications, but can also be applied to deeper levels of an organization, including products and services or the core business offering"; http://www.tbwa.com/disruption [accessed on: 19.09.2014].

5   G. Lois, *Damn Good Advice*, Phaidon Press, London 2012, p. 136.

Lois defined designing as a poisonous gas[6], the function of which is to remain in communication and to change social attitudes. Thus he was very close to the notion of designing communication, centred around the designing of communicational proposals and maintaining them in motion within a social system as the topic of communication. The point is to ensure that designing forces, on the one hand, people to reflect on issues and, on the other, to offer them a chance to communicate about the outcome of designing. The provocative designing discourse which Lois has propagated ever since is presumably a result of his artistic education. He graduated from New York's High School of Music & Art and his first positions before he established his own advertising firm (Papert Koening Lois in 1960), had fluctuated around design and graphic work. Lois is known mainly for his unconventional design aesthetics – in his visual expression, he remains distant from Soviet constructivism or the modernism of the Ulm School of Design. He often surprises with his aesthetics, which employ religious motifs, and cultural and national symbolism, clearly for reasons of provocation. Yet he himself wrote that designing does not consist of a technical-visual manner of organising the available space and area:

> My first commandment: The word comes first, then the visual (…) a big campaign idea can only be expressed in words that absolutely bristle with visual possibilities, leading to words and visual imagery working in perfect synergy.[7]

Following his own design ideology, Lois firmly rejects the empirical context in the design practice. In this he is closer to Bill Bernbach than to the pragmatism of David Ogilva. For Lois, research is a trap which captures designers who are not able to think independently or who are afraid of such thinking. He blatantly referred to market research as analytical paralysis:

> Do not analyze it. Trust your gut. Trust your instincts. In all creative decision-making, analysis involves conjuring up not only the pros, but also those hidden, spooky cons – and discussion about the cons is, ipso facto, analysis paralysis.[8]

In his criticism of market research in advertising practice, Lois even concluded that advertising is an art, not a science, and thus market research is not an adequate measure of verifying the effects of art. According to him, research freezes the creative process in tables, statistics and endless discussions about the effectiveness

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6 Ibidem.
7 Ibidem.
8 Ibidem.

of using advertising to influence product sales. Lois' revolutionary design discourse is not only advertising practice, but the general attitude towards the surrounding reality. An attitude which favours the notions of a mental revolution, fight against racism, and opposition towards various totalitarianisms and cultural intolerance. As the conclusion of the irritative dimension of design practice, I consider the following points of reference which I view as relevant in the design of experiences/ communication: (1) **speaking vs. communication**: the definition of the mode of speaking [A] for communicational purposes [B]; in other words, the point is to utilise the discursive nature of language in such a way that through speaking (in any intermediated form of communication) a recipient can deduce the real goal of the communication, as per the proposition: *don't say you're creative, prove it*, (2) the **audience**: who is the recipient of a design, who is supposed to become interested in it – communication for everyone is communication for no one: since we differentiate society (in terms of various lifestyles), it is necessary to differentiate communication in order to exclude audiences that are inadequate from the point of view of the design assumptions, (3) **the media**: not only the content of communication should be distinguishable but also its medium – every space/area can constitute a place of communication; identification cannot be permanent, (4) the **outcome**: one must realise that the only certain outcome of communication design is meaning/image; everything else is by-products, (5) **narration**: communication design cannot conclude with the medium – the recipients are responsible for the punchline, (6) the **product**: it is not sufficient for it to be clearly visible; it is necessary to have something to say, (7) **networking**: due to the multi-channel nature of communication in the design process, one must include a coherent identity, aesthetics and message; in general, the same spirit must be present throughout all the communication channels. A similar point of view was adopted by Jean-Marie Dru in his book *Disruption – zmiana reguł gry na rynku*.[9] He discussed the concept of disruption, which has become the ideology of the creative work of the TBWA advertising firm. It adopts the following assumptions: (1) *disruption* is a manner of viewing the socio-communicational reality through the prism of conventions and communicational scripts, which offer the basis for challenging the *status quo*, (2) *disruption* is also an art of asking questions, challenging conventional thinking, breaking assumptions and prejudices which prevent one from noticing the opportunities and creating, (3) the media: they define every space and area between a brand and a recipient, (4) the recipient: one cannot treat recipients as consumers; a recipient must be treated as an audience whom one can make interested in a brand; it is necessary to understand their behaviours, seize their

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9   J.-M. Dru, *Disruption: Overturning conventions and shaking up the marketplace*, Vol. 1, Wiley 1996.

attention and draw them into the narration of the world of experiences, (5) the idea: *disruption* is based on the simple notion, namely that the main character is an idea, not a consumer, (6) agency: *disruption* prevents the artificial division into strategy and application – within disruption, responsibility applies to both the strategic input and the creative product, (7) success: *that which enabled you to become successful in the past is not going to work in the future*[10], (8) convention: the convention which covers the present market dynamics becomes the starting point in the design process, (9) disruption is the ability to think outside the box, to assume an outside perspective on things, and twist the convention to be able to achieve the future vision of a design, and (10) generally speaking: *convention – disruption – vision.*

It is not difficult to infer why the two dimensions of design practice apply to completely different design domains and disciplines. On the one hand, design practice ensures smooth utilisation of the offered solutions; it makes the end user feel comfortable in their new surroundings; it builds social, cultural, and sometimes even economic affiliation – in general, it ensures the predictability and relatability of communication; on the other, though, design may irritate in a cognitive sense; it can build both a desire for the object of design, or estrangement from it; it can evoke communications of various degrees of engagement – in general, that dimension of design is responsible for securing the attention of an end user through an often challenging normality.[11] A question may arise of when either of the two dimensions of design should be used. It all depends, of course, on the goal of a design and the discipline. It would be questionable to employ the irritative dimension in the design of road signs, maps, and visual processes and procedures. Yet it is adequate for application in propaganda posters, advertisements, marketing, and other areas which do not directly or indirectly affect human safety, health or life. The basic design principle which works for both dimensions refers to the logical course of the design process, which consists of the following design questions: *Where are we?* (definition of the existing situation, context for the design and the extent of the design problem's applicability), *Where are we going?* (definition of the postulated situation, i.e. the strategy of design application), *How do we want to achieve it?* (definition of the mode of application through the design tactics), *How would we like to verify it?* (development of the design evaluation apparatus). I propose the following list as a set of adequate points to be considered to ensure the stability of the design process as a practice:

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[10] Personally, I prefer a different version of the statement: *that which proved successful for some does not have to be just as good for others.*

[11] A. Siemes, *Normalność w komunikacjach – jej negocjowanie i badanie: na materiale komentarzy dotyczących architektury domów mieszkalnych*, Primum Verbum, Łódź 2013.

1. **The problem** – the notion of a design problem is the only constant in design. It is the starting point for the design practice in almost every design doctrine; the design problem is the goal of a diagnosis, while the general goal of designing is its efficient solving and providing solutions which are easy to apply (I am aware of my repetition);

2. **Technology** – this is always a means for fulfilling a goal, never the goal in itself. In designing, it is vital to ensure that technology does not determine the strategy of designing. The role of technology consists of applying technology or developing it in reference to the social and/or corporate demand. Technology cannot dictate the conditions of a design process;

3. **Recipient** – designers need to understand their servile role with regard to a recipient as an end user, not a consumer. In that sense, Paul Rand's remark on the role of designers[12] seems an adequate design anti-manifesto;

4. **Compromise** – a design doctrine should not favour any side of the design process, be it the client, designer or recipient. In operationalising the notion of human-centred design, Donald Norman did not clearly indicate that the client/ company/ organisation for whom a design is being developed are just as important. The fact of placing its weight on only one of the sides in that unique relationship may lead to disturbing the social or corporate relevance of a design, which in turn would lead to increased direct and systemic costs of the design – and that, quite clearly, would lead to a situation of the design's unprofitability. What is certain is that a designer's role cannot be viewed in terms of its relevance – a designer's role in that sense is extra-systemic, focussed on organising and accelerating the design process using diverse resources (*know-how*, personal, technological, financial, etc.)

5. **Differences** – spatial, geographical, social or cultural differences should trigger diversity in communication leading towards local solutions; differences should be treated as opportunities, never as contradictions. In my view, the local nature of activities, which I discussed above, becomes important – no matter how efficient a community is – only at the local level. Only such a community is resistant to fluctuations, as it is diverse in that sense, and diversity leads to openness and tolerance. Mind you, the essence of design is to treat differences as an added value, not as obstacles;

6. **Space of things** – design should refrain from flooding the world with things and communications no one needs. One should consider who benefits from there being more and more attributes of everyday life – surely those who make money from people having those things. However, it seems surprising to me that designers are so naive and fulfil a servile function for corporations.

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12   Cf. S. Heller, *Paul Rand: Inspiration & Process in Design*, Chronicle Books, New York 2019.

The design practice should be responsible for providing, in a sustainable manner, ever newer solutions both in terms of the media of communication and specific items and services, in which we are slowly drowning;

7. **Knowledge** – the interpretative framework provides a specific control over the context within the design practice, which results in a broader field of view of things in the categories of design problems and their possible solutions. The broader the interpretative framework of communicational constructs is, the higher the control over context becomes. Design is based on knowledge, never on a vision of it, and as a result it should build control over context, also on the part of an end user. Design only focussed on comfort and convenience produces a thoughtless society, which is naturally also profitable for some. I have always said that the role of a designer has much in common with that of a teacher, yet, in the case of designing, the classroom is the adequate solution to a design problem, which in a discrete (the focus-direction perspective of design) or a downright brash (the irritative perspective of design) manner explains the contexts of social operation. Educational failures in design tend to be dramatic;

8. **Sensitivity** – a designer should possess a specific kind of sensitivity also to be able to transfer their sensitivity into the cognitive field of the end user – then it is possible for an environment relevant for knowledge to emerge;

9. **Active citizen** – change through design is not possible when applying totalitarian design practices – the purpose of design is not to change behaviours as such. The purpose of design is to build the awareness on the part of end users, from whom, consequently, a social change may emerge, i.e. not from the outside (often within the top-down trend) but from outside the system, considering the properties of a system;

10. **Exclusion** – the application of design at a given time often directly or indirectly leads to various exclusions: social, economic or cultural. Universal designing cannot constitute a separate discipline of design, and the same applies to sustainable design, as I have already mentioned. Design is supposed to integrate, build relations, and, finally, secure the ability to establish communication in the sense of creating and maintaining community;

11. **System** – a key word in the design practice, which once applied enables people to counter design peculiarities, and to view problems and (often) more important solutions within the optics of the metaphor of communicating vessels. Design, especially within its social dimension, cannot be abstracted from the system in which it functions. I have already discussed this in the part devoted to the design problem, when I proposed that the problem is the perspective of the observer, in which a system becomes operationally inefficient – that means that the system is working, but in an inefficient manner

due to the system's functions and properties. Similar logic should be applied to solutions being applied – those should be considered as ways of solving a design problem on the one hand, but, on the other, one must assume that every solution to a problem may produce other problems due to that exact systemic nature of how design functions. The systemic perspective, at least in design, enables one to see mutual relations, which cannot be seen "from the inside".

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Mariusz Wszołek

Jaki design ma sens? Dwa wymiary praktyki projektowania (komunikacji)

S t r e s z c z e n i e

John Thackara podkreśla, że 80% negatywnego wpływu na środowisko naturalne ma podłoże w designie i jego dowolności zastosowań. Z oglądu praktyki projektowej nietrudno nie przyznać mu racji – współcześnie design w rozu-

mieniu praktyki projektowej przyjął służalczą rolę wobec wielkiego biznesu. Konsekwencje takich praktyk możemy obserwować w czasie rzeczywistym: wykluczenie społeczne, brak refleksji projektowej i końcowych użytkowników, porażka brandingu czy polaryzacja całych społeczeństw – to tylko niektóre wymiary aktualnych zastosowań projektowania (również graficznego). W miejsce aktualnych zastosowań potrzebujemy zmiany paradygmatu zarówno w teorii projektowania, jak również w praktycznych zastosowaniach. Design potrzebuje nowego kodeksu zastosowań, który nie tylko będzie dobrze wyglądał w mediach społecznościowych, ale również będzie jasnym punktem odniesienia w praktyce projektowej.

Słowa kluczowe: design, disruption, zrównoważone projektowanie, komunikacja, irytacja systemu.

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Summary

John Thackara emphasised that 80% of the negative impact on the natural environment has its origin in design and the randomness of its application. Considering the entirety of design practices, one would have a hard time disputing this. In contemporary times, design understood as design practices has assumed a servile role in relation to big corporations. One can observe the consequences of such practices in real time: social exclusion, the lack of design consideration or consideration of end users, the failure of branding, and the polarisation of entire societies – these are only some dimensions of the current applications of design (including graphic design). Instead of the current applications, we need a change in the paradigm of both the theory of design and practical applications. Design needs a new code of application which would not only look good in social media, but would also be a clear point of reference in the design practice.

Keywords: design, disruption, sustainable design, communication, irritation of the system

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