Design and Democracy
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I shall present a few thoughts about the relationship between democracy and design, and about the relationship between critical humanism and operational humanism. This issue leads to the question of the role of technology and industrialization as a procedure for democratizing the consumption of goods and services, and finally to the ambivalent role of esthetics as the domain of freedom and manipulation.

The main theme of my lecture is the relationship between design—in the sense of projecting—and autonomy. My reflections are open-ended, and do not pretend to give quick and immediate answers. The university still offers a place to pursue these questions that normally will not be addressed in professional practice, with its pressures and contingencies.

Looking at the present design discourse, one notes a surprising—and I would say alarming—absence of questioning design activities. Concepts such as branding, competitiveness, globalization, comparative advantages, lifestyle design, differentiation, strategic design, fun design, emotion design, experience design, and smart design prevail in design magazines and the all too few books about design. Sometimes, one gets the impression that a designer aspiring to two minutes of fame feels obliged to invent a new label for setting herself or himself apart from the rest of what professional service offers. I leave aside "coffee table" books on design that abound in pictures and exempt the reader from intellectual efforts. The issue of design and democracy doesn't enjoy popularity—apart from a few laudable exceptions.

If we look at the social history of the meaning of the term "design," we note on the one side a popularization that is a horizontal extension, and on the other side a contraction that is a vertical reduction. The architectural critic Witold Rybczynski recently commented on this phenomenon: "Not so long ago, the term 'designer' described someone such as Eliot Noyes, who was responsible for the IBM Selectric typewriter in the 1960s, or Henry Dreyfuss, whose clients included Lockheed Aircraft and the Bell Telephone Company ... or Dieter Rams, who created a range of austere-looking, but very practical, products for the German company Braun. Today, 'designer' is more likely to bring to mind Ralph Lauren or Giorgio Armani, that is, a fashion designer. While fashion designers usually start as couturiers, they—or at least their names—often are associated with a wide variety of consumer products including cosmetics, perfume, luggage, home furnishings, and even house

paint. As a result, 'design' is popularly identified with packaging: the housing of a computer monitor, the barrel of a pen, and a frame for eyeglasses."[1]

More and more, design has moved away from the idea of "intelligent problem solving" (James Dyson) and drawn nearer to the ephemeral, fashionable and quickly obsolete, to formal aesthetic play, to the "boutiquization" of the universe of products for everyday life. For this reason, design today often is identified with expensive, exquisite, not particularly practical, funny, and formally pushed, colorful objects. The hypertrophy of fashion aspects is accompanied and increased by the media with their voracious appetite for novelties. Design thus has become a media event—and we have a considerable number of publications that serve as resonance boxes for this process. Even design centers are exposed to the complicity of the media, running the risk of failing to reach their original objective: to make a difference between design as intelligent problem solving and styling. After all, it is a question of a renaissance of the tradition of the Good Design Movement, but with different foci and interests. The advocates of Good Design pursued socio-pedagogical objectives, while the life style centers of today pursue exclusively commercial and marketing aims to provide orientation for consumption patterns of a new—or not that new—social segment of global character, that can be labeled with the phrase: "We made it."

The world of everyday products and messages, of material and semiotic artifacts, has met—with rare exceptions—in cultural discourse (and this includes the academic discourse) in a climate of benign indifference that has its roots in classical culture in the medieval age, when the first universities in the West were founded. This academic tradition did not take note of the domain of design (in the sense of project) in any of its disciplines. However, in the process of industrialization, one could no longer close one's eyes to technology and technical artifacts that more and more made their presence felt in everyday life. But the leading ideal continued to be cognitive character in the form of the creation of new knowledge. Design never established itself as a leading, parallel ideal. This fact explains the difficulties of integrating design education in institutions of higher learning, with their own traditions and criteria of excellence. This is evident in doctoral programs in design that favor the production of discursive results, and don't give projects the same value or recognition as the production of texts. The sciences approach reality from the perspective of cognition, of what can be known, while the design disciplines approach reality from the perspective of "projectability," of what can be designed. These are different perspectives, and it is hoped that, in the future, they will transmute into complementary perspectives. So far, design has tried to build bridges to the domain of the sciences, but not vice versa. We can speculate that, in the future, design may become a basic discipline for all scientific areas. But this Copernican turn in the university system might take genera-

1   Witold Rybczynski, "How Things Work,"
     New York Review of Books LII: 10 (June
     9, 2005): 49–51.

tions, if not centuries. Only the creation of radically new universities can shorten this process. But the decision freedom of government institutions is limited due to the weight of academic traditions, and the bureaucratization emphasis on formal procedures of approbation (title fetishism). Therefore, the new university probably will be created outside of established structures.

Relating design activities to the sciences should not be misinterpreted as a claim of a scientific design, or as an attempt to transform design into a science. It would be foolish to "design" an ashtray using scientific knowledge. But it would not be foolish—and even mandatory—to tap scientific knowledge when designing a milk package with a minimal ecological footprint. It is no longer feasible to limit the notion of design to design disciplines such as architecture, industrial design, or communication design because scientists also are designing. When a group of agricultural scientists develops a new candy from the carob bean that contains important vitamins for school children, we have a clear example of a design activity.[2]

I now want to focus on the central issue of my lecture: the relationship between democracy and design. Indeed, during recent years, the notion of democracy has been exposed to a process of wear and tear, so it is advisable to use it with care. When looking at the international scene, we cannot avoid stating that, in the name of democracy, imperialistic invasions, bombardments, genocides, ethnical cleaning operations, torture, and the breaking of international laws have been—and are—committed, almost with impunity, at least for the moment. The cost of this lack of humanity is not known. Future generations probably will have to carry the burden. With democracy, these operations have nothing in common.

Neoliberals believe that democracy is synonymous with the predominance of the market as an exclusive and almost sanctified institution for governing all relations within and between societies. So we face such questions as: How can we recover the true meaning of democracy? How can democracy regain credibility? How can one counteract the arrogant and condescending attitude of the centers of power that consider democracy as nothing more than a tranquilizer for public opinion, in order to continue undisturbed "business as usual"?

I am using a simple interpretation of the term "democracy" in the sense of participation, so that dominated citizens transform themselves into subjects opening a space for self-determination, and that means ensuring room for a project of one's own accord. Formulated differently: democracy involves more than the formal right to vote. Similarly, freedom goes farther than the right to chose between a hundred varieties of cellular telephones; or a flight to Orlando to visit the Epcot Center, or to Paris to look at paintings in the Louvre.

2   www.clarin.com/diario/2005/05/09/
     sociedad/s-03101.htm
     (Crean un nuevo alimento para escolares
     en base a algarroba.) (May 9, 2005).

I favor a substantial, and thus less formal, concept of democracy as the reduction of heteronomy (i.e., domination by external forces). It is no secret that this interpretation fits into the tradition of the Enlightenment that has been criticized so intensively by, among others, Jean-Francois Lyotard when he announced the end of the grand narratives. I do not agree with this approach or other postmodern variants. Without a utopian element, another world is not possible, and would remain the expression of a pious ethereal wish without concrete consequences. Without a utopian ingredient, residual though it may be, heteronomy cannot be reduced. For this reason, the renunciation of the project of enlightenment seems to me the expression of a quietist, if not conservative, attitude—an attitude of surrender that no designer should be tempted to cherish.

In order to illustrate the necessity to reduce heteronomy, I am using a contribution from a linguist—a specialist in comparative literature—Edward Said, who died last year. He characterizes, in an exemplary manner, the essence of humanism; of a humanistic attitude. As a philologist, he limits the humanist attitude to the domain of language and history: "Humanism is the exertion of one's faculties in language in order to understand, reinterpret, and grapple with the products of language in history, other languages, and other histories."[3] But we can extend this interpretation to other areas, too. Certainly, the intentions of the author will not be bent when transferring his characterization of humanism—with corresponding adjustments—to design. Design humanism is the exercise of design activities in order to interpret the needs of social groups, and to develop viable emancipative proposals in the form of material and semiotic artifacts. Why emancipative? Because humanism implies the reduction of domination. In the field of design, it also means to focus on the excluded, the discriminated, and economically less-favored groups (as they are called in economist jargon), which amounts to the majority of the population of this planet. I want to make it clear that I don't propagate a universalistic attitude according to the pattern of design for the world. Also, I don't believe that this claim should be interpreted as the expression of a naive idealism, supposedly out of touch with reality. On the contrary, each profession should face this uncomfortable question, not only the profession of designers. It would be an error to take this claim as the expression of a normative request of how a designer—exposed to the pressure of the market and the antinomies between reality and what could be reality—should act today. The intention is more modest, that is to foster a critical consciousness when facing the enormous imbalance between the centers of power and the people submitted to these powers, because the imbalance is deeply undemocratic insofar as it negates participation. It treats human beings as mere instances in the process of objectivization (*Verdinglichung*) and commodification.

3   Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 28.

Here we come to the role of the market and the role of design in the market. In a recently published book, the economist Kenneth Galbraith analyses the function of the concept of the market that, according to him, is nothing more than a smokescreen for not talking openly about capitalism—a term that doesn't enjoy a high rating on the popularity scale in all social classes and in all countries. Galbraith puts design in the context of techniques of corporations for gaining and consolidating power:

> Product innovation and modification is a major economic function, and no significant manufacturer introduces a new product without cultivating the consumer demand for it. Or forgoes efforts to influence and sustain the demand for an existing product. Here enters the world of advertising and salesmanship, of television, of consumer manipulation. Thus an impairment of consumer and market sovereignty. In the real world, the producing firm and the industry go far to set the prices and establish the demand, employing to this end monopoly, oligopoly, product design and differentiation, advertising, [and] other sales and trade promotion.[4]

Galbraith criticizes the use of the term "market" as an anonymous and impersonal institution, and instead insists on talking about corporate power. Against, this use of design—after all, a tool for domination—stands the intent not to remain fixed exclusively on the aspects of power and of the anonymous market. In this contradiction, design practice is unfolding and resisting a harmonizing discourse that is camouflaging the contradictions. One can deny the contradictions, but one cannot bypass them.

The issue of manipulation has a long tradition in design discourse, especially in advertising. I remember a popular book that, at the time, provoked a wide resonance, *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard (1957). But one should be on guard against a critique with declamatory character that merely denounces. More differentiation is required. Manipulation and design share one point of contact: appearance. We design, among others and certainly not only, appearances. For this reason, I once characterized the designer as a strategist of appearances, phenomena that we perceive through our senses—above all visual senses, but also tactile and auditory senses. Appearances lead us to the issue of aesthetics—an ambivalent concept. On the one side, aesthetics represent the domain of freedom, of play—and some authors claim that we are only free when we play. On the other side, aesthetics opens the access to manipulation, that is the increase of outer, directed behavior. When designing products and semiotic artifacts, we want to seduce, that is foster, a positive—or according to context, negative—predisposition towards a product and sign combination. Depending on intentions, design leans more to one pole or the other, more to autonomy or more to heteronomy.

4 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Economics of Innocent Fraud* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 7.

At this point, I want to insert a few reflections on technology. The term "technology" generally is understood as the universe of artifacts and procedures for producing merchandise with which companies fill the stage of everyday practice. Technology implies hardware and software—and software implies the notion of design as a facet of technology that cannot be dispensed with. Here in Latin America, we face the problem of technology policy and industrialization policy. Research on these issues reveals interesting details about progress and setbacks. But these seem to me to favor a reductionistic interpretation of technology. Only in exceptional cases do texts mention the question of what is done with technology. The question for the design of products remains unanswered. This presents a weak point, without wanting to underestimate the efforts by historians. But one cannot defend them against the reproach of being blind to the dimension of design, the dimension of projects, or at least of facing this dimension with indifference. The motives for industrialization include the wish to diversify exports, and not to remain an exporting economy of commodities without added value. But behind this plausible argument is hidden another generally not explicitly formulated motif. I am referring to the idea that, apart from the growth of the GNP, industrialization is the only possibility for democratizing consumption to provide for a broad sector of the population access to the world of products and services in the different areas of everyday life: health, housing, education, sports, transport, and work, to mention only a few.

However, to mention today the role of government in promoting industrialization can appear almost as an offense to good manners. The role of public intervention has been demonized with one exception, paying the debt of a bankrupt, privatized service. In that case, public resources are welcome, thus reinforcing the idea that politics is the appropriation of public goods for private purposes. But when the history of industrialization and technology of this subcontinent is written, one shall see with clarity that the role of government has been decisive, even though the detractors of the public sector with their bellicose voices have belittled its function and contributions. If we look at the recent history of Argentina—a country that, until a few years ago, followed in subservient manner the impositions of the International Monetary Fund, and that, in a moment of delirium, enthusiastically praised its "carnal relationships" with the leading military and economic power—then we see that this country didn't fare very well with this policy of relentless privatization and reduction of government presence. This process plunged a great part of the population into a state of poverty unknown until then, and led to an income concentration with the corresponding bipolarization of society into two groups: the excluded and the included. Privatization, in this context, is synonymous with de-democratization, because the victims of this process have never been asked whether they approved the credits and sales of public property that

led the country into bankruptcy. Relentless privatization and the reduction of the role of government—the unconditional opening of the economy for imports—initiated the de-industrialization of Argentina, thus destroying the foundations for productive work, including work for industrial designers.

The industrialization policies in various countries in which I have participated, above all Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, concentrated exclusively on hardware, leaving the communication and information industries untouched. Today, the constellation has changed radically. An updated industrialization policy would have to include the information sector of the economy, for which graphic design and information design can provide essential contributions. New problems show up there that confront designers with cognitive demands that generally are not taken into consideration in design education programs. The expanding process of digitalization fostered a design current which today claims that the important design questions essentially are of symbolic character. As the second argument for the semantization of products—and thus the semantization of the designer's work—miniaturization is mentioned, made possible by printed circuits and cheap chips. These do not allow us to see how the products are working because functions become invisible. Therefore, the designer's task consists of making these invisible functions visible. Though it would be blind to deny the communication and symbolic aspects of products, their role should not be overvalued as some authors do. Between the alternative to put a nail into a wall with a hammer or the symbolic value of a hammer, the choice is clear. The material base of products with their visual, tactile, and auditory conformation provides a firm base for the designer's work.

With concern, one can observe the growth of a generation of designers that obsessively focuses on the symbolic aspects of products and their equivalents in the market—branding and self-branding—and that doesn't know anymore how to classify joints. The search for a balance between the instrumental/operational aspects of technical objects and their semantic aspects constitutes the core of the designer's work, without privileging one or the other domain. As the historian Raimonda Riccini writes:

> The polarity between the instrumental and symbolic dimension, between internal structure and external structure is a typical property of artifacts, insofar as they are tools and simultaneously carriers of values and meanings. Designers face the task to mediate between these two polarities, by designing the form of products as result of an interaction with the sociotechnical process.[5]

5   Raimonda Riccini, *Design e teorie degli oggetti. il verri* 27 (February 2005): 48–57.

It is revealing that Riccini does not speak of the form of products and their interaction with functions, that is the affordances, but that she alludes to sociotechnical development. In this way, she avoids the outdated debate about form and function. The once secure foundations for arriving at the configuration of products have been dissolved today—if ever they existed. It would be naive to presuppose the existence of a canon of deterministic rules. He who defends such a canon, commits the error of essentializing Platonic forms. At the same time, it would be equally naive to claim that a limitless fickleness of forms would arise from the demiurgic actions of a handful of creatively inspired designers. We face a paradox here. To design means to deal with paradoxes and contradictions. In a society plagued by contradictions, design also is affected. It might be convenient to remember the dictum of Walter Benjamin that there is no document of civilization that is not, at the same time, a document of barbarism.