A Passion for the Real

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Invited to speak at the Icograda world design congress in Bejing, in October 2009, I realized that this would be an opportunity to focus on communication design's blind spots, on the one hand because the organizers of the event considered the unity of typography with new life "as a burning issue in media and communication design," saying that "we, in the face of a worldwide economic depression, now have a chance to look back at the energy of design, to share experiences, and restore our confidence in overcoming the challenges of this difficult period"[1] and on the other hand because their well articulated invitation showed how much we as designers struggle with the manifold and extended notions of communication today, and how difficult it is—when it comes to restoring the social, cultural, and democratic ambitions of the profession—to move from our desire for a "radical criticality" to its attainment in the real.

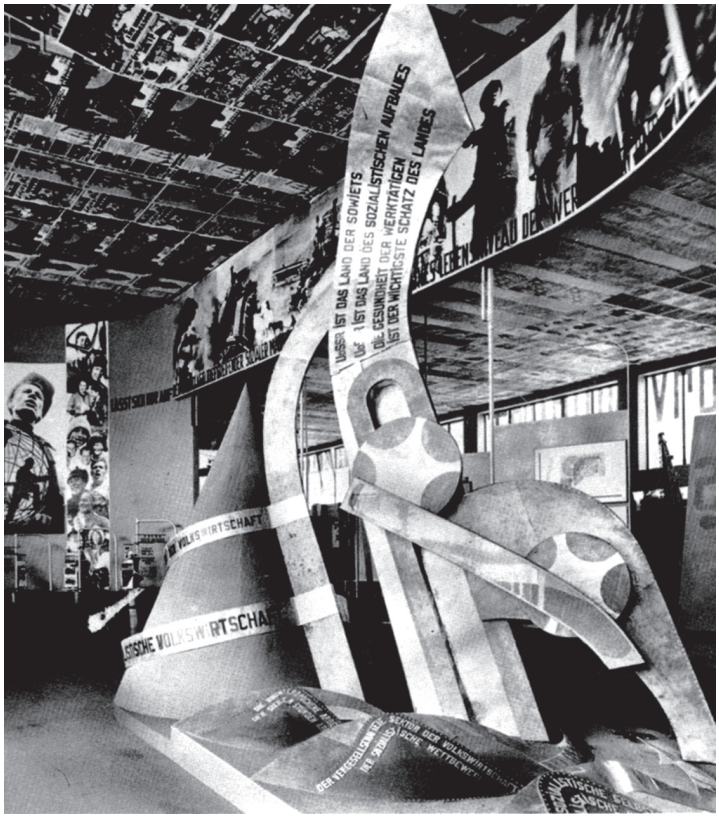


Figure 1
El Lissitzky, Hygiene exhibition, Dresden 1930.

1 Invitation letter to the Icograda world design congress 2009, Beijing, August 2009.

The elaboration of the conference topics: "access, balance, communicate and define" for example remained abstract and were not developed in concrete terms. Or, as we are used to saying in the Netherlands: the church is left in the middle, which means that all options are kept open. From the point of view of our hosts that was probably wise because we, the participants in the conference, were the ones to do the work and rise to their challenge. However, this was I still have difficulty with the suggestion that the attitude and pronouncements of Jan Tschichold in his book *The New Typography* (1928) and his concern "to satisfy the needs of our own period and to make sure that every single piece of printing is in harmony with the present" are, as the organizers of the Beijing conference said, "the answer to the complexities that face us now that almost a century has passed and we, in the new century, sense a similar freshness and eclecticism in the information and digitalized life of today."[2] I do not believe that the "unity of life and typography" the way Tschichold propagated it, is an adequate answer to the symbolic violence of the experience and information economy of the planetary market—even though many designers today apparently find the detached beauty of his work appealing. We should not forget that the "engineer" and "formalist" Tschichold replaced the inverted energies of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century—of his friend El Lissitzky for example—in the second half of the twenties with the value-free standards and principles of universal modernist belief—ideas that also supported his shift to the "new traditional style" of the mid-1940s, limiting interpersonal exchange to the beautiful temptation of a rather "abstract empiricism," totally removed from the realities of human communication as a social and cultural phenomenon.

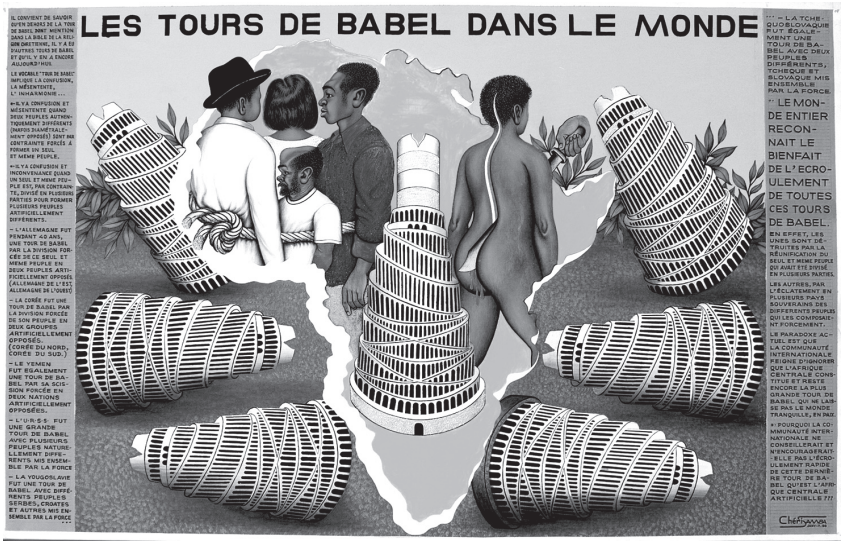
Lissitzky's attitude was completely different. Aesthetic universalism was an illusion for him. He was much more interested in the social dimensions of form, in the production and workings of design in the public arena. For him, form should neither be separated from content nor context. Typography should be dynamic and articulate as the voice, "to activate the book and the reader," and by no means be determined by tasteful impression.

The dynamic and dialectic complexities of Lissitzky, I find, are a more realistic starting point for the renewal of design's social commitment than Tschichold's restful abstractions. As for that, one could read my talk as a warning against the substantial weakness of the often-breathtaking generalizations of contemporary design—which means that the challenge of the subject of the Beijing conference, in my opinion, should not result in a worldwide esthetic monumentality with unambiguous standards immune to empirical validation.

Hence my plea is not to lose contact with social reality, to maintain an open eye and a critical mind for the conditions in which

2 Ibid.

Figure 2
Chérie Samba (Zaïre, Democratic Republic of Kongo), The towers of Babel in the world, 1998.



we produce and for the affect of our work on its recipients. In short: we should strive for dissident behavior and accept more dissonance in the design process. Visual journalism is so central a material and symbolic social activity that a progressive, reflexive practice urgently needs strategies, methods, and a language use that liberate us from the forms of domination that design and its concepts still exercise today.

The tower of Babel[3] is a Jewish and Christian metaphor that stands for the confusion of tongues by God who punishes mankind for its megalomania. I think this would be a good start for a story about communication design as symbolic production—the production of values—and the challenges and opportunities for a renewed social, cultural, and democratic commitment. The tower of Babel, like the new towers in Dubai, in the first place is a reference to the arrogance of power. Its huge size is not only an instrument that establishes power materially and spatially, but is at the same time a medium that strives to affect our imagination—a theatrical staging that symbolically establishes and consolidates a shameless canonical worldview. We should realize that the powerful control the imagination of the people without power—that the masters of the world are also those of its representation. Social classes and institutions have been very successful in this down the centuries: aristocracy, bourgeoisie, the church, state, political parties, corporations, media, etc. create again and again illusory regimes of attractive imagery showing the world in a seemingly harmonious and natural order.

Intellectual elites like civil servants, scientists, teachers, journalists, artists, architects, and people like us—adapted to the ruling power for their existence—give form and contribute to these fictitious constructions, to the staging of the world's representation with symbolic and behavioral consequences. Most of the time we easily take the dominant "utopia" for granted until we experience, like today, that it conceals so much with its impoverished but

3 Babylon, capital of biblical Mesopotamia (near Bagdad, Iraq. Ruined 126–125 BC).

spectacular rhetoric that we lack the tools to grasp what is going on in reality. Result: a Babylonian confusion of tongues.
The behavior and strategies of design adjust under the influence of changing circumstances and ideologies. When the neo-liberal revolution of the mid-1970s pushed free trade, privatized public services, enforced cuts in social spending and encouraged deregulation worldwide, design rather quickly accommodated to it and lost its public responsibility, its journalistic side. Communication design under these conditions became incorporated entirely into the radical transformation of social and cultural life by the public relations and sell-out of meaning by transnational corporations, the culture industry and neo-liberal politics. In this inconvenient situation design developed a visual, spatial, digital etc. language use that is heavily influenced by the pragmatism and managerial ideology of commerce, politics, and media. This is to say, that design's language hardly produces any knowledge because it consists of a multitude of phrases—is limited methodically, substantially and aesthetically—using only a small part of the wealth of the many vocabularies we belong to outside the realms of the institutional world.

The confrontation with the disasters and complexities of reality above all is a confrontation with the failures of the grand design of corporate power, politics and media which try, as long as possible, to keep the submission, exploitation and extremities of its regime out of sight. The many victims of power (outside and inside the "green zones") experience this again and again. Jan Tschichold's generation could still be convinced that "a new unity of art and technology" was the answer to the conditions of its day. We however are confronted with the collapse of too many towers—with a worldwide Babylonian chaos that, as Chérie Samba says, "the surrounding world is pleased to see collapse."[4] Unequivocal recipes, let alone a change of style, are no realistic answer to that.

In this sense, living and designing during a worldwide socio-economic catastrophe is also a confrontation with a symbolic crisis. In particular now that the hypermarket economy for the most part is driven by immaterial forms of production. It is surprising to me therefore that communication designers—fast thinkers like other media intellectuals—limit themselves more and more to the abstractions of the technological, logistical, and formal aesthetic aspects of their own universe. They isolate their idealized professional habits and language use—shaped in the moulds of capitalist "fast-food" culture—from its consequences in the social and symbolic reality.

4 Chérie Samba, *Les tours de Babel dans le monde*, 1998.

The fate of cities [of media] today is in the hands of those who maintain that liberal democracy is the-end-of-(city)-history [and of-media-history] and who claim that this hybrid process has finally had the conclusiveness of reconciling the individual with the collective, arguing that what works for one person works for everybody: a process where anything goes and where the possibility of judgment is denied.[5]

Instead of the present-day self-referential and narcissistic emblems of the planetary market, the Italian architect Elia Zengelis stresses the need for a political vision of the role of architecture to overcome present-day's political correctness of surreal plurality, complexity, and fragmentation. His analysis shows how the conciliation of the individual with the collective by the neo-liberal revolution limits and neutralizes the public space as a place for meaningful human interaction and behavior by a pragmatic, technological and formal aesthetic attitude. The same applies to the functioning of communication design in mass media. Hal Foster, the American art critic, talks about an attitude that deals with all content in the canons of a factual, descriptive "taste." He labels this approach as "archival work" and calls the presentation of endlessly collected and categorized material "excavation sites," resulting in messages without any conceptual flesh on the bones. These "excavation sites" having an abstract, academic nature, never become "production sites,"[6] so to say, because the presentation is missing an authentic point of view and a form relating the unearthed material to our experiences in reality. To abstract is to subtract from matter and experience. A documenting, describing attitude therefore is not enough. Communication design needs to explore other than distancing strategies and create alternatives, subjectivities to pursue a new freedom.

A really committed visual journalism—as I am used to calling the profession—needs a performative interpretation, a vision, to ensure moments of genuine human exchange.

In this respect it is high time to take a critical look at our behavior, to overcome the implosion of communication design's public role and the ritualization of its language use. Without doubt, this results in dissent: an attitude and strategy that takes account of the power relations in the media—that is to say, of the struggle between the public and private interests—of the unequel relations between producers and mediators on the one hand, and the viewers or readers on the other.

This includes that we should be courageous and use our imagination to develop a deliberate and realistic vision of design's role and collective responsibilities to find answers that no longer

5 Elia Zenghelis, "For a new monumentality," *Brussels ñ A Manifesto; Towards the Capital of Europe*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007, 224, where Zenghelis stresses that "the essence of architecture's intrinsic uniqueness is its form: it is the relative and pertinent use of form, its significance and appropriateness to our public life within the context of a political ideal that should be our primary concern."

6 Hal Foster, "On engagement," lecture in the series *Right about now, art & theory since 1990s*, Amsterdam University, June 2007.

champion the aesthetization of life but abolish the disturbance of relations of solidarity with the audience by creating more autonomous projects and free spaces in the media. Hence, no end of media history!

It is the aesthetic experience of the artwork (or of any other cultural object: literary text, photograph, cinema, theatre performance, musical recording, etc. [design,] that counts in a cognitive sense. The power of any cultural object to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative visions, varies with history's changing course. Strategies range from critical negativity to utopian representation. No one style, no one medium is invariably successful. Perhaps not the object but its critical interpretation is avant-garde. What counts is that the aesthetic experience teach us something new about our world, that it shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination that characterizes so much of cultural production in all it forms.[7]

The lack of social imagination of the interactions of cultural production that Susan Buck-Morss talks about has enormous consequences for the quality of symbolic production as a fundamental collective good of great cultural and democratic interest. As we see in the case of communication design today, it is not enough to replace the oblivion about the public role and strategies of the profession by a critical view as such. Quantitative analyses—even when they are based in compelling conceptualizations—rarely relate to the actual circumstances, and lack a sense of the broader social, political and historical determinants of the wider context design operates in. Communication design is a complicated, contextual engagement with a shared public/private responsibility. The question therefore is not with whom we engage, but what kind of priorities we set in the dealings with both private and collective interests, and how this complicated social commitment finds its expression in the message.

Modernist, postmodernist, and neo-modernist design reduces questions about social interactions in general to a passive apolitical unity of functionality and style. Their attitude is that of the traditional journalist or schoolmaster who takes the status quo for granted—starts from established presuppositions—and hands out so-called objective information flattening out all social, cultural, economic, and other distinctions between individuals and groups. A classical elitism, that strives for social *consensus*, programming

7 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe; The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000.

8 Franco Moretti, "The grey area: Ibsen and the spirit of capitalism," *New Left Review* 61 (2010), 117.

"receivers" in the world as information instead of informing them about the world. The ruling class in general, designers included, avoids with this attitude conflicts between its moral considerations and ambiguous action. "All they see is bourgeois life," writes Franco Moretti, which finds expression in the apparently rich but limited abstractions inherent in the hidden foundations of modern life. "What reigns are constant references to formal and poetic metaphors as a system of moral and cognitive commonplaces."[8] Otherwise said, in addition to an investment in a broader and in depth socio-political orientation, communication design also needs to invest in a making that, devoid of the customary signposts, extends and explores a more integrated map of communicative strategies and symbolic practices.

Human communication is much more than a purely utilitarian relationship with the "receivers." Information production is not a neutral one-dimensional representation of facts and the audience is no collective entity. That is why designers and journalists critical of the classical notion of symbolic production strive for *dissensus*. In contrast to the classical position, this "reflexive" or "dialogic" approach is not removed from social, cultural and democratic goals and the amelioration of the existing circumstances. It starts from a shared solidarity with the audience and the notion of the artificial, constructed, narrative nature of the message. It is an attitude rooted in integrated behavior and an empirical vision of the social and symbolic conditions, aware of the values it produces and the need for pluri-dimensional, polyphonic forms of expression.

Everyone shares the equal powers of verbal and nonverbal communication. Hence, "equality is not a goal to be pursued," notes Jacques Rancière, "but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained under all circumstances. . . . . Equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division."[9] Therefore the emancipation and activation of the viewer/reader starts from the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting, when we realize that "looking also is an action which confirms or modifies the distribution of the visible, and that interpreting the world is already a means of transforming it, reconfiguring it. We all observe, select, compare, interpret and relate what we observe with the many other things we have observed on other stages, in other kind of spaces, and make our own poem with the poem performed in front of us."[10]

We not only need our imagination in the social field, but in the symbolic field too. That is why communication design should be imaginative semantic action. As we know, the relationship between object or subject and their representation is "a shotgun

9 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. 2004. In Peter Hallward, "Staging equality," *New Left Review* 37 (2006), 109, 115.

10 See Sven Lütticken, "Abstract things" in *New Left Review* 54 (2008), 101.

wedding—form never manifests matter or ideas adequately."[11] This to remind you that symbolic forms are fundamentally ambiguous and filled with conventions, like moulds we are baked in and act from. Originating from the social world, they are part of a dynamic universe of symbolic exchange. The form then is the site of constant disturbance between spirit and sense, content and form—between the given and the new, between convention and innovation.

An enormous expressive handicap in this is that designers, on the whole, are rooted in the conceptual order of the text and are not familiar with the nonverbal, associative vocabularies of the figurative. Barely aware of the differences in linguistic nature between text and image—of the difference between the sequential structure of the text and the simultaneity of the image—they use images most of the time as illustration or decoration and not as substance. As a result we deploy all non-verbal, sensory, figural languages in a more or less degenerated form—most of the time hardly more than a shiny consumer surface. For dialogic practice, however, striving to activate the viewer in the space between form and value, between value and experience, it is essential to grow an awareness next to the verbal or discursive world that explores the figural worlds of the non-verbal "languages." This asks for a drastic shift of methodology and a far-reaching practical investment in the potentialities of a more complementary and polyphonic vocabulary.

To give you an idea of what this means in concrete life I show some historical and contemporary examples of design—including some of my own—hoping to make clear that it is not necessary to endlessly chew the cud of communicative, symbolic, and esthetic conventions. This to remind you that culture is re-definition, re-interpretation, and re-invention: a way of exploring and mapping the world again and again and telling stories about it—commenting on the way it is, or seems to be.

11 Rem Koolhaas, *Content.* Cologne: Taschen 2004, 304.

Figure 3
Pieter Brueghel the elder (1525-1569), *Dutch Proverbs* or *The Topsy Turvy World.*

Pieter Brueghel's painting *Dutch Proverbs*, or *The Topsy Turvy World* describes the ways of behavior of his contemporaries. It not only shows his compassion for collecting, but it also exposes his skeptical, mocking view. Breughel's carnivalesque paintings are fascinating and disturbing at the same time. They combine a vision and a factual interest in the subject with a means of expression that creates unusual upside-down relationships. His method points to the tradition of the carnival that establishes an inverted order in which fools and outsiders become kings for a couple of days.

What we see is a very complex space. The vanishing point at far right and the main axis running from front left to back right, for example, are very unusual—against the grain. An intriguing aspect is also that the observer is required simultaneously to come close to the work to see details and to remain at a distance to maintain the overall view. It is fascinating and disturbing at the same time: subject, vision and visual rhetoric create an inviting plurality. We again experience the dynamics of suspense and dialectics, as in Lissitzky's work, between conventional elements and speculation, with an ironic vision as a selective force. Through its internal dialogue the work gets a dynamic character instead of the closed, classical harmony.

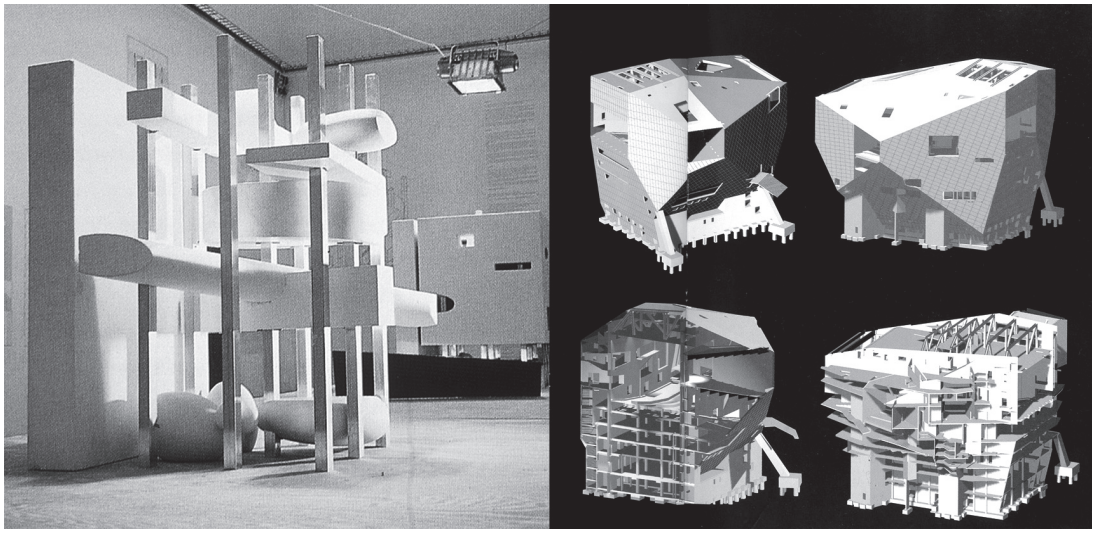


Figure 4
Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rotterdam. *Very big library,* Paris 1989 (left). *Casa da musica,* Porto 2004 (right).

It is an invitation to look and to see, to explore and interpret—to make of it what we want.

Rem Koolhaas constantly asks himself "how to make a believable building in the age of too many icons: make a public building, or make a building public, in the age of the market?" The question is how to redefine the traditional typology of the concert hall, the museum, the library, etc. Instead of struggling with form he tries to redefine the relationship between human behavior and activities. In Koolhaas' words: "It seems to be absurd to imagine the ultimate library or music hall."

His ambition clearly is to rid architecture of the responsibilities it can no longer sustain and explore the new freedom

created. Liberated from former obligations he creates a radically different dynamics and heterogeneity of activities. Koolhaas' proposal interprets the library as a solid block of information—a repository of all forms of memory; an ocean of books, movies, laser discs, microfiches, computers, databases etc. The major public spaces are defined as absences of building (pebbles), voids carved out are restaurants, a conference centre, cinemas (as much cinema as library). The Casa da Musica in Porto in the same manner has an unprecedented number of activities around the central "shoe box" of the concert hall. Being there it reveals its unusual program, without being didactic, in a refreshing, narrative staging that casts the concert hall as well as its relationship to the city in a completely new light.

I myself have always been very lucky in maintaining a "laboratory situation" for experiment parallel to the work in the studio. This practical research in many ways influences the way I deal with commissions because the go together of theoretical thinking, communicative strategy, and working method with actual experiment and artistic invention enable you to better recognize and exploit pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic opportunities. Two good examples of this combination of operative critique and practical research are my visual essay *Cultiver notre jardin* (1999)and my book *Designís delight* (2006)—both recent attempts to confront the sometimes radical nature of my thinking with the work I enjoy doing.

Figure 5
Jan van Toorn, *Cultiver notre jardin,* Nuth 1999.

Cultiver notre jardin gets its title from Voltaire's famous expression in the novel *Candide; où líoptimisme* (1759) interpreted at the back cover as: Humanity emerged from a garden, and has been living since the Fall in an imperfect landscape. That is why Voltaire exhorted us to cultivate our own garden in order to survive during uncertain times. But it is often no easy task to grow and cultivate what is peculiarly yours there, particularly at the time when the 'gardening vision' of conglomerates of institutes and systems operating at a global scale leaves less and less room for other seedlings besides their own. What is more, the dominant climate still has great influence on how the crop grows. So ever since the Garden of Eden we have little choice but to keep on bargaining with the grand design of the surrounding estates. The free space thus always remains half finished, incomplete. It is a lived paradox, and we have to get out of it what we can.

The visual essay contains color photographs of everyday scenes with people going about their lives. Behind this reality and hidden from view by the fold at the top of the pages, that the viewer is invited to cut open, are black-and-white spreads with images of the official world shaping our life: politics, media, the military, tourism, the culture industry. The color images have been manipulated digitally to give them a narrative nature undercutting their apparent authenticity.

The hundred page visual essay called "The Panorama of Habits," in the book *Design ís Delight: Method and Means of a Dialogic Practice*, presents a number of experimental projects to gain more experience in communication design as a symbolic and public practice. It proceeds from a critical position vis-à-vis the customary mediation of information.

This because it is more necessary than ever now that design operates in the entertaining and marketing spectacle of the neo-liberal world order as an instrument for the colonization of human existence. Unlike the classic form of visual communication, the dialogic approach is a

Figure 6
Jan van Toorn, The panorama of habbits. *Design's delight*, Rotterdam 2006.

Figure 6 (continued)
Jan van Toorn, The panorama of habbits. *Design's delight*, Rotterdam 2006.

connective model of visual rhetoric with a polemic and polyphonic visual form. A storytelling structure that seeks to reveal the opposing elements of the message and opts for active interpretation by the spectator. The images and form of the panorama are connected with the challenge to break through the uncontested obsessions of the media. Although the subjects perhaps are sometimes disturbing or plainly dramatic, I hope, the "heretical" pleasure with which I worked on it evokes something of the pleasure that I had when making the essay.

This text, like the original Beijng talk, is meant to introduce the vitality of an inspiring tradition in communication design—to confront you with the challenge we face as designers to swim against the tide of pragmatism and work on a real democratic, multi-faceted, but not hybrid, media use, creating an alternative atlas of the world as a contribution to the general debate of how we move forward in the real.

I tried to show how different are the circumstances we work in as designers from those we dare to think of most of the time. I believe, that communication design is threatened both from the outside and the inside. We certainly cannot easily change the outside conditions, but inside we surely can. It is alarming that the design community does not fulfill its public, political role. First, because independent formation of opinion by non-illusional argumentative forms of information and affects is needed more than ever before. And second, because the contemporary media situation, in particular new media, offers us unprecedented opportunities for experiment and circulation—free spaces we do not really exploit. Which is to say, that the room for maneuver exists elsewhere: in the awakening of our minds and hands.