Designature!

On the eco-relational paradigm

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Talking about design activism at least implies one thing: we're talking politics. But not politics in the strict sense of parliamentary or representational politics. We have to take into account the debate on politics that has been articulated over the past 50 years. Crucial in this debate is the distinction between politics and the political – Claude Lefort coined this in French la politique and le politique. Le politique or the political stands for the determining influence of power structures on collective – and by implication on individual – consciousness. Activism that wants to change collective behavior, focuses with its artistic interventions on this collective consciousness. Over the last decades it has targeted the discourse that legitimate the power relations and practices that have affirmed modern man's so called deep intuitions on race, gender, identity, in short, on all the universal markers of modern subjectivity that are deeply rooted in the hegemonic discourse of modernity. These have been deconstructed one by one in the last decades of the 20th century. Design activism builds upon their successes. My analysis of our present situation also starts from these deconstructions, but reaches beyond the resulting fragmentation that has been labelled rather simplistic as postmodernism.

At the basis of this analysis lies the critical work of French philosophers of difference – some still label them as post-structuralists – thinkers like Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. Their main inspiration was Friedrich Nietzsche. The very same Nietzsche that revalued aesthetics at the end of the 19th century by introducing the tensional connection between Dionysian vitalism and Apollonian formalism, between life force and a visual power regime. Nietzsche's main target was the modern myth of the individual. In exposing western culture to its own nihilistic tendencies, he proposed a revaluation of all values in order to revitalize culture. The Overman, Will to power and the Eternal Recurrence are the conceptual triangle in which he envisions this new culture. His revaluation, to my opinion, is still viable in present day design activism.

Yet, Nietzsche did not write about design. But we should realize that in the very period of his productive life – the 17 years between the 1872 publication of Birth of Tragedy and the 1889 published Dionysos-Dithyrambs, after which he entered the darkness that surrounded him for more than 10 years – in his productive years, design started to position itself internationally, especially in England. By combining craftsmanship with artistic creativity, dreaming of a new world, William Morris' Arts & Crafts Movement set the tone for what was to come. From then on design focused on three paradigmatic themes: the role of craft in design, design's ambiguous relationship to art - especially the avant-garde - and the designer's social and ethical responsibility. And although it was only after Nietzsche's death in 1900 that the Vienna Workshop and the German Werkbund came into existence, Nietzsche's death is forever linked to design history, due to the simple fact that the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar
was redesigned in 1902 by the Belgian Art Nouveau inspired architect and designer Henry van de Velde. His expressive mindset also vibrates in organic patterns of Antoni Gaudí’s *modernismo* here in Barcelona. Gaudí too dreamt of a new culture that he envisioned in the most unconventional organic forms. In the eminent tradition of the architects of cathedrals more than anyone else Gaudí knew that realizing this takes time. For that matter, Van de Velde was one of the most influential teachers of Bauhaus that was established in 1919 by Van de Velde's successor Walter Gropius.

One of Bauhaus’ basic concepts was developed during Nietzsche’s lifetime by one of his early inspirators, the composer Richard Wagner. As it happens, Nietzsche, being the youngest professor at the Swiss University of Bern, was highly influenced by Wagner. As a controversial composer he introduced a cultural political concept in aesthetics that inspired many architects, designers, painters, sculptors and composers after him. As a revolutionary bandmaster during the 1849 revolts in Dresden - the aftermath of revolutionary year 1848 - Wagner spent his days with socialists and anarchists like Bakunin. He inspired workers in their fights on the barricades. After his escape to Paris he returned to Zurich and published a series of essays, *The Art Work of the Future*, introducing the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the total work of art, a synthesis of all poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts. In this text he makes the following statement:

"In everything I do and feel I am only an artist. If I had to manifest myself in public life, – as an artist I cannot get a grip on it – and act like a politician, God preserve me! (...) Publicity I cannot strive for, my artistic salvation is only possible when publicity strives for me. This publicity, for which I can only create, is just a small community of individuals that form my audience." (265)

In Wagner’s proto-avant-garde statement most keywords of design activism are given: artist, politician, public, publicity, community. One hears the utopian intention, Wagner’s urge to a total work of arts, as Harald Szeemann once coined it. So next to politics, design activism traditionally had tight bonds with avant-garde art.

Is there more to say? Of course, but then we have to bridge almost 160 years, spanning the modern design history after the abolition of the guilds in 1798 at the offset of the industrial revolution. In the next 40 minutes I will perform this immense jump to counter the fatal *salto mortale* of speculative capitalism. We have to bridge at least three paradigms to reach the year of 2009, the year of Darwin, the courageous critic of God’s Intelligent Design. 2009 is also the year that the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, the father of deep ecology, another Grand Design, died. And without suggesting to much, it was the very same year that Alastair Fuad-Luke published his book on design activism. Fuad-Luke proposes this preliminary definition:

“Design activism is ‘design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional environmental and/or economic change’

Change is the target of activism. Next to politics (FL: practice) and art (FL: imagination) FL adds a third structural feature to design activism: thinking. In combination with the strategic imperative ‘to create a counter-narrative’ – I prefer to call this in reference to the aforementioned thinkers of difference: a counter-discourse – philosophy becomes the third element.

Now we have filtered down the post-utopian extract of design activism, let’s for a moment return to Fuad-Luke’s definition. “Design activism is ‘design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional environmental and/or economic change’” (27)

Parallel to his suggestion I want to make three shifts to perform a salto vitale as a triple jump: with the first hop to art I will show that the issue of the avant-garde has not been the autonomous creative individual that signed and authorized his works of art, but intermediality, i.e. interdisciplinary artistic research aiming at the realization of a total work of art. With the next move I step over to philosophy to make an argument for a relational mediaphilosophy. I will finish the triple jump with an enormous leap to politics, introducing a post-utopian, 21st century variation of the total work of art that might inspire design activism. Strangely enough Nietzsche’s focus on time appear to be productive.

I’ll conclude this tour de force with a short illustration: the urban renovation project in Rotterdam that I am working on – as supervisor/director of Rotterdam Skillcity – in cooperation with architects, designers, philosophers, scientists, artists and urban planners.

0. A short history

But first we have to speed up and run up for the triple jump. I will do this by very roughly sketching the three paradigmatic shifts that design has gone through over the past two centuries. That'll prepare us for the jump into the unfolding paradigm in out days. Inspired by the ideas of John Ruskin the early designers started to experiment with plastic languages of forms: a grammar of forms. This developed into a kind of 3D visual syntax. It took them nearly one century. In the 20th century avant-garde art was an important inspiration for politically engaged designers. The second matrix for designers explicated itself after the Second World War, reaching its peak in the 1960s. Grammar and syntax – the play of forms – are supplemented by semantics. Linking itself to the visual language of the mass media, design becomes a story in itself. In a semiotic turn the sign value of products is capitalized. Products are transformed into symbolic capital, they become investments into a distinctive lifestyle, acknowledged by all those individuals that shared a specific taste. As a status object, design becomes meta-functional in an away way, useful in its uselessness. Long before Richard Florida dropped the concept of cultural capital as the core business of creative industry, Bourdieu’s theory of distinction explained this cultural capitalisation. As Philip Starck puts it, standing on the threshold between the 2nd and the 3rd paradigm, talking about his famous Juicy Salif lemon juicer: “My juicer is not meant to squeeze lemons; it is meant to start conversations.” The juicer remains functional as a provoker of discourse.
With the globalisation of the digital revolution at the beginning of the 1990s the third
paradigm of design unfolded itself. Designers become more autonomous than ever now they
are in charge of the infrastructure. The big issue for designers, working within the global
economy, is interactivity. A concept that I prefer to understand most literally as the
autonomous act of what happens in between, the inter. This interactivism is explicated in
Marshall McLuhan slogan 'the medium is the message'. The designer's autonomy rests on this
medial autonomy. I will coin this state of being later in my talk as radical mediocrity, i.e.
rooted in the media that rule our daily lives. By the nineties creativity of artists has emigrated
out of their inner world into an in between space. This was already happening in avant-garde
art practices: the creative quality of performance art, installation art, and land art is constituted
in interaction with their audiences. In design this inbetweenness is ideologically present in
open design, in working with Linux. On a more commercial level client panels and consumer
groups coproduce the product with designers and producers. Producers and consumers turn
into prosumers. Interactivity thus spans the space between disciplines, between different
media and between people. So, after the individualisation of design the three decades after the
Second World War, with the invention of the personal computer and even more after the
introduction of Internet at the beginning of the nineties this relational quality comes to the
fore. Ideologically, the demand for more democracy, transparency and participation in the
Neweconomy strengthened this process. This 'inter' is a psycho-technological quality of
modern life. Men and media define each other. As a result the human condition gradually
starts to change.

After grammar, syntax and semantics, pragmatics becomes imperative. By the time we all
started to debate with Arthur Danto on the so-called 'end of art' and Francis Fukuyama
announced the 'end of history' terms like 'crossover', 'interdisciplinary', 'multimedia' and
'interactivity' were already accepted as crucial markers of this relational paradigm. So, in the
history of modern design, we can retrospectively discern a shift from form via content to
context, from syntax via semantics to pragmatics – from "How does it look?" via "What does
it mean for me?" to "How does it connect us?"

1. Design and art: intermediality

Okay, by now we have reach the proper speed to start the first hop of the triple jump: design
and art. Design is rooted in aesthetics. The aesthetic urge within each design – be it a tool, a
gadget, an interior, a webpage, a building, a town - strives for functionality, consistency and
perfection. Every detail refers to the goal and the whole, to a regulated totality. Yet, the
sublime awareness that design shares with avant-garde art, reminds every creator of the
impossibility to realize the perfect product. That would break the spell of progress and lead us
to the temptation of godlike powers or totalitarian politics.

This sublime awareness has always been part of avant-garde tradition (for that matter, quite a
paradoxical wording). When we look back on this tradition the first thing that comes to the
mind is a combination of works of art and their ingenious creators, like Duchamp, Picasso,
Dali, Warhol, Gilbert & George, Benys, to name only a few. The emphasis is always on the
creative individual. But on a closer look avant-garde art is foremost a self-reflexive
experiment with forms that turn into methods. In deforming and reforming the obvious and self-evident, in combining what is not yet connected – interdisciplinary, multimedial –, in revolutionizing the gaze of the perceiver, in shocking and transforming their sensibility, avant-garde art practices are through and through interdisciplinary. In tricky combination artistic and scientific media reflect upon each other: Duchamp’s installations, Picasso’s use of texts in painting, Dali’s Venus with drawers, Warhol’s mixed media, Gilbert & George’s life statues, Beuys’ interaction with a coyote. What is at stake in the avant-garde art is not the signature of the artist, but the anonymous play of forms and the act of the in between. I call this the intermedial.

But all these works are signed by one author. His signature unifies the works into a consistent oeuvre. And in the final instance, after the artist has died, they become expressions of his total work of art: his own life. In this way the Gesamtkunstwerk or total work of art regulated many avant-garde practices. Individual artists lived up to their art. Kurt Schwitters created his life by making all these interdisciplinary and multimedia performances, as did the surrealists and later Jeff Koons with his Cicciolina. Nowadays artist are less able to hold everything together in digital world that knows exactly how productive sharing can be. The urge to the total work of art is now to be found with pop stars and film actors, but also with architects like Rem Koolhaas, film directors like Peter Greenaway and Lars von Trier.

So, what is my point? The act of the inter – interactivity – is not a recent invention of the digital age: it has been a concealed structural feature of avant-garde art too. Co-creativity has always been part of the avant-garde tradition. Even Picasso admitted that ‘bad artists copy and great artists steal’. Poor Juan Gris. In my research I labeled this feature intermediality. Intermediality factually points in the direction of co-creation and coproduction, but the 20th century avant-garde art ideology does not allow this focus.

Therefore I share Fud-Luke’s critical analysis of the modern avant-garde in his book on Design activism when he concludes that the avant-garde is ‘an aristocratic body of the initiated’ that ‘must fight on two fronts simultaneously against the bourgeois culture of which it is an off spring and against popular culture’(26). So according to Fud-Luke if avant-garde art wants to make a serious contribution to design activism nowadays it has to change “its elite culture first before that group can then in turn extend influence over a wider socio-cultural or political group”(26) no longer serving itself solely. They have to become part of a co-creative process and of co-production. In my terminology: the first task for designers is not to become autonomous artists, but to radicalize the idea of sharing. Copy left instead of copyright is only one variation. The main task is to De-signature.

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3 See for a more extended presentation my lecture “Honorable Copyright” in Berlin, May 2011: http://www.premsela.org/designworld/copyculture/

4 See: Mieke Gerritzen/ Geert Lovink (ed.), Everyone is a designer! Manifest for the design economy, BIS Publishers, Amsterdam 2004, p.117
2. Design and philosophy: worldview and human condition

This huge hop allows us to make the big step connecting design with philosophy. Why philosophy? In her editorial to volume 5 of The Design Journal of 2002 editor Rachel Cooper raises the rhetorical question whether design is in a philosophical crisis? Being a philosopher myself, I think she has a point. But in order to answer this question adequately I must radicalize Cooper's question in two ways. First we have to make clear what the specific philosophical quality of a crisis is. Philosophical is at least the insistence in asking what kind of worldview lies behind the options that design brings to the fore: how does the world turn? And what kind of philosophical-anthropological presuppositions are hiding behind the designer's claims: what is Man doing in this turning world? If design shares its urge to a total work of art with the avant-garde, than it must be prepared to aestheticize these ontological claims: then the world too is a design and so is our human condition. That does not mean that every individual can at random choose how to live in whatever world he chooses. There are some restrictions, not in the least on an ethical level. Design, we have seen, is not an individual endeavor. It is a shared project within a totality that can never be grasped as a Whole because then we would place ourselves outside this whole. A regress ad infinitum. That means that both options – world and man – are fundamentally open to change and that people constitute that change. Together they shape their world. All are equal, but as George Orwell so eloquently phrased, some are more equal than others. A very few have more influence – and power and money – than others. This political-economic insight and political-ethical imperative must be the core of design activism.

The philosophical claim of design concerns man's possibility to decide to make his life part of a world that claims to be a total work of art, but as an open design. This was at least what Michel Foucault had in mind when he developed the idea of an aesthetics of existence in his latest books just before he died in 1984. And perhaps this is what Fuad-Luke means when he asks himself: “Is there a meta-challenge, an overarching challenge, tying this seemingly disparate lexicon of design approaches/frameworks together?”

This challenge is not new. It has always been part and parcel of our philosophical tradition. Philosophers always have been looking for the unshakable foundations of reality from which the essence of man was deduced. Tell me who your god is and I know who you are. Metaphysics and theology have been the result of this research. But since the deconstruction of theologically based metaphysics – starting with Nietzsche - science started to design. Supernova's, black holes, snares, DNA strings, top spinning quarks. In 2010 Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow published their state of the arts astrophysical option under the title Grand Design. Every culture, every civilization has its own version. Daoism has an option, so has Japanese Shinto, Buddhism, and Hinduism. They all open the window to the Whole. But the same goes for Southern and Northern world views from Native American tribes to African ethno philosophies. All offer answers to how the world turns and what Man essentially is. And they all share the urge to realize their totality. For the better or the worse.

From radical mediocrity to interesse
So let us take our design's earlier claim serious. When we uphold the aesthetic urge of design, we have to reconsider these metaphysical claims and ask ourselves - in our search for the our present paradigm, our present counter-narrative as Fuad-Luke formulated it at the beginning of his book — what is our human condition now and here might be, given the present state of the world. If in retrospective intermediality was the core business of avant-garde art and post-avant-garde design takes this as an inspiration for its activism — and not the creative individual - what does this mean for an activist analysis of our worldview and human condition? Are we (still) autonomous individuals as modern subjects, as Immanuel Kant claimed at the end of the 18th century?

I don't think so. As Marshall McLuhan already stated in 1964: Not Man but "The Medium is the message". As an in between the medium (middle, means) acts autonomously and man follows suit, nonetheless thinking that he is still in charge. Medium in McLuhan's analysis is a very extensive concept: next to TV and radio he shows how phones, spectacles, microscopes, typewriters, cars, planes, and computers created their own experiential fields that gradually became basic needs for peoples. Media situate us vis-à-vis each other, they are relational, forming a dynamic midfield, a creative in-between. It is creative because once we implement a new medium, it generates many more use values, that we must explore. These use values becomes valuable experiences and these experiences finally become basic needs without which we cannot live. The mobile phone did not exist 30 years ago, the car only came into the world at the end of the 19th century. They now define our basic needs.

Media render our environment transparent. All media eventually become self-evident. In this strict psycho-technological sense, our lives are mediocre. Media rule the world. That is our mediocrity (kratein). This mediocrity is even radical although this sounds paradoxical. Media - Iphone, car GPS systems, TomTom — have become our roots to the world. That makes our mediocrity radical ('radix' means 'root'). Imagine a day without all these media. You are lost. McLuhan's other slogan "The medium is the massage" pointed to the frictionlessness of our — i.e. Western — existence: we are massaged into a system of extreme comfort. Precisely because of this pleasurable comfort, media feel like second nature, like a bespoke suit. This state of being is our human condition as radical mediocrity.

That hurts, especially for creative, autonomous individuals as we are. But precisely here lies the challenge. Once we gain insight in our radical mediocrity and accept that we are nodes in networks that exist because we are always connected and so per definition share our lives with others, we suddenly perceive the abundance a luxury of an exponential increase in relations. But if you cannot cope this abundance you have to defriend, that is obvious. I'll come to the difference between physical and digital later. But one way or the other we are always in between, related, connected, in short, ontologically engaged. Engagement is not a choice. Forgetting is a choice and on the run a routine. We can only repress the experience of being connected. So to my opinion design activism should promote the self-reflective consciousness of a being-in-between, of being a medium yourself, of being embedded in relations.

As such radical mediocrity can be redefined simply as interest. Literally: inter-es-t, being in between. This ontological inter-es-t is the lining, the interior of an unreflected, radically
mediocre life. In English the word ‘interest’ has a double capture: economical/commercial as something that is good for business and aesthetical/ethical as an attitude of open design. It has a touch of the aesthetic as far as relations are strived for for their own sake. As such interest is the core business of a relational philosophy that in its turn is based on a media philosophy. This ontological primacy of relations undermines the ideology of hyper individualism and identity based consumerism. Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and all the other philosophers of difference have painstakingly deconstructed the autonomous subject, showing how an individual is always a ‘we’ first, a plural, and only an ‘I’ as a derivative. We are always ‘individuals’ first – we have dividend in communal life, we have shares, we are shareholders from the start – and only afterwards we become ‘individuals’ – those who do not share.

Let me phrase this in network theoretical terms. Individuals are nodes in a network. They are during their raising and education woven into the world. They are connected to each other through media that, once they constitute our milieu, disappear as tools and become paradigmatic. Media have become a discourse that enables us to speak. But we no longer critically discuss them on their productive power. The counter-discourse or counter-narrative that design activism aims at should make design into a discourse. The design of the act of the ‘inter’. This ‘interesse’ is not only central in the work of Peter Sloterdijk and the aforementioned French thinkers, it also forms the crux of Hannah Arendt’s work. In a recent book by one of her former students, the sociologist Richard Sennett, this inter-esse is expressed in a value extremely relevant to designers: craftsmanship.

We have bridged an enormous distance and can come to a simple conclusion. Design, we may conclude after this analysis, is a discourse beyond theory and practice. It is a way of life. Finding and expressing our form in not universalizing those. What we have experienced the past decades is an existentialization of design as an in-between attitude: our Dasein – as philosophers form Heidegger to Sloterdijk have coined it – our full being is designed. In a catchy phrase: Dasein is design. Design has been democratized. In Emotional Design (2004), the cognitive scientist Don Norman argues that design products influence us in three ways: we react out of deep-seated affect (viscerally), with an eye toward comfort (behaviorally), and reflectively. This division maps onto the parts of the brain: the stem, limbic system and neocortex. And he concludes his book with a strong statement. “We are all designers,” (224) According to him, design is relational by definition.

3. Design and politics: interested publicity beyond the private/public opposition

After the hop and the step we now have enough impact to leap to politics. This is always a tricky business. After all, you can get corrupted by compromising to much. I’ll come back to that at the end of my talk. In order to connect design’s activism to art’s intermediality and philosophy’s radical mediocrity and interest, we first have to trace the very medium of design

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activism. The answer is simple: public space. That explains that Hannah Arendt also lies on the ground as the foundation for her political theory in her book The Human Condition from 1958. But in Arendt's days public space - let's call it 'publicity' - was more or less completely a physical issue. Of course, there was radio, TV was already the center of the sitting room, and Vance Packard has criticized advertisements as hidden persuaders in 1957, but the virtual dimension in which our kids are installed before they are even born, getting a site before uttering their first cry, was not yet installed.

Politically engaged artists and designers always have worked in public space, changing its quality, varying from Mexican murals, communist agit prop, political posters in squat circles, pieces and tags nowadays. In digital space the strategies are innumerable, with adbusters only as an exemplary case. The issue is changing the code. Or in the terminology of Deleuze & Guattari: decode and recode in the very same gesture. This implicit folding makes design reflexive and draws it to the level of Faud-Luke's thinking. This is however a visual thinking, a broadened sensibility for the universal language nowadays, that, at least according to Peter Greenaway, compared with the literal tradition is still in an infantile state. Changing the visual code needs a new discourse. Design can add this extra-discursive dimension, changing visuals into a discourse. The reading is not conceptual, but, again according to Deleuze, 'sensational': creating new, i.e. unique percepts and affects. Sensitizing recipients for new codes.

In the beginning of my talk I spoke about the difference between politics and the political. Sensitizing audiences for new codes is part of the political, but it also has its consequences for politics in a more strict sense. Not only the mind is moved by visuals, the affects move bodies as well. Politics is beyond modern oppositions as mind/body or private/public. When people are nodes in networks there is not even a clear opposition between individual and collective. In our digitalized global world private and public are intertwined completely. Still we act as if there still exist a private world.

Let me give a kinky example. As a board member of the advisory board of the chief of the metropolitan police of Rotterdam I dealt with a specific case within the police force, some 8 years ago. At the end of the 90ies the computerization of the force became substantial. Yet the attitude of police officers was based on old intuitions. During night shifts at the bureau police officers got bored while waiting. They passed their time browsing porno sites. Nowadays, technologically older and wiser, this is unthinkable. But in the mind of a policeman private begins at the front door of a non-public building. The idea of being alone in the still of the night, with no one else in the room but yourself, autonomously choosing what is meant for your eyes only, was the ultimate expression of the private. You need not be a policeman to share this experience. What they did not realize was the digital embedding of their visual experiences. They were caught afterwards by the provider that was looking for other data, and fired. In digital times private is already public. We no longer need people to spy on other people. We identify ourselves in using our digital gadgets. We have become our own spies.
The same counts for our experience of the public space. Over the years we have gradually territorialized public space with private cells. Next to our automobiles, our cars as an identity driven mobile home, the mobile phone promoted cellular consciousness. Encapsulated in digital cocoons we have privatized public space. The next situation is not hard to picture: sitting in the morning train with six people in a compartment, at least five of them texting or talking on their Iphone or Ipad. Imagine two people on either side of a central square downtown phoning each other. Public has become private. In the Netherlands a law will be passed soon that forbids the use of mobile phones in public spaces. Isn't that interesting? I don't think you will all be in favor of this law.

Once the opposition between private and public is deconstructed by the very technologies that connect private life to public life, other oppositions start collapsing like a row of dominos. All modern oppositions are by now overdetermined by tensional vectors that crisscross the time/space of a globalized world that is actual in all its dimensions. Standing on the Ramblas now here, we can phone, browse, text with everyone all over the world and the effects are immediately implemented in our physical exposure. Local = global. The now here can be everywhere, i.e. no where. Virtual does not mean possible but not yet realized – that is the old Aristotelian/Hegelian potential - , virtual means directly effectuated in actual scenario's as real options. Just remember what is happening recently on the stock markets all over the globe. This is not a fictitious game of speculative idiots. The physical effects are felt in the families that suddenly are out of cash flow because the jobs have gone. This actuality is the core business of interactivism.

*Time/space continuum: the end of history*

We reached the end of history. This does not mean we all fall in a dark hole, when we step out of our front door. It means that the discourse we for centuries applied to understand and legitimate our collective policies is hollowed out, emptied. This also means that we have outlived a linear time concept in which the idea of historical change for the better, of progression for the sake of progression has played a decisive role. In premodern times this reaching out for an all encompassing Whole that unites the parts had a religious quality. Modern politics transformed this into a secular goal: in inspired utopian imagination. This has been projected into the future as an ever increasing self-conscious emancipatory project. At the end of history this totality would be realized. However, till now we have only seen the derailed results: Nazism, fascism, Stalinism and a neo-conservatist neo-liberalism that was initially hailed, but eventually dismissed by Francis Fukuyama.

All of these utopian nightmare's exclude groups of people and externalize the dark aspects of their project. Deportation, extermination, pollution, off shoring and outsourcing. At the end of history we come to realize that we can no longer externalize the bad effects of our policies and internalize only the good ones, i.e. authorize and appropriate these by means of our signature. We have to designate and start designing our nature collectively by internalizing what we don't want to accept.

5. 4th paradigm: eco-social design
French philosophers of difference have insisted on the production of new forms of subjectivity. Activism as the ongoing and systematic effort to act aims at producing agency – both words have the same stem: the Latin word ‘agere’ to act. As such it is the core business of the philosophical concept ‘subjectivity’. What is the agency of the new paradigm? Our present condition humaine is perfectly in sync with the Latin expression ‘in-media-ress’: being in the middle of things. We never start at the beginning. We are always already part of a process that links to other processes. Everything influences everything and every act eventually returns to itself. This recurrence is a material reflection of the system. Mental ecology, as Gregory Bateson called it. It may take a long time, but with climate change as the exemplary feedback loop system, we by now all are aware of the fact that designing on this level takes time. More time than destroying it. There is urgency, except for all those that accept that the struggle for life means being prepared to die on the spot, i.e. not to take the responsibility for future generations. For those the now here is all there is, which ideologically means that they are nowhere.

It was already formulated, from the Bruntland report up to C2C, and even Philippe Starck agrees nowadays: we have to take an intergenerational responsibility in a globalized world based on a fundamental system-theoretical, cybernetics and as such a fundamental ecological insight. The linear was already cyclical, but by compartmentalizing this time/space we thought we could stretch both to what now appear to be unbearable proportions. As I pointed out as to the avant-garde art every creation is co-creation, every production a co-production, and so is every futuring a co-futuring. So, let us start the decent to earth after our immense salto vitale and return to the basic question of design activism.

Global actuality is the activist’s version of Now and Here. This nowhere as a flow of spaces is connected to the Whole. Everything is related and as such the Now Here is virtually all there is. This might sound too philosophical, too sophisticated, i.e. nonsensical. Yet, this might be precisely the situation we are in now: the end of an era, the shift to a new paradigm, in short, the end of history. Well, at least of linear history as the substantial basis for linear ever growing productivity that we use to call progress. Time will not end, that is for sure. But as the snake that bites its tail, time will be reinvested in itself. Time once again has to become cyclical. The political-economic implication is precisely what has been conceptualized as a sustainable economy, based upon renewable resources. The ontological implication is a human condition that does no longer externalize its waste and by bending his productivity back upon itself, is strengthened by immanent reflectivity (cybernetics, recurrence, feedback, loops). This sounds like a mystical form of life and as such a religious point of view. Yet, it is the most secular and critical spirituality I can think of.

Activism has always been part of design history, especially in graphic design from agit prop to adbusters. Reflecting upon recent design activism, we now realize that, due to digitalization and globalization, we are in the midst of a new paradigm shift: an eco-relational paradigm. This shift is must be political-economically motivated, because design itself is deeply embedded in commercial activities and linear production lines. The waste problem is crucial and we should not ignore the role of design in producing waste. At the same time we must realize that design is integrally embedded in all aspects of our lives. Our full being, both in
public and in private, is designed. The cultivation of our lives – that is: lives in the Western World - is maximized: even nature is redesigned by man to avoid the total collapse of most ecosystems. Real nature only hits us as a catastrophe. The rest is designed or left alone.

I cannot resist the temptation to make a critical remark before I turn to my illustration. In the call for papers, I read: “design activism distances itself from commercial or mainstream public policy-driven approaches. Instead, it embraces marginal, non-profit or politically engaged design theories, articulations and actions”. This sounds very avant-gardist. Of course anarchism is also my favorite sport and I don’t want to bite the hand that feeds me. But let’s be honest: designers have always only nibbled the hands that fed them. Their expertise and creative drive forced them to reschedule the mindset of their patrons who were most of the time visually completely blind. Like architects – and unlike painters, sculptors or pop musicians - graphic designers were hired and paid to deliver the message to the potential clients of the product, industrial designers to optimize the sign and economic value, and interior designers to suit the taste of their patrons. Of course these had to be convinced if not educated in visual language. So till digital times dawned they stylized their resistance in convincing their patrons of their own ideas. Nothing wrong with that.

The current design paradigm is still largely enveloped within the values and imperatives of commercial enterprise. The lines of production are linear and the costs that are involved - resources, infrastructure, and waste – are still externalized: cheap labor and waste drops outside the Western world or using tax payers money to create infrastructure. The real challenge is perhaps to stay working from within. That is sometimes even harder because, instead of solely opposing you are obliged to create the big picture, the meta-narrative with your group in such a convincing way that policymakers, commercial enterprises and politicians are seduced to cooperate. That means that, parallel to the public interest that has to be organized, the total work of art needs to be addressed. That is hard, but not impossible.

(Follows the implementation of these ideas and concepts in the urban design project Rotterdam Skillcity\(^6\) and the HAKA\(^7\) project of Doepel Strijkers Architects\(^8\) in the harbor area renovation project Stadshavens\(^9\))

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\(^6\) [http://www.vakmanstad.nl/Skill_City.html](http://www.vakmanstad.nl/Skill_City.html)

\(^7\) [http://www.dsarotterdam.com/#!/projects/70/KRINGLOOP+KANTOOR++HAKA/](http://www.dsarotterdam.com/#!/projects/70/KRINGLOOP+KANTOOR++HAKA/)

\(^8\) [http://www2.our.nl/fw/cfk/](http://www2.our.nl/fw/cfk/)

\(^9\) [http://stadshavensrotterdam.nl/eng](http://stadshavensrotterdam.nl/eng)