CRITIQUE, LANGUAGE AND STRATEGY IN MARTÍ GUIXÉ’S ‘EX-DESIGNER’

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes designer Martí Guixé’s use of the term ‘ex-designer’ as a critical self-labelling strategy in the context of contemporary design. Introduced in 2001 and presented publicly in 2002 as a social tool meant to permit a widened space of professional practice, ‘ex-designer’ constitutes an unusual case of the use of the prefix ‘ex’ in the distinction of a cultural current or movement. The specific use of the term by Guixé has varied over time and does not allow for interpretative consistency, though the idea of establishing a critical position with regards to mainstream or conventional design has always been maintained. This first part of this paper analyzes the critical, strategic and linguistic ramifications of Guixé’s ‘ex-designer’ in the context of his work, examining the possible motives for its genesis, its specific uses and its activist effectiveness. The second part of the paper offers a terminological and typological reflection on comparable operations of differential labelling in art and design, with special consideration for the use of the prefix ‘ex’ in the history of modern culture.

MAIN TEXT
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1. Introduction

Designer Martí Guixé developed the term ‘ex-designer’ as a label for his professional identity in 2001. Since it is still in use, or at least was until quite recently, it would be fair to argue that it is not yet ready for design history. In this paper we introduce and analyze the term ‘ex-designer’ over the period of its employ, understanding it as well as a catalyst for the study of historical strategies of critique and their linguistic components. ‘Ex-
designer’ thus relates to other movements of
critical intent that feature differentiating naming
or branding, where tags or labels are attached to
ideas or currents with the goal of setting out
difference.

Our reflection on ‘ex-designer’ invites us
to explore the specific prefix ‘ex’, which is highly
uncommon as a differentiating tag in critical
strategies. Most cultural historians would know
how to decipher, at least hypothetically, the
standard prefixes used in cultural naming, such as
pre, proto, super, anti, counter, post or neo, even
in placed in unexpected combinations. The prefix
‘ex’, however, leaves us hanging. Conventional
usage would have ‘ex’ signify a former and no
longer active state, defined by what once was and
not by what now is. Commonly it denotes a step
down, a state of disengagement, or a condition
still lacking in its own definition and dependent on
a previous one. It would be less usual to raise the
alternative possibility, where ‘ex’ might point to a
reality that is not in a negative or inferior
relationship to a previous reality. This, however, is
precisely what Guixé does. Finally, this paper
draws examples from the cultural history of the
last century to illuminate Martí Guixé’s specific
use of the ‘ex’ prefix in ‘ex-designer’.

In considering linguistically articulated
difference in the configuration of cultural capital
(empowered through language and thus
ideologically driven, following Bourdieu), there
remains the question of just how tags or labels
work in the edification of critique. Dealing as we
are with an active designer who has set out to
challenge the premises of conventional design
practice, apparently setting himself apart from
fellow colleague-practitioners, our analysis of
Martí Guixé’s ‘ex-designer’ might work as a sort of
test case.

The classic dichotomy here is between
legitimate critique—the effective unmasking of
the ideological underpinnings of a structure or
practice—and strategic self-labelling, which could
be taken to be fundamentally cynical (Hearn, 207-
208),2 inasmuch as its motives are grounded on
professional and economic advancement, and are
often advanced by tactical manoeuvring and
linguistic gamesmanship (as Sloterdijk describes in
Critique of Cynical Reason). All radical or avant-
garde shifts could be subject to such quandaries,
depending on how they are read sociologically. In
any case, there is evidence that full-fledged
critique can spin off into professional or economic
benefit, just as commercially viable self-branding
strategies in design could have critical derivations.
If this is the case then our ‘legitimate critique-
professional strategy’ dichotomy would no longer
be so neat.

2. Martí Guixé and ‘ex-designer’

This is not the place to review Martí
Guixé’s work overall, though a brief biographical
sketch is in order. Born in 1964, he studied at
Elisava in Barcelona from 1983 to 1985 and the
Scuola Politecnica di Design in Milan until 1987.
He then worked for a few years in industrial
design in Barcelona, followed by a stint consulting
in Korea in the mid-90s. This context is valuable as it places him developmentally in the heart of a commercially buoyant international design boom, highlighted by a rise in the social prestige of the design profession. These factors were felt in even more accentuated fashion in Spain than in other European nations. In 1997 he began the independent practice that still typifies him, with commercial and critical success in a wide variety of projects, both conventional and conceptual. Within a few years design magazines had begun to give him significant play, an attention that has not flagged. Then as now his work moves from general consulting and commercial product design (working for firms like Camper, Alessi, Droog, Saporiti, Danese, Authentics and many more) to shop interiors, applied concepts, ephemeral stands, experimental book projects, including for children, as well as event design and performances. He has exhibited frequently in visual art galleries and museums, though he cannot be said to be an easy fit in art contexts. Guixé is also known for a significant body of work related to food design (www.food-designing.com). His insistence on working with such widely construed parameters has also brought misunderstanding, a certain interpretative frivolity interpretations and outright negativity, most notably from the design profession itself.

In 2001 Guixé began to develop ‘ex-designer’, “emerging as a consequence of the decontextualization attributed to his work” (as described on the corresponding website from 2007, www.ex-designer-com). When asked for his use of the term in a 2003 interview, Guixé responded:

Initially I was not taken seriously. People said I did not make design because my work did not fit the contention [sic] (of) what fits a designer. But it was also no art, for it is always in some way commercial. So I’d better design my own category, I thought: that of the ex-designer. Now I am in a free space, a very comfortable position. (Schwartz, 104)

This version of the genesis of ‘ex-designer’ may give us the impression of a young creator who chooses to call himself ‘ex’ because he perceives his merits are not being recognized by his peers, like an unappreciated child storming out of the clubhouse and promising never to come back. Guixé has sometimes ironically played on being jilted, though the question of professional and critical misunderstanding is more complex. Guixé frequently did meet with resistance to his ideas in design circles in this early period, and as he moved into art contexts he was equally miscomprehended. Case in point was his participation in the MOMA “Workspheres” exhibition curated by Paola Antonelli in early 2001, where he presented HiBye, a pharmaceutical system for nomadic existence. A
glaring example of the unpreparedness of critics for Guixé’s subtly forged challenge to design shibboleths was a review of the show in *Artforum*, which gave us this pearl: “Marti Guixe proffered HiBye, 2001, a menu of pills that turn into socks, underwear, and other useful stuff when you gum ’em. Ugh; I prefer the Hirst version.” (Kipnis 181)

That summer Guixé was invited to speak at the Design Conference at Aspen (ICDA 2001), where the majority of those present were said to have been completely out of synch with his presentation, laughing in the wrong places and missing all the punch lines. James Culham, a critic and writer for the *Globe and Mail* who attended the conference, describes Guixé’s participation: “When I think back to that moment of design + culture in 2001, I can imagine why he’d want to be "ex". At Aspen with all the money and power around (a "Ford" here, an heiress there) there is definitely a sense of being at court and I think Marti was perhaps invited as court jester, but refused to play his part.” (Culham)

There is more to ‘ex-designer’, then, than a reaction to being professionally or critically shunned. The cited webpage text speaks of “decontextualization”. Max Borka clarifies further in an exhibition catalogue text from 2008:

Guixé launched the *Antriebsmittel ‘Ex’* with his partner Inga Knölke in 2001, and assigned himself the status of ex-designer, a title that—contrary to what is generally assumed—was not meant to be understood as a farewell to design, but a farewell to the limitations inherent to it. (Borka 7)

Guixé’s reference to a “free space”, and Borka’s signalling of design’s limitations, take on new meaning in the context of the term’s first public appearance in Berlin in 2002. The idea was presented for a contest organized through NGBK, the renowned Kreuzberg gallery, which would be used as a production centre for the project. With the premise of gathering ideas researching social space (*Soziale Raumforschung*), the contest, under the rubric *evolutionäre zellen* (evolutionary cells), called for self-commissioned work related to the structuring or shaping of social perspectives. Most of the work selected dealt with human geographies and urban sociology from an art perspective, while Guixé’s participation was simply an A3 photograph of a work table and an A3 of the same text-manifesto originally sent into the contest (Figure 1).

In this inaugural document the prefix ‘ex’ is conceived as the driving force, propellant or impulse (*antriebsmittel*) whereby a working person might acquire a new status or position. After describing how all occupations—philosophers, artists, architects—are delimited by the characteristics which define them, ‘ex’ is presented as a title that anyone might freely and democratically make use of so as to open up their
professional status, with similar consequences for their social status. Interestingly, two conventional examples of the prefix ‘ex’ plus the name of the profession (the ex-tennis player Boris Becker, and a hypothetical construction worker who falls from a scaffold and is ‘ex’ as long as he remains injured) are discounted, for:

Based on our definition, as the examples cited have not decided to work as Ex-[their profession] they can only be labelled former + [their profession]. (Guixé 6)

The German term for “former” used is “ehemalige”, which in this unusual definitional turn is taken to be incompatible with the prefix ‘ex’.

Two points should be made about this text. First, Guixé does not present ex-designer as a closed-off personal strategy, as a label only for himself, like a creative persona. Rather, he repeats a procedure that has been a constant feature of his work: the creation of a generally applicable system or protocol that might work independently of the designer. Based more on concept than on form, this protocol could then be picked up, used and interpreted by anyone. Free, via self-service. Thus ‘ex’ is conceived as a type of open source application, a conceptual freeware or no-cost app whose function is to provide people with a space beyond their occupation’s habitual space, from where to continue to work more freely.

This brings us to the second point, namely the relevance of the project for the competition it was presented for, dedicated as we have noted to the self-generated moulding of social space. The ‘ex’ presented in for the evolutionäre zellen contest was a social tool. Here too, as is habitual in Guixé’s work, conceptual appropriateness and formal flexibility were given priority over the need to clearly objectify a designed resolution.

Taken this way, ‘ex-designer’ loses all suggestion of temporality, of denoting an anticlimactic aftermath or downsizing or denouement, as used vulgarly (ex-husband, ex-president, ex-boxer). In the interview with Knölke accompanying the text, Guixé states he “decided to become an Ex-designer in 2001, because the profession of Ex-designer has no limitations”. Guixé adds: “When people see my professional title of Ex-designer they ask “So you’re not working any more?” to which I answer “I am, yes, as an Ex-designer.” (Guixé, 7)

‘Ex-designer’ went through a large number of applications since its inception. In 2003 Guixé developed a series of phrases for Cha Chá in Barcelona called Social Textures, where new social identities, ‘ex-designer’ included, are featured on t-shirts, mugs and other objects (other identities included DJ, Chef, Social Artist, Consumer and Permanent Tourist) (Figure 2). In the same year the text from the Berlin project was reproduced in Libre de Contexte, a book published by Birkhäuser coinciding with a show at the mu.dac, Lausanne. The term was used as the title of an exhibit at
Trico in Tokyo in 2006 (Figure 3). Over the years a number of individuals—including visual artists and designers (some of them are featured on the website), though the numbers hardly justify the enthusiasm of one Wikipedia editor, who calls ‘ex-designer’ a movement.

The idea is picked up by numerous critics, usually with a degree of favourable intrigue, though there are exceptional attempts to critique the Guixé project. One example was the writer of a 2005 Intramuros piece:

“He’s position, and his output, or rather his non-output set him apart. In short, his position is like that of Jean Baudrillard, and is summed up in the idea that ‘everything nowadays is a mockery, so it’s no use being green or ecological, or working outside the market because everything is implacably consumable’. It remains to be decided how pertinent this is as an approach and just how tenable a position it is politically, because of course one could always adopt the opposite approach—like Marcuse—and take a line of resistance.” (Albertazzi 104)

This would seem to be a wildly inaccurate reading of Guixé’s work. For one, it mistakes his acute sensibility to conditioning context and his respect for design’s necessary commercial ground for a type of cliché, postmodern anything goes. Contradictorily, Guixé is distinguished by his “non-output”, but is then said to offer no response to consumerism. It is also odd that Marcusian resistance might be the alternative response to Guixé’s supposed complicity with postmodern nihilism.

If anything, and in retrospect, Guixé could be challenged for the way the ‘ex-designer’ term has been moved around, and particularly for his lack of interest in upholding the particularly acute concept of ‘ex’ as social tool as presented in 2002. It is frequent for Guixé to resort to the term as a way of setting himself off from the rigidity of design practice, and in doing so he has not always avoided posturing or bravado, which here too are often intentional. There is a sense he has not always kept the term under control. ‘Ex-designer’ cannot be interpreted on the basis of theoretical or programmatic consistency, yet its volatility could well be ground for its questioning.

True to this analysis, in 2007 the choice was made to give a new twist to the term: it was announced as a brand and presented as such at Barcelona’s H2O gallery. The ‘ex-designer’ website, from that time, included a new summary of the term’s use, pictures of fellow ex-designers, and images from the show. The press release style phrase reads as follows: “Ex-designer is a brand
that manufactures products designed by ex-designers”. This promise was never to be fulfilled, suggesting that Guixé was playing with the rhetorically categorical forms and language of commercial brand presentation.

The H2O show included a screen with the ex-designer logo and another with pictures of fellow ex-designers, a business model sketched out on a framed poster and, most notably, a poster featuring a personal-professional genealogy that situates ‘ex-designer’ within Guixé’s developmental process (Figure 4). The large poster was designed with Octavi Rofes, who has written frequently on Guixé’s work. The poster takes its format, colour scheme and graphic principle of evolutionary arrows from first MOMA director Alfred Barr’s famous chart indicating the development of cubism and abstract art, from 1936 (Figure 5). One surprising feature in the Guixé chart is the “postponement” of ‘ex-designer’ to 2007, as if it had not existed before then (usually avant-garde genealogies are falsifyingly precocious, scratching for the earliest possible reference to establish priority). This was perhaps part of the ruse of ex-designer’s unveiling as a novel brand identity. Accentuating this, flowers arranged in a vase and placed on the floor near the poster were part of a deliberate attempt to give the unveiling a corporate feel.

Instead of Barr’s large font title, the Guixé poster features the original German of the well-known opening quote from Marx’s The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.” It is the same text where Marx argues that men make their own history, but not as they please, not as something to be selected freely; history is made under the circumstances passed down from the past. We are left to wonder whether for Guixé “designer” might be history in the form of tragedy, and “ex-designer” its reappearance as farce, as a whimsically critical and humorous representation of improbable situations told in heightened fashion.

3. Differential labelling

Having reflected on Martí Guixé’s “ex-designer”, it is the moment to step back and away, picking up on a selection of historical references with the idea of setting up points of typological comparison. I refer to the matter introduced at the start of this paper, the exercise of distinction by means of specific, telegraphed labelling, and its resonance for both critique and strategy.

One question concerns how names are settled upon and become fixed indicators of a concept, movement or tendency. The second concerns the prefix “ex” more specifically, given its limited though rather fascinating use in modern cultural history.

With regards to the first question, we know that for the majority of major movements in art, architecture and design, there is normally a period of indecision before a name is settled
upon. The main players are not always the labellers of what they are doing, and often find themselves at odds with journalists and critics who seek to take on this role (as happened with Cubism). The period of name resolution is often punctuated by agitated skirmishes as various protagonists seek to claim naming rights, until finally one term wins out, at least within an influential core group or for the wider public. Then comes a period where certain creators on the margin struggle with settling in and adjusting themselves to the newfound label. This is not always possible, and it is true that important regional variations may appear, as when European post-war abstract expressionism is termed “art informel”. Finally, when a movement’s or current’s name is widely accepted and consolidated it will become subject to challenges—some substantial, others simply terminological—from successive generations of creators in the given field.

By way of example, let’s take what is now called Radical Design. In a text summarizing her project to document alternative architecture magazines, “Clip, Stamp, Fold”, Beatriz Colomina describes the naming scenario:

A famous cover of *Casabella* from July 1972, featuring a gorilla beating its chest with the words ‘Radical Design’ engraved in red, imposed the term ‘Radical’ over other rival labels, including ‘Supersensualists’—suggested by the historian Charles Jencks in *Architectural Design*—‘Italian reinvolution’, ‘Architettura Povera’—proposed by the art historian Germano Celant—, ‘Minimal Technique in Revolt’, and ‘New Generation’. (Colomina and Buckley 102)

Whether or not the *Casabella* cover was indeed an imposition, as Colomina claims, it is clear that most movements and tendencies that seek to define themselves so as to gain in critical verve and operancy are thrown into a complex naming process. Superstudio cofounder Cristiano Toraldo di Francia has sketched a parallel definitional process in relation to Italian architecture and design debates in the same period, coming to a different conclusion while also citing the role of magazines like *Casabella*, *In* and *Architectural Design*:

Definitions such as Conceptual Architecture, Antidesign, Counterdesign, Radical Architecture followed one after the other via articles, and exhibitions until the show, Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, demonstrated the power of the system to integrate its critics, finally historicizing as
“counter design” the activity of the avant-garde. (Toraldo di Francia 339)

When the naming process we describe is not fully consensuated, the consequent push and pull exposes professional and media rivalries, marketing consciousness and the not-so-hidden agendas of academics. This was seen with Celant’s intent to extend the povera adjective to design, since apart from a minority design tendency that could rightly be called povera, what was happening was not formally and theoretically close to the principles laid out in his earlier theoretical formulation of Arte Povera.

The relevant point of contrast here is that ‘ex-designer’ is not made to suffer through any of these foundational battles. As coined by an individual creator and promoted almost exclusively by him, ‘ex-designer’ is both idiosyncratic and easy to manage, however much external confusion it might generate regarding the attributes it confers. While it is true that other creators pick up the term and apply it to themselves, it never takes off as a movement, and it as such is never subject to a serious challenge. The design world’s indifference to the implicit challenge of ‘ex-designer’ is not surprising, considering there is still no particularly viable terminological consensus regarding what we might call conceptual design. Further to this, Guixé will never build on its theoretical apparatus in a way that would keep ‘ex-designer’ alive beyond his particular and at times freewheeling use of it.

4. The prefix ‘ex’ in modern culture

Turning to the second question, it is true that the prefix ‘ex’ has a relatively minor presence in the differentiating labelling of cultural movements over the past century. One of the few prolific usages was found in reference to the late 1910s and 1920s, when a large number of painters are described by later historians and commentators to be Ex-Cubists; the term is still used today. Artists as diverse as Duchamp, Léger, Villon, Mondrian, Delaunay, Gleizes, Malevich and Braque are referred to in these terms, as was Léger later on. In this period it was rare that a Cubist past would be looked upon as a deficit. Painters like Mondrian were seen at the time to be moving on from Cubism and beyond without overtly denigrating it. They had moved through it and past it, driven by the search for a purer path in abstraction, where formal and conceptual filters might be applied to the motion set off by the mother movement. Here then, Ex-Cubist did not connote loss or abandonment of a superior past state (except maybe with Braque, who was seen by some to fall into decorativism). Rather, Cubism was still a valid rite de passage for artists of this generation, a necessary stage to work through before moving on, a ritual initiation preceding the quest for a higher version of abstraction—perceptual, spiritual, evermore essential. Alfred Barr’s 1936 poster explains Ex-Cubism in precisely
this way, identifying its most vital extensions in
the 1920s as De Stijl, Neoplasticism and Purism.

The case of the Ex-Cubists does bear some resemblance to ‘ex-designer’. Most notably, both avoid any suggestion that the previous state left behind might be hierarchically superior, or that the current state could be a step down or renouncement. Ex-Cubists, like ‘ex-designers’, move on and push ahead with critical intent, evolving positively. Yet there are important differences. The Ex-Cubists are seen to leave behind a style or tendency in the process of building on it, while Guixé makes a play at moving outside a generally defined discipline itself. Ex-designer is not a stylistic shift, but rather a professional one, pertaining as it does to the status of the designer.

Let me close with a case of a painter who chose to proclaim himself an ex-artist for reasons that were largely critical and strategic. Constant Nieuwenhuys (known simply as Constant) dedicated his mature creative years to the New Babylon project, which conceived the city as a nomadic, free-flowing mega-structure dedicated to play, pleasure and collective realization. His early years were given over to painting in association with the Cobra group, until showing interest in architectural and spatial questions in the early 1950s. His later commitment to the ideas and practices enlivened by the Situationists led him to proclaim himself an ‘ex-artist’, which he did at the First World Conference of Free Artists held at Alba, Italy, in 1956, though he had in fact stopped painting some years earlier. Constant would later describe his transformation into an effective and active ‘ex’, critically motivated:

The artist’s task is to invent new techniques and to utilize light, sound, movement, and any invention whatsoever that might influence ambience. . . . Ten years separate us from COBRA and the subsequent history of so-called experimental art shows us its errors. I drew the inference from this six years ago in abandoning painting and launching myself into more effective experimentation, and this in relation to the idea of a unitary habitat. (Constant)

By terming his investigations into theoretical architecture and planning as “more effective”, Constant signals his clear belief that architectural practice was in fact superior to certain art practices when it came to effectuating practical research into ambience and habitat. Constant was actually criticizing the limitations of painting and not all art, which he seemed to believe could be saved through redefinition. But not painting, for as he wrote: “No painting is defensible from the Situationist point of view.” (Constant)
Shortly afterwards Constant was “hounded out” of the International Situationist, accused of plagiarizing and misusing situationist ideas, and would continue his New Babylon research independently (Sadler, 102). He would also eventually return to his painting, picking up an occupational hat he had previously shunned, deciding it was possible to wear it with no detriment to other forms of professional headgear he had picked up along the way.

Ex-artist, and ex-designer. The case of Constant suggests that the sophisticated operative apparatus conceived by Martí Guixé, where “ex” is both critical and strategic, a mechanism whereby the designer might find a freer and less restricted developmental terrain, was not entirely novel. Constant too had used the “ex” prefix as a way of gaining another space of critical action. He too was addressing spatial concerns while doing so, as Guixé had done for the 2002 Berlin contest. Constant used ex-artist to set up an occupational hierarchy, where practice in architecture would be seen as theoretically and functionally more advantageous and art practice, especially two-dimensional, flawed. Guixé, contrarily, uses ex-designer not to move on and out of the design profession but to challenge it without having to leave it. ‘Ex-designer’ is a critical and strategic side-step. Admitted these differences, Constant’s decision to call himself an “ex-artist” constitutes one of the most relevant historical precedents for the use of the “ex” prefix in the exercise of self-differentiating critical labelling in modern culture.

NOTES

1. In 2011 Guixé has suggested the term “ex-ex-designer”, indicating a closure of the term’s use. This might also be his way of signalling that the design profession has widened its conceptual and practical frame so as to no longer exclude him. A complementary interpretation would be that Guixé’s professional consolidation and the assimilation of his more conceptual bent by the design establishment has made ‘ex-designer’ strategically and critically redundant.

2. Parting from Brian Holmes’ description of the “flexible personality” and Paolo Virno’s analysis of cynicism, Alison Hearn concludes: “The branded self is one of the more cynical products of the era of the flexible personality: a form of outer-directed self-presentation which trades on the very stuff of lived experience in the form of promotion and profit.” (Hearn, 208)

3. Culham continues: “...it is difficult for me to answer why the participants/audience at Aspen 2001 didn’t engage very well with Marti. I could tell he was frustrated and said as much to me at the time, though it was unclear then and even now exactly the nature and causes of the disconnect. I would guess the reactions were somewhere between "is he for real?!" and "give me something I can use" (esp. other designers and corporate interests present). "People don't buy ideas, they buy things" is another likely refrain. This relates to the 1970 Aspen Design Conference
protesters as well, and is part of an endless debate as we all know.” (Culham)

REFERENCES


ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Figure 1. Martí Guixé and Inga Knölke, Beruf: Ex-[Dein Beruf], original A3 for evolutionäre zellen contest and exhibition, NGBK, Berlin, 2002
Figure 2. Ex-designer t-shirt for “Social Textures”, The Original Cha Cha, 2003. Photograph: Inga Knölke

Figure 3. Martí Guixé, poster for “Ex-designer”, exhibition at Trico, Tokyo, 2006

Figure 4. Martí Guixé and Octavi Rofes, 10 Years, poster, presented at “Ex-designer”, exhibition at H2O, Barcelona, 2007

Figure 5. Alfred Barr, “Cubism and Abstract Art”, 1936

Hegel bemerkte irgendwo, daß alle großen weltgeschichtlichen Tatsachen und Personen sich sowohl zweimal ereignen, sie nicht vergessen, hinzuzeigen: das eine Mal als Tragödie, das andere Mal als Farcce.

Karl Marx, 1852. Brumaire, Kapitel