

100% Design, Zero Tolerance

1.

What do we mean by “design”? To strip the word from the essentialist baggage that travels with it – design as an esthetic or lifestyle – it is useful and surprisingly effortless to replace it wholesale with the verb and concept of “define”. By shifting the emphasis from the mystified veneer of creativity (design) to the production of reality through language (define), we can treat design as what it fundamentally is: a practice of projecting symbolically constructed ideas of how the world should be onto the world itself.

This newly minted notion of design exhibits itself on a sliding scale. How much does a situation or environment adhere to a pre-defined script; how intentional are the forms of life it produces; in what resolution does a project correlate with the reality it produced? As a measure we can use percentages: 100% design would equate total definition, a complete correspondence between map and territory, between plan and execution. 0% design on the other hand is embodied by the catastrophe; the absence and active refusal of any design.

However, more interesting than the two extremes are the gradients in between, the bulk of the situations and environments we exist in. Life in a New Town circa 1952: 61% design, reading BuzzFeed: 72% design, a nature reserve: 90% design (the frontiers have been closed, we live under a condition of planetary-scale urbanization; i.e. a nature reserve remains in its “natural” state only because it has been defined such.)

Design is entropic: a historical city does not anymore reproduce the bio-political order its plan did even if its physical structure remains; any constructed meaning becomes obsolete once the cultural matrix undergirding it shifts sufficiently. If it isn't reproduced or replaced any design is slowly declining towards 0%.

2.

The idea of design can also be poked from another angle by looking at what distinguishes it from its distant relative art: its pledge to utility, that of creating useful things. A thing can be useful – or “productive” with which we generally equate utility – only insofar it connects to and interacts with other things. Any point of contact constitutes an interface: the plane on which two things, potentially agnostic or hostile to each other in their internal logic, can meet. Whereas a work of art has in theory the liberty to be self-contained (that is, to fail as design), a product of design must contain or work as an interface.

The defining feature of any interface is its bandwidth: the amount of information it can transmit from thing to thing. As with the sliding scale of design it is more interesting to look at the variable bandwidths in the middle of the scale rather than the speculative extreme high (where everything communicates with everything in every possible way: civilization turned into a Matryoshka brain where all matter has become computational and the dichotomy between the actual and symbolic dissolves) or the extreme low (heat death). A catalyst as an accelerating interface between two chemical compounds = low bandwidth; the shapeshifting topography of the frontal, muscular parts of an individual's head (i.e. face) with the gaze of another human being = high bandwidth. From the point of view of design as an (until now) fundamentally human activity any interface connecting a thing to a human faculty must exist on a plane our species can plug into: be it linguistic, symbolic, ergonomic, pharmacological, metabolical, financial etc.

3.

Analogous to the correspondence between the carrying capacity of information networks and the resolution of media formats, the increase of bandwidth of any interface is intimately linked with the increase of design-definition, or an increased resolution of design. In fact we have now reached such capacity for HD that the idea – or rather, illusion – of the possibility for “zero tolerance” has become attractive. 3D scanning and manufacturing technologies have reached such accuracy that the precision in which digital designs can be rendered into physical objects would have been unfathomable a decade ago. At the same time zero tolerance can be considered to be the implicit moral code of an HD information economy where all information is connected and cross-referenced with all other information. The logical end point of which is a self-organizing, self-inflicted strive for a zero-deviation, enforced normativity via incessant (auto)surveillance.

Under true zero tolerance the model substitutes reality, or is taken to represent it 1:1. What lies outside the model does not – cannot – exist. The symbolically constructed reality of design collapses into reality itself.

4.

It is easy to equate both design and its increase of resolution and the bandwidth of its transmission with the natural workings of financial-cognitive capitalism. What else would motivate the perpetual production of new forms and than capturing more of our lived reality into the market.

For those to whom 100 % design and its companion zero tolerance are undesirable conditions a direct opposition to their workings or a violent return to some earlier state (perhaps via catastrophe) appear as viable choices. Yet there is another, more indirect and likely more effective mode of struggle: *more design*.

If we abandon teleological narratives of “progress” or technological advancement we are left with a world that is indeed saturated by design, but by design that constitutes a multiplicity – a multiplicity of definitions, a multiplicity of worlds in which they are useful, a multiplicity of uses for this world. Every design carries in its genes an idea of a world in which it makes sense, in which it is true, in which it will be used.

Rather than the total space of an ocean, design must be repurposed to produce a perpetually shifting multi-layered archipelagic space of both ruins and new beginnings. Incompatibility, bottlenecks and agonism as a mode of freedom.

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