On Futures, Un/Certainties, Design Hubris and Morality: A Cautious Plea for Reflection and Moral Disarmament in Transformation Design*

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*Discussion Piece

Preface

This brief personal reflection is inspired by the experience while working on a recently published anthology: "Un/Certain Futures - Roles of Design in Social Transformation Processes" (Förster et al. 2018). The author of this text is one of the publishers. The book is not a conference proceeding, even though the "un/certain futures" symposium, which took place on December 1st and 2nd 2016 at Braunschweig University of Art, was the occasion for the initial production of the texts. The book is rather the outcome of the reflections and discussions among the initiators and contributors in the wake of the conference. Therefore, this short text is not a book review. It is meant as a discussion piece in the context of the emerging field of transformative design theories, methodologies and practices such as Transformation Design, Transition Design, Social Design, etc.

Keyword

Initial Questions and Considerations

The topic of *un/certain futures* arose from the ongoing debates conducted in the new master's program Transformation Design[1], which has been running successfully since 2015. See also Jonas et al. (2016). The central issue is the role and the potentials and limits of design in social transformation processes. The discussion produced questions of the kind: Can futures be designed for the better in a sustainable manner at all? Or will the effects of well-intentioned creative design interventions into otherwise independently evolving auto poietic systems[2] always be internally determined reactions that appear more or less random to external observers? Do we have consent about what is actually *the better* that we are aspiring? Should the concept of design perhaps even be completely reconsidered?

Heinz von Foerster (1995) argued that, in a culture open to learning, the only legitimate questions are those that cannot be answered. So, we did not expect definite answers to these big questions; we should even be sceptical if someone claims to be able to provide them. But we expected lots of preliminary, half-baked and contradictory answers. Here are a few of our expectations and aims of what we would like to have achieved with the conference and with this book;

- We want to problematize and possibly clarify concepts related to design, sustainability, and transformation
- We want to introduce the transformation design concept and discuss it in a broader, multi- and transdisciplinary community
- We want to contribute to the consolidation of the transformation design concept, without rigidly fixing it and without running the risk of being caught in our own narrow bubble
- We rather want to relate it to a wider social and academic field of socio-techno-cultural change processes and develop a collaborative network

Contextualizing the Transformation Design Concept

A few introductory thoughts about the above mentioned issue of problematizing and clarifying concepts: First of all, it is about contextualizing and thus, in a way, de-mystifying the mega project — in any case it appears as such— of Transformation Design. In my view the project is not about introducing or defining a new sub-discipline — such as product, automotive or fashion design—. This would imply the ambitious intention to create a new radical design movement, one associated with highly moral claims to know better how to guide mankind on its long and risky way towards a more sustainable future[3]. Looking back, we realize that most of these radical movements have failed or have been replaced by the next big design hype. So, Transformation Design is not a new discipline, it rather describes an attitude of being fully aware of the factual and ethical implications of living and designing in an accelerated, dramatically fast era of risky change. The concept reminds us that we should permanently reconsider what it means to actively intervene in our evolving social, cultural and natural environments.

This might be boring for some readers, but I am referring to one of the few solid and foundational contributions in design, Herbert Simon's *Sciences of the Artificial* (1996). Two aspects are of special importance;

1. The interface concept, meaning that design creates the interfaces between artefacts — the inner systems— and the contexts — the outer system— in which they have to function and survive (Simon, 1996: p. 6). I.e. we need methodologies that help us deal with systemic complexity and issues of boundary judgment[4]. In other words, specific methodologies are required for properly defining and representing the scope of our design task.

2. The broad definition that design means *to devise courses of action that aim at transferring existing situations into preferred ones* (Simon, 1996: p. 111). For instance, we conceive futures and we are making value judgments about these futures.

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[1] http://www.hbkbs.de/studiengaenge/transformation-design/ and http://transformazine.de

[2] The term autopoiesis (from Greek αὐτο —auto— meaning *self* and ποίησις — poiesis— meaning *creation production* refers to a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. The term was introduced in 1972 by Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to define the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells. Since then the concept has been also applied to the fields of cognition, systems theory and sociology. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autopoiesis

[3] The Transition Design project at Carnegie Mellon University appears to be of this kind. http://transitiondesign.net

[4] Boundary judgement or Boundary critique (BC) is the concept in critical systems thinking that, according to Ulrich (2002), states that *both the meaning & the validity of professional propositions always depend on boundary judgments as to what facts — observation— and norms — valuation standards— are to be considered relevant* or not. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boundary_critique

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In epistemological terms this implies that we do not act as distant, *objective* observers any more but as situated participants or stakeholders who have a specific stake in the situation. We are at the same time designing, are being designed, and have to carefully reflect upon our respective roles and positions in the inquiring system. Our stance must be made explicit.

The Concepts of Scope and Stance in Transformation Design

Referencing Alain Findeli in short (Findeli & Bousbaki, 2005; Findeli, 2010): We have to consider the scope of our subject matter, which is a complex, hybrid mix of material and immaterial entities and actors. And we have to consider the stance of the designing / inquiring system, which once might have been the individual author designer or the disembodied Cartesian observer[5], but is now a hybrid mix of individual and collective knowledge, motivations, intentions, interests and power constellations. Statements of objective truths are, at best, replaced by negotiations in a situation of *epistemic democracy* (Dewey, 1916), which defends the capacity of the educated and informed *many* to make correct decisions and seeks to justify democracy by reference to this ability. More realistically or typically, truth claims are replaced by conflict and fierce struggle. Both the definitions of power regarding scope and the freedom of decision regarding stance are issues of power relationships: Power relations determine what can be considered as changeable in a problem situation. And power relations determine which goals are acceptable and enforceable. Against this background we have to reflect and decide whether, in transformative processes, we consider the widest possible boundaries as negotiable or as fixed. Taking them as negotiable implies questioning the dominant regime of market society with;

- The paradigm of continuous growth by means of production and consumption, no matter what to produce and consume
- The paradigm of the one-world world model of global development: The Global North determines the rules; the Global South has to adopt them (Escobar, 2018)

Questioning these paradigms may appear as designers' hubris. On the other hand, if we take these conditions for granted, we will be mentally and discursively caught in the trivial, technocratic commonplace rhetoric of *change*, which tells us to adapt our values and our ways of living and working to the supposedly unavoidable *challenges* of global economic competition and the imperatives of growth. Actually this aims at nothing else but to stabilizing business as usual as long as possible and prevents any fundamental change in our ideas of global futures. If we have in mind that design does not actively change the world — even if some see themselves and act as design activists— but that it rather creates and offers options and images and narratives that present possible and desirable changes of the world, then we should try hard to avoid self-imposed thinking restrictions of any kind. Herbert Simon characterized design as a kind of *mental window-shopping* (Simon, 1996: p. 164): purchases do not have to be made to draw benefit from it. In other words, visions are unlimited. It is our task to propose and put them to discussion. It is not our actual task to realize them. But of course we can participate.

The Delicate Tightrope-Walk of Transformation Design

Coming back to the initial question: Are we considering Transformation Design as a new sub-discipline? No, we are not introducing a new discipline, but we are re-considering design activities under the challenging conditions of the Great Transformation (Polanyi, 1944). Some may know the hypothesis (Jonas, 2010) that there is no progress in design, meaning that Design, as the interface-building discipline, operating in the co-evolutionary space between systems and their contexts, has to struggle hard in order to keep abreast with the dramatic changes around us. On that note I think it is time to turn things upside down and argue that Transformation Design is the most general, the overall, the basic concept. All more specific *tastes* of design — dealing with products, cars, fashion, etc.— are sub-fields, limited in scope and stance, which can be derived from the basic concept. So: Transformation Design is the new normal design.

[5] In Western scientific ontology all human perceptions are referred to a viewpoint of Cartesian positional identity. This observer has been traditionally treated as real, the viewer of external objective reality. In many Oriental systems based on introspective techniques of producing *oceanic* experience, it is regarded as virtual and the objective/subjective antithesis as contingent.

[6] Von Foerster formulated the following rule:1 "For any discourse, I may have - say, in science, philosophy, epistemology, therapy, etc. - to master the use of my language so that ethics is implicit. What do I mean by that? I mean by that to let language and action ride on an underground river of ethics, and to see to it that one is not thrown off, so that ethics does not become explicit, and so that language does not degenerate into moralization." See https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/4-2/text/foerster.html ,accessed 04 Sept. 2018.

But how is this compatible with Horst Rittel's call for *a certain modesty in design* (Reuter & Jonas, 2013) and with Heinz von Foerster's reminder to keep ethics implicit (Von Foerster, 1993; Von Foerster, 1995)?[6] A strange paradox seems to arise here. If we claim that Transformation Design is the new normal, could it be that we are even more susceptible to the hubris and mystify Transformation Design even more? Maybe a *modest hubris* has to be cultivated in order to transform established mindsets? Maybe this is what Bruno Latour means when he asks (Latour, 2013: p. 23): *In other words, why not transform this whole business of recalling modernity into a grand question of design?* Only unanswerable questions are legitimate! In any case the debate around Transformation Design raises the question: How radical should design be? It seems we are performing an exciting tightrope walk between modesty and hubris, especially when dealing with political topics.

Theoretical and Practical Deficits in Dealing with *the Political*

Projects, also those presented in the *uncertain futures* book, reveal theoretical deficits. Although we love to talk about multiple futures and options and potentialities, the debate is nonetheless sometimes rather narrow-minded and moral and very normative, obviously suffering from the burden of world rescue, which seems to be a kind of tacit consensus in the community. As if we knew better what should be achieved by means of our interventions. And as if it was our own responsibility to implement these seemingly better options. This refers to the question raised in recent debates: How political can / should design education be and is permitted to be? And how does it work in practice? (e.g. Herlo et al., 2017)

In our MA Transformation Design at Braunschweig University of Art we have the explicit claim *to reflect, initiate, design change processes*, which clearly touches the political;
- To reflect: This is unproblematic, because harmless
- To (co-) design: According to Herbert Simon (1996) *To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones*. To devise courses of action does not mean to implement them. So, also rather unproblematic, if taken seriously
- To initiate: This is perhaps the most delicate term, where one comes closest to the misunderstanding of designers doing practical politics

Designers tend to overestimate the effects of their own contributions. It is my impression that reports on social design projects often show a naïve worldview in tackling the problems and a frightening triviality in the results; fashionable catchwords like sharing, collaboration, participation, empowerment, etc. are used too inflationary. Subsequent robust evaluations of the alleged improvements achieved through design interventions are missing in many cases. In their sometimes blind search for harmony and world salvation, designers frequently neglect or ignore the complex nature of human psyche and of social communities with all their stupidity, selfishness, hegemonic struggles and power conflicts (Mouffe, 2005). They seem to take for granted that humans are basically good. Which they are not! Human beings are good and bad and mostly mean — in both meanings of the term—. And societies are complex and full of paradox and conflict.

Who is the Client?

This closely relates to Simon's question: *Who is the client?* In the famous Chapter 6 in the Sciences of the Artificial *Social Planning: Designing the Evolving Artifact* he argues regarding *society as the client* (Simon, 1996: p. 153): *It may seem obvious that all ambiguities should be resolved by identifying the client with the whole society. That would be a clear-cut solution in a world without conflict of interest or uncertainty in professional judgement.* But *The members of an organization or a society for whom plans are made are not passive instruments, but are themselves designers who are seeking to use the system to further their own goals. ...*

One may object that in our progressive notion of design, plans are not made for but with people. This is what Valerie Brown (2010) addresses and elaborates in her reflections on the power relationships between the researcher and the community.

She distinguishes six qualities;
- To work on a community: observer, external planner
- To work for a community: employee
- To work on behalf of a community: delegate
- To work with a community: partnership
- To work within a community: sharing (their values and aims)
- To work as a community: belonging to the community

This sequence opens up a continuum between the one extreme of the expert designer or Cartesian inquirer — to work on a community from the position of an external observer— and the other extreme of the inquiring community — to work as a community, being part of the design situation—. The latter comes close to John Dewey's ideal of *epistemic democracy* as a collective exercise in practical intelligence (Dewey, 1916).

In the first case we have design as consultant, contractor or advisor of politics, developing options, narratives, moderating, facilitating decision-making processes for others. But not deciding. Value conflicts are likely to occur with the professional expert, which is well-known in the profession: Can I still agree with my conscience?

In the second case the individual design researcher acts as a politically and socially responsible individual. Role conflicts between professional and citizen are likely to occur, which is new and has to be reflected. New role models show up: the citizen designer or the designing citizen, which are re-enacting utopias of the 1970s about the vanishing of expert cultures in the digital age. See also John Chris Jones' (2000) narrative of the *creative democracy*, which he sees possible with the emergence of the internet.

Transformation Design is Political, but does not Make Politics

My hypothesis for the moment is: Design is political, but does not make politics! Design's main tasks are to develop options, to increase the variety of choices, to cultivate its role as scout, jester, agent provocateur for the public (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

Simon argues: *One desideratum would be a world offering as many alternatives as possible to future decision makers, avoiding irreversible commitments that they cannot undo.* And continues: *The act of envisioning possibilities and elaborating them is itself a pleasurable and valuable experience. Just as realized plans may be a source of new experience, so new prospects are opened up at each step in the process of design. Designing is a kind of mental window shopping. Purchases do not have to be made to get pleasure from it. [...] One can envisage a future, however, in which our main interest in both science and design will lie in what they teach us about the world and not in what they allow us to do to the world. Design like science is a tool for understanding as well as for acting* (Simon, 1996: p. 163).

In my own words: It is necessary to rethink the balance between reflecting and acting in design. In this respect I fully agree with Carl Di Salvo (2012): *Simply stated, the purpose of political design is to do the work of agonism. This means first and foremost it does the work of creating spaces for revealing and confronting power relations, i.e., it creates spaces of contest. This occurs both in and through the objects and processes of design: the objects and processes of design are both the site and means of agonistic pluralism.*

Sociologist Dirk Baecker (2000) called design the expert discipline for dealing with not-knowing. His more recent, slightly paradox dictum of design as a means of *Uncertainty Absorption in the Next Society* (Baecker, 2015) points in a promising direction.

His argument is, that today we know about the contingency of all options that we are facing. Design does not obscure this uncertainty but makes it explicit and reflective. That transparency is precisely why it contributes to uncertainty absorption.

A Plea for More Serenity and Playfulness

So, instead of regarding design as strained social activism I suggest to conceive it as the discipline, or the un-discipline, of playing with un/certainty: certain certainties, uncertain certainties, certain uncertainties, uncertain uncertainties, critical uncertainties…

My explicit plea is: Let´s play with supposedly fixed realities, with supposedly fixed epistemic standards that we sometimes take too uncritically of the sciences, with our own roles in design situations. For example, cultivate the role as jester (John Chris Jones). Overcome the strained fixation on desired utopias or dystopias to be avoided in favour of the playful design of mind-opening heterotopias, which can be discussed publicly (Foucault, 1990). This may relieve design — at least a bit— of the moral burden of rescuing the world…

And finally it allows us to do some good for ourselves. Otl Aicher says: *In design, man realizes himself. Otherwise he remains a civil servant.* — im entwerfen kommt der mensch zu sich selbst. anders bleibt er beamter— (Otl Aicher, 1991: p. 195)

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