Design Education in Catastrophic Times

Florian Cramer, 22-11-2019

How can you deal with the critical need of another design approach? And how will the design practice look like when this will be organized amongst other organizational forms?

To have a brief look at the issues addressed at this conference, in the announcement: “exhaustion on a planetary scale”, “ecological crises”, “growing expectations that the design field can provide the solution for various social and ecological issues?” - then it seems, when looking at contemporary design practice and education, as if the glass is either empty or full (but not half-empty or half-full).

To take the perspective of the full glass: Any survey of a Dutch Design Week, of art and design school graduation shows will indicate that designers are just engaging with these issues. Conversely, there can be little doubt that any serious attempt of tackling these global issues, or - to use Isabelle Stengers’ terminology, to do something about these catastrophic times - needs to involve design and designers at a fundamental level, not as stylers or window dressers, but as equal partners and collaborators with activists and researchers to rethink all systems that make up daily lives: housing and land ownership, food, consumer goods, transportation, health, media and communications, flora, fauna, to name only a few - we can clearly see how all these systems are poisoned in their current state.

But if we take the perspective of the empty glass: By far most projects that we see at a Dutch Design Week or at graduation shows address these issues only on a symbolic or superficial level, because hardly any of them dare to question the larger political and economical systems and frameworks that have created those conditions. To be outspoken and undiplomatic: Showcase design projects like Boyan Slat’s *Ocean Cleanup* and Studio Roosegaarde’s *Smog Free Tower* in my opinion do more harm than good, because they are pseudo-solutions doctoring on symptoms. In the worst case, they are even counterproductive because they create illusions of technical solutions to social, economic, political problems, or as modern forms of the Medieval catholic “letters of indulgence” similar to the 3-pound-per-tonne CO2 compensations that Easyjet announced this week - excuses for a toxic system to keep running while some design gadget pretends to clean up the mess. The Dutch philosophy of the “makeability of society” has become contested, but this type of design is its ultimate caricature. It perfectly illustrates the stupidity and bankruptcy of a slogan like “What Design Can Do”.

As long as we have an educational system that produces such designers and such projects, we fail as art and design educators. And, I’d argue, any walk through our graduation shows and the Dutch Design Week will, on critical inspection, amount to a document of our failures.

In other words: the urgency described by Isabelle Stengers - resisting the coming barbarism in catastrophic times - is insufficiently seen and addressed by the design field, with its traditional complicity with the industry and reformist politics.

It would be easy to blame this failure on the larger systems that we are part of and within which we have to function - such as public education, CROHOs, accreditations, national educational and cultural and research policymaking, the paradigm shift towards creative industries (rather than social responsibility) after 2011 that is also mentioned in the announcement text of this event.

But I would like to suggest the opposite: That top-down policymakers are fully aware of social and ecological urgencies, while our school curricula and institutions fail to live up to them on a bottom-up level. A good example for this is the European Union’s research agenda, Horizon 2020. I still remember my initial reaction - and the reaction of some of my colleagues - when this program was announced in 2013: That it is a resilience program against social collapse. It consists of seven “Grand Societal Challenges” which can also be read as follows: imminent challenges to health and wellbeing, endangered food security and bioeconomy, lack of sustainable energy solutions, lack of green transport solutions, lack of resource efficiency and climate action, lack of social and cultural inclusivity, risk of conflict and wars. (Otherwise these bullet points would not be called “challenges”.) This agenda could, from the perspective of the Neuhaus program, only be criticized for inadequately addressing non-human needs and rights.

Do our art and design curricula live up to these challenges? I doubt it. When Piet Zwart, who taught here in Rotterdam at the academy where I work, wrote in a newspaper article in 1928 that in the light of the social and technological developments of modern times, “the fine art painting programme will have to be shut down completely […] Instead, there should be a great deal of emphasis on synthetic and visual drawing, advertising, modern reproduction technologies, typography, photography and its visual possibilities, film, and the use of colour in architecture and in the urban space”, he caused a public scandal that ultimately resulted in his leaving the school. A century later, his demands have been met - literally through the creation of advertising, typography, photography, film and audiovisual design programs at our school (including the WdKA) -, but now amount to the same problem as the fixation on painting in early 20th century art school curricula.

These disciplinary silos can amount to a hindrance for designers to adequately address societal urgencies. At least, this is the conclusion we drew at the Willem de Kooning Academy when we reduced each Bachelor students’ curriculum to only 50% in the traditional art and design disciplines, freed the other half for interdisciplinary modules where students from all departments mix, and that have subjects like “performative action”, “new earth” and “public and private”, and to which our research programs are affiliated. [I have no slide because my intention is not to advertise our school.]

But this is not enough: For art and design education to seriously engage with the grand societal challenges, we need transdisciplinary collaboration with researchers and practitioners outside the art and design disciplines, and hence outside our schools. - If we look at art/design/research/activist collectives outside Western countries, for example in Indonesia, we see that this fluency and transdisciplinarity is a matter of course and taken for granted there, because it is driven by social urgency and community needs; and a critical postcolonial perspective that questions Western conceptual frameworks.

Such practices greatly overlap with Critical Making, or could even be called straightforward Critical Making practices - for which I represent a research project conducted together with Het Nieuwe Instituut, De Waag, West Den Haag and Leiden University. As opposed to Critical Design (as conceptualized by Dunne and Raby), interventions of Critical Makers ideally do not stay on a symbolic or speculative level; and as opposed to the type of environmental product design represented by Slat and Roosegaarde, these practices ask the fundamental critical, systemic and political questions that are avoided and sidestepped in air-cleaning towers and plastic waste-collectors. However, even in our project we are now unsure whether “Critical Making” is the right concept and term, and whether we shouldn’t speak more broadly about critical material practices (that close correspond to philosophies of new materialism such as those of Stengers, Karen Barad and Donna Haraway). [The book cover is from a EU research project and work group on new materialism.]

While this may sound promising, I am aware it is not “the solution” either; and getting rid of the inherent solutionism of design and design education seems to be a much-needed update of our field.

The problem for freeing us from old structures and 20th century industrial design paradigms are, by the way, not just CROHOs and accreditations that force us to stick to traditional design disciplines - in reality, one can work around them, as many examples in Dutch art and design education demonstrate. What we observe at WdKA is that many if not most students enter the school with traditional expectations of studying an art and design profession (such as graphic designer or product designer), and that we do not dare to tell them at the entrance that these professions no longer really exist - that there is no more job at Total Design waiting for you after your graduation, but that we maybe should have only one program called Survival Design, or even no more art and design education that is separate from other research disciplines and practices.