

In Dialogue with Things (english translation)

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Anja:

What did your (design) education look like?

What could have/should have been different in your studies?

If you are teaching today, how and what do you teach? And why?

How do you see yourself as a teacher? What is your relationship to your students?

In an attempt to answer these questions, we, Lisa Baumgarten and Anja Neidhardt, have come to the conclusion that the design education must change.

How and by whom knowledge about design is being produced is crucial for the construction and recognition of our reality.

How this knowledge is taught does not only have an impact on us here and now, but also on future generations of designers.

Lisa:

As designers, but above all as educators at design colleges and universities we are part of this discourse – we influence the communication of information and thus bear a responsibility.

That's why we founded the participative platform Teaching Design two months ago.

It functions in the form of a visual bibliography in which sources on design theory and pedagogy are shared from feminist, intersectional and decolonial perspectives.

Teachers, students, educators*, academics* and interested parties – all of you here – are invited to share their sources, connect and exchange.

You can find us on Instagram [@teaching.design](#) or via the browser at www.teaching-design.net

Anja:

The format we would like to present to you today is called "Thingstead".

Thingstead is a method from our teaching practice and part of the Teaching Design project.

Following an intersectional, feminist way of thinking, we can – with Thingstead – critically question established ways of thinking.

Ways of thinking which are often seen as given and "natural".

Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock write in their book "Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology":

Lisa:

"To confront [...] questions enables us to identify the unacknowledged ideology which informs the practice of this discipline [in our case the design discipline] and the values, which decide its classification and interpretations [...]."

Anja:

A central aspect is that we actively work on becoming aware of our own positionality. And also to show solidarity with less privileged groups.

We want to use Thingstead today to reflect with you on the current state of design education.

Many thanks to the DGTF team for the invitation! We are happy to be here today.

[\(Transition to Performance.](#)

[We switch our standing position at the speakers desk to a seated position on the stage\)](#)

(Dialogue)

(Espresso pot)



Lisa:

Which one of you owns an espresso pot?

Have you ever wondered why it looks like that?

Where did the idea for its shape come from?

What role did Italy's culture, but also the political situation of the 1930s play in the establishment of the Bialetti pot as a classic?

How closely were Italian fascism and the country's economic interests in aluminium linked to the design of the espresso pot and its success?

Anja:

And to what extent has the marketing of the espresso pot been based on traditional, heteronormative gender roles?

Have the design and advertising of the pot consolidated or changed these roles?

Did the introduction of the espresso pot into private households mean more work for women?

Or did it, as some advertisements suggested, inspire men to also sometimes prepare coffee?

Did the operators of public cafés see these pots as a danger?

(Thonet chair)



Lisa:

Speaking of public cafes:

How did the Thonet coffee house chair actually change our society?

How did café visitors* react when the comfortable armchairs were exchanged for wooden chairs with a hard seat?

Or did the Thonet chair just make it possible to found many new, cheaper cafés?

Did it possibly contribute to the fact that even members of the lower middle class or workers* could afford to go out for a cup of coffee?

Anja:

How many forests have been cleared for the production of this chair since its launch?

What were the working conditions like in the factories that were among the first to mass produce the chair?

How were the work processes designed to produce as efficiently as possible?

Which activities were carried out by men, and which by women?

What were the gender pay gaps?

How many accidents at work were there in the production of the chair?

Thonet chairs were the first low-cost chairs to be produced and were therefore affordable to a wide range of people – did workers* also afford to buy them?

(IKEA)



Lisa:

Can the Thonet chair be described as the ancestor of IKEA furniture?

How much has IKEA learned from Thonet when it comes to packaging in furniture components?

How does thinking about packaging influence the actual design process?

Does standardised packaging lead to standardised objects?

Standardised living spaces?

Do designers at IKEA think about transport in the customer's car right from the start of the creative process, and if so, what are the consequences or limitations?

(Car)



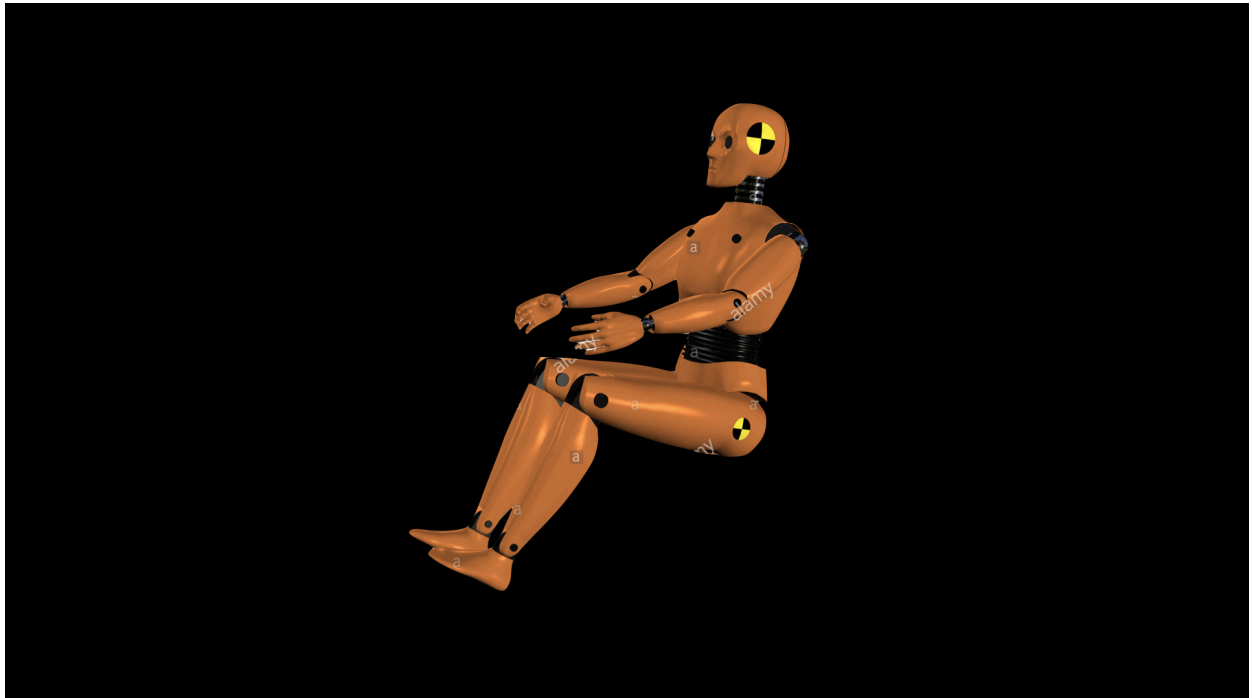
Anja:

And asked the other way around, what standards are used to design the interiors of cars?

How can a standard or a body be representative of all bodies?

When it comes to our design teaching: How can we ensure that future designers do not strengthen or reproduce standards that could have dangerous effects on certain users?

(Crashtest dummy)



For example, how can crash test dummies be designed to represent all bodies, so that women are no longer exposed to more risks than men?

(Service station signs)



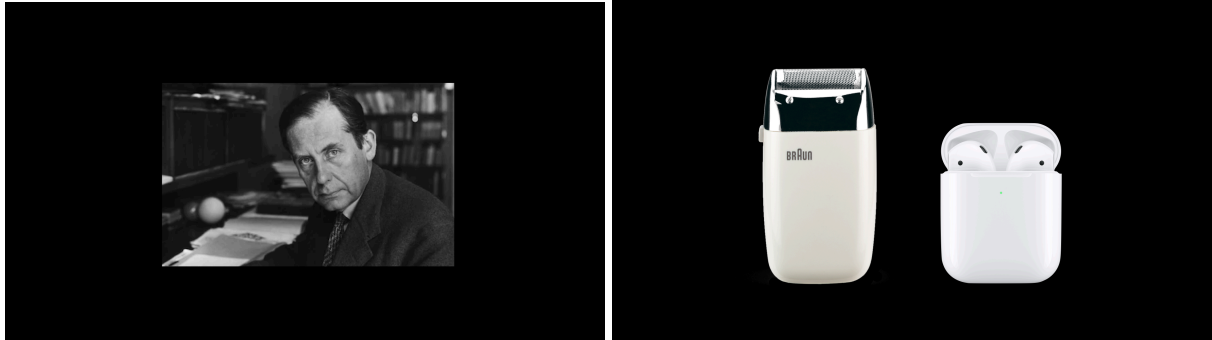
Anja:

And how can a visual language claim to be universally valid?

For example service station signs: How did the designers* come to the conclusion that knives and forks can be regarded as universal symbols for food?

Has no one thought about how these icons are received in other countries and cultures?
Everywhere where, for instance, people eat with chopsticks or their hands?
Or did the designers knowingly ignore the various ways of eating?
With the conviction of “being culturally superior”, “civilized” so to speak?
And back again to the “universal claim”: what does such a concept imply?
That a few think they know and can decide what should apply to everyone?
Must work for everyone?
What does “functional” actually mean?

(BRAUN, Apple...)



Lisa:

Can designers take on a neutral, universal perspective?
Do our individual perspectives on the world not always influence our creative decisions?
What time and context, for example, inspired Walter Gropius to formulate the idea of objective and universal rules for “good” design?
Can we today still accept this dogma? Who profits from it?
How much of this aesthetic, for example, did Apple copy for the design of its products which are “reduced to the essentials”?
What is “aesthetic” and what is “unaesthetic”?
Isn't it high time to find new definitions for “good design” and to let them exist side by side instead of upholding the one “true” definition?

(...the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos)

Anja:

To take a closer look at Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus:
Were actually *new* products designed during the Bauhaus years?
Industrially mass-produced things that everyone could afford?
Would the mass production of anonymously designed things perhaps have prevented the cult around the Bauhaus stars?



Lisa:

How can it be that we continue to celebrate Le Corbusier?

Why do people keep insisting to look at his work “independently” of his “person”?

And why are texts by Adolf Loos still read in class as a kind of entertainment?

Hasn't it long been time to clearly name Adolf Loos pedophilia?

And to point to Le Corbusier's misogynistic and homophobic behavior?

Decades after Beatriz Colomina and others proved exactly that in scientific work?

(Design and Tools)



Anja:

What tools do we work with as designers?

Or technologies such as Photoshop or programs for the development of virtual reality?

How does the application of certain technologies or tools change our perception?

Who develops these tools/technology?

And who has access to them?

For what purposes, for example, are image editing programs also being used?

Lisa:

To what extent do we intervene directly or indirectly in the production of knowledge through their use?

How can the use of these technologies be reflected in the context of design theory?

Who decides how they are used? And should this process be made transparent?

How can thinking about it be part of design education?

(Transition back standing at the speaker's desk)

(Closing statement)

Anja:

A critical approach to all aspects of design must be part of design education.

Only in this way can future designers develop an awareness of their responsibility in dealing with creative tools and reflect on their possible effects.

And this is the only way to prevent design from reproducing dangerous ideologies.

Because there is no value-free teaching and no value-free knowledge formation.

Lisa:

If we feel obliged to certain values such as democracy, fairness and social justice, it is not enough to only deal critically with design. We also need to rethink the conditions and structures within which design and knowledge production take place.

Why, for example, are contributions to this conference not paid? Who can then afford to be here and who can't? And what influence does this have on the diversity and results of this conference?

Thank you.