Book Review – Journal of Design History
Design and the Question of History

Clive Dilnot, Tony Fry and Susan Stewart, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 320 pp., 3 b&w illus, cloth, $27.99. ISBN: 9781472521606

Readers of this volume should be prepared to confront sets of provocative argument, polemic and advocacy discussed extensively in the form of three separate yet interrelated essays by scholars of design philosophy, history and education: Clive Dilnot, Tony Fry and Susan Stewart. Published as the first book in Bloomsbury's series Design, Histories, Futures, the volume appears as a framework for the other titles to come. It is challenging and dense, but ultimately a forceful and inspiringly articulated set of essays arguing that design as a discipline, practice and discourse has neglected what history means in general and exploring how history is made and remade by design in particular. While differing in the politics of their entry into the discussion of history and design, all three authors share the same ontological ground: that design and designing are embedded in history, and direct possibilities of making history within the past, present and future.

In his essay, Tony Fry calls for a 'historical understanding of design', which stands in contrast to 'design history' in its ability to tackle and discuss historical agencies of the designed, and the directions such designed and designing bring into existence. 'Worlds-within-the-world' is the phrase Fry uses constantly to remind the reader about the directionalities design and designing implicate. To ground his criticism of design and its engagement with history (design history is only one of these engagements), Fry offers several criticisms of the discipline and discourse of history by highlighting voices he considers to have succeeded in challenging the historicism of history. These voices, according to Fry, challenge the ways in which history is represented as available, as something that arrives through generalities (periods, centuries and geographies) or neatly ordered events (wars, civilizations and revolutions). Those voices belong to Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Fry's approach here is quite striking given the critical position he occupies on reading history and its crisis as a product of Western modernity, particularly colonialism. By shaping his framework through the work of these figures alone, Fry dismisses other important voices who have challenged the historicism of history and the knowledge it produces— among them feminist and post-colonial discourses of history-making.

In the second chapter of his essay, Fry looks into three specific concentration camp

sites and/or systems (Dachau/Mauthausen, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz). The Holocaust, Fry asserts, should be understood as a set of practices of design, not only in obvious forms such as walls, barracks, barbed wire, gas chambers and other specific hostile devices, but in the form of small, local design arrangements aligned with systemic design plans that mediated the actuality and scale of violence, through framing a narrative of progress, rationality and efficiency. Design, once looked upon and thought about in terms of the horror of the Holocaust, as Fry's essay discusses, then it can no longer be understood as a neutral force; as the one coming in to a situation to solve a problem, providing services, and moves out to solve another problem. The important point, however, is that such concealment of violence (for those whose bodies are not subject to that same violence) through the instrumentalization of design does not merely belong to the past, but also to the present and the future. This is a continuity, or rather a direction that design has spatially and temporally introduced into history.

Unlike Fry's essay, in which design and designing are discussed through specific theories of history and historicism, Dilnot's essay thinks of design and designing from the starting point of the ontological agency of design itself, as an act of configuration bound by the artificial. The artificial is the main ground on which Dilnot sketches out the advantages and disadvantages of design and designing in relation to historical understanding. This means that the artificial also opens towards new historical conditions. These historical conditions, determined by the artificial, provide possibilities of acting in which design becomes an important agent, mediator or negotiator, as it is able to configure and re-configure the potential that is latent in any situation.

In the last chapter of his essay, Dilnot engages with 'Orte des Erinnerns/Places of Remembrance, a Memorial for Jews Living in Berlin 1933–42', one of the most interesting and affectively designed commemoration pieces relating to the Holocaust. This powerful chapter—indeed, one of the most engaging parts of the whole book—shows concretely and successfully the ethical, political and historical dimensions of design and designing as they are configured through visuality, materiality and the locality of the situation in which design intervenes. This case study, or 'gesture' as Dilnot calls it, affirms how practice can think. This means that design practice can 'establish a thinking that is capable of thinking past the paradoxical conditions of now and therefore [is] capable of opening our history, which is to say our future, to reflection' (p. 211).

In the last essay of the volume, relatively short compared to those by Dilnot and Fry, Susan Stewart powerfully outlines the possibilities of situating history in design thinking through the question of education. What makes her argument compelling is her ability to create a threefold association consisting of design, education and history, and arguing how they are the 'characters' of what the world could become beyond the status quo.

After reading her essay, one notes that one of the reasons current design discourses and practices appear apolitical, despite emerging approaches like social design and speculative design, is a lack of understanding of the conditions that design

encounters and of the possibility that these are historically determined. Similarly, much of the discussion in relation to design and the social is formed around the future, or what has been often called future-making. However, the future that many of these practices discuss and move towards looks empty, as if waiting to be filled with their creations.

When reading Stewart's essay alongside the previous essays, the two main points of the book emerge: first, it argues for a historicity of design, one based on the understanding that design conditions our ways of moving, being and experiencing the world, thus also conditioning possibilities of change. Secondly, it argues that while there are some strong works of design history that reveal the agency of design in conditioning the past, present and future, what is most needed is the task of rearticulating existing materials and discourses in new directions. As Stewart writes, 'Much more needs to be done', as these works of design history 'in [their] isolation fail to communicate the scale of the reconfiguration of worlds in which the performances they speak of, participate' (p. 297).

Counteracting the book's intertwining of different and strong voices and narrative styles, its structure makes it easy for the reader to follow several threads through the separate pieces. The sections are broken up into short chunks, and sometimes offer one or two paragraphs to communicate challenging theoretical concepts. This reminds us how difficult it is to articulate a language for communicating the ideas at hand to a wider community of design practitioners, historians and thinkers.

In summary, aside from its compelling and insightful criticism of the absence of thinking and doing history in design practice and thinking, Design and the Question of History also offers strong propositions for what directions can potentially be taken by design practice and thinking embedded in a historical understanding, and all the risks that those directions might entail. Perhaps the task is not to treat such propositions or the book as a recipe for futures of design, but rather to understand them as frames for making certain 'redirections' (Fry), 'reconfigurations' (Dilnot) and 'performative associations' (Stewart) possible.

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