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Provocation statement

Design Business Conference

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Design | Business –

10 remarks regarding a delicate relation

1   Social_1 or social_2? We should be precise.

The conference title changed from *Design for Social Business* to *Design Business.* This is addressed in one of the topics for 2011: *Designing social business and the difference to designing business.* „Social" as the distinctive attribute can be considered as (1) a *normative concept,* aiming at social balance, fairness, support, abstaining from inappropriate private profit etc., or as (2) a *descriptive concept,* meaning communication patterns of different type, characterized / established by interaction processes that create autopoietic systems (Luhmann), or by hybrid networks of human and non-human actors (Latour).

2   Differentiation has split the social_2: Systemic eigen-logics emerge.

The evolution of modern society came along with the formation of functional sub-systems such as law, politics, science, economy, art, etc. These sub-systems fulfil specific functions and use special binary codes and so-called symbolically generalized media: legislation, power, truth, money, works of art, etc. This led to an immense increase in internal complexity and efficiency, but also to rigid structures and autopoietic closure. Each of the system works according to its own logic, incompatible with the specialized logic of the other systems.

3   Design remains universal: Asymmetric relations.

Design has never become a fully developed social sub-system comparable to law or politics or science or economy. This non-disciplinarity is not a curable deficit but seems to be essential, related to design´s character as an agency, which creates interfaces between the artificial and the contextual systems. The interfaces depend on the specific purpose: aesthetic, functional, emotional, economic, ethical, etc. This is reflected in the various ideologies / notions / histories of design. Design, which has never been modern (Latour), faces the highly specialized, highly efficient and autonomous modern system **business**: an *asymmetric* relation.

4   Devising change? Or save the world?

Simon´s teleological definition that design is about devising plans to transfer existing situations into preferred ones misleads designers to regard their profession as a moral instance. They mix what should be carefully separated: The process competence to organize and perform change processes, and the competence to decide what is preferable or good. The former is design and research competence, the latter is a negotiation and decision process among stakeholders, including design. The situation is even tightened by the urge to „think bigger", to redefine their role and shift activities towards more social_1 subjects. The Kyoto Design Declaration 2008 definitely appeals for saving the world.

5   A „critical" attitude? Difficult.

Critical theory, once the favourite toy for many intellectuals, is broken. It is impossible to embrace the entire world with its apparent calamities and – at the same time – to keep its perplexing complexity at a distance by "criticising" it. Design is aiming at intervention strategies regarding desired outcomes. But design itself cannot define these purposes. Design can be "critical" only insofar that it is unbiased and provides and illustrates different choices and puts them to discussion among the stakeholders. It has no privileged criteria that enable decisions as to morally "good" or "bad" solutions.

6   A „moral" stance? Better not.

Designers are moral human beings. But they should clearly separate their personal preference system from the preference system of the inquiring system they are working with and for. Moral is private. Design is *amoral*. The claim for moral as a constituent of design seems to be a symptom of immaturity. We need a moral disarmament of design in order to become acceptable to other disciplines. Ethics is essential but should be kept implicit in the process. Margolin (PhD Design conference 1998) criticizes Simon´s definition of design as transforming existing situations into preferred ones as "deceptively catholic". But can there be a more challenging and responsible task than this?

7   Humanistic attitudes? Not really convincing.

Humanistic attitudes are not really useful in a time where the "human measure" is an increasingly inappropriate criterion. Only by dropping rigorous concepts of humanism will we be able to work for real people in their individuality and real communities in their specificity. The humanistic attitude ignores and even destroys complexity. Design teams, companies and individuals are definitely *responsible* for what they are doing. Responsibility is possible only if we do *not* retreat to fixed moral positions. Responsibility is required to facilitate perspectivity in a democratic way, to support, for example, error-friendliness of innovations.

8   Normativity or teleology? A crucial distinction.

Designers who act as moral guards will ring hollow, because this is not their domain of expertise. Normativity should be replaced by teleology (purpose orientation) and effectiveness. Rosenblueth, Wiener, & Bigelow (1943) re-introduced the concept of teleology into science. Moral, critical and humanistic attitudes should better be transformed into an ironical attitude (Rorty). Imagination, provocation, intervention, etc. are essential of design´s role in increasing the variety of choices for people. Designers should rather conceive themselves as scouts, sometimes as jesters, hopefully as respected partners in a network of disciplines and stakeholders. The creation of alternatives is their unique area of expertise.

9   Trans-disciplinarity and ethics: Strongly linked.

Appropriate methodology, especially regarding communication processes, is essential. This accounts for an ethically responsible stance. *Transdisciplinarity* as epistemological and methodological paradigm can be considered as the operationalization of this ethical stance. Design as a transdiscipline enables the transgression of disciplinary boundaries. Design does not have the task to guarantee a morally correct solution, but design facilitates the formulation of a systemic goal. Ethics remains implicit and therefore more powerful. Its transdisciplinary character is what makes design unique. That means design has to remain different by cultivating and developing its asymmetric position in relation to its partners.

10   Designing social business and the difference to designing business.

Explicit morality in addressing business is counter-productive. Hypocrisy, bigotry and stubborn know-it-all attitudes are frequent consequences. Only the shift from assertive morality to implicit ethics enables reflections and conversations about moral concepts and advances responsible and democratic decisions. And if we are lucky, then the business resulting from this process will be social. So: given that the „social" in „social business" was meant in the normative sense, then the shift to designing „just business" means a considerable step forward towards moral disarmament, towards efficiency of the design outcome and towards maturity of the design profession.

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Separating business and social business leads to the dead end.