

Biannual international design conference, 26-27 November 2015.
Organized by St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp & deSingel Antwerp.

The change from within. Integrated2015.

'Don't try to make beautiful books and you'll make wonderful books.' This is what the Dutch artist/inventor Theo Jansen confided to the audience during Integrated2013. Beauty cannot be coerced; setting it free seems a better option. In the meantime we know that controversy and serendipity have proved very effective in generating a fascinating design or artistic practice. With this claim Jansen was also emphasizing the specific investigative character of beauty, at least if you are not being guided by a predetermined result. Proceeding by trial and error and with the utmost patience, for decades already Jansen has been building wind-powered mobiles that look like machines and animals; they are called *strandbeesten* or 'beach beasts'.

Is Integrated as a conference a sort of sanctuary for such artistic stands? Of course, in this matter Integrated is taking a sort of stand – that is, by denying one. The conference offers a platform for the compelling relation between art, design and society, and wallows therefore in the polemics of this discourse. The same holds for this essay (and all the previous ones), which is like an ongoing thought cycle with a biennial update.

Let's turn back to the 2013 manifesto for a minute:

'Yet the blatancy of the trivial nature of escapist wealth, throwaway culture and poverty is increasingly staggering. At Integrated2011 the activist artist Dan Perjovschi showed one of his cartoon-like drawings in which a man snaps 'Less is more!' at a beggar. Sharp humour *avec gêne!* The legendary American architect/theoretician Buckminster Fuller also argued in favour of "doing more with less" long before it became mainstream. He targeted the material, and not only the design. For Fuller, progress and economic renewal grew out of visionary and activist standpoints.'

The pressure of economic reasoning and its impact on our behaviour has not grown any smaller; on the contrary, the extremes between the poor and the rich, between the powerful and the powerless seem to be reaching a situation of maximum tension. Our social structures are tested daily as regards their sustainability, and genuine issues mix seamlessly with extrapolated *non-news*, which washes over us daily and forces us into arguments and polemics. Something we often eagerly help feed, by *liking* and *tweeting*, often delivered without any nuance. The delusion of the day threatens to take control of our minds, our reason, our actions.

This diktat of 'more' has reached its limits. In a society focused exclusively on economic growth, the discrepancy with regard to the notion of sustainability is getting ever greater. Is growth even necessary? What kind of growth? Material growth, spiritual growth? But before you know it even this question has become all the rage, ready to be marketed – and there you have that economic diktat again. Neither can designers or artists escape it as they try to stand by their beliefs, sometimes averse to –but also full of– opportunism.

In the meantime, the hybridity of the artistic practice –in relation to, among others, design and technology– is increasingly developing into a sort of wasteland of the mind, often very abstract and not seldom getting close to science. In a reflection of a reality which it opposes and in which it also wallows, this practice achieves a position which –in its existential struggle– is a priori polemical, but legitimate. Underground, in the meantime, a mental revolution is quietly taking place. It seems that the great paradigm shift has begun. Accepted ideas are influencing, nudging, pollinating and contesting one another. Even though it is hardly visible yet, the paradigm shift cannot be held back, even though every day frenetic attempts are made to do so. Our social and political structures are not ready for it. And yet that human drive, that instinct for something better, that urge for, who knows, a new sort of sustainability, is no longer stoppable, even if only so as to be able to keep going on this planet for a little while.

This all takes place at an atomic level, and so on a rather small scale, but – despite the 'There is no alternative' credo being drummed into us – it does have an impact. As in a reaction there emerges a kind of microclimate, where the obvious clichés are rejected and where integrity as a concept is valued once more. A climate where not only entrepreneurs take initiatives, but a range of actors, not least in the social and cultural fields. A climate where politics no longer only needs to be practised by politicians or art only by artists. And designers (of whatever kind) must ask themselves whether they still want to design or restyle an umpteenth product, or do something else, something which has never been imagined but which is badly needed.

In this sultry hybrid environment, insights are tested, considered and collected. This fusion, this binding of the specific with the general, can offer new solutions for important social contexts and problems, even at a very tangible level such as 'quality of life and urban regeneration'.

Biannual international design conference, 26-27 November 2015.
Organized by St Lucas School of Arts Antwerp & deSingel Antwerp.

All this does not stand in the way of the most individualist aspects of an artistic practice; on the contrary, micro and macro levels balance one another. Today's society is utterly complex, fragile and inextricable, and major trends are barely perceptible, let alone graspable. How designers and artists deal with this is up to them. Neither do we need to cherish any illusions. Some will always take the money and run, bearing human nature in mind. But this development can also signify a mental respite from a daily realism combined with a critical view. Things can still change and the dogmas of unilateral thought –ideologically anchored in conservative and progressive reasoning– have become outdated and outmoded and they maintain the status quo.

Flexibility lies in mankind's ability to connect –duality to duality, specificity to specificity– until new, graspable frameworks (or paradigms, if you wish) emerge. Integrated carries that very idea in its name, and as an interdisciplinary conference tries modestly to offer a platform for both this openness and this controversy. Not from an ideological perspective or from a specific predisposed viewpoint, but from an optimistic belief in the power of human ingenuity, no matter the form or the discipline.

The change from within.

Hugo Puttaert, Brussels, spring 2015
Translation by Patrick Lennon