Eclipsing the magics of the project and dwelling in its shadows

Research and text by Maxime Benvenuto

collaboration for future
the research

"Collaborations for Future" is a program in which 10 designers and 10 scientists have the opportunity to collaborate one-on-one in an open-ended manner for a period of 9 months. No specific goals have been set, no outcomes defined, and no problems presented for them to solve. The question is: what will they choose to work on? How will they organize themselves to do it? What roles and agencies will they discover? And what can we learn from having 10 of these collaborative experiments running in parallel?

We have invited several design researchers to help us examine the collaborations from different perspectives. During every community meeting, the researchers can observe the state of the collaborations, delve deeper into the individual stories, and then write a chapter about their findings. For chapter two, we have invited Maxime Benvenuto, one of the co-founders of Foundation We Are. Maxime Benvenuto is a researcher based between Rotterdam (NL) and Cergy-Pontoise (FR, near Paris).

He has a unique position as he is also one of the designers who participated in We Are Human Rights, the collabortive programme that brought together Human Rights Defenders and designers and helped build the start of Foundation We Are.

In January 2024, I was invited back to Foundation We Are as one of the original co-founders to share some experiences and critical reflections. This invitation was made in the context of a new collaborative project bringing climate scientists and designers together. The aim was to share insights from the first collaborative project the foundation had been working on back in 2017-18, a collaboration between human rights defenders and designers. It might be good to mention that, following the collaboration with human rights defenders, I made the decision to take distance with the practice of social design/research-oriented design practice. It seemed to me that there was a consequent −yet unspoken− gap between the intentions we had as designers and the outcomes of the project, and that some critical distance was necessary to evaluate both the discomfort emerging from this realization, but also search for its potential origins.

Throughout sharing our experiences and listening to the discussion that unfolded during the day, it appeared that there still seemed to exist a gap in this kind of collaboration: a rift of imaginary. When engaging with such collaborations, both designers and scientists agree on stepping off their own beaten tracks to explore what might be possible when coming together. However, with little precedents and examples, it seemed that, during the discussions, each were trying to grapple with what might be familiar or expected. This is a phenomenon that I had observed within our first collaboration with Human Rights defenders as well: when entering that gap of imaginary, the goal-oriented culture of the design field takes over and tries to grapple with what it can. What led to my distancing from social design in first place is precisely what inhabits these practice mechanisms and how they might actually prevent the 'social' or the collaboration to effectively unfold.

In this context, I have written the following text as a designer still in struggle and wrestling with the field of design and its constructs. Throughout this text, I try to unpack and open up such mechanisms via a subject that remains too often untapped when considering the design of design: that of the project.

After a historical contextualization, the text builds from the book La Zone Obscure (The Obscure Zone) *by Vincent Beaubois, in which he explores the logics and thinking that animate the project in the context of industrial design practices.[1] Considering his perspective, I propose to stretch his reflection to the implications it may have for socially oriented and research-based practices.*

1 Vincent Beaubois, *La Zone Obscure: Vers Une Pensée Mineure Du Design* (Faucogney-et-la-Mer: It éditions, 2022).

Behind the aesthetics of a discourse that seems to be smooth and that conveys the image of factual narratives, one may find many gaps when it comes to design discourse.[2] Indeed, as design history developed itself in the midst of the 20th century, it is no surprise that it formulates its narratives with the ideologies of its time and context: a Euro-centered, male-centered, heteronormative, and predominantly white set of narratives. These discrepancies have been pointed out by multiple voices in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with, for instance, Clive Dilnot's "State of Design History,"[3] Cherryl Buckley's "Made in Patriarchy,"[4] or David H. Rice's "What Color is Design?"[5] However, it would seem that, though these voices have had their echoes, the narratives and terms defining design history and discourse have changed little. This leads me to say that design history has not equipped itself to perceive certain forms of design nor to tackle some of the questions that the field has been encountering on multiple occasions.

Though the work of history is to document and remember, the state in which design history finds itself is that of a history that is blind and amnesic.[6] On one hand, blind because it cannot see beyond what it has already identified with the tools it has equipped itself with: there is a 'narrowness' in design history's aptitude to perceive design which make it blind to many other forms of design. On the other hand, amnesic because of the factual aesthetics of its discourse that contribute to maintaining the illusion of an objective totality while contributing to the production of oblivion: the aesthetics of the stories convey the idea and sentiment that they are total and true while neglecting their shortcomings or blind spots.[7] Thus, we could say that not only does this history not see, but it forgets that it cannot see. As such, it is a history –not unlike other modern histories– that creates an oblivious double denial which is characteristic of Western Modernity: the mechanisms of design history have led to a denial of some of the field's realities, but it also ends up denying this denial.[8]

2 Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 10. print (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr, 2003).

3 Clive Dilnot, "The State of Design History, Part I: Mapping the Field," in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism,* ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 213–32; Clive Dilnot, "The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities," in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism,* ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 233–50.
4 Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism,* ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 251–62.
5 David H. Rice, "What Color Is Design?," *Interior Design*, January 1992, 34-35, reprinted in: Carma Gorman, ed., *The Industrial Design Reader* (New York: Allworth Press, 2004), 277-280.
6 An expression I borrow from: Ingrid M. Parker, "Remembering Our Amnesia, Seeing Our Blindness," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene,* ed. Anna Tsing et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 2017), M156-67.
7 Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 125–169.

8 Rolando Vázquez, "Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening.," *Capital, Poverty, Development, Denktraditionen Im Dialog: Studien Zur Befreiung Und Interkulturalität* 33 (2012): 241–52.

Within this logic, the narratives articulated by design history are the overwhelmingly positive ones of innovation, change, improvement, and progress through creativity. A history of solutions that seemingly have led (Western) societies towards its apogee. On one hand, this over optimism has to do with the fact that design is young. In the face of the much older mastodons of architecture and art histories, it had to create legitimacy for itself and justify its raison d'être. Which means that there is an insecurity found at the core of the field which might be necessary to address. But another reason is the fact that the field of design developed and evolved in parallel to the rise of entrepreneurship: a liberal form of practice that is very much rooted in design practice nowadays. This is something visible in the permeation of notable entrepreneurs in the narratives of design history with, for instance, Henry Ford and his Ford T assembly line: despite the fact that Ford (an entrepreneur) does not conform in any manner to what would be considered as design at that time, multiple historians have used Ford's line as an early case in design history.[9] These permeations show how design history and the history of entrepreneurship have elements that seem to be echoing one another: the figure of the creative leader/visionary, the leaps of innovations to 'improve' society, the combination of altruistic goals via capitalistic means, a pantheon of heroic figures with almost hagiographic portrayals, and the like.[10]

This allows to see how entrepreneurship history and design history have for long been intertwined, but also to highlight how some of the blind spots of design history have been maintained: while Ford's venture holds the promises of progress and innovation, the part of the narrative about Ford's monopolization

9 It is the case, for instance, with Penny Sparke's Introduction to Design and Culture, where the case of Ford appears early on. See: Penny Sparke, *An Introduction to Design and Culture: 1900 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 36–37.

10 Anthony Galluzzo, *Le mythe de l'entrepreneur: défaire l'imaginaire de la Silicon Valley* (Paris: Zones, 2023).

of natural resources, his colonization of the Amazon with "Fordlandia," and the introduction of ecocidal deforestation techniques remain too often unaddressed as a testimony of both the field's insecurities and its intertwinement with entrepreneurial discourse.[11]

11 Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City,* (New York: Picador, 2009).

This relationship, aside from pointing out some of the origins of a certain lack of critical assessment in the field of design, also allows to understand the predominance of the project as sole modus-operandi: the taking of a risk for the seeking of benefits (often by means of 'innovation' and resources relocation). The project is a venture, an ad-venture, where the designer-entrepreneur risks themselves in the devising of outcomes that should (more or less hopefully) benefit users.

However, the 'project' in itself is not any form of practice: a project is a closure-oriented process that comes with its own time, budget, and conditions. The project is not something that endures indefinitely, but that is characterized by its predefined 'endness.' As such, in the context of the design field, it shows a very specific orientation in the practicing of design: a collective imaginary of venturing which is directed towards enclosing things into solutions, via the temporal and procedural device of the project.[12] This means that from the start on, the aim is to channel the process towards a conclusion.

12 Vincent Beaubois, *La Zone Obscure: Vers Une Pensée Mineure Du Design* (Faucogney-et-la-Mer: It éditions, 2022), 7.

Additionally, when the project takes place with a client or commissioner the external party takes a risk to hire the designer in the hope that they will create an innovation, or simply something valuable. In such context, all loose ends are tied as tightly as possible, often leaving little room for error or (actual) innovation outside of the project's (pre-)defined scope of outcome. In the case of public funding, opportunities for non-project proposal are scarce (if not non-inexistent): design work cannot be funded if it is not (part of) a project. In both cases, commissioning and funding modes of functioning tend to replicate existing mechanisms of design practices by requiring framing and limiting uncertainties. This is something independent designers specifically need to comply with in order to cope with the precarity they often face at the beginning of their careers, thus ingraining habits in the development of their professional practices. Such scopes make it difficult, if not nearly impossible, for designers to imagine their practice outside of the project mode of thinking/practicing/making thus creating a form of 'closedness' in what the process can afford.

13 Something Vincent Beaubois shows quite well with the differentiation between a final prototype of Braun and the industrialized product, two identical artefacts that do play very different roles and that can afford different things. See: Beaubois, *La Zone Obscure*.

While the process of design is traditionally characterized by its 'endness' and 'closedness,' it remains, seemingly paradoxically, a moment of opening. Indeed, while designers work within these restrictions, they still do engage in prototyping, testing, trying, revising, etc. A process of iteration that is characterized by an open search for what might be possible within the constraints of the enclosed goal that the project sets out to produce; thus, an open approach to look for ways to make things closed.[13] This brings about the question of what might happen if the openness of the design process would remain open, as a form of refusal of the closure, and an enduring of the process beyond the time of the project.

This questioning becomes increasingly important when considering both the social and the research turns in design practices. As a former practitioner of social design, I have always been shocked at how the project both signifies the beginning and the end of the 'social'. Most often, the project is both the reason for engaging with a given community or context, but also with its end comes the end of that engagement. But can such a procedural approach to design and social engagement be considered 'social'? The time of the social fabric functions on a continuity that unfolds and covers different generations, which might bring it closer to that of the collective temporality of ancestrality. As such, the time of the social is a time that exceeds that of the project in all possible manners and which thus calls upon a different form of practicing design. The same goes for design research. A research process is something which, by definition, is in a process of iterations that remain open to the next phase; a research has some milestones that mark moments of dissemination and formalizing, but most often these are embedded in a bigger timeframe that exceeds the milestones themselves:[14] closure as an opening rather than as an end. However, the culture of the project (and that of the portfolio that comes along) objects to this continuity. As such, I argue that the project culture in design practice creates the improbability of the social or of meaningful research from happening. In this light, we can see a sign of epistemic decadence: the shadow of the project in design processes as revealing the limitation and incapacity of design to act outside of the very restricted modes it has been defined around. This, in return, calls for spaces where suspending the project might become possible in order to explore alternatives: it invites to think and elaborate different forms of

14 Interview with Mike Thompson, interviewed by the author, online, 26/05/2020.

design practice than that of the project, and thus practices that are not based on more or less predefined goals.[15] Suspending the teleological (aim/goal oriented, the 'endness') approaches of design seems all the more relevant when considering the growing unpredictability societies are facing nowadays. In the face of climate changes, migration crises, political radicalizations, structural oppression, social inequalities (to name but a few), the future looks everyday a bit more uncertain. Though this uncertainty is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, it puts modern techno/scientific-solutionism (the 'closedness') in a light where it appears as an increasingly magical button each time it gets pressed. "But the more the time passes, the more magical that button has to be."[16]

Additionally, this re-thinking raises another question: that of the separation between the space of the process and the traditional relationship to the user. While design has formed itself around functionalism and utilitarianism, an opening as closing might relocate the different actors and practices that are part of the design process. In this context, the separation between "the spaces of conception that imagine and shape our living environment (design, architecture agencies, engineer consultancy) and the spaces of use, conceived as final territories, places of *reception* for this material achievement"[17] might no longer be relevant. Thus, it might require re-thinking the geographies of the practice and how the borders of these different spaces are devised and divided.
In turn, this might enable enriching the understanding of traditional design objects by widening the possible readings of them: their end would be relocated from the projected intentions of the designer/manufacturer, to be enriched by the actual use that is made out of it. This might also enable seeing how design exists not in a bubble, but rather as part of socio-cultural, economical, and political ecosystems that are feedbacking, reacting, and re-appropriating continuously what design produces, regardless of the 'purity' of its visions. Opening up this idea of purity to let design get 'contaminated' by societal effects and reactions could help get a wider understanding of what the field does (and hides), but also of how it could practice otherwise.[18]

Though this text needs a lot of further research (as it aims to open things up), it also needs to come to an "end." As such, in the form of an opening conclusion, I would say that it is clear that through its short history, design has been operating within a narrow set of narratives and perspectives on what, by whom, and how

15 Lewis Gordon talks about the teleological suspension of a Discipline when becoming decadent so as to be able to assess it and explore it without having it required to continue producing what is expected from it. See: Lewis R. Gordon, "Disciplinary Decadence and the Decolonisation of Knowledge," *Africa Development* 39, no. 1 (2014).

16 A quote from one of our discussions with Kornelia Dimitrova while preparing this text.

17 Beaubois, *La Zone Obscure.*

18 I borrow this idea of purity and contamination from Alexis Shotwell. See: Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

19 Victor Margolin, *World History of Design. Vol. 1: Prehistoric Times to World War I*, vol. 1 (London: Bloomsbury Academy, 2015); Andrea Branzi, Ken'ya Hara, and Yoshihiko Ueda, eds., *Neo-Prehistory - 100 Verbs: = Neo Preistoria - 100 Verbi* (Triennale di Milano, Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016); Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, *Are We Human? Notes on an Archaeology of Design* (Istanbul Tasarım Bienali, Zürich, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016).

20 Here, I refer to the idea of 'long and wide' as presented during a workshop that was initially conceived by María Lugones and Cricket Keating. This idea of width (rather than broad, for instance) echoes to a necessity of amplitude. This workshop took place during the 13th María Lugones Decolonial Summer School, at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, 2022.

21 Though, it must be noted that it is likely that it already is 'many worlds of practices.' However, the limited scope of the field refrains from perceiving fully what these many worlds of practices might be.

22 Here, I make echo to what Walter Mignolo considers to be Modernity's aptitude to change the topics easily without reviewing the terms of the conversation itself. See: Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2018), 111–115.

23 Listening and learning from the struggles of Afro-American designers in the USA, I here echo to David H. Rice who, in 1992, voiced clearly the need to prioritize sustainable income for struggling black designers before recognition in publications and magazines, thus calling for change in hiring, commissioning, and financing practices above representative ones. See: David H. Rice, "What Color Is Design?".

24 Here, I hint at the notion of 'precedence' developed by Rolando Vázquez. See: Rolando Vázquez, "Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing Design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 77–91.

design has been and could be practiced. While some historians in the past few years have been working towards formulating a long history of design,[19] little has been done in order to understand design in a wider manner.[20]

As such, though there might be a long understanding of design that is now possible (however, debatable), that understanding has remained narrow in what it encompasses and challenged very little what design does and how design is perceived, thought, and practiced. This allows an understanding some of the discomforts experienced by younger generations of designers as discernible in schools, academies, and universities, and highlights the fact that design simply is not currently equipped to endure in the transformations that are occurring in society. This lets us envision design as a fragile construct that increasingly lets practitioners experience that they know just enough to know that they do not know enough. This in itself is quite a rich achievement: it means that some cracks are opening in the boastingly positive narratives of the field that might enable us to question it in a bit more depth.

In this perspective, suspending the tradition of the project approach presents the opportunity to take off some of design's blinders and see the multiplicity of ways it may engage: a world of practice that has the potential of becoming many worlds of practices.[21] This suspension, however, might require, not only seeing how to address different issues, but also considering in depth the terms according to which design addresses these: the 'how' of how design designs. Design has been skillfully versatile at shifting the issues it tackled without yet revisiting its principles.[22]

As such, designing towards an opening, rather than towards a closing, calls for a fundamental rethinking of the onto-epistemologies of design practices. Thinking design, not via the project, but through the construction of a relationship or commitment, be it social, thematic, environmental, or otherwise, would transform the geographies of the field as much as its practices and may provide insights on how to practice design in ways that escape the current scopes of the field; one where relating to Earth, to a territory/site, to a community, to a subject, (…) would become central.

This brings about two concluding remarks. While this 'call' is felt by many practitioners in the design field, it needs to become a focus point, not in representation (as it too often is the case in our field), but first and foremost in sustainable forms of commissioning for designers so that they may have the financial possibilities to develop their practices otherwise.[23] This may allow for the elaboration of new habits in practicing design. On the other hand, it also asks for a different approach in design education which would require teaching relationality and commitment as and through the elaboration of one's design practice. In turn, this might enable seeing design practices emerge as a way to connect to a temporality that might exceed one's own time on Earth,[24] and thus, as designs that start to be social and collaborative in relation to wider cosmologies.

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Colophon

Collaborations for Future: the research