

# Open-ended essay on 'relational' design

While cruising through some just acquired literature about design in general and graphic design in particular I noticed an article in the *Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice-Reader* (Sternberg Press, Berlin: 2009): The conversation between *Europa* (a party of four graphic designers working together in several projects since 2007) and *Practise* (name of James Gogginses cross-media design studio) raises several interesting issues and questions. But what seems of capital importance to me was *Europas* question to *Practise* about the significance of the term *relational* in a graphic design context (p. 25). I must confess that I had no idea, what the term means in this case nor could I remember in which discourse I read it lastly. Fortunately *Practises'* answer was one that leads the reader into a debate on principles – on the graphic design consensus of the term's definition, „which I (*Practise*) don't think there currently is“ ( p. 27). Receiving such an unsatisfying answer I now was captured desperately by the subject, starting a little research whose results I want to lay down here.

Starting by googling several of the designers and theorists named in the article – for example Nicolas Bourriaud and Andrew Blauvelt – I founded three articles that seem to me discussing the term from its basics<sup>1</sup>. Paying attention to the fact that the term is strongly related to the theorists who defined it, I concentrated on them first: Nicolas Bourriaud seems to be an important person in the first case on whose work Andrew Blauvelt, who established the term *relational design*, refers to. Bourriaud is an art critic and curator born 1965 in France who settled the term „Relational Aesthetics“ in his publication of the same title (1998/English version 2002). His publications on the subject are rarely known in europe although he wrote some very basic and defining texts on today's art production and consumption. As Monika Parrinder and Colin Davies outline in their article „Part of the process“ (Eye magazine no. 59, spring 2006) relational aesthetic is „in Bourriauds terms 'a formal arrangement that generates relationships between people'. (...) A unifying principle of relational aesthetics is that they are open-ended – negotiating relationships with their audience in a way that is not prepared beforehand. Therefor they (works of relational aesthetics; A. S.) 'resist social formatting'(Bourriaud) and are not designed to end in a sale.“

These definitions remind me of on a somehow utopian movement in the modern cultural and media studies referring to theorists like Deleuze and Guattari or Slavoj Zizek. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari had an enormous impact on several fields since the 1980s with texts like *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), *Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and their term rhizom as alternative metaphor of scientific/philosophic processes. Actually the open-ended, symbolically uncoded process is a major idea in Deleuze's postmodern philosophy that leads to a quite new, exceptional concept of the subject as a virtual and performing one, that cannot be fixed within the symbolic order at all. Seen like this the subject of postmodernism is much more interactive and basically related to its environment than it was in terms of the enlightenment where subject and object are strongly separated from each other. Building the subjects identity on an ambivalent relation to the object/environment leads to what Adorno/Horkheimer exposed as the major failure of the enlightenment (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published 1947; 1972 in english). Established upon a dominance of one part – the subject – over the other part – the object – this society's structure is hardly a free one for both of the participating parts.

But let us turn back to the results of the web-research on the theorists related to relational aesthetic respectively relational design. We will meet the Deleuzian subject again later on, when trying to explain the complex user/producer relationship.

Besides french critic Nicolas Bourriauds influence on the term, it was mainly defined by graphic designer Andrew Blauvelt, head of the design studio at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (<http://design.walkerart.org/index.wac>). Blauvelt points out design to be in it's third major phase today. This third phase is based on relation and context while the first phase based on form and the second one „(...) focused on design's meaning-making potential, its symbolic value (...)“ and „(...) the authorship by designers (...)“<sup>2</sup>. In his article Blauvelt seems to be deeply impressed by the influence that digital technologies have had on nearly every other medium and surely on the designers work too. In a very optimistic way he describes what social media had done to the creative process when partaking in it as interactive user. His viewpoint seems to be one of the *Matrix-era* when everybody used digital metaphors to describe any phenomenon and lastly believed in the free, open-ended and democratic nature of the web, of new media spaces and of human identities.

But as we must consider today Blauvelts digital utopia was not just a bit exaggerated but blind for the fact that any technology and media invention builds just another room where existing society patterns will be represented. The patterns may appear to us in a new light, but not necessarily in a new form. Basic principles of who constructs the order are equal to other rooms. The fact that open source projects like Open Office could not stand up to global player Microsoft documents this. When Blauvelt writes that „the traditional roles of the designer and consumer have shifted dramatically“ I would fully agree with him. But in the next sentence he affirms that the fact that new technologies and programs turned every computer user into a designer „served to expand the role of the designer as author and publisher“. Blauvelt downgrades the designer to a creator „(...) of systems and open-ended frameworks for engagement: design for making designs“<sup>3</sup>.

But what is it worth for a designer to build frameworks for a faceless user or client? A user of whom I don't know his potential, education or creative and cognitive skills. Is everyone a professional because of the web 2.0 „revolution“? I don't think so. But unfortunately many people do as I notice every day in my practical work as graphic designer. Weather they are book-keepers, musicians, morticians or hedge fund managers – all of them believe devoutly in their know-how in the field of graphic design although they never heard about Otl Aicher or Eileen Gray for instance. Therefore „placing design and innovation in the hands of its customers“, as Blauvelt suggests, is actually no good solution in general.

Design should not satisfy an individuals taste and give instant pleasure to amateurs. It should much more be relational in a way that user and producer should be open minded regarding the actual discourse of art, media and society – and designers should nevertheless be responsible when giving advices to users and clients for we all have eyes, but not the know-how of a skillful well-educated designer.

... to be continued

<sup>1</sup> results of the google research:

<http://www.designobserver.com/observatory/entry.html?entry=7557>  
<http://blogs.walkerart.org/design/2008/11/10/towards-relational-design/>  
<http://imomus.livejournal.com/207620.html>  
<http://fraserreid.blogspot.com/2009/05/seminar-relational-design.html>  
<http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature.php?id=130&fid=573>

<sup>2</sup> Blauvelt in *Towards Relational Design* (2006-2009):

<http://www.designobserver.com/observatory/entry.html?entry=7557>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*