

THE LABORATORY OF MANUEL BÜRGER

# Slippery Design

*The Essay*



Don't Judge A Pdf By Its Cover



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Slippery Design defies balance and order, leads into the void<sup>1</sup> and<sup>2</sup> shows<sup>3</sup> us<sup>4</sup> worlds. Slippery Design creates fields of meaning, mimeses in relationship, building lines to oppositions. Slippery Dsgn masters the game of semiotic scraps; it speaks in syllables not sentences. Slippery Design relies on dissemination through irritation, mutation, failure ~ causes discourses to falter. Slippery Design is the true soul of the meme<sup>5</sup>, the virtuosity of any amateur.

This essay<sup>6</sup> – a mind game with visual sketches – seeks a new approach to visual communication, one appropriate to an era that negotiates itself through and with interdependent ambiguities. Slippery Design is not a style, but a state of mind, a practice, a way of dealing with cultural values and references, a form of writing and reading, a creator and at the same time destroyer of myths. It lives in and through differences – always with the goal of pushing towards controversial design.

Tag words: design, differences, ambiguity, slipperiness, fitness, meme, competition, dysfunction, failure, risk, virtuoso, amateur, signifier clutter, autopoiesis of ideas, search and find, replace, communicate, lost in connotation

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Points of Access: <http://imgur.com/gallery/bZDGr>

ninjabomber:

**I highly doubt this is a European beach. There is no nudity.**

borg 3:

**Commenting on this photo will surely take more than 140 characters**

gialoso:

**Ok yeah, but how does it hover?**

eatplentylomein:

**I DONT FUCKING GET IT**

Alphadisiac:

**She's a vampire...she casts no shadow.**

1

2 :-)

3 Slippery Design strives for knowledge and requires confidence – it questions the hegemony of control,

4 breaks with usual patterns.

5 Wikipedia: “The term Internet phenomenon (also Internet hype or meme) refers to a concept in the form of a link or an image, sound or video file that spreads quickly over the Internet.”

6 (a) On the search: this essay lies somewhere at point WXYZ of my past and future design research and considerations. I say this not to defuse its message, but to invite its readers to participate in the process of its becoming – hence “beta” version. (b) In contrast to typical cultural theoretical observations, this essay introduces a design concept that must painstakingly gather its own phenomena, if not outright create them. It follows both my taste and trends in contemporary design. I thus conceive of Slippery Design as something highly subjective in accordance with my spirit: confused, equivocal, ambiguous.

## **Slippery Design**

forever beta

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# 1. Fitback

## - Growing Understanding of Design and Direct User Participation



FITBACK REFERS TO THE RAPID “FEEDBACK” CULTURE OF THE WEB AND THE ASSOCIATED OPPORTUNITIES FOR DESIGNING COMMUNICATIONS IN A NEW WAY. HERE, THE USER IN HIS VIRTUOSIC SKILL WITH CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND ROUTINES SHOWS THAT HE IS FASTER AND SUPERIOR THAN MANY WOULD LIKE.

## 1.1 Internet Aware Design

Slipping on the design object, bickering over understanding, searching for a foothold and meaning – all these effects of Slippery Design can be traced back to a **democratization** of design culture. A knowledge of and **sensitization** to design and its role in our lives is now attended by know-how in visual grammar and individual practical design experiences. This phenomenon is a thankful invitation to accelerate the stretching of the term design, test common knowledge on the subject and search for a discussion outside of the elite, aesthetically oriented discourse. This essay seeks to do all three things.

I'm interested in a **new intelligence that consists of distinguishing the most diverse visual codes within the web's legendary information flood, breaking them down and making connections between them**. Ideas can thus be impressively transformed into forms, which, in turn, stimulate, train and nurture the mind. Today's informational complexity is primarily a good thing. In it lies the essence of a complex and always reacting design.

*"On October 13, 2012, there were around 77 million Tumblr and 56.6 million WordPress blogs in existence worldwide." (wikipedia.org/wiki/blog)*

Design thereby not only gains in complexity, but becomes part of the wrangling for attention and its attendant power, which the users ostensibly hold in their hands. "User generated content," one of the most shunned concepts in the Web 2.0 glossary, refers to anything brought into existence through the participation of web users, to which these usually conscious design decisions apply. Whence this primal flair for design? Why the insatiable preoccupation with shaping things?

Back then (2008): Boris Groys argued that modernity and the death of God prompted a change in the design of the unadorned soul, which became the "clothing of the body, its social, political and aesthetic appearance," with the result that "where religion once was, design has emerged."<sup>7</sup> The god-given design of the soul, contended Groys, was replaced by **self-design**, which became "a creed."<sup>8</sup> "By designing one's self and one's environment in a certain way, one declares one's faith in certain values, attitudes, programs and ideologies."<sup>9</sup>

Today (2012): young authors like Brad Troemel define the user as a Creative Director conducting his own "**online brand making**."<sup>10</sup> No one is surprised if we maintain various profiles and/or identities. We may be far better suited to expanding in difference and acting under multiple masks than we suspected. Maintaining visual sets with identity-establishing signs has become a substantial part of self-determination – both online and off.

*"[The art of] Postproduction apprehends the forms of knowledge generated by the appearance of the Net (how to find one's bearings in the cultural chaos and how to extract new modes of production from it)." (Nicolas Bourriaud, Postproduction, 2002)*

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7 Groys, Boris. 2008. "Die Pflicht zum Selbstdesign." In: *Die Kunst des Denkens*. Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts. pp. 9-11. Our translation.

8 Ibid. pp. 9-11

9 Ibid. pp. 9-11

10 "Online brand making is the new art of the masses – it is the only process of aesthetic construction America's population almost universally shares." Troemel, Brad. 2012. "Why You Should Make Yourself Someone Else Online." In: Gerd de Bruyn, Asli Serbest and Mona Mahall (Eds.). *Junk Jet*. Stuttgart: igmade. p. 25

*“We live in a constant stream of post-production, where ideas, images and formats are constantly interchanged and re-oriented.” (Artie Vierkant, “in Post” Exhibition Text, 2012)*

The ability of the Internet aware designer<sup>11</sup>, producer<sup>12</sup> or semionaut<sup>13</sup> lies primarily in his selection and **recontextualization of signs** on the Internet. The typical Tumblr blog is the most appropriate example: a collection of images selected and arranged by the blog’s creator according to aesthetic and thematic considerations in order to invite the reader to endless inspiration-and-knowledge-scroll – and to represent the creator in the best and most interesting way possible.



Author unknown, found on <http://www.spiritsurfer.net/>

**Design is everyday life**; self-design is the people’s sport. Anyone can do it – somehow. Apple is no longer as different as it claims to be; we design our Nikes online and keep our streams running. In addition to Adobe Photoshop<sup>14</sup>, perennial monopolist of visual creation and vision<sup>15</sup>, several other professional design tools have been made accessible to the masses with a home computer. The **demystification of design software** is now more or less complete; Garage Band, iMovie and Co. aim to reach the mass of users, to make their ideas easy to implement.

**Access to design resources and proficiency with their processes and terminology sharpens our awareness of design decisions.** This sense of design not only enables us to perceive the aesthetics and meaning of design elements, but also to deconstruct design itself: to recognize deeper references, origins and production processes and, if necessary, make them visible to others.<sup>16</sup>

*“The collective practice of Internet-aware blogging and art has been evolving a new language to imagine, anticipate and engage with the descending reality and its horizons.” (Katja Novitskova, Post Internet Survival Guide, 2010)*

11 A reference to the concept of “Internet aware art” introduced by Guthrie Lonergan

12 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Produsage>

13 “The activities of DJs, Web surfers, and postproduction artists imply a similar configuration of knowledge, which is characterized by the invention of paths through culture. All three are ‘semionauts’ who produce original pathways through signs.” Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2002. *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg. p. 18

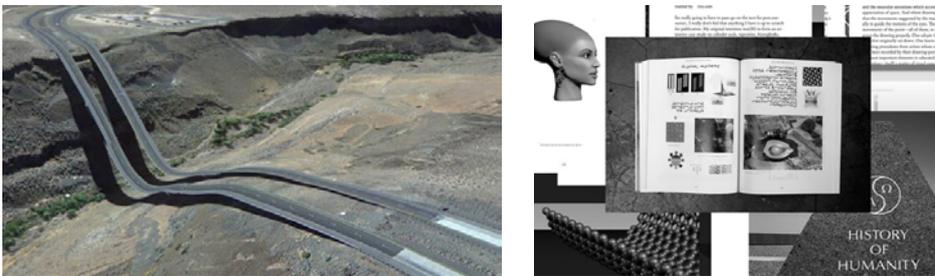
14 The incarnation of the “copy & paste” or “anything goes” credo – which is why it doesn’t feel wrong to download Photoshop via bit torrent.

15 It’s no coincidence that Helen Lupton modifies Alexander Pope’s famous phrase, “a little knowledge can be dangerous” in “A little Photoshop can be dangerous,” Lupton, Helen 2011. “Foreword.” In: Helen Armstrong and Zvezdana Stojmirovic (Eds.). *Participate - Designing with user-generated content*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. p. 7

16 **Comic Sans** is a perfect example of how users deconstruct designs. The connotations of this font (= naïve, amateur design, unprofessional) are laid bare, one is amused by it, etc. This widespread “design” ratiocination has made Comic Sans probably one of the five best known fonts.

...a further paraphrase of the basic assumption that in this era of “postproduction,” we’ve mastered the art of reading visual codes in greater detail than ever before thanks to constant practice in the web’s heterogeneous image world, in which the most varied of styles and directions find their niche.

Another “post” term was conceived against this backdrop in the context of the contemporary art discourse: “post Internet.” Initiated primarily by Katja Novitskova’s *Post Internet Survival Guide*, this discourse treats the **Internet as something natural, essentially given**, and thus legitimizes work in this medium and its (self)referentialism. Novitskova also defines a “new language”<sup>17</sup> that lets us perceive reality more critically by dissolving the boundaries between online and offline culture. It’s precisely here, in the multiplicity of the emerging signs, that a sensitization to visual codes and their references is absolutely necessary.



left: typical visual material of the *New Aesthetic* discourse, <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/>  
right: Katja Novitskova, *Post Internet Survival Guide*, <http://katjanovi.net/postInternetsurvivalguide.html>

## 1.2 Virtuosity and the Autopoiesis of the Meme?

*“First of all, [the activity of virtuosos, of performing artists] is an activity which finds its fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a ‘finished product,’ or into an object which would survive the performance. Secondly it is an activity which requires the presence of others, which exists only in the presence of an audience.” (Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004)*

A major focus of Slippery Design’s many conceptual contortions is **virtuosity, the expert mastery of a skill**. A look behind the economic fluctuation of the term reveals parallels and connections to contemporary design phenomena. In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno identifies two essential characteristics of virtuosity: it does not survive the moment of its performance (and is thus impossible to document in a work – bound, rather, to the now), and it depends on the presence of an audience.<sup>18</sup>

And so: the mode of production of the present is virtuosic!<sup>18(!)</sup> A standard Facebook stream with its many windows, its many messages and information updates, lends validity to this claim. Contemporary communication – the posting of a picture, the composing of a

17 The images that Novitskova cites as examples of this “new language” show hybridizations of nature-related mythological references and affirmative-fetishistic references to technological phenomena. This clash is evidence, so to speak, of a futuristic gesture (faith in technology), a postmodern dystopian attitude (hyperreality and the downfall of humanity) and romantic irony (nature as ideal).

tweet – expires at the moment of its enactment: **time is its fetter, and its trace is lost in an ever expectant audience.** An act that does not produce a work: no one is interested in the post from ten minutes ago. The production of new information must be fast, reliable, virtuosic!



left: Internet Memeology at Northwestern University, <http://www.northwesternflipside.com/2011/11/23/northwestern-unveils-new-meme-studies-department/>  
right: Pepper Spray Cop <- Strutting Leo Meme. Intermingled Meme Culture

*“So what really matters in every conversation, formal or informal, conducted over the net or in person, is the exchange of attention. [...] Today what counts more and more is performing, not producing in the old routine sense of factory production.”*  
(Michael H. Goldhaber, *Attention Economy*, 1996)

That is especially true for the **meme**. The term meme was introduced a good 40 years ago by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, but it did not immediately assert itself in the cultural sciences. It is now kept alive by its emergence on the web, where a meme culture manifests itself in, for example, the massive occurrence of user-modified variations of the same jokes/photos/motifs. Defined as a “unit **carrying cultural ideas**” that evolves through “natural selection, variation, mutation,”<sup>19</sup> the meme is in a constant struggle for survival. It strives for attention. It is just as dependent on **connecting communications** as it is changed by them.

Parallels to Virno are visible: the meme is not a finished work, but a process dependent on the existence of an audience. It is a nexus point in a contemporary discourse and usually functions only in that context. It exists only for a brief moment and may even go unnoticed, though it could just as easily be copied or injected into another discourse and then further mutate. At the same time, the **meme exhibits an impressive informational density thanks to its deliberately crafted combination of text and image**. The meme seeks to capitalize on this communicative advantage of its multilayered referential possibilities in order to induce the recipient to connecting communication and dissemination.<sup>20</sup>

18 Based on this understanding, every political action is virtuosic for Virno – if one wants to understand politics as an always contingent, ongoing process of joint negotiation of the collective: without a final product and by its very nature dependent on the presence of others. The political potential of the contemporary culture industry manifests itself in this way: “Within the sphere of a culture industry, in fact, activity without an end product, that is to say, communicative activity which has itself as an end, is a distinctive central and necessary element.” It focuses on interaction between people and thereby also always implies the joint negotiation of the labor process. Its contents: “the production of communication through communication.” Virno, Paolo. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude - For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, see <http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/GrammarOfTheMultitude.pdf>

19 See Wikipedia.

20 Of course, humor and absurdities cannot be denied as the guiding principles of Internet memes...

*“Memes require instant satisfaction. Art requires depth”  
(Robert Jackson, *The Banality of The New Aesthetic*, 2012)*

The meme now finds itself constantly on trial: humor, lack of depth, populism, sexism and more. At the same time, its political potential<sup>21</sup> is constantly invoked:

*“If we look at the most famous meme pool on the Internet, 4chan- we now find a growing militarization and politicization of this structure; the Internet-meme as a political weapon.” (Wyatt Niehaus, *U MAD BRO*, 2012)*

In his essay “U MAD BRO,” Wyatt Niehaus examines the structures of this form of communication and finds, above all, a “[lack of] any substantial form of hierarchy. Moderation is not imposed, it happens in generations as content is subject only to the scrutiny of populism.”<sup>22</sup> Niehaus is drawing on Hakim Bey’s concept of the “**temporary autonomous zone**,” a short-lived, utopian place that evades the traditional dynamics of law and hierarchy.<sup>23</sup> It is precisely places such as these that offer fertile ground for a design practice that can and wants to follow different rules. These places are made for letting images speak, giving words a visual gestalt.

### 1.3 Fitback (Fast Feedback Potential)

Summary: the contemporary user is not only extremely sensitive to visual codes; connected to the web, he’s also in a position to establish communication over diverse networks, penetrate microcosms and, potentially, reach the masses. He thereby demonstrates an exceptional (virtuosic?!), previously uncultivated skill with verbal and visual signs – combining them and also creating them. Fast interaction becomes possible.

I use the term **Fitback** to summarize this state of affairs and its possibilities. The fitness of the user, the give-and-go as practiced game move. Fitback is a spiritual power, a condition for Slippery Design. Without Fitback culture, it’s hard to imagine Slippery Design, since the dynamics of production, the knowledge of codes and the associated reflective potential contain within themselves the spirit of the web.

*“In the age of self-publishing and social media, the author function has splintered and multiplied. Society has changed, and so have the means of composing, consuming, and spreading the written word. ‘Author’ is now a role that anyone can play.” (Ellen Lupton, *Reading and Writing*, 2011)*

Contained within the term Fitback is an understanding of the author-recipient relationship as formulated by Umberto Eco: “Every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspec-

21 The “Pepper Spray Cop” is still a suitable example. This meme from the Occupy movement became a sharp weapon via its artistic expressions and mutations.

22 Niehaus, Wyatt. 2011. “U MAD BRO? Direct Action in the Meme Pool.” <http://pooool.info/u-mad-bro-direct-action-in-the-meme-pool/>

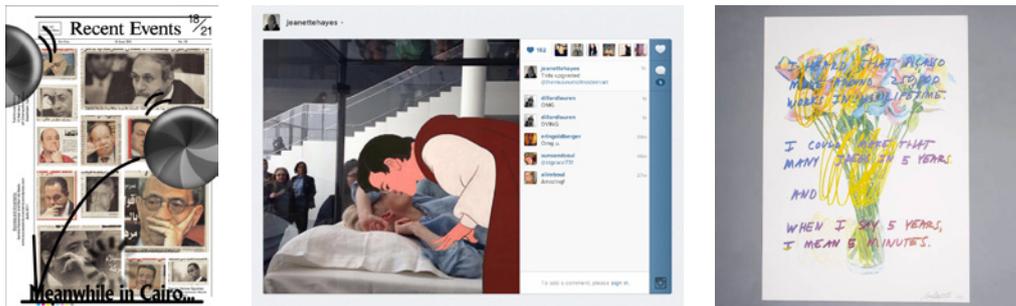
23 Cf. Ibid.

tive for itself.”<sup>24</sup> Just as the positions of sender and receiver are gradually blurred on the web in a gush of posts and reposts, forced to find themselves anew, the hybridization of the categories “reader” and “author” grows ever more pronounced. Result: the birth of and, ultimately, demand for an **active reading role**.

*“Users increasingly approach design with the expectation of having to fill in the blanks and actively insert content.” (Helen Armstrong, What is Participatory Design, 2011)*

This also, of course, affects design. Like the author, the superstar designer also dies, and an anarchic homemade design culture opens outward. Professional design clearly loses control of the visual field: the User<sup>25</sup> is born. His role evolves from single-track user of software to active participant (see Web 2.0).

By way of antithesis to and rejection of the idea of the artistic “masterpiece,” Brad Troemel recently coined the term “aesthlete,”<sup>26</sup> a visual artist, writer or musician distinguished primarily by his “**rapid production**” – and by the way he creates his own “self-mythology.” The goal is to generate the greatest possible amount of attention across online platforms, to achieve **constant output on the web** and inspire **the ongoing rehashing** of works, which only thereby become real. Time plays the decisive role here much more than previously privileged artistic qualities: “The tacit agreement between the aesthlete and the viewer is to be mutually indifferent toward quality understood as slick production value or refined craft. For aesthetes, the point of their work is not only what it expresses but the speed at which it’s expressed.”<sup>27</sup>



left: Fitback Offline: Sandra Kassenaar & Bart de Bats, Success and Uncertainty / Back Up Cairo,

<http://successanduncertainty.wordpress.com/>

middle: Fitback Online: Jeanette Hayes, Tilda Swinton-Remix on Instagram, <http://instagram.com/jeanettehayes/>

right: Aesthlete Parker Ito, from Brad Troemel's essay "Athletic Aesthetics", <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/athletic-aesthetics/>

The conditions for Fitback also lie in technical structures and ideologies: web offerings that obtain their content from the “bottom up” strengthen the user’s authority. Open source projects are specifically dependent on a user community. But Fitback also owes some of its power to the limitation of structures: the **template** is an essential prerequisite for operating quickly and securely, for designing. But it keeps everything in its context and under control. Slippery Design reflects this state of affairs and pushes at its boundaries in the hopes of overcoming them.

24 Eco, Umberto. 1989. *The Open Work: The Poetics of the Open Work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 4

25 See also: Knopf, Dennis. 2007. “You As In User - Audience Economics And The Web.” Self-published. <http://www.dennisknopf.net/>

26 Troemel, Brad. 2013. “Athletic Aesthetics.” <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/athletic-aesthetics/>

27 Ibid.

*“General Purpose Users can write an article in their e-mail client, layout their business card in Excel and shave in front of a web cam.” (Olia Lialina, Turing Complete User, 2012)<sup>28</sup>*

Lars Eijssen describes the nature and poetics of the works shown in his *The New Easy* exhibition as follows: “A New Easy work looks like it was **invented in 1 and created in 3 seconds**, proving the artist's genality. It is the kind of art that makes the blog kids cheer.”<sup>29</sup> But Fitback is not contained to the side of the artist; the blog kids don't just clap with enthusiasm, after all – they themselves can ambitiously participate in various contemporary discourses with their own output. Fitback leads to reflection, modification and mutation. Fitback is never at a standstill. **Fitback is an act of comprehension and response in one.**

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28 personal tip: Lialina, Olia. 2012. “Turing Complete User.” <http://contemporary-home-computing.org/turing-complete-user/>

29 Eijssen, Lars. 2009. Exhibition text for *The New Easy*. [www.theneweasy.com](http://www.theneweasy.com) doesn't exist anymore, review: <http://www.artnews.org/gallery.php?i=2512&exi=15940>

## 2. Balance & Challenge - Slippery Design's New "Form Follows Function" Equation



THIS CHAPTER WILL PAVE THE WAY FOR A DESIGN THAT NO LONGER SEEKS TO FULFILL ITS AESTHETIC-FUNCTIONAL PURPOSE, BUT INSTEAD EXPLICITLY PROVOKES FAILURE AND DEMANDS BALANCE IN THE COMMUNICATIVE ACT. THIS DESIGN THRIVES ON MISALIGNMENT, ON THE PULLING AND PUSHING FORCES THAT CAN CATAPULT THE VIEWER FAR BEYOND THE ANTIQUATED IDEA OF THE "INTENDED PURPOSE" OF A DESIGN OBJECT.

## 2.1 Form Fools Function – Function Fools Form

*“Outwardly progressive against environmental destruction and atomic weapons, inwardly retrospective for modern classics and the eternal use value of objects – these are not mutually exclusive! Gone the modern hope that the aesthetic can anticipate the condition of liberation from the dictates of necessity.” (Christian Borngräber, *Vor Ort - Leben am Rande des Wohnsinns*, 1997, our translation)*

It’s the tiresome topic about which every designer loves to babble: “form follows function.”<sup>30</sup> For decades, the equation has kept design in a **one-dimensional discourse** – an often hypocritical one at that. Though the principle of functionality continues to dominate, the global culture industry has been developing in the opposite direction for decades: consumption, expenditure, disposal. The dogma’s growing a long nose, and design cannot deny its complicity. As a result, its social impact and responsibility have been increasingly discussed. But well-known design manifestos like “First Things First 1964/2000,”<sup>31</sup> which seeks to give the profession back its conscience, read as though written in a forgotten time.

Slippery Design eludes both known discourses by **playing design’s use value off its sign value**. It decisively tears apart the FFF myth and draws its value from identity-establishing qualities that encourage the author/recipient in his intellectual process and refuse to take him under their wing.

Dysfunction! He who still faces it with confusion would do well to read Adolf Loos, who exalts function via absolute negation of ornament as superfluous element: “Soon the streets of the city will glow like white walls. Like Zion, the Holy City, the capital of heaven. It is then that fulfillment will have come.”<sup>32</sup> Loos, an architect and intellectual father of functionalism, wrote these words in 1908. One hundred years of human history later, his essays read like a collection of totalitarian phrases. Nonetheless, his polemic against ornament has found many devotees.<sup>33</sup>

Among them, the Bauhaus. There, though, they also sought to include the social responsibilities of design. “The romantic island,” a rejection of all environment, was not the goal;

30 “It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.” Sullivan, Louis H. 1896. “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered”. In: Lippincott’s Magazine, pp. 403–409

31 “[...] designers [...] apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles. Commercial work has always paid the bills, but many graphic designers have now let it become, in large measure, what graphic designers do. This, in turn, is how the world perceives design.” *First Things First 2000 - a design manifesto*. Published jointly by 33 signatories in fall 1999/spring 2000.

In: Adbusters, the AIGA journal, Blueprint, Emigre, Eye, Form, Items. <http://maxbruinsma.nl/index1.html?ft2000.htm>

32 “Soon the streets of the city will glow like white walls. Like Zion, the Holy City, the capital of heaven. It is then that fulfillment will have come.” Loos, Adolf. 1908. “Ornament and Crime.” Google it

33 Further statements read fantastically:

“Very well, the ornament disease is recognized by the state and subsidized by state funds.

But I see in this a retrograde step. I don’t accept the objection that ornament heightens a cultivated person’s joy in life [...]”

or “freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength.”

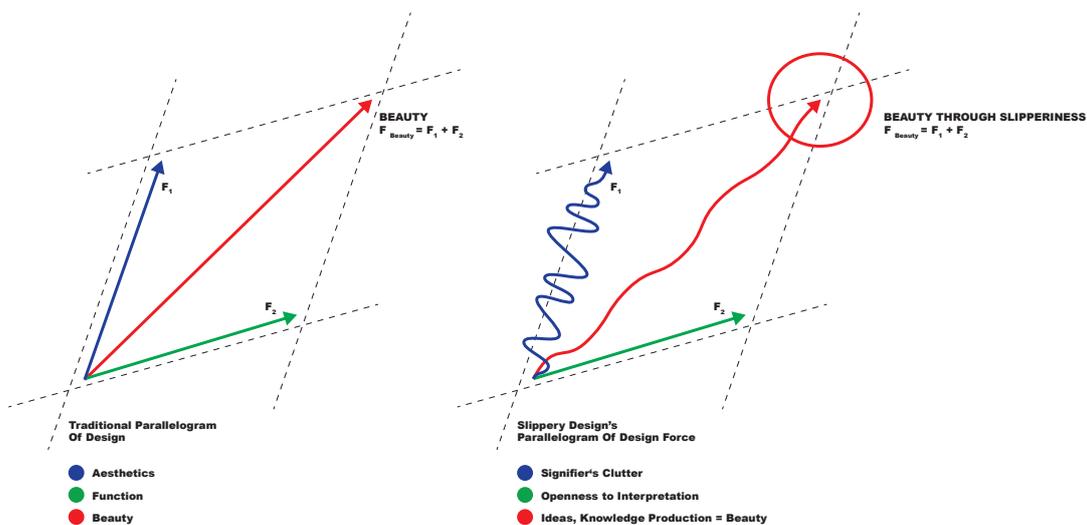
“Ornament is wasted manpower and therefore wasted health.[...] Ornament can no longer be borne by someone who exists at our level of culture. [...] The lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power.” Loos, Adolf. 1908. “Ornament and Crime.” Google it

according to Walter Gropius, design is much more “an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilized society.”<sup>34</sup> This approach also determined the demands directed towards design. In the words of László Moholy-Nagy, “quality of design is dependent not alone on function, science, and technological processes, but also upon social consciousness.”<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the ranks of functionalism hardliners continue to swell. Dieter “a return to simplicity is our only hope” Rams and company speak of a “reduction of accidents.”<sup>36</sup> Peter Sloterdijk sees the designer as “perpetrator of the verb ‘to function,’ apostle of the belief, sent all over the world, in the primacy of function over structure and essence.”<sup>37</sup> Maximum functionality in conjunction with aesthetics remains the decisive quality criterion and guiding ideal of design. **The insistence on a functionality-oriented design maxim, which necessarily leaves open few options, leads inevitably to conservatism, to a regurgitation of paradigms in fear of alternatives, emancipation and evolution.**

*“The limits of functionalism to date have been the limits of the bourgeoisie in its practical sense.” (Theodor W. Adorno, Funktionalismus heute, 1965, our translation)*

Based on a critique of a symbolic loss, of a **symbolic crisis** after World War II, Theodor Adorno laments the constraints that functionalism produces. He thereby criticizes Loos’ conception of a modernity that renounces all ideologies, which he views as simply obscuring a lack of readiness to deal with contradictions. Ornamentation in its symbolic value is legitimized. Adorno advises: “The future of sachlichkeit can be liberating only if it sheds its barbaric traits, displaces the sadistic blows of sharp edges, bare calculated rooms, stairways and the like.”<sup>38</sup>



34 Gropius, Walter. 1962. “My Conception of the Bauhaus Idea.” In: *Scope of Total Architecture*. New York: Collier Books. p. 20

35 Moholy-Nagy, Lazlo. 1947. *Vision in Motion*. Chicago: Paul Theobald. p. 56

36 Frascara, Jorge. 1995. “Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science.” In: Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Eds.).

*The Idea of Design - A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p. 52

37 Sloterdijk, Peter. 2006. “Das Zeug zur Macht.” In: Klaus Thomas Edelmann and Gerrit Terstiege (Eds.). *Gestaltung denken*. Basel: Birkhäuser. p. 305. Our translation.

38 Adorno, Theodor W. 1977. “Funktionalismus heute.” In: *Gesammelte Schriften Band 10, Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II: Eingriffe*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. p. 381. Our translation.

Liberation from functional thinking is achieved by playing contradictions off against one another. Slippery Design thus privileges references in order to nurture their power in **fields of meaning** – and then to openly discuss them and thereby allow irrationalities. It speaks in differences, urges dialogues and resists the monologue of a ruling doctrine. Visions are generated out of interpretations. Functionalism here = absorption in the game of references. The use value is generated by playing off against the sign value, which, in turn, through its own intellectual value, is essential for our one...

*“Beauty today can have no other measure than the depth to which a work resolves contradictions. A work must cut through the contradictions and overcome them, not by covering them up, but by pursuing them.” (Theodor W. Adorno, Funktionalismus heute, 1965, our translation)*

How can “Slippery Design material” be deliberately provoked? Two possible approaches: **(a) failure**, which prompts thinking in oppositions, and **(b) risk-taking**, the prerequisite for daring a controversial design, which, in all its fragility, contains within it friction and discussion.

### a.) Failing – The Challenge of Dysfunction

Surely one paradox of our society is the commandment to always function and always improve. These do not go together. As we learned long ago, evolution relies on failure and draws from a **cosmos of dysfunction**. We are organic errors and, at the same time, designed for perfection, barely able to think outside the category of ongoing movement – for he who doesn't sprint is not part of society, and he who functions walks in a strictly straight line that eventually promises success and wealth. Thus heterogeneity remains largely an empty buzzword; an equation can have only one outcome. Consequence = consensus.<sup>39</sup>

*“If one's priority is to resist failure at all cost, the potential of surprise is never played out.” (Markus Miessen, The Nightmare of Participation, 2012)*

Slippery Design counteracts this one-dimensional optimization dictate: it seeks confrontation with failure and the generation of **building lines to oppositions**. Failure always contains the potential to reveal possibilities that were previously not considered. Failing means learning: breaking new ground, turning new paths or even adopting a new form. Failure determines position and reveals process. Knowledge is retrospectively generated via reflection on missed opportunities, which, in turn, draws attention to additional potentialities. Failure is the highest functionality of a discursive, exhausting design.

To further illustrate the benefits of failure for design, it helps to call upon the conditions of the laboratory. Here, **“situations of ignorance”**<sup>40</sup> are artificially created in order to stimulate the production of knowledge: “Chance, the coming upon and also the undirected searching, the trial & error, is much more than just an accident in the basic rules of re-

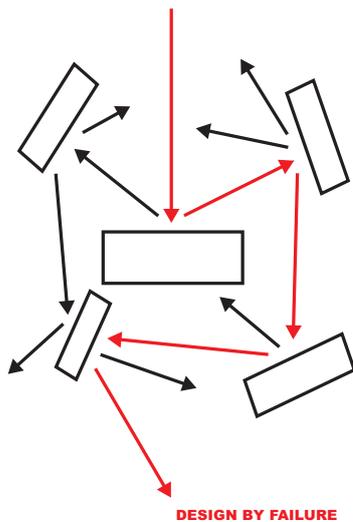
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<sup>39</sup> Like

<sup>40</sup> Schäffner, Wolfgang. 2012. “Vom Wissen zum Entwurf. Das Projekt der Forschung.” Leaked PDF.

search; it always crops up when the new is at stake, when it's a question of research in the true sense of the word,"<sup>41</sup> writes Wolfgang Schäffner in *Vom Wissen zum Entwurf, Das Projekt der Forschung*.

The **laboratory** and the experimental methods pursued therein are the proper place for Slippery Design. Here, forms can be developed that meet the requirements of a pluralistic thinking in entangled ambiguities. A sense of (re)orientation is constantly put to the test during development; the ability to continually conceive and nurture new possibilities is encouraged and manifests itself in drafts/sketches and, eventually, designs/communication products.



"always not working" – failure as chance - surprise by failure

There is thus **no fixed, finalized form** in Slippery Design; the "final" design remains to be determined by the derivation process. The recipient, in other words, is presented with perpetual failure, with endless possibilities for interpretation and further development. The design and communications process is thus stretched beyond the fixed form of an object. Participatory design in the true sense; everyone can contribute to the discussion.

Receiving a Slippery Design object is thus complicated. It's rarely possible to understand at first glance. The **failure of understanding** is literally preprogrammed; the form, after all, is somehow unknown, unfinished, fragile... This encourages an open interpretation – but is not, of course, in the spirit of a design that seeks to synchronize sender and receiver.

*"To suddenly engage. To suddenly say to oneself: I'll participate. I can't do it, to be sure. I'm a tourist. But I'll join in."* (Christoph Schlingensiefel, "Erlösungssegen," HAU 1, 2003)

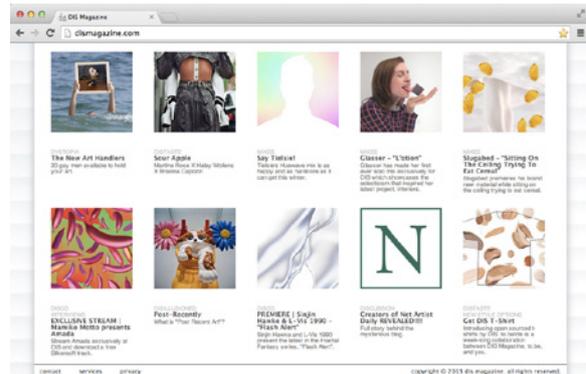
Slippery! The recipient slips and falls into the void; but if the framework is tightly built, it will catch him at a different point. The **mastering of searching and finding**, the being

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41 Schäffner, Wolfgang. 2012. "Vom Wissen zum Entwurf. Das Projekt der Forschung." Leaked PDF. Our translation.

disappointed and allowing oneself to be surprised, is rewarded with wild, interwoven ideas that stretch throughout the space. One has only to follow them.<sup>42</sup>

Deadlocked form and thought patterns can be broken open with a multifaceted, challenging reception; premature consensus should hardly be possible with Slippery Design, which demands oppositional thinking. **The decryption process engrosses our cognition via the constant confrontation with failure. Laborious but fruitful. The outcome remains open.**



left: Theo van Doesburg, Poster Dada Matinée, 1923

right: DIS Magazine: Failure as opportunity (curiosity, doubt, relocalization, criticism)

Though the information may not be new to a majority of the readership, it is worth mentioning that one contemporary pop cultural concept in which slippery moments can be discovered/in which failures of comprehension are common practice can be found on the Internet platform DIS Magazine, which has made its prefix into a style: “DIS is a multi-culti platform for creative solutions. Promoting unsafe style is a lifestyle.”<sup>43</sup>

## b.) Risking – The Balancing Act between Virtuosity and Dilettantism

What disposition helps the designer give form to the entangled, experimental derivation process? How can one achieve, via confrontation with failure, a communicable form that enriches meaning? What role do the back doors of the various oppositions play? Slippery Design is the expression of a **balancing act** that doesn't shy from slipping and falling, rather encourages it, and at the same time keeps alternatives on hand to absorb the fall.

As already mentioned in footnote <sup>(19)</sup> in the section on Virtuosity and the Autopoiesis of the Meme, the contemporary culture industry excels in virtuosity: an especially fast, time-bound and intertwined production of communicative acts. It is no contradiction to

42 Compare also the *Spirit Surfing* manifesto: “As I have gathered from watching some of the great surfers of our time at work, surfing is the balance of making choices and being led. Surfing is being led by the wave as you make your choices. The wave stirs up gifts, and it is the ability of the great surfer to recognize his or her arrival at a worthy gift. On Spirit Surfers this gift is referred to as a boon. The boon is revealed at the eureka moment of a surf when the surfer becomes enlightened by the INFOspirit.”

Bewersdorf, Kevin. 2008. “Spirit Surfing.” <http://www.krystalsouth.com/paper/#ss>

43 Al Qadiri, Fatima. 2012. Quoted from “What Is DIS? Going Where No Magazine Has Gone Before” by Fiona Duncan. <http://bulletmedia.com/article/what-is-dis/>

say that it has also, in the last years, been increasingly shaped by producers/users who contribute to cultural production in a dilettantish manner. For in this **dilettantish manner lies a virtuosic spirit** that incessantly drives the industry forward. This means, simply, that the two categories, “dilettantism” and “virtuosity,” are not mutually exclusive – not anymore. An examination of the catchword “risk” reveals the properties claimed from each by Slippery Design.

It is difficult for the virtuoso to create a dysfunctional design, to initiate a process of failure; he won't see any gain in it. To the contrary, all too open interpretations jeopardize the performance, his work. For the dilettante, on the other hand, this game is exactly right. He's a textbook example of a generalist, a user accustomed to thinking in oppositions, who knows how to help himself and is not afraid of failure because he has nothing to lose. A short description of the two actors explores this assessment in greater detail:

**X. The Dilettante.** Anina Engelhardt sees three types of dilettante: 1. Dilettantes “in the sense of amateurs who, without formal qualification, commit themselves to a job but are not recognized by the relevant profession” (e.g. many Internet Users). 2. Dilettantes who “want to free themselves of all too absurd-seeming standards and restrictions and are thus themselves professionally active in the relevant field.” (German television entertainer Stefan Raab is used as an example. The punk, the techno producer, etc. could also be included in this group.) 3. Dilettantes who “actually dabble in their field [...] but are protected by their status.”<sup>44</sup> (George W. Bush is used as an example.) We focus on the first type since it exhibits the greatest independence from the discourses in which it is involved.

**Y. The Virtuoso.** Wikipedia tells us that the virtuoso is distinguished by his readiness and willingness to risk (in addition to his extraordinary artistic ability!). Only the possibility of failure makes things real, contends philosopher and mathematician John G. Bennett. Using the term “**hazard**,” he describes situations in which a non-deterministic moment brings an uncertainty with it and demands a real decision from the individual.<sup>45</sup> A virtuoso is faced with this reality when, for example, he's on stage.

While failure rarely fazes the dilettante (the journey is the destination), the virtuoso seeks to avoid it (goal in sight). He is proficient in weighing risks and benefits and only consciously accepts risk when there is a positive balance. He is accustomed to the balancing act. He has mastered the reflection of his own work in front of an audience, incorporates their expectations and implements artistic standards.

The conception and development of a Slippery Design object requires the strengths and characteristics of both types. The experiment-happy dilettante (from the Latin *dilettare/delectare*: to delight, to amuse) acts out his enthusiasm with the behavioral gifts of the virtuoso, whose talent shows especially to advantage in the taking of risks. **The oppositional thinking of the dilettante, his cherishing of building lines** (especially in the “conception and drafting phase”) **combines with the design strengths and risk readiness of**

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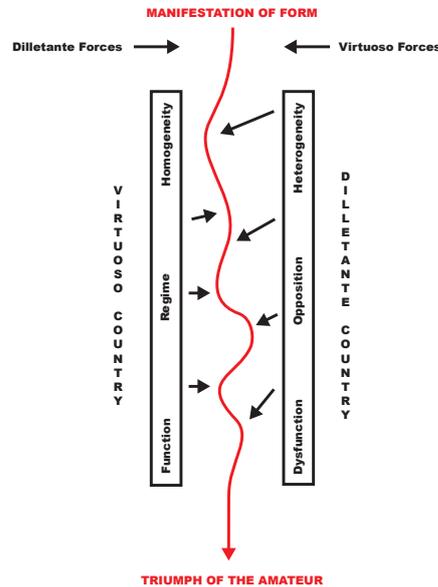
44 Engelhardt, Anina. 2010. “Der Dilettant.” In: Stephan Moebius and Markus Schroer (Eds.). *Sozialfiguren der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. pp. 68-80. Our translation.

45 Cf. Wikipedia: John G. Bennett

**the virtuoso** (required for the technical realization and manifestation of the form) **and becomes the overarching gesture of the Slippery Designer.** The “triumph of the amateur.”<sup>46</sup>



Triumph of the amateur: Chilly Gonzales (best before 2006)



With this hybridization in mind, it’s worth cross-reading Peter Sloterdijk, who sees in design “nothing but the skillful handling of the unskilled.”<sup>47</sup> In the case of Slippery Design, the “skillful handling” is not really required. Nor does the Slippery Designer perceive himself as “unskilled” – he knows the subject matter, after all, searches for identification, at least he believes and feels it. But the charlatanesque art of which Sloterdijk writes, which provides people “the technical gear for power,”<sup>48</sup> seems not entirely unfamiliar. It is reminiscent of the graphic designer who uses Photoshop in an exemplary manner, but whose view beyond the monitor is obscured by his horn-rimmed glasses.

Question: to what extent could Slippery Design be the “**unskilled handling of the skilled**” (Manuel Bürger)? What would that look like?

Conjecture: an “unskilled handling of the skilled” must occur on purpose – precisely because it results from a reflection on the skilled. Targeted blank spaces, new contact and friction points are thus created. This may be a singular quality of design: blank spaces are not, after all, controllable. The result is broad leeway for interpretation. That is to say: control is given almost entirely to the recipient, who (as discussed in the passage on new author/reader roles) participates actively in the discourse! Effect: **accumulation of ideas through dialogical construction.**

46 Sterling, Bruce. 2012. “An Essay on the New Aesthetic.” [http://www.wired.com/beyond\\_the\\_beyond/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/](http://www.wired.com/beyond_the_beyond/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/)

47 Sloterdijk, Peter. 2006. “Das Zeug zur Macht.” In: Klaus Thomas Edelman and Gerrit Terstiege (Eds.). *Gestaltung denken*. p. 301. Our translation.

48 Cf. *Ibid* p. 301

### 3. Lost in Connotation - Between Fields of Meaning and Building Lines, Great Narratives and Intertwined Ambiguities



LOST IN CONNOTATION: WHEN SEMIONAUTS ORBIT BLANK SPACES AND LEAVE TRACES, WHEN NOT-KNOWING AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING LEAD TO CONNECTING COMMUNICATIONS – THAT'S WHEN SLIPPERY DESIGN ACTS OUT ITS DISCURSIVE QUALITY, ELEVATING THE STATE OF BEING LOST TO A DESIRABLE GOAL, A CONSTANT CHALLENGE.

The story so far: the term Fitback was conceived to describe the steady exchange of User Generated Content (UGC) and the ability to jump in on design and communication processes. Evidence was gathered to show that (Slippery) Design begins to live beyond functionalism; its qualities reveal themselves in an ambiguous narrative, in the production of ideas. This led to the hypothesis that Slippery Design combines the dilettantish impulse with the reflective abilities of the virtuoso. It seems to connect a general openness with a focus on and development of specific contexts.

In the following pages, I turn my attention to a semiotic grammar that supports this Slippery Design practice. By merging various concepts and references, I draw fields of meaning and build (uncontrollable) tensions that attract the semionaut: “Lost in Connotation.”

### 3.1 (Stop) Making Sense

The power of culturally charged signs is consistently striking; their significance moves people both internally and spatially. Mythology – surely one of the most important pillars of human identity – determines the articulation of common hopes and dreams, creates a sense of shared history, present and future.

*“Mythology probably is the most important and unconsciously embracing governing structure in an ecology of artifacts. A culture can hardly be conceived without myths, and its vitality derives directly from them.” (Klaus Krippendorf, On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that ‘Design is Making Sense (of Things)’, 1989)*

*“Without the symbolic reference to mythology, product meanings become entirely dependent on their variable context and hence semantically and motivationally unstable.” (S. Balaram, Product Symbolism of Gandhi and Its Connection with Indian Mythology, 1989)*

While travelling in India, I was impressed by how sensitively the local culture of signs is handled. In the words of Indian designer Singanapalli Balaram: **“Symbols and meanings are so important that realism sometimes seems to be deliberately discarded.”**<sup>50</sup> Balaram makes a case for the rhetoric of “product symbolism,” a design practice that uses mythological signs in order to provoke identification with the product. To prove his theory, Balaram cites several examples of designs that while “functioning” – that is, meeting certain aesthetic and ecological requirements – fail in a cultural regard because they use a different vocabulary and don’t take account of the mythology of the particular culture: “The improved bullock cart with pneumatic tires is still not accepted by Indian farmers.”<sup>51</sup>

The cyberneticist/designer/communications researcher Klaus Krippendorf<sup>52</sup> takes a similar view. He criticizes the lack of meaning for the user in modern design and offers a

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50 Balaram, Singanapalli. 1989. “Product Symbolism of Gandhi and Its Connection with Indian Mythology.” In: Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Eds.). *The Idea of Design - A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p. 68

51 Ibid. p. 81

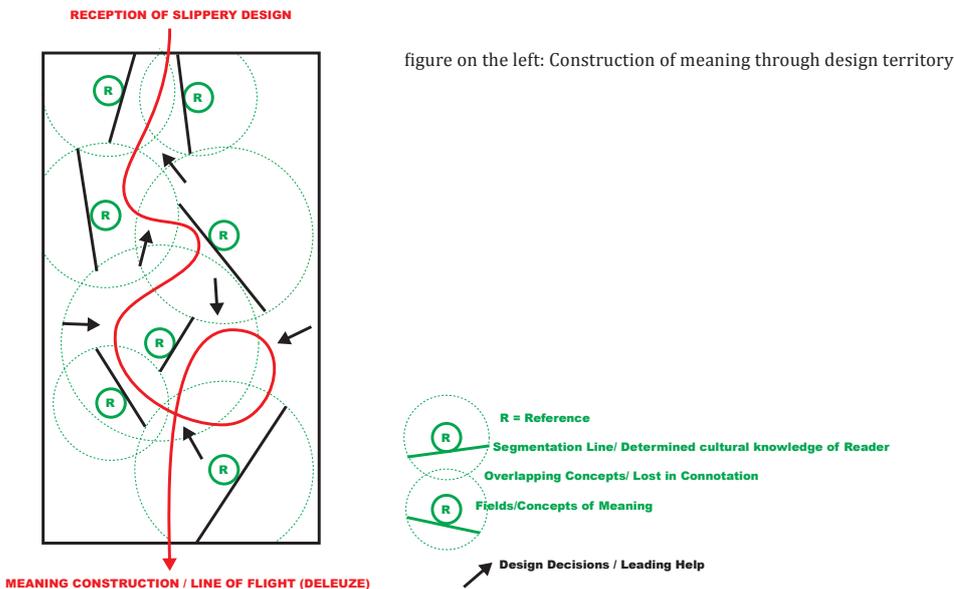
52 Also known for his theory of the “semantic turn,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Semantic\\_Turn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Semantic_Turn)

remedy in the formula **Form Follows Meaning**: “Form may not follow function but meaning, which brings the user back into the picture and strongly suggests that designers need to discuss not only the context in which their forms are used, but also how these forms are made sense of or what they mean to someone other than themselves. [...] In practice, different models may call for a **layered semantics** that enables users to penetrate through the simplest and, literally, surface appearance **to deeper and deeper levels of understanding.**”<sup>53</sup>



The wheel and its countless mythological meanings. See footnote 54

Of course, it would be wrong to blindly follow or even design a single myth. Instead, fields of meaning must be created via the juxtaposition and constellation of diverse signs. The forces at play here constantly reorient the recipient, allow him to take in new perspectives, repeatedly update his own overview and provide enough energy for further searching. At the same time, culturally charged archetypal images and the guidance of the designer help the recipient to not completely lose the ground under his feet.



53 Krippendorf, Klaus . 1989. “On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that ‘Design Is Making Sense (of Things)’”.

In: Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Eds.) *The Idea of Design - A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press. pp. 160/167

54 “The wheel is loaded with deep rooted meanings: the universal law of motion, the cycle of life, death and rebirth, the universe as seen with the inner light of illumination, the concept of continuous change, the Buddhist Wheel of Law, and so on.”

Cf. Balaram, Singanapalli. 1989. “Product Symbolism of Gandhi and Its Connection with Indian Mythology,” In: Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Eds.). *The Idea of Design - A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

For all its turmoil, this **game of guiding and gliding allows territories to be traversed**, multilayered levels to be roamed, and contributes to a reflected production of knowledge. “Mythologies give coherence to cultural complexes beyond individual understanding by legitimizing its components, assigning them to perform meaningful roles and directing them to interact with each other.”<sup>55</sup>



“Mind Fractals” flyers by Michael Ozone ~ “deeper and deeper levels of understanding”

The ornamental character of Slippery Design must again be addressed in light of these mythological aspects. The question remains open as to whether an abstract design element that initially fulfilled a decorative purpose cannot also possess an important symbolic and successively discursive value<sup>56</sup> that guides the recipient on his journey towards understanding. Discussion about “**empty ornamentalism**” must thus be conducted with a high degree of sensitivity. The charge may, in some circumstances, be justified vis-à-vis Slippery Design objects (though probably even more so vis-à-vis typical contemporary visual Tumblr works<sup>57</sup>), but as long as **contradictions** in the use of various symbols/references persist, it is rather the absence of ornament that must be indicted as affirmative.<sup>58</sup>

*“Modern architecture’s expression has become a dry expressionism, empty and boring – and in the end irresponsible. Ironically, the Modern architecture of today while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament.” (Robert Venturi, Learning from Las Vegas - The Forgotten Symbolism in Architecture, 1972)*

Adorno’s critique of a post-war symbolic loss has already been mentioned in Chapter 2. A look at Robert Venturi’s “less is a bore” mindset should bolster the side of demonstrative symbolism. In “**Learning from Las Vegas - The Forgotten Symbolism in Architecture**,” Venturi examines architecture from the perspective of its ornamentalism. He thereby establishes two concepts/categories:

55 Krippendorf, Klaus. 1989. “On the Essential Contexts of Artifacts or on the Proposition that ‘Design Is Making Sense (of Things)’”.

In: Victor Margolin and Richard Buchanan (Eds.) *The Idea of Design - A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press. P. 183

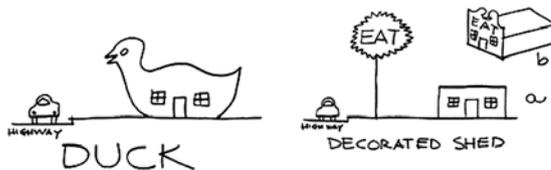
56 and thus also functional value (use value) in Slippery Design

57 I hereby again assert that Slippery Design is not necessarily equivalent to “post-Internet,” “pretty ugly” or “the new ugly” design.

58 Where facades remain sober, (open) interpretation is always dependent on the freethinking interpretation of the author or the cultural background of the recipient – a generally sad game that rarely finds a common denominator and avoids all discussion from the outset.

The “**duck**” (primarily modern architecture): “Where the architectural system of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the duck in honor of the duck shaped drive-in, ‘The Long Island Duckling,’ illustrated in God’s Own Junkyard by Peter Blake.”<sup>59</sup>

The “**decorated shed**” (primarily postmodern architecture): “Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the decorated shed.”<sup>60</sup>



See also “Duck House Theory” by Manuel Bürger for *Mimetic Club*

Though Venturi considers both architectural styles legitimate, he advocates strongly for the postmodern “decorated shed” with its focus on symbolism, historical referentiality, social message and merging of high and low art.<sup>61</sup> This commitment to an “**architecture of meaning**” can also be discerned in the following description of what he considered lacking in his own buildings: “We had failed to fit into our buildings double functioning or vestigial elements, circumstantial distortions, expedient devices, eventful exceptions, exceptional diagonals, things in things, crowded or contained intricacies, linings or layerings, residual spaces, redundant spaces, ambiguities, inflections, dualities, difficult wholes, or the phenomena of both-and.”<sup>62</sup>



PAM Italo Mix refrigerator magnet. Segmenting - Meaning Lines, Connotation Areas

59 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour. 1972. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p. 87

60 Ibid., p. 87

61 Cf. Ibid., p. 102

62 Ibid., p. 129

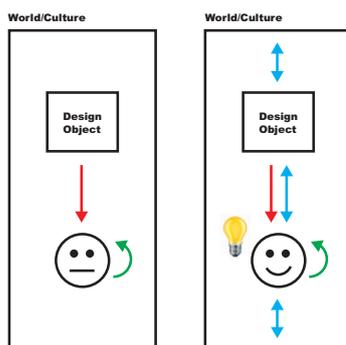
*“Not only are we not free from the forms of the past, and from the availability of these forms as typological models, but if we assume we are free, we have lost control over a very active sector of our imagination, and of our power to communicate with others.”*  
(Alan Colquhoun, *Typology and Design Method*, 1967)

To summarize: design that does not seek to span cultural reference fields, generate impulses and fully exploit the cosmos of signs may be partially legitimate, but is not relevant here (cf. Slippery Design vs. Slick Design). Here, we’re interested in stories, ideas, visions, new connections, intellectual challenges, interpretive playroom, discussions. And aside from the fact that we can’t invent anything absolutely new anyway – because the semantic chain of all that has already been/seen runs through our every thought – the thoroughly modern idea of letting go would mean freeing ourselves from the past, most coldheartedly ;-)

### 3.2 Self-Referential Design (Tristram Shandy & David Byrne – Their Nature of Contradiction)

*“Reading, or looking at a book leads directly to looking at yourself, reflecting on what you as reader or viewer are doing and how this can be ordered within existing patterns or categories.”* (Helmut Draxler, *Shandyism. Authorship as Genre*, 2007)

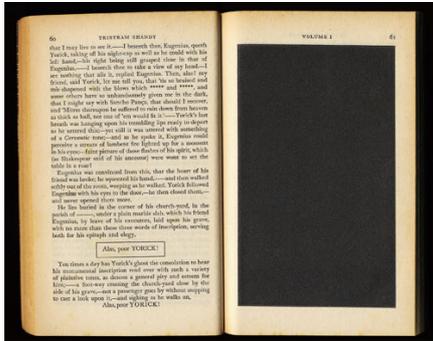
**1. Self-Referential Nature, the Viewer:** In my opinion, there are two types of design that stimulate self-reflection. On the one hand, there’s the design of an open dialogue (as discussed earlier in this essay; see Fitback), which formally asks the recipient to respond, participate, reflect himself, find identification. On the other hand, there’s also a kind of self-referentiality that arises because the design product first reflects itself – and thereby throws its own importance in the balance. Using this tactic, it inevitably narrates information about its own medium, the conditions of its production, its distribution and all the decisions of its author, then challenges the recipient to **find his own role in this context**. This form of self-referentiality is distinctive: **it accosts, plays with expectations and is happy to let the reader slip and fall** – thereby expediting reflection and the search for knowledge.



The two "Self-Referential Natures"

Laurence Sterne’s novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, published in nine volumes from 1759 to 1767, demonstrates the latter form of self-referentiality. It is not only a marvel of entangled narratives and layers of time; the narrator also succeeds in observing himself and his work: “By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a

species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, -- and at the same time.”<sup>63</sup>



left: Black page from *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne  
right: Author unknown

Helmut Draxler sees the novel's self-referentiality primarily in the fact that it plays with expectations inherent to the medium, disappoints those expectations, but then reconstructs them, breaks down linearities and prompts reflection<sup>64</sup>: “Tristram Shandy is the ultimate and unparalleled example of a book that addresses its own medium with self-reflective wit and irony. [It becomes] **aware of its own mediality, negotiates the demands of a new form of publicity and a particular construction of authorship.**”<sup>65</sup> A secret tradition of modernism?!

Carol Witts attributes a primarily political relevance to the novel. Sterne works with competing claims to truth. Different historical narratives and different definitions of social identities meet, but rather than being evaluated, they are connected; connotations are reviewed and exploited: “The political significance of Shandyism is therefore not a critique of ideology in the sense of the revelation of truth, but rather a **critique of representation** in the sense of an opening up to intermediate spaces in which the contradictions between different categorical authorities are addressed and hitherto **unprecedented relations are produced.**”<sup>66</sup>

Precisely herein lies the strength of a design that reflects on and addresses itself: **the recipient does not want to rank behind the design object in its ability to reflect.** And so the recipient asks himself questions that disrupt and confuse the usual, single-track direction of communication: design object >> recipient. He is thereby induced to reflect himself beyond the medium, which means trying to see himself and the design object in a superordinate context.

63 Sterne, Laurence. 1982 [1759-1767]. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Frankfurt: Insel. p. 698 (English).

64 The medium's wrong message

65 Draxler, Helmut. 2007. “Shandyism. Autorschaft als Genre.” In: Helmut Draxler (Ed.). *Shandyism. Autorschaft als Genre*. Stuttgart: Merz & Solitude, p. 259

66 Witts, Carol. 1996. “The Modernity of Sterne.” In: David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (Eds.). *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*. pp. 19-38

For a current critique of representation, the now-dissolved painting collective Paint FX comes to mind. The aesthetic or bluntness of its images is the best criticism of the corporate look of Adobe Photoshop and Co. <http://paintfx.biz/> or <http://www.krystalsouth.com/paper/#pfx>

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“We cannot be separated from the objects that surround us.” (David Byrne, quoted on a leaflet from *Aktionsforum Praterinsel* (Munich), 1998)

**2. Self-Referential Nature, the Author:** So far, this examination of the processes of self-referentiality has focused on the recipient. Now to the author. In this context, David Byrne occupies a slippery position in the truest sense of the word and also an ambiguous one. (A.) On the one hand, he urges the designer to renounce his authorship, to not develop a personal style. (B.) But at the same time, he loves the objects whose production methods and form tell a story about the author and reflect the culture of the users.

To point (A.) – in “The Holy Grail of No Style,” Byrne writes the following about Tibor Kalman’s designs: “Tibor and company don’t have a signature style, and that is a worthy ambition in life. In baseball metaphor land, if the pitcher keeps changing styles, the batter doesn’t know what’s coming at him, so he has to be ever-alert. [...] Having a recognizable style relegates you to the status of the quotable icon. And while being an icon is flattering, I imagine, once it happens, you become irrelevant. [...] **Having to get the ‘I’ out of the song is the ultimate compositional coup, whether in music or in design. Having a non-style is more slippery, amusing and surprising than sticking to one nice recognizable look.** It’s a way of staying half-awake, or noticing things, enjoying things and learning to love things – especially the vernacular and banal things that have been relegated to the garbage heap of design.”<sup>67</sup>

To point (B.) – “**The impulse to attribute human attributes to objects is not stupid or wrong, as many scientists keep telling us time and again...** We cannot be separated from the objects that surround us. They animate and imitate us just as much as we imitate objects and animate them. By breathing a soul into dead objects, we feel and understand that the world is truly alive, not just existing as an aggregate of dead objects and lifeless landscapes.”<sup>68</sup>

Of course, the two statements are not completely contradictory. After all, in Point (A.), Byrne is more concerned with refusing a corporate design philosophy than once again proclaiming the death of the author. But above all, his thoughts reveal a conscious approach to authorship and its reflection in design, which can be consolidated in the term “style” – a point that has not been omitted here without cause, since Slippery Design does not want to subordinate itself to or even discuss any aesthetic or style.

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67 Byrne, David. 1988. “The Holy Grail of No Style.” In: Peter Haall and Michael Bierut (Eds.). *Tibor Kalman: Perverse Optimist*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press. P. 87

68 Byrne, David. Quoted on a leaflet of the “Aktionsforum Praterinsel”, Munich that accompanied his 1998 exhibition “Glory! Success! Ecstasy!”

### 3.3 Lost in Connotation (Summary Included)

*Q: Your artistic mind strikes me as perpetually stimulated. Even in casual conversation its like you're brainstorming fictional techno band names. Does your creative capacity ever exhaust? Is there any mental serenity in the chaos?*

*A: My brain seems to need to making connections in order to keep moving. One thing always leads to another ..... which makes me think, what about Pop the Boat?*

*Never not poppin!*

*(Misha Hollenbach (P.A.M) interviewed by Modular, 2013)<sup>69</sup>*

**Lost in Connotation** is the state of a recipient, a designer, deeply immersed in “Slippery Design material” and lost in a game of references: dissolving denotations, balancing contexts, searching for relevance, piecing together meaning, tracking down paths. When the translation takes effect slowly, when missing pieces of the puzzle emerge, riddles get solved, the path leads from ignorance to knowledge – then design lives and continues. But it will never be “free,” won’t search for contemplative harmony or oneness, but rather remain in the **jungle**, in chaos. Lost in Connotation demands sustained deconstruction and thereby goes against the monotonous truth discourse of other design theories, against a clear and understandable translation.

Of course, one could now turn to theoretical texts like “homo viator/the radlicant” by Nicolas Bourriaud<sup>70</sup> or “Notes on metamodernism” by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker<sup>71</sup> to complement these visual, organic descriptions. But I’d prefer not to get too theoretical or philosophical, rather encourage the reader, on a practical level, to observe contemporary graphic design beyond the text, to consider whether or not it contains contradictions, whether the possibilities of the language of signs, which conditions the Internet for us, is reflected in some way – to determine whether or not it invites interaction. Where do these signs crop up to encourage further research? Where can I see **risky decisions** and my **interpretation threatened**? Must design take one step at a time, securely delivering individual information units, or can it lead beyond that to new horizons or into the depths of the jungle? Does not graphic design, which reflects only the language of its own profession (e.g. fonts created by designers for designers – le design pour le design), remain proof positive that **interdisciplinarity** – in other words, the exchange of mindsets/scraps of knowledge/forms of expression with other disciplines like, for example, the natural sciences and humanities – is still not a goal?

*“Thus one of the principles of the Creed, a passage from the Bible, a phrase from one of the Church Fathers, or from the Latin text of the Mass could be expressed and taken into the Game just as easily and aptly as an axiom of geometry or a melody of Mozart. We would scarcely be exaggerating if we ventured to say that for the small circle of genuine Glass*

<sup>69</sup> <http://modularpeople.com/modcast/146-misha-hollenbach-pam/23273.html>

<sup>70</sup> “For contemporary creators are already laying the foundations for a radlicant art – radlicant being a term designating an organism that grows its roots and adds new ones as it advances. To be radlicant means setting one’s roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one’s identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing.” Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2009. *The Radlicant*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, p.22

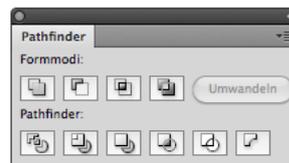
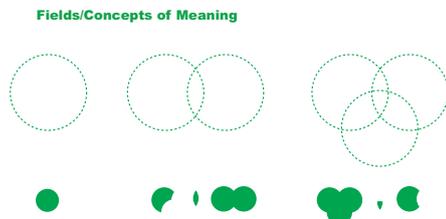
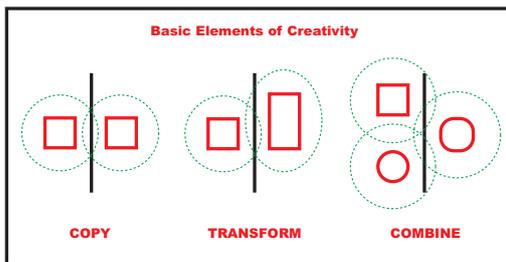
<sup>71</sup> “Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure [...] seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find”, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. 2010. “Notes on metamodernism.” <http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/index.php/jac/article/view/5677/6306>, 2010

*Bead Game players the Game was virtually equivalent to worship...” (Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game (A General Introduction)*, 1943)*

Incidentally: the term “fields of meaning” keeps cropping up here and has not yet been properly discussed. Of course, it’s meant to be taken literally, and its meaning is, I think, somehow established. In connection with an **unchronological thought structure**, which is becoming increasingly the norm, these fields are now tremendously interesting. We know chronology from school – the 1 to 9, the A to Z. But this no longer seems a suitable approach for acquiring knowledge. We operate in fields/fields of meaning whose poles we do not know; we are, after all, changing their forces via our own research.



The Google input field helps us immediately fill in missing knowledge, close gaps and open up new gaps/areas. **This economy of meaning construction is unique in history** and less dependent on the cultural background of the producer than ever before.<sup>72</sup>



Basic Elements of Creativity (COPY/TRANSFORM/COMBINE) by Kriby Ferguson, <http://everythingisaremix.info/>  
 Bootlegged with “Fields of Meaning” by The Laboratory of Manuel Bürger

*“A critical approach thus means (...) shedding light on contradictions, cycles and crises, for in each of these moments, the (...) historical development can open up to the benefit of other possibilities.” (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire – Die neue Weltordnung*, 2000)*

The critical potential of Slippery Design is thus clear: it leads to a **multilayered reception** and an equally **ambiguous design**. Some designers are already pursuing these and

<sup>72</sup> Aside from the fact that Google, of course, spits out results geared specifically to the searcher, whose worldview is thereby confirmed.

similar objectives<sup>73</sup>, often under the heading of “critical design”; others believe that “conceptual design” is already by definition critical ;-/... Nevertheless: Slippery Design does not want to direct attention to the possibilities of the critical perspectives that can be gained through slipperiness. Such kudos, a slap on the back for being (wanting to be) “critical,” too often leads only to a single, monotonous truth discourse. The venue of any design remains with the recipient; he must construct his own image – though it will, of course, always contain blind spots, as everyone knows. That’s also true for any designer! Slippery Design must thus first become much more a **mindset**, not just a design discipline, one that is conscious of the multilayered problem of reception but also knows how to play with it.

*“The tendency towards complexity has carried the universe from almost perfect simplicity to the kind of complexity that we see around us, everywhere we look. The universe is always doing this. It is always moving from the simple to the complex.” (Abdel Kadar Khan in Gregory David Roberts’ Shantaram, 2003)*

At this point of the essay – intended as the final paragraph – I’m aware that I have left many paths untrodden, have presented no counter theories, have neglected other perspectives and surely not expressed myself clearly enough for many readers. I see myself as a semionaut, blurred in the cosmos, **overwhelmed by the complexity of form and thought, but thrilled by the view**. This, then, is a good stopping point. The hodgepodge of ideas must take shape, let its strengths play out, invite further investigation, be interpreted, be slippery. As long as I believe in the basic pillars of this essay, it remains in the nature of design to want to change, to put itself up for discussion and to remain courageous.

*“Nothing is so perfectly amusing as a total change of ideas.” (Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, 1759)*

#### **In the next installment:**

Slippery Design vs. Slick Design, or  
Slick Design – How Design Becomes Truly Invisible

#### **Acknowledgment:**

to Wilma Renfordt for countless discussions and ongoing assistance  
Jenna Krumminga for the translation from German to English

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73 “[...] We have already talked about need. Instead of giving the wrong answers, design should instead begin asking interesting questions.”  
van der Welden, Daniel. 2006. “Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation.”  
<http://metropolism.com/magazine/2006-no2/research-destroy/english>

THE LABORATORY OF MANUEL BÜRGER

# SLIPPERY DESIGN

THE ESSAY

Posted on: 02.11.2011.  
Last modified: 13.10.2013

The Laboratory Of Manuel Bürger

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*The Essay*

2011



2013

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VOLUME I

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# Slippery Design

THE ESSAY



never forget:

