



NO GURU, NO METHOD? Discussion on Art and Design Research. 1998. Editorial Board: Pekka Korvenmaa, Yrjänä Levanto. Editor: Pia Strandman. University of Art and Design Helsinki UIAH B55. pp. 48-52. ISBN 951-558-020-X.

PUBLISHED IN

PRESENTED IN the International Conference on Art and Design Research NO GURU, NO METHOD? 4-6 th of September 1996 in Helsinki. Seminar C: Design studies, design research, cultural studies, history: where is the focus and which are the tools of inquiry?

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## **Vuokko Takala-Schreib** **QUESTIONING NOTIONS OF DESIGNER SUBJECT**

Are there any possibilities to demarcate the designer subject precisely? What are the notions of an author/designer when seen in theory and practice of design methods which are often based on the concept of cognition. The design act is presumed to happen in the designer's cognition and in a moment of insight. The designer is also often presumed to have a control of the product, especially in making the meaning of the product transparent for the user. What possibilities would be open for the notion of the designer subject if it is seen as in the notion of the discursive speaking subject?

By reading some articles which have inspired and fascinated me, in the field of design research, I found some themes which could be useful for studying, focussing on and questioning the notions of the designer subject. The themes are 1) history of design as a discourse within its antagonist forces and desires of the subject, 2) perplexity and the moment of insight in decision making in the design process, 3) control or lack of control of the designer subject.

### **The First Theme: History of Design as a Discourse**

Professor Alain Findeli suggests that history of design can be studied as a discourse, one way being Michel Foucault's approach. Findeli maintains that design history, which is treated as a part of design wissenschaft and should be called design studies, could offer something for design practice. The traditional way of design history focusing on the aspects which are important to the art historians has not provided much for the practising designer (Findeli 1995).

In the study of design history Findeli prefers to shape a historical phenomenon as  
*...the result of two sets of antagonist forces; inner forces or voluntary drives, and outer forces or environmental constraints.* (Findeli 1995: 61-62.)

He thinks that the design students 'have a tendency to better grasp an organic model' than a structural one. But I would question here the location of the antagonist forces, which are regarded here only as forces of the individual subject. Instead I would suggest that the antagonist forces should be regarded as forces of discourse which are



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in play in the confrontational events between the discursive subjects. Findeli also claims that Foucault ignores the inner forces in the name of objectivity, '*whereas the traditional historians have overemphasized the influences of individual will*'. (Findeli 1995: 61-62.)

The way I read Foucault's notion of the individual subject and the will of the individual is not based on the notion of objective, autonomous, cognitive or any transcendental subject. Instead, it is based on the presumption that the individual subject is part of the world or signifying systems, and thus produced by discourses when s/he is speaking or acting. And instead of speaking about the individual will or voluntary drives, I would like to speak about desires of the subject. There is a theoretical difference between the individual will and the desire of the subject.

We could see the individual as a belonging to the signifying system such as discourses and the subject as a product of the discourses. Inspired by Foucauldian thinking, we could continue that when the discursive subjects confront each other, a play of power emerges, which designates relationships between two partners or the elements of a power relationship. The exercise of power is a 'set of actions upon other actions' between the elements of a power relationship (Foucault 1983:220). There is the desire to stay alive in action or the play of differentiation for the sake of existence.

The individual subject is produced by discourses in such a power relationship. Thus we can assume that those actions generate the inner and outer forces of the subject. Perhaps we could also assume that the will of the subject is born when the discourses and its confrontational events tempt and conquer the subject. When we are studying the subject and discourse in the Foucauldian way

*the subject ... must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse.* (Foucault 1977: 138.)

and as Foucault stresses that the

*... discourse is not the ... manifestation of the thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined.* (Foucault 1992: 54-55.)

Thus the discourse is not constituted by any transcendental subject or signifier. The discourse neither provides the final truth for any signifier nor signified. Instead they are constantly in play of discourse. Discourse is a signification system ruling everything out which does not have significance or is non-recognizable within. Discourses are



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circulating among the groups of individuals. Individuals are bound by the doctrines of the discourses into a certain type of enunciation. These doctrines lead the speaking subjects into the power of discourse but they also lead the discourses into the power of the groups of speaking individuals (Foucault 1996: 28-29.) The individual subject is born as a discursive speaking or acting subject. The Foucauldian proposal of the discourse does not comprise only the language but also the practice which touches both the human soul and the body. Foucault has also dealt with the discourses as an emerging surface for institutions, which then act as produced subjects or authorities who have the right to say the truth among discourses (Foucault 1996,1992,1983).

Returning to the subject of design research and design discourses, we will follow Alain Findeli's suggestion that the design studies, or design philosophies as design wissenschaft should be something which brings together epistemological, aesthetical and ethical aspects of design. The way I have treated the Foucauldian discourse in my research can be taken as one pursuit in that direction. But instead of the epistemological, aesthetical and ethical aspects I focus on the epistemological, ontological and pragmatological aspects, which include the aesthetical and ethical aspects as well. The epistemology of design comes into play in the design discourse in the issues which are regarded as design knowledge, as the notion of 'good design' etc. The ontology of design comes into play when the discourse is regarded as an emergence surface for the epistemological objects, for those things which are regarded as beings and objects of design distinct from non-recognizable issues and non-objects. Pragmatic aspects of design come into play when design discourses are regarded as circulation systems of thoughts in the mind of the designer subject in the design process and problem solving process. That also includes ethical issues.

For studying the designer subject I can take an example from my research, within the discourse of Finnish Design. The research deals with the exhibition institution of Finland Designing in the 80's. It can be seen as a study of design in Finland in past and present. It can be counted to the order of design history as Findeli suggests and it can be called design studies. I have been following the written material of that exhibition by rewriting it, and treating it as one discourse of Finnish Design. Discourses are constructed by antagonistic forces, which I regard conflicts between different authorities and subject matters. The confrontation can be seen as events of discourse which generate phantoms of the character of design in Finland.



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The contribution of my study is to treat Plato's notion of chora and the Foucauldian notion of discourse in its confrontational events. Chora is a place for bringing forth phantoms, which do not exist in themselves. We are unable to distinguish phantoms because we are under the influence of dreaming (Platon 1982 / Timaios 52b-c). Phantoms act as kinds of tools in the confrontational event in the fantasies of acting subjects. The fantasized actions of the partners in the confrontational event are providing strategies to cope with the conflicts (Foucault 1983:224). The different phantoms serve as a means of controlling the thinking of the designer subjects. These controlling strategies can be seen also as inner and outer forces in the designer subject.

I present here some examples of the controlling phantoms of the Finnish design discourse in my research:

- when the discursive events of design in Finland are seen in the confrontation of industrial authority and design authority, then as a controlling means of design serving the phantom of the 'good design' inherited in the ideals of enlightenment and the times of founding design promotion;
- when it is seen in the confrontation of Scandinavia and the rest of the world, then as a controlling means serving the phantom of objects made of light wood or paper as a symbol and an enlightening example of the ecological design. (Takala-Schreib 1995.)

I take one example of an object which was not recognized as an object of good Finnish design. The object is a tray made by a firm that does not use legitimately educated designers. In the act of selection the designer members of the Design Council criticize the tray, by saying that it reminds them of some old Russian kitsch style. The phantom of kitsch circulates in the minds of the designers contradicting the phantom of good design, but also the phantom of Western culture and the Russian culture confront each other. The phantom of the designer without design education contradicts the phantom of legitimately educated designer. They are ruling the tray outside the order of the discourse of good Finnish design.

I assume that a set of phantoms in Finnish Design are circulating in the fantasies of Finnish designer subjects in the moment of decision making when solving design problems. In the case of legitimately educated designer the immanent demands for solving design problems can be seen in the discourses of design institutions and legitimate authorities. The controlling means of the discourse saw to it that such



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demands became true by fantasy of the designer subject. But the phantoms are also at work in the minds of each individual - the so-called user - who deals with the product of design. After those assumptions and claims we could ask who is actually doing the design: some autonomously thinking and fantasizing designer, or those discourses which are circulating in the minds of designer subjects?

### **The Second Theme: Perplexity and the Moment of Insight**

Among the research of design methods, which often leans on the science of cognition, I found an interesting article in the field of protocol analysis. The article is written by Peter Lloyd, Brian Lawson and Peter Scott, and it addresses concurrent verbalization during the design process. They ask, "Can concurrent verbalization reveal design cognition?" They found out that the verbalization does not reveal the most crucial moments of innovation in the moment of insight. They admit that the language does not provide means for reaching all from the cognition and something beyond cognition, something which is crucial in the creation process. Lloyd, Lawson and Scott write:

*The trouble with including these insights in the description of the design process is that they happen quickly and unexpectedly. Clearly there is a build up of information before, a period often termed 'incubation', but there seem to be no general rules as to when insights occur. The cognitive process seems so deep, abstract, fundamental, and above all to do with retrieval and long-term memory, that it seems almost unfeasible that a designer could commentate on such moments. Indeed if it were possible then design problems would be much easier!* (Lloyd, Lawson, Scott 1995: 250.)

The notion of Cartesian subject as well as Husserl's further development of the notion of transcendental subject are taken for granted in the field of design research among the design methods, as often also in design history. They are based on the implicit presumptions that thinking and consciousness constitute the designer subject and that the crucial design process happens in the designer's head (see Jones 1982: 46).

Descartes defines the individual subject on the premise of 'cogito ergo sum', and something that has clear and exact thoughts. (Descartes 1994: 101.) Husserl's transcendental ego or subject sits in the center of knowledge. Husserl discovers that the only clear thing that, even in the moment of doubt, 'I' am the one who observes and



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judges all the objects. (Husserl 1995: 47.) Thus the subject is separated from the world and the other subjects. Then the subject needs to communicate his clear thoughts to the others and the language serves as the medium. Thinking and language have been treated as similar issues in Western philosophies. The concepts of thinking, language and communication have been regarded as certain, clear, transparent and well known order.

Moments of insight can be seen as moments beyond the conscious thinking or beyond verbalization and speech. But can the moment of insight also be seen as a moment of perplexion, confusion and hesitation? Christopher Jones notes in his Design Methods book from 1980 that the desire for certainty is often seen as 'the chief enemy of creative thinking' to avoid stereotype design (Jones 1982:47). But is it actually true that the task of design work is more likely to be a task of getting rid of the power and order of the discourses, because in the order of discourses certainty is firmly established in our way of thinking?

The issue of certainty has been a celebrated feature in Western philosophy even though Plato kept the door open for us to deal with the perplexity. Socrates praised Hippias, because he did not have to suffer from perplexity. He could only act so as to be sure and know his way in life clearly, when Socrates himself was in never ending perplexion, which was something that every self-esteemed and wise man should avoid. (Plato 1953: 595/ Greater Hippias 304c.)

Does the perplexity of designer appear in the moment, when language or self-evident visualization practices, or discourses, do not provide any help for finding acceptable solutions? The order of discourse is to control so that dangerous things and wild ideas are not enunciated. As Lloyd, Lawson and Scott seem to believe, it would be easier to solve design problems if the moments of insight could be transparent and in that way harmless. In the field of design methods, the dangerous things and wild ideas, and perhaps the moments of perplexion, confusion and hesitation are ordered to be harmless with the means of brainstorming, and all that sort of method, which try to free the designer subjects from the demands, orders and phantoms of discourses, and to enunciate also the ideas and images, which are inappropriate in the common design practice and discourses.

Insight is the moment when we get rid of the perplexity and hesitation and reverse into



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the order of discourses. Following the Cartesian ideal, we could say that the moment of perplexion does not constitute the designer subject, but the moment when s/he finds the way back into the order and power of discourses. The acts of designers, which are studied in design methods or design history are the moments when the designer subject arrives into the order, control and power of discourses. They are also celebrated because the critics and researchers understand, know and think them clearly and exactly.

Instead of researching the moments of clear thinking, i.e., the moments of arriving into the order of discourses in the design process and design history, we could diversify our research efforts to include the moments of perplexion, confusion, hesitations, empty moments and angst of designer subjects.

### **The Third Theme: Lack of Control of the Designer**

Adam Richardson is one of the few in the field of design research who questions the designer subject. In an article in Design Issues from 1993 he claims that the designer is dead.

First, he questions the notion of communication, which is familiar and mainly used in the field of semiotics. According to this notion, it is presumed that the designer is designing one specific meaning for the product. It is assumed that the meaning of the product is conveyed to the user. The user shares the meaning of the product with the designer. There are two subjects which are linked to each others via product. Richardson questions this kind of thinking by presenting the notion of the death of the author, launched by Roland Barthes. According to that notion the designer is not the designer of the meaning of the product, but instead the user reads his/her own meaning for the product. Richardson concludes: When the user is born then the designer is dead. (Richardson 1993: 34-36.) There is an oppositional stand: the user who gives the meaning with his cognition, and the designer who's cognition don't count anymore. When the meaning of the product is no longer controlled by the cognition of the designer, he can not be the master of the design product, and also the master of his own ideas and insights. Therefore we could ask whether we even need the designer any longer.

Richardson states that the identity of the designer is in crisis because, firstly, the



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designer does not have power and control over the meaning of the product and, secondly, because of the lack of power and control of the designer in the process of product development. (Richardson 1993: 34-43.) But instead of asking for the power and control of an autonomous and individual designer, perhaps we should ask for the power of different discourses in the thinking and the fantasy of the designer. Then we should also look for the societies and their discourses the designer is actually touched by. We could see that the designer is not demarcated as we have presumed: as the subject which is separated from the discursive environments. Instead the subject is produced as several different subjects in each confrontational event.

Can we say that the designer subject is dead? Perhaps we should say that the notion of the subject, which is autonomous and able to control the effects of its work, should be forgotten. Instead we should try to see the notion of the designer subject, which does not follow the philosophy of individualism but is open for the signification processes in discourses, and linked to the other subjects. The designer subject is a kind of social issue within discourses. We could also focus on the conflicts and confrontations of the discourses, which are circulating in the fantasy of designer subjects. Finally, instead of focusing on the cognition of the individual designer subject, which is so often regarded as the location of the design work, we could focus our research on the design work which is a product of the discourses.



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