

Milan Breakfast 10 April

Creativity, Solutions and Morality

With: Guus Beumer, Justin McGuirk, Alberto Bonisoli, Jurgen Bey (moderated by Tracy Metz)

Report by Cassandra Pizze

On Wednesday 10 April the first of three Milan Breakfast hosted by The New Institute and Design Academy Eindhoven took place at LAP!, Design.nl was there to take notes. Joining the discussion – led by art critic Tracy Metz – were Guus Beumer, head of The New Institute, Justin McGuirk, author and critic, Alberto Bonisoli, Chief Academic Officer, Domus Academy and Jurgen Bey, designer and teacher at the Sandberg Institute.

The discussion focussed on design education and where it is leading graduates.

Some opening statements are given by Guus Beumer, the new Director of The New Institute (a merger between NAI, Premesla and Virtueel Platform). Many audience members will know Milan for its fashion weeks and its design week. “Although after fashion week Milan is dominated by just a handful of big brands, design week leaves the public with knowledge of independent designers.” Even though, there seems to be a large gap between the professional companies who present their latest products at large stands at the actual Salone del Mobile (some 14 km outside the city), and the independent designers who choose a show more central to the city in areas such as Zona Tortona, Rho Fiera or Venture Lambrate.

Milan has grown over the years to become a public-driven event throughout the city, and not just at the Official Salone del Mobile. Young designers are brought in by big brands to create a buzz. “They aren’t paid in money but in PR”, says McGuirk.

The author goes on to compare how each year in China some 10,000 design students graduate, “we need to rethink what designers are for.” According to McGuirk, the pyramid of big name brands, established designers and graduates is slowly changing. “We’re seeing more craft-based designers instead of product-based, but we need to teach them entrepreneurial skills.”

It’s true that brands will present works by young designers, but these are often part of existing presentations, commissions or special exhibitions. Many designers benefit greatly from this exposure, finding interested producers to back their next projects.

According to head of the Domus academy Milan, Alberto Bonisoli we aren’t training too many designers. “You can’t teach design, it requires talent” he explains. With a Bachelor Master ratio of 10:1, we are seeing many young graduates choose a different path than the one they started. “The industrial designers tend to stay on for a Master’s course, but they do need to learn marketing skills, how to be self-sustainable.”

So do graduates need to be multi-talented these days to make it? “Real product design is undervalued and there aren’t enough commissioners,” says Jurgen Bey. McGuirk agrees and adds that designers need to be diverse. With so many different paths for graduates to take after their training, designers are becoming interdisciplinary. This allows the design community to keep growing. McGuirk: “Designers are even designing their own courses.”

Is there then really a need for design education? If not to teach design then surely as a place to meet, discuss and work together. As long as they offer diversification then yes, each school should be different, focussing on specific subjects or skills. As should each design week. “If each self-respecting city is hosting a design week, why not focus on certain topics, one specially about design education for instance,” says Jurgen Bey.

Bonisoli: “There has been a big change in schools over the past ten years. I see schools as a shelter from bog companies. We allow them to work with our students but insist the students keep intellectual property.”

Text as product, product as text

With: Paola Antonelli, Jan Boelen, Joseph Grima, Tamar Shafir, Angela Rui (moderated by Tracy Metz)

Report by Jeanne Tan

In the second Milan Breakfast hosted by The New Institute and Design Academy Eindhoven, the topic of narrative was approached from two angles. From the designers' perspective, what story does a design tell and how can that story be understood other than from the finished product? How important is the story to one's understanding of the design? And from the media, what is the role of narrative and design criticism in design media like magazines and blogs and in a time where a mass cloud of images circulates over us daily, is this beneficial for the designers or do they suffer from this overdose of media attention?

Opening up the conversation, Tamar Shafir, who had worked closely alongside designers during her her Masters at Design Academy Eindhoven (DAE) explained how this consequently informed her views on design journalism. Tamar used the graduation project of fellow DAE Alicia Ongay-Perez to illustrate the complex relationship between critic and designer. Comprising a series of overturned ceramic objects that reference domestic archetypes, Alicia's project aimed to investigate the nature of conceptual design: the function of function. Stripped of their function, are the objects conceptual design or art and what role does context play? "People criticised the designer for not making the objects functional. There's a danger in isolating an image from the complexity of the actual process and story of what happens in the object. Critics must be aware of which filters they're using, reflect on their responsibility, and define their role. There is a strange give and take: journalists have a voracious attitude to new work, designers look to journalists as sort of gate keepers."

Within design criticism observed Joseph Grima, editor-in-chief of Domus, there's some soul searching going on and a lack of self confidence regarding its own identity. In the past, design media like Domus were traditionally very top down whereby the magazine editors – the gatekeepers – decided the content. "Dialogue was entirely mediated by the publications of which a certain restricted group of editors had total control. Then something happened and everyone had a voice." The internet democratized the publishing and dissemination of information which had a definite effect on magazines who had to find new ways to engage in dialogue with their readers. "We're still struggling with having to reinvent ourselves, the transformation is only beginning. There is a more ambiguous relationship between designer and critic, but this opens up opportunities for a new type of designer." Some of the best recent writing in Domus has been written by practicing architects: in design, debate seems to generated more by non-practicing individuals while within architecture, it's from practicing architects who are engaged with reality on the ground. "There's almost as much text written about the role of text than texts than about the role of designer or objects !"

Angela Rui, ex-designer and critic argued that design should be discussed in a realistic way, where everyone beyond the design tribe can take part. "We need to open our point of view wider. If you talk with someone who is not part of our world, they don't understand what we're doing. Design is becoming more abstract. We need to find a way to make it communicable, understandable."

Jan Boelen, head of Master Social Design at DAE, argued that, "Design is just a tool not a goal. It's a humble medium to make things possible, to discuss, debate, perform, tell stories, be part of a process." If the designer's intention is communicated with a certain type of text, it forms part of the process and story, even if the writing is not easily understood.

Paola Antonelli, senior curator Architecture & Design at MoMA strongly disagreed. "I don't want designers to turn into artists not because of what they do but because of how they explain it. If you use poetry, people are not going to understand you so it's your fault as a designer. As an artist you can live in that limbo. As a designer your job is to relate to others." Paola suggested designers could learn how to give an elevator pitch about their work, explaining it in a clear way. She mentioned the 'super fried air' of international art speak: even art people are tired of hearing themselves speak. "We don't need to talk to each other," says Paola. The priority should be communicating clearly so people

understand the importance of design. If designers want their object to stand up in the world, good explanation is necessary. Jan considered it a pity that the complexity of designers' texts should be reduced to elevator pitches. He argued for complexity: "We live in a world of twitter, in a networked system that allows all possible connections where new associations pop up. We have to learn how to learn to read differently and produce texts differently."

Joseph questioned the role of the text in media today: "There are some serious problems." Text can sometimes become a filler: it makes a page look aesthetic and meaningful. "What are we doing this for?" he asked. Word count and the dual language formats can be a challenge. Are we media people only window dressers, questioned Tracy? Tamar argued that a critic's role is not to interpret the project but to publicise it. Jan hoped that this was not the case for critics, journalists and curators and that by assembling new associations, new insights could be presented. Interpretation was needed, not merely transmission. Tracy added, "Journalists should not only publicise design, but put it in a context, add what you thought it meant. Without that, journalists become only a funnel for information. Choose things to write about that you think mean something."

On the influence of digital media, Joseph mentioned that, "at a certain point, the ambition of being published in a magazine like Domus was partially replaced by being published online where the selection is less brutal." This creates a mentality/logic of competition as to which article is the most read or highly rated. In this way, it's from the bottom up, an autarchical process of dissemination of information. However it does contaminate/influence the way designers think about conceiving or presenting work. Continuing on the digital, he revealed a division in opinion from journalists about digital versus print. "We need to explore the mindset about the value of text in print or online. Some writers are insulted about having their texts published online. There's a paradox here because the value of text is its ability to speak to people and reach as many people as possible. For every person that reads the article in the magazine, perhaps 500 people will read it online."

To conclude, Angela hopes that the coming future will see an exit of this period of discursive design to become less about objects and more research. Jan supported this by emphasising more insight into the process. Joseph stressed the value of support material such as the videos that accompanied Alicia's work to give context and frame the work. Paola reiterated the necessity of explanations that should be clear and well-crafted. Lastly, Tamar urged journalists to write with humility and ambition. "The beautiful thing about text is that it's the most easily disseminated object. If you write for magazines or blogs, that's a design experience for most people. Remember that their biggest contact with many of these objects is through media. We need to invest as much passion and love in our texts as the designers do for their work and think of ourselves as one of them."

On an end note, Alicia Ongay-Perez explained that she didn't believe her project was a design product: it was a masters' thesis, a 'self-indulgent' learning experience conducted in the freedom and safety of the academic context.

Linking Process

With: Miriam van der Lubbe, Corinna Gardner, Mar Zehntner, Vera Sacchetti (moderated by Tracy Metz)

Report by Jeanne Tan

For the third and last Milan Breakfast hosted by The New Institute and Design Academy Eindhoven (DAE), the theme of discussion connected to the DAE exhibition on show: Linking Process. The exhibition's curator and DAE alumni Miriam van der Lubbe aimed not only to show finished products but also the process of making. But why show the process, and for whom is it relevant? Why is there a fascination with process right now?

At the Vitra Design Museum, explained its director Marc Zehntner, exhibitions feature not only final products but process has always been on show for instance through prototypes, drawings and tools. Through social media, the museum tries to reach a wider audience to engage them during the process leading up to exhibitions. Process was a strong element of a recent exhibition Confrontations, where the show gradually took shape during the duration of the exhibition. The empty gallery at the beginning somewhat perplexed visitors but through communication and explanation, visitors began to understand that the exhibition WAS the work in progress. It's interesting to consider the role of the museum in the process noted Miriam, "As a museum, you are helping to develop the profession in a another way."

Corinna Gardner, product design curator at the V&A suggested that process helps make an object more intelligible – perhaps even demystifying it – and shows the maker's work in a new light. On an aesthetic front, it also makes an exhibition look more attractive holistically. More importantly, it shows the design in its complexity. Equally important as process is context, where it's important to make a distinction: context being the framework of a design, and process relating to its development. Showing process is often a designer's perspective.

Design critic Vera Sacchetti supported the active approach of museums to become platforms hosting broader initiatives, engaging designers and reaching broader audiences but she questioned the validity of the 'backstory' used to communicate a product. How much value does it really add?

So why is showing process so hot right now? It's related to the crisis and creating transparency especially within manufacturing, suggested Corinna. "Companies need to communicate to people about how good they are: you need to know what we do and that we can still do it." One should be aware of the 'glamourization' of process and take it with a grain of salt.

More interesting than the process itself, commented Miriam, is the connecting of processes to the world around you. Unexpected but perhaps more beneficial outcomes could result if design processes allowed for deviations or detours. The multidisciplinary approach of the V&A supports these connections and museums play an active role in the design process through their patronage and engagement with designers. Corinne poses the question of whether exhibiting is the best way for sharing contemporary design? Can connections be made elsewhere for instance through action - via workshops in exhibitions - or other platforms outside the museum. Additionally, the open design movement has helped to democratize and open up the making process.

With regards to the exhibition, Miriam commented that it was a challenge to get the material from students that showed the development of their design and their mistakes. "Do designers recognize the value in showing these moments during the process?" she asked. At a context like the Milan Furniture Fair, Corinna commented that students may be slightly apprehensive about only showing failures. This raised the issue of how process is actually (re)presented in design; are tidy, stylized, organized sketches an accurate indication of the process? "Process then becomes reduced to the product of process instead of the real thing," says Corinna. "We should be cautious of the trend of showing process in retrospect instead of during the point of conception." Vera urged that complexity should be a fundamental component of exhibitions, to show the whole big mess. Concluding, the exhibition's subtitle, 'Where do you link in?' invited visitors to participate in the process in their own way.