

BLOWING UP THE ALPS

—AND OTHER WAYS TO CHANGE PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN

JAN ALBERT ECKERT

Gui's work deals with such a diversity of topics that it is impossible to cover them in a single text. He has contributed pioneering reflections, analyses, and concepts in various areas of design, including design methodology, cognition, interaction and information design, as well as the beginnings of the "digital age", including artificial intelligence. Additionally, Gui has unfolded the socio-political, cultural and ontological dimensions of design both at its *center* and *periphery*.

Therefore, without wanting this text to become an opinion piece on design theory or history, I would like to report on some of my most significant encounters with Gui and place them historically and, above all, geographically in their respective contexts. This way they may perhaps convey to the readers a little of how difficult it sometimes is to understand a comparatively young academic discipline such as design and, even more so, to communicate it in theory, practice and teaching in different places of our world.

As a student, doctoral candidate, and professor in design, I have benefited from Gui's work,

which transcends intellectual, geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. I wish to begin by thanking Gui for all this. Finally, this text aims to inspire readers to explore Gui's work and reflect on the discipline of design and the act of designing. An act that has the potential to transform our current crisis-ridden world into a regenerative and inclusive future for all human beings, our fellow inhabitants, and our common habitat.

A PAIR OF SCISSORS TO SUCCESS

In many languages, the key is the object that helps one to succeed or better understand a situation. When I first encountered Gui Bonisiepe's work, it was a different object—a pair of scissors. As a student in the early 2000s, I came across Gui's book "Interface –an Approach to Design"¹, which was published in several languages in the 1990s. At the time, I was studying interior architecture at the University of Applied Sciences in

¹ Bonisiepe, G., 1999. *Interface –An approach to design*. Jan van Eyck Akademie. Maastricht. Originally published in 1995 by Feltrinelli, Milano.

Stuttgart, not far from Ulm, where Gui himself once studied, taught, and edited the journal of the historic school of design.

For me, design was initially only a sub-discipline in the context of my interior architectural studies, a topic that was often associated with the design of furniture or furnishings from the perspective of creating spaces. Following the 1980s and 90s, this perception was further amplified by the presence of star or author designers in interior design shops and catalogues. Some of these designers competed to bring the most artistic and expensive pieces of furniture to the market. During the years when an aluminum lounge chair in the style of “streamline design” fetched record prices at auctions², its functionality, ergonomics, and sustainability were rarely questioned, except by a few critical design theorists or practitioners who clung to a more functional approach to design. At the same time, the concept of design and designer became more and more diffused across different fields and professions such as fashion design, branding, or advertising—a development that Gui also observed with a critical eye³.

It was during these years that I read his book, in which he argued that the focus of design is primarily on the interaction between users and ar-

tefacts. This assertion gave me a new and surprising perspective because, without questioning its value, it somehow downplayed the importance of the design object, the artefact, which I had previously seen as central to the discipline. To illustrate his thesis, Gui uses the image of a pair of scissors⁴, which unfolds a space of interaction between the user’s intended action and the required artefact. This concept, which can be extended to a wide range of actions and artefacts and their various components, was completely new to me at the time, and I can certainly say that in my case it was the “scissors to success” of my understanding of design that Gui brought into the design discourse.

In this first episode, Gui’s scissors metaphorically cut through my initial understanding of design as a discipline primarily focused on object styling and opened up a whole new perspective on the extensive range of designing with interactions and information exchange in mind. This may have been the established view at some of the prestigious design universities of the day, but it was not necessarily the focus of interior architecture education at a technical university in southern Germany—even though every detail of a space was often, and rather implicitly, examined in terms of how it might affect the people who entered, used, or left that space. Furthermore,

² Designed between 1985 and 1988, Marc Newson’s Lockheed Lounge Chair has achieved record prices at auctions since 2000.

³ E.g. Bonsiepe, G. 2009. “Demokratie und Gestaltung”. In: *Entwurfskultur und Gesellschaft—Gestaltung zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie*. Birkhäuser. Basel. p.15-23. Abbreviated version of a 2005 lecture at Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana, Santiago de Chile.

⁴ Bonsiepe, G., 1999. *Del objeto a la interfase*. Ediciones Infinito. Buenos Aires. p. 18, 22. Originally published in 1995 by Feltrinelli, Milano. Title of the original edition: *Dall’oggetto all’interfaccia*. Since both, the original edition and the one published by Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht are out of print, I am using my copy in Castellano received as a present from Gui in 2010.

Gui's "scissors" sparked my interest and led me to pursue a PhD in design science, focusing on "spaces of interaction", which I wanted to understand in more detail after completing my interior design studies, which focused on the design of physical spaces.

As a last note of this first episode, it is worth mentioning that in English, the German term Innenarchitektur (= interior architecture) is often referred to as "interior design". Linguistically closer to the design discipline at first glance, however, this often refers to the above-mentioned styling of (design) objects and spaces. A fact that we in Stuttgart knew how to interpret differently, not least thanks to texts like the one by Gui.

SPECTACLES OPENING THE VIEW ON SOCIETY

In 2005, a history book titled "Design History: Theory and Practice of Product Design"⁵ was published, which I considered to be very impressive for me as a student. The book contains, among many other texts, a historical outline of the Ulm School of Design⁶. In addition to Bill and Aicher, the name Bonsiepe also appears on around ten pages of the text about the famous school—a welcome reunion for me as a young reader after my encounter with Gui's "scissors" a few years earlier. Another name that appears twice in this historical outline is Tomás Maldona-

do. Considering that he led the Ulm School into what was probably its most important phase as rector and played a key role in developing the design discipline in terms of its scientific basis and methodology, this is surprisingly little.

So, it was fortunate that in 2007 the same publishing house published a compendium of Maldonado's texts, translated, and edited into German by Gui Bonsiepe, entitled *Digitale Welt und Gestaltung*⁷. This made many of the texts accessible to a German readership for the first time. As a member of the first cohort of the newly founded international master's program in Interior Architectural Design (IMIAD) at Stuttgart University of Applied Sciences, I was required to develop research skills and knowledge in scientific writing in addition to design skills, as per the Bologna reform. Without wanting to reproach anyone, it seemed, that most of us students and our lecturers were overwhelmed by this –astonishing when you consider that only an hour's train journey away from Stuttgart, people like Gui Bonsiepe and Maldonado were already working on the development of design research and methodology more than forty years before.

During my studies in Stuttgart, Maldonado was only mentioned in historical outlines, such as the one in Bürdek's book on design history. Thanks to Gui, Maldonado's essays, including those in *Digitale Welt und Gestaltung*, were made accessible to German speaking readers. Included in these writings: another object that has great-

⁵ Bürdek, B.E., 2005. *Design History: Theory and Practice of Product Design*. Birkhäuser. Basel.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 41-51

⁷ Maldonado, T. 2007. *Digitale Welt und Gestaltung—Ausgewählte Schriften herausgegeben von Gui Bonsiepe*. Birkhäuser. Basel.

ly changed my view of design: a pair of glasses in Madonado's essay in the German translation *Brillen –erst genommen*⁸.

In retrospect, I realize that similar to Gui's text on interactions this essay also was crucial to my understanding of design. While Bonsiepe's "scissors" shifted my focus from the artefact to the interaction that unfolds between people and artefacts, Maldonado's essay, as translated by Gui, adds another dimension to this debate: the social one. In his text, Maldonado explores the initial development of spectacle lenses for the correction of long-sightedness before lenses for the correction of short-sightedness were developed almost one hundred and fifty years later. The socio-political and socio-economic context is analyzed in detail, explaining how society can exert a "push" function and technology a "pull" function, using the example of spectacles.

It is perhaps due to my ignorance as a student, but maybe also to the context in which I was studying interior architecture at the time that the social dimension of design first remained obscure to me. The design tasks in the Stuttgart context were primarily focused on meeting the needs of the industry, with less emphasis on social⁹ issues. Trade fair stands, shop design and furniture de-

sign were therefore on the daily program of our studies. While this approach was not necessarily incorrect¹⁰, it did result in a lack of attention to socially relevant issues (there were of course some exceptions). On the other hand, Stuttgart's specific context also succeeded in having its "push" onto the local design culture by catering the needs of one of Germany's major industrial centers. However, appropriate education was lacking to make this implicit dynamic explicit, to understand it, and to place it in a wider context. One of Gui's publications once again became an eye-opener, presumably providing not only me but also a broad readership access that was otherwise limited to schools and teaching with linguistic access to Maldonado's texts.

Only two years later, I encountered Maldonado's essay on spectacles again. Having become proficient in Italian, I read the text in its original version¹¹ on the eve of my entrance exam for the doctoral program at IUAV University in Venice. Not only the excitement of the upcoming exam, but also the mosquitoes kept me awake long into the night. Upon rereading the essay on glasses that was intended to prepare me for the exam, my excitement was alleviated. The mosquitoes, on the other hand, unfolded another "space for

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 241-255

⁹ *Author's note:* I am not ignoring the fact that the needs arising from the industry are part of a socio-economic system. Especially when referring to the "social" as a network of actors and actants as described by Bruno Latour in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. In this section, however, I will refer to social needs, such as e.g. the relevance of spectacles for a group of people.

¹⁰ In many of his texts, Gui emphasizes the link between design and industry. Some of these are later mentioned like the summary of one of his lectures, published in German as *Demokratie und Gestaltung in Bonsiepe, G. 2009. Entwurfskultur und Gesellschaft – Gestaltung zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie*. Birkhäuser. Basel. p. 15-23.

¹¹ Maldonado, T. 2005. *Memoria e conoscenza – Sulle sorti del sapere nella prospettiva digitale*. Feltrinelli. Milano. p. 227-238

interaction”. They were repelled by the cover of Maldonado’s paperback edition, which was just large enough to be used as a makeshift fly swatter or “prosthesis”. I hope the late author will forgive me for this usage.

A TICKET TO THE SOUTHERN WORLD

This part of my reflections is admittedly the most challenging to write. It relates to one of Gui’s achievements that I have only been able to experience partly for myself. A lot of his work focuses on illuminating the so-called “periphery” of design, which has been masked not only by the aforementioned distortions of the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, but above all by the over-representation of the protagonists involved and their geographical context—namely the northern hemisphere and its so-called western world. With his move to Latin America, Gui laid the foundations for an understanding of the world and design that is difficult to achieve through mere visits or reading.

The tireless work of him and his partner, Silvia Fernández, aims to convey the often overlooked fact that design is a discipline that impacts the entire world, not just through the means of globalization. Their book *Historia del Diseño en América Latina y el Caribe*¹² or Silvia’s book collection *Mujeres en el diseño argentino*¹³ are just

¹² Fernández, S., Bonsiepe, G. (cordinación). 2008. *Historia del Diseño en América Latina y el Caribe*. Editora Blücher. São Paulo.

¹³ *Mujeres en el diseño argentino* contain so far, the following publications:

two examples of what should be reading at design universities around the world. I came to know them only after many years of study, but they broaden the view of the design discipline and fill fundamental gaps in the discipline’s history and knowledge.

After our first meeting during a conference in Sabadell in Catalonia, it was during a visit to La Plata, Argentina, in 2010 that I met Gui and Silvia in person for the second time. Both times, from my perspective as someone born in Germany, an excursion into the “southern world”—a term that Gui used several times during my visit, but which I would only fully understand in retrospect. When reflecting on where the “southern world” began for me during my studies, I recall Zurich’s main railway station. As I was completing my final semester of my international master’s degree in Lugano, I had to change trains there to get “across the Alps”. Although Zurich is on the northern side of the Alps, for two reasons it became my gateway to the “southern world”.

The first reason still exists today and manifests itself in the form of an approximately sixty square meters bar at Zurich’s platform seventeen with the name “il Baretto”. When changing trains southbound at Zurich’s “H-B”, this was often my

–Fernández, S. 2016. *Diseño Visual y Conocimiento Científico*. Editorial Nodal. La Plata.

–Fernández, S. 2019. *Señal Bauhaus*. Editorial Nodal. La Plata.

–Fernández, S. *Brecha de género en el CIDI (Centro de Investigación de Diseño Industrial)*, Buenos Aires [1962-1988]. Editorial Nodal. La Plata.

–Fernández, S. 2022. *Arcanos del Proyecto Moderno, Lala Méndez Mosquera y Summa*. Editorial Nodal. La Plata.

first encounter with enjoyable Italian coffee while waiting for my connecting train.

The second reason why Zurich became a kind of gateway to my “southern world” is the fact that the Basel publishing house Birkhäuser, before it was sold twice, maintained a strong relationship with the local art school in Zurich – a relationship that allowed room for a series of publications, such as those mentioned above, that were able to compensate for the loss to German readers of many of the thoughts and texts coming out of the Ulm school and its protagonists, many of whom moved to Italy after its closure. Room that was made scarce not only by the transformation of some publishing houses, but also by the fact that time and space for publications in general have become scarce resources at today’s universities and research facilities.

THERE IS NO FUTURE WITHOUT DESIGN

As my awareness grew, sharpened by Gui’s texts mentioned in the first episodes, my understanding of the discipline of design has evolved into one that goes beyond the simple profession of inventing and making things, and into one that also connects to other disciplines or sciences from the perspective of the act of designing (German: Entwurfsperspektive)— an act or *pattern* that is present in various human activities.

That said, one of the most profound shifts in perspective that Gui Bonsiepe’s work offers to me is that which reflects on design and the act of designing as an ontological category. In Ger-

man, the term “Entwurfskultur”, as discussed in Gui’s book *Entwurfskultur und Gesellschaft*¹⁴, probably describes it best: The act of designing is an act deeply rooted in human culture and society. Moreover, this act is also essential to a wide range of sciences and, consequently, it is not exclusive to design as a discipline, but must be recognized as an element in its own right, crucial to the generation of artefacts, knowledge and culture. In his 2009 essay *Demokratie und Gestaltung*, Gui reflects on this perspective of designing (Perspektive der Entwurfbarkeit), which is still at odds with a perspective of recognizability (Perspektive der Erkennbarkeit) that is fundamental to many of the sciences and disciplines taught in higher education. Two perspectives that he hopes will complement each other in the future of academic practice and research¹⁵.

In their book *Are we human? Notes on an archeology of design* Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley explore the perspective of designing across the history of humankind and introduce to their text by stating that

*We live in a time when everything is designed, from our carefully crafted individual looks and online identities to the surrounding galaxies of personal devices, new materials, interfaces, networks, systems, infrastructure, data, chemicals, organisms, and genetic codes*¹⁶.

¹⁴ Bonsiepe, G. 2009. *Entwurfskultur und Gesellschaft – Gestaltung zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie*. Birkhäuser. Basel.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* P. 17. In Gui’s essay “Demokratie und Gestaltung”.

¹⁶ Colomina, B., Wiley, M. 2021. *Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design*. Lars Müller Publishers. Zürich. p. 9.

All this is design –or more accurately project making¹⁷, Gui might reply.

Such as he does in his essay “Entwurf und Entwurforschung –Differenz und Afinität” when he comments on Hal Foster’s observation on design covering everything from “jeans to genes”¹⁹.

For a clearer understanding of these nuances between the German term “Entwurf” and the English word design, it may be helpful to take a detour through its Italian counterpart, “progettare”. Similar to the German word “Entwerfen”, in Italian, another word for “designing” is “progettare” –literally meaning “gettare avanti” or: to project oneself, a situation or condition into the future in order to transform or change it through a human intervention. The question may arise: are all human beings constantly designing their future in some way through this act of projection? In their reflections on design and the history of humankind, Colomina and Wiley also conclude that

The history of design is (...) a history of evolving conceptions of the human. To talk about design is to talk about the state of our species²⁰.

¹⁷ Bonsiepe, G. 2009. “Entwurforschung –Diferenz und Asinität”. In: *Entwurfkultur und Gesellschaft–Gestaltung zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie*. Birkhäuser. Basel. p. 210.

¹⁸ In German Gui uses the word *Entwurf* as translated here with *project making*.

¹⁹ As cited by Gui in footnote 17: Foster, H., 2002. “Design and Crime”. Verso. London. p. 17.

²⁰ Colomina, B., Wiley, M. 2021. *Are we human? Notes on an archaeology of design*. Lars Müller Publishers. Zürich. p. 9.

And considering that the concept of future itself is a human projection: there might in fact be no future without the act of designing.

From this perspective, Gui’s examination of the act of designing is not only an examination of design but also places it in the context of all human behavior. Once again, a broadening of perspective that has had a significant influence on the image and practice of design for me, as I am sure it has for other readers of his texts.

DESIGN AS AN ACT AGAINST GROWING NIHILISM

There is an ongoing discourse about the damage caused by design, so the idea of a future that depends on design as depicted in the previous section may seem paradoxical to some readers. I am referring to the discourse initiated by people like Victor Papanek, and also much discussed by Gui Bonsiepe in an exchange of critical observations with Papanek, recently re-published in Bonsiepe’s “The Disobedience of Design”²¹. Rather than elaborating on this critique, I would like to point out the dialectical quality of design that constantly deals with contradictions. Or in Gui’s own words: “Designing means exposing oneself to paradoxes and contradictions, never concealing them under a harmonizing layer, and it also means explicitly unfolding these contradictions”²². In today’s con-

²¹ Bonsiepe, G. 2022. *The Disobedience of Design*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts. London. New York. Dublin.

²² German original text: E“Entwerfen bedeutet, sich den Paradoxien und idersprüchen auszusetzen, sie niemals unter einer harmonisierenden Schicht zu verdecken, und

text, I would like to expand on this note by seeing the act of designing as an act that counters a growing nihilism in the face of the contradictory and highly complex challenges that humanity faces in its relationship between its ethnic, political, economic, or religious groups, or with the planetary context on which the human species is fundamentally dependent.

And it is here that another of Gui's translations of texts written by Tomás Maldonado comes into play. Published more than 50 years ago, Gui translated "La Speranza Progettuale"²³ into German, which was published in 1972, two years after its Italian original version, under the title "Umwelt und Revolte: zur Dialektik des Entwerfens im Spätkapitalismus"²⁴. It is a text that is unfolding its enormous potential more and more, as our socio-eco-economic systems are reaching their tipping points and the consequences of environmental degradation are becoming more concrete, with unforeseeable effects on a shrinking human habitat.

While the latter is mainly discussed in chapter seven of the German edition translated by Bonsiepe, the core of the multi-layered text is the act of designing (progettare) as an optimistic

es bedeutet darüber hinaus, diese Widersprüche explizit zu entfalten". In Bonsiepe, G. 2009. *Entwurfskultur und Gesellschaft – Gestaltung zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie*. Birkhäuser. Basel. P. 23.

²³ Maldonado, T. 1970. *La speranza progettuale. Ambiente e società*. Giulio Einaudi. Torino.

²⁴ Maldonado, T. 1972. *Umwelt und Revolte: zur Dialektik des Entwerfens im Spätkapitalismus*. Übertragung aus dem Italienischen von Gui Bonsiepe. Rowohlt. Reinbek bei Hamburg.

alternative to social, political, and environmental nihilism. And if we agree that nihilism is one of the driving forces behind the dynamics that could lead to our extinction, then the concept of "hope" (in Italian: speranza) in the act of designing, as proposed as a counter-model by Maldonado, takes on its full meaning.

The German version of "La Speranza Progettuale" is currently unavailable and awaiting a long overdue re-edition²⁵. When I obtained a second-hand copy, I made a surprising discovery inside the book. One of the former owners had apparently written a note to someone who received the copy as a present, stating that "this guy called Maldonado must be an interesting person". This was written at a time when Maldonado was still alive and teaching "on the other side of the Alps".

BLOWING UP THE ALPS!

Those who have read this far may have noticed that many important perspectives for understanding design have been excluded from a specific geographical context (as well as others) for decades. This is surprising in view of the fact that the Ulm school, which is fundamental to this understanding, was located in the same context in southern Germany that I am writing about in this text. Giovanni Anceschi, my former doctoral supervisor, and an Ulm student himself, once summarized this in one of our conversations: "After the closure of the HfG, what remained in Germa-

²⁵ An Italian version, curated by Raimonda Riccini and Medardo Chiapponi, students of Maldonado in Ulm, was recently published instead by Feltrinelli in 2022.

ny was formalism. Everything else has migrated beyond the Alps.”

Without questioning the achievements in terms of knowledge of design methodology and science at many central and northern European schools, Anceschi’s observation certainly applies to many of the former Ulm students who moved to Italy, as well as to my own career and most of the schools I have attended or worked in. It may also explain why the different dimensions of design, such as the handling of information, interaction, or social context, were not at the forefront of my own design education—at least not in an explicit way. This led me to extend my studies beyond the Alps, meeting many of the former students or teachers from Ulm. Among them were Gui Bonsiepe and Tomás Maldonado, who at the time were part of the board of the doctoral school at the IUAV University of Venice.

In the light of the above-mentioned episodes, one might have doubts about the necessity of the Alps as a geographical and intellectual boundary in the Central European field of design—amongst other boundaries, too. In the eighties, the youth movement in Zurich²⁶ put forward an equally provoking demand. Their slogan “Freier Blick aufs Mittelmeer—Sprenge die Alpen!”²⁷ (A clear view of the Mediterranean—blow up the Alps!) plays

²⁶ The movement began as a protest against the allocation of 60 million Swiss Francs to refurbish the Zurich Opera house, while failing to support an autonomous centre for youth culture in the same town. ²⁷ Also known as “Nieder mit den Alpen! Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer!”

²⁷ Also known as “Nieder mit den Alpen! Freie Sicht aufs Mittelmeer!”

with Switzerland as both a place of longing and naturalness, depending on the mountain range known as the Alps, and as a bridge between geographical and cultural realities, connecting the north and the south through various routes, passes and tunnels leading to another place of desire: the Mediterranean or as I stated earlier “the southern world”.

My experience of studying in southern Germany or working in universities north of the Alps leads me to a similar observation: in terms of regions, the geographical area around the Alps (probably this is true for other areas too) has led to a divided view of the design discipline, requiring bridges, passes or extensive reading and travel, as well as translation. Gui’s work and texts have transcended these geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders, making him successful in building necessary connections for understanding design today. Using the same metaphor—although as a mountain lover I find this image disturbing—Gui managed to blow up the Alps and other boundaries that were harnessing the design discipline for many studying, practicing, or teaching design like me.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS

This text has been shaped by both personal views and experiences, as well as important contributions from Gui’s work, which are mentioned above. Without looking for a conclusion there are some takeaways that in the context of today’s systemic crisis might serve as leverage points to tweak our vast and complex systems into their next version providing more optimistic perspectives.

tives for human and non-human entities such as the ecosystem being their habitat.

One takeaway is that design can benefit greatly from diversity, even if it is shaped by endemism and isolation tied to a specific context, whether geographical or cultural. Equally, it can benefit from being taken out of isolation and transferred and translated into different contexts or scales by providing new stimuli. Both approaches surely are part of Gui's practical and theoretical work.

Another takeaway is the idea that design is an inherent part of the human species and human culture, as well as the vast range of disciplines and sciences it has developed. The dialectic mode of design that deals with paradoxes and contradictions also has the power to become the only response to surrender and may be one of humanity's paths to a successful and all-encompassing future that includes humans, non-humans and the surrounding ecosystem.

In this sense, the image of "blowing up the Alps" could be seen as a reference to a provocative and destructive past, in which design as a discipline played a significant role in contributing to the consequences we must now live with. The counterimage might be design as an act opening up re-generative pathways to cross the mountains that emerged between human beings, their environment and fellow inhabitants. Again, it needs to be concerned with interactions, relationships, the social in a wider sense and most importantly with the notion of hope and optimism embedded into the act of designing the future.



Jan Albert Eckert

