

Design Fiction, EP Vol. 2

#BookReview

For many designers the term “design fiction” is very much linked to the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (as well as Bruce Sterling, Paola Antonelli and Lucas Maassen). When thinking of Dunne and Raby’s work, one thinks of design fiction – and the other way around. Since the second volume of EP, a book series edited by Alex Coles, is on design fiction it had to (so it seems) include their work. But as there are also many other designers, artists and writers working in this field, it is worth to have a closer look at these diverse practices. And fortunately the publication is also offering this wider perspective.

Next to interviews, artist projects, and essays the volume also includes one of the final interviews to be published with novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco; a conversation with Bruce Sterling, in which the science-fiction author responds to designers who reference his writings; and design theorist Vilém Flusser’s 1966 essay “On Fiction,” in its first English translation. The makers of the book series EP, which refers to the “extended play” format introduced in the late 1950s in recorded music, aim to “create a new platform that is yet saturated within the publishing sphere by moving between academic writing and popular magazines” and combining perspectives from art, design and architecture.

EP volume 2 also presents Tokyo-based designer Hiroko Shiratori's work that can be described as a practise located in speculative and real-fictitious terrains. In one of her projects, she looks into parallel histories and uses fiction as a function to create "unusual objects from Japan". She does this mainly in order to explore and better understand the sorts of developments that happen when external influences change habits – like it had happened in Japan in the Meiji era. When this area began, around 1868, people started to wear Western-style dresses, and together with these dresses, scissors had to be introduced in the country. That is why sword-smiths turned to scissor making. Based on this reality, Shiratori imagined a barber who had lost both of his arms during military service, and invented hair cutting tools that he could use with his feet. "My intention", she says, "was to create fictitious objects and fictitious stories which were believable enough, but at the same time crazy enough for people to take them as fiction."

Then there is also the writer Umberto Eco, mainly known for his book "In the Name of the Rose", but who was also a philosopher, semiotician – and someone highly interested in correspondence between image and text. For him, image and text were interwoven and in order to develop his stories, Eco used to design and draw the spaces in which they took place. "With 'The Island of the Day Before' (1994) I spent one year designing every detail of the interior of the ship the story unfolds on", he said in his conversation with Alex Coles.

An excellent piece of writing is the contribution by Carrie Lambert-Beatty: "Believing in Parafiction". In it she discusses the work of the Yes Men, who – through actions of tactical media, like visual duplicates of official websites – aim to raise awareness about problematic social and political issues. Sometimes a Yes Men's spokesperson will make announcements that represent fictitious scenarios. This has often resulted in false news reports, such as the announcement that the company Dow Chemical is paying compensation to the victims of the Bhopal disaster. By following these strategies, the Yes Men are actually doing more than just raising awareness. Their "fiction leaks into the unscripted world", as Lambert-Beatty says. She calls this kind of art "parafictional". Through the use of fiction, the Yes Men are influencing reality. They are not only drawing the attention to certain problems, but they offer scenarios that show how things could actually be (in another world – better or worse) and put

companies and/or politicians under high pressure. Lambert-Beatty ends her essay with a clear statement: “One of art’s most urgent responsibilities in this context is not to preserve trust, but to peel a possibility away from the dense surface of the way things are. [...] For now more than ever, we need a more complex ecology of truth. After all, the fate of the planet depends, quite literally, upon generating political will for alternatives.”

Now, one can of course debate to what extent art – and also design – can and need to follow this responsibility. But leaving this aside, it becomes clear that the power and potential of this discipline (no matter if called “design fiction” or “parafictional art”) unfolds when it is implemented into reality. By designing fictional objects that are, right from the beginning, solely meant to be in an exhibition one may succeed in raising awareness, but mostly this experience stays in the museum – a space that, for so many visitors, is not linked to their daily life. A much higher impact, so it seems, can be achieved by reaching people in their realities, for example through news channels (by offering visions for a better world) or in their working environment (like through the implementation of design fiction methods in science and research labs) – and by putting the ones who are in power under high pressure.

It becomes clear that design fiction is a wide field and that there is still a lot to discuss. But this publication certainly offers a profound research and broad basis to open up a diverse discourse.

Anja Neidhardt, June 2017



Alex Coles (Ed.)

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Sternberg Press, 170 pages.

22,00 €, December 2016.

ISBN 978-3-95679-048-5

Contributions by Paola Antonelli, The Atlas Group (1989–2004), Alex Coles, Anthony Dunne, James Dyer, Umberto Eco, Experimental Jetset, Vilém Flusser, Verina Gfader, Huib Haye van der Werf, Will Holder, Sophie Krier, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Lucas Maassen, Valle Medina, Philippe Morel, Rick Poynor, Fiona Raby, Benjamin Reynolds, Hiroko Shiratori, Bruce Sterling

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Citation Information:

Neidhardt, Anja (2017): Design Fiction. Rezension zu: Alex Coles (Ed.): Design Fiction, EP Vol. 2. Sternberg Press 2017. In: DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal, (6) 2017. <https://designabilities.wordpress.com/2017/06/03/design-fiction-ep-vol-2-bookreview/>.

ISSN 2511-6274