Subjective Atlas of the EU

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Eesti Ekspress 28 october 2004 (translation from Estonian)

Kristjan Mändmaa:
What is important in design?
Annelys de Vet:
Personal involvement and related ideas.

Why are you a designer; what do you find appealing in design?
Being able to investigate and develop ideas on society and culture, and transform the observations into useful ideas or even leave them as questions.

You are constantly experimenting with different means and medias. Do you feel that everything is design or would you rather argue that these additional activities are merely attempts to seek variety and avoid boredom?
The output of the work appears in different forms or media, but the input is always the same: ideas. The computer enables me to make videos, printed matter, sounds, images, drawings, websites, newspapers, posters, stamps and coins, all from the same position: sitting at a desk, countless mouse clicks, staring at a screen without a horizon. It's not the medium that counts, it's not the skill that matters, but it's the attitude that makes the difference.

One of the more controversial themes you have been exploring is the 'Right to Copy'. The lecture and other activities: how did these come about?
It's ridiculous to think that you are original, that one speaks uniquely his or her very own language. There are so many influences, but you're not always aware of them. Children learn by imitating the people around them. Somewhere at the end of adolescence we seem to be inclined to think that we have to do it all by ourselves. But I don't see a reason why we should stop imitating the people we admire. Imitating is learning and by appropriating the copy we develop new thoughts and designs collectively. Originality doesn't exist in the pure sense of the word. Everything is processed by something else; every idea is created by all the other ideas you've been confronted with. A design is a result of a series of stimuli and influences, all set within their specific contexts. Rather than seeing a work as a unique statement of the designer, the work should be seen as a comparative moment in time. The notion of originality should be abandoned in favour of a broader reading of the work.

 Still, to be practical about the question, what

triggered the 'Right to Copy' issue? What kind of a feedback did you receive from other designers?
What triggered the idea was the urge some people were showing to be 'original'. It felt like an act of frustration to me. Copying was a dirty word at the art academy. I never fully understood this. I copied a lot, not to 'cheat' but as a moment in the design process. Appropriating already existing designs helps to develop them further. Just as in classical music, which has a centuries old tradition of composers quoting other composers. Strangely enough, in design there seems to be a tendency of needing to be unique and having your own style. I wanted to be as open and honest as possible about my 'influences'.

You've become known as an expert presenter. At the Design Academy Eindhoven you also teach presentation to graphic designers. The common knowledge in Estonia is that presentations are meant to sell something. Your presentations seem to have become an art form in their own right. What is the purpose of the presentations?
As I said before, it's not the medium or the skill that needs to be communicated, but it's the attitude, the thoughts and idea's. Design is not just an object, rather a combination of many motifs, influences and moments in time. Design is a transmission and what it tells is equally dependent on the spectator as on the narrator. It's somewhere in the middle of the moment, the context, the news, the history, the future and the emotions. As a designer it's relevant being sensitive to these influences and play with them. The presentation of things and of yourself plays an important role in the whole. It's not just telling a story, but it's you, the author of the design, who is introducing a story, moving around, choosing words, building sentences, posing questions, listing, performing, seducing, convincing, doubting and ending the story. This 'presentation' can be seen as a design as well, one can approach it in the same way as one would approach a design of a book or object. Quite some people forget that, whether you like it or not, the presentation is part of the design.

How do you like teaching? What's your method?
An artist I admire once told about the most inspiring teacher he had met during a visit at the Cooper Union art school in New York. All students had put their works on the walls and floors to discuss it. The students gathered around the drawings and started

to talk about each other's works. It was an impressive course, though the teacher (the German artist Hans Haacke) kept completely silent. Only at the end of a discussion he would perhaps ask something that apparently was not yet fully discussed. That was it, no speeches, no rules, no hurry, but all things that matter were said. In general by the students themselves, by being there, committed, concentrated, taking time...

This seems to me an ideal situation. The best way to learn things is to discover them on your own terms. What I can do as a teacher is to stimulate the environment in which these discoveries can take place. (I must admit that by pure enthusiasm I talk far too much.) I believe in activating what's good instead of focusing on what's not. I enjoy giving compliments and do my best to tell as precisely as possible for what reasons I think something is good. One of the most valuable things is motivation which is more strongly fed by a positive vibe than by a very critical one. Let each person be her or his own standard.

The theme of the workshop was 'A Subjective Atlas of the EU'. Why this subject? The EU seems to be extremely un-youthful/un-sexy thing to think about. Something for those grey-suited bureaucrats.
This is not true. The endless set of rules might be boring. But the true Europe is the cultural one. The EU is not a state with revolutionary origins but a compilation of different political, historical and cultural entities. The European Union is a concept based on networks and shared values. Every country, every city and each citizen will have its own perception of this growing Union. The sad thing is that we don't really know how to imagine Europe. There is a lack of good images. We need our own in order to commit ourselves, to start understanding and respecting each other. We need to create our own stories and pictures, not the ones from the mass media. We should allow our visions to merge, to learn to know each other. In order to make the best of the EU-concept we have to share our different perspectives. We should develop, visualise and exchange our thoughts.

We are all part of the EU, there's no way escaping that. There is nothing wrong with just the concept of putting our forces together. But the way in which it is done now, is setting an impossible task. The least we can do is talk about the meaning of the concept of Europe.

How did it work out? Did you learn anything new about the EU?
Being in Estonia, it is the first time that I'm in a former USSR republic. Being here, witnessing the history, hearing the different stories, teaches and informs me about Estonia in ways I'd never expected. It is shocking to realize how complicated and tough history has been here. It is undoubtedly important for the way people deal with contemporary life. At a first glance, life seems similar to that in Amsterdam; fashion is alike, we've read the same books, talk about the same movies, our climates are more or less equal and many speak English, which makes it easier to exchange our thoughts. Behind these similarities one feels a different way of dealing and coping with life. But you would never read this in travel guides.

sSo my answer to your question is definitely yes! I've learned a lot by listening to the stories the Estonian students told me, about their lives, their interest or disinterest in the EU, the scepticism, comparisons they made with the Soviet Union. I've learned from their enthusiasm for travelling. Most of all, I've learned more about the thoughts and culture in another country, which puts the EU in a broader perspective in my mind.

You have been researching the differences between the Netherlands and other EU countries. How different are the Estonian students from the others you have come upon?
They are of course as interesting and inspiring as students are, especially since they're from different backgrounds than I am. I was particularly impressed by the skills they already had with the computer and making infographics. Even first grade students possessed these skills.

It was funny to observe that hardly anybody disagreed with me. The Dutch students are often more opinionated. Sometimes that's useful for a design, because by having an opinion you also create a direction, a way of approaching the design. On the other hand, the Estonian students were more willing to invest time in getting the facts and information they needed for their infographics; average information didn't suffice.

I had the feeling that some students were not used to a way of working in which one's own opinion, the personal role as a designer, was important for the design. In the Netherlands this seems more generally the case. We're coining a new terminology for it: 'author design'. The designer is not just a problem solver, but also a storyteller. The Atlas we've made activates the recipient's awareness of the design's social and cultural contexts in which it is embedded.