BORROWING
POSITIONS
Role-Playing Design
& Architecture

EESTI KULTUURKAPITAL

✴✴ DEAR FRIEND,

I held a seminar the other week about the politics of design. We were reading an article by Mahmoud Keshavaraz, and as it often goes with academic texts, the language is rather impenetrable for the uninitiated.[1] Students were struggling, so instead of casually discussing design and politics, we had to talk about language first and discus the form of the text, which is often taken for granted. We read without noticing much more than the message conveyed. When faced with words, concepts, and ways of writing that we are not accustomed to, we suddenly see the words themselves. Their bodies, no longer invisible, suddenly demand attention.

This made me think about the transparency of language in general—the invisibility of voice and thought and how we give it a body by writing it down. By embodying language we make it visible, but embodied text may still stay transparent, peripheral, unnoticed. Quite often we have the biggest blindspots for the things closest to us, and what could be closer to us than our language?

Keshavaraz talks about transparency, as well. He points out that while we live in designed environments, we tend to pay it no mind. We might *look* at designed objects, but most of the time don't really *see* them. Like plants and grass, we take them for granted. Something so familiar that slips out of our vision. Our interactions with design become almost unconscious and automatic. Design settles and presents itself as natural law.

To contrast this, Keshavaraz argues that although design acts as something natural, we should always take it as unnatural. The first makes us passive. There is something deterministic about it—design is as it is and there is not much we can or should do about it. We leave it alone. Like nature, it grows by itself. The second makes us active. An artifact is something that is made and hence can be remade. It can be improved, or even destroyed if it becomes dangerous. The unnatural demands attention. It does not hide. It is not transparent and it provides us with a voice, whereas the design that is perceived as natural can be easily ignored or discouraged.

While we were discussing the language of the article, the word 'unnatural' seemed to have interesting connotations. When one encounters something unnatural, there is usually something uncanny, perhaps even weird and frightful in this encounter. Following Keshavaraz, should one evoke those frightful encounters with design on purpose?

A few months ago, my friends Kaisa Karvinen, Tommi Vasko, and I compiled and partially wrote a book on design- and architecture-centred LARPs (Live Action Role-Playing), in which around 15 people gather in character, dressed up as design-related fictional personas.[2] There is a quest, an invitation to an intergalactic design conference, which serves as a reason for all the characters to gather and a small plot, consisting of various events, workshops, and meetings. In the end, well, actually right from the start, you are left with a weird feeling. Not knowing how to act, what to think, or make of role-playing in general.

During the New York Art Book Fair last September, we launched the book together with one of the collaborators Michael Fowler and dear friend Nicole Killian. Michael and I did a reading in character and the whole thing was followed by a Q&A. One of the questions that came up was why do we, as designers, take up the role of an actor? Are we not afraid of failure, of bland amateurism? The answer is no, we welcome it.

This approach is heavily influenced by Bertolt Brecht and his estrangement effect, which was the concept of using bad, clumsy, and amateurish acting in his theatre plays to keep the audience attentive and reflective of the piece. The aim was to show the events of the plot as unnatural, as artificial. Born out of certain choices made by certain individuals, not out of a divine and deterministic natural law.

After reading Kershavaraz, it became apparent how much overlap these approaches have, and how they provide a framework for thinking about the unnatural in design and theatre, or design-theatre, in our case. For instance, following Kershavaraz's train of thought, if design is essentially unnatural, does that mean that the more unnatural a piece of design is, the better (closer to its 'essence') it is? Should designers then be responsible for pushing the boundaries of the unnatural in design, and what would that even mean? It does not necessarily mean wild and uncanny aesthetics, although it might, but rather the mere act of voicing. Voicing something that is out of the habitual. Think about any minority on the social scale. Think about what their life consists of, and our natural patterns of being fall out of perspective, revealing the traces of privilege and power that we prefer to treat with a blind eye.

And what can we take from this into design education? A question I have been thinking about a lot recently while being part of developing a new graphic design masters program here at the Estonian Academy of Arts, led by graphic designer Sean Yendrys. The program will launch in the autumn of 2020.

One of the most interesting aspects of making an MA program is the constant discussion of what design education should be. It is as if we are acting bureaucrats, who at the same time are having philosophical discussions about learning, work, responsibility, values, etc. I wonder if the unnatural and artificial have a place here, as well? These are words mostly used in a negative sense. Whereas, following Brecht and Kershavaraz, these terms have become positive, and their positivity comes from the power to activate the audience or the user. In education, the unnatural might be a way to give a voice to the student and make design visible, bring it to the centre of discussion, not leave it in the background or use it as an empty vessel for secondary problems.

Whichever the context, be it education or a designer's everyday practice, the artificiality of it should not be brushed away. It should be voiced. Its character embodied. Its transparency transcended.

PEACE! OTT KAGOVERE

1. Mahmoud Keshavaraz, 'Sketch for a Theory of Design Politics', in Markus Miessen, Zoë Ritz (eds.), *Para-Platforms: On the Spatial Politics of Right-Wing Populism*, Berlin, Sternberg, 2019.

2. Yin Aiwen, et al. *Borrowing Positions: Role-Playing Design and Architecture*, Tallinn, Lugemik, 2019.