



Why the World Needs Designers Today

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“Design has gone viral.

We simply don't see it anymore because it's everywhere.”

- Mieke Gerritsen & Geert Lovink¹

“The design process never can begin without discussion.”

- Pierre Bernard²

ABSTRACT

One of the most discussed issues within the field of design is probably the term ‘design’ itself and its many interpretations. What is the value of a schooled designer in a world in which everyone with an Adobe Creative Cloud subscription can call themselves a designer? What is the difference between a social/graphic/service/interaction designer? Should the modern designer work on a commissioned base or engage in a more autonomous practice? The question of design and its value is captured best in its diversity, or as stated matter-of-factly by Mieke Gerritsen and Geert Lovink in the quote above: design is everywhere.

KEYWORDS: Change, Designer, Product.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite all the perspectives on design and its diverse aesthetics and interpretations, there is one important factor to be found that all design – whether it is product, graphic, social or UX/UI – always have in common, namely; service. According to design academic Ezio Manzini, designers are engaging ‘in a service profession in which the results of their work meet human needs’.³ The designer provides a service in any preferred (and fitting) medium to

¹ M. Gerritsen & G. Lovink, *Made in China, Designed in California, Criticised in Europe*, 2nd ed., The Image Society, 2019, p. 11

² Pierre Bernard: *Erasmus Prize 2006*, author unknown, [online] available at: <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/pierre-bernard-erasmus-prize-2006>

³ E. Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, MIT Press, 2015, p. vii

either their client, stakeholders, or target audience. To design is to create actions and insights with the wish to change any given situation into a favoured new situation.⁴ Following this idea, it is no shock that one of the many trends in the current design landscape is the transition towards a more sustainable, social practice. However, when talking about design in a social context, the designers – who are being trained as visual storytellers and not as social entrepreneurs – with a wish to change the world for the better, face the challenge of how to actually do so. With this essay we want to answer to this how, by reflecting on our own design practice and highlighting some of our social projects as workable case studies.

2. IGNITING THE SPARK

“We live in an era in which graphic designers could play an important role in rendering ever more complicated information transparent and understandable.”

- Renate Boere⁵

About ten years ago, the question of how to have an influence on society, or how to change something about the political landscape as a designer drove us at Studio Renate Boere into the direction of generating self-initiated projects. We live in an era in which graphic designers could play an important role in rendering ever more complicated information transparent and understandable. Students at Dutch art academies are even trained to become interdisciplinary thinkers with their own critical view of society. But why, then, do we see so few effective and successful projects initiated by designers themselves within Dutch society?

The minute Renate Boere realised this, she was teaching one day a week at the Willem de Kooning academy in Rotterdam and at the same time working hard to put Studio Renate Boere on the map as an independent graphic design agency. The studio already had great assignments and collaborations with a diverse range of clients, but she also realized that, with all her ideals and principles, the studio didn't make time for creating self-initiated projects. Even though there was plenty to worry about, given the fact that it was the time at which the political landscape in the Netherlands changed rapidly. Populist parties emerged at what seemed faster than light. How could it be possible that these political parties gain so many followers simply by saying that nothing is right and that it is always someone else's fault? Or even more importantly, how can we as designers be able to seduce citizens by using knowledge and facts, to choose a political side based on standpoints instead of opting for the loudest voice?

The idea that a designer is capable of generating change might seem quite evident at the current time of writing this essay, however ten years ago this idea was still relatively new. Nowadays, designers realize that they cannot remain within the proximity and safety of their own studio when coping with social issues. To use the words of Andre Schaminée, designers know now that ‘everyone who is part of the problem should be able to be part of the change’.⁶ While running a studio with a focus on editorial design, the step towards a more social design oriented approach seemed rather big for us at the time. In order to bridge the

⁴H. Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 2nd ed., MIT Press, 1982, p. 129

⁵ R. Boere, *Beyond Design*, BIS Publishers, 2020, p. 8

⁶ A. Schaminée, *Designing with-in Public Organizations*, BIS Publishers, 2018, p. 21

gap slightly, Renate decided to develop a related assignment together with her colleague educator and designer Roger Teeuwen for 120 students of the Willem de Kooning academy. Within this assignment, they asked the students to design an interactive installation that would inform citizens about politics in innovative and positive ways. The end results were presented within the walls of the academy – not nearly as effective as the initial ideas behind the assignment. Chance had it that Renate ran into one of our former cultural commissioners, the director of an art institution in Dordrecht. He inquired what we were doing, to which Renate avidly told the story about her positive twist on action ‘against’ populists.

He immediately got excited, and promised that he would keep his exhibition space free for an exposition of the 25 best ideas, one-month prior to the municipal elections. That appeared to be the perfect timing; right before elections the press is in hot pursuit of news about politics and this concept of offering information in a positive way was new! The value of unexpected collaborations appeared when the ProDemos Institute – at that time still IPP (Institute for Public and Politics) – came to see the project too. Exactly in that period, the Dutch government had assigned IPP to find a better connection with the general public. IPP, which was previously mainly focusing on political research, changed over a short period of time into ProDemos, based in a building opposite the Dutch Houses of Parliament, where tours, debates and exhibitions were being organised. Developing interactive installations to accessibly inform citizens matched this new thought perfectly, so we proposed a collaboration which turned out to be a lasting partnership.

From then on ProDemos and Studio Renate Boere worked together regularly. After a number of years, we were assigned to design an interactive installation which could be used outside the walls of the ProDemos Institute, on festivals and in town halls. We carefully compiled a list of requirements, which had to be met by this new installation. The most important ones were accessibility; it had to be easy to transport, put together and use; and preferably hosted by one person. It had to be vandal- and theft proof, stand out among the masses, be entertaining, interactive and, above all, informative and not too expensive. Lastly, the procedure or game itself shouldn’t last too long for citizens. With a small team, we started working and we got at least ten ideas with potential. We had a clear preference for two very good ideas. ProDemos also became enthralled when we presented these ideas, after which we could continue developing the design.

3. THE NEXT PHASE

“We, as designers, prefer to skip or tend to forget this last phase of a project. We’d rather start a new project right away, whereas documenting and publishing your previous project can generate a lot of media attention and possibly provide you with again new exciting collaborations.”

- Renate Boere⁷

⁷ R. Boere, *Beyond Design*, 2020, BIS Publishers, p. 156

By testing and presenting it over time, we designed an extremely good product. The installation became very popular and is still used yearly at all Liberation Day festivals in the Netherlands. The StickerStemWijzer (Sticker Party Pointer)⁸ is a meters-long, outdoors, interactive installation which informs citizens about politics in an entertaining way. The power of this work is in the accessible manner in which people can assess political statements: a green sticker for 'agree' and a red one for 'disagree'. They take one of the preferred colours from a sticker sheet. A series of such physical choices is rewarded with a voting advice which you get by pulling the sheet with the remaining stickers through a machine.

Realizing that self-initiated projects can lead to unexpected and excited collaborations, made us decide to approach every new project in the same manner. We realized through the StickerStemWijzer that writing about design projects can lead to new insights and another kind of success. Around the time the StickerStemWijzer was finished, we got an email from an organisation unknown to us; PDMA (Product Design and Marketing Association), with an open call to send in innovative projects. We figured, why not think about it and write a piece? If you don't shoot, you don't score. Promptly the project was nominated and included in the book 'Goednieuwsuit Nederland' ('Good News from the Netherlands'). We were proud and it even got better. During the PDMA symposium, the StickerStemWijzer was voted most renewing innovation! So this is what happens when you publish.

Finally, it dawned. A self-initiated project can be more than successful in its own right; if we - as designers - take the time to write about it, the project can gain so much publicity and win awards too. Winning awards is good for the stakeholders, but also for promoting the evolving role of the current graphic designer. We, as designers, prefer to skip or tend to forget this last phase of a project. We'd rather start a new project right away, whereas documenting and publishing your previous project can generate a lot of media attention and possibly provide you with again new exciting collaborations. This way, the effect of your project, and your role as an engaged graphic designer will be many times greater if you work together with institutions or companies that want to convey the same message as you. Unconsciously we had created a method with which we could actually initiate successful projects which contributed to society.

4. EMPOWERMENT (CONCLUSION)

An important step in realizing the value of self-initiated design projects stems from the fact that Renate Boere wrote down our experiences while we were actually undergoing them. With the designers' novel *Beyond Design, Making Socially Relevant Projects Successful* (2020) we want to inspire designers all around the world to take the lead in innovative design solutions for a better future. In the back of the book you will find a simple ten step method, that anyone can use when starting a project. Over the last two years we

⁸ For a quick explanation of the installation go to:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_alnFj27QA&ab_channel=ProDemosDenHaag

worked on a quick, engaging, and fun game based on thisten step method; Beyond Design - The Game of Social Solutions. With this game we challenge you - young designers, professionals, teachers, dreamers and idealists - to set up a project based on your own idea.

On an ending note; we now know that designers are important contributors to social/political change. It is time to empower designers and work together for a better future. It maybe wishful thinking, but according to Studio Renate Boere, this is what the ultimate design trend of 2021 should be.

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