

**"Under the spreading chestnut tree
I sold you and you sold me:
There lie they, and here lie we
Under the spreading chestnut tree"**

Parts of this essay have been reconstructed using email threads;
Parts of this essay are the results of ten hours of interviews;
Parts of this essay have been grafted from a Google docs discussion;
Parts of this essay are cut and past from LinkedIn gurus;
The whole of this text will be used to approach an idea, softly.
Like a mouse tiptoeing towards cheese.

Escaping the Chestnut Tree Cafe

They sat there, all of them, around a table. Not looking each other in the eyes but at the objects instead, the unstable matter vibrating between them. The same stuff that was once promised to them. It was theirs for the taking they were told: to manipulate, to speculate on, to propose, to critique and to build with. But there they were, all of them, sat around a table.

It felt as if they were the last ones left from the school of 2020. They were the last ones to have not left the creative industries, the ones who'd resisted the lure of going into content production. The others churned out countless VR and AR worlds, shaped not by the passing of time but by Search Engine Optimisation. It turned out that design graduates were perfect for a life in CT, writers too, since machine intelligence still wasn't inventive enough to come up with new ways of extracting more capital and attention from humanity. That still had to be done by something that could smile.

The singularity hadn't been achieved yet, either. Theirs was a messy world. One that many design graduates predicted and tried to change, but had happened anyway. The onward march of capital went straight past the well meaning research PDFs, interactive installations, visceral yet critical banquets, Instagram filters, symposiums and news-featured-plastic recycling-circular economy-projects. Thousands of graduates strained to build a better world as the one they lived in coughed and burned. Hopes, expectations, and neoliberal promises of individual action and planetary salvation were sold to them by a caste of earnest pedagogues and desperate universities drained of funding.

So there they were, sitting around a table.

Each morning the five of them would meet at the Chestnut Tree Cafe, nurse a coffee, smoke, post, and curse those who left the profession. Once on the inside, they'd check how their work or research papers were doing on academia.edu and Instagram as their serotonin was drained from them like bile from a moon bear. Glances were stolen as each sought to project a different reality to the one they were living.

Inside a head, facing down:

"To be honest, I really don't like Instagram. I feel the pressure as all the posts are under my name. So people judge *me*, and everything else through that post. I can't make a mistake. I'm so nervous to post new things." *Tap

One of them had just got some funding from the Welsh Council for a material research project into alternative uses for the millions of Unions Jacks that were produced shortly before the Union fell apart. Their social media accounts and the website were updated, gleaming photos of pastel smiles and neon backgrounds of red, white and blue shot through the ether. The others filtered green.

The name D.Smith is mentioned in an influential and high-impact design research paper uploaded to Academia.

[Click here to view your mentions...](#)

Sat on their smartphones around that table they looked as anachronistic as automata at the annual Elon Musk Memorial Riot. He, like the designers themselves, never delivered salvation. But why?

Culture takes time to catch up with technological innovations. This 'cultural lag' postpones rapid advancement of societies. This is where design comes into play, reducing the lags by developing contexts for adaption and cultural uptake...

Design thinking is NOT about processes, efficiencies or product version changes. It's about having a deep and committed instinct to reduce this 'cultural lag.' Because technology is going through near autonomous advancement, many times leaving us behind to just catch up.

"Were we an industry always just playing catch up? Even our futures couldn't keep pace... Weren't we, the avant-garde, supposed to change all this?", M said under their breath as they looked up from their screen. The others shuffled slightly as flashbacks of awards, grant writing and promise darted behind their retinas.

It had all looked so alluring, the promise of fame in a closed world, the respect and envy of those who only knew their pixels. This loop of affirmation, palatable criticality, and platform reliance pushed design further and further away from the shared and lived reality.

There is no being avant-garde on a dying planet, the whole idea was a hangover from the previous century away. Because if there is no future, and there wasn't, then being avant-garde just meant trying to stay relevant to survive. Because of this, design had become toxic, leaching out its desire for newness into the world like chemicals from a consumer e-waste dump.

It was the five of them that paid the price for the manufactured desire of always wanting to be at the cutting, sexy edge. Too many of their contemporaries were looking at the horizon instead of the gaping fissure at their feet. They were the children of university PR departments, ossified or precarious pedagogues, social media channels and a professional field rife with uncertainty and devoid of solidarity. It was a generation that confused the critical with the constructive.

Their depression sat heavy on them. As the world slipped further and further away, so too did their mental health. To think about it actually, their mental health was what was at the centre of this. Twenty years into the new millennium and everything came to a point: environmental destruction

and pollution; precarious working conditions; nationalism, xenophobia and hatred permeated almost all aspects of social and political life. All facilitated by technology's ability to coalesce all of this despair in a single device, while still managing to divide. Every narrative, every human story, every non-human story of woe was suffused with hope. A hope that was being sold by educational institutes. Because if education was no longer about the pursuit of knowledge, then it was about the manufacturing of hope. If we can hope, then we can pay the fees.

We achieve this by making you reflect in more abstract ways on the meaning of your designs and the social roles you perform as a designer. Because we want to encourage you to link your personal story with the issues, problems and questions that arise in the world around you.

"Why do I feel so sad?" mumbled S as they turned round to get the sensor's attention. A simple nod and the coffee was paid for, so too were the 5 minutes 46 seconds they'd not spent looking at an Instagram feed. The familiar high pitched growls of the phone let them know they'd been DM'd the receipt.

"Thanks for choosing us to get your caffeine boost. Remember, if you want to level-up your retina training and reduce your bill: keep your eyes down and at the screen! Have a lovely day xx"

"How did we end up here?", slumping back into the chair "we were all working so tirelessly to build a better world. Thousands of us, all creative, all willing, our research was supposed to be the catalyst for change!", their voice rising to such a pitch that the others couldn't respectfully ignore it. "We really had a brilliant idea, you know. We really knew how to change the system but the system just didn't want to be changed."

Still, the group's recognition was anything but empathetic. It was part of the routine. One of them gets up, mournfully scolds their situation and then sits back down. Each of the five then carried on their individual silence, only ever interrupted by the ever-present adverts for Fluoxetine and more online design courses:

To you, designing should be anything but a duty; it is an urgency. Your life depends on it. How could you live without it? Oddly enough, this sense of urgency often goes hand in hand with diffidence.

Foistered, A Term for our Time;

It's a combination of the words "foisted" and "forced", used and invented by Donald Trump, during his 2019 Kentucky, Louisiana and Mississippi rallies. Trump's combination of words that verbalise either *being imposed or coerced upon by physical power, or imposing an unwelcome or unnecessary person or thing on someone*, is perfect for conceptualising contemporary design mid-pandemic. It feels as if *what once was, need no longer be*. There was that brief moment where birdsong triumphed over the sound of engines. In the here and now naivety plays an important role in critical thinking. It can allow us to imagine from experience, to simplify the situation to a few key subjective points.

"I experienced *this*, and I want to carry this experience through with me and share it with others."

or

"I experienced this, and I don't want carry this experience through with me and share it with others."

Such simple sentences can become the avant-garde of how we restructure the design industry and its satellite scenes. Let's push back against the emphasis that's put on the word '*normal*' when we're told to embrace the novelty of our situation. We don't *have* to have the old structures *foistered* on us again, at least not in their entirety. We can break through, with vigour.

The following essay will delve into how we can maybe do so by placing the mental health of the practitioner at the centre of a future. Foistered serves as an example of the malleability of language, its prescience and its ability to act as a kind of philosopher's stone of futures. Linger in the shadow of such a word we can ask: if the language starts to change, how would the practice?

There is tendency at the moment to force theory into every corner of our designer lives. To squeeze it in with such pressure that it starts to seep out; ironically turning content into surface and reducing it to pattern, both literally and metaphorically. To delve into the histories of art and design and note this "turn" would be pointless. Because from this particular angle, peering through and over my screen, the fires are still raging: environmentally, politically, technologically.

This doesn't mean we have to all rush to the call, or feel guilty for not doing so. It would be reductive to frame the conversation like that. But admitting that the structures we have now are insufficient for the task is a start. We don't have to reduce every project to some kind of working blueprint to address the inequalities that we *feel*. This is as much of a utilitarian-utopian dream as the content of the work itself. Two sides of the same coin. We have to learn how to be quick on the draw and shoot the coin mid-toss, before it lands. With a hole forced through we get matter transferred from one side the other, neither side is sovereign or pure anymore as they're tainted by each other, boundaries bleeding. Interdisciplinary mingling in the non-pursuit of solution, with the added thrill and action of firing a gun.

The press release for re-FORMAT mentions the importance of language, ways of expressing what we see. We conceptualise our mad, incoherent disconnected culture by making it seem rational and belonging to a shared reality by neatly packaging it in publications, well designed websites, products and exhibitions. A thread of rationally thought out kerning holds at bay the terrifying cacophony of everything. And so back to language and thinking about how we can use it.

A lot has been written about digital metaphors and how they obscure and pastoralise our imagining of technology (clouds, streams, farming, cookies, etc.) However there is one that is deliciously prosaic: the news *feed*. It serves as an excellent example of the relationship between language and design, intention and action.

We are fed, we don't feed ourselves.

No matter how much we want to discover the *truth*, if we're constantly seeing different things then there is nothing shared. We are all at sea and each one of us is navigating by a different north star. These previous explorations of language in the designed world tell us that when we start to deconstruct it, our building material can be more deviant than previously thought. A brick is a brick. But it's also a paper weight, a candle holder, a collection of five letters, a weapon, a walnut cracker...Violence is just one imagination away.

I have written previously on how we can move away from the language of design by looking to its international community.¹ I was wondering how the industry would change if we started to get rid of the word *Design* and its preconceived intentions. And for example, used the Dutch word *vormgever*: '*form giver*'. To give form, or to create a form into which we can pour ideas. This seemed like more of a generous way to talk about expanded practice without the add-ons trying to be more specific: *specul, critica, socia*. Through this, maybe we could devolve some of the power and narratives away from the word itself and its control over our imaginations.²

I'm learning, at least I'm trying to force myself to learn, that criticism exists to build up and not tear down. It's early stages yet, and it seems obvious, but instead of denying something space we should help pick it up, caress it and place it next to something for context: textually, verbally, physically. *Of course this is something a great number of people already do, but it's a good idea to remind ourselves of it every now and then.*

This action has to be taken on by us, as it seems that institutions are not the places to do it, sadly. Generally speaking, they are tombs of intent. Forlornly waiting for the crack of Indiana's whip to wake the projects and carry them off on an adventure to the outside world and a reality. So unless we address what has been foisted on us, the contemporary and a future, our projects will be stuck in a feedback loop.

Here a distinction needs to be made between intention and action. An exhibition, design research, an essay, these are all intentions. Yet action is direct, born from the rigours of designed intentions. The two need each other, but the former can survive without the latter. And that is the key difference. Our structures of imagining are so skewed to intention that we don't really know what action actually is.

I was five when my father picked me up out of bed, just before the thick toxic blackish-yellow smoke from the fire below could roll down across my nose and mouth. I asked him how he knew something was wrong. Apparently it was something deep in his body shouting at him to wake up. No one else in the house did. There was no alarm. Just a sense that something was wrong, out of kilter.

How do we work through this without continuing to wear out even the same old arguments? I believe, having talked to the laureates and many other graduates, that if we discuss these problems with the aim of improving the mental health of the practitioners then lots of our shared wants and beliefs also fall into place. It turns out that what helps keep things like depression from the door, also pushes for a renewed and more collaborative, and less hierarchical approach to the design industry.

¹ See *Critical! (un)professional everyday design criticism*, 2021

² See Stanislaw Lem's *The Futurological Congress* and 'the idea of divination through linguistic derivation, morphological forecasting and projective etymology.'

Industrial Glamour : Design as Publicity

Firstly we can use the concept of glamour, as defined by John Berger, to conceptualise and frame our relationship to platforms like Instagram. Which in their current form deny us a healthy mind, a sustainable way of working, and a shared reality. They're one of the main *feeders* in our feedback loop.

A lot of work has already been done to publicise the effect social media is having on our mental health and the design industry.³ Our interactions with it intensify its more detrimental aspects: prioritising individual promotion over collectivity. We're all individuals, but at least one our many identities intersects: that of being part of a community. It's at this shared point of reference that we can gather, and all are welcome. Any push for a renewed and more collaborative approach will always stall when one of the dominant forms of communication is mediated by a platform like Instagram.

At first it's an interesting tool but then comes the addiction and pressure of getting more and more likes.

Its prime directive is not to share, but to continuously, fastidiously and fiendishly promote glamour. Design as a profession now thrives off and on the platform, with personalities becoming indistinguishable from professions. The ideal dream of neoliberal synergy can be found in equal measure in the personalities of influencers, content producers and designers. There's often only a semantic difference between them, as the mechanics are the same. We're becoming our brands. We are already our brands. As the object dissolves, glamour, instead of research, is filling the form.

Architecture, design, biopolitics, Director Museum of..., Creative Director of..

scroll down for pictures of my family and famous designers and the beautiful life that you want.

The platform puts us in a situation where we publicise ourselves to the point of distraction. Our accounts become places that produce envy.

Publicity is not merely an assembly of competing messages: it is a language in itself which is always being used to make the same general proposal. Within publicity, choices are offered between this cream and that cream, that car and this car, but publicity as a system only makes a single proposal.

It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more.

Written in 1972, this encapsulates our relationship with Instagram. The author fills this observation with even more prescient significance by plotting the relationship between publicity, envy and glamour. In short, they all feed off one another. And it's within this messy and gaslighting three way that contemporary practice is placed. This futuro-anachronistic description offers us a glimpse of the working atmosphere of design immediately pre and mid-pandemic.⁴

There are some things that they taught me that I have to unlearn, to get rid of. I want to unlearn everything they told us about social media, everything about being present online and on Instagram. I have to learn to set my boundaries, to go against their advice.

³ See Delany Boutkan and Mikaela Steby's www.object-image.com and the essay *Lyrical Design* by Daniel van der Velden in the book *Design Dedication*, 2020, Valiz.

⁴ Lots can change because of the pandemic, for the better or worse.

Should we have been more careful with what we wished for? Our want to first transform matter, then social relations and then political systems has had an inverse effect. Our constant outward gaze has left slip our self-reflection. The glamour of the profession and its promise of creative authorship, maybe even celebrity, has rendered invisible to us the structures that promote this kind of behaviour.

The dogs bark, while the elephant carries on.

Intent is the dipstick of designed intervention, we can measure how dirty it actually gets. The further away from from action and the closer to the exhibition space, the cleaner and more aseptic it is.

Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects....The happiness of being envied is glamour. Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance.

Envy is an emotion that isn't much discussed in the creative industries. But it's an ever-present one whether we care to admit it or not. It is a state of being that is shared by all while also dividing, invisibly. I would argue that our current structures of platform reliance and funding are primed to intensify this emotion.

When we have a system that conflates personality and projects and academies that actively force students to interrogate their identities, cementing them into their practices. Then it's little wonder that the collective mental health degrades when it's stuck between affirmation via glamour, image via envy, solidarity via friendship and income via precarious funding bodies.

*You definitely don't feel you can be yourself, even though you're supposed to **find** yourself.*

To sum up the argument so far, then:

Parts of design have been severed from their historic reliance on the object, with research taking its place. However because the discipline is still in denial about this, the structures are not yet there to support this more dematerialised work. A fissure emerges between realities, only leading to more ambiguity and intent. The profession is in future-shock at a time when it's trying to mitigate such things.

All work undertaken that is of an overtly socio-political nature⁵ will forever be classified as intent as long as it stays within the current conservative structures of funding, academies, institutions and exhibitions.

Our technologies of self-expression do not serve this goal. In fact they are the complete antithesis to what we need. They exacerbate the discipline's tendency to promote the glamour of the individual over collective action.

We can transition from intent to action, not by focusing on the outcome, the reach, or the intention of the research. But by placing serious weight and significance on improving the mental health of the practitioner. This intent is synonymous *with* action.

For this to happen historic relationships need to be rethought and new mongrel ones forged from past experiences: *in the shell of the old.*

⁵ We're assuming here that all design is political. But in this essay I'm addressing the many who put such subjects at the forefront of their work and practice. Defining themselves by it even.

The point is, is that this research is valuable. Not only because it pushes for progressive and social ideals, but because it represents thousands and maybe millions of hours of creative energy and labour. This thing of research, this *hyperobject* of design research, needs to be rooted. Otherwise it'll float off with the next grant application, only relevant until the next deadline...

The funding process, while supportive and being incredibly generous, underpins the precarious nature of our work: normalising it by institutionalising it. We're so glad and thankful to get the money that we don't question what an alternative could look like.

We're asked to submit links to our social media channels when apply for funding, we're asked what our *reach* is online. It's a strange situation that our scarcity of time, our precarity, could be reliant on showing how many people could possibly like a picture we post. I wonder, if we post a picture and no one sees it, would it affect our chances of getting some cash for a project? In such situations *Project* is a synonym for paying the rent.

I was strong enough to say no.

The applications that we submit bolster the project mentality of the discipline. Historically we would start a project and see it through to manufacture and sale. Once it had a solid form, it was finished. But these steps are no longer valid if we're turning our skills to things like climate change, institutional racism or death. We need deep reach and support. So this project mentality, time frame mentality, added value mentality, relevance mentality are all part of a mode of working that cannot keep up with the present. It's archaic and not quick enough to act, it's not communal enough to fulfil the promises that most academies are selling.

Why do we use these fashionable words to describe yet another concept that we need to send to a funding application?

As soon as the end user disappeared and funds appeared, putting an emphasis on reach, the industry had to change tack completely. Our justification for our practice, our research, our projects, became an existential justification of being, of self-worth.

It's not enough that our projects end up in exhibitions and have an audience. These places are reliquaries. I use reliquary and not ossuary because of the sheer amount of brilliant burning energy that is put into each project. These things are holy, but they are not ends in themselves. We just need to rethink how education institutions and the realities that follow them can feed these *people-projects* into systems that can allow for something other than inaction. To move away from solutionism, from intent, from a project mentality we need new and *Radical* structures.

Trepanning Radicality

If we wanted to be really 'radical', we wouldn't interact with an institution in the first place.

A quick note on *Radicality*, on *being radical*. A lot has already been written on the word and its relationship to design and its education. It walks a fine line between the wet fart of PR Mission Statements and the intentions of designers to work towards recognising the unsustainability of our structures.⁶ The reason it's introduced here is because it came up during conversations the laureates were having about design in the time of Covid. Not just its response project-wise, but its display, its communication and its ability to reach people.

Our graduates have the capacity to become leaders in their fields, produce outstanding creative work, and dare to disturb.

Below is a fleeting reflection on the use of it. Radically Radical in the face of Radicality. Empty words filling a hollow, yes. But no, if we address intentions. Its ubiquitousness has become a major aspect of a small part of the discipline. From academies, to publications, to huge institutions and small indie spaces. Where radicality lingers, criticality skulks. They are again, two sides of the same coin.

We can reduce radical to a label, a well designed label, but a label nonetheless. Tacked onto applications and exhibition readers to tickle the viewers latent want for deviancy in our highly mediated and structured lives. The question we need to ask is, who gains from labelling a project as radical? Because I doubt practitioners willing to do so.....it seems like something *foistered*.

Are we all in this together? Am I the centre of something here? Is something brilliant happening?

The rumblings that brought it into being are justified. We do need to think radically, but without doing what we do best: reducing criticality to a case of ergonomics. Slipping it into a neat form instead of *bringing the process of unmaking and remaking of one's worldview to the politics of one's practice*.⁷ Bringing it *into* our practice means preparing the host first, otherwise there's a strong likelihood of rejection. Maybe this is the radical act? Looking inwards instead of outwards. Maybe we can split design in two? One half creatively dismantles and rebuilds the discipline, while the other uses these new and unsteady supports to push out into the world.

And for the word itself: how about something quieter, something that doesn't sound so sharp and almost violent? Implying such a swift act as *radical change* only leaves a vacuum for all sorts of things to slurp in. Maybe a quieter word than radical is appropriate. A softer one that can help describe this shift in practice without becoming a sexy label. A quick synonym search and we land on Basic. Basic Design. This is a term that welcomes all, while implying that these structural shifts should be basic theory and praxis for a discipline functioning in the now and the future.

We don't think the fact that there is a pandemic means that we should be radical. What is important to remember is that if something is bugging us then we do something about it, which doesn't mean radicality, it just means advocacy to an issue.

Why trepanning? Well it was an attempt at a portmanteau to describe our relationship to language and design. On the one hand trepidation and planning seemed like two words that summed up a

⁶ Abdulla, D., Laranjo, F., Willis, A., Ahmed, T., FitzGerald, K., Groten, A. and Ellis, H., 2019. *Radical Pedagogy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee.

⁷ Abdulla, D., Laranjo, F., Willis, A., Ahmed, T., FitzGerald, K., Groten, A. and Ellis, H., 2019. *Radical Pedagogy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee. p.22

practice labelled radical; and on the other it was an irresistible and ego driven stab at a chance to live up to the statement: *Every so often a good neologism is enough to make an author's fortune.*

Maybe our use of this language, these prefixes, is to cover up the grief the discipline is suffering. Manifestations of our frustration and denial in the problem solving capacities of design *as is*. Afterall, it had a very quick severing from its well worn and trusted structures of the twentieth century. Because if it's not radical, then its normal. And that ain't sexy.

We can then propose one and only one prefix to introduce design: Basic. It's within this adjective that we can restructure. It implies that design has to already do all of these aforementioned things to deserve its title in the first place.⁸ We avoid label status with Basic because of its *bat squeak of confidence mixed with an association of diffidence*. It doesn't attract the attention of voyeuristic curators and exhibition visitors seeking a spank of transgressive radicality on a visit to the white cube.

So we must ask what the 19th century designer and activist William Morris did when noticing a tendency among his contemporary political actors to attach importance to alluring but vacuous political labels:

*"My Radical Friends, which will you keep, the name or the thing?
...shake ourselves clear of mere phrases, especially as many of them will cease to have a meaning when the change comes that we all of us long for."*⁹

The Octopus of Progress: Or a lighthearted suggestion for a collaborative future.

So here we are in 2021, sat at a table looking at each other through screens. Looking back at an exhausting year that has brought out the best and worst in us. But mingling amid the terror, fear, boredom and grief is intuition. A feeling that something has changed, and to repeat a well shared meme:

We don't want to go back to normal, because normal was the problem.

So how can we stretch past this present, squeezing our bodies into the corners of seemingly (im)possible futures? It's a laboured metaphor, and one that's doing its rounds on LinkedIn, but they're beautiful creatures and deserve to be celebrated. So we'll look to the octopus for help, and not just for its mystic abilities of prediction. But for its decentralised brain, its sensitive body and its ability to get out of situations that look utterly hopeless. They are beasts of optimism, whether in the jaws of a shark, or squishing through an impossibly tiny hole. And one can only feel joy and awe when watching them.

No bones: those formal and arcane structures that get in the way.

So far this essay has skidded a little clumsily over its subjects, critiquing without really offering an alternative. This chapter is where some of those ideas will be fleshed out. But firstly I want to introduce an interesting historical case. An example of when the world (and consequently design) was faced with catastrophe, and instead of a case of *project mentality*, there was a solid coherent structural reaction.

You were entitled to buy it if you could prove you needed it.

⁸ See Cameron Tonkenwise's article on Medium: <https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>

⁹ Smart, A., Fisher, J. H., 2019, *(All the Way) Down with Platforms!*, p.122

From 1941-1951 a peculiar thing happened in a capitalist and industrial country at the centre of a global colonial empire. With the declaration of war, somehow came the implementation of war socialism. And with it came the deep collaboration between designers, industry and government to make sure that people got what they *needed*. A committee was set up to oversee the production of goods for the home and clothes for the body (all available at controlled prices or using tokens). This mixture of entities, both people and structures, guaranteed rational decision making when producing the goods, as well the quality of workmanship and materials. Design became about reaction, and not about the designer.

For ten years design and its research had direct effect as it was wielded by the state apparatus to improve living standards. It researched what bombed out people needed and produced items to solve those problems. And it might seem twee that we just talk about furniture, or think that it wasn't radical, because what can this do, right? But they didn't just replicate, they researched, designed and built anew. Responding to contemporary needs which then improved the living conditions of people who had previously been denied such a standard of living. This paradox of material scarcity and then increased living quality flies in the face of our current: *choice is liberty, more is freedom, authorship is identity* state of being.

Another starker example of this is how only through the introduction of rationing did a third of Britain's population, who were hugely undernourished, get access to and *afford* regular and nutritious food.

I just felt I needed to include this as an example because all the dreams in this essay seem like wishful intentions. But stranger things have happened.

Doing physical things helps you see patterns in abstract, conceptual things. It is why some monks prescribe physical labour to those in emotional turmoil.

This look to the past can be a trap too, though. Our desperate want to go back to normal can over shadow our need for change. Because we know, or we feel, that the change that has to happen will bring more precarity, more unknowing, more stress. To learn from the past without wanting to recreate it, is to swap the smell of pipe tobacco for sweat.

The past is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non teleological possibilities of historic development. We don't need a computer to get access to the virtualities of our imagination: reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness.

So we can start with education, with the mental health of the educated. Through many interviews with the laureates (both past and present) I found out that there was a structural rejection of collaboration within the academies: be it inter-student, inter-department, inter-disciplinary (this is of course different from designers *doing* anthropology or designers *doing* art).

Some of us really were like minded. We could have made something cool but we didn't even consider it.

This flies in the face of the reality outside of the institutions, but is no surprise when the notion of the author designer has been perpetuated for so long. The hierarchies of the academies are reflected in the hierarchies of social media. The ego of the designer then has to compete with the ego of the institution in order to survive, this is then amplified on digital media. The academy can't really be considered a generative place to be when those two structures mimic one another.

I learnt that sometimes you have to just follow your own values and that's also valid. And then you also start meeting more interesting people instead of staying with just one fucking tutor.

If we're to take the mental health of the designer seriously then we need to start with a frank reassessment of how education should change. We can work from the assertion that due to the state of the world we feel the need to change it. Design is a profession that promotes and promises this change. But it's out of sync, and finds itself almost powerless outside its conservative structures of education, exhibitions, biennales, book launches and spam. So we, the designer, are quite often left with a nagging feeling that no matter our intentions, change seldom comes. To admit that design is no longer about the individual, and the discipline is no longer solely able to find a solution to our severely complex world we can douse the dull embers of doubt and disappointment that linger. The fiction that is design education can be tempered by firstly severing its links with the rhetoric of PR departments and social media accounts.

So we enter the fold, buy-in to the game, only to find the croupier has it locked down. No matter the risks we take, if we follow the same patterns we'll always be out of pocket. But we've still got the taste, the illusion, the suggestion of victory. To change this using the lens of mental health we not only flip the table, scattering the things across the floor, but we ask our previous competitors to become our collaborators. Collectively picking up the pieces and changing the rules of the game, together. This is an approach that calls on students, graduates, lecturers, heads of departments, deans, funding bodies, boards of directors and more, all in equal measure.

It creates this unhealthy and competitive environment, I think.

Within the academy, when working on a socially aware subject, we need to instil pragmatism through collaboration; put aside individual projects and create a consensus of designers working towards a common goal; avoid the proselytisation of platforms; work with partner entities like NGOs, research institutes and local government bodies to bridge the fissure between graduation and a professional world not so attuned to the *do-research design practitioner*. If we start this process of bridging and muddying then hopefully the non-design world will start see past our historic solutionism, and we can embrace being part of something instead of positioning ourselves at the end of it.

An uneasy dynamic between promises and reality.

And should academies keep churning us out into an increasingly jobless market? Should they keep greenwashing an industry by promoting ecological awareness while asking for more things? If they really believed their hype, then wouldn't they be the pioneers of this restructuring? To make sure all of the research undertaken isn't lost they need to offer alternative structures, break down the positions that have already there for over 100 years. Break up the ancestors, the academies, crack open the tombs and parade the bones!

I almost couldn't have had a better ending to my education, but still after that I fell into a dark hole. I didn't know what to do in my life, and there's no support system for that.

To create a *new avant-garde design research* led educational course without restructuring the education process itself is like pissing in the wind: fun for those merrily swaying but messy for the others down wind in a future. Let's maybe stop, for a minute, for a month or a year and redirect our *critical* and *speculative* design practices to the industry and its educational institutions. Instead of adding to the ever-growing comic strip on techno-dystopias we can propose alternative ways of working and learning. Let's turn our worldview inward and challenge the structures of education; instead of jumping on the something like Coronavirus and pumping out an exhibition of designed intents.

So what could an educational structure for Basic Design look like?

Firstly a caveat. This sketch below is not for a fully formed course. It introduces some key structural changes that would then allow for the idea of Basic Design to take hold at an MA level (to begin with). To suggest a final outcome at the beginning defeats the point. Once tested structurally

it could apply to whole departments, and then maybe whole academies. These decisions would reduce the number of students, but that's also kind of the point.

The course would establish solid corridors between education and practice, between dream and reality. This could be with partners working in sectors like climate action, social justice, cosmology, local governance, etc.

The aim of this is to place designers in a direct relationship with people in decision making positions.

Bringing these external people in would create a process that intermingles disciplines and areas of research right from the beginning.

This approach could mitigate the current 'research turned into product' attitude.

This chair is made of recycled plastic from discarded laptops.

Table — Metalized car paint on CNC milled and folded aluminium, aluminium mobile phones outer casings, gold plated mobile phones outer casings, steel microwaves grid.

The contents of the course would be established using decision making processes taken from the set up of anarchist meetings.

In consensus process, everyone agrees from the start on broad principles of unity and purposes for being for the group; but beyond that they also accept as a matter of course that no one is ever going to convert another person completely to their point of view...therefore discussion should focus on concrete questions of action, and coming up with a plan that everyone can live with...

The tutors would have steady contracts.

But they would be on a rotational basis, with none being there for more than three years.

This and consensus process would avoid the charismatic leader syndrome that so many progressive design courses suffer from.

These are some of the bare bone suggestions from which the meat of participation and making will hang. This essay also functions as platform. A place where readers can meet, be interested or annoyed. Whatever the reaction please help move this intention on my contacting the author via the email at the end of the piece.

...making the invisible visible...

And so we move onto exhibitions. All too often the resting place of research by design. Most function as tired and tested scripts that we continue act out. Again, our *criticality* is directed away from the immediate fissure between the opposing realities of intent and action. Instead it beams out towards followers and a public equally eager for change.

We need to *channel* our efforts and not *publish* them. Again the octopus comes into play. Let's treat its head/main body as the educational institution. A place that we historically thought knowledge resided and was created. Though through examination and tests of creativity it was discovered that of the octopus's 500,000,000 neurons only one third are found in their brains, with the majority in their eight tentacles. This allows them to think *with* and *through* them, with each one capable of

making independent decisions. An approach like this flattens the hierarchies because the body collaborates independently. Collaboration means trust and trust dissolves hierarchies.

...a series of diverse perspectives, joined together by the shared desire to understand the human condition, and move in the direction of greater freedom. Rather than be based on the need to prove others' fundamental assumptions wrong, it seeks to find particular projects on which they reinforce each other.

Tackling this at the educational level can give us the confidence to then challenge it beyond the walls of the academy. Demanding a more collaborative and trust based approach to how our work and research is received. This is where we can differentiate between whether we want to be *publishing* our work (historic) or *channeling* it (octopus approach).

The design research exhibition, as it is, is another hierarchy of sorts. One that places the object, the form, the solution, on a pedestal. Once you look at the passivity of this current structure and its innate ability to smother 99% of research's potential; you see that it's a format that pushes for surface. So again, we're back to the historic paradigm of creative energy dully transmogrified into intention instead of action (this is equally valid for symposiums, et al.).

So what would a tentacle exhibition look like?

Well, it could follow quite naturally from the model of the academy. One where we focus on collaboration and the exhibition space as a nexus of action. It needs to be a constellation of intellectual and physical webs that allows designers to graft their projects closer to their subjects, utilising the creative energy to power movement. It would also have Morris's statement 'which will you keep, the name or the thing?' at its core. If we want to practice critical design, or any form of the discipline that has a social angle, then we need to be able to channel our work into crevices where they can have most effect: or at least the potential for effect. Something current exhibition formats simply do not do.

It means we would do away with the aura of the exhibition as a space of reverence. No more mood lit spaces overseen by enigmatic curators. This is reserved for the canonical: an inherently conservative process. It beggars belief that we apply the same approach to the display (that we even consider it to be *display* in the first place...) of ancient artefacts and contemporary-future oriented design project(ion)s. Unless we resign ourselves to be perennial exhibition fodder we will be always be stuck in the loop of intention. Because regardless of what curators say their reach is, they only really put a full stop behind a project. Instead of drawing it out, pushing it into a community, a local government, a bar...

If the artist is to affect the course of society's perception and understanding of itself, then, on the one hand, investigation into our society's composition by the artist is paramount, and on the other, areas of operation must be developed to function outside of an exclusive Art Environment.

At some point in its history the octopus lost what was historically common to most cephalopods, its shell. This exposed it to uncertainty, to predation and vulnerability. And, some scientists say, is the reason for its intelligence. It had to work out how to survive, to react intuitively and thoughtfully to its exterior world. After it sloughed its historic and I'm sure comfortable protection, it learnt anew. This is not a call for a Dominic Cummings's style of chaos, but a request for us to question the things that we think support us. Things that may in fact be holding us back, and apart.

*It might possibly turn out that such a world is **not** possible. But one could also make the argument that it's this very unavailability of absolute knowledge which makes commitment to optimism a moral imperative: Since one cannot know a radically better world is not possible, are we not betraying everyone by insisting on continuing to justify, and reproduce, the mess we have today? And anyway, even if we're wrong, we might well get a lot closer.*

This is not an exhaustive mapping of the design terrain. It's an amble through the bracken, viewing the scenery and soot stained forests, hoping not to get lyme disease. To conflate the mental health of the designer and that of action is to create a prototype of what academies and exhibitions could look like. It's a sensitive way of approaching the alienating and depressive (both adjective and noun) aspects of contemporary design and its research. We should acknowledge the limits of our individual abilities and realise that commenting on/giving forms to research is not the be all and end all. Embedded practice, I hope, can alleviate some of these feelings of burden.

This way of working goes completely against this idea of the designer as superstar. Design is about putting your creativity at the service of a cause that you believe in.

When we look at our mental health there are few who would argue that the changes proposed would not improve it. Positive and sustained action, instead of pin pricks of ego boosting exposure kept afloat by anonymous red hearts. Maybe some will say that this piece of writing is reductive, reducing large interconnected structures to single jazzy points. But we have to bring it back to something, don't we? Forever expanding means creating more and more potentially empty space, instead of making intelligent decisions about what to get rid of and what to replace it with.

Afterall, there is no design on a dead planet.

And finally, there are of course the hugely important and needed parts of design criticism that tackle the decolonisation and depatriarchisation of the industry and culture. They come hand in hand with the approach mentioned above. I have left these subjects untouched, although acknowledge deeply the excellent work being done by so many in the field. It's best to stick to what we're good at and others are far more erudite than me when it comes to those subjects.

The terms mental health and depression are used in this essay to shine a light on a hushed up aspect of creative education, internships and professional precarity. They are loaded terms and ones that should be taken seriously. It's this seriousness that I wanted to impart in this essay. While the design practice is not the only thing that affects one's mental health, it is a large enough factor in the way we're told we can function in the world. We're sold the promise of agency only to find that reality is far messier than the academy suggested. The mental health of most of the interviewees had been affected by their education. To use such terms adds a weight, an urgency, a severity to the subject. And hopefully gets people to prick up their ears to the low murmur of burnout bubbling below our projects.

Finally the label of designer also includes writers and curators.

This essay too is an intention. If you want to help it transition to action then get in contact at josh@ziemniakii.eu

Josh Plough (UK/PL) is a writer, artist-editor and curator. His areas of intrigue include the sordid world of design, its curation and evaluation and the webs of folklore, identity and futures. Currently he is based in Warsaw where he has founded the cultural NGO *Ziemniaki i* (Potatoes and). The aim of which is to work out how we can embed design research and practice into local and governmental structures. As well as researching the contemporary relevance of myths and folklores by locating them in a constellation of politics, the internet and creativity.

Thank you to Koen Kleijn for editorial assistance and support.

Footnote:

All the text that is standalone and in italics is a direct quote from either re-FORMAT's laureates, LinkedIn users, designed theory writers, anthropologists, etc. The idea was to quote directly without creating a hierarchy between the reflections and opinions.

A list of sources is provided below:

(Ed.) Laranjo, F., 2019. *Radical Pedagogy*. Eindhoven: Onomatopée.

Vet, A., 2020. *Design Dedication*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

Graeber, D., 2006. *Fragments Of An Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Willats, S., 2011. *The Artist As An Instigator Of Changes In Social Cognition And Behaviour*. London: Occasional Papers.

Berger, J., 2008. *Ways Of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.

Boym, S., 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York City: Basic Books.

(Eds.) Ouwens, I. Camuti, F. Stevens, B., 2020, *No School Manifesto, A Movement of Creative Education*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

Foti, A, 2017. *General Theory of the Precariat*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Ressler, O., 2020. *Barricading The Ice Sheets. Artists And Climate Action In The Age Of Irreversible Decision*. Graz: Edition Camera Austria.

Fowkes, M., Fowkes R., 2020, *No Art in a Dead Planet*.

Smart, A., Fisher, J. H., 2019, *(All the Way) Down with Platforms!*.

Lane, Marty Maxwell, and Rebecca Tegtmeier. 2020. *Collaboration In Design Education*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Lem, Stanisław, *The Futurological Congress*. London: Penguin Books.

A. Rodgers, P., Bremner, C., 2016, *The Concept Of The Design Discipline*.

<http://thecityasaproject.org/2013/05/hannes-meyer-co-op-architecture/>

<https://medium.com/@camerontw/just-design-b1f97cb3996f>

<https://networkcultures.org/entrepreatariat/the-designer-without-qualities/>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Nu87bzeHWYS18qQJGrKO8rr4JVYQf5ljF4usqPSqKc/edit>