"Design is everywhere. It’s an adage one finds scattered throughout the design world, slapped on press releases and slipped into speeches—a whole industry of collective triumph. We like to see design as progress, a smile on the face of human history (with the exception of the atomic bomb and its ilk, perhaps). Whether it’s an app, a laptop, a chair, or an entire skyscraper, with each innovation we take a step forward. Not so, however, for the co-curators of the third Istanbul Design Biennial, the academics Mark Wigley and Beatriz Colomina.
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Professor and dean emeritus at Columbia's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, and director of the architecture PhD programme at Princeton respectively, Wigley and Cololina talk about "good design" as an anachronism, something we create to dull the pain of life and distract us from the world's woes. Design, the argument runs, is implicit in creating the great inequalities of the world. It's a darker side of the discipline that we mostly choose to ignore - especially when there are big sponsorship dollars involved (for those interested, Vitra bathrooms and the Enka Foundation are the headline sponsors for Istanbul).

Wigley and Cololina's biennial, which opens to the public on 22 October is not solely focused on design from the past two years. Instead, it is due to examine far more varied timescales. Exhibitors have been asked to look at anything from the preceding two seconds to the last 200,000 years, all the while considering the central question, "Are we human?" The results ought to debate how an entire human history of design has shaped and continues to shape us.

In Wigley and Cololina's worldview, design isn't passive and it doesn't solve problems per se. Instead, it transforms us. We create something and then we adapt to that creation, rewriting our psychology and even mutating physically. We are the sum of all the design that has gone before. It's an approach that is discordant with the dominant thinking around design or architecture biennials - usually optimistic and reassuring. One example of the stark contrast is this year's Venice Biennale of Architecture, curated by the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena. Reporting from the Front demanded solutions, almost styling itself as a crusade to elevate humankind through design. Wigley and Cololina, conversely, aren't looking for answers, let alone trying to solve them. Are they nihilists?

In the wake of the violent political and social disorder in Turkey, with 265 casualties after an attempted coup in July and a subsequent lockdown on the country's academics, the Istanbul Design Biennial's question of "Are we human?" may be greeted with added heaviness. It is almost as if the curators have asked us "What have we done?" For their part, however, Wigley and Cololina don't at all embody the weight of what is implied by Istanbul's theme or the trouble in Turkey.
David Michon: You've said that design always presents itself as serving the human, but its first ambition is to redesign the human. Does that hint at a deceitfulness in design?

Beate Columbus: We don't think about it in terms of deceitfulness, it's more that people are not aware that's what design is doing. Consider how the invention of shoes led to atrophy of the toes. In principle, shoes protect your feet from the environment, enabling you to walk further and faster, but in fact they redesign you. That example is very physical, but this idea applies mentally too. We will evolve from the cellphone, for example. There is a closer relationship between design and the human than simply that humans design tools to serve humans – all tools redesign the human. There is a constant redesign of the human by design and the important thing is that it has always been like this. From the beginning of humanity, design has been what makes us human and has been designing us as humans.

Mark Wigley: Designers always say they're just solving a problem, but consider why you went to a designer in the first place. Designers almost say, "I will make a new you. You will be much better after my work." No designer ever says, "You're not going to feel good after my work." Design is never just solving a little puzzle or providing for a certain function; it always has the aspiration to redesign the human, to make the human more human than before.

Beate: Clothing stores do that all the time. You put on a new jacket and they say "That's so you!" How can it be so? Who were you before you had the jacket? So our ambition with the biennial is to make people think about design and what design is, and to claim a much more ambitious draw for the field. Within art we regularly ask questions about our humanity and philosophical questions about the world, but we don't expect those kinds of questions within design. In a world in which art is becoming more and more commercialised, and more about responding to the market than questioning humanity, we want to claim that role for design and expand it to become a field for cultural contributions.

David: Do you not think that it gets difficult to talk about design if its definition becomes so incredibly broad?

Mark: People use the word "design" so frequently and we live in a time in which a chief design officer is equivalent to a chief financial officer. The word has become more useful and powerful than ever, but it's not a matter of saying that it's difficult that the word "design" seems to apply to everything, because the real issue is determining what we think given that. Now that everything is being designed, what do we think? We live in an age of total design, so what do we want to do about it? The concept of design needs to be more attuned to the world we're living in.

David: Is it the concern of the biennial that the designed world we live in isn't as good as we believe it to be? Is it a problem that we live in a totally designed world?

Beate: The idea that we have managed to cover the planet in design is also the idea that we are the only species that has managed to design its own extinction. We are very aware that we are on our way to that goal – exhausting every possible resource, for instance.

Mark: We are the self-consciously kamikaze species. It's interesting that you use the word "good". I think a big part of this project is trying to undermine the concept of "good" design. We are surrounded by good design, heaps and heaps of it; well-designed telephones, networks, systems, communication, government products, genetic codes, the weather. These things are all being designed, but maybe the design community is a bit stranded amidst that.

Beate: We live in a world in which design has taken over; in which politicians talk about design-thinking; in which there's a culture of business schools with design departments; in which the success of Apple is inseparable from its design; a world in which design extends itself over everything. In that context, the ambition of designers is very small. They don't seem to realise how design could be construed differently.

David: Why do you think that is? Is that a result of the way commerce works?

Mark: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries there was a thought that we could redesign everything, every system, and that would make for a better humanity. It was the idea of the "new man," the suggestion that we could invent a new version of the species. But when design went viral it's as if the world said that it didn't need designers any more. There's an important lesson to be learnt there because what we're trying to suggest is that design
The word "design" is often used as a shorthand for a field that once was considered a branch of engineering or architecture. Today, design is used to describe everything from the way a product looks to the way a city is planned. This has made the word "design" more popular than ever, but it has also created a sense of confusion about what design actually means.

In an age of information overload, we are constantly being asked to make decisions based on the latest trends or the latest technology. But what do these trends mean for design? Are we designing for the future or designing against it?

The concept of design needs to be rethought in the context of the world we are living in. The way we design our clothes, our furniture, and our cities is not just about making something that looks good or provides comfort. It is also about creating something that can help us cope with the challenges of the 21st century.

Is design the solution to all our problems? Or is it the problem? In this issue, we explore the role of design in a world that is increasingly complex and uncertain. We look at how designers are responding to the challenges of globalization, climate change, and the Rise of the Machines. We also examine the role of design in the creative industries and in the world of technology.

The following pages feature articles by some of the leading minds in design, including architects, designers, and thinkers. We also feature interviews with some of the most influential designers of our time. In short, this issue is a celebration of design and its potential to shape the world we live in.
is the thing that makes humans human. Design is something that a designer does – design is what a human does. Design is making an order out of chaos, system that perfectly, seamlessly, helps the system to move. The concept of design was invented to rationalise the production of objects in a world of industrialisation and globalisation. It was not about minimising friction.

david Yet in the technology world disruption becomes such a powerful idea.

nick Disruption may be what design should be. If I were going to redesign the human, would it be an evolution or a smoothing out, or would it be quite a radical jump? We expect our art and our shock or disrupt us, whereas we expect our art to blend in. Design has been thought of as non-disruptive but anti-disruptive. We are interested in the aesthetic quality of this smoothing-out of so-called good design is a very bad thing. It's a kind of blindness.

barrett Disruption is always important and we have to take people out of their convention, otherwise we don't move forward. One aspect of the biennial has been studying the difference between what the human brain can do and what a machine can do, and something that has come up is curiosity. Humans always have the idea that they may work, but we also consider whether we do that thing differently. We are always thinking what could also be, which creates disruption. An animal finds that something works and then doing the same thing – they don't think of a crazy way of doing it. Humans actually design beautiful and useless things – things that are...

mark Maybe the most important thing in design, is hesitation. That's what disruption produces, which you have to think of or you have to make. We're interested in the ability of design to think and to see their world. And in this case their world as design. So one possible definition of design is that it's simply human curiosity about something differently. Progress implies the move from A to B, which leads to C. But the idea that things be different means that even the very natural journey is up for consideration. If you came from Mars you would notice how in the last few years humans have accelerated a lot of things...
is the thing that makes humans human. Design is not something that a designer does — design is something that a human does. Design is making an object or a system that perfectly, seamlessly, helps the economy move. The concept of design was invented to rationalise the production of objects in a world of industrialisation and globalisation. It was about minimising friction.

David Yet in the technology world disruption has become such a powerful idea.

Mars Disruption may be what design should aspire to. If I were going to redesign the human, would it be an evolution or a smoothing out, or would it be quite a radical jump? We expect our artists to shock or disrupt us, whereas we expect our designers to blend in. Design has been thought of as not just non-disruptive but anti-disruptive. We are very interested in the aesthetic quality of this as the smoothing out of so-called good design is often a very bad thing. It’s a kind of blindness.

Beatrijs Disruption is always important and you have to take people out of their conventions because otherwise we don’t move forward. One aspect of the biennial has been studying the difference between what the human brain can do and what a machine can do, and something that has come up is the idea of curiosity. Humans always have the idea that something may work, but we also consider whether we might do that thing differently. We are always thinking about what could also be, which creates disruption. An animal finds that something works and then keeps doing the same thing — they don’t think of a new, crazy way of doing it. Humans actually design very beautiful and useless things — things that don’t work.

Mars Maybe the most important thing in design is hesitation. That’s what disruption produces — a gap in which you have to think or you have to make a decision. We’re interested in the ability of design to make people think and to see their world. And in this case to see their world as design. So one possible definition of design is that it’s simply human curiosity about doing something differently. Progress implies that A leads to B, which leads to C. But the idea that things could be different means that even the very nature of that journey is up for consideration. If you came to Earth from Mars you would notice how in the last 200,000 years humans have accelerated a lot of transformation of themselves in terms of their bodies and mental capacity. They have formed a kind of geographical crust of design. The whole planet is designed. If I were coming from Mars I probably wouldn’t have a concept of nature — I would just have a concept of design.

Beatrijs Which you would have even before you hit the Earth because of all the space junk around the planet.

Mars You might collide with design on your way in; you might hit Voyager 2 even before you get to our solar system. But let’s say that as a Martian, you see that this species has made this unbelievable spider’s web of design. If you asked why they were able to do that you might discover huge patterns of disruption. We’re a species that is always trying to do things differently, always interrupting, always hesitating. We’re so reliant on friction, conflict and silences, yet the grand narrative of modernity, progress and technological evolution has been to try to wrap all of that up and make the methods predict the outcome. At any one time there are a number of options and possible viral mutations within design, but modernity or industrialisation meant ignoring vast numbers of technologies and huge numbers of people — all of those narratives had to do with keeping more than half of the planet suppressed and on the edge of death. So this 20th-century notion of progress through design doesn’t sound good. Evolution doesn’t necessarily mean progress.

David Is there such a thing as frivolous design? You talk about design as a journey or as a very complex set of influences, so is there any piece of that puzzle that we could do without?

Mars We’re interested in who decides whether something is frivolous. A big part of our social life is determining what’s frivolous and what’s not, but things that were once deemed frivolous have since proven transformative. One of the responsibilities of designers is to challenge what is frivolous and what’s not. That’s where this idea of good design is a bit of a nightmare because it implies virtue: good people have touched good design; good design produces good people.

Beatrijs What is good for one person is not good for another. What is good? People talk about how great everything was in the 1990s, but in fact there was a lot of racial and gender inequality, depression, violence, the threat of nuclear annihilation and so on. The society that gave rise to this idea of good design was actually very problematic.
“Good design provides people with a smooth package such that they don’t have to face the horror of the life we’re living.” —Mark Wigley

because if what we’re saying is true then a visitor is far more radically designed and more of a designer than anything they will see in the biennal.

Beatrice The idea of good design has a sense of morality embedded in it. Consider Max Bill’s Die Gute Form exhibition after the war: people talked about that with a straight face, as if a display of "good" objects or a school like the Ulm School of Design would be able to reform society. The Americans put a lot of money into that school and from it emerged the theory of the "good form" that would reform those terrible Germans and make them more democratic. That idea persisted for a long time.

Mark But could we risk some thoughts about what the characteristics of "good design" are? What about smoothness? Almost every work of good design is an essay in smoothness. Rounded corners, but also smoothness in the production line and marketing.

That’s what we mean about anaesthetic — the feeling that everything is in its place and everything is OK. Good design provides people with a smooth package such that they don’t have to face the horror of the life we’re living. Imagine the smooth object you hold in your hand while you’re watching refugees in the Mediterranean. Marshall McLuhan had this wonderful argument that each new technology changes us, but that change is so shocking that we can’t face it. We anaesthetise ourselves so strongly that we only realise that the change has happened when the technology is replaced by another one. We’re not saying that anaesthetic is a bad thing, we’re just identifying the anaesthetic role played by most design.

END

The third Istanbul Design Biennial is on from 22 October to 20 November 2015.