

Design and Its Discontents: Queering “Design Capital-ism”¹

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ABSTRACT

The essay takes a queer-critical look at design discourses, particularly concerning the topical designation of Helsinki as “design capital of the world”. Engaging with so-called antisocial theory, the essay questions our familiar/familial narratives of reproductive futurism in design, a field traditionally devoted to the construction and maintenance of Nation, Home, Family and Capital. The design field, the essay argues, continues to have designs on us all.

I proceed by addition, not by sketch; I have the antecedent (initial) taste for the detail, the fragment, the rush, and the incapacity to lead it toward a ‘composition’: I cannot reproduce ‘the masses.’

Roland Barthes, 1975

The Collegium for Advanced Studies made it easy on me: with the kind invitation to give this talk, came the topic (“Helsinki as World Design Capital”), so all I had to do was say yes, and write the paper. Mind you, I wouldn’t have chosen the topic myself, initially. Why not – what was my unease about? Well, that’s what I’ll try to figure out in this paper. What is it that disturbs me about this whole “design capital” business? Surely it is a harmless enough enterprise? Nothing wrong with nominating our beautiful city a monument to everyday beauty, is there?¹

¹ This paper was originally given on February 17th, 2010 at the Alumni Day of the *Collegium for Advanced Studies*, University of Helsinki. My sincere thanks to the Collegium for inviting me to deliver the Alumni Day address this year. My heartfelt thanks go also to the editor of the present issue of *SQS* for encouraging me to publish the talk. Upon reading the paper, the editor kindly suggested that I temper down some of the “verbosity”, and, most importantly, that I “translate” the foreign language puns, for the sake of democratic reading. I’m grateful for the feedback, not least because it inspired me to stop to consider, once again, the issue of writing style. To “translate” puns (which are a thoroughly queer practice) is to render them straight. To moderate one’s writing/speech style, would be tantamount to self-censorship – particularly, I feel, when publishing in a queer context. This paper is not *intended* as pedagogical, nor can “democracy” be the true virtue of a text. Therefore I must remain true to my original writing impulses (and, if anything, pour more oil on the fire).

I have given this paper the title *Design and its Discontents*. The title, obviously, is a pun on Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (originally published as *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, or "the uneasiness in/of culture"), where the psychoanalyst famously contends that "civilization is largely responsible for our misery" – that civilization (understood as cultural achievement as opposed to human/animal "nature") and happiness are at odds. In what follows, I offer a critical take on what I call *design capital-ism* in order to show how easily a well-meaning *Formbehagen in der Umgebung* can become an *Unbehagen in der Formgebung*.

Alas, *design* is not a value neutral term, least of all here in Finland, where the term first emerged as a loan word half a century ago. Though design stems from the Latin verb *designare*, our usage of the term owes at least as much, if not more, to the Italian term *disegno*. By the time of renaissance art theories, *disegno* had come to mean drawing, and not just any old drawing, but linear structure in a system of severe dichotomy – that is line as intellectual control as opposed to free-flowing, sensual color.

Not surprisingly, the *disegno-colorito* opposition of classical art theories was expressed in gendered terms. *Disegno* sided, evidently, with masculinity: it was *disegno's* job to keep "feminine" color in line. Accordingly, design also came to represent the enlightened, rational mind as opposed to sensual body.² Suffice it to say that design is, at bottom, about ideological hierarchies, control and sublimation.

Even in common usage, *design* suggests meticulous ordering, calculation, even scheming or conniving. In English, design can and often does have quite a dubious ring to it, implications of a sinister scheme: "Iran Has

2 For a more detailed discussion of this intellectual tradition in Finnish, see Kalha 2005.

Designs on Iraq", declared a recent headline in the Wall Street Journal (February 17th, 2010).³

Of course, we are not referring to such usage when we talk about design. Though the word is used in a variety of (more or less descriptive) ways in English, here in Finland the loan word has a highly qualitative ring to it, and it refers to one thing only: modern industrial design. The word entered our Finnish vocabulary in the mid 1950s as a challenge to our own term, *taideteollisuus* ("art industry"), a delightful oxymoron which didn't quite agree with internationally-minded young designers of the post-war era – though actually the paradoxical combination of art and industry is exactly what the applied art of design was all about. In any case, the loan word was introduced to invoke an emphatically industrial orientation in accordance with the tenets of international modernism. Yet the term, in popular usage, is most often coupled with the qualification *Finnish*.

For us Finns, design thus refers to modern objects of the home: glass, ceramics and textiles – *Iittala*, *Arabia*, *Marimekko*, and the likes. Design is, by definition, a *modernist* concept: it suggests aesthetic distinction and up-scale topicality, urban sophistication and up-to-dateness. But as we know, with modernism and distinction come, once again, connotations of power and ideology.

So even if we ignore the more sinister linguistic undertones of the term, there are reasons why the idea of a *design capital* may not tickle our fancies.

3 Here I beg to differ from Saska Saarikoski's more idealist account in the daily *Helsingin Sanomat* (entitled "Design Means Good Intentions", November 28th, 2009): "Design also refers to [good] intention – –, purposeful resolution, so perhaps it could be translated into Finnish as 'pilvilinnailu' [building castles in the air, or gentle fantasizing]".

In the following, I offer three viewpoints on the ideological baggage that the term, however innocent in itself, seems doomed to carry. These viewpoints center polemically around three terms: *purism*, *verticalism* and *futurism*.

1. Design = purism

“Order is a kind of compulsion to repeat”, Freud notes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Orderly design implies regularization, a kind of social anality – indeed we might call design a term of anal endearment. In thus suggesting design’s subtle function as *reaction-formation* (*Reaktionsbildung*), my reference is not to vulgar Freudianism (e.g., the personal neuroses of particular designers or consumers), but rather to the socio-cultural symptomatic of design ideology. What might it entail to understand the seamless functionality of contemporary design as sublimation, as a “collective-neurotic” disavowal of civilization anxiety? Isn’t an “obsessive” focus on cleanliness, reliability and thriftiness the very character of design?

As Freud notes, “cleanliness, orderliness, and reliability give exactly the impression of a reaction-formation against an interest in things that are unclean and intrusive and ought not to be on the body.”⁴ Freud cites a saying by Paul Brouardel (a pathologist who lectured at Paris in the days when Freud was a student of Jean-Martin Charcot): “*Les genoux sales sont le signe d’une fille honnête*” (“dirty knees are the sign of an honest girl”). The counter-intuitive observation here is that we should associate cleanliness and order with dubiety rather than virtue. To be sure, there is something dubious about design perfection: *Les formes sales sont le signe d’un dessin honnête*?

4 Freud 1963/1908, 30.

2. Design = verticalism

Design as we know it relies on a vertically inclined process of education/indoctrination, and a promise of social distinction. In short, design is a cultural fantasy that we are incited to consume in order to distinguish ourselves from those who are lacking in taste and breeding, and to identify with those who buy into the same fantasy. In the modernist context, design emerged as hierarchical dissemination of good taste: the *sine qua non* of “democratic” design were enlightenment, education and edification.

3. Design = futurism (pace Lee Edelman⁵)

Without education, there is no design. As a paradigmatic proponent of “good education”, design rests on a utopian-evolutionary premise: an idea of perfection through “innovation”, producing an endless succession of more functional, more rational, more wholesome utility objects. Of course, rhetorical emphases – the buzz words – change with the times: What was in High Modernism conceived as an aspiration toward more perfect, more practical form, may now be recast as a pursuit of more ecological, more humanistically sound, futuristically tenable objects. But utopia persists: design *will* better the world.

To be sure, design discourses rely on what Lee Edelman has described as an “ideologization of the social order as the temporal unfolding of meaning

5 In what follows, I will cite a number of recent, unpublished texts by queer theorist Lee Edelman. I am very grateful to Edelman for sharing with me the manuscripts to these his most recent talks, delivered, among other places, in Helsinki and Berlin, where I was fortunate enough to hear him. For a discussion of Edelman’s theory in Finnish and in the context of contemporary art, see Kalha 2010. For the most compelling (dare I say classic) published formulation of “antisocial theory”, see Edelman 2004.

in a syntax that requires the addition of the future as its always unrealized supplement.”⁶ In the order of this “reproductive futurism”, Edelman writes, “the event to come will always already take place before its arrival and the death drive will always be sublimated into a principle of conservation.”⁷ This, Edelman suggests, is what *education* means: “the routinized sublimation by which we all become apostles of a secular messianicity.”⁸

Edelman’s “anti-social” stance is a crucial eye-opener even, or perhaps particularly, outside its original context of argumentation, for it sheds an alienating light on a repertoire of pious concepts whose humane value we tend to take for granted:

“The human, which was never more than an aesthetic construct to begin with – –, functions as little more than the kitsch of aesthetic ideology, which as described by Paul de Man, names a vulgarization of philosophy that denies it all critical rigor as thought and turns it, instead, into works of art appealing directly to the masses as natural expressions of their ‘culture’ – a ‘culture’ adroitly consolidated in its illusion of organic coherence precisely by such political manipulations of the aesthetic.”⁹

6 Edelman 2007a. Or, to paraphrase Paul Morris out of context (he is a porn producer), design as ideology allows a *strictly policed repertoire of styles* that represents not who we are, but who we think we should be. Design thus cannot help but attest to normalizing identity. One need not be a design historian to recognize how design as a paradigmatically “modern” practice employs a future-tending ideology of mastery that celebrates abstraction and conceptualization.

7 Edelman 2008.

8 Ibid.

9 Edelman 2007a.

A prime, if not literal example of aesthetic manipulation, design attests to an allegorical logic – allegorical, that is, in the de Manian sense, as aspiring to “a ‘stance of wisdom’ by tracing a passage from a then to a now that corresponds to the attainment of insight by surmounting ‘radical discontinuity’”.¹⁰ The highly mythologized culture of design attests to our “compulsory submission to the temporality of community”.¹¹

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Museum Director Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén is one of many Finnish administrators who enthuse over Helsinki’s designation as World Design Capital. He writes in a strikingly “allegorical” mode:

“Without design, there is no humanity and without humanity there is no design. The design-drive is a central factor in our existence; it directs everything we do and everything that happens to us. This human design-drive can be extremely destructive, for example when it is channeled into ethnic-nationalistic politics of violence or into planning and carrying out activities that our social order deems criminal. – – The World Design Capital and other similar networks are channels for multiculturalism and tolerance, routes away from the national straightjackets that shackle individuals and communities. – – [Design] is all about the world of tomorrow.” (Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén: Helsinki – World Design Capital 2012. *Jannen blogi*, <http://helsingintaidemuseo.wordpress.com/2010/01/>, translation HK.)

Ironically, the museum director nominates design a “drive”, one that harbors awesome destructive potential. Witness, thankfully, the power

10 Edelman 2006.

11 Edelman 2007b, 471.

of design to make the “world of tomorrow” better, more fully human. On the other hand, as Vesa Karonen suggested in a splendidly ironic column (*Helsingin Sanomat*, November 28th, 2009), the term *design* is well on its way to becoming a metaphor for bull shit artistry (my words, not his).¹²

In any case, tomorrow’s design must always be conceived as better than today’s – if it wasn’t, the design field would be superfluous, and its hefty administrative structures mere hazmat. This design futurism even has a literal temporal dimension: Due to the inevitable lag that is part and parcel of the design process (and increasingly so as products tend to take longer and longer to “develop”), designers cannot help but design for an illusionary tomorrow. By the same token, the most novel design is always already *passé*. For by the time we get to consume the products, they are no longer hip to anybody who is really in the know – least of all the designers themselves (which of course adds to the sense of patronizing verticalism in design culture).

In product design, the product must be envisioned as “complete” *before* it can be produced. It is thus born dead, paradoxically, because it has to *survive*. This is, at bottom, the logic of normative sociality.¹³ In fact, industrial design is hopelessly archaic (in the drabest sense of the word): it could never compete with *YouTube*, *EBay*, or *Twitter* – or a host of emerging websites where people get to design their own preferred visual attires and milieus. Nor can it really compete with the ever-growing masses of aged heirlooms – a category to which it will soon enough belong. This inevitable archaism is what design futurism seeks to disavow – hence the stringent vitalistic discourses it occasions. The natural fleetingness of design is warded off

12 I should emphasize that Karonen’s irony was of a friendly kind, and that the underlying critique was not, as far as I know, directed toward any individual commentators, such as Gallen-Kallela-Sirén.

13 Cf. Edelman 2008.

by an emphasis on durability and survival.¹⁴ What the retro-futurism of design cannot afford to acknowledge is that design’s very newness is what betrays it as belonging to an already superseded order.

Behind the idea of design excellence there lurks an evolutionary model of formal idealization as well as a (paradoxically) conservative instinct. The design object, carefully conceived, nurtured and protected, becomes analogous with the figural Child, our central cultural token of reproductive futurism. Perhaps not quite as electrified by bodily repressions as the Child, but all the same infested with an ideology of purist protectionism. Only in this material form of offspring, “ethnic hygiene” and evolutive perfection are explicit (rather than implicit) ideals. This is the case at least as long as our decision makers and administrators believe there to be a link between, not just Form and Future, but Form and Finnishness and Function and Nation. Indeed, the socio-cultural anality of ethnic hygiene seems still the ideal expressed covertly (though explicitly) in current design capital-ist discourse.

14 Personally, I prefer aged utility objects or craft products; these are, as objects of yesteryear, less invested in novelty, up-to-dateness, and chauvinistic imagery of an enlightened tomorrow. (This of course, entails accepting a different form of elitism, for both vintage design and craft objects tend to be more expensive than new industrially produced objects.) But the point of a critical reading/writing exercise such as this present one should not be to offer viable alternatives. I must add, still, that I feel naturally drawn to projects such as designer Jasper Morrison’s that embrace quaint marginality and anti-spectacularity (his exhibition “Jugs, Jars & Pitchers” is currently on view in Stockholm). Yet Morrison’s ethos relies heavily on idealistic notions of anonymity and asceticism that hark back to High Modernism – especially here in Finland, land of acclaimed designer Kaj Franck (hailed once as the “social consciousness” of modern design). And alas, even Morrison feels compelled to celebrate durability and longevity, in other words, the future of design. Refusing to pose in a photograph for the daily *Helsingin Sanomat* (February 24th, 2010), he states: “It is better to stand behind the objects than in front of them”. The ethical pose thus perpetuates allegory over irony (while subscribing to a rather conventional hierarchy of *front-behind*).

As for the concept *design education*, it is a redundancy, for design is by definition both studied and educational: in other words, design always already comes with a pedagogical supplement. This self-declared “good education” is based on the social imperative of sublimation, overruling the materiality that is the very nature of our bodies, homes and streets. In short, design affords form to that which is essentially formless, and in so doing it assures social viability through sanitizing disavowal.

Could there be such a thing as antisocial design – “unbecoming” design, design of undoing? Could design be homely rather than homey, ironic rather than allegorical¹⁵? The question is, for the time being, redundant: design (as we know it) has to be productive; it must render beauty functional, sublimate the everyday, and tend to a comely tomorrow. To *de*-sign design, to conceive it as *de-Sein* – such notions are not an option.

Craft might figure as such an unbecoming force – *might*, though most of the time it doesn’t, for it is heavily invested in its own discursive, house-broken “humanity”: a softer, subtler form of consolidating identity – much more marginal, to be sure, hence all the more politically driven. Still, I propose as the radical challenge of craft to go beyond design: to promote “bad education”, to cultivate dys-functional form, to express taste-as-drive, a drive freed from vertical hierarchies and dichotomies – that is, a taste neither bad nor good (however excessive).

Likewise, we as theorists might also benefit from viewing ourselves as craftspeople rather than designers. In *Theory-as-Craft*, form follows fancy rather than function. Design, on the other hand, is square.¹⁶ Of course,

15 Cf. Edelman 2004; 2006.

16 Design historians will note that my metaphors rely here on rhetorical reduction: I evoke modernist notions of formal purity, not so much to say something literal or essential about “design”, but to activate the conceptual analogy.

craftsy can be a derogatory term (not to mention *crafty* which, like design, can connote evil intentions), but it also suggests tentativeness, imperfection, and even failure. Craft (or theory as craft) embraces the bygone here and now while design bespeaks futurity, form, function – all these f-words, but not the most compelling one, for surely craft *fucks* with form rather than reproduces it. *Theory-as-Design* would thus suggest an ideology of reproduction – underlying reason, intention, construction, education: a futurist scheme. While both are involved in the original impulse of working matter, design takes over when craft becomes purposeful: when it becomes utilitarian, future-oriented, stream-lined, marketable and teachable – in short, capitalizable.¹⁷

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So the *International Council of Societies for Industrial Design* chose Helsinki (together with Espoo, Kauniainen, Vantaa and even distant Lahti) to be the “World Design Capital” for 2012. To some of us, this notion of a utopian Designville suggests little more than a hygienization of Helsinki: a sanitized *stadi*.

I’m not *per se* against such nominations any more than I am *per se* against, say, beauty pageants. We have historical reasons to understand the value of design and beauty as cultural forces. In the period following the Second World War, design diligence was needed – alongside feminine delicacy – to prop up national self-esteem. Tapio Wirkkala’s “Chantarelle” (the glass vase) and Armi Kuusela (our first Miss Universe) were both of utmost relevance. As two hundred thousand new homes were being built after

17 There is, no doubt, a time and place for utilitarian design: in the kitchen, for example (it *does* make things easy); in the classroom, hmm – perhaps not, for shouldn’t things be made hard rather than easy in the classroom? This relates to the point I made in note 1: why modify or rectify the driven craft of writing in terms of democratic design?

the war, the home became focal point of a compelling cultural symbolic. Armi, on the other hand, seemed to feminize the spirit of the Winter War (Our *Army*), adding a modest dash of internationalism to her distinctive brand of comely, homey Finnish authenticity.¹⁸

On the international scene, the political context was expressed by a local newspaper headline in 1955: “Design exhibition shows U.S. where the iron curtain really stands” (*Hufvudstadsbladet*, November 11th 1955). Or, to quote an American journalist writing the same year:

“Time was when the Finns hurled home-made hand grenades to stop advancing Russian tanks. Today, they’re using glassware, textiles and ceramics as ‘weapons’ against a creeping communism that still threatens their independence. Barred by treaties with and pressure from the Soviet Union against almost any kind of group action with Western democracies, Finland is publicizing her arts and crafts to remind the world – indirectly – that she is still culturally and ideologically tied to the West.” (*The Times–Picaune New Orleans*, February 6th, 1955)

Alas, those days are gone. I cannot see design as acquiring the sense of cultural and political relevance it had in the 1950s. It’s not just that the objects were more interesting back then (though I dare say they were¹⁹), it’s

18 See e.g. Kalha 2004, 461–472.

19 This is, obviously, a subjective notion. If such unfair (nostalgically tinged) comparisons continue to be made, they need to be grounded. Post-war objects *strike me* as more “interesting”, not just because of the vital historical-discursive aura that envelopes them, but because there was less formal structure and vertical organization to the design process back then; because there was, by the same token, more individualism, narcissistic freedom, and, most crucially, a stronger sense of urgency to cultural expression in general. Instead of formalized, time-consuming product development and accountability control, there emerged in glass, ceramic and textile studios a kind of organic design laboratory that could put out a succession of products in as

rather that the cultural context is so very different, so much less mythology-prone. Today, stylish objects are just stylish objects – and beautiful people are just beautiful people. Besides, it hardly seems sexy for Finland to proclaim now that through design “she is still culturally and ideologically tied” – to global capitalism. So, just as Miss Finland has become an utterly trivial institution – but hardly banal enough to be enjoyed as camp – design has become too self-assured, too matter-of-fact, too “straight” to tickle our collective fancies.

What is *Finnish Design* anyway, today? Many of these so-called Finnish products are actually *Made in Asia* – it’s simply too expensive to produce Finnish things in Finland, nowadays. I’m not pining for authenticity here, just suggesting that we entertain the fantasy of Finnishness as precisely a fantasy. Many design capital-ists seem to think that design is worthy because of its very “finnishness”, a notion that to most of us today sounds an absurd note. So what might we be trying to prove through design in this post-modern era? Attesting to “Finnish excellence” is hardly a valid cause, nor is membership in an (imagined) international community of good taste.

We may ask if such pompous designations aren’t just a way for small or marginal cities to perk up their public image and prop up their self worth. Could Paris or London or New York be conceived as design capitals? I think not. It’s cities like Torino, Soul and Helsinki (& co.) that receive the honor – after bitter competition and intense lobbying (this time all of 46 cities competed for the title Miss Design City!). So it’s all mainly

close to “real time” as possible. On the other hand, this meant that the objects displayed in exhibitions had little if anything to do with the reality of Finnish living and consumption. To put it bluntly, in the 1930s–1950s Finnish design was a delightful fantasy whereas today’s design tries desperately to be real, and “real” can never compete with “fantasy” (except, perhaps, in the Lacanian sense, which would certainly herald Real Design).

marketing gimmickry – and a way of redistributing, cosmetically, cultural power dynamics.

The most cynical among us might also ask if all this design capital-ism isn't just a form of artificial respiration administered to an anemic field? In other words: we have been awarded the distinction, not because our design is capital, but because it isn't. Has the design field itself in fact fallen out of our good graces? How is this for a conspiracy theory: design capitalism is nothing but a way to coax us into believing that industrial design is, not just useful or delightful, but crucial to humanity; that Aalto University is no hoax; that we need that Excellent New University because we are the design capital because we have that Excellent New University because... In an accordingly circular manner, capitalizing *on* design relies on the capitalizing *of* design: the lower case d must become a capital D. Not happy being a descriptive term, Design becomes mythology.

If the term *design* has us wrinkling our brows, *capital* is of course no less innocent. One of the primary meanings of the word, after all, is “official seat of government”. Further meanings have to do with economic wealth and property, grandeur and excellence, even exploitation. Not exactly dainty then, this other half of the equation, either.

So the impudent combination of *design* and *capital* makes little secret of what the phenomenon is all about. *Cultural marketing* used to be considered an oxymoron by many, now it is business as usual. My astonishing Marxian inclination notwithstanding, a tendency to capitalize on aesthetics will continue to trouble us “humanists”, at least as long as we like to see beauty and money as discrete entities – which, of course, is just another humanistic mythology. But this mythology is severely activated when we read official statements such as cultural director [sic] Pekka Timonen's in *Helsingin Sanomat* (November 28th, 2009): “This [Design Capital project] is purely an economical investment, and we will reap the benefits in the future.” A

futuristic investment, indeed: the budget for the project is estimated at 15 million euros.

Of course, who is to say if “design” (the polymorphous field so designated) will play along with the designs that economical policy has on it. As it happens, the reason why Finnish design was culturally relevant in the 1950s, had as much to do with resistance to capitalism as it did with capitalism: we wanted desperately to join the Western market economy, but clung obstinately to “non-Western”, counter-capitalist ways of doing it. The same ambivalence holds true to our once so troubled relation with international modernism.

Historically, Finland was able to carve a design niche for itself thanks to a craft-based, pseudo-modern expression that was both sensitive and resistant to hard-core international trends. What Finnish design was lauded for was its nature-bound and “intuitive” approach to form, honing informal (even anti-formal, if not “anti-social”) craft techniques. Of course, we recognize here, discursively speaking, a romantic repertoire of cultural alterity – Finnishness conceived as Primitive Nature – but the fact remains that much of what Finland was admired for in those vital post-war years was achieved regardless of industrial technology and economic considerations.²⁰ As a British critic wrote in 1953:

“There is, in the Finnish grasp of applied art, a constant evasion from the machine-made precision of outline and volume, and a return to the presence of the maker in the life of an object, with all the fancies and unforeseen vibrations of his creative fingers. – In this age of the machine, Finnish artists reassert the human presence in their

²⁰ Industry may have been an instrumental, enabling factor, but it rarely meddled with the design processes themselves. For more detailed discussions of the particularities of the post-war Finnish design phenomenon in English, see Kalha 1998; Kalha 2002 and Kalha 2004.

work – -. And by their awareness of present-day sensitivity, they confer true value to what might have been only a pitiful instance of idolatry of functionalism.” (*Art News and Review*, December 26th, 1953)

Blown away by the Finnish objects, the British critic is inspired to separate *design* from *disegno*, vibration from precision, maker from machine. In so doing, he champions “human presence” over functionalism. An intriguing paradox emerges here: how could an emphasis on human presence and individuality translate into *anti-sociality* (as I find myself suggesting)?

In my view – that is, in my current reading of 1950s discourse – “humanism” in fact did side with the “anti-social.”²¹ This point entails a positional, structural-dynamic understanding of the so-called antisocial thesis (which is essentially a structural model anyway²²). In our contemporary design discourse, an acute industrial orientation coupled with both economical and ecological consciousness provides for a new futuristic “human”, whereas tacit craftiness has come to represent social impotence and queer/quaint marginality. Embracing “relevance” – ethical consciousness and the holistic milieu – ultra-modern industrial design parades as the new humane.

21 We might recall here the esteemed (and controversial) Finnish design educator Arttu Brummer, who called for “antisocial” design (*epäsosiaalisia esineitä*) as early as the 1930s and 1940s. It was Brummer’s students who, alongside crucial historical factors, created the “golden age” of Finnish design in the post-war era. For Brummer, design was to remain defiantly elitist, confronting conventional tastes as well as “the [modernist] terror of architecture”. In essence, what Brummer was insisting on was *jouissance*. See Kalha 1998 (40–44) for a general discussion of Brummer in English. For a current reading of brummerian discourse in terms of anti-social theory, see Kalha 2011.

22 See, for example, my article on the figurality of “the Child” in antisocial theory, forthcoming in *Lambda Nordica*’s Summer 2011 issue.

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In 1952, a Finnish writer proclaimed in the local journal *Kaunis Koti* [“Beautiful Home”]:

“The work of the industrial designer is ideological rather than ‘business’. If he doesn’t have strong ideals, he will not be able to combat money, the influence of which – – is in conflict with the designer’s sane and sound aspirations.” (*Kaunis Koti* 4/1952)

Interestingly, the writer uses the English word *business* (and not even the fennicized *bisnes* which has since become commonplace) to convey a sense of dubious foreignness; he even stresses that the design field should be understood as something apart from “dollar signs and streamed lines” (*dollarinkuvia ja virtaviivaisuutta*, an obviously anti-American word choice).

So, the design field’s relation to *capital* – to internationalism and economy – was never uncomplicated, nor was the terminology adopted without a healthy dose of unease. Actually, the main reason for me to endorse the term *design* today, is that I happen to enjoy loan words, the more awkward, the better – words that subvert our generally so severe linguistic protectionism. We might especially favor queer mongrels such as *disainata*, *disaini*, *disaineri*. Such fennicized English can invoke deliciously ironic overtones. For example: “Onpas teillä niin disainattua, niin disainattua”; or, “Kyösti pääsi syksyllä Aalto-yliopistoon ja nyt sitä ollaan niin disaineria”. (Unfortunately, such accents do not translate into English.)

Design, like its younger brother *branding*, is indeed an amusing loan word, yet we shouldn’t embrace such words without stopping to ask what they actually mean and do in cultural politics. The question is to some extent banal, yet it is also crucial and highly topical – not least because an official,

high profile committee was recently set up to “design” a brand for Finland (dear foreign readers, I kid you not, many politicians believe that Finland is in desperate need of an “identity”).

In *Nyt* magazine (the youthful weekly supplement to the daily *Helsingin Sanomat*), historian Jukka Relander and philosopher Tuomas Nevanlinna answer topical questions in a trademark laconic-ironic way. Last week the question was: “Why does Finland need to be branded?” (*Nyt* 6/2010). For Relander and Nevanlinna, such national branding is an invaluable means of shifting foreign attention away from gloomier, more rugged aspects of Finnishness. Away, that is, from domestic and other violence, away from *Koskenkorva* and firearms:

“This is why foreigners must be told that Finland is a dynamic and youthful land of multi-talented top achievers, that the legacy of [architect] Alvar Aalto lives on here, and the spirit of [the composer Jean] Sibelius gives wings to [rock bands such as] Rasmus and Him, that the people are prosperous and happy, and at least the prime minister doesn’t even drink [use] alcohol.”²³

An imagistic sleight of the hand and, *voilà*, we go from capital offenders to capital achievers. You don’t have to be a Freudian to understand how disavowal works its structural magic here. (And you don’t have to be a deconstructionist to recognize the other, more ruggedly romantic mythology that Relander and Nevanlinna buy into, however ironically. For surely Finnish ruggedness, as expressed by our drinking style, is but another picturesque myth?)

23 As it happens, we “use” (*käyttää*) alcohol in Finnish, and the functional word choice seems quite telling about our fraught relationship with drinking.

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Culture, when arrived at through hierarchic designation, “reaction formations” and disavowal, loses something in the process. This is a somewhat different sense of cultural *Unbehagen* from the one Freud described, yet it is no less distressing. The looming presence of administration, supervision, and other formal structures cannot help but compromise the street credibility of design – and, after all, what good is a stylish city that has lost its street wisdom?

At its best, acculturated culture begins to look wildly absurd (as in the case of the branding committee, a surefire candidate for camp appreciation). At its worst, acculturated culture just appears lame. The law of hipness prescribes that culture is cool up until the point when it reaches the heights of Kiasma (Helsinki’s Museum of Contemporary Art), after which it very quickly turns into *been there done that*. Call me an angry young man (though a blasé middle-aged man is closer to the truth), but culture does not need to be capitalized, any more than Helsinki does.

I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t take a final moment to question my own stance. I find myself peddling, in this paper, some kind of conservative-radical separatism. Indeed, if I didn’t know better, I would think myself safeguarding culture from a threatening other – safeguarding, at bottom, *aesthetics*, our visual-sensual milieu – from civilization, that is, civilization as trivialization. No doubt, I’m speaking for “realness”, against instrumentalization: against formalism and phony facades, pretentious brands, ornamental-political statements, cultural over-administration and other committee-isms. (And, what is more, I seem to have made a genuine political statement in the process.)

How embarrassing for a scholar who has spent most of his academic career deconstructing various instances of “authenticity”! Yet, as Lee

Edelman reminds us, “to read is always to allegorize, even if only by allegorizing a reading resistant to allegorization”.²⁴ But truth be told, it is hardly authenticity proper that I have spoken for, but something other: unpredictability, heterogeneity – the informality of *jouissance* and the *jouissance* of informality. Far from pining for a proper authenticity of art, it is the very notion of authenticity as the index of any brand that should be subverted.

Perhaps I should just relax – chill and let chill. After all, who could it hurt, a whole year of *Taiteiden yö*²⁵? Let’s just make sure we drink our booze from high-end glasses, and throw up elegantly, in exquisitely designed bins...

24 Edelman 2006.

25 *Taiteiden yö* [“Night of the Arts”] is an annual cultural event in Helsinki that has largely turned into a drinking fest.

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