EDITORIAL

The Promise of Rebirth

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+ A navigation through a vast range of possible names for the 9th European Academy of Design Conference (EAD09) in 2011 would always have revealed a tension within a subject that, while specific enough to deserve differentiation, could still somehow resonate across the totality of the spectrum of what Design might be – as a profession, as a phenomenon, as an object and subject of research, practice, scrutiny, study, projection, aspiration, anticipation, desire.

This process of naming EAD09, inevitably intuitive, brought us to *The Endless End*. Clever or not-so-clever pun aside, it was less a process of distillation as it was about gradually coming to the evidence that what defines contemporary existence (and, therefore, contemporary mediation – or would it be the other way around? Baudrillard is, unapologetically, still our friend) is a sense that we have reached an unsustainable subversion of what the world could-should-be-or-might-have-been-if-only. And the corresponding sense that, as human beings first and foremost, it is our duty to do something about it – or at least try, utopian if necessary, in the face of headlines equating rampant

market speculation ruining countries side by side with cute, irrelevant YouTube memes.

The hydra of a task that design seems to have undertaken, the unbearable mission of being 'surgeons of chaos' (as proposed by Jon Wozencroft in his contribution to EAD09), perpetually alert as chaos is pure, ever-changing magma, ready to engulf it all at any given second – this mission can only find a fractal parallel in the state of the world at large: that is, the state of our perception, as the world we now inhabit no longer bears particular resemblance to the tangible and proverbial relationship between cause and consequence, an evidence we have painfully been waking up to. Since the European Academy of Design conference in May 2011, if anything, our perception of this mediated, abstracted world (and therefore, of our possible contribution to its redemption) has only welcomed more noise, more mediation, more speculation. Unsure of this? Look, they are actually speaking of the possible end of post-World War II Europe as we type, all because a people's referendum was proposed amidst the dark corridors of Olympian, perpetual negotiations involving exponential, unimaginably high price tags of rescue and ransom. We say no more.

The question is, amongst the high of catastrophe and the more-than-understandable, collective dark cloud of angst, we are still surrendering to the soothing, oblivious quasi-eroticism of the iPad – and not that worried about the more-than-likely correlations between the two. While making it clear that this is no grand statement against prodigious technological advances or the possible abilities of digital media to support purposeful re-calibration of our individual and collective shortcomings, we argue that the ghost in the machine has become so deeply woven into our fabric of cultural production, that even social causes have become dominated by the allure of 'live transmission on Facebook', rather than the focus on social regeneration. Yes, hyperconformism is a valid path, but the animal here belongs to a different species: it is like current music software packages that invite you to 'express yourself', yet only provide a series of 4/4 beats on its rhythmic palette. As if the possibilities of a musical landscape began and ended there. Real life story.

In the face of slow-motion catastrophe, this catastrophe of the divorce between tangible reality and fictitious, vicarious speculation, what can design do? In the face of rating agencies playing board games while we all iPad away, how in a world of mere mortals can typeface stylists and shape-shifters contribute to a resurgence of *sanity*? Further distancing itself from its original utopia of 'pure form' yet oddly in need of ridding communication of noise (that is, in need of reengaging with the notion of 'pure'), happy to proclaim a distancing from the reductive traps of sheer commerce yet far from stepping into the traps of ideology, design can aspire at cultivating the development of a wider vision by wider segments of the human population. Help demonstrators remain focused on their own

issues. Facilitate the emergence of public discourse and synthesis. Contribute to a healthy maintenance of the definition of 'doing good'. Providing the rod rather than the fish; providing a language of personal emancipation and collective fulfilment. You get the drift.

This was ultimately the underlying thread one could observe during EAD09, an intuitive weaving through the most diverse subjects pertaining to design research, development, practice, education, innovation. The word 'participation' was often present, arguing in multiple ways for the validity of social convergence through the rehearsal of previously unheard-of collective creative practices (no guarantee that they were not there regardless, let us not forget), the inevitability of institutional change in times of instant micro-shifts, History no longer the hostage of a linear reading (the postmodern ironically having reinforced this paradigm by psychoanalytical contrast), reappearing as a vast fabric of hypotheses.

Design as template for human practice. Design as anti-profession, as it cannot – will not – tolerate being exclusive, in any sense of the word. Design as breathing, in the sheer sense of a human trait, a universal longing for discourse via structured aesthetics, the only variables being the level of talent and, of course, commitment. This is why Clay Shirky proposes the Lolcats (the Lolcats!) as a particularly effective proto-template of future cultural utopia, design clearly enmeshed in there, liberated from self-professed professional stigma. Follow it up, it makes sense.

A few more words overheard during the conference, and a gut feeling, no stats involved, they may have a role to play:

- 'Purpose'
- 'Need'
- 'Physical'
- 'Priority'
- 'Connecting'
- 'Reawaken'
- 'Substance'
- 'Enlightenment'
- 'Transformation'
- 'Charged'

Mere clichés on their own, yet potential paradigm-shifters once operative, once providing applied and inspired discourse within design thought and practice. So it was at EAD09.

'Regeneration' may also be welcomed in this intuitive list of emerging keywords that may define a new perspective on design. The End can only be Endless, because The End will always be followed by the promise of Rebirth: as designers, our current foremost mission is, we dare say, to ensure by all means this imminent and hopeful rebirth will not be a simple sequel of contemporary catastrophe.

Biography

Dr Heitor Alvelos is currently Professor of Design and New Media at the University of Porto, Associate Director of ID+: Institute of Research in Design, Media and Culture, and Post-doctorate Research Fellow at INESC Porto: Institute of Engineering and Computer Systems. He is also a member of the Scientific Board of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, member of the Coordination Board of the UTAustin-Portugal programme for the development of digital media, and member of the Advisory Board for Digital Communities at Ars Electronica. He belongs to the editorial boards of *Crime Media Culture* (Sage), *The Poster* (Intellect) and *Radical Designist* (IADE). Recent curatorship includes the annual *futureplaces digital media festival* (in partnership with the University of Texas at Austin, since 2008), the 9th European Academy of Design Conference *The Endless End* and *Nomadic.0910* – meetings between art and science, at the University of Porto. He obtained his PhD at the Royal College of Art, London, in 2003.