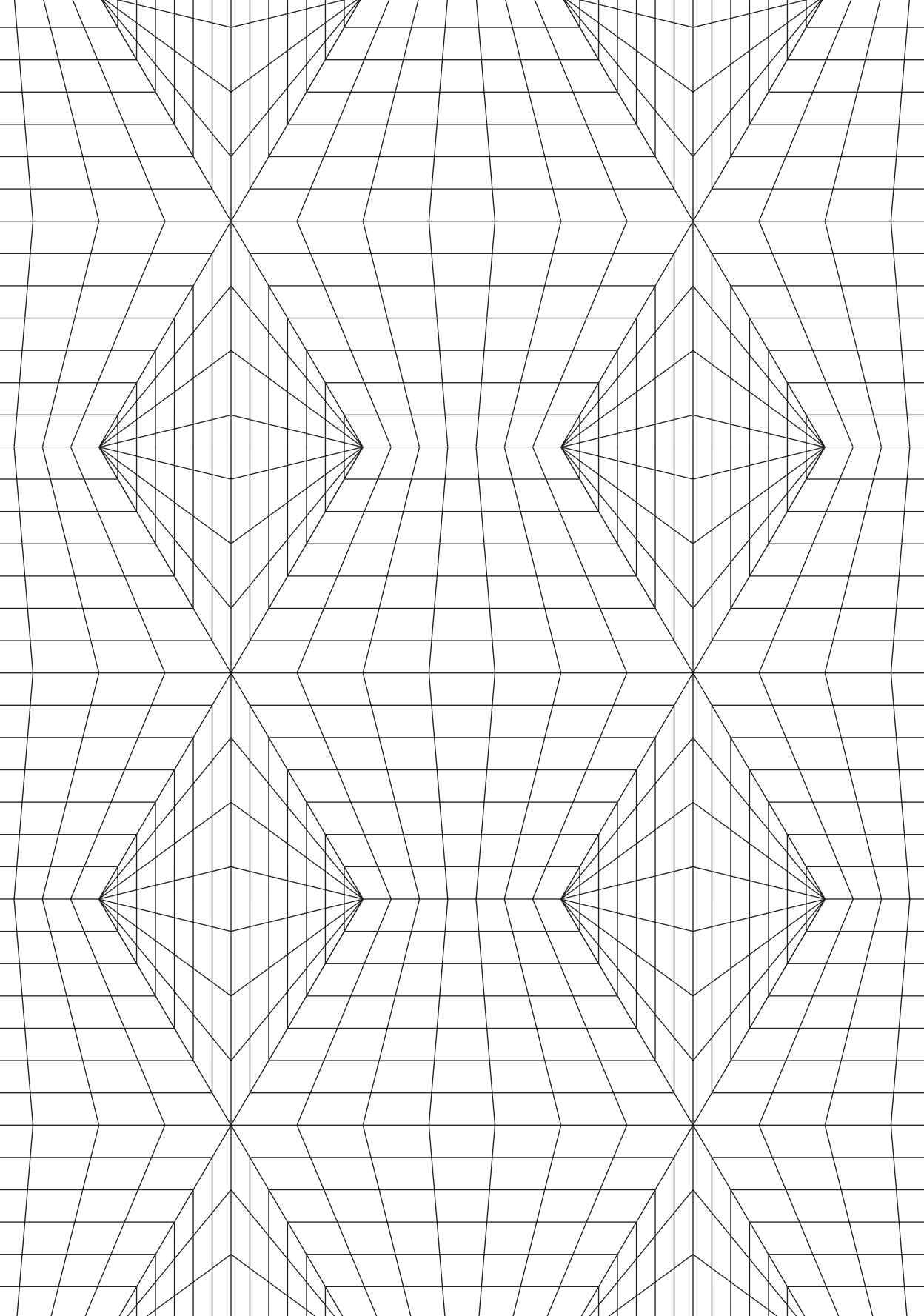
DISEGNO

VIII/02_*journal of design culture_Total(itarian) Design*



Disegno

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Disegno publishes original research papers, essays, and reviews on all aspects of design cultures. We understand the notion of design culture as resolutely broad: our aim is to freely discuss the designed environment as mutually intertwined strands of sociocultural products, practices, and discourses. This attitude traverses the disciplinary boundaries between art, design, and visual culture and is therefore open to all themes related to sociocultural creativity and innovation. Our post-disciplinary endeavour welcomes intellectual contributions from all members of different design cultures. Besides providing a lively platform for debating issues of design culture, our specific aim is to consolidate and enhance the emerging field of design culture studies in the Central European academia by providing criticism of fundamental biases and misleading cultural imprinting with respect to the field of design.

All research papers published in Disegno undergo a rigorous double-blind peer review process.
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DISEGNO_VIII/02_TOTAL(ITARIAN) DESIGN

INTRODUCTION
THE RUSSIAN DOLLS OF BEING, OR WHAT GOD'S EYE TELLS THE BOT'S BRAIN

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This issue brings together research papers, essays, and interviews that examine design, technology, and political imagination in an age defined by claims to total overview. Accordingly, this introduction attempts to situate the contributions from mapping and scale to AI and cybernetics, and, from degrowth and politics to historical design debates.

*

In Béla Tarr and László Krasznahorkai's *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the two protagonists with sensitivities beyond their world engage with the all-seeing eye of a dead whale of the travelling circus which brought destruction and shame on their town. The whale-in-the-truck motif was prefigured by a travelling spectacle that toured Eastern Europe in the sixties: a Western spy act, as common wisdom held, tracing actual military roads beneath the distorted public maps.

Curiously, Tarr has recently revealed that the godforsaken locations of their earlier collaboration, *Sátántangó* were researched with the help of military maps (Tarr 2025) which brings the two worlds into a strange loop. Would that create a shared world for their inhabitants?

In "Anti-Zoom" Bruno Latour writes "The relationship between a surveyor in the field walking along a trench on a segment of road, and his or her colleague back in the lab poring over a false-color satellite sweep that covers the same area, is not one of inclusion" (Latour 2014, 122). Ignoring this distinction, he argues, produces a false sense of globality—an illusion of absolute overview—when only a new concept of "terrestrial being," a post-national conception of the homeland, could secure human survival.

Latour attributes such categorial mistakes to "the zoom effect": the cartographical illusion—taken to the extremes by Google Earth—that we can see and manipulate "our world" in infinite layers perceived as a smooth continuum. When we shift from one scale to the other, "the latter does not contain the same information as the former: it contains

other information that might (or might not) coincide with what appears in the former"—"levels of reality do not nestle one within the other like Russian dolls" (Latour 2014, 121)."

To visualise "data of different natures originating from various pieces of apparatus and belonging to totally distinct disciplines," we must instead focus on connectivity and perhaps rely on artists to do the job, Latour (2014, 121) claims. Serbian artist Vladan Joler is doing exactly this by counter-mapping both historical empires and contemporary AI systems along paths of connectivity—systems that "aspire to map the world" (Crawford and Joler 2018), a world in which metaphors such as "the cloud" or "the internet" disguise the "complete chaos" behind them, as Joler remarks in his interview with Ábris Gryllus.

There are parallels between this work and what the research papers of this issue investigate. Sándor Őze writes about the history of cybernetics, interpreting it as a total extension of technological logic while Dávid Csűrös and Ákos Schneider introduce the concept of predictive design, an unfolding phenomenon in which humans may become optimisable elements of total design environments.

Doing the same visually makes certain challenges more manifest, however. As Latour reminds, "the data are richer in connectivity than are the (inevitably limited) projections used to organise them" (Latour 2014, 123). This surplus becomes apparent in *Calculating Empires*—Joler's 2025 Venice Silver Lion–winning collaboration with Kate Crawford (2023)—which, at three by twenty-four meters, "begins to approach the limits of human perception," as Joler admits to Gryllus. We thus come dangerously close to Borges's "Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire"—a parable (Borges [1946] 1998) Crawford and Joler invoked a few years ago to describe the AI systems they set out to counter-map (Crawford and Joler 2018).

The impossibility of a global overview—or of anything like global common sense, and consequently of global action—appears in Dennis Meadows's contribution as well, originally published in the most recent French edition of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 2022). Like Latour, Meadows is convinced that nation-states, beholden to short-term fixes, are unable to address climate change and other complex, long-term global threats. Sustainability, he argues, "achieved by agreement and sustained, concerted action by all the globe's important players […] will never happen." By contrast, resilience "can be achieved by individuals through short-term, local action." Still, Meadows cannot but chide "[t]hose blocking attempts to reduce fertility" for implicitly opting for a heightened death ratio in the coming decline.

Degrowth can constitute, however, a chicken-and-egg problem. Ben Highmore, in his interview with Márton Szentpéteri, argues, following Kate Soper, that it is not countries with the highest birth ratios that need to degrow, but the wealthy West, in order that other countries "reach

a certain level of wealth and capacity." A tough sell "if it's sold purely as loss—you're going to miss out on your computer games, your endless ability to consume." Like Soper, Highmore argues for a "new hedonism," and he also refuses a paralysing view of "total aestheticisation," one in which even consciousness is designed, leaving no space for authenticity and action.

These questions—of design, capitalism and aestheticisation—also figure heavily in Márton Horn's essay and Ármin Tillmann's review. Writing about Richard Shusterman and Bálint Veres's *Somaesthetics and Design Culture*, Tillmann ponders whether the concept of design can ever be fully freed from its original context, while Horn addresses the changing role of museums in relation to the experience industry and the challenges of inclusivity.

Just a few years ago, a seemingly commonsensical exhibition on Nazi design at the Design Museum Den Bosch ignited debates in the Netherlands about whether it should even be permitted to discuss the "aestheticisation of politics" and what made the design of the Third Reich work for so many. In our call for this issue, we likewise encouraged—alongside grand abstractions—contributions that engage with the more palpable phenomena of historical and contemporary totalitarianisms and authoritarianisms. The absence of submissions engaging with the latter, and the papers' focus instead on mechanisms of cybernetic and algorithmic control, is therefore noteworthy.

Naturally, as a design journal we must have an answer to everything. In his above-quoted essay, Latour attributes the original sin of the "zoom effect" to the Eameses' famous short film *Powers of Ten* (1977), which visualises a journey from the galactic to the subatomic. This can also be read as a symbolic shift: one in which the most influential designers leave the world of tangible objects behind, moving into information management.

The last era dominated by the belief that the tangible products of design and architecture (intertwined, or sometimes equated, with art) could be a force for a universalistic emancipatory turn—towards democracy for some, towards a leftist revolution for others—was perhaps the 1920s–30s. It is against this background that, in her interview with Ágnes Anna Sebestyén, Robin Schuldenfrei talks about the choices Bauhaus designers faced concerning whether—and for how long—to try to adapt to Nazi Germany, and how those who opted to emigrate (or had no choice to begin with) adapted themselves and their designs to new contexts and particularities.

All this may be tied back to questions of growth, degrowth and the possibility of a world designed for eternity. As Ben Highmore remarks at one point in our wide-ranging interview, "When you read Benjamin [...] you can't predict what he's going to say."

One of Benjamin's most discussed notions must be his lines about the true nature of revolution in the "Theses on the Philosophy of His-

tory" (Benjamin [1940] 1968). In Boris Groys's words, "Benjamin was right when he said that socialist revolution, and revolution in general, is more of an attempt to stop progress and momentum, to pull the emergency brake […], to stop progress and capitalist industrial dynamics." "[G]lobalisation leads to a situation where further dynamics suddenly become impossible," Groys follows, "and at that moment, everyone will turn to the tradition of stagnation. (Groys 2018, 29, my translation)"

Groys, in general, interprets many avant-garde design actors in a similar vein: as harbingers of an apocalypse that brings the end of times by creating—or revealing—the ultimate design of everything. In the Bauhaus, this would apply best to Hannes Meyer, the second director, who demanded total 'insight into the soul of the society' and conceived of design as a self-explanatory, style-free fulfilment of biological needs, to be realised by his vision of a Bauhaus community—one that despised individualism and "monkey-like intellectual agility as a talent" (Meyer 1929, 2). But Moholy-Nagy and Gropius already resented the failure to achieve mass production's socially transformative scale, and Moholy-Nagy—who, like Gropius, opposed Meyer and left upon his appointment—also held "a deep suspicion of verbal smartness" (S. Moholy-Nagy 1950, 191) and championed "a new type of creative man who was more an engineer and designer of the world than [… a] genius" (Forgács 2010, 65)

A previous book by Schuldenfrei tackling such controversies, Luxury and Modernism, starts with the comparison of two images: a photo of Walter Gropius's own bathroom and the same photo an Gropius's 1930 book with the marble veins of the sinks retouched. Bathroom marble may be an under-researched aspect of design ideologies. Donald Trump has recently replaced the clean art deco tiles of the White House's Lincoln Bathroom with dizzying black and white marble he considers period Lincoln. And if one visits the Villa Stiassni in Brno, one will be told by the guide that the bathrooms—originally austere spaces in the otherwise reluctantly modernist mansion—were remodelled in Cuban green marble at the direction of Fidel Castro after his stay there during the decades the building served as a state guesthouse.

Now, marble veins are just fine to realise that beyond adjusting our lives to maps, we can also treat various things as maps—and then experience our worlds accordingly. Recall Jacques Tati's Mr. Hulot in *Playtime*, stumbling through the automated, soulless glass and steel structures of a new Paris, to reach the grand opening of a fancy restaurant. As the place starts to fall to pieces and the people concurrently embrace chaos, Mr. Hulot—a gentle angel of history—tries to help a fellow find his way on a map, held against a column. The drunk man's index wanders off the map and pursues its journey on the congruent pattern of the marble slates. (Or take György Sándor's psychogeography-tinged candid camera act from the eighties in which he asks for directions in downtown Bu-

dapest, using a sewing pattern from the coveted West German fashion magazine, Burda. It is all a question of information design.)

These days Villa Stiassni houses the Czech National Heritage Institute, whose tasks included restoring its very own building to a historically satisfying condition. The issue of the green marble bathroom emerged, of course. Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Stiassni had separate bathrooms: one was restored to its hypothetical original, while the other retained all the marble additions. Thus arrived the best of both worlds, where design stops time in its tracks yet still allows our imagination to roam.

Olivér Horváth

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