Hybrid Identities and Paralyzing Traditions

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The term design is to define a series of interrelated, but somewhat different, areas of interest in the context of Croatian culture of today. The term "today" refers to the period starting in 1989 when Design program was founded as an interdisciplinary study within the Architecture School of the University of Zagreb. By 2005 this institution has "produced" more then 300 graduated designers. This fact has had and continues to have a major impact on the public discussion on design in Croatia.

It is also important to remember that only a year after the founding of this program Croatia experienced a significant social change as a result of the first parliamentary elections. This change has occurred through the shift from the concept of society based on planned economy to a society of free market, in other words a socialist paradigm was replaced by the concept of liberal capitalism. In this way 1990 ushered in the "third Croatian modernization" which has again placed the local context on the periphery, albeit a somewhat different and maybe even more remote then ever before (1).

How does design discipline function within transition from one social context to another? We can now discuss this term as a formal and standard field designation, finding it in the register of careers and disciplines of the Republic of Croatia as well as having an established program at the university level. Nevertheless it is important to note that design at this level of education is still considered an artistic discipline, and the design theory still does not exist as a scientific field, both of which point to the peripheral and specific position of the local context.

Methods of Discussion

Design can be discussed in terms of its products and those can in turn be evaluated through criteria usually borrowed from art history terminology, with the goal of emphasizing the importance of the field or the number of international awards that Croatian designers have received as of late (and which there is quite a lot). Design as a form of signifier is used more today in mass media as a way of referring to aesthetic or styling, for example automotive magazines when referring to the look of the series use

the term design (dizajn). At both levels design is understood as art (visual art), either as a product of an individual/collective creation in the domain of graphic communication or as an aesthetic applied to industrial product.

Very rarely does one find the term design used in to denote the social formation of an object, a complex strategy for the formation of a specific material culture (or a change in a material culture) or as a way of directing the possibilities of research in contemporary or historical design, at the general theoretical level as well as the specific analysis of the actual object. It is precisely these characteristics that define the public debate about design in a peripheral context when compared to centers of modernization. Bonsiepe describes this phenomenon as "peripheral contexts lack a serious discourse about design" speaking in particular on the lack of a critical density of participants needed to have this discussion, and not about the discussion as one sided/directed form of promotional communication, which is often equated with a theoretic discussion in the local context (2). The position of a motivated researcher in this peripheral context has some resemblance to Foucualt's idea of a "viewed viewer" (researched researcher?) which is a useful term for the multi-layered susceptibility of cultural identities being developed in the practice of design, and which the viewer/researcher seeks to see and research, within the unfinished nature of context and its political transition process striving from the periphery to the center (3).

 It is worth mentioning that two years after the publication of this text by Foucault, Matko Mestrovic, one of the key figures in establishing and defining the term design in Croatia from the early nineteen-sixties, used the term ("viewed viewer") in his text describing the new media culture, having in mind the dual identity of a consumer and producer of information. (4). While Foucault's viewed viewer is a subject of historical and scientific incompleteness, Mestrovic's is also a subject of media manipulation. Both are the protagonists of a complex cultural identity, precisely because they are aware that the issue they are concerned with escapes a fixed theoretical examination. This type of figure could describe the researcher of design in contemporary Croatia too.

It is also worth mentioning that the local, particularly peripheral transitional modernization is only one part of a world wide transition towards a western form of mass production/consumption model and an exchange between technology and work. This

condition has, within different circumstances, made Habermas's notion about modernity as an "unfinished project" actual again, but with different types of production which layer into cultural modernity and social modernization (5). The centers of modernization are dispersed throughout the globe, which material and symbolic dispersion is assumed also by the term "design", as its meaning constructed mostly in theory defines (6). But the spread and layered meaning of the term design has not at the same time meant that it has become the symbol or term for any form of cultural production, as was noted by Flusser in his reading of the "viewed viewer"(7). His question suggests an even more relevant issue and that is: what are the particulars of modernization at the periphery today and more so what are the particulars of the center?

According to the relevant sources from dispersed centers, "design" has taken the same position as has the English language, one as a kind of contemporary Latin and the other as a term that equates material production without regard for local (peripheral) particulars of culture, religion, or forms of production. Through this semiotic process, hybrid identities appear as combinations of delayed or remaining peripheral/local cultural elements and global elements of cultural material production. This phenomenon is at one side a direct result of the re-structuring of the world by new media in the post colonial period, and those mass media - including graphic design - define globally universal symbols for the purpose of mass consumption (8). On the other hand one cannot bypass the fact that total design of the world from "the city to the spoon" was one of the main issues of the discourse of the historical modernist design movement, but the actual realization of that idea does not go further then the commercial synthesis of all cultural identities, through the established of multi layered signifiers throughout the world wherever the relation of production and consumption can function. (9)

Peripheral and Transition

Transition in the local context, however, existed as a method of social change and as an ideological project before the actual transition towards neo-liberal capitalism. What is now known as design discipline in the Croatian context has itself developed a regional or local character due to the state of permanent social change which distinguishes it from the character design has in the various countries at the center of modernization (10).

Therefore in the Croatian cultural identity today design participates only to area of communication, as graphic design or as design of the media of visual communication. Since, from the center to the periphery, the notion of a strategic orientation to the market has become dominant, most of the local industrial resources dedicated to production have disappeared, and with that the need to create objects for mass production has also gone. With this the term design in Croatia during the nineties has come to exclusively denote commercial communication. The largest number of students, upon graduating from the School of Design, go on to work for the advertising industry, and all awards and honors received by Croatian designers in the local and international context are in the domain of graphic design of commercial ads. As a result the meaning that the term design carries in Croatia today has little in common with the meaning that was defined during the nineteen-sixties (11).

In this way design discipline, as a part of cultural industry, contributed to identity of the peripheral modernization of Croatia in nineteen-nineties. But design is still an elusive process of symbolic appropriation of the material in everyday life. Such an identity grew out of the continual transition state in which the society found itself, and within which process design is still not able to institutionalize itself as discipline, methodology, or social practice of identifying relations between the individual and the collective, except for in one area - the creation of commercial visual communication. More the twenty years have passed from the first theoretic foundations on design as methodology which grounds process of creating material objects and symbolic values in the human environment to the founding of an institution of higher education in the field. During those twenty years the social context, self managing socialism, has disappeared, replaced by a new peripheral context of transition (12). During this period of time the ideological tasks expected from design have also changed: the state with its corporations as the primary client for design has disappeared (or is disappearing), and in its place have appeared new types of private commercial corporations. During the earlier period the tasks at hand focused on the industrialization of material production, while today the focus is on a quick sale. The political ideal of material well-being for all has been replaced by the material ownership of the well to do. Profit has replaced the political party tasks. Through this the local peripheral context hopes to merge into the global exchange of capital, technology and

labor, and meanwhile developing a cultural identity that could be determined as "peripheral modernity" (13).

In this peripheral modernity hybrid identities are forming on the basis of paralyzing traditions. Hybrid identities are various cultural subjects formed through the joining of contradictory historical and contemporary social prepositions-objects within the discourse and practice of design. The simultaneous existence of multiple identities within the same context is a result of the transitional process from one type of society to a different type. Particularly from the remaining forms of cultural practices and social elements left over from the time of socialist state corporativism which are being blended with the new elements of neo-liberal capitalism (14). The simultaneous existence of these two models has a particular effect on the practice of symbolizing identity as well as on design as a social phenomenon. This hybridity can also be clearly experienced in the simultaneous coexistence of companies at various stages of transition in economic models and ownership as they change from public to private. The hybridity can also be defined at the level of the change in the communication of personal identity, particularly in conflicts between the individual and the communal, for example in situations where issues of property in an urban area are still unresolved, or at the same time in legal/commercial and simultaneous illegal/free use of public space for the purpose of advertising (15).

In this state of hybridity the "viewed viewer" is also a type of hybrid state, and that through the level of the discourse on design as defined by Walker (16). According his structural model, in Croatia, as a typical context of peripheral modernization, there exists only a discourse on method and a journalistic promotion of design within the domain of the creation of commercial visual communication. Communication on design occurs at the level of commercial aesthetic. The term design is almost never used to define the practice of creating symbolic values outside of mass media or outside of the educated aesthetic rules. However the fact is that in Croatia at the level of practice there exists a massive production of symbolic contents which could be discussed in terms of design. This practice exists in small urban and suburban contexts according to the needs of small clients and their businesses with their limited financial resources and, as is the case of Zagreb Club Mocvara (The Swamp), as a program of alternative models of cultural practice (17). Within this context the rules defined by design education are rarely

followed, and instead simple computer manipulations of images and words are used to create appropriate identity situations. This design approach is operative in reference to either the notion of a national identity or the idea about global culture. In the case of the Mocvara Club the aesthetic of the message is built on an ironic (almost – camp) redefinition of certain assumptions borrowed from mass culture in combination with commentary on the current condition in Croatian society.

This segment of Croatian cultural identity could be defined as the un-educated design, or in Walker's term "anonymous design" or Dilnot's "vernacular design" (18). This lack of education is quite relative however in specific cases, but as a term it is meant to denote the difference between this approach and those taught at Design School which tend to be similar to international curricula. This uneducated design takes cues from local and peripheral inspirations, therefore developing forms of symbolic meaning particular to the local context. These symbols, although outside of the sphere of interest of the local critics and theorists, significantly contribute to creation of peripheral particulars of local culture in the context of transitional modernization. This is the basis of the hybrid identity of design in Croatia, as a term and practice, in the domain of the creation of visual meanings.

The Globalization of Design
How does one theoretically approach this phenomenon? The difficulty comes from the paralyzing traditions inherited by the Croatian cultural context from the recent past, and which traditions encourage the formation of a hybrid identity. Within the unresolved situations from this past which in various ways present themselves as unexplainable and unexplained traditions, primarily based on the first period of Croatian modernization and the idea of national identity, and therefore burdened by transition on various levels: at the level of the idea of the nation, at the level of common identity, and at the level of private ownership.

A comparable situation can be experienced in the space transformation in many Croatian cities, where under the process of the return of private property to the original owners chaos reigns in public space, particularly in the zones of contact between private and public property. With that many business premises located in city centers, which would

otherwise bring large rents to their owners, instead use their shop fronts and facades only as a billboard space.   Moreover, the development of private housing has respected few if any of the public interests; thereby the use of communal public spaces always presents a problem. These paralyzing traditions, inherited from unfinished processes of the past, define hybrid identities in urban context which are difficult to negotiate within the many competing interests.

In the domain where design exists as a term defined by the Croatian language, the hybridity of cultural identity is exhibited by the existence by the simultaneous existence of so called educated and un-educated design. One way that design in understood and practiced today is formed at the level of high education and aspires to satisfy the needs and interests of the newly formed large corporate clients. The other type appears occasionally as a way of defining elements of communication for small and medium businesses or even for subcultural (alternative) social formations. Paralysing traditions are evident here not only in design practice, in both types, but within discourse on design, starting from the very definition of the disciplinary field. In practice these traditions appear as a series of methodic rules which need to be followed in order to satisfy an execution excellence ideal, but without having to engage specialized "tools" for the research of social situations and trends as well as symbolic values which occur as a creative interpretations of the commissioned work.

It is not at all coincidental that design is considered a fine art, at least as design is defined in higher education, and in fine art there is no analysis or methodology, simply unquestionable personal creativity. A similar aspect can be observed in uneducated design, only within a different social stratum and with an emphasis on different symbolic representations. The difference is only in form and technological level. But in both cases the practice and understanding of design in Croatia is defined by a lack of thought about the discipline and its meaning within the social context. This lack is compensated with promotional discourse by professional organizations in educated design and by amateur work and social activism in uneducated design. The public discourse which treats design as a form of fine art is loosing the original meaning the term had in nineteen-sixties in Croatia under the influence from the Hochschule fur Gestaltung in Ulm. In the dynamics of this change the intended meaning of design as a methodology for systematic forming

of material culture has been changed by the unquestioning formation of symbolic content for public and particularly commercial needs. Within this newly formed semantic field one can search for particulars inherent to the peripheral context and the cultural identity of transition. Although it is worth mentioning that a comparison with according terms and their semantic fields in other similar (post-socialist) peripheral areas of transitional modernization suggests similar particular identities within peripheral contexts that are changing from places of mass production to those of mass consumption.

How this hybrid identity and paralyzing traditions from which it is formed could be approached? Adapting and simplifying the methods of art history and formal criticism, in other words formal analysis focused on the description of an object, will not be enough to identify particular characteristics of design at modernization periphery. This is mostly because this periphery, on the level of meanings and symbols, is nearly oversaturated as a result of the mixing of continual local and global transitions, and on the basis of traditions from the past which even the last context of self managing socialism could not solve even through systematic planning as it wanted to bring it some closure. Just as the very discipline of design in the Croatian society is going through a dynamic change, so too is the very semantic field of the term changing simultaneously. Even though design discipline is currently placed within the field of fine art, for its analytical research a more progressive approach is needed, along the lines of Stevenson's critique of the design history as a formal extraction from the more established methods of art history (19). Because the description of design as a fine art, as Dilnot has suggested, is no more then a social myth in which the "past is a simple anticipation and legitimization for the present" and which, according to Barthes only "creates a world without contradictions…in which things mean something simply because they exist" (20).

Can this kind of historical narrative create an analytical framework for comprehension of design at the modernization periphery? Possibly the question should be changed and posed as: could or should design history and theory , as an eventually conceived academic discipline, be based on and methodology satisfied by simple formal registering of products without understanding the reasons for their creation or without the critique of those products in the context of peripheral modernity? Could design history and theory even function as an autonomous discipline in the local context? This is clearly the key

question, and as Fry has already suggested for theoretical cultural analysis at the periphery, and with the help of the center, there is a possible research approach which ties together art history with other disciplines including anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and archeology among others and which could be useful for the development of design theory as Dilnot puts it (21).

Towards a design theory at the periphery

In order to establish such a discipline at the local peripheral level it will be necessary to carry out a critical analysis of the original meaning of the term design in Croatian language and its comparison with the later change dynamic of the referential field. Only then will it be possible to discuss methods of interdisciplinary investigation as a framework for research work. Prior to this it seems unavoidable to return to the theoretic framework which was formative for the very adoption of the word "dizajn" (as a derivative from the English "design") into the Croatian language and culture, and that is the idea of environment design as it was formulated by body of theory at the School of Design at Ulm. The analysis of the original idea and scope of this theory as well as its reception by Croatian theorists and critics is an inevitable step towards any future discourse on design at the modernization periphery, for as Bonsiepe stated, "design is the motor power of modernity" (22).

Since the conditions defined by the global exchange of capital, technology and labor has made the relation of center to periphery relative, in the new topography of capital-product ties, it is becoming more clear that the cultural identity of the industrial epoch and the national economies are changing and becoming parts of the same problem in the environment. The contemporary map of the world brings into question the modern relation of center to periphery and it is possible to confirm with Bonsiepe that "cultural identity, particularly in design, lives in the discourse of the viewer". Which is similar to Jameson's "narrative category", as e ven in the perspective of the earlier mentioned "viewed viewer", which for the purpose of insight into peripheral modernity resembles more closely Mestrovic's then Fuocault's view (23). Because if design still has elements of fine art, then it is due to the instrumentalization of its methods to the wishes of those who commission design intervention. Could designers take on the position of the "viewed

viewer"? Could they, from this position, more realistically examine the situation in which they manipulate meanings, without themselves realizing that they are being manipulated? Design history and theory possibly could, as one type of interdisciplinary "critical dialectic" research, help to the clarification of theoretic and practical contradictions of hybrid identity and paralyzing traditions at the modernization periphery.

NOTES:
1. Rogic 2000:513-603.; Zupanov, u: Cengic, Rogic (eds.) 2001:11-37.
2. Bonsiepe 1999:116.
3. Foucault 2002:337.
4. Mestrovic 1968:7-17.
5. Habermas 1983:3-16.
6. Walker 1989., Heskett 2002.
7. Flusser 1999:17-22.
8. Papastergiadis 2002:166-177.
9. Rogers in: Banham (ed.) 1974:78-86., Greenhalgh 1990.; Bholey 2001:30-31., Julier 2000.
10. Bilandzic 1985:314-317, 385-391, 438-441, 446-453, 474-483, 484-494., 487,
11. Vukic (ur.), 2003:
12. Vukic, in: Doroghy (ed.), 2004:8-13.
13. Fry 1989:28.
14. Zupanov 2001.22-30.
15. Fry describes such a state as «hybridized modernisms», as connecting and mixing of cultural codes in relation of modernization efforts of center and otpor of periphery, by which is formed «marginal modernity», Fry 1989, p.28.
16. Walker 1989:14-16.
17. Vukic 2003:148-156.; ibid 2001:22., ibid. in: Kostadinov A. (ed.)2004:5-7.
18. Walker 1989:18., Dilnot 1989:245.
19. Stevenson, u: Buchli, Lucas (eds) 2001:51-63.
20. Dilnot 1989:236-237.; Barthes 1972:142-143.
21. Fry 1989:28.; Dilnot 1989:238-250.; Buchli ,Lucas (eds.), 2001., Buchli V. (ed.), 2002.
22. Bonsiepe 1999:129.; Maldonado 1969:19-29., Maldonado, Bonsiepe, 1969:29-51.; Bonsiepe 1969:51-61.; Kritovac 1969:8-9, Kritovac 1974:63-67., Mestrovic 1980.
23. Bonsiepe 1999:117.; Jameson 2002., p.40.

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