



Main Space

Xpace Cultural Centre
2-303 Lansdowne Ave
Toronto ON M6K 2W5
416 849 2864
Tuesday-Saturday 12-6
www.xpace.info

Politics of Design

David Caterini & David Schnitman, Paul Chartrand,
Julian Garcia & Eli Kerr, Ambrose Li, Pablo Muñoz, Stephen Surlin
June 25 – July 20, 2015

Politics of Design is an exhibition that includes six projects by eight emerging designers who employ design methodologies to communicate political ideas, demonstrate the potential for protest and resistance, and examine the ways we use objects and space. From Graphic to Industrial and Inclusive Design, rapid prototyping methods to handmade ceramics and large-scale posters, the exhibition explores how design can inspire and instigate social change, and how it inescapably impacts the way we live.

In *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, Dr. Victor Papanek states that design “is basic to all human activities—the placing and patterning of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end constitutes a design process.”¹ Since its first publication in 1971, Dr. Papanak’s book was the first published text to explore the social responsibility of the designer, and it has since become one of the most widely read and circulated texts on Industrial Design. Papanak situates design as the “most powerful tool with which [humans] shape [their] tools and environments (and by extension, society and [themselves]),” and the designer as the bearer of substantial moral and social responsibility to generate products with meaningful impact, both culturally and ecologically.² The projects in this exhibition demonstrate the capacity of contemporary designers to encourage and facilitate criticism and innovation.

¹ Dr. Victor Papanak, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (2nd Edition) (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2000) 3.

² Papanak, ix.

In his project, Stephen Surlin engages with both historical and contemporary aesthetics of product design. The piece consists of a series of three vintage straight razors, each carefully restored by the designer and accompanied by three distinctive stands. Each stand has been designed using open-source 3-D modeling software and fabricated by current rapid-prototyping methods (also known as 3-D printing) using Polyactic Acid (PLA) filament, a more sustainable alternative to more commonly used petroleum-based plastic. Each stand design allows the steel blades to dry fully after each use by allowing air flow underneath the razor's edge, keeping it safe from rust and further damage and prolonging their usability indefinitely. With this project, Surlin hopes to generate an accessible, low-waste shaving system that sits in opposition to the economy perpetuated by the North American grooming industry, where commercial shaving products are costly, non-recyclable and built to be disposable.³

Paul Chartrand's Industrial Design practice focuses on hybrid sculptures combining living natural elements and manufactured objects. His furniture designs are often assembled as supports for small-scale functioning ecosystems. In, *The Conversation Teable*, Chartrand has employed re-purposed materials to construct a table that serves a second function as an incubation vessel for a small garden of mint to be dried for tea. Inspired by contemporary innovations in indoor and small-space edible gardens, the *Teable* acts not only as a practical gardening vessel, but also as a platform to support discussion while consuming the plants grown inside the structure. With this piece, Chartrand has generated a hyper-local system of production and consumption, and hopes to inspire dialogue regarding the politics of Western society's relationship to and reliance on industrial farming, which distances consumers from the products they consume.

Julian Garcia and Eli Kerr's *Lamp 1: access, light data* is a conceptual prototype that explores the current proliferation of smart security technologies. Increasingly, products are designed with embedded systems to optimize security through tracking the user's personal data. We provide access to personal data online freely, and secure it with passwords, personal security questions, and in the case of smart phone technology,

³ Stephen Surlin artist statement, 2014

fingerprints, rarely asking questions regarding how, and often even why, this data will be stored. *Lamp 1* is wired with a chip that can only be operated with a corresponding swipe card, thus tracking who is using it, when and for how long. This futile collection of data is in turn both humorous and disconcerting, generating questions regarding our right to privacy and the implications of surveillance.

David Caterini and David Schnitman's collaborative practice explores Graphic Design as an apparatus to exert control and support a capitalist system. In *Visualizing Economy*, Caterini and Schnitman explore the politics of data visualization, or the presentation of data in a pictorial format, for instance, graphs and pie charts. The piece consists of a playful infographic using arrows and text to outline the steps taken in the gathering and dissemination of data: Define, Collect, Organize, Reproduce, Distribute. A cycling video of images accompanies each step, representing the action across the scales of individual, city and globe. The designers argue that though data collection and visualization are generally thought of as objective, it follows a capitalist method where a select few control the means of production, and pre-made narratives form the basis of how data is collected, evaluated and represented.

Pablo Muñoz' poster series, *Unsettling: Queer Propaganda* contrasts queer rights discourse in Canada with seldom-discussed issues of queer and gender variant migrants and how they are impacted by national borders. In each image, Muñoz references the poster design of the Black Panthers' Minister of Culture Emory Douglas, who served as the art director and designer for *The Black Panther* newspaper in the 1960s and 1970s. Douglas' "signature aesthetics of revolution,"⁴ including bright colours, thick black outlines mimicking the style of traditional woodcuts, and the repetition of motifs like the panther and the clenched fist, have become inextricably associated with solidarity and grassroots social movements. In Douglas' posters, the artist portrays his community as freedom fighters in heroic opposition to the state. In Muñoz' posters, the designer has placed the "oppressed"—in this case, queer migrants—as the heroes challenging the "state", in this case, borders and border enforcement agencies.⁵ For this exhibition,

⁴ Colette Gaiter, *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007) 8.

⁵ Pablo Muñoz artist statement, 2014

Muñoz has mimicked the presentation of billboard advertising across the urban landscape by affixing a large-scale poster to the wall of the gallery. Through the referencing of the visual language of solidarity and the appropriation of the ubiquitous presentation of advertising, Muñoz conveys the image of a “united front of queer migrant rights activists.”⁶

Inclusive designer Ambrose Li’s series of slipcast ceramic bowls explores tenuous issues of language, accessibility and inclusivity. Each of Li’s bowls is initially sculpted with Braille messages; during the process of demoulding, small pieces of the fragile text break or fall off, changing or jumbling the initial message completely. This fragility emphasizes the challenges faced by physically disabled folks as they navigate the built environment, where even subtle obstacles can deny access to specific populations. With these pieces, Li highlights an area of design that has not, until recent years, been held accountable to be accessible to all and has at times inadvertently sanctioned the exclusion of physically disabled communities. Architect Ray Lifchez argues that “inaccessible ... environments endorse the participation of and distribution of resources to certain types of bodies in public space, while marginalizing other types of bodies from which access and resources are withheld.”⁷ Though Li’s ceramics may appear at first quiet and decorative, they speak radically to a history of design that has often valued aesthetics over inclusivity.

Viewing these projects together highlights the capacity of the designer to engage critically with their environment. Through these projects, and further exploration of emerging radical and politically engaged design in all disciplines we can both critique and better our current surroundings, and imagine the future of our designed environment.

-Emily Gove

⁶ Muñoz

⁷ Raymond Lifchez, Rethinking Architecture: Design Students and Physically Disabled People (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 1.