

Interrogative Design (1994)

Interrogative: 1. Of, pertaining to, or of the nature of questioning; having the form or force of a question. 2. Of a word or form employed in asking questions.

Design as a research proposal and implementation can be called interrogative when it takes a risk, explores, articulates, and responds to the questionable conditions of life in today's world, and does so in a questioning manner. Interrogative design questions the very world of needs of which it is born. It must respond with a double urgency to such a world. First, it should function as an emergency aid in the process of survival, resistance, and the healing of social, psychological, and physical wounds. Second, it needs to increase and sustain the high level of ethical alertness that creates, in the words of Benjamin, a state of emergency understood not as an exception but as an everyday ethical condition, an ongoing motivation for critical judgment toward the present and past to secure a vision for a better future.

Instead of deconstructing itself, design should deconstruct life. Design should unmask and uncover our singular and plural lives, our lived experience, and a history of this experience from the panopticon of our subjectivity and ideological theater of our culture, no matter how unacceptable and repressed or neglected such experiences may be.

Design must articulate and inspire communication of real, often difficult lived-through experience, rather than operate as a substitute for it (i.e., the kitsch of Sharper Image design). The experience and its history are the often invisible and seemingly unimaginable complexes of problems, internal and external, that have been quickly covered up by the naive facades of all design "solutions" to these problems, and more recently by melancholic "deconstruction" of the design heritage of such cover-ups.

Design must put in doubt its search for all such often well-intended design solutions or self-deconstructions, to open the way to explore, discover, uncover, and expose the hidden dimensions of lived experience. Doing so, design as a practice must acknowledge this experience as a history of resistance to the conditions of life and a history of one's destabilized identity in the process of often enforced reconfiguration.

A history, being a critical structure of experience, is a recollection of the lived events of the past infused with the criticism of the present.

Interrogative design must create the points and spaces of convergence for a multitude of internal and external enquiries to such experience and its history.

Design of any object, space, place, network, or system must become a tech-

nology and a technique of constructing an artifice that would function as an opening through which a complexity of the lived experience can be recalled, memorized, translated, transmitted, perceived, and exchanged in a discursive and performative manner. Design must not hesitate to respond to the needs that should not, but unfortunately do, exist.

Designers must work *in* the world rather than "about" or "upon" it. In an unacceptable and contradictory world, responsive and responsible design must appear as an unacceptable and contradictory "solution." It must critically explore and reveal often painful life experience rather than camouflage such experience by administering the painkillers of optimistic design fantasies. The appearance of interrogative design may "attract while scandalizing"—it must attract attention in order to scandalize the conditions of which it is born. Implicit in this design's temporary character is a demand and hope that its function will become obsolete.

The oldest and most common reference to this kind of design is the bandage. A bandage covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence, signifying both the experience of pain and the hope of recovery. Is it possible to further develop such a bandage as equipment that will communicate, interrogate, and articulate the circumstances and the experience of the injury, provoking so as to prevent its recurrence?

The proposed design should not be conceived as a symbolic representation but as a performative articulation. It should not "represent" (frame iconically) the survivor or the vanquished, nor should it "stand in" or "speak for" them. It should be developed *with* them and it should be based on a critical inquiry into the conditions that produced the crisis. Interrogative design can also function as a critical mirror questioning the user's preconceptions and assumptions about others and about the self. The equipment can reinterpret various existing materials and components, like protective clothing, portable tools, electronic gear, defensive armor or weaponry, prosthetic components, wearable digital equipment, alert devices, shields, or a combination of these. One of the objectives of the design is to extend the use of the media of communication to those who have no access to them but who need them the most, and to those who have full access to them but who fail to take critical advantage of them.

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