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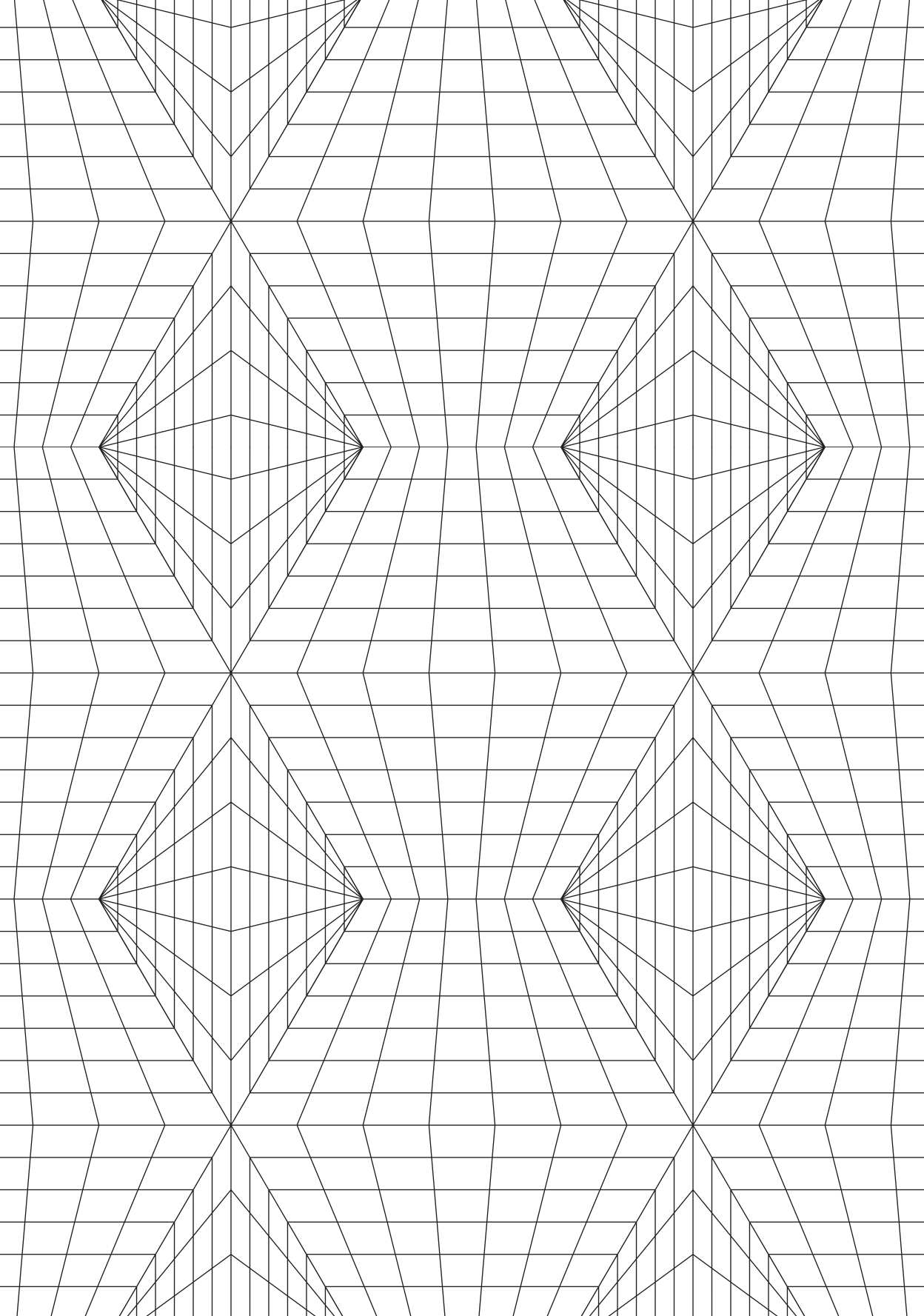

Disegno

Journal of Design Culture
Double-blind peer-reviewed, open access scholarly journal

Aims and Scope

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.
This journal does not charge APCs or submission charges.

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The Capacious Umbrella of Design Culture

An Interview with Ben Highmore by Márton Szentpéteri

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Disegno met with the leading British scholar of the culture of everyday life at a conference organised by the Doctoral School of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in 2023 titled *Designing Everyday Experience—Objects, Environments, Habits* where he gave a keynote address.[1]

[1] *Some of the papers from this conference, including Ben Highmore's, were published in* Disegno *2024 (1), special issue* Aesthetic Histories of Design Culture. *(Highmore 2024).*

Disegno: Our friend, Guy Julier has often told me that Design Culture Studies is an emergent scholarly endeavour. What do you think about that?

Ben Highmore: I suppose any healthy discipline is always emerging. When I think about design cultures today, I should first say that I don't really see myself as working *within* design cultures, strictly speaking. I'm a cultural studies scholar, but I also come from art history, from that moment when art history shifted from being a kind of connoisseurial activity about the great artists of the past to being interested in visual culture.

One aspect of that shift that was crucial for me was the emergence of design history at what was then Middlesex University. For me, it was visual culture and material culture together that became particularly important. I think of design culture as a very capacious umbrella: it includes some design history, but it isn't tied so strictly to the particular procedures and protocols that design history, as it's practised especially in the UK, tends to adhere to.

For instance, there's a lot of interesting cultural work on dress and clothing, on memories of clothing, on uniforms and what uniforms mean, on our relationship to the environment and to the rooms we live in. A couple of days ago, I did a radio programme with a British guy called Michael McMillan with family from St Vincent in the Caribbean.

He has developed almost a kind of cultural studies by practice. He's been bringing together all sorts of materials to recreate the West Indian front room, full of the kinds of things many Caribbean families in Britain had in the 1950s and 1960s as they were trying to make their mark in a very hostile environment.

He's been travelling the world—for example, to South Africa and the Netherlands—to look at what the "front room" has meant to diasporic communities. I see that as something really lively within the big field of design cultures, even though he probably wouldn't call himself a Design Culture Studies expert (see his website https://www.michaelmcmillan.uk/new-page-5). That isn't the field he'd say he works in. Likewise, some of the people writing about dress culture probably wouldn't see themselves as doing design culture either: they'd see themselves as experts in fashion and the body, or fashion history, or something like that.

Therefore, my answer is that the best, most lively design culture work often doesn't come under that title for the people doing it. But "design culture" is a very capacious way of addressing our culture of designed, found, and materialised forms—often in domestic settings.

***D:** In your paper (Highmore 2019) published in the anthology* **Design Culture: Objects and Approaches,** *a selection from the proceedings of the 2014 Kolding Conference* **Design Culture: Object, Discipline and Practice,** *you apply the notion "worlding" to describe the role of design culture experts, or those interested in this capacious notion and the corresponding research activities.*

For us in Central-Eastern Europe, "worlding" is clearly a Heideggerian notion, since we have all been trained in continental philosophy. But I'm interested in your background. Is Heidegger in the background for you?

BH: At the time I was reading a lot of Heidegger, and yes, it was coming out of Heidegger. But it was also shaped by how the term was being used by people we'd now think of as part of affect theory. There's an anthropologist, Kathleen Stewart, who was at the University of Texas at Austin, who uses the word "worlding".

I think about the way we create the world and the way the world creates us through what you might call environmental practices—not "environmental" in the sense of environmentalism, but in the sense of building a milieu that has a certain historical specificity.

It also relates back to Raymond Williams for me, in terms of cultural studies, where he talks about culture as a "whole way of life". That's a very anthropological idea of culture. He distinguishes between culture as the various items you might find in museums or libraries, and culture as a whole way of life.

He was referring primarily to his upbringing in a small village in Wales, where his father was a railway signalman. They were involved in the unions, and he's very particular about the neighbourly practices that went on—when his father was very ill, how neighbours felt obliged, but also wanted, to help out. But that whole way of life could also be contradictory. It wasn't a homogeneous activity where everything fitted neatly and had its place; it could accommodate lots of contradictions.

The work I was doing at that point, which led to the book I've recently (2023) published (*Lifestyle Revolution: How Taste Changed Class in Late 20th-Century Britain*), was about what was happening in the late 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s in terms of a whole new array of material cultures, some of which were particularly designed.

For my story, Terence Conran as a designer was particularly important, as was his shop Habitat. It was about curating a lifestyle. "Lifestyle" can have a very thin meaning, as if lifestyle culture is just shallow—people who eat smashed avocado on toast because it's this week's thing. I wanted to fill that notion with more objects, but also with the dreams, desires and imaginations that went with them. That was the idea of "worlding" for me.

Rather than thinking that taste culture meant you *must* have your Habitat furniture, your Italian lacquer table, that you must eat Italian cuisine and wear clothes from Biba, I was trying to get away from that checklist. Many of the worlds we inhabit are shown to us in a fairly pure state—sometimes in magazines, sometimes in shops. You go into IKEA today and they show you whole tableaux of the life you should have. But what we actually do is approximate those sorts of things, and we do that in lots of different ways.

What's important is not that we have *all* the things—that you must have a red enamel mug, that particular brown teapot, or that particular kind of chair. You might have several things that approximate them, but they can still work as cultural relays. They work from one to another and help build up a sense of a world.

The particular world that Conran and others imagined was itself contradictory. It could have ultra-modernist elements, but it could also have lots of what we would now call retro elements. It was about eclecticism. And it had that strange quality of being about mass production—at the height of Habitat's success there were something like eighty-four shops across the country—but you couldn't say you embodied the "Habitat world" simply by shopping in one place. You also had to show your quirky character by having old adverts from the 1920s, bits of "wacky" furniture, things you'd picked up second-hand, hopefully for very little money. That was part of it.

I see that the world very much continuing in the present. I think you see it most clearly in cafés, restaurants and pubs in Britain: you go in and there are mismatched chairs, strange photographs where you

think, "That's really odd, I can't quite make that out," a bare brick wall, some old church pews. It looks casual, but it's a very carefully formed casualness. It encourages improvised sociality, but there's also a sense that these things are rehearsed improvisations.[2] That's how I was thinking about worlding, really.

[2] *In Hungary,, so called "ruin pubs"* (romkocsmák) *are of a similar kind (–eds.).*

D: Heidegger is quite controversial and I'm not entirely comfortable quoting him. What do you think about Heidegger's philosophy, and especially the way it seems completely natural for many philosophers of design or cultural scholars dealing with design to refer to Heidegger without scruple?

When you try to go deeper into his philosophy, it becomes more and more clear that the entire composition is deeply problematic. It's not just a superficial issue that he belonged to Nazism; the entire construction can be dangerous—especially if you think about such ideas as "Earth".

I don't know whether you know Karl Jaspers' philosophical biography (1957), in which he clearly compares some of Heidegger's key notions to what actually happened in those years in Germany.

BH: I got into Heidegger through philosopher friends of mine in Estonia. They talked about how, as communism fell, you could see Marxist–Leninist philosophers marching out of the doors of the university—or being pushed out—and then, a few weeks later, you'd see them on the checkout in the supermarket. And then in came the Heideggerians; it was almost a sea change in philosophy.

I was encouraged to look at Heidegger, partly because I was interested in people like Michel de Certeau and so on. My reliable knowledge of Heidegger is probably about twenty pages of *Being and Time* and various essays that are exegeses on those pages—around notions like "being", "thrownness" and so on. I do know the critiques, and I'm completely sympathetic to the idea that Heidegger's thought is deeply related to a kind of ethno-nationalism. I really accept that.

I do think, however, that ideas like "thrownness" are a useful form of phenomenology to talk about all sorts of things. And I think many people using Heideggerian concepts today have not spent a lot of time with Heidegger himself. For me, the person who influenced me most was the legendary media scholar Paddy Scannell, who used Heidegger to talk about radio, television and everyday life. It's a really useful adaptation of Heidegger. The term he takes most from Heidegger is "care"—not care in the sense of health-service care, but attentiveness, the making of things.

So those ideas have been important to me, but I also feel no great desire to go back to Heidegger and read harder, to get more serious about him.

D: I just wanted to know your views on this because Hungary was different from Estonia. Estonia was in the Soviet Union. After—and because of—1956, we were "the happiest barrack of socialism", which meant that especially in the 1980s things were much easier than in Estonia, and almost no one was fired for political reasons.

At my alma mater, what happened to the Marxists? They left and came back, and the Marxist–Leninist Department became the Metaphysics Department. I think that's quite funny. We had a hodgepodge of everything. Marx and Marxism were thrown out often by former Marxists, which also affected critical cultural studies: no one was really interested in it because it was seen as Marxist, at least for a while in the 1990s.

Anyway, I still can't really figure out how to talk about objects, things, beings, tools and so on without some of Heidegger's most important thoughts. But I was shocked when I realised that all these key understandings in his philosophy are rooted in his hyper-nationalist understanding of the world solely "for the Germans". The real philosophical "Greece" to him was the Nazi Germany for a while then he became disappointed with even Hitler who seemed ignorant of Heidegger's "high Nazism".

Does that mean the use of Heidegger is always ethno-nationalist? No, not at all. My problem here is similar to the case of Jorge Luis Borges, who was an anti-fascist who grew old, disappointed, with no Nobel Prize—while many authors influenced by Borges like Gabriel Garcia Márquez did receive the prize. Borges, almost completely blind and disappointed, in 1976 went to accept the honorary doctorate of the University of Santiago, Chile and the decoration by the government (Orden de Mérito de Bernardo O'Higgins) during Pinochet's rule.

That was one of the key issues we discussed at the beginning of my university years in the Department of Aesthetics: whether Borges's poetry and stories are influenced by that episode or not. We usually said: who cares about this Pinochet episode at the end of his life? But I was never totally convinced about how to separate the work from the person, especially when authors are recent. With Aristotle and Plato, their political views feel more distant; but the Heidegger issue is still painfully with us.

It's especially relevant to how he was first understood in the United States, thanks in part to Hannah Arendt, who promoted Heidegger without really telling the world who he was—perhaps because she was in love with him, in a sense. Then the "shock" came in the late 1980s with Farias's ([1987] 1989) not-very-good but eye-opening book. I was at the beginning of my university studies then, and we were confused. We naively wanted to learn what was given to us, but

half of our professors asked questions about* The Origin of the Work of Art *(Heidegger [1950] 2008): "What do you think about this Nazi author?" And some of us wanted to say: "Can we talk about the work instead?"

So, when I talk to my students about tools, readiness-to-hand and so on—all those important notions that help us explain the world around us—I always have this second thought.

BH: Yes, I see what you mean. For me that kind of revelation, slightly later perhaps, came around Paul de Man. When his antisemitic journalism came to light, it sent a real shockwave through the academy.

It's interesting to look back now. Partly we might ask why we were so surprised. There is a lot of fascism around—why *wouldn't* a Yale literary professor have had a fascist or antisemitic past? Why wouldn't someone else have flirted with white supremacism when they were younger?

We often have this idea of purity around intellectuals, and I think that's a myth. I tend to think we're all pretty horrible deep down. Someone once said that when you look at people's dreams, there's always a bit of a Nazi in everyone, in terms of their worst desires. Was that Woody Allen?

Having said that, I'm still a fairly optimistic person.

D: Nietzsche said that if you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back at you, or something similar. Thank you for your honest answer; it is rare to be able to talk about this honestly.

BH: It's a really live intellectual issue. For instance, I recently found out that at the University of Edinburgh the main tower used to be called the David Hume Tower. It isn't anymore, because David Hume is no longer considered someone we can look to as an intellectual guide: someone found material where he isn't exactly excusing slavery, but he describes it as a civilising practice at one point. I don't know the exact details. Of course, Hegel's concept of race is also extremely problematic, and he said abominable things about non-Europeans.

So, it's a live issue. We want to maintain the moral and political standards of today. But at the same time, we don't want to throw away everything we've found valuable on the bonfire of today's particular sensitivities, even though those sensitivities are hugely important. It's a dynamic issue.

D: Talking about dynamic issues or ahistorical dilemmas, my next question is about the "critical" aspect: to what extent do you see this in cultural studies?

What do we mean by "critical"? For me, the question I asked about Heidegger is a critical question. But I once read in your bio on the University of Sussex website that you're described as a critical theorist. What do you mean by that? Is it Birmingham or Raymond Williams? Is it Frankfurt? What sort of tradition?

BH: Yes, it's an interesting and quite complicated area. At the moment, there's also a whole body of work I'm interested in that calls itself post-critical. So, it's important to ask how you locate yourself within traditions aligned with Marxism, for instance, where "critical" might mean a Marxist critical perspective, or within feminism, where that's also a critical perspective.

Straightforwardly, Raymond Williams has always been a really important orientation for me. Equally important is Walter Benjamin. For a while, what was important to me were people who are probably thought of as critical theorists, although they don't belong narrowly to the Frankfurt School tradition.

People like Benjamin and Williams don't seem to come with a position already ascribed. When you read Benjamin—*The Arcades Project* ([1982] 2002) or his essays—you can't predict what he's going to say. Sometimes I think I can't predict what my daughter is going to say. That sense of unpredictability is important.

Adorno's complex negative dialectics do a very useful job, but for me they tend to do the *same* job over and over again. In contrast, you can't predict what Benjamin is going to say about something.

I think many people want from critical theory a framework whose positionality is already known in advance: how you will approach something, what your points of critique will be—whether around certain ideas of globalisation, or the national, and so on.

Recently I've become more attached to the idea that the theory that informs me is not something I deploy or mobilise as a framework; it's something that has already sensitised me. I've been reading it for years and years, so I'm already sensitised by it. It's not a grid I then place on things.

I like to think of myself as a historian who tries to get *in amongst* things, in a fairly agnostic way, when I'm writing about the 1950s and 1960s and what we call the new middle classes. I didn't want to begin with:

"I'm going to absolutely nail these people. Since their tastes are awful. They've really bought into consumerism."

The people who informed me about consumer culture—Jean Baudrillard, Henri Lefebvre, and Roland Barthes to a degree—were from an older generation, older than my parents. As they were becoming intellectuals, they saw the colonisation of everyday life by the commodity, to use Lefebvre's phrase.

By the time I was born, that had already happened. I didn't have that perspective and I didn't particularly want it. I didn't want to stand outside and look down, pointing out everyone's mistakes—that kind of critical position. So, I wanted to go in amongst things in an agnostic way and look at them as they were happening, and *then* afterwards ask: what problems exist here, and how might critical theory help?

The most useful critical theory for that purpose was the theory emerging alongside those developments. So, people like Stuart Hall, writing about classlessness in the late 1950s; Raphael Elkan Samuel, looking at the politics around new political parties at the beginning of the 1980s; and others such as E. P. Thompson and—I'd add—people like Richard Hoggart.

D: To what extent can this critical attitude be seen as political? How close are you to practice in this sense? For example, my Oxford professor, Howard Hotson, who is a distinguished early-modern scholar and a good friend, says that historians take one step back and have a different view on what is going on. He says that this distance is enough as practice, because it can change how others see the world. But of course, critical theory is often closer to political action—not necessarily party politics, but real activism or intellectual activism.

BH: As a professor of cultural studies, I'm in a field that has always claimed to be as much a political project as anything else. Sometimes the problem is that when people hear you say your practice is political, they have a particular sense of time in mind: they imagine it must be *immediately* responsive and that you're giving guidance for the present—"What should we do now?"

Stuart Hall, one of the greatest cultural studies scholars ever, once said that the time of cultural studies might be *delayed*: it might take a long time for certain effects or practices to emerge. So, temporality is important.

I want to be responsive to the world, but I don't want to be merely reactive. I don't want simply to react.

In terms of politics, one of the things I'm interested in is how some of the historical work I've done—for instance on playgrounds—is not a Rankean history (see Highmore 2024). I'm not simply telling a story because it hasn't been told. I want to think in terms of "usable histories". By that I don't just mean "learning from our mistakes", but that there is something unfinished out there, still being worked through.

So, the whole history of experimental playgrounds, for me, is unfinished business. It isn't over, and there's a rich politics that is still usable.

On another front, I've got a book under contract called *Vehement Experiments: Imagining the Humanities at a Time of Competing Catastrophes*. It's about how we do humanities when, on the one hand, the world seems about to burn, and on the other hand the politics of race,

class, sexuality and gender seem to be pulling us apart. How do we think about our work in that context?

Clearly, I haven't finished that book, so I don't fully know the answer. I suspect the answer is actually quite modest. But it does involve thinking about your political commitments and what they mean.

One of my political commitments is influenced by the feminist philosopher Kate Soper, who has written about "new hedonism" and is involved in the degrowth movement. (Soper 2020) Her response to climate catastrophe is that we have to degrow. Not everyone, and not at the same rate: some countries still need to grow to reach a certain level of wealth and capacity. But the wealthy West needs to degrow.

No one will accept that if it's sold purely as loss—you're going to miss out on your computer games, your endless ability to consume. So, it has to be thought of as a *new form of hedonism*, a different kind of enjoyment. I'd like my work to be aligned with that, as well as with what I see as these competing emergencies.

I call them competing emergencies because they can be so deflating: if you're working on climate change, someone asks why you're ignoring racism, and so on. The impossibility of responding to all these emergencies, all these different calls on our attention, really demands humility and modesty about what we can achieve, and an openness to others who are doing the work around racism, around trans lives, and so on. It's very complex.

D: Yes. I remember your* "Sideboard Manifesto"—a sort of introduction to the first reader of Design Culture Studies,** ***where you say that design culture is too complex—but that this cannot be an alibi for not dealing with that complexity. (Highmore 2008; for Hungarian, see Highmore 2014.)

My last question is about the total aestheticisation of the world, or "design capitalism" if you like, in a negative or pejorative sense. We were touching upon this after Anders's paper (Munch 2024), talking about the idea that design was born almost by accident when the culture industry emerged from different totalitarian, romantic and avant-garde projects of merging art and life (see also Szentpéteri 2019).

***There is still a lingering understanding—at least in the Euro-Atlantic part of the world—that design culture is complete: everything is designed, even suffering is designed to be pleasurable, and our consciousness is totally designed, like in* The Matrix.**

I remember you said yesterday, in one of the discussion panels, that you're not simply "against capitalism", and that you don't think this aestheticisation is totally wrong. So, what do you think about these tendencies of diffuse aesthetics, aestheticisation, and this "matrix" of design capitalism in which we live? Some people say that Design Culture Studies, as a critical endeavour, can be a tool—the

red pill—against this total aestheticisation.

BH: Yes—the blue one, the red one! Just to be clear: I didn't say I was *for* capitalism either.

We were also talking about Hal Foster in relation to Anders's paper. Peter Bürger made a similar argument to Foster, probably at around the same time—in the mid-1980s. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Bürger [1974] 1984), he suggests that the critical avant-garde could be seen as the research and development department of advanced capitalism: they're doing the intensive work of experimenting with new forms and products.

My position tends to go back to Lefebvre again. Around 1956 he talks about "the controlled society of bureaucratic consumption". He describes his wife coming back from the supermarket with a bottle of bleach and saying something like, "This really does clean better," mimicking the advert. That's the moment he realised the commodity had totally colonised everyday life—it had worked its way into houses, into consciousness, into dreams.

My position has always been that I don't really buy these totalising accounts. At the start of *The Practice of Everyday Life* ([1980] 1984), Michel de Certeau talks about Foucault's grids of discipline and knowledge becoming tighter and tighter, subsuming us. De Certeau says, yes, I can believe that—but at the same time there's a residue, something else. We are never *only* the playthings of power and desire.

If we really were reduced to an aestheticisation of everyday life—if we were simply simulacra of the commodity—I don't think I'd do what I'm doing. I'd be too pessimistic to bother writing and critiquing.

The question of aestheticisation also came up after Yuriko Saito's talk. There's a problem when we say we're not going to make aesthetic judgements; we're just going to use aesthetics descriptively; and then we say we're against the aestheticisation of politics or of poverty. We need to separate those uses out.

We might need a different word if we're going to use "aesthetics" to describe alienating packaging, beautification, and "nicification". Otherwise, it paralyses us: you can't talk about grief aesthetically, even though I'd like to talk about the aesthetics of grief—the phenomenological, sensual aspects—without feeling that I'm turning it into a commodified experience. So, it's partly a linguistic problem.

For me, the most interesting aspect of "design capitalism" isn't so much material design as the design of the virtual realm. There's clearly work to do on how our worlds are being shaped, particularly around subjectivity, on social media and the requirement for affirmation.

Everyone needs affirmation: you do a good seminar, and it feels great for a while, then the next seminar isn't so good, and you lose that affirmation. But we don't need the kind of affirmation where 300 likes on social media are necessary for something to feel meaningful.

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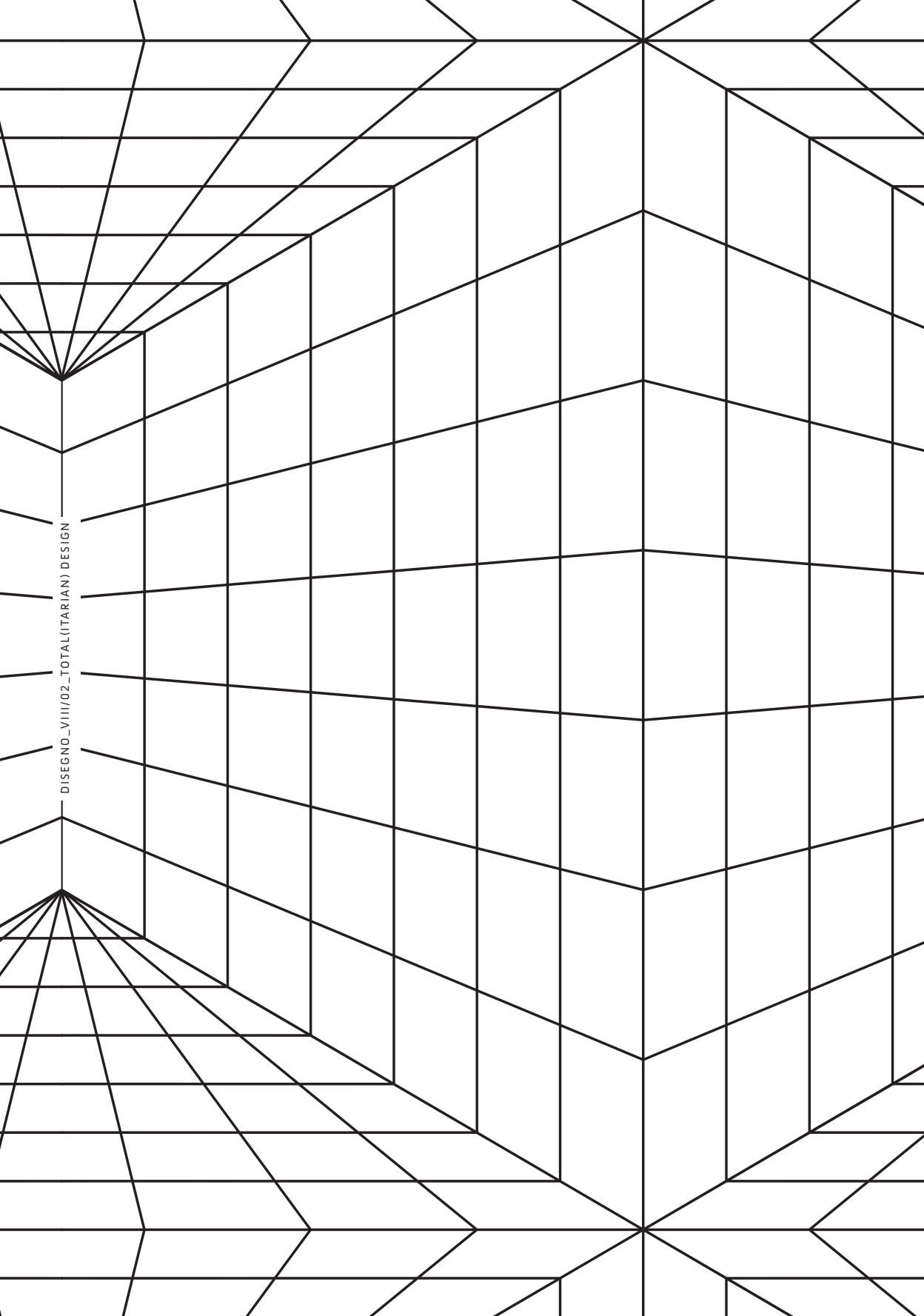
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