Watch this Space: Introducing Hot Debate

Tony Fry

Watch this Space
Introducing Hot Debate

Tony Fry

Hot debate flies in the face of the cool disengagement so favoured by 'hip' designers and their hangers-on. It will court controversy, assert firm positions, expose passion and motivate to adopt a position of bias against a neutral, sit-on-the-fence service industry sensibility.

The debate will be triggered by the presentation of a provocative case/issue/argument. Its life will be the life of the interest it generates (or not). So that multiple respondent contributions can be managed, a word limit of 500 words will rule.

The first debate will hopefully be triggered by the presentation of the Esk Manifesto on the redirection of design in the next edition of DPP (March 2003).

This manifesto has three objectives closely aligned with the DPP project itself: broadening a recognition of, and concern with, design; aiming to generate lively debate; and informing action.

Although there has been somewhat of a revival in the use of manifestos, the choice of this format is not based on their efficacy as a call to action but rather their lack of ambiguity as a marker. A crisp manifesto is a very direct mode of communication. At the same time, manifestos can be a problem.

They are often thought to be passé, echoing a usually failed politics and so are dismissed as hollow gestures lacking any ability to deliver what they espouse. Yet they continue to appear and display an afterlife still capturing the imagination of some, including elements of the design and cultural fraternity – as a flutter of recent arrivals evidence. Viewed in more theoretically reflective manner, one can acknowledge that to evoke a manifesto is to overtly call up the political and to invite the question 'what is its politics?' That design is always political, always ideological, is something continually refused or simply ignored.

While politics and the political appear to be 'naturally' bonded to each other their actual relation is far less secure. There is in fact a whole intellectual tradition of political theory that argues that there is a tenuous connection, or even schism, between the one and the other. Abstractly, this thinking evokes a complex ontic-ontological relation between the political and politics. What this adds up to is an acknowledgment of the independent domains, actions and forms of association between way the political exists (and acts) and the being of politics (institutional and individual 'political' behaviour) – this as they touch and recoil from each other. 'The political' names the perpetual generation, meeting place and consequence of competing forces, while 'politics' denotes an institutional power play which sometimes engages, avoids or feigns a recognition of these forces. At the most general this complex relation can be illustrated by the collision and differences between (i) the way cultural and political modernity created and effected ruptures between, for example, self and other, agency and institution, civil society and the state, literary discourse and law, and (ii) the way the modern world was politically governed. We experience this relation as the gap between the way the world we occupy 'is and works' and 'the ambiguous way the institution of politics, and politicians, represent their agency' in this world (which pragmatically, and according to circumstances, shifts between the assertion of power and powerlessness).

To insert the agenda of the manifesto into this maelstrom will defeat any simple, linear and orderly narrative. The complexity and multivalent character of the story just cannot be corralled in this way. It begs another kind of expositional form and we shall see in edition two if the Esk manifesto will help force it into being.

Tony Fry

Reference

1. Variants of this issue are dealt with in the Introduction and at length in essays in Lenore Langsdorf and Stephen H. Watson et al *Reinterpreting the Political* New York: SUNY University Press, 1998.