Schwerpunkt

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The values of being in design: Towards a feminist design ontology

Zusammenfassung

The values of being in design: auf dem Weg zu einer feministischen Ontologie des Designs

Der Beitrag kritisiert die Art und Weise, in der die gegenwärtige, westliche Ontologie des Designs konstruiert ist, und lotet dabei aus, wie diese das Verständnis von weiblicher Kreativität formt und auf diese Weise das Leben von Frauen beeinflusst. Ausgehend von der persönlichen Erfahrung, Designstudentinnen auszubilden, zielt der Beitrag darauf, die vielfältigen Formen eines seinem Wesen nach unsichtbaren patriarchalen und zugleich kapitalistischen Wertesystems aufzudecken und aufzuzeigen, wie dieses uns – mithilfe von für die Designpraxis essentiellen Prozessen der Verkörperung – als Designer*innen prägt. Zugleich zielt der Beitrag auf eine „De-Designation" (de-design) unserer Ontologie als Designer*innen mithilfe feministischer Epistemologien und Praxen, die Fragen des durch Design initiierten Wandels in einem Stadium der kritischen Plastizität enthalten, nicht zuletzt durch die Bezugnahme auf soziopolitische, sozioökonomische und ökologische Ethiken, in denen das Problem vergeschlechtlichter Ausschlüsse zentral verhandelt wird.

Schlüsselwörter
Verkörperte Werte, Design, Kritik, patriarchaler Kapitalismus, feministische Ontologie des Designs

Summary

This article critiques the way in which contemporary western design ontology is constructed, why this affects conceptions of female creative practice and how this impacts on women's lives. Starting with a personal account of educating female designers, the article aims to unpack the different ways in which ontologically invisible patriarchal and capitalist value systems act on us as designers, aided by processes of embodiment which are essential to design practice. It calls for the "de-designing" of our ontology as designers through feminist epistemologies and practices which keep questions about transformations, futured by design, in a state of critical plasticity by attending to socio-political, socio-economical and ecological ethics whilst keeping issues of gender exclusion at its core.

Keywords
embodied values in design, critiques of patriarchal capitalism, feminist design ontology

1   On asking for "more"

Asking for a feminist design ontology may be considered by some as a bit preposterous. Why not just a feminist design methodology or approach? But if we consider ontology as a theory of being and of reality: the nature of existence, – the need to re-shape

this existence through radical epistemologies becomes more apparent, considering the central tenet of my critique: That design's situatedness in contemporary western design ontology, governed by patriarchy and capitalism, presents an entrapment which curtails our very ways of knowing in design. I thus construct my arguments on the basis of Stanley's and Wise's feminist position that "the relationship between feminist epistemology and feminist ontology is one which positions ontology as the foundation: being or ontology is the seat of experience and of theory and knowledge" (Stanley/Wise 1993: 192) and envelope my discussion in the call to move towards a feminist design ontology which puts into service the plasticity of feminist epistemological contestations.

2   Is it war? I felt like I kept sending them "over the top"

I will start this article with my own, personal account of how it feels, as a female design educator, to prepare female students for the creative industry. As a feminist design researcher I place importance on situated, lived experience, which includes positioning myself in my writing. It is a partial reality and it is not neutral:

I entered academia after spending a number of years in the creative industry as an art director, having studied visual communication design at university. As I started to teach I wanted to make sure that my female students were well equipped to deal with the gender biases they might face once they enter the industry and that my male students would have an understanding of these biases and would hopefully not become part of reproducing them. Over the years I ended up with a broad network of alumni in the industry, and with each new cohort we would go and find the ones who had "made it" in various places. I never exposed them to the ones who "didn't make it", even though some of them were friends. I am ashamed of that. The ones we visited would talk to students about their journey into industry, the hardships and the joys of being young creatives, and they would give tips on how to "become" a designer. This is common practice within design education and is seen as a vital component when it comes to initiating students into the discipline. I was particularly proud of the female students who had "made it". I would often meet former students later for lunch or dinner, to catch up and get a more intimate update on how they were doing.

And I started to get particular stories from particular former students. Female former students.

- How a female who was part of a male/female creative team was in a design pitch and was the only woman in the room. The client handed her his coat and told her what he wanted to drink, assuming she was a PA. This happened in the last decade, not in the 1950s.
- How an award-winning female/female creative team were earning so little as a junior team that with the high rents in the capital they barely had enough money left to eat each month. Remembering my lectures on the importance of "being brave" as women to ask for more money for your work, they went to their creative director to ask to be paid the same amount as the male junior teams. They were told that it wasn't a case of gender discrimination, but that they just didn't seem as "hungry"