

PRAELUDIUM.../ENTER

I discovered Norman Potter's book *Models & Constructs—Margin Notes for a Design Culture* (1990) as I was supervising Ane Thon Knutsen's theory development, during her PhD fellowship here at KHiO. There are two reasons why we found the book attractive, as a place to start: **1)** because it was is workshop based like her work; **2)** because it doesn't ask what design, or a designer, *is* [rather it queries what design, or a designer, *does*].

Not that Norman Potter does not ask this sort of question—*what is a designer?*—indeed, he wrote a book with this title, for which he is perhaps better known than the present volume. I tend to avoid this question—*what is...?*—because if we ask this question too soon, the discussion quickly veers into abstraction, and brings us into a domain where art school does not provide training. But I am also more broadly critical to this.

In many ways, I think of 'what is...?' as a trick-question—*what is feminism, theory, design, ecology?* and a range of other important topics...—because it is asked on assumption that if we go down that alley (asking what things are) we are asking about the roots, or foundations, of things. Like if I ask *What is love?* I can think that I am (kind of) "deep". While I am instead escaping the depth of love: what does love, or the lover, do?

A much more interesting question. *What does design do* in sample range of projects that we find described in Norman Potter's book? And does a designer do in a life-time devoted to the subject? In many ways, the book we have on our list today, is a book about love. About lost love—Potter lost his life's love [a pianist] to his work: one way of reading the volume is that this very book is an attempt to make his love and life understandable to him and her.

He doesn't try to justify himself, though, and does not go for answers. But he conducts an inquiry on his own life as a professional, to lay it bare, for him to judge. From what I know, Norman Potter was a Christian Anarchist of sorts. Yet, the book cannot be reduced to an act of penance, or asking forgiveness (though it does that too). The book can also be read as a celebration of work, since it is clear that his love of work still prevails.

At a different level—which is likely to be of greater interest to us here—*Models & Constructs* is a kind of *Black Book*, in the sense that he does *not* seek *closure* in the projects that he discusses, but to query the

potential that these projects yet may have in store. And, if we look carefully, it is clear that Norman Potter's professional interests are in a state of transition: from interiors of fashion shops moving unto graphic design.

This is both evident from the kind of interest he takes in type and spreads—sketched up as a plan for the book on p. 308—but also because his follow-up to the book, he planned another publication called *Footprints and handouts*. It never came about since Potter died in 1995. Still, it is interesting because his drifting to graphic design, in the book I have in my hands, is both apparent and in statement; and coincides with his artistic development.

Indeed, the play *In:quest of Icarus*—and the poems—are well beyond his work as a furniture & interior designer, but bridged by his letter-correspondence which is also included into the volume. His typographic demarcation between his work as a designer and his artistic activities—the former being in Plantin while the latter is in a type-writer font—is brought into context by his friendship with Anthony Froshaug: the *typographer* (p. 71).

After having read through this book a number of times, my questions with regard to what kind of *beast* it is have all but decreased. Though it most certainly is about design—and serves as a document of reflective practice in design—is it still intended as a design book? Who is it for? Is it written for professionals in the discipline? Practitioners in the design-field? Or, is it an attempt to reveal the potential of a *design culture* to the readers?

The subtitle's reference to 'margin notes' makes it a very cautious step in this direction. Maybe his intention is to provide a foundation for a *cultural education* of designers alongside a larger audience, who are interested in modern art, and citizens of the modern art-world? That is not an unlikely bet. What do people need to know of *making* to educate themselves in culture of modern design?

I think that his might be the adequate question to ask about this book: both as a designer and as a member of a modern audience. If we transpose this to our context here in Norway, what would we ask? Do designers reflect sufficiently *through* their activity of making, to hatch a cultural repertoire they can propose to their contemporaries, and share with them? Do people in Norway—who do spend money on their homes—possess a design culture?

This is the kind of question I think it could be useful to query—in our local situation—that might bring to awareness what design does.

Because there are some deep paradoxes that run here. For instance, how do we understand the discrepancy between the marginal place of design in our public culture—and discourse—and the amount of time and money spent by Norwegians in styling their homes? Are we doing our job properly, in the design field?

If we compare this gross description of design in Norway with the UK—which is Norman Potter's scene—how do we account for the place of design as a culture and discourse in the UK, and the cottage-aesthetics of the mainstream British habitat, with its typical dash of improvised DIY solutions, what we see is a cultural gap. Not a design culture. And the cultural gap is different in the UK than it is in Norway. What does design do?

Are we in a situation where we can neither assume that the contribution to industry nor to culture is significant? What do designers do if that is the situation? If their impact is marginal, and mediate, how do we conceive its zone of influence? If it doesn't make very obvious modern *hits*, how do we currently understand its *impact*? What does design (or, designers) need to do in order to remain a player? We should query our foundations.

INTERLUDIUM.../Background

Hence a short interlude on where we come from. First question—is design a modern thing? Well, the first significant reference to design that I have come across is from the Renaissance. It is from Giorgio Vasari, an architect and artist, who defined design as the 'animating principle of all artistic processes'. So, *rather* than a supplement to art, design is conceived by him at the *foundation* of art. We need to take this into account...

The next thing we need to take into account—which will soon bring us back to Norman Potter—is that design in Italian, Vasari's native language, is *disegno* which means two things: **1) *disegno* means drawing; 2) *disegno* means purpose.** So, this come and go between *how things can be done* and *where it brings us*, is like the bread-and-marmalade of design from day one. Though Norman Potter's book is full of it, it comes from way back (pre-Bauhaus).

What is more, these two principles—learning by doing, and taking stock of where it brings us—is something that we do absolutely all the time through out the practical education at this school: whether you study graphic design and illustration, fashion and costume, interior architecture and furniture design. So, this we

might agree is part of an educational culture in design, with which we make do while at school, or it is our culture of life-long learning.

The latter alternative—life-long learning—is in some sense Norman Potter's option. Design is not a vocational training or a craft, but it is personal education and culture, like the Germans put into the word *Bildung*, which in Norwegian we call *dannelse*. This idea of education as the shaping of our character, and making of personhood, that equips us to partake in the life of the city, and act like educated citizens, is *Bildung/dannelse*.

It is an idea of education that if we want to grow to really become a source of light—to ourselves and to others—we have to put in effort and struggle... and, yes, life-long. Like freedom it doesn't come to us as our birth right. It is when we have put in the work, into demonstrating what design does, that we can say when we see it: *this is design*, or *this is a designer*. If we cannot define it, we know it when we see it. Design culture is real.

OK. So if—according the Vasari's Renaissance definition—*design* queries the *foundations* of *art*, a little bit like *philosophy* queries the *foundations* of science & humanities, how can we expand into design as a ferment of contemporary culture (and not only as an animating principle of art)? That is the question asked by modern design. In contemporary design may have to go one step further than this, in locating design.

For instance, locating design between artistic development and reflection, with a long history of what currently goes as artistic research. Working with aesthetically pleasing *tasks*; while at the same time realising that making stuff constitutes a fantastic *occasion* to get to know things about the world; ranging from nerdy tech stuff to values and outlooks on life. Models & Constructs features a narrative like this: a panoply of *encounters*.

In this particular aspect, one cannot walk around the challenge of *complexity* in design: both managing it and understanding it. I presents us with a real challenge because the research done by designers, more often than not, is into fields outside design. Which means that design probably not is a discipline with clear cut boundaries, but rather is defined by *a hallow of mindfulness around a practical core*. The latter being what *holds it together*.

So, what escapes us is about design therefore be explained by the fact that we may not sufficiently respect the knowledge held by

practice. That making connects. Or, even that making seduces—attracts, brings together and connects—as much as it produces. So, we need to be receptive to what making does. We need to focus on reception alongside production, to determine a role and horizon for a contemporary design. Design today.

This is where another tradition than the one that we have from Giorgio Vasari comes in. Which is *natural history*: the people who walked around with their note-books, drew and described the things that caught their interest, started to make connections across large bodies of collected data, developed their sense of nature as a whole, and felt that whatever they published should be a piece of nature. The tradition of Goethe and Humboldt.

Goethe's Theory of Colour—to which I referred during the kickoff—is a typical example. He made a note-book collection of observations on how he perceived colours during his walks. Then he reproduced the same phenomena in his studio. After which he took a stock of where the experiments had brought him. Was Goethe a *designer*? Well designer and critic Adolf Loos thought so. He called Goethe the first modernist.

As I mentioned in the kickoff, Goethe set his seal on many generations of very different people, with this in common: they mean something in the context of art-school. He was a core reference in the development of Rudolf Steiner's alternative pedagogy, for the Waldorf School. He was similarly a core reference to a group of critical theorists called the Frankfurter School (Adorno, Benjamin etc.). And also to the *Bauhaus* milieu.

A Norwegian translation of his work was awarded with a prize from the German Goethe Institute, for an introduction and an experimental kit developed by a physicist, who taught Goethe's Theory of Colours at our school, in its ancient location, for many years. And as a foundation of experimental theory development, it just cannot be missed. But we are an MA class, this is not a foundation course, so here you are on your own.

A Norwegian philosopher who has picked up on this tradition in modern times, is Arne Næss, who practiced his belief that philosophy and mountaineering can, and perhaps must, be combined. In this work, thought and practice come together in understanding nature itself, and not completely distinct from ourselves. The place he loved, the building of his cabin and his life there, held his thought. A basis for his idea of a personal philosophy.

Was Arne Næss a designer? Some would say that he was at least next/close to being one. I visited his cabin at Tvergstein this summer, and I looked in. It was interesting to see the furniture and arrangement where everything has had to earn its keep—owing to the harsh environment—for the period of 14 years that he lived there on 40m². He created a life-style there designed to allow himself, and his visitors, to learn something with/about nature.

So, clearly, we *cannot* say: *here* is design and *over there* is theory. What I believe to be true—which certainly reflects the fact that I am trained an anthropologist—is that while the practices we can bring back to Vasari's statement are alive and kicking in design, we are a bit rusty in our awareness of *fieldwork* as a part of the discipline. That is, how we get to know our subject matter through *field survey*. Architects are more aware of this than we are.

Do not misunderstand me. There is a lot of activity invested in field-inquiries amongst designers. But it doesn't have a very central place in our professional discourse. I also think that we do have the data. So, it is the travelogue we often do not have. And it is the travelogue—telling and taking stock of the *journey*—which is the foundation of the concept of *theory* in this course.

Chris Thompson wrote a book on the *Fluxus* movements—building up under the legendary encounter between Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama—where he defined theory according to the Ancient Greek sense of *teoria*: which was a journey of young people to a foreign place, encouraged by the home community, who later assisted in integrating the knowledge acquired upon their return. The traveller was called a *teoros*.

Maybe it was a little bit like the *Grand Tour*—the English term for the German *Bildungs Journey*—where young noble wo/men travelled around in Europe, and at Goethe's example, to *Italy*, in order to get to know the world and their cultural roots. This is a renaissance idea, but still living today. Or, at least living well into the 20th century. So, this is *teoria*. That is, the experimental basis of what can and will be developed as theory.

So, this is something that exists in a big variety: ranging from a *Room with a View*—a movie by James Ivory based on Forster's novel, that you may have seen—to a less bourgeois version of the journey, as Norman Potter's journey in workmanship. So, this is a little bit of context. Let's dive in...

CODA.../Purpose

Who says that writing starts with writing, and not images? At school I learned to draw characters before writing them. Drawing, at that time, was also considered to be an integrative part of education and a foundation for literacy: not only the ability to read text, but to read a variety of media. Today the international organisation for education UNESCO calls this MIL (Media and Information Literacy). So let's move.

<image carousel in here>

There is absolutely no doubt that Norman Potter's potato—in the sense the emerged in the wake of our visit to the island last week—is the particular saw-mill that Norman Potter had in his workshop. His entire life gravitated around this machine. His projects, his care of the workshop space, the cultural events that he hosted there, and the professional discussion that went on there. It was a key to the variety he worked on in his projects.

He is quite specific about this. This saw-mill was the Dominion machine. A lethal contraption but essential to the life as a joiner. A joiner is—as I wrote in today's flyer—is a professional denomination for someone working between cabinet-making and carpentry. And it is in this between-space that Norman Potter developed his concepts, projects and profession as a designer. His was a workmanship of risk, and of high stakes.

(If you are reading this after the lecture, you will have noticed that this is where I started in the lecture I gave in the classroom, and worked myself backwards, or rather in a jumbled sequence reflecting, or following, the visual logic of the book rather than following the drift of the text as you see here. The text is OK, in passages even good (perhaps), but in terms of lecturing, it takes too long to get to the point. So, this is evidence for what images do, they categorise and work differently.

The other jumbling device, is one I brought to class and presented towards the end. Sindre stayed behind and wanted to carry out the experiment on the book that he had brought. We quickly found out that coupling the passages we game to with the 20-sided die worked a little bit like a horoscope: it made a lot of sense if you wanted it to. And we also found that by combining the dice with the cards, we would to elements/types of random.

Through the 20-sided die (Norw. spill terning) we had one source of raiding. With the cards —Brian Eno's oblique strategy cards— we had another source of random. What random

contributes is really a set of constraints. You throw (the die) and make a pick (the card) and you have two sets of constraints working together. We found that this double-constraint could be generative of specific outcomes. They resemble creative use of constraints.

Chance methods—creating an ally of chance/random—and constraints have this in common: that you somehow accept them passively and by walking the paths opening up through the this acceptance, you can get some interesting outcomes. One is to connect with the expressive materials. The other is to find interesting possibilities. Ideas and expression appear be closer than they are they are otherwise. Again back to the images.

By saying: I will move to the point of hatching the readability of this book by proceeding visually—or, granting a visual lead in how you proceed—then that is an example of a constraint. It can bring us closer to the visual categorisation that determined how this book came out. But it requires a concentrated approach to what is (the images) otherwise disseminated/distributed in the entire book. And it requires honing *observation* skills

Which is much the purpose of this course).