Design and Violence - Paola Antonelli y Jamer Hunt, MoMA

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Portrait of Henry Ford, Keystone View Co., Inc., of N.Y. Library of Congress (Accessed December 2015)

It is a shock when the mind awakens to the fact that not all of humanity is human—that whole groups of people do not regard others with humane feelings.

Henry Ford [1]

For one year and a half, every week, the MoMA New York exhibited through a Web platform a design –object, software application, project, speculative design, etc.– associated with violence, together with the written response of a person related to it. Starting with a brief essay, the debate opened to any spectator-Interet user willing to join in. Thus took shape an archive on the relation design/violence based on four axes: *Hack, Control, Trace, and Annihilate.*

Archivo – *Design and Violence*

The present review is more a brief mention of the exhibition project *Design and Violence* than an examination of the homonymous book, published in the guise of an epitaph in 2015. Aside from the

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interest and the reflection that arise from the many designs and essays in “>*Design and Violence*, I want, above all, to draw attention to the way it is organised, and to the fitness of the chosen digital media.

The virtual exhibition environment not only facilitates the access to the publications on the Web; it also allows the coming together of various materials, multiple readings, and the necessary participation to tackle such a complex topic as the relation between design and violence. Although it is far from having reached a completely satisfactory solution –or distanced from spectacle–, Design and Violence is, at least, an alternative to traditional curatorship, showing the possibilities of digital editing in regard to other curatorial practices or editing practices such as Re-visiones, beyond the physical space of the museum or the paper.

With regard to the commmon thread of *Design and Violence*, the sentence by Victor Papanek (1971), “There are professions more harmful than the industrial design, but only a very few of them” (Antonelli y Hunt, 2015 p. 10), quoted by the curators in the presentation of the project, is probably what best summarises a possible connection.

Serpentine Ramp, by Temple Grandin

Among the designs included in the exhibition, I will hardly cite a couple of examples. Serpentine Ramp, by Temple Grandin –among the most controversial ones– is the re-design of the circuit that leads cattle to the slaughterhouse, keeping the end away from their sight, thus smoothening the transition and trying to spare cattle from excessive suffering. Moreover, it seems that the meat tastes better, thanks to this ‘low-stress handling system’ –a pretty understatement! Like in the lethal injection, also included in D&V, the supposed mitigation of the process does not preclude serious doubts about their designers’ ethics, as well as the reassuring effects on the conscience of suppliers, consumers, and accomplices of the executions.

Watching the *Serpentine Ramp*, I could not help remembering Henry Ford, who would merit a place of honour in *Design and Violence* if it weren’t centred in the post-2001 period –that is why I wanted to begin the review with his image. Ford shook up industrial design by means of a careful optimization of

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the assembly line, specialisation, a reduction in costs by means of standarisation, and a taylorism ridden at the limit, giving name to a whole era. What is less known –or we may have forgotten– is that Ford drew on the work system of slaughter houses and applied some of the techniques used in the meat industry to the production of automobiles. Reading in his memoirs the description of the Ford T pieces hanging from hooks as if they were racks, it is not hard to imagine.

> Every piece of work in the shops moves; it may move on hooks on overhead chains going to assembly in the exact order in which the parts are required; it may travel on a moving platform, or it may go by gravity, but the point is that there is no lifting or trucking of anything other than materials. Materials are brought in on small trucks or trailers operated by cut-down Ford chassis, which are sufficiently mobile and quick to get in and out of any aisle where they may be required to go. No workman has anything to do with moving or lifting anything. That is all in a separate department—the department of transportation. (2005)

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So one of the salient elements of D&V is what it suggests, where it leads you, and the possibility to follow some of the suggested threads. For example, the catalogue, to which I arrived through a link in the entry dedicated to the design of shooting range targets, is of equal or greater worth tan the comments themselves on the basic design analised: a vampire, a robbery at a liquor store, a terrorist holding a bomb in his arms… are only a few examples.

Examples of training target models from Action TargetTM. Retrieved December 2015 from http://www.letargets.com/

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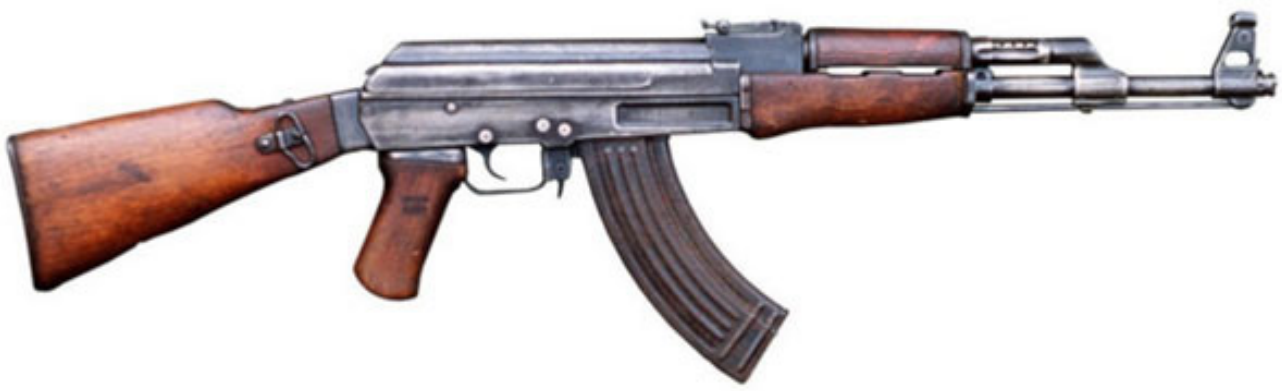
D&V treads a slippery path –it cannot be otherwise– in its endeavour to present within the same space the stiletto heels and the lethal injection, or from a software that allows to calculate the number of slaves work working for you in Slavery Footprint, to ecological bullets, Green bullets, with biodegradable cartridge shells that are good for the environment –taken literally from the description of the bullet. Their virtual exhibition invites the play "what would happen if…" typical of the speculative design also present in the platform (Republic of Salivation or Euthanasia Coaster, for example).



Ak-47 Mikhail Kalashnikov

The infamous Ak-47, although excluded from the MoMA's permanent collection, had to be present in the show. A design that has been in the spotlight on several occasions for its "efficacy" represents what for some would be the epitome of a good design, for its low cost and high reliability. Its exhibition in the museum would border on abjection, but its presence in D&V is nevertheless indispensable. China Keitetsi's and the description of her relationship with the gun as a "daughter of war" complement the accomodating vision of a "well designed" object.

> When I was there, it meant a lot in my life. It was like my mother. It became a part of me, and me a part of it. It was my identity, like my passport. Like, they ask you at the airport for your passport –at that time, if they had asked me who I was, I would have shown them my gun. It became my mother, it was my friend, my protector, and yet I still felt fear every day [as a child soldier]. (Antonelly & Hunt, 2015, p. 214.)

Made up by a variety of different proposals organised as an archive, *D&V* lays out the complex and diverse relation between design and violence, a relation that is updated but that dates way back beyond Ford's days. The fact that the platform is digital does not mean that the exhibition cannot have real effects –and this may be the most interesting point: to unite curatorship with digital writing and rich text.

The real designs and the testimonials, together with the dystopias and the comments, probe the visitor and, although they eschew the conflict of its presence, they keep showing the dark side of the device, asking about the complicity between design and violence. The format and the temporality –successive instead of simultaneous proposals– bridge the gap between the incomparable dimension of individual suffering, the victims, and the devices. The digital medium facilitates new modes of writing/reading –or

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perhaps it would be more appropriate to say new forms that facilitate old ways. Hypertextuality in the digital environment facilitates the possibility of a direct access to different, distant materials, and of quickly moving between texts. This has to do with the way of doing things characteristic of *Re-visiones*; I therefore believe that Design and Violence can have a place here, as another way of thinking with images.

Tobe Hopper (1974), *The Texas Chain Saw* **Massacre**

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Footnotes

[1] Henry Ford's memoirs, available at Project Gutenberg

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