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Design is not for the weak:
on the use in design education

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Abstract: Situated interdisciplinary between Anthropology of Education, Gender Studies, and Critical Design Studies, this essay looks at the idea of use and usability in design education. Engaging in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's philosophical exploration on use and bringing it to the field of design education, I use auto-ethnographic methods to explore micro-politics of hegemonic design pedagogy and its influence on students' subjectivities in the everyday. Furthermore, I follow feminist traditions that lend importance to mundane daily activities as socio-political configurations through the prism of ethnographic thick descriptions. Finally, in this ethnographic exploration I attempt to open the discussion around use, usability, and usefulness to explore further how asking Ahmed's question "what's the use" could unfold new possibilities for radical recentering of design education.
Keywords: Design education. Feminist theory. Anthropology of education. Gender studies.

Design não é para fracos: sobre o uso no ensino de design

*Resumo: Situado interdisciplinarmente entre Antropologia da Educação, Estudos de Gênero e Estudos Críticos de Design, este ensaio aborda a ideia de uso e usabilidade no ensino de design. Dialogando com a exploração filosófica do uso de Sara Ahmed e trazendo-a para o campo da educação em design, utilizo métodos autoetnográficos para explorar a micropolítica da pedagogia hegemônica do design e sua influência nas subjetividades dos alunos no cotidiano. Além disso, sigo tradições feministas que dão importância às atividades cotidianas mundanas como configurações sociopolíticas através do prisma das descrições etnográficas. Finalmente, nesta exploração etnográfica, tento abrir a discussão em torno do uso, usabilidade e utilidade para explorar ainda mais como fazer a pergunta de Ahmed "qual é o uso?" poderia abrir novas possibilidades para uma reorientação radical da educação em design.
Palavras-chave: Educação em design. Teoria feminista. Antropologia da educação. Estudos de gênero*

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1. You are not suited for design

Students in a classroom hang out their sketches meticulously drawn with Pantone markers and put cardboard or polyurethane mockups on shattered podiums during a break. Since there are not enough displays for everyone, we improvise using plastic quite ugly grey chairs back from the 90s' as exhibit space. The professor enters, and we begin our weekly routine. Each person stands up, shortly presents what they were working on, and the critique starts.

First, the fellow students would speak, giving their feedback ranging from helpful technical tips on materials and technologies to sarcastic comments meant to laugh out of the person. Finally, the professor is talking; he takes a mockup to his hand, the one that you would sand until late in the night, getting your whole body covered with a cancerogenic polyurethane dust, the one you would wait tables in two different places to pay for. Almost as if it was nothing, maybe something utterly devoid of any value, he throws it into the rubbish bin or just on the floor. In the end, he knows, and he marks it worthless. He would also mention how you and two-thirds of your class are not suited for industrial design. A week after, the whole year would wear newly designed stickers "Me too, I am not suited for industrial design", it's 2007 – humor, resourcefulness, and graphic design would be our resistance.

Many students, mostly female, would cry during these critiques. The feelings of public humiliation, shame, and hatred mixed one with another. Each ruthlessly criticized project invoked almost physical pain as if it was a limb, an extension of your body, and a direct connection to your soul. They were not evaluating your work, instead you as a designer. You are worth what your design is worth. So following this logic, if your design is 'worthless', you are 'worthless'. Your design is not "good enough", so you are judged useless for a design school.

> "It is not worth you staying" "It is a waste of time."
> "Find another profession, something you would be useful for." "You are not suited for design."

This scene would repeat itself so many times during my undergraduate studies that, in the end, I normalized it to the extent that it would become almost an exclusive model of design pedagogy and affective relations. However, it shouldn't be understood as a totalizing generalization on the state of design education at large since it is bound to a particular historical, political, and social milieu. Nevertheless, in this essay, I try to lend importance to mundane daily activities as socio-political configurations, following

feminist traditions (Katz, 1996). Drawing on my lived experiences as a student and educator, I use auto-ethnographic methods to explore the idea of usability and use in design education and pedagogy.

Furthermore, I want to look at the micro-politics of hegemonic design pedagogy and its influence on students' subjectivities in the everyday. As proposed by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, looking at "use provides a way of philosophizing from the everyday, a way of thinking about what we are doing as we are doing it" (p.34, 2019). Following this train of thought, I will analyze how centering design education and pedagogy around usability and use impacts affective relations in the classroom.

2. You are not suited for design

Usability is a key factor in design. "Form follows function", the famous statement by the US architect Louis Sullivan, seems to reflect a normative notion that anything designed should be determined by its function. In other words, how a building, object, visual look should depend on its desired use (Ahmed, 2019). However, as pointed out by Sara Ahmed, Sullivan wasn't only referring to design principles, rather to – as he puts it – natural law, "that in life, form follows function; indeed, form ever follows function" (p. 68, 2019). This understanding implies entanglement of use and life, and positions use as the main principle shaping the fabric of our life (Ahmed, 2019). But how does this notion of use condition design?

Many would say that the difference between design and fine arts is that design is applied, useful, and functional, responding to external needs, whereas art is introspective, unfunctional. This function and solution-oriented understanding of design is not innate to the field, rather stems from the emergence of the design profession during the Industrial Revolution in Europe and reflects the dominant paradigm of the time, and how it was primarily informed by nineteenth-century modernism, aiming to reshape the environment and society through technology, scientific knowledge, and development (Acha 2009; Escobar 2018). Critical scholars of design have contended that the discipline subscribed to Western modernity's logic of progress, innovation, and growth, while at the same time furthering the exploitation of human labor and natural resources and the strengthening of gender and race-based domination system (Escobar 2018). This resulted in a consolidation of a rigid canon defined by primarily white, male designers from the Global North and the marginalization of other ways of knowing and producing, with indigenous, female, and queer work labeled as "non--design" (Acha 2009; Buckley 1988).

Design education programs became tools to disseminate modernist values of universality, objectivity, and rationality and impose aesthetic regimes. The Ulm School of Design (1953 – 1968) in Germany played a crucial role, laying grounds for many programs across the globe (Fernández 2006). The so-called 'Ulm functionalist model' introduced science and rationality as the core of design education (Betts, 1998). The designer's role was to ensure "maximum productivity, material efficiency, and the cultural satisfaction of the user." (Maldonado in Betts, p.74 1998). Furthermore, functionalism promoted 'fitness for production' and universalism, leaving little place for differentiated individual or social needs.

Some former students at the HfG describe a tight-knitted homogenous community, dressed in simple cut black or grey clothes, in which neither painting nor color were accepted and music only if it followed Bach's mathematical clarity (Jacob, 1988). A closer look at the HfG gives a more nuanced image of the school, which was infused with functional principles and a positivist mathematical-semiotic approach; however, the affective relations very much depended on the lecturer's personality.

Little has been written about Ulm's pedagogy (understood as the method and practice of teaching) on the micro-level, on how feedback sessions were run, and the ties between students and teachers. However, based on my archival research at the HfG in Ulm, looking at the entrance exams, assignments, transcripts of lectures and evaluation, correspondence between teachers and students, the underpinning idea of 'usefulness' seems to be central.

But who decides what and who is useful in design? And what power structures nurture design education? The functionalist model of designing has been adopted almost uncritically by institutions in Europe, North and South America (Decolonising Design, 2018). It resulted in biased and dehistoricized design education, training designers who likely sustain and reproduce structural inequalities through their practice as proposed by Decolonising Design collective. Therefore, following feminist and decolonial scholars, designers have to undergo a process of unlearning "to redirect the imperial epistemology of modernity" (Decolonising Design, p.78, 2019). However, the process of unlearning must begin in the classroom, which, as pointed by feminist scholar bell hooks "remains the most radical place in the academy" (p. 12, 1994). Going back to the classroom from the beginning of the text, let's look at the feedback and how it influences our subjectivities. How does being marked as 'worthless' hence 'useless' affect you as a student? What does it do to you? Sara Ahmed in her book "What's the use? On the uses of use" writes about how use is a technique to fulfill one's potential thoroughly, so "nothing is left idle" (p. 103, 2019). This way, being deemed useless, you

are not worth existing anymore within the educational machine. You slow it down; you are a burden, you decrease the efficiency. So not only is your design useless, and you are useless, also because your design performance is useless, you affect everyone else, and you are spreading the "uselessness". You are weak; therefore, you should cease to exist. You should leave. Design is not for the weak, neither is a design school.

This functionalist, results-oriented underpinning of design education calls for our attention. If you are judged useless, it means that you failed your training. You are not able to perform, to follow the steps of a procedure instilled in you. Maybe your 3d modeling skills are not as proficient, your sketches don't conform to the marker rendering beauty standards, your CAD plans are quirky, or your concept doesn't fit the rigid disciplinary boundaries of 'proper' industrial design. Instead of embracing different subjectivities, this violent feedback aims at 'shaping' the students. "It will make you stronger. Design is not for the weak" – I heard these sentences repeatedly through my design education, directed at my colleagues or me. Looking at the function of these comments, we can see how the use is to mold the students toward a 'useful' end—the useful end as defined by the dominant narratives of design such as functionalism, universalism, individualism. The feedback process is thus a process of molding. In a mass production process, a mold helps manufacture identical elements on a large scale. The molding as in "It will make you stronger. Design is not for the weak. Start over", means shaping in a specific direction, erasing what has come before.

3. Start over!

The intense April sun is piercing through the windows of my studio. Yael, an industrial design final year student, enters holding several cardboard boxes. Her final project revolves around the idea of customized shoes. It is 2012, and customizing mass production is quite a novelty. It implies that the user can customize the product within a given range and make it unique, their own, special. She reluctantly takes out the mockups of her shoes and spreads them on my grey two-meter long desk. Dozens of models quickly cover the whole surface. They are all formal, elegant oxford shoes, characterized by shoelace eyelet tabs attached under the vamp, mostly made from suede calf leather.

I think that my mother would like them. I find them extremely ugly and old-fashioned. Yael explains the reasoning behind her design, the process, and her goals. I am not listening; rather, I start imagining how I would design customizable oxford shoes. How would I do it? I – is in the center – I am in the center – with my ideas about design. In my head, I am already

designing, understood as an intellectual process of conceiving and planning. I am not listening. What Yael is saying doesn't matter; what matters is the show of experience and design prowess. As I begin giving my feedback, I am talking to myself, bringing ideas of how to design a customizable oxford shoe, but not the shoe Yael wanted to design. She is rendered invisible. After all, I hated her design; it wasn't functional, minimalist, didn't follow the modernist aesthetics, instead had a strong vintage look. It was nothing I considered industrial design. It wasn't the good form – the good design I was taught we should pursue. It was nothing good. As I am orating my monologue, I slowly pick up all the mock-ups and put them back in the boxes. It is a performance of power. One after another, the boxes are filled, and I close them and pile them one after another.

"You know what, Yael, it is good that you made them to learn that you will not have to use them. Now you can keep the models in these boxes and start over and never open them again".

"Start over. You will not have to use them" Yael's design seemed useless and should stay in a closed box, far away from our sight. And she should start over. Reset. What has already been done is not for use, therefore illegitimate, invalid, irrelevant. I instructed her to start over. Ahmed writes that "an instruction can be a direction". So by centering design education around use, we orient students along a 'well-used-path', infused by ideas of innovation, productivity, newness and progress. Particularly in industrial design, a discipline centered around production and directly connected to marketability, capitalist modes of thinking and doing fuel pedagogy and education into a result-oriented direction, pointing to a certain fixed idea of what design should be.

This is a process of molding that I mentioned in the first part of this text. Students are being molded to fit in, and evaluated based on the 'quality' of their eg. modelling or rendering skills, of the results. What matters are the results. Yael should start over, as she didn't fulfill my expectations, she didn't design what I wanted to be designed. She didn't follow the path of universal standards and norms that define what is accepted. Furthermore, I instructed her not to use her mockups, to keep them in the box as a reminder of how not to design. Instead of building upon what was already done, from within her situatedness, I told her to start over from scratch, to throw hours, days of work to a box and never open it, deeming the knowledge produced in the process useless.

Yael was meant to be molded into a polished, brilliant cube. To achieve that, we have to 'train' her, orient her toward 'useful, good' design.

Orienting students in a certain direction is a labor of pointing and deciding which orientation is the correct one, it is positioning them towards a pre-defined endpoint, instead of opening to the possibility of not-knowing.

4. Conclusions – on being useful educators

In this essay, I try to explore how the underpinning of design with the idea of use and usability affects education and creates limiting orientations. However, I do not intend to create a totalizing, rigid, static category of use and completely discard it as useless. Instead, I would like to embrace Ahmed's question "what's the use?" and situate both design pedagogy (as the method and practice of teaching), and education (as the process of learning and giving instruction) around this question and "make use of other uses of use" as she advises (p.222, 2019).

Drawing on Audre Lorde's work, Sara Ahmed emphasizes how usefulness matters and is a crucial political address. It becomes a way "of addressing a world" and opening to multiple possibilities, particularly for those who haven't been included in the hegemonic use (Ahmed p.223, 2019). By becoming useful educators, I argue, we can open toward students asking how we can be useful? how can we help? Shifting from the traditional understanding of design education as hierarchical knowledge transfer between master-apprentice (Mareis, 2012), as moulding and shaping towards centering those who are in the 'classroom', who are present, becoming useful to them.

Rather than projecting, imposing an orientation, a predefined end, as useful educators we engage in asking questions, we focus on the potentiality of who and what is given, present in the room. Usefulness becomes occupying and maintaining a rarely used path visible.

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