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Noemi Biasetton

When the Wor(l)d Fails: On Design Education in a Faltering Reality

The question of language has long been central to modern philosophy, particularly in the twentieth century, when thinkers across various traditions began to treat language not merely as a representational system but as the ground for thought and action. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, [1] Ludwig Wittgenstein famously proposed that language and the world are isomorphic—meaning that language functions as a logical mirror of reality, sharing its underlying structure. But in his later work, *Philosophical Investigations*, [2] he dismantles that view. Language, he argues, does not reflect the world: it constitutes it. Meaning is not fixed by logic or structure, but emerges from use—from context, from social life, from the messy entanglements of habit, gesture, and power.

This shift from language as a mirror to language as a practice paved the way for later thinkers—such as Derrida, Foucault, and Butler [3]—to explore how meaning is never innocent, but always contingent, performative, and embedded in power structures. For these theorists, language does not simply describe the world but *does* something: it shapes norms, constitutes subjects, and governs what can

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922).

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell, 1953)

3 Some of the texts that exemplify this shift include: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Les Éditions de Minui, 1967); Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie Du Savoir* (Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

be said, felt, or imagined. Wittgenstein's attention to the ordinary, the contextual, and the unsayable thus resonates with critical theory's suspicion of totalizing systems and its focus on the unstable, contested terrain of discourse. In contemporary theory, what he called "forms of life" become the crucible where meaning is made and unmade.

In design theory, relatively few scholars have explored the deep interdependence between language and design practice. Design is often described metaphorically as a "language of its own," particularly in educational discourse. Nigel Cross, for instance, famously advocated for "designerly ways of knowing," [4] framing design as a "third area" of education alongside science and the humanities. In this context, he likened design learning to acquiring an artificial language—"a kind of code which transforms 'thoughts' into 'words.'" [5] However, this metaphor tends to obscure the fact that design is never autonomous from language. If we follow Wittgenstein's insight that meaning is rooted in use within shared forms of life, then design must also be understood as embedded in (and dependent on) linguistic, cultural, and social practices. Every attempt to treat design as a language "of its own making" runs up against this deeper entanglement: design cannot escape the discursive structures through which meaning, value, and legitimacy are produced.

Among contemporary design theorists, Tony Fry stands out for confronting the entanglement between language, world-making, and design practice head-on. In his renowned book *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy*, [6] he argues that history itself is a "literary construction, from an always biased perspective, that translates various forms of historical materials into a usually academically validated narrative," [7] and that design history, in particular, occupies a marginal and under-theorized position within that landscape. To imagine alternative futures (in design and, more generally, in the world), he argues that we must engage in the "unmaking and remaking" of the very grounds of knowing and acting. [8] This also and above all includes language, intended as the discursive habits, symbolic systems, and inherited categories that structure what can be thought, designed, or even perceived. As Fry writes, "we are the world we invent—it is both our project and our projection of meaning, it is our discourse—and it is nothing without us." [9] Such a view aligns with Wittgenstein's insight that meaning is not fixed in things but arises through use, embedded in shared forms of life. It also echoes the critical theorists' understanding that language is never neutral, but rather shapes the contours of subjectivity, normativity, and futurity. Fry's call for an *ontological theory* of design (which he theorized as Design with a capital D) thus hints at a practice in which making and speaking, designing and theorizing, are inseparable.

4 Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing," *Design Studies*, Special Issue Design Education, 3, no. 4 (October 1, 1982): 221–27, https://doi.org/10.1016/0142-694X(82)90040-0.

5 Ibid, p. 224.

6 Tony Fry, *Defuturing: A New Design Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

7 Ibid, p. 72.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

As I write in mid-2025, we find ourselves surrounded by a new vocabulary that shapes our political and social realities. Terms like "post-truth" or "alternative reality" are well-embedded in our lexicon, with after over ten years from their first emergence; many more, like "rearmament," are slowly creeping in and becoming the norm; others like "genocide" or "post-fascism" still fail to make it to our "mainstream" understanding of the contemporary world, often relegated to "extreme" or "radical" views on the world. What bedazzles me, however, is the language that is supposed to "counteract" the real actions that these words perpetuate. Today, in fact, terms like "sustainability," "inclusivity," and "peace" circulate as hollow signals, fragments of a language that no longer holds the complexities of our world. They are repeated, repackaged, and turned into branding by most Western governments, preserving face value through strategic ambiguity while entire realities collapse beneath them. And, unfortunately, design is very much complicit in this dynamic.

If we are to understand design as a "powerful ontological tool capable of transforming the social and cultural reality, and modeling human experience, subjectivity and life style, and environment and social events," as famously described by Madina Tlostanova, then "design is clearly one of the spheres in which ontology, epistemology, and axiology intersect in a dynamic and creative way." 10 Madina

Tlostanova, "On Decolonizing Design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 51, https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1301017. In this sense, design is fully embedded within the crisis of language, and it manifests it through aesthetics that are never neutral and forms that are never innocent. 11 On this topic see: Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," *Design Issues* 3, no. 2 (1986): 3–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/1511480; Chris Lee, *Immutable: Designing History* (Onomatopee, 2022); Ruben Pater, *The Politics of Design: A (Not So) Global Design Manual for Visual Communication* (BIS, 2016). Design is the ensemble of processes that construct infrastructures imbued with ideology as it mediates, translates, and legitimizes, smoothing over fractures through meticulous typography and speculative optimism. It builds futures no one asked for while disguising the present as inevitable. This is not a call for redemption, but a reminder that design is always a site of struggle, entangled in the very language that shapes our thoughts and slips from our tongues.

Thus, the question that emerges from these reflections is how can design operate within this tension while acknowledging its capacity to simultaneously uphold and dismantle the Agambenian apparatuses 12 Agambenian apparatuses refer to the systems, structures, and mechanisms—ranging from institutions and technologies to language and social norms—that capture, govern, and subjectify living beings. Building on Foucault, Agamben emphasizes that apparatuses are not neutral tools but operate as forces that separate individuals from their potential, producing subjects aligned with dominant power structures. See: Giorgio Agamben, *"What Is*

an Apparatus?" and Other Essays (Stanford University Press, 2009).

of everyday life. Especially when the very structures in which design discourse and practice are meant to be produced—schools and universities—are themselves embedded in strategic uses of language.

In fact, within many European academic and institutional learning environments, two familiar scenarios tend to unfold. On one hand, in schools where design education is celebrated for its "critical approach," the pedagogical structures through which this very "critical" knowledge is enacted often remain largely unchanged. In this way critical discourse is introduced, but delivered through institutional forms that reproduce the very conditions it seeks to challenge. Thus, the classroom becomes a space where radical content is discussed within conservative frameworks: students engage with decolonial theory, feminist epistemologies, and climate imaginaries—yet the teaching logic utilised to deliver that content remains anchored in Eurocentric, patriarchal, and productivist models. This contradiction fosters tension: critique is encouraged but rarely allowed to destabilize the system.

On the other hand, some schools prioritize the professionalization of students through client briefs and market-driven relevance, reducing design to a service function and aligning it tacitly with dominant economic and ideological systems. Even when experimental pedagogies are introduced—emphasizing collaboration, speculation,

or interdisciplinarity—the outcomes often remain constrained by the expectations of capitalist logics: portfolios, deliverables, and employability.

To all of this, the political superstructures that govern European countries must be added, many of which are increasingly infiltrating academic discourse itself. I'm thinking in particular of the repression of student activism in support of the Palestinian cause—through censorship and intimidation

13 Noemi Biasetton, "In the 'Real World', Nothing Is Neutral: Design Schools, Conflict, and the Question of Palestine," *villardjournal* (forthcoming, 2025).

—but also of the broader misalignment between faculty and students in many universities, where the latter feel their demands are not taken seriously into account by their teachers. This disconnect, which ultimately results in a power struggle, often prevents the emergence of a shared space for inventing a new vocabulary from which to (re) invent design practices.

And yet, in these tensions lie openings. Misalignments between what is taught and how, between theory and form, intention and infrastructure mark the edges of new possibilities. Failed projects, unresolved provocations, and refusals to produce are all signals that design, as pedagogy and praxis, is forever under negotiation. As Judith Butler observed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001,

14 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso Books, 2004).

critical voices challenging dominant narratives of war and security faced censorship, anti-

intellectualism, and the risk of being dismissed as hysterical. 15 In particular, Butler pointed to the dangerous re-emergence of rigid binaries—between "East" and "West," "civilization" and "barbarism"—that continue to shape political discourse today.

Butler's diagnosis of the silencing of dissent, and her warning against simplistic oppositions, resonate deeply in our current moment of linguistic exhaustion and political crisis. The difficulty of voicing critique—and the risks it carries—reflects one of the biggest challenges of design education in the present moment: how to create space for radical inquiry and intervention within institutions that often resist destabilization and dissent. If we take seriously the call to reimagine design education as a site of co-creative wor(l)d-making—that is, the generation of new vocabularies and their actualization—then it must also confront its own complicities and crises, committing to the invention of languages and practices capable of imagining otherwise.

To speak with a different voice, design education must become a space not only for producing "things" but for inventing new vocabularies *with* and *through* practice. This demands primarily a rethinking of the purpose of design schools, which cannot remain mere professional training grounds or capitalized knowledge-accumulation systems, focused on market-driven outputs or pre-defined skills. In the face of social collapse, ecological devastation, and epistemic exhaustion, design schools must

become a site of ontological experimentation—a space where we question the very foundations of what is made, how, and why.

Part of what limits this potential is the persistent division between design education and design research. If research is treated as abstract, elite, and "publishable" while education is relegated to applied training, both become impoverished. If design is to contribute meaningfully to inventing other wor(l)ds, education must become inquiry, and research must be pedagogical. Classrooms, studios, and thesis labs should not be sites of transmission but of co-creation—spaces where students and educators collectively invent the languages and practices we need but do not yet have. This means, of course, involving students not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in wor(l)d-making. 16 About this topic, reference is always to: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Herder and Herder, 1970). If, as Wittgenstein and Fry suggest, realities are shaped through language—the words we inherit, contest, and invent—then students must be empowered to interrogate, rewrite, and forge new vocabularies. Design education must cultivate the capacity to articulate what has no name yet, to challenge exhausted scripts like those of "sustainability," "innovation," or "progress," and to experiment with words that make other futures imaginable—and translatable into practice.

In a time of fragmentation and uncertainty, we are not just lacking in knowledge—we are lacking in ways to mobilize it, to put it into motion, to bring

it to life in the world. As Donna Haraway beautifully wrote in her *Staying with the Trouble*: "It matters what we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories." [17] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 12. Design, in this sense, is not just about shaping objects or systems—it's about shaping the narratives and imaginaries that allow those worlds to come into being. And to think in these terms—beyond isolated problems and into the collective mess of reality—requires a new "ecology of practice," [18] Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): pp. 183–96, https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i1.3459. as Isabelle Stengers reminds us. In this light, design education becomes not only a training ground for aesthetics or skills but a site of epistemological experimentation focussed on the relationship between the word and the world. What counts as knowledge? Who gets to produce it? How does form carry arguments? The classroom should not only transmit expertise but provoke doubt, expand vocabularies, and stretch the bounds of what thinking can look or feel like.

Adopting this approach means embracing uncertainty not as failure, but as material. It means legitimizing messiness, emotional labor, interdisciplinary collaboration, and favoring context over

polish. The design school must become a site of social experimentation: not a talent pipeline, but a rehearsal space for different ways of knowing and making. Not to illustrate theory, but to incarnate it. To word what it's not yet sayable, and to design it for worlds yet to come.

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