



INTERVIEW

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Zoë Ryan and the Istanbul Design Biennial

Istanbul

21 November 2013

Last week the Istanbul Design Biennial announced the title of its second edition, due to take place in Turkey next Autumn. Titled "The Future Is Not What It Used To Be", the biennial will examine the role and future of the manifesto within design.

The biennial follows on the heels of the inaugural 2012 edition, which explored the theme of imperfection through exhibitions curated by Joseph Grima and Emre Arolat. The 2014 biennial will consist of a central exhibition, accompanied by a programme of workshops, design walks, film screenings, seminars and panels.

Overseen by the curator and writer Zoë Ryan, the exhibition will examine design's past and potential futures, and how those affect its present. Below, Ryan talks to Disegno about the show's theme.

The title of the biennial is ambiguous. Can you unpack it?

We were interested in a title that could be interpreted in different ways depending on where you live or how old you are. But we're looking at the idea of the manifesto and key moments in history where people re-envisioned what the future might be. If you look back at the mid-20th-century manifestos, they envisaged a future where we'd be living in a certain way. But what have we achieved and what have we not achieved from those?

So it's looking at the past and future?

It's also about today. While researching ideas I read this Paul Valéry quote that runs, "The future is not what it used to be. Neither is the past. Both are in need of reconstruction if we are to have a liveable present." This really struck me as encompassing the feeling of our time. We're in a period of rapid change and political unrest around the world. It feels increasingly urgent to ask "What now? Where have we come from and where are we going?"

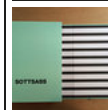
What do you hope to achieve with the biennial?

I'm not quite sure what a design biennial is, but I think it can be used as a platform to think about questions about design. What I'm absolutely certain of is that designers have an enormous capacity to identify, shed light on, help us understand and, at best, let us overcome great challenges. You can instigate change by design. I want to use this biennial as a way to understand how design can be used for critical thinking and how it is not just about tools for solving problems. It's can be about conceptualising problems instead of coming up with solutions.

Why approach these issues now?

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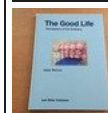
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I think we're in a special moment where design is being challenged. It's quite difficult to even define design. It's multiple disciplines and multiple different kinds of practice and there's not one singular point of view as there perhaps was in the early 20th Century. Now, it's multifarious and in some ways a biennial is an ideal platform, because it is an unwieldy, nebulous, multi-headed beast that you can shape into any kind of thing you want it to be.

How conscious are you of the biennial relating to Istanbul and reflecting its location?

Although this is an international biennial, it is in Istanbul and I think it behoves us to look at surrounding conditions and the types of work being done there and then position that in a wider international scope. But it's a special moment given everything that has happened during the summer and it's been interesting for us to think about that. The first time I went to Istanbul for the biennial was during the protests and political unrest. I really felt it was important to understand what was going on, but also to not be too overly-responsive. We're not sure where things are going and, furthermore, this is a situation going on all over the world. People are beginning to take ownership of what is going on and question and approach things alternatively.

What do you see the role of the manifesto as being?

In the past we had visionary utopian dreams and I think that at the end of the 20th Century those no longer felt relevant. Now, we're in this period where we're trying to figure out what our generation is all about and how we define ourselves. The things we're interpreting as manifestos – the Archigram pamphlets and the strategies which that group set up, for instance – are typically made in a short period of time and there is an urgency about them. They deal with big issues. They can seem very naïve and they contain a lot of violence and destruction. There's a lot that's positive about them and a lot that's negative. But even if they seem naïve and of a particular moment, they circle back into currency and future generations continue to look back on them and be inspired by them.

What treatments of manifestos do you want to see in the biennial?

I'm inspired by how we can rethink historical manifestos and rethink what a manifesto could be. Dunne & Raby's critical design practice for instance is a manifesto for rethinking the potentiality of design. We're not purely looking at texts. It could be an object, a piece of furniture, an action, a provocation, a new system. We're not asking people to dream up new manifestos or reposition their work. They're already making manifestos, it's just in our day and age we don't call them that. I'm looking for projects with strong points of view and which take positions, but they also need to deal with everyday reality. There are all sorts of design and I definitely want a project that deals as much with the marketplace as projects that deal with other kinds of issues.

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The Istanbul Design Biennial will be held between 18 October and 14 December, 2014



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