

The urgency of extra (and nonessential design)

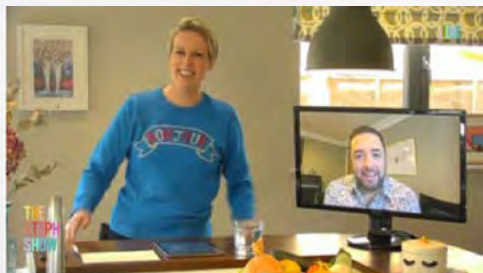
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With concerns of sustainability and waste only growing, the idea of excessiveness and abundance is typically seen as anathema. For political design, excess is usually automatically reduced without question. If something exuberant or outspoken is proposed it often faces scepticism. Much politically-oriented graphic design retains a kind of austerity through its short-termist naivete to 'just get the message across'. Commissioned as a kind of emergency design (with the non-existent budgets of grassroots groups against last minute deadlines, or undertaken the night before the event), the result often utilises – even celebrates – an ad-hoc immediacy.

This is also partially due to the nostalgia of certain styles – the functionalism of constructivist design/protekult, DIY anarcho-punk or the freshly inked silkscreens of May 1968. In my experience with ac-

tivist groups and critically-minded people in art alike, there is a suspicion of excessive beauty, slickness or glamour. These might be seen as 'capitalist' values. But I don't think politically interested designers should cede craft, scale, sensuality, luxury and planning to this arguably reactive stance. Most likely however, we need to redefine what terms like luxury can mean.

Throughout 2020 and into this year, so many activities had their essentialness questioned. Essential travel, essential work, essential shopping or food etc. This has been debated alongside a reassessment of what is truly important in life. A kind of plasticity of reality and the possible has also occurred, best encapsulated by the ongoing creation, adaptation, extending or editing of laws – or the enacting of things that previously would have been unimaginable. For example, conservative governments across Europe eventually provided a financial incentive to stay home from work throughout the ongoing pandemic¹.



¹ However unequally distributed the furlough schemes, its reality prior to 2020 was probably something imaginable only as a fringe demand in the form of Universal Basic Income.

² *Communal Luxury*, Kristin Ross

When everything feels threadbare, limited and pop-up, and with disposable plastic the most common material, a trip to an average cinema can be luxurious. Going to see *Tenet* last September in a cinema almost to myself, I experienced that luxury of space and focused time, a level of Hollywood production value on a huge screen that felt notably different compared to how the summer had been; TV programmes filled with dialed-in content, small-screen viewing experiences no more enjoyable than Zoom, and endless templated Netflix documentaries – slow zooms into archive photographs, standard voiceover, 100% pre-production. The contrast was fantastical. Visual experiences with qualities of depth, scale, richness and immersion can stand out in an amazing way at the moment.

The artistic concerns of the 1871 Paris commune aimed to abolish the division between fine and decorative crafts. One of the finest works of art created during the insurrection was the 'Château Gaillard,' a two-story barricade composed from stones and slumping sandbags, artfully arranged to impede army access.



Tenet, 2020

Napoléon Gaillard (head of barricade construction and a shoemaker) considered his site-specific structures as 'both works of art and luxury'². Why shouldn't barricades be beautiful? Luxurious as well as resistant? Why are they contradictions?

How might we rethink notions of excess and luxury now for utopian ends? Typically, luxury is elitist and morally vacuous. But are all forms of luxury and excess like this? The acceleration of technology has meant that increasingly problems of scarcity (energy, food production, commodities etc.) as well as overwork, can be eradicated, and that everything possible for a universally



Napoléon Gaillard proudly donned his commandant's uniform to have a photograph taken next to his creations which were 'complete with bastions, gable steps, and a façade flanked with pavilions.'

good life is here in the present, albeit held back by political and financial interests.

The Free Association, an experimental Leftist group, described uprisings of political struggle in everyday life as Moments of Excess:

‘Our abstract potential always exceeds and tries to escape the conditions of its production (that is, the capital relation). That’s why we think there’s ‘life despite capitalism’; because as a living, breathing mass, our needs, our desires, our lives constantly transcend the limits of capital...Every now and then, in all sorts of different social arenas, we can see moments of obvious collective creation, where our ‘excess of life’ explodes. In these moments of excess, everything appears to be up for grabs and time and creativity accelerates’

This is a different kind of excess, one where surplus is absolute necessity, the difference between merely surviving and truly living.

In terms of excess or waste, think of the economic stringency in Britain that dictates ‘no excess fat’; no expenditures beyond those necessary to maximise profits, no excess room on tightly-spaced public transport, and no health funding above the absolute minimum. We’ve seen how the logistics of such extreme leanness and divestment leaves no room for unexpected blips, where cramped public spaces are unusable or deadly.

This austerity is merged with minimalism through the protestant moralism of asceticism, which requires a self-imposed discipline and a repression of abstinence – a limiting of worldly pleasures. Pier Vittorio Aureli’s fantastic *Less is Enough* demonstrates how ‘less is more’ is no longer just an aesthetic principle but the kernel of the ideology of something else, something where economy of

means is not just a design strategy but an economic imperative tout court.’

Writing about the Black Death, Michel Foucault noted how there was a ‘political dream’ of the plague, where governments imagined the strict divisions necessary to prevent infection being further enacted across society at large after the outbreak, to retain disciplinary controls. In this way the reality of the present can make us reassess what is possible. Interestingly, he also wrote conversely how people’s dreams and memories of the Black Death gave rise to mirroring imaginations and fictions— alternative forms of uncontrolled and collective contagion. Dreams that



were joyful and festive. Strange inversions of our phobias of infection:

‘A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing quite a different truth to appear.’

- Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*



Ha Ha Ha, Betty Boop (1934)

9 Wall Street is tense. An incident has occurred which threatens to flapperize those yet uncommitted youngsters who adamantly refuse to eschew Jes Grew, last heard flying toward Chicago with 18,000 cases in Arkansas, 60,000 in Tennessee, 98,000 in Mississippi and cases showing up even in Wyoming. It would take a few months before a woman would be arrested for walking down a New Jersey street singing “Everybody’s Doing It Now.”¹ A week before, 16 people have been fired from their jobs for manifesting a symptom of Jes Grew. Performing the Turkey Trot on their lunch hour. Girls in peckaboo hats and straw-hat-wearing young men have threatened reprisals against the broker who dismissed them. The kids want to dance belly to belly and cheek to cheek while their elders are supporting legislation that would prohibit them from dancing closer than 9 inches. The kids want to Funky Butt

¹ *Carlet in the Air-Irene Castle.*

Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (1972)

How can we imagine new forms of excess and collective joy merging in a way that offers new futures for our dystopian present? We might need to think about the production of collective joys in ways that cause an abrupt halting of the status quo, and consider non-human actors too, given the impacts of non-human forms like coronavirus on humans and human impacts on nature. An infectious joy.

In the cartoon *Ha Ha Ha!* (1934), Betty Boop attempts to remove a clown’s sore tooth to no avail. Eventually she makes use of a nearby nitrous oxide canister, which results in the clown collapsing in helpless laughter from the laughing gas. The gas seeps out of their building and into the city, infecting humans and non-human things with hysterics. Everything from typewriters to bridges and clocks are affected.

Referencing this cartoon, the artist Zoe Beloff asks:

‘Could we imagine our own smart technologies, email not mailboxes, computers not typewriters... gone out of themselves... suddenly infused by a wild excess of affect, of emo-

⁹ Author Leopold Tyrmand’s concept of Applied Fantastic is defined as an aesthetic category of things from behind the Iron Curtain dedicated to replicating the glamour of the West, but under an economy that has no need for the marketing of such commodities, as the products were often simply not available to buy.

tion, of libido? They are set free. They stop working! We stop working! The whole city convulses with pleasure and comes to a halt. As Betty dives half naked into the inkwell for just a split second we can imagine bodies and things commingling in new ways.'

- Zoe Beloff,
Emotions Go to Work

This reminds me of the feeling of hiatus that surrounded the early pandemic. Many people enjoyed furloughing, the days at home, the downtime of machines, and assorted not-workings. In addition, much of the advertising here in the UK initially became a kind of 'unapplied fantastic'²⁵ during lockdown – all those advertised things we couldn't buy, all those products and services we wouldn't use.

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Secondly, Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) features a virus called Jes Grew travelling across the US of the 1920s causing danc-

ing, ragtime music and expressions of freedom, against a white supremacist conspiracy that is dedicated to plunder and control. The novel's narrative structure, told with fragments of news reports, movie scripts, photographs, drawings, and historical excerpts formally demonstrates the Jes Grew virus as a personified central protagonist guiding the story, moving from character to character and host to host.

Reed uses the metaphor of a virus to represent the spreading of collective consciousness and solidarity amongst Black Americans. This collective contagion is something authorities and the white establishment feared then, and still do – especially if it becomes uncontrollable and leads to real political change. I'm not disregarding all direct communication, or blithely suggesting these examples should be converted into political graphics.

But isn't there something fundamentally odd about a utopian politics that believes the world can be different, but embraces truisms such as 'just getting the message across' at the expense of social dreaming? There is a place for immediacy, urgency and directness, but there is also the urgency of extra, and a slower, stranger kind of design that is not immediately rationalised. It might be useless or excessive, but that might be its value.

Grounded for good? Closing the doors on face-to-face interviews

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As we are acutely aware, staff roles have been radically reshaped by the pandemic. For the last 10 years I have regularly traversed the globe seeking out international students for courses across UAL's six Colleges, from FE to Post-graduate, and everything in between. Until now that is. Due to ongoing international travel restrictions, the main component of my working remit has effectively ceased to exist and is unlikely to resume any time soon, if at all.

I didn't seek out this particular role - it found me. As a tutor, I had always particularly enjoyed looking through portfolios from both Home/EU and International students. When recruitment deadlines saw applications piling up, I was always happy to volunteer for portfolio reviews and face-to-face interviews. Student portfolios invariably present gems of pure genius, plus the hilarious and horrifying in equal measure. When I was offered the opportunity to do this on a global scale and be paid for the privilege, it was

not something to be turned down. I had no idea what to expect, consulted a few *Time Out* travel guides, and cheerily set off.

In the first instance, the reality of interviewing applicants 'in country' (to use the correct phrase) on was quite unnerving. The standard procedure was to meet applicants in their agents' offices, along with a student counsellor who doubled as a translator. The task has always been more about potential-spotting rather than straightforward talent-spotting, but I was expected to make yes/no decisions on the spot - a rather daunting prospect. Most of these students were fixated on the fantasy of a particular UAL offer. The only obstacle to their ultimate goal was me, and my 'academic freedom' to make the decision. The sheer weight of responsibility and the power to determine a young person's future was something I had not fully contemplated. What rapidly became apparent is that so many of these young people, despite coming from

