

Anyone, Anything, Anytime, Anywhere

This essay represents a revised and edited version of the bachelor's thesis, „In / Between,“ submitted in 2019.

- References:
- Bettridge, T., & Mascatello, L. (2018a, Summer). The Big Flat Now. 032c, (34), 49-70.
- Bettridge, T., & Mascatello, L. (2018b, July 16). The Big Flat Now. 032c. <https://032c.com/magazine/big-flat-now-op-ed>
- Dorfman, S. (2017, September 1). David Rudnick: The ultra-reality of graphic design. Strelka Mag. <https://strelkamag.com/en/article/david-rudnick>
- Schouwenberg, L. (2017). Material Utopias: Innovation as a Premise of Art and Design Education. In L. Schouwenberg (Ed.), Material Utopias (pp. 17-45). Amsterdam, Netherlands: Sternberg Press.

Self, J. (2018, Summer). Power, Flatness, and Nowness in the Third Millennium. 032c, (34), 58-61.

Shorin, T. (2018, September 14). Report: The Diminishing Marginal Value of Aesthetics. Subpixel. <https://subpixel.space/entries/diminishing-marginal-aesthetic-value/>

Strelka Institute. (2017, August 14). David Rudnick. Lecture „Crisis of Graphic Practices: Challenges of the Next Decades“ [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ejp4AvetSA>

The boundaries between art and design disciplines have become increasingly blurred, infinite, and fluent. A common categorization based on functionality and autonomy is outdated and no longer applicable. When categorizing, various factors must be considered, such as the context in which works are situated and produced, their semiotic systems, as well as the so called Funktionsgebung. Very diverse practices among artists and designers, many existing sub-disciplines, different educational backgrounds, points of view and levels of knowledge, as well as the break with traditional platforms and conventions, are making it difficult to define clear criteria and characteristics, resulting in an increasingly complex relationship between both disciplines.

Dutch artist, design theorist and educator Louise Schouwenberg summarizes this phenomenon as following:

„The boundaries between traditional disciplines have become so indefinite that those who might seek such frameworks [...] will soon discover their near absence. In the postmodern era, this ceaseless urge to differentiate oneself both inside and outside these now very diffused disciplines has resulted in the constant shift and expansion of what we define as “art” or “design,” an ever deeper dematerialization and continuous updating of the criteria by which new projects are assessed, or the reverse: an abandonment of formulating substantive criteria“ (Schouwenberg, 2017, p. 34).

Amplified and driven by the drastic development of our media environment in the last decade, today's creative disciplines merge to a single category. Pre-internet, our media landscape operated in a unidirectional fashion, meaning that consumers could only receive, but not distribute. Only the few existing major media channels were able to broadcast most of all media productions, leaving it difficult to explore alternative media. With the advent of the internet, a meshing construct has emerged in which every participant can create, transmit and receive. Aggregator platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter & YouTube offer the ability to share content both immediately and effortlessly with the digital world. When using such networks, everyone can now be a content creator, broadcaster, and consumer at the same time, thereby creating a direct relationship between producer & audience. Today, media companies and individual media creators share the same broadcasting dynamic (Shorin, 2018).

The growing influence of online platforms and the internet in general, can also be observed in our daily lives. Our modern age is shaped by a relativization of distances and the blend of our physical and digital world.

In summer 2018, the German culture magazine 032c introduced the concept of The Big Flat Now, capturing our Zeitgeist and arguing that the boundary between the physical world and the internet no longer exists, while applying this idea onto the creative sphere. Today, we can be everywhere as everyone at all times. Creative industries such as fashion, art, film, and music, including their sales strategies, are merging into one big whole. The underlying idea of this cultural development is to combine disciplines, and the so-called „being both“ manifests itself as a fundamental attitude of creative action and offers opportunities for new approaches (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018b).

„THE BIG FLAT NOW is the infinite plane on which our culture operates today. Its frictionless surface is composed of the obsolete hierarchies that have been melted by the Internet. Its shallowness belies a seamless texture that allows for the rapid collision of ideas. In a fiber-optic landscape, the difference between next door and next continent is a matter of imperceptible nanoseconds. Northern Baroque paintings, Triassic fossils, and yesterday's op-eds are tabs on the same browser. Raised by a global chorus of voices, our identities are voluntary, malleable, and unprescribed. We are everywhere, anytime, and everyone at once“ (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018a, p. 49).

With our contemporary media being increasingly social and showcased on media platforms without hierarchies, cultural productions of all kinds coalesce into what is called „content“. On these platforms a single idea can adopt multiple forms and be expressed in various ways. Everything is possible, as long as it fits into the feed on the screen. The term content creates its own, new and overarching category (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018a).

The amalgamation of categories into a single category, the emergence of cross-continental presence and the overall transformation of our global society through the internet is as well described with the notions of nowness & flatness. Since the shift in our media sphere, we developed a distorted relationship between past and present, which we experience by living with and on the internet. This condition shows similarities to a phenomenon called ultra-reality which is often used in cinema, as graphic designer David Rudnick lectured at the Strelka Institute in Moscow. The major aspects of this notion being the disappearance of linearity, which for example can be found in the non-chronological feeds within our social media platforms, as well as the presence of a single, continuous, and endless frame, which can be explored by moving through the internet - an endless location in itself which is never interrupted. Through complete freedom of movement and technological developments, physical barriers are eventually removed to the point of spatial uncertainty (Dorfman, 2017; Strelka Institute, 2017).

Living in the now, is therefore a multilayered experience, where information from every era of human history is accessible anytime and anywhere. The boundaries between different temporal eras become blurred to the point that the past can even be seen as an alternative present (Self, 2018).

While flatness promotes a democratic, seemingly inclusive approach never seen before, the fusion of disciplines is leading to a de-skilling within those fields. Skills and competences are inevitably no longer in the foreground, but the referencing and appropriation of already existing aesthetics and materiality, is viewed as foundation for new creations. Nowadays, anyone can become a publicist and consequently make economic profit with their content, thus becoming part of the media and creative industries (Self, 2018; Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018a).

With the opening of the media landscape, the increasing possibilities and growing influence of the individual, the gap between the producer and consumer is closing. Through models such as crowdsourcing, consumers decide which product will ultimately be produced and appear on the market. Through creating and sharing of content, consumers themselves become producers (Bettridge & Mascatello, 2018a).

This paradigm shift between producers and consumers deeply influences the aesthetic appreciation of cultural production, as writer and consultant Toby Shorin explains in his article Report: The Diminishing Marginal Value of Aesthetics.

Put simply, any image-based artwork is located within a spectrum between obsolete and experimental. On one side of the scale reside images which are visually trivial to the point of being considered irrelevant, while on the other side, we find artworks which are intangible and difficult for most consumers to understand and are more likely to gain recognition in informed, creative circles. Aesthetically, most of the images we encounter daily fall somewhere in the middle, within the realm of the normal. In marketing, the goal often is to find the sweet spot between the normal and the experiential - the point, which is considered aesthetically innovative, but still understandable enough to the consumer. In practice, this means taking things outside of mainstream culture, streamlining and applying them to consumer products. In this manner, slightly radical styles are gradually integrated into consumer culture and thus normalized. The result is a constant shift in culture, driven by artists, designers, brand strategists, and marketers (Shorin, 2018).

Through new possibilities and eliminated costs for distribution, which resulted from the transformation of our media landscape, new cultural productions in various aesthetic nuances are brought to the market with increasing speed (Shorin, 2018).

Platforms are continuously changing and reducing the aesthetic value of shared media content, by standardizing presentation formats and positioning between personal updates, news, memes etc.. Furthermore, due to the visibility and archival nature of the internet, a full range of aesthetic diversity is available at any time to anyone. While this embraces a possibility for the individual to discover personal novelty, a certain pluralism is emerging in the creative field, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to find something that is generally considered new (Shorin, 2018).