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## Design between old clichés and new concepts

“Reading goes on”: one could scarcely express it better than DIE ZEIT last week! Especially during these times, books are good for the soul and a whole wealth will be published again in the spring. Our rising star: *Not My Thing – Gender in Design* by Katharina Kurz and Pia Jerger. From a young perspective, they satirise common stereotypes and prove that girls do not always love pink and boys do not always prefer blue!

Read an **excerpt**:

### Design: Education and Profession

Functionality, durability, and sustainability: These are just a few of the attributes that factor in to making »good« design. Indeed, the »Ten Principles of Good Design« developed by Dieter Rams in the 1970s are still often quoted mantra-like to this day. But even then, he realised that just as technology and culture constantly evolve, good design also evolves – and this should apply to design education, too. However, »gender« still seems to be something of a blind spot in both design – unless it’s about its marketing – and design education. And this, despite the fact that designers always work for others, be it for a specific target group or with the aim of designing products for all.

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The fact that no designer is or ever can be »neutral« clearly means there can be no such thing as neutral design. One could say that designers are faced with a kind of determinism.<sup>1</sup> Like product users and consumers, we are all saddled with culturally transmitted concepts of gender that serve to orient us in the world. But that, in and of itself, only becomes problematic when these gendered

concepts are obsessively communicated in stereotypical ways and are allowed to become mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Gender in design – in a positive sense – does not mean to be incapable of action; rather it means acknowledging one's own and other more generally accepted notions, questioning and, if necessary, revising them. This could also mean incorporating gender into design, for example, where it may not previously have played a role, or only by way of unreflective assumptions, without any comparisons to reality. Because – and this is also clear – sociocultural concepts can shift.

Gender-sensitive design is one of the key approaches that can help make design more problem or solution oriented but also more innovative, too. In a positive perspective, adopting gender-sensitive or gender-specific strategies involves, above all, not replicating stereotypes that are at odds with the diverse societies we live in, and thus not contributing to their reinforcement. While it is not possible to measure gender in the same »objective« way one might measure the environmental friendliness of a product, we cannot allow sociocultural identities to be treated as biological and »natural«, nor can they be blanked out in a »gender blind« way. This applies to the identities of both designers themselves and product users. Initiatives such as Jaqueline Diedam's »Design for...« board game (2016) and the »Gender Equity Toolkit«, developed in partnership with the AIGA design association, enable these issues to be approached in playful and reflective ways.

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And what about the design profession? As in other occupational fields, the role of women is being increasingly debated – indeed, these discussions have already come quite a long way in many Western countries. In Germany, there has been an upturn in historical reappraisals of women's roles at the Bauhaus and the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, besides two exceptional projects – Frauen im Design: Berufsbilder und Lebenswege seit 1900 [Women in Design: Employment Histories and Life Paths since 1900] (1989) by Angela Oedekoven- Gerischer, and the website and book project »Frauen an der hfg ulm« [Women at the hfg ulm] (2003 / 2007) by Gerda Müller-Krauspe, Ursula Wenzel, and Petra Kellner from the former Ulm School of Design.

(...)

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And last but not least, two facts show how closely the past and present are linked: Firstly, design history narratives continue to be very male dominated, and museums also play their part in this. The explicit reappraisal of the history of women in design is necessary and of lasting importance, but such reappraisals also highlight how these stories are always told as separate narratives, as if they were parallel universes. From the scholarly museum perspective, it would be preferable, for example, not to turn women's stories into »special exhibitions«, but to integrate the findings into permanent exhibitions and therewith the general historiography. The (apparent) invisibility of women also begs the question: Why is this so? Which leads to the second consideration: The fact that the number of females studying and graduating from design disciplines is often higher than males, yet far fewer women are actually being employed in this field. Although the exact reasons for this remains unclear, one thing is certain: Historically, there has been a real lack of female role models in design education and in the professional field.

<sup>1</sup> What is meant here is a sense of powerlessness of having no influence in certain contexts because of their predetermined nature – along the same lines in the design profession, there is a powerlessness rooted in the inescapability of shaping as well as not being able to shape cultural practices, as Daniel Martin Feige similarly describes.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Ulrike Müller, *Bauhaus-Frauen. Meisterinnen in Kunst, Handwerk und Design*, 2009/2019; Staatl. Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Tulga Beyerle and Klara Nemeckova, *Gegen die Unsichtbarkeit. Designerinnen der Deutschen Werkstätten Hellerau, 1898 bis 1938*, 2018; Elisabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler, *Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective*, Berg. Universität Wuppertal, 2019; Gerda Breuer and Julia Meer, *Women in Graphic Design 1890–2012*, 2012.



## Nicht mein Ding – Gender im Design

HfG-Archiv / Museum Ulm / Kurz, Katharina / Jerger, Pia

German / English  
 212 pages  
 200 photos and graphics  
 Swiss brochure with flaps and  
 soft-touch feel  
 17 x 24 cm / 6.7 x 9.4 in

A bench for breastfeeding in public space, a hijab for competitive sports, a bicycle saddle that is easy on the prostate. Boys prefer blue and girls love pink? What does gender have to do with design? And what is design "for all"?

On the search for answers to these questions, the publication takes a look at various aspects of our everyday life: public space, playing and education, medicine and health, cosmetics and household. The juxtaposition of contemporary and historical design stances, of critical, playful, innovative and provoking solutions of applied design research and results from extensive cooperations afford insights into a multi-layered topic.