

What Design Can and Should be Doing in the 21st Century: Ten Proposals

by Amelie Klein

A man wearing eccentric spectacles stood at the start of Modernism. Le Corbusier – the architect famous not least for the owl-eye glasses he wore – unleashed a storm with the Pavilion de L'Esprit Nouveau at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925. The collective outcry that this two-storey building caused was one of the few unifying incidents in an art fair otherwise shaken by fierce competition and rivalry. Art Deco fought back as Historicism once again threatened to raise its head, traditionalists stepped into the ring against progressives and there was rivalry among the participating – and non-participating – nations. Germany for example, had only been invited shortly before the exhibition was due to begin and because of this wouldn't come at all to begin with.¹

Of course, all the uproar had only very little to do with lacquer cabinets and geometric ornaments. In 1925, the Ruhr district of Germany was still occupied by French and Belgian troops. In summer of the same year Hitler published *Mein Kampf*. And 1922 was the foundation year of the Soviet Union (the young state's exhibition pavilion in Paris was as radically free of ornament as that of L'Esprit Nouveau). Seven years after the end of the First World War Europe was busy re-establishing and reorganizing the balance of power. The world as it had been until this time had ceased to exist. Meanwhile, the new world that was only beginning to take shape was bringing to light new forms of cultural expression: the pioneering architecture of Le Corbusier, for example, and his furniture, which was not yet a product of assembly lines in 1925, but looked for all the world as if it was.

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Ninety years after the exhibition of 1925, the world stands again on the threshold of a new era. The Munich sociologist Ulrich Beck, who passed away on 1 January 2015, coined the term “Second Modernism”² to describe our situation. The geopolitical and economic balance of power is being re-ordered precisely as it was ninety years ago, but this time around on a global level. And as was the case back then, we must also ask ourselves what cultural

expression these upheavals of our time will bring with them. What is design able to provide when confronted with the digital revolution and new production methods such as 3D printing, crowdsourcing and the sharing economy? What should it do in the face of the mountains of garbage that the utopia of mass production that Le Corbusier longed for has dumped on our doorsteps?

It is a fact that many of the answers to these questions are emerging or already to be found in the Global South; particularly in Africa. By happy coincidence, here too we see a man with eccentric glasses. The eyewear-sculptures of the Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru are a powerful metaphor for the change in perspective that is so urgently needed today in the face of global developments. But this insight has not yet found its way into contemporary design discourse. Design from Africa is as massively under-represented in international showrooms and exhibitions as it is in the museums and galleries of the world. And when, occasionally, discussion turns to this continent, the tone is the same as it has been for hundreds of years: patronizing. The usual exhibitions covering subjects such as arts and crafts, recycling or humanitarian design all reproduce the old image of Africa we cling to – that of the failed continent.

An article from *The New York Times*, “Let the poor have fun”, provides an idea of how one-sided our notions often are. The New Delhi-based commentator Manu Joseph was caustic from the first line: “They can't do without the farmer story.”³ A poor farmer in India is on the verge of selling his harvest too cheaply – until his smart granddaughter goes online and checks out the current market prices for him. The farmer's story is a symbol of all the good and important ways in which the internet can rescue India. But, Joseph reminds us: “Too many people presume that what the poor want from the internet are the crucial necessities of life. In reality, the enchantment of the internet is that it's a lot of fun. And fun, even in poor countries, is a profound human need.”⁴

In the world of product design the myths are not (always) woven around the poor farmer, but for example, around the women's collective in the village, which can look back on “an incredible tradition of basketry” (or, as you will, beadwork, pottery or weaving). A host of designers from the North sets out to rescue these threatened handicrafts and they develop products hand-in-hand with African villagers in the course of two-week-long workshops – products that can hold their own in the international design circus. One wonders whether the village women really need help of this kind. And if they do, then there is a follow-up question: are there not already enough designers available on the continent who can do the job at least as well, if not better?

The fact that living and working in Africa can be fun (and not only when a EU-financed mother-and-child centre has been opened); that there is a plentiful supply of creative people who enjoy living there, are producing excellent work, are not on the point of leaving everything behind them to set off for Europe, but want to change their continent from within instead – none of this fits into the image that most of us have of Africa. All the clichés are too consistently present and firmly rooted in our minds: the corrupt dictator, the hungry child, the mute servant and the noble savage. These stock figures are framed by an impressive landscape bathed in golden light. “Readers will be put off if you don’t mention the light in Africa”, the Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina warns in his satirical essay “How to write about Africa”.⁵ “And sunsets,” he says, “the African sunset is a must. It is always so big and so red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical – Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces.”

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Of course no one would deny for a moment that there is corruption and hunger in Africa – and also impressive sunsets. But the danger that is hidden in these images is what the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of a single story”.⁶ “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”⁷ That’s a

shame, because it is interesting and well worth knowing that over 650 million mobile phones were registered in the whole of Africa in 2012; more than in Europe or the US.⁸ Also, a single app from Lagos was downloaded two million times in over 180 countries within a single week.⁹ And that Nigeria is the second fastest growing market for champagne worldwide. Only the French drink more.¹⁰

The question of how one should, may or can talk about Africa is of focal importance when, like the Vitra Design Museum, one is planning an exhibition about the continent. The South African journalist and art critic Sean O’Toole points to Binyavanga Wainaina’s irony and humour as one authentic way of discussing serious issues, the other way being the rediscovery of the ordinary,¹¹ as the South African author Njabulo Ndebele suggested back in 1986. For non-Africans, O’Toole adds, a certain level of sensibility is recommended. “I don’t think it means that it [Africa] is a place that cannot be spoken about or is unspeakable, because then we would just be perpetuating the trauma. You know, the key word is sensitivity,” he says. “I think it’s very simple. There’s a history that precedes [the ideas and attitudes represented by the objects in the exhibition]. How does one sensitively, not work around it, but incorporate it into the fabric of what one is trying to do as a project?”¹²

But before we approach the objects, ideas, attitudes and the history behind them all, we should perhaps first try to recognize who we are. You can put on a new pair of glasses, but you can’t shed your own skin and jump into another, no matter how hard you try. The author and artist Ima-Abasi Okon asks whether a non-African will ever succeed in presenting this continent correctly: “However, in the depiction of a black/African image will they or anyone external from this centre ever get it right? Despite what angle they approach it?”¹³ A logical answer must be: probably not. But on the other hand, what do we mean by “get it right”? An image that is complete? Representative? Neither is possible. This continent is simply too large, too complex and varied with its 54 nations, over two thousand languages and cultures, over a billion inhabitants with more than thirty million square kilometres of space at their disposal. In any one city such as Johannesburg or Cairo there is far more design diversity than can ever be fit into a single exhibition. And if “right” then for whom? Even if the solution were to be acceptable for Ima-Abasi Okon – would it suit the rest of the continent?

What *Making Africa* offers instead is a new history, a narrative that quite possibly has not yet been heard. One possibility among many for seeing this continent: a suggestion, a hypothesis. This approach emerged in the

course of hundreds of discussions, which the Vitra Design Museum had over a period of some 18 months with theorists and practitioners from across the entire continent and beyond. 47 of them met with the museum’s team at think tank meetings held in Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi and Johannesburg, we met another 25 people for interviews in South Africa, Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria, Germany and Senegal. All of these discussions were recorded and selected excerpts from them can be found in this catalogue. We visited designer and artist studios, fashion ateliers, architectural practices, museums, galleries, festival centres, theatres, hacker spaces, tech hubs, fairs, exhibitions and conferences. We were supported and advised in all of this by a 14-member expert advisory board; and most of all by Okwui Enwezor. In addition to his continuing work as the director of the Munich Haus der Kunst and his preparations for the 56th Venice Art Biennale, for which he will be the artistic director, he regularly found time to meet with us. Enwezor had a decisive influence on *Making Africa* as the advising curator.

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We were given a great deal of encouragement and support in all of our discussions, but we also had to accept plenty of criticism. Above all, the title of the exhibition was hotly debated. Why Africa? Why making? “That sounds as though Africa doesn’t even yet exist”, the architecture theorist Annie Jouga, in Dakar, said to us. The artist Jackie Karuti used almost exactly the same words in Nairobi: “It is as if we will first have to create the continent.” In the face of so much contradiction the working title was long in discussion. After a long back and forth and many changes in position, we eventually decided to stick with the original version, not least on the advice of Okwui Enwezor.

When the Congolese philosopher Valentin Y. Mudimbe published *The Invention of Africa*¹⁴ in 1988, the work was greeted as a “milestone in African studies.”¹⁵ Africa, Mudimbe said, is per se a colonial construct. The societies of pre-colonial times would clearly have been aware of belonging to a social and political structure,

which included neighbouring peoples, or comprised an entire region such as West Africa. But an awareness of the continent as an entirety had never existed. This changed with colonization. The Europeans interpreted Africa in the course of their interaction with the different parts of the continent, and did so very much in terms of it being a single and physically unified whole, and not just in geographical terms. Africa was “different”, and speculations were made about it, while exploration took place and investigations were carried out into how this otherness of continental dimensions was also manifested in biological, social and cultural spheres.

Mudimbe did not limit his criticism to discourse with the west. He argued further that an African intelligentsia had emerged to play a part in the colonial administration of their countries, a group that in the course of their travels inside and outside Africa had met with people from other parts of the continent and as a result had taken on the perspective of the colonial powers. But the specific result of having assumed this external perspective and seeing the continent as a single unit proved to be a strength. All the major Pan-African movements, such as Léopold Senghor’s *Négritude*, had their origins in this – and with them the most powerful cultural manifestations that stand against a colonial understanding of Africa.¹⁶

Okwui Enwezor follows the same logic in the new definition he provides for the verb *to make*. “We must understand the political dimension of *making*”, he said in an interview for this catalogue, “*Making* as a kind of subversive act, as the exploring of new attitudes, concepts and industries.”¹⁷ The act of making something, and thus to physically produce, to build, Enwezor contends, is elemental, since it questions the concept of industrial mass production. This is not something that should be misunderstood or seen as an alternative born out of hard necessity, especially in times like these when Africa is being flooded with mass produced cheap goods: “We must think again about concepts such as recycling, remodelling, impoverishment or informality, in order to be able to transfer them usefully into the present and to help us overcome the image we have of all the deficits, which we associate quite generally with Africa.”¹⁸

The potential of this statement, not only for Africa but for design in general, is overwhelming. Design has been in the pay of the market economy for far too long, and it is high time for a new pair of spectacles with which we will once again be able to see clearly, and as a consequence, learn to think along new lines. As we encounter the social, political, economic and technological upheavals that are lined up ahead of us, it is no longer enough to produce a new chair or design a pretty poster. Le Corbusier

was already aware that design is more than simply another sales argument, and one can see this quite clearly in Africa: design may be the expression of social change, or it may itself be changing society.

Design is interdisciplinary

Le Corbusier was convinced that the cause of this change is the machine – assembly-line mechanics, or in other words, industry. In the 21st century, however, our machines have become much more complex. What we are up against today are high-performance computers and digital production methods. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that we are now only at the very start of this digital development. “All forms of oppression are connected!” is a graffiti slogan that can be seen in the office of the activist and artist Jim Chuchu in Nairobi. The graffiti presents a complex reality in a simple form, one that confronts us all and not only in the field of technology. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, the successful are those who can react flexibly. And a flexible person is someone who has mastered many tools.

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The first thing one notices when confronted with creativity in Africa is how very interdisciplinary it is. Chuchu himself is the best example here: He is a filmmaker, photographer, artist, graphic designer, musician and founder of the arts space The Nest. Many works that have been presented within the scope of *Making Africa* are in grey areas, they cannot be clearly allocated to specific design disciplines. Products, furnishings, art, crafts, graphic design, architecture, urban planning, photography, textiles, fashion, film, music, analogue

and digital work – they all blend into one another. This makes it quite clear that the term design, as it was defined in the Modernist era, is no longer adequate. In an age where the issue is the designing of complete systems we will need to think more comprehensively about design. And we will also need to be capable of working with more than one tool.

Design is collaborative

We must take leave of the myth of creative genius, an individual producing endless of masterworks in series, conceived one after the other by a simple kiss of the Muse. The 21st century is collaborative. This can all happen in a singularly analogous manner, as for instance in Dakar, where creative people of all kinds gather to join up and work together on a project-related basis under the roof of a collective named Les Petites Pierres. The opulent photographic work of Fabrice Monteiro – costumes, sets, etc. – is created within this framework. And often, the people involved in the creation of a work do not even know one another; they are united solely by a common objective. Ushahidi, for example, was a reaction to the widespread political unrest that spread through Kenya following the elections of 2007. An online map was produced by a collective, and was used to witness and follow violent events long after all other forms of public reporting had collapsed. The Ushahidi software is now employed in crisis centres around the globe – recently, in the wake of the earthquakes in Haiti and Afghanistan.

Design is decentralized

Projects like Ushahidi clearly demonstrate how small decentralized units in large-scale networks can react with greater success to complex problems than large, singular, centralized ones. Dinosaurs are not as nimble as shoals of fish. It is in Africa that we have first been able to see clearly how mobile telephones are superior in functionality to fixed-system telephony, how small solar energy cells are better than big power stations and how M-Pesa is better than the banks. The mobile money transfer system, introduced by the Kenyan mobile phones provider Safaricom in 2007, functions with impressive simplicity using a network of local M-Pesa agents, who may also incidentally be selling petrol, groceries or newspapers in their shops. The

desired amount is paid in at one location and it is paid out at another on presentation of a code that is sent out by SMS. Some 25 per cent of Kenya’s gross national product is now handled by this means.¹⁹

Design is urban

Despite all of this decentralization there are nodes and centres in networks in which the activities and impulses are denser and occur more swiftly than in the periphery. By the mid 21st century 65 to 70 per cent of the world population is expected to be living in cities, as the prominent urban researcher Edgar Pieterse says in an interview published in this catalogue.²⁰ Design will ultimately be called upon to react to all the resulting challenges. The powerful influence that cities and the urban environment exert on creative work can already be seen in Africa today. Kader Attia, Bodys Isek Kingelez, Vigilism, Michael MacGarry, Mikhael Subotzky, Meschac Gaba, James Muriuki, Peterson Kamwathi – to name only a few creatives: their work all revolves around the city. Proposals like Justin Plunkett’s corrugated iron skyscraper are highly speculative, of course. Yet projects of this kind still comprise an approach towards the social, economic, political and cultural realities that we face in the densely settled world of the city.

Design is informal

Tahir Carl Karmali, Dennis Muraguri and Tonney Mugo also have much to say about the city. Their installation, more than four metres long, is comprised of two cogs. One of these – the significantly larger one – symbolizes the city in its formal best. It shines, glitters and radiates energy, if only on the first superficial glance. The small cog represents the informal city; we see rust and corrugated iron. These two different parts are, of course, geared for working together, and it is the small, shabby and informal city that is the driving wheel for the formal one.

We see a very similar principle at work in furniture and product design. We already have the two gears at work here today. The significantly larger one represents traditional industrial production; the other is the maker culture. They both still seem to have very little to do with one another – the conveyor belt, and the little studios and workshops in which people around the world, but above all in the Global South, are busy producing

things, whether with analog or digital tools. Very soon, however, we are all going to be makers. We will be printing out products and furniture on cheap but powerful 3D printers (or we will have these printed out for us) – all items which we will have customized appropriately from online patterns to meet our personal needs. When this has happened, informal maker culture will be driving formal industrial production.

Design is process oriented

Defko Ak Niep, a FabLab in Dakar, shares its backyard with a large apartment block, a mosque, a professional training centre for girls and a nursery school. A community garden has appeared on this formerly neglected plot of land since April 2014. The initiators of *Defko Ak Niep* – a saying in the Wolof language which means “do it together with others” – are not primarily interested in creating a snug little spot for their lunch breaks. What is much more important here is establishing shared neighbourhood work – and shared pleasures. The principle is to make the sharing economy perceptible and something to experience. Our results-oriented, performance-based society only accepts the value of processes very unwillingly. Yet despite this we have no choice but to understand: in times of change, the way is the goal.

Design is creating the bridge between analogue and digital

The sharing economy is a good example of a question that frequently goes unanswered today: how do we bring our analogue existence into line with the digital age? Naturally we can still exchange and share things offline – as people do with the *Defko Ak Niep* garden. Yet altogether more thrilling opportunities are opened up for us through the internet. The *BRCK*, Ushahidi’s latest inventive offering, is a tool that lets us get on with chasing bits and bytes through the World Wide Web, undisturbed by all the adversities of analogue existence. Using solar energy and a simple SIM card, this box – about the size of a brick – creates online links in places where there is no regular connection to be had to a main power supply or to the internet.

Design recognizes new possibilities in materials

Okwui Enwezor speaks in his interview about the Tokunbo market in Lagos, where the main items for sale are second-hand goods from the west.²¹ *Tokunbo* is Yoruba for “from abroad”, but it also means “second best”. The precision with which this word pinpoints the negative connotation recycling still has today is extraordinary: this is all garbage, but at least let’s make the best of it. The Ghanaian artist El Anatsui has chosen discarded bottle caps as one of the main components in his work. The large format wall hangings he produces from these materials fetch prices of a million US dollars and more on the international art market. In the face of such prices and values, how can we still speak about recycling – and thus garbage or the second best? What we must do instead is begin to regard the mountains of waste we have created in the course of industrial mass production during the 20th century as material resources. We can no longer meaningfully use terms such as “used metal”. We must simply refer to metal. Full stop.

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Design has a social and/or political agenda

The political dimension involved in such a reinterpretation may well seem to be ironic. For decades now the North has been shipping a major share of its wastes south to Africa. The Africans are now no longer sitting on vast garbage heaps, but they have valuable resources at their disposal. One wishes that design would more

readily show willingness to take up a critical position, as is done by the Y’en a Marre movement in Dakar, about which the curator Koyo Kouoh reports in her essay.²² A basic prerequisite for this would be, of course, for design to finally square up to its social responsibilities and not exclusively those of the market.

Design has courageous visions

This is what Le Corbusier wanted to achieve with his bold designs: he wanted to change society. Even if no one could ever have imagined this in the Paris of 1925, in the midst of the outcry surrounding the Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau, the modern movement manoeuvred itself onto a progressive path and changed our world forever. Ninety years later we can see an image of Paris in 2081 printed on a scarf of the US–Nigerian fashion label Ikiré Jones. It is a vision of the future in which visitors from the new Africa attract more attention and admiration than the Eiffel Tower. “As immigrants, they were derided and looked down upon; [...] That was years ago. Now they sidled through the crowds of onlookers as lenses pointed in their direction and tourists asked each other who they were.”²³ This is a striking vision. But not one that calls for the use of rose-tinted glasses. A little clear sightedness is all we need.

¹ Catharina Berents: *Kleine Geschichte des Design. Von Gottfried Semper bis Philippe Starck* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011).

² Ulrich Beck: “The Zeitalter der Nebenfolgen und die Politisierung der Moderne”, in: *ibid.*, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash (eds.): *Reflexive Modernisierung. Eine Kontroverse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996) 19–112.

³ Manu Joseph, “Let the Poor Have Fun,” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/opinion/let-the-poor-have-fun.html?_r=0> accessed 01.02.2015.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Binyavanga Wainaina, “How to Write about Africa,” *Granta*, <<http://www.granta.com/Archive/92/How-to-Write-about-Africa/Page-1>> accessed 02.02.2015

⁶ “The Danger of a Single Story,” TED, <http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=de> accessed 02.02.2015

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 min 59 sec.

⁸ “Information and Communication Technology is Revolutionizing Development in Africa,” World Bank <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2012/12/10/information-communication-technology-revolutionizing-development-Africa>> accessed 10.02.2015

⁹ Read more on this in the essay by Avinash Rajagopal and Vera Sacchetti on p. 50.

¹⁰ “Champagne: Nigerian Chic and European Doldrums,” *Euromonitor International*, <<http://blog.euromonitor.com/2012/10/champagne-nigerian-chic-and-european-doldrums.html>> accessed 02.02.2015

¹¹ Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele: “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa”, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 1986, pp. 143–157.

¹² Sean O’Toole, in an interview with the author, conducted in Berlin on 28 June 2014.

¹³ Ima-Abasi Okon put the further question: “More importantly will we let them?” <<http://www.another-Africa.net/design/advertising/episode-spezialthe-daily-African-revisit-where-are-they-now>> accessed 02.02.2015

¹⁴ Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Andrew Apter, “The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge by V. Y. Mudimbe. Review”, in: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol 21, fasc. 2 (May 1991) 172.

¹⁶ I would like to extend my thanks to Prof. Dr. Till Förster, founding director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, for introducing me to Mudimbe’s work.

¹⁷ More on this in an interview with Okwui Enwezor on p. 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Why does Kenya lead the world in mobile money?” *The Economist*, <<http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/05/economist-explains-18>> accessed 11.02.2015

²⁰ For more on this see the interview with Edgar Pieterse on p. 58.

²¹ For more on this see the interview with Okwui Enwezor on p. 20.

²² More on this in the essay by Koyo Kouoh on p. 42

²³ See the description of this project on p. 328

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