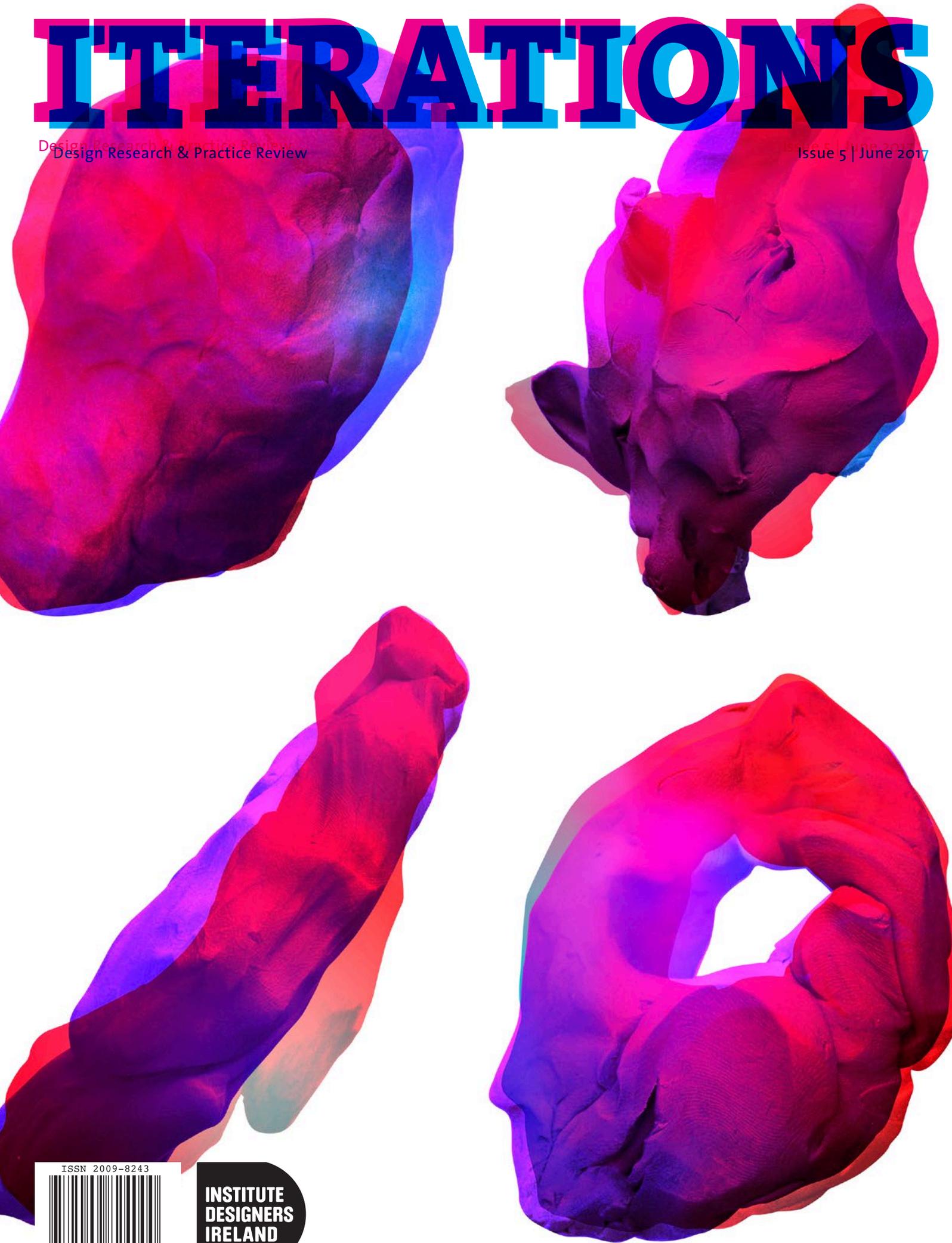


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Richard Hudson-Miles / Leeds College of Art

# The Politics of Interdisciplinarity:

## An Interview with Experimental Jetset

This article transcribes an interview with the Graphic Design collective Experimental Jetset from Amsterdam, Netherlands. The interview was responsively structured, with three famous quotes from revolutionary critical theory guiding the discussion; one from Karl Marx and two from Walter Benjamin. These quotes suggest that disciplinary specialism is a consequence of the capitalist organisation of society and that interdisciplinary or collectivised practice is the method for achieving radical social change. The interview considers the ramification of this suggestion for the contemporary visual communicator. It also considers the distinctions between art, design, theory, practice and politics today, and how a creative design practice can be sustained at the intersection of all the above. The interview, which started out as an informal e-mail exchange and retains the orality of that dialogue at times, has been slightly revised to fit, under a process of co-authorship, within the conventions of a scholarly academic journal. References and brief commentary have been added in parentheses only when the author thought it might be helpful for readers outside the field of art and/or design.

*'The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour [...] With a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist [...] to some definite art, making him exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc.; the very name amply expresses the narrowness of his professional development and his dependence on division of labour. In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities'* (Marx, 1970 [1846]: 109).

*'Commitment is a necessary, but never a sufficient, condition for a writer's work acquiring an organizing function. For this to happen it is also necessary for the writer to have a teacher's attitude. And today this is more than ever an essential demand. A writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody. The crucial point, therefore, is that a writer's production must have the character of a model: it must be able to instruct other writers in their production and, secondly, it must be able to place an improved apparatus at their disposal. This apparatus will be the better, the more consumers it brings in*

*contact with the production process - in short, the more readers or spectators it turns into collaborators'* (Benjamin, 2007 [1934]: 98).

*'Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. [...] This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art'* (Benjamin 2007 [1936]: 242).

**Q:** In 'The German Ideology' (1846), Marx suggests that disciplinary specialism is a direct consequence of the capitalist organisation of society; in other words, the division of labour. However, in a utopian post-capitalist society such divisions would cease to be meaningful and wither away. For creatives, this would mean that the professional designations of artist,

Richard Hudson-Miles is an artist, activist and academic, based in Leeds and Wakefield, UK. His recent publications (before hyphenating his name in a post-marital gesture against patriarchy) include Miles, R. (2016) 'Indisciplinarity as Social Form: Challenging the Distribution of the Sensible in the Visual Arts', *Message*, Vol. 3. Pp 35-55; (2016) 'Illustration, Education, Revolution: Lessons from Rancière for the C21st Illustration Student', *Varoomlab*, Issue 4, pp. 25-40; (2015) 'Benjamin, Googlization, and the Withered Typographic Auratic', *Message*, Vol 2 pp. 11-20. These articles argue, in various ways, for a politics of design that critically re-evaluates the accepted hierarchical stratification of the visual arts, and by extension, the stratification of capitalist society itself. This interview is an extension of that project.

designer, curator, writer, and so forth, would become redundant, as would any related boundaries, prejudices, rivalries and antagonisms. Therefore, I am interested in the extent to which interdisciplinarity, as methodology for practice, can simultaneously be a proposal for a more effective form of collective creative labour and a vision of a non-alienated society of co-collaborators and equals. With this in mind, how important is the concept of interdisciplinarity to your work?

*We know this quote well. We remember that we used it once, in an interview a while back – but, being the militant vegans/vegetarians that we are, we ‘butchered’ the quote into “man being a gatherer in the morning, and a painter in the afternoon”. Or maybe we actually talked about “growing crops in the morning, and painting in the afternoon”. Whatever it was – it was very unethical, citation-wise!*

*On the one hand, the idea of treating painting as ‘just an activity’ seems like an attractive way to break down the barriers between art and ‘the everyday’. That way, there’s no ‘judgement of value’ involved. It suggests a sort of egalitarian (non)order, in which the painter, the designer, the carpenter and the plumber occupy the same social stratosphere and can exercise the same sense of authorship and control over their lives.*

*There’s another category, which we feel quite sympathetic to, which involves people who define themselves in a narrow way, but actually have a very broad practice. For example, painters who also do installation and video work, creating new connections between disciplines, or writers who curate, edit and publish, thus expanding the definition of writing. We often define ourselves as ‘graphic designers’, working within the ‘traditional’ infrastructure of graphic design, but at the same time we also include, in our practice, activities such as writing, editing, researching, teaching, creating site-specific installations, etc. To us, the idea of taking the traditional, narrow definition of ‘graphic design’, and then filling it with a very broad spectrum of activities, feels very relevant. In a way, we think it’s more subversive.*

**Q:** On that point, Walter Benjamin, in ‘Author as Producer’ (1934) suggests that for artists to influence social change, it is not enough simply to make overtly political or

protest art. Instead, progressive practitioners need to develop a way of working which actively changes the dominant relations of production. Cross-disciplinary, collaborative practice is one (perhaps subversive) method of achieving this. Your manifesto, ‘Disrepresentation Now’ (2001) seems to suggest a new model of ‘non-representative’ design practice, documented in ‘Statement and Counter-Statement’ (2016) which could not be reductively labelled as ‘political design’, yet brings design practice and politics together in a much more expanded and progressive way. Could you explain this approach in a bit more detail?

*In ‘Statement and Counter-Statement’ (p. 313), you can read a fragment of an argument we had with a curator that relates to this question. In short, the point of the curator was that design and art became more and more inseparable, under the influence of neoliberalism and postmodernism. In her opinion, art was more and more forced out of its ‘autonomy’, and into the commercial arena – and that’s where, in her view, ‘art meets design’.*

*We argued the complete opposite. In our view, it is neoliberal forces that are driving art and design apart (parallel to the specialisation on the workfloor, the growing division between manual and intellectual labour, etc.). For us, the starting point of modern art/design can be found in tendencies such as De Stijl, Bauhaus and Russian Constructivism – collective movements, which focus on the synthesis of arts, and even more importantly, the synthesis of art and the everyday. [For the unfamiliar, a useful visual introduction to the aesthetics of these seminal design movements, which perhaps demonstrates the similarity of the projects of avant-garde ‘design’ and ‘art’ in the early Modernist period, can be found in the classic artists’ book by Hans Arp and El Lissitzky (1924); Also, Cramsie (2010) pp. 175-203. – R. H-M.]*

*In our view, it is the rise of late-capitalism/post-modernism that isolated artists, by creating this speculative illusion of ‘autonomy’ – rarefying (and thus neutralising) the idea of creativity by focusing on the myth of the individual, gifted, almost god-like artist. This movement (from the creative collective to the gifted individual) also has a lot to do with the move that modern art made right after World War Two, from Europe to the United States. Instead of collective movements with their ‘messy’, potentially ‘dangerous’ political leanings, the Americans*

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- Experimental Jetset is a small, independent, Amsterdam-based graphic design studio, founded in 1997 by (and still consisting of) Marieke Stolk, Erwin Brinkers and Danny van den Dungen. Focusing on printed matter and site-specific installations and describing their methodology as “turning language into objects”, Experimental Jetset have worked on projects for a wide variety of institutes. Their work has been featured in group exhibitions such as ‘Graphic Design: Now in Production’ (Walker Art Center, 2011) and ‘Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language’ (MoMA, 2012). Solo exhibitions include ‘Kelly 1:1’ (Casco Projects, Utrecht, 2002) and ‘Two or Three Things I Know About Provo’ (W139, Amsterdam, 2011). In 2007, a large selection of work by Experimental Jetset was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for inclusion in the MoMA’s permanent collection.



would rather focus on the idea of the artist as an individual, gifted rebel, such as Jackson Pollock. And this more Anglo-Saxon ideal, of the 'Ayn Randian' lone wolf (see *The Ayn Rand Institute* 2017), became the new global model of the artist. [A typical recent example of the popular reception of Pollock as rebellious, 'world-historical' individual can be found in Jones (2015) – R. H-M].

*This difference, between the Continental and the American mindset, is still apparent. As school kids in The Netherlands, it was quite natural for us to encounter, in a museum, a painting by Mondrian hanging next to a chair by Rietveld. Maybe there was even a poster by Piet Zwart (see Cramsie 2010: 221-2) included in the room and a maquette by Van Doesburg (183). This all made sense to us – it seemed clear that all these pieces were all manifestations of the same creative moment. However, while working for museums in the US (designing graphic identities, for example), we encountered a totally different mentality – with every move that we made, there were always curators reminding us that “this is*

*an art museum, not a design museum”. It’s a way of reasoning that’s completely alien to us. [On this point, the Gerrit Rietveld Academie website (2017) clearly emphasises the interdisciplinary nature of art and design education, with a mandatory first year of generalised study, akin to the Bauhaus Vorkurs, before specialism – R. H-M].*

**Q:** We share a mutual interest in Benjamin’s essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), which despite its age, remains a continuing source of productivity for artists, designers and academics. Personally, in an age where the UK is turning its back on collectivism in the form of Brexit, and the rise of Neo-Conservatism in the US, this text seems more vital than ever. Though not strictly Fascist, these new forms of right wing populism do seem to find expression through aesthetic forms, such as social media memes, reality TV shows, Trump’s baseball caps and mass rallies, posters, etc. All of these give the illusion of a participatory culture and perhaps the

Experimental Jetset 04 /04 /06  
 Ten years of posters 30 /05 /06

10 years of licorice  
 10 years of popmusic  
 10 years of reading  
 papers  
 10 years of staying up  
 all night  
 10 years of feeling  
 guilty  
 10 years of excuses  
 10 years of Fed-Ex  
 10 years of sunshine  
 10 years of posters  
 10 years of aspirin

Kemistry Gallery



promise of social change, whilst ultimately maintaining the status quo. I wondered if you could wrap up this discussion with some comments on the ongoing relevance of Modernist theory to your practice, or indeed the politics of design generally? Although we know, with all of our minds and hearts, that there is no such thing as 'autonomous art', and that there is no difference between art and design – we do have to admit that we sometimes understand people who still find it important to think in ultimately reactionary terms.

Our starting point will always be that early-modernist moment. Somehow, we feel we should try to recapture that moment, resurrect it, or invoke its spirit – thereby hopefully destabilizing the world as we know it and reach the utopia that was promised to us. Within such a mindset, it is only natural to simply reject the division between art and design.

However, we are living in a much more cynical world, and in a neoliberal reality

above all. Within that reality, there are also right-wing forces going against the autonomy of art – trying to turn art into an economic instrument, and artists into 'creative entrepreneurs'. Instead of turning the everyday into art (the early-modernist position), these forces are trying to turn art into the everyday.

Within this reality, we admit that we also feel it's important to defend this whole notion of 'art pour l'art', and to protect this bubble of 'autonomy'. Even though we ultimately don't believe in these notions of autonomy – we do believe they serve a certain purpose in a reality in which neoliberal forces are dominant. It can certainly serve as a protection for some artists. It might be simply too early, too premature, to make a push forward and propose a total synthesis of art and the everyday. We are certainly trying, in our own subtle, and maybe naive way, to achieve such a synthesis in our own work.