Design, Difference and Democracy

Is design democratic?

What do design and democracy have to do with each other? I will explore this question, which has indeed accompanied the practice of design since its very beginnings in modernism, using the concrete example of the DemokratieWagen (Democracy Bus) of the initiative mehr als wählen (more than voting), which seeks to offer a practical solution to the global crisis of democracy. For this purpose, I will first have to define the basic concepts of this question, in order to address the concrete design process of the 20-meter-long public bus in a second step. Finally, I will give an answer to the question of the democratic nature of design, its specific aesthetic-political dimension, within the scope of my possibilities, which at the same time should answer the question of what good design is.

But it all starts with the initial question: Is design democratic? This is a question I have been grappling with for some time now (Kosok 2021). By doing so, I am joining a modern tradition of design. But it is also a question that I ask myself as a graphic designer, not least in a very practical way, and whose answer is thus also motivated and informed by this specific perspective. Both, my personal perspective as well as the furtherance of a modern aspiration, have something to do with my education. After all, I studied at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach am Main, which was not only a supporting institution of the interdisciplinary exhibition and knowledge transfer project Making Crises Visible, but also - quite consciously - places itself in a modern line of tradition with the HfG Ulm and the Bauhaus. Both were also colleges of design, which through their work and their design wanted to democratize German society again after each of the two World Wars, 1919 and 1953. In this endeavor, as well as in the spirit of functionalism, they consequently had to provide answers to my question before I even got around to asking it. For example, the sponsor of the HfG in Ulm was the Geschwister-Scholl-Stiftung, and the university was co-founded, among others, by Inge Aicher-Scholl, the sister of Hans and Sophie, who had been executed by the National Socialists as members of the White Rose. In their memory and through political education at the new university in Ulm, German post-war society was to be democratized. Design was supposed to play an essential role in this. According to modern designers, design is democratic because, like democracy, it was shaped by the three revolutions - politically by the French one, materially by the industrial one, and finally, as the perspective of a designing subject, by the revolution of the way of thinking, the Enlightenment (cf. Arnold 2018). Thus, design is the continuation of this very Enlightenment in materialized form: egalitarian world improvement. Abstract democratic equality would get its concrete form through the design of a "democratic functionalism" (Selle 2007, 175), which, freed from the ballast of aristocratic ornamentation, would allow the essence and function of things to emerge clearly and undisguisedly, as well as for everyone equally. The " Good Form," as described by the first director of the HfG Ulm, Max Bill, was pure functionality that ultimately became universal, functional beauty in itself (cf. Bill 2014). With this modern design, all class distinctions, hierarchical social structures, and the ballast of history would be overcome. Already in the century before the founding of the HfG Ulm as well as before the founding of the Bauhaus, Louis Sullivan emphasized in the aftermath of his popular functionalist formula "form follows function" (Sullivan 1963) that in following this norm, which he immediately wanted to elevate to a law of nature,

nothing less than the egalitarian spirit of democracy, which seeks its expression in organized social form, is revealed (cf. Sullivan 1947, 99).

However, these modern answers to my own question whether design is democratic, which are briefly touched upon here, suffer from certain unquestioned preconditions despite their emancipatory claim, the disclosure of which makes a link between design and democracy at the very least questionable; indeed, anti-democratic traits of modern design become apparent to some extent. Three points of criticism can be roughly cited against classical functionalism: (1) The first is the intellectual-aristocratic as well as paternalistic perspective of the modern designers, with which they wanted to advance the improvement of society. Only their knowledge of the essence of things, their interpretation of function as well as the good to be realized in design was to be implemented in its purest form as a highly efficient rationality of purpose. (2) Following this logic, it was then also necessary to get rid of all that was superfluous in all areas of life. This tendency toward totalization is a "mutation" of democratic claims, as Claude Lefort also describes it: "the idea of a homogeneous society, transparent to itself," which no longer knows any outside, even in its design (Lefort 1990). (3) Finally, the basis of this democratic functionalism was the problematic assumption that abstract democratic equality could be implemented and realized precisely in this totalization in concrete material form as a good. However, precisely this abstract equality turns into its exact opposite when it is set as the goal of design: into the coercion to conformity, the uniformity of a "tyranny of the majority" (Tocqueville 2014).

Democratic functionalism in the tradition of the Bauhaus and the HfG Ulm thus does not yet provide a satisfactory answer to the question of whether design is democratic, since this designed "dictatorship of the philanthropists" (de Bruyn 1996) reduces democracy to the efficient design of the world in which we live as well as to the postulate of democratic equality, which must also be realized materially. At the same time, functionalism limited good design to an essentialist idea of function and thought it could limit the open-ended process of designing. With this understanding of good design, however, it overlooked the aesthetic, anti-essentialist, fashionable, and stylish parts of design, which show up in all design as openness to change, as potential re-design, as the becoming and passing of functions in a form. These aesthetic parts of design and of a contestable good that is to be realized in design, that can be aesthetically transformed by design, are equally essential parts of democracy as an aesthetic form of life. If one wants to understand design democratically, one must not separate its aesthetic dimension from a functional one and subordinate it to the latter, since this decisively misses an aesthetic concept of democracy and thus already poses the question incorrectly.

This is the missing concept that needs to be clarified before the question can really be answered. Juliane Rebentisch describes such an understanding of democracy as well as a democratic culture of freedom in The Art of Freedom (Rebentisch 2012). In it, Rebentisch defends "the aesthetic, differential logic of democracy-ethically as well as politically." For democracy is the form of government in which democratic freedom means not only that of political institutions and procedures, active participation in elections, but rather, in its aesthetic-political sense, "concerns the conduct of life as a whole" (ibid., 16). This democratic freedom and its culture are the decisive resistance to the mutation of democratic equality, which as a basis must necessarily remain abstract. Through this, the good to be realized remains contestable, since any concretization can only ever be a proposal. In her "apology of aestheticization" (ibid., 11), Rebentisch furthermore emphasizes that the aesthetic transformability of ethics and politics, the questioning and changing of respective definitions of the good, as well as the respective shaping of democracy itself, is granted an "ethical-political right" (ibid., 21). In a democracy, this possibility of aesthetic transformation is given "a priority over any determination of content" (ibid.). Democracy is the form of government that must open the necessary space to the questioning of the good and thus to the possibility of its transformation. In Rebentisch's words, "A democracy that had immunized

itself against the aestheticizing transformation of its ethical-political self-understanding would no longer be one" (ibid., 374).

Designing Democratically

I want to base my question of democratic design on this concept of democracy as a form of life. After one of the terms included in this question has been clarified, the second one –design– must be looked at more closely, in which its democratic essence is to be shown in an aesthetic way. To this end, I will turn in this second part to the specific case of the DemokratieWagen. The process of designing this bus and its result exemplify some of the pitfalls and challenges of democratic design, but also its qualities. Not only does the bus bear democracy in its name, but its design already conveys an aesthetic understanding of the contentious character of this form of government and life.

Even the design process was based on the insight that democratic design is very difficult to realize by one person alone. The task of designing the bus was directly linked to the design decision to do this collaboratively: with Anna Sukhova, who designed the typeface for the bus, and the illustrators Jan Buchczik, Nadine Kolodziey, Fabia Kuhlmann, Doro Liesenberg, Verena Mack, Benedikt Luft, Tatiana Tverdokhlebova and Helene Uhl, who contributed their figures and characters. It is important to distinguish this process from a participatory design process, which could apparently be an obvious answer to the question of democratic design. For instance, design theorist Ezio Manzini and design historian Victor Margolin also propose participatory design as democratic design in their open letter Stand up for Democracy (Margolin u. Manzini 2017). In addition to improving democratic processes and institutions ("design of democracy"), enabling participation in them ("design for democracy"), and making political institutions transparent and neutral ("design in democracy"), they argue that it is participatory design itself that has a democratic character ("design as democracy"). However, the participation of many in the design process does not automatically make it democratic. In their appeal, the authors overlook the fact that participation in design processes is mostly used as an instrument for legitimizing decisions made in advance. Although participatory design could be understood as a response to the paternalistic perspective of modernity, this design approach shares modernity's focus on efficiency and problem solving. Participation in design issues seeks to understand them as problems that can be solved by consensus rather than as contentious as well as "hairy objects" (Latour 2001). Moreover, the "nightmare of participation," as Markus Miessen (2010) titles it, can itself produce terrible things, believing that the ethical challenge of design has already been solved by the participatory process (cf. Feige 2019). Thus, this design, too, can easily tip over into social technology that justifies itself through process alone, and in this it repeats modern essentialism–only this time in its process. If modernism had believed that the good of design could be conclusively determined before the design process, participatory design believes that it can accomplish this through the form of the process alone. However, the fact that a purely formally determined good in the name of the majority can also produce racist, patriarchal, environmentally and ethically highly problematic solutions does not need to be elaborated here.

Because participation in the design process harbors this tendency to neutralize necessary decision-making, which must also be enforced against the will of the majority and within a democracy as contestable propositions, the decision was made against participation and in favor of collaboration in the design of the DemokratieWagen. Collaboration in the design process means here that this process, as well as what is to be designed in the first place, could be radically questioned from the outset, because all designers met at eye level and as equal parties. The fact that this could also lead to disputes and friction was thus programmatically intended. For it is precisely through this friction, which arises from the perspective of the many and the differing, that the bus was designed to visualize the idea of democracy as an inconclusive process of

negotiation. It is precisely through the difference of the illustration styles, which were nevertheless united on the surface of the bus, that the value of plurality in democracy, which is based on precisely this abstract democratic equality, becomes apparent. This can only be brought into a concrete form in this indirect form of reference.

This coming together of the diverse was extended to an additional level of design. Thus the figures of the individual illustrators were subdivided, mixed and recombined so that each figure consists of several styles and different worlds, each figure refers to the possibility of a multitude of its own alternatives. Each figure thus visually includes within itself its own other. If one understands democracy as an aesthetic form of life, then democratic freedom also means that it grants us the space to distance ourselves from society and also to distance ourselves from ourselves, so that we also have the freedom to return to society, to a new self-image and a new relationship to the world. Democracy grants its subjects this space of freedom and enables the transformation and the expansion of their community. A moment of distance from social determination is thus a productive part in the practical life of democratic subjects (cf. Rebentisch 2012). The figures on the DemokratieWagen are not only created in conversation, but in a discussion or dispute with each other. They additionally take up the possibility of the dispute with oneself, which is the condition of the possibility of a dispute with others, which in turn does not end in hardened opinions and pure confrontation. Thus, the illustrations of the DemokratieWagen also show that our individual freedom is not only always already socialized, but that our society maintains its openness through our very individual freedom.

The illustrations of the DemokratieWagen are not only related to democracy in terms of content in their discussions, but in their form as well as in the process of their design, the necessity of politically significant differences as well as of unavoidable, controversial decisions is revealed, which, however, deliberately exhibit themselves in their design as contestable, and sometimes not quite perfect decisions. This is also the case, for example, in Anna Sukhova's idiosyncratic design of the typeface for the DemokratieWagen. In her design, the typeface itself is the nucleus of a contradiction. In this, the font and the illustrations can be read as democratic design as well as a reaction to a post-democratic decay that shows itself in the loss of contestability of decision-making on the one hand, and in the loss of the significance of differences on the other. In addition to the anti-democratic essentialization of the good to be realized in design, it is its market-compliant as well as post-democratic neutralization that design thinks it can remove from contestation by delegating decision-making and emphasizing its own powerlessness and irrelevance. In contrast, design must be understood as a significant stage of negotiation in shaping our way of life. The democratic value of decision-making, revealed as contestable settings in design, leads me finally to a perspective on all design opened by the concrete design of the DemocracyCar. Therefore, I will conclude by explaining it in terms of a particular design decision of the DemokratieWagen in order to make a general point. The question of whether design can be democratic without being participatory or merely optimizing the processes and institutions of democracy can be answered at the same time by answering another question: So why is the DemokratieWagen actually black and white?

The democratic being of the design

A pragmatic answer to this question would be to refer to the problem of party colors, which would automatically have degraded the DemokratieWagen to an election campaign vehicle. This would be the weak justification for this specific design decision. It would be weak because the entire color spectrum would still remain as an option in the supposedly democracy-affine colorful design of a rainbow. But why black and white was chosen nevertheless is supposed to explain a political dimension of the design, which finally also affects modern design. In this way, even the design of these philanthropic dictators can be seen as democratic design. What may sound paradoxical,

however, captures the essence of democratic design: designers can be creative dictators and still produce democratic design. The decision to design the bus in the favored color spectrum of hip designers ("all black") has something intellectually aristocratic about it, which is clearly evident in the coolness of the design, and yet it is democratic at the same time. Jacques Rancière also points to the "solution of an often discussed problem" (Rancière 2005, 117) that is closely interwoven with this paradox in "The Surface of Design." Here he explicitly refers to design modernism. The critics of industry and superficial advertising, he says, are repeatedly faced with the challenge of having to explain "the personality split of [their] creators," who place the very activities they criticize "under the sign of a spiritual mission," namely, "to give society a spiritual unity in the rational form of the work process, manufactured products, and design" (ibid., 128). The solution to the problem is to radically elevate design to an aesthetic-political practice of shaping the world. Rancière is fascinated by how "through the drawing of lines, the arrangement of words, and the distribution of surfaces, divisions of communal space" are simultaneously made, a "certain configurations of the visible and the thinkable" as well as "certain forms of inhabiting the sensual world" (ibid., 107). According to him, the triple surface of the graphic - the surface of "equality," that of "transformation," and that of "equivalence" - is "an aesthetic and political division of the common world" (ibid., 124). Building on this, Rancière's definition of the "division of the sensible" (Rancière 2002) can furthermore be used to determine an aesthetic-political dimension of all design, through which design as one such division of the sensible, by showing its designedness, points to a potential designability, thereby inscribing an awareness of contingency into our everyday life (Kosok 2021). To see things as design is to see them as changeable things that can always be designed differently. This very same thing can be applied to a representation of democracy on the DemokratieWagen and underpins the strong rationale for this design decision. For while it is true that a first impulse would be to follow a certain convention, one that always depicts democracy as a bright spectrum of colors. Sometimes-as Bernhard Bürdek aptly puts it-form simply follows convention rather than function (cf. Bürdek 2015, 294). But precisely when we speak of design, we mean, after all, this fundamental, potential designability, the surface of transformation described by Rancière, in which "words, forms, and things can exchange their roles" (2005, 124). This still concerns the things of our lives that, despite their made-ness, seem to us like second nature in their social conventionality. One of the politics of design consists of highlighting these things, these systems and conventions, as something that can be shaped, and demonstrating quite directly that diversity, plurality, and a colorful democracy can also be designed in black and white

Even if the question of whether design is democratic could only be touched upon in its broad outlines within the framework of this article, the example of the DemokratieWagen should already allow an answer to be drawn as a conclusion that will have to be elaborated in other discussions and debates. The relationship between design and democracy is not only a matter of the efficient, transparent or participatory design of political institutions and their processes. Rather, design must be defined in terms of its interaction with the culture of freedom that is constitutive of democracy (Rebentisch 2012). Thus, a negotiation of the political dimension of design, which this thesis pursues, shifts to a fundamental level. Design, by virtue of design, has a political significance that cannot be separated from its aesthetic dimension. Design is not only the neutral background of our everyday life, but the stage on which questions of the constitution of our lifestyle are negotiated. A stage on which there are just as few neutral actors and actresses as there can be ultimately good forms of pure functional beauty. This stage is also a political stage, since there can be no good design without a debate about it. There is no good design without an argument about why things were designed the way they are. And there is no good design without the possibility of an argument about how things could have been designed differently. The need for critique is part of a political dimension of design. In this respect, a design would be to be defended as democratic that, in the process of realizing something good, keeps present its own

contestability and the contentiousness of such designed good. Maintaining this contestation of the good design is the task of a critical theory of design that determines its democratic nature.

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