

Boris Groys
**The Obligation
to Self-Design**

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Design, as we know it today, is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Admittedly, concern for the appearance of things is not new. All cultures have been concerned with making clothes, everyday objects, interiors of various spaces, whether sacred spaces, spaces of power, or private spaces, “beautiful and impressive.”

The history of the applied arts is indeed long. Yet modern design emerged precisely from the revolt against the tradition of the applied arts. Even more so than the transition from traditional art to modernist art, the transition from the traditional applied arts to modern design marked a break with tradition, a radical paradigm shift. This paradigm shift is, however, usually overlooked. The function of design has often enough been described using the old metaphysical opposition between appearance and essence. Design, in this view, is responsible only for the appearance of things, and thus it seems predestined to conceal the essence of things, to deceive the viewer’s understanding of the true nature of reality. Thus design has been repeatedly interpreted as an epiphany of the omnipresent market, of exchange value, of fetishism of the commodity, of the society of the spectacle – as the creation of a seductive surface behind which things themselves not only become invisible, but disappear entirely.

Modern design, as it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, internalized this critique aimed at the traditional applied arts and set itself the task of revealing the hidden essence of things rather than designing their surfaces. Avant-garde design sought to eliminate and purify all that had accumulated on the surface of things through the practice of the applied arts over centuries in order to expose the true, undesigned nature of things. Modern design thus did not see its task as creating the surface, but rather as eliminating it – as negative design, antidesign. Genuine modern design is reductionist; it does not add, it subtracts. It is no longer about simply designing individual things to be offered to the gaze of viewers and consumers in order to seduce them. Rather, design seeks to shape the gaze of viewers in such a way that they become capable of discovering things themselves. A central feature of the paradigm shift from traditional applied arts to modern design was just this extension of the will to design from the world of things to that of human beings themselves – understood as one thing among many. The rise of modern design is profoundly linked to the project of redesigning the old man into the New Man. This project, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and is often dismissed today as utopian, has never really been abandoned de facto. In a modified, commercialized form, this project

continues to have an effect, and its initial utopian potential has been updated repeatedly. The design of things that present themselves to the gaze of the viewing subject is critical to an understanding of design. The ultimate form of design is, however, the design of the subject. The problems of design are only adequately addressed if the subject is asked how it wants to manifest itself, what form it wants to give itself, and how it wants to present itself to the gaze of the Other.

This question was first raised with appropriate acuity in the early twentieth century – after Nietzsche diagnosed God’s death. As long as God was alive, the design of the soul was more important to people than the design of the body. The human body, along with its environment, was understood from the perspective of faith as an outer shell that conceals the soul. God was thought to be the only viewer of the soul. To him the ethically correct, righteous soul was supposed to look beautiful – that is, simple, transparent, well constructed, proportional, and not disfigured by any vices or marked by any worldly passion. It is often overlooked that in the Christian tradition ethics has always been subordinated to aesthetics – that is, to the design of the soul. Ethical rules, like the rules of spiritual asceticism – of spiritual exercises, spiritual training – serve above all the objective of designing the soul in such a way that it would be acceptable in God’s eyes, so that He would allow it into paradise. The design of one’s own soul under God’s gaze is a persistent theme of theological treatises, and its rules can be visualized with the help of medieval depictions of the soul waiting for the Last Judgment. The design of the soul which was destined for God’s eyes was clearly distinct from the worldly applied arts: whereas the applied arts sought richness of materials, complex ornamentation, and outward radiance, the design of the soul focused on the essential, the plain, the natural, the reduced, and even the ascetic. The revolution in design that took place at the start of the twentieth century can best be characterized as the application of the rules for the design of the soul to the design of worldly objects.

The death of God signified the disappearance of the viewer of the soul, for whom its design was practiced for centuries. Thus the site of the design of the soul shifted. The soul became the sum of the relationships into which the human body in the world entered. Previously, the body was the prison of the soul; now the soul became the clothing of the body, its social, political, and aesthetic appearance. Suddenly the only possible manifestation of the soul became the look of the clothes in which human beings appear, the everyday things with

which they surround themselves, the spaces they inhabit. With the death of God, design became the medium of the soul, the revelation of the subject hidden inside the human body. Thus design took on an ethical dimension it had not had previously. In design, ethics became aesthetics; it became form. Where religion once was, design has emerged. The modern subject now has a new obligation: the obligation to self-design, an aesthetic presentation as ethical subject. The ethically motivated polemic against design, launched repeatedly over the course of the twentieth century and formulated in ethical and political terms, can only be understood on the basis of this new definition of design; such a polemic would be entirely incongruous if directed at the traditional applied arts. Adolf Loos’ famous essay “Ornament and Crime” is an early example of this turn.

From the outset, Loos postulated in his essay a unity between the aesthetic and the ethical. Loos condemned every decoration, every ornament, as a sign of depravity, of vices. Loos judged a person’s appearance, to the extent it represents a consciously designed exterior, to be an immediate expression of his or her ethical stance. For example, he believed he had demonstrated that only criminals, primitives, heathens, or degenerates ornament themselves by tattooing their skin. Ornament was thus an expression either of amorality or of crime: “The Papuan covers his skin with tattoos, his boat, his oars, in short everything he can lay his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern person who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate.”¹ Particularly striking in this quotation is the fact that Loos makes no distinction between tattooing one’s own skin and decorating a boat or an oar. Just as the modern human being is expected to present him or herself to the gaze of the Other as an honest, plain, unornamented, “undesigned” object, so should all the other things with which this person has to deal be presented as honest, plain, unornamented, undesigned things. Only then do they demonstrate that the soul of the person using them is pure, virtuous, and unspoiled. According to Loos, the function of design is not to pack, decorate, and ornament things differently each time, that is, to constantly design a supplementary outside so that an inside, the true nature of things, remains hidden. Rather, the real function of the modern design is to prevent people from wanting to design things at all. Thus Loos describes his attempts to convince a shoemaker from whom he had ordered shoes not to ornament them.² For Loos, it was enough that the shoemaker use the best materials and work them with care. The quality of the material and the honesty and precision of the work, and not

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their external appearance, determine the quality of the shoes. The criminal thing about ornamenting shoes is that this ornament does not reveal the shoemaker's honesty, that is, the ethical dimension of the shoes. The ethically dissatisfactory aspects of the product are concealed by ornament and the ethically impeccable are made unrecognizable by it. For Loos, true design is the struggle against design – against the criminal will to conceal the ethical essence of things behind their aesthetic surface. Yet paradoxically, only the creation of another, revelatory layer of ornament – that is, of design – guarantees the unity of the ethical and the aesthetic that Loos sought.

The messianic, apocalyptic features of the struggle against applied art that Loos was engaged in are unmistakable. For example, Loos wrote: "Do not weep. Do you not see the greatness of our age resides in our very inability to create new ornament? We have gone beyond ornament, we have achieved plain, undecorated simplicity. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfillment awaits us. Soon the streets of the cities will shine like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, Heaven's capital. Then fulfillment will be ours."³ The struggle against the applied arts is the final struggle before the arrival of God's Kingdom on Earth. Loos wanted to bring heaven down to earth; he wanted to see things as they are, without ornament. Thus Loos wanted to appropriate the divine gaze. But not only that, he wanted to make everyone else capable of seeing the things as they are revealed in God's gaze. Modern design wants the apocalypse now, the apocalypse that unveils things, strips them of their ornament, and causes them to be seen as they truly are. Without this claim that design manifests the truth of things, it would be impossible to understand many of the discussions among designers, artists, and art theorists over the course of the twentieth century. Such artists and designers as Donald Judd or architects such as Herzog & de Meuron, to name only a few, do not argue aesthetically when they want to justify their artistic practices but rather ethically, and in doing so they appeal to the truth of things as such. The modern designer does not wait for the apocalypse to remove the external shell of things and show them to people as they are. The designer wants here and now the apocalyptic vision that makes everyone New Men. The body takes on the form of the soul. The soul becomes the body. All things become heavenly. Heaven becomes earthly, material. Modernism becomes absolute.

Loos' essay is, famously, not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects the mood of the entire artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century, which sought a synthesis of art and life.

This synthesis was supposed to be achieved by removing the things that looked too arty both from art and from life. Both were supposed to reach the zero point of the artistic in order to achieve a unity. The conventionally artistic was understood to be the "human, all too human" that obstructed the gaze to perceive the true inner form of things. Hence the traditional painting was seen as something that prevents the gaze of a spectator to recognize it as a combination of shapes and colors on canvas. And shoes made in the traditional way were understood to be a thing that prevented the gaze of a consumer to recognize the essence, function, and true composition of the shoe. The gaze of the New Man had to be freed of all such obstructions by the force of (anti)design.

Whereas Loos still formulated his argument in rather bourgeois terms and wanted to reveal the value of certain materials, craftsmanship, and individual honesty, the will to absolute design reached its climax in Russian Constructivism, with its "proletarian" ideal of the collective soul, which is manifested in industrially organized work. For the Russian Constructivists, the path to virtuous, genuinely proletarian objects also passed through the elimination of everything that was merely artistic. The Russian Constructivists called for the objects of everyday communist life to show themselves as what they are: as functional things whose forms serve only to make their ethics visible. Ethics as understood here was given an additional political dimension, since the collective soul had to be organized politically in order to act properly in accordance with ethical terms. The collective soul was manifested in the political organization that embraced both people and things. The function of "proletarian" design – at the time, admittedly, people spoke rather of "proletarian art" – must therefore be to make this total political organization visible. The experience of the October Revolution of 1917 was crucial for the Russian Constructivists. They understood the revolution to be a radical act of purifying society of every form of ornament: the finest example of modern design, which eliminates all traditional social customs, rituals, conventions, and forms of representation in order for the essence of the political organization to emerge. Thus the Russian Constructivists called for the abolition of all autonomous art. Art should rather be placed entirely at the service of the design of utilitarian objects. In essence, it was a call to completely subsume art to design.

At the same time, the project of Russian Constructivism was a total project: it wanted to design life as a whole. Only for that reason – and only at that price – was Russian Constructivism prepared to exchange autonomous art for

utilitarian art: just as the traditional artist designed the whole of the artwork, so the Constructivist artist wanted to design the whole of society. In a certain sense, the Soviet artists had no choice at the time other than to forward such a total claim. The market, including the art market, was eliminated by the Communists. Artists were no longer faced with private consumers and their private and aesthetic preferences, but with the state as a whole. Necessarily, it was all or nothing for artists. This situation is clearly reflected in the manifestos of Russian Constructivism. For example, in his programmatic text entitled "Constructivism," Alexei Gan wrote: "Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat... Especially now, when the proletarian revolution has been victorious, and its destructive, creative movement is progressing along the iron rails into culture, which is organized according to a grand plan of social production, everyone – the master of color and line, the builder of space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions – must all become constructors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millions human masses."⁴ For Gan, the goal of Constructivist design was not to impose a new form on everyday life under socialism but rather to remain loyal to radical, revolutionary reduction and to avoid making new ornaments for new things. Hence Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his then-famous essay "From the Easel to the Machine" that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty of industrial production and opens the public's eyes to this beauty.⁵ The artist, as described by Tarabukin, is someone who looks at the entirety of socialist production as a ready-made – a kind of socialist Duchamp who exhibits socialist industry as a whole as something good and beautiful.

The modern designer, whether bourgeois or proletarian, calls for the other, divine vision: for the metanoia that enables people to see the true form of things. In the Platonic and Christian traditions, undergoing a metanoia means making the transition from a worldly perspective to an otherworldly perspective, from a perspective of the mortal body to a perspective of the immortal soul. Since the death of God, of course, we can no longer believe that there is something like the soul that is distinguished from the body in the sense that it is made independent of the body and can be separated from it. However, that does not by any means suggest that a metanoia is no longer possible. Modern design is the attempt to

bring about such a metanoia – an effort to see one's own body and one's own surroundings as purified of everything earthly, arbitrary, and subjected to a particular aesthetic taste. In a sense, it could be said that modernism substituted the design of the corpse for the design of the soul.

This funeral aspect of modern design was recognized by Loos even before he wrote "Ornament and Crime." In his text "The Poor Little Rich Man," Loos tells of the imagined fate of a rich Viennese man who decided to have his entire house designed by an artist. This man totally subjected his everyday life to the dictates of the designer (Loos speaks, admittedly, of the architect), for as soon as his thoroughly designed house is finished, the man can no longer change anything in it without the designer's permission. Everything that this man would later buy and do must fit into the overall design of the house, not just literally but also aesthetically. In a world of total design, the man himself has become a designed thing, a kind of museum object, a mummy, a publicly exhibited corpse. Loos concludes his description of the fate of the poor rich man as follows: "He was shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires. He felt: Now is the time to learn to walk about with one's own corpse. Indeed! He is finished! He is complete!"⁶ In his essay "Design and Crime," whose title was inspired by Loos', Hal Foster interpreted this passage as an implicit call for "running room," for breaking out of the prison of total design.⁷ It is obvious, however, that Loos' text should not be understood as a protest against the total dominance of design. Loos protests against design as ornament in the name of another, "true" design, in the name of an antidesign that frees the consumer from dependence on the taste of the professional designer. As the aforementioned example of the shoes demonstrates, under the regime of avant-garde antidesign, consumers take responsibility for their own appearance and for the design of their daily lives. Consumers do so by asserting their own, modern taste, which tolerates no ornament and hence no additional artistic or craft labor. By taking ethical and aesthetic responsibility for the image they offer the outside world, however, consumers become prisoners of total design to a much larger degree than ever before, inasmuch as they can no longer delegate their aesthetic decisions to others. Modern consumers present the world the image of their own personality – purified of all outside influence and ornamentation. But this purification of their own image is potentially just as infinite a process as the purification of the soul before God. In the white city, in the heavenly Zion, as Loos imagines it, design is truly total for

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the first time. Nothing can be changed there either: nothing colorful, no ornament can be smuggled in. The difference is simply that in the white city of the future, everyone is the author of his own corpse – everyone becomes an artist-designer who has ethical, political, and aesthetic responsibility for his or her environment.

One can claim, of course, that the original pathos of avant-garde antidesign has long since faded, that avant-garde design has become a certain designer style among other possible styles. That is why many people view our entire society today – the society of commercial design, of the spectacle – as a game with simulacra behind which there is only a void. That is indeed how this society presents itself, but only if one takes a purely contemplative position, sitting in the lodge and watching the spectacle of society. But this position overlooks the fact that design today has become total – and hence it no longer admits of a contemplative position from the perspective of an outsider. The turn that Loos announced in his day has proven to be irreversible: every citizen of the contemporary world still has to take ethical, aesthetic, and political responsibility for his or her self-design. In a society in which design has taken over the function of religion, self-design becomes a creed. By designing one's self and one's environment in a certain way, one declares one's faith in certain values, attitudes, programs, and ideologies. In accordance with this creed, one is judged by society, and this judgment can certainly be negative and even threaten the life and well-being of the person concerned.

Hence modern design belongs not so much in an economic context as in a political one. Modern design has transformed the whole of social space into an exhibition space for an absent divine visitor, in which individuals appear both as artists and as self-produced works of art. In the gaze of the modern viewer, however, the aesthetic composition of artworks inevitably betrays the political convictions of their authors – and it is primarily on that basis that they are judged. The debate over headscarves demonstrates the political force of design. In order to understand that this is primarily a debate about design, it suffices to imagine that Prada or Gucci has begun to design headscarves. In such a case, deciding between the headscarf as a symbol of Islamic convictions and the headscarf as a commercial brand becomes an extremely difficult aesthetic and political task. Design cannot therefore be analyzed exclusively within the context of the economy of commodities. One could just as soon speak of suicide design – for example, in the case of suicide attacks, which are well known to be staged according to strict aesthetic rules. One

can speak about the design of power but also about the design of resistance or the design of alternative political movements. In these instances design is practiced as a production of differences – differences that often take on a political semantics at the same time. We often hear laments that politics today is concerned only with a superficial image – and that so-called content loses its relevance in the process. This is thought to be the fundamental malaise of politics today. More and more, there are calls to turn away from political design and image making and return to content. Such laments ignore the fact that under the regime of modern design, it is precisely the visual positioning of politicians in the field of the mass media that makes the crucial statement concerning their politics – or even constitutes their politics. Content, by contrast, is completely irrelevant, because it changes constantly. Hence the general public is by no means wrong to judge its politicians according to their appearance – that is, according to their basic aesthetic and political creed, and not according to arbitrarily changing programs and contents that they support or formulate.

Thus modern design evades Kant's famous distinction between disinterested aesthetic contemplation and the use of things guided by interests. For a long time after Kant, disinterested contemplation was considered superior to a practical attitude: a higher, if not the highest, manifestation of the human spirit. But already by the end of the nineteenth century, a reevaluation of values had taken place: the *vita contemplativa* was thoroughly discredited, and the *vita activa* was elevated to the true task of humankind. Hence today design is accused of seducing people into weakening their activity, vitality, and energy – of making them passive consumers who lack will, who are manipulated by omnipresent advertising and thus become victims of capital. The apparent cure for this lulling into sleep by the society of the spectacle is a shocklike encounter with the "real" that is supposed to rescue people from their contemplative passivity and move them to action, which is the only thing that promises an experience of truth as living intensity. The debate now is only over the question whether such an encounter with the real is still possible or whether the real has definitively disappeared behind its designed surface.

Now, however, we can no longer speak of disinterested contemplation when it is a matter of self-manifestation, self-design, and self-positioning in the aesthetic field, since the subject of such self-contemplation clearly has a vital interest in the image he or she offers to the outside world. Once people had an interest in

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how their souls appeared to God; today they have an interest in how their bodies appear to their political surroundings. This interest certainly points to the real. The real, however, emerges here not as a shocklike interruption of the designed surface but as a question of the technique and practice of self-design – a question no one can escape anymore. In his day, Beuys said that everyone had the right to see him- or herself as an artist. What was then understood as a right has now become an obligation. In the meantime we have been condemned to being the designers of our selves.

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Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg.
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1
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2
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3
Ibid., 168.

4
Alexei Gan, "From Constructivism," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 320 (translation modified).

5
Nikolai Tarabukin, "From the Easel to the Machine," in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 135–42.

6
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