Can Design Change Society?

ANH-LINH NGO, CHRISTIAN HILLER,
PHILIPP OSWALT

With *project bauhaus* we have subjected the ideas of the Bauhaus to a radical review. At the start of the project in 2015, the fundamental question *Can Design Change Society?* was formulated in a two-day symposium and in an exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Over the next two years, we held a symposium addressing the topic *Can the Universal be Specific?* as well as the *Preliminary Course: From Bauhaus to Silicon Valley*. A special highlight of the project was the *Datatopia* Workshop and Summer School in 2018, which took place at the Floating University designed by raumlabor. This event served to link the discourse on the datafication of society to basic issues concerning new spaces for the transfer of information and knowledge. The project has now come to a close in 2019 with the events *Ciao Bauhaus!* and *Bauhaus: A Redeeming Requiem*, the latter a play directed by Schorsch Kamerun at the Volksbühne in Berlin, with which we would like to finally send the Bauhaus to its grave.

No less than three *ARCH+* editions were produced within the framework of *project bauhaus*. The first issue critically examines models and methods of societal change; the second, under the title *Architectures of Globalization*, considers contemporary architecture at the nexus of globalization and local self-determination. The concluding issue, *Datatopia*, poses an urgent question: does the widespread datafication of our societies challenge the underlying principles of our traditional cultural, political, economic, and ecological systems?

This international edition on the work of *project bauhaus* now offers English readers a comprehensive overview of our multi-year research, performance, and publication project, which involved the participation of more than a hundred renowned scientists, artists, architects, and designers from around the world.

When we started the project five years ago, we wrote:

The expansion of design into all realms of life and the world, from landscapes, roads, and cities to workplaces, the home and, deeper still, into people and their relationships, nanostructures, and the genome, is contemporary reality. In the context of these aetheticizations and subjectivizations of dominance, given the universal profusion of design its absence would perhaps be a liberating moment.

Could the absence of design really be liberating? As long as design is only understood as aestheticization, this thesis certainly has its justification. But what if design encompasses more? What if it is only with the help of design that we can formulate a critique of the present, whose complexity we can no longer understand without technology?

Our initial question, "Can design change society?" has accompanied the project over the years. With this question, we implicitly put not only the Bauhaus's ambition to influence society through design up for discussion, but also the image of the architect or designer associated with it, who can swoop in and steer social processes in the right direction with a few formal inventions.

So what is the role of design in society? One thing is certain: by designing, we can make a statement about how the world *is* or *should be*. Design is therefore increasingly used as an instrument of critique, which helps us to describe and penetrate the complexity of the world. It occupies a neuralgic point at which political and social questions meet, a point at which issues related to energy efficiency, climate, and the use of resources—in short, issues concerning our survival as a species—are dealt with. However, we cannot expect the creative disciplines to take on this superhuman task single-handedly. Designers are not godlike artist-engineers who can transform society and save the world. Yet this air of self-importance and arrogance is another legacy of modernism and the Bauhaus, which we sought to address with *project bauhaus*.

It is in this sense that our proposed Bauhaus "funeral" should also be understood, not as pure provocation or unproductive Bauhaus-bashing on its centennial. By symbolically burying the Bauhaus, we want to leave behind the self-referential loops in order to release energies for other alliances. For it is only in and with society, and together with other social actors—which is also a lesson of the historical Bauhaus—will we be able to change society.