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OUT OF SYNC

Out of Sync

DESIGN IN QUEER
TEMPORALITIES

OUT OF SYNC

Out of Sync

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MASTER THESIS
SPACE & COMMUNICATION
HEAD–GENÈVE
2024

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DESIGN IN QUEER TEMPORALITIES

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ABSTRACT

OUT OF SYNC – Design in Queer Temporalities argues that contemporary design, through the lens of queer theory, is moving beyond linear, normative constructs of time and functionality. Instead, it is engaging with the concept of queer temporalities, creating opportunities to reimagine time, identity and relationality while challenging the imperatives of reproducibility and societal conformity. Drawing from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the thesis uses key moments from the character's journey to explore intersections between queer theory and design practices. Chapter I, *Lineage*, examines the rationalization of time in design, linking it to orientation and straightness as theorized by Sarah Ahmed, reflected in Orlando's role as the Queen's successor. Chapter II, *Failure*, explores the interplay between design and disillusionment, demonstrating how queerness reclaims failure as a site of potential and creative renewal. Chapter III, *Becoming*, focuses on Orlando's unexpected transformation into a woman after a seven-day slumber, illustrating how contemporary design practices embrace experimentation, self-reflection, presence, and vulnerability—values intrinsic to queer temporalities. Finally, Chapter IV, *Twisting*, draws on José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer futurity to expand design's engagement with alternative, non-linear timescales, inspired by Orlando's 300-year journey. This study reimagines design as a space to question and reshape temporal norms, offering new possibilities for an inclusive and speculative approach to non-linear futures.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my tutor, Sébastien Quéquet, for his invaluable guidance throughout this non-linear journey. To Alexandra Midal, whose enthusiasm inspired me to believe even more in this project. To Tay, for the kind English proofreading. A heartfelt thank you to all my friends from the Master Space and Communication; I feel deeply privileged to have shared this life chapter with you. To all my queer friends who shared their thoughts on this project and whose eddying lives teach me every day how to bend and twist time; and to all the queer trailblazers who paved the way for us to walk more safely today. Ultimately, to my parents, who, with love, showed me the "well-trodden path" and, with love, saw me deviate.

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TO ALL THE ORLANDOS
OF THIS WORLD

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PROLOGUE

Setting the Clocks

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Two clocks are placed side by side on a wall, their edges touching. At the start of the exhibition, they are synchronized to display the exact same time. Yet, as they pretend to keep their steady beat, each subtle difference accumulates. Slowly, due to the power of batteries, at some point, inevitably they fall out of sync. First by seconds, then a few minutes, until one clock eventually turns off before the other.[1]

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's minimalist artwork *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* is widely interpreted as a poignant tribute to his partner, Ross Laycock, who died of complications related to AIDS.[2] In 1988, Gonzalez-Torres shared an early sketch of the artwork with Ross in a letter, reflecting on the fragility and transience of time and their shared experience. He wrote:

> Don't be afraid of the clocks, they are our time, the time has been so generous to us. We imprinted time with the sweet taste of victory. We conquered fate by meeting at a certain time in a certain space. We are a product of the time, therefore we give back credit were it is due: time. We are synchronized, now forever. I love you.[3]

Designed to mark the chronological passage of time, these battery-operated, mass-produced clocks can symbolize notions of uniformity and the standardization of time—and, by extension, the standardization of society. However, when placed side by side and titled Perfect Lovers, these ordinary objects acquire a profound poetic potential. The clocks are visually identical, "the same," just as society might perceive these lovers as "the same." Although they track time, they inevitably fall out of sync. In a similar way, these lovers may strive to synchronize with society, but they will always misalign—at some point, they will always be slightly out of step with the norm.

What does it mean to be synchronized? And what does it mean to fall out of sync? Synchronization is the process of aligning events to allow a system to function cohesively.[4] It is associated with ideas of order, structure, and conformity, whereas being out of sync can be a way to relate to deviations and disruptions.

In the rush of daily life, we rarely pause to reflect on one of its most fundamental elements: time. Yet our relationship with time is far more complex than we often realize, encompassing emotional, psychological, and political dimensions. How we relate to time shapes our understanding of the past, our experience of the present, and our expectations for the future. Before diving into the theoretical concepts explored in this thesis, I would like to share some of my own past and present. This personal context, I hope, will offer the reader some insight into the concerns and motivations that guided the writing of this text.

When I began my design studies in São Paulo, pursuing a bachelor's degree in graphic design, I remember how dedicated I was to learning and mastering the entire methodology of modern graphic design: typographic norms, grid systems, how to structure a balanced layout, visual hierarchy, and everything else that makes up the aesthetic-formal organization of textual and non-textual elements. There was an admiration, even an obsession, with learning this set of rules, as if internalizing that way of structuring the world would make me a good designer. At the same time, I found myself also striving to internalize and convince myself that I was straight. As time went on (as it always does), this process of self-convincing became harder. While I worked in various graphic design studios, expanding my visual and design lexicon, it also became clearer to me that I was *queer*. Yet, I still held onto my inclination to rationalize and understand the world, and I began to read extensively about queer theory.

Professionally, I slowly began to face the limitations of commercial graphic design, and when I decided to pursue a master's degree, my intention was to find programs that focused on more experimental and investigative practices. Consequently, I ended up moving to

1 The Washington Post, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Perfect Lovers," 2023. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/interactive/2023/felix-gonazalez-torres-perfect-lovers/ (accessed 3 December 2024).
2 Public Delivery, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Clocks," 2023. Available at: https://publicdelivery.org/felix-gonzalez-torres-clocks/ (accessed 3 December 2024).
3 Ibid.
4 Cambridge Dictionary, "Synchronization," 2024. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/synchronization (accessed 3 December 2024).



Untitled (Perfect Lovers), 1987-1990. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Image: Felix Gonzalez-Foundation.

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Switzerland—a country that was always on my mind associated with the rational principles of the Swiss design school— but what I found in the Master's program in Space and Communication at HEAD Genève was quite different. There was a very distinct way of approaching projects, one that valued personal methodologies and approaches. Beyond aesthetic results, I began to reflect more on processes. The more I studied and encountered less normative ways of producing design, the more I realized that there was something in those practices which combined design with film, design with performance, design with art installation—that seemed inherently queer to me. Following, as I began researching for my thesis project, one thing was becoming always more visible: the relationship between these design practices and time.

In the pages of this research, I will intersect some reflections on design practice within the broad scope of queer theory, where we can find numerous reflections on temporality—particularly a twisted one that relates to the very essence of the term *queer*.[5] These reflections explore ideas of societal norms, as well as their divergences, and how they relate to the expectations of the future. Before diving into that, I think it's important to first share some key concepts about queer temporality itself.

> Queer time has long been colloquially understood to be about fifteen minutes later than the appointed time—"she's not here yet because she's running on queer time." That local color signals a larger, more complex set of discrepancies and variances between queer modes of experience and the rational, clock-based existence of the social mainstream. Living on the margins of social intelligibility alters one's pace; one's tempo becomes at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic, arrested.[6]

The book *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, edited by Ellen Lee McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, explores the intricacies of queer time beyond that quarter-hour delay. Within the collection of essays from various authors, there's an

5 Ahmed, Sara, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 68.
6 McCallum, Ellen Lee and Tuhkanen, Mikko, *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2011, p. 1.

exploration on how queer theory has recognized, resisted, appropriated, or rejected divergent models of temporality. In the introduction, *Becoming Unbecoming: Untimely Mediations*, the editors illustrate how, in Western thought, queerness has been framed as a lack of proper alignment in both time and social norms. Freudian theorists, for instance, regarded homosexuals as developmentally regressive or incapable of channeling their drives and aligning with future-oriented goals. Apart from psychoanalysis, 19th-century evolutionary and racial theories characterized homosexuality as an atavistic trait—a notion that persists in contemporary homophobic political rhetoric, perpetuating the idea that queerness is inherently marked by a unique sense of temporal dissonance.[7]

Queer theory's involvement with time signals its persistent speculation in questions of becoming as the processes of unforeseeable change. With the notion of queerness strategically and critically posited not as an identity or a substantive mode of being but as a way of becoming, temporality is necessarily already bound up in the queer. This temporality, we further suggest, is not that of chronos, of linear time whose very name mythically signals lineage (in the ancient Greek myth, Kronos is father of Zeus). Rather, the contingencies of the queer might be closer to the time of kairos, the moment of opportunity.[8]

The concepts of *chronos* and *kairos* offer two distinct approaches to time that are especially relevant in exploring queer temporality. In Greek mythology, Kronos, the son of Uranus, was foretold by a prophecy that he would one day be overthrown by his own children, just as he had dethroned his father. To prevent this fate, he devoured each of his offspring as soon as they were born. However, Zeus, the youngest, was hidden by his mother and, as tragically expected, eventually fulfilled the prophecy, overthrowing Kronos and ascending as the king of the gods. *Chronos* represents sequential, linear time—measurable and predictable—often associated with productivity, structure, and clearly, lineage. This

7 McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 7.
8 Ibid., p. 8.

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Cronus devouring one of his sons, *Saturn (Ovid, Fasti, IV,* 197-200), 17th-century oil painting by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Collection Museo del Prado.



Kairos, relief (Museo di Antichità, Turin). Roman work in marble after the original by Lysippos ca. 350—330 BCE.

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type of time aligns with a societal emphasis on forward progression and structured life stages. It is the time that never stops, relentlessly devouring life bit by bit, every second, every hour, every day.[9]

On the other hand, In mythology, Kairos was typically considered the youngest son of Zeus and the goddess of prosperity, Tyche. Kairos was swift, moved unclothed, and had only one lock of hair on his forehead. One could only seize him by grabbing this forelock; otherwise, he was impossible to catch or bring back. Kairos was seen in Athena's wisdom, Eros' love, and even Dionysus' wine. Later, in the genealogy of the gods, he seemed associated with all of them, embodying a specific moment in time.[10] In various depictions, he is shown with a finger tipping the scales: he represents time that cannot be measured or estimated, a time that is qualitative rather than quantitative.

The ancient Greeks saw *kairos* as a break from the ordinary flow of time, an invitation to step outside linearity and seize a moment of profound change or revelation.[11] If *chronos* is the time that devours us, then *kairos* represents the deviation of this fate. It's the clock that begins to fall out of sync. It's interesting to consider that our perception of time is not neutral—our understanding of time unfolds expectations about life itself.

Queer individuals sometimes spend much of their adult lives before realizing or accepting their queer identity. In some cases, they may experience a sense of regression or displacement relative to their life stage. It may feel like revisiting the excitement of adolescence, such as the rush of a first queer love, or undergoing a complete rebirth and a renewed sense of self during a gender transition. For some, there may be an extended period of what might be perceived as "adolescent behavior," particularly in certain gay male subcultures that remain tied to nightlife, often

9 Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Cronus," 2024. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cronus (accessed 3 December 2024).

10 PEPSIC, "O conceito de tempo e o sentido da vida: a experiência de cronos e kairós na prática clínica," 2012. Available at: https://pepsic.bvsalud.org/scielo.php?pid=S0101-31062012000100006&script=sci_arttext (accessed 3 December 2024).

11 Persky, Richard K., *Kairos: A Cultural History of Time in the Greek Polis*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 2008, p. 1. Available at: https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/64696/rpersky_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 3 December 2024).

due to not having children.[12] In a different light, overall, trans people die at earlier ages than non-trans people. A 2022 demography analysis published by Duke University Press revealed that 25% of transgender individuals die by the age of 69, compared to 25% of non-trans individuals who die by the age of 75 in the U.S.[13] This gap is even more pronounced in other countries, such as Brazil, where I'm from, where the life expectancy of a transgender person is just 35 years.[14] There is a shared expectation of time in a "straight" life trajectory, but in a queer life, this trajectory is often bent or shifted. Or, in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant."[15]

There is a famous classic in English literature that portrays a journey as captivating as it is recurrent, eddying, and troublant: *Orlando: A Biography*, a novel by Virginia Woolf, published on October 11, 1928. Written in a mock-biographical tone, *Orlando* tells the story of a person who lives for over 300 years, starting as a male nobleman in England during the reign of Elizabeth I, who bestows him with favors and property. At the age of 30, after years serving as an ambassador in Constantinople, he undergoes a mysterious transformation and becomes a woman.[16] In this thesis, Orlando's biography will serve as a case study, approached in a non-hermetic way. Key moments from their journey will provide a backdrop to illustrate and guide the chapters, offering insights to explore and reflect on design and queer temporality.

Recognized as a feminist classic, the novel has become a major focus for scholars in women's literature, as well as gender and transgender studies. The story

12 McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 9.
13 Duke University Press, "Differences in All-Cause Mortality Among," *Demography*, 2022. Available at: https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/59/3/1023/302037/Differences-in-All-Cause-Mortality-Among (accessed 3 December 2024).
14 UOL Notícias, "Brasil lidera ranking de mortes de pessoas trans," 27 January 2023. Available at: https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/deutschewelle/2023/01/27/brasil-lidera-ranking-de-mortes-de-pessoas-trans.htm (accessed 3 December 2024).
15 Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Tendencies*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. xii.
16 Sony Pictures Classics, *Orlando*, directed by Sally Potter, 1992. Based upon the novel by Virginia Woolf. Available at: https://www.sonyclassics.com/orlando/orlando_presskit.pdf (accessed 3 December 2024), p. 13.

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draws inspiration from Woolf's relationship with her lover, Vita Sackville-West, who, as a woman, was unable to inherit her ancestral home, Knole House in Kent. Sackville-West's son, Nigel Nicolson, famously described the novel as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature."[17] *Orlando* reflects Woolf's fascination with the relationship between individuals and the flow of history,[18] making it an ideal figure for a brief parallel with the timeline of design that we will trace here.

Although the novel is told in chronological order, Orlando's twisted relationship with time is underscored by the metaphorical device of their impossible longevity. Woolf challenges rigid ideas of identity, suggesting that gender, selfhood, and even the "I" are shaped by circumstances and contexts. Orlando's extraordinary lifespan and sudden change of sex emphasize that these transformations are ongoing, never definitive.

Beyond the novel itself, I also draw on interpretations offered by its two film adaptations. The first adaptation, *Orlando*, was written and directed by Sally Potter in 1992, starring Tilda Swinton. The film received critical acclaim, especially for its visual portrayal of Woolf's settings. While the movie introduces some differences from the novel, Potter explained: "My task [...] was to find a way of remaining true to the spirit of the book and to Virginia Woolf's intentions, whilst being ruthless with changing the book in any way necessary to make it work cinematically."[19] The movie includes lines that became iconic but aren't present in the original novel, such as Queen Elizabeth's command to Orlando: "Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old."[20] Or another memorable addition near the end, where the narrator reflects, "And ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning."[21] Potter's additions provide a cinematic conclusion to Orlando's journey of self-discovery,

17 Blamires, Harry, *A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 301.
18 Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando*, São Paulo, Editora Saraiva, 2011. Translation and Presentation by Laura Alves, p. 9.
19 Sony Pictures Classics Release, *Orlando*, 1992. p. 14.
20 Potter, Sally, *Orlando*, 1992, film.
21 Potter, Sally, *Orlando*, 1992, film.

autonomy, and to her complex relationship with time. One final adaptation shifts the setting to 1992, aligning the film's ending with its contemporary present, just as Woolf's novel ends in the present of 1928.

The second adaptation is *Orlando, ma biographie politique* (*Orlando, My Political Biography*), a 2023 French documentary directed by trans activist and writer Paul B. Preciado. The film opens with the director's declaration: "Someone asked me one day: Why don't you write your biography? I answered: Because fucking Virginia Woolf wrote it for me in 1928."[22] In this reimagining, Preciado gathers 26 trans and non-binary individuals, aged 8 to 70, to collectively embody Orlando. Each actor states: "*Je suis* [name] *et dans ce film je serai Orlando de Virginia Woolf*",[23] introducing themselves as part of a shared Orlando identity. Notable participants include Emma Avena, Amir Baylly, Jenny Bel'Air, Naëlle Dariya, and Janis Sahraoui.[24] Premiering at the 73rd Berlin International Film Festival, the documentary earned critical acclaim, receiving a nomination for the Berlinale Documentary Film Award and winning the Teddy Award for Best Documentary.[25]

Blurring the lines between reality and fiction, Preciado reinterprets Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*. Through the voices of his diverse cast, the film becomes an introspective tapestry of personal journeys. Using authentic narratives, writings, and striking visuals, it explores identity's fluidity and the stakes of living authentically. "Every Orlando," Preciado explains, "is a transgender person risking his, her, or their life daily, confronting government laws, history, psychiatry, traditional family expectations, and the power of pharmaceutical companies."[26] The documentary layers new meanings onto Woolf's narrative, transforming key events from the novel in a free-form,

22 Preciado, Paul B., *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, 2023, film.
23 "I am [name], and in this film, I will be Orlando by Virginia Woolf." Ibid.
24 Films du Poisson, *Orlando*, available at: https://www.filmsdupoisson.com/orlando (accessed 3 December 2024).
25 Hollywood Reporter, "Berlin 2023: Teddy Awards, Nigerian Drama *All the Colors in the World Are Between Black and White* Wins Top Prize", available at: https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/berlin2023-teddy-awards-nigerian-drama-all-the-colors-in-the-world-are-between-black-and-white-1235334211/ (accessed 3 December 2024).
26 Preciado, Paul B., *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, 2023, film.

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Film still from *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, 2023, Paul B. Preciado.

collage-like style. Each performer's real-life experiences weave into Orlando's character, creating a collective identity that transcends any single story.

Just as Preciado expands and reimagines Orlando's identity and journey, this work carries that narrative into the realm of design. Drawing inspiration from Woolf's satirical and lofty biographical tone, it critiques the linear history of design and challenges conventional notions of time, functionality, and efficiency. Contemporary design often overlaps with other disciplines, breaking conventions and dissolving boundaries. In embracing this fluidity, design defies rigid structures and opens itself to a richer spectrum of expressions. Or, as Woolf so aptly put it: "Nothing is any longer one thing."[27]

27 Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando: A Biography*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1928, p. 390.

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DESIGN IN QUEER
TEMPORALITIES

Orlando slept all night in ignorance. He had been kissed by a queen without knowing it. (...)

"Here," she said, watching him advance down the long gallery towards her, "comes my innocent!" (...)

He was the very image of a noble gentleman. But inwardly? She flashed her yellow hawk's eyes upon him as if she would pierce his soul. The young man withstood her gaze, blushing only a damask rose as became him. Strength, grace, romance, folly, poetry, youth—she read him like a page. Instantly she plucked a ring from her finger (the joint was swollen rather) and as she fitted it to his, named him her Treasurer and Steward; next hung about him chains of office; and bidding him bend his knee, tied round it at the slenderest part the jewelled order of the Garter. Nothing after that was denied him. (...) "This," she breathed, "is my victory!"—even as a rocket roared up and dyed her cheeks scarlet.

For the old woman loved him. And the Queen, who knew a man when she saw one, though not, it is said, in the usual way, plotted for him a splendid ambitious career. Lands were given him, houses assigned him. He was to be the son of her old age; the limb of her infirmity; the oak tree on which she leant her degradation. 28

CHAPTER I

Lineage

Orlando's journey begins brilliantly. A young English aristocratic noble man becomes the queen's favorite, and she promises him a splendid career. He will be the child of her old age, her successor. The idea of succession is an attempt to extend time: when I am no longer here, someone must take my place. The queen inspects Orlando to see if he meets her expectations, and upon finding the qualities she desires, she gives him the ring. The concept of lineage is intrinsically tied to the chronological passage of time. An ideal child is an extension of oneself. In Sally Porter's film, the queen specifically commands: "Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old." Since she herself has faded, withered, and grown old, she wishes for her successor not to do the same.

This idea of succession can extend beyond human relationships to also how we approach design and creation. Consider the production line: a sequence of identical pieces moves along a conveyor belt. At a specific moment, a tool fits a new part; further along, screws are added; later, a spray of paint is applied. At the end, a batch of identical products emerges, offspring of the same matrix. The establishment of product design after the industrial revolution and the use of the Fordist assembly line marked a point of no return in how we consume but also how we design. The time of handcrafted products gave way to the time of perfect succession. The idea of lineage aligns seamlessly with a new ideal of consumption.[29] If today I buy a razor from a certain brand and like it, tomorrow I want a razor exactly the same. We began designing perfect successors.

To design a perfect successor, one must take into account: optimization, efficiency, reproducibility. Good design became design that fits into an optimized production line.[30] The assembly line also influences the design: the final design of an object always differs from the first

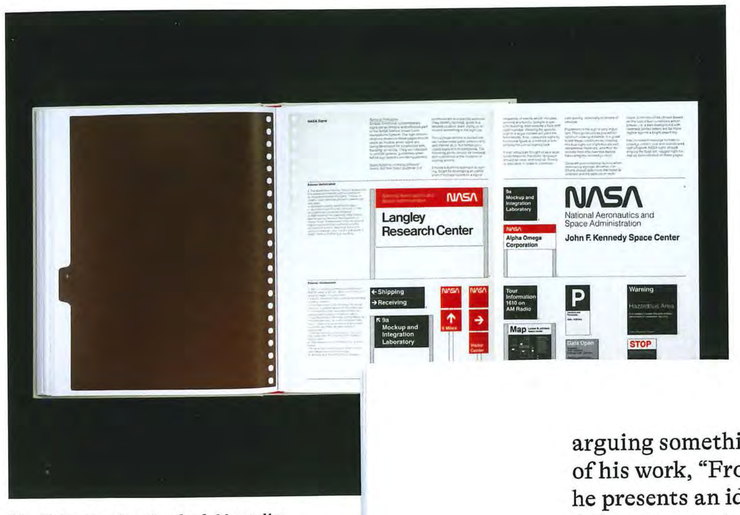
28 Woolf, 1928, pp. 24-26.
29 Kaplan, Wendy (ed.), *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion* 1885-1945, Wolfsonian Foundation, p. 143-148.
30 Molnár, Vieroslav; Cempírek, Václav; Turek, Michal; and Fiala, David "Design of production lines and logistic flows in production," *Open Engineering*, De Gruyter Open, August 27, 2021. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1515/eng-2021-0084 (accessed 3 December 2024).

prototype, parts grow and shrink by millimeters, curves become more pronounced at angles, all to facilitate mechanized production. In the day-to-day of a graphic design studio, you are constantly reminded that a good book format is defined by the best use of the sheet of paper on which it will be printed, and the insertion of any manual process can significantly increase the final price of a project. A good project is an equation of the best form with the best cost-benefit ratio for production.

Still within the space of the graphic design studio, it is interesting to observe the emergence of the standards manual as an object. When designing a logo, one is also designing a system of reproduction. A good brand extends through time depending on the success of its reproducibility. A good brand system is built with clear and objective rules, yet leaves room for the creative unfolding of the visual system. Some brand manuals, such as *The NASA Graphics Standards Manual* by Richard Danne and Bruce Blackburn in 1975, became fetishized objects among graphic designers. The book is described as "a futuristic vision for an agency at the cutting edge of science and exploration".[31] Throughout the pages of the book, the logo and its visual system unfold into business cards, collateral material, uniforms, cars, aircrafts, and rockets. More than just a collection of usage rules, the graphics standards manual presents a vision of how a brand projects itself into the future. In the design vision of *chronos* time, the future is a place that is reached through the structured and consistent rhythm of reproduction.

In the book *Design by Accident – For a New History of Design*, Alexandra Midal begins her analysis by arguing that together, Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936) and Sigfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) could be considered as the founding texts of design history.[32] According to her, Pevsner attempts to establish a single starting point for modernity,

31 Standards Manual, *NASA Graphics Standards Manual*, available at: https://standardsmanual.com/products/nasa-graphics-standards-manual (accessed 3 December 2024).
32 Midal, Alexandra, *Design by Accident: For a New History of Design*, London, Stenberg Press, 2019, page 18.



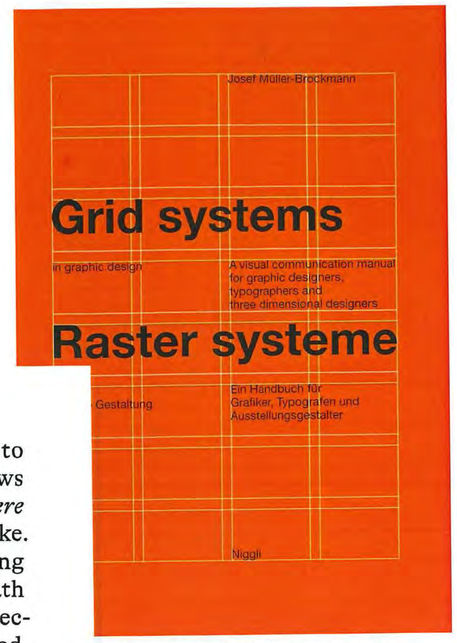
The *NASA Graphics Standards Manual* by Richard Danne and Bruce Blackburn, 1975. Image standardsmanual.com.

arguing something that is made explicit in the subtitle of his work, "From William Morris to Walter Gropius": he presents an idea of succession of heroic figures who follow one another in a homogeneous lineage. In Giedion's view, the evolution of techniques that unite aesthetics and mechanization is presented as a triumphant history of progress.[33] If from a chronological perspective time is viewed in a structural and progressive way, than this progress also consists of the reproduction of ideas. Throughout the book, Midal debates and counters these views that have shaped design as a discipline, but it is undeniable how the concepts of rationality, structure, and linearity are present in the way we study and learn about design.

We learn that design is a way of organizing the world. The valorization of normativity in design is evident both in practical applications and theoretical reflections. For instance, *Grid Systems in Graphic Design* (1981), Josef Müller-Brockmann's canonical manual, embodies the Swiss school's International Typographic Style by providing systematic models for organizing visual information. On a more abstract level, Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* (1971) defines design as "the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order".[34] For Papanek, the designer's role is deeply tied to societal service, demanding a high degree of social and moral responsibility.[35] Whether in commercial contexts or in addressing "real-world problems", the ideal designer is portrayed as a keen observer who identifies issues, and through the rationalization, organization and solution of these issues finds their central creative strength.

To organize is to arrange things systematically,[36] and for that, is needed clear orientation. "If we know where we are when we turn this way or that way, then we are oriented,"[37] reflects Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology:*

33 Midal, 2019, p. 19.
34 Papanek, Victor, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, London, Thames & Hudson, reprinted 2006, p. 4.
35 Ibid., p. ix.
36 Cambridge Dictionary, "Organize", available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/organize (accessed 3 December 2024).
37 Ahmed, 2006, p. 1.



Cover of the book *Grid Systems in Graphic Design*, by Josef-Müller-Brockmann, published by Niggli in 1981.

Orientations, Objects, Others. To be oriented means to move in a certain direction, to follow a line that allows us to find our way. Directions provide guidance on *where* to go, but they also imply *how* and *what* actions to take. The word 'direct' itself comes from the idea of 'being straight'—going 'straight to the point.' Following a path without deviation is embedded in the very idea of direction, suggesting a sense of 'straightness.' For Ahmed, following a line can also be a way of becoming straight, by never deviating at any point. The paths we follow can act as forms of 'alignment,' ways of being in line with others—we trace the same path as those before us. Reflecting on straightness and heterosexuality, she explores the ambiguous relationship between 'following a line' and the line's existence. Does the line precede the act of following, or does it only emerge through repetition? She refers to the phrase "a path well trodden": a path emerges only through the repeated act of the ground being 'trodden' upon, suggesting that the line's very existence is tied to the persistence of its repetition.[38]

> Of course, when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects he is not considering "queer" as a sexual orientation—but we can. We can turn to the etymology of the word "queer," which comes from the Indo-European word "twist." Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a "straight line," a sexuality that is bent and crooked.[39]

Sara Ahmed examines the intersections of queerness and the idea of "orientation," presented in "sexual orientation", a term that implies direction and alignment. Rooted in sexology, "orientation" replaced terms like "preference" to describe how individuals are directed toward certain objects of desire. This framework situates heterosexuality as the neutral, unmarked standard, while queerness is framed as deviation.

It is worth noting the correlation between neutrality, universality, and standardization in both the history of

38 Ahmed, 2006, p. 16.
39 Ibid., p. 68.

modern design and the model of heterosexuality observed by Ahmed. These values are often linked to notions of progress, reflecting how certain ideals become benchmarks for advancement and legitimacy, while reinforcing the belief in a singular, linear path toward the future.

The desire for a linear future is also illustrated in the passage from Virginia Woolf's novel that opens this chapter. The queen positions Orlando firmly within the well-trodden path of the kingdom, exclaiming, "It is my victory!".[40] There is no glimpse for her that things might take a different turn. Orlando's future is set; he is the heir to her legacy. And when a straight line is set to be followed, any deviation is seen as *failure*.



ORLANDO AS A BOY

40 Woolf, 1928, pp. 26.

Suddenly, with an awful and ominous voice, a voice full of horror and alarm which raised every hair of anguish in Orlando's soul, St. Paul's struck the first stroke of midnight. Four times more it struck remorselessly. With the superstition of a lover, Orlando had made out that it was on the sixth stroke that she would come. But the sixth stroke echoed away, and the seventh came and the eighth, and to his apprehensive mind they seemed notes first heralding and then proclaiming death and disaster. When the twelfth struck he knew that his doom was sealed. It was useless for the rational part of him to reason; she might be late; she might be prevented; she might have missed her way. The passionate and feeling heart of Orlando knew the truth. Other clocks struck, jangling one after another. The whole world seemed to ring with the news of her deceit and his derision. (...) He was bitten by a swarm of snakes, each more poisonous than the last. He stood in the doorway in the tremendous rain without moving. As the minutes passed, he sagged a little at the knees. The downpour rushed on. In the thick of it, great guns seemed to boom. Huge noises as of the tearing and rending of oak trees could be heard. There were also wild cries and terrible inhuman groanings. But Orlando stood there immovable till Paul's clock struck two, and then, crying aloud with an awful irony, and all his teeth showing, "Jour de ma vie!" he dashed the lantern to the ground, mounted his horse and galloped he knew not where.

CHAPTER II

Failure

Love strikes when Orlando meets an androgynous Muscovite princess. Sasha, clad in a cloak, trousers, and boots as if she were a man, skates furiously across the frozen river. Orlando describes her as a snow fox, an olive tree—like nothing he had ever seen or known before. He is ready to relinquish his title, abandon his career and break off his arranged marriage. He cannot fulfill the future others have laid out for him.

The deviation from its promised future could already be seen as enough failure, but as he waits for his beloved on the night of their escape, the cathedral bell tolls for the first time. With each chime, the lover's anguish deepens. Sasha is late. Sasha will not come. Orlando is abandoned—not only by the future he dreamed for himself but also by the one he was expected to embrace and chose to forsake. Each toll of St. Paul's Cathedral bell strikes Orlando like a blow. Time is slipping away, and his failure becomes undeniable. Orlando's disillusionment with love and society deepens after Sasha's departure, and he retreats further into his private world of poetry and contemplation.

Some designers sometimes might feel like Orlando, abandoned in agony at midnight. Silvio Lorusso's *What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion* critically explores the limitations of design in addressing societal issues, deconstructing the grand narratives surrounding its transformative capacity.

The state of design in 2023. Gone are the days of the Apple craze, of design as a positive force of change and economic growth, a golden age in which not only designers but also managers and politicians would jump on the smooth and colourful bandwagon of design. The period ranging from the mid-80's to the late 2000's was a promising one: design went hand in hand with creativity, which wasn't just a skill or a quality, but a full sociopolitical project, that of individual autonomy and cheerful reinvention, freedom of choice, agile making and breaking, self-design. During this time, management guru Tom Peters's

41 Woolf, 1928, pp. 60-61.

conviction that "design is everything, it's how you live in the world" became the default, the same Tom Peters who imagined a "world where the timid goal of 'improvement' (and the tendency to tinker) has given way to... an unabashed commitment to destruction".[42]

The promised future of design has also failed. Lorusso begins the prologue by recalling Victor Papanek's sentence: "the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order".[43] He questions the role of design in a world increasingly shaped by economic, political, and technological crises. The central thesis of the book is that design cannot be an all-encompassing solution to systemic problems. He argues that the overestimation of design's capabilities often obscures deeper social issues, rooted in structural inequalities and power dynamics. In the end of the book, Lorusso emphasizes the importance of recognizing design's limitations and working within them to contribute meaningfully to society. Moreover, is problem-solving the only value of the practice? Somehow, is the worth of design exclusively tied to activities bound to production? Perhaps the insatiable appetite of design has created a cognitive dissonance: while 'everything is design' and 'anyone can be a designer,' professionals in the field simultaneously strive to shield the discipline from the precarious effects of the economy.[44] If in the prologue Lorusso quotes Papanek, in the epilogue he turns to Clarice Lispector: "Perhaps disillusionment is the fear of no longer belonging to a system".[45] This reflection invites us to explore parallels with other examples of societal failure.

42 Lorusso, Silvio, *What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion*, Eindhoven, Set Margins, 2024, p. 33. Silvio Lorusso is an Italian writer, artist, and designer based in Lisbon, Portugal. He is the author of *Entreprecariat* (Onomatopee, 2019) and *What Design Can't Do* (Set Margins, 2023). Lorusso holds a Ph.D. in Design Sciences from the Iuav University of Venice, and he is an assistant professor at Lusófona University in Lisbon and a tutor at the Information Design department of Design Academy Eindhoven. His work engages with the tensions surrounding notions of labour, productivity, autonomy, self-design, entrepreneurialism, precarity and failure.

43 Ibid., p. 15. Papanek, Victor, reprinted 2006, p. 4.

44 Matos, Afonso, *Who Can Afford to Be Critical? An Inquiry into What We Can't Do Alone, as Designers, and into What We Might Be Able to Do Together, as People*, Eindhoven, Set Margins, 2022, p. 6.

45 Lorusso, Silvio, 2024, p. 291. Clarice Lispector. *A paixão segundo G.H.* Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2009. p. 7. Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) was a Brazilian writer known for her introspective and experimental prose. Her works explore themes of identity, existentialism, and the inner workings of the human mind.



The traditional nuclear family portrayed in a 50's Dairy Foods Butter advertisement.

The idea of failure is deeply intertwined with how queerness is perceived in the Occident. In other words, people are often compelled to conform to the pursuit of productivity and historical continuity, primarily through reproduction. Since individuals of the same biological sex cannot conceive a child together, and transgender bodies may not align with traditional cisgender reproductive norms, queerness is often stigmatized as a deviation from these expectations of future.[46] As a result, it is also defined by its complex and disruptive relationship with socially constructed timelines, both on an individual (developmental) level and a collective (historical) scale.[47]

In Western discourses, queerness has been characterized by a lack of proper orientation in terms of time as much as of social norms. For Freudians, homosexuals were developmentally regressive or marked by a failure to harness their drives and to orient themselves properly with respect to the future. Outside psychoanalysis, the understanding of homosexuality as an atavistic condition in the nineteenth-century discourses of evolution and racial sciences—a notion that haunts queers through homophobic political discourse even in this century—reinforces the sense that queerness is marked by a peculiar form of untimeliness. Western discourses of sexual and racial otherness most explicitly meet at the juncture of developmental time: "queers," as Heather Love observes, "have been seen across the twentieth century as a backward race," "as a drag on the progress of civilization".[48]

Queerness is a failure in the linear temporality of progress, success, and consequently, in what is expected of the future. In the polemic work of Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, he introduces the term "reproductive futurism" to describe the dominant cultural logic of linear temporality and heteronormativity, which centers on dependence around reproduction and the figure of the child. He argues that the child represents the possibility of the future, against

46 Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, Duke University Press, Series Q, 2004, p. 3.
47 McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 6.
48 Ibid., p. 7.



The drag queen Divine. Film still from *Pink Flamingos* by John Waters, 1972.

which the queer is positioned as the personification of an unrelenting, narcissistic, antisocial drive that negates this future. However, he believes that the queer potential lies precisely in its willingness to embrace this refusal of social and political order.[49]

It is essential to recognize that this is a conceptual generalization. Setting aside stereotypes, there are countless examples of queer individuals who have children, form families, and often aspire to replicate traditional family structures, or who create new understandings of family and reproduction. However, precisely because they cannot follow a well-trodden path laid out by heterosexual society, there is almost a creative necessity throughout the entire journey of queer life. The radical rejection of this model, or the attempt to adapt to the social order, can lead to a more experimental or even rebellious way of life. As a result, queer theorists reflect on what the expectation of a queer future might look like.

> Queer studies offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems. [...] Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. José Muñoz has produced the most elaborate account of queer failure to date and he explains the connection between queers and failure in terms of a utopian "rejection of pragmatism," on the one hand, and an equally utopian refusal of social norms on the other.[50]

Jack Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, analyzes films, animated works, and elements of popular culture to explore how failure can serve as a queer refusal to engage with normative structures. He introduces the concept of "low theory," a mode of thought that embraces the playful, the non-linear, and the seemingly insignificant in order to critique societal norms. This challenges the dominance of

49 Edelman, 2004, p. 3.
50 Halberstam, Jack (Judith), *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 89.

"high theory" and academic elitism. Halberstam discusses how animation allows for absurdity, queerness, and the rejection of realism, making it a rich space for rethinking societal conventions. He points to cartoons from what he calls the "silly archive," such as *Finding Nemo*, which, he suggests, contains a secret plan for world revolution, or *Chicken Run*, which he interprets as outlining a feminist utopia for those who can look beyond feathers and eggs. Halberstam claims that the small, inconsequential, and irrelevant can make a difference by thinking small thoughts and sharing them widely.[51]

He connects this line of thinking to Foucault's idea of "subjugated knowledges," where we move away from theories that aim to provide one-size-fits-all explanations for society, politics, and culture, and instead make room for the "local character of critique".[52] He also cites the work of José Esteban Muñoz as a reference for imagining new alternative futures. In a society obsessed with success, Muñoz offers an alternative that celebrates the messy, unproductive, and subversive aspects of life[53]—ideas that will underpin our reflections in the following chapters.

These examples resonate with design practices that challenge goal-oriented approaches. If the intent to impose social order upon the world has faltered, could design practices deliberately lean into a similar refusal? By rejecting the temporality tied to the fruitful futures traditionally promised by design, might these practices reflect the deconstructive and nonconforming narratives found in Halberstam's analysis? What, then, is design *becoming*?

51 Halberstam, Jack (Judith), 2011, p. 21.
52 Ibid., p. 10.
53 Ibid., p. 89. José Esteban Muñoz (1967–2013) was a Cuban-American scholar and cultural theorist known for his influential work on queer theory, performance studies, and critical race theory. A professor at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, he authored the provocative book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, which explores queer temporality and the utopian potential of queer experiences. Muñoz's work continues to shape discussions around identity, resistance, and the politics of hope.



Orlando as Ambassador

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman.

The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace.

(...) Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath.

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he'—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (...)

but that was all. The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

CHAPTER III

Becoming

Seven days pass while Orlando sleeps. The biographer narrating the story laments: it would be simpler to spare the reader from what is yet to come and merely state in a few words that Orlando died and was buried. But on the seventh day, Orlando is visited by the austere goddesses Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, who, to the sound of trumpets, demand in unison: The Truth, and nothing but the Truth! Orlando awakens, looks into the mirror—and he is now a woman. The transformation is presented with naturalness—she shows no surprise or discomfort; she is the same person, only now with a different sex.

In her notes on adapting the novel for the screen, director Sally Potter shares her interpretation:

> And Orlando's change of sex in the film is the result of his having reached a crisis point—a crisis of masculine identity. On the battlefield he looks death and destruction in the face and faces the challenge of kill or be killed. It is Orlando's unwillingness to conform to what is expected of him as a man that leads – within the logic of the film— to his change of sex.[55]

Meanwhile, in the film directed by Paul B. Preciado he seizes the moment of Orlando's transformation to reflect on his own transition:

> "The first year of my transition was one of the most beautiful periods of my life. I remember a time between January and June, during which, after increasing the dose of hormones every 17 days up to 250 mg. It was not yet possible neither for others nor for myself to know if my face was that of a woman or that of a man. Sometimes, roaming the streets of New York, I discovered my reflection in a window and I saw how the female face was decomposing without the male face has yet appeared. The hormones had started to undo a mask of me, but he had not yet been replaced by another. I called this period: genderless time. This one was an uncertain period, but it was also light. As if all report properties, or inheritances, of guilt and debts had disappeared with sexual diference. While hormonal changes sculpted my body like a chemical chisel operating from within and that I had started to use my new name, I felt how reality transformed around me. It wasn't just me who was changing. My change was part of a planetary mutation. You, Virginia, you understood that well. The pleasure that Orlando takes to make the transition comes from the decision to open up to experimentation, to make his life a work of art".[56]

For Potter, Orlando's change of sex arises from a crisis tied to expectation and conformity. Preciado, for instance, connects this transformation to a period of openness to experimentation. It is striking how he reflects on the experience of transformation within himself while simultaneously perceiving reality shifting around him. Looking into the mirror and failing to recognize a distinctly male or female face, he becomes captivated by the potential unleashed in the dissolution of a binary framework—how, as a consequence, the dissolution of gender binaries also unravels expectations, legacies, and obligations.

Regarding the dissolution of binary frameworks, we can glimpse some of today's design projects: a sci-fi classroom imagined for a fictional anarchist planet; a shelf of stoneware bread loaves transformed into porcelain éclairs; an autonomous plotting machine tracing war-scarred landscapes; furniture-like objects embedded with ultrasound technology; an 81 m^2 house built for the LGBTQIA+ community's imaginary friend; performers connecting their bodies to planetary systems through geo-ponchos; a quiet, meditative process of shaping lump ceramic objects; or inflatable, ostentatious sculptures that collapse and rebuild. Contemporary design practices are reshaping the discipline's old visage, unveiling a face we have not yet fully recognized.

Graduating design students today often base their projects on deeply personal inquiries, evolving them into immersive installations—such as Vincent Grange's *Dorothy's House*, a celebration of queer spaces [57] —or designing objects with critical, poetic, and political appeal, like Sonya

54 Woolf, 1928, pp. 137–139.
55 Sony Pictures Classics Release, *Orlando*, 1992. p. 15.







56 Preciado, Paul B., *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, 2023, film. English translation.
57 Vincent Grange, *Dorothy's House*, MA Space & Communication, HEAD Genève. Available at: https://maspaceandcommunication.com/#/sonya-isupova-copy/ (accessed 4 December 2024).

Isupova's *Mapping Uncertain Landscapes*, which charts the war-torn and transformed geography of Ukraine.[58]

Design practice can also become therapeutic or meditative for the maker, as seen in Thomas Nathan's repetitive process of plucking, rolling, and pressing hundreds of clay lumps to create his objects.[59] Or thoughtful, as in *The Bare Necessities* by Bruno Baietto, who reflects on his family history as the son of a baker, exploring how cultural value shifts between sculpting food that sustains us and food that remains inedible within a gallery setting.[60]

Design can imagine alternative realities, such as the anarchist planet in *Night School on Anarres*, where Noam Toram, in collaboration with Onkar Kular and Nestor Pestana, inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, created a fictional film and an experimental educational classroom.[61] Or it can challenge our relationships with everyday technology, as seen in Dunne & Raby's *Placebo Project* (1999). Through conceptual, furniture-like objects, they prompt reflections and stories about the hidden lives of electronic devices and the invisible electromagnetic forces they emit.[62]

Some works take a performative approach, like *Accidental Geopoetics* by The Rodina, where performers wearing geo-ponchos and geoglyphs navigate planetary systems,[63] or *Horizons Deferred* by El Ultimo Grito, where inflatable sculptures with motion and sound sensors react to each other and visitors, collapsing and rebuilding to critique social and technological systems.[64]

The design field has fragmented into numerous subfields, leading to a frequent redefinition of the term itself,

58 Sonya Isupova, *Mapping Uncertain Landscapes*, MA Space & Communication, HEAD Genève. Available at: https://maspaceandcommunication.com/#/sonya-isupova/(accessed 4 December 2024).
59 Schouwenberg, Louise, and Kaethler, Michael (eds.), *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*, *Amsterdam*, Valiz, 2022, pp. 130-135.
60 Bruno Baietto, *The Bare Necessities*. Available at: https://brunobaietto.com/The-Bare-Necessities (accessed 4 December 2024).
61 Noam Toran, *Night School on Anarres*, Available at: http://noamtoran.com/NT2009/projects/night-school-on-anarres (accessed 4 December 2024).
62 Dunne & Raby, *Placebo Project*, 2001. Available at: https://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/projects/70/0 (accessed 4 December 2024).
63 The Rodina, *Accidental Geopoetics*, Available at: https://www.therodina.com/project/accidental-geopoetics (accessed 4 December 2024).
64 El Ultimo Grito, *Horizons Deferred*, Available at: https://elultimogrito.website/work#/horizons-deferred-1/ (accessed 4 December 2024).



reshaping its identity and binary definitions. "Design" is is now often paired with adjectives like speculative and critical, discursive and performative, or used to modify nouns such as research and fictions.[65]

In *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*, edited by Louise Schouwenberg, former head of Contextual Design at Design Academy Eindhoven, and Michael Kaethler, a postdoctoral researcher in KU Leuven's architecture department, the authors explore the value of contemporary practices that refuse to be confined by disciplinary boundaries:

> Design is a practice and mode of thinking that has its own discipline—its own norms, systems of valuation, linguistic alignments, and so forth. Disciplines are very good at 'disciplining' and by this, I mean ensuring that those who fall under its rubric adhere to its principles, establishing a sufficient uniformity, stability, and cohesion. When this becomes too stable, it is problematic. As the epistemological anarchist Paul Feyerabend describes in *Against Method*, almost every major breakthrough in thought occurs at the borders and fringes of a discipline, where radical ideas can be developed without being censored or disciplined.[66]

Beyond introducing a new terminology, they explore how contemporary practices are operating on the fringes of the discipline by shifting the traditional role of the designer. No longer a detached observer, the designer becomes embedded within the project itself. The central creative source transitions from solving external problems to being driven by the designer's own intuition, guided by personal exploration—whether stemming from individual research, a specific need, or a deep-seated desire.

As mentioned above, for too long design has served, often unquestioningly, various masters, such as the market, industry, politics, or some notion of social good. In the process, design has been extended as a creative act for serving 'the other.' Design has thus often become an act of

65 Fuller, Jarrett, "Book Review: *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*, edited by Louise Schouwenberg and Michael Kaethler," Design and Culture: The Journal of the Design Studies Forum, https://valiz.nl/images/publicaties/Auto-etnographic_Turn_in_Design/Design-and-culture_27-04-22.pdf (accessed December 3, 2024).
66 Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2022, pp. 55–56.





materializing otherness, a form of re-affirming a certain cultural class's (the designer class) notion of the 'other.' What this book [*The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*] explores is the shift from this 'other' to the self, where the self becomes worthy of exploration as both the site and vessel for design. In doing so, the designer is not trapped in a formulation of what type of chair or lamp they might desire but rather is able to speak from their own personal experiences; they use design to understand their world, desires, and experiences, and articulate outwards from that world through a vantage point of material and cultural entanglements. This reorients design away from grand gestures and towards the sensible, modest, personal, and accountable form of making.[67]

And Michael Kaethler completes:

There is a recognition here of the designer. For too long, the designer has either been the 'star' (with a focus on ego and grand or fashionable projects) or all too absent (with a focus on design as a kind of science which understands the designer as fulfilling a more technical role of addressing problems). We are looking at acknowledging a different aspect of the designer and foregrounding them within the design process, recognizing that design research is deeply personal and that design need not only be for others but also for the self (coming from a deep personal need or desire, and addressing one's own specific world).[68]





In a discipline deeply rooted in the idea of function, these practices might seem like the antithesis of what has traditionally been deemed 'proper' design. Yet it is precisely within this tension that a meaningful connection to the question of temporality emerges. If queer temporality resists the linear, orderly progression of *chronos*, aligning instead with *kairos*—the time of opportunity—these emerging design practices may also signal this temporal departure. Design appears to be moving away from a framework that prioritizes uniformity, mass productivity, and compliance. In doing so, these experimental approaches adopt a deeper temporality—one

67 Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2022, p. 21.
68 Ibid., p. 61.

that values self-reflection, personal exploration, presence and vulnerability.

These practices also redefine the designer's relationship with the concept of future. Traditionally, design has been celebrated as a pragmatic tool for guiding society toward progress—shaping a better tomorrow through tangible solutions. But what value lies in practices that prioritize poetic exploration over utilitarian functionality? Can design exist without a clear objective or solution-driven purpose? For some, such approaches may no longer be recognized as design, dismissed instead as ventures into other disciplines—"just a film" or "just an art installation." As Michael Kaethler observes, "when design becomes too messy and personal, it is quietly nudged towards the arts".[69] This marginalization mirrors a critique found in queer theory. Lee Edelman's concept of "reproductive futurism" challenges the heterosexual social order's fixation on reproduction as the measure of the future. Within this framework, queerness, often dismissed as unproductive or self-indulgent, disrupts the dominant narrative of progress.[70] Similarly, design that rejects productivity—whether aligned with market demands or social good—as its primary aim risks being marginalized within its own field, often dismissed as mere artistic experimentation.

In experimental design practices, however, there is often a deliberate shift in focus from the final product to the creative process itself. This emphasis mirrors the queer temporalities that reject linear notions of time as a progression tied to reproduction or achievement. Instead, it values the dynamics of becoming—a fluid and ongoing process that challenges static ideas of existence or predefined outcomes. This shift invites us to see life as a state of perpetual transformation, embracing what some describe as "the fundamental mobility of life" and reframing existence as "fundamental becoming."[71]

At the same time, as design increasingly intersects with fields like art, performance, film, and academic research, this hybridization doesn't dilute the discipline. Instead, it





69 Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2022, p. 52.
70 Edelman, 2004, p. 113.
71 McCallum and Tuhkanen, 2011, p. 3.

expands its scope, allowing design to engage with cultural values traditionally reserved for other domains. Kaethler's reflections suggest that this evolution carves out a space for design to redefine its role and contribution:

We see art as producing all kinds of values—aesthetic, commercial, even ethical to an extent. We accept that art can provide a range of values, but when it comes to design, we don't seem to see such a range. I don't think design is always perceived as a legitimate vehicle for cultural expression, or else as providing a sense of therapy for the practitioner in the way that, for example, literature is—the idea that somebody just has to write and that's good for them. But there is nothing intrinsic about design that means that it couldn't have these kinds of values. I suppose these tendencies are just hallmarks of the past and of how we conceived of design when it was very clearly linked to industry, despite there being a number of examples across the last century of it doing a whole range of different things. I think design still seems to provoke a faint sense of bafflement if it's not being deployed for problem solving or to generate commercial value. That is strange, because there are not many disciplines that are quite so hemmed in as that. For example, within writing you can have beautiful, literary writing that isn't practical or doesn't provide clear answers, and that's wonderful; similarly, you can have text which is as dull as dishwater, but which is worth persevering through because there's much to be gained by struggling through it. It's the same with art: we have no problem admitting that it's very catholic as a field, and can be all sorts of things. But I never get the sense that everybody feels that they can legitimately talk about design as a way of creating an assortment of values.[72]

In this sense, these emerging design practices have the potential to redefine the very boundaries of the discipline, allowing it to be more than just a tool for solving problems, but a medium for broader cultural, emotional, and ethical exploration.

72 Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2022, pp. 66–67.



But has design always been cross-disciplinary? Some readers may argue and recall Bauhaus dance performances,[73] Bruno Munari's "Useless Machines,"[74] or any number of other projects that may come to mind. Yet, much like the witty biographer of *Orlando* sidesteps the debate between "(1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man," I too leave this question to the design historians. The fact remains that "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since." And today, what we declare as design practice is hybrid, personal, speculative, and constantly *twisting*.



Orlando on her return to England

73 "Performance Art at the Bauhaus School," Widewalls, https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/bauhaus-school-performance-art (accessed December 3, 2024).
74 Munari, Bruno, *Design as Art*, London, Penguin Books, 2009, p. 14.

Images in order of appearance: *The Bare Necessities*, Bruno Baietto,photos: Aad Hoogendoorn. *Cylindrical,* Thomas Nathan. *Dorothy's House,* Vincent Grange, photos: Raphaëlle Mueller. *Mapping Uncertain Landscape,* Sonya Isupova, photos: Guillaume Collignon. *Accidental Geopoetics*, The Rodina. *Placebo Project*, Dunne and Raby, 2001. *Night School on Anarres*, Noam Toram in collaboration with Onkar Kular and Nestor Pestana. photos: by Agnese Sanvito. *Horizons Deferred*, El Ultimo Grito's.

Immediately, the first stroke of midnight sounded. The cold breeze of the present brushed her face with its little breath of fear. She looked anxiously into the sky. It was dark with clouds now. The wind roared in her ears. But in the roar of the wind she heard the roar of an aeroplane coming nearer and nearer.

"Here! Shel, here!" she cried, baring her breast to the moon (which now showed bright) so that her pearls glowed like the eggs of some vast moon-spider. The aeroplane rushed out of the clouds and stood over her head. It hovered above her. Her pearls burnt like a phosphorescent flare in the darkness.

And as Shelmerdine, now grown a fine sea captain, hale, fresh-coloured, and alert, leapt to the ground, there sprang up over his head a single wild bird.

"It is the goose!" Orlando cried. "The wild goose. . . ."

And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight. 75

CHAPTER IV

Twisting

← This book is not very linear...
keep turning the page this way.

Orlando's biography ends on October 11, 1928—the exact day Virginia Woolf's novel was published. The character has lived for more than 300 years, and since the story concludes in the present moment of its publication, it suggests that Orlando could very well still be living among us. Orlando's life transcends the boundaries of gender, time, and space. Before the stroke of midnight, she sees a wild goose and weeps. The wild goose is often associated with freedom and the spirit of wandering. The moment can also be read as an allusion to the phrase "wild goose chase," an idiom signifying the pursuit of the unattainable or the search for something elusive. By creating a character who lives for centuries and changes gender, Woolf challenges the linear view of time, proposing that it may instead be cyclical, subjective, or malleable. This aligns with the idea that inner, psychological time does not adhere to the same rules as chronological time.

If contemporary design practices merge research with personal creative expression—crafting profoundly intimate objects that explore and communicate personal feelings, traumas, fears, obsessions, hopes, fascinations, and passions[76]—then an internal, psychological, and nonlinear temporality takes shape in these projects. Looking at design through the lens of queer theory, contemporary design seems to be breaking from the reinforcement of linear, normative conceptions of time. Instead, it is beginning to engage with the contours of queer temporalities, fostering new interpretations of time, identity, and relationality, while challenging established notions of reproduction and conformity.

Talking about time means delving into our understanding of the past, present, and future. If studies on queer temporality can offer valuable insights into today manifestations of design, perhaps they also hold clues about the future. In his seminal text, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz articulates a utopian vision of radical futurity, challenging the present as a confining and restrictive time:

75 Woolf, 1928, p. 328-329.
76 Schouwenberg and Kaethler, 2022, p. 13.

> Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain.[77]

Muñoz introduces the concept of 'queer utopia' as something that resides not in the 'here and now' but in the 'there and then,' positioning queerness as inherently tied to futurity and hope. In contrast to Edelman's rejection of the future,[78] Muñoz asserts that queerness lives on the horizon, embodying ways of being that prioritize collective and transformative futures.[79] Drawing on the work of marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, he distinguishes between *abstract utopias*—that can be overly idealistic, often veering into escapism—, and *concrete utopias*—firmly rooted in the lived realities of marginalized or emergent communities, making them more potent tools for envisioning and striving toward social change.[80] What makes Muñoz's vision particularly compelling is its origin at the margins:—he focuses on intersections within marginalized societies, including LGBTQIA+ people, Black and Latin communities, and immigrants. If queer utopia arises from the periphery, what might emerge from the margins of a discipline like design? Beyond intersections with other fields of knowledge, is valid pay attention where else do the boundaries of design stretch, and what possibilities lie at its edges.

To examine the margins, we must first understand what constitutes the center. In design, these centers are often spatial or cultural, rooted in a discipline largely shaped by studies and events from the Global North—predominantly Europe and the United States.[81] *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook* joins a growing wave

77 Muñoz, José Esteban, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York, NYU Press, 2009, p. 1.
78 Edelman, 2004, p. 111.
79 Muñoz, 2009, p. 11.
80 Ibid., p. 3.
81 Tunstal, Elizabeth (Dori), *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook*, New York, Island Press, 2023, p. 45.

of efforts in recent years to rethink the practice beyond the European modernist model. Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall underscores the importance of recognizing and integrating alternative temporalities into design. She critiques how European modernist design has historically excluded and oppressed communities, as the modernist project was fueled by the myth that individuals must abandon their ethnic and national identities in favor of a 'universal humankind.' This notion, as Tunstall reveals, assumes a subject that is white, male, European, middle-class, and Christian.[82]

Tunstall also highlights how the lives of European masses failed to improve during the Industrial Revolution and demonstrates how the technological biases of the modernist project contributed to the devastation of Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color through their role in colonization. She advocates for a design practice that confronts these injustices by recentering its theories and practices around global Indigenous cultures and histories.[83]

Through the lens of temporality, this shift extends beyond practical projects. It encourages us to broaden the scope of design history by reevaluating its relationship with the past. This challenge involves expanding what we consider the historical narrative of design, integrating overlooked perspectives, and creating space for alternative histories and tomorrows.

It is useful to consider the metaphor of the mirror. Before spotting the wild goose, Orlando sees her lover, Shelmerdine, who is also depicted in an androgynous light, acting as a reflection to Orlando's multifaceted identity—complementing, paralleling, and amplifying it. This idea of mirroring becomes particularly fascinating when examining the new practices and contemporary thinkers that are shaping the field of design today. Broadening the boundaries of what design encompasses now creates a reflective dialogue with its historical narrative. The mirror functions here not as a static reflection

82 Tunstal, 2023, p. 59.
83 Ibid., p. 48.

but as a dynamic prism, refracting the present into a spectrum of potential futures.

In a similar way, there's a reason Paul B. Preciado chooses to tell Orlando's story through the lives of 26 trans and non-binary people. If Orlando lives on, they do so through these lives, challenging societal norms with resilience and creativity. This ripple effect amplifies possibilities, multiplying what can be imagined and achieved. What we call design will continue to evolve and twist, reflecting the world and proposing solutions where needed. Alongside this, new forms of design will emerge—forms that embrace exploration and utopias. Perhaps these approaches, like Orlando, glimpse *'the wild goose'*—not as something to be objectively captured, but as an ever-unfolding pursuit.



Orlando at the present time

EPILOGUE

Untimeless Future

"First of all, the future doesn't exist—we just imagine it."[84]
AILTON KRENAK

OUT OF SYNC – Design in Queer Temporalities is an investigation into the relationship between design and time. While in the past, the emergence of the discipline was closely tied to modernism and new modes of production following the Industrial Revolution, serving as a means to materialize the ideals of progress and the accelerated pace of new consumption, recent historians have emphasized modernity as a disjunctive experience.[85]

The initial approach positioned modernity within a historical continuum, linking past and present toward a linear vision of the future. This future, embedded in ideas of rationalization, universality, and standardization, proposed a neutralization of strangeness. In contrast, queer theory's view of time embraces and centers strangeness. As contemporary design adopt's experimentation and self-expression, a bent temporality begins to emerge—one where potentially twisted futures can be imagined and designed.

This research builds on the premise that intersecting design with other areas of knowledge can provide valuable insights, contributing to a broader reflection on the discipline's scope. As design breaks away from traditional frameworks, its potential impact extends beyond problem-solving, and more speculative ways of thinking about practice are equally necessary.

A potential unfolding of this work could involve mapping these emergent practices, understanding their principles, identifying trends, and exploring the new societal values they bring. Paraphrasing José Esteban Muñoz "queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity".[86] It is also relevant to consider who the actors behind these new practices are and under what conditions they emerge. In *Who Can Afford to Be Critical? An Inquiry Into What We Can't Do Alone as Designers, and What We Might Be Able to Do Together as People*, Afonso Matos, a graduate of the Design Academy Eindhoven, delves into the hectic recent discussion on contemporary design practices to explore the intersection of design, social critique, and collective power. He critiques the gap between Critical Design Schools and the realities of work, advocating for collective solutions to avoid contradictions and individual projects with high aesthetic appeal but lack in real impact.[87] From a temporal perspective, it is worth considering: if capitalism embodies the essence of *Chronos*, what space is left for deeper, more reflective, and deviant temporalities? Is it possible to truly desynchronize from these forces?

In an increasingly complex world—marked by ecological crises and political instability—design will undoubtedly play a critical role in addressing urgent challenges, engaging with the *here and now*. However, beyond this, it can also offer a range of alternative values, encouraging us to rethink our relationship with progress and inspiring the *there and then*. If this epilogue opens with Ailton Krenak's vision of malleable future, we can close our reflection about design and temporality with another of his ideas: "Let's put our creative and critical capacity to use making some colorful parachutes to slow the fall, turning it into something exciting and edifying".[88]

84 Krenak, Ailton, *Futuro Ancestral*, São Paulo, Editora Companhia das Letras, 2020, p. 72. Translation to English. Ailton Krenak is a Brazilian Indigenous leader, environmentalist, and writer from the Krenak people. Author of influential works like *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (2019) and *Ancestral Future* (2024), he explores sustainability, Indigenous wisdom, and alternative ways of living. His work challenges Western worldviews, offering perspectives rooted in ancestral oral traditions.

85 Kaplan, Wendy, p. 143.

86 Muñoz, 2009, p. 1.

87 Matos, Afonso, 2022, p. 13.

88 Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World* (Translation Anthony Doyle), Anansi International, 2024, p. 34



ANNEX

Embodying Orlando,
Workshops

The workshop *Embodying Orlando* took place during the Junior Research Conference in November 2024 at SUPSI in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's timeless character, the workshop invited participants to explore queer temporality and creative expression through a series of dynamic exercises. We began by presenting Orlando's journey and introducing key concepts from the research *OUT OF SYNC – Design in Queer Temporalites*. Participants chose objects symbolizing their past or imagined futures and introduced themselves playfully through prompts inspired by Paul B. Preciado's reinterpretation of Orlando.

Divided into small groups, they developed actions and poses reflecting their characters' stories, drawing on the expressive power of ballroom and voguing as acts of resistance and creativity. After a short break, participants engaged with queer slang through an animated lottery, integrating this new language into their personas. During the transformation phase, each participant brought their Orlando to life, experimenting with drag, props, and makeup to create unique identities. Inspired by their objects, crafted poses, and queer slang, they presented their character narratives, sharing when their Orlando was born, how long they lived, and the advice their Orlando would offer to their real selves.

The process highlighted how crafting a persona offers freedom from the constraints of everyday identity, serving as a powerful tool for self-expression and artistic discovery. Creating a persona enables individuals to experiment with new perspectives, much like authors who adopt pseudonyms to explore alternate voices and narratives. This strategy can also be applied during the design process to unlock creative potential and challenge conventional approaches.

Blending performance, drag, and ballroom culture, the workshop offered a playful yet politically charged exploration of identity and self-expression. By embodying Orlando, participants reimagined themselves across eras, transcending conventional timelines and embracing the fluidity of gender and narrative. Through interactive activities, we delved into the intersection of queer temporality and creative necessity, drawing inspiration from José Esteban Muñoz's concept of utopian imagination. As a conclusion to this collective journey, portraits of the participants' Orlandos were compiled into a poster styled like a school yearbook—a visual memento celebrating the brief yet eternal presence of these characters in our lives.



WORKSHOP

EMBODYING ORLANDO

Class of 1928

"Time, the most mysterious of all elements"

Out of Sync

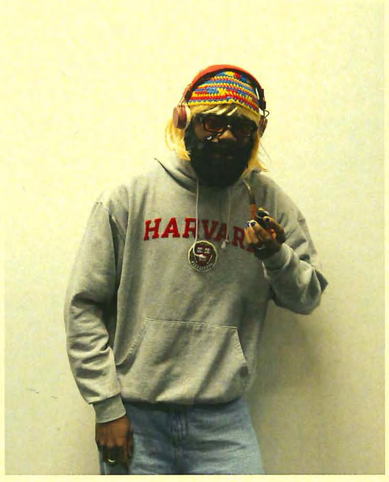
"Nothing is any longer one thing."



IGGY ORLANDO
Full leather. Learn how to drive to offer dreams to your future dates.



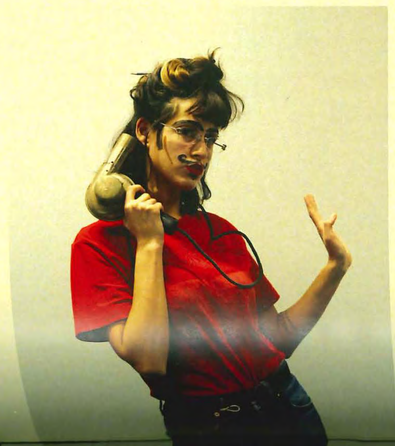
ORLANDO VOID
Ad vitam aeternam. They migth have been a dog in a past life.



ORLANDO LOVABOÏ
Born in the summer of love and still living. Make love not war.



ORLANDO PAGE BLANCHE
No name. No gender. No history. No past. No present. No future.



ORLANDOTINA
Drive your taxi fast. Drink your dry martini. Be yourself.



ORLANDO CARRY
The past, the present, and the future— all of it fits into my purse.



ORLANDO THE DEFIANT
Keep fighting your enemies, even if your sword is a candlestick and your armor is made of paper.



UNTITLED ORLANDO
It is anything or nothing. Like a wind.



PINK REBEL ORLANDO
Let nothing hold you back, except if you forget your phone charger!



ORLANDO CHIARA EILISH
She has been living between hers 13 to 18 years old. It's okay to feel down, it's part of life.



ORLANDO BADDIE WOLF
A woman boss in a man's world. Be Fucking Fearless!



ORLANDO GLAMOUUUUR
Doing nothing in the sun, nonchalantly chewing gum and smoking a vogue. Fuck the world.



ORLANDELENA
Drive fast, never stop, keep bumping that. Those slugs know they can't catch me. Beep beep!



FURRY ORLANDO
Just be you.
But keep it cute. ʕ •ᴥ•ʔ



ORLANDO ABSTRACT
Craft your own reality, and let the world be your canvas.

YOUR ORLANDO
In Orlando's journey, there's always room for more! Insert your version here.

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