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The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design

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Book Review

The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design, edited by Louise Schouwenberg and Michael Kaethler

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Over the last two decades, the design field has splintered into dozens of subfields so that the term “design” is now frequently modified by adjectives like speculative and critical, discursive and pretense, or it is used to modify nouns like research and fictions. The new book *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*, a collection of new essays, interviews, and projects, edited by Louise Schouwenberg, the former head of Contextual Design at Design Academy Eindhoven, and Michael Kaethler, a post-doctoral researcher in the architecture department at KU Leuven, adds yet another new adjective to design while also giving designers a new framework and theoretical scaffolding for the kinds of alternative design practices that operate outside the traditional commercial context.

Auto-ethnographic design (the editors and contributors use both the phrase “auto-ethnographic turn in design” and the term “auto-ethnographic design” interchangeably throughout the book), as Schouwenberg and Kaethler define

it, builds upon theories of “relational, speculative, critical, and social design,” but differs in that it resists “the pragmatic knee-jerk response to focus the act of designing on externalities – be it a design brief, a market niche, or a social or political issue.” (19) It introduces a new area of study that situates the designer not outside of the project but firmly in the middle of it. Auto-ethnography, here, asks the researcher or designer to interrogate themselves and their position in the world first, which Schouwengerg and Kaethler contrast to historical processes in both ethnography and design that first look outward. “This approach closely tethers research with creative personal expression,” they continue, “forging deeply intimate objects that research *and* communicate personal sentiments, traumas, fears, obsessions, hopes, fascinations, passions, and more.” (21) Compare this with, for example, the process of discursive design as articulated by Bruce and Stephanie Tharp; it also builds upon speculative and critical design frameworks but treats the design objects as anthropological studies meant to generate discussion for a particular audience (Tharp and Tharp 2019, 73). In this mode, the designer’s own worldview or ideology becomes secondary. Likewise, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby speak of speculative design as a type of futurist foresight that can “open up new perspectives on what are sometimes called *wicked problems*” (Dunne and Raby 2014, 2), again positioning the design process as a tool to solve external problems for an imagined other. Auto-ethnographic design foregoes wicked problems in favor of “understanding individuals or groups on a personal level,” (p. 21) prioritizing the designer’s own intuition as a creative force within the designing process. In other words, the auto-ethnographic turn unites design as both an expressive act and a type of research process. Much like other alternative design practices, Schouwengerg and Kaethler position auto-ethnographic design as a practice that blends formal experimentation, critical dialogue, and the social sciences to create a critical lens through which to explore the increasingly complex world. The effect is to challenge “some of the fundamentals of certain design practices and questions how we evaluate and assess design projects.” (19)

What Schouwenberg and Kaethler begin to identify here is the intersection of tensions in design pedagogy and practice between art and science, creativity and research. Should contemporary design practice and pedagogy be rooted in the arts or in the social sciences? Is the role of the designer one of creative expression or rigorously conducted research? For the editors of this book, the answer to these questions is “both.” As research processes have become a central component of design education, this research is often positioned as being in-service of a problem to be solved (client-facing work) or as a type of scholarly endeavor (generating new knowledge about design practice itself) that leaves little room for creative expression (Blauvelt and Davis 1997). Auto-ethnographic design proposes that creative expression, too, can be considered a type of research.

In addition to supporting commercial commissions or contextualizing user-needs, research can also be a form of reflection and creative generation. “We considered design a practice of cultural critique,” writes Schouwenberg in discussing the curriculum she developed on auto-ethnography in design. “We stressed the importance of designers formulating their own agendas and ideals and of basing theses on personal interests and artistic talents.” (32)

This approach resurrects the decades-long question of authorship within design practice. Where the discourse around “authorship” in design during the 1990s, for example, looked for individual agency through stylistic – or aesthetic and visual – devices (Rock 1996), auto-ethnographic design pushes against this concept, repositioning authorship not merely as stylistic control but as accepting ownership for the work by encouraging designers to understand both their place in the project and the project’s place within a larger system, be it cultural, political, or economic. As designer Konstantin Grcic says in his included interview: “Designers are not mere mediators ... not taking a position is a problem of our times. An author is the one who takes an outspoken position.” (82) But Oli Stratford sees a difference between authorship and auto-ethnographic design which, he explains, “emphasizes that outwardness in a way authorship doesn’t make quite so explicit ... there’s a risk that authorship could be misunderstood as emphasizing expressiveness for expressiveness’s sake, without the same inclination towards research.” (62) Historically, when the designer was visible in the process, they became a “star” (as in the architect), known primarily for their signature style or aesthetic innovation (Rock 1996). Authorship within an auto-ethnographic context as proposed here forgoes questions of style in favor of an attempt to legitimize personal experiences as integral to design production and research development. (26)

The book is divided into two sections: “Ideas and Dialogues” and “Projects and Practices.” The “Ideas and Dialogues” section includes short interviews and essays from a variety of contributors, including Portugal-based anthropologist Andrea Gaspar, who draws comparisons between art and design processes and scientific and technical processes, and the designer Gabriel Maher, who writes about challenging power narratives in design practices. The work included in the “Projects and Practices” section explores contemporary cultural issues and deeply personal questions of identity and agency outside traditional modes of design practice, demonstrating the diversity of approaches available within auto-ethnographic design. Designer Weixiao Shen’s project, *Underneath Another Moon* (2020), for example, blends video, sculpture, and installation in a meditation on modernity through the lens of her grandparent’s bathroom. Or consider Hsin Min Chan’s project, *To-be-looked-at-ness* (2020–2021), a massive sculptural garment collaged with textures, patterns, and imagery that was installed with the designer physically sitting in the middle, raising questions of identity in the age of COVID-19. While

the examples are visually compelling and conceptually challenging, they also begin to reveal the limits of auto-ethnographic design. Indeed, the limits with many of these alternative modes of practice is just that: they are alternatives, operating at the fringes of design practice. This is a problem because they become hermetic, with small groups of designers talking only to each other. If auto-ethnographic design (or speculative design, critical design, etc.) is to have influence, the question becomes how to move it beyond the practitioners already engaged with it. “The fringe is often where the action happens,” Kaethler writes in his essay in the book, “and if design is to be transformed to engage with an increasingly stable world, then this transformation will occur not from the design’s central practices but from its peripheries.” (55) This, of course, is not a new idea but it is unclear, based on the examples in this volume, how auto-ethnographic design practices will move from the edge to the center.

But centering is not the goal of *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*. Instead, through the selections of essays and projects, Schouewenberg and Kaethler provide a theoretical framework and model for the use of autobiography in works of design. In this way, auto-ethnographic design uses the language of the social sciences to approach creative expression, making it a legitimate step in one’s design process. Because of this, *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design* will find an audience, especially, with design educators who are interested in presenting diverse research methods, as well as contemporary designers and students looking to blend rigorous research with artistic practices.

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