The Ethnological Viewpoint

Observing things, deciphering and redesigning them – students examine "Design Cultures" in intercultural teams using ethnographic research.

Text:
Francis Müller

Most of our everyday behaviour is automatic. We know how to open a can of beer and how a smartphone functions. And we do not behave the same way at a salsa concert as we do at the theatre. Only when this behaviour is in some way disrupted, do we consciously reflect on this knowledge. When confronted with different greeting rituals in a foreign culture, we notice the blind spot of which we are generally unaware in our everyday life. At this point, learned behavioural patterns are now understood as contingencies. Contingency awareness is an important requirement for designers. They have to see the day-to-day world through ethnological eyes. They often deal with realities in societies unfamiliar to them. If you design something for Korean tourists, dementia sufferers, couch surfers or prospective insect eaters, you have to be able to stand in their shoes. When the environment is familiar, you have to take a step back; when it is foreign, you have to move closer and develop empathy.

Summer school and "Style & Design"

These kinds of considerations – and, of course, because cultural and economic globalisation is a reality – led to a proposal of the Department of Design at Zurich University of the Arts to set up the International Design Summer School (IDSS) in 2013, a project in collaboration with universities from India (National Institute of Design, Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology and JJ Art School) and from China (Tongji University and Jiangnan University). The IDSS takes place in China in summer 2014, and will, as in the previous year, include ten students from Zurich University of the Arts. The Indian partner universities will host the summer school in 2015. In the medium-term, there are plans to include a Latin-American university.

Thirty students and a number of teaching staff from China, India and Switzerland took part in the first IDSS in Zurich. The theme was "Transferring our Traditions: The Future of Design! From Block Print to 3D Print". Traditional or modern printing techniques were not specified as a topic but acted as a metaphor for tradition and innovation. Ten groups, each comprising one student from China, India and Switzerland, focused on a problem for a two-week period, carried out small-scale experiments and developed a design solution. One group, for instance, observed human behaviour on public transport or waiting at bus stops or stations.

Another group concentrated on time spent waiting at airports, places where people of different origins cross paths but rarely communicate. A game was used to bridge the anonymity gap. The point in question is that in any given society the rules of a game usually go unchallenged and are also a cultural construct. "Initially, we looked at board games from several cultures and presented the most interesting versions from India, China and Switzerland", says Nils Loos, a student of Industrial Design at the University of the Arts in Zurich. People got to know each other this way before starting the group work. "This exchange is teaching me how we should be open-minded in regard to other cultures and should break down the barriers of reserve, and despite differences, there are also a lot of similarities."

The specialisation course "Style & Design", where analyses of the everyday world and consumer culture form the basis for design, also focuses on the ethnological viewpoint. The module "Ethnographic Field Research" has existed since the Bachelor's degree programme was set up ten years ago. Students examine the small worlds of different groups of people: such as body builders, taxi drivers, gaming communities, Jewish women in the third district of Zurich, rabbit breeders, models, or the social behaviour in a café, a sex shop or a Buddhist temple. In most of these urban micro-cultures, behaviour, language, symbols and signs act as means of differentiation from the external environment, thereby generating an internal common identity.

Experiencing alienation towards familiar culture by immersion in nearby social environments, as happens in the "Style & Design" specialisation, or by working in a cross-cultural group in IDSS – in both cases the distance leads to new, inspirational and surprising perspectives. **Francis Müller is lecturer in the Department of Design at the Zurich University of the Arts.** ●

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