

**Interview with Daniel van der Velden on the occasion of the roundtable “Design Negation” at the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 during Atti Democratici in Bolzano**

by Angelika Burtscher

*Atti Democratici* is an inquiry into the relationship between art and democracy developed through the involvement of a network of artists, designers, theorists and curators. *Atti Democratici* produces thoughts and actions and appears temporarily through presenting exhibition projects, commissioned productions, talks, discussions, and editorial contributions. *Atti Democratici* is a project by Angelika Burtscher, Luigi Coppola, Daniele Lupo and Judith Wielander.

After stops at the Democracy Biennial in Turin and the Festival Fabbrica Europa in Florence, Lungomare and LOSS present from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 the *Atti Democratici* project in Bolzano. The project will unfold in a series of performances and film screenings, a roundtable, a poster exhibition in public spaces and a free-press journal on the basic principles of the Italian Constitution.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 *Atti Democratici* presents the roundtable “Design Negation”. The founder of the project Daniel van der Velden together with Ghalia Elsrakbi (designer, Damaskus) and Merijn Oudenampsen (sociologist, Amsterdam) will talk about the research project. Andrea Cusatelli will moderate the evening. Cusatelli studied semiotics with Umberto Eco in Bologna; there he works as a journalist and scriptwriter.

<http://www.lungomare.org/attidemocratici>

*Angelika Burtscher:*

*What have been your motivations for starting the research project "Design Negation"?*

Daniel van der Velden:

It started because of the lack of concern designers seemed to have for the rise of the populist Right. It felt like we had these do-good projects aimed at abstract causes, but little attention for what is going on in our own backyard. This concerns the situation in The Netherlands directly. It seemed like a good idea to start a project that would disentangle some of the conditions, from a designer's point of view, which is different from a purely theoretical or a purely activist standpoint.

*Angelika Burtscher:*

*How did the project continue to develop itself during the research in the group with Cornelia Durka, Ghalia Elsrakbi, Merijn Oudenampsen and Ziga Testen? Did your initial thoughts change? What are the different research topics in the group?*

Daniel van der Velden:

Design Negation has developed as a series of individual projects with occasional overlaps. Merijn's is the most complex one given its orientation on political and sociological theory, and the possibility of constructing a new Leftist subjectivity that hijacks the ideas of populism. Both Ziga and Cornelia, who are respectively from Slovenia and Germany, focus on the wider issues of design and political engagement, with their links to various practices associated with historical and neo-avantgardes. Slovenia in particular has developed interesting examples in this field, if you only think of NSK or someone like Slavoj Zizek, for example. Ghalia, who is originally from

Syria, has examined the links between populist politics and media entertainment in the Netherlands. The findings of that investigation are shocking. The overlaps are remarkable, and striking, and they are not just a matter of discourse but also of actual economical and organizational links. We suspect that some of the origins and ideological legitimacy of current populism are originally nonpolitical, and have started out as experiments in media dealing with notions like individuality, freedom and social games. This is close to what I've come to think in interpreting right wing populism in The Netherlands as a new brand of Dutch Design, something much more rooted in the way we have developed as a society.

*Angelika Burtscher*

*In the introduction text for the roundtable in Bolzano in the framework of "Atti Democratici", you mentioned the Design practice as a method, which reduces itself not simply to a formal and aesthetic aspect, but seeks out its responsibilities. How can a designer take these responsibilities and consequently formulate them into a design "act"?*

Daniel van der Velden:

Not surprisingly we have identified the 'blogosphere' as a promising arena for alternative political formation, with a technology that is easy to use for everyone. This is based on the example of the United States where blogs have had a decisive influence on the political debate, provided this is complemented by various direct interventions in public, and visible in the mainstream media. A blogosphere is essential in providing sets of alternative interpretations of events, which can influence people to think differently – especially if mass media are offering less and less of these interpretations from which eventually something can be built. So a design act requires a network. In order to provide for this it seems that the Left would need to forget about some of its disagreements on theoretical details and focus on a bigger picture. And it seems we need to reinvent not just its legitimacy but also the visual language. The language of political communication should again become an issue of the avantgarde. It seems we hope to find out if something like a 'populism for the good' can exist. Can we be simple and direct, without simplification?

*Angelika Burtscher:*

*Can you see in the development of the populism in the Netherlands parallels to the reality of Italy?*

Daniel van der Velden:

Wilders and Berlusconi are very different while they may both install and profit from fear of migrants. Berlusconi comes much closer to a kind of decadent emperor. Wilders is more like a traveling salesman, selling fear. Ironically in Berlusconi there is at least in his own impression still a positive image – with him as the personification of the 'quintessential Italian' – whereas Wilders thrives on the purely negative sentiments that he himself installs and provides the vocabulary for. This also reflects how different Italian and Dutch societies are. While Pim Fortuyn admired Berlusconi, Dutch society seems to have modeled itself more to the UK and Scandinavia, which makes its social structure very different from the Italian reality. Think also about the role of the State. Italians in the Netherlands always are surprised how individualized the culture is, and in a way this is reflected in the absolute freedom of speech propagated by the populist Right here; a freedom of speech that may prevail over any notion of coexistence, respect, or simple human decency, as long as it concerns ethnic and religious minorities. By comparison it seems that in Italy the social culture of being together – one of the nicest things about Italy – will prevent people from sitting there alone blogging behind their computer. They would much more prefer to hang out together. This preference needs to be included in any kind of counter strategy. The American model of individualized bloggers sitting behind their PCs will not

work in Italy. Creating a more social setting for political formation may help.

*Angelika Burtscher:*

*With Vinca Kruk you founded Metahaven, a studio combining design, research and writing, of which also Gon Zifroni is a partner. From 1998 to 2007 you ran together with Maureen Mooren a graphic design studio. Why was it important for you to start combining your graphic design practice with research? How can research play a role in graphic design and how should it be developed?*

Daniel van der Velden:

The thing that started Metahaven came out of a research project at the Jan van Eyck. Originally that research had been supplementary to my graphic design practice. Metahaven has since become a substantial part of what I see as graphic design. We work both as a studio and as a network, both for clients and on our own projects, both on commissioned work and research. Following Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, with Metahaven we like to make the distinction between research *by* design and research *for* design. Research by design is about designing as an exploration of possibilities. It is about asking questions through a design process. The outcomes of such a research may be various kinds of prototypes. Research for design on the other hand focuses on designing a set of givens that come before a design process and can be applied to it. Ultimately of course you are not going to get far without clients. Contrary to the 'self-initiated project' clients are very necessary. But sometimes clients could ask designers for different things than beautiful objects. Like for example to define a problem, or to create a set of new possible choices, or to design scenarios and narratives, or a new type of media presence. This is something that we can anticipate on.