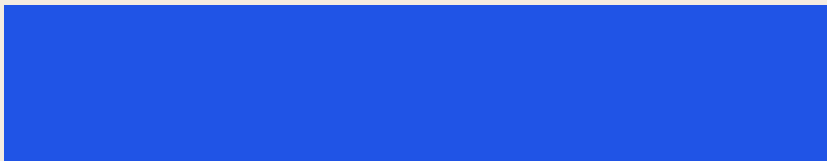


A

token of

Sexuality



An essay by Joannette van der Veer

Introduction

A token is a thing that serves as a visible or tangible representation of a fact, quality, or feeling. It can be an expression, a symbol, a remembrance or a manifestation. Yet, it can also be a badge, a souvenir, or a keepsake.

The ways in which objects can be perceived has everything to do with the ways in which they are approached. Ettore Sottsass's penis-shaped *Shiva Vase*, for example, can be regarded as a token of the Memphis artist's sexuality at the time. When designing this vase for the company Barcelona Design, Sottsass was deeply in love with a Spanish woman. The name of the vase, Shiva, refers to the Hindu god responsible for destruction of the universe to pave way for its regeneration. The vase can be interpreted as a visual metaphor of the designer's life at the time – polluting air by means of international flights in order to regenerate his sexual self. However, when merely observing the appearance of the vase it might come across as a blunt, 'poppy', banal interpretation of the male genital. Approaching a work or object in a static way will yield a similar response. The same counts for a subject or topic. In the *For Play, Shaping Sexuality* exhibition at Dutch Design Week 2016, the topic of design and the designer's role within the realm of sex and sexuality was investigat-

ed, interpreted and discussed by works from over 30 invited designers and artists. Surprisingly, there was not a single dildo on display. The curators advocated for a more playful, inventive, fragile and original vision on the topic of design and sexuality. But how do you cope with such a subject as a designer? What is left within the spectrum of design and sex(uality) when the sex tool is eliminated from it?

Part 1.

In his article ‘Writing Contemporary Design into History’, Stephen Hayward touches upon the subject of a post-optimal version of design history. This post-optimal version of design history is ‘less likely to focus on the evolution of the ‘tool-like’ capacity of everyday objects than what might be called the ‘emotional efficacy’ of things: their ability to amuse, to disturb, to trigger memories, to solicit playful interactions’.¹ Hayward mentions the *Do Hit* project by Droog Design as an example of an ‘emotionally durable’ product in which the consumer is invited to hammer out what might become a ‘cherished heirloom’: something to pass on to future generations. In this manner, the designer is viewed as a facilitator, and the outcome a product co-designed or co-created by the user or consumer. Hayward emphasizes how this poetic approach resonates with several ideas within social thought at the time, namely the presence of status anxiety, that global warming had us reconsider what we really need instead of what we merely want, and a sense that true happiness lies in the intensification of ordinary experiences. This intensification of ordinary experiences has almost become the ‘new standard’ for or credo of designers in their design

practice.

The everyday ritual of beauty and wellness, coffee and tea drinking, or mourning and death have been well covered by the designers of our time. Tom Dixon’s *Brew* series (a copper-plated coffee set), for example, was designed to reintroduce the ritual to the everyday process of coffee making; Roos Kuipers touched upon the ritual of closing the coffin of a lost one with her *Mark the Last Veil* project; and *The Alchemist’s Dressing Table* by Lauren Davies allows its users to forge a stronger connection to their beauty rituals. However, within this intensification of ordinary experiences, sex and sexuality too often have been overlooked or subordinate within the design process of designers. Although the consumption of sex has been overly designed, the experience of moving towards sex or the exploration of one’s sexuality has not. What if there was a way in which designers could design in order to let their users explore, regain, or replenish their own sexuality? Sexuality is something complex and it can take many shapes and forms: it can be something enjoyable, awkward, or physically impossible. It can even be illegal. In other words, sexuality can be anything to anyone. Therefore, dictating

how one should shape their sexuality is of no use. An ashtray is meant for ash and smoked cigarettes, a chair is meant for butts to sit on, a shirt is meant to wear, but what is meant for shaping one's sexuality?

If you think of it straightforwardly, then the designers of these ritual-related design projects did not reinvent the ritual; they just have been facilitating their users in performing it. In his book *How to think more about Sex* Alain de Botton uses the example of Edouard Manet in explaining how such a mundane subject as sex can be approached:

*“Aside from chefs, gourmands and farmers, few people in nineteenth-century France would have likely to detect anything especially interesting in asparagus – that is, until Edouard Manet painted a tightly wrapped bunch in 1880 and thereby called attention to the inherent wonder of this spring vegetable’s yearly apparition. However exemplary Manet’s technical skills may have been, his painting achieves its stunning effect not by inventing the charms of asparagus but by reminding us of qualities that we knew existed but that we have overlooked in our spoilt and habituated ways of seeing. Where we might have been prepared to recognize only dull white stalks, the artist observed and then reproduced vigour, colour and individuality, recasting his humble subject as an elevated and sacramental object through which we might access a redeeming philosophy of nature and rural life.”*²

Could it be that the key to designing a valuable product or service that lets the user explore or perform her or his own sexuality lies in a designer's ‘facilitatorship’?

Part 2.

It was Arnon Grunberg who reminded me of the ordinariness of having so-called naughty thoughts with his *Homework from a Sex Rabbi*. A vertical television screen displayed Grunberg sitting at a table whilst giving examples of how the most mundane objects present in one's home can offer a not-so-mundane sexual experience. Alongside the video stood a table with a variety of household objects. It reminded me of having used clothespins in a sexual manner. After listening to Grunberg's homework assignment, I proceeded to Jason Page's *ASS-Tour*: an audio tour that offered an insight into the process of the designers at display in the exhibition. I heard Michèle Degen read aloud the symbolic names women had given their vaginas, such as 'Tuna Town', whilst looking at her *Vulva Versa* project – a hand mirror meant to look at one's own vagina – that embraces and celebrates the fact that vaginas come in many shapes and sizes. It offered self-reflection, both literally and figuratively. The intricate subject of human relationships depicted in *Let's Stick Together*, a work by Margriet Craens and Lucas Maassen that consists of several cabinets tied together in duos by means of bondage techniques, remembered me of my own relationships.

Many of the works in the *For Play* exhibition were capable of triggering inner conversation and the process of memorizing personal experiences – whether small or big, good or bad. On the floor, pillars, and walls of the exhibition space were stickers that invited and encouraged visitors to 'do touch', 'do feel', or 'do sit' on the objects on display, triggering physical activity as well.

Before entering the secluded space where Dries Verhoeven's *Guilty Landscapes episode 4* was screened, little to no background information concerning the installation was given. As the staff members explained, reactions to the installation varied tremendously: some participants burst into laughter, others into tears. I belonged to the latter group.

Imagine entering a room with a wall-covered screening of a Thai guy smoking a cigarette whilst looking at you. You stand there observing, watching him finish his cigarette and walk towards a portable stereo to turn on some music. He starts to make movements with his body, inexplicitly and non-verbally inviting you to join him. You start to mimic his movements; he approves of your moves and starts to mimic yours. He suggests you take off a piece of clothing, since he is only wearing golden metallic briefs. You do so and, in

the meantime, you keep making movements and start touching yourself. You take off another piece of clothing. And another one. You dance together virtually and naked. You end up lying naked on the floor of the art space you have entered just 15 minutes ago, making repetitive movements with your lower body. Just when you start to notice you are getting aroused, the Thai guy stands up, turns off the music and leaves the desolate decor. He waves you goodbye. You get up with your pants on your ankles, not knowing how quickly you should get dressed again, confused about what has just occurred.

The installation moved me retroactively in that it left me with a cocktail of emotions: enticement, arousal, confusion, shame, and sadness. I wondered what happened, how I had responded to things, why I had taken off all of my clothes, if I had crossed my own boundaries, or had crossed his, and I wondered if I had just paid money for a sexual experience. After a while, I figured that I had not paid for a sexual experience but for an emotional one: an experience that had me contemplating my own sexual feelings and acts, and my sexual and emotional behavior in the past, present and future. Although every single person that bought a ticket to Verhoeven's installation walked into the same room as I did, each and every one probably had a different experience. As if each and every person had a unique code, a personal security token, that

unlocked the one-of-a-kind experience of the installation.

When Jan-Pieter Kaptein gave a talk revolving around the topic of intimacy and his featured work *Fort Folly* he invited his audience to 'do hit' each other by means of starting a group pillow fight. Music was playing, people were at first a bit hesitant, but eventually they started hitting each other vigorously, joyfully. After the fight ended, Kaptein handed out badges to the pillow fighters as a token of participation. It did not matter how hard you had hit someone, or how many times; it only mattered that you took part in the activity, and had fun. Allowing yourself to play around, to release yourself from the conformity of cautiousness that is so inherent of adult life and ditto relationships, is exactly what Kaptein's *Fort Folly* is all about. It embodies the notion of a 'homo ludens', a term coined and explained by cultural theorist Johan Huizinga in 1938 in his eponymous book, that touches upon the value and usefulness of the cultural and social element of play (or playfulness). Although the phenomenon of pillow fights serves as the introduction to many a porn video, the pillow fight I participated in did not arouse. However, it was comforting and it made me and probably many other fellow pillow fighters release the tension that may have been present in our bodies.

The fact that there was no such thing

present as a ‘sensual’ lounge chair, or a tool obviously meant to be used for self-satisfaction, or any other usual suspect you would expect in an exhibition about design and sex(uality) was refreshing and relieving. The selection of works served as an example of how the multilateral topic of sex(uality) and design can be approached and, thus, perceived in a novel way. Just like the *Do Hit* chair, one’s sexuality can be molded and transformed; yet, only if you want it to. The *For Play* exhibition works did not dictate what sexuality is or should be, but facilitated in the process of finding out what sexuality can or could be and left space for each and everyone’s interaction with and personal interpretation of. Verhoeven’s work disturbed and triggered memories, Kaptein was able to amuse and solicit playful interactions, and Grunberg did all of the above. The three curators of *For Play* – Angelique Spaninks, Sanne Muiser and Tom Loois – have not just advocated a change of policy; they signaled and disclosed a nascent state of mind. *For Play, Shaping Sexuality* showed that the spectrum of sexuality is anything but fixed and that the scope of the subject within the realm of design is still far from reaching its limits. The featured projects in the exhibition served as both (in)visible and (in)tangible representations of sexuality and offered the audience an ongoing keepsake. Design as a token of sexuality.

Sources:

¹ Stephen Hayward, ‘Writing Contemporary Design into History’, in: Grace Lees-Maffei (ed.), *Writing Design: Words and Objects* (London/New York: Berg, 2012), pp. 63-74.

² Alain de Botton, *How to think more about Sex* (London, Pan MacMillan, 2012) p. 78.