Anette Grunmann’s vision of gender sensitive design. Elizabeth Tunstall

As part of the International Gender Design Network’s second Gender Design Conference, the GREAT Small: Gender Design Exhibition opened at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on October 10. Curated by German design researcher Uta Brandes, the exhibition showcases 40 global designers’ selections of designs that represent sensitive and insensitive approaches to gender.

Using black upward arrows to indicate sensitive portrayals of gender and pink downward arrows to indicate insensitive portrayals, the exhibition raises questions about how design, across all fields, both reinforces and subverts gender stereotypes.
Sheila Levrant de Bretteville’s (USA) selection of three posters from her work in the early 1970s remind you of how far back the issue of gender and design goes. The objects Pink designed for AIGA in 1973, Broadsheet designed for the Woman’s Graphic Center in NYC, and the Invitation to the 1975 Women in Design Conference provide gender-sensitive graphic communications that maintain relevance to contemporary design.

Sheila Levrant de Bretteville’s Pink poster 1973. Provided by Uta Brandes and Marijke Doemges on behalf of Sheila Levrant de Bretteville

The pink washing of designs geared towards women is a common motif among the items in the exhibition selected as examples of gender insensitivity. Who needs a pink Black and Decker power tool, asks Annette Dieferthaler (United States) based on her selection of it for a gender insensitive product.

Uta Flick’s (Germany) selection of three sport scarves from the Football Club Köln show how far outside of its brand a company is willing to go to reinforce gender stereotypes. While two of the scarves carry the club’s red and white colors and logo, the scarf marketed to girls and women is pink with white cursive script and glitter. According to Uta Brandes, the gender-insensitivity of the pink scarves disrupt a major ritual of the games in which fans wave their red scarves in team solidarity.

Uta Flick’s selection of Football Club Köln scarves. Provided by Uta Brandes and Marijke Doemges

But it is not just products that are pink washed for women. Kunihiko Nakagawa (Japan) selected the pink branded “women only” (plus challenged persons and children) train and subway cars in Japan. Bristling against their pinkness, he recognises the ambivalence of how the coaches represent gender in contemporary Japanese society:

Object description from Gender Design Exhibition. Elizabeth Tunstall

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But it is not just products that are pink washed for women. Kunihiko Nakagawa (Japan) selected the pink branded “women only” (plus challenged persons and children) train and subway cars in Japan. Bristling against their pinkness, he recognises the ambivalence of how the coaches represent gender in contemporary Japanese society:
however, these gendered coaches insinuate women as weak and helpless beings, moreover, they show sexist men the direct way to find women.

Nakagawa Kunihiko’s selection of Japan’s ‘women only’ coaches. Provided by Uta Brandes and Marijke Doemges

The subtlety of design’s gendering is highlighted in Joséphine Choquet’s (UK) selection of three white shirts. Men and women’s shirts are only differentiated by the position of the buttons and the buttonholes. On men’s shirts, the buttons are on the right side and the buttonholes on the left.

On women’s shirts, the buttons are on the left side and the buttonholes on the right. It is rumoured this design decision was made to emphasise class positions. When clothing was more expensive, women’s buttons indicated that the woman’s maid dressed her. Joséphine offers the plain white T-shirt as:

The most unisex (i.e. gender sensitive) garment.

Three white shirts. One of which is gender sensitive. Image provided by Uta Brandes and Marijke Doemges

Anette Grunmann (Germany) is also interested in unisex clothing, but focuses on children. She selects her own line of children’s clothing, Stripes Restyled, as the gender-sensitive antidote to the sparkly, pink, tutu’ed dresses designed for girls.

The exhibition does not just challenge ideas of femininity but also notions of masculinity. Michael Erhoff (Germany) selects the bicycle as his object. He challenges the necessity of the rod or bar across the top as part of bicycle design:

The presentation of maleness, with the male 'rod' to expose virility.

He selects the bicycle without the rod as one that is gender sensitive, safe, and comfortable for everyone.

The selections of Melbourne designer, Judith Glover(Australia) and Beirut designer, Doreen Toukitian (Lebanon) address the phallocentric biases in the design of sex toys. Both offer alternative dildos that reject the focus on sex toys that replicate the shape and texture of men’s penises.

The two video installations selected for the exhibition offer the most visceral provocations to issues of gender-sensitive and insensitive design. Anthony Dunne (UK) selects the video, Menstruation Machine—Takashi’s Take 2010, by Japanese performance artist Sputniko! (i.e. Hiromi Ozaki). In the video, a transvestite boy dresses in an elaborate contraption that helps him to experience five days of menstrual discomfort and blood flow.

The video Nott by Michelle Christensen and Florian Conradi (Germany) demonstrates the possibilities of gender-free language. The video shows the auto-correction of the typing of gender insensitive language by a computer program. The word masculinity is auto-corrected to the phrase “idea of gendered identity”.

The word wife is auto-corrected to the phrase “person to whom one is currently committed”. One laughs awkwardly at the twisting of the English language to maintain gender neutrality, but also at the gender biases that the computer program corrects.
Although not many of us in Australia may travel to Hong Kong to see the exhibition before it closes in November, the GREAT Small: Gender Design Exhibition reminds us of how the designs we encounter in our everyday lives are not gender neutral.

The perpetuation of gender stereotypes through design harms the ability for individuals to fully express themselves as complete human beings. Gender sensitive designs offer alternative possibilities for a world respectful of gender diversity.