

IN SEARCH OF RESEARCH





Geo-Design repositions design research

How to present design research in exhibition form to those without extensive insider knowledge can be a tricky affair, the results often bamboozling or downright dull. With research in the field becoming more and more pressing, one event last year showed that it is possible to inform and engage with the subject. And the conversation it initiated has legs for designers and us all, the ethics and persuasion tactics of technology just part of that dialogue.

TEXT

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Alibaba's Jack Ma inspires millions with his TV talk

Geo-Design: Alibaba. From Here to Your Home, a show curated by Joseph Grima and Martina Muzi addressed the urgent need for design to speak a clear language to an audience outside of design weeks, festivals, museums and biennials. The exhibition took the difficult to represent but increasingly relevant domain of design research and turned it into one of the more riveting presentations of Dutch Design Week.

Alibaba is the world's largest online commerce company with hundreds of millions of users and as many merchants. It is an intricate and impenetrable network, masterminded by some dubious free-market rationale. It's founder and uber-buoyant spokesperson, Jack Ma, has spent almost two decades rollicking off platitudes to the world's media in the hunt for credibility and more market-dominance.

'This thing could be big.'

The participating researchers of *Geo-Design: Alibaba. From Here to Your Home* were an egalitarian mix of bachelor and masters graduates from Design Academy Eindhoven. Each was given a full room of the Van Abbemuseum to explore one aspect of the Chinese commerce phenomenon Alibaba - its global flows of production and consumption (Martina Muzi and Irene Stracuzzi), socio-political strategies (Maxime Benvenuto), corporate identity (Alice Wong), media manoeuvres (Allison Crank), algorithmic personality (Arvid&Marie), marketing tactics (Jing He), business models (Leif Czakai & Timm Donke), and materials & waste (Isabel Mager).

It was a clever subject for Muzi and Grima to zoom in on given that the complex forces driving and thriving Alibaba are the same ones shaping the work of designers today. The exhibition was most potent when it focused on the connection between these forces, which are constantly re-directing the scope of what's needed from designers, and actual design output. Especially because as the reach of design thinking expands, this connection becomes increasingly blurred, so much so that a disconnect between education and the discipline has turned into an issue in need of exactly the sort of attention *Geo-Design* provided.

‘Everything I’ve taught my students are the things I’ve learned from books. I should leave the school ... get the experience ... then go back to teach.’

Arvid Jense and Marie Caye were already avid users of the Alibaba platforms before being invited to participate in *Geo-Design*. ‘We always sourced our electronic parts from there and had noticed that there was something a bit strange about it,’ says Caye, ‘... the algorithm is totally different to say Google or eBay.’

‘For e-commerce the most important thing is trust.’

Searching Alibaba for a household item like a bed or a chair yields some eccentric results - the objects recommended appear as an amalgam of recognisable parts often with nonsensical details. A king-sized bed comprising six movable parts, for example, each with its own function yet seemingly disconnected to the next. Many of the objects offered by the algorithm look more like speculative design projects - not there to be bought, but to generate hype, more clicks, and ultimately more sales.

‘Trust. Trust us. Trust the young people. And trust the new technology.’

For the exhibition, Arvid&Marie made abstract paper models of the more unusual recommended items. From the front the objects appear as they do online, and from behind the object’s metadata is (literally) scrawled across its surface. The stats provided cover everything from number of views, to number



of wish-list adds, which is how the algorithm knows the object. Oddly, despite being at the top of the recommendations, none of the exhibited objects have ever actually been bought.

‘Or maybe even made,’ suggests Caye. ‘The algorithms do not live in the physical world; they do not perceive objects like us, or have any context. The objects are designed as click bait, to engage people, and to give the appearance of abundance and variety. Where it gets interesting is the unknown impact this will have on the designs people produce and buy.’

Irene Stracuzzi, Custom Printing, 4 metre inflatable globe, 2018
The central project visualising the enormous reach of Alibaba, was this inflatable globe by Irene Stracuzzi. On it you see the global structures and geographical traces of the company’s world-wide influence. Stracuzzi commissioned the globe from Singar Inflatables Co. Ltd., Yantai, via the Alibaba e-commerce platform. It is printed with data from Ali Research, an institute established by Alibaba in 2007 to publish statistics about the company’s roads and shipping routes which so far connect 200 countries. Stracuzzi cleverly captures the changing geopolitical conditions by inverting the traditional colonialist map by presenting the southern hemisphere at the ‘top’ of the world.
Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere



‘Everything we do is trying to build up a trust system.’

Almost every designer in *Geo-Design* tackled research as the materialisation or visualisation of a multi-faceted process. The goal seemed always to bring new insights or a new way of understanding.

‘Design research is getting a lot of attention now,’ says Jense, ‘but it is not a new thing. It has many parallels with artistic research, but probably has been more obvious in a field like interaction design though.’

‘And it seems more important than ever that on subjects with a broad impact like the Alibaba platforms, research is not only left up to the economists and social scientists,’ adds Caye. ‘Designers have the tools to offer a different perspective that can help people better understand the world around them.’

Arvid&Marie know well the friction between traditional academic research and the growing attention and demand for more space and funding for artistic research. ‘We have been collaborating with scientists and have noticed that there is a lot of let’s say “handling” of material in academia,’ says Caye. ‘And also confusing language. They will talk about manipulating an object with a hard material when all they really did was poke it with a pen. There are so many rules and restrictions and a crushing need to publish for funding. The system is quite troubled.’

On the touchy topic of legitimacy and how artistic research can better vie for it, both Jense and Caye say that more thinking is needed from designers about the forms research can take.

Where scientific research has a very dogmatic method of publishing, design research is always taking a different shape - article, exhibition, object - which runs the risk of missing a common frame of reference,’ says Jense. ‘This can cause problems if the goal is legitimacy.’

‘I think design research should more closely resemble journalism than scientific research,’ adds Caye. ‘Journalism can come at a topic from so many different angles and the impact can be big or small. There is more flexibility.’

Jing He brought legitimacy to her project in *Geo-Design* by flying her topic - live streaming as a marketing tool - over to the Netherlands to work direct from the Van Abbemuseum throughout Dutch Design Week. In China live streaming is already a popular tactic used in commerce.

Throughout the week two influencers filmed their segments from the exhibition floor live for their fans back in China. Museum visitors were both bemused and mesmerised.



Erbi Chen
Photo: Peter Cox

Erbi Chen, in particular, adopts an exaggerated online persona in her vlogs with her bright blue hair and towering platform boots. She has 1.5 million followers on the TikTok app, plus as many followers on other competing sites. Qiong Ye Chuan Zi works for ICY Fashion in Shanghai, which has 400,000 followers and a shop on Taobao, part of the Alibaba Group.

He says some of the tactics employed by influencers might be extreme, but she wants to look beyond that to the real-time reality of how the system works.

Curator Martina Muzi
Photo: Siegrid Demyttenaere



‘Some of it may seem foolish,’ she says, ‘but these people are not stupid – they have a system, and often stay online for between four and twelve hours with their fans. It is a really special relationship based on trust. My interest is not to judge, but to reveal more about the tools and tactics these portals use to maximise sales.’

Already well known (and regarded) for her research into the historic bond between China and the Netherlands via the ceramics trade, He’s work employs a mostly uncritical position. This lends her viewpoint a rare sensitivity and respect. ‘I am interested in how daily life can be changed by small things,’ she explains, ‘and I like to show rather than explain this.’

Beyond the myriad possibilities streaming offers e-commerce, having influencers work live in the Van Abbemuseum built a different dynamic. The space became an interface between streamer and fan. Visitors could watch the streaming real and/or on screens, yet the only way to participate in the live-stream or to communicate with the influencer was via the technology.

‘We don’t send things by months. We don’t sell things by days. We sell things by seconds.’

One of the more critical projects in *Geo-Design* was by researcher Alice Wong, who uncovered more than two thousand news clips from around the world of Jack Ma energetically expressing the wonder of his company to camera. The standalone quotes throughout this article are verbatim remarks sourced by Wong, made by Ma.

Wong’s exhibited edit was a masterful cut-up of breathless quotes with a bitter sting – comments from consumers wooed by the adrenalin highs offered by online shopping, especially on Singles Day. ‘I shop irrationally on this holiday,’ one admitted. ‘I must buy something to feel at ease.’



Alice Wong
Photo: Peter Cox

Singles Day, a sort of counterpart to Valentine's Day, is promoted and celebrated on Alibaba with zest, bolstered by appearances and performances by mega stars like Nicole Kidman and Pharrell Williams. Last year English songstress Jessie J. belted out her famous lyrics at the event's opening, unironically advising consumers to 'Forget about the price tag'.

'This project is a critical take on the connection between language and ideology,' says Wong. 'Jack Ma has an enormous amount of power which he has used to perpetuate consumerism in China. He never mentions money, only trust, change, and empowering young people. But what does trust mean - to Ma it is about exchange, but in reality just the buying and selling of stuff can be pretty shallow.'

It would be interesting to see the designers from *Geo-Design: Alibaba. From Here to Your Home* taking this research to the next level. Moving Eindhoven thinking beyond a conversation designed to generate awareness and closer to, for example, the recent discussions coming out of North America on ethics and persuasion in technology.

Tristan Harris, who *The Atlantic* magazine called 'The closest thing Silicon Valley has to a conscience,' worked at Google and Apple under the enviable job titles 'design ethicist' and 'product philosopher'. He seems to be leading a nascent, albeit practical discussion of how these technologies can be better aligned with the types of societies critical designers with social integrity appeal for. That such a tiny number of people are influencing how five billion people think via their hand-held devices is design's most momentous challenge. Let's see more on how to alter the current course, and more specifically on how to inject a different sort of morality into the commercial goals that taint technology's prowess.