



## Self and Unself

*The following is a slightly extended version of the speech held by Thomas Widdershoven at the DAE Bachelors' graduation ceremony on 5 June 2013.*

Today is the Final Exam and Graduation ceremony. My first one. I just arrived. And you are leaving. It seems we meet in passing. You, fresh new Design Academy Bachelors, are moving on to other challenging situations, and I have come to this one. Most of you I haven't even met, and now you are leaving already. It seems a pity. But this school has strong relations with many alumni, so goodbye often means: see you soon.

And you aren't leaving unnoticed. This year's show is strong, with so many inspiring projects reflecting your personal stories, conflicts and fascinations.

When you decided on a creative career, you also decided to speak through your work. To reveal something of yourself in your work. This is one of the essential aspects of a creative career. So in seeing your projects I am getting to know you. A good design is a personal design.

At this school we try to teach you to be personal in your work. I detect three stages in this process. First there is self-expression. People often need a little help in triggering it. Self-expression is a bit like running: once you start you become more healthy. I really think that expressing yourself will improve your personal health. Then if you train harder you will see an immense improvement and then there comes a moment it becomes addictive. You just have to go on.

That is why you learn something else at this school: self-critique. Some teachers have cheered you on in your creativity, but others will have confronted you with their evaluations. Gradually you have learned to be prepared for this criticism, and learned to balance it with your own values. That is self-criticism. You internalise a critical mindset.

Having developed these contradictory forces, a few of you get slightly overwhelmed. And yet there is no time to lose, because we still have another stage to reach. It is the stage of self-initiative. I know that for many, this is the most difficult one. You have learned to be self-expressive, you have learned to be self-critical, but you have learned to do so in projects that have been handed to you by the school. In the final work you were asked to self-initiate a project. Most of you have been struggling with this over the last semester.

Seeing your projects today shows me that you have all succeeded. You speak to us through your projects. But the projects also speak for themselves.

What strikes me in the presentations is the un-self – which is funny since, so far, I have been talking about the self. I see social issues, and an interest in the collective, the group, togetherness. Human interaction, the human collective is at the centre of many of your projects. I think this is fitting in these times when the balance of power is shifting. The big institutions have failed us. The welfare state is crumbling. People are taking initiatives where institutions fail. Group initiatives are what many of these new designers are looking for.

The un-self in the sense of the social, the care for others, is exemplified in the projects for healthcare. 'Stages of Connection' by Sanne Ree Barthels focuses on dementia; a powerful attempt to reconnect those who are slipping away with their loved ones. Renee Scheepers helps patients by mapping cancer care, providing some light in the dense insecurity with which patients may find themselves overcome. Inge Kuipers' tea set 'Touch' helps people who have trouble lifting and pouring – and is a design with a logic of its own. For people in Northern Uganda who have been mutilated by machetes, Luc van Hoeckel has initiated a project called 'Single Spark'. It focuses on self-help for a group of people whose sense of self-worth has been harmed.

The un-self in the sense of the collective is apparent in Conor Trawinski's multi-dimensional platform 'WeCollaborate', with its loose, yet structured creative jam sessions for those who need some help in setting up projects, and for those who need a project to practise their skills. Elif Özbay has come up with a creative and funny character, the 'Blye Turk', to present her research into the language used by a generation whose lives are led between two cultures.

What happens to the self amid all this unselfishness? The self is implicit in Willem van Doorn's project 'Illumination by Digestion' which highlights and promotes effective ideas for self-sufficiency. There are projects which question the self and how it is perceived; Bart Eysink Smeets' 'Artificial Atmosphere Design' explores how people use fake items to add real atmosphere. Will the plastic man's smile add a touch of true happiness? Jan Pieter Kaptein has

developed a 'Second Self Laboratory' with grotesque costumes to allow people to try on new social roles. A new self is researched in Nina van Bart's project 'The Alchemist', too, as it offers users an opportunity to concoct their own perfect elixir. And of course the self is explicitly present, and in need of some care, in Dirk Smit's 'ESC: Off the Grid', an escape with which to steer yourself away from constant connectivity, to retreat and nurture the soul.

So the self and the un-self are intimately connected in these projects. Everything you have made is personal and, at the same time, transcends the personal. This is what makes this meeting at once personal and intense and the beginning of getting to know one another.

We will hear a lot more from these talented young graduates. Today is not a goodbye. Today is a beginning.

Thomas Widdershoven

