

Designing in Dark Times

An Arendtian Lexicon

Edited by
Eduardo Staszowski
and Virginia Tassinari

B L O O M S B U R Y

DESIGNING IN DARK TIMES

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DESIGNING IN DARK TIMES AN ARENDTIAN LEXICON

Edited by

Eduardo Staszowski and Virginia Tassinari

With additional contributions by Hannah Arendt,
Richard J. Bernstein, Kenneth Frampton, and
Martha Rosler

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Series Foreword: Designing in Dark Times

Responding to the current and wide-ranging systemic, social, economic, political, and environmental challenges we face, the aim of this new series is to bring together a series of short, polemical texts that address these crises and their inherent possibilities. Understanding that the old division between the theoretical focus of the sciences and the practical stance integral to designing, making, and shaping the world is dissolving, *Designing in Dark Times* explores new ways of acting and knowing concerning the artificial. Identified by a refusal of resignation to what-is and by the equal necessity and urgency of developing new models of the possible, the series works to present both modes of thought (models, concepts, arguments) and courses of action (scenarios, strategies, proposals, works) at all levels from the local and the micro (the situation) to the global and the macro (the universal). The aim is to push the boundaries of both design and thought, to make each more capable of opening genuine possibilities for thinking and acting otherwise and thus of better facing, and facing down, the myriad failures of the present. Rethinking the relation between justice and making, and between material human needs and the means and modes of how these can be realized, *Designing in Dark Times* is conceived as a contribution to the wider necessities of dealing with a vulnerable precarious world; of establishing project not profit as the basis of action; and of building the bases for wide-ranging emancipatory politics. As the world descends into crisis these books seek to offer, in small ways, a counterview. Against the instrumental they use the fact that design is *also* a means of articulating hitherto unforeseen possibilities—for subjects as much as for the world—to show how at base it offers irreplaceable capabilities for thinking and acting well in the artificial. In so doing, they point us toward ways of reversing some of the negative and destructive tendencies threatening to engulf the world.

Preface: On Hannah Arendt
Kenneth Frampton

*Editorial Note: As a way of connecting Hannah Arendt's thinking in the decades after the publication of *The Human Condition* (1958) and the issues opened in this volume we have placed as a preface this brief appreciation of the impact of her presence and thought by the architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton. Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University since 1973 and author of, among other works, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1980: 4th ed. 2007; 5th ed. in preparation), *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction* (1995) and *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture: Comparative Critical Analysis of Built Form* (2015), Frampton attended Arendt's lectures at *The New School* in the years she was University Professor in Philosophy (1967–75). His volume of critical essays *Labor, Work and Architecture* (2002) is dedicated to her memory, while the opening essay of that volume, "The Status of Man and Status of His Objects" (1979), remains the most extended mediation on what Arendt's thought offers to architectural thinking and more widely to how we can think the relationship between persons, politics, and making.¹ The notes below are extracted from a recent interview with Kenneth Frampton by Thomas McQuillan.²*

McQuillan: You suggest in the "Philosophical Excursus" to *A Genealogy of Modern Architecture* that your critical method with respect to the analysis of the case studies is based on your reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, that is to say, her distinction between "work" and "labor," and the corresponding character of public and private spaces. How does Arendt's thesis underlie your view of architecture?

1 Frampton's essay on Hannah Arendt is in *Labour, Work and Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 15–42.

2 The interview was conducted in March 2016. The full version is available online at *Architectural Histories*, the open access journal of the European Architectural History Network (EAHN). <https://journal.eahn.org/articles/10.5334/ah.231/>.

Frampton: I just have to confess that I'll never recover from the thesis of her book. It was a total revelation about many things at once, like the idea of a spatial hierarchy, which maybe I could never articulate before, i.e., the relation between the public and the private, which determines much of the analysis in these case studies. From this I also develop the idea that the subject is formed to some extent by the space and that the "space of appearance" allows the subject to come into being in this sense—the subject—both as a unitary subject but also as a collective, family, group. So that the space itself, the articulation of hierarchy of space, is significant, that the meaning is built in into what the space can induce—not in a behavioristic sense that "this space will produce this behavior"—but in the sense that the space is an availability which may be consummated fully by the being.

Arendt's distinction between the public and the private corresponds to the two definitions of the word "architecture." In the Oxford English Dictionary, these are: (1) "the erection of edifices for human use" and (2) "the action and process of building." Process aligns with Arendt's idea that labor is process, while work can create something that is both memorable and durable. But what's beautiful about this concept is that it opens to different degrees of expression in a work between something that is commemorative or symbolic and other parts, even in the same building, which are much less so, and this makes possible a great range of expression.

McQuillan: I found the sentence where you paraphrase Arendt very beautiful:

In this regard with respect to memory, the *homo faber* hypothetically creates a world that is not only useful and durable, but also beautiful and memorable, as opposed to the *animal laborans* who in the conviction that life is the highest good, seeks only to lengthen the span of life and make the act of living easier and more comfortable.³

3 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 24.

It's incredibly precise with regard to its definition of power as something embedded in the memory. Such precision is fascinating in Arendt, given that in your search for the ontological, you might easily have gone back to Heidegger, whose sentences are often so muddy. Nonetheless, it seems that Arendt's idea of appearance can be traced back to Heidegger's idea of truth as unconcealment.

Frampton: And I think you can trace the same idea in Semper, in his notion of concealing and revealing, which clearly embodies a latent erotic aspect. However, Arendt argues in her final chapter, "The Victory of the *Animal Laborans*," that labor is all-pervasive today and that we consume our houses and cars like fruits of the earth, which will perish if they are not immediately eaten.

McQuillan: You mention that Arendt's work presages the commodification of the environment, and you say that this is of particular consequence for architecture and sustainability inasmuch as it categorically opposes a state of affairs in which the environment is constantly on the verge of being overwhelmed by the proliferation of "unrelated, amortizable free-standing objects."

Frampton: If the sustainability is not cultural, then it remains very fragile. You can't simply depend on a technological fix, a LEED standard or whatever. But durability itself is already a crucial form of sustainability, although it is somehow seen as disconnected. However, there is an aspect to commodification that wants to screen out all of this. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry beautifully puts it—and I quote him in the front of *Studies in Tectonic Culture*—"We don't ask to be eternal beings. We only ask that things do not lose all their meaning."

Acknowledgments

In this book, our role as editors has been mainly an imprudent act of bringing together a community of designers and scholars of design and related fields who kindly accepted our invitation to respond to concepts and quotations drawn from Hannah Arendt's work and thereby to set up the basis of the lexicon. We would like to thank them here for their courage to engage with Arendt's thought to thinking about "Designing in Dark Times" and for their patience with our editorial process. Without them there would be no lexicon at all, so we give heartfelt thanks to Mariana Amatullo, Ahmed Ansari, Simone Ashby, James Auger, Martín Ávila, Nik Baerten, Jocelyn Bailey, Massimo Bianchini, Thomas Binder, Andrea Botero, Constantin Boym, Jamie Brassett, John A. Bruce, Pablo Calderón Salazar, Carla Cipolla, Chiara Del Gaudio, Elena De Nictolis, Clive Dilnot, Caroline Dionne, Carl DiSalvo, Arturo Escobar, Laura Forlano, Tony Fry, Alastair Fuad-Luke, Lorraine Gamman, Claudia Garduño García, Eric Gordon, Anke Gruendel, Joachim Halse, Julian Hanna, Jamer Hunt, Liesbeth Huybrechts, Christian Iaione, Tim Ingold, Michael Kaethler, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Eva Knutz, Sophie Krier, Outi Kuittinen, Tau U. Lenskjold, Stefano Maffei, Henry Mainsah, Ezio Manzini, Victor Margolin, Thomas Markussen, Sónia Matos, Shannon Mattern, Andrew Morrison, Aleksi Neuvonen, Dimeji Onafuwa, Macushla Robinson, Søren Rosenbak, Andrew Shea, Nidhi Srinivas, Radhika Subramaniam, Maurizio Teli, Mathilda Tham, Adam Thorpe, Cameron Tonkinwise, Otto von Busch, Anne-Marie Willis, Susan Yelavich, and Francesco Zurlo.

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INTRODUCTION

Eduardo Staszowski and Virginia Tassinari

Part One: Hannah Arendt and Designing in Dark Times

But where the danger is, grows the saving power also
Friedrich Hölderlin

I. Designing in “Dark Times”

... history knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests.¹

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt uses the idea of dark times for describing her contemporaneity: a time where “*the disorder and the hunger, the massacres and the slaughters, the outrage over injustices and the despair*”² rule. However, the term “in dark times”—in a broader sense—should not be understood exclusively as a reference to the monstrous atrocities of the twentieth century to which Arendt’s writing responds. The evil in question goes beyond catastrophic events. She argues that these

are not what constitute the darkness. The darkness is what comes when the open, light spaces between people, the public spaces where people can reveal themselves, are shunned or avoided, the darkness is the hateful attitude toward the public realm, toward politics.³

1 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, [1955] 1993), 11.

2 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, viii.

3 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 6.

This is, in many ways, also our own contemporaneity.

We are living in times that remind us in many ways of those described by Arendt more than fifty years ago. The novelist Franz Kafka, much praised by Arendt, describes this darkness using the image of a tunnel, a place where beginnings and ends are unclear, and where humans feel a sense of paralysis. In a situation like this, would it be better to just do nothing, or to act despite doubt? Here Arendt provides us some concrete indications on how to respond to these dark times, in a humble, and yet powerful, way. Refusing the cynical stance, and against the denial of knowledge or understanding of what is at stake, Arendt writes,

*we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination might well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances.*⁴

So, today, we ask, what forms might these illuminations take? If it is better to act—and clearly we must, or face disaster—how do we act? What does *action* mean in this context?

These are timely questions for those who live in dark times. Yet, what possibilities can unfold if these questions are directly addressed to professional designers? How can designers (re)act to dark times? More specifically, what does *action* mean for designing (which is itself already, of course, a mode of acting)? Designing, in the broadest definition of the term, has become indistinguishable from action in general, and professional designers are increasingly engaging in the public realm, exploring new models of action to transform our relationship with governments, cities, organizations, technologies, and natural systems. Can designing (action) be understood not just as praxis but also as thought, as reflective practice? One question for designing is whether designers' actions could today potentially possess this same "flickering" possibility to illuminate the present.

4 Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, ix.

Again, we might look to Arendt as a possible guide in this process. What does it mean to consider design's role in times of fear and uncertainty? Can her definition of "dark times" be helpful to understand these possibilities? How might Arendtian perspectives inform the work of designers as they attempt to shape the ways in which we act in the world?

The dark times through which Arendt lived did not stop her from theorizing a possibility for action. Far from being a naive optimist, she nonetheless declared that dark times can *also* be precious moments for developing an "activity of thought,"⁵ where the thinking and action are deeply intertwined. This activity of thought is to her an intellectual praxis that individuals can articulate from within situations of despair, which has the potential to open new courses of action: it has a deeply transformative—and therefore political—potential. To her it is in those that seem the most hopeless⁶ of times that something like an activity of thought, and therefore also the thinking of new forms of acting, also becomes possible. This is the reason why reading today's world through the lens of Arendt's notion of dark times is not a pessimistic operation. Instead, it brings some hope.

To think, where thought is a political activity, orientated to change, is something one must do with others, in dialogue with others. This is not an intellectually abstract activity but, rather, one that must inevitably lead to action, more specifically, a process that leads to action in the public realm.

Acting politically as well as acting through designing in these times means thus moving in this space of possibilities, where one can experience a freedom and creativity that can never happen in private. For this to take place a space of appearance is required: in other words, a politics. Every individual can find for himself or herself this space of freedom, and yet cannot find it alone. Designers are also granted this possibility. But the

5 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 12.

6 "Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope." Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings vol. 1* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 356.

transformative character of the processes and consequences of designing to begin something new can only be fully enacted when our individual understanding of our actions and our words becomes part of a discourse.

If it is true that the capacity to start something new, to begin, to do what is truly unexpected, is for Arendt the freedom that defines us as humans, it is also true that this freedom describes our own space of responsibility. Working on the possible *is* possible but has its own demands. The specific way in which designers can develop their own activities of thought—merging action and speech in their own reflective practices—gives them the potential to react to dark times and to lead to new beginnings. But it also brings responsibility with it. Designing needs to face this potential and undergo a serious reflection, “*an ontological shift that transforms how design is viewed, heard, felt, thought, understood, explained and done.*”⁷

In *The Human Condition* Arendt says that dark times emerge from the loss of [public] realms where people can share their views and aspirations, their hope for brighter times. With the disappearance of the public realm, we are confined into a time of mystifications:

*If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government,” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.*⁸

In the public realm, speech and action are for Arendt connected to one another. Speeches on common interests—in which the individuals acknowledge also their own private

7 Tony Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), 7.

8 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, viii.

ones—are directed toward actions in the public, and the latter therefore result from conversations and negotiations on those common interests. When this intimate connection between private and public interests started to be mystified, consequently this understanding of speech and action also started to disappear together with the same public realm.

The disappearance of the public realm has serious consequences: not only does it undermine the possibility of the political, but it also leads to the loss of the completeness of the human condition. This weakening of the public makes such an easy target for totalitarianisms, where individuals—in their loneliness—decide to let the system—represented by authoritarians—control every aspect of their lives.

The idea that an individual can exist separately from other people is another myth: “... *men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.*”⁹ The political, as the in-between, the connector between persons, is at the core of the human condition. When the political is in place, we have weapons against the loneliness of individualism—which leads so often to totalitarianism:

*The world lies between people, and this in-between ... is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe.*¹⁰

Yet, this space “in-between” that forms the body politic(s) is little considered. What does it mean to take this in-between seriously, and to take it as the main concern of words and deeds?

For Arendt, to rethink the *in-between* is not only one of the possible tasks that intellectuals should undertake in dark times: it is the necessary (political) task. As she was conscious of the risk of a theoretical reflection that could not also be considered a political action, she preferred to be considered a political thinker rather than a philosopher. Deeply interested in the world she was living in, Arendt could not stand “*the philosophers’ resignation*

9 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 7.

10 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 4.

to do no more than find a place for themselves in the world, instead of changing the world and making it 'philosophical.'"¹¹ Her specific attitude toward action and her skepticism toward the dichotomy theory/practice make her particularly interesting for designers today to support them to go beyond the paths of an idea of designing as pure praxis.

This courage of a "*thinking without the banister*"¹² to seek to change the world is much needed in design today. We believe with her that the role and responsibility of the engaged intellectual, the designer, is an active, critical engagement with the world, with the in-between, to combat the erosion of politics, promote hope, and eventually avoid a social disaster, unmasking the many mystifications of our time. It is exactly in moments where—as today—speech loses its political value of connecting people and empowering them toward actions that Arendt theorizes the possibility of something radically new to happen: new beginnings that are not just a projection of our interpretation of the past casted toward the future, but something radically different and transformative toward dark times.

The rearticulation of this in-between seems to us more than ever a key task and responsibility for engaged designers in a time of erosion of politics. We chose to look into Arendt's philosophy in this specific historical moment as we believe it can contribute to question the intellectual, political task of rethinking this in-between.

Arendt's politics also helps us to focus on how concretely designing can be powered by this courage: she envisions for intellectuals in dark times, entangling the relationship between actions, words, and artefacts and, in detail, addressing the importance of action and speech for human artifice. Without

11 Hannah Arendt quoted in George Prochnik "The Philosopher in Dark Times," April 12, 2018, *The New York Times*.

12 Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975* (New York: Schocken, 2018). In a review for the *New York Times* of Arendt's book *Thinking without a Banister*, George Prochnik reminds us of how Arendt was passionate about Marx's famous statement (from *Theses on Feuerbach*) that "*philosophers have only interpreted the world. ... The point, however, is to change it.*"

action and speech, artifices lose their meanings, and ultimately their reason to be. They become superfluous:

*Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate raison d'être. Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object.*¹³

Yet, Arendt also provides an argumentation of how artifices are constitutive of action and speech, and provide them stability, permanence, and relevance:

*... without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating without action to bring into the play of the world the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born, "there is no thing under the sun"; without the enduring permanence of a human artifact, there cannot be "any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after."*¹⁴

Arendt's attention to what makes meaningful artefacts and their potential for the political makes her thought particularly relevant for designers today.

II. Design and Reflection: Creating a Lexicon

It is often claimed that for designers, actions come before thought. This, we argue, is a false understanding of designing. As design theorist Gui Bonsiepe once speculated, a "*design historian in the year 2050 who looks back at the design scenery at the end of the 20th century might be surprised about the*

13 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204.

14 Ibid.

binarism between action and contemplation."¹⁵ Against this, he concluded that

*I would like to see intellectuality maintained as a virtue of design in the next century: readiness and courage to put into question the orthodoxies, conventions, traditions, agreed-upon canons of design—and not only of design. That is not only a verbal enterprise, an enterprise that works through the formulation of texts, an enterprise of linguistic competence of a critical mind. The designer acting as designer, that is, with the tools of his or her profession, faces the particular challenge of an operational critique. In other words, she or he faces the challenge not to remain in critical distance from and above reality, but to get involved and intervene in reality through design actions that open new or different opportunities for action.*¹⁶

This Lexicon takes up Bonsiepe's challenge. It opens a discussion on the interplay between design word, concept, and action. In reconnecting word and action with respect to design, old divisions between abstract thinking and the practical stance of designing, making, and shaping the world dissolve. By extension, the dissolution of artificial boundaries between thought and action refuses other kinds of unproductive bifurcations, for example, the conventional separation between design and social theory or those even more fundamental separations between subject and object, artifice and nature. It also opens up new possibilities to rearticulate the relationship between design and philosophy and thought in general, where design can find in philosophy and thought tools for reshaping and strengthening its thinking from within—and through which, conversely, philosophy and thought can be triggered to be a real action of thought, to become interventions and affirmations and not merely contemplative critique (which today can no longer

15 Gui Bonsiepe, *Interface—An Approach to Design* (Maastricht: Jan Van Eyck Academy, 1997), 153.

16 Bonsiepe, *Interface—An Approach to Design*, 153.

speak power to truth because power has dispensed with truth and hence with critique).

Much has been said about the growing relevance of designing for society, and in detail of its ability to address complex problems and inform new possibilities. This is something both theorists and practitioners have been thinking through in a variety of different ways and from a variety of different motivations. As design's influence and agency increases, so must designer's responsibility increase to confront the inherent political and philosophical questions raised by their work and the world in which they live. This means that a deeper understanding of the meanings and consequences of their actions is crucial:

*Fundamentally we act to de-future because we do not understand how the values, knowledges, worlds, and things we create go on designing after we have designed and made them.*¹⁷

There is in designing today often a tendency to not pay much attention into ways in which it articulates its own inventions: a "loss" or lack of words, a too simple assumption that the "work" (whatever form it may take, tangible or intangible, processual or systemic) can "speak for itself." We know that in actuality it cannot, or far less than its creators assume. Works require a compossibility of work, reflection, speech, and discourse—and above all today, and especially politically and socially, the ability to translate the works' invention into its implications for wider models of acting.

This lack of attention goes along together with a reliance on given language, which is today often corrupted, up to the point of losing significance. In their introduction to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that language has undergone a commodification process, which has impoverished it to the point to make it unreliable. We need some skepticism towards everyday language if we want to scratch under the surface:

17 Fry, *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing*, 12.

*If public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commodity, the attempt to trace the sources of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands before it is rendered entirely futile by the consequence of those demands for world history.*¹⁸

Adorno not only criticizes the distortion of language in Western contemporary societies but also sees a fundamental problem in language as such. In *Minima Moralia*, he says,

*any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape.*¹⁹

We agree with him that every knowledge is marked by fallibility. Yet, we also acknowledge that we need to be confronted with the necessity to understand, to use words to infuse our actions, so that they can have a reflective quality. To question the current use of words we encounter every day in our profession as designers and as citizens—such as the ones we propose in this Lexicon—is then a necessary task that yet cannot be considered done once and forever, but rather needs continuous reframing and problematization. Of course, such a project is necessarily imperfect; it can never be fully realized as such. And yet, as we take up this challenge we are convinced that designers need to take up seriously their being intellectuals, and therefore also take seriously the words used to infuse their reflective actions. Therefore, we need both to question and expand the language we use; to push forward a more critical and conscious use of words. Arendt was aware of the power of words, which for her are deeply connected with actions and artefacts. To have a world that can be inhabited; in other words,

18 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, [1947] 1974), xv.

19 Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, "Finale," in *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1978), 247.

to have a politics, we need these three elements—language, actions, and artefacts— working in conjunction.

Where this links more closely to designing than we usually think is that actions in the world have essentially a dialogic nature. They are as infused by words as words are by actions. Designing actions, where words and deeds naturally tend to merge, have a specific capability or “*virtue*”²⁰ for (re)acting in dark times—in that the merging or dialogical play opened in designing allows reflection on the human condition to penetrate into actions and artefacts just as it allows actions and artefacts to have greater resonance (and ideally greater support) for human conditions.

In dark times, real actions are only the ones that have a specific political meaning. Arendt teaches us that to be fully political, an action needs to find its origin in a discussion in which meanings are shared. Deeds are inextricably connected to words. In order to value and articulate actions and for these to be political in the Arendtian sense, one must explore words infusing them and providing them with their political meaning, making out of these words a discourse, a shared discussion. If this is true, then to rethink the political character of actions and words—and their interconnectedness—is a relevant and timely task for design.

Arendt speaks of dark times as a space of possibility, populated by individuals able to find again the political character of their words and actions. She does not theorize new systems but tells the story of how individuals can shed even a weak light by their way of being in the world—and therefore also speak and act (politically).

I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say. Thought itself—to the extent that it is more than a technical, logical operation which electronic machines may be better equipped to

*perform than the human brain—are out of the actuality of incidents and incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which thinking oars, or into the depths to which it descends.*²¹

This attention to the stories of one's own living experience in Arendt's philosophy has guided us also methodologically in editing this Lexicon: instead of theorizing what Arendt's philosophy can represent for designers today, we decided to collect different voices—stories, "*incidents*"—of design scholars and practitioners represented by their own actions and words in our times. As in the case of the *Men in Dark Times*, we don't know if our "*illuminations*" are the trembling lights of a candle or that of the blazing sun. Yet, we agree with Arendt that this seems somehow secondary, as only the future will be able to judge on this. The most important thing for us is the attempt to act from within these dark times and to acknowledge this moment and our own responsibility. This Lexicon testifies to these many attempts, different illuminations in dialogue with each other, forming together an organic, nonsystematic, and inevitably nonconclusive discourse.

Part Two: The Organization of the Lexicon

There are two major reasons that urged us to edit this Lexicon. The first is that it is perhaps not a coincidence that in this moment in history, in times of fear and uncertainty, marked by complex environmental, economic, social, and political challenges, designers who are engaging in the public realm are now increasingly tangling with concepts like citizenship, equality, human rights, humanity, and public realm that are remarkably close to the language used more than fifty years ago by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, while articulating ways to react to her "*dark times*."²² Less important here are the keywords per se, but the (re)introduction to key themes in

21 Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975*, 200–1.

22 Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 11.

Arendt's work that resonate with our contemporary problems and the potential to carry her work in new directions, especially in relation to designing and acting in the world today.

The second reason to look at and to think at the words enforcing our reflective design practices is to rescue them from their loss of meaning. In his essay on politics and language, the novelist George Orwell wrote the following: "*But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.*"²³

What could be the effects of language on our ability to think design and to translate this thought into reflective practices? If we accept that design is in part a rhetorical practice and that design work, as a product of persuasion, is always open to debate and disagreement, then it follows that designing is also determined by an agenda and subjected to political ramifications. Is the only answer to risks of co-optation to continuously reject existing words and invent new ones, running the risk that they might quickly undergo the same destiny of those words whose meaning has been corrupted and eroded by their use and abuse? A viable alternative, so that we do not end up in a babel where it is no longer possible to understand each other, is to find a way to provide some criticality to those words that are key for design discourse and practice, without simply rejecting them when their meanings have been eroded by their use and abuse.

The Lexicon is an experimental project to this end, an attempt to create building blocks for a more developed discourse around designing that illuminates rather than obscures and opens a greater horizon of possibilities for engaging with our times. In its simplest form the book uses the exploration of fifty or so terms derived from Arendt's body of work to try to begin shaping a vocabulary among a global field of practitioners and scholars, both in and beyond design, interested in the key ethical, sociocultural, and political issues of our day. Focusing especially on terms bearing on the question of how we should act (both subjectively and objectively), the Lexicon challenges designers to find new ways to (*re*)

23 George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2013), 137.

act to dark times, where reflective design practices ought to be considered “activities of thought” from which new and unexpected beginnings can take place.²⁴

As editors, we decided to work with design scholars and practitioners who are engaged through their work with some of the words that are key in Arendt’s philosophy.

The ways in which they were dealing with those concepts did not necessarily have to overlap with Arendt’s interpretation. In fact, we wanted to open a dialogue between Arendt and those scholars and practitioners, rather than analyzing if and how her concepts were actually explicitly present in their work. After a close examination of Arendt’s work and of some of her major scholars, we selected keywords and passages of her writing that were, in our opinion, relevant for starting a conversation and asked the designers to enter in dialogue with Arendt’s interpretation of those concepts that are also relevant for their own work.

In this itinerary, we saw Arendt’s quotations as starting points for thought.²⁵ In so doing we adopted her own idea of quotation that she summarizes while talking of Walter Benjamin’s use of quotations:

24 Arendt herself is instructive here: “to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin ..., to set something into motion ... the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

25 Marie Luise Knott, in her comments on quotation in her book *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, gets close to our intent:

Benjamin’s quotations, according to Arendt, prove nothing. They have no need to document an analysis or interpretation of the world, no need to shore up a logical argument. Quotations are voices the author introduces into the space of a text, voices that can encounter one another in continually new ways in the here and now of writing just as they do in the here and now of reading. They repeatedly illuminate one another in different ways within the space of the text. The impoverished world of today, where the act of thinking is under collapse, has need of “thought fragments” from the past, voices that the author brings into the space of the text and allows to associate with one another ... [creating] a multilayered and polyphonic plurality.

Marie Luise Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt* (New York: Other Press, 2015), 95.

*Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions. (Schriften I, 571) This discovery of the modern function of quotations, according to Benjamin, who exemplified it by Karl Kraus, was born out of despair—not the despair of a past that refuses “to throw its light on the future” and lets the human mind “wander in darkness” as in Tocqueville, but out of the despair of the present.*²⁶

Quotations from Arendt have been used here therefore not as an authoritative reference to her philosophy—which, as indicated by many scholars, has blind spots that naturally need to undergo a serious critique—but rather as prompts, ways to shake the use of words in thinking and practicing design today. In this sense the Lexicon might be considered as a kind of *Wunderkammer*, a collection where every piece is like a prismatic rock stone that shows different facets to the living experience of the different contributors.

In concrete terms, in each instance, we asked contributors to “adopt” one of Arendt’s political and philosophical concepts that can be considered as key for contemporary design (and, in first instance, for their own work) and to write a short essay (generally under 1500 words) with an eye toward exploring its implication for understanding what it is for them to design in these dark times. Each of them was invited to choose their own register (academic, speculative, informal, etc.) and, starting from their own point of view, their own story/incidents and push Arendt’s language, to define new terms, identify possible futures, and suggest new courses of action.

We also decided not to ask Arendt’s scholars to work on these words, as we believe that a real dialogue between these pieces of a collections—these words and quotes—and designers was not to be filtered: these words needed to resonate in their own living experiences. The result is a work that sometimes misses the qualities of a strict philosophical analysis, and yet it had to pay this price for being a real dialogue, which is, as in

26 Hannah Arendt, “Introduction: Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 38–9.

real life, made of different registers. This variety of voices is, we believe, the strength of this project.

What all the contributors of this Lexicon share in common is the conviction that it is worth to critically explore Arendt's perspectives as this might help designers to understand concepts that can inform their acting in the world, to enable the renewal of public life, and support designers to make sense of the profound issues of our times and reflect on how intellectually, and therefore politically, to take action. Again, this is an ambitious and risky proposition. In which ways this dialogue will, as Arendt says, translate into future courses of action is still to be further explored, as part of the *Designing in Dark Times* book series.

The terms selected for the Lexicon do not pretend to be comprehensive, nor do they make any claim to represent all or even most of the essential terms for today. But neither are they arbitrary. They emerge both from Arendt's concerns and interests and from what is of concern today. Despite the more than fifty years in separation, there is less difference here than it might be imagined. In any case, it is sometimes the slight gap between Arendt's times and ours that allows her terms to cast fresh light on current conditions.

Considered broadly, the terms fall into five (necessarily overlapping) groups or clusters:

- (i) The first consists of terms that encompass basic human capacities and conditions. Beginning from the most fundamental—MORTALITY and NATALITY, the second of which especially has particular meaning for Arendt—they address and explore capacities such as COURAGE, CREATIVITY, FREEDOM, IMAGINATION, PLAY, SPEECH, SPONTANEITY, THOUGHT (and its opposite, THOUGHTLESSNESS) as well as subjective conditions that are never simply subjective (such as PRIVATE REALM and SOLITUDE).
- (ii) A second group takes up terms that explore how these capacities and conditions are externalized, for example, expressively in stories and through history, but also how they engender ways of being in the world—VITA

CONTEMPLATIVA, *VITA ACTIVA*, *ANIMAL RATIONALE*—and in engaging with it—as understanding (COMPREHENSION in Arendt’s particular sense of this term), but also through establishing BEGINNINGS, through creating and working through the IN-BETWEEN, and all that which connects persons to the wider political world.

- (iii) These terms link closely to a third cluster of concepts based around the social and political worlds, particularly in the sense of what is common—COMMON GOOD, COMMON INTERESTS, COMMON WORLD—and what is public—THE PUBLIC—and what flows from the creation of what is common and what belongs to this realm: questions of CITIZENSHIP, DEMOCRACY, EQUALITY, HUMANITY, HUMAN RIGHTS, THE IN-BETWEEN, PLURALITY, TOGETHERNESS, but also of how this is manifest, on the one side in political life, as ACTIVISM (*VITA ACTIVA*) and on the other in and through institutions: the inescapable enigmas of BUREAUCRACY, LAW, and POWER.
- (iv) The fourth group of words in the Lexicon deal more directly with questions of LABOR and work: as mentalities (INSTRUMENTALITY, OBJECTIVITY), as modes of acting in and on the world (FABRICATION, LABOR, METABOLISM, TECHNOLOGY), and as the creation of ontologies or modes of being-human (*ANIMAL LABORANS*, ANTHROPOCENTRISM, *HOMO FABER*).
- (v) Finally, stemming from the last two are terms that shade into more dystopian moments: ALIENATION and REIFICATION in relation to making; but also the negative side of politics—BUREAUCRACY, LAW, and POWER in their worst moments; IMPERIALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM in general; each with the concomitant evils that arise in their wake: THOUGHTLESSNESS, VIOLENCE, SUPERFLUITY, the creation of the PARIAS (today the refugee), and the institutionalization of EVIL.²⁷

27 Although we have grouped the terms here in ways that already show their connections and linkages, we have decided to present them alphabetically. The reason is similar to that which Raymond Williams gave in *Keywords*,

As a whole, these groups of terms make no claims either to being comprehensive (even in terms of Arendt) or to exclusivity as the necessary terms for today. Regarding Arendt's thought, there are "missing" terms. Some of these are contingent (authors withdrawing from the project and the like), others the product of relative arbitrariness that any selection, limited not least by number and volume size, will involve. But this is not a dictionary. The contributions, to repeat the point, are essays, not definitions. They are explorations of some key terms in Arendt's thought terms that have resonance both in her thought and to our times and—this is the wager of the volume—to designing as it increasingly engages with the wider world. As was noted earlier, not only does language require constant rescue but we need to constantly think—and indeed to *critically (re)imagine*—the terms we use. Moreover, in the book we have not encouraged but certainly are happy with degrees of overlap on how key concepts are explained. Some might find repetitive, especially if the book were to be read from cover to cover as a text with a beginning, middle, and end. But a Lexicon is never intended to be read in this way. It is a text to be referred to, and to be explored. The structure of the work lends itself to both approaches.

As for exclusivity as to key terms for today, no claims are made since on the contrary, other Lexicons are both imaginable and required. Today in particular—and we hope this will be part of a future project of the series—we need a Lexicon of designing that looks at non-Western, non-given concepts of designing and acting. Arendt's work is firmly within, and is both enabled by and limited by, the Greek–German philosophical tradition. As the Arendtian democratic discourse comes from a certain tradition, we are well aware that, for example issues around coloniality and diversity, have not been adequately addressed. After all, there is also a form of colonialism inherent in organizing the Lexicon—what the Indian social scientist Ashis Nandy calls the domination of “developed, assertive language(s) of

which is that the problem with grouping terms is that while they suggest or establish one set of connections they do so by often “suppressing another” in Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), 22. We have made as much use of cross-referencing as we can and especially paid attention to unexpected linkages. But no single mode of organization can satisfy all requirements.

dialogue.”²⁸ While recognizing this difficulty, within the limits of this project, we were not able to solve the problem, only note the paradox produced here. An urgency for now is to create wider vocabularies of terms or concepts that can bring new energy as well as can unsettle dominant epistemologies—almost by definition these will need to largely come from outside the Western tradition: that can articulate other truths concerning how we think, make, and act in the world. In concrete terms, a possible project within this book series is to work on opening up other kinds of Lexicons, using concepts and categories drawn from diverse traditions and communities.

This is all the more the case in that, even if we are convinced that Arendt’s philosophy can still significantly speak to our dark times and provoke new thinking and acting in designing, we also want to sincerely acknowledge the limitations of her thinking and take distance from some of her positions that are still deeply imbued by a Western-centric, colonial mindset. This is certainly the case when it comes to the subject of anti-Black racism, as, for instance, in her “Reflections on Little Rock” (1959), in which she showed a fundamental inability to fully understand the intricate discourse on anti-African American racism, its origins, and its dramatic implications in her contemporary American context. Furthermore, her reasonings concerning African cultures, languages, and literatures—as expressed in *The Origin of Totalitarianisms* (1951) and *On Violence* (1970)—are deeply unacceptable and indeed surprising for a thinker who experienced first-hand the absurdity of any form of racism.

The dark times in which we are living now are also times in which dramatically enough many human beings are still deprived of their human condition and more than ever require us to keep a radical distance from such positions. As editors, we are aware of this and explicitly wish to stress distance ourselves from the way in which Arendt addressed those issues.²⁹ First and foremost as

28 Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyrannies and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 14–15. Quoted in Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 100.

29 Also, we want to explicitly acknowledge that “the woman question in Arendt” is problematic and deserves a more punctual articulation, which

humans—and second as designers—we need to seriously address colonialism and racism and its consequences, both for Western philosophy as well as in designing, in order to better shape our responsibility in giving form to the world to come.

Finally, we should note four particular contributions to the volume. The first is that the entry on IMAGINATION is by Arendt herself. The short text we reproduce comes from Jerome Kohn's recent editing of some of Arendt's essays (*Thinking without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975*).³⁰ It was written for a seminar she gave on Kant's theory of imagination in 1970 at The New School in New York. It feels doubly appropriate to include an entry by Arendt, especially on a theme that, while often downplayed in professional philosophy, is far more than merely subjective import in the context of thinking designing in dark times.

The second contribution forms the preface to the volume. This is by Kenneth Frampton, Ware Professor of Architecture at Columbia University, one of the world's foremost historians and critics of modern architecture. In the 1970s he attended Arendt's lectures at The New School in New York, where her thinking had a major impact on his outlook. The brief extract from a 2016 interview with Frampton where he speaks on her impact of her thought is both a testament to her influence and provides a bridge between Arendt's teaching in New York in the 1970s and critical reflection on architecture and design today.

The third and very significant addition is a series of artists pages by Martha Rosler. The work consists of a typographic rendering of thirteen of the large-scale transparent hanging Mylar panels of quotations from Hannah Arendt's political writings. Created for the 2006 exhibit *Hannah Arendt Denkraum/Hannah Arendt Thinking Space* held in Berlin on the centenary of Arendt's birth, and thought under the rubric of "At the present moment, thinking is greatly to be desired," "*Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in the 21st Century)*" is Martha Rosler's response to the continuing challenge of Arendt's thought to how we need to think politics today.

yet goes beyond the scope of this book. On this matter, we would like to point the reader toward the work of scholars such as those collected, for example, in Bonnie Honig (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: The Penn State University Press, 1995).

30 Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Bannister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975* (New York: Schocken, 2018).

Finally, the afterword to the book is a short reflective piece on the import and relevance of Arendt's thought today by Richard J. Bernstein, professor of philosophy at The New School in New York. Bernstein knew Arendt and has written extensively on her.³¹ His essay is a reminder—if such is needed—of her import to contemporary political and philosophical thought as a whole. He does this most powerfully perhaps when, in the conclusion to his recent book on Arendt, he offers a quotation from her and its gloss which can act here both as the conclusion of this introduction and the opening to the Lexicon as whole. The quotation from Arendt comes from the beginning of *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. It is on comprehending the world:

*Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalizations that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it might be.*³²

And here is Bernstein's concluding gloss that defines precisely the relevance and necessity of comprehending for our times, not least for designing:

The task she set herself is now our task—to bear the burden of our century and neither to deny its existence nor submit meekly to its weight. Arendt should be read today because she was so perceptive in comprehending the dangers that still confront us and warned us about becoming indifferent or cynical. She urged us to take responsibility for our political destinies. She taught us that we have the capacity to act in concert, to initiate, to begin, to strive to make freedom a worldly reality. “Beginning, before it becomes a

31 Most recently, Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2018).

32 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, [1951] 1979), viii. Quoted in Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?*, 120–1.

historical event, is the supreme capacity of man: politically it is identical with man's freedom."³³

Appendix: Works by Hannah Arendt drawn on for this volume

The majority of the originating quotations for the Lexicon entries were drawn from the following books:

- The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1951] 1979)
The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998)
Between Past and Future (London: Penguin Books, [1961] 2007)
On Revolution (New York: Viking Press, 1963)
Men in Dark Times (New York: Harcourt Brace, [1968] 1993)
On Violence (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970)

There are additional references to:

- Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, [1963] 1994)
 "A Special Supplement: Reflections on Violence," *New York Review of Books* (February 27, 1969)
The Life of the Mind: Volume Two, Willing (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979)
Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)
Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994)
 "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research*, vol. 71, no. 3 (2004)
 "Truth and Politics," in Jose Medina and David Wood (eds.), *Truth: Engagements across Philosophical Traditions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010)
The Last Interview and Other Conversations (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013)
Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953–1975, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2018)

33 Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?*, 479.

ACTION

ACTIVISM

ALIENATION

ANIMAL LABORANS

ANIMAL RATIONALE

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

A

ACTION

Action is the process of doing something to accomplish a purpose, especially when dealing with a problem or difficulty. For Arendt, the general human capacity for action encompasses also a capacity for creation: not only to reproduce what is given but to reimagine and rework the given—including the political: “To act, implies taking an initiative and setting something into motion.”¹

The intentional attempts at transforming the world in which one is living has become a disciplinary cornerstone of design practice, entailing a professionalization of creative action, specifically through the verbal and material articulation of propositions of alternatives to status quo. Creating proposals for, and sometimes bringing into socio-material existence, things that do otherwise not exist is what we can call design action.

Design action works through a hopeful “if,” setting things into motion by asking evocative questions: what if we understood the issue in this way; what if we arranged our efforts in that way; what other futures might we envision if we challenge and unpack some of the contingencies that hold current reality in place?

It is no coincidence that these phrases entail a “we” since no design action (and no political action) is accomplished in isolation. As it is for politics, collaboration is a condition for design, not a preference. In Arendt’s words, “To be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act.”² This means that the “if” is never intended for an individual’s loss from others: in other words, it always has a political implication.

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 176–7.

2 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188.