

# DESIGN DISPERSED

FORMS OF MIGRATION AND FLIGHT



**[transcript]** Design

Burcu Dogramaci, Kerstin Pinther (eds.)

## From:

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### **Design Dispersed**

### Forms of Migration and Flight

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*Design Dispersed* pursues the complex and heterogeneous connections between migration and design in the 20th and 21st centuries. The edited volume gathers contributions by international researchers and curators on the question of how design practices and (historical) objects articulate, respond to and critically reflect on migration, flight and displacement: Besides a collage which highlights the aesthetic effects resulting from the networking, overlapping and mixing of forms, another strand of the book looks at the political and social dimensions of design. How are design objects material modes of a critical inquiry on movements of people and things? What role do object trajectories play in the émigré movements of the 1930s and 1940s? Other texts follow the question of how migrants and refugees form their experience and political fight for acceptance into design and architectural productions. A final essay contributes to wordings and projections – what vocabulary do we need in order to adequately think and write about a design dispersed?

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At first glance Dana Douiev's set of kitchenware utensils for the preparation of injera – a typical dish of Ethiopia and Eritrea – has hardly any connection with a design dispersed – a design linked to migration, exile and flight, sometimes characterized by its transculturality (fig. 1). However, on closer look the objects reference mobility and the ways food and its preparation are closely linked to feelings of home. Douiev's minimalistic collection consists of an injera skillet, a dough mixing bowl with ventilation holes for overnight fermenting and a bowl with a spout for pouring the injera onto the flat skillet. Injera, the flatbread with the sponge-like texture made out of fermented teff flour, is the national dish of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Dana Douiev, a former design student at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, Israel, created *Injera* as her final project under the guidance of Ido Bruno and after research trips to Ethiopia and among Ethiopian Jewish immigrants living in Israel (e.g., Schwarz 2001). Against this background the project can be seen as a design for a though growing yet still minoritized group of people, whose cultural and identitarian concerns tend to be neglected in a 'mainstream design': "Through these utensils a 'new ceremony' takes place, in which cultural elements that have been lost during the cultural migration from village to city, and from inside Ethiopia to foreign countries, are renewed," says Douiev<sup>1</sup>. Similar to her *Injera* collection there exist other initiatives by designers who rethink everyday design in the context of migration movements and diasporic living: The Àga Concept, founded by Lagos-based architect Moyo

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.designindaba.com/articles/creative-work/ancient-african-culinary-ceremony-modern-kitchen>. Accessed 30 November 2018.



Fig. 1: Dana Douiev, *Injera Collection*, 2015

Ogunseinde and the designer Olubunmi Adeyemi, is one of the first initiatives in Nigeria to take ‘traditional’ kitchen utensils, and update them (fig. 2). The collection includes cooking spoons, cutting boards, mortars and pestles, and bowls, made from local wood in Nigeria, a color system referring to an older Yoruba color scheme. Similar to the *Injera* collection, the cooking utensils by the Àga Concept serve not only people in Nigeria, but also address the Nigerian Diaspora, where food and its preparation imparts a feeling of home (see Pinther/Weigand 2018, 80).

In their exhibition *Küche der Erinnerung. Essen & Exil* the curators Veronika Zwerger and Ursula Seeber underline the meaning of food and cooking for (e)migrants: “In many fictional and autobiographical works of exile, cooking and eating are described as identity-defining and stabilizing factors. They symbolize belonging to a specific group – political, religious, social, geographical, familial”<sup>2</sup> (Zwerger/Seeber 2018, 7). The exhibition demonstrated that recipes, dishes and even whole cafés or restaurants migrated globally during the time of National Socialism and the Second World

- 2 The German original version reads as follows: “In vielen fiktionalen und autobiografischen Werken des Exils werden Kochen und Essen als identitätsstiftende und stabilisierende Momente beschrieben. Sie symbolisieren die Zugehörigkeit zu einer bestimmten Gruppe – politisch, religiös, sozial, geografisch, familiär.“ Own translation.





Fig. 2: Àga Concept, Afro-Minima, 2017

War. The preparation of food en route demanded cooking utensils that were brought with the emigrants or had to be found or produced at their new living places. On the one hand, the meals and recipes kept stable certain aspects of cultural identification, but on the other hand, they changed under the impact of local traditions in their target cities and countries.

The above-mentioned examples of a design dispersed lead to the question of how everyday practice changes in the context of migration and likewise of how designers respond to the challenge of people, ideas and objects moving: How does design react to forms of migration, flight and displacement? The volume *Design Dispersed*<sup>3</sup> attempts to face these challenges for design theory and design history by taking a broader (historical) perspective on the relationship of design, movement and the displacement of people. In regard to the contemporary and presumable future challenges caused by massive migration movements and flight, the rethinking of design practices is and will continue to be an urgent task: Worldwide migration increased from 173 million in the year 2000 to 244 million in the year 2015, with two

3 This volume brings together presentations from a conference organized by the authors at the Institut für Kunstgeschichte (Department of Art History) at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich in the fall of 2017.

thirds of the migrant population living in only twenty nations, e.g., in the U.S. (47 million), followed by Germany and Russia (each of them with 12 million) and Saudi Arabia (10 million) (International Migrant Report 2015, 5). In particular, the number of refugees increased from 1975 (2.5 million) to an estimated 66 million today – with an upward tendency. Uprooted by war, persecution and ecological crises or relocating in search of economic opportunity, most of them are refugees within their own countries.<sup>4</sup>

According to these numbers it is obvious that migration and forced displacements are not an exception, but a central part of being human and of societies all over the world – causing not only social change, but also affecting cultural practices and art and design production. This is exactly where our book starts, examining the complex and heterogenous entanglements between design, migration and flight. Among others, its spectrum ranges from (fashion) designers like Hussein Chalayan, who in his collection *Afterwords* (2000) tackles the issues of migration and displacement by transforming furniture into mobile garments, to Walé Oyéjidé's fashion collection *After Migration* (2016) and Lucy Orta's *Refuge Wear – Habitent* (1992–93). The book includes (critical) analyses of historical emergency shelter projects, and the flight and exile of Bauhaus architects and designers during the National Socialist regime as well as current participatory design projects for and with refugees. Although questions of art production and theory have meanwhile repeatedly been made a subject of discussion within the context of global migration (e.g., Dogramaci/Mersmann 2019), a fundamental and comparative historical engagement, in particular, with design and migration is only in its infancy. A special issue of the *Journal of Design History* edited by Henning Engelke and Tobias Hochscherf (2015) focused on architects, artists and designers who fled National Socialist oppression and persecution. Aiming at a reconsideration of émigrés and design between avant-garde and commercialism, the editors followed Flusser's claim about the productivity of exile; it became clear how ideas and design practices were changed in transcultural contexts. In a similar approach, Alison J. Clarke's and Elana Shapira's vol-

4 The UNHCR numbered 65.6 million refugees in 2016, including 40.3 million internal refugees. See <http://www.unhcr.org/dach/de/services/statistiken>. Accessed 12 July 2018.

ume *Émigré Cultures in Design and Architecture* (2017) addressed the issue of whether and how the migrated designers' 'other' view resulted in alternative design languages in order to tackle unfamiliar (migratory) experiences. Apart from these publications mainly based on broader research projects by the contributors and editors, recent decades saw the emergence of platforms and exhibitions dealing with questions of migration, flight and design practices. Initiatives like "What Design Can Do" (WDCD), founded in the year 2000 by the graphic designer Richard van der Laken, "Better Shelter Org" as a partnership with the IKEA Foundation and UNHCR (see Pinther 2017) as well as exhibitions such as *Architecture of Displacement* by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2017) and conferences<sup>5</sup> testify to the virulence of the topic.

Far from exhaustingly covering this intermingled field, the book is divided into three thematically intersecting chapters, where objects and design practices are discussed within the context of migration, exile and flight, dealing with different aspects of design dispersed.

**Design Dispersed – Forms of Migration** asks how experiences of migration, flight and exile are mirrored in the objects designers create. The chapter focuses on artifacts that make these specific social and political dimensions tangible. How are these processes inscribed in an object's history – and how do they become part of the product experience? How does the notion of 'home' or 'homeland' materialize in objects? What role does the materiality of the object play in this context? Following the global turn in design history (Adamson et al. 2011) we also focus on (historic) designs in which transculturality is reflected as a double figure of cosmopolitanism and locality. Object itineraries in the context of the émigré movements in the 1930s and 1940s within and from the European continent are traced in two contributions by Regina Bittner and Burcu Dogramaci. Their essays link forms of migration and the migration of forms, tackling conceptual,

5 See for instance the Annual Parsons/Cooper Hewitt Graduate Student Symposium on the History of Design conference entitled *Design and Displacement* from April 2017, <http://adht.parsons.edu/blog/design-displacement-26th-annual-parsonscoper-hewitt-graduate-student-symposium/>. Accessed 30 November 2018.

textual and material mixtures as outcomes of the traveling object. Alexandra Karentzos and Elke Gaugele take these questions to the present day, examining contemporary styles and fashion design as the expression of and reflection on recent migratory movements. Here, it becomes clear that it is more and more imperative for globally acting fashion companies to react on the issues of migration and flight, even in the sense that certain styles such as ‘migrant chic’ are constructed from outside. Since Elke Gaugele’s approach is to understand contemporary fashion design as a means to negotiate migration and flight, her text already leads to the next chapter.

In the context of the millions of people fleeing from war, conflict and persecution, the topic of design and society has developed a particular (renewed) relevance, sometimes relying on former design developments. **Design Dispersed: Design for and about Migration** thus on the one hand brings together contributions on the historical design for refugees and migrants. Alexandra Weigand’s essay “Humanitarian, Social and Participative – A New Design Culture in Times of Migration and Flight?” sheds light on possible forerunners of a specific design for refugees in the social design approaches of the late 1990s and 2000s. On the other hand, this chapter focuses on migrants and refugees as creators of indispensable objects. In her essay “Flight Design and Migratory City Planning”, Birgit Mersmann takes into consideration manifestations of design and architectural production by migrants. Kerstin Pinther and Hanni Geiger focus on the ways (fashion) designers and artists like Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin from Studio Formafantasma, Superflex and Hussein Chalayan translate trade and flight routes, mobility of people and forms into objects to critically think with. In particular, Studio Formafantasma seems to literally apply the suggestion of Arjun Appadurai (2006) to tie the fate of objects together with the movement of people.

The third chapter, **Design Dispersed: Designers and Artists as Cultural Agents and Brokers**, starts from the idea of a cultural intermediary – a concept that is closely linked with travel and migration, and with the notion of diaspora as a condition of being both ‘here’ and ‘there,’ meaning abundance rather than privation. The media philosopher Vilém Flusser understood the logic of exile as “hovering above permanent loca-

tions” (“Schweben über den Standorten”) (see Flusser 1994, 15; Dogramaci 2013, 7), and Achille Mbembe (2007, 26–29) considers mobility between different places, along with digital mobility and visibility, an essential part of the Afropolitan cultural experience. He points out the special ability to move and mediate between places and cultures, and the multilingualism this involves. Here “translation as a cultural technique for dealing with cultural difference” (Bachmann-Medick 2015, 6) comes to the fore. In the single essays of this chapter the migration of architects and artists under the conditions of exile, and the local adaptations of their creations are made a subject of discussion as well as re-migrations of designers and architects. What kinds of new topographies and *networks* emerge in the field of design and collaboration from this change in location? Miriam Oesterreich writes on the fashion and self-fashioning of the artist Frida Kahlo under the focus on “‘Ethno Fashion’ in Modernist Mexico,” and Adedoyin Teriba discusses the eclectic architecture and handicrafts of the Afrobrazilian returnees to West Africa, in particular to Nigeria. Eduard Kögel takes the perspective of the artist and architect Erwin Broner, who acted as a mediator between cultures and artists, between Germany and Ibiza, the U.S. and back to Ibiza. The final essay, by Elke Krasny, is a critical contribution to wordings and projections: She discusses the use of adjectives like local, global or migrant as categories of inclusion and exclusion and suggests alternative approaches.

The three chapters are visually and conceptually complemented by a contribution from *bitte umdrehen*: Sophia Prinz and Roger M. Buerger, the curators of the exhibition *Mobile Worlds. Or the Museum of our Transcultural Present*, which was on display at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>6</sup> Searching the museum’s collection of applied arts for objects that speak many languages, they brought together objects that bear the traces of cultural exchange and traveling. Their contribution is the result of another transfer, namely the attempt to translate the exhibition display into the two-dimensionality of three double pages of our book.

6 The exhibition was on display at the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg, Germany from 13 April 2018 to 18 October 2018. See <https://www.mkg-hamburg.de/en/exhibitions/archive/6076/mobile-worlds.html>. Accessed 12 December 2018.



Fig. 3: *Cheese Maker* by Studio Makkink & Bey. Image: Ilse Leander.

Referring back to the beginning of this introduction we'll close our preliminary remarks with a brief discussion of the *Cheese Maker* (fig. 3), a design by the Rotterdam-based Studio Makkink & Bey. Like the above-mentioned kitchen utensils by Dana Douiev and Àga Concept, it once more underlines the importance of food production in the context of migration and flight. As the outcome of an intercultural cooperation by the architect Rianne Makkink and the designer Jurgen Bey with a local trade school in Jaipur, India, the object itself literally incorporated transculturality: "The Cheese Maker is a stack of handmade objects, to make homemade cheese

with. The tower consists of a juicer, a milk jug, a spoon, a colander, a pan, a cutting board, a bowl, a cheesecloth and a press. Each product is hand-made of different materials such as wood, ceramics (blue pottery), metal, copper, cotton, soapstone and marble. Similarities between the Netherlands and India are the basis for the design. The designers were inspired by the long tradition in cheese making, the history in craftsmanship such as ceramics, and the population density which resulted in a tradition of stacking houses and goods in both countries.”<sup>7</sup> The *Cheese Maker* thus literally merges different forms and materials into an eclectic design.

7 Quoted after the description on the homepage. <http://www.studiomakinkbey.nl>. Accessed 12 December 2018. The *Cheese Maker* was presented at the 2014 Milan Design Week.

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