

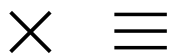
Superhumanity

Boris Groys

Self-Design, or Productive Narcissism



e-flux architecture Superhumanity - Boris Groys - Self-Design, or Productive Narcissism



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A photograph from Alexandre Kojève's extensive collection. From the exhibition "After History: Kojève as a Photographer" at BAK (Basis voor actuele Kunst), Utrecht, curated by Boris Groys.

The field of design has radically expanded. As a practice, design is no longer limited to the world of material objects, but rather extends from carefully crafted individual looks and online identities, to the surrounding galaxies of personal devices, new materials, interfaces, networks, systems, infrastructures, data, chemicals, organisms, and genetic codes. Our new publication, entitled Superhumanity, aims to probe the idea that we are and always have been continuously reshaped by the artifacts we shape, to which we ask: who designed the lives we live today? What are the forms of

life we inhabit, and what new forms are currently being designed? Where are the sites, and what are the techniques, to design others?

During the next several months over fifty writers, scientists, artists, architects, designers, philosophers, historians, archeologists and anthropologists will bring new insight to these and related questions.

Contributions will be published several times per week, both on the e-flux website and dispatched as emails. We are very pleased to begin today with a text by Boris Groys.

—Beatriz Colomina,
Nikolaus Hirsch,
Anton Vidokle, Mark
Wigley and Nick
Axel
e-flux Architecture
at the 3rd Istanbul
Design Biennial

Self- Design, or Produc tive Narciss ism

Boris Groys

Our culture is commonly described as being narcissistic. And narcissism is understood as a total concentration on oneself, as a lack of interest in society. However, it is difficult to say that the mythological Narcissus is interested exclusively in himself. Obviously he is not interested in satisfying his desires, which he ascetically rejects. But neither is he interested in an “inner,” “subjective” vision accessible exclusively to his

own contemplation,
isolating him from
others. Rather, he is
enchanted by the
reflection of his
body in the lake
presenting itself as
an “objective,”
profane image—
produced by Nature
and potentially
accessible to
everyone. It would
be wrong to say that
Narcissus is
uninterested in
others, in society.
Rather, he
completely identifies
his own perspective
with an “objective”
social perspective.
And so he assumes
that others will be
also fascinated by his
own worldly image.
As a member of
Greek culture, he
knows that he shares
the aesthetic taste of
other Greeks.

The contemporary
Narcissus, however,
cannot be so certain
of their own taste.
Today we are unable
to like ourselves if
we are not liked by

the society in which we live. And in our society we have to become active if we want to be the objects of others' admiration.

Contemporary subjects cannot only rely on the looks they were born with: they must practice self-design, and produce their own image with the goal of becoming liked by society. Even those whose activities are limited to taking selfies must still actively distribute them to get the "likes" they want.

But self-design does not stop here. We also produce aesthetically relevant things and/or surround ourselves with things we believe to be impressive and seductive. And we act publicly—even sacrificing oneself in the name of a public good—in order to be admired by others.

Alexandre Kojève
believed that the
desire to be desired
is specifically human
—that it is precisely
what makes us
human, what
distinguishes us
from animals. The
animal, “natural”
desire always
negates the object of
desire: if I am
hungry, I eat bread,
and thus destroy the
bread. If I am thirsty
I destroy water by
drinking it. But there
is also the
anthropogenic desire
—not for particular
things but for being
desired: “Thus, in
the relationship
between man and
woman, for example,
Desire is human only
if one desires not the
body but the desire
of the other.”¹ It is
this anthropogenic
desire that initiates
and moves history:
“human history is
the history of
desired Desires.”²
Kojève describes
history as being
moved by heroes

pushed to sacrifice
themselves in the
name of humankind

Superhumanity

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3 Ibid., 6.
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4 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London: Polity Press, 1989), 9.
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5 Ibid., 12.
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an natural needs and
even “natural”
existence for an
abstract Idea of
recognition. By
renouncing
everything natural
this subject becomes
historical, insofar as
it is constituted by

the desire for
historical
recognition. Thus,
this subject becomes
dependent on the
historical conditions
of recognition: on
the existence of
mankind. None are
as interested in the
survival and well-
being of society as
the contemporary
Narcissus.

This interest is
characteristically
modern, secular,
atheistic. As long as
God was considered
to be alive, the
design of the soul
was more important
than the design of
the body. The
subject wanted their
soul to be loved or at
least recognized by
God. The desire for
admiration by
others, by society,
was regarded as a sin
because it
substituted
“worldly”
recognition for the
only true spiritual
recognition—
external values for

inner values. Thus, the relationship of the subject to society was ethical: one did something good for society to please God—not society itself. The death of God signified the disappearance of the divine viewer of the soul, the viewer for whom the soul had been designed for centuries. In the secular age, God was substituted by society, and thus, instead of an ethical relationship, our relationship to society became erotic. Suddenly, the only possible manifestation of human subjectivity became its design: the look of the clothes in which humans appear, the everyday things with which they surround themselves, the spaces they inhabit, and so forth. Where religion once was, design emerged.

As a result, design has transformed society itself into an exhibition space in which individuals appear as both artists and self-produced works of art. Modern design thus avoids Kant's famous distinction between disinterested aesthetic contemplation and the use of things guided by interests. For a long time after Kant, disinterested contemplation was considered superior to a practical attitude, as a higher, if not the highest, manifestation of the human spirit. But already by the end of the nineteenth century, the *vita contemplativa* was thoroughly discredited and the *vita activa* was elevated to the true task of humankind. At least since Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, design has been accused of

seducing people into
weakening their
activity, vitality, and
energy—of making
them passive
consumers who lack
will, who are
manipulated by
omnipresent
advertising to
become victims of
capital. The
apparent cure for
this trance was a
shocklike encounter
with the “real”
capable of rescuing
people from their
contemplative
passivity and moving
them to action, to
the only thing that
promises an
experience of truth
as living intensity.
The only debate that
remained was over
the question of
whether such an
encounter with the
real was still
possible, or whether
the real has
definitively
disappeared behind
its designed surface.

A diagram from Kojève's archive registers his travels in Europe. The exhibition "After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer" at BAK (Basis voor actuele Kunst), Utrecht, curated by Boris Groys, included nearly 400 photographs taken by the philosopher between the 1950s and 1960s while traveling in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), China, India, Iran, Japan, Nepal, Russia, and throughout Western Europe, as well as over 1,700 postcards that he collected during his lifetime. Copyright: Bibliothèque nationale de France. Photo: Nina Kousnetzoff

However, the subject
of self-design clearly
has a vital interest in

the image on offer to
the outside world.
This subject is
therefore not
passive, but active
and productive.
Where it was once
both a privilege and
a burden for the
chosen few, in our
time self-design has
become the mass
cultural practice par
excellence. The
internet is a place
for self-presentation
—from Facebook to
YouTube to
Instagram—but
likewise in the
“real,” or let’s say
“analog” world, one
is expected to be
responsible for the
image they present
to the gaze of others.
The subject of self-
design is therefore
not only interested
in their own
existence, but also in
that of mankind,
their only possible
spectator. Like a
lover’s interest in
the existence of a
partner to find love
and be loved by, the
subject of self-design

is interested in the
existence of society
to find and receive
recognition and
admiration. This
interest is intense
because mankind is,
as we know,
vulnerable and
mortal. The desire of
the other's desire is
permanently
haunted by the
possibility of
mankind's final
disappearance—the
physical death of
human spectators
after the
metaphysical death
of God.

This anxiety
concerning
mankind's ultimate
fate was powerfully
expressed by Jean-
Francois Lyotard in
his 1987 essay "Can
Thought Go On
Without a Body?"
Lyotard begins his
essay with the
reference to the
scientific prediction
that the Sun will
explode in 4.5 billion
years and writes
further,

That in my
view is the
sole serious
question to
face
humanity
today. In
comparison
everything
else seems
insignificant.
Wars,
conflicts,
political
tensions,
shift in
opinion,
philosophical
debates, even
passions –
everything is
dead already
if this infinite
reserve from
which you
draw now
your energy...
dies out with
the Sun.⁴

The death of
mankind seems
distant, but it
already poisons us
and makes our
efforts senseless.
Scientists have
proven that there are
weak waves
produced by the Big

Bang that still come to us. So one can assume that there are informational waves from the Sun's explosion in 4.5 billion years that already reach us and tremble our souls. Humankind can only substitute God as the ultimate spectator of our self-design if we were to become immortal. Thus the real challenge is to create new hardware that could substitute the human body, to find a new medium on which to write human software, i.e. thought. According to Lyotard, the possibility of such rewriting is given by the fact that "technology wasn't invented by us humans."⁵ The development of technology is a cosmic process in which humans are only episodically involved. By shifting the focus from software (attitudes,

opinions, ideologies)
to hardware
(organism, machine,
their combinations,
cosmic processes
and events), Lyotard
opened the way to
thinking the post- or
transhuman.

However, from its
beginning, the
practice of self-
design prefigured
the problematic of
the post- and
transhuman
condition. Self-
design means
rewriting inner,
psychological,
political attitudes or
economic interests
on external media:
self-design creates a
second, artificial
body that potentially
substitutes and
survives that of the
human. Indeed,
when somebody
dies, the things they
chose and used
remain available. If
the person was
famous, a museum
may keep these
things as a substitute
for the absent body.

Thus, the use of things is a form of self-design: things are not only tools for practical life but also manifestations of their user's soul. In fact, as heirs to palaces and churches, art museums were originally design museums.

Postcard bought by Alexandre Kojève during his visit to Basilica of San Miniato al Monte, Florence, Italy. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France. © Nina Kousnetzoff.

Of course, one does not only use things, but also produces them. These things —artworks, books, films, photos etc.— circulate and are

dispersed globally.
This dispersal is
even more obvious
with the internet,
where not only
famous people but
all people are able to
rewrite their
personality. Yet if
one looks for a
particular name on
the internet, its
thousands of results
do not build any
unity. Thus, one
feels that these
secondary, self-
designed, artificial
bodies are already in
a state of slow-
motion explosion,
reminding one of the
final scene from
Antonioni's *Zabriski
Point*. The eternal
struggle between
Apollo and Dionysus
as described by
Nietzsche leads here
to a strange result:
the self-designed
body is
dismembered,
dispersed, and
decentered, but still
maintains a virtual
unity.[Friedrich
Nietzsche, *The Birth
of Tragedy* (1872).]

This virtual unity,
however, is not
accessible to the
human gaze. Only
surveillance and
search programs like
Google can analyze
the internet in its
entirety and thus
identify the
secondary bodies of
living and dead
persons. Here, a
machine is
recognized by a
machine, and an
algorithm by another
algorithm. Maybe
the internet
prefigures the
condition Lyotard
envisioned:
mankind's
persistence in a state
of explosion.

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Boris Groys is an art critic,
media theorist, and
philosopher. He is
currently Senior Research
Fellow at the Karlsruhe
University of Arts and
Design in Karlsruhe,
Germany.