



Design as intervention

The term “intervention” can be traced back to the 3rd century in a legal context.⁰¹ By the 17th century, the word gained prominence in the French language, particularly in reference to military conflicts.⁰² In the 19th and 20th centuries, amid struggles for power and influence in Europe and the processes of colonial acquisition and subjugation, the term became increasingly politicized.⁰³ From the 1980s onward, political actors began to appropriate the concept of intervention as a term for acts of resistance and expressions of self-determination. From there, the idea of intervention slowly made its way into design, where it has since gained considerable traction.⁰⁴

Intervention in existing systems has been conceptualized as a tool for action with utopian potential.⁰⁵ The social, cultural, urban, technological, political, epistemic, and ecological dimensions of intervention opened up new possibilities for designers. Against the backdrop of a growing recognition that design inherently produces harm,⁰⁶ intervention emerged as a method enabling designers to reclaim a positively framed agency over their own practices.

One refuge for highly motivated designers—referred to as “interventionists”—was to be the “more or less fictional” Institute for Urban Intervention (IUI), conceptualized within the research project “Urbane Interventionen.”⁰⁷

This institute was envisioned as a haven for idealists who sought to improve the world, where their idealism would not be mocked but rather nurtured and valued. However, the largely uncritical celebration of aesthetic interventions into other life realities within this research context, as well as in several publications,⁰⁸ raised questions about the potential arrogance of design, particularly when it operates on the grand scale of “world improvement.” In contrast, a power-critical perspective on design reflects its position within societal hierarchies. From this standpoint, might one not conclude that a “radical intervention is unlikely”?⁰⁹

Design, coupled with the concept of intervention, oscillates between the poles of world improvement and self-criticism. So, what has become of the great utopia of systemic change through a cleverly placed, “minimal”¹⁰ or “comprehensive”¹¹ intervention?

The 12th issue of *Neuwerk Magazine for Design Studies* seeks to explore these and other often ambivalent perspectives on the myth of intervention.

A preliminary categorization of these perspectives already reveals various questions that we associate with four key dimensions:

The **Sociopolitical Dimension** encompasses the form and foundation of interventionist action:

- Is interventionist action necessarily invasive, and when does this become problematic?
- When does an intervention become overbearing, and when is it merely arrogant?
- When is intervention a duty?

At the same time, the **Artistic/Design Dimension** focuses on the connection to design:

- When and how was the term first used in a design context?
- In which design contexts has and is the term being used?
- When does intervention become an anticipated step in a “playbook of protest”?
- When is an intervention truly effective, and when is it merely self-affirming performative resistance?

The **Epistemic Dimension** reflects on and identifies the knowledge required, the knowledge being engaged with, or the knowledge generated through the intervention:

- How strongly must I believe in my own “epistemic sovereignty”¹² to resort to intervention?
- Is design intervention a legitimate tool for... well, for what exactly?

The **Consequential Dimension** ultimately raises questions about the potential outcomes of interventionist activity:

- What happens after the intervention?
- Who is responsible for what remains?
- Are we living in post-interventionist times?
- Is intervention still—or once again—legitimate?

We particularly welcome submissions that approach the topic from intersectional and/or marginalized perspectives. It is important to us that the magazine creates a space for the convergence of diverse knowledge practices.

We encourage submissions in various formats, including but not limited to academic and non-academic texts, photo essays, films, poems, sketches, and other creative works.

Questions and submissions of abstracts or short descriptions (and, if applicable, work samples for artistic or creative projects) should be sent by February 5, 2025 to intervention@burg-halle.de.

- Feedback by February 15 with a request to elaborate on the contributions
- Submission of the final contribution by May 1

I Neuwerk Magazine for Design Studies is published annually and aims to provide a platform for emerging design research. Its focus is on a critical approach to design, emphasizing methods, design theory and history, and the reflection on material culture in the broadest sense. Supporting trans-disciplinarity is as integral to its mission as the effort to (also) embrace non-academic pathways of knowledge production.

[01] Vgl. Behrends, Okko, et al.: *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Heidelberg 1999. Dig. 171,26,6.

[02] Vgl. Limberger, Michael: „Goldenes Zeitalter“ oder „Eisernes Jahrhundert?“ – Westeuropa. In: Hausberger, Bernd (Hg.): *Die Welt im 17. Jahrhundert*. Wien 2008. S. 66.

[03] Vgl. Harper, Douglas: *Intervention*. In: Harper, Douglas (Hrsg.): *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 2020. [www.etymonline.com/word/intervention]

[04] Vgl. Kelly, Petra: *Mit dem Herzen denken. Texte für eine glaubwürdige Politik*. o.D. [<https://arsfemina.de/mit-dem-herzen-denken/zur-unterdrueckung-china>]

[05] Vgl. von Borries, Friedrich (Hg.) / Recklies, Mara: *Propädeutik der Intervention*. Merve Verlag: Leipzig 2017, S. 42–44.

[06] Vgl. Rodatz, Christoph / Smolarski, Pierre: *Wie können wir den Schaden maximieren? Gestaltung trotz Komplexität*. Beiträge zu einem Public Interest Design. transcript: Bielefeld 2021.

[07] von Borries, Friedrich (Hg.) / Recklies, Mara: *Propädeutik der Intervention*. Merve Verlag: Leipzig 2017, S. 8.

[08] Vgl. Hauptpublikationen des Projekts:
- von Borries, Friedrich / Hiller, Christian / Kerber, Daniel / Wegner, Friederike / Wenzel, Anna-Lena: *Glossar der Interventionen. Annäherung an einen unterbestimmten, aber überverwendeten Begriff*. Merve, Berlin 2012;
- von Borries, Friedrich / Hiller, Christian / Wegner, Friederike / Wenzel, Anna-Lena: *Urbane Interventionen Hamburg*. Merve, Berlin 2014.

- von Borries, Friedrich / Ahlert, Moritz / Fischer, Jens-Uwe: *Urbane Interventionen Istanbul. Learning from Gezi-Park*. Merve, Berlin 2014

[09] „Interdependence, complexity and hierarchy limit the designer’s effort to impress their personal or professional agenda on the artefact. [...] This means that a radical intervention is unlikely, and even more unlikely is the possibility that the designer alone or in a team would take such action.“ Lorusso, Silvio: *What Design Can’t Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion*. *Set Margins* #26, Set Margins’ Press: Eindhoven 2023, S. 140.

[10] Vgl. Burckhardt, Lucius / Ritter, Markus (Hg.): *Der kleinstmögliche Eingriff*. Martin Schmitz Verlag: Berlin 2013.

[11] von Borries, Friedrich (Hg.) / Recklies, Mara: *Propädeutik der Intervention*. Merve Verlag: Leipzig 2017, S. 44.

[12] Vgl. Vogelmann, Frieder: *Vier Pfade zur politischen Epistemologie*, in: *Gesellschaft und Politik verstehen*. campus: Frankfurt a. M./New York 2022, S. 189–203.