

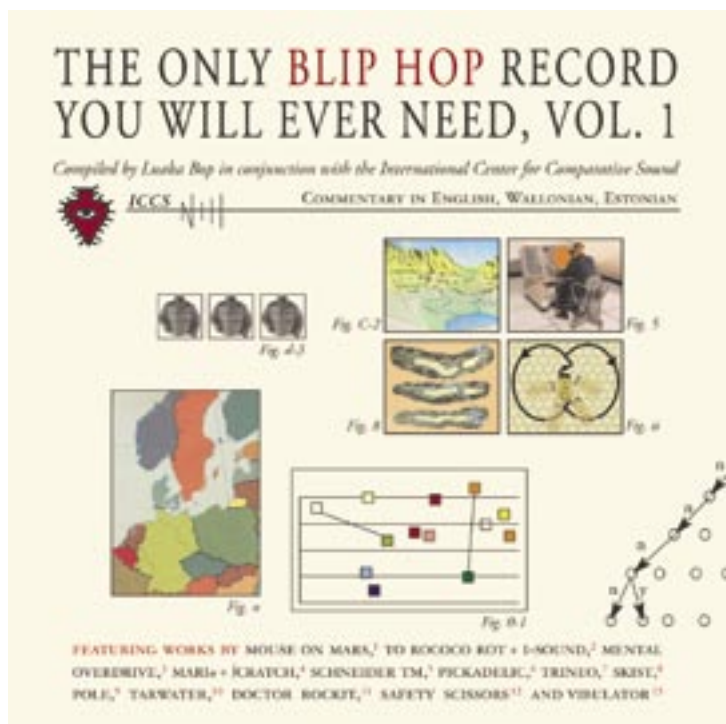
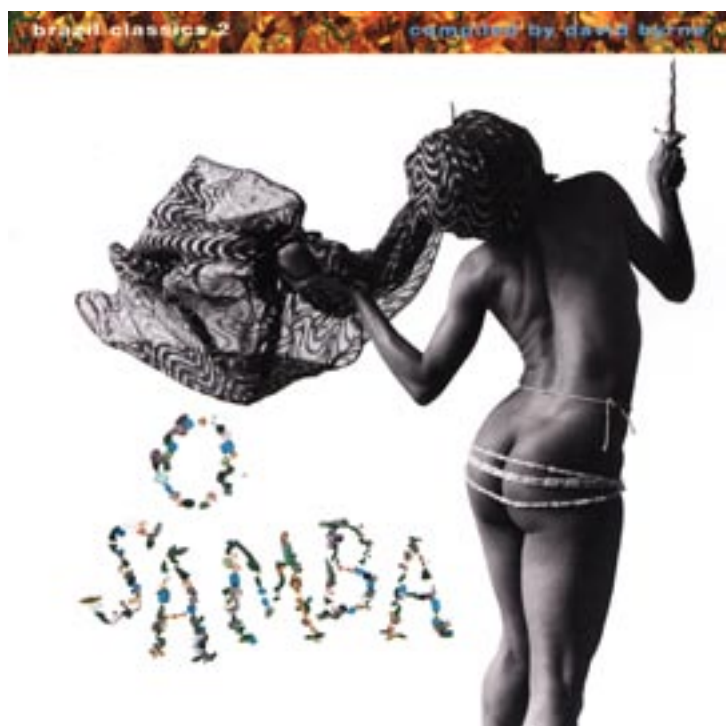


BRUCE MAU AND DAVID BYRNE

ON THE EVE OF THE PUBLICATION OF *MASSIVE CHANGE* CONTEMPORARY ASKED THE DESIGNER AND ARTIST/MUSICIAN TO INTERVIEW EACH OTHER. THE FOLLOWING IS AN EDITED VERSION OF THEIR EXTENDED ELECTRONIC CONVERSATION, WHICH TOOK PLACE OVER A NUMBER OF WEEKS



Left: *Unnaturally Cool*, Israeli researcher Avigdor Cahaner crossbreeds to create featherless birds that can thrive in the tropical zones of the developing world. From *Massive Change*, 2004. Courtesy: Bruce Mau. Above: David Byrne, *Political Flesh* poster: Hussein, 2001. Courtesy: the artist



Top: cover of *Brazil Classics 2: O Samba, Samba & Pagode*. Design: M&Co. Above: cover of *The Only Blip Hop Record You Will Ever Need, Vol. 1*. Design: Danielle Spencer with Dave Eggers. Both courtesy David Byrne

DAVID BYRNE: Hi Bruce, I received the materials yesterday, thank you. Here are a couple of thoughts to start off with. It seems to me that a lot of what you've been involved with are things that could be classified as meta, or curatorial projects.

Projects whose content is filtered by you and by the studio, which often is a collection of work and ideas gathered from elsewhere. Many of the Zone books that you designed could be looked at this way, as many were collections of pieces discussing a common theme. These were probably how I became aware of your work, quite a number of years ago. *Massive Change* could perhaps be looked at the same way, no? The book, if that is to be taken as an example of the process, is a collection of 'found' photographs, and short articles and interviews about various 'experts' whose work supports the *Massive Change* thesis. The whole project, as I understand it, is collaborative and curatorial in that way too. I see a lot of this going on these days. With the glut of information of all sorts – music, technology, science, news, gossip, sex – the world, at least

the portion of it with access to that information, wants filters. They want not more information but less, they want someone to pick the relevant stuff, the inspiring stuff, the stuff that I, the reader, client or consumer, can actually use.

As an example, I went to a lot of news sites in the run up to the Iraq invasion; I felt I wasn't getting a balanced picture from my usual sources – the NY Times, Washington Post, CNN, etc. There are all these sites that are essentially news filters, they cull and collect news items from various other sources and summarise them and link to the original source. There isn't much editorialising, the hand of the curator is more or less invisible.

Maurizio Catalan's arty magazine *Permanent Food* is a grey version of this phenomena – quasi legal. *Utne Reader* is a version for that demographic, websites like Gawker; I could go on and on. I was involved with a small record label, Luaka Bop, for many years, and we did a lot of compilations, which is the same thing.

So, what are my questions? Well, in any project like these there is a perceived demographic that is being catered to – one assumes that the curators' interests mesh with some group of people out there. Who is the target audience for *Massive Change*? I assume because part of its introduction is through museums that the design and art communities are a presumed audience, and they are sometimes a prescient group. Am I right? And where does it go after that?

BRUCE MAU: I think, rightly or wrongly, in terms of a very broad audience, young and old, near and far, hip and square, art and science, students and practitioners. And at the same time, I imagine that audience as a single individual. Someone who is generous and open, willing to be challenged and surprised, interested in difficult formulations and not afraid. One thing I learned from my collaborators at Zone Books was that when you assume intelligence on the receiving end of your work, you add dignity to the world.

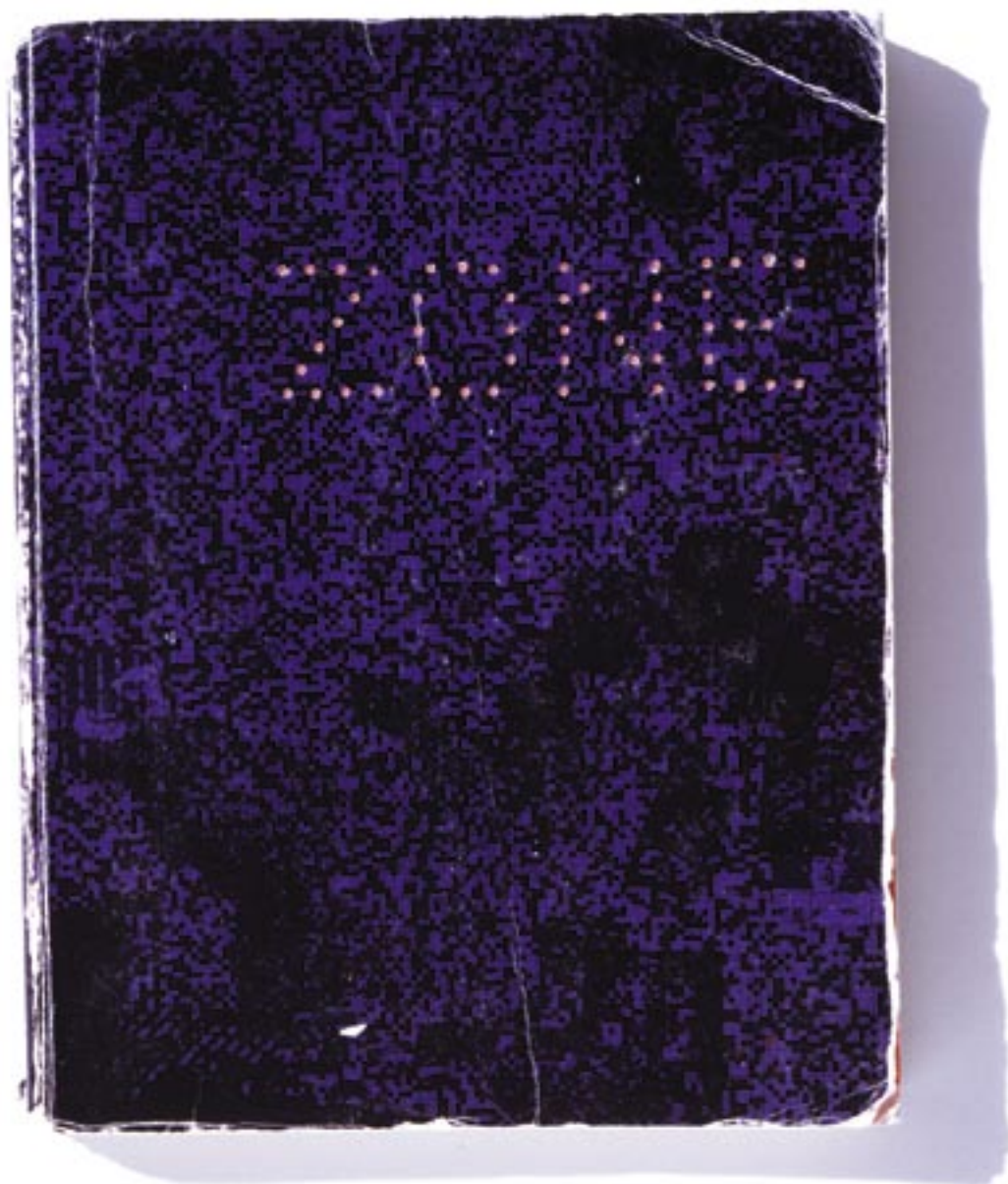
DB: A beautiful phrase, that.

BM: Probably the most damaging and demoralising effect of the field of visual communications is the degree to which we fail to do this, we fail to begin with the assumption that the consumer is a citizen first, that they have the capacity to deal with reality in all its complexities. If you think about it, most people during their lifetime have the responsibility of raising children, a challenge infinitely more complex than anything else we ask of them. As a culture we often set the bar too low.

DB: A man in Zagreb once said to me, while the war in that area was still raging, that the job of the artist is to produce creativity, intelligence and dignity as a kind of counterbalance to what we saw happening in his region at the time. He said this somewhat as a response to my query: 'What is an artist to do in this situation? How do we respond?' His response seemed to be partly (as I remember it), 'Just do what you do, do it as well as you can, THAT is what people need to see still going on despite the fever that rages. They need to have a ground to return to after the "fever" breaks, and if creative people all abandon their creative calling to become partisans, then there is nothing and no one to return to, no sense of what it means to be alive'. I took inspiration from this, but at times I do get involved in issues and politics; when a situation seems to have gone beyond human dignity and sense it seems not so much partisan as being human to say and do something. A certain involvement in the health of the larger community is part of being human, like breathing or eating. It's not outside of daily living, but an integral part of it.

Massive Change, and possibly your whole studio, is probably perceived as a collaborative project. I have done a number of collaborations myself – with designers, other musicians, theatre directors and choreographers. It's always a little bit different one project from another, but the collaborative process has certain similarities. I find someone has to be boss. Though we might claim open source, no censorship and willingness to listen, veto power resides somewhere, and has to be acknowledged as such. Someone, as subtly as possible, has to keep things on track and focused. There are ways to do this that are dictatorial and other ways that are benign, subtle, almost invisible – but the guiding hand needs to be there. In my experience I sometimes choose to defer to the other collaborator, and I make that clear from the start; other times it's the other way around.

Do you agree with the above and if so how do you manage this? You have a large office (compared to mine), which I hear runs amazingly smoothly. How do you organise such a system? How do you lay out the working and collaborative parameters with clients and partners and with the *Massive Change* project?



Zone 112, Urzone Inc, 1985. Courtesy: Bruce Mau

when a situation seems to have gone beyond human dignity and sense it seems not so much partisan as being human to say and do something. A certain involvement in the health of the larger community is part of being human, like breathing or eating.

BM: I absolutely agree with what you describe in principle. Collaboration is at the core of my work. Almost everything I do is not in the first person. My practice is an intricate web of outside collaborators (sometimes defined as clients, sometimes partners, sometimes provocateurs), inside collaborators working with me in the studio and, increasingly, an extended family of studio contributors that may include editors, manufacturers, typesetters, artists and experts like BMD chief scientist Bill Buxton. Now, with the Institute without Boundaries, I have added a new class of collaborators that lies somewhere between student and apprentice.

My approach to leadership in the collaborative process is more organic than the one that you describe. We enter the process with the idea that leadership is a floating possibility and whoever contributes the most and demonstrates the commitment, passion and capacity to lead should show the

way. This means that sometimes quite young, inexperienced people end up leading a project. There are always people around to provide support and guidance if needed. And I am always there as a backstop.

If things are going well and the project is developing in an exciting and challenging way, I may mostly coach and encourage and question. But (and, as they say, this is a big but) if not, if I feel the process is not adventurous or productive, my role as the boss is to make it happen one way or another. I occupy, I realise – an apparently contradictory position on this issue. I believe in the extraordinary potential of the studio team, and I am a hard-core elitist – I believe in leadership.

DB: This is what I have trouble resolving in my head sometimes – the elitist/



Installation view, 'Massive Change' exhibition, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2004. Courtesy: Bruce Mau. Photo: Robert Keziere

leadership thing, and the openness and deferring to collaborators. Democracy and freedom versus benign autocracy. I manage to hold the balance most of the time, but not always. There are occasional tensions and conflicts, but sometimes that's good, sometimes it leads to a new place, and sometimes to a dead end, which may be where it was headed anyway. De Tocqueville claimed in *Democracy In America* (1835) that an enlightened royalty may be, in an ideal world, the best form of government, but only if there is a moral core and willingness to compromise. Otherwise democracy, or as close to it as we approach, at least protects against the tendency to a less benign situation. He claimed that while it raises the floor, so to speak, it also lowers the ceiling. Like psychotropic drugs, I guess. De Tocqueville said that in a democracy there is less likelihood of the extraordinary or greatness, but it also protects against the reverse.

BM: I have to say that when it comes to clients and outside collaborators, I have been almost unbelievably fortunate in working with and learning from some of the best people in the world, in a startlingly diverse range of practices, from architecture to science, literature to business. Frank Gehry has been unmatched in his willingness to push me and my team to do things we've never done before, to up the ante with every project. We are working together on a museum of biodiversity in Panama City, which was conceived from the outset as a collaboration. In that case the leadership on the project flipped back and forth – sometimes our team led, sometimes his team.

The map of collaboration for *Massive Change* is infernally complex. The project began as a series of instigations by outside partners. The Vancouver Art Gallery requested a major project on the future of design; George Brown College proposed a graduate educational project in design; Phaidon, the

publisher of *Life Style*, was interested in producing our next project. My role was something akin to artistic director, overall project leader working with our outside partners, the people in the studio, and, most intensely, with the people who joined the Institute without Boundaries, who became full co-authors on the project. It was a complex, dynamic and evolving process, where everyone involved demonstrated an extraordinary generosity in realising the project. Incredibly, and at different moments, everyone in the Institute became a leader in their own project.

I think one of the most difficult things about the collaborative process, especially one that is so organic, is the moment that it goes public and is brutally translated by the media. In general, the media simply has no time for sentimentality or complexity. Anything that slows them down is cut away until what remains is clear whether or not it is faithful to reality. My direction on the *Massive Change* project is part of the story, but the story is richer and more complex. For my co-authors, the people of the Institute without Boundaries, the process was simply brutal. No matter how emphatically I insisted that the project was produced collectively (in fact the whole point of the project is the power of the collective), the media, with few exceptions, reduced it to the singular.

DB: OK, here's more: From my point of view you seem to be unreasonably optimistic. You seem to believe that problems will be solved, grace achieved and happiness attained. That's an exaggeration but, though I'm not a cynic, I take a much less consciously hopeful attitude. I see things a little more like the Beckett character: 'I can't go on, I will go on, I must go on'. We persevere and do the best we can, but the overall level of catastrophe and muddle remains more or less constant. You seem to think things have and will continue to be improved. Where does this optimism come from? OK, besides the host of



Above and below: David Byrne and Danielle Spencer, *Itsy-Bitsy Democracy/Big Fucking Democracy*, 'The Voting Booth Project', 2004. Courtesy: the artists and Parsons School of Design Gallery, New York





Edward Burtnytsky, *Urban Mines, Densified Oil Drums #4, Hamilton, Ontario, 1997*. From *Massive Change*, 2004. Courtesy: Bruce Mau

technical developments and statistics you might provide as arguments, I feel you are personally predisposed to be (unreasonably?) hopeful and optimistic. The evidence, as we know, can be seen both ways; but you choose to look on the bright side. How did this happen?

BM: Let's take this apart. Let's separate me from the *Massive Change* project. First we'll look at me. Then you.

I began with a very rough start. The son of a miner, I grew up in a mining town in northern Canada called Sudbury, whose claim to fame was that of all the places on earth, it most resembled the surface of the moon and thus was used occasionally to train astronauts. A combination of acidic pollution and deforestation had literally scorched the earth to black in an area that stretched some 30 miles around the town, where quite literally no living thing could survive. Besides this, it was a hard-drinking, nasty scene where most of the male population worked shift work in the world's biggest nickel mines. The consequence of this was to disorient the men by changing their sleeping time by eight hours every two weeks, which meant that during the winter months, for two weeks at a stretch, the men would go into the mines in the darkness, and emerge back into darkness, with an average temperature 40 below zero. (It was only when I began travelling to Europe that I realised the men were all jetlagged! Imagine flying to Paris every two weeks, but without the beautiful Parisian women and the cafes and the art.) Remember also that one of those shifts goes underground just as the bars close. The work they did was terrifying, but they couldn't talk about it. It was brutal, noisy, dirty and dangerous. Alcoholism was rampant. Family breakdown was rampant. Domestic violence, and for that matter every other kind of violence, was rampant. The men were deliriously riding the edge of chaos and disaster, and the women were desperately trying to hold it together.

I remember one particularly violent and degrading night. I decided with absolute clarity and certainty at the age of 12 that I was not going to live like this, that my life would be different. With five children, my mother left my father and held five different jobs, working practically continuously to support her family. But I happened onto this scene just as the intellectual leaders in the Canadian government were making an enormous commitment to universal access to education, health care and culture. I was nine when Expo '67 happened in Montreal and the theme was Man and His World, and I watched it all on TV. I met an extraordinary teacher in my last year of high school, who introduced me to The Art Life, as Robert Henri called it. Because of that I was able to attend the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, even though I had absolutely no possibility of contributing to it financially. From there I went on to build my life around the extraordinary opportunities that have been presented to me.

And what a life it's been. The pleasures I have experienced! I can't possibly catalogue the growth and the images, the pain and discoveries, the vistas, the intimacies, the sounds and smells of coffee and wet paint, the talk, the nights, the fears and doubts and disasters, the dead ends and the journeys, the intellectual sickening thuds and the effervescent loop-da-loops.

The demands and rewards and pleasures of this life are beyond my wildest dreams. The world has unfolded in a way that is opening doors that have been locked for centuries. Opening doors that allow a boy from a mining town in Northern Ontario to become something other than a miner, to live a life of the mind. And doors have been opened to techniques and capacities that erase the boundaries that once limited our potential and our imaginations. The image, the object, time, movement, growth – these fields have never been more volatile and exciting.

And these same openings challenge us to redefine almost every practice, and in the end that will be our work. To discover what it will mean to make art in

the future.

To top it off, I have had the good fortune to share this life with my partner and lover Bisi Williams, a great beauty and an extraordinary literary character, and now our three beautiful children, who understand better than most the implications of living this way.

So, you see, I have good reason to be unreasonably hopeful and optimistic. As for your claim to Beckett-like perseverance, when you consider deeds not words, David Byrne looks fairly hopeful. We often confuse content with action. The content of your work may be cool and neutral and even sometimes pessimistic and cynical, but your actions reveal your own optimism. Tell me, is the man who starts a band out of design school and produces more than a handful of landmark albums, stars in the film *Stop Making Sense*, launches a record label about global music culture, publishes several books of his own photography, wins an Oscar for one of several soundtracks and goes on to produce a new type of art using business software not fundamentally hopeful that his actions will affect the world?

Just like the man in Zagreb says, your deeds reveal an abiding belief in human capacity and the ability of other people to change the way they see the world. I know it is super-uncool to be authentic, sincere and optimistic, but I would suggest that perhaps we have more in common than you acknowledge.

As for *Massive Change*, there are a few points to clear up: nowhere in our project do we say that we will ever reach anything approaching utopia.



David Byrne, *Sea of Possibilities*, from *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist, Steidl and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

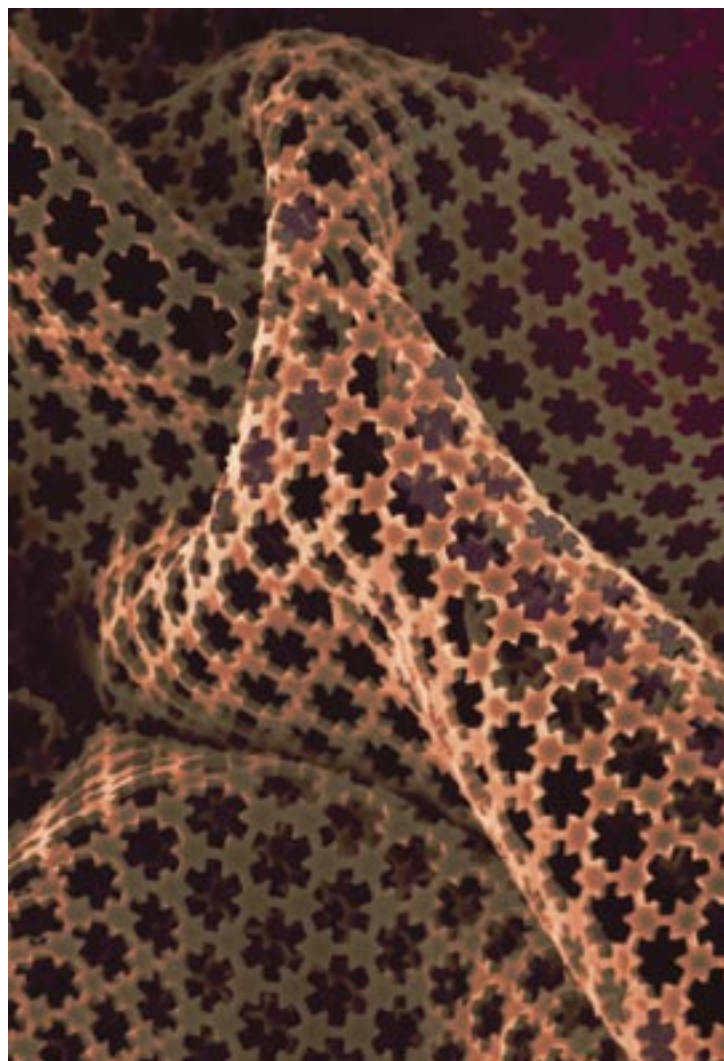
We forget that less than a hundred years ago one of the biggest health hazards in cities was disease caused by horse manure. As for whether things have improved or not, there is absolutely no question in my mind. Fifty years ago I would be a miner, not a designer.

The project is deliberately not utopian. It's about what is happening right now. We don't imagine that we will one day get it right, fixed, done. Our process was to look at what we seem to be committed to world-wide. In other words, if you mapped out all the projects in one sector of our world, say mobility, you would find that there is a pattern in that map that seems to suggest that we are going somewhere. In the case of mobility, every one knows where we're going. Everyone agrees. From the big automakers to the tinkerers, the schools, the engineers, the energy companies. They all know we're going towards sustainability. We will produce sustainable mobility. It's not exactly rocket science (if you'll pardon the pun). The few places in the world that have not already embraced traffic, and have built the necessary infrastructure to support the idea of the car, are desperate to get it. We will produce many, many more car-like vehicles. Given that, there is only one way to do it that won't be an absolute environmental disaster, and that is sustainably. Now, will there be bad ideas along the way? Yes. Evil intent? Yes. Greed and stupidity? Yes. Mistakes? Yes. Unintended consequences? Absolutely. Will it be bumpy and clumsy and nasty getting there? You know it will be. And when we do get there, will there be a host of new problems to design solutions for? No doubt.

However, look at what we've already done. Look at Los Angeles. If you want to know what cars used to be like, go to a country where they don't have pollution controls. But we forget. We forget that less than a hundred years ago one of the biggest health hazards in cities was disease caused by horse manure. You may say that we can look at the evidence from both sides, but at some point there is a preponderance of evidence in support of our proposal. As for whether things have improved or not, there is absolutely no question in my mind. Fifty years ago I would be a miner, not a designer.

I went through the material that you sent, and although I thought I knew your work, I was struck by a realisation. Namely, that you have evolved the sort of problematic body of work that I hold in the highest esteem. The range of the work demonstrates the energy of a lively, mobile, searching intelligence exploring the world in its many facets – by any means necessary. I have long been suspicious of artists that have one signature product and, with the consistency of a corporate identity program, pump out work after work safely within the confines of their self-styled identity.

DB: I find that kind of consistency hard to understand or identify with, but I can see how it can be really successful. It's like turning one's work into a logo, like branding oneself – it makes it easier for collectors, critics and part of the public to say 'ah hah! That's a so-and-so, I recognize it immediately'. Moving into different mediums is confusing for some, but often it is in the underlying concerns where the consistency lies. That takes longer to recognize, but I find it more inspiring



Self-Assembling. Cross-shaped self-assembled structures and scanning electron microscope image of polymer microstructures formed by molding in capillaries. Copyright: Felice Frankel. From *Massive Change*, 2004. Courtesy: Bruce Mau



Above: David Byrne, *Physiognomies*, from *Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information*, 2003. Courtesy: the artist, Steidl and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York. Right: *Future Warrior?* The US Army's concept figure wears a helmet equipped with a 3-D audio and visual sensor suite. From *Massive Change*, 2004. Courtesy: Bruce Mau

when I see it in others' work.

BM: Look at the life of an artist like Richard Hamilton, who explores with words, images, painting, photography, print, product, multiples, exhibits, typography, etc., etc., and it seems to me that a creative force left to its own devices will roam and evolve and become many things.

DB: He did some industrial design too, didn't he? A super-minimal stereo, if I remember correctly.

BM: I understand it was a computer, for a Swedish company.

In my own work I have been deliberately committed to the idea of evolution, constantly in search of new territory to learn about and learn from. I have a deep fear about getting stuck – I can't stand being pinned down. I think my job is to produce a body of work as free and problematic as possible, regardless of classical boundaries. But doing so also produces a continuous destabilising friction for the people bent on policing the territories.

DB: Yes, but to contradict myself, there is something to be said sometimes for consistency and repetition. Some people seem to manage to talk about a lot of different things by sticking within the same small vocabulary, the same materials and forms.

I myself am guilty of believing some of the old modernist dogmas:

1. That one should choose the medium that is most appropriate to the content (although one could argue that the medium is the content in many cases). This means it's OK to jump from music to drawing because each is suited to communicate and express different things. As your *Lifestyle* book mentions, we are in a world that uses images to communicate at least if not more than text these days. Some things can be almost instantly expressed in an image, but, as the saying goes, would take at least 1000 words.

2. That if one knows the limits of one's abilities and skills one can sometimes turn those limitations to advantages.

3. That by restricting oneself to limited means and limited subjects the restrictions can sometimes act as a goad to help focus.

I don't know where this line of reasoning is going. I think I'll stop.

BM: I thought about all this when I was watching your performance of *Once in a Lifetime* at the Union Chapel in London. It was slightly different from the original, and I thought 'My God, a song is a life sentence'. You did something in a certain way, with a certain cadence, once, when you were a kid, and you're stuck with it for ever – same as it ever was. It explains the depressing melancholy I feel when I see supposed rebels like Mick Jagger in performance, pinned to the wall like a butterfly, by a pin that he invented. In some ways, you have escaped incarceration by doing different things altogether.

DB: I was sort of aware of this early on. That bands and composers who 'brand' themselves with a specific sound and attitude may become extremely successful, and relatively quickly, but they've also made their own creative prison. It's a kind of Faustian bargain. Like the 'problem' with artists mentioned above. It might be a prison cell that's really tricked out, but it could all go away without – what is it? – horizontal diversity?

I've been asked a little too often 'Hey, where's the Big Suit?' So I am not entirely unaffected by this. (I usually tell them, truthfully, 'It's on it's own tour'.) For the most part, I've taken what sometimes is the rougher road, trying new things rather than playing the hits, whatever those might be, musical or otherwise. Musically, everyone knows that if you go out and just play your old hit singles you might end up as your own tribute band ... maybe playing stadiums, but more often not.

BM: In my case a lot of the evolution has been at the request of others. Someone calls up and asks me to do something I've never done before, and pulls me into an entirely new terrain that turns out to be absolutely compelling. Has this been the case in your work, or have you developed a more self-directed plan of attack?

DB: I think a little of both. One makes it clear by one's choice of activities that one is open, flexible and interested in new experiences. You establish this as a history and people eventually assume you are up for things you haven't done before. So they ask you. One feeds the other. The past experience of visiting new terrain lets clients know you're willing to give things that you've never done before a try. So yes, then they start to approach you with stuff that you would never had thought you'd come into contact with.

So yes, sometimes others give the nudge to try something new, but that's often because they see that willingness in evidence.

BM: Is it something that you are actively conscious of, or simply a casual evolution from one medium to another?

DB: I think the movement into different media is more organic than it seems. There are always threads connecting different projects, aren't there? A book establishes an experience of collaboration, of organising and collecting images and essays, this might lead to – what? – a TV magazine show, for example. Experience directing and editing music videos leads to the confidence to try a longer form. It doesn't always work, but there a subtle creative arrogance that sometimes pays off.

BM: You mention something here that is absolutely critical in my own practice. Namely, the idea of taking the sensibilities developed in one medium and deploying those to advantage in another. One thing I realised about my own work is that I am a child of the cinema – the work I do in book design could only have happened after the invention of the jump cut, the close up, the montage. Almost all of my work is about sequence. If you look at any individual image or page in my work, it seems dead-pan, dry and flat. All the action is in the movement from one moment to another. And I know that when I take the sensibilities that I have evolved in my approach to the book as a sequential object, an object that unfolds in time, into a practice like, say, the design of a landscape, I do it in a fundamentally different way than the traditional approach to landscape.

DB: This cross-referencing from one discipline to another reminds me that I tend to jump from one medium to another, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. It's energising and refreshing. Somewhere I got the idea that cross-fertilisation is good, that one discipline feeds the other and that each one can be entered into with a sense of play. Not that play isn't serious. I'm often not aware of the inspiration that gets carried from one area over to another, which is fine.

I wouldn't pretend to be a great virtuoso, but there are ways to express the heart and mind that don't require years of apprenticeship – and sometimes a great craftsman or skilled player forgets that the communication is not in the virtuosity, not that it hurts – one can lose sight of what's important.

Another thing I'm often not aware of is where things are headed. In retrospect things look like they were following a master plan, that there was a carefully laid out route to arrive at something or other, but more often than not it was intuition and accidents. The grand scheme may be there in the unconscious, subtly guiding one's attentiveness to pay attention to these accidents and happenstance, but I'm often unaware of it.

MASSIVE CHANGE, THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL DESIGN, BY BRUCE MAU AND THE INSTITUTE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES, IS AVAILABLE THROUGH PHAIDON PRESS ON WWW.PHAIDON.COM. FOR DETAILS OF A CORRESPONDING INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLING EXHIBITION, A WEEKLY RADIO PROGRAMME AND AN ONLINE FORUM, VISIT WWW.MASSIVECHANGE.COM

DAVID BYRNE'S BOOK OF 'TREE' DRAWINGS WILL BE PUBLISHED BY MCSWEENEY'S IN SPRING 2005. HIS MOST RECENT SOLO ALBUM, *GROWN BACKWARDS*, WAS RELEASED IN 2004, AND THE POWERPOINT BOOK AND DVD *ENVISIONING EMOTIONAL EPISTEMOLOGICAL INFORMATION*, STEIDL AND PACE/MACGILL GALLERY, NEW YORK, IS JUST ABOUT TO HAVE ITS SECOND PRINTING. VISIT WWW.DAVIDBYRNE.COM FOR MORE DETAILS

CO-ORDINATED BY ROGER TATLEY, WITH THANKS TO DANIELLE SPENCER AND BOLAJI WILLIAMS

