



States of Design 09: Green Design

A design report from New York by Paola Antonelli

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A new breed of designers is finding ways to combine ideological commitments with life's pleasures, revealing an untapped realm of opportunity between greenness and gratification

Few labels are as frayed and worn out as "green" is. In absence of any organised approach or regulation, manufacturers and users alike have flaunted and overstated ecological virtue to the point of devaluing it, much as has happened to the label "organic" in American food retail. People have been encouraged to trust as "truly green" only products that manifest holier-thanthou austerity, vaguely crude looks and a sprinkling of freckles on the packaging to indicate recycled paper or plastic, all aimed at being a Birkenstock-style atonement for our vanity and sins of indulgence. But is it really true that everything that is tasty and sexy is bad for you? And is it really true that in order to be a better person one needs to flagellate one's natural inclinations towards lightness, humour and pleasure? Environmentally responsible design should be like dark chocolate: delicious and sensual, yet still good for the health of body and soul.

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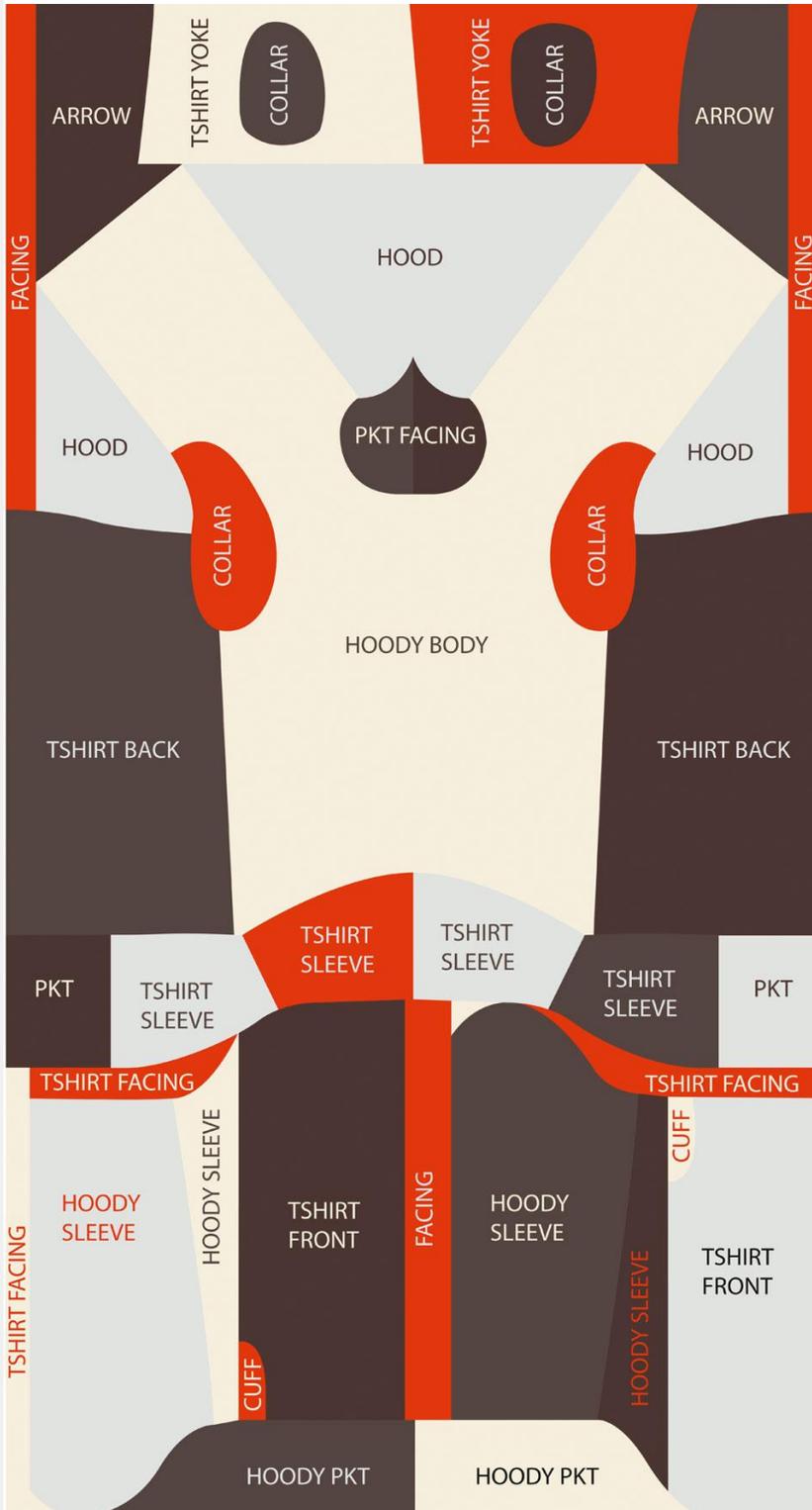
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↑ Top: The *Boeing 787 Dreamliner*. Thanks to carbon-fibre parts it uses 20% less fuel than other airplanes its size. Here, the assembly line in Everett, Washington. Above: Tejo Remy, *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* (1991)

However annoying and ideologised, the green cliché has served its purpose, driving into the public consciousness an awareness of the need to change behaviour. It is now time for designers to get rid of the last vestiges of sanctimony and do what they do best: help society's next step towards a new normalcy that incorporates an environmentally responsible attitude in everyday life. It is time for environmentally

responsible, fair trade-based, ecological, sustainable, ethical, reduced-footprint, energy-efficient, zero-waste, bioregional, biodegradable, recyclable design to be less ascetic and more human and vulnerable. If outrageousness, especially of the badass kind, is still hard to find (except perhaps in gaudy, speedy, expensive big boys' toys like the *Tesla Roadster* or the *Czeers MK1* solar-powered speedboat...), the real world needs a dose of that kind of thing, too. Green products should have their pros and cons and be subject to the whims and vagaries of taste that all things are subject to.



← Holly McQuilan, TWINSET: Pattern for embedding multiple garments in one pattern

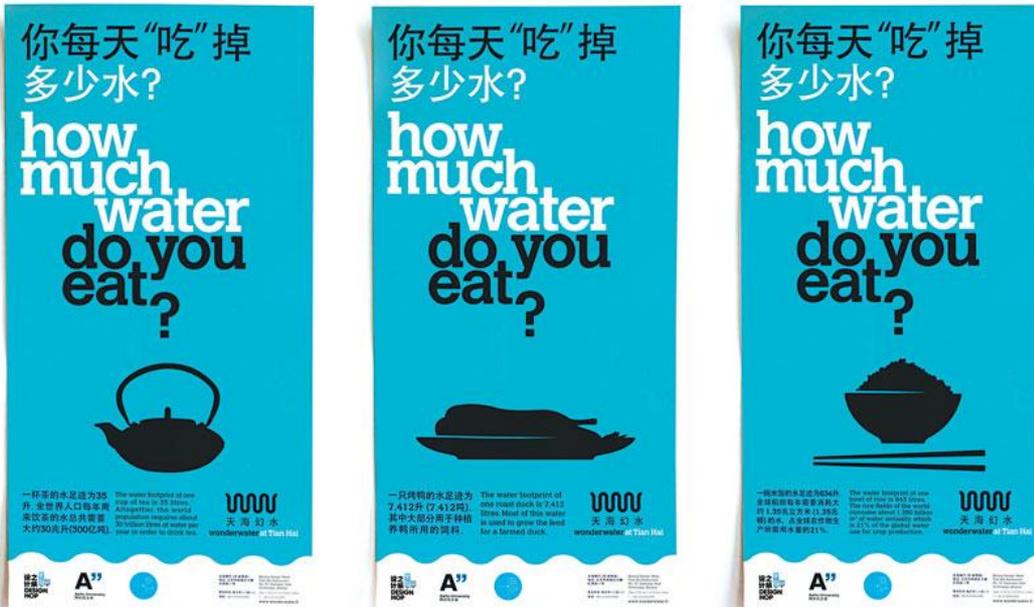
When it comes to the delicate process of adjusting to new circumstances, especially something as pervasive and incommensurable as a worldwide environmental crisis, designers can help translate it from a global scale to a very local, personal one. Design's process also works backwards, from the individual to the universal, and it can translate people's wishes (some of the loudest voices leading to environmental

policies come from the grass roots) into the language of marketing and production. When in the 1980s German consumers, who are a step ahead of the world curve in social responsibility, boycotted a soap bar by a major American cosmetics company because it was over-packaged (the soap was wrapped in aluminium foil, laid on a small plastic tray that slid into a plastic cylinder; the cylinder protected by corrugated cardboard and inserted in a branded box, which was then in turn encased, of course, in clear plastic wrap...), several German designers sent the company suggestions to maintain elegance and save face while also being more respectful of the environment and their consumers' wishes.



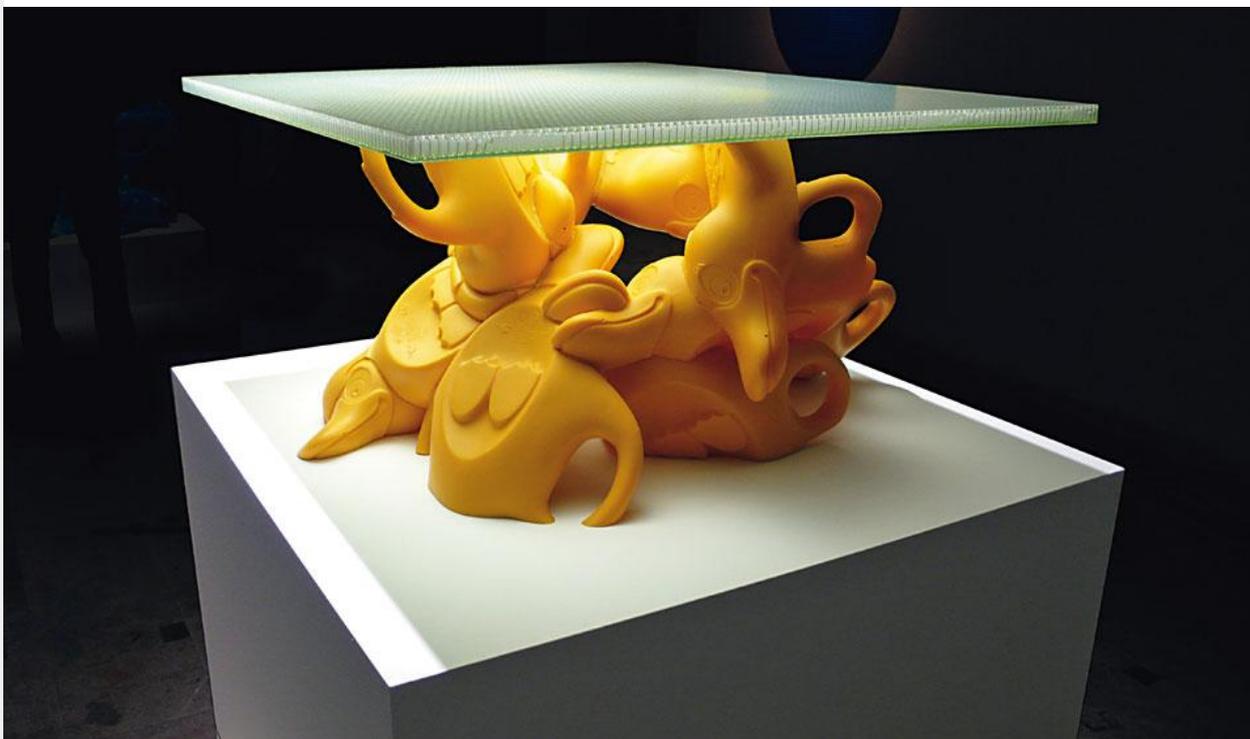
↑ David Czap, Nils Beers, *Czeers Mk1*, the world's first solar-powered speedboat. The 10-metre-long boat can reach speeds of up to 30 knots thanks to its deck with embedded solar cells. <http://www.navaldc.com>

The need for a greening of design practices, a holistic approach that starts in the designer's mind and encompasses the whole story of a product, from manufacturing and marketing to purchase, use and disposal, can lead in many different directions. However, common to all of them is the notion that everything, not only people but also products, materials and companies, has a lifecycle, sometimes built into the object (see Simon Heijdens' *Broken White* dinnerware, where planned obsolescence is elevated to lyricism) or explained by it (see Christien Meindertsma's beautiful exposé *Pig 05049*, on the afterlife of a pig from an industrial farm in The Netherlands). One of the most straightforward approaches to sustainability is the attempt to prolong that lifecycle by means of a simple attitude from the past: better-quality products last longer and can be repaired. In March 2009, Platform 21, a former online design platform based in Amsterdam, published a *Repair Manifesto*, where many of us will recognise the common sense of our grandparents and the practical wisdom dictated by material culture, especially in poor countries or times. This lesson has been learned by many young architects and designers who are engaged in community-based projects all over the world.



↑ Jane Withers & Kari Korkman, *Wonderwater Café*, Beijing Design Week 2011

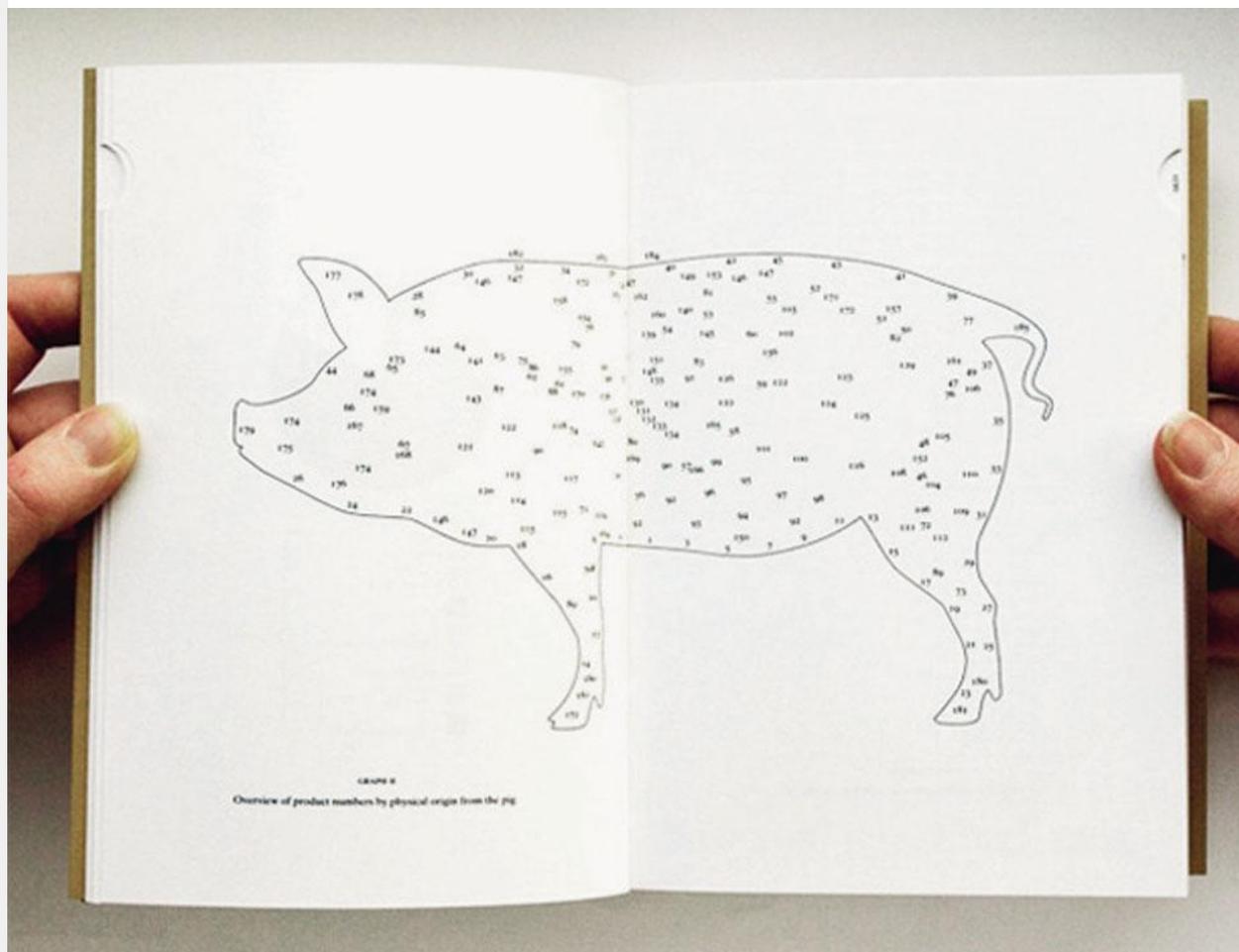
For objects that cannot be repaired, there are sophisticated methods of recycling, reuse and reinterpretation. We can find dozens of great examples in the past 20 years of furniture design, from Tejo Remy's 1991 assemblage of drawers *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, to Greg Lynn's 2008 furniture made of recycled toys laser-cut into shape. Examples abound in architecture too. First among them for its effect is New York's *High Line*, a public park built on a defunct railway that runs 30 feet above Manhattan, designed by a team comprising James Corner Field Operations, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and the garden designer Piet Oudolf. Yet it is also spearheaded by a community group of activists called Friends of the High Line, founded in 1999.



↑ Greg Lynn, *Toy Furniture* (2008)

The world of fashion is ablaze with creative activism based on reuse and, well, "re-fashioning". Since 1989, Martin Margiela has been reclaiming gloves and tango shoes as the raw materials for his *Artisanal* line. More recently, German designer Stephan Hann has used materials like Tetra Pak, celluloid, paper and blister packs to make couture statements that are a world away from agendas tasselled with Coke-can

pull-tabs. A movement that the New York-based magazine Paper calls "fashion activism" comprises the French collective Andrea Crews, founded by Maroussia Rebecq (in a photo feature entitled **ReFashion**, devoted to designers who reinterpret second-hand garments, the magazine's editors call them "Eco Provocateurs"); the pioneers Imitation of Christ and Libertine; and Swap-O-Rama-Rama, an international clothes-swapping community founded by Wendy Tremayne. Institutions and schools have cemented this direction and are forging designers who will effortlessly subscribe to the new code of behaviour.



↑ Christien Meindertsma, *PIG 05049* (2008). From the three years' research on all the things made from a single pig, the more unexpected products were: ammunition, photo paper, heart valves, brakes, chewing gum, porcelain, cigarettes, conditioner and bio diesel

At the Centre for Sustainable Fashion at the London College of Fashion, for example, founder Dilys Williams has called upon designers Katharine Hamnett and Stella McCartney to teach students the magic of ethical boundaries that range from sustainable production to fair trade. Fashion is also the testing ground for another form of ethical practice, the so-called zero-waste approach, in which designers draw and cut garments so as not to waste any material. Although veterans Zandra Rhodes and Yeohlee Teng have been practicing this for decades, newcomers like Mark Liu represent a new wave that is more vocal and insistent on the point of **environmental responsibility**. The zero-waste approach, a study in pattern design and puzzle theory, is also at the basis of several architectural experiments, for instance the *Expandable Surface Pavilion* installed in Cologne in November 2011 by Pablo Esteban Zamorano, Nacho Martí and Jacob Bek, whose economical and structurally sound design is delineated and executed by computer, and erected by hand.



↑ Simon Heijdens, *Broken White* (2004). The decoration emerges with use to recount the story of the object

Manufacturing products using 3D printing could also be a zerowaste proposition, if pushed and implemented with the right equipment. Reduction and streamlining can also happen at the source in order to maximise efficiency. Scientists and engineers are toiling away on ultra-high-performance concrete (ten times as strong as regular concrete); paints that reduce volatile compounds; coatings with anti-pollutant qualities; fibres in lieu of metals to reduce weight and achieve other advantages (see the new Boeing 787); and steels that are so thin and strong they can substitute plastics. All this research aims at treading with a lighter foot on the earth's resources—lightness being one of the keys to reduced energy consumption.



↑ Pablo Zamorano, Nacho Martí, Jacob Bek, *Expandable Surface Pavilion* (2011). The pavilion presented in Cologne is developed within the Emergent Technologies & Design Research Programme of the Architectural Association. It aims to achieve zero material waste

Pioneering sites like TreeHugger have had a profound effect on the market and elevated consumer awareness and demand, therefore also pushing major retailers like Walmart to seek consultants to improve their practices. But just as was the case with organic food, there is often a discrepancy in price, as if to say: being responsible will not be easy and will cost you. That is, unless entrepreneurs can get with the programme and reduce costs while increasing profit (earnings always help the debut of innovative projects). Sustainable design begins with people in a community, but requires entrepreneurship and investment. The hybrid car *Prius*, which began selling in the United States in 1997 and sold its millionth model there in April 2011, is the story of a big company that decided to make an initial investment and take losses in order to expand its pool of consumers. Not only did it reach a critical mass of them, changing the cost/benefit ratio, but the car became a lifestyle symbol of the so-called *Conspicuous Conservation* phenomenon as coined by economists Steve and Alison Sexton.



↑ An example of Heleen Klopper's Wool Filler technique, inspired by [Platform21's](#) Repair Manifesto

Similarly, entrepreneur Shai Agassi founded his company Better Place with the aim to build a worldwide infrastructure for electric cars. In his forward-looking view, a breaking point is soon to come in **the levels of CO2 pollution**. All these efforts are encouraging and positive, but a need for accountability and transparency remains, a call for effective public

monitoring of all sustainability claims, perhaps in the form of an footprint index for carbon dioxide production and water use. At the *Wonderwater Café*, devised by Kari Korkman and Jane Withers during Beijing Design Week in October 2011, the menu displayed the water footprint of its Chinese dishes. A simpler, universal code would be ideal, although extremely hard to implement not only across countries, but also within industrial sectors. Still, it is a goal worth keeping. Design's goal is to enable us to live life to the full while taking advantage of all the possibilities provided to us by contemporary technology. Ideology, instead, is limiting, the enemy of the elasticity that is required of us today. Through designers' work, we will be able to outgrow the need for any kind of green ideology. Sustainability will become normal, integrated in all the other aspects that make life worth living, like humour, imagination, vision, curiosity, humanity and love.

— Paola Antonelli, *Critic and curator, MoMA* ■ ■ ■ ■ ■



↑ The Toyota *Prius* family received the "2012 Best Green Car to Buy" Award. In the photo: a production line in a Toyota plant

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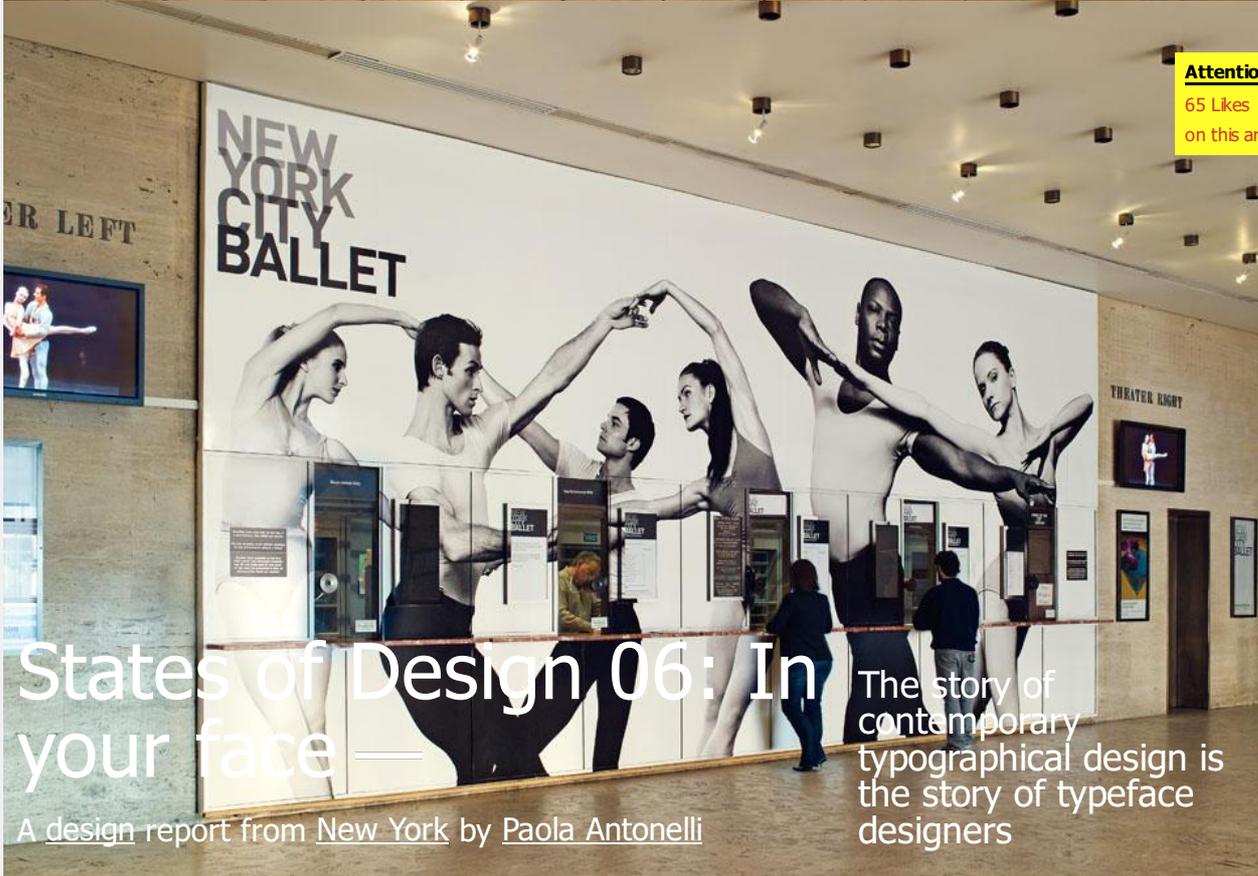


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