



Design on the margin(s)

Margins are simultaneously a location, a relationship, and a state of being. Being on the margins evokes images of inclusion and exclusion, sites of nonconformity, human flourishing, precarity, and refuge — a state that can be actively sought and celebrated, but also experienced as harmful and oppressive. It is precisely this ambivalent and creative nature of marginality that we aim to explore in the next issue of Neuwerk Magazine.

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When we examine the *margin* from the perspective of design studies, one pathway leads to the sociological concept of deviance, or that which does not conform to prevailing social norms and values. To name or claim something as deviant relies for its meaning and force on the normative value system from which that something diverges, which can inadvertently confirm the centrality and dominance of that system.

Similar dynamics can also be observed in aesthetics that exist outside of the mainstream. These often originate in marginal subcultures, are just as often torn from their original context, and made available for mainstream incorporation, appropriation, and exploitation. Even aesthetics that emerge independently of social marginalization can find themselves pulled from the margins into the mainstream of the design industry.

A prime example is the concept of *camp* described by Susan Sontag as a deliberately subversive and alternative perspective that plays with the exaggerated and the artificial. It refers to an internal language and aesthetic that developed on the margins of mainstream society, particularly in queer spaces. Attempts to shift camp further into the mainstream have had a destructive effect on its affective power as well as the integrity of queer social formations. This poses particular challenges for those who would attempt to document or theorize aesthetics on the margins.

"To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it."
(Susan Sontag in *Notes on Camp*, 1964)

One response is to develop ways to respect otherness without having to fully translate it into normative terms and frameworks. For people with a history of migration, this approach can be particularly important. In the context of colonizing forms of violence and their demand for transparency, Édouard Glissant describes a *right to opacity*. How might design studies develop methods of documentation and analysis that take this right into account?

And while being on the margins can provide refuge and experiences of relative empowerment, it can also be the effect of exclusion and discrimination. Nowhere is this clearer than the marginalization of people marked as disabled. The relational model of disability makes clear that *disability* is not a medical condition but the combined effect of bodily attributes, social attitudes, and the built environment. In other words, the experience of disability is produced through the designs of the physical and social world; from steps and thresholds to difficult-to-understand texts, technological exclusion and the willful ignorance of others, systemic marginalization is materialized in ways both large and small.

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Moreover, institutions often generate or rely on codified norms and legal minimum standards without involving people with disabilities in design decisions. Such ableist exclusions are thus not a planning error, but a structural principle. To fight such exclusions, might we need an approach to access that combines questions of design with concepts of in/justice?

23.7.26 ○ Deadline for abstracts (150-300 words; for artistic and design works, please include samples of your work) and short biographies to neuwerk@burg-halle.de

31.7.26 ○ Feedback with a request to finalize the contributions

14.10.26 ○ Deadline for final submissions and completed contributions

Information on plain language:

https://www.barrierefreiheit-dienstekonsolidierung.bund.de/Webs/PB/DE/barrierefreie_it/uebergreifende-anforderungen-web-und-app/leichte-sprache/leichte-sprache-artikel.html



<https://centerondisability.org/plain-language-and-easy-read/>

References:

Adorno, Theodor W.: Résumé über Kulturindustrie. In: Theodor W. Adorno: Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetika. Suhrkamp 1979.

Glissant, Édouard: Poetics of Relation. penguin classics 2025.

Hartblay, Cassandra: Disability and Accessible Design in Contemporary Russia. cornell university press 2025.

Kafer, Alison: Feminist, Queer, Crip. Indiana University Press 2013.

Malczok, Melanie: Strategische Devianz: Potentiale und Risiken ungehorsamer Ästhetik in der Kommunikation sozialer Bewegungen. In: Nils S. Borchers, Selma Güney, Uwe Krüger und Kerem Schamberger (Hrsg): Transformation der Medien – Medien der Transformation, Verhandlungen des Netzwerks Kritische Kommunikationswissenschaft. Westend 2021.

Sontag, Susan: Notes on Camp. penguin modern 2018.

T. Anna: Opacity – Minority – Improvisation. An Exploration of the Closet Through Queer Slangs and Postcolonial Theory. transcript 2025.

Submission Guidelines:

The 13th issue of *Neuwerk Magazine* is seeking design-related contributions of all kinds on these and related topics, including those that emerge from lived, intersectional, or marginalized positions. The magazine aims to provide a space for the convergence of diverse knowledge practices.

We welcome both academic and non-academic texts (up to 12,000 characters, including spaces), photo series, films, sound art, field recordings, poems, sketches, object documentation, etc. Texts in *plain* or *simple language* are explicitly encouraged. Disability expertise, vernacular knowledge, and experience-based practice as sources of insight are particularly welcome. The planned hybrid publishing on our web platform will enable multimodal experiences of various content.

These and other themes raise a series of questions that can serve as a starting point for submissions:

Aesthetics emerge from contexts and transcend them. Form and content need not be linked.

- Must we be mindful of the origins of aesthetics when using them in new context and for new purposes?
- What kind of counterculture is still possible today given the diverse incentives to turn subcultures into marketable brands?
- To what extent is design studies itself part of the very industry it seeks to analyze and critique?

Resistance to mainstream politics and dominant norms has long been understood through visual aesthetics of images, slogans, and gestures. Many sensory dimensions of resistance and protest remain imperceptible in such an understanding.

- What does resistance smell or taste or otherwise feel like?

Internal group languages and aesthetics help marginalized people gain a sense of agency and belonging. Opacity can create a safe space.

- What role do transparency and opacity play in the context of colonial and patriarchal violence?
- How can we design for opaque groups — or is that the wrong question?
- How do subcultures, countercultures, and anti-design manifest themselves in relation to the mainstream?
- Is *Camp* dead? Did we betray it?

Social norms and the built environment of designed things determine which people are perceived as disabled, who receives support, and who is required to explain themselves. There is a disconnect between the ideal of universal design and the reality of experienced marginalization.

- How do people with disabilities design their environment? What forms of resistant aesthetics are disabled designers inventing (Access Aesthetics, Crip Curating, etc.)?
- What design practices emerge between standardization and lived, vernacular disability expertise?
- Where do universal and accessible design stand today?
- Why is barrier reduction often considered difficult to implement? What concrete positive examples exist of anti-ableist transformation processes?