



Change for good

Speakers at this year's Design Indaba were from a range of backgrounds, united by a desire for change. By Mark Sinclair

Last year in CR, Rick Poynor raised some pertinent questions about the value of design conferences. One criticism levelled at the plethora of industry gatherings is their insularity: more often than not a collection of well-known graphic designers and/or product designers simply offer up one narrated slide-show of work after another.

Cape Town's Design Indaba is different. The sheer range of occupations in this year's speaker list was intriguing in itself. There's the hand-letterer, the head chef, the bio-tech designers, the electric car maker, the 'design politician', the fashion designer, the Indian ad creatives, not to mention the inventor of nonsense machines.

There were, of course, some great graphic and product designers seeded in amongst these varied careers but, spread out over three days and with some clever scheduling, it transpired that none of the presentations ever felt like a continuation of the previous one. Each speaker saw their 45

minutes as a unique opportunity – and very few wasted it.

Design Indaba is now 12 years old and, despite its relative youth, is already very sure of itself. There's a discernible buzz to the event which can be lacking at big conferences. Admittedly, the host city is Cape Town and the line-up has trekked in from all over the world to talk to a highly appreciative audience of South African creatives. It's also 30° outside.

Some context is important here, though. In London or New York, for example, it is relatively easy to gather some world class creatives together. But that's not to say people take full advantage of this. In Cape Town, it would seem that Indaba is both eager to show off South African design, notably through the Expo launched at the start of the conference, and to celebrate the potential inherent in the medium to change the status quo. After all, there aren't many places in the world that have witnessed change to the extent that South Africa has.

Change was certainly the overriding theme during the three day conference. It was evoked in the work of Rick Valicenti, whose desire for mutability has meant his work has never stood still (few designers could show a series of personal, diary-like ink paintings straight after some rather complex digital pieces), and in that of Commonwealth studio, whose

humans, they posited. Could we consume their meat as an act of love, or hate, even? This way of "putting these ideas into a consumer consciousness doesn't belittle them", claimed Dunne, "but rather activates a

different part of our thinking."

Our interaction with food also took centre stage in the highly anticipated talk from Ferran Adrià, the head chef at the elBulli restaurant in Spain. While Adrià is a seasoned lecturer, this was his first 'design' conference, but it felt like he was very much in the right place. Preparing food is, for him, a highly creative act: the only one, in fact, that we inject into our bodies. Food is part of an intimate, ephemeral process, but also one that can kill us. Adrià showed images of his restaurant's creations and each revealed a way of thinking that relied

on changing ingrained perceptions of cuisine and going against the norm. So pipettes and perfume sprays are used to deliver flavours, for example, while an amazing 'sphere' of tomato soup is created by filling a balloon with soup and freezing it in liquid nitrogen.

If this came across as somewhat indulgent, it was. But the attitude of going counter to fixed ideas formed the crux of many of the best talks. Indeed, for change-in-action, local architect Luyanda Mpahlwa's lecture on the progress of the 10x10 social housing project, where ten architects are creating ten new low-cost houses in the townships, was truly inspiring.

As if to continue on this air of self-determination instigated by Mpahlwa, Bruce Mau then unveiled his plans for establishing a series of Centers for Massive Change, through which he hopes to unite designers and entrepreneurial thinkers and exploit their capacity to affect global change. He put out the offer of establishing one of these Centers in Cape Town. Perhaps, in a few years, one of the people who stood up to applaud him will give a talk about what happened next? ■

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initial architectural interests now mould and shift almost as much as their progressive furniture pieces.

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby of the Royal College of Art looked to the future in their presentation on how design will be integral to our experience of bio-technology. They showed a range of work from people involved in nano and bio-tech design, opening with some arresting images from the Victimless Meat project, a meat product that can be grown in a lab from animal cells, developed by Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr and Guy Ben Ariy. But what if you took cells from