

SULSOLSAL IN CONVERSATION WITH GABRIELLE KENNEDY

Hannes Bernard and Guido Giglio make up SulSolsal — a design research practice based in Amsterdam, Cape Town and São Paulo. After graduating from the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam, the duo has been combining cultural, historic and economic research to create communal spaces, publications, video installations and performances. They are specifically interested in the complex relationship between design, economics and society, and reflecting on the spectacle of global development. For the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial — A School of Schools, they are curating the ‘Staying Alive’ installation based on their research over the past two years.

GK: You talk about neo-survivalism. What is it and is the term used in a literal sense for the design biennial?

SSS: Neo-survivalism is a term we use to describe the growing number of leisure, professional and lifestyle activities and interests that are coalescing around a shared hobby of surviving the 21st century. Mapping these activities spans from hopeful nostalgia to total paranoia. It is used both literally in the biennial installation, but is also framed as symptomatic of the wider typology of crises in social infrastructure, housing, health and changing labour conditions.

Survival as a hobby!?

Neoliberal capitalism has quantified our entire existence as work, leaving only our leisure or hobby time to pursue the basic urge for self-preservation. For instance, within mainstream media, edutainment channels such as Discovery Channel and National Geographic — once home to soft-spoken nature documentaries — now run extreme survival reality shows back to back.

Can you explain the link between crisis and learning?

Historically, social crisis has been the domain of government. As trust in state institutions including schools has eroded, individuals are increasingly taking on the responsibility to learn about, prepare for and react to an uncertain future themselves.

You position yourselves as design researchers, what is your methodology?

Although we have formal academic backgrounds, we prefer to operate outside the confines of academia. We work in an inter-disciplinary way across theory, social research, film making and performance, mapping pieces together without a predetermined output in mind. Incorporating aspects of artistic practice, we are constantly collecting, sketching, making narratives, scenarios, images and installations.

Tell me more about the installation you are presenting in Istanbul.

Staying Alive is a curatorial framing of our research from the past two years, which ranges from DIY prepping hoarders and luxury bunkers to wartime recipe Pinterest groups, nootropic supplementation for efficiency and total food replacement therapies. Showing alongside this research, we have curated a selection of work by other designers that reflect a broader topology of crisis.

What does this intersection highlight?

Our research shows real people and companies designing their life choices around the supposedly logical trajectory of the present, namely, a future of scarcity. In this scenario, the role of designers would be to manage that scarcity.

This is what characterises most design projects today.

No, that is the traditional understanding of design, which is to create a product or a service with utility and commercial value.

So there is another paradigm?

Yes. It rebukes scarcity as being inevitable, rather considering it an ecology designed by existing power structures. What the designers in our installation propose is that design can be about reclaiming agency, bolstering protest, and evoking alternatives.

It sounds idealistic.

Yes, it demands a different world. With its links to mass media and popular culture on the one hand, as well as science and technology on the other, design can pivot from commercial pragmatism to a broader sphere of social influence, systemic critique and reconditioning of the present.

You are involved in design education in The Netherlands, do you see this coming out in the design produced there?

We see the potential for this and attempt to advocate to our students that political design is not about politics but about the critical understanding of your personal position and agency. However, there is an uncomfortable tension between the power of so-called Dutch design and the states of permanent crisis that defines the Global South. In Brazil there is no market value for critical design, and in Europe there are fewer extreme crises to tackle.

What do you mean by the power of Dutch design?

The Netherlands doesn't really have any disasters, at least not on the scale of the rest of the world. Yet the sheer scale of the design infrastructure — the funding, schools, museums, institutions, markets and media exposure — cannot be contained within the borders of this small country.

Is this tension why you have centred your practice across Cape Town and São Paulo in Amsterdam?

In Brazil or South Africa, this design has no inherent value other than it being recognised as coming from aspirational Europe. Yet ironically these are places with many more problematics to be addressed, but the source of the infrastructure and problems are displaced. For us Amsterdam offers access to a cultural infrastructure that facilitates our deeper engagement with critical design.

Any solutions?

Solutions are a European concept. Problems and solutions are constantly changing places based on market value.