IMAGE BY ALENA HALMES

Depatriarchise Design *!Labs!*: Transforming Design Education

Depatriarchise design describes the process of dismantling oppressive structures with which the design discipline is interwoven. It is also the name of our nonprofit research platform, depatriarchise design. Instead of inhabiting one physical space, we inhabit different spaces—both physical and virtual. We like to think about the Internet in terms of *tangible spaces*, with its diverse dimensions and the potential it offers to create safer spaces. The creation of these *safer spaces* has become an incentive behind depatriarchise design as a research platform, moving across territories of practice, using an intersectional feminist lens.

However, the work on the ground is equally important to us. The seam between the digital and physical enables different angles of feminist work. When we discuss the normative of the designed environment and question, for example, how it privileges certain types of bodies while making life hard for others, we point to structural inequalities. This process provokes discomfort among fellow designers, researchers, and other people. By pointing out the oppressive system, suddenly we become the problem—we "kill the joy" by pointing out and challenging racism and sexism. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed writes that living a feminist life, and being a killjoy (a term she uses in her writing), can make us feel very lonely. On the other hand, creating *networks and connections* between designers, researchers, and activists who share similar experiences of struggle within the design field, whether they are based in Buenos Aires, Beirut, or London, has the power to bring mutual support, comprehensive exchange, and immense hope.

Trying to form a connection between our online and offline presence and to stir alternative modes of teaching and practicing design, we initiated depatriarchise design *!Labs!* in 2019 in Basel, which at the same time have a strong online presence. We called them *!Labs!* because each of them is an educational experiment trying to expand and to question the established ways of teaching, learning, producing, and displaying design.

TOP ROW OF IMAGES BY ALENA HALMES

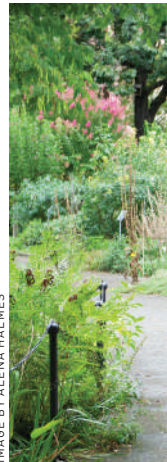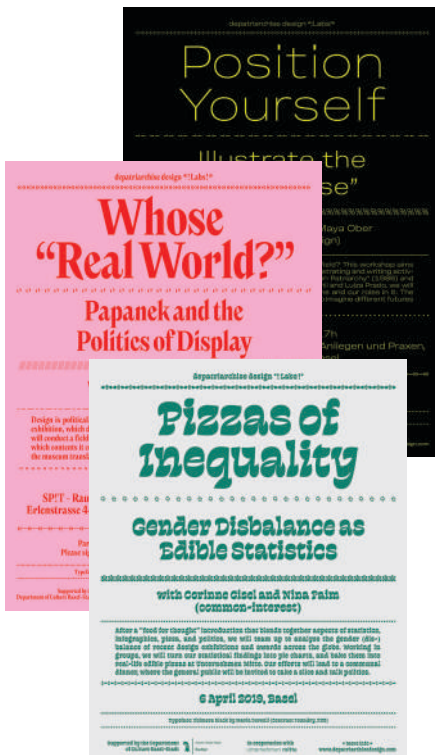**Instead of inhabiting one physical space, we inhabit different spaces—both physical and virtual.**

IMAGE BY ALENA HALMES

→ Posters of depatriarchise design *!Labs!* (visual identity: common-interest).

Design is never neutral. It is influenced by our society and simultaneously it shapes our surroundings—and even us. In our society, there is sexism, racism, homophobia, and many other structures that either privilege or oppress people based on certain aspects like gender, sexual orientation, and skin color. These structures are often (unwillingly) reproduced by design. In the *!Labs!* we deal with these politics of design and artifacts, aiming to bridge theory and practice, and developing hands-on approaches to discuss the societal issues within design practice— all through an intersectional feminist lens. By politics we mean: looking at the power relations within the design field. Who is present? Who is missing? What visual traditions do we celebrate and praise, and what we render invisible? What agendas do we foster?

We are inspired by and built on a pedagogy that was produced by feminists in the course of decades, and our *!Labs!* couldn't come to live without it. They are also spaces for dialogue, personal expressiveness, caring, and unlearning. They are never meant to be finished, but rather form part of a larger process of depatriarchising design. This process means dismantling the oppressive structures with which the design discipline is interwoven.

Depatriarchise design *!Labs!* are about breaking out, deconstructing, assembling, and (re-)constructing collaboratively. They create spaces of joint knowledge production based on our lived experiences. We aim to focus on untold, marginalized stories and to break out of rigid institutions and dominant forms of design education that reinforce our experiences of oppression and privilege.

Our daily design practices might already break dominant norms by just being what they are—the other, not fitting in, or deviating from the norm. This, however, is not always intentional or empowering. The *!Labs!* offer us the possibility to own our otherness and use it in order to shift the discipline toward a more reflected and situated one. *!Labs!* engage in the practice of *making space* for underexplored discourses and identities. Sometimes we read together; sometimes we crack numbers of representation; sometimes we illustrate the otherwise; sometimes we go on a field trip; and sometimes we just spend time listening to our stories. The *!Labs!* offer a space where we can *assemble*, with our experiences, thoughts, ideas, and different perspectives. To bring talented and skilled people together who share the same values and an empowering vision is the first step to collaboratively *constructing* support structures and hands-on tools for our daily design practices.