Luna Maurer on being a designer

June 28, 2017 - Luna Maurer runs the Amsterdam-based design studio Moniker with Roel Wouters. (They founded it in 2012 with Jonathan Puckey.) Moniker "explores the characteristics of technology, how people use it, and how it influences people's daily lives. "They've taught media courses at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, the Sandberg Institute and at Yale University, and they regularly give workshops and lectures around the world. Moniker, together with Edo Paulus, wrote Conditional Design, a manifesto and "experimental playground" that they have said is "based on the notion that designing a logic-based environment within which results take shape are more interesting and fruitful than a directly designed object." They tested these ideas during weekly workshops, which were then posted online. *The Conditional Design Workbook* was published in 2013 by Valiz. Here, Maurer discusses what it means to break down complicated ideas, the importance of having a guiding manifesto, and the difference (or lack thereof) between an artist and a designer.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2566 words.

Tags: Design, Process, Inspiration, Collaboration, Success.

Your firm has a manifesto where you talk about "conditional design." Is this the idea that design keeps evolving—that it's not static?

We try to design environments or frameworks in which a process can take place. We'd rather design conditions or rules that determine the process instead of creating a static end product.

In the manifesto we suggest designing these rules or conditions carefully and with logic. Logic and precision are necessary to be able to crystallize an idea or behavior, otherwise you only get noise.

We also describe the quality of the input for the process. It has to come from "the outside." That could be either nature or human behavior, but it shouldn't be from a computer. A process using generated numbers is not interesting to us. A process based on random numbers would be like a screensaver.

We think it's interesting to use the real world, the dirty world, and feed that into the system. Previously, we also used nature as an input, but now we're more focused on people and their behavior.

You also say you focus more on process than a final product.

Right, we say we focus on the process rather than on the end product. Or you could say the final product is evolving. In fact, the process and the end product is ideally the same thing: a changing and evolving work. It correlates to the time in which we live and to the media that we use. Technology allows us to go beyond the approach of traditional media, where you print a flyer or sheet of paper. We try to make use of technology and especially react to the technology that surrounds us. It's exciting to us to include the audience, or the visitors to the site, in order to create something that's not standing still. It's a truer way to react to the time that we live in.

If a process is ongoing, how do you know when the project's done?

This is difficult, because you could say, "There's not really a moment when it's done." It is also costly for us—some websites are still running, and as long they have visitors, they're valuable or interesting. So, at some point there are formal reasons, that make it end, such as lack of money for hosting or lack of time.

Constraints are an important part of the creative process. When we made these rule-based drawing games on Tuesday evenings at my kitchen table, we did it for two or three hours. Then we stopped even though the drawing could have continued.

Recently we developed a digital campaign for Mozilla, called Paperstorm.it, in which people could drop political leaflets on a satellite map above several landmarks in Europe, like traditional airborne leaflet propaganda. You could let it stay online forever. But we designed an end—we needed the dramaturgy. A moment when it's over.

If a client is trying to get you to approach something in a way that you don't think makes sense, do you point to your manifesto and say, "This goes against our guiding principles." Do you see the manifesto as law to a degree? Or is it looser than that? A manifesto is a written thing, but a manifesto is also the end results themselves.

The manifesto itself is more of a theoretical guideline. But we don't work for every client. We declined a famous pop-star because we didn't like his attitude. Once we're in dialogue with a client, we've never completely disagreed. Since they came to us in the first place, they like our approach.

We wrote the manifesto quite a while ago. We and the world around us have changed over the years. Conditional design started because we were interested in technology: questioning it and its developments. We made works ranging from film to web to performance. We didn't know what kind of designers we were: web designers, filmmakers, performance artists, graphic designers or what? That's why we described our working method and not the medium we were using.

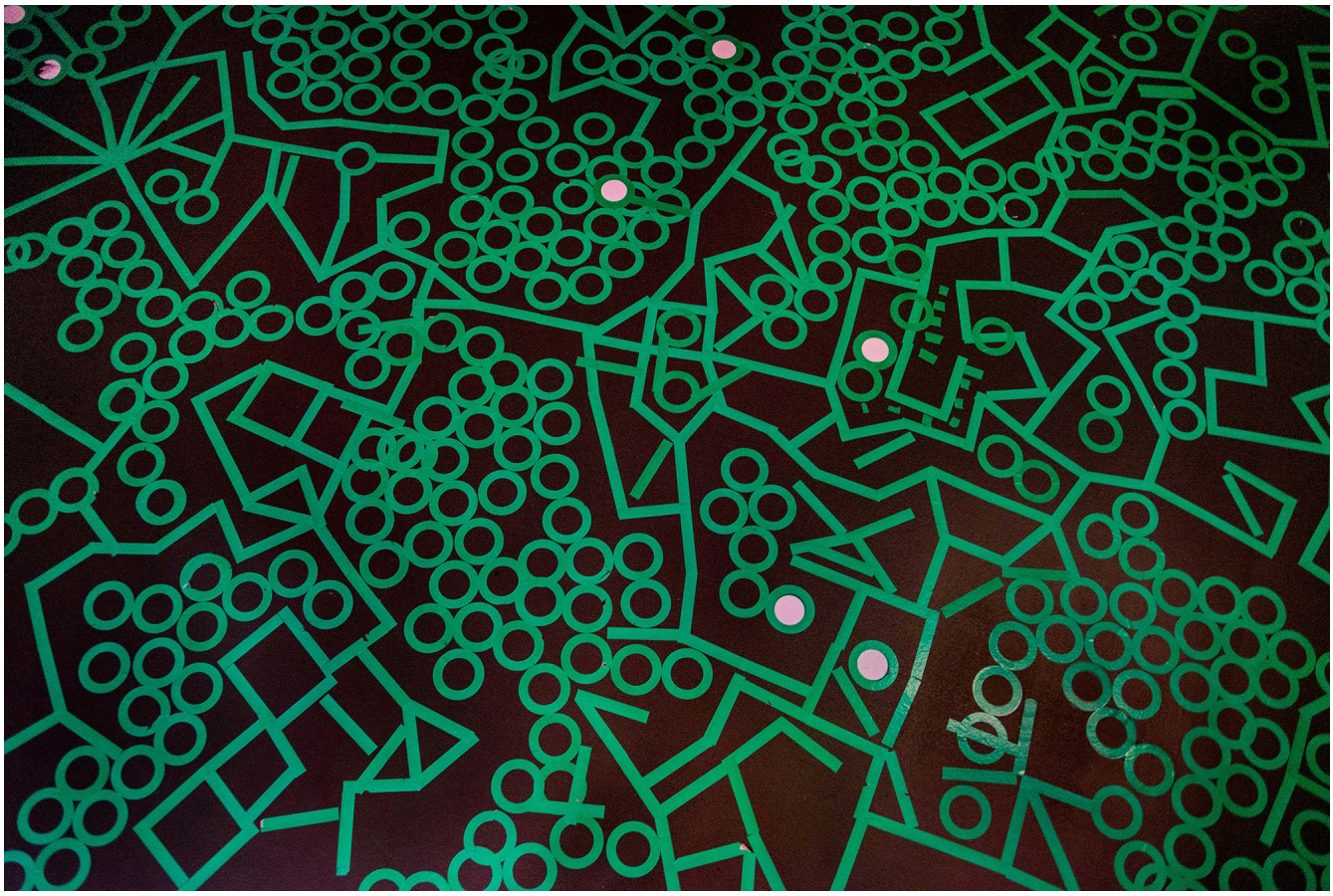
After writing it down, we made various experiments and practiced our freshly written manifesto. But we also do things now that are not in line with it so much. It's tricky to write a manifesto about something that's constantly in change. Also, we are evolving. We've found out new things along the way, and sometimes we prefer to work less rigidly. Now, we sometimes include a bit of narration. Whereas before, the narrative was purely a result of the logic of the rules.

We've talked a lot about process without specifics. Can you talk us through your process?

I can give two examples: "Do Not Touch" is a participatory video where the movement of the mouse pointer gets recorded. You see thousands of little pointers swarming over the screen, trying to respond to various instructions, moving over certain areas: This led to amazing swarm-like patterns that change over time. A clip of this from 2014 is still online at donottouch.org.

Another surprise about this process was that it depicted the regions the clip travelled to during the time it was popular. There were times that it was popular in Africa and then in the Middle East, Europe and America. This project was sort of a homage to the cursor, which is about to disappear with the development of touchscreens.

Another process example would be the "Fungus Series." We did several Fungus projects in museums and galleries. Visitors receive a sticker sheet with four stickers to stick on the floor according to certain rules. Most often a projects lasts three months during an exhibition period. It starts with four stickers and ends with thousands of stickers forming one big pattern, made by thousands of people. The fungus is about participation and how to deal with restrictions. Some people follow the lead laid out by other visitors, some users tweak the game to make their own thing, some groups collaborate to make a design that one person alone would not be able to create.



Mint Fungus, participatory sticker installation, Schunk, Heerlen

You do public workshops and events. You work on projects with people that are not artists, but they can follow your rules and try to make things on their own. It feels like a school in a sense.

After having held all those workshops with the rule-based drawing games we realized that there were quite a lot of interesting principles in there. We decided to produce a book: *The Conditional Design Workbook*. It is a book with instructions and inside knowledge for the public to use and learn from… Surprisingly within no-time it was sold out and is still in demand. It was used in schools or in university courses. For example, Casey Reas used it in his classes to get his students started with algorithmic thinking.

However, not only algorithms, but also co-authorship is a key principle that these drawings are based on, and that is also core to our current work. In general the workplace is becoming more and more cooperative, not only for designers, but for policy makers and managers, too. Our book was a playful entrance to show them how to deal with each other.

Personally, I'm not interested in making a school. We do give workshops. But we turned most requests for conditional design workshops down, because we don't have the capacity. We were asked to start a Master's course on this topic, but we preferred to continue our work in a practical setting. But we still do workshops in the attic of our studio, and we're very free to experiment with ideas and topics that we're interested in right now.

Can you discuss some of the topics you're interested in right now?

Recently, our work has become a little more political. Right now we're interested in making work that has a political connotation. If we can reach so many people online with our work, why not use this for the better good?

A recent work clickclickclick.click was a critical reflection on the fact that all of our online behavior is possibly captured and monetized. As soon as you're on this site, a voice comments on your browsing behavior.

For Mozilla, we made a digital campaign fighting for improvements of the Copyright Law in Europe that are not in line with the way we are using the internet creatively.

Right now we're preparing a project that thematizes the filter bubble we live in and the problematics that are attached to that.

Although these projects have a political message, they're still playful, fun, and work according to our participatory ideas.

You have your studio, and you're part of a collective. What, for you, is the interest in collaboration versus working individually?

I've worked in a fixed collaboration under the name Moniker since 2011. And until a year ago, Moniker consisted of three partners together with Jonathan Puckey. Jonathan left and started his own studio. Now Roel and I are partners—we've known each other since 2002, and we have been working and collaborating for so long that sometimes one has not even to finish a sentence and we already know what the other one is thinking.

I like to collaborate, and I think a work becomes stronger in a collaboration. You can reflect together, and if someone is less involved in a project, they can judge it from a step removed. This is useful because sometimes when you're in the middle of a project, you're not able to see clearly anymore.

The team in the studio are our collaborators. Everybody has their own expertise and character, and continuously contributes to the project in the making. Everybody's role is crucial—designer, developer. We work very close together so we can change and adjust quickly along the way.

We never really collaborate with other designers outside the studio. But what we do all the time is, in fact, collaborate with the rest of the world, by incorporating them into our work. I'm not sure if you would call that collaboration, but without them, we couldn't do it.

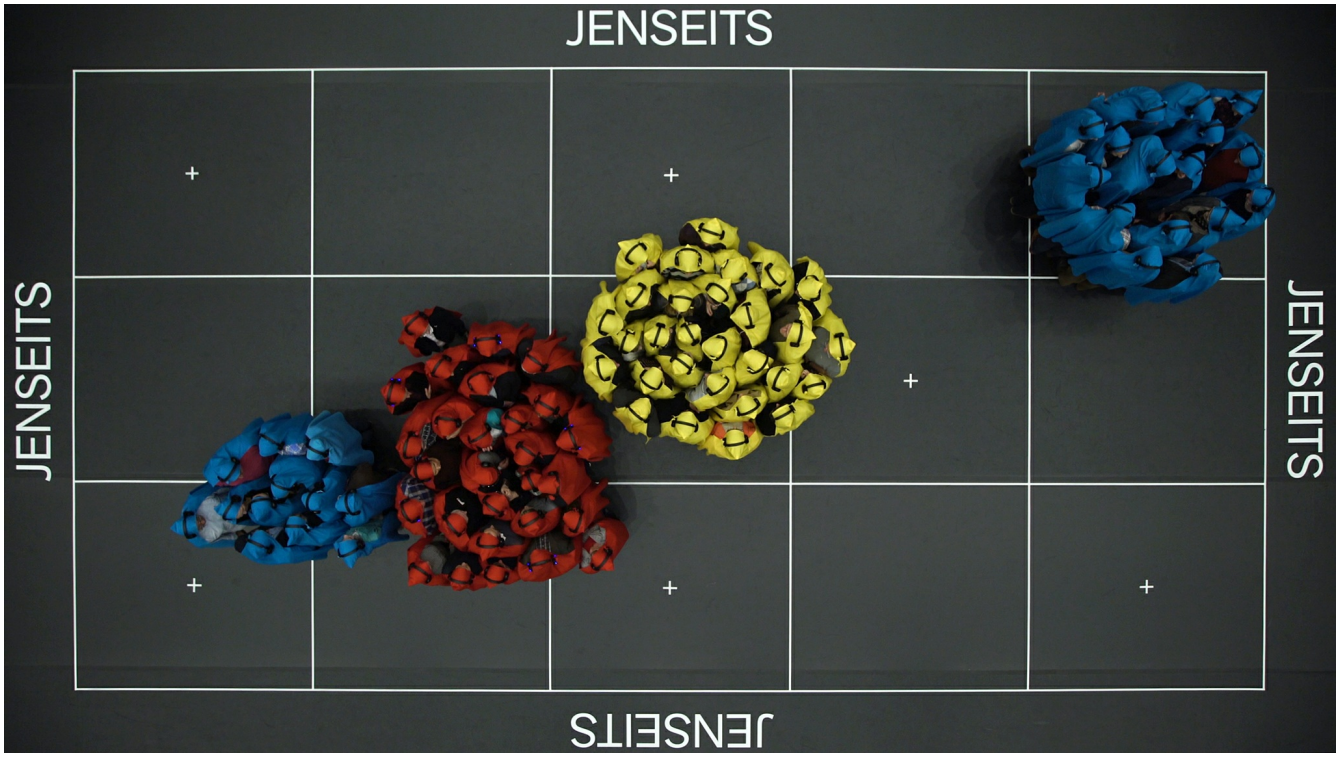
Right before we talked, you sent over something called "Steps to an Ecology of Mind." What made you think of that, and to send it over when you did?

It's a dialogue between a father and his daughter about ideas that we've constructed in our lives and that we need to break them apart into smaller pieces in order to be able to build up new ideas. The father adds that we need rules to make the ideas build up and support each other. Otherwise the building falls down. Logic are the rules.

Then he plays in this conversation with his daughter and calls it a game, since it has rules with the purpose of discovering the rules. Like in life—a game whose purpose it is to discover the rules, while the rules are always changing and can never be discovered.

And it is, I think, a perfect, beautiful, philosophical observation about our life, and how we think. These principles of play are rules as part of our daily life, thinking, and speaking and the same goes for our work, of course.

When you have people participate in environments, you need rules. All the things that we do have rules, or some kind of instructions. We learned that these rules have to be worded very carefully. Because it is so important how somebody perceives something if you give him an instruction.



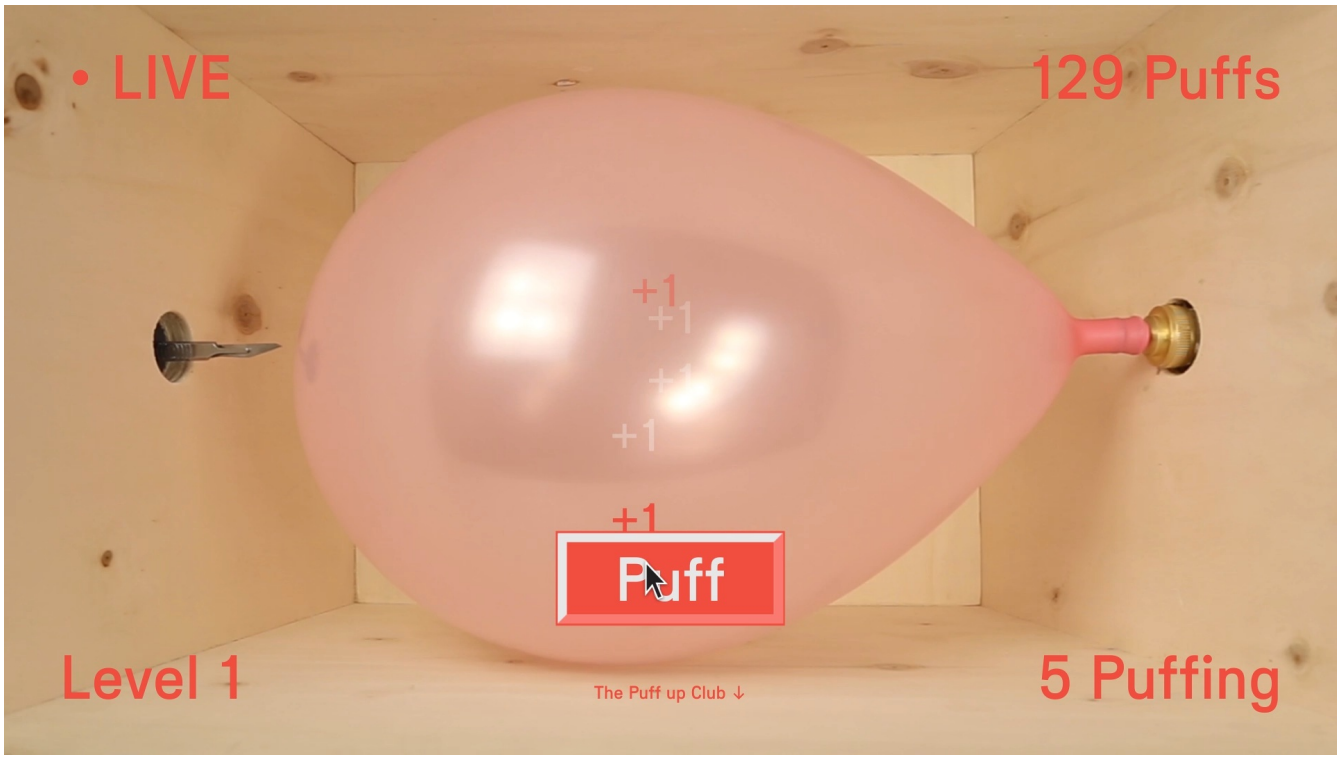
Red Follows Yellow Follows Blue, participatory performance

If you're doing design online, there's a certain limitation to how computers work. Working off the computer, outside the computer, allows you to expand the process, and expand the project.

We like to do things offline, and also combine online and offline. One project was a participatory performance under the title "Red Follows Blue Follows Yellow." That was purely people moving according to instructions that they got through headsets. They were wearing capes in different colors and each color received different instructions… The result were figures and patterns. Without telling them exactly the result what they should make e.g. "Make a circle." We just instructed for example "Red, is attracted by blue, but repelled by yellow," and yellow was said to be attracted to red and repelled by blue, etc. So, automatically certain shapes emerged. That project was completely offline.

We are also interested in is combining the digital and the physical. For example, with "Puff Up Club" you had to blow up a physical balloon, with a mouse click.

A balloon was connected to a compressor and a webcam installed observing the balloon. The balloon was in a box opposing a sharp knife. Visitors of the site saw the balloon slowly puffing up towards the knife. By clicking the button they could collaboratively puff up the balloon until it exploded.



Puff Up Club, online campaign

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success? How do you define failure?

A work can be considered successful if it goes viral. It's always nice, if you get thousands or even millions of participants. But it doesn't have to go viral to be successful. If we had a good process, and if we like the work, then we consider it successful. A project that's designed for a big crowd and that doesn't reach them, would be a failure. But we learn from every project. If it had less visitors than expected, we try to analyze what the reasons are and improve it the next time.

Do you see artists and designers as the same thing? Or do you see them as something separate?

To me, they're the same thing. I find it funny to see that sometimes we're promoted as artists, and sometimes we're promoted as designers. It depends on what framework you're operating in and how it's best for the people that pay the money. So it's a bit of a game. I don't think there's a big difference. As a designer you ideally have a strong vision about what you want to tell to the world, and you incorporate that into your practice. That's why we do things the way we do, and they're not different every time. There might be some commissions with different starting points, but the overall mentality is always in there, and that's why they come to us. A good designer is an artist.

Do you think an artist is also a designer?

I'm sure there are artists that would not like to solve problems for somebody else. Something that we really like. So it goes one way, not necessarily the other way.

"List of phenomena or ideas that I think are interesting all revolving around 'simple rules and complex outcomes'" by Luna Maurer:

Cellular automata: e.g Convey's game of life
Complexity: Emergent behavior
Collective behavior / behavior of crowds
Self organizing principles (e.g. swarms)
Occam's razor:
The Principle of Plurality - Plurality should not be posited without necessity
The Principle of Parsimony - It is pointless to do with more what is done with less

Name
Luna Maurer

Vocation
Designer

Fact

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