Verena Wieser:
Usability versus Design – a Contradiction? Theory and Practice of Web Site Development.

This thesis deals with the issues of Web design in theory and in practice. In particular, it focuses on the controversy between Web-usability-experts and Web designers, which has been dominating the field for years, and analyses the theoretical and practical manifestations of the two different positions. In the main, this thesis intends to help Web site developers avoid one-sided Web presentations by discussing approaches for balancing aesthetic aspects with functionality and ease of use.

In a short introduction, the history and the development of the World Wide Web is lined out, followed by a summary of the technical background of Web design. These comments show that the conflict between aesthetics and usability was caused by the fact that HTML (Hypertext Markup Language), the language for the construction of Web sites, had originally been developed only to mark up (textual) information homogeneously in order to deliver them via a network and to finally make them universally retrievable, i.e. on any computer platform and with any kind of operating system. Very soon, however, designers discovered the Web as a creative means of expression. They demanded new and better typographic design possibilities and more options for the integration of different media elements, which were duly implemented by the browser developers in quick succession. As a consequence, the controversy between supporters of innovative and aesthetically pleasing Web design and supporters of the highest possible accessibility and usability of Web sites has been predominant in the discourse of Web site development for some years now.

The theoretical part of the thesis analyses the two opposing attitudes in Web development. Initially, several different definitions of the term "usability" are discussed, followed by an analysis of the design prescriptions and tips Web usability experts establish in their publications. Primarily, they demand the concentration on the wants and needs of the (prospective) users of a site. This basic requirement entails more specific demands like unpretentious, text based sites with few graphics for quick orientation and small download times, the rejection of newer technologies like Flash or Shockwave, which require a special plug-in, and the demand for the observance of established standards like the left-hand navigation bar or blue and underlined text links. The comparison of their statements on several specific design elements and criteria results in the development of a catalogue of design rules of Web usability, which is used as a basis for the analysis of sites in the practical part of the thesis.

The second chapter of the theoretical part presents the position of Web designers. In contrast to Web usability experts, they set great store by a creative, state-of-the-art design of their sites and prioritize aesthetic aspects. The use of new technologies, innovative navigation tools and a sophisticated (typo)graphic presentation of the site are some of the demands designers make on Web design. In the extreme, this attitude can result in calls for a different conception of the medium, like Zelko Wiener's and Ursula Hentschläger's demand for the "audio-visuelles Gesamtereignis" ("integrated

audio-visual event") that is freed from traditional text-based structures and menus for navigation and integrates multimedia, dynamic interaction and dramatic staging.

In the third point of the theoretical part investigations and approaches to the integration of both claims are presented. The discussion of "form versus function" is well known in disciplines like architecture, industrial design and typography. Some Web site developers have already realized that Web design must be understood as a balance between usability and aesthetics, and that the dominance of one of those aspects should strongly depend on the kind of site they are building. An artist's portfolio, for example, or an entertainment site for teenagers can be designed in a much more unconventional way and with a stronger focus on aesthetic aspects than the platform for an online shop or a site with scientific information, which above all demand that users can quickly and easily reach their goal(s).

In the practical part of the thesis, several Web sites are analysed and judged in terms of their pertinence according to the criteria established in the theoretical part. This analysis consists of three sections, each of which looks at examples of one of the three previously identified groups of Web site developers, namely sites by usability experts, sites by designers and sites by developers who try to unify both usability requirements and aesthetic concerns. The thesis closes with the implications from the results of both the theoretical and the practical analysis for a design of Web presentations which is optimally adjusted to the special demands of the new medium and to the specific genre of a site.