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DASEIN AS DESIGN
Or: Must Design Save the World?

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ABSTRACT

Creativity moves from the exclusive domain of the designer into the space between disciplines and between producer and consumer. A new form of design is needed, i.e. relational design. Relational design has to focus on relationships and responsibilities instead of a focus on the individual. Relational design gives us then the opportunity to go beyond hyperconsumerism and individualism.

Key Words:
•*Design* •*Dasein* •*Relational design* •*Modernity* •*Inter-esse* •*Intermediality* •*Craftsmanship and life art* •*Sustainability* •*Ecopolitics* •*Design culture.*

How intelligent can design be? And how encompassing? In *False Flat*, Aaron Betsky and Adam Eeuwens sketch the design landscape as it has unfolded in the Netherlands over the past few decades. With its gesamtkunstwerk, the Netherlands is giving the gods a run for their money.[2] In this Darwin year, 'intelligent design' calls forth other images. After all, the loftiest thing design is capable of doing is creating a new world. The most intelligent kind of design of all dominated the debates just five years ago, with God the Great Designer as the theological zenith. With even the

prominent Dutch 'evangelical' TV host Andries Knevel expressing his doubts about creation, this variant of design has come under pressure. The legitimacy of the theological position that there must be a designer behind life's brilliant complexity is certainly disputable, and yet it shares a structural characteristic with its less pretentious competitors: every design aims to be complete in itself and therefore to be a symbol of unity and perfection. Imperfection is a sign of decline.

Karlheinz Stockhausen showed how far the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk could be stretched when he characterised the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center towers as the biggest gesamtkunstwerk of all time: it represented a catastrophic collision of survival art and geopolitics. Global society's wish for political control was fulfilled in a radical reversal of the creative gesture: the creative destruction of the existing world order. Creative, because a piece of industrial design, an airliner, was deployed as the weapon of destruction. With this fatal gesture, the dream of modern artists like Stockhausen was made reality. Afterward, the world was fundamentally changed.

We can look down on this in politically correct condemnation or laugh dismissively. But can we do the same with the secular counterpart of that radical jihadist gesture: western consumer society's disastrous everydayness? Today, virtually the entire scientific community agrees that present-day climate change is caused by the uncritical overconsumption of natural resources. Instead of the bread of charity, we eat thousand-grain loaves. Though at the dawn of industrialisation there may have been such a thing as primary needs, and it was the job of mass production to ease the desperation of the needy, the homeless and the sick; today, however, with increased everyday comfort and intensified transport, communication and leisure activity, the satisfaction of primary needs has been replaced by the consumption of design. Design has become a basic need.

Through design's brief history – about 150 years – its critical self-definition has repeatedly returned to the same themes: the role of craft in design, design's ambiguous relationship to art and the avant-garde, and the designer's social and ethical responsibility. The latter is perhaps the chief value characterising Dutch design culture.[3] These debates are paradigmatic, indicating the great changes that design has undergone since the guild system ended in 1798. The applied arts, trade schools (1871), and art education derived their power from the critical ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris, the founder of the British Arts and Crafts movement. After that, designers went in search of their own plastic and flexible language of forms,

a kind of 3D visual syntax. Though their search was initially founded on values of craftsmanship, they eventually grudgingly accepted industrial values.

The second wave of design arose in the 1960s. By linking itself to the visual language of the mass media, design became a story. Semiotics is concerned with the sign value of products. They take on symbolic capital. Hence, design need not be useful to be functional. It works outstandingly as a status object however useless it might be. In his theory of distinction, Bourdieu shows how cultural consumers use cultural products to distinguish themselves within groups of like minds. But these minds must be like, or else they will not value all the tiny fluctuations in quality. In the second degree functional and technically or technologically state-of-the-art, products constitute cultural capital that is invested in a unique lifestyle. In short, grammar and syntax – the play of forms – are supplemented by a semantics, with status-raising significance.

Design's third phase appeared in the mid-1990s. With the digital revolution, interactivity, as an exchange between designers and users, became an issue. Technologically, PCs and Macs made it possible. Ideologically, the demand for more democracy and transparency strengthened the process. Designers have responded to users' need to be creative. This pragmatic programming has facilitated social interaction. As fine artists' work becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, designers, paradoxically enough, are becoming increasingly autonomous in their mediatory role. Creativity is moving out of the designer's inner world and into the space between disciplines and between the producer and the consumer. Not within them, but between them. In debates about the 'end of art', we hear terms like 'crossover', 'interdisciplinarity', 'multimedia' and 'interactivity'. But conceptuality and reflexivity, too, are embedded in this debate. Over a century, there has been a shift from form via content to context, from syntax via semantics to pragmatics – from "How does it look?" via "What does it mean to me?" to "How does it work between us?"

In the current epoch, the convergence of these three structural tendencies is accelerating a new paradigm shift, a discursive turn, in design. Not only is the way we think about design changing, so too are design practice and the social role of design. The various disciplines within the vast spectrum of activities that make up design culture are moving onto a more integral plane. A survey of this diversity of shifts suffices to sketch a picture of this new turn. What is appearing – as yet in a diffuse way – is what I call relational design. It breaks away from the monomaniacal,

hyperindividualistic ideology within speculative ADHD capitalism that launches every gadget as an ego document and covetable item and – as my use of the term indicates – suffers from an attention deficit.

Dasein and Design

Daily life is thoroughly designed. For designers, this statement is as flattering as it is problematic. It is flattering because it reflects design's smashing success. It is problematic because designers' role as innovators seems to be played out. They are disappearing as mediators in the networked society. When everyone is a designer and Dasein has become 100 percent design, the designer is everywhere and nowhere.

Human Life as Thrown Design

The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is the rector of Germany's University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe. Sloterdijk, borrowing from Martin Heidegger, refers to the lives of individuals as Dasein: being-in-the-world. He shows how this is transforming to being-in-the-media. Dasein is never a closed capsule – a cogito – but rather situated existence. Authentic Dasein is an unceasing attempt to give a decisive turn to our state of thrownness in the world by moving together to design a society. Design, then, equates to making decisions about form in order to liberate ourselves from the arbitrariness of life. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, we can see this as a throw of the dice on the table of the gods. We must *ont-werpen* our lives [the Dutch word for 'design' can also be read as 'un-throw' – Tr.]. The etymology refers to making order out of chaos. The English word 'design' also contains echoes of sketching and marking out. Thrownness-unthrowing: there you have the human condition.

In his recent *Sphären* trilogy, Sloterdijk presents design as the crux of a different way of looking at and engaging with the world. He is not afraid to call Nietzscheanism a revaluation of all values. The principle of recycled scarcity no longer obtains; instead, the principle of abundance is the starting point for thought and action. Over the last two centuries, the modern concept of scarcity has been turned inside out, as have those of freedom and autonomy. Once, freedom meant independent self-determination; nowadays, it means claiming the right to limitless mobility and the festive wasting of energy.[4] Media are essential in this. We depend on them. Westerners live in a world of too much. Shopping and consuming are our

biopolitical duties as citizens, to which we are called in times of emergency such as terror attacks and credit crises. Go forth and buy! As McLuhan put it in 1964, the medium is the message. In everyday life, the decision to buy an item is driven more by fear and the need for identity than by inter-esse and belonging. Every Dasein is styled through the consumption of design. Without design, Dasein is meaningless.

The Paradox of Modernity: Scarcity in Abundance

Shopping is addictive. In the field of addiction care, craving is a key concept. ADHD capitalism systematically maintains craving by producing scarcity in abundance. Immersed in comfort, we usually do not notice. There may be no real shortage, but we still feel shorted if we are unable to buy the newest of the new. The lifespan of products keeps getting shorter. How can we understand this abundant scarcity?

Deyan Sudjic, director of London's Design Museum, laments the rubbish we are saddled with on this earth. After his earlier critical study of the imperial urges of architects who view their designs as gesamtkunstwerk, in *The Language of Things* Sudjic describes our contemporary urge to consume in an extremely graphic way: "Like geese force-fed grain until their livers explode, to make foie gras, we are a generation born to consume. Geese panic at the approach of the man with the metal funnel ready to be rammed forcibly down their throats, while we fight for a turn at the trough that provides us with the never-ending deluge of objects that constitute our world."[5]

Strangely enough, this hyperconsumerism is inspired by the idea of scarcity. The concept of scarcity arose in the sixteenth century at the same time as the ideal of equality. Suddenly, the other was someone you might be, and he had something you might have. You could rise in the world. This goes right to the heart of our democratic consciousness. The future is suddenly cast in the light of a possibility experienced in a dual way: as a right and as a lack. Under hyperconsumerism, product design positions itself precisely at the threshold between abundance and scarcity. Though in practice the discipline depends on abundance (mass production), ideologically it feeds on scarcity (uniqueness).

According to Sloterdijk, this reflexive consciousness of abundance can only be achieved aesthetically. If we see ourselves as viewers in a big open-air museum with no exit, the sphere we live in easily becomes visible. Reflection requires aesthetic distance, and modern art granted us this. The design of

products, houses, public space, cities, and finally all of the Netherlands intensifies this aesthetic sensibility; see Aaron Betsky. Although this awareness quickly evaporates in our consumption of pure comfort, for Sloterdijk reflectivity and luxury are still inextricably linked.

Design as a Relationship

The global living sphere is a dynamic superinstallation in which we walk around as both visitors and viewers and stage our lives as both actors and directors. According to Sloterdijk, as a sphere, the globe is a super-greenhouse, like the Crystal Palace built for the 1851 London world exposition. If Joseph Beuys' social sculpture is dated and the modern project of the gesamtkunstwerk has been brought into discredit by totalitarian experiments, Sloterdijk positions his superinstallation firmly in the tradition of these artistic practices. Neighbourhood, city, world – together, all these scales of publicness and publicity make up a layered gallery with no exit. The spaces between are not vacuums; they pulse with designed interactions and transactions.

But who is responsible for this complex intelligent design? Sloterdijk argues that responsibility is in fact less a moral concept than an ontological – or, rather, a "technorelational" one.[6] Ontological – that is, particular to things as they are. This being-in-the-world, this existence or Dasein, is thus relational. We are inclined to interpret 'technorelational' in a therapeutic way. I myself see it more as a psycho-technological quality – because the most pressing responsibilities lie with our technologies. In their ubiquity, they give account of our relationships. We account for ourselves via the media that surround and connect us, from automobiles to mobile phones. How reflexive is this relationship?

This view exceeds a simplistic, purely instrumental understanding of media. Media have long since ceased to be things that we have made ourselves and are thus totally under our control. Media create their own worlds, and we learn to live in them. They are changing from form/function into content/message. TV has changed from an information medium into a pleasurable substance and finally into a necessary resource. The mobile phone is not solely a communication and information medium; it too is a necessary resource. The medium is indeed the message. But the media are not merely packaging, nor are they pure format. In all their ubiquity, the media are a discourse. Media society is our environment, the space in which we act. There, Dasein is becoming design without us realising it. The idea that

there is still an outside no longer even occurs to us, because to be outside is to be logged out, unlinked, offline. It means being psycho-technologically alone or existentially detached.

Relational Philosophy: From Radical Mediocrity to Inter-esse

I call this non-reflective embedment radical mediocrity.[7] Like responsibility, I look at radical mediocrity in a psycho-technological way. It is not an anti-bourgeois curse aimed at the aesthetico-politically challenged. Radical mediocrity sums up how everyday life, with its hectic rhythm and its excessive measure of media and mediums, is subject to a literal medium tempo. Media render our environment transparent. Media are self-evident; their message is often empty. This mediocrity is radical because these media – headphones, handsfree, car GPS systems – interlock in such a way that they fix us in the world: 'radix' means 'root'. Who could manage without their car, PC, mobile or GPS these days?

McLuhan's other slogan "The medium is the massage" pointed in advance to the frictionlessness of existence as propagated by Bill Gates. Today, we are massaged into the system in extreme comfort. Precisely because of this familiar comfort, radical mediocrity feels like second nature, like a bespoke suit. Media have finally become basic needs. Scarcity is reproduced through the systematic creation of new needs. And thus, in a world of abundance, we acquire a constricted self-image of ourselves as imperfect beings who have limited means at their disposal and must distribute finite resources as efficiently as possible. There can be no fair distribution. With our demands for our self-evident rights frustrated, in this culture of lack, victimhood prevails in the form of a claim culture. There is no such thing as living together. One is either staying alive or living it up.

Once we gain sight of our radical mediocrity, we perceive the abundance with which we surround ourselves. There is an exponential increase in relations. Media situate us vis-à-vis each other, forming a dynamic midfield, a creative in-between. It is creative because once we obtain a medium, it generates many more use values, and we must explore them all. The self-reflective consciousness of this being-in-between is the lining, the interior, of a routine, unreflected, radically mediocre life: being-in-between as inter-esse.

This relational philosophy undermines the ideology of hyperindividualism and identity thinking. Like scarcity, the autonomous individual is an ideological construct. The philosophers Gilles Deleuze and

Michel Foucault painstakingly dismantle it, showing how an individual is always a 'we' first, a plural, and an 'I' only second. We are always 'dividuals' first – think, a bit sadly, of dividends as a form of profit-sharing – and only then 'individuals' – those who do not get a share. An individual body is a woven fabric, with the daily routine as the warp and media as the weft. As a texture, an individual is an assembled desiring machine that attains coherence through a network of meanings – a discourse. In this way, bodies are disciplined from cradle to grave, from neonatal care to the old-age home. The emotional life of the individual is measured off and custom-cut.

Until the mid-twentieth century, argues Foucault, discipline took place mainly in the family, the school and the workplace under the supervision of church and state. Bodily excess was channelled into self-discipline, burned off in mass events or resocialised in clinics and prisons. Town planning and architecture are crucial to this discipline. Architects do not design volumes ringed by brick or concrete walls: they produce relational networks and construct collective consciousness.

With the introduction of the urge to consume and the blowing up of traditional bastions of power and authority in the 1960s, normalisation became the job of the market. Even youth was marketed. Excess and abundance were externalised as market values. Scarcity established itself as a deficient lifestyle and was internalised as always-unfulfilled desire. Thus, discipline gradually shifted from private spaces – the soul, the home – to public places and the public domain. Excesses were regulated by the market. Today, surveillance is also accomplished through media, from cameras to mobile phones. Spies are no longer necessary when subjects – i.e., mobile users – inform on themselves via their phoning and emailing behaviour. In law enforcement jargon, this is called 'nodal policing'.

Our desires are driven in the same ultra-diffuse, affective manner. Vance Packard wrote about 'hidden persuaders' in the 1950s. Affect – love and hate, pleasure and pain, hope and fear, to name a few – often has more of an impact on buying than rationality does. We are affected by something, or it makes us uncomfortable. The accompanying emotions are crucial to the choices we make. In *Emotional Design* (2004), the cognitive scientist Don Norman argues that design products influence us in three ways: we react out of deep-seated affect (viscerally), with an eye toward comfort (behaviourally), and reflectively. This division maps onto the parts of the brain: the stem, limbic system and neocortex. The first part has to do with the feelgood aspect; the second values efficiency of use; and reflection is where design helps to determine status. "We are all designers,"[8] Norman concludes.

And according to him, design is relational by definition.

Individuals are nodes in a network. We are connected to each other through media that, once they constitute our environment, divide the in-between space in which we stand in relation to each other. The design of this 'inter' is not only central for Sloterdijk and the aforementioned French thinkers, it also forms the crux of Hannah Arendt's work, as 'inter-esse'. In a recent book by one of her former students, the sociologist Richard Sennett, this inter-esse is expressed in a value extremely relevant to designers: craftsmanship.

Avant-Garde Art: Gesamtkunstwerk and Intermediality

But during design's first wave, when designers working in a premodern craft tradition reflected their creative and useful labour in avant-garde practices, was there then none of this in-between, no relationality? The emphasis on the autonomy of the artist left little space for it. The artistic lifestyle of the misunderstood genius autonomously creating things in tormented solitude was one big gesamtkunstwerk. In the early twentieth-century setting, we find successful attempts at it: Kurt Schwitters and his Merzbau, the artistic lives of Marcel Duchamp and Dalí, and after the Second World War, Beuys and Warhol. In a more contemporary setting, we see the efforts of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Peter Greenaway and Rem Koolhaas – and I would bet that many creative people can recognise it in themselves. Design, as a formal experiment, rubs against the avant-garde; ultimately, life is every designer's scope.

Gesamtkunstwerk and Intermediality

The Gesamtkunstwerk as a life aesthetic has politico-economic variants – lifestyle and house style. But it also has politico-aesthetic variants: Arts and Crafts, the Wiener Werkstätte, the Bauhaus, and Berlage's community art. Here, the effort continued as the *Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* – Harald Szeemann's term for the irresistible need to give everything consistent politico-aesthetic meaning from a single perspective. This politico-aesthetic discourse was elaborated in prewar magazines like *Wendingen* and *De Stijl*. The guiding notion was one of good design for a better world.[9] Politics and aesthetics came together in the deep-seated hunch that beautifully designed

objects and environments appealed to the good in human beings. And clinical neurophysiological research does indeed show that in pleasant environments people behave more openly and creatively.

But reality was more robust. Architects like Berlage in Amsterdam and Oud in Rotterdam tried to bring art and closer together via architecture. In this way, they hoped to boost the citizen-workers' self-reflection and cultural consciousness. Van Doesburg painted austere ornamental patterns in the living rooms of tower blocks in Spangen, a working-class district of Rotterdam; Oud set the windows high up in the hope that residents would focus more on the interior than the exterior. The first things they did, however, were to build platforms under the windows so they could lean out and communicate, and paint or wallpaper over the decoration. Evidently they were driven by a different kind of *Gesamt*-urge.

Craftsman designers took part in the *Gesamt*-discourse along with architects and artists. Industrial entrepreneurs and engineers only joined in after 1925. And consumers were not invited to the table until the second half of the twentieth century. But despite the interdisciplinarity and interactivity that were influential by then, the creative individual still stood pontifically at the centre of design processes – with the architect as absolute ruler. If, however, as we look back at previous paradigms we shift our attention from creative individuals to collaborative disciplines, we find that the primacy of relationality continues to exert influence. A failed gesamtkunstwerk is highly instructive in understanding this: the interdisciplinary experiment is more enduring than the totalitarian project. A failed gesamtkunstwerk is an inventive interdisciplinary multimedia experiment. The failure of the gesamtkunstwerk releases the binding force – the relational, the between or 'inter'. In the 1990s, collaboration between disciplines – interdisciplinarity – cross-pollination between artistic and technological media – multimedia – and the attempt to style products and 'prosumers' together – interactivity – generated an international art-theoretical discourse on the role of the 'between'. Using the term 'intermediality', people studied the extent to which interdisciplinarity, multimedia and interactivity had defined the avant-garde. New concepts like media reflectivity and media sensibility were launched, the better to examine how media and mediums determined image and behaviour.[10]

The End of Art, the End of Design?

Still, designers' flirtation with avant-garde art remains problematic.

Things seem to work more smoothly the other way around. Joep van Lieshout – or rather the collective Atelier Van Lieshout – adds functionality to art objects. This feels less unfamiliar than the removal of functionality from design products. Unless, that is, it is done as radically as it is at Studio Job, which deems beauty to be the object's sole function and self-expression the supreme goal. Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel want only to be curators of their own ideas.

The position of the showpieces made by Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey for Royal Tichelaar Makkum is less clear. The basic idea is craftsmanship using local materials and production methods. Tichelaar's considerations echo Berlage's criticism of the Arts and Crafts company of the Hague in 1902. In his furniture designs for the firm 't Binnenhuis, Berlage insisted on using only indigenous Dutch oak. He also demanded that the joins in the woodwork remain visible. This formally experimental and medially reflective gesture was also perhaps a nod to the political importance that he then still attached to transparent relations.

Are Jongerius and Bey's costly showpieces in the tradition of the work of artists like Duchamp and Koons or in that of Berlage, Rietveld and Bauhaus? If they're shooting for the artistic tradition, they have a problem: after post-, neo- and retro-avant-garde, modern art has now met its end. After all, 'the end of art', pronounced by Arthur Danto, means little more than that the modern discourse around art has been exhausted. Yet this amounts to more than placing the shoe on the other foot, or dressing things up in another wrapper. It says something about the legitimacy of art in our society. Now that everything has been aestheticised, what role can art still play? Let me answer this question using Damien Hirst's most recent works.

The Golden Calf, a piece from 2008, went directly to Sotheby's, where it sold to a private investor for the equivalent of a cool £10.3 million. *For the Love of God*, a platinum cast of a human skull set with 8,601 diamonds, took the same path. Hirst hereby withdrew his work from public debate, and despite the £50-million offer he said he had the received, no increase in artistic value took place. The work's uniqueness is absolute, because it can no longer be criticised. It circulates in a closed circuit, from studio to auction house to safe. Art, kitsch and commerce rub together, chuckling gleefully. If contemporary designers mirror this short-circuited uniqueness in an attempt to increase their own artistic value, they will unfortunately be missing the point. Design can at most be art, because contemporary art has become design.

There is another option, though. When, on a rare occasion, Hirst's work

was vouchsafed to the semi-public space of the museum, the viewers' verdict was: nice craftsmanship, but is it art? Craftsmanship, the quality that Tichelaar is so proud of, is now being recognised in art – as useless handiwork, it gives the design showpieces a run for their money. But does the end of art also herald the end of design? Or is this craftsmanship not precisely the criterion that unites the two, in their embedment in life?

Japan: Imperfection, Craftsmanship and Life Art

I will try another angle of approach. Hirst's skull is perfect. This statement is an ambiguous one. Perfection annihilates time, because decay is airbrushed away. Perfection evokes immutability, eternity, immortality. Yet Hirst explains his work – as if it was a seventeenth-century vanitas painting – with a reference to imperfection: it is supposed to remind viewers of the transitoriness of life. In my opinion, however, this imperfection comes to the fore more convincingly in his cross-sectioned cows and sheep.

But in the cosmetic ideology that rules the West, the thought of imperfection is impermissible. Anything wrinkled, dented, torn or stained is mercilessly set out with the rubbish to be replaced with a new one, or better still, the latest model. The shelf life of products is getting shorter and shorter, the mountains of rubbish higher and higher. This undoubtedly has to do with our mental relationship to death and mortality.

The gold versions of Philippe Starck's famous Juicy Salif lemon juicer – seen in the Hyundai car adverts – are also perfect. You cannot use them; otherwise the gold plating would be damaged by the citric acid. In complete agreement with the second design paradigm, Starck elevates his product's function to a different plane: "My juicer is not meant to squeeze lemons; it is meant to start conversations."[11] The juicer remains functional as a provoker of discourse.

Imperfection: Wabi-sabi

There are cultures in which design and imperfection are more tolerant of each other. In Japan, design relates not to the avant-garde but to life as art, to the arts of life. Pouring a cup of tea for your guests with egoless attention on a rainy Sunday afternoon may not be the first example we would think of, and yet it gives an idea of what design is about: paying concentrated attention to qualitative relations. Every product has a performance; each everyday object has its ritual. Even in Bourdieu's distinction, the embellishment of lifestyle is

relationally motivated.

Some Dutch and Belgian designers consciously work with imperfection in their concepts and designs: think of Piet Hein Eek's pieces of furniture made from scrap wood; Maarten Baas's burnt ones, in which imperfection is deliberately created; and the Belgian fashion designer Martin Margiela's rotting garments. Perhaps these designs evoke what traditional Japanese aesthetics refers to as *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi* is a sensitivity to materials that have been affected by the passage of time, to longterm deterioration, and *sabi* is a slight sadness and melancholy. But the professional, craftsmanlike use of simple materials is a sign of handicraft more than manipulation. Japanese art makes palpable the tension between the temporary and the eternal, between appearance and reality, between life and death. The fleetingness of beauty provokes a nostalgic reverie about the brevity of existence. Aesthetics and spirituality merge in Japan. It's all about detachment in attachment.

It is thus not about grandeur but *utsukushisa*: beauty. Sublimity in the western romantic sense of the word is nowhere to be found, as the star designer Philippe Starck discovered. Many Japanese could not accept the arty object he placed on the roof of the Asahi beer headquarters in Tokyo: the 'golden flame'. Western design freaks will immediately recognise this three-ton metallic object, which resembles a golden droplet lying on its side, as a Starck icon. But the average Japanese knows it merely as the 'shit building' – to them, the object looks like a manga cartoon turd.

Craftsmanship and Life Art: Measure and Proportionality

Who is responsible for this design? A controversy-oriented designer like Starck does not permit his public to call him to account. But can a medium call its maker to account? Does the painter respect his paint? Responsibility seems to me to be a hallmark of craftsmanship. Autonomy and uniqueness have no place in Japanese aesthetics and reception, but skill and sensitivity are central. Devotion to form – *kata* in Japanese, as the judoka among you will know – goes hand in hand with the accurate judgment of the scale at which the product establishes relations. Life is related to design as nature is to art. But to the Japanese, nature is revealed precisely in cultivation. Naturalness is associated with expertly measured proportionality. A bonsai tree is more natural than a 'wild' one. No romantic idea of a pre-existing natural order, a paradise, exists. Life is styling. Lifestyle is turned into life art through expert styling. An individual life is part of a larger whole. A product connects on all

sides. It is not the expression of individual autonomy that takes precedence in a product but the harmony of the group.

Is this true for top contemporary designers? Against this background, the concept introduced by Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison in *Super Normal: Sensations of the Ordinary* takes on a deeper meaning.[12] Like Sudjic, the two designers are uneasy about the amount of junk being produced. They select 210 existing design archetypes and characterise them as "super normal". As "sensations of the ordinary", they write, these products intuitively feel very natural. They expose the beauty in normalcy. "Beauty can refer to form or shape," they write, "but in this case we're thinking in terms of the beauty of the relationship between people, the environment, and circumstances."[13]

The Ambiguity of the Gift

The Japanese professional awareness of quality is the inspiration for existentially based spirituo-aesthetic design. In contrast to providing Bourdieuian distinction, these products confirm the fundamental connectedness of everything around them. Design is a gift you give your relations, and, as such, always accompaned by a performance. This is demonstrated in the tradition of wrapping and giving gifts, which is still alive and well in Japan. Inside the expert wrapping lies not only your relationship but also the object's soul, according to Shintoism. The wrapping, though, is not the message. The biggest message of all is attunement to the coherence of the relational field, the network, your environment. A gift establishes or confirms a relationship. The Japanese give gifts en masse in December and July, respectively on New Year's Eve and All Souls' Day – the Bon festival. But the gift is ambiguous: it is both present and poison.[14] This is because it has to have the correct proportions, be of the right size. The gesture must be 'interested' – attuned to the relationship. If the gift is out of proportion, the receiver is burdened with the duty of giving back something equivalent. And this throws everything off balance.

Relational Design and Politics

OK, it's true that Japan is a whole different society. In an attempt to diminish the mountain of packaging waste, for a few years the government has been waging a campaign to reintroduce the traditional carrying cloth, the *mottainai furoshiki*, in which anything can be wrapped. Whole villages are

trying to reorient themselves in an ecological manner. And yet Japan is steeped in western values. Conversely, the West is developing a slight allergy to the valuelessness of hyperindividualism. For example, what is the meaning of 'corporate responsibility' these days? The excesses recently uncovered in the banking and insurance world have nothing to do with responsibility. In the self-confident life, everything revolves around accountability. I do not wish to go as far as the Republican Senator Charles Grassley, who advised top managers at the AIG insurance firm, which dispensed millions of tax dollars in bonuses to these failing executives, to either bow very deeply or commit harakiri in accordance with tried-and-true Japanese custom. Nonetheless, it is time for a revaluation of all values.

Sustainability: Between Attachment and Detachment

To that end, designers must find a different relationship to that cornerstone of modernity, innovation. Hella Jongerius deplores the fleetingness of contemporary design: "People are tired of innovation, and they're waiting for meaningful objects. Things you get attached to." At the boundary between attachment and detachment, sustainability presents itself as an emotional value. With his 'No Sign of Design' credo, Richard Hutten tried to keep the functional in-between space open and make non-design a design stance. The initiators of Eternally Yours, Ed van Hinte among them, stress our capacity to cherish objects. They value the ageing of products, such as certain kinds of cameras and jewellery, and use this as an argument against waste and perpetual replacement.

Sudjic, too, questions simple innovation. *Super Normal* introduces an interesting form of recycling. And even Philippe Starck, who has said he is tired of ego-driven design, calls for transgenerational responsibility. He opts for a serviceable and sustainable design that leaves behind the cynicism of big money and the narcissism of individual uniqueness. But how do Jongerius's intergenerational longing for attachment, Starck's transgenerational responsibility, and *Super Normal*'s intragenerational reinvestment relate to relational design?

What does Sudjic mean in the conclusion of his book? "We live in a time when our relationship with our possessions is undergoing a radical transformation."[15] Indirectly, he suggests that materials should be recycled, as in the work of Ron Arad. Art remains Sudjic's frame of reference. The question, however, is if when we talk about relational design we're still talking about objects. Indeed, the third design paradigm is increasingly shifting the

emphasis to processes. Designers are placing their creativity in the service of the end users by programming in an open-ended way. The accent is moving from semantics to pragmatics.

Relational Aesthetics, Relational Architecture, Relational Design

We saw similar developments elsewhere in the art world in the 1990s. Nicolas Bourriaud introduced the concept of 'relational aesthetics' as the basis for the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, which he co-initiated. Art became an interactive process. It was "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space",[16] according to Bourriaud. Works of art were intersections of the interhuman relationships they represented, produced or suggested. As Bourriaud was unfolding the space of the museum into an interactive relational network, the Canadian-Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was intervening in public space with dynamic installations, calling his work 'relational architecture'.

Is design taking account of this 'relational turn'? In architecture and urban planning, relational design is manifesting itself more and more obviously in the form of social design. I am myself involved in a large-scale renovation of the south side of Rotterdam according to the integrated development model Rotterdam Skillcity.[17] And nowadays every big city has an interdisciplinary group of students orienting themselves in an interactive, bottom-up way.

The term first surfaced in 1969, with relational database design. At first, its meaning was purely programmatic. Tools such as the impact graph allowed you to visualise how elements of a system changed when one parameter was altered. 'Relational' here referred solely to a table representing a set of relations. There was no such thing as user interactivity. That only appeared with open-source design. Open-ended processes and generative systems like Wikipedia, YouTube and Facebook still have web addresses, but a BitTorrent swap of music files has no web address and no file owner or manager. It is a node with a referential function.

In the past decade, design has gained more and more subdisciplines: metadesign, experience design, inclusive design, conditional design, even slow design. In practice, this means that in their most basic mode of being, ontologically – or to use Sloterdijk's term, technorelational – what these variants of design do is style inter-esse. Here, Dasein as design becomes medially reflective. Uncritical radical mediocrity is unfolded, spread out,

developed. Creativity thus moves from the designer's interior to the medium in which the creative end users are involving themselves. With this basic democratic gesture, creativity no longer lies within individuals but between them. Do-it-yourself design goes a step further with the hacking and transformation of product design; Platform21's projects *Hacking IKEA* and *Repairing* turned consumers from discarders into designers. As a micropolitical statement, it resonated in the geopolitical gesture of the Sao Paulo council when it decided to ban all advertising from public space in 2006.

Ecopolitics as Geopolitics: The Hydrogen Energy Web

Thus radical mediocrity is being transformed into inter-esse. Awareness of being part of a greater whole has exponentially increased with globalisation. But it happened to me in the 1960s, when I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. I realised that the pesticides being sprayed over the fields down the road were in the cod on my plate, and in ten minutes they would be inside me. In 1972, the Club of Rome used computers to calculate the limits to growth, and this ecopolitical insight became a geopolitical one after the 1973 oil crisis, which made clear at a stroke how raw materials, production lines, transport and consumption were interlinked. Energy conservation, reuse, reduction and recycling only make sense if linear production lines are turned into cyclical ones. The unstoppable growth of mobility demands cyclical relations – in design as well. Waste must become fuel for a new cycle, as in Braungart and McDonough's Cradle to Cradle (C2C) model.

Product design thus has an ecopolitical and geopolitical scope, not only because of consumption and waste but also because of production – the use of materials and labour. Small-scale production shortens vulnerable supply lines and stimulates local craftsmanship. Jongerius called upon local Dutch crafters in the production of her unique showpiece vases for Royal Tichelaar Makkum. Her IKEA vases, however, were made elsewhere in the world. Consumer pressure spurred IKEA to guarantee clean, fair production lines. Such are the geopolitical implications of design in a globalised world. The local-global relationship is ripe for redefinition within design. Alastair Fuad-Luke and Ezio Manzini point to the importance of creative communities and cosmopolitan localism. In their efforts at "revitalizing the idea of design"[18] they propagate "design with, for and by society."[19] For them, the network society is first of all a multilocal society, in which communities are nodes.

But how does relational design relate to scarcity? How does Sloterdijk's principle of abundance make its influence felt here? In the postfossil era, there is an abundance of information, energy and relationships. Rays of sunlight and data streams are sources of alternative waste. The ideology of scarcity is undermined by the openness particular to group relationships that act as networks to channel creative energy to individual members. With the transition from scarcity to abundance, we are moving from maintaining life to sharing it. Detachment from material goods and reduction of consumption are noble, but the most effective approach to our environmental problems is to bring unused energies into cyclical circulation. Web 2.0 shows us what this means. Kevin Kelly, one of the gurus of the virtual new economy, was still thinking in Web 1.0 terms when he defined a dearth of attention as the only remaining scarcity in a world of abundance.[20] The mutual attention facilitated by Web 2.0 provides a digital basis for inter-esse.

Attention and inter-esse become ecopolitical only when they reflect on their own grounds for existence: what is it that makes my frictionless radical mediocrity possible? Dasein becomes geopolitical only when monopolised power relations are made explicit. Sloterdijk does not elaborate on the specifics of how this will take place in a postfossil age. But Manzini, C2C and Jeremy Rifkin move a step further. Rifkin's vision, laid out in his 2003 book *The Hydrogen Economy,* seems eco- and geopolitics-proof. Here, hydrogen is not an energy source but a storage buffer that can be created by splitting hydrogen (H) and oxygen (O_2) molecules through electrolysis. When the two elements are fused, energy and pure water are released. The electricity necessary for electrolysis is not generated conventionally, using fossil fuel or uranium, but sustainably, using sun, wind and water.

This ecopolitical dedication takes on a geopolitical quality in Manzini's creative communities' effort to generate power in a decentralised way as "a balanced interaction between the local and the global dimensions, on the one hand, and a sustainable enhancement of local (physical and socio-cultural) resources on the other."[21] Cradle to Cradle offers an alternative to the raw-materials dilemma in the form of the design of reusable polymers, but despite the switch from scarcity-based eco-efficiency – doing more with less – to abundance-based eco-effectivity,[22] C2C remains corporate: it leaves undisturbed the large-scale power monopolies Rifkin would like to smash. Rifkin favours linked networks à la Web 2.0 and argues for small-scale power generation close to the users, with neighbourhoods and companies or other units making their own energy using small 'stations' the size of beer crates.

Unused energy, like music files, would be delivered back to the source via the Hydrogen Energy Web. According to Rifkin, this network could meet the whole world's energy needs. The interest in his ideas being shown by leaders of European countries is promising.

It is thus about more than just cyclical production lines and sustainable energy distribution. Rifkin's geopolitical approach aims at smallness of scale: shorter, less vulnerable supply lines for sharing not just creativity but power. It goes without saying that the big energy companies are not champing at the bit to decentralise, at least as long as they cannot keep control of distribution. It will also come as no surprise that Shell long ago took rapid steps to begin producing hydrogen in Iceland.

Relational Design: From Throwaway Culture to Design Culture

I am approaching my conclusion. Global warming is as closely bound up with extreme hyperconsumerism as the September 11 meltdown of the World Trade Center towers was with extremist fundamentalism. The ecosphere and the technosphere can no longer be distinguished from each other. The linear line of technology – moving faster and faster on the way to a better future – must be bent back into the cyclical processes of the ecosphere. The future – as Morrison and Fukasawa indicated – bends via the present back to the past. According to C2C, intergenerational terror must be converted into intergenerational responsibility. Because the circle is round, there is no outside. All roads ultimately lead back to themselves. In his 1972 book *Design for the Real World*, Victor Papanek, one of the pioneers of engaged ecodesign, characterised rising consumerism as "our Kleenex culture".[23] Throwaway culture has now achieved astronomical proportions: there is so much 'tissue' skimming around the earth that cleanup actions are needed to ensure future space-travel programmes can go ahead.

But must design save the world? Clearly, the very idea implies an arrogance equalled only in the banking sphere. One discipline cannot save the world. One person can, however, cause a chain reaction that leads to the world being destroyed in a final gesture. At that existential level, everyone is a designer, even though the gesamtkunstwerk remains unfinished. Everyone's life is thrown-design, however unintelligent.

Relational design is more of an appeal than a description. It prescribes nothing but appeals to a consciousness that derives its coherence from

another consciousness: one that is aesthetic, ethical and political. The politicisation of design – making ecopolitical and geopolitical choices – arises out of a different relationship to the ambiguity of our technosphere. Design, after all, is as ambivalent as a Japanese gift. A product can establish relations but can also cut you off from the group. Too many friends on Hyves can actually be a sign of digital loneliness. Design beautifies your environment but adds to the rubbish heap. Relationally, games are a gift, but as digital dope they are pure poison. When design orients our thoughts and actions, our creativity and freedom of choice, from the inside out, it becomes a form of relational design. Then Dasein as design becomes reflective, and our radical mediocrity turns into inter-esse.

What will design become in the twenty-first century? Design, which like art finds itself at a loss thanks to its smashing success, faces the task this century of developing itself as a living discourse. Relational design is the overture to a creative lifestyle whose cornerstones will be ecopolitical sustainability and geopolitical responsibility. Craftsmanship and a sense of proportion are crucial here. Yet this is not a call for a return to nineteenth-century craftsmanship but for a revaluation of some of its inherent values, such as responsibility, honour and respect, so as to limit the excesses of hyperindividualism and hyperconsumerism. At the heart of the rush to consume that we call survival is a geopolitical throwaway culture. The transformation of that throwaway culture into an ecopolitical design culture seems to me to be a precondition if people are to continue to live together.

End Notes:

1. Henk Oosterling (1952) studied Japanese and Philosophy. Since 1985 he teaches at the Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He is also the head of the Center for Philosophy and Art, and he is chairman of the Dutch Aesthetics Federation. He can be contacted at http://www.henkoosterling.nl/.
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3. Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).
4. Peter Sloterdijk, *Het kristalpaleis. Een filosofie van de globalisering* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2006), 246.
5. Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 6.
6. Sloterdijk, *Het kristalpaleis*, 203.
7. Henk Oosterling, *Radicale middelmatigheid* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2000).
8. Donald A. Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 224.

[9] Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design Culture*.
[10] See http://www2.eur.nl/fw/cfk/.
[11] Norman, *Emotional Design*, 112.
[12] Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison, *Super Normal: Sensations of the Ordinary* (London: Lars Müller Publishers, 2008), 106.
[13] Fukasawa and Morrison, 103.
[14] Oosterling, *Radicale middelmatigheid*, 102.
[15] Sudjic, *The Language of Things*, 216.
[16] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002), 113.
[17] See http://www.henkoosterling.nl/rtd-craftsmanstad.html.
[18] Chapman and Gant 2007, p. 28.
[19] Chapman and Gant 2007, p. 31.
[20] Kelly 1999, p. 74.
[21] Jonathan Chapman and Nick Gant, *Designers, Visionaries + Other Stories*, *A collection of sustainable design essays* (London: Earthscan, 2007), 81.
[22] Michael Braungart and William McDonough, *Cradle to Cradle*, *Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 85.
[23] Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World*, *Human Ecology and Social Change* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 86.

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