Design's Other

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EDITORIAL

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Welcome to Issue 6 of *Design Philosophy Papers*, this last issue of 2003 spilling over into the current year. We wish all our readers the best for 2004.

We have had a very good response to calls for papers for forthcoming issues on 'Design Ethics as Futuring' and 'User-Centred Design', with selections currently underway. Offers have also been made for 'Urbocentrism' and 'De/Re-Materialisation', however, proposals for papers for these two themes are still open. We are also pleased to announce that the hard copy 'DPP Collection 2003' for subscribers is currently in production.

As well as five essays on the theme of 'design's other', in this issue we begin a debate on the relationship between design and politics (see *hot debate*). Also, the work of media/design theorist, Vilem Flusser is considered (see *reviews*) and the idea that it is possible to think the totalising figure of 'economy' beyond money matters, is floated (see *voice of sustainment*).

The call for contributions on the theme of 'design's other' prompted varied responses and revealed important questions that beg further exploration. So the contributions published here should be regarded as just

an opening onto ideas to be developed in later issues during 2004 and beyond.

While the question of ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism in particular, has generated a good deal of thinking and research in the humanities, consideration of the question in design has hardly begun. Yet clearly design, even when just considered within its limits as a professional practice, has either been complicit with, or a more active agent of, cultural imposition in the geometry of power relations between the west and rest of the world, as these have been enacted economically, politically and culturally over several centuries and which are now gathered around the figure of 'globalisation'.

Because of its pervasiveness, design's imposition is rarely recognised. Yet the export of western-conceived manufactured products, cultural products and services to non-western cultures whose economies often provide cheap labour for multinational producers are clear examples of the continual 'designing of the designed' of the desires, ways of life, modes of material and cultural consumption of others, irrespective of the intentions of designers.

Clearly, participation in the global economy has delivered some material benefits for some people (but by no means all). And one can argue case-by-case about the material gains and losses of, for example, factory-made products replacing home-made artefacts; cash-cropping displacing subsistence farming; or modern medicines, traditional healing practices. But what cannot be denied is that because material practices are embedded in regimes of meaning and systems of belief, their sudden, or gradual, displacement also shatters, or irrevocably corrodes, long-established ways of being in the world. This was (and is) often experienced as trauma or as a profound sense of loss, be it variably across generations.

It is easy to forget that one of the ongoing legacies of the west has been to render whole, other, ways of life null and void for millions of people worldwide. Some call this progress, others call it neocolonialism, or the unstopable momentum of hegemonic global capitalism. Of course, this clipped explanation suggests a process with the prospect of a final resolution (such as Francis Fukuyama's controversial characterisation of the victory of capitalism and social democracy as delivering 'the end of history', understood as the fulfilment of human destiny). However, the reality is that millions are still stranded between the now dysfunctional fragments of a former life and another life that dangles tantaslisingly before their eyes, but out of reach because of the inherent inequity of an unsustainable and unjust 'world order'.

Returning to design, this was our call-for-papers invitation:

The discourse of design is almost totally Eurocentric, particularly its objects of engagement. When it does move

beyond familiar territory it imposes ideas of design as if they were universal. Yet there are understandings, histories and practices of design outside this universalist construct, for example the architecture, craft, gardens and civil works of African, Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. How can this other design and designing be made visible and engaged without being measured against Eurocentric norms?

Published here are two full papers – by Stanislaus Fung, on overcoming Eurocentric readings of Chinese landscapes (more on this below), and by Tony Fry, who seeks to transcend the limits of the current, Eurocentric understanding of design by speculating on an 'other' design, before and after this moment of historical dominance.

These two papers bracket the other three contributions, by Samer Akkach, François-Xavier Nzi iyo Nsenga and Kati Reijonen, which are the outcome of personal reflections upon the dilemmas of working in, and on, design, across cultural differences. Some of these reflections were prompted by an invitation to ponder the problem of the translation of the western term, 'design', which often gets applied without much forethought to the productions of non-western cultures, carrying much western baggage with it (such as notions of planning, pre-figuration, origin, originality, creativity, individuality). I was interested in how, in their work, they had faced this translation problem, and what descriptive terms from the cultures they were working with or studying, were used to translate for design, and with what implications.

On the question of eurocentricity, what Samer Akkach, François-Xavier Nzi iyo Nsenga and Kati Reijonen, have written suggests that western-inspired projects to preserve or recover non-western otherness are pragmatically too late, and ethically suspect, this because they still seek to overdetermine the other, but this time round, reflected in the mirror of their own discontent (e.g., alienated westerners in search of an imagined pre-modern state of authenticity, which they often seek to possess in the most contradictory ways, such as by collecting 'primitive art'). But all three writers, in different ways, attest to the necessity, notwithstanding the difficulties, of pursuing pathways beyond unequal exchange or stultifying political correctness, particularly in the light of the growing crisis of unsustainability. In fact there are signs that the need to respond to this crisis is displacing the pre-occupation with cultural identity and difference, so prominent over the last decade. This doesn't mean questions of difference are now irrelevant, but rather, that they can become re-framed by the figure of *solidarity* (which doesn't preclude difference) rather than *universality*. *Design Philosophy Papers* is committed to advancing such debate and the activity it can stimulate.

The paper by Stanislaus Fung illustrates how easily conceptual frameworks from one culture get transposed to another to interpret phenomena that superficially appear to be the same. This, of course, is at the core of ethnocentrism, as Clastres and others have defined it, as it emerges from the common tendency across cultures of approaching the unknown in terms of the known – the unconscious centring of one's own culture.[1] This structural condition of limit (i.e the impossibility of ever being able to entirely mentally step outside one's own culture) becomes a problem in cross cultural exchanges when no-one (or one party or the other) is aware of its presence (hence the disasterous legacy of colonialism). While ethnocentrism can never be entirely overcome, it can be brought into view and its consequences exposed, and henceforth responsibility can be taken for it (the same goes for the even less visible condition of anthropocentrism).

There is a large body of Chinese literature on gardens and landscape, going back many centuries, and an even longer tradition of landscape management and design. Stanislaus Fung's essay shows that when European understandings of landscape design have been applied uncritically to the interpretation of this Chinese tradition, cultural richness gets diminished and difference becomes obscured. The idea he explores is that of 'borrowing views', extolled as one of the fundamental principles of landscape design in *Yuan ye*, the 17th century treatise on garden design. Western scholars, as well as western-educated chinese scholars, have generally reduced 'borrowing views' to a kind of designed scenic viewing based upon one of the founding principles of western rationality, that of the subject-object split, as it is played out in the sharp distinction between the viewer (as self contained sovereign subject) and what is viewed. In his attempt to recover some of the complexity, Stanislaus Fung finds it useful to draw on western thinkers who have been critical of western discourse, such as Heidegger. This is not as contradictory as it seems, as Heidegger himself borrowed elements of eastern philosophy to develop his critique of western thinking. Fung's essay, and similar work (like that of Francois Jullien and Hall & Ames[2]) allow westerners and westernised subjects, to sense, however fleetingly, modes of being-in-the-world substantially different from those currently in ascendence.

Be it very tentatively, what the contributions to this issue indicate, is that the archives of humanity are still poorly assembled and only partially understood. The potential of these archives' knowledges to contribute to overcoming the deepening condition of unsustainability is still to be recognised and affirmatively drawn upon.

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Notes

1. See Pierre Clastres, 'Of Ethnocide' in *Archeology of Violence* New York: Semiotext(e), 1994. Ethnocentrism comes into operation when one culture encounters another. Clastres makes the point that the self-nominations of most peoples have been ethnocentric (the Guarani Indians call themselves Ava, which means 'men', the Waika, Yanomami which means 'people', the Eskimos, Inuit, which means 'men', and by implication, all others encountered *as other than* 'people'). When one culture is confronted with a culture not like its own, having only its own world view available, it can only make sense of the other in terms of itself, 'on its own terms'. This is the inescapable condition of human knowing. However there is world of difference between knowing this about knowing and not knowing it. Ethnocentrism has been the result of a non-understanding of cultural relatavism as a structural condition of human being, and linked to this, the assumption of one's own culture as the only true culture. At the heart of ethnocentrism is an act of translation that doesn't even know its is happening.

2. See Francois Jullien *The Propensity of Things: towards a history of efficacy in China* Zone Books: New York, 1995; and the trilogy of comparative Chinese and Western thought by David L. Hall & Roger T. Ames Thinking through Confucius (1987), *Anticipating China: thinking through the narratives of Chinese and Western cultures* (1995) and *Thinking from Han: self, truth and transcendence in Chinese and Western cultures* (1998), New York: SUNY.