Mediage

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EDITORIAL

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Welcome to Issue 3 of *Design Philosophy Papers*. Before introducing the 'mediage' theme and three papers, we'd like to announce some new developments:

- DPP is now publishing book reviews, the first being of Louis Bucciarelli's *Engineering Philosophy*. More will appear in forthcoming issues. We're interested in suggestions for titles to review (and reviewers) – in design philosophy, design history, design theory, philosophy of technology, architectural theory, urban studies, cultural theory.
- A new theme has been added to the forthcoming issues, which is 'using it all up' – a proposed critical take on user-centred design. See the 'back and coming issues' for further details. Our themes are intended as prompts to thinking and a way of signaling DPP's concerns, but we're also interested in hearing from you if you've got a paper proposal that doesn't fit the themes, but you think is relevant to DPP. Just send us a 200 word abstract. We also welcome suggestions for themes for future issues.
- An archive of back issues of DPP has been established on this site – a resource which will

become increasingly useful as time goes by. This will be available by passwords to subscribers, which is a good reason for you to become a subscriber, if you're not already.

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…. the question of design is always an ontological question, which is a question of what it does in the way that it acts.[1]

Things can only become visible if we analyse them 'forward' instead of 'backward': not in terms of origins but of the ways in which things give shape to their environment. Things mediate the context in which they are present, and this cannot completely be ascribed to non-thingly 'origins'.[2]

Human beings *exist* in the strong sense – that is they are 'standing' (*sistere*) 'out' (*ex*) of themselves – because they have predicated their environment into a human world, which is their own social body. And this external body of theirs is both technical and symbolic. They *exist* (stand outside of themselves) both technically and symbolically, *as* the systems of things which have exteriorised the functions of their animal bodies into what has become a human world.[3]

Much of what we are trying to do in DPP is to unsettle familiar and comfortable ways of thinking about design. For this issue, we have deliberately bolted-together the term *mediage* to signal a way of thinking design that tries to get at what design actually does in a more fundamental way than more conventional ways of conceptualising design. *Mediage* is an adaptation of *mediance*, a term coined by Augustine Berque to indicate the halfway condition of human existence – as being within our animal bodies and at the same time exteriorised in the technological and symbolic environments of our human making.

Thinking about design in relation to the nature of the human, of world, subject and object, is a long way from the more pedestrian concerns of a good deal of 'design theory'. Perhaps the most employed model is an instrumental understanding of design, laid out as a triangulation of:

1) the designer and design activity
2) the designed object
3) the end user.

Such models tend to be used in the context of attempts to 'improve' the overall design process, by better conceptualising the relations between the three nodes and striving to make them function better. This kind of 'design theory' is circumscribed by thinking design purely in terms of methods and service relations. From this mindset issue terms like 'end user', 'client', 'product semantics'. Against

this, we wish to make a clear distinction between that design theory that is entirely within the realm of instrumental thinking and design philosophy.

Contra to instrumental design theory, we'd like to present a different way of thinking design as a triadic relation, one which draws attention to the overlooked and which invites further thinking, which is design as:

1) the designed thing-in-itself (whether this be object, image, software, etc)
2) mediation (between its moment of creation and the future it links to) and
3) a thing-in-place (how it constitutes a milieu).

Here are a few brief thoughts on how each of these could be elaborated:

1) A Thing in Itself

Just about everything we encounter has been designed; the materiality and immateriality of our daily lives is delivered to us by design. This fact withdraws into the background as we enact everyday routines – making a cup of coffee, cooking a meal, sending an email, sitting down in front of the TV. The seamlessness of the designed environments in which we dwell conceals from us the fact they are the product of design, not because of some conspiracy, but because dwelling in the constructed artificial has become the naturalised normality. When something does come our way tagged as 'design' – an iconic object in a museum, an award-winning building, elegant graphics, a beautifully photographed image of an item of furniture in a magazine, this tends to obscure rather than illuminate the omnipresence of design.[4]

The foregrounding of design-as-the-designed-object (even when 'historically contextualised' by e.g., a design historian) tends to privilege space over time, which brings us to the second part of the triadic presence – design in time.

2) Mediation between Moments: Design in Time

We fashion matter – the minerals of the earth, plant materials, other living things – into forms of our own imagination and making, and in so doing change the time of materiality. A fifty year old tree that may have lived for another hundred years gets felled, chipped and turned into paper that will have a lifespan of several months. Conversely, the hide of a cow that after slaughter would have rotted away in a few months is tanned and made into a coat that may last ten, twenty years. By design we give time and we take it away. Yet the dense material presence of our artefactual worlds of dwelling conceal the fact that all (including ourselves) is in a state of flux – *en route* to dissolution or possible resurrection in a totally different form (the buried tree that eventually becomes coal

or the residue of an industrial process that breaks down over time and only much later gets absorbed into human and animal bodies causing mutations or sickness).

The flux of matter through time, or rather, the differential times of different forms of matter is so often hard to see (especially when change occurs across a vast expanse of time). When grasped, it points to the non-discreteness of things at a material level. But this non-discreteness, extends also to the cultural level, which brings us to the triad's third corner. (But before we move there, please note that this question of time and design is a truly vast one, and to which Issue 5 of DPP will be devoted.)

3) A Thing-in-Place

A designed thing is always more than itself: things never stand alone as self-sufficient objects. Things form sets and ensembles and thus comprise specific environments of existence – pen and paper, table and chair, computer and screen and so on … these, plus other things, for example, constituting a cultural space of activity we call 'office'.

Our designed environments of designed things weave a spell of comfort and habit, making us think that the spaces we occupy have a reality over and above the things that constitute them, an illusion that can get momentarily shattered when the order of things is disrupted: the interior of a building is revealed by a bomb blast, shattered contents spilling out, but stranger still are the fragments of habitation that fortuitously remain intact – a table set for dinner, a made bed, a shelf of books; or more mundanely, mild surprise and a faint sense of loss when seeing a room we occupied for many years bereft of all furniture and other things because we're moving out. Such experiences can reveal the fragility and contingency of our attachments, they can be revelatory moments that speak the inscriptive power of the designed and of our own designing by the designed. But the more usual reaction is to turn away and seek to cover up the gaping perceptual hole that has opened up with more designing and more things. The real attachment is not to things, but to the worlds and illusory sense of security that our designing delivers.

These few observations are to prompt thinking on how designed things are active agents, mediations and constitutive of milieu. Much more can be said, and the papers in this issue by Abby Lopes Mellick and Tony Fry take up the far more complex example of the designed and designing milieu of television (or rather, 'the televisual' as they name it – another term made up to try and compensate for the inadequacy of available language to illuminate contemporary circumstances). The third paper, by Daniel Palmer, addresses digital media, and while not using the same language or working in the same intellectual tradition as the other two, what he reveals about the workings of digital media upon

subjects could just as well be described in terms of the designing of design. The digital domain has become a space of hyper-design and of the over-designed appearing to offer endless options and opportunities for creativity and self expression but within a limited economy of proliferating difference-as-the-same and with yet to be fully understood impacts upon behaviours, thought and action, in short on modes of being in the world.

In talking about milieu as, in effect, designed, we are not suggesting that this is reducible just to the effect of designed artefacts and technologies. Clearly institutions, cultural practices, modes of thinking, beliefs, values, social and economic relations are all part of milieu, but then again, in considering each of these, design is there to be found.

Design as object, as mediation, as milieu or design in/as space, time and culture – there is a forced quality in making these divisions, a necessary artificiality about separating out these different elements of the workings of design. This is for the sake of explanation, after which they have to be put back into their actual undifferentiated condition of existence, though hopefully with insights gained being carried along.

The made-up term *mediage* has a certain resonance with thinking design in the context of media. *Mediage* has a sense of being an amorphous background condition – like 'age' in the discredited notion of 'spirit of the age' or like milieu, as the space, place and conditions of dwelling. *Mediage* here gropes towards naming what were once thought of as technologies of representation, but which now are more cogently thought of as technologies of *mediation* that are constitutive of modes of being and of milieu (and their inseparability). The term names a shift in actual circumstances as well as a way of thinking this shift.

Of course there has been a long history of thinking media, including electronic media, but this predominantly within the frame of representation, which yields another conventional triad consisting of 1) the thing represented, 2) the representation (the image) and 3) the viewer. What is at stake in this traditional triad are questions of truth and correspondence. Does the image do justice to the real? Does it present that which it purports to represent in an accurate manner to the viewer? Within this frame, content-circumscribed questions are asked, for example, about accuracy of reporting or the effects of viewing certain kinds of content (violence, pornography). This frame cuts off so much at the edges: it cannot tell us much about media as a space that is dwelt in, as an integral part of how we live, think and feel.

Mediage dispenses with questions of truth and correspondence or of one type of content versus another. It asks what does the designed domain of electronic imaging actually do? How does it operate, not functionally or technically, but what does it do to the nature of the human? These are the concerns of the

three papers in this issue. Abby Lopes Mellick uncovers the covering-over of televisual hyper-visuality, arguing, for example, that violence is located in the being of television rather than in the content it delivers. Tony Fry suggests that televisuality has become more deeply ingrained into the nature of ourselves and our desires than anyone could have imagined, and that its effects travel through time, silently stealing away futures. Daniel Palmer explores ways in which real time media are formative of subjectivities that are at odds with the rhetoric of 'user control' mobilised by software merchandisers and by academic promoters of e-culture alike. These mobile, flexible, interfacial subjectivities are presented in relation to shifts in the nature of work, production and value-creation (and, it could be added, to the rise of the sign economy).

As in earlier issues of DPP (e.g. Manzini and Berque on unsustainability, Harries and Tonkinwise on beauty) our writers are not all working within in the same traditions of thought, so while their diagnoses of effects may converge, their conceptions of certain fundamental categories (like human being, subjectivity, agency, freedom) are often very different from one another.

Though they are engaging with very recent developments in techno-culture, all three writers in this issue find thinkers of many decades ago to be most illuminating of contemporary circumstances, for example: Raymond Williams, Guy Debord, Herbert Marcuse, Richard Sennett for Daniel Palmer; Heidegger, Gregory Bateson and 1960s/70s Baudrillard for Abby Mellick Lopes; Heidegger and Carl Schmitt (the latter, an extreme critic of liberalism writing in the 1920s/30s on the tyranny of entertainment) for Tony Fry. Maybe it's not just a co-incidence that writers of the early or pre-televisual era have a more incisive fix on the state of things now than do many theorists alive today. This decline of critical thinking (on this, also see also Fry's 'Wall of Silence' article) is perhaps yet another televisual effect.

The next issue of DPP is on the theme of 'technology as environment', which will continue this exploration of technological being.

Notes

1. Tony Fry *A New Design Philosophy: An Introduction to Defuturing* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999, 4.
2. Peter-Paul Verbeek, paper for Sociality and Materiality conference, Brunel University UK, September 1999.
3. Augustine Berque, 'The ontological structure of mediance as a ground of meaning in architecture', paper for conference on Structure and Meaning in Human Settlements, Dept of Architecture, University of Pennsylvania, October 2000.
4. 'Design is everywhere as the normality of the made world that is rendered background as soon as 'design' becomes an individuated object of focus' Fry *A New Design Philosophy* 5.