



Manifesto for Redirective Design: Hot Debate

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Manifesto for Redirective Design

Hot Debate

Tony Fry and Clive Dilnot

[What follows is the product of exchanges over an extended period of time between Tony Fry and Clive Dilnot. Tony Fry generated the first version, but it has been iteratively modified to an extent that it is now difficult (and perhaps not necessary) to attribute authorship to distinct parts of it. There are three sections – an introduction, the Manifesto itself and a justification. It has been written as a provocation; responses, which are very welcome, will be published in the next issue of DPP, with a deadline of 31st May – Ed.].

Context for the Manifesto

A certain re-vitalisation of the manifesto as 'political' statement has occurred in design circles in recent years. The manifesto presented here, while appropriating this moment also departs from – it does not believe this form of communication has to be the expression of a vanguard or predicated upon an actual or proto-movement.¹ The form of the manifesto has been adopted as a crisp heuristic tool that hopefully will stimulate thought and discussion.

Nothing is more enervating in the present than the lack of significant argument over 'the nature of the world' in which design is implicated. This lack seems to come from two sources: a failure to see the problem of how design (as the sum of all designing and all things designed) currently negates futures; and, even when critical views exists, an overwhelming feeling of having no ability to act, either in thought or in practice. The discontented in design, in common with many 'service providers' of similar disposition in other 'disciplines and activities' generally occupy a culture of helplessness. The notion that it is not possible to be 'radical' and earn a living dominates. Much could be said on this point, but two key remarks will have to suffice.

First, we all suffer from living in positivistic cultures which tend to treat symptoms as causes, and then over-objectify them. The environmental 'crisis' is a good example: it arrives before us characterised by biophysical conditions such as global warming, reduced biodiversity, soil, air and ocean pollution, desertification, the salination of fresh water and soil, deforestation and so on. These manifestations of 'crisis' are actually all symptoms of a single causal force – the myopic actions of an anthropocentric being, – us! We humans are the problem: the way we appropriate and waste resources, our values, ways of life, economic excesses, inequities and injustices. The increasing environmental impacts of human settlement far outstrip the impacts of sheer population numbers. In fact these impacts can, and do, increase even when population growth falls.

Second, because the problem is not clearly or adequately in view, means that those who would work to create solutions are rendered ineffectual. One cannot imagine, conceptualise, design or make a way forward from a completely flawed position. Sadly, a great deal of well-intended 'reformist', 'sustainable' design activity does little more than sustaining the unsustainable.

Affirmative action is possible, but the challenges are great and the risks high.

Where the manifesto comes from is not incidental to its ambition. It is informed by working within design education institutions in many parts of the world, years of striving to broaden the constituency concerned with design, and from the early 1990s efforts to create new design institutions and practices.

Setting up the Possibility of Change

The manifesto presented below lays out perspectives on designing, making and thinking that invite careful and critical reflection, rethinking, new thought, debate, and appropriate action.

It is vital that the perspectives offered be understood as far more than just one more advocacy of the 'greening of design.'

The aim of the manifesto is not just to call for more sustainable content to be added to the existing design agenda or for design

thinking to become more philosophical. Rather, what it strives to prompt is for design and thinking to become truly constructive forces in the creation of a condition of a new age – an age of sustainment. The imperative of sustainment begs that the very natures of design and technology and thinking (an, in effect, human beings) are changed – conceptually, practically, socially and symbolically. It is acknowledged that this call presents truly enormous problems of transformation for the status quo.

The call made is not mere idealism. Rather, it is lodged in an absolutely pragmatic need that marks a fundamental transformation of our being – a need to take responsibility for the future in which enormous opportunities reside. The future, for us, can no longer be assumed. The price of anthropocentrism is to have the event of species-being delimited. Viewed from a biocentric perspective, the most effective means to sustain the biosphere would be the self-induced extinction of the human race.

Reading the Manifesto

The manifesto focuses on design.

Design has crucial strategic value as a figure and moment in practice and in thought where a negotiation can occur between (i) objects and subjects and (ii) artifice and actual or claimed beneficiaries.

Design is the exemplary procedural site for the negotiation of possibilities.

Design constitutes a confrontation between real and logical possibilities as well as actual incommensurabilities.

Design is a figure where the yet-to-be can be ethically considered (here ‘sustainment’ is posited with primary ethical value).

Design is an activity still waiting to be adequately thought.

Manifesto for Redirective Design

Ten points towards relearning how to make and shape the world.

1. We have to learn how to recognise design metaphysically and ontologically, make it present and critically read it.
2. We have to learn how to recognise technology metaphysically and ontologically, make it present and critically read it.
3. We have to learn how to read design and technology as they perform inscriptively, in relation to each other in the world. (The designing agency of design and technology not only bring things into worldly being but partly writes the form of the future).
4. We have to learn that design is either ethics materialised or ethics negated. (Everything brought into existence by design arrives by destruction and creation, and that which is designed can either take futures away or bring them into being).

5. We have to learn how to eliminate by design much of what has been designed.
6. We have to bring an age and condition of sustainment into existence not by just inventing the new but more importantly by remaking the old.
7. We have to learn how to explore design archaeologically – so much of what we need to know is held in that which was once known and designed, but now has been forgotten.
8. We have to learn how to design in time (which means better grasping the temporal nature of ourselves and things).
9. We have to learn how to design to reinvent and redefine what an exhausted language puts before us. (One example of this is ‘quality’ – what can we make or mean by ‘quality’ now?)
10. We have to learn how to design things sacred (that is, objects of belief that engender those forms of care that preserve).

Justifying the Manifesto

The manifesto focuses on design, in recognition that addressing design is obstructed by two longstanding problems.

First: critical thought almost totally ignores design. While design (as prefiguration) is one of the primary qualities of being human, it is still one of the least understood constitutive practices deployed by human beings. A critical, rather than just instrumental, exploration of design has little, or even no, place within the academy. It does not have an informed and powerful constituency. It is sundered between the arts (that knows only the de-materialised subject) and science (which gives absolute priority to technocratic reason and scorns the subjective and symbolic). The consequence of this situation is a massive impoverishment of knowledge in regard to how we constitute and configure the made world (which is to say now, the world as a whole).

Second: design education and design practice (let alone technological education) do not provide an essential foundational and phenomenological knowledge for designing and making. To learn how to design (or to make), to learn how to deploy technological effects, is rarely to adequately learn how ‘what has been designed and made actually functions in the world’. There are very serious consequences for neglecting an ontological investigation of what design brings into existence, and thus, in turn, what design designs. It means that designers act with only a limited cultural, material and economic knowledge of how to shape artifice in terms of futural consequences and effects. This limitation produces irresponsible artifice, as a result the potential for design (as practice, process, image, object or structure) to sustain is undercut. If design is not fully disclosed it cannot enter consciousness and become an object of responsibility.

The question of design’s concealment is central.

More than just the absence on an ontological perspective insuring that very significant dimensions of the designed remains hidden (even from those who design), there is also design's complicity with concealment. The history of design is in many ways a history of concealing in the act of revealing – the increasing prominence of facade design in commercial architecture, the expansion of packaging design for graphics, the industrial design profession's activity of wrapping products in style, the expressive power of fashion as it exposes or hides the body – these are just a few example of this. What is concealed from view is not just what underlies appearances but equally the meaning of ways of knowing and acting.

Bringing together the thing to be known, knowing, appearance and action is the configurative power of design. In this respect, design is not passive. Configuration can be defined here as the act of organising something to have effects. Thus, as prefiguration, design is an act of utilising configuration with a degree of self-consciousness. What design knows – but does not know that it knows – is how to shape, that is to configure, artifice and how to do so relationally so as to place what is configured within sets of contextual relations. So said, what is absent from design – and so what design does not know (but does not know that it does not know) – is the knowledge of how to configure, of what configuration consists and why it matters.

These manifestations of design's shortcomings can just as easily be read as potentialities that excite. Design is ripe to constructively open up for greater understanding and remaking, hence the manifesto is an invitation. Specifically it invites a re-opening of the possibility of design thinking and practice, an activity very different from the perpetual concern by designers and design educators with 'design process'.

As the environmental worlds of human construction (of spaces, structures, objects, images, sounds and more) have proliferated, human beings have become ever more determined by the consequences of artifice. An ontology of design which explores the potential of re-designing and re-making (beyond simplistic notions of determinism) begs immediate investigation and innovation.

Designing and making are always directive and impositional, and so always ontologically active. It follows that it is crucial to recognise and take responsibility for this agency in terms of what is directed, what is imposed. The active agency of design can be expressed as the idea that "everything made or designed goes on designing and making". Understanding design and making as directive means grasping the made and the designed as performative and inscriptive. This means that no matter what is made and designed it is always, by degree, world formative. Increasingly, and without awareness, we are the designed.

Neither making nor design can be understood by their practices, appearances or rationalised definitions alone. Of all knowledge, design knowledge is the least recognised and valued. The nature and character of artifice as well as that of design action, only comes to visibility through critical inquiry.

The Context for Design Now

It is not assumed that there is just one politically correct ideology to direct the making and designing which has become necessary. Humanity has to have plural futures (which is not the same as pluralist) – there are many ways in which humans may sustain themselves, without destroying all else.

Having said this, expressing a clear position on the imperative of sustainment can be taken as ‘a line’ – one, however, that does not narrowly restrict but actually leads in many exciting possibilities.

No matter who or where we are, or our discipline, we face a new and critical conjuncture. In this moment, our crisis of being is intimately entwined with an opportunity to be otherwise.

Specifically this moment is defined by:

- the human-created unsustainability of so many of the economic, technological and cultural practices that shape contemporary life (as lived and desired);
- the potential of the technologies, and other forms of artifice, that human beings increasingly depend upon to threaten their means of sustainment (as much through concealment as by direct material consequences);
- the increasingly tolerated disparity in gross inequalities of material provision across populations;
- the inadequacy of almost all existing ways of thinking and using ethics for engaging the economic, technological, psychological and cultural impacts of ‘our’ anthropocentric being.

Notwithstanding the growing complexity of the array of made human environments – their (under-identified) interactive impacts upon all ecologies (bio-physical, synthetic and mind), and the diminishing responsibility taken for them (exercised by humans in the face of the growing hegemony of technology) – ways to create a counter direction have to be found. This encompasses how the ‘occupied world’ is materially thought, fabricated, culturally constituted and taken responsibility for.

Pointedly, although artifice has become endemic to the human condition, what is new is that the artificial (and the centrality of technology) has itself induced some of the key qualities of anthropocentric being. Product and process now determine, at all levels, the horizons of human experience and existence. Although this is partly accepted, at least tacitly, by a significant number of thinkers, the full implications are not. In particular, the illusion is

perpetuated that humans still have the ability to control and direct technology. The embeddedness of this position makes it difficult, if not impossible, to adequately address the degree to which the artificial/the technological circumscribe the horizons of 'the nature of the human'.

All making (e.g., of things and environments) inseparably enfolds creation and destruction. Ethical decision depends upon being capable of evaluating the consequences of what is created and destroyed. Reiterating – everything brought into existence by design arrives by destruction and creation. It follows that design decisions draw the line between the positives or negatives of both what is destroyed or created.

The very possibility of responsibility depends upon clearly identifying what has to be taken responsibility for. At the minimum, the situation outlined begs taking three kinds of action into ownership.

- First, we in our difference, should more adequately conceptually grasp the nature of artifice (that is, develop a thinking adequate to the constructed conditions within which we now exist).

The demand here is for a transformation in thinking. In a way that it is not today, thinking needs to become adequate to artifice.

- Second, we in our difference, should address, as an integral part of our thinking, how we could give adequate human and sustainable shape to the re-making of what has been constructed (that is, create a designing adequate to the needs of shaping, psychologically and physically, the meaning, form or function of artifice).

The demand here is for a redirection of the generic nature and specific forms of designing and making as we know them. We cannot simply will other kinds of thinking and making – they have to be brought into being through the creation of an environment of their becoming. This suggests giving considerable attention not just to thought and making *per se* but to the manufacture of a visibility of the implications of what is thought and made.

- Third, we in our difference, should more rigorously and responsibly address the social, economic and political ramifications and consequences of the nature of technology. This requires abandoning the fiction that technology is any longer a tool that we can merely apply (not least because we as much dwell in it and are used by it as well as being users of it).

The demand here implies a different kind of practice – one that no longer makes distinctions between the technological, the political, the economic and world-making, and which sees the creation of

policies and programs in these areas as a design activity – just as design actions are seen as having consequences across these fields.

These actions are interdependent: one cannot develop without the other.

To date, artifice has mostly been considered as designed things rather than as process, and as such it has been reduced to a condition of stasis. Thinking for artifice is a kind of designing – it implies an active thinking about how to give shape to re-making things (material and immaterial). Correspondingly, designing itself is a way of thinking artifice. Together thinking and designing are themselves activities concerned with constituting the things and conditions of existence as they go on designing. To take the simple example of the chair – an embodied and intellectual knowledge of the form of chairs clearly prefigures the act of designing a chair, while living in a culture of chairs, generically, has significantly altered the human spinal structure, posture and indoor environmental habits.

While the design community has given a good deal of attention to how to design and to the forms and functions of design, scant attention has been given to the fundamental ontological questions – the instrumental and aesthetic have ruled. Such an omission has meant that understandings of the made world, of ethics and the political (in the widest sense) have all been seriously delimited. In a number of crucial ways, ‘world’ became divorced from the material. Rather than this merely contributing to a restrictive vision of the material world it has seriously weakened our ability to comprehend who and what we are and do as ‘world shapers.’ The absence of the agenda of ontological designing has been a significant omission not just from design but from a whole range of disciplines.

Artifice has never been purely instrumental; however, it is now so extensive that it spans the entire horizon of human existence. Thinking can no longer deny artifice nor can the acts of making and designing claim any longer to be simply instrumental. In fact, humanity is in a situation where it becomes ever more critical to comprehend the relation between artifice, being, organic and cultural life. Thinking needs to conceptualise structures of thought able to engage with artifice – this not only as an object of thought but in thought (such that thinking can think making and its implications in and through the act of making). Equally, the preoccupation in acts of making with end-points – be they products, systems, technologies, images – has to be seen as a kind of blindness. This productivist disposition has characterised both design and technological practice. It has to give way to a much more nuanced understanding of how seemingly instrumental action always has non-instrumental consequences.

To begin to think the full import of technological making and design action as world-making for the ‘being-of-being’ is not only

a major challenge, but an essential task for that re-making which is at the core of the material practices of sustainment.

Note

1. An enormous number of manifestos have been written over the last two hundred years. For design, art and architecture, the early twentieth century was a particularly intense moment, epitomised by the outpourings of the futurists, functionalists and other avant gardes. Of recent design manifestos, the best known is perhaps the 1999 revival and re-issue of the 1963 *First Things First*, an impassioned anti-consumerist statement signed by a number of prominent graphic designers from both historical moments. This can be found at the AdBusters website <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/signup/> along with an historical essay by Rick Poyner <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/first/toolbox/history.html>. Artists and designers manifestos have generally been fiercely anti-establishment. Obviously, the manifesto is a research topic in its own right; the challenge however would be to animate the research so as to disclose what can be learnt from them in terms of past failures, future possibilities and communication strategies.