Design Philosophy Papers

ISSN: (Print) 1448-7136 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdp20

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To cite this article: Tony Fry (2003) Designing Betwixt Design's Others, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:6, 341-352

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299303036

Design Philosophy Papers VOLUME 1, ISSUE 6 PP 341–352

Designing Betwixt Design's Others

Tony Fry

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Design is between what it was and what it is becoming.

The practice of design, in its present configuration, has a limited duration. Design's currently extended moment rests between the silence of its past ontic being, (which means design prior to it becoming one of the defining qualities of human anthropocentric agency), and the signs of its future as a non-human ontic figure.

So framed, 'Design's Other' will be explored as the 'other' of design as it is dominantly and universally projected, which is as a specific form of human agency and its artefactual expression. The Other here is design in its difference prior to and post its current manifestation.

Design Before Design

Phenomenology makes it possible for us to retrospectively comprehend something of design prior to its naming.

To grasp design phenomenologically, to glimpse its essence, is to comprehend it as: an agency of prefiguration; how this agency brings what is envisioned into being (eventually understood as a 'design process'); the material/immaterial thing(s) created in the image of

the directive idea (that prefigured); and, finally, the onward designing of things as they themselves prefigure further acts of prefiguration. While what has been described appears to be circular, this dynamic in fact never closes the circle – rather it generates movement and process.

The capability to design, understood anthropologically, is not something human beings acquired at a particular stage of species development. Rather, the ability to design was indivisible from humans coming into being, and thereafter the human ability to be world-transformative and world-creative. Placing this observation in the circular dynamic outlined, we can say that the agency of what human artifice constituted was itself transformative of human beings.

Once design is really understood as an innate agency, the binary relation between humans and things is shattered. Humans design, but are, in turn, designed by what results from this designing – be it as things, symbolic forms or traditions.

Everything said so far is an acknowledgement of design's ontic presence. Design, so presented, hints (which is all that can be done) at speaking of design before its reified creation as a category (the named) and a discourse (the institutionalised language and practice of design).

Two key points should be noted. First, historically, design's universal characteristics are not reducible to the particular qualities that definitions deal in. Rather design in its fundamental anthropological state is like speech, perception or artifice: something that contributed to constituting and defining the nature of humanity, while also being something the species share(d) in difference. Second, we need to acknowledge the vast expanse of time that existed between what a projected essence of design suggests, and design, as it has been constituted as a discourse.[1]

Whatever we say about design, it is not possible to break free of the agency of the modern construction of the category. This is not just because the dominant way that design gets interpreted comes via that discourse constituted within modernity, but also because other understandings get defined against this ground. Thus while we can be critical of this discourse, we cannot simply step outside it – our observations depend upon it. It follows that it is only possible to assert difference/otherness by reference to the normative. Certainly the experiential knowing of 'design' of the Other is unreachable, moreover, as indicated, our constituted knowledge of design itself 'designs' whatever inquiry reveals. Such a form of 'knowing' is all we have (not that a lack is generally felt). Underpinning the dominant understanding of design is the confluence of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. This confluence has made ignorance of difference and the Other an overwhelming state of mind.

To move beyond abstraction two examples of design before design will be given.

Example 1. The Savage Marks of Humanity

Almost everywhere in the world, body painting, decoration, cicatrisation, and then later, tattooing, were used by ancient peoples as varied and complex inscription of modes of being-in-the-world that appear, from a contemporary perspective, to be designing on the body.[2] However, this is not why such activities were employed or how they were perceived. The body to be inscribed was not necessarily viewed purely as an individuated anatomical entity but rather, for example, as an object and communicative surface within a socially created discursive regime. Body markings of all types were given very specific local, regional, racial or tribal meanings. These signified such diverse things as: tribal identity; social status; spiritual perfectibility; evidence of courage or beauty; the enhancement of hunting skills; and protection from demonic forces. Notwithstanding these particular meanings, body markings also can be seen to have served as meta-communication.

Rather than the contemporary reading of body markings as signs of savagery, in their context they were the opposite: outward expressions of non-animality. Thereafter, they functioned as signs in a symbolic order of identity that enabled claims of difference between peoples to be made. The inner-self that preceded the subject was thus, in significant part, a product of an induction – this from the writing of *the qualities of the being* on the social body. In contrast to *homo sapiens* simply becoming human those 'differences of being' that are ethnocentrically gathered under the rubric of humanity, resulted from what could now be called an 'ontological self-designing and making' structured by constituted ontic conditions. In other words, while there was intent to employ the surface of the body as a medium of communication, the act of making it such had an unintended but absolutely critical consequence in 'humanity' *coming* into being Phenomenologically, through 'designing' the external presentational *form* of the body, and its insertion into symbolically charged social and material environments, what was actually being designed was a particular mode and expression of *being* and *beings*.

An indicated, an enormous schism exists between the phenomenological presence and agency of 'design' and the discourse of design as it became underpinned and narrowed by an epistemology of a prefigurative practice.

Of course there is a danger that what has so far been said might give the impression of 'our' fate as beings having been fixed in just one period of the historicity of our becoming (an unreachable history). To counter this view, and the sense of either the completeness of

our being or a predetermined destiny (and thus an evolutionary trajectory) another moment, and another force, will be outlined. Its differences speak of our difference.

Example 2. The Language of Ontological Designing

Lothar Ledderose has convincingly demonstrated the ontological designing force of the written form of the Chinese language.

Ledderose has shown the way systemic modularity, stemming from the pictographic structure of the language, underpins many seemingly very different practices and products of Chinese culture.[3] There is a direct link between elements created by brush strokes, the building of a modular element within a single character, stringing the characters into a series to make a text, and the mass of the 50,000 characters of the written language (a school child uses around 2,000 symbols, an educated person 3,000 to 4,000 and a scholar around 10,000).

While it takes a good deal of time and effort to learn, the language remains constant – symbols do not have interpretative ambiguity, because the specific symbolic forms analogically fix meaning. As a result, it is possible for an educated Chinese person to read a text written several thousand years ago. The Chinese language functions with an almost inexhaustible source of character assembly from which to build complexity and difference – the modular construction of the language has designed a thinking that is enacted through modularity in diverse areas. Writing, ceramic production, bronze casting, printing, 'factory art,' the building of wooden structures, bureaucratic systems, the law, labour process and many other things, have emerged out of the same system of rules of organisation and assembly that is found within the essence of modularity of the Chinese script.

Being Chinese, in contrast to being say, French, English, German or Italian, is another way of being that is not simply a matter of racial or cultural difference, but rather one of ontology. Undoubtedly, 'globalisation' is undoing this difference. However, there is hardly the slightest recognition anywhere in the world of the futural ontological designing importance and value of what has already disappeared, and is still disappearing. Ways of life, diet, communal traditions, agricultural practices, the ability to manage natural resources – these are just some of the areas of traditional Chinese knowledge, that have sustaining ability, which are being erased or discarded without challenge.

As the examples of body marking and of the Chinese language indicate, there is a fundamental schism between a phenomenological presence and agency of 'design' and the restrictive discourse of design as it is underpinned by an epistemology of a prefigurative practice (design process) and attached to capitalist exchange. To adequately think and write

about design means going well beyond what this discourse of design makes present.

We have registered design as a directive force that while elemental to human being, actually predated and prefigured the coming to be of this particular being. Recognising the significance of design as a dynamic force inherent in the ways things are in their being, requires that we strive to become attuned to the performative nature of things (their propensity). This means that, by degree, seeing prefiguration as an imbued quality of things, and thus not merely as an attribute of human mind. Understood performatively, the idea of design brings to presence an element of the very being of being. As such, everything has direction and design potentialities that are ontically embedded. 'Things of the world', as was suggested earlier, in significant part, design the world that itself designs being-in-the-world. Such an understanding begs further elaboration, not least because it fundamentally challenges the telos and hegemonic claim of evolutionism.[4]

Transposed to design and technology, evolutionism has been used to support the instrumentalist notion that design objects (as singular things or system) are things destined for incremental development – in this way design is posited, and then naturalised, with a teleological 'logic' resting on the very foundations of western metaphysics.[5] From Aristotle onward, instrumental questions of 'how' displaced the pre-Socratic disposition to ask 'why'. Evolutionism links this first moment of forgetting of fundamental questions with the 'legitimising' of the contemporary moment – a moment wherein designers only question from an unquestioned basis (a basis that accepts rather than identifies a starting point from which to design). The implied lack of awareness is not simply a consequence of individual designer's failure, but is structural to the existing designed world. Writing on 'the apparatus' and the camera Vilém Flusser, for example, makes it clear from an etymological and cultural analysis, that it is a thing that 'lies in wait or in readiness for something', and is directive of futures. In this way, an apparatus has a 'program', with a course to run, this over-arching and directing its 'technological development'.

A camera is equally a nodal point within a calculative system – camera, TV set, cell phone, in common with other programs that surround us, get misread as individuated objects and concealed in style.[6] However, the apparatus is an embodiment of mechanised thought that facilitates the negation of reflective thought and continually extends instrumental thought.

In contrast, and as Flusser demonstrates, design can also be thought more critically as the material consequence of the performative nature of things. Certainly design is actually always setting a path of change, yet unlike the developmental assertion of evolutionism, it does not determine or 'promise' incremental improvement.

Design, as it comes out of the 'ecology of mind' of western metaphysics, folds into ethnocentrism, and more particularly, Eurocentrism. This is because it travels with the same characteristics of direction, imposition and refusal. Like evolutionism, ethnocentrism 'cannot permit difference to remain'. As Pierre Clastres affirms, the inability of ethnocentrism to see and think difference is actually assisted by evolutionism 'as accomplice'.[7] Evolutionism, in the company of Eurocentrism/ethnocentrism, is predicated upon a system of foundational thought, and judgement whereby 'truths' are universalised and then imposed to exclude the plurality from which knowledge is constituted.[8] Design, likewise, moving from modest forms to grand visions, serves to directionally orient 'the nature of the world'. What it refuses, or cannot see, are the other ways in which worlds were given shape and direction. An example is the way in which traditional architectural forms of China and Africa, have often been characterised by Westerners as unchanging, whereas, in fact, they were continually modified in minor ways by each generation, which accumulated into considerable changes over an expanse of time. This is a process of perpetual change, rather than an evolutionary trajectory of 'from' and 'to'.

While design discourse never makes reference to ethnocentrism or evolutionism, design is always inflected by what under girds these terms – a particular developmental model of direction which refuses other forms of change, and a particular notion of progressive structuring predicated upon improvement.

Design After Design

On the one hand, there has been the slow emergence of design out of its lodgement in the ontic. Now it is possible to glimpse the pathway of design as it heads toward the coming ontic condition of completed technological hegemony.

Technology in the Driving Seat

Evolutionary thought, become metaphor, was imported into thinking about technology long ago. Although the fit between the biological and the technological is mostly illusory, a relation has been forged which has taken on the status of 'common sense.'[9] This thinking posits the destiny of products as one of continual improvement and the survival of those that are practically or symbolically 'fit for purpose'. This 'giveness' is all the more so as the artefactual world of technological objects, as they constitute familiar environments, acts to naturalise our 'being-with-technology'. Technology has actually become another nature – one that increasingly fuses with and transforms 'the natural' – this to the extent that the binary relation of 'natural' and 'artificial' no longer holds. It follows that evolutionary-inflected systems theory is on a false errand of bridging the undivided. More than this, the technosphere is a major biophysical and cultural design agent of

the contemporary world. For instance, televisual and information technologies have enormous ontological designing consequences as they project and animate worlds of functionality and desire [as was discussed in several papers in DPP 3 and 4, 2003 – Ed].

Besides being an article of faith, there are clear overlaps in the mobilised biological and technological narrative of evolutionism. For example, the seemingly 'incremental improvements' of many technological objects are presented as having been driven by a need to adapt to changing circumstances – they are thus characterised as having developed via an evolutionary process. However, the circumstances themselves are so often the consequence of the application of designed, economic and ideologically directive forces: freeways, modern kitchens, telephone networks, airports are but a few of myriad examples. The illusion of naturalised pathways of product development mirrors the projected mono-directional qualities found in the ethnocentrism/evolutionism nexus. It is a narrative of exclusion aiming to render power, violence and vested interests invisible. It follows that the way 'things' are significantly results from the exercise of force coming from particular interests rather than being the consequence of a process of 'natural selection'.

It is against this backdrop that we see design slipping from the grasp of the subject (designer) and heading towards 'the coming ontic condition of technological hegemony', and so becoming embedded as a particular performative quality of the object. Immediately a qualification needs making.

All objects design, which is to say that all objects, individually, collectively or as elements of an 'apparatus', exist in a condition of actual or immanent environmental propensity. Performatively, they animate the function/dysfunction of the environments they, in whole or part, create. An excavator on a construction site, a microchip on a computer motherboard, a dinner set on a fine table, a book on a library shelf – these and myriad other potential examples illustrate the point. One can quite literally assert: 'how objects are designed designs their designing'. As indicated, what, however, is becoming evident in this condition of limit of design, is the increasing technical transfer of design from the designing subject to the designing object, both generally and environmentally, but also, and more specifically, in the design process. The more sophisticated design software becomes, the more the designer is positioned in a service relation to the technology.

It is increasingly the case that unless there is a design software tool for the design task, the task does not get done. This, of course, is not just restricted to design, rather is a comment on the designing nature of technology itself. One can equally observe that: on many farms unless there is a piece of machinery to do the job, the job does not get done; in many factories unless there is an available machine tool, the job doesn't get started; or in travel,

that unless a mechanised mode of transport is available, there is no journey.

It is possible to observe, as Bernard Stiegler has, that "… the greater humanity's power, the more 'dehumanised' the world becomes". The irony here is that the human intelligence that historically drove technological development is now being erased by its own inventions. Design, as it has been brought into its metaphysical presence as a practice, can also be viewed in the same frame of auto-negation.

These remarks make three fundamental historically directive moments of design clear.

The first moment of design, the moment of the appropriation of the instrumental agency of things-to-hand, involved a slow emergence out of the ontic. The taking into possession of the 'designing' of things brought humans into being in so far as they were designed as they themselves internalised the external 'worlding' nature of the propensity of things and then orchestrated their combined direction. Hereafter, designing was enacted, as a specific quality of mind, as it knowingly and intuitively guided the hand of artifice. Design, so embedded, was expressed and named in numerous ways as cultures were constituted and grew. The second moment, which goes to the way design was made present and has become generally understood today, is the moment when it became a conscious activity mobilised in the advancement of a particular economy by modern, western and westernised human beings, in their world-making. The third moment, which is now underway, is design's withdrawing back into an ontic state.[10] This is not, however, returning from whence it came but rather its becoming elemental to the full gamut of emergent mechanical, electronic and biophysical technologies.

As both Flusser and Stiegler show, the product of human intelligence is increasingly thinking for its creator. Such observations were predated by many decades by Martin Heidegger's analysis of the fate of western metaphysics as its eventual technological embodiment, and the designing power of technology thereafter (a situation thinkable as the next turning of design, its fourth moment, and so the genesis of an Other being).[11] The hegemony of technology is, of course, partly a consequence of the unchecked passage of design into designing tools, objects and system/apparatus, creating a rate of change beyond human adaptive capability. In this sense technology cannot any longer be framed within the fiction of an evolutionary model. Rather than being reactive to particular environments, technology increasingly creates them, while displacing the idea that there is any other way.

Technology can endure and survive whereas we, as we are, cannot.

As techno-biological beings, with a residual reflectiveness, we will increasingly find ourselves at a crossroad. Our ways back

and forward are blocked – we cannot, in our differences, return to what we were, neither can we continue as we are (not least because our protracted condition of unsustainability has so altered the environments of our dependence, including the atmospheric climate, that we have to change the direction of so many things we do). What we see to our left is a designing into a full technicity, as outlined – the directive force of this ontic domain takes us from human being toward a variety of hybridised states and eventually into a completely post-human existence. One can, and some have, accepted this as our fate. Finally, one path remains. In contrast to resigning oneself to the fate of the species becoming totally technological, another kind of being-in-this-world, based on 'an Other(s) designing', could be initiated. This designing would have the *objective* of the designing of another designing-environment. More concretely, this implies an ontological designing for 'being-with-the-designed' – what this ontological designing aims to create is a directive design thinking that demands a performative over-determination of the technological by the ethical. This means designing *how to be with technology*, rather than designing *with, for* or *by* technology. It implies a critical design practice that produces nothing *but deals with what is* (rather than what might be). It is thus a turning back toward our own being, not to dwell an inner self, but rather to activate a being that is an animator of sustaining relations. This non-evolutionary pathway is about making choices amid 'what is' that can lead to a new assemblage – one able to initiate a re-created ontic, an other world, that can sustain not just what 'the they' and 'we' need in order to be *but* rather *the being of what could be* as the *means of sustaining beings of and in difference.* Fundamentally, the condition of sustainment evoked here does not require material invention and new technologies, rather it requires a transformation of how what already exists can be differentially seen, characterised, valued and employed.

Concluding Comments

As we have seen, design did not commence with the designing subject, but rather was, and is, in the very ontic nature of things. The appropriation of things for proto-human use, out of this nature, designed modes of making that themselves made *homo faber.* Ontologically, design and the exercise of craft were unified for *eons* – the duration of the historicity of design, as phenomena, thus far exceeds the history of design made present. We have seen two very different examples of this embeddedness of design – this in how the marked body and language figured as design(ing) sites. These examples are clearly two of myriad. Design in its modern, western, productivist and named sense, and as the product of a designer, was of course a conjunctural consequence of the division of labour initiated by the capitalist mode of production (an oft cited

example is the use of design by the company created by Josiah Wedgwood at the end of the 18th century).

Technology is now re-inducting the ontologically determinant design essence of design back into the ontic.

The illusion of design emanating from a 'creative' subject will no doubt persist for the foreseeable future – which is to say the ontological designing of the designer will continue to be suppressed and repressed. The designing forces of things, the disposition to eclectic appropriation and assemblage of the already designed by designers, the designing of the imagination by the televisual, the delimitation of designing by the 'enablement' of design software, the interpolative agency of 'designer' as role: these are but some of the instances of ongoing ontological designing.

It may well be that 'craft' will be able to partly sustain the continuity of a depleted community of designers, but dominantly artefactual design will be a function of 'creatively intelligent' technology, be this 'complemented' with a simulacrum – the most likely fate of the 'designing' subject. A counter direction of design may of course cut across this (de)futuring of design (the elevation of the importance of the kind of design thinking as outlined above that can become the *means of sustaining beings of and in difference*). Effectively what underpins this imperative is design becoming the politico-ethical guidance system for the One and the Other living in a technologically naturalised world in ways that sustain crucial biophysical, cultural and psychological underpinnings upon which everybody depends (this not least by a continued pursuit of redistributive justice and a culture of sustainment [for further discussion of this see 'Voice of Sustainment' in this issue – Ed]. Putting this into the absolutely most basic formulation – 'well being' is both an individual and a collective phenomenon; one cannot be well within the biophysical world, have a healthy psyche or be nourished by a culture as a singularity. In this respect, the imperative of the We over rides the One and the Other.

An honest and courageous designer now finds herself stranded betwixt design's Others. Looking back to the ontic before design's naming and knowing, and, looking forward to the ontic after the erasure of human designing. The options are oblivion or the making of another Other – the designing mind able to redirect design. For the designer to now reject thinking, and trust in the creative drive of the intuitive, is de facto to abandon design!

Notes

1. 'Discourse' is used here in the Foucaldian sense, as the power of discursive relations of knowledge, language and practice to constitute and animate categories that are formative and directive of worlds and subjects.
2. To illustrate we can note three examples. The first is the abstract total body decoration of the people of Sudan's

Southeast Nuba where the body was treated as a surface upon which to create an aesthetic spectacle individually, collectively, emotionally and ceremonially. The second is from the Tawba people of south eastern Zaire and north eastern Zambia, whose practices of *Kulemba* (scarification) were based upon a socially complex process of marking the body (which involved specific skills and aesthetic conventions). Body scarification, along with other physical inscriptive practices, was a way of making the environment legible, and so able to be negotiated by human consciousness. Effectively the marked body was situated in a visual regime of 'order and sense'. Just as trails through the forest were marked for the hunter to follow, stray from and return to, so the marked the body was positioned within the world of its existence as a reference point within the social fabric. The third example is tattooing, which was used in ancient Egypt 4,500 years ago as a means to bring the body into a wider symbolic order. See Arnold Rubin (ed) *Marks of Civilisation* Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1988.

3. Its systemic modularity reveals a designing that breaks down the binary distinction between economic and cultural production inherent in Western productivism, as well as the centrality of the creative subject (not least as manifest in the claims to creativity made by designers). Moreover, approached from language systems, the contrast between the foundations of the West and Chinese script-based East become very clear. The West has languages that centre on the representational capability of an alphabet, which while it can be learned quickly, delivers rich but unstable language use. Western languages exist in a condition of constant change and depend upon considerable interpretative skills. So great is the change that trying to read the language used, say 1,000 years ago, is like dealing with a foreign tongue (the examples of old English and old German come to mind). This is not so with a symbol based script. Lothar Ledderose *Ten Thousand Things* Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press, 2000.
4. 'Evolutionism' is used here to indicate the transposition of evolutionary theory out of biology into the broader culture as an explanatory model of progressive change. In fact what happened was that the *idea* of evolution has become 'common sense' (i.e., ideological, as in Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's understanding of ideology as common sense) within much of the scientific community, many professions and almost the entirety of popular culture.
5. The term 'technology' here, and elsewhere in this essay, implies an ever expanding sphere that enfolds not only the electro-mechanical, but equally instrumental knowledge and its associated symbolic order.

6. Vilém Flusser *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (trans A. Mathews) London: Reaktion, 2000, 8–20.
7. Pierre Clastres *Society Against the State* New York: Zone Books, 1987, 17.
8. Plurality is used here as a quantitatively descriptive term, unlike pluralism – an ideology of knowledge.
9. See note 4.
10. For a radical and challenging analysis of technology see Bernard Stiegler *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (trans Richard Beardworth and George Collins) Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Stiegler notes that Andre Leroi-Gourhan's, after pointing out that the tool/techne invents the human rather than the human inventing the tool/techne, remarked that 'technology was a 'zoological reality". 140–43.
11. See Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology' (which was first given as a lecture in 1955) in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (trans. William Lovitt) New York: Harper and Row, 1977, 3–35. Two major qualifications beg to be made: (i) reference to an Other being created out of a technosphere is not just one more evocation of a human/technology hybrid, rather what it brings into focus is a being disconnected from *what we are*, and how we imagine *what it is to be*; (ii) the comments made do not assume 'humanity' uniformly changes, or is of one moment, however, the fate of the species rests with what occupies its technological forces of destiny.