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## The matter of design

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### ABSTRACT

This paper combines notes for the opening debate, ‘In the future design will be very important designers less so’ of the Design Research Society conference, Designing the Future, University of Umea, Sweden, 12–14 June 2014 with closing comments for the symposium Matter/Matter(ing) by Design at Parsons School of Design, NYC, 10–11 April 2015.

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### 1. ‘In the future design will be very important, designers less so’

Two hundred years ago a Design Research Society conference was not possible. Indeed, Design, as we know it, as a professional activity, did not exist. One hundred years ago we could have had debates on design – in 1914 there was a famous debate between Gropius and Van der Velde at the German Werkbund (in effect on art versus industry, some things do not change much) – but at that date the idea of design research was all but impossible and indeed the Design profession itself, as we know it was still incipient. The concepts of high-level design education and of design research waited for another half-century.

The point I am making here is obvious – almost, but not quite, for to point to the historical emergence of design as profession is to remind us what we continually tend to forget, namely that if design is what we think of today as (in effect) an anthropological capacity – without which we could not be fully human (in the words of the late British design historian John Heskett, ‘a unique characteristic of what defines us as human beings on a par with literature and music’) it is also specifically, in the form that it takes *as capacity*, a *historical* phenomenon.

In other words, if design, again to quote Heskett, allows us, or helps us, ‘to create a world of artifice to meet our needs and give meaning to our lives,’ and thus (ideally if not always in practice) ‘beneficially reshape the world of artifice we have created and inhabit,’ it does so always under *particular* historical conditions. Design is never outside of history: it *occurs*; in the context of forces and circumstances; in the *play that is set in motion* between a relation of forces and the *potential (shi)* which is implied by that situation, and can be made to play in one’s favor.

Hegel argued that philosophy is always its own time reflected in thought. Design partakes on something of the same condition. It is always at once beholden to and reflective of, its

moment – but, and this is crucial, it is also at best reflective on or reflective *concerning* its moment. Design, in other words, sometimes *thinks* its moment and its possibilities.

What does it signify/or mean/ to say that design is never outside of history? Two things: one general, one specific.

The generality is that design is always and everywhere historical. That means it cannot be thought outside of a historical perspective. To try to think design analytically or anthropologically without *also* thinking it historically is doomed to failure.

One proof of this is that it is the *lack* of such a perspective that renders so much design research intellectually null; that strips it of substantive content.

The more specific point is that, as a professional activity design does *not* occur, does not happen, only or even largely through its own volition. Rather, Design – modern design, professional design – is *called into being* by Industrialization and is so in order to do a specific job; that is, design is tasked with ‘overcoming,’ at least in appearance, the subject–object split at the level of objects. (Or we might equally say, with reconciling ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ – normally, commercially in the interests of the latter through the intensification of the former.)

Two essential qualifiers:

– The first is the reminder that industry (aka capitalism) does not simply call design into being as such, but only *on its terms*. That is, it calls it into being as a *subaltern practice* (a ‘not too serious’ profession in Latour’s terms). Industry wishes only to have design *for its use*.

The history of design from the 1840s through to the present day is in part a struggle with this determination.<sup>1</sup> But neither practice, nor history, nor research easily escapes from the a priori structuring of design activity. Put another way, designing, ‘design thinking’ and the thinking of design are *radically* limited by this origin – as well as by the uses to which they are put.

– The second qualifier becomes a question. Today it is not quite correct to say that we are in a ‘post-industrial’ world – certainly one would not say so if one lived in China for example. But, and it is a very important ‘but,’ even in China, let alone in the de-industrialized West, industry is no longer socially or economically formative.

We can put a precise date on the transition: 1973–1974, the oil price shock, the collapse of manufacturing profitability and the beginnings of a move to accumulation through the management of financial flows and consumption fueled by debt. After this point, in a certain way, industry no longer matters. It becomes like craft in the nineteenth century, present, but no longer formative.

What is formative in the world and the economy belongs to consumption and to finance and to the realm of digital communication and above all to their interlinking.

An obvious question now intrudes. If Design was born from industry and industry is no longer formative how then is Design? What happens to Design as it loses that which formed it?

We need to be careful as we answer this question. For it raises a larger one: if industry is no longer formative of society as a whole are we then even in ‘industrial society?’ Does the demise of industry (and rise of other factors of production as formative for a global society grounded on nothing but an economy that is taking a hyper-capitalist form) perhaps mean that we are entering into a new kind of historical epoch?

It is my contention that we are. I would say that since 1945 we have been in transition to a new historical period, one that obviously emerges out of industrialization but is yet distinct from it.<sup>2</sup>

What makes it different?

The far too short answer is that over the last 70 years we have been in transition toward an epoch where the *artificial, and not nature, is the horizon, medium and prime condition of human (and not only human) existence*. This epoch is *qualitatively* different from the preceding industrial epoch. To put it over simply, the quantitative expansion, after 1945, in artifice in every dimension (technological, symbolic, in relation to nature) becomes a *qualitative* transformation in the underlying conditions of our being.

What are some of the aspects of this new historical condition?

This is an immensely complex topic. In the time we have here I can say very little but I will name three 'meta' conditions that describe, in my view, the metaphysics (in the strict sense of the term – meaning the condition of the real and of truth) of this new epoch.

- The first is the *absolute* dependence (even in our relations with nature) on how we relate to [or in my language 'contend with'] the artificial.<sup>3</sup>
- The second is the equally absolute dependence for our futures on the *quality* (and I stress this) of our *mediation* with the artificial – and on the *quality* of the mediation of the artificial with all other living and non-living systems on the planet.
- The third point, in certain ways the most interesting, or at least that which is yet least understood, is the fact that things no longer 'are' as facts. To put it another way, *at least in the realm of all that we make, certainty is dead*. Today, there is, in a certain sense no Law, and we have to learn to live with this fact. (*In the artificial there are only possibilities, which are without definite end. All artificial things are therefore propositions concerning the artificial.*)

How does this bear on design? [And on the proposition I am arguing for?] Very quickly, I think in *two* major ways:

First, the ideas of relation, mediation and the propositional – the converse of the end of certainty – means that designing, in the broad sense of re-configurative activity is now objectively positioned as an essential, perhaps even *the* essential mode of acting in the artificial world. Designing is essential because mediation means the mediation of incommensurable requirements and conditions. Design, unlike technology potentially welcomes, is at home with, and does not see to erase incommensurability.

Since incommensurability – at the largest of humans, their actions and natural systems – is our global condition, this means, in effect, that there is no humanly or ecologically successful living with the artificial that is not also 'designing.' Designing (lower case, a transitive and operative verb) -as-mediation therefore becomes (will become in the future) less a specialist but marginal activity and more an *essential* generalized mode of acting in the world.

Second, in the context of generalized artifice the level at which design acts as mediation is profound. It is not a kind of supplement to what-is (which is how it functioned in the last century) but a kind of depth condition. The essential mediation of subject and object (design's subject matter after all!) now displaces the split Descartes introduced between the subject and the object. That antagonism disappears: just as 'Will' and 'Law' disappear – to be replaced by negotiated configurative activity (which replaces will) and by the idea of the proposition (which replaces Law).

This is also why ‘technology’ disappears as such. Technology is not absolute but is born as a concept with the splitting that marks the beginning of industrial modernity – roughly, that between aesthetics, ethics and technics. ‘Design’ was invented, industrially, to pretend the overcoming of that split, but in a condition of the artificial as world its overcoming becomes real. Designing therefore supplants technology, which now reverts to a sub-set of making and is in fact dissolved as such since its ‘objectivity’ is now penetrated on every side.

You can already see that the ‘design’ that is now being referred to is no longer *quite* – the qualifier is important – Design as we have comprehended it over the last two centuries.

But what then of the designer? After all, if Design (capitalized) was born out of industrialization then so was the Designer (capital D). The ‘death’ of industry [as formative for our society] therefore means also the death of the Designer (capitalized).

Why should we be surprised at this? Out of the whole of human history, only in the last two centuries have there truly been Designers in the professional sense, identified as such.

But then, were designers ever designers?

Just as Bruno Latour argues, ‘[w]e have never been Modern, I would say: we never yet had design – only its weak, subaltern industrial-capitalist, version. One reason we have never had design is perhaps that Designers, as well as struggling to exemplify the capabilities of design, also, in some ways, ‘got in the way’ of design. Is the radical conclusion of this then that in the emerging future we shall get to the point where the Designer ‘disappears’ within a wider praxis of designing as a ubiquitous and necessary condition of becoming human?

Of course, we could say, designers (in the old sense of the term) will continue to exist. But they will be like craftsmen in the nineteenth century. They will work, but they will not *as such* exert a formative influence. That formative influence will belong to design, as a multiple and generalized human capacity, occasionally professionalized.

Might the world be a better place for this? After all, the ghetto is always a precarious existence; assimilation has its advantages (recall the Borg in *Star Trek*).

The world loses Designers but it *gains* design.

## 2. What is the relation between matter & matter(ing) – or why are things ‘us’?

Something is absent in the discussion and this absence is not negligible, it goes to the heart of understanding what we are doing.

I say ‘an absence,’ there are actually three.

– Absence in the debate of any sense of that which links, connects and at the same time differentiates between, ‘objects’ and ‘design.’

– An absence of any sense of what it is that design works on; of what, if you like, *is the subject-matter of design* (and the term ‘objects’ is not by itself an adequate answer, nor is an adequate answer ‘design’).

– An absence of what makes the difference (if any) between ‘matter’ and ‘matter(ing).’

There is also a fourth missing item, this one a kind of meta-absence, it is the lack of sufficient examination of the changing historical, operational and critical context in which all this is taking place.

Let me begin with the third point (while keeping the fourth very much in mind). One way to think this differentiation, or this *movement between* matter/mattering, is to use Latour's useful little point about the shift in our time from 'Matters of Fact' to 'Matters of Concern.'

Philosophically, for us, until very recently indeed, matter, as above all natural matter, earth-stuff, has meant Fact. In effect, matter was/is equated to 'object' and was/is contrasted to 'subject.'

But *Mattering*, meaning that which matters (to us) is precisely a matter of concern and thus cannot have the quality of a fact. A *matter(ing)* is not therefore an object.

On the contrary, a matter of concern always takes the form of a question: 'This?'

So here is a first shift.

But we can go a little further.

Most matter is not today for us natural matter, it is artificial.

Indeed if you were to accept the claim that we (meaning we + nature) are today *wholly* within the horizon of the artificial then *all* matter, including everything we used to see as 'nature,' is 'Artificial.'

Oil is artificial, coal is artificial, air is artificial.

The underlying historical claim here is that since 1945 we have been in transition to a world where it is the artificial, and no longer nature, that is (for us) the horizon and medium of the world; where it is the artificial (and our relations with 'it') that constitutes as the formative totality of existence and thus becomes the prime condition of our existence.

The condition of the artificial re-frames the world, deeply.

This shift has enormous implications, which we have by no means yet intellectually fathomed, indeed have not begun to think it adequately.

In relation to what we are discussing, it changes the status of things; it *re-positions* things within the world.

Especially it changes the status and character of the made. Matter *moves*. Which means matter, all matter, becomes as I already asserted a minute ago, artificial: all matter is for us, now, artifice.

Some implications:

- (a) If this is so, then, since artifice is always the product of mind, all matter comes within mind.
- (b) Therefore, matter is not other to us. If Toys 'R' Us, Matter is us.
- (c) The proof of this is climate change. Climate change means we, collectively, have entered matter: oil is you, coal is you, air is you. To put it another way, all matter is now *mattering*. All matter *matters* differently. All matter is a *matter for concern*. As we are continuous with matter so the separation matter/persons falls.
- (d) If this is so then the mind-matter distinction falls, and so too, obviously, the subject-object distinction. The discontinuity between these moments – on which the entirety of the modern world is built – falls.
- (e) Conversely, the *entire* question becomes for us that of subject-object mediation. This, I would insist, is the *only* question that should concern human beings today.

But we need to go still further. It is not even, in fact, a question of subject-object mediation, for that formulation still preserves a discontinuity that we must now accept the loss of.

Since, as we know in our hearts, we are essentially failed animals, unable to survive without mediation, what we have in fact, as us, as ourselves, is subjects seeking the mediators on which we depend for our lives. (This is Herbert Simon's 'search for good designs').<sup>4</sup>

Three implications:

- In this relation artifice is not only or even primarily 'object'
- In fact the subject–object relation here is therefore not a relation of subject to what is other to it but of the subject *to itself*.
- In subject–object relations we do not meet the object so much as we meet ourselves. We meet ourselves externalized, even in allegorical form, or in alienated form, but we meet *ourselves*.

So our mediators, our objects, are us: But how 'us'?

Are they demonstrations of our being, or demonstrations of our possible becoming?

We have wanted, on the model of nature, to think 'being.'

But the mediators themselves, both in their multiplicity of variants and in their collective singular as mediators – things, objects, games, pollution, breeding animals, make-up – give us a contrary answer.

For a prime condition of the artificial, perhaps in the end the most fundamental, is that things do not possess being. It is not only that these things are contingent – which they are, and radically so, but that this contingency is not somehow casual, a surface attribute which belies, somehow, an identity ('objects' perhaps) it is that contingency extends into their deepest aspects. The prime condition of artifice, and thus of the artificial as a whole, is that it possesses no Law.

Let me illustrate this, even with a seemingly trivial example. Here is a slide of six modern chairs. Each embody a relation between (as Simon would put it) 'human purpose and natural law'. But in fact law is obeyed *only* in local conditions (the laws appertaining to the bending of tubular steel in one case, or the formation of a plywood sheet in another). *At the level of their configuration no Law obtains.*<sup>5</sup>

This means that, in a certain sense, in the artificial things are not. There is no ontology of a thing. Things, meaning here all that is artificial (including by the way of course, and increasingly, ourselves – for we do not stand outside of artifice, that which is our product and which literally makes us who we are) are 'merely' ontic; the contingent product of always historical encounters.

In the artificial what matters for how it is, i.e. how it acts, is not a thing's ontological condition or putative identity but its configuration.

What matters is what a thing does, how it acts, in what direction it acts, in what manner it is disposed to act towards; what relations it subtends and opens (or closes). What matters, in short, is its disposition; its negotiation of circumstance and potentiality.

We need to say more on this but this must be thought also in relation to the second prime condition of the artificial that is that in the artificial things can *always* be other.

This *radical* contingency of the artificial (which goes beyond Simon's succinctly expressed methodological problem) is thus absolute.<sup>6</sup>

The move to a (historical) condition in which things can *always* be other has a series of implications.

- (1) Certainty disappears (no Law). The artificial is the realm of the possible. Possibility is here not will. It is the *objective* condition of the artificial.

- (2) The status of truth in the artificial is not that of fact but the possible. The truth of something is its possibility. We get to an understanding of this truth through the negotiation of potentiality.
- (3) In the artificial, the world is 'possible' – but we do not know in advance what that possibility is; and the possibilities that are explored will always be contingent, a historical product of encounters. Thinking possibility is thinking these conditions through the modeled negotiation of possibility (potentiality).
- (4) Hence, in the artificial, there is not being, but only possible becoming.
- (5) In fact, we can speak about a metaphysics of the artificial – meaning a description of 'what is' and what is true. But this means, in a different sense to other historical epochs *we have made and make* the conditions of own metaphysics. What are those conditions? We can summarize them in this way.

– in the artificial, all artifice, and therefore the artificial as a whole is contingent and radically so: i.e. lacking any certainty whatsoever

- the artificial is a matter of encounters
- the artificial is a matter of the possible.

My use of the word 'matter' here in this context is deliberate.

What does this change? Well, one thing it changes is the relation between knowing (that) and acting (how).

Previously (under the horizon of nature) we focused on knowing that, i.e. on knowing what-is, i.e. laws, whether of gods, God or nature. This was where knowledge lay. Theology, philosophy and science successively confirmed this. In this regime, *acting*, the question of 'how,' is simply applied knowledge. Technology is the obvious instance. Note that as second-order knowledge acting is not permitted reflection which itself rises to the condition of knowing.<sup>7</sup> Heidegger's line, from the essay 'Overcoming Metaphysics,' captures this perfectly: 'Technology as the highest form of rational consciousness, technologically interpreted, and the lack of reflection *as the arranged powerlessness*, opaque to itself, to attain a relation to what is worthy of question, belong together: they are the same thing' (my emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

But in the Artificial, all of this reverses. The artificial cannot be known in law-like terms. The artificial 'is' not: it is a perpetual possibility. Therefore 'what' the artificial *might* be (I stress the conditional) can only be known via how it manifests. In the artificial, the royal road to understanding is not through contemplation or measurement or 'research,' it is through acting, i.e. it is through, one way or another, no matter how this is conceived, making. The artificial is known only through what is made, more specifically, what is configured, what is proposed, what is modeled, prototyped.

What experiment is to science, configurative action and 'making' is to the artificial.<sup>9</sup> Making is at once the embodiment of the artificial: its exemplification – its exploration, its discovery – and is itself, always, also a complex symbolic activity and thus a mode of knowing.<sup>10</sup>

Now we are coming close to design (but we have actually been there all the time).

We can return to the little slide of the variety of modern chairs.

How we know what chairs can be is only by creating chairs. Each chair is a proposition concerning what a chair might be. The essence of that proposition, and the factor now that both links and differentiates objects and designs, is contained in the configuration of each chair.

All things, natural and artificial, have configuration. That is they are physically structured, and through that structuring enabled to act in certain ways.



Design is nothing more, *or less*, than the act of (re)configuring.

It is configuration brought to (degrees) of consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Design (re)-configures and therefore re-directs how things act.

But as the last example shows the proposition that things address is only in the first instance to the thing itself, it is in the second instance the act of artifice itself, and in the third, and most important instance it is the human dependency on artifice.

Thus only incidentally, only through the lens of the subjective arrogance of the subject–object distinction, only thought of as manipulation, are things ‘merely’ things.

Taken as a whole, things, in their conditions as propositions, are in fact a direct address, to us, *as us*.

The perpetual *question* that a thing asks is: who are you? The *critical* question that some things ask is: do you know who you are, do you know in what world, in what contexts, under what conditions, you exist?

The perpetual *offering* that a thing makes is ‘in this small way, be well.’<sup>12</sup>

Design is the configurative negotiation between these moments. It is for this last reason that Herbert Simon can claim that all human actions boil down to the search for good designs, i.e. the search for good mediations.

And Simon points us also to the idea that, understood in this way, designing or design action is a form of knowing the world:

‘One of the charges sometimes laid against modern science and technology is that if we know how to do something, we cannot resist doing it. While one can think of counterexamples, the claim has some measure of truth. One can envisage a future, however, in which our main interest in both science and design will lie in what they teach us about the world and not in what they allow us to do to the world. Design like science is a tool for understanding as well as for acting.’<sup>13</sup>

Indeed it is. Designing is the contingent discovery of hitherto unsuspected or overlooked or forgotten aspects concerning mediation, the artificial, and by very little extension of the latter, ourselves.

We have been talking about ‘things,’ but really we are talking about situations for mediation means things in situ. The ethics of design lies here.

To summarize a complex argument, I’ll give what I think is the essence of ethics for design and which also gives us the axiom that must guide design action: ‘There is no need for an ‘ethics’ but only for a clear vision of the situation). For to be faithful to this situation means: to treat it right to the limit of the possible. Or, if you prefer: to draw from this situation, to the greatest possible extent, the affirmative humanity that it contains.’<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Design has struggled to attain a quasi-autonomy that turns out itself to be part of the social and intellectual division of labor. Design is infinitely more determined by historical forces than it wishes to admit.
2. I have started to explore this in a chapter in Tony Fry, Clive Dilnot and Susan Stewart, *Design and the Question of History* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014). See also the chapter ‘Why the Artificial May Yet Save Us,’ in *Design as Future-Making*, ed. Susan Yelavich and Barbara Adams (London, Bloomsbury, Fall 2014).
3. ‘To Contend with What We Have Made’ is the title of a work-in-progress.

4. 'The proper study of mankind has been said to be man. But I have argued that people or at least their intellectual component may be relatively simple, that most of the complexity of their behavior may be drawn from their environment, from their search for good designs. If I have made my case, then we can conclude that, in large part, the proper study of mankind is the science of design, not only as the professional component of a technical education but as a core discipline for every liberally educated person.' Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, MIT press, 2001) p. 139.
5. That is, at the level of the configuration of the artifact no Law can be drafted. There is no Ur Law determining in any a priori form, the configurative character of an artifact. The configuration (form) of a chair is entirely a matter of encounter and contingency. All chairs are therefore explorations of what a chair could be. As noted below all chairs are therefore propositions concerning what a chair could be. The propositional is a condition of the artificial.
6. 'The contingency of artificial phenomena has always created doubts as to whether they fall properly within the compass of science. Sometimes these doubts refer to the goal-directed character of artificial systems and the consequent difficulty of disentangling prescription from description. This seems to me not to be the real difficulty. The genuine problem is to show how empirical propositions can be made at all about systems that, given different circumstances, might be quite other than they are.' Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, 3rd edition (Cambridge, MIT press, 2001) p. 3.
7. Cf. design. It has never yet been permitted to Design to be thought of as a site of knowledge. Hence the oxymoron of the idea of the 'design-led university.'
8. Martin Heidegger, 'Overcoming Metaphysics' in Joan Stambaugh, trans., *The End of Philosophy* (New York, Harper and Row, 1973) p. 99.
9. The close reading of Heidegger's text 'The Age of the World Picture' is essential here. See *The Question Concerning Technology* trans. William Lovitt (New York, Harper, 1977) pp. 115–154.
10. Nelson Goodman gets this point perfectly. 'The primary purpose [of symbolic activity] is cognition in and for itself: the practicality, pleasure, compulsion & communicative utility all depend on this. Symbolization, then, is to be judged fundamentally by how well it serves the cognitive purpose: by the delicacy of its discriminations and the aptness of its allusions; by the way it works in grasping, exploring and informing the world; by how it analyzes, sorts and organizes; by how it participates in the making, manipulation, retention and transformation of knowledge. Considerations of simplicity and subtlety, power and precision, scope and selectivity, familiarity and freshness, are all relevant and often contend with one another; their weighting is relative to our interests, our information, our inquiry.' *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1969) p. 258.
11. Lacan says somewhere that culture is where form gets 'put on the table.' Design is (ideally) the place where the [given] form of things (now interpreting this term in broadest possible aspects) 'gets put on the table.'
12. See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, chapter 5 *passim* (Oxford, OUP, 1985).
13. Herbert Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, *ibid*, p. 164.
14. Alain Badiou, *Ethics* (London, Verso, 2003) p. 15. Quotation adapted.

## Notes on contributor

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