

Experiencing the Phenomenological Object

Design, particularly the three dimensional, is currently in a position to reframe the essential context of its activities, and by inference, reformulate its methods and its knowledge base. This position has come about through a change in the expectations of Design from both society and business.

While acting as the long-standing initiators and co-ordinators of most commercial design activity, business and marketing have increasingly commoditised both the act of design and its products in their attempts to objectively control branding, product identity and style trends. This has resulted in small incremental design changes and little actual product differentiation. We are awash in a sea of products that are boring and look like every other product [Peters, 1995]. Such a subordinate relationship naturally leaves Design relatively impotent with regards to its higher aims and intentions toward the meaningful content of its products.

It is precisely this lack of meaningful content in our constructed environments, in the tools we use for both work and play, that has contributed toward a profound cultural shift in the west, moving toward a society that expects more from its objects. This shift is forcing large corporations to reassess their core values and long term strategies so as to become active participants of change rather than the stoic arbiters of consumption culture. Since this is distinctly a case of business reacting to change in the culture of the consumer we must begin this journey with an investigation into this apparent societal change of mood and the opportunities this represents to Design.

This is not about throwing away the intuitive skills and creative passion that is inherent in every good designer. Rather, Design has an opportunity to reassert its importance and value in the broader relationship between business and society, and to both empower and explore the essentially human dimension of its activity.

The Nomura Research Institute identifies the forthcoming global culture trend as the Age of Creation Intensification, succeeding the (soon to fade) Age of Information Intensification which in turn succeeded the Ages of Industrialisation and Agriculturalisation. More useful to Design are the findings of social research which show that there is a growing tendency toward the search for value and meaning within life, giving rise to what is termed integral culture. The manifestations of this are apparent in newspaper and television commentary which highlight the heightening popularity of alternative medicines, non-secular approaches to religion, ecological and social awareness etc. This shift, once recognised, poses the question: why has this come about? And more to the point, what does this signify for Design?

All these phenomenon when grouped together describe a social and cultural outlook, or more accurately a worldview. This apparent shift toward meaning and the primacy of lived experience is not definitively post-modern, a term which disavows any ethical or moral preferences, and is obviously the antithesis of what we are discussing. It does however have the ring of a rejection of some other belief system.

Spirituality and personal meaning have been waning (wars apart) since the Scientific Revolution and the influences of Newton, Descartes, Galileo and the subsequent industrial revolution which materially proved technology's (the product of science) efficacy. This is not to say that a new generation of Luddites are on the way. Our technological apparati have become an essential underpinning to our

mode of life. However, the increase in efficiency and material wealth seemed to have occurred at the expense of the richness of everyday experience and the subtle meanings hidden within.

The appropriation of technology in any area of life seems to have the effect of smoothing over the experiential qualities that make us aware of what is going on underneath the bonnet or behind the screen and ultimately, mentally attend to what it means to do such and such.

Is our relationship with technology autoplastic or alloplastic? Is technology neutral when used or does it effect us through its use? To misquote Churchill 'we give shape to the buildings we surround ourselves with, thereafter they shape us'. Rather than empowering humankind both physically and mentally technology has the effect of making anything possible and yet not requiring a comprehensively conscious intention: couch potatoes one and all. There is a fundamentally scientific philosophy behind all technological systems and their implementation is enacted under the same banner. Interacting with this technocratic and de-personalised environment fuels a reactionary mindset that hankers after meaningful content, mystery and emotion. What we receive via our technological tools-for-living often falls far short of our expectations, and yet somehow manages to monopolise our conscious attention and consequently manipulate our worldview. This is the subtext of our present relationship with technology that culture seems to be engaged with.

The signification for Design is evidently that it needs to engage with this cultural shift through its appropriation, or more accurately mediation of technology. The root cause for Design's failure to mediate technology in a meaningful enough way is its dependence on the scientific and business type rationalistic underpinning that brought about the situation outlined above (and interestingly, also legitimised the activities of Design in the eyes of its clients). The grey, black or white boxes industry produces are just as cold and experientially meaningless as they were ten years ago. We merely seemed to have shoe-horned greater power and more functions into the thing, perhaps rounded off the hard edges and introduced the odd pastel coloured button, but these efforts serve only to make these clever little objects more incipient and devoid of character.

The term character neatly describes the meaningful content of an object when consciously experienced. Design however, has primarily focused on the context of experience; shape, colour and ergonomics -surface value. In terms of meaningful experience clothes do not maketh the man. By focusing on the object in purely material terms we do not come any closer to teasing the elusive strands of meaning or character from out of its function or use value (this particular dilemma highlights the difficulty when dealing with microtechnology since there is even no physicality in its operating mechanisms with which to play with, which perhaps is why we seem to be leaving all the interesting interaction stuff to software developers). Character is derived by the individual through conscious experience of the object, lending credence to the fact that we become more attached to specific objects over time. This axis of experience points toward the location of character or meaning as being a synergistic product of both individual and object, thus residing in the space in-between the two. In effect we are analysing the character of experience rather than the object. The object is merely the mediator of the experience just as it is the mediator of a certain technology. The key ingredient to any experience is the intention that either of the two parties brings to this interaction, without intention we would have no action. It is intentionality that gives experience direction and content, and since

neither designers nor technology are neutral we must attempt to consciously understand the multiplicity of intentions that a designed interaction might possess, however subtle.

To help analyse the potential content of any individual-object interaction, Design can turn to phenomenology, a school of philosophy whose focus is to reveal the essential nature of experience. At a simple level, phenomenology splits the relationship with an object into three distinct areas: embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations and alterity relations. Though none of the three exist independently of the others, the task of understanding the experience of interaction is made initially simpler by their division.

Embodiment Relations is the arena of physical form and kinetic action, where sensory data is born and physical interaction afforded.

Hermeneutic Relations constitutes the mental (cognitive) and emotional dispositions that initiate and interplay within an interaction in the form of intentionality.

Alterity Relations is the dimension of an interaction in which the object of ones intention is perceived in terms of otherness. This particularly elusive concept could be described as the felt sensation of the importance, intelligence or autonomy that the object, animal or individual that is being interacted with has [Hybs, 1996].

These three titles form a triumvirate of types that make up a coherent and unified experience, however the emphasis placed on each is relative; each individual case, between different individuals and objects is singular. An interaction between an individual and an object that is dominantly embodied is where the object or tool fits a physical requirement so well that no recognition of its existence is required by the person concerned, a perfect tool or prosthetic if you will (such as a hip replacement). Most objects, however, require some modicum of attention if any function or use value is assigned to it. The interaction thus contains a mental intention or hermeneutic element.

Thus far we remain within the remit of perceptual psychology or traditional product semantics. Such a scientific analysis assumes that perception is a structure composed of elementary, insular, and point-like awareness caused by physico-chemical stimuli. Needless to say this is not the experience we have as individuals and does not open up the meaningful dimension of interaction useful to Design. What is experienced through interaction is the totality of the object, and through interaction the object does not appear as an agglomeration of stimuli, but as having an overall meaning [Luijpen & Dondeyne, 1963].

To approach this more unified experience and move away from scientific reduction we need to make explicit the difference between people and objects in terms of experiencing them, since it is specifically the de-mechanisation of conscious and physical experience we wish to achieve. Alterity describes this difference between interaction and experience. A person whom I experience is known as the other(not me) and not an object or thing. He or she is revealed to me as a conscious being in the world (I am not alone). Kissing a person is a very different ballgame to kissing a pillow or other inanimate object.

The experiencing of alterity or of otherness can most eloquently be described as the experience of something that has autonomy and an intention towards me, something with a will and mind of its own (relatively speaking). Thus an object that induces us to sit up and concentrate or reflect on our own action or intention need not necessarily be invested with intelligence; a brick thrown at ones head is immediately transformed into a powerful and intentional entity. A door handle that does not work has its embodiment relationship

ruined and takes on an air of alterity as it commands you to acknowledge both its own presence and that of your own intention. It is this recognition of everyday intention, this critical distance between individual and technological function that provokes broader reflection of not only the part this particular object plays in my life but also the implications and ramifications that using it may have. This is the ethical and empowerment approach to the politics of everyday objects. Take the context of watching television for example, all TVs are operated and feel the same as each other, and yet everybody relates to it in a different way and watches different amounts. Where is the television for those individuals who if asked, would rather not be watching but found it hard to switch it off? The television set is inherently political because of the nature of the media that it purveys, so why pretend that the object we interact with ought to be neutral. Why doesn't my TV remind me that I am the boss? Furthermore, why cant my TV display to all my friends how in control of my life I am. My television has no more meaning than the small name badge on the front can support.

Such proposals will soon sound less ridiculous as limited artificial intelligence becomes inexpensive and finds its way into the most mundane of objects. At this point the design community must be in a position to not only be able to create meaningful experiences of technological functions but also be able to mediate actual otherness in a humanistic fashion.

References

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