Desma 10 Fall 2010

Design Culture - an Introduction
Notebook No. 1

Meeting 1, September 24, 2010

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What is Design?
What is Design Culture?

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Design understood in the widest possible sense:

“Design is the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.”

Viktor Papanek, Design For the Real World (1971)

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“All men are designers. All that we do, almost all the time, is design, for design is basic to all human activity. The planning and patterning of any act toward a desired, foreseeable end constitutes the design process.

Any attempt to separate design to make it a thing by itself, works counter to the fact that design is the primary underlying matrix of life.”

Victor Papanek: Design for the Real World, 1971

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Bricolage

‘Bricolages’ are compositions designed by combining pre-existing designs. They express their creator’s identity and worldview, consciously or unconsciously. Bricole is a form of communication by means of concrete objects and signs.

For the social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) bricolage represented the ‘logic of the concrete’: a ‘material’ way of forming and communicating meanings. It differs from abstract philosophical or scientific thought.

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Papanek’s definition of design comes close to equating design with culture. It seems to say that essentially

We create culture by designing, but we also need cultural knowledge to be able to design.

This raises the question: What is culture?

“Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. (Raymond Williams: Keywords, 1976)

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Culture

Etymology: the word culture comes from the Latin cultura: cultivation, tending.

In a similar way “broadcasting” was originally an agricultural term, referring to a way of throwing the seeds around in the field. It was adopted in the early 20th century by media culture, and came to refer to the practice of sending programming to large scattered audiences by means of radio or television.

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‘Culture’ - three ways of using the word according to Raymond Williams:

1. A general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development.

2. A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general.

3. The works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.

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Culture has ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ dimensions

- material production (studied by archaeology, cultural anthropology) - compare with agriculture.

- signifying or symbolic systems (studied by history, cultural studies) - compare with ‘cultivation of the mind’.

These are related: all cultural processes involve both the material and the symbolic.

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Culture - synthetic definition
In the widest sense, culture is the sum total of all human efforts: to survive, to create, to perceive, to signify, to communicate.

Culture covers both material things and the 'things of the mind'. Culture is about learning and passing the acquired knowledge to others.

Humans create culture; culture creates humans.

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Design Culture - definition

“Includes not only the production of useful objects (and here we should add processes, services, and techniques as well), but also their distribution and consumption.”

Maurizio Vitta

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Design Culture, or Design Cultures?

Commercial design pretends to be global and universal, but it often reflects Western values. It is singular rather than plural.

The challenge: to create design cultures that respect both local and global, central and peripheral values and concerns.

Should we always speak about design cultures in the plural?

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Expanded Definition of Design Culture

Beside concrete things, design culture also contains things of the mind: plans, dreams, utopias, fears...

Not all designs are realized - but they are part of design culture! There are for example utopian plans, unrealized patent applications, science fiction fantasies about design (things that could ot be realized by existing technological possibilities).

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Design as “Human capacity to shape without precedent in nature”

“Design, stripped to its essence, can be defined as the human capacity to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives.”

John Heskett: Toothpicks and Logos, 2002
Does nature design? 
Is there ‘design’ in nature?

These are very difficult design-philosophical questions. The answer depends on how we define things like "culture," "nature," and "design" itself.

Humans certainly use design to try to control and exploit nature, with more or less success. Humans often see nature as chaotic, and try to harness it by means of all kinds of designs.

Nature “behaves” in unpredictable ways, but does it “design” its own actions? Is this an absurd idea?

According to the philosopher Vilém Flusser, “Being a human being is a design against nature.” (Vilém Flusser: *The Shape of Things. A Philosophy of Design*, 1999)

The Idea of god as the ‘Supreme Designer’

“God is the great designer of the Universe” (a freemasonic trope)  
*Oxford English Dictionary, 1649*

Compare the notion of “Grand Design” with the ideological debate about Evolution vs. “Intelligent Design.”

The idea of god as master designer of the universe has been historically often represented by a hand reaching down from above (often from clouds), sometimes holding a measuring or drawing instrument.

In our time The “hand of God” trope appears in hobbyism, such as in the building of dioramas (miniature models). It has been transferred from the god to the human.

Will Wright’s *Sim City* and *The Sims* are ‘God games’. The player is positioned in a god’s eye perspective, and has mastery over the virtual world of the game.

The tendency to anthropomorphize (to see likenesses of living beings in inanimate things) is a nearly universal feature of human culture.

http://facesinplaces.blogspot.com/

http://www.boxvox.net/2008/09/anthropomorphic.html

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Semiotics

Human perception turns nature into culture.

To make sense of our environment, we perceive and signify as signs. To be able to form and read these signs we need codes.

Semiotics is the science that analyzes culture as a process of giving meaning. It explains the encoding and decoding of signs. Semiotics is a useful ‘instrument’ for both designers and scholars.

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Semiotics (from the Greek word ‘Semeion,’ sign)

The study of signs in cultural life and communication practices. According to semiotics, we can only know culture (and reality itself) as mediated by signs; through the processes of signification.

- Sign, according to Charles Sanders Peirce: "A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.”

- Code and message are very basic concepts in semiotics. In our lives we constantly send messages consisting of signs. These messages are based on codes, culturally defined systems of relationships. By living in a certain environment we internalize sets of codes that affect our semiotic behaviour, whether we are aware of it or not. Everyone has a different set of codes in one's mind. It keeps on changing all the time, as our life experiences change.

We put together and send messages by referring to a code, a pre-existing system of relationships. Most semioticians agree that there can be no messages without a code.

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CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE'S CATEGORIES OF SIGNS: ICON, INDEX, SYMBOL

- Icon = resembles its conceptual object in certain ways. It may share certain properties that the object possesses, or it may duplicate the principles according to which that object is organized. Examples: images and diagrams (equations, graphs).

- Index = "a real thing or fact which is a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact and by also forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign." Examples: weathervane, a pointing hand, a symptom (of a disease, etc.).

- Symbol = the relationship between the sign and its conceptual object is arbitrary, based on an agreement (occasional resemblances are possible). Example: natural
languages and notational systems are pre-eminently symbolic. A national flag is a symbol.

- Peirce emphasizes the overlapping and flexibility of sign categories. Photograph is both an icon and an index; so is a portrait, particularly to a person who knows the sitter. The richest signs are usually combinations of different types.

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Can animals design or create art?

Animals can be "smart" and creative, but are their actions based on learned codes (culture), instincts, or genetic coding? This issue is unresolved, although there is much discussion and research about it.

Example: Komar & Melamid’s Elephant Art Academies
www.elephantart.com/catalog/splash.php


“Komar & Melamid’s Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project is at once a serious non-profit organization that cooperates closely with the World Wildlife Fund and a continuation of themes familiar from the artists’ previous work.

Having lost the jobs because of strict antilogging laws in the late 1980s, Thailand’s 3,000 domesticated elephants have been forced to move into the crowded cities where they perform circus tricks, barely earning enough for their handlers (mahouts) to feed them.

By establishing three Elephant Art Academies Komar & Melamid have empowered these poverty-stricken pachyderms to make ends meet by picking up brushes and taking the artworld by storm.”

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Painting by Hong, an elephant, representing another elephant is a particularly interesting case.

- Hong is an 8 year old female elephant that resides at the Maetamann Elephant Camp in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

- See Hong paint: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy9kXxJIpug&feature=related

This work raises suspicions. Elephants have been proven to recognize their own mirror image. But could an elephant draw a likeness (portrait) of another elephant, understanding the meaning of the picture?
Is this actually a projection of Hong’s mahout’s (keeper’s) aesthetic taste? Has the keeper simple taught Hong to create a certain shape that the elephant can produce without understanding its meaning?

Semiotics claims that animals cannot learn the codes of iconic representation.

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Harold Cohen's Aaron

Can “autonomous” and “intelligent” machines design? The paintings by Harold Cohen’s artificial intelligence painter Aaron (1974-) are a very challenging case.

Aaron has been continuously under development since the early 1970s.

Cohen was a professional British artist, who became interested in computers around 1970. Aaron was influenced by Cohen’s encounter with artificial intelligence research at Edward Feigenbaum’s laboratory at Stanford University.

Aaron is an expert system that creates paintings and drawings “relatively autonomously” (Cohen) - it creates the kinds of things Cohen might have painted himself. In their details, however, they are different.

For 30 years, the aaron code has been constantly re-written and expanded by Cohen.

Different output devices have been used: a drawing “turtle” moving on paper, painting machines (designed by Cohen himself), more recently a software application that automatically creates pictures on the desktop.

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Conclusions:

Aaron is dumb, or at best semi-intelligent and semi-autonomous.

- Aaron’s performative capacity is based on the code created by Cohen. It does not hear or see; it knows reality only indirectly.

- Aaron is not a learning system. It cannot learn from its past experiences, successes and mistakes.

- Aaron has no memory, feelings, aesthetic sensibility.

- Still, it is an amazing achievement!