

# Meditations on Artefact

## *Thoughts on the nature and consequent practice of object design*

### **I. Introduction**

As a designer of artefacts, I have spent (often in the opposite fashion of professional tradition) much time pondering the nature of the practice and the resultant affectations of the “practice” on the artefacts that we produce. Design, as a practice, differs from design, as an action, which in turn, differs from design, as a manifestation, and the impetus for “design” has now begun to diffuse itself, much like any professionalised field. This essay is a composite of thoughts that have stemmed from critical study of philosophical thought and observation and reflection on design practice and the manifestation of practice in our physical and metaphysical realm.

This piece is titled “Meditations” for a number of reasons. Significantly, it is a stream of thoughts that flow, freely, irregularly and turbulently. The thoughts are fluid, coercing one to

engage with them, critique them and use them as an artefact for reflective conversation on the nature of designed objects and their creation. Additionally, these thoughts are personal preoccupations. They are not theories, as there have been no attempts to empirically, rationally, or transcendently prove them. They are not hypotheses, as they do not inherently seek a proof. They are too unstructured and non-didactic to present themselves as La Rochefoucauldian maxims. They are objects, in part and as a composite, that beseech the cerebral engagement of designer and philosopher alike. Designers may get a reason to revisit their practice in a less somnambulist fashion while philosophers would assist in critiquing these reflections and honing their craftiness.

The essay is split into four pieces. Each piece consists of reflections that bleed between categories but are most effective towards a critique of design practice and providing a constructive dissection of objects and their nature, under the umbrella that they are presented within the scope of the essay. These four pieces are:

1. **Design qua the essence of "design"**: Discusses design as a transcendental concept that can be incredibly diffused within social and sensory experience.
2. **Design qua design practice**: Design in the current context of a professional practice and an examination of somnambulist practice and the unconscious hyper-facilitated and conditioned engagement with design manifested.
3. **Objects - Symbols, icons, existence and interpretation**: Understanding the object as a manifestation of design, as a carrier of the essence of design as an ideal of design practice

and as an existing metamorphosing entity that shapes lived experience and gets shaped by interpretability.

4. **Aesthetics in Society and Perception:** Examines these three concepts as a triune of design manifest.

Each section contributes to furthering the narrative of these fragmented thoughts in a certain direction - a composite looking glass through which to observe design practice.

In some ways, this essay seeks to begin the definition of a holist and critical philosophy of design praxis that transcends the boundaries of aesthetics, art and artefact. It seeks to ruminate on the essence of design as a vehicle for plastic genesis and sustained existence of our sensory experiences as human beings. These experiences are spread thin, across many *stratis* of existence and being, and a comprehensive philosophy of design could, possibly, transcend the boundaries of purely physical and cognitive existence.

## **II. Design qua essentia consilio (the essence of design)**

Initiating this section with the etymological deconstruction of the English word "design". This is understandably problematic given that *logos* are abstracted semiotic carriers of meaning for the essence of a transcendental concept. However, words enjoy the privilege of being generally accepted, used and overused objects... to the point that they are now expectedly bastardised. In that, it is probably the best place to begin a deconstruction of the essence of design.

Design comes from the Latin “designare” and “signum”<sup>1</sup>. “Designare” translates to the verb “to designate”. “Signum” translates to “mark” or “token”. These transformed into the French verb “désigner” and eventually to the English “design”. From this Latin deconstruction of the term, “design” can, classically and etymologically, be understood as the designation of meaning to tokens. I find this interpretation exceptionally fascinating because very few of the attributes of traditional professional practice are implicated, which allows this “definition” to be applied in the transcendental sense that I wish to apply it.

1. The first thought that occurs by virtue of this definition is that the “designer” is a designator, of a sublime “something”, to tokens. The nature of this “sublime something” is clearly engaging at a cerebral, emotional and spiritual level and upon a study of design history, one could trace the metamorphosis of this “something”. A few of the possible implications of this “something” are meaning, intent, function, experience, value, status, politic, comprehension and so on.
2. The nature of the token is not implied. Is it created by the designer? Is the pre-existence or fabrication of the token by the “designer” irrelevant to the fundamental act of designating? The strangely humane and simultaneously arrogant designer of today who learns that, through replicable methods, they can redesign (in this context to be read as recreate) behaviours and experiences would loathe the idea that they are hardly in control of their

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<sup>1</sup> Flusser, Vilém: *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, 1993.

“creation”<sup>2</sup> let alone the fact that it is entirely irrelevant as to whether they created the said artefact or not. The designer (at least in this etymological sense) is no longer a romanticised creator but a calculated and intentional designator of ephemeral qualities to sensorially experienced tokens. The ability to craft and create an artefact assists only as an additional lever of manifesting intended meaning.

3. Fundamental human nature, by virtue of our need to explain the existence of ourselves and that which we sensorially experience, causes us to engage with this meaning making exercise in a very robust manner. However, the designer’s task of “designating” subliminal facets of existence to tokens (existent or fabricated) is not easily democratised. That which we typically engage in, is a pursuit of “attaching” meaning. There is a desperation in attachment that is absent in the act of designation, an activity that must be more calculated and precise and considerate. The designer must have a comprehensive understanding of context before they deem a token as carrying a specific semiotic value. The best example<sup>3</sup> of this, is religious symbols. Arguably, an idol can be thought of as a desperate attempt of humans to anthropomorphise the divine. On the other hand a symbol (like the Christian Crucifix or the Shivaist Lingam) is rooted in narrative, historical and cultural context that is explicitly relevant to everyone else including the designator.
4. The responsibility of the designer as designator augments the complexity of their role. The large crevice that exists between the denoted meaning attached to an artefact and the

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<sup>2</sup> Latour, Bruno: Love your Monsters, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> By virtue of being universal and aptly divisive.

connoted meaning drawn by the audience<sup>4</sup> is one that the designer attempts to bridge, constantly. Is this attempt to bridge constructive? At a functional level (if that is what is being designated unto said artefact), it is probably important as it renders the considered object more or less functionally seamless. However, the practice of making the intended meaning legible is confused with making the artefact cerebrally and physically unengaging. On the other hand, the shrouding of the desired intent behind the veil of that which is accessible to the audience (in the form of connoted intent) is marginally dubious and possibly unethical. An example is Deleuze's semiotic differentiation of the Soviet's "Motherland is calling you" poster in contrast with the Uncle Sam recruitment poster for the US Army. Uncle Sam is the quintessential "imperialist uncle", demanding your commitment to the nation by pledging their physical vessels and lives with no regards for the individuals behind the objectified spirited youth. The Motherland poster uses the strong "Mother" as the veil behind which is the similar request for blood and flesh<sup>5</sup>. Both posters seek the same outcome - the pledging of flesh, blood and spiritual allegiance to the nation. The characterisation of the request, however, forces us to attach different tonalities to each poster. Uncle Sam demands and transfixes while the Soviet Mother masks her base request behind motherly care and protection and unconditional love that seeks devotion in opposition to bodies.

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<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland: *Image-Music-Text*, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Žižek, Slavoj: *Organs without Bodies*, 2004.

These thoughts make me convicted in the notion that design, in essence, is not about the fabrication of myopically defined substance<sup>6</sup>, but it is an enduring task that requires a fluid comprehensibility of the universe. The task is not that of “problem solving” but of informed and responsible “sense making”. The designer is thus not the musician but the conductor, orchestrating the sensory experience of orchestral music. The experience is itself assembled then, of a series of objects all nested in each other. The experience is the composite that cannot exist by itself.

Interestingly, the Latin translation for the English word “design” is “consilio” or “descriptio” or “incurus” each as applied in a different context. They translate to “intension”, “description” and “impetus” respectively. So is design then a marriage of ephemeral essence, manifested in the realm of sensory and cognitive experience as intentional and informed designation of meaning to a token that exists or is created with the impetus to convey the intended meaning?

### **III. Design qua Design practice**

The professionalisation of the design discipline, in my opinion, was consequential and eventual to the evolution of the role of the designer. As was presented in the previous section of this essay, the designer began their journey, as professionals, of designating meaning to existing or fabricated symbols. This definition of designer-ness is volatile as it is held together,

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<sup>6</sup> Substance, in my personal preference, is best explicated, by Baruch Spinoza in *Ethica*, 1677.

very loosely, by many ephemeral and contestable variables, to be employed effectively in repetition. The “designer” was also a confusing role for the practitioner themselves as a result of the constant tussle betwixt the designer’s human instinct for finding and attaching meaning and the broadly applicable, socially legible meaning that can be consciously and responsibly attached to a symbol. Thus the designer had to modulate ones intention and direction of sense-making and also develop a “method” to the largely sublime practice, thereby rendering the practice replicable and dispersible. The rather obvious question that presents itself here is if the practice was, in soothe, rendered replicable and dispersible or was it the method that, in essence, is a heuristic abstraction of the practice, is rendered replicable?<sup>7</sup>

Since I posit that the professionalisation of praxis is linked to the evolution of design history, the following traces the change in intention and impetus to design over a century or so<sup>8</sup>. With the advent of the “machine”, a term that we have now myopically collectivised to “technology” today, design (specifically Industrial design) began to drift from a praxis of artefact creation for the privileged and able, to a subjectively democratised endeavour that, in the opinion of some, would free the human mind from production concerns<sup>9</sup> to occupying themselves more with the nature of the artefact qua artefact. This is probably the moment at which the artefact as a metaphor of meaning stopped fascinating the designer and they began to get transfixed by the influence of the artefact on society. This transition in fascination was the

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<sup>7</sup> Echoing the Spinozan debate of “essence” vs. “affection” of “substance”. Spinoza, Baruch: *Ethica*, 1677.

<sup>8</sup> Gorman, Carma: *The Industrial Design Reader*, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, Frank Lloyd: *The Art and Craft of the Machine*, 1901.



genesis of the designer's personality complex. Who were they really answering to? Was it the society that consumed and interacted and experienced that which the designer "created"? Or was it to satiate one's own creative impulse for attaching meaning to that which exists?

These questions led to a largely divisive praxis within the scope of object design. Hyper-functional products that were intended for the simple and understandable "use" of the consumer that evolved into the modern prevalent notion of "human-centred design" became the answer for one group. The design practice, for this group, was all about the identification and solving of problems which required, at its core, a replicable approach that would monopolise the skill of identifying and solving and also make the eventual result of the praxis successful<sup>10</sup>. The effects of this approach to design practice is recondite and simultaneously problematic. It presents itself as an effective and superficially "moral" manner of assisting people who are in need of assistance. The problems are far more complex.

1. The dissemination of replicable method is hazardous because it removes mysticism from the praxis. It gives the impression that anyone can solve a problem if they adhered to the toolkit and were religious enough to believe that the method would work. The method, however, neither seeks the faith of the practitioner and nor does it democratise the overall practice of design. It is a heuristic that one could employ in order to develop solutions but it does not ensure the "right-ness" of problem or solution. It is far too misguided by the

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<sup>10</sup> <https://designthinking.ideo.com/resources>

volatile “humans” around which the praxis is “centred” to be totally free from subjective bias and consequential dilemmatic solution.

2. The human moral compass combined with socio-cultural norms and the designer’s fascination creates a very strange medley of levers that influence the solution to a problem. Very often, designers are working in the service of people they don’t really understand, don’t have the time or monetary resources to understand and often times don’t really want to understand. And yet, the appropriate solution to the appropriate problem is totally predicated on a sound understanding of “they” that one is designing for. The praxis is immediately broken and the heuristic to the praxis reigns supreme.
3. The formulaic approach to design practice has also led to a very superficial rendering of the term “good design”. No series of ten commandments or principles encapsulates the magical transcendence that a user of a designed artefact experiences when the artefact is well designed. There is a metaphysical consonance between the implicit lecture spewed by the artefact and the cerebral explosions rendered in the mind of the user through sheer engagement with the essence of the designed artefact. This is definitely beyond the emotional and cerebral consonance that one feels when they are able to, without much help from a user manual, turn up the volume on their car stereo.

More succinctly, human-centred design practice lacks the tenacious definition of each of its volatile terminologies. It attempts to translate the more tangible manifestations of design praxis into replicable heuristics while almost entirely annihilating the very humble essence of design - a colossal and almost unattainable task of designating intelligible meaning to existing

or specifically fabricated symbols. Human-centred design also becomes hopelessly masturbatory in that it is feeding broken versions of people's ideal and dreamy selves.

The second segment of praxis at the crux of the divisive split in design attitude caused a more "artistic" design practice. Some designers believed that design for the sake of problem-solving or mass produced goods was a strange task and decided to use design as a tool for the facilitation, recreation and critique of specific lived experiences. The designer in this situation still remains masturbatory to ones own impulse. It becomes a pursuit of personal clarification as opposed to external satisfaction (as in human-centred design praxis). This creates a very interesting dichotomy of design essence and design praxis. Design essence is about intelligible sense-making and design praxis is about resolving the triunal tension between the designer's impulse for creation, the societal necessity for a saviour (self-admittedly the designer) and the collective need for humankind to transcend from the current state of pathetic suffering to the desired state of transcendental sublime euphoria.

#### **IV. Objects - Icons, Symbols, Existence and Interpretation**

This section raises questions and deduces practical conclusions on objects and their intersection with physical and metaphysical worlds. The object has been a subject of debate. The need to simplify, generalise and reduce the scope of a linguistic term within design to make the term understandable, and more importantly manageable, has caused the object to be either too myopic or too, baselessly and unconstructively, all encompassing. A reflection of

objects and their genesis and nature are very effective in presenting a reflective philosophy of design. It may serve as a way to contextualise previous thoughts presented in this essay.

1. An object is a confluence of physicality and interpretation that exists in multiple realities.

The physicality, in a Cartesian sense lives within the *res cogitans*, while the ephemeral and interpretation of the object would live in *res extensa*<sup>11</sup>.

2. Within the scope of Cartesian metaphysics and ontology, one could draw a conclusion that the physical affection of the object, existing in the *cogitans*, is bound by the laws of physicality which makes the presence of the object more or less constant. If it does change, arguably, the interpretation of the object is also affected and hence the object is no longer itself. In the realm of *extensa*, however, the object of same physical composition could manifest in not just multiple but also singularly expandable and plastic forms. This ontological theory overrates the imaginative spirit of the mind, that renders the object mentally plastic, over a propensity for other cognitive preoccupations, such as nostalgia. If a child's world, built using Lego bricks, is erased so that the bricks may be reused by someone else, the existence of that world is not purely captured in the realm of imagination but it has a historical precedence of existence. Arguably, as long as the bricks used to build that world exist in molecular capacity within the realm of sensorial reality, the physical essence of that world continues to exist. The memory of the object also adds to the prolonged existence of the object. In this sense, any object is forever present and never ceases to exist, physically or cognitively.

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<sup>11</sup> Descartes, René: *Principia Philosophiae*, 1644.

3. An object could totally cease to exist if its physical essence is spread too thinly and all cognitive and imaginative qualities of the object are too far recessed in the landfills of history, for it to be recalled.
4. This brings to question the value of the object in its inherent design. Why do certain objects have the propensity for being erasable while others do not? Is it a matter of context of when the object was birthed? Is it in the manner it was birthed? Is it because of the novelty of its existence? Is it because of the scarring narrative associated with its existence? It could be all of these... the least likely however, being the last question. Think about the atomic bomb that caused the explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One would very well hope that an object of that nature is never regenerated for the sanity of humankind. And yet we have been unable to stash out away and never talk about it to future generations. It still holds a very venerable place in "world history" education with the hope that our children will learn about it and not want to subject our species to the tyranny of history<sup>12</sup>. While an admirable pedagogical view, it fundamentally trusts in the best of humanity which is problematic given the subjectivity of human morality. Here, the obvious argument some would make is that the object itself is not at fault, it is the use of the object and the context of use that renders it demonic to human memory and existence, a very strangely relevant argument to the gun control conversation and debate. An object engineered with the ability to cause physical harm (or annihilate entire populations) inherently connotes a message of destruction to anyone who encounters it. While the denoted use might be for "self-defense" or for "use on all but human beings" its essence is still one of destruction

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<sup>12</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav: *Psyche & Symbol*, 1958

attached with the illusion of political power, a venomous mix. The denoted statement is drowned in this purported illusion of power and newfound capability for destruction. Is this not a common pattern within the scope of interpretation of any object? Is not the object always perceived as a confluence of “personal value” (typically augmented) and “personal function” (typically beneficial)? The premise of the object and its interpretability is then always construed, erroneously, by presentation and context of existence.

5. The object is thus not just an ontological mystery in physicality but is also a dilemmatic and perplexing issue within the scope of cognitive interpretability. It brings the question of can an object exist in physicality without the interpretation of impulsive cognition? The opposite is very true and occurs constantly. However, can an object be willed into existence so that it suspends the need for interpretation and attachment of meaning to its physical existence? What would be the benefit of such an object and its seemingly banal and unnecessary existence?
6. An object, elementally, can be thought of as being infinitely existent. Objects are essentially affections of substance<sup>13</sup>, combined with the numerous acquired essences that are loaded on them. The genesis of object is thus a perception. It begins when the attachment of meaning to the physical vessel is conceived. The knowledge and comprehension of the existence of the artefact marks its birth. In this sense, a designer never really creates the object. They stumble upon the connection of sublime thought and physical form with one another and present it to society for objective measurement of intelligibility of the object in its entirety.

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<sup>13</sup> Spinoza, Baruch: *Ethica*, 1677.

7. Humans have lamented “objectification” forever. This stems from the myopic understanding of objects as functional means to an end. Objects are associated, by humans, as inanimate “things” that are meant for or accommodate free use sans any boundaries. Putting ourselves in a situation that is, in essence, vulnerable to plastic interpretation goes against our belief that we are each entitled to a will that can be exercised freely... in this specific situation, a will to represent our selves. However, unless humans are objectified, we can never really understand the defining parameters of humanness, such as the illusion of free will or fundamentally agreeable standards of belief across global collectives of humans.
8. Alternatively, the only other way we can truly understand objects is to humanise them. By humanise, I do not mean anthropomorphising them. Nor do I mean that we subject them to humanistic constructs of emotional, cognitive and physical experience. The first approach only develops a complex fantasy. The second creates a confused medley that, in sooth, is focused on the objectification and narcissistic deciphering of the human condition. The humanisation of objects would be to honour their essence as symbols and carriers of meaning but socialise them in human environments and contexts.

## **V. Aesthetics, Society and Perception**

The topic of aesthetics is particularly pertinent to the philosophy of design because of modernist designers and the essence of their work being dubbed as aesthetic augmentation. However, the conversation of aesthetics limited to experience and pleasure is too

commonplace. A conversation on the nature of beauty and the effect of societal perception on the definition of beauty is important to understand within the scope of developing an effective commentary and critique of social collective perception.

Nevermore has a concept been twisted and reformed to the point of dissonance within perceptibility. Beauty, as a concept, was initially a way to distinguish the *bruta figura* from the privileged and gifted. In that sense, beauty was an exclusionary device that forced the sensory pleasure associated with a human or an object to be predisposed. Now, with our societal disposition towards impassioned political correctness, beauty is used, conceptually, to include. The method of doing this is far from inclusionary, in spirit. The often used monikers of “Everyone is beautiful” or “True beauty is from the inside out” are more accommodating than inclusive. This accommodation is often conferred on the excluded by people who enjoy the predisposed title of “being beautiful”. So what is beauty? If it must be neither exclusionary nor inclusionary and exist as a descriptive concept of existence, it cannot be limited to being defined as “consonance which creates or instigates an inexplicable sensibility of pleasure within our bodies and minds when we engage with the consonance sensorially.” Maritain believed that beauty had three intersecting traits<sup>14</sup>. *Integritas*, *Consonantia* and *Claritas* - Integrity, that is intelligible to the subject who views the object of beauty; Consonance, that displays harmonic relationships of the object within itself that contributes to the sense of harmony; Brightness, that is an explicit semiotic message of the existence of beauty within the object. The Thomist

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<sup>14</sup> Trapani, John G: *Poetry, Beauty and Contemplation - The complete aesthetics of Jacques Maritain*, 2011.



duality of existence<sup>15</sup> is a possible influence on this definition. Claritas can be seen as manifested within substantial existence (maybe even construed as a gift of God) while Integritas and Consonantia can be seen manifested within accidental existence - these attributes are thus, acquired by virtue of their natural substantial beauty. Beauty remains a predisposed trait that may or may not be perceptible within the realm of human sensorial experience within the scope of Maritain's Thomist ontological influence.

Interestingly, the fluidity of acceptance, accommodation and predisposition of beauty is never a human concern within the scope of description of an object. An object is, in general perception, created with the intentional premise of beauty or brute. Beauty is a compramisable characteristic of an object that informs the social appropriation of that object and its perceived value within the scope of its existence. In more ways than one, this does sound like human appropriation within society as well. Men, women and others who are thought of as, or are collectively perceived as, being beautiful, become persons that are coveted for the purposes of attachment, association and inclusion. People of inherent brute, are treated in the opposite fashion, cast away into the depths of darkness and are distanced from the objects of inherent Claritas. Arguably, with the notion of predisposed and societally appropriated beauty we have objectified ourselves. The question that remains, however, is which scope of existence led to the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of beauty? Did we learn from our own treatment of objects of brute and beauty or did our own nature of dealing with beauty inform the way we interact with objects today?

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<sup>15</sup> Aquinas, Thomas: *De Principiis Naturae*, c. 1252

## VI. Conclusion

The above essay draws some bold conclusions that are predicated on reflections that precede the conclusive statements. The statements are still reflective conclusions and are not hypotheses or theories. They are meant to proliferate my own thought in these directions, and when shared with members of the design community, hopefully triggers the impulse for more reflective and less somnambulistic design practice.

I began this essay by stating that a more holistic description of the philosophy of design may lend itself to the extension of design beyond the realm of physicality and cognition. This essay is the beginnings of that description. However, as I “complete” this essay, with the need to step out of myself for a while and observe the world of objects and experience that transcendence of objective existence, I begin to ask myself another question. Why do we need a philosophy of design that transcends the sensorially experienced world? Is that not the apt realm for the operation of designed objects? The study or fundamental premise of transcendence would probably help designers of objects be more cognisant of the consequential impact of that which is being designed. Despite the nature of the practice and discipline, the morality and ethics of designers is largely complex, skewed and indeterminately fluid. The implications of this fluid and ephemeral morality is not immediately evident to the nature of professional design practice which is probably why a study or, at the very least, a knowledge of the transcendence of design is valuable to present to designers.

