

That the experience of designworks is adequate only as living experience is more than a statement about the relation of the user to the object, more than a statement about the active subconscious as a condition of aesthetic perception.

Beginning with a simple transference from the introductory statement by Adorno in his text "Toward a Theory of the Artwork", it is possible to find a critical point of reference for design and its relationships to everyday life.¹ The analogy is a simple and direct one in light of his writings on the culture industry; if an artwork is indeed a commodity "that has rejected every semblance of existing for society", Adorno points to us the otherwise known standard whereby commodities "urgently cling" to the service of man.² And why shouldn't we embrace this urgency, extend it, find ourselves in relation to and be accountable for the objects of our own creation and manufacture? While the moment of transaction seems to supercede the general discussion of commodity in a market society, perhaps we can and should begin to look further, in the grey unbounds of use and experience, to find other grounds by which to perceive and engage the objects around us.

By addressing the designwork as commodity, we can begin to analyse it with respect to what Marx referred to as its *use-value* and *exchange-value*, whereby the former quantifies an object's utility and the latter its tradability.³ This system proposes utilitarian worth independent from the value for which an object can be traded. Design theory makes use of an analogous dichotomy whereby utility is analysed in terms of function, balanced with the physical form or body of the product.

		commodity	
Marxist theory		use-value [utility]	exchange-value [tradability]
Design theory		form [body]	function [utility]
		tangible	intangible

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Design critic Prasad Boradkar's table makes important note, however, that different understandings of utility occupy Marx's commodity discourse than in the modernist design sense. The classic form

¹ Adorno, 175.
² Adorno, 236.
³ Boradkar, 2.
⁴ *ibid.*

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versus function dialectic in design ties corporeality to form, function being the abstract carrier of the design process. Marx, however, identifies use-value with the objecthood of a commodity, tied to its physical form, and exchange-value represents the more ephemeral classification. In both cases, we can look at the commodity with respect to its materiality, "at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."⁵

The separation between a thing and its environment cannot be absolutely definite and clear-cut; there is a passage by insensible gradations from the one to the other: the close solidarity which binds all the objects of the material universe, the perpetuality of their reciprocal actions and reactions, is sufficient to prove that they have not the precise limits which we attribute to them. Our perception outlines, so to speak, the form of their nucleus; it terminates them at the point where our possible action upon them ceases, where, consequently, they cease to interest our needs. Such is the primary and the most apparent operation of the perceiving mind: it marks out divisions in the continuity of the extended, simply following the suggestions of our requirements and the needs of practical life.⁶

Bergson's text takes the designwork further into its "metaphysical subtleties" here, and the dialectic between the universal and the particular emerges as a temporal gradient. Adorno traces the path from theory to praxis along this stream, and in the designwork we can add the variable of use into the analysis. Use in this sense is not to be confused with praxis, the latter of which represents a finite point, the fixation of objecthood as the end of a process. Use marks a further phase on the way of becoming, where experience molds "completeness" towards the user's ends. The commodification of a design object represents a standstill image, but that image should not be forgotten as a metaphor for process, the active subconsciousness with which we can shift in focus from the objects of consumption to the tactics, ruses, appropriations and what Michel deCerteau calls *les combina-toires d'opérations* (systems of operational combination) which emerge around them. Adorno relates this summation to the monad: "at once a force field and a thing".⁷ In this case, the force field possesses the space between the object and user, predicated on use, time and the "minimal self-obtuse impulses" that nevertheless have the ability to reach deep into culture and consciousness.⁸

The principle of particularization to the universal exists nowhere more clearly than in the design-

⁵ Marx, 163.

⁶ Bergson, 209-210.

⁷ Adorno, 179.

⁸ Adorno, 178.

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work, who in its multiplicity makes a proposition for an ideal universal, not necessarily a world completely other than it is but one that is improved, more efficient or more beautiful. The designer, in striving for this ideal, refines his or her attention, skill and expression to the finest detail, the result of which, in production and consumption, returns to the generic, the masses and the ordinary. Even in the case of the exceptional or fantastic, design in the aesthetic sense is like the artwork, “an example of its genre: It is spuriously individual.”⁹ Mass production is one example, but for every designwork, the user also generates a mutable relationship to the design work, at once on the scales of the minute and the generic. A car is driven on a daily commute. A new shirt is incorporated into someone’s wardrobe and becomes an old favourite; the universal finds its way back to the particular.

Would Adorno still consider the designwork as polemical? The artwork separates itself from the empirical world, but on the basis of utility, design begs for living experience beyond that of art and the gaze that animates it. Even in the case of innovation or revolutionary progress (e.g., technology), the inherent desire of the designwork is to immerse itself into an everyday fabric, to disappear not by instantaneous immolation but with the longevity of being routine, well-worn, and tried (the exception of course being those wasteful products of society-by-convenience, the disposable and the faddish¹⁰). The designwork makes no appearance of truth but a practice of it. This is the “active subconscious” to which it submits, such that use becomes habit, custom, wont—the subtle layers of comfort that pervade all of human activity.

Adorno positions the fundamental quality of artworks in an ever precarious flux, an inherently irresolvable aporia between self and the self-identical, human creation and the sublime. But where this dialectic seeks the self-identical in an ascendancy of the sublime, the designwork is art’s underachieving half-sister, only able to take itself seriously as much as it regards itself as a mortal product limited to a lifespan of nowness, identity determined by its utility and *un vouloir-faire*, a will to do. deCerteau writes: “Henceforth identity depends on the production, on the endless moving on (or detachment and cutting loose) that this loss makes necessary. Being is measured by

⁹ Adorno, 181.

¹⁰ In the case of “fast food” products, those created specifically for short lifespans, single-use or disposability, disappearance is literally part of the design, not in term of longevity but ever greatly facilitated by their characterization of being generic, populist and mainstream.

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doing".¹¹ Where Kant considers art as servant of the sublime, design is relegated to humankind, no less tragic. Its own process of becoming may appear to find resolution, inasmuch as routine and practice provide the semblance of a harmonious rhythm, but this relation between object and user is as fragile as the dialogue between artwork and viewer. Technology and capitalist economics' reliance on measures of progress put the designwork ever on the brink of extinction more obviously than the artwork. Both, however are teleologically bound to serve continuity, being capable of it "by virtue of their incompleteness and, often, by their insignificance".¹²

Until now, we have already assumed the idea of artworks and designworks as commodity, animate and amoral. Culture as industry is unavoidable and numbing. In this case, designers may be accused of being the most vicious culprits, indoctrinators to the masses of the visual and tactile language pushing particular homogenizing tendencies in behaviour—how "properly" to interact with objects, software and other people. Adorno warns against the marketing of ideologies; today's lifestyle brands manufacture exactly that. Suddenly, the rhythm and comfort of use-patterns and the active subconscious seems too controlled and horrifying. The question of how to escape a pervasive and regimented cultural system returns. Not to mention the will to do, how do we *make do*? That is the subject of deCerteau's cultural anthropology and *The Practice of Everyday Life*, recourse to a totalising cultural sphere of production. Here, deCerteau calls upon the possibilities for reappropriating, subverting and reinventing, and it is in our daily lives and with the designwork that we have the greatest possibilities to do so. Whereas the artwork maintains an inherent foreignness, the designwork is seductive and seeks to befriend. It encourages interaction and bears the ability to give itself up to the user in a manner that the artwork, as servant of the sublime, cannot. Thus so, users and target markets, although perhaps despicable in their manipulation and oversimplification, must also be regarded as communities with the ability, and *responsibility*, to interpret, comment upon and critique the works that are presented to them.

The nucleus of truth in the designwork emerges as a multifaceted, postmodern buffet subject to even greater implosion from the external as is exploded from the initial concept. The designwork is shaped by doing, at its core a means and a process. The viewer's gaze upon an artwork, while

¹¹ deCerteau, 137.

¹² Adorno, 176.

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discursive, still lies outside of the inherent conflict within the artwork itself. *Starry Night* will always be van Gogh's; *The Godfather* will always be Coppola's. But Herzog & deMeuron's grandiose schemes for the Olympic stadium in Beijing will take on the metaphorical meanings of its use, to be identified and coloured by the degree of success to which it proves capable. Even the designer t-shirt becomes its owner's, part of an overall wardrobe or look. The presence of logos and overt elements of design brings in a tangent discussion that cannot be fully developed here, but it does still reference the user's consolidation as part of a community, style, or particular ideology. Through use-value and the shifting balances that occur in the lifehood of the object, exchange-value becomes an opportunity cost of emotional investment. Herein we find another kind of dialectic for design, whereby the designwork debases itself humbly, relinquishing identity to that of the user and hoping, at least, for a graceful death.

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