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Time Made Tangible

Craft, slowness and the ‘consumption of time’.

Abstract:

This paper investigates the relationship between craft, design, time and media through a series of examples derived from the spheres of ‘slow design’ and design art, where the design object is increasingly conceptualized as a container of the time invested in the making of it and where the consumption of the object becomes a symbolic consumption of time as a source of meaning. This happens in a tension between the revaluation of craft and a growing focus on mediation and communicative aspects of the object. The common feature of the examples is thus that they through their own form or their visual or discursive staging materialize or communicate different forms of time and temporal processes. Through the examples distinctions between different aspects of time and different forms of mediation are made in order to map the different ways time and mediation are connected.

Keywords: Mediation of time, craft and design, slow design, design-art

TIME MADE TANGIBLE

In 2003 Dutch design studio Makkink & Bey together with the ceramics company Royal Tischelaar Makkum created a service called ‘Minutes’ for the Milan Furniture Fair (See Royal Tischelaar Makkum 2016). Each individual piece was named after the number of minutes it took to produce, and parts of the production process like the sketches for the decoration were intentionally left visible in the final product. Instead of inventing new patterns the designers thus created a complex pattern of historical layers in the product by preserving layers of decoration which would normally have been erased and invisible in the final product.

For the historic company this collaboration represented a strategic shift away from traditional craft products towards profiled collaborations with renowned designers that

added conceptual design elements. Jürgen Bey as example did not have a background in ceramics but is normally associated with Droog design and critical design. The example illustrates how the production process and the concept of time hereby became mediated in a number of ways, both in the physical product, in the naming and in the promotion which elevated the product into the sphere of ‘design-art’. The paradox is thus that the shift from craft to design led to a mediation of the craft process.



Left: Ill. 1, Royal Tichelaar Makkum/Studio Makkink & Bey: ‘35 minutes cake saucer.’ Source: Thomas Eyck 2016
Right: Ill. 2, Illustration from Studio Makkink & Bey’s list of projects. This illustration represents a form of double mediation. The process of making is mediated both onto the product itself and as image to illustrate the point of the project. Source: Studio Makkink & Bey 2016

This paradox can also be found in a number of current design movements like ‘slow design’, ‘makers movement’ etc. which advocates the ‘return to craft’. Here one will often rediscover the mediation of the designer-craftsman and an explicit thematization of the time invested in the making process even though the focus here is often less on art and more on how the designer embody a ‘slow’ lifestyle and a certain set of values related to it. This points to a broader cultural dilemma where the notion of returning to craftsmanship and a simpler and slower way of life, combines in new ways with the designer as cultural intermediary (See Julier 2014: 54-55) and the mediatized conditions design operates in.

This paper investigates this dilemma through a series of examples gathered from the fields of design-art and ‘slow design’. These examples are not chosen for their representativity but nonetheless they point to a significant interest in craft and time in the forms of slowness and duration as an antidote to the ‘acceleration’ of globalized industrial capitalism. The notion of the cultural value of craftsmanship is not new in itself. It is in fact as old as design itself since it was a central element in the Arts & Crafts-movement which is often where traditional design histories take their starting point. The idea that this paper advocates is, however, that what is new is the role time and the mediation of time plays. What becomes important is thus not necessarily or

exclusively the material object itself but the object as a container of the time invested in it and as a sign of processes that so to speak ‘prolong’ time and give it duration. In that sense you can speak of a ‘consumption of time’ through the product and in order to exchange and consume time it needs to be materialized and visualized, which is exactly what design can do. It is however not the same concepts of time that is communicated and it is done both through the objects own form and the communication surrounding it. Thus one of the aims of the paper will be to introduce a conceptual framework in order to map different ways time is materialized and consumed through design.

Time of work and organic time

The introductory example by Makkink & Bey thematizes time as time of work with an almost provocative precision, since you by dividing the price with the name can calculate exactly how much work time you have obtained. According to Studio Makkink-Bey “The minutes of painting determine the ornaments and the price of the ceramics” (Studio Makkink & Bey 2016). Whereas craft processes and artistic processes are often connected with experiences of ‘flow’ we are here dealing with a meticulously planned and controlled process since the designated time set beforehand is not only determining the process but also the (substantially high) price of the product and this way also legitimizing it.

In the case of ‘slow design’ we often encounter another notion of time, which we might label ‘organic time’. One of the most well-known and radical examples of ‘slow furniture’ is the Australian artist/design-duo Peter ‘Pook’ Cook and Becky Northey and their garden of ‘living chairs’. In this case a tree is bend into the shape of a chair during its process of growth, which implies that a chair requires 7-10 years to make/grow and constantly evolves over time. This notion of natural growth is conceptualized both literally and as a metaphor that is mirrored in the designers own practice:

This design was one of my favorites at that time. We now have a completely different perception for living tree chairs, which incorporates stone or glass into the design of tree chair. It’s been 7 years since this tree was planted and our designs have been changing and evolving though-out that time. (Pooktre 2016)

There is thus a parallel between the evolvement of the tree and the evolvement of the designer, where the designer’s body of work is considered as an organically evolving entity. Time is still seen as a productive force conditioning the design process but not as something which is dogmatically set by the designer but rather as an unpredictable force with its own logic, that the designer both adapts and adapts to.

Besides the different notions of time we can also identify different forms of mediation. In her article on the Production – Consumption – Mediation Paradigm Grace Lees-Maffei points out 3 ways design and media are connected and has been studied.

Design *in* media covers the ways design is represented in media, design *of* media covers as the name implies the design of media platforms and representations and design *as* media covers ways the design object itself mediates as symbol or sign (Lees-Maffei 2009: 351). What is at play here is especially the interplay between the first and the last category. The living chair as concept can be read as a symbol of an ecological lifestyle and the Minutes service has decoration layers that signify its own making. The object can thus both mediate as a sign in itself or through signs on the object. Moreover we will see how representations in media both adds meaning to the objects and are necessary for the distribution of them either in a network of design galleries and museums or in the direct relationship between designer and customer mediated through the internet. The naming which especially in the Dutch case plays a significant role places itself between object and context since it is not directly visible on the object but still follows and defines it in a more integrated way than visual or discursive media representations.

Introducing a third example may exemplify and elaborate these distinctions. A Danish representative of ‘slow furniture’ is artist/designer Bente Hovendal and her company Woodnwonder. Though not as radical as Peter Cook she also tries to maintain as much of the ‘natural’ look of the freshly cut lumber while turning it into useful objects. The furniture is described this way:

The furniture is sturdy and usable while still holding remnants of the original life of the tree within the design.

Natural shapes stick out from the form, there may be cracks in the surfaces and traces of the use of the chainsaw. Every quirk becomes a part of the design and a wonder within the whole form. (Woodnwonder 2016a)



Fig. 4: Bente Hovendal: Coffee table/side table. The close up perspective brings attention to the cracks and marks on the objects. Source: Woodnwonder 2016b

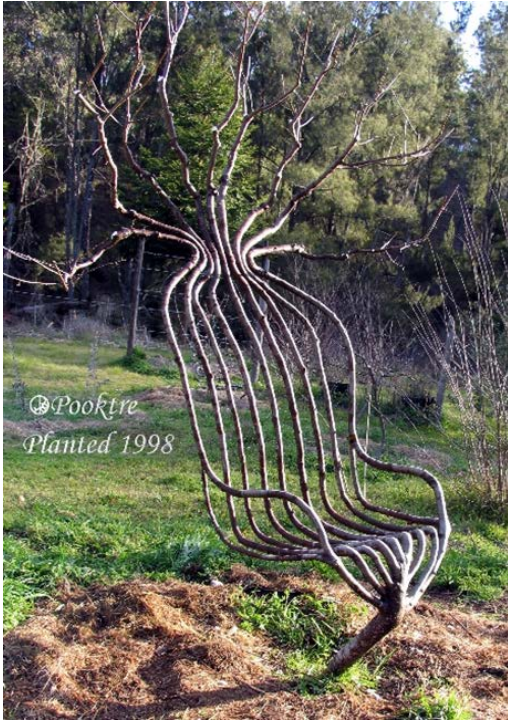
The physical product and the description of it together communicate the idea that both the material in itself and the processing of it are constructive for the meaning of the object. The furniture is supposed to hold 'remnants of the original tree within the design'. Furthermore two different types of signs may be detected on the product – the cracks referring to growth and organic time and the traces from the chainsaw referring to the time and processes of work. In order to underline the image of the furniture as the continuation of the tree, it is also mediated as part of nature. Ill. 5 pictures the furniture as a natural part of the landscape while Ill. 6 is an example of what could be called 'meta-mediation'. A picture illustrates how the staging of the furniture in the landscape is used as a context for the presentation of local products in a media context.



Fig 5 and 6: Visual presentations of furniture from www.woodn wonder.com, Woodn wonder 2016b

The designer as mediator

A significant feature of the examples is the shift from the anonymous craftsman to the designer-craftsman, whose career and lifestyle is inseparable from the conceptualization and contextualization of the object. If we look at two illustrations from the homepage of Pooktre/Peter Cook it becomes clear how the designer personality is transferring meaning onto the object.



Ill. 3: Peter 'Pook' Cook: Garden Chair. Illustrations from Pooktre 2016

The chair in itself is a highly decorative object, which might give associations to baroque garden art or the Japanese bonsai tradition. Used by the designer it turns into a dynamic object that embodies a number of counter-cultural values. With his long hair and beard the designer is recognisable as a form of neo-hippie and his clothing combines informal gardening clothes with comfortable leisure clothes with eastern references that could be associated with meditation. The way he uses the chair turns the inanimate object into a rocking chair utilising the flexibility of the branches. The informality and human surplus is underlined by his laughter. This way he embodies how the breakaway from modern industrialized capitalism towards a new relationship with nature is both liberating and spiritually enlightening.

Through this staging the practice of shaping plants and trees, which has a number of traditional counterparts e.g. the bonsai tradition, is transferred from an expression of culture and tradition to a counter-cultural statement. This transition might be illustrated by a counter-example. In the state of Meghalaya in Northeast India the aerial roots of rubber trees are traditionally shaped and combined into 'living root bridges' that strengthen themselves as the trees grow. It may take up to 15 years to form such a bridge (Atlas Obscura 2016).



Ill. 4: Living root bridge, Cherrapunji, India, Source: Farmer 2009

There is thus obvious similarities in the techniques and design strategy. The difference is, however, that as traditional cultural products the bridges have no recognisable maker and they are not considered as statements but rather as expressions of the culture of the Khasi tribe that make them. In the modern context, on the other side, the grown chair can be considered as an extremely inefficient way to solve its functional task and this irrationality becomes the very point of the object.

While the designer thus gains importance as individual artist, the relationship between design, art and crafts is conceptualized in different ways. In the case of Jürgen Bey a distinction is made between the conceptual artist who is assigned as the originator of the object and the painter doing the actual decorations, who largely remains anonymous and is given no authorship to the work. In the examples from slow design on the other hand the direct relationship and interplay between the artist and the natural material is crucial. The designer gains identity by staging his or her loss of identity in the meeting with the material.

Localization and mediatization

The examples investigated in this paper illustrate how the anti-industrial and anti-globalist notion of nature and work as something that has to be revalued and reconquered is fused with a self-reflective media consciousness. There is a certain irony to the fact that the internet as one of the main tools of globalization also creates new conditions for the return of craftsmanship, since it connects maker and client and gives mobility to otherwise place bound handmade objects in the form of media representations. Whereas

Makkink/Bey's crockery though termed design-art are still goods that are packed and sold through galleries and high end design stores, Peter Cooks living chairs are physically tied to the place. As customer you can either have a chair replanted in your own garden or the designer can work as a consultant caring for a tree that is planted in your own garden. This business model is made possible with the internet as intermediary, which is why the mediation on the internet becomes crucial. In this way the immobility of the material object is replaced or supplemented with the mobility of the images and representations of it. The different modes of distribution, either through the institutionalized design-art network or in a direct designer-customer relation mediated through the internet also plays into the visual character of the object itself. Bey/Makkink's conceptual crockery demands a high level of cultural knowledge to be appreciated. The layers of decoration are so minimalist and subtle that you need to know what to look for to recognize them at all and it demands further cultural understanding to re-categorize it as design-art rather than just traditional crockery. Cook's chair and Hovendahl's furniture on the other hand can be understood and interpreted in one look and their ideological message is quite unambiguous. In order to communicate their inherent values in broader media settings 'slow' products needs to be more easily readable and demand less subtle forms of connoisseurship.

Even if the internet and other modern media have made possible a return to the local and craft-based it is thus as mediated craft and mediated place. As illustrated the products investigated tell a story of the stretching of time through slow processes of work and growth both through their own communicative properties and through their visual and discursive staging. There is a tension however between the simultaneous presentism of the media representations and the organic time of the body and the place it is tied to, and this tension might form the foundation for the longing for the experience and stretching of time, which is symbolically consumed through the design.

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