

Research in Context – What is the role of the designer/ maker in the 21st century and how might this role change in the next 10 years? Discuss your ideas with reference to two of the practitioners or thinkers.

To design is to plan how something will be made, its layout/ composition, the process, the materials etc. A design is the final idea/ visualisation of the product. A designer is somebody who makes an idea reality, and through experimentation, reaches the best outcome for that idea. “Designers do not manufacture things. They think, they analyse, they may model or draw”, but fundamentally their “role [is] making individual products attractive to consumers” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 9). Today, the role of the designer has evolved significantly due to the growing expectations of the clients, as well as the development of technology within the design process, both while having personal accountability to keep a style and to not trade creativity for success. American designer Viktor Papanek discusses within his book *Design for the Real World*, the roles of a designer, saying “in this age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments” (Papanek, 1985, p. ix). Designers have become something there to serve others, when really, design is an art form, meaning all designers are artists, and their designs are their expression. This essay will discuss whether designers should be conscious of the problems of life and needs of people while also maintaining their own integrity as an artist. It will talk about the relationship between the designer and the consumer, and the designer’s role in creativity, as well as the environmental impacts of design as an industry and how technology can influence this. It has been said that it is “crucial for designers to understand clearly the social, economic and political background of what they do” (Papanek, 1985, p. xi), however it has become difficult to do this whilst creating an original experience for the buyer. Throughout the book *Design Activism* Fuad-Luke considers how “designers of all persuasions may recognize the daily balancing act that they have to carry out” (2009, p. 23). This piece of writing will be discussing the ideas of theorists such as Viktor Papanek and Peter Dormer while also touching on designers who tried/ are trying to balance these aspects like Tom of Holland and Anni Albers.

Within his book *Design Since 1945*, Dormer discusses the relationship between the designer and the consumer, stating that “Designers respond to their own needs because their needs coincide with ours” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 31). Arguably, it is an essential role of a designer to create and upgrade products that are desired/ will be bought by the consumer; “design is the act of deliberately moving from an existing situation to a preferred one” (Fuad-Luke, 2009, pg. 5). One way to achieve this is through “ask[ing]

questions of their client and spend[ing] time helping the client to clarify what he/ she really wants” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 9); this is based on the assumption that “the creative potential of these very same customers can help businesses create better services and better products” (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p. 143). This implies that in the future, the design process will continue to become more of a “user-centered” approach, “focus[ing] on the needs of the users and [involving] them in the design process”. For example, Fuad-Luke mentions the concept of ‘halfway products’, where “the designer/maker/manufacture only takes the product so far, leaving a space for the user to complete the making. The user embeds their own creativity, stories and mistakes in the process of finishing the product” (2009, p. 98). Unfortunately, while this does open an important line of communication, it creates a barrier between the designer and consumer, as it portrays the designers as something there to serve them (the client), in the way that “whosoever controls the designers [...] controls to a large degree the expressions and evolution of the design culture” (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p. 33). This collaborated approach of design puts the customer in a position of authority, meaning the designer is no longer creating in their own language, but somebody else’s. This reinforces the idea that “the designer tends to be anonymous as far as the public is concerned” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 30) by creating a ‘them’ and ‘us’ that minimizes a designer’s efforts.

In the past, “textile ‘art’ was one area in which women and men could express themselves more freely because it was not often policed as bureaucratically as painting and sculpture” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 189). This created a rise of textiles as an art form in the 1950’s as it created space for designers to try new things; “It was up to the designer to knock on doors that had never been opened before” (Papanek, 1985, p. 37). Since the 1950s, “design [has had to] become an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the true needs of men” (Papanek, 1985, p. x). This has made it become much more difficult for designers to create products that will sell, while also remaining creative and true to their own personal styles, as the rise of fast fashion and mass-production mean the demand for new things is much more frequent than before. For instance, after World War 2, particularly in Japan, designers were forced to become “company men” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 30), meaning their decisions were based solely on economic gain and the fastest ways to improve their businesses, similar to Papanek’s idea that “The choices facing a young designer seem mainly economic” (1985, p. 38). Dormer focuses on how

“the freelance consultant designer is less important than the company design studio” (1993, pg. 30), describing how brands prioritise profits over quality design work. While this does help grow the brand through giving the customers what they want, the constant back and forth between designer and consumer leads to a loss of identity and individualism of the artists, as supply meets demand, rather than designers creating what they enjoy - it has been questioned, “How do design students with radical ideas seem to end up a few years later designing hotel interiors, lighting, chairs and so on?” (Smith, 1976, p. 109). In this case, Dormer goes on to say “there are signs that younger Japanese designers, those who have travelled to the West or trained in British or North American colleges, are beginning to gain more autonomy for themselves as free creative spirits” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 30). It can be hoped that this is a foreshadowing of the future of design, as designers must be allowed to maintain their creative freedom, in the hopes that design studios and brands retain individuality and character rather than all producing whichever microtrend is popular at that time. In *The Culture of Design*, Julier argues “that a singularly consumption-driven approach would miss much of the interest and complexity of contemporary design culture” (Julier, 2008, p. 56). This encourages that the future of design as a creative process relies on consumers supporting small designers who remain true to their style, while designers find a way to do this at the same time as creating desirable products.

Something designers must overcome to succeed, is ‘the culture of consumption’, which is explored deeply by Guy Julier in the book *The Culture of Design* – he discusses ‘ground rules’ of design, that were laid out by David Slater, stating that “consumer culture is founded on the constant expansion of demand” (Julier, 2008, p. 57). This “constant expansion of demand” is often referred to as fast fashion which alongside mass-consumerism has been on the rise in recent years - “it is abundantly clear that current rates of consumption of many resources are unsustainable” (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p. 67). Fuad-Luke goes on to explain the growth of demand, using the example of “demands for products that are more easily personalized or customizable” (Fuand-Luke, 2009, p. 95) becoming more apparent. It is these kinds of requests and needs for something new and unique that directly contribute to the growth of fast fashion, causing designers the need to churn out work at a higher rate which not only affects the quality, but also encourages designers to opt for more efficient manufacturing processes which often come with larger emissions of

harmful waste. While this does help designers to keep up with the demands of fast fashion and micro trends, it has a negative impact as more and more people are expecting ethically sourced materials to be used in the things they purchase. It is the role of the designer to make a choice between feeding into these exceeded rates of consumption or to recognise the risks of this culture and try their best to counteract it.

With the climate change crisis and environmentally friendly choices having become so prevalent today, it has become a “high social and moral responsibility from the designer” (Papanek, 1985, p. ix) to be environmentally aware and conscious of their decisions in the creative process. “It has already been shown that the mere choice of material that is plastic and not biodegradable can have far-reaching consequences for the environment. The process of manufacturing may lead to immediate pollution problems” (Papanek, 1986, p. 24). This adds another layer of design that has previously not been much of a factor, putting “the designer in a position where difficult moral and ethical decisions have to be made” (Papanek, 1985, p. 38) to align with society’s views. Another obstacle within the ethical and environmental impact of a designer’s choices, is the types of fibres being used where textiles are involved. It has become a lot more common for consumers to have “concerns about what kinds of materials are ethical to wear (killing animals for their fur is cruel; some artificial textile production is unkind to the earth)” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 197), leaving cellulose fibres (from plants), however that involves potential deforestation for farmlands, and seasonal supply. Due to all the constraints and social expectations of today, it has become very difficult for designers to produce items that will make everyone happy.

Some companies are moving forward in becoming a better option for conscious consumers, for example Tom of Holland. “Tom explores the relationship between wearer and garment, how this evolves over time and how it is changed with mending” (Selvedge, 2019). He holds a visible mending programme once a month where he teaches people to fix their own clothes, as well as encouraging them to develop a better relationship with their clothes. He views them as reusable, durable pieces that can be salvaged rather than discarded when they go out of fashion. Tom is setting a good example for other brands, that should be using their platforms to educate their customers in getting good use from their garments as well as where they came from.



Figure 1: Mended Sweater (Tom of Holland, 2018)



Figure 2: Mended Sweater (Tom of Holland, 2018)

A way in which 21st century design is different to anything before, is how it interacts with technology. Technology is a continuously growing industry which affects everything from the idea, to the physical design, to the manufacturing process. It is clear that “advances in materials technology have widened the decorative possibilities” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 179) of designers, however, the development of things such as artificial intelligence mean designs for products can evolve without ever having the input of a human being. As well as AI, programs like swatch editor and photoshop mean designers can visualise their ideas onto products digitally rather than creating tests or prototypes. There is definite fear and dislike of tools such as AI within the industry, as designers are becoming threatened with their jobs becoming obsolete. Still, as dormer explains, while “there are many practitioners who abhor new materials, there are others who embrace them.” (1993, pg. 179). Technology became much more popular within the textile industry during the 1960s and 70s. In general, designers were inclined to explore the new avenues opened by these advancements such as: “mass production, especially of printed cloth, [which] became the target, and handicraft-based factories in the USA and in the UK were bought up or went bankrupt” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 188). This indicates an improvement for those involved in mass production, however, is a clear example of where practitioners lost their jobs to technology. Even though before, “technology fascinated those involved in textile and other surface decoration” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 193), much has been done with the resources available, and so some designers are reverting back to

original techniques, and ensuring that even digitally developed designs retain a certain hand-made feel to them. This is something that designers should continue to utilise, by allowing “Flaws’ [that] have long been a part of the Japanese aesthetic, reminding the viewer/ user that a human mind conceived and made this thing” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 195). Dormer draws attention to the values of Anni Albers, discussing how she believes “designers should handle the material as well, in order to understand its three-dimensional nature as structure” (Dormer, 1993, pg. 184). While technology can be a useful tool in the design process, it cannot replace the input of a real person/ designer; there is an innate knowledge that cannot be replicated - “they know it in the same way that a skilled person ‘knows’ how to perform that skill” (Cross, 1982, pg. 25).

The main roles of a designer are outlined by the challenges they must overcome; it would be simple to say a designer must create designs, but due to the increased expectations of the users and available resources their roles are much more complex. Evidently, the maintenance of the relationship with the client has become a much more prevalent role of the designer, as their demands must be met, and communication is clearly a vital part of the process to get there. However, this puts an immense pressure on the designer, to create something solely for the pressure of another person and, as discussed, can lead to loss individualism. This is an issue that cannot be solved solely by the designer – the consumer must do their part in supporting the small designers who maintain their creative integrity – although, creating for a customer is an integral part of design that cannot be avoided. It is an interesting approach to involve consumers in the design process, but can have interesting outcomes, and may be something that will continue to happen for the foreseeable future. Another obstacle for the designer, is the issue of fast fashion and the culture of using and discarding garments. It can be concluded that the ideas of upcycling and visible mending are gaining traction within the fashion market, a positive first step in allowing designers to take back some of their creative language by giving them more time to develop products. The inevitable slowing down of the turnover of products can also allow designers to opt for less environmentally impactful manufacturing processes, which have been adapted to best efficiency to keep up with the demands of fast fashion. This translates to a third of the roles of the designer, which is to be environmentally aware in their plans. It is important that designers remain aware of these issues and allow them to influence

how their work will progress, however, they must also accept “that no matter how much the designer tries, he or she cannot fully control the processes by which the public read, interpret or even straightforwardly use the objects” (Julier, 2008, p. 55).

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Figures:

Figure 1&2: Tom of Holland. (2018) *No title* [mended sweater]. Available at: <https://visiblemending.com/products/tom-of-holland> (Accessed: 11 December 2024)