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BA Surface Pattern Design – Maker Pathway

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What is the role of the designer/maker in the 21st Century and how might this
role change in the next 10 years?

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As Design has grown and developed over the years, Design as a theory has become something which in itself is open to criticism, review and discussion. Design has developed in terms of materiality, processing and mass production, and is recognised as a completely different way of seeing the world. There is a prism of connectivity between science, humanities, and design, which are all encoded and have relevance to each other. This is due to the three elements of this prism representing a different way of navigating and negotiating the world which encompasses us. The social, cultural, historical, political and environmental implications are all controversial topics which impact this prism. All of which effect a designer's decision-making process. In the 21st century we live in an artificial, imagined world which is preferred to the harsh realities around us. Designers are tasked with being forever conscious of the materials and processes to always use systems thinking and Futuring to design products which better and convenience humanity, whilst not compromising the natural world we reside in. Whilst we are able to criticise, review and discuss the theory of design, the future role of the designer is equally open to debate and speculation.

It is difficult to propose what the future role of a designer is without first acknowledging how past design has irreversibly altered the planet. In addressing the current zeitgeist of design, it is impossible to ignore the environmental impact that the revolution of industry and machines, combined with the developing invention of materials has had on the natural world. Plastic is the first and foremost highlighted and dreaded material of the 21st century when forward thinking for future design. Plastic is shunned for the chemicals in its production, it not being biodegradable, and its unsustainability threatening wildlife and natural ecosystems worldwide. It is astounding to think that plastic is within the fashion garments we wear, the textiles within our homes, and even the water we drink.

The difficulty which accompanies the many taboos and overwhelming negativity towards plastic, is its high function as an integral material of design. Greenwood appreciates

plastics as an ingenious development of design and technical skill. Greenwood gives examples of the beneficial uses and versatility of plastics in design, explaining:

In terms of function, they can often do jobs that are simply beyond the capabilities of other materials: they can be made into pipes that don't burst, tanks that don't corrode, boats that fold up but are impossible to sink, chairs that give but never break, and shoe-soles that last practically for ever. (Greenwood, 1983, pp.vii).

I would argue that this reference from Greenwood being published in 1983 is the reason for what would now be an outdated 'rose tinted glasses' outlook on plastic materials.

Furthermore, Greenwood continues to show a romanticised and naive relationship with plastic:

Plastics can be beautiful. Soft or hard, flexible or rigid, smooth or textured, transparent or any colour of the rainbow, plastics are perhaps more than any other material exactly what the designer makes them. (Greenwood, 1983, pp.vii).

Here Greenwood presents plastic as an ultimate answer and pinnacle of material design, which was naturally appealing to designers. This outlook contributes to its wild popularity and favour for mass production. When considering the future of plastic, I believe that within ten years the production of new plastic will be severely monitored and responsibly controlled, if not eradicated entirely.

Whilst a naïve outlook on plastic can be criticised, it is however important to be able to observe the past as a way to provide a strong foundation for a healthy environment and future of the people. Plastic is a result of man designing durable and long-lasting materials, and unfortunately designers did not proceed to 'forward think' with the gross overproduction of a material that cannot degrade itself. As a result, from this oversight we are haunted by plastic in everyday life wherever we go. This has become the saddening normality to the

passive, inactive 21st century consumer, with designers in the industry challenged to find a resolution. When considering hauntology, Andrew Gallix feels it is a sense of being “haunted by a nostalgia for all our lost futures.” This is a depressively raw description when applied in the context of environmental welfare. Gallix theorises that different objects can hold memories and narratives with different levels of connectivity, which is interchangeable between people based on numerous different factors. These factors include social and cultural ethics, morality, connotations and experience.

As a child I would regularly visit the beaches on the coast of Cornwall over my summer holidays. Even in the short duration of my existence, this was before the scares of global warming and sustainable ethicality in design. I recall one occasion vividly, which took place on an overcast day with a rough tide. Whilst paddling in the surf, the tide slipped free my footwear from my small right ankle and pulled it out to sea. It was what is referred to in fashion, as a ‘jelly shoe.’ I loved my jelly shoes. They were a hue of pinky purple with a complementary pink glitter within the flexible material, comparable to ‘jelly’. The initial reason that this day was highlighted in my mind was due to sentimentality. It meant the world to me to learn that my Grandfather returned to the beach for over a week in a hope to reclaim my lost shoe that may have been washed up on the shore in a hope to make me feel happy again. My Grandfather hoped to reunite me with something that caused me so much distress to think I had lost it. I undeniably adored and felt so attached to what as an adult who is incredibly conscious of the environment, can now identify as polyvinyl chloride, PVC jelly rubber, -or plastic. When I revisit this memory, I can acknowledge that the hauntology has developed from being sentimental, to an environmental standpoint. Being a young child no older than five years old, I recall being so upset to think that my shoe was gone forever, and I would never see it again. Reassessing this, the haunting prospect is echoed in the harsh, brutal reality that my shoe is still floating in the ocean somewhere. Given plastics properties, it is

undoubtedly still in existence, quite possible fully intact some 20 years later. I find hauntology to be an incredibly beneficial tool when considering design, as it is important to revisit the past and read the narrative an object can give you, nostalgically reminding us of a simpler, cleaner world. In reading the hauntology of my jelly shoe, I have reassessed the objects longevity and ethicality. From my newly developed, adult perspective, I can conclude the object of the shoe itself has informed my design choices for present and future projects.

With the crucial point that the environment and natural world is in, a Global call for action has been made based on the irresponsible behaviour of mankind. Within the essay titled 'The Factory', Flusser critiques mankind's poor decision making: "The name that zoological taxonomy gives to our kind – homo sapiens sapiens – expresses the opinion that we are to be distinguished from the kinds of hominid that proceeded us by a double dose of wisdom. In light of what we have got up to, this is rather questionable." (Flusser, 1999, pp.43). Flussers' outlook questions the intelligence, - or 'wisdom,' of humankind based on the irrevocable distress we have caused to the current Anthropocene. An Anthropocene is defined as the present situation we as humanity are currently in. In addition to the overwhelming production and waste plastic materials, humanity has completely altered the Anthropocene and current environment of planet Earth. We have changed the world through deforestation, the fossil fuel industry, global warming and pollution, resulting in drastic changes to the worlds ecosystem. This current Anthropocene is the story of mankind. As man is to blame for heat waves in August, rising sea levels and melting arctic environments, as a designer and a human being I am forced to question the sad world I reside in. How did we get to this detrimentally crucial point? What can I do differently in the future to attempt to undo the planets state? How did we as humankind contribute to the manufacture of the unsustainable 21st century Anthropocene? I believe that certainly within the next ten years these questions will be detrimental to the design process, as any negative ramifications of a

design will be dissected and intensely scrutinised before making it to the stages of production.

In the 21st century the relationship between art and nature have changed, which I find is blamed by designer's disregard for nature during the manufacturing processes. Design is using more tools and more adaptability, which has led to more problems and more artificiality. In addition to the material of plastic, designers have also made immoral and unethical choices when considering textiles for interiors and the fashion industry. Now more than ever we are heightened as a 'throw away fashion' culture. Clothing, accessories and homeware are available in shops such as Primark to be sold for an incredibly cheap price due to paying the sweat shop workers in third world countries a miniscule amount. As the article of clothing is priced so cheaply, the consumer is fuelled to overconsume with the attitude that it can be easily replaced when it breaks due to its poor quality. The amount of fashion textile waste is staggering, and something that companies are desperately trying to conceal within their company manifestos and mission statements. When thinking about consumerism and the fashion industry, Walker comments on the constant and repetitive turnover of new designs as a sustainable business model for profit, regardless of working to nature's detriment: "This industry has a vested interest in the dynamic of fashion because a twice-yearly change (autumn and spring collections) ensure constant production and profitability." (Walker, 1989, pp.171). As a culture we are able to assess and cast judgement on culture from looking at the mess it leaves behind. In understanding the 'mess' and monstrously overwhelming landfills, we can begin to understand and challenge the grotesque state of humanity and its relationship to nature.

The development of machinery during the industrial revolution has impacted the change in factories no end. Factories and design have developed more towards mass production and replicating collections on assembly lines, which has resulted in design being

moved further away from not only nature, but also craft and skill. Cumming and Kaplan discuss the Design and Industries Association as they historically tried to strictly keep craft within the industry, whilst still using machines and factory lines:

Several commercial designers did succeed in reappraising manufacturing methods and standards by introducing craft directly into industry. Influenced by Lethaby and Ashbee, manufacturers such as Ambrose Heal, Peach and Gordon Russell, all leading members of the DIA, restructured the relationship between craft and machine. (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, pp.98).

Unfortunately, regardless of the persistent attempts of the Arts and Crafts Movement, under which the DIA fell under, design inevitably progressed to prioritise machines. Machines have made an enormous impact on craft and design, which arguably detracts from the charm and skill of the handmade by prioritising mass production in the current consumeristic society we live in. Walker acknowledges this:

It was the gradual introduction of more intensive labour divisions, power-driven machinery, assembly lines, and growing automation which brought about the separation of craft and design and which prompted the well-known debates about the fate of art and craft in the age of mechanical production and reproduction. (Walker, 1989, pp.38).

As a surface pattern designer, I can recognise that assembly lines and machinery have altered both the fashion and interior design industry. As an example, this is especially prevalent in the processing of modern wallpapers. Historically wallpaper was printed by hand with imperfections and character, whereas today, wallpaper is manufactured in bulk through computer aided design and digital printing. I believe that whilst humanity is attempting to reconnect to the natural world and nostalgic environmental harmony, designers will continue

to pursue CAD and digital techniques to ease the physical, skilful work of artists and craftsmen.

When thinking about the factory of the future and design within ten years, Flusser makes a hopeful statement:

We can count on it being possible to overcome the crazy alienation of the human being from nature and culture such as it was at the height of the machine revolution.

The factory of the future will cease to be a madhouse and will become a place in which the creative potential of homo faber will come into its own. (Flusser, 1999, pp.46).

This statement gives me hope that designers will be a leading force in which man embarks on creating a future where humanity prevails to be slaves to the machine, in which designers will reconnect and root ourselves once again in nature, craft and skill. Only in partnership with education will we be able to strive towards the future Flusser discusses, as he continues to comment “The factory of the future will have to be the place where homo faber becomes homo sapiens sapien because he has realized that manufacturing means the same thing as learning.” (Flusser, 1999, pp.50). As a surface pattern designer, I propose that we address the properties within the materials we use in forward thinking; using Futuring systems thinking. Current designers have an obligated responsibility to take ownership of past designers’ mistakes, developing a consciousness to environmental issues in an attempt to take control of the welfare of the planet. If designers of the present day make an effort to educate the consumer whilst designing morally, ethically, and ecologically appropriately, the future sustainability of the natural world can be incredibly positive for the future of the planet.

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