

D'OU VENONS NOUS? QUE SOMMES NOUS? OU ALLONS NOUS?

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we make the case for new ideas and for a different educational approach/ practice.

Cognitive methodology and rational working processes form part of our heritage. But the lack of solutions for the complexities of the modern world – i.e. environmental issues, cultural clashes, the breakdown of cultures - indicates that Western society touches on the limits of positivism and rational thinking. We fell into the trap of procedures without content.

We are on the verge of a new era as alternative to cultural standardization and the postmodern hype of styles, subcultures and social status. How to make young designers sensible to this new cultural context and content as a counterweight to the damage, caused by overly rational thinking? How to make them aware of the fact that design is not value neutral?

In this paper we report about a different design process, worked out with the students at the TU/e, as reflection and action upon culturally embedded aesthetic and ethical values and their relevance on the language of dynamic form. Within the context of this process we looked for different ways/venues as to enhance mutual respect and appreciation as a basic attitude to cultural dialogue and understanding.

Keywords: *cultural values, ethical values, dynamic form, design interaction*

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1. THE LANGUAGE OF FORM IN MODERN CULTURE

In *Was ist Aufklärung*, Kant focuses on the ontology of the present as the only relevant question one is supposed to ask. What is the meaning of our being here and now? What do we mean? What is the meaning for us of the here and now? Kant's philosophical text can be read as the pivot changing point from feudalism, religion, metaphysics and superstition to the new era of modernism. With modernism a new ethos arises: to think in an autonomous and independent way - to look at the individual as a cognitive subject. To be modern equals the rational affirmation of change. To quote the painter Georges Braque: 'J'aime la règle qui corrige l'émotion'. Modern design took over as an intellectual and abstract activity, exercised within the socio-ethic context of the common good. It reached its climax in the supreme functional, highly aesthetic and rigorous visual designs by Dieter Rams. His

"Snow White's coffin" or record player of 1956 he designed with Hans Gugelot for Braun, the German consumer electronic manufacturer, is one of the finest examples of Rams approach to "good" design. His designs incarnate the values of the "Kalos kagathos" of the modernistic era.

Cognitive methodology and rational working processes form part of our modernistic heritage. They still resonate in our era of globalization by way of the commercial output of products with a standard look, meaning and function.



Figure 1: Dieter Rams and Hans Gugelot, record player, 1956

2. AND TODAY?

The concept of design was basically conceived and mainly developed on the promise of social ethics. Think of the Arts & Crafts Movement or the ideology behind Bauhaus. The birth of the economic principle, after the Stock Market Crash of 1929 leading to the Great Depression, heightened the urge to accumulate wealth and to consume goods and services. Design has become part of the current economic development, with the principles of standardization and mass-production as its premises. Along with these economic principles, our welfare state and its (dominant) mythology of liberty and pursuit of happiness also cherished an extreme level of

individualism. Call it the modern citizen's devotion to the virtues of indulgences and superficial pleasures, while lacking in experience. Postmodern iconic shapes were introduced and used to revitalize the market and spread into the world. One of the main differences with modernism is that postmodernism treats all values as equal.

So what about our society now? What about aesthetic values? What about moral virtue? Are these becoming marginal ideals, as Saul argues, unattached to the realities of specialization and individualism as our societal landmarks? Saul writes: "Deprived of our stabilizing humanist roots [...] we are now as alone with our age as any civilization can be. There are no solid references to give us direction, no active contradictions. In effect we are now in our own past. [...] We confuse intention with execution. Decision making with administration. Creation with accounting. On the dark plain where we wander, totems have been erected [...]. That of efficiency is one of the highest, a freestanding moral value [*italics mine*, JK]." [1] And he goes on: "It is difficult in this context to keep in mind that the essence of civilization should tend towards consideration [...]. The easy answer is that decision making must be decoupled from administration; the former being organic and reflective, the latter linear and structured. But in a civilization which has mistaken management techniques for moral values, all answers are a trap." [2]

Are we on the verge of crossing one of these difficult moments in history, as Saul wants us to believe, when any sensible approach seems unexciting and ineffective, while the forces of self-interest and structure appear tempting and unstoppable? [3]

3. AND TOMORROW?

We must in our society fill again the void that has been produced by the absence of values. As an individual we have the responsibility of "being there". Not as static human beings but as breathing, sensing bodies experiencing the essence of things as dynamic, i.e. changing over time and space. [4] Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger opened this door. They forced us to relinquish the illusion that we can penetrate to "essences". The world cannot be treated as a collection of objects for knowledge, but must be viewed as a world in which human beings interact and share experiences. As Abram paraphrases Merleau-Ponty: "My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other." [5]

As "creating, shape-shifting entities" [6] our sensory perception leaves behind the traditional and "solid" state of mind.

We no longer can ignore the poetic, emotional and empathic impact of cultural values as a new language joining people and not dividing them. [7] This switch in mentality makes up for a new quality in design interaction, with a different set of aesthetic and ethical values as framework. [8]

How this sensuous and sentient future will look like is not clear yet. It is our task and responsibility to make youngsters aware of and to introduce them to this switch in mentality. "Interaction between dynamic form and culture" was conducted in 2009 as an assignment at the department of Industrial Design. It makes up for a new quality in design interaction, with aesthetic and ethical values as its framework.

4. INTERACTION BETWEEN DYNAMIC FORM AND CULTURE

Form and culture relate to each other. This connection is overtly clear in architecture: cultural and ethical values are embodied in buildings and we can easily recognize specific form languages that relate to the way these values are embedded. Take a look at the architecture during the Ceausescu regime in Romania. These buildings breath power, while being reminiscent of constructive forms derived from classical tradition. Ceausescu built them, as to dominate his people and to dwarf them, standing in awe of his omnipotence. In contrast, the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe embodies human scale and proportion and implements beauty, craftsmanship and harmony as a universal standard. But again, this icon of modernistic architecture is static.

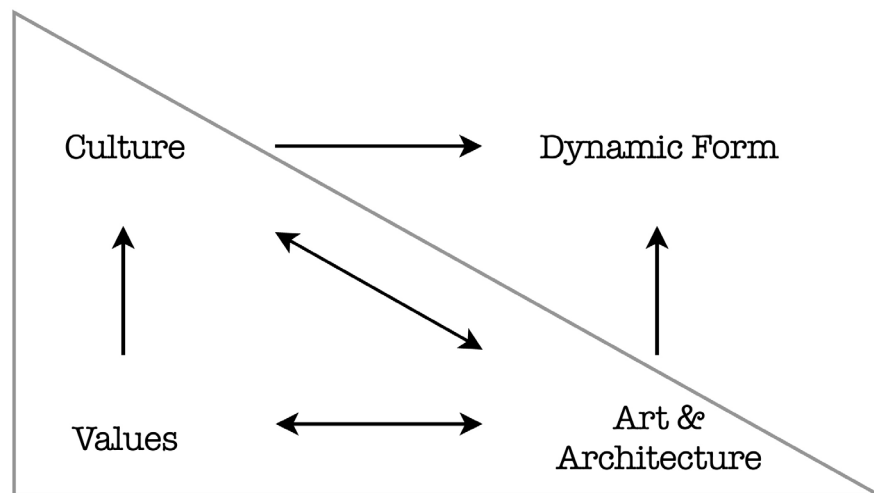


Figure 2: Interaction between dynamic form and culture: schematic presentation

We asked our students to explore and deliver an interactive light installation for the home environment, with different cultures and their ethical values and (applied) art and architecture related form language as point of reference. When designing intelligent products and systems, behavior emerges in the process as a new “shape shifting” layer. Form extends beyond the static into the realm of dynamic form, i.e. the form of product-and-system-behavior in interaction. The first step was to research the relation between culture and form through analysis of architecture and art. The Structure of Human Values by Schwartz (1992) [9] was treated as a framework for understanding and comparing different cultures and their values.

5. THE CULTURAL VALUE OF 'TRADITION' AND ITS INTERACTION WITH DYNAMICFORM



Figure 3: Static collage referring to a Moroccan village

We argue by example. One of our students, Antje Adriaens, chose tradition as cultural value. As a culture relating to this value she looked for Morocco and specific Moroccan mountain villages. She observed that the Moroccan culture is lively and hospitable. So she wanted to dive into this culture and find out in what way the characteristics of tradition are represented in the architectural patterns.

To perform the second step - the translation of cultural values into a dynamic collage as input for the design process - visual characteristics of the Moroccan architecture were analyzed. This resulted in a three layered collage, with the first collage serving as basis for the colors, the second showing shapes and forms which represent the organic feeling of the culture and the third being the technique of a mosaic, existing of several pieces and adding up to a whole. Growth was chosen as dynamic aspect: the growth of a village is also an organic movement. To realize the dynamic collage Antje started to draw the lines of little mosaics, moving from the centre of the paper to the borders, and integrating the different colors and techniques she tried out. She filmed this drawing process as to make growth, as dynamic aspect of the Moroccan culture, to become visible. The final form of the dynamic collage was one that originated while making it; a quality that can be found in tradition as well.

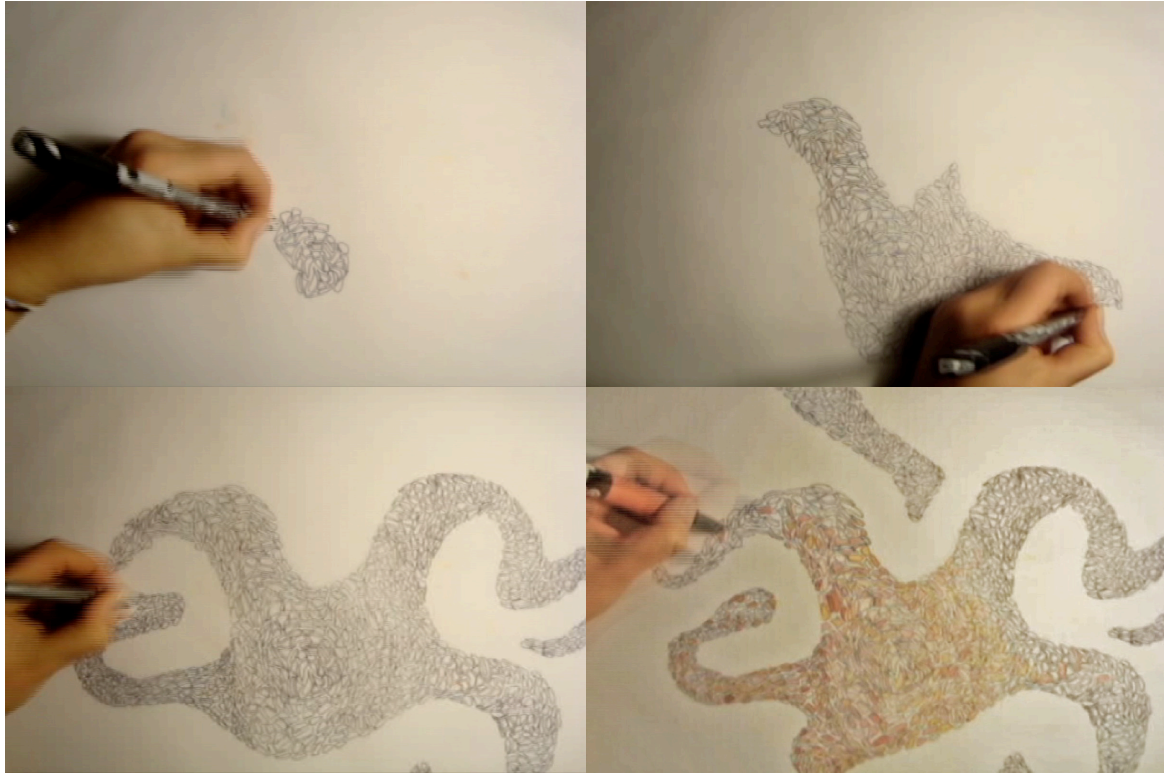


Figure 4: Dynamic growing collage

Next step was the rendering of the analyzed form language - as an abstract dynamic collage or 2D visualization of a specific cultural value - into a physical set-up or interactive design with a role in the Western home context. After getting the requirements for the design clear, research was done for possible environments and actions in the home where the design would operate. Environments and actions being important in tradition were looked at, such as being together and participating in activity. An ultimate tradition situation, she sensed, is dining: this is the moment when the members of a family all come together, share experiences and with every person adding to the experience. This analysis made her realize that another important aspect of tradition, which also played a great part in the finalization of the design, is the way everyone participates and adds to tradition.

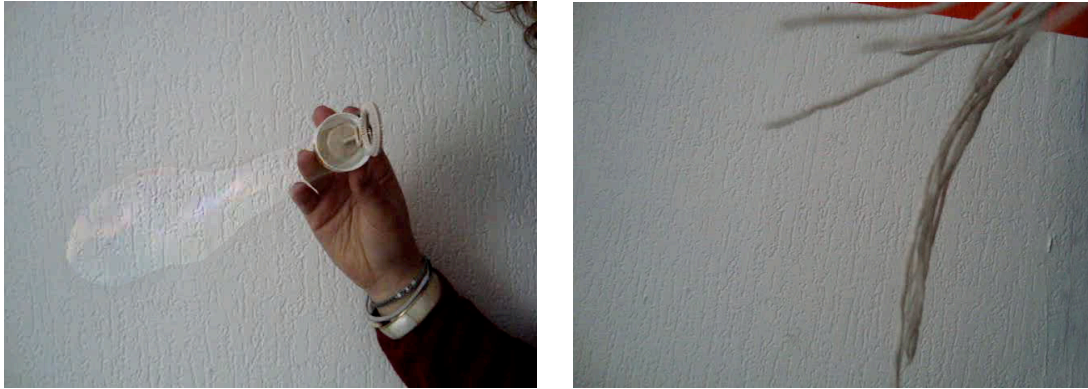


Figure 5: Testing ways of blowing

As a next step she searched for interactions with a personal touch, both in dining actions as well as in light interactions. Examples for dining are how one sits on his/her chair or how one places his/her glass on the table. Examples for light are pushing, pulling, blowing, closing, turning ... Choosing for the right interaction, she looked back at the value of tradition. Building tradition is something that does not happen solely in a passive, unconscious way. She therefore chose a light interaction that influences growth by means of blowing. Operating the light can thus become another part of the dining experience and of tradition. To get a visual idea of this interaction, she tested some ways of blowing and filmed it. We perceive her while blowing in a dish of water with the circular patterns created on the water surface. We see her blowing soap bells and the way they move and explode. We finally observe the effect of blowing with a hair dryer and the rhythmical but repetitive movement this mechanical blowing affects on wooden strings and a paper strip.

To complete the concept for the final set-up, reflection had to be done on a way to combine the interaction of blowing, growing and dining experience. The final design became a dinner table light, growing when used or being blown out. Combining the aspect of growth with blowing and the lighting effect, some try-outs with paper were made. Folding a piece of paper in different ways created beautiful growth and lightning effects. But its shapes were too harsh and sharp to match with the collage. In a similar way, experimentation started with fabric. When using this material, light does not only grow in steps but in one flowing movement.

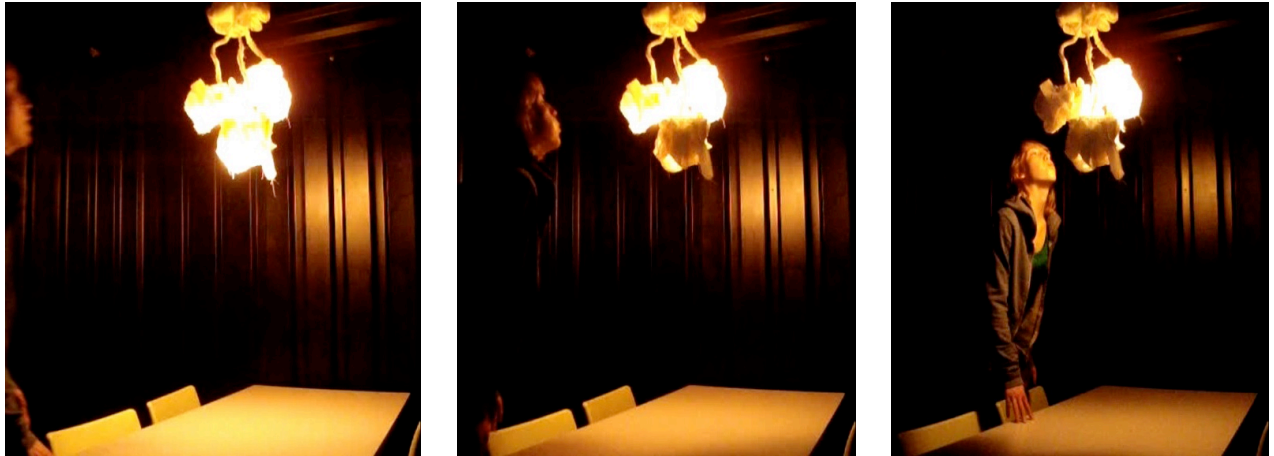


Figure 6: Blowing out “Grow Light”

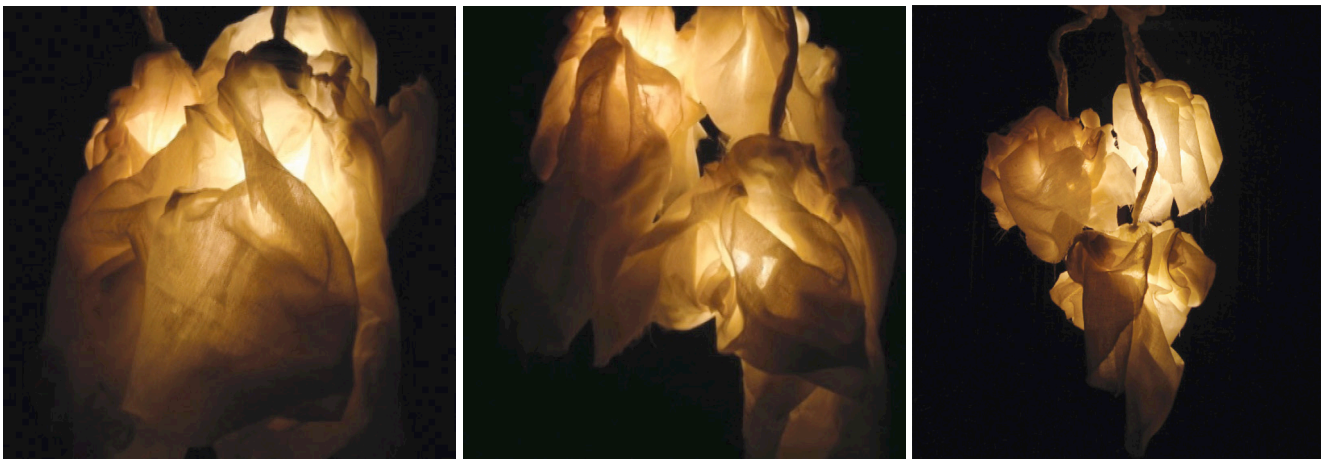


Figure 7: “Grow Light” in different states perceived from different angles

By combining material, interaction and setting into its final stage, a dinner table light – called “Grow Light” - was created. The act of blowing out the light is rewarded by its growing; a slow growth that becomes only visible after a period of time. Since the growth reacts to the way of blowing, each person operating the light will leave its personal imprint on it. Operating this light might thus become a new way of dining tradition, along with cooking and setting the table. This way the light becomes something to keep and cherish: a unique object as a dynamic part within an age-old tradition.

6. CONCLUDING

Design is not value neutral nor has it ever been, whatever standardization, mass production and the strategy of “making things that are fresh today seem old tomorrow” want us to believe. As such we set the stage for a new appreciation and application of cultural and ethical values as a different set of challenges within the field of design education and research. We want to challenge students with the poetic and emotional values as part of our cultural heritage. We look for the process of

awareness, empathy and embodied experience in the reflection of who they are, where they come from and are heading for.

We do believe cultural awareness to be one of the driving forces for a different approach and a new sensitivity towards the place and role design can take in our intercultural, global society. As such we want to fully prepare youngsters for their future role and responsibility within the new era we are heading for.

New design should be read as a “hypertext”: designers are responding to different perceptions and sensuous interactions with their environment. They transform the cultural landscape, embodying it with content and context. They wander in geography as well as in history and create new pathways between multiple ways of perceptual reciprocity between themselves and their living environment. If twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, we are now confronted with planetary negotiations and discussions between agents from different cultures. In the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty it can only be a “more-than-human-otherness”.

REFERENCES

With this title we refer to a well-known painting by Paul Gauguin. In 1891 – he was forty-three by then - Gauguin left his native France, wife and children, seeking in the South Seas a society that was simpler and more elemental than that of his homeland. The questions of the title refer to Gauguin's years at the Petit Séminaire de La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin, just outside of Orléans, where he was a student from the age of eleven to sixteen. His subjects there included a class in Catholic liturgy. The three fundamental questions in this catechism were: "Where does humanity come from?" "Where is it going to?" and "How does humanity proceed?" Although in later life Gauguin was vociferously anticlerical, these questions obviously were anchored in his mind and imbued in the painting with mythological references to the way of life of the native people of Tahiti.

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