

Remodelling design as co-creation in the era of globalisation

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Abstract

Criticisms of design frequently focus on its central role in the proliferation of consumer culture in the context of globalisation. This paper considers an experimental design that intervenes in these conceptions of design. By evoking the historical design ethos of co-creating, advocated by Global Tools in Italy in the 1970s, I contend that the furniture series Digestion (1998-2000) by French designer Matali Crasset provides a provocative and significant model of collaboration that reworks the interdependencies between developed and developing countries in a globalised economy. Drawing on art theorist Hal Foster's account of how unresolved issues of history haunt contemporary practices in visual art, I show how this experimental design reveals a number of unresolved tensions in design pertinent to today's ecological and financial crises. I argue that Digestion celebrates how the co-creation of mass produced products manufactured in developing countries can reconfigure collaboration between designers and consumers in an international arena.

Design Accounts of Globalisation

Globalisation is often optimistically discussed in design discourse as an opportunity for increased flexibility, enhanced quality, and renewed creativity in design. Design theorist Guy Julier (2008) contextualises globalisation within the liberalisation of economic trade during the 1980s and 1990s. He defines globalisation as a combination of accelerated production, the digitisation of information, strategic creativity, and the redistribution of manufacturing centres around the world. He draws on Scott Lash and John Urry's 1987 account of 'disorganised capitalism', where the shift in influence from institutional regulation to multinational corporations, combined with the flexibility of digital technology, is seen as blurring differences between culture and commerce and aestheticised everyday life. Aestheticising everyday life means moulding, shaping, and penetrating every corner of daily experience. The combination of these forces has resulted in a closer allegiance of branding and design with consumerism under the aegis of economic globalisation. Julier (2006) suggests that mutuality best characterises the relationship between the economies of capitalism and the human subjects who work and live within its orbit. I contend that while Julier champions globalisation as advantageous to design, his concept of mutuality leaves little room for reconceptualising the relationship between consumer and designer in ways that acknowledge the environmental impact of the overproduction of commodities.

Critical views of globalisation consider the wider socio-political ramifications of organising society according to the dictates of multinational corporations. These perspectives emphasise that the flow of capital and western cultural values across national boundaries constitutes a form of cultural imperialism imposed upon developing countries. Assessments vary as to whether globalisation produces cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity, yet many who focus on the social effects of globalisation agree that while wealth has increased overall it is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a minority elite (Woodham 1997, Appadurai 1996). Designer and design theorist Gui Bonsiepe (1999, 2006) has long discussed the effects of globalisation in relation to design and

international economic development. He advocates design and industrialisation as a driver for economic independence in undeveloped and developing countries.

I have identified three significant differences between Bonsiepe and Julier. First, Bonsiepe attributes responsibility for the economic dependency and environmental decline of some countries to the vested interests of globalised multinational corporations, whereas Julier celebrates such corporations' contributions to design innovation. Bonsiepe's analysis of globalisation and consumerism identifies the disparities of wealth and cultural power that have occurred in developing countries and are also increasingly evident within Western countries. Because of capitalism's ethos of overproduction, Bonsiepe argues that design in globalised capitalism produces increased environmental degradation and sees pollution as an unimportant bi-product.

A second difference is that Bonsiepe focuses on the imbrication of design in the framing of consumerism as the primary form of people's self-expression. He refutes current associations of design with luxury fashion goods and objects to the "trivialisation" evident in design's conflation with marketing and branding within globalisation (Bonsiepe cited in Fathers 2003, p. 55). For Bonsiepe (2006, p. 29), "freedom" is more than "the right to choose between a hundred varieties of cellular phones", and the key question regarding globalisation is whether design facilitates self-determining societies or societies dependent on and dominated by external forces.

Finally, in contrast to Julier's celebration of the multilateral flow of information and goods within global capitalism, Bonsiepe (1999) argues that the dominance of developed countries by developing countries results in the replacement of socio-cultural and economic development policies by programs of privatisation. These programs become wholly absorbed in servicing external debt imposed by organisations such as the International Monetary Fund. Rather than capital flowing from developed to developing countries, Bonsiepe asserts that it is developing countries that are "transferring value" to developed economies (Bonsiepe cited in Fathers 2003, p. 53). In other words, the mutuality that Julier describes exists solely in the rhetoric of developed countries, whose interests reside in downplaying the exploitative facets of globalisation.

Spectrality

In contrast to Julier and Bonsiepe, in *Design and Crime* (2002) art theorist Hal Foster describes design as a totalising system that encroaches on all aspects of public and private life. Within this framework, Foster connects the celebrated hybridity of art and design in a globalised economy to Art Nouveau's intermixture of art value and use value, contending that each mingles the values of art and design, subject and object, and leads to commodity fetishism. Against this conception of design and within the context of globalisation, Foster identifies a repetition of historical models in recent artworks that have the potential to resist the current status quo of hybridity. Rather than seeing historical repetition as a calculated strategy to win institutional attention, Foster describes artworks that are shadowed by artistic antecedents as "spectral", in that they suggest regret for what has been lost (2002, p. 130). Such artworks, he contends seem to recall "lost moments" in social and art history (p. 138) and he suggests they function as a "possible portal between an unfinished past and a re-opened future" (2004, p. 15). Foster asserts that artworks that evoke historical antecedents bring different temporalities into the contemporary frame and disconnect from the present by insisting that the present be viewed historically. In other words, the spectrality of historical references in contemporary art invoke ways of thinking and acting that counter the present socio-cultural dominance of global capital.

I contend that in the current phase of globalisation Foster's observation of spectrality in recent art practices is applicable to experimental designs that recall or invoke historical developments in design to address the social, economic and environmental effects of globalisation. My argument is that a close analysis of the connection between contemporary experimental designs and historical models of design practice exposes an overlooked critical strategy in contemporary experimental design. Adapting spectrality to design may be antithetical to Foster's strident critique of a

contemporary world awash with design in *Design and Crime*, yet it reframes how experimental designs question the apparent historical amnesia of celebrations of the eternally new in globalisation, and also reframes how design renegotiates unresolved tensions from its past.

Global Tools

Global Tools (1973-1975) was a collective comprised of Italian radical design groups Superstudio and Archizoom and leading designers and commentators such as Andrea Branzi and Franco Raggi. The collective emerged in 1973, immediately after the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) suspended trade of oil exports to the United States, Western Europe and Japan. At a time when widespread inflation, changing social values, and violent political turmoil were rampant, reduced confidence in public governance in Italy was further compounded by energy rationing. Exacerbated by the OAPEC embargo, social and environmental degradation were targeted by activists who advocated conservation rather than economic growth and resistance to the increasing influence of American-style consumerism. In fact, the oil crisis can be seen as a turning point in the growing public awareness of global interdependencies. It brought attention to the absence of global guidelines and policies for energy production and trade, and the need for international cooperation in responding to a crisis of limited supply (Turner 1974).

Global Tools explored design alternatives to the capitalist values of profit and competition. According to Branzi (1984, p. 83 and 1973, p. 4) their objective was to provide “a gymnastics of recovery” that would “restore balance in human creativity”. Raggi corroborates these descriptions, defining the collective as a school of “expanded anti-paternalistic education” that sought to break free of institutionalised relationships that merely reproduced the existing social hierarchy (Raggi, nd, 210) Influenced by Riccardo Dalisi’s research in product customisation by non-designers, Global Tools challenged the established practices and institutions of design at the time by conceptualising design as co-creation and attributing creativity to non-designers and consumers. Global Tools’ emphasis on consumer creativity sought to disrupt the growing trend in Italy towards domination by countries rich in natural resources such as oil. In the collective’s view, creatively addressing how to live within economic constraint and re-purposing existing products was preferable to excessive consumerism modelled on American capitalism. To promote this idea, Global Tools proposed experimental design workshops on The Body, Construction, Communication, and Survival, yet only the workshop on The Body was conducted. Nonetheless, in this one workshop Global Tools emphasised the value of interdependence and cooperation and positioned co-creation and re-purposing as guiding principles for design practice.

Digestion

I interpret the suite of furniture titled *Digestion* (1998-2000) by French designer Matali Crasset (born 1965) as a re-engagement of the idea of consumers as co-creators of design. Establishing her design studio in 1998, re-purposing existing products is the principle that distinguishes Crasset’s commercial and experimental designs. Crasset introduced the re-purposing of everyday products in her *Digestion* design prototypes and has exhibited such designs in several solo retrospectives. For example, an igloo constructed from plastic buckets was exhibited at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and an artificial forest of clothes hangers decorated with plastic gloves was exhibited at the Stedelijk.

Digestion No. 1 Pouf is a rectangular pouf made from a checked, woven polypropylene bag filled with foam. Crasset organises the pouf in several arrangements, demonstrating its facility for customisation, for instance, as couches, armchairs and coffee tables. The variously arranged poufs all have handles and are portable, reflecting the product’s origins as the ubiquitous laundry bag available in thrift shops around the world. Originally designed for The Ethno Techno Bar at the ‘Who’s Next’ exhibition in 1998, the pouf was also included in Crasset’s design for the Moroccan Bar at the ‘The Disorienting Objects of Morocco’ exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1999. Produced for a time by high-end Italian manufacturer Edra, *Digestion No. 1* was

exhibited at the Milan Design Fair in 2000 and purchased by the Fonds National D'Art Contemporain and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Crasset subsequently extended the *Digestion* series to four other furniture designs that are also based on cheap plastic household wares manufactured in developing countries such as China and available at supermarkets and generic \$2 shops. More recently Crasset made the pouf, re-titled *Hi-Pouff*, available to a wider market at lower cost in plain-coloured covers. While I have explored the *Digestion* series at length elsewhere (Moline, forthcoming), in this paper I shall focus on *Digestion No. 1* to demonstrate my thesis.

As a direct pun, the term *digestion* acknowledges that as there are enough products circulating in the market, design should be digested, appropriated and re-designed by consumers. The title encapsulates her view that assimilation of design should be the focus of contemporary design practice rather than the expansion of consumerism and the endless proliferation of new products. The possibilities of re-purposing cheap plastic goods, as shown in *Digestion No. 1*, shifts the expectation that design must be expensive and branded by big-name designers in developed economies such as the United States or Europe. To disrupt the media promotion of designers as celebrities, Crasset emphasises consumer interventions, which she sees as the unconscious design carried out when non-designers resourcefully reassign a product's functions to suit their immediate everyday needs. *Digestion* makes visible a strategy already at play in the everyday re-purposing of designed objects by consumers.

I have identified that a number of the ideas and values developed in the Global Tools experiment are recalled in Crasset's re-purposed design. Like Global Tools, Crasset rejects the principles of excessive consumerism central to globalisation as characterised by design commentators such as Julier and Bonsiepe. Her mobile arrangements that recycle existing products demonstrate that design must be redefined as operating within limits rather than feeding the excess and waste culture of globalisation in which it is imbricated. Furthermore, the readily available products with which *Digestion* is constructed demonstrate Crasset's aspiration to "provide a basis which people may adopt" and the model of co-creation in which she evaluates her designs according to how much "life" consumers "bring to the objects" (Crasset cited in Morgaine, 2002, p. 74). In other words, she sees design as an everyday activity in which consumers participate, rather than solely the domain of specialists. I interpret Crasset's spectral recalling of Global Tools as a refiguring of design as co-creation rather than a celebration of the designer's virtuosity in anticipating, determining or accelerating consumer desires.

Digestion No. 1 succinctly demonstrates the ethos of co-creation and re-purposing. The arrangements of the modular unit into various pieces of furniture emphasise versatility, drawing attention to the changing patterns of consumerism made necessary by environmental change. In other words, the range of uses Crasset explores with the laundry sack demonstrate how resourcefulness may be seen as desirable rather than a restriction imposed by poverty. Symbolically turning the most disposable item—a polypropylene bag—into a seat opens up the potential of re-purposing. Crasset repeats this concept in each element of the *Digestion* series to demonstrate the wide range of opportunities available if resourceful recycling of products is given new value in consumerism.

I propose that in *Digestion* Crasset adapts the Global Tools ethos to the late 1990s, specifically the implications of the Kyoto Agreement ratified in March 1998. This agreement specified targets for the reduction of pollution in each country and provided three market-driven mechanisms for achieving these targets: Emissions Trading; Clean Development; and Joint Implementation. When considered in this historical context, *Digestion* can be interpreted as demonstrating potential for a dialogue between developing and developed countries that addresses the practicalities of global trading. It does this by showing how consumers can co-create by re-purposing products manufactured in developing countries, adapting them to their own needs. In so doing, *Digestion* models a DIY design adaptation of the new protocols for global trade.

Crasset makes visible new possibilities for more equitable global interdependencies that evoke the agenda of Global Tools. Rather than reiterate a one-way trade where polluting industries are relocated to developing countries with less stringent pollution legislation, *Digestion* suggests how consumers can engage in a reciprocal arrangement with designers and manufacturing companies by re-purposing existing products to co-create furniture using products manufactured elsewhere. In this redefinition of design as co-creation and re-purposing between producer and consumer Crasset addresses the uneven distribution of wealth under the aegis of globalisation as noted by Bonsiepe, rather than merely adding to the proliferation of more stuff described by Julier.

Conclusion

I have argued that through the spectral recalling of a lost moment in design history— when Global Tools proposed the principles of co-creation and re-purposing as strategies to counteract the waste culture of capitalism—the contemporary significance of Crasset's design may be more fully understood. Furthermore, when *Digestion* is interpreted as drawing attention to the urgent need for ongoing co-creation and re-purposing in design in the context of globalisation she not only emphasises that resources are limited, but also how a co-design approach can engage and adjust consumer behaviour on a global scale. By superimposing the principles of a lost design model into the commercial arena, Crasset responds to overproduction and consumer practices that contribute to global warming. As Foster suggests, the spectral is “not a will to totalise so much as a will to relate—to probe a misplaced past, to collate its different signs” and as I suggest, to discover viable but overlooked aspects of historical design models that address problems arising from contemporary globalisation (2004, p. 21). By arguing that Crasset makes visible how consumers can engage in a reciprocal arrangement with designers and manufacturing companies to re-purpose existing products and co-create new design, I have demonstrated that spectrality can be applied in the analysis of experimental designs that are engaged in rethinking global issues in which design is negatively imbricated.

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