



Faculty of Design

2016

## Form follows meaning, meaning follows form: Surrendering the innocence of design

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### Suggested citation:

Ruttonsha, Perin (2016) Form follows meaning, meaning follows form: Surrendering the innocence of design. In: Relating Systems Thinking and Design Symposium (RSD), 13-15 Oct 2016, Toronto, Canada. Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1945/>

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# Form Follows Meaning, Meaning Follows Form

## Surrendering the Innocence of Design

*Perin Ruttonsha*

### Abstract

Creativity is a loaded concept, which we seem to assign unconditional merit. The danger in this arises when the allure and momentum of creative processes obscure underlying project agendas. If we consider designed images, products, and environments to be part of the broader cultural setting, then designers are accountable for the paradigms that we enable through our work. As systems-oriented designers, we cannot hide behind the agendas of our clients; rather, we must view each project as a powerful act of cultural meaning making, in which we share creative agency. In this paper, we will briefly examine how changes taking place within the field of design may ultimately influence what we construct as our experienced realities, and also how the positioning of creative practices within a socio-economic system can determine how they are employed in cultural production.

*Keywords:* cultural anthropology, systems-oriented design, systems change, creative industries, socio-cultural approaches to creativity, aesthetic reflexivity

### Introduction

*The following paper is based primarily on personal observations and conversations, through engagement with the arts and design communities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), over seventeen years.*

The culture of design practice has a rich history, even just within the last thirty years, or so. It is impressive, the extent to which the community continues to redefine itself to fill new market niches (such as service, healthcare, digital, and transition design). Granted, design is almost synonymous with reinvention, and has also been described as unavoidably systemic (Dubberly, 2014; Nelson, 2014); so, it is not surprising that the ‘system’ of the design field would be under frequent renovation — it is only in the nature of the practice. In part, this has arisen from the extrapolation of ‘design thinking’ from the classical design practices of creating form, elevating designers from the positions of craftsperson, engineer and artist, and endowing us, additionally, with the titles of strategic problem-solver and change-maker. At a time when the design community is situating its work more centrally in the space of economics, politics, social interest, and environmental issues, it is our responsibility to continue to reflect on the significance of design to general processes of change.

In doing so, Nelson and Stolterman’s (2012) conception of design as a ‘first tradition’ becomes ever more relevant. In their view, an archetypical interpretation of design would define it as an integration of thought and action in the intentional construction of experienced reality (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012). However, for much of the twentieth century, this would have been compressed within the socio-economic programs of what we classify as the design disciplines. Reduced and fragmented in its purposes, it would have been easy to overlook the cumulative effects that design agency had in making the things that make us. Moreover, at the peak of a long road of non-linear, emergent, and path dependent processes of cultural complexification, a ‘first tradition’

understanding of design is increasingly more difficult to formulate. Our 'construction' of experienced reality is much less direct than our description of first tradition design seems to imply.

Design processes have the potential to operate with this in mind, though at present, are not really structured to permit this level of reflexive contemplation. Distracted by specific project agendas, our attention is often drawn away from our broader role in cultural meaning making. By this, I am not merely referring to the development of great works of architecture or public space; rather, here I am more interested in the ways in which designed imagery, forms, and experiences permeate and shape the most ordinary routines and ideas of modern life. In advocating for 'first tradition' approaches to design practice, Nelson and Stolterman (2012) recommend cultivating a new kind of design culture, which orients its work around "[unique ways] of looking at the human condition with the purpose to create change" (p.22). In this paper, we will briefly examine how changes taking place within the culture of design practice may ultimately effect what we construct as our experienced reality:

"It is no exaggeration to say that designers are engaged in nothing less than the manufacture of contemporary reality. Today, we live and breathe design. Few of the experiences we value at home, at leisure, in the city or the mall are free of its alchemical touch. We have absorbed design so deeply into ourselves that we no longer recognize the myriad ways in which it prompts, cajoles, disturbs, and excites us" (Poynor, 1999).

### The Creativity Complex

Creativity is not the only capacity that designers exercise, nor is the production of cultural meaning limited to creative practices. From a socio-economic perspective, however, design is now mixed in with what O'Connor (2012) refers to as an ideas-driven industry, or the 'creative industries' — a term which, he explains, was introduced by the British government to replace and expand that of 'cultural industries'. Thus, here we will relate design to other creative practices, in our attempt to interpret its role in cultural meaning making. Furthermore, this new definition of 'creative industries' can bring us closer to a formulation of design as a first tradition, in that it is encompassing a range of professional practices which integrate creative thought with production: "...the creative industries idea represents a blurring or abolition of boundaries — between art and industry, between culture and economics, and even between art and life" (O'Connor, 2012, p.34). Historically, it would not be the first time that art, design, and craft existed within a unified system of cultural creation; so, this new socio-economic classification is really more of a reunion than a redefinition. In the creative industries, the delivery of creativity, for the purposes of stimulating growth and change, has become a marketable product and service in itself (see O'Connor, 2012). Elevated from its former classification as an 'applied art' (O'Connor, 2012), the expectation that design will, indeed, *generate* culture through the application of creativity, and in service of the economy, increases. This is where ethical tensions begin to arise, namely in that we risk assigning unconditional value to creative work.

In arts-and-design-based fields, we are implicitly involved in the endeavour of cultural meaning making, whether this is done artfully, practically, conscientiously, or otherwise. Although, arts and design fields have each developed along different trajectories, and employ creativity to differing ends — sometimes in contempt of the other. As Nelson and Stolterman (2012) note, our connection to first tradition design has been "frayed", in part, through the intellectual polarizations and hierarchies that have emerged in Western culture:

“In the philosophic writings of Aristotle, wisdom (*sophia*) became primarily the concern for first principles and causes — thus cleaving it from practical wisdom and productive action. *Sophia* was further divided into knowledge of ideals (the abstract) and the capacity for practical actions (the concrete)...In Plato’s Republic, those who *thought* about things were elevated to the pinnacle of society, while those who *made* things were positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy”(p.15).

A similar polarization plays out within the creative industries, leading to a perceived hierarchical division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, where high culture could be equated to the realm of abstract ideals, or art, while low culture might be compared to concrete, practical action, or craft (see O’Connor, 2012). Where visual artists have turned their nose up at the instrumentalism of design-like work, designers strike back by disregarding pure artistic expression as mere frivolity. But, amidst this cliché rivalry, we would be foolish to dismiss the design of everyday objects and environments as only semi-cultural, or the production of aesthetic symbolism as nothing more than a surface application. Quite the opposite is true. It is the most ordinary of designs, from kitchen utensils, to bedroom shelving, to news flyers, that permeate our lived realities. As well, the rich layers of meaning that are implanted within works of art are not only expressing, but also exposing that which is culturally relevant. Needless to say, we cannot afford to sacrifice one for the other — thought for action, art for craft, or ideal for concrete. More so, outcomes from both art and design practices will contain characteristics that are aesthetic, symbolic, and functional (see O’Connor, 2012). Rather than assigning these as disciplinary specialties, what is more crucial, is to give consideration to our professional responsibilities within each.

Within the spectrum of cultural production, artists and designers may perceive their obligations to be different. For example, artists are afforded open creative license to produce what we deem to be poetic, prophetic, and profound. We are granted freedom of expression as part of our constitutional rights. We are expected to produce work that is conceptually challenging and symbolically rich. Our audiences realize that what they are engaging with is an illusion, a fiction, a satire, or an abstracted reality. They also accept that the underlying messaging of the work may be difficult to access or interpret. Oftentimes, arts-based work will offer a *reflection of, response to, or commentary on* contemporary culture and politics, with the intention of celebrating, critiquing, or disarming social norms. In the realm of design, on the other hand, creative outcomes are often absorbed as part of the fabric of our lived realities. Generally speaking, designers are expected to produce work that is safe, practical, functional, accessible, user-friendly, and inoffensive. Designed products, platforms, and environments should be entirely intuitive for users to engage with. Additionally, design outcomes are typically *creations* more than they are reflections, in that they do, indeed, construct the conditions in which culture is enabled. These are overly-simplified distinctions, of course. However, they are worth mentioning in order to find our way through the more ambiguous ethical territory that emerges when we hybridize creative practices.

“The immediate distinction [made by art and design practitioners during interviews] is one between the autonomy of art and the hegemony of design. This can be traced back to the Renaissance where the notion of ‘artist’ came to be distinguished from that of mere craft — *techne* — and artisanship. This distinction concerned the different status of artistic and manual labour — where one was transcendent, freely creating, and the other dominated by the necessity of work” (O’Connor, 2012, p.36).

Recently, in attempt to bolster the credibility and perceived range of the design field, some practitioners have been distancing design from art, disarming popular conceptions that equate

design with stylization: “We are finally getting past the idea that design is purely visual” (Mau, 2010, p.24). As much as this has been an important part of design asserting its relevance and explaining its approaches, it also risks undermining the influence of its aesthetic and symbolic characteristics, in contemporary culture. For example, O’Connor (2012) describes how endowing functional goods with aesthetic and symbolic meaning would have been pivotal in constructing the social behaviours that drive today’s consumer market: “Thus, the term ‘designer goods’ has come to stand for a certain kind of high-end and aspirational consumption in which aesthetics, personal identity and profit are barely distinguishable”(p.35). In this case, designers’ predilection for stylization was used to push a broader economic agenda. Advertising is another instance where symbolic meaning can be obscured by the cloak of its communication function. As a separate case, hybrid practices in art and design also take cues from science and technology, in an experimental playground of invention and intervention (see *Subtle Technologies*; Inter/Access, n.d.; Oxman, n.d.), generating products like 3D-printed food (see Sorokanich, 2016), fabric made by microbes (see Venkataramanan, 2014), or bento box watches. The last example is only a concept, which was developed by Takii Seeds as an advertising play, commenting on the health implications of our busy, ‘on the go’ lifestyles (Grape, n.d.). Still, it serves to point out how easy it can be to blend the borders between cultural commentary and the creation of functional, cultural artefacts. Recent work in hybrid creative spaces indicates a renaissance of sorts: one wherein discovery for the sake of redefinition (of self and society), is leading us forward. What it also signifies is that creative practitioners *are* embracing the sensibility of design as a first tradition. We are acknowledging that to make the things that make our world, we must open the boundaries of our practices. With these examples, we can get a sense that the positioning of creative practices within a system can determine how they are employed in cultural production.

As creative practitioners, we will also be pressed by the assumptions imposed on us by our cultures and cultures of practice. For example, Sawyer (2006) unpacks several common myths that surround contemporary European conceptions of creativity. A few of the most familiar are that creativity stems from unconscious, spontaneous inspiration, taking place within an individual, and leading to the production of novelty (Sawyer, 2006). He roots many of these myths in 18th century romanticism, which rejected rational, conscious deliberation in art-making (Sawyer, 2006): “The Romantics believed that creativity required a regression to a state of consciousness characterized by emotion and instinct, a fusion between self and world, and freedom from rationality and convention”(p.16). We see these romantic ideals appearing in popular, Western contemporary perceptions of creative practices, which can often diminish creativity to expressive forms of making; for example, an online search of the term immediately turns up imagery of rainbows, lightbulbs, exploding brains, and splattered paint. The belief that creative processes are mysterious, magical, and mystical (also see Kolko, 2011), perhaps also contributes to its marginalization. As creative practitioners, we are simultaneously ostracized and glorified, treated as both eccentric and exceptional. Sawyer (2006) notes that this has become a role that we play into: “...many creative individuals believe that being normal is the same thing as being typical, and they’re eager to distinguish themselves from the average person” (p.17). Even in the rationalized modernism that followed as a contrast to romanticism, in the 20th century, the creative temperament was one of “isolation, coolness, and detachment” (Sawyer, 2006, p.17). Although the recent move to bring design practice into collaborative forums has been dispelling the myth of the individual creative genius, we have yet to completely drop the notion that our worth, as practitioners, relies on our ability to generate novel creations. Sawyer (2006) attributes these kinds of beliefs, in part, to the individualist attitudes that prevail in Western cultures. In an individualist society, he suggests, creative practitioners are expected to express a unique talent, while collectivist approaches to creativity endorse fitting in with convention. In other words, cultural conceptions of creative

practices could also be shaping what we ultimately ‘deliver’ as products and services within the creative industries.

### Creativity in the Mainstream

Organizing creative practices into creative industries is really a strategy to optimize the socio-economic value of creative work. At the same time, it establishes access points within the market, through which cultural production becomes possible. Systems and socio-cultural approaches to creativity propose that individual creative acts take place within a field and domain that are responsible, respectively, for the acceptance and dissemination of novelty (Sawyer, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). So too, are those fields and domains embedded within broader social, economic, and political contexts:

“We cannot study creativity by isolating individuals and their works from the social and historical milieu in which their actions are carried out. This is because what we call creative is never the result of individual action alone; it is the product of three main shaping forces: a set of social institutions, or *field*, that selects from the variations produced by individuals those that are worth preserving; a stable cultural *domain* that will preserve and transmit the selected new ideas or forms to the following generations; and finally the *individual*, who brings about some change in the domain, a change that the field will consider to be creative” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p.47).

Further to this, when creative practices are coordinated within creative industries, what can result are networked systems of production and distribution, some of which are large and international in scale (see Lash & Urry, 1994; Sawyer, 2006). Thus, the making of cultural meaning through first tradition design may actually be dispersed across multiple agents, who may or may not communicate directly with each other. Sawyer (2006) tells us that included within the cultural domain are ‘standard ways of working’. When these are scaled up to systems of production and distribution, these standards become fairly well entrenched. So, we could also say that our creative practices, to some degree, are channeled through the formats and forums that have been validated as socio-economically relevant. As creative practitioners, it is our job to continue to expand the socio-economic circle of comfort for engagement with creative practices, and in doing so, to render them viable through the development of new market niches.

On social terms, we permit creative practices to take place, provided that their results can be situated within the conventions that we already understand, for example, through a gallery, a theatre, a bookstore, a public space, or a product line. We have assigned specific forms of creative expression with social meaning. Within the confines of these socially accepted formats, we tolerate creative works as conceptually provocative as designer packages of garbage (see NYC Garbage, n.d.), paintings using bodily excretions (see Frank, 2015; Williams, 2015; Robertson, 2017), or hangings of blank canvases. Artists’ intentions to be satirical, critical, surreal, or otherwise are implied by the setting in which the creative work is presented, and thus, audiences are able to engage with these cultural artefacts without disorientation. Generally speaking, creativity has a position within social contexts, so long as we know how to place it. The same is true on economic terms, however, placement within an economy requires not only acceptance of the produced novelty, but also its commercialization. For creativity to sit within a ‘creative industry’ it first must be translated into a form of expression that is perceived to deliver benefits. Thus, professional

creativity, and its acts of cultural meaning making, are filtered through those formats which have already been established as meaningful — ‘architecture’, ‘film’, ‘fashion’, ‘web’, etc.

Designers’ facility to repeatedly reinvent the design field, to capitalize on market opportunities, is an example of creative practitioners applying our creative skills in the commercialization of creativity — the transformation of creative processes into a product and service (i.e. design thinking and design charrettes), probably being the most ingenious instance, yet. However, depending on how we have put our skills and services to use within the market, our role in cultural meaning making may evade our job description, or become embedded within pre-determined socio-economic agendas. For example, Margolin (2002) discusses how designers were able to find a place in late nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial economies by turning attention toward product development. More recently, the late twentieth century transition within the corporate sector, from manufacturing to image branding, would have opened another door for creative practitioners (see Lash & Urry, 1994): “Until that time, although it was understood in the corporate world that bolstering one’s brand name was important, the primary concern of every gospel of every solid manufacturer was the production of goods” (Klein, 2009, p.3). As Klein (2009) explains, by the mid-nineteen-eighties, corporations were downsizing and outsourcing their factory production, and instead investing in their brand identities: “...creating meaning was their new act of production” (p.xiv). Just as the emergence of mass produced designer goods would have been conditional on the presence of a creative team, so too could the escalation of corporate brand initiatives only gain momentum through the support of effective and efficient creative networks, to develop the related materials: “[Strengthening one’s brand] requires an endless parade of brand extensions, continuously renewed imagery for marketing and, most of all, fresh new spaces to disseminate the brand’s idea of itself” (Klein, 2009, p.5). In response to the latter trend, design studios have been able to distinguish themselves by offering everything that a big-name brand might require to captivate the attention of the public, from graphics, to product packaging, to digital applications, to immersive brand environments, and onwards. In doing so, the socio-economic system (or the domain) of creative production would have also adjusted to address some of the unique creative challenges and opportunities that arise when attempting to infuse brand identities into every corner of public perception. So, we now have studios that can integrate the design planning process across multiple presentation formats, and production houses that will take on anything from the printing of banners, to the construction of furniture, to the development of extravagant tradeshow booths. In other words, demand for a new suite of creative products and services inspired the growth of a capacity with the design field, and this capacity has further stimulated demand. These days, any North American corporation that is serious about their public image has likely gone through a branding make-over, at some stage. In Toronto, during the eighties and nineties, the influence on the urban environment was obvious, as organizations began to refresh the ‘look and feel’ of their retail centres. Multi-platform brand experiences are now ubiquitous in the civic realm of large municipalities, and corporate logos light up downtown skylines, worldwide.

This expansion of a niche within the creative industries was a win for creative practitioners, who were granted means of applying our skills in increasingly integrated ways. At the same time, it has drawn design practice, quite centrally, into the agenda of reinforcing the norms of consumer culture, along with the paradigm of the branded life experience. This is not to suggest that branding and retail design are somehow disingenuous as practices, only that designers are, indeed, implicated in the cumulative effects. We are implicated every time we create a point-of-purchase display or floor decal, flaunting the logo that we also fashioned to convey just the right corporate persona for our client, with a navy blue background to suggest ‘reliability’, and a yellow swoosh to indicate ‘ingenuity’. In this work, it may be our job to help our clients achieve market saturation and

maximize profits. But, while critics chastise large corporations for monopolizing markets, and homogenizing global cultures (Klein, 2009), the designers who are providing them with brand ammunition go mostly unnoticed.

“Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse” (Bambrook, Bell, Blauvelt, Bockting, Boom, de Bretteville, Bruinsma, Cook, van Deursen, Dixon, Drenttel, Dumber, Esterson, Frost, Garland, Glaser, Helfand, Heller, Howard, Kalman, Keedy, Licko, Lupton, McCoy, Mevis, Miller, Poyner, Roberts, Spiekermann, van toom, Triggs, VanderLans, & Wilkinson, 1999).

Behind the scenes, if you walk into an advertising, marketing, or turnkey design agency on the right day, you might catch the creative team planning for a new campaign, with pin-up thumbnails of spirited characters, like dancing cats or talking bananas, accompanied by some catchy slogans. Many of the professionals who engage in this kind of work may be young creative practitioners, doing their best to make their skills relevant in a social system that portrays creative work as accessory; those who are earnestly applying their art and craft to complete the jobs they were hired for; those who were attracted by positions that are lucrative and seemingly glamorous (Bambrook et al., 1999; Poyner, 1999); those who feel pressure to impress their team with their acumen in understanding the interests of the designated target audiences; those who want to demonstrate their flexibility and versatility in creative production; those who may equate success with their stylistic savvy being showcased on billboards, internationally; those who may still harbor lingering romantic notions that tie their perceived worth as creative professionals to an expression of their own unique genius. The degree to which their work contributes to the rise of a ‘brand bully’, or the culture of consumerism, may or may not come into conversation. Some designers will be more sensitive to these issues than others. Only some will have the training to comprehensively dissect the symbolic significance of the cultural artefacts they are producing. Still, the adoption of design products and services by the corporate sector is part of what has permitted these young professionals to find jobs in creative fields: “The rapid growth of the affluent consumer society meant there were many opportunities for talented visual communicators in advertising, promotion and packaging” (Poyner, 1999). It is part of what has enabled design practice to spread its wings, expand a niche, and prove its relevance to broader strategic issues.

### Creative Partnerships

Some designers stand up against the corporate co-optation of creativity, by stating their philosophical positions in the form of written manifestos. For example, in 1964, a group of 22 graphic designers, photographers and students prepared a manifesto, lamenting the overly-commercialized application of their creative work: “...the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents...By far the greatest time and effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity” (Wright, White, Slack, Rawlence, McLaren, Lambert, Kamlisch, Jones, Higton, Grimbley, Garner, Garland, Froshaug, Fior, Facetti, Dodd, Crowder, Clift, Cinamon, Chapman, Carpenter, & Briggs, 1964). This manifesto, entitled *First Things First*, was written primarily to plea for the renewal of design’s position within the economy; although, the undertone of its messaging also seems to call



for the ‘re-cultivation’ of social interests, beyond those that are driven by market ‘gimmicks’. Forty-five years later, the manifesto was updated and republished by a different group of 33 signatories, reinforcing the original anti-consumerist message: “We propose a reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication — a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning” (Bambook et al., 1999).

This controversial manifesto was a representation of designers aiming to take greater responsibility for their influence within processes of cultural meaning making. What is interesting about its tone, however, is that it implies that designers have little agency within their existing roles, working with corporate clients. There is a presumed innocence — a protest that designers are unreasonably beholden to the demands of the faceless market machine, cranking out irrelevant products and messaging for mass consumption. Designers are made out to be the victims, whereby our talents have been caged and corrupted: “...most product designers have been locked into the aims and arguments of their business clients, believing themselves unable to take any initiatives of their own” (Margolin, 2002, p.96). But, the other side of this story is that, working in the mainstream, designers are in a privileged position to forward counter-cultural ideas, to the extent that clients will allow it. For example, we see major brands embracing multiculturalism, feminism, gender diversity, and other social and environmental issues; we see the tongue-in-cheek attitude of the creative mind entering into brand messaging; we see avant-garde style showing up in everyday household items; we see design practitioners quietly exercising creative license within the constraints of their roles. Claiming that designers are only agents of their clients’ interests would be missing the point of design as a first tradition. We cannot detach acts of cultural meaning making from their economic and political contexts. While artistic applications of creativity permit externalized and scathing critiques of these contexts, designers, instead, are challenged to reinvent them from the inside-out, in close association with governments, corporations, non-profits, and communities. Rather than releasing ourselves from the grips of the market, designers are in a good place to begin to redefine it on terms that we would want to endorse. In 2012, Garland added an addendum to the original *First Things First* manifesto, this time to acknowledge “the positive, creative part that could be played by the right kind of client”. In this newest manifesto, Garland forwards a different sentiment, altogether — that clients are, more truly, partners in design. Returning to the socio-cultural approach to creativity, we could argue that the role of clients, in some respects, is to identify a need and establish a space wherein the skills of a creative team could be put to effective use. Only that, clients may not have enough familiarity with design thinking or first tradition design to fully anticipate and appreciate the possible outcomes. This is where designers can guide clients by illuminating the many variations, and related implications, of what could be accomplished within the socio-economic space in which these clients are working. Through creative and problem-solving processes, clients and designers, inadvertently, end up in an iterative negotiation between various project details. As much as clients may have final decision-making authority, depending on the nature of the relationship, it is often the designers that develop these options, in the first place. Thus, designers render certain choices possible.

Manifestos are one tool that design studios have been employing to make their values and intentions known, prior to project specification: “Manifestos were statements of purpose, calls to action and weapons of mass obstruction” (Heller, 2010-2014). Manifestos assert the voice of designers, within projects, by laying out a general agenda that precedes the development of any specific design briefs. Manifestos can be oriented around goals, processes, instructions, sets of beliefs, opinions, or cultural observations. They are sort of like operational ground rules for a studio, or a code of practice; although, ones which mostly serve as inspiration rather than regulation. Importantly, they send a message to prospective clients that their authors conduct their

practices according to sets of standards and methods. Clients who choose to work with these studios are inevitably drawn into the fold of their philosophies. For some studios, this might be a commitment to systems-oriented design; some may follow a human-centred approach; others may advocate for experimentation and failure. As designers, we may not have the agency to modify the delineated needs of a client project, although we do certainly have some liberty in determining how we address them. By holding true to a code of practice, which is often deeply tied to our conceptions of how to *be* a creative practitioner, designers can influence the ways in which our skills and talents are applied within the economy. But, as Margolin (2002) points out, we cannot expect consistency across the field: “A profession cannot be grounded in the expectation that all of its practitioners will share the same moral vision, and it must therefore focus on the concrete issues of practical work in order to define its social identity”(p.98).

Designers proclaiming to possess standards and ethics is no more surprising than any other group doing so; neither should it come as a shock that creative practitioners would want to align our work with meaningful causes. Rather, what is notable about the recent engagement of creative practitioners in the “culture of sustainability” (see Margolin, 2002), is how our declared values are pushing us to renegotiate our social positioning as agents of change, and restructuring the field of design, as a result. As Irwin (2015) notes, in recent years, the focus of design practice has expanded into new areas, such as service design, social innovation design, and transition design. In all cases, each of these approaches represents a radical departure from the more conventional graphic, product, spatial, or digital design agendas; more so, the outcomes will also differ, despite the latter being enfolded within the former. What this indicates is that designers’ intention to be a part of a culture of sustainability quite directly informs what we subsequently produce as cultural artefacts. Simultaneously, in recognition that sustainability is a cross-cutting issue, the structure of design practice has also matured, whereby we are no longer working exclusively in service to individual clients, but also in partnership with multiple actors. Within these new social contexts for design, what are doing goes beyond human-centred research, community outreach, or the testing of prototypes. Rather, in these contexts, design ideas are being staged as a mediator for discourse between diverse project stakeholders. Instead of hiding behind client agendas, we are bringing design into open forums that are unmistakably political. From this position, and with many heads at the table, we are better equipped to rigorously probe into the socio-ecological implications of the things that we are producing. Our thumbnail pin-ups become items for open reflection and debate, not just clever concepts to capture the attention of our patrons. When run through the engine of an open design process, the things that we ultimately create as cultural artefacts can easily go through numerous iterations of collaborative screening. This extension of creative practices into diverse socio-political, participatory initiatives represents a complexification of decision making within design. Not only are more voices represented within the creative process, but these processes are also permitted to unfold in ways that are nonlinear and surprising. Arguably, we have only been able to carve out this prominent socio-political role for design after establishing its credibility within the mainstream market.

### Complexity in Creativity

Part of what has rendered human cultures complex is our ability to reinvent our lived experiences, and also to attribute symbolic meaning to these. In this regard, the role of design within trajectories of cultural complexification and cultural meaning making is apparent, yet ambiguous. While designers wrestle to determine what a first tradition design practice might look like, the field is still semi-conflicted in its purposes. For example, what we project to be culturally meaningful, through the collection of designed outcomes, may actually be a cumulatively arbitrary position, defined by

the disconnected agendas of our clients. This is what systems and socio-cultural approaches to creativity (Sawyer, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) remind us of: that, as creative practitioners, it would be difficult to separate ourselves completely from the systems that contain us, whether we are constrained by our disciplines, the media with which we are working, our preconceived notions of what it means to be a creative practitioner, our clients' agendas, or our interpretation of social quintessence. Even when we use the limitations of a system as fodder to frame a counter-cultural position, it is still the original properties of the system that are providing a backbone to our thinking. But, what systems and socio-cultural approaches to creativity underplay is the significance of creative production for other types of actors, such as those who are commissioning or consuming creative products and services. This is part of the reason why creative practices can appear to be so socially detached. From Sawyer (2006) and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) we can gather that context impacts creation, but what influence might our creations, subsequently, have on contexts? There seems to be, within the 'cultural industries' at least, an assumption that creative responsibility ends at the point where a viewer buys a ticket to see a show; or that, so long as creative work is being produced and consumed our job is complete. This conceptual omission is, perhaps, indicative of a gap that exists in the creative industries: as creative practitioners, we have not whole-heartedly stepped into the space of thinking and working reflexively, or with respect for the cumulative effects of our efforts — although, of course this perspective would be essential to a systems-oriented practice.

Designers' involvement in the rise and propagation of consumer culture, through product and brand development, is an ideal entry point for discussing reflexivity in design. It is not the intention, here, to critique consumer culture, or to position designers as malevolent agents of immorality and greed. Quite the opposite, since, if we were to take a reflexive view of the state of the system, we might find that the positions, roles, and circumstances of various actors are too complex to be drawing clear deductions about their agency and responsibility. We will not unpack this in detail, here. However, we can begin by looking to Lash and Urry's (1994) description of the postmodern phenomenon of aesthetic reflexivity, to unravel some of this complexity:

“Aesthetic reflexivity is instantiated in an increasing number of spheres of everyday life. In the economy itself there is an ever growing centrality of 'design'-intensive production in many economic sectors....design-intensivity is embodied in the 'expressive component' of goods and services...Aesthetic or hermeneutic reflexivity is embodied in the background assumptions, in the unarticulated practices in which meaning is routinely created...”(p.6).

Both Lash and Urry (1994) and O'Conner (2012) make a case that the increased involvement of designers in industrial production has resulted in the 'aestheticization of the material world and everyday life' (the second concept which is taken from Featherstone, 1991). Margolin (2002) indicates that designers would have taken a clear position within this socio-economic shift: “Designer's first promoters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Henry Cole in England and Herman Muthesius in Germany, saw it exclusively in relation to the manufacture of products for the market” (p.93). However, this does not mean that designers were fully attentive to the emergent effects of this work, when scaled out and up. For example, Lash & Urry (1994) describe how this aestheticization included an ascription of “sign-value” (p.4) to material and non-material objects, which subsequently engendered a liminal space for engagement that transcended any attachments to social roots. In other words, individuals begin to look to these cultural artefacts as their socio-moral compass, as opposed to their social institutions (Lash & Urry, 1994). This is precisely why we can't leave our creative responsibility at the door of an exchange. It is not enough to track *whether* our creative products are being consumed, but also *how*. As opposed to existing

only within the romantic space of rainbows and sparkles, what Lash and Urry's (1994) writing points out is that creative products and services do, in fact, have a moral grip: "Entities and events which would otherwise be classified and judged by moral-political universals are judged instead through these aesthetic, taste categories" (p.133). The reason this is tragically comical is because accountability for the symbolic meaning of many of these cultural artefacts would have been displaced between designer and client: in some cases, it is possible that neither one would have been holding the reins. This tension becomes even more pronounced when designers denounce our role in aesthetic concerns, for the benefit of promoting our capacities in problem-solving and change-making. True, design is so much more than stylization. However, engaging with the aesthetic realm, too, can reveal pathways to socio-ecological transformation. Sawyer (2006) provides us with a hint as to how:

"When you define culture in terms of symbols, culture becomes something like a language — and that's where anthropology connects to the socio-cultural approach. A creative domain is like a small cultural sphere. And a domain is like a language, in that you can't create anything without a domain even though most of the time you are unaware of its importance" (p.138-139).

If we reduce aesthetic concerns within design to stylization we miss an opportunity to dig more deeply into its semiology. Unpacking the semiology of design is an important part of understanding how we create cultural meaning: *meaning follows form*. Just as creative domains emerge within socio-economic contexts, we might also presume that their languages will be attached to the purposes for which they are applied: *form follows meaning*. The question, then, that follows for designers is, in what contexts have our languages matured, and how has this determined their significance?

This question is simpler to answer, if we look, first, to the history of the visual arts in Western societies. From a general and wide-angled view of Western art history, we can detect a fairly sharp increase in the aesthetic and symbolic cultural repertoire, over time. From a design perspective, it is obvious to say that as we learn, we pick up new tools and expand our range. From the perspective of cultural significance, however, many shifts within the visual arts also came about as a result of creative practitioners breaking from convention. Thus, the creative domain within Western visual arts has become progressively more inclusive, for example, with artists cutting loose from subject-matter related to the interests of the church and state; abandoning the need to be representational; working with found materials; celebrating the beauty of ordinary objects (see Honour & Fleming, 1995); until, finally, by the end of the twentieth century, so many creative limits had been dispelled, that the field was left spinning on the question, *what is art?* If we return to the idea that art is a *reflection of, response to, commentary on, or creation within* contemporary culture, what critics are really asking with this question is *what do we understand and consider to be culturally meaningful?* The aesthetic language of the visual arts has matured by reducing boundaries, and arguably to the benefit of achieving deeper understanding of people, places, cosmology, and otherwise. In a similar vein, Nelson and Stolterman (2012) tell us that design is a "way for us...to become what we are capable of being, but do not have the full capacity to be without our creations to aid us" (p.14). Following from this line of thinking, we could suggest that where art permits human understanding, design extends the human range of expression.

Within the twentieth century, the evolution of product and graphic design disciplines would have enjoyed a close relationship with the rise of consumer culture (Poyner, 1999; Margolin, 2002). What this suggests is that, as these disciplines were advancing in their professional status, they were doing so within the cozy nest of corporate initiatives. It would not be a far stretch, therefore,

to assume that their aesthetic rhetoric also developed, to some extent, with the explicit purpose of engaging with consumers. In the paradigm of the branded life experience, we are surrounded by an aesthetic language that is intended to seduce us, and streamline our cultural sensibilities. But, even artists contend with the pressures of commercialization, whereby market demands can water down creative content to something equally standardized. Hence, we may never see an end to the production of watercolour paintings or posters of kittens sleeping on porches next to pots of geraniums, as a quintessentially inoffensive approach to art-making. As satisfying as it might be to point our fingers at the faceless corporate machine, and claim that it is bleaching our cultural artefacts of their merit, realistically, what we are also confronting is a problem of complexity. When attempting to design for the masses, what is gained in appeal may be lost in depth, authenticity, diversity, and nuance. However, rather than attributing this flattening of meaning in creative content to either designers or clients, it would be more constructive to consider the systemic dynamics. For example, as mentioned earlier, the ways in which a system positions creative practice and defines its socio-economic relevance, or its role in cultural meaning making, to a large extent, will determine what is produced. On the other hand, in the case of the kitten posters, someone would have had to create the first one for a distributor to even guess that it could be marketable.

At a time when we are still shaking off our mechanistic worldview (see Midgely, 2000), it is understandable that even something as non-linear as creative process would be caught by the customs of mechanization. The homogeneity that arises with design standardization is the antithesis of diversity. If we view consumer culture and the paradigm of the branded life experience through the lens of diversity, however, a few important contradictions emerge. For example, mass production of goods has resulted in the expansion of consumer choice, while simultaneously marginalizing the work of small producers. International markets are now flooded with many hats for consumers to try on, although perhaps at the expense of the aesthetic languages that were original to certain regions. Mass production and distribution lowered the bar for access to designer goods, consequently, amplifying the range of personal expression permitted through purchasing (see Lash & Urry, 1994). Though, Lash and Urry (1994) propose a more subversive side to consumer choice: “In the circulating information and communication networks of contemporary popular culture, the masks may largely be trying people on” (p.133). The final contradiction that I will mention, for now, is the one that was already indicated in earlier sections: through its affiliation with consumer culture (i.e. standardization), the field of design has managed to find its way into a more diversified socio-political position of facilitating multi-stakeholder creative processes for systems change. Now that we are in this new position, we can cast our gaze back on the languages (both aesthetic and functional) that have evolved along the way, and consider whether they sufficiently capture the diversity and complexity of the socio-ecological systems with which we are working. These languages, after all, are what ascribe cultural meaning to our creations. For example, when consumer interactions with the world are heavily packaged, programmed, and regulated, does this present an illusion of certainty despite systems complexity?

## Conclusion

If we are to understand the role of design in cultural meaning making, it is our responsibility to deconstruct all sides of the system, including the context, the content, and the broader implications of our work. Systems and socio-cultural approaches to creativity (Sawyer, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) indicate how context can influence production; and, Lash and Urry’s (1994) discussion of aesthetic reflexivity touch on some of the emergent social impacts. Conventionally speaking, content creation will be the part of the system that designers are most familiar with, although,

embedded within this is the less definable process of developing the *languages* (aesthetic and functional) with which we are working. This consideration takes us, again, full circle to examining the contexts in which these languages emerge.

In systems and socio-cultural approaches to creativity (see Sawyer, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), it is suggested that creative acts are constrained by the contexts in which they occur. In the case of design, we have witnessed the field redefining itself alongside broad market shifts, as the corporate world transitioned from the manufacturing of products to the proliferation of ideas and ideals (see Lash & Urry, 1994; Klein, 2009). At the same time that design practices were able to expand in response to these market opportunities, so too, would they have had a hand in shaping what has matured into a paradigm of the branded life experience, and the aesthetic rhetoric that accompanies this. From Lash & Urry's (1994) discussion of aesthetic reflexivity, we can gather that even some of the most basic aesthetic choices of designers are not innocuous, rather, have collectively indoctrinated our civic spaces with symbolic significance that is impacting the moral-political judgements of individuals.

Along the way, groups of designers have banded together to express concern with the close affiliation of the design field with consumer culture (Wright et al., 1964, Bambrook et al., 1999; Margolin, 2002). Generally speaking, these protests imply that designers have felt a lack of agency within client projects. On the other hand, it might be argued that through these corporate initiatives, design thinking has gained credibility within the mainstream, permitting designers to enter into a new socio-political position, wherein cross-cutting projects for systems change are being organized as collaborative partnerships.

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