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About the term 'design'.

Many English words have become terms used internationally. This is taken to be a symptom of Anglo-Saxon predominance within the cultural scene at present. But the case of the term 'design' is different. In its international use the term means something like a pattern or a sketch, and the verb 'to design' means something like to make a plan for the production of some object. With this meaning the term has become important, and schools for design (industrial and otherwise) tend to become centers of cultural activities all over the world. This merits closer examination, because there are other terms (like the German 'Gestalt' and the French 'façon') which have similar meanings. Why was the term 'design' chosen to mean an activity which no doubt is becoming ever more characteristic of our civilisation as we approach the third millennium and 'post-historical' existence?

The word 'design' means in English (among other things): a sinister scheme, a a secret project, an aggressive intend, a plot, an evil purpose. There are other terms which have similar insidious, cunning, deceitful connotations. One of them is 'machine' and 'mechanism'. The Greek 'mechos' means a contrivance for the purpose of cheating, a machination. A typical machine is the Trojan Horse, and its builder, Ulysses, is called 'polymechanikos', which means 'trickster'. In fact: 'mechanics' should be translated by 'the science of cheating'. Another such term is 'technical'. The Greek word 'techné' means the skill of a carpenter ('tekton'), and the idea behind this goes as follows: there is shapeless matter, mostly wood ('hylé'), and a specific skill is needed to press it into a shape ('morphé'). Philosophers, especially Platon, have discussed that idea. They have shown that shapes are distorted when applied to matter, and that there-fore the skill to apply them ('techné') amounts to devious treason technicians are people who seduce people to admire contemptible matter like stones by shaping it into statues. In fact: 'MIT' means 'Massachusetts Institute for the teaching of skillful swindlers'. The Latin translation of 'techné' is 'ars', which means the skill of joining things together. The diminutive of 'ars' is 'articulum' (little art) which means knuckle. Thus 'to articulate' means to skillfully twist one's little finger, and an 'article' (like the one you are reading) means a skillful little twist to deceive you. You may feel that meaning in terms like 'artful', 'artifice', and 'artificial'. Thus an artist is one who is more or less good at cheating.

Now consider the terms 'design', 'machine', 'technical' and 'art' together. They mean, all of them, methods for cheating, various forms of cunning. But each of those terms has a different meaning on the surface of cultural discourse. So different are those surface meanings that ever since the end of the Renaissance their deeper meaning which connects them to each other was suppressed and tended to be forgotten. In fact: modern, bourgeois civilisation has devided culture into two sharply opposed branches: the "hard" one with its machines and technicians, and the "soft" one with its artists. Now this fateful divorce between the mechanic and the artist became impossible to maintain at the close of the 19th century, when it became ever more obvious that the one cannot live without the other. At that point, the term 'design' stepped in to bridge the gulf between the two cultures.

He who still thinks in the terms 'machine' and 'art' with their surface meanings will possibly say that 'design' means that area where mechanical and artistic skills and activities overlap, and that therefore the growing importance of design shows how the two modern cultures are merging. But he who thinks that the meanings of 'machine' and 'art'are fundamentally identical will have a different vision of our situation. He will tend to see that the increasing importance of design (and of the schools for design) is a proof for our increasing awareness of what we are doing when we commit ourselves to culture. Such a one will argue that all four terms; design, machine, techical and art, mean cheating, that those are the central cultural terms, and that the term 'design' shows that we begin to understand this. That we now begin to cheat consciously when we commit ourselves to cultural activities and endeavors.

Let this be illustrated: A lever is a simple machine (althougt it does not look like one). It is designed to simulate a human arm. It is an artificial arm. Its technique is very old, probably older than our species. Thus 'machine', 'design', 'art' and 'technique' cannot be thought one apart from the other where the lever is concerned. Now the purpose behind the lever, its intend, is to cheat gravitation. It is to conspire against gravitation so that heavy bodies may be lifted inspite of their heaviness, against their nature. The lever is a machine designed to technically cheat nature, and to substitute it by an artificial object That object of art (the artificial arm) is more powerful than nature and its 'laws and Archimedes saw that if you find a point of support for your lever, you may lift the whole world out from its hinges. The lever is a machine designed to lift us above nature, it is a means for technically transcending nature, and if we use it artfully, we may become gods and fall back on nature from above like a 'deus ex machina', and thus govern the laws of nature.

This may be extended from the example 'the lever' to the entire realm of culture. Culture as a whole is a design tocheat nature, to outwit it, and everything in it is designed to artificially deliver us from our mammal condition and to make free artists of us. This is a way to formulate the reason why the term 'design' is becoming ever more important: it now means the very center of culture. But now consider what is implied in such a late glorification of plotting, of scheming, of insidious cunning. Take a plastic fountain pen as an example:

Plastic fountain pens are becoming ever cheaper, and they tend toward being distributed free of charge, toward becoming worthless. (Note that worthless does not mean useless.) The material plastic fountain pens are made of is even more shapeless than is wood ('hylé'), and we need no Platonic philosophers to show that it is worthless (nothing to be admired). Modern analysts, and especially Marxists, have shown that the value of an object is not in its material but in the work which produced it. In the case of plastic fountain pens that work was done by technically highly developped machines, and has thus bean cheapened to a point where it is worth nothing. The entire value of the plastic fountain pen is in its design (which makes it write), and in the design of the machines which produce it.

If you now consider the design of the fountain pen and of the machine which produces it, you will find that they are due to a coming together of several very complex ideas. Those ideas come in from pure science, from applied science, from esthetics, from economy, from social psychology, and even from disciplins like mathematics. This coming together of complex ideas is highly creative: the design of the plastic fountain pen shows an accumulation of intelligence, imagination and intuition. Still: the fountain pens tend to be distributed free of charge, which means that they are thrown away after having been used, that they are contemptible gadgets.

This example too (like the one of the lever) may be extended to the whole of culture. We are becoming ever more conscious of the fact that the whole of culture is a design against our natural condition, that each and every artifact is intended to cheat nature around us and within us, and that the term 'design' means the very essenc of culture. This awareness of ours implies that we are designing ever better. Mechanics, techniques and the arts have begun to melt and to constitute one single commitment. Everything is thus becoming ever mor functional, ever more beautiful, ever more powerful around us. And for the same reason it is becoming ever cheaper. The whole of culture is becoming ever more a set of contemptible gadgets. The explanation of it is that we now know that nothing about it is real: everything is a cunning attempt at cheating, at substituting the fake for the real. Our hospitals may be designed like de luxe hotels, and our deathbeds may be seigned like works of art, and still we must die like mammals. The more we become aware of what 'design' means, the more we lose faith in mechanics, in technology, in the arts, and the less we trust culture.

The initial question was: why was the English word 'design' chosen to mean internationally an activity which is becoming ever more important? Why not use terms like 'Gestalt' or 'façon', which mean almost the same thing? It now appears that a possible answer to this question is: precisely because the term 'design' implies a sinister scheme, an evil purpose. As that activity named 'design' becomes ever more characteristic of our situation, it becomes ever more evident that the whole of civilisation is a cunning devise to cheat us. As we approach the third millenium, we begin to learn to outwit culture, to scheme against the schemes which are designed to cheat us. To see behind all those mechanisms which were designed to mage us believe in artful deceptions. This new mistrust in fakes, this incapacity of ours to accept them at face value, this loss of the sense of value, may be what the term 'post-history(means, namely a period where 'design' re-acquires all the connotations it had lost during history, and where we must face nature within us and without us. 'Post-history' may be that terrible period when designs no longer work, because we have learned too much about them.