

Design and empathy

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The relationship between design and empathy is not unproblematic. Consideration of this relationship brings several questions to mind, including whether it is possible for design to be practiced in a predominantly empathetic way to begin with. An attempt is made to interrogate what might be understood by the term empathy, as well as its place in western culture, and, lastly, the potential role of empathy in design practice.

Key words: Empathy, Design, Othering, Da-sein, I-Thou, Buber, Heidegger

Die verhouding tussen ontwerp en empatie is nie onproblematies nie. Nadenke oor hierdie verhouding bring verskeie vrae na vore, byvoorbeeld of dit enigsins moontlik is om ontwerp te produseer met 'n oorwegend empatiese inslag. 'n Kritiese bevraging na wat bedoel word met die term empatie, en die rol van empatie in westerse kultuur, en laastens, die moontlike rol van empatie in die ontwerp praktyk, word hier gepoog.

Sleutelwoorde: Empatie, Ontwerp, Andersmakery, Da-sein, 'I-Thou', Buber, Heidegger

For the industrial object no resurrection is possible: it disappears as rapidly as it first appeared. If it left no trace at all, it would be truly perfect (Orazio Paz – Use and Contemplation).

Any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee (John Donne – No Man is an Island).

Consideration of the relationship between design and empathy brings to light a number of questions. Does design in general display an overriding element of empathy? If it does not why is this so? And lastly, is it possible for design to embody, or even contain an element of, empathy, to begin with? An interrogation of the nature of empathy, as well as of design, might aid in conceptualising ways in which empathy can be related to design practice, if it can be.

A history of empathy

Neither empathy nor 'emotion' in general received much attention before the 18th century, when the Romantics championed emotion as a necessary antidote to Enlightenment stultification. Burke (2005: 41) refers to the eighteenth century as the "affective revolution", an indication of the novelty as well as intensity of inquiry into matters emotional. Empathy (specifically) surfaces in the philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German Romantics, as an element of philosophical aesthetics. Philosophers such as J. G. Herder, influenced by I. Kant and J. W. Goethe, regarded empathy as a means by which to poetically identify with nature, and in so doing counter man's alienation from nature, a state of affairs which had been catalysed by the Industrial Revolution and compounded by the instrumental approach to nature encouraged by positivist science. Nineteenth century philosopher Theodor Lipps wrote extensively on the subject and conceived of empathy as "the primary basis for recognizing each other as minded creatures" (Steuber online 2008). Lipps' term for empathy was '*einfehlung*', roughly translatable as 'feeling into'.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the hermeneutic philosophers F. Schleiermacher and W. Dilthey conceived of the hermeneutic interpretation of texts in terms of the verb '*verstehen*'. It relates to the term 'understanding', which, according to Dilthey, requires "a mental act of transposition" (Stueber online 2008), and is superior to mere 'knowing about' or 'explaining' (as the natural sciences are wont to do). The *verstehen* approach came to be rejected by subsequent

hermeneuts such as Hans-Georg Gadamer as “a naïve conception ... of understanding as a mysterious meeting of two individual minds outside of any cultural context” and was, according to Steuber (online 2008), partly responsible for the decline in an interest in empathy in twentieth century philosophy. Hermeneut Martin Heidegger was to formulate his own theories applicable to the notion of empathy addressed here. Heidegger’s contribution is discussed below. Apart from these philosophic attempts to come to grips with the notion of empathy and how it might pertain to the understanding of texts, empathy as a subject largely fell from favour and did not attract much attention in general, with the exception of the field of psychology. The trend within psychology has been to pathologise (or at least medicalise) emotions, including empathy. Thus, fascination became ‘fixation’, love became ‘attachment’, and to be happy was to be ‘adjusted’ (Richards 2005: 50). Empathy might then be medicalised or psychologised as tendencies of ‘association’ or ‘identification’.

Early twenty-first century research on empathy focuses on neurobiological explanations for the phenomenon. In this way, empathy is said to originate in the ‘mirror neurons’ of the brain, where the parts of the brain which recognise emotion in others overlap with those parts of the brain that *experience* emotion (Stueber online 2008). Empathy thus becomes a mechanised biological occurrence. (The theory does not explain, however, why empathy, being such an automatic, biological response, seems lacking in certain social interactions). Thus the prevalence or absence of emotion in cultural discourse, and the way in which we understand and articulate emotion has varied throughout history, and is shaped by historical conditions (Gouk & Hills 2005: 26, 28). There are ‘epochs of feeling’ (Burke 2005: 35) in which emphasis on certain emotions comes and goes, and modes of expression consequently vary. Extreme wrath, for instance, “is no longer treated as a respectable ... mode of expressing moral displeasure” and the appearance of the term ‘irritability’ in eighteenth century discourse enabled people to become irritable “for the first time” (Richards 2005: 53, 49). History also changes the ‘object’ of emotion, so that the ‘object’ of fear in sixteenth century Europe has, for instance, respectively been ‘the sea’, ‘the dark’, and ‘the Turks’ (Burke 2005: 41).¹

In contrast to the scant attention paid (in western civilisation) to the inculcation of empathy as a value (generally, and thus also in design praxis and education – see below), empathy is well placed to address issues such as prejudice reduction (where stereotypes are undermined or deconstructed) and the amelioration of ‘othering’. It might also lead to ‘good’ design.

Swanger (online 1993) outlines the historic reasons for empathy’s low status in western culture. It can (amongst other factors) be traced to Plato, whose explication of enlightenment as ‘escape’ from the cave did not leave room for returning, out of empathy, to the gloomy interior in order to convince the indwelling ignorami there of the possibilities awaiting outside. Besides this omission, Plato, as well as Socrates and Aristotle, regarded reason, and not emotion (including empathy) as the fundamental prerequisite to morality.² Similarly searching for the root of the west’s ‘instrumental’ approach to the world, Heidegger (2002: 46) points out that the Biblical account of how the world was ‘made’ confirms the notion that the world consist of ‘formed matter’. The outcome of the emphasis on reason and a subsequent scientific and instrumentalist approach to phenomena in the west, is that empathy is regarded neither as a useful skill in society, nor is it a virtue prized by it (Swanger online 1993). The ramifications of this, for society, as well as for design as a manifestation of cultural norms, are considerable.

Explaining empathy: the importance of not being (too) earnest

Thus far the terms ‘understanding’, ‘feeling into’ (*emfühling*), ‘association’, and ‘identification’ have been used to describe empathy. Further terms associated with the word empathy include

compassion, and (erroneously) sympathy. Sympathy is not synonymous with empathy, as feeling sympathy does not imply congruent emotion (the similarity in emotion between two people). In other words it is possible to feel sympathy for someone who is at that point feeling something completely different to what we are feeling (Stueber online 2008). The observer may not be aware what the 'other' person is feeling at all. Empathy, on the other hand, can be described as an emotional response involving "psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with *another's* situation than with his own situation" (Hoffman in Stueber online 2008). Of importance is the observer's ability to differentiate between his or her own emotion and the emotion of the other. Stueber (online 2008) explains that

such a feeling of sadness [upon seeing the sad face of another] should count as genuinely empathetic only if one recognizes that in feeling sad one's attention is still focused on the other and that it is not an appropriate reaction to aspects of one's own life ... [Empathy entails concomitant] appreciation of the other person's emotion as an appropriate response to his or her situation.

In lieu of this awareness, the emotional response might simply amount to extreme personal distress, in which case the observer's attention is focused solely on him or herself. Thus, to be overwhelmingly sincere, earnest, grave or intense amounts to personal anguish, which is 'other caused' but 'self-oriented', and therefore antithetical to an empathic experience. In a similar emphasis on empathy as the focus on another's feelings and situation, Schwartz expands the notion of empathy to include the transpersonal modes of "emotional world-disclosure" informed by a religious/spiritual notion of "loss of self" (Gouk & Hills 2005: 28-29). In summary, empathy involves awareness and understanding of others' feelings as opposed to one's own. Because of this, it is regarded (in terms of psychological development) as leading to prosocial behaviour, as well as to the establishment of moral awareness. Moral awareness (a social endeavor) is not the same as 'personal values' (which, unlike empathy, are again, self-oriented).

Swanger (online 1993) describes empathy as the connection between people that reminds them reciprocally of each other's humanness, "to see the other not as someone distinct or different, but someone with whom human destiny is shared". Furthermore, a lack of empathy leads to 'othering', which Swanger (online 1993) describes as an "immoral act", supplemented by reductive and dehumanising epithets (such as 'kraut', 'bimbo', and 'homo'), all used to enable and articulate othering. On an optimistic note, Swanger argues that "the arts generally" (by which he means the literature, architecture, art, craft etcetera, of all cultures), can act as an antidote to the practice of othering.³ Designed objects might also be valuable in this regard. This proposition is interrogated here.

The framework against which this investigation is outlined can be described as the opposition between a scientific/ positivist/ instrumentalist paradigm (dominant in western culture), and a paradigm of openness, non-exploitation and non-othering.

A clash of paradigms

The paradigms referred to above can further be described as the 'exclusory' paradigm of positivist science which insists on facts and rationality, and an 'inclusory' paradigm (more difficult to define succinctly), which entertains and values notions around the metaphysical, the emotional, the religious, and the broadly humanitarian. The work of twentieth century hermeneut Martin Heidegger is given to the explication of the differences between these two approaches to the world. Heidegger is not a friend of the positivist stance, and is not interested in promoting the progress of science (Heidegger 1985: 9).

Heidegger (1985: 59) describes the rise and dominance of the positivist outlook as follows:

[The] intellectual situation toward the middle of the nineteenth century is essentially characterized by the definite predominance of a particular form of science; it is designated by the catchword 'positivism'. This is knowledge whose pretention to truth is from beginning to end based on what one calls 'facts' ... one holds that there can be no argument about facts: they are the highest court of appeal for decisions concerning truth.

Heidegger addresses himself to that which, according to him, science not only does not want to know, but cannot know (Heidegger 1985: 9). The positivist outlook leads to a subject/object relationship with the world, and in his inquiry into the nature (being) of 'things' (conducted in order to clarify the nature of the being of man), Heidegger proposes that the 'thing', described in terms of either subjective or objective perception, should be regarded from neither point of view. Heidegger (1985: 27) rejects the distinction (between subject and object) and finds the subject/object relationship itself questionable. This relation is born from "modern natural science" which has entrenched a particular approach in "our basic relations to nature ... knowledge of nature ... our rule over nature" (Heidegger 1985: 51), engendering an entire culture which reduces the animate to colloidal chemistry. When we encounter objects, and people, in such a manner, we utter statements 'about' them, throwing attributes over them like an obscuring veil. We then focus all our (scientific) attention on the veil and forget about the underlying 'thing'. Such an approach constitutes comportment towards the world in the 'mode of assertion'. Heidegger (1985: 62) notes "something is said from above down to what underlies ... Much can be said down to a thing, about it".

Thus Heidegger turns his back on the objectifying gaze of science, but also on Kant's assertion that we can not experience 'things-in-themselves' (the untouchable *noumena*) but are only free to subjectively determine their presentation. Heidegger's claim is that we *can* experience the immediacy of world and object, but only in the correct mode. Thus on the one hand, our objective approach fixes the nature of the 'thing' based on external observations. On the other the 'thing' is remotely separated from us by ontological necessity (Kant). But for Heidegger, beyond this radical subjectivity, and beyond science's objectification, there is an overarching realm, "a third which is first" (*een derde dat het eerste is*) (Heidegger 2002: 33). Awareness of such a realm entails for Heidegger (1985: 50) the "transformation of the hitherto existing position toward things ... of the being-there (*Da-sein*) in the midst of what is". Opening ourselves up to the world, and being receptive to its mode of being, we (neither active nor passive) are able to appreciate its true nature. Martin Buber, a fellow (Hassidic) hermeneut refers to these two modes of comportment as an I-it relationship with the world (which extends to our relations with other human beings) and an I-Thou relationship (which includes our attitude toward the inanimate world). For Buber our task is to *confirm* the world by "holding holy converse with the thing", with a 'non-self-intending' attitude, thereby transforming the world as well as ourselves (Buber 2002: vi, v, 27). An I-Thou relationship is characterised by reciprocity and mutuality, whereas the I-It relationship "is a relationship of mastery and slavery, of *sub-* and *super-*ordination" where the I is implicated in a "*world project* in which it ensnares things" (Theunissen 1986: 273-274).

The hermeneutic position expounded by Heidegger and Buber (as well as Gadamer) embodies a critical and dubious stance toward the instrumentalist paradigm that underpins western culture. Heidegger and Buber refer to its negation respectively as awareness of the world around us in the mode of *Da-sein*, (where we are 'already with the things') and an I-Thou, consecrating demeanour toward the world and each other. *Da-sein* (being-there) and an I-Thou comportment are *empathetic* modes of consciousness, which, from the above, seem not to be valued by, nor indeed to be broadly compatible with, the social, political, economic, moral

and cultural code that underpins western society. If one were to regard design as a western discipline dependent on consumerism, and implicated in exploitation and commoditization, one could conclude that design praxis is *unable* to implement an empathetic approach. A closer investigation of what is meant by ‘design’ might affirm or disprove this proposition.

Design

The term ‘design’ is not monolithic. It refers to several disciplines, which include amongst others, graphic design, product design, architecture and landscape design, interior design, furniture design and surface design. There are also textile design, jewellery design, ceramic design, and so forth. These examples indicate that design can also be said, in some cases, to overlap with the traditional notion of craft. In some cases the line between design and visual art also becomes obscure. For instance computer generated animation has found a place in various modes of visual art, and graphic design often comments on social issues and is exhibited in galleries in much the same way that visual art is. For the sake of inclusivity, this paper does not exclude reference to any of these (and other) examples of design, and an effort is made to relate various kinds of design to the notion of empathy: whether empathy can be seen to inform them, whether it should, and whether it can.

Upon consideration of the interrelation of design and empathy, the topic seems clear-cut at first, to the point of inhibiting efforts to address it in a systematic manner. Surely empathy leads to ‘good’ design. The designer empathetically assesses and responds to the needs of the consumer/client. With more thought an image of exploitation does arise however. The retail industry is overburdened with an abundance of products which range from the apparently necessary to the fairly useless. In an effort to exploit consumer aspiration, designers churn out ‘embodiments’ of the perceived *zeitgeist*, careful to emphasise the ‘now’, even, or especially when, referencing the past. Consumer aspiration is dominant in western culture, and spreading to ‘other’ (non-western) societies only to the extent to which those societies are in the process of being westernised. Such aspiration is the driving force behind the design industry, aided by the marketing and advertising industries. Product design in cahoots with marketing and advertising conjures an even more sinister situation. Marketing teams are expert at ‘repackaging’ products to seem more useful and desirable, and the advertising industry is rife with the exploitation and entrenchment of stereotypes. Design can not be exonerated in this: pleasant package design manipulates in order to increase ‘market share’ (a hideously reductive way of referring to a specified group of people). In the case of package design, it is less the consumer than the producer (of the product) who informs the choices made by the designer. The nature of the design industry as indicated here, falls within the instrumentalist, dehumanising construct critiqued by Heidegger and others, and it is not defensible to talk of ‘design and empathy’ within this framework of western consumerist capitalism.

In reaction to these oppressive elements within design, the design industry itself is aware of the need to lessen exploitation (of people as well as the environment), to mitigate the impact of consumerism, and to be generally socially conscious. Such a commitment is not new, and ideological design practitioners have expounded on the necessity of ‘humanistic’ design since the inception of design as praxis in the nineteenth century. The Arts and Crafts Movement is archetypal in this regard, and the majority of significant modernist architects have addressed the issue of low-cost housing.⁴ The diverse kinds of design industries, therefore, seem to be variable in their awareness of the need for empathy (which can be described as ‘design as service and in the furtherance of quality of life’), and in their ability to actualise the ideal of empathetic design within their respective domains.

At the same time discourse about the need to humanise design, and the reality of its implementation are not concomitant. In their essay *Strategies for Infusing Cultural Elements in Product Design*, Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson address the notion of socio-cultural awareness within the sphere of product design. The context of their study is design practice in Botswana, for the Batswana (the people of Botswana). The authors speak of the integration of socio-cultural factors into the design process, and of integrating the users' culture into the designed products (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 2). The extent to which their approach falls within the instrumentalist paradigm, and nullifies the notion of actual, empathetic design is illustrated in their terminology and the motivation behind the proposed 'culture-oriented design model'. The authors speak of *culture as a resource* (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 3), significantly implying it is there to be appropriated by the design practitioner, in order to assist him or her in the creation of 'innovative' products. The challenge, seemingly, is to determine how "the core components of culture can be embedded in designing products" (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 2). One might respond by stating that if *consumerism* does not form part of the core component of the culture referred to, then the integration thereof into product design is an ontological misconception.

Furthermore, there is the problematic notion of assuming that the designer *can* access the core components of a culture not his or her own, and/or that 'a culture' is an homogenous sphere which wholly and without residue encompasses a particular cultural group. The authors refer to the need to come to a deeper understanding of the users' culture in order to avoid the trap of identifying stereotypes as representative of a particular culture (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 2). Whilst invoking cultural theory to the effect that the existence of sub-cultures, dissent within a culture (and within sub-cultures) and the personal lived experience of the 'user' within a given culture remain unarticulated, the authors seem unaware that this precisely negates their efforts (to access deep cultural practice). Thus it can be argued that a design approach such as proposed here, can not presume to have access to the 'deeper layers' of culture, but that even if such access were possible, it remains unclear how the 'user' might benefit from this.

Lastly, the notion of creating culturally imbedded products, as propounded here, seems on the surface to be an empathetic venture, but closer scrutiny reveals a 'top-down' imposition of design praxis on the identified user. Having penetrated the inner layers of culture, the designer is in a position to "give them [the users] narratives", and to "create cultural experiences" (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 3, 9). Presumably the group in question is in a position to generate its own narratives and cultural experiences. Such a design approach falls within the mode of assertion, the Heideggerian 'saying down onto' the object (which in this case is the identified culture and its proponents). The conclusions at which the authors arrive include the notions that "*adequate research*" will ameliorate the problems experienced by the designer in accessing the deep culture of the identified group, and, lastly, that "*products succeed* only when they resonate with users' values, attitudes and behaviours" (Moalosi, Popovic and Hickling-Hudson 2007: 3, 9) (emphasis added). More empirical research, then, is the panacea in penetrating the culture of the future client, not to his or her benefit, but to the benefit of the design industry, who will have expanded its 'market share'.

Such an approach can be argued to perpetuate the exploitive and hegemonic paradigm problematised above, not furthering the cause of empathy in design, but diminishing it. As such the kind of product design envisaged and described here can be equated to the popular arts, defined by Swanger (online 1993) as "the only arts that do not provide us with [an] epistemological ... resource", because they are "essentially nostalgic and trivial and cannot expand our knowledge, our empathetic connections, and our humanity". There are fortunately examples of design where empathy does play a role in generating design-as-service, as well as in

catalysing empathic awareness in the benefactor ('user'). In other words, there are examples of design where empathy plays a role in the designer's consciousness and praxis, but consequently also in that of the intended user. The design disciplines where empathy does seem a viable practice include architecture, graphic design and design disciplines which incorporate elements of craft. This list does not exhaust the range of design disciplines which might be seen to actively practice empathy. Furthermore, not all architecture, graphic design, ceramic design etcetera can be regarded as empathetic.

Empathy in design

Empathy in design can include and be based upon a feeling of empathy toward another person, as well as a feeling of empathy toward nature, or, in modern terminology, the ecological environment. It might be argued that these two 'kinds' of empathy are no longer as separated as they seem, as environmental disruptions have reached the level where human lives are threatened, and the disenfranchised of the world seem hardest hit (consider for instance climate change which has uprooted vast communities around low lying, flood-prone areas). One might say, the ecological has become the social, and vice versa.

An early commentary on architecture empathetically addressed to human needs include that by Renaissance historian Leon Battista Alberti. Writing in the 1440s on the art of building, Alberti stresses the ability of architecture to affectively and effectively soothe the troubled viewer/user. His efforts can be seen as an attempt to interpret the discipline of architecture in terms of Renaissance humanism (Hills 2005: 90), and from his writings an empathic concern for the 'other' is evident. Alberti describes Florence Cathedral in terms of the "pleasures of body and mind of writer and reader" [or designer and user], and, the cathedral, a setting for well-being, is "both a metaphor for the mind's tranquil state and a model for achieving it". In this way, a building becomes both the locus and agent for change (Hills 2005: 91, 95). Alberti expounds on the notion of *concinnitas* which is very similar to Heidegger's notion of *Da-sein* and Buber's conception of the I-Thou relationship. *Concinnitas* (translatable as 'congruity') is the result of a mode of proceeding, and brings together the architect and the inhabitant to the betterment of both. By this means the architect enters into society. Without *concinnitas*, the relational regard for another, the architect cannot contribute meaningfully to society (Hills 2005: 102). Alberti lastly describes *concinnitas* as not only the harmonising element in human to human relation, but also as the regulating overarching principle in nature (Hills 2005: 102). (This relates to Heidegger's 'third which is first' as well as to the Doaist notion of the encompassing principle of the cosmos). The architect, responsible for effecting socially unavoidable intervention, is well advised to take cognisance of *concinnitas*.

In a similar vein, Watson (2007: 2) addresses the need for architecture students to be trained to apply their expertise in an empathetic way. She reports on two service learning projects where the students, as part of their training, generated the designs for and process-managed the building of two specific facilities. These included a residential/education facility for Ugandan HIV/AIDS orphans, and a community facility in Wollongong, Australia, for people with schizophrenia. The projects were initiated in 2005. The most important aspect of the design process was communication with the clients in order to address their social, medical, emotional and personal needs. Through the interactive process between the designers and those generally marginalised by society, the students became aware of the social responsibility and ethical dimension inherent in their profession, and came to widen their cultural paradigm (the projects were based in Australia). The students came away from their training with personal experience of the notion that "the built environment is for people, not designers" Watson (2007: 8). In a similar vein postmodern architect Michael Graves (1992: 377) states: "[o]nce aware of and

responsive to the possible cultural influences *on* building, it is important that society's patterns of ritual be registered in the architecture" (emphasis added). The Australian architecture students mentioned above tellingly remained involved in the activities at the respective facilities long after the completion of the projects.

Design educator Thomas Angharad, reporting on the series of workshops *Educating Designers for Global Citizenship* held between 2005 and 2007, stresses the need for the design industry in general to concern itself with issues of global justice and social responsibility (Angharad 2007: 3). With this in mind, internationalisation of the curriculum, with a focus on cultural diversity and the inculcation of a critical, involved view seems inescapable. Angharad cites *Design without Borders* as an example of a collective design enterprise that addresses the needs of the poor and those threatened by man-made or natural disaster. *Design without Borders* serves critical situations such as war areas, where there is almost always a need for shelter. One of their ongoing projects is the supply of easily assembled structures which are convertible to permanent housing. (See figure 1). The work is done in collaboration with non-government organisations and private studios in Norway (Design without Borders online 2008). Critiquing design dominated by an ethos that continues to glorify consumption, Angharad leaves the question as to how this might be addressed in design education and in design practice open.



Figure 1
Design without Borders, *Models of convertible shelters*, 2002.
(http://www.norskform.no/default.asp?V_ITEM_ID=1122)

An engaging example of design as social commentary, the 'school' of graphic design currently emerging in Beirut, Lebanon, has created images addressing issues of identity, cultural hegemony and pluralism. Nathalie Fallaha, representative of this emerging group of designers, emphasises the need for design to be user centered, as opposed to perpetuating the construct of the 'designer as author' (Fallaha 2007: 3). Yet contrary to the notion of the designer addressing the needs of the 'other' by focusing on the social and cultural constructs of the viewer, it is the viewer in this case who is nudged toward an empathetic understanding of the cultural sphere of the designer. Examples of current Lebanese graphic design include a series of works which address the multicultural aspects of Beirut, consisting as it does of Italian, French, English

and Arabic speaking communities, each with their own conception of where they ‘fit into’ the social order. Apart from the internal othering which takes place amongst the members of the various groups resident in Beirut, there is also the notion of the Arabic speaking world as the global other. Fallaha (2007: 4) notes how the *visual* manifestations of multilingualism tend to be neglected. In poster designs addressing this aspect of Lebanese life, designers have juxtaposed Arabic calligraphy (which represents the sacred element of language), with French and English typography, associated with a secularised use of language (See figure 2).

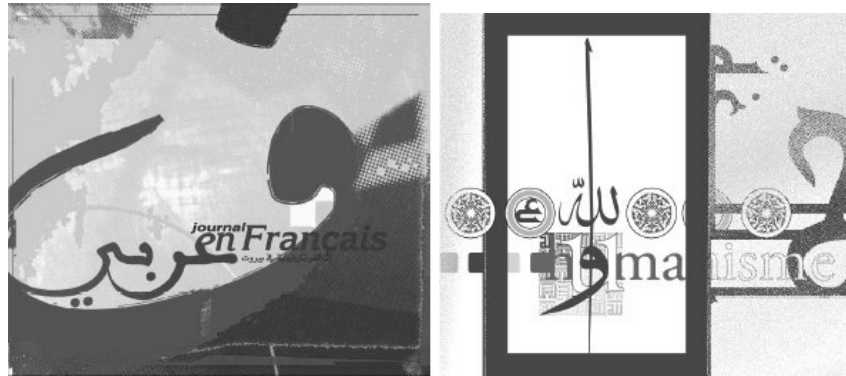


Figure 2
Lebanese American University, School of Graphic Design,
Roundtable Series, S.a. (Fallaha 2007: 6-7).

Visual culture can also, according to Fallaha, reflect a sense of place, as shown in the posters which conceive of Beirut as a digestive system (imbibing elements of English, French and Italian, and regurgitating these in the form of colloquial Arabic), or as a membrane (emphasising the position of Beirut between the Mediterranean and the Middle East) (See figure 3). For Fallaha (2007: 8) the value of such images lies in their ability to transcend the acknowledged border of a given situation, in order to embody “the more universal values of social interaction and politics within a multilingual society”.

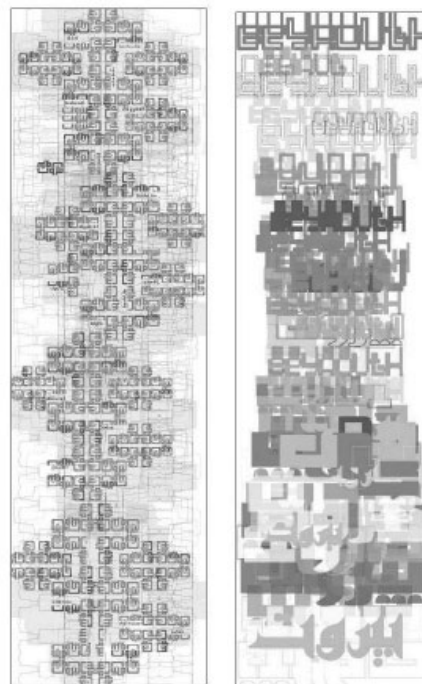


Figure 3
Lebanese American University, School of Graphic Design,
Ville Mutiple Series, S.a. (Fallaha 2007: 9)

The sphere of design as an empathetic response to ecological issues is addressed in the work of Australian textile designer Sandra Heffernan. Grappling with the clash between sustainability and consumer desire for “style, glamour and excitement” (Heffernan 2007: 2), she nonetheless feels impelled to attempt to widen the use and acceptance of cloth dyed with colorants derived from natural, fast growing and sustainable sources, and rejects the use of chemical dyes and toxic mordants. (Mordants are substances used to fix the colour in the fibre of the cloth) (See figures 4 and 5). For such practice to be accepted commercially, notions of colorfastness and evenness need to change. Ironically, the attempt to ameliorate ecological pressures by using natural plant resources on a commercial scale, might do ecological harm itself, as the unexpected reverberation of the cultivation of plants for the bio-fuel industry has shown. Here, for instance, whilst lichen is a viable dye material, its use would contravene ecologically sustainable practice. It would seem as if changes around the notion (and practice) of consumerism itself need to change, in conjunction with the utilisation of less ecologically harmful materials.



Figure 4
Laura Newton-King, Berberis
dye on fabric, 2006
(Heffernan 2007: 7).

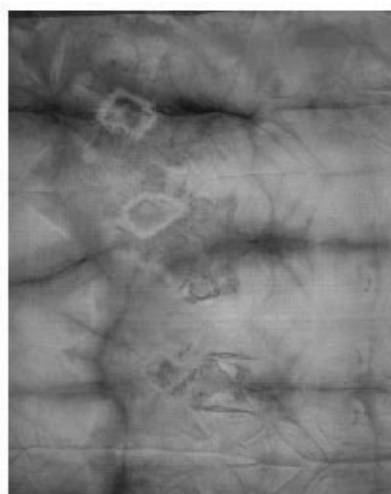


Figure 5
Sandy Heffernan, Berberis, elderberry
and inkweed dyes on fabric, 2007
(Heffernan 2007: 7).

A final approach to design which might be discussed here in terms of empathy, leads to questions on the role that craft can play in the design industry, and vice versa. The reason for this is that empathy can be regarded, and is regarded by some commentators, as an inherent aspect of craft, whereas in design, effort needs to be applied to ensure that an element of empathy forms part of the design process (which, regardless, in some cases seems to be a futile endeavor). In his essay *Use and Contemplation*, Octavio Paz (1992: 404) describes industrial design objects as mute and intangible servants. In contrast to this the craft object, with its fingerprints (which might be literal or metaphorical), made by hands for hands (for use), serves a practical purpose, but not at the cost of a transpersonal, empathic mutual awareness between maker and user. Paz (1992: 405) elaborates: “These imprints are not the signature of the artist ... nor are they a trademark. Rather they are a sign: the scarcely visible, faded scar commemorating the original brotherhood of men, and their separation”. The craft object makes us aware of “something or someone not ourselves” (ibid). Reflecting the clash of paradigms addressed above, Paz (1993: 406) states:

Modern technology has brought about numerous and profound transformations. All of them, however, have had the same goal and the same import: the extirpation of the *Other*. By leaving the aggressive drives of humans intact and reducing all mankind to uniformity, it has strengthened the forces working toward the extinction of humanity. Craftwork, by contrast, is not even national: it is local. Indifferent to boundaries and systems of government, it

has survived both republics and empires: the art of the making of pottery, the woven baskets and the musical instruments depicted in the frescoes of Bonampak has survived Mayan high priests, Aztec warriors, Spanish friars, and Mexican presidents.

It remains to be seen whether craftwork will survive the onslaught of modern technology, but the nature of craft is, seemingly, subversive in its simultaneous ordinariness and otherness, in its refusal to be commoditized into a collection of mute objects. Mehta and Katiyar (2007: 2) comment on attempts in India to combine the advantages of craft production (such as its ability to deliver customised products and the opportunity it affords low income groups to earn a living), with the advantages of ‘design’, which they explain, makes the crafters aware of and able to respond to the demands of non-local markets, in so doing increasing their earning potential. Integrating craft and design could benefit both disciplines, for reasons mentioned above, but care should be taken that the production and nature of the craft industry, here and elsewhere, is not destroyed by design practice.

Conclusion

The notion of the relationship between empathy and design was interrogated in order to clarify whether design can be regarded as empathic, to establish why not if not, and to determine whether empathy is compatible with design praxis to begin with. In order to address these questions the nature of empathy and its status in western history was investigated. Furthermore, in order to prevent platitudinous statements such as ‘empathy makes for better design’, without addressing the reasons for the apparent general lack thereof in design praxis (or at least the fairly global call for the increase of empathy in design praxis), the nature of the paradigm within which design can be seen to function was clarified by investigating an oppositional paradigm, which can broadly be seen as antithetical to hegemonic instrumentalist exploitation.

The benefits of encouraging the role of empathy in design practice include the humanisation of a discipline which could be seen to pander to the demands of the consumerist, capitalist system as opposed to the needs of the ‘user’. The result could be a world filled with more varied, beautiful, thought provoking and reciprocally empathy evoking objects, which also fulfill their practical use. The benefits do not end there. The designer who operates from a transpersonal openness to human need is aware of the disastrous effect of othering. These effects impact on the social, cultural and global sphere in which the designer inheres. From an environmental point of view, sustainable production and consumption seem viable only within a culture that lays more emphasis on empathy. In such a system, Gandhi’s exhortation to his fellow Indians to ‘make’, in subversive and proud re-appropriation of Indian culture and resources, could conceivably be applied to the design industry. Redefining Gandhi’s definition of craft as made by the masses for the masses (Mehta and Katiyar 2007: 4), *design* could be made by the many for the many and simultaneously accentuate the humane, moral and responsible dimension implicated in the practice of empathy. A cogent Heideggerian observation⁵ applies: every thing through and through involves the people who make it and who are implied in it, constituting global, human situations.

Notes

- .1 Note that these are all manifestations of ‘othering’ and fear of the ‘obscure’ in general.
2. Socrates regarded wisdom as the most important virtue, and the means by which to acquire it, intellectual inquiry into the nature of ‘goodness’. Plato similarly held that goodness was attainable through rational contemplation of the Form of Goodness (not perceivable by any means other

than the mind), and Aristotle, in his teleological account of the purpose of human life, believed that one's chief aim was to realize and perfect one's capacities as a 'rational animal' (Kruger 2006: 39-43).

3. In support of his argument (that cultural artifacts can induce feelings of empathy by emphasising an awareness of shared humanity), Swanger (online 1993) refers to the writings of seventeenth century poet John Donne, which reads "any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send

to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee". This phrase formed part of Donne's *Meditation 17: Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), and the wording differs slightly from the poem (*No Man is an Island*) based on them (Donne – Form Whom the Bell Tolls online 2008).

4. Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, amongst others, generated low-income housing schemes.
5. (Heidegger 1985: 287).

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