

# The Anthropology of Design

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It seems to me especially important in the present crisis that we revisit the role of the consumer of design objects. Only when we understand the significance of design in our everyday lives can we widen the circle and move on to other questions. When doing this, it can be helpful to ask a very simple question: what is design? Shedding light on various approaches to the definition of design can open our eyes to the multiple significances that design can take on in our society.

[→ Deutsch]

We use design objects every day without paying them much heed. Often, we are unaware just how much design shapes our daily lives. While we may have an emotional attachment to some things, we use others without giving them a second thought. By using objects, we become consumers, implicated in an economic system in which those goods are manufactured, transported and marketed. Like language, design is a system of signs based on social conventions. As Roland Barthes observes in his essay “Semantics of the Object”, we invariably experience objects that have a function or use as pure instruments although in reality, they transport meaning. But what is meaning? And what other questions are bound up with the question of meaning? Asking for a meaning can be problematic, because there is never only one. Societies change, and their individuals change with them. But for that very reason, we should perhaps venture to ask about the meaning of the design system, in order to appreciate the centrality of design’s role. One helpful approach is to ask a very simple question: what is design?

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But why do this at all? Firstly, it seems to me especially important today that we revisit the role of the consumer of design objects. Only when we understand the significance of design in our everyday lives can we widen the circle and move on to other questions. Secondly, taking a step back from their own discipline can give designers new ideas. This is vital right now because we find ourselves at a turning point; at the very least, we urgently need a rethink if we are to save our planet. I’m deliberately using the personal pronoun “we” here, because ultimately climate change is a fact that affects us all. Countering climate change is a huge challenge, because the patterns of behaviour that have led to this result are underpinned by an anthropocentric world view that will probably be far from easy to reverse. The current crisis, too, has thrown up new questions and fostered uncertainty that is hitting the creative sector especially hard. The frequently invoked entreaty to “use” the crisis as an opportunity, however, can quickly shade into cynicism. The option to derive use from something is mostly reserved for those whose position enables them to do so. So let’s stick to the simple questions.

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The simple question of what design is all about is one that Kenya Hara, for example, tackles in his book “Designing Design”. In the concluding chapter “What is Design?”, the Japanese graphic designer and curator attempts to sketch out the origins and history of the discipline. Clearly someone who knows his subject inside out, he does so in a forthright manner, as his comments make no claim to scientific rigour. Instead, they help us to pause and look back, and in so doing encourage new ways of acting. Hara offers up a fascinating, albeit simple narrative, attributing design to two origins: the stick and the vessel (in its earliest form, two hands cupped together). The two tools embody two different attitudes. The stick is, to a degree, an extension of our body; it stands for physical strength that can change the world, but it can also become a weapon and therefore equally symbolises power. The vessel, meanwhile, evolved into various types of containers, but also tools such as clothing and shelters. Even language and letters, Hara argues, can be traced back to the vessel. The vessel also stands for emptiness. Over the course of evolution, human beings have also developed things that, for Hara, result from the combination of the two principles. Interestingly, Kenya Hara finds in the principle of emptiness the potential for a critical perspective on civilisations in which the principle of the stick has gained the upper hand. Design thus contains within itself the tools by which it can be questioned. Finally, Hara puts forward the thesis that design is “the occupation of straining our ears and eyes to discover new questions from the midst of everyday life.”

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There are two things about this thought that I find noteworthy: that design relates not primarily to objects but equally to a non-material process; and that this process is not initiated by experts (which is to say designers), but can arise out of anyone’s daily practices. Consequently, we are not simply passive consumers of things with a prescribed function but are ourselves active, appropriating objects only when we use them. We may even discover functions that are very personal to us. As laypeople and dilettantes, we are capable of devising creative usages. Claude Lévi-Strauss, writing in “The Savage Mind”, calls this way of acting and thinking “bricolage”, while in “The Practice of Everyday Life”, Michel de Certeau elegantly demonstrates how the way we treat products can also be a form of “fabrication”. This is strongly reminiscent of ideas from the 1970s, such as Enzo Mari’s concept of “autoprogettazione”, in which consumers making things themselves engage in a form of participation and thus offer a counterpoint to mass consumption.

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We could easily add more examples to this list of critical approaches. The good news is that these ideas are in no way outdated, because today especially, designers are increasingly interested in who is using their products and how they are made. Creating a beautiful object is not the primary aim: the focus is increasingly on the interaction with users. By turning their attention to the design process as a whole, designers are offering a form of resistance to the pure logic of markets and consumption. The very act of making — the performative aspect of design — is something that designers are addressing more often, for example by merging technology and craft in the production process. Having the power to dictate action and fabrication is also one of the tasks of the designer, allowing them to take responsibility and build a bridge between the design and the manufacture of products, whether by hand or machine. Designers are general practitioners, Jörg Boner (Chair of the Federal Design Commission) recently said in an [interview](#). Design is a kind of interface passing through our lived experience and everyday practices; viewed in that light, design can very much be described as an anthropological discipline. Its meaning arises out of this extended function, and the work of designers can make us acutely aware of this. ●

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