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Production as Aesthetic Experience Examples of Ecological Design

by Johannes Lang

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Though terms like ecological design, eco-design and sustainable design are all the rage these days, aesthetic issues barely play a role in their theoretic treatment. Instead, ecological design is usually reduced to the use of eco-friendly technologies in the manufacturing of a product. Product properties and production methods are preferred, which indirect effects on the ecosystem are deemed less harmful than conventional technologies like, recycling, low-emission manufacturing and the use of biomaterial and monomaterial.¹ But these strategies do not produce equally characteristic product properties vis-à-vis design aesthetics. Despite the use of identical technologies – like, for example, recycled materials – products may be distinguished by the most diverse forms of aesthetic experience. It is easy to imagine the difference of an ecological product like an ecological Bauhaus chair or an ecological Baroque armchair. In this essay, I would like to demonstrate how new forms of aesthetic experience develop against the backdrop of changing attitudes towards the environment, forms that can be discussed independently of environmental technologies or the de facto »environmentalness« of products. I will focus on these forms of experience related to the integration of the user in the production process, which refer back historically to the do-it-yourself movement. Finally, I will attempt to describe more precisely the relationship between ecological technologies and ecological design.

The idea of user-conditional production and co-production is as old as the environmental movement itself. As early as 1973, James Hennessey and Victor Papanek – a pioneer of ecological design – were already advocating a do-it-yourself approach and publishing designs for people to put together themselves.² Around the same time, in the winter of 1973/1974, the International Design Center in Berlin organized the *Design it yourself* exhibition. Do-it-yourself and self-sufficiency became the guiding principles for an anti-consumerist, environmentally conscious lifestyle. Eventually, they were met with an economic response in the form of home improvement stores like the Bauhaus megastores in Germany and mass furniture companies like IKEA, noticeably losing their connection to a lifestyle originally motivated by environmental consciousness.³

In the course of this do-it-yourself movement, ecologically-motivated designers developed, among other things, an approach that integrated objects from the user's environment as resources, thereby increasing their lifespan. Representative examples of this approach, which I call co-production through repurposing, include Sebastian Bergne's *Candloop* candlestick,⁴ Jorre van Ast's *Jar Tops* kitchen containers⁵ and Nicholas le Moigne's *Verso Diverso* watering can.⁶ By purchasing *Candloop*, the user receives a wire with mounting plates that becomes a candlestick only by means of a non-included bottle. *Jar Tops* is a selection of lids that becomes a selection of kitchen containers only with the addition of various jam jars. *Verso Diverso* is a spout that becomes a watering can only in combination with a plastic beverage bottle. These products have in common a characteristic user experience: because the buyer does not receive a product that is ready for use, he cannot immediately relate to the product as a user. Instead, he must first focus his intentions on the product element itself and the possible concrete additions from his personal environment that will make it usable. This process is attended by a change in his everyday relationship to the objects around him.

In general, this everyday relationship is characterized by a tendency for objects to virtually disappear behind their usage in our perception and experience. Everyone is familiar with the strange phenomenon of an object vanishing behind its function the longer it is used and the more intensely it is needed in everyday life. If at first the carefully selected chair was still a sensual attraction sui generis – an object one was content simply to behold – this perspective soon transforms into one that sees the chair merely as a place to sit, a means of performing an action, a possible use. In this view, objects are seen only as purposed things: they seem to be essentially that for which they are *used*.

This is where the three products mentioned earlier come into play. When the user is asked to supply a new purpose for bottles and jars with which he has already interacted physically in order to fulfill some other purpose and which subsequently disappeared for him behind that purpose, those objects emerge as something self-contained, something beyond their use. As things, they remain the same; it is only their purpose that changes. The result is that the user, for the first time, sees object properties like size, color, shape and material as divorced from the object purpose, as autonomous. When a user is asked to modify a product and thereby participate in the process of its production, his everyday objects are momentarily stripped of their purposes and the network of actions in which they are embedded. They are no longer experienced only as means, but rather as autonomous entities.

Another form of integrating the user in the production process is co-production through modification. The difference between this and co-production through repurposing is that in this case, the user does not change the use of a product by adapting it, but rather changes the *object itself*. Marijn van der Poll's famous stainless steel *Do hit chair*⁷ and Jordi Canuda's ceramic *Lesslamp*⁸ are good examples of this form of co-production. Each is accompanied by and indeed sold with a tool for its own modification: the lamp with a special tapered pickax, and the chair with a sledgehammer with an unusually wide striking surface. Like the three products mentioned earlier, these two also distinguish themselves firstly by confronting the user as unusable things that require additional processing before they can fulfill a purpose. The *Lesslamp* is purchased as an opaque egg. The *Do hit* is sold as an undifferentiated cube of stainless steel. At first, a user processing the *Lesslamp* – using the pickax to hack individual holes into the egg – may be quite successful in realizing his intentions; but the moment he tries to break off larger pieces, he will experience the inherent laws of the material, which does not submit docilely to his agenda. The formal tendencies of the material are in conflict with the formal intentions of the user. He must defer to those formal tendencies as inherent laws dictated by the material and the object itself if he does not want simply to hit the object blindly but rather achieve certain results, such as a specific purpose or shape. The same is true in the case of *Do hit*: with each blow, the metal cube deforms in an only partially predictable way. The user must defer again and again to the autonomous behavior of the object, which he experiences as the palpable resistance of the material and its visible formal transformation. While in co-production through repurposing, the user experiences an *object's autonomy* beyond its function, in co-production through modification, he experiences a *material's inherent properties* beyond his design intentions.

¹ See, for example, the criteria that determine the inclusion of products in the publication *ecodesign: Silvia Barbero and Brunella Cozzo, ecodesign, Berlin, 2009, p. 36 et seqq.*

² Victor Papanek and James Hennessey *Nomadic Furniture I*, New York 1973

³ See Petra Eisele, *Do-it-yourself-Design: Die IKEA-Regale IVAR und BILLY, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History, Online-Ausgabe, 3 (2006) H. 3, URL: zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Eisele-3-2006 (20.12.2012)*

⁴ Sebastian Bergne, *Candloop*, 1999
manufacturer: *Wireworks*;
for images, see: www.sebastianbergne.com (20.12.2012)

⁵ Jorre van Ast, *Jar Tops*, 2005–2008
manufacturer: *Royal VKB*;
for images, see: www.jorrevanast.com/spip.php?article12
(20.12.2012)

⁶ Nicolas le Moigne, *Verso Diverso*, 2005
manufacturer: *Viceversa*;
for images, see: www.nicolaslemoigne.ch
(20.12.2012)

⁷ Marijn van der Poll, *Do hit*, 1999
Client: *Dr oog*;
for images, see: www.marijnvanderpoll.com
(20.12.2012)

⁸ Jordi Canudas, *Lesslamp*, 2008
manufacturer: *Metalarte*;
for images, see: www.jordicanudas.com or
www.morfae.com/0342-jordi-canudas (20.12.2012)

The extent to which these experiences, co-created by designer and user, also have an aesthetic dimension becomes clear when we compare them with those experiences that we have in the course of everyday modification processes and home improvement projects. In everyday modification processes, we spontaneously use objects in our environment for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. A chair thus becomes a clothes rack, a bucket a stool, a wine bottle a rolling pin, a plastic bag a bike-seat raincoat and so on. It is characteristic to these everyday modifications that they are accompanied by a goal-oriented mentality in which the attention of the user is not directed at the modification itself, but at the spontaneous purpose for whose fulfillment the object represents merely the best available means. The defining characteristic of modification as part of co-production, by contrast, is that it invites reflection on the process of modification itself. The user has not opted to convert an object out of some everyday necessity, but rather willingly decided on the process – that is, consciously purchased not only the supplemental product element, but also, to a certain extent, a corresponding activity. The designer-conceived modification relieves this activity of its practical everyday use and makes it an integral part of the product itself whereby the user approaches the experience of modification with the same aesthetic mindset with which he approaches the experience of a finished product.

Unlike everyday modification, which is accompanied by a degree of fixation on purpose, home improvement – the most established form of everyday modification – is accompanied by a fixation on design that encourages the selection of those methods and materials that are easiest to control and seem best suited for a successful implementation of a design vision.⁹ The resistance of the object and the material experienced in the activity of home improvement is not considered evidence of autonomy, rather as something that must be defeated and made subordinate to the design vision. The fundamental difference between home improvement and co-production through modification thus lies in the inversion of the relationship between design and material. In co-production, the point of departure is not the user's design vision, but the object itself and its material properties. The user must reflect on the autonomy of the material in order that a design vision can emerge that is suitable for the material at hand.

It may be said, in conclusion, that these forms of co-production differentiate themselves from everyday forms of DIY in that they make *production* experience a part of *product* experience. In co-production, the user is encouraged to approach the active process of interaction with an object with the same aesthetic mindset – that is, the same reflectiveness vis-à-vis perception – with which he usually only approaches a finished product. In everyday forms of DIY, the production process is usually regarded only as a means of implementing preconceived ideas, whereas in co-production, the production process must be perceived as something independent. Here, the user experiences the fact that objects and materials cannot be modeled at will according to his expectations but conversely, that his expectations must develop on the basis of the objects and materials. It is in the course of this experience that objects begin to appear to the user as autonomous and governed by inherent laws. Co-production thus robs DIY of its purpose fixation and instead makes objects experienceable for their own sake, thereby endowing DIY with the character of aesthetic experience, which

⁹ See Friedrich Wolfram Heubach *Der Heimwerker oder Die Dinge sind nicht immer entweder Mittel oder Motiv oder Symbol oder Ersatz, manchmal sind sie das alles zugleich: Symptome*, in: Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, *Das bedingte Leben, Entwurf zu einer Theorie der psychologischen Gegenständlichkeit der Dinge*, München 1987, p. 141 et seqq.

in turn reveals the characteristics of the ecological view on the material environment. The ecological view does not look at objects regarding their modes of applicability and instrumentalization, but rather seeks to experience the natural processes that surround us and embody our physical present as something autonomous and defined by their inherent laws. The natural and material aspects of a product become part of the aesthetic experience of it and thereby emerge for us for perception.¹⁰

Thus not only ecological technologies, but also characteristic forms of aesthetic experience are evolving against the backdrop of ecological reflection. But how to interpret the connection between these two product dimensions? It seems necessary not to think of the relationship between aesthetics and technology as deterministic, as many today still do as part of a one-sided reading of functionalism and its »form follows function« credo.¹¹ As mentioned earlier, an ecological technology is not automatically accompanied by a corresponding aesthetic. Nor is the opposing view, as represented in various sign-theoretical approaches that understand the relationship between product aesthetics and product technology as arbitrary and conventional, particularly useful. It treats the product as a mere means of communication. The product then in some way communicates the rating »ecological«, though it cannot be defined more specifically what this means.

In my view, the relationship between product aesthetic and product technology only becomes clear when we neither attempt to infer the one from the other, nor emphasize their mutual contingency, but rather contrast both with something else – namely, certain aspects of reality with which the product is connected and which constitute the focus of the *design interest*. In ecological product design, this interest refers to the natural processes with which the product is associated and in which it is involved. If this design interest becomes the basis for *technological* design, the result is a practical *influence* on this natural side of the product vis-à-vis those processes that are deemed suitable in view of the sustainability of natural systems. This practical influence is what we might call a green technology. When, on the other hand, the design interest becomes the basis for *aesthetic* design, these natural processes are not practically *influenced*, but rather aesthetically *reflected* upon in a moment of perception. In the one case, the ecological handling of natural processes expresses itself practically in the technology of the product. In the other case, it expresses itself experientially in the product's aesthetic. But the technological and aesthetic sides of the product are not necessarily connected. Whether or not a connection exists rather depends on whether the technological and aesthetic designs are linked by a common design interest that, in the case of ecological design, is oriented towards the product's inherent natural processes. Only thereby can we understand, in my opinion, what we really mean by ecological design – in terms not only of technological questions, but also aesthetic ones. Ecological design can so be specified as a way of designing products and their experiencing, which invites aesthetic reflection on the natural processes in which a product is involved.

¹⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the aesthetic of natural processes, see Johannes Lang and Bernhard Schieder, *Formen des Kontingenten: in Land-Art und ökologischem Design*, in: Frédéric Döhl, Daniel Martin Feige, Thomas Hilgers und Fiona McGovern (ed.); *Relevanz – Kontingenz – Werk*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich 2013 (forthcoming)

¹¹ See, for example, Stuart Walker, *Conscientious Objects: Products aesthetics and sustainability*, in: Ed van Hinte (ed.), *Eternally yours, visions on product endurance*, Rotterdam 1997, p. 164 et seqq.