Sustainable design thinking to unmake waste through values

Session 10

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Not Just “Stuff”: Design, animism and materiality.

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Picking up Stuart Walker’s argument that design process and production are sites of potential for ‘spiritual’ awakening (Walker, 2012), this paper examines the recent revival of animist cosmology as a lens to critique Western modernity and our need to radically refocus material culture.

As Walker (2013) contends, a ‘wisdom economy’ necessitates a shift away from material objectivism, a view that privileges a world of “stuff”. This is especially pertinent in light of Loy's (2002) argument that the legacy of modernity – obsessions with consumption, individualism, competition and power, is deeply rooted in a collective history of ‘lack’ which, he suggests, is essentially spiritual in origin. Social injustice and rampant ecological decline are but consequences of our ‘lack’ that now demand from us alternative ways to function. In my view, animist cosmology offers such alternatives that are critical to valuing our life-world as more than just “stuff”.

What has recently come to be called ‘neo-animism’, is perhaps more present and pertinent in our postmodern times than we care to admit. It views the physical and metaphysical worlds as fields of entanglement in which our apprehension of the ‘real’ shifts away from binary opposites towards systems of infinite relationality. Through it, our perception of what is human and non-human, living and inert becomes more fluid, processual and transformative. Things brings forth each other in webs of reciprocal co-creation. Fundamentally, animism is not a way of believing about the world, but a way of being in the world – ontologically it stands prior to differentiation (Ingold, 2006). For design, therefore, the neo-animist lens offers new pathways for perception, behavior and production embedded in life-world systems. But, its implications require close attention. Critics of design and technology already note the elicitation of animist behaviours in human users (Jensen and Blok, 2013; Marenko, 2014) and as the corporate-controlled ghosts in our machines become more life-like, the distance between us and the value of organic reality widens insidiously. If located in neo-animism at its deepest, however, design could help reopen us to the world of the natural, and awaken our perception of materiality that ‘lives’ as part of the world’s creation of itself. A sample case study from recent fieldwork discusses this in practice and concludes with views on its potential for design in pro-environmental behaviour change.

Keywords: Material culture, consumption, animism, ontology, design, Lurujarri
Introduction

This paper aims to sketch-out the argument that our obsession with material possessions is symptomatic of a deeper problem with our perceptions of physicality. In defining the “Stuff” of modernity I raise two initial points: 1) that modern material culture is largely ‘dematerialised’, concerned as it is with transient material ‘presences’ that negate intrinsic physicality in favour of socio-symbolic currency; and 2) that the reason for this is our spiritual longing for connectedness and proof of being. Subsequently, I argue that a possible way to reclaim the physical/spiritual connection, and a fuller conception of ourselves in the world, is through the lens of animism. Animism views the physical and metaphysical as fields of entanglement, where our apprehension of the ‘real’ shifts away from binary opposites towards systems of interdependent relation. I suggest that this perspective has significant potential for the field of design, not merely as a means of doing, but as an ontology of process that could catalyse shifts in perception and ‘rematerialise’ modern culture towards lasting sustainability.

“Stuff” is a ubiquitous catch-all for things too numerous or indeterminate to mention, but its use is more telling of our attitudes towards physicality. As a meta-term, ‘stuff’, implies at one level, the convenient omnipresence and availability of ‘things’. At another, it indicates the symbolic aggregation of our socio-cultural attachments – sports stuff, Christmas stuff, holiday stuff. Widespread use of the word ‘stuff’ also suggests our unconscious detachment from things as ‘things-in-the-world’. ‘Stuff’, in fact, denotes a conceptual ‘dematerialisation’ in modernity, one that reveals a paradox in the way we use, value and relate to ‘things-in-the-world’. This paradox rests on our tendency to privilege the sign value of objects over their real-world consequences. As such, ‘things’ become primarily objects for mental consumption, driving our subsequent use and abuse of resources equally at the speed of thought. The impacts of this accelerated entropy are now emerging in ecological and social crisis worldwide.

The animist impulse

Yet, our dematerialisation of the physical is not peculiar to modernity alone. Henneberg and Saniotis (2009) argue that shamanism of the Upper Paleolithic era may have profoundly impacted human cognitive evolution. In it, psychophysiological adaptations for altering consciousness may have emerged, where [for the first time] brain-mind states became integrated” (Winklemann 2000: 58 in Henneberg and Saniotis 2009). The resulting ‘altered states of consciousness’ (ASC) may have established archetypes for a “universal grammar of symbols” (Ryan 1999, in Henneberg and Saniotis), and the integration of ‘self’ into cognitive processes (Henneberg and Saniotis 2009). Early shamanism could have therefore been critical to the later emergence of animism, in which more complex forms of communion with ‘Otherness’ arises. Animism shows a propensity for ‘openness’ to the world, where a sense of connection to non-human ‘Others’ informs experience and interaction (Henneberg and Saniotis 2009). Additionally, the role of mimesis in early shamanism may have been crucial to the development of ‘symbolic thinking’. The collective performance of ritual to induce ASC as ways of ‘Othering’ may, in turn, have helped establish religious imagination and mythopoetic symbolism (Henneberg and Saniotis 2009).

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1 Shamanism in my analysis here, is understood in only general terms according to source literature. For more specific and complex analyses see Descola’s Nature and Society: Anthropological perspectives, Routledge, 1996.
Brought up-to-date, these animist and mimetic tendencies persist, not through the ‘Others’ of nature, but instead to vivify products of culture. Manrenko (2014) suggests we are “turning animist” to deal better with a world increasingly populated by intelligent things. Our compulsive stroking, swiping and holding of devices express a range of animistic inclinations where technology extends human cognition (Marenko 2014: 221). Significant though, is not that we actually believe our devices are ‘alive’, but more that we behave as if they are (Manrenko 2014). This ‘techno-animism’ in the age of digital ecosystems inclines us towards pre-modern responses that are psychologically and imaginatively suited to the peculiarities of the information jungle (Davis 1998: 225 in Marenko 2014). Subconsciously we tap into latter versions of our primitive altered states, but in so doing we unknowingly contradict the mind/body, human/thing dualisms that freely pervade modern thought.

Of course, the animist impulse exists aside from technology too and can be seen in the broader affects of material culture on human identity. Belk (1988: 145) argues that ‘things’ constitute an ‘extended-self’. All possessions facilitate some form of ‘having’, ‘doing’ or ‘being’ which, by nature, coalesce to form an enlargement of the self. We cognitively frame objects in terms of their relationship to us, where their ‘otherness’ may mirror what we believe we are or what we aspire to be. Essentially, humans are enmeshed in a semiotic economy where selfhood relies on ‘dematerialised’ things as specific kinds of sign.

Daniel Miller (2008) argues this further, suggesting that this coalescence our every-day ‘things’ constitutes a form of personal cosmology. In The Comfort of Things (2008) Miller locates the “centrality of relationships to modern life” as interdependent with “the centrality of material culture to relationships” (Miller 2008: 287). The spatiotemporal order of ‘things’ in peoples’ daily lives therefore reinforces their beliefs about the natural order of the world (Miller 2008: 287). The appearance of these cosmologies is, in many ways, ‘religious’ in structure despite their secular context (Miller in Borgerson 2009: 162). Echoing this, Marenko draws on critic Christopher Bracken to describe the secular sympathetic magic we feel for commodities: to us they are a “capitalist mana” (Bracken 2007, in Marenko 2014: 229).

If personal cosmology is reinforced by material culture, then the animist impulse must surely encompass institutions as part of it. To provide ‘capitalist mana’ corporations seek to immortalise their brands in the popular imagination by charging them with socio-cultural powers that transcend utility. The quasi-religious role that many brands now play in our lives engenders such values, behaviours and modes of being in consumers that we must now question if in fact consumers have not themselves become ‘product’; are we consumers or the consumed?

Products of all kinds have neo-spiritual value in the lives of modern people. Through their symbolic affect on identity, socialisation and the shaping of personal cosmology it seems we have endowed things with ‘souls’ (Adorno and Horkeimer 2002, in Marenko 2014: 229) Can it be that we are surrounded by “a circulation of souls” in endless cycles of production and consumption? (Marenko 2014). David Loy (2002) contends that modern patterns of consumption are rooted in a collective history of ‘lack’, which, he suggests, is spiritual in origin: “what we lack as a sense of ‘being’ compels us to seek reassurance through symbolic acts of consumption” (Loy 2002: 8). Ironically, despite our animist impulse to connect with ‘things’, the ‘souls’ of some things often turn out to be of those marketers trying to magnify our lack and boost sales. Consequently, consumers find neither meaningful connection nor lasting fulfillment. Instead, objectification and lack remain and the compulsion to consume persists. There is a parallel here with Descola’s (1996: 94) notion that animic relations present particular
variations, one of which is explicitly ‘predatory’. Together with the illusion that consumer choice equates with human ‘freedom’, this forms a key aspect of consumer capitalism. Loy believes capitalism has religious origins and still retains a religious character. If so, then perhaps our response to an objectified waste-ready world, and a subjectified lack-driven self, should also be ‘spiritual’ in character? (Loy, 2002: 8).

In the challenge to shift away from current patterns of waste and ecological abuse, we must clearly address our ‘order of things’. As Miller maintains, material culture [whether capitalist or otherwise] is a form of ‘practical taxonomy’, the order of which influences human habitus and expectation. Such orders, while largely accepted and socialised, are not deterministic. The process can be transformed to cause shifts and adaptations to those orders, and changes in our relationship with the world. People are the vehicles of change for material culture, and they then re-socialise others (Miller in Borgerson 2009: 163).

The animistic-turn

It would seem that transforming of our ‘order of things’ must be a spiritual/material process that occurs through people. Stuart Walker (2013) argues that, for designers, the revival of spirituality is found in more meaningful, sustainable and enduring alternatives to waste-ready consumer culture. This includes orienting practical output towards social responsibility and reducing/repairing ecological decline through a shift in consumer habits (Walker 2013). But this requires recovery of our reciprocal relations with all environmental Others. Interestingly, Descola (1996: 94) defines ‘reciprocity’ as the inversion of ‘predation’ in animic systems, where interdependency is fed by continual exchange, both material and symbolic. Most importantly, as Walker (2013) adds, “a post-religious, post-materialist society engenders a spirituality more intimate with the natural world”. The animist recovery of ourselves in, of and with nature would therefore involve closing the gap between our physical and symbolic production of ‘things’, and the intrinsic worth we place on the ecosystems affording us those ‘things’.

Contrary to early anthropology which saw animism imputing life into things – a belief-system about the world, post-modern interpretations view it as condition of “being alive to the world” (Ingold 2006). Ingold (2006) defines this as “heightened sensitivity and responsiveness in perception and action, to an environment in continual flux”. A condition in which “beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence” (Ingold 2006). Described also as ‘neo-animism’ (Bird-David 1999, Marenko 2014) there resides in this an ontology, not for how we might ‘do’ sustainability (or sustainable design specifically), but for recovering deep awareness of our exchanges with the world. Through “animic ontology” (Ingold 2011), designers in all fields can help re-attune human perception and reconfigure our symbolic and material relationships with the world. As a modality for creative process, animic ontology may be a way of reading and responding in design towards the formation of new, more sustainable cosmologies of material culture.

How does this work? The following summary draws much from Ingold’s (2011) theories on the characteristics of animic ontology as ways of perception. Occurring as simultaneous and emergent ‘knowings’ across mind and body (Ingold 2011) it has the effect of conflating dualism. I use this to contextualise my own fieldwork thereafter.

Continuous birth

The first characteristic of animic ontology is ‘continuous birth’. Conventional religions regard the life-spirit as inhabiting the body-vehicle, but Ingold (2011) suggests that
animic ontology apprehends life as “a perpetual generation of being”, a process of continual transformation and becoming. This applies to animate and inanimate phenomena, all of which are ‘beings’ that constitute some intrinsic involvement in the life process. As such, that which perceives ‘continuous birth’ must also be continually born, transformed by its own perceiving of the world which, in turn, it transforms through perception. Perceiving and relating are maintained through performative behaviours such as habits and rituals. These could be considered as ways of ‘feeding’ reciprocity to keep systems alive.

**Perception as ‘participation’**

Especially relevant to designers who, we might believe, are quite well-sensitised to aesthetic experience, animic ontology offers deeper understanding of how perception informs modes of being, both in making and in reading the world around us. Merleau-Ponty (in Abram 1996) suggests that perception is a *participatory* experience – the perceiving body acts as the field of interplay with the world, coupling the perceiver with the perceived (Abram 1996: 52). Abram describes this mode of animic, subjective interplay thus: “…my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence—to the way of this stone or tree or table—as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity. In this manner the simplest thing may become a world to me” (Abram 1996: 52). Neither the perceiver nor the perceived is entirely passive in this transaction, for without the existence of each, as both ‘event’ and ‘experience’, perception cannot take place. *Participation* is intimately partnered with *relatedness*.

**Relational constitution of being**

Modes of perception described thus, denote our ‘relatedness’ to physical phenomena, but this needs a wider context. As a relational event, perception still supposes ‘things’ and ‘beings’ in the world as somehow *separate* from each other, that there is ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’ space and boundaries that ‘contain’ them (Ingold 2006). But animic ontology does not recognise this. Instead, it views all manner of ‘beings’ as uncontained fields of experience bleeding through each other: life exists only as intersecting, processual relationships. Ingold (2006) visualises, this ‘relational constitution of being’ like the growth of fungal mycelium (figure 1). The filaments of this growth are the paths along which “being issues forth” (Ingold, 2006). They intersect and connect in such ways that there is no ‘one’ being in isolation but an entanglement of differences along lines of relationship.
Figure 1: Growth patterns of Agaricus bisporus, fungal Mycelium. Rob Hillie 2011.

Primacy of movement

Critical to entanglement is the ‘primacy of movement’, for if fields of experience are to be entangled, transformed and reconfigured they must be in motion. The vital attribute of this ‘being-in-motion’, as noted again by Ingold (2006), is that it results in trails. These we might identify as peculiar to each ‘being’ that created them. In this respect individuation occurs naturally through experiential direction and historical variation across aspects of the whole (Ingold 2006). A human parallel to this might be the activity of walking in which we innately create and follow trails/paths of movement, experience, history and culture. Of walking Robert Macfarlane (2012) writes “For paths run through people as surely as they run through places”. “Walking as enabling sight and thought rather than encouraging retreat and escape; paths as offering not only means of traversing space, but also ways of feeling, being and knowing” (Macfarlane 2012: 24).

Astonishment

Another aspect of animic ontology identified by Ingold, and one particularly relevant to this thesis, is that of ‘astonishment’ – the form of wonder that openness to the world can bring. This is what Merleau-Ponty (1964:166) defines as the magic or delirium of vision – the astonishment, in fact, of seeing (Ingold, 2006). It could be understood as a complete apprehension of the world by all our senses and faculties of perception. But, it would be wrong to believe that astonishment assumes timidity or lack. For in essence it is strength and a likely source of resilience to fully apprehend the world for what it is, fair and ill, particularly in our current climate of change. Seeing the world thus is to find wisdom and preparedness for change to come; to meet the world creatively, with care and courage (Ingold, 2006). Creatives who appreciate the subtle alchemy of drawing will know what it is to perceive the world through the agency of relatedness. Theirs is the discovery of self in the other, where astonishment is a way of seeing through a heart as open as one’s eyes.

Fieldwork: The Lurujarri Heritage Trail and animic ontology in practice

With these terms in mind, I will now turn to an example of what may be animic ontology in practice. The following case-study concerns the confluence of these processes as a communication tool, an experience providing entry to the animist world-view, and subsequently a sense of heightened connectedness to human and non-human others.
In spring 2013 I joined the Lurujarri Heritage Trail, a 9 day, 90km route along part of an ancestral song cycle that indigenous and non-indigenous people walk together in Australia’s North-West. The route is mainly coastal and requires participants to leave all modern comforts and technology behind, taking only portable essentials. During this trail the indigenous law keepers of the Goolarabooloo people share their creation stories, practical skills and local knowledge, with the aim to trigger peoples’ intrinsic affinity with country. It is a space to foster trust and empathy between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples while being truly immersed in, and opened to the environment as catalyst for personal change. My aim on the trail was to document the experience of others on it. The data collected was telling and reveals how deeply the process of immersion can affect one’s perception of self and capacity for wonder. My method involved narrative phenomenology and auto-ethnography to form an interpretation of the trail experience and its possible relevance to pro-environmental communications. Participants were of mixed ages and social demographics with the only common factor being their affiliation to the Australian Conservation Foundation who had commissioned three groups for the 2013 season. The following reflections are taken from field notes and interviews gathered from the third trail group (figure 2) and evidence some of the key concepts that emerged from the experience. It is important to note that this data and its initial interpretation was collected before reviewing the literature on animism, and is therefore not primed by any prior theory.

Perhaps the most powerful realisation to emerge from the Lurujarri Trail was the value of primary experience with nature. In the absence of phones, clocks and calendars, participants expressed a very tangible sense of surrender to the Trail’s organic reality. It seemed that visceral sensation assumed priority over reason. This was not initially an experience of the conscious mind but one of the body and primal sensation. It takes time to adjust to the pace of the Trail, but soon after, many people expressed a heightening of their senses and a stronger perception of nature – details like the qualities of light and air, the configuration of the ground and various landscapes, the presence of particular animals and birds, colours, changes in temperature, new sounds and especially the sky at night all became renewed sources of wonder and
conversation. It was clear that given time and space for reflection, people revealed their natural inclination to notice more of the environment and make it meaningful.

Walking was key to the trail experience. One woman used the word ‘sacred’ to describe her experience of walking with others. She referred particularly to an all female group that was permitted to walk at night across an ancient midden where ancestral ‘women’s business’ was once conducted. The experience of being with other women in motion, crossing ground steeped in ancient history, created for her a powerful affirmation of the feminine. It evoked a tangible conflation of time as ancestral history became present experience. Being with others outdoors, sharing the same space and rhythms of movement, for many seemed a profound way of ‘becoming’– connecting with something bigger than oneself. Many of the middens we crossed (figure 3) were littered with flint implements, cutting blades, axe and spearheads, all many thousands of years old. The reverence we sensed for these objects was reminiscent of that held for religious relics, except that these artefacts were not sealed away from the world but remained in the open and allowed to stay ‘alive’ to the generations passing through.

Figure 3: Lurujarri Heritage Trail, third party, August 2013. Chris Thornton 2013.

Similar to walking, breathing too was strangely symbolic – inhaling the world, exhaling oneself. Such thoughts rarely occur to us in the everyday, but on the Trail, the process of reading one’s body as it walks, breathes, rests, eats or drinks, defined new forms of awareness and self-description. The physical exertion of daily walking, added to the labour of pitching and striking, camp revealed the value of effort. It was noted that through physical effort, perceptions of distance, time, weight and one’s personal priorities were quickly clarified. The sense of exertion in light of simple returns like rest, companionship, food and peace-of-mind brought intrinsic reward – when life is simplified gratitude seems easier to summon.
At a number of camping stops our indigenous guides shared with us their traditional skills. They taught us the ways for making clap-sticks and boomerangs (figure 4). In Goolarabooloo culture these objects ‘live’ in a very real sense and hold significance to both the people and the land they occupy. Goolarabooloo creation myth tells how the Naji spirit people first took form, and that to do so they made sound to come into being. The world’s first sound, they say, was made by clapping hands, and by dancing the Naji kept their vibration and assumed physical form. In Goolarabooloo culture the boomerang is not a weapon but an instrument of music and creative becoming. As a non-indigenous person learning this story along with the means to make such objects, I, along with others in the group, felt great privilege to be entrusted with such knowledge. I look back on this experience with growing understanding that participation is perhaps the deepest way to learn this, and that in fashioning objects that are of ‘place’, we invest ourselves in ‘place’ through physical, emotional and symbolic synthesis. Equally, place is invested in us by way of the same. The concept of ‘nature as sign’ is transformed here into a dynamic and deeply personal process of emergence through creative endeavour. This experience has, for many on the trail, transformed our understanding and appreciation of made objects and their value to the world. For me, as a designer, it has galvanized my resolve to change the means and motives by which I make work and the function it has in the world.

Another aspect of the spiritual that for some became quite magnetic, was the indigenous concept of ‘Liy-an’. According to Goolarabooloo law, Liy-an lies at the core of one’s connection to country. One of our indigenous guides described it as coming from the middle of his body, from beneath his diaphragm. Liy-an is the physical sensation of one’s intuitive knowledge of country and cultural law, facilitating navigation and connection to ancestry. He described it as growing from himself, an outward pathway that he follows. Interestingly the heightened sense of one’s breath at the diaphragm makes this concept tangible to all of us, and when on country, inhaling the outdoors, a heightened empathy for the surroundings can be found by attending to the sensations of one’s own Liy-an. When our Goolarabooloo guides spoke of their Liy-an it was always with warmth and affection, never in an objective sense.

Without the excuse to check clocks, one’s sense of time elongates on country. Everyone on the trail remarked how much longer the days and the nights seemed and that life had somehow decelerated. With few distractions to fragment the experience of time, days acquired continuity and people attended only to what mattered most. The trail revealed time in numerous forms: There was ‘geological time’ in the surrounding rock, solar and lunar time marked our states of wakefulness and rest, cultural time in the songs and stories imparted to us, and task time – the duration in which objects were made, a camp pitched or meals eaten. All these were different, but on no occasion was there a sense of time lost. Instead, time reclaimed meant permission to
return to oneself and fully locate experience in the continuity of place and the mindfulness of moments.

Conclusion

By meeting free-nature on its own terms, empathically and creatively there is the prospect of restoring our openness to the world. As a tool for communication The Lurujarri Trail seems to achieve this with many of its participants, though the subsequent return to modernity complicates the retention of its impact. But, in clarifying some of the socio-psychological power of the Trail, is it possible to invest what is learnt in some redirecive practice for design? With the Lurujarri Trail we see communication function at its most intrinsic, participative and experiential. Can we therefore develop other communications or forms of material culture that resonate at a similar level, re-attuning our perceptions of the world towards the relational and the real over the individualised and artificial? Is it possible to generate pro-environmental design outcomes –objects, spaces, messages and experiences of the future– that engender similar apprehensions of the world as those we found on country? Meditating on what I believe the Trail reveals, my Liy-an might say it cannot be so contrived. But intuitively, I also sense instead that animic ontology can steer design process through the very nature by which work is conceived and made, namely, the nature of the designer herself. Therefore, might the primary aim for real-world, sustainable design be to affect design education and the formative experiences that shape designers in-the-making? To help lay foundational values on which creativity and openness to the world can naturally build lasting and ecologically reciprocal design praxis.

I suspect what may result from this will not, cannot, function solely through the semi-passive consumption of print media, websites, TV ads or other innumerable ‘things-on-display’. Though these serve as useful stages for the stories of our living-world, priority must be sought for a deeper language in the creative process; a language that draws from, and feeds into forms of reciprocity with our all our Others. It must be a language where we discover for ourselves the intrinsic worth of engaging with the natural orders of the world, orders to which we are bound and by which we must live. The prospect of recalibrating our material, cultural and social relationships with the biosphere means to prioritise participation and perception as the medium for making meaning. It requires designers as the producers of culture, to release long-held preoccupations with appearance and transient novelty, and instead develop forms of mediation that nurture ‘astonishment’ at our surroundings. What animic ontology offers is a path to deepening for both designers and users of design. In essence, it is a modality of being that instigates co-creation and reciprocation at the most intrinsic level across the production/consumption/context paradigm, where all participants reciprocate with the other, and none exist to the detriment or alienation of the next.

“…when a dreamer dreams of matter, when in his dreams he goes ‘to the bottom of things’. Everything becomes great and stable at the same time the reverie unifies cosmos and substance” (Gaston Bachelard 1969: 176).

“Only by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our [lives] to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world” (Abram, 1996: 56).
References


Images:

Figure 1. Hille, Rob (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons

Figures 2 – 4, Thornton, Chris (Own work) Lurujarri Heritage Trail, August 2013, University of South Australia, Adelaide.
An approach to letting go: Mindfulness towards designing futures

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In looking towards future contexts of design where the processes and consequences of making are becoming increasingly scrutinised, I explore how we, as designers, can develop mindfulness towards what we ‘make’ together with others. I draw upon various key scholars in design, feminist STS and cognitive science that take a pragmatic orientation to a deeper, ethical investigation of being and change. In doing so, I consider mindfulness as an approach and practice to designing that enables awareness of others, sensitivity towards contexts and reflection of one’s actions. This approach to mindfulness is inflected with Zen Buddhism, drawing upon my cultural background. I question how we conceive, enact and embody designing with other people, seeing design as a process of transformation of ourselves when making socio-material relations and the making of futures.

Keywords: Mindfulness, reflective practice, Zen Buddhism, phenomenology, ethics, community
Why care about mindfulness?

If designing is to change futures or intervene in someone’s life, then an ethical consideration becomes paramount. For some time, I have been questioning what it means to be an ethical designer and becoming increasingly troubled by a persistence for a common worldview or an ethical framework for all designers (see name withheld 2012; Norton 2012). Reality is not a given but multiple and impermanent; ‘...to be human, indeed to be living, is always to be in a situation, a context, a world. We have no experience of anything that is permanent and independent of these situations’ (Varela et al. 1993, 59). Likewise, designing is inherently social and relational – it is with, by and for other people. In these instances, all manner of perspectives, practices and conflicting values are immanent, surfacing in relational interactions. In order to attune to such emergent encounters, I have been exploring reflective practice in my designing with communities. This paper on mindfulness continues a trajectory of my ethical inquiry, motivated by a concern for our world and what futures we are making together.

My practice over the last five years has focused on working with regional communities in Australia, in strengthening their resilience for disaster preparedness or by contributing towards the efforts of Indigenous Nations enact their self-determination and governance. This work has been informed, critiqued and inspired by the participatory design (PD) community, a field where the ethical and political concern is at the forefront to pursue how people (like ‘users’, community or polity) participate in the design process to co-create changes. In PD, instead of only focusing on how products or technology are co-designed participatively, there is also a concern for intervening in structures of social relations for change. Social relations in communities or workplaces are often invisible but play a powerful role in enabling or inhibiting change. In PD, such power-dynamics are addressed pragmatically by inviting people from merely being consulted to actively ‘step up, take the pen in hand … with fellow colleagues and designers, and participate in drawing and sketching how the work process unfolds as seen from their perspectives’ (Robertson and Simonsen 2013, 5), or strategising ways to empower the resource-weak and marginalised groups in decision-making alongside those already in position of authority and power (Bannon and Ehn 2013).

Bannon and Ehn, building on Latour, is of particular importance here to explain how designing is an assembly of socio-material collectives (which include humans and non-humans), gathered around ‘matters of concern’, continually being appropriated and re-made on-goingly. This view brings much needed attention to the complex and heterogeneous socio-material dimensions instead of solely a product-centred view – a view that still dominates design and sustainability discourse. For example, popularity of process and frameworks such as the Life Cycle Analysis and Three R’s of Reuse, Reduce and Recycle are still centred on re-thinking how objects are produced and consumed to minimise materials, resources, energy and waste. Similarly, Walker’s book, The Spirit of Design (2011), is largely about sensitivity, ‘disciplined empathy’ and intuitive ways of knowing towards designing products, demonstrated by plumb lines, lighting devices and modifying old technology in new ways. I resonate with his mindful approach on sustainability whilst emphasising a focus on designing socio-material heterogeneity to consider how we ‘become with’ one another.

The feminist discourse reminds us that we are already entangled in a web of systems and influences, and any interventions are from ‘within’ and cannot be seen as external, isolated or independent. This is also Nancy’s (2000) co-ontology of ‘being with’, where plurality is irreducible, and the singular ‘I’ does not precede the relation of ‘we’. Being fully engaged and aware of this connection is central to mindfulness. Committing to this
relational, co-ontological view rather than a moral or ideological one is important in pursuing how and what we design together. For example, Light and Akama (2014) examine the notion of ‘Care’ to consider how people can participate in re-designing their relational and invisible mediating structures around them to enable social change. The ‘Care’ that is evoked is a pre-condition of inter-dependency; ‘For not only do relations involve care, care is itself relational’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 198). It recognises the inevitable interdependency, not something forced upon by moral order, because ‘care is somehow unavoidable’. It is a condition of living, and ‘for life to be livable, it needs to be fostered’ (ibid). Taking this on, Light and Akama (2014, 159) suggest how designers might enact their care towards ‘making the invisible cement of collaborative practice visible’ and to create spaces for people to come together to re-examine relationships, re-make their environments, re-imagine familiar places and create spaces to reflect, think, make mistakes, learn and debate about making their futures. What they mean by designing with care is to structure ways to support sustainable and flourishing relations in the ecology of beings and materials.

I pursue a discussion on mindfulness by building on these scholars, though my insights come from my design research practice. Like a lofty zen-quote, mindfulness can be abstract and obscure, and it makes little sense unless it emerges from practice and returns to practice again. As this paper seeks to promote discussion rather than share empirical evidence from case studies (see the citations for these), the methodology I use here is reflective practice, combined with literature. The paper is written in first-person to describe the journey I have taken, and am still continuing to make towards designing with mindfulness.

**Mindfulness**

There are various approaches and rich descriptions of mindfulness. A single definition is not possible, just like one’s state of being can be numerous and different from one person to another. One notable Zen scholar and practitioner, Thien-An, elucidates how mindfulness can give insights into harmony of nature: ‘Since everything is interrelated, since all things depend on one another, nothing is absolute, nothing is separate, but all are part of the one indivisible whole’ (1975, 32). He suggests mindfulness as a pathway for self-realisation and to discover new ways of relating to others. Another renowned scholar, Suzuki (1958, 9), describes a kind of awakening of a certain consciousness that is ‘attuned to the pulsation of Reality.’

On mindfulness, Varela and colleagues (1993) observes two contrasting meditation approaches. One avenue is a development and training of good habits. ‘[M]indfulness is being strengthened like the training of a muscle that can then perform harder and longer work without tiring’ (26). This view is to develop special skills, gain better attentiveness or to make oneself into a philosophical virtuoso. Working harder and longer to acquire new skills, building expertise to perform better, surely, is a form of mastery that designers strive to achieve? Looking at modern work practices, including my peers in design seems to suggest this. Interestingly, some researchers in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) have used mindfulness to enhance work performance. For example, Levy and colleagues (2012) studied the effects of meditation to enhance attention, multi-tasking and memory retention. They draw upon neuroscience and frame mindfulness as ‘training’ for cognitive improvement. Similarly, others discuss mindfulness as a feature for productivity in work and study, such as enhancing effectiveness and efficiency (Bernárdez et al. 2014) and reduction of stress (Vidyarthi et al. 2012). However, Varela and colleagues are wary of seeing meditation as training,
lamenting that it is like ‘engaging in self-deception and is actually going in the opposite
direction’ (29). Despite good intentions to improve a worker’s well-being through
meditation, the given HCI example ironically aims to make the worker perform more
effectively and productively in highly stressful environments. In fact, the absence of
critique of modern work practices obsessed with performance, growth, competition and
consumption is alarming. Thien-An is similarly concerned about this aspect of work; ‘we
usually do not work for an inner goal but for something external to ourselves’ (1975,10).
To add, approaching mindfulness as a skill or training could escalate a distanced view
of the world.

In our busy lives, our mind has a tendency to be occupied. Even when totally absorbed
in a task such as reading or writing, the mind can be focused and attentive, but that
does not necessarily mean it is aware and present. Varela and colleagues is cautious
about concentration techniques for ‘tethering’ the mind because periods of total
absorption may feel pleasurable but all else can pass by in a hazy blur, suggesting the
distanced, abstract attitude. They claim that the first significant discovery of
mindfulness meditation is not a piercing insight but an awakening ‘of just how
disconnected humans normally are from their very experience’ (25). They describe this
abstract attitude as a ‘spacesuit’ padded with ‘habits and preconceptions, the armor
with which one habitually distances oneself from one’s experience’. However, such
disassociation, distraction and disconnect is a habit that can be broken. Practicing
mindful meditation can prevent the practitioner from being automatically lost in mindless
habits. It can be a way to realise ‘the meaning of what we are doing, if we can be what
we do.’ (Thien-An 1975, 38 original emphasis). Mindfulness can be a way to bring one
closer to one’s ordinary, embodied experience.

There are several points I must stress before we progress, especially in discussing
mindfulness in design. Design’s ‘problem-solution’ paradigm has become so
entrenched that it has a tendency for an affirmative orientation to provide solutions to
complex challenges. I elaborate on this below. However, mindfulness must not be seen
as a way to ‘solve problems’, as a means of improvement, or to attain goals. Neither do
I advocate that the readers adopt Zen Buddhism as a guiding religio-spirituality. I do not
suggest that I have mastered mindfulness, or have novel techniques in meditation.
Instead, I share what I have learnt in my own approach to mindfulness through
designing with communities. As most of these case studies are published already, I
share a meta-level reflection of my journey of unlearning through these experiences
and its relevance to design. Here, I emphasise the importance of action, practice,
reflection in everyday, and this to be one pathway I have taken towards a developing
awareness.

Unlearning: Practicing mindfulness by ‘letting go’

I necessarily begin with the notion of ‘letting go’ in approaching mindfulness because it
is the first step to short-circuit entrenched habits. As discussed earlier, the mind can be
cluttered with habitual patterns, which ‘constantly tries to grasp some stable point in its
unending movement and to cling to thoughts, feelings, and concepts as if they were a
solid ground’ (Varela et al, 1993, 26). Varela and colleagues suggest that an approach
to mindfulness is to ‘letting go of habits of mindlessness, as an unlearning rather than a
learning’ and ‘it is a different sense of effort from the acquiring of something new’ (29).
In approaching and practicing mindfulness, I believe there are things we need to unlearn in design.
Designers are often poorly trained to engage in community work, chiefly because their education or apprenticeship in industry is highly specific to craft and practices that are relevant to various fields, whether this is in communication design, industrial design, or the built environment. This view is echoed by Girard and Shneiderman (2013), who examined sustainability in design education. They claim that design is still framed within the precepts of industrialisation, based on ‘growth, materiality, and a fixation on the artefact – values that are generally contrary to the underpinning principles of sustainability’ (132). Frustration and rejection of this kind of design has catalysed interest in social design, service design (for public services) and design for social innovation over the last ten years. Currently, there are many designers practicing in alternative ways, or willingly pursuing these nascent pathways to carve out a meaningful contribution to people and the world. I am one such designer, and my observations of designers being poorly equipped for community work also comes my own personal experience and reflection.

The first thing I had to let go when embarking on this pathway is in fact a conception of design to ‘solve problems’ on behalf of the community. Large, complex, ‘wicked’ problems like natural disasters cannot be ‘solved’ by a designed artefact alone. In fact, a community we worked with initially expected our team to design a better communication and warning system. It indicated their expectation of expertise – a team of academics, researchers and designers – to provide solutions, when in fact an entrenched obstacle was their sense of dependency on authority, lack of awareness and fragmented social relations (see name withheld 2010). In this context, we had to learn to dismantle expectation and expertise, particularly those that involved designing products, and instead, to begin with the view that we had little or no expertise in the complex issues that were observed in a community. This departure enabled us to move towards co-designing a methodology with the community to build their adaptive capacity and reciprocal interdependency.

Case studies like ours in design for social innovation demonstrate how non-design experts can perform designing, harnessing latent creativity and leveraging resources in tackling issues (Murray et al. 2010). This reflects Simon’s (1968, 55) oft-quoted observation; ‘everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations, into preferred ones’. But if people are already designing in communities and making changes, what can designers do that is any different, or ‘better’? This question points to a need to de-couple design from designers, which many designers find uncomfortable, especially if they are holding on to their design expertise.

Yet we are seeing responses to this question, no longer in the form of designed products due to the reasons given before, but emerging as a new trend in design thinking. Worryingly however, design thinking claims another form of expertise in strategy, critical thinking, innovation and creativity. Largely spurred on by business, fields like service design have burgeoned to demonstrate how methods, not products, can tackle complex problems (see name withheld 2013). For example, the Double Diamond diagram (www.designcouncil.org.uk/) is widely used to explain design to other fields because its abstraction gives a perception of certainty and a logical understanding of a design process.

However, methods alone cannot enable agency – they are embodied in enactment, and its use does not guarantee effective outcomes (Light and Akama 2012). This was another unlearning – a ‘letting go’ – I experienced when we passed on the methods to community stakeholders to ensure continuation of preparedness. Even though they were convinced of its performance and value, we did not consider the infrastructures to
continue and support its process. As reflected on in name withheld (2014, 176), ‘[i]t demonstrated the difficulty beyond one-off interventions to truly embed transformation so the community had the final ownership of the process and methods themselves for on-going evolution.’

This is another importance of ‘letting go’ of attempts to attribute design as causal and unique, isolated and presented as discretely ‘bounded’ in projects, artefacts, methods, models or performance. Change is a gradual and continuous process, already in motion. Even though designers might wish to attribute purposeful change to their specific interventions, this view can often omit that there are other conditions entangled with people, place, culture, materiality, indigenous knowledge, histories and aspirations that can enable intentional transformation. This omission leads to the next discussion of ‘letting go’ through reflective practice.

**Approaching mindfulness through reflective practice**

When engaging in community work, the act of designing with groups of people is rife with contingency and personal relations are strongly influential (Light and Akama 2012). Yet, these nuanced dynamics and analysis is often missing in the design and social innovation discourse. This is seen in Manzini’s work – a respected scholar of great distinction and prominence in establishing this field. However, well-intended in promoting the agency of design, many case studies in this field inadvertently ignore the inherent social structures of communities (including power, political and cultural dimensions) that enables social innovation to catalyse. Instead, the pragmatic interventions are often highlighted to focus on ‘whatever design can do to start, boost, support, make robust and replicate social innovation’ (Manzini & Rizzo 2011, 202). This is a limitation of design, also critiqued by a seminal anthropologist Lucy Suchman (2011, 1) who argues for design’s need to ‘acknowledge the specificities of its place, to locate itself as one (albeit multiple) figure and practice of transformation’. In other words, to notice such specificities means the need to develop sensitivity and awareness in these situations when entering into and engaging with communities. Designing is enacted in the between-ness among heterogeneous influences.

Incremental details of transformative processes often remain hidden by their very nature of being silent, internal, ephemeral, dispersed, all of which are difficult to capture and categorise (name withheld 2014). I have already discussed entrenched habits we display as designers that become barriers to this noticing and the need to unlearn these mindsets. Simultaneously, I see this surrender as a process of transformation that can be catalysed by continually reflecting on our activity, our being and how we are with others. This is reflective practice.

Reflection, undertaken as mindfulness, is not just to reflect on experience, but to experience reflection itself. Varela and colleagues (1993, 27) explain that reflective practice ‘can cut the chain of habitual thought patterns and preconceptions such that it can be an open-ended reflection, open to possibilities other than those contained in one’s current representations of the life space.’ They call this form of reflection ‘mindful, open-ended reflection’ (ibid, original emphasis). They further add that, reflection simultaneously changes the practitioner, which ‘changes what is being observed’ (33) enabling a transformative process. In other words, undertaking reflective practice is a form of mindful meditation, slowing down and attuning towards a relational sensitivity in the contexts we are immersed within.

It is important to note that this kind of mindful reflective practice is different to ‘critical reflection’ that many researchers are familiar with. This tends to be more cognitive and
rational in process, in order to interrogate, question, analyse and deconstruct phenomena. Indeed, reflection influenced by critical theory can expose institutionalized cultural, social or political assumptions (Sengers et al. 2005), though I would argue that little can be revealed about self-awareness or our being in the world. An intellectual and cognitive orientation can only get us so far, inviting rational argumentation (Walker, 2011), just as only reading and thinking about mindfulness also has its limitations. The avoidance of words and texts is strongly seen in Zen Buddhism’s orientation to mindfulness (Suzuki, 1959). Thien-An (1975, 24) is similarly absolute in this view: ‘If we wish to understand, we must experience, and to experience, we must practice. There is no other way’. Here, I see a resonance between designing, reflection and mindfulness, which can only be experienced and undertaken by doing.

A Zen Buddhist approach to mindfulness is actioned in everyday tasks. Other resonances are seen in walking labyrinths – the body moving through space calls on the ability to be in the world through affective senses (Vaughan 2004). This is different to Indian Buddhism that practices mindfulness by sitting calmly, or in ascetic isolation. Thien-An explains: ‘Every day we face problems, some easy, some difficult. … Of course, it is more difficult to apply meditation in action than at rest, but it is also of more value…. when we meet troubles or obstacles in our life, they should be faced with the mind poised in the calm of meditation’ (38, author’s emphasis). This notion of poise is important in being ready to do something (name withheld 2015). Being poised seems to be a helpful way to consider designing when there are emergent actions, dynamics and flow that one needs to be responsive to, without being overtly reactive. It is a form of composure, preparation, and readiness to enter and immerse in contingency, such as those encountered in situations of designing with communities.

Reflection of my own practice is undertaken anytime and anywhere I can, sometimes alone, often with others, during, after and in-between projects as a continuous movement. It connects with Schön’s (1983) description of reflection-in-action of an embodied, affective, immersive experience, but with more emphasis on a relational process, incorporating views and reflection of others. To me, this is also an act of releasing anxiety, removing judgments, clearing clutter and preconceptions. Instead of a clenched fist, grasping and holding on to certainty, it relaxes into an open palm of emptiness (Hara, 2011), ready to receive and be part of the world in its continual becoming. This cyclical process of designing and reflecting, gradually develops a form of sensitivity and awareness towards new and familiar encounters. It is an awareness that invites a feeling of being part of the whole.

Conclusion

Being mindful cannot be immediate, and nor will it end with ‘perfecting’ it. Instead, I see it as a way of continually catalysing change to my own practice, to embrace and surrender to the flux and flow of designing whilst being changed by it. It is a circular movement, and I can never step outside of it as I am already entangled within. When we surrender to the emergent, we can embrace that change is as much by chance rather than by design. And as designers, we can learn to accept and welcome chance, helping us become ready and poised for such encounters.
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Hyper-Consumption, Authenticity, Value and the Resurgence of Reuse

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Accelerating patterns of global consumption are necessarily matched by expanding patterns of wastage. Food, packaging, apparel, electronic devices, appliances and building materials are all discarded or abandoned as soon as their perceived value declines, in some instances before consumption itself can occur. This has led to a global resurgence in reuse, for some from necessity, and for others for profit.

Focussing on the appeal of reuse to the consumer, this paper will argue that the rise of reuse is not only a response to increasing ethical and environmental anxieties, but also a quest for the experience of authenticity at a time of social acceleration, through what is in effect a hybrid, ‘new-old’ possession or experience. The ‘new-old’ suggests uniqueness, a narrative or association the user can identify with in some way. The ‘new-old’ becomes a symbol of more lasting value and continuity in a material culture dominated by increasingly short-lived products which in turn result in increasingly rapid declines in perceived value.

The reused object’s visible, temporal traces of the past, suggested by the previous life of the material or elements reused, breaks through the temporal and psychosocial ‘contraction of the present’ experienced in today’s state of acceleration. In a manner not dissimilar to the way luxury brands appeal to their users through implied claims of authenticity, history and identity, the ‘new-old’ object has a tangible past, a meaning and identity, as well as an aesthetic value, quite distinct from that typically found in an object designed for rapid consumption.

**Keywords:** Consumerism; ‘Social Acceleration’; Reuse; Values; Sustainable Design
Introduction: Consumerism and ‘Social Acceleration’

‘Hyper-consumption’ is a defining attribute of contemporary society, with products, buildings and systems increasingly made to be replaced or to fail after increasingly shorter periods of time (Lipovetsky 2011; Slade 2006). For example, many new composite building materials are now assumed to last only 25 years, whilst many tall city buildings, made of reinforced concrete, are expected to need renewal or replacement after 50-80 years. Cars, appliances and smaller items like mobile phones are being used for shorter and shorter periods, with many disposed of whilst still functioning (Cooper 2004). What is purchased is thus increasingly short-lived, and often replaced before its ability to function ceases.

The causes of this accelerated cycle of purchase, use and discard are often attributed to technological innovation, but this tends to overlook consumerism and the relative obsolescence it includes (Cooper 2004). While consumerism can be defined as a ‘state of mind’ that encourages a continuous expansion of apparent needs, its direct manifestation is ‘hyper-consumption’, an accelerated cycle of purchase, use and discard (Lipovetsky 2011). What causes this acceleration is perhaps not quite so easy to understand, since it is built upon both mental attitudes and behaviour as well as established material systems such as manufacturing, communication, transportation, retail and waste disposal. Hartmut Rosa argues that we are now subject to a continuous feedback loop between three broad types of mutually reinforcing acceleration: technological acceleration, ‘social acceleration’, and a more subjective ‘acceleration of the pace of life’ (Rosa 2003, 8-10).

‘Technological acceleration’ has been led by computerization since the 1980s, which has had a transformative impact on transportation, communication, manufacturing and retail, simultaneously reducing transactional costs and increasing the consumption of many goods and services. ‘Social acceleration’ has developed alongside this technological acceleration: people everywhere are now more mobile and more interconnected, increasingly trying to do more, and more quickly, than ever before (Tomlinson 2007). Consequently, our experience of the ‘pace of life’ as increasing has become more apparent, with many suffering from a continuous pressure to connect, email, text, talk, coordinate and focus on too many things at once, and in many overlapping domains (Rosa 2003).

Rosa concedes that capitalism alone is an insufficient explanation for this global, ultimately cultural, impulse towards continuous change (Rosa 2003, 13). Instead, he argues that this acceleration has a significant ‘cultural motor’ he explains in classic sociological terms as a ‘eudaemonic impulse’, an impulse towards ‘happiness’ or the ‘good life’. Consumerism in this way can be understood as a pursuit of this ‘good life’ through engaging in an expanding field of commoditized means (Rosa 2003, 13; Campbell 2004). Rosa also notes that the subjective consequence of this social acceleration is a ‘contraction of the present’, where we cannot attend to more than what is immediate in time and place (from Lübbe 2008). As this suggests, the pressure of acceleration leads to a narrowing of our frames of reference, from the longer continuities enjoyed by most in the past, to a narrower field of immediacy and instantaneity (Tomlinson 2007).

Hyper-consumption thus involves an acceleration of the process of consumption, use and discard, so the ‘new’ can more rapidly bump out or replace the ‘old’, which is often still capable of use. So 77% of the 1.5 million people who queued up for a new I-Phone 4 in 2010 on the first day of sales were replacing their previous model, presumably a phone that was still functioning (Kim & Paulos 2011). Discarding the old seems to be
necessary since the new is made to seem more valuable, the old becoming mentally devalued by comparison, with this process occurring more and more rapidly (Dinnin 2009). The growing influence of this ‘relative’ obsolescence has transformed our relationship to the world of goods, rendering more and more things we own or use unstable, temporary, and soon exchangeable for the ‘latest’ (Cooper 2004; Burns 2010). The ‘good life’, materialized in our possessions, seems to require continuous maintenance and frequent upgrading (Dinnin 2009).

Desychronization, Deceleration, Value and Authenticity

One of the more interesting parts of Rosa’s argument is that acceleration always seems to be matched by a countervailing tendency towards ‘desynchronization’, sometimes in the same individuals (Rosa 2003, 3-6). So the same person who complains about how slow their broadband is might also admire ‘Slow Food’, and talk of the benefits of walking or cycling. Or, the same right wing commentators who lament a decline in ‘family values’ will also complain that government social services are preventing the unfettered operation of a free market economy. This seemingly contradictory desire to both accelerate and ‘slow down’ at the same time, often in the same people, can be religious, political, social or cultural, and personal in origin. As Rosa suggests, examples of this kind of desynchronization, like those of acceleration itself, are everywhere in modern societies, from the early Victorians to the Indian and Chinese middle classes today (Rosa 2003: 3-6).

In this paper I would like to suggest that such a ‘desynchronization’ is not only universally present in modernity, but often manifests in the cultural sphere through an attachment to the past, to old objects, buildings, ways of making and consuming (Brett 1996). Brett makes a case for this when he argues that what is now seen as ‘heritage’ was never seen or understood until modernization occurred (Brett 1996; Connerton 1989). The imprints of a local meaningful past in this way often become tokens in a struggle to define ‘who we think we are’, whether as a group or a nation (Brett 1996). War memorials, older public buildings, churches, libraries, seats of government, art works, memorials of other kinds, and also older homes and streetscapes, can all become sites of resistance against an accelerated ‘relative obsolescence’ that acceleration seems to bring in its train. The great attraction of the pre-existing old in a period of social acceleration, I would like to suggest, is that their time-frames transcend our ‘contracted present’, and become anchors in a world of continual, escalating, and necessarily destructive change (Brett 1996).

Thus while some might identify with the promise of ‘freedom’ and ‘perfection’ through hyper-consumption and various forms of acceleration, they may also value the countervailing promise of authenticity, identity and relationship through what is old, slower, already established as a landmark in their lives, and is already in existence. The authentic past, like ‘nature’ itself, presents us with a deeper frame of reference that extends our sense of self, place and relationship beyond the ‘contracted present’ and the ‘fast’ superficial life dependent on consumerism (Belk 2002). In one large survey from America it was found that a large number of people from all walks of life deliberately engaged with the past, either through visiting monuments and museums, watching the ‘History Channel’ or documentaries on the past, or reading books and magazines. Very few of these formally studied history (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998).
There seem to be three particular attractions in this kind of ‘desynchronization’. Firstly, most such activities, for example eco-tourism or bush walking, aim to engage directly with nature, or with traditional human activities that seem closer to the natural environment or to a more direct physical experience of it. This may not be a totally ‘authentic’ nature, but this experience is the intent of the participants seeking some ‘slower’ more ‘natural’ holiday or experience, and one that transcends the ‘contraction of the present’ of their own more accelerated working life.

Secondly, desynchronization is often associated with some direct sensual, physical experience, such as having a massage, surfing, or cycling. This counter-accelerative pursuit of the ‘authentic’ usually sensual experience then gives rise to its own interest in, and purchase of, what can remind them of what they most value. So for instance having an old or ‘old-style’ bike may involve having an old but restored leather seat or bag, or a basket made of cane, both ‘authentic’ natural materials and not synthetic, mass-produced ones. Going slow will require a certain physical expression, and consumption patterns to match.

Thirdly, desynchronization will engage the memory in some way, often recalling important places, people and relationships from the past that seem especially meaningful and valued. So for example, it is common to find posts on social media that quote Thoreau, Gandhi, and others who in their lives and works directly attacked the acceleration and associated consumerism of modernity. These seemingly random quotes help justify and sustain their wish to escape, at least momentarily, the treadmill of acceleration (Rosa 2011).

Memory plays an important role in determining what should be valued as especially authentic and meaningful in instances of desynchronization. Certain places, people and times become defining moments in the life journey of the individual and community, and the tokens of these memories are treasured as links to a sense of identity and belonging. Daniel Miller describes this relationship between individuals and their most valued possessions in their homes as ‘social cosmologies’ through which they experience themselves, others, and the world, and something like this can be seen within larger communities (Miller 2008; see also Connerton 1989).

Within such a ‘social cosmology’, older objects of special significance can become anchors to the self in a sea of continuous change (Belk 2002). These may not invoke happy memories but painful ones, such as a dead father’s identity card from the War, or a photograph of a long-dead sibling. But they have in common a symbolic as well as a material, sensual presence that cuts through the more superficial emotional babble of the new consumerist object (Marcoux 2001; Czikzentmihalyi and Rochberg Halton 1988).

As this suggests, ‘desynchronization’ can be deliberately evoked and its mnemonic associations designed (Manzini & Tassinari 2013). Some forms of eco-tourism can evoke a de-acceleratory frame, by pushing individuals back into older forms of engagement with nature and place, with others and themselves. Picking strawberries at a farm, camping in some remote wilderness, working at a craft, horse-riding or doing some gardening, are all ‘decelerating’ activities that are enjoying renewed support as ‘leisure activities’ within otherwise ‘high-speed’ societies. These ‘desynchronized’ activities are widely appreciated, and now account for a significant proportion of leisure-based consumption, and they have increasingly become symbolic of more sustainable forms of production and consumption (Manzini & Tassinari 2013).
Evoking deceleration through design is now a popular theme in visual communication and design, with references to the past and the ‘slow’, the ‘natural’ and more ‘authentic’, present in many objects, buildings and images. Advertising and branding, for instance, deliberately mythologize past associations to try to raise the value of what they are selling. So every important brand has a company ‘history’ page on its website, replete with sepia photographs of some moustachioed, suitably distant founding father. This image is then used to authenticate what is taken to be the brand’s ‘deeper’ or core value (e.g. Skoda nd.).

Reuse and Sustainable Design

Reusing older objects and materials, like the purchase and display of ‘antiques’, has been a design strategy in Europe since the Renaissance. It became especially popular during the turn of the twentieth century, at the very height of industrial modernity, amongst the wealthy and aspirational middle classes in Britain and America. As one design writer complained in 1940, an estimated $4 billion dollars had been spent on importing antiques into America from Europe over the past twenty years, a sum that would equate to $40 billion now (Robsjohn-Gibbings 1944, in Crocker 2015).

Rich industrialists in America, Britain and Australia led this passion for reuse and ‘revivalism’, building lavish ‘old-new’ houses, often incorporating genuine architectural antiques and older artworks, from the French baroque ceilings and ‘boiserie’ inserted into the Rothschilds’ Waddington Manor (1876), to the more modest seventeenth century English oak staircase, wood panelling and windows and doors used to ‘authenticate’ Adelaide’s own more modest ‘old-new’ mansion, Carrick Hill (1935) (Waddington; Carrick Hill). Between about 1880 and 1940, the trade in architectural antiques boomed, with specialist stores selling whole interiors to the wealthy, and furniture makers and textile manufacturers supplying many tonnes of quality historicist reproductions, many of them based on museum pieces held in Britain or America (Crocker 2015).

But today’s fascination with reuse is different, justified by environmental concerns as much as by an increasing fascination with a past that is frequently destroyed, built over or concealed beneath the glossy facades of the new. At a time of accelerated cycles of purchase use and discard, the revived ‘old’ object retains a unique identity and a desirable symbolic and material value. So near where I park my bicycle everyday I notice a beautiful old Dutch bicycle from the 1950s or 1960s that has been lovingly restored, a bike now remade to last another twenty or more years. Such ‘new old’ objects suggest a persistence and potential lifespan in use unmatched by the new, and such genuine ‘old’ objects are quickly copied by designers keen to capitalise on this revived interest in the ‘vintage’ and a slower, more authentic past.

But whereas many modern, mass-produced objects seem more ‘efficient’ in use, they lack the solidity, authenticity, history, materiality and traces of their own making many older objects reveal. Objects such as these have a materiality, a capacity to engage us sensually, that very few modern objects, apart from the hand-made, possess. There are no batteries or ‘death chips’ in these, and no such thing as built-in obsolescence. The hand of the maker, however humble he or she was, is clearly apparent in their designs. This desire for the slow and the human in the object can be seen in not only the revived interest in ‘vintage’ clothes and goods, but in many new products that attempt to show-off signs of the maker, or deliberately reference the past in their making. So, for instance, Britain’s Brompton folding bikes are worth more, apparently, when traces of the hand-soldering on their frames can be clearly seen (Brompton).
Reuse is thus not just about its more obvious environmental, economic and social benefits, but also about the revalorisation that seems to occur in the mind of the consumer when confronted with the past in and through a particular object or experience. From the now rapidly distanced past the reused object or material breaks through the barrier of the ‘contracted present’ created by acceleration, and links us back to a larger frame of continuity, history, identity and authenticity. The renewed old object, whether a building, a chair or a leather jacket, defies the rapid decline in value that the new, mass-produced object typically must endure. For being unique, or almost so, it cannot be easily replaced. It is symbolically sustainable, since it has persisted, and will persist, so long as it is chosen and valued. Its materials seem more ‘genuine’, whether leather, stainless steel, timber or bakelite, and are often hand-assembled. Its mere survival over time suggests its story, its larger time-based frame.

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