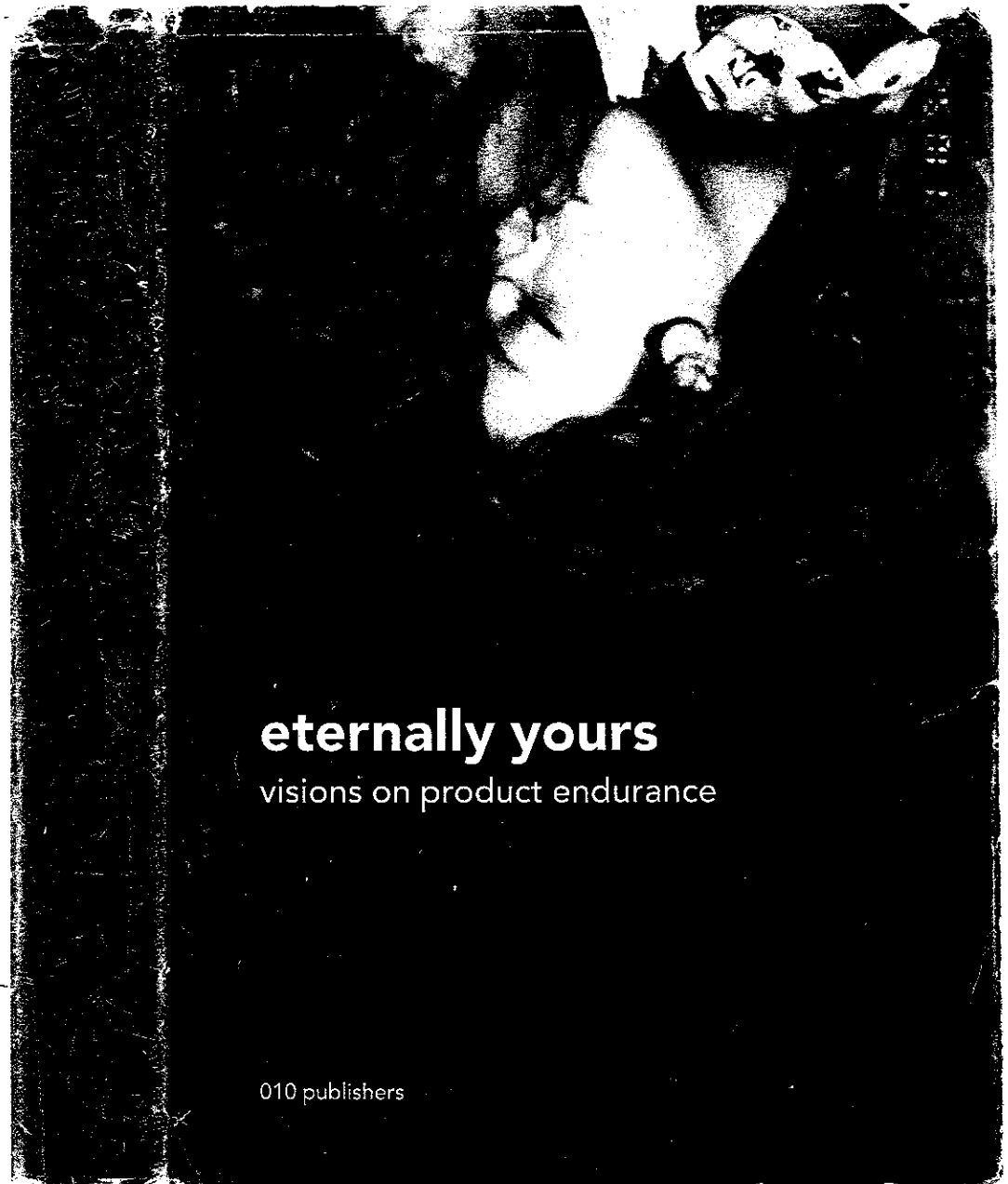


Products are entitled to dignified ageing. Their contribution to waste needs drastic reduction. 'Eternally Yours' is an inspiring guide to achieve this goal, suggesting strategies for their design, as well as for the organisation around them. The book goes all the way, from aesthetic wear to upgrading services and advertising.

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**Matter Matters** A spectre is haunting design:



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the spectre of platonism. When looking at the history of design, this paraphrase of Marx's famous dictum forces itself upon us immediately. The very discipline that is almost entirely dedicated to matter and material culture, strangely enough seems to be trapped in a way of thinking that totally neglects materiality. We will show that this goes for the Eternally Yours programme as well.

Let's explain this somewhat provocative statement. The history of design can roughly be divided in two main periods: modernism and post-modernism. After some initial protests and transitional phenomena, design first developed under the regime of functionalism. Products were conceived as embodiments of function. They had to do their job well and be durable and easy to produce in large quantities, and they did not need decoration. In the Fifties modernism ended with Contemporary Style, when the way was paved for Pop Design and, eventually, Post-modernism, some 20 years later. From then on not the function of the object became the key issue, but its meaning. Products had to fit culture, with all its different lifestyles. So where is the spectre? Everywhere. In both modernism and post-modernism, products are seen mainly as secondary, material shadows of something non-material that is considered primordial. Apparently design has always been an idealist rather than a materialist discipline.

The functionalist orientation of modernism, by definition reduced artifacts to their function. In this vision it is not

the object that counts, but the function it fulfils. Of course it cannot do without matter for its embodiment, but this materiality in the end is of secondary importance. The physical characteristics of the product are only seen in the light of the product's function. Form follows function: matter is necessary but derivative. Indeed, Rietveld designed chairs as 'objects for sitting in' and Le Corbusier saw a house as 'a machine for living in'. Post-modern design, in its turn, is trapped within another form of platonism. Here products are not reduced to their function but to their meaning. Products become icons, symbols or signs. They do not even need to be durable anymore, as they did for modernists. This indicates, that to post-modernism matter is even less important. Objects are seen as embodiments of meaning, and it is from this perspective that they have to be designed. The platonic anti-materialism is evident. Post-modern designers are not primarily concerned with things, but with ideas.

### **Platonism and durability**

What does all this have to do with the lifetime of products, the topic we are supposed to be discussing? Let's start again with modernism. As the German philosopher Karl Jaspers already indicated in the early thirties, the modernist emphasis on function results in a loss of attachment to products. When artifacts are designed mainly to fulfil a function, the individual characteristics of a product become less important. In his view functionalist products develop into ideal

types that function well and can be produced easily but don't evoke individual attention: 'When [the ideal type] has been realized, attachment to one specific exemplar indeed has no relevance anymore; one only loves the form, not the specific object. Despite all artificiality, one has a strange, new nearness to the objects, ... namely to them in their function.'

Modernism, in other words, leads us away from matter towards the idea of function and in doing so diminishes our attachment to products, which in its turn may well lead to shorter product life. Because, however durable products may be physically, in a culture where people only care for them because of what they do, they will be easily discarded and replaced.

Looking at the lifetime of products from this perspective, post-modern design seems to be a giant improvement, because it focuses on the symbolic character of artifacts. Jaspers' critique appears outdated: his call for meaning has become irrelevant now that post-modern design has shown a true semiotic explosion. The emphasis on function has disappeared from design and mass-produced objects can be obtained in so many styles that the fear of a uniform material culture seems unfounded.

But Jaspers' worries are not as outdated as they seem. His opinion on material culture is indeed too much directed towards functionalism to be up-to-date, but his worries about a loss of attachment with material culture is not irrelevant. After all, his worries are exactly the same as the ones troubling Eternally Yours. Our products

are still not 'eternally ours', despite the post-modern abundance of styles. The insight that design has developed into a platonic discipline may be of help here. The neglect of materiality, implies that the very design of products up until now has been directed at most towards attachment to the ideas they represent and not to the products themselves. With this statement, we do not want to suggest that meaning doesn't have anything to do with our attachment to things. We feel it does, a lot in fact. After all, every product carries meaning. But if our attachment only concerns this immaterial aspect and not the object itself, it is destined to remain secondary. It can easily be replaced at any time by another artifact with the same immaterial quality. In order to increase product lifetime, we therefore think designers should not only create things that are meaningful, but things in which meaning is firmly anchored in their materiality. Things should direct attention towards themselves instead of just being a material embodiment of meaning. We should not be able to obtain meaning and objects separately. Only then will products themselves be durable, and not just our need for meaningful objects to fit our lifestyles.

How does this relate to the Eternally Yours programme? Let's look at the outcome of the three expert meetings Eternally Yours organized in November and December 1996. The meetings covered the three topics which Eternally Yours explores: Signs 'n Scripts, Shape 'n Surface and Sales 'n Services. We quote the summary of the outcome of these meetings:

'In Signs 'n Scripts the main topic was the creation and control of stories around products. Shape 'n Surface provided the insight that meticulous care for quality and detail with which new products are developed, is more likely to determine product longevity, than specific geometrical characteristics, style or features. But a lot still has to be learned about the relation between behaviour of product surface and change in time. The last meeting was about Sales 'n Services. Some companies, most of them in the realm of professional products, appear to already shift the emphasis in their activities from just selling new products to maintaining a relationship with customers. In view of this change there is a new kind of employee, called a 'relations manager'. In sustaining relations the material product mainly serves as a conversation piece that keeps on generating turnover for years after its birth.'

It may be clear that materiality remains almost completely out of sight here. Signs 'n Scripts is all about the stories around products and in Sales 'n Services, products are only relevant as conversation pieces. Only in Shape 'n Surface are products seen as objects, but here the physical characteristics of products seem to be immediately translated into terms of attractiveness. Platonism evidently appears to be at work here as well. We feel that attempts to realize 'durable design' should not only focus on signs, shapes, surfaces, sales and services. However important they are, all of these issues - we deliberately did not mention 'scripts' for reasons that will become clear later - fail to take the materiality of

products into account. They understand products as elements of certain languages: of form, of product meaning, of relationships between company and customer. But when we strip all non-material aspects of products, something remains that is more than language, more than symbol, meaning, function, or icon. We could call this the 'own weight' of the product as an artifact. In order to do justice to this 'own weight', the 'materialist turn' in design, we would like to propose here, demands an extra perspective in our thinking about things. To the dominant semiological approach within design thinking, a second angle needs to be added: the phenomenological one. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement from the beginning of this century, that has renewed itself and is starting to become popular again in the USA. It can be viewed as philosophy's attempt to understand everyday human experience. Its slogan was 'back to the things themselves' and that seems very applicable to the subject at hand.

We will not tire you with the subtleties of this approach, apart from saying that phenomenology, since it tries to understand our everyday relation to reality, offers lots of insight into the relationship between people and products. In our view, this is what we should focus on in a materialist approach. After the iconological deconstruction of products, we should not only try to reconstruct them and create new icons. We should also try to understand what remains after this deconstruction: products as artifacts.

DESIGN

### Towards a materialist approach

What we want to do here, is to elaborate on an important aspect of products that manifests itself when we take materiality seriously. This is the so-called 'script' of artifacts, or rather a specific kind of script: product intentionality.

The notion of 'script' is getting more and more popular in Science and Technology Studies. It indicates the 'built-in manual' of artifacts, the implicit prescription for their use. Artifacts organize their environment in certain ways. A very obvious example is the plastic coffee cup, that contains the script: 'throw me away after use'.

It is designed for a short lifetime because of its inability to survive several cleanings.

We think scripts provide a good starting point for thinking about design in a more materialistic way.

But we first have to narrow the notion down a little, for it does not entirely fit the 'materialist turn' we are discussing here.

Scripts also cover the impact of non-material product aspects. Products can, for instance, contain gender scripts. The electric shaver for men usually has a high-tech look: it is equipped with several control switches and sometimes even a display indicating available shaving minutes. The lady-shave, on the other hand, reflects the stereotype of women as technologically incompetent, soft beings. Its shape is round, it contains only a few buttons, and numbers are preferably replaced by pictograms. These shavers clearly contain different scripts, and it is very important to deconstruct such 'built-in biases' in products. But this kind of script cannot

be part of our elaboration on material aspects of products. For our aim was to add a perspective to the part of the semiotic that concerns artifact materiality.

Materialist scripts are of a different kind. We can indicate them as 'intentionalities', like the North-American philosopher Don Ihde does. The term indicates product influence on its user, but it concerns its 'hardware' and not its 'software'. It entails the mediating role of products that arises from their functioning and being used. Ihde gives the example of different writing styles that occur when using an ink dip pen, a typewriter or a word processor. Whereas a pen invites us to write slowly, because it is difficult to erase mistakes, a typewriter implies a closer-to-speech style of writing.

Word processors by their nature promote composition and lay-out quality. The coffee cup mentioned earlier, is another good example of intentionality. And so is the copying machine. The default settings of most copiers contain 'single-sided copying' and this is what they make us do. But for many, if not, most documents, it would be no problem at all if they were copied double-sided. This would reduce paper use by a factor of two.

In all the cases mentioned, no determination is involved, but rather inclination. Artifacts can evoke specific treatments, by their very functioning and by the use they imply. Explicit attention for intentionalities in our opinion is an essential ingredient of a materialist approach. It focuses on the impact of the product as an artifact within our relationship to it, and not just as a carrier of meaning or function. By focusing on the artifact's own

weight, we explicitly do not deny that meaning and interpretation are involved. As Don Ihde made clear, there are no 'artifacts in themselves'. These would just be pieces of junk lying around. Artifacts always receive their identity in the context of our relation to them.

The telephone, for instance, was invented to assist the hard of hearing, but the cultural context it entered gave it a much broader definition. Technologies are, to use Ihde's term, multistable. Neither of the two telephones can claim to be the only 'real' one.

Once a stability has developed, the artifact can show intentionalities that cannot be reduced to our interpretation of them. A revolving door could be interpreted as a work of art to decorate public buildings. But once we interpret it as a door, it has the intentionality to give us access to the building - or rather, most of us, because it also has the intentionality to make it impossible for people in a wheelchair to enter the building. These intentionalities don't stem from our interpretation of the object, but from its functioning once we use it as a door. In short: we don't want to naively turn towards the 'things themselves' but to make it clear that there is more to say about artifacts than that they embody meaning and require interpretation.

Let's be more concrete. The mentioned intentionalities of the plastic coffee cup and the copying machine were directly connected to the pollution caused by their use. The topic at hand, however, is product lifetime and not pollution.

Therefore, we would like to discuss two kinds of product intentionalities that might be especially relevant.

They are founded upon the ideas of two phenomenologist philosophers: Martin Heidegger and Albert Borgmann. For the context of product longevity we need intentionalities that create a relation between products and their users. Heidegger and Borgmann each explain an important aspect of this phenomenon: the capacity of objects to be 'zuhanden', ready-to-hand and their engaging capacity.

### **Readiness-to-hand**

Already in the twenties, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger concluded that there are two modes of relation between people and their tools or objects. They can either be present-at-hand or ready-to-hand. When everything works all right, our involvement with the world takes place through the object. For instance when hammering, our attention is not directed towards the hammer but towards the nail we want to get into the wall. There is a familiarity with the hammer that allows us to incorporate it in our engagement with the world. The hammer withdraws from our relation to the world: it becomes a medium of engagement. When something goes wrong, for instance when the hammer breaks in two, it suddenly is not ready-to-hand anymore but becomes present-at-hand. The absorbing engagement with it is suddenly transformed into a distant attention to it. The familiarity is broken. We cannot embody the hammer anymore: it draws all attention towards itself and needs to be repaired for its readiness-at-hand to be restored. For design practice the first implication is obvious: products have to be made in such way that the

relation to them can be ready-to-hand, which is mainly an ergonomic quality. But perhaps more important, and more closely connected to the engaging capacity of objects, is a second implication: products should allow restoration to readiness-at-hand when the familiarity is broken. The sealed housing of many electronic products forbids repair when breakdown occurs. But a transparent product that can be opened, understood and repaired would not only be sustainable in a technological sense, with regard to its physical lifetime, but also entail durability in a 'psychological' sense. It allows us to continue our relation with it, even when it breaks down, since it can be repaired. Our involvement with a transparent product does not have to end at its breakdown.

### **Engaging capacity**

The second aspect is the engaging capacity of objects. We borrow the notion of 'engagement' from Albert Borgmann, a contemporary philosopher from the USA whose work is about the implications of technology for our relation to material culture. According to Borgmann, technological products of our time differ from pre-technological things in that they diminish our engagement with material culture. Technological products - 'devices', as Borgmann calls them - consist of two elements: machinery, the device as physical object, and commodity, the result it produces when it functions. Our central heating system, for instance, is a device, with the radiators and the heating installation as machinery and 'warmth' as commodity. Characteristic for modern technology is that it develops towards commodification

of more and more wants and desires. Technology promises disburdenment: we will get more for less. New devices are continually being designed to deliver commodities easily, quickly and safely. In this process, the machinery of devices necessarily disappears to the background. It is only relevant as a supplier of commodities and draws as little attention to itself as possible. Machinery withdrawal diminishes our engagement with material culture. Devices function well when they work with maximum independence from human involvement. They are designed in such a way, that they do not invoke our engagement with them as artifacts but only with the commodity they procure. This is not wrong in itself. But, according to Borgmann, the ongoing replacement of things that ask for engagement by devices that only ask for instant consumption, may eventually result in an impoverishment of our lives. This view does not imply that we must romantically reject technology. Instead Borgmann argues for the preservation of spaces in our lives where engagement remains possible in what he calls 'focal practices', centred around 'focal things'. They ask for attention and involvement, for a practice which is not characterized by consumption but by engagement. One could also construct a different therapy from Borgmann's diagnosis, which is especially relevant to design practice. His analysis can imply a solution for the diminishing attachment to products that fit our materialist orientation. If we want our attachment to be directed towards objects and not only towards their meaning, it would be wise to design them from the

perspective of their engaging capacity. One way to do this, would be to bridge the gap between machinery and commodity. This would imply a reevaluation of product machinery, which should be freed from its withdrawal and once more be visible, accessible and understandable. Objects should depend on us instead of being quasi-autonomous. Accessible machineries which allow participation in functioning and repair, could create a bond between people and products as artifacts. The BayGen clockwork radio is a fine example of such an 'engaging' product: it receives its current from a generator that has to be wound up by hand. It simply does not function without participation.

Making product machinery explicit, however, is not the only way to create engagement. Products are engaging, when they ask for our involvement. This may concern the machinery of products, but it does not have to be that way. A piano for instance, certainly is engaging, even when we are not able to tune it ourselves. And it will be hard to find a pianist who is not attached to his or her piano. It is the involvement it calls for that counts, that creates a bond with us. It might seem, now, that Heidegger's and Borgmann's analyses are at odds with each other. After all, Heidegger focuses on human-product relations in which the product withdraws, whereas Borgmann focuses on those relations in which products ask for attention. But there is no real contradiction here. In fact, we worked out Borgmann's ideas towards two kinds of engagement. The first one is with the artifact itself, by being involved in its functioning. The second kind deals with something the

artifact allows us to do. In this case, the instrument does not ask for our attention but in a peculiar way withdraws from our relation to it. In other words: our relation with products does not have to disappear when they withdraw in readiness-at-hand.

The new generation of products should be one of objects, not just ideas. We hope we have made that clear. The materialist orientation we propose, still requires a lot of work. We have only given a few preliminary ideas and thoughts about its concrete implications for design. But we think it deserves further exploration. A durable material culture, after all, can only arise when matter matters.

*Peter-Paul Verbeek & Petran Kockelkoren*

(1) We use this rather old-fashioned slogan for rhetoric reasons only. We do not share the old belief that such a return to the 'things themselves' would be possible. Our relation to the world is always mediated by a cultural context of interpretation, and therefore the things themselves necessarily withdraw when we want to grasp them. Nevertheless, taking the mediatedness of our relation to the world into account does not mean that it becomes impossible to think about our relation to things. That relation - mediated by contexts of interpretation - is exactly what is being studied in contemporary phenomenological studies of technology.