Tony Fry

There was a major and circular debate on the nature of ideology in the early 1970s that inflected how mediation was viewed.

In significant part this debate centred on Louis Althusser and his notion of ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ and the concept of ‘interpellation’. His key formulation was: ‘all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects’. By this he meant that ideology ‘recruits’ subjects among individuals via the agency of interpellation understood as a hailing, calling, a summoning.

In 1972 Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ appeared in translation in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It presented a critique of an industry as it mediated capital and culture and in so doing interpellated subjects (although that’s not a term they would have used). We can now read this text as an account of the mass production of cultural consumers, who, from a Nietzschean perspective, are subjects with diminished agency, and thus the product of nihilism.

A critique leveled at mediation at the time was that it presumed a certain fixity: at one end, the agent of intent and at the other, the recipients of the message. This critique mapped onto the discrediting of the ‘injection model’ of communication between sender and receiver, made around the same time.

I make these remarks as a way of approaching the relation between design, mediation and politics. They are all fluid.

The designed does not sit between capital and culture, subject and object, production and consumption. It is no mere agent of mediation; rather it is omnipresent as milieu, prefiguration and process. It is an environment of our becoming, elemental to us, and a diverse practice we all existentially, and some professionally, mobilize. *De facto* we are both designer and designed in the endless ontological circling of design and designing.

Design never comes to rest as product, it is always futural and as such it either futures or defutures. Finitudinally framed, it makes time or takes it away.

Fundamentally and essentially, design is political. It is never neutral. In process, minutely or massively, it affirmatively sustains or aggressively destroys the world-within-the-world upon which we depend.

At this point I should say I have been trying to understand what design is and does for a long time. I am not going to drag you all through the blood and mud of this unfinished journey. But to help you understand what I have to say I will say something about what I have been doing for just over a decade - which now only makes sense to me in retrospect.

Essentially, I have only found out where I was going by looking back at where I have been.

It goes like this.

Out of a public lecture series in the late 1990s aimed at overturning conventional design history I wrote *A New Design Philosophy: An introduction to Defuturing*. In brief, it set out to show that historically, much that was designed took and takes the future away – we human beings, in our anthropocentric myopia, become unsustainable by design. A few years later the sequel – *Design Futuring* arrived to say that while design got us into a situation which negated the time of our finitudinal being, we now urgently have to redirect what design is and what it does to get us out of this situation.

Words are cheap – saying this is one thing, trying to do it is another.

To re- evoke Althusser, we are in circumstances that are ‘overdetermined’, not least by that which is deemed sovereign, by hegemonic technology and capitalism as well as by the lacuna of institutionalized politics.

For design to have redemptive and real transformative agency it has to break free of its shackles and become constructively dangerous. In essence, this is what my latest book *Design as Politics* is all about.

It’s about beginning to think a new post-democratic political imaginary within which design is integral. It’s about cutting design loose from that to which it has been instrumentally and economically bound.

It’s about admitting:

- ‘we’ cannot establish the project and the process of sustainment under democracy;
that democracy cannot be the end of politics;

and that new political imaginaries have to be forged.

It’s about understanding the power of imagination and the power of design as liberated prefiguration. This is a power that transcends:

- design as a professional practices;
- design as a cluster of disciplines;
- design as an instrument of commodification.

It’s about grasping design as a complexity and potentiality well beyond its function within the restrictive economy of capitalism and contemporary globalizing culture.

In our media and commodity saturated world, design comes at us from all directions. But for all this, our actual understanding of the complexity of its relational agency mostly escapes us.

The ontological determinism of design folds into a complexity still beyond our understanding of the complex — something which systems theory de facto conceals. However, there is a first instance which we can discern.

Restating design’s endless circling: anthropologically, as designers we are equally the designed. We come into being by design as much as we arrive biologically and socially formed. I go so far as to say Darwin and Herbert Spencer were blind to the directive force of technics and the artificial. To make this claim requires trying to understand design ontologically and pre-historically in our very coming into being as already constituted beings. This, I suggest, is that first instance, in which design is a mediation between the animal that we were and the animal that we are.

It is a long story, and the one I am currently working on. I am not going to try to tell it in any detail. But I will try to give you a sense of how it goes.

Famously, Martin Heidegger, in his 1929/30 lecture series on The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, discussed at length the fact that for him ‘the stone does not have a world, the animal is poor of world and the human is rich in world’. Brought to Andre Leroi-Gourhan’s seminal work, Gesture and Speech[5], this observation has generated a great deal of debate over recent years, including by Derrida, Agamben, Stiegler, McNeill and many more. All have engaged the issue of the origin and nature of the human via the animal/human relation. Putting design into this picture changes how these accounts are viewed.

Here is a fragment of this changed picture.

Around 2.5 million years ago a proto-hominoid picked up a stone to break open nuts, smash bone to get at the marrow and the like. Like some other animals, it had found and used an object in the world as a tool.

Almost 2 million years later two stones were smashed together and the resulting sharp edge disclosed another tool — one that could be productively applied to the process of making other tools. It took around another 300,000 years for some 60 diverse and specialist stone tools to be designed-in-making to perform different tasks (not least the making of other tools in bone and wood). When we, Homo sapiens, arrived on the scene in Africa 160,000 years ago this was our inheritance.

Effectively hominoids, in making and using tools, started to change the world and themselves. The use of tools, and the demands they made upon us bio-mechanically and cognitively, was indivisible from our cortical development. This process of the transformation of self and world remains unbroken, increasingly complex, and mostly ignored.

Back to Heidegger and the stone, the animal and the human — the stone in the hands of the animal made the human rich in world, As said, the mediating practice afforded by the stone as tool enabled the animal to become that Other which we know as the animal we call human. Tellingly, the title of one of Derrida’s last works, The Animal That Therefore I Am — and the work itself — not only proclaims this and undercuts Descartes, but deposits a major question that Western metaphysics has, and still largely, ignores.

That animal which we call human, at the most fundamental level, is not as rich of world as has been assumed, and in a certain unsustainable sense, is getting poorer. To actually become rich is to become fully human.

But what is it then to be fully human?

I suggest, in a post-humanist sense, it is to become superhuman. The overman, the übermensch, the superman that
Nietzsche named, clearly has become an unfortunate term, partly because of its crude and misplaced appropriation by the Nazis in Germany in the 1920s, and partly because of its science fiction connotations. Yet using Heidegger’s reading of the term it can be radically recast and rehabilitated. In What is Called Thinking he said:

The “superman” does not simply carry the accustomed drives and strivings of the customary type of man beyond all measure and bounds. Superman is a qualitatively, not quantitatively, different form of existing man. The thing that the superman discards is precisely our boundless, purely quantitative non-stop progress. The superman is poorer, simpler, tenderer and lazier, quieter and more self-sacrificing and slow of decision and more economical of speech [7]

The design task, the challenge before humanity in all its difference, as we have unwitting thrown ourselves into the universe of the naturalized artificial, is the transformation of our being by design.

We cannot continue to be as we are, so in the end, in order to continue to be, this is what has to be done. It is essential, not a choice. We have no evolutionary mechanism of transcendence.

We have to design to make time, not take it away, but for us this is very hard for we are Chronophobes.

In 1978 Bernd Magnus, drawing on his readings of Nietzsche’s notion of eternal reoccurrence, addresses a general feature of humanity’s aversion to time and temporally, which he called ‘kronophobia’.

Magnus recognized that what Nietzsche made clear is that ‘we’ seek permanence where and when there is none. Moreover, our very being, our being towards death, is enacted via refusal of time, as the pursuit of power, wealth and fame evidence. To make time we have to understand time not as measure but as change, with everything having its own time.

It is in this setting that we need to learn how to think and design in time.

Let’s take a salient example – climate change. In the scheme of things it is not the greatest challenge we as a species have ever faced. In the heating and cooling cycles of this planet there are unimaginable hardships behind us, and if we get to them, also in front of us. The next ice age is meant to arrive in 25,000 years hence.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration published a report last year that presented overwhelming evidence that the changes in the climate that have already happened, and continue to increase, will, no matter what we do, be irreversible for at least 1000 years.

That we find it so easy to dismiss time as the being-of-being before us in which we are implicated by simply embracing a state of helplessness marks a convergence of chronophobia with a lack of understanding of what design futurally brings into being. We fail to recognize that to think and proclaim helplessness is to manifest our nihilism. Conversely, to assert and exercise even the smallest degree of agency is to be political.

Being political as an engagement with time means breaking the trajectory of speed. It means going back to grasp that the productivist drive commenced when the stone became tool, initiating a process of transformation that was also destructive. This continuum has to be broken. Slowing the rate of destructive change is making time.

So framed, adaptive action in the face of climate change is simply an opening into the ever-larger task of making time as a process of becoming. Available rhetoric impedes us.

Certainly chronophobia renders the anthropocentric evocation about acting for future generations hollow. But more than this it conceals that which is most obvious. Our species has a beginning and it will have an end.

We are that one being whose actions can be directed to extend or diminish the time of our being.

It’s a matter of seeing ourselves in time – seeing that medium in which change occurs; seeing that which is most pressing, that which is so urgent.

Consider.

For 150,000 years Homo sapiens survived by being nomadic. As climate cycles changed so we moved. The ice age that lasted over 100,000 years almost wiped us out, but we survived and distributed ourselves around the planet as we adapted to climatic vagaries. Then around 10,000 years ago the process of settlement commenced.

Now most of us are urban. We increasingly live in huge, dense urban conurbations. By the end of this century, when there are around 11 billion of us, there will be endless cities of 100 million people. In the climatically unfolding situation,
the more of us static in one place, the more vulnerable we become. We are not seeing cities in time. There are a huge numbers of cities around the world that have no future. From their initial creation in inappropriate locations, they were always cities at the end of time.

We humans cannot return to what we were, nor can we remain as we are. We do not have one fate. We will hide, be abandoned, live in far more informal cities, create places of protection, confront conflict, go underground, become uramic (urban nomads) and more.

To seriously think the future is to be unsettled. We are heading towards an age of unsettlement. The political institutions we have are not capable of dealing with the situation. The nation state will not survive (Bangladesh, Holland, Australia are examples of at-risk nations). Our political institutions are all chronically chronophobic.

Lest you should think all I am doing is doom-saying, let me correct you. Everything I say leads to action. Specifically for me this means a radical engagement with politics via a remaking of design. In the context of Design as Politics this requires three moves.

1. Confronting the defuturing nature of the status quo as a confrontation with finitude, human being and the destruction of our being in time.
   This requires acknowledging all that is currently enacted under the rubric of solution is inadequate. But it also requires that we acquire a far more developed understanding of design and then mobilize this understanding redirectorily against structural unsustainability (as this condition includes ourselves and a great deal of the world around us).

2. Starting to reframe the political. This means creating clear distinctions between: (a) institutionalised politics versus the political as a domain of enacted agency of people and things; and, (b) pluralism (a political ideology) and the plural (a socio-biological necessity). It means mounting a substantial critique of liberalism and democracy’s inability to deliver Sustainment (which is how the redirective project of humanity writ large is named – a project incidentally larger than the Enlightenment). It means elevating Sustainment as sovereign, which, in turn, implies sovereignty itself be remade.

3. Developing futuring as making time by a massive re-creation of education, culture and value. Nietzsche believed the superman could arrive by the remaking of values, but he delivered no method to do this. The ambition here is to start to create a method by which this remaking can happen. Essentially this means learning to re-learn, recognizing we are all educated in error, reclaiming memory from its industrialization and embracing care as the foundation of our being. More than this, it means acknowledging that all future freedom stands upon the imposed unfreedom of sustainment as sovereign. Finally it means taking design beyond the limits of how it is currently understood and practiced; and in so doing, seeing that it is our only means of being futural.

More broadly it also means a radical engagement with politics via a remaking of design.

This is what informs what I teach and the practical projects that I initiate. These include:

- My work developing an indigenous based creative industry in Timor-Leste - which is all about decelerating the speed of production to make time and viable futures in a society where 70% of young people under 25 are unemployed.

- My design work on moving cities that are at risk from climate change impacts; work that has been informed by a practical project in Sweden and several successful design projects in Australia.

- My practical work, as a farmer, with urban food production and farm forestry – which is all about the seasonal and long-term time management.

In conclusion one asks how does the kind of argument presented here impact upon design education? The answer is informed by two observations: the first on the state of higher education; and the second is a reflection on the experience of actually deploying of the kind of material outlined to create a Master’s program and reshape undergraduate courses.

Unambiguously, higher education has become instrumentalised by a series of convergent factors over the past few decades – hegemonic capitalism and techno-culture have meshed with the rise of education as a service industry supporting the advancement of the economic status quo. In practical terms this has turned the majority of disciplines into domains of vocational education. This has, in turn, been responsible for culling a great deal of teaching in the humanities and creating generations of students who believe that servicing the labour market is the role of education and that as they pay fees (which is now the norm) they have the right of customer satisfaction. Such a sensibility is at odds with having existing beliefs challenged and learning things that have little or no exchange value. More
fundamentally, education for the status quo is effectively 'education in error' in that it is predicated upon the continuity of knowledge in the service of the unsustainable.

The experience of actually providing courses that counter the trend just outlined is interesting.[8] This is especially the case with Master's students who have all spent time in the workforce. While numbers are not large, there are a growing number of people who become disillusioned with the professions they enter. These are people who want to feel they are doing something worthwhile, something creative that they value. They are not content to just be compliant and to work in contexts of which they have become critical. Of their own volition they come to realize the limits of their education and they want something more substantial.

Although there is still little realization of the fact, the modern university (as a product of the Enlightenment) has had its day. This is not to say it is going to disappear quickly; it is to say that it is not able to deal with the world this institution helped bring into existence. For a future with a future (for us) to be possible there has to be another incarnation of the university.

That the kind of content that would fuel such a university is starting to be created and written, that there are academics around the world exploring new institutional forms, and that there are students willing to explore radical programs all suggests that a process has started that will eventually result in very significant change.

Tony Fry is Professor, Design Futures Program, Griffith University, Queensland College of Art. His latest book is *Design as Politics* (Berg, 2011) — reviewed in this issue. The paper was first delivered at ‘Mediating Practices: Design, Politics and their Publics’ symposium at London’s Goldsmiths Media Research Centre, University of London in November 2010.

[8] A Master of Design Futures Program was introduced in 2007 at Griffith University Queensland College of Art in Brisbane. The program is based on advancing 'Sustainment' by the transformation of design practice coupled with deployment strategy. Subsequently, substantial design futures content is being introduced to undergraduate programs. The intent, in general terms, is to educate designers for the future rather than for the perpetuation of the present.