

## 5600: Design for this Century: Fall 2013

### Recitation sections: Writing Exercises

#### Assignment #1: Writing about things, well

##### Assignment

To write a short but dense 500-800 word essay that explores the resonance of a ‘thing’ (thing is widely interpreted here, as any designed phenomenon). By resonance I mean the way a thing fits into the contexts of its use and deployment, how it embodies the subject who will use this thing in its design and how it translates an understanding of context and use into its form. All designing surely starts here—with the desire (which often fails) to make things whose features and capabilities resonate, strongly, with our own (think Steve Jobs and Apple) at the same time as they satisfy objective and contextual demands.

##### Why should you do this?

###### Because

###### (i) ... how we design things

We can often recognize the resonance of things (or its failure) but have great difficulty in accounting for it.

Designers are generally people with acute (but often diffuse) perceptions concerning things and how they could serve users better. A problem in design is communicating this complex understanding and apprehension to others.

###### (ii) ... how we think/talk and write about designed things

An equal problem is how we make language become more adequate to our experience of things, especially the resonance of things and persons.

Both of these devolve around the question of how we can invent the right concepts and categories to get at the configuration and the resonance of things?

##### What you do

To choose an “object” (very widely interpreted, any designed thing or interaction of what ever form or discipline) that in some manner resonates with you and to explore ways of writing about it that capture something of ways in which it mediates between users (ourselves) the technical system it is based on.

The text you produce should try to capture something of the complexity of the objects resonance, both with users and the wider social/ cultural/ecological landscape of which it is a part.

##### Readings and resources

I have copied for you the essays “Toys” and ‘Plastics” and “The New Citroën” from Roland Barthes famous little book *Mythologies* (based on articles he wrote for French newspapers in the 1950s). I have also scanned John Berger’s little essay “The White Bird.” These are two quite different ways of writing about the resonance of things, but they get at ways of capturing the density of designed and made things.

Your job is to use the inspiration of these instances to attempt your own way of capturing and coming to understanding about resonance in things.

**Guide to Writing.** I have also scanned for you “Memento” from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* of 1944: this is one of the best short guides to writing I know.

### **Background/underlying issues**

How does language become adequate to what is not linguistic? How can complex non-linear but durational experience and understanding be translated into the awkward limits of language? If understanding is not practice it is nonetheless the translation of practice and its meaning/its import back into the language of understanding. Language is ‘becoming self-conscious’; it is an offering to others such that they are able to see what you-see. Our experience of things is massively tacit. We “know” what we do to them and with them—and, to a degree, what they do to and for us. Yet we do not *explicitly* know about things. *Because we do not know about things, we see them, yet we do not see them.*

Two examples, both from Elaine Scarry’s book *The Body in Pain* [whose fifth chapter, “The Interior Structure of the Artefact,” deals with the relation between making things and making persons].

Scarry’s emphasis is how we embody qualities of our selves into things such that they can work for us. She takes as an example the child-proof Aspirin bottle and asks us to think about what it knows about the human world:

"It knows about the chemical and neuronal structure of small aches and pains, and about the human desire to be free of those pains. It knows about the size of a hand that will reach out to relieve those aches and pains. It knows that it is itself dangerous to those human beings if taken in large doses. It knows that these human beings know how to read and communicates with them on the subject of amounts through language. It also knows that some human beings do not yet know how to read or read only a different language. It deals with this problem by further knowing how human beings intuitively and habitually take caps off bottles, and by being counterintuitive in its own cap, [. . .] it contains within its design a test for helping to ensure responsible usage that has all the elegance of a simple three-step mathematical proof."

Or consider this wonderful metaphysical analysis of a light-bulb ...

“A light bulb transforms the human being from a creature who one who would spend approximately a third of each day groping in the dark, to one who sees simply by wishing to see: its impossibly fragile, milky-white globe curved protectively around an even more fragile, upright-then-folding filament of wire is the materialisation of neither retina, nor pupil, nor day-seeing, nor night seeing; it is the materialisation of a counterfactual perception about the dependence of human sight on the rhythm of the earth’s rotation; no wonder it is in its form so beautiful.”

The brilliance of Scarry’s re-descriptions is that they force us to re-think the object she is describing.

But this is also the essence of design: good design *re-describes* the things it makes. Design is very often no more—and no less—than re-thinking the familiar.

This 1st writing exercise then is therefore about seeing and knowing and about using language as a way of sharpening both perceptions and understanding.

### **Task re-stated**

Your task is to provide a short piece of writing that manages to make us “see” the object/ interface/ situation in question.

Here is an example, the Italian designer Bruno Munari writing about the orange as if it were a designed and manufactured product:

### **The Orange**

This object consists of a series of modular, three-dimensional segments grouped vertically around a central axis. The straight side of each segment, rests on that axis, while the curved side is to the exterior. The finished object is spherical. The segments come wrapped in a highly-distinctive package, both in terms of material and colour. This packaging has an outer coating that affords effective protection from the elements. The harshness of this outer skin is mitigated and the delicate contents are protected by the application of a soft lining to the inside.

The material is all of the same type, but varies according to the purpose. Opening the package is very simple. Written instructions would be quite superfluous, The lining layer also serves to create a buffer zone between the outside surface and the containers. This ensures that if one exerts a little too much pressure when piercing the skin - not difficult since one has no idea how thick it actually is - one does not risk damaging any of the containers within.

Each of the containers is formed of a plastic film that is just large enough to hold the juice, while of course, being easy to handle. Although the segments are held together by an adhesive, this is weak and easily gives way to allow the segments to split apart. As used today, the packaging is non-returnable, and can be thrown away. Something deserves to be said here on the form of the segments. Each is in the exact shape of the human mouth. Thus, once removed from its packaging, a segment can be placed between the teeth. By biting down gently, one breaks the outer wrapping and can drink the juice. Speaking of this, so-called mandarin oranges might be considered a line extension, whose smaller segments make them particularly suitable for children. (these days, the advent of juicers means that confusion reigns, and adults eat what might be called children’s food and vice versa.) [327 words]

From: **Bruno Munari**, *Design as Art* (London, Penguin, 2009)

## **Two additional points: iteration and illustrations**

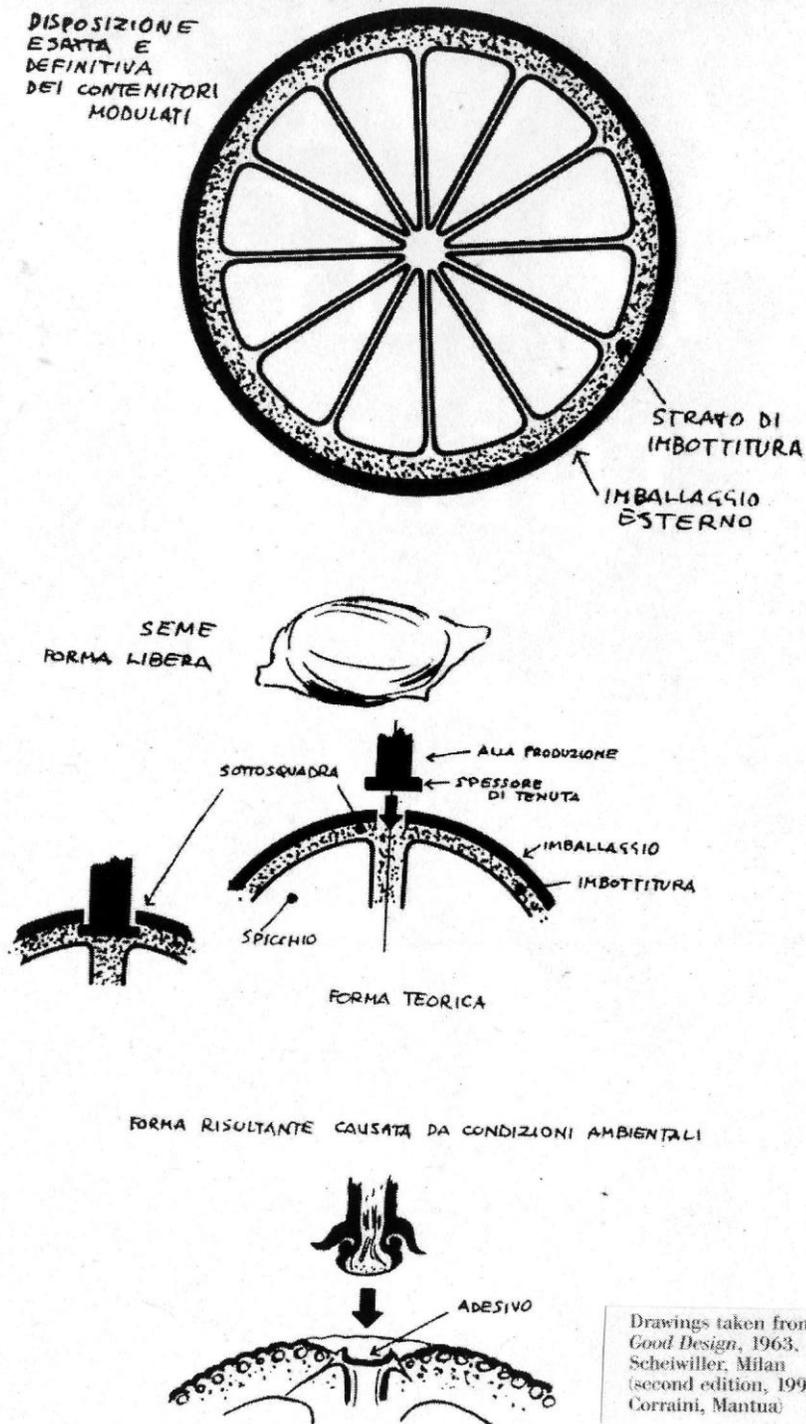
### **Iteration**

Designers axiomatically iterate: they work forms over and over again until they are right. Writing is no different. Adorno’s line applies: “No improvement is too small or trivial to be worthwhile. Of a hundred alterations each may seem trifling or pedantic by itself; together they can raise the text to a new level.”

### A note on Illustrations.

Designers are supposed to be visual persons. Yet it is amazing in my experience how little really intelligent use of illustrations is made in explaining and accounting for things. You can by all means use illustrations providing they are integrated into the text.

Here is an example: Munari's drawing of the Orange as product.



Drawings taken from  
*Good Design*, 1963,  
Scheiwiller, Milan  
(second edition, 1998,  
Corraini, Mantua)



