

Aesthetics of interaction

Citation for published version (APA):

Hummels, C. C. M., & Overbeeke, C. J. (2010). Aesthetics of interaction: Special issue editorial. *International Journal of Design*, 4(2), 1-2.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2010

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

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Special Issue Editorial: *Aesthetics of Interaction*

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Citation: Hummels, C., & Overbeeke, K. (2010). Special issue editorial: Aesthetics of interaction. *International Journal of Design*, 4(2), 1-2.

A Bit of History

Most people have the (mis)conception that Design is concerned only with beauty. Designers are thought to spend their time making beautiful shells that are simply containers for technology. This is not true. Without trying to give a complete historical overview, we can say it is a fact that in its very early days, Design became involved in emancipatory movements. The Bauhaus, for example, was part of the socialist ideal of creating a “new man” by ameliorating his environment. The slums were to be replaced by houses that let air and light in, furniture was to be easy to produce and made affordable by using the latest in production techniques. The same for cutlery and dishes. Beauty was indeed an essential part of this endeavor, but not its sole aim. Design gave direction to the cultural developments of the time. Beauty was defined in a context of transformation.

After the Second World War, when modernism died in the West (Kint, 2001), designers were left without any ideology to follow, and Design got lost in “beauty,” in an obsession with form. We admit that this is obviously an over-generalization: things are not that simple. But it was a main trend. Bauhaus objects were reproduced, it is true, but only for the elite, and they became ridiculously expensive. They are now being sold in “design boutiques.”

During this period, the new design schools went two ways. Some emphasized their artistic calling and withdrew into conceptual thinking and an emphasis on the designer’s intuition. Others looked to science, striving to become associated with a rational, scientific approach. The problem with the latter, however, is that there are very few designers who are interested in classical science. They are professionals: their attitude is, why bother about science? Again, this is too general of a sketch. But the trend is there.

At the same time, Design missed out on the major industrial development of the era: the birth of electronics, and the subsequent importance of an approach that emphasized interaction with the ungraspable. Industrial designers designed the buttons of the new machines, not the new machines. The HCI people did the interaction thinking.

Where Do We Stand Now?

This special issue attempts to provide an overview of current research in the Aesthetics of Interaction. We believe there is no

such thing as absolute Aesthetics. Aesthetics always refers to culture, to what people in a specific culture find valuable. In other words, aesthetics refers to ethics. Already in classical Greece *to kalon* meant the beautiful and the (morally) good. What is beautiful will make you a good human being. The paper included in this issue by Philip Ross and Stephan Wensveen exemplifies this view. These authors search to establish the way that an object allows for interaction, the way it influences our experience of value. Still, we need to go one step beyond this and look at how we are being touched by value. Charles Lenay’s paper on emotional value explains how this might come about. Lenay turns to “experimental phenomenology,” based on the work of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, who states that the act of experiencing the world and experiencing others through our bodies is the fundamental generator of meaning. This means that meaning, and beauty, are within the experience, prior to any knowledge structure. This is a theoretical stance that is essential for designers to embrace, as it claims primacy of experience and intuition over abstraction. And it is a stance that is needed today more than ever, our world nowadays being so lost in abstraction and procedure, so devoid of experiential meaning and beauty. The paper that we have included by Patrizia Marti shows how this theoretical stance, when applied, can lead to an innovative view of Design. But how do we access this experiential level of beauty? Are there any methods? Dance is one means that can enhance the experiencing of our bodies-in-contact-with-the-world, and thus offers a gateway to the experiential. This is what the paper by Lian Loke and Toni Robertson explores. Another paper, by Marco Rozendaal and Hendrik Schifferstein, also takes a radical phenomenological stance in exploring the “pleasantness” of bodily experience. Mikael Wiberg and Erica Robles, on the other hand, examine the role of the experiential by looking at design as the act of making a composition, and by paying special attention to the role of texture. Texture, in their discussion, refers to the point of contact with the world that is composed by a designer.

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What is Our View on the Aesthetics of Interaction?

Over the last twenty years, we have advocated the following points:

1. Design is about our lives, about our being-in-the-world. Fundamental to this is the sensing of the world as an interactive activity in which experiencing the world is primary to any thinking. Therefore, it is necessary to take a scientific and a philosophical stance. As the basis for our stance, we have chosen Gibson's (1986) theory of perception and Merleau-Ponty's (2002) view on phenomenology. Both of these claim that the world is inherently meaningful on a sensing or experiential level. Intuition and common sense should therefore be high on the agenda. They should be exploited to the maximum. As Voltaire said, "Le sens commun n'est pas si commun." Common sense is not so common.
2. Reflection comes second: and it is always a reflection on action. A design theory consequently must be a theory of action and the embodied in the first place, and a theory of meaning in the second, not the other way round. Reflection on action is the source of knowledge.
3. Interaction Design nowadays is about interaction with intelligence, i.e., an interaction with the ungraspable. The ungraspable—and here we are talking mainly about the ungraspable quality of many innovations in electronics—has to be made graspable again. Our bodies are mechanical: all interaction is essentially mechanical, or tangible. We have few other ways to interact with the world. Therefore embodiment is essential.

4. Beauty, and thus beauty in interaction, is an experiential and social given. It is not just a quality of an object. It is the way an object speaks to us, calls us, affords us, puts us into contact with others, is meaningful to us, shares its inner horizon with us. Thus considered, beauty emanates from our unity with the world. It is pre-reflective.

By taking this radical stance, we hope to reconcile the experiential with the rational, to reconcile feeling with thinking. This may not be the only way, but we believe it is one way to advance Interaction Design towards a truly transformative level, a level that can lead to true innovation—innovation that can contribute to making our lives worth living.

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Dr. C. C. M. (Caroline) Hummels (1966) is an associate professor and director of education at the department of Industrial Design at Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e). She has a background in Industrial Design Engineering (Master and PhD). Her research, education and design activities concentrate on developing a holistic design framework to answer the overall question "How to design for interaction within adaptive and highly dynamic systems with a special focus on aesthetics, resonance, embodiment, social interaction and living learning labs. She developed various installations such as ISH, next to design techniques and processes such as the Reflective Transformative Design Process, interaction maps & mechanisms, and interactive tangible sketching. She is a member of the steering committee of the *Tangible Embedded, and Embodied Interaction Conferences* (TEI) and she has been a member of a variety of program committees and national Think Tanks since 2001. She has given several keynote speeches as well as dozens of invited lectures and workshops at conferences, international universities and for industry. She has been guest editor of *Knowledge, Technology and Policy* and worked also as a visiting researcher at Media Lab Europe in Dublin for three months.

Dr. C. J. (Kees) Overbeeke (1952) studied psychology at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, where he earned his M.A. in 1974. After working there, he moved to the Department of Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands, where he earned his PhD in 1988 on spatial perception on flat screens, and where he headed the Form Theory group as associate professor until his move to the Industrial Design Department of Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) in 2002. During the 2005-2006 academic year he held the Distinguished Nierenberg Chair of Design at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and in 2006 he was appointed full professor at TU/e. He has initiated several new subjects in design research: design and emotion, funology, aesthetics of interaction, rich interaction, and design and ethics. He has published extensively on these subjects in journals, books and conference papers. He initiated the "Design and Emotion" and the "Designing for Pleasurable Products and Interfaces" (DPPI) conferences. He has been a keynote speaker and a member of the scientific committees at several international conferences. He is also an editor and a member of the editorial board of several leading international design journals.