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SEEKING COMMON GROUND FOR ARCHAEOLOGY AND DESIGN

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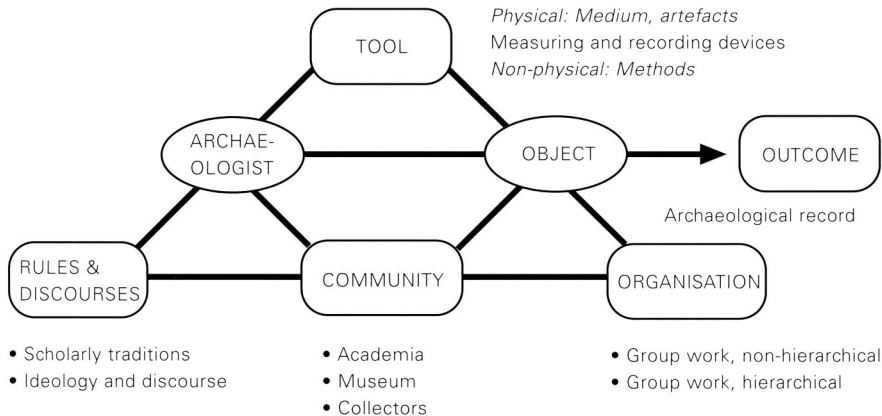
“There is an urgent need for new frameworks of knowledge that enable us, not only to investigate, but also, to *create*”, is the final sentence in Lily Díaz-Kommonen’s doctoral thesis *Art, Fact, and Artifact Production*. The work is a designer-artist’s exploration of the traditions of her own field and those of archaeology in the context of the project *Illuminating History: Through the Eyes of Media*. The project was a collaborative effort in which archaeologists from the University of Turku and artists and designers from the Media Lab at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki created a hypermedia archive. The raw material for the archive was the finds and documentation from the excavations at the Late Iron Age and Early Medieval (c. 980–1280 AD) settlement site of Mulli in Raisio in south-western Finland. The project created an opportunity to investigate the different modes of representation in the humanities through the use of new media and design and to examine the area between visual arts and the humanities. The thesis is an analysis of the meeting of the two distant worlds of designers and archaeologists. Its main research question is how design knowledge can “be defined, articulated, and represented within the space of an academic collaborative endeavour” (p. 13). The point of departure and the envisioned journey is intriguing, but unfortunately this potential seeps away, page after page, like water through one’s fingers.

Díaz-Kommonen’s focus is naturally on the activity of the designer and on the concept of design. Her challenge is to find a way to integrate theory and practice, her work in design and the analysis of that work. The core of her thesis is in the study of the interaction between a community of archaeologists and herself, and she adopts Alain Findeli’s project-driven method to do this. The method is based on the idea that a theoretical inquiry “in design research can be realized through the work carried on as part of a professional project” (p. 40). The gap between theory and practice is reduced in their dialogue, which the designer sets in motion in her work. The description of design research, the archive project, the method and its application cover the first two chapters of

the thesis. Terminology and theoretical framework are presented in the third chapter followed by a comparative analysis of art, design and archaeology as activities and their part in making the archive in chapters 4–9. In the tenth and final chapter Díaz-Kommonen concludes that as design is “the skin of culture”, it can also be the skin between the arts and the humanities. A designer can act as a uniting mediator.

Already in the introduction she describes the unfortunate circumstances of the project: “Efforts to realize such collaboration were to a large extent handicapped by the fact that only the Media Lab portion of the proposal received funding; the decision by the funding authorities had a deep impact on the overall structure of the project, as well as the feasibility of attaining the proposed objectives” (p. 15). The attempts to develop a common language were met with “a lack of motivation resulting from not having a clear enough idea of the potential benefits” on the part of the archaeologists (p. 165).

Although the circumstances undoubtedly have affected the final outcome of Díaz-Kommonen’s work, the main problem lies in its theoretical core, which, in fact, hinders the creation of interdisciplinary understanding. She puts forward her theoretical standpoint in the third chapter titled “Activity theory”, which refers to the cultural-historical theory of activity. The theory was first developed by a group of Russian psychologists in the 1920s and 1930s, the central figure being Lev Vygotsky. Activity theory is a framework attempting to conceptualise the inseparability of doing and thinking, individual and social context. The basic analytical unit of the theory is the activity itself, with the focus on the relationship between actor and her objectified motive. One of the central concepts here is *mediation*. Artefacts mediate between the actor and the object and extend the operation of actors beyond their biological dimensions. These mediating artefacts or tools change human activity, and in the process of mediation are themselves transformed.



Mediation transforms the simple dualistic scheme of stimulus–reaction into a triadic configuration of stimulus–sign–reaction, and this threefold subject–tool–object model forms the theoretical base of the thesis. Through this model, Díaz-Kommonen compares the activities of art, design and archaeology, which are distinguished from each other according to the objects they produce. She connects activity theory with Marx Wartofsky’s three-level concept of the artefact in which artefacts are differentiated according to their position on an axis running from natural and material (e.g. a pencil) to conventional and immaterial (e.g. a scientific paradigm). This view of the artefact is used to widen the concept of one special class of artefacts, tools, which are used in the transformation of the object of an activity into an outcome.

On this theoretical basis, it is possible for Díaz-Kommonen to define art as “a higher order process concerned with the structured and informed expression of feeling” (p. 92). What is striking

in Díaz-Kommonen's views of art as expression and, in general, in her definitions of subjects and objects, is their modern and romantic basis (*cf.* Barthes 1977). This is in stark contrast to how they are conceived by Michel Foucault, to whose works Díaz-Kommonen refers. Although she claims to adopt Foucault's concept of discourse into her model (p. 62), it is, in fact, impossible to integrate Foucault's (1979) view of discourse with her model of action. For her, discourses seem to be clusters of speech and rules between acting and speaking bodies. "Discourses" are placed as one element beside other neat boxes titled "actor", "tool" and "object". This totally differs from Foucault's use of the concept as something which constructs subjects, objects and their relations. In his thought, there are no pre-discursive biological bodies or entities which could be put in an already given threefold scheme. In fact, it is possible to interpret Foucault's concept of discourse as an attempt to undermine the whole modern, romantic, and humanistic model.

Another important concept in Foucault's later works was power. Díaz-Kommonen mentions it briefly (pp. 39–40, 63), but it does not have a central place in her conception of action. In activity theory this is possible, since its subjects, objects and tools are pre-discursive entities whose formation does not need to be questioned. To speak of pre-discursive entities and art as expression is humanistic (Thomas 2002). Humanistic tradition sees biological bodies as entities upon which layers of culture or action are pasted. In the Foucauldian anti-humanistic tradition, however, it is not possible to understand material actions and bodies without the concept of power. Differences between individuals are created in networks of power and knowledge. Following anti-humanistic thinkers, we do not possess some kind of a hidden core identity which is expressed in art and artefact production. Instead, differences between actors, their actions and identities are open for study and manipulation.

The humanistic tradition sees natural bodies as uncontaminated by any cultural or political sphere, and thus individuals are apolitical by nature. This sets up archaeology, design and art as apolitical and liberal fields where all power investments and political actions are merely a contamination of the original body. Yet the concepts of power, production and consumption are present not only in Foucault's thought but also in the Marxist tradition, at which Díaz-Kommonen glances only hastily before turning to activity theory. How can a designer in the contemporary world describe her activity without these concepts? How can art be understood without the art market, commoditisation and exclusive practices, or archaeology without nationalism or scholarly debates?

One symptom of the model's inadequacy is the way in which the book portrays archaeology. If discontinuities of understanding are the ground from which the thesis springs, how can the designer-author claim to give a neutral summary of the activity of archaeologists? It would be more correct to say that the designer is explicating her own view of archaeology. Díaz-Kommonen should have articulated more clearly the process that leads her to describe archaeology in the way she does. When the activity of archaeologists is presented, the most preferred archaeologist is Michael Shanks. The crucial questions, however, remain unanswered: How did the project's archaeologists see their own work? How many archaeologists related to Shanks' views and how did their views of archaeology affect the collaboration?

Another alarming symptom is the way communication and art are presented. The model seems to assume that they both are a transportation of an idea from the artist's head to her work and finally to the viewer's head. This assumption leads to a dead end. In this straightjacket of a model, different entities are treated as already formed and final, and thus it is not possible to regard understanding as an event where all participants are transformed into something new. In the thesis, this leads to the almost complete absence of description of the meetings between designers and archaeologists. It seems as if there had been no real communication and sharing of thoughts between these groups.

I would suggest that communication is an event of gathering, an event where archaeologists and designer-artists come together and produce a common truth which binds them together and enables their co-operation. More detailed descriptions of meetings between archaeologists and designers

could reveal problems, obstacles and new paths which always appear when two very different traditions meet. When communication is understood in this very concrete way, a lack of resources is not only a hindrance, but also a place to put forth a question: Why did archaeologists not consider hypermedia or the designers' ideas important? Such a lack of interest is a lack of common truth.

The outcome of the project, the hypermedia, has a very modern look: clear, educational, and a bit blunt. A good example is the 3-D Gallery, where the viewer can choose pictures from a list and then exhibit them in her own virtual reality gallery imitating an art museum context. The idea is a nice comment on the debates in contemporary art, but the navigation system is irritating to use and the visual realisation dull and unpleasant. The 3-D Gallery does not entice one to try it again and remains just a nice idea. Still, it is the only reference to contemporary art, which has questioned the concept of art and the possibilities, practices and politics of representation. Why are there no other traces of these developments in the hypermedia? Should the forgetting of contemporary art be interpreted in relation to archaeology? Has archaeology's claim to re-produce or re-present the past as it was hindered the development of the hypermedia?

As Díaz-Kommonen concludes, there is indeed a need for frameworks of knowledge, understanding and communication that enable us to create together. Her attempt is a brave and much needed step onto a new path, but the reader is left longing for a more solid theoretical basis and more concrete descriptions of the dialogue between archaeology and design. One misstep on this new path, the vital path for archaeology in contemporary world, must not lead to its abandonment.

References

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