# The Ineffable Durable

Learning to live with and really appreciate objects is a condition beyond mere ownership. It requires a particular mindset and active participation: an intentional savoring versus quick, convenient consumption. Thorough appreciation means an investigation of origin; it is intimately tied to the creator of the object and his or her chosen method of creation. The aura of the maker is easiest to perceive when the object is handcrafted, but it is not exclusively the domain of handmade. How else to explain our reverence for an industrially-made item like a classic Anglepoise lamp, or our ability to find a Braun travel alarm clock adorable?

Good design, at least according to Dieter Rams, is useful and honest about what it is. His philosophy is laid out in his ten famous principles. Rams believed in technology closely integrated with design; he created a body of work that is gleamingly, unabashedly industrial. However, good design can also be crafted by hand and still follow the same tenets of utility and honesty. Rams was a contemporary of Soetsu Yanagi, Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, the leaders of the Mingei movement. This movement, which began in 1920s Japan, extolled ‘the unknown craftsman’ and the superiority of the everyday objects they created compared to the mass-produced goods popular in their rapidly industrializing nation.

Both the Mingei master craftsmen and their modernist industrial designer counterparts felt strongly that form followed function. The merger of these two approaches may be understood in the work of Sori Yanagi, the son of Soetsu Yanagi. Sori honored his father’s values derived from the handmade while creating work largely with industrial methods. In fact, his work and Rams’ are both included in Super Normal, an exhibition that followed this design ethos to conclusion.

The Super Normal show was conceived in the mid-2000s, at the tail end of a period of economic expansion and right before the global financial crisis. Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison came together through their dissatisfaction with fellow designers who they felt used access to capital and media savvy to determine the products they created. They wanted to create an exhibition of work that they judged to be beyond timeless, somehow beyond anonymous design. The objects on display were a combination of thoughtful (purpose-driven creation) and thoughtless (made without ego or striving to be ‘designed’) - both incredibly pure and ‘normal.’

Even though a well-designed object may seem anonymous, it can inspire love or lust, and gains further emotional patina over time. Unlocking how we imbue physical objects with personality, worth and provenance is endlessly fascinating. Sometimes these attributes are assigned through marketing efforts, but when they emerge on their own, they seem to be more “real” and true for the consumer.

Associating the ineffable with the durable is nothing new, but has become more complex as of late with the introduction of networked technology. What is happening as we upend the world of objects, and the long-established rituals of making, buying and

selling them? Will our definition of good design also change? Will our relationship with an object shift as the hand of the maker loses meaning? Can we sustain desire for an object that we don't own?

**technology as a tool**

Any tool can be regarded as technology in the era it is introduced. In our industrial era, technology has been used to increase productivity so that surplus goods can be sold at profit. A cotton gin is a useful tool, as is a harvester, but they are specialized, costly and "dumb". In contrast, tools today are smaller, less expensive, easily and widely distributed and "smart". They therefore have the ability for wide-scale disruption since they can touch every point of an object's lifecycle.

Recent technological advances in the areas of making, shipping and selling has caused the roles of producer, designer, maker and consumer to collapse together, invert or even disappear entirely. This can definitely be a boon for those who have never had access or control over their own consumption. However, since most people have only ever held the single role of consumer (and occasionally maker), one outcome of changing or adding roles is the generation of new questions about how to personally relate to stuff.

Today, it's possible to shop straight from vast image feeds from your friends instead of a store, or to curate your own image repositories and circumvent the need to buy products you "like". Alternately, you can rent an item for a period of time, or work with a designer or a fab shop to have it made for you. If you feel like making something yourself, the range of what you can produce is not even limited by your skill or imagination, only by your ability to search digital libraries for an appropriate template.

Once upon a time, selling work was the last step in a long process that involved raising funds, finding skilled labor, producing enormous quantities to achieve economies of scale, and negotiating contracts with middlemen who would get work to stores, who would actually put products into the hands of customers. Now you can paste a unique generated URL into a tweet and effectively start selling direct in about thirty seconds. Even the produce-then-sell cycle runs in reverse; just send a file to the output medium of your choice after the buyer's money is in your account.

Even the once-simple act of buying is now fraught with choice in a way it was not previously. For the modern consumer, you are what you consume, but also how you consume it. Throw in the sticky decision to own rather than share, to make rather than buy, and no wonder why many of us are touched by analysis paralysis. This is alluded to in a recent *New York Times* op-ed by a Millennial discussing the agony of pluralism and the decision-making process; for his generation, "commitment to even seemingly simple aesthetic judgments have become shot through with indecision."

There are apps cropping up to clinically assist you in making decisions, large or small . Allowing behavioral data to make up your mind is perhaps not a lot better than believing marketing hype about a product, but it's part of the trend toward leading with your

Quantified foot forward. Whether or not this will play out in the long term remains to be seen; at least one other similar product shuttered after realizing this. From their farewell message: “We’ve learned that not all decisions are fast or easy.”

**the excellence of the everyday**

What happens when a society that places emphasis on individual taste and expression is given tools that theoretically allow for endless variation? Can a consensus on ‘good design’ be achieved when non-designers can create? Can the notion of ‘the unknown craftsman’ survive when everyone is their own brand, and every design can be modified?

Tools, whether they are physical device operated by hand or an application that lives on your smartphone, are being marketed directly to consumers so that they may become makers, designers, producers and sellers. This is heady stuff but ‘what’ and ‘how’ often eclipses ‘why’, especially in the early days of a new tool’s introduction. Also, when the ‘why’ is addressed, the answer is often an entrepreneurial response. Play for play’s sake is disappearing under the assault of our compressed time schedules, desire for self-improvement and need to measure effectiveness.

Also, play is hard work. Some of us lose our ability to create after childhood; we are out of practice or have not been encouraged to make things up for a very long time. If you throw the capability to create into the world, it’s not immediately a liberating gesture for everyone.

In the best future scenario, these wonderful, widely-available tools promote a greater understanding of the complexities of making. This includes reverence for expertise, acceptance of pricing that fairly reflects the effort put forth in creation, and so forth. The definition of ‘good design’ will grow and change to take into account the products emerging from these new tools for production and distribution while incorporating the lessons learned by traditional object creation and consumption. Craft and industry might be disrupted, but not discarded.

In order to reach this level of integration, however, there will most likely be growing pains. Hobbyists who are empowered to produce and sell may inadvertently dilute the marketplace and cause a pricing ‘race to the bottom’, affecting established makers whose livelihood is at stake. These makers, who provide wisdom and stability to the community that cannot be quantified or tracked dollar-for-dollar, could be pushed out of the market.

In another scenario, the market may flood with new designers who lack a general level of competency, ethics and awareness of cause and effect when making choices. Instead of innovating in the face of so much freedom, they may opt to take the shortcut, using pre-made templates without modification or copying somebody else outright. The ‘sharing economy’ rhetoric says that this is alright or even desirable, but fear of copying

could cause the most creative inventors to avoid sharing, leaving the design arena stagnant and repetitive.

What about gaining mastery through training and experience? Unless you have some skill in understanding the properties of the material, structural integrity, design proportions, and a myriad of other decisions, you won't automatically be creating those wonderful designs in your head just because you have the correct toolset.

Look at microwave ovens, which were promoted as game-changing technology in the 1960s with as much fervor as 3D printers are today. There was the promise that you could make anything in it; hundreds of microwave cookbooks appeared to help you make every dish in a gourmet multi-course meal. Today microwaves are indeed ubiquitous, and tremendously useful, but how do we really use this powerful tool? A large number of people use them to 'make' just two things: popcorn and reheated leftovers. While it's possible that people with a 3D printer in their home can 'make' anything they need, the more likely outcome is that it will be relegated to very occasional and specific use. Those invested in the maker movement might wish to make as enormous a breakthrough as home computers, but not every new tool will have that kind of impact.

To craft, or to make something well-crafted, means putting in the hours. Technology's current obsession is circumventing the hours and saving time. This leads to quantity of output having more importance than its quality, if only because it can be measured more objectively.

The act of making by itself is not necessarily creative, though it can be regarded as an important part of a lifelong goal of learning and self-improvement. The goodness we associate with one design over another, and respect for the creativity of the maker, is intimately tied with what we as humans bring to that design. How we regard and interact with objects changes with the introduction of new methods of design, production and consumption. Technology may bring about these changes but does not define what they will be; that will occur as we gain better understanding of the roles we play when interacting with objects and with each other.