Virtual Materiality: Design Pedagogy in the Age of COVID-19

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From the dawn of human materiality, matter holds a crucial part in our daily surroundings. From local wood, used in traditional craft, through the cultural meanings of Italian Carrera marble, to smart textiles. Each material is situated in a unique socio-cultural context, echoing its relevance, geographical location and various economic, transportation and technological meanings. Each object, in turn, carries within itself the story of the materials it was made from, its place of origin and social route, imbuing it with unique value.

Design studies (in general and specifically industrial design), traditionally start from deep understanding of the attributes and qualities of various materials and their full potential. In part, preliminary exercises begin with a meandering route in search of structural possibilities, enabling students to challenge and reshape these venues, and indeed, the very use of materials in design practice.

Our new and strange reality we found ourselves in the last year took a basic understanding in design pedagogy to extreme. As designers we have to acknowledge that virtual objects, living in harmony on the screen, do not necessarily survive their transition to the real, structural and physical world. Material-less elements can float happily on the student’s screen, devoid of a gravitational system, anchoring these to a specified reality. In addition, since the dawn of imaging programs (ranging from InDesign, through AutoCAD to SolidWorks), students are drawn to the enticing allure of the ephemeral image, contrary to the classic ‘truth to material’ approach. This decline in
materiality holds an immediate peril to the very understanding of physical surroundings, critical to industrial design and inclusive design alike. As the former nestles on the importance of manufacture, the latter rests on material understanding of ergonomic methodology and the illusive definition of ‘the body’.

Returning to Baudrillard’s famous theory, we are witnessing the rise of a ‘hyper-simulacrum’. This was recently manifested in a student’s presentation, enthusiastically presenting a discovered flexible material, shown on Zoom, yet we lacked the ability to decipher whether it was vinyl, cork, polyethylene foam or industrial felt. As tactility is lost in our virtual reality, the only sense left is the visual. So how do we teach in a period of unmateriality?

We claim that like the invention of plastic materials changed the whole perspective of materials abilities, “truth to material” agenda and shapes invention (as Roland Barthes wrote), our new computerized, virtual and digital reality will change it again and move it to the next level, towards the platonic idea (that the material world is just a partial imitation of).

We need to rethink of the transformation of our pedagogic practice. Not only as a substitute to real life but as a new stage in our new non-material reality.

As a pre-research, we asked our department’s designers to answer a single question ‘which parameter vanished while teaching remotely, you miss the most?’. From their answers we wish to propose a practice-oriented pedagogic outline targeted at design practitioners and teachers alike. This outline will deal with various theoretical and practical issues, ranging from vernacular materiality to trans-global design, as well as unmaterial design and ideas.

• Author(s) Biography:

Prof. Jonathan Ventura is a Design Anthropologist specializing in social and healthcare design. Jonathan completed a PhD in applied design anthropology at a joint venue of the industrial design department at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and the anthropology department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He continued to complete a post-doctorate focusing on social design at the Helen Hamlyn centre for design, Royal College of Art, London UK. Today, Jonathan serves as Senior Lecturer at the Department of Inclusive Design at Hadassah Academic College, Jerusalem, and at The master’s degree Program in Design at Shenkar; he is also a research fellow at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, at the Royal College of Art, London. Ventura published various books and articles focused on design anthropology, design research and theories. Lately, Jonathan in collaboration with MOME School of Design built the Social Design Network, consisting of 10 academies from 8 schools around the world, focusing on social issues through design.

Galit Shvo is a Designer and lecturer in design, engaged in research, curatorship, design, initiating and leading projects on the axis between industry and academia. In the last
decade she has focused on theoretical, cultural and ideological aspects of the field of design. Graduate of the Department of Industrial Design and the master's Program in Industrial Design at Bezalel (with honors). She is currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Inclusive Industrial Design at Hadassah Academic College and a lecturer in the master's Program in Industrial Design at Bezalel. Together with Dr. Jonathan Ventura, she has published a number of articles dealing with various theoretical aspects of design. In addition, she exhibits in design exhibitions in Israel and around the world.