Reflecting on the Seminars:
Orienting The Utility of Anthropology" in "Design"

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As a PhD candidate embarking on research in a faculty of industrial design with a background in anthropology and the humanities, I come to the design anthropology community eager to analytically assimilate and negotiate these various disciplines and approaches with one another. I take this position paper as an opportunity to familiarize myself with the different neighborhoods of this community and to understand how they identify themselves (and with each other) so that I may develop a vocabulary to approach my own work. The papers from former seminars engaged with many topics, many of which used a case study as its main structural element, others which pondered design and anthropology on a conceptual level. As this is the season of positioning and orienting in my career, I will spend this paper addressing some of the themes raised by some of these conceptual discussions, and briefly address the work that I am doing as a part of my dissertation.

While the marriage of design and anthropology is generally considered to be relatively young, as separate entities the two had historical legacies where their identities have been independently established. Yet, there has been significant discussion in this forum addressing *what* anthropology *is*. Outside the context of design, the discipline of anthropology has had a contentious history. As a byproduct of colonialism, questions about implicit power hierarchies in representation, ethics, and questions about impact and intervention have always vexed the field (Murphy 2014). But the questions that have emerged in this seminar have been along the lines of defining the scope of the discipline, its relation to what it studies, and lastly its utility.

One of the most foundational discussions is introduced by Ingold who questions the scope of the discipline itself. Ingold argues that ethnography isn't "anthropology", as it is often assumed to be synonymous with (2014). Ethnography, he argues, is a means to gather data, whereas anthropology is where data is joined with theory and

transformed into knowledge. In their essay, Anusas and Harkness (2014) argue another foundational aspect of the discipline, which is its temporal orientation. They critique previous work from Otto and Charlotte-Smith that characterizes anthropology as a discipline that's concerned with deciphering the past (2013). Anusas and Harkness argue that instead anthropology takes a more holistic approach that considers the past, present, and future to be of equal consideration, and fluidly influencing one another (2014). While I doubt that many anthropologists would have abided the initial characterization that Anusas and Harkness were critiquing, it still represents an effort to make meaning of the discipline.

A specific thread in the discussion of the scope of the discipline has been under scrutiny in these seminars is the relationship between anthropologists to what they study. This has historically been a source of tension within the discipline, and tied up with questions of politics of representation and power dynamics (Murphy 2014). One particular discussion has been that of neutrality, and taken further, the impact that an anthropologist should have on the context that she studies. There is the custom among anthropologists of explicitly (in the process of analysis and writing) situating oneself and acknowledging your personal biases, and the unavoidable influence and impact that you have as an "outside," in the context you are working within; Murphy realizes this the most clearly in his essay within this venue (ibid). There has been much discussion in these seminar's papers of the inevitable influence of the anthropologist, and that she and the subject being studied are inherently intertwined, and shape and impact one another (ibid, Anusas and Harkness 2014, Halse and Boffi 2014). Ingold suggests that in fact this entanglement and mutual shaping is what defines anthropology (2014). Charlotte-Smith and Otto make a similar argument that knowledge is generated through action and engagement, and not just observation (2014). Murphy encourages anthropologists to let go of the assumption that they should minimize their impact on the subject of study, and instead find ways to make it productive towards building knowledge (Murphy 2014).

This discussion of impact of anthropologists naturally brings us to the examination in this seminar of the utility of the discipline as it relates to design. *As has already been*

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suggested, many have seen the utility of anthropology to be defined as a practice that is transformative and generates knowledge (Murphy 2014, Ingold 2014, Anusas and Harkness 2014 & Halse and Boffi 2014) *and that this offers opportunities within a design context*. Some parse out the essence of ethnography, as a tool of anthropologists, as offering designers "methodological transformations" (Halse and Boffi 2014, p.4), or a means that offers a grounded theoretical approach to interpret the work of design (Charlotte-Smith and Otto 2014). When considering the utility of anthropology, another thread of argumentation is that anthropology and design are very much aligned. This argument suggests that the two disciplines are similar, in that they unite data and theory, and generate knowledge through doing (Ingold 2014, Charlotte-Smith and Otto 2014); or that they both seek to explore what the future holds (Anusas and Harkness 2014, Halse and Boffi 2014).

In these seminars we see efforts to define "anthropology" and "design anthropology" (DiSalvo 2014, Charlotte-Smith and Otto 2014), but it doesn't appear that design in itself receives similar scrutiny. Mazé does however make what appears to be an attempt to use a more theoretical anthropological lens to examine the ontological temporal orientation (and bias) of design (2014). Instead, the questions have been how to *do* or *use* design as opposed to what defines design — a decidedly more instrumental approach to a discipline. Is this because design is less contentious? Could it be that whereas anthropology has been embroiled in a complex history, design hasn't struggled with its own difficulties—thus the effort has been devoted to assimilating anthropology with design? I don't believe that argument could be made in good conscious. The impact that design has in shaping and defining people's worlds and contexts has been recognized (Winner 1980).

My PhD work, for example, utilizes the opportunities that anthropology and design hold to join data and theory as a transformative means to generate knowledge within the context of how we build ethical relationships with connected objects. We first approach this question with the observation that the way current design approaches usability often mask the way technologies function. This is increasingly true for connected objects. This masking hinders the socio-cultural context in which

technologies are situated, and reduces them to mere commodity. Philosophical approaches argue that a consequence of this is that the main form of engagement with technological devices is purely to consume (Borgmann 1984). My work aim to explore and suggest an alternative design approach that communicates traces of use via a connected object's material form. We argue that this approach helps people understand how technology is used and the role that it plays in our lives. This in turn facilitates a more ethical relationship with technological devices, which promotes dialogue and reciprocity. Similar to what Mazé suggested, we take a critical stance on how predominate design paradigms favor a future-orientation (2014) and suggest that the material form of these objects should communicate and retain traces of use. In promoting traces in this way, the work manifests and mobilizes the temporal orientation of both design and anthropology (Anusas and Harkness 2014).

We have begun to apply this design approach in a design inquiry with our Industrial Design master's students at TU Delft. The students developed a 'connected sink' that illustrates how traces of use can situate a connected object as focal thing and practice. It offers an interaction that uniquely draws on the notion of materials experience (Giaccardi and Karana 2015), a framework that discusses how materials come to shape ways of doing and ultimately, social practice. Gestures that are metaphorically related to the tasks the sink performs (as opposed to turning a faucet) are used to unmask the technology's machinery. Hot water is procured by rubbing a portion of the basin rapidly, similar to how one would warm his own hands. The force of the stream is made stronger with a long stroke that travels the length of the basin, almost as if to beckon more water from the sink. These interactions are made possible by sensors and smart materials along the basin. These materials also respond to these gestures by wearing in ways that reveal traces of how the sink has been used. As a connected object, the sink would communicate with the water heater, so that not only the appliances learn the patterns of use, but so does the person using it in the form of material traces. The design of this sink no longer masks how the technology works, and instead situates itself into our social world thereby revealing how it is used and consumed. These traces are cumulative and expressive and speak to our individual experiences as well as our relationship with the technology itself building a mutual,

communicative, and thus ethical relationship in their ability to foster mutual learning (for the human, not just for the machine).

We propose that with this project draws on several different themes that emerged in this seminar series about the role of design and anthropology, and design anthropology. Firstly, we are using social sciences as a tool to understand some of the politics of at play behind designed objects, as Mazé recommends (2014). Additionally, we are engaging with principles of how temporality should be addressed with and by both anthropology and design (Mazé 2014, Anusas and Harkness 2014). Further, we are engaging with the principles behind design anthropology that embrace takes data and theory together in a transformative capacity to generate knowledge (Murphy 2014, Ingold 2014, Anusas and Harkness 2014 & Halse and Boffi 2014).

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