

MEDIUM DESIGN

Medium Design: It is not what you think. It is not new. It is not right. It is not magic. It is not free. It does not happen. It does not always work.

The oncologist follows not only the tumor but also the chemical fluctuations in surrounding tissues. The actor in the theatre transmits information not only through words but also through interdependent actions. The architect sees not only buildings with shapes and outlines but also the matrix of activities that inflects them. The geologist does not merely taxonomize specimens but rather reads them as traces of a process.

Still, while this medium thinking is practiced in many disciplines, it is perhaps under-rehearsed in the face of more dominant or ingrained cultural habits. Culture is good at pointing to things and calling their name but not so good at describing the relationships between things or the repertoires they enact. It privileges declarations, right answers, litigious proofs, universals, elementary particles and telos. It circles modernist scripts that celebrate freedom and transcendent newness — narrative arcs that bend toward a utopian or dystopian ultimate. This collective mind that looks for the one or the one and only is so often organized like a closed loop.

And since the loop that only circulates compatible information cannot abide contradiction, it also often lashes out with a binary fight against any challenger. Fighting is essential to being right. There is no growth or ideation without argumentation or debate. There is no literature without conflict. Favoring successive rather than coexistent thoughts or practices, the new right answer must kill the old right answer. The newest redemptive technology will make you free, but the freedom of one group must rob another of its freedom. And the fight should build to a revolution or an apocalyptic burnout. Cue the brooding music.

Oscillating between loops and binaries, an unnecessarily violent culture, having eliminated the very information it needs, is often banging away with the same blunt tools that are completely inadequate to address perennial problems and contemporary chemistries of power. A bully is elected, a migration of refugees swells in number, a financial crisis makes properties worth less than nothing, an industrial disaster kills thousands, shorelines flood due to global warming, or teenagers join ISIS. If economic and military templates of causation provide no explanation, if new technologies do not provide the solution, if the consensus surrounding laws, standards or master plans provide no relief, little sense can be made of the problem. Assuming that these problems are simply impossibly deadlocked or unresponsive to rational thought, even the smartest people in the world stand with hand to brow.

These are the hackneyed plot lines of our “humanities.” The binaries of wars and the chest-beating Westphalian sovereignty of nations remain in place as darlings of history. *Homo economicus* is allowed to upstage and hold forth. Rom-coms align with the ancient folktales of a patrilineal society. Sci-fis align with ancient tragedies, and dark conspiracies foil our hero. Smart is confused with new. Empowered is confused with free. Dissent, also adopting a binary, exists in a world of enemies and innocents. Since the world’s big bullies

and bulletproof forms of power thrive on this oscillation between loop and binary, it is as if there is nothing to counter them — only more ways of fighting and being right and providing the rancor that nourishes their violence.

So how do you drop through a trapdoor and engage the flip side of these logics?

On that flip side, where nothing is new and nothing is right, there are no dramatic manifestos. But maybe there is a chance to rehearse a habit of mind that has been eclipsed. You are already able to detect, as if with half-closed eyes, a world at a different focal length. Rather than only declarations, right answers, objects and determinations, you can detect and manipulate the medium or matrix in which they are suspended and in which they change over time. Just as this *medium thinking* inverts the typical focus on object over field, maybe *medium design* can invert some habitual approaches to problem solving, aesthetics and politics.

Speaking to any discipline or treating anyone as a designer, medium design uses space to prompt productive thought about both spatial and non-spatial problems. Like those media theorists who are returning to elemental understandings of media as surrounding environments of air, water, or earth, the approach treats the lumpy, heavy material of space itself as an information system and a broad, inclusive mixing chamber for many social, political, technical networks. Space does not need the screens and sensors of the *internet of things* to make its stiff arrangements dance. It is already dancing. And even at a moment of digital ubiquity and innovation, space may be an underexploited medium of innovation with the capacity to make other information systems dumber or smarter. Not bound by notions of media as communication devices, analysts of socio-technical networks, political theorists, designers and artists among others share a scaffold of thought or engage in *medium thinking*. (See *Medium Thinking*)

The largest sociotechnical organizations of space — the repeatable formulas for formatting space all around the world — may prompt innovative thought because they are everywhere and nowhere. From the micro to the macro scale, from institutions to cities, they are too large or too widely distributed to be assessed as a discrete object with a name, a shape or an outline. They don't respond to singular solutions or determinations, and they can really only be assessed by the activity or disposition immanent in their organization as it unfolds over time and territory.

But in any context, large or small, designing the medium is managing the potentials and relationships between objects, the activity or disposition immanent in their organization. The disposition of any organization makes some things possible and some things impossible. Like a growth medium, it determines what will live or die. Like an operating system, it sets the rules of the game that link and activate the components of an organization.

Since unreasonable politics easily unravels reasonable politics, being right is a bad idea in medium design. It is too weak. It does not work against gurus and totalitarian bullies. Stock narratives of history about the succession rather than coexistence of knowledge, sci-fi futurologies, persuasions about lubricated freedoms or righteous activism do not make sense. Instead, multiplying problems can be helpful. Messiness is

smarter than newness. Obligations are more empowering than freedom. Histories can expand to include things that do not happen. Problems can be addressed with responses that do not always work.

Culture's spectacular failures together with the underexploited powers of medium inspire alternative ways to register the design imagination — form making in another key or part of speech. Inverting the authority given to declarations, master plans, standards or laws, medium design discovers extra political and aesthetic capacities in indeterminacy, discrepancy, temperament and latency in organizations.