# The Great Convergence: Future Making, Making Futures

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The science fiction author William Gibson once observed that ‘the future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed’. It’s a good line, and one that holds for pretty much any era. As new technologies, new ideas, and new challenges arrive, they hit people and places at different rates. There is, for example, a whole industry of trend forecasting, which is deeply fascinating for its particular expertise. As if in an attempt to prove Gibson’s observation, forecasters devote themselves not to the future, precisely, but rather to the study of emergent cultural dynamics. They prowl the globe on the hunt for signs of early onset. Their prey might be something as trivial as a color (Millennial Pink, anyone?) or as profoundly transformative as the displacement of resources away from hardware and into biotechnology.

It must be said that trend forecasters are not much respected by the rest of the design community. They are seen to be ambulance chasers in reverse. I’ve met several such experts in what is around the next bend, and the one thing that they all share is a disinclination to admit that their prophecies may be self-fulfilling. Futurists are often subject to a pack mentality, and if enough of them start to predict a certain trend – well, it’s not so surprising when it comes true. Yet forecasters are just one example of professional ‘futurists’, who work for large and well-capitalized companies, attempting to spot cultural waves in time for their employers to surf them towards some still-wealthier shore. Are most designers so different?

Like many people, probably, I’ve been thinking about the future a lot recently. Given recent political developments – a series of self-inflicted disasters on the part of the USA and UK – and current assessments on climate change, it seems evident that we bear a much higher collective risk than we did just two years back. It’s a challenge for us all, and for those of us in the design world, even more so. I had the opportunity to consider this last year, when I was asked to curate Beazley Designs of the Year, an annual project at the Design Museum, London. The show was composed of over sixty international projects proposed by invited nominators (academics, critics and designers), covering six areas – architecture, product, graphics, fashion, digital and transport design.

As curator for the tenth anniversary edition of this series, I decided to emphasize the political implications of the year’s designs. One of the dominant themes of the show was the experience of stateless migrants into Europe, which prompted responses like Yara Said’s Refugee Flag (based on the colors and materials of a life jacket, like the one the designer herself wore while fleeing from her native Syria). Another was protest design, exemplified most famously by the Pussyhat Project, and also by innovative initiatives like the Protest Banner Lending Library in Chicago. It wasn’t all politics, of course. There were many other designs too, all of which engaged the future in one way or another – self-driving vehicles, digital fabrication technologies, and touch-sensitive fabrics among them. The projects that seemed most significant to me, though, were the ones developed by independent activists, artists, and makers, all of whom were taking the responsibility for change into their own hands.

Much has been written, in recent years, about the implications of digital technology for design. What we seem less attentive to is the way that human making is being reshaped, and empowered, in the process. Most obviously, there are new tools for fabricating – 3D printing and the like – which open up possibilities in countless directions, most of which involve some element of handwork. Linked to these new processes is the question of scale. Unlike traditional factories, digital manufacturing platforms can be effective within very small runs, and constant variation can be introduced across a series, resulting in 'mass customization'. The impact of communication technology is also disruptive, in that it allows designers to collaborate with clients and partners worldwide instantaneously, swiftly eroding local frameworks of reference, and raising money for independent projects via crowdfunding strategies.

Another development is less obvious, but perhaps even more far-reaching in its importance. This is the decline and fall of categorical thinking. In my book, The Invention of Craft (2013), I discussed a great divergence between craft and industry, which occurred at the time of the industrial revolution. Put simply, the argument runs like this: until the advent of machine-driven mass production, there was only one way to make things – with hand tools. 'Craft' was certainly an active concept in the culture, but it did not have the associations of being slow, authentic, humane, or aesthetic. These attributed qualities were only attached to craft through juxtaposition with industry. Effectively – and this was a mighty traumatic process – the 'body' of production was split along lines of efficiency. Craft as we know it today was invented in the process. It was defined as something worthwhile, but fragile and ineffective (this, despite the fact that the term derives etymologically from the German 'Kraft', meaning power). The key role played by artisans in industry, and the capabilities of independent makers were both de-emphasized in the process.

Right now, it seems to me, we are experiencing a great re-convergence, in which the productive oppositions within modernity are being resolved through a dialectical synthesis. On one level, we might liken this current collapse of previously distinct categories to the operation of a search engine. Consider what happens when you enter a search term into a library's computer database. In that instant, what might have taken years of study to notice – the mutual relevance of studies from wholly different disciplines – is suddenly conjured, as connections between books stored under different subject headings are made immediately evident. To a certain extent, the whole world is like that now. Instead of laboriously constructed frameworks, each clearly labeled and divided from its neighbors, we now inhabit an infinitely flexible information network. The upshot is that many previously intractable debates, including those concerning design's relations to art and craft, are already largely irrelevant. We once needed to know where things were kept, and what they were called, so that we could find them. This no longer matters. Where something is kept and what it is called do not matter either; indeed, continuing to cling to those issues – or to terms like 'industrial design', 'studio craft', or 'design art' – is simply an unhelpful limitation. All such categories do is to obstruct the process of adventitious discovery that drives the present.

The dissolution of categories occurred first, and is still most evident, in the arena of circulation. When you encounter something on social media, you tend to engage it on its own terms, not as an example within a larger set. You may care about who made it, how, and where, but only as part of its specific narrative – you don't need a label to pin it down, you can always find it again. But this flexibility has no exact parallel in the physical making of things. Just as museums, which are very path-dependent institutions, are struggling to reimagine themselves to suit the new digital landscape, processes of manufacture have a great many factors built into them. That means it is hard for makers themselves to simply embrace the whirlwind.

It takes a long time, and much expense, to learn skills, acquire tools, and build out a suitable workspace. All those forms of investment militate against flexibility. Someone who has spent years training in woodwork, and has a whole shop fitted out to do it, is unlikely to drop everything to go and weave baskets. The same friction attends art schools, which increasingly find it difficult to commit to specialist equipment and skills-building; that is partly because dividing an institution up into medium-specific categories just seems backward-looking, but mainly because of the resources required.

What all this amounts to is a somewhat counter-intuitive phenomenon: the makers who are distinguishing themselves most within our rapidly changing digital environment are those who work in an assertively materialist fashion. It's comparatively easy to capture the tenor of the times in a website; much more difficult in wood, concrete or metal. Those who do manage to navigate the hyperfluid present through physical means achieve a resonance that was perhaps impossible even a decade ago; for never before has our bodily, experiential domain seemed more in need of imaginative inhabitation.

The future will never be 'well distributed', to recall Gibson's words one more time. We will probably always suffer global inequity, and huge variation when it comes to access to innovation. Making wealth is one thing, and spreading it is something different. That too is a design problem. But first things first: let's be supportive of those designers who are not content with the material world as it has been served up according to the dictates of capital. Who are reimagining it, today.