

The Softness of Things : Technology in Space and Form

Despina Papadopoulos, Spring 1010

Jasper Johns once wrote in his notebook: "Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it." In this class we investigate what it means to "do things" to objects in ways that transforms them and our relationship to them. We will experiment with materials and objects, stretching their limits and exploring their relationship to space and the self. These investigations are grounded in an understanding of the interactional possibilities of gestures, social and spatial dynamics, and on the recursive relationship between making and inventing.

Softness, modularity, adaptability and re-configurability, connectors and ways to engage the senses (and sensors), social and sustainable design are just some of the ideas and topics we examine through weekly assignments and social experiments.

Week 1: Introduction

Introduction to the class: What it means to "do something to a thing", how technology participates or affects the transformation of objects, perceptions and interactions. How can we as designers and practitioners experiment with objects and materials and create new emergencies? How are we looking at the world? How have we developed our visual literacy and how is it affected by new technologies and social realities?

Week 2: Modularity - Configurability - Adaptability

Modularity exists in all levels of the biological hierarchy. We will look into various instances of modularity, and experiment with developing our own modules which we will reuse throughout the semester. In the process we will examine camouflage, strategies of reinterpretation and reformulation, adaptation, reconfigurability, inheritance and conservation.

Week 3: Connectivity connectors and connections

In the making of new things a challenge lies in finding ways to connect them to "old" ones. When we create new connections we also create new possibilities while the lack of connections, physical or otherwise, has distinct effects. We will survey existing connectors and investigate what it entails to create new ones.

Week 4: Systems

Are connected modules a system? Are assemblages systems?
Do networks create systems? What makes a system? Methodologies, rigour, and mapping out ideas come into play as we begin to bring elements together and probe into the nature of systems.

Week 5: Sustainable Design

There is much talk for the need of sustainable design. We are in a unique position to explore “sustainability as interaction” – both figuratively and literally. We will look into Buckminster Fuller’s World Game, the lessons of Cradle-to-Cradle, and recent trends and actions in the realm of sustainable design.

Week 6: Social Design

Design is often about finding solutions to self-created “problems”. But what about finding design solutions and creating capabilities where both are scarce? How does one design for development? From Victor Papanek’s “Design for the Real World” to Amartya Sen’s “Development as Freedom” the class we will trace positions, possibilities and the complex problematics of development & design.

Week 7: Materiality / Material Culture

Is there a circular relationship between materials, innovation and invention? Is there deliberation in the development of a material culture? What is a material culture? The “materials is the mechanism” – How do new materials affect our practice? What new materials can we use and how can we extend their prescribed use? From Eva Hesse’s work to Biomimicry we will probe into the nature of materials and their uses, and stretch their limits.

Week 8: Body - “Man is the measure of all things” and human centric design

Designing tools and devices for humans. What is the methodology to follow? Design after our own image? We will look into the human body and mind, culture and practice, evaluate existing design objects and create our own variations.

Week 9: Space (architecture, form, dance)

Understanding the way we relate to space is fundamental in any investigation of interactive design. We will look into architecture, dance, social and spatial dynamics, relate them to our practice, and see what type of interventions we can come up with.

Week 10: Fort-Da; Principles of Interactivity

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud describes a game his grandson had devised – throwing objects and declaring Fort! (gone) and then retrieving them, Da! (there). We will look into this play of absence and presence and use it as a spring board for a discussion of interactivity, performance and playfulness.

Week 11: Meaning / Narrative - Presence / Awareness

With technology the possible is ever expanding. We can measure, track, quantify, visualize, sense (and so on), a vast number of data – but to what end? What role does meaning and narrative play in this process? How can objects become part of narrative, what is the “middle” of narrative? And what about notions of presence and awareness in a techno-efficient environment?

Week 12: Transformations

Technology is largely about transformation. We will retrace the themes that we have been working on throughout the semester and see how they have transformed our work. We will retrace assignments, exercises and projects we developed during the semester and synthesize them. In the process we will transform them, reevaluate their various aspects, and improve them with final transformational interventions.

*“That which exists may be transformed
What is non-existent has boundless uses” – Lao Tse*

Week 13 & 14: Class Presentations