Final reflection

DCB170 Socio-cultural sensitivity 2018-2019
University of Technology Eindhoven

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Having previously looked through the core courses of the Industrial Design bachelor, I felt disappointed that none of the subjects contained art or design history. Thus, when finding out this course covered design history, I was pleasantly surprised. It also left me feeling excited about the first assignment of creating an exhibition with the knowledge we had gained about the topic. Our exhibition about the lighter did not only mention the relevance of its different iterations during the time period in which they were designed, it also showed how large societal topics like the sustainability of a product affect how people think of it. In addition, the exhibition ultimately turned into an intervention – or a design for debate considering its descriptive nature – about the use of cigarettes and the environmental impact of disposable plastic lighters.
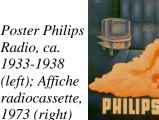
If there is one thing I learned from the first two weeks of this course, it is that a design can never be considered perfect. When looking at different iterations of lighters, from matchsticks, to refillable Zippos, to plastic BiCs, each new version seemed to be the perfected version of its predecessor. It is only when time passes and the environment around the product changes that flaws and improvements appear: Zippos are more convenient and last longer than matchsticks, BiCs are easier to use and cheaper to produce than Zippos. Only now that we are rethinking mass production and consumption, we notice the flaws of the disposable lighter. For this reason, it is clear to me that the environment in which a product resides and the society that will experience it cannot ever be ignored when designing it.

While visiting the Philips museum for this course, I was intrigued by the Philips Radio advertisement posters they had printed on postcards in the museum shop. The two cards I bought were of posters that showed beautiful young women using a Philips radio. What I found interesting about them is that they give a social context to the product they are designed to promote. An ordinary object is suddenly tied to a feeling or a lifestyle and consumers who desire or identify with a similar lifestyle are now compelled to buy the product. Seeing this social context of the products I saw in the museum gave more depth to them and made me look differently about product commercials I have seen afterwards. I have noticed that almost all commercials not only try to sell you a product, but a lifestyle or feeling as well. This insight has influenced me to think differently about design and made me consider that when designing a product, it does not suffice to 'make it look appealing', but it is more effective to let a products appearance adhere to the lifestyle of its user.

The growing public outcry for sustainability, recycling, waste reduction and the like, is changing ethics and moral values. Designers are increasingly obligated to take the production and afterlife of their product into consideration, where previously the actual use of the product was seen as the most important moral discussion to have. Freon became the new Kalashnikov. For me as a designer, it means that I will have to consider these topics as well. What interested me the most from the web-lectures, concerning this were the Tegenlicht documentary from the VPRO about the Cradle to Cradle principle and Lideweij Edelkort's predictions regarding an upcoming trend in producing locally. The latter intrigued me especially since at first it seems to conflict with the rising globalisation. Regardless, I affirm her prediction and would like to apply it to myself as a designer by averting from using materials acquired from, and product assembly in distant countries. When an entire production line – from raw materials to end-product – is done in a small or enclosed region, the sustainability of the production line is more closely managed as it has to fully conform to its environment. In addition, the use of depletable resources and harmful practices is more actively watched over as well.

In conclusion, before this course, my knowledge of different art movements, social issues and phenomena consisted merely of the fact that I was aware of their existence. The course Socio-cultural sensitivity has helped me understand in which ways they are intertwined with each other and what the role of the designer is when dealing with them. At the start of creative freedom lies the social environment of the creator. At the end lies their moral responsibility.

Poster Philips Radio, ca. 1933-1938 (left); Affiche radiocassette, 1973 (right)