Contemporary Movement (Nomadic Design)

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1   Game Workers Unite
     has a nice summary of
     worker cooperatives,
     particularly in regard
     to the gaming industry
     and its brutal "crunch"
     culture: http://www.
     gameworkersunite.org/
     worker-co-op-resource

Mainstream design—that includes all of its many disciplines such as architecture, industrial design, and graphic design—more often than not, does not promote the human right to experiment or experience. Most workplace decisions are for client retention and acquisition, and such client entities, indirectly or not, dictate the goals and ethics of an employer (i.e., agency or studio) or designer. The design profession simply promotes conformity to client brands and products through strategies based on alienation (read: individualism) and scalability. Are all clients wealth–hoarding and evil? No. But as a service industry, it's difficult for working designers to create an alternative model for their labor and livelihood when that means having to dismantle a dual–employer system (middlemen agencies and/or the high–paying corporate clients those agencies report to).

      Worker cooperatives are one such alternative: they share control, ownership, and profits of the workplace and the products of their labor; encourage all workers to help shape the direction of the group; create accountability for poor decisions of leadership; and build a sense of community from mutually respecting relationships, helping to dismantle sexism and racism in the workplace.[1] But instances of worker co–ops are more prominent in product industries, not service industries. Like artists or musicians, these product industries make something, share it, and hope for monetary or live–setting support. In such cases, an employer, and the hierarchy that comes with them, isn't necessary to produce the goods you want to share with the world. With traditional service industry models of design—which are deeply rooted in capitalism—goods are made but they are for another entity to sell and profit from. And for designers to simply make things for themselves without clients relegates their work to that of an artist. And while an artist's work is vital for fueling imagination and new realities, it doesn't have the means to literally create them on

a massive scale. Which leads to the larger issue, that the public still needs *things*: shelter, transportation, journalism, medicine, and the list goes on and on. There are necessities that require design invest–ments to explore all of the pros, cons, and use–cases for a myriad of demographics and territories. Design as a discipline simply cannot end.

However, a majority of agencies and studios root themselves in major metropolitan cities, and young graduates flock to those same cities in the hopes of finding work. Anything "cool" or established will find itself in one of these places. Sometimes these cool establishments pay a living–wage, and sometimes they don't. In the simplest of terms, cool and established clients tell us what to consume, how to consume, and when to consume, and designers are crafting the infrastructure for that behavior, making sure it stays timelessly defined and defended. In a way, designers are like police, and the questions of "Who do you protect? Who do you serve?" lead to the answers of private property and those who are wealthy. This leaves miles of territory, and the people within it, ignored, abandoned, and forgotten. There is also the issue of celebrity designers and starchitects, regardless of where they are based in the world, winning hegemonic design proposals simply because of their notoriety or wealth. This leads to a flamboyant infiltration of a place that is in need of dedicated collaboration. But what if designers uprooted from these metropolitan design bubbles and went literally anywhere else? And what if they kept uprooting themselves? What if designers and their studio entities became nomads?

Nomadism could be the concept that allows entities in the service industry of design to be worker–owned. By moving place to place, the roots of capitalism could slowly be cut as other constructs bring the profession a greater purpose and a better livelihood. At each new place, designers or studio entities don't wait for clients to come to them. They instead canvas neighborhoods and environments, asking questions and listening to the concerns of those who live there. Denizens[2] become "clients," but more importantly they are constituents deter–mining the things *they* need. Designers then take that feedback and build products or happenings that they then test. As thoughts change activities change, and strangeness and experimentation are no longer automatically dismissed as useless. With that change comes modi–fication, and more testing, until both designers and denizens can live with the results. The role of the nomadic designer is to *support* public services, initiatives, and groups with design awareness and skills. Symp–tomatic "solutions" are unwanted. Responsibility becomes something more than hitting a deadline or completing a to–do list. A measure of success isn't based on branding a territory or dressing advocacy in design vocabulary. Instead it stems from the compassionate and

2 It's worth noting the reason for using denizen instead of citizen. All people have the right to a healthy, egalitarian life, regardless of their location. Citizen only addresses those with the "right" to occupy certain land. The usage of denizen is to be inclusive of all people regardless of status, including those who have been displaced or classified as immigrants.

3   Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt.
     *The Mushroom at the End
     of the World: On the
     Possibility of Life in
     Capitalist Ruins.*
     Princeton, NJ: Princeton
     University Press, 2015.

4   Cedric Price's Potteries
     Thinkbelt proposal being
     one inspiring initiative.

generative behavior engendered from understanding who lives where, why they live there, and what they live for. Addressing that which "has been ignored because it never fit [morality's] time line of progress" becomes the reason for a designer's role to exist.[3]

A quick online search of "nomadic design" reveals images of contemporary takes on upcycled products, furniture, and architecture, similar to things found in James Hennessey and Victor Papanek's 1973 book *Nomadic Furniture*. My proposal for nomadic design, however, is not based on upcycling or frugalness alone. The things international design agencies attempt with large budgets still have a place within nomadic design—if anything, nomadic design is about reclaiming such large-scale initiatives in the name of societal necessity and collaboration. Beyond just the *what* and the *how* of making things, nomadic design is about the importance of circulative conversation in relation to identity and belonging. Yet it obviously cannot simply be a switch that designers flip one day, terminating their studio leases or quitting their agency jobs and then hitting the open road. And capitalism isn't disappearing anytime soon that the need for monetary funding won't be necessary. Especially in the United States, government funding for an "arts" initiative will be difficult to lobby for. But I do think one sector has the means to prove and iron out the logistics and importance of nomadic design, that being education.

Nomadic design education[4] would be no different than the aforementioned professional scenarios: the classroom is the world and the assignments are collaborating with denizens to survive in that world. After a year or two of introductory technical and historical courses, students and instructors would begin to work with local cooperatives or denizens. Starting from scratch, students would learn to assess their needs and values and then build their own means of transportation, shelter, and production—the collective action of the cohort determining how far the school travels for each academic year. But more importantly, this DIY culture and mentality helps to build a lifestyle, not just skills, after graduation: a lifestyle in which community life is a resource and a commitment. When students see and experience the deterioration and oppression brought upon this world, their professional views come to recognize the systems, rather than the surfaces, that need to be reassessed or dismantled. Nomadism turns a school into a mentality rather than a place and instills that mindset within students after they graduate.

In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes a unique argument for how fungi growth and commerce can be the basis to human survival in a world of capitalist destruction. Fitting for the case of nomadic design she asks, "How does a gathering

become a 'happening,' that is, greater than a sum of its parts?" Her answer is

> **contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. ... Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival.**[5]

In the professional world, the consequences of a nomadic designer's actions reveal the political nature of everything we do as a society. Presently, political design aesthetics fail because they are just a veneer or facade applied to a symptom of the cause. It does not dismantle the isolation of the design profession from society nor the divide between constituents and policy makers. Nomadic design is a political act that does not—or rather cannot, when face-to-face with fellow denizens— accept the surface level as the only space of action. Every nomadic initiative is a rehearsal—or contamination, as Tsing suggests—before it becomes a product or happening. With designers as the participants in these contagious rehearsals, the misguided ethos of "design thinking" or "problem solving"—remote or tourist-like approaches—are replaced with the ambition to understand and the dedication to follow through: desires to be entangled not just with people but also the various lifestyles and livelihoods that come with those people. And when the worker cooperative principles of nomadic design remove the profiteering middleman from policy-making—while also removing employers— the production and implementation of societal needs can be more easily addressed without *experimental* direct action needing to trickle down through a hierarchy. Thus a true democracy is represented in workflows.

The goal of nomadic design, borrowing from Brian Massumi's interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, "is not to develop a general idea (model) that would stand out and above (transcend) the bodies it subsumes; it is to create a new body at ground level. ... The end is for there to be no end, to turn collective existence into a repeatedly self-applied series of incorporeal transformations."[6] Nomadic strategies bring design to an egalitarian level by forcing the profession to be cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and community-centric. As one travels from place to place, making and establishing human relations, a purposeful network forms and the work designers build and publish becomes the infrastructure for the transfer of ideas and resources. And just like with the operations of nomadic education, this work determines the reach and longevity of a designer's practice. This isn't mindless, narcissistic infiltration. With designers' feet always to the ground—and no base, headquarters,
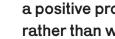
5   Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

6   Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

or web presence to run and hide behind—accountability comes to the forefront of the profession if design entities leave fellow denizens to clean up misguided failures. Everything proposed, debated, prototyped, dismantled or built stems from an urgency to move into the future together.

At this point I must again acknowledge that when design no longer serves employers and instead addresses denizens' societal needs, it will lack the monetary funding necessary to sustain itself in our presently capitalist society. While our goals are for a healthy and egalitarian anti-capitalist society, we are unfortunately nowhere near fulfilling such goals. Therefore we must consider how nomadic design functions in our present world *and* how it can transition us to the future we want. The previously proposed nomadic education initiative can certainly prove nomadic design's worth, but how do we introduce sustainability to the professional operation under capitalism?

A newfound sense of accountability could place design under government programming as a public service, giving it a dedicated budget and regulations. There are pros and cons to such government programs—as state-owned does not equate to anti-capitalist—but socialist ideas could be introduced, particularly at local-level assemblies that designers would attend as policy-makers. But there are so many bureaucratic roadblocks and hierarchical structures in government organizations that nomadic goals and intuitions would quickly be co-opted to stabilize existing wealth distribution or become focused on single-issue work.

But what if we looked at another model currently trying to transform distribution of wealth under contemporary capitalism: mutual aid. Mutual aid is not a new model of collaboration (or contamination)—many Black Panther survival programs from the 1960s and 1970s, for example, were large-scale mutual aid initiatives—and it is almost always a success, proven when governments and policing step in to shutdown the mutual aid initiative and reestablish the status quo.[7] So, understanding that mutual aid is collective coordination to fulfill what our current systems lack to provide or gatekeep us from acquiring, would defining nomadic design within a mutual aid context help it to become a transformative opportunity within a capitalist world? Consider nomadic entities as *clans*, whose manufactured goods—such as clothing, books, furniture, foods, shelter, et cetera—are an extension of their practice. Yes, this is similar to a present day *brand*, but the distinction stems from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "Schizophrenia,"

a positive process [that] is inventive connection, expansion rather than withdrawal. Its twoness is a relay to a multiplicity

> **... Not aimlessly. Experimentally. ... "Nomad thought" does not lodge itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference.**[8]

A clan is an always-moving, decentralized amoeba-like mass that "rather than reflecting the world, [is] immersed in a changing state of things."[9] The collaborative work done within the clans or with denizens highlights the uniqueness that defines each of us as either individuals or collectives. It highlights our differences and disagreements, embracing change of thoughts and opinions in order to destroy the homogeneity that the present day design profession has wrapped our world in. Any dissent stemming from clashes of uniqueness are acts of transparency in order to build trust for the broader goals of clans' movements. It's the aforementioned accountability being enacted not just internally within a clan but externally between clans. This engendered heterogeneity and transparency allows clans to be inclusive and welcoming of denizens' interested in joining and providing their unique skillset, broadening the definitions of "design" and dismantling the racist, misogynist, and elitist gatekeeping aspects that plague the present day profession. In comparison, a brand sells nothing more than a logo of its time for the sake of privatized expansion. Obviously a change in nomenclature does not equal a living wage under capitalism, but this distinction between clan and brand begs the question: why do we need to sell our ideas to a big brand, whose only use of such ideas is to make an even greater profit for themselves, when designers can just make the products and infrastructure that address our needs? Big brands don't fear activism or charity—they fear being obsolete. So by organizing decentralized clans, built upon imaginative and democratic instincts, can we actually destroy institutionalized markets and change what it means to survive in both a capitalist and anti-capitalist world? Quoting Tsing again,

> **In popular American fantasies, survival is all about saving oneself by fighting off others. The "survival" featured in U.S. television shows or alien-planet stories is a synonym for conquest and expansion. Please open yourself to another usage ... that staying alive—for every species—requires livable collaboration. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination.**[10]

Although societal needs are at the forefront of nomadic design practices, the embodiment of Tsing's collaborative definition of survival does not abolish visual explorations of attraction nor visceral expressions. Such facets are vital to the entanglement of life, and those

8   Massumi, Brian. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.

9   Ibid.

10 Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

conversations run parallel to those about necessity so that the
two may rearrange and influence each other. Looking to find a sense
of where we are going, nomadic design leaves no rock unturned.
It's not just a reassessment of our physical interactions and output,
but also an effort to redirect our intentions away from normative
obsessions (e.g., rudimentary and morally–driven visual solutions/trends,
or heteronormative/patriarchal/racist/capitalist schemes) and
toward a willingness to engage with strange(r's) thoughts: an urgency
to shift discourses—design or otherwise—from alienated identity
to generative belonging.