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Tenderness of Form

On the shift toward tender sensitivity – the role of relations, emotions, and empathy in design.

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At first glance, tenderness and design do not appear to have much in common. It could be even argued that tenderness is a characteristic undesirable in a good designer, who should be rational, insightful, and smart – but not tender. A good designer cares for the quality of design: its functionality, usability, and form. A tender designer, on the other hand, might be seen as unprofessional, overly guided by emotions, and indecisive.

In her Nobel lecture, Olga Tokarczuk points out that tenderness "appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our 'self.'"[1] Does tenderness in this sense not lie at the foundation of good design? Certain iconic pieces of architecture and design offer the best proof that what failed projects lack is precisely tender sensitivity. Le Corbusiere's *Unité d'habitation*, a model for all apartment buildings, overwhelms us with the enormity of its size, its truly inhuman scale. Juicy Salif, Philippe Starck's famous lemon-juicer resembling a three-legged spider, is devoid of sensitivity in terms of both proportions and the choice of the material. Some versions of the squeezer may be damaged by the acid contained in the lemon juice. These are but two of many well-known examples.

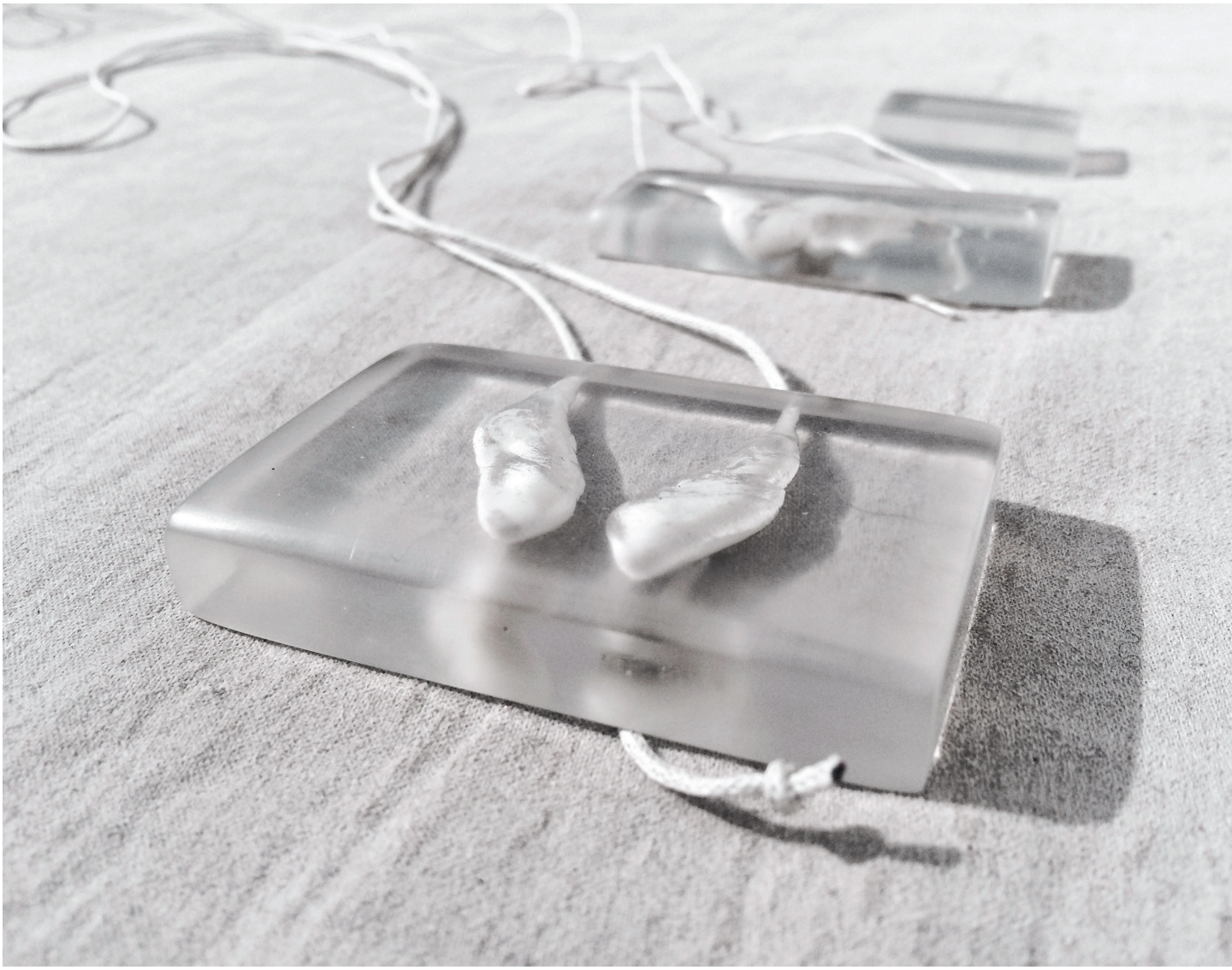
Tenderness is a relational emotion, not one that exists in and of itself, like joy or sadness. The etymology of English *tender* harks back to offering an outstretched hand, giving rise to a conceptual network embracing such meanings as gentle, young, and soft. Similarly, Polish *czuły* is based on a root of *feeling*, and its meanings embrace care-giving, empathetic, sensitive, kind, soft, and emotional. It might appear that these notions belong mainly to the context of family or interpersonal relations that are based on closeness. But – if we follow the Polish Nobel prize winner's train of thought – could tenderness not become the *modus operandi* of public or formalized relations, or even consumer relations?

Tenderness in design could be seen through several prisms. However, I would like to start from the one that I regard as quite obvious, namely that of an object woven into the history of tender relations between people.

The relationship between people and objects

Tokarczuk starts her Nobel lecture by describing a radio that had "a green eye and two dials – one to regulate the volume, the other for finding a station. This radio later became my great childhood companion; from it I learned of the existence of the cosmos." Without that radio, the Nobel prize winner's relations with her mother would not have been the same: "When as a little girl I would look at that picture, I would feel sure that my mom had been looking for me when she turned the dial on our radio." Similarly, objects that serve as tender intermediaries in relations between two people are described by Marcin Wicha in the book *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem* [Things I Didn't Throw Away], for which he won Poland's prestigious Nike Literary Award. He writes with great tenderness about his parents' daily shopping trips to town:

[1] English trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, www.nobelprize.org. © The Nobel Foundation 2019.



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Series 1 of the Ritu jewelry collection. A set of necklaces for the menstrual, ovulation, and premenstrual phase of the female cycle, Kamila Iżykowicz, 2016

Mother and father would buy small, useless things. Little teapots. Pocketknives. Lamps. Mechanical pencils. Flashlights. Inflatable travel pillows, spacious cosmetic bags, and a medley of ingenious gadgets (…). Every purchase was based on ritual (…). They would look at a thing. Ask about the price. Conclude they couldn't afford it. Return home. Suffer. Shake their heads (…). They would spend the following days discussing that unattainable lamp. Wondering where they would put it. Reminding each other that it was too costly. The lamp lived with them.[2]

In the life of Wicha's parents, the lamp was an intermediary in their relationship – it helped create it and was a pretext for conversations. In short, it was woven into the everyday dynamics of their relationship. As Marek Krajewski points out in his essay *Przedmiot, który uczłowiecza* [An Object That Makes One Human], objects not only are intertwined with our life (and death, as demonstrated by Wicha's novel) but also determine who we are as people:

> People are not objects, but where there are no objects, there is likewise nothing human. The relationship between people and objects, despite fundamental yet often disputed differences between them and us, is therefore symbiotic in its nature.[3]

The lamp that Wicha's parents wanted to buy so badly also helped them discover themselves – their tastes, preferences, and likes. Although it was not yet physically present in their apartment, it represented above all the unique emotional states and habits characteristic only of this triangle, of the tender relationship between people and an object. Tokarczuk sums this up very aptly: "Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it

[2] English trans. of this fragment A. Król & D. Sax.

[3] English trans. of this fragment A. Król & D. Sax.

The Lurving sofa by Ikea, designed for pets

a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk."

Dialogue with our own bodies

It is likewise interesting to observe how modern-day designers are shifting their interest towards discovering the human body and experiencing it with a greater amount of tender sensitivity. As part of her diploma project, Kamila Iżykowicz created pieces of jewelry that she called "Ritu." She filled them with three types of aromatic substances: common sage, clary sage, and animal musk. The scents are released when you pull at the strings embedded in each piece. Their characteristics correspond to the changing phases of a woman's menstrual cycle: "from the most energetic and cleansing phase, through the one associated with sexuality and the desire to procreate, to the one that reminds us of the need for isolation and helps alleviate the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome." When designing her menstruation jewelry, Iżykowicz relied on women's intimate knowledge of their own bodies. Instead of resorting to the dominant paradigm of medicalization and detached monitoring of the body, she encourages women to tenderly observe the changes taking place in their bodies.

Empathic design

Other examples of an openly articulated shift towards tenderness in the design world include campaigns in the field known as empathic design. In Poland, this term was popularized thanks to the exhibition "Empathy, now!", curated by Michał Bachowski, and selected events as part of the Biennale Warsaw. In his famous book *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* from the 1970s, the professor and designer Victor Papanek aptly pointed out that designers devoted their talent, work, and attention to benefit of the world's richest 1%. Mainstream – and therefore commercial – design still remains very distant from empathic insight into the real lives and problems of users (as opposed to the lives and problems forcefully attributed to personas). The projects from the fields of architecture, design, technology, and services selected by Bachowski are examples of solutions that are addressed to the rest of humanity, including the growing number of those in need, war and climate refugees, and those affected by natural disasters.

In the context of the Polish initiatives presented as part of the "Empathy, now!" exhibition, it is worth mentioning Jarmiła Rybicka's project called Conflict Kitchen. It is a place that offers legal employment to refugees and operates as a social-work enterprise. "They differ greatly in terms of the countries and cultures that they come from, their age, and the moments they are at in their lives. Previously, they also did different things, usually very distant from gastronomy. Essentially, the only thing that they have in common is the fact that at a certain point they all found themselves in Poland, and it was not entirely their choice," one of the people linked to Conflict Kitchen says. The place enables its guests to explore

the real tastes of different cuisines of the world and, most importantly, offers the possibility of interpersonal contact and integration for people from different cultures who do not know one another. In the context of migrations in the 21st century, empathy will be an increasingly important attitude and an important topic in design.

In the 21st century, commercial design should find an identity different from the one that it had at the end of the 20th century, which involved seducing consumers with attractive forms in order to boost sales. The designer's efforts are addressed not to so much to a customer or consumer in the traditional sense, as to a human being: a child, a pregnant woman, a mother with a child, an elderly person, a disabled person, a person with a mental illness, a homeless person, or a migrant.

Non-anthropocentric design

Tenderness in design also involves broadening the group of those who benefit from design processes. Some time ago, the furniture giant Ikea created a collection called Lurvig specifically with dogs and cats in mind. It includes beds, scratching mats, bowls, dosing containers, collars and miniature copies of Ikea's permanent-range furniture pieces, such as the Klippan sofa – all adjusted to the size of pets. The collection was designed by a Spanish studio in collaboration with a veterinarian, which allowed the Lurvig range to accommodate specific needs of different cat and dog breeds and their typical behaviors.

Until recently, architecture and designed focused exclusively on humans, attempting to diagnose and address their complex and constantly changing needs. The Ikea collection is consistent with the trend towards non-anthropocentric design for plants and animals – design that aims not so much to improve the material culture in which people currently live as to take into account above all other species by empowering them in architecture and design processes.

In the modern-day world, many architects and designers seek to see the reality past their own perspective, namely the one of the human species. Created by architects and designers, the platform Architecture for Dogs presents 13 pieces of architecture that allow dogs and their human companions to reexamine their human-animal relations with fresh eyes. Atelier Bow-Wow, a Tokyo-based architecture firm founded in 1992, is famous for designing public-access and commercial buildings in Asia, Europe, and the United States. As part of the Architecture for Dogs projects, the studio designed a platform for dachshunds that allows these dogs to reach human eye-level. Due to their disproportionately long bodies, dachshunds have difficulty jumping on a chair. Architects therefore designed a piece of furniture that allows them to meet the eyes of humans and people to lie on their back. The platform is made of layers resembling multiple stories, that are placed on horizontal structures so that a dachshund can climb them safely. The dog ramp is not only a great piece of design that addresses the needs of a specific dog breed but also an example of non-anthropocentric design that recognizes unique non-human relations.[4]

Creating the probable

Tenderness in design reflects attitude to the Otherness of objects, humans, or animals. Designers have power over matter and can manipulate their surroundings and the relations in it. In a sense, they know everything and see everything. Just like the tender narrator described by Olga Tokarczuk: "Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us." A tender designer examines the way in which things are interconnected. Designing also means telling stories – about what is possible and what is impossible. A designer's advantage over others lies in his or her power over what we imagine, which can change human thinking.

> In the modern-day world, many architects and designers seek to see the reality past their own perspective, namely the one of the human species.

I believe that tenderness is born out of recognition of one's privileged position in the world. And that design has extraordinary tools to change the ways in which things are connected into a whole. ■

[4] I study the topic of non-anthropocentric design together with Dr. Agata Szydłowska as part of a grant funded by the National Programme for the Development of Humanities for the project "*Kartografie obcości, inności i w(y)kluczenia*" ["Cartographies of Strangeness, Otherness, and (Ex)(In)clusion"] led by Prof. Magdalena Środa. So far, there have been two exhibitions, namely "Zoepolis. Design for Plants and Animals" at the BWA Wrocław gallery and "Zoepolis. Design for Weeds and Pests" in the Nośna Gallery in Kraków, as well as the scientific papers: "*Zoepolis. W stronę dizajnu poza paradygmatem antropocentrycznym*" (https://kulturapopularna-online. pl/resources/html/article/details? id=157449&language=pl) and "Zoepolis. Non-anthropocentric design as an experiment in multi-species care" (https://archive.nordes.org/index.php/n13/ article/view/468/439). A book on non-anthropocentric design will be published in 2020.

Further reading:

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