DESIGN, RES AND RESPUBLICA



In Tokyo for EPIC – Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference. 6th edition. [Link]

Some summary points from my keynote.

How could I not respond to Kenya Hara's wonderful opening keynote and his emphasis on the dialectic of making and its deep connection with human being? [Link]

The range of research techniques and methods that I have seen gathered under the headings of design thinking, design research, design anthropology, ethnography in industry and similar terms is truly impressive (a neat introduction is the IDEO method cards – [Link] available as an iPhone App – [Link]). The expertise of so many practitioners is exemplary. Academic anthropology can look very narrow and complacent in comparison.

I followed Kenya in focusing less on these processes of research and more on the object of ethnographic research – people, things, places. After all, a most significant drive to research is to improve *human*-centered design.

I have set myself something of a mission over the last year or so to raise questions about just what the human in human-centered design is. And I suggest that there's no better place to start than with the Humanities, that treasure house of study of human qualities, experiences and cultural achievement. Questions then of ontology – of human *being*.



Corinthian aryballos (7th century BCE) – a total social fact – the distribution of human being through things

Archaeology encompasses the Arts and Humanities, the Social, Human and Natural Sciences, and offers a long term perspective. I told a few archaeological stories about things like this little perfume jar (to be found also on my wiki web site – [Link])

Message – think of things as assemblages, bundles of materials, features, potentials, affordances, values, even different times – think of how they gather and connect people and possibility.

Message – think of the human as being distributed through these assemblies and gatherings.

(This is why it is so right to hold that better design will come from an emphasis not so much on a particular product as on what it may offer – focus more on experience, interaction, service, platform – the assemblages.)

A word that means "thing" and captures all this is the Latin RES.

And it is entirely right to think in a collective way – RES PUBLICA is the commonwealth, the state, the assembly of the people and their goods, cultural and political ecologies. Keep in mind the *missing masses* in these assemblies that are our human being – not just things, but other species too, plants, animals, bacteria, viruses.

Have a look at the range of meanings and usage of RES – [Link]

In such an ontology of distributed human being, the apparent substantiality of a person or artifact is simultaneously vacancy, emptiness, openness perhaps; and the past haunts, present in its absence. We are no longer faced with the problem of connecting, for example, tangible and intangible, materials and immaterial values, pasts and presents, functions and emotions, people and their goods: these are already connected. The task is to discover how.

Under such an ontology, how do we perform research? What is the way, the DŌ of ethnography, in the terms of the conference theme?

- look to the qualities of human being – the quiddities and haecceities, the qualities of sustainable human living, and tell their story, lest we forget

- methodology – don't look for tight systematics – plunge IN MEDIAS RES, into the imbroglios – be pragmatic and opportunistic

- the challenge is one of re-presentation (in the political sense too), of giving voice, speaking-for, witnessing

- consider research (ethnographic, design, contextual, whatever) as intervention in the RES PUBLICA

- intervention in cycles of ideation/design/manufacture | exchange and distribution | consumption | reuse | discard – a political economy

I ended with an exhortation to keep in focus the human in human-centered design – a purpose, a care to enrich human being.



Vesalius (16th century) — inhabitation — dissection reveals the architecture of human life, set in the ruins of the past