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# ZELLNERPLUS

PETER ZELLNER

Design as an Extension of Art Practice / Part 1  
03/06/2011



1964 Jaguar E type 3.8 liter

On January 28th 2011, the [Pacific Design Center](#) in Los Angeles, California, in association with the [Art Los Angeles Contemporary Art Fair](#) presented a round table discussion with Los Angeles based Architect [Peter Zellner](#), former MOMA curator Christopher Mount, Los Angeles artist Justin Beal. Led by Bay Area conceptual artists Eric Gibbons and Tom Borden of the [Muistardeaux Collective](#). The discussion topic was "Design as an Extension of Art Practice." The event was conceived and organized by Helen Varola, curator/director, [Design Loves Art](#) programming at the Pacific Design Center, West Hollywood. Here is what was said:

## PART 1: Design and/as Art

### Muistardeaux Collective:

We would like to welcome you to the round table "Design as an Extension of Art Practice," a discussion on the relative successes and failures in the cross over or the grey zone, between art and design– the way the two are thought of and executed. Let's first introduce our speakers. Justin?

**Justin Beal:** My name is Justin Beal and I am a sculptor based in Los Angeles.

**Christopher Mount:** I'm Christopher Mount. I've been a museum director and curator. I worked at MOMA for fifteen years as a Curator of Architecture and Design, and I was, until recently, the Director of the Pasadena Museum of California Art. I've also been the Editor in Chief of *ID Magazine*, which no longer exists. I'm basically a design historian.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** We're the Muistardeaux Collective from San Francisco, California and Peter Zellner, is principal of ZELLNERPLUS, an architectural firm based here in Los Angeles. He's also a faculty member at Southern California Institute of Architecture where he co-coordinates the Future Initiatives program. So we can probably just jump into it but after having the discussion on our earlier conference call, it sounds like it would be interesting to hear you describe your definition of what design encompasses.

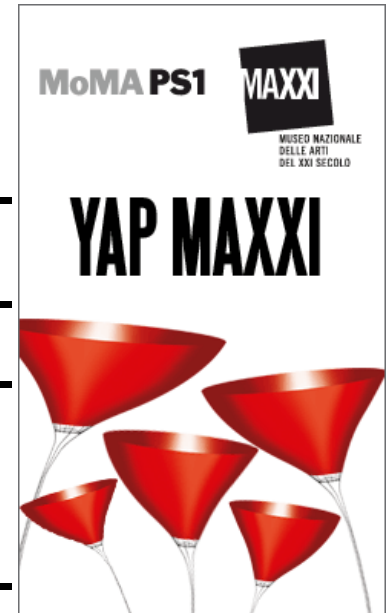
**Christopher Mount:** Well, design is really very simple. I don't know why it becomes such a big deal. Design is really anything you can use, anything that has a function. That's a Marxist way of looking at it, but basically a piece of art is something that doesn't necessarily have a function. That's a definition of

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fine art. It's pleasing and it's wonderful to look at and so on but you don't tend to use it as a tray, you don't get in it and drive to work like you do a piece of design. That's not to say that design can't be as beautiful as work of art, it's just that you also can use it. There are cross-overs nowadays and there are a lot of people, particularly artists, using design as a jumping off point for something else, for instance making tables that you can't necessarily use. Frank Gehry is a good example of somebody who is on the other side of that approach because he's an architect who makes roofs that look like sculpture.



Frank Gehry, Fish Necklace, Tiffany & Co

**Justin Beal:** It's hard to argue with that definition.

**Christopher Mount:** Thank you! Finally someone agrees with me! I teach a lot and I have students who argue with me about this issue of what is design and what is art all the time. I have to tell them "no, you don't serve drinks on a Picasso painting. That's not a tray, even if you put drinks on it's still not a tray."

**Justin Beal:** I think, at least with my own work, where I engage design is in using the expectation of design's functionality in the art context— the way a functional object or an object that has some kind of purpose. Something that has different kind of set of associations or expectations than that of a traditional fine art object interests me. How you can employ that presence that it has in the direction of art making to change the expectations of an art object is compelling. But it's important to still appreciate a clear distinction between the two realms. What happens when you drag one thing into the other? Or deny the functionality of it by calling a sculpture a chair then it's no longer a...

**Christopher Mount:** You can't sit on it. I had a friend who had a Robert Wilson chair that was made out of chicken wire and he had a big party and somebody thought they could sit on it, they sat on it and they destroyed it. It looked like a chair but it wasn't meant to be sat on so it wasn't really a chair. Right? I mean it's evocative of a chair but it's not a chair.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Right. So where does that leave us in terms of design as an extension of conceptual art practice? What about pre-designed materials used in sculpture?

**Justin Beal:** What do you mean by pre-designed?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Like something from Home Depot that has a function but you're rendering it non-functional by calling it fine art but it's loaded with prescribed content.

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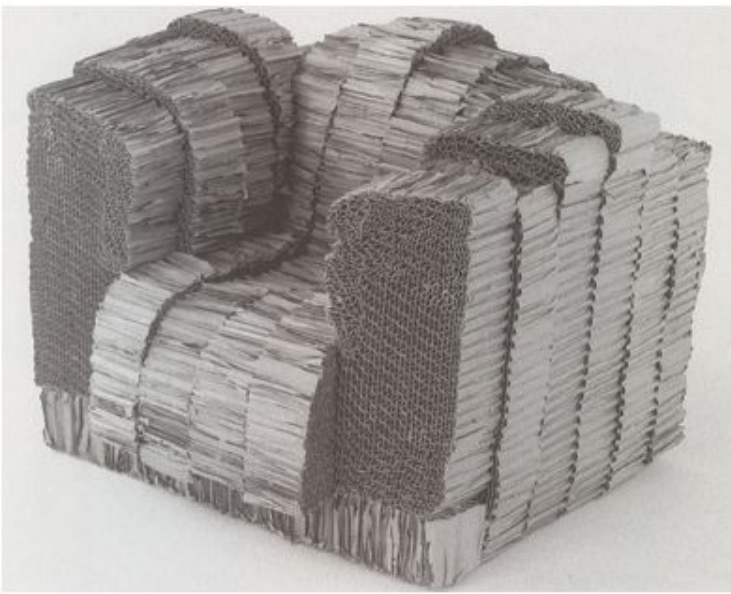


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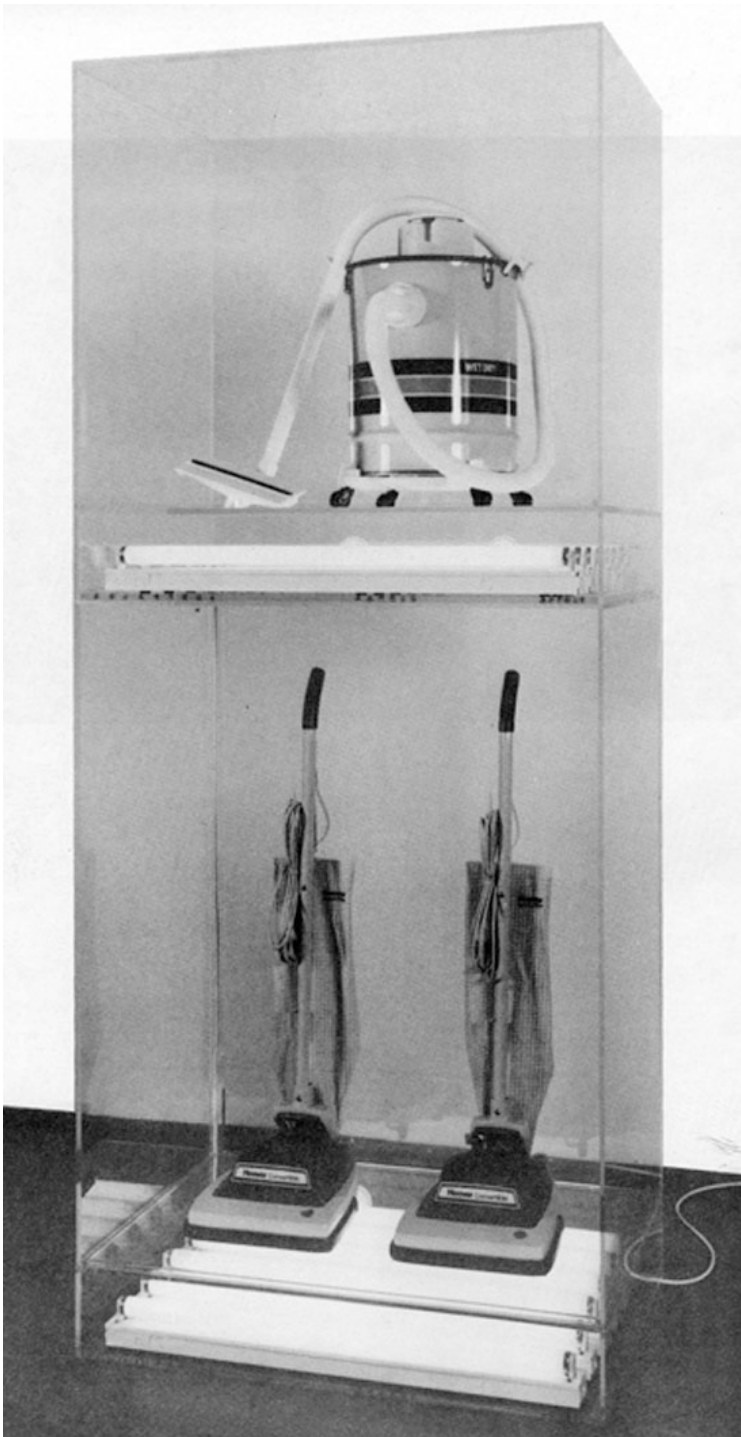
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Frank Gehry, Grandpa Beaver, chair, 1987

**Justin Beal:** Even more than prescribed content, I think there is some kind of physical relationship there then. If you walk into a room and there is a chair in the middle of the room you have a very different kind of haptic response to that chair than a similarly sized object. So somehow you establish a sort of sense of scale and a sense of physicality with a chair that you might not attribute to a stone or a sculpture in its simplest form. What is interesting to me is how that can contribute to work somehow. You feel differently standing in front of a table than you do standing in front of a sculpture in a traditional sense because we have a whole pre-programmed physical relationship to tables because we deal with them constantly. That to me is interesting. That changes the nature of an object because you understand it as having functionality.

**Christopher Mount:** It also depends on where you put something, where it is placed, and the context of where something is. I think of somebody like Jeff Koons who put vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas boxes. You know, those are works of art, sort of Post Pop or whatever you want to call them. They're works of art but they are also really just vacuum cleaners. I used to work at MOMA and MOMA was the first museum to place to an automobile on a pedestal and say, "Look at this not as an automobile but look at its lines look at its shape, enjoy it." When I was there I acquired a Jaguar E type, something John Elderfield, Head of the Painting and Sculpture Department at MOMA, said that was the most beautiful thing at the museum. He was absolutely convinced that the XKE was the most beautiful thing at the museum; it still didn't make it a piece of art, but you know, they are beautiful cars.



Jeff Koons, New Hoover Convertibles, Shelton Wet/Dry Doubledecker, 1981–86, acrylic, fluorescent lights, two Hoover Convertible vacuum cleaners and one Shelton Wet/Dry 99, 41×29". Image courtesy of Daniel Weinberg Gallery

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Do you think in a way that goes a step beyond or transcends the question of whether that was intended in the design or not? For example, Walt Disney World is a classic example of grandiose and very elaborate design but also with an inherent element to it that in some ways makes all other art meaningless. The scope of it.

**Christopher Mount:** A great example is beauty is not always the designer's intention is what you're saying. There are some things like the Stealth Fighter that I would argue are beautiful. Those planes really are amazing objects but they're not designed to be beautiful, they're designed to avoid radar signals. A Formula One race car is one of those things that ends up being kind of beautiful in the way a dolphin is beautiful or a submarine is beautiful because the shapes work with hydrodynamics.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Well where would you- in that mindset- put symphonic composition?

**Christopher Mount:** You mean about beauty?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Well in terms of having structural integrity to design? You're following a form even if you are Sun Ra or Frank Zappa you're definitely following the form but you're also stepping beyond pure function and giving it something that's intangible.

**Christopher Mount:** Well music is hard. I don't know if music has the same structure. There is a little more variety in what is beautiful or what people enjoy musically. We could all sit down and agree that something, more or less a work of art, is beautiful. If we had a Rothko here, most people would say "Yeah that's beautiful even if they didn't like Abstract Expressionism. A piece of music, Beethoven's, Iron Maiden...that's harder to judge or agree about.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Peter, we just jumped right into the question of design as an extension of art practice but also conceptual art practice. The first thing that led us there was the definition of design. What is your definition?



Frank Gehry, Superlight, Chair, 2004, Emeco

**Peter Zellner:** I think at this moment design also has something to do with the monetization of the design act. It is important now to separate out the act of design, which is often conceptual or creative or sometimes disciplinary, from the commercialization of design acts. I say this because in the context of the art world it seems to me that design is being marketed as a commodity, an investment grade commodity, which just like art, can be evaluated and collected as something that delivers a return on an investment. This definition of design is very different from how the Bauhaus or the Soviet Avant-Garde conceptualized design as a populist activity. They thought of design for the people, or rather they believed that the design act brought some value to a society. I think that if you look at things like the Milan Furniture Fair you see that really it's a very big business these days and far more about pleasing elites than serving a broader public.

**Christopher Mount:** Well that's a whole other question. I still think that a piece of something that you use is a piece of design. But the market has become more wide-spread. People are looking to collect more and more things. Watch the *Antiques Roadshow*, everybody thinks that they have something worth a million dollars. Contemporary art has become so expensive that the next thing for people to look at is contemporary design.

**Peter Zellner:** Yes, but if you look at something like Shaker furniture you find examples of design objects that are designed within a community or a social setting, that have absolutely nothing to do with marketing. Some of it really just emerged out of a culture that had necessities. Those necessities were addressed through a communal discussion about what a chair was or what a table was or what a mirror stand was. Some of those Shaker objects are really beautiful but they were evolved in a culture that was largely religious and very particular about its practices, not as part of a secular marketing campaign. So, design is also a cultural practice, and I think it can be a social or even political practice.





Gaetano Pesce, Rag Chair, 1972

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And then it ultimately gets exoticized, and thus the resistance to that kind of crossover.

**Peter Zellner:** Well, again I think first you have to separate out the idea of design as an activity versus design as the creation of an artifact. The artifact basically is the commodity object but the activity of design itself doesn't have to produce anything.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Right.

**Christopher Mount:** Or it can produce something on a computer screen that is something or isn't something. Certainly, software is design but there isn't really anything there.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** As far as contemporary artists go, do you see many artists employing design in the fine arts?

**Justin Beal:** I would argue that it's not even a select group at this point. It's just something that has become taken for granted. Essentially, there was a moment at the beginning of Modernist sculpture when the sculpture came off the pedestal. At that point in the conversation any object was open to being a sculptural object and in the forty years since then there have been different actions taken in directions that conflated the two realms, sculpture and design. There are artists making design objects and marketing them as art—this goes to idea of monetization that Peter is addressing. The way an object is sold is an important way of understanding how design is essentially a commercial undertaking. How we understand how these objects position themselves in relation to commercialism within the art world is important. For instance, consider how Franz West chairs are bought and sold and used as furniture objects in galleries or how Jean Prouvé's is work being brought into the art world as art. All these things were made in series but are being sold in galleries as if they were singular one-off objects. The way this work has been bought and sold informs this discussion more so than the way those artists are addressing design or art.



Franz West, Uncle Chair, 2006

**Peter Zellner:** Roy McMakin is a great artist who basically makes furniture as art that also passes as furniture. It's very good well-crafted functional furniture that also seems to be situated within an art practice.

**Christopher Mount:** You could also spend hours talking about craft. That's something in between.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** So you consider that to be a different beast altogether or somehow...

**Christopher Mount:** A vase is not a vase. There are plenty of craft vases. What is it Littleton? Littleton makes great vases but you can't get a flower in them. It's a piece of glass. Tom Patti sells his glass pieces for seventy to eighty thousand dollars. They're gorgeous. He blows them using a window glass that's kind of green. But, you wouldn't put a flower in a tiny eighty thousand dollar vase. Another example is Shepard Fairey. I think he is totally uninteresting as a graphic designer, totally mediocre. Yet he has a career in something in between, but no one is really willing to admit that he is just a mediocre graphic designer. I don't know what he is really. He's a poster artist but he's I don't know what he is.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** He's persistent.

**Peter Zellner:** I think there are a lot of individuals who *pass* or who cross and move from one discipline into another and somehow avoid the usual scrutiny. I could name a number of artists who make architecture that is deplorable. If I were to submit that architecture to a community of architects, it would not do so well. But in the context of the art world it passes. I could also suggest that there are a number of architects who make art that's also not so great, seen from the art world perspective. You know, Frank Gehry makes jewelry, but do I know if it is good jewelry? I really don't know but because of his aura and reputation I would say I like it. The reputation of the designer precedes the work. And if the reputation is good you are predisposed to like the work. So the jewelry he did for Tiffany has the aura of Frank Gehry all over it and so you don't look at it with the same lens that you might look at more generic jewelry design. This is the issue, when you start crossing over you start changing the lenses you use to view art or design. It is actually very interesting because suddenly you look at something and you realize that it has multiple readings.



Thomas Patti, Blown, laminated plate glass vase, 1976, MOMA Collection

**Muistardeaux Collective:** So would you say the same thing about John Waters and his paintings?

**Peter Zellner:** I don't actually know them.

**Christopher Mount:** Neither do I.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Well, you can just imagine a John Waters painting.

**Peter Zellner:** I would imagine it would be cute.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And his reputation would precede him?

**Peter Zellner:** Yes, for sure.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And the idea that maybe design happens to be a pretty big part of the fact that anything crossing over into art starts to land on uncertain ground. Why is that?

**Peter Zellner:** A lot of artists have successfully transitioned to making films. Who made *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Julian Schnabel.

**Peter Zellner:** That was a great film. So Schnabel passes as a really good filmmaker. I also think that some architects, for instance Tony Smith, make better artists. Smith was not a very good architect but he found his voice as a sculptor. Ironically I find his sculpture very inspiring architecturally.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** I think that's a good place to investigate. So why don't we talk about people that you get excited when you think about this question because they make you see it in a different way?

**Christopher Mount:** This is off the point but it's important for me because I just wrote a book on this Ted Norioka. He is a Japanese artist but he was really a poster designer. Norioka was most prevalent in the 60's, 70's and 80's. He was friends with Yoko Ono, friends with the Beatles- a major figure in Japan, a major cultural figure. What he created were posters, but they were not advertisements. They are things that sell in galleries. They are brilliant- he is like Murakami before Murakami.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Right.

**Peter Zellner:** I like Andrea Zittel's work a lot. If I were to submit her work to the standards by which I would judge furniture design by a furniture designer, maybe it would not hit home for me. However, if I look at it within the context of her practice as an artist, and again I have to shift my perspective, then I can appreciate it. Then I think it is remarkable. So, one of the standards by which designers and architects judge things usually has something to do with the degree of virtuosity or accomplishment associated with the, let's say, eloquence of the object. Is it a beautiful chair? Is it well finished? Is it a well-made building? I think designers and architects have fairly conservative standards, I certainly do, about what a refined or eloquent object or space actually is. In general, if you make uncomfortably unresolved



work like Frank Gehry did in the 70's, you get attacked and it is controversial. Gehry crossed the line into art with his architecture but then the artists yelled at him and said "Get back into your camp, you're an architect!" That was the whole Richard Serra-Frank Gehry dispute. That said, if I look at design by artists, or architecture by artists, I am usually comfortable allowing my standards to slip. Standards, that's a judgmental word right there, that's a pejorative. I will admit that I'm rather inspired by Gaetano Pesce. He was prominent in the 70's less well known in the States now. He made really sloppy work but it was really exciting. You look at that work now, especially in the context of some of the things that Frank Gehry or Greg Lynn are pursuing, then Pesce seems way ahead of the curve. This is largely because he was an artist who came at things like making chairs without any of the hang ups that professional designers, industrial designers, or architects would struggle with to get that sloppy. So that sort of freedom, I guess, is a part of art that is harder to capture in design or architecture.



Roy McMakin, Untitled, Found chair, plywood, enamel paint, 2008. Image Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

**Justin Beal:** Pesce is a particularly good example in every way because his practice was designed to undermine fundamental things you take for granted in design; like creating serial editions of objects that are each unique. He's constantly trying to undermine the confines of design. Pesce will make a series of one hundred vases but each one will be different because they are extruded plastic denying the serialized production that you associate with design.

**Peter Zellner:** If you look at something like Roxy Paine's work, those SCUMAK drippy things, or Greg Lynn's more recent investigations and then you look at Pesce's work as a designer in the 70's you'll find very interesting alignments formally. I enjoy making those sorts of connections across disciplines.

**Christopher Mount:** I wouldn't want to live with Pesce's work. I could have one chair to look at but you wouldn't want to sit in it. I have furniture at home and my wife is always saying, "Why do we have that chair?" And I just say that I just like to look at it. When I was at MOMA, many years ago, we had this Braun toaster by Reinhold Weiss and it was just beautiful, just all steel. A lady wrote a letter to Arthur Drexler, the Director of the Architecture and Design Department and it said: "Dear Mr. Drexler, I saw that toaster, I loved it, I bought it, but it burns my toast!!!! Every damn time it burns my toast! What should I do???" And he wrote her back and said: "Dear Madam, I suggest you take the toaster, put it in the living room and look at it. Buy yourself a GE to make your toast!"

**Peter Zellner:** That's a funny story. There are a lot of design objects that actually fail from a functional perspective. I have a Frank Gehry Superlight chair that is part of an edition. Mine is number 96 of 500. He did a very special chair for Emeco which is the aluminum chair company that made those really remarkable and very lightweight chairs for the Navy and now the very fashionable, Phillipe Starck versions of the same chair. Anyway, Gehry did his own aluminum chair and if you were to describe it is the most delicate idea of a chair you could imagine. It is literally just a sheet of aluminum that bends up and over and is folded at the corners. Then it is supported by two very slender bent U-shaped rods, just two, and those have a sleeve on them and the sleeve is actually glued to the interior fold of the aluminum sheet. I tried to sit in it and it broke. Now, I glued it back but I don't sit in it, I just like to look at it.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** It is sold as a chair?

**Peter Zellner:** It is sold as a Frank Gehry edition of 500 chair. Like a print. It is Frank Gehry's idea of what you can do to a chair to reduce its presence almost to nothing.

**Christopher Mount:** It's about minimalism. It's about the idea of a chair as opposed to an actual chair you can use.

**Peter Zellner:** It's a beautiful chair.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** You were pretty bummed that you sat in it.

**Peter Zellner:** Yeah, I felt like I just ruined my investment. I mean, it can be fixed but I think if you look at a lot of Gehry's furniture, there is a lot that is non-functional basically.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Do you think that when you then take a step into architecture you can get away with a lot less?

**Peter Zellner:** No not really. Usually that's how you can get sued.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Right!



Gaetano Pesce, Lava Vase

**Peter Zellner:** Do you know Peter Eisenman? He’s getting to be a senior figure in the American architectural community but he’s still something of notorious bad boy genius. He designed the Wexner Center in Ohio back the 1980s. This was in the midst of his Deconstructivist phase and he basically rendered nonfunctional a lot of the art spaces in the museum. He did this by doing things like hanging incomplete columns in the middle of an art space. Eisenman called them columns. Rafael Moneo called them prisms because Moneo argued that a column must touch the ground to be a column. I think for Eisenman, however, the Wexner’s hanging columns are more like ideological columns, maybe functionless columns or anti-design columns. As far as I know most curators hate working in that institution, and they hate the building but maybe that’s a good thing.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** He took architecture to an emotional art form.

**Peter Zellner:** Absolutely, but he also said “fuck the program, why do I have to make a white box, that in itself is a prison for the artist, why can’t I make something the artist has to fight with?” Now, the artists get up in arms because they don’t like architects making spaces that conflict with, frankly, general commercial art hanging practices for lack of a better word, but at least the politics of design are on the table at the Wexner. That is my opinion is very laudable.

**Christopher Mount:** A house can be less functional. If he had done that in a house...

**Peter Zellner:** He did do it in a house.

**Christopher Mount:** Right. Then that’s kind of OK, because you’re living there.

**Peter Zellner:** He split a house and he basically put a hole in the bedroom, in the floor that was supposed to symbolize the unity between husband and wife.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** That’s what you want in a house.

**Peter Zellner:** Maybe that is very functional, how it keeps the partners apart but together. Maybe that’s better than a real divorce.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And Eisenman is getting very good commissions...

**Peter Zellner:** Not really...I think that because of his tendencies he is far less commercially successful than some other less interesting architects. . Did you, by the way, know that his cousin is Richard Meier? If you look at their work it’s actually very similar in some formal ways. They both sort of started with Corb but ended up very different. Like Hejduk, Graves and Gwathmey they were both part of the New York Five. The Five were called the Whites and they fought with the Greys (Giurgola, Greenberg, Moore, Robertson, and Stern) about basically high art architectural design purity vs. design populism and accessible design aesthetics. Anyway, returning to Meier and Eisenman, one of them basically pursued a viable commercial practice, but one that’s also well regarded culturally. That’s Meier. If you go to the Getty it’s a beautiful thing and people basically like it. The other pursued a highly theoretical and philosophical architecture and largely has suffered commercially. If you go to the Wexner most people don’t “get it.” It’s abstract and confrontational at the same time. Some hate Eisenman’s work because it’s not digestible but I would venture that in hundred years Eisenman will be the cousin we’ll be talking about the most because his designs raise questions.

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PETER ZELLNER

Design as an Extension of Art Practice / Part 2  
03/07/2011



Peter Eisenman Architects, *The Wexner Center for the Arts*, Columbus Ohio, 1989.

On January 28th 2011, the [Pacific Design Center](#) in Los Angeles, California, in association with the [Art Los Angeles Contemporary Art Fair](#) presented a round table discussion with Los Angeles based Architect [Peter Zellner](#), former MOMA curator Christopher Mount, Los Angeles artist Justin Beal. Led by Bay Area conceptual artists Eric Gibbons and Tom Borden of the [Muistardeaux Collective](#). The discussion topic was "Design as an Extension of Art Practice." The event was conceived and organized by Helen Varola, curator/director, [Design Loves Art](#) programming at the Pacific Design Center, West Hollywood. Here is what was said:

## PART 2 Architecture and/as Art

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Can we go back to the Wexner example and architecture asserting itself into a curator's would-be exhibition design and how that can relate to site-specificity?

**Elderly Man in Audience:** Speak up!

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Site-specificity!!

**Peter Zellner:** The Wexner re-invented the notion of site-specificity in architecture. There are axes that cross the project that exist and there are some that don't. Remember this project was designed in the middle of Post Modernism, which was a movement that often promoted a return to the use of classical site design devices (symmetry and axial compositions) and historical references. Eisenman actually made up some of the axes and the historical references at the Wexner! They're not real, or they refer to abstract or conceptual systems like shifted grids. So in a way they're fake, they are actually part of a fake narrative which is just brilliant. In his work Eisenman even threw out the idea of contextual idea or ideology driving the architecture. It's much more like conceptual art. The Wexner actually has a fake castle corner that is supposed to have some sort of historical presence but it's divided up by the building's grid so it's rendered as something that's not real either.

**Christopher Mount:** Most curators or artists want what is called a white box. A white box is just a white room.

Blog's author  
Peter Zellner

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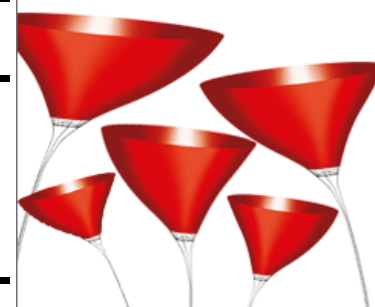
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**Peter Zellner:** Yes, I should know- I have spent the last six years of my life making about two hundred of those white rooms and I'm sick of doing them but that's what you do when you do galleries. I figure that I have built about 3 or 4 miles of white wall by now.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** It's a different breed of design. It's the difference between the two cousins' approaches to design. In reality, when you're talking about architecture, as soon as one asserts their own...

**Peter Zellner:** Identity.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Identity.

**Peter Zellner:** You get in trouble.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Yeah, it just doesn't work.

**Peter Zellner:** Completely. And I speak from personal experience. As I said my firm designs art galleries. We're even quasi famous for it. Minor celebrities even. An article even recently came out in *Art and Auction* about this specialization we've developed in making white boxes. It was called "The Invisible Hand" and it basically said "Isn't it great that this guy isn't even a presence as a designer? His work fades into the background and his clients and artists *love it*." For me that was more than a little traumatic because on the one hand you could be successful at doing something well and addressing purely functional design requirements- that's what we do best- but on the other hand people might mistake that for a lack of talent or spirit. The way I see it now, with the design of art spaces, there are some parameters that you *must* stay within but if you get outside those limits and you're fighting with the artists and the clients about your voice. Frankly from a creative perspective, it's becoming increasingly difficult to figure out if we are learning anything new doing these endless art galleries but I guess we are good at them. A huge challenge for any creative individual is this: once you become an expert at something, what next? I don't criticize my clients or what their requirements are, they're totally legitimate. Nor do I want to challenge artists on the grounds of creativity or originality. And I certainly don't want to be known as the guy who makes a gallery that doesn't work. That would seem unethical. But I am sensing it's time to move on now. So we are doing a lot of design competitions and these efforts have allowed us to start to expand our design interests.

**Justin Beal:** Well, that's a good question of how you see your role as an architect.

**Peter Zellner:** Yes, there are roles and there are roles. I think to Christopher's point, a house is very different from a gallery. We are going to start doing more houses.

**Christopher Mount:** Right. You could do it in other places. An airport could be more interesting; a baseball stadium could be more interesting. They're all different. I was recently at the Farnsworth House. I wouldn't really want to be there on weekends, particularly in the winter but it's gorgeous, it's fantastic and you have to live there in a different way. You're buying a piece of sculpture.



ZELLNERPLUS, Wallspace Art Gallery, Chelsea NY NY, 2009.

**Peter Zellner:** Mies really left nothing to chance. Furniture placement, the orientation of the kitchen, inwards on the house so that you did not look out, the location of the door, all very specific. Phillip Johnson, when he did his own glass house, basically stated once that started with the positioning of the furniture and the rugs and he saw those as the first design acts. Everything scaled out of that so nothing could be moved later- it was all designed in scale and in sequence. Once he was in the house and he lived with that because it was like a watch- every part had its fixed role to play. He designed the arrangement of the objects and then the shell and then the relationship to the

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landscape. He said that essentially even his property in New Canaan was part of the design of the house. He felt that that the green grass was basically an extension of the inside floor surface of the house. It was just natural carpet.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Do we just start talking about this when the individual decisions made are aggressive or somehow deviate from traditional design or rules or even aesthetic and functional pleasures? Is it only when you cross over that line do we even talk about it? Is it only when it becomes confrontational that it becomes part of the discussion, as opposed to someone who creates a building and every individual design choice made was meant to enhance the experience rather than jar you?

**Christopher Mount:** There are all kinds of things that are radically different, that overstep the line of pure functionality. If you do it well, it does work. There are plenty of Le Corbusier buildings that do that. Mies is a great example of that. The National Gallery in Berlin is just an open space and it works pretty well as a museum.

**Justin Beal:** We have set up these two oppositions- there is Richard Meier versus Eisenman and there is Mies versus Phillip Johnson. To bring it back to where we started, I would argue that Richard Meier and Mies are both really brilliant designers. Richard Meier figured out a system for doing something coming out of very much the same lineage as Eisenman but really he was developing it in a way that works or functions. He has been incredibly prolific because of it. There is a defined brand, it's consistent and it works. He has a very aggressive aesthetic but it's not a contrarian one necessarily. In terms of Peter's initial definition of design as something you can monetize and brand, it is a product that is totally coherent; not like Eisenman trying to undermine the discourse or the discipline.



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Farnsworth House, 1945-51 Plano, Illinois.

**Peter Zellner:** And then there is somebody like Zaha Hadid, who has actually, to her great credit, figured out how to do design at almost every scale from the shoe to the opera house. She is really provocative because in some ways she has a very defined language that is completely outside of what is normally accepted as the traditional solution for any design problem. That work *passes* because she has found a way to essentially distinguish her very specific voice so concretely.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And it still works.

**Peter Zellner:** It totally works! Actually, if you look at her work, she rarely gets attacked anymore for the buildings being anti-functional. She did a quite beautiful opera house in Guangzhou; acoustically it works, performance wise it works. And yet the shape is totally bizarre. So, in some ways she is like a much more evolved version of Frank Gehry. In a way she has taken some of the lesson of expressive architecture to a less controversial place- maybe like Richard Meier she has figured out how to pass off high design as everyday design.. But, what is most interesting to me is that she employs four hundred people and her teams work at every scale. There are people working on opera houses and there are people working on shoes, belts, chairs, and water faucets and knobs. They do everything- just like Michael Graves does for Target.

**Christopher Mount:** Or Phillipe Starck

**Peter Zellner:** Or Phillipe Starck but he's a designer and I think designers have always had an easier time passing design as architecture or art. I think Zaha, maybe more than any other current architecture figure, has found a way for architects to pass as designers, maybe even as artists. She makes art by the way, she makes these design art objects. She has found a way to say, "I want it all and we will do it all and we will do it all in this one codified language." It's kind of revolutionary. People will buy into that because they want a Zaha project. She has really transcended the idea of the architect being just a professional. I would argue that she is the first major cultural figure of the twenty first century who is a designer. She is certainly the first a

person of this millennium who has been made herself into a design god...the designer as cultural deity. Everything she touches becomes Zaha. It's really powerful. I actually don't like the work at all but I am really compelled by the ambition to say that design could touch every aspect of life at every scale. For me that's more like an art practice in many ways because Zaha's approach shapes life.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** A conceptual art practice.

**Peter Zellner:** Absolutely.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** What about painting?

**Justin Beal:** What about it?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Painters that are doing similar things in terms of successfully bridging the gap into something new.

**Justin Beal:** I don't think it's possible in painting.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** It's not?

**Justin Beal:** I think painting an interesting example because painting is one object of art that is always an object of art. Unlike a photograph which can merge into a commercial realm or a sculptural object that can merge into a design realm, even performance, the power that we have all collectively granted to painting is that it is always stuck in painting as painting.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Despite many attempts to bring it out of that.

**Justin Beal:** Sure. Who would be a painter that is successfully entering the design realm?



Phillip Johnson, The Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1949.

**Christopher Mount:** Well you could say Warhol, copying the Campbell's soup can is a copying of a piece of graphic design. And maybe some Koons, I don't know.

**Peter Zellner:** I hate to use this painter, because whatever you think, I know it's corny work but Kaws is a good example. He's one of a number of painters in the more populist range who have gotten into toy design, shoe design, fashion. We haven't mentioned fashion!

**Christopher Mount:** You have something here in LA that I did not know about being an East Coaster; you have Lowbrow. You have Mark Ryden.

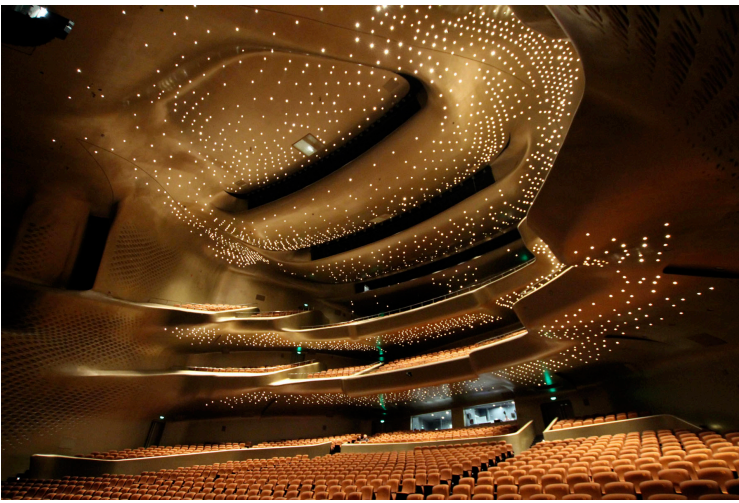
**Peter Zellner:** Geoff McFetridge. He's a designer-artist.

**Christopher Mount:** The Clayton Brothers, you have all of that here which is a very strange thing from an East Coast perspective. It's kind of illustration which is design, but they sell out here! It's just a West Coast thing.

**Peter Zellner:** It is a West Coast thing. Companies like Nike go out of their way to court these artists so that they can actually bring their signature into their design process. I don't know what that means by the way, I find it really confusing. Usually the shoe and the artist never benefit in my opinion. It always ends up seeming really lame.

**Justin Beal:** You brought up Murakami. Murakami is a total design object designer.

**Christopher Mount:** Yeah, they are design objects. I like Murakami very much and I argue with people but I look at it like Japanese graphic design, Japanese toys, I think they are very pleasing. I get a kick out of it.



Zaha Hadid, Guangzhou Opera House, Guangzhou, People's Republic of China, 2010.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** It's also a piece of a more overarching design concept that Murakami has for his vision a-la Zaha Hadid.

**Christopher Mount:** And in Japan there isn't this clear definition between fine art and design. Culturally it is a much more, I mean everything is design. Murakami is this figure who is both a designer and a fine artist.

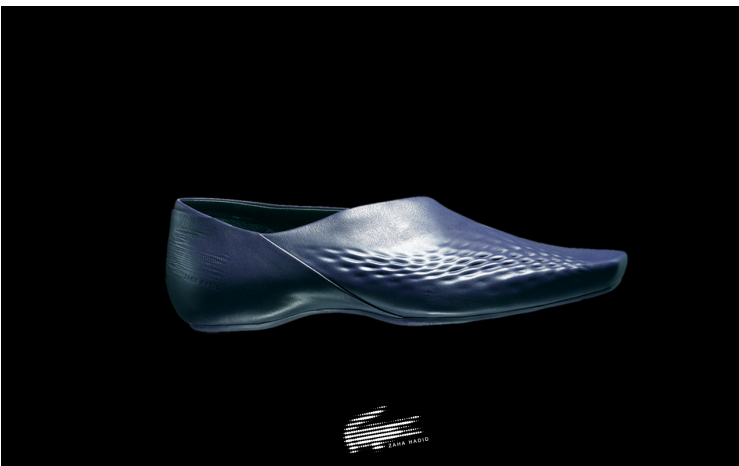
**Peter Zellner:** I think Japan has a long tradition of attaching aesthetic importance to every cultural object. Maybe Japan more than any other country. This is a complete aside but I was always curious why in Japan, which is still a pretty misogynistic culture, so many women architects are successful. I asked a friend of mine in Tokyo about this and she said that the reason was that basically the arts, the fine arts: music, painting, sculpture, and then architecture were all things that were perfectly acceptable to do historically as a woman because they were seen as feminine activities. It's really interesting because in some ways it also suggests that design can be caught up in gender issues. This is often not mentioned because usually design is seen as being gender neutral. When you look at the work of Andrea Zittel, clearly it does deal with women's work and other issues that frame domesticity. A lot of design occurs within the domestic sphere.

**Justin Beal:** I would almost take issue with the idea of design being gender neutral, if you think about it in relation to architecture.

**Peter Zellner:** I don't think that it is gender neutral at all but that it is marketed in a very utilitarian, neutral, utopian, the way like a chair is a chair. And it's sexless.

**Christopher Mount:** Except when you get to cars. Then there is the old person's car and the young person's car, age and family specific and so on.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Which as you pointed out is one of the seminal design models.



Zaha Hadid, Lacoste Footwear Project.

**Justin Beal:** Automotive design?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Yeah. Function meets design but not entirely?



**Christopher Mount:** Yes, sometimes it's done very well and sometimes it isn't. I think a lot of it is selling an ordinary car to as many people as they can. It doesn't cost any more to design a beautiful car than it cost to design a Toyota really. It's funny when you look at car companies, the more expensive the car, the better looking the cars. Apple does the same thing. The first iPhone was OK, the new one is better looking, the next one will look even better. You get the sense that they are holding back.

**Peter Zellner:** This does get to the point of design as commodity because if you go back to revolutionary design collectives, whether it was the Bauhaus or the Soviet Avant-Gardes, or even the work of the Case Study Architects, or furniture designers here in Southern California in the 1950's, there was this idea of design for the masses. There was no distinction between high and low. The irony of course is that now the Eames chairs that people covet and pay top dollar for were meant to be cheap! That was the whole Case Study idea- "Let's find local industries, tie into the most accessible ways of making things and rely on a new design language to evolve from the ordinary, not the extraordinary."

**Christopher Mount:** Prouve even more so. He was using engineering, he was using aeronautical engineering and that stuff that you see people buying, they all come out of schools, they are all desk chairs for schools and now as antiques they sell for...whatever.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** What was the area you were looking at in regard to local communities?



Takashi Murakami, Limited Edition for Louis Vuitton, 2003.

**Justin Beal:** The project I believe Peter is referring to is an art effort looking at the development of plywood in Southern California, specifically for use in the Second World War. At the end of the war, a lot of research went into how to market plywood as a construction material beyond its first uses in military applications. And the way that the Eames got involved in military research was making splints and what-not. The plywood furniture was designed under contract with the army. There is an interesting confluence there of a specific material with a regional specificity and the connection to wartime and post war applications. That can go off in any number of tangents but...where they were designing these things that then became ubiquitous.

**Peter Zellner:** The Eames splint is a beautiful object. Through the development of that particular object, which was really just meant to stabilize somebody's limb in the theatre of war, the Eames' learned how to steam and bend plywood and developed that into an aesthetic language....that they then

applied to chairs. Initially, it was about conforming to the geometry of the body. It's a beautiful object by the way.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Do you think something like that is being referenced in Joseph Beuys creating messy reenactments of the objects that supposedly had an instrumental role in the story of how he was saved out in the snow? It's creating a design object that doesn't really exist but has a role in a narrative.

**Peter Zellner:** There is an argument that you could make that no design act is necessary. But, fundamentally, even the first spear or the first implement was moving us from a state of just being in the world like an animal to being human, being designers. But nothing in this room for instance is necessary. This is a question for our time too, "What do we need to live now?" Things are disappearing. A lot of our technology now is invisible or takes a miniaturized form. You could think about the transformation of something like the radio, which was a fairly large and elaborated object to begin with to what we have today. Originally radios were made out of wood and they were hand crafted. They looked like they were from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and of course there were huge transistors that had to be covered up, speakers had to be inset etc. Now all of that fits on your phone or on your chip or whatever. That transformation also shows how rapidly a lot of the subjects of design are disappearing. On the other hand, chairs are still ubiquitous. It is a thing that people have been working on for centuries and it's still something that excites a lot of designers and architects as a topic of design.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Why do you think that is?

**Peter Zellner:** Because they're fun to sit in.



Apple, iPad2, 2011.

**Justin Beal:** I think chairs have a metonymic relation to any design object. They are the surrogate of a person. They become the pedestal for a human. Every architect has to design a chair and it somehow becomes a consolidated representation of their work. I don't really see a comparison between Beuys and the Eames. Beuys is really more about Shamanism and the creation of narrative as a means of justifying a material interest. But, his fat chair sculpture is one of the most seminal chairs in the history of art. In that example it totally becomes an anthropomorphic thing, the chair becomes a surrogate for an absent human.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** And in the end it's a fake story.

**Justin Beal:** Absolutely, but in terms of how you deal with seeing that object right? In that sense, the function of the chair, in an art historical sense, it all has to do with Michael Fried and art and object-ness, theatricality and expectation. There is not just a sculpture in a room but rather there is a viewer in the room with the sculpture. Furniture in that context can have a specific charge that another technical object might not.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** One question I have is what do you think about something like all these little objects that in their own way become part of this design scheme that have represented eras in design trends or even lifestyle trends; a lot of that is being replaced by technology, right? A lot of it is being condensed but there are still small design elements that impose a design ideology.

**Peter Zellner:** Right. I think that these tools prefigure how people interact with one another obviously. I see my daughter, she's two, I see here on her iPad and it is eerie how easily she's become conditioned, without any language, to accessing an App. There are Apps for toddlers! She absolutely flows through that space and it's a space that is behind a piece of glass. She does not question that- the flip between app and screen. What amazes me is that she has absolutely no question about its reality or unreality- for her it's as natural as sitting on a swing, which isn't natural anyway- but the point the iPad and the swing are both designed mechanisms for play. For her and probably a lot of young people today, the whole conflict of real vs. virtual is a



dead subject. The way she plays with those Apps vs. the way she plays with her toys is very similar. She's engaged and she's creative. It creates joy. I have no idea of what sort of world she'll live in. I imagine she will live in a world where she will interact with design and technology in a haptic and holographic way. I know we are years off this supposedly but some architects are already opting out of building physical models and buying holograms to show clients they're building designs. You can actually purchase them.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** Really?

**Christopher Mount:** You mean that you can project your building on?



Justin Beal, Untitled (Black Shelf), 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

**Peter Zellner:** No, it's basically imbedded in this flat sheet. I don't know how it works. I think it's basically some sort of a lenticular sheet. When you hit it with light from a particular angle a three-dimensional object appears. You can walk around it. Personally I still like making architectural models but I think the subject of how we will physically engage media is a very interesting topic. We're on the edge of a whole other design problem. I don't think that design goes away just because new technology is integrated. I think one of the things that pushes design inevitably forward is new technology. One of Mies' greatest contributions to architecture was to figure out what to do with the non-load bearing glass skin, the Curtain Wall for instance, which was a new technology last century. It was glass just like the surface of the iPad. The environment bounces into and out of it. So, what was your question?

**Muistardeaux Collective:** I think you hit it pretty well. My question was how the consolidation of all these physical objects that inform how we interact even conceptually with our environment, those are being condensed into aesthetic objects, fewer of them but with very definitive aesthetics...you talked about the next level which is that it's just that aesthetic that gets you in. Then it becomes a much bigger design question, when it is technological and emotional.

**Peter Zellner:** You know what the limit miniaturization will be? The limit of the body. A thing cannot get so small that you cannot work with it. It's the same problem with the chair.

**Justin Beal:** I think the iPhone is particularly interesting simply because it is so unbelievably mediocre in its primary function of being a phone. It is kind of a design miracle that Apple has gotten millions of people to buy into this thing. It actually doesn't function well as a phone. It's brilliant in all its other capacities but it is a weird example of a design being so successful that it begins to eat its own tail.

**Muistardeaux Collective:** It goes way more *Matrix* than the design question about a chair. It takes this to another level that is difficult to imagine what the boundaries of it are.

**Justin Beal:** It essentially becomes like the Frank Gehry chair Peter mentioned, the Superlight. It is so beautiful and such the essence of a chair that you can't even sit in it. I love my iPhone but it really sucks.

**Peter Zellner:** So do I, but it's a very impressive phone that doesn't serve its primary function well but does all sorts of other cool things. Despite that, maybe that is what design does best, is that it overcomes this functional issue. Design gets us to a point where you are not purely just engaged in whether it works, whether in a proletarian way, it does its job. Great design makes us take on the full potential of aesthetic, eg human, creativity.