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# **PROLOGUE: DRAWING ON *PLENITUDE & EMPTINESS***

# **PR**

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*I give you an emptiness,  
I give you a plenitude,  
Unwrap them carefully.*

*-one's as fragile as the other-  
and when you thank me  
I'll pretend not to notice  
the doubt in your voice  
when you say  
they're just what you wanted.*

*Put them on the table by your bed.  
When you wake in the morning  
they'll have gone through the door of sleep  
into your head.*

*Wherever you go  
they'll go with you and  
wherever you are you'll wonder,*

*smiling about the fullness  
you can't add to...*

*and the emptiness  
that you can fill.*

*Presents,  
Norman MacCaig, 1974*

Dorian Wiszniewski

# PROLOGUE:

## DRAWING ON *PLENITUDE & EMPTINESS*

As the central premise of the first PhD Architecture By Design Symposium at the University of Edinburgh, the Glasgow poet Norman MacCaig's *Presents* conveyed that both presenter and presentation would be received with requisite hospitality, curiosity and pleasure. At the same time the content of the poem alluded to the expansive yet tightly wrapped situation developed by any design-research project. In short, as means for offering opportunity and requisite reassurance to potential presenters, the poem seemed to provide by analogy a description of the gift opened through the act of presentation that is at the heart of every research-by-design inquiry.

Design as presentation, as every designer knows, is a double act of presenting: presenting to oneself as a designer ones conceits or doubts and presenting to others what design is. Presentation is thus critical to any given inquiry. As Vilém Flusser's description of (architectural) design suggests design is a prediction of the future, of a situation that is yet to be realised (if it is to be realised at all).<sup>1</sup> Presenting design work entails making and presenting such a future, but this can only be done once a way has been found to regard it. It is through this double act of making – the making of possible futures and the making of a way (or ways) to present and to regard those futures – that research-by-design proceeds. This way, this twofold making, the Architecture-by-design way, is full of fearful obstacles and delightful destinations (as Flusser might suggest this making inherently encompasses all times: now, then and futurity) but as part of the architecture-by-design way this sublime making is the embodiment of critical design in action.

As Heidegger might say, if it is to be truly revelatory this process, this way to revelation and to a future world (to both the making of the way and the way described by that making) must necessarily be pathless.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is a way nonetheless, a way that is psychologically navigated and weathered by oscillating between temporary conceits delivered to oneself (by speaking to oneself as designer) and rebounding realisations that such affirmations always contain "doubt in your voice."<sup>3</sup> These unsettling oscillations are critical; while the way of a research-by-design enquiry might not always be compelling these oscillations ensure that it is ceaselessly propelling. Through these conceits and doubts, and despite the many "fragilities"<sup>4</sup> experienced and encountered in navigating the abyss of Heidegger's pathless way, designers continuously propel themselves along in the hope, expectation actually (and hence the disappointment when it does not come off), of attaining delight, enlightenment and excellence – of getting what is wanted by oneself and what may be given to and also wanted by others.

Experienced designers know this from the outset; they know that this propelling journey is an unfathomable and pathless way littered with *presents* (of unknown quantity and unguaranteed quality). They unwrap and rewrap as they progress, binding themselves into their findings and wrapping their findings around them. This is what designers are attuned to, and it is what makes their particular form of research so enthralling: the promise of the gift is the double excitement of giving and receiving, and a designer's methods simultaneously open the presents of their own discoveries and offer them as presents for others. In such an investigation we should, as



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René Magritte, *Découverte*, 1927.

MacCaig warns, “unwrap” what we encounter “carefully.” In so doing more than we can regard, know or intend is usually exposed. What a designer designs, therefore, is a wrapping that needs opening; they open presents and present openings as presents.

This kind of gifting is, therefore, somewhere on the pathless way between closing and opening. It cannot make precise demands: it can neither overcome doubts over whether what is received is worth giving nor ensure that anything that is wanted in return is received. It is both full and empty, evidence perhaps of the recurrent “double handedness” of a gift.<sup>5</sup> As Lewis Hyde noted, “a gift is a thing that we do not get by our own efforts,” and even though “we cannot acquire it through an act of will” the shared conceit of all research-by-design enquires is that through care, curiosity and “regard” for a situation the designer can create opportunities for gifts to become present and be presents.<sup>6</sup> This is their gift and in their gift. This is what research-by-design reveals by drawing out its trajectories. The promise in this double action of gifting, between the artist making the work and the work making the artist,<sup>7</sup> is not only that “the spirit of an artist’s gifts can wake our own,” but also that the spirit of a potential receiver of gifts wakes the artistry of presents.<sup>8</sup>

But not all design is delightful, enlightening and excellent. We as designers, as much as what we navigate, have fragility, a fragility that comes with being situated within an abyss, out of our depth (somewhere between imagination and reality), in a perpetually precarious oscillation between the *plenitude and emptiness* of both the situation and the objects of our findings. Research-by-designers become attuned to research methods that navigate and explore this abyss, and “the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for archaeological destination” beyond.<sup>9</sup> This is what research-by-designers reveal by drawing out and presenting their respective trajectories, and it is why the presentation of the trajectory (now, then, futurity) is as significant as the presentation of the present (the now, the gift, that which is here). The research-by-design way is going somewhere, but with no final destination, even if on a planned trajectory. “That is a traveller’s delusion.”<sup>10</sup>

To put it another way, in his introduction to Derrida’s book on the French poet Francis Ponge, Richard Rand outlines something of the importance Derrida gives to the notion of *mis en abyme* (placement in abyss). Taking a cue from ancient heraldry (the shield within the shield

within the shield and so on), text, poetry, Ponge’s prose, etc. we might say that the most perfect gift, again to quote Derrida, “the MOST BRILLIANT of the world’s objects – through this fact – is not – NO – is not an object; it is a hole, the metaphysical abyss; the formal and metaphysical condition of the whole world. The condition of all other objects. The very condition of a regard.”<sup>11</sup> In presenting and in making present the medium of design creates holes in space: it is a medium through which we regard the object in the first instance and is an equal aspect of what is regarded. This is, without doubt, simultaneity of plenitude and emptiness.

What frequently becomes clear then is that the real gift, the real *present* in any inquiry, is the journey itself: a compound of the abyss and the ineffable sublime sensations induced by it. Journeys such as these are frequently a little “weird and dream-like.”<sup>12</sup> They operate between the real and imagined, following a logic of the unfathomable and pathless way: logical because, as the term *journey* invoked above suggests, experience goes along with or suspends the passing of time – varied series of now, then and yet to come;<sup>13</sup> illogical because experience is also fragmented and deranged (not yet fully comprehensible and arranged) – for example, coming to terms with Braque’s multifaceted candle, or the accretions of which De Chirico’s tangential puffing steam-train are frequently a part, or the strange markings of Magritte’s *Tiger-Women (Découverte, 1927)* – without the clear structure of any conventional epistemology or wisdom yet nonetheless replete with resonances, rumblings and even ravings.<sup>14</sup>

The symposium, *Plenitude and Emptiness*, offered a space, perhaps a hole in Derrida’s terms, into which presenters could cast and even find their work, an opportunity for logical journeys and illogical experiences. *Drawing On*, the follow on to this event and the hole into which future research-by-design trajectories can be cast, delineated and presented, offers an opportunity to these and further presenters to re-present their findings. Having reflected on the gifts they have encountered in their various researches-by-design, we encourage the presenters to retain the precariousness of their poise in the abyss, but nonetheless to represent their offerings, “smiling about the fullness [we] can’t add to... and the emptiness that [we] can fill.”<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 This paraphrasing of Flusser is potentially overly reductive. In *The Shape Of Things: A Philosophy of Design* Flusser has a specific design in mind: "to expose the cunning and deceptive aspects of the word design." (p.21) In his essay on 'Designing Cities', he elaborates an important serial impetus in the term: to provide the first images of a future city and as a device for also bringing into view "alternative cities." This leads him to the thesis that we should see designs (of cities) as deceptive, contradictory but also necessarily oscillatory: "On the one hand the sketch appears to be a completely unrealizable fantastic dream of someone who hovers outside the social fabric. On the other hand, it appears to be a projection of tendencies that can already be observed in this fabric." (p.180) See Flusser, Vilém. 1999. *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*. London: Reaktion and Flusser, Vilém. 2002. *Writings*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 2 Zimmerman, Michael E. 1990. *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics and Art*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, p. 233. In his analysis of Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology Zimmerman poses this phrase to describe the way craftsmen or artists take in their encounter with *techne* (the revelatory processes that Heidegger theorises as the poetic aspect of technological enquiry, for which we can also read technique).
- 3 MacCaig, Norman. 1974. 'Presents' in MacCaig, Norman. 1993. *Collected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, p.316
- 4 MacCaig, Norman. 1974. 'Presents'.
- 5 "The word gift is itself slippery and ambiguous." Atwood, Margaret. 2012. *The Gift: How the Spirit Transforms The World*. Edinburgh: Canongate, p.viii. See also, for example, Chapter 6, concerning the Arapesh of New Guinea as recounted by anthropologist Margaret Mead in 1931: "At the great festival they gave away canoes, whale oil, stone axe blades, women, blankets, and food . . . Your own mother, your own sister, your own pigs, your own yams that you have piled up, you may not eat. Other people's mothers, other people's sisters, other people's pigs, other people's yams that they have piled up, you may eat." p.95.
- 6 Hyde, Lewis. 2012. *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, p.xxii
- 7 Gombrowicz paraphrased, see Goddard, Michael. 2010. *Gombrowicz, Polish Modernism and The Subversion of Form*. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, p. 32
- 8 Hyde, Lewis. 2012. *The Gift*, p.xxii
- 9 As this particular psychoanalytical metaphor from Derrida suggests, every journey, every exploration is multidimensional. Derrida, Jacques and Prenowitz, Eric. 1995. 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' in *Diacritics*, Vol.25, No.2 (Summer), p.19
- 10 Hyde, Lewis. 2008. *Trickster Makes The World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, p.5
- 11 Derrida, Jacques. 1984. *Signéponge / Signsponge*, trans Richard Rand. New York: Columbia University Press, p.140.
- 12 Hyde, Lewis. 2008. *Trickster Makes The World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, p.5
- 13 Bergson's "duration" or Augustine's "inner stretching out of the present" – an unavoidable pun.
- 14 See also Wiszniewski, D., and Martin, G. D. 2003. 'Materiality: Poetics in Material, Form, Efficacy and Ritual' in *InForm: The Journal of Architecture, Design and Material Culture*, Vol.3: Celebration, Environment and Memory. Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska, pp. 35-41.
- 15 MacCaig, Norman. 1974. 'Presents'

## FIGURES

- 01 René Magritte, *Découverte*, 1927. Reproduced by permission of Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

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