

Engaging with Ku~: from abstraction to meaning through the practice of noticing

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Abstract

This paper presents a design project that explored the practice of “noticing”. Noticing is a way in and through which we are able to understand and create our relationship to space and place. The practice of noticing can facilitate awareness, reflection, learning and transformation (Mason 2002). Noticing is a practice that enables us to engage with the concept of *Ku~*, meaning “space”, in Japanese. In this project context, *Ku~* is interpreted as a space of *potentiality* rather than *emptiness* or *nothingness*. Engaging with *Ku~* through the practice of noticing can enable a transition from *abstraction* to *meaning*. *Ku~* can also be an expression of the ambiguous potential of design investigations: including knowing and the unknown, the limitations and the challenges. To practice design in this way is to step outside of the confines of certainty and embark on an exploratory path of discovery. Just as design is a way of engaging with space – to enunciate the unknown, to create meaning from the abstract – so too is noticing as a temporal practice of discovery and place making. Through the act of noticing the ambiguous openness of space is transformed into the connectedness of place (Casey 2001).

Author biography

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Laurene Vaughan is the Associate Professor of Design and Communication in the School of Applied Communication at RMIT University. She is also co-Research Leader of the Geoplaced Knowledge Stream within the RMIT Design Research Institute. Laurene is a practicing artist, designer and educator, who through her research practice endeavours to explore and present comment on the interactive and situated nature of human experience, particularly creative practice, through actual and digital interventions. She regularly publishes and exhibits her research outcomes internationally.

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Yoko is a lecturer, designer and researcher in communication design. She has also been studying and practicing communication design in various locations including London, Los Angeles and Melbourne (where she is currently residing). Her Japanese perspective and philosophy has been instrumental in her teaching, designing and research in exploring a design practice that embraces diversity of social and cultural values. This had led to her PhD topic on human-centred design and using design “scaffolds” as a way to manifest implicit values within design projects. She is also involved as a Chief Investigator in several Australasian CRC for Interaction Design (ACID) projects and various other research projects within the Design Research Institute at RMIT University. She was born in Japan, grew up in Australia, England and Japan; studied (and hated) living in Los Angeles; did her BA (Hons) at Ravensbourne College of Art and Design, England and now she “calls Australia home”.

Introduction

Through a discussion of a particular design intervention, this paper will explore the synergy of two approaches to engaging with the experience of time and place. These are the *practice of noticing* and the engagement with *Ku~*. One is Western, the other is Eastern in origin, yet they are similar and different, and in combination they have provided us with a way to conceptualise and communicate our experience of the inhabited world. The paper discusses how such engagement and experience can offer designers an alternative paradigm to conceptualise what it means to design.

This design project explored Mason’s notion of noticing as a way in and through which we are able to understand and create a relationship to place (2002). He states how the practice of noticing can facilitate awareness, reflection, learning and transformation. Eleven communication design researchers embarked on the practice of noticing during a 24hour design project where the objective was to document their experience of an unfamiliar location. Details of this design project will be discussed further in the next section. As a consequence of undertaking this project the participants were also exposed to the experience of *Ku~*. The literal interpretation of *Ku~* in Japanese is “space”. In this project we engaged with the interpretation of *Ku~* as a space of “potentiality” rather than its oft-associated meaning of “emptiness” or “nothingness”. A detailed discussion on the concept of *Ku~* will follow later in the paper. However, nothingness can be understood to encompass the potential of space – whether it is empty or inhabited – where the potential can be generated

through the absence, the unexpected, or the unfamiliar. Generating potential through an exploration of the unknown are familiar activities in design. Thus, *Ku~* is also an expression of ambiguous potential for design investigation. Particularly where the designer seeks through form and practice, to discover the act of knowing the unknown by embracing the limitations and the challenges that will be encountered. To practice design in this way is to step outside of ideas of certainty and to embark on an exploratory path of discovery. This was essential to the design project under discussion. This project drew on the understanding that as one walks through the landscape (urban or rural), the interweaving paths of our trajectory give shape to spaces (de Certeau 1984), and through this we create an awareness of “self” as the body that moves and transitions from place-to-place (Relph 1976, in Casey 2001). In this case the different localities and landscapes of the selected site held potential and inspiration – *Ku~* – for each design researcher. As they traversed their multiple yet individual paths of noticing, a particular practice evolved, one that resulted in a collective of individual views that were visually expressed as disparate things.

Engaging with *Ku~* through the practice of noticing requires one to surrender to the unknown and to uncertainty. To “notice” is not to seek out or to scrutinise. As soon as one tries to “look for” or strategise a plan for focusing, genuine engagement with *Ku~* is dissipated. Instead, noticing draws our attention through our peripheral vision. Like a glimpse, it enables us not to look for, but rather to chance upon “something or someone serendipitously” (Mason 2002). This approach and engagement with *Ku~* and its application to design practice may be considered contradictory to common definitions of design. “To design” is often interpreted “to plan” or “to provide a description” (Cross 2006). Designing is often perceived as a way to fulfill a plan and to provide a description to the client and users of what is to be expected in the outcome. However, in this paper’s discussion, we explore design as a way of engaging with space – to enunciate the unknown, or to create meaning from the abstract – so too is noticing as a temporal practice of discovery and place making. This project necessitated the design researchers to step out of their normative practices and inculcated definitions of design. This release of control and stepping into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable territories is highly confronting to the designer. However, the rewards for this risk are in its potential to stimulate the discovery of the unknown that a more predictable process would not. Thus through noticing and *Ku~* our experience transitions from the ambiguous openness of space into the connectedness of place (Casey 2001).

Design project: *24hour Noticing*

24hour Noticing was a project undertaken by eleven postgraduate communication design researchers in May 2007. The catalyst for the project was the group's visit to Hobart, a seaside town in Tasmania, Australia. The brief for the project asked the participants to explore the practice of noticing as a method for experiencing and creating a sense of place. A 24-hour timeframe was set as a limitation within the project brief, and participants were to document their transitions through this location. Prior to embarking on their individual adventures, the design researchers were given the following piece of text intended provoke their thinking about the practice that they were asked to engage in.

Noticing is an act of attention, and as such is not something you can decide to do all of a sudden. It has to happen to you, through the exercise of some internal or external impulse or trigger. The more you notice, the more you can accumulate to support noticing in the future. Marking is also an act of attention. It involves attaching connections so that what is marked can come to mind later without the need for outside triggers (Mason 2002, p. 61).

Mason's text was a trigger or a lens that guided the practice of noticing undertaken whilst the design researchers documented the surrounding spaces, places, signs and landscapes. The group of design researchers often visited particular locations together. This fostered a community experience that resulted in a level of shared and common observations and documentations, yet the practice of noticing is an individual act and they subsequently observed and engaged with disparate things.

As a result of this process a collection of over 300 images was amassed between the design researchers over the 24-hours. The resulting visual collection was diverse, and although the documentation was the outcome of individual observations, there was an echo or trace of the presence of others and their shared experiences. These images were later curated as an on-line exhibition by two of the project participants. The challenge for the curators was to create a visual narrative that represented the diversity of observations whilst also enabling the viewers to notice for themselves as they experienced the outcome. The curators wanted to retain a balance between the individual and the collective, an experience and a perspective that was central to the project. Implicit in their curatorial approach was the process of noticing, which had

now reached a second order of meaning. It became a method of creating and also a way of engaging the viewers of the exhibition.

Design and phenomenology

The experience and reflection of the *24hour Noticing* project was catalytic in embarking on a journey to broaden and question definitions of design and how designers can engage with their world through design. The dominant paradigm of design that has emerged in Western theory and practice is one that privileges design as an active and conscious mode of engagement. Much of this is reflected in the numerous published texts that focus on what design *does* in the world and to the world as opposed to emphasising what it means for design and the designer to *be* in the world, which significantly shifts our understanding. Design research is often characterised by learning more about what design is; its materiality, its impact, its methods and processes for involving and engaging people in its production and outcome. The design research community acknowledges that this area of scholarship makes a valuable contribution, however, some have also questioned the omission of an ontological way of understanding design in this discourse. Fry (2006) and Willis (2006) both seek to perceive design as a subject-decentred practice rather than one obsessed with objects. According to Willis, ontological designing differs to the predominant paradigm of design as it seeks to know “how we ‘are’ and how we come to know who/what we are” (ibid, p. 1) in this world. We design this world, which in turn acts back on us and designs us – a process that results in us being designed by our designing.

We argue here that this dominant design paradigm that privileges an active, logical mode of engagement is grounded in Western language and shaped through education. This language (a singular term for a range of Germanic and Latin based outcomes) institutionalises a mode of engagement that emphasises analytical intellectual facility. It is a mode of consciousness that favours the active, physical mode of experience that results in selective perception (Bortoft 1996). Bortoft explains how psychologists have discovered that human beings have two major modes of organisation: the action mode and the receptive mode. The action mode refers to a consciousness that discriminates, analyses and divides the world up into objects. In relation to our understanding of design, this action mode is aligned with descriptions and discussions of what design *does* to the world. In contrast, the

receptive mode is best described as openness, for example being open to events as they happen. This alternative mode of organisation utilises holistic, non-verbal, non-linear and intuitive modes of communication. It emphasises sensory and perceptual consciousness and is based on taking in and working with what is, rather than manipulating an environment or situation to some predetermined outcome. In the context of design, it is a method that draws on and deepens the designer's ability to understand what it means to *be* in the world, an engagement that requires a way of designing that is open and receptive to the world.

Bortoft explains that in order to reverse the way in which we engage with the world from one that focuses on an analytical, sequential and logical mode of consciousness, one must turn ones awareness from the singular *object* and encounter the *whole*. Using Goethe's science as the basis of his argument, Bortoft states that recognising and distinguishing one thing from the other immediately separates oneself from the thing – we stand outside of it. This mode of consciousness implicitly limits the possibility for us to experience an authentic wholeness. "This turning around, from grasping to being receptive, from awareness of an object to letting an absence be active, is a reversal which is the practical consequence of choosing the path which assents to the whole as no-thing and not mere nothing" (Bortoft 1996, p. 17).

Bortoft's concept of an "active-absence", or the whole as "no-thing" is complex and paradoxical. In order to build on Bortoft's notion of experiencing an authentic wholeness, we have turned to using Japanese language and concepts to argue the main ideas of this paper. The Japanese language is conducive in articulating and capturing symbolic, abstract notions of perception and experience, especially with regards to ideas of "absence", "nothingness" or "emptiness". These words are of particular significance to this paper's discussion due to the notion of what "space" is and means and, how this was explored in the *24hours Noticing* project. Western semantics, based on logic and consciousness, can often emphasise and subsequently heighten awareness and perception that something is *missing*. However, the Japanese language, which borrowed many concepts from the Chinese language, has evolved over time through the influence of Zen Buddhism. This evolution has facilitated a language and mentality that is able to conceptualise, as well as articulate, notions of "space" that is not understood as an "absence" of things, nor is it "nothingness" or "emptiness" where the focus is on something that is *missing*. *Ku*, meaning "space" in Japanese, acknowledges the existence and

perception of an active force that occupies its conceptual, physical or time-durational dimensions.¹ This interpretation of space allows for a dimension that has agency. It is a productive space, not a “void” to be “filled”. Its notion is similar to the pauses and silence in music that has an active presence in the totality of the musical experience.

The *24hours Noticing* project provided an opportunity for the design researchers to develop an awareness of the concept of *Ku~* through an engagement with the practice of noticing. Even though each of the design researchers undertook a practice of noticing that engaged with *Ku~*, the resultant images do not capture *Ku~*. *Ku~* is not a space that can be contained or rendered through an image or object, in fact such actions and outcomes destroy it. *Ku~* ceases to *be* when captured, documented or described. This is because when captured in this way *Ku~* is transformed and becomes an object “thing” – a photograph that depicts a subject, represented through the chemical processes to visualise a defined physical entity. Although it is possible to argue that *Ku~* could exist within the photograph as a space of possibility through the gaze and interpretation of the new viewer of the image, this space of reading/viewing is not the same thing as the image itself. This act of perception is with the being that perceives; it is not in the thing itself. The embodied action of perception is a different space that could be interpreted and engaged with in many ways, according to what the viewer brings with them.

Embodied Perception

Integral to both the experience of *Ku~* and the practice of noticing are practices of embodied perception. Noticing is an activity that engages the whole being. It is intellectual, emotional and sensorial. Each of these modes of knowing and being in the world are drawn on consciously or not, and support us in deeply knowing the world that we are in. The body is one way of articulating this integration but it is not just a physical entity of flesh and bone, it is a multi-modal vehicle for transforming the world. The objectives of both of these practices (*Ku~* and noticing) are to provide us with a more meaningful and connected understanding of the world. They are “light” methodologies that, in their ease, enable us to see what might otherwise be lost or unnoticed. We are not bound to a need to structure, rather we are free to *be* with the things we encounter, and from there, form a relationship. As argued by Malpas (1999) this is essential in the creation of a sense of place and what it means to be human in that context. “There is no possibility of understanding human existence –

and especially thought and experience – other than through an understanding of place and identity” (ibid p. 75).

One of the key challenges of embarking on a *Kũ* informed exploration of place is that the agency of *Kũ* requires that we engage with each experience a new. *Kũ* does not rely on any accumulative understanding of life and the world (Vaughan 2008). Like *Kũ* itself, we must become a space ready to receive; we must see each thing afresh – an approach that is congruent with the notion of the peripheral view or the glimpse of the practice of noticing. To look is to know what you are seeking before you start. To notice is to chance upon without expectation. Such an approach to exploring a location, familiar or unknown, opens up possibilities to be somewhere that you never expected to be.

Engaging with *Kũ* through the practice of noticing can enable a transition from *abstraction* to *meaning*. This practice of noticing brings into our consciousness the elements of our environment (tangible or ephemeral) that may go unseen. Yet there is something about these elements that allows them to be noticed in some way that would otherwise be passed by in a sea of grayness. It glimmers and seduces us, makes itself known. As such our perception of these unfamiliar, foreign, or unseen elements, those which are outside or beyond the self, transitions from being outside of the self to become part of the scope of possibility. This transition is purely one of perception; nothing has changed for the thing that is being noticed. There has been no action, no statement; this shift in meaning is purely in how it is perceived.

The *24hours Noticing* sought to explore the possibilities of engaging people in an exploration of a particular site without the influence of previous knowledge or expectation. To do this, participants were asked to utilise Mason’s definition of the practice of noticing as a methodology, not by looking, but to document this noticing. Through this process the designers were faced with the challenge of balancing the view from the eye and what could be seen through the viewfinder (a device for controlling what can be seen and what is captured in image). These physical shifts could only occur through a shift in their cognitive and perceptual methods for being in space. The project brief was the means to highlight the presence of the two key elements that would otherwise be lost in their everyday familiarity – the body and the landscape/place that it is in. For as Casey (2001) states these two elements are so ingrained in our experience that they go unnoticed for the most part.

In this case the curated digital exhibition is a physical record of this design intervention. It is a narrative that is layered with many meanings. Even though it is an outcome of the *24hour Noticing* project, the curatorial design of its form is a second order articulation of the original brief. It is an articulation of the group's images and the record of their noticing. Through a random database driven narrative, it provides the opportunity for others to notice again. It is a space that holds the potential for noticing, to notice what was noticed, and to notice the relationships between the images of the individual noticings. If *Ku* was present in the initial acts of noticing, can it still be present in this curated, designed state? Can a viewer of such a narrative, be looking at a space of visual communication that has the elements of agency and potential that the physical world once had? Can its visual projection and its interactive system be a space ripe with possibility? The answer may be, possibly yes; but not through its form. Rather it can potentially become *Ku* through the viewers' perspective and expectation. *Ku* is a way of being in relation to space. It is a way of viewing and experiencing. In this way, the design intervention is not in the *thing* that is made; rather the design intervention is a *way of being* the audience/viewer and their relationship and experience of the space. Such a perspective calls for a radical shift in the understanding of design; the focus is not on the design, the thing that is made. Instead the focus is on that which is constantly in state of making, through the eyes and experience of the perceiver.

Endnotes

¹ According to many Zen Buddhist texts, *Ku*, is often associated with *Mu*, meaning "emptiness", "non-being" or "nothingness". For example, Kasulis (1981), who has published several books on Zen Buddhism, discusses *Mu* as "without thinking", a pre-reflective mode of consciousness as the very ground of immediate experience. He explains that the Zen person who operates in such fashion, "experience is grounded in its most direct contact with concrete reality" (p.100). Though these concepts of *Mu* are interesting areas for discussion, this paper does not use *Ku* associated with *Mu* and Zen personhood, rather *Ku* is interpreted to discuss the agency of space.

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