

**KENYA HARA GREW UP IN TOKYO, WHERE HIS FATHER WAS BOTH A BUSINESSMAN AND A SHINTO PRIEST.** Hara himself draws deeply from the Japanese traditions of “emptiness and potentiality” so integral to Shinto.<sup>1</sup> Out of such traditions Hara creates impeccable graphic design that replaces frenzied technology-driven experience with sensory-driven design. In his 2007 book, *Designing Design*, from which the essay below is taken, he provides an alternative to the voracious Western appetite for “newness.” In his words, “Design is...the originality that repeatedly extracts astounding ideas from the crevices of the very commonness of everyday life.”<sup>2</sup> He urges designers to stop straining to keep up with technology and instead begin to experience anew the world in which we actually live. “Human happiness,” he explains, “lies in how fully we can savor our living environment.”<sup>3</sup> A designer, author, curator, and educator, Hara leads an emerging powerhouse of Japanese designers. As creative director for the Japanese company MUJI, he oversees the design development of hundreds of products for home and office. There he has crafted a global strategy for marketing and advertising that expresses the company’s “no-brand” philosophy. In addition, Hara is managing director of the prestigious Nippon Design Center.

1 See interview with Maggie Kinser Hohle, “Kenya Hara: Praise the Gap,” *Graphis* (July–August 2002): 32–53.

2 Kenya Hara, *Designing Design*, trans. Maggie Kinser Hohle and Yukiko Naito (Baden: Lars Müller, 2007), 435.

3 Kenya Hara, interview with Maggie Kinser Hohle, “Kenya Hara: MUJI Creative Director,” *Theme* 3 (Fall 2005), <http://www.thememagazine.com> (accessed February 1, 2008).

## DESIGNING DESIGN

KENYA HARA | 2007

### COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN

Where does design stand today? The remarkable progress of information technology has thrown our society into great turmoil. The computer promises, we believe, to dramatically increase human ability, and the world has overreacted to potential environmental change in that computer-filled future. In spite of the fact that our rockets have only gone as far as the moon, the world busies itself with worries and preparations for intergalactic travel.

The cold war between East and West is over, and the world long ago began revolving on the unspoken standard of economic might. In a world in which economic power accounts for the majority of our values, people believe that the best plan for preserving that power is to respond quickly to forecasted changes to the environment. Convinced of a paradigm shift to rival the Industrial Revolution, people are so worried about missing the bus that they beat their brains out trying to get to a new place, but are only acting on precepts of precomputer education.

In a world in which the motive force is the desire to get the jump on the next person, to reap the wealth computer technology is expected to yield, people have no time to leisurely enjoy the actual benefits and treasures

already available, and in leaning so far forward in anticipation of the possibilities, they've lost their balance and are in a highly unstable situation, barely managing to stay upright as they fall forward into their next step.

Apparently, people think they shouldn't criticize technological progress. It may be that deeply seated in the consciousness of our contemporaries is an obsession of a sort, to the effect that those who contradicted the Industrial Revolution or the machine civilization were thought of as lacking in foresight and were looked down upon. That's why people have such a hard time speaking out against flaws that are likely felt by everyone. This is probably because they're afraid that anyone who grumbles about technology will be thought an anachronism. Society has no mercy for those who can't keep up with the times.

However, at the risk of being misunderstood, I have to say that technology ought to evolve more slowly and steadily. It would be best if it took the time to mature, through trial and error. We are so excessively and frantically competitive that we have repeatedly planted unsteady systems in unsteady ground, which have evolved into a variety of trunk systems that are weak and liable to fail, but have been left to develop anyway. Having no way to stop, they barrel down the track, completely exhausted. People have wrapped themselves in this unhealthy technological environment and are accumulating more stress every day. Technology continues to advance and has multiplied beyond the amount knowable by a single individual; its entirety can be neither grasped nor seen, and it's so vast its edges fade from view. There is nothing aesthetically appealing about communication or the practice of making things when their ideology and education remain unable to cope with this situation, but just continue on their familiar trodden paths.

The computer is not a tool but a material. So says John Maeda, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The implication is that we shouldn't use computers in the manner of just swallowing whatever software comes along, but need to think deeply and carefully about what kind of intellectual world can be cultivated based on this new material that operates with numbers. I think his suggestion deserves our respect. For any material to become a superb material, we need to purify its distinguishing attributes as much as possible. As a material for modeling and carving, clay has endless plasticity, but that limitless plasticity is not unrelated to the material's development. If it were filled with nails or other shards of metal, we wouldn't be able to knead it to a usable consistency. These days it's as

if we're kneading the clay until our hands bleed. I have trouble believing that anything generated in this kind of impossible situation is going to bring any satisfaction to our lives.

Design today has been given the role of presenting the latest innovations of technology and here, too, is strained. Design, which is accustomed to showing its strength in “making what’s fresh today look old tomorrow” as well as bringing novel fruits to a table full of curious diners, is further exacerbating its contortions, in obedience to the new technology.

### **BEYOND MODERNISM**

Digging a little deeper into the relationship between technology and communication, some designers have begun to rethink the possibilities of the quality of information; putting aside the rough information that swirls around like dust on the Internet and clings to our monitors, they have recognized the profundity of the quality of information perceptible only when the senses become mobilized. A symbolic example is the attention in recent years that the field of cognitive science (which studies virtual reality) has showered on the “haptic” senses—those besides sight and hearing. The very delicate human senses have begun to become very important in the forefront of technology. Human beings and the environment being equally tangible, the comfort as well as the satisfaction we sense is based on how we appreciate and cherish our communication with the world via our diverse sensory organs. In terms of this perspective, the paired fields of design and technology and of design and science are headed in the same direction. I specialize in communication but have come to think that the ideal of this discipline is not trying to catch the audience’s eye with an arresting image, but having the image permeate the five senses. This is communication that is very elusive yet solid and therefore tremendously powerful, which succeeds before we even realize it’s there.