

# Keller Easterling Medium Design

01/05

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 Keller Easterling  
Medium Design

Art after culture. Just to say the simplest and most obvious thing: culture, in the broadest sense of the word, is good at pointing to things and naming them, but not so good at describing relationships between things. It privileges declarations, right answers, universals, and elementary particles. It is captivated by circular logics and modernist scripts that celebrate freedom and transcendent newness – narrative arcs that bend toward a utopian or dystopian ultimate.

The modern Enlightenment mind that still looks for the one and only answer is often organized like a closed loop that only circulates compatible or reflexive information. And since that loop can't abide contradiction, it lashes out against any challenger, using a binary opposition. Favoring succession rather than coexistence, the new right answer must kill the old right answer. As if due to some fatal error, humans are creatures who have trained their minds to want to be right – to have the right answer.

Oscillating between loops and binaries, an unnecessarily violent culture that has eliminated the very information it needs is then left banging away with the same blunt tools. A bully is elected, a migration of refugees swells in number, an industrial disaster kills thousands, or shorelines flood due to global warming. And if economic and military engagement or new technologies do not provide the solution, if the consensus surrounding laws, standards, or master plans provides no relief, the smartest people in the world stand with hand to brow. Dissent, also adopting a binary, seems to believe that it exists in a world of enemies and innocents.

The binaries of wars and the chest-beating sovereignty of nations remain in place as darlings of history. *Homo economicus* is allowed to upstage and hold forth. The old sci-fi futurologies are brought out of mothballs. And all the stories build to a revolution or an apocalyptic burnout. These are the hackneyed plotlines of our “humanities.”

Since the world's big bullies and bulletproof forms of power – superbugs like Trump, Kim, Putin, and Bibi, or free-zone agglomerations of corporate power – thrive on this oscillation between loop and binary, it is as if there is nothing to counter them – only more ways of fighting and being right and providing the rancor that nourishes their violence. Is it possible to drop through a trapdoor and exit these logics?

This would usually be the moment to unleash a radical new proposal. But that would be sadly conservative. On the other side of that door, a radical proposal has no traction, because nothing is new and nothing is right. By taking a hard pass on dramatic and emancipatory

02/05



"Both left and right-wing ideologies result in concentrations of authoritarian power. It is not the ideology that is declared but some other potentials or latent dispositions that are undeclared that seem to be determining outcomes." Image courtesy of the author.

manifestos, maybe there is a chance to simply rehearse a habit of mind that has been eclipsed. And maybe it is something you already know how to do. It is a blind spot that is right in front of you. It is a terra incognita where you have already been.

There is no end or modernist succession or moment after culture. Only more middle or medium. Clear of associations with communication technologies, medium, in this context, returns to its root, *medius*, meaning “middle” or “milieu.” On the other side of the door, it may be easier to see at a different focal length. Beyond *declared* ideologies, here is a matrix or medium of activities and latent potentials – the *undeclared* dispositions that are something like culture’s muscle memory. Just as this *medium thinking* inverts the typical focus on object and matrix, maybe it can offer some alternative approaches that outwit the most cunning superbugs.

To assess and manipulate the medium, you may have to cultivate a capacity to perceive in a split screen – to straddle mental partitions that separate the nominative from the active and dispositional. You must develop something like a canine mind; you see things with names and hear humans speaking words but those things cannot be comprehended in the absence of a thousand other affective cues and relative positions between things in context. The position of the human relative to the door or the dog bowl, including the human’s particular posture or potential for violence, are all assessed equally with the sounds of words and their assigned meanings.

Or suddenly, in a simple room, the objects with names – table, chair, lamp, pen, teapot, teacup, apple, and window – are bristling with latent potentials, active repertoires, and affordances. They are actively performing. The stuff in your fridge is triangulating in a kind of periodic table of possible combinations and expiration dates. When thinking in this way, you can see affordances or potentials as clearly or even more clearly than overt events and declarations.

Turning the sound down on those declarations, it is also easier to detect the difference between what an organization is saying and what it is doing, and how organizations decouple their messages and ideologies from their real activities, underlying motivations, and structuring logics.

Consider some of the dispositions that elude us. On one side of the screen, stories about sociotechnical organizations – be they railroads, hydroelectric networks, or blockchains – may be about decentralization and freedom. But they may actually be concentrating power and

authority with a universal ambition. The smart city maintains the shine of the new, even while it centralizes information in ways that violate privacy, with a network that is primitive and crude. A social media network that purports to be information-rich filters all that information through a dumb binary of likes and dislikes to become information-poor. A global network of Dubai-style zone cities does not facilitate free trade, but manipulates trade. A centralizing power espouses a populist message.

Both left- and right-wing ideologies can result in the concentration of authoritarian power. It is not the declared ideology but rather some other undeclared forces in the mix that seem to be determining outcomes.

The disposition of any organization makes some things possible and some things impossible. Like a growth medium, it determines what will live or die. Like an operating system, it sets the rules of the game that link and activate the components of an organization. It is wildly dangerous to rely on declared ideology, when undeclared forces often facilitate untouchable accumulations of power and environmental forms of violence.

Take another look at the world’s superbugs. They cocoon within the loop and binary. They are capable of monastic demagoguery and head-on brutality. But this is child’s play to them.

Like confidence men, superbugs are also masters of the split screen. Their lies, distractions, and confusions even turn lexical expressions into physical force fields. They know how lies work. Telling one lie is a bad idea. But telling many lies works very well. One lie calls for reconciliation and truth. Many lies creates Teflon. Unburdened by truth or earnest declaration, the superbug knows how to make words dance around and fascinate in the absence of meaning and information. Lies are everywhere, animated and in color. They lubricate and insulate.

Reasonable people may not take advantage of this undeclared potential, but superbugs do. The discrepancy that others futilely try to reconcile through reason is the raw material of fully mediated rumor and contagious fictions. It’s not what the lies say but how they bounce that is important. Superbugs become pure medium – activity divorced from content or meaning.

On the other side of the trapdoor there is a redoubled territory of operation with extra political and aesthetic capacities, where some expectations can be inverted.

For instance, being right is a really bad idea on the other side. It is too weak. It does not work against gurus and totalitarian bullies. Maybe culture’s spectacular failures, together with the underexploited powers of the medium, could

inspire alternative ways to register the imagination – other approaches to form-making and design in any discipline.

Entanglements are more productive than solutions. Designers are usually very good at making things with shapes and outlines, but design in the medium is less like making a thing and more like having your hands on the faders and toggles of organization. It is the design of interdependencies, chemistries, chain reactions. It benefits from an artistic curiosity about spatial wiring or reagents in spatial mixtures. You are designing not only a single object but a platform for inflecting populations of objects or setting up relative potentials within them. You are comfortable with dynamic markers and unfinished processes.

Working in the medium would then be something like playing pool, where knowing about one fixed sequence of shots is of little use. But being able to see branching networks of possibilities allows you to add more information to the table. In pool, you don't know the answer; you only know what to do next. To borrow from Gilbert Ryle, you don't "know that" (the right answer), rather you "know how" to respond to a string of changing conditions over time. Although perhaps counter to expectations, you are making something that shouldn't always work and that is *indeterminate to be practical*.

In another inversion, this *medium design* works, not by eliminating, but rather multiplying problems, and using them to leaven and catalyze each other. Like Parrondo's Paradox – the counterintuitive game theory that pairs losing games to generating wins – the losses create a kind of ratcheting traction against which to make many small gains. And maybe the existence or content of a problem is less important than the interplay between problems. Failure is a limitless wilderness for design ecologies.

In yet another inversion, the newness or succession of technologies is less important than the relationship between technologies. There is not only one species of information, but a mixture of different species of information – like the digital together with the heavy or spatial – which becomes information-rich. Rejecting the necessity of a digital presence of sensors and devices to make the stiff world dance, medium design treats heavy, lumpy, physical space as an information system that is already dancing with potentials. As Gregory Bateson observed, a man, a tree, and an ax constitutes an information system. The goal of medium design is not homeostasis but imbalance, not fixed pools of information but rather extrinsic, inclusive mixing chambers for many social, political, technical networks.

Just as medium designers design things

that shouldn't always work, they tell the histories of things that don't happen. Punctuating events, like crises, competitions, victories, and defeats, are usually center stage in the most familiar cultural narratives, but disposition does not *happen*, because it is ever-present as a *latent* temperament. Just as glass doesn't have to break to be brittle, dispositional qualities are changing and unfolding in ways that may not be reified by a single event.

If an unsafe factory collapses or burns, there is an event to mark the violence, but in countless factories or industrial parks that do not buckle under the weight of their own denial, there is no event, no drawn sword. There is only latent temperament – the constant aggression of blatantly imbalanced power dynamics. The potential for either concentrating or distributing power; the potential for escalating or reducing violence.

Histories of *things that do not happen* might be structured like an epidemiology or a branching set of thresholds and points of leverage, and they might be largely concerned with how to modulate violence in organizations by making them information-rich. They might consider the spatio-political reagents or accelerants in these gradient moments of political metastasis and remission.

In the medium, can you adjust space in ways that are attuned to latent temperament? In addition to declarations or confrontations, the designer might also operate like the parent with squabbling children. That is, the designer would not try to parse the content of the argument but change the disposition of the context. The designer would lower the temperature of the room, move a chair into the light, increase the blood sugar of one child, or introduce a pet into the arms of another, so that the chemistry of the room no longer induces or supports violence.

Think back to the superbug's skills of discrepancy. Medium design might be bored with the safety of the purely rhetorical. But if it has any hope of effecting change, it manipulates the organization as well as the instrumental narrative that attends it with moves that are potentially sneakier or more politically agile.

These narratives may offer a dissonant story that, however nonphysical, has physical consequences. It may be a narrative that makes something contagious. It may have an emotional message that renders some power more vulnerable. Or it may have a surprising cultural bounce because of its irrationality, outrageousness, cuteness, creepiness, or violence. This is a stealthier form of activism that mixes spatial change with the gifts, pandas, rumors, meaningless distractions, and totemic fictions that are so effective in culture.

Here, on this flip side, right answers are mistakes, and obligations are more empowering than freedom. Histories follow latent aggressions as well as gunshots. Messy is smarter than new. You deliberately address problems with responses that shouldn't always work. You can steal some of the powers of infrastructure space to design a snaking chain of moves, worming into and generating leverage against intractable politics. And like a really good pool player, you don't necessary call your shots but keep the other side guessing. The medium designer might be too smart to be right.

✕

Excerpted and adapted from Keller Easterling, *Medium Design* (Verso, forthcoming 2020).

**Keller Easterling** is a writer, designer, and professor at Yale University.

05/05

e-flux journal #106 — february 2020 [Keller Easterling](#)  
**Medium Design**