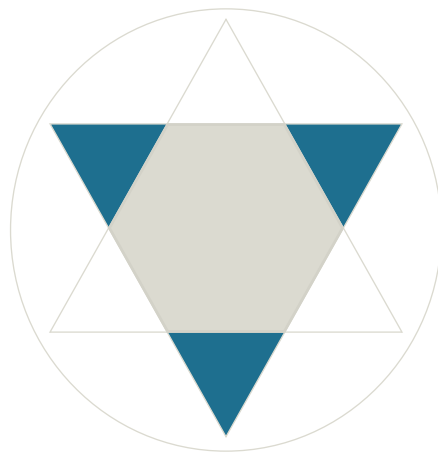


ALCHEMICAL DESIGN

And the Theatre of the Future



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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of applying the theories and methodologies of alchemy in the context of contemporary design. Designers play a crucial role in shaping the kind of world we live in and how we interact with one another, it is therefore vital to create technologies that benefit the common good. However, in the capitalist age the design practice is frequently confined to the commercial sector. This restrictive trend has also contributed to a spiritual disconnection to one another and the world around us, leading to devastating impacts in societies through political, economic, and ecological inequalities. Alchemy as the experimental art of transmutation could allow us to renew the practice to design technologies of spiritual utility.

The research was guided by extensive reviewed literature, interviews with designers and audiences and data collected at creative events. By analysing the theories and practice of alchemy, a methodology and schematic framework is outlined for approaching design problems through spiritual and symbolic modes. This study demonstrates the significance of ritual and play activities in connecting humans and enabling new culture, and how specific technological sites such as theatres and raves can accommodate these experiences. In contemporary times these sites are finding experimental synthesis, indicating a trend towards new forms of experience design. Alchemical design principles can help guide this development towards catalysing revolutionary shifts in society.

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Introduction

According to the International Council of Design¹ “Design is a discipline of study and practice focused on the interaction between a person — a “user” — and the man-made environment, taking into account aesthetic, functional, contextual, cultural and societal considerations”. The field of design is therefore often understood in terms of functionality and problem-solving within our world. This definition, while inherently broad, seems to be directed towards specific regions of life, in the technologies that compose the fabric of our societies under the capitalist mode of development. In doing so, it becomes pigeonholed into a narrow field of exploration.

This thesis aims to answer the question: in what ways can the experimental, occult practice of alchemy, find relevance through the actions of designers, and what practical benefits may there be in designing artefacts of spiritual utility? How can we use alchemy to broaden the horizons of design?

Methodology

In this thesis I build upon research carried out for an essay entitled “Alchemy as a Design Approach”, where I investigated how the spirit of alchemy as the “poetic science” could be applied to contemporary technology and design. Developing this theoretical framework further, I will endeavour here to explain how the design of interactive multimedia environments can be improved to contribute to the development of a transformative “theatre of the future” which can serve to address some of the critical problems being faced by society including intolerance, xenophobia and narcissism.

The study uses a wide range of reviewed literature, interviews with artists and designers and data collected while participating in creative events. By breaking down the main archetypal principles of alchemy and relating them to design, I aim to demonstrate a set of tools that can guide a spiritual re-engineering of society, developing a new mode of technology

¹ <https://www.theicod.org/en/professional-design/what-is-design/what-is-design>

creation. In doing so I will also recognize areas of conflict within the alchemical tradition, suggesting ways in which they can be resolved towards a more complete and integrated form that is synergic with the needs and interests of contemporary society.

Presentation of findings and analysis

In the first chapter I describe design and alchemy in the context of technological development. I explore examples of early practitioners of alchemy in antiquity, explaining how their work paved the foundations for a vast array of technologies and modes of thought. This will establish the basis for my argument on the significance of alchemical design and its potential contributions to modern society.

The second chapter lays out the aims and processes of alchemy, explaining the relevant terminology and relating these concepts to the process of contemporary design. This allows for a *modus operandi* to be fleshed out to guide the thinking of this approach to creation, and an understanding of the psychological intentions of the hybrid practice.

My focus in chapter three is on the analysis of technologies which have historically served the spiritual needs of human societies, drawing attention to ancient ritual practices, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* design concept, and contemporary rave culture. This provides the basis for a speculative design structure, uniting the arts and technology to produce a tool of potent spiritual utility. By breaking down the design qualities of these traditions, I shall outline their theoretical frameworks, defining particular strengths to carry forth as well as deficiencies to improve upon. This creates an oppositional base from which to imagine a new model that incorporates the alchemical design approach. This will facilitate the decentralized and fluid engagement of users of designed transformative spaces.

The fourth chapter looks at examples of current design trends that feed into this notion of spiritual technologies. Contemporary reference comes in the observation and analysis of an emerging strain of raves influenced by cross-disciplinary practice and an incorporation of theatre, spirituality, and expansive ritual practice, with a primary focus upon the i8i art collective and their work “Infinite Scroll” at the Trauma Bar und Kino in Berlin. This is guided by an interview with a member of the collective on their practice and experience on the

project, and how they envision the development of design in connection to future forms of creative expression.

This thesis explores an under-explored area of design, and therefore operates with an acknowledgement of the limitations of such pioneer work. The forms and functions of alchemical design and the speculative ‘theatre of the future’ are explored through the restrictions of time and access to resources of a BA thesis-writing period. Further research is needed to expand and realize the concept, and so I propose here a foundational framework for future analysis. I aim to incorporate the findings laid down in relevant academic studies while also taking into account the perspectives of peers in the field, from fellow rave participants to designers exploring these regions of human experience

1 Alchemy, design, and their synthesis

It may be difficult to see a link between alchemy, commonly understood as a mystical pseudoscience from antiquity, and the logic-driven field of design. Alchemy is an esoteric practice – shrouded in mystery through its complex symbolic encryption, while design is typically exoteric – oriented towards utility and accessibility. However, these perspectives are superficial and limited. The image of alchemists as charlatans and scam artists on a hopeless quest to transfigure lead into gold belies alchemy’s rich global heritage and contribution to culture and science. Design, meanwhile, is a diverse discipline that frequently intersects with a wide range of other fields and is informed by multiple methodologies.

The use of the word alchemy as a *verb* shows how pervasive the idea has been as a contribution to contemporary culture. Numerous books have titles including “The Alchemy of [...]” such as *The Alchemy of Finance*, *The Alchemy of Herbs*, *The Alchemy of Animation* etc. The term, to act “alchemically” is frequently used to describe any acts of unusual experimentation that change ordinary entities into sublime new forms, taking place through enigmatic processes (Merriam-webster.com, 2022). Acknowledging this linguistic phenomenon is crucial in understanding alchemy’s potential as a psychospiritual tool of experimentation.

1.1 Archetypal links between the practices

One of the most direct ways to draw connections between design and alchemy is to understand them in terms of technology. In *“Are We Human?”* (2018) Colomina and Wigley frame an expansive understanding of design and its artefacts as a guiding force for the development of humanity. Whether through material constructs like architecture, or abstract constructs like language, design has become a means of externalizing the human mind; a way of projecting beyond present conditions, looking forward into our future with the intent of continuous reform and conscious evolution. As a result, our artefacts become the very things that define our experience of the world and our definition of “human”. Through this lens, design becomes an extension of the human, and all our technologies are forms of prosthesis which accumulate into a vast network of artefacts that form layers over the natural, “organic” world. According to Colomina and Wigley (2018, 9), “Design always presents itself as serving the human, but its real ambition is to redesign the human.”

This process of continuous actualization and restructuring of the human being through acts of design is analogous with alchemy’s legacy as the art of transmutation. What connects alchemy and design is the deep-seated desire of humans to create and transform the world around them. Renowned alchemist Paracelsus described the potent activities of the imagination as a tool for shaping our realities. As such: “for what man thinks is what he is, and a thing is as he thinks it. If he thinks a fire, he is a fire” (Paracelsus in Roob, 2021, 20).

Theory seems to be the link between the various strains of alchemy rather than explicit practices or material technologies. While there are certain deviations between the philosophies of Chinese alchemists and their Arab counterparts, for example, what unites them is a spiritually and artistically informed approach to interpreting the organic world and the subsequent application of their knowledge through practical experiments and the creation of new forms. In their writings, the alchemists generally referred to themselves as philosophers, and their collective practice as either “the Work” or “the Art”, treated as a divine task in devotion to all of creation (Roob, 2021).

Alchemy has always encompassed a broad spectrum of cross-disciplinary practices which could be engaged with fluidly. Without the constraints of formal categorization which

professions of the modern age would come to expect, alchemists were able to explore and express their spiritual efforts from multiple points, generating exciting new hybrid forms as a result.

1.2 Alchemy as a precursor to communication design

Amongst alchemy's practical achievements have been the development of colour pigments and printing technologies that are used throughout the applied arts (Brafman, 2017). There is also evidence of the alchemical tradition creating the conditions for much of communication design practice through various innovations in its visual culture. Communication design concerns itself with the ways in which we relate to media, taking into consideration the subjectivity arising through different media and audiences. In this way it does not restrict itself to a particular medium, but studies how ideas can be expressed most effectively to reach a targeted audience. Although its categorization as a field within design was relatively recent, it has arguably been practised far longer than academic discourse has been able to identify it.

Alchemy concerns itself heavily with communication systems. Its legendary founding figure Hermes Trismegistus, was supposedly descended from Hermes, the ancient Greek god of knowledge and communication. Hermes is also where *hermeneutics* comes from, the theory and methodology of interpretation. It was through an experiential approach that alchemists sought to understand the natural mechanisms of life, relying upon the medium of their imaginations and the spiritual knowledge of the times to aid this. Visual language plays an interesting role in this effort. As they observed phenomena in the world and through their laboratory experiments, alchemists documented their findings in manuscripts. Initially this was solely through written text, but eventually visual aids were used, beginning with crude representational illustrations of apparatus and ingredients, allowing readers to replicate processes (Obrist, 2003).

As the movement became more diverse and sophisticated so too did its theoretical corpus. This called for a refinement of communication methods, resulting in an advanced set of graphical systems that represented both physical phenomena and abstract concepts with a greater degree of efficacy.

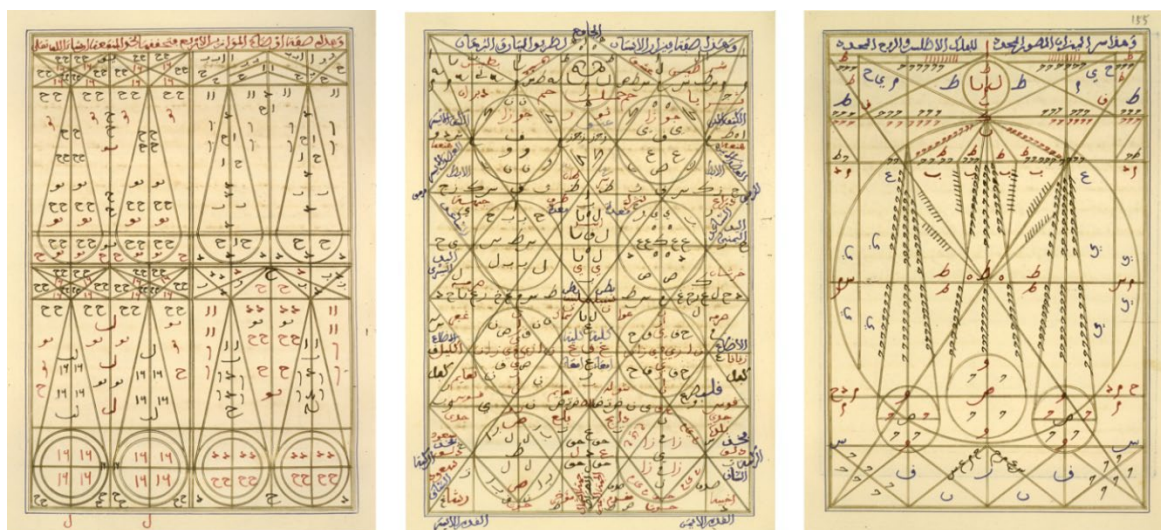


Figure 1. Schematic tables and diagrams from the alchemical treatise "*Kitāb al-Burhān fī asrār 'ilm al-mīzān*" (*Proof Regarding the Secrets of the Science of the Balance*) by al-Jaldakī (1342)

The inclusion of pictorial symbols which stood for specific objects and processes (expanding upon the hieroglyphics of alchemy’s Egyptian heritage) allowed for a shared vocabulary to develop within the movement. More complex concepts called for new graphical systems, and thus a form of proto-diagram would arise. Simple geometric shapes enabled the compression of dense writings into easy-to-understand tables and charts. Twelfth-century theologian and scientist Robert Grosseteste extolled the emerging phenomena saying: “all causes of natural effects must be expressed by means of lines, angles, and figures, for otherwise it is impossible to grasp their explanation” (Grosseteste in Lindberg, 1982, 12)

Practical alchemy found a fascinating synthesis in this period. Alchemists began to make holistic connections between the psychological processes they experienced and the chemical processes taking place in their laboratory experiments. This created a semiotic interweaving of the physical and metaphysical apparatus of alchemy, where substances were personified as having souls (Roob, 2021). From the technical illustrations of laboratory equipment developed a set of richly allegorical images that simultaneously communicated inner and outer



Figure 2. Alchemical Illustrations depicting three stages of the Magnum Opus. Aurach, Georges (17th Century). Donum Dei

experience, and thus, the spiritual thrust of the work of alchemy found expression in exquisite engravings and painterly forms, uniting art and science. This simultaneously poetic and functional method of expression can be connected to communication design, which seeks to express complex meanings through playful abstraction and rerouting beyond the conventions of language and text.

Despite the esoteric nature of these materials, their influence upon subsequent communication systems is undeniable. From the technical diagrams and illustrations of the sciences to graphic design's infographics and pictograms, the genetic materials of alchemy can be found throughout culture and technology. The alchemist's intuitive approach to problem-solving through alternative modes of expression permeates through our highly semiotic engagement with the world around us.

1.3 Why alchemical design?

If alchemy represents a poetic synthesis between applied arts and science, what could result from a poetic approach to design? We can argue for the application of alchemical thought to design practice by means of attitudinal design approaches. Attitudinal design was first described by the designer Lazlo Moholy-Nagy in his 1947 book *"Visions in Motion"*. In it, he states:

The designer must see the periphery as well as the core, the immediate and the ultimate, at least in the biological sense. He must anchor his special job in the complex whole. (...) The idea of design and the profession of the designer has to be transformed from the notion of a specialist function into a generally valid attitude of resourcefulness and inventiveness which allows projects to be seen not in isolation but in relationship with the need of the individual and the community. (Moholy-Nagy, 1947, 42)

This description expands the conception of design beyond a simple profession and into a vital tool for shaping our world. Moholy-Nagy was a teacher at the Bauhaus School which, in its short-lived, yet vastly influential existence, presented a new image of the designer as the “artist-engineer”, concerned as much with understanding the world as they were with designing it through expanded notions of utilitarianism that acknowledged spiritual needs (Otto, 2019).

Design, as we have already explored, has been an incredibly powerful tool for evolving our species and the world we inhabit. However, design and technologies uphold dominant power structures and hierarchies, which places them in a position of great responsibility. Throughout the industrial age, the role of designers has been confined to the commercial sector in the production and promotion of commodities. But it is evident that we need to shift from the reductive narrative of design’s role as economic catalyst, because of the potentially dangerous consequences. Designers carry a degree of responsibility with respect to the type of world that is being constructed through their actions.

Technologies can be weapons just as easily as they can be medicine. In a world of increasing instability brought about through dominant structures of power, designers, as the developers of new technologies, can choose to help or hinder these developments in their continued participation in the practice. In “*Technology as Symptom and Dream*”, Romanyshyn points to the invention of two technologies; the atomic bomb and the spaceship, as being significant catalysts for an underlying sense of detachment in humanity to the Earth in our age. The atomic bomb has demonstrated the very real potential of the total annihilation of our world at any moment, while the spaceship promises an escape from our dying planet (Romanyshyn, 1989). The cultural impact of these two technologies is undeniable and their effects filter through to contemporary times.

To think of designs as medicines to alleviate our problems could help restore connections between people themselves and between people and their environment. Medicines heal, treat, develop and protect. Alchemy was often viewed as a health project and had close ties to the developments of medicinal practice from its earliest days, where one of its primary goals was the development of elixirs (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008). If current political, economic and ecological instabilities are sicknesses, how can we create elixirs to aid a reformation of our world? Designers have the power to address inequalities and engineer better societies for all people and alchemical design can provide an effective means to do this.

The discipline of design has moved into more ethical modes and the ideas of attitudinal design thinking are increasing in popularity. This has resulted in numerous efforts to expand the definitions and understandings of functionalism. The notion of “good design” is generally built upon the values invoked by the industrial capitalist age. Good design must be useful, and what is useful has come to mean what is simple, efficient and easily consumed. “Usefulness” in design is now being challenged as new areas of societal concern emerge which call for design solutions. Even if a design serves its purpose well, the said purpose may conflict with the pluralistic needs of society. For example, ‘hostile-architecture’ urban design strategies may restrict the accessibility of public spaces to homeless people (Hu, 2019). Good design must therefore fulfil usefulness and integrity. Even if it is functionally serviceable, the moral and ethical effect must be considered (Rawsthorne, 2018).

Designers are choosing to address a vast range of areas in our lives, from ecological collapse to the refugee crisis; queer, feminist, minority rights, and participatory policy making.² Many designers are finding immense power in new technologies for addressing these issues, with increasing efficiency and success (Rawsthorn, 2018). Design methodology is also frequently used across disciplines. With increasing access to both the technologies and understanding of the practice, anyone can design.

Engaging with design like an alchemist can help with the dissolution of strict disciplinary categorization. The alchemists could interpret the world as a scientist and

² For a comprehensive list of examples, refer to Rawsthorn’s “*Design as an Attitude*” (2018)

philosopher, express their thoughts as poet and painter and act as engineer and healer. They might look to the celestial constellations or the minerals of the earth. And at no point was this an isolated act; the alchemists were a cross-continental network of practitioners who would share their knowledge through vast interconnected societies and alliances (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008). Within the context of our internet age, this spirit of fluid collaboration and information exchange could be elevated to far greater proportions.

1.4 A return of spirituality through ritual and play

Despite contemporary society's possession of tools of global communication, we live in an age of disconnection. In Byung-Chul Han's "*The Disappearance of Rituals*" he identifies the increasing loss of symbolic relationship to the world as the major catalyst for this detachment of people to their environment, where rituals are "symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world" (Han, 2020, 2).

Johan Huizinga argues in "*Homo Ludens*" that play is a vital human activity and is the essential producer of culture that has permeated through our childhood development and featured prominently in the development of our species. Play does not concern itself directly with the production of material things. Instead, it operates in the realm of the imagination (Huizinga, 1949). It is worth recognizing that the word "play" can also mean performance and game, and can describe a wide array of activities through many contexts that all have potential as "affirmative powers of reflection and development. Dance affirms becoming and the being of becoming; laughter, roars of laughter, affirm multiplicity and the unity of multiplicity; play affirms chance and the necessity of chance" (Deleuze, 1983, 194).

Rituals provide a space for play. Play serves the purpose of understanding and then creating new forms. In a world without rituals, magic, symbols or romance, people are unable to form strong emotional bonds to their surroundings, leading to an atomization of society and narcissistic tendencies. Under the mechanical conditions of capitalist society, life is defined by production for the sake of survival rather than contemplation and celebration of its forms. This results in a relationship with the world as a resource to be consumed, rather than a home that sustains all our lives. Rituals are ancient human activities that have shaped the course of our world from its earliest moments. It is only within our capitalist mode of life that

the function of play, ritual and rest lose their ontological value and are confined to a non-serious form of leisure in subordination to work. As Han argues:

In ritual context, things are not consumed or used up [verbraucht] but used [gebraucht]. (...) Under the compulsion of production, by contrast, we behave towards things, even towards the world, as consumers rather than users. In return, they consume us. Relentless consumption surrounds us with disappearance, thus destabilising life. Ritual practices ensure that we treat not only other people but also things in beautiful ways, [so] that there is an affinity between us and other people as well as things. (Han, 2020, 4).

Beyond the commodity production industry, there is a potential for focusing on developing technologies of spiritual utility. Creating tools that enable the formation of bonds between consciousness and the material aspects of our world are potentially revolutionary, but as Han and Huizinga demonstrate, this is not a new idea.

Spiritual technologies are all around us. Using the perspectives of Colomina and Wigley we can consider cultural systems such as religion, astrology, tantra and tarot all as tools of spiritual utility that are still relevant today. If we employ design to aid symbolic, spiritual concerns, it could guide a cultural transmutation towards more thoughtful relationship between people, communities and the world. And alchemy, as the potent tool of transformation, already orients itself towards this goal. For example, in the sixteenth century several climate change disasters corresponded to an increased interest in alchemy, when the publications of alchemical books were at an all-time high (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008, 83). This confirms that in times of social unrest, human beings seek spiritual help. Alchemy promises a means of change, of enlightenment.

1.5 A conceptual framework

The conceptual framing of alchemical design is multifaceted. While the focus is on the act of design, alchemy is the key to undertaking the approach, and we must consider both halves as a cohesive whole. While alchemy provides a specific model from which we can base our design operations, the act itself simultaneously enables the basic tenets of alchemy through the design medium. Therefore, design reveals and renews alchemy (and vice versa) and allows for the mindful development of technologies and their consequences on our world.

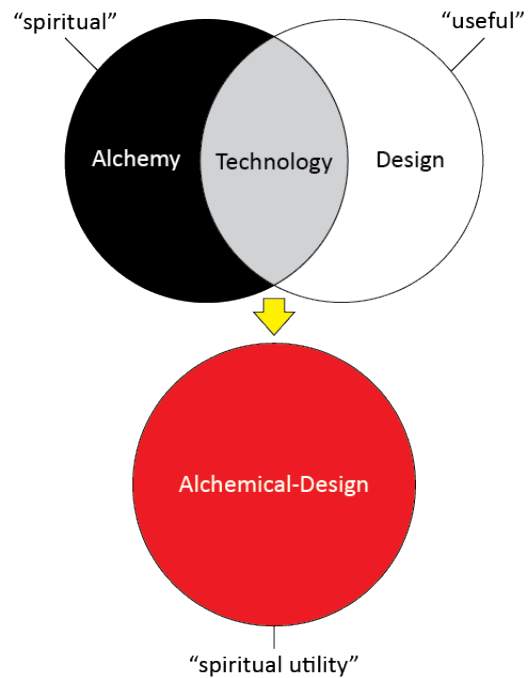


Figure 3. Conceptual framework for understanding alchemical design

This is not a call for a homogenization of approaches to design in any sense. Design is a diverse ecosystem of nuances and niches that call for individual treatment to best suit the needs they wish to meet. Design is eclectic as a practice, existing on countless planes of experience, serving a multitude of concerns. The alchemical route is just one potential pathway to achieve this.

2. Magnum Opus: Redesigning alchemy for the post-modern age

“Every age renews its powers from these works” – (William Blake in Roob, 2021, 8)

The most useful way to understand the value of alchemical work is to focus upon its process, rather than its ultimate goal. In striving towards some divine and practically unachievable ideal, the alchemists undertook a grand journey of idiosyncratic experiments using intuitive and imaginative means that generated a plethora of unexpected yet fascinating and results along the way. Seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon describes this using a vivid analogy:

Alchemy may be compared to the man who told his sons he had left the gold buried somewhere in his vineyard; where they by digging found no gold, but by turning up the mould, about the roots of their vines, procured a plentiful vintage. So the search and endeavours to make gold have brought many useful inventions and instructive experiments to light. (Francis Bacon, 1623, *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, quoted in Thorpe, 2017, 43)

Alchemy operates through the desire to transmutate substances, in mimicry of natural systems that are themselves in a constant state of flux and evolution. Simultaneously, it seeks to understand the relations between all things, finding unity between seemingly separate entities. Paracelsus considered alchemy to be “the knowledge of the experiment” (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008, 86).

2.1 Analysing the Great Work - The goal and process of alchemy

The *Magnum Opus* (Latin:] for the Great Work) was the legendary labour that all alchemist’s undertook; their mystical journey towards a divine achievement.³ It consists of the process and achievements of the movement in its entirety and was described in the extensive lore emanating from this tradition.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung understood alchemy as an expression of the archetypal dramas of the soul. Using a psychoanalytical and semiotic approach, he identified recurrent archetypes within alchemical symbolism which also appeared in the dreams of his patients. His extensive research led him to the belief that alchemists were expressing a mythology rooted in the collective unconscious of humanity (Raff, 2000). Just as Jung used the drama of the *Magnum Opus* as a framework to describe individuation⁴ in psychotherapy, applying these modes of thought can provide designers with an alternative framework for approaching their projects in more boundary-pushing ways. In service of this argument, I shall outline some of the key concepts of alchemy that can be used in aid of the alchemical design approach.

³ The phrase has since been commonly adapted as a form of high praise for any creative work.

⁴ Individuation is the process by which an individual integrates the conscious and subconscious components of their personality as a means towards self-actualization.

The Philosopher's Stone: A frequent misconception about the Great Work is that its aim was to create gold or achieve immortality. The actual goal, however, was to create *the philosopher's stone*: a legendary object which gave the user divine powers. We can interpret the philosopher's stone as the ultimate technology that we are trying as designers to work towards. The ambition underlying such an undertaking is the true value of the work – it is the motivating force which enables growth.

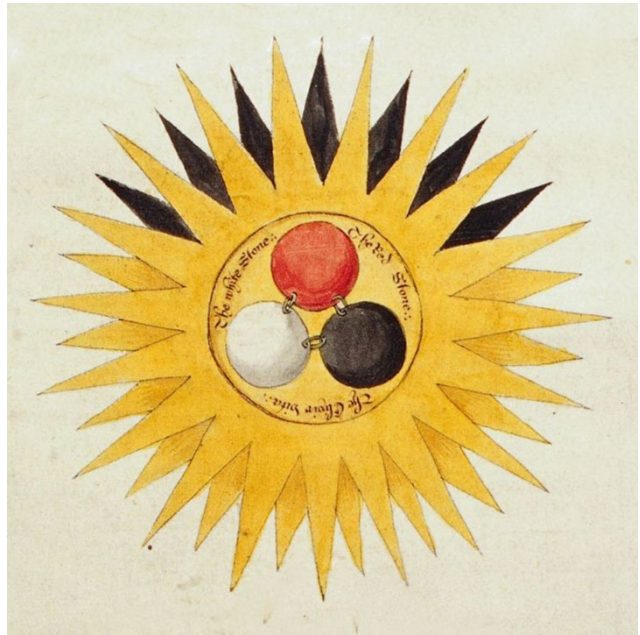


Figure 4. Illustration detail from a copy of “The Ripley Scroll” depicting the legendary philosopher’s stone, (16th century)

Prima Materia: To initiate the Great Work, alchemists must choose their *prima materia*, or prime matter. The prima materia is a mysterious base substance that will eventually transform into the philosopher's stone. Jung interpreted it as an archetypal point of origin of all things, arising from the unconscious mind; the site of intuitive thought and the mysteries of spiritual perspective. For the alchemical designer, if “the work” is the area of concern in need of development, seeking out the prima materia forces the designer to consider the roots of the issue, building off existing knowledge and being in close engagement with the subject that is designed for. In seeking to change how things are, the designer ought to investigate how things got to be that way in the first place.

This can be connected to the popular esoteric phrase “as above, so below”⁵ meaning that occurrences between the celestial and terrestrial, spirit and material, macrocosmic and microcosmic have a direct effect upon one another and continuously inform one another (Grafton; Newman, 2001). Employing this perspective allows the alchemical designer to be aware of how specific decisions in their work process might create unanticipated effects elsewhere and act accordingly.

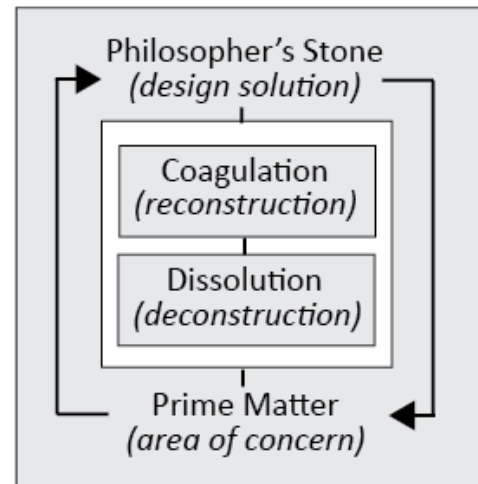


Figure 6. "The Great Work" of design explained through alchemy

It might also provide alternative pathways for working. If a designer encounters a challenging obstacle in their projects, it may help to shift perspectives and look at the big picture. Simultaneously, the solution may require an analysis of the smaller intricacies of the materials being explored.

2.2 Issues with alchemical philosophy

The alchemy of antiquity reflects the cultural values of its time, frequently being informed by dominant religious doctrines of the Catholic Church. This results in a problematic linkage with hierarchical and patriarchal structures, anthropocentrism and a totalizing conception of perfection (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008). Influenced by gnostic thought,⁶ the notion of a universe emerging in an imperfect and chaotic form drove alchemists to believe that it was their divine duty to bring order to life. This was carried out by reorganizing natural forms into perfect, purified transcendent ones (Roob, 2021). We can connect this to the traditional doctrine of

⁵ A paraphrased line of text from the *Emerald Tablet*, an ancient hermetic work from which alchemy derives much of its foundational dogma. The full phrase reads “*That which is above is from that which is below, and that which is below is from that which is above, working the miracles of one [thing]. As all things were from One.*” (Roob, 2021)

⁶ Gnosticism: a collection of pre-Christian philosophies that sought spiritual enlightenment through the pursuit of esoteric knowledge and a rejection of the material world.

design as a continuous process of problem-solving through social reform, wherein both are working towards some abstract notion of perfection.

The philosophy of the alchemical canon is heavily intertwined with the idea that perfection is the ideal state. This descends from the theories of the Classical Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who identified all forms of life as striving towards perfection (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008). Aristotle defined perfection as that

- Which is complete – which contains all the requisite parts
- Which is so good that nothing of the kind could be better
- Which has attained its purpose (Tatarkiewicz, 1979, 7)

This notion of perfection is subjective, but the idea has dominated western culture and formed the basis of many problematic assumptions throughout history. It is intrinsically tied in with a hierarchical notion of what is most valuable, often in the economic sense. Alchemy and its historical fascination with gold have not been spared from this notion. As Lévi-Strauss (1990) explains, human brains are predisposed to understand the world through dualisms, and this is how we have historically designed our knowledge systems, including alchemy. Binary distinctions (such as the male and female gender dichotomy) arise from observable phenomena within the world but oversimplify reality and dictate virtual perceptions, resulting in pervasive and often harmful social constructs that uphold inequalities.

The post-modern philosopher Gilles Deleuze opposes “arborescent” modes of understanding, such as simple, linear alchemical processes. Arborescent models are like trees, growing from a central point of origin and developing through linear, hierarchical means. Deleuze argues that this model of understanding has prompted the reductive and harmful worldview that has dominated western thought and practice throughout history. In response to postmodernity’s scepticism of the cultural narratives of the modern and premodern period, he suggests the rhizome model as an alternative (Deleuze; Guattari, 2013). Rhizomes have no centre and no inherent hierarchies, and they consist of multiplicities. An example of this in nature would be a mycelial network, but in the context of our societies the internet is emblematically a rhizome; it is a decentralized network, designed through collective efforts and in a continuous process of non-linear growth.

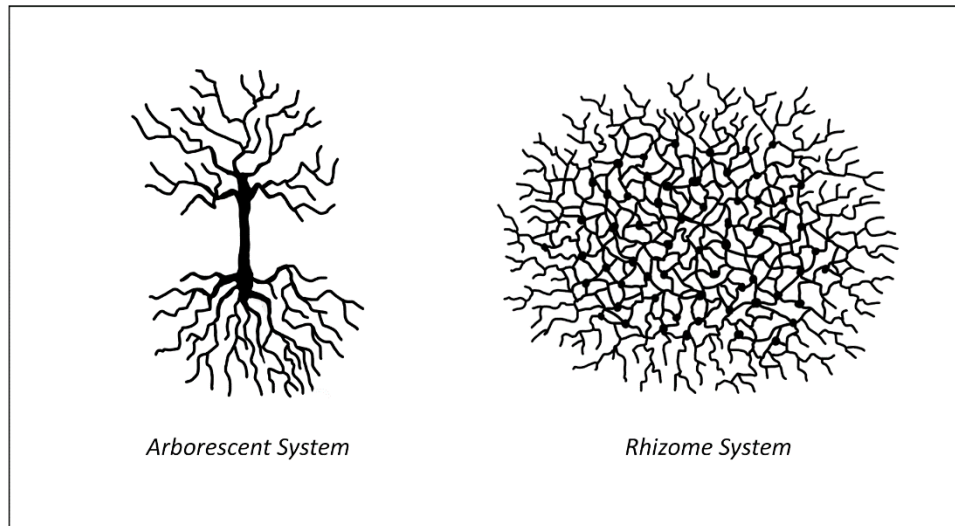


Figure 7. Arborescent vs. Rhizome models

I argue that the Deleuzian perspective does not necessarily defeat the potential of alchemical teachings in postmodernity. In the true spirit of alchemy, we must put the concepts and theories of the Great Work itself through a process of dissolution and coagulation. The key to purifying the art lies within.

There are practical benefits in employing arborescent models as simple mental tools for interpreting parts of wholes. As noted by Korzybski, (1958) *the map is not the territory*. Maps are virtual tools that help us interpret actual territories. In certain contexts it is more useful to have an accurate model of phenomena, such as in the realm of scientific understanding. But in other contexts, abstractions, symbols and metaphors can be very useful in helping to interpret and interact with the world. Even within non-linear, non-genealogical and decentralized rhizome structures, instances of arborescence can still occur. For designers – the cartographers of our worlds, the map-territory distinction should be obvious. Designers are in the constant process of analysing the world and developing systems to enhance our experiences within it. Having an awareness of the limits of representation can allow for a sensible, critical and constructive application of these systems.

2.3 Adapting the model

In order to transmute alchemy effectively in the design context (and the world at large), it is necessary that the essential concepts used are easy to grasp.

By dissolving reductive structures, we reveal components that constitute a complex and pluralistic whole. Within this fluid state, we can recalibrate and restructure the mechanisms and the way they connect to one another, so that coagulation can take place and a reformed and improved system and can solidify in place of the old (thus achieving successful transmutation). Coniunctio as the unity of opposites can function within pluralism. We can think of the sacred marriage as a tool for community building –considering the different needs of diverse bodies within an inclusive system for a mutually beneficial structuring of our societies. Through this, the universe becomes a pluriverse,⁷ utopia becomes polytopia and the “whole” can be seen as one and all.

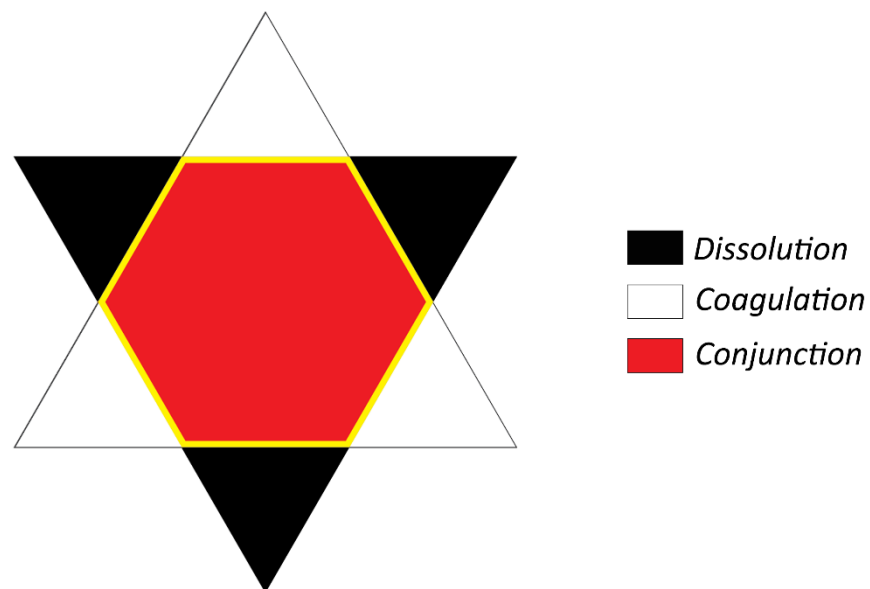


Figure 8. Diagram illustrating alchemical-design theory

In Figure 8 I represent the theoretical framework by employing the hexagram. The composition of the hexagram does not have to be seen as only apex pointing above and below. While it is often interpreted as two intersecting triangles, the resulting geometric figure points outwards in six different directions and contains a newly formed shape within its centre. Visualizing the Great Work in this way permits a non-arborescent reading where the goal is

⁷ In *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Arturo Escobar calls for designers to actively reorient their practices beyond pure functionalist, rationalist and industrial traditions, embracing an ontological approach to creating relational/non-dualist forms in the process (Escobar, 2018).

not perfection but integration. Figure 8 could be used as a visual aid for orienting alchemical design processes; a compass that points in all directions though it still reveals the potential destination within. It is a map of the zone of possibility, where designers can symbolically situate their practices.

Broadly speaking, the alchemical design movement can change the pre-existing order to find more harmonious modes of existing in the world for macrocosmic and microcosmic bodies as well as internal and external matters. It envisions better worlds and seeks to understand the components of life in their multitude: how they differ and how they can relate. Like the ouroboros it moves into the future by confronting the past; a constant feedback loop between base material and object of desire. The work is never done.

This approach will not be relevant for everyone, but for some it may open new (or renewed) potentials to the way we shape our world, acknowledging its spiritual value and its concerns for life enhancement and wellbeing. It embraces experimentation, ontological considerations and the fluidity of designerly action across disciplines and media and can be employed in a variety of contexts where any number of needs can be met.

3. Heterotopias of ritual and play: potentials in prior forms

We may imagine a ritual turn that re-establishes the priority of forms. It would invert the relationship between inside and outside, spirit and body. The body moves the spirit, not vice versa. Body does not follow spirit, but spirit follows body. We may also say: the medium produces the message. This is the force of ritual. (Han, 2020, 21)

To explore alchemical design's potential in enabling a spiritual turn in our world, it is beneficial to examine a specific project. This spiritual technology – our philosopher's stone – requires a prima materia to build from. The world as we experience it is profoundly structured in a way that makes it difficult to imagine alternatives. As Figure 8 demonstrates, transmutation is possible through challenging established systems. This necessitates an understanding of the materials and their origins.

Following Han and Huizinga's theories, ritual and play enable us to step out of our normal worlds and into new realms. Rituals become places of transition, thresholds, rites of

passage between the regular flows of space and time as we perceive them. Through the development of rituals, we can restructure spiritual concerns to affect material ones. This is analogous to the experimental processes of alchemy; the alchemists formed a relationship with their work in laboratories that treated the processes more like rituals than scientific procedures (Maxwell-Stuart, 2008). The experimental mode always requires some quality of play to challenge prior forms. And if the atomized, spiritually emaciated world is sustained through forces of blind mechanical production and labour, perhaps our Great Work would be better initiated as a *Great Play*.

3.1 The significance of sites

Alchemical illustrations frequently represent the Great Work as a space to be traversed; a fortress, or labyrinth; a pilgrimage towards enlightenment (Roob, 2021). Environments have a very strong affect on people’s emotional and spiritual condition. The psychological effects of space and architecture were explored extensively by the Situationist International Movement through their concepts of the constructed situation, psychogeography and unitary urbanism. They sought to transform the spiritual relations of society through interventions in physical

space (Wigley, 1998).

Alchemical designers could also choose to envisage their practice in psychogeographical terms. This speculative zone is more heterotopia than utopia. Utopias are unreachable goals to be strived for but never fully achieved, as they are literally “no-places”. Heterotopias, on the other hand, are “other-places”, actual worlds within our world



Figure 9. Engraved emblem from “Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae” by Heinrich Kunrath, (1602)

that operate by a different set of rules to society at large (Foucault; Miskowiec, 1986).

Humans across history have designed dedicated environments that function to transport people into new realms for the sake of creative and spiritual engagement. Examples include stone circles and other festive or ritual spaces, temples, theatres, museums, cinemas, and night clubs. In the context of our discussion, these heterotopias need to be designed to catalyse experiences of connection and transformation through playful action.

We can employ two anthropological concepts in aid of this: *communitas* and *liminality* (Turner, 1974). *Communitas* is defined as experiences of group solidarity that are external to the structures of regular social order. *Liminality* describes a phase within rites of passage where a transformation of identity takes place, and one can re-enter the world a changed person.

While there is much to be said for the design aspects of religious buildings as ritual heterotopias, these spaces centre around fixed religious belief systems and frequently exclude people and so are limited in their “play” function. Institutional religions such as the Catholic Church have also either persecuted or coerced the alchemical tradition through the ages.

3.2 From Dionysia to carnival: The festival heterotopia

Festivals can be considered one of the most archetypal and pervasive heterotopic sites. It is difficult to point to a particular source for the festival, as there are examples to be found in virtually all cultures. They explore spiritual, political or ecological community concerns,⁸ allowing for temporary moments of dissolved social order and enabling an engagement between different levels of society through acts of ritual and play. Festivals are not necessarily restricted to a specific physical space and typically unfold over a variety of environments; however, as ritual heterotopias they exist within temporal bounds and preordained scheduling.

The Dionysia was an ancient Greek festival which became a significant tradition in Athenian life from around 700 BC. Ancient Greece was a threshold of cultures, incorporating elements of surrounding African and Asian influences into its social fabric. Dionysia involved a variety of practices including orgiastic rites, feasts, poetry readings, music, dance and were centred on theatrical performances.

⁸ Seasonal harvests were a particular cause for festivities

Theatre played a crucial role in ancient Greek societies, valued as a sacred and established practice. The dramas would explore topics of deep religious and mythological significance through intersectional forms that explicitly spoke to the political, social and psychological experiences of the society (Cohen, 2019). This allowed theatre to operate as a platform with an educational value lying beyond pure entertainment. Citizen attendance was mandatory, and at points people were made to participate in the performances. In this way theatre became institutionalized, while it allowed for radical innovations in a myriad of cultural and technological forms.

In “Narrativizing Visual Culture” Shohat and Stam (1998) highlight the significance of carnivals as a rebellious device against normal social structures. Carnival practice emerged as a deliberated response to the hegemonic festivals; the conjuring of a temporal upside-down world; a situation arising through subversive means and the hybridization of various artistic forms not bound to external societal structures. The significance of carnival as a legitimate means of social transformation dwindled in European societies, to be replaced by carnivals that produce bland entertainment rather than powerful social comment. Carnivales have been commodified and absorbed by the established order in much the same way as festivals before them. It is worth noting, however, that carnival and the carnivalesque have continued to be subversive tools outside the West, in particular in Latin America and the Caribbean islands, where it is still a significant tool to challenging institutional powers through a variety of media.

In their best form, festivals function as exceptional generators of liminality and *communitas*.

3.3 Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk and the industrialized festival

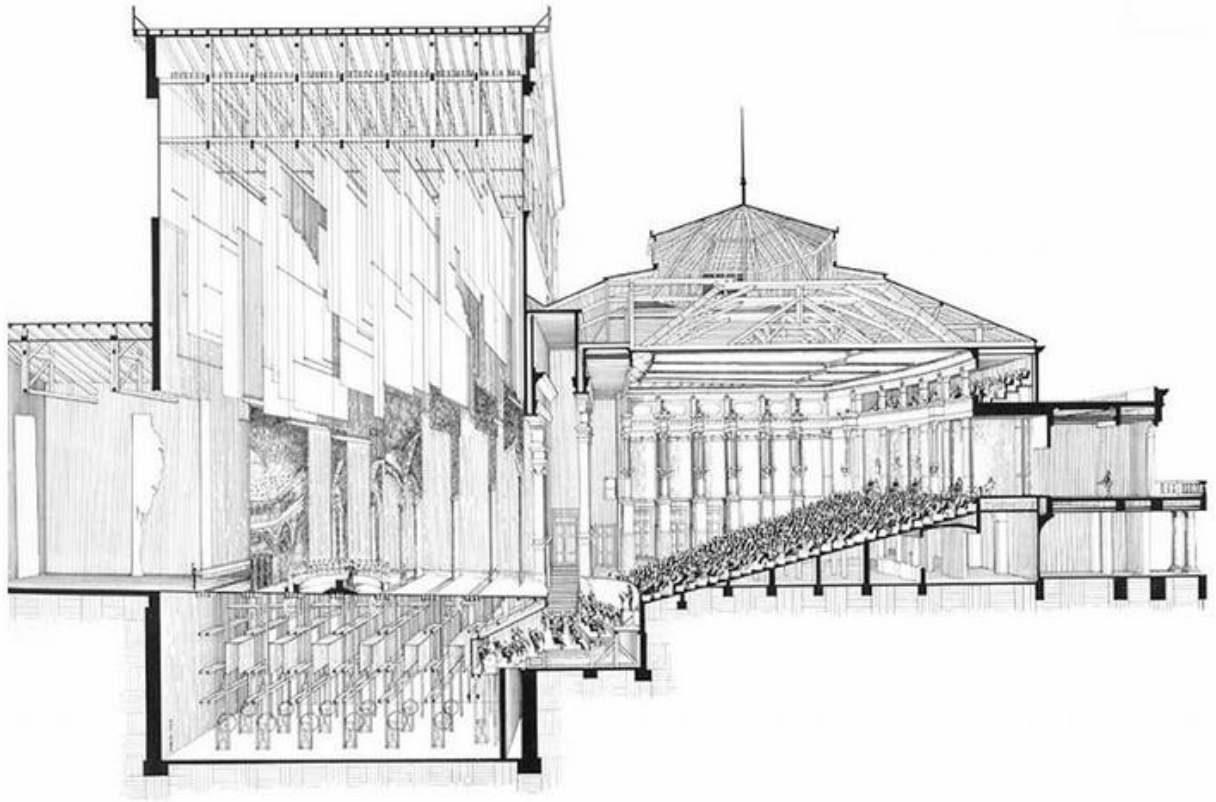


Figure 10. Cross-section of the Festspielhaus. Credit: Izenour, George C. (1997) "Theatre Design: Second Edition".

In the context of the industrial age, there has been a trend towards design projects which express revolutionary ambitions towards restoring a sense of spiritual relation within a mechanical and fragmented world. One of the most notable attempts has been the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) project. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as defined by nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, is an effort to create an organic synthesis of the arts as a means towards serving humanity's deep-seated spiritual needs (Smith, 2007). The general concept predates Wagner, and its realization has been attempted through a variety of forms,⁹ most typically manifesting as architectural sites. While the goal of the total artwork is, of course, to be *a work of art*, the process and intended purpose makes it a design project. The

⁹ The Bauhaus School would engage with the concept through a variety of collaborative and cross-disciplinary projects, under the banner of their motto: "Art and Technology: A New Unity" (Otto, 2019)

technical requirements to create such a grand and complex project called for some of the most advanced technologies of the time.

Gesamtkunstwerk qua Wagner follows an idea that is analogous to the classical aims of the Magnum Opus. It seeks to create new order within the chaos of the industrial age and the mechanized terror it unleashed on humanity, thereby achieving a sacred, transcendental form. Thus, we can connect the mystical significance of what the total artwork represents to the mythology of the Great Work. The successful execution of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project anticipates a designed artefact with functional properties comparable to the philosopher's stone as transcendent and unifying spiritual technologies.

Wagner strove to design a technology that would bring back a spiritual connection to the atomized society and the natural world, an ambition he described in his essay titled "*The Artwork of the Future*" (1849). Wagner looked to ancient Greek theatre as a direct reference for his model, believing that the unification of music, dance and poetry within their productions created sublime, celebrated works that served an integrating spiritual function within the structure of their society. This would result in the construction of the Festspielhaus, an opera house located in the heart of Germany, where grand theatre productions would be staged alongside annual festival celebrations with strong allusions to Dionysia, intended as a site of pilgrimage for the celebration of humanity. Ultimately however, it became a form of pseudo-propaganda for the superiority of the German *Volk*.

Wagner's operas included references to myths and symbols of European folklore, alluding to the values of Western antiquity. The explicit subtext was a return to some idealized primal utopia; an effort to use industry covertly to liberate humanity from the machine.

Wagner's conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was highly arborescent. His celebratory notion of the organic is ideologically linked with a sense of the authenticity and supremacy over

mechanical forms within culture and society,¹⁰ and was manifested in an overwhelmingly western (and masturbatory¹¹) vision of utopia.

There is also a clear hierarchical dualism communicated within Wagner's design of this theatre. His effort to create a unity between all of society is foiled both ideologically and technologically through the symbolic gesture of the "mystic gulf". This was the name given to the orchestra pit that Wagner and Carl Brandt designed especially for the Festspielhaus. They placed it between the auditorium and stage to conceal the source of the music to create a more immersive experience of the theatre production. This was aided by a double proscenium arch which would enable further concealment of the technologies that allowed the fantasy world of the opera to be realized. In combination with a revival of the Greek amphitheatre and other radical innovations in stage technologies, the Festspielhaus was potentially the most revolutionary building in the history of theatre design, and anticipated the future of electronic media (Kittler, 2014). This component of Wagner's project paradoxically reinforces an aspect of the industrial consumer society which he had intended to oppose: "audience-spectacle opposition" (Smith, 2007, 32).

Theatre is a fixed experience spatially. The audience occupies a specific zone and role as observer. Aside from brief moments of interaction during "fourth-wall breaks" and the customary applause, there is an otherwise unbroken distance between the audience and performers, with each group inhabiting a separate zone; the reality of the outside world and the fantasy of play on stage. And so, the play is only seen, not touched. The focus is solely on the stage itself, with the seating oriented around and towards it, and often concealed in darkness.

¹⁰ Which he inextricably ties to Jewish culture through a strongly antisemitic rhetoric through his essay "*Das Judentum in der Musik*" (1850)

¹¹ The official full title of the opera house being "Richard-Wagner-Festspielhaus" is incredibly telling.

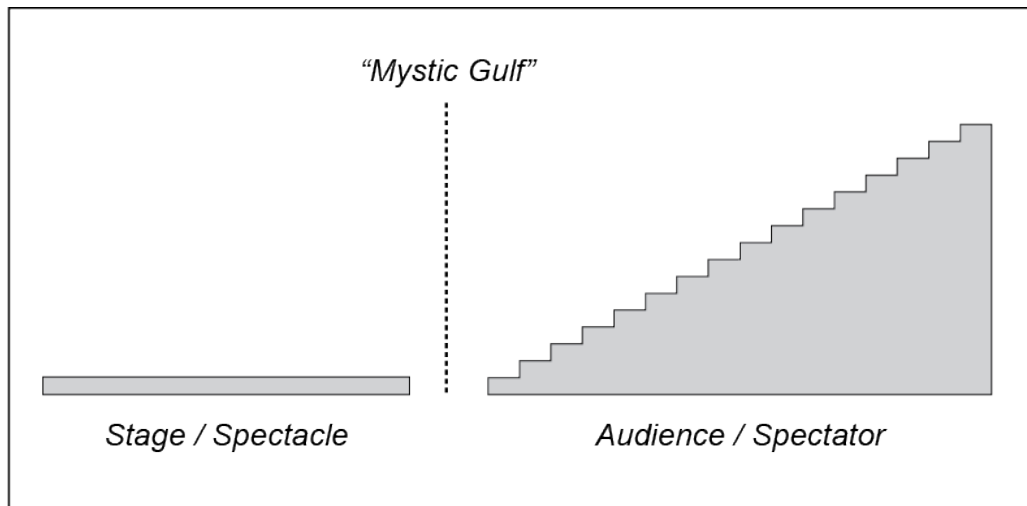


Figure 11. diagram of audience/spectacle opposition

Audience-spectacle opposition is in many ways the definitive quality of consumer society, where art is made into a spectacle of aesthetic and economic value, but not of utility. The irony of Wagner's mystic gulf is that, in attempting to achieve a deeply immersive experience between the audience and his artwork, he created an additional physical and symbolic barrier between the real world and his ideal. Paradise can manifest only on the stage, but not in the audience. Unlike the previous heterotopias of this discussion Wagner's theatre fails to enable *communitas*. Just because an audience is brought together to collectively observe a spectacle, it does not make them a community. And any experience of liminality achieved lacks a necessary degree of interactivity that Wagner's muses in antiquity possessed. Thus, despite its reliance on industrial ingenuity for its very existence, the Festspielhaus could not function as the utopian device that it was intended to be.

3.4 The rhizomatic heterotopia of raves¹²

Where Wagner's vision of a unifying spiritual technology for the atomized society fails, Raves provide an intriguing alternative approach. Raves are a form of ecstatic long-duration dance parties, organised around an ideology of inclusivity and counter-cultural values. The word 'rave' describes both the event and the activity: one attends a rave *to* rave. They find their

¹² As a frequent participant of rave culture, much of my writing here is based upon data gathered first-hand through personal experience and the experiences of friends/fellow clubbers. This research was assembled through field notes and direct observations during time spent raving.

origins in marginalised urban communities in the 1980s, where groups of people would gather in vacant spaces such as warehouses and open fields to find reprieve from the oppressive social structures which defined their everyday lives. The phenomenon grew organically in various countries and has since evolved into a diverse and extremely versatile global subculture.

The ethos of raves can be compared with that of carnival as a rebellious practice through the playful subversion of social norms; from its radical embrace of queer culture and sexual freedom to illicit drug use. The upside-down world which raves design can be of a more extreme manner in many ways than carnivals because of their concentrated intensity. The early rave scene consisted almost entirely of illegal events which faced heavy opposition from systems of authority through the strict enforcement of anti-rave laws in many countries, forcing the movement further underground. And the act itself demonstrates a peculiar subversion of industrial capitalist values: exerting energy by dancing for hours at a time as an act of exhausting labour with aims lying far beyond the production of wealth (Kalliala, 2016).

Participants of raves frequently describe having near-religious experiences, while many refer to raves as temples or churches, imbuing upon them the sacred value that lies beyond hedonistic escapism – as sites of spiritual healing. Comparisons have been drawn between the consciousness-altering effects of the rave and trance dance practices of certain cultures which also employ repetitive rhythmic drumming and flickering lights (Hutson, 2000). Throughout the movement, it is commonly accepted that these practices have liminal potential.

Raves utilize a variety of technologies within their events to facilitate their transcendent qualities, from sound systems and DJ controller equipment to lasers, light displays, projections and fog machines. And there are many aspects of their architectural and interior design that serve this function. With multiple dancefloors hosting different music styles to areas for resting and socializing, the energies can be extremely diverse in nature. This is only considering the tools of the rave organizers and without taking into account the different technologies brought to the scene by the ravers themselves. Costumes and make-up play a significant role in rave culture in enabling participants to share their spirit of empowerment and radical expression.

While many choose to follow trends within the scene,¹³ others develop personalized styles, often designing their own clothing and accessories. Drugs are technologies that serve a significant purpose within raves. The degree of consumption varies throughout the scene (some participants I interviewed claimed to abstain entirely), and the drug of choice for an individual, group or party has a very strong impact on shaping the rave dynamics.

The result of these accumulative efforts, like *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is the conjuring of a world boldly contrasted to that of the 'outside'. What distinguishes it from Wagner's approach is its communal structuring and the degree of interaction between the technologies and the audience.

Rave culture embodies a rhizomatic system of relations. While the movement began in small, localized clusters, it has since evolved into a wide decentralised network of collaborators spread across entire continents. The raves themselves are also very rhizome-like. While most rave participants on the dancefloor will orient themselves in the direction of the DJ, the dance floor itself becomes a stage. DJs, alongside the lighting technicians, occupy a role as engineers of the rave's atmosphere, influencing the collective experiences of the crowd in what can often be compared with a form of abstract storytelling. The audience has a role in directing this narrative too. DJs will take cues from the body language and enthusiasm levels of a crowd to inform their curation of sound. Although the technical setup is designed intentionally, its usage within the rave is improvisational in nature when compared to the highly scripted traditional theatre or music performances, leaving it open to spontaneous occurrences. This embrace of chaos is helped by the inherent fluidity of the experience where participants are encouraged to move around, explore, and intermingle with one another within the environment.

Liquidarity is a term coined by ethnomusicologist Luis Manuel Garcia to characterize the dissolutive potential of the rave dancefloor in enabling strong social bonding through shared energetic exchange. A combination of the words "liquid" and "solidarity", it is described by Garcia in a way that is highly analogous to *communitas* as a phenomenon "which

¹³ These trends have greatly influenced the fashion industry at large (Fedorova, 2018).

generates a space of inclusion uncoupled from identity or other forms of particularized belonging” (Garcia, 2014, TC 12:12). By entering the rave heterotopia you lay yourself open to the dissolution of your identity, due to its sheer diversity and anonymity. When everyone is the “other” there is no necessity to express yourself as you would normally, opening new potentials of identity and performance and subsequently allowing for connections and experiences that might not be attainable in regular life.

An analogy could be drawn between the processes of alchemy and the use of technologies within raves. The chaotic essence of the practice is a result of a dissolution of social barriers where new forms can coagulate. The act of DJing can be seen as a form of alchemical experimentation; a process-based act of synthesizing musical elements to generate new complementary forms based on an intuitive approach, thereby influencing the emotional and psychological qualities of the audience (in addition to the literal chemical experimentation undertaken through drugs). By adapting pre-existing environments to best suit the rave’s functions they are subjected to a transmutational process, changing otherwise neglected cultural objects into artefacts of elevated spiritual significance.

Despite the strength of the rave heterotopia in meeting the ideal of alchemical design, it also has issues. Because of the dynamic potential of the rave experience, it is difficult (and problematic) to ascribe a specific focus to the movement. However, its tendency to follow ritual forms based upon the consumption of substances and maximum indulgence in intense emotions can result in a certain stagnancy. Many modern raves attempt to recapture the aesthetics of the early movement, fixating on industrial techno tropes and thereby potentially confine themselves to a restrictive formula.

The narrative that raves are sites of potent spiritual healing in our age is also greatly exaggerated when taking into account the diversity of the scene. For some this may be true, but many ravers indulge in this practice for its social, sexual, or pharmacological qualities without any pretence of seeking enlightenment. While raves have the potential to empower those facing marginalization and other struggles, they can just as easily trap people in toxic cycles of escapism and self-destruction. Moreover, because of the social stigma against drugs, it is difficult to ensure their usage is responsible and regulated, resulting in a culture of abuse.

The social taboo on drugs restricts the potential to apply the technologies in alternative ways. Consequently, the movement faces a continuous struggle to sustain itself against the effects of authoritarian resistance and gentrification, with many clubs shutting down or being forced down the route of commercialization to survive.

This is not to totalize the movement. There are countless parties that continue with radical innovations in technology and substance, pushing far beyond their limitations to create exciting new forms. One of the most beautiful aspects of raves is its transmutational qualities. It taps into archetypal human urges and allows for an experimental mode of play, transmitting new experiences through communal networks of diversities rather than similarities.

In an article for *Flash Art* magazine, architect, and designer Martti Kalliala (2016) addresses the struggles of club culture in recent years to sustain itself against the rapid gentrification of urban spaces. He proposes that the rave/club scene should concentrate its efforts on designing established material sites of the same magnitude as temples and theatres, built to withstand the ephemerality typical of the movement and to celebrate its values and community. This vision, while attractive in its optimism for the future, does not really offer immediate solutions to the problem. And as Wagner demonstrates, creating fixed sites for culture runs the risk of exclusion and obsolescence in the long term.

Ephemerality is not necessarily a bad thing, for in the right circumstances it enables richer impact upon people than established forms. The ritual sites explored throughout this chapter share similarities in their transformative potential and are connected by an urge to transcend material conditions.

4. Magnum Ludus: Speculations on the ‘Theatre of the Future’

4.1 i8i and Infinite Scroll: A case study

My interest in alchemical design was ignited dramatically over a year ago, in September 2021. As the world found momentary respite from the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic and public life began to open, I attended an event at the Trauma Bar und Kino – a multipurpose arts

venue in Berlin that hosts a variety of projects, from exhibitions and film screenings to concerts and raves. This event, titled “Infinite Scroll” was organized by the i8i Collective, an international group of multidisciplinary artists which had come together over the internet during the pandemic. I first became familiar with i8i through their online presence: which consisted of a fragmented collection of creative works exploring themes of spirituality and technology in the contemporary age. Infinite Scroll was their most ambitious project, and, with a large budget and a cooperative venue hosting them, they were given a powerful degree of creative freedom to design a deeply immersive work incorporating their best talents.



Figure 12. Performance by the musician s280f beside a sculpture designed by Riccardo d'Avola-Corte (Photo by Camille Blake)

Infinite Scroll was like no live event I had ever before experienced. From a large-scale multimedia exhibition, elements of rave and a series of dynamic performances, the show eluded easy categorization and seemed to transmute through a variety of states. Upon entering the building, guests were left to explore the various rooms and levels of the labyrinthine space without clear orientation as to what they would find. Grotesque sculptural artefacts populated the rooms; panoramic videos of vast, complex 3D environments were projected onto the walls; booklets with esoteric writing alluding to some sort of mythological narrative, without expressing a clear meaning were scattered about. The overall effect was to create an eerie and

suspenseful atmosphere which the entire crowd experienced. This was before the performances had even begun.



Figure 13. The artist FITNESSS embracing members of the crowd during a climactic moment of the performance (Photo by Camille Blake)

Eventually, and without warning, the first act erupted in the form of abrasive experimental music from one of the rooms. The crowd gathered here was consumed in an onslaught of harsh noise and colourful, flashing visuals projected on all walls. This induced a dissociative trancelike state in the audience, and at certain points evolved into moshing.¹⁴ While I usually avoid participating in moshes at concerts, I felt a sense of trust with those around me and was immersed in the rapture, as though entering in this strange new world together had enabled us to form a wordless social bond.

Each of the many acts unfolded throughout the different rooms (which went through continuous shifts in layout and scenography) and as one performance came to an end, a new one emerged seamlessly on one of the other floors. The nature of the performances ranged from traditional rave DJ sets to forms of experimental dance theatre. And with the aid of

¹⁴ A form of frenzied, aggressive dance common at hardcore music concerts

advanced lighting and special effects we were plunged into a variety of immersive experiences, with the artists situated among and directly involving the crowd through their intimate physical engagement. These artists were more than just musicians or DJs; they were performers, many in elaborate full body costume, acting as otherworldly entities in an epic drama told through various expressive and splintered forms. And we were not merely simple spectators; we had been initiated and accepted into this world and had become the performers of our own rite.

There was never a sense of fixed division between any component of the event, and participants could choose to engage directly in the performances or leave to explore the other rooms – or to find a moment of reprieve from the more overwhelming moments of the experience. It combined the ambitious dramatics of theatre with the fluid involvement of raves. But even this description fails to fully capture the dynamic qualities of the event. It was a chimeric experimental form, a vivid universe manifesting through a network of physical and virtual artefacts, and existing beyond the venue through the assembled works of each artist. In many ways it bares resemblance to the ambitions of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its artistic and technical hybridity. The liminal state achieved supersedes that of the Festspielhaus however. Through its heterogeneous embrace of creative play and willingness to employ the audience in its opera, Infinite Scroll was not merely seen, it was *lived*.

While there was an undeniable sense of *communitas* and euphoria generated at Infinite Scroll, The experience left many audience members severely disturbed. They criticized the organizers for not providing a disclaimer about the intense and, at points, violent nature of the show. In an interview with Contain, i8i collaborator Ben Sang described the nature of the show in relation to the audiences: “we’re doing energy ritual extractions, generally without the known consent of the crowd, and they feel that. It’s really interesting to think about the responsibility of that” (Contain, 2021, TC 17:25). He reflects on the violence and heaviness of the performances, and how the members gradually dissolved from the group due to the intensity of what they were engaged with. “[W]e live in a very soft world right now (...) people want to experience intensity but when they get it they freak out” (Contain, 2021, TC 24:14).

Interestingly, in a follow-up interview published just over a year after the original Infinite Scroll show, he reflects on how the events that transpired over the tour significantly shaped the course of his life and career (Contain, 2022). I can personally attest to a similar experience: aside from greatly influencing my creative practice, I met many of my closest friends at Infinite Scroll and was brought in contact with a vibrant subculture within Berlin I had no prior exposure to, yet now forms an integral part of my life in the city. Many other participants I later interviewed expressed a similar sentiment, with one saying, “It was like a collective exorcism of the traumas of lockdown.” It was as though the pent-up frustrations after the social detachment resulting from the pandemic were able to be released cathartically through ecstatic and transcendent means.

i8i was formed out of a need to sustain the creative practices of its members during a time of turbulence and isolation and were able to develop a transgressive and immersive artform for a world in flux. Ultimately, they could not sustain the chaotic nature of their project, but by engaging with such a radical and ambitious experiment they generated countless new connections and potential future forms. In this way Infinite Scroll (and i8i at large) could be thought of as a social cleansing through ritual sacrifice; a catalyst for the emergence of something other.

4.2 Other emergent forms

One of the things that excited me most about the experience of Infinite Scroll was its potential as a tool for spiritual transformation. Following life under lockdown, where most interactions with the world could happen only through a screen, I have felt a strong attraction to more interactive and challenging art forms. Traditional theatre is a beautiful art in its own right, but something in the audience/spectacle opposition finds uncanny resemblance to the feelings of powerlessness experienced in the face of a tumultuous world outside of your control.

During my research I interviewed i8i member Andrew Kato Eastman (who performs under the name 011668). Eastman took on a role within the group as producer and director, helping to create the overall structure and conceptual framework to accommodate the individual artists. Based on their experiences I asked them if they saw potential in a new type

of participatory creative technology combining aspects of pre-existing modes arising in the future. They replied:

In small pockets this exists, but I think it can't last long. Once something is named, it changes. Once something is as big and visible as even i8i, it is very easy to lose control of it. Public opinion, social media, are very influential. In order to successfully handle this, one must be very in tune with their ego, not letting it get too big, and also to not be shaken by fear and uncertainty.

Eastman is not wrong; we have witnessed a trend of creative events that have a similar chimeric form to Infinite Scroll.

One such; the Mamba Negra collective based in São Paulo, Brazil has been throwing carnivalesque raves in disused urban spaces for the last decade, incorporating theatrical components into their parties with extravagantly costumed performers dancing alongside regular DJs. The collective's cofounder Laura Diaz states, "Mamba Negra is a device for direct action (...) It is the fruit of the need to access the means of production of the cultural machine" (Kale, 2018). Rave participants whom I interviewed also described the occult and ritual qualities of the Mamba Negra parties, whose events are typically thrown around the time of the full moon. They also claimed to have witnessed members of the Candomblé and Umbanda religious sects "making ritual offerings on the dancefloor".

Shanghai-based collective Asian Dope Boys create experimental operatic performances, inspired by the aesthetics of religious iconography and club culture. The group stages hybrid events that synthesize aspects of raves with absurdist theatre, installation design, ritualized dance and audience-engaging interventions. "Trance", a show staged by the group's director Tianzhuo Chen, has a duration of twelve hours, which places it in a similar league to many regular raves (Feola 2019).

In June 2022 I attended "L Exp", an experimental multimedia event at Acud Macht Neu in Berlin, which took the form of a rave with a highly participatory and game-like structure. The details of the event were very esoteric in nature, and participants were required to complete a cryptic questionnaire before they were given its actual location. The event itself was heavily designed; composed of multiple performances and choreographed "scene-changes", with participants receiving instruction on the rules of the game at each consecutive

stage. This required an extensive amount of planning and organization from a large team of collaborators from a variety of professional and creative backgrounds. Despite this, it still struggled to fully engage the crowd, many of whom seemed to ignore the game component entirely. L'Exp was very ambitious, and its creative director, Jenny Ames, expressed disappointment with the way the project was executed compared with its original concept. In an interview, Ames told me:

I initially came with the idea of creating an immersive experience that would bring people together through a rave about romance rather than sex. I curated a group of academics to develop the game component, and each one came up with great theoretical concepts. I think it failed because I had only academics on the game team and academics like to write and theorize but they don't think practically. They also worked separately on the game rather than trying to work as a team and most of them weren't available to execute the game on the day of the event which left us scrambling.

This mirrors something that Eastman said about the struggles of i8i:

We had many, possibly too many intentions. And this may have been one of our faults. The intention is the most important aspect, but it's hard to keep a large group on the same page. It requires a lot of constant communication, compromise.

In spite of the deficiencies of both i8i and L'Exp, each was able to push the boundaries of more traditionally designed heterotopic experiences in unique ways, revealing unexplored possibilities in the process.

4.3 The Great Play

“The old forms are in ruins, the benumbed world is shaken up, the old human spirit is invalidated and in flux towards a new form.” Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus School, 1919 (quoted from Colomina and Wigley, 2018, 208)

Following the Covid pandemic our world has experienced a collective trauma and disruption to our life systems on countless levels. In the face of this disaster, there is the implication of major change to come in how we structure our society, and designers are the architects of much of this change. Just as Wagner's operas were born out of frustration with the effects of the industrial revolution, and the Bauhaus school from the Great War, this new chapter in history provides ripe conditions for the development of new technologies to meet our changing needs. Through an alchemical lens the pandemic can mark a symbolic death of

the old world, and to act as alchemical designers designates us as the bearers of transmutation, towards our philosopher's stone.

In anticipation of this new turn, it can be constructive to speculate upon the potential nature of the practices of the future. As has already been stated, traces of this can already be found in prior forms. The intensity of Infinite Scroll is comparable to Antonin Artaud's '*The Theatre of Cruelty*', a conceptual redesign of theatre which sought to radically immerse and transform audiences through shocking experimental performances. Artaud made direct allusions to alchemy in his manifestos¹⁵, connecting the work of theatre in its transmutations of the real world into symbolic, transcendent creations in the realm of the spirit (Autard, 1997). We can connect this to the Jungian perspective of alchemy being the drama of the subconscious.

Theatricality has been a connective feature in all the heterotopias of this discussion. Regardless of the form, theatres are always spaces of play. To extend the possible readings of the theatrical beyond spatial confinements, beyond places of diametric performance and spectatorship, we could imagine an experimental rhizomatic practice. Theatre as laboratory of play. When I refer to 'the theatre of the future', I am not suggesting a fixed site. The theatre could exist *anywhere, anyway*. And it is already under construction; being prototyped through a boundless network of artifacts. This is not an architectural project; this is a life project. In the same way that Magnum Opus was to the alchemists an all-encompassing project of experiments with life, the Great Play is a concept of renewed experimental spirit through play as revolutionary catalyst: *the Magnum Ludus*¹⁶. The theatre of the future therefore becomes its philosopher's stone. Play becomes work. Work becomes play. A platform of potentialities, an endless becoming. A self-reproducing matrix generating through virtual and actual forms. And in the dramatic realm of the theatre of the future, anyone can perform.

¹⁵ See 'The Alchemical Theatre' in "*Theatre and its Double*" (Autard, 1997, 48)

¹⁶ *Ludus* (Latin): A word describing play activity in all its forms

5. Conclusion

There are common links between alchemy and design. In technology they share an urge to create and transform the quality of life. Alchemy is an extremely versatile practice and is expressed through a variety of means that have greatly influenced other areas of culture and technology throughout history. It has shaped the ways in which we interpret the world around us – and subsequently – how we create meaning and communicate with one another. Far from being a primitive pseudoscience, it is a highly intuitive approach to problem solving which has been integrated into contemporary culture.

Building on the first three chapters of this thesis, where I outline the historical and contemporary role of alchemy in design, including its methodology and its ideals of transformation and transmutation, I describe inspirational contemporary manifestations of these ideals and ethical approaches in the rave and other theatrical experiments.

Synthesizing alchemy and contemporary design practice enables us to be more mindful of how our technologies impact on the world; helping us to create healing technologies and make design more ethical and useful. An alchemical approach allows the design intention to expand to other areas through the fluid interdisciplinary and collaborative practices which are crucial to connect groups and ideas in our alienating world. Alchemy enables us to form emotional and spiritual bonds with the world via an engagement in ritual and play. It connects the conscious to the material, and by integrating it with design we can find new utility in symbolic and spiritual forms. Within this framework, design and alchemy revitalize one another.

What makes alchemical process so transformative is its ambitious spirit to refine and make the world a better place. The psychophysical analogies of laboratory experimentation allows for a powerful methodology to emerge in the design context. From chaos rises new forms, so chaos is the genesis of change. And while there are undeniable conflicts between the traditions of the alchemical practice and postmodern values, its main tenets of dissolution, coagulation and conjunction are still applicable in our era.

I show in chapter three that the context plays a critical role in influencing culture. Humanity has a deep-seated urge to create spaces where they can gather and transcend the normal rules through play and ritual, and in times of social unrest, these heterotopias can become places of refuge and sources of inspiration for revolutionary action. In the industrial age and beyond there have been many attempts to capture these qualities, with varying degrees of success, from the *Gesamtkunstwerk* projects of Richard Wagner and the Bauhaus School to the psychogeographical investigations of the Situationist International Movement. In the contemporary period, raves have an exciting potential to bring about communal transformative experiences comparable to alchemical processes, through their dissolutive properties and embrace of chaos. At the same time, they tend to lack phases of restructuring and integration, along with many other issues that restrict the rave movement from fully realizing its metamorphic ideals. Within the contemporary context, these heterotopic projects are giving life to new hybrids in versatile experimental works that incorporate cross-disciplinary approaches and multimedia forms. These are essentially the qualities of alchemy, and in these contexts, they challenge the traditional oppositions of audience-performer and user-technology.

While we can identify a variety of contexts in which the alchemical design approach has application, its most serious use could be to orient the design of heterotopic spaces to the pursuit of a spiritual turn for society. This must be done with care, however, to avoid the risk that it would become a component of the very same systems it seeks to transcend.

This thesis is not intended to prescribe the future of our technologies, but to locate it in an undeniable historical trend. Significant cultural shifts are occurring as a result of global events and designers are responsible for guiding them in positive and ethical ways. We need to challenge our relationships to technologies and by extension, to the world. As a timeless medium of communication, in our post-Covid age theatre can be utilized to help transform society for the better.

I have had limited time and space to express my ideas in this thesis. It has been a challenge to present my ideas through the arborescent formal of a research paper. Nevertheless, despite the theoretical and highly speculative nature of this work, I believe the project will in

many ways lead to more detailed study of the potential of alchemical design and the theatre of the future. Academic writing has a limited reach for communicating ideas to a wide audience, and if the ambitions of the theories assembled through this thesis are to find practical application, they deserve expression through more material channels.

I am also restricted by the lack of alternative contemporary viewpoints for honing these ideas. My hope is that this work will inspire further investigation from researchers of diverse backgrounds and expertise, so that the dialogue and its outcome in practice will expand. This thesis is simply the foundations of a much greater creative endeavour, and as demonstrated, it is the process itself that is most significant, not the final goal.

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Figure 1. Schematic tables and diagrams from the alchemical treatise "Kitāb al-Burhān fī asrār 'ilm al-mīzān" (Proof Regarding the Secrets of the Science of the Balance) by al-Jaldakī (1342). Image retrieved from:

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/arabic/alchemy52.html>

Figure 2. Alchemical Illustrations depicting three stages of the Magnum Opus. Aurach, Georges (17th Century). Donum Dei. Image retrieved from:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Magnum_Opus.jpg

Figure 4. Illustration detail from a copy of "The Ripley Scroll" depicting the legendary philosopher's stone, Author Unknown (16th century). Image retrieved from:

<https://www.artforum.com/slant/alchemy-forever-81717>

Figure 5. Copper engraving from the "Donum Dei" treatise by Abraham Eleazar (1723). Image retrieved from:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Uroboro_cosmico.png

Figure 9. Engraved emblem from "Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae" by Heinrich Kunrath, (1602). Image retrieved from:

https://www.alchemywebsite.com/Alchemical_Symbolism_Queen_in_a_Tree.html

Figure 10. Cross-section of the Festspielhaus. Credit: Izenour, George C. (1997) "Theatre Design: Second Edition". Image retrieved from:

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Figure 12. Performance by the musician s280f beside a sculpture designed by Riccardo d'Avola-Corte (Photo by Camille Blake). Image retrieved from:

<https://www.aqnb.com/2021/10/11/pandemic-era-cybernetics-contemporary-spirituality-in-the-ritual-performances-installation-of-i8i/>

Figure 13. The artist FITNESSS embracing members of the crowd during a climactic moment of the performance (Photo by Camille Blake). Image retrieved from:

<https://www.aqnb.com/2021/10/11/pandemic-era-cybernetics-contemporary-spirituality-in-the-ritual-performances-installation-of-i8i/>

Appendix

Interview with Andrew Kato Eastman (conducted over written exchanges in a shared online document)

How would you define your practice? Do you consider yourself a designer at all?

I'm an artist exploring spirituality in the modern age. I would not consider myself a designer, but it seems that our personal world-building can be used as an example for how people can use world building to fulfill our spiritual needs. i8i formed out of the need for us to remain connected and keep our creative practice healthy during the pandemic.

I feel like I focus more on the process and the overall concepts.

How important is spirituality to your work?

I see my art practice and spirituality as the same, a method to understand and process the world. Spirituality is how we understand the world, so spirituality is in constant communication with culture.

Could you describe your role in the creative/design process of Infinite Scroll?

I was like the producer/director. I helped create the overall structure and conceptual framework that could accommodate the individual artists.

I always struggle to explain to people what Infinite Scroll was exactly... it doesn't fit into any singular category like rave/concert/exhibition, seemingly encompassing all at once while reaching towards something else entirely which I connected to *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

This was partly due to its theatricality, and the dissolution of separation between performer and audience which created a level of immersion I'd never experienced at a show before that point. How would you explain Infinite Scroll? What were the intentions behind it?

In the simplest form, the intention was to just perform as we did before the pandemic. Before its formation, we would perform together, and felt the energy but did not name it. The immersion happened naturally because our chemistry as friends first.

We have played shows together since 2018 with basically the same line up, but with very few people in attendance. And this energy grew really naturally right up until the pandemic.

So infinite scroll was a showcase of this energy which we already had naturally, but with the addition of a budget, and a cooperative venue. So it allowed us to build out our performance with a higher production value (lights, sculptures, space, creative freedom, institutional support).

We were simultaneously developing the lore and values, through this process, which is ongoing.

We had many, possibly too many intentions. And this may have been one of our faults. The intention is the most important aspect, But it's hard to keep a large group on the same page. It requires a lot of constant communication, compromise.

Between the offsite installations with Final Hot Desert, raves in literal caves and your digital web presence, your works often seem to move away from more traditional art spaces like galleries or nightclubs. Why are you drawn to these environments in your creative practice? Is this indicative of a broader cultural shift?

i8i formed during the pandemic, so traditional venues and approaches were not available to us at that time. And in general, venues are typically too expensive for us. Maybe more and more people are feeling empowered to make things happen on their own. I personally don't want to wait to do things. u could be waiting forever, or ur really just waiting for yourself

You have frequently collaborated with Chino Amobi, who describes himself as an "apophatic designer" (designing through forms of negation that lead to gained knowledge

within the opposition of concepts, in other terms 'learning through unlearning'). This idea seems opposed to traditional notions of functionalism and 'user friendliness' in design, though there is definitely potential in using intense/challenging/deconstructive forms as tools of construction. Do you connect with this concept of apophatic design?

I think the obscure project name 011668 is an example of this. Using an intentionally difficult to identify name on the internet reminds me of the newness, mystery, and vastness of the web, perceived anonymity, our digital identities and avatars. Many people will be turned off by how not user friendly my work can be, but others appreciate the scavenger hunt. In a world where media is constantly shoved down our throats on an insanely fast schedule, I'm happy to be lowkey and out of the way and see who notices. who is actually looking for something extraordinary. most will overlook it like a flower on the side of the road.

What do you think about the future of raves? Could you envision something like the 'Theatre of the Future' ever developing?

In small pockets this exists, but I think it can't last long. Once something is named, it changes.

Once something is as big and visible as even i8i, it is very easy to lose control of it. Public opinion, social media, are very influential.

In order to successfully handle this, one must be very in tune with their ego, not letting it get too big, and also to not be shaken by fear and uncertainty.

Where do you hope to take your practice? What are you working towards?

i8i took us on a journey, and after infinite scroll, the spirit of i8i basically vanished from each of our bodies.

We are left to work on our personal lives and projects now, rekindle and strengthen our friendships, and wait patiently for when it appears again.

I think it won't appear again until we each reach our **[answer left unfinished]**