

SOLVE ET COAGULA : « PURIFY AND INTEGRATE »

An interview on simplicity, technology and design with John Maeda and Sam Hecht

John Maeda is a pioneer of digital art. An American of Japanese ancestry, he is a slight yet powerful go-go-go intellectual with a talkative, enthusiastic yet thoughtful manner. A brilliant math student whose artistic skills went unencouraged for years, he received his Bachelors and Masters degrees in engineering from MIT and immediately took off for Japan in order to pursue a classic art degree. A wise teacher there told him «when you're young, you should do things that are new.» He went back to technology and his research led him to develop the field of digital art, which involves conceiving and designing computer programs that will run to create sensitive and emotional, rather than just technical, artworks. After a PhD, Maeda is now a professor at the MIT Media Lab, where he has spearheaded several programs with his colleagues, one called Open Studio that aims to teach and evolve art as an economic force, and one called Simplicity, which is a design-oriented program aimed at redefining and simplifying our relationship with technology in our everyday lives.

Sam Hecht is a master of simplicity and thinking things through. His soft-spoken, discerning demeanour is matched with a highly analytical mind that is constantly questioning everything he sees with disarming clarity. Born and raised in England, he has designed ground-breaking products, soft electronics and elegantly functional appliances. In 2002 he founded his own London-based company, Industrial Facility, with architect Kim Colin to explore the junction between product and space. He is currently the European mastermind behind MUJI's products and has recently published the books *Things that Go Unseen* and *Product as Landscape*.

Both John and Sam have just finished major shows of their work, Sam and Industrial Facility presented *Found/Made/Thought* at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, as well as shows at the Design Museum and V&A Museum of London. John developed a series of 3-6 minute motion paintings and reactive graphics for his *Nature* show at the Fondation Cartier for Contemporary Art Museum in Paris, which was the occasion for our encounter...

Sam speaks of constellations of things, of their interconnectedness. He explains that products rely on other things to exist, and the design focus is shifted when we admit this. Instead of

making each product « do it all » each product can acknowledge the other objects in the room and participate in the landscape. For Sam, this « justifies evacuating functions from objects that have been overloaded because something relatively near is already doing it. » Interestingly enough, this leads us to sole purpose objects rather than the complex multi-purpose items currently in vogue. He calls this « product as landscape» and the passwords are « connection, integrity and simplicity ».

« Simplicity » is the experimental research program that John instigated in 2004 at the MIT Media Lab. The program aims for « a radical reexamination of ways to break free from the intimidating complexity of today's technology and the frustration of information overload. It is about inventing a future where less is more. » John's blog is a series of musings on the topic of simplicity, entries which occasionally result in a stated « law » of simplicity, written in poetic form . For example, the first Law of Simplicity is :

A complex system of many functions can be simplified by carefully grouping related functions.

As of this writing, there are 13 Laws of Simplicity, and Maeda has promised to stop at 16— The blog has been so successful that he is currently working on a book version, or bloog, as he calls it.

In our conversation, when discussing simplicity both Sam and John cite Ikko Tanaka, the father of graphic design in Japan, as a major influence.

John : He was the real floating cloud. Everyone else was a different world.

Sam : When he worked, he did not try too hard.

John : He never had to. Like one breath.

Sam. Nowadays, there is too much trying hard...

When asked what their unofficial roles in their fields are, John answered immediately:

John : I am an aspirer. I am very influenced by what I see around me, and there are so many wonderful people and things. If I am in a room and I see even a beautiful brass doorstop, a fantastic rug, it inspires me.

Sam : I feel that designers tend to be sensitive, in the way that they have the ability to sense things about the place they are in and they can sometimes see things that other people can't. It is a precious skill because if you can see things that others can't, then you have the ability to show them. I think that is inherently the way I tend to operate in my career.

John, a bit later : Couldn't you argue that artists are trying to help those people who are desensitized by daily life, to sensitize themselves? And therefore art doesn't have to exist because it is about appreciating what is around you? And once people all know that the world is beautiful then art could go away? I go to museums, but you can just sit in a room and see a hundred things that spark and inspire you because you are listening to your environment.

Which eventually brought us to the subject of colour...

Sam : Lots of people have said to us that there is not much colour in the work we at Industrial Facility do. I think there is. I am not so inclined to apply colour when the colour itself is not inherently part of the idea. For example, when we designed an LCD projector, we deliberately made it a very non-descript background colour, a grey beige, because you do not look at the projector, but at the projected image. Non-colour is a deliberate part of the concept. In other projects, there is a connection between colour and object, like the series of notebooks I am designing for Muji that are exactly the same size, texture, number of pages and colours as passports. You buy them in a pack of five different colours, yet you do not see colour, but nationality. It is more about feeling the colour than seeing it. Ikko Tanaka was a master of colour and once gave me three coloured notebooks. I tried to match different occasions of emotion with the colours. If anything, I do believe that the background colour is critical to appreciating the foreground.

John : What is a background colour exactly ?

Sam : It is connected to a background object, like objects that turn on, such as computers or TVs. Why do they make TVs silver? When you turn a TV off, you no longer need it, so why give it that foreground power? So it is clearly a marketing concept; the energy is put into the decision-making moment of purchase. But it is the entire lifetime it will spend in your home or office that should be the focus.

John : I was at a conference at which there was a sound designer for video games. He talked about how the eyes blink, but if you do the same thing with sound, stop it for even the briefest moment, the effect is jarring. Because our ears don't blink. I love that idea. Certain things are always on.

And blinking brought us to time, especially as Sam has designed a number of digital and analog watches and clocks, and the interacting with and passing of time is omnipresent in John's work.

Sam : Time is a great area of thinking but what I apply it to is fairly formalistic. My 3D clock shows the correct time only from one position. The great thing about the analog clock is that it gives you the feeling of the time that has gone as well as the time that is to go. Whereas in the digital experience you tend to see only a number, which is just a piece of information.

John : When you read time it is different than feeling time. When you catch it, you are catching the semantics of time but not the whole spirit of time. The humanist writer Lewis Mumford wrote that time was considered an invention of the monks, so that they would know when to pray. So time is about ritual. That got me thinking about the daily connections we have with time, because the computer clock thing always bothered me. How we always want a faster, two, three or more gigahertz computer. We want a time/space frame that we don't actually live in. The computer can count in milliseconds and nanoseconds, but we do not. Some of my programs are about taking the computer and showing how it is a time object. Now I am more curious about how the computer lives in this super time, and that is the spirit of my new work, about living in a state of unreal time. Someone asked me why the work I showed at the Fondation Cartier is choppy and not smooth. Well, it is about trying to break things apart that I thought were precious. Taking things apart and oftentimes leaving them like that. There is one part where the screen freezes, and I left it in intentionally.

Both Sam and John would like technology to react directly—almost intuitively—to our actions. One of John's first digital art programs is The Reactive Square. When you speak to the square it moves, trembles and reacts according to the tone of your voice, especially if you shout at it. In a similar vein, Sam's DoCoMo cell phone is designed to increase or decrease in volume automatically for the listener, depending upon if the speaker speaks quietly or loudly. But in developing their work, how do they physically interact with their designs ?

John : For me, I aspire to touch my work and have it touch others with every sense I have, both mind and body. To be really able to touch in a full-bodied way.

Sam : We still physically make everything that we conceive, in cardboard, plastics, anything. It is maybe a bit different because we are essentially dealing with things the hand will be manipulating in some way. Sometimes when I see other product designers that use the process of the computer, there is a tendency to make the designs quite expressive because the ability to do that is there. In that sense, it is extremely difficult to make things that are very simple and graceful on the computer. By nature the screen has luminosity, which is already quite expressive. Whereas if you make something out of cardboard your ability to appreciate the form and the simplicity of it becomes much easier. You don't have to resort to any applied thought; it can actually be the thought.

Which moved us onto the opposite subject, complexity :

John : In the new images I made for the Nature series people have commented « You are so interested in simplicity, but this doesn't seem simple at all. » But to understand what is hot, you have to understand what is cold. When I try something with the computer, I am trying to see what are the limits, what are the bounds of how complex you can go when you go beyond the software tools, which is what I always try to do. What can you create ?

Sam : What is interesting is the idea of dependence. You can already feel some of that in the technological world, with software in particular. Software depends upon other things for it to function : it does not offer all features itself, but can rely on other extensions to provide those features. If you relate this to products, it is a difficult concept for manufacturers to comprehend. If you make a telephone you generally have to provide all of the features within the package, even if those features are replicated elsewhere. You start to get situations where there is an enormous amount of duplication. Your TV may do just as much as your computer. Simplicity within the idea of dependence starts to get interesting. You can create products that come with less because you know that what is near them can fill in the gaps.

John : People talk a lot about making the computer disappear, being able to plug in your house to the network, like you buy power and other utilities. But then you worry. By keeping the computer in a box, we have the delusion that the computer is like a little safe repository. But the problem is that it has a little hole in it that connects you to a vast network...

At the end of the day, we turned again to the subject of simplicity.

Sam believes that we are entering an era he refers to as « voluntary simplicity : a conscious revolt against conspicuous consumption. People are now attracted to products they respect from responsible brands that reflect and support their value system. It's not about more products, but better ones. » Status-symbol objects will give way to a desire to make meaningful and sustainable choices . Yet these choices do involve pleasure, with well-made, intelligently-conceived, visually appealing products.

John speaks about « having enough. This is not necessarily related to minimalism, because the pleasure factor is also important. » Currently working on an MBA in his spare time, John points out that « there is economic value in having a good life. Richard Florida has proven that creative cities also do well economically. » This makes one think of the country of Bhutan, whose king has instigated the GNH—Gross National Happiness—factor to be presented alongside the GNP—Gross National Product—as an indicator of the wealth of his country.

Pleasure was very much a part of the encounter : the pleasure of meeting a kindred spirit, the pleasure of sharing a moment in time and a series of musings together, as well as a meal. Which lead to the Twelfth Law of Simplicity, as found on John's blog :

« We talked a great deal about a variety of issues concerning the ecology of the product landscape, but the most memorable moment for me during our lunch conversation was when he turned to our lunch itself. Sam said something to the effect that the taste of our beautiful sushi meal was affected by the room that we were sitting in. He felt that the visual purity of the meal was anchored by the environmental tranquility of Provider's elegantly simple office. Thus we come to the twelfth Law of Simplicity we shall call « Hecht's Law » :

A pure and resonant experience
is only as simple
as the greater context
where it is appreciated.

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Interview Lisa White

Images Christoph Theurer