

Distilling Reality, Defining a Future

Interview with Michael Anastassiades

The London-based designer is invited by MDFF World Tour Greece as a guest curator for the first edition in Athens, presenting a selection of films conversing with “space and time”. How do we actually select a representation of the world we live in today, of our planet, and of humans?

Exploring the role of design beyond standard definitions and summoning the power of film to engage audiences, Anastassiades sends his “Arecibo Message” as an ephemeral signal to negotiate our quest for evolution.

You must be asked this question a lot, but it is something that I am curious about as well. Which is your main principle in design?

To have an intention. My main principle is that there needs to be a reason to engage with the act of design. If there is nothing new to contribute, why produce another object? To put it in other words, in my view, design is something to be done with consideration, a lot of thought and a higher level of consciousness.

This approach speaks to your ideas about the responsibility of the designer?

I think designers have an incredibly powerful position from which they can define the environment that we live in through design objects, through space — if you take architecture under the broad umbrella of design. So, the environment that defines our generation and hopefully the ones to come is precisely the theme that interests me for this year's Milano Design Film Festival World Tour Greece–Athens.

“Arecibo Message” is the title you have chosen for your guest curator section. What prompted you towards this concept?

“Arecibo Message” comes purely from memory. This was an interstellar radio message carrying basic information about humanity and Earth sent from the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico to outer Space in the mid–1970s. It was both a demonstration of human technological accomplishment and an attempt to surmise and represent the essence of who we are. For my generation, it's like a childhood memory we share that connects us all to a time of fascination with space travel, UFO sightings and alien theories.

I don't think Arecibo Message functions as a point of reference for today's generation, does it?

It is too old fashioned, too out of date, almost nostalgic. Yet, it very much touched my generation and my imagination in terms of how we communicate—not with the people of this planet, but

with forms of life from another world. They are our audience and because they belong to a different space and time, they become a metaphor in our mind for future generations. They are not aliens anymore. They are our perception of how future generations will look at what we did, at what we are producing at this point in time. So, another question enters the frame: how do we actually select a true representation of the world we live in today, of our planet, and of human civilization in general?

You have chosen a series of art films to address this question. Why is that?

Art films offer a subtle way to engage with the audience and my selection reflects my thoughts on what defines the future. They prescribe a certain psychological atmosphere and each touches upon the subject in a different way. If you imagine the theme I've chosen as a circle, these films are like satellites rotating around it, existing as different points on its diameter, sometimes escaping its boundaries completely. So, some of the films deal with the core idea in an abstract way, others relate directly to it and to the question of how we select objects in order to represent aspects of who we are. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the idea of the "Arecibo Message" and what I've decided to communicate by curating this selection of art films functions as an invitation to see design in a different way. And we need different ways of seeing design rather than the traditional ones that we have been educated in.

If this is the case, what is your way of seeing design?

I see design as a creative art. "Design" is almost like a name that is given to you, something that defines you just because you were trained in the discipline. It's almost like trying to tame a creative soul into doing something and giving it a definition. The problem is that, as human beings, we have the tendency to go for definitions, because by defining something we can consume it better. Yet, I don't feel that this is necessary. It concerns an insecurity we have.

We believe that video is increasingly used to describe our digital era; that the audiovisual narrative and the moving image have the potential to capture our contemporaneity, to develop a dialogue between different creative disciplines, to inform, engage, and investigate on social and cultural issues, and to document conceptual projects and research stemming from the numerous expressions of design and architecture. What is your relationship to film, and how important do you think is the cinematic language in reflecting the complexity of our current reality?

Film is a medium with the power to engage. All the more so today that we are overwhelmed by myriad communication options and an abundance of information. Unavoidably, people find it difficult to connect to anything effectively or they are submerged in superficiality. How to attract their attention, then? Personally, I believe that the less means you have to communicate, the more effective communication is. If you go back to look at the power of the radio, a form of communication dependent solely on sound and words, you come to realize that such level of

influence is non-existent in this day and age. We may have podcasts but we also have the option to turn things on and off, to return to them later. We may choose to watch a film in the controlled environment of a theatre, but we also have the option to watch it on our mobile phone through YouTube in a very busy environment, while we're on the move, so film becomes something not unlike a conversation with somebody on a video call. Consider that in the past you didn't even have the possibility to record a program in order to listen to it later. Imagine the level of commitment in terms of time and concentration required. Now we are constantly distracted and unable to engage with anything. We are used to accessing all things on the internet, for free, in our own time, and in the conditions and surroundings of our choice. Any degree of complexity or effort to invest discourages us.

Do you believe that film's decontextualization today, in terms of it no longer being controlled or limited to a particular space, has, in a way, decreased its potential?

Film still holds an incredibly powerful role. If curated and presented in an effective way, it can actually pull you in. However, if you cannot control the environment or the different elements that are important for a very strong communication, then it's going to be absolutely challenging. So, having a film festival where you control the conditions of the film's projection, while trying to convey a message through it, is the only effective way to make communication happen. The problem is that modern culture, unfortunately, has a very limited audience for this type of presentation.

Do you believe this "limited audience" can be expanded? In other words, this ability to go beyond the surface and open up to things and situations is something that can be cultivated?

It is certainly something that can be cultivated. It requires, however, enormous effort. You need education to lead the way for people to learn how to look at film beyond the level of entertainment. And unfortunately, everything is related to entertainment these days. I also believe that the way you choose to present something is crucial in terms of what type of audience you reach. If you are presenting art films, as in my case, which require a certain environment and setting, you need to make this setting accessible to people otherwise you will immediately exclude a lot of them who do not want to be associated with art.

Is this a matter of people feeling intimidated?

On some level, yes, because art is considered more elitist. It requires an access point to allow you to enter its world. Of course, a lot of artists want to prove that they are artists by doing the complete opposite, that is, in terms of public engagement. Design, on the other hand, as well as architecture, are more democratic, so I can see that a Design Film Festival has to make an effort to appeal to a wider audience, responding as such to the democratic nature of design.

Milano Design Film Festival World Tour has reached Greece, starting with this first Athenian edition: do you see Greece, and especially contemporary Athens, as a place with a design-oriented crowd and with the prospect to evolve?

I don't see Athens as different to any other place. I think it has the same potential to evolve as any other part of the world. Obviously, every culture, just like every country and place, is defined by its own temperament. However, there are certain parameters which are universal. For example, the possibility to engage with an audience or to create a potential for such a culture to exist. I don't think that a place needs to have a particular education about design in order to have the prospect to evolve. In other words, I don't think that education in that respect is so defining, because there is sensitivity, and there is history, which are really fundamental.

Artificial intelligence, technological development, digital revolution. What are the major changes they bring into our lives, and what scenario can we expect for the world of design?

I think the way in which technologies influence me is different. I almost have to build some resistance towards them, because an essential part of the way I work is to constantly and consciously stop to redefine my role as a designer. I believe that humans are easily seduced by anything new. Newness has always the power to fascinate because it is unfamiliar. Interestingly, the way in which I try to engage people is through familiarity. I see familiarity as the beginning of a dialogue. Because if somebody sees something they know, they will be able to talk about it. On the other hand, it can also be easy to talk about something completely new, because the power of "shock" is something you can immediately connect with. The problem in this case, is that you may not be able to continue the conversation after the initial shock dies. The idea has to be strong enough to continue the engagement. This is why familiarity is a gentler way to communicate. Also, we need to be real: people feel more comfortable with reality than with something that is completely alien to them.

Could you give me an example of how you approach and apply technology in your own practice, in a sensible, congruent, and balanced way?

The first big mistake is to be completely pulled in by novelty, which happens often with technological progress. Something new comes up that proposes to overturn the way you think and you are taken in by enthusiasm. As a designer, I try to keep myself informed about technology, while standing somewhat outside technology. I am willing to include technology in my work when it is not alienating, but, on the contrary, it promotes human connection and positivity.

Granting substance to relationships is vital to make them lasting and meaningful. Versatility, adaptability, freedom, balance, longevity, timelessness, and involvement are only some of the key values of your design alphabet. Are these qualities the substance that adds meaning and purpose to the objects you create?

I certainly hope so, because in this way I can actually associate with objects beyond their ephemerality. I don't see objects as expendable or transient because human nature is not. All these qualities that you mentioned add layers to the object in the effort to make it instantly recognizable so that when you first encounter it in its initial release into the world, there is no need for much explanation. Yet each time you encounter the object, another layer of interpretation adds up until you build a multilayered, complex and meaningful relationship with it. I think this is how we build relationships not only with objects, but also with human beings and our surroundings in general.

So, in a way, this layering is what grants objects a “body language” of sorts, that can be inviting and relatable (or not) to a specific audience?

The most important notion to deal with what you are describing, is how threatening an object can be. Threatening means very different things to different people, but I can only try to capture as many of those elements that define the notion of threat. Usually for me, it is a notion that relates with proportion. Usually, big objects are threatening, while smaller objects feel safer and more manageable. Big ideas and complexity are threatening, whereas simplicity is not. This takes us back to the idea of familiarity we were talking about earlier. Usually, familiarity is not associated with threat because it pertains to something that you have seen before and you feel comfortable with. This for me is fundamental and directly relates to the physicality of the object.

How would you describe your relationship with time in general?

We have to embrace time. In terms of the theme for the festival, the notion of time is quite important, and so is the notion of accepting time. But, you know, what's interesting to see is that history somehow repeats itself. Things may get repackaged, or may appear in different ways. Despite that, human creativity is something that has never changed. It has always been constant. Even if you look at its earliest manifestations three, five, twenty, a thousand years ago, its power is still there.

There is a difference between reaction and response: 'reaction' tends to be conditioned by external factors and driven by an emotional need, whereas 'response' is associated with assertiveness, calmness, objectivity. It is the result of observation, thought, and self-awareness. Throughout the years, has your relationship with the actual act of designing changed?

I believe in evolution, and I believe that every creative should evolve. Our work should evolve as well as our maturity and approach to design, because we have to get better at things. I don't think necessarily that the end result will be different. But I think that we become better at it over time, in terms of how we respond to things and how we arrive at a certain result much more quickly, because we have developed that maturity as a skill.

In a past interview, you described your approach to your own design practice as a process of distillation, of reduction. Nowadays, we are surrounded by a plethora of design outgrowths. How important is it to apply this reductive process to the present, as a more general guideline for our production and consumption mindset?

I understand distillation as the moment when you actually reflect on something, and I think reflection is absolutely necessary in our culture of mindless over-consumption. More than this, the idea of distillation is about capturing the true meaning and essence of what it is that you are doing. It is a way of refining and removing all the unnecessary stimulants—all the things that only seduce you and pull you into a space of confusion.

Do you think that some design experts or creatives, in general, might see this distillation process as incompatible with the notion of innovation, when it comes to creating something new, appealing, unique, and so forth?

Perhaps they could, but all creative people are different. Personally, I don't see distillation as incompatible with innovation. It's not that I don't believe in spontaneity, but I believe more in reflection.

If you were to ask one question to today's design culture, what would that be?

I think that I would ask everyone if there is any real contribution and new participation or a new suggestion as to the role of design. The same question that I ask myself: "Can I contribute something positive, can I say something new? Can I say something different?"

Do you think that today's design culture would be willing to answer this question?

No, I don't think it will, because by nature, humans are selfish. We think we can do everything, change everything, put our signature on absolutely everything. I personally have no intention or interest in doing that.

Interview by *Annie Markitanis, Director of MDFFF World Tour Greece & Cyprus*

*The first edition of the Milano Design Film Festival World Tour Greece–Athens will take place from **Friday, November 6 to Sunday, November 8**, at [Greek Film Archive / Tainiothiki tis Ellados, 48 Iera Odos St. & 134–136 Megalou Alexandrou St.](#) – with film screenings, national and International guest appearances with talks, and presentations.*

Opening Night

(Upon registration)

Thursday, November 5, 2020, at [Benaki Museum, 138 Pireos St.](#)

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