



University of Southern Denmark

Little sun

An indicative framework for the analysis of art and design objects

Ebbesen, Toke Riis

Published in:
Design Issues

DOI:
[10.1162/DESI_a_00425](https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00425)

Publication date:
2017

Document version
Final published version

Citation for published version (APA):

Ebbesen, T. R. (2017). Little sun: An indicative framework for the analysis of art and design objects. *Design Issues*, 33(1), 48-60. https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00425

Terms of use

This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark through the SDU Research Portal. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

Little Sun: An Indicative Framework for the Analysis of Art and Design Objects

Toke Riis Ebbesen

Figure 1

Little Sun, front and strap. Photo by the author.



Introduction: The Case of Little Sun

Some of the most conspicuous art objects today are, it seems, close to being “design,” and what is commonly referred to as design objects certainly are often seen to be artful in many respects. Perhaps the most important thing is that both art and design can also seem to be alluringly close to life itself. Although most people tend to speak of these types of objects as design or art, they seem also to be posited as everyday objects, destined to be parts of the material cultures of which they partake.¹ Of more interest, a class of objects seems to work to cross this border in a conscious manner. These are what we may designate art and design “hybrids.”² One such case is the solar lamp, Little Sun, by Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, in collaboration with Danish engineer Frederik Ottesen (see Figure 1). This object is interesting to study, I argue, because of the way it performs this border crossing.

Although Eliasson is principally renowned as an international artist, working with color, light, steam, and monumental pieces, and is popular both within art circles and with the general public,³ this specific project seems to blend together the concepts of “everyday” technological objects, designed for a practical use with “art” objects. From the outset, Little Sun might not seem to be art, when understood as a singular object, but when looking closer at its built-in complexities and its mediations, it plays at non-functional properties that make it a compelling example of this

1 Tim Dant, *Material Culture in the Social World* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999).

2 Jette Lykke Jensen, “Contemporary Hybrids Between Design and Art” (PhD Thesis, Department for Design and Communication, University of Southern Denmark, 2015).

3 Christopher Bagley, “From the Archives: Olafur Twist,” *W Magazine*, (July 2007), http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2007/07/olafur_eliasson (accessed July 3, 2016).

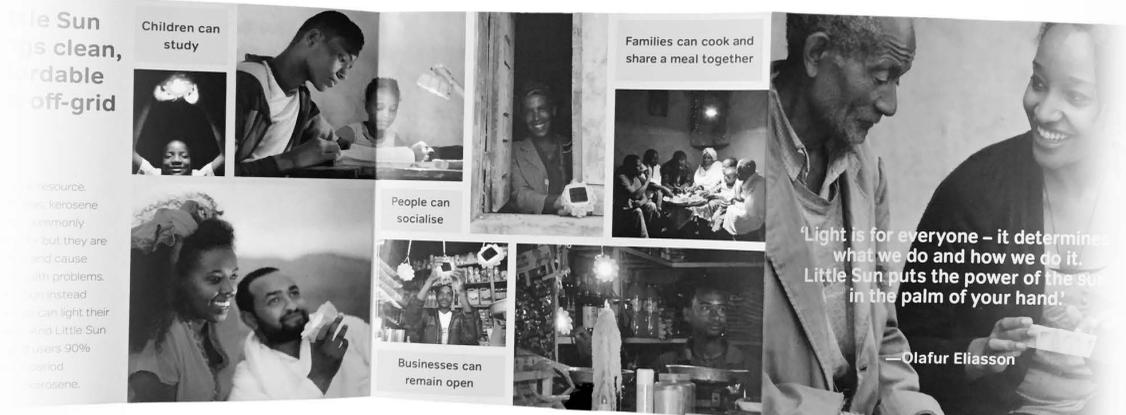
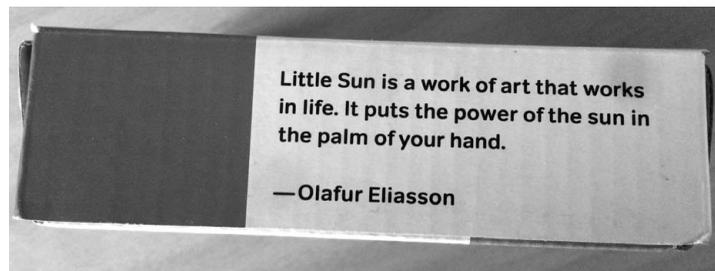


Figure 2 (above)
Leaflet inlaid in product packaging, this side depicting happy 'African' users of the lamp, while the other side of the leaflet depict happy 'western' users. Photo by the author.

Figure 3 (right)
Quotation from the original packaging of Little Sun. Photo by the author.



kind of hybridity. It is “a part of life,” as Eliasson says in a promotional video.⁴ Thus, in this specific project Eliasson acts not only as an artist, per se—mainly producing objects for the art scene, with its exhibitions and magazines—but also as a designer cooperating to produce very useful objects meant for developing countries.

Understanding the Lamp and Its Contexts

Little Sun is a single-purpose solar lamp, explicitly designed with the noble aim of providing affordable, clean electrical light both in parts of the world that don't have access to electricity and to people who cannot afford electricity. Eliasson frames this goal in more poetic terms: “Light is social, light is life... that is the beauty of it.”⁵ Little Sun has been praised as a prime example of design with a social and sustainable approach, making it possible for “impo- verished individuals to gain access to lighting that is affordable, reliable, and above all, safe,” as Pham writes.⁶ As such, it can be understood as the result of a “social” model of design practice, aiming at the satisfaction of human needs rather than of mere business needs, as defined by Margolin and Margolin.⁷ At the same time, the lamp seems to be less social in other respects: It also is marketed to affluent consumers in the Western world, as is evident from the project website and the para-artifacts in the pack- aging of the object (see Figures 2 and 3). For instance, a leaflet in the packaging is clearly targeted to a Western consumer, both in its use of language and pictures and in the choice of an evocative CD- sleeve format that depicts happy “Western” consumers on one side

4 Thomas Gislason, “Olafur Eliasson on Little Sun,” *Vimeo* (2012), <https://vimeo.com/54012377> (accessed July 3, 2016).

5 Ibid.

6 Diana Pham, “Olafur Eliasson Combines Art and Solar Technology to Shed Light On the 1.6 Billion People Who Live Without Electricity,” *Inhabitat* <http://inhabitat.com/olafur-eliasson-combines-art-and-solar-technology-to-shed-light-on-the-1-6-billion-people-who-live-without-electricity> (accessed July 3, 2016).

7 Sylvia Margolin and Victor Margolin, “A ‘Social Model’ of Design,” *Design Issues* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 25.

and happy “African” users on the other (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the lamp has been exhibited in leading Western art galleries, such as Louisiana in Denmark, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Tate Modern in London. I found my own copy of the small lamp in an otherwise rather high-end lamp boutique shop in the most bourgeois area of my hometown, Aarhus.

At the time of writing, more than 439,000 units of Little Sun have been distributed and sold worldwide, and of those, more than 241,730 units have gone to developing countries without electricity, according to the product webpage.⁸ The “social business” model of the lamp is based both on training programs, with provision of seed capital for start-up businesses in local distribution areas, and on the fact that buyers in the West partially finance the costs of the lamps sold in the development countries. In some cases, as on the website of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Plan, it is sold on a “buy one, donate one” basis.⁹ In other cases, as for the Lys in Afrika/Light in Africa project, the business model is more complicated. Here, Danish consumers can buy “green” wind power and lamps through utility companies, which in turn donate resources for construction of local solar power plants and provide reduced lamp prices for local families in Uganda.¹⁰

The lamp itself is built to sturdy technical specifications, but its form differs quite a lot from solar lamps with similar specs, which are often much more utilitarian in their design. It is not the only solar lamp that can be characterized as more or less artful or “designed,” straying away from the purely functional provision of solar-powered light. Although Little Sun probably isn’t the most advanced solar lamp on the market, Eliasson’s use of words like “beautiful,” “social,” “life,” and indeed “art” in the product video, and in other mediations of the solar lamp, seems to blur the borders between art and the designs of everyday material culture in a very deliberate manner.

The question is how we can more clearly understand and analyze the confusion of terms that arises from an example such as Little Sun. In this article, I untangle the peculiarities and differences of meanings between art and regularly designed objects to give a possible answer. I suggest that what I designate “the indicative framework” is viable for such an analysis. I use Little Sun as the recurring example of the method, examining the object itself and some of its mediations. Objects that mix art and social design, as Little Sun does, are particularly hard to make sense of, I argue, because of the communicative complexities both in the material properties of their design and in their discursive mediations.

8 Website *Little Sun* (2015), “Little Sun, Big Impact,” <http://www.littlesun.com/index.php?sec=impact> (accessed July 3 2016).

9 “Køb Little Sun Solcellelampen Og Støt et Godt Formål – PlanShop” [Buy Little Sun Solar Lamp and Support a Good Purpose - Plan Shop], *Planshop* (2015), <https://www.planshop.dk/little-sun-lampen.html> (accessed July 3, 2016).

10 “Lys I Afrika” [Light in Africa], <http://www.lysiafrika.dk> (accessed February 19, 2016).

Meaning-Making in Objects

Central to meaning-making, according to anthropologist Alfred Gell, is the human tendency to infer from technology or from design—understood in its broadest sense—as what refers to man-made artifacts, communicative agency, or intentions.¹¹ Such inference of agency is especially likely when we don't really understand the artifacts in their full complexity.¹² In Gell's account, the same is true for art objects. They are similar to technology in that the complexity of their material properties defies a common-sense interpretation. Thus, from this attribution of intention, or "distributed agency," we perceive art objects as "enchanted" and as the result of active "enchantment" by someone: the artist.¹³ As design theoretician Carl Knappett has suggested, the reason Little Sun may seem confusing might be exactly because it embeds layers of associative effects we normally would classify in very different domains of life, or in different interpretative "registers," as Knappett calls them.¹⁴ The solar cells and light diodes can be seen as drawing on the registers of "utility," as we normally would expect in an object such as a solar lamp. However, you may also notice the bright yellow colors and the use of durable hardened plastics, which might suggest that we should attribute a more playful value to this object. At the figurative level, Little Sun might be likened to a mini-windmill or a sunflower, "designed to appeal to women and children," as one (somewhat biased) commentator states.¹⁵

Furthermore, a decorated strap serves as a quite unconventional lamp holder, undermining the generally more utilitarian figure of the lamp. This strap is yellow, like the rest of the object, and carries the name and heavily stylized picture of Little Sun; however, imagining the lamp hanging from this strap in the way lamps normally hang is somehow difficult. Instead of pointing downward, the lamp faces to the side in its default configuration, very much like the sun can be seen as lighting from above in the sky. In effect, these physical features work together to determine interpretation in a way that collapses the registers of interpreters and creates this mystifying effect: Little Sun is clearly recognizable as a useful design artifact with some kind of purpose of use, but simultaneously the temptation arises to explain it as the work of enchantment or, simply, as "art."

The Misconception of Design as Communication

Having established a general conception of how such a hybrid object seems to (not) make sense, my contention now is that the idea that objects in general *communicate* meanings—in the sense of making meaning common—is often destabilized in actual objects.

11 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); See also Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, eds. J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40–66.

12 Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, 7.

13 Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," 44.

14 Carl Knappett, *Thinking through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 131.

15 Anya Ventura, "Olafur Eliasson Brings Little Sun Project to MIT," *Olafur Eliasson Brings Little Sun Project to MIT* (2014), <http://arts.mit.edu/olafur-eliasson-brings-little-sun-mit> (accessed July 3, 2016).

I expand this argument by introducing the indicative framework, a semiotic perspective that at its very core builds on this destabilization of meanings in objects. Design critics, designers and even users of everyday language often say that designed objects communicate, perhaps based on their readings of earlier semiotic propositions (e.g., in the works of Baudrillard and Barthes), but what I propose here is that objects most often are *not* constructed solely with the explicit intention to communicate. Furthermore, a designer might intend to communicate something through the creation, but the message might not resonate with the user of the object. “Interpreters may believe that designers intended something,” says Bonta, and “designers may verbalize their meanings” with the aim of favoring certain interpretations.¹⁶ However, the meaning of objects in reality is far more varied and complex than any single interpreter could imagine, even if the interpreter is the object’s designer argues Bonta.¹⁷

The problem is that interpreters have a tendency to ascribe intentions to objects that in fact have no such intention. At the same time, designers tend to think that they control the meaning of their creations when, in fact, it is controlled only in fierce competition with the interests of other interpreters—among them business owners, marketing teams, media commenters, end users, buyers, and others involved in assessing the cultural meaning of the product. Describing most design and art objects as simply communicating is therefore too vague; rather, they must be understood as constructions of a mix of several types of indicative features, which then can lead to different interpretations for the various interpreters involved. This viewpoint—that meanings are distributed among several actors and embedded in objects with agency ascribed by interpreters—is in accordance with theories of material culture.¹⁸

The Paradigm of Interpretation

The meaning of objects in pragmatic discourse, understood as the interweaving of intentions and non-intentions in the interplay of interpreters and agents of communication, is the approach advocated by and developed into what Juan Pablo Bonta calls “the paradigm of interpretation.”¹⁹ Bonta’s conception of this paradigm derives from earlier works of linguists Buysens,²⁰ Prieto,²¹ and Mounin,²² who were mainly interested in understanding how language communicates. In contrast Bonta is concerned with how non-linguistic phenomena, such as architectural objects, are received and determined in discourse by certain communities of interpreters (e.g., the architectural profession).

16 Juan Pablo Bonta, *Architecture and Its Interpretation. A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 226.

17 *Ibid.*, 227.

18 See Daniel Miller, “The Fame of Trinis: Websites as Traps,” *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 1 (2000): 151.

19 Juan Pablo Bonta, “Notes for a Theory of Meaning in Design,” in *Signs, Symbols, and Architecture*, ed. Geoffrey Broadbent et al. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1980), 271–310.

20 Eric Buysens, *La Communication Et L’articulation Linguistique* [Communication and Linguistic Articulation] (Bruxelles & Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1967).

21 Luis Prieto, *Messages et signaux* [Messages and Signals] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966).

22 Georges Mounin, *Semiotic Praxis* (New York: Plenum, 1985).

Jørn Guldborg later elaborated this paradigm into a more general semiotic methodology for understanding designed objects.²³ Where Bonta tends to understand the meaning of design objects as mainly a discursive phenomenon, Guldborg maintains that the physical features of design objects themselves are important in understanding their meaning potential, and that the various interpreters involved in the design and production of the objects are as important as those involved in their reception and consumption. In other words, discursive interpretations are interpretations of “something”—physical objects—and the meaning of objects is negotiated in interplays between producers of objects and their interpreters. This perspective, which I call the indicative framework, is based on a close examination of what communication really is and, equally important, what communication in objects is not.

The Indicative Framework

The indicative framework can best be understood within two dimensions that build on a theoretical argument of what constitutes a true communicative act: Communication takes place when a sign emitter with the intention to communicate sends a coded message, and a receiver recognizes the intention to communicate in the sign and decodes the message accordingly. The two dimensions or criteria for successful communication are then: 1) the intentionality of the emitter and 2) the interpreters’ recognition of an intention to communicate. The sign may be produced with or without the intention to communicate, and it may be perceived by an interpreter either as a natural, indicative sign with no agency involved or as being communicative. A combination of these choices produces a total of four subclasses of indication: indicator, signal, intended indicator, and pseudo-signal (see Table 1, page 56).

Indicators: Design as Natural Indications

The first kind of indication, simply termed the *indicator*, has no intentional sign producer, and the interpreter of the sign does not assume intentionality. Indicators could also be classified as natural signs because they are the sole product of the operative procedure of inference within the minds of interpreters and are never intentionally produced by a human emitter.²⁴ For example, when it is lit, Little Sun works as a reminder to the interpreter of the fact that the sun has been shining and has charged the solar cells of the device. This indication does not involve any intentionality.

Little Sun also carries other non-communicative information. For example, the engineering and design of the device is indicative of a certain context of production; from its use of plastic, molding and assembly techniques, and solar panels, we can infer

23 Jørn Guldborg, *Skitse til en materiel-kulturel semiotik* [Sketch for a Material Cultural Semiotics], vol. 25 (Odense: Center for kulturstudier, 2003); Jørn Guldborg, “Singular or Multiple Meanings? A Critique of the index/Anzeichen Approach to Design Semiotics/semantics,” in *Design and Semantics of Form and Movement* (2010): 71–84.

24 Hervey Sandor, *Semiotic Perspectives* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), 63.

that it requires a rather elaborate technically advanced and complex organization to produce such an object. It also carries with it some cultural and historical stylistic elements that make very clear that it originates, not in the African contexts where it is distributed, but perhaps in the developed world, within the past ten years. Of course, as indicators go, this interpretation depends on the interpreters' background knowledge and cognitive facilities, as well as on the efforts of the interpreter. Most often we depend on non-expert habits of interpretation when we associate such indicative meanings to objects.

Signals: Design as Communication Proper

The next kind of indication is the *signal*, a sign produced by a "sender" with the intention to communicate a specific content or "meaning" to an interpreter who, in part, assumes this intentionality or agency behind the sign and thus is transformed from an "interpreter" to a "receiver" of information. Furthermore, signals are systematic based on conventions and governed by a pattern or code shared by the sender and receiver in each instance. In other words, interpretations of cultural objects are determined by pre-existing, socially based standardized understandings of what means what, available within interpretative communities.

The signal is more cognitively demanding of the receiver because it requires two interpretative operations: first, the recognition of the sign as carrying the intentional purpose of the sender to communicate, and second, the selection and application of a code to understand the intended meaning. In the case of Little Sun, perhaps only the name tagged on its strip (see Figure 1) is truly communicative in this sense, although even such a simple statement as "Little Sun" is obviously not to be taken in the literal sense of the term, but instead relies on complex metaphorical social knowledge embedded in the choice of words.

The idea that the interpretation of objects can be understood in the opposition pair of convention-based and non-convention-based meanings is not special to the indicative framework. These first two sign types are very close to the notions of "index" and "symbol" within the semiotic frame of Peirce or to "sign" and "connotation" within the semiotic frame of Hjelmslev and Barthes.²⁵

Intentional Indicators: Design as Expression

Another possibility is to conceive of a situation where a sign indeed has an intentional sender behind it, but the sign is not interpreted as a signal by an interpreter. Instead, it is understood as a kind of indication. This sign type, which Bonta calls the *intentional indicator*, has as its basis a fundamental misrecognition: A sign with intentionality is understood by an interpreter as a natural sign—that is, as one produced by a non-human emitter. Such

25 In his treatment of these associations, Carl Knappett refers to the representative sign relations in Peircean semiotics as the solution to understanding the meaning of objects as a continuum of different associative effects. Hence, Knappett mentions iconicity, indexicality, and symbolism of products, relying on the presence of features of similarity, contiguity, and convention, respectively, as adequate in his analysis of object features. (See Knappett, 85).

Note that the Peircean concept of iconicity—the representative relationship through which the physical features of the sign have some similarity with the object of the sign—does not have a terminological equivalent in the indicative framework. This absence might be considered a deficiency of the framework, but because the figurative motives of Little Sun have been discussed several times, another possibility is to see that iconicity is really a form of conventional sign relation, reflecting Eco's and others' many criticisms of Peirce. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

Although Eco might have been refuted, what is discussed under the umbrella of iconicity in Peircean semiotics would seem to concern many of the same problems of intentionality and effects discussed in the tradition of the indicative framework, and in the discussion of the subsequent two sign types. For discussions on iconicity, see also Göran Sonesson, "Iconicity Strikes Back: The Third Generation or Why Eco Is Still Wrong," in *La sémiotique visuelle: nouveaux paradigmes* [Visual Semiotics: New Paradigms], ed. Costantini Michel (2010), 247–70.

misrecognitions easily can occur by accident; also not unusual is for the sign producer to impose the meaning of what the interpreter perceives as a “natural” sign upon the interpreter. Therefore, we could also call this imposition “strategic communication.” Although such a use of words might imply a drama of malicious intent, such intent is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, this scenario is not quite an exhaustive description of the concept because this sign type is really not a vehicle of communication. Rather, Bonta calls this type of indication “expression.”²⁶ As Guldberg suggests, most design products (and indeed also Little Sun) could be understood as the product of such expressive meaning production through the device of the intended indicator.²⁷ On the technical and material level, the use of this sign strategy is functional in the sense that interaction with objects are greatly simplified by the use of expression; on the figurative level, the sunflower motif of the lamp might imply the basic solar charging lamp function through the use of metaphor. In a sense, what effective expressive design does is simply to “work” in a seemingly “natural” way—that is, in an unmediated manner, even though from a meta-analytical perspective all design inherently implies an aspect of expressive intent.

Pseudo-Signals: Assuming Design Intentionality

Although I have identified the sunflower as a possible figurative interpretation of the Little Sun, the product website names another flower as the figurative motive behind the design: the Ethiopian Meskell. This flower is described as “a national symbol of positivity and beauty.”²⁸ As Bonta writes, “Interpreters sometimes feel that designers intend to communicate something. Nevertheless, this is a belief on behalf of the interpreter, not an intention of the designer.”²⁹ In the case of Little Sun, the Meskell figure might effectively indicate certain meanings for Ethiopians, but it probably is not an effective signal in other third-world countries and in the Western markets because other figurative attributions are more likely, such as sunflower or children’s windmill, as proposed earlier. The fourth sign type is thus what Bonta designates the *pseudo-signal*. This kind of indication is the reverse of the intended indicator: It is not produced with the intention to communicate but still is understood by an interpreter to carry certain intentions and is therefore understood within what the interpreter assumes is a shared code of understanding. Most archaeology operates within this category because material remnants dug up from the ground obviously were not intended to be shared with contemporary archaeologists; instead, archaeology, and indeed many ethnographies and futurologies, are concerned with attributing communicative meanings to such indicative objects, even though no true communicative evidence exists.

26 Bonta, *Architecture and Its Interpretation. A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture*, 282.

27 Guldberg, “Singular or Multiple Meanings? A Critique of the index/Anzeichen Approach to Design Semiotics/semantics.”

28 Bonta, *Architecture and Its Interpretation. A Study of Expressive Systems in Architecture*, 282.

29 Ibid., 279.

Table 1 | The indicative framework. Adapted from (Bonta 1980)

	Interpreter does not assume intentionality	Interpreter assumes intentionality & encoding
There is an intentional emitter & encoding	Intentional indicator <i>Expression</i>	Signal Communication
There is an intentional emitter & encoding	Indicator <i>Indication</i>	Pseudo signal Pseudo communication

This final sign type also provides a clue to understanding the meaning potential of Little Sun. In fact, many artful objects seem to do their work within the category of pseudo-communication. The enchantment of the art object relies, I would suggest, on the construction of an expressive intended indicator so complex that interpreters are led into transforming it into the category of pseudo-communication.

The Importance of Design Mediation

According to the proposed indicative framework, an artwork or design object is in a sense open—not because it is not produced with intention, but because its intentions deriving from agency of its producer are deliberately blurred. Design objects that draw attention to themselves as art objects typically achieve this blurring through a variety of mediations—for example, by visual or textual communications that can include catalogues, packaging, staging at art galleries, marketing websites, and others. The mediations of Little Sun are a prime example of this kind of signaling; they work by drawing directly on the communicative code of the “art” category, claiming this status by way of intended indicators and signals in the marketing materials, catalogues, and so on. The central quote found on the side of the packaging of Little Sun is such an indicator: “Little Sun is a work of art that works in life. It puts the power of the sun in the palm of your hand. – Olafur Eliasson” (see Figure 3). By referring to the mediated object as art and by pointing to Eliasson as author of the Little Sun—instead of his project partner, Frederik Ottesen, who is an engineer—the interpretation of Little Sun is forcefully determined in the artful direction. This interpretation is supported for the interpreter by all the other art mediations, including the Littlesun.com website; art exhibitions across the world (e.g., the Roppongi Art festival in Tokyo); and mediations in art magazines, blogs, and online videos, where Eliasson the artist is consistently identified as the communicative sender of this object. The production of the object is rarely attributed to Ottesen or, for that matter, to the many other stakeholders involved in its design and production. Although we might find the border crossing between art and design expressed in its physical features, this connection is not as explicit an enchantment strategy as the abovementioned discursive mediations of the object.

Table 2 | Proposed categorizations and relations of meanings at play in Little Sun and its mediations

	Interpreter does not assume intentionality	Interpreter assumes intentionality & encoding
There is an intentional emitter & encoding	Solar lamp function, flower & toy windmill motives, strap	Name, tags, various discursive mediations of the objects
There is an intentional emitter & encoding	Conditions & relations of production, distribution networks, cultural & stylistic contexts	Non-functional object, "Art that works in life"

Unlocking the Meaning Potential of Little Sun

As demonstrated, Little Sun might potentially be understood within all four sign types of the indicative framework: 1) indicators, or "natural" signs; 2) signals, or true communication, requiring mutual cognitive intent and a selection of conventionalized codes; 3) intended indicators, or expressive communication through objects; and 4) pseudo signals, indicators (mistakenly) understood by interpreters as communication (see Table 2). However, even though a designed object can conceivably contain a multitude of different meaning potentials, both designers and other interpreters are selective in their production of meaning. In the final analysis, some physical design objects communicate; these products are intended to communicate something, and this trait characterizes what often is called communication design. Examples include subway maps and timetables, hand-washing posters or more complex electronic communication devices. This special group of objects clearly are seen to be "talking to us," as Tim Dant writes.³⁰ Nevertheless, within the perspective suggested here, several other variations of communicative and non-communicative intents and effects are conceivable within the broader realm of objects.

Arguably, most design objects rely heavily on discursive para-objects (e.g., packaging and marketing materials) that mediate the communicative intentions of their producers and designers, while the physical objects themselves often have a far less determined character, or polysemy.³¹ This openness was the case with Little Sun—an object that clearly is invested with "designerly" meanings in its design but that also seems to require additional discourse to achieve its hybrid status. Furthermore, because of the complex nature of this type of inference, the understanding of the communicative signals necessarily is limited in scope, as is the communicative intent that interpreters are capable of receiving. As a result, the physical objects themselves, I suggest, often are understood as intended indicators. Thus, in the case of Little Sun, the object would not be understood as art if not for the active enchantment of technology performed in the media, in the packaging, and in the other communicative mechanisms already identified.

30 Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society* (Open University Press, 2004).

31 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana Press, 1977).

Emotional Durability and Sustainability of Design

Some of the magic of objects is achieved by the tendency of interpreters to ascribe communicative meanings to objects that were never meant to communicate. This tendency is a reminder that, although the designed object might be said in a loose way to be polysemic, the fact that it is manifested as a material object also means that interpreters tend to assign it some intentionality. For an object like Little Sun to be perceived as artful, it needs to assume some order of efficacy within the community of interpreters by which it is used.³² Although Little Sun as a material object crosses the border of design and art registers and thus reinforces its mediated meanings in the Western world, in the local material cultures of the developing countries where it is used, this connection might seem rather abstruse.

The lamp seems to be situated in a much more utilitarian discourse in non-Western social mediations of the object, far removed from the domain of art. Certainly, this seemingly innocent little lamp is aesthetically far removed from the austere bric-a-brac objects advocated for and envisioned in Papanek's *Design for the Real World*, the founding text of the current movements of social and sustainable design.³³ This rather conspicuous object and its discursive placement arching across the spheres of art and design seem to work against the ideas of sustainability as this concept is understood by Chapman in relation to social design: aesthetically conspicuous objects simply tend to fall out of fashion.³⁴ As they lose their emotional appeal for Western users, they sustain the ever-faster consumption cycles of the modern world, says Chapman, rather than the opposite.³⁵ Thus, while Little Sun might provide some sustainability in a narrow technical sense in developing countries, the emotional durability of the relationships established between users and product is certainly questionable.

Joining the Modernist Western Art and Design Tradition

Little Sun, through its mediated positioning as an art/design hybrid, might be sustained as a durable object in another sense. The whole concept of Eliasson's enchanting the object as "art in life" echoes the major schism inherent in the ideas of the twentieth century Modern Movement in design, which from its inception explored the aesthetic and life-changing potentials of design objects. As Greenhulgh writes in his exposition of the Modern Movement, modern designers from the beginning saw their role as "that of the artist, as defined in the post-Romantic era, the struggling genius fighting towards the definitive solution, the dedicated and ethical bohemian."³⁶ Greenhulgh further notes that this image of the designer genius as fighting for social equality was

32 Daniel Miller, "The Fame of Trinis: Websites as Traps," 151.

33 Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972).

34 Jonathan Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design: Objects, Experiences and Empathy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20.

35 *Ibid.*, 20.

36 Paul Greenhulgh, ed., *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 18.

bound up in a distrust of the taste and lifestyle choices of the masses. Likewise, while the inherent disavowal of function in favor of art and life in Little Sun can be seen as playful postmodernist referencing, Little Sun also can be understood as a very modernist and romanticizing endeavor. Hence, the seemingly innocent and well-meaning gesture toward non-Western users might in the final analysis be just another patronizing Western gaze objectified in a toy-like product. This strategy not only strengthens its commercial potential with regard to affluent Western customers; it also positions the object as a part of the still-overarching modernist strain in the dominant Western design and art traditions. Hence, it can secure its continued placement in design museums and as a collector's item, while still fulfilling its stated social design objectives.

Conclusion: Analyzing Hybridities of Design

The hybrid crossing of art and design in objects has been shown to rely on a complex interplay of expressive intentions and pseudo-communicative interpretations expressed in the objects and in the discourse by its creators. This interplay relies on the existence of a communicative potential while simultaneously dissolving the possibility of proper communication, at least in the most banal sense of the concept; they don't signal in a clear manner. Little Sun demonstrates such a use of both physical features and powerful mediations to achieve this effect. On the one hand, the discourse and practice of Little Sun tells a story of a successful commercial endeavor. On the other hand, it is not merely a commercial business, but a social design venture that invokes values of magic borrowed from the art scene. Barriers between the object as a work of art and the object as a utilitarian consumer product are broken down, making Little Sun appear as a semi-magic object by means of the perceived simple, innocent appearance and Eliasson's enchantments. Meanwhile, the meaning of the object might also be located in a wider critique by its creators in the context of social design. In this regard, they seem to expose a Western tradition of patronizing romanticism regarding the development of non-Western cultures.

Although the design of Little Sun can be seen as just one extreme example of the interplay of art and design, the case highlights the available strategies of meaning-making in this type of object. My contention, therefore, is that the indicative framework can be used as a tool for understanding the shifts between art, design, and cross-domain objects. As C. S. Peirce suggested on the topic of semiotics as analytical method, it is merely a way to "make our ideas clear, but they may be ever so clear without being true. How to make them so, we have next to study."³⁷ Thus,

37 Charles Sanders Peirce, "Illustrations of the Logic of Science II," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (January 1878): 302; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_12/March_1878/Illustrations_of_the_Logic_of_Science_III (accessed July 3, 2016).

although claims have been made about the analytical strengths of the indicative framework in understanding the meaning potential of objects, this paper does not claim a complete understanding of how the studied objects work in life. An interesting continuation of this study would therefore be to connect this method of semiotic analysis with ethnographic studies. This connection would indicate how users in developing countries actually interpret and use hybrid objects such as Little Sun, for instance, as well as whether and how the inherent tensions between the objects as exclusive art object and its social design profile are perceived.

Toke Riis Ebbesen is assistant professor at SDU Design Research at University of Southern Denmark.