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Art and Algorithms

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In response to the exhibit “Designs for Different Futures” showcased by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I had a really enjoyable experience and I engaged in a lot of amusing ideas. What piqued my interest the most about the exhibition is the headings that are placed above the pieces throughout the gallery space. I’m really attracted to this feature of the show because it really made me consider alternate ways of interpreting the works from a curatorial, design, and artistic perspective.

The space that the worked was displayed in was a larger room, and the headings were placed on the wall about 20 feet from the ground. There are ten categories or headings; Data, Bodies, Intimacies, Earths, Materials, Food, Jobs, Cities, Power, Resources (Not in a specific order). There are three of each word-oriented equally spaced apart throughout the gallery. The words are about a foot tall, and every letter in the word is uppercase. The font is something similar to a boldface “Gothic” with black text color. And once you arrived at a new category depending on the heading there are multiple paragraphs that serve as an introduction to the works. The introductions refer to history, design, and general questions about the prompts.

After viewing the exhibit I had the chance to ask a curator a question about the titles. The curator; Orkan Telhan is an associate professor of fine arts, emerging design practices, and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. My question was; “Why were the headings incorporated into the show?”, his response was that “they were not there to serve a purpose of classifying the works, but more as an opportunity to see the whole exhibit as a

functional cycle by using basic universal terms that relate to development.” After hearing someone’s opinion who has a design orient lens, as well as a curatorial practice compared to my naive artistic view made me consider how he wanted the headings to be translated and how I translated it. I first perceived the headings on the wall as very peculiar because I have never seen anything in a white-walled gallery with this type of component. Especially considering the variety and uniqueness of this exhibit I was really intrigued and somewhat confused. A lot of the works involved technologies and forms of digital fabrication that I didn’t even know existed which made it feel quite alien. I interpreted each heading as a separate category, but now reflecting on it they all seem to reminisce on the same idea of “future”.

From the design viewpoint, I found the heading to be distracting. According to Orkan, the exhibit was unique because its focus was on design and not that many contemporary exhibits showcase design as fine art. What I know about design is that it serves a function and good design is invisible because it goes unnoticed. In collaboration with the works, I felt that they were clashing because the works ranged from so many diverse mediums and concepts that putting a general subject over the works took away from their personality.

In “Designs for Different Futures” the goal of the exhibit was not to predict the future but to comment on how we presently live in it and how we might go about shaping different futures. I can say with confidence that this exhibit was unlike any other exhibit I have ever seen and I hope to see more exhibits evolve and push into new boundaries of merging art and design. Overall I can appreciate the works and the exhibit with and without the use of the headings, but I do think that because of the eccentric nature of the exhibit adding elements that seem unusual creates an interest conversation that lends itself to the communication of the future.