

# CONTEXTUALISING CRITICAL DESIGN: CLASSIFICATION OF CRITICAL DESIGN PRACTICES

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## ABSTRACT

Critical Design was popularised by Anthony Dunne in *Hertzian Tales* (1998). In it Dunne introduces the idea of product design and electronic objects fusing into critical design; where the object functions as critique. Since *Hertzian Tales* 'Critical Design' has been adopted as an umbrella term for any type of critical practice in product design. This paper outlines the first phase in an ongoing PhD project. In it I want to present the notion that critical design operates as an umbrella term describing critical practice in product design, and that 'Critical Design' falls within the scope of this practice.

Using a radical hermeneutic approach (Caputo, 1987) the research explores critical design in an attempt to classify and categorise differences in practice methods employed by critical designers. Classification takes the form of a taxonomy attempting to contextualise critical design practices within the 'movement', and the 'movement' within the field of product design.

The research considers the emergence of critical design as a reaction to 'orthodoxy and protocols of design method' (Ball & Naylor, 2006 p. 11); and the development of a critical tradition in product design. It explores the shifting discipline of product design within the interdisciplinary arena, with specific regard to how critical design operates at the interface between art and design.

*Keywords: Critical Design, Radical Hermeneutic, Design Taxonomy,*

## 1 CRITICAL DESIGN

Critical design is located outside terms set by capital or production, countering conventions of utility, technological agenda, and financial gain. Produced as prototypes for exhibit rather than sale, these products are, as Ramia Mazé says, "less about problem solving and more about problem finding within disciplinary and societal discourse" (Mazé, 2007 p. 211). Critical design aims to expose the current state of design. It seeks to avoid or challenge conventional production and consumption, offering alternative perspectives within design. Often described as ideological critical design is seen as un-structured; however, these practices are increasing in examples, theoretical depth, and exposure.

## 2 THE ART OBJECT - DESIGN OBJECT DEBATE

Art has an established tradition of criticism, whereas criticality in product design is less definite. In establishing more critically concerned practice designers look to neighbouring disciplines including art and its incorporated critical theory. As critical design borrows from artistic traditions of criticality, disciplinary boundaries are less distinct, thus questions are asked of critical design as to whether it falls within the remit of art rather than design.

In this hermeneutic project, I feel that this questioning is somewhat irrelevant. I would like to draw attention to the difficulty in trying to establish disciplinary boundaries as Caputo argues:

I want to argue for a notion of reason which begins by acknowledging the uncircumventable futility involved in trying to nail things down. In the end I want to say that science, action, art and religious belief make their way by a free and creative movement whose dynamics baffle the various discourses on method. But I do not want to treat this as a negative start, as a kind of despair in reason, but as the only really sensible, or reasonable view of reason. The problem with reason today is that it has become an

instrument of discipline, not a mark of freedom, and that, when it is put to work, it is taken out of play". (Caputo, 1987 p. 211)

It may be better to describe critical design as design interfacing with art as Jerry Palmer writes "The boundary between art and design is always fluid insofar as all art pieces and design pieces have elements of both in them and are the result of some creative process" (Palmer, 1996 p. 3).

Considering Caputo's and Palmer's writing I distinguish between art objects and designed objects that successfully afford critical reflection by how they are framed. High finish, carefully constructed narrative, and the practical, explanatory and normative aspects of critical design promote a different discourse than if the objects are framed as art objects. In successful critical design a clever matching of aesthetics and irony promotes reality, but positions the object ever so slightly out of sync with it – the design allowing the user to open up for reflection by affording some form of rhetorical use.

### **3 RADICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Hermeneutics is situated in the interpretive paradigm. The first thing to address in any hermeneutic endeavour is bracketing. In a radical hermeneutic approach the researcher's beliefs are integral to the study and aid in the generation of research data. Prejudices are not suspended, bracketed or reduced; therefore, at this point I include a statement of belief: 'a horizon' that informs and helps develop the research:

Industrial design is changing; adjusting to the social, political, economic and technological conditions of today. One of the biggest challenges now facing design is to ensure it remains relevant and meaningful, establishing itself as a significant cultural actor through the continued development of critical practice.

Two embedded assumptions of hermeneutics are that humans experience the world through language and that language provides understanding and knowledge. Radical Hermeneutics develops "an acute sense of the contingency of all social, historic, linguistic structures and appreciation of their constituted character, their character as effects" (Caputo, 1987 p. 209). I apply a radical hermeneutic; in doing so I accept that coming to a place of understanding is tentative and always changing in the hermeneutic endeavour. There is a personal, temporal and context specific element to understanding. It is therefore necessary to account for one's position and trace one's movement throughout the research process using the hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle refers to the idea that understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts, and one understands each part by reference to the whole. I apply the circle seeing critical design as the whole in an attempt to understand its constituent practices. The circle is used to understand methods of practice, and 'operating concepts' that stem from what I am describing as designer's 'ideology'.

### **4 TAXONOMY**

A review of literature surrounding critical design shows how these practices are described as Concept, Conceptual and Critical design. I present these categories as the 'Scope' of critical design. The use of Concept, Conceptual, Critical Design, represents the starting point in developing the taxonomy for critical design Figure 1. For reasons of 'convention', I use critical design as the umbrella term for this practice. Capitalised 'Critical Design' (Dunne, 1998) is used to describe a practice within critical design. To eliminate confusion I intend to change the terminology as the project progresses but for now, this is how critical design is 'understood'. I propose critical design as a movement within product design. The common conception is that it is not a field that can be neatly defined. However, describing a movement as a tendency or style with a specific common philosophy or goal, followed by a group of designers, who challenge the way the discipline approaches its work, and considering critical designs emergence and influence over the past decade, I would argue that it is reasonable to describe critical design as a movement.

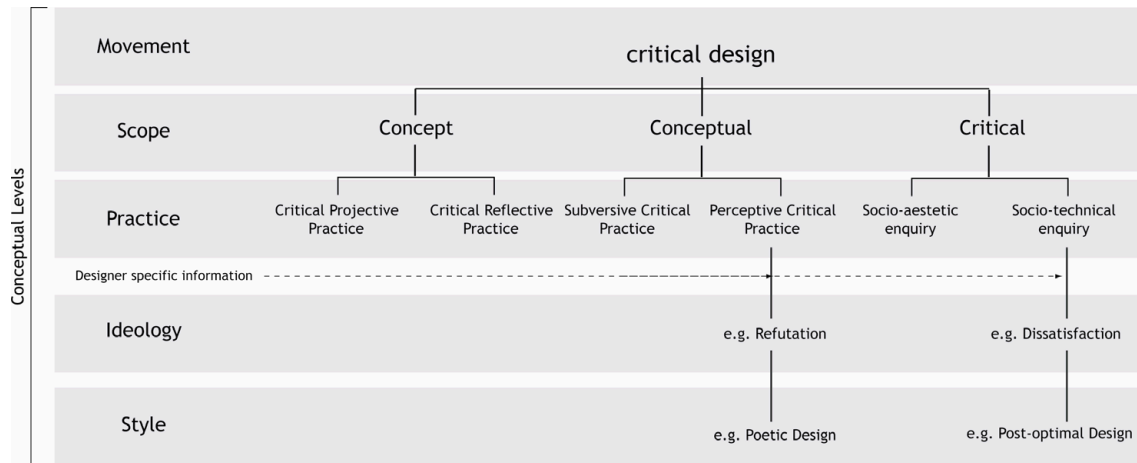


Figure1: Taxonomy of critical design practice

## 5 THEMATIC CONCEPTS IN CRITICAL DESIGN

### 5.1 Concept design:

This is a speculative practice concerned with the projection of socio-cultural trends, developing scenarios of product roles in possible futures. It is linked to forecasting, sociology, scientific and technology research within an industrial design context. Rather than utopic or dystopic visions, concept designs pose challenging statements attempting to explore ethical and societal implications of design and future commitments.

#### 5.1.1 Critical Projective practice:

This approach engages in exploring possible futures grounded in political, scientific and social issues pertinent today. The practice questions where we are going by drawing concepts from critical political, scientific and social theories and reflects on the implications of design decisions made today and how they may proceed into the future.

#### 5.1.2 Critical Reflective practice:

This is a practice of reflection of one's own design practice, through design practice; a means for both designers and users to rethink dominant traditions and values in design. Such approaches indicate increasing commitment to reflection within design practice, upon design effects, and in use.

### 5.2 Conceptual design:

This shifts focus from designer and object to the concept. It challenges ideas, orthodox traditions and the user. Operating conceptually, conceptual design remains rooted in the everyday, relating to the conceptual domain of art but also to everyday conventions of use. Conceptual design challenges embedded assumptions of products, making use of conventional disciplinary frames to assert and subvert norms

#### 5.2.1 Perceptive Critical practice:

This is a scholarly practice exploring the strategic potential of design processes. Through embedded narrative the object acts as critical medium for cultural reflection, playfully reflecting on cultural meaning, visualising issues pertinent to society today. The practice leans towards artistic speculation rather than design for production. It's a poetic inquisition of the everyday that affords design an opportunity to re-imagine itself. Experimentation is the main research method subjecting ideas to a critical process of refutation.

#### 5.2.2 Subversive Critical practice:

This subverts design norms intervening in concepts and behaviours engaged in use. This practice employs a more straightforward attitude to materials, an inventive approach to fabrication processes and methods,

and a resistance to product styling. Latent humour and wit characterises its products. It subverts the expectations of the ordinary and the everyday and our expectations of the designer's role by flaunting formlessness and alternate endings in the design of the object.

### 5.3 Critical Design:

This focuses on the social, cultural and ethical implications of design objects and practice. The designer is positioned as a critically engaged practitioner. It draws inspiration from diverse sources but is grounded in everyday rituals and conventions of use. It scans the potentials of design, presenting the potential consequences of current socio-technical conditions. It is grounded in critical social theory, a criticism from within design practice.

#### 5.3.1 Socio-aesthetic/technical enquiry

This is the use of speculative design proposals to challenge preconceptions about the role products play in everyday life. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion about the aesthetic quality of our product mediated lives. It exposes assumptions, provokes action and debate, using satire by matching aesthetics and irony. "It takes as its medium social, psychological, cultural, technical and economic values, in an effort to push the lived experience not the medium." (Dunne et al., 2001 p. 58).

## 6 HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

Hermeneutic research demands self-reflexivity, actively constructing interpretations of the experience and questioning how those interpretations came about (Hertz, 1997). Van Manen (1997) believed writing forces an individual into a reflective attitude in which one writes in a deeply collective way. I engage with the hermeneutic circle using a reflective journal. Supplementing writing, I use practice as a method of reflection and engagement with the circle. An example of this is the design of 'A' chair, a series of three chairs Figure 2. The chairs embody concepts used by critical designers in their practice. The designs present an interpretation of operating concepts regarding critical design practice and practice led research.

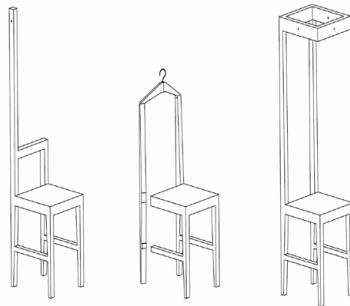


Figure 2 Concept sketch: 'A'- Chair: engagement with hermeneutic circle through practice

### 6.1 'A'- Chair Design synopsis

Hanging a jacket on a chair is an everyday ritual of use. A chair affords us this use. To communicate this, I use Ball and Naylor's notion of 'design poetics' (2006 p. 86): The aesthetic encouraging the user to hang a jacket referencing use through the stand, hanger and pole. However, hanging the jacket takes the chair out of play. By hanging a jacket sitting is obstructed, the jacket is creased and the chair falls over. I've designed out the afforded use of hanger. To achieve this obstructive mechanisms are incorporated offering the object as either a chair or a hanger, never both. By designing out the afforded use I reinforce the value of chair; to state: this is only a chair – to hang a jacket takes the chair out of play. The design is deliberately problematic and challenges conventions of use, raising questions relating to perceived affordance and everyday interaction with objects. The concept is reinforced by designing it into three variations on the same chair, three deliberate mistakes subverting design.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

The outcome of this phase is the development of self-interpreted constructions and an understanding of the current state of critical design. Using text as a data source I worked to understand critical design practice through the hermeneutic circle. The result of this process includes thematic categories of practice structured by taxonomy. The taxonomy was developed through attention to language, writing and design practice. These processes form a decision trail that document rationale and demonstrate engagement with the area of study.

The critical practices outlined in the taxonomy all counter terms set by capital. They use the mechanisms and materials of product design as tools for various critiques: whether it is of social or technological issues; subversion of design orthodoxy; as a form of reflection on practice or as a method of projection, visualising possible or alternate futures. Operating in the institutional framework of academia objects of critical design are not governed by the constraints of industry and are often speculative, where conventions of function are redefined. In the institutional context of academia and using the spaces traditionally reserved for art critical design operates in a parallel space to mainstream design.

Gadamer (1998) understood hermeneutics as a process of co-creation between the researcher and participant where meaning occurs through a circle of reflective interpretations. The next phase of this research involves interviewing critical designers. A series of pilots have been conducted where the taxonomy is used to probe the participant to discuss how critical design can be structured and how it contributes to product design.

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