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Beyond critical:
The importance of introspective conceptual design

Conceptual design is an emerging area of design research and practice which shares much in common with conceptual art. Both are driven by the idea that the concept or question behind the artefacts they produce is often more important than the artefacts themselves. Speculative design is the most prominent form of conceptual work undertaken by designers. This article argues that being speculative, and as such forward looking, it leaves a deficit in our evaluation of current issues in design and their roots. A more immediate and introspective form of conceptual design may allow us to make better decisions by questioning and challenging current design culture and contemporary practice.

Introduction

The design of physical objects is informed by the culture that surrounds it. It is also often a response to a perceived absence of satisfactory solutions to a particular problem. Conceptual design on the other hand is an application of the skills of design for the creation of objects which are driven by the expression of a concept. This article introduces the current form of conceptual work that designers mostly engage in and proposes to broaden the range of conceptual work from mainly speculative to include a more immediate form of enquiry. This form of conceptual design, which is introspective, can help put expression to issues surrounding contemporary design practice. It also argues that conceptual design should be used to broaden the investigative tools of all designers so that they may make more informed decisions about how they practice.

Beyond critical design

There are emerging and established forms of conceptual work that designers engage in, the most notable of which is Critical Design. The term, which was coined in the book Hertzian Tales (2008) by designer Tony Dunne, describes a practice where designers use experimental products and speculative narratives to explore the potential of future technologies and how we might interact with them. Dunne and his partner Fiona Raby, as the practice Dunne & Raby, have helped establish this type of conceptual practice as both a scholarly and professional pursuit through publication, teaching and extensive exhibition. Critical design has become the most visible aspect of

conceptual design practice to date and has an important role to play in the way it shapes and questions the future of design. Critical design, however, has its natural limitations in that it is speculative and therefore concerned with the future. Design history teaches us about the forces that shaped contemporary practice and speculative work informs us about future possibilities. But how do we interrogate and evaluate current practice and how might that be a useful exercise? Conceptual work need not be purely speculative, perhaps an introspective approach could open up debate around more pressing issues within design and how design practice relates to current culture in general.

An important area for critical introspection is the way in which designers facilitate the transition of new technologies to commercial applications. In an interview in 2009, sociobiologist E.O. Wilson said "The real problem of humanity is the following: we have Palaeolithic emotions; medieval institutions; and god-like technology". Using this statement as a starting point for conceptual inquiry, how might we assess the role of design in the society Wilson describes? Taking the concept at face value, where do designers stand in relation to the propagation of the "god-like" technology?

As new technologies are developed and are exploited commercially, designers may be seen as exacerbating the lack of understanding of those technologies by facilitating their rapid exploitation. Conversely, perhaps designers play a

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mitigating role by making the transition from technology to utility easier to comprehend. Has design played a positive or negative role in human sociological development? It could be argued that it is a positive or a negative force, or indeed an ambivalent quantity. Perhaps design simply "is" and it's what we do with it that matters. In that case what have we done with it and how can we evaluate its effect? The goal of this article is not to answer such questions but to argue for their importance to our practice.

Parallels

A similar discussion is currently happening in the field of science, a discipline that at its core is about exploring the fundamentals of nature. Basic research in science, research which explores fundamental principles, has become largely relegated in favour of more commercially practical applied research. The majority of science research is now funded by private enterprise and government funding for basic research is in decline. In 2015, over 800 researchers were signatories to an open letter in the Irish Times expressing concern for the future of scientific progress and the decline of support for basic research. These concerns are being raised and written about in countries around the world. Similarly, one could argue creative practice has recently tended towards highly applied commercial concerns. By making itself more applied and focusing strongly on the service of commercial interests, could design similarly lose the ability to investigate its own fundamentals?

In the 1930's, philosopher of Science, Karl Popper put forward his theory of falsifiability, through which one could make a clear distinction between conjecture and scientific rigour. In so doing he created the means to draw a line in the sand, to deal with propositions that were unfalsifiable was unscientific. This segregates philosophy from the practice of science as a distinct but unnecessary part of scientific enquiry. Self-described ex-designer Martí Guixé has defined design as being a creative pursuit applied to commercial purposes. As undergraduate students we learned the more laconic definition of design as *"applied creativity"*. With their rigid definitions, Popper and Guixé limit the scope of their respective practices and by limiting the
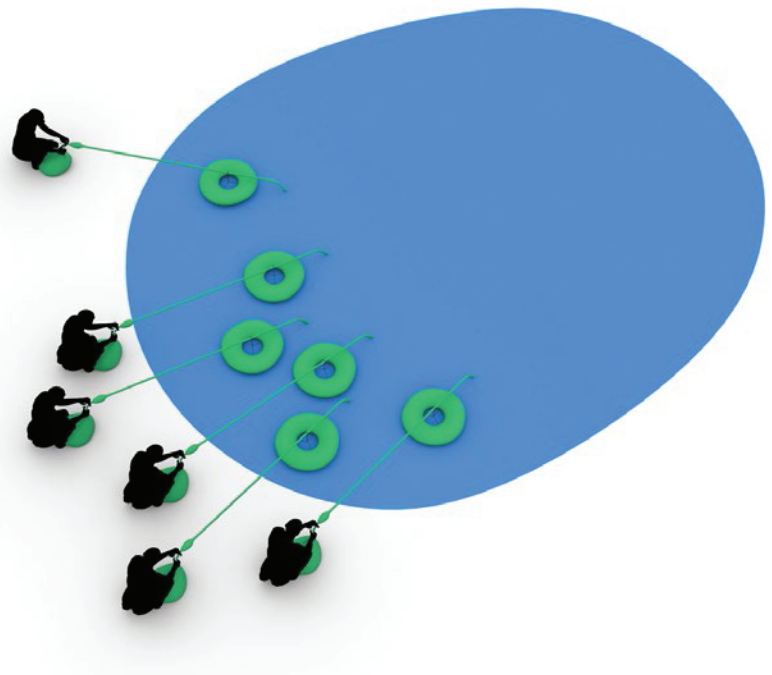

Figure 1. Dunne & Raby, Foragers (2009)

Figure 2. Martí Guixé, "Autobahn Cookies" and "I-cakes" (1997, 2001) Photo © Ana Lisa Alperovich for Inhabitat

scope of a discipline in this way the tools available to practitioners are limited also. In the grey areas between philosophy and science and the blurred borders between art and design there is still much that is worth exploring about each of these disciplines.

But is it art?

The question of what differentiates conceptual design from art assumes that objects cannot contain dualities or even multiplicities. Yet we often imbue objects with attributes outside those the designer, artist or producer ever intended, such as a family heirloom, my favourite pen, the worst (but most beautiful) juicer I have ever owned.

Giving form to intentional conceptual ideas can be challenging for designers and it requires a different approach to that of typical design projects. The artefacts of conceptual design do serve a practical purpose, they are communication devices. For example, their function may be to communicate a proposition, question, or argument. Their form and function, however, may not be reciprocal in the way they normally would, breaking a golden design principle. Both form and function still exist in conceptual design but rather than being explicit functions of each other they can perhaps be seen as independent qualities of the same object. That is, however, also a very literal reading of these objects; within the objects there should be suggestions as to the intended concept, thus form still does follow function, but laterally as opposed to linearly.

An example of a conceptual design object that follows this principle is the afterlife battery by designers James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau. The battery contains the captured chemical potential of a recently deceased loved one. This is communicated by the epitaph-like inscription on the side of each battery. Though still physically a battery, the way it is employed is given deeper meaning. For example, you may choose to use the battery in a form of tribute to the one whose energy is contained within it. As such, the form of a battery, with which we are familiar, belies its true function. It still has the terminals, cylindrical form and dimensions we associate with a typical battery but it is something more akin to a ceremonial object and ultimately it invokes questions around afterlife and reincarnation and gives tangible expression to the act of mourning or remembrance.

It is important to note that conceptual design objects do not rely on the suspension of disbelief. On the contrary, the work of the designer must be to impart a strong sense of purpose to the object. The observer, consumer or user must also be convinced by the reality described by the object.

Integration

In his book The Shape of Things (1999), philosopher Vilem Flusser argues that we are entering a new epoch in manufacturing, which is distinguished from the transition to tools or the transition to factories, in that humans will no longer be at the centre of the process of making. The robot will become the fixed quantity at the centre of the process, which necessitates a new industrial architecture.

This profound change in how we create raises many serious issues around how the role of the designer will change to meet these new realities. How will the relationship
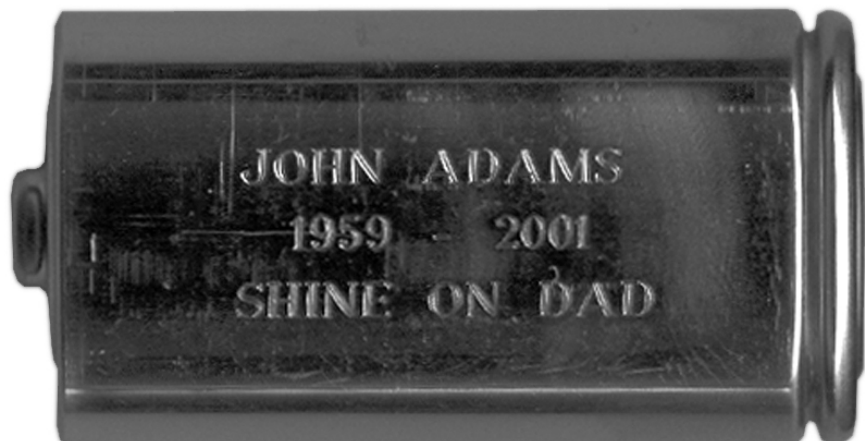

Figure 3. Auger & Loizeau, Afterlife Battery (2009)

"The question of what differentiates conceptual design from art assumes that objects cannot contain dualities or even multiplicities. Yet we often imbue objects with attributes outside those the designer, artist or producer ever intended, such as a family heirloom, my favourite pen, the worst (but most beautiful) juicer I have ever owned"

of design, craft and art evolve as these changes accelerate with seemingly ever-increasing momentum?

The contribution of critical introspection can help to inform developing issues, but more importantly it may actually shape them too. The important decisions that are made in the present may have wide ranging implications for the future of the profession of design as this new model of production expands.

While critical design is borne of research and careful narrative choices, speculation without basis is idle. Introspective conceptual design can fortify the narratives of speculation but it should also contribute to the conversation from which speculation might arise, and do so in a similar theoretical language to that employed in speculative design. Further to informing speculation, and perhaps most importantly, it should inform us in the present of the debates and questions surrounding our contemporary practice and culture, by making them visible, tangible and accessible. The importance of conceptual inquiry should not be outsourced to the ex-designer, it is too important not to be integrated into the education and practical toolset of current designers.