

Björn Franke *design and art*
design explorations
design as medium
epistemology
philosophy

Introduction

This paper investigates the possibility of using design as a medium for inquiry into questions of practical philosophy and the human relationship with technology and artefacts. With design, however, I mean design in a narrow sense centred around the design artefact and not design in an extended sense as a process or activity of planning or structuring^[1]. Furthermore, I am not referring to mainstream design practice, but rather to a form of design, which produces artefacts for thought rather than consumption or practical use. Within the discipline of design, this form can probably best be described as “design exploration”, as opposed to “design practice” or “design studies”, since it is neither driven by commercial interests, practical design problems or by how well the outcome fits into an existing context, nor by an investigation of the process of design, but rather by the exploration of ideas and possibilities. The exploring designer follows his/her own agenda and is not trying to solve pre-existing problems or narrow goals. The outcomes of such a design process can be subversive, provocative or critical artefacts, with the capacity to facilitate thinking and critical reflection on social situations (Fallman, 2008).

Although the term “design explorations” probably describes the overall direction of this form of design research well, I would like to mention two other terms within this area. The first term is “critical design,” which has been described as design that asks questions, makes one think and facilitates debate and discussions, through “conceptual design proposals offering a critique of the present through the material embodiment of functions derived from alternative value systems” (Dunne, 1999, p. 13. Also see Dunne & Raby, 2001, p. 58; and Dunne & Raby, <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/by/dandri/13/0>). The second term is “interrogative design,” which has been described as a form of design that “takes a risk, explores, articulates, and responds to the questionable conditions of life in today’s world, and does so in a questioning manner” (Wodiczko, 1999).

Both terms describe a questioning as well as criticising attitude towards the research object. To conceptualise design as a medium for a philosophical inquiry, however, I will focus on the questioning dimension of this form of design, rather than the criticising dimension that is often only commentary and does not enhance understanding of the question at stake. Thus, in the following, I will use the term “design” to describe the process and the outcome of design exploration that is not criticising the status quo, but rather tries to gain an understanding of the complex relationships between humans, artefacts and technology.

Design and art

To understand design as a mode of inquiry we first need to understand how design is related to other modes of inquiry such as philosophy, science or art. To answer this question, we might look at the output of design in comparison with the output of these other modes of inquiry. According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, philosophy can be understood as a mode of inquiry that creates concepts, which are self-referential objects that point to possible worlds but should not be confused with general or abstract ideas. Science, on the other hand, creates functions which are presented as propositions in discursive systems. Art, in contrast, neither creates concepts nor functions or propositions but perceives affects and sensations. None of these modes of inquiry should be regarded better or more complete than the other, but as merely different ways or perspectives from which research objects can be approached and questions can be investigated (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996,

pp. 17, 22, 24, 117, 198).

Following this model, design falls into the category of art, as it produces material artefacts, which are neither concepts nor propositions. Within the field of art, however, “design” can be distinguished from “art” – at least in the contemporary dominant meaning – which is more concerned with the artist’s subjective view and experience of an object and how he turns this experience into sensations. This conception of the “autonomy of art” often leads to entirely self-referential artefacts and loses the connection of basic questions concerning life. A designer, on the other hand, is less concerned with his/her relation to the object and in what expressive forms this could be articulated, but rather with creating forms that facilitate the relationships among humans and between humans and artefacts. Therefore, design is more concerned with problems and questions of everyday life and what material forms these could have, even if they are highly experimental and hypothetical.

Although design is an artistic inquiry, it shares the object of investigation with other modes of inquiry. One of the most obvious objects is the question of the “good life,” which it shares with practical philosophy. This exploration of the good life, however, is less concerned with normative judgements but rather with exploring possibilities of existence. Explorative design is not asking “what ought to be” but rather “what could be” or “What would be if...?” Normative judgements are replaced with explorations of possibilities of existence by “trying out” these possibilities – similar to the way literature explores these issues. In this conception, design could explore different social norms and value systems and even morally problematic matters.

Design and knowledge

What epistemological framework could an explorative design inquiry be based on and how could such a mode of inquiry contribute to knowledge and understanding? As we have seen, design cannot be scientific or philosophical, since it does not produce propositions and functions or concepts. Explorative design investigates something which does not yet exist and something that could be. Therefore it cannot rely on “truth” which describes the existing and can be evaluated in categories of right or wrong, but has to rely on appropriateness and understanding. Design is also related to the non-rational, since the exploration of possibilities is related to our irrational wishes, fears, and

expectations (Jonas, 1999). Such matters are related to the questions of practical philosophy on the one hand and to literature and fiction on the other hand.

Whether or not design can be a form of inquiry is mainly a question of whether and how it can contribute to knowledge. However, the above can be extended to art as a mode of inquiry in general, since the ways in which art investigates questions is very different from other modes of inquiry that are commonly associated with the generation of knowledge, namely science and philosophy. Since art produces sensations and not propositions or concepts which can be elaborated in the form of arguments or in discursive systems, the question is how sensations can be understood as a form of knowledge [2].

Within the discussion about the cognitive value of art, James Young has suggested an interesting model, which sees art as a mode of inquiry that generates knowledge and that can be transferred to design as a medium for inquiry. For Young, both science and art (he does not distinguish it from philosophy) creates knowledge through representations, but whereas science articulates knowledge mainly through semantic representations, art mainly uses illustrative representation. In order to develop a cognitive value, these representations have to be grounded in careful observations and have to be represented in such a way that they can provide insight into the objects of investigation. Both semantic and illustrative representations can either provide testimony or interpretations of these objects. Testimony, Young argues, is cognitively less interesting than interpretation. Whereas science interprets the objects through functional propositions in theories and models, art interprets the objects through illustrative representation which allows to give a *perspective* on the objects of investigation. This demonstration of a perspective, however, is different from how scientists demonstrate a theory. Whereas rational demonstration is demonstration by means of an argument, illustrative representation is non-rational and does not provide an argument. Illustrative demonstrations rather places one in the position to recognise something and to see the rightness of a perspective (Young, 1999, pp. 65-69).

According to Young, such illustrative representations can “draw attention to features of objects, place them in context, display their consequences and draw comparison between them” through techniques such as amplification, connection, correlation, juxtaposition, selection and simplification (Ibid., p. 82). Therefore, he points out, illustrative representations are best suitable to provide insights into complex subjects which cannot be explained through general laws, such as our relationships to each other or our place in the world. In these situations we have to rely on perspectives rather than theories to understand these phenomena. “A perspective can give us the capacity to discriminate features of complex phenomena and navigate the problems posed by daily life” (Ibid., p. 92). In order to see the perspective, he argues, the audience needs to look at the object in this way, which means that they have to *experience* the perspective, so they can judge if they support the provided perspective or not (Ibid., pp. 105-106).

Although Young acknowledges that the form an illustrative demonstration takes is an important part of an epistemology of art, he does not distinguish clearly between the content of the perspective and the medium in which the perspective is experienced. This could lead to the conclusion, that the “real knowledge” is the rightness of the content where the artwork gives a perspective, which appears to neglect the importance of the medium. The importance of the medium, however, is what Martin Seel argues for (although this is not in opposition to Young’s argument, but rather an extension).

For Seel, the knowledge that art can create is not the perspective on some object, but rather in the medium through which we can gain a perspective on an object. It is not the rightness of the perspective that makes an artwork successful, but rather the possibility to see a perspective. In Seel's constructivist view, the audience does not merely discover an object through the medium but also creates the object through it, which means that we deal with any object through a medium (Blank, 2004). This conceived artworks can lead the audience to take a certain aesthetic view, by guiding them to given ways of perception and experience. The point is to undergo the experience instead of judging the rightness of a perspective. He believes aesthetic knowledge (*ästhetische Erkenntnis*) can never be conceptual knowledge, since it is bound to aesthetic experience which has its roots in perception (Seel, 2008, p. 192).

According to Seel, artworks are not objects of pure contemplation, but rather signs of a certain view on an object. Therefore, art invents demonstrations (*Darstellungen*) of perspectives on objects and thus successful artworks allow to experience objects that would otherwise remain unnoticed (Seel, 1991, p. 44). In this sense, art invents media in which the disclosure of an object can take place. Hence, the audience has to experience the artefact, where the perspective on an object is presented, as the medium of the experience of the object and not only as a perspective on the object. This means that art is not demonstrating existential perspectives on objects but illustrates perspectives as existential (Ibid., pp. 63-69, footnote 25). For Seel, art is a mode of inquiry that reflects on human practice, a fact which aligns it with other modes of inquiry such as theory and ethics, although their reflection process is very different. Whereas theory reflects through arguments and ethics through guiding principles, art reflects through creating confrontation with current perspectives on objects (Ibid., p. 79).

Both Young's and Seel's models are useful epistemological frameworks for an exploratory design inquiry. Following Young's model, design could be said to create illustrative perspectives on objects that then can be judged in their rightness. However, following Seel's model, design could be said to produce artefacts that put audiences in the position of experiencing perspectives on previously inaccessible objects. Thus design could explore moral and ethical issues, changing values and possibilities of existence by creating media in which perspectives can arise. The way this mode of inquiry produces knowledge about objects, however, differs from other modes of inquiry, since results cannot be presented as arguments or as functions but rather as experiences. Furthermore, the inquiry does not aim for understanding of objects but rather for finding ways in which perspectives on an object can be experienced: knowledge about an object is generated by the audience forming a perspective through experience. In this sense artefacts facilitate the generation of knowledge rather presenting it, in other words, the artefact does not give answers but raises questions.

Approaches for inquiry

How can an explorative design inquiry take place within this epistemological framework? How can objects be approached and articulated using design as a medium? Within this framework, I would like to distinguish between three ways in which design can be a medium for inquiry.

First, the design artefact can be a fictional device through which a perspective on an object can be seen or experienced. Hereby existing media categories, such as products, furniture, photography or film, can be used to show this perspective. Although the medium shows the perspective, the cogni-

tive value is the newness of the perspective that is presented, rather than the medium through which it is presented. The medium, however, has to be appropriate to show the perspective, so that the audience can judge whether the perspective is appropriate, right.

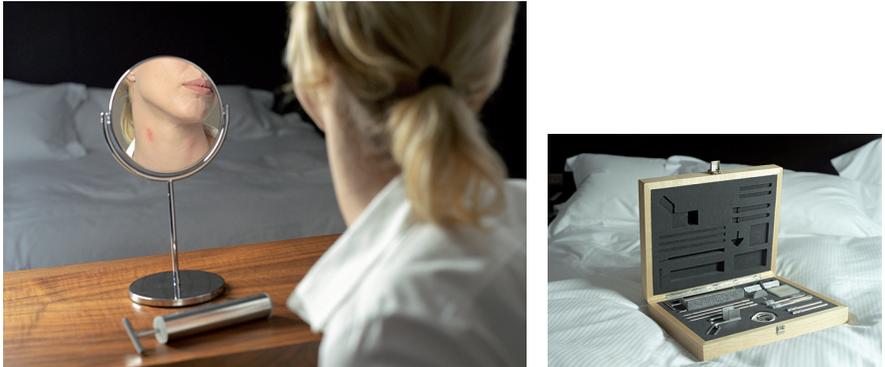


Figure 1
Björn Franke, *Traces of an Imaginary Affair*, 2006.

An example to illustrate this strategy is my project *Traces of an Imaginary Affair* (Fig. 1), which is a collection of nine tools which can be used to create an imaginary affair: to leave marks on the body, such as bite marks, carpet burns, bondage marks, love bites, scratches and bruises. In addition, probes of perfume, lipstick and hair can be applied to either the body or clothes. The design artefacts act as fictional props to think about ethical behaviour in relationships and especially about intentionally instigated jealousy. The audience can try and imagine these uses and the resulting social situations and in this sense members of the audience judge whether the presented perspective is right, and thereby clarify their own standpoint on these issues. However, this approach should not be confused with conceiving design as a “vehicular medium” through which the ideas are presented in ways the audience can agree or disagree with. Rather, the issues are presented in such a way that the audience has to form their own judgement on the perspective by decrypting the potential use and scenarios these artefacts promote. The key difference is ambiguity, instead of clear-cut statements, that force the audience to form their own perspective on the objects. I will call the use of design artefacts to create these perspective narratives “design fiction.”

Design can be an inquiry by transforming or creating the medium in which a perspective is articulated. The audience then experiences the artefacts as the medium of experience of a previously inaccessible perspective. Although related to existing categories of media, such as models, products or machines, the medium can be created or transformed in such a way that the medium itself, the design artefact is so to speak in the foreground of attention. In this sense it is not just the right perspective of what is experienced that is evaluated but also how this perspective is articulated, since this way of articulating allows a view on an object that is only possible in this specific medium. The object does not necessarily have to be new or controversial, but the way in which the medium offers a new way of looking at the object, has to.



Figure 2
Tim Simpson, *Natural Deselection*, 2006.



Figure 3
Shona Kitchen and Noam Toran, *Buried Alive*, 2004.

Tim Simpson's project *Natural Deselection* (fig. 2) is an example to illustrate this approach: an instrument that makes plants compete against each other using sensors and mechanised shears. Sensors set above the plants detect the first to grow to a specified height, at which point it is saved, and the others fatally chopped. The instrument allows one to gain a perspective on the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest – here the fittest is the fastest to grow – since the instrument creates a perspective on this theory by replacing nature as the selecting force with an autonomous artificial system. It furthermore allows one to gain a perspective on our technological systems and environments as selecting. In this sense this is an experience of the artefact as the medium of experience which I will call “material thought experiments.”

Finally, as an extension to this concept, design can be an inquiry through bodily involvement of the audience with the design artefact. Here, the design artefact can be seen as a simulation device that allows one to experience the perspective both intellectually and bodily. In this sense, the medium is a perspective in which the audience has to undergo the experience of “what it feels like.” Here, however, the medium must create a simulation and not a real experience, as otherwise the cognitive difference would vanish, and the object could not be evaluated, since the medium would not show a perspective but offer an experience.

An example to illustrate this approach is Shona Kitchen and Noam Toran's project *Buried Alive* (fig. 3), which is an installation of a custom-made coffin in which Shona Kitchen was temporarily buried alive. The audience was able to experience this event while lying in the same coffin in which the event took place, and watching a video including sound. In this design artefact, the uncanny object of being buried alive can be experienced and allows contemplation of a previously inaccessible perspective on the object. I will call this approach “staging situations.”

Conclusion

In this paper I have conceived design as a medium of artistic inquiry – as a practical art that creates sensations instead of propositions. The outlined epistemological framework allows to view the knowledge that a design artefact yields aesthetically through the experience of a perspective. These artefacts are cognitively valuable since they can facilitate knowledge and enhance our intellectual dispositions, and since the audience can enter a thought-provoking dialogue with them. The perspectives on the objects are presented in a way so that they may be grasped phenomenologically rather than analytically (Schellekens, 2007, p. 83). Design, conceived as practical art, could then become a tool for philosophy similar to the way fiction and poetry are. It could show perspectives and clarify the understanding of concepts. To this extent design can also, more precisely, be a tool for practical philosophy, that is, to aid the inquiry into ethical and moral issues, although the latter requires further investigation.

Endnotes

- [1] To which extent we can speak of an extended notion of design has been outlined by Bruno Latour (2008). Vilém Flusser (1999) furthermore points out that “design” is both a verb and a noun in the English language.
- [2] For an overview of the current debate about art and knowledge see Gaut (2003).

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