
Design as Ethical and Moral Inquiry

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The paper investigates the possibility to use 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 of design 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 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.[2]

The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part I shall investigate what distinguishes design from other fields of inquiry such as science, philosophy and art. I shall argue that we should conceive design not as science but as art, which I will call practical art, which is based on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari distinction between science, philosophy and art.[3] In the second part, I shall outline an epistemological framework for an explorative design inquiry. Here I shall focus on the epistemological qualities of the design artefact to generate knowledge rather than the design process, which is based on cognitive theories of art such as those of James Young and Martin Seel.[4] In the third part, I shall outline approaches for this form of inquiry, such as *design fiction*, *material thought experiments* or *staging situations*, based on three case studies. The questions design can ask in this context are questions about the “good life” which links design to 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 – the normative judgement, however, has to be done by the audience. The aim of this paper is to evaluate to which extent design can be used as a medium for inquiry, and particularly what kind of philosophical questions can be asked, what kind of knowledge it can generate, how the results differ from those of other modes of inquiry and how they might relate to each other.

Notes

[1] To which extent we can speak of an extended notion of design has been outlined by Bruno Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (With Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," *Networks of Design, Design History Society Conference in Falmouth, Cornwall* (2008): 1-13. Vilém Flusser, "About the Word *Design*," in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) furthermore points out that "design" is both a verb and a noun in the English language.

[2] Daniel Fallman, "The Interaction Design Research Triangle of Design Practice, Design Studies, and Design Exploration," *Design Issues* Vol. 24, No. 3, (2008): 4–18.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17, 22, 24, 117, 198.

[4] James O. Young, *Art and Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Martin Seel, "Kunst, Wahrheit, Welterschließung," in *Perspektiven der Kunstphilosophie: Texte und Diskussionen*, ed. Franz Koppe, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991).