Grey design: critical practices of design at the peripheries of the discipline

Moritz Greiner-Petter

Over the past two decades, critical practices in design were predominantly framed, discussed and imagined under the rubrics of a number of by now widely established labels, movements and modes of practice, the most common of which might be Critical Design and the later Speculative Design. Others include Design Fiction or Design for Debate, slightly less prevalent terms like Adversarial Design, or more recently Discursive Design, proposed as an umbrella term that in fact aims to incorporate all of these approaches. These separate notions each vary in their respective perspectives and leanings, emphases and strategies; but as hinted by Discursive Design, attempting to provide an overarching label, in their characteristics, methods and scopes of engagement as well as conceptual genealogies and references they appear to a large degree surprisingly similar. This raises the questions of how diverse the most prevalent and established conceptions of critical practices in design are; how far they may occlude the view for other forms of critical engagement; and how we could begin to widen the recognition and repertoires of description of more expanded critical practices in design.

Many of the mentioned frameworks by now have arguably – probably not intended by their proponents – become somewhat formulaic. They are exhibiting distinct and recognizable aesthetic means and dissemination strategies, a palette of certain domains of thematics they are able and appropriate to address, and have cultivated design processes and approaches to do so. With their popularity, approaches like Critical Design have to some degree also proved to be susceptible to be mined as a creative design method resource (e.g. Jakobsone 2017), in danger of becoming just one of many in the designer's toolkit or being degraded to a mere project style.

Lamentation over the formalization of these practices is not to dismiss in any way the influence that the establishment of these approaches into such widespread labels has had on the field of design. For instance, the proliferation of Critical Design through the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby as well as the highly visible cohort of students and colleagues they gathered at the Royal College of Arts was instrumental in refuelling and popularizing discussions of critical practices in design since the turn of the millennium. Their work must also be considered influential for subsequent approaches like Critical Making or for fostering a critical influx into adjacent disciplines like Human–Computer Interaction (e.g. Bardzell / Bardzell 2013). Critical Design and similar approaches have since proven, and still might be, productive in providing some of the necessary visibility, vocabularies, validation, and not least examples for practising design with the purpose of critique.

But still, these labels in their prevalence and discursive dominance can also hinder a wider exploration and recognition of alternative possibilities for forms of critical practices in design. For one thing, these prominent labels might occlude and exclude kinds of critical interventions and fields of critical practices that do not adhere to the stylistic or conceptual characteristics of these recognizable approaches. And similarly, they might not speak to a variety of practitioners that, while operating with like-minded intentions and kindred strategies, do not so readily commit to being related with and subsumed under these terms, precisely because of their associated traditions, established aesthetics and specific approaches to critique. Further contributing to this, Critical and Speculative Design in particular are contended fields that have themselves received a fair bit of justified criticism in recent years. Among the inherent problematics within these approaches, critics question their effectiveness in stimulating genuine and sustainable debate, as this might, for instance, require more prolonged and invested engagement with the respective contexts than the usual design project timeframes allow. More fundamentally, critics point out the often unconsidered privileged positionalities from which critique is uttered or futures are envisioned by many proponents of such approaches, calling into question the critical credibility of the field (see for instance Prado de O. Martins 2014; Prado de O. Martins / Vieira de Oliveira 2015).

To begin to open up these understandings, I want to briefly point out two notions that figure as shared characteristics within the prominent design frameworks I mentioned at the beginning. Both of these, in my view, might be limiting towards more expanded conceptions of how design can be employed and recognized as a critical practice. These notions are related as they similarly concern aspects of the form that critical design projects take and the role attributed to designing within them.

Firstly, the mentioned approaches share the intention to perform discursively, which is encapsulated by the term «Discursive Design» (Tharp / Tharp 2018) as an attempt to establish this very characteristic as their foremost commonality. The discursive aspiration means that the conceptual, aesthetic and communicative strategies employed in these approaches aim at stimulating debate and critical reflection through the design and (media) circulation of provocative, speculative or contemplative artefacts and scenarios. More often than not, these projects do not necessarily perform as «actual» design objects in use, for instance, but are disseminated by means of carefully crafted narratives and contextual framings through exhibitions, publications and other media formats. Such approaches consequently assume a particular notion of an audience and thus tend to configure critique

as a mode of reception, contemplation or consumption, if you will, from a distance.

Secondly, these approaches often employ and exploit the «language» of design as a deliberate strategy to aesthetically and narratively ground their critical artefacts and scenarios in the designed everyday lifeworlds of the audience. As nearly all aspects of contemporary social life are configured and permeated by design, the very means and manifestations of design are meant to serve as a vehicle for subversion or critical intervention. As such, to some degree, these kinds of projects need to be «phenotypical design», able to be recognized and *read* as design. However, this might be limiting in what kind of issues, thematics and contexts can be effectively addressed in that manner, as it primarily suggests a consideration for domains where design is most visible, familiar and readily recognizable for people, like the domestic sphere, consumer products and technologies, the workplace, or the urban environment.

Thus, I would argue, there is a need for expanding and diversifying understandings and imaginations of how design can facilitate other critical engagements and investigations into different fields, contexts and aesthetic forms than those that the common techniques and frameworks of critical design, as we have come to know it, focus on – and in ways that also openly question the boundaries of what it means to design or how critical design has to perform and look.

How then might we reconfigure understandings of critical design practices in that sense? Stephen Wright in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013) makes an intriguing proposal from the perspective of art practice, that could also be indicative and relevant for a discussion of design practices. Wright introduces the notion of «1:1 scale projects» (Wright 2013: 3–5), in the sense of what could be characterized as embedded artistic practices, indistinguishable from the real-world contexts they chose to operate in. They are not «scaled-down models» (Wright 2013: 3) typical of modernist notions of art production, but «full-scale practices» that are «not themselves representations of anything» (Wright 2013: 3). What would these 1:1 scale practices look like? «Well they don't look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don't look like art» (Wright 2013: 4). According to Wright, these practices operate in a certain redundant «double ontology» (Wright 2013: 22), being what they are while being at the same time artistic propositions of what they are; being indistinguishable from an existing practice (vocational, institutional, commercial, social or otherwise) in a certain context, but done with an entirely different self-understanding.
The point here is to escape «performative capture» within the «ontological landscape» of art «in order to gain traction somewhere else»

(Wright 2013: 22), meaning a practice that deliberately attempts to escape being framed and evaluated as art in order to open up new possibilities to gain use value in real-world contexts.

Taking cues from Wright's notions, how could we think of critical design practices as full-scale practices? How can we escape the performative capture of critical design *as* design, where the use of the language and modes of representation of design for critique ultimately could also be disregarded in its critical impact as *just* design? And what kind of contexts could critical practices engage with that lie beyond the domain of «professional» designing?

The PhD work of product designer and design researcher Johanna Kleinert might serve as an exemplary entry point here, at least to the last question concerning the extended contexts for critical engagements. From the methodological perspective of Design Research and Science and Technology Studies, in her work she looks at «living products» like industrially produced fruits and vegetables as designed artefacts, as «biofacts» (Kleinert 2018, 2020). Through her investigations, Kleinert shows how these objects are mainly shaped through an arrangement of aesthetic, economic or regulatory processes and considerations. The procedures of picking the produce, the automatic and software-based visual classification in sorting facilities, the regulation through industry standards and norms, or the hard to untangle correlations between supposed consumer preferences and the perceived constraints of producers respectively all co-constitute the multilayered conditions and dynamics that «design» the resulting products, which end up on display in the supermarket. These describe design processes that are devoid of individual figures that identify or could be identified as conscious «designers». Which might be one reason why these fields of complex and distributed design agency might often be neglected by traditional design perspectives and might appear hard to grapple with, or simply not as interesting and exciting for design practitioners to get seriously involved in. But it could be argued that these forms of opaque, anonymous and distributed design, to varying degrees, govern the shaping of the majority of our everyday material objects, structures and environments.

These areas of design activities and processes I came to think of as «grey design». Grey design comprises the manifold technical, legal, economic and social processes and structures that latently condition and shape the way things are designed. The term is partially borrowed from «grey literature», where it characterizes all forms of written documents of organizations like reports or government documents that circulate outside traditional publishing channels and often escape archival capture. Similarly, «grey» here denotes forms of design activity outside the «professional» realm of designing that often remain

obscured, as the contributing actors, structures and forces are hard to discern within the traditional categories of design. Grey design is where design becomes infrastructural and governmental, characterized by mundane, dull, outright «boring things», as Susan Leigh Star (1999: 377) described the study of infrastructure. Think building codes and safety regulations, technical standards and protocols, policy documents and business plans, manufacturing processes and logistics, scientific visualizations and climate modelling, weather forecasts and carbon markets, border controls and immigration offices. In a further, more productive notion, then, grey design can also be understood to denote domains where design increasingly mingles with other disciplinary environments and professions, in a grey area of practices that open up understandings of what the contexts and activities of designing could be.

Going back again to the example of «living products» introduced above, how might a critical engagement into such an area of grey design appear? As a primarily analytical and empirical study, Kleinert's research might not be seen as a «critical» practice in an interventionist, constructive or transformative – meaning designerly – sense (albeit the examination of a field commonly neglected by design is already a critical gesture). But it is easy to think further, how her exemplary investigation could expand into an even more active involvement that engages critically with questions of legal regulation of produce and their production processes, techniques of classification and quality control governing agricultural products, the practice, expertise and aesthetic judgements involved in picking fruit and vegetables, or the negotiations of expectations between consumers and producers, among many other possible issues within the complex. And similarly diverse, this could happen in a number of imaginable approaches, including more «canonical» critical design project genres that, for instance, might involve the conception of provocative and discourse-oriented artefacts that render visible the manifold factors and actors involved in the design of «living products», or speculative proposals of intervention in and extrapolations of these processes. However, and this is where I am pointing, a critical engagement could also happen in a more embedded or contextual fashion that operates within and on the same level of the very processes it tries to address and engage with. This could mean working with or even for producers or picking sites over prolonged periods of time, collaborating with biologists, rare crop growers or supermarket managers, engaging with software developers that design the systems and interfaces for automatic optical quality assessment in sorting facilities, or becoming heavily involved with regulators, policy makers, guideline documents and classification schemes that establish quality standards in the industry.

In a sense similar to what Wright describes in terms of «Usership», this would be a critical practice that partially takes on the logics of a field of investigation to the point where it might seem indistinguishable from the contexts and practices it is involved with, but which is guided by different intentions or aspirations that make a difference (the «double ontology»). Like the domain of grey design it engages with, as a practice of design it may be less spectacular, obvious or visible, to the point of being «barely» design – an unrecognizably different and dissolved form of designerly engagement not particularly typical for the categories or criteria under which design commonly is perceived.

To help further illustrate the directions I am hinting towards and to get a better understanding of some of the implications that these approaches might entail in practice, I turn to a brief discussion of two examples of design cases. I chose to point out two projects that were presented during «Critical by Design?», the conference that preceded this volume, as they were also quite influential in instigating the reflections laid out here.

Matt Ward, in his keynote speech[1] (2018), highlighted «The Social Mining Union», the degree project by Tearlach Byford-Flockhart, one of his former students at the Department of Design at Goldsmiths. In a form of organizational design, Byford-Flockhart aimed to rethink workers' unions under the conditions of contemporary neoliberal economies. By setting up a speculative trade union, he wanted to design new models of care, community and the support of labour rights that exploit the logics of multinational and neoliberal organizations of work. He immersed himself in the professional domain of metal scrapping by visiting scrapyards in South London. The designer joined the «scrappers» and started to trade locally «mined» scraps himself. He directed his earnings to a stockbroker account set up for the union to buy shares in Glencore Xstrata, a publicly listed multinational commodity trading and mining company. As an owner of shares, he started to get into communications with the company and also earned the right to take part in shareholder meetings. That led him to attend the 2014 annual general meeting of Glencore in Switzerland, where he took the opportunity of a Q&A session to address the economic, social and environmental impacts in the mining industry.

In a seemingly more typical fashion of Critical or Speculative Design, Byford-Flockhart also designed badges, uniforms, backpacks and business cards to give tangibility and credibility to his fictional union. After all, it is hard to ignore that the economics of circulation and reception of design projects often demand a certain visuality that photos of shareholder meetings alone might not be able to deliver.

1 See also Matt Ward's contribution in the epilogue of this volume, that is based on his keynote speech at the conference.

But the economic and organizational prototype he conceived and realized, which once adopted widely would see whole communities of scrappers unionize and contribute income towards buying shares in global corporations to be given a chance to voice their shared concerns to them directly, is arguably the more impactful and intriguing contribution of his project.

In his presentation at the conference, Carl DiSalvo (2018) talked about ways design can experiment with diverse publics and engage within broader civic contexts.[2] One of the projects he was involved in was concerned with how to advocate for alternative configurations of property and ownership in neighbourhoods threatened by gentrification. Specifically, he was working with housing activists and residents in a historically African-American community in Atlanta that was in danger of being destroyed by the developments around a new stadium. A group of residents advocated for a community land trust, a legal structure that separates land and homeownership to keep down the costs that usually result from increased taxes as part of gentrification processes. What was needed in this context more than any other design intervention, as DiSalvo pointed out, was «the design of the means to make arguments that will sway the decisions that need to happen amongst developers and city workers in order to allow community land trusts to exist» (DiSalvo 2018). In the project, the group leveraged strategies commonly used in real estate development and speculation that employ data analytics and modelling to evaluate and predict housing prices in neighbourhoods, for instance. But unlike real estate developers, they produced their own data tools and means of representation that would serve the communities' ends and agendas. Participants utilized simple mobile data collection tools and produced several alternative maps and models of the housing situations and economics in the community. Aesthetically these are strikingly similar to the kinds of materials you would expect from real estate presentations and municipal meeting slides. However, it is exactly this context-specific aesthetic that allowed the residents to effectively communicate and advocate to local policy makers their vision for their own neighbourhood. «You end up with very mundane images that make a profound point», as DiSalvo (2018) put it. Thus, the role of a critical design practice in this case is in the support of local communities and initiatives in developing appropriate, highly contextual and emancipatory tools and media of expression for their cause.

In both projects, the designers engaged with contexts that are not necessarily recognized as domains of professional designing per se, and fields where design is not addressed in an explicit form.

2 I highly recommend watching DiSalvo's talk, in which he raises crucial questions to which the discussion here is indebted (see DiSalvo 2018, available online).

In either case, an intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the respective contexts and the affected communities is essential to properly understand the specific conditions and to identify opportunities for appropriate and effective critical engagements.

Returning to my earlier remarks on the two notions that are characteristic of many common critical design projects, these examples might differ notably. Firstly, in regard to my points on the discursive aspirations, the notion of an audience might be configured differently. «The Social Mining Union» is a well-designed and thought-provoking socio-economic speculation that mainly aims at creating a wider debate about new forms of labour movements, much in the tradition of discursive design concepts. But as an activist *proof of concept*, its discursive impact and credibility is significantly elevated by actually pursuing and protoypically realizing the creation of the union. In the case of the community land trust, the purpose is in supporting local initiatives in a very specific socio-political struggle, where the discursive reach of the project might be focused on, and also be fully satisfied with, persuading the responsible authorities. The main audience, if you will, is the local stakeholders and conflicting parties within the context.

Secondly, the role of the «design object» or the question of what is actually designed might differ as well. The artefacts that Byford-Flockhart created as an identity for his union surely help to give tangible shape to his speculation. But they seem more collateral to the organizational design and economic experiment he conceived as the foremost design proposal. In DiSalvo's case, the artefacts, the documents, mappings and presentations produced by the community are not critical in themselves; more important are the practices that these context-specific media designs can be employed to support.

The notion of expanded critical practices outlined here thus tends to question various boundaries of design as an activity and a discipline. When designers start to engage critically with hitherto foreign fields of practice, with opaque and mundane processes and infrastructures of grey design, different conceptual and aesthetic strategies are called for. In the sense of full-scale practices, this might mean not necessarily «designing» in the common sense of conceiving products or services, but finding ways of expression that take on forms and logics of the contexts they operate in, to the point where they become indistinguishable from the very practices encountered there. As such, these approaches might also require a reframing of prevalent professional habits, identities and disciplinary currencies within design. This applies, for instance, to the notion of *the project* as a disciplinary-ingrained unit of production and dissemination and its frequently short-lived temporal scopes. A certain designerly ego and narcissism might also be called into question, as the interventions implied here

might be more subtle and unspectacular, might demand continuous and often tedious engagement, and might not predominantly yield design outcomes that are easily conveyed, circulated or exhibited as designed artefacts or scenarios. An expanded understanding of critical design practice thus also affords another set of sensibilities and competences that many designers might not necessarily be equipped with by their training. As such, the ambition to operate in fields of grey design also has implications for design education. It poses questions of what kind of competences designers would need in order to engage meaningfully with different and foreign contexts; what responsible understandings of their own practice would need to be cultivated; or what kind of «materials» – social, institutional, regulatory, rhetorical, technical or otherwise – designers are able to recognize as «design resources» to be engaged with.

Finally, the notion of grey design is not invoked here to add yet another label to the list. But it might serve as a helpful conceptual framing to steer sensibilities and attention to domains of potential critical design activity that are hard to capture and address by the means and logics of approaches we have come to understand and acknowledge as «critical design». The notion of grey design thus opens up manifold areas of similarly diverse and productive fields for critical engagement by designers. At the same time, though, it must be cautioned that advocating for an expansion of design into other non-traditional and neglected disciplinary contexts, social systems and practices is not without its own problematic ambivalences. In recent decades, design as a practice and paradigm has already been entering into, or has conquered, an expanding range of specialized fields. Paula Antonelli summarizes the situation in a sympathetic tone: «Design is not what it used to be. In schools and in studios, in corporations and in political institutions, designers are using their skills to tackle issues that were previously out of their bounds» (Antonelli 2012: 6). The conceptual and practical expansion of design as an integrative and generalized problem-solving activity made it into a compatible technique for addressing ever wider ranges of social, political or ecological issues that have thus been reframed as, and often reduced to, fundamentally design problems. «This *trans*-disciplinary ethos allows design proponents to claim to offer *the* integrative solution to any number of complex problems, including regional economic development, environmental sustainability, urban resilience, and so forth» (Grove et al. 2019: 2, emphasis in original). Rendering complex socio-political conflict situations as a matter of design can harmfully preclude and disenfranchise more socially and politically appropriate negotiation processes and initiatives. In this light, critical design practices that attempt to dissolve into expanded social and political domains, as

proposed throughout this chapter, must simultaneously consider and reflect even more critically and carefully on the ways design as an episteme is already wielding power in all its opaque, infrastructural and grey forms. And perhaps it is exactly this suspicious greyness of contemporary design that such practices might be asked and most suited to question, expose and subvert.

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