

The vitality of  
the negative:

critical design

between social  
philosophy and

conceptual art

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1 This is the thesis of the book *Strange Design: From Objects to Behaviors* (Dautrey / Quinz [2014] 2016). The reason for placing these four moments in succession was not to trace a comprehensive history but rather to establish a link among various episodes by emphasizing a common posture, in the same way that a seismographic record signals the resurgence of a phenomenon.

## I

It is possible to identify a genealogy of the critical paradigm in design, a sequence that begins with the Italian Radical Design of the 1960s, continues with the Dutch Conceptual Design of the 1990s and the Critical Design promoted by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in the UK in the 2000s, and goes on into

a multitude of current practices, engaged as well as experimental.<sup>1</sup>

In order to get a clear sense of this attitude that traces its contrasting paths within the history of design, it is crucial to consider the individual episodes of its genealogy from the broader perspective of intellectual history. By defining themselves as *critical*, all of the different design strategies underpinning these various episodes adopt an explicit theoretical orientation that is at once *positional* and *oppositional* within a specific context, engaged with social, political, but also philosophical tensions.

Thus, the debate surrounding *function*, which is the primary arena in which critical design intervenes and expresses its opposition, must be read in the broader context of a debate regarding *functionalism*, understood as the *logic* and *morality* on which the system of production and consumption is based in the socioeconomic context of Western capitalism.

In the same way, it is important that we juxtapose the emergence of the critical paradigm in design and its conceptual framework with the *critical turn* that led to the emergence of the conceptual paradigm in the history of art. Just as conceptual artworks, to borrow Joseph Kosuth's formulation, «express definitions of art» (Kosuth [1969] 1991: 21), so the projects of critical design embody singular definitions of design or, more precisely, *anti-definitions*, which draw their force from their opposition to a traditional model of design that seeks the broadest possible appeal, and their tactics from the systematic negation of the (formal but above all functional) strategies on which that model is based.

Moreover, by introducing the historical density of the specific theoretical context in which these projects identify themselves as critical, we also become able to assess their impact and, by that same token, to delineate a (history of the) *critique of critical design*.

## II

Reconstructing the theoretical context of these critical positions is no easy matter for design historians, since it means taking into

account a wide range of sources that lie outside the boundaries of their field.

For example, mapping out the positions of the Radical constellation in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, between the economic boom and the socio-politically tumultuous Years of Lead, presents a formidable challenge. Rarely has theoretical ferment produced such density and complexity, with manifestos, essays, magazines, and productive interdisciplinary collaborations. So much so that, in some cases, theoretical production gradually invaded the field of the design project itself, replacing the object.

While the ground has already been laid for a reading of the ties between certain theories of radical architecture and *operaista* political thought in the context of Italian neo- or post-Marxism (see for example Aureli 2008), other chains of influence, other stratifications, filiations, and ramifications still remain to be explored.

I will confine myself here to highlighting one of the many threads that go to make up this complex web; it involves borrowing the analytical perspective developed by the social philosophy of the period, interwoven with the constellation of theories that guide political action. This perspective is primarily drawn upon for a definition of art, which the Radicals then extend to architecture and design, where the *critical* dimension expresses itself as *negation* – a position, I suggest, which then goes on to constitute a fundamental theoretical framework for the critical design strategies developed in the following decades.

From the perspective of the social philosophy of the 1960s, the attack on modernist idealism, which is the first major battle undertaken by the Italian Radicals, must be seen in conjunction with the diagnosis of the transformation «of an architectural civilization [*civiltà architettonica*] into a commercial civilization [*civiltà merceologica*]» (Branzi 2014: 18) – a view that regards the progressive industrialization of systems of production and the mass distribution of goods as converging in a political project of domination. Within the general framework posited by Marxist materialism, the analysis developed by the various representatives of the Frankfurt School – in particular Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, whose translated texts were widely influential in Italy at the time (see Clemente 2001; Galli 1973) – supplies the basic theoretical notions and perspectives, linking the development of the technical apparatus of production and distribution to a general transformation of the social sphere. The evolution of industrial culture can no longer be isolated from its social and political effects. The mechanization and rationalization of the processes of production, the *serialization* of the products themselves, and the *standardization* of their forms have their counterpart in a similar serialization and standardization of values and behaviors.

The imperative of production and consumption tends to fill the entire space of individual and collective life as a now-dominant, even totalitarian system, dictating not only occupations but also needs and aspirations.

The notion of function, which is central to our reflection on the role of design, must therefore be read from this systemic perspective. It assumes the role of the cornerstone of a new form of rationality that Horkheimer defines as *instrumental reason* (see Horkheimer 1947; Jay 2016). Combining the objectivity of science with the operational empiricism of technology, this rationality is not organized around the territory of the real but on the contrary *organizes it*.

In this process of advancing rationalization, in which «technological reasoning, which tends «to identify things and their functions»» (Marcuse [1964] 2002: 90; here Marcuse cites Gerr 1942: 156), spreads to all levels, from the design of objects to the organization of society and the shaping of the rhythms of work and everyday life, that reasoning loses its purely circumstantial dimension, becoming instead an abstract mechanism that dictates the conversion of qualities into quantities, objects into instruments, and behaviors into operations: «technological rationality has become political rationality» (Marcuse [1964] 2002: xlvii).

With its aim of transforming society into a highly regulated, stable, and linear mechanism, the system tends to implement practices that absorb all contradiction. The free play of philosophical speculation and artistic imagination is reduced to the material goals of satisfying material needs. The controlled regulation of the spaces of conditional freedom (freedom of action, thought, speech, and conscience, as well as creativity) ensures the maintenance of a peaceful status quo, a standardized form of social cohesion. By promoting forms of material and intellectual comfort and apparent satisfaction, the system is able to eliminate any thought of social liberation. In this way, it causes the subject to «interiorize ... coercion» (Horkheimer [1968] 2002: 56, *passim*), leading it to view functionalist rationality as the morality of a positive and necessary order, that of «modern well-being,» which «promote[s] the art of life» and satisfies the urge «to live ..., to live well, ... to live better» (Marcuse [1964] 2002: 232; here Marcuse cites Whitehead 1959: 5). The result is the establishment of a condition that Marcuse, in a variation on Hegel and Marx, calls the «happy consciousness,» which

reflects the belief that the real is the rational, and that the established system, in spite of everything, delivers the goods. The people are led to find in the productive apparatus the effective agent of thought and action to which their personal thought and action can and must be surrendered. And in this

2 See Adorno / Horkheimer ([1947] 2002), particularly the chapter on the *Kulturindustrie* («The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception»: 94–136).

transfer, the apparatus also assumes the role of a moral agent. Conscience is absorbed by reification, by the general necessity of things. (Marcuse [1964] 2002: 82)

In a famous passage of *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947), Adorno and Horkheimer had already described the fate of art under advanced capitalism. When the work is replaced by the product or service, when meaning is supplanted by function and truth by necessity, art loses its speculative power and becomes absorbed by industrial logic; it becomes the *culture industry*.<sup>2</sup> An idealist vision of art survives in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis but also in Marcuse's, albeit filtered through dialectical materialism and Nietzsche, a vision in which critical tension is not just art's mission but its nature. Art is alienated *by nature* because it is rooted in a position of antagonism, of consubstantial alterity, not just with respect to the social sphere but also vis-à-vis the reality principle it establishes. Moreover, when faced with the threat of its own destruction by the positive logic of industry, it is forced to radicalize its negative impulse, negating the system's forms to negate its values.

In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse suggests a number of different approaches, which are precisely those that will be adopted by critical design, beginning with the Italian Radicals. One involves responding to the passivity demanded by functionalist rationality with critical detachment, on the model of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Another involves using systematic strategies of ambiguity to thwart that rationality's mechanisms.

This was the approach already taken by the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century and systematized by Dada and Surrealism, that of a *revolution internal to language*. In poetry it proceeded by deviating from syntactical norms and the binary logic of the bond between signifier and signified in images and objects by freeing signs from their functional economy in order to restore their symbolic power, transforming them into «objects with a symbolic function» (Giacometti), «objects of affection» (Man Ray), or «poem objects» (Breton). As Marcuse points out, this approach leads to a situation where political revolt is expressed as «poetic subversion.» Not only does art become critique, but (political) critique occurs through artistic action. Seen from this theoretical perspective, critical practices appear as guerilla operations which attack the instrumental function of objects in order to strike at the oppressive normativity of the project of functionalist rationality itself. Thus, for the Italian Radicals, the choice of design seems to be motivated by a negative impulse. They confront the luminous triumph of positivism with the

- 3 «The Vitality of the Negative» is the programmatic title of an exhibition of the time (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1970, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva).

giddy or uncanny resonance of the negative. Rather than viewing design as a specific and self-contained field, they regard it as a middle path between architecture and art.

From architecture, it inherits the existence of a tangible social impact, while condemning architecture's inevitable surrender to the system of power. From art, it borrows its methods (ranging from the montage of heterogeneous elements to the ready-made, from the strategies of ambiguity and Surrealist analogy to Situationist *détournement* or hijacking). Unlike architecture and art, however, design speaks the same language as technology and industry, which enables it to act against the system *from within* by manipulating the very same objects and images that allow the system to condition behaviors and legitimate its values. As proclaimed by Superstudio and Archizoom in the manifesto *Superarchitettura* (*Super-Architecture*, 1966), the strategy of radical ambiguity «accepts the logic of production and consumption and works for its demystification» (Archizoom / Superstudio [1966] 2016: 4). The radical object functions as «a «Trojan horse»» (Branzi 1984: 54), which insinuates itself into the domestic sphere, the protected domain of the bourgeoisie, and exploits its forms and rituals in order to overturn its values. Design as a means of infiltrating the fabric of everyday life – *against design: counter-design* (see Sottsass [1972] 2002: 225–226).

The strategies adopted by the radical constellation are varied and deserve to be analyzed in their diversity. While they expand the project of design beyond the object itself to a wide range of different supports – installation-based, audiovisual, narrative, or performative – they all reflect the same *vitality of the negative*.<sup>3</sup>

This choice of the negative is vehemently criticized by architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, who condemns what he views as the project's slide into utopianism. For Tafuri, by abdicating design's true mission, its legitimate place at the helm of the cycles of production, and instead proposing models of counter-design which are speculative, dysfunctional, theoretical, and utopian, the radical avant-garde assigns «a ... persuasive rather than operative role» to design (Tafuri [1969] 1998: 30), in which the «desacralization of values» becomes «the new, unique value» (Tafuri [1973] 1976: 55). For Tafuri, the critical dimension can only be judged in light of its «operativity,» its capacity to instigate an actual transformation. Reaffirming fears already expressed by Marcuse, Tafuri insists that the capitalist system always succeeds in metabolizing the most advanced artistic positions, neutralizing their subversive charge. Be that as it may, the radical constellation establishes the negative and dysfunctional model derived from the dialectic of 1960s social philosophy as the matrix and model for

4 See also the notion of «adversarial design» in DiSalvo (2015).

the critical design and counter-design of the following decades, which defines itself as a «form of social research to integrate aesthetic experience with everyday life through «conceptual products»» (Dunne 1999: 20).<sup>4</sup>

### III

As for Marcuse, so for Tafuri, analysis is incapable of stepping beyond the horizon of the modern, and critique is essentially *consciousness of the crisis*. In *Le système des objets* (*The System of Objects*, 1968), Jean Baudrillard shifts the focus of social critique. While it is true that in advanced industrial society the logic of the system of objects is based on a functional rationality that is becoming increasingly abstract, for Baudrillard this abstraction shows that the system of objects is now defined as a *system of signs*. The advent of consumer society replaces the material economy of needs and satisfactions with an immaterial economy of signification. The values defined by the economy of the sign are no longer tied to use. Nor are they linked to the economic logic of exchange value, based on the equivalence of goods and products. Rather, they are tied to a system of symbolic exchange based on the ambiguity and reversibility of symbols, a differential logic that permeates the entire sphere, from objects to behaviors. In this transition from industrial to consumer society, function is replaced by *functionality*, understood as the confluence of the object's primary, instrumental functions and its secondary, symbolic ones.

Compared to the analytical models of the Frankfurt School, Baudrillard shifts not only the perspective but also the focus. Faced with the triumph of determinism and functionalist positivism, he seeks to concentrate on its effects rather than its causes, on the social transformations associated with the technical evolution: «how objects are experienced, what needs other than functional ones they answer, what mental structures are interwoven with – and contradict – their functional structures» (Baudrillard [1968] 1996: 4).

The terrain of analysis now becomes the private home and in particular the «modern house,» the center of the bourgeois world of the postwar economic boom and design's privileged field of application, where the organization of furniture and furnishings reflects the organization of social structures and that of the political economy of signs, which gives expression to the *morality of functionality*.

After establishing the theoretical framework and describing the new incarnations of functionalism, Baudrillard turns his attention to certain categories of objects which elude that framework, strange

5 The term «parafunctionality» is later adopted by Dunne (1999: 42).

and useless objects that represent «functional aberrations,» dys- or «parafunctional» objects such as gadgets or *objets trouvés* (Baudrillard [1968] 1996: 113).<sup>5</sup> But he focuses

on other objects as well – eccentric, primitive, baroque, folkloric, exotic: marginal objects that represent survivals of an anachronistic symbolic or mythological order and fulfill functions of witness, escapism, symbolic intercession, the evocation of faraway places, and poetic suggestion in the private sphere, and closely resemble certain forms adopted by critical design, from the Italian Radicals to the Dutch Conceptual Design of the 1990s and beyond. In their redundancy, elusive complexity, and anachronism, these objects upset the balance between functionality and signification, positive and negative.

Baudrillard's analysis gives new life to Umberto Eco's syllogism, dear to the Radicals, which showed how reducing the object's primary, instrumental function to a minimum or intentionally suppressing it makes room for expanding its secondary, symbolic ones. At the same time, it emphasizes the *surrealist paradigm*, critical design's adoption of the strategies of ambiguity employed by the artistic avant-gardes, as already noted by Tafuri. Like the surrealist *objets trouvés*, the objects of critical design are not *objectively* but *subjectively functional*. In revolt against «the new reality principle of the object» (Baudrillard [1972] 1981: 194), they oppose «the rational calculus, which «liberates» the object in its function,» and champion an approach «which liberates the object *from* its function, returning it to free associations from which will re-emerge not the symbolic (in which the respective crystallization of subject and object does not take place), but subjectivity itself, «liberated» in the phantasm» (Baudrillard [1972] 1981: 194).

But this strategy, which seeks, by transgressing functional normativity, to reintroduce individuality (that of the objects but also that of the subjects) in the face of massification and standardization, seems unrealistic to Baudrillard, since on closer examination it turns out to be based on the same process that guides functionalist determinism: the *reductio ad absurdum*. If functionalism can seem surreal with its abstract logic of an «extension of the functional (and semantic) calculus to the whole field of everydayness» (Baudrillard [1972] 1981: 193), surrealism, by reducing the object to its opposite pole, dys- or parafunctionality, serves as a negative confirmation of functionality as the object's moral law.

6 «È importante pensare a uno sviluppo per negativo del progetto, dove l'ipotesi sia quella di togliere anziché accumulare, quella di essere effimero invece di incrostare, di non contribuire alla saturazione costruttiva e alla distruzione per eccesso» («It is important to think about taking a negative approach to the project, in which the premise is to remove instead of accumulate, to be ephemeral rather than enduring, to avoid contributing to constructive saturation and destruction through excess») (Mendini [1979] 2004: 66).

#### IV

In the late 1970s, at the threshold of post-modernism, sociologists began to ponder the phenomenon of kitsch, which marks the appropriation by the masses of the forms and objects of art and design that were previously reserved for the elites, from decorative sculpture to handcrafted furnishings to replicas of streamlined furniture in the Bauhaus style: «kitsch is art applied and adapted

to the life of «everyone,» to «everyday» life» (Mendini [1979] 2004: 68).

Alessandro Mendini borrows the elements of this sociological analysis to propose a reformulation of the negative strategy of critical design. Observing that «all design methods are essentially marking time» (Mendini [1979] 2004: 67) – not just functionalism but the surrealist and radical strategies of ambiguity as well, which are also absorbed by the logic of consumption – Mendini advocates «taking a negative approach to the project» («uno sviluppo per negativo del progetto»)<sup>6</sup> Rather than producing deviations in a standardized landscape through the systematic use of strangeness or dysfunction, he suggests expanding the idea of the mimetic and subliminal infiltration of the bourgeois domestic sphere – of the object as Trojan horse. Faced with the banalization of design, he advocates responding with *banal design*, which uses the same forms as consumer culture. Like a Duchamp readymade, a Warhol Brillo Box, or Pierre Ménard's Don Quixote in Borges' fiction, the critical object is indistinguishable from the object criticized. The *Poltrona Proust* (*Proust Armchair*, 1978) is as kitschy as kitsch, if not more so. But while the form is identical, the function is no longer the same. Concealed behind the instrumental function is the critical one, which reverses the perspective from which the object is interpreted from positive to negative. In this procedure of reversal, which Mendini does not hesitate to call «amoral,» design moves closer to the protocols of conceptual art's «transfiguration of the commonplace» (see Danto 1981). The banal object no longer attempts to conceal its banality by pretending to be noble. On the contrary, it fully assumes the regressive stigma of that banality and thus becomes a tool of consciousness and social critique. In a nutshell, «we practice hyperrealism on the banal, that is to say, we make it conscious» (Mendini [1980] 2004: 267).

The awareness of the impossibility of an aesthetic hypothesis that would extend to the masses leads to the formulation of the opposite hypothesis, the anti-aesthetic one. Banal design and stylistic amorality may thus be regarded as a revolutionary

idea. Indeed, they give rise to a radical reversal of the prevailing tendency in design projects, because they represent the non-consenting, courageous, and contradictory acceptance of the concrete, limited condition of reality, in which every thing, act, or project involves a finite and determinate constraint and is the banal echo of a transcendent which is inoperative and inaccessible. (Mendini [1979] 2004: 69)

## V

In *Les usages sociaux de l'art* (*The Social Uses of Art*, 1999), sociologist Henri-Pierre Jeudy observes a banalization of the «surrealist method» favored by critical design. While British Critical Design, which developed in the 2000s under the impetus of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, turned its back on industry and production and took refuge in the protected domains of the academic and museum worlds, the strategies of ambiguity and dysfunction were picked up by marketing as a means for differentiating products in a fully saturated commercial space.

Jeudy cites the example of Philippe Starck, who elaborates a design approach that incorporates aspects of critical design into highly successful commercial objects. A detailed knowledge of the codes of communication, of the sociocultural stereotypes that guide the interpretation of the signs inscribed in these objects, enables designers to target their deviations with surgical precision. According to Jeudy, in Starck's method the perfectly calibrated proportion of strangeness and dysfunction, the deliberate employment of the useless within a highly structured utilitarian framework, and the irreverent exultation at transgressing functional morality no longer respond to a critical project but rather to a *demagogic* one.

In his analysis of one of Starck's earliest projects, *Prototype 1* (1967), a chair with a missing leg, Jeudy explains how the mere presence of an object like this in a domestic space not only *naturalizes* but *banalizes* its deviant form:

[W]hen the chair's own essence transcends its function by denying it, the chair itself becomes more banal than it was when it had its missing leg. This game is endless; it could be regarded as trivial if it did not reveal the extent to which the missing aspects or elements in no way compromise the object's function. This is precisely the paradox: the useful and the useless, the strange and the banal can be made so equivalent that the world of objects always seems to triumph over the dysfunctions that challenge it. (Jeudy 1999: 59)

The banality can no longer be reduced to the indistinguishability entailed by the seriality of production, by the principle of repetition. Rather, as Marcuse and Baudrillard had explained, it is the very *nature* of the system of objects. Hence, as Mendini had suggested, the only possible way to generate difference is to heighten that banality, which produces a breach in the system *from within*. The formula of the (no longer *formal* but *functional*) deviation developed by Starck in the 1980s is no longer *amoral* or *immoral*, as in the radical or post-modern strategies, but rather, as Jeudy writes, «moralistic» (Jeudy 1999: 67). What Starck terms «correctness [*justesse*]» refers to the exact proportion of ambiguity, of a never excessive eccentricity which indicates the precise point of equilibrium between individual expressive freedom and the constraints of the system, between *détournement* and reaffirmation. The ambiguity is no longer the means for provoking friction, for causing a split within the normative realm of the economy of signs that would make it possible to step outside it, but rather a rhetorical form of empathy, of willing cooptation, which reaffirms that economy's absolute power.

In the same way, the use of dysfunction is no longer the index of a critical position that distances itself from the system but the sign of an «irony that can be shared in by everyone» (Jeudy 1999: 75), thus ensuring the *ecumenical character of difference*, which replaces the functional rationality of the industrial age and its standardization of forms in the hierarchy of values. In this sense, the principle of correctness (*justesse*) promoted by Starck goes far beyond the framework of formal strategies to evoke the eminently political idea of a social *justice* that legitimates not just the object or design project but design itself more generally, as a practice: «the social vocation is the new utilitarian vocation» (Jeudy 1999: 55). Function is no longer the morality of the object; rather, *morality becomes the function of the object*.

Jeudy cites Starck's own discussion of a vase he designed for Venini:

Of course, the functions are always the same, and the least one can demand is that the object fulfill its function. Invention lies in discovering a new way of looking at things and designing an object that conveys that new way of looking. So what was a vase? It was morbid to accept that it was a coffin for dead or dying flowers. ... So I designed a vase like a shroud, a horizontal vase, a glass coffin. This as an example which shows that there is no fatality of function. (Philippe Starck, as quoted in Jeudy 1999: 72)

«Meaning,» counters Jeudy, «is never given once and for all; it is constantly diffracted in its effects» (Jeudy 1999: 73).

The meaning of the parable of critical design resides in this logic of diffraction, this play of tensions which opposes it to the system of production and consumption: the effort to show, not that the object is reducible to its function, but, on the contrary, that it is never *purely functional*. While there may not be a fatality of function, there is nevertheless a fatality of signification.

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