Social

Critical ?

World
Accidence   by   Critical Object   ?   by   ?
               by   Social   Discourses   by
Critical   Critical   by
Critical Design   by   ?
Critical   Critical Design   by   ?
Epistemic   by   ?   Critical Design   by   ?
                           World   by   ?
                                               ?
                                                             by

Genealogies

                                               Understanding

                                                             Human
                                                             Foucault   ?
                                               ?   Accidence   by   ?
                                               ?   World   by   ?

Critical Design   Critical   ?   ?
Politics

                           Human   Epistemic
               by   by
               by   Discourses
                                                             by   ?
               by   Critical   Critical   Design Politics ?
Critical Object by   Ontological   ?   by   Human
                                              ?   World
               by   ?   Human
Foucault   by   Critical Design
Accidence   Accidence   ?
               by   ?   Critical   World
                           Critical   by   ?
                                                             by   Human   ?
Human   Critical   ?   Human
                                                             by   Epistemic
                           Critical Design   by

                                                             by   World

Critical Design
Epistemic   by   Critical   ?
                           Politics
               by   Critical Design   by
                           Critical
Negative   by   Critical   Critical   ?
                           Critical Design   Critical Design by   ?
                                              ?   World   by
Foucault   by   ?
Critical   Accidence   Politics   ?
                           Desubjugation
               by   by
               by   World   ?   by

Critical Design by Ontological ?

Epistemic by Disobedience ?

Undesign ?
Human by Critical ?
by Critical
Critical by Disobedience ?
by World Critical Design
by ? Critical Critical Design ?
Critical by
Social ? Critical Reflection
by
by
Politics
Ontological by
Politics
Politics Critical Object by
Foucault ?

Critical Critical Human ?
?
by Foucault by by Critical Design ?
Foucault
Social by
Foucault Social by Human
by ?
by ? Politics
Mutual Becoming ? Epistemic by Desubjugation ?
Foucault Human and World Politics ?
by
Critical by ? Social Human ?
Critical by ?
by
Epistemic Building ?
Understanding ?
by Human ?
? Social Critical Design ?

Social ?
Critical by Critical Design
Critical ?
by Critical Critical
by Critical Design Discourses Accidence ?
? Critical
? by Critical
Critical Design by ?

Critical Design ? Human Ambiguity
Ontological by
by Speculative by

What is a critical object?

Design as

«desubjugation» (after Foucault)

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It was a lasting achievement of Michel Foucault to ascribe power and control not only to political rulers, but to institutions, their discourses and finally to knowledge itself. Every aspect of our existence is subject to rule and normalization, even through the use of objects. We could therefore apply Foucault's insights to design and posit that artifacts ranging from basic objects of everyday use to the latest technological gadget represent the materialized knowledge of a society. They discipline the user or consumer in their correct handling and the proper use of objects in society. To design, therefore, is a technique of governance. Design is a powerful means for people to impact the world. But design then also forces us into certain ways of being in the world.

This is the background to understand Foucault's concept of criticism. To critique cannot merely mean to design objects by innovative methods and make them more useful and effective. This would result in replacing an established discourse of power and control with a new and even more potent one. Objects would still govern us. We would still follow their operating manuals to make them function. To require and use objects in this mode degrades us into passive consumers.

According to Foucault, there is no superior or more truthful knowledge that would finally help us to break out of the vicious cycle of being dominated through improved designs. Accordingly, to critique specifically does not mean to refute old or established objects and methods to change them according to new insights.

Critique therefore has to strive to subvert the very essence of governing, «as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing,» as Foucault has put it (2007a: 44). Critique is a «way of thinking» that succeeds as «the art of not being governed quite so much» (Foucault 2007a: 45). At issue is an effort to no longer accept the power of objects and the knowledge that works its power through them without criticism. What is called for is resistance. As Foucault has determined: «Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth» (Foucault 2007a: 47).

Turning to design, the question then arises: Can the practice of designing effect a desubjugation as defined by Foucault? Could there be a design that would not govern users, but emancipate them? Could objects in and of themselves therefore effectuate criticism? This approach would be new, as cultural discourses have traditionally clung to the idea that works of art are critical by definition: That the arts produce their works for the very purpose of offering criticism – criticism being the purpose of their existence. We object to this convention and maintain that design is still a kind of commodity that has

1   «Critical Design,» Wikipedia, https://en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_design.

to be subject to criticism out of principle. A range of criticisms can apply, including: critiques of media and technologies and critiques of consumerism and capitalism. To sharpen the point: only artworks are tools of criticism – commodities can never have that quality. But does this idea really hold true today?

Critical design in the context of definitions of criticism

Today, a new, international movement in critical design is looking for answers to this question, thereby stirring up the teaching of design in academia. This school of thought goes head-to-head with established design theory, questioning the basic premises of the discipline: to be relevant, design theory would have to define concepts of criticism that could serve as a basis for the design of objects that can be tools of criticism. This turns out to be a topic of wide concern. Even Wikipedia is offering a perspective in its entry on «critical design,» starting with the assessment: «Critical design takes a critical theory based approach to design.»[1] But why does the actual practice of designing need a theoretical foundation at all?

I would like to show that the critical properties of critical design ultimately come down to critiquing the theoretical foundations and the methodological toolkit of the discipline. At the same time, calls for a critical theory to ground critical design tend to provoke references to the «critical theory» as defined by the Frankfurt School. But does that framework really provide an answer to our question? Further inquiry seems to be in order here, too.

One argument for this is provided by the two most prominent exponents of critical design, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. They explicitly reject hitching critical design closely to the philosophy of the Frankfurt School: «When people encounter the term *critical design* for the first time, they often assume it has something to do with critical theory and the Frankfurt School or just plain criticism. But it is neither» (Dunne / Raby 2013: 35). Dunne and Raby stake out a much wider framework for critical design by simply stating: «All good design is critical» (Dunne / Raby 2013: 35). We therefore need to identify qualities of objects that go far beyond the ideas of the current movement in critical design. According to Dunne and Raby, critical design could well have occurred in earlier times. They conclude that critical design «is critical thought translated into materiality» (Dunne / Raby 2013: 35).

But does critical theory even provide the ideas to think in such a fashion? As I would like to show, the Frankfurt School refutes the concept that material things have the capacity to serve as media for

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critical thinking. We therefore have to tackle a twofold misunderstanding. On the one hand, it is unfair to presume that critical design is a product of the theories developed by the Frankfurt School. Secondly, one cannot blithely assume that critical theory can conveniently serve to create innovative methods of design. On the contrary, as a basis for further inquiry we have to establish who can legitimately offer criticism of anyone else.

But it gets even more complicated: Critical design has itself already become the target of criticism, presumably resulting from misconceptions of what constitutes a critique. Those practitioners and theorists critical of the new movement do not necessarily share common ground and present arguments that are too diverse for a concise overview. But they share a common thrust by charging critical design with overly focusing on cynical and dystopian scenarios prioritizing fears and worries plaguing the rich Western world. Furthermore, these critics hold that critical design indulges in the production of art-like projects that mostly turn out to be politically irrelevant gadgets and gimmicks, while lacking any perspective on realistic planning and design. Critical design has thereby supposedly betrayed the original goal of improving the world as it exists by instead indulging in egotistical navel-gazing. In the end, according to critics, critical design has already become incapable of making any real difference.[2] These voices push for recharging design theory with utopian concepts. They want at long last to realign intellectual emancipation and political activism as a foundation for work in design. These utopian concepts are supposedly readily available as a legacy of the ideas proposed during 1968, critical theory being the most important contribution to that revolutionary period.

But does this critique concede any new or different ideas to critical design? Critics revert once again to traditional concepts of design that in ever pragmatic fashion should be focused on problem solving and making the world a better place with new things and technologies. In this sense, «criticism» would amount to nothing more than the introduction of a few feedback loops to achieve improved results for all stakeholders by additional participation and discussion, as well as a more comprehensive mediation of the totality of divergent interests at play. But this is exactly the approach that critical design is opposed to: a prioritization of solutions is seen as affirmative and insufficiently critical. The dystopian and the grotesque, and even the bizarre, monstrous and ambivalent are at the core of critical design. Ignoring the function of these qualities can only result in a failure to understand the fundamental shift from a design that solves problems

to a design that generates problems. That shift is pivotal to this new attitude towards the field.

As I endeavor to show, such an effort can be explained in a much more vivid way by applying the concept of criticism proposed by Michel Foucault rather than that of the Frankfurt School. Then critical design can become a critique of the epistemological certainties of knowledge – meaning as a practice and not as theory. That said, I would first like to explain the concept of criticism developed by the critical theory and how the concept would apply to design.

There are quite a number of parallels between Foucault and Adorno, to pick one name from the Frankfurt School. Both would likely have agreed that criticism has to be something different from the definitions proposed by the critics of critical design mentioned above. A truly critical attitude is by no means so innocuous and naive that it could easily be converted into the pragmatic rationality of visionary design as a practice.

Critical theory as criticism of design

Published in a revised edition in 1947, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is considered a core work of the Frankfurt School. Authors Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer identify a technocratic rationality as the key driver of the self-destructive processes that now threaten the very existence of mankind and nature. The same intellectual approach is at the heart of a design education overly focused on practical solutions. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment always reverts to mythology as its opposite and thereby turns into political and social oppression. Adorno has applied this dialectic explanation to design practice in his essay «Functionalism Today» (2005), where he shows how a utilitarian rationalism in planning and building has resulted in a new barbarism, a process that became increasingly evident in the icy inhumanity of postwar architecture. Adorno and Horkheimer point to the idealized objectivism inherent in positivist philosophy and absolutist claims of truth according to an ideology of knowledge as the main drivers for this thrust to optimize utility and efficiency. A critique of ideology therefore cannot be reduced to developing a counter-ideology to correct the errors of their precursor and again claim superior knowledge. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* knowledge itself becomes the problem.

One should not forget that Adorno and Horkheimer came out publicly against the rebellious movement of 1968. Even as young intellectuals claimed them as father figures, the elders of the Frankfurt School refused to show solidarity with the movement (Rath 2018). Adorno and Horkheimer saw the students and their newly fashioned

counterculture merely as acolytes of yet another lie of the cultural industry. As the protesters celebrated alternative or even critical consumer products, Adorno and Horkheimer always maintained that these items were still commodities in the first place. «Wrong life can not be lived rightly,» as Adorno famously concluded in his «Minima Moralia» (1978: §18).

Only a total departure from the world of material commodities into an immaterial sphere of intellect could promise a legitimate salvation, or a «Gegenglück,» an alternative existence of true happiness, as the poet Gottfried Benn has put it. According to the Frankfurt School, there can be no critical objects.

Up to this point there are certain parallels between critical theory and Foucault, who has identified a «furor of power» (Foucault 2007a: 54) as a product of the rational utilitarianism inherent in enlightenment philosophy. Whomever claims to pursue a utopian effort to make the world a better place by the might of their designs therefore cannot build their pretenses on the thinkers of the Frankfurt School. Adorno would also clearly have steered away from the identity politics of our day on the terms of race, class and gender. He would merely have recognized these strategies as substitutes for traditional ideologies of power and domination. According to Adorno's critical perspective, individuals cannot claim a legitimate identity at all. The only possibility of achieving a righteous existence as a non-Ego in a dialectical sense would be in a deep dissonance, if not a schizophrenic attitude towards oneself. As we will see, Foucault took another position on these issues. But in our quest for an appropriate concept of criticism we can already point out that the Frankfurt School proposed radical ideas that stand in the way of an activist approach to design cloaked in erroneous claims of enlightenment.

This background further complicates the relationship between critical theory and critical design. Both approaches certainly agree in their opposition to the traditional concept of design that prioritizes the optimistic pursuit of practical solutions. But they fundamentally diverge in their attitude towards the role of the arts and design in society. Here the Frankfurt School was much more conservative and never really departed from old-school European thought going back to Hegel. Only the arts supposedly could provide a realm to legitimately lead a critical existence. And only an artwork could transcend the quality of objects as commodities because it works towards dissent and dissonance instead of trying for consensus and material satisfaction. Art therefore was seen as departing the comfort zones of life that design always has to cater too. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, design by definition has to be based on normalization and common standards to produce optimal solutions as craftedforms

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for the needs of everybody. This consensus is inherently understood as needs determined by a society as a whole. This also means that not every individual wish has to be necessarily fulfilled: there is a larger, comprehensive rationality at work. As design sets out from a superior knowledge that already has determined what is good and rational, designing material objects inevitably produces ideologies. Critical theory could only reject this dynamic as a whole.

Their position could be illustrated with the example of a regular chair. According to critical theory, there can be no such thing as an innocent object or piece of furniture. The dialectic of enlightenment is present in every item designed by mankind. The invention of chairs not only allowed us to sit more comfortably, but also enabled people to perform new kinds of work. Chairs enabled us to achieve education and culture, progress and technology. For without sitting down to read, write and think, we would still be hunters and gatherers. However, critical thinking not only looks at the bright side of progress in civilization but also at the damage done to body and soul by all this sitting down. And there is more. Our intellectual labors done in a sitting position have had dramatic consequences for our environment. Applying critical theory and the dialectic of enlightenment, one could even say that as mankind moved to sit down on chairs, we also launched the Anthropocene that has succeeded in wreaking wholesale changes and devastation on our planet since the year 1800. One must assume that every technological-industrial invention has been devised by sitting people. And therefore, chairs must be regarded as a tool of mankind to perpetrate domination. However good the intentions behind the creation of material things might be, critical theory always has to regard them as problematic.

This leaves only the arts as an avenue of escape from the world of commodities, true to the words of Hegel. He stated that the artwork provides the medium for absolute thought to transcend the material qualities of things (Hegel 1971: 48). Therefore it would even be possible to rise to a purely intellectual level of the world-soul, free from any trace of materiality, because matter is not able to absorb critical knowledge. As the state of objects as commodities or matter itself becomes the problem, improving objects by critical thinking no longer provides a solution. The Frankfurt School rejects all shades of an epistemological optimism or discourse on feasibility in current thought on design – including the tradition of American pragmatism, the school of Bruno Latour and his actor-network theory (ANT) as well as the fundamental ontology proposed by Heidegger.

A negative dialectic, according to Adorno, therefore cannot serve as a bridge to critical design, as critical design is explicitly devoted to shape material objects. Seen from the vantage of the Frankfurt School,

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3 As one of the editors puts it in her introduction: «Undesign upsets this symmetrical relation that assumes design is the very solution to the very same problems it creates» (Coombs et al. 2019: 1).

practicing critical design means to willingly give up on the immaterial and discursive qualities of the arts to stay bound to everyday objects. Such objects are being designed to be of practical use even as they germinate as figments of the imagination. One should not ignore this difference to an artwork that is meant for intellectual reflection and explicitly not for material use or consumption. This leads to the conclusion that critical design cannot be critical in the sense artworks are. Critical design therefore is *not* art and demands a fundamentally different concept of criticism.

Yet efforts to salvage the Frankfurt School for theories of design continue unabated. One such interesting enterprise is presented by the volume of essays *Undesign: Critical Practices at the Intersection of Art and Design* (Coombs et al. 2019). The authors plead for *less* innovation in design as our problems cannot easily be solved by an endless stream of new objects. This includes a downright retreat from design as an endeavor.[3] The authors extend their criticism even to the political design activists of the DIY movement and the maker culture, accusing them of continuing to produce objects whereas the only solution would be the renunciation of objects (Coombs et al. 2019: 3).

Following this line of reasoning, the authors call for a «de-progressive design» and recommend an attitude of «I prefer not to» modeled on the tragic protagonist in Herman Melville's short story «Bartleby» (Tonkinwise 2019), who refuses to follow the demands and pressures of the modern workplace. In this way, a refusal to design should become a new attitude towards design. Hegel provides a convenient basis for such a concept. Some 200 years after «the end of the arts» that the philosopher had defined as overcoming material works of art via absolute ideas, we are here met with «the end of design» – as an «undesign» that has given up on creating objects.

This stance might well concur with critical theory, but not with critical design. Critical design continues to confront us with material objects. Refusing new things would also hardly resolve the power issues we already have. Design as a desubjugation, according to Foucault, therefore has a different meaning than a revocation of the practice. I propose that in critical design the theory does not criticize the practice (to the end that theory now even gives the command to desist from design), but that the practice is engaged in criticizing the knowledge at the heart of theory. We therefore encounter material things here, and not only immaterial intellectual musings.

Critical practice as criticism of knowledge

As I see it, critical design rests on one core idea: practical experience does weaken the epistemological value of philosophical theory. Whether a design has a critical or an affirmative effect, whether it works in the ideological service of domination or for an emancipatory «desubjugation,» all of these issues have to be discussed around the objects themselves. Otherwise, we would grasp neither their value nor their critical potential. To phrase criticism in the shape of objects, critical design has to abstain from usable objects for commercial markets. These would only serve to again discipline consumers via their norms and standards. Among others, Paola Antonelli (2011), the curator for design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, has suggested this as the crucial characteristic for critical design as a movement.[4] Usable, utilitarian objects would be consensual and thereby affirmative. Switching over to speculative objects is therefore not some arbitrary postmodern ploy of critical design. The move into the fictional proves to be necessary to formulate criticism. We meet imaginary objects that are presented as a model or prototype, as series of sketches or illustrations to clarify a specific point that we would reject if we came across it in our everyday lives. Even if one had such critical objects functioning and readily at hand, one might not really use them. The lighters developing tumors on their surface, designed by Jackson McConnell, only exist as a series of digitally rendered images (Fig. 1.1), but they provoke us to think seriously about our expectations from objects. We want them not only to work properly; objects should also satisfy us on a symbolic level. And the lighters refuse to provide exactly this service by producing a dilemma in communicating the exact opposite of their supposed use. Critical design creates dissonance. Matt Malpass grasped the essential quality of these designs when he described them as «post-optimal» and «para-functional» (Malpass 2017: 47). The iron-clad law of user-friendliness has been rooted out completely. Critical objects are «user-unfriendly». They confront us with bizarre emotions. Ratio and mind get confused and lose their grip. We run into a grotesque incapacity to make decisions. In this respect – and only in this respect! – objects created by critical design are truly critical and non-affirmative: they rule out unreflected use and throw our needs and desires, our expectations

Fig. 1.1 Jackson McConnell,
lighters as critical objects, 2011.

and convictions into a profound confusion. Knowledge itself loses its footing at this point. Another project creates similar, ambivalent feelings. In 2016, in «Sea-Meat Seaweed,» designer Hanan Alkouh experimented with the future of our diet in a «post-meat-world» (Fig. 1.2).[5] She foresaw a civilization that had overcome the consumption of meat after a diet based on animal protein had become unsustainable for our environment. Alkouh wanted to combine innovative research into materials with traditional crafts: butchery should not become extinct as a profession and we could also preserve our passion for a slice of meat and the sophisticated culinary culture built to cater for it.

Fig. 1.2, Hanan Alkouh, Sea-Meat Seaweed, 2016.

Hanan Alkouh therefore developed an alternative meat made from a red alga called «dulse alga.» If you fry it, this seaweed tastes just like bacon and it can be called a «superfood» as it is rich in vitamins, minerals and so on. Supposedly there is an ample supply of it in the oceans, just waiting to be harvested. Once the «meat» has been packed into a pigskin made from plastic, it can be butchered and prepared according to time-honored rules of craftsmanship. While obstacles remain to the realization of this vision, the idea alone is fascinating, as it is repulsive and attractive at the same time. Rational minds can be duly excited about taking giant steps towards the utopia of a world without meat.

Yet the envisioned substitute animal is not that easy to swallow. Everyone has to ask themselves: Will I go along with this? Am I ready for a new world of surrogates that has been made necessary because we are too many people on earth and cannot sustain our current lifestyles? In this case, criticism means to essentially question everything we want to hold on to whatever may come: our individual choices, our cultural identities and the ideas we hold as certainties.

Critical design talks about this fundamental crisis. Knowledge is powerless in the face of practical problems, as we practice lives that are more ambivalent than the rationality of a thinking focused on everyday solutions allows. In this sense, critical design provides a tangible archeology of the future: fictitious remnants of items that either do not exist or cannot be manufactured yet force us to imagine a coming civilization. What will remain of our current culture if future

needs demand a restriction of human influence on nature? This might just sound dystopian, but only because we still refuse to believe that such a course of history could be upon us.

The traditional concept of design focused on unambiguous solutions is failing at this point as we are entering situations that are critically undecidable. «Critical» means here: a fundamental lack of knowledge. And this is just what, according to Foucault, desubjugation aims for: the governing mechanisms controlling objects cease to dominate us as the knowledge underlying their power fails. How could a critical chair look in this context? As pointed out above, given that sitting itself is our problem, there can be no innocent chair. Accordingly, Dunne and Raby speculated in their conceptual design «Faraday Chair» from 1995 (Fig. 1.3) that chairs might have to take over the mission to protect people from the fruits of their own labors. For instance, a kind of couch or lounger could incapacitate our ability to perform any kind of work and instead keep us away from an active life. The radiation emanating from our permanently wired gadgets could reach such an intensity that we would be forced to retreat into special shelters to rest. At least that was their vision.

Fig. 1.3 Antony Dunne, Fiona Raby, Faraday Chair. Photographer Lubna Hammoud, 1999.

But why should such an expectation be only speculative and dystopian? Thousands of pilots and flight attendants already run «radiation accounts» to monitor their exposure to cosmic radiation while they are airborne. If they reach dangerous doses, they have to stay on the ground. This is already a reality. Could we all meet such a fate? And how would we deal with it? The dialectic of enlightenment has caught up with us before civilization could offer solutions. And how, indeed, would we feel using the lounger conceptualized by Dunne and Raby? Would it be like being buried alive, squeezed into some kind of coffin; or rather like being an unborn, cozy in a fetal position in the mother's womb? The object does not provide answers. It was devised to remain ambivalent. It primarily serves to demonstrate an epistemological crisis.

I would therefore like to suggest a definition of what makes a critical object: it is a thing that does not try to resolve a dilemma that it exposes. The wound that the dialectic of enlightenment is inflicting on us is being kept open. There is no way around the dystopian dimension of critical objects – or else there would be no reason to doubt our knowledge or our cognitive faculty. Critical design is a design of crisis given the shape of practical objects. Anyone who

deems this definition too negative or overly dialectical, in the way of Adorno, should turn to Foucault in order to develop a version of criticism that could provide a better basis for everyday life.

Life as criticism

Human-centered design has failed to make the world a better place by offering solutions focused on users, because the human factor typically is the problem. Should humankind therefore start to learn to think against humans and plan «inhumanely» to get beyond merely satisfying their own wishes and rather save all actors and elements on our planet – plants, animals, the air and water, our whole environment? Today, anti-anthropocentric ideas are enjoying a revival. Some pursue technological and posthuman visions. Others wish to take humanity down a few notches and seek to integrate our kind into a complex network of actors or a «parliament of things» (Latour [1999] 2009), as one voice among many. These thinkers only allow schemes that subordinate humanity to higher causes. But to get there, new forms of power and governance will have to be deployed. Under such an order, individuals would be even more repressed than ever before and would lose any control over their own lives. Despite these obvious risks, design theory currently is accepting many aspects of these ideas with enthusiasm. It is just too hard to resist the promise to achieve practical solutions through the application of more technology and progress. Supporters are seduced by the prospect of reestablishing the validity of solutions-oriented approaches via a newly accomplished legitimacy of the purposes of design. Yet they are completely blind to the fact that pressure to innovate and apply technologies always ends in a maximization of domination. Technologies can never be free of ideology, as they inherently do not permit the choice to decline participation in progress.

Desubjugation, according to Foucault, does not mean submitting oneself to the better proven knowledge of technologies of superior functionality. Foucault wants us to cease submissiveness. To this end, the approach developed by Foucault needs humanity and the individual more than ever before. Only an individual subject can practice criticism as a critical attitude towards any form of domination – for example by the way they live their lives in regard to objects (Foucault 2007a: 56). Building on Kant, Foucault argues that a critique of knowledge can only succeed as a performed practice – otherwise it would just be another form of knowledge accompanied with a respective discursive power. For Foucault, only an individual who is aware of their own perceptions and reflects on them can be the legitimate locus of a critical practice. And such an existence has to prioritize a critical

interaction with objects. The design of objects can be of assistance here by not forcing a subject into standardized actions. Design can also help us to question the resulting objects. And this is exactly what critical design aims for.

This movement is centered on designing objects that do not appear to provide solutions for problems. On the contrary, critical design strives to create problems or at least to pose questions. Critical objects are not ready for easy consumption. They do not reflect a dubious consensus that Adorno has warned us about. Rather, critical objects in and of themselves prevent user satisfaction. Only at this point does a critical use of objects turn into desubjugation.

Contrary to Adorno, Foucault therefore did not regard a retreat from the world of objects and commodities to the arts as a necessary condition to practice a critical attitude. The place for desubjugation is indeed an everyday practice of «the art of living» or an «aesthetic existence.»[6] What is meant here are not the visual arts or esotericism employed to enhance individual wellbeing but a *techné* in the sense of craftsmanship and practical application, as an exercise to handle objects without succumbing to dependency on them. In this instance a self-governance takes over the helm that is understood as a resistance against the automatism of objects and habits, as well as against the optimization of uses and utilitarian exploitation. As Judith Butler (2011) explains in her essay on Foucault's deliberations in «What Is Critique?,» he meant a virtuous, practical existence: «existential arts» as defined by Foucault shape the whole existence as a creation if not as a work of art (Foucault 2007a: 9). This includes the liberty to refrain from doing something. Voluntary self-control therefore is at the heart of self-creation.

Designers are no longer necessary in this existence. But Foucault also developed perspectives on the ways the designs of objects and places could help us to practice a critical attitude. Places and objects are needed that do not predetermine how they are being used. In his early writings, Foucault developed the term «heterotopy» or «other places» for these requirements, defining them as:

> real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (Foucault 1993: 39)

Heterotopy functions as a site of crisis; it reveals and practices an in-between, an ambivalence, an abstinence from defining order and domination shaped as transition and ritual (as in fairgrounds or processions), as passages through time and space (such as ships), of knowledge and ignorance (libraries, museums), utopia (gardens) and dystopia (hospitals, prisons, colonies). Life and death, peace and violence, fantasy and the law, freedom and norms are clashing here without any resolution in sight. There are only upheavals and interplay. These objects and places do not prevent or cover up the crisis of knowledge; they reveal it and open it up for us to experience. An individual can take a critical position on this or experience the crisis inherent in objects and places in the first place. Openness and freedom come into view, but also the hopelessness for decisions and resolutions. Foucault described heterotopies as «the greatest reserve of the imagination» (Foucault 1993: 46) in society; this looks like a suitable term comprising the simultaneously utopian and dystopian potential of critical design.

Current critics of critical design have not yet sufficiently appreciated this elementary function. Design is not only devoted to the mission of offering good solutions for our practical routines. Design must question these very routines. Critical design sows confusion in the world to curb the overwhelming powers of the status quo. Critical objects make evident for us that there are no solutions in the form of objects, as objects themselves create the problem. Only by realizing this crisis of objects can we begin to throw off their yoke.

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