

21st-Century Design Should Focus on Making. The Immediate Future Is Not Concerned with Reflection, Philosophy, or History (Luxuries of the Past)

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ABSTRACT

Without sounding too much like an idiot (with no time for critical thought or lessons from history), I will describe how philosophy can encourage 21st century designers, but is largely forgotten in an industry model that depends on emerging technology and immediacy of action. Design itself is a critical act now; discourse and rhetoric, a thing of the past. Making is the most relevant act for designers today.¹

Keywords

Critical design, immediacy, connectivity, crowd sourcing, making, ethical design

INTRODUCTION

It is currently 2010. We are in a new era, a fast-paced internet age of live ideation and real-time iteration. Reflection is nice but hard to practice—maybe there’s an app for that?

THE CRITICAL CHALLENGE

Clive Dilnot asks in his essays and lectures that designers “engage with the social, cultural, and ethical implications of the technologies they makes so sexy.”² First of all, it is a mistake to assume that all designers want to act ethically. It is not for me to say that they can’t be ego driven or cash driven. ‘Eco-centric’ becomes ‘ego-centric,’ and ‘green initiatives’ means a pocketful of dollars. Dilnot graciously allows for market forces, but his challenge that designers solve the climate crisis, the economic downturn, are ludicrous. You could make the same charge of many professions: architects, economists, chefs.

Designers today are not just constrained by market forces; we are hypnotized by technology. Open prototypes, emerging technology, interactivity has been discussed at length by designers as the current agent for change. It isn’t bad news: this technology will fuel the social designs of tomorrow, through realized action and building.

Designers can decide when, how, and **if** they act ethically. Van Toorn said designers “are handmaidens to market forces.”³ Harsh words, but many designers wouldn’t care to

differ. Whatever your personal motivation is, it’s best if you can do work you are proud of:

Dilnot says to start with a proposition then consider how to make a difference.² Historian Barbara Tuchman said, “Research is endlessly seductive, writing is hard work.”⁶ Modern designers are better served by presenting ideas (by reaching out to industry leaders and the user community) than by protecting their ideas⁷ or ruminating for long stretches of time.

Dilnot puts the responsibility squarely on the designer, like Heidegger who says that a designer chooses what image to place before an audience.⁴

Of course these things take thought, but that is what designers do. In no way, am I abandoning critical thought.

Wicked problems are poorly articulated and extremely challenging. It is important to think beyond the boundaries of a client or a design problem when possible. In order to get a user-centric design, reframing may be necessary. It is important to remember that designers can solve problems that have not even been articulated.⁵

These ideas can be observed through critical and ethical design by 21st century industry leaders discussing their action and progress to address important and timely issues. It requires more emphasis on the process and ideation as it relates to modern life.

The Way Designers Learn Today

Many design students can only think about the current world of design in relationship to the world wide web. Connectivity and immediacy blossomed in the last century. History is something that happened hours ago, because the internet changed everything about the way information is consumed. There is a constant struggle to stay ahead, stay connected, that does not always require or reflect a critical examination of the big picture.

Design takes place in real time, so there is very little energy allocated to reflection. This is not an optimized scenario for thoughtfulness, but it is a reality. We live in an age of immediacy, real time, streaming updates, dings,

connectivity and data swell. The reflective process must be folded into the way designers currently work which is a live process of thumb-nailing, drafting, presenting and testing, iterating, polishing, proofing, and launching. Dialogue occurs in real time. Shirky says that collaboration will ultimately save time, because it connects designers with the “cognitive surplus pool of thinkers and creators.”⁸

Making is not a new discipline. Only the immediacy and interaction has changed:

“A work of art is never made in advance... There is no separation between the thought and the creative act. They are completely one and the same” (Henri Matisse “Interview with Verdet, 1052” *Matisse on Art*, Jack Flam, ed. 1978: 143)

“After Michelangelo died, someone found in his studio a piece of paper on which he had written a note to his apprentice, in the handwriting of his old age: ‘Draw Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and do not waste time.’” Annie Dillard “Write Till You Drop” *The New York Times Book Review* 28 May 1989: VII-23.

One example of this in modern writing is the way news is posted on the web before the traditional model of editing has occurred. Web news (speaking from experience), is a culture of immediacy. The philosophy is that errors will catch themselves, but the story’s timeliness is most important. Through contact with sources or readers who will correct spelling errors, there is less attention to accuracy in publishing.

THE GREY ALBUM

When Dangermouse remixed *The Grey Album* in 2004, he had no idea the impact it would make. He was attempting to make art for art’s sake. He deconstructed the Beatles’ *White Album* into samples and then mixed Jay-Z’s masterpiece *The Black Album* to create an opus of equal weight, the most epic mash-up of all time.

He did not own copyright to any of the Beatles’ music, so he spread the music through the web and word of mouth. It was quickly hailed by the mainstream press as revolutionary. *Entertainment Weekly* named it 2004’s best album. This is an album that was never released, an album that was illegal to hear or own!⁹

Dangermouse was working with technology that was fresh, including advanced internet distribution models and a vocal disc Jay-Z specifically designed for dj experimentation. This modern masterpiece is an example of immediacy, urgency, compulsion, timing. Not reflective thinking:

“People assume I took some Beatles and, you know, threw some Jay-Z on top of it or mixed it and looped it around, but it’s a deconstruction. It’s not easy. I was obsessed with the whole project, that’s all I was trying to do, see if I could do this. I didn’t think about anything but finishing. I stuck to those two because I thought it would be more challenging and more fun and more of a statement to what you could do with sample alone. It is an art form. It is

music. It doesn’t have to be just what some call stealing. It can be a lot more.”¹⁰

He basically sat in a basement for two weeks trying to pump this out and it changed the world of music forever. We are in an era of doing.

ATTITUDES AND LATITUDES

I created this project through collaboration with Leif Percifield. It is an active mapping website that you can enter an audio recording of your story that relates to place and attitudes towards the LGBTQI community. Through user testing, we were convinced that we must build this out or it would be unethical.

We came up with this as an art piece, a response to the string of gay teen suicides in 2010, like the “It Gets Better Project.” I related to the teens, because I know personally how tough it is to be told every day by your government that you are a second-class citizen, denied civil rights that others complacently take for granted.

A user scenario for this project would be a gay teen that is deciding what college to attend by taking a virtual walking tour of the various cities and listening to what people in that area have to say about their experiences or perceived attitudes toward LGBTQI community.¹¹

It was a personal project that became social and political. We were able to act ethically because we were not addressing a client’s needs or agenda or anyone trying to make it commercial or editing out the essence. We were acting from our hearts, like Dangermouse.

Crowd sourcing on this scale is new. There are many limitations to this option for acquiring content. As the essay “All Together Now” indicates, a strong editor or vision is usually ‘a must’ in order for this to be effective. Many crowd sourcing projects turn to mush. It is just one interactive tool augmented in the modern age.¹²

The audio recordings at Atts&Lats resemble Yelp reviews, which Jamer Hunt has criticized in the past as being contradictory and nonsensical.¹³ Our hope is that each person has a story to tell. We can’t guarantee a recording will suit your research question, but you are welcome to listen person-by-person, like a virtual walking tour. It is scalable to the Google Earth view of the world, the modern equivalent of the conceptual “Powers of Ten.”¹⁴

Ted Byfield has questioned this type of info-mapping in the past and what type of argument is made based on the content which is or isn’t included. By eliminating search fields, i.e., age, race, we are making the pins on the map democratic. One person, one story. I hope his criteria that infographics be examined in a social and historical context would hold up to our project. I would like to think so.¹⁵

Ultimately our culture must be viewed as a collection of all the variables of art, religion, biology, philosophy on the macro and the micro plane.¹ Schon teaches about iterative design and the back and forth, the importance of listening and responding.¹⁶ The message is still important but the tale

is out the window when you can build it and experiment in live time, like with the Atts & Lats project.

Although there are ‘critical’ issues at play, I have a gallery launching my site tomorrow with an exhibit. Last minute logistics and development are the critical concerns keeping me up at night. I will reflect on the project after I meet the launch date.

CONCLUSIONS

Don’t piss away opportunities you have to make the world a better place.

Design has much to contribute to social commentary beyond the theoretical. It is rewarding to know that I can effect a change within my community on an immediate level. The time for action is now. The time for reflection, history, and philosophy has been relegated to academic luxury.

In a book that gets it right about design education *Never Sleep*, Andre Andreev and Dan Covert of Dress Code say, “We are, professional pitch artists. Coming up with ideas and communicating them is what separates designers from software gurus or scrapbook Moms.”¹⁶ In a response to my critical writings, Lisa Grocott commented that, “A lot of complacency or inability to act comes from recognizing the exhaustive list of concerns.”¹

I say pitch and build in real time with your thinking cap on, because making and thinking are one and the same now. Technology is one step ahead of us. Having a footing in history is an important grounding for reaching world-changing heights, but it is a perspective lost on most modern designers.

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