

Burning Approaches to tensing the Present: a new Political Dimension of Design

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Abstract

The contribution presents a preliminary reflection on the nature of design in our “post-political” scenario. It argues that design increasingly embraces critical thinking and antagonistic practices to push on social reality and bring about change. The document explores theoretical reconfigurations of design drawing on the ideas of contemporary thinkers and examines case studies of critical-making approaches that support the proposed critical framework. The primary objective of the contribution is to uphold the inherently political nature of design. It underscores the significance of “disagreement” as a foundation for the project. The investigation calls for critical thinking and the necessary process of “decolonization” within the field of design. The overall argument advocates for a political design that embraces dissent, criticality, and speculation, intending to reshape the boundaries of the discipline and address the crises and conflicts of our time.

Keywords

Political design
Distribution of the sensible
Minor design
Critical making
Dissent-oriented design

Design in crisis: uncovering collective narratives and reshaping the collapsing world

Undoubtedly, design is one of the contemporary disciplines deeply influenced by the 20th century. While acknowledging the necessity to constantly redefine its scope of action and boundaries, its mandate, and its cultural, social, and political responsibility, design emerges as the driving force that shapes the world we live in today, reflecting the transformations and profound upheavals that unfolded throughout the century. However, in the face of a global historical reconfiguration and rapid changes across various domains, design finds itself embodying a narrative of crisis. The question arises: can design exist without a minimum degree of stability? The current state of flux and uncertainty requires constant questioning of who we are and what we are capable of. In *The Third Unconscious. The Psycho-sphere in the Viral Age* (2021) Franco Bifo Berardi characterizes the current catastrophic situation as:

the end of human history, which is clearly unfolding before our eyes; the ongoing disintegration of the neoliberal model and the imminent danger of the techno-totalitarian rearrangement of capitalism and the return of death to the scene of philosophical discourse, after its long denial by modernity. (p. 31)

The notion of an “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decline of the Soviet regime, suggesting that conflicts had been resolved and consensus prevailed, ushering in an era of stability and prosperity under the banner of liberal democracies and capitalist economies. This trend, rooted in the belief in objective historical development and a linear progression, positioned liberal democracy as the ultimate and universally embraced social model. However, the reality is right before our eyes. Ecological catastrophes, military and social conflicts, financial collapses, and economic crises, the proliferation of artificial intelligence and big data, technological and digital divides, the extension of algorithms into our daily lives all serve as a negative crescendo, highlighting how a world shaped by the neoliberal capitalist model is far from the best of all possible worlds. It's not just about climate change, as Donna Haraway points out in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016):

It's more than climate change; it's also extraordinary burdens of toxic chemistry, mining, nuclear pollution, depletion of lakes and rivers under and above ground, ecosystem simplification, vast genocides of people and other critters, et cetera, et cetera, in systemically linked patterns that threaten major system collapse after major system collapse after major system collapse. (p. 100)

In the face of this ongoing systemic crisis marked by instability and fragmentation, can design still uncover collective narratives of critical value? Is there an extraordinary opportunity for design to reshape the world and give significance to the interconnectedness of humanity and seemingly insignificant details?

The inadequacy of the design discipline in reading and understanding the present is evident. Design faces an epistemic

debt when it comes to understanding the interconnectedness and intricate dynamics of profound planetary changes and technological dominance. Thus, the discipline of design often lags behind, clinging to outdated problem-solving perspectives that distort our perception of the present and limit our ability to envision the future. Instead of engaging in thoughtful foresight, it produces simplistic, momentary, and conceptually impoverished utopian models. Design is entangled with positional privilege, the denial of otherness, and various forms of negation that depict a weary world in need of care, rehabilitation, and repair.

Towards political design: embracing dissent-oriented approaches in design practice

It is time for us to assume full responsibility. One thing is clear: in this reality, the role of the designer should engage with the “political dimension”, stimulating knowledge processes and harnessing its inherent power to shape potential worlds. We must question the belief that progress, whether technological or social, automatically leads to better living conditions. In this context, we can confidently say, “Welcome to interesting times!” (Žižek, 2012), where we have the opportunity to decolonize our imagination, explore new theoretical and operational territories, shape new “adjacencies possible” (Kauffman, 2000) and fill them with new trajectories and resistances, even if they are not yet defined.

Like all conversations, when discussing the political dimension of design, it is important to explore the convergence of meanings. The term “political” in this context draws from the ideas of post-foundationalist, post-Marxist, and agonistic political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (2005; 2013) and Jacques Rancière (2000; 2004; 2007). These theorists highlight the inherent ambiguity of politics and the distinction between the consensual and “dissensual” dimension of practices in civil coexistence. “Politics” refers to a mode of deliberation, governance, and administration of collective life, characterized by varying degrees of consensus but always contingent. However, “political” signifies dissent, the disruption of established orders, and the conflictual negotiation that allows new and unpredictable orders to emerge.

According to Chantal Mouffe, Western governments represent different variations of the neoliberal model, which seeks to suppress moments of conflict and hinder genuine political debates. They strive to construct an illusory consensus that is ultimately unreal. Mouffe (2005) points to the political philosophy of liberalism and the concept of democracy derived from it, clarifying that:

[...] the dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which forecloses acknowledging the nature of collective identities. This kind of liberalism is unable to adequately grasp the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist. The typical liberal understanding of pluralism is that we live in a world in which there are indeed many perspectives and values and that, owing to empirical limitations, we will never be able to

adopt them all, but that, when put together, they constitute an harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble. (p. 10)

Moreover, Mouffe argues that the postmodern condition has led to the disintegration of the agonistic horizon of politics, primarily due to the prevalence of aesthetics in late capitalism. This has created a hedonistic culture that lacks space for imagining and designing antagonistic experiences. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek contends that nowadays we are confronted with a negation of politics, a post-political condition that not only “represses” the political but effectively “forecloses” it (Žižek, 1999, p. 35). Within these liberal systems, there is a notable tendency to exclude moments of social conflict, which frequently arise from the inherent contradictions of the capitalist model, from any form of representation or narrative, except through exclusion and moral condemnation. Consequently, these moments of conflict lack the necessary avenues for development, denying them the space and time needed to manifest in new forms and expressions.

Jacques Rancière (2010) argues that politics emerges precisely through disagreement, dissensus (*mésentente*), rupture, and disorder within a shared order. It involves destabilizing the established “order of the sensible” by disrupting the assigned place of a body or altering the destination of a place. This process reveals what was previously unseen, amplifies speech that was previously silenced, and transforms what may have been perceived as mere noise into meaningful discourse. As Rancière (2004) claims:

[politics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (p. 13)

The concept of a “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2004) comes into play, referring to how sensory orders in society reproduce and enforce divisions. This notion determines who has the privilege to see, hear, and participate in debates, while others are excluded or made invisible. It establishes a visible and recognized “community of sense”, while those outside of it lack the common space and time to experience alternative ways of perceiving the world. They are unable to see what is not intended for them to see, hear what is not intended for them to hear, or discuss what is not intended for them to discuss (Keshavarz & Mazé, 2013, p. 13).

At this juncture, it becomes evident how the concepts of “dissensus” and “antagonism” challenge the idea of design as a neutral and transparent endeavor that establishes a regime of meaning, thereby reinforcing power dynamics and politics inherent in current institutions. Moreover, “dissent-oriented” approaches in design provide means to intervene and disrupt established sensory orders, fostering innovative thinking and shifting the focus from a level of (re)production to one of proposition. This realm engenders a new cultural paradigm that reestablishes the political role of design, one that refrains from excluding moments of social conflict from any representation or narrative of the world. As a result, design, with

its emphasis on the social organization of everyday practices, can re-engage with power relations and influences, discerning fresh terms and themes for contestation and novel trajectories for action (DiSalvo, 2010, p. 6).

Embedding minority, speculation and critical making within the political design

Engaging in discussions about dissenting design entails inherent risks, as it requires undergoing paradigm shift, altering perspectives, and relinquishing comfortable positions. Emphasizing the broader context of the necessary “decolonization” of normalized thinking, Camillo Boano (2020) highlights the significance of the “minority” as a potential framework for the project.

The approach of minor design effectively tackles the crucial conflicts present in our contemporary reality. Instead of providing definitive solutions, it disrupts prevailing disciplinary norms and fosters alliances. It serves as both a “space of crisis” and a “place where light gets in” (Boano, 2020, p. 10-11). Therefore, the minor is a crack, a “disagreement” within a “constellation of thought” that signifies a position where partiality, not universality, is the condition for constructing new meanings.

Boano argues that the resurgence of the minority as a framework aims to shift the discourse away from focusing solely on domination, diffusion, commodification, and communication inherent in contemporary design. Instead, it seeks to promote an alternative practice of thought and action, advancing speculative propositions. Minor design should not be seen as an inferior or powerless undertaking incapable of concretely responding to crises and manifesting itself. It is not marginal, external, or devoid of agency. Rather, it represents a distinct intensity of design, a “critical practice” that continually reevaluates the relationship between critique and project.

By incorporating the concept of minor design, political design acknowledges the importance of minor perspectives, critical thinking that finds concreteness through critical-speculative practices and translates into objects that narrate alternative interpretations of the world, stimulate debate and reflection, and propose new behaviors and ways of coexisting. As a critical practice, political design recognizes that the crises we face today require more than simple solutions. It acknowledges the complexity of our socio-political fabric and seeks to unravel the layers of discipline that maintain the *status quo*. By engaging in alliances with diverse “agencies” (Latour, 2005), political design endeavors to enact tangible transformations and politicize its impact on society.

In this context, political design becomes a platform where different intensities of design converge. It invites designers, practitioners, and users to challenge prevailing paradigms, embrace alternative perspectives, and set problems that address the critical conflicts of our time. Through immanent critique, political design uncovers and amplifies the sporadic thickenings, fragments, hints, and makeshifts that hold the potential for transformative change. By merging dissent, decolonization, and criticality, political design emerges as a powerful force capable of reshaping the boundaries,

ideologies, and practices that shape our designed world. The corrosive attitude and the desire to deconstruct a system find common ground in two controversial movements in design culture: the Italian Radical Design movement of the 1970s and the English Critical and Speculative Design of the 1980s. Both of these design currents emerged during different periods of crisis demonstrating the urgent need to react by developing alternative cultural proposals capable of dismantling an outdated system of values.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Radical Design represented a disruptive stance against the social, political, and industrial systems of that time, as breaking away from the past was intended as a requirement for a new project that surpassed the utopian exercises of the 1960s. As Germano Celant (1972), who coined the term “Radical Design” in 1966, asserted:

All the new Italian architecture – Archizoom, SuperStudio, etc. – has declared that its objectives are conceptual and behavioral. By proclaiming itself radical, it no longer wants to be commercialized or alienated, nor does it want to give up its ideas and expressive attitudes. It is an architecture that has no intention of being subservient to the client or becoming its tool; it offers nothing but its ideological and behavioral attitudes. (p. 382)

Groups such as Archizoom, Superstudio and Global Tools, along with influential figures like Ettore Sottsass, Gianni Piretti, Andrea Branzi, and Ugo La Pietra, have actively engaged in critical practices that seek not to domesticate the paradoxes of contemporary society in a reductionist manner, but rather to bring them to the forefront and make them more explicit and tangible through awareness, provoking thoughts, and inspiring potential for change.

Following the economic boom of the 1980s, the theoretical legacy of Radical Design inspired Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby’s Critical Design, as exemplified in their influential book *Design Noir* (2001) and *Hertzian Tales* (2006) by Dunne alone. Drawing inspiration from the Radical Design movement, Dunne and Raby’s critical approach establishes a deep engagement between design and capitalism. It suggests the exploration of speculative and rhetorical potential inherent in design, employing futuristic scenarios and shifting the focus from the final product to the medium itself. By embracing this critical and reflective framework, Critical Design employs speculation as a *dispositif* to construct scenarios and fictions that “can act as a catalyst for collectively redefining our relationship to reality” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 2).

Dissent, Scarcity, and the In-Between: Exploring Critical Design Practices

The critical practices approach can be explored through case studies that exemplify dissent, decolonization, and criticality within the design realm. Three noteworthy examples can be Ernesto Oroza’s “disobedient re-design”, Vicky Katrin Kuhlmann’s *The Volume Economics. Design Scarcity*, and Martina Muzi’s *The Feminine Space In-Between*. These case studies offer insights into how design practices can challenge norms, provoke reflection, and propose alternative visions.

Ernesto Oroza's "technological disobedience" embodies a captivating instance of critical design practice that embraces a conflictual dimension through acts of disagreement. By exploring and experimenting with immediate conditions, Oroza seeks to extend and subvert the possibilities within systems. For instance, *Rikimbili*, a bicycle with an artificial kerosene engine in a plastic bottle, key-copying machines powered by washing machine engines and television aerials crafted from tin plates sourced from canteens, closely embody the principles akin to hacking. These practices push the boundaries of systems, altering their logic and expanding their limits (Oroza, 2012). This resonates with the Neapolitan "philosophy of the broken", observed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1929/2009), where objects are reimagined and repurposed beyond their original use. By forging experimental connections with matter, disobedient re-design unlocks possibilities for design practice, challenging norms and expanding boundaries.

Vicky Katrin Kuhlmann's project, *The Volume Economies. Design Scarcity* (2014) delves into the concept of "finitude" (Pievani, 2020) and the artificial scarcity that we have created to sustain our economy. By challenging conventional thinking and proposing alternative approaches to resource distribution, Kuhlmann questions established power dynamics embedded in our economic structures. In the envisioned system, each individual possesses a designated "volume" to store belongings, encouraging a shift from individual ownership to collective responsibility. This approach fosters reflection on needs versus desires and underscores the political agency of consumers in influencing the market through deliberate choices. Through her project, Kuhlmann prompts a critical examination of our relationship with material possessions and advocates for responsible consumption from a political perspective.

Martina Muzi's manifesto-like project, *The Feminine Space In-Between* (2013), addresses tensions within design and the female condition within a neoliberal economy and presents a thought-provoking design approach focused on the evolution of nomadic living. Muzi emphasizes the interconnectedness between places, possibilities, and life itself, highlighting the social and personal struggle of living an "in-between" world, becoming, such as seeking employment, a home, and spaces that facilitate valued practices. As we are in the world living our fragile body, the only certain home, Muzi seeks a place that exists among possibilities. These scenarios challenge the prevailing paradigm where individuals are reduced to fragmented "scripts" (Akrich, 1992) for capitalist exploitation. It underscores the need for critical engagement, especially within the design field, to shape these phenomena and create alternative realities. Aligned with the concept of minor design, the project aims to break free from deterministic perspectives that enforce a singular worldview and design approach. It advocates for the materialization of a "pluriverse" (Escobar, 2018) where diverse and unforeseen forms of life can be recomposed and recreated. Aligned with the concept of minor design, the project aims to break free from deterministic perspectives that enforce a singular worldview and design approach.

Rethinking Design: Towards a Political Practice of Global Transformation

The design field currently faces global crises and profound transformations, which challenge the prevailing narrative of stability and progress. To reshape a collapsing world, design must embrace its political dimension and uncover collective narratives, departing from traditional approaches that fail to address the complexities of our time. Through dissent, criticality, and decolonization, design becomes a catalyst for debate, reshaping boundaries, ideologies, and practices. In our fragmented world, design holds the power to inspire meaningful action and forge a future of possibility.

The showcased critical practices seek to transfer the provocations, challenges, and issues inherent to the realm of mass consumption, granting them a meaningful purpose. In this process, designers adopt a strongly corrosive attitude, shifting “from problem-solver to a problem-finder” (Marenko, 2018), employing a constant investigative logic focused on constructing tools for reflection. To conclude, we can finally establish that while design alone may not have the power to save the planet or fix all the world’s problems, it does have the potential to change the way we think.

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