

FROM GRAPHICS TO PRODUCTS: CRITICAL DESIGN AS DESIGN AUTHORSHIP

Design criticism is generally thought of as critical writing about design. The critical act is not just commentary on, or criticism about, but the translation of the visual and material into the verbal. The relationship is inherently reactionary—first comes the design, followed by the criticism.

The emerging field of Critical Design, however, uses the medium of design to make statements about social, political, economic and cultural issues, or about the discipline itself. Primarily associated with contemporary product design (see explication in Dunne and Raby's 2001 book *Design Noir*), critical design's posture bears strong resemblance to graphic design authorship, which often takes a critical stance. The other parallel is in critical design's communicative nature—the objects may function in the traditional sense, but their main goal is to contribute to the field's discourse as polemical actors.

Diverse themes of consumption, privacy, waste, sexuality, debt, technology, genetics, media and globalism are raised in critical design's broad agenda. Recent exhibitions of critical design demonstrate worldwide interest: *Don't Panic* (London), *Products of our Time* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), *Connections: Experimental Design* (Sydney), *Designing Critical Design* (Belgium) and *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design* (London).

This presentation proposes casting critical design into the wider context of design authorship. By considering historical precedents and examining similarities, the activism and entrepreneurialism of critical design will be shown to have their roots in theories of graphic design authorship.

There are two primary parallels between critical design and design authorship. The first is the act of self-initiation—acting without client commissions—whereby designers frame the topic, aesthetics, process, medium, materials, and users of their designs. The second is the politicized viewpoints of the designers; their designs stake out intentional positions that range from social, cultural, economic and geo-political to personal concerns. Both design authorship and critical design, whether self-referential and 'art'-like or populist and idealistic, pose questions as readily as they offer alternative solutions.

While architecture's influence on critical design can be acknowledged—Archigram and Archizoom from the 1960-70s are appropriate models—I maintain that the theoretical projects, exhibits and publications about graphic design authorship since the 1990s have had a more direct bearing on the discourse surrounding critical design. Specific examples include Tibor Kalman's whimsical paperweights and conceptual watches; Jonathan Barnbrook's rhetorically charged typeface designs and naming provocations; Bureau's confrontational posters for gender and sexual awareness issues; Shepard Fairey's globally viral *Obey Giant* campaign, and *Adbusters* magazine as a forum for anti-consumerist designs.

The field of industrial/product design doesn't own the concepts behind critical design any more than how design authorship is the exclusive intellectual domain of graphic design. Both terms overlap and converge. Both enlarge the activist presence of the discipline of design in general, and both require society to engage in design meaning-making beyond the passive role of consumer.

[Dunne, A & Raby, F 2001, *Design noir: The secret life of electronic objects*, Birkhäuser, Basel.]

McCarthy is professor of graphic and interactive design at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis-St. Paul, USA. He holds an MFA in design from Stanford University—a joint program of the departments of mechanical engineering and art, and a BFA in sculpture and drawing from Bradley University.

McCarthy creates and exhibits works of design authorship—many of which have received critical recognition and are in institutional collections—and has published on the topic in academic journals and in the trade press. In 1996, he co-curated the seminal exhibit *Designer as Author: Voices and Visions*.

McCarthy's international scholarly presentations have included *Declarations* (Montréal), *Mind the Map* (Istanbul), *Hidden Typography* (London), *Politics of Design* (Belfast), *New Views: Repositioning Graphic Design History* (London), *Wonderground* (Lisbon) and *ConnectED* (Sydney).