Observations on Aesthetics in Experience Design

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Abstract

In this paper, I will look at how design researchers deal with aesthetics in their work by comparing it with recent discussions in collaborative/participatory art. The paper reviews several recent cases of community-oriented design research. The conclusion of the paper provides an initial mapping of how design researchers work with aesthetics. I will argue that although aesthetics is not a topic of much discussion in contemporary experience design, there is in fact a lively debate about its role in design research if we look at theoretical and methodological commitments that animate recent work.

Keywords

Aesthetics, design, interaction design, community design, collaborative art, participatory art, relational aesthetics

Design Goes Relational

When we look at the word "experience" in design, we can see a family of quite scattered uses, but also several patterns. In the 1990s, experience was usually understood as customer experience in marketing, but soon afterwards, it became one of the candidates to replace user-centered design and usability testing in designing for information technologies. Both industry and research picked it up around the turn of the century and it became a cornerstone in many companies and university programs. Design researchers have continued to enrich the concept by pushing it into many directions. There were conceptual and theoretical openings, usually towards understanding experience in social rather than psychological terms.[1] There were methodical openings, building on artistic practice. There were also process openings, usually towards co-design, in which experience was probed socially rather than through a traditional research process.[2]

More than ever, over the last few years, design has expanded from the triangle of business, technology and people into a variety of new forms. The most notable forms are service design, which combined service systems with a user perspective; critical design, which encouraged designers to explore alternatives to the market-based design; and more recently a plethora of concepts like social design, world design, sustainability.[3]

In these new forms, objects are variously important but secondary to the communal aspects of design. In these new lines of thinking, the object of design is some kind of community rather than an object. In want of a better name, I will follow Nicholas Bourriaud and talk about these forms of design relational designs.[4] Physical objects are at best key devices for main argument, but more typically, they are a background in the actual design, which is giving a form of community interaction. The thing to be designed in these new forms of design is not *the* object, but a service, discourse, community, or even piece of culture. A good deal of this work borrows theories and methods from experience design, or has influenced experience design, as in the case of critical design. The question of this paper is: how is aesthetics built into design projects of these new kinds?

Aesthetics in Relational Design

There is an ongoing discussion in art that gives a few hints in answering this question. Variously named as participatory, collaborative, relational or conversational art typically works through projects in which the artist leaves the gallery, hits the streets, and works with local communities. With roots in critical and conceptual art of the sixties and performance and installations of the seventies and eighties, these artists analyze issues in culture and society in an effort to propose improvements to these issues. Critics like Claire Bishop have criticized conversational and participatory art for forgetting aesthetics, while others like Grant Kester have sought to locate art-making in communication processes and community-building, pushing aesthetics to the background, and sometimes even seeing it as harmful to the aims of the artists.[5]

As Bishop notes, there is a gap between relational Europeans and critical North Americans, for whom the Europeans (specifically the French) were uncritically spectacular. She traces the difference to theory: the relationists built on post-structuralism, for whom there was no outside position to which an artist could elevate himself. In making their point, critical artists wanted to be unambiguous and worked with interviews, statistics, rather than fiction and opacity.[6]

To illustrate the difference, we may compare two relatively recent artworks. Picture 1 is from Pierre Huyghe's enigmatic retrospective in Paris; I will not try to interpret his work, but point out that it is inescapably aesthetic.[7] Park Fiction in Hamburg is an example of Kester's collaborative art (Picture 2). This project explores human institutions and sees community interaction in the park as its artistic achievement. The project took a redevelopment site in Hamburg and managed to repurpose it into a park through a series of artistic and architectural interventions. The outcome is a community space that stands as a witness to the power of civil society.[8]

As these two examples suggest, aesthetics is not a *sine qua non* of art, at least in any traditional sense. Here, new forms of art align well with conceptual art of the sixties. Like conceptual art, these projects pose many questions, like whether the artist's touch is needed to create an artwork;

whether art is something that belongs to the art world or whether what people do can be art; whether the artwork is the idea behind the work or the actual outcome; and so forth.[9]

Picture 1. Pierre Huyghe: pictures from a retrospective in Centre Pompidou in Paris, December 2013. Photographs by IK.

If the art world is a relevant precedent, we can expect to see many approaches to aesthetics in design, which has gone through a similar transition from its traditional objects to working with communities. The next three sections look at three ways in which aesthetics enters contemporary design. It is based on an analysis of eight recent cases of design research. The cases are Anna Meroni's recent work in Milan; Katja Soini's research in East Helsinki; Andrea and Marcelo Judices' studies in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia; recent writings in participatory design by Pelle Ehn, Peter Daalsgaard, Thomas Markussen, and Carl DiSalvo; and recent work in critical design, most notably in London in critical design, the Material Beliefs project, and Bill Gaver's recent work. All these cases have their origins in design, have a significant design component, take people designed-for seriously, and produce not only designs, but also texts, which makes it possible to decipher them. References are at the end of the paper.

Picture 2. Park Fiction in Hamburg, Germany: transferring a derelict urban no-place under development into a community space. The method was turning the planning process into a game that activated local knowledge. From http://park-fiction.net, accessed 23 Oct, 2014

***Aesthetics as* Verfremdung**

One way to understand aesthetics in relational design builds on several 20th Century avant-garde movements in art and in some cases, philosophy. Here we meet yet another take on aesthetics, which aims at changing human perceptions and habits rather than creating community. The best-known examples of this work come from London, which saw the arise of critical design at the turn of the century, but also new research methods inspired by art.[10] The aim of early critical design, roughly, was to create distance from design as usual. Using a memorable metaphor, normal designs were as Hollywood Blockbusters, designed to please as many people as possible. Critical design, on the other hand, worked from the margins, questioning the self-evident character of design as usual.

Over the years, this stem has branched out into three different directions: critical design works on science; design for debate targets community perceptions; and work coming from Goldsmiths aims to balance unusual forms with a familiar appearance. For more than a decade, this interpretation of

aesthetic has had two aims: familiar appearance suggests that objects could be used, while unusual forms suggest that they are research objects. The outcome is always unusual, but never otherworldly.[11] The difference to critical designers is that for critical designers, the balance is between manufacturability and strangeness. In "design for debate," which is the most obviously relational strand of critical design, this aesthetic has been extended into the community. Designs have been placed in museums, fairs, community centers and cafes, where they have served as starting points of conversation. Debates around these objects have been curated to the extent in which it is possible to curate debates building on ambiguous designs designed to open discourse rather than direct it. (Picture 3).[12]

Picture 3. *Flight Tracker* by Bill Gaver and his studio; two pictures from *Material Beliefs* (materialbeliefs.com). For the Flight Tracker picture, thanks to Bill Gaver.

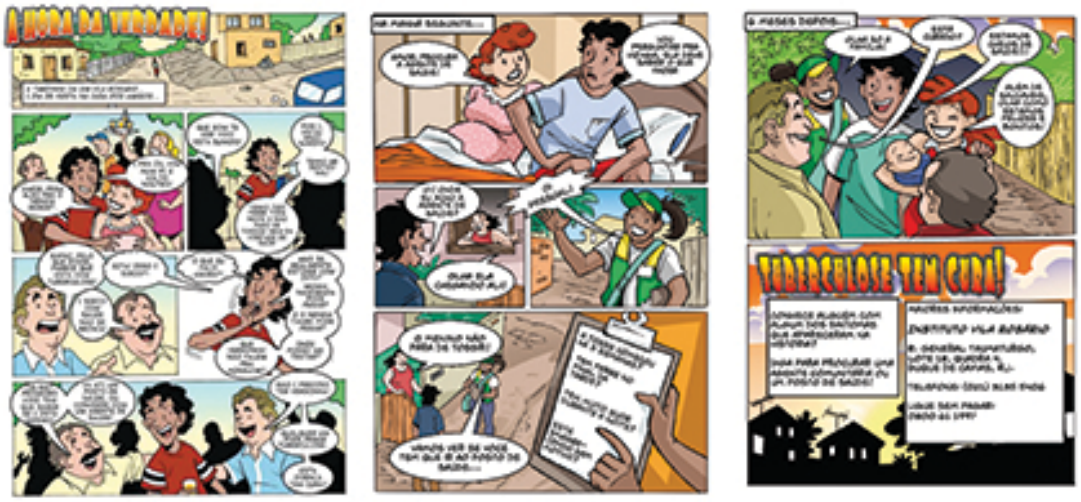
The aim is to provide tools for reasoned discourse that helps participants to shape their attitudes independent of marketing talk and science, and that way make better decisions. Designers create a community in which the best argument gets a fair chance behind all those social forces that usually mask it. As people participate in debate, their thinking gets better informed, but they also learn others' perspectives and that way, learn to take their interests better into account. The result is a Habermasian transcendental, ideal community that respects the rules of rational argumentation. Situationist *derives* and *detournements* are necessary to set this ideal speech community in motion.[13]

There are also agonistic variations in this line of thinking. These variations have their roots in participatory design, which had roots in trade union politics of Scandinavia.[14] Those following this logic see the role of aesthetics as an alarm. Exceptional aesthetics is a way to stop people by breaking their habits. After this has happened, their reflections are guided to politically desired directions. Aesthetics becomes an exercise in Brechtian *Verfremdung*, which is a precondition to a dialogue that may lead to change in society. Needless to say, in this line of thinking aesthetics becomes an instrument of political consciousness, and it is usually directed against the alienating impulses of bureaucracies, tycoons, and other forms of rationality that – in Habermasian language – colonize lifeworlds and refuse to treat people as individuals.[15]

Conceptual Design Aesthetics

Another approach to aesthetics in relational design comes from empathic design, which has expanded its scope from smart products to networks and communities.[16] One example of how empathic designers work with aesthetics is a recent piece of work by Katja Soini and Heidi Paavilainen, who did a community project in East Helsinki in 2012. In *Ave Mellunkyla!*, they moved their design studio into the neighborhood with the aim of learning to live like the locals in order to develop a long-term vision for the renovation of the suburb. They organized several activities during the project, including things like video competitions for local pre-teens and teens, and design workshops for the adult population. They saw the process of developing the vision as social sculpting in which their job was to keep the process going.[17]

In *Vila Rosario, Rio*, Marcelo and Andrea Judice developed a series of designs to assist local women hired as health agents in their works against tuberculosis. After probing Vila Rosario, they did a field study, and then developed and tested the designs in the village. In their work, the Judices captured the local aesthetic in detail in their design process with a variety of visual methods.[18] This was the popular aesthetic of Vila Rosario, with colors and forms typical to impoverished neighborhoods, and characters based on Brazilian *telenovelas*. The actual design pieces, however, were done professionally to keep their cost down, and to make them attractive enough. Theory and the professional quality of the final designs was for them a way to keep distance from the community. Their approach is consistent with aesthetic double play held dear by many industrial designers which, on one hand, tells them to stay away from aesthetics, which it is a matter of taste, and on the other hand, tells them to capture the mood of the times for their designs with tools like moodboards, sketches and mock-ups. (Picture 4).[19]



Picture 4. *Vila Rosario*, thanks to Andrea and Marcelo Judice

This is an aesthetic that tells viewers to focus on the idea, not on visible details. By bracketing aesthetic intentions, they withdrew themselves from the work and let others do it. The aim, simply, was to make sure that the spectators would not start to search traces of the designers' skills.[20] Instead, they had to focus on the idea, and as the artwork as such could be only a sentence, or a snapshot photograph, and thus something any child could do, even the designer was not important.

Such a withdrawal of aesthetic has several implications to aesthetics in design. It tells the designers to push their own aesthetic judgment to the background and build on popular aesthetics of the people instead. In many ways, this is consistent with the instrumental attitude to aesthetics typical to many industrial designers. In their work, they want to capture the mood of the place or times in their designs it, and often refuse to theorize about aesthetics. This way of working, however simple it sounds, is fairly similar to many trends in contemporary participatory and collaborative art. For example, Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* in Houston's Third Ward took a community and treated it as a found object. With his colleagues, Lowe bought row houses in the neighborhood with money from foundations supporting art and rebuilt the houses to keep local residents in the Third Ward. Inspired by John Biggers and Joseph Beuys, PRH created a place for people to live. It sided with politicians talking for the poor against the interests of real estate business, which had already its eyes on Third Ward. [21]

Seen against this background, we can catch a glimpse of how aesthetic works in *Ave Mellunkyla!* and *Vila Rosario*. Social forms have their own aesthetics. Designers may treat these as *objet trouve*, much as Rick Lowe treated Third Ward in Project Row Houses or Naoto Fukusawa and Jasper Morrison and Konstantin Grcic in the *Supernormal* and *Design Real* exhibitions.[22] Their approach was process-based, but instead of creating an enclosed temporary community like Tiravanija, these researchers did confront the institutional realities beyond their control, and worked with these realities when they intervened in their work. Paradoxically, by withdrawing aesthetic intentions, the resulting aesthetic guarantees that design lives in "the heart of the people": the result is a sophisticated articulation of popular aesthetic.[23]

Conviviality: The Aesthetics of Interaction

Yea another way in which researchers have dealt with aesthetics makes a split between two types of aesthetics. First, there is aesthetics as usual, which means that everything designers do in a project has to look like design. Thus, even in community design, which is an outgrowth of service design,

graphics, physical objects and Web sites have the look of being designed. The prevailing aesthetic there, however, is typical to design: it captures the spirit of the times and works with it. Aesthetics is not a discourse; rather, it is an outgrowth of a visual research practice.

Second, there is the aesthetics of community – the ways in which people interact and jointly create an object the designers have helped them to bring forth. Here, the aesthetic may be hard to put in words, but it exists in the new interactions that designers have imagined, and the outcomes of these interactions. Says Anna Meroni, an Italian designer behind *Nutrire Milano* (Feeding Milan), a project seeking to reconnect the Milanese to the agricultural Parco Sud (South Park) producers through a service prototype:

> Of course the more "conventional" idea of aesthetics is still important: the "beauty" and care of the physical spaces (interior and exterior design), of the visual evidences (logo, communication, touch points), of the tools for any interaction. This is part of service design in the more traditional sense and it is very important. In collaborative services this is one of the most complex part to manage and, in a way, "direct". Let's say that, sometimes one need to re-set the direction... Nevertheless, talking about the appeal of Feeding Milano... we have always talked about the aesthetic of interaction, and in particular the sense of "conviviality".[24]

When aesthetics is understood as conviviality, it goes through several changes from what Meroni calls the conventional idea of aesthetics. It becomes an idea rather than something built into objects. It is the property of community involved in design. As the designers do not claim to have aesthetic authority over the community, the approach become conceptual: like in John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings*, designers create conditions for a design work to happen, rather than orchestrate it in detail. This is quiet aesthetics that is not meant to change a community, but rather give it an opportunity to enjoy what it already has. The new thing here is the community and its ability to rejoice communally; this is what makes the work different from conceptual artists, who placed art into ideas. (Picture 5).[25]

Picture 5. *Nutrire Milano*, thanks to Anna Meroni.

One obvious art world precedent is Rirkrit Tiravanija and his process art centering on Thai food and tea rituals. In its conceptual, quiet foundations, Tiravanija's work has many similarities to Nutrire Milano. Just like Tiravanija, however, Nutrire Milano has difficulties in defining its limits. Nutrire Milano did not look into the power struggles of society, but turned its efforts into community building. This leaves designs vulnerable to actions by those outsiders whose work sets the limits to the project. In Milan, the city closed the first farmers' market of Nutrire Milano in Largo Marinai

d'Italia in Eastern Milan because of local opposition to increased activity in this quiet neighborhood.[26]

Discussion

This paper has looked at what happens to aesthetic when experience design has branched out from its traditional base in industrial and interaction design into relational design. I have explored this question through art by looking at what kinds of arguments and approaches contemporary artists have developed in response to a similar shift.

When we look at those contemporary designers who work with communities, we find several ways to work with the question. These interpretations of aesthetics, as different as they may be, lead to a few commonalities. First, all make some sort of distinction between conventional design aesthetic and something different. Second, aesthetics is a social property: people have aesthetics, and this aesthetic needs to be respected by designers. Third, aesthetics is situated outside objects into the community. Fourth, most researchers fit into the prevailing aesthetic of the community, and are happy with that. This is not universal aesthetic of Kant or the Bauhaus. Finally, these aesthetics are, as expected, of convivial and friendly kind, not the aesthetics of agonism of many of the 20th Century avantgarde movements in art. The closest equivalences are the new, collaborative forms of art.[27]

Some differences are equally obvious. The actual way in which aesthetics is dealt with differs from one researcher to another. These differences essentially stem from philosophical differences. Regardless of how philosophical they may be, they have implications to design: for example, design for debate gives aesthetics a triggering role in Habermasian reasoned argumentation, while the notion of conviviality seeks aesthetics from community spirit, communion, celebration, and togetherness. More conceptual approaches direct designers to work with people's aesthetics and play down their role in the aesthetic process.

What do these projects teach to experience designers? Clearly, as design has expanded its scope, designers have sought new, extended concepts of aesthetics accordingly. New objects have expanded discourse, and invited designers to venture into something new. It has been a leap of faith, and although little consistent terminology exists, there are fresh interpretations that give designers ways for working with aesthetics. This paper has suggested contemporary art as a place to learn from: it does not provide answers, but helps to raise questions that help designers to understand better one of the cornerstones of their work, how aesthetics relates to experience.

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Notes

[1] See Forlizzi and Ford 2000; Battarbee 2004; Wright and McCarthy 2004.

[2] *Presence Project* 2001; Rizzo 2009.

[3] For services, see Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011; critical design, Parsons 2009 and Dunne 2007; social design and activism, Julier 2013; world design, Judice 2014.

[4] Bourriaud 2002.

[5] Kester 2004, 2011; Bishop 2012.

[6] Bishop 2012: 199-200.

[7] Huyghe 2013; Bourriaud 2001.

[8] For even more minimalistic projects, see Kester's analysis of *WochenKlasur* and *Project Row Houses* (Kester 2004 and 2011)..

[9] In Sol Lewitt 's words, "ideas alone can be works of art... all ideas need not be made physical" (1969); Lawrence Weiner's famous statement of intent stated in a similar manner how "the artist may construct a piece. The piece may be fabricated. The piece need not be built." In the footsteps of Duchamp, he located art in the receiver rather than the artist alone (Weiner 1969).

[10] For critical design, see Dunne and Raby 2001; for new methods, see *Presence Project* 2001.

[11] Dunne 2007.

[12] Beaver et al. (2009) and http://www.materialbeliefs.com; Bill Gaver, e-mail, 24 Oct 2014.

[13] Habermas 1987: 17ff. Dunne (2005, p. 83) distances himself from Marxism: "Many issues touched on here, such as... the need for art to resist easy assimilation, overlap with those already addressed by the Frankfurt School... The similarities between these issues and those addressed by Marxist approaches to aesthetics do not imply an identification with Marxism but are the result of seeing design as having value outside the marketplace."

[14] DiSalvo (2012) has been a particularly vocal proponent of agonistic thinking in interaction design.

[15] Habermas 1987; see also Maldonado (1972) and Ehn (1988).

[16] Mattelmaki, Vaajakallio and Koskinen 2014.

[17] issuu.com/lahio2072/docs/design_collaboration_____thoughts_. Social sculpting is an obvious reference to Joseph Beuys, and especially his *7000 Oaks* in Documenta 7 in Kassel.

[18] A. Judice (2014) sought guidance from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, while M. Judice (2014) built on Wittgenstein's later philosophy, following Pelle Ehn's (1988) earlier work in participatory design.

[19] A. Judice 2014. One of the best-known recent artworks, Ai Weiwei's *Dropping the Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), was for him an attempt to explore how we decide what is valuable by giving a new form to an antique vase by shattering it. See youtube.com/watch?v=rCgo6b6bqqQ&feature=related, March 21, 2010.

[20] Weiner's (1969) and Lewitt's (1969) statements aside, the most famous examples are John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings* and Donald Judd's sculptures made by iron workers after the *Primary Structures* exhibition (1966). In these works, the artist commissioned the actual craft to others to make sure their "touch" could not be used as a sign of originality the art work.

[21] projectrowhouses.org.

[22] Fukusawa and Morrison, *Supernormal*; Grcic, *Design Real*.

[23] Ai Weiwei, "Shame on me." Der Spiegel, Nov 21, 2011. spiegel.de/international/world/ai-weiwei-shame-on-me-a-799302.html.

[24] Anna Meroni, e-mail at 15 Oct 6:05 am. The best description of Nutrire Milano in English is Baek et al. (2015). A point that needs to be added is that conviviality is not to be confused with the aesthetics of interaction in interaction design. In that discipline, it has come to mean explorations into the aesthetics of action and attempts to translate these explorations into objects. For example, Ross 2008.

[25] Esp. like Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner (1969) and Sol LeWitt (1969).

[26] Tiravanija (2007) talks about process art; Bishop (2012: 210-211) points out a paradox in Tiravanija's work: as it intensifies convivial relations for a small group, it excludes others. Kester (2004: 105) tells about Tiravanija's performance in Cologne which took place while the police was breaking a homeless camp right outside the Kunstverein, attracting criticism in press, local art community. The narrative construction of Tiravanija's work has also been critiqued; Gabriel Orozco, for instance, tells how his performances target those on the rim rather than include people in the artwork (Morgan 2011: 25).

[27] Kester 2004, 2011; Bishop 2012.