Confusions: How Design Research Meets Art and Design

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Introduction

One of the more exciting ways design research has developed over the last few years is on its borderline with contemporary art. Important work has been accomplished in many places. The focus of this paper is on constructive design research, in which design becomes a key part of research. In a recent book, I have explored its methodologies. These methodologies range from laboratory-style experimentation through field-work-based methods to methodologies that build on art and design traditions rather than on the sciences or even the social sciences (Koskinen et al, 2011).

Those who seek inspiration from art face the question of the borderline between art and design. These researchers make constant references to art and design, confusing discourse. They also build prototypes using techniques borrowed from design (and sometimes art), confusing methods and outcomes. They ultimately exhibit their work in galleries and museums, among other places, again directing followers into an artistic frame of mind.

Perhaps more than anyone, these questions haunt Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, who rose to fame through *critical design*. As the name suggests, their work was targeted at criticizing design, much in the tradition of – in Germano Celant's terms – "controdesigners" (Celant, 1972). Their work, however, is typically exhibited in art galleries and exhibitions all the way up to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which exhibits their work as design, but situates it in the midst of contemporary art and artistic discourse.[1] Nevertheless, Dunne and Raby are not alone on the borderline between art and design. Every design researcher who builds on art and design deals with this in-between zone.

No doubt, pushing design towards art also has its benefits. It aligns design with a more prestigious discourse. It also lends the conceptual freedom to explore questions that would not attract an attentive ear in industry, or even in most design schools. As Ulm's Otl Aicher noted in the fifties, art may encourage experiments that would be labeled silly by

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[1] See MoMA, 2008, which had a section on critical design,

professional designers. Would you like to sit in a strictly Cubist chair? (Aicher, 2009).

This paper examines the borderline between art and design. It looks at recent contemporary design research, but also discourse in contemporary art and design. This is where we find the best experience.

Going Overboard

The downside of the coin does still exist. If a designer situates her work in the art world, it builds on discourses and practices that do not come from design. When seeing work from groups such as Droog, many designers see unfinished conceptual pieces: Art rather than design. Designers need to pay attention to the borderline between art and design. Tony Dunne says:

> *What we do is definitely not art. It might borrow heavily from art in terms of methods and approaches but that's it. Art is expected to be shocking and extreme. Design needs to be closer to the everyday, that's where its power to disturb comes from. Too weird and it will be dismissed as art, too normal and it will be effortlessly assimilated. If it is regarded as art it is easier to deal with, but if it remains as design it is more disturbing, it suggests that the everyday as we know it could be different, that things could change.* (Dunne 2007, p. 10)

Obviously, this is an exaggeration. There are many artists who do not shock. Think about Sophie Calle's "Take Care of Yourself" at the Venice Biennale in 2007. It surely disturbs, but its melancholy, absurd, humorous tone brings to mind Godard's "Jules et Jim" rather than, say, Orlan's self-mutilations. But is Calle's piece shocking? Surely not.

This is not, however, the point. Dunne puts his finger on an important thing. Design students, in particular, tend to use critical design as a license to shock. The list of things they find shocking is normal: racism, pedophilia, sex. In their enthusiastic effort to be critical, students are routinely blinded by their very enthusiasm. If they want their professors to turn a blind eye, they may hit the right nail on the head by building sex toys. However, creating a plastic female body for masturbation is misogynistic and probably offends women more than their professors. And is it a novelty? Hardly. It does not pass the test criteria set for critical design, and it dehumanizes the weak.

The problem, however, is larger. This is the dominant image of contemporary art for many who do not follow it. If designers want to build on art, and buy this image, their designs may turn inwards. Instead of

doing things for society, or trying to make their fellow designers think about how to design better for society, they try to insult their peers and teachers.

Quite simply, it is easy to go overboard. If this happens, designers risk shooting themselves in the foot. Here we can learn from art. As the Dutch critic Hans den Hartog Jager has noted, art had become an autonomous world by the early sixties. Being largely autonomous from social pressures lent artists the freedom to explore practically anything. With freedom, however, came the risk of being irrelevant.

> *"Only in the 1960s was it apparent that something quite different had happened... Art was a bonfire of freedom in those years, a bonfire of the vanities as well, a world in which everything was possible... But society, meanwhile, had had enough: it knew the mechanism, saw through it and shrugged its collective shoulders... Despite all its controversial messages, this art was not thwarted and so appeared to be accepted. But in essence, that lack of opposition is a sign of indifference. The art world became a world in itself, an unbounded, unrestrained world that forfeited its rights as a seismograph, commentator and mirror of the real world. The boundary wall became too high."* (den Hartog Jager, 2003, pages 115-116.)

The issue is not what design researchers do, but that if designers are not taking researchers' stuff seriously, it does not ripple. If researchers go towards art, they may win many things. However, they must take care not to go overboard.

How can design researchers avoid confusions between art and design? Is this question relevant in what Andrea Branzi (1988) has called a second modernity – a world in which ambiguity is impossible to avoid, at least if we believe in Robert Venturi's old book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*?

It's the Institution, Stupid!

Exhibiting in galleries, museums, and showrooms is attractive to designers and researchers for several reasons. Exhibitions make designs concrete, tangible, and touchable. Exhibitions are symbolically prestigious, with polished rituals that open design to wealthy, educated clientele. In the gallery setting, designers can work with taboo topics, play with scale, experiment with materials, and explore aesthetics that would not be interesting from a commercial standpoint.

Small wonder that many design researchers prefer to publish in exhibitions rather than in conventional publications!

Exhibitions can be a Faustian bargain, however. Designers may end up paying far more than they get. When design is exhibited, design becomes an intellectual object, something to be seen and reflected upon, rather than something to be used. Seeing Jurgen Bey's "Tree Trunk Bench" in the Droog Design shop in Amsterdam is unlike seeing it in its original location in Oranienburg near Berlin. In Staalstraat, it is a curious, expensive object. In Oranienburg, the idea of turning logs on the ground into benches with a backrest was a wonderful, humorous spark of design imagination (Weiss, 1999).

It is also not obvious what the long-term effects of going artistic are. To be sure, pushing design to its artistic extremes is useful, to a degree. There is room for laboratories of imagination. But oddly enough, these laboratories push design in a very conservative direction. Organizations like Design Miami/Basel are not interested in mundane products, services, or plans to revive communities. After all, how can one sell cutting-edge research projects like "Nutrire Milano" in a gallery? (See Manzini, 2008.) These laboratories seem to produce radical conservatives, as Pierre Bourdieu called Martin Heidegger.

Of course, this route does not need to have Faustian overtones. There are sensitive, knowledgeable and serious curators with a wonderful sense of humor. Describing Petra Helm and Martin Rinderknecht in Berlin with any other terms would be wrong. The point is simply that designers relinquish a lot of control to curators and gallerists when they work in the art world.

Drawing the Line

By now, constructive design researchers have come up with several ways that make it possible for them to seek inspiration and tactics from art and design but position themselves outside the art world. It looks to me that there are four main ways to do this in current design (research) literature.

One way is to place design in an industrial setting by using industrial techniques and processes. Says Fiona Raby:

> *"By emphasizing that this is design, we make our point stronger. Though the shock effect of art may be created, it is also more abstract and it doesn't move me that much. The concept of design, however, implies that things can be used... What is more: all of our works could actually be manufactured. No one will of course, but as a matter of principle, it would be possible."* (Raby, 2008, p. 65)

This principle makes design skills and training essential. In thinking about manufacturability, designers have to take seriously things like materials, machinery, joints, and making proper (usually) parametric CAD models, among other things.

This is not the world of art anymore, but it is true to design. Design is not free art; to make research relevant for design, research cannot be free art either. Designers may make small series of conceptual pieces and even sign them (see Lovell 2009), but this principled manufacturability is different from artistic objects that, ready-mades and pop art included, are tied to originality.

As anyone familiar with design can easily figure out, this criterion is porous. At the minimal end, it requires that there be technical drawings or CAD models to enable manufacturing. Other researchers have created different tactics. For example, James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau built two pieces of their "Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots." Making these robots required drawings and technical and material specifications. In addition, electronics and software had to be specified in detail. All this extra work aimed at saying that the robots were design objects, not interactive art. In design terms, the second piece was redundant, but it was needed to support the argumentation.

Another way to create distance to art is participation in dialogue. Conceptual, research-based pieces do not have to be exhibited in art galleries and museums. They can also be exhibited in places where they attract the attention of the people for whom they are meant. For example, "Material Beliefs," a recent project in London, created concepts from the social implications of front-end science (Beaver et al, 2009). Instead of being content with merely publishing their work in exhibitions or scientific publications, the researchers in "Material Beliefs" went to places like schools and community gatherings to discuss their work. The Stockholm-based project "Design Act" (see Ericson et al, 2009), is another example. It discusses: "contemporary design practices that engage with political and societal issues" by examining "tendencies towards design as a critical practice, which is ideologically and practically engaged in these issues. If designers participate in dialog about the meaning of their work, it is not only curators, critics, and media who define it. A degree of control can be gained this way." (Koskinen et al. 2011, p. 98)

This is no news to contemporary artists, who have been taking their work out of the galleries for decades (see Friedling, 2008). The reason for this, however, is every bit as valid as before. Projects like "Material Beliefs" and "Design Act" are designed to tickle the imagination and shift

arguments in public discourse. The only proper test ground for these projects is public discourse.

Yet another way is to follow designs in society. Typically, this is a field study that ranges from serious ethnographic research to short-story gathering missions. At best, fieldwork is not merely a brief evaluation with a few students, but proper research that actually gives researchers a chance to see how people define design in their activities.

This kind of research is seldom on par with professional social science, but the reasons for doing research lie elsewhere. Research provides designers with tools to understand how people understand design. The insights gained are very likely quite different from the artistic mindset of gallerists and, in many ways, far more true to design than the artificial settings in which designs become – in the words of the American ethnomethodologist Eric Livingston – "deeply reasoned objects" (Livingston, 1987). Moreover, the very gesture of doing research may be every bit as important as the results. Doing research situates design in research, not art, and helps create distance from art.

To be sure, there are many things design researchers can learn from contemporary artists. Maybe the most important choice is whether to work with an open agenda or to be didactic. Among design researchers, Bill Gaver, in particular, has forcefully defended the idea of openness in fieldwork (Sengers and Gaver, 2006). If we consult the history of participatory art, didactic efforts tend to fail. In design it is likewise a good idea to focus on understanding how people make sense of designs and how they integrate them into their lives, not to teach them utopias through design.

The fourth way in contemporary design research focuses on community building. The design community is just about large and established enough to provide the possibility to think it can create its own standards on research. For example, this is happening in Scandinavia right now.

Having been able to create such islands of meaning has its attractions. Their success has radicalized many designers to think they can redefine research. What is deviant for scientists and the social scientists is quite simply defined as normal for design researchers. Logic becomes a matter of announcement. Out goes the requirement for any proof beyond the smiles the work raises among the audience.

It seems to me that this is utopian. Design research may have gained a degree of autonomy, but how far can it go on this route without losing its credibility? Winning friends among researchers, professional skeptics of the best sort, is difficult. But doing the hard work of convincing scientific gatekeepers has its rewards. If designers manage to gain a foothold in

research, they also enter a world that is far wealthier and more powerful than the art world. Does it make sense to lose relevance in its eyes?

Another question is that setting up small islands of meaning is at odds with what the leading contemporary artists and designers are doing. Many, if not most, leading artists and designers try to integrate their work with the everyday. Hans den Hartog Jager made this point clear in writing about artists after 9/11:

> *"Those that saw the towers collapsing – Jay McInerney, Amitavh Ghosh or Brett Easton Ellis – had no need for ambiguity or controversy. They limited themselves to writing reports, journalistic items or impressions. The 'artistic' take came from artists who witnessed the attacks thousands of miles away on television. The detached remarks by (Karl-Heintz) Stockhausen, (Damian) Hirst and (Dario) Fo had to be a reminder of the artistic and independent view an artist has on the world, but confirmed what increasingly more people think – that artists are not really engaged in real life."* (den Hartog Jager, 2003, p. 118)

Stockhausen, Hirst and Fo did call 9/11 an art piece, although Stockhausen later apologized. In a similar vein, Andrea Branzi has written about young designers, contrasting their ways of working to those of their predecessors in the more revolutionary times:

> *"The new designers are often considered to be a generation of young, politically uncommitted hedonists. Indeed, if we measure them against the generation of 1969 or 1976, there is no comparison. In that period, politics was equated with absolute militancy and represented a totalizing cultural category. That era (and its disasters) is permanently finished and perhaps it is a time to assess things in a less schematic manner... the age of Revolutions... is over and with it the idea that unitary solutions are able to change society with a single gesture... Young designers see that the world around them is ugly and wrong, so they try to reform it straightway, starting with a design for a new seat, a vase, or a toy. Their multi-faceted work is in this sense unmanageable and apparently directionless; it is the result of a spontaneous political project that attempts to trigger reforming strategies that arise from the idea that aesthetics represents the most serious political problem of the future. This political practice occurs without theoretization... its action follows a molecular strategy, a sort of enzymatic energy that does not product traumatic change but slow transformation. The historical climate to which this generation*

belongs is typified by the decision to implement great transformations by starting with the infinitely small (design), the apparently superfluous, and inadequate structures.” (Branzi, 2010, no page)

If design researchers follow this route, they integrate their workings humbly with existing structures and take pride in small successes, rather than seeing these as failures on the way to revolution. Building isolated communities is not necessarily the smartest way forward. It runs the risk contemporary artists face, if they claim that they have access to a higher truth that justifies looking at the world from the outside. In Hans den Hartog Jager's colorful but apt metaphor, such artists are like old, dilapidated comics who bang on the door of their old theater and expect everyone to automatically stand up and cheer them. The best art is on the sidelines, if we believe den Hartog Jager: maybe this is where the best design research ought to be too, if it wants to flirt with art (den Hartog Jager, 2003, p. 118).

Wrap Up

Over the last few decades, design research has come of age in many ways. One interesting development has put design in the very middle of the research process. I have called such research "constructive design research" with my colleagues and classified its current methodological approaches into laboratory-based, field-research-based, and art- and design-based approaches (Koskinen et al. 2011). Constructive work is exciting for researchers and designers alike. Because it uses design techniques and processes, it can also be understood by designers.

The first two approaches build on well-known principles familiar from the sciences and the social sciences, but the third has no such basis. It calls for experimentation and methodological development. It brings design research close to contemporary art, as such, especially because its best-known proponents are critical designers, who tend to exhibit their work in galleries and museums rather than in conference papers.[2]

This paper has looked at the borderline between art and design. Its basic premise has been that art is useful for design. Designers have much to gain if they take contemporary art seriously and integrate some aspects of the art world into their work.

However, they also have much to lose. As soon as they step into the art world, they face problems contemporary artists have been struggling with

[2] For example, MoMA, 2008.

for decades. In particular, contemporary artists have pushed the boundaries of art, taste, and morality so far that at the extreme, their work is easy to label as just art: as something so detached from reality that it has nothing to tell people in ordinary life. If design and design research go this route, their fate will, at worst, be similar. Should design research produce objects that are too easy to label as art, even designers will find yet another reason to stop listening to researchers. This undermines the very raison d'être for design research.

Constructive design researchers are well aware of this problem. As this paper has shown, they have developed several ways to go onto the artistic track while creating distance from art. Through a variety of means, they underline that their work is design, rather than art. I have explored four such means in this paper. The main conclusion of this survey is that researchers should think about the borderline between art and design and find ways to make sure they do not confuse these two worlds. As related as they are, they have different aims and different criteria for success.

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