

# Design Thinking or Critical Design?

Rick Poynor

**Rick Poynor** (UK) writes about design, media and visual culture. He was the founding editor of *Eye* magazine, a co-founder of the *Design Observer* weblog, and contributes regular columns to *Eye* and to *Print* magazine in New York. His books include *Design Without Boundaries* (1998), *Obey the Giant: Life in the Image World* (2001), *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (2003), and *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice* (2008). In 2004 he curated the exhibition *Communicate: Independent British Graphic Design since the Sixties* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London. He is a Research Fellow at the Royal College of Art.

**Camiel van Winkel** (NL) is professor in visual art at the Academy for Art and Design | St. Joost in Den Bosch, the Netherlands. Based in Amsterdam, he teaches art theory at Sint Lukas School of Arts in Brussels. He is the author of *Moderne leegte: Over kunst en openbaarheid* (1999), a critical study on the theory and practices of public art. In 2005 he published *The Regime of Visibility*, a book on the dialectical relationship between art and mass culture.

Art's recently renewed romance with design – the reason for the subject's inclusion in this series of essays – comes at a time when design has been going through a phase of self-questioning and review. Seen from the perspective of the design world, which happens to be my own location as a writer, the art world's perception of both design and designers' motivations fails to take into account the full range of positions and stances possible in the contemporary design scene. Most telling, perhaps, is the enduring assumption that designers lack agency – that the designer, unlike the free artist, is fatally restrained by the presence of the client and the need to answer a given brief, so that any and every outcome must be compromised. The free art/un-free design dichotomy is so deeply inscribed that even experienced designers can be inclined to view design in these restrictive terms. The American designer (and artist) Milton Glaser reports that whenever he speaks to students they always ask him whether he does any work for himself. 'The presumption beneath that question is that since one works to assignment, the work is not for oneself. My view is that *all* the work I've done is for myself, and it also involves accommodating either a personality (the client) or problem that has to be solved. Such is the nature of the design profession.'<sup>1</sup>

While it is certainly the case that design activity is often conceived and applied in purely instrumental ways, many designers are troubled by their role in consumer capitalism. In the last decade, there has been much discussion within design education and the more self-aware parts of practice about the social and cultural role of design, a continuation of recurrent bouts of disciplinary

1. Milton Glaser, *Drawing is Thinking* (Woodstock and New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2008), 13.

soul-searching that can be traced back to modernism. It is not especially surprising if the art community is unaware of this self-examination since it is confined to specialized design publications and professional events and receives barely any attention in the general media. A more questioning view of design also fails to fit the media perception of design as being essentially concerned with branding, lifestyle, shopping, cool gadgets, luxurious home makeovers, stunning restaurant interiors and hip hotels. One might add that any critique of design issuing from the art world is likely to be complicit, too, since art insiders, just like everyone else, enjoy the trappings of the designer lifestyle.

What I want to examine here are two ways in which design is now being reconsidered within the field. The first development, called design thinking, is the more widely used term. Although design thinking claims to challenge design's established practices and received ideas, it does this from the perspective of the client's business interests, while purporting to empower design's users, and it aspires to an even more focused form of instrumentality without disclosing its underlying motivation. The second development, critical design, arises from within design practice itself and has so far received much less discussion. Critical design proposes new possibilities for design as a form of speculative practice and implicitly resists design thinking's urge to subjugate designers and control the design process in the name of a dubiously imagined public good.

In 2007, *BusinessWeek* journalist Bruce Nussbaum gave a speech at Parsons, The New School for Design in New York and then published an edited version in the blog he writes for the magazine's website. His piece was headlined 'Are Designers the Enemy of Design?' and in Nussbaum's view the answer was affirmative. 'There's a big backlash against design going on today and it's because designers suck,' he writes, acknowledging his desire to provoke.<sup>2</sup> Designers suck, he explains, because they are arrogant, believing that only they know how to design, and because they are ignorant, knowing almost nothing about sustainability. 'The rap against designers is that they design CRAP that hurts the planet,' he declares, making it sound as though these unscrupulous polluters with bloated egos are running around at will designing harmful, unnecessary junk. He has nothing critical to say about the *BusinessWeek*-reading industrialists, managers and marketing people for whose commercial enterprises and profit margins these crimes against the planet are being perpetrated. Nussbaum's argument might lack evidence and be laughably sweeping, but it captured a growing conviction among business thinkers that design has become too important to be left to designers. He ends by reporting that business people don't like the term 'design', which sounds to them like it is concerned with dresses or drapery, and that top

2. Bruce Nussbaum, 'Are Designers the Enemy of Design?', *BusinessWeek*, 18 March 2007, found at [http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/NussbaumOnDesign/archives/2007/03/are\\_designers\\_t.html](http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/NussbaumOnDesign/archives/2007/03/are_designers_t.html).



D-School website, 'Design Thinking' screen. Courtesy of Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, d-school, at Stanford University, California.

CEOs who embrace design would prefer to rename it something manly like 'innovation' – Nussbaum's calling card and the banner under which he blogs.

Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, takes up the theme: 'Business people don't just need to understand designers better – they need to become designers,' he says.<sup>3</sup> The problem with the way business people think, argues Martin, is that they are over-inclined to 'crunch the numbers' and reach for formulas that have worked in previous situations. Instead, they should organize businesses so that they operate more like design studios, where life is organized around work and one project flows into the next, and they should embrace the 'mystery' of the problem with open minds, just as designers do. Business schools locked into traditional patterns of thought have failed to deliver this new breed of manager. 'We're telling students that the big bucks are made by administering linear improvements – getting better and better at doing essentially the same thing,' says Martin. 'But the real challenge lies in getting better and better at a different thing: devising clever solutions to wickedly difficult problems.'<sup>4</sup> Rotman's answer was to introduce the study of design principles, which it calls 'business design', into its MBA courses. 'Whether the goal is to develop new products or services, create new ways of marketing to customers or reinvent an entire business model, "design thinking" helps get bigger ideas, faster and more efficiently. We believe the mindset and methods behind great design are the same ingredients for successful Business Design. By incorporating the "design experience" into our curriculum, we offer students a unique and valuable opportunity to learn new ways to tackle complex challenges in deeper and more holistic ways.'<sup>5</sup>

3. Roger Martin quoted in Bill Breen, 'The Business of Design', *Fast Company*, 19 December 2007, found at <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/93/design.html>.

4. Ibid.

5. 'Business Design', Rotman School of Management, found at <http://www.rotman.utoronto.ca/businessdesign/default.aspx>.

### Design and Innovation

'Design thinking' was given another notable boost when Stanford University launched its high-profile D-School founded on the concept. The school provides a meeting place where graduate students at Stanford from any discipline – engineering, computer science, business, medicine, humanities – can take additional courses in design. The D-School claims that only this kind of multidisciplinary interaction, with designers involved as a key part of the mix, can create the fertile conditions necessary for innovation. Today, the Internet abounds with attempts to define design thinking. Tim Brown, president of IDEO, based in Palo Alto, a highly successful design company in the forefront of the movement, uses the term as the title of his blog.<sup>6</sup> 'Design thinking is inherently about creating new choices, about divergence,' Brown told the *New York Times*. 'Most business processes are about making choices from a set of existing alternatives. Clearly, if all your competition is doing the same, then differentiation is tough. In order to innovate, we have to have new alternatives and new solutions to problems, and that is what design can do.'<sup>7</sup> Even YouTube has a short film about design thinking, offering a series of brief definitions. Among other things, we learn that design thinking is: 'Developing understanding and solutions through modelling and conceptual play'; 'Finding new insights into the familiar'; 'Imagining the as yet unimagined'; and 'Seeing and making connections'.<sup>8</sup>

When design thinking is summarized like this, it is hard to see what the fuss is about. There are no startling revelations here. Artists have always thought in this way and so have designers. There is an inescapable feeling with much of this rhetoric that business theorists, having belatedly woken up to the vital role played by design, are now trying to bottle, re-label and peddle to credulous clients – as though it were something new – intuitive modes of investigation that were always intrinsic to visual thinking. In essence, it is not much more than sales talk, a jazzy way of restating the obvious. Designers have always hoped to collaborate with clients open to design's possibilities and they have always had to deal with clients that thought they knew better, often leading to concepts and finished projects that were compromised. On one level, the new rhetoric of design thinking simply codifies and validates a longstanding reluctance, in some quarters, to trust the designer's unquantifiable expertise. It is hardly surprising that some designers are suspicious of recent attempts by business people to 'become designers', especially when the motivations of this supposedly 'human-centred' design thinking trend are so murky. If design has suddenly become human-centred, as the design thinkers assert – it's a favourite term – then what was design before: human-opposed? Designers have always visualized their task as being to improve the quality of everyday life for people by creating better objects and environments. The frequent failure,

6. *Design Thinking: Thoughts by Tim Brown*, found at <http://designthinking.ideo.com/>.

7. Tim Brown quoted in Janet Rae-Dupree, 'Design is More Than Packaging', *New York Times*, 4 October 2006, found at [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/05/business/05inbox.html?\\_r=2&scp=2&sq=stanford&st=ese&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/05/business/05inbox.html?_r=2&scp=2&sq=stanford&st=ese&oref=slogin).

8. 'Design Thinking – Some Thoughts', *YouTube*, 31 January 2008, found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RjpWfVbDWA>.

despite this idealism, to design products, services, visual communications, housing, public spaces and public facilities as well as they could be designed is a collective responsibility, in which short-sighted business decisions and failures of public policy-making play a considerable part. Design can only be as good as its commissioners.

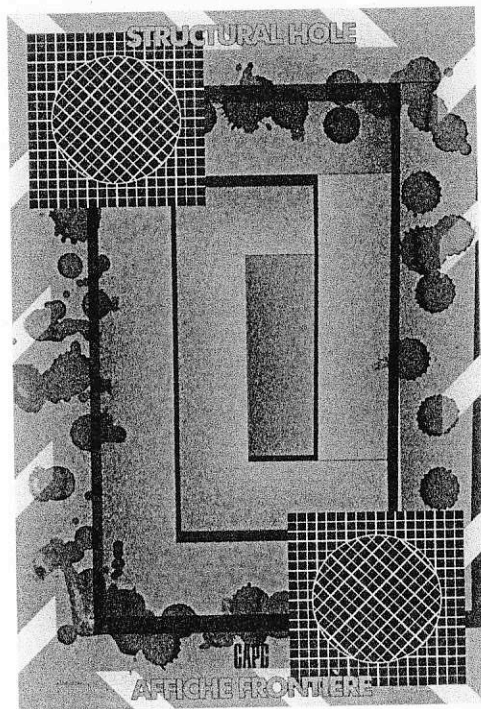
This might seem to take us some distance from art theory's concerns, but as stated earlier, art's view of design is partial – in both senses of the word – and does not address design in the round. To fully understand the conditions operating in design now, and then, perhaps, interrogate design through art, a more contextually specific awareness is necessary. The most notable recent book-length examination of the relationship between art and design, Alex Coles' *DesignArt* (2005), focuses on four areas: pattern, furniture, interiors and architecture.<sup>9</sup> Coles examines the contributions made by artists to each field, analysing both historical and recent examples – 'from Matisse to Murakami'. Designers' involvement in the art/design interface receives no attention and the design business, as a business, falls outside Coles' field of inquiry. Meanwhile, the costly collectibles produced for the growing designart market can be seen as extreme embodiments, aimed at the wealthiest class of consumers, of the view that design is inherently concerned with the consumption of luxurious designer accessories and experiences. This misapprehension now dominates public perceptions of design.

### Critical Design

By comparison with design thinking, which has the backing of wealthy universities, globally positioned, high-earning design companies and widely read business magazines, critical design is a less pushy, almost grass-roots phenomenon within the design scene. In the last two years, several exhibitions, each using the term in its title, have helped to define critical design's territory: *Designing Critical Design* (Z33 Gallery, Hasselt, Belgium, 2007); *Don't Panic: Emergent Critical Design* (Architecture Foundation, London, 2007); and *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design* (Architectural Association, London, and other venues, 2007-2009). To these might be added *Wouldn't it be nice ... wishful thinking in art and design* (Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, and other venues, 2007-2008), which featured some of the same designers as the other shows: Jurgen Bey, Martí Guixé, Dunne & Raby, and Dexter Sinister. The catalogue briefly considers the recent emergence of critical design, noting that the exhibits are not formally attached to it (though there is no formal critical design movement or group), but suggests that there might be some overlap with critical design's concerns in the exhibition's theme of wishful thinking. 'Common to both is the business of envisaging a different scheme of things, one that is imagined in spite of, or maybe even because of, harsh realities.'<sup>10</sup>

9. Alex Coles, *DesignArt: On Art's Romance with Design* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005). See also Alex Coles (ed.), *Design and Art* (London: Whitechapel and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

10. Emily King, 'Wouldn't it be nice ...' in Katya García-Antón, Emily King and Christian Brändle (eds.), *Wouldn't it be nice ... wishful thinking in art and design* (Geneva: Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, 2007), 46.



Metahaven, *Structural Hole* (poster from the series *Affiche Frontière*), 2008. © Metahaven and CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux.

11. Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience, and Critical Design* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2005, second edition), 205.

12. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (London and Basel, August and Birkhäuser, 2001), 58.

This is putting it too diffidently. Critical designers believe that design's role in society should be broader and more inquiring than simply serving the processes of manufacturing, promotion and consumption. While commerce and wealth generation are important, there are other areas of contemporary life – education, culture, health, the free exchange of information, democratic participation, sustainable living – to which design thinking (in its ordinary, non-business design sense) and design practice can make a vital contribution.

The British design duo Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby have done most to formulate and disseminate critical design as a theoretical and operational position. Dunne used the term in the subtitle of his first book, *Hertzian Tales* (1999),<sup>11</sup> and Dunne & Raby's *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (2001) develops the concept. 'Critical design, or design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think, is just as difficult and just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers,' they write. 'Critical design takes as its medium social, psychological, cultural and economic values, in an effort to push the limits of lived experience not the medium.'<sup>12</sup> As pragmatically inclined theorists and committed educators, Dunne & Raby are exerting considerable influence on a new generation of critical designers

– they teach in the Design Interactions department at the Royal College of Art, London.

For Dunne & Raby, as for other critical designers, the purpose of critical design is to stimulate discussion and debate among designers, industry and the public. Its basic tool is the speculative proposal – a design version of 'paper' or 'un-built' architecture – used to extrapolate the possibilities of design ideas that may never be realized as finished projects, or put into mass production. Proposals might take the form of plans, drawings, texts, videos or models. Using these devices, critical design has the potential to travel far beyond the usual boundaries of design conceived as an activity concerned primarily with the creation of commodities.

While a critical point of view will be the basis of any intelligent design process, it should be remembered that some designers have always taken the practice further. The stance of the early modernist artist-designers was a critical reaction – underpinned by utopian idealism – to the outdated aesthetic dogma, inefficient modes of production, and restrictive social conventions and political structures of the time. Intellectually and practically wide-ranging designers such as Charles and Ray Eames and Bruno Munari also have much in common with contemporary critical designers. 'When the objects we use every day and the surroundings we live in have become in themselves a work of art, then we shall be able to say we have achieved a balanced life,' writes Munari, a Futurist artist who later transferred his attentions to graphic and industrial design.<sup>13</sup> Victor Papanek's influential book *Design for the Real World* (1971) was a radical blueprint for rethinking design practice in terms of a more rational ecology. Also in the 1970s, the Italian team Superstudio mounted a sustained attack on architecture's and design's role in servicing the consumer culture. 'If design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design ... until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs,' writes Superstudio member Adolfo Natalini.<sup>14</sup> The Dutch graphic designer Jan van Toorn, active in the 1970s and 1980s, provides another paradigm for the critically engaged practitioner. The critical designer, Van Toorn advised, should make viewers aware of the ways they are being manipulated by design by restructuring the message and making its code visible.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1990s, graphic design theorists, seeking greater autonomy for designers, proposed the idea of the 'designer as author', a self-motivated initiator of projects who was not content merely to carry out a client's bidding without offering a personal point of view.<sup>16</sup> This powerful idea has been taken on board by critically inclined industrial designers, most notably Dunne & Raby.<sup>17</sup> Another widely used term, representing a similar desire to reform design practice, is 'citizen designer' – an image that makes the designer's social responsibility plain.<sup>18</sup> As a developing category of design, critical design grows from the ideas and innovations of all these earlier design movements and tendencies.

13. Bruno Munari, *Design as Art* (London: Penguin Books, 2008, first published in 1966), 27.

14. Adolfo Natalini, 'Inventory, Catalogue, Systems of Flux ... A Statement,' in: Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2003), 167.

15. See Rick Poynor, *Jan van Toorn: Critical Practice* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008).

16. See Michael Rock, 'The Designer as Author', *Eye*, no. 20, vol. 5 (spring 1996), 44-53.  
17. Dunne, *Hertzian Tales*, op. cit. (note 11), 75-78.  
18. Steven Heller and Véronique Vienne (eds.), *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility* (New York: Allworth Press, 2003).

### Art and Design

Contemporary critical designers share some obvious concerns with contemporary artists. First, and most controversially, their work is often self-initiated, though this doesn't rule out working to commission for clients in the usual way. Second, the exhibition space is the primary platform for presenting their speculative projects and proposals and engaging the public. Third, some critical designers have working relationships and friendships with artists. British artist Ryan Gander, for instance, has close ties with designer-editor Stuart Bailey of Dexter Sinister – they have collaborated on a book – and both were included in the mix of artists and designers featured in *Wouldn't it be nice . . .* 'Our purpose is not to propose a destruction of the boundary [between art and design],' write the curators, 'but to create a space to investigate the divide in an environment where art asks questions of design and design asks questions of itself.'<sup>19</sup> Without already knowing which was which, it would have been difficult, solely on the basis of the projects presented in the exhibition, to distinguish the artists from the designers in most cases. Nevertheless, while some critical designers might indulge in wishful thinking that they could be taken seriously as artists, Dunne & Raby emphatically reject the idea that their work should be understood as art,

19. *Wouldn't it be nice . . .*, catalogue (London: Somerset House Embankment Galleries, 2008).



Dunne & Raby,  
Robot 4: Needy one from  
*Technological Dreams Series*:  
No. 1, Robots, 2007.  
Photo: Per Tingleff.  
© the artists.

although they dislike the separation of art and design and regard the blurring of boundaries as desirable. This is a view shared by the Dutch 'design think tank' Metahaven, founded by graphic designers Daniël van der Velden and Vinca Kruk and spatial designer Gon Zifroni, who were included – as was Bailey – in 'Forms of Inquiry'.<sup>20</sup> Both teams argue that the persuasive force of their projects, as visual arguments, depends on its framing and reception as design. These proposals are aimed at industry, policymakers and design's users, the public. If they were to be perceived as art, as purely fanciful constructions with no intended application, then it would be easy to dismiss them as catalysts for provoking changes in our use of design.

The ambiguous nature of critical design projects can be seen in Dunne & Raby's *Technological Dreams Series*, commissioned by curator Jan Boelen for 'Designing Critical Design' at Z33, and also shown in *Wouldn't it be nice . . .* and in *Design and the Elastic Mind* at the Museum of Modern Art (2008). The piece consists of four 'robots': Robot 1, a high-density foam ring; Robot 2, a funnel-like form; Robot 3, an angled wooden box; Robot 4, a white screen mounted on a movable wooden platform.<sup>21</sup> Presented only as immobile objects, these would have been un-engaging. What gives the series life and humour is a video by Noam Toran – also a critical designer – in which a young woman responds to each robot in a manner that reveals its personality. The woman, dressed with fetishistic formality in a black dress with white trimmings and long black socks, moves around the white space with studied grace and precision, circling, approaching and picking up the robots, so that her interactions take on the quality of a stylized rather than naturalistic performance. Robot 2 is described by the designers as nervous: it scans intruders with its many eyes and becomes agitated if they approach. Robot 4 is characterized as needy, fidgety and whiney. Using its own expressive electronic language, it calls the woman to encourage her to move it around, coaxing her into forming a symbiotic bond with its unfathomable machine intelligence. The robots prompt questions not only about the nature of our growing interdependence with complex forms of technology, but about the possible new relationships that might emerge as artificial intelligence evolves. In Dunne & Raby's science-fiction scenario, machines entirely lacking in human or animal attributes in their outward appearance nevertheless share emotional characteristics with children or pets that oblige human care-givers to react to their needs, demands and whims.

*Technological Dreams'* emotionally engaging micro-narrative works a similar effect on the viewer. Dunne & Raby might think like artists, but the cogency of their analysis comes from being situated in design. A curator asks Dunne what design must accomplish. 'The integration of poetry and everyday life,' he replies. 'A hybrid of politics and poetry . . . Design can only follow our

20. See Zak Kyes and Mark Owens (eds.), *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design* (London: Architectural Association, 2007).

21. This follows the robots' numbering in Libby Hruska and Rebecca Roberts (eds.), *Design and the Elastic Mind* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 28–29. The numbering differed elsewhere.

22. Anthony Dunne quoted in Christian Brändle, 'Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades', in: King and Brändle, *Wouldn't it be nice* . . . , op. cit. (note 10), 163.

needs and desires, it can't create them. If our desires remain unimaginative and practical, then that is what design will be. I suppose in our projects we are hoping for a time when we will have more complex and subtle everyday needs than we do today. Our objects are designed in anticipation of that time. Patiently waiting. Maybe they are utopian.<sup>22</sup> Measured against critical design's wild dreams, design thinking's rhetoric just sounds tawdry.

# Middle Culture

## Designers, Artists, Professionals

Camiel van Winkel

The opposition between high and low culture, between elite art and the culture industry, is a product of modernity. Historically the rise of mass culture must be linked to the appearance of the autonomous work of art. Each half of this pair can only be imagined in opposition to its 'other'. The split between high and low culture is more than a product or effect of modernity – you could say it is its foundation. To borrow a phrase from Boris Groys: 'Modernity is not only characterized, but even constituted by this split: in a sense modernity is nothing but this split.'<sup>1</sup> The autonomous work of art is inconceivable without its dialectical counterpart, its 'other': the heteronomous and the banal; the kitsch product; global mass entertainment. Before Beethoven and Balzac there was no such thing as kitsch. During the centuries of human civilization that passed before the autonomy of the artist was installed, mass culture didn't exist. It needed the technologies of mass communication, mass production and mass distribution in order to come into existence. Mass culture definitely is an industry, in every sense of the word.

Both the autonomous work of art and the culture industry were predicated upon social, economical and technological changes that followed the Industrial Revolution, the demise of the *ancien régime* and the emancipation of the middle classes. Walter Benjamin's intuition that modern reproduction technologies would forever end the realm of the contemplative, elitist work of art has proven unfounded. The relationship between the two forms is dialectical. Art and mass culture are each other's spinoff . . . each other's debris . . . each other's perversion . . . each other's disgrace . . . This is a mechanism that cuts both ways: art is a derivative of mass culture just as much as mass culture is a derivative of high art. Mass culture amounts to junk when measured

1. Boris Groys, 'Fundamentalismus als Mittelweg zwischen Hoch- und Massenkultur', in: Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters* (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997), 65.