

Entitlement Crisis and Post-Criticality in Design Discourse

Carlos Romo-Melgar

This essay delineates the role of speculative design as a practice that can solve an undergoing crisis of boundaries within design. The structure is divided into two sections that critically enquire two circumstances, with the aim of finding areas of intersection where the designer has opportunities to operate.

Firstly, the essay deals with the entitlement crisis in design discourse, represented by the traditional means in the disciplinary writing. It proposes change of ontology in design theory through the means of an expansion-by-discourse model, using Krauss's 'Sculpture in the Expanding Field' as a pivot from which other ways of understanding professional disciplines and the role of authorship appear. It evidences expanded understandings of publishing with examples such as Stadler's *publication* (Stadler, 2012), and looks for a less submissive approach to design authorship (Fitzgerald, 2015). The argument is embedded in the framework of the *precariat*, carried through the ideas of Duvall.

Secondly, the meaning and implications of the term Speculative are dissected, providing an extensive critique to the insular approach present at Speculative Everything (Dunne and Raby, 2013) and to the shortfalls of specific critical examples to that perspective (Prado and Oliveira, 2015). The chapter proposes a better grounds for the use of specific terminology, and a stronger connection to other fields of knowledge, so the agency of designers can be augmented. In particular, it is discussed the connection to the different branches of the recent Speculative Philosophies (Wilkie, 2017 and Vitale, 2012).

The essay follows a critique of the disciplinary authorship, proposing alternatives to it, and scrutinises the field of speculative design from a transversal critical position, making evident its agency in design discourse. The aim is to establish new arenas for design discourse in which self-imposed boundaries can be avoided, through the use of transversal terminology and an inclusive interpretation of disciplinary phenomena.

Crisis of boundaries

'That basic realisation that we are not absolute agents, making utterly autonomous choices, becomes a lens for viewing contemporary practices in critical ways.'

(Emily McVarish, in Sueda, 2014)

The *designer-as-xxxxx* is a jack-of-all-trades clause, overused, and to some extent dated (Duvall, 2014:53-54). This formulaic description of the capabilities of the designer on a skill-based fashion expresses rather an insecurity towards less archetypical ways of defining forms of practice. While other practitioners like architects phagocyte what exceeds their traditional skillset as their own (Hollein, 1993), designers usually lack of entitlement, considering every dissident practice as an in-drag experience.

The linguistic structure of designer-as-something shows a self-entitlement problem probably still influenced by the modernist conception of design as a subsidiary discipline.

This entitlement crisis has been tackled by several authors, but it has a milestone in Michael Rock's article *Designer as Author*. His thesis proposes overcoming the *transparency* that modernism imposed over the work of designers (Warde, 1955), inviting them 'to speak out' (Rock, 1996). Years later with the continuation of the original essay, *Fuck Content*, Rock claims the authorship of the skills aside, as a correction to an alleged misunderstanding of his former essay¹. This move undermines the figure of the designer as a professional entitled to generate self-initiated contents or divergent definitions of their professional scope. The two essays from Rock don't give room for situatedness, and serve as an evolution of the modernist model of manifesto writing. They become authoritative messages in defence of the design *status quo* (Duvall, 2014:41), or safeguarding the individual practices of their authors.

1 - *Designer as Author* and *Fuck Content* claim the relevance of form as a valuable content, overcoming the form and content dichotomy. Despite being necessary, it is problematic the way in which Rock postulates it, by negating the role of designers as authors of content, or the importance of self-initiated practices. The critique from FitzGerald is not one to the core ideas of Rock, but a transversal reading of classism inside the profession, signposting the threats of the comeback of a service-based definition of design.

'The covert agenda in *Fuck Content* is to reinforce the status quo of design as service industry—and the established hierarchy of practitioners. At the apex are moneyed culture and its servants. [...]

Why is graphic authorship so reviled and marked for elimination? While problematic as a concept, graphic authorship implicitly (and dangerously) questions the purposes that design talent is put to, and the terms under which we appraise it. Eradicate content as an evaluative factor, whether self-generated or for non-commercial purposes, and we default to abstract graphic treatments possible only under the patronage of affluent clients.'

(FitzGerald, 2015)

The problem with design authorship is not only that designers don't work as *absolute agents* (Emily McVarish, in Sueda, 2014), but also that the course of technological improvements will minimise many of the skill-based tasks existing today. The disciplinary discourse over the 20th Century has exerted a sort of moral and vocational perspective on design, failing to acknowledge the inextricable connection between the designer and their tools—and their evolution. It has overlooked the technological changes in the discipline (or consider them anecdotal) to the extent of not considering in what do designers spend their time as professionals on.

'Innumerable confusion and a profound feeling of despair invariably emerge in periods of great technological and cultural transitions, such as our own. Our Age of Anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools—with yesterday's concepts. With yesterday's ideals.'

(McLuhan and Fiore, 1967)

As it is problematic using yesterday's tools for today's problems, it is unfair to evaluate the past with the tools of the present. The tasks a designer undertakes in the present differ substantially from those existent

in the times of the *Crystal Goblet*, so are the meanings and information layers of design productions. The democratisation of design tools, and the automatisisation of processes, are converting skill-dependent profession into a skill-friendly—even a skill-free—one. This problem has been extensively debated, and it is subject for a whole lineage of discourse in design writing. The high moral ground in which some practitioners like Siegler or Metahaven are positioned, is providing a simplistic way out of the problem of automatisisation, seeing designers as a collective of dependent helpless practitioners. The—seemingly never ending—series of cautionary tales oversees a world of placeholders, templates and ready-made structures. Notions such as post-design (Shaughnessy, 2012), the *templated* mind (Siegel, 2006), or the surface taxonomy of Metahaven depict an overarching unsettling situation rather than unpacking actual ways in which design—and designers—is still relevant.

‘Surface is the reincarnation of neutrality. Default friends, default faces, default desktops, default writing. In the world of surface, the confrontation with harsh realities, such as having no face, or no friends, becomes mediated and softened by the presence of placeholders, which become the new symbols of absence. Placeholders also possess the surface capability of gradually overwriting original structures and original texts. [...] Software does precisely what its name spells out: it softens the relationship between man and manufacture.’

(Metahaven, 2009)

Limiting the agency of designers to their objects speaks about an inward discourse of design abilities. Authorship-by-education limits the possible scenarios where designers unfold their curiosity, and narrows the scope of design research and its outputs. A wider reality could be relevant for a designer to be scrutinised if design would transform itself into a projective intelligence (from a profession to a critical position); intentions instead of education would set the limits, and learning would be achieved through making (Amann, 2017).

From the mindset of the codependency between design and its production, the original archetype of the designer-producer (Lupton, 2012) is currently facing the threats of the *precariat*². In order to survive this philosophical framework, design needs to envision itself as a way of seeing and organising, instead of a way of making. In this context, design production is distortion, automation, remix and curation (Duvall, 2014:54). Overcoming the homogeneous archetype of designer, enforced by iterations of the tradition of manifesto writing, requires an expansion in the ways of thinking what is the profession.

The meaning of expansion is linked linguistically to accumulation, addition or conquest. Nevertheless, an expansion can also be achieved by a perceptual change of the way of looking at reality. For instance, Krauss’s *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* is not positioned in the propositional—it’s not a manifesto—but in the analytical and discursive. It draws a structure³ from which certain existing objects could be understood

2 – The *precariat* can be defined as a social class formed by workers suffering from precarity in the frame of the neoliberal capitalism, also called the working poor, and who are subject of changing conditions without the ability to planify, leaving their working experience to survival skills (Standing, 2011). The ‘sector of the working class whose livelihood is constantly threatened by economic downturn and obsolescence through technological advances.’ (Duvall, 2014:52)

3 – The structure that Krauss uses for arguing the expansion of sculpture can be discussed and reduced even labelled as pseudo-scientific or fanciful, but the actual device it is not relevant to the results. It is used as a temporary signifier to unpack the possibilities—or rather the discursive limitations—of sculpture with success at establishing links between practitioners otherwise isolated.

as forms of sculpture. This discursive gesture grants new territories to explore for artists, without necessarily innovating in technical/procedural terms. It also allows establishing a network linking seemingly distant practices. The disruptive use of discourse to retrace the boundaries of the discipline works against what Krauss defines as historicism:

'The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past. Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. It makes a place for change in our experience by evoking the model of evolution, so that the man who now is can be accepted as being different from the child he once was, by simultaneously being seen—through the unseeable action of the telos—as the same. And we are comforted by this perception of sameness, this strategy for reducing anything foreign in either time or space, to what we already know and are.'

(Krauss, 1979)

'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' provides insights into alternative ways of thinking. It acknowledges the socially constructed dimension of sculpture, and exerts a critique on art's ratification system. Instead of making *tabula rasa*, Krauss uses logic devices to include other possible visions. She avoids binary conceptions, surpassing the need for a norm; she doesn't theorize to impose, conversely, she re-structures to include.

The discussion over authenticity is also a relevant point since the text is transparent in the way it achieves its logic and provides a structure that avoids authority principle. This operation serves as an invitation for establishing new discursive formations that could challenge the established perception of a subject. Therefore, authenticity can be a matter of intentions and construction of discourse.

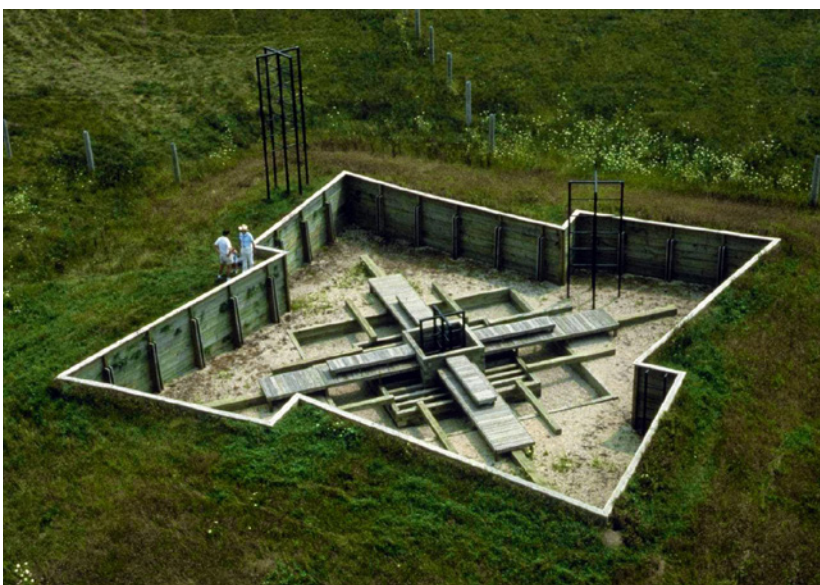


Fig.1. Miss, M. (1980-81) Field Rotation [Sculpture]
— Mary Miss is one of the cited sculptors in the expanded field by Rosalind Krauss

Another example, closer to the functioning principles of design as a projective intelligence, is Stadler's expansion of publishing. He proposes understanding the definition of *publication*⁴ as the creation of new publics, through setting *public* spaces where potential readers interact and modify the contents, physically (gatherings) and virtually (platforms such as a.nnotate.com) (Stadler, 2012). With the same intention of Breton's famous quote, "One publishes to find comrades", Stadler enacts an ontological shift in the notion of publishing as a whole. It is relevant the role of self-legitimization (or a self-initiated validation) in Stadler's redefinition of publishing. Enacting this change widens the possibilities and diversifies the actors involved in the process of publishing. It becomes a platform-based environment in which knowledge—traditionally reserved to the author—is produced through the deliberation of a network⁵.

As shown in the examples, the expansion-by-discourse requires a supportive structural practice (or an existing pool of works to be organised on a particular way) that helps setting out any ontological shift. These expansive narratives don't need to deny or contra-argument other modes of practice, thus they don't define rules, they document existing processes. This practical perseverance feeds back into the *designer-as-xxxx* clause, in which individual practitioners are entitled to delineate their own practice in a much more diverse working landscape. In the prosaic environment, where the less defined profiles happen naturally (those *in-drag*, *designer-as-xxxx*), designers surpass the commodification process of the neoliberalist professional profiling. Commonalities and divergences between these new hybrid professionals would set the new disciplines—however, this expansive condition is yet to be reflected in the academic design discourse.

4 – Stadler uses publication instead of publishing to refer to his practice. While publishing understands publications as their outcome, Stadler sees publications as his process, the act of creating a public.

5 – Expanding the field of publishing to one that is about social interactions, gatherings and spaces can subvert established practices and formats. Stadler's notion of 'publication' functions through the organisational structure of what Saskia Sassen calls a multi-scalar assemblage: "[A]ny group of people that acts at every scale, from the intimately local to the global, in the course of their work together. (...) What is most interesting and most potent about these groups is their ability to operate with the narrowest and most local of interests and yet have agency on global scale. Money is not the key. Their potency rests in their focus, the enduring intensity of their commitment." (Stadler, 2012)

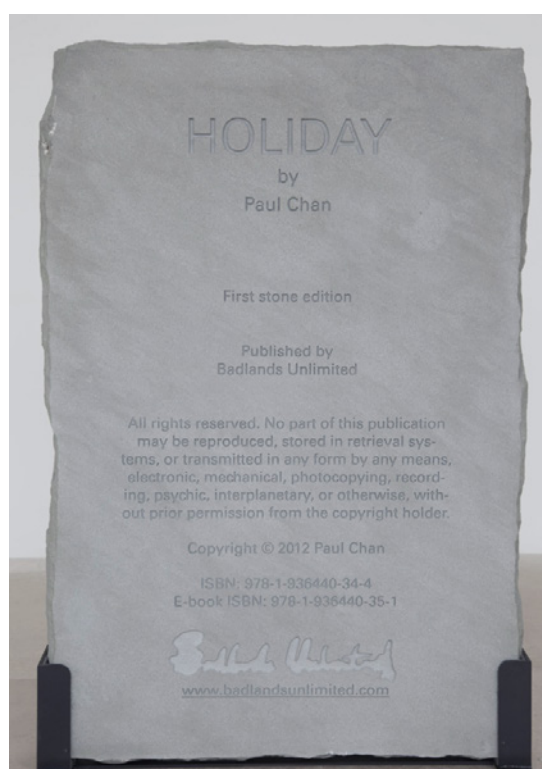


Fig 2. Badlands Unlimited – Chan, P (2012) "Holiday" [Gravestone and E-book] Badlands Unlimited is a publishing house directed by the artist Paul Chan, in which he subverts the notion of the artist book through a wide variety of media and formats. The example, "Holiday", a gravestone containing a short story, is seen as a book, legitimized by engraving an ISBN code onto the object. The contents were afterwards remediated in an EPUB format. Understanding the gravestone as a book is a discursive process legitimized by an existing ratification system, like the ISBN and E-book distributing platforms.

Speculative design as a post-critical mode of practice

Among the higher-cultural practices of design, there are propositions that have the opportunity to enact an expansion in the way design is performed; it is the field of speculative design. However, the disconnection of its main figures from other ongoing cultural discussions locates these practices in the authorial realm, and address their productions to privileged intellectual bubbles. In this section the flaws of both the theory behind speculative design and its criticism are exposed (terminology, magnification of the critique and omission of further theoretical frameworks), and it is offered a way of anchoring it to other contemporary thought schools represented by speculative philosophies. The intention is to provide situated, transversal ways of formulating design, understanding speculative strategies as a way of expanding its agency.

Inaccuracies and misunderstandings in Speculative Design

Speculative design is currently a very discussed mode of practice.

It was introduced by Dunne and Raby as a remake of their very own critical design⁶. The approach to both modes of practice is narrow, disconnected from any intersectionality, and addressing primarily the context of the Royal College of Art in London, where they were conceived. Dunne and Raby prescribed through *Speculative Everything* what *is*⁷ accepted or not as a speculative approach to design. In the words of Tonkinwise, 'what entails a copyrightable "DnR"⁸ project' (Tonkinwise, 2014). This universalist approach poses risks on the perception of the field of speculation, mostly patent in the existing criticism on the subject. Speculation has a long tradition and a diversity of meanings, from its role in finance, to a whole family of literature genres, or its relevance in architecture (Sueda, 2014). Thus, speculative design shouldn't be reduced to the prescription of a singular book—an example of a modernist way of delivering theoretical knowledge.

Within this situation, the criticism towards speculative design wipes out all sorts of speculation by the unspecific use of terms (presumably, this criticism refers only to the DnR take on speculation). Several examples in the publication *Modes of Criticism* fully deconstruct, mock or parody any possibility for speculative design and design fiction to happen. This makeshift 'design complaint department' provides few ways out of the problem. Negating any possible agency for this method, it rather embodies the other side of a binary; total dissent, alternative normativization of design practice. The criticism rejoices in highlighting DnR faulty methods and the lack of criticality of their proposals. The following example from Prado and Oliveira, although tackling an extremely relevant fault in the particular cases of design they criticise, the critics drop a bomb instead of throwing a dart at the problem:

6 – This "ownership" over critical design, or with the capitalised C and D has been discussed by Zak Kyes and Mark Owens in *Iapsis Forum on Design and Critical Practice: The Reader*. (Ericson, 2009) Their conversation unpacks several standing points of the renowned exhibition *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design*, in which they avoid the intellectual property that involves capitalising a term that is usually linked to a specific author or school. They use the example of Dunne and Raby' Critical Design, making a parallel with the coetaneous exhibition *Designing Critical Design: experimental objects and hypothetical projects for a consumer society*, which was curated by them.

7 – The tense of the verb to use here is conflicted. Dunne and Raby prescribe very detailed archetypes of the do's and don'ts, but also acknowledge that they are able to change their mind: "Over the years its meaning and potential has changed for us, too, and we feel it is the right moment to offer an updated view of what we think it is" (Dunne and Raby, 2013:34). The correct tense would be the past simple "was", but is kept as present for purposes of the reading flow of this paper.

8 – DnR is the acronym for Dunne and Raby proposed by Cameron Tonkinwise in his essay 'How we intend to future', where he reviews the book *Speculative Everything*.

‘The near-futures envisioned by the great majority of projects seem devoid of people of colour, who rarely (if ever) make an appearance in clean, perfectly squared, aseptic worlds. Couples depicted in these scenarios seem to be consistently heterosexual and bound by traditional notions of marriage and monogamy. There are no power structures made visible that divide the wealthy and the poor, or the colonialist and the colonised. Poverty still happens somewhere else, while the bourgeois Speculative Critical Design subject copes with catastrophe through consuming sleek, elegant, futuristic, white-cubed and white-boxed gizmos.’

(Prado and Oliveira, 2015)

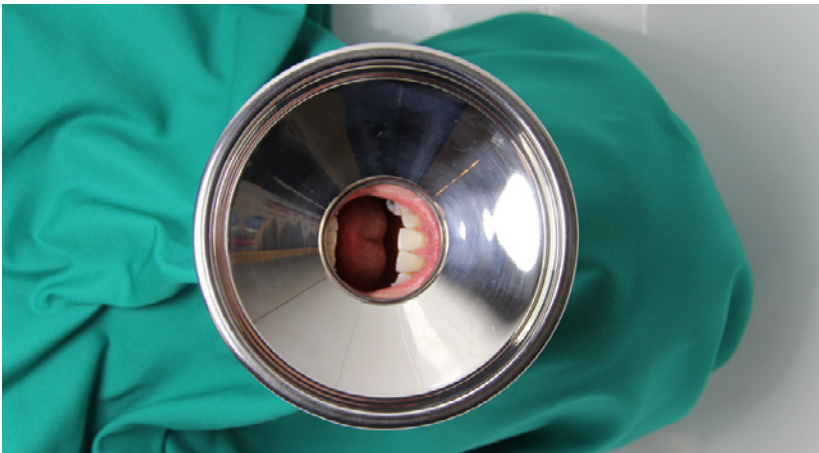


Fig 3. Burton, M. and Nitta, M. (2011) *Republic of Salvation*. This example, part of the critique from Prado and Oliveira envisions a dystopian future in an hypothetical country where the goverment should provide rationed food. The approach of this project is overlooking structural problems of capitalism, and foreseeing a future that already exists in less privileged parts of the world.



Fig 3b. São Paulo's mayor João Doria Jr. wants to fight hunger with food pellets called Allimentos (a mix between the English word all and the Portuguese word for food, alimento). These are made out of the dehydrated leftovers from the commercial processing food industry. Doria's program has drawn criticism from experts, who have compared Allimentos to dog food and a human rights violation.

It is evident that Prado and Oliveira are referring to DnR's Speculative™-modernism, but the use of overly unspecific language encompasses ‘the great majority’. The criticism is using the speculative methodology as a thread to tie together projects that have been conceived inside (and addressed to) rooms of privilege. The question to pose is if the problem in those project resides in the methodology, or in their intent. As a counter example, the *Energy Babble* by the Energy and Co-Designing Communities project, uses a speculative device as a research tool that seeks to develop engagement with the participants of what they call ‘energy communities’:

'The Energy Babble is a kind of automated talk-radio that is obsessed with energy and the environment. We developed it with, and deployed it to, a number of existing "energy communities" in the UK. The system gathers content from a variety of online sources, including Twitter feeds from the communities, from governmental departments, and from the National Grid, and chats about it continually using a number of synthesised voices interspersed with a variety of jingles and sound effects. Designed to playfully reflect and comment on the existing state of discourse and reports of practice in the UK, the Babble can be considered both as a product and as a research tool, in which role it worked to highlight issues, understandings, practices and difficulties in the communities with whom we worked.'

(Gaver *et al.*, 2015)



Fig 4& 4b. Energy and Co-Designing Communities project (ECDC) (2015). *Energy Babble*.



Another argument used against Speculative Design™ is that its outcomes find their natural habitat in the gallery space (Prado and Oliveira, 2015). Taking the speculative as a lens from which what is 'not yet', or that provokes rather questions than providing answers (Bruinsma, 2014), one could understand that there exists a whole body of production that

could be labelled as speculative. This retroactive way of applying the label, although not strictly necessary, could help to diversify what speculative design can be, and where it happens. The use of theoretical discussions should aim to sharpen the lenses we use to look at reality instead of establishing a replacement helm that reproduces the power dynamics that it criticises. A merciless critique falls short of influence on the broader spectrum of approaches to design; it just works as a type of feedback that encapsulates controversy, proving to be beneficial only for those involved in the dichotomy of production and critique. This situation signposts the currency of Krauss's expansion-by-discourse, that is supported by evidence and balance—that looks further of historicist boundaries and subverts established knowledge.



Fig 5. Saturday Night Live (2016) *Fisher Price 'Wells for Boys'* [Video Still]. This fictional TV advertising toys for 'sensitive boys' is proposing ambiguous criticism of the toy industry, and the networks that support it.

Considering the formal aspects of Speculative Design™, there is also room for an inconsistency of its own discourse. It is relevant to point out that the graphic elements of Speculative-Design™ proposals aren't aligned with what Dunne and Raby proclaim as Speculative Graphic Design. This situation only illustrates a modernist-like attempt to exert authority over styles. Speculation can be focused more on a strategy⁹ or tone, than a style.

'The almost petulant policing of what meets with DnR's approval. Deadpan, absurdism, black humor are good, and irony, parody, pastiche are bad; sketches can seem old-fashioned, but detailed drawings are daydream-like; Buckminster Fuller is too technological, better is Norman Bel Geddes; Matthew Barney is too idiosyncratic, the Yes Men too sensational; model-like is good, toy-like is bad; museums were to be avoided, now they are perfect'

(Tonkinwise, 2014)

Harnessing design discourse to major schools of thought.
Cross-sectional terminology.

The detachment of design writing from non-design theoretical frameworks and practitioners, gives the self-referential designer a naive freedom, but also generates difficulties when trying to establish links with other

9 – There are other speculative approaches to design that don't have the same visibility/press as the one from Dunne and Raby, but nevertheless they provide more tactic and effective procedures. One example of this is foregrounded in Cameron Tonkinwise's critique of the book *Speculative Everything*, the prefigurative criticism of Fry and Willis. This strategy antecedes a critique over the *not-yet* object of design—such as Google Glass—to raise awareness the potential threats that this particular design can bring within itself. The aim of prefigurative criticism is the equivalent in design criticism as preventive medicine.

disciplines or broader cultural manifestations. It is extremely relevant dealing with the problem with terminology from a situated perspective; the use of terms, regardless of the authority principle, needs to be done understanding the implications that such use brings along. Preceding the enunciation of Speculative Design™, Dunne and Raby wrapped their practice as Critical Design (which, to clarify, from now on will be trademarked), which was detached from any other form of criticality:

‘Naming it critical design was simply a useful way of making this activity more visible and subject to discussion and debate. (...) When people encounter the term critical design for the first time, they often assume it has something to do with critical theory and the Frankfurt School or just plain criticism. But is neither. We are more interested in critical thinking, that is, not taking things for granted, being skeptical, and always questioning what is given.’

(Dunne and Raby, 2013:34-35)

Establishing the author as a demiurge of a theoretical framework (which uses old terms, supposedly unrelated to their precedents) prevents dissent or malpractice, because the actions of the authors/designers simply fulfill (even define) the value system created by the same authors. This situation denies any interest of design writing (or understanding writing as a design tool) for anyone outside their privileged circle of acolytes. Critical™ design would be only understandable by those who submit to the Critical™ creed, that is subject to be changed at any point and without notice, according to its terms-of-use (Dunne and Raby, 2013). Origins, scopes and destinations will always vary, and it's illogical to think that the work of designers is only speaking to design (or to designers). There is a need to acknowledge situatedness and a certain level of intersectionality.

Looking into speculative design (without ™), there are ways of harnessing it to current schools of thought¹⁰. Speculative design can be connected by its basic terminology to speculative philosophies, which have seen a ‘renewed interest’ in recent times (Debaise, in Wilkie *et al.*, 2017). Although they share core principles and some figures, they can be organised into two positions: speculative constructivism, and speculative realism. According to Wilkie, in the field of social sciences and cultural studies, speculative design has more opportunities when linked to Speculative Constructivism¹¹, represented by the work of Whitehead, Deleuze and Stengers. This approach involves creating inseparable bonds between ‘the researched, researcher, research-device and question’ (Wilkie, 2017). While intersectional and situated, the strategy shows a certain level of control from the researcher-as-director. Contrary to Wilkie's proposition, design-related practices might have as well a connection with the other branch in Speculative philosophies: Speculative Realism, represented by authors like Harman, Bryant or Meillassoux. This school of thought, home of the Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) opposes an anthropocentric definition of reality. Besides the situatedness of the links established by OOO,

10 – In the book by Dunne and Raby there is no connection to other discipline's theoretical framework. The use of “we” along the whole book suggest a rather personal approach to the definition of what entails an object of speculative design.

11 – Constructionism in other sources. Apart from the cited authors, Bruno Latour, principal proponent of Philosophy of Science, Symmetric Sociology and Actor-Network Theory, is often used to depict constructivism, but his notions are also used by various authors of Speculative Realism. It is unclear if Bruno Latour has chosen one of the two options to locate his thinking, or if it is instrumentalized by both trends. Bruno Latour's lecture “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” is used as a reference from both sides of the genealogy of speculative philosophies. The seminal text of Speculative Constructivism is ‘A Constructivist Reading of Process and Reality’, a review of Whitehead's Process and Reality from Isabelle Stengers. Finally, the seminal book for Speculative Realism is edited by Levi R. Bryant, *The Speculative Turn*.

Speculative Realism also allows temporality and uncertainty in those bonds. According to Vitale, Speculative Realism invites to 'dream of new worlds, ones which are as open to change as the Derridean system wants to be, but without the self-enforced quietism' (Vitale, 2012).

Reading design from an OOO perspective to reframe Speculative Design as a Post-critical practice

Object-Oriented Ontology sets a framework from which objects are liberated from their definition, never fully understood; thus they remain always in the uncertain to some degree.

'Objects are also unable to interact with things in themselves. When fire burns cotton (...) fire does not interact with the color or the smell of the cotton. Most likely, it's interacting with the flammability of the cotton. So the fire is also distorting the cotton, it's translating the cotton into its own terms. So things never make direct contact for Object-Oriented Philosophy. They're withdrawn from each other, they're hidden from each other. And this is true of all objects, all objects in their interaction with each other. (...) The human relation to the world is not special. The human relation to the world is just a special case of the relation between raindrops striking the table or fire burning cotton or two rocks slamming together in outer space. Every relation distorts the terms of the relation. There's something withdrawn, something real. (...) So objects cannot interact directly (...) They have to be mediated by a third term.'

(Harman in Garcia *et al.*, 2015)

Under this logic, the designer and their production, can be understood as objects that are unable to interact directly. The ownership of the designer over their productions is necessarily partial, their (temporary) interaction doesn't exhaust the meaning that others can unpack in the outcome (or what they can make with it), neither it exhausts the designer's potency (thus the designer is allowed to evolve past their productions). At the same time, the designer can be seen as this third part—the 'vicarious causation' according to Harman's terminology—that puts the different objects in contact, withdrawing some of their qualities, provoking unexpected results. The power of speculation under this lens, as a plausible mode of practice, resides in its power towards revealing unprecedented outcomes. This agency includes the traditional clause "what if?", but also any other logic structure that puts into question a set of given assumptions. As Vitale reflects when introducing the influence of Speculative Realism, this naivete surpasses 'the unravelling scrutiny of the post-structuralist critique' (Vitale, 2012). Therefore, speculation embodies a post-critical way of making. The design object moves from being the conclusion of a deconstructive-reconstructive act—analytic/propositive, thoughtful/productive, observational/operational—into a temporal end, a set of partial conclusions that work as a baton in a relay race, ready to be taken. The *speculative* in speculative design isn't the outcome—it is a methodology that is embodied temporarily by objects and mediators, in which authorship is withdrawn from the initiator. Design is something that happens within

the fluid iterations of knowledge, with an intermittent presence as object and causation—nothing is fully solved, found, owned.

Considering design as an object also helps to overcome the traditional binary of practice and theory. According to Harman both of them are superficial and temporary agents. Observing doesn't allow you to understand a reality fully, but experiencing doesn't exhaust all its possibilities either. Both realities are 'shallow', and 'basically on the same level of reality'. (Harman in Garcia, Harman and Peters, 2015).

This measurelessness has a parallel with what Duvall proposes as the *hypermodernist*¹² manifesto, which becomes 'the appropriation of artefacts of the present, where one image changes hands instantaneously, acquiring signifieds while the signifier remains (visually) unchanged' (Duvall, 2014). The objects are out there to be interpreted and iterated. The authenticity, that traditionally is located in the physicality of the outcome vanishes, and the 'vicarious causation' that designers represent, holds the responsibility of the new meanings, but always leave an open end for further development or analysis of objects.

12 - The term *hypermodernist* can be found in other sources as *metamodernist*, *post-contemporary* and *contra-modernist*. There is no consensus or unified use of terminology. Every of these terms refers to discipline-specific particularities. However, in all cases the term is used to differentiate a temporal span that has overcome postmodernism.



Fig. 6 a-c. Different uses of Disney's mickey mouse as signifier with multiple signifieds, in what Ben Duvall calls 'the hyperlinked sign'. Authors: Atlas, Zak Group, Bureau Mirko Borsche

The speculative in design is often linked to futurization or counter-factuality. Both of them are intuitive ways of diversifying the possible presents and futures. The field of design, being agile in providing answers that suggest and inform, is responsible for unveiling hidden messages, offering tools for reading specific layers of reality, and also to diminish the disempowerment that media induces over its readership/viewership. Prognosis has been traditionally understood as an expert source for information, but its uncertainty is often overlooked. This situation has led the audience to believe as solid truth many pieces of information that come from speculative and statistical systems (Bierut and Helfand, 2017).

Speculative design seems responsible for helping society achieve a better understanding of complexity and truth:

‘Singular messages have ceased to exist. So, too, have unambiguous messages.

The content and effectiveness of communication have become strongly context dependent, not least because the audience with whom the message communicates has itself matured.’

(Bruinsma, 2014:39)

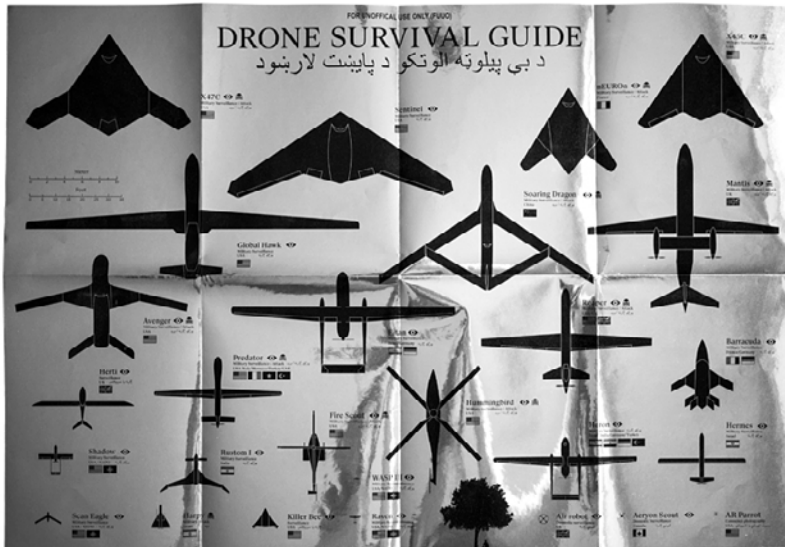


Fig 7. Pater, R. (2012) *Drone Survival Guide*

Therefore, speculative design shouldn't be understood as a tool for utopians/ dystopians, or as a reality-enabling device. The objects of speculative design are discursive tools that can open the discussion about a reality 'yet to be designed' (Bruinsma, 2014). As the work from åyr in *Aspects of Change*, or the cautionary tale of Metahaven's *Invisible Skies*, the insight from them is not the content of their forecasts, but their *prefigurative criticism*. Speculative design encourages thinking and interpretation, contrary to more authoritative approaches to design. In the words of Tonkinwise, it aims to 'preemptively ambush the branding of an objectionable project in development, associating it with adverse consequences before it has had an opportunity to market its benefits' (Tonkinwise, 2014). This also applies to alternative views of the present, being this prefigurative critique a tool to activate discussions, rather than a control device.



Fig 8 Åyr (2015) *Aspects of Change*: 'We could interpret the images used by åyr to describe the state of contemporary home making as referring not only to the process of making-a-home, but also to that, more general, of making-a-world—or, in other words, of "reality engineering".' (Campagna, 2016)



Fig 9. & 9b Metahaven (2016) *Information Skies* [Video Stills] Metahaven creates an abstract cautionary tale that serves as an ambiguous prefigurative criticism of Virtual Reality Technology



Conclusion

This essay has had the aim to identify and discuss two relevant critical points that provide keys to an expansion in the understanding of design as a mutable discipline. It has highlighted the relevance of a situated and intersectional use of terminology in design writing, with the intention of opening the debate to other disciplines.

The first section has been focused on understanding the crisis of boundaries of design, which is mainly influenced by the way design ideologies are communicated. Design self-perception has overlooked its technical codependency in its writing, and the problem has been observed from the lens of the threats that precariat is posing over designers, as it requires professionals to be rather discourse-based than skill-based—what Ben Duvall calls the designer-as-ghost (Duvall, 2014). This way of understanding the profession seems to widen it and connect it with other creative practices, allowing professionals to undertake more diverse paths in their professional development. This post-disciplinary perspective allows new ways of defining the works of designers, in a disruptive fashion, through means of expansion-by-discourse. The chapter defends rather a discursive mode of expanding design practice, reorganising existing phenomena under a different lens, than one represented by an authoritative approach, following the insights from Krauss's 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' and Stadler's *Publication*.

The second section provided a critical review of different perspectives and critiques towards the controversial practice of speculative design. With the aim of clarifying its scope and decentering its London-centric hegemony, it has been recommended to engage, from the discipline, with terminology aligned with wider schools of thought. The intention was to achieve better communication between professionals and thus avoiding the natural inconsistency in the use of a personalised terminology (Tonkinwise, 2014). Within this final aspect, the two existing options for engagement with speculative philosophies have been discussed, proposing Speculative Realism as the widest of them (Garcia et al., 2015). The interest in connecting speculative design methodologies to schools of thought resides in the aim of developing a critical position for designers within broader contexts of knowledge. Regardless of the specific theory involved in such connections, there is a need for broader theoretical debate within the frame of design. As shown, there is an extensive breed of designers that use speculations in their processes or outcomes. Their work is responding spontaneously to cultural-ideological concerns regardless of the factual or analytical observation. They become forms of foreknowledge to be unpacked and discussed in further instances, by a broader—and more diverse—body of actors.

The different contexts studied in this paper imply the need for a collective response, or one that is able to encompass a diversity of practices. Community seems to be a necessary and less-authoritative tool for co-creation (Duvall, 2014). By echoing the contexts with each other, an underlying need for flexibility and cross-sectional critique appears. As a result, speculations not only seem legitimate devices for modelling post-critical design proposals; they become apparatuses that push forward disciplinary boundaries traditionally defined by observation and discourse.

Notes

This essay is a reworked extract from the Critical Context Paper of the design-led research project *Expanding the Field of Architectural Publishing*, conducted by the author within the frame of the postgraduate course Graphic Media Design at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London.

References

- 1 – Amann, A. (2017) Interview. In Romo-Melgar, C. (2017) *Expanding the Field of Architectural Publishing*. London, self-published.
- 2 – Bierut, M. and Helfand, J. (2017) 'Cones of Uncertainty', *The Observatory*.
- 3 – Bruinsma, M. (2014) 'An Ideal Design is Not Yet', in Sueda, J. (ed.) *All possible futures*. London: Bedford Press, pp. 30–43.
- 4 – Campagna, F. (2016) 'Framing Åyr's House of Terror', in Self, J. (ed.) *Symbolic Exchange*. London: Real, pp. 53–63.
- 5 – Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (date unknown) *Critical Design FAQ*. Available at: <http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0> (Accessed: 26 June 2017).
- 6 – Dunne, A. and Raby, F. (2013) *Speculative everything: design, fiction, and social dreaming*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- 7 – Duvall, B. (2014) *New Modernism(s)*. New Jersey: Conveyor Arts.
- 8 – Ericson, M. (ed.) (2009) *Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice - The Reader*. Berlin: Sternberg Pr.
- 9 – FitzGerald, K. (2015) 'Fuck All', in Laranjo, Francisco (ed.) *Modes of Criticism 1: Critical, Uncritical, Post-critical*. Self Published.
- 10 – Garcia, T., Harman, G. and Peters, R. (2015) 'A Dialogue Between Graham Harman and Tristan Garcia', *Speculations VI*, pp. 167–203. New York: Punctum Books.
- 11 – Gaver, W. et al. (2015) 'Energy Babble: Mixing Environmentally-Oriented Internet Content to Engage Community Groups', *Proceedings of CHI 2015*, (10.1145/2702123.2702546), pp. 1115–1124.
- 12 – Harman, G. (2011) *The quadruple object*. Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books.
- 13 – Hollein, H. (1993) 'Everything is Architecture', in Ockman, J. and Eigen, E., *Architecture Culture, 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*. Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation, pp. 459–462.
- 14 – Krauss, R. (1979) 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, 8, pp. 31–44. doi: 10.2307/778224.
- 15 – Lupton, E. (2011) 'The Designer as Producer' in Blauvelt, A, Lupton, E. (eds). *Graphic design: now in production*. Minneapolis, Minn: Walker Art Center.
- 16 – McLuhan, M. and Fiore, Q. (1967) *The medium is the message*. London: Penguin.
- 17 – Metahaven (2009) 'Surface', in *White Night Before a Manifesto*. Self Published.
- 18 – Prado, L. and Oliveira, P. (2015) 'Futurist Gizmos, Conservative Ideals: On (Speculative) Anachronistic Design', in Laranjo, Francisco (ed.) *Modes of Criticism 1: Critical, Uncritical, Post-critical*. Self Published.
- 19 – Rock, M. (1996) 'The Designer as Author', *Eye*, 20(5).
- 20 – Rock, M. (2013) 'Fuck Content', in Rock, M. and Heifetz, J. (eds) *Multiple signatures: on designers, authors, readers and users*. New York: Rizzoli.
- 21 – Shaughnessy, A. (2012) When Less Really Does Mean Less, *Design Observer*. Available at: <http://designobserver.com/feature/when-less-really-does-mean-less/32738> (Accessed: 5 June 2017).
- 22 – Shukaitis, S. (2014) 'Toward an Insurrection of the Published? Ten Thoughts on Ticks & Comrades', *Transversal*, 6:14.
- 23 – Siegel, D. (2006) Designing Our Own Graves, *Design Observer*. Available at: <http://designobserver.com/feature/designing-our-own-graves/4307> (Accessed: 6 June 2017).
- 24 – Stadler, M. (2012) 'What is Publication Studio'. *Big Ideas in Art and Culture Lecture Series.*, Guelph. Available at: <http://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/What-is-Publication-Studio-by-Matthew-Stadler.pdf> (Accessed: 3 January 2017).
- 25 – Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*, *Policy Network*. Available at: http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4004&title=+The+Precariat+%e2%80%93+The+new+dangerous+class (Accessed: 13 June 2017).

References

- 26 – Sueda, J. (2014a) All possible futures. London: Bedford Press.
- 27 – Sueda, J. (2014b) 'The Farther Back you Can Look, the Farther Forward You Are Likely To See. Jon Sueda in Conversation With Emily McVarish', in Sueda, J. (ed.) All possible futures. London: Bedford Press, pp. 14–29.
- 28 – Tonkinwise, C. (2014) 'How We Intend to Future: Review of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming', Design Philosophy Papers, 12(2), pp. 169–187.
- 29 – Vitale, C. (2012) 'Speculative Realism, Deconstruction. and Post-Structuralism: Can We Start Philosophizing Again, Or Is That Just Naive?', *Networkologies*, 8 June. Available at: <https://networkologies.wordpress.com/2012/06/08/speculative-realism-deconstruction-and-post-structuralism-can-we-just-start-philosophizing-again-or-is-that-naive/> (Accessed: 6 June 2017).
- 30 – Warde, B. (1955) The crystal goblet: Sixteen essays on typography. 1st Edition edition. Sylvan Press.
- 31 – Wilkie, A. (2017) 'Speculating', Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Methods. Edited by C. Lury. Available at: <https://www.academia.edu/314444955/Speculating> (Accessed: 23 June 2017).
- 32 – Wilkie, A., Savransky, M. and Rosengarten, M. (2017) Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures. Taylor & Francis.