

The Aesthetics of Action in New Social Design

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Abstract: Social design has recently gained more attention for several reasons and it has responded to these through new forms. One question literature in social design needs to address is aesthetics. Its aesthetic approaches has been discussed elsewhere (author), but one remaining question is the aesthetics of action in it. This paper asks what kinds of aesthetic approaches are there to social objects such as social forms and organizations. It describes three approaches to the aesthetics of action, agonistic, convivial and conceptual, and studies their implications through three case studies in London, Milan, and Helsinki. The paper is a part of a larger ongoing exploration of aesthetics in social design.

Keywords: social design; design research; process art; conceptual art

1. From socially responsible design to new social design

Designers have been doing design that seeks to respond to social problems for over fifty years. Probably the best oversight of social design is in a recent exhibition catalogue *Design for the Good Society*, in which a leading American design historian Victor Margolin (2015) has traced the origins of social design to utopic and critical thinking in design and architecture. These utopias go back to the scientific utopias of the fifties (Buckminster Fuller) and the ecological and political utopias of the sixties [the Club of Rome and Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* (1984), and Nigel Whiteley *Design for Society* (1993)]. This is traditional design that is driven by social causes rather than by the market. In the terminology of a recent report, this mode of social design can be called socially responsible design (Armstrong et al. 2014).

The last ten years have seen a shift in object of social design. In several projects, the object is the social – social structures, processes, and forms of action – rather than a social problem. “New social design,” as this paper calls it, has shifted the object of design, but also its conceptual foundation, which comes from the social sciences (see Meroni 2007). A good example is a project in Colonsay, West Scotland, where researchers from the Glasgow School



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of Art mapped local resources of this small island to find ways to guarantee its future. Although the projects led to physical objects, spaces and interactive technologies, these were secondary issues. The true meaning of the project was the new kind of community spirit and resourcefulness it created. It was this larger social framework that gave meaning to the objects (Koskinen and Hush 2016). The project well illustrates the *differentia specifica* of new social design: unlike socially responsible design, it is concerned about this larger framework rather than

The shift has expanded the scope of design and has opened up the scope of imagination in design, and it has also created new kinds of work opportunities for designers. In essence, they can tackle social goods that the market would not produce, and they can connect their discourses to those of the government through the social sciences (Koskinen and Hush 2016). As pointed out elsewhere (Koskinen 2016), this shift has also led to losses in some of the constitutive vocabularies of design. In particular, designers do not have an aesthetic language for talking about and designing for social forms and activities.

This raises an issue: how do new social designers work with aesthetics in their work. The author's earlier work has described three aesthetics approaches in social design, one building on 20th Century avant-gardes like Situationism; another building on process art; and the third going back to some of the founding beliefs of conceptual art (Koskinen 2016). This work also pointed out that new social designers have a vocabulary for objects they create, but less so for those forms of action they want to construe, nor to their collaborative methods. The problem this paper addresses builds on this foundation and asks what kind of object is social action in new social design?

2. Habermasian Communities: Agonism

Recent literature in interaction design has touched upon aesthetics in two waves. The first literature has built on Dewey's pragmatism, which places aesthetics to the gap between experience and an experience. Here, an experience is something lifted out of the stream of experience. It is reportable and storyable, and in this sense transcends experience. The pragmatist approach shifts aesthetics from the designer to people being studied and expands its scope from vision to other senses, thinking and emotions (Graves Petersen et al. 2004; McCarthy and Wright 2005; Overbeeke 2007).

The second and more recent literature has shifted its theoretical basis from pragmatism to Jacques Rancière's agonism, with roots in Althusser's structuralist Marxism (Rancière 2004; DiSalvo 2011; Markussen 2011, 2013; McCarthy and Wright 2015). The shift has changed the way in which aesthetics is understood significantly. For Rancière, an aesthetic act reorganizes the social field by introducing new heterogeneous objects into perception. By reorienting perceptual space, it disrupts socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world. Writes Thomas Markussen, a scholar of design activism:

For Rancière, what characterizes the aesthetic act in particular, is that it introduces new heterogeneous subjects and objects into the social field of perception. In so

doing, the aesthetic act effects people's experience in a certain way: it reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world. (Markussen 2011: 4).

When new social design is done under these auspices, it operates by creating objects around controversial topics to raise discussion that bring adversaries to the same table to discuss their relationship to these topics. The topics range from robotics (Auger 2012) to poverty (one example in DiSalvo 2011 is *Million dollar blocks*). The method is debate that redefines the meanings of objects like words, things or social processes like detention rates by neighborhood. The debate paves way for new types of action that bypasses those habits that make current social order unequal, unjust, wasteful and suboptimal.

A good case to see how the aesthetic operates is *Material Beliefs*, a design project about bioengineering technologies in Goldsmiths College (cf. Beaver et al. 2009). The framework that guided the project was called "design for debate." The designs created in the project were intended to provoke questions in the minds of the public, and lead to debate around these questions. The aim was to enable the public to form an opinion about whether they prefer the implications of bioengineering or not. The strange and provocative designs that resulted included projects like *Carnivorous Domestic Entertainment Robots*, a series of robots that caught flies and mice and extracted energy from their bodies to keep the robots running.

Lamp Shade Robot in Figure 1 was designed to be both strange and familiar. It captured flies, killed them with UV light, and consumed their bodies in a microbial cell to create energy that kept the robot running. It was simultaneously an exploration into science, domestic technology, and design (Beaver et al. 2009; Auger 2012).¹

In agonistic thinking, aesthetics usually gets an instrumental role. For Carl DiSalvo, a forceful proponent of the agonistic model, design works like a sugar coating on a bitter pill: "But the aesthetics of design, in a formal and traditional sense, still have significance in evoking the political... many examples of adversarial design leverage an expertise in the making of products and the use of formal aesthetics as a strategy for luring people into the consideration of use" (DiSalvo 2011: 102, 125). The result is typically an avant-gardist aesthetics that balanced the familiar and the strange.

While the implications of this aesthetics to objects are clear, the aesthetics of action is a much less charted territory. If we turn back to *Material Beliefs*, we can find some cues about the aesthetics of action. The project firmly placed aesthetic into the minds of the people, and in this regard, it is in line with contemporary art since the time of Duchamp. In the spirit of Duchamp, *Material Beliefs* took design out to museums, galleries and other types of community gatherings, and used them as props to debate the implications of bioengineering. The form in which these debates were curated, however, was remarkable in their familiarity. They were curated in a manner art and literature salons, and although they

¹ The author would add that it could be seen as an indirect commentary on energy harvesting at home as well.

broke the line between the designers (performers) and the audience, the forms were not radicalized to any significant degree.²



Figure 1. Lamp shade robot by James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau (thanks to James Auger)

At least at the outset, then, the agonistic aesthetic seems to be Janus-faced. It is avant-gardist and strange in terms of objects, but conventional in terms of social action. While objects are seen as props that generate discussion and debate, social forms used to curate these conversations are familiar from everyday life, and even more so from institutional forms of action. Conversations in museums and galleries have been around for decades, and city planning has been built on participatory events in most European countries and North America since the sixties. The chips are put on the power of debate, reasoning, and thinking about the future together. Debate makes participants aware of not only how they see objects and issues they may (or might) embody, but also of how others see these objects. Debate generates understanding and tolerance, and creates a future people can agree upon regardless of whether this is said out loud. The hope is that debate turns dissensus into consensus by creating an emancipatory Habermasian community of reason that is put into motion by design (see Habermas 1987).

² Thanks to Paul Chamberlain for pointing out the similarity to salons.

4. Designing Conviviality

Another aesthetic can be called convivial. Its aim is to create a community that generates its own social goods. The aesthetic is located into emergent social forms; it is open-ended; and it works through direct community involvement. The convivial approach presents an alternative to the agonistic aesthetic, which is an heir to avant-garde and usually leftist social movements, and it has similarities to contemporary process and community art rather than to their historical ancestors in the avant-gardes.

The immediate aim of the convivial approach is to create a community that creates social goods that the market would not be produce. These goods may consist of many types of things and activities, including daycare, car-pooling, handyman help, communal cooking for children and seniors, and better care for the physical environment, among others. Designing becomes an activity that organizes these activities by creating a community spirit. This spirit produces social controls that keep people participating in these activities and control free riding through social exchange rather than by creating hierarchies or markets.

The best-known project is *Nutrire Milano* that aimed at shortening the industrial food chain by creating shorter connections between agricultural producers around Milan and people in the city. It created a food network that connected these two parties and kept it going by creating a Web site (including a shop) and by building and running a Farmer's Market in Eastern Milan. (Figure 2).

Anna Meroni, one of the project's senior researchers told the author that the project made a distinction between conventional and convivial aesthetics. Conventional aesthetics referred to the artifacts created by the project, including graphics, Web designs, and spaces. These were designed professionally, and they reflect the prevailing design aesthetics of their time. Convivial aesthetic, in turn, referred to the emerging forms of social action in the communities the project created. Examples of these forms were celebrations and interactions in the Farmer's Market. The convivial aesthetic was the heart of the project and though it is hard to capture in words, it was crucial to the project's success and appeal, Meroni speculates.³

A detour in art helps to understand the aesthetics of action in *Nutrire Milano*. Rirkrit Tiravanija's process art of the 1980s took age-old social forms like cooking together or having tea and brought them into an art gallery. His artwork was not a painting, but the (temporary) community and the activity that created it. The act of cooking and eating together, for instance, created only a short-lived community, but it also created an opportunity to experience what it means to be together and to enjoy an exotic meal. His art gave participants an opportunity to see each other in new light, which, in turn created an opportunity to reflect upon their relationship to these others, and that way question their own pre-conceived identities. (See Grassi and Tiravanija 2007).

³ Anna Meroni, e-mail at 15 Oct 6:05 am.



Figure 2. *Nutrire Milano: a community in action (thanks to Anna Meroni)*

Something similar was happening in Nutrire Milano, which brought together various parties who knew each other previously only through the commodified, impersonalized, and dehumanized relationships of the market-driven food chain. In Nutrire Milano, farmers, merchants and city-dwellers alike got an opportunity to shortcut these relationships and meet each other as individuals. Much as in Tiravanija's art, Nutrire Milano delivered many types of social goods: not just better food, but also *joie de vivre*, enjoyment of being together, a sense of achievement, and a flash into the world of people the participants would not have met in everyday life.

The convivial approach faces several possible criticisms, of course, but Nutrire Milano confronts many of these. One problem is that its means of action are limited to the community worked with, which may mean that the solutions remain only locally relevant.⁴ For example, Tiravanija is the middle of attention in his performances, which limits his acts to those who are invited to his openings. As a form of public action, Nutrire Milano had to

⁴ This problem is a variation of the critique Tiravanija faced in Germany. His performance in Koln Kunstverein in Germany, which took place while the police was breaking a homeless camp right outside the Kunstverein, attracting criticism in press, local art community and by the fellow Thai artist Jay Koh (Kester 2004: 105). Bishop (2012: 210-211) points out a larger paradox in Tiravanija's work: as it intensifies convivial relations for a small group, it excludes others.

negotiate with the city, farmers' organizations, and neighborhood associations. The original Farmers' Market in East Milan was closed because of the pressure from the neighborhood, but it was later reopened elsewhere in the city. Also, the way in which Nutrire Milano was done provides some answers to the first critique. It was a research project, which used international design research community to spread the news, and it also used the Desis network (desis-network.org) to share learning from the project.

Another potential critique is the project's reliance on local community as a resource for improvement, which may be seen as an inherently conservative response to social problems – as if rebuilding bucolic villages would somehow heal the earth. However, although the aim of the project was to produce a community rather than direct this community to political action, political action is by no means excluded from its outcomes. Nutrire Milano was animated by a reformist social agenda, which was also anti-capitalist, as the idea of shortening the food chain suggests. The project built convivial communities, but did not suggest them as the only solution to ills in society.

The third question is the designer's role in the process: is he an insider or an outsider? Tiravanija was usually in the middle of action, while his fellow artist Gabriel Orozco positioned himself to the margins of his processes (see Morgan 2011: 25). In Nutrire Milano, researchers were participants, observers, designers, and facilitators. Their role set was complex, and designed to support many types of action. Finally, another potential critique is the open nature of community action: what about a community decides to turn against society, and how to prevent, say, racism in it? Logically speaking, the convivial approach cannot rule out racism or misogyny, but a quick look at the background of the project reveals a reformist agenda that works to make communities more resilient at the face of ecological and social threats.

5. Social Sculpting in *Ave Mellunkyla!*

A third approach treats aesthetics as a found object and builds its program around small changes rather than debate or creating new communities. In the manner of conceptual art, the approach foregrounds the community and its aesthetic and pushes the designers' aesthetics, skills, and opinions to the background. The aim is to build on existing social forms and steer them to outcomes that would be unattainable without a design intervention. The process works through small, situated designs that have a small-scale local relevance. The unit of design is the situation, not the community, as in convivial aesthetics, or its belief patterns, as in agonism.

Ave Mellunkyla! is a good example for studying how this aesthetics might work. Mellunkyla is a leafy East Helsinki neighborhood that consists of four former villages, each with a distinct identity. Mellunkyla suffers from a bad reputation and it is poor by Helsinki standards. Its public housing stock is mostly from the fifties and the sixties and approaching an age in which it needs heavy restoration. The local populations are proud of the neighborhoods, but it is aging. Some parts of the neighborhood are densely populated, public housing attracts

social problems, and it has also become a destination for immigration. The greener parts of Mellunkyla consist of houses and semi-detached houses, and have a village-like feeling.

Ave Mellunkyla! was a part of the City of Helsinki’s program of reviving old suburban neighborhoods. As a part of the World Capital 2012 year, a group of design students rented apartments in the Kontula subsection of Mellunkyla. They also rented an office space from the Kontula mall. From this “design research field station,” they worked with various groups in the neighborhood to push local democracy, to help people to organize renovations of apartment buildings, and to help them to organize things like neighborhood festivals. (Figure 3).

The project had several noteworthy aesthetic qualities. Its approach was molecular at heart: it did not try to produce anything transferable (though it had nothing against the idea of reusing the ideas elsewhere). It was also conceptual: its outcomes were largely invisible to those who did not know about the project. The design objects of the project were social forms in the community, but unlike in Nutrire Milano, there was no attempt to create new forms of social action. Rather, the idea was to facilitate existing social forms.



Figure 3. Ave Mellunkyla! Clockwise from the logo: co-design exercises in housing estates; studies of how to use coffee and food to work with the community; assisting the authorities to set up a graffiti wall; liaising with media in village festivals (thanks to Katja Soini)

This sort of conceptual understanding, of course, has been well rehearsed in art for decades.⁵ Although easily dismissed as conceptual and ephemeral, these art works may lead to significant impacts. For instance, Joseph Beuys’s *7000 Eichen (Oaks)* consisted of 7000

⁵ Treating aesthetics as a found object goes back to Duchamp’s bottle rack and his infamous urinal, and to the main ideologists of conceptual and minimal art in the sixties.

basalt blocks that were unloaded in the front of Fridericianum museum in Kassel in 1982. Anyone could take a stone and plant it in Kassel, if they promised to bear the cost of 500 DM. The work was presented in *documenta 7* in 1982. By *documenta 8* in 1987, all 700 oak trees had been planted, each with a basalt stone standing next to it. One tree at a time over a five-year period, Beuys's artwork changed the cityscape of Kassel for decades to come, and to the better. Another project that have inspired the conceptual approach of Ave Mellunkyla! was Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* in Houston, Texas. This project treated the city's Third Ward as a found object and revived and turned this formed slum district into a lively neighborhood that has been able to resist real estate barons for two decades. These art works took existing social activities and shaped them to achieve ends through a series of activities that, as a whole, massively improved the lives of people in Kassel and Houston.

Something similar happened in Ave Mellunkyla!, in which the process was even less material than in these references. The project worked with citizen boards and housing associations, youth clubs, sports clubs, event organizers, and the city to produce a series of plans that were mostly immaterial. If successful, however, the impact of these design activities will be seen for decades. This is equally true for urban furniture, detail plans of the neighborhood, and for social forms like youth clubs. Design may disappear from sight, but if it is able to form habits, Ave Mellunkyla!'s minimalistic conceptual approach may be a particularly efficient form of designing.

If we zoom still farther away from the project to its political and scientific (sic) environment, we can also see some of the larger connections of the project. Ave Mellunkyla! had its origins in the City of Helsinki's urban planning, and although it used some radical techniques, it built on a legacy of many other projects (Soini 2015). Some of these projects had led to changes in rules, statues and even law. The project was a part of a City initiative that aimed at reviving aging neighborhoods within the city limits. It was also a continuation of empathic design, a research program in industrial design in the former University of Art and Design Helsinki (see Mattelmaki et al. 2014). Through this program, it had references in earlier research. The program also became a reference for further work. Its significance was not just local.

Finally, one of the key researchers of the project, Dr. Katja Soini, was well read in contemporary art, but her interpretation pushed it to the background to give room focus for design instead. Her conclusion was that although art can open up ways of thinking for designers, it couldn't provide design solutions that have to come from the world of design. What remained from her reading was tolerance to the idea that a strong concept is more important than its material realization. She also realized that a minimal aesthetic building on local vernacular might sometimes be the best path to improve a neighborhood. Her language reflected this reasoning. During her PhD work, she initially spoke about co-design, but turned later into collaborative design stress that she works actively with people and does not put herself above them. She also discarded notions about creativity, innovation and even designing, and preferred instead to work with the therapeutic language of

“facilitation.” This conceptual learning became the main message to other designers, empathic or other.

6. Discussion

This paper has explored the aesthetics of action in new social design. While the aesthetics of objects in new social design has been studied elsewhere (Koskinen 2016), the aesthetics of action has received little scholarly attention.

A few precedents exist. A few interaction designers have shifted aesthetics from designers to people through pragmatism, (Graves Petersen et al. 2004; McCarthy and Wright 2005; Overbeeke 2007). The last few years, however, interaction design has seen a surge in interest in Jacques Rancière’s agonism, especially after DiSalvo’s “adversarial design” (DiSalvo 2011). In design literature, Julier’s and Markussen’s “design activism” similarly refers to Rancière (Julier 2013; Markussen 2011, 2013). This shift in theory has shifted the locus of aesthetics back from people to designers. In pragmatism, aesthetics resides in people, and designers have to capture it. In agonism, aesthetics becomes a “lure” (DiSalvo 2011) that attracts people to pay attention to the designers’ underlying political message that is aimed at reorganizing their perceptions.

Upon closer reading of these literatures, however, we see aesthetic attention mostly goes to objects. One of the reasons may be that this literature largely relies on visual metaphors (like perception) that tend to push social objects and processes to the background. This creates a gap in language in understanding how to work with aesthetically design social action.

This is the gap this paper has tried to address. It has studied three projects to see how they treat social action in aesthetic terms. A detour through art has given some cues to this analysis. In art, we routinely see objects of many sorts, but we also see activities like happenings and performances that involve human bodies and social interactions. Through this analysis, the paper has described three ways in which social action can be treated in aesthetic terms.

- *Agonistic approach* radicalizes the aesthetics of objects in the name of bringing adversaries to the same table to debate their differences. It uses conventional social forms in curating these debates, though;
- *Convivial approach* puts its chips in building communities that produce their own social goods. The approach has precedents in process art;
- *Conceptual approach* pushes design-based aesthetics to the background and gives priority to local vernacular. It leads to minimal design interventions in the community, but aims at producing designs that live in the community for a long time.

The main outcome of this paper is that it shows that there is an aesthetic of action in new social design regardless of whether we acknowledge it or not. Aesthetics is an important tool in new social design, and it has many implications to how it is done. It aligns designers with

agendas of many sorts; for example, agonism aligns design with avant-garde art and its usually leftist political agendas. Aesthetics also creates expectations of how to interpret a piece of work; for example, if the approach is conceptual, a fair evaluation of a piece of design requires that this fact be respected. This paper has also shown that social designers have several ways to work with aesthetics, and each can be turned into an instrument of change, though through very different means.

Large-scale research pending, this paper is best treated as a hypothesis, of course. For example, although a project like *Presence Project* (2001) gives little attention to action as a design object, this does not mean that it is non-existent. It may lie in the Situationist foundations of the project. These hidden roots of the aesthetics of action are matters of further research, however.

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