F(R)ICTIONS. DESIGN AS CULTURAL FORM OF DISSENT

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to provide a theoretical frame, where the practice of design can be understood as political. It aims to raise a cross-disciplinary debate around the redefinition of the design profession and also around the practices of curating and reflecting on design. Main theoretical reference has been The practice of Everyday Life by the sociologist Michel de Certeau. Certeau’s work has influenced the thinking of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, who I will refer to in order to explore his notion of fiction and dissent as forms of political subjectivity that can create new modes of sensing. The paper suggests how activism in design can play a critical role in society, by setting up micro-situations of dissent (disagreement), and in doing so generate new forms of sensing and making sense in contemporary living. Conclusions will point at the potential of design fictions (understood as projections) and frictions (considered as irritations) in order to re-fabulate the commonplace.

MAIN TEXT
This paper aims to provide a theoretical frame, where the practice of design can be understood as a political practice, due to its ability to generate fictions. These fictions, which I will introduce following the definition provided by the philosopher Jacques Rancière, are not illusions and do not project into the future, but instead engage with the here and now of everyday life. That everyday life is the central issue of design could sound like an obvious statement, but precisely because of this obviousness, critical designers decide to de-construct the dominant, hegemonic landscape of things and attitudes. How to pay attention to the understated everyday? It happens in the nearby, marginal, almost invisible, ignored by institutional discourses and camouflaged behind the most banal situations.

To articulate the critical and political element in design is as challenging as to ground theory on the slippery terrain of the lived experiences of ordinary people. This is the complex, subjective
and unspectacular territory of everyday life. If design is ready to look for alliances with other disciplines, for example the humanities, it may be possible to join forces and share common ground for similar questions.

This is what I want to share with you in the next minutes: To describe what a Design fiction is, its political nature and its ability to project alternative scenarios, in co-existence with other realities, especially in a world of increasing complexity, interconnected and multicultural. A starting point for my research has been the thinking by the sociologist Michel de Certeau. His theory on the lived space elaborated in his essay *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau 1984) is helpful for theorising design as form of activism and potential source of social change. There, he describes the way people organise their personal space in temporary articulations, pointing at the creative potential embedded in their decisions and negotiations. In such micro-political acts people empower their existence in front of given structures and dominant forms of organisation.

Certeau points out at three main characteristics, three main ingredients for the making of everyday life. First, he speaks of several *dynamics of social exchange* (or a gift economy) These are the set of possible political actions that individuals are able to take in an apparently free way. For example, passing on knowledge and cooking for others in family meetings. (Fig.1)

Secondly, he refers to people's capability of *technical invention* (or what he also calls the mechanisms of trickery). This is the manipulation and constant re-design of our artificial environment, what the design theorists Uta Brandes and Michael Erlihof have also identified as called Non-intentional Design. This is the use and misuse of existing artefacts as a raw material, re-sampling and mixing proper and improper codes through a process of re-organisation and dis-organisation. (Fig.2)
And last but not least, the third element is that of Resistance (or the persistence to achieve a purpose). These are usual situations, where norms are subverted or simply ignored. For example, people do not always start to read the newspaper from the first page onwards, but maybe from the last one. Or people keep crossing a meadow to reach the cafeteria at the other side of the park, even though the landscape architects have designed a stone path to get there.

An image taken in Barcelona, not too far from the conference venue summarises Certeau's three ingredients that constitute the everyday. (Fig.3)

Certeau's legacy is present in the thinking of the philosopher Jacques Rancière, especially when he elaborates his theory on the notion of fiction as a form of political subjectivity that can create new modes of sensing. Jacques Rancière brings Certeau's theories further when he lays bare the political core of those daily actions. In his essay *The distribution of the Sensible. Aesthetics and Politics* (Rancière 2004) Rancière describes a fiction as a way to 'visualize an encounter of incompatibilities'. He does not present fictions as oppositions, or as militant acts of resistance, which is sometimes the weak point in Certeau's text, but instead, Rancière defines fictions as moments of disagreement towards a given discourse, without aiming to replace it.

This encounter of incompatibilities takes place under a regime of co-existence, of close contact between the involved parts in a somehow unsustainable friction. Rancière describes fictions as processes that establish new relationships between appearance and reality. If we understand
design as a Fiction too in the context of contemporary aesthetic practices, then design can also create new frames of sensing and, in doing so, 'allow the development of new forms of subjectivity' (Rancière 2004).

In his essay *Ten Theses on Politics* (Rancière 2001) fictions are described by Rancière as forms of dissent, (disagreement) which are the essence of politics. Such fictions or forms of dissent do not pretend to polarise, generating a conflict of interests between different groups, but they need to exist in order to keep the possibility to confront one vision of the world with an alternative one. This is the reason why dissent is the essence of politics, while consensus on the contrary, would be the reduction of politics to the police; Rancière clarifies that 'Consensus is the end of politics and not the accomplishment of its ends. Consensus is determined to erase the very concept of politics, since precariousness and undecidedness are its essential elements' (Rancière 2001). In other words, full consensus is paralysing, if everybody agrees, there is only silence left.

Let's put an example of design research with a critical approach to daily life, which could correspond with the kind of aesthetic practices that Rancière defines as fictions or dissent. (Fig.4)

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby are interested in the ethical impact of technology in everyday life. The series of objects designed for “fragile personalities in anxious times” aimed to address phobias, anxieties and other paranoia generated by the everyday “invisible design” that surround us: electro waves, magnetic fields, noise, etc. Here, the *Electro-Draught Excluder* acted as a screen able to stop radiations and provide emotional comfort and trust to the user. The design propositions by Dunne and Raby and their consistent and intriguing use of intermediality (this is the combination of different media, like for example text, 3D objects and images) are paradigmatic of cultivating fictions as a conscious strategy. Fictions here are not understood as tales, but following Rancière, fictions are 'highly specialised forms of making visible „that which had no reason to be seen, lodging one world into the other’ (Rancière 2001)-

Since critical design is making use of an increasingly specialised circuit of presentation and debate and also is often using the formats of an
art exhibition, my research went on examining relational aesthetics, which at the moment is present in the debate on curating critical design. The theory on relational aesthetics developed by Nicolas Bourriaud opens the space of the museum to host non-artistic situations, enabling artists and audience to live fictions as authentic experiences in the frame of an 'everyday micro-utopia' (Bourriaud 1998). Bourriaud describes a shift in attitude towards social change: He observes that instead of a futuristic agenda, today's artists seek to find provisional solutions in the here and now, “learning to inhabit the world in a better way”. Parallels are found in the positions adopted by critical designers, but the question is not so much if the boundaries between art and design mingle, but to realise that both have a problematic relationship with the protected environment of the white cube. Art and Design set up a kind of therapeutics for deteriorated social relations, but at the same time they aim to have an impact in real life and engage in social change. This an ongoing challenge for both disciplines and a ground for further research around the ideal place and actual impact of these fictions.

This paper concludes stating that when design adopts a critical discourse it is able to create new frames of sensing. These design frames or interfaces are political in the measure that they set up those necessary moments of disagreement, those temporary situations that open doors for alternative ways of living, thinking and acting. Rancière’s theory on politics contributes to articulate critical positions in design in order to raise awareness to such fundamental political activity of generating fictions. Design can be understood as a practice of re-framing the real, not in absolute or oppositional terms but reinforcing the complexity and open-endedness of experience. An invitation for designers to disagree through the elaboration of fictions runs parallel to the call for more 'running room for cultural practice' (Foster 2002). A similar observation comes from Klaus Krippendorff, when he advocates for the re-empowerment of the design discourse (Krippendorff 1995), while the 'poetical unfriendliness in design' (Dunne 2005) encouraged by Anthony Dunne is not far from Rancière’s definition of dissenting. Understanding fictions in this way, can make design play a critical role in society, and become an active agent for social change.

REFERENCES


