Towards Critical Practices: Art and Design as Socially Productive Practices
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Mel Jordan is an artist in the Freee art collective. Freee work together on the production of slogans, billboards and publications that attempt to challenge the commercial and bureaucratic colonization of the public sphere of opinion formation. Freee occupies the public sphere with works that take sides, are forthright and divide opinion. Freee proposes that the notion of 'public' in the idiom 'public art' should be understood as a discursive construct as opposed to a physical, spatial understanding as in the term 'public realm'. This revision considers the act of being public as a *process*, a series of inter-subjective temporal experiences, rather than a *spatial* condition. This helps expand art's role from an autonomous field of exhibition making into a position of publishing, thereby recognising art as a contributor to collective opinion formation. Jordan is also Head of Programme for Contemporary Art Practice and Reader in Art and the Public Sphere at the Royal College of Art, London.

Not all design is marketable! Not all art is innocent!

Whereas design is largely seen as a practical response to commercial requests and designers the lackeys of capitalist marketeers, the lone artist has been tasked with searching for individuality and extoling the virtues of personal autonomy. Art helps sediment the idea that: 'I am an individual with the right to express myself', whispering to me that it is the idea of collectivism that limits my freedom, inferring that it has nothing to do with the reality of advanced capitalism. By comparison, design's preoccupation with improving our existing living conditions assumes a kind of 'common sense' pragmatism, which further embeds us within the ideological apparatus of Neo-Liberalism. For sure, design does make capitalism more tolerable. And thankfully, I hear you holler.

We need to survive it to overcome it!

Yet there is no doubt that design, through market innovations, assists capital in the harnessing of our bodies and minds to function as machines for profit and usually for somebody other than ourselves. These ideas are polemical but then the oppositional positioning of art and design always is. Of course certain designers work collectively and towards social and political projects, and some artists challenge the prevalent social construction that their role is merely to obsess with their own individuality, overturning the rule and committing to a career of social and collective art practice. I am not interested in setting up a contest between what is best: art or design. Neither do I want to flatten their differences by listing their similarities this would further determine them as technical categories and this doesn't help us think about them as social processes. I don't even want to examine what art and design is, or what constitutes it. I propose that both art and design have the potential of operating as socially productive practices. I suggest we avert our attention to the difference between a politicized practice and an unsuspecting practice whether it is characterised as art or design. This changes the emphasis from what *is* art and design to how art and design can improve the way we live. I wish to use the framework of critical theory to suggest a function for critical art and design practice that is *not* defined by specialized procedures. I suggest that this type of art and design practice can encourage us to change how we act in the world whether we are producers, consumers or observers.

Not all art is critical and not all design is commercial!

Art can no longer be unique!

Throughout the twentieth century there has been a dominant belief that art's core value is its distinctiveness. Art's obsession with originality has led the way in terms of its continued desire for innovation. The pursuit of newness and uniqueness in art has fuelled the idea of nomination; 'Is it art?' being the continued cry of the critics and the viewing public. In his seminal essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935) Walter Benjamin, argues that mechanical reproduction liberates the work of art from its

historical dependence on ritual.[1] He believes that the breakdown of the authentic within artistic production reverses the function of art, stating: 'Instead of being based on ritual, it [art] begins to be based on another practice - politics'.[2] He famously gives the example of the photographic negative, whereby, because of the technical conditions of the process, several prints can be produced from the same negative. As there is no one authentic print but many versions of the same image or artwork, the technological conditions of photography affects the way it functions. Thus art's uniqueness is brought into question by the process of production and a change occurs: art's relationship to ritual is altered and without one original event the ritualized view of an image or artwork is brought into doubt. Through this example Benjamin also identifies the way that the means of production cannot be seen as separate from the final artwork but that it is central to and embedded in the continued function of art.

However, this essay is not a semiological account of the meanings constructed through the combination of processes and content in the production of art and design works, or a celebration of mechanical production as a means of aesthetic innovation, but rather a way of understanding how we produce and reproduce our own conditions of existence. It is concerned with art and design's importance to the material practice of living.

In 'The Theory of the Avant-garde' (1974), Peter Bürger also interrogates art's uniqueness.[3] When describing the consequence of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), a designed object or 'ready-made', he states, 'The idea of the nature of art as developed since the Renaissance – the individual creation of unique works – is thus provocatively called into question.'[4] In this instance Duchamp, through the practice of announcing his 'ready-mades' as reproductions, questions the expectation we have for the function of art. The shift he makes from *art* to *work* upsets the ritualizing status of previous artworks in favour of

1 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt (ed., translated by Harry Zohn) *Illuminations,* New York: Schoken Books, 1969, pp. 1- 26.
2 Ibid, p. 6.
3 Peter Burger, The theory of the Avant-Garde, Minneosta: University of Minneosta Press, 1984.
4 Ibid., p. 56.

one of 'contemplation immersion'[5]. This move is not based on the consequences of technological advance as in photography, but on a desire for art to operate as a socially productive practice thus differently from a revered and aloof activity manifested in an esteemed one-off object.

Although he does not go as far as to say it, Benjamin extends ideas of production to the reception of artworks and his position on the production/reception relationship highlights the importance of art's relationship to our subjectivity. Once an artwork's unique specialness is put into question our relationship with it changes from reverie and awe to actual engagement. We are invited to view it as a means to explore our curiosity and encouraged to relate to it. Benjamin goes on to explain that the spectator of a film has a different psychological experience to that of a viewer of a painting. To look at painting is contemplative: the viewer is conscious of the stillness of the product, providing an experience for the onlooker that stirs subjective interpretation. Conversely to watch a film is to experience a set of moving images that are sequence and therefore less subjective.

Designers need to strive for critical practices not arty ones!
Designers need to learn the difference between ethics and politics!
Designers must try harder to upset people!

When we consider design the conditions differ; engagement with the viewer and user is already set, design's function is to establish direct communication with the onlooker or user. Although at times design does stray into the realm of contemplation, its function is usually more determined than that of art practice. In order for design to assume a role as a socially productive practice, it is not necessary to make ethical design products that target marginalised users; design needs to challenge the apparatus of advanced capital. Design must overturn its reliance on pragmatism and reach beyond the application of 'considerate' responses to certain problems. To do this design ought to establish the political positions and practices designers need to reject ethics.

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5 Benjamin, op.cit., 12

Design is too nice and designers are too courteous!

Art and design are not simply innovative!

Art (and design) as Critical Practice (is it ok to delete this as it is the only subhead in the piece – unless I'm missing one!

In his essay 'Benjamin and Adorno on Art as a Critical Practice' (2015), Georg W. Bertram revisits Benjamin's essay in order to interrogate Adorno's original critique of it.[6] He asserts that if we endeavour to understand the nuances between Adorno's and Benjamin's position, we might get a clearer idea of Benjamin's conception of art. Bertram claims that, 'Benjamin introduces the concept of 'aura' in a context in which he comes to speak about questions of perceptions'[7] and that this enables Benjamin 'to conceive that sensuous perception is historically determined'.[8] This interpretation moves the artwork away from an essentialist positioning: that the artwork is essentially beautiful, and it positions the artwork in a social continuum, which calls our attention to the idea of behaviour and perception as a socially determined practice. Bertram says, 'According to Benjamin the structures of perception that are established in communal practices ("being based on ritual") determine the particular perception of practices of subjects'.[9] For Adorno this undermines the potential autonomy of art and therefore its ability to be critical. But Benjamin's sees creative practices (art and design) as having the agency to change the way we act, what we do and how we behave. For Adorno this is not dialectical enough because it replicates the way in which capital reproduces itself, however what Benjamin speaks to is 'an immense and unexpected field of action'.[10] As Bertram says, for Benjamin 'artworks are thus measured with the respect to their capacity to open up new fields of action', stating,

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[6] Georg W. Betram, 'Benjamin and Adorno on Art as Critical Practice', in Nathan Ross (ed.) *Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno,* London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.
[7] Ibid, pg 2
[8] ibid, pg 2
[9] Betram, G.W, Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory, pg 4, Ross, N (eds), Rowman and Littlefield, 2015
[10] Ibid. pg 8

'The essential question for Benjamin is one of understanding how art can operate as a critical practice, and by this he is concerned with the prospect of change; how critique can lead to social transformation…Benjamin upholds a conception of art that does not put up with such a form of powerlessness, but rather connects the potential of change with art… His conception of art does not aim at the occurrence of a certain experience, but at the distinctive way in which art can intervene in societal practices.'[11]

Art and design helps us reimagine the world!

Art and design practice repeats itself. Art and design practice repeats itself. Art and design practice repeats itself.

Artists and designers are always starting again. They rehearse, iterate, train, study and redo things. And as viewers or users of art and design we reuse, review, revisit and reread their outputs. This process can be said to be a type of practising practice. Practices include 'ideas' or 'opinions' that the division of labour assigns to individuals as well as their 'customs' and habits' and their concrete comportment. The individual in question behaves in such-and-such a way, adopts such-and-such a practical line of conduct and, what is more, participates in certain regulated practices, influenced by the ideological apparatus from where the ideas emerge and are chosen in 'good' conscience. So if she believes in God, she may attend a religious service: kneel, pray, confess, do penance. Therefore practices, rituals and behaviours can be seen as an important part of the organisational systems that sediment ways of being and are adopted in order to attach oneself to society. As Benjamin points out different practices of art and design can affect the way we engage with these works thus enabling new subjectivities to emerge through the process of spectatorship[12].

Art and design are essentially practices made public and continually repeated!

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[11] Ibid. pg 7
[12] Benjamin, op.cit., p.14

Publish, review, republish and remake the spectator!

As art and design practices hope for and try to produce new subjectivities, the spectator is not automatically furnished with the capacity and pleasures to interpret all works of art or design - at least not straight away and not for long - but needs to engage in a kind of creative labour which is as much about transforming oneself as it is about knowing the work, of negotiating the places constructed by the work or the exhibition or the event, of altering oneself so as to occupy the new place designated by the work. The work cannot do this alone it is through the exchange that this event emerges. New subjects for art and design, which include new collective subjects, require the transformation of the apparatuses of art and design. Only then can the labour of engaging with art and design be a labour of transformation from the possible to the impossible. Art and design allows us to become something unpredictable, something unacceptable, perhaps, or something strange, but only if the apparatuses of art and design are subverted and transformed.

Collectivise to transform the apparatuses of art and design!