

**CONCEPTS OF ART AND DESIGN: TENSIONS BETWEEN DOMAINS::  
KEITH RUSSELL**

Dr Keith Russell

School of Design, Communication and Information Technology, University of Newcastle, 2308

keith.russell@newcastle.edu.au

**Abstract**

While Art and Design share a large number of concepts, there is a fundamental tension, at the level of both theory and practice, between Art and Design in the articulation of their concepts. For example, reference is common to both domains. A painter may sketch and make a painting of a chair; a designer may design and build a chair. The references for each may be similar in terms of the history of an object, but the actual use-references will be at extreme ends of a continuum. In simple terms, the built chair can be sat on; the painted chair is for looking at.

Use and purpose tend to hold Art and Design theory apart. Design students are taught Art theory at a distance, as part of a general history of artefacts. Art students are taught Design theory indirectly as an aspect of creativity and process. Both domains tend to keep to themselves on the basis of the tension between them that is determined at the conceptual level.

This tension is available as a structure that can help inform both domains. By calling on the strong differences between Art and Design concepts, it is possible to draw both domains into a common understanding of the theoretical issues of Art and Design. Design theory is on the outer edge of the post-modern: its concerns are still largely those of an innocent modernism. Art theory, while it has embraced the richness of everything "post", is on the outer edge of use-value: its concerns have become, for many, those of an anonymous interior.

Beyond this tension there remains the general avoidance of concepts that inform both Art and Design. This may be less of an issue in Art where the rush of recent social theory has been powerful if not overpowering. The resistance of Design to this body of theory is instructive in that Design has managed to retain a coherence. Between these two responses (embracing and resistance) there is the possibility for a new shared domain of Art and Design theory secured by the tension and openness to other domains such as archaeology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, theology, history, literature, biology and technology.

## **Introduction - The Aesthetics of Opening Doors:**

There is something very pleasant in the use of a door that works. The ease of opening; the swift silent swing; and, the secure sound of closing: these all confirm the practical event of opening and closing a door. Mostly we have this door experience as a thing unnoticed. To call attention to the satisfactions of the door is to do something other than simply use the door; it is to engage in an aesthetic experience of the door, door-ness and the kinetic, haptic and auditory experiences of a door. We can imagine that for those who design doors, this experience is deeply critical and fundamentally cognitive; that is, the designers of doors and door systems, spend much of their time engaged in the aesthetics of doors. By the time the door is produced, marketed and installed, most of this wealth of experiential knowledge has become embodied in the door. In its final location and use, the door is enclosed in its use; the aesthetic aspects have been invested in the object. When we, as users of the door, open and close the door, we are consuming the aesthetics of the door in our use of the door. Having used the door, we move on. The success of the door hides the aesthetics of the door. The art in the artefact has been consumed without there being an isolated experience of consumption. The design object has been de-arted. Closer inspection of the aesthetics of opening doors and design objects will reveal the rich relationship of tension between objects of art and design. It will also reveal the potential shared reception space of illusion and transitional experience that is typical of our meetings with art and design objects.

## **Failure and the Location of Enhancement:**

When a door fails in all or part of its use, then the aesthetics come to the attention of the user. Perhaps the handle is cold or rough, the door squeaks or is heavy to push, or the closing mechanism does not give a positive account of its successful closing. Then we notice the door-ness and our sensory apprehension of the object as an object of contemplation. Here failure has led to the re-location of the everyday object as a special object. Through our different attention, the object of design has become, potentially, an object of art. If "we pay attention only to cognitively enhanced stimuli" (Schaeffer, 1998, p. 26) then it also needs to be said that we pay attention only to objects that "call" our attention in their being "cognitively enhanced". Design objects no more or less than art objects are "enhanced". All human-made objects are "enhanced" in that it is re-cognition of the possibility of enhancement that has accompanied the human-making. What we attend to actively by way of making we also attend to passively by way of contemplation.

The shift in our attention to contemplation is obvious enough in the case of human-made works of art; it is less obvious in the case of objects of everyday use. When we look around at the simple human-made objects in our world, it can be difficult to shift attention, especially when many of these objects seem to call to mind natural prototypes. That is, unlike with art objects, we can forgive the human made-ness of design objects because they seem to be not much more than convenient enhancements modelled on natural things. We accommodate the art in these objects are being mostly craft or skilful duplication. We make such distinctions in our dealings with objects to "enhance" the enhancement in art objects and we do this to "naturalise" the enhancement in design objects.

The evolution of the modern knife and fork from flint and stick, and the evolution of the spoon from the cupped hands and shells of eons ago, seem thoroughly reasonable stories. But they are more than stories, constructed after the fact by imaginative social scientists; the way our common tableware has developed to its present form is but a single example of a fundamental principle by which all made things come to look and function the way they do. That principle revolves about our perception of how existing things fail to do what we expect them to do as well and conveniently and economically as we think they should or wish they would. In short, they leave something to be desired. (Petroski, 1993, p. 22)

In pointing out that form follows failure, Petroski allows us to distinguish a primary motivation for design that would seem to set design apart from art:

Here, then, is the central idea: the form of made things is always subject to change in response to their real or perceived shortcomings, their failures to function properly. This principle governs all invention, innovation, and ingenuity; it is what drives all inventors, innovators, and engineers. And there follows a corollary: Since nothing is perfect, and, indeed, since even our ideas of perfection are not static, everything is subject to change over time. There can be no such thing as a "perfected" artifact; the future perfect can only be a tense, not a thing. (Petroski, 1993, p. 22)

### **Perfect Doors and the Transgressive Object:**

Already we have sketched several opposed positions between art and design in terms of their objects. These positions are not absolute, rather they are indications of our interpretations of objects. While the relative nature of our interpretations may caution us to be hesitant in making larger distinctions, the concepts that we use, in our interpretations, allow us to go further. Looking at "perfection", as raised by Petroski, it is easy to see that a designer might attempt, sensibly, to perfect a door or mouse trap. Equally, it would be nonsensical to suggest that an artist should attempt to paint the perfect door or square metre (except that we seek perfection as being a singular achievement). "Perfection" takes its meaning from the concept of "completed work". In this sense, a work of art may be completed in its own terms and hence be "perfect". The extensions of "perfection" to included the achievement of an ideal finished state are the logical outcome of the possibilities of an iterative process that is typical of design. Design is precisely about the elements in an object that can be repeated and altered in their next iteration. The production process permits such dreams. From the perspective of users, we do not need a perfect spoon in the sense of an ultimate spoon; a spoon that does its job in the here and now is finished enough. We might want a better spoon because our present spoon has made us aware, through its bringing attention to itself, that our present spoon is not finished enough: the spoon has, in its use, provided a revisionary critique of itself. When the spoon "fails" the aesthetic qualities are made obvious as cognitively enhanced but in ways that draw attention to a desired alternative experience of perfection. As in the case of the good door experience, any experience of an ultimate spoon would lead to the end of the aesthetic experience of the spoon unless the spoon then became art. In this sense the use of design objects allows design objects to be transgressive. Design objects, within the critique of their use, point to the possibility of their being objects of contemplation while at the same time pointing to their possible perfection and subsumption into the category of art.

### **Poetics and the Antagonised Object**

Given that artists and designers spend their time in the realm of the aesthetics and poetics of objects, it is instructive to offer here an account of the process of critique from the maker's perspective. In the case of design, the majority of critical literature is from the position of the maker. This "distortion" of the discourse is a reflection of the generally closed nature of design objects: their intentions are their functions. Nonetheless, the accounts of designers do reveal the potential antagonisms embedded in all human productions. The following is from a successful door handle maker, from Germany. The interviewee is Jürgen W. Braun:

One day we were sitting in Johannes Potente's old studio - it must have been June 1985 - and Aicher asked: "What makes the products of Johannes Potente different from other door handles?"

We all looked at one another. Somebody said: "They feel good in the hand." We started to describe what "feeling good in the hand" might be. I said something like, "the thumb finds its stop, the index finger its indentation, the roundness, the volume..." and after quarter of an hour we had defined the four laws of grip. Otl Aicher wrote them down immediately: 1. thumb stop, 2.

index finger indentation, 3. roundness, 4. grip volume - and did a drawing to go with them. That led to a poster. Although here in the company, people were initially embarrassed. (Geberzahn, interview with Jürgen W. Braun , 2001, URL)

The embarrassment arising from the simplicity of the aesthetic account indicates the generally hidden nature of the sensuous in design. While the design object has its aesthetic dimension, the design team is only driven to inspect this dimension as part of an identity crisis within the firm. The question "what makes our objects different?" arose from outside; the door handles were fine, but something was going wrong in the market place. Following on from this vivid account, the designers quickly move away from their aesthetic apprehension of their own products. They return to the quite despair of intention and function. As Braun points out:

The semantic effect is fundamental. The language of our products is unambiguous: here's the exit, here's the entrance, take hold of it, shut the door . . . There is nothing that can replace these semantics.

Semantics now pushes out the aesthetics. The design object has been returned to its "proper" domain that of use and use value. In the case of the Italian designer, Ettore Sottsass, we can see how the tension between domains can facilitate the extension of the aesthetic. Sottsass calls for a radical disruption of our expectations about design through a litany of aesthetically charged if impossible objects:

Design of a door to enter into darkness; Design of a door where someone doesn't let you in; Design of a floor where your steps will be uncertain; Design of a room where assassinations are decided, etc. (Radice, 1993, p. 185)

Sottsass has produced photography exhibitions around these themes of imaginative things. Such imaginative objects are not within Braun's brief. After having felt his door handles, Braun's account of the design process is much what we have come to expect from a person expert in design:

First of all every product has to function. In this respect we are good functionalists. But symbolism and aesthetics are equally important. Not to mention the material. There is a time for plastic, for aluminium, for stainless steel. It is wrong to ignore the symbolism of the materials. Nor can aesthetics be entirely separated from the zeitgeist. So what I would say to a young designer is this: take a material that is in line with the times, design a functioning product and rely on your own taste, which should differ distinctly from that of your grandfather.

### **Closing the Doors of Perception:**

The world of Sottsass' doors is a special world, a world of the aesthetic where possibilities remain suspended in their aesthetic apprehension. In the everyday world of design objects, we are usually confronted with closed systems where there should be nothing left over that might produce confusion. Nonetheless, the possibility of failure still haunts this world of quiet things: the aesthetic can still arise. Donald Norman, in his studies of the everyday world of everyday objects, offers to provide an account of the psychopathology of every day things and the psychology of everyday actions. Neat as it may be that the title of Norman's book (*The Psychology of Everyday Things*) can be turned into the acronym POET, the circumstances that are under investigation, interesting as they are, fall into the category of object and design semantics rather than object and design aesthetics. Norman's objects deny the disruptions of failure except as simple accounts of poor design. On doors, Norman narrates:

If I were placed in the cockpit of a modern jet airliner, my inability to perform gracefully and smoothly would neither surprise nor bother me. But I shouldn't have trouble with doors and

switches, water faucets and stoves. "Doors?" I can hear the reader saying, "you have trouble [p 2] opening doors?" Yes. I push doors that are meant to be pulled, pull doors that should be pushed, and walk into doors that should be slid. Moreover, I see others having the same troubles - unnecessary troubles. There are psychological principles that can be followed to make these things understandable and useable. (Norman, 1988, pp. 2-3)

Understandable and useable things are the things of design. The more immediate the understanding and use then, presumably, the better the design. The idea of puzzle objects, or objects that aspire to value above or parallel with use seems lost to design. Papanek, for example, seeks to supplement design through an urgent need for ecology rather than through a re-location of design in relation to the aesthetic:

There can be no transcendental refrigerator, no righteous chair, no moral tea kettle. We cannot find a spiritual advertisement, a soul-stirring logo or trademark. In the fields of fashion and textile design it is impossible to locate an immaculate cotton print or a saintly dress. (1995, p 49)

And yet, Papanek allows a kind of spirituality as objects get larger, and as projects require greater community involvement. Somehow the human, especially in its physical connection, can be drawn beyond the material through the structuring of the material:

When the low entrance to a Japanese tea house forces us to bow as we enter, this unavoidable obeisance forces us once more to a spiritual and muscular effort, designed into the structure. (1995, p 86)

### **The Resisting Reception of Objects:**

The tea house "low entrance" or door, has produced the kind of aesthetic object denied by Papanek and Norman. That is, in his elaborations, Papanek is able to determine a tension between art and design. Here the use of the object has its spiritual objective correlative: as we bow to enter so we are made humble. In Norman's terms we are simply required to bend in a way which probably has occupational health and safety issues. If we parallel the tea house entrance with revolving doors then we can expose the aesthetic in the accident or incident. When using revolving doors in the northern hemisphere it is disconcerting to confront a door that is made to be entered from the right and not the left. Presumably the intention of the designer is not to confront the door user. This ease of use is true for all those who walk and drive on the right. For the rest of us, the door presents a "failure" that calls up the apprehension of revolving doors as an aesthetic experience of some discomfort and/or thrill. We receive the door as an object of resistance: the object seems to refuse its own slide into its own obvious use. Which then points to the problem of the obviousness of design:

Design as we might and will, there is something altogether too concrete about things designed; the outcome of the process of designing is too much there, too much its own put on face. (Russell, 2001, p. 17)

Taking off the face is what failure allows. Putting on the face differently allows us to critique the space between design objects and those of art.

That is, just as the aesthetic dimension can offer an account for all sensory apprehension whether of art, design or natural objects, so a psychology of objects can offer an account of our relationships with objects that gets us beyond the use-based restrictions of Norman. The deliberate holding of tension in the design object necessarily causes a shift in focus when the objects are teapots and kitchen implements. Surely kitchen utensils are beyond any notion of the spiritual? The design objects produced by the company ALESSI cultivate a disruptive playfulness. Christopher Waller in an "interview" with Alessi points to the collision of art and design in the philosophy and production strategies of ALLESI:

If the language of objects expresses our dreams, aspirations and anxieties, then the unconscious message of ALESSI products is of a society desperate to escape back to the reassuring realm of the child where fantasies are still possible. Why else would we need a sugar filter called Gino Zucchini? Gino Zucchini, designed by Guido Venturini in 1993, is a bright, plastic, amorphous form with a large, inanely grinning face, whose stated function is to sift impurities from a mass-produced, artificially processed foodstuff. Gino has more of the attributes of a toy than of a cooking utensil. But to dwell on these aspects of the product is to miss its irony. Gino is an item of mass production, the implicit function of which is to be cathartic – to make us feel happier about the products of industrial process. As Alessi is fond of saying, "There is no difference between a coffee-maker or a teapot and the Linus blanket or a teddy bear." (Waller, 1996, p.73)

### **Linus and Transitional Objects:**

In raising the Linus blanket or teddy bear, Alessi is calling on the psychology of transitional objects as developed by Winnicott.

I hope it will be understood that I am not referring exactly to the little child's teddy bear or to the infant's first use of the fist (thumb, fingers). I am not specifically studying the first object of object-relationships. I am concerned with the first possession, and with the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived (Winnicott, 1971, p. 3]

Perhaps the best known and most successful of the ALESSI transitional objects is the *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer designed by Philippe Starck. The success of this object is in spite of its failure to function as a "better" lemon squeezer. When challenged with this observation, the designer replied:

Sometimes you must choose why you design - in this case not to squeeze lemons, even though as a lemon squeezer it works. Sometimes you need some more humble service: on a certain night, the young couple, just married, invites the parents of the groom to dinner, and the groom and his father go to watch football on the TV. And for the first time the mother of the groom and the young bride are in the kitchen and there is a sort of malaise - this squeezer is made to start the conversation. (Starck, 1998, URL)

For Starck the squeezer is a transitional object that is open, as an objective correlative, to ground the new relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Like the good door, the squeezer is used up in its use, even though its use has been re-defined as an aesthetic one. The conversation may even focus, as it often does about the squeezer, on the many failures of the squeezer. In spite of this expensive failure, or because of it, the play opens up the transitional space. Other accounts of the squeezer's semiotics can be provided, for example, Lloyd and Snelders spend considerable time exploring the surrounding ideas:

We have, then, a number of possible ways to construe the lemon squeezer as an object that expresses or embodies ideas. We have the idea of permanence, the idea of "a past future", the possibility of irony, the idea of instability, and of sex. A sexy, Soviet, statue: a morality tale for the over-spending consumer: beware of fixed, top-heavy systems, for they may be toppled. (Lloyd and Snelders, 2001, p. 251.)

While these ideas are important accounts, in their own right, they tend to take attention away from the primary location of the object within a possible psychology of objects. That is, the rush to a social analysis is at the expense of the accounts by both Alessi and Starck of what they think their objects are doing. This is not to presume authorial-intention equals object-meaning. Rather, it is to allow that design objects might

have some other discourse open to them that is currently confused by the polarity of art and design. Winnicott points to the crucial uncontested nature of the transitional object and the transitional relationship:

The transitional object and the transitional phenomena start each human being off with what will always be important for them, i.e. a neutral area of experience which will not be challenged. *Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: "Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?" The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.* [Italics in original.]

This problem, which undoubtedly concerns the human infant in a hidden way at the beginning, gradually becomes an obvious problem on account of the fact that the mother's main task (next to providing opportunity for illusion) is disillusionment. This is preliminary to the task of weaning, and it also continues as one of the tasks of parents and educators. In other words, this matter of *illusion* is one that belongs inherently to human beings and that no individual finally solves for himself or herself, although a theoretical understanding of it may provide a *theoretical* solution. If things go well, in this gradual disillusionment process, the stage is set for the frustrations that we gather together under the word weaning . . . It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is "lost" in play. . . . Should an adult make claims on us for our acceptance of the objectivity of his subjective phenomena we discern or diagnose madness. If, however, the adult can manage to enjoy the personal intermediate area without making claims, then we can acknowledge our own corresponding intermediate areas, and are pleased to find a degree of overlapping, that is to say common experience between members of a group in art or religion or philosophy. . . . This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work. (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 12, 13, 14)

### **Conclusion and an Intermediate Area:**

The transitional objects of Winnicott allow us to re-see the objects of art and design. The playful psychology of ALESSI allows us to review the tensions between art and design. The danger in a psychology of objects is that it shifts attention away from the enhanced objects of art and design. For psychology, the focus is on the apprehension of enhancement itself and its cognitive function in the development and maintenance of the life of the individual. This psychological "use" of objects pretends to be more fundamental than either art or design. The same danger presents itself in the form of other alternative grand views such as Papanek's ecology of objects or Norman's quest for an ergonomic universe.

A larger danger to both art and design is the general discounting of other humanities areas that can inform art and design. This discounting extends to the critical use of each discourse by the other. This paper has explored the tensions between art and design, at the theoretical level, mostly from the perspective of design. The paper could obviously be extended to take more account of the tension from the perspective of art, and this remains to be done. Design has been used here as the failed squeezer to initiate the potential intermediate area between art and design theory. Design is in radical need of this space if only to avoid the fall into style and the personal. In its fascination with objects as objects, potentially, design keeps us aware of the revolutionary:

I despise provincial utopias. I know that every man has his memories . . . Other people, too, have lived in particular circumstances . . . but there is absolutely no reason, for me or for them, to immerse ourselves in defensive fortresses in which to play and replay ad nauseam the scratchy record of our singularity. (Sottsass quoted in Bayley, 1985, p. 51)

### Reference List:

Bayley, Stephen. 1985 *Conran Directory of Design*, London: Conran Octopus.

Geberzahn, W. O. 2001. "Design Report from Germany", an interview with Jürgen W. Braun, URL <<http://www.designboom.com/news/june/designreport.html>> [Accessed June, 2001.]

Llyod, Peter and Snelders, Dirk. 2001. "What was Philippe Starck Thinking Of?" in *Designing in Context: Proceedings of Design Thinking Research Symposium 5* (Delft University of Technology, 18-20 December, 2001). Delft: Delft University Press - Science, pp. 241-256.

Norman, Donald A. 1988. *The Psychology of Everyday Things*. NY: Basic Books.

Papanek, Victor. 1995. *The Green Imperative: Ecology and Ethics in Design and Architecture*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Petroski, Henry. 1993. "Form Follows Failure" in *The Evolution of Useful Things*. London: Pavilion Books.

Radice, Barbara. 1993. *Ettore Sottsass: A Critical Biography*, London: Thames & Hudson.

Russell, Keith. 2001. "Towards a Poetics of Design and Play", in *Designing in Context: Proceedings of Design Thinking Research Symposium 5* (Delft University of Technology, 18-20 December, 2001). Delft: Delft University Press - Science, pp. 17-30.

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie. 1998. "Experiencing Artworks", in Bartomeu Marí and Jean-Marie Schaeffer (eds.). *Think Art: Theory and Practice in the Art of Today / Symposium Under the Direction of Jean-Marie Schaeffer*. Rotterdam: Witte de With.

Starck, Philippe. 1998. "Starck Speaks: Politics, Pleasure, Play", in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Summer. <[www.gsd.harvard.edu/dearts/](http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/dearts/)>

Waller, Christopher. 1996. "The Transformer" ["Interview" with Alberto Alessi], *21C*, No.2, pp. 72-75.

Winnicott, D. W. 1971. *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock Publications.