

Making Radical Theory Pay: What is the use of edgy research?

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Abstract

Despite the creative ideals surrounding art and design pedagogy a tension persists between critical speculative experimentation and the acceptable educational values of encouraging ethical responsibility and commercial innovation. Such a tension is best embodied in radical art and design theory, which is often an explicit denunciation of both the humanist ideology of ethics and the oppressive instrumentalism of capitalism.

Yet this talk will investigate the ways in which radical art and design theory is being made practical to the ideological needs of ethical 'de-politicisation' and the commercial needs of brand differentiation and youth marketing. Particular attention will be paid to the way in which the radical anti-capitalism of Situationist theory has been domesticated and become foundational to the 'edginess' of contemporary design practice. The question will then be asked about the possibilities of art and design teaching going beyond the legitimation of 'acceptable resistance'.

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In the debates about trying to make art and design theory more relevant what are often lost are the fundamental justifications for cultural theory in general. At present it is based on a spectrum between two poles, one a residual rationale of Renaissance-era humanist ideals which an emerging bourgeoisie attached themselves to in order to justify their hegemony on more than just mercantilist grounds. This pole is represented today in the discourse of ethics, through which theory contributes by reinforcing the responsibilities of well-rounded citizenship and equipping social actors with the critical skills necessary for the hurly-burly of a democratic society. The other extreme is an emergent discourse representing a bourgeoisie more secure in its power and seeking to extract profit out of the cultural realm, this discourse is today represented in the language of 'innovation'. My focus is on the problems teaching radical art and design theory between these two poles of relevance, particularly theory relating to Situationism. This is due to the fact that Situationism still resonates as the most potent radical discourse within art and design, one that chafes not only at the 'usefulness' of commercial innovation but also that of ethical citizenship. The ways that Situationism has thus been made 'useful' tells us a lot about the problems and potentials of such critical thinking.

At a time when tertiary education is under pressure to justify its public funding those areas that lack an obvious application are usually forced to make a virtue of their long-standing 'meta-applied' status. Thus in seeking to placate the immediate 'stakeholders' in art and design (especially design) education as to the value of theory one is still reliant on vague but noble-sounding invocations to ethics, which both students and employers seem to tacitly accept without any real enthusiasm. Of course no one would want to be seen to be advocating unethical art and design and the importance of the 'citizen designer'¹ is broadly accepted, though the reasons for this are usually framed in terms of an amorphous 'greater social good,' which are difficult to fundamentally integrate with the practice of design per se. As a consequence the theory based around such social ethics is perceived as at best 'tacked on' and at worst a negative drag of 'external' social issues which distracts from core skill sets.

This externality has become a persistent problem ever since the post-War ‘technobureaucratic’ restructuring of the university system. John Guillory has noted how the changing constitution of the bourgeoisie has seen the growing redundancy of Classics as the means to inculcate literacy and ideology.² While an earlier haute bourgeoisie had nurtured such ‘useless’ humanities studies to maintain both a class distinction and a continuity to past Great Civilizations, an emerging professional-managerial class has been less concerned with social status and civic virtues and more with education that is relevant to the business and administration of contemporary capitalism.³ Along with this push for technocratic efficiencies the advent of new or improved mass media and communication technologies has increased the value and relevance of culture (and its attendant theories) as a commodity rather than as an amorphous realm of social harmony external to immediate economic concerns.

The most recent iteration of this discourse of relevance can be seen in the attempts by numerous scholars and commentators to valorise arts education in the more explicit and commercial language of ‘innovation.’ In a recent submission from the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences the importance of socio-cultural theory in contributing to economic prosperity, particularly via ‘creative industries’, was emphasised in terms of increasing innovation.⁴ This innovation was not only the type that creates new ‘content’ for the burgeoning ‘knowledge economy’ but also that which provides creative solutions to the more general question of how we can keep sustainably squeezing more GDP out of the population and environment. Yet innovation not only functions as a language of economically rational commensuration it is also deemed the creative, fun, experimental and edgy binge to the dry, bureaucratic (but necessary) purge of ethics. It is within this spectrum that any justification for art and design theory must be made. So what happens to theory that not only falls outside this spectrum but directly challenges its legitimacy?

Born of a militant desire to challenge the authoritarianism of both capitalist consumerism and state socialism, Situationism was based in both French avant-garde and anarcho-Marxist cultures of the late 1950s.⁵ What makes it still so important to radical art and design theory is the way these two branches of art and politics were dialectically critiqued. Situationism was as fervently against the fetishisation of creative experimentation for the purposes of prestige bourgeois consumption in galleries or servicing the needs to commodification as it was against the turgid earnestness of technocratic reformist politics.

Thus the most well known Situationist theorist, Guy Debord, attacked what he called the ‘spectacular critique of the spectacle,’⁶ meaning critical politics that sought to solve social problems without fundamentally changing social relations. In this regard Situationist tactics were about ridiculing ethical reformism based on a desire to find a pluralist consensus rather than dealing with the fundamentally agonistic nature of politics. To this end Situationists satirised ‘pragmatic’ politics with crude, obnoxious derision (‘Bigger Cages! Longer Chains!’⁷) and sought to disrupt ‘business-as-usual’ as often as possible.⁸ They also sought to expose the way ethics tended to either dissolve politics into amorphous moralising (so as not to offend anyone) or reduce it to issue-based individualism that focuses on the ethical choices of individuals rather than political collectivism.⁹ But generally Situationism used avant-garde tactics to challenge the bloodless technocratic rationalism of ethical politics and focus on the power of imagination in politics (neatly summed up in their maxim: ‘Be Reasonable Demand the Impossible!’).

Yet the Situationists did not find this kind of imagination in what passed for radical art and design. In fact in many ways they were even more scathing in their critique of the contemporary avant-garde whose formal innovations and empty acts of defiance were seen as not only ineffectual but actually a direct support to capitalism in reinforcing the illusion of a dynamic, revolutionary status quo where dissent is freely allowed and engaged with; another ‘spectacular critique of the spectacle.’¹⁰ In so doing they set themselves against not only particular art forms and artists but the very right of bourgeois art or commercial design to exist at all; seeing its ‘irrationalism’ as neither intrinsically radical¹¹ nor even a neutral battleground of ideas.¹² Where the very existence of art is attacked the use of such theory is obviously a problem for art (and even design) pedagogy.

This is not to say that Situationism has not been made ‘useful’ to such a pedagogy (I have to justify and ‘rationalise’ it when I teach it, making it just another ‘idea,’ removing its discomfiting contingency). It has been de-fanged to suit a rather moralist (and almost technophobically nostalgic) ethics as well as a vacuous sign of resistance to, well, stuff. Without wishing to be too unkind Kalle Lasn and *Adbusters* magazine represents this ‘ethical Situationism.’¹³ While faithful to a lot of the critical humour of Situationism *Adbusters* is still a rather dour version full of reformist litanies

against 'consumerism' which usually read like moral invocations against hedonism ('Buy Nothing Day') rather than political demands for a new radical hedonism.¹⁴

As this design critique becomes more amorphous we see a similar pattern developing, such as in the following exchange between Véronique Vienne and the founder of the graphic design collective Socialist Designers, Fabrizio Gilardino:

But I also make reference to Situationist leader Guy Debord by signing all my letters with an insider's pun, "Vive Guy, d'abord." VV [Véronique Vienne]: What is your connection with Guy Debord and the Situationists? FG: There are no real connections. I am familiar with Debord's writing. He has been an influential thinker for me. More specifically, his critique of everyday life is still relevant today. But what really interests me and what I think we should point out is that at the beginning of their critique of everyday life, the Situationists thought that urban planning and architecture were the two disciplines that were the most compromised with the bureaucracy and what they called the "Society of the Spectacle." But it's important these days that we also think about the role played by graphic design and the advertising industry.¹⁵

Yes, by all means let's think about it; think about it all you like as long as you don't actually *do* anything about this role. If there are 'no real connections' between Situationism and nominally radical design it is clear that one does not have to let that hinder the innovative edginess of design with no real radical agenda at all.

The present visual culture is littered with the signifiers of resistance and defiance. From 'Burger King's slogan "Sometimes you gotta break the rules" to Hugo Boss's command to "Innovate, don't imitate"¹⁶ the contemporary advertising design-sphere is predominated by invocations to liberate your authentic self, fight conformity and (obviously) accessorise your resistance with various products. The textual promises of wild freedom are augmented by design styles that embody disdain for rules and boundaries: 'In the super-cool, up-for-it, irony-with-everything world of advertising, ...new design styles encountered...a ready understanding that such powerful signifiers of freedom and non-conformity could be pressed into persuasive commercial use.'¹⁷ It becomes clear then what the value of radical art and design theory can be to brand innovation. A great example of this was the recent *Matrix* franchise of films, with its time-tested scenario of authentic underdogs against inhuman conformity liberally dusted with just enough critical theory (a little bit of Debord, a dash of Foucault, more

than a pinch of Baudrillard) to separate it from the herd of similar sci-fi/action features.¹⁸

Indeed the larger overlap between business and cultural studies can be seen in Thomas Frank's observation that:

To an undeniable degree, the official narratives of American business – expressed in advertising, in management theory, in pro-business political and journalistic circles – largely share the cult-studs' [an affectionate diminutive of 'cultural studies'] oft-expressed desire to take on hierarchies, their tendency to find "elitism" lurking behind any criticism of mass culture, and their pious esteem for audience agency.¹⁹

To Frank this is not a case of devious recuperation so much as a synergy between the desire of so much critical cultural theory to celebrate the radical autonomy of the mass mediated signifier and the desire for business to see the post-Taylorist emphases on marketing over production as a triumph of fluid culture over stodgy politics.²⁰ It is with this background that one can understand the need for 'innovatory' design to associate itself with radical cultural theory so that it can enable brands to be differentiated from the conformist, sell-out herd, attract that lucrative youth demographic that wants to prove its rebellious individualism, and resonate with the contemporary capitalist concerns to appear 'dynamic' and 'creative', though not at any political level. To this end the particular attraction that Situationism holds for cutting-edge design becomes apparent.

Enter Bruce Mau, a graphic designer whose cutting-edge work has been sold to many big name mainstream clients like Disney, MTV and Nokia, but whose work with boutique theory publisher Zone has given him the risqué postmodern cache so desired by the truly innovative.²¹

Mau wants to do more than document his practice as a successful graphic designer; he wants, like just about everyone today from advertising copywriters to chartered-bank CEOs, to show himself a sophisticated intellectual, the savviest of savvy cultural critics.²²

For the most part he achieves this through a lot of vague, portentous talk of ‘paradigm shifts’ in his hybrid self-promotion/social theory tomes like *Life Style* and *Massive Change*,²³ echoing the form, and often the content, of Marshall McLuhan, who is a classic study of tremendous hyperbolic energy without intellectual heat. But to achieve real vanguard edginess you do need to have some, well, edge. Thus amongst the myriad theoretical associations that Mau likes to make it is not surprising that Situationism features strongly:

The opening salvo in *Life Style* is, in addition, a reference to the ideas of the Situationist thinker Guy Debord²⁴ whose work *The Society of the Spectacle* has become a favourite touchstone of art directors and magazine editors.²⁵

The invocation is of course an empty one, a point emphasised by Kingwell when he notes the level of Mau’s commitment to high-minded critique:

Mau’s rhetoric sometimes echoes the celebrated First Things First manifesto, pioneered by [Tibor] Kalman, which called graphic designers to social account: if ubiquity in the mediascape was acknowledged, so too must be their political responsibility. That Mau did not sign the manifesto is not necessarily an adverse comment on his politics (though it might be), but it does betray a certain arrogance about these issues.²⁶

Perhaps it is better to say that Mau’s use of Situationist style critique demonstrates not so much arrogance but an awareness of the demands of innovative edgy design, which must focus on daring profitable appearance rather than politics (boringly ethical or otherwise).

So where does this leave the teaching of the kind of radical theory represented by Situationism? Without the resources to provide a real challenge to the regimes of ethical and innovation utility there is little that can be done other than to make students aware of the restraints that such regimes pose. Yet possibilities do remain for trying to create, however ephemerally, a value for such theory beyond ethics and commercial innovation. As mentioned such a value requires resources to create viable, sustainable sites for such theory to be enacted by students with a meaningful autonomy to allow experimentation with the kinds of political praxis suggested by

radical art and design theory. Of course this is an exceedingly vexed proposal precisely because such sites would be seen as not only separated from legitimated justifications for theory but even antagonistic to them, so a great deal of negotiation is necessary. My own baby steps in such a direction are to start developing more outlets for critical design research. There is presently a paucity of critically radical design theory and journalism. Most of it is a ghetto for the professional concerns of academics, like myself, to score research points. By providing journals and other ongoing, viable projects for design students to radically experiment and critique existing visual culture we can start linking critical theory to critical practice and make this critique an exciting core component rather than a tolerated marginal interest.

Notes

¹ Steven Heller, & Véronique (editors), *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility* (New York: Allworth Press, 2003 [1999]).

² John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), xii.

³ Which is not to say that the pressure is simply to crudely render all theory to instrumental needs. The rise of the popular culture curriculum of Cultural Studies has been part of this process, with its theoretical largesse tolerated due to the contemporary relevance of its content (Guillory, 80).

⁴ Stuart Cunningham and Toss Gascoigne "Submission to the Review of the National Innovation System" 20 April 2008, *Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, <http://www.chass.org.au/submissions/SUB20080420SC.php> [Accessed 24 June 2008].

⁵ Edward Ball, "The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International," *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 22-23.

⁶ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), par. 196. Debord, via the Marxist theory of reification set out by Georg Lukács, focuses on the abstract nature of contemporary social power, now exercised through the pacifying effect of an image collective he calls 'the Spectacle', such that it is the world of controlled appearances that dominates social life (Debord, par. 17).

⁷ A jeering slogan which became the title of a Situationist-inspired pamphlet: Larry Law, *Bigger Cages! Longer Chains!* (London: Spectacular Times, 1991).

⁸ Most commonly through politically-motivated pranks and the use of *détournement* an 'aesthetic theory of sabotage' which pirated images and changed them to disrupt and antagonise. A good example is the book that Debord and Asger Jorn produced made entirely of pirated images and chaotic text which was then bound in sandpaper so as to damage any books it was shelved with (Ball, 31).

⁹ As a related aside I have noticed how emphases on being an ‘ethical designer’ tend to presuppose that the profession of the designer itself is not up for question merely certain ‘unethical’ activities that can safely be eschewed from design-business-as-usual. Not wishing to be hyperbolic but the whole situation is reminiscent of the film *The Professional* where the hitman gives lessons to his wannabe-protégé on how to be an ethical assassin-for-hire (no killing children etc.).

¹⁰ This resonated with Walter Benjamin’s critique of commodity novelty covering up the ‘return of the ever-same;’ the eternal capitalist commodity culture which constantly renews itself (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999), 11.

¹¹ Even though they never fully broke free of the Romanticist faith in humanist liberation through art the Situationists went a good deal further than the post-structuralism of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze et. al. who nominally attacked the foundations of bourgeois humanism but could not overcome their faith in the ultimate guarantor of such humanism: art (usually in a radically modernist form).

¹² In attacking the belief that art works are neutral vessels of political meaning Guillory (22) notes: ‘In the stratosphere of pluralist pedagogy, the same reified values are often exposed and ritually qualified, subverted or rejected, as though the work were simply the container of such values.’

¹³ Which is not to say they have removed all the satirical fun from Situationism: ‘Choosing to screw around with received ideas about life, and how it should be lived, can of course be traced back to the activities of the Situationists – their notion of “detournement” being a favourite incantation of *Adbusters*.’ (Matt Soar, “Culture Jamming, or Something Like It” in *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, edited by Steven Heller & Véronique Vienne (New York: Allworth Press, 2003): 210). In a more sombre mode that is more representative Lasn claims: ‘The American dream has devolved into exactly the kind of vacant obliviousness the Situationists talked about – a smile-button-have-a-nice-day kind of happiness that close examination tends to disturb. If you keep up appearances, keep yourself diverted with new acquisitions and constant entertainments, keep yourself pharmacologized and recoil the moment you feel real life seeping in between the cracks, you’ll be all right.’ (Kalle Lasn, *Design Anarchy* (Vancouver: Adbusters Media Foundation, 2006): chap. 3)

¹⁴ With some recognition of the lack of political effectiveness Lasn notes: ‘In retrospect, though, I’m left wondering if it made any real, material difference. It’s not as if Absolut’s sales have plummeted, or as if alcohol ads are any less ubiquitous. And the fact that Absolut ad aficionados collect our spoofs alongside the official Absolut ads suggests a frightening prospect.’ (ibid.)

¹⁵ Véronique Vienne & Fabrizio Gilardino, “Socialist Designers: Véronique Vienne Interviews Fabrizio Gilardino of Socialist Designers” in *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, edited by Steven Heller & Véronique Vienne (New York: Allworth Press, 2003): 183.

¹⁶ Rick Poynor, *Obey the Giant: Life in the Image World* (London: Birkhäuser, 2001), 127.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In noting the philosophical pretensions of *The Matrix* Zizek points out how the fragmentary dispersal of theory tidbits lures theorists in: ‘My Lacanian friends are telling me that the authors must have read Lacan; the Frankfurt School partisans see in the Matrix the extrapolated embodiment of Kulturindustrie, the alienated-reified social Substance (of the Capital) directly taking over, colonizing our inner life itself, using us as the source of energy’ (Slavoj Zizek, “The Matrix, or Two Sides of Perversion” *Philosophy Today* 43 (1999) <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-the-matrix-or-two-sides-of-perversion.html> [Accessed 2 July 2008]).

¹⁹ Thomas Frank, “New Consensus for Old,” *The Baffler* 12 (1999): 8.

²⁰ See in particular Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counter Culture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17-32, where Frank makes the point even before the counterculture of the 1960s American business was already undergoing a critique of pre-War bureaucratic conformism and advocating the importance of marketing image and creative diversity.

²¹ Mark Kingwell, “Interior Decoration” in *Practical Judgements: Essays in Culture, Politics, and Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 212; Thomas de Monchaux, “Bruce Mau” (2008) <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/medalist-brucemau> [Accessed 2 July 2008].

²² Kingwell, 214.

²³ A few examples from the latter: ‘This new condition demands that design discourse not be limited to boardrooms or kept inside tidy disciplines (Bruce Mau et. al. *Massive Change* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 16); ‘The first step to its unfolding is to reject the binary notion of client/designer.’ (ibid., 17); ‘There is a proposal integrated into Massive Change for a right-angle shift in the axis of discourse defined by right and left, socialism and capitalism.’ (ibid., 19) Yes, neither right nor left just static in the middle. The kind of solutions to social problems propagated by Mau are markedly reformist compared to the revolutionary nature of the rhetoric, they largely involve a slightly more ventilated, technocratic version of the status quo.

²⁴ It is worth noting that later Mau distances himself from the ‘paranoia’ of Debord, particularly his negative appraisal of spectacles, but only to the effect that this puritan streak in Debord makes his own embrace of modern spectacle seem more carnivalesque and radically irreverent: ‘Debord highlighted the isolation of the reigning economic system that led to an inevitable dependency on the culture of spectacle. He advised the culture’s dissidents to bide their time before the revolution by abandoning crass counter-cultures to study true philosophy.’ (David Rockwell & Bruce Mau, *Spectacle* (New York: Phaidon, 2006), 52) Of course Mau is simply trying to trump Debord’s radical credentials, but just in case this is in doubt the book includes an assessment of the Seattle riots in 1999 against the WTO as a positive ‘spectacle’ (ibid., 18).

²⁵ Kingwell, 219.

²⁶ Ibid., 220.