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Critical Design. Critical Making. Critical Use?

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Critical use is mediated.

Critical use is applied.

Critical use is an act of appropriation.

Critical USE drives content and insight.

It spins off new: systems, ideas, solutions, rigor sets, affinities.

Critical use gets us past the blocking points.

Critical use is risky it asks us to engage in new ways.

It makes use of quasi—disruptive forms.

It draws on embodied experience.

It is situational but not positivist.

Phenomenology plays a role.

Through USE things adjust. New modes are generated.

Use is not stable/static.

It is dynamic—

Perpetual.

It is giving.

I noticed something the other day. About the work we are doing on the cloTHING(s) as Conversation project and the emergent research discussions and design outcomes that are occurring/appearing on the periphery. Provocative possibilities pointing to Critical Use are at play. At Emily Carr there is a significant contingent of individuals seeking to re-think the status quo. This is driven by a common set of values that hold; that the connections we have with people, the environment and the artifacts around us are meaningful and significant; that consumptive tendencies in contemporary western society set up an unhealthy disconnect; our presumed relations with waste and care need significant re-adjustment.

Shifts require shocks of sorts. Many of us apply strategies from Critical Design, and Critical Making in order to sort through, proffer up, and attempt to condition new outcomes and relations or, more radically, afford paradigm change. Yet this does not quite satisfy. For those of us working with clothing, there is a discourse complimentary to our own that has come to us through the work of Kate Fletcher on the Local Wisdom project and by extension the articulation of Craft of Use practices. At Emily Carr, in the cloTHING(s) as Conversation project, we are considering use and craft of use—identifying, applying and amplifying insights from our own individual and group mediated experiences.

My intent here is to begin to frame this tendency and set of emergent practices at Emily Carr. I will outline and situate key aspects of Critical Design, Critical Making, and other creative theoretical frameworks and modes of inquiry that are informing Critical Use. I will discuss investigations and strategic applications of artifacts and actions that privilege and prioritize use as a means, an informant, and instigator of changed perspectives. In doing so I aim to provide an initial mapping of a design practice that interrogates and calls into question our current relations with use.

Precedents: The Term Critical

To begin, it is worth considering when and how we use the term “critical.” As an adjective, the word critical serves to modify or describe nouns: stable placeholders such as names, and words that act as markers. Critical can be understood as “expressing adverse or disapproving comments or judgments” [5]. Connected to situations or problems that are at “a point of crisis” it refers to decisive or crucial actions/choices that are required in order for something to succeed or fail. When used in relation to nature and

properties of matter and energy in physics “critical.” speaks to “a point of transition from one state to another” [8]. In the Arts “critical” is used to describe acts of analysis and evaluation that take on and consider the merits or faults of an artifact or body of work [6]. Critical Design, Critical Making, Critical Use all tap into this. These are design approaches that demonstrate concern, discomfort with the status quo, and a desire to point to, invoke and incite changed relations with the products of design. The ways in which they do this varies.

Critical Design

First applied in the late 1990’s, Critical Design makes use of speculative design proposals in order “to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life” [16, 15]. Dunne and Raby are careful to situate Critical Design as a position and not method [16]. Critical Design is a device intended to make us think —to produce artifacts that raise awareness, expose assumptions, provoke action, spark debate [16]. While the tactics it applies lead us to a reflective space it also, arguably, acts as a catalyst. Design artifacts that come out of a Critical Design approach offer up opportunities to consider alternate spaces and modes of engagement. These are provocateurs that make use of Design Fictions and storytelling that act as “diegetic prototypes” [2]. As such they afford a means to test an idea [2] and arguably (contrary to Dunne and Raby’s original articulation) point to means of accessing them as part of a method of inquiry.

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uncertainty of the form and their ability to maintain usual relations with space, time, and the social encounters that shape them.

Something else important to consider, Critical Design situates its propositions in a detached space—separate from the user. A means of entertaining—“in an intellectual sort of way, like literature or film” [16]—we are titillated/enticed but relegated to observer. We do not participate in its making. Possibilities of knowing through lived engagement and usage are not offered up to us.

Empathy and Heuristics

In other domains of Design, engagement with use is increasingly common. Role playing empathy techniques such as Experience Prototyping and Bodystorming are used by Designers as a means to immerse and internalize alternate lived experience (to release their own view), and evoke a greater appreciation/alignment with the user [4,29]. In Psychology and the human and social sciences, Heuristic Inquiry (a mode of qualitative research) also pulls on embodied practices as a way of understanding use and lived experience [28]. The inverse of empathy studies, Heuristic Inquiry taps into the researcher’s own experience through long term engaged explorations that include stages of: immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis and finally validation through the transmitting and sharing of this experience ([27, 24].

Critical Making

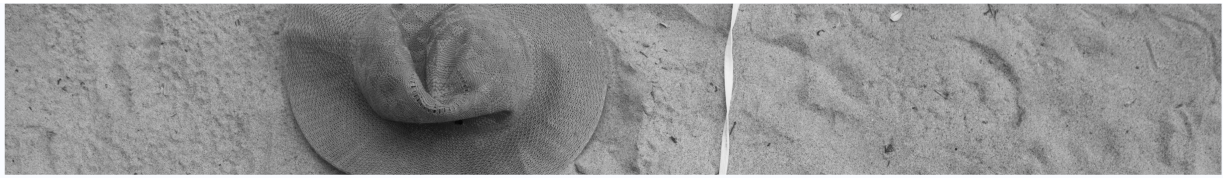
While Critical Making does not apply empathy studies or Heuristic Inquiry it does recognize the gap that Critical Design does not address. Critical Making seeks to “supplement and extend critical reflection” via “material forms of engagement with technologies” [33]. In the doing (in the making) a means “to reconnect our lived experiences with technologies to social and conceptual critique” is facilitated [33]. Rather than an artifact of observation, process is brought to the fore. Attention is shifted to the insight and possibility available in the initiation of an artifact—in acts of making [36]. This insight is not relegated to the designer. A focus on open design, access, and engagement is applied to a new group—to others who may build, use, and/or modify plans and lived experience of (Critical) making [25].

Users, Use Practices and Heuristics

As exemplified by the efforts and events surrounding the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference (COP21) contemporary society actively acknowledges a need to radically adjust our engagement with the environment. By extension, many within Design are seeking new approaches in order to change up unhealthy assumptions pertaining to the things we design, and the ways we produce and consume objects [20, 38, 22]. Exposing existing and nascent use behaviors (in the mean or on the periphery of society) is key to these endeavors. A growing body of research into *Design by Use* [3] and *Craft of Use* practices [18] is indicative of this perspective. The significant shift that has occurred in the approaches taken on by product design over the past 25 years (from expert driven to user centered to co—creative) and the growth and uptake of Participatory research methods into the main stream is also part of this dynamic [35, 34, 23, 30].

Kate Fletcher's ground breaking work on the Local Wisdom Network and ongoing documentation and articulation of use practices (via storytelling, interviews, visual documentation) has uncovered and made accessible our nuanced relations with use and clothing [17]. For those of us invested in the cloTHING(s) as Conversation project, Fletcher's work is of particular interest as it demonstrates links between cognitive process and physical practices of garment use. Fletcher notes that use is "all about synthesis"—that the ideas *in our heads* and the way we conceptualize our world are linked to the way we engage with the clothing we wear [19]. Sequencing and sorting that is a part of everyday use practices can be linked to both practical understanding and abstract knowledge [18]. They are integral to products that are comprised of both material dynamics and mental activities.

Fletcher's work points to use as a strategic means of getting at new knowledge/new systems of knowing. It draws us to consider the potential of use (and it's strategic application) as a means of re-thinking designed products and systems. Revised use scenarios—Critical Use—as a way to re-route existing behaviors and affectively encourage new alternatives, in this case, pertaining to clothing.



I threw it down (in a foreign place). I secured it (with a bulldog clip). A stranger offered me help. I wrapped myself up. I wore it to a family function (and shucked corn). I stretched my feet out – took time to reconsider assumptions as I watched strangers across an expanse of grass.

Critical Use

Similarities-Alignment

Critical Use pulls on all of the design and research strategies described above. Similar to Critical Making and Heuristic Inquiry it acknowledges that open source and embodied process of knowing are integral to critical thinking. It looks to existing evolving engagement with artifacts and use practices for insight. As with Critical Design and Critical Making it involves disruptive artifacts.

Artifacts Employed

Provocation as *raison d'être*: Critical Use seeks to confound intentionally with the aid of idea artifacts [9]. The Situationist International's analysis of contemporary capitalist society and approaches for social transformation set precedence [31]. The Legacy of Detournement and tactics used to reveal new material conditions (potentials) and “enable divergent political affairs” through making strange are also employed by: Critical Design, Critical Making, Adversarial Design, Slow Design [13]. These approaches use artifacts and accompanying scenarios to throw those participating off their usual course as a means of re-understanding.

Differences

Unlike with Critical Design, the leverage points for Critical Use are participatory; unlike Critical Making, they are ongoing.

Participation

Examples of Critical Use reject scenarios that station the user as observer and passive consumer of the visual. Similar to Guy Debord who critiqued the capitalist infatuation and manipulation of the “spectacle,” Critical Use seeks active participation [10]. This is seen as a means to get past passive social relationships, between people (and between people and things) mediated by images: to side step the problematic display and consume dynamic often attributed to mainstream Design [31]. Critical Use refuses performances and postures that relegate individuals and artifacts to isolated positions of observer and the observed.

This intent to connect people to creative acts—to affecting design—is similar to aspirations of Fluxus and Critical Making. Critical Use attempts facilitating “non-hierarchical ways of making and knowing” through the ongoing amalgamation of design constituents of Use: users, artifacts, actions [37, 25].

Ongoing

Use is a fluid space. While there are markers, evidence of use is implicitly always about moving and adjusting—about flux. There is nothing static about use. Critical Use asserts that embodied knowledge should not only be considered at the front end but also adapted and applied on an ongoing basis [9]. Use is considered a key mechanism to afford new meanings to the products we engage with [18]. Knowledge garnered through ongoing provocative relations with products (through use) is applied to affect change.

This application of Deleuze and Guattari's "and...and...and..." rhizome contingent (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) and access to Design that facilitates conjunctive arrangements that do "not follow the lines of a preconceived patterned or an embedded program" moves the user and the design artifact into an ongoing state of negotiation [1]. The focus is shifted away from the front end "lived experience of (Critical) making" [26, 32]. The object, unlike those found in Critical Design is never final (delineated by an end point). With Critical Use we offer ourselves, and others, the possibility to rethink existing artifact—action ecosystems.

(+) a Disruptive Artifact—Use Equation

Critical Use seeks to ply and design speculative propositions in order to enable new sets of artifacts/systems. It is intent on making us question assumed approaches. Through their semi disruptive nature these propositions instigate new use situations. In doing so they facilitate a re—patterning of contemporary circumstances and conditions.

In Summer 2015 three individuals (including myself) wore our plus(+) template for an extended time (anywhere from 7 to 38 consecutive days). The experience was provocative and built off an earlier exploration done in 2013 (8 participants for one day). It placed us in positions that had us rethinking our use and involvement with clothing, the spaces we inhabit and the people, animals we interact with. As a quasi—disruptive form the plus(+) allows us a critical platform, a place to deposit and reposition our biases and experiences towards clothing.

How does this play out? An unusual but vaguely recognizable form is constructed and used. This open source form is made based on the individual's desires, needs, whims. It may be documented before it is used

—out of its usual context (at the lake, on the pavement of a parking lot, hanging from a tree, suspended from a climbing gym set up). When put to Use/used the designed artifact confounds. Its users have to deal with unusual questions, queries from others. They have to deal with the uncertainty of the form and their ability to maintain usual relations with space, time, and the social encounters that shape them. They have to improvise, tell stories, create new structures, new body movements (to go through doorways, up stairs, round corners). They navigate the social—answer what ifs, contend with family expectations, professional obligations, personal desires of self—projection. And as they document and move forward they identify new sets and patterns that might be accessible. They consider new approachable behaviors, criteria, and aspects of use that make things meaningful and allow the user (themselves and others) to engage with a wide range of qualities of the environment (social, political, ecological) in different ways.

In the case of cloTHING(s) as Conversation we, the designers, have taken on Use. We have created an artifact and a scenario. The plus (+) is a designed artifact. It is made. But most importantly it is used and through its use (over an extended period of time) concentration is shifted away from assumed stances. We now consider our experience with clothing as more than the constructed sites of articulation that we usually afford ourselves—you, me, that beautiful object. The pedestal, the role of provocateur, the performer setting out a statement for confirmation or debate (black/white, yes/no)... is resituated. Our assumptions have been thrown back at us, reconstituted by applied use. Moving forward, the making and the use will be shared with others—to individuals in New Zealand, Holland, Spain, England, urban and rural North America who

have approached the initial users of the plus(+) and asked... if they too could use it.

End: Beyond Commentary and Reflection

At Emily Carr interventions intended to dislodge individual and collective assumptions are abound; cloTHING(s) as Conversation is but one among many. These interventions are used to trigger new discussions, outcomes, means of getting at the tacit, implicit, implied. I think we (and our colleagues, peers and students) are doing something particular that is tied to the critical (and the strategic). We are reconstituting Use as a creative entity for questioning: Critical Use.

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