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The Role of Design Activism

To understand design activism we must examine both the designer and the activist. The extensive work of Faud-Luke introduces the idea of a “delicious tension” between the two words and acknowledges our inability to confidently define the term (Fuad-Luke 2009). The activist is a well-known character advocating a political cause, intent on creating change in a system but obviously the design-activist is more complex than a designer simply being an activist, or employing activist techniques.

We live in an age filled with growing concerns for the future of the planet and the survival of humankind. This essay aims to communicate an understanding of the design activist and explain how the designer has an opportunity to make a political statement through design activism, and why they should

“Design converts nature’s capital and man’s (human and financial) capital into ‘man-made’ capital by giving it form, by embedding meaning (by vesting the form with symbolic capital), by defining societal values and, ultimately, by designing our perception of reality.”

Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World - Alastair Fuad-Luke

Going forward this essay will explore the way meaning in design ties itself to intent in activism.

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The interpretation of the ‘political’ is important to this argument. In political science there is a strong distinction between the conventional practice of politics and the political that “concerns the very way in which society is instituted” (Mouffe 2000). It can be understood that politics are the decisions and the structures of governance whereas the political is the response and the



Figure 1 Taking the Street by Santiago Cirugeda

interaction resulting from that governance. Here we assess the design activist's relationship to political issues and their concern for systems within set structures.

The designer, driven by their intention, has an aim or a response to a cause and, like the activist, seeks change in a system. But the argument here is that the practice of design activism is not a simple appearance of design in activism, like that observed by Jody Boehnert in the Climate Camp 2007 march (Sinclair 2008). In this case graphic design presents a strong visual representation of the ideals held by the many activists, displaying the faces of our diverse world printed on shields. The role design plays here is outstanding but we can't bind designs presence in activism to its pre-existing conventions (Thorpe). In doing so true design activism wouldn't be achieved and by limiting the potential of design we make a loss where more might be achieved. Design activism should borrow from design and from activism but be free to create its own conventions.

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Projects of design activism that resist the status quo or the existing structure they inhabit make strong political statements and ask questions of their audience. This idea of questioning through resistance can be seen in projects like 'Taking the Street' (Cirugeda). 'Taking the Street' (Fig. 1) takes advantage of local legislation to provide a moment of play in the streets of Seville in the form of a seesaw built into dumpsters. This installation asks why an items presence in the city needs so much consent and challenges the civic system in general. It repurposes the public space. In this context design activism plays an important role in identifying an issue. Participatory design like this makes



Figure 2 iSee by The Institute for Applied Autonomy

Simply informing the inhabitants of a city what the correct solution is would be counter productive and hypocritical.

Asking questions is a first step, an important step, in getting to the root of larger political problems.

productive use of participants to involve them in the experiment and in turn form their own opinions based on their experience. There is importance in bringing these issues to the community rather than simply bringing a solution. This installation, like many others, is making a statement about a civic issue, simply informing the inhabitants of a city what the correct solution is would be counter productive and hypocritical. Ideas need to be formed by many and any solutions will come of collective opinion not the opinion of a small governing body. This project has been described as applying "resistance that can be used to suspend existing structures of power" (Markussen, 2012). In this case the governing body has no power over deciding whether or not the piece should be on the street, Cirugeda followed all procedures to gain permission to occupy the space. The value of design activists making statements and asking questions is a first step, an important step, in getting to the root of larger political problems. The solutions to problems that are discovered through these means are often more successful. Design practices enforce their traditional approaches and conventions to problems and as a result of this the force that design as activism applies has the opportunity to redefine the purpose design has in society.

Surveillance is a tool of the government, the industry and of the individual. Its presence can put people at ease, provide a sense of security and protection but more often we are presented with the issue that too much surveillance poses a loss of privacy. Design activism can play a strong role in the communication of how important ones privacy is. In the case of the iSee (Fig. 2) project the issue of surveillance is contested, where the citizen is given the ability to find a way to navigate that city while limiting



Figure 3 Artist Ai Weiwei

Taking advantage of existing systems to make a statement is often the most meaningful approach.

their exposure to being captured by CCTV (Institute for Applied Autonomy). The intentions of the project are to both highlight a condition of society and give the audience an opportunity to participate in their own solution (Markussen 2012). In this case we find design lending its own qualities in the form of an interactive website. We can see the value in an idea when it's easy to interact with. Taking advantage of existing systems to make a statement is often the most meaningful approach. The activist explores this strategy and can consider the subjects they oppose as strengths in their movement against a political issue. The camera, in this instance, is seen as negative in its recording but we can look to that channel as a platform – we are the subject and can choose how we act when recorded. This medium is powerful to both the recorder and the recorded (Hatuka & Kalmar 2008). In terms of contemporary design we can think of the sheer volume of information in the world now and the need for innovation. Not only is innovation important for recognition in a crowded industry but also it pushes the industry further ahead and drives the designer to consider their intentions and impacts. Design activism can lead its industry.

As we start to see more and more channels for communication we see the opportunity for delivering our messages. We have the opportunity to present ourselves as a mass to make our political statements. The field of design activism is taking the form of an international movement or era (Julier, 2013). This is an important movement, with an emphasis on creating real positive change. Artist Ai Weiwei talks of his work and has expressed a need to “look your enemy in the face and tell them what you’re fighting for” (Weiwei 2013). Now not every body you disagree with needs to be

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considered an enemy but if we look at Weiwei's statement, even though he states he is not an activist, it's easy to understand how powerful the concept of the fight can be. This can be compared directly to the design activist who fights with intent and hopefully with peace. Markussen defines design activism as transcending all disciplines from product to architecture (Markussen 2012). With this in mind it's easy to justify Julier's argument that this is not merely a trend but a movement.

Designers should take the opportunity to develop their own political statements through design activism. Today's designer already gives meaning to exploring and developing solutions to problems. What we're seeing in recent years is the next step, in applying that meaning to a more context considered solution. The application of meaning and its connection to the intent of the traditional activist, and now the design activist, is the force behind change and progression. Taking advantage of pre-existing systems is what emphasizes the intent and message of the design activist and their art. Although the term 'design activism' is being constantly redefined we can still hold a strong understanding of what it is and how it works. It is a force that is quickly evolving to inspire a new era of design.

Psychologist Paul Bloom speaks about seriously considering the best way we can help people. His well-argued claim is that we are blinded by empathy and that “the whole world cares so much more about a baby stuck in a well, than we do about global warming” (Bloom 2016). His argument is not that we shouldn't help people where we can but that we should thoughtfully consider the way we act, the way we live, on a much larger and

longer-term scale. The way this concept connects to design activism can be seen by looking at the way we question and aim to solve problems. There's always a need to find solutions to issues around us but design activism is about shaping a better world and tackling larger issues, issues that might need to break the systems we live by now.

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