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Critical Design Theory

Critical Design Theory, a concept introduced by the British industrial designers and educators Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, emerged in the late 90s as a sort of conceptual successor to Anti-Design (its aesthetic successors being the Memphis group and Droog Design).

According to Dunne and Raby, Critical Design is not some sort of group or movement, but an attitude, a position that can be adopted by anyone, even by the people who have never heard of the term.[1] In the theory they developed, Critical Design is opposed to Affirmative Design.[2] Affirmative Design reinforces the status quo, while Critical Design challenges it. Critical Design aims to raise awareness, provoke thinking and actions, and start debates—unlike Affirmative Design, it asks questions rather than answering them.



Critical Design poses questions, some rather uncomfortable, and provokes reflection and starts debates—so basically it does what art usually does. Then how is it not art? It certainly borrows from some of its features and methods: the provocation, the shock, the metaphorical speech. But it doesn't

aspire to be art; moreover, art critique might even diminish Critical Design's impact and meaning. For Critical Design to work, to commentate, to question, it has to be viewed as industrial design. Its whole power is in its proximity to everyday use. Design's approach, think Dunne and Raby, should be in the ability simultaneously to appeal and to challenge—in the way a film or book does. The “appealing” part, however, doesn't happen purely in the aesthetic field, or, at least, not altogether in the visually aesthetic. The “aesthetic of use,” according to Dunne, helps concentrate less on sculpture, the traditional reference for industrial designers, and more on the “complicated pleasure” of literature and film.[3] By complicated pleasure, they mean a type of experience that a person can get by not merely observing something, but understanding it and reflecting upon it.

For example, a project by Noam Toran, “Accessories for Lonely Men” (2001), is a collection of eight objects that are supposed to provide some of the “incidental pleasures of shared existence for those who live alone.”[4] The little machine called “The Sheet Stealer” pulls the bedclothes to the side of the bed; “The Chest-Hair Curler” is a steel finger that, while rotating gently, plays with its owner's chest hair; another device breathes warm air in your face when placed on a pillow next to you; and so forth. Are those objects intended for production? Clearly not. But they are products for the mind—they make the viewer reflect on how the world should be in order for those objects actually to exist on a market. Dunne and Raby compare such designs to “physical synecdoche,” a part that represents the whole—“Accessories for Lonely Men” as a prop from this parallel world of lonely men that mysteriously appeared in front of us. One of the possible ways of looking at critical design objects, admit Dunne and Raby, is to imagine that they are props for nonexistent films: the viewer has to imagine his own version of the film world this object belongs to.[5]

Critical Design in Jewelry

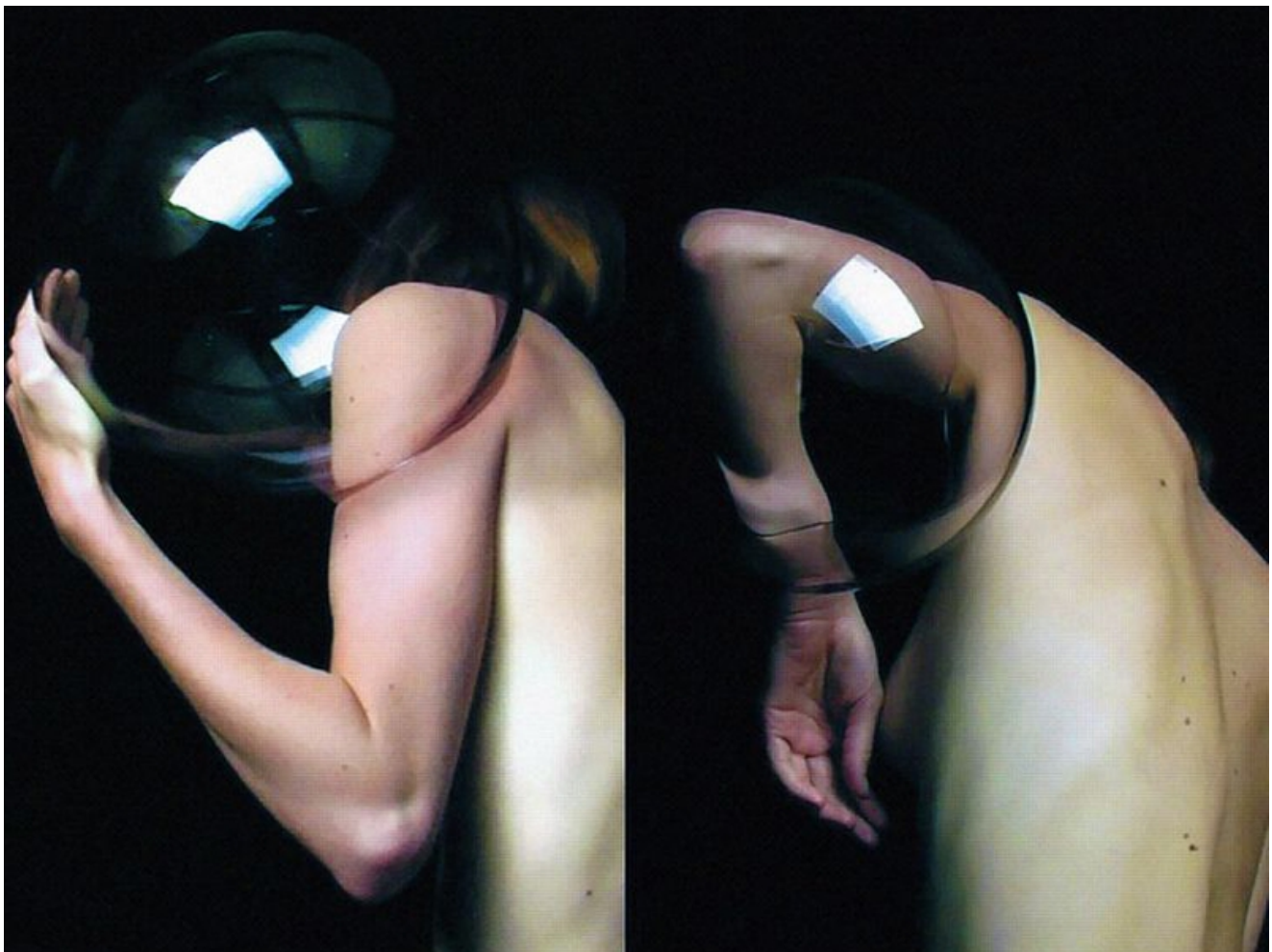
Objects created by industrial design can have an infinite amount of different functions: they can brew your coffee, iron your clothes, measure your heartbeat, and connect you to the internet. The common factor is that they all are supposed to facilitate your daily life in some way—by actually taking upon themselves some of your routine tasks, or relieving you from boredom. Critical Design in the industrial sphere is known for its ability to make you imagine different *kinds* of life that can be facilitated, parallel-world life, if you wish, or possible and plausible worlds.[6]



Now, jewelry, regardless of its long history and regardless of the many forms and shapes it takes, has only two general functions—to decorate and to symbolize—and one general quality—to be valuable. It is possible on the rare occasion to find a contemporary jewelry piece that would work in the field of Critical Design exactly as an industrial design product would. (A perfect example of that is the *Energy Addicts* collection by Naomi Kizhner, where jewelry created from gold and biopolymer can be used to charge your electronic devices from your own bloodstream when connected intravenously. It sort of asks the question, “How much are you attached to your device?”). But for the most part, the typical Critical Design “what if” questions in the case of jewelry would be directed at its value, its decorative functions, and its ability to symbolize. What if jewelry were so precious because it was actually made of human flesh? What if in the future we were forced to wear jewelry that controls our facial expressions for corporate needs? What if together with engagements or coming of age, special jewelry pieces commemorated the death of a favorite Tamagotchi (a handheld digital pet)? What if we worshipped corporations and proudly wore golden Coca-Cola crucifixes? If we extend the “prop for a nonexistent film” metaphor to jewelry, the movie we end up with will be a sinister corporate dystopia—or an episode of *Black Mirror*, if you wish.

Jewelry That Decorates

Jewelry's primary status has always been decoration of the human body. Beauty standards are different for every culture and every time period, and jewelry, together with fashion, keeps up the pace. However, if we talk about the clothing history of the Western world, jewelry changes with time are much less dramatic than the evolution of clothing itself. A lady in an 18th-century oil painting may wear a white wig and a deforming corset, but she will nonetheless be wearing a pearl necklace similar to the one that your mother owns. An antique gold and ruby signet ring might look vintage today, but it won't appear completely ridiculous and out of place on its modern wearer, unlike a pair of trousers with a codpiece, which would certainly raise some eyebrows. This stagnation of the field might be one of the reasons why by the end of 20th century, jewelry design started rapidly growing in all directions, in some of its shapes occasionally seizing the areas that used to belong to fashion. It seemed like Critical Design in the jewelry field suddenly felt responsible for everything that was wrong with beauty standards in general and had the urge to express its opinion on the subject.



Violation of natural biological forms of the body could be a part of the process of the body's social rationing—but if we talk about the strategies of "denormalizing" artistic expression, then one such strategy can be precisely bringing the norm *ad absurdum*: for example, the huge clown lips of the models at the Alexander McQueen ready-to-wear 2009/2010 show. "Reductio ad absurdum" is a popular method in Critical Design[7] and in the case of McQueen's show it is used as if to ask, "Was this what you meant when you asked your plastic surgeon for full and sexy lips?" *Ad absurdum* can naturally be opposed to a more straightforward artistic method: the intentional creation of images of a

"bad," "wrong" body as a contrary to normative aesthetic prescriptions. A subtle example of such a work is one of the objects made by Naomi Filmer, a glass ball that, when put on the elbow of the model, forces her to always stand in an old woman's bent, "sick" pose. Designer Annelie Gross also works with the violation of the norms of posing and posture. Linor Goralik, a Russian theoretician of fashion, writes that Gross's collection *Defects* is made up of objects that in their structure remind us of exoprosthetics and medical corsets, but functionally force the wearer to stoop, hunch, curl in the embryo position, or fall over. The viewer in this situation is offered an extremely uncomfortable opportunity to feel himself in the role of a person who was forced into disability.[8]



Another jeweler who works with a metaphor for prosthetics is Christoph Zellweger. Zellweger compares the concept of jewelry in general with the idea of prosthetics: in his opinion, jewelry is for the body what a prosthetic is for the skeleton—it helps the body to function more fully, helps in its transition from functional to significant.[9] Zellweger claims that in our time luxury is not in jewelry anymore, but in the body itself, in the plastic surgery that is able to change it, to mold it until a perfect result is obtained. Adorning yourself from the outside is too retrograde for him. "The body," says Zellweger, "becomes an artifact, a luxury product, because it becomes a matter of design." [10] The jewelry pieces that Zellweger produces out of medical steel aesthetically remind one of prosthetics, of something that should be inside—but he instead places them outside of the body, offering a sort of new intimacy on the border line with exhibitionism.



The idea of the body itself transforming into jewelry instead of being just a frame for it was also important for Sissi Westerberg. In 2002 she created a bracelet/armband called *Flesh*—a plain and unremarkable silicone net that transformed the skin and flesh of the wearer's arm into a pattern by tightening it in some places and letting it bulge in others.[11]



Several contemporary jewelry designers create body pieces that force the wearer to freeze in a certain pose, as if reflecting on our photo-centric era, when everyone we know gets photographed more often than any movie star of merely 30 years ago.[12] Jennifer Crupi, for instance, creates from sterling silver something she calls *Wearable Sculptures*—constructions that bring to mind lightly modified medieval torture devices that make the wearer stand with his arms crossed or form his hand in the gesture of a dancer. These objects affect or control the body's movement and thus interfere with the wearer's autonomy and therefore with their definition as a person.[13] Auste Arlauskaitė created several mouthpieces in her collection *Body Adjustments* which deliberately put the wearer in a situation of discomfort, forcing his mouth into different expressions. Kristina Cranfeld, from the Royal College of Art, works in a similar way: she made a series of face objects called *Ownership of the Face*. One of them, a pair of huge magnifying glasses combined with a plastic mouth spreader, is, according to Cranfeld, supposed to be a speculative narrative “where the human face is an artifact that is highly commercialised and manipulated by external forces. The project portrays the future, where facial expressions of the workforce are exploited purely for corporate needs and to advertise a strong and successful company image.”[14]

Jewelry That Symbolizes

Traditional jewelry relays certain messages: “I’m engaged,” “I’m married,” “I turned 18,” “I’m a Christian,” “I’m a king,” “I’m a war hero.” Some of those things are reminders of the moments we cherish, others express our identity and remind us of what we’ve been through. The things, in other words, that are significant for us. Helen W. Drutt English writes, “Jewelry has a rich and complex subject matter: it has a long history of being intertwined with people’s imaginations. Jewelry is present in familiar rituals and institutions: engagement, marriage, the church, the military, [...] coming of age, declaration of personal status and group identity.”[15] Those wedding rings, christening gifts, and gold crosses can be banal in design, but “the content of the ritual surrounding each of those objects lifts them above other mass-manufactured design.”[16]

The flourishing of conceptual jewelry, however, brought us examples of designers’ reflections on the subject of values that we find necessary to commemorate with jewelry. Imaginary “what if” questions of Critical Design sounded like, “what if there were a world where different things were celebrated?” and “what if those events could be celebrated differently?”

Cristoph Zellweger imagines a world where virtual death is as tragic as the real one, creating a highly polished, almost chrome-looking silver pendant in the shape of a small monster with a dedication to a deceased Tamagotchi pet: “My little Lilli! You had to die just because of my little brother Alexander! He pressed RESET and off you went! REST IN PEACE!”[17]



Another work that speaks about death is a set of brooches called *Out of the Dark*, by Mah Rana. She offers a piece of jewelry to be worn in mourning. The black textured surfaces of the discs slowly wear off, “revealing the gold beneath and marking the passage of time.”[18] They serve to remind the wearer of their loss but also mark the stages of the mourning, from grief to acceptance, with a physical transformation from darkness to light: “The permanence of gold then serves as a life-long reminder of a lost loved-one.”[19]

The famous Dutch jewelry designer Ted Noten invented his own symbol in his *Mephisto* bronze ring. This, he claims, will prevent him from possible bankruptcy, as it has Noten’s own head 3D-printed on top of the ring and—as the designer is sure—he is his own best salesman, “so why not play the

devil's advocate—Mephisto?”[20] The ring plays the role of a token in the egoistic era—and on top of everything else has a secret compartment “for a sniff of coke or a Viagra pill.”[21]



Tamar Paley offers an alternative take on medals. She's talking about the modern perception of achievements and creates a 14-karat gold pin with a Facebook “like” sign. “Have you ever thought of how many ‘likes’ you give out daily?” asks Paley. “And what if you had only one ‘like’ to give as a medal to only one special person or for one occasion, who would you give it to and what for?”[22]



Religion, always being a subject of heated debates, also provided a topic for Critical Design in jewelry—and no wonder: the crucifix proved itself to be an object so widely used and abused that jewelers just couldn't get past it. Dutch designer Pauline Barendse made a foldable crucifix named *It's Just a Box*—it folds into a box and as a result raises the issue of religion as a mere cover for the emptiness inside. From afar, Frank Tjepkema's *Bling-Bling* looks like an abundantly decorated cross, but if you take a closer look you can see that it is in fact made out of many thin layers of gold-plated steel, perforated to form a chaotic ligature of dozens of modern logos—from Nescafé and Apple to Playboy and Coca-Cola: “the world of capital loves to wrap itself in the illusion of timeless beauty.”[23]



Jewelry That Costs

Another imperishable quality of jewelry is its preciousness, which derives from the preciousness of the materials involved. However, except for, maybe, pearls, other “ingredients” that create the value of traditional jewelry are not “naturally” precious to us, not even in the monetary sense, for they have to be made precious by the expertise of craftspeople. But now a lot of designers who work in the contemporary jewelry field are choosing to work with nonprecious materials. Some of them make this choice merely to make their work less expensive in production, but others “opted for non-precious materials because they hated the values of wealth, status and power which they thought were wedded to gem-encrusted, precious-metal jewelry.”[24] All those material choices looked radical and rebellious when they just appeared—wood or plastic for instance—but now they look like an obvious choice and are even embraced by the jewelry industry. In order to keep making critical statements about traditional jewelry’s value, contemporary designers have had to turn to more radical materials: now “ingredients” involved in the making can vary from ready-made to matter of human origin like hair, skin, teeth, or blood.

The choice of using ready-mades is very popular among contemporary jewelers. It brings a wider context into a piece, offering a meta-view, reinforcing the designer’s statement about new values and preciousness by introducing a material that’s already “been there,” seen the industry, and been

exchanged for money at some point of its life. It is man-produced in the same way that gold or gemstones are, so why shouldn't it be used in jewelry?



A striking ready-made collection was created by Ted Noten in 2001: he made a series of brooches that were cut out of an actual Mercedes Benz. The pieces are minimalist, highly wearable, and crafted with a great skill. They are successful jewelry pieces in their own right, but to know where they came from adds a completely other interpretative level to them. A Mercedes is not made out of precious metal, but its high value is indisputable in society's point of view: Noten just replaces traditional preciousness with a modern one.

If certain materials are made precious by men, wouldn't it be precious if they were made *of* men? Wouldn't it increase their value even more? This kind of thought is behind those works that use human matter in their making. In 1995, Mona Hatoum made a beaded necklace out of her own hair. Serena Holm created a brooch, *Hero in Vitro*, that is made of a glass capsule filled with HIV-positive blood. The most striking example, however, is the *Forget-Me-Knot* ring by Sruli Recht, which is made of gold and upholstered with a strip of skin from Recht's own abdomen. The video of the surgery is a part of the work, and the final product is for sale for €350,000—DNA certificate included.[25]



Another way of criticizing society's obsession with luxury items is replacing the object of desire with a sign of it. This post-modern method is most effective when used on diamonds—which have a characteristic and recognizable shape. Ashley Buchanan makes rings with a laminated picture of the diamond on top, Trudee Hill made a giant two-dimensional metal ring called *Taken*, with an accentuated diamond shape, and Norwegian jewelry designer Sigurd Bronger's *Diamond Necklace* is, in fact, a can of diamond spray hanging on a rope.



Sometimes, to criticize everyone's lust for gold, actual gold can be used too, but in this case precious metal will re-create something very mundane, if not to say controversial. Nanna Melland, in her *Decadence* necklace (2003), cast in 14-karat gold a year's worth of her own nails, and Ted Noten in 1998 started an amusing project, *Chew Your Own Brooch*, when he offered people to chew a piece of gum, send him the result in a box, and cast the results into golden brooches.[26]

One of the reasons for gold's high value is the fact that it is less prone to damage over time than other metals. The same is relevant for diamonds: "Diamonds are forever," as the slogan from De Beers diamonds advertising once stated. Through preciousness of jewelry, its owners are craving immortality—and this is partly the reason why the concept of family heirlooms exists. Some contemporary jewelry designers are aiming directly at that issue, creating jewelry pieces that are deliberately fleeting, disappearing, existing only in the moment or over a short period of time. Millie Cullivan's *Lace Collar* (2004) is a momentary work made lasting only by a photograph. An image of lace was traced onto the bare skin with white dust. "Transient, feminine, tender," writes Caroline Broadhead about Cullivan's work. "What's left behind is a memory of touch, evidence of contact with the skin. There is an illusion of substance, but on recognition of its ephemerality, almost a holding of one's breath so as not to disturb the image." [27]



Contemporary jewelry might not always be recognized as art by the art community, but it undoubtedly falls under the definition of design, as it originates from a highly commercial field with its rules of production and distribution. We can assume that contemporary jewelry as a field to mainstream jewelry is the same as Critical Design is to commercial industrial design: both contemporary jewelry and Critical Design are rooted in the 60s but flourished and became a subject of theoretical studies and analysis several decades later. In whole, they research the same subject: What are the tendencies of our world and to what possible futures can they bring us? But if Critical Design in the industrial design field does it mostly through examining the possibilities of electronics and science, Critical Design in jewelry addresses the transformation of rituals and identities.

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[1] Dunne and Raby, "Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming," p. 34.

[2] Dunne and Raby, "Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects," p. 58.

[3] Crampton Smith, "Foreword to the 1999 Edition," p. IX.

[4] Dunne and Raby, "Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects," p. 63.

[5] Dunne and Raby, "Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming," p. 89.

[6] Dunne and Raby, "Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming," p. 5.

[7] Dunne and Raby, "Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming," p. 80.

[8] Goralik, "Body Deforming Objects and Costume Design as Social Art,"
<http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/7327>.

- [9] Gaspar, "Foreign Bodies: Christoph Zellweger," p. 10.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Asrfalk, Broadhead, Derrez, "New Directions in Jewelry," p. 114.
- [12] Goralik, "Body Deforming Objects and Costume Design as Social Art," <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/7327>.
- [13] Broadhead, "A Part/Apart," p. 35.
- [14] Cranfeld, <http://kristinacranfeld.co.uk/Ownership-of-the-face.html>.
- [15] Drutt English, "Jewelry of Our Time: Art, Ornament and Obsession," p. 14.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] Gaspar, "Foreign Bodies: Christoph Zellweger," p. 14.
- [18] Asrfalk, Broadhead, Derrez, "New Directions in Jewelry," p. 76.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Noten, <http://www.tednoten.com/index.php/portfolio-items/mephisto/>.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Paley in "Most Excellent: Jewellery Art for Heroes," p. 50.
- [23] Asrfalk, Broadhead, Derrez, "New Directions in Jewelry," p. 14.
- [24] Dormer, Turner, "The New Jewelry: Trends+Tradition," p. 11.
- [25] Recht, <http://srulirecht.com/forget-me-knot>.
- [26] Noten, <http://www.tednoten.com/index.php/portfolio-items/chew-your-own-brooch/>.
- [27] Asrfalk, Broadhead, Derrez, "New Directions in Jewelry," p. 27.