The Critical in Design (Part One)

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— ‘What could be a criticality in design? What could be a form of resistance in design? Is design a catalyst between art and capital and therefore always subjected to its role of functioning? Does design need a kind of external experimental space?’

Questions presented to the Ph.D.-Design list-serve in December 2007 under the title ‘Criticality in Design – The Blind Spot’ by Kaja Gretinger, a design researcher at Jan Van Eyck Akadamie, Maastricht

Abstract
The paper concerns the critical in design which is examined under three headings: structurally, as an internal aspect of the processes of designing; economically, in terms of the internal collusion between (weak) design and the strength, persistence and lure of market forces and private interests; historically, in terms of the emergence of a situation—the artificial becoming the horizon and medium of our existence—that now marks our times as one where design takes on new critical dimensions, above all in relation to securing and creating the conditions that can support a humane sustainable global futures.

I: The indispensability of the critical
‘Criticality’ trips uncomfortably off the tongue, feels instinctively awkward in use. No surprise then that its use is unfamiliar, and not only in everyday speech. For design, ever unsure how to treat the critical, the connotations are in any case difficult: it is one thing to deploy criticism (in an operational context – to make it useful to designers as in a studio critique), it is even permissible (just) to be a critic (in a professional sense) – there is, after all, if in embryo, a field of design criticism. But what are we to make of the critical when we deploy it as a noun? What does criticality describe? And what would it be to have the critical not just as an occasional moment, but as that which defines the very state of being of a practice?

It was perhaps these uncertainties that prompted, in December 2007, a rare silence on the Ph.D.-Design list-serve. Kaja Gretinger, a designer, researcher and writer from the Jan Van Eyck Akademie sought help in understanding the potential of the ‘critical’ of design. (The epigraph reproduces the essence of her request.) But though pregnant with implication, for practice as much as for theory, her questions evoked little response. They were, as Barthes might have put it, the ‘motor of no development’. Nor did they provoke what many might think long overdue, namely a debate (or at least a discussion, a symposia) around the role of the critical in design.1

Keywords
criticality
critical processes
market forces
economics
cri ses
history

1. It should be noted that Kaja Gretinger has recently answered her own questions in a short but telling paper Thinking Through Blind Spots, 2008. (Unpublished at time of writing)
In the context of design research as we see it is playing out today (at least in its more orthodox moments), none of this is very surprising. For a field that often gives the impression it would like to eschew the critical in its entirety, the question as Kaja Gretinger posed it: ‘What could be criticality in design?’ is bound to be uncomfortable. Similarly, to ask whether design must always be ‘subjected to’ the ‘role of [the] functioning of capital’ is by implication to signal the desire to explore the possibility of other kinds of practice – other, that is, than those permitted by the market. ‘Form[s] of resistance’ and ‘external experimental space’ (Gretinger, 2007) are equally difficult; their associations (respectively political and aesthetic) call up realms that design research more or less eschews. Taken together, it is clear that these terms and phrases suggest a set of values and practices that ask of research and practice a response beyond what they can today comfortably deliver.2

But to note all this only throws into relief both the greater difficulty of placing the critical in relation to design and the urgency of so doing. The (still) dominant stance that design should efface itself as critical knowledge, in favour of translating the tasks assigned to it into operational or instrumental procedures, already eschews, from the beginning, a critical perspective. The critical is no less difficult for research. The ‘self-oblivious’ instrumentality that still governs the research ethic (and which design research has largely taken over without question) tends to balk at such concerns – operational finesse sits uncertainly with critical viewpoints; certainty is not vouchsafed for in the speculations of critical thought or practice (which aim, of course, at a different kind of truth).

From neither perspective, operational nor speculative (or research nor practice?), then, can the critical easily come into view. True, this is no more than we expect (nothing lower than the critical expectations of most practice – or most research). Yet the implications are still an occasion for concern, and on two grounds. First, because if these terms ask more of practice or research than either can currently deliver, this must make us ask some hard questions about the range and robustness of the conceptual structures of both—why should such terms threaten? Why should the critical be so difficult for both? Second, if the critical is today outside of the range of apprehension of much design thinking and practice, this means not only that the critical is not thought, but that there is, in effect, an acute blind spot in design, a place where thinking – and to a large degree practice – cannot enter.

To some of course this will seem of little import. What matters (it will be said) if the critical is not thought, provided we are able to grasp the instrumental or operational core of design? The thought has its attractions. Yet even minimal reflection tells us that understanding the critical is not an option or a luxury that can be dispensed with in favour of allegedly more rigorous pursuits, but is integral to any adequate comprehension of what design achieves and the processes whereby it does so. Even in its most evident repression, the critical is always and necessarily present – so present indeed that its presence is routinely discounted.

Take for example Herbert Simon’s famous definition of design. Often evoked as a justification for instrumental action, the ‘devising of courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones’...
(Simon 1996: 111) is in fact secondary not primary. The process which ends with the realization of previously unforeseen possibilities cast into a new configuration. begins from an understanding that it is possible to critically discern amongst the potentialities existing within a situation those that can form the basis of a new (preferred) entity. No motivation for setting in train the ‘devising of courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones’ happens without an initial apperception that what-is is in some manner deficient vis-à-vis what could be. Objects arise, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, first as ‘objectification[s] of [sentient] awareness’: moments of ‘perception’ subsequently materialized ‘into a free-standing design’ (Scarry 1985: 289–90). Perception, not realization, opens the game; that which is in the gift of the designer is, therefore, in the first instance, a critical apperception.

Even its repression cannot negate the qualitative force of the critical. Just as it is said that the real value of a scientific or philosophical project lies not in the success of the answer or argument it might offer, but in the acuity, forcefulness and originality of the critical questions it asks, so, also, it is out of, or it is from, the initial critical process that so much (most?) of what is of qualitative, cognitive and ethical significance in design comes forth. Critical perception seizes, shows, exposes, and announces the truths of a situation and its potentiality as it sees it. Design, the process of the realization of these perceptions – these truths – into an actualized form (whether that of an artifact, a situation or a perceptual tool) is the process of translation of these perceptions into a composite synthetic configuration that is the realization of these perceived truths (no matter how intuitive their origin) and the realization of the critical truths of configuration.

By contrast the denial of critical perception (or the reduction of its role to a mere nominal or artificial moment) is the replacement of critical perceptual truths by the falsehoods generated by interests that refuse the opportunity for critical reflection. The denial of critical perception therefore institutes the realm of un-truth at the level of things.

Further proof of the structural necessity of the critical is given by the fact that even those who would wish it away are nonetheless forced to invent substitutions.

The specific rhythms of the fashion seasons, and of annual styling changes; in general the valorization of avant-gardes, the glorification of novelty and the new for its own sake, are all procedures invented to induce a just sufficient discontinuity between what-is and what-could-be to set the configurative process in motion – whilst allowing design to trick itself that it can escape the responsibility of critical thinking. But perception – critical perception in the sense meant here – not only originates a design, but, crucially, gives it orientation (perception having, in this sense, a directive quality) and as Jan van Toorn reminds us, even the most ‘dynamic position for production does not mean…that we can do without an orienting principle in relation to social circumstances (van Toorn 1994: 150).

We can summarize these initial reflections in the following way: if the critical is necessarily at the core of practice this means that criticality in some ways names the state of design. This naming is open, not closed: it is not premature nor is it a forcing. The critical names design as an open condition. But this also tells us why the critical is a problem for research
for it is that which cannot be predicted – since the result of the critical process in relation to a situation cannot be known in advance.

To refuse this understanding (and its implications) is not just to place design in something akin to the position of psychology before Freud (we sense that the unconscious is determinate, although in ways we do not understand or have not yet modelled) it is also, more seriously, to have to make a substitution. It is to offer against the density, complexity and the dimensions of the critical truths (the capacities) that design is capable of touching upon, a merely ‘ersatz’ version of design, one that is ‘fitted’, almost exquisitely, to the demands of the market but which is useless for determining our truth in relation to things and thus useless for comprehending the possibilities of design in other than in its instrumental roles.

II: The economic paralysis of imagination

On one level all of this is self-evident – except that today it is not. That it needs to be re-articulated – against the grain of how matters are now conceived – speaks to the remarkable effectiveness, at least at the level of common sense, of the ideologies (practical, theoretical, pedagogical, methodological) that aver that one need not concern oneself with the critical. The transformation of a once reflective, critical and pre-figurative practice into the a-critical affirmation of what-is can be laid (though not entirely) at the door of the process whereby, since 1945, design has become a branch of the culture industry, and has thus learned to place the un-critical affirmation of what-is at the centre of its world (rather than, for example, offering what modernism initially promised: the anticipation of a realizable future possibility that was not dependent on a particular economic schema).

So effective are these ideologies that today design (and the modes of study of it that reflect its formations back to itself) is now characterized by so powerful an adherence to what-is that the very possibility of other modes of design practice (at least at the institutional level) becomes all but impossible to conceive. This transformation is not without cost. More than sixty years ago, Adorno and Horkheimer gave a grim assessment of the trajectory that otherwise critical practices undergo through the metamorphoses engineered by blindly pragmatized thought, noting that such practices ‘suffer what triumphant thought has always suffered. If it willingly emerges from its critical element to become a mere means at the disposal of the existing order, then despite itself it tends to convert the positive it elected to defend into something negative and destructive’ (Adorn and Horkheimer 1979: xii). In other words, too close a naive affiliation with the powers (as Jan van Toorn puts it) of ‘money, bureaucracy and the media’ (van Toorn 1994: 147) cannot but be corrosive in terms of determining our truth in relation to things: ‘The metamorphoses of criticism into affirmation do not leave the theoretical content untouched, for its truth evaporates’ (Adorn and Horkheimer 1979: xii).

For design, these predictions have come home to roost. The evasion, abandonment and outright refusal to encompass the critical together with the retreat from the emancipatory goals that were, at least to a degree, a significant motivation and driving force in European modernism, has meant that in the absence of any countervailing ideologies or axioms, design has placed itself more and more at the direct service of private
interests. The ensuing relation has had benefits for both – at least superficially. As van Toorn has noted, the 'coinciding group interests of clients and the [design] disciplines' has meant that the 'practices and notions of [professional] design have been introduced into society on an ever larger scale. This has...fostered the acceptance of the images and doctrines of design....[and] strengthened the position of design in relation to economic, social and political intercourse' (van Toorn 1994: 150).³

But of course no such (Faustian) bargain comes without a quid pro quo. As van 'Toorn again notes (in a critique that has only gained increased force in the fourteen years since it was first offered), what suffers in this process is the relation to those whom, ostensibly, design serves, for while design still wishes to 'claim responsibility for the interests of users' and presents its 'professional and private concerns as a public interest', 'under the pressure of neo-liberalism and the power relationships of the free market', design has been 'forced to dilute the public wine with a large dose of private water'.

Thus despite the remnant of the ideology of public service that still accrues to design, in practice we encounter only its almost complete replacement by the concerns and values of the market. Public interest today occurs at the margins – or it occurs through and as a consequence of the private. The latter, and not the former, sets the overall agenda.

In this process not only is the designer’s individual freedom, purportedly still existing within a space of its own, infiltrated by the client’s way of thinking, but design ends up discovering that, for all its attempted accommodation with these interests, it has become little more than a handmaiden to market concerns. Small wonder then (as van ‘Toorn puts it in his most incisive criticism) that even at best design serves today as little more than a ‘theatrical substitute for [missing] essential forms of social communication’ – whilst at worst, ‘drawing on its roles in the organization of production and in helping to stimulate consumption’, it is at once hand-in-glove with the intensifying creation of a fundamentally unsustainable world (a role it is incapable of acknowledging with any honesty) and part of the ‘extensive disciplining of the general public’ in the terms of the market – a disciplining ‘whose most far-reaching consequence’ (even beyond the inflation of unsustainable consumption) ‘is...a political neutralization that is at odds with the functioning of an open and democratic society’.

What makes all this possible (van Toorn goes on to argue) is a blindness to social and economic realities that ‘cannot any longer be called accidental.’

Despite the enormous dissemination of information, the complex factors of institutional power, which definitively contribute to production have mostly been ignored. Nor has contemporary design been related to theoretical developments in other spheres of cultural production, or to conditions in the economy and media.

But if ‘individual designers and the discipline as a whole are seldom more than superficially aware of their role in the staging of the cultural environment’ this is not because of inherent qualities or conditions within

3. I was intrigued to see that the request for help with the concept of criticality came from Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, Holland. In the 1990s, van Toorn’s directorship made the Jan van Eyck school an acclaimed centre for critical thought in art and design. At least two significant books of papers originating from conferences in the school were published in this period – And Justice for All, edited by Ole Bouman, in 1994 and Design beyond Design, edited by Jan van Toorn, in 1997 (both Maastricht, Jan van Eyck Akademie). Both sets of essays pushed at the limits of design thinking as it was then circumscribed. Van Toorn in particular gave a unique force to these discussions, bringing to them his identification with the perspectives of the Frankfurt School, and his considerable experience of the realities (and possibilities) of communicative practice. In the following pages, as at once a tribute to van Toorn’s trenchant critique and as a means of trying to bring back something of his forcefulness in these matters, I have quoted extensively from his essays in these books (van Toorn (1994) and (1997)). I have also done so as a means of reminding contemporary researchers and practitioners that there is a limited, but nonetheless
design but because ‘designers…fail to reflect critically upon the conditions in which their action comes about’. Since they ‘lack the necessary concepts and arguments…they have found themselves incapable of re-negotiating an attitude which is beneficial to all’ and thus less and less capable of mediating private interests and public needs. What is missing in all this is the sense of a ‘critical attitude…by which the use of language and the methods of the operational critique [can be deployed] to see the world in terms of multi-dimensionality and transformation.’ Dispossessed of the insights that a critical perspective – and only this – can provide, design loses sight of its own work and of the contexts in which it operates.

To lose sight of context is also to lose sight of the real ‘spaces and places’ (and persons) in regard to which design works. But it is also to lose sight of the real capabilities design deploys or touches upon, for these only become evident when they are understood and seen in relation to context. But as perception of the context of design’s work narrows, so does self-understanding: design becomes blind, both to itself as to its capabilities, and blind in relation to the work it performs (or should perform) for others. But blindness is also weakness. If the loss of critical perspective erodes self-understanding, the disappearance of the idea of design as a mode of transitive action capable of engaging with the actuality of the world debilitating how design can take up – i.e., can actively and critically engage with – the growing commercialization and consolidation of the world. The result is a growing lack of belief, within the design professions, as to the ‘makeability, the changeableness of socio-cultural’ and economic conditions. Design, in other words, ceases to see itself as a transitive and transformative practice and as a mode of acting with its own ethical and even political demands. In a word it acquiesces to what the market wishes of it — it becomes (to repeat), the handmaiden of consumption and cheer-leader for inequality. It becomes passive where once it was active.

Attenuated in this way practice (and thought) are thrown exclusively into the present. Through persuading itself that the future exists beyond the pale of thought except as the extrusion of what-is, design loses the capacity to pre-figure or to address meaningfully future possibility. But in losing the future history is also lost: lost as a past that is still operative in the present, and lost as movement, for as consciousness closes around the present, the comprehension of historical transformation vanishes. Exclusive attention to technological transformation has diverted attention from the deeper transformations occurring in our situation. These transformations have acute consequences for design, though they refer less to immediate transformations in the character of practice (though these too are occurring, and in ways that will accelerate in the coming decades) than to a shift in the historical significance or meaning (the responsibility) of the act of designing. Critical comprehension of design possibility requires an understanding of the depth of the historical changes that are now beginning to become evident. Above all, it requires a comprehension of the radical transmutation of responsibility that is called for by the corpus of immanent and emergent crises and possibilities that are before us. It is to these that we must now turn.

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III. The transmutation of responsibility

We shall see as we progress that there are a number of developments in the character of what used to be called late capitalism that are determinates both for the context of design and its structural position. From the point of view of criticality or the role of the critical we can best characterize the implications of these developments in terms of the transmutation of responsibility, which they entail. We should begin with the most profound underlying transformation with which we need to be concerned, which is also the deepest and most abstract, and the one that bears most particularly objectively on design, in that it signals the shift in the structural position that design (or at least those capabilities associated with it) will inhabit in the future.

This transformation can be easily stated: it concerns the objective rise of the artificial to the point where it (and not nature) now constitutes the ‘horizon and medium’ of existence.

It is not difficult to see immediately some of the consequences of this shift. The rise of the artificial to the point where it, and not nature, provides the constitutive horizon of our lives and our world, changes the balance between the realms of nature (or natural forces), human conduct and artifice. These objective transformations have subjective implications, not least in terms of what we might call the ‘answerability’ asked of us. The transmutation of responsibility can be seen in terms of the call that this new situation makes on us to become adequate to that which we have made.

The degree of shift involved here (a shift both ideological and practical) can perhaps be seen best if we consider that across most of recorded history it has been assumed (at least intellectually) that mankind could sufficiently comprehend the conditions of human possibility through mentally inhabiting or understanding only the first and second of the three moments listed above. We have largely assumed – and our universities still largely reflect this assumption – that ‘nature’ (including here theology or the nature of the gods, and understood through the apprehension of natural or religious laws) and conduct (understood across the swathe of human behaviour as revealed to us, for example, through history and literature, and later anthropology) between them encompassed the context and character of the human condition and therefore sufficed to comprehend the essential range of human possibility. Artifice, the third realm, central to practical life, has been largely thought irrelevant – except in the form of language, annexed as a natural aspect of the realm of human conduct.

Today – which means here ‘for the foreseeable future, and increasingly so’ – the situation is reversed. We are beginning to perceive that our comprehension of who we are and even more of who and what we might be depends on how we understand the artificial; not only operationally or instrumentally (as the determining condition with which we must contend, and as that which sets the terms for the systems and environments in relation to which we negotiate our existence) but ontologically – as that through-which, or by-which, or in relation to which, we interpret and realize (historicize) our condition (which means realize our being as finite creatures who are enabled to be so only through our capacities to deploy artifice). To make this statement reveals the degree of transformation that is now under way.

4. The term “horizon and medium” is borrowed from Hans-George Gadamer. In Truth and Method (London, Sheen and Ward, 1960) Gadamer calls language the ‘horizon and medium’ of existence. My reference to Gadamer here is deliberate for of course I am suggesting that if language appeared to be the horizon for human thought in the twentieth century artifice is the horizon of existence in the twenty-first century. The focus that was on language—that compulsion which made almost all philosophy across the century focus upon it—now needs to be on the artificial (of which language is but a moment).
What we are discovering (albeit painfully, yet not without moments of joy – for there is a certain exhilaration in what is now opened to us) is that it is only through the artificial that we can discern our possibilities – and that it is the sufficient (or insufficient) character of the artificial (that which is, after all, our product and which now constitutes the environment in relation to which both we and nature subsist) which becomes the seismograph or the true gauge of our existence. To put this another way: we discover today the ‘measure-taking’ of our existence now passes through the artificial – as indeed do all of our relations to nature, and as indeed do all questions of conduct.

This changes, powerfully, the character of ethics. It means that the axioms and criteria that might guide an ethics adequate to our time can only have weight, or find resonance, if they are capable of encompassing artifice. One consequence of this is that the distinction, once thought almost absolute, between the realm of (free) ethical conduct and (unfree) praxis – a distinction that persisted in every attempt to make a differentiation between labour, work and action and to offer hierarchies of conduct on that basis – dissolves, utterly.

The question of the sufficient or insufficient character of the artificial that is now at the heart of ethics transforms the question of conduct. The shift we are speaking of here insists rather that the question of conduct now takes also (and urgently) the form of the question of doing – with doing here meaning transitive action in and in relation to the world. The implication is clear: questions of moral philosophy are today questions of transitive action. But this also means that there are no acts of transitive action (i.e., also no acts of design) that are today not also moral acts. Responsibility, moral responsibility, now passes through transitive action. The question of the qualitative formation of the artificial is now the key moral question of our time. But this appears to us not as an ought (the ideal to which we should aspire) but as immanent to how we act: as the axiom of action or, better, as its criteria.

The question of the transmutation of responsibility, which of course now takes in artifice in all its aspects, has implications at a number of levels.

1. For example, the axiom of the qualitative formation of the artificial (qualitative with respect to the conditions for human and natural life) reverses the axiom of neutrality vis-à-vis what we used to call material culture. A-critical praxis has always paradoxically justified itself by implying that, in the end, the material practices that design helped shape were not of consequence. That was ever a lie. Technology (and the image) has long entered consciousness. As Adorno puts it as early as 1943, ‘The new human type cannot be properly understood without an awareness of what he is continuously exposed to from the world of things around him, even in his most secret innervations’ (Adorno 1974: 40).

Who we are as subjects has thus long been determined (and by no means always for ill) by our relationship to material culture. As that culture today becomes total (in the quite objective sense of this term) and at the same time is the direct agent that engenders global and not merely
local un-sustainability, the illusion of more or less benign (or even empty) neutrality falls away. Material culture in the total sense of the term is now that which both sustains and un-sustains us, this grammatical infelicity being justified only to try to encompass the double and different position we now inhabit, in which we are required to understand, far more sharply than we have previously, the way that our frailty (and resilience) as human beings is both supported (sustained) and undermined (de-futured) by artifice.

2. This is partly a consequence of how artifice arrived at this point. If we attempt to give dates to the onset of the artificial as the horizon of the world, two will suffice. The first, 1945, marks the coincidence (which is of course no such thing) of the globalization of technology and the onset of the capability or potentiality for destruction on a planetary scale. The second, 1995, can stand as the retrospective marker of the onset of global warming – or more pertinently and exactly, the onset of the globally objective standard by which we can measure the un-sustainability of what is. Within these fifty years we can mark the germination of the epoch we are now moving into. Both are by no means only objective developments. As Adorno already hinted, such developments do not remain external to us. On the contrary, as Julia Kristeva has noted with some acuity, the potential for destructiveness that we inherit from the last century is necessarily formative for our consciousness:

We, as civilizations, we know not only that we are mortal, ass Paul Valéry asserted after the war of 1914; we also know that we can inflict death upon ourselves. Auschwitz and Hiroshima have revealed that the malady of death as Marguerite Duras might say, informs our most concealed inner recesses. If military and economic realms, as well as political and social bonds, are governed by a passion for death, the latter has been revealed to rule even the once noble kingdom of the spirit. A tremendous crisis has emerged…never has the power of destructive forces appeared as unquestionable and unavoidable as now, within and without society and the individual.

(Kristeva 1989: 221)

The implications of this for our understanding of history—meaning our history, the history we hope will come—are revealed in some lines by Peter Eisenman given in an essay in 1984:

[Today a] new sensibility exists. It was born in the rupture of 1945. This sensibility was neither predicated in the tenets of modernism nor brought about by their failure to achieve the utopias of the present. Rather, it emerged from something unforeseen to modernism, in the fact that not since the advent of modern science, technology and medicine has a generation faced, as it does today, the potential extinction of an entire civilization.

(Eisenman 1984: 65)

There is always a temptation, on reading these lines, to want to see this final phrase of as merely messianic – and on that basis to dismiss the insight as a whole. It should be resisted. Even empirically, if the particular threat that
is referred to here (nuclear holocaust) appears to have receded since 1989, it has not disappeared. (One would, for example, be unlikely to secure high odds for a wager that there will not be a nuclear exchange in the next decades.) Meanwhile, the ramifications of 9/11; the omnipresence of terrorist threat (now internalized into political consciousness and on that basis made necessary for all concerned); the visible decline of governments as effective organizing forces (and not only in the third world) and the wider social, economic and ultimately demographic or democidal (and even genocidal) implications of the undeniable slippage towards ecological disaster, can all be seen as the symptoms of an unprecedented underlying crisis. The delay in the possibility of our extinction does not necessarily therefore refute the depth of Eisenman’s insight.

But the deeper issue Eisenman is pushing towards here is the argument that 1945 marks the beginning of an epoch characterized by a wholly new historical condition.

Previously, the present was seen as a moment between the past and the future. Now the present contains two unrelated poles: a memory of this previous and progressive time and an immanence, the presence of an end – the end of the future – a new kind of time.

(Eisenman 1984: 65)

In this view 1945 marks the second of the breaks or discontinuities that separate us (and definitively so) from all preceding societies.

The first of these was with the continuity of the past, a break that is the very mark of becoming modern, which commences between 1500 and 1700 and is made irreversible with the assured victory of industrialization after 1820 (no retreat to the sylvan woodlands) and which finds one of its most poignant cultural expressions in Barthes’ lamentation: ‘is not to be modern to know clearly what cannot be started over again?’ (Barthes 1977: 13).

By contrast, the second great discontinuity of the modern period, the rupture of 1945, is not with the past but with the future. From this moment, Eisenman is saying, the future is no longer assured, is no longer for us a certainty. We exist in a present that lacks a guarantee that it will have a future. This is a shattering development. If the previous ‘shocks’ to the human psyche have been in terms of breaking with human discontinuity and exceptionalism vis-à-vis existence (Copernicus), nature (Darwin) and un-reason (Freud), this break establishes a fundamental shattering of the assumption that, of all things, the future will be there. While this possibility has faced both individuals and communities – is it not one of the greatest poignancies and crimes of the Holocaust that any and all futures were to be denied to the European Jews? – it has not, ever, faced human beings as a whole. We, as an entirety as it were, as a global population persist and indeed numerically flourish—it would appear unstoppably so.

Yet over the last fifty years we have only very narrowly, and still with no absolute certainty, escaped the effective destruction of a very great deal of human life. Emerging ecological crises, and the social, political and economic crises they will spawn, have less definitive outcomes. It is worth
remembering, however, that as crises of artifice, not to say technology, these fall under the tendency of social crises since the mid-nineteenth century that, once they have erupted, above all into warfare, have been infinitely more deadly than even the most imaginative thought. No one conceived, or could have conceived, that the US Civil War of the 1860s would eventually consume 620,000 lives, or 2 per cent of the then US population (equivalent to six million deaths today); or that WWI would take the lives of ten to fifteen million, and would be a catastrophe that set in motion revolutions, and political developments that, over the next sixty years, would consume somewhere between 100 and 150 million lives, including around fifty-five million dead in WWII alone.

It would be foolish, then, to underestimate once again the capacity for systemic failure to induce conflict and crises beyond the capacity of our current political systems to manage. The possibility of nuclear destruction is the objective reminder that this remains on the table. Eisenman’s warning of a historical break with the assuredness of the future therefore needs to be taken seriously—if only because by so doing we might gain an adequate perspective on the present.

3. Eisenman’s proposition changes, completely, the ‘work’ we need to do in culture. In modernity, culture celebrated the sundered continuity with the past. Insisting that all naive attempts at continuity were false, it projected itself into the assurance of a future to come. Such assurance was the well-spring of confidence in ‘heroic’ modernism. (It was also, taken naively, the source of its downfall.) We, who are modern in a different way, know that this particular project cannot be started over again. If the depth of our crisis is such that even the future cannot be assured to us – and hence history in the projective sense, as a given, as an axiom of existence, individually and collectively can no longer be assumed – our negotiation is not therefore with a sundered past and an assured future, rather it takes place in order to bring the future into being.

Charged with a new sense of the fugitive and precarious – but also revelatory – character of immanent existence, history and the future are no longer for us the abstract givens of our existence, that to which we can automatically refer and therefore have scant need to bring to consciousness as such. Indeed, in a sense, there is no longer history (or the future) or rather, and better, we are in the unprecedented position of seeking to create the conditions in which there can (again) be history in the sense of a continuing progression into a future that is not destructive. This last sentence exaggerates, but not by much. The truth that the otherwise empty slogan ‘the end of history’ catches (against its own ideological thrust) is that in the absence of an assured future the most fundamental assumption, that of continuity beyond the present, falls away, and with it, therefore, go (or seem to go) the axioms that secure history even in its minimally progressive sense.

4. This then gives us our task – that if neither past nor future are any longer continuous with our present, if these connections cannot be assumed, then the relation to both, and especially to the future, has to be (re-)negotiated. The work of culture becomes that of building the possibilities
for history – meaning for a future. This is not the historical ambition of building-the-future in a modernist sense (whether Fordist, Stakhonovite or Fascist), but the cultural project of seeking to create the conditions for a future. Today, culture (which of course includes design—and which, or us, replaces history) is today an attempt to make the future possible; i.e., the role of culture is create the conditions to make (a humane and sustainable) future possible.

Two requirements (at the minimum) now come to the fore. The first is that the objective potential of extinction sets in motion the need to articulate and deal with the difficulties (and creative possibilities) opened by the tension between the memory of historical progression and the new condition of finite immanence (of making the future possible) into which we are thrown. The exploration of the impossible dialectic between the memory of (historical) continuity and the exploration of a sense of immanence is the very opposite of merely living within capitalism’s endless afternoon of the now. It is perhaps one of the major ways of snapping the cycle of denial that marks our political and cultural moment. Second, the affirmative shadow of what Eisenman discusses as the potentiality for catastrophe, is the break from history into culture – by which I mean culture as praxis, as proposition and as transformation. What matters, today, is not expressing the objective movement of history – for there is none. What matters instead is proposing a grammar for the forms that (democratic) life can take. Democratic, here, does not mean only in the liberal sense in which we now take it, it stands also for the idea of exploring (under the double axioms of the same or equality and the realization of justice) the possibilities of a humane transition to a (truly) humane modern world-system.

5. Simply naming these tasks already suggests the degree of change that has taken place in our sense of history and therefore in our conception of both artifice and culture. Design – which as we know owes its identity and possibility to both (and which stands as an agent of negotiation and mediation between them) – changes consequentially. If we are to look back on what this paper has opened so far we would say that it has revealed (and therefore opened) three levels of the critical: the structural (the critical as a condition of design, even when almost violently repressed as such); the economic (where the lack of a critical perspective induces blindness – ‘Wealth Makes Blind’ as the title of one of Otto Kunzli’s marvellous pieces of jewellery has it); and the historical (which we now discover is the cultural and the requirement that we seek to establish the conditions for (a humane) future to be possible).

Does this exhaust the dimensions of the critical? Not at all. The transformed historical position of design in relation to artifice and the crisis of the future, when thought of also in relation to design’s possibility or its potentiality (including, most evidently, that of which we are not yet aware), calls forth something of a new object for design – using this word now in its sense of goal or ambition – except that what is called for here is not an external ought, not a commandment (even less is it a rule), but something more like a series of axioms or criteria; a net shall we say (if metaphorically) within which one might catch the critical and
design in new ways. In part two of this paper I would like to take up the ‘principal propositions’ (Barthes 1977: 156) around which we can gather criticality today.

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