The Critical Design Exhibition: an epistemic space

Gillian Russell
Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Canada

Follow this and additional works at: https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers

Citation

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at DRS Digital Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in DRS Biennial Conference Series by an authorized administrator of DRS Digital Library. For more information, please contact DL@designresearchsociety.org.
The Critical Design Exhibition: an epistemic space

RUSSELL Gillian

Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Canada
gillianrussell@me.com

The overall objective of this paper is to position the critical design exhibition as a context of discovery – a material space for thinking – distancing itself from the more didactic forms of exhibitions that still dominate practice today, and to pose ways to establish a far more dynamic and open relation between critical design and its staging. What will follow will be an examination of critical design as a form of research which seeks not so much to make explicit knowledge production but rather to provide a space for thinking. Consequently critical design is an open undertaking centred on thinking in, through, and with design. I propose the exhibition as epistemic environment for critical design, an environment that secures and creates conditions to support the thinking dimension of critical design practice while unlocking an active agency in the audience. It is a space where research and knowledge production is evoked in situ and in action, reflecting the search for an exhibition practice which moves beyond simple communication to a form of embodiment that embraces collaboration, and experimentation.

critical design; exhibition; embodied criticality; epistemic space

1 The Exhibition as research for Critical Design

When British educationalist and writer Christopher Frayling (1994) examined the stereotypes of design research he described three types of research (with reference to Herbert Read) which could grow out of design: 1) Research into design, in terms of historical research, aesthetic or perceptual research, and research into a variety of theoretical perspectives on design; 2) Research through design, in terms of materials research, development work, and action research; 3) Research for design, in terms of the expressive tradition, where thinking is embodied in the artefact, in the sense of visual or imagistic communication. Frayling (1994) considered the latter as research with a small ‘r’ which he earlier defined as “the act of searching closely or carefully” (p.1) He states,

So research with a little r has been used, in the last four hundred years, of art practice, of personal quests, and of clues and evidence which a detective must decode. The point, says the OED, is that the search involves care . . . it isn’t about professionalism, or rules and guidelines, or laboratories. It is about searching. (p.1)
What interests me in Frayling’s account of design research with ‘r’ is the emphasis he places on comprehending the possibilities of design research outside of its instrumental roles. He describes Research for design as an expressive idiom rather than a cognitive one – steeped in autobiography rather than understanding. What this implies is that research with ‘r’ emphasises self-reflexivity over a communicable knowledge.

2 Critical Design as Research ‘r’

The same criteria that Frayling identifies as defining Research ‘r’ could be said to hold for critical design practice, whose raison-d’etre is to insight questions, challenge and enable action. A form of discursive design (B.Tharp & S.Tharp, 2015), critical design uses artifacts to prompt self-reflection, contemplation, and discussion – to make users think. Therefore, building upon Frayling’s typology, critical design calls forth something of a new category of design research - using research with ‘r’ – one defined by Swiss educators Simon Grand and Martin Wiedmer (2010) as Research as Design. In their article ‘Design Fiction: A Method Toolbox for Design Research in a Complex World’ (2010) they argue that design research as a practice is fundamentally a way of understanding and creating experimental systems, which our societies need to deal with their most controversial, essential and complex questions and challenges. (p.8) They argue further that this very idea bears close resemblance to an understanding of design fiction, which systematically questions and deconstructs the self-evident by materialising, visualising and embodying controversies and perspectives in the form of objects, scenarios, installations and performances. (Grand & Wiedmer, 2010, p.5; see also Bleeker, 2009) In a more recent article Grand (2012) further argues for both design fiction and critical design as distinct ways to approach design research, both of which he states focus on the world as it could be: What if? as the actual starting point for conducting, positioning, reflecting on, and practicing design research. (p.171) Here the designed outcome is not viewed as an end point in the search for a solution to a problem, but instead assumes an ‘experimental value’ which acts as an “entrance point for critical thinking about the self evident, not only as the world could be, but rather to find a new, distant perspective on reality as it is”. (Grand & Wiedmer, 2010, p.5) Consequently, the work seeks to enhance our experiences not just with what we ‘know’ and ‘understand’ but with ‘who’ we are and ‘where’ we stand. In this instance what comes to the fore is that critical design becomes a method to reframe what is taken as ‘self-evident’ in our world, while distributing the agency of research between the designer and its audience.

In this sense critical design could be understood as a device, as theorised by sociologists Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (2012) Drawing on Foucault’s notion of the apparatus, they propose the ‘device’ as a term, which can be understood as a complex ensemble of practices that are organised in response to urgent needs. (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, p.8) Importantly, they assert, devices act or make others act. (p.9) They are not static forms of representation of issues, but instead active measures which interfere in the worlds in which they are positioned.

Situating the principles of ‘device’ in relation to that of critical design helps us to conceptualise works of critical design as assemblages (practices, objects and concepts) of experimental activity that are always in relation to particular situations, problems and/or needs. This analogy further positions critical design as both inventive and adaptable, reliant on movement whereby reflexivity becomes its primary tool. Any critical design could therefore not be considered a static fact but more so a performative act in the here and now. It is precisely here where one sees the transition from design characterised as praxis (a will that produces a concrete effect) towards a design that inhabits the space of possible becoming.

The design theorist Clive Dilnot (2014) has referred to this strategy as the ‘science of possibility’, or what he has elsewhere called the ‘science of uncertainty’. It is that which translates the given into uncertainty and therefore opens as question its possibility. Dilnot’s point is important for drawing
attention to the work of critical design as a device which allows us to see how we negotiate the limits of what we understand, at any moment, as the ‘actual’.

This way of thinking, I argue, contributes to an understanding of critical design as a form of criticality in curator Irit Rogoff’s (2006) terms. Criticality, Rogoff (2006) observes, offers an opportunity “to explore that which we do not yet know or that which is not yet a subject in the world.” (p.3) It exists in the operations of revealing possibility and potentiality with an emphasis on modes of embodiment – a ‘living through’ the very problem we are trying to analyse and apprehend. The emphasis here is on the creation of conditions for both thinking and doing, whereby works of critical design privilege a criticality within which users are asked to question their knowledge and modes of inhabiting the world. This emphasis on possibility and potentiality, in which works can be approached as subjective not absolute truths, offers a space for multiple viewpoints and experiences, which together create a collective endeavour that remains forever open to contestation and adjustment. (Rogoff, 2006) Broadly speaking, what Rogoff’s theory of criticality brings into perspective is a deeper understanding that critical design is necessarily embodied through the user.

From the present point of view then, critical designers are not experts in solving problems, but more so in arranging situations in which thinking and action become possible. In fact one could go as far as to say that in the context of critical design the whole notion of the expert can be replaced with what Bruno Latour (2004) defines – building on Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe – as the co-researcher. He states:

We are all engaged . . . into the collective experiments on matters as different as climate, food, landscape, health, urban design, technical communication, and so on. As consumers, militants, citizens, we are all now co-researchers. There is a difference to be sure, between all of us, but not the difference between knowledge producers and those who are bombarded by their applications. (p.16)

Forming part of his argument on the collective experiment Latour (2004) summarises all of the rules of method under the slogan “No innovation without representation”. (p.17) It is time, according to Latour (2004; Latour & Weibel, 2005) that we have a collective say on the innovations in our world, and decide for ourselves what is good for us.

Not only does Latour’s notion of the co-researcher represent a particularly influential way of conceiving of the user in critical design, it also introduces the need for critical design to change its terms of engagement. Or to paraphrase Latour: No critical design without presentation.

In what follows, I elaborate critical design as both an object of research and an entity in which and through which research takes place. Through this process of research the audience, as co-researchers, are invited to partake – they are invited to think – in a situated and embodied way.

The intention is not to resolve all the challenges that critical design faces (see Mazé, 2009; Moline, 2006; Prado, 2014) but rather to recognise the importance of its situatedness and modes of engagement. The methods of analysis I apply, which have been gathered from a variety of movements across and between cultural studies, feminist theory and social studies of science and technology (STS), variously make it possible to address the complex relations between critical design and its audience.

I propose the exhibition as epistemic space for critical design, a space where both research and thinking is evoked in situ and in action. (Knorr Cetina, 2001; Suchman, 2007) I offer three examples of critical design exhibitions, that, while not done through the trope of Research as Design, suggest the possibility for the critical design exhibition as an open undertaking centred on thinking in, through and with design.
3 Risk Centre – Onkar Kular with Inigo Minns

To some degree, it can be argued, critical design practice has concentrated its efforts on the development of methods and practices focused on the creation of spaces for thinking, without inviting the thinking to take place. It hasn’t really considered or addressed how to actually engage a user in thinking. Which begs the question: Where do the co-researchers figure into the equation?

As mentioned previously, the aim of critical design is to allow its users to think so as to engage with past, present and future worlds, both critically and differently (Rosenberg, 2007, p.6). Complicating matters further, when outcomes are neither knowable in advance nor necessarily bound up in material form, and when co-researchers play an integral role in the process of design, it becomes necessary to question how does the approach take form? And how are co-researchers invited into the overall process? (Kerridge, 2015) Onkar Kular and Inigo Minns’ Risk Centre (2013) (Figure 1) is emblematic in this context: Using the museum exhibition as the medium of their work their outcome worked towards reframing the concept of Risk (from financial to physical, from civic to legislative, from personal to digital) in unexpected ways. Through a series of performative gestures ranging from playing out scenarios (The guidance script) to participating in workshops (Slow Motion Accidents) to observing others engaging with the space, the work invited the audience to question their personal understanding and relationship to risk while pondering risk as a force that shapes our environments, behaviours and interactions. Risk Centre did not function like a standard exhibition whereby objects are put on display for a viewing public. Instead it acted as an open platform, which actively engaged with the subject of risk through both experimentation and reflexivity. In a similar spirit, through ‘Risk Centre tours’, ‘First Aid Training classes’, and the ‘Painting and Drawing Risk workshop’, run by sociologist Erika Wall, Risk Centre employed the education department as a more performative, participatory actor in the exhibition context. The education department in turn was figured as an integral part of the work.

Figure 1 A scenario from Onkar Kular’s Risk Centre, in which the dangers of an unidentified black bag were explored. Source: onkarkular.com
Importantly, then, through both staging and performance, the project offered a moment to encounter the exhibition; not as a medium for representing a work, but for explicitly inventing it. It embraced elements of chance and unpredictability into its working order, collapsing boundaries between the work of design and its exhibition, while being reflexively critical and disruptive of the institutions expert-driven systems of power. As sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) reminds us, Risks can only become ‘visible’ when socially defined. In this sense Risk Centre acted as a prime site for the social definition of risk, while simultaneously emphasising the work as dependant on a plurality of actions and voices.

The project as a whole declared that its desired function to address and transform our relationship to risk could not be secured in advance. Instead the exhibition was restricted to a matrix of possibilities dependent on an audience to activate the outcomes. Here, there is a move away from an exhibition about critical design towards a process of criticality. Indeed the work amounts to questions rather than answers, and it is these questions that take the work elsewhere, through the audience (co-researchers). As Kular (2013) describes it,

*This approach does not aim to be problem solving, rather it forms an open question or situation that the audience can interpret and respond to. In doing so the traditional relationship between the user and the design is transformed so that the design becomes a tool and the user is elevated to co-author.* (p.32)

This repositioning of the exhibition as a space for experimentation signifies a move whereby the very act of exhibiting critical design is made available as an entity for speculation and reflexivity, which privileges an active engagement with co-researchers directed towards perception rather than understanding. It is in this staging where the exhibition moves from an ascribed space of objective knowledge and learning to a potential space for exploration and discovery. By creating these objects or situations with multiple potentialities, designers and audiences (co-researchers) are invited to ‘think’, in a situated and embodied way. This ties in with sociologist Karin Knorr Cetina’s (2001) notion of ‘epistemic objects’, which she characterises as knowledge objects defined through “an incompleteness of being and the capacity to unfold indefinitely”. (p.180-181) These fluid objects she contends, have an ‘ontological openness’. (Knorr Cetina, 2001, p.182) They are objects of investigation that enable the emergence of the new and the unforseen, while acting as signs for further searching and unfinished thinking. (Knorr Cetina, 2001; Rheinberger, 2007; Borgdorff, 2012). Equally, by emphasising the inherently constructivist, critical, experimental and imaginative nature of Design as Research, as understood in the above, we can interpret a direct correlation to the unconventional perspectives in science and technology studies (STS) and their recent preoccupation with the important role of experimentation and the experimental system, which carries the reflexive and affective aspects of epistemic practice. (Latour, 1993; Knorr Cetina, 1999, 2001; Rheinberger, 2007)

### 4 Epistemic Practices in Science and Beyond

When we speak of scientific research we often think of a laboratory filled with experts wearing white coats working towards proving or disproving specialised theories through a series of experiments, repeatable at will, whose results, if justified, would at some point in the distant future be presented to a public. Such a view, if taken seriously, elicits two different yet inseparable elements. The first is what Latour (2004) defines as the “trickling down’ theory of scientific influence whereby knowledge transfer is one-directional, “The public could choose to learn the results of the laboratory sciences or remain indifferent to them, but it could certainly not add to them, dispute them, and even less contribute to their elaboration.”(p.18) As an expert driven system, it presents itself as ‘truth’ tested by scientific researchers, and taught to a listening public. The second is the portrayal of scientific research as method-driven, repeatable, systematic, rational, objective and universalisable. In this classical formulation experiments are seen as singular, well-defined empirical instances embedded in a context of justification dependent on explicit instructions which reveal the methods of one’s logic while justifying one’s conclusions. (Frayling, 1995). This understanding of science, however, runs
counter to the more recent ‘practice turn in the philosophy of science’ (Rheinberger, 2007; Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 2001; Latour, 1993) which seeks to liberate the context of discovery from the context of justification, shifting the focus to experimental systems framed through subjectivity in place of experimentation as a theory-driven activity centred on objective knowledge. (Borgdorff, 2012)

Sociologists like Knorr-Cetina and historians like Rheinberger have in fact argued for an understanding of the experimental system as the centre and motor of scientific research, which inherently situates scientific research as far less method-based and far more focused on dynamic, creative, constructive and normative actions. (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p.187; Rheinberger, 2007)

According to Rheinberger (2015) experimental systems offer unknown answers to questions we are not yet able to ask. Such systems, he contends, quoting French biologist François Jacob are: ‘Machines for making the future’ (2015). They are designed to allow for unprecedented events to occur. They do not seek to augment knowledge, and are in fact not meant to generate answers, but rather to materialise questions. (Rheinberger, 2015; 2013 (1997), p. 220) In an essay entitled ‘Artistic Practices and Epistemic Things’, art theorist Henk Borgdorff (2012) makes the comparison between research in both art and science through an understanding of the experimental system. Referencing Rheinberger he maintains that,

Experiments are not merely methodological vehicles to test (confirm or reject) knowledge that has already been theoretically grounded or hypothetically postulated, as classical philosophy of science would have it. Experiments are the actual generators of that knowledge – knowledge of which we previously had no knowledge at all. (p.189)

The reality of an experimental system, characterised through the realisation of epistemic objects, thus resides in its fundamentally open perspective on what is or could be. (Borgdorff, 2012) Similarly in critical design practice, critical works are the epistemic objects, they are the generators of that which we do not yet know. They create room for that which is unthought and unseen. Critical design practice, like experimental systems, is thus centred on opening new perspectives and unfolding new realities.

This fuzzy epistemology of critical design practice, where thinking and things intertwine, is what enables us to see things differently. “As long as epistemic objects and their concepts remain blurred”, writes Rheinberger (2012) (and I argue the same applies for works of critical design) “they generate a productive tension: they reach out into the unknown and as a result they become research tools” (p.156) This emphasis on unpredictability while being open and attentive to the unknown, is what makes works of critical design vehicles for materialising questions.

But as Borgdorff (2012) reminds us, it is imperative to consider that the specific contribution that practices like critical design make to our understanding, insight, thinking and experience lies in the manner in which the works are articulated, expressed, and communicated. (p.186) Borgdorff (2012) proposes that the component of dissemination that accompanies material research may go in three directions (p.168):

1. A rational reconstruction of the research process;
2. Interpretive access to the findings;
3. A verbalisation or conceptual mimesis of the artistic outcome.

The third possibility, in his eyes “involves an emulation or imitation of, or an allusion to, the non-conceptual content embodied in the art” (Borgdorff, 2012, p.168) He asserts that traditional research in the sciences and humanities are essentially concerned with the first two forms of dissemination (the context of justification) while establishing an argument for this third possibility (the context of discovery) as being integral to the specificity in how art research is articulated and communicated. Fundamentally for Borgdorff, it is the non-conceptual nature of art that sets our thinking in motion inviting us to reflection. As Borgdorff (2012) states:
Art invites us and allows us to linger at the frontier of what there is, and it gives us an outlook on what might be. Artistic research is the deliberate articulation of these contingent perspectives. (p.173)

Borgdorff was speaking about art. But the concept applies no less to critical design.

5 The Critical Design Exhibition as the ‘context of discovery’

The specificity of critical design lies in this third possibility of dissemination, as outlined by Borgdorff. Critical design hinges on collective experiments, which are in themselves acts of communication and dissemination. Celebrated here is the experience of critical design, the conditioning of perception and the construction of the relationship and dramaturgy allowed to be developed through situated and embodied engagement with the audience. Suggested in this understanding is not so much the importance of creating spaces for discourse and debate about design, but how to create a space for an engagement through design.

This is the ‘context of discovery’ in critical design practice, which assumes a performative dimension for both the work and co-researchers. Dissemination in this case would seem to take on a completely different set of meanings and suggest a different set of questions, then what is typically considered for design. For example, how can we create works of critical design in a way that situates the audience/activator/co-researcher in a role that blends the production of design and its mediation? How can we conceive of critical design in a way that accommodates this blend while including within it the potential to bring thinking into being? At the core of this understanding of a ‘context of discovery’ lies the very spaces in which critical design is created and explored. While much of critical design practice is currently found in graduation shows, written up in academic journals, or reported on in mainstream media (blogs, magazines, websites) I want to focus specifically on the critical design exhibition, which I discussed at the beginning of this paper.

Critical design exhibitions, I argue, have the potential to situate themselves as entities in which and through which critical design can take place. By critical design exhibition, I am not referring to exhibitions of critical design – which put works of critical design on display for a viewing public to consume – but instead to critical design works who use exhibitions as part of their medium of practice (which can themselves be found in critical design exhibitions). Here the emphasis is on how exhibitions might be understood as an alternative model of critical design practice, not as spaces that speak conclusively, authoritatively and absolutely about design, but as other forms of coming together focused on directions over concrete outcomes.

These works, I maintain, subscribe to a movement in curatorial practice whereby exhibitions are increasingly approached as sites where both research and thinking are evoked in situ. As curator Christel Vesters (2016) states:

They are not merely the outcome of a curatorial research done by a dedicated expert, but in and of themselves sites where various modes of research and various modes of thinking are enacted. (p.1)

She goes on to distinguish ways in which exhibitions can be understood as thinking spaces arguing that in the same way we can think about, with, and through art (I have argued the same for critical design) we can also think about, with, and through exhibitions. (Vesters, 2016) Vesters (2016) writes that this thinking space opens a political agency aimed at changing the way we think while encouraging a different way of relating to the world we inhabit. She proposes that this shift in exhibitions from spaces dedicated to aesthetic contemplation to dynamic sites for thinking things differently is directly influenced by the spatial layout of the exhibition. (p.14) This understanding is built around the notion of embodied criticality, that is, that exhibitions should allow their audiences to inhabit problems or situations rather than offering opportunities to analyse or objectify from the sidelines.
Implicit in this statement is thus the understanding that the exhibition may be more than the representation of an undeniable truth, and instead function as a site of possibility, or as curator Georgina Jackson (2015) suggests, as a site for “the emergence of questions about the world in which we live.” She continues: “In this way, exhibitions become spaces in which the suspension between question and answer permits the continued proposition of meaningful ways of thinking and realising the world anew.” (p.78)

Out of this perspective it becomes possible to approach the exhibition medium as an unbounded space of not knowing whereby one is free to test what it means to be in the world. (Rogoff, 2008)

Returning to the example of the Risk Centre, the critical design exhibition works as a medium in the process of becoming that engages other becomings. From a space where we learn about Risk, to one where we are invited to think about our relationship to risk in the world.

Celebrated here, then, is the exhibition as a site of possibility and potentiality, connected with ideas of flexibility, experimentation, research and thinking.

6 AfterLife - James Auger & Jimmy Loizeau

To take another example, AfterLife (2008) (Figure 2) by James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau is a work that questions human relationships with death and the afterlife. The project proposes the design of a coffin capable of harnessing the acids derived from human decomposition. The device uses an electrochemical reaction to convert organic matter into electricity, which is then contained within a conventional dry cell battery, which could be used to power up a machine, or technological device after a persons passing. While this particular case study has been used previously within conversations on the importance of managing the uncanny in works of critical design (see Auger 2013; Gentès and Mollon, 2015) I argue that it offers equal value to a discussion on the exhibition as a context of discovery.

Figure 2 Coffin which includes two microbial fuel cells that would be used to generate electricity from organic matter. The electricity generated would be stored in the accompanying dry cell batteries held in the capacitor bank on the underside of the coffin. Source: auger-loizeau.com
AfterLife was first exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) exhibition Design and the Elastic Mind (2008). The display included a 3D visual and technical drawing of the coffin, a photograph of a battery with engravings that read: JOHN ADAMS, 1959 - 2001, SHINE ON DAD; a text describing the project, and a video produced as a mock commercial emphasising the service provided by the work and its value as ‘the only genuine guarantee of life after death’. According to the designers the MoMa exhibition was a complete failure. As Auger (2013) states:

*Unfortunately the viewers of the exhibition chose mostly to ignore the intellectual aspect of the project to focus on the more unsavoury aspects, namely tampering with the process of death, the passing of a loved one and the material activity of the human body during the operation of the fuel cell. This resulted in simple revulsion as the benefits of the concept were overlooked* (p.16)

The problem was that, in this context, the work was mainly engaged through an aesthetic contemplation, which focused the audiences’ attention toward the functionality of the coffin and the processes of decomposition. The staging of the work supported the perception of a consumerist product destined for the market, while offering no potential for criticality (a living out the situation) or for an exchange beyond consumption.

Alternatively in 2009 AfterLife was exhibited at Experimenta 09, the Design Biennale in Lisbon, Portugal. For this iteration the designers reconsidered their approach to exhibiting the work shifting the emphasis from the coffin design and fuel cell to the existence and function of the AfterLife battery. (Auger 2013) To produce this shift they invited 15 colleagues to either propose what they would do with a loved one’s battery, or what they would imagine a loved one would do with their own battery. So for example one of the respondents wrote (Auger & Loizeau, 2009):

*If my father passed away, this is how I would use his battery. I would power some kind of electrical bird warbler. To be left in the garden, a unique noise though, formed from bird sounds common to Cheshire and rural Wales. It should not warble constantly, it should be around breakfast. This is because my father – early in the morning – can often be found out in the Garden (having pissed on the compost) in pants and vest, whistling along with various birds, for extended periods. It has to be said, he is pretty good. - Jack Schulze, 2009*

Together the 15 narratives, each displayed with an object representing the desired scenario (Figure 3), formed the focus of the installation in Lisbon. This arrangement introduced an emotional and human perspective into the work that was not present in the MoMA exhibition. In this iteration AfterLife seemed to create room for what was unthought and unexpected while indicating ways to gain access to the work. Through simply introducing an array of possibility to what AfterLife could be, the project offered a fundamental incompleteness.

This condition of contingency, as Borgdorff (2012) contends ‘is what invites us, again and again, to see things differently” (p.196) This more personalised approach to AfterLife emphasised the open unfinished nature of critical design. It activated the user/audience to experience their own individual response to the work (how would I use the battery of a loved one? or What would I want a loved one to do with my battery?) while contemplating a subject they had perhaps not considered before. Through the use of scripting and storytelling, the designers were able to invite the visitor to carry the work forward, experiencing themselves as relational and constitutive elements of the project. In this sense, the exhibition took on the role of the experimental system that had been absorbed into the work. It acted not merely as a space to display the project produced by the designers (as in the case of the MoMA exhibit), but in and of itself was a site where research and thinking were enacted in situ and in action. (Vesters, 2016) Furthermore the exhibition as a ‘context of discovery’ offered the visitor an active agency, engaging them in a specific form of ‘experimental reflexivity’ targeted at perception and not understanding.
This approach to the exhibition as an experimental system shifted the focus from the designed object, understood through detached modes of rationality and objectivity towards a socially constructed ‘epistemic object’, an object associated not with its materiality but with its ability to open new perspectives and unfold new realities. (Knorr Cetina, 2001; Rheingber, 2004; Borgdorf, 2012) In this sense the exhibition played the role of a dynamic site for thinking things differently. It acted not as a space of closure, a last word, but instead as an opening which seeks engagement over agreement. What emerges in this instance is the provocation of a discussion or an imagining of life after death. What the exhibition in this instance afforded was the potential to think about alternative possibilities of everyday life that may not be obvious otherwise.

7 Evidence Dolls - Dunne & Raby
This idea of the exhibition as an experimental system for critical design brings to mind Dunne and Raby’s Evidence dolls (2005) (Figure 4), which willfully employed a lack of totality in the exhibition as a tactic for engagement. In fact, it was through the very same juxtaposition of objects and narratives, explored in the previous example, that the audience was invited to carry the work forward.

Commissioned by the Pompidou Centre in Paris for the D-Day Modern Design exhibition, the project comprises a series of 100 custom dolls made of white plastic and available in three penis sizes (S, M, L). Each doll was designed as a customisable storage device able to safeguard material from a male lover (hair, saliva, nails). The work, which explored the impact that genetic technology might have on ideas of love, romance and dating, was presented as an installation consisting of 25 dolls (with illustrated surfaces) displayed on a large table, 4 DVD players showing edited interviews with single women discussing how they might use the dolls in their lives, and 55 blank dolls resting on shelves.
Here too, the exhibition acted as a space where research and thinking took place in situ and in action. The recordings of the 4 interviews, placed amongst the objects, offered personal stories while operating as a catalyst to enter into a dialogue with the work. From statements of concern: Lady 01, “A genetic future seems so far away, even though it may not be. I’m scared of it, if we start to allow things like developing humans outside of nature, what do we become?” to imaginings around living with the dolls: Lady 02, “If I had one for every single relationship there would be lots of them. A cupboard full. It would be difficult having memories around, sometimes that’s uncomfortable. If it was a bad relationship you would probably destroy it. Cut it up into little bits, run over it with a steamroller, flatten it. You could have funerals... that would be cathartic.” (Dunne & Raby, 2009) the narrative montage evoked a specific kind of thinking space which worked to unlock an active agency in the visitor (co-researcher) aimed at facilitating different ways of thinking while enhancing their experiences with who they are and where they stand. Like Auger and Loizeau’s second iteration of AfterLife, Dunne & Raby positioned the exhibition as an experimental system through a staging that invited embodied, situated and enacted forms of cognition. At the same time it invited the visitor (co-researcher) to think through their own position in relation to the social, cultural and ethical impacts of genetic engineering.

8 Conclusion
What these examples point to is how critical design can function as a space for thinking within the parameters of the exhibition context. To return to AfterLife for a moment, Auger and Loizeau’s engagement with challenging the public’s perception of notions of life after death extends beyond merely presenting the work within a clearly defined narrative or knowledge structure. By manipulating the staging and mediation of the work to include personal narratives that left room for uncertainty, the designers shifted the exhibition from a space of aesthetic contemplation to a dynamic site for thinking things differently. Echoing Borgdorff’s contingency approach, the designers invited the audience to linger at the frontier of what there is, while offering insight on what might be – ultimately appealing to the audiences imagination to carry the work forward. Each of the preceding examples illustrate a consciousness of research with ‘r’. It is the search that they are inviting the audience to participate in, whereby the exhibition assumes an experimental value which acts as an entrance point for critical thinking about what we ‘know’ and ‘understand’ as well as ‘who’ we are and ‘where’ we stand.

Opening up the theme of the exhibition as an experimental system for critical design allows for a different field of action that positions the exhibition as a context of discovery that seeks not so much
to produce knowledge but rather to provide a space for thinking in situ and in action. What is implied here is the exhibition as a specific system of critical design, which treats its subjects as uncertainties, and itself as proposition. In this sense, the exhibition acts not only as a form of dissemination for critical design practice, but more importantly as a site for enacted research. But it can only do so by remaining flexible, unpredictable, and open to the unknown, allowing the audience to inhabit problems or situations rather than offering opportunities to analyse or objectify from the sidelines. This repositioning of the exhibition as a modality of lived experience signifies a move whereby the very act of exhibiting critical design is made available as an entity where embodied criticality takes place, privileging an active engagement with audiences directed towards perception rather than understanding.

Through this paper I set out to demonstrate that the work of critical design is tied to the shift from critique to criticality as defined by Rogoff (2006) which sets it beyond the cognitivist preoccupation of Frankfurt School critical theory. The focus here set up one of the main arguments of this paper. That critical design seeks participatory, democratic engagement, which points towards the importance of the very parameters of how the public understand and are invited to engage with the work. The central aim of this paper has been to find a means for disseminating critical design that focuses on engaging through the work not about it. This mediation, I have argued, is the necessary link between critical design and its audience. The museum exhibition is not the only medium for this way of working. If we want critical design to become a more accepted practice, its modes of dissemination, and relation to its audience, must be further explored.

9 References


About the Authors:

**Gillian Russell** is a Designer and Curator whose projects centre on the interplay between design and its critical contexts. She has a PhD in Design History from RCA and is a lecturer in Design at Emily Carr University, Vancouver, Canada.