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Perspectives on Critical Design: a Conversation with Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor

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Perspectives on critical design: a conversation with Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor

Matthew Malpass, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Abstract

This paper features an edited conversation with designers Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor. It explores their thinking in relation to critical design.

In the preface to *Form Follows Idea* (Ball & Naylor, 2005) Jeremy Myerson describes Ball and Naylor as being regarded among Britain's most thoughtful furniture designers.

In 1985 Ball formed a design partnership with Maxine Naylor a reputable experimental designer maker. Together they began to challenge the boarders between art, craft and design. They have exhibited work internationally and held teaching positions in colleges in the UK and USA. Over the course of a decade from 1985 Ball taught on Furniture, Jewellery and Industrial design at the Royal College of Art where Naylor taught on Furniture Design, directing the course between 1995 and 1998. Today Ralph Ball is Professor of Design at Central Saint Martins University of the Arts London and Maxine Naylor is Professor of Design and Director of the Design Research Institute University of Brighton.

Through practice and academic tenure they have developed a distinctive approach to practice based research and refined their critical perspectives. They describe themselves as critical designers and use design as a critical, visual discourse to communicate ideas about design culture and society today. Taking experimentation as a research method they subject their ideas to a critical process of refutation. They question the work through a scholarly approach that challenges protocols of design to enhance the design profession.

In this conversation the designer's concepts of 'open-process' and 'design poetics' are discussed. They describe their role acting as critics of design from within design practice. They outline their thoughts on the increasingly un-ideological culture of industrial design. They describe how through playful experiment they question the value of repetition in design and mass production of products. They do this by taking modernist axioms to extremes and 'embedding narrative' into objects as commentary on the state of contemporary design.

Supplementing the conversation the author offers his reflections. Primarily this exposes a form of critical design that differs significantly from popular and often technologically orientated notions of critical design.

Keywords

design practice; industrial design; reflective practices; rhetoric; poetics.

A growing number of designers employ Product Design as a medium for critique and speculation within disciplinary and societal frames. Although they are distinct from each other in their concerns and approaches, what these designers share is not simply a transgressive attitude but a critical perspective on design's self-understanding. Each challenges established discourse, institution or episteme and present alternative roles for design to those characterised by industry and driven by technological and financial concerns. They offer new interpretations of prescribed agendas legitimising and problematizing alternate forms of design work that extend product design's cultural agency.

These alternative approaches are understood under various terms, for example, Moline (2008) describes experimental design. Bruce and Stephanie Tharp (2008) describe discursive design outlining a design approach that leverages functionality to spark contemplation. In a discussion on the origins of critical design and its operation in Sweden Robach (2005) describes koncept design emphasising the link between critical design and conceptual art. More recently a discourse has emerged surrounding speculative design. (Kerridge, Loizeau, Caccavale, Auger, & Soares, 2008)

Arguably, speculative design has developed from of the popular understanding of Critical Design developed by Dunne (1998).

These practices are uniform in that they suggest a move away from commercial design towards a conceptual, discursive, inquisitive and often provocative role. Design as a critical language where the object and medium of design are used as a form of inquiry in societal, technological and disciplinary discourse.

To understand how product is used as a form of critical language in terms that do not exclusively rely on established discourse in other disciplines – for example in Art, Architecture or Sociology– we need to develop a disciplinary understanding of critical designs meaning, potential and explore its contribution to Product Design.

To establish this understanding we need to question in design terms: What are the examples of practice – the designs? In what contexts do these designs operate? By what methods and tactics do they operate? What is the focus of critique or the subject of investigation through design? In addition to analysing individual projects and practitioners we need to consider them in the context of the whole that they form. We need to attend to the subtle differences in the approaches and explore the links between the individual modes of critical practice. Underpinning this we need to consider conditions in mainstream design that have led to the emergence of critical design practice.

In this paper the author begins to address these questions aiming to illustrate one approach to critical design through the perspectives of designers Ralph Ball and Maxine Naylor.

Method

This conversation is one in a series of interviews with critical designers that form part of a PhD project contextualising critical practice in Product Design. The function of the PhD is to analyse approaches in Product Design that have been described as critical in an attempt to conceptualise the field and thematically separate examples of practice (Malpass, 2009). Using literature and interview transcripts as a source of information the author has developed thematic categories through a process of dialogical reasoning and "constrained generalisation" (Butler, 2002). The author aims to structure the field of practice and illustrate through taxonomy: the function of critical design practice; the rationale for critical practice; the contexts where it operates; the projects; the designers; the methods by which it operates.

A hermeneutic is employed (Klein & Myers, 1999; Gadamer, 1998). A nessecery element to satisfy the hermenutic method is to engage with multiple partcipants to elicit multiple interpretations of the field. To staisfy this element interviews were arranged with expert designers. Through interview the 'critical' designers were encouraged to reflect on their experience and practice. A conversational approach to interviews is used. (Rubin & Rubin, 2004; Laverty, 2003)

A hermeneutic approach enables the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Gadamer understood hermeneutics as a process of co-creation between the researcher and participant in which the very production of meaning occurs through a circle of reflective interpretations. This approach supports a dialogue between the researcher and participant. The participant's contributions are allowed to affect the co-construction of ideas. This principle calls on the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on the construction of the data derived from the interaction. The reflexive discussion supplementing in this paper contributes to this process.

The participants and context

Ball and Naylor are identified amongst a group of expert participants who through writing and practice present an alternative perspective in critical design discourse. Their practice differs from those in critical design that deal with scientific engagement or technological futures – "What if's" (Dunne & Raby, 2009) or "Design Fictions" (Bleecker & Nova, 2009). Using an experimental approach they design and make furniture. Ball and Naylor's approach forms part of an academic strategy that they describe as a practice led approach to research. Through object they offer commentary on the impact of design in society. To set the scene the interview was conducted at

Central St Martin's University of Arts London on an afternoon in August 2009 where Ball and Naylor were preparing work for their exhibition 'Chair Poetics: Envisioning Anonymity' part of the London design festival.

On: Critical design

Matthew Malpass: You describe your research activity as critical design practice. It might be good to have some definition of what critical design is. Is this something you can give?

Ralph Ball: I think the first thing it means is that the objects we produce are about making commentary or comment on design practice. That means the objects themselves don't necessarily need to be functional, practical objects but they need to refer to functional, practical objects or to the culture of design in order to make relevant comment. We use objects instead of using text. Those will be visual observations about particular issues associated with design. The issue might be to do with sustainability, excessive obsolescence, it might be to do with obsessive focus on a particular ideology and where that might lead. In some cases, we've explored the axioms associated with modernism and demonstrated how the axioms if taken to an extreme produce absurdities. The ideology finishes up being problematic. It's a way of exposing the fallacy of unreflective ideologies of any kind.

On: Open process

MM: You write about an 'open process' can you explain this?

Maxine Naylor: It's a way in which we work at the moment. We both trained as furniture designers. As a furniture designer you are often working on your own projects – certainly in your educational experience and often as a professional. In a more 'open process' what you're doing is you're working with other designers. It's a much more communal activity and it's where ideas are debated and discussed – they're moved through a conversation. In many ways critical design is a dialogue. It's a visual dialogue about our ideas concerning design thinking. The 'open process' is that process when you are having a discussion and debate while you are working. It's also substantially to do with the idea that you are not working for a client. You are working to a design agenda rather than a client or service agenda.

RB: If you are working as a professional you are invariably doing something relatively preconditioned whether it's a specific design brief or a particular set of required parameters to operate within. In an 'open process' those things are much less constrained and you can allow all sorts of other elements in. We talk about allowing accidents to happen, finding things by accident and the fact that when you are working with the juxtaposition of objects in space something might happen simply by the fact that two things come together. You can be aware of that and use it to lead off. In a conventional design brief you would often have to ignore that newly opened route.

When we talk about 'open process' it doesn't mean there aren't any rules. The rules are determined by the choice of the object or the choice of story that we're trying to tell. When we conceived the 'Archaeology of the Invisible' – the overarching project is called 'Sustaining Desire' – what was interesting is that we were working deliberately and specifically with objects that had already been designed and we were redesigning them.

What that strategy does is that it objectifies the process in a different way because you are starting with a given. For example, that is a generic stacking chair and asking the question, what are we going to do with that? We can both buy into that discussion objectively. It's not about whether I think that this proportion is better than that or I'd detail something in a different way to Maxine. It's about what makes sense in terms of telling the right story about this specific object. The objects impose certain kinds of rules because they are what they are.

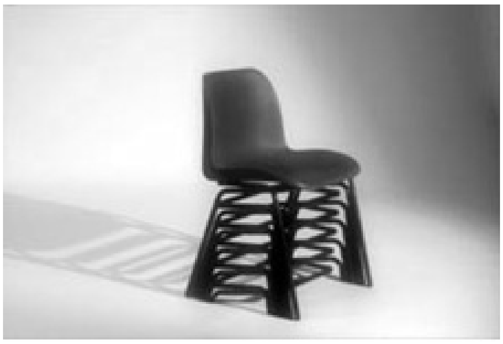

Figure 1: Blackstack. Archaeology of the Invisible collection 2003-04

RB: A stacking chair is a stacking chair and not any other kind of chair. It has a certain set of rules about what it does and doesn't do and we have to honour those rules.

Maxine Naylor: There are particular parameters implied by the objects themselves. We try and define and operate with those principles. We almost agree a set of principles before we start working so that we know we can't do that but we can do this. The old design principle of creativity within specific constraints. By limiting the language we actually exploit it better. We get more out of it because we focus on the elements which are appropriate.

This type of designing is a much more open ended activity. When we started the first collection Archaeology of the Invisible it wasn't determined that there would be a collection of chairs. There was a discussion about chairs. The objects are a manifestation of the conversation we were having.

On: Design poetics

MM: You talk about 'design poetics' and the use of rhetoric in your approach. Can you describe the notion of 'design poetics'?

RB: 'Design poetics' is coined and used in the same way as literary poetics and poetry. Something doesn't have to make literal sense it has to make poetic sense. What does that mean? It means that in literary poetry you can put words together that wouldn't necessarily make figurative sense but elicit a different kind of meaning. For example, if I talk about someone having a loud voice that would be a normal literary statement but if I talk about a pale green voice or a dark blue voice that would be a more poetic description – one which engages the faculties of both imagination and interpretation. We can consider 'visual poetics' in the same way. We put together something which creates a contradiction, creates a paradox, or creates some form of visual resonance, which is different to conventional expectation but which throws light on the object that we are dealing with.

MN: Often the work is about engaging people in looking at objects afresh and it doesn't have to be serious and ponderous. It's actually often quite witty and amusing. One of the things we had happen quite a lot when we first showed *Archaeology of the Invisible* was people asked me if it was alright if they laughed at the pieces. I said yes, they're funny, they're funny aren't they? It's about people getting it rather like comedy. Being poetic about something allows people to look at things in a very different way.

MM: Is humour is an important element?

MN: Culturally it is and so it should be in our design work.

RB: Another point about the poetic aspect is that we are making objects that look both familiar and strange. In literature there is a recognisable relationship between ordinary prose and poetic language. Poetic language uses the same words as ordinary prose it just puts words in different orders. When we're working with chairs we're making objects that are familiar but we're remaking them to be simultaneously unfamiliar.

MN: We also look at features, characteristics and differences. Because we're both furniture designers we look at chairs very closely. Chairs have got real personalities and attributes. These characteristics are invisible to most people. By altering them they become generally more readable. We shift and emphasise. We make their personalities stronger and people see them more fundamentally.

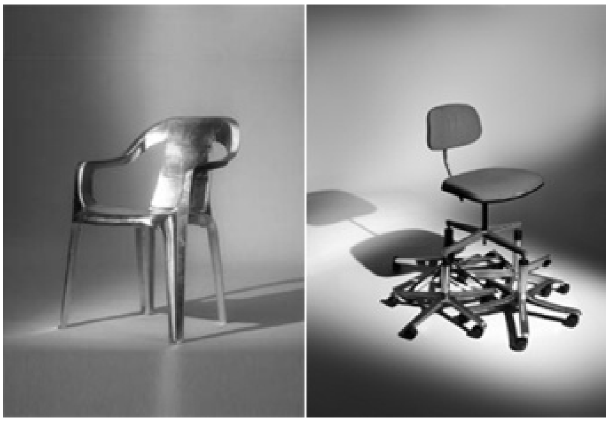

Figure 2: Plastic Gold (anonymous and ubiquitous white plastic stacking garden chair) & 24 Star (generic office chair). Archaeology of the Invisible collection 2003-04

RB: The whole point about the *Archaeology of the Invisible* collection is that it's actually 'digging up' awareness, making visible that which, because of it being so common and so ubiquitous, is invisible, culturally buried. The value of stacking, or the economic or structural difference between one chair frame and another goes unappreciated.

MN: Whether an object is 'designed' or not designed, or if it is well conceived or not well conceived is often simply not considered at all.

On: Rhetoric and Embedded Visual Narrative

MM: Other critical designers talk of rhetorical use presenting work that alone you wouldn't have any idea what it is or is for. It needs an external narrative to establish context of use and with that persuasive narrative you can imagine using the design. Is that how you use rhetoric?

RB: No we don't use it like that. We are interested in what we call 'embedded visual narrative'. The idea is that we're trying to use a visual narrative. What we are looking for is to have the object speak for itself or declare its intentions directly. The story ideally is embedded in the object rather than existing as a separate narrative. You don't have to have a piece of text to go with it. That's the difference between what other critical designers may do and what we do. We intend that you are able to directly, visually read what the object is about.

MM: Critical design isn't functional in a traditional sense. Do you ever see this type of design practice feeding into a more traditional idea of the design process or is it something that should remain separate?

RB: I think it can occasionally become conventionally functional as an accidental by-product of the process. In the past some of the things we made prior to *Archaeology of the Invisible* which were developed within a critical or an ideological frame of reference and driven by that particular definition. But we were designing these objects within a product design ethos that meant that we were conceiving and detailing them as if they could be produced. That suggests that if, by accident, they happen to have a commercial viability then it's possible that they could easily migrate over the object boundary and become products. This happened with *Golden Delicious* and *One Day I'll Design the Perfect Paper Light Shade* (Fig 3). They became products but only because they're conceived using the language of industrial design – they therefore already have the latent possibility of being product design. They were originally conceived and presented as one off pieces but within industrial production ideology.

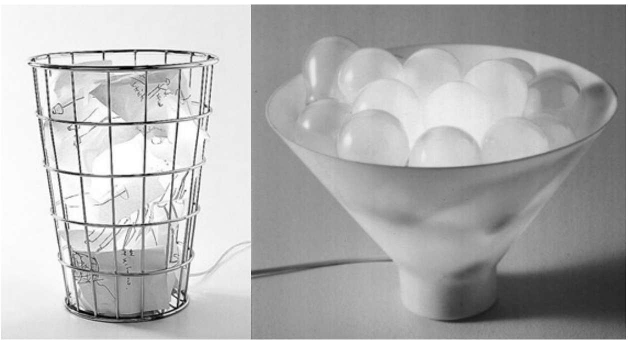

Figure 2: One day I'll design the perfect paper light shade 2000 & Golden delicious 1997-98 for Ligne Roset

MN: By nature because we're designers we try and rationalise as a designer would. We put things together in a rational way using the principles we've grown up with – economy of means and so on and we use materials effectively and appropriately. So in a sense that's what it's also about. It's expressing those traditions. They are now traditions of thinking about how things are manufactured. Even if it is something we've altered it's still reflected in the language of the piece and in the way it was manufactured.

MM: Can you tell me about anything that motivates your practice are there any notable influences, inspirations, education or any theoretical perspectives?

RB: One of the things that initially motivated me was a kind of frustration with what I would call an endless cycle of the same neo-modernist work. Also a frustration with the way that postmodernism and various forms of contemporary design simply seem to be fairly stylistic activities with very little intellectual content. Certainly postmodernism was used to attack modernism as being something, which has nowhere else to go and was caught in a stylistic cul-de-sac. Postmodernism as a replacement can be accused of equally facile activity and limited works. There are exceptions of course; there are exceptions in both camps to that limitation. So yes what we're interested in are the exceptions rather than the rules. In that category we would put people and influences like SITE, the architectural practice, Marcel Duchamp's Rue Larrey Door. There are certain types of objects and certain things that make sense to us in terms of what we are doing now that are historically part of that same lineage. I think initially it's to do with frustration with the design work that was and still is coming out and seems to be more and more of the same. I don't see any value in actually doing something, which is no better than something that Charles Eames did in 1950.

MN: The work extends in terms of education. In many ways the thinking came from – well certainly from me – a frustration with students being unable to look properly at objects. They don't look at things analytically or critically. People don't look at things more than superficially. Students particularly have to cultivate a sustained concentration and the project turned into one where actually I got my students to appreciate objects better. They looked at things for longer. They understood the implications of manufacturing an object. They started understanding that it was built, it was constructed and that many people worked on it. They gained a greater appreciation of artefacts, and this goes back to engaging the sustainable debate.

On: Mature typology

RB: There is another difference in how we work. Because we are furniture designers we are interested in what we call 'mature typologies', types of object which generally have an agreed consensus on basic form. I'm not particularly interested in electronic objects which don't seem to have reached any kind of formal maturity. The other definition we have therefore is that there are 'immature objects' and they haven't reached a final form because, for example with the telephone the function is to communicate with somebody over a distance. That form and method keeps changing doesn't it? With the chair the basic form was established thousands of years ago. We have many variations on the same fundamental form – something that holds your body at a certain height off the ground, to make it comfortable for your legs. With regard to talking to people over a distance that's changed from smoke signals to mobile phones and could continue to morph into something that's almost intangible.

MN: The thing about furniture is it's about ritual, it's about culture, and it's not just about comfort. The electronic world is driven by micro technology, which is fascinating but it's an expansive, shifting and a kind of amorphous entity that in a sense could be almost invisible. In contrast, furniture is always going to have a physical presence.

RB: That goes back to the 'embedded' narrative. We are working with recognisable archetypes. I think the problem with electronic products is that they are less recognisable. That is why some designs need an external narrative to explain what they are. You could have a cube or a minimal shape and you can say this is a something – a radio for example – you declare that's what it is.

MN: Driven by hidden electronics it could be anything. Is this cube a calculator or a smoke alarm?

RB: Then you have the idea of imagining using. As soon as I pick this up and put it to the side of my face it becomes a mobile phone. As soon as I pick this up and behave with it in a certain way it becomes the object associated with that particular behaviour. But it requires a 'theatre of use' to have that happen. With mature objects we already recognise them so therefore we've got a recognisable narrative to start from.

MM: I'd like to talk a little about framing your practice. What makes your objects design objects and not conceptual art?

MN: We have this debate quite a bit. Sometimes out of perverseness, sometimes we want to – if we're labelled as designers – say no we're artists and sometimes when I'm called an artist I say no I'm a designer. But actually in the end I don't know if it's an interesting debate in itself. As soon as you set yourself in that position people look at the work in a particular way. I know they need to set it in a particular context but my thinking is that they look at it how they want to look at it. If they want to see it as conceptual art fine, but if they want to see it as an interesting statement about design that's also fine. I would probably always say fundamentally I'm a designer because I like the problems that designers tackle. I think they have serious implications for the world. If you're going to get deeply philosophical I think designers have an ability to make a huge impact on our environment. Not just in terms of sustainability but to the quality of the environment. We suffer for a lack of quality and integrity and at the moment society still doesn't know what design is. They think it's a styling exercise, they think its packaging, they think its branding, but the core activity fundamentally is coming up with good products.

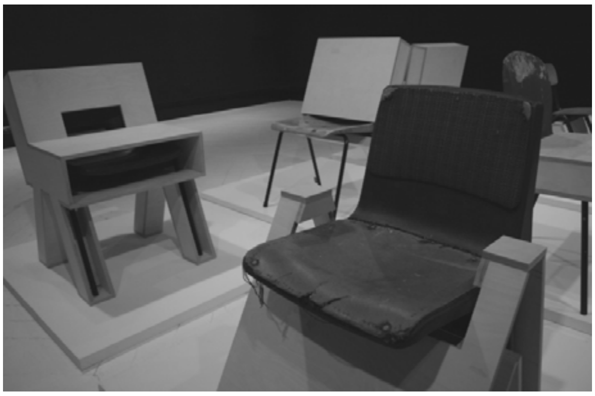

Figure 4: Chair Archive 2008. Indeterminate Cases exhibition. La Sala Vinçon Barcelona

RB: It follows from that. You might choose to use art as a strategic label because people sometimes take art more seriously intellectually. There is a perception, a position – when you locate something in a gallery it is looked at differently than if placed in a retail store. You can use this perception of the gallery context. It's strategic to use the idea that it is somehow art about design or better, art using design as a point of reference in order to make statements about design.

MN: I think your point earlier, which I would agree with, it's that we honour the process of designing. We don't mean to throw it out of the window and start from first principles. We have a good legacy to work with. What designers haven't done is move design on to where it needs to be. We've corrupted it by doing these copies of things. In general we have a very different idea of what design can be than many designers. I think it is a very, very significant profession that's been much abused and much misunderstood and actually what I find upsetting is I think many other professions understand what we're getting at more than the profession itself, what the value of it is.

MM: Other critical designers focus on issues that can be considered outside of the design discipline – what I describe as 'With-out' – using design to address societal and ethical concerns such as bio-ethics and scientific futures. Your work seems to subvert design challenging the discipline by offering critique of a design core – what I describe as 'With-in'. Is this something you would agree with?

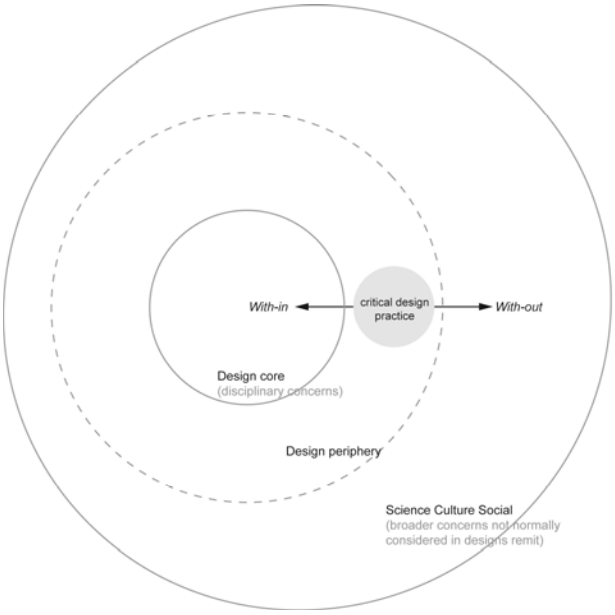

Figure 5: The focus of critique. Illustration used as a discussion prompt.

MN: It's subversive in a sense of challenging current design thinking and practice, that is, much of design often defaulting to branding exercises. Yes our design actively opposes that. But not subversive fundamentally I believe design can be a powerful tool that doesn't need to be completely dismantled; it just needs to be paired back to what it's capable of doing.

RB: I would agree generally with that. However, additionally we are looking at sustainability, in a way I think is different to other people. Sustainability does belong to that larger territory. The umbrella title of the original project was called Sustaining Desire and the idea involved looking inwards to project outwards again to a larger social context. It's basically proposes that we need to start valuing the good things that we already have rather than making more and more, throwing them away and making more and more again. So Sustaining Desire becomes: let's focus on both the intellectual and the aesthetic marriage of things which are really good pieces of design. So we have to go inward i.e. to be introspective in terms of looking at what these objects really are and what they do by representing the forgotten and the familiar.

MN: But then also it's interesting because it depends on the audience. I would say that our audience is primarily a design audience. I see other designers as my audience. I'm trying to inform and motivate that inner core to do something. Yes they are being asked to look outwards but what we are doing is trying to influence design education and in how we deal with, how we think about design as a profession. We've got very complacent.

RB: Well it's not very ideological anymore is it? It's very commercially orientated.

MN: It's driven by very specific criteria that are very limited and ultimately terribly disappointing and design isn't only about that.

RB: I think that's strange and it's perhaps why we keep getting attached to art.

MN: Through their work artists are allowed to comment and critique and we're not. We're told you're not really a designer unless you're providing a 'service'. I am providing a service it's just not got a client in a traditional sense. The client is the educational system, it's design thinking.

Reflections

It is difficult to put in place the critical rhetoric it takes to visualise a need for a revision of the status quo through design. Ball and Naylor aim to do this by reflexively turning design method on design itself. They present a tension of structure and ornament, and point to the contradictions of functionalist design traditions, satirically exaggerating the effects of instrumental approaches to design and superficial replication.

Ball and Naylor describe their approach as research. If critical design is framed as research it must conform to some measure of rigor and validity. In their work Ball and Naylor present a method of visual citation referencing designers and modernist design ideology in the objects they design. In their tactics they draw on literary composition; mechanisms of juxtaposition and satire to create contradiction and visual resonance. They establish an analogous language to that of the written word using object as prose in their concept of ‘design poetics’ through which they offer both critique and affirmation of design methods.

They aim to challenge design thinking by reassessing contemporary practice and how designers read objects. Their critique is established by grounding critical design in established traditions episteme and discourse consistently referencing design principles; this in turn incites reflection on tradition. They are loyal to a core set of industrial design skills, proportion, production, manufacture, quality and function. These are subverted reinforcing the need for an attention to these principles.

Ball and Naylor recognise their audience as a design audience. Through their ‘open process’ they enter into a dialogue with the audience. The work is disseminated in the gallery context and through publication. They engage with how the object is shown and read in the gallery context exploiting any association with Art.

Design commentary informed by art sometimes treats design’s preoccupations as over-determined and misguided. Ball and Naylor negotiate this suggesting that it doesn’t matter if the object is read as Art or Design. Associations with Art and gallery dissemination facilitate the concept behind the object and the commentary through it. Objects of critical design are however, always the result of a design process conceived and developed in the ethos of Product Design.

This identifies a challenge and opportunity to a mainstream design community and raises the question: How do we develop critical practice without relying on discourse in other disciplines –for example Art – and the critical analysis applied in these disciplines and develop a lens with which to view and further understand objects of critical design in our own disciplinary terms?

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Author Biography

Matthew Malpass

A PhD Candidate at Nottingham Trent University. Through his PhD he is developing taxonomy of critical practice in Product Design. The aim is to promote a discussion about design as a discipline in transition and contribute to the disciplinary discourse on critical design practice.