critical and speculative design: interview with benedetta crippa

This interview is born as part of the thesis of Giovanni Pamio and Lucia Del Zotto "News from Nowhere", which was on the topic of critical and speculative design. Giovanni and Lucia asked me a few questions about the subject. Answering was no easy task as it is always difficult when it comes to applying definitions to design.

G **Dunne & Raby say there are two opposite kinds of design: the affirmative one, which confirms the existing values and the status quo, and another kind of design which they define as "critical", through which the designer can challenge the preconceptions and dogmatic values dictated by the post-industrial society, in order to stimulate the debate and let the current criticalities emerge. Do you think that the critical design, with its speculative method, is an effective design process? Do you think it actually puts designers in the position of problem-setters rather than problem solvers?**

B This question encloses a lot of other questions that are difficult to answer to, especially since they refer to the present and the present (not to mention the past) is always difficult to evaluate. You have to be very well prepared, which honestly I cannot say I am, so I will just try to have a chat with you guys and give you my two cents.

I will start with the last question: I do not believe that "critical design" puts the designer in the role of problem-setter. I rather think that some designers like to ask questions, and thus they put themselves in the role of problem-setters. Because of this, what they do is defined—*today*, and by *some* people—"critical design".

But the critical practice, even without ever getting mainstream, has always existed—without necessarily being defined as 'critical'. It was simply a way of working, of doing things.

I think that to a certain extent it is our duty, not only as designers but primarly as people, to assume a critical attitude towards the world. A world where, today as always, there are a thousand issues of a thousand different kinds that cannot be ignored. Designers, and graphic designers as communicators, have a great responsibility towards what they communicate and the way they do it. Through objects, pieces of furniture, and visual solutions, they help shaping the world. Thus, everything carries a responsibility.

Moreover, it seems to me that you assume that the so called "critical design" is necessairly of a speculative nature, which I do not think it is. It can be, but it can also work in different ways. Alexander Girard comes to my mind. In the 30s, in a historical period where functionalism was starting to deprive decoration of any legitimacy whatsoever, he worked to give the people a kind of design they were not supposed to need anymore. He tried to affirm certain values through patterns, colors and objects. This is also being critical, to me.

I also think about Ettore Sottsass with his "absurd and monumental furniture" which instead of being against the walls, lay in the center of the room. With Pianeta Fresco which did not have any defined function, but while I write is displayed at the Barbican Centre in London which means it did say something after all. So, I think that a critical attitude has always existed in different forms and ways of making it visible and tangible.
For some reason, which may be a result of our present social condition but I can't tell for sure, today we feel the need of talking about "critical design", or "speculative design", especially in the field of graphic design. It is maybe a legitimate need, but perhaphs we should, like Rick Poynor says, ask ourselves why we feel this urge, today. It would reveal a great deal about ourselves.

You ask if this kind of approach is effective. Well, I don't know, first we maybe should agree on what we mean by 'critical' and then on what we mean by 'effective'. If we interpret a critical attitude towards the world as the ability of questioning it, of primarly asking questions rather than giving answers, of elaborating a own vision without just accepting the status quo, of playing an active role in our own existence, well, then I think it is always effective. That is, I think it is always good, for ourselves and the others out there, both in work and life.

There are lots of people that have no interest at all in changing or even just questioning the status quo, they feel perfectly comfortable in it. I don't feel like judging them, as questioning something— anything—requires a great deal of effort and to take certain risks. I personally feel closer to those designers who do it or did it in the past.

I graduated in 2011 with a thesis which was totally "speculative", that used design as a pretext to talk about sociology and time. At the final dissertation, my professors asked me three times what the conclusion, the final output was; and I had to admit that the project had no conclusion at all. How can you draw a conclusion when you are talking about the present, which is an open scenario?
I did that project because I had some questions about the world we live in and I wanted to explore them. I did that through design, and it has been very useful in order to understand a number of things about my own life and the way I want to work. I will be very happy if I will be able to continue to work through this approach.

G **The word 'critical' has become very common within the discipline of graphic design (not necessarily in relation to the critical design as Dunne & Raby interpret it). In *The Reader*, Ramia Mazé poses the question "Critical of what?". The exhibition *Graphic Design Worlds* in 2011, on the other hand, has presented a selection of graphic designers who in different ways represent the current landscape of the discipline and share**

a critical approach to design. We ask you the question, "Critical of what?". What do you think are the critical issues that designers are addressing or should address today?
Perhaps the biggest problem related to the critical graphic design is the very word "critical". Critical design today is characterized, in our opinion, by irony and a paradoxical approach, reflecting on current issues through fictitious scenarios, instead of real ones. Do you believe that if the term used to define this new "methodology" were "fictional graphic design", instead of simply "critical", there would be fewer doubts and perplexities?

B I think there will always be perplexities of some kind. Trying to frame a complex discipline as design in more and more specific definitions and terms is no easy task. It is like trying to enclose water in one's hands —the more you squeeze, the more it will escape.
I believe that perplexity is far more interesting that certainty.
It leaves more room to breathe and try new approaches. Regarding the critical of what, I agree with Ramia Mazé, and I think I answered to the question before.

G **In the article *A Swedish Perspective on Critical Design*, Rick Poynor makes a good point: "No one pauses to question why any of these fields, already occupied by highly competent practitioners, might need "trespassing" designers to help them do the job, or what it is about graphic design education that would qualify a designer to intervene in such a range of disciplines". What would you answer to this very issue?**

B I remember that essay and I think that with that specific sentence (this is my intepretation, of course) Poynor expresses his frustration towards all these "multiple roles" of the graphic designers we hear so much about today, and as if they were something new, too.
He does not like it, but his statement is merely provocative. We often hear people talking about the graphic designer as producer, writer, curator, artist, etc. lately. I think Poynor is criticizing this

"legitimation" of the designer to enter those spheres that "should" compete to other kinds of professionals, like the designer was in a privileged position to do so. There is still a lot of debating around this.

I believe he is trying to stress the fact that we should not lose the focus on our own job, and that we should not perceive ourselves as privileged, nor think that we are doing something totally new. As it is for the critical attitude, designers that perform multiple roles and tasks within the practice of design have always existed.

Going back to Alexander Girard, he was a graphic designer, but he also designed furniture, interiors, objects, textiles, clothes, fonts, games, cutlery and kitchenware, he curated exhibitions and museums, and he was a collector of folk art. The extreme specialization is an invention of the last 30 years, and that's maybe why some of us reject it so deeply (me included).

But at the same time, I think we should be humble enough to recognize that every job requires different competences. We cannot "improvise" ourselves curators, writers, or any other thing. Every job requires a lot of work, effort, time, and thinking, and a strong humanistic competence. Anyway, if there are these things, in my opinion one can intervene in the a "range of disciplines" as wide as possible, and I would encourage that. I think that disciplines are only words, when confronted with the human ability of intervening in the world.

G **In your opinion, besides Metahaven, who can also be considered as a critical graphic designer? Who else works, on a regular basis, with a design methodology based on speculation and the creation of fictitious scenarios?**

B If as "critical designer" we mean only people that *exclusevely* work with a speculative methodology...I cannot think of anybody right now (who works only in a speculative way? And does not speculation

always translate into something else?). If instead we talk about designers that assume a critical attitude towards the world, then we have many examples, even if maybe they are not as many as they should or could.
I would think of Experimental Jetset, Erik Kessels, m/m (paris), but also Dexter Sinister, Daniel Eatock, Marian Bantjes, Inkahoots, and I am not even mentioning those involved with product design or achitecture... many of these people were in *Graphic Design Worlds*, but for me the same idea applies to any student that questions what his professors say and reflects upon the world he lives in. Whoever asks questions and tries to express them in his or her own practice.

G In your opinion, Metahaven have influenced the young students more with their methodology, or their graphical style?

B I really cannot answer this question, I do not know what students think. I hope that many students (and professionals too) know the work of Metahaven, and the motives behind it. In this sense, I think that *Graphic Design Worlds* has helped to cast a light on many ways of doing graphic design that Italy has almost ignored so far, which are important because they affirm certain values. If we talk about Metahaven's graphical style, well I would rather say it is a non-stile, a rejection of style itself, an affirmation of the kitsch, and this is their way to affirm a value, it is a consequence of their values.
It is the values what we should pay attention to.

further readings

Experimental Jetset,
Design and Ideology,
2008

Rick Poynor,
Observer: Critical Ommissions,
2008

Rick Poynor,
The Death of the Critic,
Icon 003, 2006

Rick Poynor,
The Time for Being Against,
2001

William Drenttel,
WikiLeaks: Design Proposals by Metahaven, 2010

Rick Poynor,
Inkahoots and Socially Concerned Design: Part 1, 2013