

INSIDE/ INSIDE/OUTSIDE: WORKING OUR WAY OUT OF THE DAMAGED NOW (DESIGN AS DIALECTICS)

DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Inside/Outside: (Design as dialectics) is a discourse manifested as an exhibition of experimental design work which was held at the San Francisco State University Design Gallery in the Spring of 2017. The project is a collection of artefacts, statements, and conversations whose intention is to blur various boundaries. It is an experiment intended to bring together theory and practice, discourse and artefact. It is a philosophical exegesis of design and its potentialities.

The project defined a philosophical position for design, namely that while design can be seen as a way to instrumentalize reality and thus reaffirm existing categories, it also has the capability to operate within the inner, and often unseen, “dialectics” (Adorno 2005) – a process of spontaneous criticism that unfolds from within reality. Design also has the ability to question existing categories, reveal meanings and values that commonly remain invisible due to their oversimplification.

The project’s intent was to explore topics of critical and speculative design and design futures within critical and speculative forms and forums, showing how in practice design can be considered

as a form of “dialectics”. By considering that an artefact can embed a philosophical reflection, the project becomes not simply a collection of objects and statements, but also a complex dynamic of exchange and an experimental investigation of design as a philosophical dialogue by means of artefacts.

INTRODUCTION

“Nothing less is demanded of those who think today, than to be at every moment in the matter and outside of the matter – the gesture of Münchhausen, who pulled himself out of the swamp by his own pigtails, becomes a paradigm of everyone who wishes to think besides the categories in which reality is currently interpreted.”
T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Reflections on a Damaged Life (Fragment 46)

Inside/Outside: (Design as dialectics) *Inside/Outside: Working Our Way Out of the Damaged Now (Design as Dialectics)* is a discourse manifested by artefacts showcased in an experimental design exhibition that took place at the San Francisco State University Design Gallery in the Spring of 2017. The exhibition project explores how artefacts can operate as active discussions to reflect on a common issue, namely how the philosophy of the German thinker Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno – and particularly his idea of dialectics – resonates with contemporary design practices. The theoretical framework for this discussion has been a project called DESIS Philosophy Talks¹, a forum of trans-

¹ The DESIS Philosophy Talks are an initiative of Ezio Manzini & Virginia Tassinari (DESI) aiming to nurture the dialogue between design & philosophy, between practice & theory. The idea is to match practical issues and topics emerging from design practice in the field of social innovation around the world with insights from the

disciplinary discussion developed within the DESIS Network where issues from design practices – and, particularly, practices of social innovation – are viewed through a philosophical lens. While within DESIS Philosophy Talks the organizers use verbal discourse to explore the subject, in this particular Talk they decided to let the artefacts speak instead.

Critical and speculative design, and design futures are practices that use design as a method to challenge our expectations, propose new ideas, and encourage discourse by using design methods to create design artefacts that provide critique and commentary on current societal challenges. *Inside/Outside: Working Our Way Out of the Damaged Now: Design as Dialectics* is a discourse within this practice with a specific philosophical question of how design might be considered a form of “dialectics” in the manner described by the Frankfurt philosopher T.W. Adorno, i.e. the self-criticism that develops from within society. If design can be considered a form of dialectics, then it can operate to question current understandings of society and imagine alternatives.

The aim of *Inside/Outside (Design as Dialectics)* is to offer a dialogue on design as a praxis that can “dialectically” develop a criticism of the status quo and help to imagine alternative paths that can be meaningful for present and future society. The project can be considered as an artefact as such, an experimental investigation of possible critical discourses by way of design practices.

DESIGN AS DIALECTICS

According to Adorno, what we experience in our everyday life as “reality” (things, situations, people...), is rich in meaning. Yet, reality is so infinitely complex that it is impossible for us to understand or engage with all of its meanings. To Adorno, in order to understand and engage with reality, we tend to over-simplify it. When this happens, reality can be easily used (and abused) as an instrument for a specific purpose, and rendered an object at the subject’s disposal. Politics, economics, the community, the individual, the body, the psyche, nature ... these are all infinitely complex entities which history and the present have shown to be susceptible to over-simplification, and therefore also to be easily instrumentalized. When this happens, reality is impoverished. A whole range of its meanings remains therefore unknown. This is for Adorno the way

philosophical tradition. Several notions, such as beauty, public vs. private, community, etc., which normally belong to the field of social sciences appear to emerge from a kind of “phenomenological” study of different cases of design for social innovation. The DESIS Philosophy Talks aim to stimulate dialogue between the fields of philosophy and design, starting from concrete cases of design for social innovation. The DESIS Philosophy Talks want to explore them from a philosophical, theoretical perspective and see how the result of these discussions can add meaningful value to the design practice and possibly also philosophy. www.desis-philosophytalks.org

in which the Western idea of rationality has crystallized: as an instrumental rationality that polarizes the ideas of subject and object according to a logic of an instrumental power relationship that makes of everything (including subjects) objects of use (and abuse).

Yet, according to Adorno, reality has the capacity to resist its over-simplification and to free itself from instrumentalization. He calls this resistance “dialectics”: a process of spontaneous criticism that unfolds from within reality. “Dialectics” emerges from a damaged reality (damaged by its oversimplification) and, like the character of Baron Münchhausen, can pull “*himself out of the swamp by his own pigtails*” (Adorno, 2005). In other words, it creates a critical view that allows reality to be seen in all its richness of meanings.



Figure 1: From the Munchausen tales illustrated by Gustave Doré

If one looks at many contemporary design practices, one can recognize that they are also attempting to create a critical view in order to expand our perception of reality. While design can be seen as a way to instrumentalize reality and thus reaffirm existing categories, it can also be considered as a practice having the capability to operate within the inner and often unseen “dialectics” taking place in reality. To be more specific, even if design operates in our existing societies, it can also be seen as a tool for criticizing them. Design can question existing categories, reveal meanings and values that commonly remain invisible due to their over-simplification. For example, in design for social innovation, ideas of production, distribution, consumption, and community that are not normally considered within typical ways of producing, consuming, and living are finally rendered visible. Alternative behaviors, meanings, and values are uncovered enabling transformation to new realities and thus new outcomes.

In *Inside/Outside (Design as Dialectics)* this understanding of design as “dialectics” is thus proposed to the design community as a lens by which to read these contemporary design practices. Design researchers and practitioners from around the world had been asked to submit work showing how within practice design can be considered as a form of dialectics, i.e. of self-criticism taking place in society.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL POTENTIAL VALUE OF ARTEFACTS

The project began as an investigation of experimental and speculative design practice and its grounding in a philosophical framework. As a means to align the project closely with its premise(s), the organizers published a call in the form of an artefact; a slightly abstract video statement. It offered an invitation “to create an artefact (an object, a situation, a video, a performance, a story ...)” that in some way realized the philosophical position.

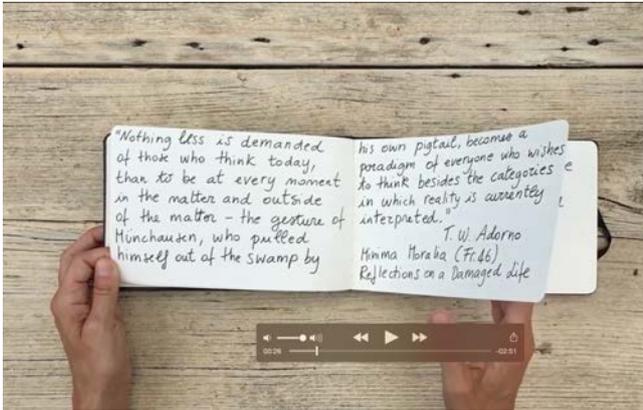


Figure 2: Still from video *Prompt for: The Exhibition Inside/Outside: Working Our Way Out of the Damaged Now: Design as Dialectics*, 2016

The video prompt can be seen as an act or performance to serve as a catalyst by which to begin the conversation and, also, as an example to set a tone and context. Additionally, it demonstrated the project's presumption of the blurring of boundaries between praxis and theory and that design artefacts can themselves be considered as provocations and discourse. It proposes that this exhibition is not a visual display of design objects, but rather a discussion in lieu of papers and/or presentations, with the discussion embodied within the artefacts and the discourse generated by the poesis manifest through material and form.

In *Design as Future Making* Elio Caccavale articulates this phenomenon:

The role of design continued to evolve during the last decade, which has seen a proliferation of products and services that are intended to enable philosophical reflections. The traditional roles of design, designer, and designed object are redefined through new understandings of the relationship between the material and im-material aspects of design, where the product or service is an embodiment of food for thought. We know that design can help people to live better lives, but here we are particularly interested in using design as a tool for philosophical inquiry by creating design objects that do not just promote social innovation, or functional or stylistic enhancement, but that prompt the viewer to see things differently or to ask questions.” (Caccavale, 2014)

Clive Dilnot, in describing the potentials inherent in a contemporary world comprised of artifice, contends that the artifact inhabits a double condition and that this condition “... can scarcely be expressed verbally but can be expressed typographically in the form “This!?” The artifact is “This!”: existent, possessed of reality, possessing these attributes, and showing them forth, that is, exemplifying them. And also “This?”: the artifact as quasi-fact, as like nature in its quasi-objectivity as a proposition, constituted as a form, which implicitly, if not explicitly, offers a question to the world.” (Dilnot, 2014)

And so we can see the artefact as inhabiting a liminal space where the mediation between its own inner logic and that of the existing outer world blurs the lines between object and discourse. Because of this hybrid nature, the artifact/discourse can be critical towards the over-simplifying and instrumental understandings of reality that are, if one follows Adorno's reasoning, based on the logic of instrumental rationality that makes of everything an object to be used and exploited. Also, because of this hybrid nature, an artefact can explore and express the possibilities of what might be, besides subject-object relations² as a way of understanding the world and its potentialities.

Artefacts can be speculative and therefore they can also embed a philosophical reflection. This is not too high-minded. On the contrary, some philosophical reflections particularly need to be embedded in artefacts, so that they can escape the binary logic subject-object and the power and the instrumental character that is often conveyed by verbal discourse. This strategy has not often been followed by philosophers, yet with some relevant exceptions: for example some experimentations such as those of Benjamin's creation of faux geographical maps, Baudrillard's use of photography, Debord's use of videos, Agamben's use of collected images, Adorno's dodecaphonic music, and so on.

Adorno's reflections on dialectics seem particularly poignant for this sort of experimentation. In fact, the hybrid nature of artefacts and their critical potential align with the capability that Adorno attributes to dialectics, namely to criticize the instrumental relationship between subject and object characterizing the Western understanding of reality. The exhibition *Inside/Outside (Design as Dialectics)* was a way to prove this, and to experience a philosophical dialogue by means of artefacts. The works exhibited have provided some evidence that this intuition was not mistaken. Many designers around the world reacted enthusiastically, showing to be part of this discourse by means of their artefacts.

2 Which are, therefore, instrumental, power relationships.



Figure 3: Cat Normoyle and Rebecca Tegtmeier, *Speculating the Possibilities for Remote Collaborative Design Research: The Experimentations of a Drawing Robot*, drawings, video, robot, 2016



Figure 4: Zachary Kaiser, *Our Program*, video, LED matrix, acrylic enclosure, 2016

THE EXHIBITION

For instance, the work “The Non-Proliferators” by Branada, Habre, and Smirnow showcased in *Inside/Outside (Design as Dialectics)* is an example of artefact embedding a reflection that resonates with Adorno’s idea of “dialectics”³. Their artefact addresses the complex challenges of global sustainability in the Anthropocene; consumerism, overpopulation and global growth. It presents a fictional alternative society that acts as a role model for a new societal structure in order to decrease human population to ecologically sustainable levels. They illustrate a new time-cycle within which procreation is prohibited and then allowed. This drastically accelerates the aging of the society thus changing conventional concepts and functions of family. Two speculative objects are presented to illustrate the Non-Proliferators’ worldview: *Arnold’s Arm*, a toy that introduces children to the concept of elderly care from an early age and *Playgrave*, a public space that merges graveyard with playground to celebrate death as a contribution to sustainability in daily life. The designers state “As a reaction to dropping birth-rates in the most developed countries, the Non-Proliferators could exist today. ... Design is used as a provocation to debate global priorities, the growth-mindset, and a

3 Additionally, participants were asked to submit written and video statements to serve as explanations or supplements to their design artefacts. Its purpose was to expand upon the artefacts themselves, provide information for the exhibition installation, and to be used at a later date as part of published work that extends the discursive trajectory.

human-centered perspective.” (Branada, Habre, Smirnow. 2016)

While verging on fantastic science fiction, its proposition seems somewhat plausible in that it posits the design within an unconventionally longer time-scale. Its design solution would take multiple generations and indeed centuries to reach its outcomes. It proposes a dramatic disruption of human progress as a critical method using tools from design futuring and foresight, and uses conventional design methods to develop artefacts and spaces to facilitate its outcomes.



Figures 5 and 6: Valentina Branada, Elena Habre, and Christian Smirnow, *Non-Proliferators* including: *Arnold’s Arm*, cast rubber, stained wood, wool textile, 2016; *Meredith’s Picture Book*, paper, 8 printed photographs, 2017

Addressing the controversial issues of global mass surveillance, exhibitor Sören Rosenbak asks “what is metadata, and how is it helpful in constructing characters and narratives, in short: make sense of reality and literally make reality?” His project *Meta(data)morphosis* engages members of the public in the design of characters and narratives or “digital shadows” which are constructed from their personal trail of digital data at the absolute current moment; from Facebook to the government intelligence. Using speculative design and storytelling methods, participants turn the metadata into a short script template⁴. Despite these

4 On the wall of the gallery were two audio recordings of narratives read out loud from a final session from a Meta(data)morphosis experiment. Alongside this, was a completed script template that the narratives were based on. On a pedestal were copies of a “workbook/probe kit” that gallery visitors could take that included instructions on how to produce one’s own alternative narrative.

“shadows” being incredibly obscure, they “are intensely real in that they bring about real life consequences for people every day, and yet we struggle to relate to their existence, let alone grasp their building blocks: trails of data, and in particular huge quantities of metadata.”

Rosenbak sums this up as follows: “Through its social “peer setup” the dialectics between subject and digital shadow is momentarily instantiated in a double bind. Past, present and future, and the causal logic that follows, is obliterated in the process. The invisible layers of data, the constant iteration loops of digital shadows and unfolding narratives spun around them are reconnected to real life.”



Figure 7: Sören Rosenbak, *Meta(data)morphosis*, paper, audio, 2017.

DIALECTICS AND TIME: THE BASELINE FOR AN IN-DEPTH DISCURSIVE SEMINAR ON DESIGN & PHILOSOPHY

The artefacts showcased during the exhibition told multiple stories. The artefacts triggered and provoked new reflections and some threads could be traced as these objects seemingly held together a dialogue. Among a few conceptual matters, the issue of time emerged as a particularly relevant subject. In order to further investigate this common thread the organizers held a live discussion – a DESIS Philosophy Talk – relative to and literally next to the artefacts, thus literally triggered by the artefacts. This was also a way to test how far artefacts could empower discussions in real life, and to experiment with various forms of hybridizations of discourse via artefacts and live discussions. There, exhibitors together with invited guests, enter into also a verbal (and no longer only artefact-mediated) dialogue on a specific aspect recurring in the exhibited works.

The DESIS Philosophy Talk@ STUDIO TIME: *The Ideology of Linear Time and Progress* specifically addressed the general notion of time in Western societies as linear – leading from the past, across the present into the future – in which the future image is (generally) a projection of perceptions and actions (a continuation of what has been proven successful in the past). In prospect and retrospect, the dominant logic (which is built on the ashes of the past) overshadows parallel logics which never have the chance to materialize. This idea that the future will necessarily be better than the past (“progress”) is a kind of profane “faith”, a belief, an ideology.

Signs point to the fact that this ideology of progress is naïve and over-reductive when facing the dilemmas and issues characterizing contemporary society. Tying this back to the exhibition’s primary theme of Adorno’s dialectics, we can expand on it and see that designers and artists have the ability to unmask and critique the failures of the ideology of linear time and show alternative understandings that can provide alternative ideas of the way in which to perceive our past, but also the present and future time with all its potentialities.



Figure 8: DESIS Philosophy Talk banner, 2017.

At the beginning of the DESIS Philosophy Talk there was some critique and pushback from a few of the participants in response to the rather dense philosophical themes framing the Talk. This had the effect of moving some of the conversation towards more direct reflection on what it means to create critical designs while working in a conventional design practice such as how

can designers find a method of critical praxis outside of the purely theoretical and intellectual. Different models of design practitioner were considered, such as one from the exhibition, Daniel McCafferty's *Designer as Gardener* where the designer is a facilitator, coordinator, and caregiver.



Figure 9: DESIS Philosophy Talk: The Ideology of Linear Time and Progress: Design as Dialectics. Left: brainstorming tools. Right: Shown are (in video) Naama Agassi, (seated left to right) Jeremy Mende, Geoff Kaplan, Christian Smirnow, Elena Habre.

Amongst the issues raised, were also the transformative power of wonder and how this is a necessary tool to create a cognitive shifts in a reader/audience/user. The concepts of *askholia* (occupation, or in terms of time, haste) and *skholē* (leisure or free of time) were presented by the Discussant with design as *askholia* (labor, commerce, deadline, etc.) and speculative and critical practices as *skholē* (the time needed for reflective thought, logically outside of the time of commerce). These points worked their way through a number of conversations and evolved into questions of how can design praxis be pivoted away from predictable processes and operate within a less imperialistic context. Is it possible to slip critical tactics into commercial/conventional practices? If we can exist outside of a linear financial system of time, then what does design practice look like? Is the role of designers to simply make and pose questions? Ultimately there was a sense that the designers present (and in the exhibition) were in a kind of *skholē* or design as thought experiment and critical reflection outside of the controlled and hurried time of commercial design (*askholia*).

Immediately following the DESIS Philosophy Talk, participants and attendees gathered in the gallery space where casual conversations continued from the discussions of the Talk surrounded by and sometimes prompted by the artefacts themselves. Adjacent to the material objects of the exhibition, the participants

could, in a spontaneous and informal way and triggered by the artefacts, engage in further discussions. This informal movement of exchange was particularly successful as the conversations were physically adjacent to the material artefacts. The latter proved to be a relevant element. The artefacts brought the participants back to a discourse embedded in reality. What could have simply been an “abstract philosophical discussion” was being shaped by another communicative value. The ability to criticize society that Adorno anticipated in his idea of dialectics was redetermined as something relevant for our contemporary condition. Additionally, the issue of time was getting “real” again, and escaping the risk of becoming a mere theoretical reflection.

As it results from the micro-experimentation of this DESIS Philosophy Talk, it has appeared that the interaction between verbal presentations/discourses and artefacts was a fruitful research track to continue with further experimentation. The potential for what might be possible in this context is, in our opinion, something worth continued exploration in a setting that would allow even more radical forms of hybridization.

FINAL THOUGHTS

At the conclusion of this experiment, comprising both the exhibition as the DESIS Philosophy Talk, a number of observations and assessments came to light. There seemed to be a clear discursive thread that leads through the entire exposition. The prompt connected both formally and conceptually to many of the video and written statements made by the participants. The unspoken discourse of the artefacts was translated into discussion – to questions and responses. The project was no longer merely objects and statements, but now included a complex dynamic of exchange.

What could not be said by the artefacts was said in statement and talk. What can never be articulated in words (the complex considerations of form, context, relations to audience, culture, other forms) was the discourse found only in the artefacts. The project facilitated and coordinated these multiple forms into a whole creating a positive virtuous loop. By simply posing the questions, setting the stage, and facilitating various forms of dialogue the project created an ongoing time and space for expression, reflection, and assessment. The multiple components of the project attempted to become a dialectical process unto itself. An unanticipated result was an apparent blurring between the voices of organizers, artefacts, exhibitors, the Talk discussants, the moderators and even the Talk audience. Each of them apparently playing a role in a larger, and somewhat nebulous, conversation.

The project is still somehow ongoing, as in the next months the experience of the exhibition/talk will be further shared with a larger public, and the documentation of the exhibit, the statements, symposium documentation will be shared on the DESIS Philosophy Talk and Z33research website. A compilation will be designed as a hybrid publication in the future. These, and other unforeseen manifestations of the project will serve as an extension of the discussion and also show

how artefacts as discourse and other forms of discourse (for instance visual and verbal) can further merge and hybridize thanks to digital technology. We will therefore see the exhibition and the symposium, and the yet to be realized publications and future events of the project are themselves fragments of a reality, portions of an exegesis constructed by artefacts, discussions, videos, writing. These combine to act as a “mediation” which exist in a liminal space of discourse that can be considered a complex and systemic whole.

The philosophical discourse here is not to be considered a commentary on design practices, but rather to be deeply embedded and interwoven within design practices. The exhibition has shown examples of how design can be seen as “dialectics” and therefore conveys per se a specific meaning that is deeply philosophical such as Adorno’s idea of dialectics. This is also the case for many other examples addressed by both philosophical reflections as well as by contemporary design practices. Moving on into the future, there will need to be more articulated investigations to further tap into this promising territory. When both philosophers and designers become more aware of the philosophical potential of artefacts, this can lead to new experimental forms of interactions that can help to further shape ideas and find new expressive instruments.

The interaction and mediation between forms of discourse works to inform and supplement each individual form. While we would argue that the artefacts themselves offer material forms as mediations (as liminal objects that bridge context and meaning) and as irreducible linguistic form, they also should be assessed within context, in multiple timeframes – in situ, in post reflection, in conjunction with other forms of discourse (textual, verbal, audiovisual, ...) – in order to: critique; to fully understand their meanings and implications; to enrich their meaning; and to contextualize them within practice and culture. This small, unpretentious experimentation is just a first attempt in sensing the philosophical value of contemporary designerly artefacts, and can only further evolve through trial and error, and other experiences to create a fruitful and necessary dialogue on this issue.

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