Aarhus School of Architecture // Design School Kolding // Royal Danish Academy

The Material Practice of Potential and Talent in Design

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Publication date:
2007

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Sommerlund, J. (2007). *The Material Practice of Potential and Talent in Design.* Paper presented at SEFUN-Seminar: Design Semiotics in Use, Helsinki, Finland.

The Material Practice of Potential and Talent in Design.

Submission for SEFUN-Seminar, 2007: Design Semiotics in Use

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This paper presents a work-in-progress. It will present an outline of a study of potential and talent in design. At this point in time, no systematic data-collection has taken place. Hence, what the paper will present is the theoretical background, the methodology, and the empirical basis of the study – as well as a few preliminary hypotheses.

Introduction

As the title indicates, this paper's *empirical* focus is talent and potential in design. Even here, in the empirical focus, the paper offers a take on seminar's title which is a bit off centre. Rather than analyzing actual designed objects in use, the paper will discuss some of the practices that produce specific brands of designers. It is one important finding, that these criteria more often pertains to the future, to the *potentiality* of the person being assessed, rather than the qualities or competencies the person already possesses. The question becomes what the qualitative content of potentiality is, and how the criteria of potentiality are performed as material practice?[1]

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[1] So far, I have observed admission procedures, walk-throughs and examinations at Denmark's Design School, and listened to talks on design education made by teachers and lecturers at London University of Art, Royal College, and the Fashion Institute at Arnhem. Moreover, I draw on observations made by a colleague at the Danish Film Institute (DFI), the grand-awarding authority that has played a big role in the "wave of success" experienced by the Danish film industry in the last 10 – 15 years. I plan to move the investigation out of education, and follow criteria of artistic quality in professional life, mainly in respect to competitions and prizes, particularly at fashion fares and film festivals.

If the empirical focus of the paper is a bit off centre, so are the *theoretical* conceptualizations of it: In the paper's take on the seminar title, "Design Semiotics in Use", no less than three essential translations have taken place. First, "semiotics" is used as the radical relational take on materiality and sociality presented by Actor-Network Theory (ANT)(Callon 1986; Latour 2005) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Law 1999; Sommerlund 2004 (2007); Sommerlund 2006). Second, "use" will be understood as "practice", practice being the site where design (or science, or technology, or even society) is being co-produced along with materiality and sociality. Third, the focus on talent and potential means that I will focus on "designers" rather than "design", although the two are of course, intimately related. Thus, the theme of this paper will be "Designers Performed in Practice" rather than "Design Semiotics in Use"

A Semiotics of Materiality: ANT, STS and the Sociology of Expectations

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is the basic theoretical starting point used in the project this paper describes. ANT is a theory if the social, but one that reinscribes the material as constitutive of the social. It is thus a basic premise, that the technical and the social are mutually constitutive, and *not* oppositions. Importantly, however, the point is not that dualisms, such as technical/social, cannot exist and have reality, but that they have reality as *effects* not as *causes*. As in the words of John Law: "For it is not, in this semiotic world-view, that there are no divisions. It is rather that such divisions or distinctions are understood as effects or outcomes. They are not given in the order of things." (Law 1999).

Logically, in this radical semiotic way of seeing the world and sociality, entities are shaped through relations. No entity has specific essentials qualities, but is shaped – and are shaping – the entities to which the entity is related in a network. ANT is a material semiotics, which uses the relational logics of semiotics ruthlessly on all types of materials – not only language (Law 1999: 3). Thus, reality is both real and material, and radically constructed. There is nothing universal or stable about the materiality of reality.

This relational and semiotic logic will be important in the study of potential and talent, as potentiality will not be considered an essential or intrinsic characteristic of a person, but as a relational phenomenon, performed in material practice.

ANT - and the related field of STS - has given space to a range of niches, which has used the ideas of co-construction of material and social, the importance of networks, relations and translations to move into new fields of study. One such line of study, which is of overall important to this paper, is the Sociology of Expectations (Brown 2003; Sommerlund and Langstrup in press). Futurology has long had a

reputation of being not too serious; a business for fortune-tellers and futurologists; not an appropriate object of interest for vigorous academic thought. This has been changed by transforming future-predictions from statements that can be proven right or wrong, to objects of empirical examination in their own right.

The basic idea of the Sociology of Expectations is that predictions of the future are *performative:* Instead of seeing the future as something that lies ahead of us, at a specific and set place to which the road is hidden, Sociology of Expectations suggests to regard the future as an abstraction that has reality now – in the exact same way as the past is both something that once was, and which we in the present have no direct access to, as well as a discursive abstraction that lives and works among us now. But the future-as-present-abstraction is not innocent or transparent. Rather the future is contested (Brown 2000), because the future-as-present-abstraction is an important tool in the colonization of the future. This is to be understood quite literally: Different actors harness different expectations, some that might even be in conflict. By proposing these different expectations and visions of the future, actors perform a colonial war. Important tools in these wars can be arguments, narrations, but material embodiments such as certain types of design or technologies also play an important role. This way of analyzing predictions and expectations has hitherto been restricted to empirical sites of biomedicine, and the shifting of sites offered in the proposed project is quite novel.

In the project described in this paper, the logic presented in the Sociology of Expectations will be crucial, as the discussion and assessments of persons and their potentiality will be seen as anything but innocent. Assessing someone's potentiality is not simply a question of being right or wrong. It is a deeply performative act, and one that has profound consequences for the types of designers we will see in the future.

The Material Practice of Artistic Criteria

When starting the preliminary empirical investigations of artistic criteria – at the admissions for Denmark's Design School – I immediately learned that artistic talent was defined not as an assessment of present ability, but as an assessment of future potential. Since then, the idea of talent as future potential has been an important theme traversing all observations, interviews and conversations. It has become one of the papers' most important hypotheses that the definitions of future potential embedded in the material practice of assessment, is paramount to the selection of which aspirants are admitted to the schools, and hence to which kind of design we will meet in the future.

Artistic Criteria are of essential importance in cultural production. Every day, artistic criteria are applied to people and objects, to judge who should be accepted at schools, who should graduate from schools, who should win awards, and which objects should be produced. However, it is characteristic of the artistic criteria that they are made verbal and explicit to a very limited degree. Still, the criteria are performed, and are probably performed quite consistently. Thus the important question in this paper becomes; what is the qualitative content of the criteria, and how are they performed?

Empirically, I have found sites that I presume are important for the material practices performing the artistic criteria of potential observations of (admissions, walk-throughs and examinations from Denmark's Design School as well as talks made by, and conversations with, teachers from Denmark's Design School, London University of Arts, Royal College and Fashion Institut Arnhem) – but they are yet to be studied in a systematic way. What I can present here are general themes, and simple observations, that I expect will be important in the future analysis.

Observations and Hypotheses about Artistic Potentiality and the Expression of Artistic Self

In admissions procedures, walk-throughs and examinations at Denmark's Design School, two overall explanations are used to explain why students' work is assessed as not quite good: First, work can be too sleak – too visually perfect (often materialized by means of computer-technology), which is read as a lack of originality and too much orientation towards predefined markets, and a too strategic way of thinking[2]. Second, work can be the opposite, too visually imperfect (often materialized by means sketches and hand-drawings on paper), which is read and understood as being the work of a person too much into oneself, and as a lack of will to express oneself clearly.

In between these two lies the potential and talented designer: One that is deeply original, individual, anti-market, but who works seriously and methodically. These designers are described as being creative, and their design are characterised by a multitude of detail, a visual equality between centre and periphery, by well-made handdrawings, and by naïve and almost childlike stylistics and wilful imperfections. Thus, the designer that is highlighted as talented have Personal Style, and are Personalities in their own right. In parallel, Strandvad observes how consultants at the DFI "advice applicants to give up the ambition of making a film that demonstrates their qualification… Rather, applicants should

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[2] Similar phenomena can be observed at DFI, where projects that are "too" aligned to existing genres and/or market-niches, are judged as non-creative (Strandvad, forthcoming: 4).

discover their own idiom", and ".. it is these unfitting and awkward ideas that contain the original and promising material" (forthcoming: 12).

Still, of course, it is an open question *why* this kind of designer is perceived as possessing more potentiality than others.

A lecturer at the Royal College, Ike Rust, might have given some clues to why the talented designer must also be a great personality, in a talk he gave at the Design School at Kolding (Rust 2007). He referred to a study he had made, asking firms in the industry what their requirements were for good students. They had unanimously required creativity. Ike Rust himself had then explicitly translated their requirement for creativity into a credo for the education. Creativity, claimed Rust, was the same as "Expression of Self". Thus, he perceived the main goals for his school to help students "Identify Self" and then to "Express Self". Again, Strandvad observes something similar at the DFI, where applicants are encouraged to "discover their own idiom […] sink deeper down into their own ideas…". (Strandvad, forthcoming: 12).

What Rust (and the DFI-consultants) looks for, is someone who is yet unaware of "Self" but who has the potential - through the support of Rust, teachers and consultants - to identify and express their self. It is fair to presume, that such expectations have a stake in performing specific types of selves being performed.

The Designer as Brand-Bearer?

It seems that the designers (and film-makers) portrayed in the wordings of the teachers at the design schools, the DFI-consultants, and at the Royal College in particular (how this is performed materially will be a question to investigate) – is a designer very reminiscent of the romantic Artist, in which artistic practice was to be found in the essence of Artist's very person. This is particularly interesting at a time in history where the Artist has been debunked within the arts proper since the early 60s, to a point where the romantic ideal of Genius-Artist is almost a joke. The very DFI-consultant that look for personal, un-

Coco Chanel

conventional and deeply personal film-projects, also says: "In the old days, you had a […] very old-fashioned theory that – and when I say old-fashioned, I mean like the 60s, the time of the Auteur, the Golden Age [laughs], or should I say the Stone Age…" (Strandvad, forthcoming: 10), thus expressing a wide-spread opinion: the Artist/Auteur died in the 60s.

At the same time, the very idea of Self as something that can be "identified", which implies that it is already there, independent of being identified, contradicts both the theoretical framework set up for this paper – putting much emphasis on the relational logics of semiotics – and contemporary psychology. Contemporary psychology is leaning towards a similar relational conception of identity, and social psychology in particular would shrink from the idea of a self waiting to be identified[3]. Nevertheless, this quintessential romantic ideal of the Artist can be found within design – particularly, but not excludingly - fashion design.

Why is that? Why does the Artist pop up here, at educations that explicitly state that they are not art schools, and that design is not art? And why does the Artist appear at government agencies that laugh at the idea of the Auteur?

One hypothesis is that what is being performed and designed here, is not so much the *design* made by the charismatic Artist-designer – but the *Artist-designers themselves*. The designer has become increasingly important as marketing-tool, and in many cases the image of the designer has become synonymous with the

Karl Lagerfeld

design-brand. Famous examples are Coco Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld, once founder and present chief-designer at Chanel, respectively, Vivienne Westwood, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and many more. Lately, celebrities have traversed the borders between designer and celebrities from the opposite direction, making designers out of celebrities (Madonna and Kylie Minogue for H&M, Kate Moss for TopShop). These designers' physical characteristics have become as well-known as the clothes they make. Thus, in promoting people and projects that have potential of expressing an individual and artistic Self, the market, marketing and branding is built into the conceptions of artistic potentiality as such. It is thus my

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[3] See for instance, Gergen 1997.

hypothesis that the market - which is used explicitly as an opposition to the type of person the design schools and the DFI recognize as possessing potential – is reintroduced to the designer through that which is presented as its very opposition: individuality, creativity and sense of self.

The Market can thus be argued to be integrated in the expectations designers meet, and not in the explicit requirements of applicants. This means that the designers perceived as talented are not just expected to design objects, products or films of a certain style, but are perceived as a marketable brand themselves. Through this expectation, I suggest that what is being performed is a *designer* to be used, as well as *design* to be used.

Concluding remarks

"Conclusion" is not an appropriate title for this last section. Rather, what I can present here, are some of the most obvious places where further work should start. First of all, the paper started out presenting *material practice* as paramount in discussing potential and practice. Indeed, the entire theoretical basis rests on this assumption. However, in the paper, I have hardly pointed to any material practice. Rather, I have pointed out some discursive framings of potentiality and talent. Thus, obviously, I will need to study material practice: *How* are the discursive framings of potentiality performed in material practice? Secondly, it is worth exploring whether the Designer-as-Artist is as prevalent in all contexts. At this point, I have identified the Designer-as-Personality at Denmark's Design School, the Designer-as-Artist in the wordings of a lecturer at the Royal College, and the Filmmaker-as-Personality at the DFI. But this is not enough to conclude that the designer is framed and verbalized as such in all contexts. Next, if the Designer-as-Artist does turn out to be a more prevalent type, it should be studied whether this designer is common to all types of designers, or whether it is restricted to fashion designers.

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