



Tricky Design: The Ethics of Things

Tom Fisher and Lorraine Gamman (eds.), *Bloomsbury Visual Arts*, 2018. 248 pp., 14 b&w illus., cloth, £76.50. ISBN: 9781474277181.

This is a virtuous book revolving around one particular virtue: humility. In acknowledging that design is ‘tricky’, Tom Fisher and Lorraine Gamman along with their contributors start from a premise of modesty. Certainly, designers—at least the practitioners, students, and scholars most likely to read this book—have been de-centring their roles in the design process for decades. It is worth remembering that mid-twentieth-century ergonomics shifted attention away from the designer to bodies, laying the groundwork for designing with social bodies. That said, *Tricky Design: The Ethics of Things* articulates a new phase in this transition, one in which designers embrace the politics of their work more overtly.

Less clearly virtuous is the identification of ‘trickiness’ as the common denominator for the social design practices presented here. It is not problematic that ‘tricky’ is interpreted variously. The word itself encourages liberties. It is, however, potentially confusing that the editors do not parse the essays more clearly among the term’s possibilities: tricky as in malign, tricky as in difficult, tricky as in ambiguous, tricky as in illusive. Given that the book is titled ‘Tricky’ and that its contributors go through more than a few contortions to clarify their use of the word, it may be productive to reshuffle the book’s contents according to types of trickiness to better extract some of its epiphanies. (The reader is invited to consider how the contributors not discussed here, solely for reasons of brevity, might fit into one or more of these paradigms.)

Tricky as in malign

Tom Fisher (p. 23) and Tim Dant (p. 69), respectively, discuss the role of design in the arms industry generally, and guns particularly, adding to a growing literature about the malignity of that complicity. In *Design and Violence*, Clive Dilnot not only wrote about ‘green bullets’ as oxymoronic, but also excoriated the premise that ‘design’ can be separated from ‘violence’ by a conjunction.¹ Fifty-five years earlier, George Nelson produced ‘A Problem of Design: How to Kill People’, making the point that, by distancing those who use them from their targets, weapons create a dynamic of unequal subjects and objects—the risk of all design interventions.²

Fisher makes the case that designers actively engaged with weapons promotion (graphics) and ancillary products (camouflage) are as culpable as the engineers who design bombs and the military. That this work ‘bleeds’ from military to civilian life is not exactly a secret to those who forbid their children to play with toy guns. However, Fisher’s larger indictment of the normalization of violence by design is worth attending to, for he, like Nelson, is describing trickery as intrinsic to design itself—its dark side, if you will.

Dant has a more nuanced view. He rejects the idea that the gun is intrinsically amoral, on the grounds that material objects have no moral compass. He takes on Latour’s claim for ‘actor-actant symmetry’, claiming morality cannot be distributed. But he ignores the fact that, as Verbeek also writes, we delegate moral decision-making to things (seatbelts, for one) all the time. I appreciate his awareness that guns cannot be separated from culture, but question his patience with the pace of cultural change.

Tricky, as in difficult to navigate

Here ‘tricky’ is deployed as a synonym for the more familiar ‘design constraints’. However, since that phrase entered the lexicon of practice, a new constraint has been acknowledged: designers themselves. They not only have to contend with the biases, limitations, and capabilities of the actors they work with, they also have to contend with their own. Even with this heightened awareness, the basic dynamic of designing as the negotiation of incommensurates remains largely intact. Thus, Adam Thorpe’s consideration of designing in conditions of austerity (p. 159) and Nidhi Srivinas and Eduardo Staszowski’s consideration of the gap between intentions and outcomes (p. 59) extend, more than innovate, the historical remit of design as reform.

Thorpe writes of ‘disentangling the contradiction between hoping and coping’ as the ethical responsibility of social designers. He goes beyond managing expectations to advocating for proactive negotiations by designers on behalf of the community, recognizing they will only be able to carry the process forward so far, given the complex expectations of the agencies and constituencies involved. Thus, he offers the reader the ‘good enough’ designer, in a tacit nod to Donald Winnicott’s 1953 theory of the ‘good enough mother’ whose failures can benefit babies and children. The thinking presumably being that if the parties affected can cope with only partially satisfactory outcomes, then those ‘failures’ can generate agency.

Srivinas and Staszowski are also concerned with balancing hopes and working within boundaries. Where design conversations with communities produce desires that exceed the terms set by the funder/client, Srivinas and Staszowski see opportunity. They demur from sneaking new features into the brief in favour of bringing the ‘latent expectations’ of the community/client to the fore. Here, tricky equates with difficulty of serving two ‘clients’, engaging in the power/political struggles that ensue and, ultimately, designing in an innately messy democracy.

Tricky, as in ambiguous

Ann Light and Yoko Akama (p. 131) offer an understanding of trickiness that better captures the word’s inherent instability. To wit, they make room for attending to both ‘rights’ and ‘care’ in social design situations—the latter being under-recognized because it often happens in lighter social moments. Apropos, they also note how irreverence can shift the balance of power, paying rare

tribute to the constructive role of humour—otherwise overlooked in the book. (Unrelenting virtue can be tedious without it.)

For Shana Agid (p. 115), revealing the ambiguities of commonly accepted terminologies like ‘crime’ is a critical aspect of designing. Working with Critical Resistance (CR) Oakland No Cops since 2013, he has gathered multiple narratives about safety in a community prejudged, and consequently, made unsafe by policing. The objective in assembling the narratives is to instantiate ‘problem posing’ before the work of problem setting to avoid excluding possibilities prematurely. (At this writing, almost two months after the murder of George Floyd, this chapter is painfully charged.)

Tricky, as in illusive

Pedro J. S. Vieira De Olivetra and Luiza Prado de O. Martins (p. 103) tease the reader with the prospect of meeting a decolonized trickster but then abandon the shape-shifter’s perspective to devote the better part of the chapter to critiquing the cultural elitism of Speculative Critical Design. They do eventually return to the shape-shifter, not as a trickster figure but as a process of shape-shifting that arises from carefully nurtured dissensus.

More radically, Cameron Tonkinwise (p. 81) openly embraces trickery as magic and magic as central to design, accepting that its objects and systems do have shape. Describing the quality of the encounter with magic in design, he writes: ‘an aesthetics of coherence becomes the magical aspect that design adds to what are otherwise an infinite set of logistical options’ (p. 92). Moreover, he notes that this magic is a matter of experience, not the ritual or the thing itself. The inference is that if we accept our cell phones as magic, then we should be willing to accept others’ experiences of magic, and in the process, decolonize design. Tonkinwise’s effort to dispel the hegemony of western design’s scientism brings to mind what phenomenologist James Dodd calls ‘surplus’ in design.³ He posits that this ‘surplus’ (or what Tonkinwise calls ‘magic’) combined with use and context make up ‘the *event-character* of human existence’. This is the essence of tricks, not the fact of their misdirection but their intrinsic ineffability.

Conclusion

In a book concerned with current and future practices, it is worth noting that its Introduction and Conclusion

do cite relevant precedents. (This, despite claiming ‘Yet historically design seems to have imagined itself as a process with no moral character’ [p. 209].) However, it is unclear why the editors’ references to the history of progressive design are split between the beginning and the end of the book. In any case, the treatment is sketchy, e.g., the socialist ambitions of the Bauhaus receive no mention. Also, the neglect of Michel de Certeau’s work is especially curious since so much of the work discussed is tactical. His theories would have offered the editors a useful conceptual link among the various chapters—for the trickster is the master of the tactic and tactics are archetypal tricks.

doi:10.1093/jdh/epaa052

Advance Access publication 9 January 2021

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Notes

- 1 C. Dilnot, ‘Green Bullets (U.S. Military)’, *Design and Violence*, Museum of Modern Art, 29 January 2014, <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/designandviolence/green-bullets-u-s-military/>.
- 2 S. Yelavich, ‘Prescience of Nelson’, *Constructs: Yale Architecture* (Spring 2013): 8.
- 3 J. Dodd, *Phenomenology, Architecture and the Built World: Exercises in Philosophical Anthropology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

Mag Men: Fifty Years of Making Magazines

Walter Bernard and Milton Glaser, *foreword by Gloria Steinem*, Columbia University Press, 2019. 288 pp., col. illus., cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 9780231191807.

Between the publication of *Mag Men* in December 2019 and the writing of this review in November 2020, two significant events have happened. First, co-author of this book and prolific, renowned magazine designer Milton Glaser died. Second, the people have rejected Donald Trump’s run for a second term as President of the USA. Both of these historic happenings re-frame how this book is read. On the one hand, *Mag Men* is now weighted with the knowledge that it is among Glaser’s last works. This tinges the book with

FIFTY YEARS OF MAKING MAGAZINES

MAG

WALTER BERNARD & MILTON GLASER

MEN

FOREWORD BY GLORIA STEINEM

solemnity. On the other hand, this book now reads as though it celebrates—more than urges the importance of—democracy. In this respect, Glaser and co-author Walter Bernard’s engagements with political themes and power struggles seem prescient. All of this is to say that *Mag Men: Fifty Years of Making Magazines* is not a time capsule; it is relevant today.

Mag Men is a retrospective of five decades of Bernard and Glaser’s art direction and design of a wide variety of magazines published mostly in New York. It shares their ‘thinking behind most graphic decisions, including some clever ideas and stupid mistakes’ (p. 12). Bernard art directed and/or designed many of the most-recognized magazines of the twentieth century, including *Time* and *The Atlantic*. Glaser worked on equally impressive publications but his biggest claim to fame is his design of the ubiquitous ‘I heart New York’ logo. It captures the tone of this book. *Mag Men* is a