Contemporary design. Variables and categories

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Abstract: The article maps different design’s trends in contemporary, post-industrial, “DIY” society, that gives birth to the “design-industry” and to new production methods, and aesthetic. My aim is to identify and name a set of variables and categories of design based on different combinations of these variables. By defining the variables I use a set of phenomenological tools that analyse production processes, materials, and ways to experience objects. I look at Donald Norman’s “Three levels of processing” and I use them to discuss how variables can describe the quality of the object’s performance. I then provide arguments for the additional concept of design categories using two theoretical assumptions. The first originates from categories introduced and named by Tommaso Bovo, that I describe by using the variables previously identified. The second comes from Carlo Martino’s argumentation about the value of DIY technology in the ‘path’ of design that I suggest to categorize as craft design.

Keywords: objects, post-industrial society, objects’ performance, variables, design categories

1. Variables

I consider five variables in defining design categories:

1. Target: mass target or niche target.
2. Production context: with this category I describe the relationship with industry and I identify two typologies: Industrial and non-industrial.
3. Fabrication techniques: I refer here to two production processes: the method of fabrication based on direct “manipulation”, and the process of fabrication in which matter is cast into molds made by hard or soft materials. I define this two methods direct fabrication process and indirect fabrication process.
4. Materials: I identify two main typologies: basic materials (natural or artificial materials with homogeneous chemical structure) and complex or experimental materials. These include smart materials, composite materials, Hybrid materials and Bio-materials.
5. Objects’ performance: functional, speculative, aesthetic, emotional. Generally the term ‘performance’ describes how well the product does those desired functions. Here I argue that design object’s performance is the set of functions and qualities of the polymorphic object.
1.1 Objects’ Performance

I describe now the four object’s performances above cited, distributing them among two of the three Norman’s levels of processing, the behavioural and reflective one.

- **Functional object:** ‘Functional’ here describes a quality the object shows when the user experiences it, and enshrines Norman’s definition of “function, performance, and usability” (Norman, 2005, p.37). This performance takes place in the behavioural level.
- **Speculative object:** I argue that ‘speculative’ is a quality of objects that (in reflexive level) provide us to ask questions, and not necessarily provide answers. This design is generally named critical, and its aim is to think about different scenarios on realistic objects. That means the designer can simulate an experience of possible future.
- **Aesthetic object:** I define ‘aesthetic’ not as an attribute of first Norman’s visceral level, but a quality the user experiences by interacting with the object. Aesthetics therefore acts at the behavioural level and can be “contextual and informational [...] in the sense that it takes place within an act of communication”. (Folkmann, 2013, p.31)
- **Emotional object:** ‘Emotional’ is a quality of the object capable, in the reflective level, to transform sensitive feelings in emotions. Norman defines emotion both as a conscious experience of affect, and “a necessary part of cognition” (2005, p.7). Here I consider emotion as a cognitive process following the object’s performance.

2. Design Categories

I recognize that an exhaustive mapping is impossible due to the high number of combinations of the above variables. Nevertheless, is necessary to classify them, and I hereby suggest names and possible criteria to build categories.

*Post-Masters Design:* Tommaso Bovo names Post-Masters the category of designer whose final aim is to design for mass market with an industrial production system. For these designers, objects must be functional, but they also recognize an aesthetic value. Therefore I claim that Post-Masters Design is characterized by fabrication of functional objects with aesthetic qualities, produced in industrial context for mass target with basic or complex materials and production methods both direct and indirect.

*New-Pop Design:* Bovo discusses new-pop designers as contemporary offshoots of 80’s design, and emphasizes the intimate value of their objects, that are no functional but aesthetic, as they create an emotional relationship with the user. He includes in this category the posh kitsch. New-pop design thus, presents emotional objects with high aesthetic value, produced for a niche target in production context both industrial and non-industrial using generally basic materials.

*Art Design:* Bovo compares art designers with artists who create objects with high speculative value in limited number of pieces fabricated with high-tech DIY. Therefore, I name Art Design the category of speculative objects with high aesthetic qualities produced to arouse both social and scientific questions. These objects are produced for a niche target in direct production process, with experimental materials used in non-industrial context.

*Alchemist Design:* Bovo names Alchemists those designers who base their objects on the materials experimentation. Their objects are functional, and designed to solve real needs using specific materials. I claim, therefore, that Alchemist design is the category of functional and speculative objects for a niche target, produced in both industrial and non-industrial context, through both direct and indirect fabrication process. Materials used are generally complex and experimental.
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Craft Design: I add one category to those cited, and I name it Craft Design. This category stems from the design’s craft tradition and proposes a new relationship with simple materials that designers experience by studying the functional relationship between shape and materials. Therefore it presents functional and emotional objects, produced for both mass and niche targets with basic materials, in non–industrial production context, and through both direct and indirect fabrication.

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