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Educators as Design Activists
Co-mingling Ethics of Care and Aesthetics

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the field of design needs to apply philosophical ideas about responsibility related to ethics of care and aesthetics within its own design practice. I suggest that institutions of higher learning, and the entire design profession, are in need of a radical reordering in order to the protect the field. I explore themes including responsibility and duty, applied environmental ethics, and social justice theory, and, utilizing the lens of a designer, concurrently draw on aesthetics, ethics, and activism in this discussion. Specifically, I will navigate through sub-themes including 'piercing of the veil,' the breach of trust, Foucault's aesthetics in activism, and the ethics and tactics found in the Deep Ecology movement. I will demonstrate that a new design paradigm is on the horizon: design activism.

Key words: Design Activism, Higher Learning Institutions and New Design Paradigm.

1. Piercing the Veil
It is important for everyone to understand that the vast majority of these products that we recalled were the result of a *design flaw* in Mattel's design, not through a manufacturing flaw in China's manufacturers.[1]

Toys. Drywall. Toothpaste. What I play with, where I enclose myself and how I cleanse my body have become the sources of controversies of our time. Today, it is not unusual

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[1] Thomas Debrowski, Mattel's executive vice president for worldwide operations,
http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/09/21/us-china-safety-mattel-idUSPEK10394020070921

to hear or read about designed objects and spaces being in the media for product violations, recalls and hazards. Toxic materials are entering our bodies and the environment.[2]

In this paper, I expand on discussions put forward by several authors about abstract ethical and philosophical issues and argue that a so-called breach of trust has occurred within the design community. Jean Baudrillard's book, *The Systems of Objects*, for example, suggests that design is reaching its end in terms of being truly socially progressive or even meaningful.[3] And Franco Berardi has postulated that society's obsession with futurism and progress needs to come to an end, and that the race for ingenuity has failed.[4] Jean-Luc Nancy, in his essay "Human Excess," attempts to link excess with humanity's responsibility - "Each of these gestures is the reverse of the other, so that the proliferation of large numbers in our culture, our interests and our needs (the size of a computer memory, the price of a nuclear submarine, and so on) also defines the exponential growth of such responsibility."[5] Here we can begin to understand that the sheer size of humanity makes it inseparable from morality and dignity, and concluded that justice needs to be rendered. As a result of this above-noted discourse, I believe that contemporary designers are currently facing new questions about design. Has the time come to end the practice of market-driven aesthetics? Is design dead?

Discussions about excess and responsibility have revealed discriminatory practices found within the design profession and have simultaneously fueled dissenters attempting to make change. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, offers designers some insight for change as he stressed the need to consider socio-cultural behavior as involving a mixture of equality and justice.[6] This paper draws from Rawls most well-known and often-quoted term "justice as fairness," along with his concepts of a "veil of ignorance" and the "original position." Thus, I base this discussion on the premise that if justice is to be fairly distributed, and the legality of the social construct of equality is to be solidified, then a new design discipline must emerge.

This essay asks the reader to consider some important design questions: If design is creatively purposeful, then what purpose does design serve? Can the rubric of consumption

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[2] From Di Cintio's lecture notes: '*design flaw*' my italics. Mattel recalled 10,000 toys due to excessive levels of lead paint. Recalls have also been issued for drywall (causing respiratory problems) and toothpaste (containing antifreeze), among other products.
[3] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996).
[4] Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011).
[5] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 178.
[6] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, reprint of original edition).

be a two-way street between prosperity and sustainability of humans, the environment, and the economy? What would happen if designers took on ethical pursuits when designing toothpaste, interior spaces, or toys before conceiving aesthetic considerations? Is it possible to design in opposition to the demands of the market, and still meet the basic needs of enjoyment, shelter, and health?

The following will co-mingle philosophical ideas about the ethics of care and aesthetics within the design practice. Conceptually, using a legal terminology — piercing the veil[7] — I seek to provide evidence that a *breach of trust* has occurred within the design community. How has this happened, and who is responsible? Have corporate market demands denied designers the opportunity to pursue or practice ethical behaviors? Are designers being used as agents for global capitalism? If a breach of trust has occurred, is it time to seek justice for the users, makers, and waste collectors of designed objects or spaces? Should we go so far as to call for the end of design and designers?

At times in this paper, the two principle themes — the ethics of care and aesthetics — will be explored separately to provide historical context; at others, they will be discussed together. Similar to Jacques Ranciere's investigation of what ties aesthetics to politics, here design is explored as it relates to justice.[8] Finally, this discussion will explore the possible need to redirect design practice toward design activism. My overall objective is to challenge designers to practice the ethics of care or *ethical aesthetics*, and to politicize their production as a daily pursuit. These processes would encourage a paradigm shift in which education and practice must change, expert knowledge methods must be diffused, and market-driven practices must be scaled back drastically.

2. Ethics and Aesthetics

According to the ancient Epicureans, "good equals pleasure" and "evil equals pain." They noted that overconsumption causes physical pain to the external physical body: this pain then spreads and damages the internal mind of tranquility. According to the Kantian ethics model, it is important to maintain commitments to specific values. Kant's categorical imperative can be defined as a way of evaluating motivations for action. He argued that individuals should live by the following categorical imperative, which helps identify moral

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[7] 'Piercing the veil', most often used as in 'piercing the corporate veil.' Taking my cue from legal terminology, I take the concept of 'piercing the veil' to provide evidence that a 'breach of trust' has occurred.

[8] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004).

duties: "So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[9]

For design professionals, the Kantian imperative can be a form of professional ethics. The traditional role (duty) of a designer is to produce for manufacturers and/or patrons targeting a specific socio-economic population. However, designers can consider re-scripting the nature and practice of design based on the Kantian ethics of duty. For example, Kant went on to suggest that duty means equality and fairness for all, or in other words *design for all.* Thus, design practitioners could expand their sense of duty beyond the market model and move into realm of politics of lawmaking (design law). The formulation of design production laws might better serve humanity as a whole. Issues of health, safety, and welfare would move beyond professional practices like building codes and regulations, and incorporate the often-forgotten individuals who help manufacture, live with, and collect the waste products of mass-consumed objects and spaces. Designers could step back from the dominating design paradigm of duty and move toward action that has "genuine moral worth."[10]

According to Michel Foucault, "not everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous." If this is the case, then we must always "do something," which "leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism."[11] Foucault's ethics often incorporated a repressive hypothesis model, which eventually would be referred to as the "Foucault effect."[12] For instance, some feminist and queer theorists have justified their activism modalities based on Foucault's writings.[13] Essentially, this discourse requires the practice of self-critique, which is related to how the Epicureans tried to understand the self from an ethical perspective. In this way, the ethics of design can be connected with the tactical positioning of design activism.

To further this discussion and offer a potential strategy for commingling ethics and aesthetics, both Nietzsche and Foucault offer an "aesthetic of existence," which could be a promising roadmap for designers — "we need art [design][14]not to make us immoral, or to take us beyond the sphere of the ethical, but to enable us to carry on being moral in the

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[9] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. & ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 38.

[10] Ibid., p. 12.

[11] Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 231.

[12] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[13] Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism & Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988). Lois McNay, *Foucault & Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992). Caroline Ramazanoğlu, ed., *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[14] My insertion - design

fate of our recognition of the terror and absurdity of existence."[15] This potential strategy could be considered a sort of ethical promise to the field of aesthetics — one that is highly tactical, calling for a reworking of the systematic values of the dominating design paradigm. Market-driven design production has been the dominant paradigm, and has yet to be fully disrupted. Similar to various activist groups, designers will need to re-theorize power to move into any form of design activism, which will need to be a cultural response. Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" has been used tactically by marginalized groups such as feminists and civil rights and queer culture activists, but within the discipline of design, it has only been used tangentially with regard to environmental or sustainability issues. Foucault's work can inform the processes of design production, governance, and ethical responsibility: the "Foucault effect" is arguably already beginning to affect the design community, encouraging a new field of design activism.

3. Deep Ecologists: Aesthetics and Activism

Who thinks today about future generations? Who is concerned about what people will eat, drink, breathe in one hundred years, where they will get energy when there are twice as many people living on this planet as today? Only an idealist, a dreamer, a genuinely spiritual person who, they say, is not modern enough.

These dreamers, who are often at the margin of society, will find their way to the place they belong, among the politicians, only if the very spirit of politics changes towards a deeper responsibility for the world.[16]

Havel wrote that we have become "blind …to perpetual economic growth and never-ending consumption, no matter how detrimental to the environment, the dictates of materialism, consumerism and advertising, the voiding of human uniqueness and its replacement by uniformity."[17] He and many others have provided important historical insights about re-examining the dominating paradigm, which equates technological advancement with economical prowess. Science and technology were initially considered ideal models for the pursuit of human betterment: innovation, capitalist practices, and the birth of the market-driven design paradigm at one time seemed immutable.

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[15] Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 5.
[16] Vaclav Havel, 1997, http://www.socialcritic.org/
[17] Ibid

When discourse about the environment began to be linked with political and social change in the early 1960s, Thomas Kuhn and others began to question the mechanics of the scientific paradigm.[18] By the early 1970s, the environmental movement had gained momentum. Comparisons can be drawn between Arne Naess' philosophical work, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," and the work of Victor Papanek, an educator, UNESCO designer and author of *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change.*[19] Both authors attempted to elevate discussions regarding ecology and social change. Naess was noted for identifying and deconstructing the symptoms and causes of the environmental movement. Specifically, he used the term "shallow" to describe immediate issues, such as the fight against pollution and resource depletion, and used the term "deep" to describe the philosophical interactions between the social and the human within the environmental crisis. Essentially, he called for a more holistic modality.

The introduction of the Deep Ecology movement ignited proactive radical change. Specifically, it launched an active discourse about the "dominant worldview." Deep Ecologists identified individuals/corporations who were causing environmental destruction and held them responsible. At its essence was the need to change: by recognizing that individuals need to change, a holistic view of the environment seemed to naturally evolve into various forms of political activism. The Deep Ecology framework began to provide a link between ecology and ecophilosophy. Naess believed that linking ecological and ethical concerns with scientific and aesthetic understandings could encourage a new modality of philosophical thinking to emerge. The writings of Naess and others (for instance, Devall and Sessions) became immensely popular among political activists, artists, and scientists.[20]

Key to the Deep Ecology movement was its discussion of ethics and how they relate to political concerns. Deep Ecologists challenged traditional philosophical distinctions between individuals and nature, and their positioning of ethics and aesthetics allowed value and beauty to enter into the discussion. Deep Ecologists adopted some methodologies used in the arts (poetry, narrative form) as a way to encourage individuals to make radical shifts in their worldviews. The following excerpt illustrates how the dominant worldview of perception and evaluation developed and how they are not considered valid within the Deep Ecology framework:

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[18] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
[19] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16: 1 (1973) pp. 95-100. Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1984).
[20] Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Layton, Utah: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985).

Confrontations between developers and conservers reveal difficulties in experiencing what is *real*. What a conservationist *sees* and experiences *as reality*, the developer typically does not see – and vice versa. A conservationist sees and experiences a forest as a unity, a gestalt, and when speaking of the *heart of the forest*, he or she does not speak about the geometrical center. A developer see quantities of trees and argues that a road through the forest covers very few square kilometers compared to the whole area of trees, so why make so much fuss? And if the conservers insist, he will propose that the road does not touch the *center* of the forest. The *heart* is saved, he may think. *The difference between the antagonists is one rather of ontology than of ethics*... To the conservationist, the developer seems to suffer from a radical blindness. But one's ethics in environmental questions are based largely on how one sees reality.[21]

The Deep Ecology movement was unique because it propelled activist thinking. Its approach to ecological issues provided an understandable methodology: it incorporated philosophical and political components, and used a philosophical approach to legitimize a form of activism.

The Deep Ecology movement was criticized, however, for various reasons: the tactics of activists, the diverse sources used for philosophical inspiration, and the fact that it was mainly pursued by Western environmentalists and would not help mitigate environmental concerns in underdeveloped countries. Still, its approach can help emerging designers who are interested in linking ethics with aesthetics. The development of the Deep Ecology movement is an important historical process to consider when questioning ethical protocols and practice; its theoretical and practical approaches could become part of a new theoretical framework for design ethics and design activism.

4. Contextualizing Design Activism

At the beginning of the 21st century, a new paradigm of design began to emerge, embracing social justice and community engagement. This would later become formally known as design activism. Design activism is an under-researched topic: few studies have investigated cross-over activities between design and advocacy/activism, and fewer still have analyzed the extent to which design activists have been able to re-orient ethical design protocols within local, national, and/or global communities. Design activism is rarely included in design curricula, even while universities across the globe are attempting to expand their civic engagement protocols. Additionally, very little research and content

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[21] Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*: *Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 66.

is available about teaching design activism in higher learning institutions. Educators and practitioners cannot work effectively without guidelines and tools related to design activism. Because universities are increasing their emphasis on experiential and service learning in their mission statements,[22] determining how to use design activism to its fullest potential across the design field and in design education is a particularly timely objective.

Papanek's book, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*,[23] established him as one of the earliest known activist designers who advocated for socially responsible design and who used a non-Western approach to design practice. Since his seminal work, several design practitioners and scholars have attempted to classify different types of design activism.[24] Some practitioners in the field of design activism have focused on practice motivated by a cause or event, and types of pro bono projects.[25] Others have focused on the results of globalization.[26]

Also of importance is the work of designers who have been engaged in developing design solutions within the context of the global social justice movement. Lacking any shared critical language or historic documentation, these designers found themselves having to create a new form of practice. For example, the advocacy design work of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, with its cleverly designed slogan and image, **Silence = Death** (a pink triangle on a black background), pre-dated contemporary design activism mechanisms and is historically significant because it employed the tactics of earlier activists.[27] By 2007, initial evidence of this new design practice could be seen in the precedent-setting exhibition entitled *Design for the Other 90%,* which took place at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution.[28] The theme of the show was global population problems such as accessing food, clean water, and shelter. The exhibition included more than 30 projects by designers, academics, and social

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[22] Ernest L. Boyer, "The Scholarship of Engagement," *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 1:1 (Spring 1996), pp. 11-21. Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Campus–Community Partnerships: The Terms of Engagement," *Journal of Social Issues* 58:3 (2002), pp. 503-516. Stephanie Watson Zollinger, Denise A. Guerin, Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, and Caren S. Martin, "Deconstructing Service-Learning: A Framework for Interior Design," *Journal of Interior Design* 34:3 (2009), pp. 31-45.
[23] Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1984).
[24] Alastair Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World* (New York: Earthscan, 2009). Ann Thorpe, *Architecture & Design versus Consumerism: How Design Activism Confronts Growth* (New York: Earthscan, 2012).
[25] Bryan Bell, Katie Wakeford, eds., *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008).
[26] Ann Thorpe, *Architecture & Design versus Consumerism: How Design Activism Confronts Growth* (New York: Earthscan, 2012).
[27] T.V. Reed, The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) pp. 180
[28] Smith, C. E. & Smithsonian Institute 2007. *Design for the other 90%.* New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers.

entrepreneurs who had designed low--cost solutions for under-privileged populations. The exhibition and subsequent provision of pro bono design services by not-for-profit organizations (Architecture for Humanity and Design Corps) demonstrated that design practitioners were starting to leave the protected confines of the traditional design studio.

There is clear evidence that design practitioners and educators are moving beyond the traditional logic of design practice, which tended to overlook issues related to activism and social responsibility.[29] The current logic of design activism is highly relevant and well-reasoned within the context of 21st century design practice. Fifty years have passed since the social activism of the 1960s and 1970s gave birth to widespread consciousness about the urban condition. Today, design practitioners in general, and in particular their cohort of educators, are productive, critical, and have proven their willingness and capacity to embrace contradictions. They have also demonstrated a readiness to take on socially responsible design. They appear to be reclaiming design activism in new and exciting ways. Untethered by fixed notions of practice, the long-term vision is strong and the work is very important. However, current documentation of this kind of work is limited to discussion of individual projects by practitioners, and does not offer guidance to educators in the field of design or its organizing professional bodies, nor does it address contemporary knowledge mobilization techniques such as those of Foucault or Naess.

5. The End of Design? Or an Attitudinal Paradigm Shift.

Is this the end of design? How could one begin to answer this question? It might be helpful to go back to the dominating design paradigm of the 20th century. Design has been historically linked to technology and capitalism and the practice of "planned obsolescence."[30] Designers, like artists, have embraced aesthetics as one part of the creative process, often modeling creativity using metaphor, e.g., the "machine."[31]

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[29] Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr, eds., *Design Like You Give a Damn: Architectural Responses to Humanitarian Crises* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2006). Smith, C. E. & Smithsonian Institute 2007. *Design for the other 90%.* New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers.
[30] *a*1960 B. STEVENS in V. Packard *Waste Makers* (1960) vi. 58 Our whole economy is based on planned obsolescence… We make good products, we induce people to buy them, and then next year we deliberately introduce something that will make these products old fashioned.http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145131?redirectedFrom=planned+obsolescence#eid299 97289
[31] Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1985). Originally published in 1923.

Antoniades wrote, "There is a certain romanticism in approaching architectural creativity through metaphor."[32] He noted that the practice of some designers, in this case architects, was inspired by Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. They interpreted Nietzsche's philosophy into design, and were essentially "among the first to impose on the world a superhuman vision, to remind the viewer of the greatness of the universe in contrast to the "smallness" of humanity."[33] Antoniades continued, "It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that metaphor has been favored by architects who have domineering personalities and who perhaps find inspiration, and justification for their dreams in superhuman and often 'out of scale' metaphors."[34]

The attitudinal paradigm shifts dominating contemporary design discourse today no longer refer to the "smallness of humanity" — they call for a radical dismounting of "expert knowledge" and for the end of the "superhuman." Designers in the 21st century are struggling to identify themselves as partners in humanity. The questions that need to be answered are predominately related to the areas of ethics and justice (e.g., social-economic and cultural). Can the designer strive for simultaneous action including aesthetics and ethics in design learning and practice? Should the designer choose ethics over aesthetics? Have we entered a design crisis? Can we declare the end of design?

This discussion has attempted to integrate philosophical ideas of ethics of care and aesthetics into design practice. A breach of trust has occurred within the design community, and the themes explored here — responsibility and duty, applied environmental ethics, social justice theory — generated questions about the need for a new discipline. To prevent the end of design, institutions of higher learning and the design profession require radical reordering. "Metaphorical" practices need to end, and the redirection of design practice needs to move toward design activism. Design theory and practice is a young field and is still evolving — it is in a generative form of "becoming." The next wave of design pedagogy and practice may manifest as an ethical-aesthetic field that incorporates an ethics of care.

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[32] Anthony C. Antoniades, *Poetics of Architecture: Theory of Design* (New York: John Wiley, 1992), p. 34.
[33] Ibid., p. 33.
[34] Ibid., p. 34.