Products as Media: Towards a practice of design that takes products into account as mediating entities

Abstact
One of the most important characteristics of designed objects as products is that they are part of our everyday life. For an art piece to be experienced you need to visit a museum or a gallery. Many designer movements such as Radical Design and anti design worked on the intersection of design and art. At the beginning of 2000's this approach has gained popularity again (Dunne and Raby, 2013). One of their forerunners Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby state that "I kind of feel that art exists because design has failed. In an ideal, utopian world, everyday life would be so rich, meaningful and challenging that we wouldn't need this separate category called art." (Puolakka & Sutela, 2010) and underline the importance of design for being critical. Those designers on the other hand forget the strong advantage of the products that they could invade the daily life and exhibit their objects at galleries or through visual media. In order to spread a particular message or experience designers use objects as containers of message but when they omit the materialistic-reproduction part of the objects. Bennett (2007) for example claims that objects can control people, although people think they control the objects. Products as material entities are far more stronger than their visual representations or a single object in a gallery. Therefore this paper suggests that designers who want to work on critical usage of design object should be aware of the products' ability to invade our daily life by being produced in thousands of physical copies. A theoretical background for such an approach could be that we could see products as a media and apply theories of media to these products.

Bennett, J. (2007). Edible matter. New Left Review, 45, 133.

Dunne, A. & Raby, F. (2013). Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming, MIT Press, Cambridge, UK.

Puolakka, A., & Sutela, J. (2010). Science Poems. Helsinki & Paris: OK Do.

Design has not a static definition; it is defined by its subject (Mareis, 2006). Also each practitioner defines design for herself/himself and builds upon this definition her/his work. Some industrial designers are closer to engineers others to artists (Hugentobler, 2010a; Stappers, 2007). In several museums art and design objects are exhibited together (Steinbrenner, 2010). It is very common to define design somewhere between art and engineering. Besides that objects could also have some rhetorical features (Buchanan, 2007), which makes them similar to media. Lash and Lury (2008) consider products as 'a medium' with 'structure and surface'. And according to Krippendorf (2007) a product should be meaningful. It should be meaningful to its users, its stakeholders etc., it should reveal intentions, thoughts and decisions of it's designer. Objects could be seen both as text and as visuals (Kreuger, 2014). Several researchers consider products as containers of meaning (Joost and Scheurmann, 2008 ; Dunne and Raby, 2001 ; Mareis, 2006 ; Krippendorf, 2007).

Another important aspect of industrial design practice is that it is producing objects that are material. They are not just visual elements, you can touch, smell even taste if you want. The thingness should be an important issue for designers. For example Bennett (2007) argues that objects are also in control of people, although people think they control the objects. One of her recent studies is about people who are hording things; she defines them as a group of people that are overwhelmed by the power of objects (Bennett, 2011). Ingold (2010) and Hawkins (2011) have also some researches about how materiality of things affects human nature.

Designers especially who produce projects on the field of critical and speculative design consider objects as conveyers of messages. Dunne and Raby emphasize the importance of realization of the ideas, turning them into 3 dimensional objects in a very professional manner when doing speculative, explorative and critical design (Puolakka & Sutela, 2010). Those designers handle design very different than corporations. For example Krippendorf also suggest that design should not be a servant of commercial system, it should shape the system and turn it to a better one (Ylirisku, 2013). But a very common practice of some of those designers is that they produce objects for galleries and exhibit their ideas there. At this point a contradiction occurs. The difference between design objects and art objects, whether it is needed to be stated or not, is at this point very difficult to define. In my opinion one the most distinctive feature of products are that they are part of our everyday life and they are reproduced in several numbers when not in thousands. Those two distinctive

characteristics of products could also be used as a starting point to develop a theory of design that handles objects differently than so far. In this theory products could be seen as media, which will cover the two characteristics: being part of daily life and spreading into the world in several numbers. What kind of advantages could products as media have? How could products be seen as media? What would be the applications of such a perspective? Those are questions that are worth to investigate in this article.

Products as Media
Products especially mass manufactured ones are spreading out into our world just like media do. When we take the definition of Luhmann (2000) for mass media, that the mediating thing is no longer connected to the source, products fit into this definition, too. The designer of the product has no control or feedback after they release the objects into the world. One important example for this case can be seen at the products of IKEA. Bruns (2007) in her article investigates the relation of IKEA products and their role at the film 'Fight Club'. At the scenery in the film IKEA's proposal of a home becomes a globally mediated ideology.

A medium is no longer defined as the technology of a communication; the medium is both the object this technology transports and the technology itself (Lash and Lury, 2008). Dunne and Ruby (2001) sees that electronic products can be defined as media, they also compare different types of products with the genres of films, for example products of Alessi could be seen as comedy films, medical products can be seen as horror films. Krippendorf (1989) suggest that designed artifacts should 'make sense' but not for all the time the message they convey are very easily understandable (cited in Steffen, 2013a). According to Joost and Scheurmann (2008) designers use visual elements such as colors, textures, forms etc. to convey certain messages through everyday life objects. According to Buchanan (2007) a product emits at least two messages if not more, the products needs to persuade its users that it is useful and the products also emits the message that the user needs it than we can say that the product is 'desirable'.

Also surface and material qualities of objects bring an emotional and semantic value into our daily lives such as films, advertisements and other media do (Dunne and Raby, 2001).

Another very important aspect that suggests that we could see products as media is their relation with daily life. The objects of mass culture have different materiality but they have something common, they are part of our everyday life and they are mediating from an authority (Joost and Scheurmann, 2008). According to Foster (2002) Design penetrates in every aspect of our life, not only architecture and products are designed, every commercial activity is part of a design process (cited in Bonsiepe, 2007). For example according to Ross (2008) in 50's and 60's Americanism was not spread to Europe with books, radio shows or films, it was spread with products for daily life like 'jeans, cars, cleaning products'. With the help of technology it was possible to mediate culture to masses but this resulted in a standardization (Schicha, 2003). Since the 1960's products have been seen as mediators of ideologies (Mareis, 2006). Nowadays we could encounter same objects worldwide (Dorfles, 2014).

Joost and Scheurmann (2008) categorise media into two groups, dynamic media such as film or static media such as picture or products. Designed objects can be used as messages and media in order to talk about issues and make people aware of certain topics (Dunne and Ruby, 2001). According to Horst Rittel designers should be more interested in 'issues' rather than 'problems' (Buchanan, 2007). One of the most used design definition is Herbert Simon's (1996) "[e]veryone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" (cited in Huppatz, 2015). Susanne Langer (cited in Steffen, 2013b) states that forms, colors, textures, proportions can be used as text. According to Vihma (2003) object do not only answer our practical need, they also affect how we behave, think and sense.

Therefore it is important that the non-commercial design activities focus on objects as containers of messages, but in doing so they also shouldn't forget that mediation of the products are an important aspect if you would like to have an impact on people. So a theory of design practice that considers products, as media would include two aspects of mass media: that is part of our daily life and that it reaches to many people.

Materiality of Objects
The second important aspect of objects is the materiality of products. The majorities of the media we encounter are in form of visuals or are printed on a 2D surface or in a virtual environment. Objects on the other hand have the ability to be experienced by all of our senses. This makes them to have more special influence on the human nature.
According to Hawkins (2011) people think that they form materials and they control them, but when you look further you will realize that the contrary is also true. Ingold (2013) for example divides everything we see on the earth into two categories 'raw' materials and the results of materials 'artefacts'.

According to Steinbrenner (2010) the medium of industrial design is objects. It can be derived that designers are communicating their ideas through material objects. According to Bennett (2004) things have a power that attract people and manipulate their thoughts. Objects could be seen as screens (Zizek, 2014).
The materiality of objects is an important aspect when we think about products as media. New materialism could be an interesting area to support this idea. New thoughts about materiality and how material objects influence our world underlines the role of products as mediators of ideology. Thing- power materialism deals with the invisible power of objects, which were identified by different philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Julia Kristeva and Theodor Adorno (Bennett, 2004).

Two example Cases
The following two examples show that objects designed and produced with a critical stance do not have to be in form of an exhibition or need to be shown at museums and galleries. Those objects could be handled like products.

In this way the objects could also use the two important aspect of products, being able to be mediated in form of material entitiy and being part of daily life.
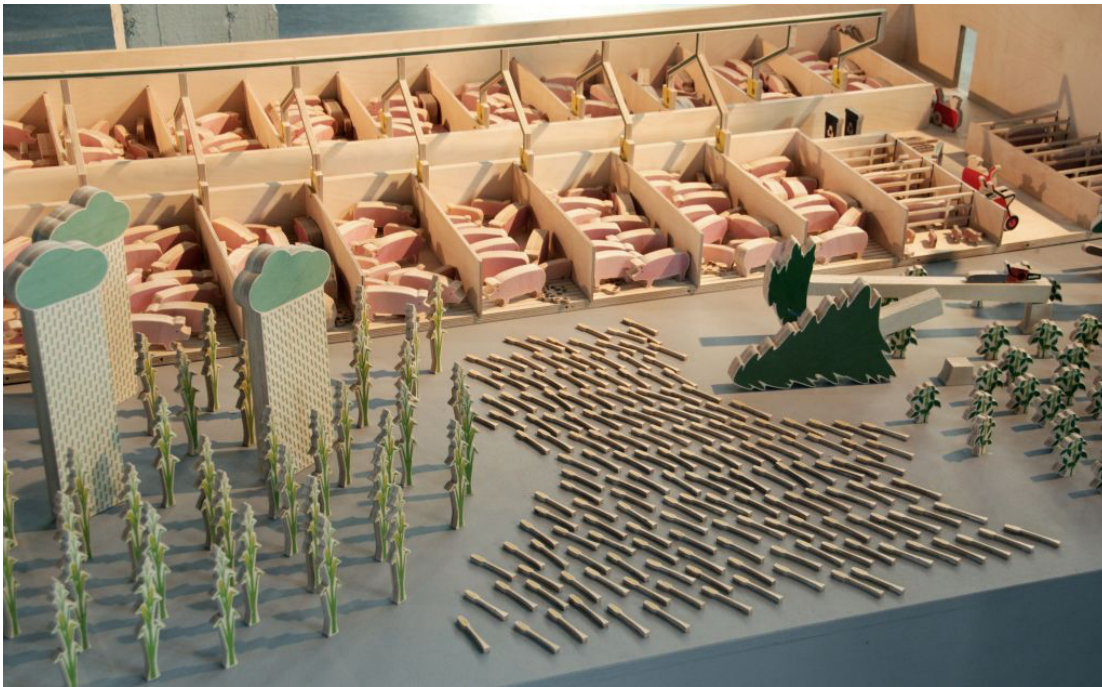
Figure 1-2: Voedseltje Spelen by Tomm Velthuis, Courtesy of the designer (Copyright)

The first example is from the Ducth designer Tomm Velthuis. The product is called 'Voedseltje Spelen'. It is a wooden toy that represents a farm house. But on the contrary of an ordianry farm house toy that shows a romantic view of a farm house 'Voedseltje Spelen' reprents a real farm that our meat comes from. With such a representation it conveys certain messages both to parents and children and in this way it can even be able to change people's attitude.

The second example of the objects that can be seen as materialise and mediates message in form of a product is called 'Food Miles Board' designed by Marije Vogelzang for Go Slow Cafe. It can be seen as a plate for food that gives information about from how far foods come from.

Figure 2-3: Food Miles Board for Go Slow Cafe by Marije Vogelzang, Courtesy of the designer (Copyright)

The cicles on the Food Miles Board represent a certain CO_2 emission and the food you could put on the cicles are proportioned to each other. So you can eat local food more and for the food imported from far away there is a very small space. The board could be used in a daily life and the message it conveys could reach many people. It can also be used as a conversation starter. The audience of such a product is confronted with the issue in their daily life, just on the moment where their attitude change is most important.

A pilot Experiment After the short literature research and example cases for the study, I wanted to conduct an experiment in which a product is going to be designed as it is a media.

In this small experiment, a piggy bank was designed for a function that a leaflet would perform. The piggy bank was produced 16 times and it was mediated in different ways such as through an online marketplace, as a gift, as a give-away and as commercial exchange. There was a sticker glued on each piggy bank and the buyers/owners of the bank were asked register their piggy bank. Eight of the sixteen piggy banks were mediated and five of the eight piggy banks were registered.

After approximately a month later, the owners of the piggy banks were asked to donate their savings minus acquisition price to a NGO (Unicef, IFRC …). In this way the piggy bank acts as a leaflet, a print media. An object could be used as a means of communication in a material form.
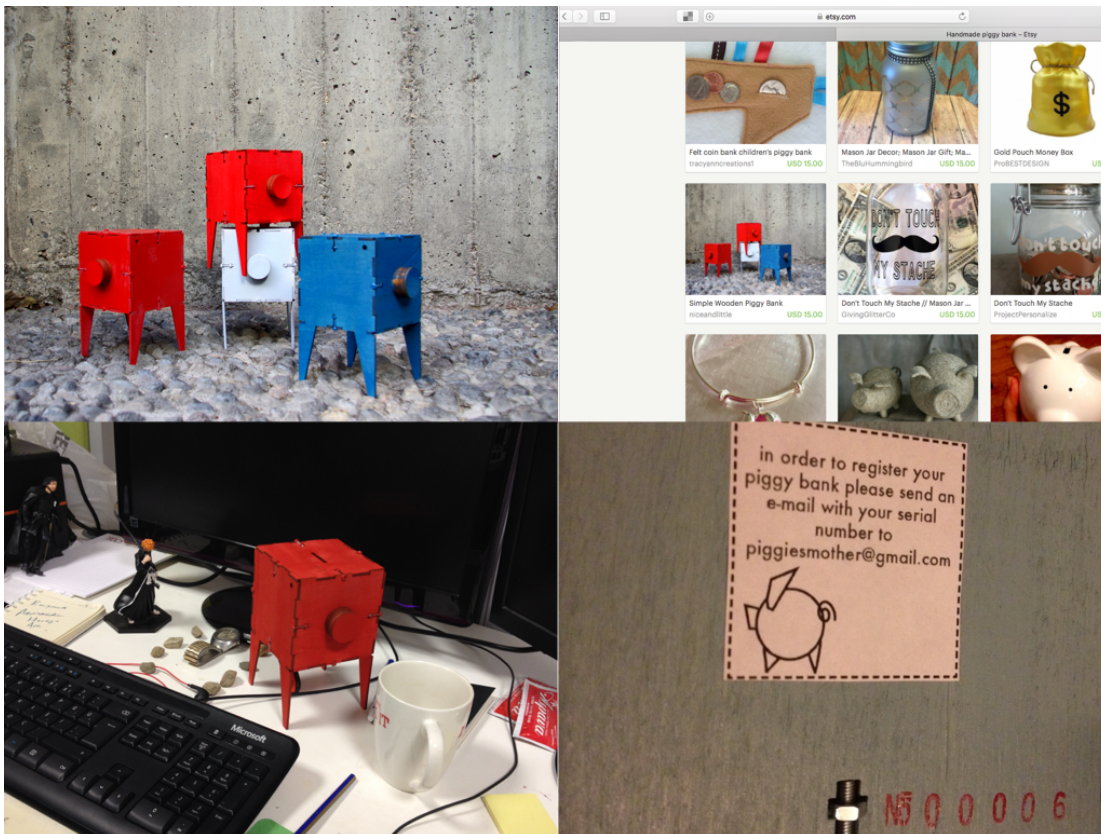
Figure 4: The Piggy Bank Experiment

Conclusions and Future Perspectives

At the end of this study it could be seen that some researchers and theoreticians see products as media and production and mediation are closely connected. Products have different qualities such as their materiality compared to other media like images and film. This quality of the products could be used and researched further for products with a critical stance.

During the small experiment it was revealed that distribution and tracking of objects are more difficult than digital media and for a larger study this should be taken in consideration. Production of objects could have also some problematic issues about cost, waste, responsibility to nature and people when compared to mediation of ideas and ideologies in form of digital media.

The potential of the products as mediating entities are not yet fully explored and there is a need of reviewing media theories from a design research perspective. Different types of products should be used inorder to experiment with the notion of 'products as media'. A wider research, exploration should be made and larger quantities of objects should be used in order to reveal more or maybe different insights on the subject.

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Images

Figure 1-2 :

Velthuis T. , Playing Food. Retrieved from http://www.bytomm.com/byTomm/VOEDSELTJE_SPELEN.html on 20th of January, 2016.

Figure 2-3 :

Marije V. , Go Slow Cafe - Food Miles Board. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/marije.vogelzang/posts/10152146963262422 on 20th of January, 2016.