

Failure, Product Semiotics, and the Modern Construction of Design

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Abstract :

Failure, mistakes, mishaps, errors, etc. is something that the modern designer usually seeks to avoid and eliminate in his/her practice. In a sense modernity is fundamentally about the rational and systematic elimination of mistakes from the systems of production and organisation; a tendency which—mistakenly—was applied to society and had monstrous and traumatic results. Method development in user centred design and related disciplines today also seems to be driven by the motivation to eliminate mistakes and errors as early as possible in the development of a new product so that the stages of development and production will be as effective as possible. However, whereas product development obviously has good reason to eliminate mistakes in respect of developing functional products that may perform well on a traditional market, mistakes and errors may, errors and mistakes may provide the designers with a symbolic property by means of which a product may still have an important part to play on a market and in society. This presentation will present the preliminary results of a research project that is currently being undertaken at Denmark's Design School in association with Superflex; a group of artists which have been internationally leading in the field of relational or social art (<http://www.superflex.net>) by combining product design, technological innovation, and artistic communication strategies. The author of the paper has followed Superflex since 1999 on various art and design projects as well as a critic and art theorist. In this paper, the preliminary results of this joint research project on mistakes, failure, and errors in design will be presented with reference to the tradition of product semiotics and to new hybrid categories of design artefacts that connects art, craft, and product design.

1. Introduction: Failure and Design

Supposedly, most people take an interest in failure, errors, mishaps, mistakes, and the like, in order to avoid them—to learn from own mistake as well as other's, and to identify sources of error, possibly emerging mistakes and failure to eliminate such sources and to make success more likely. Failure is meaningless, it seems; people may find own mistake regrettable, failure devastating. It is true that some people may divulge in other people's failure for some reason or another, and of course failure may also be amusing and fascinating—not because of evil intent but because it confirms such things as the limits of

reason, the power of chance, and perhaps a basic absurdity of being within a certain system and at a certain time. We might thus ask ourselves what on earth made Austrian taylor Franz Reichelt believe that his clumsy and apparently heavy overcoat parachute would make out a fully functional parachute for a normal size adult when he jumped out from the lower platform of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, 1912, and had a small crew to document the—obviously tragic—event by means of cinematographic recordings (Fig 1 and 2). And what made the masses in Europe celebrate the initiation of the First World War and cheer the soldiers, seemingly without worries, two years later?



Figure 1: Franz Reichelt and his overcoat parachute.



Figure 2: Franz Reichelt demonstrating his overcoat parachute on 4th February 1912 (film still)

Supposedly, also designers take an interest in failures, errors, and mistake in order to avoid and eliminate them. Seemingly, inasmuch as “design is artistic expression with a purpose” (in Danish: “Design er kunst med et formål”)—as the former director of the Danish Design School, Kjeld Ammundsen had as his motto—design would in principle be about avoiding mistakes and eliminating errors so that the designed artefacts would serve the particular purpose intended. Sources of error and possible mistakes would thus be something that should be eliminated as early in the design process as possible, and failure would thus be something that the practising designer should know about as part of his or her basic training. In current design practice’s orientation towards the user-centred design, the company IDEO and similar enterprises distinguish itself by a methodology that has been developed in order to eliminate as many sources of error as early in the design process as possible in order to be effective and innovative; effective in the sense that their products find a marked and a use that corresponds with the original strategy.

In this essay I would like to discuss notions of failure with reference to design and product semiotics. Failure makes out a fascinating phenomenon and paradoxical problem in design and management since these modern disciplines, in their attempt to serve purposefulness and to rationalise processes and organizations seeks to eliminate sources of failure rather than to recognize what failure may be and what failure may lead to in terms of positive outcomes. By this essay I seek to develop failure as a problem pertaining to design in regards of management, pedagogy, and the symbolic economy of designed artefacts in respect of their life in society; an economy that we find constructed conceptually with reference to research as well as to strategic use in the semiotics of products and artefacts. My thesis is that the strict approach to design as purposefulness—that designers systematically should concentrate their efforts to make useful things and to facilitate meaningful use—denies a critical understanding of the modern ideological construction of design and excludes itself from practical insights that possibly might lead to better design and make the role of the designer more important due to a more profound critical knowledge of his/her own enterprise.

In the first section below I would like to discuss the notion of failure with reference to modernity, management, and design pedagogy. Here I seek to demonstrate that design should be seen as an ideological construction that forms part of what I would like to designate as modernity's discursive strategy of exclusion. Secondly, I discuss failure with reference to some of the basic assumptions in product semiotics. My thesis is here, that the application of semiotics in product design has contributed significantly to the construction of design as a modern discourse of exclusion, but that one may identify alternative orientations in product semiotics that does not display the same characteristics and where one may thus find a critical, self-reflective potential for the study of how meaning is formed in respect of designed objects.

The contextual background of this study is my collaboration with art group Superflex, that I am currently hosting at the Danish Design School with funds obtained by the national Art Foundation's artists-in-residence program (Kunststyrelsen). Superflex's relational art is characterized by their interest in design that may facilitate and empower basic living conditions for people around the world that have become endangered by forces of globalization; e.g. projects such as *Supergas*, *Guaraná Power!*, and *Free Beer*. Their work at my institution is organized as an exploration into concepts, problems, and phenomena pertaining to failure and mistakes; an exploration that has taken place by means of an informal seminar series where, mainly post-graduate, design students have "confessed" what in they considered their main failure in their practice as designers. This exploratory work is expected to be published in one or more volumes within the next year and form part of the foundation for their future work as artists.

2. Failure, Design, and Modernity

Obviously, the development of design as a modern discipline is very much a—modern—project. Bauhaus and Ulm are formative not only to our contemporary concept and institution of design, but also to Modernity. Again, one may say that modernity in a certain sense is characterized by its attempt to eliminate sources of error and potential failure—to avoid errors and mistakes in production, communication, organisation, etc., and to construct a dominant perception, ideology, of what is proper and what is a failure, an error, and a mistake; a perception of normality, standard, and of deviance, abject. The most disturbing outcome of such dominant perceptions consisted in the transference of design

ideals from the field of production and distribution to that of society, and the transference of evolutionary principles of nature to culture. During the 20th Century, we thus saw how the desire for an ideal, standardized society led to the exclusion and annihilation of elements that did not fit into the picture; human beings of another race, sexuality, ethnic origin, nationality, etc. than the dominant one. Paradoxically, the admiration of an ideal also brought about a particular fixation on what was seen as wrong and erroneous. The exclusion of the other, the so-called deviant, manifested itself as an objectification—as in the so-called freak show and its exhibit of the abnormal body—and in the phobic and idiosyncratic discourses that both objectifies and excludes human beings of a certain race and sexual disposition. In this respect, modern societies seem to have a somewhat ambiguous relationship to error and failure.

Obviously, the dichotomy of standard and abject still plays an important role in industry and in the management of the public sector, and certainly, modernity's discursive strategy of exclusion lives on by means of what my colleague, Karen Lisa Salamon (2007), recently has coined a general "managementification" of society and life; an ideology where modern principles of management come to encompass most aspects of human life including our everyday life, personal relations, etc., with the aim of making us more effective (in terms of time, resources, etc.), flexible (ready to adapt to a changing environment), and pro-active (ready to identify and react to threats and options earlier than necessary) in any aspect of life, that is, not only in our professional field. The dichotomy of standard and abject manifests itself clearly in pro-active evaluation which is an integral part of modern management, and which seeks to identify inappropriate performance in terms of certain measures as early as possible in processes in order for management to facilitate change and avoid emerging failure. According to Salamon, such pro-active evaluation is pervading every aspect in modern life. However, for her the obvious problem is that not all qualities in life may be subjected to pro-active evaluation with standard systems (e.g. love) and thus that decisions may be taken on conditions that are—erroneous, falsely perceived. Salamon thus finds that the pervasion of management is leading to a dehumanisation and, paradoxically—bad management, failure, on the level of the individual life and those societies that depends on its contributions.

The pervasion of management replaces the construction of design as a discourse that was dominant in the age of industrialism (from Bauhaus to Ulm). Whereas the dichotomy of standard and abject in industrial modernity characterised the perfection of the industrial system and its conditions in society, this dichotomy has come to manifest itself by the efficiency by means of which the worker may realise him-/herself in the system and thus also in some respect how rich a life, that he/she may get out of this self-realisation. Hence the concept of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore), where the role of the designer is not to develop products with reference to an industrial system but to provide people with rich experiences with reference to a global economy of individual self-realisation.

3. Failure and Product Semiotics

Now, how does semiotics relate to failure? Semiotics is the study of signs, signification, and signifying processes and practices. Product semiotics (or product semantics, as Klaus Krippendorff insists on calling it) is thus the study of signs and signification in the field of designed products and artefacts. It should come as no surprise that whereas a dominant construction of the concept of design is based on the idea of art-with-a purpose, dominant

orientations in product design set off from the idea that the “meaning” of design fundamentally is given by its usefulness. The definition of usefulness in product semiotics should not entirely be identified with the functional properties of an artefact, it is true. Rune Monø (1997: 19) characterizes various domains of “semantic necessity” by means of which a designed artefact becomes useful and thus meaningful to human beings, e.g. domains such as the practical, artistic, antiquarian, commercial, and industrial points of view each of which may identify a particular sense of usefulness in a product. Similarly, Krippendorff finds that a semiotic (or semantic) interest in designed object basically should be a ‘a concern for the sense artefacts make to users, for how technical objects are symbolically embedded in the fabric of society, and what contributions they thereby make to the autopoiesis of culture’ (1995: 157). Claiming that “design is making sense of things”, and thus that designers should seek to make their work facilitate users in making products meaningful by their appropriation, he identifies four basic “contexts of meaning” which seek to capture all possible domains of meaning-founding contexts from the functional to the “ecological” one where designed artefacts are seen as becoming meaningful in terms of their mutual interaction. Whereas it is true that the concept of usefulness becomes relative and complex in Krippendorff’s systemic account, his basic thesis is still that meaning is based on usefulness in the sense that he finds that an artefact becomes useful when it finds its place in functional use (:the operational context of meaning), society (the socio-linguistic context of meaning), production (:context of genesis), and among other artefacts (:ecological context). In a sense, in Krippendorff’s perception of design nothing can “fail” inasmuch as in his fundamental systemic approach every instance will “find its own place” in terms of autopoiesis irrespective of the possible strategic intentions of its originators.

As far as semiotic studies in general is concerned, product semiotics distinguishes itself by having been developed primarily by practising designers with the aim of enhancing designers’ ability to include and manage the communicative dimension of designing product. Within semiotic studies this particular strategically applied semiotics seems to be shared only by a few other projects such as Jacques Bertin’s semiology of graphics (, his successors in the field of graphics and especially cartographic semiotics, and computer semiotics (Peter Bøgh Andersen)—in other words by scholars and institutions that have had a sincere interest in improving design practice in respect of communication. Interestingly, one finds a similar ambition among what we could call the founding movements in the modern construction of design, for instance in Russian formalism (e.g. Eisenstein, Malevitj) and second phase Bauhaus with its exploration of basic laws in geometry and colour. In this perspective it is difficult not to think of the application of semiotics (and kindred projects) in design as something that has had a significant import in the modern construction of design as a discourse. One should, on the other hand, also take into account the critical as well as the scientific ambitions of semiotically inspired practices within art and design—and of course the critical and scientific ambitions of semiotics as such. It is worth while at this stage to introduce what could be designated as the symbolic avant-garde in art and design; an orientation in avant-garde that should be distinguished from the avant-garde profile that would support the design discourse that I have outlined above. It is true that both avant-garde profiles may be found in the heritage that Peter Bürger (1984) designated as “historical avant-garde”; a fundamental orientation in modern art that sought to annihilate the difference between Art and Life and thus let Art serve Life. However, whereas what I call symbolic avant-garde would insist on the critical and perhaps even scientific dimension of their signifying

practices, the “design-oriented avant-garde” would prioritise purposefulness and in relation to a critical dimension. The two profiles are very different in the sense that whereas the design-oriented avant-garde ultimately will accept the annihilation of itself as avant-garde (e.g. Russian formalism after the revolution, politically instrumentalised art), symbolic avant-garde will ideally insist on an avant-garde position in society as far as its signifying practice is concerned (whereas one could imagine an annihilation of itself as avant-garde in other respect (e.g. the surrealist artist who became part of a communist community without insisting on revolution). What is at stake here is basic difference as concerns the ethos of design and communication.

It should finally be emphasized that the above mentioned representatives of product design by no means exhausts the overall project of product design. Susann Vihma's concept of reference relations (1997) provides us with an orientation that differs fundamentally from the ultimately ideological yet immensely practical traditions that I have presented above in that her fundamental take on signs and signification fundamentally insists on the existence of a sign function and thus on a semiotics of designed artefacts. Artefacts constantly call for an interpretation; they never become transparent vehicles of a given functional, socio-linguistic, genetic, or ecological contexts of meaning. However, the aim of this essay has not been to explore the symbolic activity in designed artefacts but to contribute to the disclosure of design as an ideological construct and to discuss the general role played by product semiotics in this respect. As far as product semiotics is concerned, Franz Reichelt can never be reduced to a transparent vehicle for function, culture or innovation. He will remain a mystery in his absurd display of failure. I invite colleagues studying the construction of meaning, signification, to consider the critical potential in the meaningless, in failure.

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