

DIALOGS

Value, Relationality and Unfinished Objects: Guy Julier Interview with Scott Lash and Celia Lury

Guy Julier

Guy Julier is Professor of Design at Leeds Metropolitan University, UK, and Honorary Professor of the Glasgow School of Art and, in 2008, Visiting Fellow at the University of Otago, New Zealand. An Associate Editor of *Design and Culture*, his books include *The Culture of Design* (2nd revised edition, 2007).
g.julier@leedsmet.ac.uk

ABSTRACT This “dialog” features an edited conversation with sociologists Scott Lash and Celia Lury. It explores their recent thinking in relation to political economy, critical theory, design and branding. Primarily, it opens up a discussion regarding the role of design objects, value and relationality. This perceives them not as fixed things fulfilling finite use-values, but as objects that are located within flows of meaning and capital. These have movement, not just in terms of their circulation, but also in the way they are not always temporally fixed. This is apparent in their relationship to other objects but also

to the systems of financialization within which they are engaged. By continuation, design becomes a “meta” activity where the structures of meaning production are fashioned as much as the objects that circulate within them. Within this analysis, the “user” may be understood to involve a multiplicity of individual and collective forms.

KEYWORDS: value, relationality, temporality, narrative, flows, financialization

Introduction

During the past ten years design and sociology have come progressively closer to each other. For some sociologists such as Paul du Gay and Angela McRobbie, this is captured in critical discussions of emergent discourses around the creative industries. More practically, Nina Wakeford and Elizabeth Shove are social scientists who have both explored the integration of sociological thought into design methods. Some key design consultancies, including Ideo and Design Continuum, as well as companies such as Intel and Philips have increasingly used anthropologists and sociologists within their design research. We also have the proponents of Science and Technology Studies such as Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. They are concerned with the relationship between the material and the immaterial in social networks. Through this relationship of sociology and design, issues of value, relationality and the role of creative industries in the post-Fordist, finance-dominated world emerge. How we understand the design object and the way it is mediated is crucial to this process.

Scott Lash’s work has progressively mapped out the shifting, global political economy with particular attention to the rise of the semiotic and symbolic in a post-Fordist world (Lash and Urry 1994; Lash 2002). Celia Lury has developed a compelling sociological analysis of brands and branding (Lury 2004). Their individual approaches most recently come together in *Global Culture Industry* (2007). This text critically explores, both theoretically and empirically, the flows of cultural goods, both as things and signs, within the structures of globalized systems. Within these analyses, the role of design and culture – and, eponymously, this journal – takes increasing center-stage.

Sociology and Design

Guy Julier: In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Bruno Latour (1993) argues that few academics – and particularly sociologists – talk about objects, or quasi-objects. What value does sociology bring to the discussion of objects?



Figure 1

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Celia Lury: I agree that many sociologists don't talk about objects, specifically, but sociologists have talked about object relations and object processes at some length. So for example you can think about commodity and gift exchange as examples of ways of thinking about object relations, and commodification, fetishism or gift giving as object relations. And of course, if you bring in psychoanalysis, the understanding of fetishism is extended, and you have the whole psychoanalytic school of object relations. And feminist social and cultural theory has had a huge amount to say about objectification, seduction and glamour. And then there is the centrality of notions of objectivity to debates in the philosophy of social science and epistemology. So one might refute Latour's claim altogether. But it is true I guess that sociologists have had relatively little to say about objects as objects. Even here though I think the work of Simmel needs to be acknowledged. He seems to me to be one of the most object-sensitive sociological thinkers, in his accounts of both objective culture and specific objects.

Scott Lash: I'm fascinated by the more epistemological or ontological questions about the nature of "the thing." If you look at Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* it starts out by talking about the relationship of humans and things. He says that this is about the relationship of *value*, so value comes before fact. So we value the thing before we know the thing; we value the thing in terms of our desire of the thing. So right away a relationality comes between you and the thing which is so different to the classical, Cartesian or even Kantian idea that has no relationality at all. But Simmel says

at the very beginning of *Philosophy of Money*, that value isn't a predicate, value's intrinsic to whatever thing. Things open up onto the biggest questions, onto transcendentals and art, but they are also manufactured in economies at the same time.

CL: And Baudrillard is important too – although in some of his later work his account of objects is pitched at a meta-abstract-level. In his early work he is very interested in individual objects, as well as systems of objects, and the particular qualities of object relations. But this account indicates what I think are the strengths of sociology in relation to the study of objects – that the focus is not on objects in isolation but in relations, in processes – and its weakness – that it has been relatively uninterested in the specificity of particular objects. And here other disciplines have obviously contributed far more.

GJ: And vice-versa? What can the study of objects bring to sociology?

CL: I think the take-up of Latour's work is testimony to the ways in which thinking about objects might transform sociology. But I would also recognize the work of Karin Knorr Cetina (e.g. 1997) who suggests that the study of objects is necessary for sociology, and even suggests that the contemporary ubiquity and character of objects require sociologists to engage with what she calls the post-social. This is a call to sociologists to consider whether and how sociology has come to delimit the social, by reducing sociality to subjects in relation to subjects and the inter-subjective. Knorr Cetina's notion of the post-social is part of a more general move, in which sociologists are having to reconsider the value of the ways in which lines have been drawn between the social and the natural (the environment, animals, biology and so on) and the social and the material (technology, objects, matter). A sociology of objects can open up the question of how to think about agency, extend how we think about the category of the human and contribute to debates about the very fundamental question of the limits of the social itself.

Unfinished Objects

GJ: You speak of “unfinished objects” and this is what underlines their relationality. Things undergo continual development so that they are no longer fixed. We buy a *version* of a software program – 2.0, 2.1 etc. – or a particular generation of a mobile phone, for example.

CL: For me, what is interesting about Karin Knorr Cetina's notion of unfinished objects is the way in which she links the relationality of an object to its membership of a series or system of objects. That is, the way in which I understand her notion of “unfinished objects” is that our relation to any single object is always in part informed by our relation to the object world of which that object is a part, whether that world is a network, a series, an ensemble, a closed or open



Figure 2

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system. And that the characteristics of the series, the ensemble, the system the network – as a specific organization of relations, with specific properties - are important in understanding relations between subjects and objects. And if you push this further then I think one of the questions being posed is whether and how such series, ensembles or systems have the capacity to be self-organizing – or at least whether and how the kinds of reflexivity that are produced in, for example, the series or the network, have properties or capacities which need to be acknowledged. So, for me, the unfinished object is not (only) to be understood as single, “user-friendly,” “multi-purpose” or “open-use” objects but as an open-ended series or system. It is about what an object might become, how it might evolve, how and with what (as well as who) it might connect, interact or evolve and so on.

GJ: Perhaps we could call this “relational design,” to transpose from Bourriaud’s (2002) idea of “relational aesthetics.” Nicholas Bourriaud is interested in open-ended and highly social art practice – the audience as community with the art being about human interactions. Does your notion of relationality demand a distinct approach to “object analysis?” Where would this process start, how and where would you recommend that the student of “relational design” begin their analysis and approaches and tools might they use?

CL: It's interesting to think about the relationship of the unfinished object to an environment or ecology in which the individual human user is not the only or even necessarily the most important element of the environment. The "user" might thus be understood variously: as some kind of collective, mass, assemblage or ecology (including other objects and the natural environment). And of course the notion of unfinished-ness directly introduces the notion of temporality – thinking the future of the object as something to be considered as implicated in the present of the object.

SL: I think there's something processual about the way we describe what's going on in the global culture industry. Design surely does work in networks and its got a certain temporality and atemporality in that sense. By contrast the Material Culture Studies approach, like Daniel Miller's work, has a very static view of objects. It's quite traditionalist in the way he sees, for example, the gift. The piece that influenced us a lot was that of Arjun Appadurai (1996) where he talks about flow. Circulation and movement are really important.



Figure 3

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Narrative

GJ: Individually, you write about the reduction of information to bytes, the cutting out of narratives (Lash 2002) and the atemporality of objects (Lury 2004). There is a sense of both intensification and fragmentation of the information and objects that you are both dealing with. At the same time, I can't help feeling that branding specialists and managers are constantly trying to, in fact, create clear stories,

to present narratives and control these, their boundaries, their temporality and their flow. For example, I am reminded of hearing about someone being appointed as the manager of “brand retirement” of the Ford Escort car – so someone is employed to make sure that it gets a good send-off and then is remembered fondly. Thus one of the automobile company’s aims is to create, tell and therefore control a final chapter in the story of a brand. Do your analyses – which suggest an end of narrative and representation – stand at odds with my suppositions about the processes of branding?

CL: Yes of course you are quite right that stories – and narrative – are a very important part of brand identity for many brands. But although we do talk about the rise of the mediation of things and the thingification of the media in the global culture industry, we explicitly say that this does not mean that representation is disappearing or will disappear. And I’d stick with that but it doesn’t address the point you’re making. Perhaps one way to do this is to say that we are arguing that the relation between narrative and representation is changing – that narrative is no longer so consistently organized in relation to texts, or in relation to an author function, regulated by copyright, separated out from everyday life (that is, it is less consistently representational). Rather, we suggest that narratives are circulating in a multiply mediated environment, in which their internal integrity or coherence is much more permeable, in which characters can be detached and move across narratives and media, in which the capacity of narratives to induce self-reflection in the reader declines – in which, in fact, narratives don’t have readers (whether of books, films, television programs or brands) but audiences, publics or users.

SL: I wonder if the kind of stories that advertisers or branders are telling us are very different from the classic narrative structure in which we have a protagonist whose projection is played out through, for example Hollywood cinema. Narratives are also glosses. Stories are an account and if they are an account it’s a lot different. I think we construct reality by saying things and giving an account at the same time. An account is a bit of a gloss, a bit of a justification – you’re saying something and signaling something at the same time. And that’s different to classical narrative.

GJ: It’s a kind of reflexive narrative then?

SL: Yes. In sociology there is ethno-methodology which is about the analysis of account giving. We’re doing some work with branders in China and there’s a magazine called *Modern Weekly* there which is probably the most successful private-sector Chinese weekly. It has fashion, some politics, media, technology. They do advertorials in a blatant way. So the content, the editorial and the advert are collapsed. Partly because it pays for it but partly because they don’t think as much as perhaps we do in terms of these separate categories. So

narrative or accounts are less separate from branding. The other thing is that the Chinese reader doesn't have the same image culture as we in the West do. So they want an account to understand the image. Stories and accounts, in the least "classical narrative" way, like these are going on. That's like the storytelling that's going on in branding.

GJ: How does this system relate back to design objects?

SL: The object has imploded on the inside and exploded on the outside. For example, there's the beauty of the iPod, the whole surface ability and its attractiveness on the outside on the one hand and there's something else that's going on at another level. On the inside this is partly a software and algorithmic thing – designers are writing algorithms! So between these there's something happening on the brand level that is very hard to put your finger on and which is a classic Kantian thing: unknowable in itself. Yet we can write about it, talk about it and teach about it even if we can't say exactly what it is.



Figure 4

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Finance

GJ: *Modern Weekly* also manages to include "news, business and lifestyle" into one magazine. Here we can see the palpable connection between design as something aspirational and the world of finance. Just as we've seen the globalization of finance markets in the past twenty years, so design and branding have been in ascendance. Is this rise of financialization, branding and design

linked? I understand financialization, in strict terms, to be about, firstly, the rise of shareholder value within corporate governance, secondly, the rise of profit through financial rather than commodity production systems (e.g. deferring on pension systems, subleasing a truck fleet, liquefying the real estate of a corporation to lease it back while investing the capital elsewhere), and thirdly, the rise of financial trading.

CL: I think there is definitely a historical coincidence between the three, but I'm not sure that there is any necessary link in the sense of a causal relation between them. Rather – and here I'm speculating somewhat – I think that financialization and branding at least (I'm not sure about design here) are examples of the increasing significance of what Lee and Lipuma call cultures of circulation. That is, they are examples of the ways in which the relations between production, distribution and reception are no longer to be understood in terms of some kind of sequence, in which production was located as the (prior, original and principal) source of value. Instead, both financialization and branding might be seen as examples of market cultural forms in which the heterogeneous temporalities of circulation produce value. There is a more open-ended relation to the future; no longer a necessary reference back to the producer (labor time), but instead a calculative relation to a future as a source of value. In finance markets, and to some extent in relation to brands, this is understood through the prism of risk.

GJ: Saskia Sassen (2003) talks about the way that architecture becomes a way to release capital into global flows. So a building isn't just steel, glass and concrete but a way of raising further capital (presumably by acting as security). Equally, we are reminded that Ford now makes more money from loans than from selling cars and trucks. More prosaically, home improvement shows on TV are ways of identifying sources of value (the potential of the property) and creating further value. I think this refers back to the other questions about atemporality ... of things being in the present but also pointing to a future realization of value. In here, brand valuation (like the annual Interbrand survey) is about future value, and design is harnessed in here to somehow point in that direction.

SL: Design and finance work differently, but they both have to do with value. I wrote about design intensity – in *Economies of Signs and Spaces* – and its role when you're producing for an economy where there are more and more different things being made and production runs are shorter. So much more value is put into things through design if we are to talk design as a labor process. And in that sense brands create value in a not completely dissimilar way, except that for design it's a real knowledge input. Design is something you're going to copyright or patent whereas brands work through trademark law which is something very different. It's

something out there, it's almost creating itself. But if you go back to finance in that same context – I'm involved in a large study of Chinese financial markets – the more you look into finance the more you notice that people are unlocking sources of value. It's a different kind of knowledge work.

GJ: Perhaps there is a distinction between the work of design that puts value into things and the object of design that sometimes works to produce or unlock future value. Do you think that a similar sensibility comes through in Richard Florida's work? Florida (2002) is about identifying not finance, but creative potential in a location so that the existence of designers in a city, for example, acts as a signifier of potential, future value that can be unlocked in that location?

SL: It's something that's generating value. If I make this cup [picks up coffee cup] on an assembly-line, it's not really *potential*, it's something actual. But the potential that can generate ten different kinds of cup or the potential that can think of three or four different kinds of financial products or even where to look for value is what is significant in this case. I think design is a lot about potential as is it is about creativity.



Figure 5

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Acknowledgments

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