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To cite this article: Matt Kiem (2013) If Political Design Changed Anything They'd Make it Illegal: Review Essay on Carl DiSalvo's Adversarial Design, *Design Philosophy Papers*, 11:1, 31-38

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279313X13968799816038>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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## REVIEW

# If Political Design Changed Anything They'd Make it Illegal

Review Essay on Carl  
DiSalvo's *Adversarial Design*

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A review essay of Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design*, MIT Press Press, 168 pages, published April 2012.

Design is political, right? ‘Of course!’, we might reply. But how exactly? What does it mean to even talk about ‘politics’, and, when considering different answers to this question, what are the implications for design? Is there more than one way for design to be ‘political’? If so what options are there and how do they work? These are the questions that Carl DiSalvo engages with in *Adversarial Design*. Drawing principally on the political theory of Chantal Mouffe, the central thesis of this work is that adversarial design represents a means to generate the kind of antagonistic relations deemed essential to the experience of ‘the political’ and the condition of democracy. Focusing on the medium of computational design, DiSalvo uses a generous number of examples to tease out in precise terms how

agonism can be produced through the design of various artefacts and systems. The result is a relatively systematic account of how information design, social robots and ubiquitous computing (ubicomp) may be deployed in the form of tactics that DiSalvo terms ‘revealing hegemony’, ‘reconfiguring the remainder’, and ‘articulating collectives’. However, while *Adversarial Design* presents a novel take on the political possibilities of design, my experience of reading this book, which began with genuine interest, had by the end resulted in frustration and dissatisfaction. In the following review I will describe the elements of DiSalvo’s argument in more detail before examining what I believe are the book’s theoretical and political limitations.

The overall aim of *Adversarial Design* is to provide a detailed examination of the possibilities of political design, a concept that is set in contrast to design for politics. The difference between the two concepts hinges on the intent and effect of the design in question. Drawing the political theory of Chantal Mouffe, DiSalvo proposes that, whereas ‘politics’ is concerned with the administrative issues of governance, ‘the political’ refers to the experience of antagonism that emerges as a contested line of interest between two groups. As Mouffe has argued, ‘the political’ is a condition of social existence that, if understood and managed appropriately, has the potential to improve rather than threaten liberal democratic governance. Political design, therefore, is concerned with how the experience of agonism might be articulated through the work of design. Following Mouffe, DiSalvo positions adversarial design as a kind of political design that contributes to the healthy politicisation of life within a democracy:

For democracy to flourish, spaces of confrontation must exist, and contestation must occur. Perhaps the most basic purpose of adversarial design is to make these spaces of confrontation and provide resources and opportunities for others to participate in contestation.<sup>1</sup>

Having defined adversarial design, DiSalvo devotes three chapters to a closer analysis of how agonism is expressed in different kinds of computational design. While adversarial design can be applied to any kind of artefact or system, DiSalvo chooses to limit the scope of his study in order to develop an understanding of computational design’s ‘medium particularity’. The three categories that DiSalvo defines, information design, social robots and ubicomp, are each analysed for the qualities they exhibit and the kind of agonistic tactics they are disposed to facilitate.

The first of these categories, information design, is characterised by the effect of representational procedures, that is, information design that is able to reveal, in a dynamic way, the relation between informational inputs that change over time or according to different contexts. Two examples that demonstrate this are Josh On’s They Rule and Exxon Secrets. For They Rule, a website was created

that allowed users to visually map the relation between executives, politicians, and other powerful figures through the various corporate boards that each sat on. Similar software was then created for Exxon Secrets, a Greenpeace sponsored project that showed the funding connections between Exxon-Mobil and various researchers, lobbyist, and organisations that form part of the climate-change skeptic industry. In doing this, DiSalvo claims that these and other examples of computational information design are engaged in the agonistic tactic of revealing hegemony, defined as “exposing and documenting the forces of influence in society and the mean by which social manipulation occurs”.<sup>2</sup>

For the design of social robots, DiSalvo moves his analysis to the physical embodiment of ‘computational intelligence’. The issue that concerns DiSalvo at this point is the way our relation towards robots are normalised by acts of design. The tactic that follows from this observation is called reconfiguring the remainder. This terminology derives from Bonnie Honig’s theory that the workings of any political group tends towards the exclusion of something, whether it be people, practices or discourses that can be identified as the remainder. Reconfiguring the remainder in social robots, therefore, represents the privileging of characteristics that are generally excluded in the design of robots. To make this point, DiSalvo compares a typically amiable robot designed for a task similar to animal therapy with other projects that aim to create a more uncanny relation between people and robots. Two examples of ‘uncanny engineering’, both from the artist Kelly Dobson, are a food blender that runs at an intensity that matches growling or whining sounds of a person, and a football sized rubber object designed to mimic the breathing pattern of someone holding it. A third example is the project by Marc Böhnen involving two robots programmed to engage in responsive dialogue that escalates into an argument.

The third category, ubicomp, moves the scope of analysis away from singular artefacts and towards questions of how systems of computationally enabled things might facilitate agonistic experiences. Here DiSalvo defines his interest as the ‘articulation of collectives’, or the way that computational devices might act to reveal or enact relations amongst things. This is described as the construction of “linkages between objects, people, and actions”, that, when thought of in terms of agonism, may be deployed to create an “open space of contest in which the elements gathered together are able to act out a plurality of conflicting practices, values, and beliefs”.<sup>3</sup> An example used by DiSalvo is Usman Haque’s Natural Fuse project, in which pot-plants are incorporated into a network of electronic devices that are designed to release only as much carbon as is possible to offset by the plants. Through specially designed switch, networked users must make a decision about whether they use the limited amount of electricity that is afforded by their plant, or to drain the collective store of carbon, thereby putting the life of some other user’s plant at

risk. Two further examples, each created by Mark Shepard, involve devices that respond to the issue of electronic surveillance: Ad-hoc Dark (roast) Network Travel Mug – a covert communications system disguised as travel coffee mugs, and CCD-Me Not Umbrella – an umbrella augmented to disrupt and confuse camera surveillance systems.

So what is the value of DiSalvo's thesis? The innovation of course is in bringing the concept of agonism to the practice of design. In a field whose interests too often remain limited to what is instrumental and commercially viable, adversarial design represents an alternative mode of thinking and new language of critique. For what it aims to do and the way that it is demonstrated, 'adversarial design' sits somewhere very close to Dunne and Raby's 'critical design', a body of work that I have found somewhat useful for challenging undergraduate preconceptions about what it is possible to do with design. But, while DiSalvo's book holds similar potential in this respect, I think it also shares many of the shortcomings of critical design. Specifically, in the case of *Adversarial Design* there are substantial limitations that follow from not considering the implications of 'the political' as a condition of 'the designed', a consequence of which is a much narrower conception of design's political agency. Furthermore, I think this work suffers from a failure to articulate the grounding of its own politics, which, while not substantially articulated, does tend to default to supporting a problematic status quo.

To expand on these points, the most substantial thing left out of the equation in DiSalvo's thesis is the extent to which the political is circumscribed and directed by design. This is a curious oversight given that the grounds for examining this point exist within the very theory that DiSalvo draws upon. As Mouffe has argued, the bulk of liberal political theorists are misguided in trying to articulate the possibility of a neutral political order, particularly with arguments based on some presupposition of what it means to be reasonable. In contrast, Mouffe, using Wittgenstein, makes the point that any consensus on what is reasonable will always presuppose some tacit identification with a way of living, not a universal (neutral) sense of what is rational or just. This is a point that should be of principle concern for design theorists because the character of a way of life will always be a condition of what has been designed, which in turn will imply both a way of designing and a way of being (or not being) political. This points to the ontological character of design, which – as Winograd and Flores argued in 1987 and Tony Fry extended in 2011 – is necessarily political.<sup>4</sup>

Design, therefore, is something that exists as a (usually unnamed) political force before it is explicitly identified as a means to produce agonism. That is, by conditioning experience at the level of the ontological, design is always implicit in the way boundaries are erected and order is established and enforced. In this way, as the active background to our experience of the world, design is something

that can work to delimit political possibilities. By this I mean that the condition of what has already been designed effects what kinds of political issues will be allowed to gain traction, in what way this will occur, and to what effect. Climate change, for instance, is a clear case of an issue that, despite being made intensely political through a variety of designerly means, has, through the counter effects of the televisual, socio-material structuring, and the insipid politicking of domestic and international elites, developed nothing of the kind of agency needed to shift the trajectory of a phenomenon that will fundamentally change how humans live on this earth. This failure is not due to a lack of design induced agonism, but, rather, a lack of political agency that has been brought into being by design.

Misrecognising the political-ontological force of design impacts on the way DiSalvo represents political design. By this I mean that 1) DiSalvo does not pose the politics of the already designed as a political problem, meaning that, 2) he accepts the (designed) politics of liberal democracy as a legitimate frame within which to consider political design, which, 3) precludes the possibility of an autonomous design politics that, motivated by its own political imperative, looks to displace the liberal democratic order. This is where the politics of *Adversarial Design* represents a problem, no less because DiSalvo articulates the value of adversarial design in relation to a disastrously simplistic conception of democracy. This is an important point because despite being an oft-sited concept, 'democracy' certainly does not have a clear, singular, or universal meaning. On the contrary, there is much that has and continues to be done under the banner of democracy that would strike both proponents and opponents as profoundly inconsistent. In raising this point I am not calling into question the value of 'equality' per se, but what is at stake in how this is interpreted and translated into a political system. There is a world of difference, for instance, between Carl Schmitt's conception of democracy as the flip-side to dictatorship (equality of substance within a homogenous political body personified in a charismatic leader), the Marxist ideal of a (historically unfulfilled) stateless condition of economic equality, and the liberal idea of procedural equality amidst economic freedom (inequality and perpetual growth). There is still further difference between a system of representational democracy (with its political alienation, corruptibility, and dependency upon the design(ing) of mass media) and the direct, horizontal, and consensus based practices used by Quakers and the Global Justice and Occupy movements (involving the design of radically different customs, procedures, spaces, symbols etc.).

Given these significant differences, it is somewhat of a problem to deploy 'democracy' as an unexamined signifier of 'the good'. From the treatment DiSalvo gives it though, the best we can discern about the relation between political design and democracy is that the health of civic life and public discourse is best served by cultivating the kind of agonistic relations that may be resolved without escalation to a

condition of absolute enmity or radical political change. Adversarial design fits into this framework by providing a means to prompt a potentially infinite series of agonistic positions that can (by design) only play out within the bounds of a liberal democratic order. In my reading, this amounts to a more conservative version of Mouffe's original defense of liberal democracy, which she is at least honest enough to describe as "an intervention that implies the repression of other alternatives".<sup>5</sup> For DiSalvo, therefore, adversarial design is not just about the creation of agonism in itself, but, because it provides a non-, or perhaps even anti-radical way for designers to 'be political', political design also works as a means to deflect support for any kind of (design lead) politics that aims to displace liberal democracy.<sup>6</sup>

That political design is positioned in support of liberal democracy without substantiating either its character or value is a highly problematic undercurrent of this book. It also accounts for why some of the examples in this book seem misjudged and problematically framed, in the sense that they model a way of being political that appeals to some of the design field's most myopic (self)interests. For instance, 'controversies' around social robots are an exemplar case of a technophilic fetish that attracts far more attention than it deserves. In a world where (by design) the vast majority of people are systematically deprived of the socio-material means to create healthy lives, and where (again by design) companies continue to profit from materially intensifying the lives of the wealthy (increasing the output of the soon-to-be-wasted), exploring the nuances of human-robot relations on the premise that this will be a major problem in the future seems to me a somewhat indulgent distraction.

The same can be said for ubicomp. To start with, I think it is a major failing that throughout *Adversarial Design* the designerly concealment of the wastefulness, toxicity, energy intensiveness, and the labour conditions of computer electronics production goes unacknowledged as serious ethical-political issue. This exclusion comes to a head in the third chapter where the problem of ubiquitous computing is elided for the sake of making rhetorical points about other issues. For the social and ecological effects it produces, the unexamined expectation that computer electronics will become more ubiquitous (higher impacting) is something that desperately calls for critique, challenge, and designerly redirection. This is not to say that we should ignore or abandon computer electronics. We are long past the point where this is either possible or desirable. Rather, the challenge is in finding a proper relation with (and within) technology that puts an end to a productivism that has become dislocated from actual human need. Crucially, this state of affairs and the problem it represents has arrived by design, meaning that it is possible, with the right kind of political agency, to design a different state of affairs into being. The examples in *Adversarial Design*, however, do nothing to help us understand or enact what this might mean.

These issues are unfortunate, especially as the analysis often takes the form of good insights gone wrong. For instance, the observation that artefacts are designed to fit within and change psycho- or socio-material conditions is a point of such political significance that it is quite frustrating to see it manifest as a blunder that responds to screaming. This can be contrasted with projects that have developed designerly strategies to eliminate otherwise unnecessary products.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as we learn from Heidegger, Latour, and Fry, the way that our sociality is conditioned by the interconnectedness of things is a point that holds true and presents possibilities that are perhaps more interesting for not relying on everything being electronically connected. This, however, requires a style of critical analysis and design action that takes into account the kinds of relational, ontological, and political effects identified by Flores and Winograd, the futural implications raised by Fry, and something like the design scenarios represented by Manzini.<sup>8</sup> This also calls for a much more critical examination of the liberal dimension of liberal democracy. For instance, building a designerly resistance to technocentric productivism necessarily involves a collective (political) claim about how ‘we’ should or should not live which challenges the liberal tendency to deflect such questions to the realm of private ethics and a capitalist marketplace. These issues inevitably return however in the form of various technologically extended threats to environmental, national, personal or personal security, which, as we see in Haque and Shepard’s work, often reproduce proposals for unreflective technological responses.

Revealing hegemony, reconfiguring the remainder, and articulating collectives are all interesting ideas, but, with the exception of some of the informational designs, these tactics are demonstrated using projects that will produce far more exhibitions, images, catalogues and books than actual political agency. This issue is somewhat broached by DiSalvo in the concluding chapter, but the implications of the politics implied by his version of political design is far too quickly dismissed. It seems that by this point in the book DiSalvo has become so closed to the possibility of thinking the political as designed or liberal democracy as a problem that anything beyond the horizon of an aestheticised investigation into technocentric futures seems either rigid or “unduly romantic”.<sup>9</sup> In response, when it comes to the question of what is and is not possible I side with those like Žižek who claim that “the true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are”.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, *Adversarial Design* seems to be a book about political things rather than the politics of the designed. It does represent a different way of thinking about design but I find it hard to see how, as it stands, political design will make difference beyond the self-perpetuating world of research labs, design galleries, seminars run by clever designers, and more books like *Adversarial Design*. In this sense most of the examples are really aestheticised props for

(re)producing ineffective discourses rather than design led political agency. As the strongest examples, the informational designing involved in revealing hegemony still operates within a politics of appeal (to the current order), rather than building political alternatives. This tactic, however, could fruitfully be applied to the design field itself in order to reveal how our thinking about design is structured by the agendas of government, the market, the profession, and the university itself. In general, if political design is to become a concept of influence beyond the fashions of design academia I think it would need to take up a more substantial political imperative and engage directly with the problem of designing against the politics of the already designed.

### Notes

1. Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012. p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 35.
3. Ibid., p. 96.
4. Terry Winograd & Fernando Flores. *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*, Sydney: Addison-Wesley, 1987, p. 163 and Tony Fry, *Design as Politics*, New York: Berg, 2011.
5. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of The Political*, London; New York: Verso, 1993. p. 152.
6. For more on what this might mean see Fry, *Design as Politics*, 2011.
7. Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Design Away', *Design Philosophy Politics*, August 2009. <http://designphilosophypolitics.informatics.indiana.edu/?p=115> Accessed 14/11/2012.
8. Ezio Manzini, *Sustainable Everyday: Scenarios of Urban Life*. Milan: Edizioni Ambiente, 2003.
9. DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design*, p.121.
10. Slavoj Žižek, 'Don't Fall in Love with Yourselves', in C. Blumenkranz et al. (eds) *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*, Verso, 2011, p. 67.