

Fashion Victims: Visualizing the Hertzian Space Through Critical Design and Wearable Computing

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Hertzian Space is three-dimensional and spatial. It's an environment that needs to be fully understood if it is to be made habitable. – From www.fashionvictims.org

Created by collaboration between Agnelli Davide, Buzzini Dario, and Drori Tal from the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea in Italy, the work Fashion Victims explores the effect that cell phones have on social environments.[1] A bag, a shirt, and a hat permanently change color as a reaction to cell phone signals around them. Red pigment leaks onto the neutral white surface of the fabric, creating the impression that something inside the bag is bleeding.[2] Fashion Victims explores the invasion of physical and personal space resulting from widespread use of cell phones, inspired by the author of Hertzian Tales, Anthony Dunne.[3] It is an example of a conceptual wearable art work that blurs the boundaries between art, craft, gadgets, and design, in order to critique the new social codes that have been created by the widespread use of technology. In a larger context, this work shows the emerging avant-garde movement in conceptual design, where functionality is used as a vessel for exploring the poetic qualities of technology.

IMAGE COMING SOON Agnelli Davide, Buzzini Dario, Drori Tal Fashion Victims 2003, www.fashionvictims.org. Image courtesy of the artists.

The creators of Fashion Victims sum up their project as “an exploration of the

invisible world behind mobile communication through clothes and apparel.”[4] Their aim is to explore this subject through an unconventional approach of “critical design” or “design research”. They hope that findings from the project can be used as an alternative source of information for designing new products, therefore serving as an equivalent to traditional user studies of technology. Dunne refers to this design approach as seeing objects and technology as ideas, not merely mass products.[5] Following that approach, the work is a conceptual art piece that stands alone and makes its audience contemplate the invasion of their personal space by the cell phone signals that surround them. Fashion Victims is a characteristic example of critical or research design, which can be read on many levels, and from many disciplines.

Marshall McLuhan argues that new technologies change the way in which societies structure themselves: “that the personal and social consequences of any medium...result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs.”[6] His theory that the “medium is the message” can be easily applied to Dunne’s approach to critical design and ambiguous objects. Whereas new technologies are created as extensions of our body, these works function as a means to examine technology, while using its own language to do so. The findings of these experiments can then be used both to develop these technologies, and to call our attention to the flaws in their ethical or sociological content. Like a Litmus paper test, they examine their own message through using the technology of the medium itself.

Following theories of McLuhan and Dunne, the work Fashion Victims places our use of cellular phones on the examining table. Over the past few years, cell phones have become such an intrinsic part of our everyday life that we find it difficult to imagine the world without them.[7] They have shaped our personal communication, as well as rebuilt the social landscape. Davide states in his introduction to Fashion Victims: “the emergence of a new body language, the definition of private space versus public space, the concepts of presence, tele-presence and attentiveness, as well as the appearance of new social codes.”[8] All these elements of our everyday life have been altered over the past few years due to widespread cell phone use, yet few theorists have thoroughly examined these changes on a cultural level.

One such theorist is Hans Geser, whose text “Towards a Sociological Theory of a Mobile Phone” argues that whereas the Internet has received substantial

amount of analysis, cell phone use has remained relatively ignored. He believes that theorists' lack of interest in the use of cell phones ignores a great social phenomenon, "in comparison with PC's and Internet technologies, cell phones are used by broader strata of the population, and that for many users, they have stronger impacts on social life." [9] Geser goes on to examine many layers of social interaction that cell phone use has affected: from the way we interact with our own families, to how we use cell phones as a barrier against unwanted contact with strangers. [10]

Hertzian Tales also references cell phone use indirectly. His concerns, however, are more artistic than Geser's: "the extrasensory parts of the electromagnetic spectrum form more and more our artificial environment, yet designers direct little attention toward the possible sensual and poetic experience of this industrially produced new materiality." [11] The hidden poetry of the electromagnetic field is what lies behind Dunne's conception of Hertzian Space. The spaces created by electromagnetic fields are simultaneously real and imaginary, as well as conceptual. Their reality lies in the fact that electromagnetic waves are physical entities, emitted by technology that uses them. They are, however, invisible to the human eye, so this existence is partly mythological. A further psychological, or conceptual, content is added to this space by disruption of patterns in human interaction that results from the use of technology, such as cell phones. Fashion Victims uses techniques of critical design suggested by Dunne to explore the invasive nature of Hertzian Space. Taking into account sociological issues presented in Geser's essay, the Victims' apparel in effect materializes the Hertzian space around it, using it as a device to produce patterns and colors. On one level, the bleeding patterns of the paint invoke associations of destruction and invasion, spoiling the white purity of the purse. On another level, however, the metamorphosis of the bag creates often unpredictable and visually appealing effects. The Hertzian Space around the bag creates a new object from the white canvas, invoking reactions ranging from skepticism to excitement, purposefully maintaining a neutral ground that is aimed at posing, but not answering these questions.

The absence of straightforward criticism in Fashion Victims is one of the most predominant elements of the work. [12] It emphasizes the ambiguity within its many layers of meaning; the piece thus blurs the boundaries between design and art. Sarah Kettley, in her essay "Framing the Ambiguous Wearable," argues that the main problem of wearable technology artworks lies in the tension be-

tween viewing the work, and the prospect of hypothetically using it. According to Kettley, artists often resolve this problem through the use of ambiguity of information, context, and relationship between the work and its audience.[13]

Using Kettley's classification system, the ambiguity of information and context are most prominent in *Fashion Victims*. As mentioned earlier in the essay, the garments' metamorphosis is disturbing and aesthetically fascinating at the same time. This effect is what Kettley refers to as ambiguity of information, where "visual output, normally explicit, is blurred or scrambled." [14] The creators of the work also support this argument by posing the question to the audience: Can an "illustrative" project stand on itself, and have effective results, if it starts from a non-judgmental standpoint?" [15] While *Fashion Victims* occupies this seemingly nonjudgmental realm, it also maintains certain clarity of purpose: mainly that the garment is meant to be worn. The working prototype is first, and foremost, a bag. This clarity further pushes this work into the grey zone between art and design; is it a bag, or an artwork? Do these classifications have to be mutually exclusive? Can a functional bag be an art piece, or does it become a commercial product when it's taken out of a gallery setting?

By occupying the grey zone between art, design, and craft, works such as *Fashion Victims* possess certain subjectivity in the situations in which they are viewed. Going back to Kettley's classification of ambiguity, this effect can be said to constitute the ambiguity of context, "in which a recognizable object with strong connotations is replaced within a new context, thus highlighting how we read objects through their framing." [16] The ambiguity of context, as well as information, is what Kettley uses to draw parallels between pieces that critically explore wearable technology and the artistic movement often classified as contemporary craft. She states: "Contemporary craft... as a field of design, has utilitarian foundations, which have been overtaken by poetic motivations." [17] These poetic motivations can often become apparent when the craft objects are presented in a gallery setting, whereas the utilitarian functions are more prevalent when the same objects are used functionally as, for example, a necklace, a soup bowl, or a tea set.

Fountain, the iconic work by Marcel Duchamp, and arguably most influential piece of the twentieth century, can be said to embody the concept of ambiguity of context. Duchamp signed and presented an ordinary urinal in a gallery setting, suggesting it can be viewed as an art piece. Shocking the conservative art

world with this bold gesture, Duchamp defied the rigid ideals of Modernism, giving birth to a new avant-garde movement which would evolve into Post-Modernism. Whereas the direct goals of this work cannot be compared to the ideals behind Critical Design, the questions it poses are very relevant to the understanding of artworks such as Fashion Victims.

IMAGE COMING SOON Marcel Duchamp Fountain 1917,
<http://arthist.binghamton.edu/duchamp/fountain.html>

Throughout history, art has been used as a tool to both project into the future and critique its present condition, from Impressionism and the Industrial Revolution, to Post-Modernism as a reaction to the emergence of a global society. Viewing the era of Post-Modernism as a transitional stage from the constraints of Modernism, artists and theorists are drawn to examine the paradigm shift that is happening even today. The stains on the clean surface of the Fashion Victims bag can be seen as an analogy to the emerging avant-garde movement, drawing our attention to the Hertzian fields that have grown to dominate our daily lives. In today's world of gadgets and graphic design, technology aims to be seamless and invisible, merely serving its basic function of making our lives easier.[18] Working against these notions, artworks such as Fashion Victims have chosen to bring the invisible technology out into the open, using its own medium to examine the sociological, ethical, and personal implications of its domination.

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Endnotes

1 Agnelli Davide, Buzzini Dario, Drori Tal (*Fashion Victims*, 2003), www.fashionvictims.org

2 Agnelli Davide, Buzzini Dario, Drori Tal: "Fashion Victims: an unconventional research approach in the field of mobile communication." (*InteractionDesign Institute Ivrea*, 2003). http://people.interaction-ivrea.it/d.agnelli/on/fv/resources/ismid04_fv_v01.pdf (accessed November 10, 2006): 1

3 Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience and Critical Design*, RCA Computer Related Design Research, 1999

4 Ibid. 1

5 Dunne, 15

6 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. "The Medium is the Message". (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964): 23

7 Davide (*Interaction Design*), 1

8 Ibid,

9 Hans Geser,. "Towards a Sociological Theory of the Mobile Phone." (*University of Zurich*, 2003). http://socio.ch/mobile/t_geser1.htm (accessed November 16, 2006): 6

10 Ibid. 10

11 Dunne, 30

12 Davide, (*Interaction Design*) : 4

13 Sarah Kettley. "Framing the Ambiguous Wearable." (*HCI Research Group, School of Computing Napier University*, 2005) <http://www.soc.napier.ac.uk/publication/op/getpublication/publicationid/7894743> (accessed November 12, 2006): 5

14 Ibid. 7

15 Davide, (*Interaction Design*): 4

16 Kettley, 6

17 Ibid. 9

