

Our Enquiry

We chose the WikiLeaks Silk Scarf (2011) created by Metahaven as a starting point for our enquiry.

The project took inspiration from the formal qualities of the collaboration, while also making a creative leap to explore wider contexts and positions.

The questions that emerged for us surrounded the idea of design as a tool for critical expression. What are the different kinds of ‘value’ that can be created by Graphic Design practice, both in and out of commerce? And what is the relationship of this ‘value’ to concepts of identity, activism, critique, skill and environment?

The idea of ‘value’ production within graphic design lead to an exploration of digital commodities by incorporating NFT and digital AR fashion aesthetics. We were interested in how image-production and design relates to identity, monetary value, status and criticality in digital spaces.

We however noted that both the NFT and Fashion industry are known for ethical concerns regarding sustainability and exploitation. This made us question the critical value of Graphic Design.

How might we begin to question the role of designers within such a system? What value could designers produce outside of the boundaries of commerce? Could we prompt a discussion about this? And could this discussion help us generate knowledge? And does this knowledge have a purposeful critical value?

Our exploration hasn’t reached a conclusive answer to these questions, but hopes to prompt a discussion surrounding how designers might apply their skills critically and effectively.

Laranjo, F. (2014) ‘Critical Graphic Design: Critical of What?’ *Modes of Criticism*.

Laranjo (2014) references Metahaven’s work and their label as a ‘critical’ design studio as he develops a critique and framework for what ‘critical’ design actually means. Our chosen object, the translucent silk scarf created by Metahaven is meant to reflect ideas of transparency within our governments and information networks; it was created to fund the non-profit organisation WikiLeaks.

The essay poses three types of ‘critical’ graphic design, through which we began to analyse the chosen object. First, as a critique of an individual practice; second, a critique of the discipline itself; and third, critical expression in response to wider cultural contexts (Laranjo, 2014).

This piece of design easily fits into the third category; a scarf that’s purpose was to support the work of WikiLeaks, that in extension represents a critique of a lack of transparency within our mainstream media and political narratives. However, in applying the lens of the second category, the scarf also tells us about the discipline of graphic design. Specifically how present day artists and designers express critique or dissent. Here it is done so by creating a commodity that funds and supports critique and activism.

Blauvelt, A. (1994) ‘An Opening: Graphic Design’s Discursive Spaces’ *Visible Language*. 28(3). pp. 205-217

Blauvelt (1994) discusses the ephemeral nature of graphic design as opposed to other design disciplines. He also highlights the importance of the presence of objects that document the ‘cultural capital’ or the ‘value of design,’ (1994; 208).

Using this as a lens to analyse the WikiLeaks Scarf, we deduced that it sits in the boundaries of ephemeral and permanent when placed in the V&A Rapid Response Collecting rooms.

It is both an ephemeral piece of design, a fashion garment to be used and discarded when the purpose has been fulfilled. It is a transient commodity to support a non-profit organisation that signals cultural and political alignments within a particular moment in time. And yet, when placed in the context of a museum, it also becomes a representation of a particular moment in cultural and political (present) history.

What is the relationship of the physicality of this object to it’s value? And what is the relationship of identity, political context and cultural capital to it’s perceived value?

Thorpe, A. (2012) *Architecture and Design Versus Consumerism: How Design Activism Confronts Growth*. Abingdon, Oxon: Earthscan.

Thorpe (2012; p. 1) puts forth the framework of ‘activism, consumerism and growth,’ to analyse design work that aims to create or respond to social change.

The scarf is an artefact that not only aims to fund social change through supporting the work of WikiLeaks; it also is a consumer item. Specifically a fashion garment. We as a group were interested in the close relationship that this reflects between design, activism and consumerism.

Thorpe (2012) also suggests that in a post-growth context, critical and effective social change through design will need to confront infinite economic growth and the dependency on consumerism within a system of finite resources.

Here, the scarf represents the production of a fashion garment in fairly big quantities that requires labour, resource and skill to produce economic value. This value supports social change. But at what cost? How many of these scarves will end up in landfills? How might we produce ‘value’ that supports social change outside the confines of predatory consumerist culture?

Fuchs, C. and Sandoval, M., (2014.) *Critique, Social Media and the Information Society*. New York: Routledge.

The WikiLeaks Scarf signifies themes of transparency, mainstream government and media narratives and issues surrounding opaque information networks. Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) explore the notion of Informational Capitalism and the relationship between the contemporary global economy, information and media.

This critical lens was useful to give context to the pressing issues surrounding the condition of data, information and communication methods in contemporary society. It also gives context as to why there is a need for increasing cultural awareness on subjects such as questioning the information we consume, along with understanding the impact of the channels we consume them through.

However, we felt that the scarf itself does not do much in the way of increasing awareness on the subject matter it represents. Yet it is an object that might prompt one to look further into this subject if they had the interest to do so. How might graphic design work as a prompt for knowledge exchange? Can this be considered as an other form of ‘value’ outside of the monetary value it can produce?

[Tribute Brand](#)

In considering the types of ‘value’ generated, especially within the system of consumerism, we began to look into digital manifestations of commodities.

Tribute Brand is a fully digital fashion brand that positions itself as an entity that confronts infinite production by working solely within digital space. Everything is virtual. It doesn’t burden the limits of resource, it doesn’t require a physical product to be shipped and nothing ends up in a landfill. So how does a virtual or augmented ‘object’ have value? Is digital space really more equitable and sustainable?

When juxtaposing the physical conventional commodity, such as the WikiLeaks Scarf with an AR fashion garment we can draw some parallels in terms of the value ascribed to ‘owning’ these objects. It is closely linked to culture, identity and status.

The WikiLeaks Scarf as a fashion object tells you about the cultural and political alignments of Metahaven along with those that purchase and wear the scarf. Would a digital translation of this have the same value?

Metahaven

We also looked further into the practice of Metahaven itself. They are proclaim themselves to be a ‘critical’ graphic design studio with alternative and counter-cultural associations.

It is apparent that they work with the theme of internet cultures, the dissemination of information and the economic, social and political conditions that surround them. This gave us context beyond the singular scarf and to their wider choice to collaborate with WikiLeaks.

This helped us understand the position that Metahaven has situated itself within. They aim to occupy the margins between politics, discourse and design.

This knowledge allowed us to make the contextual leaps from the chosen object - the Silk Scarf - toward the wider discussions surrounding critical graphic design, the value of design and the cultural, economic and political systems that surround communication design.