

# critical

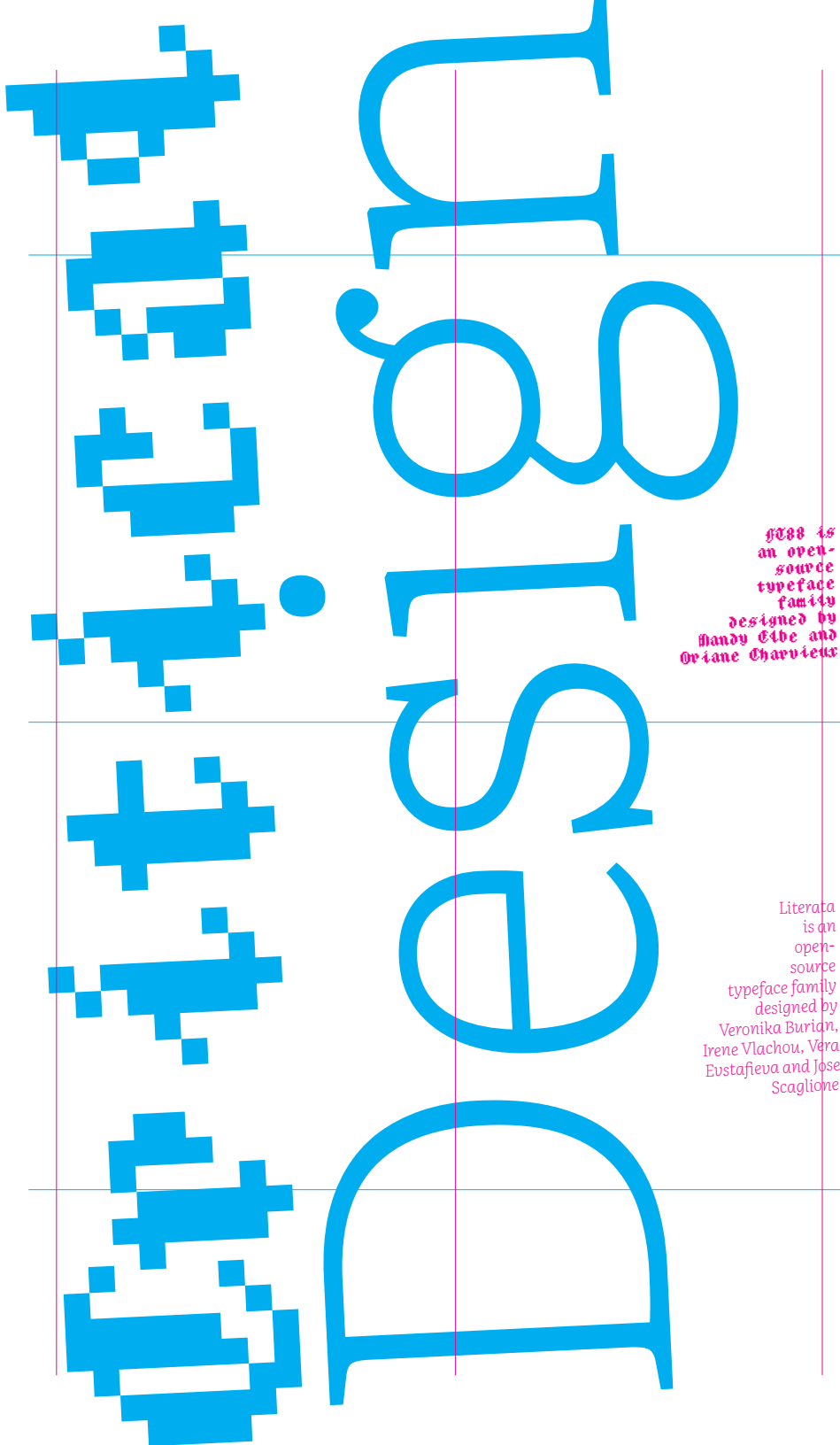
a zine exploring the role of  
critical thought and change  
within the graphic design  
industry

Within the rabbit hole of on-line graphic design discourse, it's hard to miss back-and-forth disses regarding the role of agency and critical thought within graphic design. Meme pages, such as [ethicaldesign69](#), on Instagram remind viewers that there is no ethical design under capitalism and that their time is better spent organizing as a worker than creating a political design. On the other hand, books, practices, and studios, such as Bastion Agency, promote critical design as a disruption of visual production and a means to change the industry. My disagreements with certain shortcomings of both sides of this spectrum, critical designers vs designers critical of design, as well as my frustration at petty-memes-as-dialogue that treats the two sides as antagonistic, has inspired me to lay out the predominant ideas across this spectrum and identify where my own thoughts fall within it.

The zine begins by outlining the main arguments or points of interest within the critical design camp. Using excerpts from books and articles, the zine explores 6 different perspectives on this spectrum and ends by looking at the main features of the critical-of-design camp. Both sides of the spectrum are ultimately interested in a similar goal - freeing graphic designers from the constraints and worst elements of capitalism - but have different ideas of how to achieve this.

Critical Design	1	2	3	4	5	6	Critical of Design
<p>Critical Design is primarily concerned with freedom of expression, creating ethical design practices, and changing the culture of design. Critical Designers believe that cultural change can spark broader changes. This view of design often looks toward the future - speculative design, decolonizing design, or decenter eurocentric norms are all examples of critical design in action. Individual change matters within critical design and designers function as authors and agents of cultural change. Design in of itself is a tool for change.</p>	<p>CRITICAL DESIGN</p>	<p>IT'S MORE THAN JUST DESIGN</p>	<p>YOU AND THE INDUSTRY, TOO</p>	<p>CREATE A COLLECTIVE CULTURE</p>	<p>YOU'RE MISSING THE POINT</p>	<p>THERE'S NO ETHICAL DESIGN UNDER CAPITALISM</p>	<p>Primarily concerned with the working conditions of the industry, designers in what I'm calling the critical-of-design camp, focus on the potential for economic and political change. Within this view, designers are constrained by the industry itself. The industry already exploits creativity from designers as much as possible. To them, expanding creative capacity at work misses the point. The critical-of-design camp often looks toward the past to make sense of the present. Changes in labor leading up to the creation of graphic design as a field and how technology has affected the industry are examples. Designers are seen as workers and design is seen as a service. Change comes from organization, not cultural change.</p>





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Mandy Elbe and  
Oriane Charvieux

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Irene Vlachou, Vera  
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Critical Design, which overlaps with speculative design, social design, and more, is primarily concerned with creating ethical design practices and achieving change of industry through inclusive cultural practices and diversity of expression. Critical design is,

**“on the most basic level it is about questioning underlying assumptions in design itself, on the next level it is directed at the technology industry and its market-driven limitations, and beyond that, general social theory, politics, and ideology.”<sup>1</sup>**

Critical designers may be concerned with exploring utopias, marginalized aesthetics or groups, or critical research within their designs. Designers are viewed as agents whose work has the potential to intervene in politics. Individual change matters and design is a tool to be used for good.

Examples of critical design can be found in the article, **How Can Designers Address Power Inequity? Start Small and Focus on the Local** by Grace Han and Sara Duell, published on AIGA’s Eye on Design blog in March 2021. The authors cite queer theorist

Jack Halberstam explaining how to start small. Halberstam says that he “believe[s] in low theory in popular places, in the small, the inconsequential, the anti monumental, the micro, the irrelevant... I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely.”

The emphasis of individual choice shared by Halberstam is also embodied in the practice of Bastian Agency, a Stockholm-based design studio. The women of Bastion, according to the authors, compare their design choices against a venn diagram of intersectional identifiers, such as gender, race, or class. They do this “to challenge themselves to go beyond established untold rules and constrictive norms.”

Critical designers use visuals and the choices within their practice, such as who a typeface is designed by, to push back against the conventions, restrictions, and looked over areas or designers of normative design.

<sup>1</sup> *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby



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# It's more than design.



Pater states that

“the political system in which a designer works and lives cannot be disconnected from [their] created design. A political ideology is continuously being produced and communicated through design. Acknowledging this fact can give designers more agency in their practice to either serve or subvert the status quo.”

Within this view of design, individuals can directly act on the political system through their choices and foster alternatives to the capitalist economy in their practice.

**While** critical design, broadly, focuses more on individual designers' and practitioners' choices that go against the status quo or upholds a culture or group of people, **Caps Lock** by Ruben Pater is an example of a critical design ideology that calls for conscious decision making on the behalf of graphic designers, collectively. Ruben Pater asks graphic designers to make ethical decisions regarding how they produce their designs, the clientele they work for, and how ideology is embedded in their works.









## you and the industry, too

While generally upholding similar aims as Pater and the critical design camp, Erik Carter, in his article, **Do you want typography or do you want the truth?**, focuses more on issues within the field as it exists. He recognizes designers as workers, constrained by the economic pressures of the field, as well as agents of cultural change.

He recognizes that not every designer is in a position to produce critical designs or have their own critical practice. But regardless of one's working situation, Carter believes the industry needs to address politics and prejudice. He writes that the graphic design industry is obsessed with the idea of designer-as-celebrity, and that debates about personality in design vs objectivity are pointless.

Carter makes critical diagnoses of the industry while also upholding that graphic designers should utilize their services, if they're able, for the greater good. Carter balances the economic constraints of the industry, while calling for graphic designers to change

Manager

This blue is not in accordance with our branding standards.

Reply or use @ to invite others

Manager

Please keep our targeted audience and marketing messaging in mind when designing.

Reply or use @ to invite others

**“[Designers should] try and lend their services to public works, government agencies, local communities, civic groups, and other systems that are less aligned with capitalism; taking on work that is less financially rewarding but ultimately more beneficial to the designer and to society in the long run.”**

☐ pay rent

☐ update portfolio website

Manager

You'll need to get me edits and an updated version of this by the end of the day today.

Reply or use @ to invite others



# CREATE A COLLECTIVE CULTURE

**Mandate for People's Culture** by Angela Davis takes a stark turn from the outlook of critical design, while still upholding many of its central ideas, particularly around the importance of a progressive culture. Davis does not advocate for individual change, perse, but the individual's participation in political movements is key. Her concern in this piece, is that designers and artists embed themselves within social and political movements, and to utilize their skills in service of revolutionary and progressive political change. For Davis,

**"Progressive and revolutionary art is inconceivable outside of the context of political movements for radical change." She further advocates that "cultural workers must thus be concerned not only with the creation of progressive art [or design], but must be actively involved in the organization of people's political movements."**

Design, she argues, is not progressive in isolation. She believes in the production and proliferation of a radical culture, like many critical designers, but that only art and design in the service of and created within the context of political and social movements has the potential to bring about greater change. Political or propaganda posters and the work of Emory Douglas come to mind in relation to this framing. With Davis's perspective, political change is the priority.

The background is a solid green color. It features several thin, white, wavy lines that meander across the frame. One line starts from the top left, loops around, and extends towards the right. Another line starts from the top center, curves down, and then sweeps across the bottom. A third line starts from the left edge, loops, and then curves towards the bottom right. A small, solid blue dot is located near the bottom left, at the end of one of the white lines.

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A decorative white line starts from the top right, curves down and left, ending in a solid green dot. Another white line starts from the green dot, curves up and right, forming a loop.

# You're Missing the *Point*

Going further away from the tenets of critical design, the article *GraPhIC DesIGN iS mY PasSiON* by Max Weinland and Charlotte Rohde represents many of the main tenets of the critical-of-design camp. The authors are almost solely concerned with the working conditions of designers, and not the culture of the industry or the culture in which designs are embedded.

They believe that graphic design is a service, and that designers do not have agency within their work. To Weinland, this idea of designer-as-political-agent is a remnant of 20th century modernist thinking. Both authors believe that design is a trade, rather than a critical field. Much of the critical-of-design camp articulates their arguments in opposition to critical design. From this perspective, careerism and attempting to reform the graphic design industry through cultural means is futile.

“What we can do »as designers« often only leads to performances of moralism or »business-networks« at best. We need to go way further. Organize labor power, demand fair pay, rights and social securities, protest (the design quality of protest signs is REALLY NOT the point), educate yourselves and others, share resources, redistribute capital, shift your focus away from »making it« as an individual to strengthening social bonds. Capitalism is destroying not just the natural, material basis for human life, it is also radically anti-social. And we're still glorifying »careers«?” --- MAX WEINLAND





And lastly, we have arrived at the critical-of-design camp, embodied in the work **Power of Design as a Dream of Autonomy** by J Dakota Brown. Brown's views stem from his PhD research of the history of labor and the emergence of graphic design as a field. The critical-of-design viewpoint is primarily concerned with the working conditions of designers and prioritizes economic change over cultural change in the industry. People operating within this viewpoint believe that designers are already exploited endlessly for their creative capacities, and expanding the possibilities of creativity at work misses the point. As Brown states,

providing a service to clients, and individual change in the aesthetic or content of the design doesn't matter much, if at all. Much like the sentiments of Weinland and Rhode regarding careerism, Brown is concerned with annexing critical efforts into professional respectability within the industry, as critical designers seek to normalize and proliferate radical ideas and aesthetics in the field. This can lead to the defanging and domestication of these ideas. They believe the project of critical design misleads designers into believing they are changing their conditions through design alone, rather than organizing, and this obfuscates their position as workers.

**"The critical project, as I see it, does not rely on autonomy for the profession, but autonomy from it."**

The critical-of-design camp tends to look at the past to make sense of the present. Such as looking at the changes and revolutions in labor leading up to the creation of graphic design as a field.

They are concerned with how technology and innovations in the field, all the way back to typesetting days, have led to the further exploitation of workers, not their emancipation from labor. From these observations, this camp advocates for designers primarily as workers. They are

**NO  
ETHICAL  
DESIGN**

With this information, I hope designers can form their own position on the role of critical thought, intervention into aesthetics and form, and authorship in design. Both critical designers and designers critical of design are concerned with the constraints of the design industry, but approach these issues from opposite ends. Whether you believe cultural change or organized political change is most pressing, or like me, believe these issues are inseparable, I hope you act on your beliefs and make the design industry more equitable, more diverse, and just.

- Avrie



