

Going for Gold: A Medal of Dishonor

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The work sets out to show the imperative of design and its ambiguity. The methodology used was narrative theory. The result was a polemic. The conclusion was: for repair to be ethical, it has to be predicated upon ethical norms.

Keywords

care

ontology

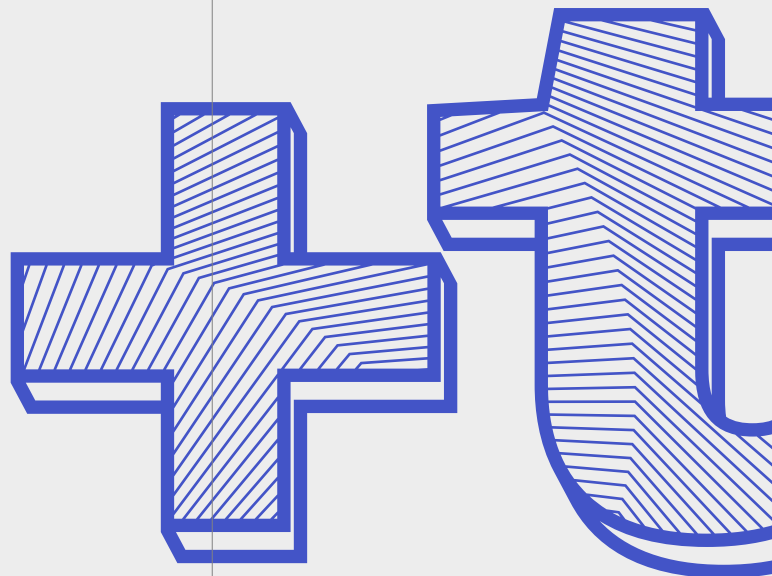
education

futural

practice

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Diseño Detonante—Diseño Detonante is a Colombia-based collective created by Carolina Martínez Tolosa and Héctor Tabares Rodríguez. Diseño Detonante takes design as a political practice of re-existence and recognition. Carolina Martínez Tolosa is a designer for disobedience and insubordination and a filmmaker, who holds an Industrial Design Degree from Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano. Héctor Tabares Rodríguez is a filmmaker and a designer for disobedience and insubordination. Diseño Detonante is the author of 'Experiencia de un accionar mutante' (*La Tadeo Dearte*, Vol. 8, Issue 10); and co-author of 'Pequeñas personas, pequeños haceres' (with A. Cruz Aburto; *Arquine*, 2018) and 'Im/Explosión: A Conversation with Diseño Detonante' (with S. Moran, A. Nocek, and M. Orospe Hernández; *Techniques Journal*, Issue 2: Bordering).



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What is at stake—not just design, but the very form of the future itself.

Care needs to be taken over what is repaired. Repair can bring valued and sustaining things back to life, but it can equally extend the life of unsustainable things and the status quo. Therefore, repair itself has no independent value. It always requires to be qualified—this as much materially and immaterially. But likewise, there is much that, rather than being repaired, if it cannot become futural by repair, retrofitting, or remaking, needs to be destroyed with care (e.g., to recover resources), be they environments, industries, products, systems, infrastructure, organizations, or cultures.

How does one speak of design? It is not a coherent whole, there is no consensual meaning, the discourse is unbounded. As prefiguration, it is ontologically elemental to mind; as such, all that is brought into being with intent is the result of design. But then, design is a projected signification that *designates* certain material and immaterial objects as overtly semiotically expressing that they were designed. Here, design is a sign. Equally, design is taken as designation, as a particular practice, wherein prefiguration migrates: from the unconscious to the conscious; and from an aware act of mind directive of making to a professional practice.

So, what is in need of repair? What is broken? Who decides? Who cares?

These are questions to engage. Two stories intertwine—world and force, desire and design—can you read between the lines?

It is not hard to distinguish what material things to repair: there are those that can be shown to sustain life in some way that clearly invite repair, and those that do harm and do not invite. But repair also extends to the immaterial, not least to *values*. However, the material and the immaterial, objects and values, meet. Gold as a material, product, industry; as a symbolic value and an object of desire; and as the foundation of an economy, is a good example of the material/immaterial nexus.



Figure 4: Love, engagement, property.

A ring, a golden ring, a sign of love. Gold, a force of history, blooded by war and colonialism; once, in ancient times, an administered medicine. Gold is seen as rare and beautiful, crafted into things to adorn the body, and slept with, as the stuff of dreams. One can say the same of a stone, a diamond.



Figure 2: Power, consumerism, luxury. Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

Gold: What a history to confront, what a tangle to unwind. Gold as value has acted as a driving force of extractive environmental destruction and of human/animal suffering, of crime and violence, of desire and greed, conquest and power. So much is concealed by aesthetics, by design. Life is lived behind its façade. The image is broken. But how to repair?



Figure 3: Progress, development, sustainment. Collage. Diseño Detonante 2023.

Water washes over gold. In nature, it liberates it from its embedded home in rock, seekers after gold have known this for eons. They seek this gold in the flow of streams and rivers. But power follows a more violent path. It blasts gold out of the earth, of mountains and forces, to release its bond to rock. This rock is crushed to dust, and mercury is then added to separate the gold from it. The water used

in this process is released and contaminates rivers. Over time, vast numbers of indigenous people from South America have died as a result of water so poisoned.

There is no life without water. One can live without gold. But nothing lives without water.

The value of gold is not indexed to life; the value of water is. Gold is protected and treated with great care. Water is not: it is polluted, and wasted, and used as if its supply were infinite. But it is not—the volume of the planetary system is fixed, although its distribution in the water cycle of rivers, streams, lakes, oceans; in soil, ice, and the atmosphere is not. Yet global warming is reducing the availability of fresh water, and turning fresh water held in polar ice into salt water as it melts. Yet as the population grows, so does the demand for freshwater, while its availability reduces. So, what of its value?

The uncaring needs repair, and this implies the practice that brings uncaring things into being, and also the things themselves. But the practice does not exist independently from the practitioner. One cannot simply conclude that the practitioner is the fundamental causal agent of uncaring and the broken, as the practitioners are themselves a product of what brought them into being.



Figure 4: Violence, dispossession, impoverishment, corruption, death. Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

How many people have been killed for gold? How many people have been killed for water?

How to learn what to create and what to destroy? How to create value that futures and how to destroy value that defutures?

Now we ask, what designs the ontology of the designing of the designer? At the most general level there is, whatever is made, the semi-spherical presence of 'the designed' conscious—a de facto induction into an ecology of design

as image. As an attractor, image became an object of interest, idea, an inquiry and knowledge that, for some prompted, marks the commencement of an education in design (as a specific practice domain).

This education is dominantly vocational and directed by a tradition partly modified by the circumstances external to it. Most fundamentally, education failed/fails to impart a knowledge of the world that is in significant part constituted by design(ing). More than this, it is dominantly an induction into a political economy of design as service, and this means it is overdetermined. Put more explicitly, the designing of the designer is essentially designed by the specification of a client and the market. Yes, design occurs also in other contexts, but they are marginal. So, for example, with the arrival of 'sustainable design' and design for the 'circular economy', they are still constituted within capital logic and predominantly sustain the unsustainable. Circular design can be—often is—a vicious circle.

Now, if the question of what is broken is asked, one concludes: design education is an education in error. At the more basic level, it does not provide the design student with the ethical literacy, knowledge, and independent capability to bring care into being. Care so characterized is the ontological operative agency of things. This is based on affirmative ontological design being the ground of ethical design. To understand this is to resituate the objective of design and recognize that the design intent has to see the design object as transitional. The primary aim is not the thing itself but what it designs, for everything brought into existence by design goes on designing. This happens anyway and with all things.

Knowing this, for the thinking designer, changes everything, including the very possibility of sustainment, of design being futural, as it depends on this change of perception and action.



Figure 5: Ecocide, ethnocide, anti-colonial resistances. Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

The golden lesson of design, the essential lesson to learn is: how to read the world in which, as a designer, I am in small part designing, and so, changing.

A knowledge of the ontological nature of design delivers a design literacy that enables the designed world to be read as being in a state of active

agency that, by degree, futures or defutures. Thus, it sustains or contributes to the unsustainable, adds to the time of being or takes it away. In so understanding design, the dialectical essence of the act and agency of design comes to presence. Whenever design is directive of the creation of something, it is also responsible for destruction. Design and productivism drive extractivism, design innovation drives redundancy and increases waste, design and style negate use value. In an ethico-material sense, design is currently uncaring—in its presencing it is also a mechanism of concealment. The façade in all its guises conceals. Styles and fashion conceal labor exploitation and waste, digital communication technologies conceal their psycho-techno consequences, and so much design education conceals what needs to be designed.

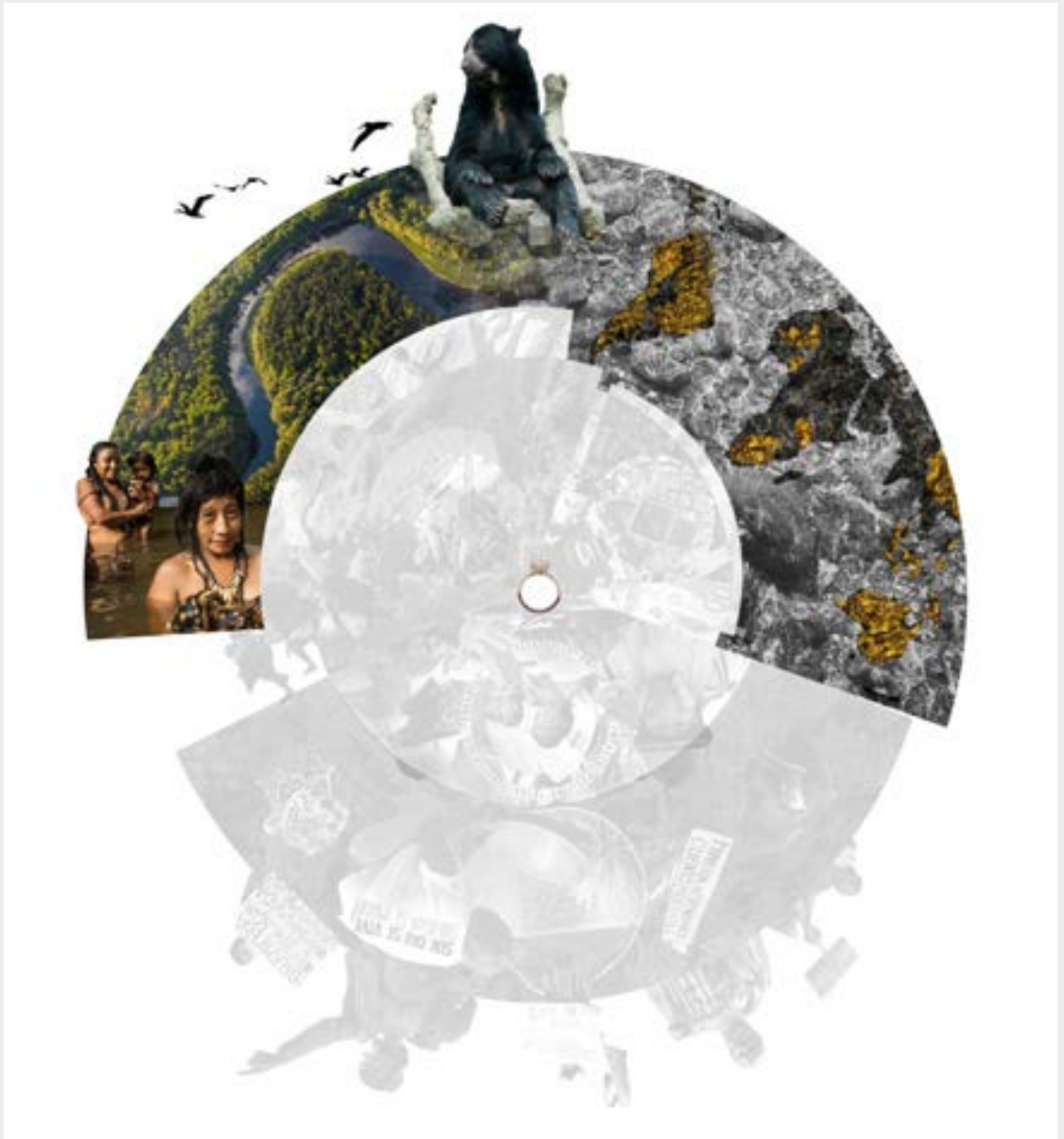


Figure 6: Territories full of life or gold-filled lands? Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

No matter how small, no matter if it is material or immaterial, everything brought into being by design breaks or makes the world upon which life depends.

The damage done by design is omnipresent. It is inherent in the systems, industries, products, ways of life, dreams, desires, and inequities of the

global north and south. Writ large, damage is the character of the material condition created by the fabricated world of our species, it is this damage that impacts upon the biological world we, and other species, depend on. Extractively, technologically, industrially, chemically, militarily, domestically (via unrestrained consumerism), damage is the enduring bequest of the presence of our being. Unwittingly, thoughtlessly, and with all an enormous instrumental capability, our species has created conditions of auto-destruction. Life itself has been rendered fragile.

Existence per se is now situated between the long unwinding and now commenced sixth extinction event and the instant vaporization created by a nuclear Armageddon.



Figure 7: Gold, what does it matter to me? Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

Gold, what does it matter to me?

So, surrounded by the broken, be it hidden in the beautiful or exposed in its naked horror, one asks again, what is to be repaired?

Our answer is us. We need to be repaired; we need to repair

ourselves. Causally, as a diverse species, we are the broken, in our fragility. We are an autoimmunity species at risk from our own auto-destructive conduct, for which 'we' lack immunity, we lack care. This lack is evident in the defuturing propensity of what has been, and is, brought into being by design as it goes on designing conditions of negation. What this produces, is a future of cascading breakdowns: environ-climatically, geopolitically, socio-culturally.



Figure 8: What do you see?
"Without gold, we live, without water, we die." Collage. Diseño Detonante, 2023.

It's true, without gold, you live, without water, you die. So simple, so forgotten.

ON CLOSING

So framed, repair arrives in two recursively configured registers: the repair of the designed ontological designing of the materiality of uncaring that defutures, produced by the diverse complexity of industrialized societies; and the repair of all those whose mode of being, and designing, is designed by the ontological designing they, and all who went before them, designed. This massive and long-time task implies the creation of a break, a rupture, in design itself.

Clearly, this is a massive task: not just to contribute to reducing the extant defuturing impacts and advance means of sustainment, but also to establish the basis of our own ontological repair by design. Thus while 'we' need to radically change to become less of a force of defuturing, and therefore auto-destruction, this will not happen unless that which ontologically designs us is transformed. Education, industrial production and what industry produces, design practice, and modes of life, are some of the more obvious areas that require transformation. Clearly, such change cannot happen uniformly: it will be globally uneven. It will take many decades, and meet considerable resistance. While it can be driven by activism, it will gain more momentum when it arrives as action in response to geographically situated breakdowns and the dysfunction of social and economic order. Leadership can be created, and come from a globally distributed autonomous change community. A starting place coming from self-generated projects of unlearning and relearning design as a redirected and remade practice.

Such a change begs for a community, begs being developed via the creation of a catalytic core of thinkers and designers able to think and act in time (which means acting in the medium of time with a sense of urgency). It also needs to have an anticipatory recognition of systems breakdowns (social, environmental, and economic).

These views written from the Global North imaged in the South do not travel universally. Meaning cannot be frozen on the page. So, in recognizing plural voices and different life-worlds, we ask: How does designing in the Global South see itself? How does designing in the Global South want/need to be seen? And as a particular locus of damage and a great deal of uncaring, how can care be projected from, and seen in the Global South?

Finally, the status and relation of repair and design needs to be emphasized. As characterized here, to engage with repair at the level of contemporary circumstances requires it to be more fully recognized, together with the scale of what is broken. This, as dysfunction, extends over ways of thinking, values, perceptions, cultures, material practices, ways of life, as well as all the more obvious instrumental forms and systems. As such, repair makes a demand upon design in crisis to learn how to repair itself, in order, as indicated, to far more effectively contribute to repairing all that is broken—as it constitutes much of the unsustain-

able. By implication, rather than being on the margins of design, repair needs to be central. Most fundamentally, repairing what exists—from cities, industries, and institutions, to geopolitics, global equity, and the psychological fabric of everyday life—is essential if we, as a species, and our biological others, are to have a future.

A bibliographic note:

To address the stated question of “How does one speak of design” in the current age requires recognizing that design is in crisis, this in two senses: the global context in which design is situated, in every respect, is in crisis; and then, crisis is the existential condition of design and design practice. See Fry & Nocek, 2021.

There are three particular figures of design thought and practice that can respond to this situation: ontological design, care as ontologically inscribed in the designed, and design futuring. See Willis, 2006; Fry, 2009.

On gold:

It is mined in forty-three nations globally. The top four are China, Russia, Australia—each process over 300 tons per year—and then some way behind them, the USA, with just over 200. The value of gold per ton, priced at the time of writing, is 68 billion US dollars. Gold mining is a disaster (Bland, 2014). The literature on the gold mining industry’s devastating impact on environments globally is extensive and extends over many decades. See, for example, the bibliography of journal articles on the topic of ‘environmental impact of gold mines and mining’ in Grafiati (2022). The impacts, including to human health, arrive during the mining process and live on after it in the toxic mine waste containing arsenic, lead, mercury, cyanide, and nitric acid (‘Brilliant Earth’, n.d.). As Interpol indicates, illegal gold mining is a major global problem, especially in Latin America: it has the lowest regard for its impacts. However, large companies with government licenses also do illegal things (or even within a legality that is not capable of guaranteeing the care and preservation of life), under cover of their appearance of respectability and responsibility (Interpol, 2022). □

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