

SKILLING SAWS AND ABSORBENT CATALOGS

By Kenneth FitzGerald

THE TEACHER TRIES TO MAKE THE ASPECTS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN INTERESTING BUT HE REALLY CAN'T BECAUSE THEY ARE BORING.

Art student's evaluation of Foundation Graphic Design course, Spring 1997, Kenneth FitzGerald, Instructor

THE MATTER WITH TWO MINDS

Designers have an art conflict. When attempting to establish design quality, discussions customarily enter – some say intrude into – the region of art. Is design an art overall? Is great design art? For the latter question, the answer's usually “yes,” no matter what designer you ask. For the former question, the answer seems invariably to be “no.”

Paul Rand himself couldn't arrive at a consistent, coherent answer to those questions. Depending upon where his theorizing wandered, design was or was not art. Neither author nor editor cared (or dared) resolve the internal inconsistency created by contradictory claims. To Rand's legacy we may add this art-schizophrenia. Design desires to be art and not-art simultaneously – and fears it's nothing.

While it is futile to argue what is and isn't art or design, we will gain from studying the origin and operation of the terms. By revealing our need for such terms, we may move to a healthy method of evaluation. The goal is not to “elevate” design to art's level but to relocate both. It's a given that art has a higher cultural station, however nebulous and undeserved. Establishing this hierarchy is an evaluating function based entirely upon self-image rather than objective criteria. People want the prestige that derives either from producing art or knowing it when they see it. This despite the fact that there is not, never has been, and never will be a consensus on what art is. Art is all aura – wondrous but unable to sustain itself under the spotlight.

Challenging stock convictions may move us toward what Edward O. Wilson calls a “consilience.” This obscure 1840 word derives from William Whewell's book *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences*. Wilson describes the word as meaning “...literally a ‘jumping together’ of knowledge as a result of the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation.” As art and design are intellectual constructs, we can never prove any assertions. We may, however, establish a more realistic foundation for

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discussion of our visual culture.

More than conceiving new theory, we need to identify and disassemble the many ill-constructed conceptions between and within art and design. Ultimately, consilience is a radical action for both fields. For art, consilience challenges a position at the top of the cultural food-chain. A major threat for design is to the stature of designers whose regard within the field depends upon peer ignorance of art.

The paradox of design is that the more it tries to distance itself from art and assert independence, the more art-like it becomes. Conversely, prominent efforts to (re)connect design to art have only served to devalue design and produce a legion of irascible practitioners.

Articulating a substantive difference between art and design is impracticable. In terms of forms, process, intent, causality, or response, the activities are identical. Difference lies in the sector of consumer culture one wishes to operate in, and the cultural role we feel most comfortable playing.

IT IS CLEAR THAT ART IS USELESS, THAT PERCEIVER AND ARTIST ARE ARROGANT AND INDIFFERENT. ... ART TELLS US NOTHING ABOUT THE WORLD THAT WE CANNOT FIND ELSEWHERE AND MORE RELIABLY. ART DOES NOT MAKE US BETTER CITIZENS, OR MORE MORAL, OR MORE HONEST. IT MAY CONCEIVABLY MAKE US WORSE

Morse Peckham

THE PRESUMPTION OF ART'S ESSENTIAL “GOODNESS” IS A CONVENTIONAL TROPE. IT DESCRIBES NOTHING. ART EDUCATION IS NOT REDEEMING FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF STUDENTS, NOR IS ART PRACTICE REDEEMING FOR THE VAST MAJORITY OF ARTISTS. THE “GOOD” WORKS OF ART THAT RESIDE IN OUR MUSEUMS RESIDE THERE NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE “GOOD,” BUT BECAUSE WE LOVE THEM... (THIS) IS THE ARGUMENT: ART IS GOOD, SORT OF, IN A VAGUE, GENERAL WAY. SEDUCING ONESELF INTO BELIEVING IN ART'S INTRINSIC “GOODNESS,” HOWEVER, IS SIMPLY BAD RELIGION, NO MATTER WHAT THE REWARDS.'

Dave Hickey

THE CAP A, DROPPED

The immediate obstacle in talking about art is locating which one you're talking about. Is it the personal, the pop cultural, or academic definition? The calling or the art culture industry? As described by art historian Donald Preziosi, the academic meaning is constantly in flux. “The broad amalgam of complementary fields in which the modern discipline of art history is positioned never achieved fixed or uniform institutional integration. Nevertheless, in the long run its looseness...proved particularly effective in naturalizing and validating the very idea of art as a ‘universal’ human phenomenon.”

Transition is the requisite state. A conditional answer is all that is possible. (Want design to be art? Wait a few minutes.) With the expansion of what art history considers its field of study, excluding anything – not simply design – is problematic. Selecting out design becomes a matter of personal taste or prejudice. These motivations continue to be the most powerful influences on discourse.

A more fundamental complication in debating art is the origin of the term. The structure of our language precludes arriving at a functional definition. When Aristotle and Plato carved up reality, art was the Other. Art is what's left when you can't categorize something as useful. To paraphrase Lacan, *l'art il n'existe pas*. Rather than being elevating and resplendent, the term is a linguistic black hole. Calling something art effectively removes it from our universe altogether. The activity collapses into a realm we can only speculate upon.

Those speculations are essentially mystical. Art is venerated for its ability to produce transcendent experiences. Attributed to art are virtues and verities that are as profound as they are ineffable. While these art apotheoses are likely very real for their recipients, we may still question their cause. All attempts to locate “artness” within objects or their producers have proved failures. Describing the art experience is more rightly the province of perception theory and cultural study.

Morse Peckham describes art in terms of role playing. The purpose of studying art is to instruct us in how to

play the role of art appreciator. When presented with what we recognize as an art appreciation situation ([almost exclusively the gallery or museum](#)), we know to adopt the art viewer role and anticipate the art experience. A great work of art is one that best meets our anticipation of what an artwork should be. The rigidity or flexibility of our expectations determines what we will consider art. The inherent nature of the work is, at best, secondary.

Our reaction to art is hardly spontaneous – culture instills it. That art exists is a teaching of culture. We respond as a result of training. The profundity of our reaction depends upon how seriously we take our role. Everything we today regard as art – whether it be a Renoir or a Koons – was once non-art and was rationalized into the definition.

Art is also purported to be our vanguard of culture and a vital experience. As prevalent the belief is that art anticipates culture, little evidence can be found as proof. Art objects may be catalysts for and products of social change. However, all artifacts of our material culture possess these qualities.

The means by which art enlivens existence are a matter of faith. Billions of people have and continue to live without exposure to anything considered art and are no worse for it. A better case may be made that the experience of art is detrimental. It either proposes an unobtainable fantasy or twists the mundane into distressing phantasmagoria. Assuming, that is, you are able to comprehend the work. And, of course, there's always a bottom line. If you get addicted and want to possess some art, the costs are exorbitant. Is it expensive because it's art or art because it's expensive?

Then there's the disturbance of interacting with artists. Certainly, no one can claim the makers of art are *de facto* a saintly breed. The popular conception insists just the opposite. One of the most bizarre and insupportable contentions of our culture is that only reprehensible persons have the ability to generate the art experience. Though possessed of a self-image as exemplary humans, artists are no better than most, likely worse on average. And in their emulation of artists, designers adopt their most offensive traits. They regularly fuse aesthetic superciliousness with an arrogance born of considering themselves masters of their profession. In art as in design, this conceited attitude likely compensates for a bitter realization. Society considers their activity a marginal, self-indulgent pursuit. Artists receive adoration from the greater public only in the abstract.

BE REGULAR AND ORDERLY IN YOUR LIFE... SO THAT YOU MAY BE VIOLENT AND ORIGINAL IN YOUR WORK.

Gustave Flaubert

THE DESIGNERS' ART

Designers consider themselves creatively aware and often study within art programs. However, designers are no more in touch with art than your average Joan. When designers talk about art they rarely deal with the reality of contemporary art practice or theory. The art of the past seems a more commodious area to opine in. However, comfort doesn't bring clarity. Misinterpretation and misrepresentation are common when designers engage past activity. Art is rarely looked at rationally. The people, process and product all become romanticized.

When referring to art, designers usually settle in one of two historical eras. For those of a more traditional bent, nothing seems to have happened in art – or be worthy of attention – since about 1940. The more progressive-minded designers will, however, accept up to 1955. What often distinguishes a conservative from a progressive designer is which outmoded conception of art they prefer. Art after 1960 is largely ignored, even though conceptually, it's more interesting for designers.

The former, larger group of designers see art as high aesthetic activity. The lineage that Paul Rand created in his books were classic demonstrations of this model. Art is artifacts of transcendent genius that stir profound emotion in the human soul. A masterly manipulation of formal elements moves these artifacts to a rarefied plane. Only the finest of design may claim this level of achievement, though all should aspire to it. The requirement is awareness of and strict adherence to aesthetic rules consistent throughout history.

This model is no more arguable than any that has evolved since. However, the fact is that it is historically

backward and archaic. Rather than responding to the critiques of their models – in other words, recognizing any of the art made in the latter half of this century – Rand and his followers dismiss them. Their neglect of art begins at about the time when Dwiggins coins the term “graphic design.” It's almost as if the birth of design meant the end of art. Or that design is heir to the true, historical art.

“To poke fun at form or formalism is to poke fun at... the philosophy called aesthetics,” Rand wrote in his essay “From Cassandra to Chaos.” The problem is, art had been debunking aesthetics his entire adult life. In his books, Rand referenced outdated doctrines, peppered his text with quotes yanked out of context, and constructed a philosophy ultimately dependent upon his status in his field. Only within design could you find regard for these declarations.

Of course, Rand's books were self-promotions. The theory's ultimate end is creating a noble lineage into which he inserts his work. Like David Carson's *The End of Print*, these books theorize to self-aggrandize. An objective, critical analysis is nowhere on the agenda. The art interpretations made by design-star hagiographer Lewis Blackwell in David Carson's name supervene Rand's in shallowness and distortion. Both theorize from surface readings. Carson considers his work as having “similarity” with “Outsider Art/Art Brut” in *2nd Sight*. The statement sounds learned but is more empty romanticism. Ignored, as always, are the quite separate historic, intellectual and cultural circumstances that brought these artistic conceits into fashion. The former construction, “outsider art,” is a self-negating term (if it's outside art, it's not art) which denigrates, not celebrates, the activity. Carson's “outsider” stance is similar to a career politician claiming to be a “Washington outsider.”

Rand was entitled to formulate his own version of art history. For the majority of people, Rand's claims sound succinct, sensible and lyrical. This is due to the fact that they are concise bursts of received knowledge. Everyone knows these things. It is, however, comforting to hear them intoned by the Oracle. If someone with his stature lives by these beliefs, there must be something to them. Designers forget that design conferred his stature, creating a self-reinforcing system. It also doesn't hurt to write your own monograph.

Rand's theories require review because of how they continue to shape the sensibilities of designers. In a recent *AIGA Journal* article, Elizabeth Resnick describes the response of design students to a new film on Rand. All show enthusiasm and admiration for his insistence that design is art. However, those students will become even more marginalized and disenchanting with their work and status if they attempt to define themselves by Rand's fallacies. Omitted from his theories were the wholly subjective and situational-specific circumstances surrounding the acceptance of his work. ([That corporate America has turned to designers who are formally antithetical to Rand was seen by him as evidence of a CEO dumb-down. What it actually demonstrates is that the CEOs are shrewd enough to recognize how to utilize design styles to signal contemporarity. No matter how aesthetically “correct,” business will junk design that doesn't signify what consumers respond to.](#)) Rather than investing in the ideas of their times, the students accept inculcation into an illusory legacy.

Today, it is a common opinion of designers that everything went to hell with art in this century. For many people, art of the last half-century has been progressively appalling. Art stopped being about the visual and became ideas – masturbatory and ridiculous ones at that. Once the province of genius practitioners and unquestioned aesthetics, academics hijacked art and stifled it under incomprehensible jargon. Artist-manqués were only too happy to join the game.

There is merit in some of these arguments. Unfortunately, designers lack critical substance to expose any conceit due to their fundamental misinterpretations of past art activity. Art has always been about ideas. It is designers who focus on the visual nature of the works and assume the surface is what art's about. As Dave Hickey says, “Junior professors (!) began explaining to me that non-portable, non-object art had arisen during the nineteen sixties as a means of ‘conceptualizing’ the practice of art in response to ‘commodification’ and the ‘commercialization’ of the art object during the postwar era. This would have been a wonderful argument if a painting by Edward Ruscha or Jean-Louis David were any less ‘conceptual’ than a pile of dirt on the museum floor...”

The complex iconography that makes up so many great paintings was the incomprehensible artspeak of yesterday. If you hold that art of earlier times was “about” the visual aspect, all painting is ruined.

Design can only suffer in comparison to this popular construction of High Art. The ideal is unattainable not because of a designer's cupidity, indifference, or hack status. It's because the artist ideal is wholly fictional. The closer you examine art activity, the more diverse a behavior it becomes. If it resembles any contemporary activity, it's design.

HE HAD NEVER REALIZED THAT HE HAD PRODUCED QUITE THIS MANY THINGS. WHY, SOME PEOPLE MIGHT CONSIDER HIM AN ACTUAL ARTIST, BY PROFESSION. WAS THAT POSSIBLE? HE PICTURED ALL THOSE HOURS SPENT ALONE IN HIS ROOM, PATIENTLY FITTING TOGETHER TINY SCRAPS, FEVERISHLY HUNTING UP THE PROPER TEXTURES, POUNDING IN A ROW OF THUMB TACKS UNTIL THE BACK OF HIS NECK ACHED — ALL THAT DRUDGERY. IT WASN'T THE WAY HE PICTURED THE LIFE OF AN ARTIST.

Anne Tyler, *Celestial Navigation*

THE ARCHETYPE-CAST

The artist beau ideal is that of a loner pursuing a personal agenda. Design is said to be different because of its collaborative nature. Often, a team accomplishes design projects. Credit usually goes to the principal designer, of course, obscuring the process. The determination to produce under one person's name (e.g., [Kenneth FitzGerald Design](#)) intends to appropriate the artist's cultural authority. When a designer stresses that they are a "one-person shop," the intimation is one of greater creative distinction — working like, being, an artist.

The fact is that most artists past and present operated as a firm. For hundreds of years, artists apprenticed in shops, working under masters. Whether it was painting portraits, frescoes or blacksmithing, you weren't working alone. The goal was to set up your own shop then make your underlings do things your way. Rather than temples of individual attainment, museums are show houses of art direction. The Rembrandt Project — the ongoing research effort to identify "authentic" paintings by the master — displays the normative situation, not an aberration. "The Great Masters" was a collection of schools; art firms directed by principals. The devaluation of works only partially executed by Rembrandt speaks more to our culture's skewed values than the paintings' intrinsic worth.

Social and cultural changes did occasion a more specialized art commodity provider. These individuals desired a higher social status, as did the purchasers of their wares. From here, the art idea as we know it began to form. However, the lone genius remains the exception. It's almost a truism that to find an artist working alone in a garret was (and is) to find a failure. Today's major-selling fine artist is still regularly a company in every way. Assistants fabricate the bulk, if not the entirety, of pieces. They stretch the canvas, paint the content, then wash the Range Rover. It's a plum job for aspiring artists, and has been for centuries.

In process, art is like design is like fashion is like scientific research is like most human activity: the labor of many to the glorification of one. The solitary creator myth, however, still dominates inside and out of the art world. I remember my disdain when, as an art school undergraduate, I first read of an artist's assistants. This pseudo-revelation is regularly roto-tilled up by the popular media as an exposé of contemporary art avarice and hypocrisy. My naïveté resulted from the reinforcing art school indoctrination and a wholly visual definition of art activity. The dissimulation lies with our culture. We demand mass commodities with the aura of exclusivity.

Alternating, and often mixed, with the Great Master model is one inspired by the heroic artists of abstract expressionism: Pollock, de Kooning. These American (native or adopted) painters wrested the art world from European dominance in the 1950s. Combined with the lust-for-life archetype of the late 19th century ([Van Gogh, Gauguin, et al.](#)), the artist became a tormented soul. Art now was an intensely personal self-investigation of the psyche. Artists make art to purge their demons. It is a representation shared widely within our culture, though the movement was brief and problematic. Designers, for all their claims of practicality, buy into the romance. They either play against it to assert their creative sobriety, or conjure its spirit to siphon off artistic aura.

THE BIG EXPRESS

The ultimate artistic license is personal expression. Designers will be forever distinct from artists because they must present someone else's message. To free themselves from corporate/modernist shackles, designers strive to inject their own personality into their work.

At this year's *Fuse98* conference, Erik Spiekermann received a round of applause for stating he designed to solve his clients' problems, not his own. He offered the comment while reviewing presentations by other designers whose speculative nature he saw as bordering on the artistic. ("Artistic" meaning, in this context, impractical and useless.)

On the latter side, Lewis Blackwell again imparts David Carson with the legacy of the rebel Americans. In *2nd Sight*, Blackwell explains of Carson, "He doesn't go to a psychoanalyst to express himself — he designs." Here Blackwell attempts to link Carson with Big Art while disparaging critics who have read something other than *The End of Print*. Of course, Pollock painted *and* went to the psychoanalyst.

This idea of self-expressiveness permeates design's conception of art. Within art, dispute of the rhetoric of expressionism came soon after its inception. Once more, design seems bent on rearguing constructs art moved beyond decades ago.

In *The Expressive Fallacy*, Hal Foster demonstrates expressionism to be just another fabrication. "(E)xpressionism is a paradox: a type of representation that asserts presence — of the artist, of the real. This presence is by proxy only (the expressive marks of the artist, the indexical traces of the hand), and yet it is easy to fall into the fallacy: for example, we commonly say an expressionist like Kandinsky 'broke through' representation, when in fact he replaced (or superimposed) one form with another — a representation oriented not to reality (the coded, realist outer world) but to expression (the coded, symbolist inner world). After all, formlessness does not dissolve convention or suspend mediation; as the expressionist trope for feeling, it is a rhetorical form too."

As examples of the artistic reaction against expressionism, Foster details a succession of painters beginning with Jasper Johns ([Target with Plaster Casts](#)) in 1955, to Roy Lichtenstein ([his brushstroke paintings](#)), and, more recently, Gerhard Richter. In other art media, self-expression acts primarily as a conceit to work against. As we draw closer to contemporary times, artwork in form and concerns move closer to design, and, finally, art must coexist with design to have import. Foster cites Jenny Holzer and Peter Nadin's artist book *Eating Friends*, which "debunks" expression with a literal obsession with "inner life": texts and images ([the stuff graphic design is made of](#)), focusing on internal organs.

Still, designers regularly travel extended rhetorical distances in form to arrive at art. Usually, designers aspire to painting — the traditional art medium. Frequently, designers express a desire to "paint with type." The implication is of scattering letterforms as expressively and directly as Pollock splattered enamel on canvas. However, as Foster points out above, the process of abstract painters is just as intentional as representational painters. The gestural, immediate style of painting is merely a point in the artistic continuum. Deliberate, systematized painting routines — ones that resemble common typographical practice — have been the dominant method. If you can't find a painting approach that matches your design process, you haven't looked hard enough. The aspiration to type-paint is less a desired working method than another longing for artistic legitimacy.

Self-expression stands as another attempt to signify truth through formal means alone. For design, however, the effort is ironic. Expressionism long ago became a language appropriated by consumer culture. As Foster suggests, "...we must open up ([expressionism](#)) to include the expressionist rhetoric of psychology and consumerist society in general. Express yourself, we are exhorted — but only via the type, only via the commodity." Striving to elude "commodification" through self-expression, designers charge headfirst into its maw. Meanwhile, the expressionist desire to create a public, formal language was likely usurped by design. Culture has for a time defined itself through mass media: the realm of design.

The point being made here is not that one must be absolutely contemporary in their art metaphors. The past should be neither venerated nor rejected. The issue is that designers continue to work from a romantic ideal of

art. Rather than construct a relevant model for their activity, designers orbit a hoary salon.

Unfortunately, when art isn't romanticized, design treats it as visual supermarket. Designers unashamedly investigate art because it offers many graphic ideas to purloin. Design becomes a process of raising movie-set facades behind which business is conducted.

FILTHY LUCRATIVE

What are the essential, irrefutable particulars separating design from art? People go into design to make money. Designers prostitute art for business. Designers work for clients, artists work for themselves.

These clichés hold up as well as the other aspects of the art myth. It is a delusion that the activity of fine artists is divorced from commercial considerations. It isn't even a matter of degree. All that separates art and design is the kind of marketplace one chooses to operate in. The direct evidence of this is the art world's obsession with sales. No matter how "conceptual" or "non-object" oriented, art can and must be sold. Economic viability is the preeminent determinant.

The traditional estimation holds that designers are dependent upon having clients and are subservient to their will. Artists, however, are self-starters who answer only to their muse. To believe this, you must disregard admissions committees, art faculty, review boards, competition jurors, selection committees, gallery owners, curators, critics, grant committees, opening attendees, *et al.* Each of these groups has a profound and often direct influence on how and what art is made. For artists, these encounters are client meetings. Artists frequently modify how they make and present their work in the wake of feedback from these groups. The input of knowledgeable art insiders is craved, not scorned.

The notion that art is an "anything-goes" zone is misinformed. Straying too far from well-delineated boundaries is hazardous for artists. The field is broad, but often shallow. To gain recognition as an artist, it is incumbent to exhibit regularly in approved forums. Critical recognition requires first being seen. This means you must please people, particularly, gallery owners. If they are to be at all successful, gallery owners must make a basic economic decision about art. Will it sell?

Sales are evidently not a requirement to be an artist. If it was, we must remove the majority of practitioners from the canon. The large number of artists successful in their time but ignored in contemporary estimation complicates the situation. Unless we are ready to accept that unseen creations are artworks ([just as anything done in type and image can be design](#)), we must acknowledge that art is mediated by forces exterior to the artist. Every artist must face the reality that the surest way for their labor to be considered art is to attach a high price tag to it.

Historically, artworks have always functioned as commodities. Finding clients has concerned artists throughout history. Jacques-Louis David resented having to accept portrait commissions. The historic epics he preferred to paint, however, couldn't find a clientele. Art was born of the marketplace, as was design. Design was merely a new product line.

Brian O'Doherty takes a scathing look at the "art industry" in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. The gallery is a showroom floor, displaying manufacturers' latest models. "For many of us, the gallery space still gives off negative vibrations when we wander in. Esthetics is turned into a kind of social elitism – the gallery space is exclusive. Isolated in plots of space, what is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is expensive. What it contains is, without mediation, well-nigh incomprehensible – art is difficult. Exclusive audience, rare objects difficult to comprehend – here we have a social, financial, and intellectual snobbery which models (and at its worst parodies) our system of limited production, our modes of assigning values, our social habits at large. Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified.

"The classic modernist gallery is the limbo between studio and living room, where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralized ground. There the artist's respect for what he has invented is perfectly superimposed on the bourgeois desire for possession. For a gallery is, in the end, a place to sell things – which is O.K."

The modernist gallery didn't transform art into commodity. It was always in that state. Like the illusory

neutral grid, the gallery is an ideological space – and receptive to commerce. Willingly complicit is the artist. O'Doherty writes, "The economic model in place for a hundred years...is product, filtered through galleries, offered to collectors and public institutions, written about in magazines partially supported by the galleries, and drifting towards the academic apparatus that stabilizes 'history' – certifying much as banks do, the holding of its major repository, the museum. History in art is, ultimately, worth money. Thus do we get not the art we deserve but the art we pay for. This comfortable system went virtually unquestioned by the key figure it is based upon: the artist." All art is in the marketplace. It must be to be considered art; its validating establishment resides there.

The fiction of the artist as victim of these forces – and not devoted accessory – is a component of the modernist construction of the avant-garde. To command authority, artists must claim a privileged status in society. They must be above crass commercialism and defend culture. Art must be kept pure. But someone must take the fall. That would be designers.

Nevertheless, a look at the most prominent art stars shows individuals responding to markets and making no ([or little](#)) pretense to making commodities. To afford his epic Cremaster videos, Matthew Barney has to up-front please people with money. Damien Hirst conceived floating a shark in a tank of formaldehyde but it took the financing of a Saatchi to do it. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is as much a brochure for its patron as was the Mona Lisa for whoever commissioned that vanity item. Commissioning a work of art has historically been a public declaration of virtue and wealth. Why is it different if your claimed virtue is the making of a beverage?

AN ARTIST'S DESIGN

It isn't necessary to detail the scorn most artists have for designers. In an interview in *Emigre #46*, the designers of Orangeflux relate a typical story of artists dismissing their work: "...when we show *Rust Belt* within the art community they tell us it's not art, it's design. They can't see beyond the type." The ongoing marginalization of fine artists in our culture drives their determination to keep designers in a lower status.

These are attitudes within the arts deserving mention. They relate to the way design dispels certain works as not being design but art. In keeping with its art schizophrenia, design can't decide if having your work called art is condemnation or acclaim. It depends, of course, if you respect the designer or not.

As Orangeflux learned, the art world is not a commodious place for daring designers. The work condemned as art by designers is a non-starter for artists. Art industrialists who champion the most difficult, challenging art become obstinate conventionalists in their design concerns. For every Walker Art Center, there's one hundred museums that can't get enough 12 pt. Helvetica. The preferred exhibition announcement is a template design: color photo of the art piece on the front ([always white bordered, like a frame, so you know it isn't just a design](#)) and easy to read centered type ([Helvetica, Gill, Garamond](#)) on the back. To violate this design space is like stepping outside the gallery, which the card emulates. You risk not being taken seriously.

At a presentation to fine art graduate students, I garnered the expected response to contemporary "cutting-edge" design. The reaction to the art school publications I brought for the students' appraisal – P. Scott Makela's Minnesota College of Art & Design catalogs, ReVerb's Otis and CalArts works – was almost uniform. They regarded the publications as incomprehensible indulgences that failed to meet their fundamental purpose. Students expressed their opinions with a startling passion. They recoiled from a representational disturbance they assiduously cultivated in their own work.

It's only slightly ironic that artists are the most vehement defenders of conservative design. Design is different, they'll say, it's about relaying facts, information. It's about communication. Though this would seem to be a harsh judgment on art – that it is uncommunicative – it certainly proves true. Arguably, art isn't about communication – at least, no more than design is.

Artists thrive on the avant-garde notion that it is their role to critique and experiment with cultural forms. A designer investigating these ideas is an offense against sensibility, against the cultural order. Artists don't like this view contested as it leads to prying apart desperately held illusions of relevance.

FACTOGRAPHIC DESIGN

Design has directed attention to contemporary artists thought to have links with its practice. Barbara Kruger is cited as a kind of designer-made-good. She's often looked to for insight on design's potential as a medium of cultural commentary. While Kruger's work is significant, its relevance for design is limited. Her works were readily acknowledged as art, unlike the magazine layouts she briefly worked on. Acceptance of her work hasn't increased regard for design activity. Also, Kruger hardly utilizes the potential of the rhetoric of design. Though she explored different typefaces in early works ([and nothing controversial in design](#)), she has stuck to an extra bold Futura italic since. In this, she proves more discriminatory than Massimo Vignelli. Considering the conservatism about design described previously, it may be that Kruger recognized what was unacceptable in art. Being typographically challenging might prove professionally dangerous.

The artist Hans Haacke provides a crucial insight into the construction of art and design. Critical study of his work highlights the artificiality of the art/design division. In their content and reception, Haacke's installations disclose the overriding commercial concerns of the art industry. By denying what he terms the "trademark appearance of art," Haacke constructs a relevant art by constituting it as design.

Haacke – a German-born artist who has resided in the U.S. since 1965 – has been one of the most significantly controversial artists of the past two decades. (["Significantly" means that the controversies have not centered on political distractions such as obscenity and flag-burning.](#)) Originally allied with conceptual art movements in the 1960s, he turned to a political art at the start of the 1970s. His works blandly document "...the institutional, discursive and economic apparatuses of international high art..." Manipulating the advertisements and collateral of multinational corporations, he exposes their connections to repression and exploitation. Support for the arts serves as whitewash, not altruism. Art is implicated as another method of control.

Censorship and cancellations mark Haacke's exhibition career. Institutional discomfort with the works' content motivated these actions. Elaborate circumlocutions attempted to draw attention away from accusations of suppression. Haacke's work was criticized for its lack of aesthetic pleasure and for being mere journalism. Curiously, he employs strict ([Swiss International Style](#)) modernist design tools to attack modernist ideals of "...esthetic autonomy and esthetic pleasure."

Art historian and critic Benjamin Buchloh's *Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason*, is an important analysis of the artist's work and its ramifications not only for art, but our entire visual culture. Buchloh believes Haacke's work "...has in fact been marginalized because it represents a turning point – one of those historical moments in which a set of assumptions about the structures and functions of art are being effectively challenged ([in a way that Heartfield's work constituted such an instant in the 30s](#))." Like Heartfield's, Haacke's work utilizes the forms of "commercial art," using its language to critique society.

To categorize Haacke's ([and other like-minded artists'](#)) work, Buchloh coined the term "factography." Factography is an art form that is motivated by a desire to expose economic and political powers manipulating our society. Factography also attempts to escape and disrupt the corrupted art practices of the past. It takes as its subject matter a neutral, documentary reportage of facts, such as statistics. This form is regarded by the public as both participatory and immediate – no art education is required to comprehend its message. Factography thus denies the typical aesthetic concerns of art and invites challenge as an art practice.

Haacke's works frequently simulate corporate PR. Billboards and advertisements are restructured with corporate design precision. Through these simulations, the photographic and textual inversions have great impact. The bland straightforwardness becomes highly charged in ways a more adventurous design could not. An infamous censored work, *Manet-PROJECT '74*, is chilling in its simplicity. The rejected installation would have displayed a Manet painting with ten panels tracing the art work's provenance. These panels, set in Times Roman, resemble the ubiquitous head-shot/text bios of countless annual reports. ([The work was rejected as its ninth panel revealed "...a prominent figure in the economic establishment of the Nazi government...now functions as a major cultural benefactor in the liberal democracy of postwar Germany."](#))

Along with demonstrating the complexity of meanings attendant in design forms, Haacke's work leads to a

profound insight on the relationship of art and design. In his article, Buchloh scrutinizes different artistic strategies to "reject the idea of esthetic autonomy." To accomplish this, artists have also needed to "...abandon traditional procedures of artistic production ([and, by implication, of course, the cognitive concepts embedded in them](#))." To describe this process, Buchloh expands upon a term used by artist Ian Burn: "deskilling." Deskilling rejects "manual dexterity" as a principal component of art. To pursue traditional art practices is to be caught up in their ideological adulteration. New practices with new skills must replace what has been repudiated. First amongst these new skills is the ability to recognize that factographic forms are culturally significant, intellectually substantive, and relate directly to the public.

In this way factography is identical to design. Buchloh echoes the rhetoric of design and its impact upon audiences. The conception that there is an unmediated, objective visual language is still questioned. However, we can recognize that particular forms popularly signify factuality and objectivity. This indicates a greater potential for using "style" as signifier. Design work, however, is not universally factographic because of its form. Design is popularly regarded as more ideologically corrupt than art, and most designers unabashedly adopt the rhetoric and politics of their clients. Negotiating the problems and potential of design requires novel skills indeed.

The Guerrilla Girls are other factographers design should make note of. This anonymous group of women artists and art professionals have arguably made the only truly dangerous art of the past decade. Through a remarkable series of mostly text-only handbills, the Guerrilla Girls have pointed up the gender and race bias of the art world. ([Like Barbara Kruger, their font of choice is Futura.](#)) Once again, the most cutting and substantive art uses design as its principal constituent.

Through these works, design demonstrates what Donald Preziosi calls a "carrying capacity" – the ability of a study object to have art historical significance as a cultural artifact. It also confirms that design artifacts require a much deeper reading.

Haacke's influence has already paid significant dividends for graphic design. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller studied with Haacke at Cooper Union. Their use of design as a fundamental element in their factography refers to Haacke's investigations.

ESTHETICS IS FOR ARTISTS AS ORNITHOLOGY IS FOR THE BIRDS.

Barnett Newman

THE PLEASURES OF THE VORTEXTURE

A cynical opinion about art theory is that its complexity and self-referentiality can justify anything. But rather than shunning it, designers should investigate and elaborate.

Of course, the basis of art world regard is doctrinal adherence, not theoretical alignment. The goal shouldn't be gaining art world acceptance. Designers must add art's material culture speculations to their data base – if only to chart wrong directions.

Art is a recent construct historically. The notion of timeless objects being preserved through the centuries because of their inherent quality is misguided. Art is all "presentism." Much of what we value was a previous generation's excess. And who knows what was lost?

That there is an "art" phenomenon is still pure speculation. As stated by Donald Preziosi, art history has not only described art, it has shaped it. Artists' awareness of art history and subsequent desire to be part of the canon has been the fundamental motivation for art making this century. All other rationales are secondary at best.

Art history indoctrinates students into the art industry primarily through books and magazines. First-hand experience of art is still rare and overshadowed by the preponderance of art publications. Artists become artists because of what they see in print, not in a museum. Ed Ruscha's determination to be an artist came from seeing a reproduction of a Jasper Johns painting in *Print* magazine. For scores of artists, art is a small repro ([frequently in black and white](#)) with an accompanying caption. Art became its representation almost immediately upon birth. Concrete artifacts were but illustrations of concepts. This, of course, is the truth of all

art, inadvertently revealed.

With print as the direct vehicle defining art, design becomes the framework for its perception. Rather than being handmaiden, design is validation. As with the show announcements, it is the design that tells you it's real art. Art publications ([direct descendants of auction catalogues](#)) don't support and frame art, they consume it whole. At best, there is symbiosis.

This design filter has been modernist. However, this structure is breaking down, as is the gallery framework. Postmodern art within modern frameworks is causing public dissonance. Art needs to reconfigure its perceptual vehicle, which will also change its nature. This direction leads through design.

A prototype of this eventuality is Jonathan Barnbrook's design of the Damien Hirst monograph, *I Want to Spend the Rest of My Life Everywhere, with Everyone, One to One, Always, Forever, Now*. Barnbrook and Hirst realize that the "neutral" modernist paradigm for representing art work cannot adequately serve a postmodern artist. ([The "original" works, of course, regularly appear in the modernist White Cube.](#)) Hirst's problematic pieces are far more engaging as graphic devices than objects of contemplation. Barnbrook's inventive and seductive design comes closest to accounting for the appeal of the morally questionable practice of segmenting farm animals.

Meanwhile, designers like Paul Rand deserve inclusion in the art canon. This recognition, however, will not come in the way he would have wanted. As art history gravitates toward visual culture studies, attention will move toward design. Rand's logos were the emblematic artifacts of their time. They were of a kind concurrent with abstract painting and sculpture. Corporations hung and placed those art works in their offices for the same reason they placed Rand's symbols on their letterheads. Each signified modernity, efficiency, and was resolutely neutral. Rand's aesthetic rationale is dissertation material but not germane to their impact.

Eventually, art comes down to aura. Walter Benjamin predicted that works of art would lose their aura due to mass reproduction. However, it hasn't quite turned out that way. During his presentation at Fuse98, Bruce Mau noted that mass reproduction has caused art to become even more valuable. The Mona Lisa, for instance, now transcends valuation as a commodity.

What also has happened is an aura for mass produced works with no original. Designed artifacts may generate an aura due to the various associations people append to them. A personal example is record albums. It was aura I was experiencing when I picked up certain desired albums. I knew there were millions in circulation but it didn't matter. Purchasing one was enough. I still experience the aura when I'm shopping for CDs and run across a favorite work I already possess. I want to buy it again, to refresh the aura.

ART IS THE ORIENTATION THAT MAKES INNOVATION POSSIBLE.

Morse Peckham

THE ONE IMPORTANT THING I HAVE LEARNT OVER THE YEARS IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TAKING ONE'S WORK AND TAKING ONESELF SERIOUSLY. THE FIRST IS IMPERATIVE AND THE SECOND DISASTROUS.

Margot Fonteyn

ART FOR OUR SAKE

What role do art and design play? For Dave Hickey, art should be a function of democracy. The first step is for art to admit it is a "bad, silly, frivolous thing to do." "...We can stop regarding the art world as a 'world' or a 'community' or a 'market' and begin thinking of it as a semi-public, semi-mercantile, semi-institutional agora — an intermediate institution of civil society, like that of professional sports, within which issues of private desire and public virtue are negotiated and occasionally resolved." This is also design's state. All the aesthetic rationalizations and informational architecture conceits can't change the fact that it's usually self-indulgent toying with form. And that it's okay.

Morse Peckham finds a biological necessity in art. Rather than an expression of order, art strives to create disorder, so we may learn to handle the stress of reality. "Art is exposure to the tensions and problems of a false world so that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world." Peckham

and Hickey come from different directions to agree on art's frivolity and necessity. Peckham states, "The only moral justification for the study of the highest level of art... is to take what it can give so seriously, so passionately, with such conviction that one can learn to do without it."

Art offers many theories that suggest it's in crisis intellectually, but the industry keeps rolling along. ([Hans Haacke is regarded as a major international artist and sells work.](#)) Socially, the art world grows increasingly marginalized. Art industrialists show little inclination to reverse the trend. Art is a pleasant bourgeois playground.

Helping to drive this marginalization is design assuming its former status. The ephemera of today will become tomorrow's timeless art. Design is the contemporary popular art that mediates for people. Therein lies its power. Designers hankering after art legitimacy is like rock stars writing operas, symphonies, and musicals. They crave high culture affirmation, effectively renouncing what came before as frivolity.

The challenge for designers is not to become fluent in artspeak so they have come-backs the next time some artist disses them. The task is far more difficult than regurgitating theory. It's about unequivocal honesty about what you do and why you do it. It's about looking for that honesty in work, not arbitrary surface features. It requires putting aside the desire to be seen as doing something "higher" than other people. It's wanting to do something meaningful today, not begging history.

And the best part is that you can do it with any materials, in any style, any theory, any job, any time. Then art isn't and doesn't matter.

SO MUCH FOR ART, WHAT OF THOUGHT?

Thomas Pynchon, V.

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At this year's Fuse98 conference, Erik Spiekermann received a round of applause for stating he designed to solve his clients' problems, not his own. He offered the comment while reviewing presentations by other designers whose speculative nature he saw as bordering on the artistic. ("Artistic" meaning, in this context, impractical and useless.) On the latter side, Lewis Blackwell again imparts David Carson with the legacy of the rebel Americans. A spill absorbent sock is a flexible tube of absorbent filler material, designed to quickly limit the spread of smaller indoor spills. An even longer version of the sock intended for outdoor use on larger spills or areas of land/water tends to be called a boom. Absorbent sheets are rather like very large tissues, and tend to come in similar-looking stacks, but have a much higher capacity for soaking up and holding liquids. Heavy-duty spill absorbent rolls are common in workshops and on factory floors. Spill absorbent powders, such as alumina silicate pouches, can be used to absorb and solidify