

Design Feeds the Poor, and Art Historians, too!

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As an art historian and academic whose field is American contemporary art, I am flattered and honored to be asked to address this gathering of experts in the fields of design and design education. In the interest of full disclosure, I have to admit that I accepted the invitation to speak at the conference in order to attend it and to listen to all of you! Because although I may not have anything new or particularly enlightening to say to you, I know that over the course of the next two days, I will glean a great deal that is relevant to my own teaching and research.

For over the past decade, the field of art history has attempted to break out of the confines of barriers erected by 19th century definitions of art in order to assume a new position of authority in the study of images. The field of the new art history is, broadly-speaking, visual culture. As Columbia University art historian David Freedberg wrote in the September, 1994 Art Bulletin: “The art historian may indeed choose to deal with art and art objects, but he or she ought also be trained to deal with the whole range of visual things—from the variety of moving pictures to the full gamut of visual strategies by which the world is reduced to semblances of order...” (“Context, Visuality and the Objects of Art History,” Art Bulletin LXXVI/3 (September, 1994), 396). I consider this declaration to be a typically American, ‘Manifest Destiny’ approach to scholarship. The field of art history can expand into new territory at will; after all, there is nothing in the way, with the possible exception of a few pesky Indians! But the territory into which we are expanding has long been inhabited and extensively cultivated by the field of design. Obviously we art historians cannot get away with treating our counterparts in the various design fields as the European settlers once treated the Native Americans. We can only break down fences by making alliances.

So what is the expertise that art historians can bring to the field of design, to which it has now linked itself, for better or for worse, with or without the consent of our new ‘partners’? On the face of it, this marriage of convenience favors art historians rather than designers, who may not even be aware of this new arrangement. Perhaps our amateur status may be of benefit in a field that as Milton Glaser has argued has become increasingly segmented and professionalized. Having broken through the main gate, maybe in our ignorance of their functions, we can leap over some of the internal fences. However, new media may be able to effect such gymnastics more nimbly than the lumbering art historian toting those heavy art books.

Yet the art historian’s very devotion to the archaic form of the book does point to one significant area of revised art historical narrative. After all, art history is taught through books and catalogues, in which the objects of the study are reduced to images. Somebody designed those books and catalogues, which frequently can be considered art objects in

and of themselves. Further, the manner in which they are designed has much to do with how the 'art' within their covers is interpreted. Throughout the field of the history of art, the graphic designer provides the visual context; the art historian the historical one. It seems odd that we have yet to analyze how the two interact, or to acknowledge the central role the designer has played in interpreting those objects we now designate as art, and which are for the most part first experienced not in museum frames, but within the framework of the page layout. If this ready example of the interdependency of art history and design has been documented and published, I am unaware of it. So, if nothing else, art historians can offer designers credit where credit is due, and the contribution of designers to the history of art can begin to be articulated.

The other contribution has been ongoing, but is perhaps more problematic. The careers of artists such as El Lissitzky, who in my day were studied only in terms of their paintings and perhaps their photographs, are now chronicled with their design contributions provided with equal weight and value to their so-called high art activities. [Once in a while in my hometown of Boston the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard even decides to plug in Moholy-Nagy's Light-Space Modulator and lets it cast faint shadows on its white walls.] What the art historical approach ignores, however, is the collaborative nature of many of those design activities, as art history still defines the artist as an individual rather than part of a collaborative team. Without ignoring the importance of the individual creative mind, designers can help refocus art historical writing toward the nature of creative collaboration. In sum, if this is a marriage, the designer need not play the housewife sweeping up after the masterful art historian who does the serious work. Rather, designers may recognize that they are artists and art historians, just like art historians may recognize, as they did with female artists in the 1970s, that designers have been making art all along.

A central task is surely the escape from the mental prison of the anachronistic medium-based equation: art = painting, sculpture, architecture, and the full acknowledgement of the implication of Walter Benjamin's characterization of the twentieth century as the era of mass reproduction. The reframed equation should read: Modernism = the period of mechanically-produced images and objects. Unique objects, while retaining some of their former intrinsic interest, are now being investigated for the ways in which their reproductive paper trails lead them to their final destination/validation in museums. (The minimal prerequisite of a painting's entry into history [i.e., the museum] has been its reproduction, its 'authorization,' in a book, catalog or art magazine cover.) Is there a difference between the 'experience' of Target with Four Faces at the MoMA or in an art book? My hunch is that for those over 40, the answer would be unequivocal: the first-hand experience is richer and deeper, while those under 40, I suspect, would acknowledge a difference but perhaps not a preference. But does this mean that within the world of global communication, design by electronics, there is no longer room for the unique hand-made object? This question is being addressed by designers in the Third World, and I will return to it shortly.

[Apart from the transformation of the subjects of art history, the merging or at least the interface of the design fields will effect a transformation in art institutions. Indeed, it

already has. For the past several years, the major museums in New York, founded upon the notion that they should protect and display the highest achievements in art, have been delivering some severe blows to accepted notions of what constitutes art, at least art that carries emotionally-laden modifiers such as enlightening, moving, meaningful, or transcendent. Motorcycles at the Guggenheim, Rock star finery at the Metropolitan, even the stop-action animation of Wallace and Gromit at the ultra-conservative Museum of Fine Arts in Boston are indicative not simply of the financial need to attract a large paying public, but of a seismic shift in the notion of the categories of objects deemed worthy of display. The traditional hierarchies in the arts have been crumbling so quickly that nonplussed museum visitors may well begin to doubt the scholarly authority and curatorial expertise of the institution they have paid to enter. Nearly 40 years after conceptual artist Robert Rauschenberg meditated on 'the museum's ruins', arts institutions seem to be holding the definition of 'art' in suspension. At the same time, construction of new museums, or new wings of old museums, is occurring at an unprecedented rate, providing a false reassurance that curators have a clear idea of what they plan to display in those spaces. To date the pendulum-like swings between popular culture and the endlessly recycled retrospectives Monet and van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso suggest that curatorial thinking has not gone very far beyond the limits of the fundable. Ricocheting between these extremes, the museum visitor is given little basis on which to understand or to anticipate how our notions of art are changing. The blockbuster exhibit is like the 19th century world's fair concept—a smorgasbord of objects celebrating society's cultural production. Art is best defined as anything found in a large, economy-sized exhibition. Little will the visitor suspect that the future may consider the most valuable item on display to be the one thing they can afford to take home, be it the catalog or the poster.]
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Finally, the benefit of the merging of art and design and its various histories is simply one of democracy. Art history was founded by cultural elites, or amateurs, who owned the Titians and Monets about whom they wrote. Design on the other hand has been the discipline of the working class bloke who needed to work for a living. Andy Warhol, an artist from a blue collar background, was trained in design. His career is a model of what can happen when the design principles he was taught concerning multiple, mechanically-reproduced objects produced through collaborative effort, are applied to the fine arts. The artworld has not been the same since. Declaring that he was not 'the high priest of pop art, but rather one of the workers in it', Warhol's populist production permanently erased the distinction between high art and consumer object. His own 'art collection' included many manufactured or multiply-produced items, from Tiffany jewelry to McCoy cookie jars, each embraced as an object of human labor, no matter what their monetary value. In the essay I have written for the catalog of the exhibit of Warhol's collection at his museum in Pittsburgh, I have argued that the curators made a fatal error in excluding items such as the Caille Brothers' Punch or Hug Machine from 1910, an important precursor for today's gym equipment, and a lot more charming. What can we really learn from the Tiffany jewelry worth millions without the 'art historical' comparison offered by the fairway machines operated by the general public for pennies?

It is this democratic impulse that brings me to South Africa, and it is not merely a matter of equality, but also of creativity. America at present convinces itself that it is exporting 'democracy' when in fact it is exporting capitalism. Fat and rich, America since the end of the Cold War has become increasingly insular, while assuming, ironically, that it can run world affairs. We Americans are interested in Third World as a market for our products, but not in the Third World's existing markets and methods of production. But it is precisely the huge gap between first and third worlds that constitutes the challenge to all areas of society, including the design arts, at present. Not the imposition of our way, but the creation of a third way that incorporates and learns from high and low technologies, from indigenous and Western forms of knowledge. Isolationism and complacency are indicative of a society in decline. It may not be easy to be working in South Africa now, but this is where it's at, where efforts to bring together the First and Third Worlds are being negotiated on all fronts. The South African government is banking on hand craft as a means of poverty alleviation, and although not much literature has been produced, (leaving a wide open door for the art historian/interloper), it has many successful grassroots projects and can be considered at the forefront of socially-conscious design. Significantly, at least two of the papers at this conference address this issue: James Fathers from the University of Wales will examine the history of design in development and Professor Jackie Guille from Middlesex University in London will discuss a number of contemporary examples of the sharing of design skills and knowledge for poverty alleviation, Louise van Stade and jewelry. To provide additional local context for these papers, I want to take a few moments to describe a project operating out of the basement of the Marydale Building at the Technikon Witwatersrand. In my opinion it provides an excellent model for the use of design education in development.

A senior lecturer in printmaking in the Fine Art Department, Kim Berman trained as a fine artist at Wits University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. She continues to make art, and in fact, has an exhibition currently in Belgium, but as an educator and activist she has extensively rethought the role of art and art education in South Africa. (slide: Fires of the Truth Commission). In 1986, Berman, recognizing the need for locally-available sources of fine art paper, began to include a unit on papermaking in her course. In 1996, the NRF funded the papermaking unit, renamed as the Papermaking Research & Development Unit (PDRU). Two years later, DACST awarded a grant of R3,000,000 to the Technikon's PRDU to set up papermaking projects in all 9 provinces in South Africa for the purposes of poverty alleviation and job creation. Currently some 20 rural papermaking poverty relief projects, collectively called Phumani paper, are up and running, and over 460 job opportunities have been created and the basis for a new cultural industry has been established. The project is far too complex to summarize here, but I show the organizational chart here to give you a brief look at what has been accomplished in a relatively short time. I will then look at the educational benefits within the Technikon.

The PRDU personnel now number over 30, half of whom are undergraduate and graduate students, and community artists involved in training, marketing and research. The unit has provided skills training, installed the technology and the infrastructure, developed

products for the market, established partnerships with industry and government, and conducted market research for all of the projects as they have been established. Given the enormity of the tasks to be accomplished, the students have faced a steep learning curve, but they have all measured up to the challenge. For Berman as programme manager, learning the same material she was simultaneously teaching her student-assistants, a major challenge was the re-conceptualizing of the function of art education itself. The problem she has addressed is how to best harness the creative training artists receive in South Africa's tertiary institutions not just for the 1% who goes on to successful careers as fine artists, but for the urgent needs of the country as a whole. She believes that education in art and design must serve the rebuilding of a nation whose very existence is threatened by overwhelming poverty.

For the students who work in the unit, the application of their skills to community development has been inspiring. Applied knowledge in turn has become expanded knowledge, in terms of learner-centered teaching skills gained in order to train producers, the technical skills needed to produce paper, the design skills acquired to develop products from the paper, the business skills used to market those products and the new scientific knowledge about the properties of the plant materials used to make the paper. In order to produce this wine box from the kuyasa paper project in Kommetjie on the Western Cape, students received input from their peers in industrial design for its construction and in graphic design for the logo. Simply put, they have learned what designers know from the outset: that the end product is a collaborative process. Or, I should say, end products. For new knowledge gained will be the basis of masters degree papers as well. Amanda Coppes is investigating the use of invasive plant vegetation such as black wattle, water hyacinth, and Port Jackson Willow as alternative fibers for the hand paper industry, as part of a nationwide effort to control the environmental damage caused by alien species. The end point is products for the 'green' market. Bronwyn Marshall is investigating making quality acid-free papers from traditional fibers such as cotton, hemp and sisal (which are becoming major crops in South Africa) in order to service the local art industry. Her research is proceeding in consultation with Sappi and Rand water, as well as the TWR's schools of Health & Biotechnology and Chemistry. Her thesis will include a feasibility proposal for the possible establishment of a cotton/fibre mill for a rural development project.

Students are passionate about this kind of applied research, for the field is wide open and their contribution to knowledge and to the lives of people using that knowledge so significant. If South African artists in the 1980s were political activists, now it appears that artists are social activists, no longer illustrating problems through their artwork, but transferring their knowledge to those who lack educational access. At the PRDU, art students, whose job is acquiring knowledge, can take risks that would be professionally unacceptable if they were working in the design industry. In addition to the Technikon Witwatersrand, faculty-student collaboration at the Pretoria and Durban Technikons is also actively producing new knowledge based in community development and skill building. Yet getting the administrations at these institutions to buy into forms of knowledge not based on established systems of thought can be frustrating. Technikon

Witwatersrand, for instance, has yet to officially establish their definitions and criteria for practice-based research.

Finally, what about the disadvantaged women in the projects, some handicapped, many HIV-positive, who are making the objects that are the products of this design research unit at the Technikon? The truth is that they are not designers or even artisans as yet. They are learning to become producers and marketers, and the money they are earning from the sale of their products is, in fact, supporting them and their families and adding to their self-esteem. But the designs they produce without supervision, which derive from the low-end of the conventions of western illustration, would not be marketable to a white or upper class clientele whose money can sustain their projects. And so, for now, the projects do not produce indigenous African designs, but an African 'look' that has little to do with local expression. Papermaking is not an indigenous practice as it is in the East, but rural workers **are** accustomed to making use of the materials that are around them. Perhaps as younger people see that their elders' hand-work skills can be used for poverty alleviation, they will become more interested in learning them, and their own aesthetic may develop. For now, economic development takes precedence over aesthetic development. As Steven Sack at DACST has noted, design feeds the poor. In the future, it can also feed the soul, especially if there is an increase in the number of black designers interested in researching and in tapping into their local traditions.

[if time, will add paragraph about training]Designers at Artist Proof teach high school students from the townships about design procedures and about careers in the field. Glenda Venn (Design 9) and Lee Selsick ([code:] design) Needed because lack of art instruction in schools as caused a dwindling pool of entrants into the design field. One hand is washing the other

The thinking required for that effort will of necessity be creative, as will the objects that it produces. I'm here to observe and to participate in that process in my limited way. And who knows? Some of that creativity may rub off on me!

Communal living sounds nice, but can be difficult. Everyone likes their own space, their own declared territory of expertise.