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Design As Language

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My grandmother's kitchen is puce. It is perfectly styled to make one appear and feel ill when using it. Designed and remodeled in the '70s, its general esthetic is appalling to my 21st Century eye but taken for granted by her. What was good design then is not now. But these are my subjective, trend-bound esthetic assessments. When I thumb through the cheap old records at the music store, I see the design problem of the square record jacket addressed in a myriad of era-bound esthetic styles. These are the lost dialects of good design. Just as one would not say the word "groovy" anymore for fear appearing in bad taste, one would also not design one's kitchen in shades of puce, nor would one buy an album with John Travolta in bell bottoms on the cover. (My proof for this assumption lies in Billboard's current record sales chart.)

Good design has many faces; one is articulated well by the principals of Gestalt, while another is formed by tradition and style. When teaching design, it is important to delineate between the two. What makes the Mona Lisa universal and the cover of "Staying Alive" doomed is that the former uses good design grammar, and the latter uses an obsolete design dialect. Understanding their difference is integral in deciding the line between less expressive designs, like commercial design, and the design layer of a cathartic painting. Design is a language.

The Failings of Purely Formal Discussion

Design (defined loosely as "the way we organize our surroundings") is linked to a time and/or region's esthetics (values used in judging worth). Comparing two masterpieces from times of dissimilar esthetics is useful in a design discussion. There is a distinct esthetic to late Nineteenth Century Japanese prints. This esthetic is characterized by economy. Reduced and simplified forms comprise the language of this design. On the other hand, Baroque painting's esthetic is more lavish. There is a horror vacui. A search for rule reduction and a universal design maxim through comparison of these periods is futile if design is reduced to a discussion of the formal qualities of shape,

line, etc. It is obvious that there is worth in both Baroque painting and Japanese printing, yet their design schemes are almost polar opposites. If we look at design as an organization of surroundings to an end, or as a language used to articulate something, we have a better gauge of assessing a given design's worth. Baroque painting's language of forms effectively creates a lavish, lusty atmosphere as in Reuben's (Fig.1.

Peter Paul Rubens, Henri IV Receiving the Portrait of Marie de' Medici. 1621-25). Japanese printing's sparseness evokes a sense of contemplation as in Hokusai's "The Wave" (Fig.2. Katsushika Hokusai, The Great Wave, c. 1831). These two esthetics were the tastes of the time, and that is why there are not Baroque Japanese prints, nor vice versa. The language of design was utilized by the artist to create not only a good composition, but a composition that was time specific and later time tested as universal. I am using market value of the two artists' pieces as a rough gauge of universality.

On Grammar

There are two languages at work: a grammar and a dialect, if you will. The grammar was the language of forms within both previously mentioned pieces that created each given mood. The dialect was the eccentricity that place the pieces within the given time context's taste. The dialect is what makes a sparse, contemplative piece from today different from Hokusai's work. Today, when making a sparse and contemplative design, one does not incorporate every trick of Japanese printmaking, but one does incorporate a modern dialect or a modern eccentric use of the language of forms. Therein lies the discussion of lasting and good design. The two masterpieces are not just Baroque or Japanese printing masterpieces, they are design masterpieces because their narrative is clear to this day, despite the dialect.

When grading a student's design piece, it is therefor inadequate to merely identify the adjectives of design (shape, line, etc.) and necessary to discuss their end or their meaning. Describing a student's work using the vocabulary of design but not relating to the statement made therein, either means the work says nothing or that the instructor does not have empathy to the statement. In this design student's work (Fig. 3. P.L. Carrico. Untitled. 2001.) one should recognize the lines and shapes, but not simply quantify their use by saying, "good use of line," but rather specifically articulate the ends of the use of line, such as observing that "the darker tones of value here makes one sad." Granted that many experiences had from art are subjective, one hopes that the artist has control over some of the reactions. Schooling is where this ability is honed.

On Dialect

A classroom of younger design students has a programmed esthetic of dialect. Generally, younger kids have been exposed to the new organization of space that occurs in web design

and video games. Also, they are generally heavily influenced by the bright colors of advertising. Music is performed and replayed in a digital format which has mastered the natural character of sound, thus the popularity of two very digital media: rap and dance music. The younger mind is generally more used to the spitfire stimuli typified in advertising and web design. Looking at computer web sites, I see a cacophony of fonts and animations. There is an almost Baroque feel: lusty, lavish, horror vacui. Styles at the nation's largest clothes retailer, Wal-Mart, are colorful. These are signs of the time, distinct for our time and thereby having the largest influence of generational dialect. Generational dialect is limited in its range of vocabulary, so certain effects come of using it. (There is, of course, no web site that can compete with the experience of a well-acted production of *King Lear*.)

When creating a non-representational design, one can without premeditation play with shapes and create an appealing picture. I wonder if the artist is so self-actualized that he or she can create a piece devoid of catharsis. An obvious and sordid example would be phallic symbol. Seeking to create without a premeditated aim lends the product to be an unarticulated catharsis prone to affecting potential viewers in unintended ways. Now, while this is perfectly valid in art, its consequences are not articulated well enough in the teaching of pure design. Seeking to design a conceptual piece, having fully justified every form used therein will create a more universal statement. Consider street signs. The sign reminding drivers that they are in a school zone (Fig. 4. Road Sign.) presents a female form in a long skirt. The presentation of a female form in a skirt being paternally guided by the other presumably male form might offend by presenting gender stereotypes, thereby subjecting it to ridicule and distracting one from the given danger it tries to allude to. These characteristics are the antiquated dialect used to describe gender. The pedestrian crossing sign (Fig. 5. Androgynous Male.) shows a sexless form in the act of walking. It is very clear. While the design of the children present sign will probably be updated, the walking man will not (barring some strange and drastic evolutionary change).

The Solution

Dialect is multi-vocalic, expansive, and impossible to isolate. To try and separate a given generation's influence on another is impossible. It is therefore impossible to finitely isolate and separate dialect from the language of design. It is, however, possible to plan design experiments that reduce the influence of dialect, such as creating design around universal concepts and comparing their effectiveness to old master works whose appeal have passed the test of time.

An example of an assignment that would reduce dialect and work predominantly with design grammar is as follows. The instructor would assign a class to design for sadness, then strictly define sadness with a dictionary. Next, the teacher would provide a limited vocabulary of shapes, perhaps a few triangles within an assigned rectangle. The critique would have students' works next to old works that demonstrate a dic-

tionary definition of sadness, dissuading and commenting on every element in the experimental design that is unnecessary. One could thereby teach students to practice their design language skills. Dissuading unnecessary forms in a student's design is the key to separating dialect from the good grammar of design.

In Conclusion

My own childhood was not uniform to my peers. I was raised in a variety of countries and influenced by a number of defunct styles. Some of my earliest memories are of my brother's Thompson Twins albums and how I would study the shades of purple pleather and the half-shaved heads of the musicians. This was an ethereal and awe-inspiring style. The style of a great and wise generation. A generation that smoked dramatically at the high school next to my grade school. I emulated my brother and his New Wave style. I no longer revere the dialect of New Wave, but its tenants have a subconscious weight in my mind. Here I am taking a round about way to say my design choices are influenced by my past. However, if I am armed with a vocabulary that I can arrange with good design grammar using dialect as a spice or even a grammatical tool, I can create designs more moving than disco and more lasting than the career of a one-hit wonder '80s New Wave band.