

ANOTHER OPEN LETTER

from Stuart Bailey

As is only half-explained below, this was written in reaction not only to a short piece by Rick Poynor published in *Print* magazine in October 2008, but also in reaction to a response to that piece by Zak Kyes & Mark Owens, as well as Rick's response to their response. All are archived at the time of writing at www.printmag.com/Article/Observer_Critical_Omissions. I recommend reading all three in advance of what follows in order to make full sense of what was originally a closed letter that I decided not to send but didn't quite manage to forget about. Coming across it again recently, the thoughts still seemed (just about) timely, and very much in line with the editorial breeze blowing through the rest of the issue.

The *Forms of Inquiry* exhibition and related material referred to throughout was first assembled by Zak and Mark at the Architectural Association in London in late 2007, and has since sprawled all over the place, efficiently tracked and now archived at www.formsofinquiry.com.

August 1, 2010

What follows is in response to "Critical Omissions," your opinion piece for *Print* magazine about the recent use and misuse of the term "critical design," with particular reference to the exhibition *Forms of Inquiry*. For better or worse, I hardly ever read the design press. I knew about this, however, because I happened to show up at Mark Owens' house—one of the people implicated in the piece—while he was in the middle of drafting an impetuous response. As I both agreed and disagreed with aspects of both your comments and his reaction, I thought it worthwhile to try and pinpoint where I stand in precarious relation. The fact that I was directly mentioned as an example a couple of times in ways I thought misleading helped me muster the energy to do so.

I should also admit upfront a kind of anterior motive: I'm trying to conceive a "last" issue of Dot Dot Dot which tries to be as clear and direct as possible about both what the publication and its constellation have come to stand for, as well as what it hopes to achieve with that stance.

In other words, the sort of explication your piece calls for. Already I suspect that what I'm about to write will still come across as wilfully ambiguous, but for now at least I'll stick to my guns and suggest that this is mainly because when I say "as clear and direct as possible," I honestly (meaning as close to "objectively" as I can get) think that it isn't that possible to articulate what I'm after very clearly and directly. I mean that the stuff at the heart of that description is inherently slippery, and so the writing about it is accordingly elliptical.

"In any case, the artistic process that tries to give form to disorder, amorphousness, and dissociation is nothing but the effort of a reason that wants to lend a discursive clarity to things. When its discourse is unclear, it is because things themselves, and our relationship to them, are still very unclear—indeed so unclear that it would be ridiculous to pretend to define them from the uncontaminated podium of rhetoric. It would only be another way of escaping reality and leaving it exactly as it is."

(Umberto Eco)

To add to this little stack of disclaimers, first, I know relatively little about the background of the term "critical design," and second, I only actually saw a half-assembled version of the *Forms of Inquiry* exhibition in its first incarnation at the Architectural Association. I do, however, have the book. I'm emphasizing these points only because I want to present a straightforward personal account of how the various exhibitions, books, and histories you mention actually coalesce to affect someone of moderate involvement, in order to describe the gap between how things tend to come across to others in reportage, and what really happens. I think this is the only "problem" I'm trying to address here: the distorting effects of pigeonholing. My ambivalence to terms like "critical design"—and exhibitions or publications dealing with it—has been fairly consistent from the early nineties onwards, even when I was much more preoccupied with Design as a subject. For those in the corner of the generation I've grown up with, all that designer-as-author/editor/producer/publisher/critic business was always at least mentally prefixed with a "so-called" and some eye-rolling. James Goggin recently described this collective ambivalence

in a piece called "Practice from Everyday Life,"¹ in which he points out that the day-to-day activities of graphic designers are typically nuanced and expansive enough to render such renaming—rebranding really—unnecessary, therefore superfluous, and so (again, my main point here) misleading.

My first impression of your piece and Mark's response was that the two arguments seem to miss each other entirely. You write: "if the implicit aim [of design] is simply to help clients sell more doodads, then all that matters is how effectively design achieves this goal," to which I'd immediately respond that this is absolutely, patently, not the implicit aim of the work of the majority of the people contributing to, say, *Forms of Inquiry*. Rather, these "designers" are quite plainly working, away, as you later acknowledge, in various arts margins. They tend to make work that documents or otherwise organizes other people's work (and sometimes their own), but selling anything—doodads or otherwise—rarely comes into it. Such work is, instead, subsidized somewhere along the cultural food chain, whether by grants and awards (such as those in The Netherlands and Switzerland) or relatively benign cultural institutions (such as the AA). I understand you're only trying to set up what "design" tends to mean for a broad audience, in order to pitch "critical design" against it, but I think this simplification is already too much of a distortion, or at the very least confusing. Further, I seriously doubt whether any of the participants would ever think of themselves as "critical designers," which is how it comes across. Metahaven maybe, though I can't imagine them wearing the badge voluntarily. It seems more accurate to point out that such terms are only really employed by journalists and curators.

The main effect of this (your) distortion is to suggest that these typical *Forms of Inquiry* participants and organizers are "critical" towards designers who are involved in selling things. Again this is misleading: reproach has nothing whatsoever do with the intentions of this work. There's a difference between not doing something, and thinking someone else shouldn't be doing it either. The question this *does* raise, though, is: if neither selling doodads nor busy criticizing the selling of doodads, what are these so-called critical designers doing. Or: what do they *think* they're doing? What's the point? What are they after? etc.

And I think the answer is that they don't yet know what they want, other than opportunities and occupations that accommodate their interests. Their defining characteristic as a group is Lost, sometimes happily adrift, sometimes unhappily insecure. They care about working, and the nature of that work, but not particularly about either \$\$\$ or Big Causes. They're more commonly seeking to perpetuate and share interests—in art, literature, music, and all the other usual tools for psychic survival. They're busy stabbing about looking for channels and outlets which aren't immediately obvious or might not yet exist. *Forms of Inquiry* indexes this displacement, and any attempt (whether by its organizers or its critics) to label the pack as a whole are bound to be wide of the mark because it's fundamentally all over the place. The premise of the exhibition is supremely useless—to produce posters which engage an "architectural inquiry" towards no apparent end. Lacking any sense of requiredness, that it comes across as whimsical, wilfully obscure and without urgency is hardly surprising ... yet it can't help betray a group of well-read, engaged, invested, restless minds at play. In this sense, the exhibition is completely timely—and its title weirdly apt, though not really for the reasons its curators imagined.

"Journalists have conquered the book form. Writing is now the tiny affair of the individual. The customers have changed: television's aren't viewers, but advertisers; publishing's not potential readers, but distributors. The result is rapid turnover, the regime of the best seller. But there will always be a parallel circuit, a black market."
(Gilles Deleuze)

From what I've seen or can gather, the exhibition is what you might expect—obfuscating, in-jokey, and full of barely articulated references—but this doesn't necessarily amount to exclusionary, elitist and wasteful. I'm inclined to accept Mark's claim, that the main purpose of the show was to provide a format for people to meet, for further events to occur, and in order to organize and extend their eccentric and far-reaching reading room (despite coming across as a supplement to the main event). And this is, it seems, precisely how the constellation (exhibition, book, reading room) has functioned—as a red herring (or a carrot)

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which has resulted in a number of temporary communities (the participants; the audience; the institutions). Foucault's term "heterotopia" is useful here: a space where contradictions can exist, an actual place rather than a utopia, but as yet without any clear purpose other than representing something outside the status quo. At best, this is a form of criticality itself—a quiet, local declaration of independence. It's admittedly far from the public criticism and accountability you're advocating and I'm by no means against, but surely there's room for both. I could sum this up by saying that these practices are, by implication, small-p political or small-c critical, working something out for and by themselves. Their attempts can function as a public model too, just not a very spectacular or glamorous one—and so one that doesn't really translate into column inches.

Frankly, I also find it difficult to imagine what kinds of presumably broad channels you imagine your Dunne & Raby-like critical designers might utilize. Your example of Metahaven (who I appreciate a lot) still only operate in the limited design locale, with pretty much the same insular codes as the rest of whoever might constitute a scene these days, and it's hard to conceive of any wider reach. (Their *Forms of Inquiry* poster is as impenetrable and ostensibly useless as any of the others, at least without the sort of contextualizing text which tended to emerge later in supplementary talks and interviews.) In fact, designing new modes of dispersion—setting up independent channels and outlets—seems to be precisely what's occupying this bunch right now. Even within the last couple of years, Motto in Berlin, Corner College in Zurich, Textfield in Los Angeles, castillo/corrales in Paris, Bedford Press in London, and Split/Fountain in Auckland, are all examples of small, generous, involved organizations who have collapsed production and distribution into a single, fluid activity. None of them set out with a loud Political agenda, but they end up making a quiet political point: this is possible.

"These projects aren't exclusive and are open to anyone who is interested in their activities, but their existence doesn't rely on being connected to a global network. They don't reject that network as much as express confidence in their autonomy from it."

(Anthony Huberman)

"Often I have been asked, by Washington policy intellectuals and California environmental activists, why *Harper's Magazine* doesn't publish program notes for a brighter American future or blueprints for the building of a better tomorrow. All well and good, they say, to point to the flaws in the system, or to suggest that the leading cast members of the Bush Administration be sent to sea in open boats, but why so many jokes, and to what end the impractical criticism? Where are the helpful suggestions and the tools for forward looking reform? ... If I had answers to the questions I'd stand for elective office; as an editor I've been more interested in the play of mind than its harnessing to a political bandwagon."

(Lewis H. Lapham)

This brings me to the issue of our immediate prehistory of "critical design," specifically the insinuation that our band of merry nepotists are deliberately covering over the tracks of those who preceded us in the eighties and nineties. Speaking again for both myself and with some confidence for my immediate circle, the nature of the influence of such as *Emigre* magazine is similar to that of the various venues I mentioned above, i.e. the simple fact of its existence is the actual extent of its legacy. Meaning: we never really read it, engaged with it, related to it, took its "debates" very seriously—and we don't refer to it in retrospect either. But not because we were desperate to kill fathers as you suggest—as Mark rightly points out, we were simply more fond of our grandfathers, or stepfathers, or our friends' fathers, or indeed mothers. As far as I recall we were hungry enough to talk—just not about what *Emigre* was talking about. The U.S. art school take on French Deconstructionism was hard for us to swallow or take seriously (though we couldn't have articulated why until Robin Kinross did so eloquently in *Fellow Readers*²) and its "debates" therefore came across as storms in teacups. As I and others have said before (and I'm sure you can appreciate), what we turned to, or tuned into, instead was the scarce but deep influence of Paul Elliman and not many others. This was a different kind of intelligence: luminous, full of idiosyncrasy, humor, and the "breath of life" you once quoted him as promoting in a piece we recycled in Dot Dot Dot 9. So *Emigre* was

an influence, yes, but no more or less than an independent record label, or a band, or your big brother doing a newspaper round in order to be able to buy his own bike.

Though we disregarded the tradition you're making a case for (CalArts, Rhode Island, Cranbrook, etc.) we did very much have our own, or made our own, and continue to do so. The lineage won't surprise you—Moholy-Nagy, Froshaug, Potter, the Themersons, Godard, Nabokov, and on to Barney Bubbles, Muriel Cooper, Richard Hamilton and everyone else that crops up irregularly in our publication and related projects. The quality these mavericks share, I think, is that, whether within a single discipline, or spanning two or three at once, they're all generalists, polymaths—their work seems at once technically specific and broadly allusive. Mark recently wrote a piece about Californian post-punk band The Germs as a way of pointing at the existence and discussing the nature of these alternative histories and entry points outside the canon.

"Throbbing changes, stops and starts, revisions and omissions, additions and ambivalences emanating from a corpuscular network resist any monopolizing thematic analysis. The process ensures that its strengths always will reside in specificities."
(Dustin Ericksen)

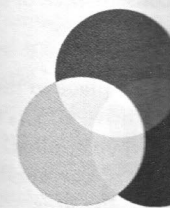
Finally, by way of explaining this generation's supposed dismissal of its predecessors, you write that "it's just the latest example of graphic design's endemic lack of faith in its own worthiness" and that "Art and architecture [are] conspicuous sources of envy among the new critical designers—many of their projects are for artists." Now, I'd be the first to agree with the lack of faith in the (canonical version of) graphic design's worthiness, as well as to suggest that this lack is justified (by its basic surplus, superfluous aspect)—but it doesn't automatically follow that the individuals involved are sitting around self-flagellating. First, I'd argue that the apparent lack of available channels to produce work that these "designers" might consider worthwhile simply forces them to look further afield. And so, as we're witnessing, they become writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, shop owners, event organizers—all practical extensions of previous roles, taking matters into their own hands.

There's a great line (I forget who wrote it, though if it wasn't Marshall McLuhan it might as well have been) about a railroad company in the U.S. going bust because they made the mistake of thinking they were in the business of railroads rather than in transportation. It's easy enough to apply this to what I'm talking about, and say that we're just trying to stay focused on the fact that we're in the business of communication rather than graphic design. Second, I don't see why working on projects with or for artists or architects equals envy. I can understand why a fair proportion of our generation or circle or whatever feel closer to the more playful, exuberant legacies of conceptual art than, say, the sadly scarce residue of semiotics or information design, but I think you're closer to describing the real character of the current state of affairs when acknowledging the importance afforded to collaboration and community. The affirmative persistence of the drive to participate and communicate ... these are the "politics" at stake here. In short, the bonds seem far more prevalent and relevant than the divisions, and what is actually happening far more prevalent and relevant—and thankfully less watertight—than the terms used to describe it.

"I abhor averages. I like the specific case."
(Louis Brandeis)

NOTES

1. James Goggin, "Practice from Everyday Life: Defining Graphic Design's Expansive Scope by its Quotidian Activities," *Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2008* (Bern: Swiss Federal Office of Culture, 2009).
2. Robin Kinross, *Fellow Readers: Notes on Multiplied Language* (London: Hyphen, 1994).



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