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# Design, words and history

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## Abstract

Every dominant movement in art has depended upon the development of an accompanying critical discourse. Using the writings of design critics and design journalists, this paper suggests that there are similar, albeit under-developed, discursive dimensions to the reception of innovative design. Critics, advertisers and commentators offer vocabularies of appreciation analogous to the critical discourses of artistic avant-gardes. These suggest the manner in which a design should be used or experienced, the nature of experiences that should follow and the discontents with earlier forms that inspired it.

A major implication is that the lukewarm enthusiasm of the UK public for good design is unlikely to be overcome simply by exposure to it. Good design, of some kinds at least, can no more be expected to speak for itself than good art. It needs to be approached with some understanding of what it sets out to do, what is to be gained by engaging with it, motivated, where appropriate, by a new sensitivity to the shortcomings of what went before. Except amongst those already inclined to value design innovation, such frames of mind are unlikely to arise spontaneously. They depend on the promulgation of appropriate vocabularies of appreciation from within the relevant design communities, and these, like the discourses of modern art, will need to possess a critical and historical dimension.

# Design, words and history

## Art Critics: what do they do?

*“You cannot explain Mondrian's painting to people who don't know anything about Vermeer.”*  
Rosenberg (1952)

It is 1967 in the Art World of North America. Jules Olitski's painting *Feast* is on show. For most people outside the art world, it is simply a tall rectangular canvas sprayed with red paint locally smudged with vague darker patches. But that is not how matters stand inside it. For the initiate, this work stands in relation to others, in a dense field of critical commentary, visual sensibility and the social currency deriving from them. It makes sense, that is, in relation to particular conceptions of the nature of art and of art history. Not unconnected with this, it also stands in relation to a lucrative and rapidly expanding art market.

The critic Clement Greenberg, once the isolated champion of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, William De Kooning, and Robert Motherwell has become the sought-after adviser of both painters and gallery owners. He has also been adopted as a guru by a group of postgraduate students of art history at Harvard University. For the students, Greenberg possesses the charisma of a once-isolated prophet who has been proved right in the important case of the first generation Abstract Expressionists. For the critic, the young academics provide theoretical and historical backing for his judgements. The consequence is an ossification of both, a dogmatism of judgement backed up by a doctrinaire version of art history. This insists that the defining feature and touchstone of authenticity in each of the arts is truth to its medium – in painting, the flatness of the canvas and the boundedness of the frame. In Greenberg's view, each genuine avant-garde is a reaction to the exploration of these properties by previous avant gardes, with 'painterly' and 'flat' styles in dialectic alternation. Painting which falls outside this schema is to be regarded as mere fashion, not an authentic forward move in the evolution of modern art. According to Greenberg, the current direction of evolution is through 'Post-Painterly Abstraction', a cool flat-toned reaction to the explicit working of the paint in Abstract Expressionism. It is an intellectually tidy version of art history which has no place for such prominent movements as Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art (Reise 1992). Partly for this reason it generates intense controversy.

In his 1965 introduction to *The Artist in America*, Greenberg has already identified Jules Olitski with the coming of Post-Painterly Abstraction, seeing him as an artist who seeks to continue and expand Abstract Expressionism rather than break with it entirely (Greenberg 1993: 215). In his introduction to Olitski's work at the Venice Biennale of 1966, Greenberg comments specifically on the spray paintings:

“In the first sprayed paintings linear drawing is displaced completely from the inside of the picture to its outside, that is, to its inclosing shape, the shape of the stretched piece of canvas. Olitski's art begins to call attention at this point, as no art before it has, to how very much this shape is a matter of linear drawing and, as such, an integral determinant of the picture's effect rather than an imposed and external limit. The degree to which the success of Olitski's paintings depends on the proportion of height to width in their inclosing shapes is, I feel, unprecedented. Because they attract too little notice as shapes, and therefore tend to get taken too much for granted, he has had more and more to avoid picture formats that are square or approach squareness. He has had also to avoid picture formats that are long and narrow, simply because these tend to stamp themselves out as shapes less emphatically than formats that are tall and narrow do . .

The grainy surface Olitski creates with his way of spraying is a new kind of paint surface. It offers tactile associations hitherto foreign, more or less, to picture-making; and it does new things with color. Together with color, it contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface; it is as if that surface, in all its literalness, were enlarged to contain a world of color and light differentiations impossible to flatness but which yet manages not to violate flatness. This in itself constitutes no artistic virtue; what makes it that - what makes Olitski's paint surface a factor in the creation of major art – is the way in which one of the profoundest imaginations of this time speaks through it.”

Several features of these passages speak to the argument we will make in this paper. Firstly, they situate Olitski as a motive force in the new phase of art history, with implications for how his work should be viewed. As Lucie-Smith (1969:111) put it, we are to see Olitski's work as experiments with a critique of abstract expressionism . Secondly, the work is described in terms of Greenberg's conception of truth-to-medium in painting. Namely, the description concentrates on what the artist does with the rectangular frame and the flat surface. Thirdly, the reader is offered instruction on how to look at the work so as to pick up on these aspects - and on the experiences which are supposed to follow from that looking. The absence of lines, for example, is to be seen as a displacement of drawing from the picture to its frame. This, in turn, should be seen as 'calling attention to' the role of the frame in determining the overall effect of a picture, and thus as a comment on painting as such. Fourthly, there is an authoritative assertion that the work is major art, perhaps with the unspoken implication that the sensitive viewer ought to be able to experience it as such. In sum, Greenberg's writings on Olitski, and probably most critical writings on most art, offer a 'vocabulary of appreciation' through which the critic believes the work ought to be experienced.

### **Vocabularies of appreciation**

Since the work of White and White (1966), we have become accustomed to the idea that new movements in art do not succeed through the unaided persuasion of the work itself, nor do they do so through spontaneous movements in taste. Rather they are actively promoted through a 'dealer-critic system'. Dealers of the kind Boime (1976) called 'ideological' support young artists who appear to have prospects, acquiring in return a stock of their work whilst prices are still low. They then work to create a public for the new art, with the dual aim of publicising a form of art in which they believe and drawing a profit when its prices appreciate. The balance between these two aims, of course, varies with individual dealers.

Whilst much has been written about the 'dealer', or entrepreneurial, component of the dealer-critic couplet, the way in which critical writings work to create a public for new art has received little attention. We will use the term 'vocabulary of appreciation' to refer to the medium through which this is achieved. As the term implies, it includes ways of talking and writing about the new art which highlight and valorise the intentions behind it and the experiences it is supposed to produce. Typically in avant-garde movements, the intentions, the values, and the talk about them, derive from a particular critique of the artistic modes against which they are a reaction. Because of this, the vocabulary of appreciation associated with an avant garde is simultaneously a vocabulary of deprecation towards its predecessor form, one which articulates and emphasises its limitations. Here Clement Greenberg, in a characteristic move of avant-garde criticism makes his case for post-painterly abstraction by showing his readers how to see cliché and degeneration in the diffusion of abstract expressionism which preceded it:

“Having produced art of major importance [abstract expressionism] turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms . . . The most conspicuous of the mannerisms into which Painterly Abstraction has degenerated is what I call the “Tenth Street touch” which spread through abstract painting like a blight during the 1950's. The stroke left by a loaded brush or knife

frays out, when the stroke is long enough, into streaks, ripples, and specks of paint. These create variations of light and dark by means of which juxtaposed strokes can be graded into one another without abrupt contrasts. . . In all this there was nothing bad in itself, nothing necessarily bad as art. What turned this constellation of stylistic features into something bad as art was its standardisation, its reduction to a set of mannerisms, as a dozen, and then a thousand, artists proceeded to maul the same viscosities of paint, in more or less the same ranges of color, and with the same “gestures” into the same kind of picture.”

(Greenberg 1993: 193)

As this passage demonstrates, vocabularies of appreciation are more pro-active than mere description. Greenberg is showing his readers how to pick out the technical similarities in different painting so that they can be seen as cliché. As with paradigm shifts in Kuhn’s picture of scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 1962), those involved in new artistic movements actually see the world in different terms, both the new art to which they are committed and the old against which it is a reaction. For this reason vocabularies of appreciation include ways of looking as well as ways of describing, sensitivities to the intentions behind new forms which are simultaneously sensitivities to the limitations of what went before.

It is the mission of critics to share their experience of the work with a wider public, writing of it in language which assumes the values it pursues and the validity of the technical means by which it does so. The same language, as we have pointed out, also stresses the limitations of what has gone before. To the extent that writing of this kind succeeds, it does so not simply by getting people to try the new art for themselves, but by persuading them to look at it as the critics do, to see what they see and to feel as they do. In the process the new audience comes to assimilate some of the aesthetic culture within which the new art originated, its discontents with previous forms and the version of art history in which its solutions are the main direction of artistic development.

## **Vocabularies of appreciation in design**

### **Adolf Loos**

Thus far we have seen that the artwork itself reveals its full meaning only through the vocabulary of appreciation which comes into being alongside it, a vocabulary which it is the business of the critic to publicise. The result, when it works, is a public which looks in new ways at much else besides the new art. Importantly, it is likely to share the avant garde artists’ impatience with the forms against which they are in reaction, thereby seeing art in the context of a new version of art history. Those convinced by Greenberg’s interpretation of the role of the frame in abstract art, for example, would likely see continuities with its role in representational art. Each form of art, then, is apprehended through a vocabulary of appreciation which is both critical and historical.

We will now argue that much of this is true of the way we apprehend the designed artefact. In this field, there are obvious counterparts to the innovative art critic. A prominent example is the pioneer architect and polemicist of modernism, Adolf Loos (1870-1933). A practitioner rather than a systematic theorist, Loos’ writings were less concerned to advance a coherent position than to persuade people to see things differently. To this end, they were ‘exaggerated, full of hyperbole, untenable contradictions and paradoxes’ (Maciuika 2000). Our concern here, however, is less with the mechanics of Loos’ rhetoric than with the intentions behind it.

His well-known essay , 'Ornament and Crime' (1908, reprinted in Loos, 1997), is a convenient starting-point. As the title states explicitly, Loos’ aim was to undermine the appeal of decoration, not by reasoned argument from hard evidence (indeed, how could he?), but by creating a series of disreputable associations between a love of ornamentation and various forms of immature and anti-

social and behaviour. To this end, his essay begins not with his actual target - the then-current Viennese taste for decoration - but with the tattoos of 'Papuan' and the doodles of children, forms of decoration which Loos connects in a parody of evolutionary recapitulation:

"When man is born, his sensory impressions are like those of a new-born puppy. His childhood takes him through all the metamorphoses of human history. At two, he sees with the eyes of a Papuan, at four, with those of an ancient Teuton, at six, with those of Socrates, at eight, with those of Voltaire."

It is only after lodging these connotations in the minds of his readers that Loos moves on to the Viennese taste for 'wallets and leather goods covered with Rococo ornamentation', and 'tin bathtubs that aim to look as if they are marble' (Maciuika 2000). Having made his point, Loos then wraps it up in an aphorism so that his readers can carry it around with them:

"I have made the following discovery and I pass it on to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects."

Logically, empirically, scientifically, and even politically, the argument is ridiculous (Banham 1999:18). Loos knew it and so, judging by the essay's notoriety, did his readers. That, however, was not the point. As a pioneer of modernist architecture, Loos saw decoration as childish and unsophisticated, not in a considered way, but as part of his immediate experience. Whilst his style of writing may not have added up as logic, it made every sense as an attempt to persuade his readers into this way of seeing. The aim was not so much to encourage them to reflect on the meaning of decoration, but to frame their next encounter with it, to superimpose the image of the tattooed Papuan and the childish doodle, as it were, on the ornate object or building. At the time Loos was writing, this new way of seeing also required a new version of design history to justify it, one which saw the Vienna Secession not as the revolt of a vigorous avant garde against academic conservatism but as a regression to a primitive state, a taste for decoration destined to be superseded by a mature and sophisticated functionality.

## **Reyner Banham**

Writing almost half a century later than Loos, Reyner Banham's day job was in academia rather than in practice. Possibly for this reason, the philosophy behind his design journalism was more systematic than Loos', or perhaps just more systematically expressed.

His view of aesthetics as realised in what is now called 'active consumption' (de Certeau 1984) set Banham apart from those modernist designers for whom 'use' tended to equate with the narrower considerations of ergonomics and functionality from which appropriate form was supposed to follow. This dissent surfaced in articles such as 'Machine Aesthetes' (1958) which pointed out that the smooth plain surfaces rendered onto reinforced concrete in the 'White Architecture' of the Thirties had little to do with the look of actual machines or with truth to material. Rather they were products of amateurish misunderstandings of both by 'aesthetic fumbletrumpets'. Banham's opening up of the supposed fusion of form and function in modernism marked an important moment in its slow leakage of authority. Even amongst those broadly sympathetic to modernism, it was a scepticism which was in the air. Thus Lynes, (1959: 338): 'Modern architecture, even when it doesn't work – and it often doesn't – looks as though it ought to'. Thirty years later, Ewen (1988:210-211) was less sympathetic, 'The machine look which they produced, however, contained a paradox. In many cases it could only be achieved by painstaking hand-craft methods.' and 'There is a greater concern that the building should look rational rather than that rational methods should be employed in its design.'

Banham, then, was an early interrogator of the air of rational inevitability with which modernist design had hitherto been presented. For if its aesthetics did not, after all, follow from function, they must be – just aesthetics. In practice, Banham observed, much of the form justified in the name of functionality was actually that of classical geometry, in which respect ‘modernism’ could fairly be castigated as retrograde and academic. And even when it did express a genuine functionality, it was a legislated functionality, not one derived from the actual practice of users. In this respect modernism could fairly be accused of authoritarianism, an accusation which certainly resonated with the slum-cleared inhabitants of the Brutalist flats of the 1950s.

Once suspicions of this kind are planted in our minds, we begin to look differently at modernism – which brings us back to our main line of argument. An autobiographical example will illustrate. In that quintessential representative of functional ‘White Architecture’, the New York Guggenheim, there are a number of spiral arms which end in blank walls. At the time of a visit by one of us in 1996, one of them bore a notice attributing the slogan ‘form follows function’ to Louis Smith, the mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright. It was Lloyd Wright himself, apparently, who took the ‘next step’, declaring that ‘form and function are one.’ There was not even a chair from which the visitor could reflect on the relevance of these proclamations to his imminent need to retrace his own steps - the point being that the prior existence of a discourse of scepticism towards the modernist project sensitises the spectator to performative contradictions of this kind. Alert to the possibility of hand-crafted unevenness in the supposedly machine-like curvatures of the Guggenheim, sure enough we find it.

### **Contemporary design journalism**

It is in the work of innovative thinkers on design (and major art critics) that vocabularies of appreciation are at their most visible, and this is because they are trying to change them. In order to do so, they need to draw out what is ordinarily taken-for-granted, what we habitually attend to, what meanings we attach and the standards or icons of design against which we make our judgements. In the ordinary way of things, these matters are largely implicit; we apprehend the designed object without reflecting overmuch on how we do so. Following major changes of taste, that is, vocabularies of appreciation sink back into what Bourdieu (1986) called the ‘habitus’, giving rise to the illusion that design (or art) can speak direct to our unsocialised humanity. But this is an illusion: spontaneity is not instinct.

This means that we should not expect to find vocabularies of appreciation systematically set out in the everyday journalism of design. As the ideas of pioneer thinkers slowly filter into the small change of routine description, they become familiar and can be evoked through a repertoire of stock phrases. A kind of shorthand evolves, which comes to stand for a whole ‘look’ and a whole way of appreciating it. Readers of style magazines and newspaper colour supplements are bombarded with articles about interior decorating and home makeovers which are full of these terms and phrases. The objects and room-settings are shown in pictures accompanied by a vocabulary of appreciation now reduced to slogans or adjectives. If, for example, an item is described as ‘clean and functional’, we now know that we are intended to experience it through the lens of a popularised modernist aesthetic, one which looks for and finds virtue in simple geometric form and undecorated surfaces. Even in these truncated forms, however, vocabularies of appreciation still display occasional traces of the tendencies outlined earlier. That is, they also work as vocabularies of deprecation towards rejected styles. In this vein, the journalist Jonathan Margolis (2000) offers his readers a compact reprise of Loos’ fulminations against decoration:

“It is common today to enter a working class home and find amidst the swirly carpets and ornate three piece suite, a couple of stunning modern Scandinavian items....”

If Margolis echoes Loos' modernist functionalism, Friedman (2002a) urges her readers to look at it with the scepticism of Banham:

“The modern movement dictated that white should be one of the commandments of contemporary design, simple pure and light . . . [but white] . . . is actually a singularly unfunctional and inappropriate colour for furnishing fabric, wall covering or carpet in London in particular, one of the filthiest, greyest cities in the world.”

Notice too the echo of Banham's charge of authoritarianism against modernism. In the following extract, also from Friedman (2002b), the historical dimension to a vocabulary of appreciation is visible, in this case a version of history which sees the initial excesses of modernism gradually softening as architecture opens to the influence of its users:

“A house has to be eclectic and have a bit of history. You have to bring some meaning to ownership, not just be a tenant in your own home. Modern architecture has always been extreme.....today's architects are less doctrinaire in their approach”.

Despite these adjustments, continues Friedman, many users have still not assimilated the modernist vocabulary of appreciation, even in its softened version: “inexperienced buyers of the new can still feel overwhelmed by what they see as the expectations of contemporary design”.

Friedman's mention of personal history points to an important difference between the way we experience art and design. For most of us, most of the time, artworks are viewed in social spaces set apart from everyday life. Even the wall-space over the mantelpiece may be thought of as such a place. In contrast, the designed object is often part of everyday life. Whilst the difference is obviously not a hard and fast one, it means that design is more likely than art to carry associations of the aspect or phase of life into which it fitted. Although most of these associations are private, enough of them are public to create a market for works of design intended to dispel them if they are unpleasant or to tap into them if they are pleasant. Thus Deyan Sudjic (2001) explains the early success of Habitat as a cheap and simple way of covering up decor which by the early 1960s had come to carry associations of scrimp and save:

“the foam sofas, plastic wastepaper buckets , Art Deco wallpaper, brushed aluminium up-lighters and rush matting helped a generation liberate itself from the bleak memories of their parents' world. Conran showed how the lingering odour of utility furniture, coin-in-the-slot gas fires and bath times limited to three inches of water a day could be dispelled with a coat of orange paint, a floor sander and a scattering of ethnic durries”.

However, the terms in which Sudjic describes the Habitat package hints at a vocabulary of appreciation which now sees through it. It seems now to be seen as a cut-price veneer of fake modernism which could only work so long as it succeeded in staving off its association with the sadness it typically covered up. On a par, perhaps, with the boy racer's hopeful addition of a rear spoiler to his parents' cast-off Rover saloon.

The use of design as a way of tapping into (mostly) pleasant associations is signalled by one meaning of that complex adjective 'retro'. At its simplest level, retro indicates that a piece is to be viewed not as an embarrassing relic of an obsolete style but as a keepsake from a simpler, nobler, and better past. The aluminium-spoked steering wheel is intended, perhaps, to evoke the world of pre-war motoring with its open roads, its absence of speed limits and casualties largely confined to pedestrians, animals and cyclists. But retro may also signal that we are to understand a display of past design as a knowing, ironic and even post-modern framing of kitsch. An example is the revival



of the 1960's lava lamp by a company called Mathmos, named tongue-in-cheek after the 'bubbling life force' in the sci-fi cult film *Barbarella* (Tyrell 2001). The commercial success of objects of this kind bears witness to the appeal of demonstrating our own sophistication by a suitably framed display of its cheap and tacky antithesis. Need we also add that such a display depends on a vocabulary of appreciation which is also a vocabulary of deprecation and which is historical in its nature?

Design also differs from the fine arts in the matter of functionality. Typically the functional counterpart to the aesthetic vocabulary of appreciation is a combination of the book of instructions and the sales brochure. Though the two overlap, the first concentrates on how to use the product and the results which should follow, whilst the second focusses on the improvements these represent over previous designs. In this respect, the brochure works rather like the historical dimension of avant-garde vocabularies of appreciation. As with certain artworks, moreover, it is sometimes possible to build statements of both kinds – of usability and historical movement – into the physical form of the product itself. The transparent barrel of the Dyson vacuum cleaner is an interesting example. This not only declares a technological advance over previous types, but also guides the user on the disposal of the dust. This mention of product semiotics, however, leads away from the main topic of our paper.

## Conclusions

There are times when design seems to work with an immediacy which suggests that its appeal is direct to the central nervous system. If all design actually worked like this, the education of the public into the appreciation of good design would require nothing more than exposure to it. And should this direct and simplistic approach fail – as we think it always has – the disillusioned would-be missionary is at least left with the consolations of snobbery. To the extent that good design remains a minority taste, it is one which speaks of a refined sensibility.

We think this whole picture is misleading. Sensibilities are manufactured; in the fine arts through the agency of the dealer-critic system; in design through the writings of pioneer critics as filtered down through style magazines, advertising and other media of design journalism. In the writings examined in this paper, we catch these critics in the act of cajoling their publics into looking at things differently, describing them in different terms. These writings are the verbal component of what we have called vocabularies of appreciation, ways of paying attention and describing which have developed alongside the modes of design or schools of art to which they are attached. It is these specific vocabularies of appreciation, not some more generalised refinement of sensibility, which enable us to read works of art and design more-or-less as they are read and intended within their native aesthetic communities.

Since the arts and designs of the twentieth century were importantly characterised by a succession of avant-garde movements, each defining itself in reaction to what went before, vocabularies of appreciation possess a critical-historical dimension, in which the meaning of a work lies partly in what it rejects. Modernist design, for example, invites the eye to wander over its bland surfaces, luxuriating in relief from the decoration which might once have been applied to them. Thus the eye sees through the lens of a version of design history and vocabularies of appreciation are simultaneously vocabularies of denigration. For the lover of good design, it follows that failure to be up with the game signifies not merely a lack of good taste; it is bad taste. As Poggioli (1968) put it, 'the typical form of the ugly for the avant garde is "ex-beauty", the cliché.'

From all this it follows that a wider appreciation of good design depends on the dissemination of its associated vocabularies of appreciation. This would require design criticism and the journalism derived from it to be far more explicit on the matter of what to look for in good design and what

experiences are supposed to follow. That instruction of this kind would strike some of its current public as crass only symptomises the strength of the exclusionary tendency. With the expansion of higher education in art and design, vocabularies of appreciation are now increasingly acquired in the course of professional training, with the fluent and confident mastery of them serving as a sign of initiation. In more traditional social forms the love of art could legitimate inherited privilege by denying the long process of socialisation through which it had been acquired (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1992). By similarly suppressing their educational origin, contemporary vocabularies of appreciation can serve to define a community of 'spontaneous' good taste against an excluded philistine majority. With a wider public understanding of what to do with good design, all that would have to go, but that is only to say that design cannot simultaneously be popular and exclusive.

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