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© APPETITE ENGINEERS F OR SHO W AT SFMOMA

ART AND DESIGN: BOUNDARIES BLURRED AND PRESERVED

Is design a form of artistic expression that, luckily, can be a lucrative profession as well? Or, are design's aspirations to be considered art inevitably tainted by its commercial heart? When a promotional piece moves from the desk to the wall, does the designer become an artist alongside his or her work? And if a designer also practices so-called purer forms of art, such as painting or sculpture, how does one activity inform the other?

These contentious questions have been a constant companion throughout the history of graphic design. Perhaps it's because so many designers have trained in fine arts, and so many artists have turned to design as an ostensibly more practical means to express creativity. Or perhaps it's because fine artists seem to live in such an exalted world that any visually creative person aspires to share that rarefied air.

Martin Venezky of Appetite Engineers in San Francisco says his design students frequently ask the same questions: "What's the difference between artists and designers?" "Why are some people considered artists and others aren't?" "How do I think about myself as I go through life in this career?"

"It's always designers who claim they are artists and never the other way around. This suggests a psychological hierarchy. Whereas the art world rarely recognizes designers as artists," notes Venezky.

Because art and design are both creative pursuits that call upon many of the same skills, it is tempting to consider them as equals, or at least different expressions of the same process. But Barry Katz, professor of humanities and design at the California College of Arts and Crafts, warns, "Don't confuse creativity with art. Many artists are not creative, and many non-artists are creative." He offers a distinction: "The artist, in a very strict and pure sense, is not answerable to anyone but him or herself, and execution is between you and the canvas, whatever form it takes. In design, there are always constraints—commercial, financial, time.

"The measure of your skill and virtuosity as a designer is how well you handle the constraints, not if you escape them. If you have an unlimited budget and a user group of one—yourself—that's not design; it's art," Katz says.

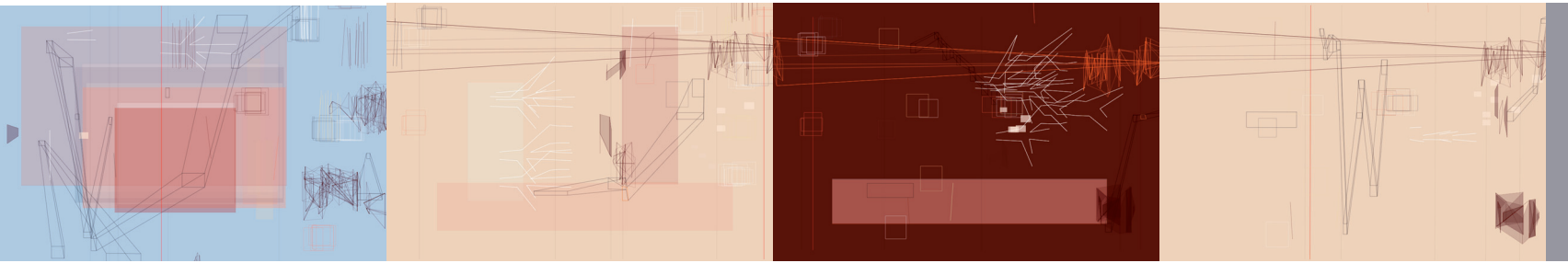
Deciding whether a creation is art isn't up to the creator, rather it's up to others who consider the creator's entire body of work. "Designers, unlike artists, are not used to having critics and curators who help define standards, create definition, and push work forward. Artists deal with this all the time and know it improves their work," Venezky says. "I've had shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Southern Exposure gallery, and while I use artistic processes, I'm still considered a designer, and my work does not get relabeled as art."

Paula Scher, a partner at Pentagram in New York and a painter, concurs. She says having a design piece elevated to some kind of higher status is "irrelevant." For example, a poster she designed for Elvis Costello became a valuable collector's item. "It had nothing to do with me. It's an odd by-product that happened as a result of someone else's judgment; an accident based on the nature of the client. It was a rush job that became an icon," she says.

Scher cautions against designing with an eye toward making art. "The word *art* is often used to judge quality. But there's plenty of art that sucks and plenty of graphic design that's sensational. Anyone can claim their design is art, but the important questions are, 'Does it function?' 'Does it elevate standards, push boundaries, or raise expectations?' 'Is it any good?'"

So what makes a commercially designed object warrant the art label? Katz lends historical insight: "One-hundred years ago, the arts and crafts movement was made of people who fundamentally thought of themselves as artists and came to design through a socialist perspective that said we can no longer elevate certain kinds of art above others. They felt there was no zone of human creativity that is too banal for a creative person to turn to it."

“If anyone is designing to support



their painting, they should get out because the design world doesn't need them.”

PAULA SCHER



COMPOSITIONS OF MUSIC, COLOR, VISUAL SYMBOLS, ABSTRACT GRAPHICAL GESTURES, AND SOUND EFFECTS FROM VARIATIONS,
AN INTERFACE EXPERIMENT BY POSTTOOL.

Indeed, some art institutions have been particularly progressive in asking us to critique design objects with a fuller respect for their artistry. Ruth Keffer, curatorial associate of architecture and design at SFMOMA notes, “Just because something is mass produced doesn’t mean it’s not art.” But she also notes differences between pure art, such as an abstract painting, and something created with a secondary purpose in mind. “People who don’t know much about art start with the concept that art is rare, but this concept only applies to certain kinds of art. For example, we did an exhibit on sneakers. Anyone can purchase a pair; they’re not too expensive. But the technology, beauty, and design makes them art,” she explains. Knowing what to display on a pedestal or gallery wall is a combination of experience and emotion.

“Sometimes a gut reaction to a piece of work startles you, you react to it with your senses, but then you have to contextualize it: Does it break ground, show exceptional skill, or challenge accepted practice? Novelty, originality, and aesthetics all come into play,” Keffer says.

As do clients—who set tasks, outline limitations, and pay the bills. Occasionally they also provide inspiration and the opportunity for a designer to give full range to their creativity. Gigi Obrecht and David Karam of PostTool Design (San Francisco), winners of the SFMOMA 2001 Experimental Design Award, feel strongly that as “designers for hire,” client needs are first. “But sometimes there is an overlap in what we are interested in artistically and what the client needs,” adds Obrecht.

For example, the Body Shop asked Obrecht and Karam to respond simply to a strategic plan, giving the designers freedom to create both form and content. The resulting interactive CD includes a musical score and moral fable, translated and recorded by native speakers in 21 languages. “Because the client commissioned an experience, they changed the perception of the medium, and this can elevate a piece to art,” Karam says.

Obrecht adds, “When the content is interesting and allows for the exploration of new territories and concepts that are more mature, then the work will also be at home in a gallery or museum setting.”

Because this convergence of artistry and utility is rare, designers who want to experiment with new forms of expression often do so on their own time with their own money. Orangeflux in Chicago set out to create a design product that could be sold, and would offer the partners a chance to explore the overlap between music and design. Using tools of the design trade paired with harmonic and rhythmic processes of music, they create visual recordings. *Rust Belt*, the first project, is a series of tracks created by individual designers who used custom typefaces and other graphic elements, which were bound and packaged like an album.

Matt Fey of Orangeflux describes the firm’s most recent release, *Esperanto Marmalade*, as “an exploration of how to create a live visual recording, a real-time design composition, and an improvisational effort.” Working together, the designers used graphic instruments to make their creative marks on a long scroll. Fey focused on a geometric backbeat, partner Kristina Meyer put down a percussive line using Typetix—stamps hand-carved onto the ends of wood sticks—and other designers added their signature elements. The scroll was then cut up and compiled into a book called *Loud*, which is a kind of graphic representation of both the restraint and collaborative dynamic that occurs when musicians “jam.” Meyer points out that these visual recordings “pull some music and art into the graphic design space, not force design into the gallery space.”

This distinction is important as it speaks to the role of intent and motivation, but it may or may not be the most critical difference between creating art and creating design. Joshua Trees and Yvan Martinez of Fake I.D. in Los Angeles are design collaborators who make no distinction between so-called commercial and artistic projects. “Regardless of the realm it gets shown in, we take the same attitude in making it,” Trees insists.


“There’s always a client, no matter how vague. There’s always someone you answer to, even if it’s only yourself as devil’s advocate. We always ask ourselves what’s being said, regardless if it’s our own voice or another person’s. It’s part of creating with, rather than for, someone,” Trees adds.

Akiva Boker feels strongly that “art and design are now feeding each other, so these days the boundaries are vague. This is part of where we’re headed culturally. It’s like in music where mixing allows all kinds of music to come together; we don’t have to define whether we’re listening to jazz or hip-hop.” In addition to being a partner at the Mint Group in New York, which works with clients who foster social and environmental change, Boker is also bringing his experience as a diver and sculptor, as well as his childhood in Israel, to a project to create an artificial coral reef in the Red Sea. When built, this underwater structure will give sea creatures another place to inhabit and offer divers an alternate playground, alleviating pressure on the natural coral reef.

Others feel that while blurred boundaries are interesting, inevitable, and even productive, critical differences between creating art and creating design are still important not only to the final product but to designers and artists themselves. Lew Minter, painter, sculptor, occasional graphic designer, and design professor at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, says, “When talking about how the fundamental components of visual language, such as line, shape, rhythm, harmony, and proportion, work together, and when talking about the craft of both design and art, there are similarities because you’re dealing with the same formal elements. But when you’re in the studio, the variables that motivate are internal, rather than external; they have to do with historical context and how you see yourself in the world.”

Scher agrees, saying, “The difference between fine art and commercial art is an economic decision. When you’re doing graphic design, the purpose of it is laid out by another person. When you do fine art, the only criteria you’re satisfying is your own.”

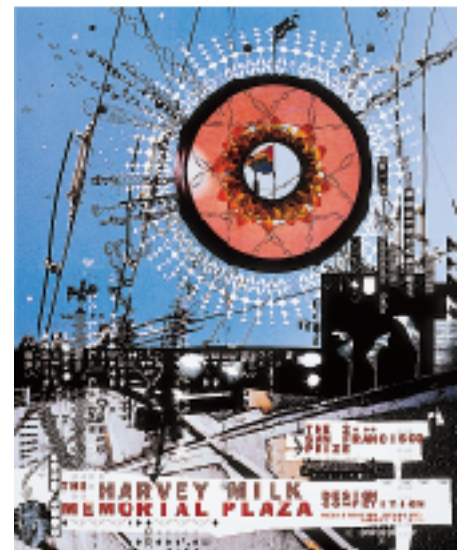
She uses similar creative processes in both her art and design, but she uses “one against the other because the acts are opposite. Design is immediate decision making. It takes less time because of the computer, and it’s social—meetings, teaching, coaching, clients, other designers. My painting is solitary and laborious. The differences create a balance that keeps both sides going.”

Any discussion of art and design is full of nuances and subtleties of emphasis, meaning, and opinion, but two areas of consensus emerge. One is that there is no reason not to do it all. Expressing oneself creatively need not be limited to a single discipline. The other is that design should never be viewed as the servant to some notion of a higher but less lucrative creative effort, often deemed “art.” 

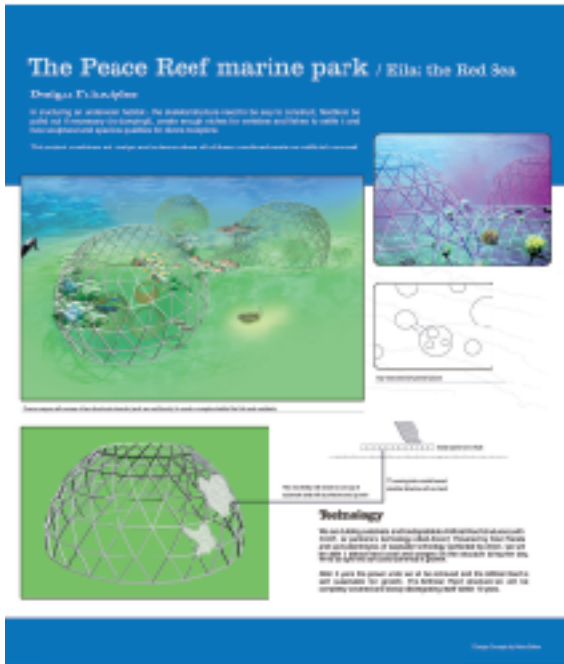


FAKE I.D. EDITED AND DESIGNED BY MIGRÉ 59 USING A COMBINATION OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND BITMAPPED ICONS TO PLAY WITH MEANING AND SHAPE FOR THE ISSUE'S THEME AND TITLE, "ECONOMY OF MEANS." THE VISUALS DON'T SIMPLY SUPPORT, BUT SOMETIMES CONTRADICT THE TEXT, THEREBY CONTRIBUTING TO THE DIALOGUE, ACCORDING TO JOSHUA TREES.

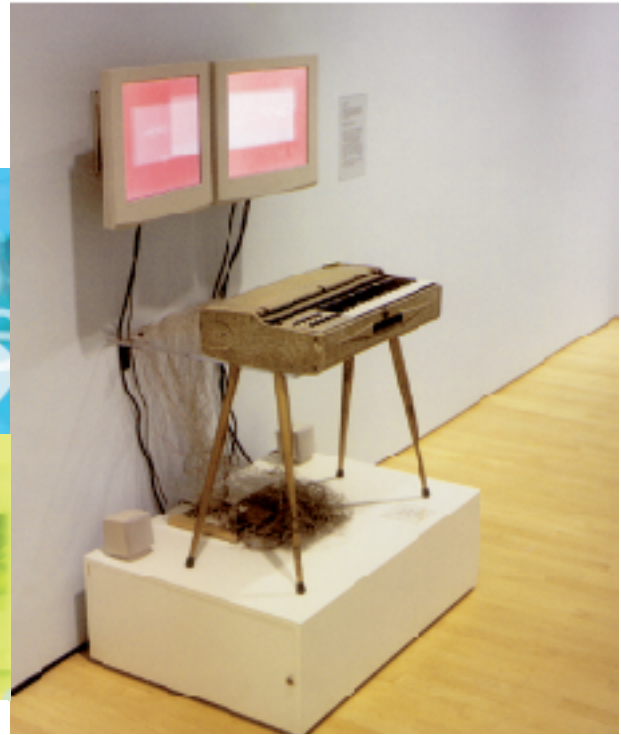
(LEFT) APPETITE ENGINEERS CREATED THE POSTER FOR THE 2001 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL, WHICH FEATURED MANY OF THE SAME GRAPHIC ELEMENTS USED IN OTHER PRINT PIECES. (BELOW THIS POSTER WAS USED TO PROMOTE AN ARCHITECTURE COMPETITION TO REDESIGN THE HARVEY MILK MEMORIAL PLAZA. ALL OF THE ELEMENTS CAME FROM THE SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOOD, VENEZKY RECALLS.



AKIVA BOKER OF THE MINT GROUP IS DESIGN DIRECTOR FOR THE PEACE REEF, A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROJECT THAT COMBINES ART, DESIGN, LANDSCAPING, AND SCIENCE TO CREATE AN ARTIFICIAL REEF IN THE RED SEA, WHICH WILL APPEAL TO CORALS AND OTHER NATURAL WILDLIFE, AS WELL AS VISITING DIVERS.



THIS BOOK BY ORANGEFLUX IS A FUSION OF DESIGN, ART, MUSIC, AND LITERATURE THAT CREATES A NEW FORM OF EXPRESSION. ACCORDING TO MATT FEY, RECENTLY SELECTED AS AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF BOOK DESIGN BY THE AIGA, IT WILL APPEAR IN THE TRAVELING EXHIBITION, 50 BOOKS/50 COVERS.



(ABOVE) POSTTOOL DESIGN CREATED VARIATIONS, AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE DERIVED FROM A DERELICT ORGAN CONNECTED TO A COMPUTER PROCESSING UNIT, ALLOWING USERS TO GENERATE BOTH SOUNDS AND VISUALS ACROSS TWO MONITORS.

(ABOVE, LEFT) CARDINAL DIRECTIONS IS A VIDEO INSTALLATION POPULATED WITH OUR CHARACTERS, EACH REPRESENTING A PARTICULAR ATTITUDE. AS THE CAT, CAR, HPPO, AND BUBBLES NAVIGATE THROUGH THEIR ENVIRONMENT, AN OPEN-ENDED NARRATIVE IS CREATED. THIS PIECE WAS CONCEIVED FOR AN EXHIBIT OF NEWMEDIA AT SAN FRANCISCO'S LIMN GALLERY IN 1997. IT WAS FURTHER DEVELOPED AND REFINED FOR THE NATIONAL DESIGN TRIENNIAL AT THE COOPER HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM IN JANUARY 2001.

