Curation, Cataloging, and Negative Capability

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Curating graphic design

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If words had patina then a word like "curation" would be have a surface so shopworn as to be unrecognizable from its original form. The concept of curation in its unreconstructed sense is intimately connected to institutional authority. If "curate" as a noun in an archaic sense, refers to the ecclesiastic duties of a church pastor, and "curator" in a more modern sense, is one who acts as an institutional overseer that preserves the contents of a museum or collection, then the entire concept of curation cannot escape its roots as part of a process of cultural conservation. Fundamentally, the act of curation is conservative, hewing to tradition or institutional continuity. But when we reduce the idea of curation to an act of list making, the cataloging of objects and ephemera, the conservative impulse is upended. Curation then becomes an act of proliferation, a reduction to the most basic element of any creative process. Any list can be potentially interesting, even arbitrary or random lists of things will eventually generate interesting associations purely by the act of serendipitous permutation. It is too easy to point to any number of social networking or web-based tools as the source of this shift in emphasis from genealogy to catalog. Technology is merely symptomatic and obscures larger institutional and discursive shifts in thinking about curation. What is in need of closer examination is how curators and designers understand curation and in particular how they define it as a means of framing exhibitions about graphic design.

The recent Cooper-Hewitt/Walker Art Center show *Graphic Design: Now in Production* (2011) is most emblematic of the institutionalization of curation as catalog. If this show can be seen as a lively and thoughtful engagement with the form and sheer mass of contemporary design (contemporary being defined in a tidy and arbitrary manner as "since 2000"), then it is also a weird form of capitulation to the curatorial means of last resort:

the catalog. The very idea of a catalog implies that it is part of the process of curation, not an end in itself. Yet it is the catalog or the process of cataloging that has become synonymous with the idea of curation in graphic design.

In alignment and in some ways, in opposition to the catalog is the idea of the inquiry. Perhaps the most influential articulation of inquiry as a form of curation is found in the introduction to the catalog of the *Forms of Inquiry* exhibition that ran from 2007–2009 at the AA School of Architecture, London, and various locations in Europe. Curators Zak Kyes and Mark Owens define their approach to the show as being framed by the idea of inquiry. For Kyes and Owens an inquiry is distinct from any rigorous empirical or analytical investigation, they define it as an "anti-methodological methodology" that is intentionally intuitive.[1] *Forms of Inquiry* is a collection of works by graphic designers that fall under the rubric of what Kyes and Owens call "intuitive modes of investigation."[2] Absent any clear statement of curatorial intent, it is difficult not to confound the thematics of *Forms of Inquiry* with its curatorial process. Inquiry is both the operative process and the object of *Forms of Inquiry.*

1 See the introduction by Kyes and Owens in *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design*. London: Architectural Association, 2007.
2 Ibid.

Beyond the interdisciplinary focus of the show on the combination of architecture and graphic design, it is the thematic and curatorial framework of the inquiry that is the most provocative.[3] The first order of business is to separate the idea of inquiry from the idea of 'critical graphic design' that acts as a confusing sub-title for the show. There is no necessary or obvious relationship between criticality and inquiry. It would be easy to assume that the terms could be understood as opposites: criticality implies a rational analysis or some sort of overtly oppositional stance, while inquiry could be the basis of any number of practices

3 See Rick Poynor's review and unpacking of the term "critical design" in the June 2008 issue of Print magazine. Available on the web: http://www.printmag.com/article/observer_critical_omissions/. The web version is notable for the inclusion of Kyes and Owens' response to Poynor and Poynor's reply.

that verge on the poetic or even deliberately irrational. A *derive* or an assemblage could constitute an inquiry, but neither is critical in a way that is obvious or unambiguous. Kyes and Owens managed to confuse the issue, perhaps because the show is related to architecture, by an inept use of architect Manfredo Tafuri as a generic placeholder for the critical project in architecture. Tafuri in his *Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1987) insisted that the critical project had moved from architectural practice to history, practice being compromised by its investment in capital and its reliance on existing means of production in an unjust economic system. Only the historian or critic could have sufficient distance in order to enact any sort of uncompromising critical project. Contra Kyes and Owens' own framing, *Forms of Inquiry* is anti-Tafurian in its focus on the design practitioner.

The most singular and obvious influence on Kyes and Owens' concept of inquiry is the poet John Keats' notion of *negative capability*. In Keats' 1817 letter to his brothers he offers this classic broadside to enlightenment rationality: "I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—" It is the deliberate use of non-rational means of knowing, of literally being content with "half-knowledge," and denying any kind of coherent or useful epistemology that seems most congruent with something like an intuitive mode of investigation. Negative capability is the locus of Keats' Romantic poetics, embodying an early nineteenth century "counter-enlightenment" where reason is put to the sword. The fact that negative capability survived to influence numerous early twentieth-century avant-gardes gives it a particular resonance

(F.T. Marinetti and the Futurists perhaps being the most telling example involving both a messianic irrationalism and the fetishizing of technology). Keats' invocation of contradiction and uncertainty is almost a proto-modernist statement of difficulty where aesthetics emerges not from transcendence, or reaching after idealized forms, but from the incommensurate nature of a given work.

In the sense that Kyes and Owens use the concept of an intuitive inquiry, curation becomes a type of poetics. Works are collected under the aegis of an exhibition not because of some rationalized intellectual project, but because there is something valuable in juxtaposing works that are multifarious and contradictory. There may be thematic coherence, but the crux of the exhibition remains beyond reason, in the realm of what they call the "subjective world."

Forms of Inquiry could be classified as an attempt at synthesizing a catalog and an inquiry. The structure of the exhibition is reliant on the slight tweaking of three received categories, any of which could be applied to any of the works in the exhibition. The need to call out a category like 'typographics' in a show specifically focusing on graphic design is pure tautology, even as it reflects a widespread and somewhat flatfooted confusion as to what constitutes graphic design as a practice. To a lesser extent categories like 'modes of production' and 'methodologies' suffer from the same sense of typology as being generically descriptive rather than synthetic or even poetic. The result of this tepid cataloging of works is to deflate the premise of *Forms of Inquiry;* that which is intuitive must be disciplined and rationalized even if the rationalizations only obscure the primacy of intuition as a means for investigation. If fundamentally an inquiry is attempting to re-enchant the world, grappling with contingency head on, the list only serves to deaden and deceive, giving false order to a world that

has never been amenable to woolly-headed reduction.

Graphic Design: Now in Production suffers from similar faults. As a catalog it is ecumenical to the point of brain death. Exhibition curators Ellen Lupton and Andrew Blauvelt's ambitions are clearer in the sense that they see the exhibition as part of a defined lineage of sprawling catalogs such as the writer Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968) and architects Alison and Peter Smithson's *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London) in 1953. One does not have to go much further into the depths of what would qualify as pre-history for graphic design, to find architect John Soane's museum established in 1833: a massive collection of art and architectural objects from antiquity and the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where the contemporary (neo-classical enlightenment) and the ancient found concord as part of the genealogical project of early modernity.

In contrast, *Graphic Design: Now in Production* is completely about the contemporary. It is literally a "history of the immediate present" to follow historian Anthony Vidler's rephrasing of Reyner Banham's famous title. Lupton and Blauvelt's exhibition has one overwhelming virtue: in a purely formal way they succeed in conveying the boundlessness of contemporary graphic design. One gets the sense that they have considered any and everything that might fall under the rubric of graphic design, even if in truth their curatorial strategy is ruthless in its parochialism, implying that the only graphic design that matters is of Anglo-American origin and almost monolithically in English.[4] Perhaps this points to the main advantage of the list or catalog as a curatorial strategy: it provides a semblance of completeness without ever having to be complete.

4 See Ian Lynam's review of the exhibition *Japanese Graphic Design: Not In Production* in *Slanted* 19 (2012). Lynam notes the exclusion of large tracts of non-Western design production in particular the absence of any representative design from East Asia.

A list is potentially boundless, it has no implied endpoint. It is the format of almost every web page and application by default, where "below the line" becomes an infinity of javascript constantly reloading content into the white void below. If Lupton and Blauvelt indeed had "sought out innovative practices that are pushing the discourse of design in new direction, expanding the language of the field by creating new tools, strategies, vocabularies and content", as they argue in the exhibition catalog, one wonders if this just a shrewd way of justifying the list as curatorial strategy. A search for new "strategies, vocabularies and content" in graphic design is a search for a haystack in a pile of other haystacks. It is a statement of non-discrimination, not curatorial intent. Never mind the fact that the concept of "innovation" is so imbued with the mendacity of the entrepreneurial huckster that it is now best left to the MBAS and Richard Florida's of the world.

Between the slipperiness of the inquiry and the conceptually stunted catalog, graphic design curation is at a rather bizarre crossroads. What is at stake here is nothing less than the idea of how the discipline of graphic design constitutes its own contemporary canon. At the heart of any curatorial impulse is a critical opinion. One must decide what is valuable and why it is valuable if it is to be preserved and exhibited. Yet these criteria for curatorial value seem either to be cloaked in obscurantism or so vaporous as to be unintelligible. In one of the many captions in the *Graphic Design: Now in Production* catalog, Blauvelt admits to a deliberate strategy of incoherence. Commenting on the design of the catalog, Blauvelt notes that the design is based on a "pre-modern style of arrangement" derived from paintings exhibited in salon-style hangings, where the goal is to "… impose an order and sensibility on an often incoherent assemblage of objects…". One suspects that this is less a case of a gloss accidentally contradicting a specific

curatorial vision than an admission that the entire concept of the exhibition was based solely on a process of collection, collation, and display that had no clear direction. This is a blind heuristics run amok, unleashed with the desperate hope that there might be meaning hiding somewhere in the infinite proliferation of objects.

The catalog and inquiry can be read as symptoms of a more ominous issue. This is not a simple issue of decline or unoriginality, but one of belatedness. Both *Graphic Design: Now in Production* and *Forms of Inquiry* share an obsession with the contemporary that is expressed in a manner that is now retrograde. At the root of what is considered modern (or "modernist" if one wants to be explicitly ideological) is the idea of newness and nowness. More important for modernity than any explicit rejection of tradition or the past is a strident need to be 'innovative' and of the moment. Whether it was Marinetti in his phenomenology of speed and car crashes as the foundation for aesthetics of a nihilistic 'now' to later movements like Fluxus, who moved the nexus of the "now" to the use of everyday materials and multiples, a need to find the locus of the contemporary became an *idée fixe.* The fact that at this late date there is still an obsession with the contemporary implies that this is an era of a belated modernity, skipping like a locked groove on the remnants of the now.

If there is a critical function to be found in graphic design curation beyond the descriptive then there must be a move beyond the discomfiting continuum between inquiry and catalog. These options give us a palette of extraordinarily limited means where we are faced with the black box of intuition on one end and the endlessly scrolling catalog on the other. Both of these strategies are symptomatic of what the music critic Simon Reynolds defines as basic conundrum of our era, a "hyper-stasis" where there is "a paradoxical combination of speed and standstill."[5] We should no longer be beholden to the modern, and on the quicksand we stand and sink, assuming that it is the only ground available for a solid foundation.

5 See Reynolds' *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (2011), p. 427. The last chapter "The Shock of the Old" is perhaps the best diagnosis of the contemporary condition, easily applicable to design culture and all its permutations.