



Art is...

**W H A T E V E R**

 School of VISUAL ARTS

 SVART

# What is design?

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Obviously I have given this issue a lot of thought over the years. In teaching, you have to be clear about what you tell your students, so I developed a set of definitions about what design could be. One definition is that design is the intervention in the flow of events to produce a desired effect. Another is that design is the introduction of intention in human affairs. A third rather elegant description is that design moves things from an existing condition to a preferred one. This last one reduces the complexity of the idea, but I like all three definitions. Design doesn't have to have a visual component. Ultimately, anything purposeful can be called an act of design.

**The title of this book is "Art is Work." Do you ascribe any social, moral, or professional attributes to the word "work" when it is applied to design?**

Work is essential to people's lives. To do work that is meaningful and excellent seems a fundamental desire of the best human beings. If we assume that art is a form of work, it becomes more related to our daily life. The disassociation of art from other human activities has impoverished our lives. When art is defined as an activity driven entirely by the needs of self-expression, I become very nervous. The overwhelming history of art, in fact, has been the history of people doing work for a specific purpose, in other words, commissioned works with specific intentions. After all, Michelangelo did not paint the "Last Judgement" to express himself. He painted it because the Pope wanted to scare the bejeesus out of the congregation. The idea that art is primarily an expressive medium is a recent invention not more than two hundred years old. This notion is supported by individuals like Vincent Van Gogh, who couldn't work for anybody because he was so emotionally incapacitated; he has assumed heroic status as a result. One quickly realizes that Van Gogh is an aberration in the history of art. It is more instructive to look at another genius like Rubens, who organized painting workshops, executed innumerable commissions, and whose life was spent responding to other people's needs. Art is not only a vehicle for self-expression or exclusively for the pursuit of the spiritual. From the very beginning, drawing an animal on the wall of a

cave had a purpose—you would more easily be able to control the animal and this magic would help the tribe. In a most fundamental way work that was socially productive was very often combined with personal expressiveness to define the nature of art. If the word "fine" means to purify, when used to explain the difference between fine and applied art, one has to ask what is the impure in the latter. The lack of a spiritual intention seems to be the answer. However, we come across very few works created exclusively for a spiritual purpose. Throughout history, art has been purposeful and, almost without exception, has had a directive.

**Can the commissioning of Piero della Francesca by the Duke of Urbino for his portrait really be compared to a record company commissioning you to do that famous head of Bob Dylan for a poster sleeve insert? [p. 60]**

It is difficult to compare them because there is so little agreement about what art is. One could take the point of view that art is whatever you point at and call art, the judgement of the art world at a particular moment in time. At this postmodern moment, another view is that artistic standards are a conspiracy of history to be viewed with scepticism. Or we can believe that art has standards that derive from historical comparisons. We know that in the presence of certain works we feel transformed. In our minds we establish a threshold at which we are metaphysically transformed. For me, art is anything above that threshold, whatever the category. We discover that a Persian rug or a work of Chinese pottery can be more transforming than an oil painting. It's not the category that seems to matter but the effect the work produces in us.

**Yes, but aren't rugs and pottery squarely within the tradition of artistic workmanship, and isn't that something different altogether?**

During her graduate studies my wife Shirley reintroduced me to African sculpture. These works never intended to be "art"—in fact the construct doesn't even exist in the culture—yet they are incredibly powerful in their effect on our consciousness. Few cultures—including that of Hellenistic Greece—have produced an idiom so moving. Its expressive power cannot be denied. But the work was also created for reasons other than making art.

**Illustration has been central to your design. It is one example of your elusiveness regarding a particular artistic niche.**

**During your first quarter century as a central figure within Pushpin Studios, there was an attempt by the studio to break down many distinctions in professional practice. Why was that important to you?**

I was always personally interested in the idea that you could draw, you could design, you could do three-dimensional work, and so on. At Pushpin we viewed ourselves to some degree as generalists, not specialists. This idea really emerged from the Western tradition. Artists like Giotto, Michelangelo, and Leonardo were also architects, designed uniforms, and did lettering. In their day there was no need for the extraordinary specialization that our culture seems to value.

Specialization comes out of the needs of commerce. From a professional point of view, typesetting is a more efficient way of using people. It seemed to me that one could practice a broad spectrum of activities and learn from those activities so that one informed the other. This is not necessarily true for everyone, nor should it be. I'm not even suggesting this is a desirable aim. I wanted to do different things that interested me. I was interested in interiors. I was interested then, as now, in color and the relationship between space and light. I was interested in drawing. I was interested in typography and letterforms. I was interested in the intersection of design and illustration. It seemed to me that rich results could emerge from the hands of somebody with a variety of interests. I always thought that drawing and illustration established my sense of scale and proportion, which in turn could be applied to a page of typography. I did not see these categories as being unrelated. I thought each supported and broadened the possibilities of the other. One of the things that may make my work distinctive is that I see no difference between drawing and designing. To some degree, designers think I'm an illustrator and illustrators think I'm a designer. If you cannot draw, you must draw on the image of others.

**Intention and change are integral in your approach to work. Where do you begin?**

The first question to be asked about any design problem is: who is it for? This is a question that obviously relates

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to the nature of the audience. Who are the people in that audience? What do they know? What do they desire? The job is empathizing sufficiently with them in order to shape the message to accommodate their nature. It is not all quantifiable and is partly intuitive. You then have to ask yourself, what do I tell them and what do I want them to do? That links the message to the audience's response. In all cases you want the audience to do something, to buy something, to go to a concert, to become informed about a subject, to vote for a particular politician. Finally, the question emerges: how can I express that message most forcefully and most appropriately? Here for the first time, aesthetics, organization, and appearance come to the fore. In the first two phases questions of beauty are not part of the thought process. Only in the third phase do I choose a particular form to express the message. That is informed by my own sense of style, by the vernacular language surrounding me, by the zeitgeist, and by the other factors that shape our ideas of beauty and appropriateness.

**You've been doing this for a long time, but you still like to draw, create, print, design, paste.**

I'm never happier than when I'm making things or thinking about making things. I have not lost the passion or the satisfaction of working. When I was doing the Dante monoprints last year, I would go to the studio at nine a.m. and before I knew it, it was twelve o'clock at night. I felt the same way when I was a student. It's an experience I cannot imagine living without.

**How do you keep your ideas fresh?**

Without generalizing too much, at a certain point we all lose the capacity to accept the new. For instance, the music you grew up with becomes your identity, and it becomes very hard to listen to new music with the same level of interest or appreciation. Then you discover that you haven't heard of the musician that has the country's number one hit. Finally it all begins to sound strange and uninteresting. We have preferences that we develop throughout a lifetime, and there is no eliminating those preferences. We can only hope to keep an open mind and recognize that these new forms have vitality even if we don't like them.

**Do the ideas always have to be new?**

Our culture is obsessed by the new. This obsession is

driven by economic interests. Magazines, for instance, have to celebrate the new because they are based on the idea of what's new, what's hot, and not necessarily what's good. The new is energizing and essential to our economic system. Things occur that are fresh and represent an opening for the imagination. So as a teacher, I can say you must remain open to fresh possibilities. At the same time, you must be critical, not simply accept what is new without a historical frame of reference.

**You are a designer who comes out of a classic tradition—your studies in Bologna with Morandi, your interest in Piero, Monet, and many other artists. What is there in that tradition that can find a platform in today's environment?**

You have to be aware that we're not talking about art now. Much of what is produced, driven by advertising and fashion, is basically ephemeral and concerned with novelty. It is work that exists for two, three, or five years. We've just gone through what I think is a misunderstood period of typographical design. Type was used expressively at the expense of understanding.

**Yet some people really liked that work and thought it was some new beginning?**

If you are in the design field you have to understand this ephemeral characteristic. There is a lot of work that signals the moment and has no other ambition. It doesn't aspire to become a permanent part of human history. Novelty has always been and will continue to be an aspect of work. Short-term, opportunistic work often takes advantage of a shift in language in order to signal something "new" to people. This is especially true when you are selling products to them.

**Does this kind of work have any lasting influence?**

It has opened the way for more expressive ideas in the area of typography. It was integral to the work of the Futurists and the Dadaists and their typography. But, fortunately, disregarding the meaning of words was something that could not persist. It has finally become less interesting and everybody has moved along.

**A lot of life consists of walking by things. How do you arrest the viewer? You have often said that the goal of posters is to sell something and the job is to stop the viewer for a second. Which is more important, the message or the image?**

Which is more integral in a pop song, the words or the music? Obviously they are both important, although in

certain cases the music is much better than the words, and in others the words are better than the tune. Ultimately, we hope they are two of a piece, that they no longer can be thought of separately.

**To what extent do clients impose their will on your work?**

The nature of the professional life means you are constantly working with people you don't know. As in all relationships, there are good ones and bad ones. Through the years I've come to believe the personal relationship with a client is central to the quality of the work produced.

**When does the designer/client relationship work best?**

A good brief expresses the objectives. A bad brief says, "do anything you want." Then, when you bring in the solution, the client says, "You missed the point." (Incidentally, it is usually done this way to suggest some vague idea of artistic freedom, but that is nonsense). Uncontrolled egocentricity, on the part of either the client or designer, is counter-productive. Getting your own way is usually less desirable than solving the problem. The good brief does not offer freedom; it establishes boundaries. Incidentally, the brief can be challenged. A designer can say, "I don't think this is the most important aspect in terms of what needs to be communicated." The best jobs I've done in my life came about because I had a great relationship with somebody who trusted me and my judgement. I wanted to do the best work I could for that client. Not to express myself, not to impose my vision, but to do work that would solve the problem because we were in the same boat and we were trying to achieve the same thing. Usually, because of my relationship with my clients, I show them one solution. If they're unconvinced, I'll do something else. The process of showing endless variations usually is exhausting and also counter-productive. An editor once complained that he needed some guidance in selecting a magazine cover. The art director had submitted two hundred alternatives. I told him it wasn't possible to make a selection from two hundred alternatives.

**What about the budget?**

The budget is not a significant factor, although it has some effect. It all relates to creating an environment in which people feel they want to do their best work. In

which people feel they want to do their best work. In my mind, an art director's major role is to make people do their best work.

**And also pick the right designer for the project?**

First, you have to find somebody who is intrinsically interested in the job. Second, you have to shape the problem so that the person feels they have a contribution to make. It is devastating for anyone to feel that they are just another cog, and that things have already been figured out. "Give me something by Monday and make sure you make the type big." That guarantees a mediocre product because the designer has been reduced to an anonymous vendor. You're saying in effect: "Give me a pound of bologna and make sure that it's not too expensive." This approach robs people of their emotional and intellectual energy. In certain circumstances you find small organizations paying very little money for designers' services but somehow managing to maintain a wonderful level of quality because people feel their work is respected. Of course, the financial constraint should be real, not a device to rip someone off.

**What about pressures of time?**

A friend once told me: "Fast, cheap, and good—you can have two out of three." Time constraints very often generate quality. I don't try to do a two-week job in one day. I transform it into a one-day job. I know what is attainable within a day, and I know how to marshal my resources so I can most effectively do something within that amount of time. If someone commissions a drawing and it's due in four hours, I'm not going to do cross-hatching.

**You have talked about dignity and the loss of dignity in the design community. How do you reconcile this idea of dignity with concepts of business in which the bottom line is everything?**

I can't believe that ultimately the species can ignore the fact that there are other things in life besides money. My fundamental belief is that form-making is essential to a culture and those who make form to communicate ideas have a very important responsibility. Since the dawn of history, those involved in transferring ideas from one place to another have had an important role in shaping the value system of our

culture. Today designers take ideas that generally don't originate with them and transfer them to the culture at large in some way. Sometimes this activity has been so compromised that those involved don't want to examine the nature of the message they are transferring. In the advertising field the central issue is not whether you are harming your culture, it is how effectively you are communicating your client's desires. I've always found this an ethical problem—not from a position of self-righteousness but from a position of self-questioning. What is my responsibility to others, what can I do in the course of my daily work that won't make me ashamed of what I do? What I'm interested in from that point of view are decisions that come out of another historical model, which is the culture of art, the theory of beauty, and the well-made object; other important values don't always have to be trumped by economic considerations. I believe well-made things have a beneficial social effect.

**It would seem with you to come down to personal decisions about how people want to live their lives. But I'm not sure too many people ask the questions you do.**

Everybody has the notion of doing the right thing, wherever that comes from. When you violate your own belief something happens to the personality and to the self—something is damaged.

**Is there something about living in New York that exacerbates this factor?**

I spent several years in Bologna, and Shirley and I spent a year in Rome, and we've gone back for extended stays. Those were important experiences. But New York has always been a driving force in my life. I've received a tremendous education here. I've had access to things that I would never have had access to any place else. The challenge of competition, the high levels of expectation and many of the best and most interesting people in this field make New York irresistible as a place to accomplish things. Of course there are many reasons for living elsewhere, too.

**Do you think it really matters where designers are based now? After all, is there really much difference today between the American design community and, say, the European one?** Less and less. It has become one vernacular language. Globalism in advertising and communications has little

respect for local peculiarities.

**Is this the inevitable consequence of the advances in communication, especially the Internet?**

The Internet erodes culture. It destroys the prohibitions about what you can and can't do. And since culture is largely defined by what you can't do, the Internet is post-cultural.

**A new format and a new world has emerged with the development of web page design. How is that affecting the design community?**

Many aspects of electronic media have become big economic forces in the culture. The same design issues still hold true whether we are talking of web pages or other things. It's still the same question of understanding how to convince an audience of something.

**Is there a different kind of client today? Perhaps there is a different set of needs. Does that require a different vocabulary from the designer?**

It is a learning process and mistakes are made. But everybody is beginning to coalesce around a set of principles, some of which are already useless. We're at a point where people are trying to understand what is effective and what is not. That is always true of new categories of work. Some succeed and those that do are copied. This is a field where imitation and plagiarism are rampant and accepted.

**In a wider context, has technology fundamentally changed the role of the designer?**

The computer and devaluation of drawing skills have undoubtedly changed things. We are living in a "collage" world. The extraordinary reservoir of available historical and contemporary imagery means designers can find and assemble anything on screen. It can be called electronic surrealism. You can take images from any moment in history, assemble them electronically, distort them, shift them, stretch them, color them, and make them your own to some degree. But you're not starting with material that you have invented.

**Doesn't all art play on previous ideas?**

Of course. I wasn't saying that collage is not an imaginative approach. After all, since Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters invented collage, it has been a fundamental tool of artists. In fact, it is hard to understand how we lived without it. The work we see now tends to be

recontextualized. The process has changed.

**Are skills and talents being lost because of these changes?**

Certain skills have become irreparably lost. People have lost the motivation to draw because drawing seems unrelated to their vocational life. The Chinese have a quote that has always given me comfort: "when things are at their fullest they are already in decline." Basically the act of drawing has nothing to do with being an illustrator. We draw because it enables us to see. The act of drawing is perhaps the only time you pay attention to what is in front of you. For instance, if I decided to draw you I would pay attention to how much gray there is in your beard and how wrinkled your shirt is and what kind of shadow is falling across your face. I wouldn't pay attention to that otherwise. I am immune to experience the same way that most people are. Drawing is the path to observation and attentiveness. Technology makes old standards irrelevant and creates its own aesthetic.

**So that observation and attentiveness is lost?**

Yes, but the form-making impulse is so powerful in human behavior that even the most incomprehensible technology eventually becomes usable as an instrument of the imagination. One has to remain optimistic about this and not simply deplore changes. Some older practitioners view these changes as both dangerous and a reduction of artistic quality and basically say that this new stuff is all trash. Many young people feel they are being criticized and held in contempt. This separation hurts the field and the sense of generosity and professional friendliness that should characterize our practice.

**We've been talking mostly of two-dimensional work, but in fact in your career you have always done work in which drawing perhaps was only a starting point. What is the effect of technology, if any, on three-dimensional work?**

Well, I refer to a recent quote by the well-known architect, Charles Gwathmey: "The worst thing that has happened to the field of architecture is that people don't draw anymore." He thinks a lack of drawing skill is a tremendous limitation for an architect. The computer is not useful as a conceptual instrument. It crystallizes an idea too quickly, before that idea has had a chance to develop conceptually. There isn't anything more powerful in learning than the interrelationship of eyes,

hand, and brain. When you're thinking, you do a sketch and it's fuzzy. You have to keep it fuzzy so that the brain looks at it and imagines another iteration that is clearer. Then you do another sketch that advances it again. It may take a number of these intermediate solutions before you arrive. Sadly, the computer bypasses this dialectic between the hand and the brain.

**But architects continue to design buildings with the help of computers and some of them are very good.**

Yes, but something is lost. If you get on the computer right away you are immediately subjected to the will of the computer. What people don't understand (I use this analogy frequently) is that the computer, which seems like a willing servant- at first an empowering servant- turns out to be like the servant in the famous film with Dirk Bogarde in which, by the end, the servant has become the master and the master the servant. It changes your value system, it changes the way you think and it is an encumbrance to certain kinds of thought. This needs to be put alongside the advantages. My wife wanted to buy me a good turntable on which to play our old LP's. She went to a store and asked for the best turntable. She bought a turntable called "The Well Tempered." It was a primitive looking wooden box consisting of a tone arm stuck in a tube of silicon, a thick plastic base, an elastic cord that moved the turntable and nothing else. In order to make it work, you had to lift the arm onto the record. It was like the first Victrola. This new one cost one thousand dollars and it looked like nothing. So I went to the store and I said: "What is this dinky thing you sold my wife for a thousand dollars?" He asked: "Did you play it?" I said, "No." He said, "Go home and play it." I went home and put the arm on the record, and I heard the most extraordinarily glorious music. I went back and said, "What's that about?" He said, "Every time there is a piece of convenient technology added to the record player, we lose musical quality. What you want is an uninterrupted relationship between the needle, the arm, and the speaker. If you put a spring in there that brings the arm back, you lose fidelity. If you put a button in there that starts it at the right spot, you lose some more. It is only in this direct relationship between the needle, the arm, and the speaker that you get the

sound that is better than any CD."

There is no instrument more direct than a pencil and a piece of paper for the expression of ideas. Everything else that interferes with that direct relationship with the eyes, the mind, the arm, and the hand causes a loss of fidelity, if I can use that word this way. I like the idea that this ultimate reductive simplicity is the way to elicit the most extraordinary functions of the brain.

**So we are losing something important with technology?**

Technology has a price, like everything else. It can be used well or badly, and it changes forms. I mean it changes our perceptions of form, and we're at a point where we're going to have to deal with it. You lose some things and you gain others.

**You're of a certain age, what are your personal goals?**

I don't think I have any new personal goals. Two years ago I bought a black and white houndstooth jacket, something I had wanted since I was a teenager. After I bought it I suddenly realized that I no longer had any aspirations.

**Would you like to do any other kind of work?**

It's not the categories of work. Let me try to be clear on that. It is people I work with, the nature of clients and the shared objectives.

**You said that twenty-five years ago.**

It's all true. On the other hand, the idea of sitting down and drawing something, whatever it is, has not lost its importance in my life. It's not what you do; it's the way you do it. Even though you may have done something a thousand times, the issue still is how do you make it extraordinary?