

Bad Things Done: Aesthetics and Immunity, Ethics and Duty.

Keith Owens

Derided in increasingly strident language and actions, global capitalism and branded consumerism have recently come under increasingly sharp attack by a growing number of opponents. Certainly, instances of citizenry holding corporations in contempt is neither new nor uncommon. Our country's sporadic populist sproutings draw their nourishment from deep roots. What is new, however, is the fact that today, in addition to corporations, those who polish their images are also finding themselves standing accused by groups of every ilk gathered from across the political and social spectrum. These newly formed coalitions express their opprobrium at those conspirators who they have come to believe, are responsible for the effects of global corporate malfeasance—rampant environmental degradation, virulent brand co-option of public space and discourse, and the existence of repressive political regimes eager to trade the well-being of their countrys' populations for profit. Converging in cyberspace and on the streets, these groups decry the current state of worldwide economic affairs. Bristling with activist agendas, they voice their shared concerns by protesting, parading and participating in creative acts of civil disobedience.

Like first time offenders facing the prospect of conviction and jail time, members of the profession have responded to the charges leveled against it in distinct ways. Some, backs rigid with indignation, sputter pleas of not guilty. Neither acknowledging complicity in nor accepting blame for the consequences of their acts, these individuals contend that any culpability, if it exists, resides squarely in corporate boardrooms along with their ensconced chieftains. In contrast, others have found redemption by freely admitting their guilt and the guilt of everyone else in the profession. Exuding all the fervor of court-mandated, twelve-step program graduates, these designers have embraced a rhetoric of

intervention. Ministering to, in their view, the unconverted, their proselytization finds its form in culture jamming and other acts at or near the level of social disturbance. Finally, the majority of designers who, being moral human beings as well as pragmatic business people, have pleaded no contest. Wanting to placate their accusers while retaining their businesses, this group offers their clients design and their society expiation. Through public allocutions, they acknowledge their duplicity in corporate disinformation and the misguided “techniques and apparatus” of advertising. Either by indictment or through confession, many in the practice have begun to acknowledge some level of ethical culpability for the societal impact wrought by their decisions. This recognition is commendable, yet more remains to be done. Holding the beautiful in one hand and the good in the other, the discipline needs to reconcile the immunities aesthetics offers with the duties ethics prescribes.

Straddling both commerce and culture, graphic design operates at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics. As designers, individuals find themselves plying their trade within a fractious domain; one that is sustained by the dialectic existing between these twin branches of value theory. As problem-solvers responding to the needs of their clients, they are expected to marshal aesthetic properties in order to identify, inform and persuade. As social beings enjoined by the strictures of their culture, they are compelled to consider the ethical ramifications arising from these efforts. One way the profession explores this duality is through the ongoing debates framed by those respectively calling themselves modernists and postmodernists.

Twentieth-century modernists endowed design with a utopian vision of technological progressivism. Inheriting its cognitive structure from earlier Enlightenment thinking, this world view engendered a belief system predicated on external objectivity, rational cognition and universal forms. Confronting design in the latter part of the twentieth century, postmodernism roiled the then dominant dogma. Like Copernicus’s earlier challenge to the belief in a geocentric universe, this philosophical stance was critical of any view holding that external truth is attainable or that any possibility existed to know how those things, external to us, ‘really are’.

Into Deeper Waters

However encompassing these debates between modernists and postmodernists might appear to those in our profession, in a wider sense they exist as eddies swirling alongside the edges of a larger

philosophical discourse. From Plato's criticism of mimesis in his *Republic* through Hegel's belief in art's inability to transport meaning to Derrida's attack on the 'metaphysics of presence', society has deliberated the purpose, meaning, and morality of artistic endeavors. Existing not as the isolated chatter of philosophers or artists, these debates fuel pivotal cultural events. Over the centuries, those involved in the conflicts over the arts' role in life have seen books burned, icons smashed, buildings destroyed, towns razed and lives extinguished. History catalogs these events, but society's knowledge of them offers no inoculation from their latter day incarnations. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's recent cannonade destroying ancient Buddhist statuary is an example (in the extreme) of this discourse in action. If the profession were to risk venturing, so to speak, into these deeper waters, they would be able to recast our modernist/postmodernist debates within a broader socio-ethical context.

In his book *Toothpicks and Logos, Design in Everyday Life*, author John Heskett makes a trenchant case for why design is important and by extension, why the practice—its values, processes, artifacts and their consequences—should be examined within this broader context.

Beyond all the confusion created by the froth and bubble of advertising and publicity, beyond the visual pyrotechnics of virtuoso designers seeking stardom, beyond the pronouncements of design gurus and the snake-oil salesmen of lifestyles, lies a simple truth. Design is one of the basic characteristics of what it is to be human, and an essential determinant of the quality of human life.¹

Heskett's point is that design's salient role in the human condition contravenes its apparent marginal novelty. It is, in his estimation and that of others, a necessary rather than contingent aspect of mankind and its artificially constructed realities. Moreover, design's increasingly robust incursions into the (before now) closed aspects of the natural world continue to corrode the boundaries between culture and nature. Design's pervasive nature, however, does not shield it from its ability to obviate social progress. Stuart Ewen, in his description of early design beliefs points out this duality: "Conscientiously applied, it [design] could transform social reality. It could help to bring about a utopian future, or, if misused, put a varnish on barbarism."²

It is not design's ability to bring about a utopian future that should concern us. Today, few in the

practice and even fewer outside of it brook faith in that conviction. What should concern all of us, however, is the dark inverse to which Ewen points: design's misuse—its availability to polish perniciousness. And, because design cannot exist without practitioners, the collateral fact that more than a few in the discipline, whether through naiveté, willful ignorance or avarice, exhibit a marked tolerance for and participation in the co-option of their aesthetic prowess. The manifestation of this subtle yet all too common aesthetic hijack—barbarism's varnishing—is the sad reply to those who would question the need for ongoing discourse concerning the philosophies underpinning design's value system.

Design cannot easily, by hiding behind its corporate affiliations or by offering up coy protestations of its own irrelevance, divorce itself from society's broader mandates: particularly mankind's centuries-old labor to make sense of the relationship between the arts, life and morality. This cultural affiliation makes it reasonable, therefore, to embrace the position that design—as part of the arts—can be examined within a broader evaluative domain; one constituted with those philosophical positions concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and the morality of artistic endeavors. Some might question how these aesthetic and/or ethical notions about the arts, per se, can be used to formulate an evaluative domain within which to examine design. After all, design is a contingent art form created not for its own sake but as a means to some external end. However, since a great deal of what is now venerated intrinsically as art was originally created in order to serve social, political or religious agendas—all extrinsic purposes—it seems untenable to believe that design, in its service of present day economic goals is so vastly different as to be unintelligible within this particular context.

Context Refreshed

For the purposes of this discussion, this evaluative domain will be constituted using three philosophical positions; each selected because of its interest in the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Contrary to many ethical theories, the first two, Platonism and utopianism, make no allowances for a variable moral assessment of the arts. Platonism finds them to be morally suspect while utopianism, finding them laudable, assumes the opposing position. The third theory, autonomianism, by holding to the separateness of the aesthetic and ethical realms, would consider any discussion about the morality of the arts, variable or otherwise, to be a deficit in judgment or taste; a category error akin to passing judgment on an algebraic equation—that is—philosophically unintelligible. Using these

theories to establish our evaluative domain, we will then assess three types of morally suspect attitudes common to our profession along with a sampling of excuses used by those practitioners who, when exhibiting these attitudes, are called to task for them. Further, we will observe how these excuses—these aesthetic shields—in part draw their force from autonomistic arguments in their attempts to defend against ethical judgments.

Arthur Danto, in his book *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, wrote: "... from the perspective of philosophy art is a danger and aesthetics the agency for dealing with it."³ In this statement Danto recognizes Platonic thought's foundational role in aesthetic philosophy. Plato believed that, while philosophy encouraged discovery of the world's metaphysical order through rational thought, the arts invariably led its devotees to an emotional trade in images masquerading as knowledge. Thus, Plato granted no autonomous value to that which we now consider the arts. In short, Plato believed the arts to be unethical in their essential nature. As a result of this view, Plato considered the arts' sole redeeming value to be their singular, instrumental ability to accurately represent aspects of or align society with the eternal forms that constituted absolute value in Plato's metaphysical world view.

Plato reserved his chief criticism of the arts for their propensity to encourage mimesis—an identification with others or with what he considered chimerical imagery. In the case of the performing arts, any identification with the other, loosely defined as impersonation or dramatic characterization, was grounds for moral alarm. Whether it was actors playing designated roles in plays or private parties modeling themselves after other's characteristics, all were instances of individuals 'becoming' someone else and this simulation, Plato thought, was morally suspicious. This form of imitation violated, in Plato's estimation, numerous ethical strictures. For instance, through mimesis one might identify with, and thus become more like, a morally vicious character.

In the visual arts, Plato castigates mimesis for similar reasons. However, unlike identification through direct mimetic action, imagery's mimetic qualities were in a way indexical proxies—visual dramas pointing to real life. The visual arts created instances where one's enjoyment of an object's image could ultimately lead to a direct enjoyment of or identification with the object itself. And, like the performing arts, if the given image was in some way morally defective, the viewer's close identification with this image could easily lead them astray. In the final analysis, Plato believed that the arts were an

impediment to the rational understanding of *kalon*—the ‘fine’ in life. Also translated as beauty, *kalon*, for Plato, was part of a metaphysics that valued a beauty not found in this sensible world but instead in one existing unchanged in the (intellectually divined) eternal world of forms.

Utopianism, like Platonism also holds no room for any variable moral judgment of the arts. However, this theory, contra Platonism, considers all artistic endeavors, in their complicity in socioeconomic progress, to be meritorious. Noël Carroll, in his objection to utopianism, left-handedly illuminates its position: “... utopians make art a category of commendation rather than of classification.”⁴ In similar fashion, Platonism and utopianism each believe in the arts’ causative role. However, they again part company when utopianism’s ‘possibility of alternatives’ is considered. Unlike Platonism, utopianism views the arts as pluralistic and emancipatory. Pluralistic in that, through their necessary fictive and representational nature, the arts offer viewers alternative world views. Emancipatory in that, by foregrounding these alternative views in a fictitious way, the arts license viewers to peruse similar alternatives in fact.

Both Platonism and utopianism hold the arts to be distinct from reality. However, when the theories are compared it becomes clear that the one inverts the other’s ontological ranking of the arts and life. Platonism privileges reality—its immutable forms and those form’s corresponding temporal manifestations—while holding the arts to be mere imagery with no claims to the illumination of true knowledge. Conversely, with utopianism it is reality that is reduced. The arts, being ontologically separate from life and therefore unbounded by its limitations, are superior sources of freedom on numerous social, cultural and psychological levels and as such, morally commendable.

Completing our evaluative domain is autonomianism. Simply put, this third theory holds that the aesthetic is immune from ethical evaluation. And that any so called ethical qualities exhibited by a particular piece of artwork—meritorious or dubious—have no bearing on its aesthetic merits or lack thereof. This theory, reaching its zenith in the mid twentieth century, continues to hold appeal for those who observe the nature of the arts through an essentialist lens. That which we call art, in this view, is expected to share a common characteristic unique to itself: a characteristic shared by the arts and only the arts. This stance, espoused by formalists like Monroe Beardsley and Clive Bell, sequesters the arts: they are unique unto themselves, they share nothing with anything else in this world and they

are exempt from extrinsic evaluative criteria like ethics. To support its position that the arts reside outside the realm of common human endeavors, autonomianism offers arguments the force of which compel consideration.

One of the many arguments offered by this theory is its contention that individual artworks can be morally flawed but nonetheless aesthetically powerful. Autonomists point to the existence of this dialectic as a valid argument against the conflation of ethics and aesthetics; a tenet central to their philosophy. In turn, this tenet is enlisted to answer the general problem that aesthetic and moral considerations can and often do diverge. Mary Devereaux provides us with an incomparable example of this divergence—an ethically defective yet aesthetically commendable film.

Leni Riefenstahl's documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg rally of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, *Triumph of the Will*, is perhaps the most controversial film ever made. At once masterful and morally repugnant, this deeply troubling film epitomizes a greater problem that arises with art. It is both beautiful and evil.⁵

Key is Devereaux's observation that the film conjoins beauty and evil while at the same time separating beauty and goodness. The pairing of beauty and goodness is a union we not only intuitively feel but also a union whose articulation is found in the Platonic traditions so entrenched in our western ways of thinking. Here again is Plato's sense of *kalon*—the 'fine' in life. An autonomist would point to this rupture of beauty and goodness via aesthetic contrivance as reason enough to hold that moral and aesthetic evaluations cannot share common ground.

In order to justify another of their arguments, autonomists appeal to the theory of 'aesthetic attitude'. This attitude, originally described by Edward Bullough in his seminal 1912 *British Journal of Psychology* article titled "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle", encourages the viewer to step away from the quotidian when evaluating artwork. Some formalists, in their support of autonomianism, believe that this retreat from the everyday by the viewer is required in order for them to successfully concentrate on a work of art in and of itself—its significant form or "regional properties".⁶ Presupposed in this aesthetic attitude is the notion that the arts are intrinsically rather than instrumentally valuable. Because of this view, autonomists support the concept that the arts

are not subject to extrinsic purposes and, that by holding only to themselves, the arts cannot be held accountable for any behaviors they appear to encourage. These conceptual points are reinforced by the empirical fact that, small contingents within art and psychology notwithstanding, little is known about the behavioral consequences arising from the consumption of artwork. Because of this deficit in our understanding of the behavioral responses to the arts, it again follows that any moral evaluation of the arts' role as causal agents is *prima facie*, specious.

A third argument forwarded by autonomists to buttress their case is known as the common denominator argument. This argument states that any evaluative scale applied to the arts must be general to all the arts. The argument rests on two underlying principles. The first is that a thing, in order to be art so defined, must exist in an aesthetic dimension unique to itself and none other—a thing is art or a thing is something that is not art. As Carroll states when paraphrasing this formalist tenet: “This is the card that Clive Bell plays when he announces that unless we can identify such a common, uniquely defining feature for art, then when we use the concept, we gibber.”⁷ The second principle is that, within this aesthetic dimension, two types of artwork may exist: one type with moral significance and one type without. Because of this duality, any value scale based on morality is not generalizable to all of the arts. Therefore, any moral evaluation of the arts is inappropriate and should be discouraged. In its strongest sense, the theory applies a global standard of artistic value that precludes, because of a flux in the moral status of individual works, the notion that the arts generally are subject to ethical judgments.

Platonism, utopianism and autonomianism have each in their own way wrestled with attempts to develop a coherent account of a general relation between the arts and morality. To a greater or lesser degree of success, the three schools of thought have endeavored to reconcile the essential nature of the arts with their contingent role within a broader societal milieu. More so than the first two, however, autonomistic thought in particular has implicitly informed the normative climate within which design is practiced. Because of design practice's generally unacknowledged yet widespread acceptance of, among others, selected tenets which in part constitute this philosophical theory, certain morally suspect design attitudes flourish with little comment and sparse condemnation. In this sense, autonomistic theory functions as a type of philosophical get-out-of-jail-free card; one often played by those designers whose professional actions are called into question.

Sidestepping Slings and Arrows

It is no surprise that designers, like everyone else, adopt ethically suspect attitudes which allow them the opportunity to exempt themselves from some of the basic conditions of social responsibility. Designers, like everyone else, spend a portion of their time attempting to evade accountability. They do so, like everyone else, in order to deflect blame when they are taken to task for their activities. Most notably, blame that comes their way as a result of their aesthetic manipulations of content the consumption of which causes untoward consequences. Blaming, in this full sense "... is to assert that the actions of a person were one of the causes of an untoward event and that the person in question has no acceptable excuse for those actions."⁸ Many designers, finding themselves in those situations where they are considered blameworthy for their actions, will offer what they consider to be 'acceptable excuses' predicated in part on one or more arguments founded in autonomianism. These excuses—offered to the public and fellow practitioners alike—take, among others, the form of three particular philosophical dodges: the severability of form and content, the immunities offered by aesthetic distance and the privileging of aesthetic judgments over ethical ones.

One of the most common moral exemptions claimed by designers presupposes the previously explored autonomistic notion that aesthetic form, unlike content, is essentially neutral and thus not subject to moral adjudication. Hence, many designers would endorse the following line of reasoning: while it is true that designers routinely give form to content, it is not true that they can or should be held accountable for any untoward (cultural, political, social) consequences caused by the content if their association with that content is only by virtue of giving it form. "The basic strategy here is simple: when approaching a work of art that raises moral issues, sever aesthetic evaluation from moral evaluation and evaluate the work in aesthetic (i.e., formal) terms alone."⁹ By adopting this strategy, designers can when praised for their efforts, plump for their successful marriage of content and form; and when castigated for their aesthetic prowess, deflect culpability by neatly severing the two when their matchmaking results in untoward consequences—when their work 'raises moral issues'.

This philosophical ability to divorce content from form gives design practitioners the ability to apportion any blame to the problematic content (and by extension its authors) while at the same time enjoying immunity via their association with the liberated, neutral form. The notion that form is

substantively value free and that those who dwell in its realm are on the side of the angels is dubious at best. One need only to examine an abridged catalog of form's rhetorical qualities to see that this type of persuasion influences actions as much as if not more than any content it aestheticizes. Given that, any consequentialist reading of form's complicity in eventual outcomes would judge it culpable. It is a vain hope to believe that causal chains are broken at the same time form is severed from content. In the end, the consequences stemming from form's rhetorical nature, whether conjoined with content or not, negates any formal aesthetic shield behind which designers can hide.

Another common exemption claimed by designers rests squarely on autonomianism's call for aesthetic distance or attitude. "The aesthetic attitude is sometimes defined in terms of detachment or disengagement from practical concerns, [it] being an attitude of pure contemplation towards the aesthetic object."¹⁰ Its veracity perennially debated, aesthetic distance can in one sense, be considered a simple function of personal cognition and appreciation, a brief mental shift that allows the viewer to set aside instrumental or teleological concerns in order to appreciate a phenomenon intrinsically. However, when pressed into service by those designers bent on insulating themselves from the demands of morality, aesthetic distance is often recast into a form of "sophisticated formalism".¹¹ In a turnabout from the previous excuse whose force derived from the severability of form and content, sophisticated formalism argues that, "[a] work's aesthetic achievement consists in the skill with which it expresses its content."¹²

Aesthetic distance, understood this way, privileges the relational aspects between form and content. This form of aesthetic double play allows its practitioners the opportunity to set aside the moral dimensions of content they have chosen to work with while at the same time fully accepting that content. Sophisticated formalism gives designers the ability to handle admittedly 'toxic' content (marketing messages for corporate regimes whose values and practices are patently injurious to individuals, communities, society and the environment at large), while at the same time claiming moral immunity from any untoward consequences its handling might cause by insisting that the true merit of their work lies in the skill with which they have aesthetically signified the content.

Like the previous excuse, this one—predicated on the theory of aesthetic distance—is also an ineffectual philosophical dodge. While it is true that, when using this argument, designers recognize content and

its nature, it is also true they do so within such a narrow scope—formal relationships—as to effectively uncouple any links between themselves and the moral culpability inherent in the content. Hence, this apparent recognition of the import of content is a pretense substituted for any real acknowledgment of moral culpability. Akin to closing our ethical aperture, this ploy is delusive—a contraction of our ethical frame of reference which does nothing to ameliorate the moral imperatives lying outside its diminished perspective.

One final moral exemption claimed by designers is more a point of view or an attitude than an excuse. This indirectly claimed exemption is not offered in response to society's expressed opprobrium. Instead, it is a form of propaganda designers create and then foist upon themselves. Quietly insinuating itself into the practice's normative background, this sophistry spreads virally and infects the designer's tacit belief systems. Those tainted begin to believe it logical and prudent to attempt to sequester artistic endeavors from all other evaluative domains by virtue of its membership in the aesthetic. The didactic, exclusionary nature of this theory fosters an undeclared loathing towards any notion of evaluative plurality. Self-replicating and contagious, this theory permeates the design culture and those infected behave as if an aesthetic criteria above all others is the first, best and arguably the only choice for artistic evaluation.

This self-imposed canard presupposes one of the two underlying principles informing autonomianism's common denominator argument. Restated, this principle holds that a thing is art or a thing is something that is not art. That is, if the arts are to exist, they must by definition exist (in their multitude of forms and functions) within an aesthetic continuum whose sole constituent is itself.

Of course, by declaring art to be utterly separate from every other realm of human praxis, the autonomist secures the quest for essentialism at a stroke, if only by negation, by boldly asserting that art has nothing to do with anything else. It is a unique form of activity with its own purpose and standards of evaluation, generally calibrated in terms of formal achievement.¹³

Circulating throughout the normative environment within which designers operate, this philosophical particulate matter transparently informs the ethical views held by more than a few practitioners. These

views in turn affect how they comport themselves, conduct their practice and create artifacts for release into the public domain.

One might ask why some design practitioners are so susceptible to this propaganda's allure. What do these individuals find so appealing, even in adulterated form, about the autonomistic notion of sequestered artistic forms, judged according to aesthetic criteria. Designer's fetishistic compulsion for the aestheticized artifact aside, it seems odd that, given their view of themselves as teleologically focused applied artists, designers would hold a philosophical position that would be considered highly suspect and possibly nefarious by those whom they serve. It would seem then that a case of faulty logic on the part of design practitioners has caused them to adopt a conceit more at home in the intrinsically focused world of the fine arts. In unraveling this seeming paradox, it can be argued that the reasoning underlying this philosophical position is not a matter of faulty logic—at least, not from the perspective of some in the design culture. On the contrary, this reasoning as understood by these individuals makes eminent and pragmatic sense—it offers them yet another line of defense with which to mitigate their moral responsibilities.

This particular line of defense is a plea for immunity predicated on definition. This immunity is claimed by virtue of a narrow, autonomistic (aesthetic distance in its sophisticated formalist guise) definition of the aesthetic, its subject matter and to what its devotees should attend. According to Devereaux, this approach offers the following advantages:

The first option allows us to keep the historically important, eighteenth-century conception of the aesthetic intact. (It is in effect the conception of the aesthetic introduced by sophisticated formalism.) This conception has the advantage of keeping the boundaries of the aesthetic relatively narrow and clearly defined.

And it keeps aesthetic evaluation relatively simple. Questions of political meaning, of truth and falsity, good and evil, right and wrong fall outside the category of the aesthetic.¹⁴

Put simply, this approach affords design (and by extension its practitioners) immunity from many types of moral adjudication. It does so by advancing the following argument: If the aesthetic realm is

defined (narrowly) as one which excludes many larger issues (re: Devereaux's examples) then by definition, these boundaries bar most of the messy questions posed by life—its social dilemmas, cultural pluralities and moral incongruities. And, if it is the case that design's primary concern is to attend to that which falls within this aesthetic realm, it would then follow logically that those moral, political and societal issues, being outside the aesthetic realm, should not be design's primary concern. Therefore, design, operating within the aesthetic realm in the pursuit of its primary concerns, should not be held morally accountable for ignorance of or indifference to those issues falling outside of this realm. A clever autonomistic hat trick, this defense is used by design practitioners in three ways: to ensconce design practice within a world shielded from the many of the moral concerns of life, to claim ethical immunity for any indifference they may show for the larger, moral yet extra-aesthetic issues and to excuse themselves for any untoward events resulting from their aesthetic activities.

This defense creates an all purpose, philosophical safe zone within which more than a few design practitioners continue to pursue the championing of economic regimes, immune from the brunt of, in their estimation, inappropriate social opprobrium. Donned like an ethical flak vest by these designers, this defense provides little protection against the impact of pointed moral assessment. While it is true that, by drawing a tight compass around design, its practitioners enjoy the benefits of operating within a world colored by easily digestible values and judgment criteria, it is also true that this narrow, exclusionary perspective is bereft of the expansive empathy necessary to humanely and ethically respond to the challenges posed by today's increasingly complex world. This expanded empathic perspective should be designer's shouldered, self-imposed mandate to impartially promote the interests of others—by any standard a basic tenet of morality. Their pleas for immunity by virtue of a definition found wanting, design practitioners should reverse themselves and consider expanding rather than contracting their empathic compass—including more of humanity's concerns rather than fewer of them.

In the end, those in design practice need to accept the fact that their discipline is home to more than a few morally suspect attitudes. And, the corresponding philosophical dodges offered by its practitioners in defense of these attitudes—those aesthetic shields with a growing number of slings and arrows pincushioning them—are not justifications; they are excuses. Increasingly called upon to answer for their actions, many designers use these shields in attempts to deflect judgment for that which they have

done and that which they have neglected and left undone. What designers have done (and now increasingly must answer for) is to continue to align themselves and their business interests with corporate regimes whose values and practices are patently injurious to individuals, communities, society and the environment at large. By lending their aesthetic prowess to those who are committed to fostering “terminal materialism”,¹⁵ they are helping to visualize a consumerism that, ironically, is hungry to consume all those it touches. What designers have neglected and left undone (and for which they are also deemed lacking) is to attend to all those necessary things precluded by their substantial equity in pernicious corporate agendas. Those in our practice who hold a delusory belief in the consonance between corporate and societal interests have charmed themselves into believing that, by faithfully serving the former, they are also serving the latter. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Karen Hanson, in her essay *How Bad Can Good Art Be?*, offers readers a contrast for consideration. Found at the end of her treatise (in footnote 23), she scrutinizes the difference between a “a thing done badly” and a “bad thing done”. In this footnote, Hanson contrasts the reaction one might have to being served well prepared quail and well prepared human flesh. For many (but certainly not all), consuming the quail would pose no moral dilemma; any judgments they might have about the fowl and its preparation would be culinary ones. The dish, by virtue of its nature, would be assessed within an evaluative domain that made no distinction between right or wrong—only whether or not the dish was a thing done badly. In the alternative, all but a very few would consider the consumption of human flesh, no matter how well prepared, to be morally unconscionable. This dish, by virtue its nature, would be judged within an entirely different evaluative domain; one that would offer pointed judgment as to whether or not cannibalistic cuisine was a bad thing done.

The more general lesson of the extreme example is that our assumptions about moral acceptability, or irrelevance, may sometimes be unsettled and our typical practices of judgment open to confoundment. [William] Gass suggests that it is simple-minded not to judge things on ‘their own terms.’ But the very question at issue may be ‘What are the relevant terms of judgment?’¹⁶

Many design practitioners, believing they are serving quail, think that their responsibility begins and ends with a well prepared dish. Sadly, the case may be that the dish designers are really serving

prompts the question: should they have prepared it in the first place. The possible answers to that question are ones that we—practitioners, teachers and students of design—should take to heart. Only then can we hope to assuage the growing legion of accusers who rightly invoke judgment on those among us who, from behind their philosophical shields, launch aestheticized commendations on behalf of nocent corporate values.

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Notes

- ¹ Heskett, John; *Toothpicks & Logos Design in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.
- ² Ewen, Stuart; "Note for the New Millennium" *Citizen Designer, Perspective on Design Responsibility* Ed. Steven Heller, Véronique Vienne (New York: Allworth Press, 2003), 192.
- ³ Danto, Arthur; *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 13.
- ⁴ Carroll, Noël; "Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 133.
- ⁵ Devereaux, Mary; "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 227.
- ⁶ Beardsley, Monroe; *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1981), 456-70.
- ⁷ Carroll, Noël; "Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 134.
- ⁸ French, Peter A.; *The Spectrum of Responsibility* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 14.
- ⁹ Devereaux, Mary; "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 242.
- ¹⁰ Gaut, Berys; "Art and Ethics" *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* Ed. Berys Gaut, Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge), 344.
- ¹¹ Devereaux, Mary; "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 244.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 244.
- ¹³ Carroll, Noël; "Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 134.
- ¹⁴ Devereaux, Mary; "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 246.
- ¹⁵ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly & Rochberg-Halton, Eugene; *The Meaning of Things, Domestic Symbols and The Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 231.
- ¹⁶ Hanson, Karen; "How Bad Can Good Art Be" *Aesthetics and Ethics, Essays at the Intersection* Ed. Jerrold Levinson (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226.