DESIGN AND CRIME

AND OTHER DIATRIBES

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production of consumer society, the image world of commodities and celebrities screened by Warhol and others; and a third in our own midst, the digital revolution and dot.capitalism.[6] Like many of us in this moment of massive retooling and retraining, Seabrook may mistake signs for wonders.

Finally, is nobrow culture as total as he makes it out to be? One chapter is a bravura tour of stores in downtown Manhattan, where Seabrook finds essentially the same black T-shirt at vastly different prices. But even SoHo on Sunday is not as homogeneous as he suggests here, and the city is not so bereft of *dérives* even today. Strange though it may sound for an academic to say, Seabrook needs to get around more; his fieldwork does not go far enough afield. For all his ironic insights about his profiled subjects, they define the world too much for him; that is a high-corporate view, not a nobrow one. However politically correct it may sound, it is good to counter the wondrous statistics issued from the Megastore – like the fact that in the year 2000 there were ten million households with $100,000-plus incomes in the US alone – with a reality-check list from somewhere else – like the fact that half of the people on this planet have never used a telephone.

TWO

DESIGN AND CRIME

The turn of one century calls up others, and 2000 was no exception. Over the last few years *Style 1900* or Art Nouveau has returned with a vengeance in museum shows and academic books. It all seems long ago and far away, this pan-European movement pledged to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work" of arts and crafts, in which everything from architecture to ashtrays was subject to a florid kind of decoration, in which the designer struggled to impress his subjectivity on all sorts of objects through an idiom of vitalist line – as if to inhabit the thing in this crafted way was to resist the advance of industrial reification somehow. As the aesthetics of the machine became dominant in the 1920s, Art Nouveau was no longer *nouveau*, and in the next decades it slowly passed from an outmoded style to a campy one, and it has lingered in this limbo ever since. Yet what struck me, in the midst of this recent parade of Art Nouveau

manifestations, was its strong echo in the present – an intuition that we live in another era of blurred disciplines, of objects treated as mini-subjects, of total design, of a *Style 2000*.

Adolf Loos, the Viennese architect of austere façades, was the great critic of the aesthetic hybridity of Art Nouveau. In his milieu he was to architecture what Schönberg was to music, Wittgenstein to philosophy, or Karl Kraus to journalism – a scourge of the impure and the superfluous in his own discipline. In this regard "Ornament and Crime" (1908) is his fiercest polemic, for there he associates the Art Nouveau designer with a child smearing walls and a "Papuan" tattooing skin. For Loos the ornate design of Art Nouveau is erotic and degenerate, a reversal of the proper path of civilization to sublimate, to distinguish, and to purify: thus his notorious formula – "the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects" – and his infamous association of "ornament and crime."[1] This anti-decorative dictate is a modernist mantra if ever there was one, and it is for the puritanical propriety inscribed in such words that postmodernists have condemned modernists like Loos in turn. But maybe times have changed again; maybe we are in a moment when distinctions between practices might be reclaimed or remade – without the ideological baggage of purity and propriety attached.

Loos began his battle with Art Nouveau a decade before "Ornament and Crime." A pointed attack comes in 1900, in the form of an allegorical skit about "a poor little rich man" who commissions an Art Nouveau designer to put "Art in each and every thing":

> Each room formed a symphony of colors, complete in itself. Walls, wall coverings, furniture, and materials were made to harmonize in the most artful ways. Each household item had its own specific place and was integrated with the others in the most wonderful combinations. The architect has forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Cigar ashtrays, cutlery, light switches – everything, everything was made by him.[2]

This *Gesamtkunstwerk* does more than combine architecture, art, and craft; it commingles subject and object: "the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail." For the Art Nouveau designer this is perfection: "You are complete!" he exults to the owner. But the owner is not so sure: this completion "taxed [his] brain." Rather than a sanctuary from modern stress, his Art Nouveau interior is another expression of it: "The happy man suddenly felt deeply, deeply unhappy . . . He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one's own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete!*"

For the Art Nouveau designer this completion reunites art and life, and all signs of death are banished. For Loos, on the other hand, this triumphant overcoming of limits is a catastrophic loss of the same – the loss of the objective constraints required to define any "future living and striving, developing and desiring." Far from a transcendence of death, this loss of finitude is a death-in-life, as figured in the ultimate trope of indistinction, living "with one's own corpse."

Such is the malaise of "the poor little rich man": rather than a man of qualities, he is a man without them (as another Viennese scourge, the great novelist Robert Musil, would soon put it), for what he lacks, in his very completion, is difference or distinction. In a typically pithy statement of 1912 Kraus would call this lack of distinction, which precludes "all future living and striving," a lack of "running-room":

Josef Hoffmann, an Art Nouveau interior, 1899: "The individuality of the owner expressed in every ornament . . . this is what it means to go about life living with one's own corpse" (Adolf Loos).

> Adolf Loos and I – he literally and I linguistically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room [*Spielraum*]. The others, the positive ones [i.e., those who fail to make this distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.[3]

Here "those who use the urn as a chamber pot" are Art Nouveau designers who want to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot). Those who do the reverse are functionalist modernists who want to elevate the utilitarian object into art. (A few years later Marcel Duchamp would trump both sides with his dysfunctional urinal, *Fountain*, presented as art, but that's another story.) For Kraus the two mistakes are symmetrical – both confuse use-value and art-value – and both are perverse inasmuch as both risk a regressive indistinction of things: they fail to see that objective limits are necessary for "the running-room" that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture. This is why Loos opposes not only the total design of Art Nouveau but also its wanton subjectivism ("individuality expressed in every nail"). Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural "essence" of art, or an absolute "autonomy" of culture; the stake is one of "distinctions" and "running-room," of proposed differences and provisional spaces.

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This old debate takes on a new resonance today, when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but all but subsumed in the commercial, and everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes – seems to be regarded as so much *design*. After the heyday of the Art Nouveau designer, one hero of modernism was the artist-as-engineer or the author-as-producer, but this figure was toppled in turn with the industrial order that supported it, and in our consumerist world the designer again rules. Yet this new designer is very different from the old: the Art Nouveau designer resisted the effects of industry, even as he also sought, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "to win back [its] forms" – modern concrete, cast iron, and the like – for

architecture and art.[4] There is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in postindustrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of architecture and art to the manipulations of design. Moreover, the rule of the designer is even broader than before: it ranges across very different enterprises (from Martha Stewart to Microsoft), and it penetrates various social groups. For today you don't have to be filthy rich to be projected not only as designer but as designed – whether the product in question is your home or your business, your sagging face (designer surgery) or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums) or your DNA future (designer children). Might this "designed subject" be the unintended offspring of the "constructed subject" so vaunted in postmodern culture? One thing seems clear: just when you thought the consumerist loop could get no tighter in its narcissistic logic, it did: design abets a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption, without much "running-room" for anything else.

Some may object that this world of total design is not new – that the conflation of the aesthetic and the utilitarian in the commercial goes back at least to the design program of the Bauhaus in the 1920s – and they would be right. If the first Industrial Revolution prepared the field of political economy, of a rational theory of material production, as Jean Baudrillard argued long ago, so the second Industrial Revolution, as styled by the Bauhaus, extended this "system of exchange value to the whole domain of signs, forms and objects . . . in the name of design."[5] According to Baudrillard, the Bauhaus signaled a qualitative leap from a political economy of the product to a "political economy of the sign," in which the structures of the commodity and the sign refashioned one another, so that the two could circulate as one, as image-products with "sign exchange value," as they do in our own time.

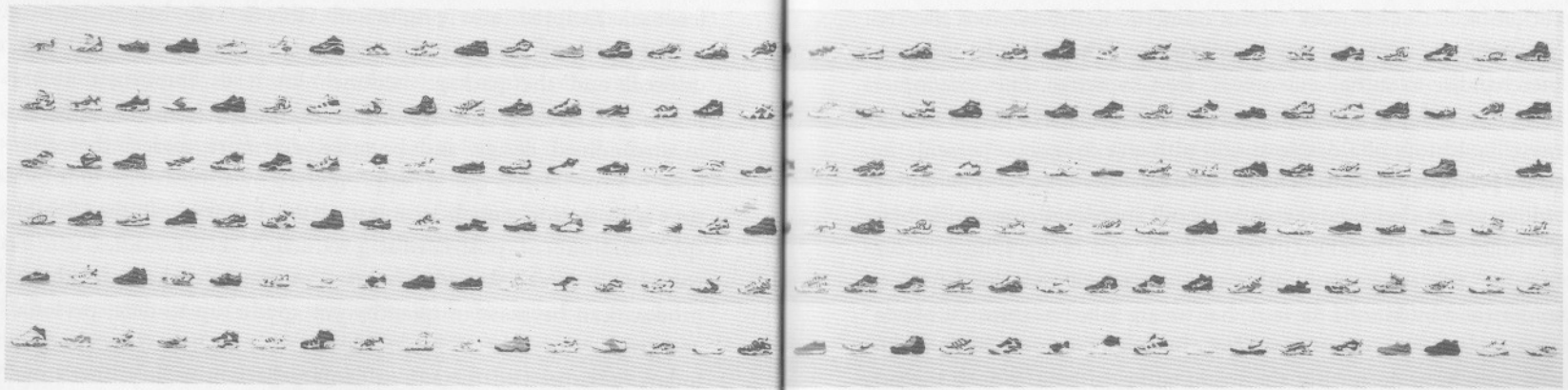
Of course this is hardly what the Bauhaus Masters, some of whom were Marxists, had in mind, but such is often "the bad dream of modernism" in the ruses of history (as T. J. Clark once termed it). Beware of what you wish, runs one moral of modernism as seen from the present, because it may come true – in perverse form. Thus, to take only the chief example, the old project to reconnect Art and Life, endorsed in different ways by Art Nouveau, the Bauhaus, and many other movements, was eventually accomplished, but according to the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, not the liberatory ambitions of the avant-garde. And a primary form of this perverse reconciliation in our time is design.

So, yes, the world of total design is hardly new – imagined in Art Nouveau, it was retooled by the Bauhaus, and spread through institutional clones and commercial knock-offs ever since – but it only seems to be achieved in our own pan-capitalist present. Some of the reasons are not hard to find. Once upon a time in mass production, the commodity was its own ideology, the Model T its own advertising: its chief attraction lay in its abundant sameness. Soon this was not enough: the consumer had to be drawn in, and feedback factored into production (this is one origin-scene of modern design). As competition grew, special seductions had to be devised, and the package became almost as important as the product. (The subjectivizing of the commodity is already apparent in streamlined design and becomes evermore surreal thereafter; indeed Surrealism is quickly appropriated by advertising.) Our own time is witness to a qualitative leap in this history: with the "flexible specialization" of post-Fordist production, commodities can be continually tweaked and markets constantly niched, so that a product can be mass in quantity yet appear up-to-date, personal, and precise in address.[6] Desire is not only registered in products today, it is specified there: a self-interpellation of "hey, that's me"

greets the consumer in catalogues and on-line. This perpetual profiling of the commodity, of the mini-me, is one factor that drives the inflation of design. Yet what happens when this commodity-machine – now conveniently located out of the view of most of us – breaks down, as environments give out, markets crash, and/or sweat-shop workers scattered across the globe somehow refuse to go on?

Design is also inflated as the package all but replaces the product. Whether the design object is Young British Art or a Presidential candidate, "brand equity" – the branding of a product name on an attention-deficit public – is fundamental to many spheres of society, and hence design is too. Consumer-attention and image-retention are all the more important when the product is not an object at all. This became clear during the massive mergers of the Reagan–Thatcher years when new mega-corporations appeared to promote little else but their own new acronyms and logos.

Andreas Gursky, *Untitled V*, 1997: the perpetual profiling of the commodity, of the mini-me, drives the contemporary inflation of design.



Especially as the economy slumped under George I, this branding was a way to prop up stock value apart from the realities of productivity and profitability. More recently, the Internet has set a new premium on corporate name-recognition for its own sake. For dot.coms such brand equity is necessary for survival, and part of the recent purge of these virtual companies stemmed from a Darwinism of the web-name.

A third reason for the inflation of design is the increased centrality of media industries to the economy. This factor is obvious, so obvious that it might obscure a more fundamental development: the general "mediation" of the economy. I mean by this term more than "the culture of marketing" and "the marketing of culture"; I mean a retooling of the economy around digitizing and computing, in which the product is no longer thought of as an object to be produced so much as a datum to be manipulated – that is, to be designed and redesigned, consumed and reconsumed. This "mediation" also inflates design, to the point where it can no longer be

considered a secondary industry. Perhaps we should speak of a "political economy of design."

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Some of these speculations can be tested against *Life Style* by Bruce Mau, a compendium of projects by the Canadian designer who came to prominence with *Zone* Magazine and Books in the late 1980s. With a distinguished series of publications in classical and vanguard philosophy and history, this imprint is also known for "Bruce Mau Design," whose luscious covers with sumptuous images in saturated colors and layered pages with inventive fonts in cinematic sequencing have greatly influenced North American publishing. Sometimes Mau seems to design the publications to be scanned, and despite his frequent denials in *Life Style* he tends to treat the book as a design construct more than an intellectual medium.[7]

Life Style follows on the mammoth monograph of architectural projects by Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (1995), which Mau helped to design (these are not coffee-table books, they are coffee tables). With his usual wit Koolhaas picked this title to signal not only the various scales of his work – from domestic to urban – but also that hot architects are today like hot designers – they must have lines of merchandise to suit all customers (see Chapter 4). *Life Style* aspires to be the *S, M, L, XL* of design; it too is a massive manifesto-for-myself, a history of a design studio with an extravagant presentation of its projects, plus little credos, historical sketches, and laboratory studies about design, along with several anecdotes concerning Master Builders like Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, and Philip Johnson. Here too the title is a play on terms: we may hear "life style" as understood by Martha Stewart, but we are asked to think "life style" as conceived by Nietzsche or Michel Foucault – as an ethics of life, not a guide to décor. But the world surveyed by *Life Style* suggests

something else – a folding of the "examined life" into the "designed life." The book opens with a photograph of the planned Disney community "Celebration" captioned: "the question of 'life style,' of choosing how to live, encounters the regime of the logo and its images." This encounter is hardly a fair fight, and though Mau may identify with the underdog here, his design practice is contracted to the other side.

For *Life Style* is a success story: bigger and bigger clients – first academic and art institutions, then entertainment and other corporations – come to Mau in search of image design, that is to say, brand equity. Bruce Mau Design, he states candidly, "has become known for producing identity" and "channeling attention" for "business value." Fair enough, it is a business after all, but Mau should have left things there. "In this environment," he goes on, "the only way to build real equity is to add value: to wrap intelligence and culture around the product. The apparent product, the object attached to the transaction, is not the actual product at all. The real product has become culture and intelligence." They are eyed as so much design. So is history: commissioned to lay out a private museum of Coca-Cola memorabilia, Mau concludes, "Has America made Coke? Or, Has Coke made America?" Biological life is seen in these terms as well. "How does an entity declare itself within an environment?" You guessed it: design.

The remaking of space in the image of the commodity is a prime story of capitalist modernity as told by Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, Benjamin, the Situationists, and radical geographers since (e.g., David Harvey, Saskia Sassen). Today it has reached the point where not only commodity and sign appear as one, but often so do commodity and space: in actual and virtual malls the two are melded through design. Bruce Mau Design is in the vanguard here. Of one "identity program" for a Toronto bookstore chain,

Mau writes of a "retail environment . . . in which the brand identity, signage systems, interiors, and architecture would be totally integrated." And of his graphic support for the new Seattle Public Library designed by Koolhaas, he states: "The central proposition involves erasing the boundaries between architecture and information, the real and the virtual." This integration, that erasure, is a deterritorializing of image and space that depends on a digitizing of the photograph, its loosening from old referential ties (perhaps the development of Photoshop will one day be seen as a world-historical event), and on a computing of architecture, its loosening from old structural principles (in architecture today almost anything can be designed because almost anything can be built: hence all the arbitrary curves and biomorphic blobs designed by Gehry and followers – see Chapter 3). As Deleuze and Guattari, let alone Marx, taught us long ago, this deterritorializing is the path of capital.[8]

Mau develops the old insights into media of Marshall McLuhan, but like his countryman he seems confused in his role – is he a cultural critic, a futurist guru, or a corporate consultant? In media futurology a critical term today can become a catchy phrase tomorrow, and a cliché (or brand) the next. In a wry move Koolhaas now copyrights his catchy phrases, as if to acknowledge this commercial curdling of critical concepts on the page (see Chapter 4). Yet for all the Situationist lingo of contemporary designers like Mau, they don't "détourn" much; more than critics of spectacle, they are its surfers (which is indeed a favorite figure in their discourse), with "the status of the artist [and] the paycheck of the businessman." "So where does my work fit in?" Mau asks. "What is my relationship to this happy, smiling monster? Where is the freedom in this regime? Do I follow Timothy Leary and 'tune in, turn on, drop out?' What actions can I commit that

cannot be absorbed? Can I outperform the system? Can I win?" Is he kidding?

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Contemporary design is part of a greater revenge of capitalism on postmodernism – a recouping of its crossings of arts and disciplines, a routinization of its transgressions. Autonomy, even semi-autonomy, may be an illusion or, better, a fiction; but periodically it is useful, even necessary, as it was for Loos, Kraus, and company a hundred years ago. Periodically, too, this fiction can become repressive, even deadening, as it was thirty years ago when postmodernism was first advanced as an opening out of a petrified modernism. But this is no longer our situation. Perhaps it is time to recapture a sense of the political situatedness of both autonomy and its transgression, a sense of the historical dialectic of disciplinarity and its contestation – to attempt again "to provide culture with running-room."

Often we are told, as we are in *Life Style*, that design can give "style" to our "character" – that it can point the way to such semi-autonomy, such running-room – but clearly it is also a primary agent that folds us back into the near-total system of contemporary consumerism. Design is all about desire, but strangely this desire seems almost subject-less today, or at least lack-less; that is, design seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority – an apotheosis of the subject that is also its potential disappearance. Poor little rich man: he is "precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring" in the neo-Art Nouveau world of total design and Internet plenitude.

"The transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal," Benjamin once remarked of *Style 1900*. "Individualism is its theory . . . [But] the real meaning of Art Nouveau is not expressed in this

ideology . . . Art Nouveau is summed up by *The Master Builder* [of Henrik Ibsen] – the attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall."[9] And Musil wrote as if to complete this thought for *Style 2000*:

> A world of qualities without man has arisen, of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view, which for such a long time considered man to be at the center of the universe but which has been fading for centuries, has finally arrived at the "I" itself.[10]

THREE

MASTER BUILDER

For many people Frank Gehry is not only our master architect but our master artist as well. Projects and prizes, books and exhibitions, flow toward him, and he is often called a genius without a blush of embarrassment. Why all the hoopla? Is this designer of metallic museums and curvy concert halls, luxury houses and flashy corporate headquarters, truly Our Greatest Living Artist?

The notion is telling, for it points to the new centrality of architecture in cultural discourse. This centrality stems from the initial debates about postmodernism in the 1970s, which were focused on architecture; but it is clinched by the contemporary inflation of design and display in all sorts of spheres – art, fashion, business, and so on. Moreover, to make a big splash in the global pond of spectacle culture today, you have to have a big rock to drop, maybe as big as the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, and here