



Writing Visual Culture

Introduction: Design History at 40

Grace Lees-Maffei, University of Hertfordshire

Abstract

2017 marked the 40th anniversary of the Design History Society, founded in England in 1977, and the 30th volume year of the Society's journal, the *Journal of Design History*. To celebrate this double anniversary, the *Journal's* Editorial Board and the Society's Trustees agreed to dedicate a strand of the Society's annual conference to new work that reflected on the history of the subject and showcased new approaches to design history. Grace Lees-Maffei conceived of and convened that strand. Nine papers were presented in the anniversary strand at the conference 'Making and Unmaking the Environment' held at the University of Oslo in September 2017, convened by Kjetil Fallan. Seven of those papers are published as Volume 8 of *Writing Visual Culture*.

The papers in this volume reflect on design history's past and current status and consider the subject's neighbouring fields including cultural studies (see the article by Ben Highmore) and Design Research (read Søren Rosenbak's article). National design histories remain a core preoccupation in the field. The articles by Joana Meroz, Trond Klevgaard, Freddie Floré and Javier Gimeno Martínez, Meret Ernst and Sorcha O'Brien understand design and its histories within, and beyond, the frame of the national in various ways.



Celebrating Design History at 40, and the *Journal of Design History* at 30

In 2017, the Design History Society (DHS) celebrated its 40th anniversary. At the same time, the Society's journal, the *Journal of Design History*, published its 30th annual volume. Rather than reflecting on these landmarks with reference to canonical or well-known work from the past, the DHS agreed to mark these occasions through a call for new work which examines design history, past, present and future. Following an open call for papers and double-blind peer review, this work was presented in a dedicated anniversary strand at the Society's annual conference, Making and Unmaking the Environment, convened by Prof Kjetil Fallan from 7th-9th September at the University of Oslo in Norway. The conference formed a suitable occasion on which to mark these important milestones. The conference theme, Making and Unmaking the Environment, allowed space for reports on new studies of the development and trajectory of the field. The anniversary strand comprised three panels, each with three presentations. Of the nine papers presented in Oslo, seven have been developed as articles in this volume of *Writing Visual Culture* using feedback received at the conference and editorially.

New Approaches to Design History

Our first article, 'Design History, Cultural Studies, and the Emergence of the Pop Connoisseurs', sees Professor Ben Highmore (University of Sussex, UK) recuperating connoisseurship for design history. Connoisseurship has been associated with art history and the decorative arts, but it has a function within contemporary design history, Highmore argues. His examination is comparative: he understands design history through reference to the neighbouring field of cultural studies and a tension between criticism and connoisseurship is persistent in Highmore's article.

The second article continues the exploration of design history through its neighbouring fields, turning this time from cultural studies to design research, or design studies. Søren Rosenbak of Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden, reports on his project Design Research Failures, and asks what design historians might have to contribute to this work. As well as inviting reflection on the interactions and interfaces of design history and design research, Rosenbak's article invites examination of the relationship between success and failure. Rosenbak's questions seem to assume that design research has failed as a field, but the conference audience in Oslo were keen to recommend reflection on its



successes as well. After all, Henry Petroski's work has examined design failures for what they might contribute to future design successes (Petroski 1992, 2006).

We turn next to 'Towards a Post-Anthropocentric 'Political Context' in Design Historiography' by Joana Ozorio de Almeida Meroz (Leiden University, Netherlands). In this article, Meroz seeks to move design history beyond regarding politics as a human affair, to capture the workings of a broader notion of politics and its sites including, especially, the political agency of materials and things. Meroz examines some ways in which artefacts play active roles in the construction of national design canons. Constructivist histories of national design have tended to view artefacts as the passive and arbitrary outcomes of social categories and discursive conventions. Meroz proposes, on the contrary, that as some objects are isolated from the rest as 'design objects' they achieve an elevated 'object position' (to use Fernando Domínguez Rubio's term) and enter into contact with different regimes of meaning (international cultural politics, export programmes, education, art museums, the media). In these contexts, the material characteristics of design artefacts tangibly enable and restrict the political production and transnational circulation of certain narratives of design and of national identity.

For example, although in the late 1980s industrial design was discursively designated by the Dutch government as representative of design from the Netherlands globally, its material and visual characteristics (weight, scale, subdued aesthetics) sometimes made its international dissemination difficult and prevented it from representing Dutch design in the world's museums and design centres. Meroz shows in her PhD thesis, *Transnational Material Politics: Constructions of Dutch Design, 1970-2012*, that this physical failure in occupying the object position of Dutch design meant that industrial design did not come to be enduringly associated with Dutch design and was ultimately largely erased from its historiography. The construction of national design canons is not only discursive and social but also partly, if fundamentally, a material question. For Meroz, the relationships between people and things, and things natural and man-made, were salient and productive points of tension.

In 'Writing About New Typography from The Margins: Problems and Approaches', Trond Klevgaard of Westerdals Oslo School of Arts, Communication and Technology, shares his PhD research into New Typography in Scandinavia through a methodological reflection on how modernism in design resonates differently in different regions, and how it has been negotiated and adapted. Klevgaard considers key theoretical tools such as the notions of centre and periphery, networks, domestication, and the rhizome. Klevgaard shows how



Scandinavian printers modified New Typography to match their own professional contexts.

Next, two articles express concern about the lack of a strong and distributed national base for design history, in Belgium and Switzerland respectively, and how this might impact on the development of design history in those nations. Dr Fredie Floré (University of Leuven) and Dr Javier Gimeno Martínez (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) present jointly their call for 'Making Room for Design History in Belgium' through a review of historiographic efforts in museums and higher education institutions. They call for a joint master's degree in design history as a sound basis for future development of the subject in Belgium. In 'Learning from History – But How? Design history and the practice-based education system at Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS)'. Meret Ernst of HGK FHNW, also calls for an expansion of design history in art and design higher education. Switzerland has a rich history of design and design education. Yet, design history lacks any academic affiliation there, with no chair in design studies at Switzerland's universities, or at the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology, or the newly founded Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). What, then, does design history mean in this practice-based context? Ernst provides one answer with her analysis of how the present lack of a national base might impact the emergence of design history in Switzerland. Reflecting on the past of the past is an instructive way to understand not only the history of design, and the history of design history, but also to better understand the present. How can we learn from history?

In 1995, the period of vocational education at traditional schools of arts and crafts, which had begun towards the end of the 19th century, was ended by law. A standardized education system was enacted with the Bologna reform of 1999 and established across the EU by 2011. The five years of vocational training provided by the art schools was reduced to three years for a BA at Switzerland's Universities of Applied Sciences. This condensed the curriculum and courses which were not clearly professionally instrumental came under pressure. Nevertheless, courses in history are compulsory in all design curricula. Moreover, Universities of Applied Sciences have to conduct research by law. Why, then, have many of them missed out on researching the history of their own disciplines? More historiographical work is needed to meet the demands of practice-based education, and enrich the discourse of neighbouring disciplines. Relevant debates abound in new networks linking academics with independent experts, practitioners, and researchers. In this way, Switzerland may serve as an example of why, where, and how design historiography should be implemented as a field of study, Ernst argues, even in a predominantly practice based education system.



Our last article continues the examination of the complex ways in which national identity is formed around designed objects, particularly the increasing number which have not been designed, manufactured and sold all in one country. 'Made in Ireland'? National Narratives and Hybrid Identities in Irish Design History' by Dr Sorcha O'Brien (Kingston University) interrogates the formation of the Irish national canon. O'Brien offers two case studies, the first of which is the IQ Lamp designed by Danish designer Holger Strom for Kilkenny Design Workshops in 1973. This lamp has been presented as part of the canons of both Irish and Scandinavian design and we may see it, therefore, as an instructive example of mediation in ascribing national identity in design. O'Brien's second case study is the lesser-known example of the Fam washing machine, designed in the Netherlands in the 1950s and manufactured and sold in Ireland as an example of Joana Meroz and Javier Gimeno Martínez' 'expanded domain' of Dutch design practice. She concludes that there is a need for greater recognition of hyphenated identities, such as Dutch-Irish, in the consideration of national identity in design history.

Conclusion

We are continuously constructing design history, as we continue to research and write about the history of design. The articles included in this volume of *Writing Visual Culture* offer a variety of methodological foci for the field. And the majority of them show, too, that the geography of design history remains critically important as a focus for the development of the field. This work demonstrates how the field's preoccupation with national identities is understood in relation to local, regional and global contexts in ways that are sensitive to temporal as well as geographical specificity, and the complex ways in which the local, the national and the global intersect with the past, the present and the future to enrich the field and promise much more to come.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the authors whose work is showcased in this volume of *WVC*; to the speakers in the anniversary strand at the Design History Society conference at the University of Oslo, September 2017 and to the conference convenor, Prof Kjetil Fallan; to colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire, Katharine Collins and Caroline Munklinde.



References

- Meroz, Joana and Javier Gimeno-Martínez. 2016. Introduction: Beyond Dutch Design: Material Culture in the Netherlands in an Age of Globalization, Migration and Multiculturalism. *Journal of Design History* 29 (3): 213–227.
- Petroski, Henry. 1992. *To Engineer is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design*. London: Vintage Books.
- Petroski, Henry. 2006. *Success through Failure: The Paradox of Design*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Rubio, Fernando Domínguez. 2016. On the discrepancy between objects and things: An ecological approach. *Journal of Material Culture* 21 (1): 59 – 86. First Published March 9, 2016

Contact

Professor Grace Lees-Maffei
Professor of Design History
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane
Hatfield
Hertfordshire AL10 9AB
g.lees-maffei@herts.ac.uk
http://www.go.herts.ac.uk/grace_lees-maffei