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Toward an understanding of how I wish to present my own work.

Preamble

At nearly every critique in the MDP there seems to be two distinct theories into what constitutes good work. Or, more precisely, what constitutes hard work. (The second seeming more accurate whenever the discussion is about the merit of the student and not the merit of the work.) I have strong feelings toward one of these camps, and yet people I deeply respect belong to the other. I will do my best to present each side fairly.

Side one believes that good, original ideas are hard to generate and that making things is easy. That the heavy lifting is in the conception and that the execution—while needing to be done well—can be done with relative ease. Furthermore this camp sees consideration of the limitations of making (practical limitations) to be stifling. They believe that sticking to what can be accomplished leads to doing little more then what has already been accomplished, mere exercises in style.

Side two sees everything the other way around. To them, ideas are easy. It is the embedding of those ideas into designed things, that function on their own in the world, that is the challenge. While they acknowledge that you have to start with a good idea, it is the struggle of communicating that idea that is the most work. Furthermore this side sees wild, ambiguous and radical ideas as exasperating because they rarely lead to embodied work. They believe that privileging ideas leads to a lot of talking and not much else.

Enough with fairness. I can't stand the position that Ideas matter more then making. Sure everything needs to start from a good idea, and work without any interesting ideas is just empty style. But, an idea without making is just hot air. (Some would say that it is philosophy, but philosophers have to write their ideas down, have them published, hear others philosophers' rebuttals, and then reform their ideas. Philosophers are dutiful makers, not pure idea people.)

It all goes back to my first art class as an undergrad (my degree is in art with an emphasis in design.) In this intro to art methods class you were not allowed to talk during the critique of your own work. In fact, as much as possible, work was intended to be critiqued without knowing the artist. Leaving the world of art and entering design, the need for work to stand on its own becomes even clearer. While fine art has to function within the world of gallery docents, artist statements, catalog essays, and art history lectures; design has to function in the world. Design always stands on its own, if it is good design.

Introduction

When you start from the position that good design speaks for itself, the question "What forms and modes will I adopt to discuss my work and its place in the world?" is a tricky one. I am not sure I can methodically lay out a case for a response or even form a coherent response. However, I've had very strong reactions to this term's speakers, so I must know what I like (or don't like.) Therefore, I propose the following format for this paper: I'll pose a question, choose a speaker who resonates with that question, describe my reaction to them, then reflect on that reaction, and finally draw conclusions of what this means for how I want to present.

What am I presenting, work or ideas?

Stuart Bailey presented a lecture on the history of writers and designers collaborating and influencing each other with the implication that this history affects his work at Dot Dot Dot. But that implication was never made explicit. Unlike the majority of presenters, from this term and

the spring, he didn't present a portfolio of his own work or share anecdotes and insights about his work that might transform our understanding of it.

I should say that I found Stuart charming. I sat next to him during his lecture and spoke with him at breaks. In those moments he shared interesting stories and asked about my own work. However, I didn't like his presentation. Part of my reaction may be that I was already familiar with a lot of the material he was covering. A greater part was that I had different expectations of what he would present. What Bailey showed was a great Critical Studies or Art History presentation. What I had expected was personal reflection on his work.

My expectation were such for several reasons. From spring's Design Dialogues a certain pattern of presentations had been set. Beyond Design Dialogues nearly every public lecture at Art Center that I have attended has followed that same pattern. The only speakers who have not followed this pattern, of personnel reflection on their own work, have been academics and professional non-designers: Margaret Wertheim, Mark Meadows, Rob Tow, Henry Jenkins etc. Finally, as per my previous Design Dialogue paper and this paper's preamble, I believe we live in a time of doing. A time where making things is more important than theory.

My negative reaction to Bailey should be no surprise then. Here was an accomplished designer not speaking about his own work. It is clear to me from my own reaction that it is important to me that I should show my own work. The reason to hear a designer speak is to hear what they have to say about their own work, along with their practice and themselves.

Am I presenting, my work or others?

Dmitri Siegel's most recent piece for Design Observer, "M...O...T...I...O...N," is a typical piece of art or design writing. He has taken the work of two contemporary artist, compared them to several historical artist and then commented on how all of them are examples of perception of time in media. It is well written and interesting to read. However, what I find more compelling is

the self documentary one of the artist, PES, has made for his website: www.eatpes.com. Here the creator himself made a new motion piece, complete with footage shoot specifically for it, talking about the original work "Kaboom" while sharing anecdotes about the creation of "Kaboom" along with insights into how he works.

If a piece of design is going to be used as a jumping off point for a discussion, that is to say, if something is going to be added to a piece of design, who has the right to do that? Obviously the creator does but do critics too? The author can provide deep insight into how the work was created and can inspire others to create their own work, while the critic can put what has been made into a wider context comparing it to work by other designers. But their is a more self serving side to critique as well. Heidi Julavits in the Believer article writes:

"I am now reading The Recognitions. Why now, after all these years of well-meaning procrastination? Because I want to be able to interact with Franzen and Park on more than a surface level, meaning that I read their essays and thought, huh, interesting, but was incapable of a more engaged or informed response; I want to read Gaddis so that I can figure out if I agree with them or not..."

Critics use creator's work to illustrate their own points, to draw their own conclusions, and to interact with other critics. Dmitri's article is a perfect example, he wanted to talk about motion and uses the work of several artist to do so. It is a great piece and introduced me to PES, but I find PES's self reflection far more interesting and useful as a working designer. I, of course, look at other people's work and use their work to define the context within which I am working. I'm inspired by other artist, but when presenting my own work, feel that it is only appropriate to mention them briefly, not to use their work to build my argument.

Should I show old work or new work?

Nathan Shedroff was similar to Bailey. He presented his ideas, this time on Designing Meaningful Experiences. He also shared his thoughts about working within large corporations and his latest project, the Reveal label system. What was different than Bailey's presentation was

that Shedroff was explaining his ideas through his work. He didn't show any applied work, which makes him still an exception to what I expected, but he presented his ideas through diagrams and examples he had made for communicating his points.

Many of Nathan's ideas are embedded within the MDP and it was great to hear him so clearly articulate them. He was also a lot of fun to spend a Friday afternoon chatting with. Yet I still think his presentation would have been better if he had shown more of his own work where he had applied his ideas about experience.

Finally Nathan fell into a trap I saw briefly in spring term but would become a major trend this term: the Most Recent Work Syndrome. During his presentation he showed us the work he has been doing on the Reveal label system, including several comps of the mark. The problem is two fold. First the work isn't done yet, so it can't speak for itself. We can't look at the mark and understand its implications fully because it is not complete. (A problem made worse by seeing multiple versions of it.) Second the work isn't done yet, so he can not speak of it. He can't tell us about how it has been received or what it means or much of anything because he is still working on it. Since he is still working on it he has neither finished thoughts about it or enough distance from it for real reflection. So the work can't speak for itself, the author can't speak for it, and the audience is reserving judgement (because it is not done yet.)

Showing your most recent work must feel fresh or fun or interesting to presenters, a break from the same work they have talked about over and over. (Just think of Jerry Seinfeld's 1998 decision to retire his entire act and start over anew. But like Jerry in Comedian, the 2002 movie chronicling his creation of an all new act, new work is raw, rough material that isn't necessarily ready for an audience.) If the goal is for the work to speak for itself first and the designer to add to it, then unfinished work will never be appropriate.

Where to present? In my studio or elsewhere?

Fritz Haeg and the Sundown estate illustrate a few interesting points. The first of which is, where you present can be as important as what you present.

The Sundown estate is an amazing place. The grounds, the house, the use of the space are all idiosyncratic and add to Haeg's guru like air. The house and how he chooses to use it is also a defining characteristic of his practice. We have gone on several studio visits, but this particular one made me really think about what it is to present in your studio. There are the obvious benefits of having all your work at hand and assistants to find thing for you to show while you are talking. The convenience of being able to give a tour and answer questions as they come up. But there is more to it then just that.

What strikes me, is how seeing a presentation in a studio feels like watching vacation slides in someone else's living room. (Or like the dinosaur movie sequence in War Games, for those of us who have never watched slide in someone else's living room.) The presenter is comfortable, the audience is slightly uncomfortable and trying to be on their best behavior. Everyone is facing one direction in a room probably not designed for that purpose. I was also struck by how a studio can naturally feels like a living room, more so then when companies build fake living rooms into offices.

The visitor gets greater access to the presenter, by seeing their working space, but that working space is not wholly unfiltered. Designers meet clients in their studios. Studios are structured to present a certain face of the designer, a face we don't normally get to see when the speaker comes to us. The visit to the Sundown estate is similar to our visit to machine projects. In both cases we were not visiting just the artist studio but a space they have created as an integral part of their practice. If my practice developed in the same way the I would try to always present there.

What is my practice anyway?

Fritz Haeg's also does a great job of talking about his work as a practice. He sees the formation of his work into a formal practice as a way of understanding and shaping what he does. By having several outlets where he can work, he is able to have ideas in many fields and work on ideas in the most appropriate field for them. He, like every architect who has spoken to us, sees architects as the hyper-generalist, who's work can subsume all other fields. Haeg works an architect, landscape architect, promoter-organizer, curator, teacher, guru, and installation-artist-gardener-provocateur.

A speakers' understanding of their practices are one of the main things I listen for. Before starting the MDP I never thought of myself as having a practice. I was stuck with a vision of my career being job based—on who would hire me to do what—not on building my own practice of the things I like doing. When successful designers speak of their practice it is more then inspirational, it is a glimpse into a different world view. Discussions of practice are also a way of understanding how work was made and how it relates to other work, in practical terms.

Dmitri Siegel was equally inspirational in the way he described his practice. His work can be divided between writing, experimentation and commercial work. He often starts a project as an experimental investigation of a theoretical concern. He then writes about that investigation and has that material in the background for later commercial work. Dmitri has a place for all the activities he likes to do, so he doesn't have to rely on just one of them to satisfy all of his creative needs. I am sure many designers do this but Dmitri formalized this into his working method. Other, just as interesting designers like Mike MIlls, do not present their work as a practice. They simply present one piece after the next without comment on how they fit together or why they choose this project over another.

I am starting to form my work in to a practice based on human centered design research

as an investigative tool for both discovery and inspiration. If I want to think of my work as a practice then I need to present it as such. Fritz Haeg and Dmitri Siegel are great examples of the tone around practice I wish to use.

Is presenting about showing work or giving a lesson?

I was completely disappointed to not see Somi Kim's body of work. I heard that she had prepared it, and was going to show it in the second half of her presentation but after taking so many questions, she ran out of time. Instead what we did see was her most recent project. (By this point it should be clear how I feel about that.) Previously I had speculated that presenters talk about their newest work as a way of staying interested in their own presentations and, in some cases, to get feedback on current projects. I believe Somi had another agenda. She presented to us her most recent project as a teaching tool on how work gets done, or not done, within a large firm. Her goal was to bring to us something that only working professionals can: practical stories of the day to day practice of being a designer.

Along those same lines, the most interesting aspect of the class discussion was her talking about who they hire and how those people have worked out. It was heartening to myself and many others to hear a practitioner at a high level talk about how finding an employee is about finding a good fit, not finding the best portfolio. These sort of stories, about the day to day running of an office, hiring freelancers, working with ones boss, are great to hear in gradschool.

Presenting for fame?

In the last 6 months three celebrity designers have spoken at Art Center: Mike MIlls, Stephan Sagmeister, and Geoff McFetridge. Each of them presented in almost the exact same way: show a great piece of work that wows the audience, then tell a quick anecdote about the work something quirky or fun or funny, then move on to the next piece. Throughout their talks they use catchy, well worn phrases and most often have a sections specifically for their collection

of personal mantras. The experience of their presentations is a collision of their work, fame and personalities.

All of these high profile speakers have been good examples of two things: letting the work speak for itself and bringing something more to the evening. They all have given good tours of their work. Shown a lot of work, both older and newer, but never too new. Shared their insights into how they work and think along with their general world view by way of mantras and sayings. It could be claimed that this is simple celebrity worship. But, what I love about them is not that they are celebrities but the confidence, polish and ease with which they present. The way they give their own work a lot of room to be experienced.

Mieke's two presentations last fall are a good example of how the same material and same presenter can feel very different. When she spoke to us in Colloquium she presented her work much like the three men above. Letting the work speak and then adding small details while sharing a lot of her personality. When Mieke presented for the Toyota Lecture Series it was completely different. She had a written script that outlined her formal, critical thinking. It was a lecture with a few slides of work thrown in. Her first presentation was so much more engaging for the audience and inspiring to other designers.

My plan for how I would like to speak about my own work is not to become a celebrity. However, the celebrity designer mode of presentation epitomize the style I value.

Recap

After reflecting on this terms presenters, and others, I am beginning to see how I want to speak about my own work. Firstly I want my work to speak for itself. I don't feel that it is appropriate for me to lecture about my ideas. My role is to show my work and give a tour of it. Secondly, in the spirit of letting the work speak for itself it is important to only show finished work that I have had time to reflect on. Thirdly, if my studio is an integral part of my practice

then presenting in my studio has many benefits. It allows for talking about more then just the work, it facilitates talking about work as a practice. Fourthly, the construction of a practice not only allows a designer to do work differently, it gives a context for talking about that work. Which leads to talking about work not for the works sake, but as a means of discussing design as a profession. While talking about design as a profession there is a chance to talk about both creative and business work. Finally from celebrity designers I am inspired toward a certain style of presentation.

Conclusions

One reading of my paper may be that after critique comes celebrity, that what matters now is showy pieces and catchy stories. The way I prefer to see it is, that after critique, what matters is design standing on its own. If something is well designed, then the answer to the most basic question: does it work, will be self evident. If your work is standing on its own, then what is left for you to talk about is your practice, your working methods, and your world view.