

Toward A Definition of the Decorational

(In Real Time)

DENISE GONZALES CRISP

Someday I hope to be able to quote myself. —Denise Gonzales Crisp

I am at the beginning. Yes, right this moment, starting on this page I set out to understand an impulse, to investigate something I suspect to be true about graphic design. I have an hypothesis of sorts. That's something. Maybe it's not much more than a hunch, a sense. Maybe it's just a hope. But it could evolve, as pronouncements will, into a theory, a model methodology, a revolution! I have named this hypothesis the "decorational." This is where I am.

I am also, just now, stepping into what I will claim as my design research. I am not a scientist or systems analyst or an historian. But I am a designer—pre-disposed to invent, to make something out of nothing, to connect things to other things to surprising, and if I may say not untrue, ends. My design, my experience, perspective and values all crowd this threshold, this now moment. The means, the hypothesis and the intent convene here to spark a departure toward the unknown.

My inquiry then is two-pronged: the content of the research and the process of making it research are emerging simultaneously, in real time. And so the goal is two-fold. To give substance to the hypothesis so a theory of the decorational might serve the discipline, at least moreso than if it were to remain in my head. And to demonstrate that design itself can be research, or that design research is this, here. Right now...

My position is predictably unformed and likely unsatisfactory. So be it. I am alone in my laboratory, examining what I know, holding it up to existing knowledge. I am working on my experiments, a bit mad in this way, insulated. Not unlike Le Corbusier who in 1925 asserted that "we have now identified decorative art as commensurate with the art of the engineer" [Corbusier 1925, 76].

Just before that he wrote (as if to ground his claim in logic): "Since we are sensitive to the harmony that brings repose, we recognize an object that is in harmony with our limbs. When a and b are equal to c, a and b are equal to each other. In this case, a = human-limb objects; b = our sense of harmony; c = our body. Thus human-limb objects are in accord with our sense of harmony in that they are in accord with our bodies" [76].

I trust you will believe me when I say I am no Corbusier. Unlike him, I value ornament for its own sake. But like him I believe designers invent out of one



Transformations, 2001/2002 lecture series poster. Organic structure in space digitally constructed from cloth. 27" x 39", 5-color offset litho. Client: Southern California Institute of Architecture. Design: D. Gonzales Crisp.

moment toward a truer one. His ideal cities (*contemporaine! radieuse!*) were necessary fantasies and finally radical alternatives for radical times. "If the hard life of this machine age makes us bitter that is because a page has been turned; we have a new existence, one which is not so very playful" [42].

The machine proposed solutions that could deliver us from tortured frivolity: "Purity, economy, the reach for wisdom. A new desire: an aesthetic of purity of precision, of expressive relationships setting in motion the mathematical mechanisms of our spirit: a spectacle and a cosmogony" [114]. Tools constructed from material and manufacturing truth would extend human reach: "The steel in our hands was the machine; with the machine came calculation; with calculation, the solution of a hypothesis; with the solution of a hypothesis, the resolution of a dream" [51].

In 1928, cowhide, steel and chrome tubing coalesced in what we might call a chaise lounge, what Corbusier named a "relaxing machine."

Hyperbolic, critical, righteous, contagious: his ideas were extreme and—as with most research—manifest a finite perspective. The micro view necessarily shuts out other views for the duration of its discovery. Like Corbusier (but not) I have my suspicions, my experiments, my radiant microcosms representing what I see as possible and necessary in the now world.

My hypothesis of the decorational leads me here: "Modern decorative art is not decorated" [84]. Corbusier theoretically dismantled ornament in his series of 1925 essays collectively titled *The Decorative Arts of Today*. Before Corbusier was born his beloved machines were stamping out versions of Louis XVI chairs like so many pennies. Rabid automation (and exploited labor) of bad-quality goods is exactly the sort of thing that motivated the Arts and Crafts movement's various attempts to reinvest handicraft with honor and social value—anathema to machine manufacturing of the late nineteenth century. So ornamented chairs, rugs, spoons, even buildings—stuff made by craftsmen of conscience—carried

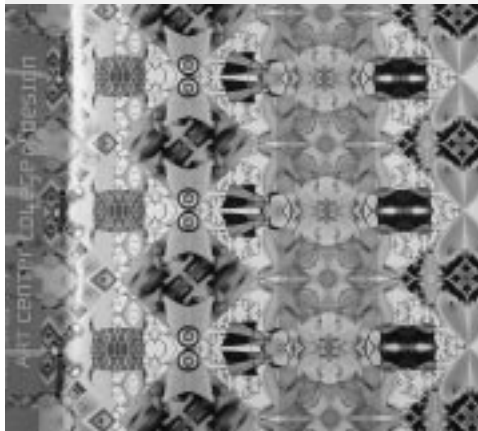
anti-technological sentiments. All well and good, and thank you mister Morris & Co. for caring. But.

Decorative arts were anti-technology and therefore useless to Corbusier's future. The technology train had already left the Gare du Nord. No looking back. His was the age that witnessed and survived the First World War: "1914: the event that upset everything. . . . The old world was shattered, trampled on, rejected, buried. . . . While the event took its course, technology could dare everything" [141]. Any lingering decorative impulse would need to conform to a steely techno-logic that not only expressed modern life, but promised to redeem it.

I wonder what the young Corbusier would think of our computing machines, our sleek tablets that spin bits of light and time into entire worlds. Digital space, digital products, and physical products conceived in digital space are formed in ways unique to the dynamic capacities of the CPU. Would Gehry's frozen liquid Disney Hall exist in real Los Angeles space if not for the digital? A knotted web of steel lies beneath waves of titanium and belies the economy and vertical simplicity of Corbusier's blessed I-beam. Is this architecture decorative? Arguments I will entertain elsewhere allude to the possibility [Foster 2002]. At base, the decorative is now exuberantly technological.

Toward a Definition of the Decorational

I suspect it is time to move the computer past the "machine age," derail the persistent perception that it should only reproduce form languages originally invented for another techno-logic.



2001/2002 Art Center recruitment catalog, cover and spread. Patterns digitally constructed from details of student work. 10" x 9.25"; five 48-page booklets bound with industrial staples, 4-color offset litho. Client: Art Center. Design: D. Gonzales Crisp, E. Gladstone, Y. Khan.

Adolf Loos wrote "Weep not! See, therein lies the greatness of our age; that it is incapable of producing new ornament. We have outgrown ornament; we have fought our way through to freedom from ornament. See, the time is nigh, fulfillment awaits us." This spectacle of a statement was first published in 1908, but the

time was not quite nigh. Seventeen years later Corbusier perceived "no mystery in the crisis of decorative art; the miracle can occur of an architecture that will be, the day when decorative art ceases to be" [Corbusier, 181]. Evidently the apotheosis had yet to be realized. These architects seem mighty anxious for the day when marble, glass, steel and stone could finally complete the job of glorifying modernity, the day when nothing insignificant could detract from their pure and clear purpose. Allow me to speculate: if they could possibly have kept women with unnecessarily large hips and fancy hats from walking within view of their buildings I think they might have.

Oh pardon me. Am I indiscreet? Outrageous? Leave me alone. I am in my laboratory.

Toward a Definition of the Decorational

I suspect that functionalism—historically fixed in the physical world and powered by an economy of materials and means—is by now a quaint ism in need of a nice pair of earrings.

"Form follows function" is the familiar slogan promulgated by modern architects and a century-plus of designers. It is the tagline that continues to criminalize the decorative. "Much of the time, form is nothing more than an educated guess about function. . . ." argued architect Peter Blake in 1974. ". . . Much of the time, for better (but probably for worse) form follows the mortgage interest rate. Much of the time, form in modern architecture is anti-functional. Much of the time, this may be all to the good" [Blake 1974, 28]. "All to the good" means in spite of—or maybe because of—modern architecture's limits, options for lifestyles emerge organically and therefore creatively within concrete cracks. I am speculating again here: it is there in those cracks that the decorational survives.

In the 1960s and '70s, *Vogue* used monolithic modern buildings as fashion backdrops, often as counterpoint to flagrant chiffon or kooky prints. This contribution to superfluosity wasn't how these resolute symbols of urbanity and commerce were meant to "function." But business reconfigures everything and anything for profit. Mies van der Rohe's sheet glass façade serves as a Victoria's Secret storefront and as I dance past it my reflection interlaces with pretty product. Functionalism is decorated by capitalism, and desire.

Toward a Definition of the Decorational

I suspect that to be taken seriously a graphic designer must favor a rationalist aesthetic.

Modern graphic design adopted principles of modernist architecture. I will venture here that by the time commercial art began to identify itself as "graphic design" in

the mid- to late-1920s, high design had already abandoned decoration (last seen on a platform of a neo-Corinthian train station fronted by statues representing nine great European cities, her pointlessly embroidered hanky waving moist farewells).

Decoration is not simply frivolous, however. It represents a crime of excess (a doomed love affair slathered over torment). So it would seem that the course of modern design ideology in general, led by architecture, sidestepped the need for a theory of ornament in graphic design. I am still looking for essays arguing against or for ornament in graphic design as vehemently as those arguing about it in architecture at the beginning of the century. Could a relative lack of discourse mean that decoration in graphic design is just fine? Trust me, it is not just fine. Graphic design of consequence—and simply moving product doesn't count—is not overtly adorned. The course of clear communication cannot be cluttered with curlicues.

How can this be, a theory of graphic design, of commercial art, sans embellishment? Germany's Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) Ulm, and the Swiss Kunstgewerbeschule Basel. That's how. In the 1950s and '60s Max Bill, Otl Aicher, Armin Hofmann, Emil Ruder et al. stood alongside Corbusier and Mies as researchers theorizing design's role in post World War II society. In particular, HfG Ulm developed approaches that would strengthen design's significance to culture, and to ever-expanding industry. 1958 curriculum copy read: "The task of this department is to design images in accordance with their function . . . typography, graphic design, photography, and exhibition design are treated as a single area, which will shortly be augmented by . . . motion pictures and television. The term 'visual communication' has emerged to denote this area, in accordance with international usage To this end methods must be evolved that take account of the advances made in recent decades in the theory of perception and meaning" [Ulm Design, 140].

But design's partnership with the social, linguistic and physical sciences was not a natural one, even as late as 1965. Core faculty Guy Bonsiepe wrote in the institution's journal *Ulm* "... tension and hostility spring from the fact that the HfG pays more attention to the question of how design relates to the sciences than to the question of how design relates to the arts" [151]. While Basel teachings reinforced the more familiar values of the Bauhaus—the project that brought art to industry—faculty at Basel did experiment with ideas such as mathematical systems (rumor has it typographer Emil Ruder walked around campus in a white lab coat). The influence of these and other institutions further ossified the "form follows function" logic by giving it a scientific face. Enter "design science," that is, systematic and comparative methods applied to determine and construct systems that would solve so-called problems.



Magazine covers: 2 of 4 embellished quarterly mastheads and other fancy typography. 9.5" x 10.625", 4-color offset litho. Client: *Artext Magazine*. Design: D. Gonzales Crisp.

Toward a Definition of the Decorational

I suspect that the rationalist aesthetic as theorized and practiced by mid-century modernists is not only of a different time, but of a different place, a different gender, a different ethos.

Different than Corbusier's singular vision but similar in impulse, HfG Ulm and the Basel School were design laboratories setting forth and testing what might be true. They generated imaginative (for the time) ideas, made relatable objects, built a case for their research, and sold it to the client, the sponsor, the press and the public. Now their processes and products are what continue to inform most design study, and what establish the limits of practice.

The forms and functions of design are instigated by design research, by designers' drive to communicate their place and moment truthfully through the material world. Corbusier's theories responded to his modernity. The form languages founded in Basel and Ulm gave shape to the concepts of corporate identity and public information, ideas that coincided with the birth of global trade. Each literally designed the future for which their moment would eventually be history.

Today! I seek what was left on the platform to wither. Since 1925, ornament has served many with dignity: W.A. Dwiggins, Fredrick Goudy, The Eameses, Wes Wilson, Herb Lubalin, April Greiman.

And today! The decorational identifies and responds! (You see how, as I near the end of my investigation, I am given to assertion, to hyperbole? I am in my laboratory.) The decorational dares the attempt to be true to now. It honors



many meanings in many forms; honors histories and contemporary currents, communal and technological invention. The decorational intends to engage the discourse of ornament with that of rational design. The decorational finds pride in craft, joy in materials (Our material is digital! Our digital is material!). The aim is not nostalgia, nor pastiche nor irony, but to reflect and be the complexity of our time (which could be nostalgic! ironic!).

There it is. This now. I have initiated the argument and presented my experiments and find myself here, some weeks and pages later. And so I begin.

Detail of a poster, *What I Was Doing When I Should Have Been Listening*, announcing a presentation of work by D. Gonzales Crisp to the Art Directors Club of Tulsa, 2003. Digitally constructed from doodles. 28" x 19", 4-color offset litho. Design: D. Gonzales Crisp.

ESSAY STUDY: What is decoration in graphic design? What is ornament? By accepting one or both as integral to communication, will they cease to be decorative, ornamental, superfluous?

ESSAY STUDY: The decorational is alive and well on the www. Groups are developing form vocabularies that intricately weave information, simulate physical surfaces, create complex pattern, animate the figurative and the abstract. Proponents are growing in number. Identify the decorationalists!

ESSAY/DESIGN STUDY: Document decoration's communicative value that speaks to complexity and diversity.

ESSAY/DESIGN STUDY: Meet need with delight!