

The Gay Science (What is Life?)

Sanford Kwinter

What one should learn from artists: How to make things beautiful, attractive and desirable for us, when in themselves, they never are.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

Every object around us is a composition of forces, as important for how it is made as for the elements of which it is made up. Design is not about making things beautiful, but simply about making them what they are ... for us. If the general public is neither instructed nor accustomed to understanding design in this way, it is hardly a surprise. Most designers are also unaware of the obscure logic of forces that composes our object world, of the cues and compulsions that provoke in us the patterns and routines that animate our nervous and mental life. If this sounds more like engineering than design, well, isn't that, at bottom, what it is?

We are, more than ever today, prisoners of design. Our world is so saturated with design that we can hardly separate ourselves from it. Though much of design is explicit enough to amuse, focus, quicken, or infuriate us, we hardly notice that in so doing, it continually enters and reorganizes us. With art now faded irretrievably into entertainment, we are left to conjecture the ways that design may be taking its place. More radically, is it not possible that design is now taking over the social role that music has served for the last three decades, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world? Design is arguably among the most important, ubiquitous, and least understood shapers of public consciousness today. But to fully appreciate this, one must know where to look for it. As Nietzsche's statement suggests, no thing is beautiful or compelling in and by itself. All beauty—all power to affect—derives from the way in which things are invested with disposition, how they are made to *appear*. Design, then, has to do with the shape of *appearance* (no small thing!), with the critical proviso that someone or something (some force!) is always responsible for that shape.

Nietzsche called this shape-giving aspect of life (and the things it catches up in its movement), "meaning," largely because he was interested in irritating the blind belief in static things like Truth. In the rare passages where he gave himself over to deep and personal passions, however, he referred to the culminating point of "meaning" as *style*.

Nothing is more important, more necessary, he proposed in a famous passage in *The Gay Science*, "than to give style to one's character." And no one was more adept at this, he argued, than the healthy, form-loving Greeks. If philosophy is one day to be reborn as a gay science it would need to be put back in service of Life (not Truth!). And the purpose of life is to bring into the world a system of novel forms that reflect the constraint of a single will or viewpoint. Style.

Style is often dismissed as a mere effect of surface, and this might well be valid if one could understand by surface the most profound of all things. In sports, for example, style means nothing less than a *whole new way of doing things*. Think of Jean-Claude Killy's "avalement" skiing style that brought him three Olympic gold medals and a revolution to the sport; think of the two-handed backhand in tennis, the Fosbury Flop, Pele's bicycle kick, Jordan and Gretzky, or in music, of Jimi Hendrix's right thumb. What is so profound about these examples? Simply this: that each innovation is the product of a single and novel way of being in the world, an invention that then re-disposes that world according to entirely new rhythmic values. It changes the underlying music of a given world and in so doing changes the very notion of what will become possible in it.

Objects too—books, buildings, clothes, tools—embody and emit styles, establish and constrain possibilities, introduce and limit freedoms. When we "give style" to our character, we do nothing else than to claim and renounce freedoms. We compose an environment of possibility that we enter into and use with either grace or awkwardness. Either way, in the end, the final product is who we are. Life, too, is composition, and style is what our lives are about. To see the world as style (is it not, after all, the goal

of every ambitious composer to forge a new and personal style, so that even the task of achieving a work "with no style" is an heroic act of style-making?) is to take possession of much more than just a theory of the world. It is to possess a theory of all the activity in it, perhaps an entire science, an ethology that could tell us everything we want to know about human behavior. To live in a technological society is not just to submit to the imperative of style but rather to face the challenge of creating a science of it. This may well imply a new use of the intelligence, but if that is so, then we may be on our way to inventing a new (life) style here as well.

Design invests raw, even base, matter with "performativity"; it endows an inert thing with a capacity for action. One could see this process as the forceful subjection of one thing to the goals and will of another, or one could see it as investing something with "anima" or intelligence (in the purely technological sense, at least). Design is, in fact, a cybernetic process because it takes the functions of communication and control from a human operator and embeds these (as in a microprocessor) into the thing itself. Design makes things move, but that is the least of its power. For the type of movement that design projects into objects has the intention to make other things move. Design modifies objects so that they, in turn, can modify the world.

This certainly sounds like science fiction: design as the invention of formulas, algorithms, chants, matrixes, diagrams, and songs that quicken the world and make it alive. If life is a "pattern in time," and design is the practice of impressing pattern into things, it stands to reason that the highest ambition of design would be to target the forms of life itself. But this would serve no good if it were simply to open the door to new, increasingly sophisticated techniques of human and social engineering. To "give style" to life is, on the contrary, to free life of routine, to place it into syncopation so that it can find new, entirely unexpected patterns of unfolding. All improvisation is life in search of a style. It took years for the BMD studio to settle comfortably into this project. Each step toward life was experi-

enced first as treason, as an *abandonment* of design (I remember an uprising once to have my own provocations banned from the office). In time, the "design" project itself came to be seen as increasingly suspicious and deficient, an intolerable submission to a client's imagined need to conform to a market. We spoke in those days of "through-designing," a process by which an action or set of forces is transmitted to the *agora*, or social sphere, through the object but in no way limited to it. We spoke of sheep-dogs and whistles and landscapes and the way a shepherd moves a troupe through and over a terrain by transmitting tonal signals remotely to a dog, who moves the fluid sheep-mass precisely yet improvisationally and according to his own way. We invented concepts, built models, and ran experiments.

I learned about design in its most dizzying and exhilarating states. In turn, BMD developed a practice that became at once increasingly collaborative and independent of the client. Collaborative because "through-design" meant re-engineering the impetus by first designing (rethinking) the client's task itself; independent, because a fully confident set of social researches was forming within the BMD milieu, a constant interrogation of "what is possible?" and "how can this be put at the service ... of life?"

In the last few years the project of (post-Swiss, bourgeois) design appears to have been abandoned almost wholesale by the office, in favor of a new style of working. Years of reflection on the social aspects of design have transformed the practice from one focusing on graphics to one intimately involved in a struggle with the forces that shape markets and consciousness today: the image. There simply is no greater or more obscure force than pictures compelling action, reflex, behavior, and routine in our society today. No denser or more tacit form of communication, no shaping or organizing force more comprehensive or more insidiously embedded in our lifeworld than images. They make up the true *lingua franca* of commerce, politics, and psyche; they are the "cloaking devices" par excellence of the human social world. The twentieth century saw to this transformation: it is the first century in a millennium to

have left a larger and more constitutive record of itself in images than in words and ledgers.

If working with BMD for the last fifteen years has taught me one thing, it is that design and life can be raised with impunity, each to the power of the other. It does not trivialize life to see its task as the attempt to give birth to a new style (just as an author, over an entire career, creates a "voice"), nor does it elevate design ludicrously to place it at the service of living. The wars to be fought within our own historical period and in the future are increasingly about the shaping of consciousness. In this state of affairs, design could only be demonized unless we were to propose a method of action whereby design becomes a kind of "de-design." Amid the hysterical cacophony of commercial messages and cues, de-design would provide a way to clear a space where the subtle structures of coercion could momentarily be suspended. Nothing would happen in such a space except... what was completely unforeseen. In other words, the autonomous processes of life itself.

Not all life forms are good (soldier ants, for example), and not all of BMD's designs are uniformly brilliant. But a commitment to the *cultivation of life* is a practice whose value far transcends the pettiness of individual products; it represents a heroic enlargement of work to an ethics, and a commitment to a human social ecology that far exceeds the usual posture of voluntary submission to the law of markets. No one knows where such an experiment will go, and it is one certainly rife with traps and dead ends. What is most beautiful about it, in fact, might well be its potential to magnify risk. To bring design into such close proximity with life is to make laughter a necessary component of work and action. For only laughter makes risk tolerable. To the attentive reader, it will not be surprising as one looks over this book that as the game gets bigger, the mood gets increasingly light. Design, it tells us softly, *can* have pretensions; it can aspire, not only to activism but to science and thought.

I, for one, detect the risk and the laughter everywhere here, as well as a remarkable lack of the cynicism that has invaded so much of design work

today. The power of BMD's work is not at all a function of being "critical" in the banal sense in which the word is now used, but rather of being deliberately out of step with the contemporary current, and even dismissive of collective expectation. There is something in the work that is a pure dismantler of design. It establishes a demilitarized zone of sorts, a place whose serene and confident atmosphere places all bets on hold yet at the same time raises the stakes beyond the reach of any player, BMD included. You will recognize it in those quirky silent moments in the work that allow—even provoke—thought to begin.

It is in these moments—rare now anywhere in our culture—that one is tentatively permitted to dream of a day when design might merge with philosophy itself, and even lead the way to a truly gay science.

New York City
May 27, 2000