

CRITICISM

DESIGN CRITICISM HAS LONG BEEN THE POOR RELATION OF OTHER FORMS OF CRITIQUE. BUT ANNA GERBER AND TEAL TRIGGS SAY A NEW COURSE WILL CHANGE THAT

Elbert Hubbard, the American writer and founder of the Arts and Crafts' Roycroft Press once wrote: 'To avoid criticism, do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing.' His words still resonate with the state of today's design discourse. If we wait around much longer, we may have missed a crucial opportunity to legitimise and validate a sustainable role and position for the design critic. In order to address this problem, we have been involved, with other staff, in the development of a new MA course in Design Writing/Criticism to be launched in January 2008 in the School of Graphic Design at London College of Communication. This is one of the first courses of its kind; what makes it particularly distinctive is its focus on critique in both written and visual forms. While the course is situated within a graphic design context, the aim is to explore criticism as it can be applied to design more generally – including architecture – as a viable form of communication.

For most creative fields, outside design, critics are plentiful. Historically, critics have played a vital role in shaping people's perceptions of art, television, theatre, film, food and literature. We see the work of such critics published on a daily basis in national newspapers, specialist magazines and online. The critic has long been the arbiter of taste, determining for their readership what is considered good and what is bad. As Maurice Berger, editor of *The Crisis of Criticism*, writes: a critic 'is capable of engaging, guiding, directing and influencing culture, even stimulating new forms of practice and expression.' So what about design? Do we appreciate the critics we have? Do we get the critics we deserve?

Despite the maturity of the design profession and its discourse, the number of critics who take a strong position in their writing can be counted on one hand. Most writing in the field has been journalistic, the function of which has been to adopt a 'cheerleading' approach, celebrating and promoting 'star' designers. On a lesser scale, there has been a place for design history writing in which contextual and historical frameworks are identified for use in the interpretation of contemporary design objects. Both approaches have raised an awareness about design. But what of the harsh criticism that keeps an artform alive? Critics have a responsibility to be demanding of their subjects in order to foster evolving practices and to generate a response and a reaction from their audience.

Design has always drawn from art and architecture their

approaches to theory and critical frameworks for analysis. But what we still don't have, and definitely need, is a language for ourselves. Very few critics thus far have aspired to this goal. Rick Poynor, founder of *Eye* magazine and a prolific writer in design, is one of them. Poynor returns to the theme of the state of design criticism in much of his own writing: 'While it's hugely encouraging for anyone who continues to think criticism matters that we are discussing it at all, design criticism continues to survive in, at best, a precarious state of health.'

We also need to recognize that the Internet has expanded the number of 'lay critics', and that there has been a sudden surge of web sites dedicated to design commentary (e.g. *Design Observer*, *Speak Up*). We can now point to a DIY culture of critics who have over time become highly prolific as dedicated bloggers, with online journals, downloadable podcasts and fan websites with self-appointed reviewers. Invariably, however, these virtual spaces, while increasing the number of outlets available for writers, have fostered yet more descriptive commentary rather than developing an agenda for any sustained critical discourse. The technology, while encouraging immediacy, is also lacking a rigorous and disciplined approach to written (and visual) communication.

Design writing and criticism has not been formally recognised as a vital component of design education. Within our British system, students are quite rightly taught to engage critically with theoretical and historical contexts. If we are to move the profession forward, we have a responsibility to facilitate ways in which students can critically engage through and into their own practice – either examining aspects of their own work or using design tools and visual methods to critique practise. As visual communicators, we need to consider the possibility of generating our own content and designing appropriate forms. Having said this, it is also important to acknowledge that not all good designers are good writers. But for those who are, we need to create a place where the act of writing and criticism can be explored and pushed through the act of design. Again, we have a responsibility to move the discourse into new, progressive and uncharted territories.

If we really want to stop playing catch-up with other creative disciplines, we need to think of ways to create a new language for design. One way to do this is to validate the role of writing and criticism in design, be it through, about or as design. As American comedian Richard Pryor once remarked: 'I never met anybody who said when they were a kid, "I wanna grow up and be a critic".' Well, with the start of courses in Design Writing/Criticism that just might change ■



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