

[Back to Article page →](#)

London Review of Books

Hey, that's me

Hal Foster

Life Style by Bruce Mau

Phaidon, 626 pp, £39.95, November 2000, ISBN 0 7148 3827 6

The turn of one century calls up others, and 2000 was no exception. Museum shows devoted to Style 1900 or Art Nouveau were on view in London, Paris, New York and other cities. It all looked long ago and far away, this pan-European movement pledged to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of arts and crafts, in which everything from architecture to ashtrays was subject to florid design, in which the designer struggled to impress his subjectivity on all sorts of object through an idiom of vitalism – as if to inhabit the thing in this crafted way was to resist the advance of industrial reification. As the aesthetics of the machine became dominant in the 1920s, Art Nouveau was no longer nouveau; in the next decades it slowly passed from an outmoded style to a campy one, and has lingered in this limbo ever since. Yet what struck me about this recent parade of Art Nouveau exhibitions was its strong echo in the present: an intuition that we live in another era of blurred disciplines, of objects treated as mini-subjects, of total design, of a 'Style 2000'.

Adolf Loos, the Viennese architect of austere façades, was the great critic of the aesthetic hybridity of Art Nouveau. He was to architecture what Schoenberg was to music, Wittgenstein to philosophy or Karl Kraus to journalism – a scourge of the impure and the superfluous. In 'Ornament and Crime' (1908), his fiercest polemic, he associates the Art Nouveau designer with a child smearing walls and a 'Papuan' tattooing skin. For Loos the ornate design of Art Nouveau is erotic and degenerate, a reversal of the proper aim of civilisation to sublimate, to distinguish and to purify: hence his notorious formula – 'the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects' – and his infamous association of ornament and crime. This anti-decorative dictate is a Modernist mantra if ever there was one, and it is for such puritanical propriety that Post-Modernists have, in turn, condemned Modernists like Loos. But maybe times have changed again; maybe we are in a moment when distinctions between practices might be reclaimed or remade – without the ideological baggage of purity and propriety attached.

Loos began his battle with Art Nouveau a decade before 'Ornament and Crime'. He made a pointed attack in 1900, in the form of an allegorical skit about 'a poor little rich man' who commissions an Art Nouveau designer to put 'Art in each and every thing':

Each room formed a symphony of colours, complete in itself. Walls, wall coverings, furniture and materials were made to harmonise in the most artful ways. Each household item had its own specific place and was integrated with the others in the most wonderful combinations. The architect has forgotten nothing,

absolutely nothing. Cigar ashtrays, cutlery, light switches – everything, everything was made by him.

This *Gesamtkunstwerk* does more than combine architecture, art and craft: it mingles subject and object – ‘the individuality of the owner was expressed in every ornament, every form, every nail.’ For the Art Nouveau designer this is perfection: ‘You are complete!’ he tells the owner. But the owner is not so sure. Rather than a sanctuary from modern stress, his Art Nouveau interior is another expression of it: ‘The happy man suddenly felt deeply, deeply unhappy . . . He was precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring. He thought, this is what it means to learn to go about life with one’s own corpse. Yes indeed. He is finished. *He is complete!*’ For the Art Nouveau designer this completion reunites art and life: for Loos it is a catastrophic loss of the objective constraints required to define any ‘future living and striving, developing and desiring’. Far from a transcendence of death, this loss of finitude is a death-in-life, it is living ‘with one’s own corpse’.

Such is the malaise of ‘the poor little rich man’: rather than a man of qualities, he is a man without them (Musil was another Viennese scourge). What he lacks, in his very completion, is difference or distinction. In a typically pithy statement of 1912, Kraus would call this lack of distinction, which precludes ‘all future living and striving’, a lack of ‘running-room’:

Adolf Loos and I – he literally and I linguistically – have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between an urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with running-room. The others, the positive ones [i.e. those who fail to make this distinction], are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn.

Here ‘those who use the urn as a chamber pot’ are Art Nouveau designers who want to infuse art (the urn) into the utilitarian object (the chamber pot). Those who do the reverse are functionalist Modernists who want to elevate the utilitarian object into art. (A few years later Duchamp would trump both sides with his dysfunctional urinal, but that’s another story.) For Kraus the two mistakes are symmetrical in confusing use-value and art-value, and both are perverse inasmuch as both risk a regressive indistinction of things: they fail to see that objective limits are necessary for the running-room that allows for the making of a liberal kind of subjectivity and culture. This is why Loos opposes not only the total design of Art Nouveau but also its wanton subjectivism (‘individuality expressed in every nail’). Neither Loos nor Kraus says anything about a natural ‘essence’ of art, or an absolute ‘autonomy’ of culture: they are concerned with ‘distinctions’ and ‘running-room’, diacritical differences and provisional spaces.

I rehearse this old debate because I think it has a new resonance today, when the aesthetic and the utilitarian are not only conflated but subsumed in the commercial, and when everything – not only architectural projects and art exhibitions but everything from jeans to genes – is regarded as so much design. After the heyday of the Art Nouveau designer, one hero of Modernism was the artist-as-engineer or the author-as-producer, but this figure was toppled in turn along with the industrial order that supported him, and in our consumerist world the designer rules again. Yet the new designer is very different from the old: the Art Nouveau designer resisted the effects of industry, even as he also sought, in the words of

Walter Benjamin, 'to win back its forms' – modern concrete, cast iron and the like – 'for art'. There is no such resistance in contemporary design: it delights in post-industrial technologies, and it is happy to sacrifice the semi-autonomy of art and architecture to the manipulations of design. Moreover, the rule of the designer is even broader than before: it ranges across very different enterprises (from Martha Stewart to Microsoft), and it penetrates various social groups. For today you don't have to be filthy rich to be projected not only as designer but as designed – whether the product in question is your home or your business, your sagging face (designer surgery) or your lagging personality (designer drugs), your historical memory (designer museums) or your genetic future (designer children). Might this 'designed subject' be the unintended offspring of the 'constructed subject'? One thing seems clear: just when you thought the consumerist loop could get no tighter in its narcissistic logic, it did: design produces a near-perfect circuit of production and consumption, without much running-room for anything else.

Some may object that the world of total design is not new: that the conflation of the aesthetic and the utilitarian in the commercial goes back to the design programme of the Bauhaus in the 1920s – and they would be right. If the first Industrial Revolution prepared the field of political economy, of a rational theory of material production, as Baudrillard argued long ago, so the second Industrial Revolution, as styled by the Bauhaus, extended this 'system of exchange value to the whole domain of signs, forms and objects . . . in the name of design'. According to Baudrillard, the Bauhaus signalled a qualitative leap from a political economy of the product to a 'political economy of the sign', in which the structures of the commodity and the sign refashioned one another, so that the two could circulate as one, as image-products with 'sign exchange value', as they do in our own time. Of course this is hardly what the Bauhaus, some of whose members were Marxists, had in mind, but such is often 'the bad dream of Modernism', as T.J. Clark once termed it. Beware of what you wish, runs one moral of Modernism as seen from the present, because it may come true – in perverse form. And so, to take only the chief example, the old project to reconnect Art and Life, endorsed in different ways by both Art Nouveau and the Bauhaus, was eventually accomplished, but according to the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, not the liberatory ambitions of the avant-garde. A primary form of this perverse reconciliation is contemporary design.

So, yes, the world of total design is hardly new – imagined in Art Nouveau, it was retooled by the Bauhaus, and spread through institutional clones and commercial knock-offs – but it seems only to have been fully achieved in our own pan-capitalist present. Some of the reasons are not hard to find. Once upon a time in mass production, the commodity was its own ideology, the Model T its own advertising: its chief attraction lay in its abundant sameness. Soon this was not enough: the consumer had to be drawn in, and feedback factored into production (this is one primal scene of modern design). As competition grew, special seductions had to be devised, and packaging became almost as important as product (the outright subjectivising of the commodity is already apparent in streamlined design and becomes ever more surreal). Our own time is witness to a qualitative leap in this history: with the 'flexible specialisation' of post-Fordist production, commodities can be continually tweaked, markets constantly niched, so that a product can be mass in quantity yet appear up to date, personal and precise in address. Desire is not only registered in products today, it is anticipated there: a self-interpellation of 'hey, that's me' greets the consumer in catalogues and on-line. This perpetual personalising of the commodity is one factor that drives the inflation of design. What happens when this commodity machine – now conveniently located

out of the view of most of us – breaks down, as environments give out, markets crash, or sweatshop workers scattered across the globe somehow refuse to go on?

Whether the design object is Young British Art or George W. Bush, ‘brand equity’ – the branding of a product name on an attention-deficit public – is fundamental, and hence design is too. Consumer attention and image-retention are all the more important when the product is not an object at all. This became clear during the massive mergers of the Reagan-Thatcher years when new mega-corporations began to promote little else but their own new acronyms and logos. Especially as the economy slumped under George I, branding was a way to prop up stock value independently of the realities of productivity or profitability. More recently, the Internet has set a new premium on corporate name-recognition: such brand equity is necessary for the survival of dot.coms and part of last year’s purge of these virtual companies stemmed from the Darwinian competition among web-names.

A third reason for the inflation of design is the increased centrality of media industries to the economy. This factor is so obvious that it might obscure a more fundamental development: the general ‘mediation’ of the economy. I mean by this more than ‘the culture of marketing’ and ‘the marketing of culture’: I mean a retooling of the economy around computing and digitising, in which the product is no longer thought of as an object to be produced so much as a datum to be manipulated – to be designed and redesigned, consumed and reconsumed. This ‘mediation’ also inflates design, to the point where it can no longer be considered a secondary industry. Perhaps we should speak of a ‘political economy of design’.

Some of these speculations can be tested against *Life Style* by Bruce Mau, a compendium of projects by the Canadian designer who came to prominence in the late 1980s with the magazine *Zone* and *Zone Books* – a distinguished series of publications in classical and vanguard philosophy and history. The imprint is also known for ‘Bruce Mau Design’ – luscious covers with sumptuous images in saturated colours, layered pages with inventive fonts in cinematic sequencing – which greatly influenced North American publishing. Often Mau seems to design the publications to be scanned, rather than read, and despite his frequent denials in *Life Style* he tends to treat the book as a design construct more than an intellectual medium.

Life Style follows on from the mammoth monograph of architectural projects by Rem Koolhaas, *S, M, L, XL* (1996), which Mau helped to design (these are not coffee-table books, they are coffee tables). With his usual wit Koolhaas picked this title to signal not only the various scales of his work from domestic to urban, but also that hot architects are today like hot designers – they must have lines of merchandise to suit all customers. *Life Style* aspires to be the *S, M, L, XL* of design; it, too, is a massive manifesto for myself, a history of a design studio with an extravagant presentation of its projects, as well as various sketches, reflections and studies about design, along with anecdotes concerning über-designers like Koolhaas, Frank Gehry and Philip Johnson. Here, too, the title is a play on terms: we may hear ‘lifestyle’ as understood by Martha Stewart, but we are asked to think ‘life style’ as conceived by Nietzsche or Foucault – as a philosophy of life, an ethics not a decor. But the world surveyed by *Life Style* suggests something else – a folding of the ‘examined life’ into the ‘designed life’. The book opens with a photograph of the planned Disney community ‘Celebration’, captioned: ‘the question of “life style”, of choosing how to live, encounters the regime of the logo and its images.’ Mau may identify with the underdog here, but his design cannot help but be pledged to the other side.

For *Life Style* is a success story: bigger and bigger clients – academic and art institutions, then entertainment and other corporations – come to Mau in search of image design, that is to say, brand equity. Bruce Mau Design, he states candidly, ‘has become known for producing identity’ and ‘channelling attention’ for ‘business value’. Fair enough, it is a business after all, but Mau should have left things there. ‘In this environment,’ he goes on, ‘the only way to build real equity is to add value: to wrap intelligence and culture around the product. The apparent product, the object attached to the transaction, is not the actual product at all. The real product has become culture and intelligence.’ Culture and intelligence, in other words, are so much design. So is history: commissioned to lay out a private museum of Coca-Cola memorabilia, Mau concludes: ‘Has America made Coke? Or, Has Coke made America?’ And biological life, too: ‘How does an entity declare itself within an environment?’ You guessed it: design.

The remaking of space in the image of the commodity is a prime story of capitalist modernity as told by Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin, the Situationists and other radical geographers. Today it has reached the point where not only commodity and sign appear as one, but often so do commodity and space: in actual and virtual malls the two are melded through design, and Bruce Mau Design is in the vanguard. Of one ‘identity program’ for a Toronto bookstore chain, Mau writes of a ‘retail environment . . . in which the brand identity, signage systems, interiors and architecture would be totally integrated’. And of his graphic support for the new Seattle Public Library designed by Koolhaas, he says: ‘the central proposition involves erasing the boundaries between architecture and information, the real and the virtual.’ This integration, that erasure, is a deterritorialising of image and space that depends on a digitising of the photograph, its loosening from old referential ties (perhaps the development of Photoshop will one day be seen as a world-historical event), and on a digitising of architecture, its loosening from old structural principles (in architecture today almost anything can be designed because almost anything can be built: hence all the arbitrary shells and blobs designed by Gehry and followers). As Deleuze and Guattari, let alone Marx, taught us long ago, deterritorialising is the path of capital.

Mau develops the insights of Marshall McLuhan, but, like McLuhan, he seems confused in his role: is he a cultural critic, a futurist guru or a corporate consultant? In media futurology a critical term today can become a catchy phrase tomorrow, and a cliché (or brand) the next. In a wry move Koolhaas now copyrights his catchy phrases, as if to acknowledge this commercial curdling of critical concepts on the page. And for all the Situationist lingo of contemporary designers like Koolhaas and Mau, there is no *détournement*: rather than critics of spectacle, they are its surfers (a favourite image in their writing), and earn both ‘the status of the artist’ and ‘the paycheck of the businessman’. ‘So where does my work fit in?’ Mau asks. ‘What is my relationship to this happy, smiling monster? Where is the freedom in this regime? Do I follow Timothy Leary and “tune in, turn on, drop out?” What actions can I commit that cannot be absorbed? Can I out-perform the system? Can I win?’ Is he kidding?

Contemporary design is part of a greater revenge of capitalism on Post-Modernism – a recouping of its crossings of arts and disciplines, a routinisation of its transgressions. Autonomy, even semi-autonomy, may be an illusion or, better, a fiction, but periodically it is useful, even necessary, as it was for Loos, Kraus and company a hundred years ago. Of course it can also be repressive, even deadening, as it was thirty years ago, when Post-Modernism was first advanced as an opening out of a petrified Modernism. But this is no longer our situation. Perhaps it is time to recapture a sense of the historical specificity of both claims to

autonomy and claims to its transgression, a notion of some dialectic of 'discipline' and 'indiscipline' – to provide culture once again with running-room.

Often we are told, as we are in *Life Style*, that design can give 'style' to our 'character' – that it can point the way to such semi-autonomy – but clearly it is also an agent that folds us back into a system of consumerism. Design is all about desire, but this desire often appears to be without a subject (this is why design seems to perfect a kind of narcissism). Poor little rich man, 'precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring' in the neo-Art Nouveau world of total design and Internet plenitude. 'The transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal,' Benjamin once remarked of the original Art Nouveau: 'individualism is its theory, but the real meaning of Art Nouveau is not expressed in this ideology.' 'A world of qualities without man has arisen,' Musil wrote as if to complete this thought for our time,

of experiences without the person who experiences them, and it almost looks as though ideally private experience is a thing of the past, and that the friendly burden of personal responsibility is to dissolve into a system of formulas of possible meanings. Probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric point of view, which for such a long time considered man to be at the centre of the universe but which has been fading for centuries, has finally arrived at the 'I' itself.

[Vol. 23 No. 7 · 5 April 2001](#) » Hal Foster » Hey, that's me (print version)

Pages 13-14 | 3419 words