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Author(s): Richard Buchanan

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Anxiety, Wonder and Astonishment: The Communion of Art and Design

Richard Buchanan

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In 1966, well-known American art critic Harold Rosenberg published a small collection of essays in *The Anxious Object*. In the foreword, "Toward an Unanxious Profession," he argued that a new form of anxiety had entered the art community. It was no longer an anxiety of alienation—the psychological state of anxiety that often characterizes the outsider, struggling with loneliness, in a society and a culture that does not appreciate his or her contribution to human experience. That form of anxiety, he argued, had been overcome by the professionalism that settled over American artists in the 1960s, and by the apparent acceptance of art as a regular part of the daily lives of many people. Instead, the new anxiety was a philosophical anxiety, born of the "lightning speed" with which art is appropriated by commercial media and popular communications. "The anxiety of art," he argued, "arises not as a reflex to the condition of artists, but from their reflection upon the role of art among other human activities."¹

It is an objective reflection of the indefiniteness of the function of art in present-day society and the possibility of the displacement of art by newer forms of expression, emotional stimulation and communication. It relates to the awareness that art today survives in the intersections between the popular media, handicraft and the applied sciences; and that the term "art" has become useless as a means for setting apart a certain category of fabrications. Given the speed and sophistication with which the formal characteristics of new art modes are appropriated by the artisans of the commercial media and semi-media (archi-

¹ Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16.

itecture, highway design, etc.), the art object, including masterpieces of the past, exists under constant threat of deformation and loss of identity.²

Lacking a secure identity, the art object, itself, becomes “an anxious object” whose nature, as art, is now “contingent upon recognition by the current communion of the knowing.”³

The anxiety that Rosenberg identified in the 1960s continues today in the complex relationship between art and design. The only change is the growing stature of design as a cultural art, and the development of that art in a wide variety of new forms and expressions. Indeed, one feature of the complex relationship of art and design is the tendency of some artists to explicitly characterize their work as a form of design, where the work often becomes an expression of the artist’s opinions about social or political life presented to provoke emotion and thought in its audience. Aside from any intellectual or philosophical justification for regarding art as a form of design—that is, recasting art from a more traditional, poetic grounding in aesthetic expression to a rhetorical grounding in persuasive or confrontational communication—it also is pragmatically expedient. For example, without being fully conscious of the shift in thinking, some art departments and schools of art around the world are promoting their affinity, if not their identity, with design; perhaps hoping in this way to attract more students and claim some portion of the current recognition of the importance of design for them. However, the complexity of the relationship of art and design also is evident in the opposite tendency: a rearguard action by some art schools intent on denying any relationship with design. This is particularly curious in the case of some traditional craft programs that obviously have design origins yet promote their craftwork as a form of art, devoid of design associations.

Ironically, as art has sought (or been driven to) a closer connection with design, design, itself, has moved in other directions. This began with a clearer identification of the purpose of design—not the aesthetic “self-expression” of art, but a practical service directed toward enhancing the dignity of human beings in their daily lives, with all that this entails in social and economic matters. Then followed a growing clarification of the methods of design thinking, with recognition of the need for designers to understand how their products function in contexts of use and, closely related to this, recognition of the need to understand the nature of human beings through research and careful observation. Finally, from this came the new movements of design as we observe them today. First, there is a closer alignment with engineering, computer science, and the natural sciences—generally a movement toward the new technologies. Second, there is a closer alignment with psychology, anthropology, and the other human sciences—a movement toward deeper understanding of the behavior of human beings. Third, there is a closer alignment with business, management, and

2 *Ibid.*, 17.

3 *Ibid.*, 18.

organizational science—a movement toward collective behavior and economic influence. Fourth, there is a closer alignment with the humanities—a movement toward communication, information, and narrative. Gone is Rosenberg's loose characterization of "popular media, handicraft, and applied sciences." Gone, too, is his characterization of "the artisans of the commercial media and semi-media." We speak of design and designers, whatever the specific area of their creative work.

One consequence of the movement of design into relationships with other disciplines and professions is a quiet anxiety in the field of design, similar to the anxiety that Rosenberg identified in the art community. As design finds closer alignment with other disciplines, it also is forced to contend with jealous guardians, each seeking to characterize design in its own terms, and as an application of its own knowledge and practices. Thus, it remains a problem for design to explain itself among new friends and acquaintances, resisting attempts to appropriate design by other disciplines while, at the same time, resisting the simpleminded identification of design with art that many people still assume.

Beginning in the 1990s, the complex relationship of art and design—and the anxiety of both forms of human activity—found subtle expression in the problem of research. On the one hand, artists in universities found it necessary to compete for funding and promotion through the vehicle of research, without appearing to compromise artistic vision. To this end, a common argument emerged in this form: the production of a work of art or a body of work—perhaps accompanied by a brief textual description, little more than an artist's statement suitable for publication in a catalogue of the artist's work—is the equivalent of research in other fields, and thus deserves the granting of a Ph.D. and receiving all of the recognition of research accomplishment that research in other disciplines receives, including government funding. This is a questionable argument on many levels; not the least because of the damage it does to the stature of artistic creation, itself a highly valued human activity without need of justification through the traditional means of other disciplines. It is an argument that eventually must be addressed within the academic art community, as well as by researchers in other fields including design, through asking what the difference is between disciplined artistic inquiry and the disciplined inquiry of formal research.

On the other hand, designers in universities began to recognize the need for research to advance practice, develop theory, and, generally, build an academic discipline on stronger and more rigorous foundations than the intuitions and rules-of-thumb of designers involved in commercial practice. And they also faced the need for funding and promotion as part of the academic culture. To this end, a common issue of debate focused on the role of practical design work in the process of research—famously located in discussion of the real or imagined differences between "practice-led" (or "practice-based")

research, and other forms of research (empirical, critical, theoretical, scholarly, philosophical, or speculative). It appears that anxiety still exists in the research efforts of both art and design, particularly after the initial development of their research efforts and, today, an emerging concern for assessing the quality of research in art and design, and its specific contribution to knowledge.

In the current situation of anxiety, it may be useful to consider the communion of art and design: to reflect on what they share in common and how they explore their common ideas and emotions even though they pursue them in different directions and for different purposes. A good place to begin, once again, is Harold Rosenberg. In his foreword that we already cited, he shifts attention toward the problematic nature of art, and away from art criticism that focuses merely on the final product. It is a shift that many in the design community also urge—a shift away from design competitions and museum exhibitions that merely celebrate the formal qualities of the final design product—toward deeper understanding of the problematic situation of the product and the processes of design thinking.

With regard to the destiny of the artist's freedom, the current integration of the arts into our society of specialized functions is far from reassuring. The closing of the gap between artist and public has not come about through an expansion of freedom in American occupations generally. On the contrary, it is occurring under conditions in which work and the practice of the intellectual professions are being constantly narrowed and more strictly disciplined. In this environment the present emphasis in art criticism on the end product, rather than on the problematical nature of the art undertaking, opens the way to art produced under direction, as in related professions. Today's socially accepted vanguard already responds to paintings and sculptures executed according to formulas suggested by critics, dealers or collectors without any more surprise or revulsion than is aroused by a TV drama composed to fit the story line of a program producer. Indeed, efforts are continually under way, both here and abroad, to establish "project" art as the ruling principle for the art of tomorrow.⁴

Rosenberg's perspective on problems in art deserves further consideration by artists as well as designers and design critics. He regards painting and sculpture as "a web of problems and contemporary artists as engaged in a dramatic struggle with those problems."⁵ (For example, he points toward Arshile Gorky's struggle with the problem of identity, and Barnett Newman's struggle with the problem of the absolute.) Unfortunately, too many designers and design critics at the beginning of the twenty-first century are so concerned with technical problems and with the economic implications of design

4 *Ibid.*, 18–19.

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

work that they fail to discuss—or perhaps even recognize—the deeper, substantial problems that lie behind individual visions of design, the problems that drive and guide individual innovation and creativity. Even in design research, the problems most often are technical and empirical, without explicit connection to the problems of purpose and value that lie at the heart of the best design thinking. Design, it seems, has become thoroughly professional and, at the same time, merely pragmatic and technical. From the literature of design, what we see is essentially the quieting of the designer’s anxiety and the quieting of the general philosophical anxiety of the field, much as Rosenberg observed the renunciation of the “intellectual and emotional ingredient in twentieth-century art” in the 1960s, leading to the quieting of art’s anxiety: “The quieting of art’s anxiety is bound to suggest the cheerfulness of a sick room.”⁶

What made Rosenberg’s critical writing important, and what gives it value today, is his recognition that the most significant product of art is not the work of art, itself, but the quality of the artist’s mind that emerges from engagement with substantial problems.

Instead of solving his problem—“his” because he has chosen it—the artist lives it through the instrumentality of his materials. By fixing his idea in matter he exposes either the crudeness of his thought or the clumsiness of his art; thus he is led to experiment and refinement. In time he becomes so adept in materializing his hypotheses, and in manipulating his materials as if they were meanings, that the problem itself is transformed. He has transformed it into a unique set of terms; besides, he, the investigator, has through his efforts remade himself into a different man.⁷

The quality of the artist’s mind is what gives “intellectual gravity” to his or her work, without reducing art to the terms of formal research. The artist does not “solve” the problem of identity or the absolute or any other substantial problem in the manner, say, of the philosopher or the psychologist. Instead, the artist lives it through materials and technique, enabling the audience to live it, too, in the immediacy of the work—in what Dewey calls the audience’s act of reconstructive doing and making.⁸

If we follow Rosenberg’s idea, the communion of art and design lies in the quality of mind that both the artist and the designer share in the beginning of their work. One aspect of this quality of mind is the capacity for wonder or astonishment. It is also the quality of experience that is engendered in the mind of the audience when one encounters their best products—when one appreciates the problem that lies at the beginning of the artist’s or the designer’s engagement and struggle. “Apart from that,” as Rosenberg says, “every kind of excellence can be copied.”⁹ And, indeed, the excellence of new and well-known designs also are copied in products that represent no new insight, but merely replicate the form and style of an original insight made by others.

6 *Ibid.*, 19.

7 *Ibid.*, 19.

8 John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 52–54.

9 Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, 20.

For all of their differences in direction and purpose, art and design share an intellectual gravity in their beginnings. In the contemporary world, where gravity is easily lost or submerged in the crosscurrents of popular media and economic pressure, we find the instant copying that appropriates art to mass communication or that reengineers a successful product in the imitative products of competitors. However, intellectual gravity remains in the best and most original works of art and design, and it is the source of wonder that we feel when we first experience such works.

There is little talk of wonder or astonishment in contemporary art and design. Both disciplines are more concerned with creating other kinds of emotional reaction in their audiences. Yet wonder and astonishment deserve greater attention than they currently receive, because these emotions are both the sign and the source of creativity and originality. Consider, for example, the insights of Descartes and Spinoza when they explore wonder and astonishment in the context of other emotions. For Descartes, wonder signifies surprise. It is the primary human passion, and it marks the beginning of desire in the human soul, giving the first indication that an object before us merits our attention and further exploration because it may be important for us. Wonder has no other significance than this, but it is the beginning of our creation of meaning—meaning which gradually will unfold through prolonged engagement.

When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all the passions; and it has no opposite, because if the object which presents itself has nothing in it that surprises us, we are in nowise moved regarding it, and we consider it without passion.¹⁰

Wonder does not tell us whether we are dealing with mere novelty or true innovation, but it is a beginning because it is a differentiation in our perception. That is Descartes's perspective.

However, Spinoza provides a deeper and subtler analysis—as he does in most of his discussions of the emotions. Though he does not provide a definition of wonder, the equivalent of wonder for him is astonishment. With characteristic brevity, he defines it in this way:

Astonishment is the imagination of an object in which the mind remains fixed because this particular imagination has no connection with others.¹¹

We are astonished when our mind focuses on an object precisely because it has no connection with anything else that we can imagine. The object is truly new to us, though we may discover connections with other things through prolonged engagement.¹²

10 Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul" in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. by Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 358.

11 Benedict De Spinoza, *Ethics*, James Gutmann, ed. (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1949), 175.

12 For a useful discussion of wonder, thought, and aesthetics, see Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

It is true that wonder and astonishment are seldom lasting qualities. They fade as the familiarity of the object grows, and as one moves on with interpretation and the fixing of meaning through disciplined development of connections with other aspects of experience, memory, thought, and passion. But in that brief period at the beginning of experience, wonder and astonishment provide the power for sustained engagement—they are the source of passion and curiosity. Thus, they accompany the beginning point of inquiry, whether it is the disciplined “common sense” inquiry of the artist or the disciplined formal inquiry of the researcher: they signify the initial moment in inquiry when a new idea emerges.

Unfortunately, most education in art or design, in the haste to prepare a suitable professional, does little to cultivate the sense of wonder or astonishment in students. Problem solving takes priority over problem finding. Interpretations abound, and little time is given to the free play of invention and discovery. Thus, invention and discovery appear to be a matter of chance rather than disciplined artistic and intellectual exploration. Only the best teachers understand that time and silence are needed by the student to open imaginative space for finding the problems that are most important for their creative work.

The uneasy relationship of art and design will not soon be overcome. Indeed, it may become more strained in the future as each continues to seek its proper place in social and cultural life, and as the similarities and differences of art and design are increasingly blurred. However, there is a common ground—a communion—that should be further explored. It is the emerging concept of rhetoric that is shared by both art and design today.¹³ It is this concept that one finds implicit in Rosenberg’s critical writing, and it is the concept that he struggled with as he tried to understand the anxiety of art that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. Both art and design are deeply engaged with the public and with social and cultural issues. However, they employ rhetoric in different modes and in different ways for communication. Nonetheless, wonder and astonishment are the beginning of their work, and we should take this as a starting point for a better understanding of how each of these important forms of cultural communication unfolds in concrete work. This line of investigation will elevate our appreciation of the contributions made by art and design to our cultural life and perhaps lead to the proper reconciliation of art and design that should take place for the benefit of both communities.

13 Richard Buchanan, “Design and the New Rhetoric: Productive Arts in the Philosophy of Culture,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34:3 (2001): 183–206.