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EnGendering Design

As an artist, designer, and educator I engage constantly with images and their meanings and explore critical issues of race, gender, and the media of propaganda in my work. I am especially interested in the history of design and the function of images in recording and manufacturing social history.

In my project, EnGendering Design, I examine the emergence of gender as a vital factor in the industry of design. I draw upon feminist critique to complicate our understanding of design history and reveal how cultural notions of the masculine and the feminine influence the profession. My findings focus on long-standing dichotomies such as creating and marketing products as emotive versus rational, luxurious versus functional, natural versus technological. In a word, gendered.

Importantly, the rise of the designer coincides with defining moments in women's history; as a result our assumptions regarding both design practice and gender are bound together. A further result, I argue, is that most debates that have occurred in design history and persist in design education and practice have to do with the supposed opposition of the masculine and feminine. Design History should seek to resolve this conflation of gender assumptions with design education and practice.

In Anthea Callen's article "Sexual Division of Labor in the Arts and Crafts Movement" published in [A View from the Interior, Feminism, Women and Design](#), she writes:

"What is needed in my opinion, is continual questioning and reappraisal of the personal and of the political in its broadest sense: self critical analyses of our approaches to history and the ways rewriting the past can transform the present, of our received ideas and preconceptions of all oppositional categories—craft/fine art, female/male, nature/culture – and how the construction of such polarized binaries functions to constitute negative 'others' within our patriarchal culture. It is through lack of awareness and understanding of these categories and of their ideological power that we collude in the construction and limitations of our own sexual roles and creative potential."

As part of my work I integrate my research into Design Methodology, an undergraduate studio course on branding and identity. I have developed a course packet of critical readings examining gender and design. Students engage with the material through discussion and studio projects involving notions of gender and the branding of products and services, and their institutional identities.

These projects and readings are intended to not only expose the design student to critical theory but to demonstrate through the practice of design the application of those theories and their particular relevance to the construction of gender by designers.

For their first assignment I asked the students to interpret, using type the everyday titles: Mr. Mrs. and Ms.

This was prior to the student's exposure too much of the critical language of the readings, though they were familiar of course with the design process and the role of typography in connoting meaning. I was especially interested in how they might interpret designations that were so clearly gendered. I was also intrigued by how they might perceive the titles indicating the marital status of women in contrast to the seemingly neutral title assigned to men, no matter their status.

I was also not unaware of the popular impact of the Ms. magazine masthead and its association with reinterpreting the meanings of the modern woman. In addition these seemingly benign and mundane titles parallel nicely the designed objects and images that surround us yet go largely unnoticed.

Several of the student's solutions represented "Mr." using a more conservative typeface. Combining letterforms, was also repeated, the man being seen as a total or complete entity.

Simultaneously we see "Ms." towering above the male like a monolith. The more feminine form of the "S" seems to be subsumed within the more masculine and modern "M".

Here we see "Mrs." represented by a union of forms, where the viewer completes the connection between the "Mr." and the "S". "Mrs." appears slighter and more feminized than the singular titles.

Again we see "Mrs." represented as a union but we can also see a portion of an inverted heart in the lower counter-form of the "S", suggesting that the inner emotional life of a couple resides with the female.

Here we see "Mr." sporting a tie, placing the man solidly in the world of work.

In this representation of "Ms." the "S" and the period combine to form a question mark, leaving us to question the status of women.

The student's second assignment was to design a mark or logotype, the subject being "tomboy trucks". I gave very little instruction as to the nature of the product, whether a toy truck line for young girls, truck accessories for young women, etc. I was eager to see how they might apply, typical design solutions to a product or service that suggests an ambiguous association with gender and childhood.

Here the student uses a well-known pictograph that slyly kicks against the “boy” perhaps, in a subtle act of defiance.

In this logotype the student has employed an eclectic and playful assemblage of letterforms. These suggest not only the tomboy as child but also the feminine’s association with childlike and less serious activities.

The student’s third assignment was a satirical redesign and repositioning of a product in the spirit of an Adbuster’s spoof of contemporary advertising and branding. This assignment was proposed as a method for revealing the constructed nature of gender present in consumer culture. Very often these spoofs are simply inversions of gender roles. For this assignment I wanted the students to appropriate the very forms used by the media to undermine the gender assumptions being put forth.

In this ad for condoms the student created a two page spread spoofing an actual advertisement for Trojans. The original ad showed only the lower front torso of a woman with a condom tucked in her string bikini. This rather shy student spent the afternoon at Southbeach in Miami approaching and photographing potential models.

In this spot for Calvin Klein the student imagined an ad as it might really be if the fashion industry was more upfront in their cultivation of younger and younger female consumers. The fragrance’s name “Juvenescence” was arrived at using a search of an online thesaurus.

This piece rather graphically explores gender and race and their relationship to the bridal industry, diamonds and exploitation of workers in the third world.

The fourth assignment involved an infographic interpretation of the subject of the “glass ceiling”. The assumption being that their treatment would appear in an editorial context, along with text and other images. None of the students knew what “the glass ceiling” referred to and had to “Google” it.

This infographic describes the inversion of power and labor in the work world.

In this infographic a multitude of women make up the larger figure of a man. Statistics regarding women’s rankings and earnings in business are represented by individual female figures at a substantially smaller scale.

For their final project, the students designed an original and comprehensive brand identity for a product or service that is typically gendered either female or male and attempted to reposition it within its particular market. There are two solutions I’d like to present, as they complement each other nicely.

Amie is a new identity for an existing product, the female condom.

This is an attempt to reposition the product for retail sales within the context of feminine hygiene products thus exposing it to a much wider market. It is also an attempt to loose the product from its current rather clinical, image, as well as disassociate it from the male condom, point of purchase.

Opt is the identity for the male “Pill”.

Opt is an effort to shift gender roles in the division of labor regarding birth control. There are in reality two separate studies being conducted along these lines, one that stops the production of sperm and another, which debilitates it.

I believe that both of these solutions are excellent examples of the role that design can play in reassigning notions of gender to products long associated with reproductive health.

In the case of Amie, design can and should be enlisted in bringing to light a product that has languished behind pharmacy counters, even in the age of aids. Imagine if you will if the same attention were paid to this existing product that has been poured into launching and promoting Viagra.

In the case of Opt we see the opportunity that design might have in launching the male Pill. Will the phrase “the Pill” come to mean an oral contraceptive employed and enjoyed by both sexes or will it too languish.

Both these solutions offer a positive role for design in the branding of products and the establishment of identities, a field that has come under increased scrutiny and criticism in recent years, as it has grown in power to influence consumers.

My efforts to integrate the teaching of design with critical theory have been invigorating but frustrating and rarely seamless. The very methods by which we teach design emphasize the so called “rational” and its reductionist techniques, which distill every idea down to its most basic elements no matter how complex the nature of the problem.

The practice of design is inextricably linked with modernism and its utopian vision of a universal vocabulary of form. This transparent new language could supposedly give pure and direct expression to any content yet was given birth to largely western European males seeking a new aesthetic for modern technology that was itself construed as masculine.

My ambition is that my students come to recognize that design practice operates within cultural conventions of femininity and masculinity while also reinforcing those same conventions; that design that claims to be neutral or universal is very often masculine.

A feminist analysis reveals the socially constructed nature of design history, practice and education. I am striving to impart some sense of this to my students, so that they may understand that every design decision we make, is never simply formal nor purely functional but lends meaning to every object and image we design.

Pat Kirkham and Judy Attfield stated in the introduction to, The Gendered Object, “Relationships between objects and gender are formed and take place in ways that are so accepted as ‘normal’ as to become ‘invisible’ Thus we sometimes fail to appreciate the effects that particular notions of femininity and masculinity have on the conception, design, advertising, purchase, giving and use of objects, as well as on their critical and popular reception.”