Unsustainable Histories, Models of Practice

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**John Calvelli
teaches design
history and theory
in Canada, at the Alberta
College of Art and Design.**

'[T]he historian's picture of the past is…in every detail an imaginary picture…' R.G. Collingwood[1]

Design history is a young discipline, but designing as an activity goes back to our origins as a species. The interpretive frameworks we bring to design history, however, say more about us now than they do about our historical object of study; moreover, our frameworks design what we do with our present and future. If our efforts as educators are to counter unsustainability, then our imperative as design historians is to redesign design history in order that design itself may be redesigned – to design more future rather than less.

With the more general dissemination of literacy, we organized our learning through the creation of colleges and universities, designing ways of knowing that were able to create value for present and future societies. As these are the institutions of learning within which we also learn to practice design today, we will thus need to redesign them if we are to be effective at countering unsustainability. This requires that we embrace changes in the way we teach

design history that inevitably will rub against the structures of learning we find in our colleges and universities today.

Design history must be taught as an imaginative history, to help students prefigure a future. As the future must be left open, our histories should act more like ceaseless iterations rather than authoritative narratives. We should teach history from the perspective of a future that can sustain us; and although we don't know what that future looks like, we can continually propose new experiments in how we create future from the past. That is an old and unacknowledged trick of the historian. What we need is to make it apparent and lend it agency in order to change how we practice design today.

The Short History of Design History

In 1989, Clive Dilnot wrote a seminal essay aiming to 'facilitate design history's development as a discipline in its own right.'[2] In the past 20 years, much has been accomplished. Design history has moved from the state of being a 'handmaiden' to design practice to being largely accepted in academia (although it could be argued that in the United States, where his essay was published, the discipline still both craves legitimacy while lacking design scholars and programs).

My proposal encourages design history as a support for practice, though in a way that would lead towards sustainment.[3] In the twenty years since his essay has been published, both design history and practice are still recognizable as what they were; yet our knowledge of the world in the interim has profoundly changed. On November 7, 2007, The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its Fourth Assessment Report.[4] The report was a milestone in human thinking about its world. For the first time in history we were informed that the organization of our society has led us to an increasing crisis of unsustainability that threatens the survival of our own and other species on this planet.

Given design's role and responsibility in this – both through the design of stuff and the design of a world that wants and needs stuff [5] – and the grave consequences of not addressing the problem – it is incumbent upon us all, especially design educators, to begin addressing it now. The discipline of design history must look for academic legitimacy *less* and start trying to affect practice *more*, in a direction toward sustainment.

The Errors of Art History

Design history is the stepchild of art history, so it is there we should look for some of its founding assumptions. Primary among these are its emphasis on the artifact considered in terms of form and style, authorship, and provenance. To the extent that design is considered within an horizon of time, its effects are generally limited to the transmission of style or considered as a mirroring

of an historical zeitgeist. Although these aspects of the discipline of art history are potentially worth preserving, the fundamental reliance on the object must give way to the objects' effects and relationships.

The more egregious error within the discipline of art history is one of its founding assumptions, emerging with full force in the 18th century: the creation of the 'fine arts.' The publication in 1746 of Charles Batteux's *Les beaux arts réuit à un même principe* (*The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle)* is often cited as the first book to use the term 'fine arts' as part of a classification scheme, based on an opposition between pleasure and utility. By 1751 it had been codified by Diderot and d'Alembert in the tree of knowledge published in their *Encyclopédia.*[6] This founding ecology of the image, separating the non-utilitarian work of art from the functionalist object of design, inaugurates the fallacy that lies behind the disciplines of both art and design history.

The specific debate regarding the separation of the fine arts from design is only an aspect of a larger historical ecology of knowledge that relied on, on the one hand, that knowledge constrained by utility, and on the other, knowledge pursued for its own sake. Several significant contemporaneous events may illustrate the designing force of this ecology:[7]

1746   The publication of Batteux's *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*

1751   The term 'fine arts' makes it into Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encylopédia*

1763–75   James Watts' development of an industrially capable steam engine[8]

1764   The publication of Johann Joachim Wincklemann's *The History of Ancient Art,*[9] marking the entrance of art history into the University

1769   The founding of Wedgewood's pottery factory, pioneering the assembly line and instituting a division of labor between artist and craftsperson

1790   Kant's *Critique of Judgment* is published, forming a philosophical foundation of the idea of 'art for art's sake'

1804   The French painter and art critic Benjamin Constant uses the term 'art for art's sake,' possibly for the first time

The historic influence of this 'bad ecology'[10] results in the growth of a powerful yet unsustainable industry of mass-produced design and advertising, separated from a culturally influential yet materially ineffectual sector of fine arts. This dichotomy is still institutionalized within today's university and has important repercussions for the education of design students. The survey course in art history,

normally a prerequisite for graphic design students before studying the history of design, comes already loaded with a perspective towards the image as existing beyond utility. The subsequent course in the history of graphic design then follows, carrying with it a narrowly productivist view of utility.[11]

Another unfortunate knowledge ecology, which developed later in the 19th century, was the encounter of the radical materialism of Darwin with an Hegelian and idealist art history. Alois Riegl, one of the early modern founders of the discipline of art history, based his theory of art history on a mistakenly teleological interpretation of evolution, asserting that universal laws – autonomous from any existing material forces – govern the development of art through history.[12] Although some overt misapplications of Darwinist evolutionary theory were eventually discredited, during the reign of modernist abstraction and Clement Greenberg's criticism, Hegelian teleology was *de rigueur.*[13] It wasn't until the later 20th century[14] when art history would rid itself of most vestiges of idealism,[15,16] even as it remained largely tied to the analysis and interpretation of objects of art.

The Studio as Existential Ecology

Philippe d'Anjou, in a 2007 *Design Philosophy Papers* article, discusses the teaching of sustainability to students in the process of becoming designers.[17] He makes the observation, based on a reading of Sartrean existentialism, that:

> '[T]he studio is of primary importance because it represents a core pedagogical paradigm of design education. It is indeed where professional designers are formed, where the individual becomes a designer….[T]he designer is to be considered as a conscious self that defines …his/her being-in-the-world through the design project and the act of design, and not as a problem-solving agent aiming only at the making of artifacts.'

In other words, the project of sustainability must, according to d'Anjou, become a *'freely chosen attitude that takes place within the dialectical process between the existential project and the design project of the student in design.'*

In an educational environment where design is taught primarily as a market-driven discipline; where the design major is seen, relative to the fine arts, as an attractor of students, business support and funding; where, over the last few decades, our educational establishments have increasingly viewed students as customers of their education; in such an environment it is not sufficient nor assured that a student's studio education will provide the necessary experiences to allow for the choice of an existential project of sustainability. An education in design history must therefore not

only support what should otherwise be happening in the studio, but it must also become, for the student, another opportunity to choose *as their existential project* the design of sustainability.

> 'The ecology of the image is fast becoming our first ecology – emerging from the horizon of our seeing and knowing – an organizing framework for all other ecologies.'[18]
>
> – Abby Lopes

Classroom Ecologies

As Lopes and others have remarked,[19, 20] the crisis of unsustainability isn't primarily an *environmental* crisis; rather it is instead the foreclosure of our ability to understand relationality: in other words, we remain largely ignorant of the relations within and between images, ourselves, and the rest of the material environment. Our society as a whole is in a condition of defuturing,[21] which is to say that the comprehensive effect of our institutions and actions upon and within the world is reducing our species time on earth. By living in a defutured world, we learn to adapt as defutured beings,[22] the image world we create forming for us the screen around which we live our lives. Current design education is, unfortunately, structured to *reinforce* this adaptation.

When we acknowledge, as educators, that we have *already* adapted ourselves to the defuturing limits of our world, we can begin to open up a space for cooperative experimentalism with our students. As a new generation, they more quickly and seamlessly adapt to the constraints of a world more defutured than the world that shaped us, reproducing and extending its effects. But youth also has the advantage of any youthful organism: the evolutionary spinning of variation for purposes of adaptation and survival. Like us before them, they might learn to reproduce and extend the world's defutured state; but the young also have the greater possibility of stumbling on the 'good trick'[23] leading to more future. Our task is to create the environment where this might have more likelihood of happening.

To do this, design history must be redesigned from the ground up to be imaginative and experimental. We must provide a multiplicity of perspectives in order to challenge students to develop new ways of knowing outside of convenient disciplinary models. Rather than the focus being either on objects or designers, our history must instead describe ecologies of use. Further – and here I circumscribe design history to the field I am primarily involved in, graphic design – the history must break down the barriers between design, fine art, and visual culture in order to become an *ecology of images.* And if we are to affect design practice, we need to provide an environment within which students can begin to form their practices of making through the exploration of ecologies of use and the theoretical modeling of designing effects.

Case Study: The History of Design as Image and Ecology

I began developing a class towards toward this goal in the fall of 2008, titled *History of Design: Image and Ecology*,[24] basing it on a more traditional graphic design history class I taught from 2002–2005.[25] It combines several approaches: chronological surveys, an exposure to multiple perspectives on the use and interpretation of images, the gathering of 'image ecologies,' and the use of the reverse creative brief, which I will describe below.

Chronological surveys show the work of design in time, and understanding time is essential if we are to make time. Rather than the monolithic, semester long torpor-inspiring survey, I presented multiple, thematic surveys, for example: human representation from Venus figurines to the Gibson Girl; memes from the Christian cross to the Nike swoosh; or representation as a response to modernization from 1650 to the present. There is inevitable overlap, which helps take the designed image out of its status as artifact and places it more effectively as something used in various ways to further human ends.

The course was structured around a series of readings, each exploring a particular concept or mode of interpretation, for instance: Darwinian evolutionary theory, Marx's concept of the metabolism of nature and society,[26] Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*,[27] or Summer's rethinking of art from the standpoint of the displacement of social space.[28] Students were asked to find three to five images that reflected their interpretation of the reading, which became the basis for analysis, questions and discussion. These discussions became the focus of learning in the class.

This gathering of images I call an image ecology, defined as 'a group of images that relate to each other and to the world in some way or ways.' I encourage the students to experiment with their choices and bring their own interpretations as to how the subject of the reading might inform their corresponding 'ecology.'

The students work with these images using as their form of analysis the 'reverse design brief.' Based on the process of reverse engineering[29] they apply a design brief (also referred to as a creative brief, and which is used generally at the *start* of a design project) to the existing images in their image ecology *post facto*. There are many types of design briefs; the one I use is oriented towards graphic design practice and has been helpful in studio pedagogy. It consists of six questions: *what's the project?; who's the client?; who's the audience?; what's the core message?; what's the hoped-for outcome?; and what's the graphic strategy?* To this I add one additional question: *what are the designing effects and consequences?* The student applies this brief with as much concision as possible to their image ecologies, which could originate from prehistory or the present. These exercises serve two purposes: to gain experience using a brief in order that a strategic

understanding of design can become internalized; and to make history relevant to studio practice *in order that it be applied to the activity of creating future*.

The assignments rely on the students' considerable skills of visual research using the Internet, one of their generations' 'evolutionary' advantages in our techno-informatic environment. The visual research helps give a directive purpose to the readings, with the images becoming the path for discussion. The experimental rethinking of history, as ecologies, has fostered a collaborative environment of extended discussions and promising insights.[30]

The two semesters I taught this initial course represent a small effort toward the goals I have articulated in this paper. As an upper division 'special topics' class, it allowed wide latitude in its conception and execution. At present, I am adapting elements of this class (specifically the use of the creative brief) for use in what, at my current institution, has been the survey course in design history for visual communication students. Nonetheless, both the 'special topics' course and the present survey course have allowed me to consider the challenges to be faced and directions worth pursuing:

- The introductory art history survey course should be replaced by a modified material and visual culture course that, nonetheless, includes materials found in both art and design history surveys. The class that I discuss here could become this substitution or, instead, exist as a more advanced seminar developed in conjunction with an introductory class. In either case, a two-semester class would be more adequate.
- Chronological lectures are important for several reasons, not least of which is the ignorance of most students toward all but the most recent of histories. Additionally, design exists in time, both in its effects on the world as well as on other design. This needs reinforcing.
- Chronologies should not, however, replace an emphasis on ecologies of use. The focus should remain on the human use of images in its interaction with the world.
- A multiplicity of interpretative frameworks must be introduced. Its primary purpose is to open up a field of understanding in order that design practice might change – *not* to create a new academic discipline.
- The use of a practical tool like the reverse creative brief can provide a link to practice while encouraging the development of students' historical imagination. With the addition of one component to the brief – focused on the designing effects of (an object of) design – the emphasis can then become ongoing ecological interaction.
- The class must rely on the visual research and insights of students and be taught in a spirit of mutual exploration.

Partial and Total Criticism in the Work of Moving Forward

We are enslaved by a society and a way of knowing that has been with us for almost four centuries now: [31] its effects have transformed the world and now threaten our survival. In our attempts to deal with our unsustainability, we revert to the ways of knowing that are institutionalized as our disciplines. We are at a time in history not dissimilar to when the alchemists and astrologers ruled, in the midst of the fundamental change being wrought by the Enlightenment. Partial criticism and its action from a disciplinary perspective, no matter how much rigor we bring to our task, will neither further our objectives nor deliver us from an unsustainable society. The seeds of our present condition were sown in the seventeenth century, almost a century and a half before the discipline of *art* history was even begun. In order for us to design a future, we will need to use whatever tools and perspectives are available to us – regardless of discipline, hierarchies of the theoretical and practical, or of the fine and applied arts. The multiplicity of perspectives is key, in order to wage a perpetual experimental struggle with the unsustainable.

To redesign design history in face of unsustainability we must be unrelenting in our critique of how design has designed unsustainability in our past, and be vigorously transdisciplinary and experimental in our attempts to forge new ways of thinking for our future.

Notes

1. Collingwood, R. G., and W. J. van der. Dussen. *The idea of history : with lectures 1926–1928*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 245. Quoted from Lemisko, Lynn Speer. 'The Historical Imagination: Collingwood in the Classroom.' *Canadian Social Studies* 38, no. 2 (Winter 2004). www.quasar.ualberta.ca/css.
2. Margolin, Victor. *Design discourse : history, theory, criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 213.
3. 'Sustainment' has been used with some frequency in this journal in order to register an impatience with.' and a critique of the presuppositions of the widely-used term 'sustainability.' In an article introducing the idea, Tony Fry notes that what needs to be sustained is generally not addressed, thus furthering the condition of unsustainability: 'What is to be made? This is a question to travel with, but provisionally one can say: a thinking, a seeing, a valuing, organization(s)/institutions, relations, paths, things, pleasures, the yet-to-be, and a conservation of the future. In sum 'what is to be made' is 'an age' (and a being in that age). What has to be created is that which sustain and that needs (beyond utility) to be sustained along with the means to destroy the unsustainable.'

Fry, Tony. "The Voice of Sustainment: an Introduction." *Design Philosophy Papers* 1, no. 1 (2003).

4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *IPCC fourth assessment report climate change 2007.* Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007.

5. See my fable on the subject: Calvelli, John. 'Design, Designing, Designing Designers, and Redesigning Designing: A Fable on Sustainment' *Visual Research Scholarship,* Volume 3, no. Number 2 (2007). http://research.agda.com.au/library/group/1202870689_document_01_vds030204.pdf.

6. Shiner, L. E. *The invention of art : a cultural history*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 83 (uncorrected page proof).

7. Unger, Roberto. The Problem of Language,' *Knowledge and politics*. New York: The Free Press, 1975, pp. 12–16.

8. Wikipedia contributors. 'Watt steam engine.' In *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watt_steam_engine

9. Minor, Vernon. *Art history's history*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1994, p. 20.

10. Gregory Bateson remarked, 'There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds.' Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.

11. I am choosing here to focus on the relationship between art and design history in order to isolate the problems that utility raises; the influences of visual culture studies, semiotics and poststructuralism, or other more recent theoretical models are significant but should be thought in relation to this originating 'bad ecology.'

12. Fernie, E. C. *Art history and its methods : a critical anthology*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996, p. 116.

13. The critic-priest of high modernism, Clement Greenberg, famously promoted an Hegelian avant-garde modernist teleology beginning with his early writings, for example 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' and continuing through his writing during the heyday of color field painting: '*It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'nonobjective' art – and poetry too.*' Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' quoted in Huyssen, Andreas. *After the great divide : modernism, mass culture, postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 56.

14. Specifically, with the publication in one year of two books by T. J. Clark, listed directly below.

15. Clark, T. J. *The absolute bourgeois: artists and politics in France, 1848–1851*. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973.

16. Clark, T. J. *Image of the people; Gustave Courbet and the second French Republic, 1848–1851*. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973.

17. D'Anjou, Philippe. 'The existential self as locus of sustainability in design.' *Design Philosophy Papers* 3–4 (2007). http://www.desphilosophy.com

18. Lopes, Abby M. 'The Ecology of the Image.' Phd dissertation, University of Sydney, 2005, p. 8.

19. Ibid., p. 11.

20. Fry, Tony. *A new design philosophy: an introduction to defuturing*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999, p. 130, 244.

21. Ibid.

22. This statement brings us into the territory of the theory of natural selection. Although it brings with it a long history of misuse when applied to human culture generally and art and design history specifically, I believe it reasonable to reconsider the value of evolutionary theory for design history, given its species-centric viewpoint and *our* species-centric predicament. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

23. See Dennett's explanation of the Baldwin effect in Dennett, Daniel Clement. *Darwin's dangerous idea : evolution and the meanings of life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

24. The syllabus for the first section of this class is available to Design Studies Forum members as part of the Sustainable Syllabus Exchange at Calvelli, John. 'Design History: Image and Ecology.' *Design Studies Forum*, 2009. http://www.designstudiesforum.org

25. Included in: Heller, Steven. *Teaching graphic design: course offerings and class projects from the leading graduate and undergraduate programs*. New York: Allworth Press, 2003.

26. Marx, Karl. 'The Labor Process and the Valorization Process,' in *Capital : a critical analysis of capitalist production*. London: S. Sonnenschein, 1887.

27. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a theory of practice (Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, dt.)* Transl. (with revisions) by Richard Nice, 1977.

28. Summers, David. *Real spaces: world art history and the rise of western modernism.* London; New York NY: Phaidon Press, 2003.

29. '…the process of extracting applied know-how from a human-made artifact that embodies technical knowledge contributed by others.' Einhorn, Michael. *Media, technology, and copyright: integrating law and economics*. Cheltenham UK; Northampton MA: E. Elgar, 2004.

30. This was evidenced recently in a course I am currently teaching, *Critical Contexts in Modern and Contemporary Visual Communication Design*, where we spent an hour and a half discussing one film still from Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Move*

Camera. Getting to the insights is in large measure a process of coming to terms with the distortions our perspectives place on our interpretation of history and different cultures, while encouraging the use of the imagination in order to traverse the path from past and present into the future.

31. Unger, Roberto, *Knowledge and politics, p. 2. 'In each branch of learning, men have before them only those aspects of the classical system that seem to bear directly on their own concerns. These are the aspects they criticize and transform. They are not troubled by other parts of the system and, after a while, they are no longer aware of them. Nonetheless, if the classical theory is itself a unity, the problems it produces cannot be understood or solved separately.'*