Review

Design as an Attitude

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Design writer and critic Alice Rawsthorn's latest book '*Design as an Attitude'* is a collection of her *By Design* columns written for Frieze magazine from 2014 to 2017. Composed of twelve chapters, each chapter tackles an area of design she argues that is transforming and impacting the world today. The *Prologue* defines what the author means by "attitudinal design". Opening with László Moholy-Nagy's famous quote from his book Vision in Motion "Designing is not a profession but an attitude", Rawsthorn writes a touching tribute to Moholy-Nagy. She attempts to demonstrate how she draws inspiration from his ideas in the argument for attitudinal design through the projects she discusses; projects that demonstrate resourcefulness and inventiveness to social, political and economic challenges of our time.

The use of the term "attitudinal design" feels like a movement from the 1990s – a term you would expect Thomas Frank to critique. And while the ideas are drawn from Vision in Motion (published in 1947), what is striking is that Moholy-Nagy's ideas remain relevant today, where he saw "design as an attitude" as the "potential to become a more powerful force in society by acting as an efficient and ingenious agent of change, free from commercial constraints" (p.9).

The chapters are short and easy to read, each possessing a short reference list of cited work, and Rawsthorn presents design in an accessible form to the audience. The book is good for anyone interested in understanding design and its role in everyday life. The main critique is that the chapters end in an abrupt manner, however, they open up debates and opportunities for critiques. Recurring throughout is a focus on technological change and digital tools. Rawsthorn invests heavily in the idea that these will move design away from specialisation, and in opening up avenues for diversifying the discipline. Another recurring focus is an attempt to shift perceptions on design as merely a styling device, and demonstrating the relevance of design in addressing political, social and economic issues.

In a similar way to how she begins the prologue through an engaging telling of Moholy-Nagy's journey prior to publishing Vision in Motion posthumously, she begins Chapter 1, *What is Attitudinal Design*, with the story of Willem Sandberg, who she describes as the personification of design as an attitude. This chapter continues on from the prologue, drawing on examples from history who have used design as a defence for human rights.

Chapter 2 signals a shift, dealing with what is considered an exhausted topic: the difference between design and art. The author does well in placing this here as she sets the stage of sorts regarding what she defines as 'design' and 'art' and when these lines blur. The aim of the chapter is to reiterate that design is not merely a styling tool. Interestingly, the chapter opens with a quote from Jean Prouvé "if people understand there's no need to explain. If they don't, there's no use explaining" (p.29). Reading this, we wonder, is this chapter's inclusion necessary? As the book targets a general audience, its inclusion is logical. Rawsthorn recounts the historical rift between the terms, and how artists and writers contributed to defining design as aesthetics. She makes relations on how artists and art institutions have a growing interest in design through "exploring the impact of digital technology on the ways we relate to the world" (p.34), using the work of artists like Ed Atkins, Helen Marten, Yuri Pattison and specific exhibitions to demonstrate her point. However, that these ideas are drawing from design is hardly recognised within the art world but rather become practices absorbed by art. This chapter sets the tone for Rawsthorn's call emerging throughout *Design as an Attitude* – of abolishing the disciplinary boundaries (the specialism Moholy-Nagy warns against) in favour of a more collaborative and generalist approach to design.

Chapter 3, *The Craft Revival*, begins with the story of William Morris at Crystal Palace. Disappointingly, the majority of the historical examples draw from Western design history and feature the same actors we come to expect with books on design. The historical context on crafts, while interesting, is at the expense of a more pertinent conversation: the marginalisation of crafts as it was perceived as 'feminine.' Moreover, what Rawsthorn describes as the "[e]qually problematic … dismissal of the craft traditions of developing countries" (p. 43) is a mere paragraph that glazes over the debate of 'good design'; a term equated with the West, whereas everyone else (i.e. the so called non-West) does 'crafts'. Indeed, her discussion on the use of craft symbolism and techniques amongst Dutch designers feels like a 'craft revival' but does crafts only become 'design' when the Dutch produce it, despite crafts and design being more intertwined in other parts of the world? What this chapter does well is tie crafts to contemporary technological advances; who is a maker? What is now considered crafts? These are important questions to debate.

Rawsthorn's understanding of design is particularly vivid in Chapter 4, *The Descent of Objects*, when she discusses the Darwinian evolution of objects. She enables the reader to understand the importance of objects in our lives. While this chapter makes for a compelling argument, as a designer, I cannot help but feel that its weakness is in discussing the translation of these objects from the physical to the digital world. For example:

> Our phones and computers have become progressively smaller, lighter, and faster … [and] are able to fulfill the functions of hundreds of different products: from printed books, newspapers, magazines, diaries, and maps, to telephone kiosks, cameras, calculators, watches, Rolodexes, sound systems, television sets … (pp.52-53).

Computers and phones have rendered the use of different products much easier, but if we take the example of how some products and services translate from the physical into the digital, the transition is not always seamless. Why are we not analysing how digital equivalents have migrated into the digital form rather than praising their physical obsolescence?

Rawsthorn covers all aspects of design, including graphic design. Chapter 5, *Back to the Future*, begins with a history of the hamburger icon – the drop-down menu now ubiquitous on websites. The author does a good job of relating the appearance of the icons on the screen to the objects we engage with daily, an aesthetic that she describes as "steeped in nostalgia" (p.63). She draws on Apple as an example and their inability to fully embrace flat design as their competitors have, a style that she is equally critical of for being nostalgic. The chapter ends with an important reminder on the future of designing user interfaces: user interfaces are not "encumbered by formal constraints. There is no legislative pressure to use specified operating symbols, or an industry-wide agreement that compels companies to do so" (p.65). Rawsthorn presents designers an opportunity for future development: the ability to develop a new aesthetic unencumbered by nostalgia.

Chapter six poses the question *Is design still a (cis) man's world?* Important arguments from chapter three are picked up here. Once again, Rawsthorn engages the reader through historical context. She reminds the reader of how female designers who have made a name for themselves in the past was largely due to wealth, social connections, or through marriage (to a famous male practitioner). The chapter is a good primer on issues faced by female designers within a man's [design] world and the progress they have made – progress that Rawsthorn feels will be empowering to women in the future due to advances in science and technology that will call for new disciplines, enabling women to operate independently "free from the constraints of old boys network" (p.74).

Chapter 7, *Design's Color Problem*, starts off with a discussion on the absence of black designers from design history. The "things are changing" argument is repeated from chapter six, but it is difficult to see how the process of including a few new designers and more exhibitions are addressing this absence. Instead, she frames it as a diversity issue. But diversity is ticking a box, and Rawsthorn fails to acknowledge that inequality is both systematic and structural. The chapter then moves on to discuss several projects – emphasising 'digital design' – from Africa, Latin America and South Asia. These projects, she argues, could inspire designers from the Global South with "more ingenious and ambitious ideas while encouraging their peers in other countries to be more perceptive and generous about fostering greater diversity and inclusivity within their own design communities" (p. 84). It is difficult to see how exactly. Despite her argument that the influence of European modernism on design culture from the twentieth century – a style that favoured standardisation over diversity – is disappearing thanks to the ability to customise outcomes due to technological advances, the fact is modernism remains highly influential because it represents the standard of 'good design' and is emulated all over the world. Additionally, museums and galleries continue to produce exhibitions on its leading figures, and its principles remain the main readings of design courses across institutions.

Chapter 8, *The Fun of the Fair*, is one of the strongest chapters. It presents a well-argued critique of the Salone del Mobile's continued relevance in design culture. While successfully launching the careers of many designers, furniture's cultural impact has diminished since the Salone launched in the 1960s. Rawsthorn argues that students are less interested in becoming "mini-Starcks" and more interested in "making meaningful contributions to ecological catastrophes, or to redefining design's interpretation of gender identity" (p.93). While questioning the Salone itself, Rawsthorn remains optimistic as smaller cultural events spring up. Here is where a relation to arguments in the previous chapter could have been strengthened: how does the appearance of cultural events in

other places contribute to the development of more progressive design cultures outside of Western design centres?

Chapter nine discusses customisation as technology and demand offers consumers more choice. The argument in this chapter is not entirely convincing however as the examples she draws on are at times confusing (as with the case of Rachel Dolezal). The chapter raises questions that it leaves unanswered: does customisation prevent waste? What other options do we have versus mass availability? Does customisation give consumers the illusion of being unique and authentic? And is it possible to talk about the waste caused by industrialisation but not argue against consumerism? The examples used revolve around gender and Rawsthorn's reading of these, rather than designers being informed enough to consider how gendering objects has been used as a marketing tactic historically. This is an opportunity to discuss how design education helps inform designers of the ideologies they embed within their design work, but there is little to no mention of design education across the book, or how these changes are affecting the agendas of large companies that can influence the conversation on design and production. Throughout the book, she attempts to argue how a new generation of designers use digital tools to pursue their own goals by operating independently – "liberating" design from its role as a service-provider. But these conversations remain on the fringes – how are these projects impacting design education and influencing larger companies? The power large companies possess is mentioned in Chapter 10, *Out of Control*, a chapter she ends with an interesting discussion on the 3D printed gun and the unintended consequences of design work – or the design work whose consequences designers fail to fully consider. There is an interesting debate to be had that in relation to design education here.

Chapter 11, *Design and Desire*, discusses new found attention on touch and the increasing importance of other sensual qualities such as scent. The long focus on worldview throughout history has been discussed extensively in other disciplines (vision at the expense of other senses). It would be interesting if drawing on examples of design projects from the Global South could demonstrate how other senses have been emphasised. The chapter attempts to argue that other senses and qualities will become determinants in design's desirability, leading to a more sophisticated understanding of design and less rubbish. The diminishing power of design as a styling tool argument is referred to again: "However much you enjoy the phone's styling, the pleasure you take in its appearance will not last long if it is infuriatingly difficult to operate" (p.128), yet we are far from this. Desirability remains one of the main reasons why we choose our devices (iPhone X for example), and why people continue to force themselves to use badly designed objects.

Chapter 12, *When the Worst Comes to the Worst,* starts off with the story of Dutch architect Jan Willem Petersen analysing the flaws of the Task Force Urzugan project and how rigorously he prepared and immersed himself in the work. Rawsthorn highlights the importance of research but despite writing how "such endeavors are admirably intentioned, and many of the gutsiest, most dynamic designers of our time are working on them" (p. 133), she cautions that they should be "planned and executed to the highest possible standards, given the political sensitivity of working in volatile, often perilous situations where the consequences of failure can be calamitous" (p.133). While it is difficult to disagree with this statement, the chapter does not critique the NGOisation of design and the dangers this approach poses, a topic that several scholars have written

about. Instead, Rawsthorn argues that despite an increase in social design projects, they "have had little impact on the popular stereotype of design as a commercial styling tool" (p.133). Further in, she discusses how local projects have proved more successful and this leaves the reader wondering why the chapter begins with a discussion on global non-profits rather than featuring local projects where designers are familiar with the context. The last few examples draw on designers 'helping' with the refugee crisis, another topic that has been critiqued in academia. She does not discuss the lack of awareness amongst most designers working in these situations and how the proposed solutions generally maintain the status quo. To practice attitudinal design is to become an agent of change, to be resourceful, collaborative and inventive, but these examples fail to demonstrate these qualities.

Politically, the statements remain similar to any other design book: light. Rawsthorn's accessible writing has the opportunity to provoke, but she does this through safe topics – hence the emphasis on technology and gender identity. The book attempts to display a sense of 'diversity' or 'inclusion', but this does not question – radically enough if we are to consider the title of the book – the state of how things are. Despite appearing like a manifesto, Rawsthorn does not provide any possibilities for action. If this was a manifesto, then it would have a stronger call to action. As she writes "[n]ot that every designer will turn attitudinal; nor should they" (p.11). It is important to remember that the original form of each chapter as columns for Frieze targeted a general arts readership, and this explains the examples being familiar to anyone in design and not as thought-provoking as it could be.

Discussions on the role of design as an agent of change have been debated for decades within design education, but only recently has the design industry taken an interest in the matter, and yet they remain within the confines of traditional definitions of design, hardly questioning design's role as a mere service-provider. Despite its safe political statements, *Design as an Attitude* is an excellent addition to anyone interested in design or those who never paid much attention to it. It is accessible and informative, with enough historical references to provide background context.

The accessible writing of *Design as an Attitude* and the range of contemporary design issues it covers from gender, ethics, politics, race, disciplinary boundaries, and technology amongst others, may prove useful for design educators teaching at the undergraduate level, and as an introductory text to design at the secondary school level.

What *Design as an Attitude* does well is bring up how much of design is hidden, anonymous labour, generally female labour, and how these contributed to the success of the lone, celebrity designer. Rawsthorn does not only remind us but makes an effort to name this labour throughout the chapters and through the glossary of designers and design projects at the end.

The design of the book is worth mentioning because it is thoughtful. It is typeset in Genath throughout, displaying excellent attention to the power of different sizes and weights of one typeface. Whereas many books take full advantage of page 'real-estate', the decision to include large margins allows for comfortable marginalia, and a pleasant reading experience. For a book on attitudinal design, this is a conscious design decision, and can be viewed as a statement against publishers cramming in text to fit a certain number of pages to ensure cost efficiency.

References

Moholy-Nagy, L. (1947). *Vision in motion*: Paul Theobald & Co.