

JOSEPH Frances
Navigating Design and its Histories

Abstract

The New Zealand Design Archive (NZDA) was established in 1999 to identify and document material and publish new research about New Zealand design history. The impetus for this project was to provide better research resources for postgraduate design students in the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) School of Art and Design's newly established Masters Degree programme, to mentor interested staff in forms of design research and generate more research about design, building on the strength of the School's reputation for design education. While the decision to set up the archive as a digital resource was pragmatic, the development of this system has fostered new lines of research enquiry, experimentation and publication focussing on the potential of database and interface to create multiple interpretative pathways.

Design history has been defined as various and competing explanatory models of design. Digital theorist Lev Manovich has claimed that database is the key symbolic form of cultural expression of the computer age and that the computer's ability to automatically classify, index, link, search and instantly retrieve data might lead to the development of new kinds of narratives. The potential to explore models – or narratives – of design and its history through computing has become the focus of my own research. The purpose of this work is not simply to present variety, but in generating multiple narratives or interpretative pathways, to challenge the conditions of marginality produced by established forms of institutionalised knowledge, particularly in relation to New Zealand design and its history.

Biography

Frances Joseph is Programme Leader of Postgraduate Studies at the School of Art and Design, Auckland University of Technology. Born in New Zealand, Frances graduated from the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart in 1979, majoring in sculpture. She taught for some 17 years at the Sydney College of the Arts in the area of Sculpture, Performance and Installation. During this time she completed an MVA at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW, exhibited sculpture, installation and designed for theatre and public events in Australia and Europe. In 1997 she returned to live in New Zealand and work at the AUT.

Since then her research and creative focus has shifted from physical to digital structures and systems. While much of her previous work drew from historical research, this has now become a central focus prompted by the desire to better understand the New Zealand context.

Frances was the founder of the NZDAD (Digital Archive of Design) and co-developer of the ADORe system (Art and Design Online Resources), a teaching, learning and research environment at the School of Art and Design, AUT. She has presented keynote papers at conferences in the UK and China, and was awarded an Honorary Research Fellowship by the Design History Research Centre at the University of Brighton, UK in 2002. Currently she is working on a PhD and finalising material for publication of a book, CD and exhibition in 2004 about changes to the physical and social environment of Auckland depicted through the work of graphic artist Nobby Clark.

Navigating Design and its Histories

Introduction

While there has been a proliferation of digital resource creation in 'cultural heritage' sectors over the last ten years, the primary motivations for such projects were usually identified as assisting the preservation, management, access and profile of existing physical collections, or as Hal Foster put it 'repertoire, access, connection, speed – all the familiar use values of the information age.'¹

In scientific and linguistic disciplines, new research approaches and questions have developed through the use of computational systems. In fields like linguistics, the use of digital technology for the creation of language corpora and the development of research techniques based on the quantitative analysis of text have had a profound effect on the development of extensive, disciplinary based, cross institutional collections and on the shape and methodologies of the discipline itself. A similarly profound change has occurred in relation to geospatial research and systems. But within the arts little consideration has been given to ways digitisation might affect cultural epistemologies and facilitate new disciplinary perspectives or research methods.

Initially most cultural heritage, image based, digital resource creation was institutionally based and mimetic in that it used the typologies and material from existing gallery, library or museum collections presented via digital versions that paralleled more traditional media of access and display (e.g. the virtual gallery, the online catalogue etc). Discourse around these emergent forms was confined largely to procedural and project management issues, with little reference to disciplinary frameworks or philosophical perspectives.

Collections

Scholarship in the areas of collection and museum studies confirms that collections are never neutral groupings of objects and that collectors are motivated by more than just pragmatics – collections are ‘ways in which people make sense of the world by bringing elements together... through the accumulation and juxtaposition of material things’.²

Susan Stewart has noted that ‘the spatial whole of the collection supersedes the individual narratives that lie behind it’. She recognises that identifying the principles of organisation used in articulating collections will help identify what the collection is about. ‘It is not sufficient to say that the collection is organised according to time, space, or internal qualities of the objects themselves, for each of these parameters is divided in dialectic of inside and outside, public and private, meaning and exchange value.’³

In contrast to physical catalogues and collections, digital resources can be fluid/ cross-searchable/cross disciplinary/multimodal systems where artifacts can exist across a number of different categories or typologies and can be linked to other reference material. In considering these issues, Steve Dietz (paraphrasing Hal Foster) has asked ‘is there a new dialectics of seeing allowed by electronic information? Art as image-text, as info-pixel? If so will this database be more than a base of data, a repository of the given?’⁴

The process of a new medium developing initially in imitation of older, preceding media is typical of the way people have historically developed, explored and adapted to the introduction of new technologies. New media theorist Lev Manovich, in tracing the shift from early computational processes to the complexities of networked digital environments, has warned that ‘interfaces developed for the computer in the role of calculator, control mechanism or communication device are not necessarily suitable for a computer playing the role of a cultural machine.’⁵

Manovich draws attention to the limitations of many new media genres whereby the conventions of older cultural forms are duplicated, preventing new capacities and possibilities offered by computers from being explored. He describes this emergent computer culture as ‘a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modelled the world and the computer’s own means of representing it.’⁶

Related fields

Some interesting questions regarding discipline specificity, image collections and digitisation have been raised by art historians. The study of art history, like that of its parent discipline archaeology, and its offspring design history, was based in the study of material artifacts. The identification, justification and presentation of these artifacts formed the canon of art history and the basis of its subsequent challenges and rewritings. To enable the analysis and explication of images, art history has long relied on techniques of image reproduction, and there are several pre-digital instances whereby the forms of such image technologies have influenced methodologies of analysis and pedagogy to the extent that they have become orthodoxies; intrinsic parts of the culture of art history. An example of this is the use of ‘binary’ image projections introduced by German art historian Heinrich Grimm, and popularised by Heinrich Wölfflin in the 1880s which over time became the dominant method used in the teaching of art history and the presentation of scholarship as the ‘two carousel’ slide lecture.⁷

Christopher Bailey and Margaret Graham at The University of Northumbria have looked at changes taking place in the practice of the discipline of art history ‘as a result of the availability of digitised reproduction of cultural artifacts.’⁸ Their research into the attitudes and use of digital resources by art historians, provides data that reveals not only the widespread ambivalence of many art historians towards new media resources, but also begins to identify and evaluate a range of methodological

practices that might be enhanced or translated into the interfaces and practices of emergent cultural media technologies.

Hal Foster has written about the 'archival relations' existing between art practice, art museum and art history. In his recent book *Design and Crime* he identifies three historic sets of relationships between art history and collections (that of Baudelaire and Manet in the mid nineteenth century, of Proust and Valery at the turn of the twentieth century, and of Panofsky and Benjamin on the eve of World War II) in which, 'in different ways the one figure in each pair projects a totality of art, which the second figure reveals, consciously or not, to be made up of fragments alone.'⁹

Foster goes on to ask whether we might now be at another important juncture, and whether there might be another archival relation, another 'moment in this dialectics of seeing', enabled by electronic information. If so, Foster asks will it fracture tradition or 'permit the finding of ever more stylistic affinities, the fostering of ever more artistic values'. He wonders if this underlying historical dialectic (of the fragment and the whole) might become outdated and irrelevant in this new context and asks an important question: 'What cultural epistemology might a digital reordering underwrite for art practice, art museum and art history alike?'¹⁰

Foster's critique introduces two notions that have provided useful reference points for the development of the NZDA. The first is his methodological approach – of looking at historical relationships between practices, collections and histories. The second is his introduction of the concept of a memory structure, a particular 'dialectics of seeing' specific to certain historic periods of disciplinary development.

Foster's notion of this historical dialectic between fragment and whole - can be related to Lev Manovich's theories of database and interface. Manovich has suggested that historically in the West writing has been oriented in two directions (or two 'competing imaginations') - the narrative which creates a cause and effect trajectory of events and the encyclopaedia, which represents the world as a list of separate items

He proposes a contemporary equivalence between database and encyclopaedia, interface and narrative and suggests that these two approaches drive different forms of computer culture. CD-ROMS, web sites and other new media objects organised as databases correspond to structure, that is, data organised for search and retrieval. Whereas narratives, including computer games, correspond to algorithm - which is a process, a final sequence of simple operations that a computer can execute to perform a given task. Manovich recognises that data structures and algorithms are complementary kinds of software objects which have a symbiotic relationship: 'The more complex the data structure of a computer programme the simpler the algorithm has to be and vice versa. Together data structures and algorithms are two halves of the ontology of the world according to a computer.'¹¹ In computer programming data structures and algorithms need one another – both are important for a programme to work.

Design:

It is relevant to consider Foster's dialectic in relation to design, where a 'totality' of design has long been sought but never convincingly posed.

The very term 'design' is both ubiquitous and ambiguous. Defining design is considered by many to be a risky if not impossible enterprise. Any definition of design will depend on whether it is considered to be an idea, a knowledge, a project, a process, a product or even a way of being.

Design as a discipline is still immature and has not developed the same internal structures and understanding that older disciplines have. There is little to point to as a theoretical base for design. Although design has its own purposes, values, measures and procedures they have not been extensively investigated, formalised, codified or even significantly entered into the literature created for the field.¹²

Design integrates several areas with different research traditions and competing methodological claims. As a formalised knowledge domain, design is invisible, dispersed within other typologies:

There is no database and/or Library of Congress (LC) classification: Design. Design literature resources are organized under databases of related fields such as architecture, psychology, business and economics, marketing, humanities and engineering. For

example the sub-category 'industrial design' is organised under the LC classification of 'technology' while 'graphic design' is under 'art'.¹³

Changes in the way design has been articulated in the twentieth century exemplify and contribute to this epistemological confusion: Design is a trade activity; a segmented profession; a field for technical research (Margolin and Buchanan, 1996). Design is a form of national identity; a lifestyle choice; innovation; an economic generator (NZ Design Taskforce, 2002). Design is the cause of ecological crises; a way of addressing ecological crises (Ecodesign Foundation, 1995). Design is 'the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions and communicative practices' (Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 1992:4). Design is 'values made visible' (Cooper and Press, 1995).

Design departments in universities are at times located in art schools and sometimes in engineering schools. Design in recent New Zealand Performance Based Research Funding Review Categories was spread across creative arts, information technologies and engineering groupings. Design is an art and a science. Design is an art and an industry. Design is a craft. Design is a knowledge industry....

Such complexity has led many designers, educators and theorists to yearn for simpler models. However design discourse - defined as comprising the totality of ways in which design is thought about and verbally discussed by design stakeholders¹⁴ - cannot be reduced to a singular or monistic vision of design. Complexity need not be a negative attribute. Within the context of technological convergence, design may be seen as an 'integrative discipline'¹⁵ and may be better located as a practice through which complex issues can be articulated and explored than within more rigidly demarked traditional disciplines.

Rather than seek to find a singular definition Margolin, Doordan and Buchanan have suggested we might be able to 'navigate among the different ways of reflecting on design so that we can bring them into relation with each other (as we seek ... systemic integration)'.¹⁶

This suggestion of navigation and relationality implies computing and has prompted me to rephrase Hal Foster's question to ask: What cultural epistemology might a digital reordering underwrite for design practice, design museum and design history alike?

In considering design collections and their relationship to the construction of design history, Jonathan Woodham has suggested that company, institutional, organisational and individual designer archives are of great potential value to the historian of twentieth century design.¹⁷ He has argued that any historic evaluation of the significance of such factors as corporate identity creation and the economic role of design will be problematic if we rely solely on evidence drawn from the design profession itself. The self-historicisation and justification by some sectors of the profession in the often highly ideological design publications it produces has formed the basis for a number of 'celebratory design centred corporate narrative histories', which are, he suggests, at the very least partial.¹⁸

Woodham has also highlighted the problematic of the majority of museum based twentieth century design collections. His criticism has focussed on the policies that have 'centred on celebrated products or the output of specific designers whose work is seen to embrace high standards of aesthetic distinction or cultural status.' Furthermore, he adds, those charged with selection policies and the acquisition of materials 'have generally been drawn from a narrow social and cultural spectrum and, when they have been bold enough to step outside their own national conventions of artistic excellence have often favoured objects that conformed to the modernist canon.'¹⁹

While Australian theorist Tony Fry has defined design history as 'various and competing explanatory models of design',²⁰ design history has been considered by others as 'merely seeking to reproduce and interpret concrete events as they actually occurred'.²¹

While the object or artifact has been identified as the focus of design historians some later writers have suggested that while objects have remained important as the symbolic location of experience, increasingly the focus has centred on the psychological, social, and cultural contexts that give meaning and value to products and to the discipline of design. However it can be argued that this is not a break or abrupt change of approach, but rather a recognition that 'objects are situated in a variety of ways that were not clearly understood or adequately informed by the designers, historians, critics and theorists who established precedents in the field of design in the early 20thC'.²² This position better recognises a continuum between design history and more philosophical and theoretical approaches.

The New Zealand Design Archive

Research, scholarship and publication in New Zealand design history is limited. While in recent years there has been some growth in terms of historical exhibitions, social history compilations that include writing about artifacts and a burgeoning of design as lifestyle magazines, such presentations have tended to focus on individual designers-as-artists, baby boomer nostalgia or 'good design', with little consideration of production, consumption, economies of taste or trade or the contexts that give meaning and value to products and to the discipline of design.

The NZDA was established in 1999 to document and publish material about New Zealand design history, building on the Auckland University of Technology's established reputation in design education and providing an online repository for postgraduate teaching and research.

Through the processes of identifying and documenting types of New Zealand design material not represented in national design collections, and researching the establishment of a digital archive within a national and institutional environment that provided little in the way of infrastructure or expertise, the research team had to develop an understanding of both historical and technological research processes. In doing so the project focus had to engage not only with pragmatics but with ontological questions in relation to design and its history and how it might be represented, structured and interpreted through computing systems.

The project currently visible on www.nzda.ac.nz is about to undergo a major redevelopment (its third in five years) as we upgrade the database, interface and contributor dynamics to bring theory and practice closer. This will include practical improvements allowing other research partners to add material to the Archive remotely; setting up better online editing and quality assurance processes; supporting other file formats like Flash, M peg and digital video. It will also enable a more flexible user interface allowing not only text-based search and retrieval, but access to various interpretative frameworks through which particular objects can be viewed and linked to build up historical narratives.

Conclusion

Manovich's analysis of the genealogy of new media - from an underlying techno-logical initiative, mediated through old industrial media genres into new media forms (in particular of database and interface) has some parallels with the genealogy, the changing contexts and the resulting problematic of design and its history, which has evolved as a discipline over the same period. Such parallels suggest a different sort of 'archival relation' to that of art history (which developed as a study of unique pre industrial forms) and suggest a potential in shifting Hal Foster's question to an enquiry into design research, design collection and design history.

The lack of definition within the discipline of design, while being a major factor in the current confusion surrounding design research may not be a negative attribute. Within the context of technological convergence, design is situated in an interdisciplinary position and may be better located to enable the identification and address such complex ontological issues of culture and computing than more rigidly defined, traditional disciplines.

¹ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002) p.112.

² Susan Pearce and Kenneth Arnold, *The Collectors Voice* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2002).

³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) p.152 – 153.

⁴ Steve Dietz, *Memory_Archive_Database* v3.0, 1999,
http://switch.sjsu.edu/~switch/nextswitch/switch_engine/front/front.php?artc=31

⁵ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001) p. 46.

⁶ Manovich, *ibid*

⁷ See Maryly Snow, 'Property and Capital in 19th & Early 20th Century Visual Collections: Tales in Search of the History of the Visual Copy' (unpublished paper from Gateway to the Future Conference, ARLIS, St Louis, USA, 2002) p. 5.

⁸ Christopher Bailey and Margaret Graham, 'The Corpus and the Art Historian' (Unpublished paper, DRH2001 Conference, London 2001) p.1.

⁹ Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (London: Verso, 2002) p.65 - 82.

¹⁰ Foster, *ibid*

¹¹ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001) p.223

- ¹² Practionary Chayutsahakij, 'Overview', *Visible Languages, Special Issue: An Annotated Design Research Bibliography; by and for the design community*, 2002 Volume 36, number 2 p.7.
Chayutsahakij, 2002
- ¹³ *ibid*
- ¹⁴ Krippendorff, K. 'Redesigning design: an invitation to a responsible future' in Tahkokallio, P. & Vihma, S. (eds) (1995) *Design – Pleasure or Responsibility?* Helsinki: University of Art and Design.
<http://www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/krippendorff>
- ¹⁵ Buchanan, R. 'Wicked Problems in Design' (1992) in Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. (eds) (1995) *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press) p.3.
- ¹⁶ Buchanan, R., Doordan, D. & Margolin, V. (1988) Editorial, *Design Issues*, 14 (1) Spring.
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Woodham, *Twentieth-Century Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.154-159.
- ¹⁸ Woodham, *ibid*
- ¹⁹ Woodham, *ibid*
- ²⁰ Tony Fry, 'Geography of Power: Design History and Marginality' in Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. (eds) *Design Issues: Vol. VI, Number 1, Fall 1989*, p.15.
- ²¹ Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. 'Introduction' in Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. (eds) (1995) *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press)
- ²² Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. 'Introduction' in Margolin, V. & Buchanan, R. (eds) (1995) *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press)

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