

Chapter 6

Signs, Codes and Visual Culture

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Art, Design & Visual Culture

Introduction

This chapter will begin the attempt to examine works of art and design themselves. Previous chapters have examined the different ways in which artists and designers have conceived of their own activities, the various groups that they have formed themselves into and the assorted audiences or markets for visual culture. Many kinds of media have also been examined. One would be forgiven for thinking that maybe it is about time that this book actually began to look at some works of art and design. The chapter will begin the 'attempt' to look at works of art and design because, as Williams for example has pointed out (1981: 119ff.), and as has been seen above in Chapters 1 and 2, there are numerous problems involved in defining notions of 'art' and 'design' and of 'works of art and design themselves' and then finding examples of them. This chapter will inevitably, therefore, develop many of the debates begun in Chapters 1 and 2.

This chapter will outline the main problems involved in trying to define art and design. It will consider whether conscious performance qualifies something as art, or whether art has to be of high quality. And it will ask whether art is something that is beautiful or whether, as Baudrillard has argued (1981: 79), the beautiful is simply a product of difference. It will also consider whether these criteria are fit to define design. Is there any human artefact which is not in some sense a work of design? In 1988, for example, *The Sunday Times* reported on

'designer cars', 'designer water' (Philippe Starck designed the bottle for 'Glacier' water in America), 'designer jeans' and even 'designer gods' worshipped by Californian hippies (Burchfield 1988: G17). The idea of designer water and designer gods is likely to strike many as merely a characteristic of the 1980s but the notion of designer jeans and designer cars is genuinely interesting in that it seems to imply that the jeans and cars produced before the early 1980s did not have designers. This, of course, is absurd. Of course jeans and cars had designers before the early 1980s; what the prefix 'designer' does is to raise the status of the product concerned. It transforms the product almost into a piece of art.

It will be argued in this chapter that there are no neutral, objective and eternal definitions of art and design that could be used to analyse and explain them. 'Art', 'design' and even 'visual culture' are not innocent, neutral or objective terms. Different people, existing in different societies at different times and places, have defined these terms in many different ways. A simple postmodernist relativism will be avoided, however, by arguing that different cultures at different times and places have used different rules, or codes, to define what is and is not art and design and to distinguish one form of art or design from another. These are among the ways that cultural identity is formed. Following Williams (1981: 130ff.), these codes, which play a role in determining the interpretation of visual signs within a culture, will be explained as external and internal codes. External codes are used to indicate the places and occasions at which art and design may be encountered and internal codes govern the interpretation of signs within the work of art or design. For example, if one receives an invitation to a private show at an art gallery, one will expect a certain type of event to take place, with certain types of people present doing certain kinds of thing. Internal codes are used to convey a desired impression or meaning. These internal codes help us to understand, for example, that visible brushstrokes in a painting may signify an expressionist, rather than a realist, painting, or that 'Boom' written in large letters can signify an economic phenomenon in the *Wall Street Journal* or an explosion in a children's cartoon.

Art and design as conscious performance

The first definition of art and design to be considered is that art and design are conscious performance or exhibition, the product of some

- no clear definition of 'art' or 'design'
- each def. depends on codes (internal + external) of time + place

- isn't just to say they are consciously making art, not from their conscience?

conscious planning process. This definition has the benefit of including all that would normally be called art: painting, sculpture and so on. It would also include all design products; there can be no design products, after all, that are not the product of a planning process. Film and television would also be included in such a definition, as would dance and various performance art forms.

Problems arise, however, if the idea of an unconscious or subconscious mind is admitted. It was Sigmund Freud, working in Vienna until 1938, when he moved to London to escape the Nazis, who is often credited with discovering the unconscious. The idea of the unconscious is needed in Freudian theory to explain aspects of people's behaviour that cannot be explained by recourse to our conscious minds. The notion of the unconscious implies that people are not as in control of their desires and actions, and of the pleasures they receive from those actions, as they would like to think. The unconscious, on this kind of account, is a reservoir of unacknowledged, and unacknowledgeable, desires, all of which actively fight independently to be satisfied in the things people do and say in everyday life. Some artists attempted to give expression to the contents and workings of their unconscious or subconscious minds.

The Dadaists, for example, were very interested in their dreams, which for Freud were a special route to uncovering the contents of the unconscious. André Breton, Louis Aragon, Max Ernst and Robert Desnos were among the Dadaists who experimented with hypnosis and sleep in order to get at images from the unconscious which were normally repressed by consciousness. They also experimented with what they called automatic writing, writing which attempted to escape or bypass the conscious mind to reveal unconscious feelings and desires. The conscious mind was seen by the likes of André Breton as a sort of mental straitjacket, confining and restricting the imaginative impulses to be found in the unconscious.

The Surrealists, who many see as developing out of Dadaism, were also interested in the unconscious. Indeed, in the First Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, surrealism was defined in terms of a 'pure psychic automatism . . . thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason'. The automatic writing of the Dadaists was supplemented by automatic drawing, introduced by André Masson in 1924, in which a line, or lines, formed supposedly unconscious images which could be embellished and developed by the conscious mind. Of course it is Salvador Dali who is most popularly associated with Surrealism and the unconscious. Although artists like Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico

and even René Magritte have been understood as using dreams and other elements of the unconscious to produce paintings, it is Dali who claims most of the attention. Dali's work of the 1920s and 1930s is said to contain images from dreams and to use the mechanisms of dreams that were identified by Freud in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in 1900.

Other artists, it is claimed, did their best work when in less than complete control of their minds. It has been suggested, for example, that Vincent Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, James Ensor, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Beckmann and George Grosz all endured mental health problems which were not unconnected to the impact and success of their work. Of these, it is probably Van Gogh whose work has most consistently been interpreted in terms of mental illness. The point here is that these painters were not always in control of their minds and that much of their work was produced during such episodes. It is difficult, therefore, to rule their work out, to say that it is not art because it was not always under conscious control. Munch's painting *The Scream* is usually explained as the pictorial representation of his psychological problems, as is much of Van Gogh's work, and the question of creative madness is raised above, in Chapter 3.

As far as design is concerned, the status of the unconscious is problematic. At one level, the notion of design appears to leave little room for the unconscious; at this level, every aspect of a product's design should be accountable to reason. This is not to argue, of course, that objects of design may not be said to be the result of the designer's unconscious desires. Nor is it to argue that consumers and users of designed objects may not be said to get unconscious pleasures from consuming and using those objects. It is, however, to use the popular notion of the design process as one that is totally rational, the result of reason, to question the notion of the unconscious having a large role to play in design. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that in the 1930s Dali, one of the most well-known of the Surrealist artists, designed hats and other accessories for Elsa Schiaparelli and in the 1940s he produced a sofa in the shape of Mae West's lips. In 1928, Dali also collaborated with Luis Buñuel, the film-maker, on the film *Un Chien Andalou* and two years later they made *L'Age d'or*. Fashion, furniture and film, then, may well be examples of some of the areas in which the unconscious plays a part: they are not necessarily always under the conscious control of their producers or consumers.

art is conscious
but I'd like
that it means
we are
supposed to
necessarily
be conscious
study of
unconscious
like dadaists
& surrealists
make the
one that we
are not
necessarily
have to have
conscious
control: the
conscious
embellishes
the ideas
from the
subconscious

their
artists
who are
just
plain
crazy =
not
conscious
at what
they're
doing.

design + the
unconscious:
unconscious choice
of what to make,
unconscious pleasure
from use

So, unless one is willing to argue that Dadaist and Surrealist painting, sculpture and performance are not art, then art cannot simply be a matter of conscious performance. In addition, art cannot simply be a matter of conscious exhibition, as there are images, cave paintings, for example, which many people want to call art but which do not appear to have been consciously exhibited. It is at least plausible to suggest, that is, that paintings and drawings found deep in inaccessible caves are not being consciously exhibited. Similarly, unless one is willing to deny that people may get unconscious pleasures from creating and consuming pieces of art and design, then art and design cannot be entirely conscious phenomena. This is because, in order to deny such a proposition, one must argue that creators and consumers are always in control of their desires, pleasures and reactions.

Art and design as high quality

This is the idea that for something to be considered 'real' art or design, it has to be something that is **performed or produced to a very high standard**. Ernst Gombrich proposes a version of this definition in his *The Story of Art*, where he says that 'we speak of art whenever anything is done so superlatively well that we all but forget to ask what the work is supposed to be, for sheer admiration of the way it is done' (Gombrich 1950: 456; see also Gombrich 1979: 152). There are various problems inherent in such an approach. First, there is the question as to **how to define 'high standards'**. Different people will have different ideas as to what is a high standard; producers will have different ideas of standards from the users and consumers of art and design. For example, some might hold that painting in oil is necessarily of a higher standard than painting in watercolours because it is more difficult or technically demanding. Others might believe that furniture from Ikea is of a lower standard than that from John Lewis or Habitat; such people would be committed to arguing that Ikea furniture is not proper design, as it is not of a sufficiently high standard. And there will be those people who see the camerawork or the acting in the *Dirty Harry* series of films as vastly inferior to that of Kieslowski's *Three Colours* series. However tempting or initially plausible, however, it is not easy to argue that watercolours are not art, that Ikea furniture is not design and that the camerawork and acting of *Dirty Harry* is neither art nor design. Is all watercolour

painting not art? Is the whole Ikea range not design? And is there not a minute in the *Dirty Harry* series that does not become art? What, similarly, is to be made of art that uses poster paints, of furniture from Argos and of the acting in the *Police Academy* films? Is there some superlative form of non-art and non-design?

The problem remains, also, as to what criteria are supposed to be applied to these items of art and design. **Where are criteria of quality supposed to come from?** Every single criterion will necessarily come from some socially located group within a society. Each of these groups will have its own idea as to what constitutes quality in paintings, furniture and film. There are other problems. Even if it proved possible to arrive at criteria of quality that were acceptable to all the different social groups and classes of a society, there is still the problem that there are things which one might want to call art which have **functions other than that of being art**. For example, if it is agreed that items of 'real' art are those things that are produced to 'high standards', then items like the Swiss Army Knife, the Golden Gate Bridge and an Emanuel dress must be admitted as works of art. This may be no problem to many people. The problem is, however, that all of these items are functional items as well as being or not being works of art. They are all items that have uses, that are functional items, as well as being of high quality.

Art, design and aesthetic intention

This definition of art and design proposes that **art and design is that which has some aesthetic intention or purpose**. It was first broached in Chapter 1 above, which was trying to define visual culture and where Erwin Panofsky's account of art as that which was aesthetically affecting was introduced. On the broadest possible understanding of the aesthetic, art and design would be everything that could be seen, everything that affected one's visual senses. Clearly, this will not do. It was noted in Chapter 1 that natural objects, like landscapes, or the human body may affect one's senses but they are not works of art or design in any commonly accepted form. The idea could be refined, so that it was only objects that both affected one aesthetically and were 'beautiful' or 'harmonious' that were art or design. Again, this fails to rule out natural objects: both landscapes and the human body may be referred to as beautiful and harmonious and, as noted above, they are not the sorts of things that one would want to call art or design. There

Does aesthetically affecting have to mean beautiful?

people are never always in control of their desires

high standards are hard to define because all cultures are diff. have diff needs (and criterion for what is art + what is functional) so when would the def. come from

RAADTY ARGUMENT!

are also the problems that, first, the beautiful may vary between different class and social groups and, second, that the beautiful may only be a product of difference. The first argument is that, as different groups will have different ideas as to what is beautiful, they will have different ideas as to what is and is not art. The second argument, as put forward by Jean Baudrillard, for example (1981: 79), is that, as the beautiful is the product of historically shifting relations of difference, what counts as art is only the result of those differences. It is the argument that there is nothing substantial or significant in the things themselves that is beautiful, just that they are different from other things.

This kind of definition is useful in that it allows the serious consideration of items that fall beyond the traditional categories of art and design, but it is less helpful in that it does not rule much out. It also allows the discussion of the art and design of many different social groups, but it does not account for the fact that the aesthetically affecting may have other functions, which are not aesthetic. Thus, fashion and clothing, garden design, film and furniture design may all affect one aesthetically but, like the items considered above, they all have other properties and qualities as well as those of being aesthetically affecting. They may all be considered as items of visual culture. But they also have other functions. Thus, a garden is almost guaranteed to affect one aesthetically, but it may also be a garden in a primary school, that is there to teach the young about plants. It therefore has an educative function as well as an aesthetic function. The Armani raincoat is also likely to affect one aesthetically, but it also has the function of keeping anyone fortunate enough to wear one dry in a shower.

There are other problems involved in defining art and design in this way. The main problem is analogous to some of those noted above. It is that what counts as aesthetically affecting is also likely to vary between different social groups. Just as there are those who will remain forever ignorant of the tonal subtleties of Vermeer, there are those who will miss the energy and power of Captain America or Batman comics. There is, therefore, an element of truth in Clive Bell's pronouncement that Frith's painting of Paddington Station 'is not a work of art' (Bell 1982: 71). To someone of Bell's class and educational background, the thoughts and feelings evoked by Frith's work simply are not those that are recognised as aesthetic; the work, therefore, is not a work of art. It should be pointed out that many contemporaries of Frith would not have disagreed with Bell's later

beautiful - different

so many things - these are functions besides being aesthetically affecting

what is aesthetically affecting from culture to culture

judgements. His 1889 painting, *The New Frock*, for example, was purchased by the Lever company and made into an advertisement for Sunlight soap, even suffering the indignity of being retitled *So Clean*. The argument is that the audience which saw the painting only in the form of an advertisement can be said to have responded to it aesthetically, but in such a way as to have bought the soap as part of their (aesthetic) response to the painting. To someone like Bell, however, such a response is not an aesthetic response and the work is not art.

Art and design as sign systems

The attempt to look at the works of art and design themselves, then, is not as straightforward as it might at first appear. As soon as a definition of either art or design is proposed, it seems that there are other social groups or other historical periods which would define them differently. Consequently, different objects, practices and so on count as art or design for different groups and periods. There are no objective, neutral and eternal definitions of art and design that may be used in the study and explanation of visual culture. Now, there are those people who will be cast into despair by thoughts such as these. It may well be argued that as there are no such objective and neutral definitions, there can be no definitions at all. Alternatively, it could also be argued that as there are no such neutral and objective definitions, there can be no useful work done in the study and explanation of visual culture. Both of these arguments may be presented as a form of relativism. If what is thought to be art, design, beauty and aesthetic feeling, for example, is relative to cultural time and place, then there can be no stable knowledge and analysis of those things. However, these arguments all presuppose that such thoughts are obstacles standing in the way of further thoughts.

It is possible to see such thoughts as starting points on the way to other thoughts. Rather than understanding the arguments above negatively, as signalling the impossibility of knowledge and analysis, it is possible to understand them positively, as being productive of knowledge and analysis. The attempt to provide answers to questions like 'what is art?' or 'what is aesthetic feeling?', for example, is itself also an essential part of the human process of cultural production. Just as people do not stop producing visual culture (despite having no objective and neutral definitions for it), so people should not stop

no exam def. of art + design therefore they can't be analysed objectively
but they're relative to time + place so that it's not objective either

what is art? what is aesthetic feeling? → more planned

trying to analyse and explain it (despite having no objective and stable definitions for it). Different groups within different societies define the artistic and the aesthetic differently as part of the process of their cultural life. It follows that **debates concerning the artistic and the aesthetic may be seen as social processes**, as part of social life (Williams 1981: 130). They may, therefore, be studied as cultural production. The analysis and explanation of visual culture itself do not need an objective and neutral account of culture, art and the aesthetic, for example, in order to study what different cultures understand by these terms. **Nor does it need such an account in order to analyse and explain the ways in which they are used by those different cultures.** Thus, that Clive Bell understands by the notion of the aesthetic something completely different from what Frith or the Lever company understood by it is not only evidence that these definitions are not objective terms or eternal truths. It is also evidence that the differences between Bell, Frith and Lever are part of ongoing cultural processes, part of a specific debate concerning the nature of the aesthetic, for example, in a particular society. They may be studied as such by visual culture.

So, **distinctions between art and design, and distinctions between what is and what is not a valid aesthetic experience, for example, are made differently by different social groups.** These social groups exist within different societies found in different times and places. As there are different societies, existing in different times and places, one may expect the distinctions and definitions that they make (between art and design, and between different forms of aesthetic experience, for example) to vary and to change. These distinctions and definitions are parts of and products of the cultural processes of those societies. As such, they may be studied, analysed and explained by visual culture. In this way, it is suggested that **what some see as obstacles may in fact be seen as starting points.** These **sets of distinctions and definitions are themselves culturally significant; they indicate the values and beliefs of different cultural groups.** Consequently, following Raymond Williams (1981: 130ff.), **these sets will be thought of here as sign systems.**

These sign systems may be found relating to all aspects of visual culture within a society. These sign systems may also be roughly divided into two types. They may, as above, **be defining what is and what is not art and design within a society.** This type of sign may be said to be 'external': it concerns the places and occasions in which **what counts as art, or design, may or may not be found as well as the**

external signs: defines art / place / time / what it counts as and how it is expanded to

distinctions = diff by diff social groups

sign systems in def of art/design / of values/beliefs / diff cultures

ways in which a society responds to that art and design. And they may also define what the **conventions within individual art or design forms are taken to mean by that society.** This type of sign may be said to be 'internal': it concerns the devices or conventions within particular **forms of art and design.** The way in which the floating baby in Roger van der Weyden's *Three Magi* is understood as miraculous while the floating city in the *Gospels of Otto III* is not miraculous, which was discussed in Chapter 2, would be an example of how such internal signs work. According to certain conventions, floating either is or is not interpreted as miraculous. The sign systems which determine how art and design or the conventions operating within art and design are to be interpreted are therefore part of and products of the social organisations in which they are found. They also contribute to the production and reproduction of those social organisations, although this will be taken up in more detail in Chapter 8.

internal: conventions / devices used in art / design of the time

External sign systems

The first types of signs to be explained here are **external signs.** These signs indicate, primarily, the **presence or existence of art or design** at some time and place. They indicate the **nature of the experiences that one may expect to undergo at a certain time and place.** And they indicate the **nature of the relationships that will be found, and which one will be expected to enter into, at that time and place.** External signs may be thought of as **indicative of the sorts of experiences and relations that are to be expected;** they are preparatory in the sense that they prepare one, make one ready for that set of experiences and relationships. Williams proposes the art gallery and the performance of a play as two cases in which the external signs for art and theatre may be clearly discerned (1981: 131-2). The art gallery, he says, 'is a place specialised and designated for looking at painting or sculpture as art' (131). The art gallery, then, is a sign that what is to be found inside it is 'art', as opposed to not-art. In the theatre, the sign system of 'advertised time of performance, arrangement of seating, raising of curtain and so on' indicate that one is in the presence of a 'play', or a piece of 'theatre', as opposed to 'real life', presumably (132).

external - relations + experiences + indicated them out @ a specific time + place

In an art gallery, then, the external sign system consists in the advertisement of opening times, the displaying of paintings on walls and of sculptures set on plinths, the progression of rooms and corridors and the arrangement of ropes and other protective devices.

Such elements signify that one is in the presence of art, that one is to walk round in a prescribed order and not get too close to the works. In many ways, this is not so very different to the external sign system of many upmarket furniture shops, for example. There is a store on Third Avenue in New York called *Bon Marché*. Among other things, it sells chairs designed by the likes of Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier. Various relatively minor cues will differentiate this store from many museums of modern design; the store advertises its willingness to accept payment by Visa and MasterCard and points out that its uptown branch is open at slightly different times from its downtown branch (see Ill. 6.1). The presence of credit facilities is one way in which the establishment externally signifies that it is a store and not a design museum. It alerts one to the fact that one may expect a slightly different set of experiences from what one would expect at the design museum. There is a commercial relation present at the Bon Marché store that is not present at the art gallery.

That is not to say that there is never a commercial relation present at an art gallery. Should one receive an invitation to the opening of a show, or a private show at a gallery, one would be surprised to find that there were no paintings or other art works present. More specifically, one would be surprised to find that there were no art works for sale. In this instance, there would be an art gallery, containing paintings and maybe sculptures, but there would also be price tags, as in the furniture store, and there may even be credit facilities available, as in the furniture store. The external signs are slightly different in each case, indicating a different set of experiences to be undergone and a different set of relations to be entered into. In the gallery, for example, there would be spectators, perhaps even connoisseurs and art lovers. In the store, there would be customers, salesmen and saleswomen, maybe even credit advisers. Alternatively, where the practice of holding swatches of fabrics or wall-paper against the items on display, to see if they 'go', would pass unnoticed in the furniture store, it would almost certainly attract whispers of disapproval in the gallery. The descriptions of people as either spectators or customers describe the different relations into which people enter in the different contexts and prescribe the different experiences and behaviours that are to be expected in those contexts.

The differences between books, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines and leaflets, for example, may also be explained in terms of external signs. The different aesthetic experiences associated with these

CLASSICS FOR THE 1990's

A Mies Van Der Rohe
Black frame/Black
Peltex or Marial
\$139
Chrome frame/
Black Peltex
\$169

B M. Stam
Chrome frame/
Grey,
or White Leather
\$49.99
Chrome frame/Black Leather
\$54.99

C Mallet Stevens
Black steel w/ Black
vinyl seats
\$57.50 ea. 4 or more
single \$12.50
Also: Upholstered seat
& back, black fabric
Reg. \$69 Now \$59

**D Marcel Breuer's
Wassily Chair**
Chrome frame/ Black or
Black Frame/ Black Leather
\$199

E Le Corbusier Lounger
Original Design:
Chrome/Black frame
\$415
Pads: Peltex \$177
Leather \$359
Other variations
available from \$100

F Eileen Gray
Adjustable table
w/glass top
Chrome or
Black frame
\$135

Closed Monday Labor Day

READY TO GO
VISA MASTERCARD
DOWNTOWN &
UPTOWN HOURS
DAILY & SAT
10:30 - 6:30

IN STOCK
DELIVERY ADD'L
PICK UP AT OUR
18TH ST
LOCATION
10:30 - 6:15

**bon
marché**

020-5682 ◀ 1080 3rd AVE (83rd St.) • 55 W. 18th St., N.Y.C. ▶ 020-5550

Commercial aspect
of design always there but
never set of design
to me of
spectator

different types of printed matter are a product of their different external signs. As noted above, the external signs prepare people for various different experiences and ways of behaving. Thus, many people are more careful with a hardback book than they are with a paperback or a magazine; they simply take more care of it. The external signs of a hard cover, relatively expensive binding techniques and usually better-quality paper, indicate to people that a different form of behaviour is expected and a different level of response required. Many people behave towards some hardback books as if they were pieces of art, displaying them in full view, as if they were rare and precious things, on a coffee table. The pleasures of magazines and newspapers are generally much more ephemeral than those of books of any kind and this is suggested by the materials, the quality of paper and binding, for example, that make them up. In these ways, then, external signs prepare people for the kinds of experiences, behaviour and pleasures that are to be expected in and from a certain kind of product.

There are, of course, those artists who set out deliberately to confound the expectations set up by these external signs. This can be done in a number of ways. First, ordinary and everyday objects may be displayed in galleries. This is the tactic adopted by sculptors such as Carl Andre and Marcel Duchamp. Andre is famous for exhibiting one hundred and twenty firebricks at the Tate Gallery in 1976 and calling it a sculpture, *Equivalent VIII*. Duchamp achieved similar notoriety some sixty years earlier when he exhibited a men's urinal in New York with the title *Fountain*. Second, conventionally artistic objects and practices may be exhibited or performed in places which are not art galleries. The work of Richard Long, or Andy Goldsworthy, who creates often beautiful and moving sculptural objects from snow, ice, grass and other natural objects in natural settings like forests and fields, may be seen as an example of this strategy. The external signs which indicate 'art gallery' are absent but the objects nevertheless invite the description 'art'. And third, artists may challenge both the location and the object or performance conventionally labelled art by means of manipulating these external signs. The performance art of the Futurists and Constructivists in the early twentieth century may be seen as an example of such manipulation, as might the performance art of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists such as Stuart Brisley, performing arduous and strenuous pieces in their baths, for example, do not obviously exhibit conventional external signs for the performance or presence of art.

Internal sign systems

The second type of sign is internal signs. These signs may be thought of as conventional signs and they indicate a relationship between form and social structure. A simple example will make this difficult and rather grand-sounding definition clearer. It is well-known that shavers for men are often matt black and largely rectangular; they may also be grey and set off with an orange or a red line, like the red line that surrounds the Golf GTi radiator grille. Shavers for women are often found in shiny pastel shades and in more circular and rounded shapes. These shapes, colours and textures constitute internal signs. From signs such as these one may understand that they are masculine or feminine objects; the signs signify either masculine or feminine. That the masculine object is matt, black and largely rectangular and that the feminine object is shiny, pastel and largely rounded is the result of conventions. It is entirely conventional that one set of shapes, colours and textures is deemed to be masculine and another set feminine. The difference in colour, shape and texture signifies a difference in gender identity. These signs are interpreted according to these conventions, thus indicating the relation between form (the shape, colour and texture) and social structure (whether they are for men or women).

Different styles of art and design may be approached and explained in terms of internal signs. There are, for example, styles of art and design that draw attention to the methods and means of their own production. And there are styles of art and design that attempt to hide the methods and means of their production. In painting it is tempting to arrange works on a sliding scale which has seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings at one end and twentieth-century abstract expressionist works at the other. In the still life paintings, there is every attempt made to efface the work of the artist's brush, and in the abstract expressionist paintings there seems to be every attempt to draw attention to the work of the brush and the constructed nature of the piece. Now, someone like Norman Bryson would explain this scale as a common-sense and misguided attempt to explain realism, or the lack of it, in painting (Bryson 1981: 1-28). On this misguided explanation, realistic paintings would be the product of the brushstrokes being almost invisible and the lack of realism in abstract expressionist paintings would be the result of the brushstrokes, or knife-marks, or whatever, being highly visible. Whether the explanation is misguided or not, it is clear that there is something like a convention operating here. The brushstrokes are constructed either to

external context of people's behaviour towards hardback vs paperback

be visible or to not be visible and meaning is ascribed to the paintings as a result. The former is understood by common sense to be realistic and the latter are said to be 'modern', 'postmodern' or even 'avant garde'.

Works of design may also be approached in terms of these internal signs. Some works of design seem to have appeared on the planet as if by magic, as if they were not made by human processes at all. Others look as if they are not yet finished, as if they should go back to the factory for completion, so apparent are the marks of their construction. The steel furniture of Ron Arad, for example, displays all too clearly the methods and means of its construction; sheet steel is difficult to present in a way that disguises the fact that it must be worked, bent, riveted and welded. The Lloyds building in London, designed by Richard Rogers, is a building that many have objected to because it displays the methods and means of its construction. It makes no attempt to hide the fact that it is constructed, and that it is constructed from certain, all too obvious, materials. Furniture that is available on the high street, however, never shows its screws or its staples; such features would be grounds for returning the product to the store. Similarly, most domestic buildings conceal their construction. Cement and plaster are always 'finished'; indeed, the latter is used to cover bricks and is itself most often papered over so that it will not be seen. Again, as with paintings, such buildings as do display the means and methods of their construction are variously described as 'modern', 'postmodern' or 'avant-garde'.

As Kurt Back has pointed out, fashion is also an area of design where the characteristic methods of construction have become of central interest recently. He argues that where modern painting displays the means and methods of its own construction to announce 'this is a painting', so modern fashion displays the means and methods of its construction to announce 'this is clothing' (Back 1985: 12). In the early 1990s, there was a group of fashion designers who routinely exposed the seams of their garments, who used fabrics that were more commonly used only in the construction and strengthening of garments, who left edges unfinished and who restricted their palettes to black, white and perhaps natural creams. These designers, who included the likes of Martin Margiela and Anne Demeulemeester, were known as deconstructionists and were thought of as postmodern designers. Again, the fashions and clothing found in high street stores are more likely to be rejected as faulty or 'imperfect' and returned to the manufacturer if they have exposed seams or edges left unfinished.

The different forms and styles of typography and layout used in books, in magazines and on television programmes are also good places to look for internal sign systems. In *Bugs!*, for example, a nature magazine for the very young, the typography used for the title is a form of handwritten script, mixing upper and lower case and appearing in a variety of lurid, often primary, colours. The close-up image of some hideous bug on the cover is surrounded by bright yellow lines which zig-zag at an angle across a blue background. Much of the headline type inside the magazine is placed at bizarre angles, getting larger or smaller as it progresses across the page. And some of it threads snake-like, or 'creepy-crawly'-like, as it promises to uncover 'the creepy-crawly world of minibeasts' (*Bugs!*, no. 6, 1994). The print appears on a variety of background colours, black, salmon-pink and a rather unsettling shade of green. The effect is extremely colourful, energetic and sometimes, frankly, exhausting to look at. The BBC's magazine *Wildlife*, however, has a rather different audience. It is read by senior members of the Forestry Commission, the British Bryological Association and Sustrans, if the letters page for the April 1994 edition is at all representative (bryology, of course, is the science of mosses and Sustrans is the name of a group that supports ecological transport policies). There are, admittedly, some rather racy diagonals on the front cover (an advertisement for Simon King's *Wildguide* video appears just off the vertical and the top right corner has a tiny promotion for a photography competition), but the tone is generally much more sedate. The typefaces are usually sans serif, they are always horizontal and they never get bigger or smaller as they progress across the page. These typefaces, layouts, colours and so on are internal signs. They are also conventional. It is, for example, a conventional idea of childhood that children like big, bold, exciting and colourful images. The more mature readers of the BBC magazine are conventionally held to be put off by such things. This is part of the explanation why the magazines look the ways they do.

It was argued above that the sign systems which determine how art and design or the conventions operating within art and design are to be interpreted are part of and products of the social organisations in which they are found. This is clear in the case of the shavers: the shapes, colours and textures are conventionally associated with different sex and gender groups. They also contribute to the production and reproduction of those social organisations. The continued and unthinking use of these shapes, colours and textures in these ways produces and reproduces sexual and gender identity. In the case of

painting, furniture design and fashion design; the relation between form and social structure may be less clear. It is, nevertheless, still there. It is there, for example, in the reference to the avant-garde. The notion of an avant-garde only makes sense in terms of a social group that is apart from, and maybe opposed to, a larger social whole, the rest of the society. As such, it represents an elite form of visual culture, available only to those with the educational background, what Bourdieu calls the 'cultural capital', to respond to it, to understand it and thus appreciate it. The furniture of Ron Arad is not found in everyone's home, just as the fashions of Martin Margiela and Anne Demeulemeester are not found in everyone's wardrobe. They are found in the homes and wardrobes of a small educated and moneyed cultural group. The members of this small cultural group use such items to construct their identity as members of that group and to differentiate themselves from other cultural groups. Consequently, the internal signs here construct class identity, rather than sex or gender identity. This is the relation between form and social structure.

In the case of the typography, the relation between form and social structure is also fairly clear. The kinds of shapes, colours, typographies, layouts and so on used by the children's magazine are those conventionally linked with children. In the way that matt, black and rectilinear were deemed to be masculine, so bold, colourful, odd angles and different sizes are deemed to be appropriate to children. The use of these typefaces, colours and layouts, for example, both produces and reproduces the identity of childhood as a certain kind of thing: it produces and reproduces childhood as having a specific meaning. The more sober, horizontal and staid typography and layout of *Wildlife*, however, is understood to be more appropriate to older readers. It is a convention in certain cultures that maturer and possibly professional readers will not be attracted by the colourful and energetic approach of *Bugs!* but will require a more conservative approach.

Crossover

There is, of course, what might be called 'crossover' between internal and external signs. This is where external signs become internal and where internal signs become external. It seems to be more difficult and less common, however, for internal signs to become external than for external signs to become internal. Internal signs can become

internal signs
can be external if
they cause you to
think about you to
to think about you to
what the object
created was
imposed by

external signs when the design or style of a building raises questions as to the characteristic experiences to be had, and the appropriate forms of behaviour to be adopted, within it. The Pompidou Centre, designed by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano in 1977, houses the gallery and library of the *Centre de création industrielle* in Paris. It is confusing enough for the word 'creation' to be used in conjunction with the word 'industrial', but when the gallery and library look like a factory, as some have suggested, people might be forgiven for not knowing what to expect or how to react to the objects within the building. What some people have suggested is that the Pompidou Centre does not look like a gallery should; it does not look like the Louvre, for example, or even the Guggenheim Museum. And it certainly does not look like the great municipal art galleries of Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester, for example. Consequently, the expectations as to what will be encountered within the building and how the contents are to be reacted to may well be unclear. The great municipal art galleries of the world engender an atmosphere of calm, of solidity and of civic prosperity and propriety in which the best of the world's art may be contemplated. Buildings like the Pompidou Centre adopt a different set of internal signs and disrupt the conventional understanding of those signs as they relate to what might be expected within such a building.

External signs may always be approached and analysed as internal signs, however. This is because those signs will always have to be done in some style or other. The style-free or neutral sign is impossible. Thus, for example, the invitation to the private show, or the fashion store shop-front, will always be done in some style or other. Consequently, it will always be available for analysis as an internal sign.

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Conclusion

This chapter has shown that a neutral, objective and innocent definition of either art or design is impossible. It has, however, argued that, far from being a problem, this is a starting point for the understanding and analysis of visual culture in that different cultural groups, existing at different times and places, will define art and design, as well as what counts as aesthetic experience, differently, as part of the way they are constituted as a cultural group. These different definitions, then, may be used to analyse and explain those

cultures' responses to visual culture. It was also argued that the notions of internal and external signs could profitably be used to investigate what cultures defined as art and design as well as the conventions in terms of which their art and design could be interpreted. Thus, what different cultures defined as art and design, as well as the conventions they used to interpret those works, were linked to the social structures existing within those cultures. Indeed, it was claimed that they were the ways in which those social structures were produced and reproduced. These matters will be returned to in Chapter 8, on culture and reproduction.

The next chapter will consider the various different types of art and design. It will look at the ways in which paintings, no less than cars, trousers and typefaces, exist in many different forms. And it will consider potential explanations as to why these things exist in so many different forms. Specifically, it will consider the argument that these things look the way they do because different cultural and social groups use them to construct and reproduce their identities.

Chapter 7

Different Types of Art and Design

Introduction

This chapter begins to explain how and why cultural products, such as works of art and design or visual culture, are produced in so many different forms or types. It is difficult to think of an area of visual culture that does not offer products in different forms. This proliferation of forms exists in fashion, furniture design, photography and graphic design, in addition to painting, car design and film. There are different types or forms, then, and there are different types within these types. This chapter will begin to explain these different types of cultural products as developing in time and in relation to different social classes or fractions of classes. This chapter will explain the different types of art and design as the product of different social classes and fractions of classes existing and evolving in time. Different social and cultural groups, at specific times and places, use these different types of art and design to construct and communicate their identities. These artefacts exist in different forms in order to construct and communicate different social and cultural identities, then. Part of the explanation of why these things look the way they do, therefore, is that different social and cultural groups use them to differentiate themselves from each other. So, part of the explanation of the appearance of visual culture is found in the existence of different and opposing social and cultural groups.