CRAFT

Instead of technique, I think it might be useful to talk about craft. A contemporary mistake assumes that craft has something to do with paper-mâché, or that it is merely the manipulation of production. It is true that the more one understands the computer or printing, the better one can devise solutions to problems. But to define craft trivially, only in terms of technique, does not address the way that knowledge is developed through skill.

My own interest in craft stems from my experience as a design student at Cranbrook, where "the crafts", like weaving and ceramics and metal smithing, were taught seriously. I was always confused by what seemed like a strict but unexplained wall between design and craft; "craft" seemed to be limited to the making of one-of-a-kind things, whereas design was aimed at mass production. We all made things for use, but a deeper issue seemed to exist at the heart of how things were made.

In my search to understand this, I encountered *The Art of the Maker*, a book by the late British design theorist Peter Dormer. He discusses craft in terms of two different types of knowledge. The first is theoretical knowledge, the concepts behind things, the language we use to describe and understand ideas; the second is tacit knowledge, knowledge gained through experience, or "know-how."

The tacit knowledge required to make something work is not the same as a theoretical understanding of the principles behind it. Theory might help you understand how to make something better, but craft knowledge (sometimes also called "local" knowledge) has to be experienced on another level. For Dormer, these two types of knowledge are completely intertwined.

Much of craft defies description. "Craft knowledge" is aquired by accumulating experience, and as you attain mastery you don't think so much about the conceptual basis that got you where you're going. Craft knowledge, though hard to

get, achieves the status of a skill once it is taken for granted and not rethought every time it has to be put into use. It's instinctual.

Knowledge gained through familiarity also includes that which we know through the senses, connoisseurship, recognition based on not only attribution or classification but also just knowing what is good (having "an eye"). Craft knowledge has to stand up to public scrutiny, but it's also very personal because it has been gained through direct experience.

When craft is put into the framework of graphic design, this might constitute what is meant by the "designer's voice" – that part of a design that is not industriously addressing the ulterior motives of a project. So craft is about tactics and concepts, seeking opportunities in the gaps of what is known, rather than trying to organize everything in a unifying theory. As Dormer states, "One needs the ability to experiment. Experimenting, … often described as playing around, demands judgment – it improves one's sense of discrimination." Dormer saw the search that is part of craft as a critical human function, comparing it to processes like the creative thinking practiced by mathematicians or physicists at the top of their games. Dormer claimed the activity of craft as a major part of our culture.

Thinking about this larger definition of craft, which equates investigation with meaning, it's possible to better account for the individual visions of many graphic designers who have produced bodies of work that don't seem so stuck in the limitations of the market. Too personal, maybe, or too eccentric, their work resonates anyway, looks better and better over time, and makes more sense. I look at my own list of guilty pleasures, designers whose work I love because of its integrity to itself, above else, like W. A. Dwiggins, who reinvented American typography by bringing arts-and-crafts values to design for machine production, all the while running his completely hand-crafted puppet theater out of a garage in Massachusetts; or Alvin Lustig, an architect, printer, designer, educator, who refused to specialize (he is the author of one of my favorite definitions of design: "I propose solutions that nobody wants to problems that don't exist"); or Imre Reiner, an anti-Modernist typographer in Switzerland, who rebelled against

"objecitvity" by coupling his own beautifully subjective scrawl with the public language of classical typography; or Sister Corita Kent, Southern California nun and printmaker who, in the 1960s, seized upon the idea of using the language of pop culture to speak to her local audience about spirituality, subverting and appropriating to communicate before those words were in our critical vocabularies; or Big Daddy Roth, and this I really can't explain, except that I think it has something to do with the pure audaciousness and delight of thinking and acting really locally; or Edward Fella, who mutated out of "commercial art" by working on problems only as he defined them – his commitment to anti-mastery (exemplified by his dictum: "keep the irregularities inconsistent") liberates design from digital perfection, getting down with everyday life, creating poetry.

Each of these designers invents in ways that transcend the clichés of "concept" that characterize so many of the current predictions of what design needs for the future. It's too easy to write this work off because of its marginality, but we need to pay attention because it suggests an alternative path. As another writer on the subject of craft, Malcolm McCullough, in his book *Abstracting Craft*, has stated, "The meaning of our work is connected to how it is made, not just 'concepted.'" I am highly self-conscious of the weirdness, in 1998, of arguing for a reenergized and reinvented teaching of basic color theory, or drawing, or composition, or basic typography that reconnects the digital with the whole span of graphic invention. But these are the tools we need to build creative independence, to liberate invention, to produce the exceptional.

A new commitment to the practice of craft will supplement design theory and help reposition design at the center of what designers contribute to the culture (and to commerce, in the long run). This is what is missing from all of the predictions for the future of design as a purely conceptual or technical activity. It's frustrating to watch so many attempt to reduce design to a theoretical argument, undervaluing the knowledge and pleasure to be gained by passionate engagement in the craft itself. The knowledge gained through activities that can be described as tactical, everyday, or simply craft is powerful and important, and it must form the foundation of a designer's education and work – it is how we create ideas; again, how we create culture. Why else are we here?