

# From the Toolbox of a Serving Library

A third pamphlet concerned with art/design education compiled by Dexter Sinister in conclusion to "Towards a Critical Faculty (Only an Attitude of Orientation)" Published by The Banff Centre and The Serving Library, Summer 2011

These are attitudes—but how do they become skills? (Richard Sennett)

This is the last in a modest trio of pamphlets that consider some past and present models of art/design education in the attempt to forge a new one. The first, *Towards a Critical Faculty*, was a compendium of both familiar and obscure fragments of arts-educational intent from across the 20th century, while the second (*Only an Attitude of Orientation*) proposed a number of "working principles"—attitudes—that a contemporary faculty might reasonably try to foster in light of this overview. And where the initial document was mostly a reader of quotes drawn from the field of pedagogy itself, its successor alternately paraphrased some related insights drawn from a wider range of disciplines such as literature, cultural studies and philosophy. The idea was to have digested these influences enough to pass them on, as a kind of practical caricature of the teaching process. Both previous installments can be freely downloaded from [www.dextersinister.org/library](http://www.dextersinister.org/library). Continuing this cumulative process, the third pamphlet's title, *From the Toolbox of a Serving Library* completes the series' compound sentence, finding form as a prospectus-of-sorts for an emerging Foundation Course-of-sorts.



Philosophical interest in the classic reciprocal Duck-Rabbit image might be summarized as follows. First you perceive one animal, then the other, but your perception of the second is affected by having seen the first, then, looking back at the first again, your perception is further affected by having seen both. This third pamphlet follows the same triangular logic: a reconsideration of the first one's scientific intentions with the second one's romantic outcomes in mind, in order to draw a total gestalt. Or—to literally cannibalize its predecessors—this pamphlet assumes the "contemporary" forms of *attitude*, *practice*, and *deconstruction*, abiding Thierry de Duve's survey of art school paradigms in the first pamphlet:

| ACADEMY   | BAUHAUS    | CONTEMPORARY   |
|-----------|------------|----------------|
| talent    | creativity | attitude       |
| technique | medium     | practice       |
| imitation | invention  | deconstruction |

— towards these ends outlined in the second one:

its students self-reflexively designing their own program as an intrinsic part of its instruction—as a movement towards a "critical faculty" in both senses of the term.

In the first pamphlet, we considered what the (then) popular but woolly term "design thinking" might augur for art/design education by collaging some diverse (and largely

incommensurable) characteristics suggested by a motley roster of writers. Since then, prompted by the free-ranging spirit of its successor, we happened across another inventory that feels both more timely and closer to home. In "A Cautious Prometheus," a talk delivered to an audience of design historians, contemporary French sociologist Bruno Latour reduces the particular "discipline" of design to five fundamentals:

*Humility*—that designing involves doubt, speculation, planning, sketching, iteration etc., rather than arrogant assertion;

*Attention to detail*—that all aspects are equally relevant and subject to scrutiny;

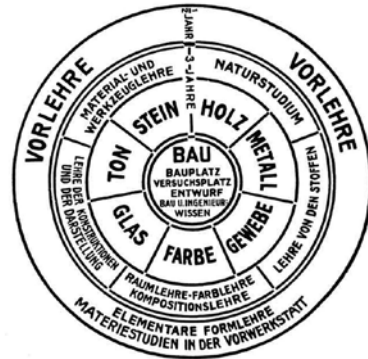
*Semiotic capacity*—that a design lends itself to interpretation;

*State of flux*—that to design something is really always to REdesign a previous version; and

*Ethical implication*—that any design essentially provokes the response "good" or "bad."

Latour cites a pretty convincing real-world example as to why these qualities are particularly pertinent right now: the ecological crisis, with its chronic imperative to deal immediately, pragmatically, with hard practicalities rather than soft abstractions. Resolution is not an option here, only constant monitoring and perpetual repair. He further claims *we have never been modern*, meaning that the "official" critical project kick-started by the Enlightenment—that of Modernity in general, and its Modernist arts wing by extension—was always fundamentally flawed. As long as we continue to proceed according to its myth of incremental progress towards perceived ideals—of absolute solutions governed by verifiable facts—Latour contends that any emancipatory ambition will remain fundamentally disabled; a lost cause. In one modest gesture towards "changing our way of changing," he proposes a semantic shift from the hoary notion of *progress* to a more tentative *progressive*. Hence the nicely absurd image of a wary Prometheus as Latour's designer mascot, cautiously sketching rather than heroically building. Our course, then, assumes a comparable demeanor—the stereotype of the well-adjusted Librarian rather than the gung-ho Bauhausler.

2



Here's our point of view. Given that the Bauhaus was set up specifically in reaction to the particular social and cultural conditions of ±1920s Germany, why does its Foundation Course ("more or less amended, more or less debased," according to De Duve) remain the default model in, say, ±2020s U.S.A.? If we reconsider what might constitute a good foundation today, initially ignoring the regular distinctions of both under- and postgraduate, and art and design, and at a necessary remove from the crippling bureaucracy that attends most schools in the early 21st century, what *progressive* form might it take?

The Bauhaus was a paternal model. To paraphrase a sentiment often ascribed to Lord Reith, one-time Director General of the BBC, it attempted to *give the public not what it wanted, but what it ought to have*—it knew what was best. From a position of intellectual authority, the school (like the BBC) concurred

what society required, and developed a fit-for-purpose plan of action in order to utilize industry towards constructive ends. A century on, we might conclude that such top-down authority in the arts has been undermined by the bottom-up primacy of market demand. And so much so that the implied arrow of production has now surely reversed, from *Industry-serves-Society* to *Market-dictates-Industry*. A crude generalization, but one we assume is broadly felt and widely acknowledged enough to reasonably guide our approach here. In line with this inversion, then, our instinct is to similarly work “the other way around.” Rather than the usual Promethean talk of a return to zero, launching an initiative from scratch, we’ll work backwards from the prevailing condition, retreating in order to observe and tinker with what’s already in place. Deconstruction is our inheritance, after all.

3



And here’s our frame of reference. Digital arts software exerts a fundamental influence on contemporary cultural work. The vast majority of anyone even vaguely touching art and design use the same few programs from the broad and ever-blurring set of disciplines such as fine art, graphic design, photography, writing, editing, etc.—or any of the alternative categories put forward by George Kubler (envelopes, sculpture, painting) or Norman Potter (things, places, messages) in the last pamphlet. Whichever you accept, all are already one, abetted by the erosion of any meaningful amateur/professional divide. This is all old news, but still served by old models.

Compared to the hard tools of the Bauhaus (whether color wheel, paintbrush, camera or planer), today’s soft simulations lack any significant distinction from one another: the paintbrush IS the eyedropper IS the eraser—one of a continuously expanding collection of pixel-modifiers, or effects. According to Tim Griffin writing in *ArtForum*, today’s digital “effect” effectively synthesizes its various etymological roots—a result; goods or moveable property; a mode or degree of operation on an object; the physical result of an action of force—to produce similarly indistinct hybrids of production & product, catalyst & consequence. Effects become ends in themselves: After Effects with no identifiable Befores. Fluency in this toolbox, then, disregards the technical proficiency of an earlier Bauhausian model and replaces it with a kind of forensic faculty. In place of “How can I do this?” the more useful question now is, then, “What did I just do?”

We’re going to borrow one of the software monopolies, Adobe’s Creative Suite bundle, as shorthand for current arts software in general—and even more specifically, the “Photoshop toolbox” as a kind of colloquial proxy. The advantage of CS in the face of other obvious contenders like Adobe Premiere, Microsoft Office or Final Cut Pro is that it usefully circumscribes the trickle-down effects of three formerly distinct domains (Photography, Drawing, Typography) in one compound package (Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign)—a gamut already rich with implications. For instance, consider what Bauhaus DNA remains manifest in these generational updates (Effects? Vectors? Makeup?): what has been lost and gained in this genealogy? Here’s some more

precog from the other pamphlets:

So my naive idea of the 1960s—that designers were part of the solution to the world’s chaotic uncontrollability—was precisely the wrong way round. Today’s designers have emerged from the back room of purist, centralist control to the brightly lit stage of public totem-shaping.

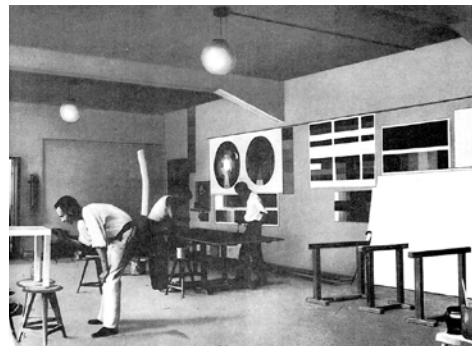
the encroaching sense of culture appearing to have been distinctly *designed* by media, retail or advertising—a state of high mediation, of “culture” wrapped in quotation marks.

the role of designers has by now rotated 180 degrees from solving problems to creating desires, and whether resulting in commercial or intellectual objects, they are always surplus, unnecessary, and without urgency.

All of which suggest a wholesale shift from the construction of images and objects to their rote mediation; from depth to surface. How, then, to reintroduce an ethical dimension, in which form is determined by the depth of engagement rather than an aggregate of expectation? If we accept that broad switch to *Market-dictating-Industry*, a package as entrenched in contemporary culture as CS must, by virtue of being a massively popular product, reflect the consensus of market demand—its “creative” components at any given point a reflection of *most wanted* techniques. What exactly *are* these techniques, why have they prevailed, and what relation, if any, do they bear to their manual precedents? The aim is to navigate an education according to such questions, following a course guided by whatever seems intellectually and practically instructive in the commercial toolboxes of the time. Not in order to capitulate to market demand, of course, but to interrogate its preferences; to query tools whose uses have become bland, unthinking; to work FROM the situation rather than TOWARDS it. The course as a whole, then (the container, the box) is itself a tool for thinking, as well as a means to prompt the use of that tool.

Lest all this should seem suspiciously abstract, arbitrary or absurd, it’s worth mentioning that the founding conceit here—*reconceiving the Bauhaus Foundation Course via the Photoshop toolbox*—is drawn from actual experience. A couple of years ago, my better half was appointed to the full-time faculty of the Fine Art department in a major U.S. university, and one of her inaugural obligations was—surprise!—to teach an undergraduate class in Design. Such a situation doesn’t seem untypical, and though the overarching causes are more or less obvious, it’s worth summarizing this one particular effect: a “teacher” “teaching” a subject she has never herself been taught, and has no particular involvement or much interest in otherwise. The extent of any guidance was to be handed the couple of sheets that constituted her predecessor’s stab at a curriculum which comprised—surprise!—the Bauhaus Foundation Course: color wheels, grayscale, circles, triangles, squares, *more or less amended, more or less debased*. And so: “[exasperated] you know [sigh] it would probably be more useful to [sigh] go through the fucking Photoshop toolbox ...”

4



Aside from the reconsideration of its tools, the box metaphor was prompted by three other frequently recurring art school

disillusions. One is the demise of the *inclination and ability*—presumably a loop—of students to articulate their own or others' work, especially in a group. A second—surely an outcome of the first—is the demise of both the *inclination and ability* to consider such work relative to culture at large. And a third is the absence of shared intentions, of staff and students working towards perceived, declared ends (however abstract or diverse) including a sense of who is teaching what (and why and how) in relation to everyone else. In short, how the parts fit together into a whole.

So: literally *for the sake of argument*, our initial contention—or suspicion—is that color wheels and other principal features of “basic design” are today less constructive than a COMMUNAL effort to observe and relate the contemporary condition by practicing the forms of reading, writing, and speaking that facilitate its articulation. The most appropriate foundation we can imagine right now is one that fosters both the *inclination and ability* to participate in this process—to articulate current social and cultural phenomena as a group in order to work parallel to them individually. And aside from its ready stock of metaphorical tools, our cartoon toolbox icon is also handy in constituting a readymade framework—a matrix that shows the sum as well as the parts, an image that can be held in mind by the whole “department.” Ditching the specificity of Photoshop or even CS, then, we'll begin only with this nominal *idea* of the toolbox—an outline—and customize our own hybrid with bits from various domains and softwares along the way.

We're clearly not interested in “teaching the tools” so much as trying to defamiliarize them, to make them as strange as we suspect they actually are. And so we'll start with a handle—a carrier—then clip on new components as and when they're abstracted into a teaching class, forming an expandable and adaptable diagram rather than the locked-in panopticon of Johannes Itten's Bauhaus schematic. In fact, flip back to that Bauhaus onion, with its progression through layers of years towards a final imperative: BUILD. With Prometheus in mind again, what might it mean to invert the metaphor, starting from the inside and *designing* our way out—asking why as well as how? Because the idea of this course is that it works itself out in practice, THAT THIS PROCESS ITSELF CONSTITUTES PART OF ITS “TEACHING,” and that this is the first installment, we'll necessarily start with those components that allude to more general, structural “skills.” Meaning the hand, pointer or lasso rather than pencil, brush or knife—those already a degree of metaphorical remove beyond that of the more obvious art tools. As time goes on, the priority ought to switch.

5



Last summer I took part in a two-week temporary academy in the company of a dozen youngish artists and a faculty that comprised a painter, a collagist, a writer, a designer, a poet, and a Greek philosopher. The overarching theme of the fortnight, *When your Lips are my Ears, our Bodies become Radios*—attuned to national identity and group activity—was played out through a kind of extreme sports version of the group workshop. The group had arranged to submit three pieces of work each day to be channeled through three local media formats: a meter-high poster displayed on dedicated columns through the town, a 10-minute audio segment aired

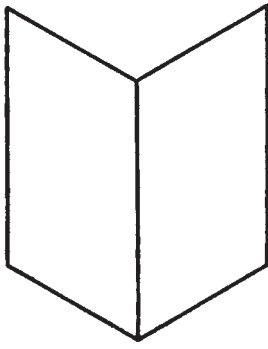
on a community radio station, and a certain number of column inches in the local newspaper. This incessant production was deliberately designed to force the sort of abstract discussion we might expect from the group art seminar into concrete, public, “answerable” forms. Because the matters arising had to be more or less immediately communicated to an external audience, they were forced through a high-pressure mangle of translation. In the process, the issues were actively *handled*.

Then last month I attended a two-day conference on French philosopher Jacques Rancière titled *Everything is in Everything* after the motto of Joseph Jacotot, quietly radical eighteenth century pedagogue and subject of Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I've already recounted, in a lengthy postscript to the previous pamphlet, how that book sums up and now informs our attitude here, but to briefly recap in the terms that dominated this event: Rancière (speaking for and through Jacotot) posits a “horizontal” egalitarian pedagogy against a “vertical” hierarchical one. In the traditional vertical model, an authoritative master typically *stultifies* by dispensing knowledge piecemeal, progressing step by step towards a complete intelligence, while in Rancière's horizontal alternative, the “ignorant” master *emancipates* by insisting that intelligence is the PRECONDITION of learning rather than its goal. In this formulation the student essentially teaches him- or herself, while the “master” creates the conditions for this to occur by providing articulate objects (a book or other device) that will “reveal an intelligence to itself.”

What struck me at the conference, though, was how the principles being espoused and debated were unwittingly enacted by the presentations themselves. It became increasingly difficult, in fact, to pay attention without reflexively evaluating to what extent the various speakers were acting in line with their subject, i.e., whether they were behaving like an explicating authority or fellow ignorant. The social implications of Rancière's thinking were manifest too in the more mundane aspects of conference decorum: speakers overrunning their slots, panel discussions without discussion, opaque academic jargon, and sundry opinions and mannerisms that seemed suddenly heightened either in accord or at odds with Rancière's lessons. The net effect was a kind of meta-conference in addition to the ostensible one, which merely demonstrated the difficulty of putting principles into practice even if you wholeheartedly adhere to them in theory. But the point remains: Rancière's writing is carefully contrived to prise the reader—or proselytiser—out of inertia and into action.

And the other week I went to a two-hour talk, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, by a well-regarded cultural theorist at a local art school. He began by briefly describing the two fundamental Marxist notions of value—“use” and “exchange”—in order to consider whether, in light of social and cultural developments since Marx's time, it's possible to conceive other types of value outside this binary distinction. The rest of the lecture comprised a number of suggestions, nicely prefaced (and summed up) by the notion of “whistling in the shower” as representing the sort of romantic activity that occurs outside our normal conceptions of *time spent productively*. While the examples presented in the talk involved situations or objects that carried these alternative values, considering the idea from a user's or observer's perspective, most of the students' questions afterwards—which lasted as long as the talk itself—wondered what it might mean to *produce* according to this dissident ethos, to *make things* not primarily instrumental or profitable. As it turned out, the talk was merely a set-up for a group discussion the following day, dedicated to this question.

The exaggerated workshop that forces abstract into concrete; the auto-implication of Rancière's horizontal idealism, where student and teacher investigate a strangely articulate object; and the thought experiment that unhinges now in relation to the recent past. These three encounters strike us as exemplary working models; ways in which our course might manifest itself in terms of practical projects.



Our toolbox will be housed within the larger environment of a newly-minted not-for-profit umbrella institution The Serving Library—and stored in close proximity to the bar. The Library consists in two complementary spaces, virtual and actual. The former ([www.servinglibrary.org](http://www.servinglibrary.org)) is a depository of freely downloadable PDFs, or “bulletins,” assembled bi-annually in themed batches to serve as a rough semester’s worth of reading matter. The latter (currently a mobile library, but on its way to a fixed location) comprises two collections—of books and artefacts—both derived from 10 years and 20 issues of our house journal, previously known as *Dot Dot Dot* but now superseded by a bi-annual hard copy of the PDFs, called *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. These two collections will continue to grow as each issue of the *Bulletins* suggests a new round of books and artefacts to scavenge.

The books are shelved according to a simple binary: either (0) older, “classic,” most-frequently-referred-to works of, e.g. literature (*The Man Without Qualities*), cultural studies (*The Nineties*), philosophy (*Either/Or*), and, typically, all three combined (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*); or (1) newer publications that passed through—and were often published by—our workshop/bookstore Dexter Sinister in New York, essentially the prototype of the library back when we were more preoccupied with selling than archiving. One way to relate these two types of books is to say the new ones are directly marked by the spirit of the old zeros; another is to level them with anonymous hardback library leatherette.

The artefacts are mostly flat, framed, and hung in the haphazard manner of the assorted junk that hides the fading wallpaper in old British pubs. They are wildly diverse in size and medium, from a huge red wax crayon rubbing of a *Monument to Cooperation* (the original relief fronts a housing estate around the corner from Dexter Sinister) to a modest update headed *Monument to Information* on an enamel plaque. Other objects include paintings, lithographs, woodcuts, polaroids, record covers, and LSD blotter art. And because each one originally appeared, scanned or photographed, as an illustration in an issue of *Dot Dot Dot* (or will have done in the *Bulletins*), they come with more or less elaborate backstories attached.

Both books and artefacts are *cooperative collections* in two senses. First, that they constitute the pooled resources and influences of a relatively large group of writers (say, 100 people) over a relatively long period of time (about 10 years). Second, that they have been sought, swapped and bought, bound and framed, courtesy of a number of sympathetic institutions over the past few years (thanks again!) as and when germinal versions of the Library were staged in various corners of Europe. During our course, the idea is to freely draw on both books and artefacts. Mid-seminar, I might recall something, run to the shelf, grab one of the “past” books—say Pirsig’s *Zen*, again—, spend five minutes trying to find the page, then read:

The result is rather typical of modern technology, an overall dullness of appearance so depressing that it must be overlaid with a veneer of “style” to make it acceptable. And that, to anyone who is sensitive to romantic Quality, just makes it all the worse. Now it’s not just depressingly dull, it’s also phony. Put the two together and you get a pretty accurate description of modern American technology: stylized cars and stylized outboard motors and stylized typewriters and

stylized clothes. Stylized refrigerators filled with stylized food in stylized kitchens in stylized houses. Plastic stylized toys for stylized children who at Christmas and birthdays are in style with their stylish parents. You have to be awfully stylish yourself not to get sick of it once in a while. It’s the style that gets you; technological ugliness syringed over with romantic phoniness in an effort to produce beauty and profit by people who, though stylish, don’t know where to start because no one has ever told them there’s such a thing as Quality in this world and it’s real, not style. Quality isn’t something you lay on top of subjects and objects like tinsel on a Christmas tree. Real Quality must be the source of the subjects and objects, the cone from which the tree must start.

... or might point to the square object with the stencil alphabet and explain that it’s a ouija board made by Paul Elliman while a design professor at Yale a decade or so ago in order to engage Josef and Anni Albers in a séance with his class; that it utilizes a version of Josef’s modular geometrical typeface to render A–Z, 0–9, a “yes” and a “no,” laser-cut from one of the three proportional formats, and in the same material (hardboard), used for his well-known series of color paintings.

... or might refer to one of the “present” books—say, the essay collection *Notes for an Art School*, and show how all aspects of its material form—size, colours, paper, margins—were directly drawn from the very particular restrictions of the eccentric printing machine that produced it; and relate this to the historically-organic form of the ouija board; and oppose these to the kind of surface style lamented by Pirsig; and onto a discussion about the relative presence and value of both today in art, in society, and so on. All of which ought to occupy a morning, at least.

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We’ve been missing a shared goal for some time now—to establish a plan as concerted as a Bauhaus mandate, bearing in mind the lessons of such previous experiments and the cultural changes since. We intend to assemble a bunch of tangible skills (critical faculties, orienting attitudes, whatever) relevant to working right now. Not in reaction or capitulation, but more as a means of staying awake, alert, concerned. It should be apparent that this is a hard surface with a soft centre—a structure but no curriculum. As ever, it’s a case of trying to establish and maintain an equilibrium of freedom and order; careful to ensure that “letting things work themselves out” doesn’t morph into an excuse for letting original intentions slide.

Here’s how we imagine all this working. We’ll invite guests from different fields to come and help deconstruct their respective digital toolboxes by isolating a component in order to consider, together with the class, its analogue past, virtual present, and possible future. The “past” aspect will consider the lineage of the tool in question as a physical object or process, whether prosaic (type), allusive (hand) or madcap (magic wand). The “present” will consider its digital corollary, whether a direct translation of an analogue technique, a more complex metaphorical interpretation, an effect that has superseded its physical referent, or an autonomous function with no ostensible counterpart. And the “future” will, of course, be pure speculation—science fiction—according to the whim of the teacher’s particular ignorance.

In response to the closing question, “Are you an idealist?,” in a recent interview, the Danish art critic Lars Bang Larsen replied:

The question remains, how to combine idealism with the scepticism and self-reflection that turns it into an artistic tool rather than an end in itself?

In which case, this prospectus will ideally serve as a kind of all-purpose wrench.

(Excuse the lack of references: we ran out of space.)