

BACKTALK

Interview by Steven Heller

Johanna Drucker, Art and Design Theorist

Editor's Note: Johanna Drucker is associate professor of contemporary art and theory in Yale University's department of the history of art. A distinguished maker of artists' books, as well as a writer and scholar, she is the author, most recently, of The Century of Artists' Books (Granary Books, 1995). Her other titles include Narratology (Druckwerk, 1994) and The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Heller: What makes theory useful in the teaching and practice of art and design?

Drucker: It is a metalanguage. It lets you see that there are ways to articulate *how* meaning is produced, not just *what* meaning is produced. Here is an example—in a non-theoretical reading, you understand that the meaning of the “Stop” sign is a command which you, as a socialized human, obey. In a theoretical reading, you would describe the relation between “material codes of production” (the shape of the sign, color, placement, size, etc.) and the “production of meaning in a social system” (this is a traffic sign, it is official civic signage, it indicates traffic flow and potential danger, it must be obeyed for legal reasons, and so on). Having distinguished these two things—material codes and production of meaning—you could begin a critical analysis of the variety of relations between these two aspects of any sign in different historical or cultural circumstances.

Heller: Let me take a reactionary approach. Theory also establishes a vocabulary that tends to exclude

people; it is a foreign, even nonsensical, language.

Drucker: Those things are true, but you have to realize that the language of theory is not the same as the content of theory. When people first learn theory, they get confused as to whether they're learning a language or a set of ideas. Within the academy, the use of esoteric theoretical language is rewarded with positions at prestigious institutions. I think it's best to speak theory in the vernacular—to just use ordinary language to talk about things that theory gives you access to.

Heller: Why retain any terms from the language of theory, then?

Drucker: There are certain terms that come out of theory-speak, such as “subject” and “subjectivity,” that are useful. Nothing else serves as a good shorthand for those concepts. You could talk about them, but it would require more explanation. I remember the first time I read a book by [French post-structuralist literary critic Jacques] Derrida, I just wanted to throw it across the room. I thought, “Why is this guy bothering to do this?” And then you make your way through it.

Heller: It is like reading a novel in a foreign language. It takes months to get through a book that would ordinarily take a week.

Drucker: But after a couple of years, you can read those novels in a week. And the same thing happens with theory language. You get good at it. But I think the challenge at this stage is to translate theory for a wider audience.

Heller: Can you give an example?

Drucker: If you're trying to raise the consciousness of young women, for instance, you might talk about things like beauty contests or the sex industry. You could ask, what is excluded by the fact that beauty is so highly valued in our culture? And likewise, questioning the sex industry: who's really making money off it, and how does that system work? Why is it that sex-industry jobs are the one type of work available to women in our culture where they can make quick, easy money? What does that say about this culture?

Heller: Does graphic design require a theoretical foundation?

Drucker: On one level, absolutely not. I don't think theory is ever going to make somebody better at creating a printed page, a Web page, an object, or anything else. Now, I know there are a lot of people who disagree with me, who think theory is a useful creative tool. I don't believe that. People who work from a theoretical perspective, whether it's in design or the visual arts, often do very stilted, self-conscious work that ultimately is only an illustration of the theoretical position.

Heller: But shouldn't there be something working in design in addition to pure talent or intuition?

Drucker: I don't think that design needs theory, but I think designers need theory. Everybody should study Ideology 101, beginning in kindergarten, because I think we are so blind to ways in which we absorb the culture around us. We need to be given the tools for thinking through our relationship to the power structure—something for all

those people who went to see *Forrest Gump* and didn't know that it was [a modern version of] Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, and thought, "Wow, what a great movie."

Heller: On the other hand, what can the visual arts or design offer to theory, and how can there be theory that's specific to the visual world, that isn't merely borrowed from theories in other, nonvisual fields?

Drucker: There are many aspects to visual experience that have no parallels within the linguistic sphere, for example, focus. How does focus work? What is the degree of resolution in relationship to focus in a visual work? How does it communicate to us, and how does it help to produce meaning in a particular image and circumstance? Questions like these could be explored in theoretical terms that would grant the visual realm its own specificity. Language is the tool we use to analyze it, but there is no linguistic analogue. We would not be borrowing a concept such as discourse versus narrative, first person versus second person—any of those models.

Heller: What do you propose?

Drucker: You'd probably go to cognitive science, perhaps the work of J.J. Gibson, *Visual Perception and the World*, or to Rudolf Arnheim's Gestalt psychology. Or to writers like William Mitchell and W.J.T. Mitchell. Even to the history of style. If you were talking about advertisements, you'd address body language, body posture, body style, not to mention hair style and grooming.

Heller: Despite theory, designers

continually run up against what marketers believe is necessary to identify and attract consumers—market research, which is more practical than theoretical. And this is where I have a problem with theory being applied to design. At some point it seems totally removed from the object, and ignores an important part of the significance of that object, which is its appeal.

Drucker: Some things theory can't explain at all. It can be a useful prescriptive tool for analyzing structures, relations, the historical specificity of situations. But there is an analogy to those mass-produced China dolls with faces painted on in about half a second. Those faces are a little cockeyed here, a little bit crooked there. It's a grimace, it's a smile—and yet, when you describe the dolls in theoretical, structural terms, they are all the same thing. If you're standing there as a little child picking one out, you want to pick out one that has the expression you like. I don't think there is any theoretical model sufficiently sophisticated to explain why you'd pick that specific one.

Heller: Why do you think some designers want to embrace these critical models?

Drucker: Part of it is the inevitable colonization of every area of inquiry by theory, once theory upped the ante of academic and critical discussion—if you can't "do theory" in your particular domain, then that domain is not going to have the same clout as those employing theory. There's been an increasing trend toward giving the history and

theory of design a place within the academy. And why shouldn't this be done? Design is as interesting and legitimate a historical discourse as any, and the amount of information we get through the culture industry and commercial sources is much greater than what we get through fine-art sources.

Heller: Can theory be pushed too far?

Drucker: Sometimes its application to commercial products gets very parodic. I had a terrific student who wanted to do an analysis of cereal boxes in terms of psychoanalytical structures of desire. The spoon represented the Phallus, and the milk was the mother. . . . Come on—it's a cereal box! What else would you show, a knife and fork? I couldn't go for it because it wouldn't tell you anything about the cereal box that you didn't already know, and if theory doesn't tell you something you don't already know, then why do you need it?

Heller: Can theory tell us anything about graphic design that we don't already know?

Drucker: Theory is useful for analyzing historical and cultural codes, but also for tackling new design challenges. You may be familiar with a particular phenomenon—say, Hollywood cinema—but not be able to articulate the way it works as a narrative system. When you gain an insight into the formulas of such a system you realize they mutate in relation to different expectations about morality—and that's what I call a "theory moment." You are able to identify the working of the codes,

such as "unfaithful wife must lose family" versus "unfaithful wife is allowed a second chance." Or you learn the difference between discourse (the structural organization of a text, such as the distinction between an author and narrator) and narrative (the actual story). When you watch an episode of "My So-Called Life" you realize the writer of the show is giving you one side of the story while the young woman narrating the episode in first person is telling you another. These simple distinctions are powerful in talking about the structure of news, fiction, documentaries, and other instances in which we tend to align whoever is speaking with what is being said.

Heller: But how does this work with graphic design?

Drucker: These distinctions become increasingly important as designers tackle the difficult task of presenting complex information and databases. The structure of presentation or display, like the layout of a traditional print media newspaper or reference book, automatically encodes levels of hierarchy and importance into the work's material structure. But in a mobile, fluid information environment, such hierarchies may be unsuitable or distorting, since the information may have a different value in any of a number of presentations. Structure and information are not the same: a company's employees are not the same as a company's operational structure. Imagine a phone book for an organization whose information is designed, not alphabetically but

Continued on page 122

Johanna Drucker

Continued from page 34

spatially according to rank and position and could be rearranged to display decision-making trees relevant to specific tasks or projects within the organization—then you have an idea of the ways structure and information begin to relate. The implications for understanding the way that structure is a part of information will become even more crucial as designers work in database navigation and organization where relations between apparent structure and intended meaning will be mutable. As structure and information interpenetrate, the designer's task requires more rigorous theoretical skills.

Heller: Can theory have a bad effect on graphic design?

Drucker: I think too much theory can make you too sophisticated for your market. You can start to produce graphic design that's only interesting to other designers. I saw that happen while teaching in an architecture department. Theory-doused architects designed some interesting projects, but they had nothing to do with living. They might be compelling ideas, but when it really came down to it, I didn't want to live in an uncomfortable environment in order to have my consciousness raised about how family structures are merely functions of the bourgeois mythology of the nation-state!

Heller: One of the current design tropes is multilayer design, which often verges on illegibility. Is this a visual manifestation of theory?

Drucker: Somebody asked me this question in another interview and I was puzzled by it, and so I asked Sheila de Bretteville [head of Yale University's design department] what she thought. Does it have to do with a phenomenon of the illegible as a cultural notion? She said that in her experience, students will do that kind of design when they're work-

ing with somebody else's text. When it's their own text, they won't make it illegible; they actually want it to be read. The illegibility trope seems to signal, "There's so much stuff already out in the world that we're not really trying to get you to read this; we're just trying to get you to look at it long enough see whatever logo is on it." This is an admission that most text produced at this point is just noise.

Heller: How would you analyze it?

Drucker: As frustration on the part of the individual: "Will anybody pay attention to anything I have to say?" And then, "Well, why should they?" The culture we live in promotes a notion of the celebrity as the privileged object of attention, and people often think that if they're not being perceived at a celebrity level, then they're not being perceived at all. Since when has existence been about being perceived? It's supposed to be about experience. Many designers working in the "noise" mode choose the radical extreme of what is acceptable so they can become celebrities. Reasonableness, middle-of-the-road positions, and moderate analysis are never going to sell.