
Kathy McCoy: Where Did All the PoMo Go?

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Heller: You spent the better part of a generation at Cranbrook overseeing a hothouse for design experimentation—everything from typography to imagery. Whatever one calls it today—PoMo, deconstruction, or new wave—the work that emerged from Cranbrook was unique for its time and defined the design of the times. Before we talk about today’s hothouses, or lack thereof, how do you feel that particular moment in design history has impacted this particular practice of design?

McCoy: Any design always lives within a historical context, a continuum of development. Everything that has come before this moment impacts current practice, intentionally or inadvertently. So Cranbrook’s “hothouse experiments” are embedded in what goes on today. They’re part of the knowledge base for today’s practice.

But the extent that those experiments affect today’s work is open for discussion. We weren’t working in a vacuum at Cranbrook. We were part of a whole environment of writing, thinking, discussing and publishing that was going on in the U.S. and Europe in graphic design and also architecture and industrial design. This all took place over a long time. I was at Cranbrook for 24 years and our work and influences went through a lot of changes. In fact, there were several distinct periods of experimentation. You were kind enough to invite me to speak about this at one of your “Modernism & Eclecticism: A History of Graphic Design” conferences in the mid-1990s.

Heller: How have those changes, those experiments, morphed into today’s practice?

McCoy: Designers all work off past influences. For instance, I’ve been reviewing a number of web design firms’ work as part of a consulting project. What you describe as “PoMo”, “Deconstruction” and “New Wave” are embedded in all these studios’ design forms. Are these designers aware of the sources of the forms that they use everyday? The best of these designers could probably write insightful essays analyzing their antecedents and influences and how they build on them. But other designers probably don’t have a clue where their forms are coming from. Many simply apply a catalog of derivative visual moves that they absorb from the media that surrounds us all. In fact, we all do that to some extent, either intentionally or inadvertently—we live in a visually charged atmosphere, it is in the air we breathe.