

Antenna in the Gallery

I am going to go out on a limb here and say that it's hard to mix art and design. I have about as much interest in opening up the generally absurd and pointless debate about the meaning of these terms, and what they mean to each other, as I do in having my fingers crushed in a vise, and so I am going to grit my teeth and do what I can not to devolve into semantics. I'm just trying to be practical, is all.

More to the point, it's tricky when design is exhibited in an art space. This was one of the conclusions I came to upon experiencing Antenna Design's "Pattern Recognition" show at the Frederieke Taylor gallery in Chelsea this past April.

The gallery in question is a smallish one, but with high ceilings. It's six floors up, so you have to ride up in a fancy brushed-steel elevator and then circumnavigate a clutch of offices and satellite galleries that share the floor. Antenna's work sparsely filled the space; it didn't feel crowded at all.

The works on display varied greatly in their materials and execution. A small, sleek, brushed-metal box mounted on the wall would, when blown upon, come to life with a video display, such that it appeared that the word "yes" was flying out in a particulate maelstrom from the breath sensor. An arrangement of extruded yellow and grey rectangles formed the shape of a low-resolution icon of a taxi cab, but in three dimensions. An abstract set of neon curves on the wall suggested a transit map.

The one work most dominant of the space was a series of prints, maybe 24" by 36", that illustrated New York City street scenes, peopled by generic white human silhouettes and augmented by flat colored shapes. The idea, as far

as I could gather, was that these were slightly tongue-in-cheek proposals for interventions. One print showed two people on a molded-plastic public bench that was designed to function like a psychiatrist's couch; one person sat in the role of the therapist, while the other reclined as the patient would. Another image showed treehouse-like structures in Thomkins Square Park.

1. Lenticulars are composite images covered in ridged plastic. When you view the image from slightly different angles, it appears to change. They were popular in the 1980's, in such applications as the little free prizes that could be had with breakfast cereal.

It was hard to get a clear fix on these images, though, because they were not simply prints. They were lenticulars¹, mounted on light boxes. Each lenticular had at least three phases that I could distinguish, and the direct composition of the graphical elements and real photographic images compounded my visual confusion. Furthermore, each light box had a chain with a handle dangling from the bottom, which you could pull to hear a prerecorded message that presumably had something to do with the scene to which it was tethered. I don't know, because I couldn't really discern what any of them were saying.

The thing is, though, that if you spend any time in New York at all, you will end up interacting with Antenna's work, whether you are aware of it or not. They designed the interiors and exteriors of the newest fleet of subway cars, as well as the machines that dispense MetroCards and the new "Help Point" intercom kiosks. If you fly into the city on JetBlue, Antenna's automated ticket kiosk may have printed your boarding pass. If you stay awhile and end up taking a job at Bloomberg, your every interaction with your work will be through the Antenna-designed Bloomberg terminal.

Antenna excels at the monstrous task of taming machines like subway cars and data kiosks. Their work gives us an acceptable façade for something as complex and promethian as a subway car, or a financial statistics database. I say "façade" and not "face", specifically, because Antenna's work is pleasing in its legolike simplicity, and the attendant lack of decisive personality. Or

rather, Antenna's machines are successful because they perform the crucial dualistic function of smoothing over the ugly logistical truth of their innards without getting in the way of those who wish to use them.

This is a double-edged sword. While this brand of simple aesthetic harmony makes for a fantastic MetroCard machine, it doesn't quite translate in the gallery, where Antenna's work seemed to flinch in the spotlight. In many cases, Antenna's touch was too gentle. In the case of the breath-reactive "yes" fountain, the pattern of "yes"es was the same every time it was activated (although the rate did seem to be sensitive to the amount of breath applied). Naturally, I don't want my MetroCard machine to throw a different interface convention in my face whenever I use it, but when I'm in some Chelsea gallery staring at some postmodern interactive work, I expect to be fucked with a bit more, and so the pattern's predictability interfered with the pieces' success as a work of art.

In the case of the street-scene intervention prints, it seems like Antenna went a bit too far in the other direction. Here, there seemed little justification for the multiple techniques Antenna employed: the lenticulars, the backlighting, the triggerable audio. These things merely got in the way of the images, which were using the visual language of architectural renderings, and as such seemed like they had something to communicate.

2. Or at least perceived; these days, "art" is such a conceptually broad umbrella, encompassing sound art, video art, landscape art, and other things that require the employ of a non-traditional blend of senses.

3. This, of course, assumes that what is meant by "design" is strictly "design" and not in any way illustrative, or otherwise embellished... there. That is my concession to semantics. As you were.

Art, generally speaking, is meant to be directly looked at². Design, on the other hand, is typically meant to be perceived without direct focus³. "Printing should be invisible!" admonished Beatrice Warde, in her infamous "Crystal Goblet" essay, the reading of which is a canonized staple of any design education.

4. See also Lorraine Wild's critique of 2x4's SFMoMA show on Design Observer, which seemed to have suffered from similar problems. In the essay, she claims that "no one wants to look at design under glass."

<http://www.designobserver.com/archives/004362.html>

Antenna would make Mrs. Warde raise her glass in delight: their elegant installations and visual systems take the idea of invisible printing into the 21st century, and use their thorough mastery of the range of materials and information involved in a design project without abusing them. Unfortunately, by the same token, looking at these works in this context was a bit like staring at an empty wineglass in an attempt to get drunk⁴. You can go ahead and call me a Neanderthal traditionalist if you like, but I would have much rather have seen a display of their actual design work, with accompanying sketches and other evidence of process. At least, hauling a MetroCard machine into a Chelsea gallery would have been kind of funny (especially if it remained functional)... Perhaps you could even call such a thing "art". I do believe there is some sort of historical precedent for that sort of thing.