

NOSTALGIA FOR THE REAL—OR, BAD IS GOOD David Byrne

Bad design is good design. And tasteful good design, likewise, is bad. Not good-bad, just bad-bad. Now that "perfect" design is possible with the click of a mouse, the industrialized world has become nostalgic for "imperfect" design. As computer aided everything takes over our lives we begin to realize, little by little, what is missing from the high-tech world. We realize that a crooked line sometimes has more soul than a perfectly straight one and that a recording that has just the right amount of distortion and color added by ancient equipment is often preferable to a perfect copy. Woe unto us when the medical profession perfects their newest genetic and cloning techniques! We might actually realize that our imperfections are what make us human. It is one thing to perfect typography, eliminating stat machines, lead type, and typesetting houses, but quite another to assume to perfect the organism that actually creates and consumes that typography. The endpoint of a mechanistic worldview is a worldmachine.

The easier it becomes to produce perfection, in design, grammar, rhythm, and pitch, the more those who have the earliest and easiest access to that perfection want to abandon it. In a kind of reverse snobism Web designers and trendy magazine editors use the latest software programs to imitate the work of anonymous designers and artists—workers like those featured in this book. They use high-end computers to imitate the work of people who can't even afford a computer. These unsung artists are the sources of inspiration for programs such as PhotoShop, Illustrator, Quark, or Pro Tools, but never in their lives have they had access to, or even dreamed of, these tools. Such pathetic heroes can barely draw a more or less realistic face or carry a tune, forget about having access to spellchecker or auto-kerning their type.

As true perfection appears on the horizon, as the fruits of the enlightenment and of centuries of scientific progress appear within grasp, we take a bite of the perfected tomato or a huge flawless strawberry and realize that something has been lost. Flava. Soul. Humor. Funk.

The nostalgia for the design featured in this book is a pathetic attempt by sophisticates like myself to recapture that lost soul. We think that by imitating the look of something "real" we might actually become more real ourselves. But for most the Faustian bargain has already been made. We can never actually be the man or woman who draws the shoes or the tacos on the kiosk walls, but we have certainly learned to appreciate the person who draws them. We can experience that weird but typical twenty-first-century sensation—loving something and laughing at it at the same time. The sophisticated designer leans back in his or her Aeron chair and employs in his or her design a slightly altered version of one of these drawings. They may also employ a variation on some of this type, knowing full well that their audience, the educated and sophisticated consumer, will know that the designer actually can draw a face, a shoe, or a car perfectly, realistically, easily, possibly aided by some computer program or other. But by purposely using "bad" type there is a knowing wink going on between producer and consumer. A conspiratorial pact that says "I know I can do better than this and you know I can do better than this, but don't we both like this for some strange reason." This conspiratorial tone allows the consumer to feel that they are part of an elite club—paradoxically, a club to which the original sign painter will never belong. And the reason that both designer and consumer like this look is because it denotes soulful content. It implies that the work has the soul and life that is missing from goods produced by multinational corporations.

In the nineteenth century, as the technology of photography became more and more ubiquitous, artists quickly abandoned "realistic" portrait and landscape painting in droves. Why compete with a machine that can do it more quickly, easily, and inexpensively than you? In short order, they had to unlearn their drawing lessons and abandon their technique. They learned to draw like a child, like a "primitive," a lunatic, or an unschooled draftsman. They wanted to capture the soul, the feeling, the sensation, that the camera missed. They made virtual African art, virtual primitive art, and eventually even virtual advertising art—a form which had often imitated those same fine arts in its own efforts. Sometimes artists incorporated all these virtual styles at the same time. They made high art that looked like it was made by people who didn't know what they were doing. Or were doing what they were doing for vastly different reasons.

In a search for realness they made expensive luxurious homes that look like factories, warehouses, or industrially mass-produced sheds. Eventually those who could draw, print, or letter by hand abandoned all such efforts and the art schools even stopped teaching them. "Good" design was so easy even your software could do it! 10

Little icons. Little shrines to those less schooled than they. The studio walls would be filled with photographs and clippings of signs and buildings like these. Their own work was good, but this was the "real" thing. Unschooled, uncorrupted, and mostly unpaid.

Sure it is funny, the clunky layout and the sloppy painting on most of these images, but everyone knows that like these images a taco on the street tastes better than one from Taco Bell. And there lies the key.

Street tacos actually are better. They feel better and smell better. They are less perfect, less clean (certainly), less high-tech, and there are no groovy advertising campaigns to back them up. But the quesadilla con flores that one can order (during the right season) on the street, with a cold cervesa or home made jamaica is something that the perfection of a chain can never approach.

Perfection, one must conclude, is not actually perfect at all. In fact, it is almost the complete opposite. Perfection is bad. But bad is good. But bad perfection is not good, only good bad is good. It's all very simple.

When one sees a sign or a structure like those featured here, one assumes naturally that one is going to receive personal attention from the vendor, imperfect maybe, but without the cold beaucroatic attitude that accompanies the products of the globalized world. For these are stores, buildings, graphics, and shops from before and in spite of the best efforts of globalization. These merchants will give you honest work, as opposed to work broken down and compartmentalized by some foreign "expert." Woe to us a society managed by "experts."

If these works are authentic, real, true, human—what then are the works made using sophisticated software programs, elegantly designed and with beautiful tasteful graphics? Are they inauthentic because they are well done? Is perfection not also real? Is not the antiseptic globalized world just another kind of real? Isn't a false thing that everyone believes in then a real thing? And of course isn't it the real that many of these self-taught artists and signmakers aspire to? Aren't they just dying to be corrupted?

Well, it might all be a matter of semantics, but if one is to assume that "real" infers having some basis in life and living as we know it, then, yes, the products of globalization are not, in fact, real. They are imitations of things that are real, which in fact the march of globalization seeks to irradiate. They are cleaned up versions
11 of these funky kiosks, mom and pop stores, imaginative works of architecture and signage. And the global wave

would wash away all of these originals, and leave only their copies. A kind of pod people world. The ad campaigns and copy of the corporate products point at these places in their references to "home cooked flavor" and ads featuring happy families, but they only refer to these places as icons, they don't actually contain that home cooked flavor. They aren't even a good simulation.

The new attitude expressed toward the crummy artifacts featured here is that they are evidence of the resistance of the real to the unreal. If the unreal at various points and places around the world manages to completely obliterate the real, as it has done in many parts of the industrialized countries, then the real itself will eventually become merely a memory, a quaint story, a picture in a book of something that no longer exists. Colonial Williamsburg, Main Street USA, or Warwick Castle. The real is unreal in many places because it is no longer there. I guess this book is an attempt to reintroduce it into the culture, admittedly in a foreign strain, but one must use what one has at hand if no other material is available.

The faster and greater the spread of globalization, neo-liberalism, and multinational corporations, the greater the nostalgia for that which they replace. We must memorialize the anonymous artists in this book, and in others, because their work is in danger of disappearing. It is beautiful. It reminds us that underneath the slickness and the logos there are still human beings.

David Byrne, primarily known as the musician who co-founded the group Talking Heads (1976 – 88), has also been involved in an array of music, theater, film and photographic projects, including work with Brian Eno, Twyla Tharp, Robert Wilson, Jonathan Demme, and Bernardo Bertolucci. Byrne has his own record label, Luaka Bop, founded in 1988. The label releases recordings by artists from all over the world and compilations of existing music.

Like his film and music, Byrne's photography is often described as elevating the mundane or the banal to the level of art, of finding the sacred in the profane. Recent museum shows in Germany, Italy, and Japan have mixed photographs with audio elements, acoustiguides, and sculptural elements. Three books have been published containing this work. The first, *Strange Ritual* (Chronicle, 1995), mixed text and image in a notebook-type format. The second, *Your Action World* (Chronicle, 1999), was modeled after corporate reports and inspirational and motivational literature. The third is a religious text titled *The New Sins*, created for the Valencia Bial, to be published in the United States by McSweeney's.