

Book Review

Grace Lees-Maffe

Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism by Alice Twemlow (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017). ISBN: 9780262035989, hardback; 312 pages, illustrated, hardcover (\$34.95).

Alice Twemlow's degrees in literature and design history have informed a book based on her PhD work that looks not at design but at the discourses surrounding it. Twemlow defines design criticism very broadly as the ways design has been mediated, principally through text but also through exhibitions and design itself. Just as *Sifting the Trash* is no doubt informed by Twemlow's role as founding director of the master's program in Design Research, Writing, and Criticism (DCrit) at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (2008–16) and currently as head of the master's program in Design Curating and Writing at Design Academy Eindhoven, so it will serve as a textbook for these programs.

The book is premised on an extended metaphor, that design criticism is a process of "sifting the trash," rescuing certain examples of design from the scrap heap and consigning others to oblivion. There are two layers of sifting, though, as Twemlow has also sifted the history of design criticism to discuss what she considers to be the most salient examples in this book. The five chapters focus on a few years from each decade, 1955–2007.

Chapter 1 begins on familiar ground with a discussion of *Design* magazine in 1960, most notably Richard Hamilton's article "Persuading Image," and goes on to a valuable case study of less well-known women's contributions in an analysis of Jane Thompson and Deborah Allen's work on *Industrial Design* magazine (the latter being a car critic who did not like cars much). The chapter closes with Twemlow's refreshing takedown of Reyner Banham's championing of an "aesthetics of expendability," which put him at odds with currents in design and design criticism.

The second chapter charts an intergenerational conflict at the Aspen design conference in 1970 and 1971 that will be familiar to readers of

Twemlow's 2015 article on the same topic. Positing 1970/71 as a flashpoint between corporate, professional, and unsustainable design and anti-establishment, ecological, young guns is a convincing strategy. This event marked a shift in design criticism, as well as design: design criticism need not take the form of worthy expounding; instead, it can be disruptive and eventful.

Chapter 3 looks at design media in the designer decade, the 1980s. Part 1 offers an extensive treatment of *Blueprint* magazine, including not only the priorities of its auteur-editor, Deyan Sudjic, but also the magazine's coverage of the International Slipper and Footwear Fair in Blackpool, which Twemlow damns as "dismal-sounding." She apparently enjoys exposing the pretensions of Stephen Bayley's V&A Boilerhouse Project, but omits to trace its binaristic trash-or-treasure curatorial approach back to its precursor at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Its first incarnation, the Museum of Manufactures, showed exemplary designed goods alongside a "Gallery of False Principles" (dubbed a "Chamber of Horrors" by the press) which may, in turn, have been influenced by Augustus Welby Pugin's *True Principles of Pointed and Christian Architecture* (1841), which reproduced examples of good (Gothic, considered indigenous) and bad (classical, considered imported) architecture on its facing pages. Twemlow instead moves on to explore Dick Hebdige's "pathological" design criticism; in its "soothing rhythm" and repeated clauses, she perceives "the voice of someone speaking to a mentally ill patient" (186). This jarring metaphor was perhaps inspired by Hebdige's own mental health history, which Twemlow briefly discusses. The chapter progresses to admire Judith Williamson's Marxist-feminist political conviction, if not her luminous cultural critique, which is said to have reached a conceptual "stalemate."

The final two chapters are brief: chapter 4 is half the length of its predecessor and chapter 5 is only a few pages long. The fourth chapter begins with an account of two of curator Claire Catterall's exhibitions. First, "powerhouse:uk" (1998), commissioned from Branson Coates by the Department of Trade and Industry, is criticized by Twemlow, whereas "Stealing Beauty" (1999) for London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, is largely lauded. The latter left

“viewers space to elicit meaning or to remain confused by what they saw” (224). The same might be said of Dunne and Raby’s work, discussed by Twemlow as a commentary on mainstream design. Perhaps Catterall’s exhibitions and Dunne and Raby’s output are not as distant from the design industry as suggested by their forms and the narrative in which Twemlow places them. The economic base for their creative, technophilial experiments derived indirectly from the Thatcherite coopting of design to business ends, which made design a common topic in the media before the late 1980s recession and created an audience for exhibitions like Catterall’s and Dunne and Raby’s designs.

The last chapter examines the shift of design criticism from mainstream media into the unedited and sometimes amateur realm of blogs and blog comments. Rick Poynor’s apparently lone voice eulogized the analytical standards achieved through editing until he, too, began blogging for *Design Observer* in 2010. This was three years after the watershed of 2007 in which blogging was said by several commentators to have lost its edge and become corporatized.

Sifting the Trash is better on the inside than the outside. Its compact format contains forty-two color illustrations and sixty-nine black-and-white illustrations. The hardcover is the color of dust, and my copy started to disintegrate as I carried it with me. It has been one of the books I have most enjoyed reading in the past couple of years, and it represents a valuable contribution to design discourse.

Teal Triggs

Muriel Cooper by David Reinfurt and Robert Wiesenberger, with Foreword by Lisa Strausfeld, Afterword by Nicholas Negroponte (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), ISBN: 9780262036504, 240 pages, illustrated, hardcover (\$60.00).

I clearly remember as a young child in 1969 when the weighty volume of Hans Maria Wingler’s *The Bauhaus* landed on the drawing table in my father’s design studio. The distinctive black-and-white cover and accompanying slipcover of this monumental tome visually conveyed its importance as a scholarly

work. I came to appreciate the clarity of its design and layout; the bold use of Helvetica against a black background seemed sympathetic to the aesthetics of modernism. I later discovered that *The Bauhaus* was designed by the venerable Muriel Cooper (1925–1994), along with other books she designed for MIT Press, including *Learning from Las Vegas* (Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, 1972) and *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Donis A. Dondis, 1973). These books took pride of place on my father’s shelf for many years.

Thus, it was with some delight that earlier this year I received a copy of David Reinfurt and Robert Wiesenberger’s new monograph titled *Muriel Cooper*, featuring Cooper’s portfolio of design, teaching, and research. The basis for this publication grew out of the coauthors’ 2014 exhibition “Messages and Means: Muriel Cooper at MIT,” which opened at Columbia University and immediately earned a broader public awareness for Cooper. Cooper’s fascination with new technologies using experimental production processes was featured in the exhibition and form thematic threads for the book. Her four-decade career at MIT was unique, and the authors capture this as she moves effortlessly from analogue to digital, first as design director of MIT Press (1960s), then as founder of the Visible Language Workshop (1970s), and later in the 1980s as founding member of the MIT Media Lab. Reinfurt and Wiesenberger use the term “media archaeology”¹ to describe the process of creating the exhibition and later, writing the book.² They draw on a range of archival materials, media (videos, sketchbooks, cassettes, etc.), and interviews with Cooper’s past students and colleagues (many of whom are credited in the book’s acknowledgments) to scope a lifetime of experimental projects, teaching methods, and research collaborations.

This process of piecing together the life and career of this pioneer graphic designer, educator, and researcher is effectively presented as an “archival project” illuminated by the reflections found in the book’s four essays. Pentagram partner and former MIT master’s student Lisa Strausfeld provides the Foreword to the book, reflecting on her own short-lived but impactful experience of Cooper’s teaching environment. Nicolas Negroponte, in “Afterword: The Cartesian Gypsy,” remembers Cooper’s early

work in computers and information landscaping. He writes of meetings with her research funders, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, where “she fascinated the military brass with her language, manner, and bare feet.”³ The descriptors that surface throughout these personal reflections are helpful for establishing some sense of Cooper as a personality: “defiance of protocol,” “devotedly passionate,” and “a person of extremes.” One of the more telling photographs shows Cooper “in conversation with unidentified males c. 1972,” where she is casually perched on the edge of the table with her bare feet clearly visible.⁴

Two reflective essays bookend two more substantial contextual essays by Reinfurt, “Hard Copy (1954–1974),” and Wiesenberger, “Soft Copy (1974–1994),” which document Cooper’s life and career. The titles reference Cooper’s early and late works in print and software and provide a neat narrative that shows how the designer evolved from designing books to designing information landscapes. For example, early influences include Cooper’s fascination for Gregory Kepes’s 1944 book *The Language of Vision*, which sought to break down disciplinary boundaries; this example sheds light on how she viewed her role as “a kind of interface between science and the public.”⁵ By the early 1990s, Cooper’s “drive toward more responsive interfaces” resulted in collaboration with Suguru Ishizaki on an experimental software called Typographic Space. Subsequently they joined David Small and Lisa Strausfeld to develop information landscapes, which aimed to reflect a three-dimensional landscape of data “dynamically navigated by a user.”⁶ Some of these advances certainly foreshadow later communication and multimodal developments. For example, Cooper’s research collaboration with Richard Bolt and Nicolas Negroponte, called *Books Without Pages*, undertaken in the late 1970s, signaled for electronic reading the use of “a simple finger gesture captured on a small touch-sensitive pad.”⁷

Designed by Yasuyo Iguchi, the book offers a visual gesture to Cooper’s original slip-cased volume for *The Bauhaus*. The interior layout is generous in the use of white space, which allows each image and artifact to become part of a visual narrative—smaller images appear in the main text cunningly designed

with red page numbers pointing the reader to locate their fuller treatment in the three portfolio sections, Design, Teaching, and Research. The authors state clearly: “This book is intended, then, not as an archive but as a sourcebook for future production.”⁸ The portfolio sections deliver this by including a range of works from the presentation boards for the MIT Press colophon to Cooper’s and her students’ later Polaroid digital prints. Interspersed throughout are photographic examples that give a flavor of her and her students’ working lives. Examples include her photographs from the late 1950s in Milan, students working in the Messages and Means printing workshop c. 1975, and the computer and production facilities of the Visible Language Workshop in the 1980s. There is a wealth of visual material here.

As a sourcebook, *Muriel Cooper* certainly provides evidence of this designer’s significance and the case for her immediate inclusion in any canon of graphic design history. It will be left to future historians to write the book that interrogates the lasting historical impact of her ideas and processes. In the meantime, *Muriel Cooper* takes pride of place on my bookshelf, right next to my father’s collection of early MIT Press publications.

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- 1 Dante Carlos, “Muriel Cooper: Turning Time into Space,” *The Gradient*, Walker Art Center, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/muriel-cooper-turning-time-into-space> (Accessed December 30, 2017).
 - 2 David Reinfurt and Robert Wiesenberger, *Muriel Cooper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, 188.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 75.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 3.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 31–32.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 24.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, xv.