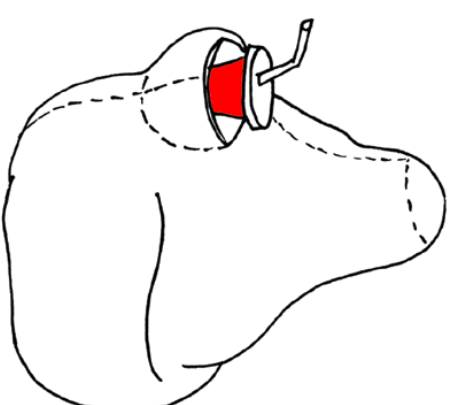
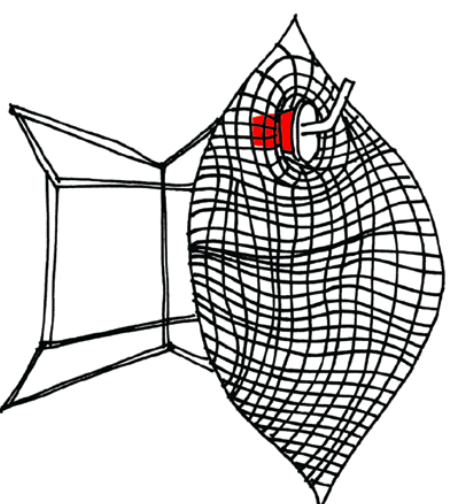
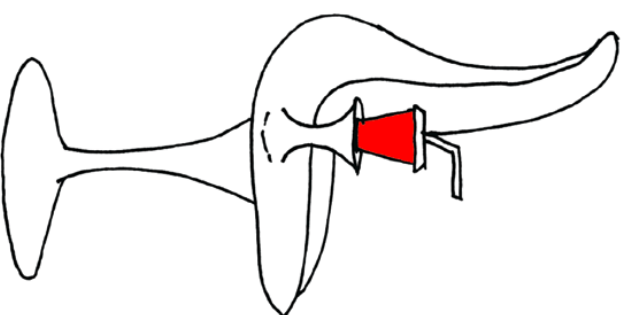
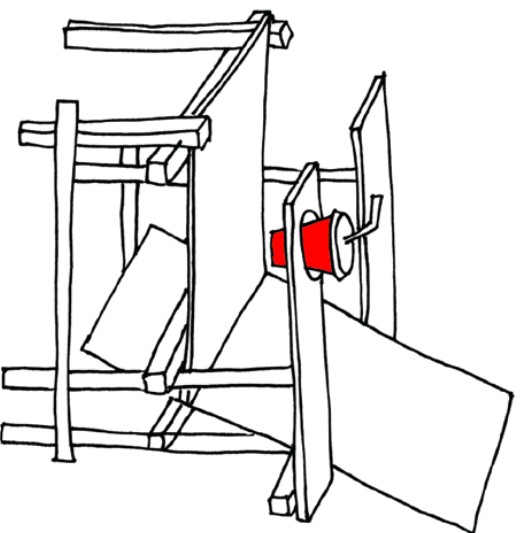


DESIGN THINKING: A CONVERSATION

Ellen Lupton

Interview by Angelina A. Rahn

Ellen Lupton is known for wearing many hats as she divides her time between New York City, where she is a curator of contemporary design at Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and Baltimore where she is active as the director of the Graphic Design MFA programme at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). These two vocations often inspire her to write books that share her unique take on what design readers are craving.



You are both active as a university professor and as a curator at Cooper-Hewitt. What are some of the similarities between these two functions (beyond the obvious in that they are both educational) and how are they radically different?

They are both educational, but one is very intimate. When teaching in a school, you become very close to your students, you work with them over a period of years, you have, I hope, a big impact on their lives and vice versa. As a museum curator you speak to a very large public, most of whom you never meet. And you have a very short experience. Maybe they buy a book or read about the project, but it's a very quick relationship. To me they are both fantastic and they both have an important function.

You got into curating quite early. What made you pursue academia subsequently and not dedicate yourself fulltime to curating?

Opportunity. When I was in school I became very interested in writing about design and the history of design, wondering why there was so little information and how we could create a discourse for design. I was very lucky to run a study collection at my school at Cooper Union and I became a curator sort of by accident. It was great fun. I published a lot and got many exhibitions and was able to move my career forward. And then I had the opportunity to come and teach in Baltimore in 1997. So I decided to experiment with that, and see what it would be like. That's been a whole other chapter alongside

my work at Cooper-Hewitt. I've done a lot of publishing that is directed at students and young designers, which is very different because most other publications about graphic design tend to be too scholarly or a souvenir for an exhibition of an exhibition. But as a teacher I became excited about publishing a whole different kind of book. One that is much more directed at people who are using it as a tool. So this part of my career is more directed at the "making and doing of design" not just the history of design. Thinking with Type was a response to the traditional books that were out there, which were either too detail-oriented or just ugly books that did not speak in an intelligent voice to my students. So I wanted a book that was inexpensive and nice to look at and contemporary.

What triggers these ideas in publishing for you? Since you have also published books with your sister:

Often my ideas come from seeing a topic that is useful but hasn't been addressed. I really think about readers and what they will find useful. And my readers are designers. A lot of writers work in the opposite way. They think about what they think is interesting or what would further their career. I recently did a book called Graphic Design Thinking. There are a lot of books about design thinking more generally from a business point of view or innovation point of view. But nobody had done a book about how graphic design connects to innovation and business but has its own procedures. That's how you make good product. When you look at what's missing out there.

Have you ever pursued the idea of doing commercial work yourself?

Well, I'm just so busy doing what I do. People always ask me that. I don't know where they think I can find the time. I do occasionally do client work but it's not where my passion lies.

In light of your limited time, how do you keep yourself constantly informed about new contemporary designers since your two jobs are radically different?

I just try my best. I wish I did better. Having young students helps because they know

a lot. It's good to learn from them. I am working on a show that will open at Cooper-

Hewitt next year called How Posters Work and this project will bring the two voices together in terms of what I do in academia and in my role as curator. It's going to be very much about the design principles that are universal in poster design in the 20s, in the 30s all the way to contemporary design. So I think this show will be very interesting and for me a convergence of my museum voice and my teaching voice.

In curating, how much of it is an emotional response to works versus an intellectual one?

Well, the emotion works for about five minutes and the rest of curating is very much about e-mail and data entry and going to meetings. It's not creative. Most of it is just about making things happen and can be very tedious.

Do you see design as fulfilling primarily a functional role or an artistic one, especially in light of the recent tendency to collect design often through auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's?

The vast majority of design is functional and we don't think about it very much. Telephone booths, kitchen pots and most other things are really just functional. But there is that strata of design that is collectable and speaks to this new market, the design as art market. And museums of course are very interested in that. But it's really a tiny tiny fraction of what design is.

What are some of the trends and challenges you see in today's design landscape?

There is a lot of interest in code and creating self-generating systems, designing tools that other designers can use. Open-source design is an interesting area. Designers are creating plans that other people can download and use to produce things themselves. Sustainability of course is a big issue and concern how to design for the complete life cycle of products. With the economy, a lot of designers are trying to develop new ways of working and are looking at systems to work with each other, sharing small offices and resources and I think that has affected the vocabulary of design.

In both your roles as a curator and an academic, you are well informed about the history of design. What are in your opinion some of the important milestones and movements that you would qualify as revolutionary?

There are so many. The European avant-garde, which is endlessly fascinating and continues to influence design today. From cubism to futurism to the Bauhaus, but also the great popular movements like streamlining and the advertising revolution and the impact of film and television. The scope is so large and so much of it continues to be an inspiration for designers today. We keep going back and looking at it in new ways.

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Speaking specifically about graphic design, can we talk about digital versus print? What are the major differences in approaching the solution?

Since you have previously stated that a graphic designer is best served in a framework where he has to find a solution. There is so much more basic problem solving involved in digital. Just how to create a page layout in CSS is so tricky. The tools are still very primitive for a designer to use. And the whole question of interaction and how people will interact, to design for digital you have to create this whole flow of how people get from A to B and what the transitions are. So there is so much basic and literal problem solving. In print all of that has been worked out: you turn a page. So it's a very slow and very intensive process where it's not so much about what you are communicating or the imagery but more about the basic mechanics of it. A designer likes to respond to a situation, a condition in which some piece of communication is required. Where you put your creative mind at the service of working within certain constraints. It's a very social activity. It's not just about what you want to do, but it's about the interaction with the world.

When you look for new designers what stands out for you? Is it more the aesthetic aspect or functionality? Or a combination of both?

The aesthetic is very important because when you are planning an exhibition you

have to create things for people to look at. There are lots of important things in design that are invisible or not very interesting to look at, and in a museum you are creating an experience for the public. So the aesthetic is very important. It's a hook. But we also try to look deeper and find other reasons and functions.

You also put value on exhibiting a specific design's prototype and its sketches. So how valuable is the actual thought-process to you?

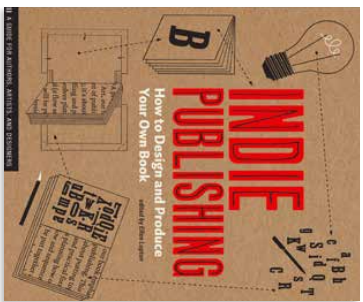
It's very important. At Cooper-Hewitt we try to collect prototypes. We try to get drawings for products to show how designers came to their solutions and that it's not always a straight path but requires experimentation. Testing different ideas to get where you are going. So we are very proud of having a lot of that material in our collection.

What do you qualify as good design?

Ultimately good design is useful to people. It serves a function. It should also inspire and provide more than what is expected.

Does the product have to be sellable or is evoking an innovative idea sufficient?

Paola Antonelli presented some examples during her appearance on the Colbert Report, where the accent seemed to be placed on innovation. What are your thoughts? Products that aren't necessarily sellable serve an important purpose too. They serve



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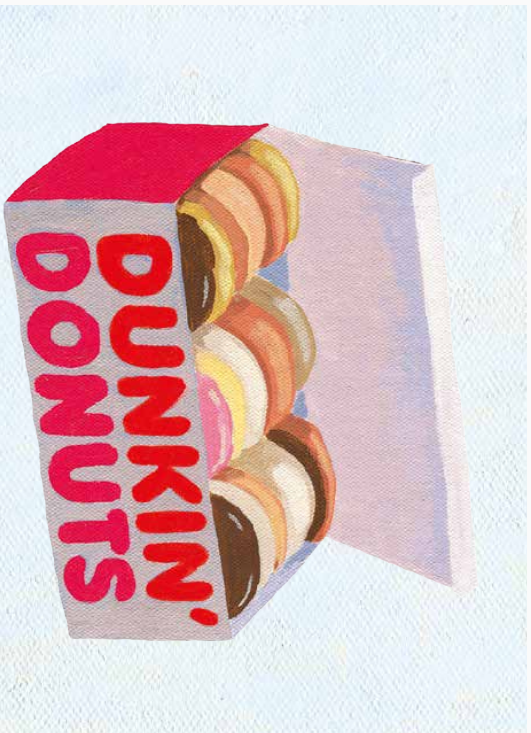


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1-6 Book Covers, books published by Ellen Lupton



as a provocation. They help us think about what's possible. They point to the future. If people only made things that could be sold, we would have never progressed. To have progress you have to have failures, and attempts, and risks. Some of the most influential things were never built, like Tathin's Tower, but it was seen. And in being seen it inspired a lot of things to be built and made. There is a discourse about design that moves things forward and inspires production. And sometimes the elements of that conversation aren't ready to be made yet.

As far as university programmes are concerned you mentioned that some have more structured curricula while others approach design more as an art form. How is it with design museums around the world?

Some design museums are more about collecting the best and most important examples, like for example the MoMA. They have very strict criteria in terms of the aesthetic significance of each object in their collection. And some collections are more eclectic like the Victoria & Albert museum or Cooper-Hewitt. We are a little more open-ended about what each project might represent. So we have prototypes of some products where the product may not be all that significant but we had the opportunity to document the whole process, and to us that makes it a worthy acquisition.

Are there any countries or geographic areas that stand out in terms of design innovation?

Well the Netherlands are crazy. They just have had this amazing work done here for decades that influences designers everywhere else. And designers from around the world go here to study design and to absorb that culture of questioning, innovation and experiment.

Companies and brands are increasingly interested in differentiating themselves by initiating sound or even avant-garde design collaborations. Can you mention some that have stood out for you?

IKEA with their PS programme worked with top designers like Hella Jongerius to create products that are accessible but are experimental in working with new materials or new craftsmen. Target, a big inexpensive retailer working with designers to create products that have their name on it. I think that helps to raise the public awareness of design.

Do you ever come across a specific niche or industry, where you feel like they are light years behind in terms of design and innovation?

Airports. There are so many parts of our lives



1 Design Your Life Donut
2 Design Your Life Signage

"I see today's activism is designed as activation."

that aren't well considered. Parking on the street. A lot of things. Road signs are looking terribly, with ugly graphics.

What about the reverse?

The whole area of consumer technology, like Apple products for example, which is geared towards innovation and what people like to use. Or Nest the thermostat that learns and communicates with users. They are introducing a smoke alarm that actually works.

What are you currently working on?

I have a show opening in December called Beautiful Users about user-centred design and the way designers look at human need. I also have a book that just came out called Type of screen.