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Design History Society-sponsored panel: Administering design: the hidden practices of design work

DESIGN HISTORY SOCIETY

Chairs: Leah Armstrong, University of Applied Arts Vienna; Kasia Jeżowska, University of New South Wales

Administering design : the hidden practices of design work The question of what constitutes work, past and present, has come under serious critical attention of late, but there has been a notable absence of historical study on administrative and bureaucratic forms of design labor. Sociologists and social historians have put pressure on the boundaries between visible and invisible forms of labor, challenging the power dynamics of industrial capitalism. This presents an opportune moment to explore questions of value and identity at work, with pressing relevance in today's society. We propose that design bureaucrats and administrators represent something of an *éminence grise* and that these roles have been traditionally hidden from view. Unseen and frequently gendered, they were often central to positioning design as a tool in cultural diplomacy and to the performance of the designer's role in business and in public life. This panel brings attention to these invisible forms of design labour in historical context, calling for papers that address design across disciplines, geographies, time periods and practices including (but not limited to): design office administrators, secretaries; press agents; committee members of design organizations; archivists and librarians; state bureaucrats; diplomats and design managers. Aiming to shed new light on practices that might previously have been considered as 'merely' supportive, the panel invites submissions that reconsider agency in design history and respond to the question of what constitutes design work from a new perspective.

Marta Fraenkel, GeSoLei, and Designing the Insurance State

Jonathan Odden, Williams College

In the late spring of 1926, a fairground replete with purpose-built galleries, pavilions, and an Expressionist-style café appeared along the Rhine river in Düsseldorf. Spanning nearly a kilometer, the fairground was the site of Weimar Germany's first public health exposition, a tribute to modern medical design, the burgeoning insurance state, and new social contracts promised and promoted by the post-war welfare state. Düsseldorf's *Grosse Ausstellung für Gesundheitspflege, Sociale Fürsorge, und Lebensübungen*—or simply *GeSoLei*—often escaped the bounds of its nineteenth-century world's fair logic, yet the spectacle of awe and education remained. In fact, by the time the show opened, *GeSoLei* not only presented a series of new means to articulate self- and social-care for modern audiences, but also how these articulations could be represented in exhibition design and new pedagogical aesthetics. This innovative design work, however, has largely been overlooked by historians, due in part to the fact

that planning for the fair fell largely to medical professionals and city officials—that is, to bureaucrats. Among these organizers was Dr. Marta Fraenkel—later the director of the famous Deutsches Hygiene-Museum—who served as general secretary. This paper returns to Dr. Fraenkel's work for the fair and rereads GeSoLei through her bureaucratic efforts and design decisions. Furthermore, by situating Fraenkel's work alongside fellow medical professionals turned adhoc designers, this paper argues that the elision of professional labor, often female labor, in state-sponsored projects like GeSoLei mirrors a elision of responsibility between individual and state, whereby the visitor is attuned to their own health responsibilities while the larger social structure of health and wellness is increasingly rendered illegible.

“Untapped Reservoirs:” Mineral Diplomacy, Developmentalism, and Spratling Silver

Grace Kuipers

This paper examines mineral diplomacy and developmentalism in the design workshop of William Spratling. Funded in the 1930s by the U.S. government as a project of cultural diplomacy, Spratling revived a colonial-era silver mine in Taxco, Mexico in order to construct silver jewelry based on Pre-Columbian designs (fig. 1). While both the jewelry itself and the workshop's spectacles of Indigenous labor transformed Taxco into a popular artistic mecca for Mexican and U.S. artists alike, they also prolonged a deeply fraught history of silver extraction in Mexico, in which white settlers laid claim to Indigenous labor and resources. Moreover, this revival happened at a moment in which Mexico's mineral resources were hotly contested. As Mexico pushed to nationalize its subsoil in the 1930s, extractive companies and their political allies launched campaigns of mineral diplomacy which stressed the transnational properties of minerals. Ultimately, I argue that Spratling silver helped to administer the largely invisible work of the U.S. mineral frontier through a vocabulary of border-crossing developmentalism, which suffused perceptions of the artistic form of the jewelry, the Indigenous labor that made it, and the minerals themselves. Conceived from the beginning as a project of cultural diplomacy, Spratling's workshop presented a vision of mutual collaboration, in which the introduction of U.S. capital could activate, modernize, and develop Mexico's squandered reservoirs of wasted potential. Beyond Spratling's self-presentation as a developer of “dormant” minerals and art forms, his developmentalism also played out in spectacles of Indigenous labor: for an audience of Mexico's urban elite and U.S. tourists, Spratling presented a system of production in which autochthonous authenticity was rendered productive by factory-like managerial practices in a mutually beneficial arrangement (fig. 2).

Strategic Misfits: Design Work and Professional Values at the National Institute of Design in India

Vishal Khandelwal, Harvard University

India after the end of British colonial rule in 1947 presents a compelling case to study intersections among design, bureaucracy, and industrial capitalism from the vantage point

of a developing, independent nation attempting to define its cultural production in tension with its colonial legacy. Current scholarship tends to consider professionalized design in the decades immediately following the Indian independence a kind of misfit within a protectionist economic system that hindered private participation, market competition, and as such the very creation of well-designed products and commodities. This paper questions such a narrative through analyzing the intended and actual meanings and scope of design work in postcolonial India. It archivally reconstructs public and private discussions and disagreements among administrators, funders, and bureaucrats regarding the pedagogy and work of the eminent National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad, established in 1961 with funding from Indian bureaucrats and capitalists and the US-based Ford Foundation, and whose experimental pedagogy borrowed from the German Bauhaus and Ulm design schools. The paper argues that critical conversations around the significance of design in an economy riddled with poverty, unemployment, and scarcity addressed the ability of the NID to not produce impressive products and commodities, but institutionalize attitudes, values, and behaviors among designers and their associates that were considered beneficial for both the scholastic community and society at large. Such discussions ultimately not only oriented the NID curriculum towards perceived national needs such as economic developmentalism, but also strategically ensured the institution's autonomy through its embrace of statist service.

Materializing hidden labor in the administrative management of design: the case of Michael Farr (Design Integration)

David Preston, University of the Arts London

Michael Farr (Design Integration) has been recognized as the first design management consultancy in Europe, yet the significance of their work is yet to be addressed by scholars. In this presentation I argue that their founder, Michael Farr, was a key progenitor of design management who helped to reify a hidden practice through his business and publishing operations. As he began to conceptualize his new business in the early 1960s, Farr faced the issue of how to ascribe value to a practice that was largely invisible and unrecognized. There was little precedent from which he could draw upon and the immateriality of his work created problems in terms of evidencing the value of his labor to potential clients who were unfamiliar with such practices and could not identify their purpose. With help from associates, Farr developed the theoretical basis from which his consultancy could flourish. Terminology and naming were carefully considered, alongside diagrammatic representations that showed working processes and the labor relations between designers and their clients. Through this work Farr and his associates began to inscribe particular ‘ways of practice’ unique to the administrative management of design. This process of reification began locally, but was soon shared internationally, as Farr disseminated his methods to a wider audience through several major publications. Drawing on original research from the V&A Archive of Art & Design I share examples showing how Farr

used the process of inscription to reify practices associated with the administrative management of design, thus materializing an immaterial practice.
