Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility

Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility is a collection of essays and interviews by design professionals and writers, edited by Steven Heller and Véronique Vienne and published by Allworth Press. I purchased it from Amazon for $14.56. Citizen Designer is intended for graphic design professionals, and I believe particularly for newly graduated designers. It can be read by anyone who grew up in a consumer economy, since almost all references and essays revolve around designing for consumer goods and the ethics involved. It is organized into four sections—Social Responsibility, Professional Responsibility, Artistic Responsibility, and Rants and Raves. I will discuss the articles and interviews I found most interesting from each section.

Social Responsibility

The essays and interviews in this section of Citizen Designer revolve around two key concepts, sustainability and consumerism. Neither of these topics meshed much with IST, but it was the more interesting section of the book for me. The first essay about sustainability suggested that before a graphic designer take on a job, they should consider the lifetime social and environmental impact of a product. Katherine McCoy suggests that if the designer believes that this particular or type of product costs too much to society or the environment, the designer should refuse the job. Judith Schwartz contributed an interesting article about so-called altruism advertising—products that sell their products in part by paying to have nonprofit organizations’ logos printed on the packaging. She says that 60 percent of consumers believe that products that have the American Cancer Society’s logo on them reduce your chance of contracting cancer (p. 9). In reality, companies like the American Heart Association will allow a company to use their logo for $2,500 and $650 per year afterward and also give your product an exclusivity contract to keep their logo off of similar products. She argues that this is
harmful because nonprofits can be hurt if alliances are not chosen wisely, it can alienate consumers who oppose the cause, and companies only use visible causes with mass appeal (p. 16-7).

An interview with Shawn Wolfe discusses his personal project, a brand called Beatkit, which produces anti-branding related apparel and most notably the RemoverInstaller. The RemoverInstaller has no practical use or purpose whatsoever, and is sold completely by virtue of its advertising. Shawn Wolfe calls it a “concrete metaphor for planned obsolescence and conspicuous consumption” (p. 48). He also says that designers are particularly responsible for their actions, because the professional decisions they make are multiplied by the virtue of repetition.

Professional Responsibility

The essays in Professional Responsibility primarily involve advertising and contain an article and interview that both actually involve IST. In an article titled Reality Branding, Nancy Bernard contends that advertising needs to be more honest. “If the product is frivolous, don’t pretend that it’s serious; if someone else’s stuff is pretty much the same as yours, don’t pretend that it’s unique” (p. 89). She says that if a product will not revolutionize business, don’t say that it can unless you do so in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Steven Heller, one of the editors of the book, includes an article Typographica Mea Culpa: Unethical Downloading, in which he frankly discusses his own electronic font piracy, and then provides several reasons why it can be hurtful for designers to pirate. He discusses license agreements, which all IST students would be familiar with, which he never read; instead, he provided the fonts to everyone down the design pipeline who of course would then keep the font. Although the graphic design community abhors the copying of a photograph or illustration without compensation, most do not have the same high regard for typefaces, which Heller calls “dead wrong.”

In an interview with Don Norman, a usability expert concerned mostly with computer interfaces, Norman quickly asserts his belief that humans do not make mistakes. He argues that humans evolved to
make surprisingly accurate approximations in a natural environment, and society has invented processes and machinery that require inhuman acts. “Do we err when we walk along a weaving path? Of course not—that is how people walk. It is only when engineers and designers require us to walk in straight lines that we call the behavior erroneous—so too with almost every place where people err” (p. 129).

He discusses the infamous butterfly ballots used in Florida for the 2000 presidential election, bringing up a point I had not considered at the time. The ballots were designed to be as cheap as possible, as opposed to usable—so there was no problem with the ballots, but the perspectives and objectives of the designers. When asked about unreadable software manuals, Norman says that before the software is written, the manual should be completed—and then the software must follow the manual.

Artistic Responsibility

Only one article in the artistic responsibility section caught my attention, in that it tied in with a concept in 413. In an article Beautility, Tucker Viemeister discusses the fusion of beauty and utility in design. He says that design is what separates humans from other forms of life in that it is premeditated action. Viemeister then argues that beauty and utility are intertwined, and that a designer’s job is to add beauty in a product, tying into the concept of the aesthetic usability effect.

Rants and Raves

Rants and raves had the least to do with IST in general, with most of the articles revolving around graphic design specifically. In an article by Teal Tiggs, he discusses the purpose of May Day, an international anti-consumerism day intent on disrupting as much business as possible on May first. He argues that the success of capitalist and consumerist economies are based on engineered waste and obsolescence, and that the goal of advertising is to make consumers desire new products through discontent with an older product that still likely serves its purpose.
The End

Well before I was done reading the book, I realized it was written for graphic designers by graphic designers, which left me wondering why it was one of the suggested books for our assignment. While I found a number of the articles and interviews interesting, quite a few just read like anti-consumers sounding off for myriad reasons. It may help a young graphic designer start their career working ethically, but as an IST student, I learned little that was beneficial.