On calling yourself a designer

Who gets to call themselves a designer? Design studies scholar Claudia Marina questions the boundaries of what we call "design" and who gets to do it.

Claudia Marina

Designers are protective people. This self-preservation is a form of survival, perhaps, in the face contemporary design, which threatens to absorb disparate practices and call everything design. If everything is design, then I suppose nothing is. As I am writing this essay, I am also preparing to give a lecture on this topic, and I'm nervous because I don't know if I'll be able to deliver the message efficiently—a quality designers love but is rarely the reality of the mythologized "design process." I sit at my computer to write my script, and I begin thinking about whether I can call myself a designer. My instinct is to say no, and then I offer: I am a writer, a teacher, a theorist, but not a designer. Designers who hire me to teach classes, such as the one for which I am preparing the lecture, often like that I am not a designer because this position gives me an interdisciplinary perspective. But isn't design inherently interdisciplinary if it responds to human or ecological needs (or to the anxiety between the two)? Despite my field being design studies, I still feel as though I'm at an introduction with design. This feeling isn't an insecurity but rather an innate curiosity. I feel as if I have to say this not least because I am a woman, which seems to affect the voice of authority I have on the subject. (One anonymous online reviewer on Ratemyprofessors.com described me by writing, "She literally doesn't know what she's doing." To that person, I ask: Do you?)

At what point did you feel comfortable calling yourself a designer? Are you still negotiating this? If I can successfully convince others that I am, do the long-term implications of that acceptance destabilize the institution of design and render it meaningless? I cannot practice design without positioning myself as a woman who is white and Cuban American, from Miami, and born in 1993—which makes me a millennial. All these conditions might explain the propensity that institutions or industries have for initially not taking me seriously. Scholars encourage me to walk into a room and start off with this issue of positionality, which always feels a bit like lacking confidence—though I understand its academic reasoning. But I would like to be known for my ideas, not for the body that delivers them—naively. Perhaps it is my own form of self-preservation to evade criticism and allocate my stubbornness to, once again, being a writer, "not a designer," when I stand at the front of an auditorium and begin to speak.

To use a term designers love, my recent thinking on the relationship between design and feminism is that it is one of design's many *wicked problems*. This sort of thinking stems not only from my experience of being a woman in design but also

from reading about design in general. Richard Buchanan considers the problem of understanding design itself to be wicked. "The flexibility of design often leads to popular misunderstanding and clouds efforts to understand its nature," he writes. He extends his idea to the positionality of the person writing that history: "*One could go further and say that the history of design history is a record of the design historians' views regarding what they conceive to be the subject matter of design.*"[1] In the questioning of the difference of design in various contexts, to ignore the actual body of the designer—and who gets to call themselves one—leaves out the visceral reality of design. How I experience it is not the same as how my neighbor does, and herein lies the difference in "what [you versus I] conceive to be the subject matter of design." In embracing the wickedness of design and the resulting confusion of who gets to practice it, a feminist design practice today necessitates a series of questions rather than definitive answers—some of which I invite you to think about with me.

In 1971, a decade before feminist design historians began to seriously question design's subject matter and construction of gender, Victor Papanek wrote that design is "cleaning and reorganizing a desk drawer, pulling an impacted tooth, baking an apple pie."[2] At a very surface level, I knew this was true, but why hadn't design historians seriously examined everyday life as an essential part of design rather than as an area that design serves? Why were consumers (historically imagined as women) not treated as designers, too?

Feminist design history has much more at stake than just writing women into the history books. To be a feminist designer is to be aware of difference as a basis for all interaction, which concerns more than just women. Culturally, design is so enmeshed with ideas of rationality, productivity, and problem solving that systemic issues stemming from design culture make their way into everyday conversations without so much as questioning how design has been appropriated by capitalism and, by extension, cisheteropatriarchy. For example, why did the interior designer Florence Knoll feel the need to distinguish herself from women in general when she told the *New York Times*, "I am not a decorator. The only place I decorate is my own house."[3] Knoll was referring to the right to be taken seriously, and she justified the holding of this right not because she is a human who is not biologically predisposed to domesticity or more "feminine" forms of space planning but because she received her design education from canonized male architects.

Because I have taught in an interior design program, I often encourage my students to seriously question whether decoration is a practice exclusive to the home. More pressingly, is Knoll's assertion rooted in design's internalized misogyny? Why is it that when men design at home—as in the story of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak designing the first Apple computer out of Jobs's family garage—their practice is recorded under the guise of "innovation"? In fact, Wozniak has said, "We did no designs there ... no prototyping, no planning of products."[4] Yet the prioritization of innovation over maintenance is so prevalent in American culture that the Apple garage has joined the HP garage ("the birthplace of Silicon Valley") as a protected historic landmark. Garages are more likely to be seen as spaces

where we go to design something singular. The designing that happens in kitchens or bedrooms, by contrast, is rarely recognized perhaps because its practice is so enmeshed with the body. It does not subscribe to the creation myth but instead follows the quieter practice of adaptation, maintenance, and care. Why is it that the construction of gendered spaces continues to influence what we value? How is design complicit?

In my mind, what Florence Knoll seemed to be saying is somewhat the occupational equivalent of "I'm not like other girls"—the kind of thinking that seeks acceptance and respect from people in power by relating and identifying closer to them than to those who exist as "other" by comparison. In Knoll's case, the latter would be women who designed through informal networks of craft or were educated by means of home décor magazines throughout modern history. They practiced design where they could, in spaces where they were not excluded from developing expertise (i.e., the home). As Cheryl Buckley argued in 1986, "If a feminist approach to design is to be articulated, it must cut across these exclusive definitions of design and craft to show that women used craft modes of production for specific reasons ... because they had access neither to the factories of the new industrial system nor to the training offered by the new design schools."[5] In 2020, revisiting her original questions from that earlier article, Buckley found, "That the small scale, domestic, intimate, and, perhaps, the transitory and incidental remain on the periphery of designers' interests is indicative that this [a feminist approach to design] has yet to be done."[6]

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As designers in a capitalist system, we identify ourselves by our occupation rather than by our role in communities. But who are designers when they step out of the studio and enter the space of consumption? Maintenance workers and manual laborers who are incorrectly perceived as participating only in the peripheries of design may be less likely to recognize their own role in design systems. With the prevalence of codesign rising to the occasion of trying to solve design's internal democracy issue, I wonder what participatory design would look like without the designer's participation. Such a provocation requires us to ask ourselves: What do we gain from exclusion? Sometimes I have no idea what design means, which is exactly what keeps me in it. This instability urges me to find a way to reconcile my belief in design as inherent to everyday life and its intricacies, even in the institutions that increasingly limit a sense of agency to participate.

My position—one in which I feel comfortable—is that of both an outsider and a designer. The questions that arise out of a feminist design practice are intrinsic

to the types of questions that arise from considering design in relation to yourself and the institutions that affect the way you think about your ability to practice it seriously in everyday life. These questions ask who is allowed in a place, what kind of technology allows an object to materialize, and how many degrees a machine is removed from the mind. The gap widens between the sketch and the thing, between the idea and the building, between the verb and the noun. Do we even need the word *designer*?

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1 Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (1992): 19, emphasis in original.
2 Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 3.
3 Quoted in Virginia Lee Warren, "Woman Who Led an Office Revolution Rules an Empire of Modern Design," *New York Times*, September 1, 1964.
4 Brandon Lisy, "Steve Wozniak on Apple, the Computer Revolution, and Working with Steve Jobs," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 4, 2014, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-12-04/apple-steve-wozniak-on-the-early-years-with-steve-jobs.
5 Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," *Design Issues* 3, no. 2 (1986): 7, doi:10.2307/1511480.
6 Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy II: Researching (or Re-searching) Women and Design," *Design Issues* 36, no. 1 (2020): 22, doi:10.1162/desi_a_00572.