Reshaping and Rethinking: Recent Feminist Scholarship on Design and Designers

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Introduction

The four works I have been asked to discuss in this review essay comprise recent writings by approximately fifty different people, many of whom are prominent feminist design critics, practitioners, and / or historians.[1] Three of the works—the exhibition at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture (BGC), the substantial accompanying catalog, and the special issue of *Studies in the Decorative Arts* (also a BGC publication)—are part of a large research project spearheaded by Pat Kirkham that attempts to chart the "diversity and difference" of women designers practicing in the U.S. between 1900 and 2000.[2] The definite (but not exclusive) focus of the BGC publications is on women who "design" small-scale, discrete, aesthetically pleasing objects, whereas the contributors to Joan Rothschild's edited volume *Design and Feminism* are more often interested (though again, not exclusively) in the needs of "consumers" of architecture and urban design. The Bard projects and the Rothschild book thus are engaged with such different questions and categories of design that there is little overlap between the two, either in terms of content or approach.

Comparing the BGC enterprises to Rothschild's book is nonetheless instructive, as the juxtaposition illustrates the diversity of scholarship that is currently being produced by self-proclaimed feminists. The BGC projects, for example, are characterized by fairly conservative notions about the nature and purposes of feminist inquiry. However, by including crafts in the exhibition, Kirkham does make use of what are still apparently perceived as fairly radical definitions of "design" and "designers," at least if comparing the content of the Bard exhibition to the content of two concurrent design shows at the Met and Cooper-Hewitt is any indication.[3]

In marked contrast to the BGC productions, Rothschild's book seems to employ a fairly standard definition of design that is notable only for its inclusion of architecture, which the BGC publications do not address. Rothschild's book also provides a wider sampling of feminist approaches to the study and practice of design, many of which are explicitly activist in nature.

Pat Kirkham, curator, *Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000: Diversity and Difference* (exhibition at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, New York, November 15, 2000 – February 25, 2001).

Pat Kirkham, ed., *Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000: Diversity and Difference* (exhibition catalog published for The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture by Yale University Press, 2000).

Pat Kirkham and Ella Howard, eds. *Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000* (special issue of *Studies in the Decorative Arts* VIII:1, Fall-Winter, 2000–2001).

Joan Rothschild, ed., *Design and Feminism: Re-Visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

Footnotes begin on page 87.

Due to the number of authors represented in these works, and to the difficulty of addressing in sufficient detail the diversity of their approaches and subject matter, this essay is not intended to serve as an overview of the "contents" of the show and the three publications. Instead, it is intended as a critique of the methodologies that Kirkham and Rothschild have employed as editors (and / or as curator and conference organizer, respectively) of these works.

Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: The Exhibition, the Catalog, the Journal

Each of the three Bard "Women Designers" productions serves the useful purposes both of promoting "a deeper understanding of the varied and multiple roles and achievements of women designers during the twentieth century" and of "explain[ing] women's absences from certain activities as well as their participation in others."[4] All three are also visually compelling; the illustrations in the catalog, for example, are plentiful and lush, and the videos and timelines in the exhibition spaces add considerably to the appeal and educational value of the show.

However, even though many of the individual essays in the catalog and journal do merit praise for their impressive historical research, clear writing style, and good illustrations, the project's focus on women's roles as "designers" means that little mention is made in either the essays or the exhibition placards of women's other important roles as purchasers, users, patrons, and scholars of design. Given that Cheryl Buckley's 1986 article "Made in Patriarchy" is clearly a key text for Kirkham's formulation of the category "designer"—and of her inclusion of what are usually called "crafts" in an exhibition on "design"—I was disappointed that Kirkham's study did not seem to be informed by the other half of Buckley's argument, which was that feminist scholars should move away from the study of individual designers, and instead focus on the other kinds of interactions women have had with design. Focusing on designers does of course have certain uses, but as Buckley points out, "The monograph, the primary method used by historians to focus on the designer, is an inadequate vehicle for exploring the complexity of design production and consumption."[5]

Especially given the influence that Buckley's article has had on feminist design scholarship since it was published, the kinds of questions posed both explicitly and implicitly by Kirkham et al. seem somewhat dated; they are virtually identical to the queries typical of "traditional" art history (e.g., how "significant" or "great" was this designer? Can she be considered an innovator or, better yet, a "pioneer"? What influence did she have on her field and on subsequent practitioners? Has her work been unjustly overlooked or undervalued by historians? What obstacles did she overcome on the road to fame and fortune? and so on). As a result of this mode of

inquiry, the conclusions that many of the BGC scholars draw are unsatisfying. In many of the essays, readers are assured that female designer X (or X and the other members of her design specialization or race with whom scholars choose to group her) indeed was one of the "greats"; that she was unfairly omitted from the history of design; and—now that she has at last been "recovered" from the dustbins of history—that due to her "sheer determination and talent" in the face of so many obstacles to success, she can now serve as an inspiring example to all (or at least to all who share her sex, race, or design specialty).[6]

In the BGC essays these familiar tales of artistic heroism have been reworded to apply to female designers rather than male fine artists, but the assumptions underlying both the stories and the questions that generate them remain largely unaddressed. I find it curious that Kirkham and her coauthor, Lynne Walker, readily acknowledge in the first chapter of the catalog that Nikolaus Pevsner's 1936 book, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, "set the tone for histories of male modernist heroes, and for proto-modernist ones, too," but that they nonetheless seem undisturbed by the extent to which Pevsner's master narrative of male modernist heroes also has shaped the tone and terms of many of their co-contributors' essays.[7]

The word "pioneer," in fact, appears with great frequency in both the catalog and the journal; two of the eight journal articles feature the word in their titles.[8] Given that Susan Weber Soros, director of the BGC, claims in her foreword to the catalog that "By focusing on diversity and difference, this project challenges the hierarchy of the arts and the eurocentrism of scholarship surrounding them," I am surprised to see that the term "pioneer" is employed so often and seemingly so uncritically.[9] What is a pioneer if not the protagonist of eurocentric myths of manifest destiny? Was it not European pioneers who, as catalog contributor Pamela Kladzyk suggests, were responsible for the obliteration of Native American design traditions and ways of life?[10] I would argue that pioneers are venerable figures only when viewed from a eurocentric standpoint. Although the term "pioneer" (much like the monograph) indubitably has certain uses, it is ironic that the term is featured so prominently in a self-avowedly feminist research project that claims to challenge eurocentrism and embrace "diversity and difference."

In this post-Pevsnerian era, describing an artist or a designer as a "pioneer" suggests (at least to me) a desire to position that person within a eurocentric, masculinist, modernist canon of "greats," an endeavor that, as Buckley pointed out in her 1986 essay, is fraught with a number of problems. Indeed, Kirkham and Walker are rather defensive on this point. They claim in the first chapter of the catalog that "This publication contributes to the ongoing efforts, which began with the Women's Movement in the late 1960s, to recover women previously 'hidden from history' and to reevaluate their roles and contributions." As the authors note, "it is easy to

caricature such studies as [doing] little more than adding token women to 'male' narratives." Rather than formulating a carefully argued response to this critique, however, they dodge the issue by claiming that "the best feminist scholarship has always gone beyond that [process of recovery and reevaluation(?)]—to the broad social context of political and personal issues—and has been at the center of reshaping and rethinking the telling of history."[11]

I agree that engagement with political, personal, and social issues is absolutely central to feminist scholarship, and feel that, as director of this research project, Kirkham did provide much of the context needed for an understanding of the legal, political, and social status of women in twentieth-century U.S. culture. However, due to a number of flawed premises related to the ways in which design was, and is, customarily defined and valued in this country, the feminist "telling of history" that Kirkham presents in the exhibition and publications demands "reshaping and rethinking" itself.[12] Had Kirkham framed her guiding question in a Nochlinesque manner—for example, as "Why have there been so few famous female designers, and what attitudes and practices would need to be changed in order to produce more of them?"—I believe that the resulting exhibition and publications would have been both more compelling and more constructive than the ones that were actually produced.[13]

Instead of questioning and defending their premises carefully in light of the many critiques of their method that have been written in the last two decades, Soros and Kirkham take the surprising position that theirs is a "groundbreaking project."[14] Mounting an exhibition that focuses explicitly on both white women *and* women of color simultaneously—especially mounting a design exhibition that does so—indeed is unusual. However, as Kirkham herself points out, the notion that "separating out" women and minorities allows their work to be showcased more effectively is one that can be traced to much earlier exhibitions, such as the one at the Woman's Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition.[15] Although Kirkham's positioning of named Native American women as active "designers"—rather than as anonymous, passive subjects of ethnographic analysis—still is somewhat unusual, I nonetheless hesitate to call an exhibit that is both so heavily influenced by traditional curatorial preferences for "objects of beauty and originality" and so exclusively focused on establishing an expanded canon of named individuals a "groundbreaking" one.[16]

I also take issue with Soros's claim that the women included in the exhibition have been "underrecognized."[17] Given that design usually refers not to the work of just one mind or one pair of hands, it is unrealistic to expect that a single person's name can or should be associated with any given work of design. Although there are a fair number of designers who are known by name, and many of them are males, there also are legions of designers—both male and

female—whose work could be said to be "underrecognized" or even unrecognized, but only if one's standard of comparison is the history of Western art. The exhibition does not support the claim that women designers have been lost to history to any greater degree than men have; if anything, the show suggests that those women who did succeed in entering the design professions garnered a great deal of attention.

I therefore find it problematic that Kirkham and Ella Howard state in the journal that one of the primary purposes of the BGC research project is "to redress the marginalization of women within the history of design and the decorative arts."[18] A similar goal is outlined in the catalog, in which Soros states that by examining "the multifaceted and largely underrecognized contributions of women designers to American culture in the twentieth century," she and Kirkham hope to place women "at the center of history, rather than the margins."[19] I question such noble-sounding aims for a number of reasons. First, as Ellen Mazur Thomson correctly points out in the BGC journal in her astute review of Martha Scotford's *Cipe Pineles: A Life of Design*, "To concentrate on the life of individual designers would appear to distort graphic design history [and other kinds of design history, I might add], yet graphic design critics and historians continue to insist on writing design history in a series of biographies of individuals, as if biography were the best approach to understanding design history."[20] Thomson notes on the same page that "Writers and critics in the field have defended their almost exclusive reliance on monographs as a necessary step to build a foundation of 'facts' before a more general history can be written," a questionable premise that certainly seems to be one accepted by many participants in the BGC project. Thomson's points nicely problematize Kirkham's goal of "redressing" past inequalities in the design and design history professions by "recovering" women "pioneers" and arguing for their centrality to the history of design; Thomson is right to suggest that writing biographies of individual women designers will do little to help people today understand the ubiquity and persistence of gender bias in the past. If anything, a biographical approach fosters the notion that truly "exceptional" women will always triumph over the obstacles society places in their way (which, in turn, minimizes the obstacles posed by sexism and racism by suggesting that they were not that great after all).

Although I certainly would not go so far as to say that biography is of no use to feminist scholars, it is nonetheless ironic to see Thomson's excellent critique of biography as a method of studying design history juxtaposed with some of the other essays and interviews included in the journal. In some cases, the interviewers asked more questions about the personal lives of their women designer interviewees (Eva Zeisel, Lella Vignelli, Gere Kavanaugh, and Judith Leiber) than they did about their training, career paths, works, or design philosophies. The following are some of the ques-

tions from Eva Zeisel's and Lella Vignelli's interviews that I found somewhat impertinent:

> "You have always struck me as a strong and independent woman. Did you have women role models in your early life?" (Ron Labaco to Eva Zeisel, p. 130)
> "Do you think your experience of household work has helped you as a designer of products for the home?" (Labaco to Zeisel, p. 135)
> "Did you take time off to get things set up for your family?" (Melissa W. M. Seiler and Pat Kirkham to Lella Vignelli, p. 144)
> "As working mothers, we are both interested in how you managed." (Seiler / Kirkham to Vignelli, p. 147)
> "Did your mother want you to become a professional architect?" (Seiler / Kirkham to Vignelli, p. 149)
> "Do you try to keep work away from home?" (Seiler / Kirkham to Vignelli, p. 150)
> "What advice would you offer young women entering the design profession?" (Seiler / Kirkham to Vignelli, p. 151)

The answers to these questions, I believe, tell us about the interviewees as *women*, but do not provide much information about them as *designers*. The interviews were conducted very differently than most interviews of male designers; men are much less frequently asked personal—as opposed to professional—questions like these. One certainly could argue that male designers should in fact be subjected to personal questions, too, but until that happens, I would prefer to see less emphasis in interviews on "woman questions" and personal lives, and more discussion of actual design practices. Further, I would like to question the assumption that is articulated between the lines in these interviews, namely, that mentor-protégé relationships between females are somehow more significant than those involving persons of the opposite sex. I would counter that young women are not the only people who need mentoring, and that female professionals are not the only ones who can or do provide it. To suggest otherwise plays into sexist stereotypes about women as "natural" nurturers, as well as implying that men are uncaring and that young women need "extra" help and guidance to succeed in male-dominated professions.

Defining "Design"

My most serious criticism of the exhibition and of the BGC project more generally probably is the one most likely to cause controversy. In short, the way in which Kirkham defines (or declines to define) the term "designer" has been an issue of considerable concern to me since my visit to the exhibition on its opening night. Surprisingly few of the "designers"" represented in the show actually conformed to my own definition of that term. Kirkham's definition of

"designer" is not the same one used, for example, by the faculty or students at the school of art and design where I work, and many of the women "designers" whose works were represented in the show, I felt, would be more accurately described as "artists" or "craftspersons."

Since the wall placards at the exhibition neither defined the term "designer"" nor explained how (or if) Kirkham understood a designer to differ from an artist or a craftsperson, it took me some time to grasp and then articulate her operating definition. My confusion was compounded by Kirkham's seemingly interchangeable use of the terms "decorative art," "applied art," and "craft" with "design." But after viewing the show twice and testing my hypothesis repeatedly on the various objects on display, I concluded that the show ultimately defined as a "designer" anyone who makes—or creates plans to make—tangible things other than paintings, photographs, buildings, or traditionally defined sculptures (i.e., "artists," "photographers," and "architects").

Probably I would not be so concerned by a lack of clear definitions and consistent usage if it were not for my conviction that many of the objects displayed in the show were not actually "design," at least not in any useful sense of the term, and that many of the women represented there were thus not actually "designers," either in the current sense of the word or in the sense in which it was used in their lifetimes. I would argue that Carolyn L. Mazloomi's quilt *The Ancestors Speak to Me*, Frances Higgins's *Dropout* vase, and Maria Martinez's and Nampeyo's jars (as well as numerous other objects included in the exhibition) do not belong in a show that is titled *Women Designers*. My resistance to applying the term "designer" to these women, I am well aware, bucks the trend in feminist scholarship set by Buckley in her aforementioned 1986 article. In that essay, which Kirkham prominently cited in her literature review in the catalog, Buckley claimed that "Central to a feminist critique of design history is a redefinition of what constitutes design."[21] She contended that design historians have misguidedly privileged mass production over craft production, and that "if a feminist approach to women's design production 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, not merely because they were biologically predisposed toward them. To exclude craft from design history," she argued, "is, in effect, to exclude from design history much of what women designed."[22]

Kirkham seems to have agreed wholeheartedly with this assessment. She not only included "craft" in the exhibition by retroactively recategorizing it as "design," but also created a new ancestry for feminist design history. In the first chapter of the catalog Kirkham and Walker trace a lineage of feminist design history that begins with Patricia Mainardi's 1973 essay "Quilts: The Great

American Art" (incorrectly cited on page 78 of the catalog as "Quilts: The Great American Myth"), followed by Roszika Parker's 1975 essay "The Word for Embroidery Was WORK," and then by Buckley's 1986 article. However, I would argue that neither Mainardi's nor Parker's essays would have been considered design history at all had it not been for Buckley's intervention in the discipline, since neither Mainardi nor Parker was interested in claiming that quilting or embroidery was "design."[23] Instead, they sought to elevate needlework from the lowly status of "craft" to the much more prestigious status of "art," as their arguments and word choices make very clear. "Design" as a category of endeavor or mode of production (as opposed to "a design" in the sense of "a composition") was not even one of the terms of Mainardi's and Parker's debates. I believe that only in retrospect—after Buckley had pressed the claim that craft history and design history should be desegregated—did it occur to most feminist historians, including Kirkham, to claim that quilting and embroidery (among other things) should be considered part of design history rather than of art or craft history.

Since Buckley's argument that craft history constitutes part of design history is one of the fundamental premises of the *Women Designers* exhibition, and is essential to an understanding of the way in which design and designers are defined therein, it is important to examine Buckley's own premises and assumptions with some care. First, I would like to take issue with Buckley's claim that "a redefinition of what constitutes design" is "central to a feminist critique of design history."[24] It certainly is true that the term "design," as most people use it, refers to a category that excludes the work of the majority of women, who historically lacked access to many of the educational and professional opportunities available to males, and who labored under other less obvious but no less powerful forms of sexual discrimination. However, redefining "design" to include "craft" is a truly dangerous move. Such a redefinition can do absolutely nothing to change the fact of past inequities. Americans' reluctance to accord "crafts" the same level of respect they accorded "art" or even "design" should not be dismissed or ignored or forgotten, which is what scholars risk when they promote interpretations of the past—such as the one seen in this exhibition—in which every woman was a "designer." If, as Buckley currently contends, the means to "interpret and understand, and perhaps to conceive of change" lies in "the analysis of design within its context and history which aids our understanding of its significance in women's lives," then it is foolish to dismiss the way that past practitioners and theorists categorized art, craft, and design, since those categories are an important part of the context and history of the production and consumption of objects.[25] Thus the exhibition, I believe, does its viewers a disservice by suggesting that despite the odds against them, many white women and women of color were

leading productive, satisfying lives as amateur or professional "designers" in the twentieth century, when in fact that was rarely the case.

My point is that it is all very well to declare—assuming a sizeable group of practitioners or scholars can be persuaded to follow such a proclamation—that from this day forward, the crafts and design will be defined differently than they have been in the past. It is another proposition entirely to proclaim such a definition to be in effect retroactively. Thirty years ago Linda Nochlin very sensibly argued that "What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that of ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought—and true greatness—are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown."[26] Like Nochlin, I believe that until scholars are willing to accept that the past was unfair, and that the creations of some groups of people were (and still are) valued more highly than those of others, they are going to find it difficult to analyze and critique the ideologies that informed those value systems. And until they can formulate persuasive critiques based on systematic arguments rather than on wishful thinking, it will be very difficult for them to effect positive social change, which, like Nochlin, I take to be the point of most feminist discourses.

I do not believe Buckley's essay or the Bard exhibition and catalog serve that end particularly well. Kirkham, summarizing Buckley's article, argues that "the work of many women designer-makers and designers was marginalized because it was too decorative and domestic; made by the 'wrong people' in the 'wrong place.'"[27] This statement is problematic both because it uses the term "designer-maker" (which, though never defined, seems to mean exactly the same thing as "craftsperson"), and because Kirkham seems to wish to use the term to refer to almost everyone who "designs" or "plans," with the exception of fine artists, architects, and photographers. Buckley and Kirkham apparently promote this generous definition of "designer" because they feel it counters design historians' biases toward "modernist form and practice, machine mass production, and innovation."[28] The problem with such a broad definition of the term, however, is that it encompasses so many activities that it becomes almost useless as a descriptor.

Defining the term "designer" through a process of subtraction—that is, as everybody *except* fine artists, architects, and photographers—means, in effect, that anyone who picks out his or her own

outfits each morning is a costume designer and that anyone who cooks dinner or orders lunch at a restaurant is a meal designer. To laugh off examples such as these as trivial or meaningless (whether because the designers in these cases are not professionals, because they don't think of themselves as designers, or because their "products" are not necessarily aesthetically pleasing) is, in a very real sense, to buy into those same hierarchies of design that privilege certain groups of makers and certain kinds of design over others. But despite their oft-stated desires to dismantle such hierarchies, neither Buckley nor Kirkham seems very interested in dealing with all the kinds of "designers" that their definition logically includes. Kirkham, for example, may very well be committed to studying the ways in which ordinary people design their wardrobes, their homes, their hair, their food, their gardens, etc., but if so, that commitment is not made apparent in the exhibition or the publications. It seems to me that Kirkham wants it both ways—she wishes to employ an expansive enough definition of "designer" to include the crafts, but yet wants to maintain distinctions between "serious" and mundane design, as well as between design and art.

I would argue that, if scholars wish to use the terms "design" and "designer" in ways that distinguish certain kinds of planning activities from others (which Buckley and Kirkham both seem to wish to do), then much narrower definitions are required. A definition I find more useful is this: a designer is simply a certain type of participant in a mode of production characterized by a division of labor between planner(s) and maker(s). This definition does not necessitate (or even imply) a bias in favor of modernism, mass production, or innovation; it simply refers to the fact that within industrialized societies (and within certain non- and pre-industrial ones, too), labor often is divided in a particular way among two or more people. Such a division of labor is not inherently sexist, nor does it inherently privilege one part of the production process over the other; rather, so long as people are free to perform either planning or making tasks to the extent that their skills will allow (rather than being relegated to one role or the other simply on the basis of their sex or class or race), there is little inherently "wrong" with division of labor. Nor does reserving the term "designer"— used as a complement to the term "technician" or "executor" or "maker"— to describe one of the participants in this mode of production imply machine rather than hand production.

Some of the women whose works appear in this show fit my definition of a designer, but most, including the persons to whom Kirkham refers as "designer-makers," do not.[29] I would argue that when both "designing" and "making" roles are performed by the same person, and thus no division of labor exists, the proper descriptor is "craftsperson" or "artist" rather than "designer," and that "designer-makers" therefore do not belong in a show called *Women Designers*, since the distinction between designers and

craftspersons is a fairly logical and clear one that has been (and still is) persistently maintained in American culture. To ignore or dismiss the importance of the distinction is to misunderstand not only the terms and the people that used (and still use) them, but also the roles to which those terms refer. Given that the English language boasts a number of words that could describe the range of objects and persons represented in the Bard show without blurring the important distinction that Americans have maintained between the fields of design and craft, I think a more appropriate title for this exhibition would have been *Women Designers and Craftspersons* or *Women Designers and Decorative Artists* or *Women Producers of Material Culture*.[30] Although there is nothing wrong with displaying design and craft together—and in fact there are a number of good reasons for doing so—the exhibition's title is misleading. If its purpose was to promote Buckley's position that craft history should be integrated with design history, then somewhere in the exhibition Kirkham needed to persuade viewers that her expanded definition of "designer" was a reasonable one to adopt.

The exhibition not only reframes "craft" as "design" in a rather troubling way, but also favors one-of-a-kind, "precious" works of art and handcraft over more mundane, mass-produced types of objects. For example, rather than displaying the mass-produced glasses Francis Higgins designed for the Dearborn Glass Company, Kirkham instead chose to exhibit one of Higgins's studio glass "experiments."[31] Similarly, the vast majority of the clothing in the exhibition was one-of-a-kind couture, theater, or cinema garb rather than mass-produced, ready-to-wear clothing. Kirkham seems to have adhered to the hallowed curatorial practice of displaying objects that are notable for their "beauty," "quality," and "craftsmanship," rather than for their popularity or typicality, which I might argue are the more useful criteria to employ in the study of design (rather than art) history. Whatever the reasons for her selections, through them Kirkham effectively privileged "one-off" artworks and crafts over "design."

Part of the reason I have dedicated so much time to questioning Kirkham's definitions of "design" and "designer" is because the definitions she uses are crucial to her focus on "diversity and difference." That is, if one were to apply my definition of "designer" to the exhibition, not only would a large portion of the white women drop out because they would be categorized as artists or craftspersons, but nearly all of the women of color would disappear as well. An overwhelming majority of the women of color represented in this exhibition are identified as either African American or Native American, and a high percentage of their works are what I would argue are "craft" or "art." Kirkham and Shauna Stallworth claim in the introduction to their catalog essay "'Three Strikes Against Me': African American Women Designers" that "despite various levels of invisibility, some black women worked as design-

ers throughout the twentieth century, though only in large numbers toward its end."[32] If the authors are using the term "designers" in the same way that Kirkham does elsewhere (i.e., to include craft and art), this statement is clearly inaccurate, as a quick perusal of the essay demonstrates that African American women were designing quilts, for example, throughout the century.

On the other hand, if Kirkham and Stallworth are using "designer" in the more limited sense that I prefer—as I believe them to be doing in this instance—then their statement is a very telling one, and in fact presents a far clearer picture of the effects of race discrimination in this country than either the exhibition or the remainder of the catalog essay does. As Kirkham and Stallworth point out, women of color suffered from both sexual and racial discrimination; their access to educational and professional opportunities in design was thus at times virtually nonexistent. So even though I commend Kirkham for her effort to draw attention to women designers of diverse races and ethnicities, it seems to me that a more responsible structuring of the show would have emphasized the *absence* of racial and ethnic diversity in the design professions, rather than deflecting attention from that absence by filling in unseemly historical gaps with the works of "designers" who most likely thought of themselves as artists or craftspersons (and who most other people, I think, would categorize similarly).

As a feminist design historian, albeit one who is less interested in designers than in consumers, I believe it is a mistake to try to rewrite history in a more palatable way (by claiming that there were many women who have been unfairly forgotten), or to redefine the category of "design" in such a way that more women can be included in its history (as Buckley and Kirkham do). Only by emphasizing the ideologies and social structures that kept women politically powerless and denied them educational and professional opportunities (rather than by setting up "exceptional" individual women as heroes or geniuses and studying their biographies) can scholars create an accurately devastating picture of the ubiquity of sexism and racism in the twentieth-century U.S. "Recovering" women designers, artists, craftspersons, and architects for history is, of course, a worthy pursuit, but I would question whether it is intrinsically any more useful than recovering the even greater number of males who have been "unfairly" forgotten by design history. Asking questions about the fame, "importance," and influence of individual female (or male) designers does nothing to challenge the notion of the canon. As many others have argued before me, such scholarship generally serves instead to ratify it and its attendant hierarchies.

Design and Feminism (defined very differently)

In contrast to the designer-oriented nature of the BGC projects, Joan Rothschild's edited volume *Design and Feminism: Re-Visioning Spaces,*

Places, and Everyday Things focuses on users of design. Rothschild's book and the conference from which it sprang asked contributors to consider how well "our designed environments—the places and spaces where we live, work, and play, the tools that we use—meet our needs, both aesthetic and functional."[33] The book also addresses process, which Rothschild notes "is the special focus of the last three essays—that is, who has input, how designing is taught and carried out."[34] I would argue that these questions point to a more self-conscious, theoretically informed, and yet simultaneously more practical form of feminist writing than is often displayed in the BGC projects. Rothschild claims that the purpose of her book is "to open doors and be a useful tool for design practitioners, educators, and a wider public. If it inspires readers to learn more and take a greater role in shaping their designed environments, then the first step will have been taken."[35] Rothschild seems to see her book as an opportunity to expose others to "feminist" ways of framing questions, so that they will be more alert to opportunities in their own lives to restructure their environments in ways that suit their needs (whether "they" be male or female, old or young, white or black, etc.).

A fairly obvious criticism of the formulation of Rothschild's initial question, however, is that it is not clear whom she includes in the term "we"—women? men? children? the differently abled? feminists? middle-class Americans?—and of course "our" answer to her question will probably vary greatly depending upon who "we" are (there is certainly a group of people—though probably not the same people Rothschild assumes her audience to be—for whom the status quo is quite comfortable). For example, Rothschild assumes that "we" are Westerners. She concedes that the book has a Western and industrialized-world focus; however, to her credit, in the afterword she does address "how the book's feminist approaches might be relevant in very different contexts and cultures."[36]

Like Rothschild, who through her use of the term "we" implies that her readers are on her side, so to speak, many of the contributors to this anthology have a tendency to preach to the choir by assuming that their audiences are already in agreement with their premises, rather than working to persuade the "unconverted" that those premises are reasonable ones. For example, Buckley's essay "Made in Patriarchy: Theories of Women and Design—A Reworking" is based on what I consider to be highly problematic assumptions about the character of her readers. Buckley states in the essay that her intention "is not to argue that women remain hapless victims, incapable of challenging the vagaries of patriarchy….And yet it seems to me that we are losing our original focus. We risk disempowerment and marginalization particularly at the hands of postmodern theorists who pay scant attention to women."[37] Who are "we" in this case? Women? Feminists? Scholars? All three? Buckley seems to assume not only that women or feminists are the

sole audience for her work, but also that she is authorized to speak for one or all of those groups (a rhetorical strategy that, if my students' reactions to it are any indication, tends to turn off many readers). Buckley's (and a few of the other authors') casual assumption of the role of spokesperson for all women and all feminists is troubling, as are her statements that although "the feminist agenda in design has continued and developed," "women's agenda has yet to be incorporated into the mainstream."[38] I would question the notion that either of these groups could articulate a single agenda on which all of its members could agree! In short, I think Buckley's arguments would be more effective were she to reconsider her use of language; many feminists, as well as the "unconverted," react very negatively to language that seems to include or exclude them against their will, and which assumes their agreement rather than attempting to win it.

Buckley also makes a number of problematic claims in this essay. She contends that "Questions about women's role in design remain tangential to the discipline and are tackled with reluctance," and blames this state of affairs on postmodernism's "emphasis on masculinity."[39] She claims that "it is possible to argue that postmodern theory, although ostensibly challenging the value systems of moribund academic disciplines, has remained largely ignorant of and uninterested in feminism," and that it has "replaced one set of patriarchal discourses with another set which is equally patriarchal." However, her conception of what constitutes postmodernism is very different from my own; she states that "Postmodernism is dominated by yet more 'great' men—for example, Baudrillard, Barthes, Lacan, [and] Lyotard," whereas I would argue that postmodernism is a far more complex and diverse phenomenon, which is integrally related to and based on many of the same premises as feminism.[40]Although Buckley claims that "To some extent the problem facing us as feminist design historians is how to rearticulate the categories 'feminine,' 'gender,' 'woman,' and 'subjectivity' in order to move beyond postmodern discourse," I see the problem as a different one, which is that of producing writing that is sufficiently rigorous and accepting of ideological "diversity and difference" (both within feminism and without) that it can speak to a wider audience.[41] I think Buckley's assumption of the role of authoritative spokesperson and her conception of "feminism" as a monolithic entity, in other words, could both stand to be "postmodernized."

The tone that Buckley takes in the reworking of her 1986 essay—i.e., that she knows what "our" agenda is, and that she can tell "us" how to get back on track—is echoed by other writers in the Rothschild book, particularly by Ghislaine Hermanuz in her essay "Outgrowing the Corner of the Kitchen Table." Hermanuz's project is a sincere attempt to reconceptualize housing to respond to the needs and desires of female heads of households; however, some of her assumptions seem almost essentialist in nature, as when she

claims that "Home spaces have special meanings for women" (do they not for men as well?).[42] She also claims that "Because of women's dual role as nurturers and producers, the ideal conceptualization of a 'good' community is one where homes, production spaces, and neighborhood are one and the same."[43] I am surprised by both the premise and conclusion of this statement; not all women are nurturers or producers, and therefore surmising that housing must be built to accommodate one or both of those activities seems a dubious conclusion to draw. Mightn't it be more productive to ask if gender roles could be made more flexible? Is tailoring architecture to fit existing social structures really the goal Hermanuz thinks feminists should pursue? My own preference would be to explore other options—ones based on the assumption that both men and women are potential nurturers and producers—rather than accepting the status quo, and building structures and cities that accommodate and thus perpetuate it.

Conclusion

If the Kirkham and Rothschild publications represent the state of the field of feminist design scholarship—if it can be considered to be a unified entity at all—what is that field like, and what challenges does it face? Buckley claims in the Rothschild anthology that "we" are losing ground due to postmodern theorists' shift in interest from "women" to "gender."[44] Kirkham and Howard also claim that feminist design history is endangered, but they believe that the problem is a lack of appreciation: "We as historians of design and the decorative arts," they state, "argue that our academic discipline deserves [i.e., apparently they feel it is not receiving] the respect shown to the history of art and the history of architecture."[45] Since feminism and design are both (according to these scholars) currently at the margins of contemporary critical theory and of art and architectural history, respectively, being taken seriously by non-feminists and non-design historians may indeed be a challenge that feminist design scholars need to face head-on.

I agree that feminism has not had, up to this point, the earth-shaking effects on design history, theory, and practice that some might have desired. But as a feminist scholar myself, I am skeptical of "our" chances for greater influence on mainstream scholarship and practice if the Kirkham and Rothschild compilations are representative of "our" work. Make no mistake; many of the essays in each of the three publications, taken individually, are excellent. However, at least as they are framed by Kirkham and Rothschild, as a group the writings seem riddled with questionable premises and assumptions, a tendency toward antiquarianism (by which I mean that many of the essays shed light only on the specific topics they address, rather than drawing connections or conclusions that foster an increased or more nuanced understanding of the past or the present), and an anti-theoretical bias or avoidance of theory, all of

which will conspire to damn them in the eyes of those who are not already self-identified feminists (as well as in the eyes of some who are). In other words, if the exhibition and publications in question are indeed representative of contemporary feminist design scholarship, then I believe the form and the content of the discipline's rhetoric needs "reshaping and rethinking" far more urgently than the history of design itself does. If feminist design scholars wish to move from the margins of critical debate to the center, then I believe they must employ a more rigorous, theoretically savvy form of rhetoric that will both address and sway an audience wider than themselves.

1 I would like to thank the editors of *Design Issues* for inviting me to write this review; Ron Labaco and Han Vu of the Bard Graduate Center for providing copies of publications and photographs of the exhibition, respectively; the School of Art and Design, UWPA/Women's Studies, the Graduate School, and the Office of Research Development and Administration (all at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale) for providing travel support to New York; and Diane Stadelmeier for her patience and encouragement throughout the writing of this essay. I am also greatly indebted to Eric Peterson for accompanying me to the exhibition, discussing it with me both at the time and thereafter, and for helping shape and refine many of the ideas expressed herein.

2 Because the three BGC productions share the same author, title, and date, I will refer to them in the text and in the notes as the exhibition or show, the catalog, and the journal

3 I refer to the shows *American Modern, 1925–1940: Design For a New Age*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 15, 2000–February 4, 2001 and *Masterpieces from the Vitra Design Museum: Furnishing the Modern Era*, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York, October 10, 2000–February 11, 2001.

4 Kirkham, "Preface," catalog, 15 and Kirkham and Lynn Walker, *Women Designers in the USA, 1900–2000: Diversity and Difference*,"catalog, 50

5 Cheryl Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Critique of Design," *Design Issues* 3:2 (Fall 1986):3–14. Reprinted in *Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism*, edited by Victor Margolin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 251–262. The quotation appears on 259.

6 The phrase "sheer determination and talent" is from the introductory paragraph of Kirkham's and Shauna Stallworth's "'Three Strikes Against Me': African American Women Designers," catalog, 123. In all of the BGC projects, but especially in the catalog essay on African Americans, there exists what I consider to be an undue insistence on the necessity of having role models of one's own gender and race (and in turn serving as a role model to others of one's own gender and race). The mentoring roles played by males and by persons whose skin pigmentation does not match one's own are consistently downplayed or ignored.

7 Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 79.

8 The two essays to which I refer are Judith B. Tankard's "Defining Their Turf: Pioneer Women Landscape Designers" and Ashley Brown's "Ilonka Karasz: Rediscovering a Modernist Pioneer," both of which appear in the journal. The term appears with particularly notable frequency in Tankard's essay; she uses the term not only in her title, but also in phrases such as "Other important pioneers" (34), "Unusual for a pioneer-woman in landscape architecture" (34), "Three exemplary pioneer landscape designers" (36), "the subject of pioneer women designers in the field" (48), "other pioneer women" (51), and "Rose Nichols…stands as a pioneer" (also 51).

9 Susan Weber Soros, "Director's Foreword," catalog, 10.

10 Pamela Kladzyk, "The Sacred Hoop: Native American Women Designers," catalog, 101. Unless the organizers of this show define "eurocentric" to mean only "centered on Europe," rather than "centered on Europe and its former North American colonies" (and they do not to my knowledge ever define the way in which they use the term), I do not think that they can convincingly claim that the exhibition presents a challenge to eurocentrism. All of the women designers included in the exhibition lived and worked for at least a portion of their lives in the United States of the twentieth century. In the past to an even greater degree than in the present, the U.S. was a country in which the dominant culture was indubitably eurocentric or even anglocentric. All of the women represented in the exhibition worked within the parameters of the dominant culture, albeit to varying degrees. As Kladzyk makes clear in her essay, even the work of those women who were reared and trained within the context of traditional Native American cultures were directly affected by the expectations of white tourists. Not only did they produce work specifically meant to suit the tastes of white tourists, but many also began signing their works in response to white Americans' belief that a signature guaranteed "authenticity" (when of course it implied precisely the opposite).

11 Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 50.

12 Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 50.

13 I refer to Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"; in that truly groundbreaking essay, Nochlin not only discussed some of the institutional and social biases contributing to women's historic lack of access to necessary training, but also problematized many of the gendered terms that were then (and still are now) so prevalent in art historical discourse ("genius," "virility," "decorative," etc.). By changing the terms in which artistic production was described, she suggested, art historians could alter entenched ways of thinking about gender and about art, and by so doing, promote positive social change.

14 Susan Weber Soros, "Director's Foreword," catalog, 10.

15 Kirkham "Preface," catalog, 14–15 and Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 52.

16 Soros, "Director's Foreword," catalog, 10.

17 Soros, "Director"s Foreword," catalog, 10.

18 Kirkham and Howard, "Guest Editors' Introduction," journal, 4.

19 Soros, "Director's Foreword," catalog, 10 and Kirkham, "Preface," catalog, 14.

20 Ellen Mazur Thomson, review of Martha Scotford, *Cipe Pineles: A Life of Design*, journal, 180.

21 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy," 255.

22 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy," 255.

23 Roszika Parker, "The Word for Embroidery Was WORK," *Spare Rib* 37 (July 1975): 41–45; cited in Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 78–79.

24 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy," 255.

25 Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Theories of Women and Design—A Reworking," Rothschild, 116.

26 Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTnews* 69:9 (January 1971). Reprinted in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1995): 56.

27 Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 79

28 Kirkham and Walker, "Diversity and Difference," catalog, 79.

29 Kirkham applies the term "designer-maker" to potters, jewelry makers, quilters, etc.—women whom I would call "craftspersons."

30 I can certainly sympathize with the argument that craft and design can and should be studied together, even if I do not agree that the same term should be applied to both. I have often wondered why the term "material culture" is not used more often by those who study the twentieth century, since it is a fairly non-hierarchical term and applies to all kinds of goods/objects, regardless of mode of production.

31 Ella Howard and Eric Setliff, "'In a Man's World': Women Industrial Designers," catalog, 286.

32 Kirkham and Stallworth, "'Three Strikes Against Me,'" catalog, 124–5.

33 Rothschild, "Introduction: Re-visioning Design Agendas," Rothschild, 1.

34 Rothschild, "Introduction," Rothschild, 5.

35 Rothschild, "Introduction," Rothschild, 5.

36 Rothschild, "Introduction," Rothschild, 5.

37 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 110.

38 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 111, 109.

39 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 111.

40 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 113.

41 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 116.

42 Hermanuz, "Outgrowing the Corner of the Kitchen Table," Rothschild 67.

43 Hermanuz, "Outgrowing," Rothschild, 70.

44 Buckley, "A Reworking," Rothschild, 110–114.

45 Kirkham and Howard, "Women and Design: Guest Editors' Introduction," journal, 7.