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SUSPENSION

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ABSTRACT

For the past decade, in addition to her contributions as a design historian, theorist, educator and professional designer, Anne Bush has created works of installation art that engage their viewers in a set of questions about the role of design in the construction of knowledge. *Façade* (1995), *"Type" Specimen* (1998), *Trust* (2002), and *Library/Catalogue* (2003) all fuse typography with a range of materials that have become fundamental to human interactions with each other and the environment—including banknotes and the basic tools of scientific research such as microscope slides, test tubes and books. With these installations, Bush constructs conceptual way-finding systems that operate on both large and intimate scales to orient visitors not only to the specific details of the spaces in which the works are installed, but also to the general systems of demarcation, classification and control that shape our comprehension of our world.

An example of the best design was before my eyes, the design of a seductive unity of person and machine, sensuality and playfulness, beauty of form and aptness of function. A sort of fusion dream, the staging of this dream as reality and, at the same time, the most treacherous delusion.¹

— Gert Selle

System, Suspension, Seduction:

Anne Bush's Critical Design Practice

Seduction

John Zuern

THE "UNTIMELY OPINIONS" GERT SELLE first voiced fifteen years ago in *Design Issues* recapitulate questions that have troubled designers since the consolidation of the modern design professions. From the founding rationales of the Bauhaus to Ken Garland's 1964 "First Things First" manifesto to the reaffirmation of that manifesto in 1999, designers and design theorists have engaged, but have certainly not laid to rest, the set of problems that prompted Selle's rather lugubrious reflections

¹ Selle, Gert. 1995. "Untimely Opinions (An Attempt to Reflect on Design)." John Cullars, translator. In Margolin, Victor and Richard Buchanan, editors. *The Idea of Design: A Design Issues Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Originally published in 1990 in *Design Issues* 6.2, 33-42.

on the state of design in the culture of late capitalism. Of perennial concern has been the relationship between professional design practice, with its ties to industry and commerce, and the hegemonic political, social and cultural regimes in force in the world in which designers must work. How does a designer cope with the apprehension that a successful solution to a design challenge, the kind of felicitous union of formal beauty and intuitive functionality Selle so admires in the Olivetti Divisumma 18 (the tabletop calculator that serves as his double-edged “example of the best design”) may constitute little more than the fulfillment of the designer’s role as an under-sung minion of capitalist technocracy? And if we insist that designers are more than merely window-dressers in the malls of transnational capital, more than merely ushers in the theaters of postindustrial urban space, how do we identify design’s social surplus value, the potential for enlightenment, critique and even resistance and dissent, within design itself? How do we articulate—and, moreover, actualize *in* and *as* design—a critical design practice which “makes visible to perception and thought that which is considered invisible in design so as to understand it,”² or, as more recent formulations of the question have put it, links “the multiple degrees of separation between the everyday notions of meaning making and the specific decisions of designers”³ and effects “a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning?”⁴

A critical design practice worth its name would certainly have to be something more than a soy-ink-on-recycled-paper environmentalism and even something more than the outrage and good intentions of the “First Things First” manifestos. It would have to be something more, too, than wishful thinking on the part of theorists of design.

Ideally, the critical insights born of such a design practice would extend beyond auto- and meta-critique within the design community into the community at large, and the designed object or system would comprise, within the parameters of its function, a critical intervention into the larger social-cultural-political systems in which it plays its functional role. Design solutions arrived at through this kind of critical design practice would draw their users into a critical consciousness not merely by delivering a “criticizing” message, in the form of what we call

2 Selle, “Unruly Opinions,” 243.

3 Storkerson, Peter. 2003. “Designing Theory in Communication.” *Visible Language* 37.1, 19.

4 Barnbrook, Jonathan, et. al. 1999. “First Things First Revisited.” *Émigré* 51. <<http://www.emigre.com/>>. 20 July 2005.

propaganda and “negative” political campaigning, but by affording users, in the course of their very act of making use of the design, a kind of intellectual—and potentially also ethical and political—deliverance.

How might such a design practice be theorized, let alone accomplished? While in the domain of commercial design work such an orientation to practice might well be hampered by market-driven client concerns, other dimensions of design practice, in particular the zone where design crosses into its neighboring territory of fine art in the form of exhibitions and installations, offer avenues along which to explore the critical possibilities of an expanded design sensibility. “In present-day graphic design, is it possible to distinguish between the private and public, the artistic and commercial?” Fedja Vukic asks in the course of his examination of Eduard Cehovin’s public displays. Vukic argues that Cehovin responds to this dilemma “by elevating graphic design works above the realm of the directly usable.”⁵ Moving design into the domain of art does not so much get design off the utility hook as it throws into relief the aesthetic, rhetorical and conceptual functions that figure into the usefulness and the social meaning of any designed object.

The installation projects Anne Bush has pursued over the past ten years form a body of work that fulfills many of the desiderata for such a critical design practice. A professor in the Graphic Design Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, a theorist and historian of design and a practicing designer, Bush has found in public installations a medium in which to extend her scholarship into “project-oriented research, making the design process a subject of design.”⁶ All of Bush’s installations explore the question of how local, site-specific design solutions intersect with the global, pre-established codes that inflect human perception, knowledge production and social interaction.

Anne Bush’s Installations: Critical Approaches

THIS EXAMINATION OF BUSH’S INSTALLATION PROJECTS takes its analytical cues from two commitments that are clearly central to her design practice. The first is Bush’s keen awareness of design’s *place*—in physical as well as social terms—and the designed object as a kind of “place” users must enter and navigate. Bush’s awareness of the spatiality of design extends from her

5 Vukic, Fedja. 2005. “Re-design in Public Space: The Work of Eduard Cehovin.” *Visible Language* 39.1. 44.

6 Wolfgang Jonas. 2001. “A Scenario for Design.” *Design Issues* 17.2. 79.

typographer's consciousness of letterforms and the disposition of type on the printed surface to an architectural comprehension of the built space of the material systems in which the typography will appear as a component. Additionally, Bush is conscious of the space *through which* readers must pass in their approach to the systems and the texts, the space that comprises the overall environment in which the designed system is situated and that is also the social space in which design operates and realizes its utility.

The smaller-scale, "hand-held" objects Bush has designed, such as books and exhibition catalogues, also embody this commitment to activating the space in and around the object. For example, her catalogue for *Sum of the Parts*, an exhibition in Honolulu in which artists displayed autobiographical work centered on parts of the body, is composed of five unbound signatures to echo the five senses. The 6x6" booklets are printed on transparent paper to emphasize visually the interrelations among the different essays in the catalogue, and each set of signatures is packaged in a plastic sandwich bag, requiring the catalogue to be unpacked—literally and conceptually—rather than merely opened. More recent projects such as her design for the book *Anderson + Anderson: Architecture + Construction*⁷ and the promotional materials for The Contemporary Museum in Honolulu likewise make the fundamental actions of the reader—opening a book or an envelope, turning pages, unfolding a brochure—into integral components of the object's overall message. Bush's installations accomplish an even more dramatic fusion of the reader's physical approach to the design and the critical "approach" she encourages her visitors to take toward the conceptual problems her design is posing.

All of Bush's installations are site-specific; they refer to their immediate locations through the texts they incorporate, their materials, their colors and above all in the concepts they are exploring and inviting their viewers to explore. Like most installations, Bush's environmental works demand a very literal *approach*. We enter the space in which they are installed and must advance toward or into them. More than many artists, however, Bush activates this space of approach. Radical shifts in scale prompt the viewers to move in close to read the printed texts or to inspect the materials, and then a suggestive fine-grained detail compels

⁷ Anderson, Mark and Peter Anderson. 2001. *Anderson + Anderson: Architecture + Construction*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.

them to step back again to reorient themselves within the overall system. In this way, the visitor's physical approach to Bush's work fuses with the critical "approach" she encourages her visitors to take toward the conceptual problems her installations are posing.

The second obvious commitment in Bush's installations is to precisely this conceptualization of space and of conceptualization itself as an ongoing event *in* and *through*—space. Design is in large part the subjection of space to thought. Design turns the spaces of the world into legible, navigable, livable human *places*, but it does so by acting on both the material structures of the world and on the mental structures of the mind. Design functions because it "thinks." It embodies concepts and, through its successive and successful use, reproduces those concepts in the social world. Richard Buchanan has associated design's replication of concepts in society with the "rhetoric" of design: "if design is an architectonic art with respect to things, its efforts and products are guided in turn by another architectonic art that further integrates objects into social activities and even guides the practice of design at every turn. This architectonic art is rhetoric—not simply the old verbal rhetoric but rhetoric as an art of thought."⁸ This conceptual-rhetorical power makes design a preeminent carrier of culture and at the same time predisposes design to the role of collaborator in what Selle calls "the most treacherous delusion."

Bush's installations throw into relief the operation of design as concept-formation. They are a creative response to the call for self-reflection from within the design community as well as an answer to challenges to design practice from philosophy and cultural studies. In their overview of the contemporary "rivals" of philosophy in their last book, *What is Philosophy?* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari complain that,

the most shameful moment came when computer science, marketing, design, and advertising, all the disciplines of communication, seized hold of the word concept and said: "This is our concern, we are the creative ones, we are the *ideas men!* We are the friends of the concept, we put it in our computers." [. . .] Marketing has preserved the idea of a certain relationship between concept and event. But here the concept has become the set of product displays (historical, scientific, artistic, sexual, pragmatic), and the

⁸ Buchanan, Richard. 1995. "Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design." In Buchanan, Richard and Victor Margolin, editors. *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 25.

9 Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, translators. New York: Columbia University Press, 10.

10 Foster, Hal. 2002. *Design and Crime and other Diatribes*. London: Verso, 126.

11 Foster, *Design and Crime*, 130.

event has become the exhibition that sets up various displays and the “exchange of ideas” it is supposed to promote. The only events are exhibitions, and the only concepts are products that can be sold.⁹

Hall Foster has echoed these worries in his critique of contemporary installation art, much of which he sees as capitulating to our “pervasive design-and-display culture” and losing the “productive contradictions” deployed in earlier postmodernist experiments.¹⁰ If we give Bush’s projects the attention they demand—that is, if we succumb to the seductive lure of their beauty and the intellectual fascination of their structural and conceptual complexity—we will find that by way of what Foster describes as “a formal transformation that is also social engagement” her work “helps to restore a mnemonic dimension to contemporary art, and to resist the presentist totality of design in culture today.”¹¹ Moving design into the realm of public art, the experimentation and risk-taking of Bush’s installations point toward a critical design practice through which designers can reach inventive, creative, functional design solutions without suspending their ethical commitments or surrendering their political resolve.

Façade (1995)

FOR THE 1995 INTERIM SITES ART PROJECT each of the participating artists was assigned a space in the mezzanine of the Pauahi Tower in Bishop Center in Honolulu’s financial district; the exhibition’s goal was to have the artwork comment in some way on its immediate context. Bush was given a 40 x 28’ portion of granite wall, for which she created *Façade*, an evenly spaced row of 360 glass test tubes suspended close to the wall on nylon filaments from ceiling to floor. The test tubes hang roughly a foot from the floor and are filled with paint mixed to match the colors in the stone in the wall behind them as well as the flesh tones of the Revlon Liquid Foundation line of women’s makeup. The gently swaying tubes with their subtle differences in color, ranged along the bottom of a shimmering curtain of slender threads, compose a dramatic image, even from a great distance. The large-scale structure of the piece creates a literal *façade*, covering but not fully concealing the wall (see figure 1).

Drawn toward this enigmatic construction, the visitor realizes that each test tube bears a label, a single line of text

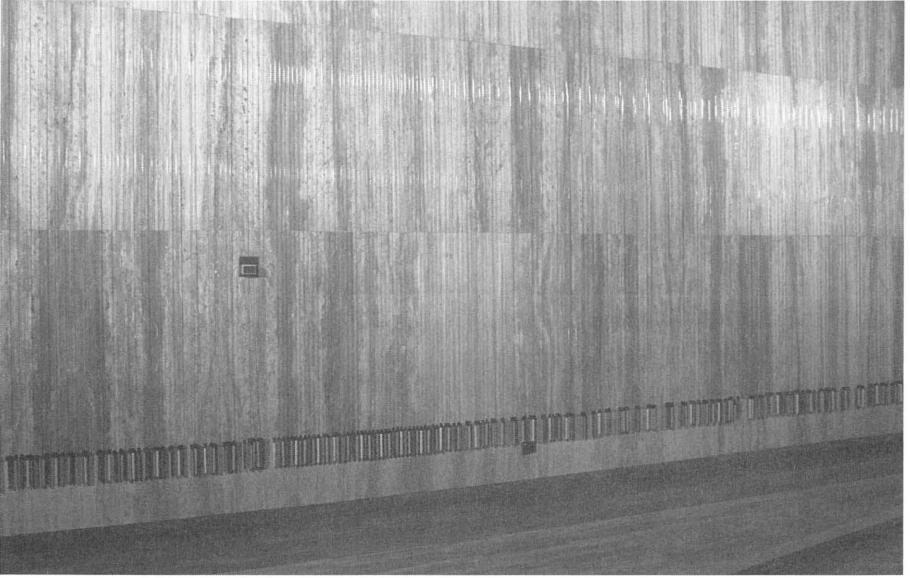


FIGURE 1

Facade, Installation of 360 test tubes, suspended from a 40x28' wall. Mixed Media. Bishop Square, Honolulu, HI, 1995

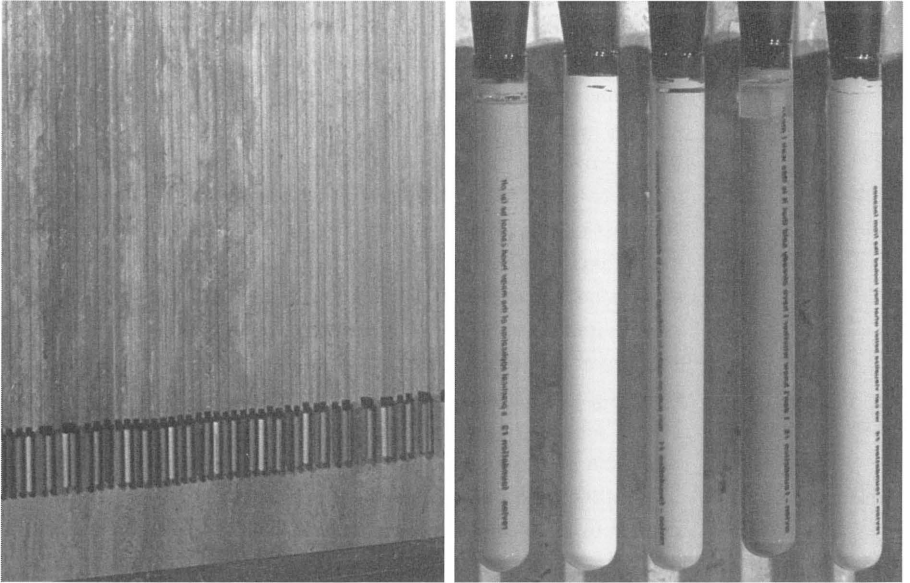


FIGURE 1 (detail)

Facade, Installation of 360 test tubes, suspended from a 40x28' wall. Mixed Media. Bishop Square, Honolulu, HI, 1995

running up the side. The text fragments are drawn from a range of sources, most of which deal with themes of faces, masks, vision and self-reflection. Most of these quotations occur only once, but interspersed throughout the series is the repeating line “I don’t know whether I have already said that it is this wall I mean,” providing on one hand a clue to the color choices, but on another hand adding another level of ambiguity and intrigue: *which wall?* The granite wall, or *Façade’s* own slightly swaying “wall” of filament, glass, words and pigment? This question triggers others: Don’t the colors in the tubes also correspond to pigmentation variations of human skin? Aren’t the words *façade* and *face* connected somehow? What kind of experiment is going on here—for isn’t the test tube a paramount icon of the natural sciences? Wouldn’t the glass tubes shatter on the stone floor if the supporting threads gave way?

A design experiment in its own right, *Façade* draws upon the basic tools of scientific experimentation to call attention to the power and the risk of our society’s faith in the natural sciences, especially when we use science as a “foundation” for our ethical responses to our natural and social worlds. The gleaming row of labeled tubes in variegated colors points to the rigid categories into which science sorts our understanding of reality, yet the precarious suspension of the tubes indicates at the same time the ultimate fragility of the scientific apparatus and the irreducible ambiguity of its labeling systems. As a literal façade covering the stone wall to which it seems to refer, *Façade* also questions the degree to which scientific inquiry can reveal the truth of the world. The colors in the tubes have indeed been “extracted” from the wall, “sampled” as specimens of the stone’s complex, unified reality, but the apparatus that serves to sort and systematize those specimens also serves to *obstruct* our vision of that reality. In this respect Bush is engaging a key insight of theoretical physics, articulated in the Heisenberg principle: as soon as we elect to observe one phenomenon of the physical world, another phenomenon eludes us.

To understand how Bush’s *Façade* connects to its place, we cannot overlook the broader context of Hawai’i, a place that is often held up as an emblem of successful multiculturalism, but that is in reality fraught with ethnic and class tensions stemming from its vexed history of colonization, occupation and

plantation-driven immigration. In this context, Bush's matching of the colors of the paint not only to the stone, but to the shades of a popular brand of cosmetics, links her critique of science to the domain of interpersonal ethics and social justice. In what ways do the categorizations that are essential to scientific inquiry—and that design follows for the essential hierarchies of its systems and displays of science-derived information—inflect and infect our relationships with other human beings? The categories that compose the idea of “racial difference” have been particularly destructive to mutually affirming relations, in Hawai'i as in many other places. Present-day ethical philosophies recognize that the genus-to-species framework that allows biological sciences to systematize other living things makes a poor basis for understanding individual humans and human collectivities, but to what extent do the cultural systems we continue to employ, systems created and sustained by design, reinforce categories that perpetuate the divisions and hierarchies that subordinate some humans to others? In *Façade*, Bush's response to this question is to execute a “formal transformation that is also a social engagement”: the play of revelation and occlusion in her mesmerizing wall of test tubes signals that systems as such, seductive as they may be in their order and their beauty, do not themselves suffice to create a knowledge that is “human” in all respects, or that respects all human beings.

“Type” Specimen (1998)

BUSH RETURNS TO ICONIC TOOLS OF SCIENCE in “Type” *Specimen*, a gallery installation at the University of Hawaii's Windward campus. The piece is displayed on a 4x4' light table and is comprised of a grid of microscope slides to which Bush has affixed strips of newspapers in English, Chinese and Japanese, all of which were printed in Hawai'i in the early twentieth century. Recovered from a dumpster, the newsprint is considerably aged and sometimes stained, and the light renders it translucent, allowing images and text from the reverse side to bleed through. On the glass slides, the printed yellow-brown slips resemble tissue samples, grafts of tattooed skin (*see figure 2*).

As in *Façade*, Bush deploys a dialectics of revelation and/as occlusion to draw the viewer into the process of conceptualization that links the material structures of her work to the cultural formations and structures of thought her work engages and

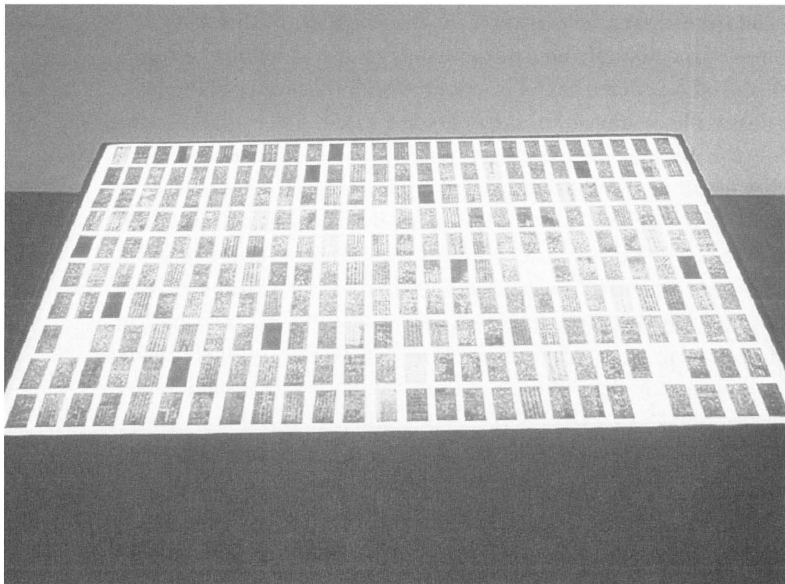


FIGURE 2
 'Type' Specimen, 4 x 4 ft., Mixed Media on a light table, 1998

critiques. In "Type" Specimen, the illuminating force of the back-projected light is checked by an apparently systematic inking-out of individual letters throughout the English texts. On closer consideration, many readers familiar with the Hawaiian context will recognize that the cancelled letters are those that are not included in the set of fourteen Roman characters that make up the Hawaiian-language alphabet. By omitting these common characters—among them B, D, F, G, J, R, S and T—Bush imposes upon the writing system of English an arbitrary systematization akin to the early nineteenth-century missionaries' imposition of the Roman alphabet upon the phonemes of spoken Hawaiian. That the English text is rendered largely illegible points to the cultural occlusions and losses the Hawaiian people sustained in the process of colonization. The strokes of ink on the pages are eerily similar to chromosomes under an electron microscope; her cancellation of the letters enacts a "genotypography" of writing systems and the cultural violence that sometimes accompanies their imposition.

Working against the dictate that design should render information "transparent," Bush often insists that her readers make

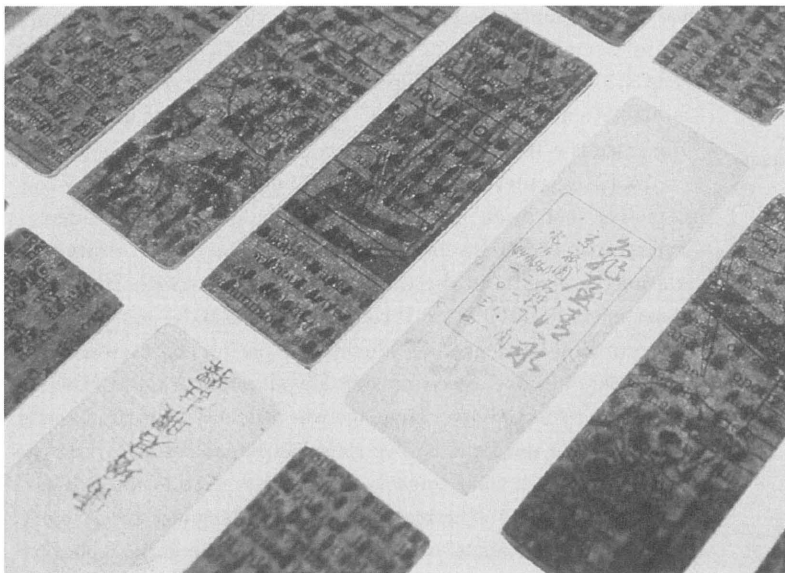


FIGURE 2 detail
 'Type' Specimen, 4 x 4 ft., Mixed Media on a light table, 1998.

an effort to seek out or decipher elements of her designs, to “find their way” into her conceptual way-finding systems. James E. Traue has commented on the use of *blocage* and “masking” to “create suspense” in public exhibitions of materials, like books, that lack a high intrinsic visual appeal. Comparing museum exhibition practices with strategies for merchandizing luxury goods, Traue observes that “What is common to all these techniques—these tricks of the trade, or art of the designer—was the principle of seducing the eye and then proffering a visual reward if the viewer succumbed and moved in the direction indicated by the designer.”¹² In the case of Bush’s installations, it is not so much a “reward” or a “payoff” of visual delight that viewers receive as a kind of intellectual disturbance, a slight breakdown in the meaning-making apparatus. This moment of crisis, in combination with the very real pleasure derived from the sensuous forms and materials Bush employs, casts viewers into a critical situation that demands a re-vision of the assumptions, predispositions and automatic (hegemonic) responses that accompanied and reinforced their initial seduction.

“Seduction is a key tool for persuasion,” Katherine McCoy

12 Traue, James E. 2000. “Seducing the Eye: Contemporary Exhibition Design in France and Italy.” *Design Issues* 16.2, 68.

13 McCoy, Katherine. 2000. "Information and Persuasion: Rivals or Partners?" *Design Issues* 16.3, 81.

14 On the role of newspapers in the colonization of Hawai'i and their importance to Native opposition to colonial rule, see Noenoe K. Silva, 2004, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, especially Chapter 2 "Ka Hoku o ka Pakipika: Emergence of the Native Voice in Print."

has noted. "A graphic design can seduce the reader/viewer into a useful encounter with its message. Seduction initiates the entry step in the communication process, promising a reward for the audience's attention."¹³ If "*Type Specimen* rewards its audience, the prize is a troubling recognition of the cultural and ethical conflicts surrounding print literacy in colonialism. Literacy can certainly "enlighten"—and in fact, by the late nineteenth century Native Hawaiians had become one of the most literate populations per capita in the world, with many Hawaiian-language newspapers in circulation throughout the islands—but it can also be a cultural battleground. During the period represented by the papers in "*Type Specimen*, virtually all publication in Hawaiian ceased and the Hawaiian language was officially banned in island schools.¹⁴ Not until the Native Hawaiian Renaissance of the 1970s did the language start to reclaim a central place in the living culture of Hawai'i. The inclusion of Asian-language newspapers among the "specimens" serves to document the large-scale immigration of Japanese and Chinese workers to the islands' sugar and pineapple plantations, a population shift that paralleled the disenfranchisement and subjugation of the indigenous Hawaiians.

The precise historical and geopolitical specificity of "*Type Specimen* testifies to Bush's awareness of the difficult ethical issues facing designers who work in Hawai'i. Local designers—many of whom are trained in the program in which Bush teaches—have to negotiate their own sensibilities and identities in the face of the tourism industries' demand for sometimes trivializing and demeaning representations of Hawaiian culture. Like *Façade's* engagement with the supposedly empirical data that serves racial categorization and "profiling," "*Type Specimen* alludes to the deep histories that underlie the contemporary cultural stereotypes that commercial design all too often reiterates.

Trust (2002)

TRUST WAS INSTALLED IN THE FIRST HAWAIIAN BANK'S MEZZANINE as part of an exhibition of The Contemporary Museum of Honolulu. Perhaps even more than *Façade*, *Trust* comments directly on its location in a major financial institution. Visitors initially encounter Trust as a billboard-sized rectangular banner suspended in the open atrium of the First Hawaiian Bank Building. The word "TRUST" is emblazoned in sans-serif capitals across the upper third of a richly textured gray-green surface.

A catwalk runs across the well of space in which the piece is mounted and allows visitors to come close enough to touch the work; this use of the existing structures of the bank building to regulate access to *Trust* becomes significant as the visitor comes closer to the banner and the surface reveals itself to be composed entirely of American banknotes—in all, \$5,200 in one-dollar bills.¹⁵

“Is it real?” At the opening of the exhibition in which *Trust* appeared, a number of visitors whispered this question to their companions as they stepped onto the catwalk leading to the work. By then they were well within reach of the money, all crisp new bills, and a whiff of their distinctive inky smell hung in the air, yet they still couldn’t quite trust their senses, stymied, perhaps, by the sheer number of bills and the scale of the 15x25’ work. Once they determined (in some cases by actually stroking the money) that it was, in fact, real money, in a real bank, within easy reach of their fingers, the word “TRUST,” which had first beckoned them to approach what appeared to be a beautifully textured quilt, now loomed over their heads as an admonition (see figure 3).

In one sense, *Trust* reverses the process of reading demanded by *Façade*, in which the text is a fine-grained detail that emerges on closer inspection. Here, the text “TRUST” is the first element to catch the eye, and only as we draw closer to *Trust* do we see that the word is in fact a matrix of smaller elements: one-dollar bills that have been folded to show only the portrait of George Washington. The word “trust” of course echoes the emblem “In God We Trust.” In assembling the word out of the iconic image of a “founding father,” and in a block type that contrasts sharply with the engraved serif fonts that dominate the text on the bills themselves, Bush also calls attention to the often-unexamined iconography of money as a printed document that assumes its power and authority by what amounts to a symbolic fiat.

Slavoj Žizek has identified money as “the sublime object of ideology” *par excellence*: “we know very well that money, like all other material objects, suffers the effects of use, that its material body changes through time,” but we behave, “in the social effectivity of the market,” as though money had an intrinsic, even magical value transcending its materiality.¹⁶ As “the physical representation of a transaction of considerable abstraction and

¹⁵ Correspondence with Anne Bush, 23 May 2005.

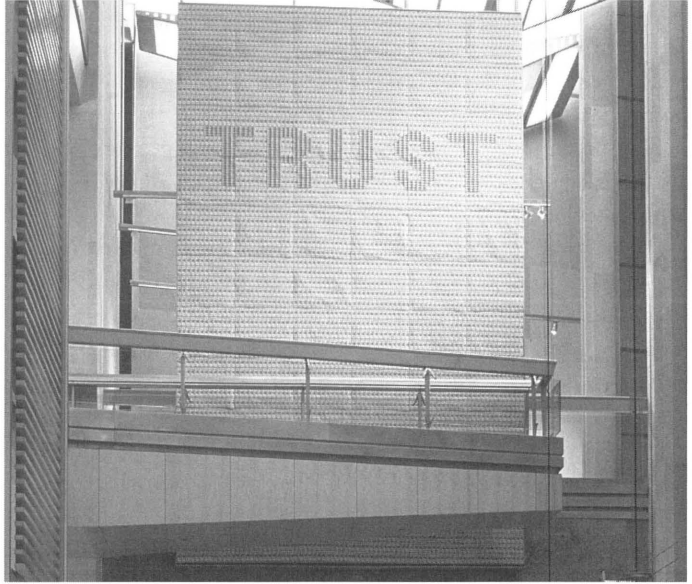


FIGURE 3
Trust, 15 x25 ft. *Mixed media*. The Contemporary Museum at First Hawaiian Bank, Honolulu, HI, Spring 2002

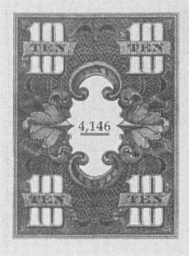


FIGURE 3 details
Trust, 15 x25 ft. *Mixed media*. The Contemporary Museum at First Hawaiian Bank, Honolulu, HI, Spring 2002.

consensus,"¹⁷ the official banknote, "legal tender," exemplifies the role of design in forging concepts that in turn shape social relationships.

This role turns on the analogous functions of currency and sign systems. Like money, "language is an economy of transaction with certain standards based on the context of use. Words are the medium of exchange from which understanding is derived."¹⁸ *Trust* plays out this analogy by accompanying the large banner with a set of six 2.75 x 3" printed cards that visitors may take away with them. Alluding to the functional similarity between ephemera and money, both of which must circulate in society to realize their value, the printing on the front of the cards combines the distinctive typography of American currency with enigmatic numbers and measurements, such as "1/8" and "1,000,000 SF." While *Trust's* large banner of dollar bills clearly comments ironically on the degree to which we think of the cultural value of art in terms of its exchange value in the art market, the information printed on the reverse of these cards extends this commentary to a wider field of social values. The back of the card that reads "1,000,000 SF," for example, bears the message

Between 1992 and 1998 over 1 million square feet of physical plant was added to UH [University of Hawai'i], but no operating support was authorized for new facilities.

EDUCATION - FUTURE PROSPERITY

(think about it in the next election)

With these messages and the direct call to political action, the concept of "trust" expands to include the sense of a "trust fund," a base of support from which individuals and communities can draw, but also a resource that must be protected against mismanagement and misuse. In addition to the funding woes of the University of Hawai'i and the State Department of Education, many local visitors to this exhibition would have had in their minds the scandal over the disastrous management of the Hawai'i-based Kamehameha Schools/Bishop Estates Trust, the largest educational trust in the world, which resulted in the dissolution and reconstitution of the estate's Board of Trustees in 1999. As *Trust's* "collateral," these take-away cards, which also mimic the pamphlets on services the bank offers its customers, are juxtaposed to the fixed banner just as the living values of

16 Slavoj Žižek. 1989. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 18.

17 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer. 1995. "Between Visual and Digital Tokens: A Look at the Abstraction of Money." *Visible Language* 29:3/4, 266. This issue of *Visible Language* entitled *Money!* is devoted entirely to discussions of design and currency.

18 Poggenpohl, Sharon Helmer, Pragma Chajit Jeamsinkul. 2004. "Language Definition and its Role in Developing a Design Discourse." *Design Studies* 25, 580.

democratic culture, including “trust,” respect, knowledge, literacy and freedom of thought—in short, all the values and skills fostered in a liberal education—are juxtaposed to our society’s foundation on capital. Bush’s exhibit reaffirms the value of that education and at the same time calls into question the sincerity of the lip service our political leaders, and perhaps also many of *Trust*’s visitors, so often give it.

In her critique of the antiquated design of American currency, Sharon Poggenpohl reflects on how “[t]he ideals on which the country imperfectly runs—democracy, free enterprise and equal rights—are visually (and sometimes actually) elusive.”¹⁹ In a sense, the complex system of structures, documents and images that make up *Trust* allows us to visualize that very elusiveness of values: *are they real?* Can they be concretized in physical forms, like money, or do these forms only seduce us into trusting that something of value is “there” when it is not? Do we trust in the surface appearance of tried-and-true symbols before we look more closely to how they have been constructed? In light of such questions, we might imagine other “articles of faith” assembled out of money: the American flag, for example, or the psychoanalyst’s couch, or the Christian cross. In the current American political climate, which combines demands for an unquestioning faith in leadership (and in the power of money to solve problems and resolve conflicts) with widespread illusion and deception in the media, challenges to such blind trust of the sort Bush offers in *Trust* are indispensable.²⁰

Library/Catalogue (2003)

OF ALL HER INSTALLATIONS, *Library/Catalogue*, produced for the Florida State University Art Gallery’s *Design X* exhibition in 2003, speaks most directly to Bush’s commitment to visualizing, spatializing and rendering dynamic the relationships among research, design practice and knowledge production. As one of ten artists invited to contribute work for this retrospective show, Bush choose to display images of her own design projects only in the eight pages she was allotted in the exhibition catalogue and to use the gallery space for a large-scale installation representing the research procedures and thought processes that underlie her final products (see figure 4). As do all of Bush’s installations, *Library/Catalogue* embodies what Foster has described as the “archival impulse” in much contemporary environmental art that

19 Poggenpohl. “Between Visual and Digital Tokens.” 281.

20 In 2003 *Trust* was recognized with awards from the New York Art Director’s Club (Distinctive Merit) and from the American Institute of Graphic Arts’ 365 Annual Competition and Exhibition.

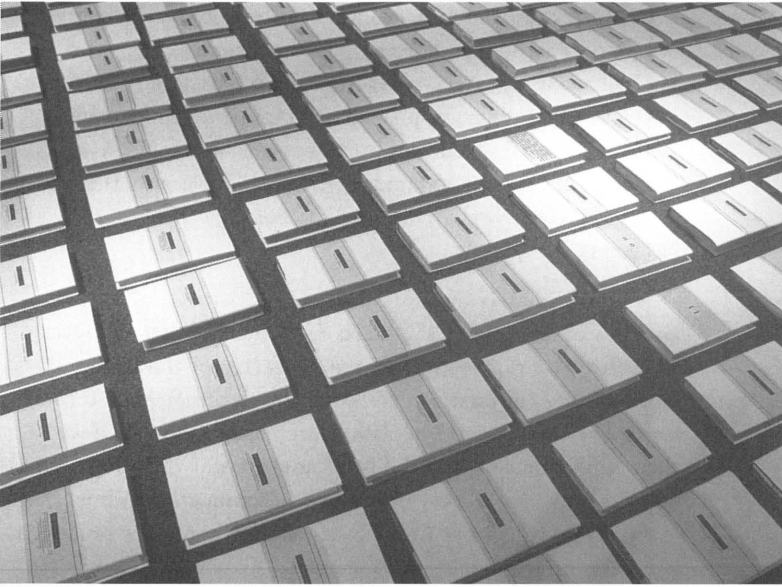


FIGURE 4

Library/Catalogue. *Installation and exhibition catalog pages 20 x 20 ft.*
Mixed media. Florida State University Art Gallery, Tallahassee.

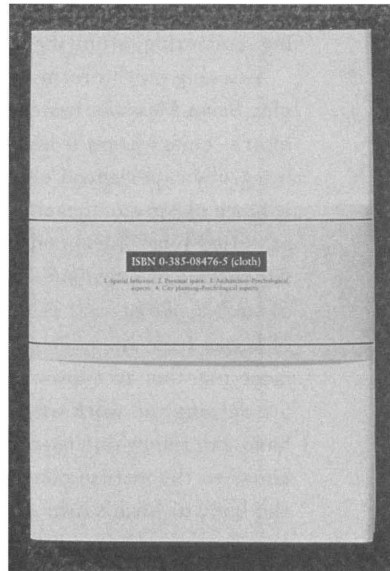
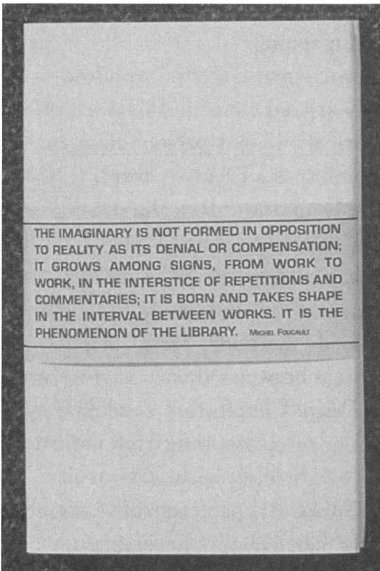


FIGURE 4 detail

Library/Catalogue. *Installation and exhibition catalog pages 20 x 20 ft.*

not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private. Further, it often arranges these materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects [. . .].²¹

A literal "matrix of citation and juxtaposition," *Library/Catalogue* is a 20x20' grid of 430 books from Bush's personal library which are also represented in the collection of the library at Florida State University. The books are placed directly on the floor. They are covered in plain white paper and labeled with their ISBN numbers and the brief notations of their topic areas derived from the Library of Congress classification system. As in *Façade*, what looks at first like a completely regular sequence is broken up with additional elements. Some of the covers are printed with excerpts from the work of theorists who have been important to Bush's thinking, such as Michel Foucault, while others offer brief texts that situate Bush's specific projects within *Library/Catalogue's* larger constellation of ideas about reading, collecting, archiving and cataloguing.

Drawing on the terms of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, Brian Massumi has recently argued that in effective works of art "composition is less a critical thought project than an integrally experienced emergence. It is a creative event. [...] It is not a closure or framing or subsumption. It is the openness of closed form, form continually running into and out of other dimensions of existence."²² *Library/Catalogue* provides an example of such a *mise en scène* of a creative event. Surveying this field of books from the edge of the grid (the books are placed too close together to allow any passage between them), visitors who are viewing the work with the *Design X* exhibition catalogue in hand can follow out multiple lines of connection from individual books to theoretical concepts to formal design solutions in the body of Bush's own work. Unlike the products of academic research, the fruits of designers' labor almost never include a bibliography of their sources of inspiration; *Library/Catalogue* affords a rare glimpse into a designer's thought, and the striking size of the exhibit silently but eloquently testifies to the often

21 Foster, Hal. 2004. "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110, 5.

22 Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 174.

unrecognized magnitude of the intellectual effort outstanding design requires. It is significant, too, that this piece appears in an exhibition associated with a university; Bush's commitment to her role as an educator, which was so clear in *Trust*, is reaffirmed in this piece.

Library/Catalogue is also the most personal of Bush's installations; the collection of books represents her own private library. Still, the person is subordinated to the public and the conceptual, in marked contrast with artists' installations that invite intimacy by revealing private details of the artist's life, such as Bob Flanagan's *Visiting Hours* or more recently *My Bed* by British artist Tracy Emin.²³ Bush's work creates intimate spaces by insisting on being read, from up close as well as from a distance; they are the efforts of a critical typographer whose work is grounded in careful research and thoroughgoing critique. *Library/Catalogue*, like all of Bush's installations, is about reading as an act of social as well as personal transformation.

System, Suspension, Seduction

AT FIRST GLANCE, the compelling beauty of Bush's installations derives from their boldly systematic formats: they strike the viewer immediately, even from a significant distance, as stunning grids, series, frameworks, formal arrays. Before the "meaning" of their systems is revealed by a closer inspection of the smaller-scale components, including the incorporated texts, these installations present themselves as systems, as systematic structures. The tension between the large, global frameworks and the small constitutive units creates a space for *suspension*. The viewer is in suspense: the system must mean something, but only by entering it can we understand it. Through the interaction of scales, Bush's work demands not only an approach toward intimacy—this is the condition of its legibility as well as its seduction—but also a stepping-back, a regaining of distance and perspective which constitutes the *critical* moment of their functionality as reflections on design practice.

As a shorthand formula for describing the critical design practice exemplified in Bush's installations, the triad *system-suspension-seduction* does not mark the stages of serial process, the "willing suspension of disbelief"²⁴ that facilitates the reader's seduction by the work of art or, for that matter, the advertisement. For visitors to Bush's installations, system-suspension-

23 Images from Flanagan's 1992 *Visiting Hours* installation at the Santa Monica Museum of Art can be found in the 1995 issue of *Grand Street* 53: *Fetishes*, 65-73. See also Juno, Andrea and V. Vale, editors. 1993. *Bob Flanagan. Supermasochist*. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications. A discussion of Emin's *My Bed*, exhibited in 1998 at the Tate Gallery in London, can be found in Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. 2001. "The Rumbled Bed of Autobiography: Extravagant Lives, Extravagant Questions." *Autobiography* 24.1. 1-14.

²⁴ Effective design shares with effective poetry what Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously referred to in his 1817 *Biographia Literaria* as the capacity “to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”

²⁵ Hansen, Mark. 2004. *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 200.

²⁶ Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London: Verso, 193.

seduction rather graphs an experience of crisis and resolution in which a moment of suspension is *interposed between* their experience of a system and their seduction by that system. Our seduction by the system is itself suspended, and we reflect upon how our knowledge is conditioned by the feature of that system. Each of Bush’s installations “functions by catalyzing a perspectival crisis” of the sort Mark Hansen describes in connection with the sculptural installations of Robert Lazzarini.²⁵ In addition to the embodied, proprioceptive response Hansen privileges in his analysis of new media artworks, however, Bush’s installations continue to engage the viewer’s intellectual capacities at the level of conceptual abstraction: in fact, they *embody*, in their very structures, the processes of abstraction and conceptualization that are at work in the design process, but that are usually hidden in the final product. Moreover, her work interrogates the social and ethical ramifications of design’s abstraction and conceptualization and invites her viewers to join in this interrogation.

“Nobody has ever clapped eyes on an ideological formation,” Terry Eagleton reminds us, “any more than on the Freudian unconscious or a mode of production. The term “ideology” is just a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs.”²⁶ Occupying a middle register of scale—large enough to contain smaller units, but small enough to stand out as an object unto itself and resist being neutralized within the surrounding environment—Bush’s installations give us a glimpse at least of the processes of systematization that generate ideological formations within culture. As we approach them, we can see their edges, which is not the case with the vast codified systems of communication, transportation and social stratification that shape our lives and to which Bush’s more contained systems allude. These works of design-as-art impose upon the fuzzy but nonetheless powerful systems of race, language, economy and knowledge the same principles of global overview-local detail that designers are called upon to apply to urban transit networks and building floor plans.

The questions Bush’s work stimulates pose themselves in the midst of the “seductive unity of person and machine, sensuality and playfulness, beauty of form and aptness of function” that

facilitates the functionality of design and, at the same time, its capacity to delude and manipulate. Our affective response to beauty-in-utility is an aspect of utility itself, but can also blind us to our own positioning by the design and to the design's structuring of our world so that it—and perhaps also we ourselves—might be *used* in a particular way. “As always,” Selle reminds us,

design is the stage and, at the same time, a play within a play that historically is acted on it. The plot is being unfolded constantly in design, with the use of tools and objects as props. The actors on this stage, the prompters, their patrons, and their audience think that they certainly know the roles in this play, but whether they guess what they are playing or what is playing with them seems yet again highly uncertain.²⁷

To break the spell of this seductive, deceptive beauty, it is not enough for a work to announce itself as critical or radical: we have plenty of examples of self-proclaimed radical design. The structure of the work must in some way engage with the conceptual structure of a problem (the problem of design, design as a problem), and its use must trigger a little phenomenological crisis that splits open the experience of use and makes it “critical,” reorienting the user to the concept and the problem (the concept as the problem). In each of the four installations discussed above, the dialectical movement from large- to fine-grained perspectives on the total piece directs just such a conceptual reorientation. As we approach any of Bush's installations, we “zoom in” on the details that compose its system and that are in turn organized within the system. Puzzled and intrigued by the ambiguities, contradictions and questions generated by these details, we step back, and the system resolves up through levels of granularity to the stunning global view that first caught our eye, but now we know more about it, and perhaps we “know better.”

Poggenpohl, Chayutshakij and Jeamsinkul have recently argued that with the possible exception of architecture the field of design as a whole “does not have a strong tradition of reflective or critical writing, perhaps because much design knowledge is tacit and formalizing this knowledge through language is difficult.”²⁸ Without discounting the crucial value of a

²⁷ Selle, “Untimely Opinions,” 240–241.

28 Poggenpohl, Sharon, Praima Chayutsahaki and Chujit Jeamsinkul, "Language Definition," 588.

well-developed theoretical discourse on design, we might look to projects such as Bush's to see how, in addition to the verbal meta-discourses of theory and manifestos, designers formalize their profession's "language," its problem-solving processes of abstraction and conceptualization, in *designed things*. In design practice itself, the "native" language of designers, we find a variety of critical design practices that are articulated through design. In finding the words with which to explore this work and rearticulate its critical contributions, design theorists, critics and historians will in turn contribute to the linguistic, rhetorical and conceptual foundation of design theory.

In many respects Bush's pieces are about "finding the words." It is not only that she often plays with dialectics of revelation and concealment, placing the typographic components of her installations in the finer-grained dimensions of the work; it is that in confronting her viewers with complex and dynamic visual and spatial concepts, Bush challenges them to step back and articulate the *meaning* of her installations, to find the words for the intellectual, ethical and political insights that emerge in the experience of viewing. As tangible outcomes of a designer's research as well as occasions for learning and reflection on the part of viewers, initiatives such as Bush's installations—ultimately no freer from the demands of functionality than are commercial projects, but operating according to a different creative brief—afford designers a space for exploring a discourse *within* the visual, spatial, chromatic and typographic vocabularies of design that will allow the wider design community, its critics, theorists, designers and possibly also its clients, to find the words, and, more important, the concepts, for a more productive and progressive critical practice.

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