

Success Disavowed: the Schools of Design in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. (An Allegory)

Couplets without rhyme . . .

The relation between the words *art and industry*, *fine arts and industrial art*, *industry and design*, and the relations between these types of couplets constitute a special discourse on the paradise that capitalism would become if only one could reconcile the differences that they suppose. A paradise realized through the perfect harmonization of production and consumption. It is one of those unending stories. For, if it took a particularly modern form in the first third of the nineteenth century, then it has undergone periods of intense reworking and renewal since: at the time of the 1925 Exhibition in Paris, for example, and during the last decade. The conviction that British industry will be reborn from a new marriage of art and industry, consummated in the bridal suite of high technology, in the shadow of the home computer and its games, the compact disc player and the whole range of articles of domestic pleasure that have escaped from the cornucopia of military research, has never been more flaunted.¹

Without doubt Fine Art courses have never found recruitment easier than in the last few years, with waiting lists longer than for those in the various fields of design. But, equally, the authorities have no doubt that the former must be sacrificed in favour of the latter. It only requires a little displacement in the language of the market-place to forget to notice that potential students are themselves a market. Indeed, no idea could be more silly. They are a product, whose successful sale depends upon the complete identification of the market for education with that for jobs, an equation that is now to be given legal status in the form of the Polytechnics Central Funding Council. And if industrialists and design consultancies themselves often remain unconvinced of the profitability of this politic, they at least seem agreed that it has a good moral profile, that it offers a way out of economic and social subordination

that is not dependent on an over-generous diffusion of the principle of 'freedom of choice'.

This should not be seen as a simple case of trickery. The Utopian dream of a wise and cultivated workforce enters profoundly into the cultural make-up of the industrial managers and entrepreneurial classes. Nor should it be something to reject outright when the means of confronting or escaping subordination are already diverse and ill defined in their outcome. On the contrary the gap between the wish-to-say and the power-to-say of the vocabulary of *art and industry* leaves space for the imagination. It is a confusion that can produce ideas. Amongst other possibilities it helps to situate artistic culture as a source of legitimate desire, as a form of leisure or national well-being in a way that frustrates its representation as a simple utility. We will look at how, at the level of multiple and diverse practices, the irreconcilability of our terms and couplets implicitly confirms their differences as the operative content of the discourse on *art and industry*: and at how this discourse provides for the sublimation of several social contradictions.²

Design Histories . . . (couplets without reason)

This relatively recent re-emphasis of the pre-eminence of design in national well-being has been accompanied, albeit in the longer term, by the accelerated professionalization of design history—a process of which journals like the *Journal of Design History* and *Design Issues* are potent representations. For the wider public this process takes place under the patronage of the store, such as Habitat, with its own staff of both designers and historians, and it accompanies the day-to-day processes of current consumption. The French catalogue of Habitat, *Préférences*, the luxury range of goodies that extends