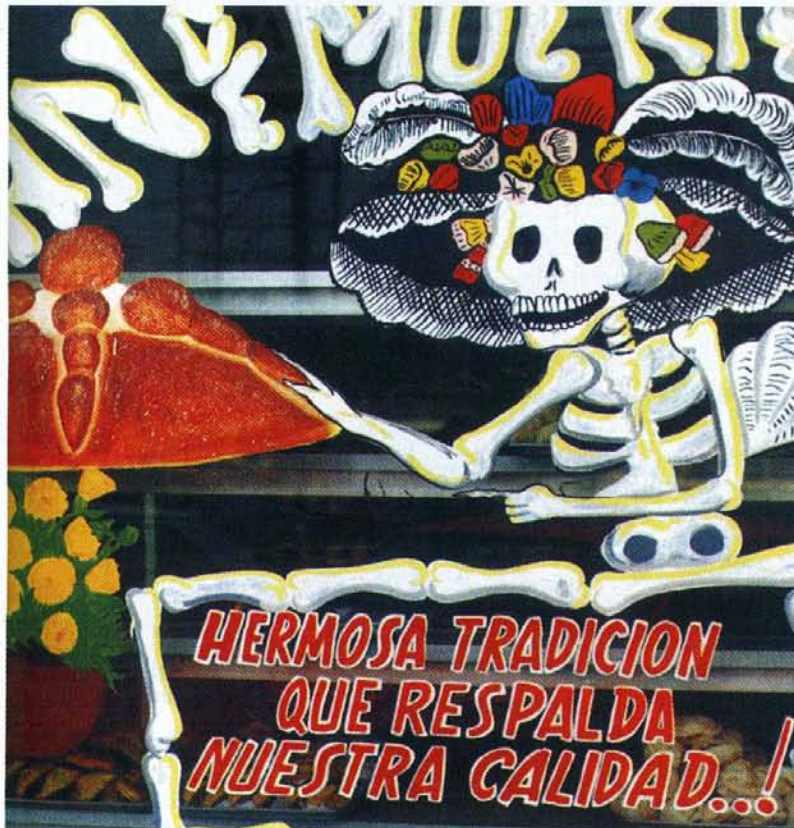




Gleanings

WISDOM & WHIMSY FROM ALL OVER



When Bad Art Is Good

Our love of imperfection is what keeps the world real

BY DAVID BYRNE

From the introduction to a new book on Mexican street art

BAD DESIGN IS good design. And tasteful good design, likewise, is bad. Not good-bad, just bad-bad. Now that “perfect” design is possible with the click of a mouse, the industrialized world has become nostalgic for “imperfect” design. As computer-aided everything takes over our lives we begin to realize, little by little, what is missing from the high-tech

world. We realize that a crooked line sometimes has more soul than a perfectly straight one and that a recording that has just the right amount of distortion is often preferable to a perfect copy. Woe unto us when the medical profession perfects their newest genetic and cloning techniques! We might actually realize that our imperfections are what makes us human.

The easier it becomes to produce perfection, in design, grammar, rhythm, and pitch, the more those who have the earliest and easiest access to that perfection want to abandon it. In a kind of reverse snobbism, Web designers and trendy magazine editors use the latest software programs to imitate the work of anonymous designers and artists. They use high-end computers to imitate the work of people who can’t even afford a computer. These unsung artists are the sources of inspiration for programs such as Photoshop, Illustrator, QuarkXPress, or Pro Tools, but never in their lives have they had access to, or even dreamed of, these tools.

As true perfection appears on the horizon, as the fruits of the enlightenment and of centuries of scientific progress appear within grasp, we take a bite of the perfected tomato or a huge flawless strawberry and realize that something has been lost. Flava. Soul. Humor. Funk.

The nostalgia for design that originates on the streets is a pathetic attempt by sophisticates like myself to recapture that lost soul. We think that by imitating the look of something “real” we might actually become more real ourselves. But for most, the Faustian bargain has already been made. We can never actually be the man or woman who draws the shoes or the tacos on the kiosk walls, but we have certainly learned to appreciate the person who draws them. We can experience that weird but typical 21st-century sensation—loving something and laughing at it at the same time.

IN THE 19TH CENTURY, as the technology of photography became more and more ubiquitous, artists quickly abandoned “realistic” portrait and landscape painting in droves. Why com-

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pete with a machine that can do it more quickly, easily, and inexpensively than you? In short order, they had to unlearn their drawing lessons and abandon their technique. They learned to draw like a child, like a "primitive." They wanted to capture the soul, the feeling, the sensation that the camera missed. They made virtual African art, virtual primitive art—basically, high art that looked like it was made by people who didn't know what they were doing. In time, "good" design became so easy even your software could do it! "Bad" design took soul. Or at least virtual soul. Artists and designers began collecting examples of this "authentic" design as items of inspiration. Little icons. Little shrines to those less schooled than they. Their studio walls would be filled with photographs and clippings of signs and buildings like these. Their own work was good, but this was the "real" thing. Unschooled, uncorrupted, and mostly unpaid.

Sure, it is funny, the clunky layout



and the sloppy painting on most of these images, but everyone knows that like these images, a taco on the street tastes better than one from Taco Bell. And there lies the key.

Street tacos actually are better. They feel better and smell better. They are less perfect, less clean (certainly), less high-tech, and there are no groovy advertising campaigns to back them up. But the *quesadilla con flores* that one can order (during the right season) on the street, with a cold *cerveza*, is

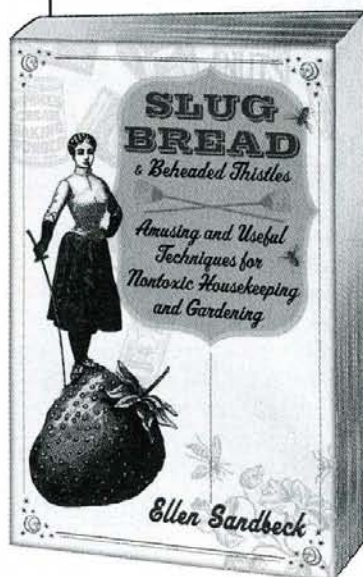
something that the perfection of a chain can never approach.

Perfection, one must conclude, is not actually perfect at all. In fact, it is almost the complete opposite. Perfection is bad. But bad is good. But bad perfection is not good, only good bad is good. It's all very simple.

If these works are authentic, real, true, human—what then are the works made using sophisticated software programs, elegantly designed and with beautiful, tasteful graphics? Are they inauthentic because they are well done? Is perfection not also real? Is not the antiseptic globalized world just another kind of real? Isn't a false thing that everyone believes in then a real thing? And, of course, isn't it the real that many of these self-taught artists and signmakers aspire to? Aren't they just dying to be corrupted?

Well, it might all be a matter of semantics, but if one is to assume that "real" infers having some basis in life and living as we know it, then the products of globalization are not, in

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fact, real. They are cleaned-up versions of those funky kiosks. They are imitations of things that are real—which, in fact, the march of globalization seeks to eradicate. The global wave would wash away all of these originals and leave only their copies. A kind of pod people world.

The new attitude expressed toward crummy artifacts is that they are evidence of the resistance of the real to the unreal. If the unreal at various points and places around the world manages to completely obliterate the real, as it has done in many parts of the industrialized countries, then the real itself will eventually become merely a memory, a quaint story, a picture in a book of something that no longer exists. Colonial Williamsburg, Main Street USA, or Warwick Castle. The real is unreal in many places because it is no longer there.

The faster and greater the spread of globalization, neoliberalism, and multinational corporations, the greater the nostalgia for that which they replace. We must memorialize the anonymous artists because their work is in danger of disappearing. It is beautiful. It reminds us that underneath the slickness and the logos there are still human beings.

Primarily known as a co-founder of the band Talking Heads, **DAVID BYRNE** has also been involved with conceptual art, photography, and design since his college studies at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Maryland Institute College of Art. "As an adolescent I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a scientist or an artist," he says. "Both fields held a naive fascination for me. (Later, I would discover both are manipulated by greater powers.) I eventually opted for art school because (1) the graffiti in the halls was better and (2) I wouldn't have to go through at least four years of boring shit before I had the opportunity to do anything bordering on the creative." His latest CD is *Look Into the Eyeball* (Luaka Bop). Reprinted from the anthology *Sensacional! Mexican Street Graphics* (Princeton Architectural Press), a visual survey of Mexican vernacular art with essays by Byrne, Steven Heller, Isaac Victor Kerlow, Hervé Di Rosa, and Emiliano Pérez Cruz.



Delicious Phrases

Curious origins of our tasty language

From **MENTAL FLOSS**

The Cold Shoulder

Believe it or not, there was a time when giving someone the cold shoulder didn't just mean publicly snubbing them; it actually meant handing them a cold shoulder, as in a cold shoulder of beef. During the Middle Ages, the easiest way to hint to guests that they'd overstayed their welcome was to serve them a heaping mound of cold cow parts.

Humble Pie

In the 13th century, British families tended to divvy up food after a hunt by giving the best portions of meat to the man who shot the stag, his eldest son, and his closest male friends. Those of lesser importance (the man's wife and his remaining children, for example) were graciously offered the umbles—organs like the heart, the brain, the kidneys, and the entrails. Years later, some punster added an "h" to the phrase, and "to eat humble pie" became synonymous with any sort of humiliation.

Bring Home the Bacon

What today means coming home with a paycheck used to be a bit more literal. In the 12th century, the Dunmow Church in Essex County, Britain, began awarding cured bacon strips to newly married couples if they could swear after one year of marriage they had never once regretted the decision. Standards got a little stiffer in the 16th century when the church turned the event into a competition: Couples had to appear before a jury of six bachelors and bachelorettes and plead the magnitude of their happiness in order to "bring home the bacon."

Ham

The common term for someone guilty of overacting is abbreviated from the slightly longer, slightly more offensive "hamfatter." Low-grade minstrel actors often didn't have the cash to spring for cold cream, so they resorted to applying ham fat to their faces to help remove their stage makeup.