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Chris MYERS

# HANDSOMELY, HANDSOMELY NOW! 5 IMPROMPTUS FOR THE EARLY PART OF THE CENTURY

*For Robert Ackerman*

## ABSTRACT

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*Based on a 19th century compositional trope popularized by Frédéric Chopin, the impromptus presented here are linked as a storytelling suite. The notion within the impromptu is to seek depth through lightness, as if improvised. The five stories provide metaphors for the conundrum of design education and practice. They engage the reader in interpretation; an open-ended hermeneutic pursuit.*



*“The idea of the design intervention in all of  
its lights and shadows promises change, if  
not betterment. It is not ambivalent. It is  
never ambivalent.”*

I

*Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous, that the true  
revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.*

Ernesto Guevara, “CHE”

A few years ago, my wife received a tee shirt with his face on it as a Christmas giveaway at the local Army-Navy store. The dark, olive green of the fabric projects a vague, military fragrance and the red star recalls The Revolution, something now hazy, powerful and possibly nostalgic. Maybe for some this image still calls forth hope; maybe it is only hopelessness. For some, maybe it is only a Star. Che communicates to us through time, weightless, without age or a single layer of dust. His portrait is famously reduced to stark black forms—absolute—with no modulation. He is distilled and in his distillation his beauty is strangely magnified. Set in that handsome face are the eyes that only look down from the mountaintop or up into the clouds. His comrades called it “The Look”. It was impossible to know what he saw. These are the eyes that only see the Future. These are the eyes that Michelangelo gave to Moses.

Trained as a doctor and with a desire to be a teacher, the healer sought out and took lives and shed blood. We have testimony to what he did and to what he witnessed. Caught in history’s complicated web, his choices were limited. If he did no harm, could he have done anything at all? In his feverish writings, we have no understanding of how those images settled into his memory.

After Fulgencio Batista fled from Havana, the revolutionary was made Cuba's Minister of Industries and the President of its National Bank. These are the quotidian activities of the winners. This was the unimagined life. On weekends, he took up the machete and went into the fields to cut sugar cane.

A machete has its own beautiful, violent efficiency and exhilaration. It is the blade of the young. As a young boy, it was my job to take up the machete to clear paths through the North Woods where I lived. A man-child with a blade half his height can cut with remarkable ruthlessness and efficiency through the trunks of saplings. I have felt the exhilaration of this knife. The trick is in the angle of attack, the design of the stroke. There is electricity in its violence. Was Violence always part of this revolutionary's dream?

He gave form to ineffable feelings: the pulsing, unshaped desires for Change, the passions for the ephemeral, unstructured design called Utopia. Was he the One Who Speaks for Those Who Cannot Speak Well for Themselves? Are his great feelings of love reserved for the abstraction of a new world that is always beyond reach? In the revolutionary heart, is there any difference between a love and a passion?

He left his bureaucratic tribulations in Cuba to search for the Revolution in an unforgiving, mountainous land and in whose junta he found a target for his passions. It was in a land where the People seemed uncertain as to whether they wanted his visions. He died there, not for a cause, but as a trophy—a legendary animal, captured, cornered and shot at close-quarters within a schoolhouse. And so the would-be teacher dies within a classroom in a world where he never found his students. Some say that he was searching for his death that could only be meaningful in a place offering a rock for a pillow to remind him that he was alive.

The official photograph of his death resurrects him as it floats on each new wave of how we communicate with each other. It is awash in the sea of global communication. He is stripped to the waist, his wounds obvious. His last shoes were shattered ideas of a shoe, canvas fragments barely held together. They are not in the final image. Christ was barefoot.

Was the shadow of Rembrandt that breathes through this image a conscious construction of the photographer? There is the mystery of the violent deaths of each of the military men that

surround this deposition. In the official photograph, there is a nun who smiles—and who apologizes every day since for the betrayal of feelings that the camera seems to have captured. No woman before in the pictorial history of the Deposition has ever smiled.

His face is what carries him forward more than his deeds. For two thousand years, men have walked their own dark halls reaching out for another Messiah in their own flickering torchlight. He looks like the Christ that they expected. Today, Ernesto Guevara is canonized in the country of his death by the religious poor searching to define their own Gethsemanes.

What if he had lived? Can there be any solace for a lion in winter? For such as these, there might be little magic in the day-to-day. Can they see the present clearly, much less enjoy it, as compared to the Past? And can it ever hold the allure of the Future? The great love was always the love of the idea, not the great feelings for life and what it might hold. It is a pure love of the abstraction of a purified life.

There is a sense that the world has moved beyond his dreamed Revolution—the Revolution he knew would catch fire. Hoped would catch fire? Begged would catch fire. There is a sense that the Solitary Man with Heart Affire is now unnecessary, misguided or redefined. Does the martyr ever know his destiny until the trigger is released?

Nowadays, revolutionaries are discovered and forgotten everyday in an ethereal world of global communication and the attention deficit of its consumers. The designs of the hidden revolutionaries, the nameless ones, continue underneath our surveillance. They hover above those who live in the technological deserts of the world. All are reduced to technological shouts and whispers. Their grand designs become smaller. Now, we associate these men with the technology that delivers them to us or the technology they manipulate, a tweeted call to arms, *if* they flash across our screen of vision. So, too, the revolutionary designer of an inexpensive computer for Third World children, or the breathtaking inventor of titanium sheathing that appears to give a building wings. We remember the detritus of their deeds; we struggle to remember *them*. It is a bloodless coup. They are led to a quiet death as their innovation or their cry is absorbed into the every day and disappears, sinking into the instantaneous chatter of satellites. They shrink to our size and they fill our worn-out shoes.

## II

*As if we were the wind...*<sup>1</sup>

Eleanore Marie Sarton, MAY SARTON, POET, NOVELIST, MEMOIRIST

Twentieth-century man preferred his mysteries to be kept between the covers of a book. Not so, his ancestors. In them, there was a desire to know, but a healthy acceptance of the unknown. What connects us to the Past is our continual fascination and respect for wind, which embodies the Gemini qualities of the early centuries' mystery and the twentieth century's need to redefine mystery as a problem to be solved.<sup>2</sup> No one can have more than ambivalence toward the caprice that is wind.

At an earlier age, I could gauge the temperature and temperament of the day by the pitch and the volume of the cedar-tree-filtered wind outside the window of my room. My room was a converted coal bin and more like a monk's cell, but it was my own and that was significant. In that simply furnished room without the distractions of radio or television, or any sort of media beyond borrowed books, senses were heightened. If I stood on a chair to look out of the window, I might happen to see a gull and the subtle ways in which the bird rode the wind would confirm my suspicions. I now live in the city and this talent is too often set aside.

No one knows who first decided to harness the wind, but it had to come from close observation of the personality of each breath and from cataloguing its behaviors. This is the design of the unseen. Our inventiveness springs from the senses. The body verifies. It validates. It tells us what is necessary. We do not know how we move to invention from sensation—the feel of the wind through the sailor's hair, the temperature of the air against his skin, the direction and velocity felt as an invisible hand pushing against him as he moves about the deck, the mist on his face. His observations of the dark patches of water might reveal the secret locations of small, unpredictable winds. There are the subtle, observed ways in which a gull plays the air currents.

A handsome vantage point in the history of man's negotiation with the elements is the early nineteenth-century English fighting ship. The intricate design of this vessel arose from the calculation of the force of the water on the bows, the tension on the rigging, the strain on the spars and the masts, the pressure of the sails, the

stress on the timbers of the hull. This ship is a living fabric, held in place by lashings, nails, joints, all manner of the carpenter's imagination, and the tension and release of each part to another. The crew is held in place by the lash and the noose.

The successful design must breathe; there must be a flexibility of the ensemble of parts to confront the emphatic shouts and the careless whispers of Nature. Every successful motion is a careful conversation between the ship, the wind and ultimately, the captain and his men. It is a heady, fragile concoction of ingenuity and the marvelous. This is the inanimate alive. It is no wonder that a ship is anthropomorphized. As the sails fill, *It* becomes *She*.

Granting that design is rife in the lines of the ship and its blueprint, the real design is the movement toward the destination. That is the province of men. It is a collaborative design that, given the intricacies of the machine, is also a design co-created by the captain, his officers and his crew. The majority of the crew arrives through the press, the forced deployment of the citizenry of England. They are the baker, the potter, the tailor, the farmhand, the petty thief, the gaoled and the drunk, all swept from their lives to the ship. They are old men. They are boys of ten years and all in between. The officers are drawn from the ranks of the seasoned seamen and the ranks of titled privilege. Some are the boys of privilege, given authority by birthright over men more than twice their age. The ship that sails from harbor to begin a commission is a fierce hash of sublime knowledge and gross ignorance. The most important aspect of the design of the fighting frigate is the education of the crew.

Here, design focuses on behaviors. This is not new. Design appears to arise from necessity, which is a gentler description of coercion. The idea of the design intervention in all of its lights and shadows promises change, if not betterment. It is not ambivalent. It is never ambivalent.

Learning is experiential, knowing by doing; a boy must climb a mast in a gale higher than the roof of his parish church. It is learning by repetition—the undervalued but powerful orphan of today's educators. It is based in listening. Inattention has public consequences. Practice precedes professional focus, the kind of focus that allows you to carry out your charge while under fire. A hierarchy is established; collaboration is essential. It is the merging of talents and the emergence of new talents. Sailors



learn in context—the changing weather, the circumstances of battle, the mercies and cruelties of the wind. If necessary, they must be able to repurpose, in all manner, the ship and its contents. They are caught between the water and the sky and at the mercy of their own invention. There will always be a plan. There will always be the destruction of the plan. In the end, creativity will be the hinge on which the life of the community may turn. It is the spark to all of that practice and all of that focus. It is either present or absent. There remains the impossibility of teaching creativity, or parsing successful collaborations.

The English Navy, like all armed forces, depended upon the irrationality of man. Though impressed into the service for at least a two-year conscription, many of these men willingly died for a king that they may not have particularly admired. They died for the idea of a King and for the abstraction of England, an English Utopia they sorely missed at sea and one that did not exist. The Articles of War,<sup>3</sup> the official contract under which the sailors were conscripted, is saturated with the threat of the lash and death. It was read aboard ship every Sunday after church service because many of the crew were illiterate. It is well recorded that floggings and sometimes, the noose, were useful at the beginning of a voyage; they were much less in force in a successful, fighting commission. In the sailor's heart, is there any difference between love, duty and loyalty?

It is not without suffering; it was unimaginably hard until you become inured to it. Old men will die. Boys will die. And all in between.

How adaptable one can be when the options fade with the shoreline! Is adaptability our inherent design? At night, the safety and progress of the ship is guided by the senses beyond the memory of the sea charts and the glance at the compass. The tilt of the deck. Listening, the sound of the canvas, the songs of the rigging, the live cries of the wood, the percussion of the water and the bows.

Sometimes it appears that we are sailors moving through a gale at night with the wind flowing against our ship and through it—flying before a gale as if we were the wind. How we come to invention is both a mystery and a problem. How we attempt to teach creativity is both a mystery and a problem. Eventually, isn't the success of education located at that point where your knowledge

lies so close to the heart that it is more felt more than known,  
accepted without being seen?

### III

*Are these triangles supposed to be mountains? Do all  
designers believe this, or just the ones that you work with?  
They just look like triangles to me.*

David Seneca Myers, MY SON AS A MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT

*Who* are we talking to?  
*Who* are we working for?  
Who do we *want* to talk to?  
Who *could* we help?  
*Who* should we be talking to?  
Are we *talking* when we should be *listening*?  
  
Are we helping?

### IV

*Our own epoch is determining, day-by-day, it's own style.  
Our eyes, unhappily, are unable yet to discern it.*

Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, LE CORBUSIER OR "CORBU"

The lasting memory is the glasses, at first perfectly round, later in life slightly modified, but always, heavy, black frames that overwhelm the birdlike features: the beak of a nose, the swept-back hair like avian plumage. He writes in sound bytes before they existed with a self-assurance found also in Walt Whitman: "I *will* be read!" Today, there is also a sense that his texts, despite their assured propulsion, are more like instruction manuals to be declaimed in vast, empty, echoing auditoria—he is talking to himself. When he refers to 'our' in his writings, the word appears to include himself with his audience as Everyman, but the aftertaste washes over with an implied *j'accuse*. A pejorative *you, you people, you* can never be *me*. He saw architecture and design in crisis in the early part of the twentieth century and nothing less than the clear sand at the water's edge after the receding wave would suffice as his beginning point to save it. He ran from history as if he were chased by wildfire.

Today, it cannot be said that design is in crisis, if it ever was. The design critic Lorraine Wild notes that

*A successful search for either aesthetic absolutes or social reform are symptomatic of the alienation of those who want to avoid the complexity of both the past and the present.<sup>4</sup>*

Maybe so. Or maybe they had eyes that only looked down from the mountaintop or up into the clouds.

Design is most often reactive: a deluge, a flood, a dam, a levee. Necessity appears to supply the quick match for the powder keg of ingenuity. Now we live in a state of 'churn,' a state-of-mind offered up by David Thorburn,<sup>5</sup> to describe the uncomfortable time in which technological advance, and very importantly, its resultant technological displacement or submergence, rains down into industry and daily life as one honored technology or a treasured behavior is retired in the face of a new one. Churn roils the waters. It engenders doubt, feeds the dread feelings of unpreparedness, magnifies the worries that one is out-dated—about to be cast aside. Fundamental change is uneasy; it engenders self-pity. Thorburn suggests that technological advancement, particularly in telecommunications, has been so rapid and so insistent that there are no longer the fallow periods where life settles into its newer frame. Life no longer offers the quieter progression gracing the transition from sail to steam, the horse to the automobile. Churn and its discomfort is now the toll on the road to Utopia or maybe just a hazy Future.

Design that fuels desires rather than needs continues unabated. We do not know if it was bequeathed to us genetically from out of the depth of Lascaux's dark faith and deep mystery. A new armchair is not indicative of a crisis in seating. Karim Rashid's elegant *Garbo* wastebasket, found in countless mid-priced hotels across the land, does not herald a crisis in consumer waste disposal. It is beside the point. It exists, as does much of design—because it can.

A very real crisis in Design Education was detonated at the beginning of the 1984 spring semester at Drexel University in Philadelphia.<sup>6</sup> That year, the university required that all of its students have personal computers, in this particular case, the Macintosh. Ever since, Design Education has followed Technology like a retired hunting dog. There is the memory of the chase,

the exhilaration of leading the master. But today, do we fetch? Roll over? Or do that which every dog secretly wishes when his owner isn't looking? Break the leash and chase butterflies. Churn pressures the educators to both provide a path to today's practice as well as to ensure the student's ability to adapt to what happens tomorrow. The challenge is to design the unseen.

Corbusier suggests that we cannot see ourselves as we are or within the life that we live. He looked for order, called it "the style," and for him it floats above his forms to usher us to a new way of living. His geometry provides a handsome reflection of clarity, the white walls an attempt to banish shadows, to satisfy *his* desire for light. The mystery of light has become a problem or a solution. It flows in through the windows creating a private, exclusive Utopia. It is untouchable. Corbu gave form to ineffable feelings: the pulsing, unshaped desires for the New, the passions for the ephemeral design called Utopia. His Achilles heel was that of many of us: he assumed we might be like him or more likely, wanted to be. His is a pure love of the abstraction of a purified life.

We are still fighting our battles with mystery and we are still attempting to redefine our mysteries as problems. We are capsized continually because we have no defense as designers against the irrationality of Man. We have developed a desire for logic as an antidote to human nature, an impulse to fix or repair rather than understand. How is this different from Corbusier's *Radiant City*? We are comfortable with need, less so with desire. Need asks for a ramp, a pulley. Desire can ask for everything. How many times are we ambushed by man's unpredictability? We breathe over this concoction with *our* good intentions, *our* hopes, *our* desires. We have developed a culture of not listening, where we write profusely, but read sparingly. At least, Corbu had an audience.

Who has seen the Future? Who has seen the wind? Very few, if any, have been allowed to cross Jordan to that Promised Land. Corbusier did live to see the Nazis repurpose his landmark Villa Savoye as a haystore. Perhaps they found his movable walls useful to their purpose. He did live to see his idea of cities ringed with wide highways and the celebration of the automobile. He did not live to see the traffic of Los Angeles. He lived to see his *Radiant City* transformed into urban housing projects in America and France to house the poor in isolation. He did not live to see their celebrated destruction. As a young man, he stated that,

*The father no longer teaches his son the various secrets of his little trade.*<sup>8</sup>

If this were not so, he would have become a watch enameller, a dying trade in Switzerland as mechanization took command in the early twentieth century.

His concrete ideas for the future might be seen in the Indian city of Chandigarh. It was built by the Indian people with whom he did not wish to work. The images of the time show us young women in saris carrying cement in flat baskets balanced on their heads. The City of the Future is built as if it were the Pyramids. Handcrafted. He did not live to see it neglected. He did not live to see the footpaths of the people who had to live there worn through the perfect plans. He did not see the washing hung to dry on the prefabricated concrete lintels or the makeshift barber stands on the streets.

What will we be blamed for?

And yet, there is the gift of Notre Dame du Haut. I am thinking now of a photograph of my favorite teacher and a young woman walking up the rise at Ronchamp to that church years ago. He may have known Corbu. Their frozen gestures are within the light and slightly formal etiquette of a new friendship. He is at the end of his career; she is at the beginning. The church appears to rise, despite its heavy, ten-foot thick, concrete walls. It appears to rise as if the wind. Neither of them knows that I will marry this young woman. Who can see the Future?

## V

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more...*

William Shakespeare, HENRY V, ACT III

It is a matter of paying attention. Close attention. That design, which is so easily explained as a protocol or series of obvious, logical steps, is often more difficult when it must be executed in real world conditions: tide, wind, the tensions of the ropes, the necessary attentions of men.

Let us suppose that our fighting ship must be held to its anchor under conditions in which the ship's anchor will most likely be overwhelmed. If this occurs, the ship will be grounded, potentially

with loss of life, certainly with the loss of the ship itself. Here is a problem that requires the attention of science, imagination and faith. If a cannon that could fire 24-pound shot is attached to the cast anchor, the combined weight of the cannon and the anchor might sustain the ship through the night. The cannon must be released from its protective breechings on deck and swayed to a small boat alongside the ship, then rowed out to the anchor site and sunk. The theories of force, gravity and the physics of the pulley are at the mercy of the quality of communication and trust between the officer and his men. What is essential is the concerted carefulness of execution, because without it the damage is significant. The gun will plummet and breach the timbers of the launch with the loss of the gun, the loss of the launch, potentially with loss of life or the maiming of the boat crew. And the eventual loss of the ship itself, that would consecrate the failure. The action is designed and monitored closely. Collaboration reigns. Improvisation is at the ready hand.

The ship's crew sways the hoisted cannon and its carriage over the fragile launch, which, with the help of science can bear this extreme weight—inch-by-inch—intent on the necessary soft-landing, the only way to avoid sinking the small craft.

The Second Lieutenant calls out to his men, “Handsomely! Handsomely now!”

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#### REFERENCES

- 1 From: Sarton, May. 1992. *May Sarton Collected Poems: 1930-1993*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company. May Sarton, (1912-1995) was an outspoken voice in American literature, perhaps best known for her journal meditations, especially *Journal of a Solitude* (1972-1973). Her recurring themes are those of Nature, everyday life and aloneness.
- 2 This succinct description of the transition from the early 19th century to Modernism is attributed to Gabriel Honoré Marcel (7 December 1889–8 October 1973), the French philosopher and playwright. Marcel is often mistakenly identified as the first existentialist. He himself did not accept Sartre et alia as philosophical companions, but rather saw

himself as steeped in the Philosophy of Existence, an important distinction. I am grateful to Robert Ackerman, Fellow of Cambridge University, and author of *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, (Cambridge University Press), who steered me toward this idea as I was preparing a course in 19th century cultural history. That was years ago and I have never forgotten it. It changed everything.

- 3 The Articles of War are sketched out in the context of traditions, rules and expected behaviors here. Craig V. Fisher, *Royal Navy & Marine Customs and Traditions, Ship's Company H.M.S. Richmond Royal Navy and Marines Living History - 1775 to 1783*. (Accessed January 6, 2012, last modified August 27, 2004) <http://www.hmsrichmond.org/avast/customs.htm>
- 4 Wild, Lorraine. 1992. On Overcoming Modernism. *I.D. Magazine (International Design Magazine)*, September-October, 74-77.  
What is interesting in reading this article twenty years past its publication is to note what it predicted. While it was controversial in its time and caused a certain amount of generational rift among the design cogniscenti, today it appears to be more observational than confrontational. There is also a vague undercurrent that we are too burdened, maybe too busy coping with everything (churn?), to dedicate our lives to the Revolution.
- 5 David Thorburn, MacVicar Faculty Fellow at MIT, author of *Democracy and New Media* and *Rethinking Media Change* (both MIT Press), developed this description as part of the historical cycle of technological innovation and cultures' acclimatization of change.
- 6 Master, Joseph. 2011. When the Mac Came to Market Street; the story of the Drexel Microcomputing Program. *Market Street*, Fall-Winter. (Accessed January 6, 2012.) <http://www.lebow.drexel.edu/Newsroom/Publications/MarketStreet/mac.php> A further description of the Mackintosh debut can be found here.
- 7 A more complete description of the fate of Chandigahr and its genesis in the theoretical Radiant City is catalogued in the two fairly recently published books that follow.  
Scheidtger, Ernst and Stanislaus von Moo. 2010. *Chandigahr 1956: Le Corbusier and the Promotion of Architectural Modernity*. Zurich: Verlag Scheiddeger and Speiss. Nooteboom, Cees, Martino Stierli, Iwan Baan and Lars Müller. 2010. *Brasilia - Chandigahr: Living with Modernity*. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers.  
The fate of Chandigahr is recounted here as it is reduced to commodities in the black market for classic designer goods. Burke, Jason. 2011. Le Corbusier's Indian Masterpiece Chandigarh Is Stripped for Parts. *The Guardian* (London), March 7. (Accessed January 5, 2012.) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/.../2011/.../chandigarh-le-corbusier-heritage-site>
- 8 Petri Liukkonen. *Le Corbusier 1887-1965. Books and Writers*. (Accessed January 6, 2012, last modified 2008) <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/lecorbu.htm>

Also germane to this piece is the following:

Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together; Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.