In Support of Design Students
An Interview with Ellen Lupton[1]

Laura Scherling[2]

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— _Ellen Lupton, US_

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This interview and provocation with designer, educator, and curator Ellen Lupton explores general trends in design education related to digital technology change. In contemporary design education and work settings, young designers must contend with a variety of issues in order to lead successful practices. Challenges like accessing health support services and paying for college can create major anxiety points for designers. Design students are, for example, also learning to use new tools, develop skills in coding, conduct research, and to think critically about design theory and history, which can be enriching and overwhelming. This interview considers some of the varied education-related issues that design students face, and provides a snapshot of how design education has changed, and examines some of the roles that schools and employers can take in support of design students.

Interview

Laura Scherling: Can you tell me a little about your work as a designer, writer, and educator? What do your days look like?

Ellen Lupton: I am a faculty member at Maryland Institute College of Art, MICA, and I was the senior curator of contemporary design at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. I've been at MICA since 1997. I get up early, take care of my dogs, and then work for a while. I work at home a lot.

LS: Can you talk about what it was like entering the design profession?

EL: College was very enriching. I went to Cooper Union, an incredible place and very open in terms of how design was experienced and practiced by students there. Then after graduating, I joined an art history Ph.D. program for a couple of years, where I worked with Rosalind Krauss and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, who are possibly the most brilliant art theorist and the most brilliant architectural historian, respectively. Those were very enriching experiences.

I have always been into education and learning things. Therefore, I took a bunch of technology-oriented classes early on. First, there was the switch to digital production from traditional print production. We used Quark and Photoshop, preparing files digitally for print. That was the early 90s. Then, in the mid-90s, there was the Internet. There were new outcomes, new places for design to be, and new ways for people to interact with design.

I have also taken a lot of writing classes more recently. Of course, working is extremely educational when you are a writer and a teacher, because you have to learn all these things. You learn so many things just from working. School is intellectual and exposes you to what design is, what the world is, what critical theory is, and a kind of realm of ideas. By the time I was working as a designer, everything was different.

We are creators of our time. I wish I was 20 years younger and starting out now as a designer. I went to school at a certain time that is different from the time we are living now. Nonetheless, I have learned a lot and stayed engaged in thinking about what design is and how it functions and, in a way, have done so continuously. I started to be a writer and a critic when I graduated from school. I did that right after graduating, and I have been really consistent. What we write, teach, and think about has certainly changed—it is not a solid state. Thus, perhaps the focus of my career is a continuous focus on an object that is shifting and unstable.

LS: How do you stay informed of the most recent developments in design?

EL: As a curator, I stay up-to-date by reading blogs and news media. As a teacher, I pay attention to what the students are doing and bring visiting artists to do things in our program. This requires paying attention to what's going on and what people are doing, which means being aware of who's doing things in graphic design in particular. I also organize the conference *Typographics* at The Cooper Union. I am also at the point in my career where I do a lot of writing and public speaking.

LS: How are you responding to the digital transformation of design in your work?

EL: For many years I taught graphic design history, and I continue to teach Design Theory. With history, you have to go back. The crisis is not so much about "digital" but also comes from issues of globalization and the need for decolonization. There is also the question of who owns design history and defines the design practice.

We certainly talk about digital transformation as a chapter in design history. In the theory class, we incorporate studies of user experience, behavior, experience design, design thinking, and service design as a

phenomenon—which is very much a "post-object" way of looking at design for better or worse. The notion of digital practice is woven into that course.

When I teach graduate students and advise them on their thesis work, many of them do digitally-based work, while some of them are more interested in objects and print or typeface design, which is also software-related, but we would not think of it as "digital design" per se.

Many of my students are digital designers. Many are into coding, interactive media, virtual reality, and technology-based work. This is what they are interested in and what they are creating. If you are in graduate school, you have to create work that prepares you for what you are going to do next. Some of them do digital design, and some came to graduate school to make unique things that I am not going to do, such as printmaking. In grad school, there is a lot of agency.

LS: How can we cope with the number of digital technologies we need?

EL: There has to be a lot of self-education because there are many different skills that designers can learn and can apply to their work. We have specific classes that are very tech-oriented where students learn particular software like After Effects or Cinema 4D—these things are fascinating. Students also want to learn specific things that relate to their projects, and you can't necessarily take a whole class on that. Therefore, all of us have to do a lot of self-learning.

Furthermore, not everybody would agree that history is important—I think it is. There is a huge industry that employs people who aren't interested in foundations or the history of anything. However, people who want to get a master's in design are usually interested in the discourse of design as a global conversation.

LS: How do you think young design students can be better supported with all these changes happening?

EL: There is a difference between a boutique studio in Brooklyn and a big corporation like Google or even a big consultancy like Frog Design. Thus, those different organizations have different abilities to support designers. A lot of people end up working in tech because the pay is so much better.

Designers also need better-paid family leave and permanent contracts as opposed to everybody being a freelancer forever. We need pay equity. We need

better support for designers seeking visas, and better support in general for immigrant students. Designers who are moving to the US from elsewhere and want to work here permanently require a lot of support from employers. Many employers want to avoid having permanent employees in favor of temporary workers, and it is not just little studios that are doing it.

There is a rise in the "gig mentality." The nature of work will change so quickly that it is scary to commit to anyone because who knows which design skills they will need to know in five years? It can be very uncertain and stressful.

We also need affordable schools. Students have to pay for a program that is not subsidized heavily by taxpayers. That can be very limiting. It limits who can participate, which is a problem for many students who do not realistically assess that. The finances can be a source of anxiety for students, and that gets in the way of learning.

Anxiety also gets in the way. You are probably familiar with epidemic levels of mental health distress among students worldwide, not just in the US. It's very challenging. What is the role of the school in healing students at that level? It's a big challenge.

LS: Do you have any other thoughts on the relationship between mental healthcare in the visual arts and design?

EL: In an ideal world, they would have more access to high-quality psychotherapy. Not specific to art school or the visual arts—it is just something that people need and where the demand outstrips the supply of available care. It is something that schools, in particular, can solve.