

A REVIEW IN PARTS

THE IDEA

'GENERAL ASSEMBLY (CANBERRA)' IS THE SECOND COLLABORATIVE PROJECT THAT STUDIO HAÇIENDA HAS PRESENTED THIS YEAR. THE REFERENCE IS TO INDUSTRIAL PROCESSES- THE FACTORY ASSEMBLY LINE-NOT HIGH SCHOOL TIMETABLES. 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY' IS NOT ONLY A COLLABORATION BETWEEN PHOEBE PORTER AND BLANCHE TILDEN, WHO ESTABLISHED THEIR MELBOURNE WORKSHOP IN 2005, IT IS ALSO A COLLABORATION BETWEEN THEM AND THE AUDIENCE IT FOLLOWS AN INITIAL 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY' WHICH WAS PART OF THE CRAFT VICTORIA EXHIBITION SOLUTIONS FOR BETTER LIVING (8 MARCH - 7 APRIL 2007, CURATOR KATE RHODES; REVIEWED IN CRAFT CULTURE BY ROBYN HO).

I THINK OF THAT VERSION NOW AS 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY (MELBOURNE)', A NOT INAPPROPRIATE NAMING IN RETROSPECT, AS THEIR MODUS OPERANDI COULD BE APPLIED TO ANY CITY, I SUSPECT, WITH EQUAL SUCCESS.

TOGETHER PORTER AND TILDEN DEVELOPED SHAPES AND TEXTURES REDOLENT OF CANBERRA (AS THEY HAD FOR MELBOURNE). THEY WENT BACK TO MARION MAHONEY GRIFFIN'S BEAUTIFUL WATER COLOUR DRAWINGS THAT WERE SUBMITTED FOR WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN'S ENTRY IN THE COMPETITION TO DESIGN AUSTRALIA'S NEW CAPITAL CITY. THEY ADOPTED THE UBIQUITOUS ROUNDABOUTS THAT DRIVE PEOPLE CRAZY WHEN THEY FIRST COME TO LIVE HERE. THEY ABSTRACTED THE STRUCTURE OF THE CARILLON, THE BELL TOWER THAT STANDS SENTINEL OVER THE LAKE. ALL STRONG MEMORIES OF A CITY IN WHICH BOTH ARTISTS HAD SPENT MANY YEARS (BOTH STUDIED AT THE CANBERRA SCHOOL OF ART, ANU).

THE INTENTION WAS TO COMPILE A SET OF COMPONENT PARTS THAT COULD BE ASSEMBLED INTO A BROOCH IN A VARIETY OF WAYS: AN ENGINEERING AND DESIGN CHALLENGE IN ITSELF. ASSEMBLED NOT BY THEM, BUT BY AUDIENCE MEMBERS.

'GENERAL ASSEMBLY' WAS TO TEST THE CHOICES OF THE BUYER; MAKE THAT PROCESS A CONSCIOUS ONE. IT IS A NEW TAKE ON PERSONALISING THE MASS-PRODUCED. IT TESTS THE LIMITS OF THE HAND-MADE VS. THE PRODUCTION LINE. LIKE THEIR ACKNOWLEDGED INSPIRATION (BEN KELLY, DESIGNER OF THE INTERIOR OF THE MANCHESTER NIGHTCLUB THE HAÇIENDA, AND GRAPHIC DESIGNER PETER SAVILLE, WHO REDEFINED "INDUSTRIAL CHIC" THROUGH HIS WORK FOR FACTORY RECORDS) 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY' WOULD BE A BLEND OF THE INDUSTRIAL AND THE INDIVIDUAL.

THE PROTOTYPE

PORTER AND TILDEN SPOKE ABOUT 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY' IN THE ART FORUM SERIES AT THE ANU SCHOOL OF ART A DAY BEFORE THE WORKSHOP BILK OPENING. HEARING THEM OUTLINE THE PROCESS WAS A REVELATION: EVEN A JEWELLER BESIDE ME WAS AWED BY THE PATIENCE, SKILL AND DETAILED PREPARATION THAT LIES BEHIND THIS PROJECT. THEIR METICULOUS MANAGEMENT IS ONLY MATCHED BY A CERTAIN BRAVERY TO EVEN EMBARK ON SUCH A SCHEME.

THE LOGISTICS WERE FORMIDABLE: NECESSARILY SO IN ORDER TO MAKE THE PROCESS CLEAR TO FOLLOW AND THE BROOCH EASY TO ASSEMBLE.

PROTOTYPES WERE MADE FROM A RAFT OF INITIAL COMPUTER DRAWINGS. THE PROTOTYPES WERE ALL HAND-CUT AND FINISHED. IT IS AT THIS STAGE THAT THINGS SUCH AS SCALE CAN BE ADJUSTED; WHAT LOOKS RIGHT ON A COMPUTER DRAWING MIGHT NOT SIT WELL ON A PERSON'S LAPEL OR CHEST. THE CHOICE OF A BROOCH, PERHAPS THE LEAST GENDER-SPECIFIC PIECE OF JEWELLERY THEY FEEL, MUST BE ABLE TO BE WORN COMFORTABLY ON A SUIT, JACKET, DRESS, T-SHIRT, OR SCARF.

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THE COMPONENT PARTS

ONCE THE PROTOTYPE HAD BEEN TESTED, THE COMPONENT PARTS WERE ELECTRON WIRE CUT IN MULTIPLES FOR A FINITE EDITION, BUT EACH PIECE REQUIRED HAND-FINISHING AND ANODISING. IN THE TALK TILDEN SHOWED A CHART SHE USED TO TRACK WHAT PIECES HAD BEEN FINISHED: AN EXERCISE IN TIME-MANAGEMENT, THE SHEER QUANTITY OF PARTS AND THE MYRIAD PERMUTATIONS POSSIBLE UNDERLINED THE EXTENSIVE CHOICE IN THE EVENTUAL SELECTION. THE AUDIENCE IMMEDIATELY STARTED TO DO THE MATHEMATICS. TILDEN ADDED, TO CONFIRM OUR THOUGHTS, THAT AS YET NO COMBINATION HAD BEEN REPEATED.

THE PALETTE OF COLOURS AND FINISHES (MATT OR POLISHED) ADD AN EXTRA LAYER OF COMPLEXITY. ONE'S SELECTION COULD BE MULTI-COLOURED, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL, MONOTONE OR EVEN MINIMAL. SINGLE OR MULTIPLE PRESSED GLASS COMPONENTS COULD BE INSERTED. ONE PIECE I SAW USED ONLY ONE COMPONENT WITH A CONTRASTING RIVET.

SINCE STUDIO HAÇIENDA WAS ESTABLISHED, GRAPHIC DESIGNER TY BUKEWITSCH HAS BEEN AN INTEGRAL PART OF THEIR IDENTITY. HE DESIGNED A FOLD-OUT BROCHURE (THE STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS) FOR THE CRAFT VICTORIA SESSION, AND FOR WORKSHOP BILK. FOR 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY (CANBERRA)' HE ALSO DESIGNED SIGNAGE BASED ON MARION MAHONEY GRIFFIN'S PLANS: SIMPLE, GRAPHIC AND EFFECTIVE, AND ALL IN THE BRAND COLOURS OF STUDIO HAÇIENDA: HAZARD YELLOW AND BLACK.

THE CHOICE

I THINK THIS IS WHERE THE PROJECT IS REALLY INTERESTING. AS CONSUMERS WE ARE SO USED TO MAKING OUR CHOICE FROM FINISHED OBJECTS. IF I ANALYSE THE PROCESS I GO THROUGH, AND THIS IS WHAT PORTER AND TILDEN WANTED TO PROMOTE, I OFTEN TAKE A BIT OF A GAMBLE WITH THE ACTUAL DESIGN IF I KNOW I LIKE THE ARTIST'S WORK. IN OTHER WORDS, I TRUST THE DESIGNER TO TAKE ME TO NEW PLACES WITH THEIR CHOICES.

WHEN THE CHOICE IS GIVEN TO ME ALL SORTS OF OTHER ISSUES COME INTO PLAY. IN 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY', THE CHOICES ARE MADE WITHIN A FRAMEWORK CONSTRUCTED BY STUDIO HAÇIENDA, BUT AS WE SAW ABOVE THERE ARE MANY DIRECTIONS THE FINAL OBJECT CAN GO.

I FOUND MYSELF THINKING ABOUT SYMMETRY OR ASYMMETRY, SIMPLICITY OR COMPLICATION, DEPTH OF COLOUR, RELATIONSHIPS OF COLOUR AND FINISH. THESE ARE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF DESIGN: THOUGHTFULNESS ABOUT EACH DECISION, EACH CHOICE.

THERE ARE A GROUP OF FINISHED BROOCHES AT WORKSHOP BILK. WHEN I SAW THEM LAID OUT ON THE COUNTER, I WAS STRUCK BY HOW DIFFERENTLY I CONSIDERED THEM. THE OPENING NIGHT WAS FULL OF CONVERSATION, BANTER, HARD THINKING. LOT'S OF "WHAT DO YOU THINK?" AND "OH, THAT'S A GOOD IDEA." MANY OF US WENT HOME WITH A BROOCH THAT RETAINS THE MEMORY OF THAT EVENING AS PART OF ITS APPEAL.

THESE OBJECTS ARE DIFFERENT BECAUSE WE HAVE ENTERED INTO A GAME WITH PORTER AND TILDEN. IT IS A GENEROUS GAME THAT ALLOWS US INTO THEIR WORLD.

THE ASSEMBLY

ONE SELECTED WITH A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO THE ASSEMBLY OF THE COMPONENT PARTS, USING A NEAT BLACK TRAY, LIKE A DESIGNER CAFETERIA LUNCH. THIS PART OF THE PROCESS COULD TAKE QUITE AWHILE, AND I NOTED SOME PEOPLE GOING THROUGH THE PROCESS ONLY TO START AGAIN FROM SCRATCH.

WHEN THE FINAL DECISION HAD BEEN MADE, THE TRAY WAS TAKEN OVER TO A WORKBENCH, WHERE PORTER AND TILDEN SAT IN READINESS TO ASSEMBLE THE BROOCH. AMID THE OPENING NIGHT CROWD, THEIR BENCH WAS AN ISLAND OF CALM. THEY WERE NOT FAZED BY THE SCRUTINY. NOT DISTRACTED BY THE TALK. NOT TEMPTED BY THE CHAMPAGNE. THEY WERE WORKING. IN THE INSTANCE OF WORKSHOP BILK, DEMAND OUTPACED PRODUCTION. (AT CRAFT VIC, THERE SEEMED TO BE AN EQUILIBRIUM, AND EACH FINISHED BROOCH WAS IMMEDIATELY DISPLAYED ON THE WALL OF THE GALLERY FOR THE DURATION OF THE EXHIBITION). I RETURNED TO WORKSHOP BILK A WEEK LATER TO COLLECT MY BROOCH—NOT A HARDSHIP—AND AS I MENTIONED ABOVE, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THE FEW EXAMPLES, THE 'EXPRESS LANE' VERSIONS THAT PORTER AND TILDEN HAD MADE BEFORE THE OPENING.

EACH PIECE WAS STAMPED WITH THE STUDIO HAÇIENDA MARK AND GIVEN A UNIQUE NUMBER.

THE ARCHIVE

EACH NUMBERED PIECE IS RECORDED, SO STUDIO HAÇIENDA HAS A RECORD OF WHO PUT TOGETHER WHICH PIECES. TO THIS END, THEY AND THE GRAPHIC DESIGNER, DEVELOPED THE FORM THAT DOUBLES AS AN EASY RECKONER FOR THE COST OF THE FINAL PIECE, IN MUCH THE SAME WAY AS ONE SHOPS AT IKEA (THE DIFFERENT SIZE PLATES ARE COSTED, AS ARE THE RIVETS AND GLASS PARTS (A+B+B+C= X)).

THE FUTURE

'GENERAL ASSEMBLY – OPEN HOUSE 08' WILL BE A SPECIAL SERIES (THE 3RD 'GENERAL ASSEMBLY') FOR THE AUSGLASS CONFERENCE, AT THE SMOKESTACK GALLERY, THE CANBERRA GLASSWORKS*. THIS MAKES SENSE, AS EACH BROOCH TO DATE HAS INCLUDED A GLASS COMPONENT (BLANCHE TILDEN ALSO STUDIED IN THE CSA GLASS WORKSHOP WITH KLAUS MOJE, AND HAS MADE THE GLASS/METAL COMBINATION A TRADEMARK OF HER WORK).

THE ADDITION TO THE CANBERRA EDITION OF A NEW COLOUR (YELLOW), AND A NEW HALLMARK, SHOULD MAKE THIS EDITION EVEN MORE COLLECTIBLE.

PHOEBE PORTER AND BLANCHE TILDEN WILL BE AT A WORKBENCH TO ASSEMBLE THE BROOCHES 24 JANUARY – 3 FEBRUARY 2008.

SO, WHERE TO NEXT... THE BOULEVARDS OF PARIS, NEW YORK'S GRID, LONDON'S OVERLAPPING HAMLETS, BEIJING'S RING ROADS. THE QUESTION TO STUDIO HAÇIENDA IS: WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?

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