

In
Conversation:

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&
Romi
Morrison

ON UNSETTLING
THE EQUIVALENTS

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Mimi Onuoha and Romi Morrison interviewed each other on May 19, 2021. They discussed their collaborative art projects and the fluid space between art and design. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

MIMI ONUOHA: Does design equal art? Does design not equal art?

ROMI MORRISON: I want to start by unsettling the equivalents between these two terms a little. Maybe we can frame it by what each offers to the other or what each provokes from the other. Ultimately, I think there are definitely spaces where these things overlap or trade similar visual languages and then I think there are ways in which they very dramatically depart. Each has an asset and a detriment, I think, in that regard. I'm curious about what design offers art? What art offers to design? I think both of our practices trade back and forth between those two spaces so thinking about it through offerings is kind of nice.

MO: I do like that. This question does come up in certain contexts more than others. Often I'm not very interested in answering it at all because there is just one very simple, straight-forward answer, which is that it depends on the context. It depends on the market. It depends on where you're presenting it. Really anything that you call one of these could be presented as the other, depending on what the aims of it are, but I feel like often when people are asking this they're talking about

something else, which I think you're starting to unsettle here, which is that there are these sort of aesthetic characteristics, or as you said, "offerings" or needs, that either art or design is presumed to have inherently. If we hold those in place, and we say, "Okay, that is the core and here are the assumptions of what those fields give," then yes we can say these have different aims, different needs, and often different conceptions of audience.

RM: As Black people that have to work in and between these two worlds, there is also strategy about what term you use in what space, how you present yourself in a way, depending on who's around you and how you need to be legible. I think that's why for such a long time design was a term that I used really readily. I think "artist" is also a very capacious term in a lot of ways, but I think design is even more ambiguous because it's applied in so many different contexts. Yet, it still has this strange residual air of precision or acuity. Designers are always very serious.

They're always in their monochromatic ensembles, with slightly off-color rims for their glasses. So much of this is inherited from European schools of design, especially modern design and its sleek, arid visual language. There is a seriousness that I feel is tacked onto it. It doesn't always have to justify its own value or its own credibility as much as art often has to do. This is a question of how you strategically identify yourself, depending on what space you're in, how you want to be seen, need to be seen, and what kind of role you want to play.

MO: Absolutely. I think there's a sort of presumed professionalization of design. I remember a friend of mine who's an architect said that originally she wanted to be an artist, but being an architect is the acceptable way to be an artist. You're still embedded

within a structure where you seem very legitimate. You can say, “Look at this degree, this isn’t a joke. This is rigorous. This is work. There are standards. There are protocols. There are things that we do.” Often I think there is a sense that the art world is contrasted against that, as if artists are in the wishy washy space where people are just messing around and there’s nonsense, but designers have work to do.

RM: This is where the serious creativity and making happens.

MO: Exactly. Rigorous creativity is for design and foolish whimsical creativity can be passed off to art. Again, these ideas are not accurate and are over generalized and not particularly useful. However, as Black folks who are navigating these spaces, you do see these ideas and you get pushed up against them. I agree with you that there is this question where you say, okay, well, what does it mean to be—and what does it mean to call myself—a designer in this space? What does it mean to call myself an artist? What does it mean to be an artist and a designer in a space full of designers or to be in a space of people who don’t care about the difference between either and to call that, to claim one or the other, that all of those have different affordances?

I think for me, personally, it’s just much easier to say I’m an artist because a lot of the structures, organizations, the residencies, the places where I show work, and the ways in which I show work, fit more into the art world. But the work itself is never about being in one of these fields. That’s the thing. At the end of the day, I think the work that we are creating is informed by the practices of multiple fields, but it’s not in one or the other.

It then gets commodified in different ways and then presented in still other ones. That is fine. To me, the most important thing is understanding: what's the work and what's happening here? What are we trying to do? Cool, from there call it what you like.

RM: I think this is a helpful distinction between the ways that art or design are often thought about ultimately as objects versus as methods or practices. Sometimes they're considered that way, but often I feel when there's a question of "is it art or is it design," it's mostly a question of where do I place this object that's been created? Which is very different than the process of working through something and trying to place emphasis on the material as much as on what it evokes, what it performs or does afterwards, that then requires an audience or requires a viewer, it requires some kind of interaction. I feel that when I try to think about art and design, they're both very different practices depending on what kind of interaction I'm ultimately hoping to elicit, offer, or have people step into. Art and design function very differently when thinking this way.

When I am more explicitly working in a design practice, it's usually to take on the language of design, which is often about clarifying: making something more acute, axiomatic, or almost subliminal, right? It's to make something seem as if it's not designed, that has a sense of ease or is naturalized. That clarity to create these kinds of contradictions or to create spaces in which the transparency of design's visual language can be made explicit. You're making the things that aren't supposed to be visible an active part of the design language. Then it becomes really fun, especially working with maps, which we both share a deep love for. I mean the map in itself is an epistemology. It's a very clear epistemology that's being evoked and part of what makes it effective and simultaneously violent, what gives its

utility is its clarity. Its clarity to demarcate borders and boundaries. To be able to visualize and ascribe whole mythologies of people and culture onto those places—that's a deeply powerful thing. Design feels like it's uni-dimensionally focused. It's very clear what the aim is. There's a path, and it's taking you onto that path very clearly. With the ways that I think about artistic practice, I'm trying to create multiple ways for someone to come into a much larger experience. Hopefully at least one of those pathways become something that's resonant or congeals in your head, to evoke a feeling that's been elicited along that journey. It isn't so discrete or didactic. It uses ambiguity in a way to unsettle something or to form a connection that previously would have been thought to be unheard of or impossible. It's a much stranger murkier kind of space. It isn't so much about the confrontation that design can offer because of its clarity as much as it is an amorphous unsettling, but in these generative ways.

MO: One thing that is nice, just to extend this point that you've been making, is that I think both art and design are concerned with the connotations of things. They're not just concerned with how something performs, but also with how a particular group of people will perceive it in a particular context and what that suggests. I contrast this with something like engineering, which actually should—and in the best cases, does—also have that same interest in everything around the thing that you're supposedly communicating, but at its most brittle says, well, that's unimportant. We just care about one particular metric and we can solely optimize for that. I think in both art and design, anyone who is in both of those fields has to hold a bit more of the murkiness of things. However, depending on which one you say that your work lands in, you'll be judged by the sort of ideal

standards and customs of that space. Something that you just cannot get away from with design is the brief and the audience, because these two things are attached to each other. The design brief tells you what it is that you're meant to be doing. With both art and design, you're presenting some kind of information, and I use both "presenting" and "information" very broadly. With design, you have this thing where you can point to, "this is what it's meant to be," and "this is what it's meant to clarify," and "this is who it's for." I think you bringing up maps is so fantastic because I think they are such a perfect example. Maps are these artifacts that can be so many things at once. They are scientific, they're extremely artistic. They're designed objects. They're violent objects. They constantly obscure. They clarify certain things and by clarifying it, they then choose what will be obscured and that then gets erased from the process.

Personally, I use strategies from the two worlds very differently. I try to create work in a variety of different contexts for a variety of different reasons, so it is useful to pick up and set down whatever it is, whatever I want, depending on what I'm trying to do. In some moments, I intentionally stay in the art space because of the increased murkiness compared to design, where there is no need to state so many things, even though they are still there. The fact that they are not stated doesn't mean that they're not there. The fact that you don't state it does bring in other complications. I think there's something fun to work with there, just as there's something very fun in seeing a structure supposedly be legible, but then pushing past that.

RM: While you were talking, I kept thinking about universality relationship to both of those spaces. In stating or not stating the design brief or the audience, I feel like design is often rhetorically spoken about as something that's situated for particular users, and simultaneously this contradictory claim to universalism through iconography and standardization.. It also has the capacity to be the metric upon which to measure universalism. There are so many universal design methods and universal design principles. It's strange that in a field that is so clear about its brief or its audience, there's still this simultaneous attachment to universalism that doesn't go away even as it's being plastically funneled to a particular user.

MO: It's as if the ability of design to claim a kind of, as we said, legibility or professionalism . . .

RM: And because it's so tied to industry, very explicitly.

MO: I'm thinking about conversations I've had with designers and artists about this. It does seem to me that some of my designer friends are like, "Oh, but I'm creative too. You know." They're like, "I can make art as well." Which, of course you can. Then on the other side, artists, being given this sort of lovely capaciousness, that openness, the intimacy, the way that universality is not imposed on the art world in the same way that it is, I would say imposed on so much of the design world, that the assumed lack becomes, "Well, now there's no rigor." There's no standard. What does it mean? How is it even helpful? Can it even kind of scale? Similar questions. Which I think both sides are operating from a strange point of scarcity, but also of trying to prove something that doesn't really need to be proven. Again, even as we're saying this, I can still identify people who work in

fields as artists and as designers who are undoing both of those. So we say all this, but this is still to say that we're speaking to a kind of core but there's so much more. There's always more space in the margins. Within that core, I do agree with you. There is a kind of freedom from the trappings of the myth of universality. I think the design world constantly is dealing with what feels like this need to show its proof of utility. This question of utility that comes up all the time. It doesn't need to. Yet, we can't not acknowledge that it does.

RM: You just touched on standardization. I feel like we're trying to identify these things like universality, standardization, metrics, clarity, and scalability. These are things that have become for better or worse, within the vernacular and lexicon of design. Utility is often how we experience design. Right? I think in our daily lives that's often our experience with it. Which is strange because I think people probably have way more interactions and relationships with designed objects or materials than they do with anything that we would think of as art or artistic. There's a kind of intimacy that we have with the products of the design world that is a part of the design process as well. Again, because utility is so much of the focus, there are times where it can overshadow what can potentially happen within our relationships with designed objects. It becomes almost invisible. For example, I open my laptop and I start working on it. I'm not really thinking about my relationship with my laptop very much, unless I'm up at four in the morning screening something when I shouldn't be.

MO: What is interesting about the two of us is that we don't fit solidly into one of these two worlds or one of any world. It's either a blessing or a curse. Something I feel like we've spoken about and I've wanted

and fought for quite a bit, is this idea within the art world that the art is just in the artifact, the expression. As opposed to claiming, “Well, no. What if there’s a latitude in the ways in which we can even approach thinking about a topic?” What if it’s about extending what we considered to be XYZ? What if it’s about creating art as this form of endurance or repetition? We talk about opening up the space to connect when you’re facing the violence of the world. This is particularly important as Black artists, designers, whatever you want to call us. It feels like this framing of design versus art does rely upon the most mainstream ideas of both, as opposed to the edges of each. That edge space is far more interesting, far more blurry, and begins to look more the same. Whether people are calling that speculative design or confabulation, the space around is the more interesting thing.

RM: I think it’s interesting to think about *Noticing the Preconditions For _____* as a way to think about the relationship between the edges or the fringes of art and design. I can see both in that project and I guess we should introduce our work together.

MO: We’ve been working on this project called *Noticing the Preconditions For _____*, and it’s this durational, correspondence piece in which we are looking for the traces or preconditions of the world that we want to live in, but looking for it within the world in which we’re living in today.

RM: Yes, exactly. I would say it comes in part from the protocols of design, at least thinking about modularity and modulation. We’re each essentially creating a database, right? You have yours; I have mine as we go out and experience

the world where we are trying to train ourselves to notice those preconditions, not to pass by them, but to take them in as profound moments of transformation. Even if it's just the residue of something that you desire, that's an important resonance for coming to realize the things we desire but might not know yet.. Then we struggle to put them into a form. I mean, the database that we have is a very clearly designed object. It's very axiomatic.

MO: As we're recording those things for ourselves, we're then doing an act of translation. I notice something and then I make a short piece that's trying to communicate what I gleaned from whatever I noticed and I then send it to you. We're making that kind of translation, description, and expression really explicit in the piece too. For me, it feels like it's blurring art and design a lot more because it's subjective, it's creative. It is abstract. It's about expression. I'm still trying to communicate something to you. Ultimately I'm still trying to communicate to you something that I saw and experienced, and I'm also trying to communicate it to you in a way that doesn't close down the potential in how you might read it. I'm trying to communicate to you the potential of what I have noticed without condensing or reducing it . . .

RM: . . . To something, like a designed object or an artifact, but instead something that is motivating for you to reinterpret and to build until the project goes back and forth in this modular, explicit act of making noticing, creating, expressing, interpreting, and translating, going back and forth. So I like how it moves. I think in this kind of blurriness, along the edges, where the threads of art and design need each other, because ultimately, they're really shared languages. As we were saying before, I think how we work with those two languages, is always

trying to offer a gentle unfamiliarity for how people can step into seeing the world, themselves, and their relationship to it differently. I feel like it's always trying to give people just enough to hold onto in order to take the next step into a space of discomfort.

MO: But there's something also quite lovely. I think something to stress is that both of us are doing these noticing. We see something; we translate it into some kind of digital artifact where it's a video. It could be audio, it could be a web, something, it can be anything, so long as its digital. Then we send it to the other person. That person takes that, not knowing what the original noticing was and then engages with it, examines it, and responds to it by creating something that then modulates upon that that changes what, what has been sent. There is a question of not everything being given away when I get something that you've sent me. I don't know what it is that you're really saying.

RM: As you're describing this, I'm thinking about its relationship to Blackness beyond just identity or beyond representation, but more into the epistemology, the critical ontologies of how Blackness functions and what Blackness does. There are a lot of parallels, I think, in the ways that you're describing the process right now. There is a necessary unsettling for us, that's bringing together lots of different things that are maybe seemingly disparate, and making new meaning from them or remixing them in different ways, but it's always this constant orientation, both to what has passed and to what needs to come. In a way this is not about purity, but I think engages in the risk of modulation and of change— of adaptability for fugitive practices.

MO: This feels very full circle because so much of what brought us into doing this whole project in the first place was this sense of Blackness as this necessarily unsettling force. That is absolutely indispensable, absolutely irreducible, but that within this there are models that we can see for care and for hope in spite of chaos and in spite of unpredictability. In spite of pain. This project has been an enactment of that reality on so many different levels, but also a kind of search for that at the same time. All while knowing that it is there already, but that the thing that brings this to the surface is the practice of searching.

RM: I think sometimes there's a frustration that I often feel when talking about Blackness, both in the art or in the design world. Often the visuality of Blackness is always tied to epidermalization, is always tied to the body, and then always tied to identity being predefined. You're stepping into a situated predefined notion of how Blackness has been articulated, but it always feels self-contained. It rarely feels like it's leading beyond the edge, expanding or unsettling what we think the edge or border is. It always feels very neat because it seems to be so focused on representation. That's become so loaded. I don't know what to do with it anymore.

MO: Using representation and visibility as the two anchor points for any kind of mainstream analysis of what Blackness can be is so limiting. Certainly for the two of us and for many more people, Blackness is a destabilizing force that destabilizes so many of these notions in the first place. Not just for fun or because it makes us feel good, but because historically when it comes to the formation of this world, this globalized world, that has always been the case. How do I put it in

words? Holding onto that becomes much more difficult in the face of other conceptions of Blackness that are tied to an easy reliance upon these other metrics.

RM: Yeah. I mean it's born out of neoliberal multiculturalism —a way of saying we can take something like Blackness or even race and we can divorce it, untangle it, or disentangle it from anything political or economic. Then representation becomes something that expresses culture. We just want to see all of these cultures together, but it doesn't fundamentally make any demands or challenge the structure or the organization of what's overwhelmingly a Western modernized world built on racial capitalism, that required Blackness to construct itself as coherent.

MO: It required Blackness to construct itself, but also required a kind of refusal of Blackness at the same time. That duality right there is fundamental to so much of the work that I think both of us are really interested in. It's fundamental in a high-stakes kind of way, asking "How do we live in this world?"

RM: It's quite clear what the end point of a Western modernity looks like, and we're accelerating toward that pretty quickly. It looks like a complete instability with the actual natural processes of the world. That's a huge statement but I think it's very true. It should be somewhat revealing looking at industry Titans who take on this kind of hegemonic white masculinity as the saviors of Western civilization such as Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. Their solution to the crisis of climate instability and mass extraction is that we're going to terraform another planet to extract more because this home isn't salvageable. It's completely congruent with the extractive ethos that they have profited off of so heavily. It should be a good indicator of not only

the lack of imagination, but the refusal to shift any of those practices. Therefore, Blackness is a necessity, not even just to unsettle, but to constitute, conjure, and birth other ways of living that don't take on those same trappings. We have to figure out other ways to relate to each other, that aren't just about bloodlines or kin, but are extended into all these other relations. We have to take on different ways of looking at labor, different ways of looking at affect, and different ways of coexisting. Blackness is both used to cohere this really extremely violent constitution of the world and then simultaneously denied. In that denial, I think it has had to function alongside the violence of modernity. Blackness doesn't neatly escape racial capitalism, but it also doesn't have to absorb it or internalize it in all the same ways. This liminality is a gift.

MO: Absolutely. I suppose it brings us back to the place that we find ourselves in as artists, designers, whatever it is. Working in this world, working with these topics, knowing what we mean when we talk about Blackness—that we are also talking about this political economy. We're talking about the ways in which it's operated alongside different models of domination, depending on where you are. We're talking about these histories of colonization and coloniality, as we continue to inherit it today. We're talking about what it means to have to be forced to find these sustainable or just vital ways of living amidst unlivable circumstances. Continually created unlivable circumstances that are then heralded, particularly when using emerging technology as if to say, "Look, here's a brand-new novel way to do things," but actually just continues to contribute to that same degradation. Holding all of this but then existing as well in these spaces where that is very continually undercut,

removed, and conformed into being something else entirely.

RM: I'm really heartened by the ways that I see particular Black scholars and thinkers move back and forth between artistic and scholarly worlds that are taking up very shared affinities for the Blackness that we're describing. They are refusing simple, neat, or innocuous reductions of Blackness as a figure to be consumed, and are really pulling from the well of a constant state of resistance and generation simultaneously. I'm thinking of the ways that Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, Fred Moten, and Denise Ferreira da Silva are thinkers that are really foundational to critically thinking about Blackness and [who] are being celebrated right now. That's something to recognize. It's heartening for me at the same time, as I feel really frustrated and really incensed by the ways that Blackness is just constantly reduced—particularly to make work about Blackness and then to have to appeal to institutional spaces for resources. To see how easily and how quickly what you're trying to articulate just gets plastically molded into a neoliberal multiculturalism or into something that adheres to an innocuousness of Blackness. It's really crazy how efficiently that happens.

MO: Efficient is the word. The mechanics for that process and that kind of constant co-option are always being refined. It feels like it's refined with each generation and even more rapidly. I agree there are fantastic people who actually are getting the due they deserve. I think there are fantastic artists who have been doing this work in ways that are not so legible. I think of Simone Leigh. I think of Okwui Okpokwasili. I think there are so many people who are doing this and have been doing it for a long time and are now coming into the spotlight. I think the thing I take from what we might call

the “art world,” but really someone could say this is from the design world or from whatever creative world is the holding of many things at the same time. This pushback, I guess, as a response to universality, is to say, “Well, actually let’s hold all of these things and they might not be congruent. Yes, these things will be co-opted, but at the same time there is something beautiful that will come through.” There’s a seed that continues to live and can sprout elsewhere. That does give me hope.

DESIGN = ART ≠ DESIGN **7.6**