

A REEXAMINATION OF SOME ASPECTS OF THE DESIGN ARTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A WOMAN DESIGNER



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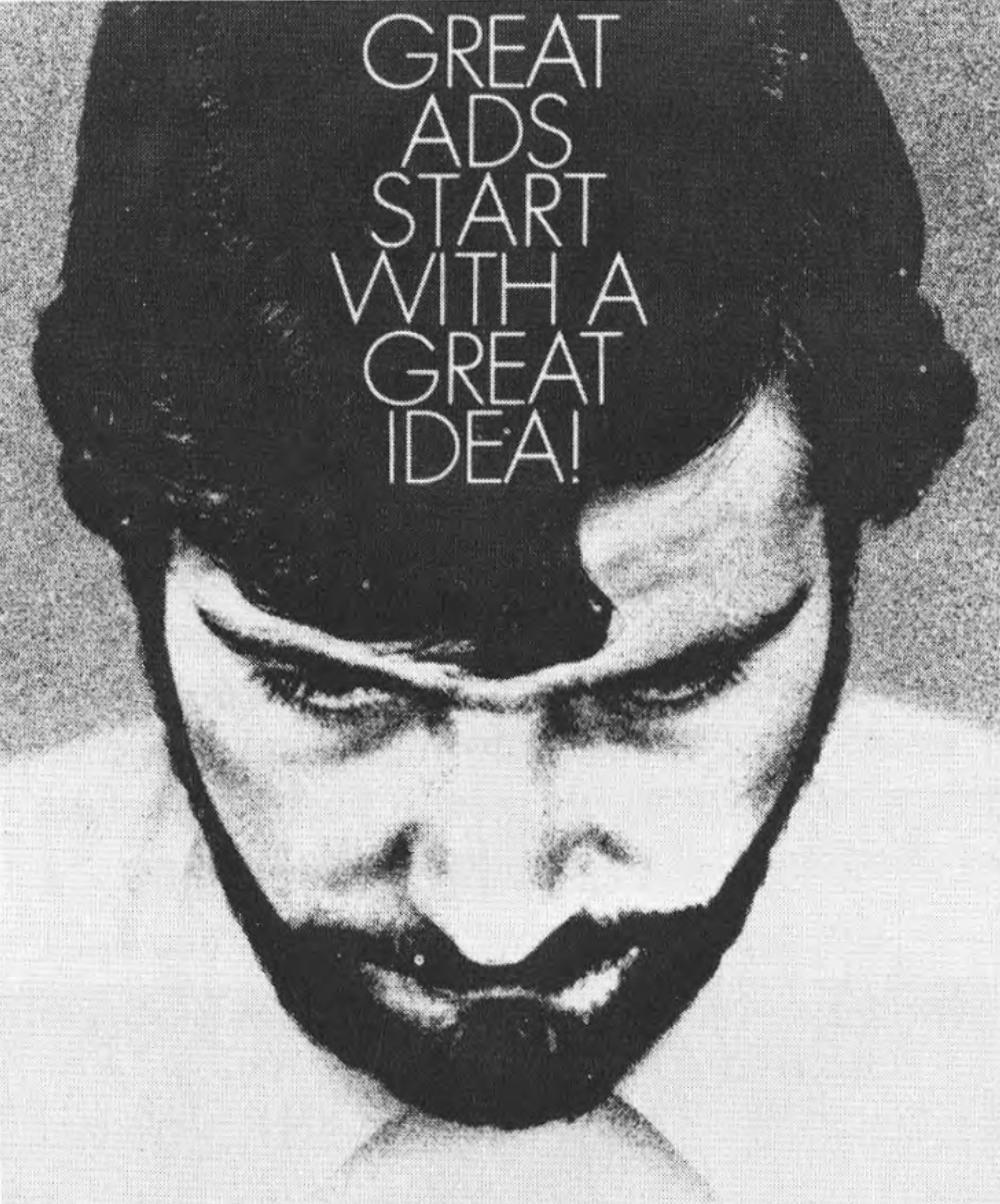
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"Sheer desperation made me try Cold Power"

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"Sheer desperation"

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"Absolutely astounded"

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Mrs. Paul Schwartz



Cold Power—gets out the worst kind of dirt in cold water. Germproofs too.

by Sheila Levrant de Bretteville

Designer, instructor in Design at the California Institute of the Arts and co-founder of the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building, Los Angeles.

The process by which forms are made, and the forms themselves, embody values and standards of behavior which affect large numbers of people and every aspect of our lives. It is this integral relationship between individual creativity and social responsibility that draws me to the design arts. Feminism has caused me to become more self-conscious about being a woman and this awareness has become a necessary part of my creation and criticism of work in the design arts. Reading the messages of design, I have been trying to locate, create and use positive modes which reject the repressive elements of dominant culture. I am looking for forms and processes which project and reassert those aspects of society which—though of essential value—have been devalued and restricted to women and the home.

As I become more sensitive to those aspects of design which reinforce repressive attitudes and behavior, I increasingly question the desirability of simplicity and clarity. The thrust to control almost inevitably operates through simplification. Control is undermined by ambiguity, choice and complexity because subjective factors in the user become more effective and the user is invited to participate. Participation undermines control. The oversimplified, the unremittingly serious, the emphatically "rational" are the consistent attitudes associated with work adopted by our major institutions and the men and few women who inhabit them. In the circle of cause and effect, these attitudes are reinforced and reproduced as they are visually and physically extended into our environment.

One means of simplification is to assign attributes to various groups and thereby reinforce divisions. The restriction of certain behavior to the home and the designation of women as the sole custodians of a range of human characteristics create a destructive imbalance. The design arts reinforce this imbalance by projecting the "male" tone only in the public world of our large institutions: business, science, the military and even education, valuing their anonymous, authoritarian aspects and separating themselves further and further from the private world, thus continuing to isolate women, female experience and "female" values.

Designers are most often taught to reduce ideas to their essence, but in fact that process too often results in the reduction of the ideas to only one of their parts. "Designed" has almost come to mean exclusive, universal, clear and simple, rather than inclusive, personal, ambiguous and complex. As a result visual design generally means imagery with a single, large image, one major headline, and any explanatory information in a block of small type. A more organizational style and more visual material would insure enough complexity to entice readers, who normally dart away with someone else's encapsulated vision, to remain long enough and openly enough with the information to create ideas of their own.

**Mass media communications:
a diagram of simplified separations.**

The mass media have a tradition of visual simplification in order to isolate their mes-

sages to attract attention. Such simplification denies the complexity of life's experience, for while simple statements, familiar and repeated imagery sell the product and the idea most efficiently, they also reinforce restricting separations.

In advertising, women are described as, or permitted to be, laughing, crying, doubting, making mistakes, hesitating: women alone are seen as nurturing or as providing emotional support for children and men. When, for example, a company presents itself in a service capacity or as particularly accommodating, it uses a female figure and reinforces traditional attitudes by this symbolic imagery. The iconography for men is equally rigid. Men in work situations are shown as serious, decisive, professional, assured. No emotions, no fantasy; the few moments of relaxation or emotion permitted to men are relegated to leisure and the home. Likewise, the home becomes devalued as a place where no serious work can be done. As the woman is virtually seen only in the home, she too is devalued. By depicting woman as exclusively emotional, doubting, cooperating and helping others, by only showing these activities in private, in the home, the polarities not only of what men and women are thought to be, but where it is appropriate to be that way, are reinforced and legitimized. In fact, the very characteristics which are allowed women in the home prevent "success" in the competitive public sector.

If the idea and the design are simple, complete and set, there is no opportunity to bring one's own values to the forms, let alone challenge one's attitudes and assumptions about men, women, work, and home. If there is no ambiguity the eye is attracted once, the message understood and accepted quickly. When visual material is ambiguous the different nuances often encourage multiple and alternative reactions to the same communication, and the viewer is encouraged to make an effort to extrapolate, to participate. But the client seldom includes this as part of the problem and designers themselves most often limit the problems to be solved in an effort to arrive at a potent image. For most clients and designers, the problem does not include the encouragement of a thinking audience.

The Modern movement encouraged simplicity and clarity of form, a mode which was embraced by some of the most creative and intelligent designers. It became fashionable to simplify for the clarity and power of the image, but as design becomes fashion, simplification becomes pernicious. This simplification in form and process leads too often to restriction and limiting separations and boundaries. By allowing for more complexity and participation, designers could avoid visual authoritarianism.

Publications: some alternative modes.

The movements of the sixties questioned the structure and institutions that engender

... dutifully absorbed during the (fiction) or something plain idiot -- unless they're the same. I suppose, tapering that off, there is something forever seeking an equilibrium too, and the question is which happens faster. One hopes for the balance of power -- that somehow all the good will will master itself in the same place at the propitious time. But if we can't get any bloody automobiles off the highways and city streets, how in the world are we going to get the destructive impulse out of our souls? Maybe Anthony and Jona can figure it out, they've got all the righter impulses going, but then the system seems impenetrable, and one wonders if their stamina is any greater than ours.

All things are linked, your writing and world politics, but the simple truth is you have a lot more control of your writing even when you're not.

*** FORGOTTEN FOREVER**

What is your present draft status?

"In my I don't have a 7x10 picture to send you, but I have the 1 1/2" x .75" I could send, but it's more glossy and is fading the more I handle it. Keeping it in a safe. ~~Complicated~~ I never did that I have never been in a wisest riot except altam and but I played football at Campa Park N.S. Also, I had to tie my hair down and wear a diadem to get into Edouard and last summer. I paid some dues.

Board of Trustees Meeting June 1, 1970

I would be governed by what the faculty and students want. They will be here long after we are gone--and if we endeavor to mold them after ourselves we will have failed. We are building a school to give of ourselves--not to set up a factory. The greatest danger of institutions of higher education today is having the Board of Trustees at odds with the faculty and students.

—Scott Newhall

The rules and regulations should be exposed and discussed with the surrounding community, even counseling with them at the start—even if we disagree—the most important thing is that we do not "surprise" them in a moment of crisis.

—Stanley Gorlikov

We have gone to a great deal of trouble to find truly unique and creative students who do not fit into a mold and because of this, the Board of Trustees must also be creative and have a flexibility of thought and opinion second to none. We must learn to listen and learn from students whom we are seeking by design. We must keep a positive approach. Our students will have come to learn, not to be preached to.

—William S. Lund

How can we protect ourselves from complete destruction? Only if we win the respect of faculty and students. No government, no police force, no security guard will be able to protect the campus—unless the students and faculty feel that it is their campus and choose to protect it from violence—outside and inside. Channeling pride with involvement is the best defense.

—Mrs. Thayer Gipanic



unquestioning conformity. The youth, hippie, counter-culture movements helped validate some repressed "female" values, and encouraged the growth of the women's movement.

Alternative modes which pointed out the limitations of one-directional channels of communication began to be developed and modern offset printing began to be used as a model for participatory politics. *The Whole Earth Catalog*, by compiling reviews of goods and services recommended by a large number of contributors across the country, helped reestablish the value of individual subjectivity. In a special issue of the *Aspen Times* devoted to the International Design Conference in Aspen, I distributed cards on which the participants themselves could express their diverse attitudes toward the conference. An increasing number of periodicals have guest editors, guest designers—*Radical Software*, *Design Quarterly*, *Arts in Society* and others. As in the structure of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the IDCA issue of the *Aspen Times*, special issues of ongoing publications provide alternatives to the creative input of the established designers and editors and expand the number of sources of information.

Volume 7 number 3 of *Arts in Society*, devoted to the formation of the California Institute of the Arts, was composed of several types of visual and textual material organized in waves of information. As the California Institute of the Arts was yet to open

and not completely defined, I created a tentative, fragmented organization in an effort to encourage the reader to participate in the ultimate conceptualization of this new community of the arts. My intention was to supply a multiplicity of information which would create a struggle for the readers making their perception more meaningful. As we become more used to ambiguity and complexity in design and content and are encouraged to participate, the more we will be able to support the formation and expression of individual, subjective conclusions to advocate the sharing of authority.

If the design material is organized in fragments, multiple peaks rather than a single climatic moment, it has a quality and rhythm which may parallel women's ontological experience, particularly her experience of time. Although I used this fragmented organization in an effort to reflect a community of the arts in formation and to encourage the reader to participate, I realized simultaneously that this form of visual organization corresponds to what is considered by our society to be women's way of working.

There are several genres of women's work, quilts and blankets for example, which are an assemblage of fragments pieced together whenever there is time, which are in both their method of creation as well as in their aesthetic form, visually organized into many centers. The quilting bee, as well as the quilt itself, is an example of an

figures and which may bring to a climax the events of a lifetime. In language what the dramatist seeks above all is concentration, imagery and metaphor, by appealing to our memory in our senses, by relating the concrete to the abstract, are the most highly charged forms of language he can use. And more important, they enable the dramatist to solve the most difficult of his problems: those repetitions of the inner life of his characters which may not relate directly to the action of the plot, but are nonetheless significant parts of the play. It is for this reason that our playwrights need to realize again the basic of their art—the living word. Of all language, that which I've called imaginative is the fullest and most intense, and unless the theater relates itself to the most vital expression of the modern sensibility it will become by its own effort less—superfluous.

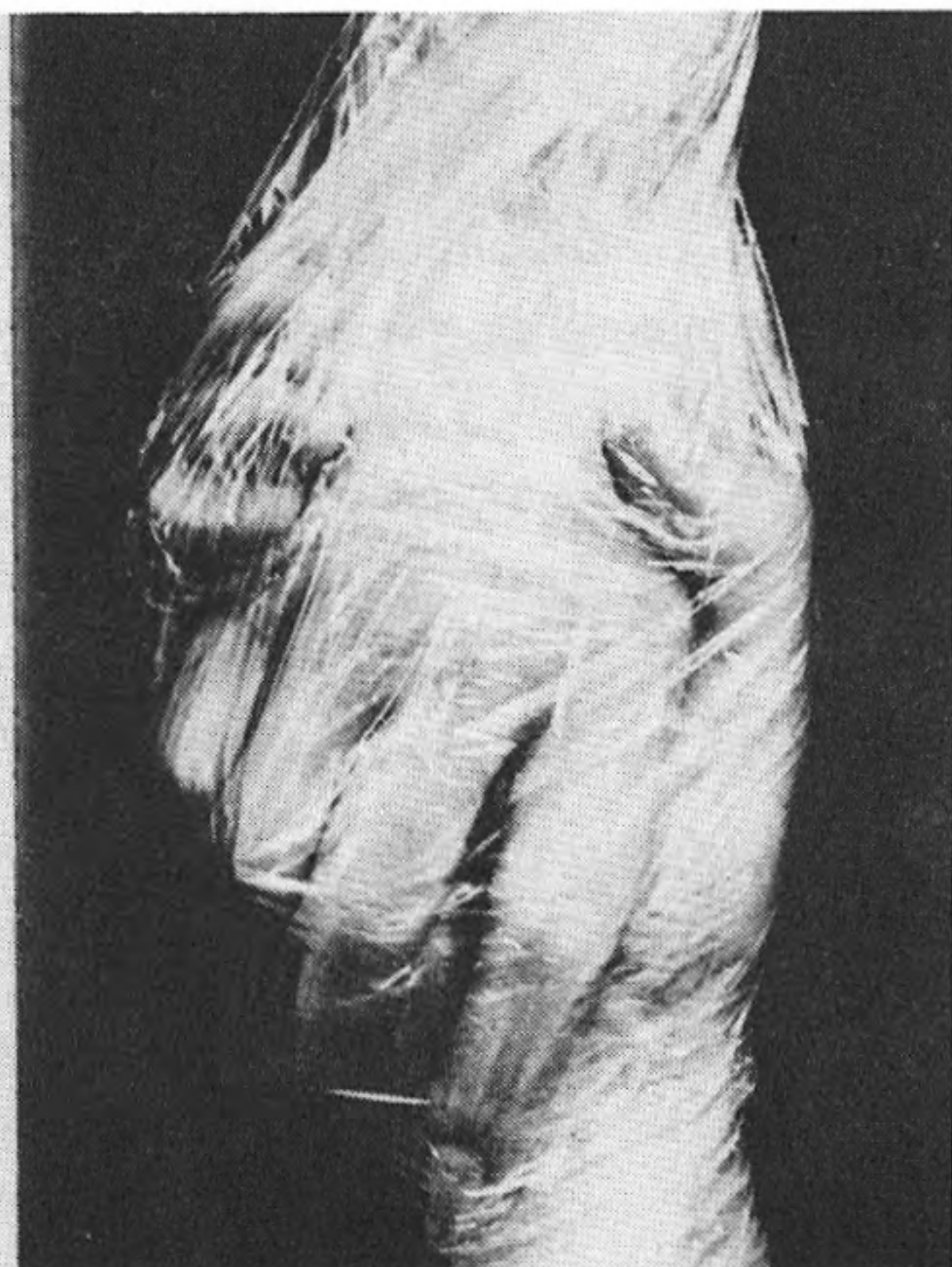
In their use of language the Absurdist would deny this, and it is very possible that the theater they would revise will turn out to be stillborn. If the language in their plays consists of meaningless clichés and stereotyped phrases, they would insist that this is the way we talk. If their characters are constantly changing personalities, their playwrights would point out that no one today is really consistent or truly integrated. If the people in their plays seem to be helpless dupes, the Absurdist would argue that we are all passively at the mercy of blind fate and meaningless circumstance; that their theater is the true theater of our time.

But if it is true—and I believe it is—that man is a creature of his language, that by the use of it he defines himself, that ours is a civilization that has lost its nerve, it has lost its trust in the possibility of words to communicate meaningfully, I am sure the Absurdist would agree with this, and their plays are persuasive documents of the fact. Whenever an age loses its nerve, more and more it reduces its language to the bare, that verbal expression which denotes action in its simplest and most concrete form. On the other hand, a more confident age uses nouns and adjectives—those verbal forms which express the quality of action. This is the irony and the danger of the avant-garde theater. They would "do" our theater by "commenting" it with the vital theater of former ages, but they forget that the source of vitality of this enduring theater is in that language which they would deny. By all means let's realize the theater and its language. But we must never forget that the theater in its most embracing form begins with the play, and if you eliminate the spoken language, the play will not exist. It can be admitted that words are limited in what they can express but they are finally all we've got.

The Theater of the Absurd has done us a great service by experimenting with nonverbal techniques. But the final irony is appropriately directed to the playwrights themselves. They are seeking ways to lose the conventional theater with the traditional theater, and the traditional theater is first and foremost a celebration of life, that life which the Absurdist would deny.

The real answer to the despair of the Absurdist, and this is the affirmation of our theater is that our playwrights and I include Beckett, Ionesco, and Artaud—will find human action significant, still find it necessary to write plays, and in the very writing attest to the miracle of life that their philosophy would deny.

—Brecht W. Covolan



From the top, I considered California, with its mild climate and lush greenery, one of the most beautiful and stimulating places in the world. The city of Los Angeles, in particular, excited me because it seemed so diverse and animated.

—Ravi Shankar

Food, shelter and clothing. These are no longer the basic needs. For we have taken clean air and drinkable water for granted for long. Chemically and sterily we have seen how we pollute rivers, lakes, oceans and the air. Through pesticides and herbicides we have managed to almost exterminate ourselves. Every year, nearly 100,000 people are killed by badly designed automobiles all over the world. In or near Los Angeles is there the first city with more of its space devoted to roads and parking areas than to the housing of human beings.

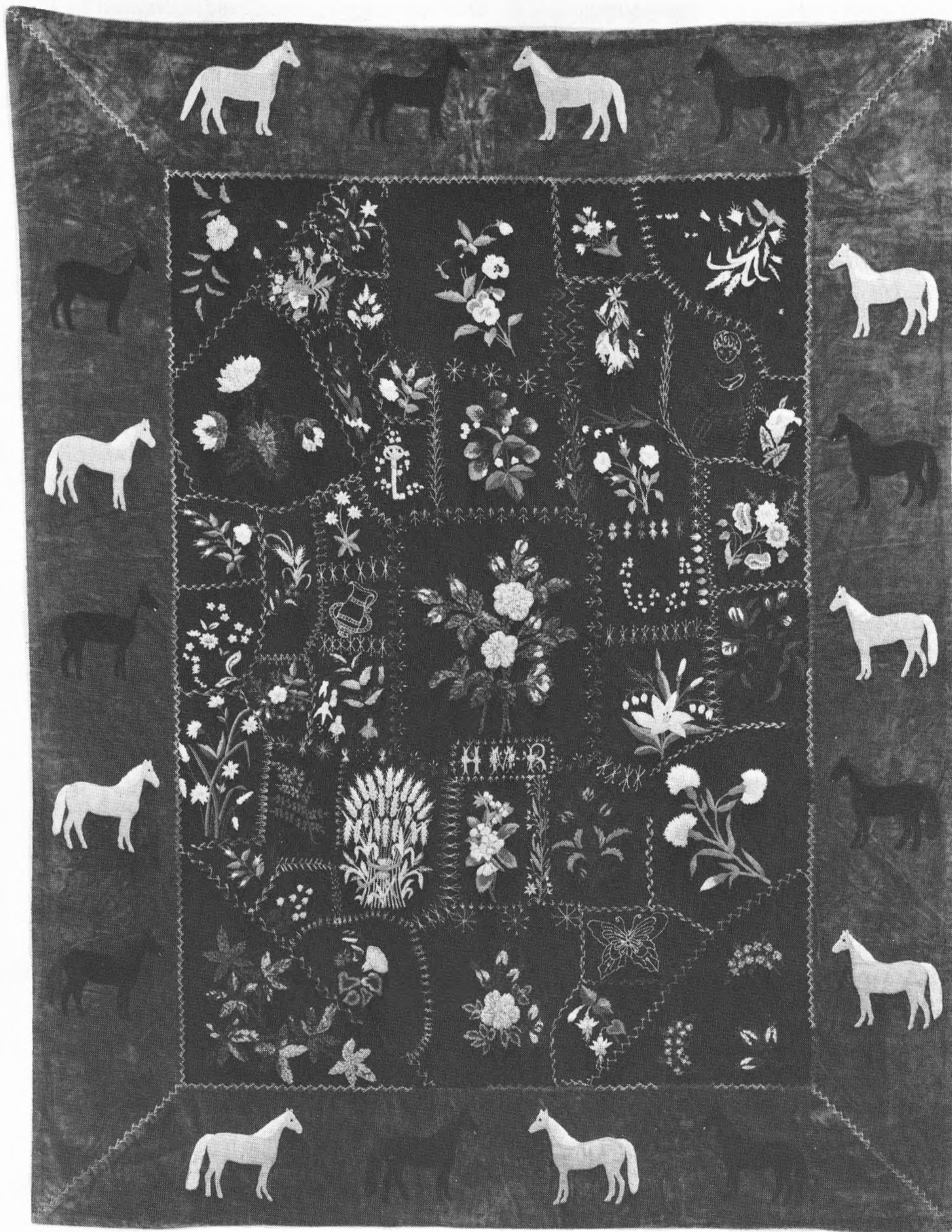
—Victor Papanek

Water. I will begin the following page on June 5, 1970.

RETHINKING IN A precise way to save through time and space. Long meditations at Fremont Workshops. The Fresno apathy in the United States is so visible. The individual states lose all tenacity. All that's left are the people.

I propose to create, using myself as the medium, a sense of relationship between San Diego and San Francisco. Contact points will be determined by the random method of blindfolding. I will record each contact. They will depend directly upon the immediately preceding relationship. Each relationship will be indefinitely projected into the future.

Jim Beaman



"Horse" Crazy Quilt, made in 1887 by Helen Mary Rounsville in Fowlerville, Michigan. "She raised horses and loved her garden." From the collection of Mary Strickler's Quilt, a shop at 936 "B" Street, San Rafael, Cal.

essentially non-hierarchical organization. Certainly the quality of time in a woman's life, particularly if she is not involved in the career thrust toward fame and fortune, is distinct from the quality of time experienced by men and women who are caught up in the "progress" of a career.

The linearity of time is foreign to the actual structure of a day as well as to the rhythm of women's monthly biological time. Thought processes released from the distortions of mechanical progress are complex, repetitive and permeated with the multiple needs of others as well as oneself. Unbounded relationships cause most women to think not only about work, but about the groceries needed for dinner, a child's dental problems, etc., in between thoughts about work. Women's tasks in the home are equally varied and open-ended—child-rearing is the classic example—while a man's work in the home has a beginning and an end, it has specific projects, like the fixing of windows, appliances or plumbing. The assemblage of fragments, the organization of forms in a complex matrix, suggests depth and intensity as an alternative to progress.

When the design arts are called upon to project aspects of the women's movement it is a particularly appropriate time to challenge existent assumptions about form and process. When I was asked by a group of women artists to design a special issue of *Everywoman*, a feminist newspaper, I tried to incorporate the visual projection of the egalitarian, collective form of small group process. In weekly meetings women throughout the country meet in small groups, and talk in turn so that those easily dissuaded from speaking by more vibrant, dominant personalities, are assured of being heard. In this *Everywoman* design I avoided the associations of space and length of article with quality, and gave each woman a large photo of herself and a two-page spread. I tried to link the spreads visually and to make no spread dominant. Looking alike, the articles did not visually compete with each other for the reader's attention: it was left to the reader to discern differences which might be subjectively more meaningful.

Designing a structure that will encourage participating, non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian relationships between the designer, client and user, also results in visual and physical forms that are outside the mainstream of design as much as these ideas and attitudes are outside mainstream culture. Publications designed in such a way look different from the way our national publications look; this difference is much less the result of creating another style than of designing structures which encourage other values. As desirable as it is that these values become infused into society, such design structures are often modest in appearance rather than bold. Perhaps the importance of dynamic visual stimuli should be questioned, and quiet literary forms be reevaluated.

In trying to create visual forms and processes which reflect the political form of the women's movement, its collectivity and consciousness, a designer must adopt a structure which encourages a broad base of participation. One of the ways women artists can express their experiences, feelings, and needs directly to a larger audience than the loft-gallery-museum-going elite is to use mass media technology so that more people could see and respond to their images. Because of the separation of art and design in our schools and in most critical publications, artists are often unfamiliar with and sometimes scorn offset lithography as an appropriate form in which to do their work.

In response to the restricting separation of our disciplines, I have joined with two other women, an artist and an art historian, in an effort to create an alternative learning situation for women in the arts—*The Feminist Studio Workshop*. In designing the mailer announcing this experimental project I created a matrix of the quotations and imagery which were influencing our ideas about the formation of *The Feminist Studio Workshop*. As the mailer is opened, information written by each of us and a photograph is presented. As the reader unfolds the mailer, new bands of written and visual work, by women past and present, are revealed followed by a progression containing some of our own work, work done with students, and text written collectively about the goals of the workshop. The viewer can

read any or all of the quotes, can connect the images in any way personally meaningful, and we hope that she will be enticed to respond.

We each chose the material which we wanted to represent us; the quote which best describes my feelings about being a woman designer is from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*,

Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed . . . The question we put to you is how can we enter the professions and yet remain civilized human beings . . .

I have begun to try to find an answer for myself as a woman designer. Designers must work in two ways. We must create visual and physical designs which project social forms but simultaneously we must create the social forms which will demand new visual and physical manifestations. The work in the design arts which I have described are products of situations in which the designer was to give physical form to efforts devoted to creating new social contexts. In these cases the major thrust was to rethink assumptions; profit was not a major consideration, the budget was modest, and the audience (unfortunately) was often limited. The designer was exempt from the pressures that make it difficult for larger money-making projects, to see the connection between effectiveness in shaping our consciousness, the forms and processes which might encourage values and financial viability.

In its need to grow and present its point of view, *Ms.* magazine appears to have looked to the successful mainstream publications for models rather than to those special interest publications of the sixties. The need for color advertising for survival as a mass magazine, makes demands on the size and paper used, and it is doubtful that a publication has to be on newsprint and in black and white only in order to express alternative values by its physical form.

But I am less convinced of other assumptions about the forms necessary for survival. I am distressed that the equalized relationships which mark the political form of the women's movement are expressed by *Ms.* only by the equalization of office relationships, rather than challenging the creation of an authoritarian elite by reorganizing other aspects of its structure as well. A combination of the guest editor, guest designer structure used by *Arts in Society*, *Radical Software*, *Design Quarterly* and others, and the direct broad-based participation involved in the structure of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the *IDCA Times* issue might be possible. The formation of a small, closed design and editorial elite and the authority of a centralized geographical location could possibly be broken by creating editorial and design teams in the east, west and midwest. This decentralized structure would also create a vehicle for many different points of view, expressed by the women participating themselves rather than being reported upon by others. This variety and structure would affect the look of the magazine, expressing its theoretical differences. Though attractive and lively as it is, *Ms.*'s form is much more the result of traditional forms and processes than an integral connection with new values of relationship.

My concern with more complex, open, unbounded forms of both the profession of design and its expression relates to ideas about the traditional female role. The inclusiveness, accommodation and service associated with female role—and restricted to women—corresponds with the aspect of design as a helping profession, one in which the designer helps give physical form to the clients' needs. Being a designer and a woman becomes most compatible for me when the client's needs are much like my own. This was true when I designed the *Arts in Society* issue about the formation of the California Institute of the Arts. In this instance I was the designer for an issue about the institution where I would be teaching.

In the resurgence of feminism in the sixties, it appeared important that we proclaim that we can be aggressive as well as passive, capable of primary responsibility as well as

being dependent, competitive as well as accommodating. But somehow in the demands for equality and even superiority some have lost sight of this concept, creating instead an either/or conceptualization. Reexamining some aspects of the design arts and being more aware of being a woman, it seems that the complexity and contradiction, the "female" values, could be revalidated and reinforced. It appears to me that it is the "male" tone prescribed for the public world of our major institutions that makes the profession of designer an ambiguous enterprise for a woman. The present professional system does not encourage the emergence of the values restricted to women and the home into the public world and fosters instead—among designers, at least—a kind of style-conscious creation of "pretty" objects detached from alternative social contexts. The professional system in which the choice is between being a commercial star or a commercial hack does not encourage design for social change.

Futures: some alternative modes.

One way for the design arts to alter the public world is to develop images of the future which embody alternative values. To do this we must know what forms most communicate "female" values and which devalue the female experience and cannot incorporate such modes as emotionality, complexity and supportive cooperation. The difficulty of infusing positive aspects of woman's experience in the private home into the public work world is exemplified by our inability to imagine a perfect or radically different society. The inevitability of reproducing ourselves rather than a new society could be avoided as we think of the values we wish to project into the new world.

The tradition of utopia in the Renaissance appears "female" in tone—supportive, cooperative and gentle. Sir Thomas More was unable openly to criticize his contemporary society and consequently used satire in juxtaposition to his vision, thus softening what would have been a more obvious and harsher evaluation. This element of satire allowed the people of his time to aspire toward the values which More was articulating by comparing their own society with his invention of Utopia.

While early utopian visions were pastoral, later ones were more mechanical, developing as they did in conjunction with man's ability to control nature. By the twentieth century, control first of nature, then of man himself, is not only a possibility but to a large extent an actuality, and utopias became transformed from aspirations to predictions and warnings. Fourier was perhaps the only nineteenth century utopian thinker who tried to envision social and physical structures which encouraged a variety of human response rather than building social forms which either eliminated certain behavior patterns or controlled them.

Most modern visions of the future reflect and project the rigid separations of male and female, work and leisure, public and private, that the design profession has so often reinforced in its mass communications. To warn society of what could become the inevitable outgrowths of contemporary patterns, Wells, Orwell, and Huxley described negative visions of the future. The total restriction and control of people's behavior in these anti-utopias represents a critique of existing society. The unique characters who oppose the social and political order are rendered absolutely impotent and are eventually edited out of these fictional societies.

Systems that achieve reliability—as virtually all dystopian systems do—through conditioning cause people to be simplified and controlled. What dismays me most is that the kinds of behavior most frequently eliminated in these visions are the "imperfect" characteristics which have been defined as "female," partially because they are not simple, limited or predictable. They imply choice, inclusiveness and complexity, which, as I have pointed out before, undermine control. These dystopian visions warn of futures in which men and women are indistinguishable—they are all made in that narrowest definition of "male". We find a future projected from modes of behavior designated for the public realm of work while the characteristics of home and women are deleted.

It is the absence of other "female" futures that renders the utopian vision negative. Without a concerted effort to imagine alternative futures, we will have a future in which individual choice is eliminated along with

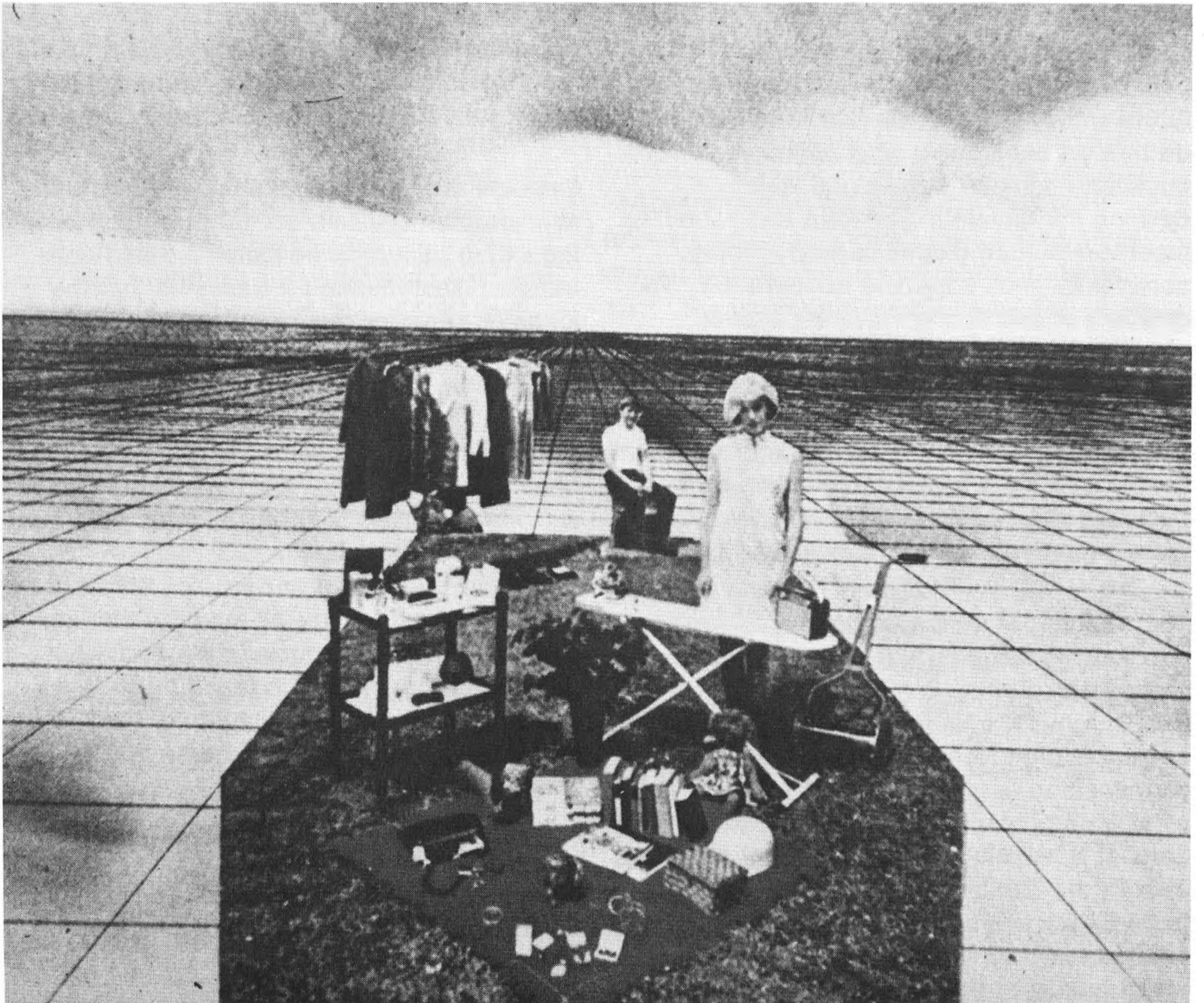
emotions, ambiguity and fantasy. For if we continue to eliminate female values in an effort to warn society of impending futures and make such visions real by their artful vividness, then, in this editing, it is humanism which is finally, totally eradicated.

I would not reiterate such dire visions of the future if I did not feel that there are some realistic alternatives and that these alternatives are somehow involved with the rediscovery and projection of female experience. There seems to be an intrinsic relationship between the communitarian aspects of the women's movements and fanciful human utopian visions. Why are there so few positive visions of the future reflecting female experience despite the fact that there have been communitarian efforts (Mother Ann of the Shakers, for example) in which women have played a major role? It appears that it is even more difficult for women to fantasize about a future when their effectiveness on

the present is limited to daily life in the home. And perhaps, women's more visible contribution to unique, prototypical utopian communities is a reflection of this experience of time in the home.

It seems to me that the integration of design and feminism has implications for the future and it is the opportunity and responsibility of women to use this area to infuse "female" values into our culture. As there are virtually no blueprints for the future by woman based on female experience, we must project a future responsive to our needs if we are to have a future at all.

In a women's studies class I initiated at the California Institute of the Arts, the women have begun to read utopian literature, to look at the theory and design of communitarian environments and to create images of the future from their own individual, personal perspective. Not surprisingly, the first



The Happy Island by a group of women artists called Superstudio, 1972.

images that are being made exhibit fears identical to those of the dystopian writers. We look forward to the creation of images which will disseminate female values presently minimized and even threatened with eradication.

Projects like this blur the role distinctions between designer and user, expert and amateur. They increase the number of participants in the life of society and provide a successful model for non-hierarchical organization. You the audience can now look at the few images which have been created, evaluate them and make choices creating your own personal alternative views of the future. You can reject the contemporary status quo and reach out for new forms through which to shape wished-for worlds. Together we can salvage values which have been eliminated from contemporary life as well as project new values and ideas which come from our own bodies

and experiences. Women have learned that it is impossible to live without real communication either with others or with themselves. To some extent the very process by which we take responsibility, not only for our own choices, our own lives, but for society as well, is a new form which brings a humane future closer. □

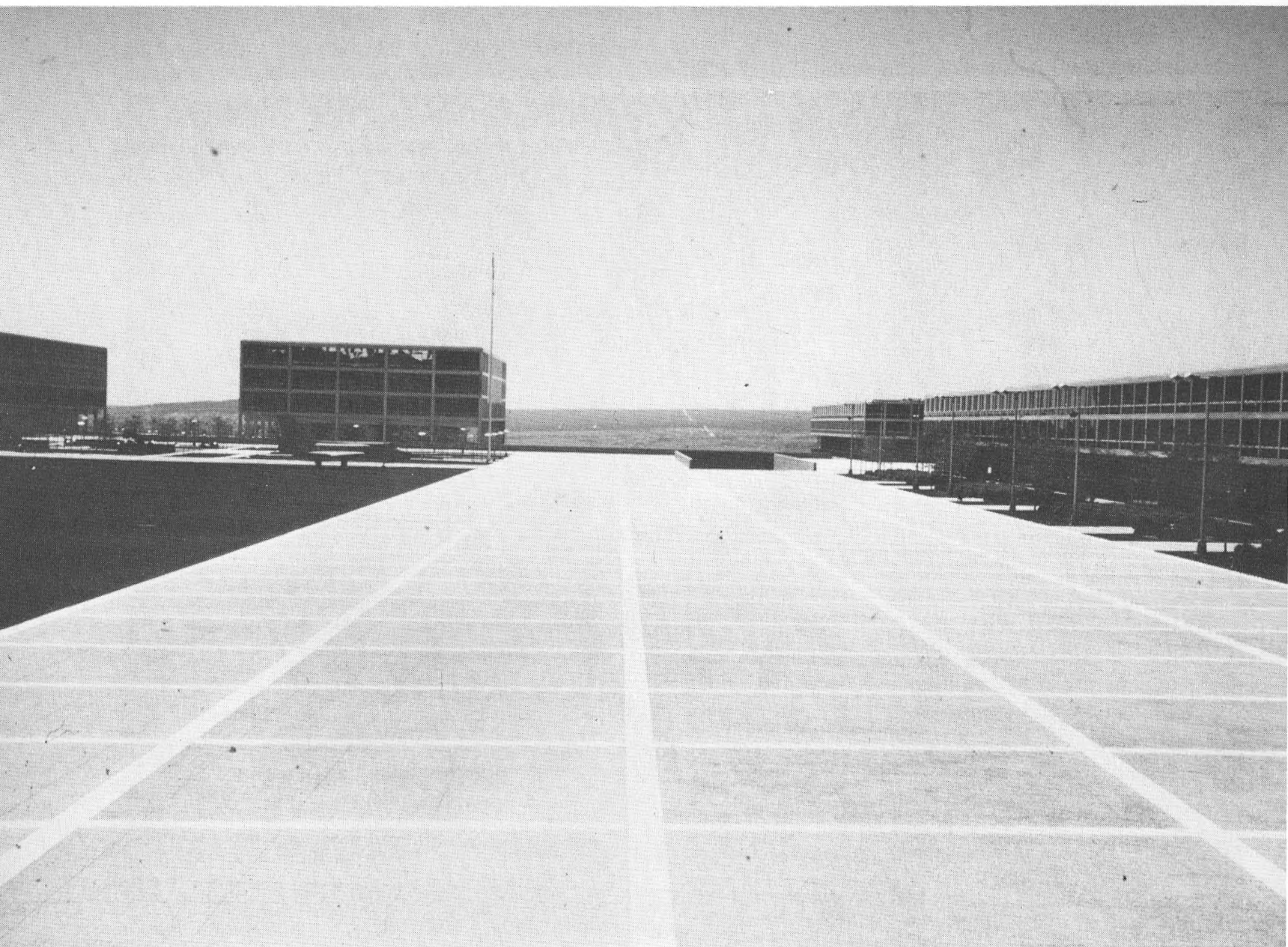
*This article was written and edited from lecture notes first given at Hunter College in the fall of 1972. The formulation of my ideas about design and its relationship to feminism is in part a response to information from the following sources:

C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962). Originally the article "Man in the Middle: The Designer" was published in the review *Industrial Design* (November, 1958).

Amos Rapaport and Robert E. Kantor, "Complexity and Ambiguity in Environmental Design," *American Institute of Planners Journal* (July, 1967).

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