Design Criticism’s Winding Road

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On the whole, Deborah Allen had little patience for the “expensive toys” she reviewed as car critic for *Industrial Design* magazine in the 1950’s. She lived in New York, used public transport, and didn’t even like cars that much. “It was hard to write about them because I thought they were senseless,” Allen says of the exaggeratedly low-slung and streamlined cars of the period. There was one car, however, that almost changed her mind.

Allen’s epiphany came one summer evening while riding into New York from Westport in a friend’s 1955 Buick. As they sped south along the coastal road, a cool breeze circulated throughout the car’s interior, and the setting sun reddened the gleaming chrome detailing. “I saw how he lived in his car and how he enjoyed it,” Allen recalls. “And I was so amazed that there could be some sense in this car. It was a revelation.”

Back in the magazine’s midtown office, Allen typed up a report on her Olivetti Lettera 22. The exhilarating motion of her recent ride is captured in a review that, unlike many of her others, seems to epitomize the era’s most optimistic view of cars and all that they promised in terms of mobility, modernity and social progress. The Buick, she tells us, “was not designed to sit on the ground or even roll on the ground; it is perpetually floating on currents that are conveniently built into the design.” Elsewhere she refers to it as a “slab on waves.” As a pragmatist she has a hard time reconciling this illusion of weightlessness with the fact that the materials at the designers’ disposal are masses of metal. But she suggests that the beholder suspend their disbelief as they would when encountering solid wooden clouds on the underside of a canopy of state in Baroque cathedral architecture. Her analysis of the way in which the car’s styling reinforces its dynamics combines both technical specificity and a kind of breathless lyricism: “The Buick’s designers put the greatest weight over the wheels, where the engine is, which is natural enough. The heavy bumper helps to pull the weight forward; the dip in the body and the chrome spear express how the thrust of the front wheels is dissipated in turbulence toward the rear. Just behind the strong shoulder of the car, a sturdy post lifts up the roof, which trails off like a banner in the air. The driver sits in the dead calm at the center of all this motion; hers is a lush situation.”

People tend to think that criticism is critical. Understandably. And yet criticism can also be a creative force — a critic responds to an object or idea by creating something new that is itself open to re-interpretation. This chain of inspiration can contain many links and lead in unexpected directions.

A couple of years later in London the artist Richard Hamilton (34 years old and not yet famous) was sitting in the US Embassy Library on Grosvenor Square reading a copy of *Industrial Design* magazine. Along with other American magazines of the period such as *Life*, *Look* and *Esquire*, *Industrial Design* was a valuable resource both for Hamilton and the design critic Reyner Banham who, throughout the 1950’s, were part of a loose-knit discussion salon known collectively as The Independent Group. The Group arranged a series of seminal exhibitions and lectures at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on aspects of pop culture, and specifically American pop culture, as a rebuttal to prevailing standards of good taste in 1950’s England.

Hamilton sampled images of cars and consumer appliances from the pages of the magazine both for use in his articles and lectures and as inspiration for his paintings and collages. He also sampled text: the *Playboy* headline “A definitive statement on the coming trends in men’s wear and accessories,” for example, became part of the title for a suite of paintings in the early 1960’s. As he scanned the pages of the January 1956 issue of *ID*, it was the phrase at the end of Allen’s Buick review that caught his attention. “Hers is a lush situation” became the launch point and title for a series of studies and a painting, featuring shallow relief, that explore the relationship between the automobile and feminine form. The lipstick-red mouth of a body-less passenger hovers above a diagrammatic inventory of Detroit styling features including visored headlamps, chrome spears, tail fins, speed markings and a CinemaScope windshield.

ID, which Allen co-founded and co-edited with Jane Thompson (then Fiske) at the behest of publisher Charles Whitney (and advised by George Nelson), was run on a shoestring budget. There was no money for her to go to Detroit, the epicenter of the car-making industry, and so Allen based her analyses on what she “saw on the road” and examination of the photographs and brochures the manufacturers sent her. In this way she made use of the formal techniques of art history that she had studied at Smith College. Indeed, in a 1955 essay titled “Vehicles of Desire” Reyner Banham refers to her “ability to write automobile critique of almost Berensonian sensibility.” Allen’s analyses also demonstrate a prescient concern with ergonomics, however. Her sensitivity to the ways in which people inhabit cars, and to how industrial design is experienced bodily, differentiates her writing from art criticism. Additionally, her writing shows that she understood and engaged with the interrelated processes of manufacture, retail and distribution. The ability to write about human interaction with objects as well as the mechanics of their economic exchange are two characteristics of a new form of writing that was emerging in the US at the time. Through her pragmatic yet elegant reviews of cars, Allen helped to pioneer an incipient genre of writing we now call design criticism.

To what extent does design criticism inspire a reaction; to whom is criticism addressed and what happens as a result of it being read? Even though in the case discussed here the effects were unintended — Allen wrote her criticism for car manufacturers, designers and drivers, not for Pop artists and Moulton bicycle-riding design historians in England — this is one of the more tangible examples of design criticism having an impact that I have encountered. Despite her own disillusionment with her subject matter and her rejection of the medium she was so skilled in, the fact is that Allen’s writing has transcended, or at least escaped, its genre and made a curious voyage across continents, disciplines, and contexts to become immortalized in the canons of British, and international art.

By the time Hamilton’s painting was completed, Allen, her husband and children were living in Washington DC and she’d stopped writing about design altogether. She had no idea about the repercussions her writing was having on an elite group of avant-garde writers, artists and architects in London. For a while she commuted to New York to work on the magazine part time. Soon, though, she quit her job. It had become difficult for her to continue writing about cars, not only because of the pressures of family life, but because she couldn’t muster the enthusiasm to review them any longer. “I think I got lost,” says Allen, who is now in her 80’s.

Luckily her writing found its own winding road.