Judith Attfield (d. 2006)

Professor Judith (Judy) Attfield’s work in design history centres upon several major contributions: the feminist analysis of design; an insistence on the significance of the everyday; and the introduction into design history of ideas and methods from material culture studies, design anthropology and ethnography.

She came to design history following a career as a designer. She taught at Brighton and then at Winchester School of Art (later incorporated into the University of Southampton) alongside colleagues including Barbara Burman and Alison Clarke. At Winchester, Attfield developed her teaching in oral history and everyday life. On her retirement, Judy Attfield was Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow.

Attfield’s interest in the everyday extended across her career, from her MA History of Design dissertation on tufted carpets in the ordinary English home at Middlesex Polytechnic, via her PhD on the furniture industry at the University of Brighton in 1992/3 (with Suzette Worden as her principal supervisor, the anthropologist Daniel Miller as her external supervisor, and Penny Sparke as her examiner) and her edited book *Utility Reassessed: The Role of Ethics in the Practice of Design* (1999; 2001) to her work in later years informed by material culture studies. Her book *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (2000) found in material culture studies a way to go beyond the high/low dichotomy in cultural analysis, and to value everyday things. In *Wild Things*, she showed that the consumption of designed goods is a transformative expression of modernity; ‘things’ shift in meaning as they are incorporated into people’s identity constructions. Within a week of her death in 2006, Attfield’s edited issue on kitsch appeared in *Home Cultures*.

Feminist design history was a similarly constant feature of Attfield’s scholarship. With Tag Gronberg, she co-edited *Women Working in Design, A Resource Book* which appeared in the same year as Cheryl Buckley’s ground-breaking essay for *Design Issues* ‘Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design’ (1986). Attfield’s chapter ‘FORM/female FOLLOWS FUNCTION/male: Feminist Critiques of Design’ in John A. Walker’s *Design History and the History of Design* (1989) was an extremely influential follow-up to Buckley’s article. Attfield and Buckley have each argued for feminism as something of concern all design historians, male and female, and as something which is implicated in all design. Attfield continued to examine the gender and design from a feminist perspective in work such as *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women And Design* (1989, revised 1995), co-edited with Pat Kirkham, and her chapter on the dolls Barbie and Ken in Kirkham’s edited book, *The Gendered Object* (1996).

Attfield’s death in December 2006 followed a long illness. Her activity in her last years centred upon consolidating her legacy in publications such as the anthology of her selected work *Bringing Modernity Home: Writings on Popular Design and Material Culture* (2006). But Attfield’s legacy is also found in the way she developed the careers of others as a teacher and an editor. She was a long-serving member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Design History* and sat on the editorial board of *Home Cultures*. Her death prompted many tributes, as the posts in the ‘Material World’ blog so tenderly testify. <http://www.materialworldblog.com/2006/12/judy-attfield/>

**See**:

Attfield, Judy (2000) *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg).

Attfield, Judith (2007) *Bringing Modernity Home: Writings on Popular Design and Material Culture* (Manchester University Press).

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