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TROUSERS AS AN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT: THE CASE OF ERIC GILL

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ABSTRACT

The English artist, typographer and social critic Eric Gill did not wear trousers. This paper explores the political dimension of Gill's choice of dress in terms that link it to his response to industrialization and alienation, conditions he perceived as constituent features of modernity. Systems of production and distribution rather than questions of gender identity occupied a central position in Gill's discussion of clothes. In his choice of homespun tunics in place of trousers Gill sought to actively demonstrate his resistance to the industrial system of manufacturing clothing. Gill's position was clearly articulated by him in his writings. In his 1937 pamphlet *Trousers* he wrote: *This essay is neither a plea for sexual exhibitionism nor sexual absolutism. It is not a plea for anything except a frank recognition that … our clothes & our commercial-industrialism exactly go together*. Focusing on the political dimension of his choice is not to deny the subjective and psychological dimensions of Gill's life. Indeed one goal of this presentation is to consider how design historians confront the issue of the integration of political ideologies and personal histories when the subject of historical inquiry is a single artist or designer.

MAIN TEXT

In late June 1930 the English artist, type designer and social critic Eric Gill visited Germany at the invitation of his patron Count Harry Kessler. The purpose of the trip was to enable the two men to confer on Gill's illustrations for the proposed Cranach Press edition of Song of Songs. Kessler met Gill at the railroad station and later recorded the arrival scene in his diary.

Gill was immediately visible in the station in his odd garb: knee stockings, a short black cassock and brightly colored scarf. He said that all of Cologne was looking at his legs- was this perhaps because his stockings were so thin? (Kessler, 1930)

Gill's customary costume was indeed unusual for men of his time and is consistently remarked upon in the descriptions of him penned by his contemporaries. Beginning in the 1910's it appears that Eric Gill gave up wearing trousers in favor of tunics or smocks. Donald Attwater, one of Gill's biographers, described Gill's way of dressing as follows:

[H] e was always dressed in a collarless tunic or smock which reached to his shins, confined by a leather belt, woolen stockings and shoes. … the material was always a homespun varying in weight and texture according to the time of year, brown or dark grey in colour, and no difference was made in material and colour whether the particular tunic was to be worn on formal occasions or when at work with hammer and chisel.(Attwater, 1965: p.151)

Another Gill biographer, Fiona MacCarthy, noted Gill's choice of dress and observed:

Gill always insisted it was a rational dress, the clothing of his trade, and indeed it had a precedent within the Arts and Crafts tradition in the blue craftsman's smock as worn by William Morris and Cobden Sanderson … But somehow Eric Gill managed to wear it differently (MacCarthy, 1989: p. 110).

This afternoon I want to explore the political dimension of Gill's choice of dress in terms that link it to his response to industrialization and alienation, conditions that he perceived as constituent features of modernity. I also want to attempt to link my discussion of Gill's decision to dress in a distinctive way to the theme of this conference: Design Activism and Social Change. Gill's decision to forego trousers and most other features of tailored men's clothing brings into sharp relief the connection – central to design and therefore important to design history – between thought and action. And I would like to explore the possibility that this historical episode can be employed to interrogate contemporary calls for design

and social activism such as Tony Fry's Design as Politics (Fry, 2011).

I need to begin by acknowledging some of the complexities one encounters in any discussion of Gill. Eric Gill was an important English artist of the early twentieth century. He was also a vocal social critic and during his lifetime he was a controversial figure for the positions he took on a variety of artistic, social and economic topics. Since the publication in 1989 of Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Gill with its revelations about his sexual conduct he has become a notorious character. (Everybody wants to talk about his sex life.) Today, he remains a challenging figure for historians: the divide between Gill the artist and public intellectual and Gill the private man can be difficult to negotiate. So I need to say that while I am focused here on the political dimension of Gill's choice of dress and his arguments about clothes, I do not deny the existence of the subjective and psychological dimensions of Gill's personal life when it comes to his preference for tunics rather than trousers. How historians integrate political ideologies with personal histories is always an issue when the subject of historical inquiry is a single designer.

Clothes were a recurrent theme in Gill's writing beginning with his 1921 pamphlet *Dress (Gill, 1921)* (subsequently republished in his important collection Art-Nonsense(Gill, 1929)). In 1931 he published a book-length treatment of the subject, entitled Clothes (Gill, 1931) and returned to the theme in 1937 when he published a small pamphlet Trousers (Gill, 1937). *Clothes* was widely reviewed, Evan Gill cites more than fifty reviews in his bibliography of his brother Eric's work. And while it is impossible to prove either way, Donald Attwater's observation that "*on the strength of its title, it has doubtless come into the hands of more general readers than any other of Gill's books except the Autobiography"* (Attwater, 1965: p.151) suggests something of the book's importance and place in Gill's career as a writer and social critic. The core of Gill's argument about clothes and modern society focuses on clothes as manifestations of systems of production and distribution rather than emblems of gender. In *Trousers*, for example, he pleads with his readers to recognize that:

> *This essay is neither a plea for sexual exhibitionism nor sexual absolutism. It is not a plea for anything except a frank recognition of the relation between clothes and*

> *civilization and, above all, a recognition that **our** clothes & **our** commercial-industrialism exactly go together. (Gill, 1937:p. 22)*

Gill develops his argument most fully in his 1931 book *Clothes*. Modern clothes he maintained were a direct manifestation of the de-humanizing and de-individualizing effect of modern industrial civilization.

> *Industrialism means servile labour; it means standardized labour and it means the standardized product. It means that the thing which everybody needs or thinks necessary will be made to standard patterns. (Gill, 1931: p. 73)*

Mankind was, according to Gill, a special kind of clothed animal. The naked form is beautiful and a source of pleasure; but a naked human being remains incomplete. Clothes are essential to completing a man or a woman because in putting on clothes they come to recognize their full dignity as human beings. Give a naked man a coat, Gill declared, and he will be more a man than before. *"It is not the coat that makes him gentle but in the coat he recognizes what is becoming to his natural gentility and without which he cannot live up to his nature." (Gill, 1931; p. 3)* Gill goes on to employs the metaphor of clothes as houses and explains that while houses provide shelter from the elements, utilitarian concerns alone cannot explain the evident diversity we observe in the environment. Cultural systems and philosophical beliefs enrich and differentiate houses and manners of dressing as well.

Gill admired the beauty and the gravitas of ecclesiastical dress and the robes worn by jurists and civic officials on state occasions. He spoke highly of dress military uniforms and was particularly fond of sporting gear such as the racing silks worn by jockeys. He counted all of these as residual elements – holdovers from premodern times – and lamented the fact that regardless of their profession or station in life men increasingly tended to dress the same. "*The counting house* (one of Gill's euphemisms for contemporary culture infected with the values of Puritanism and industrialism) *sets the fashion; the counting house has swallowed everything. All men wear the clothes of clerks."(Gill, 1931: 63)*

How something is made – how it is what it is – is a central theme in Gill's work and his writings. In *Clothes* he distinguishes between garments that are draped over the body and those that are pre-cut according

to a standardized pattern to which the body is forced to conform. Creases and folds are good and compliment the human form; cuts and seams are wicked and confine the body.

This next sentence concludes with a multiple-choice. The tragedy of Eric Gill's career as a social activist is that he was:

A) An irascible contrarian
B) A savvy manipulator of his public image
C) A Catholic weirdo
D) An eccentric Englishman.

Now let's review this list.

The contrarian is always with us. We recognize the type; he or she possesses an acerbic voice and the utter conviction that whichever way the wind is blowing is the wrong way. The contrarian serves as a convenient foil for argument's sake but after awhile you begin every conversation with a contrarian aware of how it will unfold and you become more inclined to indulge rather than engage critically.

I included the term savvy manipulator on my list because we know that Gill commissioned publicity photos that portrayed him in ways that reinforced the image he wished to project of an independent spirit committed to living and making art in certain ways. In this reading Gill's preference for tunics rather than trousers serves more as an unmistakable sign of his declaration of independence from social conventions and is emblematic of his provocative lifestyle. (And I will return to this point below).

As for Gill's Catholicism: it was central to his thinking about both art and social issues. The Thomistic philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, which Gill absorbed through the scholarly writing of Jacque Maritain, was absolutely fundamental to Gill's intellectual development. But the Catholic intellectual is almost by definition out-of-step with the mainstream secular worldview of modern times. I am not saying that Catholic views were absent from the great debates of the period, but I do suggest they remained peripheral rather than central to the discussions. Witness, for example, the place of Distributism – the political movement inspired by Catholic social teaching which Gill supported –in the political landscape of the early twentieth century.

The eccentric Englishman is a charming cultural type, a character we enjoy but do not necessarily take seriously.

The world of the eccentric is too small and personal for most of us. The world of the Catholic is perceived as too confining and the world of the contrarian is - well – too contrary.

But is there another lens we could use to examine Gill's case? Is there another way to see Gill that might shed some insight on something besides or beyond Eric Gill? Is Gill and the household he created perhaps a model of what Tony Fry describes as a community of estrangement that creates a "place apart" - a place or pattern of action that materializes - in Fry's words – Future Thought?

Whatever else he was, I am prepared to argue that Gill was not a Romantic Medievalist yearning to return to the Middle Ages. Gill rejected what he called the tyranny of tailors but not the twentieth century. Nor was he a Utopian Modernist "dreaming out loud" about a more perfect future. He was an artist trying to live according to a set of precepts that valued individuality, appropriateness and the integrity of the well-made thing.

In some ways Gills would appear to be a model of the kind of critical alterity – *otherness* - that Fry calls for in *Design as Politics*. Gills' tunics and smocks were indeed homespun. His daughter Petra had studied weaving with Ethel Mairet in Ditchling. While Gill certainly worked **in** the modern world, he consistently refused to be identified as a **part of** the modern world – at least as it was shaped by the values of industrialism. His choice of living arrangements is noteworthy in this regard. He preferred communal living, first as a member of the Guild of Saint Joseph and Saint Dominic in the village of Ditchling and later, after he left Ditchling, in communal settings that included his extended family and apprentices. He endeavored to integrate his living and working conditions in a way that would serve as model, in his words: *to make a cell of good living in the chaos of tour world*.

In terms of Design Activism and Social Change, confrontational is the word that best describes Gill's strategy of social activism at least as it relates to clothes. In terms of his own conduct, any time you came into his presence you were confronted by his emphatic choice to dress differently than all the other men present. No words needed to be said or action required by others present; but no one could ignore the obvious. In his writing

about clothes Gill forced his readers to confront a central fact about the modern experience: the sheer pervasiveness - the intrusiveness - of modern economic systems. Modern clothes are an intimate, immediate, unavoidable point of contact with industrialism and “the counting house” culture Gill abhorred. Certainly, other design thinkers and social critics shared Gill’s reservations about modern industrialism. They suggested that the corrupting influence of modern society could be resisted or blunted by attention to the design of the domestic realm and the promotion of the cult of domesticity or through the cultivation of the Fine Arts or through the restorative effects of exposure to Nature, that is: the home, the museum and concert hall or the rural landscape all provide nurturing retreats for modern man. But Gill argues that without first reclaiming our full human dignity, without casting off the very trappings of industrialism and the counting house, resistance was futile. If you wear the clothes of a counting house clerk when you are at home then that is what you are regardless of your surroundings. In what I consider a significant move, Gill rejects the concept of design determinism (i.e. the belief that we are shaped by the buildings that surround us and that if we reconfigure the built environment we will change society). Instead Gill argued*: “A change of mind is not caused by a change of clothes; on the contrary a change of clothes is caused by a change of mind. (Gill, 193: p.70)”*

If I am reading Tony Fry correctly, this is exactly what he is arguing: a change of mind - a recognition of the true nature of what is - must precede the fundamental reconfiguration of how we live that is required by the crisis of unsustainability or Defuturing to use Fry’s name for the it. We must change the way we think and see and feel the world before we can design the tools, the systems, and the lifestyles of what Fry calls Sustainment.

What then can we learn - or at least observe intelligently – from the case of Eric Gill? What, for example, undermined Gill’s effort to persuade people through his own example? The link between thought and action needs to be framed in ways that people can understand in order to process and eventually identify with. For Gill writing was his way of framing his acts and linking his personal actions with a political stance. But his book *Clothes* can be a frustrating read. Earlier I quoted Donald Attwater’s remark that Gill’s book *Clothes* probably reached more readers than almost anything

else he wrote but Attwater goes on to conclude: *"it has been productive of more disappointment than any of them."(Attwater, 1965: p. 151)* *Clothes* is about a lot more than tunics and trousers. In addition to describing the evils of industrialism and the modern tyranny of tailors Gill spells out his position on gender identities, sexual mores, birth control, homosexuality, the nature of work and art, the origin of human dignity along with observations about the soullessness of modern science and the Thomistic distinctions between making and doing. In the context of this conference, Gills' writing is a fatal weak link between his thinking and his actions.

Despite the very public nature of his choice to dress a certain way Gill's activism remained solitary and misunderstood. However astute Gill was at self-promotion it is exactly the fierce independence of the image he created that, I suggest, undermined the power of that image to promote social activism and to incite others to reject the tyranny of tailors and thus resist the hegemony of modern industrialism. Standing in a German railroad station in 1930, Count Harry Kessler could not see the political act of separation and resistance signaled by Gill's refusal to wear trousers; all Kessler saw was the arrival of his friend the eccentric English artist. Successfully framing the link between thought and action is critical and, in the end, Gill's efforts to frame his actions were critically flawed.

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