

Mickey Patel's conflicts with design: IDC as a metaphor for an artist - designer interface

by

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Mickey Patel's passing away this August seventeenth may be taken as an occasion to examine a couple of issues that emerge from a domain created by Mickey in his brief interaction

with a design school in India. Mickey's forte stood in the broad areas of cartooning, illustrations for book-covers, jackets for books, etchings, paintings and others. A basic thought behind having Mickey over at the Industrial Design Centre, IIT, Bombay was, therefore, to be able to harness his unconventional brilliance into something that could allow the student a glimpse into a distinct world of illustration-design.

Mickey Patel's work:

Mickey was born in Karachi in the early-forties' turbulent years and whichever way one looks at it, these were turbulent times for our country, turbulent for the continent (Europe), turbulent world wide. Mickey's youth advanced through another kind of turbulence -- the radicalism of the sixties. What settled down eventually is reflected in his prolific and essentially eclectic body of work - notably, his series on the 'Sarod player'; his series on 'Gandhi' articulated within cinematic frames in reverence to the hugely compressed and frozen concept of time that cartooning is apt to embrace; the kind of time-frame that, in Mickey's words, could make "cinematic time blush in embarrassment ". His cartoons ranging from the "disinfected medical symbol for sex ", to the faceless Annual General Meeting, to "the advisor on economic and political affairs imported from the affluent West" (a la the 'all-knowing' experts on our countries' conditions who are sent in by the Brettonwoods' institutions and such, and who continue to perpetuate

their "mutilated myth and perception" of the Third World); his statement on 'the beautiful people', to his own muscled version of the Miss and Mr. Universe. His book-cover designs and illustrations for books for children; or ,for writers as varied as Sigrun Srivastava representing fiction-writing, to books covering non-fiction writings such as those published by the National Book Trust (NBT). And especially a book like the 'Economics for the Laymen' which carries his work, and which aptly reiterates the fact that regardless of the subject Mickey handled, his quirks added on to each of his illustrations.

Mickey' achievements by contemporary interpretations:

Without meaning to rationalise on why Mickey today appears to a section of the media (including the print and advertising) as a man who 'didn't quite make it', one would like to interject with the thought that perhaps Mickey was too sorely aware of the frailties of the here and the now to wish to 'make it' at its expense. Living, as he did, in a world caught up in a web of its own inhibitions, its guilts and its "falling-downs" and its "falling ups," the conveyance of this harsh reality through his work laced with a Jules Pfiesser brand of black humour never always carried a comfortable sense of reminder for the establishment that constituted part of the readership of Mickey Patel's work. Or perhaps Mickey was not quite prepared for what he had only just begun to witness, i.e., the blurring of the communications, cultural and economic boundaries, the absence of which had earlier had the effect of enclosing the real market for our products. In practical terms it meant that this fusion with the external would only now begin to unleash more takers for 'our' stuff across our boundaries than ever before. That, the media now represented more and more avenues in varied forms and proportions, an upliftment of the artist's works than could have been envisioned in all the previous twenty five years of publishing put together, and a sad coincidence to occur with Mickey's own prime years of output behind him. In sheer objective terms, Mickey had operated in a field stymied by a lack of adequate outlets, that today seems to be exploding with potentials. Until twenty five years ago we had had no electronic media, until

ten years ago these had remained fairly regulated, and yet, today, we are suddenly breaking into the market place - with the skies opening up and the media from abroad arguably keen to find a toehold in India. With Mickey no more, whether he would have commanded the sellers' market or the buyers' market can only be a matter of conjecture, but by most reckoning, Mickey would have survived in spite of the adversities of his health and the weight of the prevailing opinions about his iconoclasm. In any case, a man who had had the temerity to wish to survive in spite of his cartoons making "digs at Doon School heirs" bang in the mid-eighties at the height of a Doon School brigade forming the political establishment and headed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi - himself a Doon School graduate - couldn't have been making much of a living for himself. Obviously, for him these were precisely the times when satire served as the artist's corrective for society that was "straying away from a rational course", and he lived by it with full conviction. Also, Mickey's achievements by contemporary interpretive yardsticks can in no way diminish his efforts at attempting to use cartooning as "a legitimate dialect of its parent language" viz., the drawing. And, therefore, the very criticism against Mickey that he had spread himself thin through his use of parallel modes of expression outside of cartooning (viz., through drawing, painting, etching, illustration) could itself be turned around to accord to his work a certain degree of legitimacy and credibility, which in its turn, had derived from his ability to grasp the broader as well as the immediate nuances of communications, that are so intrinsic to the very spirit of the representational arts. Mickey may also be credited for upholding the view that humour was not THE "inevitable ingredient" for cartooning----a notion that had been widely and quite erroneously presumed and which had begun to border on the myth of the essential cartoon. The important thing for Mickey, in stead, was to be able to attempt "a visual allegory" that employed "familiar images to reinforce and heighten their meaning".

The artist-designer interface -- some fall outs:

The question then is what happens when such an artist extraordinaire arrives at a design institution ? Which is what Mickey Patel did in the fall of 1989 at the Industrial Design Centre(IDC), where he stayed on through the spring and summer of 1990 . It is not often enough that the paths of the artist and the designer meet. While the designer relates himself to changing the immediate lives of people through his design interventions, the artist works in abstraction without necessarily having to relate to any immediate cause or concern. Therefore, regardless of common world views their methods of achievements could very well differ from each other's. Under the circumstances, the interface provided by a design institution for the artist already contains a potentially explosive situation but not entirely unique in its scope as a potential hazard. There are examples of artists from the performing and the reproduction arts represented respectively by classical dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai, musicians Ravi Shankar and L. Subramaniam, and film maker Satyajit Ray among others, who are known to have accepted certain bottom line conditions as visiting faculty members for prestigious Ivy League institutions such as the Brown University at Providence,R.I., on Eastcoast USA, or at the Univ of California, Berkeley on the Westcoast, or at New York University. In situations such as these, artists have had to find their own sense of equilibrium with having to 'teach' their art, or as a step ahead, to have had to find skilful, useful areas of applications of their individual artistic domains in order to (i) extend their personal sense of creativity beyond the immediate boundaries of the solitary act of creation, in order to keep it alive and burning; (ii) allow more and more people to participate in the dialectics of these glorious moments of creation by interacting with these learners while the language of these creations continued to retain their fire; and (iii)to help the non-artist to "penetrate through the veil of mere appearances and reveal the truth". Under the circumstances the strength of the kind of institutional support extended for such purposes by a set up such as the IIT-IDC may not be underrated. Mickey's conflict might well have arisen out of a common sense of consternation faced by artists viz., the absence and the consequent need to

construct universals, and which by their presence, might help define how an artist interfaces his creative skills with the objectives and the needs of an institution.

In our bid to understand the nature of this artist-designer interface that is potentially situated in a design school, one is inadvertently, therefore, drawn towards parallels from a post-War One design school - the Bauhaus in Germany. In its decade-and-a-half span of existence (1919 - 1933) Bauhaus had managed to set the standards of present-day industrial design. In a distant but a nonetheless tangible sort of a way, Mickey might have been visualised to be something in the mould of painter Johannes Itten given his perplexing mixture of the 'saint and charlatan'. However, while Mickey matched the above description of Itten's, he entirely lacked the Bauhaus form-master's conviction for art education. Especially considering the fact that prior to his arrival at the Bauhaus, Itten had already been engaged in teaching an unconventional form of art based on techniques espoused by Pestalozzi, Montessori and Franz Cizek. Moving on to finding a closer match for Mickey, one conjures up the example of the second form-master Lionel Feininger, who happened to be the second of the three original faculty appointments made by its principal Walter Gropius into the Bauhaus (the third form-master being the sculptor Gerhard Marckes). Feininger was a highly successful cartoonist known for his contributions to American newspapers and German magazines; also a serious painter, he was at the Bauhaus 'to create atmosphere' which Mickey himself managed to create at the IDC through his dour and wild humour and which more or less also signatored his own works. Between the two now, one might try and understand the nature of the influence of Mickey's presence at the IDC. Mickey's engaging role as a kind of crusader made him denounce in no uncertain terms the *modus operandi* of student evaluation at the IDC, which had appeared to him to be rather stringently analytical and problem-solving, with no room that would seem to allow one to breath one's impulses into subjectivity. This crusading of Mickey's for a less sterile form of

evaluation, had had the definite effect of eroding a slice of the then existing/prevaling student morale by the setting off of the faculty into an ideological position that might have been easily interpreted/construed as being in opposition to their own, and thus causing a certain ruffling of feathers. The general consensus at the school was that Mickey's brand of iconoclasm minus his talent would take a student nowhere. But another school of thought in assessment of Mickey's approach that emerged soon after Mickey left and which was initially dismissed as being a lot of pro-establishment tirade was exactly what many of the Bauhaus' own creative-teaching members(who were also painters, sculptors, illustrators and so on in their own right) had themselves had to endure - viz., the insinuation that such individuals effectively remained not much more than 'rootless painters' who were 'reluctant to show their work to the students'. And showing one's work obviously meant transcending the mere activity of discussing one's repertoire to more concrete propositions in terms of certain suggested means of achieving a style, locating its relationship within the broader matrix/canvas of other styles - both prevailing and past, and upfronting critical evaluation (formalistic, functional, technical) of one's style, in order to arrive at a decided point of a creative scale that attempts to "dissect" these styles by contemporary and past aesthetic values. If a teacher failed to establish these principles of pedagogy, it meant that he had not been able to connect up with his students in a very fundamental way --- his brilliance or range of work notwithstanding. While it was Wassily Kandinsky who had provided some relief to this tenor by his views that legitimised scientific principles as being intrinsic to the advancement of the knowledge of art, many of the other Bauhaus teachers fell back upon the precept (as Mickey did) that art cannot be taught. In so many ways, Mickey also stood apart from the Bauhaus comparative categories. The example that comes to mind is Bauhaus' Paul Klee, whose work was described by his colleague Shelemmer as inspiring a lot of shaking of heads. Mickey's work never even grazed past these areas of social applaud. Mickey, on the other hand, always managed a much more direct and grounded response from his people.

While the above section by no means attempts to cover the entire spectrum of creative and teaching viewpoints prevailing at the Bauhaus, the section certainly seeks to serve as a pointer to the way artists of calibre have functioned in a design school; and which, though located far away in space and time yet manages to provide a certain perspective and points of convergence or divergence to our own references.

On Mickey's part, IIT's staid, white-collar, scientific -technological firmament threw him back and quite ironically into his days at the Lintas in the early sixties. Both seemed to have depicted for him the taste of an "aerosol can of corporate antiseptic for spraying any and every threat of freedom, movement, liberation, change" as well as a place that (even) provided for him the recipe for "grinding creativity out of a crucible". His eight months at the IDC-IIT seems a watershed in terms of an effective argument against what institutionalised design could do to its pedagogues and practitioners. Mickey's paradigm seemed to be a derivative of his earlier experience with the ways of the private enterprise, and which he seemed to relentlessly apply to the IDC, albeit some modifications. Essentially this meant that like Lintas, an institutionalised set up such as the IDC had had the potentials to "curdle to ash every posture of creative bureaucracy". Mickey found it hard to accept that there could be any of the Buckminster Fuller 'critical path' understanding towards the arts, and quite definitely not towards his own brand of 'specialisation', viz., cartooning. However, as a useful counterpoint drawn from a similar set of coordinates of an artist working within a design school one is tempted to quote Bauhaus' 'non-object' artist Wassily Kandinsky's views on how to teach one's own art. In his 1926 work 'Point, Line to Plane' (republished by Dover, NY, 1979), Kandinsky asserts that "aside from its scientific value, which depends upon an exact examination of the individual art elements, the analysis of the art elements forms a bridge to the inner pulsation of a work of art " And, therefore, for him there was nothing foolhardy about "dissecting" art just because many others ,and to a large extent even Mickey believed, that such dissection could only yield its

death. It is not so far fetched an idea to allude to the Bauhaus, because IDC itself was fashioned after it, although more closely in time to the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm in Germany. With an ex-graduate of the school being invited by the Govt. of India in 1969 to set up (with help from a team), India's first post-graduate school of design.

Within the specific context of the IDC-IIT, Mickey was probably over-reacting to the role of clear thinking. And a perfect example that may be advanced in favour of the positive fall outs of such creativity-logical interfacing (and something quite likely even endorsed by Mickey deep down somewhere) is the Buckminster Fuller geodesic dome. Even a single visit to the MIT (Cambridge, Mass) will confirm for anybody the splendour wrought by the combination of logical thinking with artistry, and which finds such elegant display on the lawns of an institution that works in the best tradition of drawing inputs from economists, linguists, philosophers, mathematicians as well as the best of scientists from around the world.

And now without much hesitation one begins to see another parallel universe reflected in Mickey's conflicts with art education on the one hand, and with IDC on the other. This refers to IDC's own conflicts with IIT itself; where IIT works with a positivistic, scientised, systems-attitude in its endeavour to transfer scientific ideas on to the plane of technological applications, which easily makes IIT one of the premiere schools of technology in the world. Under this frame of reference, IIT obviously has had the occasional difficulty in comprehending for itself a course of studies that is the M.Des (Master of Design) and which entails, in its view, the occasional subjective (read 'artistic') tilt towards problem-solving. By the same token, one also likes to credit IIT for having relented within its broader scientised attitude, a certain leeway to IDC's functioning. And not without its rewards -- for IDC has brought to IIT awards, corporate funding, state funding and eventually a certain external humane sensibility to her

otherwise staid firmament. And yet, Mickey found IDC's intellectual grounding too straitjacketed to be able to come to terms with it.

Conclusion:

For those at the IDC who have had an opportunity to work or interact closely with Mickey, what remains among other things, is the artist's conception of his own art. Add to this a dash of funk and chic and one has a Mickey Patel. His search at IIT for a certain kind of freedom of expression and space mirrored a similar search for a similar freedom in his own existence. Until the end he never shortchanged this route in order to hasten the process of what he had wished to achieve - adversities of health and public opinion notwithstanding; a rare brand of dedication that has made cartooning not entirely empty of honour but, in fact, quite to the contrary.