

## Judy Attfield

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It is with great sadness that we have to announce the death of Judy Attfield, one of the pioneers of contemporary material culture studies who did so much to demonstrate the value of this approach. Judy started her academic career within a discipline called design history that was largely devoted to hagiographic accounts of great designers and the history of great designs, both of which almost entirely ignored the wider context of understanding the form and style of the world of goods most people lived with. Thanks to her textbook *Wild Things* and a series of exemplary studies she transformed Design History into a study of the intimate relationship between populations and the common form and design of mundane material culture. She thereby switched the discipline from a complete disrespect for people other than named designers, into one that starts from an empathetic respect for ordinary lives. More than anyone else she can therefore be credited with the invention of a new contemporary design history that can command a respected position within social science and the humanities, instead of being relegated to the poor sibling of art history. I first came to know Judy as the external supervisor of her PhD on a history of British furniture, including the Utility furniture that had dominated the period of the last war. There were many revelations in her work, of which the one I best recall is how through patient scholarship she revealed the autonomy of different parts of the furniture commodity chain. Shops selling hand made furniture might market them as exemplary modern industrial forms, while shops selling industrially made furniture might sell them as olde-worlde hand crafts, depending entirely upon what they thought would appeal to the market. Judy's courage lay in the very topics she then chose. Other design historians would hope for vicarious respect by tackling famous design images, but Judy devoted her time to key papers on topics such as the tufted carpet, or the empty cocktail cabinet. What her work demonstrated was the possibility of a subtle and different history of well enshrined topics such as gender (she wrote several papers on feminist approaches to design history), class and family, through this grounded sensibility to everyday objects and the ironies and paradox of popular taste and desire. These studies culminated in the book *Wild Things*, surely the single best introduction and exemplification of this new genre of design history studies, and a major advance in material culture studies more generally. This is a classic 'must-read' book.

It is entirely appropriate that her death followed the publication a week earlier of her edited volume of *Home Cultures* on the topic of kitsch. The fact that unlike any other work on this topic this starts from a respect for otherwise denigrated materials, not from some postmodern or ironic or clever conceit but from a modest humanism, a desire not to judge or patronise but simply pay attention to and create an understanding of all our material culture however it is otherwise labelled and dismissed. This politics of respect is something that was a leitmotif of all her work and is her legacy for the future.

-- *Daniel Miller*

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