"The Time For Being Against"

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Two or three weeks ago, while I was thinking about this talk, I received an e-mail from a designer I know. In the subject line, at the top of the message, it said: "The time for being against is over." When I read the message itself, I discovered that this did have something to do with its content, although only in a roundabout way. The writer was concerned not to be seen by his colleagues as an activist, in the mould of *Adbusters*, or some similar group. As it happens, I had never suggested he was anything of the kind, but this slightly awkward but memorable phrase—"the time for being against is over"—seems to crystallize many aspects of society and culture as we experience them today.

For the fact is that, among our own group, designers—and especially young designers—this appears to be a fairly general view. The phrase is actually taken from a book called *The World Must Change: Graphic Design and Idealism*. It's a quote from a Dutch design student: "I do not want to separate. I have no interest in being against. I want to include. The time for being against is over." Not long ago, a design historian of my acquaintance, a clever young woman with a PhD, said something very similar to me: "You can't be against everything all the time." I used to teach at the Royal College of Art and this issue of not being against things—the consensual feeling that we have somehow reached a point of *rapprochement* or healing or wholeness—came up all the time. To be against things was to be negative and what's the point of that? Life is too short. You can't change anything by being "against things" – the world is what it is – so all that negative energy is just going to boomerang back on you in the end. By being against things, especially when most people agree that the time for being against things is over, you will only make yourself unhappy. The whole issue came to a head for me when I sat in on a project with an environmental theme, organized by one of the other Royal College of Art tutors. He gave a spell-binding performance, unleashing a scintillating stream of facts, statistics and examples of earlier environmentally-based art and communication projects. He outlined the issues and constructed a cogent and provocative set of arguments. The students—about 40 of them, all studying at masters level, young adults in their mid-20s—sat there like a bunch of sullen, unresponsive kids, offering only a few occasional, usually sarcastic remarks. Here was someone who was very definitely against things, but this display of a fiercely engaged, critical intelligence seemed to make this group very uneasy. It's not even that they argued against his point of view. Why should they? What a waste of energy and for that matter how uncool! The time for being against things is over.

Well, if this is anything like the dominant view – at least among educated young people – then these do not appear to be very propitious times for any kind of criticism, let alone design criticism. Because, as I have always understood the term, to be critical involves not taking things for granted, being sceptical, questioning what's there, exposing limitations, taking issue, advancing a contrary view, puncturing myths. On occasion, of course, the critic will take the role of supporter and advocate. He or she will seek to persuade us that some idea or thing is deserving of our full attention and merits a closer look. They will act as interpreter and explain some seemingly arcane aspect of culture that many or most of us don't yet grasp and are perhaps inclined to resist. But this process of supportive elucidation will always the imply its opposite: that there are objects and projects that are not worthy of our attention, that are problematic, flawed, and sometimes possibly even pernicious. Any would-be critic who practices only the role of supporter and advocate, who never finds fault, sees nothing to contest, is not really a critic at all.

While it's hugely encouraging for anyone who continues to think criticism matters that a conference like this should take place – it's almost unthinkable, at the present time, that a British design organization would mount such an event – design criticism continues to survive in, at best, a precarious state of health. How could it be otherwise? To exist at all, criticism depends on two things: a range of suitable outlets and a body of people – the critics – to supply the criticism. We don't have enough of either. If criticism is struggling in a wider cultural sense, if proprietors of mainstream media believe it is simply not required by most ordinary readers and viewers, and readers and viewers show every sign of endorsing this judgment (because the time for being against is over) then it would be very optimistic indeed to expect specialist trade publications aimed at practicing graphic designers to lead the critical fightback. On the contrary, as a very young discipline, graphic design criticism needs to learn by "looking closer" at critical practice in neighboring areas. Fortunately, the critical mentality is so deeply entrenched that it still thrives in pockets elsewhere, and there are even signs of a possible renewal.

I'll return to this later, but first I'm aware that I need to state my own position more clearly to supply the context for these remarks. The term I have sometimes used for the practice I would like to engage in is "critical journalism". I have occasionally described myself as a "critic", for reasons of expediency, but "critic" is a pretty strange passport description and I really just see as myself as a writer with a lasting, fairly serious commitment to design and visual culture. I engage in different ways with material that interests me, depending on the forum and audience. I certainly hope there's always some strand of critical awareness in anything I publish—I might be wrong about that, of course—but the writing undeniably slides up and down a scale between relatively impersonal journalism at one end (though I'm not at all interested in doing this kind of writing) and criticism, in some notionally purer, much more personal and perhaps more academic sense, at the other. Most of the time it will be strategically located somewhere near the middle of this scale—hence my use of the term "critical journalism". It's an attempt to combine journalism's engagement with the moment and its communicative techniques with criticism's fundamental requirement for a worked-out, coherent, fully conscious critical position: a way of looking at, and understanding, the world, or some aspects of it, anyway.

But to explain this fully, I need to go a little further because the kind of writing I now do, in this particular field, comes directly from my experiences as a reader going back many years. I've always read criticism and I've always read critical journalism. Much of my education and sense of the world has come from undirected, personal reading across a range of cultural fields—literature, music, social history, film, photography, fine art, and other subjects. I'm sure most of you could say the same. I have always been engaged by writing that seemed to assume the existence of readers like me: people who just happened to have an interest in a subject, whatever it might be—the post-war novel, Kurt Schwitters' collages, New German Cinema, the French Nouvelle Vague—because they took meaning and pleasure from it and believed it to be important. This writing wasn't directed exclusively or even perhaps largely towards an audience of academic peers and students, even if the academy was often its point of origin. It wanted to discover a broader audience. It was aimed outwards at any intelligent, literate, thinking individual, from any background, with the curiosity to undertake their own personal researches and see what they could find out.

There's a nice term for the kind of writer who chooses to occupy this cultural position, to think in public, and address the broadest possible readership—it's "public intellectual". One hundred years ago such a position would have been taken for granted. Intellectual discourse was a public activity accessible to any educated citizen. Fifty years ago it was still perfectly viable. Think of figures like the

architectural writer Lewis Mumford, the psychologists Bruno Bettelheim and Erich Fromm, the art critic Clement Greenberg. A few months ago, the New York publisher Basic Books organized a debate on "The Future of the Public Intellectual"—you can read an adapted version on *The Nation*'s website. Four of the six panelists were academics—among them Herbert Gans, Professor of Sociology at Columbia University, and Stephen Carter, Professor of Law at Yale. The other two were critical journalists: the British writer Christopher Hitchens and Steven Johnson, co-founder of *Feed* magazine on the web – more on him a bit later. Today, the public intellectual is often thought to be an endangered species. Public intellectuals were sustained by an audience of learned readers that has dwindled hugely since the 1960s, even if it hasn't entirely gone.

Do graphic designers form any significant part of that remaining core of readers with a commitment to ideas and the independent life of the mind, expressed through the act of reading? Are they, in other words, really interested in criticism? And, conversely, are those with a commitment to ideas the slightest bit interested in graphic design? These are daunting questions, when framed in those terms, as I think you'll probably agree.

Let's stick to designers for the moment. For as long as I have been writing about graphic design, I have heard it repeated like a mantra—by designers themselves and, more worryingly, even by one or two design writers—that designers as a professional group, as a type of person, "don't read". Not that they don't read history, or philosophy, or literature. But that they don't read, period. Not even the undemanding lifestyle magazines they like to "graze" to catch up on the latest styles and trends. (My source for this last assertion, by the way, is a recent book about new magazine design.) As someone who has voluntarily chosen to write about this material, and could have done something else instead, I suppose that makes me a pretty extreme form of masochist. Why go on with it? First, because I don't really believe it. I suspect that the designer who pronounces blithely that "designers don't read" is often just talking about himself (it usually is a "him", too). I know too many designers who do read and care about writing to accept the generalization, even if it holds true for the majority. Second, because it struck me quite early on, as someone then writing about architecture, art and three-dimensional design, as well as graphics, that graphic design was a genuinely fascinating area of study. In art or architecture, it sometimes feels as though all that remains is to add footnotes and corrections to the huge corpus of criticism, theory and history that already fills the libraries. Graphic design, by comparison, was still relatively unknown, uncharted territory. There was work to be done. There was the excitement of discovery and getting to things first—a huge motivation for any writer, whether engaged in journalism or criticism.

The other thing that struck me—and this is where these points connect up—is that, given the relatively open, unprofessionalized status of graphic design writing, as well as the nature of its potential audience, it ought to be possible to find a way of writing about the subject that corresponded with my own preferences as a reader. My models here, in many ways, were the music press, as it was in the late 70s and early 80s, and the serious film press, as it is even now. Both of these areas had hugely knowledgeable, talented, independent writers, who earned a living from their enthusiasms by writing critical journalism for a broad, smart, demanding readership that might include academics, but was open to anybody who shared the writers' perspectives, passions and tastes.

I hesitate to give too many examples because, in my case, they are necessarily mainly British. I'm thinking of the kind of writing you might have found in the music paper *New Musical Express* during the punk and post-punk years, or the film magazine *Sight and Sound* at any point in the last four decades. The sort of prose produced, in America, by a music writer like Greil Marcus or film writers like Jim Hoberman and Amy Taubin (both of whom write for *Sight and Sound*). Books like Ian

MacDonald's extraordinary, meticulous, track-by-track study of the Beatles, *Revolution in the Head*, which teases a revolution in sensibility from the song-writing process. Or Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming*, which sees British society refracted through punk rock. Or David Thomson's brilliant *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, one of the truly essential film books, lovingly crafted and periodically updated by a master essayist who has much to teach any would-be critic operating in *any* cultural discipline. These writers are both hip and scholarly, generous but rigorous, and they make the reader feel that their subject truly matters. It always seemed to me that graphic design, as a ubiquitous form of popular culture, could be written about in much the same way and that this was the strategy, if one could pull it off, that would be most effective in winning readers.

And here we return to the nub of the problem. For who, indeed, *are* the readers? Well, as we all know, in the main they are people involved in design—the ones who can be bothered to read, that is. Design has many beautifully produced, highly professional publications, but, by and large, they are not read by non-designers, and nor do they expect to be. That's rather strange, though, if design really does have the cultural importance and meaning that we constantly tell ourselves that it has. It's like a music press read only by musicians, or a film press read only by film-makers. Film and music publications *are* read by professionals, but the whole point of these magazines is that they address a broad, general readership. Design magazines, however, are mostly trade publications, and you wouldn't expect ordinary members of the public to read *Hotel and Catering Weekly* or *Liquid Plastics Review*. Yet, to judge by the look of them, design magazines aspire to be very much more than this: they are lavish, confident, magnificently visual. You can even buy them on certain newsstands. They win press awards. The problem is that no matter how good some of these publications are, the fact that they address and serve a professional audience of designers must inherently limit their ability to criticize their subject matter. I'm generalizing, of course, because I do think some are much more genuinely critical than others, but still there are certain lines that are rarely if ever crossed.

Yet, at the same time, as anyone who's tried it well knows, finding outlets for graphic design writing outside its dedicated press – outlets which could, in theory, allow much greater freedom to be critical—is always a struggle. Earlier this month, Jessica Helfand, a designer who also writes regularly, published a big piece about Milton Glaser in the *LA Times*, based on a review of his book *Art is Work*. It was a rare and notable exception. I recently wrote a longish essay about graphic authorship for one of the British Sunday papers. Amazingly, they ran it on the cover of the culture section, but it was touch and go for a while. There were real concerns behind the scenes, among some of the editors, that it was "too specialist", even though I had done everything I could to "open up" the subject for the general reader, and it was pegged, opportunistically, on the publication of Bruce Mau's heavily promoted book, *Life Style*, and several appearances by him in London in the course of the following week. I automatically included a brief explanation of graphic design near the start of the piece and I notice that Jessica did exactly the same thing. Imagine a review of a novel that felt obliged to begin with an explanation of "fiction", or a feature about art that felt it was necessary to explain the mysterious craft of "painting". Graphic design may be everywhere, but for commissioning editors, it would still seem to be largely invisible—and a little bit odd. Let me read you the headline and intro to my article:

"Is it art? Is it photography? No, actually, it's graphic design.

"Rick Poynor reports on how the quiet, selfless people who used to organize the pictures and words became authors themselves."

I hasten to add that these words were written by the editors, not by me. What this shows, with depressing clarity, is that any discussion of graphic design in the mainstream media must almost

always start by zeroing the clock. It has to assume that the general reader has never heard of this arcane activity, pursued by a secret order of modest, self-effacing hermits dedicated to a vow of silence, even if by now most worldly, educated, broadsheet-reading people will have noticed that the world is looking pretty slick these days and someone must be responsible. Why, they may even have a graphic designer in the family! Articles like this are one-offs, and I'm sure it will be exactly the same next time. It's encouraging to see the significance of graphic design acknowledged at all, but I can't say I find it especially satisfying to produce this kind of article, because the level of sophistication possible, when writing for an audience of designers, is often considerably higher.

Three-dimensional design fares much better in mainstream media for a very predictable reason. Often there is something to go out and buy, a gadget or a chair, or there's a new look you could try at home. This kind of consumer journalism rarely rises to the level of cultural criticism. One could also argue that the relentless focus on design as stylish consumerism is fundamentally damaging to public and, for that matter, professional conceptions of designing, but at least design is routinely acknowledged as having a role in culture. We have to start somewhere. With graphic design, however, there is rarely a commodity as such, unless it's a design book—as with Glaser and Mau—but design books are reviewed in only the most exceptional cases. There is no unceasing flow of new product, as with music, films, or novels, and consequently no obvious need for a weekly consumer guide in a newspaper or glossy magazine's culture pages, advising us where best to spend our cash. Graphic design is not, in most cases, a thing-in-itself—it's a formal property, a rhetorical dimension, a communicative tissue of something else. It may be an essential component, and the object may not properly exist without it, but its contribution is still usually just taken for granted, played down or overlooked by reviewers and critics whose expertise lies elsewhere. In truth, these days I don't believe that graphic design should be separated out in most cases. By doing that, we end up with the kind of distorted, self-aggrandizing view so often seen in the design press, where design is the be-all-and-end-all—at least in its own eyes — and is often considered almost independently from the project and purpose it serves. I should add that one obvious exception to this is graphic authorship, where the content of a project, as well as the form, is determined by the designer. Here, if the trend continues, and there are commodities for sale, or experiences to be had (perhaps in the form of an exhibition), review coverage may in time become a more regular feature in the press.

So where does all of this leave us? It leaves us in a distinctly paradoxical position, with a subject matter that we all agree plays an essential role in everyday life and culture, yet which lacks regular, direct outlets for critical public discussion. A subject that ought to engage ordinary people—its end-users—and quite possibly does engage them, but one that remains shadowy and mysterious, a shaping force in the contemporary world without any apparent motive cause.

I'm sure you don't want to hear about my long dark nights of the soul, so I'll pass quickly over the number of times I have wondered whether I was deluding myself about design's importance, and have come very close to conceding that it really is a subject of very little interest—unless you are a designer — and a crazy way for any half-way serious writer to spend his or her time. I wish I could offer you a rousing, multi-point program with lots of emphatic "musts" in it—"graphic design writing *must* do this, it *must* do that"—but the process of finding a way to write about this subject is much more tentative and exploratory than that. The only way to discover how to do it, or whether it can be done at all, is to try it. A few years ago, when the need for design criticism was a regular theme, one or two people started complaining—often in the pages of *Emigre*—about the inadequacies of design journalism, and on many points they were absolutely right. But where are they now? What have they written and where did it appear? I don't see their bylines very much, or even at all.

In the early 1990s, most of the best writing on graphic design came from designers. A few emerging designer-critics were very productive and visible for a while, but I suspect that the point came when they had to choose: writing or design? Understandably, they chose design. Yet, if someone really wants to be a writer, if that's their primary ambition, then that is what they have to do for much—perhaps most—of the time. Write! Take a look at the standard in neighboring disciplines. There are brilliant people out there in the writing world and they are not kidding around. What you quickly learn, if you try to live by freelance writing, is that you are engaged in a constant process of trial and error and continuous negotiation to find spaces to write in the way that you want. That's the challenge and the fun. Those spaces won't be just handed to you, because you mean well. You have to prove yourself by writing, then build by degrees on the space you have gained. The goal is to propose or be given assignments that allow you the freedom to do what you want as a writer, while satisfying the legitimate requirements of the publications for which you work. I hope it's clear from this that I am certainly not saying that design writing must necessarily be limited or bound by the "rules" of the marketplace. My own experience has shown me that design writers potentially have rather more room for maneuver than many of them—and their academic critics—sometimes imagine.

This brings us back to the question of developing a critical position. This is absolutely crucial to any discussion of criticism and I hope it's something we'll be exploring in the course of the day. Everyone has opinions and preferences—"everyone's a critic", in that limited sense—but while infusing journalism with a lively dose of personal opinion might make for entertaining writing (or not), this cannot be classed as serious criticism. I don't believe that a writer, operating regularly in mainstream media, can declare her position in an overt way, as a separate, sign-posted statement, every time she puts her fingers to the keyboard. An article for a magazine or newspaper is not an academic essay, and many articles are quite short – 1,000 words, 1,500 words—but over time, if a writer has a critical position, it will be implicit in everything she does and regular readers, coming to new pieces by her, will bring this understanding with them.

An example: Earlier, I mentioned the British music and pop culture writer Jon Savage. I've been reading his pieces for years and have a clear sense from his writing of who he is, what he stands for, what he values, what he believes. I can see his weaknesses too, but the crucial thing, for me as a reader, is that his vision of the world has depth and makes sense – that it adds something to my own understanding when I read him. I trust his judgment and this is the essence of the compact between reader and critic. Another example: Many of you will have read Judith Williamson's book *Decoding Advertisements*. For ten years, in the 1980s, Williamson worked as a film critic for several magazines, including the British political and cultural weekly *New Statesman*. Her film essays and reviews, collected in the book *Deadline at Dawn*, are models of incisive, provocative, enlightening critical journalism—film writing that really is a form of cultural criticism, not mere reviewing. Williamson always does her job. She captures the films she reviews with great particularity, but she goes much further than that, effortlessly sifting them as evidence for tidal shifts and movements and patterns forming in the society that created them. She relates her experience of the screen to her experience of the world.

Unfortunately, in mainstream print media that kind of intellectually ambitious, highly engaged writing about popular culture is now increasingly rare. Savage and Williamson are both writers whose political convictions are obvious—Savage is a gay socialist and Williamson is a feminist and Marxist. They have struggled with recent changes in the media agenda and have retreated, to an extent. These days there are many talented prose stylists able to divert and amuse us, but not many able to supply a deeper critical view. Too much writing now seems to serve what the American cultural critic Thomas Frank, in his new book *One Market Under God*, calls "market populism". This writing accepts a

market-determined consensus. It doesn't question and it certainly doesn't attack. It embraces current economic and political reality as inevitable, a manifestly reasonable state of affairs, requiring no criticism or dissent: the time for being against is over, after all. Looking at design writing in the design press, as it's currently practiced in this same marketplace, much the same conclusion holds true. Most of it plays safe.

In recent years, I've been thinking a lot about my own critical position. I don't see how you can do this kind of writing regularly, for any length of time, without considering these issues. Why *are* you writing? What, ultimately, is the point? I believe I have always had a position of some kind, but that doesn't mean it has necessarily been unambiguous, clear, or sufficiently developed. To some extent, like many people, I felt bound by the circumstances I was in. I have always been a writer, but for a while I was an editor, too. Those can be tricky roles to reconcile. An editor needs to be more open, more eclectic, more inclusive than a writer—not that I'm suggesting a writer should be narrow. Nevertheless, if I had let my obsessions and core concerns as a writer dominate my role as an editor, the result would have been a much narrower publication.

For a long time, I was preoccupied with questions of value and this was one concern that did apply equally to editing and writing. I was first drawn to design, as a non-designer, because I noticed how intensely I responded to it, how much it meant to me as a viewer and user, and I wanted to know why. My engagement with the experimental design of the late 1980s and early 1990s was prompted by a sense of excitement at its aesthetic and communicational possibilities, and also by its coded, subcultural dimension. Moreover, at that stage, these design approaches were still controversial, so the role of writer-as-advocate seemed worthwhile, particularly in Europe where design criticism was less developed than in the US. But the very success of these new design approaches by the mid-1990s, their global use as style by business and advertising, and the uncritical collusion of some designers in this process, obliged me to re-examine this earlier commitment. Of course, I was well aware of the market's tendency to recuperate and commodify even the most radical interventions and strategies. Art critics had long ago declared the artistic avant-garde to be dead for this reason, and the same fate had befallen one counter-cultural uprising after another. I knew all this, but I had never witnessed the phenomenon close-up, as some kind of participant, and in the early days, the take-up of these design approaches as fashionable style didn't seem very likely, however obvious it might look in retrospect.

These days, what I find most pressing, as a writer, is how design functions in society and what we imagine it is for. This is something that should in theory concern everyone, but for the discussion to be meaningful, we have to find ways to talk about design outside the self-interested enclave of the design business itself. Despite the various problems I have highlighted, I am optimistic. The web now presents enormous possibilities for all kinds of criticism. The website *Arts & Letters Daily*, started by Denis Dutton, an academic, is a brilliant idea. If you haven't seen it, it provides links to excellent writing all over the web. It often gets more than 20,000 visitors a day. It's extremely well edited. For instance, it picked up the *LA Times* article on Glaser by Jessica Helfand, which I mentioned earlier, as well as one on Glaser in the *Boston Globe*. Dutton argues that for diverse points of view and open, robust criticism, things have never been better than they are today. Speaking as one of his regular readers, I'm starting to think he might be right. *Arts & Letters Daily* makes a vast amount of material easily available that one would not otherwise be likely to see.

Steven Johnson, co-founder of *Feed*, the web-based magazine, takes a similar view. Speaking at the "Future of the Public Intellectual" forum—which I discovered through *Arts & Letters Daily*—he said:

"There's been a great renaissance in the last five years of the kind of free-floating intellectual that had long been rumored to be on his or her last legs. It's a group shaped by ideas that have come out of the academy but is not limited to that . . . a lively new form of public intellectualism that is not academic in tone."

If this is true, these are ideal conditions for the kind of free-ranging, critical reading I was talking about earlier. They are also, of course, ideal conditions for the free-ranging critic. Johnson talks about the ways that writers, using a dynamically updated homepage, linked to the web-based publications they write for, will be able to achieve a level of engagement and interaction with readers that has never been possible in the past, although it has often been conjectured.

In the mid-1990s, it was almost impossible to challenge the commercial uses of design. At that point, there was no larger public discussion to inform and sustain such a specialized critique. Dissenting voices were marginalized, barely heard in the media and seen as hopelessly old-fashioned in many people's eyes. We were still, at that stage, in the history-has-ended, ideology-is-over phase of post-Berlin Wall economic triumphalism. The techno-libertarians were having a field day and their relentless message—how convenient for big business—was always: "Let the market decide!" By the end of the decade, though, it was clear that many people shared a growing unease at the absence of any strong, visible opposition to the swaggering might of global big business as it smoothly muddled its own interests with ours, as though they were by definition necessarily the same. The *First Things First 2000* manifesto, launched in several countries in August 1999, was an attempt by a group of design people to test the water, to try out one or two supposedly pass ideas about design priorities, and see whether anyone agreed. Many were apparently infuriated, but in the last 18 months the text has received an international groundswell of support. The protests on the streets of Seattle at the end of 1999 confirmed the scale of disenchantment with global capitalism in the most spectacular fashion. It was a watershed event. Naomi Klein's book *No Logo*, which has been out for a little over a year, needs no introduction from me, but I can report that the public response in Britain to an argument about branding that probably could not have been made five years ago has been nothing less than phenomenal. *No Logo* has provided a vital litmus test for the changing mood, and other cultural critics are also contributing exhaustively researched, intellectually challenging, book-length polemics. I have already mentioned Thomas Frank's *One Market Under God*. In Britain, an environmental writer called George Monbiot, author of *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*, is another consistently compelling, passionate, argumentative voice.

So, we propose to talk here today about design criticism. For me, these writers demonstrate in the most vivid and inspirational way possible what criticism really means. With considerable guts, they are puncturing some of our most powerful and persuasive contemporary myths—myths sustained in part by design—and taking issue with immense corporate and governmental opponents. Any of them could easily opt for something much less demanding, yet they are determined to speak out and say what they think. They refuse to accept the complacent, lazy, foolish and solipsistic notion that "the time for being against is over". (And, let's face it, that day won't arrive until we're all sitting around on fluffy clouds congratulating ourselves for having arrived in heaven.) The problem for design is that it almost dare not open its eyes to what is really going on, to its own complicity, and to its manifest failure to face up to its own responsibilities and argue convincingly that design might be anything other than a servant of commercial interests. Start pulling the knot with any determination and the whole arrangement might begin to unravel. No, there's too much at stake. Better to pretend design's few critics are "naive" or "elitist" or some other piffle, do your best to ignore them, carry on regardless, and perhaps it will blow over soon.

For anyone with the stomach to be a critic, there is certainly no shortage of targets, causes, issues, or places to start.