The Importance of Critiquing Apple
by Steven Heller

In the 2012 Power Issue of *Print* magazine, Alexandra Lange wrote a very interesting essay titled "An Anatomy of Uncriticism." In her article, she suggests the idea that certain sacred cows are not simply resistant to design criticism, they are not critiqued at all. Apple is her main example.

"In June 2011, when Apple unveiled its doughnut-shaped, spaceship-suggestive headquarters in Cupertino, California, I took to my Design Observer blog to critique [it]," she writes. "… Commenters immediately wrote back, accusing me of East Coast snobbery and, worse, irrelevance."

One commenter's response made Alexandra particularly angry:

"Apple can do whatever it wants to do. It is a company and they make good stuff and they try their best to do the best at whatever it may be. Not all companies do that … No one can complain or has the right [to]."

Alexandra was right to be annoyed. That last phrase is just plain silly. Criticism is as necessary in every part of the design world as it is for art and culture. Opinion sparks discussion. Discussion educates. Education forms opinion. Opinion is necessary for free speech, and so on. So, what's that nonsense about not having "the right" to be critical?

Alexandra takes her argument further, questioning where, when, and how criticism should be done, and what is worthy to be critiqued. In asking who, along with Apple, is "above criticism, and why" she lists three categories: "Living Legends" (and the power of excellence), "Those too good to be criticized" (because of their good intentions), and "The Power of Happy" (bloggers who are "too helpful, too tasteful, and too positive to be critiqued").

There are designers and designs that get free-from-critique passes. There are also those that are totally ignored by critics for various reasons. The larger question is not who or what is criticized, but what deserves criticism. Critics must make critical choices. Saying nothing is often as revealing as saying something—although sometimes it is just ignorance. Understanding the reason for silence is part of the critical discussion.

Arguably, the Apple commenter is right in a wrong-headed way. Apple has definitely done a lot for industrial, graphic, and other kinds of design. But that does not mean blind acceptance. Apple has made mistakes that have impacted the public.

When Steve Jobs died, the first request I received asking me to write about his legacy was to focus on the "flubs," "misfires," and "failures." I chose the eMac, the handsome, though bulky and bulbous, desktop without any handle. That was a design flaw that still haunts me (I still have the machine on my studio floor, too heavy and much too difficult to carry downstairs).

So, Apple is not above design criticism. No company or company's products that directly impact the general public should be. But does that apply to individual designers? What about famous Italian designer Massimo Vignelli? And influential American graphic designer Seymour Chwast? Alexandra singled out these designers as "legends." They are in their eighties. Does a lifetime of work exempt their work from evaluation? If they are still producing after all these years, which these designers are, shouldn't they get some kind of senior discount?

If the standard for what deserves design criticism is based on how much the work impacts our society and culture, then a particular work is fair game no matter how old or talented its maker is. Since criticism is not meant to be a scold, but is rather a way to illuminate—to find positive aspects of the work by explanation and analysis—nothing and no one should be exempt. The "legends" deserve the attention, even if the work is "lesser" than their earlier accomplishments.

The critic should choose what is worth critiquing. Whatever the decision, the critique needs to have merit—it needs to provide value to the end-user, who, in the end, after all, will be the final judge.