

BOOK REVIEW: LAWS OF SIMPLICITY

JOHN MAEDA (MIT PRESS, CAMBRIDGE, MA, USA, 2006)

Review by Per Mollerup, Designlab

The Laws of Simplicity is the promising title of John Maeda's handy collection of observations on simplicity. The title suggests a systematic and exhaustive treatment of the subject, but Maeda's laws are mixed messages. Most of the laws involve issues related to simplicity rather than general principles of simplicity, that is, laws. The "laws" deal with such different issues as reduction, organization, time, learning, differences, context, emotion, trust, failure, and subtraction or addition. Subjects such as learning only have a distant relation to simplicity.

Laws of Simplicity includes many good observations. These fight for the reader's attention with passages typified by namedropping and personal memories. Maeda could have been more rigorous in applying his own first law, the law of reduction. Maeda fails to define simplicity, and he never explains why we want it. While he suggests implicitly that there are functional and aesthetic reasons, he never states them.

In a better-structured book, we would have forgiven Maeda's blunder in stating that he finds Pareto's Principle useful. His argument demonstrates that he hasn't understood it. Pareto's Principle is not about dividing a matter into two fractions of 80% and 20%. Pareto's Principle says that a small percentage of the input in any project or organization yields a large percentage of the results. These two percentages should of course not be added, as they are based on different lots.

Published online 14 March, 2008

ISSN 1749-3463 print/ ISSN 1749-3471

DOI: 10.1080/17493460701880662

© 2007 Per Mollerup