

Unusual design concepts

Lut Pil, Design Flanders

At the furniture fair in Cologne in 2004 a dual was held between two duos, the Campanas and the Bouroullecs. Brothers Humberto and Fernando Campana from São Paulo and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec from Paris presented their visions of living and life in the future in two major projects. 'Unusual design concepts' – that much was clear from their proposals. Their visions – including space for the Campanas for a spontaneous craft-based production using poor materials and, for the Bouroullecs, an unexpected interpretation of functionality (to name but one element each of their much richer design concepts) – are representative of a number of current trends. This concentration on the handmade and on the reinterpretation of functional implements also indicates, in a non-coercive way, the contours within which the 4th Triennial for design takes place. From the ceramic lights by Jos Devriendt made of porcelain that allows the light to shine through dimly, evoking an atmosphere of candlelight in its small table version, to the playful garden furniture by Dirk Wynants, floating on the water like a huge doughnut. An exhibition that treats you to doughnuts by candlelight.

What do the *DoNuts* and the series of lamps have in common? Although they have clearly emerged from different design concepts, both are still fairly strange entities in the world of industrial design. The ceramic lights combine traditional associations with industrial production and *DoNuts* is definitely a very attractive and unusual garden chair (and is rather 'not done', which is almost literally indicated in the product's name: Do Nut – Do Not; the attendant company name 'Sexy Outstanding Stuff' plays with all kinds of meanings and abbreviates to SOS). The industrial logic here seems to mesh in a fascinating way with ideas which do not immediately belong – and this is precisely what the 4th Triennial wants to examine: how can non-industrial processes or concepts have a meaningful effect on industrial design in Belgium? Today, as previously, industrial design is not always thought of in purely industrial terms. Designers and companies are open to influences from non-industrial contexts. This non-industrial can be broadly interpreted but is confined here to the craftsmanlike or artistic, where artistic is interpreted both in terms of shape and concept. More on this later.

Industrial design

Design and industrialisation have been building up an impressive history for over a century. While the relationship may initially have been difficult – the 19th century saw the transition from manual labour to industrialisation and characters such as William Morris explicitly continued to champion traditional production – the 20th century demonstrated that machine production does not necessarily have to lead to inferior objects. Moreover, new ideas increasingly determined the design philosophy. Form was matched to function and decoration largely lost ground. By promoting a type of design that responded to the context of the machine, the quality of industrial production was improved. The slogan 'art and technology, a new entity' was indicative of the new Bauhaus trend in 1923. Individualised production made room for industrial standardisation. In subsequent decades, industrial functionalism increasingly became the paradigm for good design. Functional products with a clear and rational design completely organised everyday life, not only for the elite but also for the general public. The 1960s were years of triumph for functional design and for

faith in technology and progress. Design and production processes became highly technological and specialised and clearly intended for mass production. However, this does not mean that the paths of the industrial and the non-industrial have to diverge completely. Scandinavian design demonstrates that it is possible to build up a rich history of industrial design based on traditional crafts. However, industrial designers have also written history with designs in which they play in a surprising way with concept, humour, memory, decoration, etc. and build up a more mental relationship with the user. This produced icons such as the *Joe Sofa* (1968) by Gionatan De Pas, Donato D'Urbino and Paolo Lomazzi.

Interaction as current trend

The interaction between non-industrial design and industrial production is not only historically interesting, it is also one of the current trends in the international context. Contemporary designers are allowing experimentation and their own handling of material to evolve into a situation in which production takes place industrially. The new digital techniques are also having an impact on design, research and production. Computer programs enable 3D simulations and Rapid Prototyping produces a physical version without the designer's hands having to come into contact with material and tools. In addition, the design world has expressed a clear interest in incorporating an artistic or craft-based culture into the machine-produced mass product. This is a trend which Dineman Kuilman, director of Premsele – foundation for Dutch design – characterises as 'room to experiment'.¹ Here, he is referring to Richard Hutten (and others), who has his furniture designs produced in his own cabinet-making workshop. It is not nostalgia that guides this Dutch industrial designer. His workshop is fitted with contemporary technology and his furniture is perfectly finished. The traditional character of his work is the result of his conceptual design philosophy and of the imperfection inherent in the material.²

Room to experiment is a good summary of cross-pollination. In 2003, when Thimo te Duits, curator of the design department of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, was asked to give the state of the art of crafts in the Netherlands, he put the *Knotted Chair* (1996) by Marcel Wanders at the top of his article.³ This chair combines a manual macramé technique with carbon and aramide fibres which harden. The knotted chair came about as part of the *Dry Tech* project set up in 1995 and 1996 by Droog Design in collaboration with the Faculty of Aviation at Delft Technical University. Other designers also took part in this project. Hella Jongerius designed a knitted lamp made of glass fibre threads (1996). For her, the experiment was a quest for a symbiosis between traditional techniques and new technology, without a trace of cynicism.⁴ She insisted on not having the material research controlled by computer but by an open, unconditioned mind – she describes her interaction with technology as childlike in its naivety⁵ - although she was able to make use of the knowledge available at a high-tech laboratory. The fact that this research does not always produce satisfactory results should be no reason to write off the non-industrial experiment in the industrial sector as irrelevant. This is because working unconventionally with material provides an insight into both familiar and unfamiliar qualities and possibilities. Designers such as Richard Hutten and Hella Jongerius are

¹ Dingeman Kuilman, 'Room to Experiment', in: *Premsele Newsletter*, April 2003, p. 5.

² Cf. Ed Van Hinte, *Richard Hutten*, Rotterdam, 2002, p. 150 and 200: 'Richard Hutten is an industrial designer who works from a clearly defined set of limitations rather than towards an image of what the object is going to have to look like.'

³ Thimo te Duits, in 'The future of the crafts: views from around the world', in: *Crafts*, 181, March-April 2003, p. 22.

⁴ Louise Schouwenberg, *Hella Jongerius*, London, 2003, s.p.

⁵ Ida van Zijl, *Droog & Dutch design*, Utrecht, 2004, p. 74.

therefore happy to get their hands dirty and they are not designers on the fringes of the world of design.

'Craft is back' – the trend is generally recognised and is one in which the cultural avant-garde dares to identify with traditional crafts. Louise Schouwenberg, artist and publicist with a clear position in this debate, summarises a number of the reasons for this, 'including globalisation and a logical reaction to it which calls for the preservation of local customs. In addition, developments within art and design have also led to a re-use of old techniques. The "new" media in the art world are no longer quite so very new. The hype is over and, through familiarisation, the matter-less media are finally achieving the position they deserve: alongside all other media they are no more or less than vehicles for content. Cautiously, a better balance is emerging between relatively old and new media. Within design, people are dealing with excessive industrialisation of the production process. The profusion of similar, cheap mass-produced products calls out, as it were, for products to which more attention is devoted. Paradoxically, the range of production possibilities has increased enormously, precisely thanks to the industrial process, not only in the form of new technical discoveries, but also through re-discovered techniques. The return of craft-based techniques does not however mean that they have become more important in principle. Artists and designers sometimes use them as a way of making a specific comment, sometimes as an expression of "camp", but they are also gradually being seen simply as suitable means if required by certain ideas.'⁶

These are reasons she also recorded in her contribution to the collection of essays entitled, *The Future is Handmade. The Survival and Innovation of Crafts* (2003), published in association with the eponymously named touring exhibition organised in 2004 by the Prince Claus Fund and Premsele.⁷ Thus, crafts are not simply back again, they are also content-related and interpreted by some designers and companies technically, in a new way. 'Craft is not a dirty word but one that designers are actively redefining for the twenty-first century.'⁸ An appreciation of the handmade even enables a traditional material sensitivity and specialist skill to be recognised in some functional objects that are entirely industrially produced. The German designer Konstantin Grcic, who was first trained as a cabinetmaker, is for example pleasantly surprised when told that his work exudes a feeling of something handmade. He is convinced that good industrial design can only be based on an understanding of how things are physically made.⁹ The craft aspect is thus present in his work in a subdued way and to a certain extent intentionally.

The cross-over redefines the relationships between the various disciplines. The triangular relationship between art, craft and design is becoming one in which the positions are no longer hierarchically and clearly demarcated:

'In the past, art, craft, and design existed in a rigid triangular relationship; art reigned supreme and untouchable at the apex, while craft and design occupied opposing corners at the base. In the past decade, this triangle has been replaced by

⁶ Louise Schouwenberg, 'Sumptuous content deserves a beautiful vase', in: *Nieuwsbrief Fonds voor Beeldende kunsten, vormgeving en bouwkunst*, 6, May 2004. The text was originally published for the exhibition *Twaalfdelig en méér (Twelve-part and more)* in January 2004 at the Fonds voor Beeldende kunsten, vormgeving en bouwkunst, Amsterdam.

⁷ Louise Schouwenberg, 'A Dutch Perspective on Craft', in: Malu Halasa and Els van der Plas (eds.), *The Future is Handmade. The Survival and Innovation of Crafts*, (Prince Claus Fund Journal, 10a), The Hague, 2003, p. 108-121.

⁸ Kristi Cameron and Paul Makovsky, 'When did craft become a dirty word?', in: *Metropolis*, October 2003, p. 115.

⁹ Susanne Helgeson, 'Konstantinian concentration', in: *Form*, 1, 2004, p. 63.

a new paradigm in which art, craft, and design exist in a circular arrangement, with each field supporting, nourishing, informing, and challenging the others. Craft has not disappeared from our vision. It has simply become embedded in the arts and design of our time.¹⁰

Freedom

Industry works with a rational vision of production and sales and imposes its rules on the designers who work for it. They have to adapt to the requirements and methods of industrial production. Their freedom is limited. Experimentation must ultimately produce results. However, new developments benefit from a certain slowness in research and in the design process. Traditional research allows this. The search for new developments – the (arts and) crafts have long since stopped using only materials from the past but are also incorporating high-tech innovations without renouncing their material basis – may progress with difficulty and an experiment may go wrong. The economic consequences are less drastic than in industry, where every adjustment to machines must be financially profitable.¹¹ Once the experiment is finished and has produced the desired result, it is still difficult to convince industry to take the project on board. Hella Jongerius has so much respect for the company Makkum, that was prepared to begin production of her porcelain *B-set*, a design in which she explicitly aimed for imperfection although the company has all the knowledge in house to deliver technically flawless work.¹²

Perfection/imperfection

Industrialisation creates the possibility of machine perfection and, at the same time, this possibility soon becomes a requirement. 'In creating the machine, we have set before ourselves a positively inhuman standard of perfection. No matter what the occasion, the criterion of successful mechanical form is that it should look *as if* no human hand had touched it', wrote Lewis Mumford in 1934.¹³ Designers can therefore deliberately give the industrially manufactured object an imperfection, based on a conceptual attitude, or allow coincidental errors and play with the aesthetics of the imperfect. We see this, for example, in a number of designs by Droog Design, such as *Bronto* (1997), a children's chair in which Richard Hutten allows the irregularities in the production process to radiate their own beauty. Imperfection is thus given a positive content and gives the product intellectual added value which industrial perfection cannot provide. Imperfection also makes the user aware of the relevance of the production process, a relevance that is not confined to traditional techniques (which do in fact often aim for a technically perfect finish) but which – including for Jongerius – can also be meaningful in a high-tech, industrial production context.¹⁴ To allege that every designer must aim for perfection is

¹⁰ David Revere McFadden in 'The future of the crafts: views from around the world', in: *Crafts*, March-April 2003, p. 31.

¹¹ In the discussion organised by the journal *Domus* under the heading, 'In the World of Objects' for the April 2004 edition, between Andrea Branzi, Ettore Sottsass, Alessandro Mendini, Vico Magistretti and Enzo Mari, the focus is immediately on the need for passionate company managers who are not guided solely by mass production. After the Second World War, Italian design became great thanks to manufacturers who dared to think big and still worked partly at traditional level. Ettore Sottsass: 'And manufacturers were different too. They were young industrialists, almost all of them anti-fascists that had entered their fathers' businesses right after the war. They hoped that Italy could come up with something new, both socially and ethically. They followed us with great ethical passion, but they were not real industrialists. They were mechanized artisans.' - Enzo Mari: 'They were industrialists who were not familiar with the horrors of industrial production and naively took risks in equipping their factories. Sometimes all went well, often they went bankrupt.' Maria Cristina Tommasini, 'In the World of Objects', in *Domus*, 869, April 2004, p. 32.

¹² Louise Schouwenberg, *Hella Jongerius*, London, 2003, s.p.

¹³ Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, New York, 1934, p. 358.

¹⁴ Louise Schouwenberg, *Hella Jongerius*, London, 2003, s.p.

therefore a disputed allegation, particularly if it is not clear what is meant by perfection.¹⁵ However, when the search for imperfection becomes a trend that is fed more economically than conceptually, one may wonder where the ultimate added value lies.

Standardisation, less is more

Individuality, decoration

Industrialisation also leads to standardisation. Nonetheless, this does not mean that coincidence, individuality or handiwork have to be completely excluded from the process. The production chain can for example be opened up at a certain point to manual contribution and leave an individual trace on the final product.¹⁶ Coincidence and uniqueness can also be built in by devising systems that make product differentiation possible. The Italian designer Gaetano Pesce has developed a technique that links mass production to individual variation – and he knows why he is doing this: 'In the future customers will expect original objects. What I call the third industrial revolution will give people the opportunity to have a unique piece; the technology we have today gives us the possibility to produce in this way. Materials too. It is very much like what the artisans of the past achieved. But at the same time, it reflects the spirit of our time, where everything is relative.'¹⁷

Coincidence and uniqueness are also at work in *Repeat* (2002), the fabric designed by Hella Jongerius for the textiles firm Maharam. In this project, Jongerius has combined her own design philosophy with production on an industrial scale. *Repeat* is a fabric design with a three-metre repeat that uses existing fabric designs and technical codings from the weaving industry. As a result of the large repeat, the upholstery can deliver an individual product each time because the upholstery has no repeat in design or the repetition is not noticeable. 'You have an industrial product that looks like it's been woven specially for you', explains the designer. It offers the industry new possibilities that are clearly recognised by Mary Murphy, vice president of design at Maharam. 'It's a totally revolutionary way to look at textiles, one that really challenges how the furniture industry uses fabrics.'¹⁸ 'Future craft' is how Ilse Crawford describes this manipulation of production techniques in order to make industrialised unique products.¹⁹ Here too, the computer can be useful. By programming the software in such a way that the industrial machines randomly apply patterns to the product, mass production delivers unique pieces. For example, Michael Young makes use of this in *Tölt*, a series of tables with a Corian top which is irregularly perforated, designed for the Belgian company Extremis. Decoration is immediately back again and, with it, the possibility of tradition and history.²⁰

However, the movement can also be reversed. Industrial designers with an interest in decoration and cultural identity can easily cope with traditional techniques which they then appropriate in an innovative way. This legacy is not sought based on nostalgia, but on an urge to experiment. Knotting, crocheting, knitting, weaving and

¹⁵ Cf. the discussion between Marc Vlemmings and Maarten Baas in *Items*, 1, 2004, p. 26-28.

¹⁶ Cf. the *Trace box* project (2001) by Richard Hutten for Picus in Renny Ramakers, *Less + More. Droog Design in context*, Rotterdam, 2002, p. 124-125.

¹⁷ Gaetano Pesce in *Gaetano Pesce: Modern Times Again*, New York, 1988, s.p.; quote in George H. Marcus, *What Is Design Today?*, New York, 2002, p. 31.

¹⁸ Jennifer Kabat, 'Smart hands of Hella Jongerius', in *Metropolis*, July 2002, p. 112.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Cf. embroidery decoration by Hella Jongerius; Louise Schouwenberg, *Hella Jongerius*, London, 2003, s.p.: '(...) embroidery gives me a way of saying something about customs of eating and decorating, about being trapped in conventions and etiquette.' The cultural significance of decoration is not further developed as a theme in the 4th Triennial.

embroidering are often techniques that allow craft and industrial design to merge into one.

Alternatives

In areas with little in the way of developed industry, handiwork and non-specialised technology can provide interesting solutions. Inspired by the economic and social reality in Brazil, Humberto and Fernando Campana incorporate poor materials and imperfection into their design. They thus create a language which offers an alternative to the perfection of Western industrial products and which shows respect for the local situation in their country. Every single one of their *Favela* chairs (2003), manufactured by Edra, is hand-glued and hand-nailed and consists of wood that is used to build slums.

The leitmotifs of their work are weaving, accumulation and collection, signs of a manufacturing system based on the most elementary of technology. The main concern to keep things together by any means available: straps, nails, elastic, wire, joints. In this way the Campanas have the freedom to grow their forms through a process of accretion. They create form spontaneously through the process of making, rather than through any a priori definition. This spontaneity has allowed the Campanas to avoid the more obvious pitfalls of a nostalgic craft-based approach to design. In their hands, design is about freedom, the freedom to reinvent the forms around them and to work with their own hands. They take their time, working slowly, so as to be able to select gradually the themes and materials that interest them; they are ready to explore but also to change their minds, to combine materials without preconceptions.²¹

Corallo, a chair which the Campana brothers also had manufactured by Edra in 2004, is even less of a mass-made product. Although the chair consists of industrial steel wire, finished with coral epoxy paint, this steel wire is hand-bent for every chair. Each chair is a unique product which – compared to the *Favela* – is even further removed from industrial design. *Corallo* is perceived as a museum piece and is almost a sculptural object. Even within an industrial context, the inventive manipulation of material and technique can be 'art that can be used when necessary', as the work of Ron Arad is described. This is also the case when the form emerges from the clearly sculptural background of the designer. Then too, the result reveals an artistic-functional duality.

Recycling

One of the strategies for combating the rigid logic of industrial production and over-production is to re-use discarded industrial products. The object is sometimes literally retrieved from the waste bin and, after 'treatment', given a new life. 'Restoration of daily life' is what Franck Bragigand calls this process. This French artist, who works in both the artistic and the design world and regularly collaborates with Droog Design, may for example paint old furniture in striking colours, after which they are publicly auctioned or sold as expensive objects through a gallery. However, the painted objects can also be given away for nothing. Irrespective of the system through which the furniture finds its way to a new owner, it regains its original function and gains another one. In this kind of manipulation, it combines functionality and a certain degree of artistic autonomy. It becomes a sculpture – in Franck Bragigand's case, a painting at the same time – without ceasing to be an implement. This type of

²¹ Francesca Picchi, 'Redeemed by imperfection', in: *Domus*, 860, June 2003, p. 86.

ambiguity colours the Dutch café that was fitted by Droog Design on behalf of Premisela in the Baltic House Theatre in St. Petersburg in 2003. Franck Bragigand painted the existing room and a number of old tables in various shades of green and pink. Re-use also characterises Bey's *Lightshade shade* lamp in the centre of the room or Tejo Remy's milk bottle lamps above the bar. Recycling here is linked to conceptual thinking and social realism.

Reinterpretation

The conceptual design attitude has become very popular with Droog Design. Many (young) designers are interested in working outside the usual boundaries. Functional products are being reinterpreted. Reinterpretation places the object at a distance, causes confusion and hesitation. Nothing seems evident any more. In the challenge, the object is looked at again in a specific way and placed in a new context. This context is broader than that of the functional use. The critical approach takes advantage of an intellectual, cultural and emotional way of dealing with the material world and here too demonstrates a relationship with practices from the art world. When Marcel Wanders is asked what links art and design, he answers, 'the poetry, the imagination, the fun, the "journey" one makes to discover the meanings, the excitement felt by the creator in showing people what he has done, regardless of whether it is art or design. The feeling of doing something for the rest of the world. When something goes "click" and things change... I like all those things in art, and I like it when design succeeds in doing this as well.'²²

The many interpretations of such a banal industrial thing as the light bulb form an excellent example. At *Brilliant. Lights & Lighting*, a recent exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, this was one of the themes, with presentations by Ingo Maurer, Harri Koskinen, Rody Graumans and Dumoffice, to name but a few.²³ To Ingo Maurer, the light bulb is 'the perfect meeting of industry and poetry', a fine tribute to the qualities of industrial design. At the same time, the light bulb inspires Ingo Maurer to his own form of industrial design. His designs play with a light bulb in a light bulb, with wings attached to the light bulb ('because light comes with no noise'), with an intangible light bulb that makes Edison light up as an illustrious mind in the room. The lights conceived by Ingo Maurer are just as much a perfect meeting between industry and poetry. The poetry is defined less by the laws of engineering than by playfulness and artistic design.

This type of meeting requires companies that are open to the unusual and unconventional, to the stratified and metaphorical, and whose production brings interesting diversity to the vast array of consumer goods. It is not the ultimate chair or table that is being sought, but something that differs from the standardised universal model.²⁴ Designers and companies must not leave their own field in the process. However, it can help to call oneself an 'ex-designer', as the Spaniard Martí Guixé does, which means he does not always have to answer for the unconventional in his still somewhat commercial design. He is a designer 'with the mind of an artist, and the "do-mentality" of a designer. In his search for essential contemporary forms of design, he operates outside current paths and formats. (...) Guixé is a typical contemporary artist-designer.'²⁵

²² Lotta Jonson, "Creator of surprises", in: *Form*, 3, 2004, p. 71.

²³ Jane Pavitt, *Brilliant. Lights & Lighting*, (V&A Publications), London, 2004.

²⁴ Christine Colin, *Moins et Plus. Collection design du Fonds national d'art contemporain, Ministère de la Culture, Paris, France, 1980-2000*, Paris-Taïpei, 2001, p. 13.

²⁵ Ineke Schwartz, 'Martí Guixé', in Ed Annink and Ineke Schwartz, *Bright Minds, Beautiful Ideas. Parallel Thoughts in Different Times. Bruno Munari, Charles & Ray Eames, Martí Guixé, Jurgen Bey*, Amsterdam, 2003, p. 101-102.

Experimental process

In a recent text, Edith Doove writes, 'A studio is a wondrous place, a place of practice. All is still in process – sculptures are looking for their place and form in it. A studio usually has one sculpture too many, but that is not a downside. It has too many sculptures to qualify as an exhibition hall. There is a lot of disturbance around the sculptures: comfy chairs, books, magazines, cups and saucers here and there. The place may be dirty, dusty; it is certainly not tidied. There are sculptures that are only just finished, some already wrapped up and set to go. It is a place for living with the sculptures. Sculptures come into existence in it.'²⁶

The 4th Triennial is not attempting to reconstruct the designer's studio in the exhibition hall. Alongside the final product it does however also show the experimental process that precedes this result. Prototypes, sketches, photos, working material, etc. document the research and development for the project.

Around thirty designers from Belgium are present with one or more recent products or projects. Together, they form a heterogeneous group. Methods and starting points differ and the final products are not always what they seem. The choice was not obvious and was advised by a working group. Six broadly interpreted starting points form the basis for the selection. Thus, the (industrial) product may have emerged from a traditional practice and retain the material sensitivity and tactile quality in the industrial product that is inherent in the traditional craft. The product can also be the result of a craftsmanlike creative investigation which subsequently has to be translated into an industrial production process. Since industry and the associated production logic cannot be flexible enough for the machines to be easily adapted to the innovation to which the craft-based investigation has led, the conversion is a long and arduous process. Designer and manufacturer together have to want to look creatively for solutions, have to be willing to make adjustments, both to the design and to the machines, and must want to accept the limitations that necessarily go with industrial production. The final result can also explicitly pick up ideas that do not belong in the industrial design process but are derived from a craft-based context, such as imperfection, coincidence, individualisation, an idea of fragility and of cultural diversity. In addition, the product can be conceived based on a sculptural language or it can have a striking graphic or sculptural form as a result of the material and technology used. It may also be an industrial product in which artistic ideas are reflected. Finally, the starting point may be an industrial product that has been reconsidered from a conceptual context, with an (artistic) interpretation as its counterpart. What this selection ultimately produces is not a better form of design, but a different form. The meeting between industry and the non-industrial perhaps has something that can be extrapolated to the fourth power.

²⁶ Edith Doove, 'I am a Good Horse on a Soft Brick ... A collage of reflections on the work of Johan Creten', in *Johan Creten. Miami Dreams*, Mechelen, 2004, s.p.