



Left: 'Flower Pyramid',
Stella Jongerius, 2008
Right: 'Cinderella' table,
Jurgen Elshoven, 2008
Below: 'Gardenhouse',
Jürgen Bey, assisted
by Christian
Oppewal and Silje
van der Velden, 2012



TALES OF THE

*Coinciding with the V&A's
'Telling Tales' exhibition,
Gareth Williams explains
why today's designers
love narrative. Plus Hugh
Pearman and Caroline
Roux, on design art*





Left: 'Rubber Baron'
cabinet, Studio Job, 2006
Right: 'Flower
Pyramid', Studio
Makkin & Sey, 2008
Far right:
'Flower Pyramid',
Studio Job, 2008
Below: 'Rubber Baron'
table, Studio Job, 2006



UNEXPECTED

To 'tell tales' is a phrase wrought with ambiguity, bearing meanings both innocent and deceitful. As children, we are told tales that enthrall us with imaginary virtues, but these stories teach us about moral boundaries and social expectations, too. Children also learn the effect of exaggeration and half-truths, and how to avoid blame by telling tales on each other. This behaviour is learned in early childhood but we take it with us into adulthood. Likewise, the designs discussed in this essay display an ambiguous and complex relationship to story-telling and narrative. We are never far from

the power of language to shape the imagination, and this book [here extracted] about the design of objects is also a textual narrative. It shows how we can make stories from the things around us, stories that need not be accompanied by clear interpretations. It showcases work by international contemporary designers who make narrative an integral part of their finished objects, which often recall fairy stories, history, archetypes, rites of passage or life's rituals. As exemplified by Dutch designer Wield Smeets's *High Tea Pot*, a teapot modelled on a pig's skull and enclosed in a water-tight tin case, the

function of these objects is evocative and symbolic rather than utilitarian. They seem to slip across an arbitrary and invisible line that separates design and art. Together, they make us think of something beyond the objects themselves: their narrative character bears associated meanings.

Narratives and stories are primarily oral and linguistic constructions. In his early 20th-century essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin argued that the tragedy of the modern condition was that people had become alienated from the organic quality of story-telling. In its most extreme form, this was





Left: 'High Tea Post',
Wahki Samson, 2007
Right: 'Chinese Art
Furniture' chair,
Royce Parkman, 2008



emphasized by the trauma wrought by the intimacy of war. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is miscommunication all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something has become inaccessible to us, the secret among our possessions, were taken from us the ability to exchange experiences. Stories, therefore, link us, but these links are broken by trauma. In this sense, the works of New York-based Royce Parkman entitled *Building of Chinese* - miniature replicas of well-known buildings that commemorate man-made disasters - are what psychologists might term 'traumata', symbols in which different incidents can be stored and buried, and which allow us to tell tales once again to the face of terrible events.

Benjamin also drew an analogy between traditional craft skills and the crafting of tales, telling making and telling, the object and the subject. "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work - the road, the machine, and the urban - is itself an artistic form of communication, as it were. It does not convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It strikes the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the fingerprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel."

The Dutch designer Hella Jongorius knows that the vase she designs tell stories. Though she herself is not the potter, they retain the marks of their making and the shadows of forms from the past. "Vases were originally meant to be used, of course, but like any useful object a vase has a potential that goes beyond functionality. The story can rise above the object itself... Useful objects have a rich history. They are saturated with references to specific contexts and situations in history. If you refer to that

history explicitly, and include all the associations in a new story, then you are communicating something - and it's something about useful objects."

Benjamin concluded that story-telling and making objects are aspects of the same activity. In fact, you can go on and ask yourself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way.

But before this narrative begins we need to explore the context within it can be located, and to establish key relationships. Twentieth-century and contemporary art practice has increasingly favoured 'concept' above 'material'; the artist's exploration of ideas has become more important than his or her ability physically to construct them. Today, more than ever, the painter's supporting statement is liable to be judged as carefully as the artwork.

Broadly speaking, this left with century craft practice to focus on the materiality of the object, its substance and technique, usually in the sphere of the unique and handmade or the limited edition. Forced into a corner by the visibility of the notion of art-as-individual-as-object, 'low-cost' craft has followed the process of making the creative at least considered (though not entirely rep-

resented) by art. If nothing else, craftpeople could claim to create their own individualized works even if constrained by conventions and dogmas often of their own making. But little or no space existed for notions of 'creative autonomy' for designers (as opposed to craftpeople) who, in the modern period, became professionalised into design managers, juggling impermissible demands in clients' briefs, market requirements, technological innovation and bottom-line economics.

In more recent several trends have brought the practices of these groups into closer alignment: the antiquarian term 'design art' standing like a leaky umbrella over them all. One trend has been the response of conceptual, minimal and installation artists, in their individual ways, to the experience of real life, by creating works that appeared to imitate or recreate designed objects and environments. Of these, Donald Judd is widely cited as a precursor, but unconsciously so, as his furniture and interiors were conceived as actual objects of (relatively limited) utility, not as representations of objects of utility. Judd's own design thinking did not help, but maintained the old art/design hierarchy: "If a chair or a building is not functional, it is appears to be only art. It is ridiculous. The art of a chair is not its resemblance to art, but its ability to enable reasonableness. The art is art is partly the invention of someone's interest regardless of other considerations. A work of art exists as itself, a chair exists as a chair itself. And the idea of a chair isn't a chair."

The chair may share common ground visually with his sculptures, but their creative concepts are quite different, so there the similarities end. Subsequent artists have created works of art that look like design objects - for example Jorge Pardo's take on the appearance of interior designs and domestic objects, but which arise from artists

**"Vases were meant to be used,
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HILLA JONGORJUS



Left: 'Catastrophe' 1998, Maxim Velocovsky, 2007
 Below: 'Buildings of Disaster (Chernobyl)', Royce Parkers, 1998-2009
 Right: 'Buildings of Disaster (World Trade Center)', Royce Parkers, 1998-2009



Design art: the case against

By Hugh Pearson

Design art is either design or art. It cannot be both, therefore it is a term that does not need to exist. There are designers, there are artists. There are many designers who think they are artists - normally they are deluded - but not so many artists who turn their hands to design. This is because art is not the same as design, and the artists know it.

If you make design to mean the (usually routine) making of useful, reproducible things, and craft the direct making of more usually one-off things that might or might not be useful, then is craft sometimes the same as art, which is also hand-made? There is overlap, but also distinction. After all, for the Victorians to name a stylistic movement 'Arts and Crafts' suggests a coming together rather than a duplication. Is a Hans Coper or a Lucie Rie pot art or craft? I would call them craft-based artists. That seems to work. Design-based artists? No. Does not compute.

It's interesting to speculate on the difference between an artist's limited-edition print run, say, or the teams of workers employed to turn out Damien Hirst's spin and spot paintings - and the designer of an object with a small production run, such as a Formula One racing car. In any season each team will produce no more than half a dozen cars of the same type, each

essentially hand-made. Does this make a Formula One car a work of art? Some would say so, but in truth it cannot be. Works of art are by definition useless, in functional terms. A racing car is pure function. It is often beautiful. That is not the same thing as art.

Mr Anthony Caro once told me, matter-of-factly: 'All art is a scam.' That's it, exactly. Art persuades us it is art by the simple act of the artist saying it is so. An artist could not say that a work of art was a

designed object however the users of the object, since it must have a function, might disagree.

A designer can be an artist, of course, in the same way that T. S. Eliot was a banker who was also a poet. Design has more to do with art, perhaps, than banking with poetry. But at best it is more like sculptural architecture - having attributes of art while not itself being art. Neither fish nor fowl nor good nor better, or the baffling old saying has it.



'Thirty-six colors', Damien Hirst, glass on canvas, 97 cm x 127 cm, 2007

debate rather than design imperatives. One such work, entitled *Project* (2000), reconfigured the reception space and bookshop of New York's Dia Center for the Arts, and was conceived as an installation for a period of two years. Although *Project* looked like an interior makeover of the space, visitors were encouraged to regard it as an autonomous artwork or intervention and were not expected to judge it solely for its effectiveness as a design solution.

Another trend has been the revolt of craft practice against the constraints of a legacy too closely associated with vernacular activities, traditions, technical conventions and even the requirement to make objects of utility. Craft has increasingly asserted the 'concept' as being of equal importance to the 'material practice', heavily approaching the practice of making fine art. And the market has responded accordingly, allowing (with some condescension) space for the craft object alongside (but somewhat lower down) 'real' art. There are exceptions that only serve to prove the rule, for example the work of potter Grayson Perry, who, by winning the Turner Prize in 2003, conquered the art world.

Perhaps surprisingly, a third trend, the so-called 'aestheticisation of everyday life', has been brought about not by artists' quests, or craftsmakers' virtuosity, but by designers' relationship with commerce. Design has always been open about its flirtation with capital and has never shirked its responsibility to the hand that feeds it. As Western society has become richer, and culture has become more sophisticated, design has willingly serviced it with ever-more products for consumption. As a result, designers of furniture, lighting, objects for the home and so on, have found themselves caught between the constraints of commerce, the ghetto of craft and the individuality of art.



Left: 'Latter' chairs,
vca, Sebastian
Bregjevic, 2008
Below: 'Fig Leaf'
wardrobe,
Tud Boontje 2008
Opposite: 'Wich' chair,
Tud Boontje, 2004

Manufacturers selling to the saturated markets of the First World have turned to aesthetics and styling to differentiate consumer goods. This trend has not been confined to the elite or luxury products. It has seen the democratisation of high-end contemporary design across the market, in much the same way as the high ideals of Modernist designers reached the mass market through product design in the 1930s. Henry Dreyfus impressed his signature into the moulded plastic vacuum flasks he designed, just as Tud Boontje translated his signature style into affordable Christmas decorations and gift products for the giant American homeware chain Target.

In the past, mass-market products have not necessarily evinced high-end design values, but this has now changed. IKEA promotes high-end design at low-end prices (see p.18 this issue), achieving both through economies of scale and distribution, and other design-led manufacturers must match improvements in design quality with associated savings in production costs.

However, some of the designers discussed here reject the mass-production paradigm altogether. 'Producers make mass productions. We are not producers,' says Job Smeets of Antwerp-based designers Studio Job, who selects designs for industrial-scale production. Designers are hailed when they make thousands of the same thing. But artists are hailed when they make a unique thing. I think the amount of copies has nothing to do with the creative value of the piece.'

Connoisseurship actively rejects populism. Makers' marks, labels and signatures (as well as distinctive signature styles), numbered editions, exotic materials, high-quality fabrication and documented provenances in creditable collections are its ingredients. The connoisseur gains expertise and, crucially, is allowed access to rar-

ity. Since the early 90s, the secondary market – especially for mid-20th-century design artefacts – has grown hugely based on these values, until a storage unit designed by Charlotte Perriand, or a screen by Eileen Gray, is priced as if it were a fine-art object traded within the same market as blue-chip artists of the period.

Connoisseurship and rigorous design history also add intellectual value to design objects by applying standards of research and documentation to hitherto-overlooked works. These may be better than art at capturing the cultural moment of their inception precisely because designers design in tandem with, and in service to, society and culture, rather than making art 'for art's sake'. The cultural theorist Vilém Flusser wrote: 'The



wood design has managed to retain its key position in everyday discourse because we are starting (perhaps rightly) to lose faith in art and technology as sources of value. Because we are starting to wise up to the design behind them.' It was inevitable that objects designed by the likes of Perriand and Gray should become referred to as 'design art' once the model of connoisseurship, borrowed from the art market and art history, was applied to design.

Thus the maturing market for mid-20th-century design objects fuels demand for newer – even brand new – design objects that conform to the standards demanded by connoisseurs. And here is the rub: some contemporary designers deliberately court elitism and consciously recast themselves as gallery artists, responding to and symbiotically with a network of galleries and auctions that is focused on design. The work shown in such galleries – often cast as 'prototypes' or 'research' – is free of the constraints of industrial manufacture or the need to appeal to a mass market.

These designers, often well-known names, are seeking more autonomy from the design-manager role prescribed for them, and more creative freedom than working to industrial briefs will allow. They realise also that art fees are potentially more lucrative than design royalties will ever be. For those designers without the backing of galleries, small editions of self-initiated projects offer a way to produce their own work, giving access to collectors and the chance to build a media profile. It is no coincidence that they adopt from the art market the mechanisms of limited editions and the language used to describe collections, even when the idea of an artist's proof of a chair or lamp seems to stretch the notion to breaking point.





The designers who inhabited that space where craft and design intersect used to be known as designer-makers. Their prophets were Ettore Sottsass and Gaetano Piretti, and Italian designers of the 70s and 80s especially professed contemporary practice. Alessandro Mendini, the venerable Italian designer and theorist, spectacularly attempted to fuse painterly techniques with historical design in his *Front chair*. Today they are known as 'design artists', and their prophets are Ron Arad, Marc Newson and Zaha Hadid, whose rank is confirmed by their status within the art market, and among whose disciples number the brothers Campana and Bouroullec. By specifically producing limited-edition works, industrial designers and architects including Ross Lovegrove, Amanda Levete, Barber Osgerby and Patrick Jouin have also engaged with 'design art'.

Arad's reputation is built on his innovative, singular, experimental and influential furniture, created in small editions over three decades. It embodies all the values demanded by a market built on connoisseurship. Hadid, one of a tiny coterie of 'architects' and the winner of the 2004 Pritzker Prize for Architecture, creates works of design that are ostensibly furniture but are actually miniaturised essays in her uncompromising, expressive architectural language. They bear no relation to product design, aside from superficial similarities in material and fabrication, and are most akin to abstract sculpture. Newson's output is more limited in range and quantity, but is no less visually distinctive, and its rarity and panache no doubt contribute to the value ascribed to it by the market. These designers have almost completely disengaged with the design world for their most personal (and collectible) works, preferring to show at art fairs and with art galleries. Newson exhibits with the

Design art: the case for (sort of)

By Caroline Bosse

There's a certain amount of guess work going on here - Gareth Williams's *Telling Tales* show will open after publication - but it feels like it might have come at just the right moment, at the end of an era. The era when everyone fell upon the idea of 'design art' with a cry and to the process used, abused and finally reduced the term to nothing. In 2007, Mark Rappolt decreed in *Art Review* that it was all about marketing, by creating a faux exclusivity, while it took two writers in *Elle Decor* to misunderstand the phrase and declare that design was only ever about form and function so design art wasn't design. Had they added 'industrial' before the word design, they might have got away with it.

Instead they missed the point.

Personally, I'd rather talk about limited-edition design and forget the art bit. And limited-edition design has been around for a long time, so why the fuss? Christopher Dresser paved the way for industrial design in the mid-19th century, but his work wouldn't be in the limited bracket now. Charles Peckham played with the machine-age aesthetic, but this was still craft production. London gallery David Gill produced his first collection of limited-edition work in 1976 with Gervase and Florentia - a full 20 years ago.

The sudden huge appetite for, and production of, limited-edition design post-2000 resulted from two situations. A conspicuously ripening market for 21st-century

design pieces made the production of new ones seem viable and desirable, and the frenetic state of the contemporary art market made many designers and galleries in Europe and the US long for a piece of the action. Art collectors have traditionally invested in both the fine and decorative arts, so it was quite reasonable to expect the art buyers to follow suit and pick up a Hadid to go with that *West*.

Think or say what you like about design art, and indeed call it what you like, but I'm hoping this exhibition will simply show what a liberating time it has been for design. So what if it was fuelled in part by an insatiable excess of City money and gallery greed? So what if it produced some less than glorious results, they simply won't last. The strong pieces will survive.

Designers who 20 years ago would have been forced into industrial services, or floundered as so-called designer-makers, were able to find themselves a gallery and give vent to an aesthetic expression not dictated by industry and an exploration of materials not dictated by price.

The salerooms have been quiet since October, and limited-edition pieces and one-offs are sometimes failing to meet their estimates. Galleries are being cautious: several will close in the near to come. But a new embourgeoised, bubble-burst approach to design will not be lost over night.



'Dove table', Zaha Hadid, 2007

Below: 'Dear Lord for What We Are about to Receive Make Us Truly Thankful', Barnaby Barford, earthenware, porcelain, enamel/paint, 30 x 38 cm, 2007
 Right: 'Priscilla 37', Klara Nevada 1997
 Designs for 'Fragile Personalities in Aardous Times', Dames + Babo with Michael Anantashaleo, 2003



Gagosian Gallery in New York and Arndt with London's Timothy Taylor Gallery, alongside the painters Craigie Aitchison, Bridget Riley and Alex Katz. The contemporary art market has welcomed these designers as, relative to the cost of art, design objects remain affordable but no less distinctive. Yet in these early stages of the commercial boom in 'design art', designers of all calibres remain unknown quantities to art collectors.

It is impossible to overlook the support given to the development of 'design art' by museums, which give validation and legitimacy to emerging art trends. New York's MoMA, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, the Rijksmuseum van Beeldende Kunsten in Rotterdam, as well as London's Victoria and Albert Museum and others, have all contributed by collecting, displaying and publishing 'design art' objects. Inevitably it is difficult to show well-known work and not face criticisms of complicity with the marketplace, though these are seldom voiced about contemporary art institutions. Yet it is surely the case that both 'design art' and fine art are as subject to critical assessment as to commercial pressure.

Suddenly almost any object conceived within a spirit of enquiry and experiment can be passed off as 'design art', even if it barely registers as design. Within a few years, an entirely new 'design art' market has arisen as an adjunct to the mainstream market for contemporary art. Rich collectors have not invested much in design and rarely in craft - although there are markets for glass by Dale Chihuly and furniture by Wendell Castle. Launching the first 'design art' sale at Phillips de Pury & Company in New York in 2001, Alexander Payne, the auction house's worldwide director of design, described the category as 'design that aggressively saw towards form and vocalises the boundaries

between respected movements.' He acknowledged the tacit demarcation lines between art and design while simultaneously seeking to blur them. Some six years later, in *Art Review*, Mark Rappolt considered 'What is "design art"?' and concluded that it is really all about marketing. 'The suggestion ... is that "design art" is about scarcity and the finer end of the market (as opposed, presumably, to the regular kind of product design that is aimed at the masses). It's a type of design that's not designed to work better, but to cater to a refined audience.'

'Design art' can be defined in a number of ways, depending on your point of view. It can be seen as a mode of practice within a larger discourse on contemporary art practice; a creature of the arts and antiques market, based on connoisseurship and market demand; or the creative supplanting of a new generation of designers schooled in the discipline of design-management but with the creative freedom of artists. Perhaps the third definition is the most interesting and significant. Just as in much contemporary art and some craft, critical and conceptual designers subordinate materiality and functionality to symbolism and emotional resonance. Design may even have an advantage here because it is grounded in common experience, even if it is expressed uncommonly. London-based designers Dames and Babo repre-

sent the paradigm of an intellectualised, critical, non-commercial, de-materialised and virtually de-aestheticised alternative to conventional design practice, a blast of fresh air blowing through the stagnant debates about the nature of design, art and craft.

Critical and conceptual design practice is as diverse and individuated as could be hoped for by a market that craves singularity and rarity. Yet there are common themes and shared concerns running through much of the work, which has led to what we might describe as a Dutch inflection in international design today. The root of this inflection is a response to historical precedents and paradigms, both ironic and celebratory. Indeed, the work picks up and straddles the narratives and stories, those cultural imperatives and threads that united in design before the schism of 20th-century Modernism, with its rejection of history and ornament, broke them. Does this make work by Hella Jongerius and Jorgen Bey, for example, reactionary and conservative? Far from it, as their responses to the past are never slavish or ill-thought reproductions; rather they are filtered through their awareness of the requirements of the present.

Telling Tales, therefore, explores a certain manner of designing-with-narrative, embodied by designers like Bey and Jongerius, but also Dames & Babo, Boyrn Partners, Studio Job, Masel Warden, and a host of others. Most of them are regarded as 'gallery designers' or 'design artists' at least some of the time. All their works are unique, or produced in limited quantities and editions. By listening to the tales their objects tell, we can often hear echoes of the past and of universal stories.

Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design, by Gareth Williams, £19.99 PB, accompanies the 13th show of the 2009 series, from 14 July - 18 October 2009. For further details see [Crafts guide](#)

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