

Design Art Furniture and the Boundaries of Function:

**Communicative Objects,
Performative Things**

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**Submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy
University of the Arts London in collaboration with
University College Falmouth**

September 2011

Abstract

Over the last two decades a category of artefact has appeared that has come to be termed 'design art': highly expressive furniture and domestic products that are created as self-initiated, often limited edition designs, sold through galleries, exhibited in museums and collected in the manner traditionally ascribed to art. To date no in-depth theoretical analysis of the growth of such design has been conducted and key protagonists such as Droog Design have received little critical attention, as those involved have been largely left to write their own history. Consequently, the aim of this thesis is to account for the development of these objects as the products of particular cultural and historical conditions and ask what the implications of the rise of these particular practices of making, distribution and use may be.

This thesis proposes that close analysis of the objects, their form and functional potential, reveals their dialectical qualities, in that in their materiality the tensions and conflicts of the period of their development can be discerned. Through an account of the development of the market for such goods it examines the way in which these things can be studied as commodities, in that they can clearly be understood as status symbols or a form of cultural capital. It is also asserted that by regarding such design as having the potential to impact upon everyday life, and not just as existing as something to be consumed by an elite, such practices illuminate broader problems of the ethics of design in a wider sense.

In this way it is argued that these communicative objects, in their ambiguous form and problematic relationship to function, can give an insight into the way we live with performative things: the ideological products of modernity that act upon us as we use them and which contain in their being the protocols and disciplinary forces of their time. The intention therefore is to ask whether design art can be seen as a politically radical practice that suggests ways in which both makers and users can assert a new relationship to the things with which we live.

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Acknowledgements

The preparation of this thesis has been made possible by the provision of a studentship supported by the European Social Fund. I would like to thank Gareth Williams, Julia Lohmann, Laszlo Rosnoki, Gareth Neal, Maarten Baas and Jan Konings for their time. Thanks are also due to Lis Darby and Jeremy Morrison of Sotheby's, Saskia Copper of Vivid Gallery and Timo de Rijk of TU Delft.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Deborah Sugg Ryan and Stuart Evans. As my Director of Studies, Deborah deserves special praise for being my tireless mentor, champion and friend throughout this process and it is no exaggeration to say that without her I could not have done it. Thanks also to Kimberley Stone for being there and offering wise counsel when I needed it most, and Ben Carver and Magda Tyzlik-Carver for their camaraderie along the way. Boundless gratitude is also owed to Brendan Byrne for his friendship, intelligence, wisdom and wit, not to mention his willingness to spend long hours discussing the finer points of theory at the club.

A heartfelt thanks goes to my parents, John and Carol Taylor, who have supported me financially and emotionally, as always, with a solidity of love and trust which has formed the foundation of anything that I have ever achieved. Finally, words cannot express what I owe to Helena Bryant, so here I shall just say thank you.

Note

Elements of Chapter 1 (in 'Everyday Life and Performative Things') and Chapter 3 (in 'Performative Objects?') have been published in a different form as:

Taylor, D. (2010) 'Performativity' in *Interior Wor(l)ds*, (eds) Basso Persault, L., Forino, I., Postiglione, G., Rizzi, R. Torino, Milan: Umberto Allemandi&Co pp. 223-226

An element of Chapter 4 (in 'Precursors') has been published in a different form as:

Taylor, D. (2010) 'Mountain Climbing in Holland: Writing Dutchness into the Discourse' in *Design and Craft: A History of Convergences and Divergences*. (Eds: Gimeno-Martinez, Javier and Flore, Freddie), Weteren: Universa Press, pp. 438-441

Preface

This thesis begins from the proposition that making things is a political activity: that to give form to an object, to bring something into the world, is to make a material assertion that what is created has a legitimate reason to exist. At this point in history we face unprecedented challenges precipitated by the way we live: possible impending ecological disaster, economic turmoil caused by the melt-down of the world's financial system, social upheaval created by emergence of a networked and increasingly virtual way of living and myriad pressures caused by the processes of globalization. It may therefore seem somewhat capricious that I have chosen to study the political and moral problems of making and using things through the analysis of what has come to be termed design art: limited-edition furniture and products, which are available to few, used by fewer and of interest to a minority. When there are so many clear problems with the conditions of mass-consumption and the structures of mass-production upon which they depend, why take the time to elucidate the rarefied nature of a few highly wrought and often absurd domestic items that are generally so expensive they will only be bought by a particular elite? The chairs and tables, the cabinets and side-boards, the light-fittings and fancy furnishings considered here may not appear to be very important in the wider scheme of the history of design, so why study them in such depth?

The answer must lie in the very fact that these things have been made and exist in the world at the point of crisis. In this way they are as much a response to the pressures of our time as the technical attempts to answer our needs more efficiently and sustainably. It is because we are in such a situation and the florid objects presented here have come into being in the same historical moment that is worth considering them.

If they were simply presented as art, there would be little problem. It would have been possible to examine the turn to design in art, as the art historian Alex Coles has done in some detail, as another expression of the discourse of art with all of its attendant debates (2005; 2007). Yet what is considered here is of interest because it makes a claim to be of use, because they are presented as useful things, functional objects. Thus throughout I have tried to limit the discussion to objects that, however

nominally, make the claim to be use objects, as this is where the interest lies because of their underdetermined ontological status.

Yet arguably the mediagenic objects examined here are of a new form because of the context in which they have arisen. They flow in the media, in a way not thought possible only a few years ago. It is because they do not just sit in the collector's living room or the museum gallery, but transition through the matrix of culture as they exist as a strange relationship between the material physical and the immaterial world of communication, that they are interesting. They do exist as physical things, but in the majority of interactions they are consumed as data: the picture on the website or in the magazine, the report on the television, the review in the blog.

At the 2008 conference of the Design History Society, *Networks of Design*, the key-note speaker, the sociologist of science, Bruno Latour, argued that:

A politics of matters of facts and of objects has always seemed far fetched; a politics of designed things and issues is somewhat more obvious. If things, or rather *Dinge*, are gatherings, as Heidegger used to define them, then it is a short step from there to considering all things as the result of an activity called "collaborative design" in Scandinavia. This activity is in fact the very definition of the politics of matters of concern since all designs are "collaborative" designs – even if in some cases the "collaborators" are not all visible, welcomed or willing (2008: 6).

Here, therefore, he drew out two themes that are central to the following thesis: that design is essentially a political problem, that is an issue of ethics; that design is produced in collaboration between many parties, that design exists in the interrelationship of networks of actors.

In what follows I have attempted to identify and understand the nature of the key networks of design that pertain to the development of design art. Consequently there is a concentration on the relationship between makers and the market; the things ('Dinge') and the media through which they flow; actions and their place in history. At times it has been necessary to limit the extent of the investigation to provide clarity. The response to shifts in material culture studied and intervened in by those such as Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, for example, and their conceptualisation of the issue as one of 'Critical Design' has been touched upon but not studied extensively, as their approach seems to lead back to the gallery and away from things being used in everyday life (1999; 2001). When considering this actual use any

attempt to examine the objects in use has been limited by the wish not to over-emphasise an ethnographic understanding of such phenomena and their characterisation as part of ‘material culture’ as a discrete subject of study. Such issues have been addressed from an anthropological perspective by critics such as Daniel Miller (1987; 2001), yet the problem with the strictly anthropological approach to the study of material culture is that, as Hal Foster notes, it may be said to encourage a movement horizontally from subject to subject across social space more so than does vertically along historical lines of analysis (2002: 91). Also Miller’s approach, though nominally ‘material’ seems to rather ignore the actual objects whilst privileging what he describes as ‘social relations’ (1987: 18). Thus the intention is to consider the networks examined from the perspective that commodities can be said to have social lives, meaning ‘we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in the their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ (Appadurai 1988: 5). This is then to take an approach in which the intention is to follow such ‘trajectories’ whilst not favouring any given actor, producer or user, but to see the shape and effects of the networks *in action*. This is therefore to see the things as a part of design culture, which can be said to be an approach which adopts ‘a systematic approach to understanding the dynamics and effects of material and immaterial relationships that are articulated by and through the multiple artifacts of design culture’ (Julier 2006: 73). It can be argued then, that such a methodology, one which examines the dynamics and effects of these material and immaterial relationships, will essentially be involved with understanding the history of design as a process of mapping the action of networks of design in operation through time.

If, as Victor Margolin argued two decades ago, the project of understanding design from a historical perspective had initially developed as a response to the early literature in the field such as that of Nikolaus Pevsner and Siegfried Gideon (1992), it can be suggested that the nature of the discipline is now more fully responsive to the concerns of making and use that recent cultural and technological challenges have presented. Similarly, if the early development of design history was shaped by its origins in art history (Hannah & Putnam 1980; Fallan 2010), whereby the emphasis was placed on the examination of classic designs and heroic designers, in recent years it can be seen to have shifted to a more expansive understanding of design as a practice which involves a whole range of participants and agencies beyond the activities of iconic things or creators. Moreover, in this regard Margolin’s assertion

that this suggested the necessity of seeing the field of as one of design studies, rather than of design history, seems to carry less weight now than it did even then. History is an active practice, one which takes as a central question the problem of the nature of its own ontology and epistemology, consequently it is capable of drawing in the methodologies of other approaches in a manner that allows for productive cross-fertilisation whilst retaining the rigour of a bounded discipline. The methodology adopted here then draws from sociology, anthropology, art history, psychology and philosophy not because this is intended to be a multi-disciplinary approach as such. Rather the diversity of techniques employed serves to demonstrate the versatility and flexibility of design history as a discipline in itself.

All of this is only worth attempting if there is really anything at stake. In recent years it has become a banality of the critique of design to suggest that the issue at hand is one of 'sustainability' (see Chapman 2005, for example). That rampant consumerism and its concomitant depletion of the world's resources means that design must address the pragmatic problems that this presents. In this regard many solutions are proffered, from the cornucopians who believe that human ingenuity and reason will allow us to come up with another technological fix, to the millennialists who argue that we should begin to plan for a new dark-age in which we shall all need to huddle in well constructed shelters. This study begins from a different position. It is predicated upon the idea that it is only through a well elaborated sense of our historical conditions that we can begin to understand what situation we are in and from this attempt to build, indeed design, new ways of being and reacting in such circumstances.

Any act of composition must inevitably be as much about what is excluded as what is put into the frame. Given the ethical nature of the problem addressed there are many clear similarities to those confronted by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts adherents of the late nineteenth century. Similarly the way in which the media is an important element of the way in which the objects examined are to be understood, the activities of those such as the Independent Group in the 1950s could also have shed light upon the processes involved. In earlier drafts of this work both of these areas were considered in some detail, but it was decided in the final instance that too broad a scope would detract from the key theoretical points to be made. Therefore the parallels that are drawn with Russian Constructivism and Surrealism in the early twentieth century are made because it is the materialist and ethical concerns of the

former and the anti-rationalist stance of the latter that seemed to have the most bearing on the analysis.

The examples considered broadly date from the early 1990s through to the present day, as it was throughout this period that an identifiable approach to furniture making and dissemination came to adopt its contemporary form. The history of the Droog Design features prominently as it was arguably through the establishment of this organisation that the phenomenon being studied first came to the fore. Also, in the way in which Droog was promoted, publicised and assimilated into the wider discourse of design through the 1990s, the influence it had, and the manner in which it seemed to lose its way in the increasingly networked and thoroughly commercialised 2000s, offered a lens through which to view the shifts in the matter at hand in a comprehensible form.

Though this is meant to be an exercise in mapping the terrain in which design art developed, the topography is not complete and indeed never can be. As vital forms the networks described flow into each other and continue to emerge. As was inferred at the beginning of this preface, this is a political argument. Where omissions have been made or seemingly obvious lines of discussion or analysis excluded, the final logic has been that of making the ethical points more clearly at the expense of covering all of the possible ground.

*

For me this has been an investigation, a piece of abductive reasoning whereby induction and deduction has been used in the creation of new knowledge. It began with an intuition that towards the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century something in culture had subtly shifted and this could be seen in the unashamedly preposterous things created by a small group of designers working on a limited stage. By getting to know the work and the world it inhabited, that *had* to exist for it to come into being, I gradually began to see the shape and logic of the way in which it operated. Through close examination of particular examples encountered upon the way certain theoretical problems seemed to assert themselves until a sense of the terrain developed along side a range of questions that demanded to be addressed. Consequently the following discussion retains some of this quality of a journey, a process of detection whereby evidence must be sifted in the building of a case.

Counter to conventional academic practice my position is not asserted in the introduction. This is because the way in which the final conclusion has been arrived at is as much part of the point to be made as the bald stating of a position. Thus the analysis begins from a mapping of the initial situation: that design art has come to exist as a recognisable practice and body of artefacts, and through a series of investigations of particular facets of the problem builds into an argument that accounts for the conditions discovered and asks what the consequences of such a situation must be. As is inevitable, what was being studied was itself in motion as it was being probed and dissected. In the volatile second decade of the twenty-first century the world looks a lot different to the way it did even a few years ago. This is then reflected in the way in which the argument progresses. That the design discussed can simultaneously be recognised as the last gasp of a particular relationship to objects, of a certain form of materialism, and the first breath of a virtuality of affect and the instability of matter precipitated by the rule of data, was not obvious when I began this process. Therefore the argument does not begin from this proposition, but works towards it.

The full nature of my position in relation to these processes, my personal political stance, is not made explicit until the conclusion. This is meant to allow the evidence to build the case before I place my own perspective nakedly before the reader. That what is included or excluded, introduced or not utilised will shape the nature of the discussion is acknowledged, that is to say what I have chosen to examine and the way it is analysed will necessarily constrict the investigation in a certain manner, but it is hoped that by waiting until then end to emphasise what I see as the moral imperatives of the problem I leave the reader more room to construct their own sense of what matters.

Though this piece was painstakingly constructed to conform to the requirements of a doctoral thesis, it has also been written to be read. Where possible examples have been chosen that seemed to me to bring the issues to life. Throughout I have tried to not simply describe the pieces but evoke their presence. Where theoretical explanation has seemed necessary I have attempted to render the arguments as clearly as possible. When there has been a choice between dryly recounting what has been found and emphasising a point with a rhetorical flourish, the latter has generally been employed in the hope that it will carry the reader on through the discussion and make it apparent why these things are of interest to me, whilst also

making my often dense expositions bearable. For me all of this really does matter, and it is hoped that the way it is written allows this to be grasped.

London - February, 2012

Introduction

In the first decade of the twenty-first century something changed in the design world. Designers started to behave like artists. There have been star designers before. In the 1950s Charles and Ray Eames were lauded as American pioneers of modern design. In Italy in the 1960s Joe Colombo acted like a design playboy and in the 1980s Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis group courted publicity like the pop stars they were. In the 1990s design proliferated to service the burgeoning lifestyle industry and Phillipe Starck and his Postmodernism-lite seemed to be everywhere. Yet they still remained designers, servicers of industry and mass-production. Since the turn of the new century furniture designers have started to act and work specifically as though they were contemporary artists.

Almost out of nowhere designers seemed to want to express themselves. The work produced is not generally created to commission or to fulfil the needs of a particular client. Instead they have effectively started setting their own briefs, creating speculative projects that operate to examine the designer's concerns rather than fulfil a pre-existing need or solve a problem. Just as with prints or various casts of a sculpture, the work is generally produced as limited editions, varying from those of five or eight, which is quite small, to ones of fifty, or even in one case two-hundred, which is pushing it a little. The pieces they produce are exhibited and sold through galleries such as The Carpenter's Workshop Gallery in London, Vivid in Rotterdam, The Moss Gallery in New York and Contrasts in Shanghai. They are shown and traded at fairs such as Design Miami/Basel and the fringes of the Salone del Mobile in Milan; just as with contemporary art, it is then through the auction houses of Sotheby's, Christies and Philips de Pury that the secondary market operates to further cater for collectors of this type of design.

Mr Pitt's Table

It is because there are collectors that such a practice of design can exist. There are celebrity patrons, such as Brad Pitt, who caused a stir at Design Basel in Switzerland in June of 2008, when he bought a limited-edition marble *Cinderella Table* by the Dutch designer Jeroen Verhoeven (see Figure 0.1) for \$293,000, from the stand of the Carpenters Workshop Gallery (Barreneche 2008). That Pitt should have bought the marble version of this table is perhaps telling, in that the material telegraphs the object's status and value, just as the fact that the edition is limited further adds to the sense of exclusivity. The first examples of the *Cinderella* were in plywood and the designer used Computer Aided Design (CAD) and Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) routing to create an object which morphs from the outline of an eighteenth century commode into that of a console table of the same period (Figure 0.2). In wood the object has a delicacy to it. The forms sweep round in a graceful arc as one silhouette glides into the other. In marble the table takes on a monolithic quality that marks it out as a thing of consequence but which robs it of its subtlety.

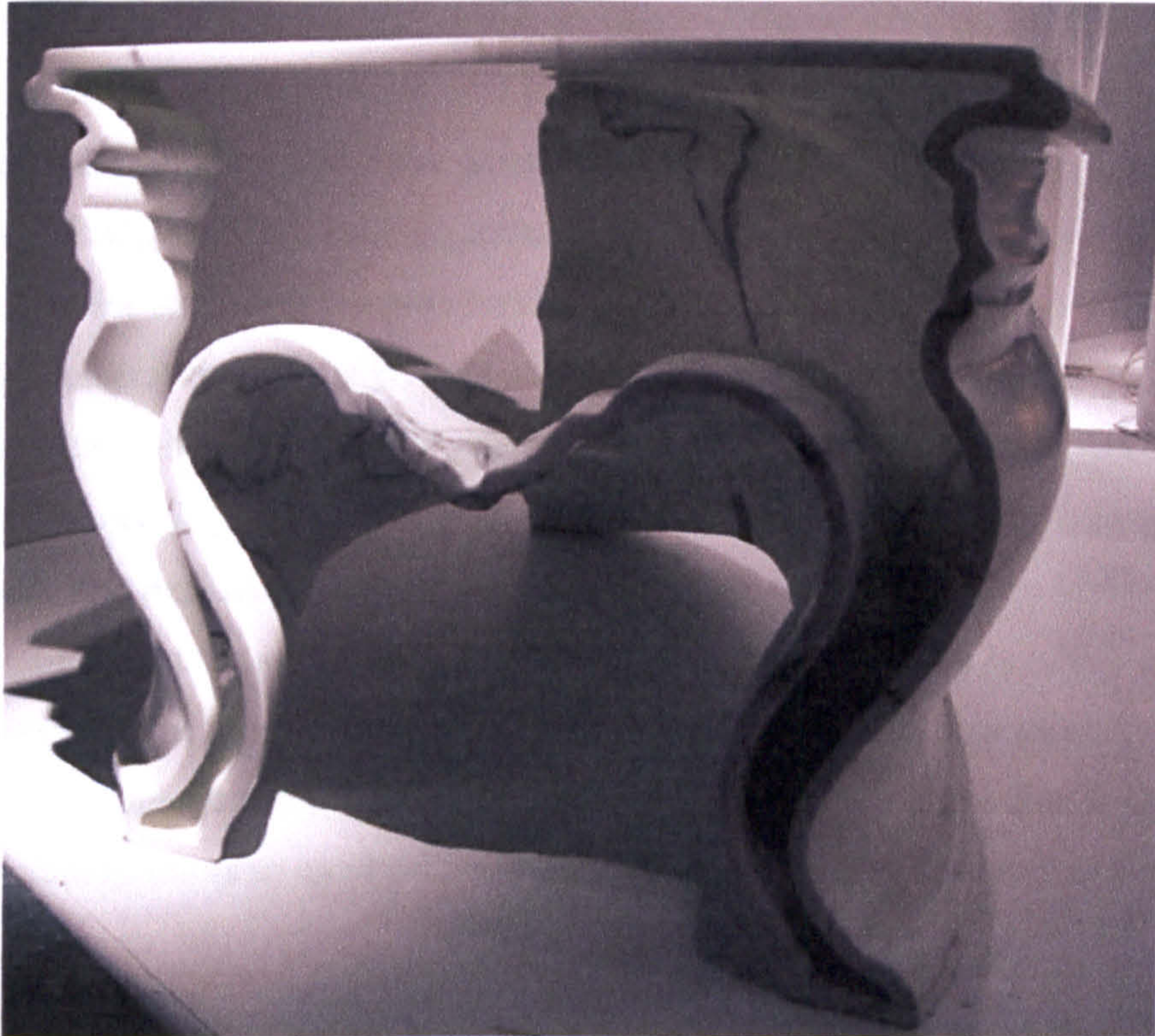


Figure 0.1 Jeroen Verhoeven, *Cinderella Table*, marble, 2008

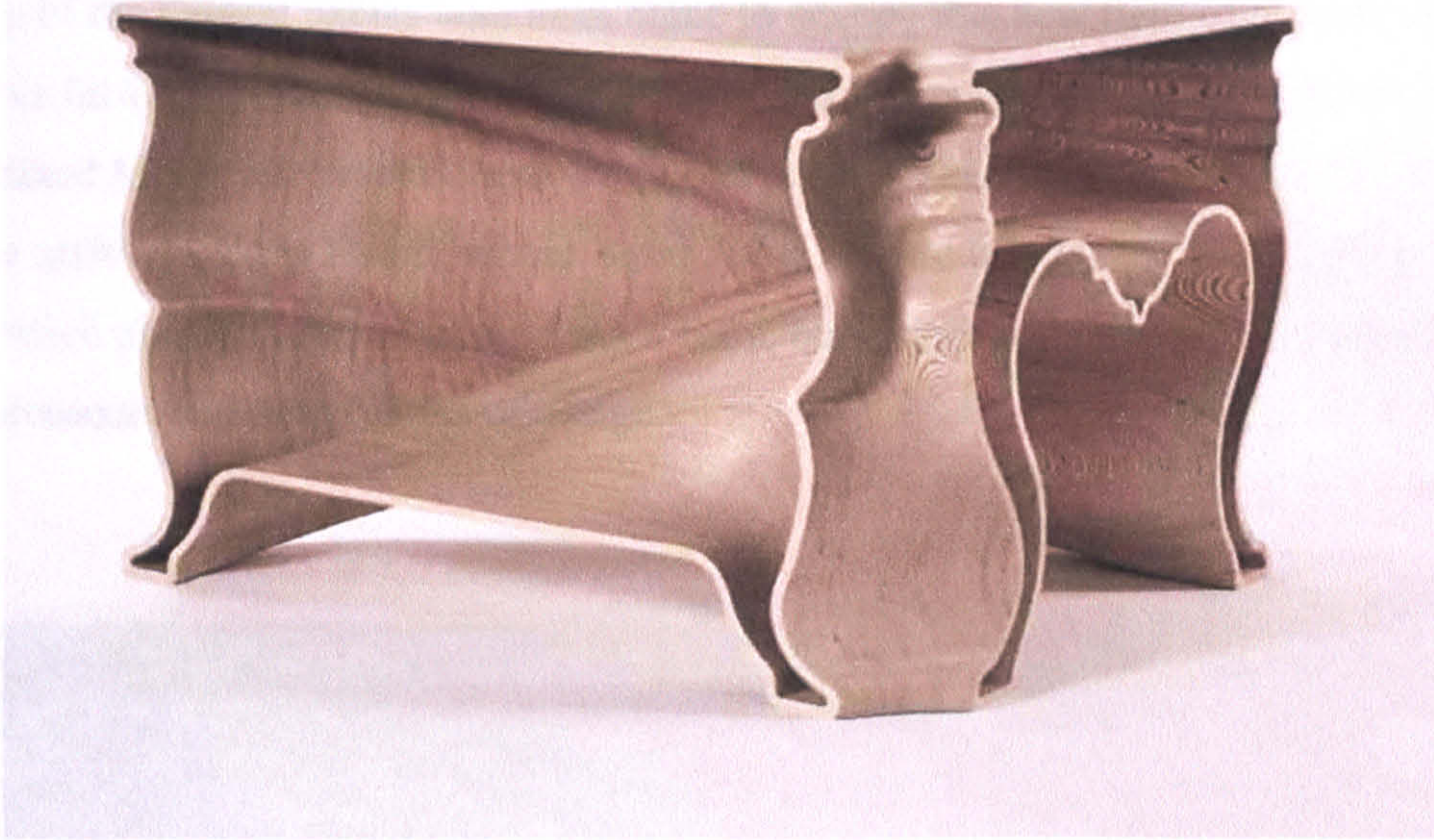


Figure 0.2 Jeroen Verhoeven, *Cinderella Table*, CNC cut birch plywood, 2005

This demonstrates how quickly something can transition from one state to another, how a piece of furniture created as a technical experiment in modest materials can, as its context shifts, become a luxury status-symbol. Because it is design, it is all about reproducibility and seriality. Different versions can be made. The design can be applied in varying ways, creating a series of material actualisations of the original principle. Given the technical possibilities of reproducibility offered by the likes of CAD and CNC milling, transpositions of form and material have become viable routes for exploring the possibilities of certain designs and approaches in a way that only a generation ago would have seemed unthinkable. This is therefore not mass-production, but it is certainly technological reproduction, and this takes place in a wider economy of reproducibility. In such a situation an object that has an aura of authenticity and exclusivity can be made in multiples, allowing it to be both unique and reproducible at the same time. This then happens in conditions in which the image of the design can be reproduced almost infinitely, allowing it to flow through the channels of the media and information exchange, thus making it possible for the object to gain in status as its visibility grows, even as it retains its status as a unique design.

Furniture as Sculpture

Many of the biggest names who have come to occupy this new field of practice appear to have little interest of the questions of form and function or the ethics of production that taxed Modernist practitioners. From one position this is represented by the likes of the architect, Zaha Hadid, whose *Aqua Table* (Figure 0.3) is really just a very expensive plastic table. It has an elegant form, but it does little to extend or examine the protocols and possibilities of design.

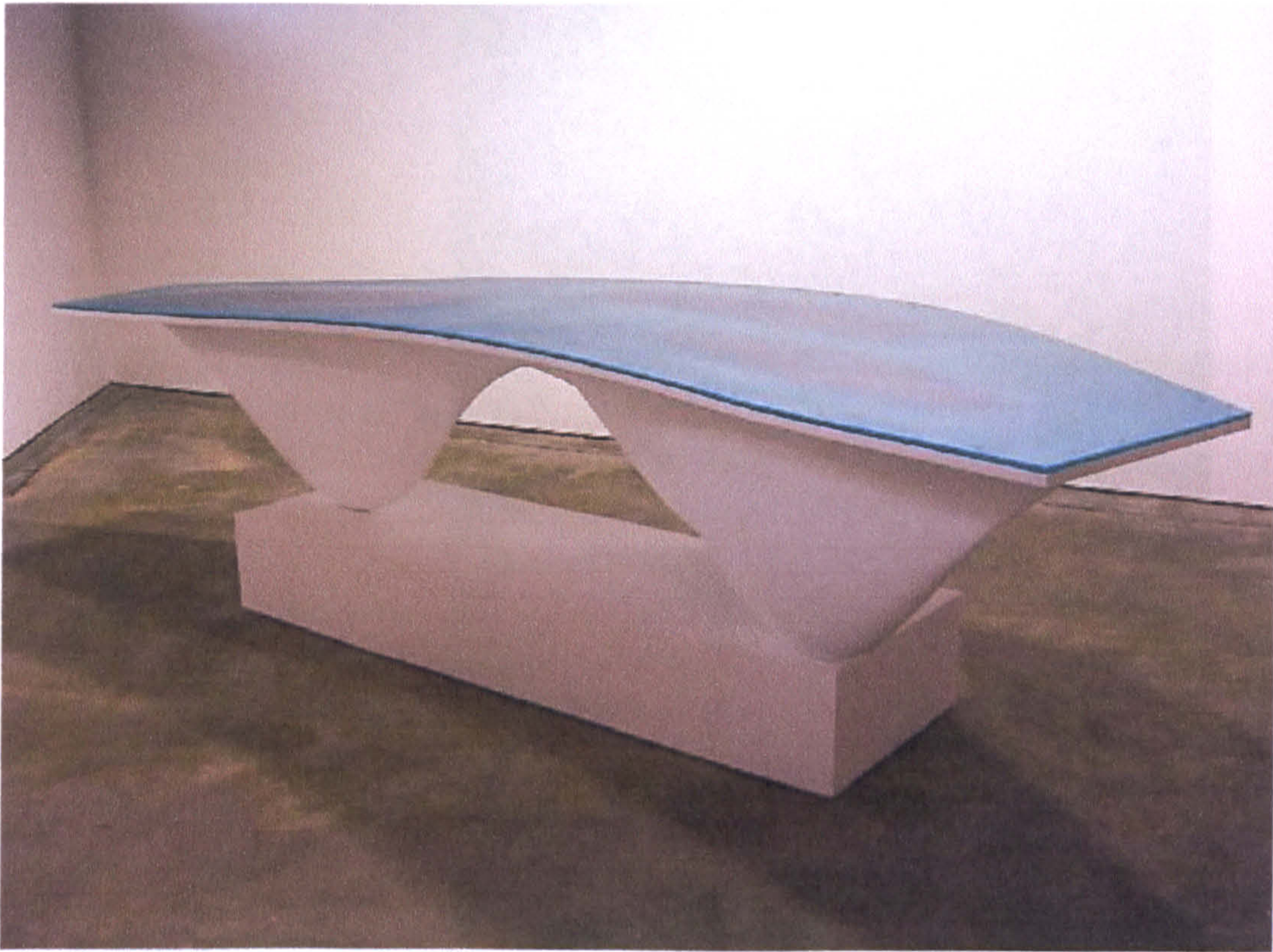


Figure 0.3 Zaha Hadid, *Aqua Table*, Laminated polyurethane resin, silicon, 2005

Similarly, the Australian Marc Newson has been called by the television producer and presenter, Alan Yentob, ‘one of the hottest designers on the planet’ (Yentob 2008: 01) and he is certainly amongst the best known and saleable of these artist-designers (Rawsthorn 2007a). Yet his work is actually quite conventional in the way in which it deals with issues of form and function. In a piece such as the *Extruded Chair* (Figure 0.4), we have a piece of furniture that is relatively conservative in its form, but which is rendered in an exclusive material. The technical

expertise brought to bear is impressive, as the work from this range has been cut from solid blocks of Carrara marble using computer cutting technology and no little skill on the part of the quarry-men who actually made it. Yet, as Newson himself admits, often his design work is really the use of the form of a piece of furniture that then allows him to create sculpture (Yentob 2008: 04). Here the piece looks as though it could be made of plastic and it is not clear what the material does in regard to the effect of the object, beyond signalling its value through the associations connected with marble.



Figure 0.4 Marc Newson, *Extruded Chair*, Carrara marble, 2007

Similarly, a designer such as the Israeli born London based Ron Arad is also in the top ranks of bankable designers producing this kind of work (McGuirk 2010). In a

piece such as his *Bodyguard* chair (Figure 0.5) a concern with function can be discerned in the unusual form of the piece, it remains in an upright position until sat upon, whereby the chair rocks back to accommodate the sitter. Yet it is clear that this has not been made to be used, it is a piece to sit on a plinth and be admired.



Figure 0.5 Ron Arad, *Bodyguard* chair, polished aluminium, 2007

The title is telling in this regard, as Arad had been mocked by friends about the number of bodyguards who surrounded his furniture, so this work gained its name (Rushton 2007). This is clearly furniture as sculpture, its primary function is to operate as an object of aesthetic contemplation whilst any nominal utilitarian purpose is entirely secondary. As a piece of sculpture it is a thrusting phallic statement that owes more to Constantin Brancusi than it does to any quotidian considerations of furniture use. In this way these objects are relatively easy to account for. The tradition they work in then is that of the (usually) male artist creating bold heroic statements.

The usages and tropes of sculpture have been employed to allow designers to pose as artists so that they can enter a particular economy of exchange, that of the art market.

Design in the Age of Things

Less easy to explain is work such as the *Kebab Lamp* (Figure 0.6) created under the name Committee by the husband and wife team Clare Page and Harry Richardson. Here a domestic standard lamp has been made by skewering found objects onto a central pole. China ornaments meet wooden trinkets, children's toys butt-up against candle-sticks (see Figure 0.7). This is a totem-pole of modern detritus. Every edition is the same principle, but each is a unique meeting of the elements used to make it. It is clear, however, that the components have not been assembled randomly. The way



Figure 0.6 Committee, *kebab Lamp*, found objects and textile shade, 2004

that the parts resonate with each other, it seems that the composition has been carefully executed to balance an elegance of proportions with significant

juxtapositions of aesthetics and meaning (Campbell & Hershberg 2005). This is a much quieter piece of work than that of Arad or Newson, and it is arguably more powerful in its effect for it. The seriality of the artefacts stuck on the spike cannot help but invoke the serendipitous sequentiality of the meeting of objects in everyday life. In this way it is not simply a comment on consumer society, it is hewn from it. It is not a coldly objective critique of consumption and waste, rather it functions more as a capturing of the materiality of such a way of living. Each lamp becomes a core-sample of a moment in the age of objects, and what it captures is not the thrusting masculinity of the more sculptural works, but a smaller scale, more domestic reality.



Figure 0.7 *Committee, kebab Lamp* (detail), found objects, 2004

By way of contrast Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel, operating out of Antwerp as Studio Job, create pieces which amplify the objecthood of things by the manipulation of scale and the application of narrative devices, swelling the artefacts with meaning and presence until they almost collapse under their own weight. The work has more narrative content than that of Arad or Newson, yet it is still a form of spectacular design. Their *Robber Baron Table* (2009; Figure 0.8), for example, is a dining table the base of which takes the form of a patinated bronze factory, which belches out pollution to create a cloud of polished bronze, forming the tabletop. The

architecture upon which this form is modelled is apparently inspired by buildings such as the Peter Behrens's AEG factory, Battersea Power Station in London and the fascist neo-classicism of Albert Speer (Moss Gallery 2009). Yet, to what ends has such source material been used?



Figure 0.8 Studio Job, *Robber Baron Table*, patinated bronze and gilding, 2009

The extent to which this is an ironic statement is somewhat unclear, yet it is apparent that this object is more concerned with signifying than it is with utilitarian functionality. These are things to be looked at rather than used. Even when they are exploring more quotidian issues, such as in the series *The Farm* of 2008 (Figure 0.9), where the objects they deal with are the traditional furnishings and tools of rural Dutch life (seen here installed in the Zuiderzee Museum in Enkhuizen in the Netherlands), through the technique and methodologies employed, the gilding and polishing for example, the things are wrenched from their context to operate as signs. Indeed, Smeets and Tynagel go as far as to state that they are actually trying to become artists, that issues such as function actually hold no interest for them at all (Rawsthorne 2007b).



Figure 0.9 Studio Job, *The Farm*, mixed media, 2008

The New Rock ‘n’ Roll?

If in the 1990s artists such as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin played the role of the rock star artist, always sardonic and playing to the media, sneering at the process whilst happily servicing it, this then appears to be a part that Smeets and Tynagel are aspiring to. In publicity material Smeets in particular is careful to project this image. This photograph taken for an article in the *New York Times* in 2007 is typical of the way in which they pose with their work (see Figure 0.10). Smeets’s stance appears to communicate a certain insouciance, even an arrogance. Ambra Medda, the founder of Design Miami, declared in 2008 that ‘designers are the new rock stars’ (in Barraneche 2008); it certainly seems that Studio Job are attempting to demonstrate the voracity of this statement. More than anything, it seems that Smeets and Tynagel want to be part of the art world. This is not quite the same thing as wanting to produce art.



Figure 0.10 Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel posing for *The New York Times*, 2007

The photograph of Page and Richardson produced to accompany a British Council exhibition (Campbell & Hershberg 2005), which included their *kebab Lamp*, demonstrates the way in which a different image of the designer as artist can be presented. Here the pose is much more informal and we get a sense of the artists at work. The suggestion seems to be that it is their concern for the objects that is really at issue, they look more like working artists than rock stars manqué.



Figure 0.11 Clare Page and Harry Richardson, 2005

However, what is interesting about these two images is the way that in both the subjects are positioned as artists, authors of their work, but in each they occupy different economies of art. Job Smeets does not just want to be an artist. He wants to be a celebrity. Page and Richardson are characterised more as art-workers who are using material artefacts to explore their concerns. This then demonstrates the way in which there are a range of different economies of production and exchange in the art world that design can feed upon; the art world that designers are encroaching upon and drawing from is not a monolithic whole, but a system of systems with many points of entry and interconnection.

Domestic Art?

Bath Boat (2005; Figure 0.12) by the Dutch designer Wieki Sommers is a working bathtub which takes the form of a boat. The designer has not created a bath shaped sculpture, rather she has created a fully functional object with a form that communicates; it is a useful thing which makes allusion and suggests a narrative and meaning beyond its basic utilitarian functioning. The large-scale sculptural pieces created by the likes of Arad and Newson are the easiest pieces to explain as they replicate the aesthetics of Modernist sculpture in order to cater to the art market. Studio Job's output can also be understood as being comprised of artefacts which are made to enter an economy of gallery display and auction retailing. However, at the same time as this tendency has been operating a smaller-scale and more domestic approach can be seen to have developed. These objects are much more involved with function and it is clear that they have been made in a design tradition which conceives of these things genuinely as use-objects. Though gender is not an issue explored directly in this analysis it does seem apparent that this shift can to some degree be thought of in these terms.

As the art historian Christopher Reed notes, one of the guarantees that Modernist art was serious and genuinely avant-garde was its disavowal of the domestic sphere (1996). Here, then, in the experiments with everyday use-objects a concern with domesticity seems to be leading design directly into the home, a space which has generally been characterised as a feminine (Attfield 2000). This then suggests that within this field of practice there is a dialectical tension between a



Figure 0.12 Wieki Sommers, *Bath Boat*, oak and red cedar, epoxy, 2005

discourse of sculptural objects as phallic symbols, thrusting assertions of intention and authorship, and a smaller-scale domestic approach which derives from the patterns and possibilities of living with objects. This is not to unproblematically map masculinity on to one tendency and femininity to the other; it is to observe the way in which the dynamic is operating as part of the material discourses being played out.

The question that an artefact such as the *Bath Boat* suggests is not ‘can design be exhibited and sold like art?’ but ‘what if the things we used everyday operated as art?’ This is then less about the creation of spectacular objects that work entirely as a form of display, and more about the possibilities of some of the tactics and approaches of art being co-opted by makers of useful things. In its penetration into the home this form of artful design seems to suggest that those creating it wish to not only comment on the domestic, through the creation of functioning furniture and products, they are actually materially altering what it means to inhabit such a space.

Designers are creating objects that function, but which seem to work on a number of different levels. Peter Marigold’s *Box Legs* (2010; Figure 0.13) consists of four cabriole legs with pierced angled struts connected to the top of each one. These



Figure 0.13 Peter Marigold, *Box Legs*, found legs, cardboard and string, 2010

can then be attached to any cardboard box using a string tourniquet, thus turning the box into a piece of furniture. The mechanism is delightfully simple and the effect is to convulse the humble cardboard box into an object of utility and status. Yet, a moment of disjuncture is experienced upon encountering an object such as this, as the formality and historical resonance of the shape of the leg meets the somewhat abject quality of the box. Also there is a form of anthropomorphism taking place as the addition of the legs seems to bring the object to life, suggesting that it may scuttle away at any moment. In this way what could have been seen as amusing or witty begins to reveal a certain darkness that seems to come with interventions into these intimate objects. Because these are things to live with rather than simply see in a gallery, there can be as much of a shudder as a wry smile when they appear to reveal their agency in this way. Also, here the object is not complete until it is used, so the user becomes a part of the creation of the artefact, thus volatising the relationship between making and use.

The *Smoke* series, created by the Dutch designer Maarten Baas in 2002, has been made by taking old pieces of furniture and burning them with a blow-torch until they resemble things rescued from a house-fire (Figure 0.14). The surface is then stabilised using epoxy resin and the objects finished with new upholstery and fittings. Here the elegance of the chair's frame has been transformed into something which is both beautiful and disturbing. It appears to be some form of relic, suggesting that it has come through a cataclysm, yet the pristine nature of the upholstery jars with this as it speaks of craftsmanship and quality. So, the piece rocks backwards and forwards between horror and desire.



Figure 0.14 Maarten Baas, *Smoke Chair*, found chair, epoxy, leather upholstery, 2002

In the piece seen in Figure 0.15, by the Brazillian designers Hubert and Fernando Campana, a similar dialectical struggle can be discerned. On one level this appears to actually be quite a jolly piece of furniture, as the exuberant mass of soft toys tumble out to form the seat of the chair. Yet, the blank stares of the animals' faces seem to belie this. In fact the profusion can be seen as a disturbing, unsettling. What could be the innocent profusion of a child's bed crammed with toys, with a slight turn of the head, becomes the terrifying vision of the excrescence of mass-production and the uncanny gaze of the doll.



Figure 0.15 Campana Brothers, *Cartoon Banquette with Soft Toys*, found toys, canvas, steel, 2003

Many of the pieces discussed in this research rely upon disjuncture as a technique, what could be called disjunctive design, which is about the meeting of elements which do not fit, or the playing out of tensions which cannot be resolved. Material clashes with material, hard meets soft, form wrestles with function, the new exists in uneasy harmony with the old and the celebration and affirmation of the possibilities of technological reproduction vies with nostalgia for the hand-made. In Gareth Neal's *George III* cabinet of 2008 (Figure 0.16) a CNC router has been used to scour out layers which reveal within the shape an eighteenth century bombe-fronted commode. It is as though the hi-tech exterior contains within it the ghost of the older form, which seems to be manifesting in the material world.

So, what would it be like to live with an object such as this? What would it mean for this to be a part of everyday life? It is one thing to discuss it as though it were sculpture, to examine its aesthetic effect, the meanings and resonances captured by its form. It is quite another to think of being with it day-in-day-out. Would you still notice it after a while? Would it not recede into the fabric of habit and routine, as the things we live with most intimately tend to do? Or would its form and the way in which it functions keep on having an effect, even if you did not notice it? Or perhaps exactly because it was no longer fully present to consciousness it would sneak under the radar and affect you all the more?

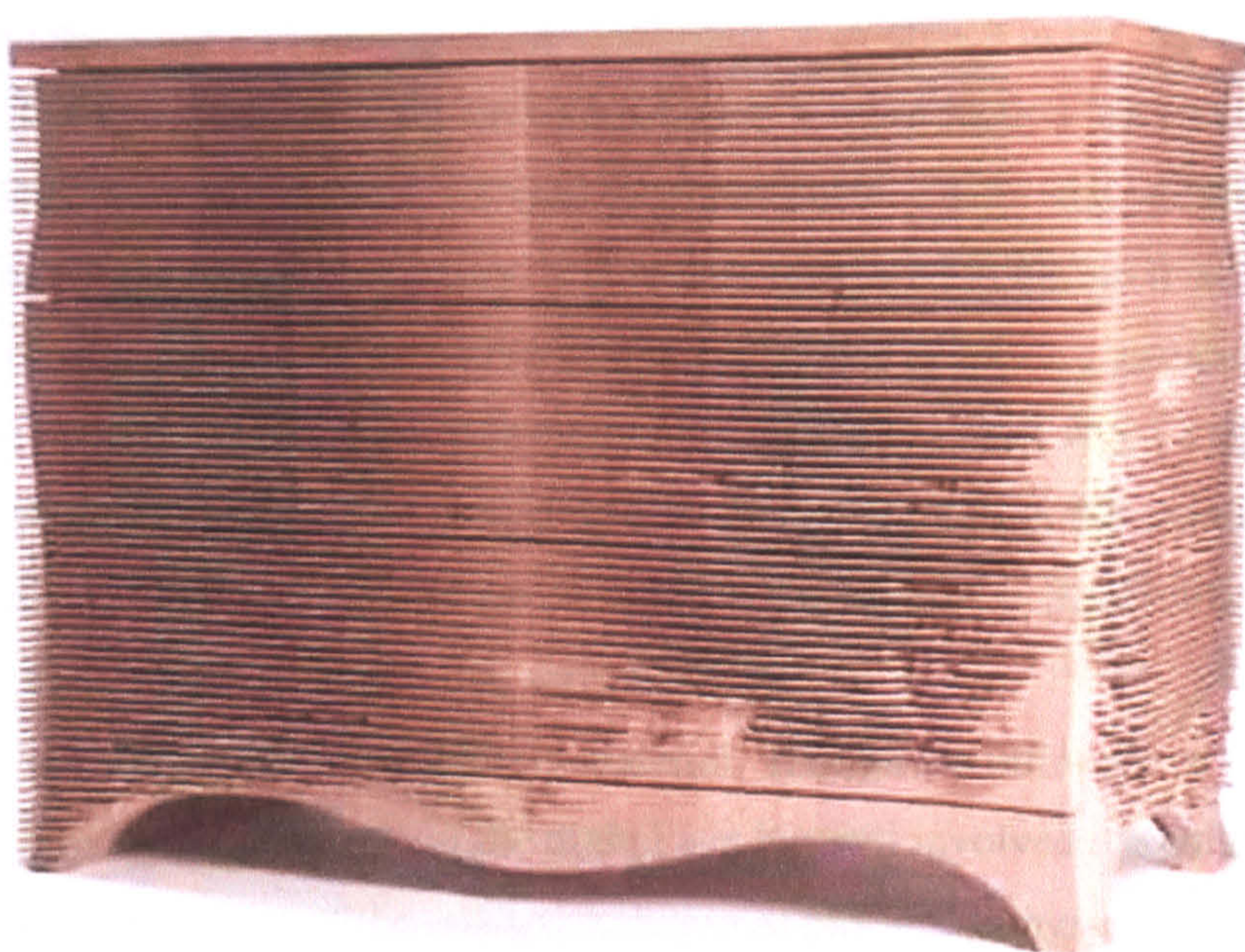


Figure 0.16 Gareth Neal, *George III* chest of drawers, oak, 2008

As pieces of sculpture the work discussed in this thesis are hardly unique or novel. It is the proposition that these are really functioning use-objects that makes them interesting. Although the way in which this practice has been monetised means that it is generally rich collectors who can afford to own such objects this does not negate the claim that they are domestic things, it simply means that the questions that the existence of such a practice of design throws up attain another level of complexity.

To some degree it is obvious why some designers should be making work which can be shown and sold as though it were art: this is where the money and prestige is. Yet, there is clearly a strata of designers who understand this, but who are

also working through problems in their designs of how we live with objects and what this means. Consequently, to begin to understand this phenomenon it shall be necessary to account for the growth of this area as a market, as a site of commodity exchange, just as the flattening effect of commodity culture is denied and the content of the pieces, their unique qualities and characteristics are taken seriously as expressions of the concerns of our age.

Why Now?

The approach to design examined here has developed during a twenty-year period that has seen the most rapid alteration in the conditions of existence in the history of humanity. The proliferation of digital technologies of reproduction has reached the point whereby daily life in the developed West has become saturated with information. Until the end of the twentieth century, if you were interested in design it was necessary to seek out information in specialist magazines or locate a particular book or article in physical space. Now, like everything else, it is a click away. Objects created by designers can now be picked up and circulated through the channels of culture almost instantaneously and we can consume them on this level without ever leaving the chair pulled up before the screen.

Yet the world remains resolutely material. Though the influence of the virtual has altered how we live, the rise of the digital age has still involved the continued expansion and refinement of the mass-production of physical things in an increasingly globalized world, which has made consumer goods more available than ever. This then is an extension of a process that has been a feature throughout modernity, whereby commodities are produced in ever increasing amounts to maximise economic growth.

So, in a world of hyper-mediation, things appear to have become very immaterial. Yet it also seems to be the case that we are drowning in a sea of objects, the fruits of untrammelled mass-production and consumption. The endless reproduction of images means that objects exist as much in their representation as they do in their materiality, at the same time as they can appear to be unique and exclusive whilst also being available for mass-consumption in their virtual form. This is the age in which branding and PR operate to give the products we use identity, to

give immaterial presence to physical products. Yet this has not rendered the things we live with less physically present, it does not appear to have diminished their materiality, instead it has had led to them gaining a certain intensity as their existence in the world becomes multivalent and fluid. It is in this context that the approach to design studied here has come about, and in the form, content and functioning of these pieces it can be argued that the dialectical tensions of this phase of modernity can be seen to be played out.

It is also perhaps necessary to observe that the time-frame of this phenomenon also broadly corresponds to my experience as a lecturer and researcher in the field. Having initially trained at Staffordshire University on the History of Design and the Visual arts course in the early nineties and undertaken my Masters in Cultural Studies at Leeds, my career in teaching Design History to practitioners really began at High Wycombe in 1995. Although originally employed to teach history and theory on the BA Graphic Design and Advertising course (which I continued to do throughout my time there), through working in the traditional centre of the British furniture industry it was perhaps inevitable that my concerns should become more three-dimensional. It was by working with the designer-makers on the furniture and 3D programmes that my knowledge of the history of the field began to deepen and my understanding of contemporary practice became more acute. It therefore seems pertinent to note this here for two reasons.

Firstly, it means that I have experienced first-hand the shift that has taken place in design in terms of production and reception as the world tipped over the digital edge at the end of the twentieth-century. In my first year of teaching only one of my students had a mobile phone, I typed my lectures laboriously on an electric typewriter and research meant going to the library or a museum. By the time I left Wycombe in 2007, most of the students I taught had grown up with the main designer's tool being the Apple Mac and would profess horror at the idea of being separated from their mobiles, many of which came with access to the all pervading internet. Consequently I was spending a lot of time explaining to first-years that research meant more than typing something into Google.

Secondly, then, this also means that I cannot separate the history I am investigating from my own. When, at the end of the nineties, I began to become aware of the work disseminated under the banner of Droog Design, for example, schooled as I was in the teachings of Modernism, these strange and exuberant designs appeared

difficult to account for. Certainly my training in the methodologies of the canon of Cultural Studies, with its emphasis on social and political meanings and analytical techniques, allowed me to theorise what I was finding, but it did not seem to *explain* it. The tendency appeared to be to broadly lump it together with anything else that did not seem to be primarily concerned with function and treat it as 'ironic' and call it all 'Postmodernism'; this, however, seemed to be more of an exercise in tidying-up than it was an attempt to really understand what was being created and what it meant.

What was obvious to me was that the students had a very strong reaction to such work. It seemed to excite them. Some, particularly the more whiskery, woody men (and they were almost always men) would look at me incredulously, as if to ask why we were wasting our time with such frippery when we should be looking at 'real' design; they did not just dismiss it, it annoyed and irritated them to a surprising degree. Other students would be delighted, seeing in such things something that moved them, not just as an intellectual exercise but on a more visceral level. What struck me throughout was the depth of the responses that these people had to a chair or a table. Considering that these were usually unremarkable furniture and product types, everyday use-objects such as chairs and tables, the reactions were extreme; these seemed to be quotidian things that operated on the level of affect. This was interesting.

Similarly, as we moved into the two-thousands, the discourse around design began to turn towards emotion, so students often gleefully picked up this approach, recognising that the things we use could as much be about feeling as practical function, even if the examination of the former did tend to be directed to the maximisation of the latter. Though the application of such ideas often seemed more enthusiastic than effective or illuminating (as much from the theorists as the students, it must be said), it did seem that something was happening that was not primarily concerned with the practice of design as a mechanistic form of problem solving, but appeared to be involved with processes that were more nuanced and deeply woven into culture; that took as their starting point the experience of living with things and the problem of the nature of subjectivity in modernity. This then appeared to be an approach that, yes, often resulted in the creation of absurd objects which as likely as not did not seem to function terribly well on a narrowly practical level, or which sometimes seemed to be constituted by little more than a designer appropriating things and saying, 'well, couldn't this be used for that?' Yet it seemed to me that it was about much more than intellectual games or the designers cocking a snook at the

public. It appeared to be a practice that was involved with the relation between design and use, people and things, making and living. That is, for all its eccentricity and playfulness, it seemed to be about the ethics, and therefore the politics, of design. This, it seemed to me, was worth investigating.

The Research Questions

So, in researching the development of design that is highly expressive and made and sold as though it were art, it seems necessary to ask if these designed goods can be regarded as communicative objects, that is things that 'say' something. To these ends it is necessary to examine the context in which these artefacts have been made, both historical and cultural, to understand how they relate to what has come before and how they fit into the wider society in which they operate. Methods such as the use of found objects and the production of fantastical, spectacular artefacts has a history, for example, and it seems important, therefore, that such lines of descent be understood if we are to gain any insight into the way in which such tropes are now being employed. Also, the objects under consideration appear to suggest a certain approach to making, it is therefore necessary to enquire into the relationship such methodologies have to the traditions and practices of craft production.

Given the importance of the development of the market in the growth of this field, it also seems pertinent to ask whether the objects under consideration are simply status-symbols for the rich. Similarly, given that these are use-objects it must be asked what it would mean to live with such things. What would be the implications of living with utilitarian items that have been engineered in such a way that they are much more than simply a chair or a table, but have become bearers of meaning and perhaps even spurs to action?

In pursuit of such objectives it must then be asked to what extent furniture and furnishings such as these can be seen as ideological in their functioning; how do the objects we live with determine how we behave, and what can this expressive and inventive design tell us about this process? To what extent can these be seen as performative things, ideologically speaking, that actually have the potential to change the way we live? This seems important because it then leads on to the problem of whether we can learn anything about the way in which designers can intervene in the

design process to effect change for good or ill. Given that designers seem to be moving into areas that have previously been the province of art, such as seeing artefacts as a medium for self-expression or the investigation of personal concerns, combined with their infiltration into the commercial side of the art world, it seems vital to ask what relationship such practices have to the production, dissemination and reception of art. It must then be asked how it is possible to write a history of such a phenomenon at all. Given the way in which it appears to permeate so many given regions of creative practice, commercial activity and cultural expression it becomes necessary to question the very means available to account for these objects in a historical sense.

Ultimately the question to be addressed is does this form of design have any radical potential for restructuring our relationship to objects on a wider scale? Can the ethical questions suggested by such work actually inform a broader understanding of the morality of design? That is, does design that aspires to the conditions of art without renouncing its status *as* design give insights into material forms that shape our lives and the physical residues of being and can it be used as a site of intervention into the ideological and political functioning of our material culture? Is it that by insisting on these pieces being seen as operating as design we begin to see the development of an art which demands its place in everyday life, or is this simply another exclusive and excluding approach to art *and* design?

Design Art?

So, what to call it? The auctioneer, Alexander Payne, is popularly attributed with coining the term 'Design Art' to describe work being sold at the auctioneers Philips de Pury (Rawsthorn 2007c; Bennett 2008; Williams 2009). It was also used by the selling show, *Design Art London*, which set up in Berkeley Square in 2007 and 2008. It appeared in the explanatory material for the exhibitions *Telling Tales: Fear and Fantasy in Contemporary Design* at the V&A and *Design High* at the Louise T. Blouin Foundation, both in 2009, and it featured in the title of recent books, *Design Art: Limited Editions* edited by Karolien Van Cauwelaert, (2009), and Sophie Lovell's *Limited Edition: Prototypes, One-Offs and Design Art Furniture* (2009). 'Design Art', as the term used for a particular type of expressive and communicative use-object that is sold as though it were art, has therefore demonstrably started to come into common

usage. Yet it is a clumsy term and one not likely to survive for long because of it; it also seems that it was originated to rather crudely brand an approach to design in order to sell it (Rawsthorn 2007c; Williams 2009). It is, however, this very unwieldiness that makes it attractive as a generic term for the purposes of this study. As an appellation it has the effect of pushing the two key terms up against each other, so that the dialectical relationship between design and art is made explicit. That is to say, it is because the two elements of the phrase do not sit comfortably together such terminology is productive. It also has the effect of both naming an approach to making and designating a particular market for design. The capitalisation does seem to determine the field too much as a defined grouping rather than a looser term of reference, however, therefore the less strident 'design art' will be used unless specifically necessary.

Experiencing the Objects

Given that so much of the following discussion depends upon investigating the way that furniture and domestic products make us feel, their affective quality as material things, it seemed necessary to experience as many of the artefacts as possible at first hand. Consequently, sourcing the examples has involved visiting the galleries and exhibitions in London and Rotterdam listed above. It also meant attending The Design Art Fair in London (2008); the Salone del Mobile (Milan Furniture Fair) in 2009 and 2010; The Pavilion of Art and Design in London in 2010, the collections at the V&A in London, the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam and the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. Thus I have been able to spend time with the objects, even if this has usually been in the controlled environs of the show or gallery. On occasion I have been able to touch them. Once or twice I have been able to sit on an example and once, in a museum, when no one was looking, I leaned over a rail and opened and closed a drawer to feel how it moved in its casing. This is of course not the same as living with them and using them, but it has allowed for a certain material sympathy for the things being discussed.

Throughout the thesis the images have largely been sourced through the internet. Though every effort has been made to use the clearest possible, in places they reveal the unmistakable burr of such digital images. Far from constituting a flaw,

however, it seems apposite that a discussion that so much depends upon the digitisation of the image of such objects should demonstrate their provenance in this way.

The trade in design art is international, with the main activity being through London, Rotterdam, New York and Basel (Van Cauwelaert 2009; Williams 2009; Lovell 2009). For reasons of proximity and to ground the research in some form of cultural specificity, London and Rotterdam have been the main geographical areas examined. The educational institutions which have fed this rise of the artist-designer are the Royal College of Art and Central Saint Martins in London, and most importantly the Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, all of which promote a creative and questioning approach to the study of design (Williams 2009) and this has led to Dutch and English practitioners dominating the scene. However, no in-depth examination of the curriculum or practices of these institutions has been conducted as this would have constituted a diversion into pedagogies and the role of education that, despite the origins of the study in my experience of teaching designers, would have distracted from the main drive of the discussion. The related phenomenon of Art Furniture in America has not been discussed in any depth as, despite its name, this tends to be characterised by relatively conventional furniture that is either produced by artists (such as Donald Judd); or straightforward furniture-types that are expressive in their form but do little to challenge the utilitarian nature of furniture or depart from the norms of furniture form, materials or use, as in the work of Wendell Castle. Similarly, ceramics and lighting are discussed, but not as discrete fields of activity and theory as this is beyond the scope of this discussion, instead they are regarded as domestic products and seen as part of the broader landscape of everyday items with which we live.

Meeting the People

Throughout this research I have met a lot of people and had many conversations about furniture. On an informal level I have talked to designers, artists, gallerists, educators and curators. I have spent a long time at fairs and private-views, drinking warm white wine and eaves-dropping on the conversations of others. Whilst such a 'collecting of chit-chat in situ' is certainly a valid approach to research (Morris 1988: 208), in that it

does not present facts or demonstrate how others really feel but begins to give a sense of the discourse in operation, it seemed that a more rigorous approach to grounding the analysis in the experiences of individuals was necessary. Arranging and executing formal interviews was challenging. Given that many of the designers I wished to talk to live and work in the Netherlands, and I live in one of the most inaccessible places in the UK, no small degree of planning was involved. My initial fantasy of arranging a number of interviews in the window of a few weeks, travelling the Netherlands on my bike, talking to designers on the way soon foundered in the reality of trying to pin people down to dates and locations. The modern artist-designer is very busy and internationally mobile. What was meant to be one surgical strike into the Netherlands became repeated trips to the region.

In the end six semi-structured interviews were conducted, consisting of five designers and a curator. I also had a fascinating discussion with an auctioneer who did not want to be quoted or named in the research, but whose insights certainly coloured my understanding of the functioning of the market. The designers were chosen to provide a range of different career stages, some balance between London and Rotterdam and some variation in approach. Maarten Baas studied at the Design Academy Eindhoven and has gained a great deal of success in recent years, both in terms of acclaim and sales, he is therefore a good example of a designer who is fully operating in the field being studied. Lazslo Rosnoki also works in the Netherlands and is at the beginning of his career and is attempting to make a name in the world of furniture design. Julia Lohmann is German, she graduated from the Royal College of Art and mostly works out of London. She has recently gained something of a reputation in the field and her work has been shown in museum settings. Gareth Neal is perhaps unique amongst these examples for having graduated from a course specifically devoted to the design and crafting of furniture, the BA(Hons) Furniture Design and Craftsmanship course at High Wycombe (Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College) and he also can be seen as a mid-career designer who has had no small degree of success but he is a good example of a practitioner who has come to be well known in the field but still needs to supplement his income through teaching. Jan Konings graduated from Eindhoven and works in Rotterdam. Though he had initial success with furniture design with the Dutch organisation Droog in the 1990s, he has since moved on from the design of individual objects and somewhat withdrawn from the market to work on projects that are more socially based.

Gareth Williams, was curator of contemporary furniture at the Victoria and Albert Museum for ten years until 2008. He published the most comprehensive study of the historiography of this area, *The Furniture Machine: Furniture Since 1990* (2006). He curated the major show in the UK of this type of work *Telling Tales: Fear and Fantasy in Contemporary Design* at the V&A (2009), and he is now Course Leader of Design Product at the Royal College of Art. The interviews began with Williams, as he can be said to be a professional explainer of this type of work. This interview then allowed me to set the co-ordinates for the rest of the conversations, though it should be noted that this was not a case of relying upon Williams's opinion, but rather beginning to search for the key terms and assumptions of the discourse. Less important than the assertions of individuals as to their methodologies and practices or what they were specifically trying to achieve, was the sense which developed of the nature of working in the field of design art, the possibilities of making and the relationship to the market. The interviews were taped and edited transcriptions appear in an appendix at the end of this study. It should be noted that this was not meant to constitute an oral history of the phenomenon or an ethnographic study of production and mediation. It was not the intentions of the makers or their opinions as to the meanings or significance of the work that I wished to discover as much as their methods and approaches. Consequently it was not my intention to analyse these interviews in depth in their own terms or quote from them extensively. Where these discussions are used, to follow the methodology of sociologists Scott Lash & Celia Lury, they are offered 'neither as records of subjective opinions nor as documentary records of fact, but as fragments of (shifting) points of view' (2007: 20). That is, throughout, the proclamations of makers as to the nature of what they are doing are not taken as definitive or ultimately explanatory, but are treated simply as pieces of evidence to be weighed and doubted just as any other, but which added another dimension beyond experiencing the objects and the more theoretical investigation of the work.

Studying the consumption and use of these objects has been difficult. Gallerists tend to operate as gate-keepers and are very reluctant to allow access to their main source of income. A full scale ethnographic study of users has not been conducted, not least because this is far beyond the scope of this limited research but also because, as Fallan notes 'Getting at the real users in situ... by means of ethnomethodology will rarely be the solution' (2010: 98). Instead throughout, beyond

the informal observation of potential purchasers at galleries and fairs, use has been inferred from the material affordances and physical scripts of the objects (Gibson 1986; Akrich 1992), in that any object can be seen to contain certain possibilities of use that delimits what it can or cannot do. This has then been fitted in to a broader cultural understanding of the role of design in contemporary society (Appadurai 1988, 1996; Attfield 2000; Bourdieu 1987, 1993; Forty 1995; Heskett 2002; Hoskins 1998; Julier 2008; Julier & Moor 2009; Miller 1987, 2001; Shove et al 2007)

The intention, therefore, has been to work from the position that design is a part of a cultural nexus whereby the designed object exists as a relationship between the designer, production practices and consumption. As the design theorist and commentator Guy Julier states, ‘This honours the designer’s role in shaping the form and content of the visual and material artefacts which are produced and consumed. But it also allows us to pay special attention to the less conscious features which inform and structure the process’ (2008: 4). Meeting the people involved and talking to them has therefore been only an element in trying to conceptualise the relationships upon which this field depends. This is therefore to see the production, distribution, mediation and consumption of the objects being considered as a discourse of design set in the wider context of social and political life and culture.

The Chapters

The first chapter takes the form of an extended introduction that maps out the philosophical terrain in which the discussion operates and lays out the theoretical methodology upon which the investigation depends. The key points of discussion are identified, such as the question of what function actually is, whilst the way in which these things can be regarded as communicative objects and performative things is explored. This section also asks how it is possible to write the history of such a phenomenon and establishes a mechanism for doing so in the terms of this debate. In Chapter 2 the role of Droog Design in the historical development of the design art tendency is examined in an effort to illustrate the way in which the concerns of the designers involved can be said to have precursors, yet it is argued that they were and are ultimately products of their time and conditions. Chapter 3 discusses the role of the market in the rise of design art, but then goes on to ask how these design

statements could be implicit in everyday life and actual use. In this process the concept of performative function and the ideological operation of furniture is then elaborated as it is argued that such dynamics can be seen writ large in the content-heavy work that has come to be known as design art. Chapter 4 recounts the biography of one specific design to demonstrate the way in which an object goes through transitions through the course of its life story, thus exemplifying how the object names not a static and unchanging entity but a volatile and endlessly reconfiguring problem to be encountered. Chapter 5 then uses the way in which a range of designers have intervened into the form of the monobloc plastic garden chair to show the different points at which the designer can act upon an object and the politics of affect involved in this. Chapter 6 examines how the contemporary art world relates to objects and their place in everyday life and asks how design art fits into this construct. Through an examination of the way in which art now functions as what can be termed a relational discourse the congruencies and dislocations between the practices and economies of art and design are examined to demonstrate what potentialities the practice of design art may have within this context in regard to the ethics of design in a broader sense.

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This research charts a moment in history when art and design collided in a world of hyper-mediation. It seems no accident that in an age when objects mean more to us than ever before, whereby in neo-liberal consumer culture we seem to have gone way beyond the fetishisation of the commodity to its total internalisation and assimilation into the self, a form of design has appeared that seemingly ramps-up the material affective qualities of the goods on offer to an almost absurd degree. In a time when art seems to reveal itself as profoundly immaterial and conceptual, in that so much of what it is and what it means circulates through conduits far beyond the boundaries of the physicality of objecthood, it also can be seen to be almost autistically materialist in its endless re-presentation of the tsunami of things that consumerism represents. At this historical moment an attitude to design appears that mirrors these concerns but goes a step further to propose that art really should enter life and the things with which we live become more than simply tools for living.

These things can be studied as commodities. They can clearly be understood as status symbols (Veblen 1994 [1899]), or markers of the taste and discernment of those who buy them (Bourdieu 1987), yet if this were all then they would be of little interest. It is proposed here that what can be discerned in these works is the dialectical tensions and conflicts of our age being played out. It may be the case that these communicative objects, in their ambiguous form and eccentric functioning, can give an insight into the way in which we live with performative things, ideological objects which contain in their being the protocols and disciplinary forces of the culture in which they have appeared. Finally, then, the intention is to assess to what extent design art can be seen as a politically radical practice that may suggest ways in which we can assert a new relationship to the things we make and use which denies the crushing logic of commodity culture.

Design Art and the Everyday Life of Performative Things

Two old tables have been used to make a base. Upon this has been placed another table, creating a form of frame. This has then been screened around by lace curtains and topped-off with sheets and blankets which have been braced by string guys that extend out to be held by rocks, as one might do when camping on hard ground. Within the chamber a mattress with a bold flower-print can be seen. It is a private, shrouded interior. The entrance to this space is then defined by the carcass of a wardrobe, its back removed and its doors open, allowing access to the inside, creating a threshold. Here sits a chair with its back legs sunk into the base of the wardrobe. The chair wavers in indeterminacy, it at once suggests the act of entering at the same time as it seems to stand sentinel, guarding the space. What is this structure? Well, if you had seen this object at *Telling Tales: Fear and Fantasy in Contemporary Design* (2009) you might have examined the label to discover that it was titled *Linen-Cupboard-House* and had been created by the Dutch designer Jurgen Bey (see Figure 1.1). If this was all it told, however, you might not be any the wiser.

At the entrance to the exhibition a board of text set the context for the exhibition as a whole:

In recent years works like this have been described collectively as Design Art, a catch-all term for objects that are somewhere between art, craft and design. They are mostly self-initiated works – personal statements or manifestos, made by designers as unique pieces or in limited editions. Rather like art, the objects in this exhibition are generally traded through galleries. Yet unlike sculpture, they retain their role as functional objects, even if their usability is often subordinated to their symbolic or decorative value (Williams 2009)



Figure 1.1 Jurgen Bey, *Linen-Cupboard-House*, 2002

So here, rather concisely, the curator of the show, Gareth Williams, situates an object such as Bey's *Linen-Cupboard-House*. It is a 'personal statement or manifesto' that lays 'somewhere between art, craft and design' (2009). It is something which is to be traded as though it were art, yet it retains its role as a functional object. This, however, actually raises more questions than it answers. How is an object such as this operating between art, craft and design? Is this then a new territory? Art, craft and design have traditionally been separate, if closely related, disciplines and it may be that serving the

interests of one is antagonistic to one or both of the others. Similarly, what does it mean for something's usability to be subordinated to its symbolic or decorative value and does this then constitute a manifesto or suggestion as to how design should operate? Indeed, if this is what the object is doing, is what we are looking at even design?

In order to make it possible to address such questions this chapter therefore lays out the theoretical methodology upon which the following discussion depends. Consequently the intention is, through the introduction of a series of problems and key theoretical approaches, to establish a conceptual framework which can then be drawn upon throughout the subsequent analysis.

Communicative Objects

One thing seems certain, Bey's creation is an object that is trying to say or signify something beyond its mere utility. It is communicating something, in this way it can be described as a communicative object. A few years ago work such as this would have been easily dismissed as so much Postmodernism, a term that in its wider cultural usage became so broad as to be almost meaningless, but which in design retained at least some recognisable application. As a reaction to the perceived sterility of Modernism, Postmodern design drew upon historical styles and references and happily attempted to erase distinctions between high and low culture; it also relied on techniques of exaggeration and parody as it played with hegemonic narratives of style and class (Williams 2009; Houze 2010). Alessandro Mendini's *Proust Chair* (Figure 1.2) has come to be regarded as an iconic example of the Postmodern approach. The chair has a formal rococo structure, yet this appears to contrast with the pointillist, painterly effect of the surface pattern. Indeed Williams suggests that Postmodern design such as this has a direct relationship to more contemporary design art. He argues that much of what is presented as such 'seems to embody Postmodern thinking' in that it can be regarded as in some way being ironic. He states 'Irony relies on discordance between intention and effect... For ironic design to succeed, the viewer must have a pre-existing notion of how to interpret a stylistic device, material or technique, which is then subverted in the way in which it is delivered' (2009: 24). However, despite the truism that Postmodernism relied upon irony, it is not clear

exactly how use-objects are meant to be ironic, beyond a rather fuzzy conception of subversion or some form of visual or formal wit. Therefore it is necessary to ask not only whether furniture and other use-objects can be regarded as ironic, but also why anybody should claim this to be the case.



Figure 1.2 Alessandro Mendini, *Proust Chair*, wooden frame, textile upholstery 1978

Williams does note that whilst Postmodernism was concerned with the symbolic qualities of objects, the work seldom engaged with emotion, remaining as ‘cool intellectual exercises’, whilst the work of the more contemporary designers exemplified by the work shown in *Telling Tales* is described as ‘much more emotionally hot’ and he claims that it ‘tackles universal psychological truths’ (2009: 24). The idea that design engages us on an emotional level has recently been popularised by the professor of computer science and advocate of ‘Human Centred Design’, Donald Norman (2002; 2004). However, for any critic coming from a perspective of design history his apparent discovery that design operates at the level of emotions is perhaps not as ground-breaking as he believes it to be. Designers such

as Jonathan Chapman (2005) and Stuart Walker (2005; 2010) have then used the concept of emotionally engaging design to argue that objects that are designed with this in mind can achieve more durable forms. However, this work on design and emotion tends to regard design as an essentially instrumental process in which issues of emotion and affect are only really of interest to the extent that they contribute to the sustainable production and efficient functioning of the objects. Here, in a piece such as Bey's *Linen-Cupboard-House*, emotion and affective reaction appear to be operating in a different manner. Rather than utilising emotion to allow for the better practical functioning of the object, instead it appears to be *playing* upon emotion. The affective response of the viewer/user is somehow being stimulated to add another level to the object that is entangled in its functioning but is not intended to somehow improve it in an instrumental sense.

Upon initially encountering an object such as this it is difficult to see what type of useful object has been created. Apart from a child's den or play-house it may seem that such a structure has little utilitarian function. However, to a Dutch observer the resonance would be immediate. The traditional Dutch bed is a recessed structure which can be screened-off from the rest of the room to make use of the limited space of the interior. This is illustrated by the traditional Dutch tale, *The Courtship of Hilbert and Japiky*. When Hilbert arrives at Japiky's house to court her (bearing a traditional gift of gingerbread, of course), we get a flavour of what it must have been to live in such conditions and the role the screened bed must have fulfilled.

With that, he went into the house, and there were Japiky's mother and father and six little brothers and sisters all in a row to stare at him. They looked him well over, up and down, before and behind. They asked him this and that and the other thing, and when they had made up their minds he was good enough for Japiky, they all went off and crawled into their various holes in the wall where they slept, leaving Hilbert and Japiky quite alone (Anon. in Beaupré Miller 1926: 33)

An example of such a screened bed can be seen in the Maud and Miska Petersham illustration to the Dutch nursery rhyme *The Stork* seen in Figure 1.3. It is possible to imagine if one was living in an open-plan space that the *Linen-Cupboard-House* could act as a form of semi-private extra room for guests. It has also been titled *Garden House* (Williams 2009), though it is doubtful how waterproof it would be, it is also easy to see how it might function in this manner. It also has definite cultural

resonances upon which the design is playing. This is not the *meaning* of Bey’s piece, however. Knowing this does not collapse the object into explanation or didacticism. This is not the origin of the *Linen-Cupboard-House*, rather it is a resonance, a connection and an allusion which contributes to the operation of the object as it refers to its historical descent.



Figure 1.3 Maud and Miska Petersham, illustration to *The Stork* showing a traditional Dutch screened bed, lithograph, 1923

To such ends Bey has not simply constructed such a space from new materials, as we might expect from a designer. Instead he has chosen to build his spare room from found elements. This then has two effects. Because of the sort of items used, this connects the thing that Bey has constructed to its pre-history, in that it directly draws upon the connections and connotations implied. However, it may also be that Bey has co-opted a methodology from art, for as Williams suggests appropriation could said to be one of the practices that has brought artists and designers closer together in recent

years (2006: 20). However, this does rather assume that art and design operate in the same way, that in the transposition of this methodology from the field of art to that of design the function remains the same. Might it not be that such an approach actually works in a very different way when it is applied to use-objects and the things we live with everyday?

Bey's creation is also an uncanny thing. In Surrealist thought the concept of the uncanny is derived from Freud's concept of the 'unheimlich', literally the 'unhomely', which exists in contrast to the 'heimlich', the 'homelike', the familiar, the known. The word also has a double meaning, however, in that heimlich also refers to that which is hidden, or so known that it is no longer seen (Foster 1995). The unheimlich, or uncanny, therefore is not simply what we are not at home with, but rather it is the return of the familiar made strange by repression. It is the moment of recognition and alienation experienced when that which we come into contact with is both commonplace and strange at the same time. Bey has created a house, a little home, but the manner in which it draws upon previous styles and usages, such as the decorative qualities of the furniture, the cabriole legs, the swags and curlicues, the lace and the soft furnishings, suggests a return of that which has been hidden or previously discarded, but in a fantastical form. The use of the old-fashioned elements means that, even if we do not get particular specific cultural allusions, such as the role of the screened bed for example, we are still aware of there being a certain historical subtext, a sense of connection to the past. At the same time the make-shift nature of the structure certainly suggests the fantasies of childhood, just as the form could be reminiscent of a gypsy caravan or a funeral coach. That is, the romance of its form means that we necessarily have an affective relationship to such a creation. As the curator and critic Jane Alison observes, Freud noted that in some languages 'the uncanny can only be translated as "the haunted house" that gives rise to ghosts' (2010: 22). So the Surrealist uncanny is the recognition of the haunted nature of reality, haunted that is by our unconscious knowledge and desires. For the Surrealists this was certainly about beauty and eroticism, but for them these ideas were suffused with a darkness which was expressed in terms of the irrational residues of experience.

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The intention here, therefore, is to regard the objects under discussion as communicative objects, in that they are things which can be understood as having strong signifying qualities. This is not to designate them as being in contrast to other objects which have no signifying function, as shall be demonstrated below, all artefacts can be seen as having this effect. What is noticeable about what is here described as design art, is that this element of the functioning of the work is emphasised and amplified to an observable degree. That is, it seems to be a key factor in the functioning of the pieces, not a supplement or add-on to a more primary utilitarian telos or final cause. It should then be noted, however, that the intention is not then to decode the objects and discern what the author of the work is 'trying to say'. Instead, the actual objects are regarded as being eloquent in and of themselves. This therefore is not an exercise in second-guessing the motivations of the designers or searching out their explanations of what the pieces are meant to do, it is to regard the makers as actors in history to whom the causations, content and effects of the work may be as opaque and difficult to discern as any other observer, no matter what they may think, or claim, they were doing.

Many of the objects under consideration seem to have uncanny qualities. For all that these things are often expensive status symbols for the rich they do not generally speak of uncomplicated luxury. Often found-elements will be employed as a raw material. This could, therefore, be regarded as having some form of ecological purpose, in that it is the recycling of waste. Yet here *objet trouvé* tend not to be used in this way at all. Instead there seems to be more of a Surrealist agenda that is concerned with the resonances and effect of objects. If Postmodern design was involved with the distancing effect of ironic statement and intellectual games, then it seems that the form of design being studied here has more affecting resonances based on the use of that which is familiar made strange through alteration of context and juxtaposition. It may be, therefore, that in the practices of design art it is possible to discern the way in which objects appear in everyday life as uncanny things. In order to do this, however, it will be necessary to consider the way in which material artefacts can be said to communicate at all.

Telling Tales?

The device that Williams and the curatorial team of *Telling Tales* used to pull the show together was that of narrative and story telling. Though Williams happily accepts that this could never be the last word on the subject (Williams to the author 2010), it is his contention in the catalogue that objects such as Bey's 'tell tales', that 'designers use objects to explore the meaning of past events and our relationship with them by questioning or subverting traditional forms, materials, expectations and historic values' (2009: 9). Yet, it is not clear that objects can 'explore meaning' in any systematic manner. Is this not the act of a subject rather than an object? Or, as shall be discussed, is this not actually a quality of the *relationship* between subjects and the objects?

As Williams notes, for a story to function it needs a beginning, middle and an end, what linguists describe as 'inaugural, transitional and terminal motifs' (2009: 15). Yet, is it possible for an object, or even an encounter with an object, to have an identifiable beginning, middle and an end? Does the object's beginning start with it being encountered or was it when it was made, or conceived? What is its relation to what came before it? Similarly, does an object end when it has ceased to be encountered, or when it ceases to function, or when it is thrown away? All of this is left unclear by Williams. However, this does not mean that the concept of narrative is not useful, rather it suggests that it must be understood as operating beyond the idea of the individual object narrating its story. Bey's creation is not something that tells a tale, as such. It is something that is *implicit* in a story. It is one of its components. In the fairytale, the woodcutter's axe does not tell the story, it animates it. As soon as we are made aware of the presence of the axe we know what possibilities are implied. We do not know exactly what it denotes, what path is determined, but we know what it can mean, what connotations are suggested. We know where things could go. We know this because we are aware of the conventions of the fairy-tale and the material potentialities implicit in the form of an axe. Material narrative devices are embedded in the broader meta-narrative of such story telling, at the same time that they have their own physical possibilities of action and use.

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These do seem to be objects that are involved in story telling and narrative, but this must be understood as suggesting a relationship between people and things, subjects and objects, whereby narratives are constructed and enacted through artefacts. It is therefore necessary to understand how material things are implicit in such structures, how they are used by individuals to tell the story of the self; how organisations wrap stories around objects to render them meaningful to consumers; how entire nations weave a sense of identity from the artefacts that come to represent them; how historians and critics pick up and use design to construct history itself. This is then to suggest that any analysis of the way in which we ascribe meaning to the things we encounter and use must be sensitive to the tales they are used to tell. At the same time, as it is understood that material things animate scenarios, it is necessary to ask whom such stories serve.

Crafted Communication

If, whilst visiting *Telling Tales*, you turned around you would have been faced with an object that is equally as troubling and difficult to understand as Bey's, but which can be seen to operate in a very different manner. Where the *Linen-Cupboard-House* is a collection of found elements, Tord Boontje's *Fig Leaf Wardrobe* (2008; Figure 1.4), produced for Meta, is a highly crafted item. The exterior structure of the piece has been created from a multitude of hand-made enamel leaves, each painstakingly attached to the frame of metal branches. This shell is then opened out to reveal a fantastical interior in which a bronze tree appears to grow, silhouetted against a background of extremely fine silk, graduating in hue from green at the bottom to a hazy pale blue at the top. In the exhibition a single dress with a snake motif hangs from one of the branches. To remark that this is a narrative object seems somewhat redundant. The use of the fig-leaf motif has biblical connotations, relating as it does to Adam and Eve and their encounter with the serpent at the tree of knowledge (as evoked by the addition of the dress in the show). Therefore the object does not simply tell its own tale, rather it makes allusions to history and myth that allow it to communicate within a certain narrative matrix, which is to a large degree dependent upon the manner of its making.



Figure 1.4 Tord Boontje, *Fig Leaf Wardrobe*, bronze, enamel and silk, 2008

Though very different types of thing, both Bey's spare room and Boontje's wardrobe operate as communicative objects, in that they hook into narratives which exist beyond them as individual artefacts. They also share an approach to making, even if at first sight they appear to be from opposing camps, that of the cobbled-together and the highly crafted. Both can to some degree be regarded as craft objects because they share David Pye's quality of the 'workmanship of risk', whereby 'the quality of the result is not pre-determined, but depends upon the judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises' (1971: 7). This is therefore to posit craft as the result of esoteric knowledge, in the application of judgement, skill in the dexterity of the maker, and attentiveness in the form of care. These then are clearly things that have been made by people. Paul Greenhalgh observes that 'the etymology of craft relates it to power. The power to control one's own pattern of life, to resist through the process of making and designing' (2002: 8). This is useful because it implies that

rather than suggesting that the task at hand is the designation of particular pieces as craft objects, what is necessary is to examine the way in which craft can be seen as an approach or an attitude, which is discernable in the material residues of processes that have been applied to the making of an object, as, in this sense, as the craft theorist and historian Glenn Adamson notes, craft can only be said to exist in motion' (2007).

Bey's piece speaks eloquently of a maker, the person who has selected and assembled these elements; Boontje's work, though not actually made by him, bears the mark of skilled workers who have crafted by hand the artefact we encounter.

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That both can actually be regarded as the product of craft does suggest that it is necessary to ask what the role of craft is in the production of these highly wrought communicative objects. However, in this context the really pertinent question is how this use of craft idioms actually communicates to the putative user of such objects; that is, how does the fact that the presence of the maker is apparently imbued into such objects affect the way in which we react to and therefore use such things? This is important not simply at the level of the individual artefact, but at the broader level of how we relate to objects as part of a more extensive system or culture of designed goods whereby we narrativise the things with which we live. This is therefore to suggest that the way in which these objects communicate can actually be best understood as a historical phenomenon, since the way in which we relate to the making of things is clearly a shifting historical trope dependent upon the ideological schema of the time.

The Cultural History of Design

How then is it possible to write a history of this type of design? The following analysis takes the form of a study in design history informed by an understanding of material culture, not from a position of identifying good and bad design and narrating the development of such artefacts, but as a means to examine the social life of things and subject-object relations as features of design culture. This is specifically a cultural history of design because, as Kjetil Fallan argues, such an approach allows for design

to be seen as ‘any other cultural phenomenon’, in that it does not give a privileged position to the artefacts, actors, institutions or structures studied, but regards these elements as part of a nexus of inter-relations (2010: 49). That is to say, it is necessary to see these objects not as discrete entities but as part of a matrix of interacting forces which can be mapped and the interconnections examined; it is to regard such things not as the individual creations of inspired geniuses but as part of what Fallan has called the ‘seamless web of socio-design’ (2010: 55), the filigree, four-dimensional web of historical event and action that is actualised in the material.

History can be an exercise in making the facts fit the story. Or as Friedrich Nietzsche suggests, often the historian looks back so much that ‘in the end he thinks backwards’ (1979 [1889]: 25). That is, history can become a mechanism applied in the search for the initial cause of a phenomenon. This he refers to as ‘*ursprung*’ or origin (1887). Nietzsche’s point, as Giorgio Agamben notes, was to suggest that the search for straightforward origins can blind us to the entangled nature of the historical phenomena we wish to study; that rather than seeking points of origin, we need to begin to understand how forces are continually being played out in the emergence of historical events (Agamben 2008: 87). Therefore Nietzsche contrasted this tendency to seek for origins with the concept of ‘*herkunft*’, which translates as ‘descent’. This is not a search for origin, rather it is an analysis of the way in which the story has come into being. It is a plotting of events not as neat sequential steps in an inevitable culmination in the now (as what could only ever be), but as disparate contingencies, only some of which have been realised and the effects of which can only ever be partially known. As Michel Foucault notes in his analysis of Nietzsche, history can be practiced as a form of genealogy, the intention of which is to ‘maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us’ (Foucault 1977: 146). Therefore the intention is not to construct a unified and totalized history of the existence of the objects considered, but to understand the dialectical tensions which have allowed them to come into being.

In neo-liberal consumer culture we inhabit a very smooth world. The things we live with appear complete. It is the culture of the black-box where things cannot be mended. Similarly through narrative devices and a certain form of presentation, history is also made to appear smooth. This is therefore, in Louis Althusser’s terms ,

an ideological reproduction of the conditions of production, it is the historicisation of ideological structures that renders them apparently inevitable (1993 [1970]). At every point in an object's life it could have become something else. Every thing exists as the result of all of its contingencies. These realised possibilities can then be traced. By mapping the decisions made as evidenced in the artefacts and identifying the forces acting upon the actors we can begin to see the structuring principles and protocols at play in the material ideology of our culture. This is then to map the descent of things. As Foucault notes: 'The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself' (1977: 147). In the tracing of the descent of design art from the early 1990s to the present what becomes clear is how such a phenomenon does not represent a break with the concerns of the past, such as the functional nature of furniture or the way in which we relate to designed objects, rather it demonstrates how such problems have persisted throughout the history of modernity and continue to have resonance today. What it does demonstrate, however, is that the way in which these concerns manifest in different ways depending upon the contingencies of history.

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Therefore any account of the appearance of design art cannot be a simple recounting of the tale, but must needs be a mapping of the myriad interconnections and relationships that have allowed such a phenomenon to occur. This tracing of the descent of design art will then make it possible to see how certain usages and practices, such as the use of found objects and the creation of disturbing or unsettling things, have been employed in relation to their cultural and historical context.

Droog Design

If one had to choose a point of origin for the phenomenon that has come to be called design art, a very attractive moment would be the first exhibition presented by the Dutch organisation, Droog Design, at the Milan Furniture Fair (Salone del Mobile) in April of 1993. Droog was established by the historian and critic Renny Ramakers and

the designer and educator, Gijs Bakker. At this point Ramakers was one of the most important and well known design commentators in the Netherlands. Since the late 1980s, as part of her job with the Stichting Industrieel Ontwerpen Nederland (ioN) foundation - a Rotterdam based organisation established in 1984, the aim of which was to improve industrial design in the Netherlands, provide education and promote the practice of design more generally - Ramakers had been searching for work by young designers that could be promoted as the new cutting-edge of practice in the field. Bakker and his partner Emmy van Leersum had been central to the Dutch and German studio jewellery movement of the 1970s and in the 1980s his activities had broadened out to include furniture and product design, making him a leading figure in the Dutch design world at the time (Adamson 2007: 33).

At the Salone in 1993, Droog presented a range of furniture and utilitarian domestic objects, which included 'A bundle of second-hand drawers, a chair made of rags, piled up lamp shades, a coffee maker in which bicycle lamps were mounted, a bookcase made of paper' (Ramakers 2004: 4). Reviewing the show the French newspaper *Libération* suggested that the 'unknowns' responsible for Droog should be 'given a medal for spiritual savoir vivre' saying that 'They tell the most improbable of stories. Fairytales without fairies. Fleeting. They are brilliant in that they arouse the desire to revivify the quotidian in life. Design for them is not a question of taste but an ongoing issue. That makes you feel better. The way a stroll through the flea market does' (in Ramakers & Bakker 1998: 92). This then illustrates how Droog was initially received as somehow breaking the mould of how design was being presented at this time.

Jan Koning and Jurgen Bey's *Folding Bookcase* of 1991 (Figure 1.5) was one of the first things selected to be shown as a Droog product and it demonstrates the combination of technique and approach that typifies the organisation's early work. The piece has been made from long lathes of plywood that have been bolted together at the top to create a sprung effect. The shelves have then been formed from paper, which means that the bookcase can expand and contract, depending upon how many books are placed on it. The use of materials is inventive. The effect of the object's functioning is pleasing and a little surprising – here is an object that *does* something as it functions. As shall be demonstrated in the following chapters, this and the other furniture and products presented by Droog at this time are things which certainly do function, they are undoubtedly use-objects, yet they also seem to be appealing the

emotions and stimulating affective responses in a way that pushes them to be more than simply functional. In this way they seem to be pushing the boundaries of what is regarded as function. As shall become clear, this is then a tendency that can be discerned in much of the more contemporary work being considered. It may then be that through studying such an effect it becomes possible to understand better the ideological nature and functioning of furniture in general.

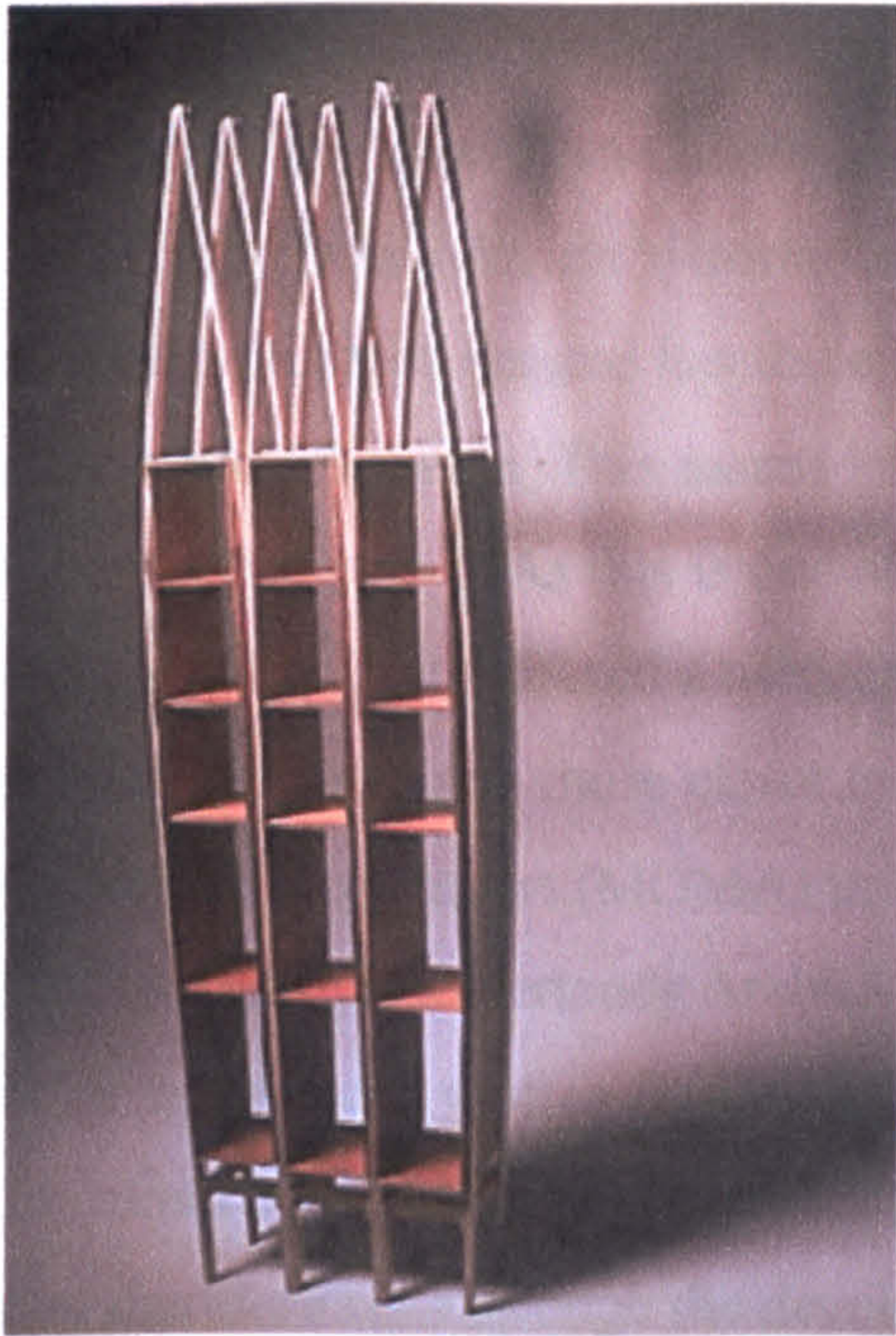


Figure 1.5 Jan Konings & Jurgen Bey, *Folding Bookcase*, Plywood and craft paper, 1991

The arrival of Droog on the scene therefore provides an attractive point of origin in constructing the history of functional items that seem to have a narrative and emotional charge. However, this moment must actually be seen as a transitional phase in the descent of design art. For, as shall be demonstrated in the subsequent discussion, Droog has a pre-history that informed the way in which this organisation operated, as did the approaches adopted by the designers who worked under its banner. The charting of the development and influence of Droog then offers a way of demonstrating how such practices and the assumptions upon which they are based change over time. The appearance of Droog and its subsequent development does not then function as the origin of design art. Rather it marks a key moment of transition in its emergence.

In studying the history of Droog Design any scholar of the field is presented with a problem, in that most of the material available has been produced under the aegis of Droog itself. In this regard it does seem remarkable that the organisation has effectively written its own history for so long. Consequently the 1998 Droog publication *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties* (1998), and Ramakers's contribution to it in particular, is examined, not as a neutral source but as a tendentious statement which can be interrogated in an effort to see what assumptions underpinned the Droog project. One exception to this domination by the organisation of their own story is the recent article in *The Journal of Modern Craft*: 'So-Called Craft; The Formative Years of Droog 1992-1998' (2010), by the Dutch design historian and theorist, Timo de Rijk. He knows personally many of the protagonists and has therefore had privileged access, whilst retaining an invaluable critical distance. This means he has been able to retell the Droog story from a different perspective. As this is one of the few counter-analyses of the phenomenon available it has offered a useful fulcrum on which pivot the often polemic statements of Ramakers and those closer to Droog, such as the curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, Paolo Antonelli (1998), and the director of the Netherlands Architectural Institute, Aaron Betsky (2004a; 2006), both of whom have written for Droog publications and seem to have firmly bought into Ramakers's version of events.

The history of Droog therefore runs through the development of the design considered in this research and offers a useful way, in the first part of this study, to map the way in which design as a practice metamorphosised as the historical context changed. As Adamson observes, the early output of Droog in the 1990s can be seen as relatively unified project based upon allusions to craft processes and an inventive use of materials (2007: 35). By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century Bakker had left in unexplained circumstances and its range of products had descended, in Adamson's words, into a collection of 'disparate one-liners' (ibid) that were being offered to the market through a store on the Las Vegas Strip. This then presents a trajectory that seems difficult to resist in charting the descent of design art as a whole. Droog's longevity also means that it has endured through the informational revolution of the advent of mass internet use and the expansion of the channels of communication. It is therefore available as a mechanism for gauging the effect of such a transition on the way in which design can be made, mediated and consumed in such circumstances.

The intention, therefore, is to place Droog in the overarching descent of design art as an examination of the development of a tendency that regards the making of use-objects not simply as the engineering of tools, but as things to live with in a broader sense. This is then to begin to see the making of functional objects as being concerned not only with efficiency but a wider understanding of what it means to use such things, thus allowing for an examination of what constitutes the boundaries of function as a concept. Such a position of course makes the assumption that what we are dealing with here are actually functional objects and not simply pieces of art that have been given the titles of utilitarian things, such as a spare-room or a wardrobe, for example. It is necessary, therefore, to pause for a moment and consider whether these can be called functional things at all.

Functional-ism

Modernist design was predicated upon a version of functionalism that gave primacy to the expression of function in a utilitarian sense (Marcus 1995). This thesis seeks to demonstrate that function is actually a much more complicated problem than this, that Modernism itself produced highly symbolic and communicative objects and that far from representing a Postmodern break with the past, objects such as those made under the Droog name or Bey's and Boontje's later work can be understood to be concerned with problems and approaches that grew out of Modernism.

For an object to be designated as representing design to some degree it must be making a claim to function. In the early part of the century the debate about the nature of the role of function was at the heart of the search for an ethics of design, and throughout the twentieth century this issue was a central concern of Modernist thought and practice (Thackara 1988; Heskett 2002; Siu 2003; Sudjic 2008). In such a context, the principal 'form follows function' appears to suggest that the form of an object should be dictated by its purpose, what it is meant to do: that form should be derived from function. It is worth considering, however, the origin of this famous

Modernist dictum. In the architect Louis Sullivan's 1896 essay 'The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered' he stated that

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law. (Sullivan 1896).

Here in Sullivan's original 'law' this actually seems more of an observation than a suggestion. He appears to be arguing that form cannot help but spring from function, rather than suggesting that utilitarian function is primary and form should be used to express this.

In his influential polemic *Ornament and Crime*, first published in 1908, Adolf Loos argued that 'the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects' (Loos 1908). This was therefore to introduce a moral imperative to aesthetics and the styling of objects as to their functionality; that the removal of ornament to emphasise the functional nature of design was to somehow become more civilised, that an ascetic lack of ornament or adornment was more morally sound. It is far from clear, however, that Loos's proposition flows from Sullivan's. The latter is suggesting that what something is for, its purpose, what it *does*, will dictate its form. Loos, however, went further to argue that objects should express their function to the exclusion of all else, because this will necessarily mean that the removal of all ornament or extraneous form will guarantee that what is left is only functional in a practical sense, and therefore better.

In Figure 1.6, Marcel Breuer sits in his 1925 *Model B3* chair, later to become known as the *Wassily* chair. Taking the essential structure of an easy-chair, it is as though the mass of Victorian upholstery has been hollowed-out to leave simply volume delineated by line. It is spare and economical. The metal gleams, the linear tensions of the struts beat out mechanical rhythms against each other as the light plays upon them. The webbing is tight. The angles are correct and the proportions satisfying. It appears to subtract all that is not absolutely necessary for the act of sitting, to the extent that the sitter appears to almost float in the space an armchair usually takes up. This can to some extent be discerned from a photograph, but the effect is much more striking when the chair is physically present in a room. It is a large thing, its footprint being the same as that of a traditional armchair, but its construction means that it



Figure 1.6 Marcel Breuer sitting in the *Model B3 (Wassily)* chair, tubular steel and canvas webbing, circa 1926

seems to fill up no space at all. It appears to be an efficient tool for sitting at the same time that it is a coolly elegant piece of furniture.

This was one of the first products to emerge from the Dessau Bauhaus and it played a part in establishing the school's reputation as an institution pioneering a functionalist approach to design. One of the earliest designs to exploit the qualities of tubular steel, it is said that Breuer took inspiration from observing the construction of his Adler bicycle (Czerwinski 2009; Massey 2011). This was arguably because the bicycle, particularly at this time, would have exemplified a machine which represented an almost perfect marriage of form and function: there is nothing there that does not need to be there for the efficient functioning of the machine, at the same time that what is there is absolutely honest as to what it is made from and what it does (Penn 2010). It can be argued that this is exactly what Breuer tried to achieve in the *B3*. He could easily have clad the frame in fabric to achieve a more conventional looking chair. Instead the intention has been to create an object which not only

provides the optimum requirements for sitting (a machine or tool for sitting, so to speak) but which also then crucially expresses this function by emphasising how this has been achieved technically and materially.

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Functionalism, therefore, was as much about telling a story about the nature and value of function as it was a technical working out of material expediency and engineering logic. It was a setting of what constituted the boundaries of function as a concept. Despite it being an icon of apparently functional design, an object such as Breuer's *B3* can also be demonstrated to be something that had as one of its central purposes the communication of this very functionality. In this way the functionalist objects of Modernism, such as the *B3*, can be seen to be as much concerned with communicating something as they were with being tools for living. Therefore it must be asked what relation contemporary design art furniture and domestic products have to function within such a legacy, whereby function is characterised as being concerned with much more than a simplistic solution of straightforward engineering problems.

The Social Rhetoric of Function

The form of the *B3* has to a large degree been determined by the material qualities of tubular steel and the technical capacities of the equipment used to bend it at the time of making. It is clear from Breuer's posture (as it is from actually sitting in it) that questions of ergonomics and sitting position have been considered, as have issues pertaining to the manufacture and mass production of the project. Breuer's decision to effectively leave the mechanism exposed, to show how the chair is formed and held together, however, is as much based on aesthetic considerations as it is any practical problems associated with the physical act of sitting. The newness of the materials from which it is manufactured and the stark aesthetic adopted were intended just as much to symbolise and express a modernist faith in the machine future - as a place where people would live, use furniture, sit down - as for any utilitarian reasons. As a sitting device this chair was no more effective or functional than the upholstered version it was meant to replace. Yes, it was meant to be easier and cheaper to mass-

produce, but at this point it was still very much a prototype that had been hand-made (Massey 2011). In this way then, it operated as much as a suggestion or a proposal as to how furniture might be in a truly modern world as it did as any practical solution to a problem.

This was a theme which ran through the development of Modernist design: that to be functional an object had to express its function first and foremost, that to emphasise any other element of the role of a piece of design (to signify status or act as decoration, for example) was to betray the essentially functional nature of an object. In this way Modernist functionalism made a claim to be concerned with the logic and grammar of design, but this was at the cost of denying its rhetorical nature, even as they employed it in the name of efficiency. This appeal to function as a symbolic quality of the object based on forms which were perceived to embody the spirit of the machine could therefore be described as functional-*ism*, an essentially romantic belief in the moral superiority of functional objects – or perhaps more accurately those which displayed a functional aesthetic.

We do not *need* a chair, table or sideboard in an absolute sense, rather we use one because it fits in with a certain manner of living. In this instance the goal of Breuer's chair is not simply to facilitate sitting, it is to allow the sitter to both sit *and* feel themselves to be doing so on a chair that does nothing but speak of function. As George Marcus has discussed, functionalism was actually as much about aesthetics and symbolism as it was concerned with the practical functioning of designed objects (1995: 9-16). This is therefore the provisioning of functionalism as a creed with the tools for achieving a certain sort of life.

Thus the modernist approach to functionalism was as much a poetic approach to how the world should appear in the symbolising of a new life with new values, as it was a practical attempt to realise a functioning and functional utopia. In this way function, as it is manifest in Modernist design practice, is essentially an idea or defining myth. Therefore the final cause or central teleos of Modernism, as exemplified by a design such as Breuer's *B3*, was not function as the basic satisfaction of utilitarian need with regard to the individual thing, but rather this was superseded by the overarching purpose of the object. The final cause, the teleological goal, of Breuer's chair is not sitting as function but Modernism as myth: the creation of a milieu that both looks and feels modern. Or what Jean Baudrillard describes as 'the functionalist myth', the vision of the possibility of a completely functional world

(2005: 60). This is therefore to suggest that the purpose of Modernist design was ultimately the construction of a uniquely modern subjectivity; that ideas such as functionalism were above all facilitators in the pursuit of this end.

Furniture does not simply fulfil prosaic practical requirements, it also makes us feel things. As Edward Lucie-Smith argues, the practical functions of furniture are comparatively few and 'Furniture is the servant of fantasy just as much as it is a response to practical everyday needs'. He then goes on to note that the domestic interior as a whole often acts 'as scenery for a play which we make up as we go along' with the furniture acting 'as components in a constantly shifting and capriciously altered three dimensional collage' (Lucie-Smith 1995: 11). Therefore, as John Heskett argues, a broader definition is needed, one which acknowledges that the meaning of an object is as much a part of its function as its prosaic material purpose or use-value. He suggests that, 'In place of dogmatic assertions that limit consideration of what form is considered permissible, a more inclusive definition of function is needed, which can be opened up by breaking the concept of function into a twofold division: the key concepts of utility and significance' (Heskett 2002: 39). Function must be understood as referring to much more than the simple utilitarian action of an object working, but must be seen in its wider cultural context, as it refers to the totality of what we believe something is for and what it can do.

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So, given that even the apparently ascetic functionalism of Modernism can be described as the provisioning of goods to *facilitate fantasy*, one question that must be addressed is, through their utility and significance what fantasies can design art furniture be said to serve? It seems clear that the desire of the rich for exclusivity is one, but in the content of many of the pieces it does seem that a darker presence can be discerned. If these are highly communicative objects, and this is an element of their functioning, what can design art tell us about what it means to use the objects that surround us?

Everyday Life and Performative Things

It is in the routines and rituals of the hardly-noticed that much of existence is constituted. Even significant and life-changing moments take place in the landscape of the mundane: what has come to be termed the everyday. Ben Highmore describes the everyday as ‘the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met’ which is constituted by ‘those most repeated actions, those most travelled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally the day to day’ (Highmore 2002: 1). In this way things appear to recede into the fabric of life. Underlying the philosophy of Modernism there has often been an implicit suggestion that good design should do this: that it should essentially be invisible, that it should be expressed simply as function, that it should be instrumental (Marcus 1995). Beneath this trope of functionalism, therefore, is the proposition that the things we use in everyday life must primarily be efficient, that first and foremost good design should be based on clarity, effectiveness and fitness for purpose (Matthews et al 2008). Yet, such an instrumental approach to the nature and value of design can be said to disregard the opposite feature of everyday life identified by Highmore: its marvellous character. As he notes, ‘to see everyday modernity as boring or relentlessly routinized is to capture only one side of its general articulation’. This would then be to miss the way in which the everyday can be also be seen as strange and mysterious (2002: 12). The everyday is therefore both mundane and marvellous, tedious and extraordinary, and the ‘everyday offers itself up as a problem, a contradiction, a paradox: both ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and unknown, obvious and enigmatic’ (ibid); this is therefore to identify a dialectical tension at the heart of everyday life, which is the setting in which most of life is played out.

Given that we inhabit it, we often do not notice the structures and protocols of everyday life. Yet it can be argued that it is through the materiality of the way we live that the possibilities of action are established. In the 1980s the French philosopher Michel de Certeau elaborated an approach to the problem of everyday life which does not accept that producers or those in power actually have total control. Instead he suggests that there can be seen to be a distinction between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’. Strategies, he argues are the calculation of power relationships which become possible once an agent (such as a business, a city, a scientific institution and the like) with will and power can be identified. This then represents the macro-level of rules and

institutional control. Within this, however, the weak who are subject to these rules and regulations, the action of strategy, can adopt tactics which allow them to live with some degree of autonomy within the architecture of strategy (1988). This in some ways seems an attractive reading, and such an analysis helps to explain how design art practitioners operate. However, as John Roberts notes, such an approach that stresses ‘creative consumption’ does rather sideline the importance of ideological reproduction and control in the everyday (2006: 3). It seems to accept that consumption as a way of life is all there is and any resistance can only take place on the level of the small-scale subversion or tactical intervention. It is useful, however, in that it establishes this relationship between the large-scale structures of power and the possibilities of action that are available within them.

It can be argued that the objects we live with in the everyday have a profound effect in structuring our sense of our selves. As Althusser stated in his analysis of the action of ideological reproduction of the conditions of production, ‘an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice or practices. This existence is material’ (1993 [1970]: 40). That is, it is through the material world that we are constituted as particular subjectivities. This is then achieved through the act of interpellation, whereby ideology functions in such a way that it recruits subjects among individuals (and as Althusser notes, it recruits them all) by the act of hailing: his famous ‘Hey, you there!’ cried by the police officer, where the guilty response acts to constitute the subject. What then if we are actually interpellated by the furniture and furnishings we live with? What if the things we live with in the everyday can be said to be *performative*?

Here the term performative is derived from the linguistic designation, whereby it refers to a statement which does not simply describe the world but actually affects it; it is a speech act which performs a function, such as when a judge pronounces sentence on a convict, or a priest declares ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ (Austin 1976). As Jacques Derrida states, a performative utterance does not refer to something that exists outside of language. Rather it transforms a situation and actually creates an effect through its operation (1988). It is a statement that does not describe but actually enacts. Judith Butler transferred this concept from the linguistic to the social realm by noting how a cultural construct such as gender does not exist as fixed given we adopt, but rather it is a role that is continually performed and thus generated through iteration (Butler 1990; 1997). The proposition, therefore, is that the concept

of performativity can then be applied to the study of material culture and design history (Taylor 2010a).

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Everyday life can be said to be the spatial and temporal site in which existence takes place. It is the term used to describe the conditions of life as it is lived which can be understood as essentially material in character. This can then be regarded as an ideological apparatus, in that the physical things we live with allow, or disallow, make expedient, or cause to be difficult, the performance of actions and expressions that constitute living. On a macro level the action of power can be demonstrated to exert strategic control. Mass-production, for example, makes available to us an avalanche of cheap furniture. In such a circumstance why would anybody then attempt to make their own? However, individuals, within such structures can adopt tactical positions that allow them to survive on their own terms. Therefore despite the existence of Ikea a designer may find a way to make what they wish by side-stepping the economy dominated by the large corporation.

If, then, we can be said to live with performative things, if all furniture and domestic products can be regarded as ideological, not simply in their references but in their action, through their effect as they function, in their functioning, so to speak, given that design art is an approach that tends to ramp up the communicative and affective qualities of objects, can this then tell us anything about the way in which we are interpellated by the material things with which we live? Similarly, in the practices of those who are making things on a small scale and outside of the dictates of the dominant power structure, can anything be learnt about the potential for resisting such forces?

The Revolution in Everyday Life

If everyday life is ideologically constructed then it is at this level that any resistance to the action of power must take place. In the 1960s, Guy Debord argued that the first stage of the financial economy coming to dominate social life was a process whereby '*being* had become *having*'. This he then contended had culminated in a 'shift from

having to appearing' whereby all ownership, all use, must derive its logic and ultimate purpose from appearances (2009 [1967]: 28). He thus concludes that this had culminated in an all encompassing spectacle, which had become 'the ruling order's non-stop discourse about itself' (2009 [1967]: 29). This discourse is, however, not only manifest on the level of visual spectacle, it is also a very material experience, and for the Situationists this represented a profoundly alienating experience. One which it is unlikely they would have believed could be mitigated by the adoption of tactics in response to the weight of the spectacle which endlessly reproduces the ideology of power.

Debord's position is one that emphasises that the struggle with the all-encompassing nature of the spectacle actually takes place in the arena of the everyday. However, if Debord's conceptualisation of the everyday as dominated by spectacular experience appears somewhat insubstantial, the Marxist thought upon which it is predicated was resolutely materialist in its concentration on the effects of living in a commodity culture. In Marx's terms the things we live with can be regarded as commodities because they have both use-value, what they are for in a practical sense, and exchange-value, what they can be exchanged for in monetary terms (1979 [1867]: 162). In the logic of the market everything has value in relation to money, in that all things in a capitalist system can be exchanged for money as an abstract representation of something's worth. This means that, from a Marxist perspective, there is a definite equivalence to all commodities, in that they can be exchanged for money, no matter what their putative use-value (Marx 1979 [1867]).

For Marx this value is then derived from the human labour exerted in the production of commodities. He suggests that because of the ultimate exchangeability of all commodities for money, the real source of their value, human labour, is obscured and cannot be seen. Therefore value is perceived in its fantastic form as a relation between things rather than people. This is then to apprehend the world of objects as essentially alienated: as the result of forces which are not human and changeable but somehow external, natural and intrinsic to the world of things rather than human action (1979 [1867]). This is therefore to create a fetish out of the commodity. As Don Slater observes Marx, in using the term fetish, draws from Ludwig Feuerbach and Emile Durkheim who discuss the way in which religion projects or externalises human powers and social values onto an independent God or totem, thus meaning that the object world is endowed with a certain power (Slater

1997). This therefore not only points to the way in which a culture based in the exchange of commodities confers a certain latency to the object; it also, through the employment of a word associated with 'primitive' religion, suggests a certain mysticism is involved in the subject's relation to the things they encounter in a commodity system.

In order to understand the everyday more fully, however, it is necessary to look to the way in which this concept was conceptualised in the wake of the upheaval of the Russian revolution for, as Roberts observes, the detailed theoretical elaboration this category underwent at this time 'largely shapes the content of the concept through the twentieth century, pulling other uses of the "everyday" towards it' (2006: 20). Georg Lukács, for example, argued that the commodity structure that Marx interrogated in such detail in the first chapter of *Capital, Vol I* wholly permeates society, not just in terms of economics but in the very fabric of everyday action and thought. The commodity, he argued, is the 'central structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects' being the 'model of all objective forms of bourgeois society, together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them' (1974 [1923]: 83). Therefore from this perspective, as Susan Buck-Morss argues, in the same way that commodities in the arena of production took on a reified form and became fetishes that then appeared to be separate from the social processes of their creation, so any reified conception of the object as an unchanging given can be said to obscure the sociohistorical processes which had allowed it to come into being (1979: 2). To counter the ruthless quantification of life through the action the commodity form, Lukács argues that it is necessary to understand how we relate to quality, as he suggests that 'all the subjective and objective phenomena in the societies concerned are objectified in qualitatively different ways' (1974: 84). This must then be resolved through an understanding of the way in which both the object and the subject are constituted in a culture where the commodity is the universal structuring principle. As Stuart Sim notes, Lukács believed that art as an autonomous category, located between the individual experience (the here-and-now) and the universal (the essential) could act to reveal the structural workings of a culture. Not simply through an understanding of the intentions of the artist, but through the sub-texts that cannot help but be coded into the work in its creation (Sim 1994: 29). This therefore means that a study of design art cannot help but be a study of the operation of the commodity form.

Design art exists as a spectacular form of design that inevitably reproduces the material ideology of power. If, through the action of an all pervading commodity culture existence appears reified, whereby relations between people take on the character of a relation between things, then at the heart of such a discussion must be the issue of how subjects and objects interrelate. It may then be that in the florid creations of design art that the action of ideology can both be charted through the work, at the same time as it is possible to see attempts to baffle or redirect such protocols to allow new subjectivities to flourish.

Novi Byt

It is very difficult to escape the way in which the commodity form shapes the nature of our society and the material experience of the everyday. For the Constructivist thinker, Boris Arvatov, the phenomenon of the everyday arose as a result of the development of capitalist modes of production and the concomitant tendency for individuals to consume things that are primarily characterised as commodities. For him, writing as he was in the early twentieth-century, this shift from an economy whereby production was centred upon the home to a culture which depended upon the products of industrial production was crucial, because in such a situation the consumer no longer has 'direct physical contact with the production of material values' which means that subjects tend to only have contact with the forms that things take in the sphere of consumption (Arvatov 1997 [1925]: 120).

For the Constructivists their revolution was to be made manifest through what was termed *novi byt* – the new everyday life. In his essay, *Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing*, Arvatov argues that material forms of culture represent an essentially conservative force known as the everyday (*byt*). Thus understanding the tendencies of material *byt* meant being able to intervene in them to effect change (1997 [1925]: 120). It was therefore a study of things and their operative capacities which was to be at the root of any revolution in everyday life. This was because:

The commodity nature of bourgeois material byt constitutes the fundamental basis for its relation to the thing. The thing as an a-material category, as a category, as pure consumption, the thing outside its creative genesis, outside

its material dynamics, outside its social processes of production, the thing as something completed, fixed, static and, consequently, dead – this is what characterises bourgeois material culture. (Arvatov 1997 [1925]: 121)

Therefore Arvatov was proposing that the social and cultural narratives of consumer-capitalist *byt* serve to shape the physical form of the things with which we live.

The products of consumer capitalism, which have come to dominate our lives ever more since Arvatov undertook his analysis, tend to come to us as apparently completed and fixed in their function. This is therefore a political economy of design whereby the user is conceptualised as a perfect consumer of the completed product. This was a theme picked up by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their analysis of mass-culture and the effects of mass-production. However, in their hands the consumer is rather reduced to a dupe of the system, passively taking in the culture manufactured for them (1979 [1947]). For Arvatov this analysis of material culture was intended to be a more practical intervention which would actually begin to equip subjects with a way to resist the deleterious effects of bourgeois *byt*.

Given that the structure of commodity exchange can be demonstrated to be a fundamental ordering principle of consumer culture, how is the relationship between the subject and the object constituted in this process? In Cartesian terms the world can be divided into subjects, which are regarded as pure reason or consciousness, and objects, which are defined as external to the subject and constituted as matter, which is devoid of reason or mind. In this way the material world is declared to be a mechanism separate from Descartes' Cogito, mind or self; it is disenchanted and deemed to be a field of knowledge that can be mastered by human reason in the form of science; understanding of the material therefore becomes a question of epistemology. However, as Slater notes, such a vision of the world is profoundly alienating because 'If the world has become pure object to human subjects, how can they ever be at home in it?' (1997: 102). Slater's response is to observe, drawing from Hegel, that 'the relation between subject and object is in reality dialectical and interrelated, not external and mechanical. It is a relationship of mutual constitution of subject by object and object by subject' (1997: 102-3). This was at the basis of Arvatov's analysis and it suggests a way in which our relationship to objects can be reconceptualised. Not as the fixed relation between a discoverable authentic self and an external world of objects, but as a dynamic relationship whereby subjects and objects generate each other in their reciprocal action.

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Living in a world that appears complete, where all we are asked to do is be consumers, seems to limit the possibilities of action to almost nil. Arvatov argued that the realisation that the very materiality of life, *byt*, is acting upon us opens up this space as one of radical action, in that changing the everyday is to alter subjectivity. Examining the extent to which design art furniture and domestic products develop the possibilities of incompleteness then gives us a way of understanding how such an approach to design may be fruitful, beyond simply creating baubles for the rich, in that it can render visible the subject/object dialectic that can be said to underlie our relationship to all material things in a commodity culture.

The Material and the Metaphysical

We open on a deserted beach. Gentle breakers in the distance stutter in to the shore with the almost comical action of time-lapse photography. A young man walks into shot. He digs a hole in the sand and lowers something into it. He then covers this with a board. With a spade he ramps-up sand into a low, flat heap which he then smooths off. With a series of tools he begins to work on this mound. Objects are carefully pushed down into it and pulled out again. Others are scored across its surface. Lines are etched out and indentations made. Upon returning to the original pit, the cover is taken off and a pan lifted from the stove it contains. The lid is removed and the quick-silver metal, in all its strange molten glory, is poured into the mould. We watch as he keeps returning to check if it has cooled. Always too early, always the impatience of waiting for the process to take place. Finally he judges it ready and begins to scrape away the sand. The form of a three-legged pewter stool is revealed. Looked over and washed down, it is placed on the ground.

This is the video of the young British designer, Max Lamb, making his *Pewter Stool* on Caerhays beach in Cornwall in 2006 (Figures 1.7 & 1.8). As a record of a designer-maker at work it provides an insight into Lamb's working methods and concerns. The use of pewter in the old tin-mining location of Cornwall is an obvious indicator of an interest in materials and their wider cultural resonances. The way in



Figure 1.7 Max Lamb, filming the making of the Pewter Stool, Caerhays beach, Cornwall, 2006

which the act of making has been turned into a performance suggests a desire to explore craft and the qualities of performance which can be found in such processes. However, for all we can read into the video as text, it is not as interesting as the apparent process in which it is embedded. Because, it seems, the over-arching question that a video such as this suggests is - what are we looking at here? Where does the designer's practice lie? Is it in the making of the object, the conception of the form it was to take and the process necessary to create it *combined* with the actual crafting? Is it in the production of an artefact which exists as a trace of the process; or the creation of one which bears the indexical marks of the method of its manufacture?

Or finally is it in the mediation of the creative act through recording and uploading of the visual documentation? Until very recently, when Lamb updated and simplified his website, this footage was available through Lamb's own site and it can still be seen on YouTube. It is clear then that he wanted to project this as an aspect of what he does, yet this is not a special case. It is what always happens as design enters the media. What was material becomes mediated. All that is solid melts into air (Marx 1848). So, the answer is that Lamb's practice exists as an interrelationship between conceptualisation, making, selling, consumption and mediation. *But not in that order.* Rather a recording such as this demonstrates how the designer has come to inhabit the media, that the material thing has become part of the wider web, as has the agency of its maker.



Figure 1.8 Max Lamb, making the Pewter Stool, Caerhays beach, Cornwall, 2006

Any attempt to understand our present relationship to objects must be able to account for the way in which they now appear in the media. Lash and Lury argue that any method that attempts to follow cultural objects needs to presume, in Appadurai's terms, the existence of something like a mediascape or media environment (Lash & Lury 2007: 28), in that there can be said to be no separation between users and producers but both roles can be seen as taking part in the circulation and

dissemination of information and artefacts through a distributed network of connections that is constituted by the flows of culture.

For Lash this is to move from a concentration on the physical, the mechanistic world of objects 'out there', the extensive world of materiality, to what he describes as the metaphysical, the intensive world of things in themselves as they are experienced. In this discussion of what he terms 'Intensive Capitalism' Lash refers to the sociologist of science, Bruno Latour, and his call for sociologists to dare to be metaphysical. This is then based on Latour's suggestion that throughout modernity the separation between subject and object has been a useful myth, in that we have never really been separate from objects but exist essentially as quasi-objects and quasi-subjects (Latour 1993; Lash 2006, 2010). This can therefore be seen as proposing a metaphysical understanding of subject/object relations as a normative position, whereby it represents a relation that has always been there but has been obscured. Lash rejects this stance and argues instead from a position of social change, to suggest that if in Marx's day we were primarily physical, in that capitalism and the dominant forms of our culture were essentially about marshalling material resources, then in a world of the knowledge economy and an unprecedented capacity to reproduce both things and their representation we are increasingly metaphysical.

This can therefore be characterised as a question of ontology. As Lash suggests, 'The problem is that *ontology* is not a doctrine of reality but a question of *being*. "Realism" speaks of knowledge of reality as comprised of actual things or beings that we encounter. Ontology looks beyond the actual beings or things we encounter to the *being* of those things, to the *being* of those beings' (2010: 8). Therefore Lash posits the task as one of developing an intensive knowledge of the world we encounter: where the observer is not a disinterested outsider but very much part of the action, a singularity amongst singularities. As he notes

Ontology is at the heart of intensive knowledge and intensive culture. So we want to make a first analytic distinction in terms of what is not ontological. Here... any doctrine of knowledge in which an observer who is separated from the world of things that she studies and understands those things in terms of our world and our categories, is *epistemological*. Intensive knowledge, in which the observer is placed in the world with the things or beings that she studies, in terms of their own world, and through their own categories, is *ontological* (Lash 2010: 8).

Therefore, the intention in this discussion is not simply to give an epistemological account of the furniture and products being studied. Rather it is to attempt to understand the things under consideration as singularities through their own categories. This is why it is important to consider the content of what is being examined and its place in the wider structures of socio-design (Fallan 2010), as things that *happen* rather than simply are, that are in state of becoming, that are *emerging* into culture and constituting it as they do so.

For Lash this shift from the physical to the metaphysical is important because, in his terms, it moves the discussion from a Marxist position of the equivalence of all things through their commodity nature to a more Deleuzian stance whereby it is difference which is the key to understanding subject/object relations in a world which has moved from the simple exchange of commodities to one which is characterised by the action of brands and hyper-mediation. In *The Global Culture Industry* (written with Celia Lury; 2007), it is suggested that this means it is necessary to move from a dialectical to a metaphysical methodology. As they argue:

Dialectics presumes ontological difference: between spirit and matter, being and beings, superstructure and base, same and other, friend and foe. Metaphysics is instead a monism, an immanence of spirit-matter, of superstructure-base. The ontological difference of dialectics is displaced by metaphysics of difference. In this ontology of difference, simple substance itself is difference.' (Lash & Lury 2007: 15)

However, it is for exactly these reasons that a shift to metaphysics seems a step too far. In Marx the problematic nature of materialism and the mythical qualities of the commodity are directly addressed. As he observed, it is possible to turn a piece of wood into furniture and materially it will remain a piece of wood, but as soon as it emerges as a commodity in the marketplace it takes on a marvellous character. 'It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was (Marx 1979 [1867]: 176).

What Marx is suggesting here is that a commodity has a certain way of functioning in the marketplace. Not least of the effects of the commodity, in its almost magical appearance in this mythical marketplace, is its tendency to make it seem that objects come from some other alien place; that they simply appear rather than being the product of human labour. Yet as Arvatov notes, the commodity structure of things

also acts to convince us of the structure of reality and our place in everyday life. Yet this must not be understood as a static description of a scenario, rather Marx conceptualises this as process, as the dynamic action of dialectics in operation.

In both *The Global Culture Industry* and Lash's later works, the emphasis on dialectics and monism as being in opposition seems premature and unconvincing. Just because all entities and events can be regarded as being of one substance, as a monism, this does not mean we must abandon the dialectical position. As shall become clear, certainly in Walter Benjamin's hands dialectics does not represent a conflict between this discrete unit and that discrete unit; instead it stands for a tension, a pulling in different directions or a pushing against within the monism of historical experience (Benjamin 1979 [1936]: 2002). In this sense dialectics can easily be understood as the dynamism of the flows of culture, rather than an ontology of separateness. Currents within the same substance can be in antagonism, this is therefore arguably exactly the ontology of difference - whereby simple substance is difference - which Lash and Lury discuss.

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It is precisely because a word such as metaphysics can sit in a sentence so comfortably with a phrase such as 'immanence of spirit-matter' that it is rejected here as a tool. It seems too laden with meanings that seem to extend beyond the admittedly specific way in which it is used by Lash in his recent work (2010). What is meant by 'spirit'? When Marx borrowed 'fetish' as a term from theology he did so to highlight the quasi-mystical nature of our relation to commodities. Benjamin's use of theology was precisely a tool to illuminate the way in which in modernity, far from being the rational mechanism claimed by Enlightenment thinking, was actually a form of religious thinking which fetishised progress (Buck-Morss 1991). In Lash and Lury's hands there seems to be the danger that these conditions come to be reproduced in the critique. Lash has specifically defined his use of the metaphysical as 'that which transcends the physical' (2006: 2). Although it appears that he is therefore proposing this term as referring to that which is not reducible to the physical, where there is an excess beyond the vulgarly material, the use of the term 'transcends' does seem to have unfortunate connotations that appear to suggest that the metaphysical somehow

stands above the physical, rather than being immanent to it. However, this does not mean that the central conclusions of this approach should be ignored. What Lash and Lury make very clear is the way in which the apparent immateriality of the world of hyper-mediation and the action of the mediascape are actually the conditions that serve to establish the material possibilities of action, as subjects and objects mutually constitute each other through their functioning. This therefore suggests that any study of design art must account for the relationship between its material existence and its virtual manifestation in the system of systems that is constituted by our hyper-mediated culture. Not just as an attempt to understand how such things appear, but to grasp what it is they *do*, indeed, how they *act*.

Things with Agency

The production of Lamb's *Pewter Table* is a conspiracy. It is not just the action of the designer which makes the table. The pewter must be molten, heated by the burner. The sand must be moist enough to create the mould; the mould must hold the pewter. Although we may regard the acting subject in the form of the designer-maker as being the source of the artefact, in actuality its creation is a collaboration of forces acting upon each other. In this regard Actor Network Theory (ANT) suggests that all the constituents involved in any interaction, whether human or non-human, should be regarded as actors or 'actants', which then collectively go to constitute the whole as a network of interdependent and interacting agencies. In this way actants do not simply 'sometimes "express" power relations, "symbolize" social hierarchies, "reinforce" social inequalities, "transport" social power, "objectify" inequality, and "reify" gender relations' in Latour's conception they can actually be said to be 'at the origin of social activity' (2007: 72). As Fallan observes, ANT is primarily a conceptual framework within which the practices of design may be understood, one of the strengths of which stems from its destabilisation of ontological categories (Fallan 2010). However, when applied to design, in an analysis such as that of Albena Yaneva, such an approach can appear to rather gloss over the way in which power is enacted in such mechanisms (Yaneva 2010). Developed from the field of ANT, Madeleine Akrich's concept of products as having 'scripts' encoded into them then proceeds to provide a methodological tool for the study of design, as it constitutes a mechanism for

conceptualising the relation between production and use. This is because through its material form any artefact can be said to contain a form of metaphorical instruction manual (the script) which keys the user into how it is intended to be used (Akrich 1992). A chair, for example, has legs that maintain the seat pan at a certain height from the floor, it has a back against which the sitter can rest. Therefore its script suggests this act. This methodology is useful, as Fallan observes, because the physical scripts of the object can then be related to the broader ‘socio-technical script’ in which it is implicit. The trope of the physical script, derived as it is from Gibson’s concept of affordances (1986), therefore

consists of those properties of the product’s physical form and interface that try to tell the user about its intended use... The socio-technical script has more to do with the transportation and transformation of a product’s symbolic, emotional, social, and cultural meanings. This also is partly related to the artifact’s physical, formal, aesthetic qualities, but the socio-technical script includes much more than the artifact itself” (Fallan 2008: 64-5).

As Fallan then concludes this is not to suggest a dichotomy between the physical script and the socio-technical. Rather it is to suggest that these elements can be understood as entangled and reciprocal.

Just as the maker cannot ever be fully cognisant of the scripts they are coding into the piece, it should also be noted that there is no guarantee that the script will absolutely determine the role that the user adopts. As Matthews et al observe, users can often choose to misuse or subvert the scripts and the object may be displaced into a setting that was never envisaged for it (2008). However, the manner in which the user relates to the object, as they ‘des-script’ it, in Akrich’s designation, will certainly happen *in relation* to the scripts encoded by the designer and the wider socio-technical script in which it is situated. If we are to understand that, as Latour suggests ‘objects too have agency’ (2007: 63), it can be argued that it is necessary to conceptualise the way in which things enunciate their scripts. That is to say, how are the scripts coded into objects, both intended and unintended, actualised in the world?

One way of beginning to conceptualise this is to move to an understanding of the difference between the object and the thing. As Heidegger notes, the derivation of ‘thing’ suggests that the ‘word thing means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter’ (2009 [1927]: 118). This is therefore to posit material reality as a problem to be encountered rather than a series

of facts to be discovered. As Bill Brown notes ‘The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation’ (Brown 2001: 4). Thus the mechanism by which objects constitute subjects can be rendered visible through the application of a methodology which regards the material phenomena we encounter as things, unresolved problems, which then have certain scripts encoded into them.

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The word object therefore refers to our understanding of what is ‘out there’, that which is separate from the subject in a Cartesian sense. A thing is a problem. It is an issue in which we ourselves are implicated. In the broader hegemonic scripts of culture the things we encounter are not inert matter waiting to be animated by subjects. Rather they can be understood as things which animate and constitute subjects, in this respect they can be seen as having agency, the ability to act upon the world as the scripts they contain are played out. What then becomes pertinent is the way in which such things are then structured by the machinations consumer culture and the way in which this becomes apparent in design art furniture.

In Shklovsky’s Sack

But is it art? This does not seem to be a very productive question. Does it function as art? This might be a more useful starting point. In his essay *Art as Technique* (1925) the Russian formalist literary critic, Victor Shklovsky, argued that ‘the purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known’ (1925) This emphasis on the relationship between art and perception was important to him because of his belief that the habitualisation of life renders it impossible to see the world around us with any degree of clarity, as he argues that as perception becomes habitual it becomes automatic. Therefore he suggests that we actually only apprehend objects and recognize them through their main characteristics, that we take the generalisation of the thing because we have encountered it so many times. In this way, he argues, ‘We see the object as though it were enveloped in a sack’ in that we

perceive only its outline. This automatising of the object takes place because it allows for the greatest economy of effort in perceiving it, yet this can mean that if things behave as we expect them they can not even appear in cognition at all. He quotes Tolstoy, who recounted an occasion when he could not remember if he had dusted a piece of furniture:

I was cleaning and, meandering about, approached the divan and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember - so that if I had dusted it and forgot - that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been (in Shklovsky 1925).

Thus, for Shklovsky, 'Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war'. He therefore concludes that art exists to rescue the sensation of life from this oblivion; that a central function of art is 'to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.' This is then to be achieved through what he calls '*ostranenie*', or estrangement. In this way the function of art is then to revivify the sensorial experience of the world. The act of defamiliarisation is intended to increase the difficulty and length of perception in order to prolong it, to make it richer and more productive. Thus for Shklovsky 'Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important' (1925). So in his terms art can extend the moment of perception through defamiliarisation and it could be argued that in its use of disjunctive combinations, strange forms and uncanny usages this is what design art is attempting to do.

Yet to what ends is this to be directed? Is this meant to somehow allow the receiver to contemplate the thing presented in more depth? Is it to somehow act as a form of critical art? As Jaques Rancière argues, such critical art can be said to be intended to 'raise consciousness of the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the spectator into a conscious agent in the transformations of the world'. Yet as he notes,

understanding alone can do little to transform consciousness and situations. The exploited have rarely the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them. Because it's not a misunderstanding of the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed, but a lack of confidence in their own capacity to transform it (2006: 83).

That is, if design art is meant to shock us into a realisation of the commodity nature of our culture, for example, it is a little late on the scene. For, in reality who is not conscious of this? It is played out around us all the time. Is it meant to be a form of critical practice that allows us to ask questions? If this is so, then what use is this in itself? As Rancière continues 'Critical art that invites you to see the signs of capital behind everyday objects and behaviours risks inscribing itself into the perpetuation of a world where the transformation of things into signs redoubles the very excess of interpretive signs that make all resistance disappear' (ibid). Therefore if what is here termed design art is adopting the tactics of art, such as Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, or alienation effect, it does not seem adequate if all this can do is then make the receiver aware of their situation. Indeed, this could be seen as worse than useless. Perhaps then the key lies in understanding what is unique in the production and operation of artful use-objects as things which actually make things happen in the process of their functioning. This is because, in the final analysis, how design art can be seen to function must be understood as an ethical question; one which relates to what we understand design as a whole to be for.

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With its emphasis on assemblage and often disjunctive relationship of elements, the inventive use of materials and the strange forms design art takes, it can be seen as an exercise in defamiliarisation. That is to say it adopts a particular aesthetic or vocabulary of aesthetic usages, some of which seem to be very similar to that of art. Would it then be correct to say that it functions *as* art? Art, of course happens in highly rarefied conditions and it could be a mistake to suggest that the borrowing by designers of tactics from the operational vocabulary of art constitutes a form of artistic practice in itself. Similarly, placing something in an art gallery certainly makes people consider its 'artfulness', yet it may be that in such a transposition some of the power of its place in the everyday is lost. As shall become clear, the conditions upon which art depends for its operation are not identical with those of design, and the congruencies and discontinuities between the two discourses can therefore provide a way to understand how and to what ends they have begun to interact as is evidenced

in the practice of design art. The purpose of this, then, is to understand what the potentialities may be for design art to extend our understanding of the ethics of design as a whole.

Benjamin and Historical Experience

The line that runs through this investigation is the attempt to account for the phenomenon of design art as a form of historical experience. This is to understand history not simply as the recounting of what has happened, but as an attempt to recover existence as sensorial experience, affect, which takes place time and space. If affect takes place in a perceived moment of existence how then are we to understand the nature of this moment, its form and character? How is it connected to what preceded it and what follows? What then are the political implications for such practices of history?

For Walter Benjamin the historicity of the everyday is to be understood through the idea of the 'dialectical image', which he argues represents 'dialectics at a standstill' (2002: 456). Highmore notes that this then requires the arresting of the flow of history, particularly as a narrative of progress, 'so that it can be recognised as a specific experience of the moment' (2001: 62). The intention here, therefore, is to examine the products of design art as dialectical objects, things that reveal the historical contingency of their existence through their emergence into the world.

In the first instance, therefore, it is necessary to understand how changes in the nature of society have established the boundaries of the possible. In his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Benjamin states that what 'withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (1979 [1936]: 223). However, as the cultural critic Miriam Bratu Hansen notes, this withering can be said to be symptomatic of a process the significance of which extends far beyond the realm of art, as it represents an essential shift in the conditions of human sense perception (2008). This Benjamin attributed to the new technologies of reproduction and the increasing importance of the masses in modern life (1979 [1936]). This is because, in Benjamin's terms, the concept of aura refers to the experiencing subject's sense of the unique presence and authenticity of the object. In 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' he argues

Experience of the aura thus rests on a transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return (1979: 190)

Although the concept of aura is anything but straightforward (Eagleton 1988; Buck-Morss 1991; Bratu Hansen 2008), in the 1930s it was Benjamin's contention that the advent of mass-production had devoided objects of this perceived capacity, that their apparently inhuman nature as homogenised machine-produced objects had robbed them of their ability to return the gaze in its traditional manifestation, as the expansion of technological reproduction was engineering an new relationship to the auratic qualities of the material.

In contemporary culture, branding is exemplary of the attempt to embed products and services into a web of interconnections to give them the quality of character. It is a reanimation of the commodity which goes beyond the fetish or any conception of a reified relationship between subjects and objects, as the commodity is recast as another subject to facilitate its consumption. The brand restores the subject's capacity to invest objects with the ability to look back. Benjamin's analysis of aura then demonstrates the way in which commercial culture and the action of the commodity form comes to actually constitute the relationship between subjects and objects. It is therefore necessary to understand how this concept of aura can then be applied to the making and presentation of design art furniture at the specific point at which it arose and proliferated through the channels of culture.

Therefore this is to regard the project of accounting for the descent of design art as one which is not simply meant to discover the past, but rather as being an attempt to account for it as an experience in which, as Susan Buck-Morss argues, 'philosophy's ideational elements are expressed as changing meanings' within a range of shifting and transitioning objects 'that themselves are discontinuous' (1991: 56). That is, the construction of the history of design art is to map the shifting incongruities and ambiguities that are contained within such a discourse. If the dialectical image is a montage of elements that in their meeting produce a 'spark' that makes it possible to see the operational protocols of history, then an understanding of the dialectical object is to recognise the way in which the materiality of modernity coalesces in the physical things which we use to make up our lives. This is what

Ranciere describes as the 'dialectical work in things' that he suggests 'renders them available to art and for subversion – by breaking the uniform run of time, by introducing a temporality within another, by changing the status of objects and the relationship between exchange signs and art forms' (2006: 84). The contention is, therefore, that in the corpus of design art can be seen a harnessing of the flows of culture as materialised in objects, whether those making it realise this or not. It is to argue that in such work the ideological functioning of a particular culture at a specific point in time can be made out and, therefore, put to use.

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In Benjamin's terms, therefore, design art can be seen as a body of design in which the dialectical nature of objects is made more legible. Given that these are manifestly objects that signify in an exaggerated way, the tensions and desires that allowed them to come into being can be read. Just as in the arcades of Paris Benjamin could see the ur-forms of capitalism and commodity culture in sharp relief, so in the ludicrous works discussed here the mechanisms that operate to stimulate their auratic qualities can be seen to be writ-large and are therefore made available to the writing of history.

Conclusions: The Architecture of the Argument

The suggestion, therefore, is that the things referred to here as design art, such as Bey's strange and disturbing assemblage with which we began, are not simply visual jokes or some form of Postmodern ironic statement, but can actually be regarded as functional use-objects. In taking them at face value in this way, in accepting that what we have here is a spare-room or a wardrobe, a table or a chair, and not just some form of thing for display only, it then becomes necessary to account for them not only as highly communicative and deeply coded statements about the world, but also as actual material propositions as to how such functional things may act in use, what it would mean to use and live with them.

The concept of narrative, whilst it may be reductive when applied to a single thing – in that, as has been noted, it is actually very difficult to see how objects 'tell stories' in and of themselves – becomes very useful in the way it relates to how such

objects are embedded in stories, are used to tell tales, how such things are placed into, and help to construct, histories. In this way a major aim of the following analysis is not simply the recounting of the history of design art and a relating of the manner of its manifestation, instead the intention throughout is to demonstrate how the construction of such an edifice is itself part of the problem being addressed.

The examples of design art considered here can be understood as communicative objects in that, given their often highly affective aesthetics, it seems impossible for them not to be saying something. In this sense they are often very present and difficult to ignore. Yet what it is that they are communicating is not to be reduced to what the designer wanted to get across, what was intended, rather the suggestion is that in their emergence they cannot help but have taken on the more ingrained scripts and subtexts as part of a culture that allows them to come into being.

They are performative things because everything we live with affects us and inducts us into culture, whether we accept it gladly or reject it as an obscenity, whether we see it clearly or it recedes into the grey-tones of the fabric of life. That this is a question concerned with the boundaries of function is then clear because we live in a world where the term seems to have been appropriated by a certain utilitarian approach to what things are for, what they do, which is itself historically contingent. Just as some of the designs under consideration can be seen to be at the boundary of function, in that they are often concerned with much more than simply working on a practical level, so the limits of what the term 'function' can be understood to mean must then be challenged, not least because this is actually a question of ethics, of what we believe the purpose of use-objects to be, of what constitutes the boundaries of action in the world in which we find ourselves.

Thus, if we are to understand what it may mean to consider the artefacts that constitute design art as performative things, communicative objects that illuminate the boundaries of function, dialectical objects in which can be apprehended the tensions, contradictions and possibilities of the materiality with which we share the passage of our lives, it seems apposite to begin with one narrative that pulls together many of the issues to be addressed. It seems appropriate, therefore, in the next chapter to begin with the problem that is Droog.

Droog and the Descent of Design Art



Figure 2.1 The Droog store at the Continental, Las Vegas, 2010

On December 15th, 2010 Droog Design opened a new retail space in The Continental, a 3.9 billion dollar hotel and gambling complex in Las Vegas (Figure 2.1). The interior, designed by Marcel Schmalgemeijer, was modelled on the final sequences of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Droog.com 2010) and the under-floor lighting gives the space an other-worldly glow, as it sets off the strange and outlandish furniture presented. A few days before the opening of the store, John Unwin, CEO of The Cosmopolitan gave a journalist from the publication *Travel and Leisure* a tour of the hotel site. Having pointed out the ‘casino cabanas’ and the lobby columns patterned with high-definition video screens, they reached the building’s eastern edge, where it opens onto the sidewalk of the Las Vegas Strip. Here, Unwin remarked ‘We’re going

to put a Droog in this corner', 'a what?' the journalist asked, bemused. 'You know: Droog, the Dutch design store' replied his host, explaining 'slots [slot machines] would make more money, but I think Droog is cooler' (Frank 2010). It is clear then what the hotel gained from this, prestige and the glamour of appearing cutting-edge. But what was Droog getting from the deal?

Nearly two decades before, in April of 1993, in an old villa in the centre of Milan, Droog Design showed their first collection at the Salone del Mobile. Now they were a cool loss-leader for a hotel and casino. Ramakers, her co-founder Bakker having departed by this point, stated that 'Droog has always pioneered new directions for design, we see our role as a design company in creating new content and also in setting new boundaries in how and where our work is encountered. Las Vegas is a new context for us and we are excited about the opportunities it will bring' (Droog.com 2010). Yet, this seems a strange trajectory. How did an organisation that began life challenging the design profession by presenting work which appeared to revitalise the everyday come to be selling its wares in the gaudy environs of the Las Vegas Strip?

It could be argued, for example, that it is changes in the way in which design is marketed that have led to the development of this new category of object that has come to be described as design art. In the catalogue to *Telling Tales; Fear and Fantasy in Contemporary Design* (2009), Williams, argues:

What we can say from the outset is that the mechanisms of the art world, specifically the art market, have increasingly leached into the practices of designers, creating a new hybrid dubbed 'design art'. And it is the relationship between contemporary design practice and the art market that is a cause of increasing debate and hyperbole (2009: 16).

Although through the rest of the catalogue Williams goes on to demonstrate that the situation is much more complicated than this initial statement might suggest, it does illustrate the way in which recent texts have stressed the importance of the market in the appearance of anything which we may wish to describe as design art (Cargill & Thompson 2007; Rawsthorn 2007c; Payne in Bennett 2008; Bennett 2008; Van Cauwelaert 2009; Lovell 2009). Whilst it must be acknowledged that the development of the market has been crucial in shaping how we relate to such objects (and this is discussed in detail in the next chapter), the intention here is to place the artefacts into

a context whereby they are understood *as* design, rather than simply a form of pseudo-art. This will then involve taking into account the way in which commercial concerns have shaped them, but at the same time keeping in view the way that particular formal and functional considerations, associated with the discourse of design rather than art, have determined their nature.

Droog was established by Ramakers and Bakker as a way of showcasing the work of young designers from the Netherlands, both to raise the status of Dutch design and to market it on the international stage. Influenced by work such as Jasper Morrison's *Some New Items for the Home Part 1* (see Figure 2.2), shown at Milan in 1988, Ramakers detected what she described as a 'back-to basics' approach which was more playful than the neo-modernist design which dominated at the time (1998: 34). Morrison's show has the feel of an installation. A spartan room is populated by a few pieces of simple furniture. The bookcase is drawn onto the wall and three green bottles stand on the table. Here, therefore, something interesting is happening, in that the viewer is directed to examine the table and chairs, but a broader narrative is implied. The stage-set like appearance of the show seems to suggest a domestic life interrupted, that is, the set-up seems to say something about *use*.

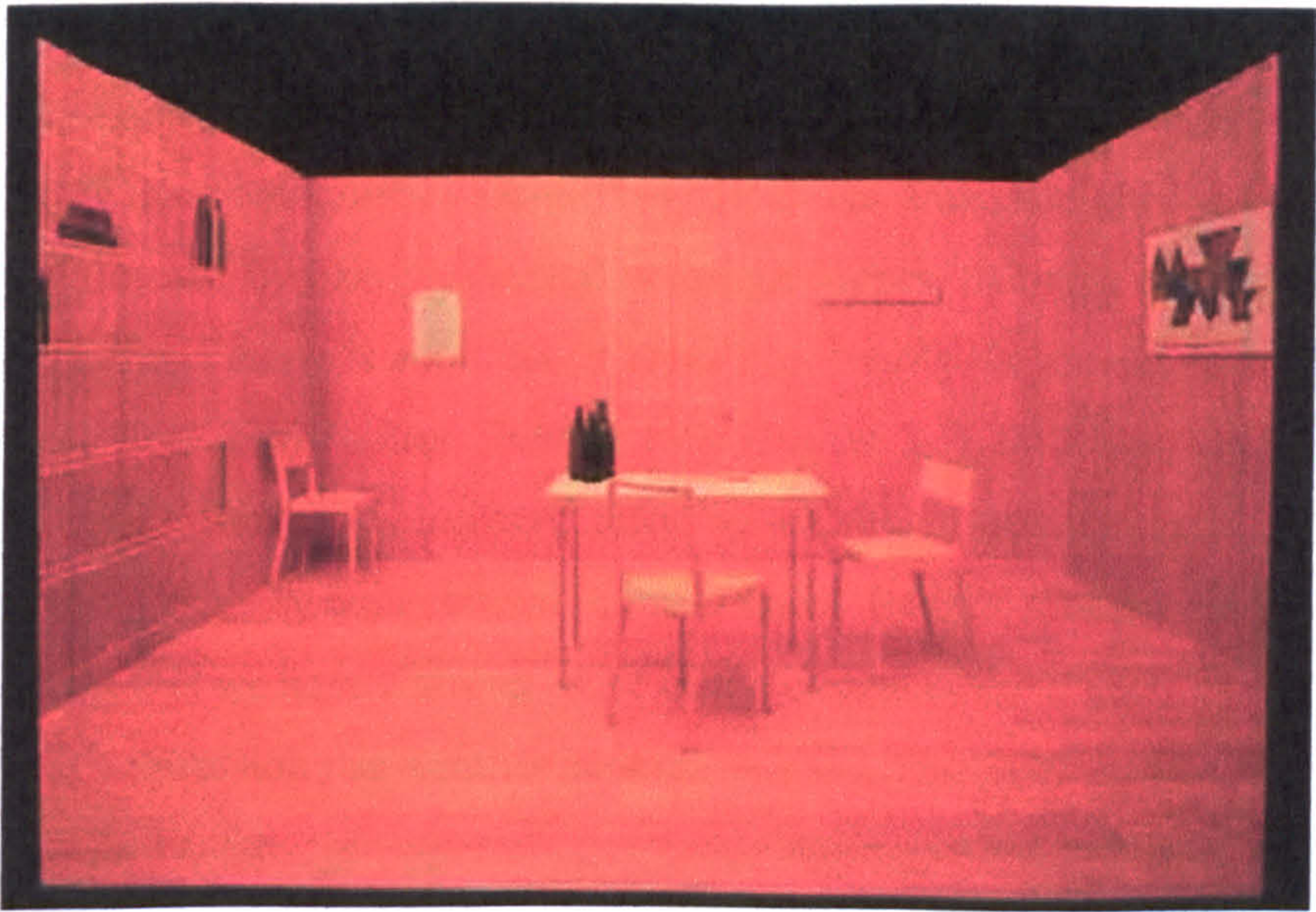


Figure 2.2 Jasper Morrison *Some New Items for the Home Part 1*, mixed media installation 1988

The following chapter is not a history of Droog as such, but it does follow the path of the organisation to discover how the form of highly expressive design they

promote has come to move from the margins of the design world to occupy a place at the top-end of the market for designed goods. In the process the intention is to cast this as essentially a problem of historical experience, as it is asked what tools may be brought to bear to make it possible to understand what has happened to allow for these present circumstances. To do this it shall be necessary to ask what qualities this form of design possesses and how our relationship to such objects has changed in the intervening years. Throughout, Droog products are examined, not to form a chronological account of the organisation's history or to catalogue their output, but to allow a window onto contemporary practice that reveals how these strange and marvellous things actually represent a darker and more interesting undercurrent in design than their reputation as quirky status-symbols may suggest.

Forcing the Aura

The artefacts that are described as design art often difficult to ignore, they seem to be very physically present, that is, they seem to have something of an aura. As was discussed in the last chapter, Benjamin argues the capacity to technologically reproduce things on a mass-scale has led to objects being devoided of their aura (1979 [1936]). This has then led to producers adopting certain tactics to in a sense reanimate this quality of objects being able to 'look at us in return' (1979 [1936]: 190). The central feature that distinguishes design from art is use. Designed objects, no matter how absurd they are, by being presented as design suggest that they will actually be used by someone. Yet use is about much more than simply the application of the object as tool. Tejo Remy's *Rag Chair* of 1991 (Figure 2.3), for example, which was a feature of Droog's first show, has been made by wadding together rags which are held in the shape of a chair by being bound in metal tapes. As shall be discussed below, in a piece such as this we have a strong sense of the creator of the object, its improvised feel gives the impression that another person has spent time putting this thing together. Crucially, however, upon encountering an object such as this there is also a sense that this is a thing that has been made for somebody to use.



Figure 2.3 Tejo Remy *Rag Chair*, rags and metal tape, 1991

Upon initial consideration the *Rag Chair*, would appear to be in complete contrast to Breuer's *B3* discussed in the previous chapter. Where Breuer's chair is stripped back to almost pure line through the use of tubular steel, Remy's chair achieves its form through the use of wadded layers of rags contained by steel tapes. Where the *B3* appears as emptied volume, the *Rag Chair* presents itself as mass. On the level of utility, however, the two objects are equally matched, in that they both provide for an experience of sitting-down. It is therefore with regard to their signification and significance, that is to say how and what they signify, that they really differ. The *B3* is made from shiny tubular steel, which as a new material in the 1920s symbolised the possibilities of machine production. Yet, though it would later go on to be mass manufactured, when it was first made this was a hand-made object; it was essentially a piece of craft which had been styled along the lines of modernist thought to express an idea of the functional future. One thing that is noticeable about Breuer's chair is how much more slick it looks in reproduction than it does when encountered on a material level; in the flesh it seems to be much less technically advanced than it does in pictures, suggesting that its aesthetic is connected to its status as something technically reproducible. Remy's chair, being made of rags appears to

point in an entirely different direction. Though both chairs have actually been made by hand, Remy's clearly demonstrates this mode of manufacture in a way that is denied by Breuer's. It has been put together from elements that have initially been created for a different purpose, suggesting some form of recycling or re-use. Consequently it appears to speak of the transience of manufactured goods and the way that modernity is as much about waste and decay as it is about the construction of a shiny new future. Indeed, as Benjamin notes, Baudelaire, the lyrical poet of high capitalism, was much concerned with the rag-picker as a feature of modernity. He observed:

Here we have a man who has to gather the day's refuse of the capital city. Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything crushed under foot, he catalogues and collects. He collects the annals of intemperance, the *capharnaüm* (stockpile) of waste. He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry (Baudelaire in Benjamin 1997: 79).

In just this way Remy's chair appears to be the work of a designer who has sorted through the detritus of modern production to create a useful or gratifying object.

Things such as Remy's chair can certainly be regarded as functional pieces of design, in that they do what they were intended to in a practical sense. That they are also expressive objects which demonstrate a poetic approach to the way in which they function does not then disqualify them as functional, rather it exemplifies the way that, as Heskett has argued, a more fully inclusive definition of function is needed (2002: 39). This, then, is to argue that the use-value of objects cannot be reduced to a simple mechanistic analysis of their utilitarian function, but must also extend to an understanding of the way in which they are used to signify and act symbolically. Indeed, as Barry Katz observes, to attempt to separate an objects 'material utility' from its 'social-cultural' function is a false division (2005: 388) since, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton observe 'Even the use of things for utilitarian purposes operates within the symbolic province of culture' (1999: 20). So, despite Modernism's fetishisation of functionalism, engineering function cannot be separated from cultural utility. Therefore to plot the history of a phenomenon such as design art it is necessary to understand it in its cultural context, to see how an

approach to utilitarian function relates to issues of how objects function in a more symbolic sense.

In contemporary manifestations of design art this relationship between utilitarian and communicative function can be seen to be manifest. For example, Pablo Reinoso is a Brazilian product designer who has lived and worked in Paris since the late 1970s. Well established as a commercial designer of furniture, lighting and jewellery he began to make more fanciful and expressive furniture in the late 1990s that sell as unique or limited edition pieces through galleries and at auction. Therefore it would be easy to suggest that a piece such as his *Spaghetti Bench* of 2006 (Figure 2.4) was created to service the growing market in such design. Hand-carved from Portuguese chestnut with each example existing as a single unique piece, this is not object as archetype or everyday piece of furniture. The familiar form of the garden bench has convulsed beyond its boundaries as it writhes and grows voraciously up the wall. It appears as though something escaped from a dream or a nightmare. It seems to exist in an inter-zone where the mundane has become the marvellous. It is clearly a thing of consequence, and as a highly crafted object we would expect it to be worth a lot of money. So, on one level it can be accounted for as a product of market forces, in that mechanisms of the art world (its unique status, the manner in which it is traded) have been utilised to allow the object to exist. Yet this does not seem to account for the content of the piece. It does nothing to tell us why it should take on this marvellous and dream-like form.



Figure 2.4 Pablo Reinoso, *Spaghetti Bench*, Portuguese chestnut and welded steel, 2006

It could be said that Reinoso is effectively stimulating the auractic qualities of the piece in the same manner as Droog designers such as Remy did in the 1990s, or indeed as Art Nouveau designers did a century before. The art critic, Hal Foster, suggests that the original early twentieth-century Art Nouveau (or Style 1900, or Jugendstil depending on where you wish to look) was created as a response to the increasing industrialisation of the manufacture of domestic use objects at this time. He argues that the organic form of these products stemmed from the struggle by the designer 'to impress his subjectivity on all sorts of objects through the idiom of the vitalist line – as if to inhabit the thing in this crafted way was to resist the advance of industrial reification somehow' (2002: 13). However, Foster goes on to suggest that this then gave rise to a certain sterility in an approach to design that demanded a totalising effect. Paradoxically, he observes, this attempt to re-inject life into designed objects threatened by the homogenising effect of a commodity culture based on mass-production and standardisation, arguably created an interior which was so unified and complete that, in the words of Loos, it precluded any 'future living and striving, developing and desiring' (in Foster 2002: 14).

Benjamin, however, suggested that this style based in organicism and the vitalist line developed because, unlike the Arts and Crafts adherents who came before them, designers had ceased to treat new technologies, materials and production practices as a threat. Instead it seemed that they intended to smother new materials and techniques with a honeyed mass of vegetal form to ornamentally sterilise them. Yet this then meant that 'the confrontation with technology that lies hidden within it was all the more aggressive'. As he goes on to state: 'Jugendstil forces the auratic' (Benjamin 2002: 557). Therefore, for Benjamin, Art Nouveau represented an approach to the making of products whereby their aura is stimulated synthetically through the use of ornament. In Art Nouveau this is achieved through the application of organic form to the more mundane archetypal structure of furniture. In a similar way Reinoso's bench can be seen to be a functional object that asserts its aura through both its unique nature and its vitalist form.

Many Droog products adopted similar tactics, such as an appeal to a vital organicism, as can be seen in Joris Laarman's *Heatwave* radiator of 2003 (Figure 2.5), that has a rampantly Rococo form, in contrast to the supposedly functional austerity of such devices. The fact that Laarman used this shape because it is actually more efficient (giving a greater surface area for the conduction of heat;



Figure 2.5 Joris Laarman, *Heatwave* radiator, reinforced concrete, fibreglass, 2003

Williams 2006), then demonstrates how function and narrative allusion are not diametric opposites, but part of the process by which things become useful to us. It is arguable, therefore, that in the development of Droog the emergent relationship between form, function, narrative and meaning that characterises so much contemporary design art, and indeed design in general, in the early twenty-first century can be discerned.

Spirit of the Nineties?

In 1998 Ramakers and Bakker published the book *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties*. As de Rijk observes: ‘The book was a pamphlet, an advertising brochure, a primary source, and a canonizing historiography all rolled into one’ (2010: 162). It is therefore worth considering the way in which Ramaker’s essay, *Spirit of the Nineties*, contained in the larger work, serves to act as a self-generated historiography, or origin myth for Droog.

In the essay Droog is identified as a form of ‘New Design’, in that it is established as representative of a novel tendency in the making of use-objects, one, however which has identifiably grown out of Italian New Design. As she states: ‘The developments in the New Design of the nineties as manifest in Droog design are inseparably linked with the design revolution of a decade earlier’ (1998: 30). Droog is

therefore characterised as having developed concerns that had previously exercised the Italian pioneers.

The Memphis group, founded in Italy in 1981, which Ramakers suggests prefigured Droog, can itself be said to have developed out of the radical design movement and counter-cultural tendencies of the 1960s (Radice 1985). It was effectively formed as a secessionist group from the Alchymia group organised around the editor of *Domus*, Alessandro Mendini. The new grouping's central figure, the industrial designer Ettore Sottsass, along with Michele De Lucchi, Aldo Cibic, Matteo Thun, Barbara Radice and others, wanted to develop an approach to design that moved away from Mendini's nihilistic principal that 'design can do nothing but redesign' (Mendini in Radice 1985: 25). Instead the direction that Memphis was intended to follow was concerned with confronting the functionalism of the modern movement and a concentration on 'product language', what Sottsass described as the attempt to create things with 'stronger stimuli, more concentrated, more rapid, more complex' (in Ramakers 1998: 31).

Ramakers suggests that this was done not to confront the developing consumer culture, as might perhaps be expected from radical design, but as an attempt to connect to it in a new way. Here she quotes Sottsass, when he states 'If society plans obsolescence, the only possible enduring design is one that deals with that obsolescence, a design that comes to terms with it, maybe accelerating it, maybe confronting it, maybe ironizing it, maybe getting along with it... And then I don't understand why enduring design is better than disappearing design' (in Ramakers 1998: 31). That's a lot of 'maybes' and it is more than a little vague as a call to action. This statement therefore demonstrates the rather loose heritage that Ramakers claims for Droog in Memphis, that is she seems to be arguing for an approach to design which is related to consumer culture, rather than being any programmatic response to it, but the nature of this connection is not resolved. It is to characterise consumerism as a motive force, certainly, but it is actually difficult to get a sense of what Ramakers believes design should actually *do* in such a situation, what it should be *for*. Instead we learn that in Memphis, and consequently in Droog 'The psychological, symbolic and poetic values of the product now came to the fore' (1998: 30), yet why this should be the case is left unclear. She notes that such an approach was based in an interest in semiotics, and referring to Baudrillard she observes that 'products are increasingly construed as signs, as a code distinguishable from other codes' (1998: 33), but no

tools for reading such codes are proffered, as such. We are told that Sottsass and company were concerned with the ‘meaning of objects in today’s everyday (sic) surroundings, and with manipulating that meaning’ (1998: 34), but as to what these meanings may be we are left a little hazy.

It could be argued that this very indeterminacy was a deliberate tactic adopted by Memphis to allow an apparently critical stance to be adopted, just as they actually remained very much within the discourse of commercial furniture design and production. In a piece such as the *Casablanca Cabinet* (1981; Figure 2.6) it can be seen how Sottsass has given the object an expressive anthropomorphic form which seems to almost throw its arms out towards the user, but any references it may be making are opaque, even blank. This was therefore an exercise in creating use-objects that were meant to be outside of the arena of bourgeois good taste because they did not connect to what had come before in any way. As De Lucchi argued ‘you don’t relate them yet to anything or anybody and you can project new possibilities onto them right away’ (in Radice 1985: 67). Declared to be The New International Style by the group themselves this was therefore intended to be an antidote to what Sottsass and the other members of Memphis considered to be the sterility of tasteful good design. Using brightly coloured patterned plastic laminates and bold and exuberant forms created a recognisable aesthetic, which Catherine Rossi notes meant that these objects quickly became ‘postmodernist pin-ups’ (Rossi 2010: 322). Such a tactic was therefore a useful way of allowing Memphis to both be a radical response to commercial orthodoxies, at the same time that it was a rather safe challenge to good taste which could then refresh consumerist design rather than negate it.

What is in evidence, looking retrospectively at Memphis, is not the extent to which it shocked the design establishment, which it certainly did in its initial appearance on the scene, but the speed at which this challenge was assimilated into popular culture and the canon of design. If Memphis represents a rupture in a narrative of good taste as related to Modernist design, what it really can then be characterised as is a point at which the content of the aura of elite high design changed, rather than a withering away of this trope. In this way Memphis, in its media friendly photogenic form, actually momentarily opened up a space in which it became permissible for furniture to be ornamental and expressive.

In discussing the way that Memphis was received in the Netherlands Ramakers quotes the Dutch art historian, Hein van Haaren, who spoke out against the

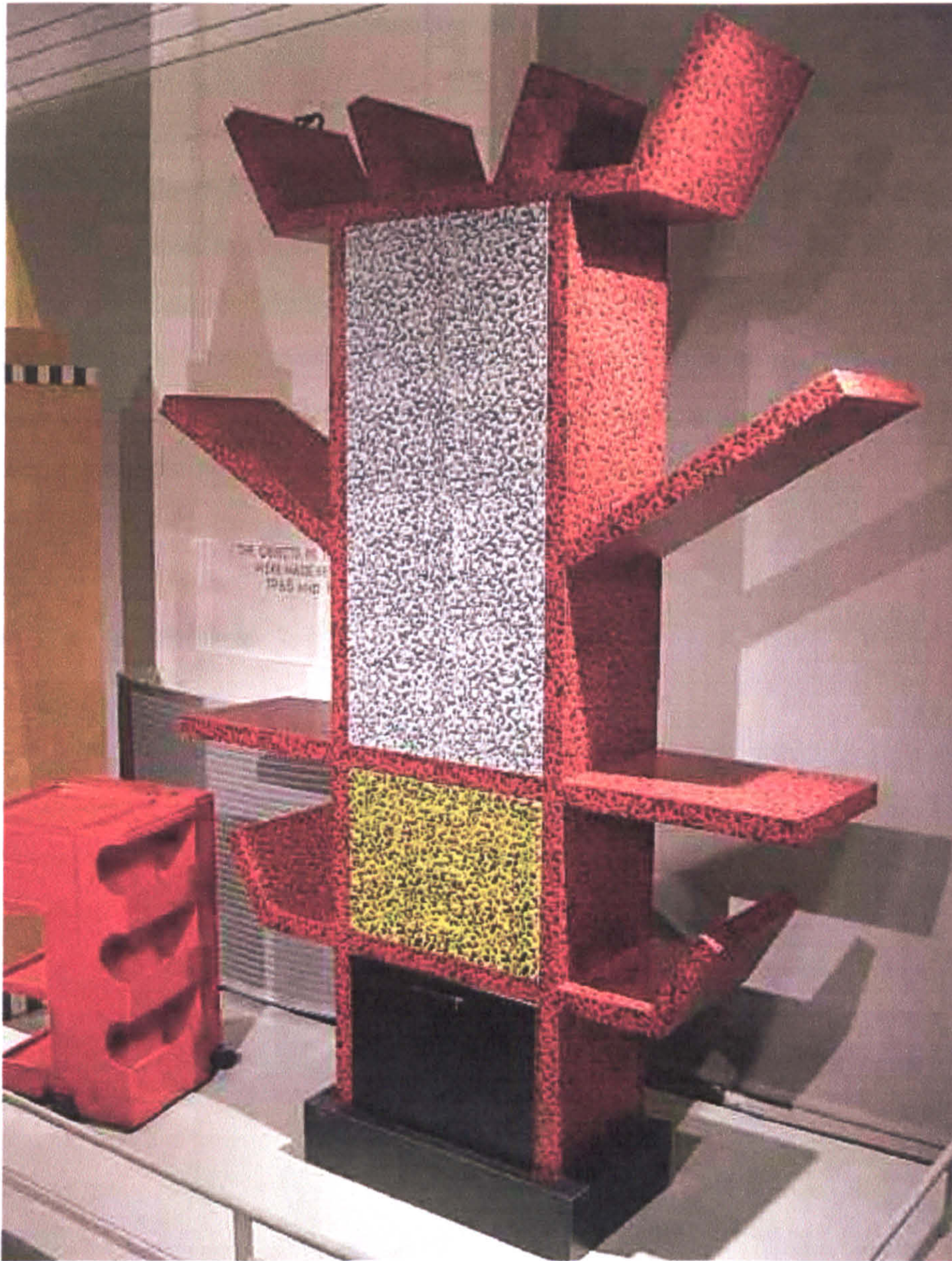


Figure 2.6 Ettore Sottsass *Casablanca Cabinet*, 1981

work of Memphis, criticising what he saw as ‘indolent Milanese design... a dangerous fashion that shirks critical analysis’, condemning as he did so the elitist nature of the objects not simply because they had pretensions to being art but because they were incomprehensible to ‘the masses’ (in Ramakers 1998: 41). Here, for Ramakers this is illustrative of a particular Dutch approach to design ‘where symbols of power and status mean little’ (1998: 41), and design should be for the many; yet she still claims Memphis as a precursor and this goes to underline the inconsistent manner in which she constructs this sense of Dutchness.

That Droog can be understood as developing in a very specific national context is examined in detail in Chapter 4, but it is worth noting here because it can be argued that Ramakers again makes a claim for Droog as being a form of paradox: both representative of a Dutch mentality and in contradiction to it. So we see that she suggests Droog was based in the New Design of the 1980s, and this is characterised as communicative but without specific content. So it can be seen that in Ramakers's essay *Spirit of the Nineties* what is presented as an explanatory analysis of the Droog's origins actually layers mystification upon myth; in this way it is an exercise in constituting Droog as much as explaining its emergence.

Expensive Rubbish



Figure 2.7 Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, *Mezzadro* stool, found tractor seat and steering bar, 1957

In *Spirit of the Nineties* Ramakers notes that in the first half of that decade the accent in Droog design 'lay on the assembling of existing components' (1998: 55), and as Williams observes, appropriation became a major tactic employed by a range of designers at this time (2006: 20). Williams then goes on to discuss the way that this was far from being a new approach, as he suggests that this tendency can be traced back from Marcel Duchamp's readymades through to Achille and Pier Giacomo

Castiglioni's *Mezzadro* stool of 1957 (Figure 2.7), made of a tractor seat, and he declares that 'appropriation is a practice that has brought artists and designers close together' (2006: 20). This is, however, problematic in that it can be argued that there is a clear difference in strategy between Duchamp's unassisted readymades used for artistic ends and the assemblage that can be seen in the work of the Castiglioni and evidenced in Droog and more recent design art pieces.

Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni's approach to design was avowedly based in the everyday, in that it was to be drawn from the components delivered by mass production and observation of how people actually interacted with these artefacts. With the *Sella* stool, also created in 1957 (Figure 2.8), for example, the seat from that icon of functionalism, the bicycle, is attached to an upright that has been sunk into a curved base – allowing the stool great freedom of movement. Achille explained that 'When I use a payphone, I like to move around, but I would also like to sit – but not completely' (in Czerwinski 2009: 58). These are therefore assemblages of the functional found. They are fundamentally not Duchamp's 'unassisted' readymades, as despite their apparent similarities the act of appropriating an object is fundamentally different in the discourse of design as it is to that of art.



Figure 2.8 Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni *Sella* stool, found bicycle seat, steel 1957

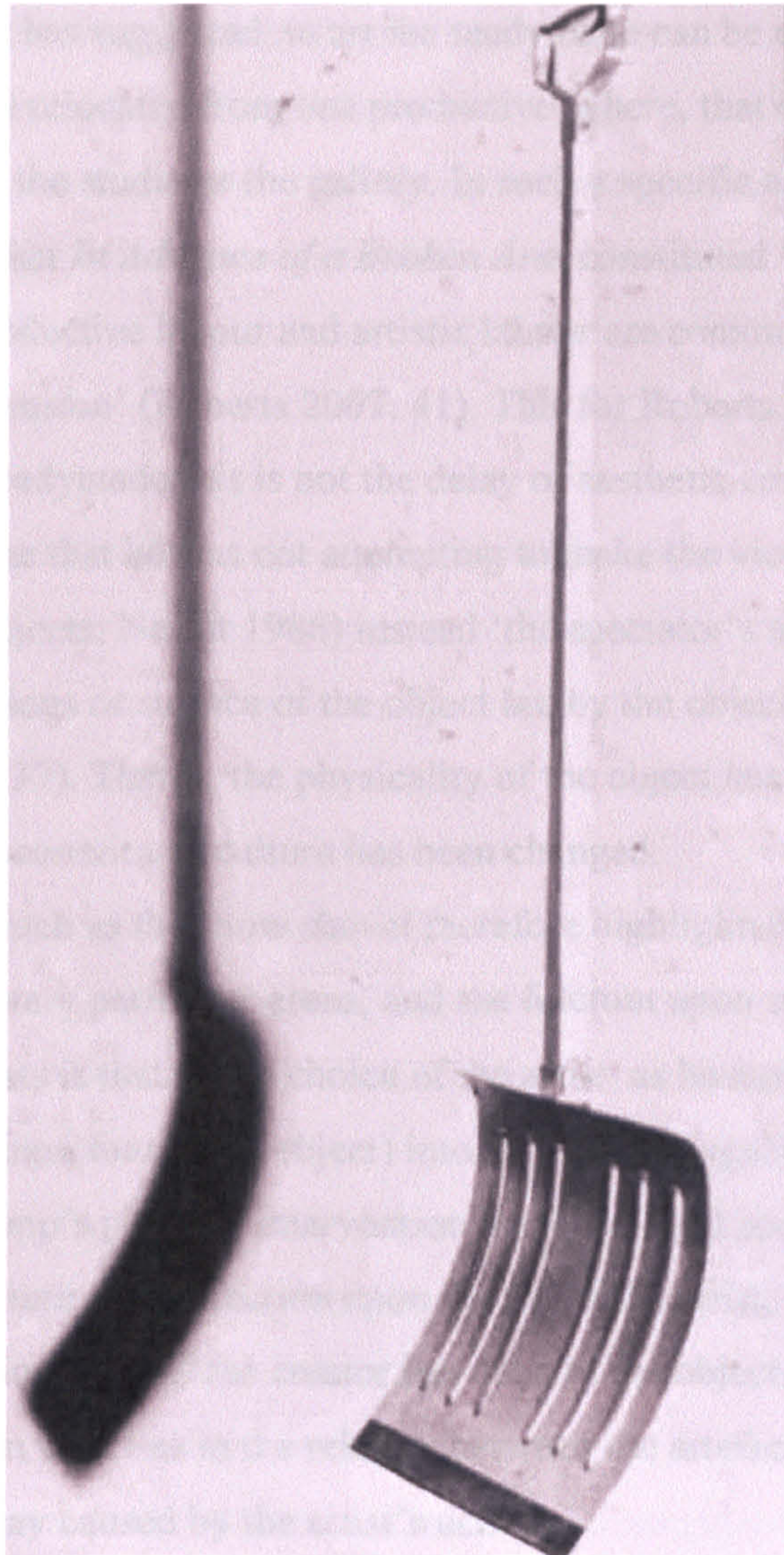


Figure 2.9 Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, found snow shovel 1916

If the Castiglioni's *Mezzadro* stool is compared to one of Duchamp's original unassisted readymades it can be seen how such things share certain tactics but serve different strategies. The first of Duchamp's readymades to be referred to as such was the snow shovel of 1916 (Figure 2.9), which was given the title *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (Mink 2001). Here Duchamp has taken a mass-produced industrial product and, without altering its form, transmuted it into an art object by an act of designation: by giving it a title and declaring it to be art. It is this case of ontological violence that defines the readymade in Duchamp's hands.

As an unassisted readymade, the snow shovel was created as an exercise in revealing how meaning cleaves to the object in terms of artistic production and

presentation. As Roberts has suggested, in art the readymade can be understood as a commodity that has been relocated from one productive sphere, that of the shop or the workplace, into another, the studio or the gallery. In such a specific act of transposition he argues that *In Advance of a Broken Arm* constituted 'the production of an object in which productive labour and artistic labour are conjoined in a state of critical tension and suspension' (Roberts 2007: 41). This for Roberts then creates a form of 'delay'. In the readymade this is not the delay of aesthetic contemplation (Duchamp was quite clear that he was not attempting to make the viewer appreciate the aesthetics of these objects; Nesbit 1986) instead 'the spectator's attention is not held by the internal relations or surface of the object but by the object's conceptual identity' (Roberts 2007: 37). That is, the physicality of the object has not been altered, rather its place in the taxonomies of culture has been changed.

An intervention such as the snow shovel therefore highlighted the way in which art functions in a very particular arena, and the fulcrum upon which the operation of the piece rests is that of the choice of the artist, as he moved the object from one category (common functional object) into another (a singular art piece). Given the lack of Duchamp's physical intervention into the object and its aesthetic opacity, the delay leads back to a reflection upon the act of the artist; the issue becomes what the intentional act of the creator has done to the object in the act of transposition. Here the art then lies in the relation between the artefact, the reception of the viewer and the delay caused by the artist's act.

Though both the Castiglioni's and Duchamp's acts of appropriation have the effect of taking common objects and making them singular, the methodologies employed are actually very different. The *Mezzadro* stool is manifestly not an unassisted readymade. In connecting the seat of the tractor to the steering handle the designers have intervened and changed the materiality of the object. Duchamp transposed the snow shovel from one ontological category (the functional everyday) to another (art). The Castiglioni's piece is an act of appropriation that has not changed the ontological category the object inhabits: the components remain functional objects, but they have had their capacity to function altered by the way in which they are being used.

With *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, the delay or point of reflection engendered by the piece depends upon the tension created between its form as a functional object and its presentation, in a very specific location, as a work of art. This means that the

spectator's reflection depends upon the nature of this transmutation. It is the act of shifting categories from not-art to art that produces the object's conceptual identity, therefore any contemplation of the object is directed back to this point, even as the viewer considers what the piece may mean to them. It can be observed, of course, that it was just this process that Duchamp was critiquing (Molesworth 1998), however this actually then serves to emphasise the contrasting nature of appropriation in design to that of art.

In the *Mezzadro* stool the Castiglioni's have actually altered both the form and the internal relations of the object. The delay is therefore putatively ongoing, not temporally fixed to the moment of artistic creation but focused on the chronic functioning of the object, its emergence into the world through its functioning. When presented with a work of art we have been schooled to know that we ask 'What is the artist trying to say? What does it mean to me?' When faced with a piece of design, that is to say a use-object presented as such, the question is less one of intrinsic meaning than of potential use. With the art object the spectator looks, experiences the delay and reflects upon what the artist was trying to say and what it says to them; with design the delay can be said to occur in the moment of projected use, in that the user comes to the object and says 'how is this meant to function?' With a use-object the user will attempt to reconcile the physical script with its broader socio-technical role (Akrich 1992). This is because design as a trope can be said to be predicated on the concept of use (Thackara 1988; Siu 2003), that is to say an iterative relationship whereby the thing is not encountered only once and contemplated or reflected upon subsequently, but rather the object is returned to again and again as a part of life as it is lived, allowing for a relationship to emerge, to come into being, in the use of the object.

In functional appropriation the elements do not simply stand for themselves, they are not even metonymic signifiers, they are functioning components. They are very present as tools at the same time as they are not shorn of their meaning through relocation, as was the snow-shovel. Instead the significance and value to be found in everyday objects is pressed into service in these assemblages. Yes, the objects are to some degree made strange by their use in an unfamiliar setting, but this is not arbitrary in the Castiglioni's work, nor is this the case with early Droog products, in that the use of the found element does not shift the object from one ontological category to another. Instead it can be argued that if the components employed are in

any way alienated, this has been done because what is appropriated is, frankly, appropriate in its use-values.

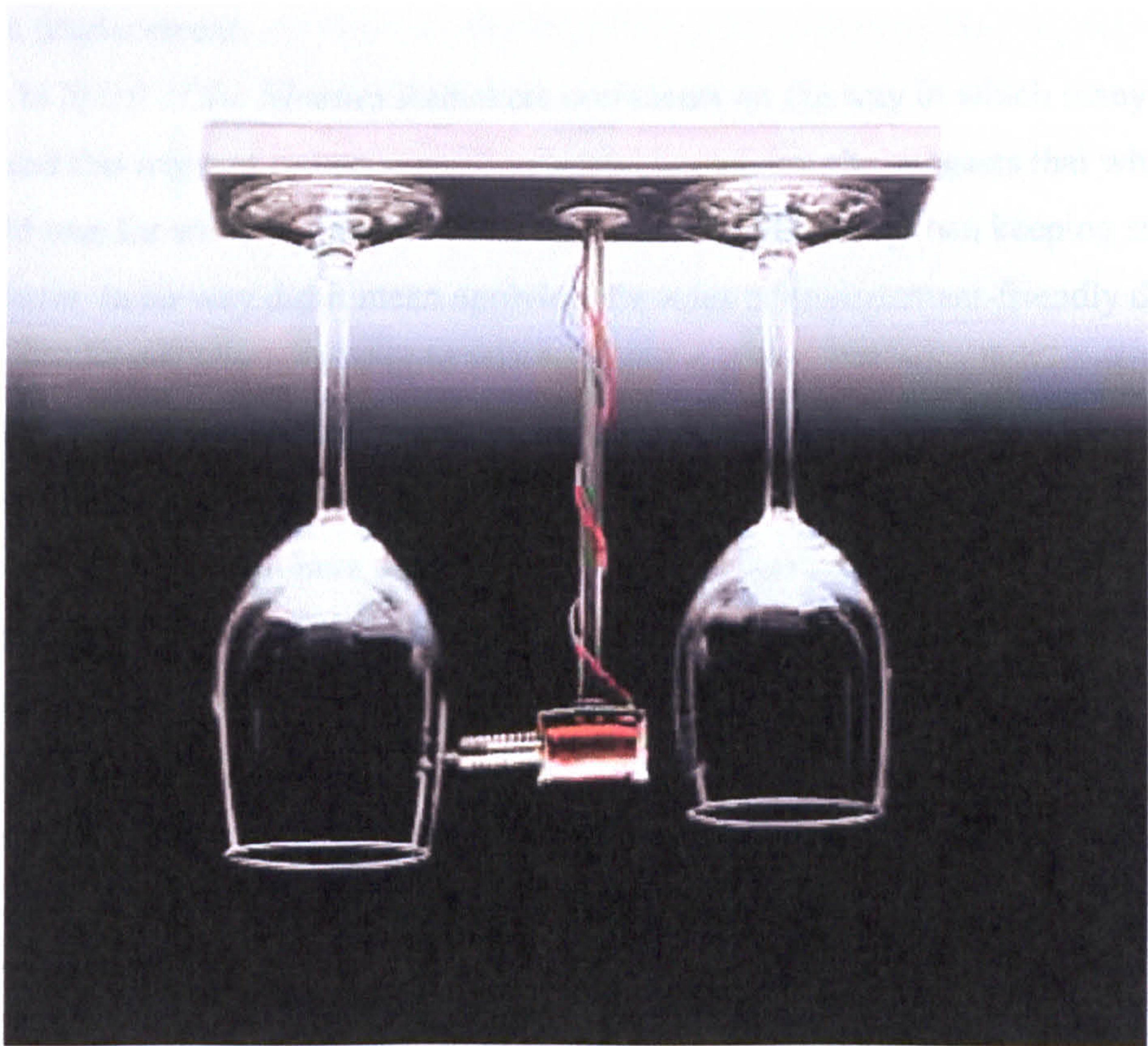


Figure 2.10 Peter Van der Jagt *Bottoms Up Doorbell*, found wine-glasses and steel, 1994

A piece such as Peter van der Jagt’s *Bottoms Up* doorbell of 1994, illustrates the marriage of functional and symbolic appropriation adopted in many of the early Droog pieces (Figure 2.10). Rather than appealing to historicism to place the object in its story, the design takes a piece of social life as its symbolic drive. The use of found wine glasses does nothing to suggest recycling for ecological purposes, as such. Instead they are used for their physical qualities to represent an archetype of sociability.

As one of the central conduits allowing those on the outside of a house to communicate to those within their desire to enter, the doorbell can be a source of anxiety. The standard ‘ding-dong’, or worse a buzzer, operates in the same way as a traditional telephone ring: it is an invitation and a command; it is a hailing of the subject. Van der Jagt’s doorbell takes the potentially disturbing appeal of the doorbell and transmutes it into a social experience. Through striking the wine glasses the

immediacy of the doorbell becomes the clink of glasses, a sound which is firmly rooted in day-to-day experience as one of sociability. This is therefore a humanisation of the design object through the use of archetypal elements, not their alienation through displacement.

In *Spirit of the Nineties* Ramakers comments on the way in which many connected this trope of re-use to environmental issues, but she suggests that whilst this held true for some designers 'it was more a way of thinking than keeping strictly to the letter: in no way did it mean applying the rules of environment-friendly design' (1998: 55). In this context it should also be noted that with the exception of perhaps Marcel Wanders, the designers shown by Droog were either graduating students or very early in their careers. Consequently, rather than being an environmental strategy of recycling, for practitioners with no real access to mass production techniques or expensive industrial processes, the use of found components represented a cheap and available way to construct new products. It is curious in this regard that Ramakers does not in *Spirit of the Nineties* refer to the influence of designers working in Britain in the early 80s, such as Tom Dixon and Ron Arad, who had most recently made use of this version of product design created with found elements.



Figure 2.11 Ron Arad *Rover Chair*, found car seat and scaffolding poles, 1981

For example, Ron Arad's *One Off* gallery was established in Neal Street in 1983, and it was just such a method that was employed here. Objects created by the

likes of Arad, such as the 1981 *Rover Chair* (Figure 2.11) made from an old car seat, demonstrate a concern for re-use which is not so much a comment on over-production as the result of it: the availability of readymade elements. This is then combined with an approach to means and methods which is that of the outsider, who uses what they can to enter the discourse.

Similarly along with Mark Brazier-Jones and Nick Jones, Tom Dixon formed the company *Creative Salvage* in Britain in 1984. They claimed that ‘The key to Creative Salvage’s success is not in the expensive research and development costs of modern-day products, but in the recycling of scrap to form stylish and functional artefacts for the home and office’ (Creative Salvage in Williams 2006: 20). As Williams notes this DIY approach to the making of things was the furniture equivalent of punk and this approach based in appropriation and improvisation could be seen to be mirrored in the graphic design of Jamie Reid and the sampling culture which was developing in music at this time (Williams 2006).



Figure 2.12 Rody Graumans, *85 Lamps* chandelier, light bulbs, cable and electrical connectors, 1993

This could only happen at a certain point in history because of the availability of objects created through industrial production. The designer becomes an arranger of elements, and as such becomes visible themselves as a labourer – one adding value to the matter manipulated. Rody Graumans’s *85 Lamps* chandelier (1993; Figure 2.12) takes that most disposable of everyday things, the incandescent light bulb, and turns what was the faceless and inhuman multiple into a singular thing of consequence. In

Marcel Wanders' *Set Up Shades* lamp (1988; Figure 2.13) the problem is approached from the other direction to similar effect. Here he is using the archetype of the lampshade in an attempt to create an instant connection between the object and the user through the familiarity of the object used.



Figure 2.13 Marcel Wanders, *Set Up Shades* lamp, found lamp-shades, 1988

In this way the early Droog assemblages can be said to owe more to the techniques of montage than they did to Duchamp's unassisted readymades. The Berlin Dadaists used photomontage because it provided them with an easily accessible method for taking parts of the industrial world, the newspaper, the magazine, which could then be re-constructed to make work which was manifestly not traditional art. As the leader of the Berlin Dada, Raoul Hausmann, declared: 'We call this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the role of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers, and our work as construction: we assembled [in Frech: *monteur*] our work, like a fitter' (in Roberts 2006: 9). Therefore the early Droog designers can be regarded as *monteurs*, crafting new constructions from what is to hand, not to create artistic statements as such, but making use of the design

vocabulary available to them in the construction of objects that cannot help but emphasise the disjunctive nature of material reality.



Figure 2.14 Jurgens Bey, *Light Shade Shade*, found chandeliers and plastic foil, 1995

Jurgens Bey's *Light Shade Shade* of 1995 (Figure 2.14), for example, is a traditional and somewhat kitsch chandelier with a foil shade wrapped around it. When switched off it appears to be a sleek modern light fitting. When the room darkens and the light is switched on, the chandelier is illuminated and it hangs ghost-like within the now transparent outer layer. The elements of the object are at once harmonious but in tension, the old meets the new, illumination reveals the archaic within the modern. Many of the most interesting of the objects discussed in this thesis are like this; the obsolescent is reclaimed to be incorporated within the new, the abject is pressed into the service of luxury, the discarded and outmoded becomes the novel and the coveted. The forgotten past returns as it is reclaimed in the present. If for Walter Benjamin the arcades of Paris were where 'the most recent past becomes history' then in these

objects we see the what has just passed into obsolescence, the outmoded light fitting, the broken chair, the tasteless and gaudy ornament or the forgotten child's toy return as new things to be used, interacted with and experienced. Because this is not mainstream mass manufacture 'the commodity proliferates along the margins and enters into fantastic combinations, like tissues in a tumour' (Benjamin 2002: 42). Therefore these objects are best understood not as readymades, they have been worked upon too much for this, but rather as assemblages whereby the creators can often be seen to be employing what may be called disjunctive design, in which the elements play upon each other and the disjunctions, incongruities and contradictions that can be created by putting available functional parts together.

The Dry and the Moist

Accounts of Droog tend to stress how the designers created apparently humorous objects. Antonelli, for example, observes in her introduction to the 1998 Droog publication that non-indigenous texts always explain that 'Droog' means 'dry' in Dutch (1998: 12). De Rijk also notes that Ramakers constantly stresses the idea that 'Droog possessed a liberal sprinkling of humor' (2010: 166). Therefore the name 'Droog' was intended to suggest that what is presented is somehow possessed of a dry or ironic wit. As was discussed in the last chapter, this concept of ironic humour depends upon a certain relationship to the codes of communication concerned. The theorising of irony usually proceeds from a semantic definition that it is involved with saying one thing and meaning another, yet as the literary theorist Linda Hutcheon observes, irony is actually characterised by having an 'edge', in that it is about attacking something within certain conditions (1994: 33). For something to be considered ironic in this sense it is therefore not enough to simply say one thing and mean another, this must have some form of intended effect. In her study of gender and humour, Nancy Walker, has argued that 'irony engages the intellect rather than the emotions' (Walker 1990: 24), yet as Hutcheon argues, irony always has a 'target' and a 'victim' (1994: 15), that is to say it is always actually emotionally laden and directed. For all the emotional content of work such as the *Rag Chair* or the *Light Shade Shade* for example, in attempting to understand Droog's output as humorous it is difficult to get a sense of what exactly is being subverted or highlighted, what the

target is supposed to be. It seems more likely, therefore, that the irony of Droog is actually a more diffuse product of the time in which it was produced, the 1990s, when a clear programme of formal and ethical approaches to design was difficult to discern and irony was a more general stance. These designs could be seen to be playing with codes of status and taste, yet there does not seem to be enough actual direction to them to call what they are doing irony in any meaningful sense of the word.

Irony must perforce have a specific context, as Hutcheon continues, 'irony happens as part of a communicative process; it is not a static rhetorical tool to be deployed, but itself comes into being in the relations between meanings... between intentions and interpretations' (1994: 13). That is to say irony always takes place within a discourse. There must be an expectation of something making sense a 'general expectation of sincerity and coherence' (Colebrook 2004: 18), before this can be subverted through the ironic stance. Thus the Droog designs of the 1990s may have been deliberately departing from the neo-modernist orthodoxies of the day, but in the play of signifiers of the time they could perhaps be better described as ludic rather than ironic. Betsky has argued in relation to Droog that, 'Irony and wit ... show that one is "in the know" and thus part of a tribe' (2004: 20). Indeed, irony is always both exclusionary and inclusionary, in that it implies an assumption of superiority and sophistication on the part of both the ironist and the intended, comprehending, interpreter (Hutcheon 1994: Colebrook 2004). Yet, as is noted above, irony is not a static device, it is something which happens in the dynamic interplay of communication and discourse. This means that no fixed constituencies can be identified, particularly as these things transition through the course of the life histories. This is because irony is relational, in that it comes into being between the said and the unsaid, between intention and interpretation within specific contexts (Hutcheon 1994: 178).

Droog may have been self-consciously presented as humorous or ironic in a dry manner, with the suggestion is that we will all get the joke because of our informed sophistication, but this does not mean that this was actually the case. Yes, much of what they were doing was dependent upon a disjuncture between elements or codes, but this did not necessarily signify irony or wry detachment at the time of their manufacture and mediation, and it certainly does not mean that they must be read or understood in this way now.

As de Rijk notes, these designers had received hardly any theoretical training (2010: 170). They were not schooled in Postmodern theory. Rather they had been exposed to the broader dominance of neo-modernism in Dutch design practice and discourse, and reacted against this. Therefore, almost inevitably, the vocabulary they adopted was essentially non-rational and self-consciously anti-functionalist. They did this, as all good students should, to get up the noses of their teachers and what was perceived as the design establishment, and it is arguable that this resulted in the work of early Droog having a clear Surrealist bent (de Rijk 2010; Konings 2011). As Rancière notes, such practices constitute ‘a pure encounter of heterogeneities, testifying wholesale to the incompatibility of two worlds’. Therefore this can be seen as ‘the Surrealist encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine, showing the absolute power of dreams and desire against the reality of the everyday world, but using its objects’ (2006: 84). So, rather than constituting a dry irony these early Droog assemblages actually reveal themselves as a more visceral Surrealist practice.

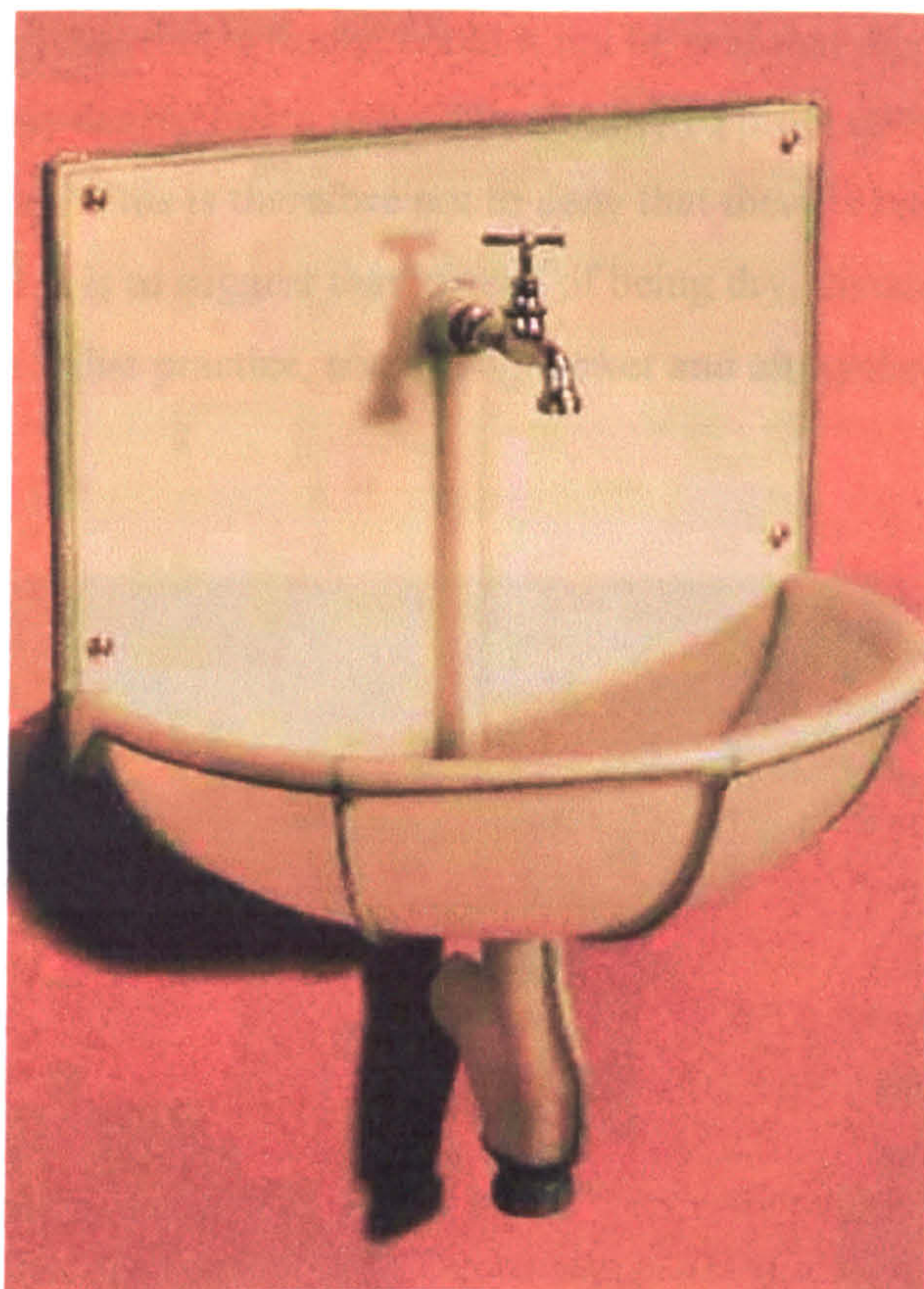


Figure 2.15 Dick van Hoff *Washbasin*, felt impregnated with polyester resin, 1996

Dick Van Hoff's sewn together wash-basin made from felt and then impregnated with polyester resin (1996; Figure 2.15), which was for the designer 'a criticism of the clogged-up attitude of the sanitary industry' as 'a washbasin to me is a receptacle for catching water, no more and no less' (Van Hoff in Ramakers & Bakker 1998: 64), can actually be said to be much more than simply a receptacle for catching water. Through transposing the usually hard form of a washbasin into what appears to be soft textile, the irony could be said to be that what we expect to be hard, the basin, is made from a soft material, yet the textile has been made rigid by impregnation with resin. Yet in such examples it is in actuality difficult to see the joke, and if the humour is apparent it could be suggested that it is not as dry as has been implied. A piece such as Jurgen Bey's *Garden Bench* (1999; Figure 2.16) could be said to exemplify the conceptual dry humour claimed for much of the organisation's output: it is essentially a machine which takes organic waste and extrudes a bench which will then slowly decompose, fertilising the surrounding area. Yes, Bey's bench seems to be making a funny statement 'hey, why not just extrude the bench from the waste we have?' But even if it is accepted that this is funny, could it not be said that this is actually an object which to some degree refers to both the futility of production and the inevitability of decay? This is therefore not to deny that there is humour to be found in these pieces. Rather it is to suggest that instead of being dry, distant and ironic, instead, as with Surrealist practice, something darker and altogether more disturbing lurks beneath.

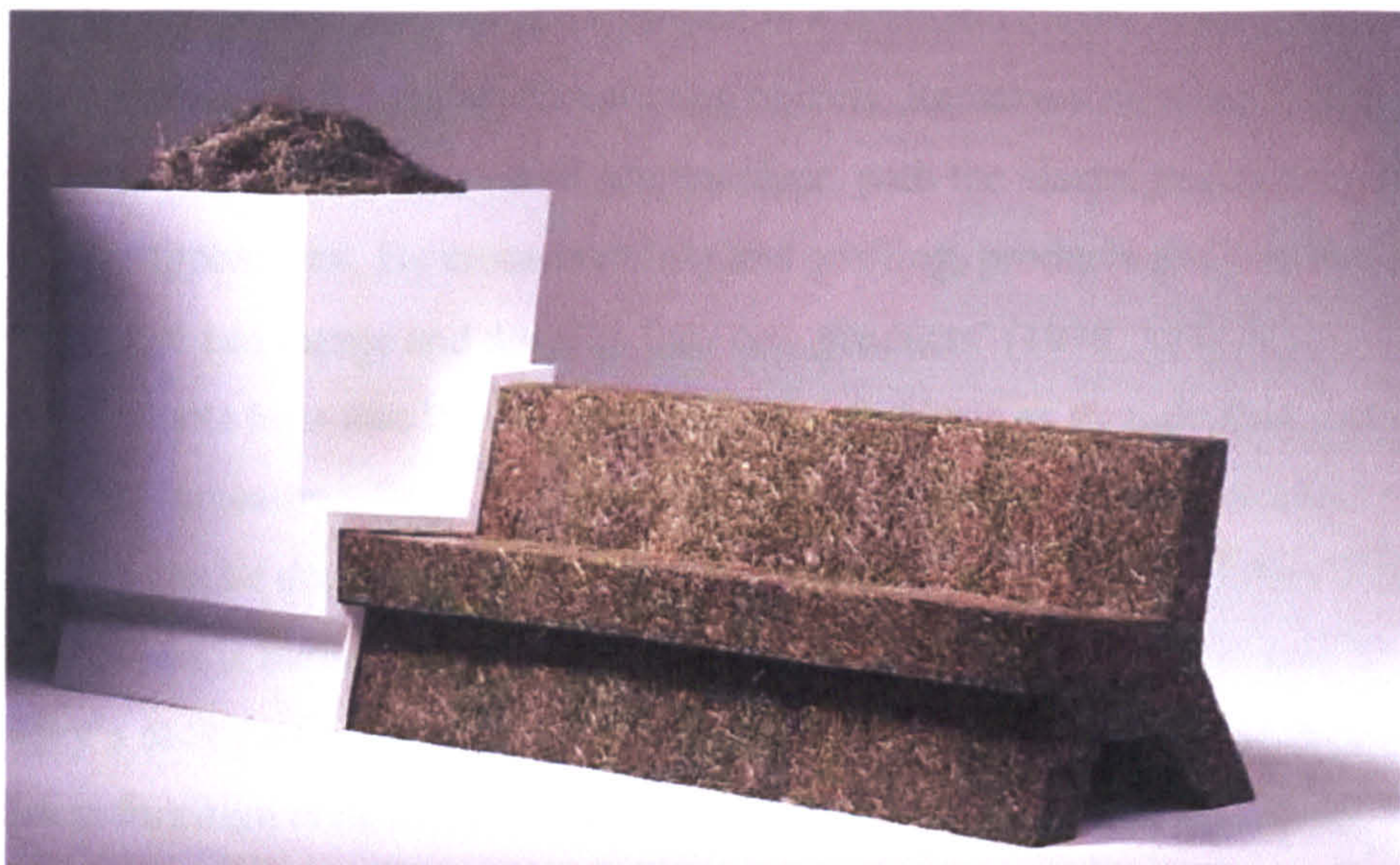


Figure 2.16 Jurgen Bey *Garden Bench*, hay, MDF, resin 1999

In Van Hoff's washbasin, for example, can be seen a clear echo of the technique employed by Meret Oppenheim in her 1936 surrealist object *Breakfast in Fur* (Figure 2.17) where the usually hard porcelain of a tea cup has morphed into the sensuousness of fur. In just the same way, with the washbasin, it is not difficult to see how Freudian resonances of desire can be read into a piece which speaks of softness, hardness and the plunging of hands into hot wetness. Far from being 'dry', such connotations seem very clearly to have returned as moist.



Figure 2.17 Meret Oppenheim, *Breakfast in Fur*, found cup, saucer, spoon and fur, 1936

Similarly, in Jan Konings and Bey's *Kokon* furniture, created in 1997 (Figure 2.18) in conjunction with Technical University Delft, Faculty of Space and Aviation Technology, the products have been wrapped in a synthetic elastic fibre. These can be seen as marvellous and strangely threatening objects. Ramakers informs us that with these pieces 'the "skeleton" is a well-known chair, with the elastic skin adding an entirely new appearance. By cross-breeding and grafting, products and functions of a different nature can merge and develop into new products' (1998: 124). It is interesting to note here that Ramakers speaks of the objects as though they were living things: 'cross-breeding' and 'grafting' and as de Rijk observes definite comparisons can be drawn with *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* by Man Ray (2010: 170). The object is hidden, repressed, and could even be said to be enveloped in Shklovsky's sack (see Chapter 1), so that it remains always an ambiguous mystery. The *Kokon* furniture is more overt than Man Ray's piece, its wrappings tighter, but it is still hidden and repressed in the same way.



Figure 2.18 Konings and Bey *Kokon* furniture, found furniture and synthetic elastic fibre, 1997

If functionalist Modernists dreamed of the transparent house filled with tools for living, then the Surrealists can be said to have looked in the other direction, in that they delved into the fantastic nature of the modern interior. As the Surrealist theorist Roger Callois wrote:

It's clear that the utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its form, that is to say the object always overflows the instrument. So it is possible to discover in every object an irrational residue determined among other things by the unconscious agency of the inventor or technician. (in Alison 2010: 20)

In this way the Surrealists certainly saw how the power of the presence of the unconscious of the creator could imbue the object with an aura in an increasingly mass produced material culture. It can then be argued that it is actually this reservoir of affect that the work of Droog drew upon, much more than any humorous or ironic stance.



Figure 2.19 Man Ray, *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, found object, textile and string, 1920

The Unheimlich

Droog examples such as those discussed above can therefore be seen as disturbing because they appear to draw upon a reservoir of affect and association beneath the surface of the apprehended object. This then is a tactic which has been adopted by many designers working more recently.

The *Cow Bench*, created by the British based German designer, Julia Lohmann, in 2004, for example, is an uncanny object (Figure 2.20). It has been made by taking a cow hide and stretching it over a wood and hard-foam superstructure to exactly mimic the form of the animal, minus the head. It takes up the space that a cow would and, according to Lohmann, people who encounter it tend to react to it as though it were a living thing (2010). One of the ur-objects of Surrealism was the mannequin or doll which disturbs us because it appears to exist as both animate and inanimate; it is uncanny because it appears to be familiar as a human form yet monstrous because it is lifeless. What then is also disturbing is the object which transgresses from the other direction, whereby the artefact appears to be coming to life. For Foster this is the definition of the marvellous, a relation to objects whereby



Figure 2.20 Julia Lohmann *Cow Bench*, leather and hard foam on a wooden superstructure, 2004

the distinction between the animate and the inanimate is ambiguous. This was then at the root of the Surrealist project: ‘the re-enchantment of the disenchanted world, of a capitalist society made ruthlessly rational’ (Foster 1995: 19), and it is a methodology which is apparent in early Droog work and more recent design art furniture and products.

Meret Oppenheim’s *Table with Bird’s Legs* (1937; Figure 2.21) for example, can be said to represent an object which demonstrates the surrealist preoccupation with the occult resonances of manufactured goods. As with Lohmann’s creation, it is an object which seems to have escaped from a dream, whereby the inanimate has somehow metamorphosised into the living. Inspired by Max Ernst’s series of detoured engravings *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934; Figure 2.22), where the normality of the bourgeois interior is ruptured by marvellous manifestation, Oppenheim’s piece is both humorous and horrifying.

It has power because it appears to blur from one category (the inert, the object) into another (the animate, the living thing), consequently it can no longer recede into the background; it asserts its presence as it alludes to the suspicion that the things around us may be more animate than we wish to believe. In this way the Surrealists sought to disrupt the apparent seamlessness of the interior as ‘etui’ or comforting case filled with the bourgeois consumer’s carefully accumulated objects (Benjamin 2002), not by its blank rejection but by its intensification. There is no little humour in such an

approach, but it is a form of humour which acknowledges the underlying uneasiness of everyday life, in just the manner that Lohmann's piece can be seen to operate.



Figure 2.21 Meret Oppenheim *Table With Bird's Legs*, 1937



Figure 2.22 Max Ernst *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1934

Thus, since both functionalism and Surrealism can be said to have been concerned with the effect of the things we encounter they can therefore be positioned as dialectical counterparts. Both are philosophies of the object, yet functionalism can, in Lash's terms, be identified as essentially an extensive attitude to the human relationship to things, in that it was an attempt engage with material reality through set categorisations (Lash 2006: 2010). Surrealism, by contrast can be understood as an intensive reading of things, as mysterious and always subject to an irrational residue which exceeds our knowledge of them. As Foster states:

Functionalism is about discipline: it breaks down the domestic body into functions and assigns them to antiseptic spaces; the result is often a house type with scant allowance for history, sexuality, the unconscious. Surrealism is about desire: in order to allow it back into architecture it fixes on the outmoded and the ornamental, the very forms tabooed in such functionalism, associated as they became not only with the historical and the fantastic, but with the infantile and the feminine. In effect, against the 'machine for living in', surrealism presents the house as hysterical body (1995: 190)

In this way the designers who worked with Droog can be seen to have been working not to an agenda set by functionalism, but rather one which drew upon the more emotional and affective register of Surrealist practice. The legacy of this can then be seen in the work of designers such as Lohmann and Marigold, as discussed in the introduction, who have arguably been influenced by the experiments of the Dutch designers. In Pieke Bergmans's *Light Bulb* series, for example, we are faced with the everyday object, the angle-poise lamp which now seems to have become subject to unstable growth. The hard angularity of the lamp appears to contrast with the globular fecundity of the bulb which appears to grow from it. Hard and soft; animate and inanimate. The disjunctive elements work together to create a strange and uncanny effect which acts to destabilise and revitalise the products created.



Figure 2.23 Pieke Bergmans *Light Bulb*, found lamp and hand-blown bulb 2008

‘Craftsy’

When asked by a design journalist in 1996 about the ‘craft ethic’ which seemed to be apparent in early Droog work Ramakers replied ‘I don’t think Droog Design can be described as craft. Craftsy certainly, but never craft’ (in Adamson 2007: 35).

Adamson concludes that this choice of words suggested that Ramakers regarded craft as ‘a crucial point of reference, but only one among others’ (2007: 35). In relation to Droog and the design which can be said to have descended from it, then, it seems necessary to examine this statement and judge the extent to which anything we may wish to describe as craft can be identified as a key reference point.

In this regard, the Memphis products that Ramakers claims as the precursors of Droog were intended to be prototypes for mass-production. However, as Rossi notes, the furnishing on display in the Milan showroom were actually ‘hand-made one-offs – in other words, objects crafted by artisanal skills and processes’ (Rossi

2010: 324). This is an important point that has been excluded and marginalized in design historiography because it does not fit with more conventional postmodern narrative attributed to Memphis.

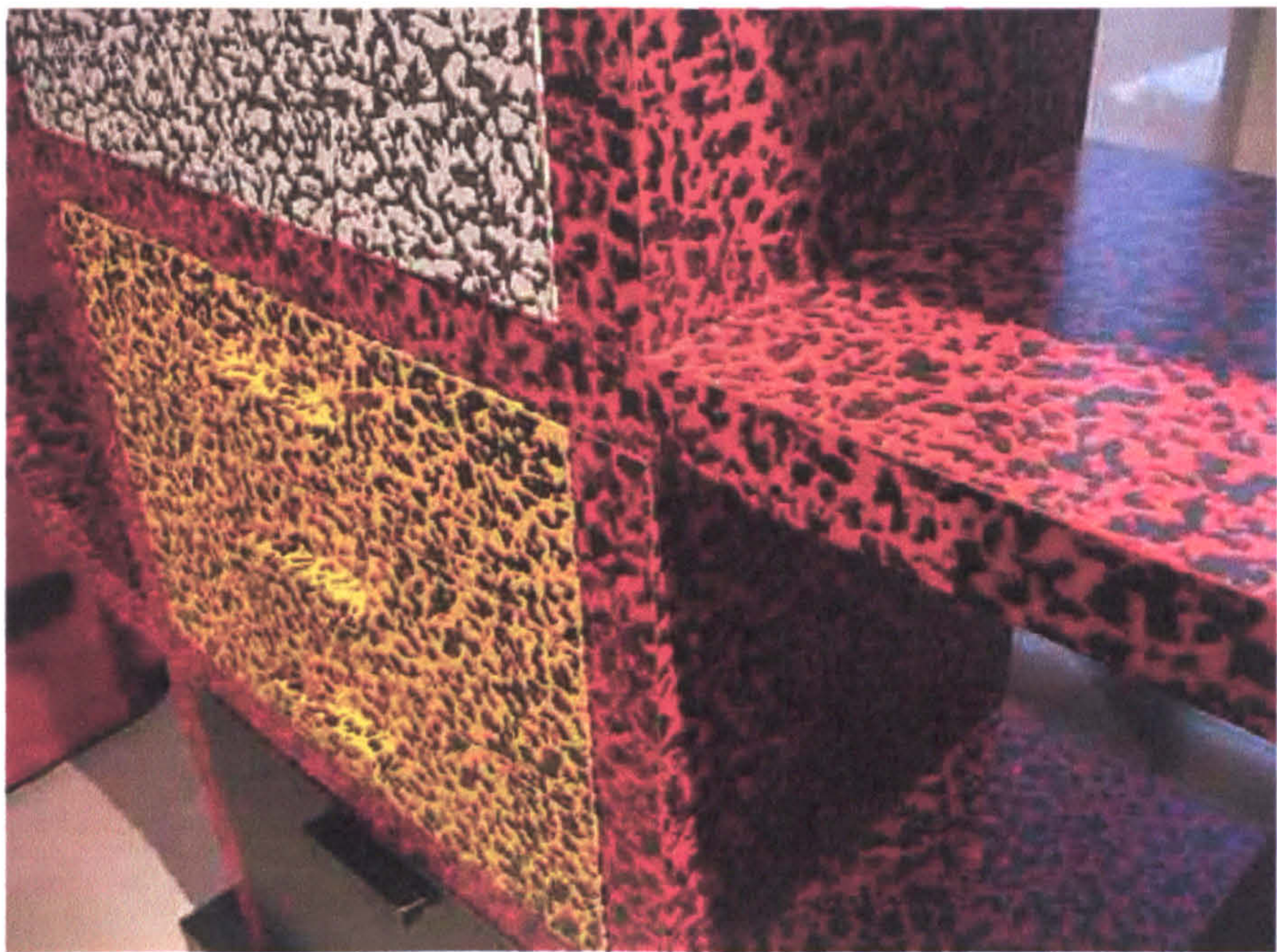


Figure 2.24 Ettore Sottsass *Casablanca Cabinet*, 1981; detail showing the intricacy of the application of the laminate

These first collections were made by Renzo Brugola, a carpenter from Brianza, the traditional centre of Italy’s furniture manufacturing on the outskirts of Milan. It was Brugola’s technical know-how that allowed for these one-off pieces to be made. Though ostensibly industrial prototypes, it can actually be seen that the pieces involved so many individually crafted pieces of plastic laminate, bonded onto wood, that there was no option but to build it by hand (see Figure 2.24). This meant that, as Ernesto Gismondi, the president of Memphis, stated, ‘on no account can this be produced in series’ (in Rossi 2010: 324). It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that these smooth, plastic covered objects should actually be revealed as crafted things rather than the technologically centred objects made for mass production that they appear to be. The reason why this was obscured with Memphis, therefore, was to code the pieces as fit for technological reproduction; it was to characterise them as not being the product of the human hand, even though they were. This then is the opposite of the tactic in relation to craft adopted by Droog.



Figure 2.25 Piet Hein Eek, *Scrap Wood Cabinet*, 1990

As was discussed in the previous chapter, one way in which craft can be understood is as a form of esoteric knowledge coupled with the physical skills to apply it in the making of highly wrought objects. It is, however, difficult to see these qualities in most of the work of Droog, particularly the assemblages. It can be seen in a piece such as Piet Hein Eek's cabinet (1990; Figure 2.25), as it has clearly been made with skill and judgement, yet, as de Rijk observes, the use of scrap wood suggests that Hein Eek was more concerned with what the piece meant, its connotations, rather than the form being expressive of a particularly skilful attitude to making. De Rijk therefore argues:

Craft as pursued by Droog is an exercise in symbolic meaning, a suggestion of one or another method of production and, at the same time, an anti-form that counters conventional aesthetics and its attendant dictates of perfect execution. Droog Design is "so-called craft," in which the method of production assumes a role in the narrative about the product (de Rijk 2010: 173).

In this way Droog products of this period were not meant to represent craftsmanship in the sense of refined knowledge and skills applied, but the suggestion of the hand-made in opposition to the sleek finish of the mass manufactured, just the opposite of what is played out in the Memphis prototypes. Such artefacts could therefore be said to refer to the power Greenhalgh alludes to as discussed in the last chapter, even if they are not actually to be defined as craft objects as such. This is because they can be seen to be resisting what Tanya Harrod describes as ‘a kind of technological determinism in which a visual [and material] culture is created by a prevailing technology’ (2007: 229). Though often very hi-tech solutions are employed, the aesthetic or symbolic functioning of the pieces has been engineered in such a way as to suggest the crafted or the hand-made, though it should be noted that they also often stand as material assertions that there is no intrinsic boundary between craft practice and high-technology.

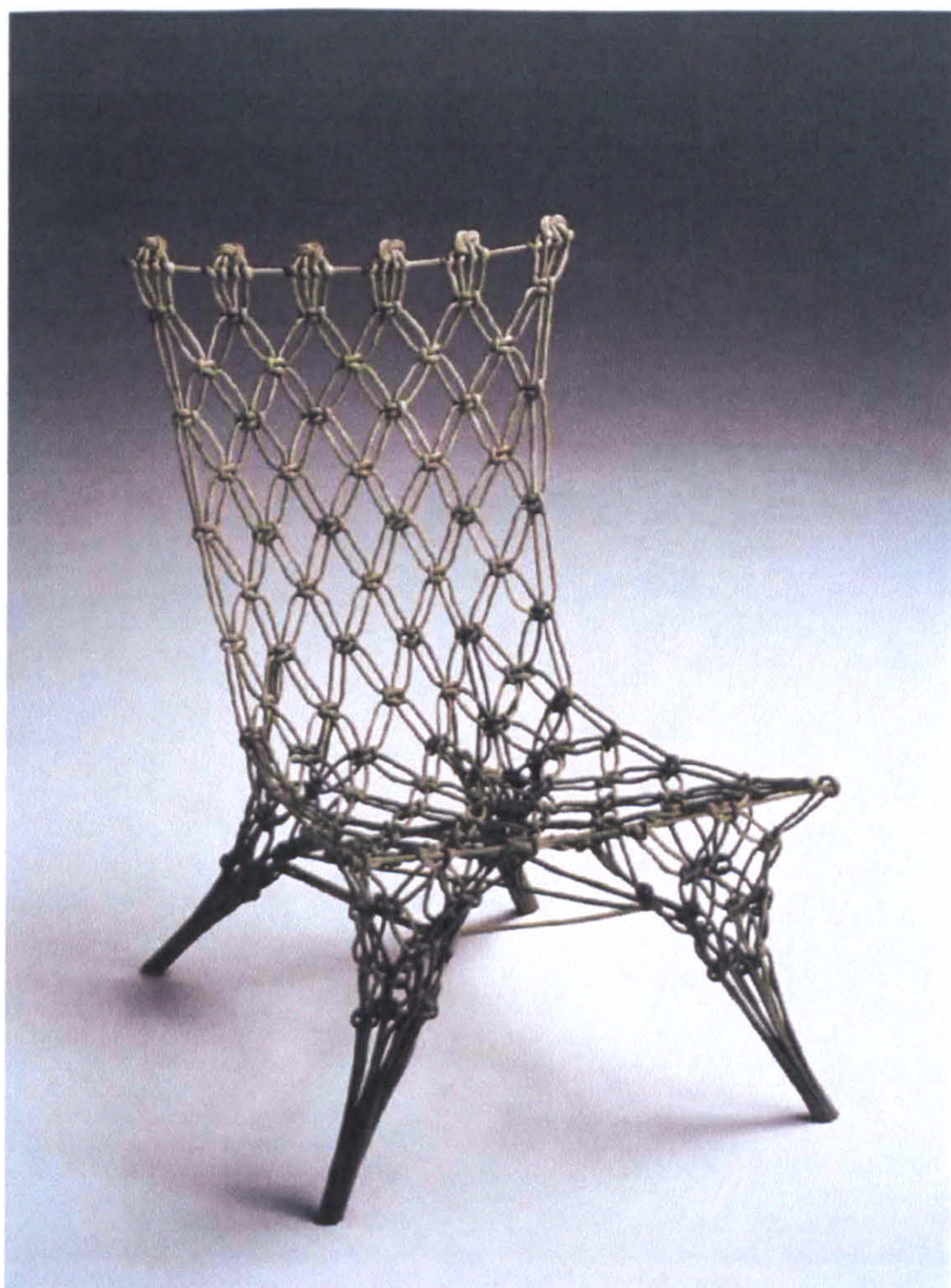


Figure 2.26 Marcel Wanders, *Knotted Chair*, rope and epoxy resin, 1996

A good example of the employment of a craft aesthetic that disrupts the smoothness of much technological development is Marcel Wanders's well known *Knotted Chair* of 1996 (Figure 2.26 & 2.27), shown as part of Droog's output. The chair has been made by hand-knotting a chair in rope which is then been hung upside down and treated with epoxy resin. Close examination of the piece then demonstrates how the craft skill of macramé has been employed to make the structure. In this way the object exists as a manifestation of the dialectical tension between the hand-made craftsy quality of the chair's manufacture (what de Rijk insists on calling 'so-called craft') and its hi-tech nature due to the resin that allows it to take rigid form.



Figure 2.27 Marcel Wanders, *Knotted Chair*, rope and epoxy resin, 1996

In Droog objects, as Adamson observes, ‘The found object and the crafted object alike are presented as fixed points of everyday life – shards of the “real” – that penetrate the frictionless, normative qualities of a serially produced commodity’ (2007: 35). The fact that such objects appear to be realisable by anybody who took the time to put things together or employ simple craft skills then seem to connote a certain DIY approach to design that suggests the consumer could actually become a producer, whereby such objects represent, if not a self-empowering component of a do-it-yourself culture (Triggs 2006), then at least an approach to making which is within the realm of the human rather than an alienated world of machine produced smoothness and artificial perfection.

In such a conception these early Droog pieces can be considered as narrative designs. Not so much in that they tell particular stories, but because they imply a certain relationship to their own history, which will to some extent remain opaque (the story cannot easily be told, it remains implied), but definitely present in the form and nature of the object and the traces of their manufacture. That is to say they reveal their own history as things made by a person, rather than a machine. In this sense they appear to speak more of handicraft, or the craft of the amateur.

Craftsy was therefore an excellent description of Droog’s output at this point, as it was the allusion to a practice, not the actual practice itself, that mattered. Thus in this way Droog designers could humanise their work by suggesting a relationship to craft, at once emphasising their relation to tradition, the descent of their practice, and the aura of the hand-made, with all that comes with this.

Crafted

If the early products of Droog were therefore statements about the possibilities of making outside of both a tradition of craft and the alienation of machine production, a piece such as Boontje’s more recent *Fig Leaf* wardrobe (2008; Figure 2.28) resides squarely in the camp of the highly wrought object which has been made to signify status through the application of esoteric craft skills and high quality materials. As has been noted, the piece was produced for Meta, which is an off-shoot of the British antique dealers Mallett. Launched at the Salone del Mobile in 2008, as part of a

project whereby Meta took on Louise-Anne Comeau and Geoffrey Monge of Atelier Idée (whose clients include Design Miami/Basel and Swarovski) as creative directors and charged them with selecting a group of designers, which included high profile practitioners such as Boontje, Matalai Crasset and Barber Osgaby, to work with ateliers who use traditional craft tools and materials. Giles Hutchinson Smith, the managing director of both Mallet and Meta stated that this was because they wanted to establish a connection ‘between the eighteenth-century and the modern and that link is, of course, the workshop’ (in Lovell 2009: 178). The intention with such a piece, therefore, has been to create an object which is valuable because of the skill of those who have made it and the traditionally sumptuous, and therefore expensive, materials used.



Figure 2.28 Tord Boontje, *Fig Leaf Wardrobe*, detail of enamel leaf showing the Meta mark, 2008

Similarly, Established & Sons, conceived in late 2004 by the former publisher of *Wallpaper** magazine, Alasdhair Willis, and the CEO of the steel parts manufacturing group Caparo, Angad Paul, have made use of traditional materials and a highly crafted aesthetic, along side their more accessible volume production, as a form of marketing loss-leader. In 2007 they presented a non selling exhibition in

which they showed their volume production collection remade as one-offs in Carrara marble and mounted on white plinths. Described by Lovell as ‘an interesting blend of manufacturer, branding agency and gallery’ she notes that Established & Sons put on this exhibition ‘to provoke debate over the whole “Design Art” issue’ by, in the organisation’s terms ‘reappointing functional designs, iconic in their utility, as opulent objects’, yet as Lovell concludes ‘Provoking debate generates discourse, and if everybody is talking about you, you tend to sell more products’ (2009: 177). Such practices would therefore appear to be diametrically opposed to the efforts of early Droog designers, in that the products created by Meta, and Established and Sons in their *Marble* collection, have been created in a highly crafted form aimed at an exclusive market, whilst early Droog (in its initial reception, before it began to take on the aura of ‘classic’ or iconic design) seemed to speak of the cobbled-together or the amateur maker, thus connoting a certain democracy of making and using.

What these objects share, however, is the way in which they are marked out as different from the standardised products of mass-production. In the early Droog assemblages the user is made very aware of the presence of the designer as *monteur*; that is to say, in Baudrillard’s terms we are aware of the aura of a person who has brought these elements together (2005 [1968]: 81). In the high craft of a piece such as Boontje’s wardrobe we are aware of the work of the craftsman whose skill and judgement has been impressed upon the object. In this way the crafty quality of Droog and the craft of the limited edition works mark the things out as singularities. But what are they for? It is arguably in these two approaches to craft that we find the two polarities of the design art dealt with in the coffee table books – the two object languages – that of the one thing used as another (often a reclaimed thing brought out of obsolescence) and the highly crafted pieces.

From Good Design to ‘Design Design’

At the Pavillion of Art and Design held in Berkley Square in London in 2010 (see Figure 2.29), a selling show where a range of galleries and dealers touted their wares, it certainly did seem that a new tendency was noticeable. Two years before, at the Design Art Fair (as it was then styled) the stands felt like those of a trade-fair showing design. In 2010 art and design mingled, often in areas coded as though they were

rooms. What was on offer here was the totally designed world, an integrated selection of art and design choices which could be combined to create the desired lifestyle.



Figure 2.29 Discussing business at the Pavillion of Art and Design, London 2010

If the twentieth century had begun with an intense esoteric debate as to the form designed goods should ideally take, then by the end of the century to some the practices of industrial production appeared to have answered these questions (Foster 2002; Cannell 2009). As Ramakers observed, by the late 1990s the word design had become epithetic and ‘Design design’ had seeped everywhere (1998: 52). That is, the discussion about what constituted design as a way of giving form to the objects we use had essentially been answered by the rise of consumer design: the forming of objects to serve a particular market or economy of desire. The emphasis had shifted

from a debate about how production could be modelled to create good design for all to one concerned with how manufactured goods could be formed to make them desirable and meaningful for consumers. The role of the designer had essentially ceased to be conceptualised, in the minds of the public at any rate, from that of the shaper of the nature of products to that of stylist who rendered what was produced amenable to the market.

Supplements such as the *Guardian Space* magazine (Figure 2.30) and *Elle Deco* told people where to source the latest trends and provided useful illustrations of how their purchases might look when artfully arranged. Through the nineties and into the new century television programmes such as *Changing Rooms* presented consumers with templates that could be adapted in their construction of their particular look.



Figure 2.30 *The Guardian, Space* magazine demonstrates how to gain the right look.

The availability of cheap furniture meant that people had more of a chance than ever before to express themselves through their furnishings. The anthropologist Daniel Miller discusses the way in which such domestic choices can express a range of different social issues, such as class and generational differences (Miller 1987;

2001), and the development of the interior as a site of display and fantasy meant that this tendency became amplified. People had begun to use their homes as a canvas for painting who they really are in a way that their parents would often have thought unimaginable. As the critic and author Rob Walker, points out:

Good design is something you want, its sort of a mark of progress... if you are a person that recognises good design it distinguishes you from all of the naïve and sort of corny bourgeois of the past – the past being everything up to that minute. So you can now buy into that: progress, good design, good taste [that is] made available to you in a very attainable way. (in Hustwit 2009: 00:33)

In this way the concept of design has begun to fulfil a very particular function in the culture of the West. It is a way of intervening in the world, the apparent application and guarantee of discernment. So a knowledge of design has become a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1988) available to consumers. As people started to understand design more as a collection of artefacts (as a noun to describe a certain form of thing), so they also began to see themselves as designers of their own lives. However, what is obscured in such a process are the hegemonic structures in the raw materials available to the consuming public. Just as the development of the home computer allowed everybody to become a graphic designer – but within certain very defined limits and with literally pre-set parameters – so the availability of domestic objects meant that everybody could now become an interior designer. What was not apparent, however, was the extent to which the boundaries of possibility were set. The rise of style and lifestyle publications and TV programmes meant that an agenda was being established. Through choice a certain form of subjectivity was being demanded. This was therefore not control through repression, but control through stimulation (Foucault 1980: 57). As the design curator Claire Catterall noted in her introduction to the catalogue for arguably the first exhibition in the UK to present design as a form of self-expression, *Stealing Beauty: British Design Now* (1999):

Design has entered the language as a common currency – to many Eames is a household name, Mies a byword for good taste. It has become synonymous with style, presenting a slick, shiny gloss on life. If you're not who you would like to be, then simply go out and buy your way into the lifestyle you imagine suits you. Just make sure it looks right (1999: 8)

As she then goes on to note, lifestyle was being presented as a panacea in a situation in which more than class or profession, taste was what seemed to define the individual (ibid).

Increasingly, then, we are sold pre-packaged lifestyles. Foster has expressed his horror at the advent of the totally designed world which he describes as a return of the Art Nouveau tendency described above to create a totally unified interior aesthetic as a form of complete lifestyle. This must be seen in the larger context of the fact that as consumer culture has developed it has become increasingly possible for individuals to shop for a lifestyle by buying the goods necessary to both present themselves to others as a certain sort of person, at the same time as making it possible for them to believe that that is who they are. Indeed the philosopher Anthony Giddens has gone as far as to state that this is now a requirement of consumerism: that it is necessary to identify oneself through the adoption of a lifestyle (Giddens 1991). It can then be argued that a central stimulus to the development of design, both as a body of goods and as a practice, has been this drive towards the acquisition of things predicated upon the need to be the right sort of consumer displaying the correct taste. In the early part of the century in the Parisian arcades Benjamin perceived this ever increasing cacophony of goods to have accreted into what he described as 'phantasmagoria', a blinding spectacle of things to consume which lull the shopping collective into the dream-state of consumerism (2002).

It was in such an atmosphere that the first Droog shop was opened. One problem which Droog faced was that despite the international interest shown in their work at exhibitions such as the Salone del Mobile, they found it hard to begin to really monetise their practices. In an attempt to begin to bring Droog products, amongst others, into production Marcel Wanders created the company Moooi in 2000 in conjunction with the Italian furniture manufacturer B&B Italia SpA. In May of 2002, Droog established their first retail outlet, Droog & Co. in Amsterdam. Up until this time the organisation had operated out of a small office and from the number of visitors who seemed to expect to be able to buy what they had seen in the media, Ramakers and Bakker have argued that they believed that some form of shop was going to be necessary if customers were to be able to buy into the Droog brand (Ramakers & Bakker 2004). It could be observed, however, that the organisers of the Droog project had also noted the rise of outlets selling high-end design at high prices

and wished to capitalise on this. A small outlet was then established in Tokyo in 2008 and a large two-floor show-room opened in New York in 2009.

Yet it seems that Droog are now operating in a very different climate to that of 1993 when they first entered the market. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century design had become a much more dynamic market, thanks to the opening up of the channels of communication and a growing awareness of design, the growth of cheap manufacturing and the expansion of global trade. What really appeared to have changed for Droog, however, was that a trend of which they had originally been pioneers, for expressive and communicative design, had overtaken them. In many ways the turn of the millennium can be characterised as the point at which the world really became digital, when mass internet use made the world radically more available. As is discussed in the next chapter, it is in such circumstances that spectacular design thrives as it can pass through the circuits of culture as representation in a way not dreamed of only a decade before. Droog seemed to be somewhat wrong-footed by this. Such mechanisms definitely favoured the communicative objects they had been championing but it is not clear that they had realised that such a shift in the informational economics of culture meant that the whole ethos of what it means to design and be a designer (or design promoter) had changed.

Critical?

When Droog set out they appeared to be a challenge to the neo-modernist orthodoxies of the early 1990s. One way they did this was by creating communicative objects that had presence and no little aura. This was then in part achieved through the adoption of the tactics of art, such as assemblage and the use of uncanny juxtapositions, but in a design context. Ramakers has argued that

Art is blending with life. Not that this is new thing. But now it is happening on a grand scale and with myriad lines of approach. In addition utopian thinking has ceded to critical commitment within the existing structures. Marketing mechanisms and economic principles get annexed too. (2002: 29)

Yet, to what extent it is possible to be critical within the power structure as is? Indeed, it can be asked whether it is possible to practice design as a form of critique at all. In *Hideaway Furniture*, part of the *Designs For Anxious People in Anxious Times* series

(2004-5), Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, both of whom teach at the Royal College of Art and can probably actually be best described as design theorists (Williams 2009), have, in conjunction with the designer Michael Anastassiades, produced a form of furniture for hiding in (see Figure 2.31 & 2.32). Here the principle is that a place to retreat is constructed from the same material as the floor. Should the owner then feel the need to take refuge they can climb into the casing and be concealed from their tormentors. Such a creation is never going to be commercially produced of course, and they are clear that their designs are not meant to serve industry. Instead these 'proposals' are meant to stimulate debate and ask the viewer to consider their own ideological position with regard to products. In this way they claim they are practicing what they term 'Critical Design' (2001: 58). This is based on their assertion that 'all design is ideological', in that to make something is always 'a statement about the world informed by certain values and beliefs about the nature of reality' (ibid). They therefore argue that design can fall into one of two very broad categories, that of affirmative or critical. Affirmative design, they suggest, is that which 'reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation'. Critical design, the category in which they place themselves, conversely can be said to be an approach that 'asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think' (2001: 58). They suggest that this is a function that design can fulfil as it can examine 'the way poetic moments can be intertwined with the everyday and not separated from it' (ibid). This led from Dunne's earlier suggestion that it is possible to create objects which operate 'between rationality and reality', which can be said to 'function as test pieces that, through their marginalisation, make visible the barriers limiting poetic experience and everyday life' (1999: 56). Through his analysis he asks 'what if the gallery were viewed as a test-site for designs unlikely to enter everyday life?' (1999: 69). More recently Dunne has described this approach as 'design for how things could be or might be' or a form of Social Fiction in the manner of Science Fiction (2008), that it can exist as the imagination of a culture based upon 'what if's'. Yet, as Rancière observed, is it enough for critical practice, whether this be in art or design, to raise awareness or make people think? (2006: 83). As he notes, the central problem is seldom that people have not noticed the problems of the world, it is that they cannot conceive of how to act in such a situation.

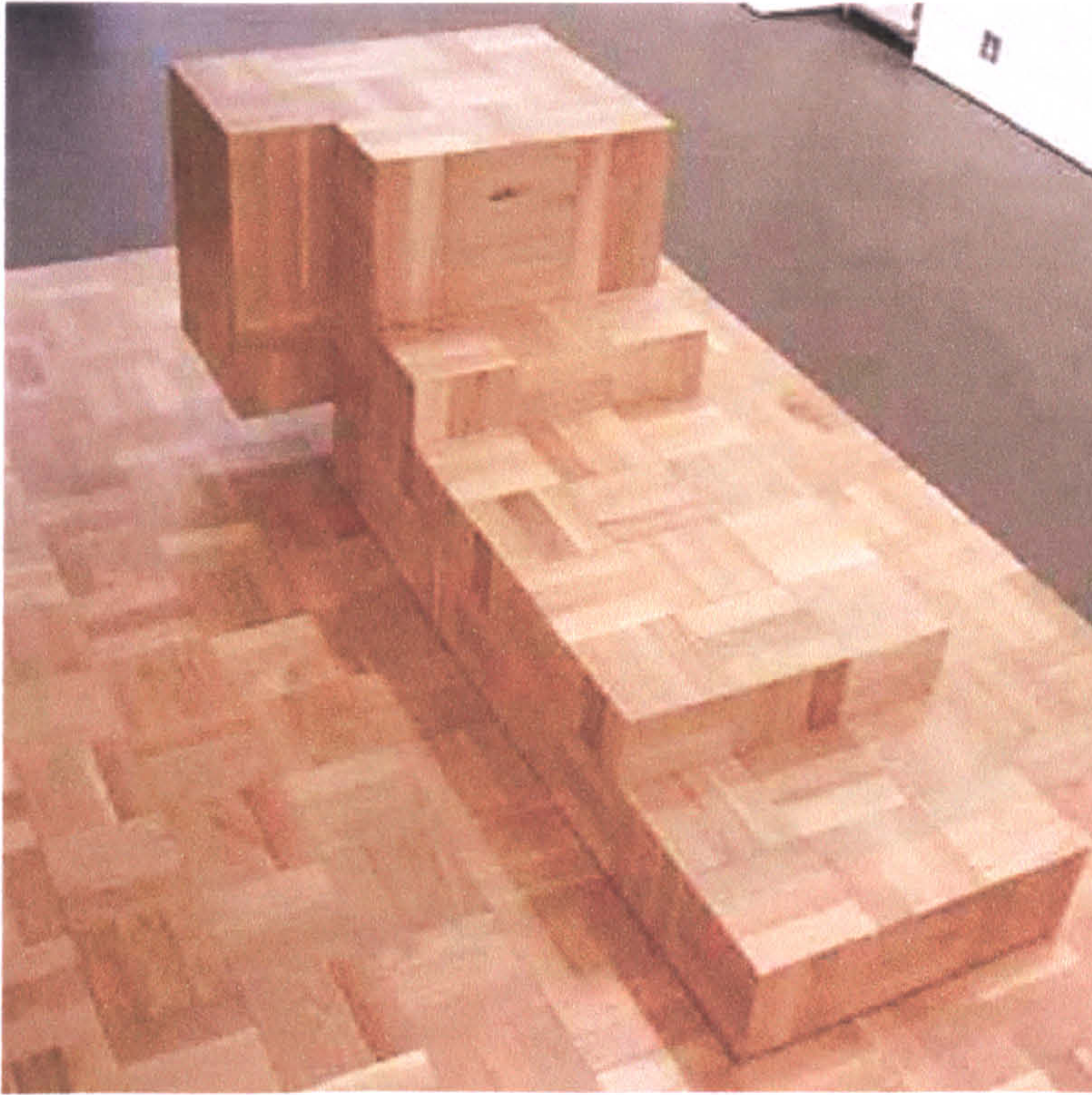


Figure 2.31 Dunne and Raby (with Michael Anastassiades), *Hideaway Furniture Type 2*, laminated English oak and felt, 2004 – 5

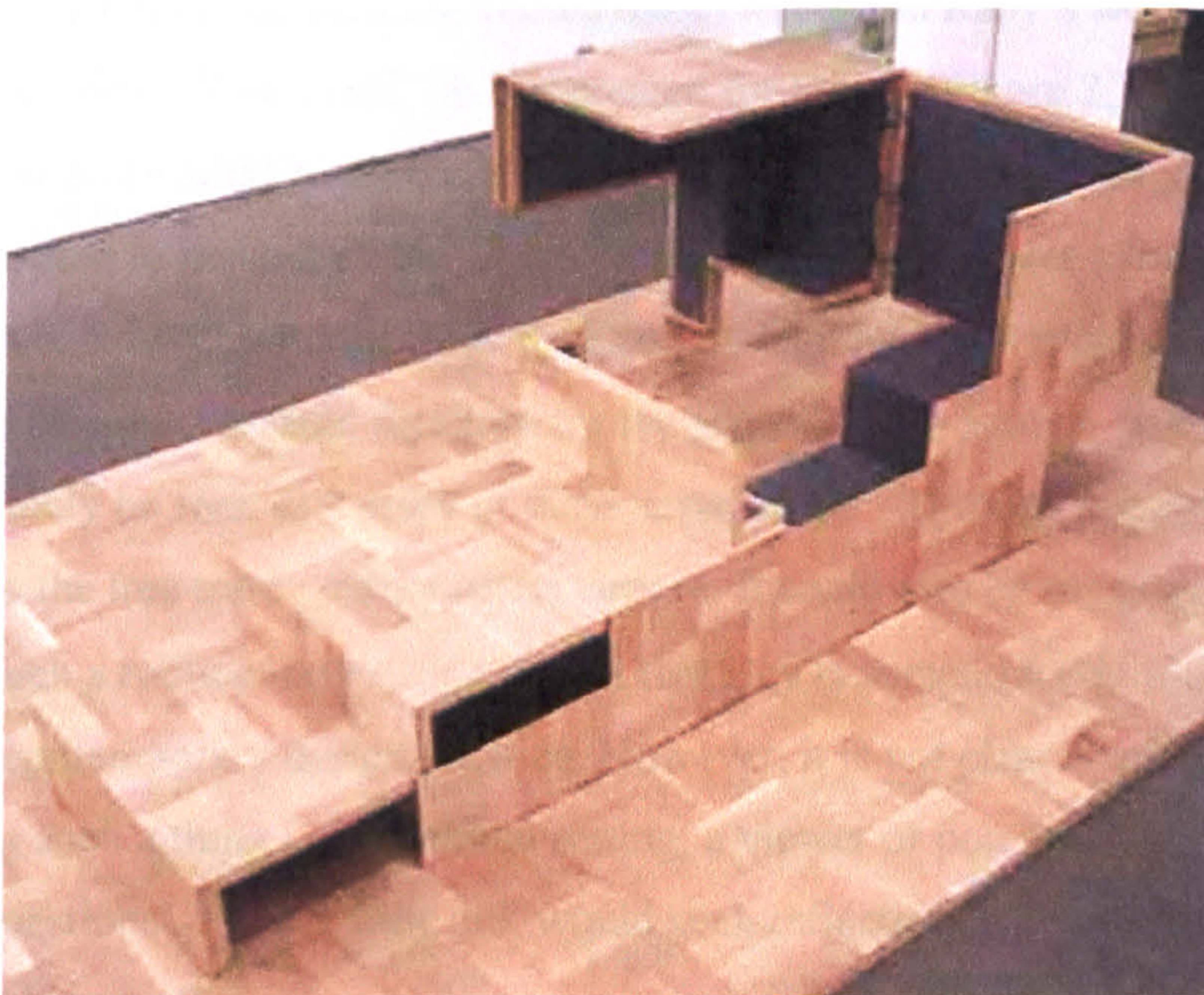


Figure 2.32 Dunne and Raby (with Michael Anastassiades), *Hideaway Furniture Type 2*, laminated English oak and felt, 2004 – 5

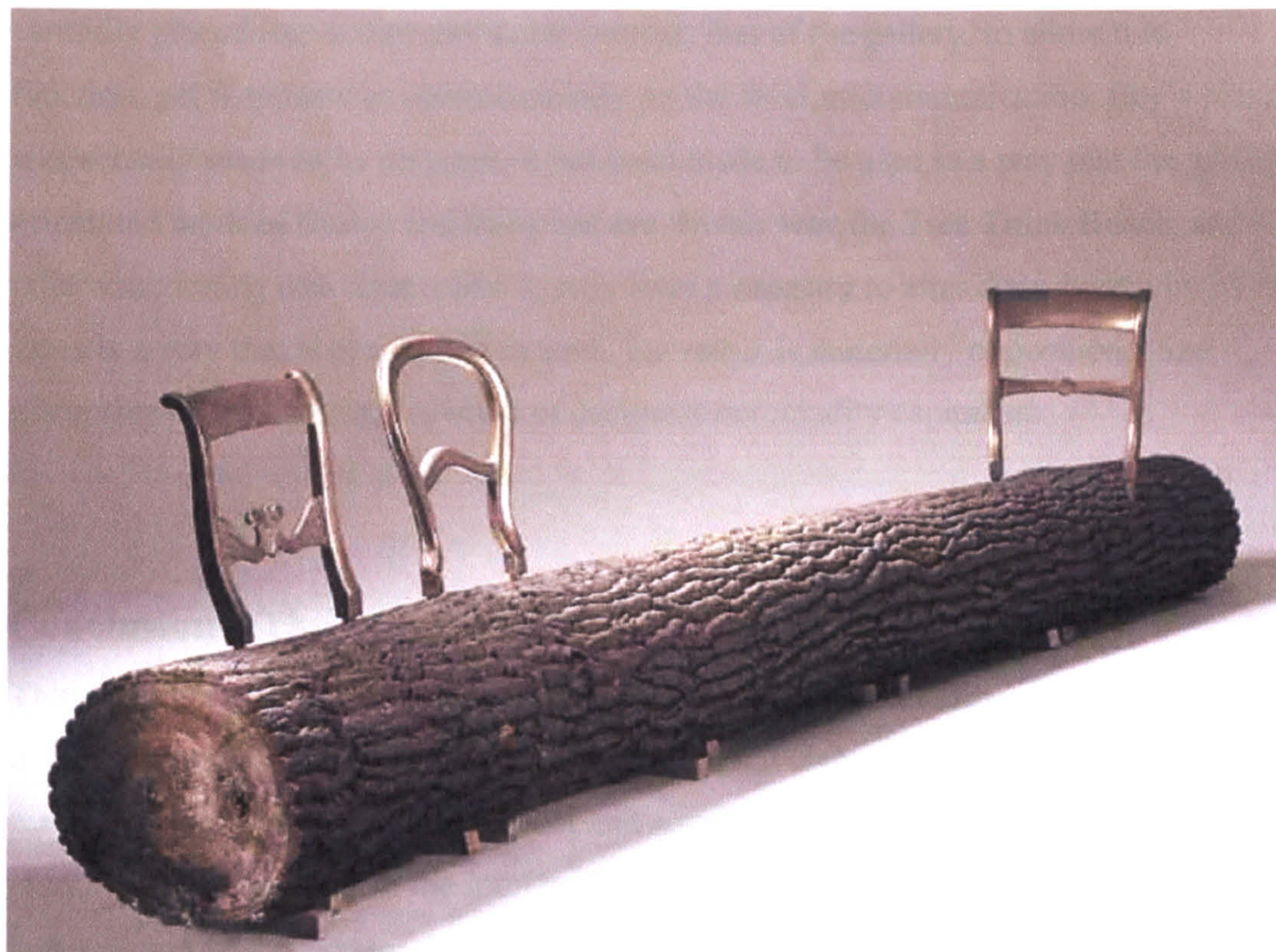


Figure 2.33 Jurgen Bey, *Tree Trunk Bench*, tree trunk and bronze seat-backs, 1999

It is worth for a moment then comparing Dunne and Raby's work with a piece such as Jurgen Bey's *Tree Trunk Bench*, created for Droog (Figure 2.33). As a piece of furniture, it is remarkably simple in its construction, in that it is a large log which has been chocked to make it stable, to which have been added three classical chair backs cast in bronze. Originally made for Droog's Oranienbaum project in 1999, whereby the designers created furniture for the grounds of a German country house, this can certainly be seen as a piece of disjunctive design. Through the addition of the seat-backs to the tree trunk, nature meets culture. It could also be suggested that in presenting such a rudimentary sitting device that Bey is somehow critiquing the excesses of contemporary design practice. However, it is not clear whether, upon encountering such a thing in its original setting, a viewer or potential user would see it as 'asking questions'. Even if they did, would such reflection tell them anything they did not already know?

Yet there is an essential difference between Dunne and Raby's practice and Bey's that may point to the way in which such design may have a potential to affect its users beyond any such consciousness raising. The work of Dunne and Raby is

carefully placed into a very particular context, that of the gallery, to allow it to function, yet it appears to operate entirely on the level of communication. Bey's piece was actually made to be sat upon, it has been made to be used in a way that the gallery orientated work of Dunne and Raby has not. In this way the Tree Trunk Bench, and other functioning use-objects like it, may have a capacity to alter the subjectivity of its users in a way that is not critical as such, but rather is materially oppositional and disruptive of the dominant schema of design in commodity capitalism.

Conclusions: The Descent of Droog

Things do not go away on the internet. If they are deliberately removed or somebody does not pay the hosting fee they will disappear, but if they exist somewhere maintained or they are forgotten about and simply not taken down, things can persist indefinitely. In this way in the information age the past has started to become a material part of the present. It is a little melancholy, then, to see the press from the opening of the New York Droog shop now, as it breezily announces their arrival in the city in 2009 (Sokol 2009), as less than two years after the opening it closed almost overnight in November of 2010. Ramakers claimed that this was because the stock was needed for the opening of the Las Vegas store, thus leaving the New York venue empty (Junte 2010). Yet, given the unannounced closure of the premises and the almost immediate relocation to Las Vegas, Ramakers's explanation does not seem convincing.

How then did Droog go from being a challenge, a 'breath of fresh air' (*Liberation* in Ramakers & Bakker 1998: 92), to being part of a restaurant and casino complex in Las Vegas? It seems clear that The Continental bailed them out. This becomes apparent when it is known that this is not really a retail outlet at all. The Continental is not hosting the selling of Droog products. According to Konings they have actually bought the whole collection (Konings to the author 2010). This is therefore not a shop but an exhibition. The pieces are not commodities on display to be consumed through purchase; they are commodities *as* display, which are meant to circulate through the channels of media and publicity to enhance the reputation of the hotel and casino complex.

Throughout the 1990s Droog were pioneers of an expressive and communicative form of design, the legacy of which can be seen in the design art produced more recently. Approaches such as the use of found elements and disjunctive combinations of materials served to force the aura of simple use-objects to the point where not only were the alienating effects of mass-production mitigated, but they became objects of desire in a new political economy of design predicated on the protocols of consumer culture that demands we all adopt and express a lifestyle.

Far from representing a smooth passage of inevitable evolution, the history of furniture over the past hundred years or so has been characterised by a dialectical tension between the development of mass-culture predicated on mass-production and its concomitant standardisation and homogenisation, and the attempt by designers to periodically assert the auratic qualities of objects as products of human labour and will. Yet in a capitalist culture, as William Morris found in the nineteenth century and Droog have experienced in the last couple of decades, it is difficult to make a living from making high quality design unless one sells it to the rich at a premium.

Ramakers and Bakker may have intended for the name Droog to signify a wry detachment or ironic stance on the part of the work presented, but as has been demonstrated, irony always takes place within a discourse. It *happens* rather than exists as some form of ontological constant. For irony to exist there must be what Hutcheon describes as a 'discursive community', in that both sides must understand the codes for the trope to function. As she suggests, 'the complexity of the potential interaction of the interpreter, ironist and text in making irony happen has to be part of any consideration of irony as the "performative" happening it is' (1994: 123). Therefore the meanings of the work presented change as it passes through time, as it descends through history and the discursive community alters, in this case to the point where the apparent irony is stripped away and its darker qualities become enhanced.

In this way the disjunctive and ambiguous designs presented by Droog can be seen to have been more involved with a Surrealist uncanny, the return of the repressed, the irrational residue of life, than they were any form of dry humour. Craft techniques have been utilised and alluded to, but this has been more as a motif that suggests the hand of the creator than it is evidence that the work is the result of a craft practice. It is 'craftsy' rather than craft, or as de Rijk puts it, it is 'so-called craft' (2010). This has then been used as a signifier which has allowed the work to take its place in an economy of consumer desire; it is a marker which distinguishes it from the

inhuman products of the machine rather than demarcating it as a form of craft production.

Did Droog represent a form of critical design? It seems problematic that Dunne and Raby insist on using the gallery space to present their form of Critical Design, as this would rather seem to tear it from its context. This issue of what happens when design is placed in spaces which have traditionally shown art is examined in detail later on in this thesis (see Chapter 3 & 6), but it is worth noting here that the gallery space is a very particular context and it does seem a little perverse to call something design if all it can do is reside in the gallery. This is not least because it may be very pertinent to ask whether design can ask questions at all, and even if it can, does this really represent a challenge to the neo-liberal consumer capitalist orthodoxy? Certainly it may be able to present a series of 'what ifs?' in the gallery, particularly given the art world's propensity to suggest that what is shown in galleries can 'confront', 'challenge', 'subvert' or 'question', yet outside of work shown in such contexts this is not conventionally a vocabulary used in the world of design. Droog's products were always meant to be actual use-objects and Ramaker's justifications of its output have consistently stressed the relation of the organisation to the market (1998; 2002). It is perhaps for this reason that Droog has been presented as humorous and ironic rather than critical, as such. Yet in the tactics adopted by those who were taken up and promoted by the organisation, in the disjuncture and messy uncanny qualities of the objects, it may be that a form of subversion can be detected which has more to do with the cosmic irony, of the unintended consequences of life, than any programmatic assault upon the ideological material culture of consumerism.

It is within this context that the descent of design art, as objects which force the auratic and play upon the irrational residue of life, must be understood. Yes, the development of the market in such design can be traced (as it is in the next chapter). However, it must be accepted that this has taken place within a broader context of social change that has been characterised by a shifting relationship between subjects and objects as the technologies of reproduction have expanded and fundamentally altered our experience of the world.

Therefore to understand what conditions have allowed this phenomenon to develop it is necessary to understand how the market has been established and to what ends. Then, if it is accepted that these things are actually meant to function, in order to

begin to establish what it would mean to use such things it can be asked, under what circumstances might this possibly take place?

This is Not Design

Madonna reclines on a sleek silver chaise-longue (Figure 3.1). The form undulates beneath her as its biomorphic curves echo the shape of her body. Though it is a static object, it seems to thrust and writhe as the light plays upon its hard yet somehow yielding surface. It appears to be an incredibly futuristic piece of furniture at the same time as it calls to mind the glamour of 1930s air travel. This is Marc Newson's *Lockheed Lounge*, the first version of which was created in 1986. There are fourteen of them in the world: an edition of ten, three artist's proofs and a prototype. It has been on magazine covers and discussed by critics (Sudjic 2008; Lovell 2009; Yentob 2009). It is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 2009 it sold at auction for over £1,000,000, and Madonna has sat on it. You could be forgiven for thinking that it is the most important piece of furniture in the world.

The object upon which Madonna sits began its life in more humble surroundings in a shed more usually used to make surf boards. It was constructed by creating a fibreglass-reinforced polyester resin core, which was then covered with small sections of aluminium sheet that had been hammered into shape with a wooden mallet. Each plate was then blind riveted into place forming a smooth skin. It was made for Newson's first solo show in 1986, at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery, shortly after his graduation from Sydney College of Arts. After the show he gave it to his mother (Supertouchart.com 2009). How then did this thing go from being something made in a shed to become one of the most expensive domestic objects ever made?



Figure 3.1 Madonna in the video for her 1994 single *Rain* sitting on Marc Newson's *Lockheed Lounge* (1986)

In our consumer culture it seems that we have become so used to the idea that some objects sell for far more than their apparent intrinsic worth that it no longer seems strange. Houses, for example, which were once viewed primarily as a place to live, appeared to come free from their moorings and become generators of wealth, and until very recently everybody seemed to believe that this process could only go on and on as the hidden hand of the market drove up their value. Similarly, in the world of furniture, the clear demarcation between simple utilitarian items and opulent status symbols appears to have become blurred as no longer is it materials or craftsmanship that determines what something is worth. Instead something's status as a form of valuable design, as designated by a community of makers, dealers and collectors seems to be dependent more upon a series of opaque codes of taste and their place in the networks of the media, than it does upon any functional or aesthetic qualities.

This then is the context in which what has come to be called design art has developed. Consequently, the first part of this chapter seeks to examine the way in which the emergence of a new market for what Peter Dormer describes as ‘high design’ (1990: 124) has helped to stimulate the creation of certain forms of expressive use-object, in order to determine how the form and communicative content of the work is related to the market in which it operates. The discussion then moves on to consider how the development of such a market then relates to anything we may wish to call everyday life since, if the practices described really are concerned with the making of use-objects rather than simply the creation of conversation pieces for wealthy patrons, it must be necessary to consider what it would mean to use such things and live with them. In this way the intention, therefore, is to determine whether or not this can be regarded as design at all, and if it is to be considered as such, what use it may be.

Who Cares, as Long as it Sells?

Sophie Lovell, the ex-editor of the style magazine, *Wallpaper**, suggests that the real difficulty critics have with the existence of design that is meant to be highly expressive as well as practically functional is that some people are ‘willing to spend very large sums of money on it’ (2009: 111). In a way, she is right. One of the first things that must be addressed when studying the appearance of this phenomenon is that the majority (though certainly not all) of the objects being discussed tend to sell for a lot of money. Why then would anybody be willing to pay so much for an apparently useless use-object?

When discussing how contemporary design has become ‘militantly useless’ Deyan Sudjic (2008: 100) refers to Thorstein Veblen’s treatise *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994 [1899]) to argue that this form of design represents conspicuous consumption, whereby for the leisure class that consume them these are not objects which are primarily made to fulfil prosaic everyday functions. Instead, they are bought and owned in order to show the wealth and disposable income of those who can afford them; that their function is to exist as a needless extravagance or form of ‘peacock tail’ (Sudjic 2008: 100). This is therefore to regard the ownership of such objects as a form of needless extravagance or exhibitionist excess.

Often we buy things to demonstrate that we know that this is what we should consume, in that, as Bourdieu notes, it is through the exercise of taste that ‘one classifies oneself and is classified by others’ (1987: 56). The *Robber Baron* series, created by the Dutch design duo Studio Job, for example, consists of five monumental pieces: a cabinet (Figure 3.2), a mantel clock, a table (Figure), a standing lamp (Figure 3.3), and a jewel safe (Figure 3.4), all cast in bronze, each in a limited edition of five. However, despite being highly crafted pieces of design these could hardly be described as tasteful objects. Indeed, they appear to have been deliberately constructed to be the opposite of good taste. The cabinet is chunky and garish. The lamp is a sky-scraper that is on fire and the jewel safe depicts a mocking clown face topped with a vase, which would be difficult to live with in any circumstances.

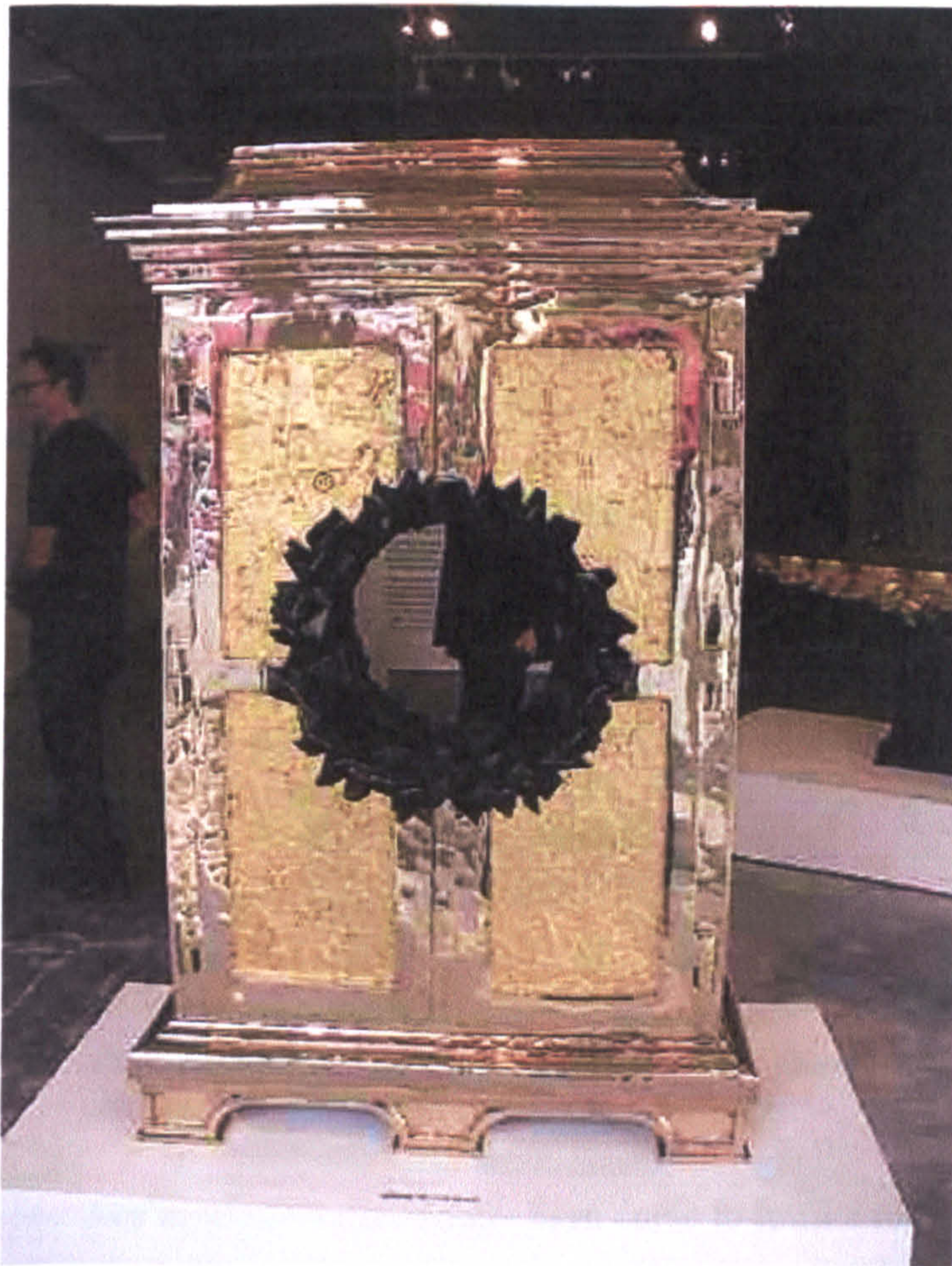


Figure 3.2 Studio Job, *Robber Baron* cabinet, cast bronze, patinated and gilded, 2006

They have been deliberately designed to be so opulent and expensive that only those as wealthy as the oligarchs ostensibly being critiqued (or marketed to, depending upon the perspective adopted) could afford to buy the work. This has therefore neatly ensured not only the economic status of the furniture, since any potential purchaser would need to be very wealthy to own such things, but also their cultural position as something worth looking at, because, as Sudjic notes, ‘money demands attention’ (2008: 177). This then confers on the owner a certain status as an individual so rich that they can afford to buy something essentially useless; just as they demonstrate their taste by knowing why such a thing is desirable.



Figure 3.3 Studio Job, *Robber Baron Jewel safe*, cast bronze, patinated and gilded, 2006

This is one way in which these objects have come to fulfil a role previously reserved for art, that of a form of conspicuous display and demonstration of discernment by the wealthy. As Rolf Fehlbaum, CEO of Vitra, observes, one-off and limited edition furniture has existed for some time. What has changed is the way in which a market for it has been established, as he states ‘[t]he market developed when

design in general became collectable for the people who are buying art. That is a phenomenon of the last ten years' (in Lovell 2009: 171). This is therefore to identify a shift in the status of design, in that the evidence seems to suggest that certain forms of everyday use-objects are coming to be consumed in the rarefied manner in which high-status art objects have been.

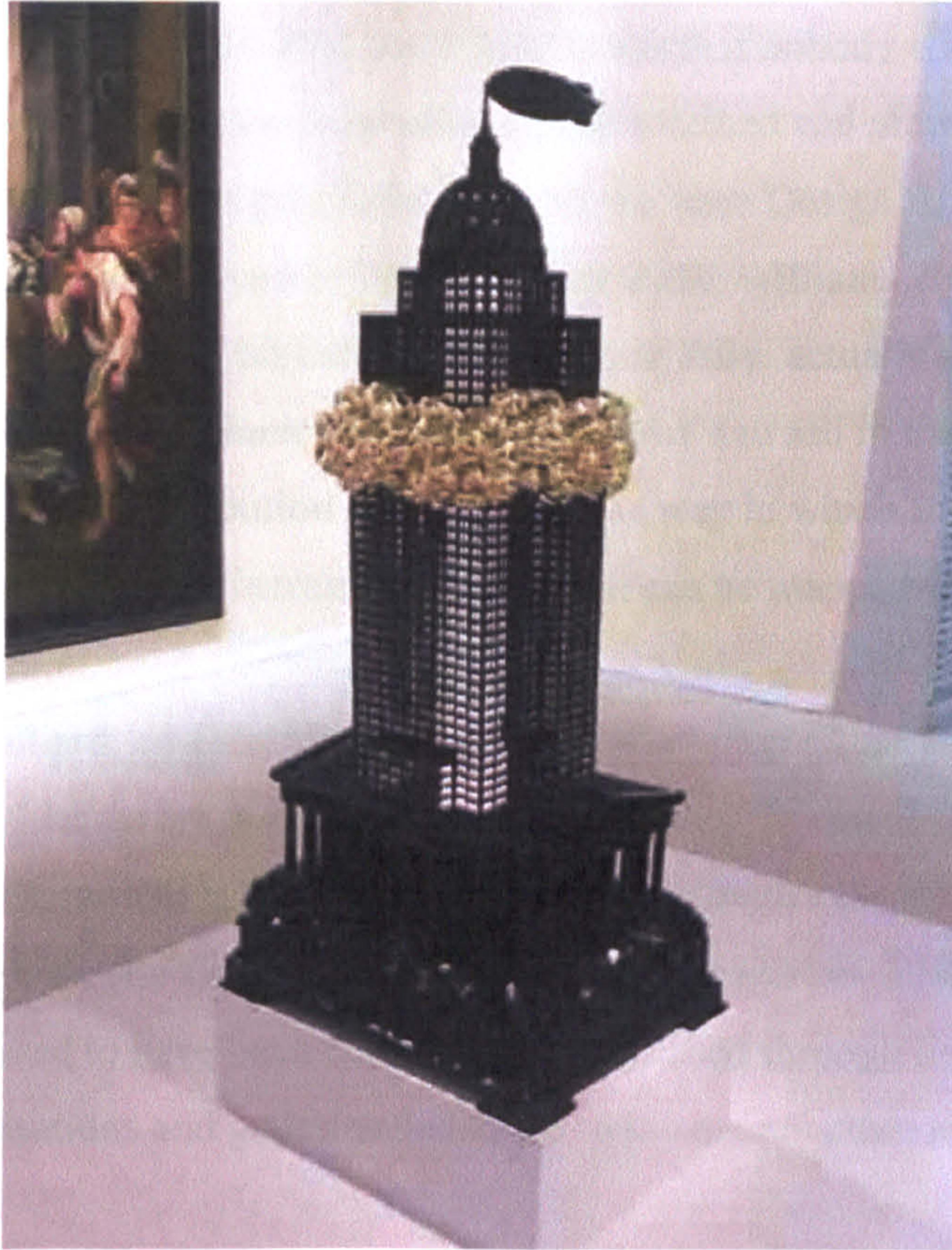


Figure 3.4 Studio Job, *Robber Baron* lamp, cast bronze, patinated and gilded, 2009

When considering whether this work can be regarded as important, as art might be said to be, whether it is able to 'push boundaries' or 'express the zeitgeist', Lovell's answer is straightforward: 'Who cares, as long as it sells?' (Lovell 2009: 111). This is because she inhabits a certain economy of design. This is a world where design is something created and traded. The end user is a given: they are those who buy it. That is the final cause or purpose of the work in her world. The content of the pieces, what they might mean is not really the point, the purpose of the work is to sell. Such economies then depend upon belief. How much is something worth? What

people believe it is. How is this then established? Well, it can be argued that the value of an object is determined through the action of exchange in the market-place.

Making the Market

Those who control the market may not actually be able to establish particular values *per se*, they cannot just decide what something is worth if nobody will pay this, but they do have a lot of power over how value can be ascribed and afforded. As was noted in the introduction, it is popularly held that the term Design Art was coined by the auctioneer, Alexander Payne in 2001 (Bennett 2008; Williams 2009). Despite the fact that it is quite likely that his employer, Simon de Pury, actually suggested the title (he has also tried to create 'Game Art' and other '- Art's to sell in the auction house; Neum 2010 00:24), this attribution does point to the way in which the development of this type of furniture and the increased interest in it can be mapped in relation to its financial exploitation.

Loic Le Galliard, co-founder of *Carpenters Workshop Gallery* in London, has commented that, 'design art is a market that doesn't exist' in that 'market is a very big word' and the present field is 'tiny, tiny, tiny', as he estimates there are less than 400 collectors world-wide (Le Galliard 2009). However, this market, small though it is, can be demonstrated to have been deliberately established through the creation of a number of organisations and galleries dedicated to the manufacture and sale of such artefacts.

In 1995 Murray Moss opened the Moss Gallery in New York's SoHo, selling work that he claims explores the 'ever-evolving rich dialogue between Industrial Design and Studio Art' (Moss 2010). In 1999 the Kreo Gallery in Paris was established by Didier Krzentowski. He set out to be what Lovell terms a 'producer-gallerist' or patron (Lovell 2009: 167), gathering together what he styles as a 'family' of designers such as Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec, Naoto Fukasawa, Hella Jongerious and Jasper Morrison. As was discussed in the last chapter, Droog established a retail space in Amsterdam in 2002 in an attempt to capitalise on this market and then went on to expand more internationally later in the decade.

Similarly, auction houses such as Sotheby's and Philips de Pury have also had a significant role in developing this market in the early 2000s. In this respect, Payne has

modestly claimed to be essentially ‘curating the market’ (2009). Though it is unlikely that anybody could actually control a market to the degree necessary to make this meaningful, it is likely that, as a key employee of the auction house, he has had a significant influence on the emergence of the market in this type of object, even if he may not have the level of control that he might imagine.

Yet, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the formation of the market has been entirely producer led, though this has been a significant element. It is also that people have come to regard design in a new way. Richard Wright of Wright auction house in Chicago argues that ‘the collectors for design are changing. The influx of art collectors actively buying is a shift, both in their willingness to spend but also in what that signifies: design as the expression of the collector, not just quiet furniture that recedes into the room’ (in Lovell 2009: 225). Indeed, as Lovell notes ‘It is now far more fashionable to add polish to the personal identity with a house (or houses) furnished in a collection of contemporary one-offs and limited edition pieces to match the art and the architecture’ (2009: 226). This is therefore to regard the work as having entered an economy of subjectivity and the expression of the self as a form of lifestyle (Giddens 1991: Slater 1997). So the rich are doing just what we do. They are dressing the set of their lives with things that express who they are. They’ve just got more money than we have, so they can afford more exclusive stuff.

Limited Edition

In the process by which objects such as these have come to be seen as valuable, one classical economic mechanism brought into play by those who produce and disseminate such artefacts has been the restriction of supply. The anthropologist, Igor Kopytoff, suggests that ‘we take it more or less for granted that things – physical objects and rights to them – represent the natural universe of commodities’ whilst at the opposite end of the spectrum ‘we place people, who represent the natural universe of individuation and singularization’ (Kopytoff 1986: 64). As was established in Chapter 1, this is not least because the commodity is understood to be essentially formed by a concept of equivalence: at its purest all commodities are absolutely interchangeable and equivalent, in that they can be exchanged for money.

At the opposite pole of our cultural schema any given thing can be held to be unique; that this actual singular thing before us is the only representative of its particular passage through time and space to this moment. The exemplar of this, its quintessence, is then to be found in the individual person who is taken to be a unique product of their particular circumstances, biography and consciousness. These can therefore be said to represent two polar opposites: at the one end a world where everything is essentially the same and interchangeable; at the other a way of being in which each thing is its own singular entity (Kopytoff 1986: 69).

As he then goes on to note, neither of these absolutes are fully realisable. No social or economic situation could completely represent either end of the spectrum, since there can be no realistic possibility of everything being absolutely equivalent to everything else within one unitary sphere of exchange, just as there is no system in which everything is so singular as to entirely absent even the merest suggestion of exchange. They can, however, be posited as 'the two extremes between which every real economy occupies its own particular place' (Kopytoff 1986: 70). It is in such circumstances that the market for limited edition furniture has developed; the pieces being sold having been deliberately engineered to appear as products which are in some way more singular than their mass-produced counter-parts. One way in which this has been achieved is through restricting the physical supply. As Veblen argued, within this mode of conspicuous consumption, whereby commodities are consumed to display the wealth of those who own and use them, the presumed scarcity of particular consumables is one way in which value is ensured in our culture (Veblen 1994 [1899]). Thus, if in an abstract sense all things for sale are commodities and therefore common, one way in which this commonness can be mitigated is by restricting the practical availability of the object. The fact that the *Lockheed Lounge* or Studio Job's *Robber Baron* series have been limited in their editions has the de-facto effect of raising their value: this is one way that such things can become more singular, or rather move towards the pole of singularity. If the product were to go into mass production its level of singularity would diminish, its scarcity value would decrease and therefore so would its monetary exchange value as a commodity.

Therefore one way in which the object can achieve a certain singularity is by the limiting of supply. It should be noted that as a commodity it actually still partakes of ultimate equivalence as exchange value, yet the restricting of supply gives the impression of distinction through an increased relation to the singular. This can

happen at a series of different degree of intensity. If the prestigious manufacturer Vitra, for example, were to produce an open edition that was still hand-crafted and very expensive this would have a much less devastating effect upon the object's singularity, and therefore its perceived value, than if Ikea were to stock a mass market version at an affordable price. For example in 2005, the Dutch designer, Hella Jongerius, was invited by the retailer Ikea to create large-run productions of her ceramics, the result being the *Jonsberg* vases (Figure 3.5) which retailed in store for €34.95, thus making them accessible purchases for most people. Therefore to own a *Jonsberg* vase is to have bought into the cachet of owning a Jongerius, it marks the owner out as a certain sort of person who knows something about design. Yet its low price and mass availability means that such an object loses its qualities of singularity.



Figure 3.5 Hella Jongerius, *Jonsberg* vase, ceramic, 2005

If everybody can have one, it is no longer exclusive. By limiting a piece to a specified edition the value of the work is ensured to a set degree by the scarcity value programmed into the physical nature of the object and its actual existence in the world. Just as the diamond dealers DeBeers are careful to restrict the flow of precious stones onto the market in the knowledge that a glut would drive the price down, so the

designer and the dealers have insured against such a situation by declaring that only a restricted number shall be made.

Gallery Design

It is not only through physical scarcity and monetary price that a certain singularity can be achieved, as it is not exclusively through buying or owning objects that we encounter them. It is also through what may be termed cultural exchange that value is established and regulated. Leonardo DaVinci's *Mona Lisa* say, or Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, may be some of the most valuable works of art in the world, but it is still possible to experience them in the original without having to buy them. If there were such a precondition their almost 'priceless' nature (or high degree of singularity) would limit their availability to almost nil. Instead they are made conditionally available to a wider public through a very restricted form of access. They are held in a very particular location, that of the prestigious gallery or museum where access is strictly controlled: visitor numbers are limited and opening times regulated. This is then an area which has been colonised in the constitution of the category of design art as their value as culturally important items has been established.

These are things for which the claim is made that they are, to one degree or another, functional objects, a table, a chair, a bookcase and so on, but that are produced as either unique pieces or limited editions; that are shown in gallery settings and sold at auction in much the same manner as art traditionally has been. In this regard, as Sudjic suggests, 'what is new... is the huge increase in the size of what might be called gallery design' (2008: 177). This should not be mistaken for the phenomenon whereby regular design objects get elevated to the status of classics, because they have become so iconic as to allow them to enter the gallery, rather this is to do with a category of object the primary purpose of which is to be shown in such a space.

So, as well as appearing in gallery-style retail spaces the type of design under discussion here has been shown in gallery and museum settings, and many of the more iconic pieces, such as Newson's *Lockheed Lounge*, are in the permanent collections of some of the most prestigious museums in the world. These objects are not simply being treated as expensive things, therefore, they are also clearly being

treated as meaningful in a wider sense. They are being presented as culturally valuable, the determination of which then takes place through cultural exchange in the form of exhibition and reception in a particular context.

In this regard it is interesting to note that the furniture of the ruling elite has been shown in galleries and museums before, but not generally as soon as it has been made. Traditionally furniture and domestic products have not been deemed worthy of being exhibited as culturally important artefacts unless, that is, they had reached a certain age and therefore guaranteed their social significance, their economic value or their status as a classic of their type. In recent years this has changed. Design, as a category of objects which have ostensibly been created to created to fulfil functional requirements, such as a chair, a bookcase and the like, has increasingly come to be seen as a form of cultural production that is worthy of being exhibited, analysed and discussed in a manner which was previously reserved for art.

This is certainly true of the manner in which Newson's creation has been made available to the world, for example. Though it was nominally created as a functional object, a chaise-longue or day-bed, the very fact that there are not many examples in the world combined with its astronomical price-tag mean that few people will have had chance to sit on such a piece, still less own it. It can, however, be experienced as an object and an original, but only in very particular circumstances. As has been mentioned, it is in the permanent collection of MOMA, and it can also be seen in the Design Museum in London, the Weil am Rhein museum in Germany, The Powerhouse in Sydney and The Pompidou in Paris, amongst others. What is important, however, is that it cannot be seen in your living room, and you cannot sit on it. That is a privilege afforded only to the likes of Madonna. As Bourdieu notes, this therefore represents a particular 'orchestration' of the relationship between the fields of production and consumption in the social construction of taste, whereby the objects come to attain a certain cultural capital (1987: 230). In this way, therefore, these objects' position in a cultural economy of design can be seen.

Furniture has always been produced in series. This was as true of pre-modern forms of production and use, in the way that an archetype of a useful thing will be constantly reproduced because it always needs to be present, as it is of post-Fordist societies, whereby we literally live with technologically produced multiples much of the time. In art it has long been common practice to produce several casts of a bronze from the same mould. Etching, lithography and screen printing have also given

opportunity to the artist to indulge to one extent or another in a form of mass-production. Since Warhol the extent to which art can be produced in a factory has been amply demonstrated, confronted and deconstructed. Yet at the heart of the artistic discourse seems to be an anxiety as to the multiple's relationship to authenticity. This is then now a feature of the discourse of design, but such a conundrum has developed in historically specific circumstances different to those in which art had to confront this issue.

Virtually Unique

Though Krzentowski of the Kreo Gallery maintains that the pieces he showed were not created as limited editions for marketing reasons, Lovell notes that such retailers are 'well aware of how much more desirable an object becomes when it is almost unique' (Lovell 2009: 167). 'Almost unique' is, of course, technically an oxymoron. Something is either unique or it is not. What becomes very interesting, however, is when we think of something as virtually unique. This is because the expansion of reproductive technologies means that the object can exist as both absolutely singular (in that this is a 'Newson' it is not anybody else's, only he does it) yet at the same time it can be almost endlessly available as a series of multiplicities.

If there was only one *Lockheed Lounge* it could only be in one museum, or worse, one private collection. By creating an edition of ten, Newson has made the object multiple. On a material level this means it can be in more than one place at a time. It is still the same thing because with design, much more than for art, the product is understood to be the original Newson (or Starck or whichever designer it may be), even if it has been produced in series. The fact that it is in a limited edition helps to guarantee exclusivity, but the cultural understanding of design and the way in which authorship is ascribed means that we are comfortable with the idea that there may be multiple editions of a single design. So it can both be on display in MOMA, for sale at Philips de Pury and in a private collection, all at the same time. Not only can the event which is the *Lockheed* happen simultaneously in a (limited) number of places, but also what is in the museum and is thus deemed culturally important can be acquired, owned and used by a very small and exclusive group of people. And if it is culturally important, then so are they. By owning the object that exists in the museum

they therefore by association accrete its cultural capital. In this way the artefact's place in the cultural economy of design helps to determine its position in the economy of selfhood and subjectivity in relation to the commodities that designed goods represent.

Crucially with its relation to virtuality, that the thing that is the *Lockheed* can be in more than one place at a time then also means that it can move much more in the media; it can flow more easily through the channels of culture. Every time it is sold it is in the news. Each museum that shows it can use it in its publicity. The more of them there are, within the parameters of a certain prescribed exclusivity, the more they can be talked about. The object's multiple nature means it can exist as a reproducible series of events. We live in an age of hyper-mediation, whereby much of what we experience as real – the news, the things which are there to be consumed, even friends through social networking sites – actually come to us in the form of representation. Through such circulations, what indeed can be termed symbolic exchange, such objects then gather more weight, meaning and value. So, in our supremely materialist culture the significance of the things we consume has come to be determined not simply by their material qualities or physical use-value, but through their circulation as signs in the media. In this way their value is determined by the action of symbolic exchange. This is particularly pertinent when discussing the development of design art, as it exists as a phenomenon as much on the level of the image, through representation in magazines, websites and books as it does as a collection of material artefacts.

In the 1990s Baudrillard asserted that reality itself founders in the hyperreal of simulation, suggesting that we now live with signs with no referent in the real world, that we essentially exist within the circuits of mediation (1996). What then looked like hyperbole, in the age of the internet appears to be a conservative reading of the situation. In the endless technological reproduction of objects as signs, of things as virtualities, it is clear that their symbolic value, as established and maintained through representation, is as important, and indeed flows into and helps to determine, their existence as material things. In this respect it may be useful to compare Madonna to the piece of furniture upon which she sits in the initial example. Madonna is of course only one person. She is a real individual who you could go to see perform live or even shake hands with in the right circumstances. However, through the mass production and distribution of her music it is possible to experience Madonna in an almost

infinite range of situations. When the reproduction of her image and the other ways in which she colonises the media are then factored into the equation it starts to become apparent the extent to which the value which accretes to Madonna is dependent upon not only her material presence in the world but also her virtual existence in the media. In this way it can be argued that Madonna is not so much an individual but a brand, a collection of relationships and interactions which circulate around a particular product.

In just the same way, Newson can be said to have established himself as a brand, with his specific objects being actualisations of this entity. When an individual consumes the *Lockheed Lounge*, either by actually buying it (should they be rich enough) or simply by viewing it (which is to consume its sign-value) it is not just the object or its image that is consumed. Instead a certain relationship to Newson as a famous designer is established, for as Lash and Lury observe, the brand is constituted as set of relations. In this sense, brands can be regarded as ‘abstract objects’, in that they ‘operate as if they were interfaces or surfaces of communication’ (Lash & Lury 2007: 37), and this is only possible because of the structure of distribution established in their mode of production, which in this case is constituted by their existence as limited edition objects which circulate widely as multiples in the media. They are objects of high monetary value, because they are limited in their edition and sold through exclusive outlets, with a high symbolic value, not least because they are expensive, but also because they appear in the right places, both as actual objects and in representation. This then makes such artefacts available for induction into the economy of selfhood.

It is not necessary to physically own something to feel a certain ownership over it. Ramakers has argued, ‘The mediatizing of our society means that ‘within everyone’s reach is no longer the same as ‘affordable for everyone’. New products, whether expensive or cheap, are disseminated forthwith by the media’ she then goes on to ask ‘Why should actually have to own everything we find beautiful or interesting? Sometimes it can be enough to just to look at it or be inspired by it’ (2002: 21). This however, is conceptualise ‘within everyone’s reach’ in a very particular manner, in that the individual subject can only interact with the object within certain economies: in this way use is then determined in a very specific form that equates representation with the economy of day-to-day material experience.

Like live music, products such as the high design being discussed here are sold essentially as events, original multiples. Each gig in a U2 or Rolling Stones tour feels like a one-off event for the audience and may be a once in a life-time experience for the individual, but for the band and the road-crew it is another night creating the same performance; it is part of a process whereby a product is manufactured continually. This does not make any iteration less authentic, the audience has still seen U2 or The Stones. Each night is an original multiple, with the audience experiencing it as authentic because they have had direct connection with the band in time and space. And, of course, with entities such as super-groups, the band is a brand. Consequently, interaction with the band as brand will come through multiple platforms. If a brand is characterised as an agglomeration of relationships then the possible ways in which an individual can interact with the brand are only limited by the communication opportunities available. If the gig is the actualisation of the rock-band, then the object is the actualisation of a brand such as Newson. As shall be demonstrated in the next chapter, this was an approach deliberately pioneered in the realm of design by Ramakers and Droog and it can be argued that this has then played a significant role in the way in which design has come to be regarded in contemporary culture.

An object may only exist as a one-off or as part of a very limited edition, but the proliferation of the channels of communication and the availability of information made possible by the development of the internet and communicative technologies, means that though you may not be able to own an object by Newson, you can to some degree buy into it through experiencing it virtually. As Benjamin observes 'technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach of the original itself'. He goes on to note that technological reproduction, above all 'enables the original to meet the beholder half way... The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room' (Benjamin 1979: 222). Similarly, the unique object, the material singularity, can become endlessly multiple in its virtual form and flow out into the world. We can meet it half-way as it comes to us through the screen – which is now not even shackled to the domestic interior as we can take our interiority around with us.

This then has an effect on the material original. As Benjamin says, 'By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder...in his own particular situation, it

reactivates the object reproduced' (Benjamin 1979: 223). In such a conception the original or material version of the object becomes another turn in the multiplicity of copies. The power of the mediated versions of the thing is derived from the value of the material original and its scarcity – however, this value is then dependent upon the multiplicity of copies which circulate in the broader mediascape. As Baudrillard notes

The serial nature of the most mundane of everyday objects, as of the most transcendent of rarities, is what nourishes the relationship of ownership and the possibility of passionate play: without seriality no such play would be conceivable, hence no possession - and hence, too, properly speaking, no object. (2005: 100)

It is therefore in this way that objects such as Newson's chaise, or any of the other pieces under discussion here, are established in their value as part of a relationship between their singularity and their seriality as they circulate in the flows of culture.

Everyday Things

Jurgen Bey's *Do Add* chair (Figure 3.6), made as part of Droog's *Do Create* series (2000), is an appropriated stacking chair which has had one leg shortened. This means that if the chair is to be used, it is necessary to place something under it such as a stack of books or magazines. At first sight it appears absurd. Why would anybody want a chair that has been altered in such a way that it does not function properly?

The *Do* project was initiated by the Amsterdam publicity company KesselsKramer in 1996. Intended as an open-ended experiment in the manipulation of the power of branding, an essentially 'empty' identity was created, *Do*, which existed as a collection of values and broad mission-statements rather than as an actual product range. The originators then anticipated that products or services could be developed that would express and manifest this. To such ends Droog collaborated with the agency in developing the *Do Create* collection in 2000. The results were then shown at the Milan Salone del Mobile accompanied by large images, created by the photographer Bianca Pilet, which served to demonstrate the objects being used. Though an exhibition of the work, *Do Create on Location*, then toured internationally, it is important to note that the objects created, through being presented as part of a brand and represented as being in use in the accompanying photographs, the underlying proposition of the objects' mediation is that these things were to be

understood as existing in economy of design for use, rather than functioning entirely as representation.



Figure 3.6 Jurgen Bey *Do Add* chair, modified found chair, 2000

This approach of presenting prototypes which are shown in exhibitions and disseminated in the media, only some of which then go on to be commercially produced, is typical of Droog’s *modus operandi*. Since its first show, Droog has been as much a gallery of possibilities and a virtual shop window as it has been an actual facilitator of the commercial production of designed goods. Yet Droog is a business which sells and markets design, and the artefacts created for *Do* were intended to be products which could be bought and actually used. Yes, as a cultural object Bey’s chair was mediated in its inception and it did not actually go on to be commercially produced as other objects in the range did. Yet the manner of its presentation means that it can be considered as a functional object, albeit one which exists on a material level only as a prototype.

Therefore if we are to take Bey’s ludicrous design seriously as an object of use it must then be asked in what way the designer has intervened to alter its functionality and what effect this has had upon the way in which it might be used. In order to do this is it is necessary to conceptualise the way in which the *Do Add* chair exists as a

material relationship between Bey as the designer, and the end user, as the actor who actualises the potential use inscribed into the physicality of the object.

One consequence of Bey’s intervention into the chair, the shortening of the leg, has been to interact with the tendency discussed by Arvatov, outlined in Chapter 1, for things in consumerist material culture to appear seemingly finished or complete (1996 [1925]). He has done this, in Akrich’s terms, by altering the way in which the subject and the object can interact through changing the chair’s physical script (1992). Yet to what ends has this been done? The suggestion here is that Bey is not attempting to make the user conscious of the nature of the object and then reflect upon it as one might with a work of art such as Duchamp’s snow shovel, or as a consciousness raising piece of Critical Design as Dunne and Raby might (see Chapter 2), rather he has changed the way that the thing can be used, he has therefore altered the nature of this use and the place it can take in a wider socio-technical script of usefulness.



Figure 3.7 Weiki Somers *Bath Boat* 2006

The objects we live with are much more than simple utilitarian devices. We seek rational solutions to our needs, but the domestic objects we use are about much more than this. Somers’s *Bath Boat* (2006; Figure 3.7), for example, is actually a bath, a

functional device for washing. It is however not simply an anonymous tool, it also has romantic and playful associations with floating and sailing that challenge any dictum that form must only follow basic utilitarian function, indeed it seems to suggest that fantasy is a function of the furnishings with which we live. By claiming to be, and not just represent, the functional elements of a house things such as this illustrate the way in which it is possible to materially alter the conditions of domesticity by providing an alternative version of the everyday, one in which objects may be much more than simply instruments which should recede as they allow us to lead a productive life.

As the design historian and theorist Louise Schouwenburg suggests, ‘What makes conceptual use-objects so interesting is the tension between a certain disappearing into over familiar and reliable functionality while at the same time they make themselves subtly known by telling something about themselves’ (2006: 42). In late capitalism the domestic becomes a gallery, just as the gallery has begun to draw upon the domestic and the everyday. However, this does not mean that the two have somehow merged or that there are no distinctions any more. A chair and a table may be shown in a gallery – but you couldn’t go and live in it; the rituals of daily life may be played out in the gallery space, but only under certain circumstances.

Performative Objects?

As was discussed in Chapter 1, it can be argued that artefacts such as Bey’s *Do Add* chair constitute a form of performative object. The designer and commentator Kristine Niedderer has suggested that such things can act to raise consciousness, that in the baffling of straightforward utilitarian function it is possible to shock the user into a new form of consciousness, that such interventions can cause us to think about our daily interactions with such things (2007). This would then be to understand performativity as a referring to the way in which the artefact could be said to act in an almost theatrical sense, which can then be decoded by the user. However, as has been noted in the last chapter, even if this is possible it is not clear that it would actually be effective in changing behaviour. Performativity then can be conceptualised in a different manner, as was outlined in the first chapter, one which allows us to see the way in which an object such as Bey’s chair can be said to be functioning in its relation to its place in the business of everyday life.

As has been noted, objects are not inert matter waiting for human agents to bring them into use. Things act, and they do this through the performative enunciation of their scripts. Through their material qualities, objects hail us. The practical affordances of the chair, its physical script, are a speech act, an enunciation which says 'sit'. In recognising themselves as the one addressed the user takes on a certain identity, not just as the one who sits, but as the one who sits in this particular chair at this point in history, thus serving to constitute what Patricia Pringle describes as "what is happening" as a result of the complex entanglement of *these things in this place with these people at this moment in time* (her emphasis) (Pringle 2010: 191). In this way, in an ideological sense, the performativity of objects can be seen to be the action of material social interpellation. As Butler observes, in Althusser's famous scene of interpellation 'The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence' (1997: 25). This means that through their performativity the things with which we live, far from simply reflecting some pre-existent selfhood, through a process of interpellation and incitement to discourse actually function to bring a certain form of subjectivity into being. Therefore performative objects are not a special category of thing which can shock us into reflection, rather an understanding of the performativity of furniture and the domestic products we live with begins to demonstrate their place in the ideological apparatus of everyday life (Taylor 2010a).

Performativity is a quality of all objects: it is not a specialised feature of some that have specifically been designed to have an effect; it is a quality of all things as they function. It is concerned with the behaviour of objects, the totality of their actions and their power to animate subjects. Far from being a specialised facet of a particular type of speech, performative utterances happen in ordinary circumstances, in the everyday. This is because performativity is at its most effective as an iterative form, one that emerges from the repeated processes of living with things as they enunciate their scripts in everyday life. As Edith Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, Derrida can be said to be saying that 'the only really interesting part of it is how all language is performative', whilst observing that Judith Butler adds: 'Not only that, but its most performative when its performativity is least explicit – indeed arguably, most of all when it isn't even embodied in actual words' (2003: 5). To this can then be added the observation that it is perhaps at its most effective when it is embodied in the material things that we use every day.

It is not necessary to alter a chair to turn it into a performative object. The simple fact of its existence means that it is affecting the user and acting to constitute their identity, no matter what form it takes. Performative function, therefore, can be understood as the action of the object's practical and symbolic latent affordances in the passage of its functioning. If we take it as a serious piece of design rather than simply a representation or visual joke, it can be seen that in the *Do Add* chair, Bey is intervening in this process by altering the object's script, not to cause the user to reflect and decode the meaning of the piece as such, but rather to alter the affective potentiality of its functioning through the creation of an everyday use-object that is persistently incomplete.

Everyday Play

Performativity is therefore an emergent quality of the relationship between subjects and objects. Performative function, in this usage, is therefore based on the understanding that things behave in a certain way and that such mannerisms act to form human subjectivity. This should not be taken to suggest that the experiencing self is entirely constituted by discourse, but that the intention of the subject and interpellation of the material interact to create the physicality of the everyday world we inhabit. In this way design is understood to be relational (a concept discussed in more detail in Chapter 6), in that it is brought into action by the participation of the actants involved. This therefore is to identify a point of intervention for the designer whereby the physical script of the object can be manipulated to affect its place in the broader ideological structures of the socio-technical scripts in which it operates. When practicing the rituals and iterations of everyday life we do so to a large part through the medium of objects. We may have motivations and we may give meaning to life, but it is through things that we exist in the world in a material way.

With Laszlo Rozsnoki's *14% Table* (2008; Figures 3.8 & 3.9) we are presented with a domestic object, the dining table, which through its form disrupts the everyday practice of eating as a social activity. The dining table is a place of ritual and the functioning of this piece depends upon the way in which power relationships are enunciated in such situations. The table is canted at a gradient of 14%, meaning that objects placed upon it will slide down the slope. However, at each end where the

place settings are a ‘gecko’ material has been applied to the table cover which means that the accoutrements of dining stay in place.

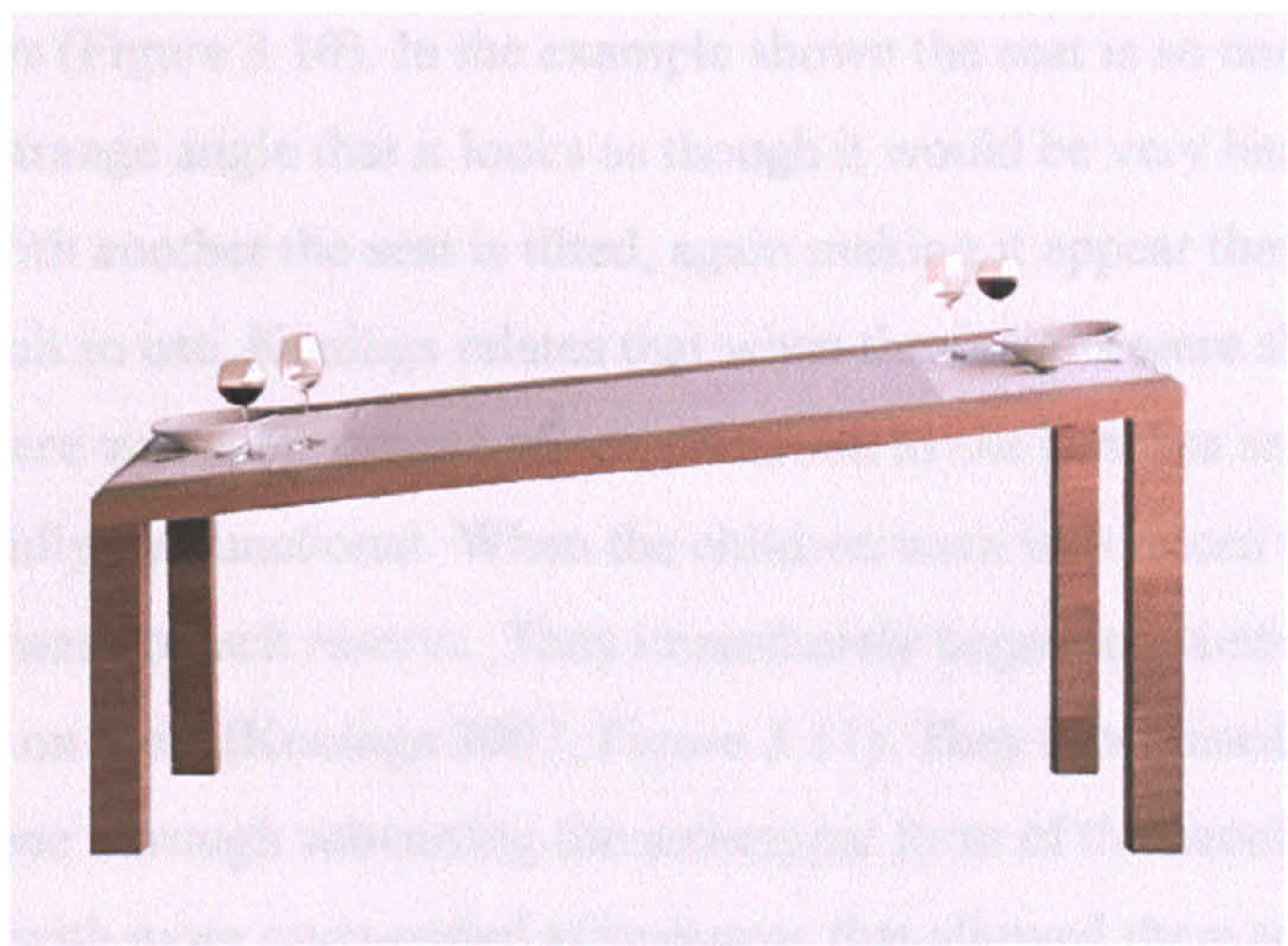


Figure 3.8 Laszlo Rozsnoki - *14% Table*, beech and textile, 2008

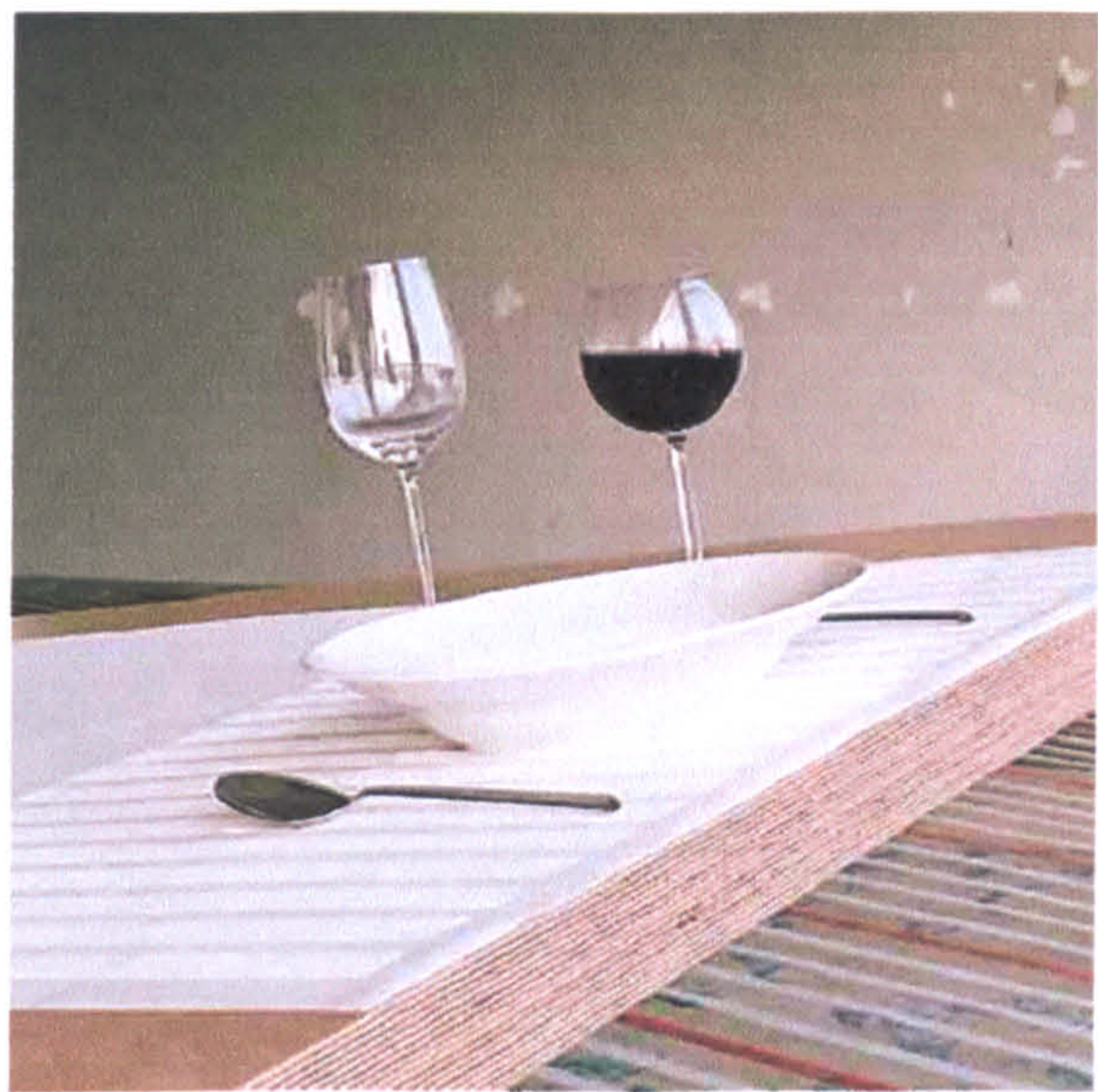


Figure 3.9 Laszlo Rozsnoki - *14% Table* (detail), 2008

As Rozsnoki states ‘The performing nature of the table caricatures hierarchical structures by setting the persons taking a seat into a hierarchical relation’ (Rozsnoki 2009). However, this does not mean that the table has been made performative, rather it is to recognise that such an incitement to experiment and play is a specialised form of performativity.

In 2000, Jan Konings, Bey's former collaborator, was commissioned by Liudger Drachten school in the Netherlands to create benches for the grounds. The resultant designs took the conventional form of the bench and altered the performative function in different ways (Figure 3.10). In the example shown the seat is so narrow and the back at such a strange angle that it looks as though it would be very hard to sit on it comfortably. With another the seat is tilted, again making it appear that the object would be difficult to use. Konings relates that when the designs were shown to the school-board there was some degree of consternation as the benches seemed to have been made wilfully dysfunctional. When the children were introduced to the seats, however, there was no such reserve. They immediately began to clamber about and find ways to sit on them (Konings 2007; Figure 3.11). They recognised what the designer had done: through subverting the archetypal form of the bench he had created objects with more open-ended affordances that allowed them to be creative in how they were used. That is, he had made things they could play with, and play allows for new forms of subjectivity to come into being.



Figure 3.10 Jan Konings, bench for Liudger Drachten school, painted pine, 2000

The unusual form of the benches means that there is no obvious way to use them. The children were forced to experiment and improvise to find ways to allow the object to come into use. It should be noted that Konings has not constructed a game for the children. As Matthews et al observe: 'It is difficult to conceive of games without rules: games, in order to be games, must be played in a certain way. They have a structure'. Games definitively contain a (usually explicit) script in Akrich's sense, whereas play can be said to be much broader and open than the game, in that 'play also can be the *suspension* of goal-directed activity (whereas most games trade on ultimate goals, winners and losers, etc.). Play can be for play's sake' (Matthews et al 2008: 62). Therefore in the creation of objects which can have multiple uses, none of which declare themselves as correct, Konings has created benches which have ambiguous scripts that are more open-ended than the apparently complete commodities that we are provided with in consumer culture.



Figure 3.11 Jan Konings, bench for Liudger Drachten school in use, 2000

Play is often characterised as existing in opposition to earnest and productive activity. As Warren Motte observes such a relationship is characteristically advanced

as being isotopical and balanced, yet can actually be seen to be hierarchical and ideologically laden, in that ‘the “earnest” is invested with meaning, importance, and value, while the “playful” is relegated to the domain of the trivial, the otiose, the supplementary’ (Motte 2009: 25). In this way it is asserted that the real business of living is work, efficiency and, by implication, productivity; play may then be allowed outside of this zone of activity, but only if it supports the more valuable field of work. Indeed, even the cultural historian Johan Huizinga, who did much to popularise the notion that play is a part *of* culture, not something which arises *in* culture, asserted that play exists in opposition to ordinary life (Huizinga 1970). This was contested by Jaques Eherrmann, who argues that play and the ludic impulse must be seen as very much a part of the texture of everyday existence (1971: 33). In recent years play has developed as a dominant metaphor in contemporary design whereby it has tended to be associated with a form of co-design whereby the active consumer or ‘prosumer’ in Alvin Toffler’s famous designation, acts to ‘complete’ the artefact through use (Toffler 1984).

An example of this can be seen in Marjin van der Poll’s *Do Hit* chair (2000), also from the *Do* Series. Here the chair arrives at the purchaser’s home in the form of a sleek steel box, accompanied by a sledge-hammer. The new owner must then smash the cube into the shape of the chair (Figure 3.12). This means that the object is completed by one explosive act of phallic power which is then never repeated. The user is required to interact with the design to finish it, but the options are limited and are actually little different to the co-opting of the consumer to complete flat-pack furniture. However, such a conceptualisation of play can be said to still be very much within a teleological model of design as serving the needs of consumer capitalism as a socio-technical script, in that the performative function of the object is still constructed in such a way that play actually serves the efficient functioning of the object through the involvement of the consumer as they react ‘correctly’ to stimuli (Almquist and Lupton 2010). Conversely designs such as Bey’s, Rosnoki’s and Koning’s present the notion of play as being valuable in and of itself, in that the act of material interpellation acts to require the user to find, recognise and create scripts of their own.



Figure 3.12 Marjin van der Poll – *Do Hit Chair*, steel and sledge hammer, 2000

Play is never outside of everyday life, but a fundamental component of it. As Motte expands ‘Ludic activity is never “for nothing,” ... To the contrary, and even in the narrowest sense, it constitutes an expenditure, and that expenditure takes its place in a broad behavioral economy’ (Motte 2009: 32). With the playground furniture, rather than simply offering an opportunity to sit down and momentarily cease play, Konings has created things that offer the possibility of sitting *as* play. He has not stipulated a way of sitting, the script is unclear thus the content of the interpellative utterance is ambiguous. Similarly, the very ludicrousness of Bey’s intervention means that the efficient affordances of the original chair are frustrated in such a way as to mean that the user is prevented from following the usual socio-technical script associated with such things. They cannot adopt the conventional instrumental relationship to a chair; instead they are required to become inventive in how it is used. In this way Bey’s chair and the benches at Liudger Drachten refuse the boundary between, and the mutual exclusivity of, the two categories of play and not-play.

Conclusions: This is Design

If Madonna had been sat on Lohmann's *Cow Bench* (as discussed in the previous chapter, see Figure 2.20) it would have been a very different video. Given the explicit Surrealist usages in the presentation of Lady Gaga, Madonna's apparent usurper as lead pop-culture media manipulator, it would not seem impossible that this may happen now, but in 1994 the *Lockheed Lounge* represented just the mixture of elegance, exclusivity and fantasy to serve her image-projection at the time. The *Lockheed* therefore acted as an expression of an intersection of particular economies of design that was only to intensify for things made after the advent of mass internet use and the expansion of reproductive technologies. That is to say, all designed objects come to be ascribed a certain value as they move through particular mechanisms of exchange, and this can be seen to be writ large in the cultural event that is the *Lockheed Lounge*.

This is therefore the process whereby what is referred to as design art has come to be seen as valuable. Such objects are commodities (or can be discussed as such) and therefore it is necessary to understand how monetary exchange determines one form of value; they are also increasingly seen as culturally significant, not least because they are now worth so much in monetary terms. Also, these things have risen to a certain prominence at a specific time in history when we have an unprecedented access to cultural information whereby a form of symbolic exchange is possible, which means that this must be factored in. Finally, the way in which monetary exchange value, cultural exchange value and symbolic exchange value interact to construct the possibilities of the economy of subjectivity must be accounted for. Yet, for all their value as culturally significant things (and this could certainly be said to be at issue), these are still nominally use-objects. This means that it is not enough to account for them simply within these economies of exchange. This is because if you claim to have made a chair, it must in some fashion be possible to sit on it, or within any reasonable frame of reference it is not a chair. If, then, you have indeed made a chair it does seem pertinent to ask not only what it is worth, which in practical terms seems a somewhat secondary question, but how it functions. That is, it is worth asking what it would mean to actually *use* such a thing.

Pieces such as Bey's *Do Add* chair, or Rosnoki's *14% Table*, in being presented as design, as functional things for use rather than being simply a visual joke or a one-

off gag, actually suggest a way in which the designer can intervene in the object to alter its physical script and therefore its performative function. They cannot completely control this, of course, but they can affect it. With Bey's creation, rather than transmuting the object into art, as Duchamp did, or convulsing the object into performativity, as Neidderer suggests, what Bey has created is an object which, like Rosnoki's table or Koning's benches, necessitates experiment and play through the very ambiguity of its affordances and material script. In this way the performative function of the piece has been shifted from the realm of efficiency to that of the ludic. It is still a performative object, as all things are, yet in Bey's chair a clear act of interpellation, the café or dining chair which tells us to sit in a certain manner, has been rendered absurd by the negation of its practical functionality. The alteration of its physicality has changed how it can exist in the broader socio-technical script.

The *Do Add* chair is an incitement to slapstick, bringing play into a conventional and often mundane relationship and opening up the range of possibilities for the constitution of subjectivity. Therefore, in a culture whereby things are presented to us as 'complete' the creation of a radically incomplete object is a refutation of the dominance of the finished commodity; it is a refusal of the socio-technical script of efficiency. This is not through the sterile form of the prosumer, who is actually the user co-opted into an extended goal-orientated mode of consumerist manufacture, but through a command to create a way in which the apparently broken or baffled can be made to be useful again. Duchamp's intervention discussed in the last chapter was titled *In Advance of a Broken Arm*. Therefore it is forever caught in a position prior to use in temporal terms. It is metaphorically stopped; it always remains 'in advance' rather than projecting into future use. Bey's *Do Add* chair tells the user to *do* something, both in its title and in its physical script as manifested in its affordances, yet since this is design intended for use there is a question any potential user must answer, either discursively or through action: after it has been altered in this way, how could you live with such an object? That is, it is presented as the potential for action which is then actualised through use, just as the user becomes a new form of subject in the act.

In the financial designation of how much these things are worth, how they function in a practical sense is irrelevant. How they operate symbolically is pertinent, in that it feeds into perceived value, but in terms of the market this has little to do with what things mean to individuals and everything to do with how a general economy of

significance is established. Yet to understand the value of a piece of design in this way is to ignore its most powerful effect, that of its performative function as a working use-object.

Many of the things we use everyday seem to actively require our passivity. They have a tendency to appear finished or completed. The tropes of efficiency and functionalism that underpin the production of objects in a commodity based culture leave little room for the user to actually interact with them beyond a relatively fixed and somewhat static conception of consumption. Therefore objects such these can be seen to offer an alternative, whereby through the alteration of the object's physical script a space is opened up in which the user is still interpellated into a subject position (as it can be argued that it is not possible to step out of the process) but that this role in the socio-technical script is one in which they are stimulated to become *as active* as the thing that is hailing them.

Yet, as has been argued above, this is not simply a case of an all powerful author-designer coding a script into an object and the user then decoding it in use in some perfect reading of the text. A designer may originate an object, though it can never be completely original, it will have precursors, the designer will have influences; they will have intentions for the piece, but it is not inevitable that this is then what it comes to be used for. Indeed, the user will encounter the artefact at a particular point in its history, and this will then to some degree determine how and why they use it. In this regard it can be said that an object has a life-course, a biography, and in the travelling of this path it will change and become different things at different times. Therefore, in the next chapter, the intention is to follow the life story of one particular design to make it possible to see how such a thing transitions in the passage of its history.

Laying Down Memories



Figure 4.1 Tejo Remy, *You Can't Lay down Your Memory*, Edition No. 22, found drawers and wine-rack, maple casings, jute strap, after 1991. Acquired by the V&A 2008

If you were to wander into room 76 of the V&A in London, amongst the exemplars of late twentieth century design you would find an odd chest of drawers that has been made by taking a collection of old drawers, and in this particular case a wine rack, and encasing each of them in carefully crafted maple surrounds. These units have then been stacked up upon one another in an apparently haphazard fashion and held together with a tensioned canvas strap. The different dimensions, colours and textures

of the found elements, the range of handle types and the jutting angles of the parts provide interest and variation across the front plane of the object. The uneven, seemingly precarious, yet meticulously worked-out, stacking of the boxes gives the piece as a whole a sense of dynamism, as there appears to be an implicit threat of collapse in the makeshift nature of its arrangement. This is Edition No. 22 of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*. It was originally designed and made in 1991 by the Dutch designer Tejo Remy as part of his final degree show. If you knew this, you may then wonder how such an object had gone from being a student project to being part of one of the most prestigious furniture collections in the world. What, you might ask, was its story?

The Story of Things

To write the biography of something is to regard it as a form of unified entity that has persisted through time, that it has had a life and it is possible to tell the story of that life. If, as the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai suggests, the things we make and use, the objects we live with, can be said to have 'social lives' of their own (1988: 3), it should then be theoretically possible to trace the descent of such an existence. To do this, Appadurai argues, it is necessary to 'follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories' (1988: 5). To talk of the biography of an object seems appropriate because, as Lash and Lury argue, 'the notion of biography makes it possible for us to avoid seeing the object as the outcome by which one structure out of a set of predefined forms acquires reality'. It is to see an object as a singularity formed by the action of historical contingencies. Such an approach ensures that it is possible to observe 'how things actually move, how they "transition" between many states, how they are (self-) organized as temporal, rhythmic morphologies or coherent behaviours' (Lash and Lury 2007: 19). That is, in the plotting of the object's biography it becomes possible to see, through the action of its transitions in its single trajectory of form and use, the behaviour of the thing in its social context over time. In this way the concept of biography reveals the thing in motion, as a dynamic part of the flows of culture, rather than simply a product of them.



Figure 4.2 Edition No. 7

The construction of a biography is to some degree always an act of appropriation. When, in *Spirit of the Nineties*, Ramakers wrote that Remy's work was a 'swipe' at 'the glut of objects, at the excessive consumerism afflicting our society' and asserted that he was 'protesting against the sheer complexity of the design profession' (Ramakers 1998: 54), the author was already co-opting the designer's work into a narrative of her own making. As shall become apparent, many other motivations and influences were present and it is certainly not clear that the one identified by Droog's historiciser-in-chief was the way in which the piece operated or signified upon its inception. This, however, was part of a process in which the biography of the piece was colonised, in this case to allow Ramakers to tell a story about Droog Design as an organisation. That her assertions do not fit with what Remy himself had to say about the work renders visible the way in which different actors in the social life of an object may be able to give different accounts of an artefact that, if

not flatly contradictory (perhaps Ramakers had a point, maybe this was what Remy was doing without realising it himself), then at least lay bare the internal tensions contained within any object as it moves through time and space and flows through many lives.

Biography, as the telling of the story of an existence, however, must also be treated with some scepticism and regarded as presenting a tendency to totalize and simplify. As Janet Hoskins observes 'earlier accounts of "life histories" have operated as if they existed "out there", already formed', only needing to be 'collected, recorded and transcribed' (1998: 1). This is what Bourdieu describes as the biographical illusion, (1986) and to counter this tendency it is always necessary to remember that 'Making a life into a story involves crafting it, editing it, giving it form and finality that always to some extent fictional' (Hoskins 1998: 4). That is to say, it is always a story that is being told, it is never the truth of a life which can be empirically discovered.

Each individual fulfils many roles in their life and the telling of any biography, rather than being the single story to be narrated is only one amongst many that can be extracted and presented. Just as there is no one 'true' picture of an individual that can be shown to represent them, so there are many tales that can be used to build up a picture of the individual. To illustrate this, therefore, images of the different iterations of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, in the form of the different editions issued between 1991 and the present day, are included throughout this chapter, as the intention here is to use the idea that objects have a life-story or biography to make it possible to conceptualise the movement of Remy's chest of drawers through time in all its dispersal and indeterminacy. This then allows for the gaps and discontinuities 'contingency accident and circumstance' of the history of this designed object to be retained (Dilnot 2009). The simplistic narrativising tendency of the writing of history can be countered by this self-conscious biographical approach because it becomes possible to move beyond the crude sequentialising of the object's movement through time and its transitions between states as a linear narrative. As Lash and Lury suggest: 'Tracking the movement of... objects' means that is possible to 'consider not only the temporal sequencing of production, distribution and consumption' but also to be able to account for objects 'in terms of duration or differentiation' (2007: 17). This is therefore, in Appadurai and Kopytoff's terms, not to regard each artefact as a discrete material object with static relations to the world, but to conceptualise each stage or

moment in its existence as a singularity, a unique event in space-time which is a node in an infinite web of sociodesign (Fallan 2010).

This is therefore to understand the biography derived from any object as being to a large degree eliminative, in that any description of the phenomenon is only one narrative which can be wrested from the inexhaustibility of its social life. The literary theorist Maria Tambokou talks of ‘nomadic narratives’, stories without definitive beginnings or ends which represent the multiplicity of meanings that a life can represent. She suggests that such a way of thinking about narratives is ‘driven by an interest in singularities and differences that can nevertheless be imagined as related and as making connections’ (Tamboukou 2010 : 21). The point of writing the biography of Remy’s *You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory* chest of drawers, therefore, is not to create a seamless history or definitive account of its origins and adventures – it is to allow us to move topographically across time and discourses to map the connections in the network, or rather the conjunctions in the flows, in which the object has participated. Though the life story of Remy’s piece has broadly been laid out chronologically, to give a sense of transition and movement, methodologically speaking it has been necessary to avoid an over-reliance on sequentially ordered narratives in the construction of the history of this object. Rather the intention has been throughout to use points positioned in time to help create a spatial rather than a linear chronological model of the existence of the object which acknowledges, as Lash and Lury observe,

that an individual object may be manifold without having a unity to its parts; that its movements are not to be understood in relation to an external dimension or extrinsic force, but rather are immanent; and that the object’s state is embedded in a complex space and cannot be separated from it’ (Lash & Lury 2007: 18).

That is to say, just as the life of a person must be understood in the social and historical context in which it occurred, so the life of an object must be accounted for as the agglomeration of singular moments in history.

We use objects to make sense of our own lives. As authors such as Hoskins (1998) and Sherry Turkle (2007) have persuasively argued, it is clear that things are implicit in our own biographies. It therefore seems appropriate to attempt to understand how the biography of objects comes to be woven into the lives of those

who encounter them. This can then be mapped by attempting to understand how objects come to fulfil different roles at different points in their lives. It is arguable, for example, that Remy's chest of drawers started life as a unique object, a one-off craft piece, the ultimate function of which was to allow its designer to graduate from college. Through being taken up by Droog Design, being produced as a limited edition, shown at design fairs and entering museum collections it then became something else, it has gained a certain weight and begun to take upon new meanings as an exemplar of conceptual design. As it came to be illustrated in books and appear on the internet it took on a form of iconic status, at the same time as it became ultimately multiple and reproducible. In this way the same object, the chest of drawers, moved from being a straightforwardly biographical object for Remy as an individual, in that this was part of his degree show, to being a public commodity, a common, something exchanged (and therefore exchangeable), something owned, and in terms of mediation, *ownable* (at least theoretically) by everybody. This descent was not inevitable and at every point a number of different pressures acted upon the material, just as the object itself had an effect upon them.

On Crusoe's Island

It is 1991 and Tejo Remy has just finished arranging the work for his degree show at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten in Utrecht, the Netherlands. He stands back to view the work before the visitors arrive. What does he see before him? As de Rijk records: 'The inspiration for the furniture and the lamp had its roots in Daniel Defoe's story of Robinson Crusoe—the shipwreck survivor who is stranded alone on an uninhabited island. As conceived by Remy, the shipwrecked man would attempt to fashion new products from the objects that washed ashore' (2010: 166). In line with this self-set brief these were therefore pieces of furniture created from scavenged materials: rags, bottles, old drawers (see Figure 4.3).

It could easily be imagined, therefore that Remy was responding to the call made by Victor Papanek some years before that 'ecologically and socially responsive' design should mean consuming less through longer use and the recycling of materials (Papanek 1978: 287). The Netherlands had only two years before his graduation implemented its first national Environmental Policy and, as Ramakers noted, at the

beginning of the nineties ‘environmentally-conscious’ design began to figure prominently on the agenda of industrial designers in the Netherlands (1998: 37). Remy’s concentration on re-use could therefore be construed as a way of conserving materials, of accepting a somewhat abject aesthetic because it was better for the planet.

Figure 4.3

Tejo Remy



Figure 4.3 Tejo Remy. Graduation show HKU (the Utrecht School of the Arts), 1991

Figure 4.4

This, however, is no hovel to shelter from the typhoon. It is a civilised place. Our castaway has fashioned for himself a chair and a table, a lamp and even a chest of drawers, and the objects are placed carefully into a ‘room’, the boundaries of which are delineated by the thin wooden panels laid out as a floor. In Defoe’s narrative, Crusoe’s main objective upon establishing himself on his island was to scavenge what he could from the wreck of his ship, so that he might make something of a life in his new location. This chapter of the book is entitled ‘I Furnish Myself with Many Things’ (Defoe 1994 [1719]: 51). After building his shelter the narrator sets about creating pieces of furniture, for, as he relates ‘without these I was not able to enjoy the few comforts I had in the world’ (Defoe 1994 [1719]: 70). This illustrates a central tendency of Defoe’s story: how it is not simply a tale of survival or a battle with the elements, instead, *Robinson Crusoe* is the story of one man trying to establish a

respectable middle-class life in his new home, through the making of things.

Throughout the book the issue of middle-class respectability is a central theme, indeed the narrative opens with the young Crusoe being lectured by his father that he was of the 'middle-state' which was 'the best state in the world, the most suited to human happiness' (Defoe 1994: 9), and warning him not to go seeking adventure. The young man, as young men always do in such tales, believes he knows better and comes to calamity through being ship-wrecked. However, the narrative which follows actually recounts Crusoe's efforts to build the 'state of life which all other people envied' (Defoe 1994: 9), that of the developing bourgeoisie – through the making of the material accoutrements of such a life.

De Rijk, in rejecting the 'environmentally-conscious' reading of the original show, which he suggests was a later opportunistic interpretation (2010: 166), argues that Remy's work actually uses a 'Jungian, archetypal narrative as a motivation for design. The context here is not re-use and conservation of the environment but, rather, a poetic and sublimated fantasy of primal man, of beach and sea and blue sky and a setting sun' (2010: 170). However, it can be asked to what extent the collection presented can be seen as speaking of 'primal man'? Despite the fact that Remy has constructed his pieces from re-used materials, what he has produced actually appears to speak of a striving for respectability. The pieces in the tableau do not emphasise their difference from the bourgeois norm; it can be argued that they strive to be as normal as possible within the constraints of being made from what was available.

The thin wooden panels of the floor are neatly laid out. Despite being made from milk-bottles the low lamp bounces light into the space in a pleasing manner. Yes, the chair is made from rags, but this is only clear upon close inspection, as its form is derived from the sleek lines of functional modern furniture. The table is a little crude (perhaps this was why it was not later picked up by Droog), and the chest of drawers is something of a jumble, but it has the weight and presence of a proper piece of furniture, as the strap holds it together and rescues it from being merely a pile of boxes. Just as Crusoe was not content to merely survive but wanted to live in a certain manner, so Remy in his degree show did not create a post-apocalyptic vision of a desperate struggle to avoid death. Instead this appears to be an attempt at creating bourgeois respectability by one who has a strong sense of what is correct, but whose means have become severely restricted.

Arguably Remy's brief was not to create the basic means of survival for the modern castaway or to fulfil de Rijk's appeal to a Jungian 'primal man', instead it appears to have been much closer to Defoe's conception of Crusoe as an individual attempting to live 'properly', constructing what he needed to allow him to exist in a manner that to some degree denied the rupture implied by the need to improvise such furnishings. This is not to argue that Remy was working to a strict reading of Defoe's text (it is not even clear whether Remy had actually read the book or was instead working from a diffuse sense of the conditions of Defoe's protagonist). Instead it is to read the objects as presented in this original tableau and observe the priorities that appear to be in play. What castaway would build a chest of drawers? In what scheme of necessity would such an artefact feature? Remy did not create animal traps, a functioning stove or means of protection – instead we see an easy chair, mood lighting and a cabinet. Therefore it is arguable that this is what Remy would have been confronted with when standing back to survey his creation, whether he realised this to be the case or not: an essentially reactionary statement about the world and the material culture he inhabited at the time. There may be disaster, but we can still live in this way, in the 'middle state', as our furniture attests.

For all of the avant-garde appearance of the furniture in general and the chest of drawers in particular, it could be argued that in the original degree show Remy was asserting his place in the traditional culture of the Netherlands: that his work was reproducing a trope of Dutch middle-class domesticity in the selection and arrangement of the furniture. For all its formal innovation, Remy's work can be seen as an exercise in good taste and a desire for a respectable home; it is an effort to make what is needed, but it is also an attempt to make what is necessary in a beautiful manner. Indeed as the Dutch curator and design historian Mienke Simon Thomas notes 'beauty and ugliness in the Netherlands have often been synonymous with good and bad' (2008: 9), and it is clear that for all their improvised construction their maker has attempted to make these 'good' products. It is then arguable that he has drawn upon a heritage of Dutch design culture when making such decisions about the objects.

At this point it should be noted that Remy, according to his own account, had not attempted to create a chest of drawers at all, in the conventional sense of being a volume storage device. Speaking at the Inhabitat discussion at the Haute GREEN design show in 2007, he explained the intended function of the object, saying that 'for me it was... a system for how the memory works, like Socrates had this philosophy

for training your brain to remember things. You take a house and in this house you put in different spots a kind of memory so you can recollect this memory instant[ly]' (2007: 00:04). Therefore, in the mind of the designer at least, this piece of furniture has never been about creating any form of conventional furniture archetype. It was not meant to be a solution to the problem of where to store your socks, in his conception. Instead, for Remy, this was a functional object which was concerned with the retention and retrieval of memory. However, this does not operate to close down the above interpretation. Instead it demonstrates the way in which meanings are not fixed but mobile and contingent upon whom is doing the reading, when and to what ends. It is interesting, therefore, to observe that nowhere in Ramakers' or any other published analysis of the piece outside of Remy's own descriptions, does this interpretation figure (Ramakers 1998, 2002, 2006; Williams 2004, 2006; Simon Thomas 2008; de Rijk 2010). The piece may have been made as a memory store, but nobody has ever read it in this way. Meanings move as the piece follows its path through life; the intentions of the maker are only one reading amongst many.

Joining Droog

In late January and early February of 1992, Galerie Marzee, a jewellery gallery in the Dutch town of Nijmegen, was showing an exhibition, *Meubelsculptuur* ('*Furniture Sculpture*'). On display were a paper bookcase by Jan Konings and Jurgen Bey, a cabinet made from scrap wood by Piet Hein Eek, a chair made from rags and a cabinet made from scavenged drawers held together with a tensioned canvas strap. As was noted in Chapter 2, Ramakers was at this time searching for work which could be promoted as the cutting-edge of new Dutch design. The work she found at the Marzee was congruent with her agenda, as it appeared to demonstrate something of a unified tendency at the same time as it was the work of young and previously unknown Dutch practitioners.

To collect furniture together is to give it a narrative. Each piece does not simply exist in its own right, rather all the items will resonate with the others to create an impression of a life, or lifestyle, that fits these artefacts. Indeed, to see a collection of furniture is to call into being an imaginary user and by implication a set of values. As Baudrillard observes, in such a situation, 'The pieces of furniture confront one

another, jostle one another, and implicate one another in a unity that is not so much spatial as moral in character' (2005 [1968]: 13). In his degree show Remy got to build his castaway's room. In that context the pieces of furniture, within the space delineated by the floor panels, created an ensemble that keyed the viewer into their meaning as a group of objects in a given (albeit putative) location. Though each design solution was different, the individual pieces shared a coherency of approach and aesthetic finish. At the Nijmegen show the chest of drawers had to co-exist with objects that may have had certain similarities, but which also had significant differences.

We cannot help but judge the conjunctions and contradictions of the objects we encounter; to see a functional object is to conceptually conceive of it functioning, of it coming into future use in relation to those things around it. Now, next to Konings's and Bey's bookcase and Hein Eek's cabinet, displayed in a gallery, *You Can't lay Down Your Memory* was no longer on Crusoe's island. A different story was being told. In Hein Eek's piece (see Figure 2.25), the initial approach is similar to Remy's, in that it is made from scavenged wood, but this is then carefully attached to a more conventional carcass. It is clear from this piece that the appropriated material is being used for its aesthetic qualities, and the cabinet has little of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*'s dynamic quality. Bey's and Konings's bookcase is similarly made from inexpensive materials, yet this feels much more like a resolved object which could serve as a prototype for mass production. Together the pieces begin to speak of a certain attitude in the work of young Dutch designers, one that eschews expensive materials and production processes for a more craft based aesthetic. This then has the effect of suggesting the lifestyle of the people who will use these objects, in that much more than Remy's tale suggested, the ensemble shown in Nijmegen appears as a collection of potential products; things that really could be consumed as part of a way of living.

The work was then shown along with another two pieces by Konings and Bey under Ramakers's curatorship at the Interieur Biennale in Kortrijk in Belgium. Displayed with the brand name '(un)LIMITED editions' the designs attracted some measure of media attention. This was important as Ramaker's strategy for promoting what was to become Droog Design was essentially based upon the model which had been established in the previous two decades for selling bands and popular music. Her husband, Leon Ramakers, was the head of Mojo Concerts, the leading promotion

company of its kind in the Netherlands. He had been organising rock concerts for venues such as the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam since the late 1960s and was a major player in making the *Kralingen* openair concert in Rotterdam happen in 1970, an event which became a key counter-cultural symbol for the Dutch. At his suggestion it was proposed that (un)LIMITED present the work in unconventional venues on a limited tour, thus mimicking the way in which a band would establish itself (de Rijk 2010; Konings 2011).



Figure 4.4 Edition No. 12

When reflecting upon the development of Droog Design in 2004, Aaron Betsky stated that Droog as an organisation ‘does not believe in the hook, the soundbite or the brand’ (2004a: 16). Yet it was precisely through the methods of marketing and PR that Droog was established and *You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory* was to become an icon of contemporary design. Under the attention grabbing but ultimately vague title *Things Look That Way Now* the (un)LIMITED collection was first shown at the concert hall Muis Sacrum in Amersfort. This was followed by a much larger scale event at the Paradiso music venue in Amsterdam, which took place for one afternoon only, entitled *een middag gewoon doen*, which can be translated as

either ‘an afternoon of being normal’ or ‘an afternoon of getting down to action’ (de Rijk 2010: 165). As Ramakers was to note later ‘Act normally, that’s quite crazy enough’ is a saying popular in the Netherlands (1998: 43), and the title of the Paradiso event can be seen as both a reference to this curious Dutch relationship to the idea of normality, and an early example of Ramakers’ skill in attributing snappy tag-lines and ambiguous associations to the design presented. What Ramakers was doing then was creating a narrative for the design she was promoting, she was establishing a mythology which accounted for its existence. Such mythologies cannot simply be conjured from nothing, however, they must to some degree be built upon what is already to hand.



Figure 4.5 Exhibited as part of Droog (edition unknown)

Precursors

In the critic's vocabulary, the word 'precursor' is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotations of polemic or rivalry. The fact is that every writer [or designer] creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future' (1964: 201).

Jorge Luis Borges

As Borges suggests above, the past is created in the now for the purposes of the present. Every event makes its own pre-history by creating a lens through which we may look. It is only through the prism of Remy's piece that the things that came before it can be said to have any resemblance. When we connect the past to the present in this way, as we make connections and infer correlations, it appears that this came from that, or that was a particular influence on this. Yet to trace a line of descent, as has been noted, is as much concerned with what is excluded, overlooked or missed out as it is about that which is claimed for the story. This is not a search for origins but relationships. In this way the problem of the relation between *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory's* and its precursors can be understood as dialogical. In the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's terms all creations are dialogical, in that they maintain a constant dialogue with all other works with which they co-exist or which preceded them (1982 [1930]). This is then not a one-way relationship whereby an event or phenomenon then forms what comes after it. Rather any thing will constantly be informed by what came before it, but it also structures and gives shape to its precursors. That is to say, by existing and shaping the present, so material things, just as much as abstract narratives, give form to the past.

For example, the comparison between what Remy created for his graduation show and Gerrit Rietveld's Schröder House in Utrecht (Figure 4.6) is remarkable. Upon close inspection it is clear that the tableau created by Remy reproduces the formal arrangement. The wooden panels mimic the coloured blocks of vinyl on the floor and the arrangement of the chair and the unit on the left are in noticeably similar positions. Even the lamp in Remy's work appears to pick up on the sunlight which bathes a section of the floor in the earlier scheme. This room seems to be the same sort of space that Remy has created. The unit in the Rietveld house is worthy of further mention in that it is formed of a stack of boxes (referred to by the tour guide as

a ‘stapplekoff’: a Dutch word meaning broadly ‘pile of stuff’ which is a Dutch idiom with no direct English translation) that seems to prefigure Remy’s creation by some sixty years. The biggest difference when comparing *You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory* with the stapplekoff, created by Rietveld to house Mvr. Schröder’s film equipment, is the wilful instability of Remy’s work. The stapplekoff is just that, a pile of boxes which sit solidly upon each other. Because of the strap holding the encased drawers in tension, Remy has been able to arrange the elements so that they rest at different angles.



Figure 4.6 Gerrit Rietveld *The Schröder House*, Utrecht 1924

Yet this is not to claim the Schröder house as an influence, as such. Although we may assume that Remy would have been familiar with the house, having studied near it in Utrecht and it being an icon of Dutch design, there is no concrete evidence that he was directly influenced by it. Rather what can be discerned is that both Rietveld and Remy, though they were creating innovative designs, were drawing from a sense of what was appropriate for a living space in Dutch culture.

If we are searching for precursors for Remy's cabinet it then bears comparison with a superstar of the design world of the 1980s, Sottsass's *Carlton* bookcase for Memphis of 1981 (Figure 4.8). Visually the two pieces have definite resonances. The drawer at the foot of Remy's work mimics the base of the *Carlton*, the drawers in the middle of the Sottsass's design are echoed in Remy's, the overall outline of the two pieces of furniture is similar and both culminate in a box at the top. Also both designs make use of a sense of breaking from the grid. In the *Carlton* this is achieved by the expressive sloping shelves on either side; in Remy's this happens through the tilting units that occupy much the same position to break the grid of the front plane of the object. Even the colour palette is similar.



Figure 4.7 Edition No. 37

Having been created some ten years before Remy's piece Sottsass's bookcase had had time to become iconic. Even now it appears to be a bold and expressive piece of furniture. Given the impact that Memphis had throughout the 1980s it is certainly the case that Remy would have been familiar with the *Carlton*. It is the signature piece of the 1981 Memphis collection, it was (in design circles at the very least) a famous thing. Remy would have seen it many times in books and magazines. It would have featured in lectures and Remy would quite likely have had to participate in

discussions that considered its merits. Also, as was discussed in Chapter 2, Ramakers claims Memphis as part of the pre-history of Droog as a whole. There are, though, significant differences. Not least, that the *Carlton* was made from plastic laminate ostensibly as a prototype for mass production (see Chapter 2) whilst Remy's object is made from an assemblage of found and made elements. The resonances can be seen, but this does not mean that one brought the other into being. Rather they are part of the same landscape, the topography of material history, in which they both exist.

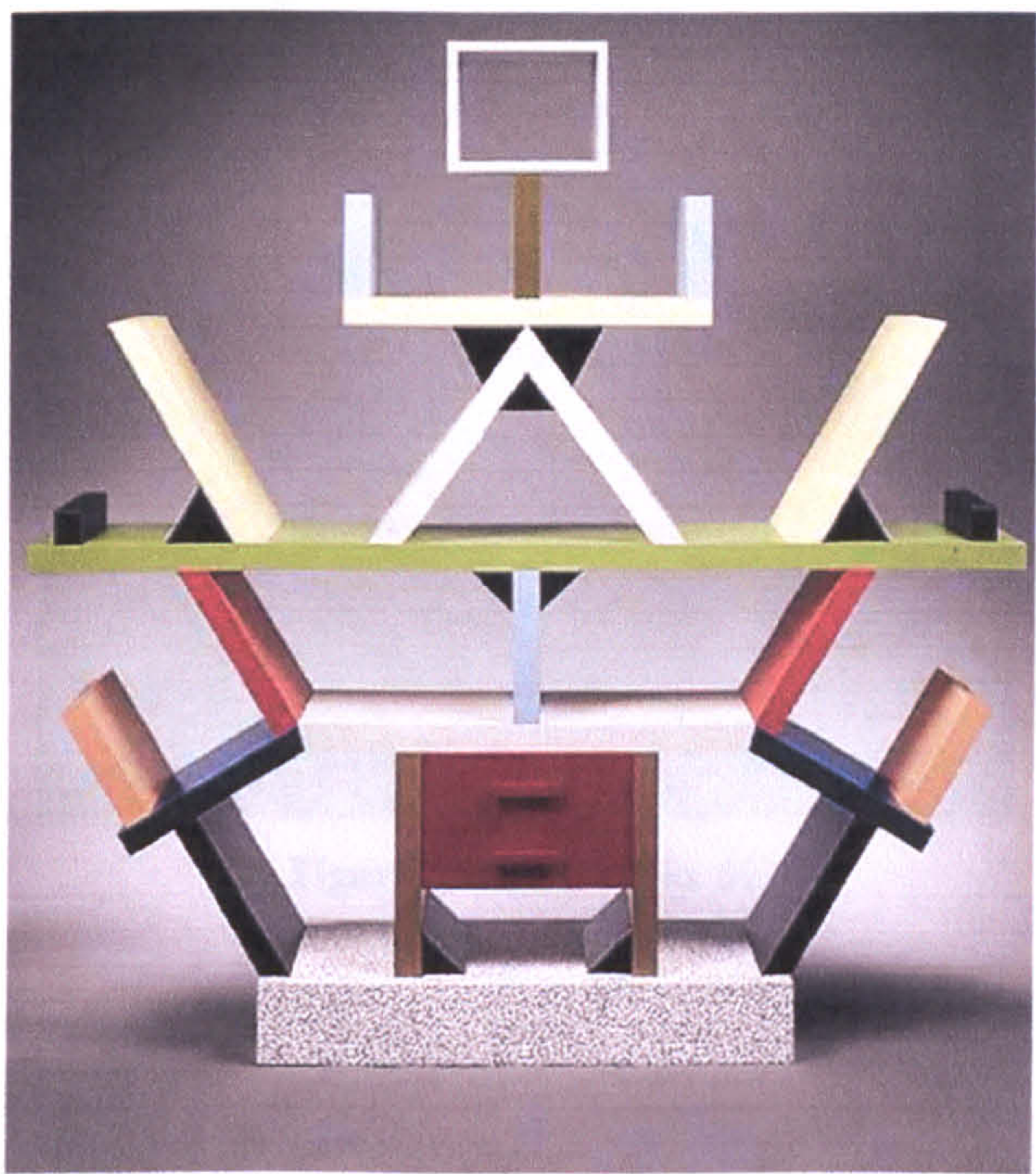


Figure 4.8 Ettore Sottsass *Carlton Bookcase* for Memphis, wood and plastic laminate, 1981

Similarly, *You can't Lay Down Your Memory* appears to have other famous Dutch antecedents. In Ramakers' fantasy family history of the Droog project, *Spirit of the Nineties* (1998; see Chapter 2), she makes the assertion that Dutch design can be regarded as springing from the rural landscape of the Netherlands, whereby 'in a landscape largely wrested from the water and kept in balance by a system of hydraulic engineering... careful planning is an absolute necessity' and 'The Dutch live in the most artificial of landscapes, where nothing is left to chance'. She therefore attests that '[t]he tendency (and the need) to subjugate, manipulate and structure nature is an inseparable part of Dutch culture: so the relationship with nature is by and large

functional’ (1998: 41). Ignoring for a moment the essentialist nature of such a statement and its dubious connotations of a kind of ‘blood and soil’ understanding of material culture (which shall be returned to below), here it is worth noting Ramakers’s assertion that it is therefore in the work of Piet Mondrian that these tendencies find their most clear aesthetic expression (Figure 4.10). She suggests that in his ‘striving for clarity, aesthetic order, reduction and purity’ the physicality of the Dutch geography is mirrored (ibid).



Figure 4.9 Edition No. 52

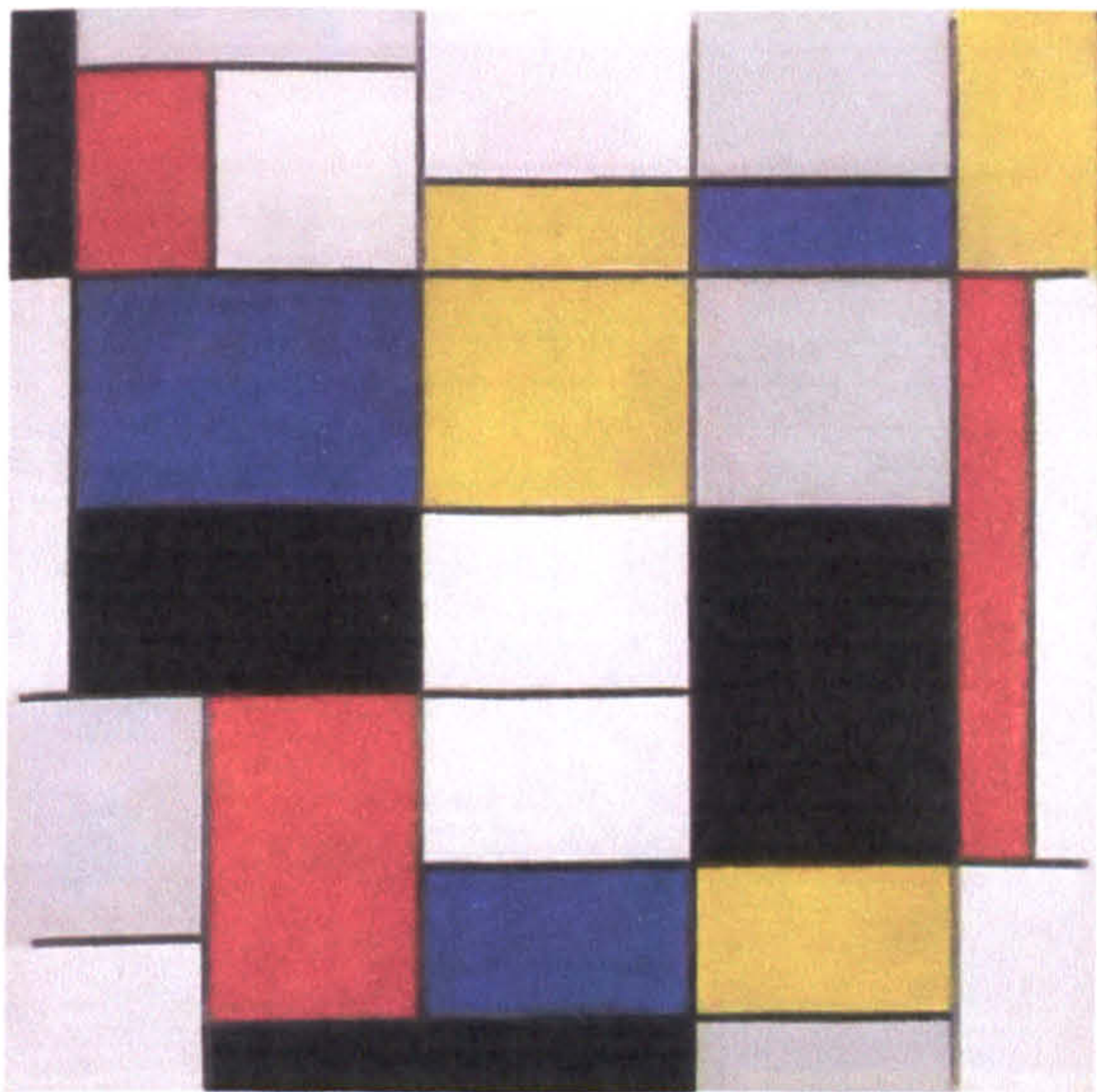


Figure 4.10 Mondrian, Composition A: Composition with Black, Red, Gray, Yellow, and Blue 1920



Figure 4.11 The bulb fields of the Netherlands

Upon initial examination Ramakers' proposition does appear to hold water (so to speak). Certainly to spend any time in the Netherlands is to realise the extent to which water management and its concomitant technologies of locks, dykes, dams and polders (the flat plains of land created by reclamation from the sea) is a structuring element of life. However, to reduce Mondrian's early twentieth-century, Theosophically inspired, Neo-Plasticist exercises to this one element is, to say the least reductive and tendentious. In attempting to understand the lineage of this object it is certainly very tempting to see only the congruences. When an image such as Mondrian's *Ocean Study No. 5* of 1915 (Figure 4.12) is placed next to an image of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* the initial similarities are striking. The drawer fronts seem to be there. The intersection of linear tensions are mirrored. There even seems to be a 'strap' holding it all together.

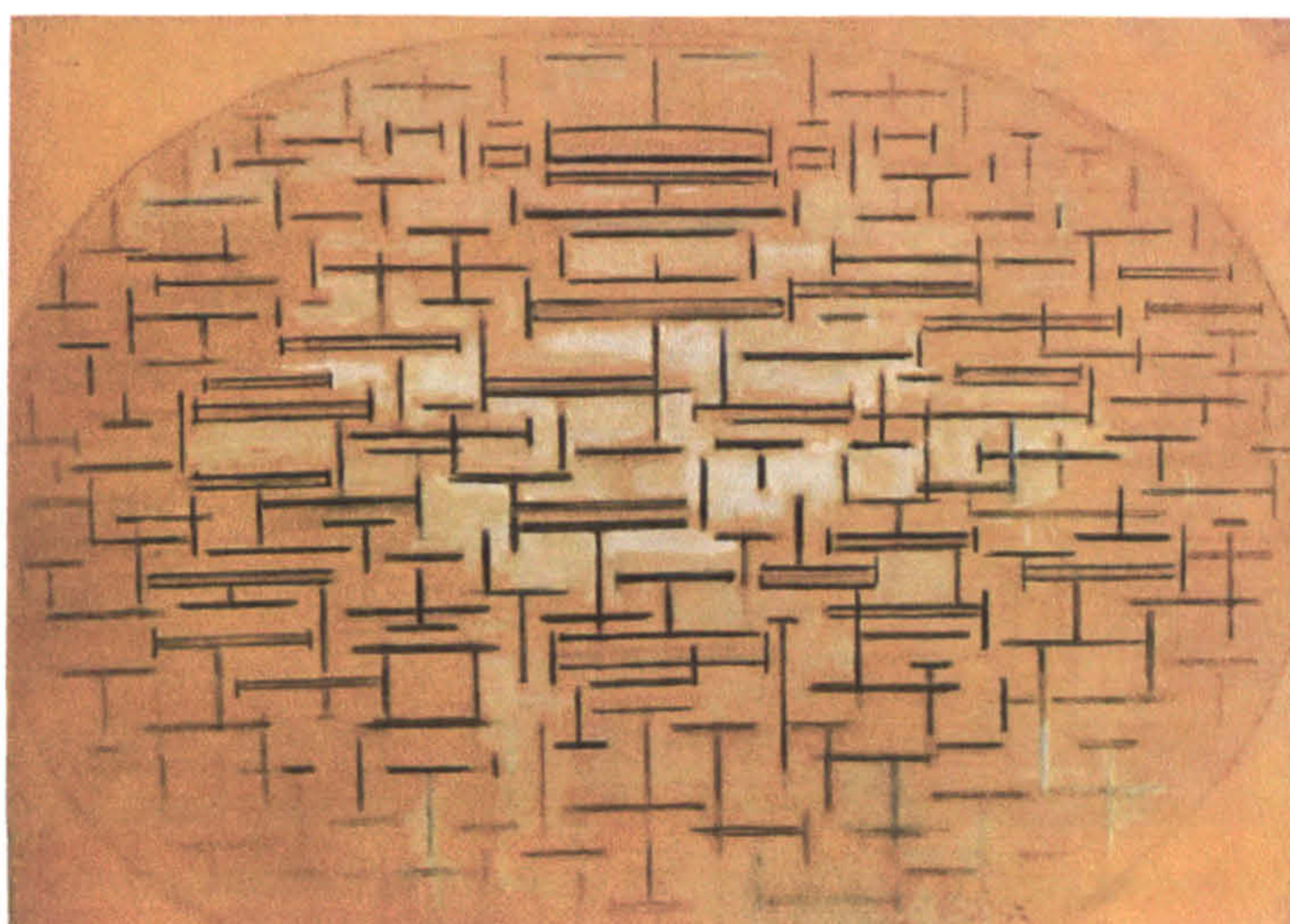


Figure 4.12 Mondrian *Ocean Study No. 5*, charcoal and gouache 1915

Yet it is possible to trace the descent of Remy's chest of drawers back even further. In the seventeenth century 'Golden Age' of exploration and trade the Dutch version of the Cabinet of Curiosities, or *Raritäten-Kabinett*, was a wooden cabinet that housed the nobleman's or rich merchant's collection of fabulous things from culled from around the world. Built to be a microcosm of the larger room or rooms of the *Raritäten-Kammer*, which was the forerunner of the modern museum and was itself viewed as a microcosm of the world, this piece of furniture made of many drawers and compartments, contained objects intended to demonstrate the collector's panoramic education and broad humanist learning (Koeppel 2000). In the example shown in Figure 4.13, made in about 1630 in Augsburg for Duke August of Brunswick-Lüneburg after a design by Philipp Hainhofer and housed in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum (Rijksmuseum.nl 2011), the physical similarities to *You Can't lay Down Your Memory* are clear to see. It could also be argued in its association with the housing of memory and classification parallels could be drawn.

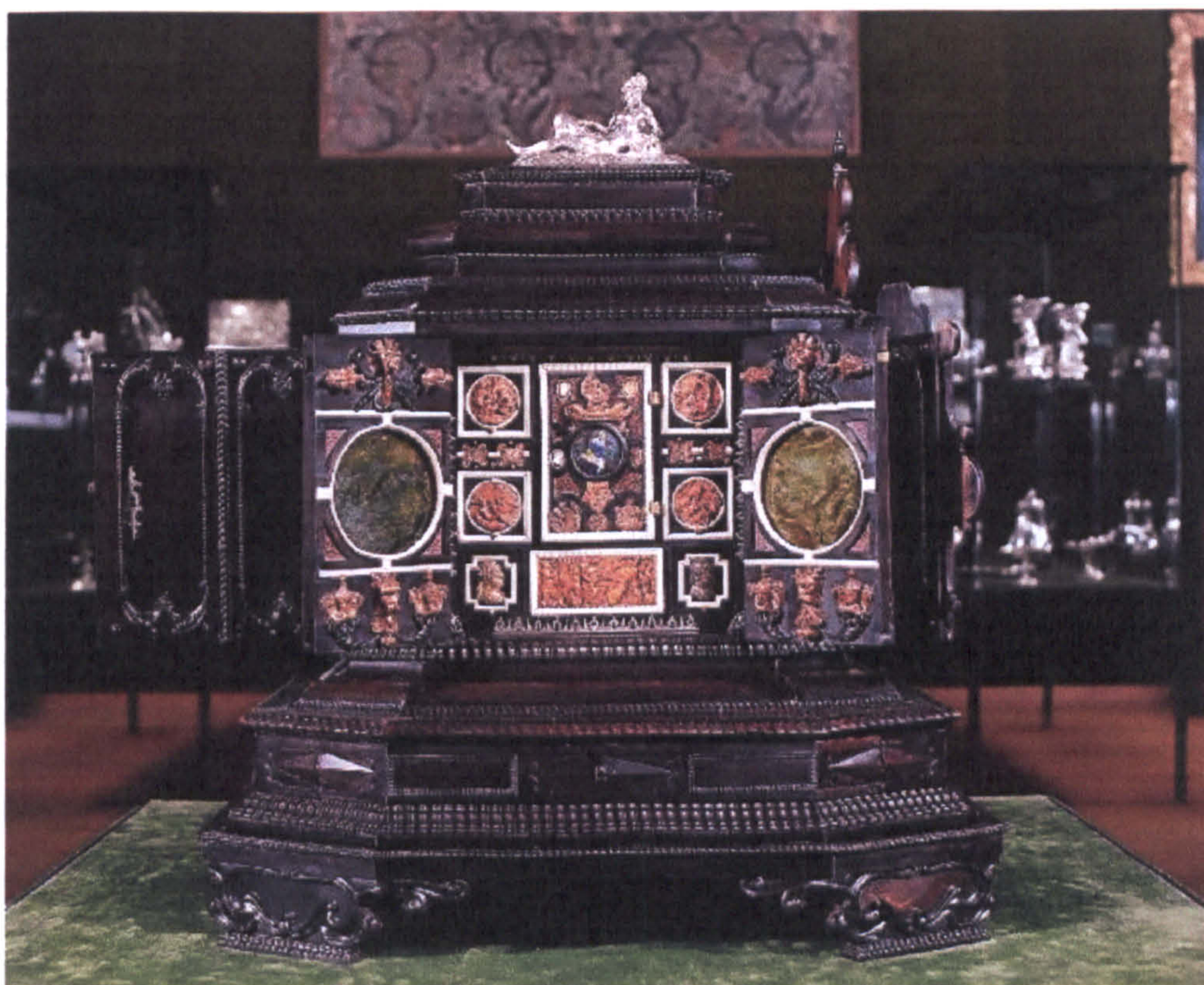


Figure 4.13 Philipp Hainhofer, an Augsburg *Raritäten-Kabinett*, Various woods, bone, marble, copper, textile, ivory, gemstones, glass, silver, paper, circa 1630

However, when the intoxication of recognition begins to wear off, doubts begin to creep in. In order to get to Remy's cabinet from Sottsass's bookcase, the landscape of the Netherlands and the paintings and drawings of Mondrian, back through to collecting in the seventeenth century, we find that we have to actually perform some historiographical gymnastics. Sottsass's piece of furniture is a bookcase, its elements are fixed and conventionally jointed. Mondrian's paintings and drawings are two dimensional. The *Raritäten-Kabinetts* were made for a specific purpose at a particular point in history. These artefacts were all made at different times and for different reasons. Certainly when we put a picture of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* next to these things the jolt of the resonance is undeniable. Yet when we start to think about scale, form, material, function and meaning the initial flush of emotion begins to wear off. As the literary theorist Kali Israel argues, when assessing a life path, 'Noticing similarities need not lead to reading as a practice of code-breaking and the awarding of priority' in that 'when noting similarities of structure, language, or material' we should be very careful in attributing any causal effect (Israel 2010: 6). That is we can see dialogical connections, but we must be very careful about ascribing causality.



Figure 4.14 Edition No. 60

Similarly, Ramaker's appeal to nationalism in material culture should be treated with caution. She has asserted that in the work she claimed for Droog, such as *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, 'the Dutch tradition of simplicity and clarity links arms with the nose-thumbing element' which is typified by a 'dry' (droog) humour' (1998: 30), and there has often been a tendency to suggest that these things can be seen as somehow essentially Dutch. Antonelli has observed that Droog designs 'did not necessarily have much in common but shared a similar sensitivity' which was identified as 'typically Dutch and thus exquisitely dry' (1998: 14). In more recent years Betsky, in line with Ramakers, has argued that the nature of Dutch culture in particular has fostered a certain approach to design, one which has been shaped by the constructed and heavily populated landscape of the Netherlands (Betsky 2004b: 44). Similarly Gareth Williams has observed that there are 'common themes and shared concerns' that are observable 'which has led to what we might describe as a Dutch inflection in international design today' (2009: 25) whilst in 2009 the Design Academy Eindhoven's exhibition at the Milan furniture fair was actually titled 'Dutchness' (Taylor 2010b).

This is therefore to suggest that there is a specifically Dutch attitude to design and material culture which can be said to derive from an experience of the physical environment; that somehow the Dutch psyche has been formed from a historical relationship to materiality in this particular landscape. Therefore a claim is being made for a connection between a certain Dutch attitude to making, based on a national identity rooted in a physical experience of the land. It is also to suggest that these qualities can be discerned in the actual things themselves. Yet could you in all seriousness actually look at Remy's individual piece and say it 'looked Dutch'?

In *The Embarrassment of Riches; An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987), the historian Simon Schama recounts a traveller's tale which describes what he refers to as the 'The Drowning Cell'. This was apparently a punishment which was meant to forcibly induct miscreants into 'Dutch values'. The account states: 'If they do not want to work they are tethered like asses and are put in a cellar that is filled with water so that they must partly empty it by pumping if they do not wish to drown' (de Perival in Schama 1987: 22). Therefore Schama argues that 'men were faced with a stark choice: drown or become Dutch' (1987: 16). This is therefore to conceptualise being Dutch as not simply being a citizen of the Netherlands but as subscribing to a certain set of values that constitute Dutchness; and

in this conception given the very material nature of Schama's example this tendency is to be found in the subject's relationship to the physical practicalities of life.

To argue that there is a specifically Dutch material culture is to propose the existence of national material culture *per-se*. As the cultural theorist Richard Johnson has argued, what we understand as the nation depends upon a material experience of culture, and 'Under certain circumstances, these practices, or some of them, are made to mean a nation and come to be evaluated in positive or negative ways, they are culturally nationalised' (1993: 168). Therefore there is a case for arguing that national traits can be discerned in the material culture of a region, even if it may be difficult to define exactly what they may be. As Johnson observes the study of nationhood has tended to be dominated by 'political scientists and political historians rather than by students of culture or by social historians' and it may be that in doing so such 'academic studies' can be seen to have 'mimicked the nation-state itself, which however is only one form of the existence of the nation' (1993: 169). It can be argued, therefore, that Ramakers et al. are appealing to this sense that a nation is constituted through its material culture. Yet, as Benedict Anderson famously suggested, the nation can be regarded as an 'imagined community' because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1991: 6). Therefore it is necessary to conceptualise the nation not as a fixed relationship to the legalities of citizenship, but rather as something which is constructed. Indeed Max Weber argued that there is an important distinction between the state and the nation. In such a conception the state is a political institution, the nation is a cultural community (1978: 1), one which, in Anderson's terms could be said to be 'imagined' into being. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm has observed, "'the nation', once extracted, like the mollusc, from the apparently hard shell of the 'nation-state', emerges in distinctly wobbly shape' (1990: 181).

In this way it can be argued that commentators such as Rammakers and Betsky are actually constructing a national narrative around and through the designs they discuss and as such are attempting to establish a sense of Dutchness, rather than describe one. As Stuart Hall has argued: 'National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about "the nation" with which we can *identify*; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it' (1992). Therefore we may see

that the nation as a material form of knowing and being is a discourse which is brought into being through use and experience on a material level, at the same time that mediation and (re)presentation function to (re)inscribe this discourse. It should always be remembered that Ramakers in particular was (and is) attempting to sell *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* and the other Droog designs, and implicitly Dutch design, to the rest of the world. One way in which this is then being achieved is through an appeal to a discourse of Dutchness. It is perhaps telling that *An Embarrassment of Riches* came out only a few years before the Droog project took off and, as the catalogue to the 2000 exhibition *Droog and Dutch Design* stresses, Schama's book did much to popularise this 'idealized Dutch self image' (Sjarel 2000: 13). Ramakers can then be seen to be employing a certain trope of Dutchness to popularise an approach to design which she herself designates as being exemplary of this very form. As Hobsbawm observes, such an appeal is powerful because of its 'very vagueness and lack of programmatic content' (1990: 169). In this way a certain type of nationalism is being used precisely because it is difficult to define and broad in its scope.

Mienke Simon Thomas notes that since as early as the 1970s there has been a tendency in Dutch culture to seek refuge 'en masse in the nostalgia of the good old days'. This, it can be suggested, has been as a reaction to the 'impersonal mass-produced' aesthetics of Modernism (2008: 190). In 1972 the designer and publicist Simon Mari Pruys argued in *Dingen vormen mensen* (Things Form People) that for an object to be considered well-designed it was not enough for it to meet reductively functionalist utilitarian requirements. Indeed he went as far as to suggest that even what may be regarded as kitsch products could be thought of as good design in that they met the need for 'security, familiarity and safety' (in Simon Thomas 2008: 198). It could be, therefore, that in claiming an object such as this, with its evocative old drawers and home-made feel, to be exemplary of Dutchness, Ramakers is actually appealing to just these drives.

Therefore, it can be argued that objects such as *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* are being used to inscribe a certain sense of Dutchness, rather than it being possible to discover it in such things. In an increasingly globalised culture, national identities can be perceived to be under threat. In appealing to a sense of nationality as derived from material culture, commentators such as Ramakers invoke loose and shifting values which are attributed to the objects (such as dry humour, simplicity,

clarity and the like). These then act as radically vague signifiers which can be employed in the construction of 'Dutchness', not just as a means of establishing such design as national brand, but in buttressing Dutch conceptions of what it means to be 'of the nation' in the face of cultural change.

Therefore precursors of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* can be identified, but this is actually the action of the practice of history and the narrativising of a life-story. It is through the process of sifting, selecting, interpreting and processing that the tale begins to form. The Cabinet of Curiosities used a system of classification that today seems strange and arbitrary, whereby things were collected together not by today's 'scientific' taxonomies but by resemblance and associations such as being 'natural' or man-made, but which at the time seemed perfectly sensible. In his oft-quoted preface to *The Order of Things* Foucault relates how he burst out laughing upon reading Borges's quotation of a certain 'Chinese encyclopaedia' in which animals were divided into groupings that to us seem absurd, such as 'those belonging to the Emperor' 'embalmed', 'tame', 'fabulous' or 'that from a long way off look like flies'. He therefore observed: 'In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*' (1970: xv). That is our schema of classification, of similarity and difference, of order and connection, entirely structures our way of understanding the world, it establishes the accepted architecture of association upon which analysis is based: and this is historically specific. Writing the story of a life is to write history, yet this will always be as much a process of omission and construction as it will be any form of discovery. If history is made in the now to serve ends present to us in this moment, then it is these structures which must be sought out and accounted for even as the facts of the story are related

Becoming Iconic

The Salone del Mobile in Milan is the largest and most prestigious furniture fair in the world. When Ramakers and Bakker presented *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* under the Droog logo for the first time at the fair in April 1993, the piece immediately took on a new weight. Moving even further from its desert island origins and out of

the landscape of the Netherlands, Remy's work began to function in a new way. Milan, it should be remembered, for all its showcasing of new talent, is primarily a trade show. The vast majority of the Salone is taken up by very conventional furniture manufacturers whose interests lie in mass-production and saleability. The exhibitions which take place outside of the main halls have always had the opportunity to be more experimental, but the underlying tendency at the Milan fair has been to attempt to attract manufacturers, distributors and customers.

As has been noted in Chapter 2, the Droog exhibition caused something of a stir because the objects on show appeared to eschew the functionalism of neo-modernism and instead emphasised a willingness to create expressive functional objects that have a strong communicative quality. When, almost exactly one hundred years before, Halsey Ricardo, the partner of the famous craft potter William Frend de Morgan, complained: 'Take the common chest of drawers as a case in point. Its function is to hold a man's shirts and his clothes, articles of a known and constant size. Why are the drawers not made proportionate to their duty?' (in Lucie-Smith 1995: 155), he was expressing a common concern of the users of design. Why does the piece not simply function properly? Well, in this instance, as has been discussed, its function was never to hold 'a man's shirts', or any other clothing for that matter. For Remy the piece had been designed as almost a wooden hard-drive, a device for storing memories, not everyday items. For Ramakers, it can be argued one of the functions that the piece fulfilled was to look good in an exhibition. This it did handsomely.

It is arguable that the main reason that this object has become a famous piece of design is because it is striking to look at. The assembled old drawers, with their mismatched and worn fronts, create variation across the front plane of the assemblage and make it visually interesting. The artful arrangement of the elements as they balance on each other and are held together by the action of the strap then creates a sense of tension, both literally and figuratively. Though it may be that the final composition was intended to be irrelevant, in that the user is meant to be able to configure the elements as they wish, and indeed Ramakers emphasises this point repeatedly (1998; 2002; 2004), the reality is that for exhibition and publicity purposes the parts have been assembled anything but indiscriminately.

Similarly, on first sight the re-claimed drawers that form the central motif of the piece inevitably call into play a number of mythologies. They are second-hand, reclaimed; they are old and used; they are all different from each other, yet they are all

of the same type (it should be noted that though a wine rack has been included in Edition 22, and even a television has been set into it on occasion, as the images of the editions show, these are exceptions to the rule). The viewer therefore experiences continuities and discontinuities as a series of messages overlap and interact. The exact nature of the inter-relation of these mythologies will depend each viewer's position and pre-suppositions but what any viewer will derive from the piece will be what Barthes describes as 'a second order semiological system', in that meaning will be built up from a 'semiological chain which existed before it' (Barthes 1993 [1957]: 115). That is, the meaning of the piece will depend upon the exact interplay of myth experienced in the time and place in which the object is encountered.



Figure 4.15 Edition No. 79

Initially the drawers do look like a random assemblage of parts from a rubbish dump, but upon closer inspection it can be seen that of the twenty-odd drawers (and occasional wine rack and TV set) presented, no two of the elements are the same. If these were really scavenged objects gathered to demonstrate a minimum of means wouldn't we expect there to be two drawers from here, three from there, rather than

this carefully selected series of different examples? The apparent form seems to imply the trash aesthetic of the student room or the squat where one thing is turned into another for the sake of expediency. Actual analysis begins to uncover a carefully selected body of found elements which completely precludes any pretension to these being the parts that were simply to hand. Indeed, the presence of these chosen elements then implies a whole mass of rejected candidates, also finally closing down the possibility that this is some form of protest against over production. Indeed, upon examining the reverse of the piece it is quite clear that this is a unified design with a central structural logic (see Figure 4.16). But this is not how it looks from the front.



Figure 4.16 The Reverse of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*

At the Biennale in Kortrijk the stand had drawn large crowds. This was partly because Remy's chest of drawers had featured in a report on the fair by Belgian television. This then had a twofold effect: on the one hand it simply acted as publicity for the Dutch designers' stand; it also meant that *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* had begun to attain its first whiff of the glamour of the mediated. It had begun to take

on an element of the aura of that which has been seen in the mediascape and therefore people were keen to see this strange new object which had been on the television.

Throughout the mid 1990s Droog was promoted heavily and publicity was courted at every possible turn. As well as showing at Milan the development of the design press at this time helped to disseminate images of the products throughout the world and *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, with its arresting appearance and fashionable air of sedition, was a favourite of art directors, appearing as it did in 1994 on the cover of the first issue of the new German based international publication, *Moebel Interior Design*, and in the article 'Droog Design's Dry Wit' in *Blueprint*. Illustrated feature articles also appeared in *Intramouros* in France in 1995, *Blueprint* again in 1996, *The New York Times* in 1997, *Abitare* in Italy in 1997, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Holland Herald* in 1998. *The Observer* in Britain ran an article on Droog in its *Life Interiors* section entitled 'The Future's Orange' in 1999 and in the same year the magazine *Monument* published a feature in which an image of Remy's chest of drawers was again splashed across the double-page spread. Such interest was hardly surprising, however, given that one of the central criteria that Ramakers and Bakker appeared to apply to their selection of objects was that they should be photogenic. As publicity material released by them in 1995 stated: 'Droog Design does not represent a style, but an image' (Ramakers & Bakker 2004: 161). It should be remembered that whilst Ramakers and Bakker were trying, through the vehicle of Droog, to raise the profile of Dutch design in general, they were also now running a commercial organisation the aim of which was to sell the products they were presenting. As a promotional device, therefore, one of the strongest cards they had to play was the eye-catching image of Remy's chest of drawers.

In 1996 the entire Droog collection was purchased by the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. This was then updated in 1999 and the institution went on to organise a touring exhibition which then travelled across Europe, America and Japan. A key feature of the exhibition, and an element that the press always seemed to pick up on, was the striking chest of drawers. It is worth noting, then, the relationship between Remy's design as a unique, singular physical object, its existence as a material multiple as a series of editions, and its presence in the mediascape as a virtual multiple. This tour, and the others it partook in its lifetime, such as the touring retrospective exhibition *Droog 10+1* in 2004, allowed versions of the actual object to move around the world so that it could be experienced concretely on a material level.

However, this physical movement also allowed the image of the object to circulate ever more freely through the channels of information. This constant symbolic exchange therefore acted to increase the object’s cultural capital, which therefore served to increase its economic value, and so on. In this way, as the sociologist John Urry argues, it has become necessary for the study of culture to take a ‘mobility turn’ (Urry 2007: 6), which allows us to understand the world has become radically mobile; this is then to account for the mechanisms of social ordering which are constituted ‘on the move and contingently as processes of flow’ (Urry 2007: 6). Therefore it is necessary to understand Remy’s design not as a static object which has a fixed relation to the media, but a cultural object which flows through the channels of culture.



Figure 4.17 As shown as part of the 10+1 exhibition at the Haus der Kunst, Munich 2004

Betsky has suggested, in reference to the way in which Droog operated at this time, that this is how an icon or an image such as the chest of drawers, can then become ‘so inescapable and seductive that it embeds itself in an operating system, whether human or not, and becomes an inalienable part of that host’. Despite his assertion that Droog was not a brand, therefore, he does actually observe that ‘This is, again the way in which all productions and systems of production present themselves in our Western culture’ and he concludes that in such a situation, ‘Branding is god, or perhaps the other way around’ (2004a: 16). As Droog developed as a brand its visual

identity was increasingly represented by *You Can't lay Down Your Memory*, as its media-friendly aspect came to act almost as a logo for the organisation.

Being Owned

The presentation of design suggests the possibility of ownership. As Dormer notes, in consumerist terms it is very important that it is possible to own that which is on display (1990). An object may be far too wildly expensive to even contemplate actually buying, but its very designation as design (as something meant for a function, for use) means that we project ourselves into a world where we might use the object. Given that *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* was now being offered for sale as a limited edition piece of furniture it is therefore reasonable to assume that some of the private individuals who bought the piece (as opposed to institutions such as museums), will have then installed it in their domestic space. This will then have been another turn in the transitions of the life path of the object. In such a space it will then have taken on a new role and way of functioning.

Imagine, therefore, for a moment, a large modern apartment. It has a double height ceiling in the main living area and a mezzanine with an expensive looking dining table and six chairs. On the long, white wall behind the sofa hangs a large abstract painting. The glass coffee-table stands on a white rug. In the corner is an Eames recliner and footstool. A Brancusi sculpture lurks in the corner. It is quiet. The lights are out. It is semi darkness as street-lights reflect in through the tall windows at the end of the space. Set in the space below the mezzanine stands an odd piece of furniture made up of found drawers held together with a strap, throwing strange shadows on the floor.

With *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* sitting in somebody's living room we are, in a way, back on Crusoe's island. The furniture again acts as part of an ensemble to signify a certain taste and system of values; however this time it functions to represent the life of the owner. If the buyer is a serious collector it is likely that they will know and understand the history and provenance of the piece. Anybody who then enters their house or apartment and sees Remy's chest of drawers, who also knows something of the work, will then be impressed by its presence. Not least because they are likely to be able to guess what the price-tag must have been, but

also because the piece's status as an icon of avant-garde design demonstrates the owner's taste and discernment. It will act as a form of conspicuous consumption and a particular form of cultural capital.

As has been noted, Ramakers has suggested that the drawers in their casings were 'stacked any old how' (Ramakers 1998: 54). Yet even a cursory glance suggests that it has been meticulously arranged to be just stable enough whilst creating a pleasing tension between the stacked parts. Yet why would anybody have a chest of drawers in their house which was so inherently unstable if they could afford a nice new stable one? Well, it could be that the whole make-shift quality of the piece that appears to denote an ingenious poverty, and so evoke a critique of consumerism, actually functions to signify the lack of importance of utility for the owner: an ultimate act of conspicuous consumption, wasted value. However there is then a doubling of this cultural capital, in that a piece such as this through emulating a critique comes to denote 'critique', as form of 'critical design', even as it functions as an ostentatious display of surplus value - that is to say it operates as a sign value of critique. As Julier notes

Ultimately, high design is therefore providing a more spectacular version of the processes of the wider marketplace. That is it engages in wilful acts of destabilisation. In the case of high design, this is just more intensely concentrated into the aesthetics and performance of the object but also into its systems of mediation. In terms of the object itself, this may be in terms of raising its performance value, or... it may also emerge from precisely the opposite – the denial of utility. (2008: 91)

In Dormer's terms such objects are 'conceived not to serve but to titillate.' In that they are part of a 'strange exercise in controlled stimulation and satisfaction' (Dormer 1990: 136) Therefore we can see the development of a category of object whereby the utilitarian conception of function is repressed to the point where it is almost imperceptible (though it endures in the meta-linguistic proposition that this is a useful thing with a designated role which identifies the object as design). Just like Starck's Juicy Salif lemon squeezer, to some degree the poor utility or unstable relationship to function of this piece 'forces one to stand back and think about it as an aesthetic object.' (Julier 2008: 84) It is therefore through the repression of utility that this aestheticisation occurs.

One of the key sign-functions of this piece is its instability. One of the principle elements we desire from furniture is that it should be stable. We are all familiar with the ritual of folding up pieces of cardboard in an attempt to stabilise a table in a pub or restaurant and the instinctive judgement passed upon any piece of DIY will to some degree depend upon the extent to which the result looks stable, and therefore capable of fulfilling its function. Remy's assemblage of encased drawers appears to deliberately play on this expectation and frustrate it. The elements rest upon each other and the play of weight and mass creates a sense of tension (which is made manifest in the tautness of the strap and its tensioning clasp). In short, it looks like it could fall over. Therefore an inherent danger is coded into the piece. Its meaning is not just unstable, the piece of furniture is literally unstable. In this way Remy's chest of drawers can be said to be an example of a tendency noted by Julier whereby 'risk becomes aestheticised, reflexive and often deliberate' (Julier 2008:89) as part of the vocabulary of the production of titillating 'risky' commodities for those whose lives have been reduced to the cosseting (apparent) safety of consumer culture. Indeed Julier could easily be directly describing Remy's chest of drawers when he states: 'the form alludes to the conditions of consumption - commodified yet purporting to unmarketability. The form also draws on a central theme of design production – risk, or more accurately its minimisation' (Julier 2008: 91). So the owner gets to feel a little bit risky, a little bit out-there, just as the object actually operates quite safely within the structure of commodity aesthetics.

Now that it resides in the domestic sphere it will inevitably begin to play its parts in the conventions and rituals prescribed in such a space. Therefore, no matter what it was designed to do or be, irregardless of Remy's designations as to its functions, it will start to join the other items in the room in the formations of domestic life. In such a situation a piece such as this will then resonate in a particular way, not least because it is an object which is essentially a collection of boxes. This means that in the domestic interior it will take its place in a hierarchy of boxes that is played out in such a zone. As the design historian Nicolette Makovicky observes 'just as the bourgeois home enveloped the individual, Benjamin described the tendency to "devise" boxes, coverlets, and cases for the storage of every item', and 'At the apex of this mania stood the imposing figure of the household cabinet, from which emanated a "divine order... as if from the holy tabernacle"' (Makovicky 2007: 292). As *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* is such an imposing, indeed auratic object, it cannot help but

be a very strong presence. In a museum or shop it stands out from the crowd. In a living room it will then inevitably impose the rhythms and resonances of its own structure on the space. In the box of the living-room, its boxness will speak loudly, for such a piece of furniture represents the house in miniature. As the art historian Brian Dillon observes, an object such as this ‘presents a doubled interiority: the inside of the inside, not merely a dwelling or shelter but a secret inwardness to be hidden even from the private space of the salon or bedroom’ (2010: 61). In the heimlich space of the domestic interior this piece of furniture becomes unheimlich. What’s *in* those drawers?

Fame

When in 2008 edition number 22 of *You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory* was acquired for the V&A, the reason the curator gave in the acquisition records for wanting to buy it for the museum was because it represented ‘an iconic piece of early 1990s design, embodying many of the ideas that gave rise to the prominence of Dutch design in subsequent years’ (V&A Acquisition Records 2008). So, it had passed from being merely representative of Droog and become an emblem of Dutch design as a whole. In this way its function had shifted and taken on another valence. It was still a chest of drawers, but it had also become an image of Dutchness, a representative short-hand for the ‘Dutch inflection’ (Williams 2009).

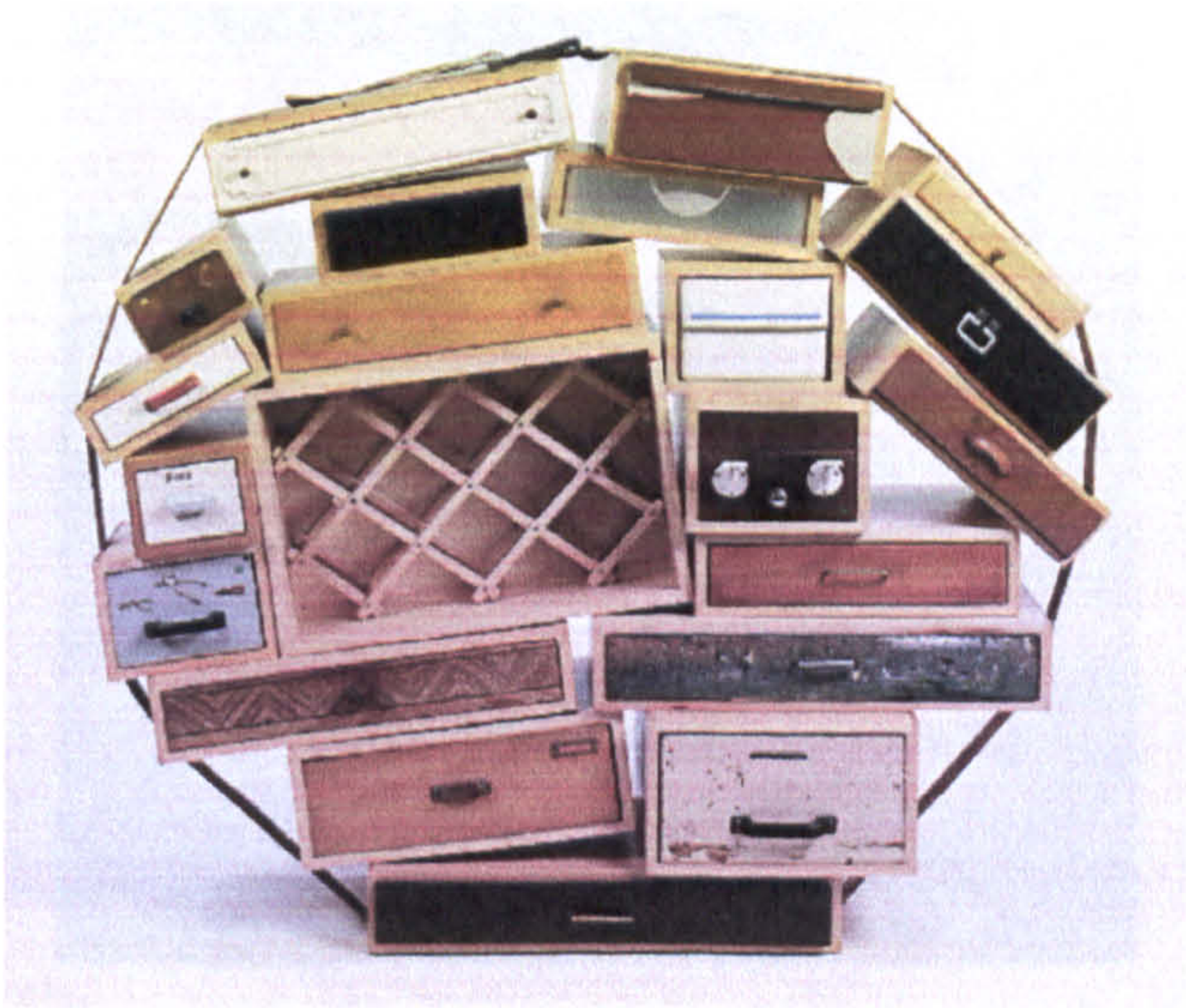


Figure 4.18 Edition no. 22

Yet its maker still yearned for the object he gave life to back in Utrecht. In an email in response to the curator's attempt to source an early example of the piece, Remy tries to bring his creation back to its original purpose. He explains that as well as the Droog limited edition, once a year he makes a special version from drawers with some form of resonance or meaning. He then suggests that, being the V&A he might produce a bespoke example using drawers with specific historical significance. This was to completely misunderstand the V&A's reasons for wishing to own an edition of the piece. What is important to an institution such as this is to own the physical material expression of a multivalent cultural product. The integrity of a collection such as the V&A's depends upon it being one of *the* repositories of important things. *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory's* induction into the canon was not to do with Remy's standing as a designer, they did not want him to add to their collection as such. Rather it was important that they should have an example of such an iconic object. Further down in the email Remy recounts the Socratic origins of the piece and suggests that this would therefore be an appropriate approach. He was gently rebuffed as the museum sought out an early example of the piece.

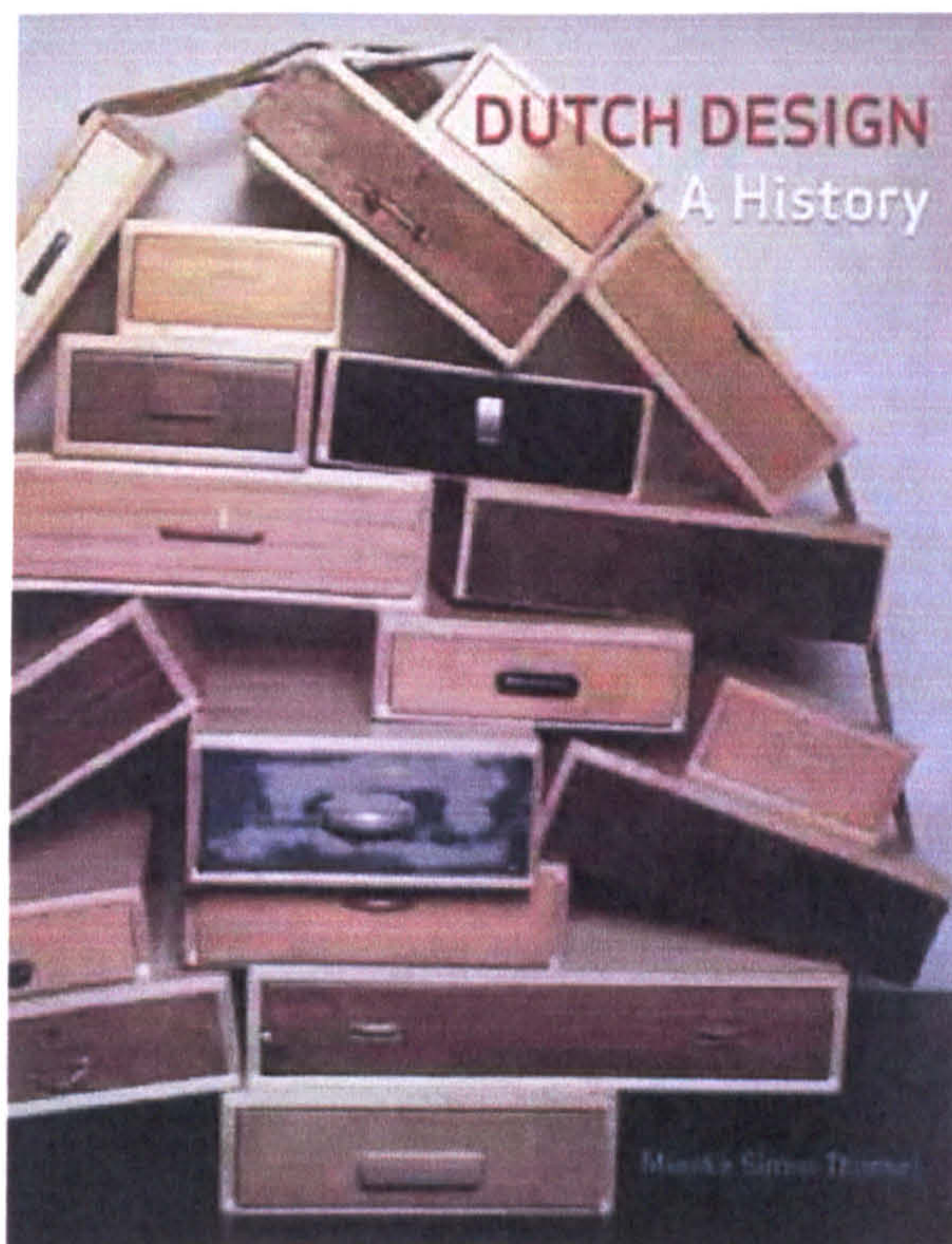


Figure 4.19 The cover of Mienke Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History*, 2008

Through the last decade Remy's chest of drawers has been growing in stature and reputation as its image has moved through the flows of culture. Also, as institutions across the world began to acquire it for their collections, so it gained a form of exit velocity whereby it became something that they all had to have. It had already been acquired by the Centraal Museum in Utrecht in 1996 as part of the Droog collection; in 2005 the piece was acquired by the St Louis Art Museum in the USA; it was added to the collection of The High Museum of Art in Atlanta in 2008. Also in 2008, it featured on the cover of Mienke Simon Thomas's review of the history of Dutch design (Figure 4.19). As it tends to be publishers rather than authors who get to choose book covers it is unlikely that Simon Thomas specified the image, but this does illustrate the way in which by this point it was coming to be a logo for Dutch design.



Figure 4.20 The cover of the V&A map, 2010

In 2010 edition 22 appeared on the museum map of the V&A (Figure 4.20), suggesting that their publicity department had concluded that it was a good representative of design in general. This amount of interest and media exposure then has the effect of manufacturing celebrity, no matter what the intrinsic qualities of the subject of scrutiny may be. This was therefore a meeting of serious academic interest combined with an expanding media profile. At the same time that it was appearing on book covers it was also exhibited in serious exhibitions such as *Destroy Design* at the Lausanne Museum of design and contemporary applied arts, representing design which suggested some form of implicit critique of the practice. It was also selling very well, with edition N0. 88 selling for \$57,400 in June of 2008 (V&A Acquisition records 2008).



Figure 4.21 At the “Destroy design”, the Lausanne Museum of design and contemporary applied arts, 2010

This means that the value of the piece, both monetary and cultural, was being determined and guaranteed as it passed through the mechanisms of exchange. Other

attributes also function to assure the status of the piece. The work as a whole has been signed by Remy, for example (see Figure 4.22). This is unusual for a piece of furniture and here it plays a dual role. Firstly, it suggests that it has the status of art. In fact, just as Duchamp's 'R.Mutt' signature on his infamous urinal, or the artist Piero Manzoni's signing of objects and people demonstrates, the simple addition of a signature can actually demand that an object be considered as art.

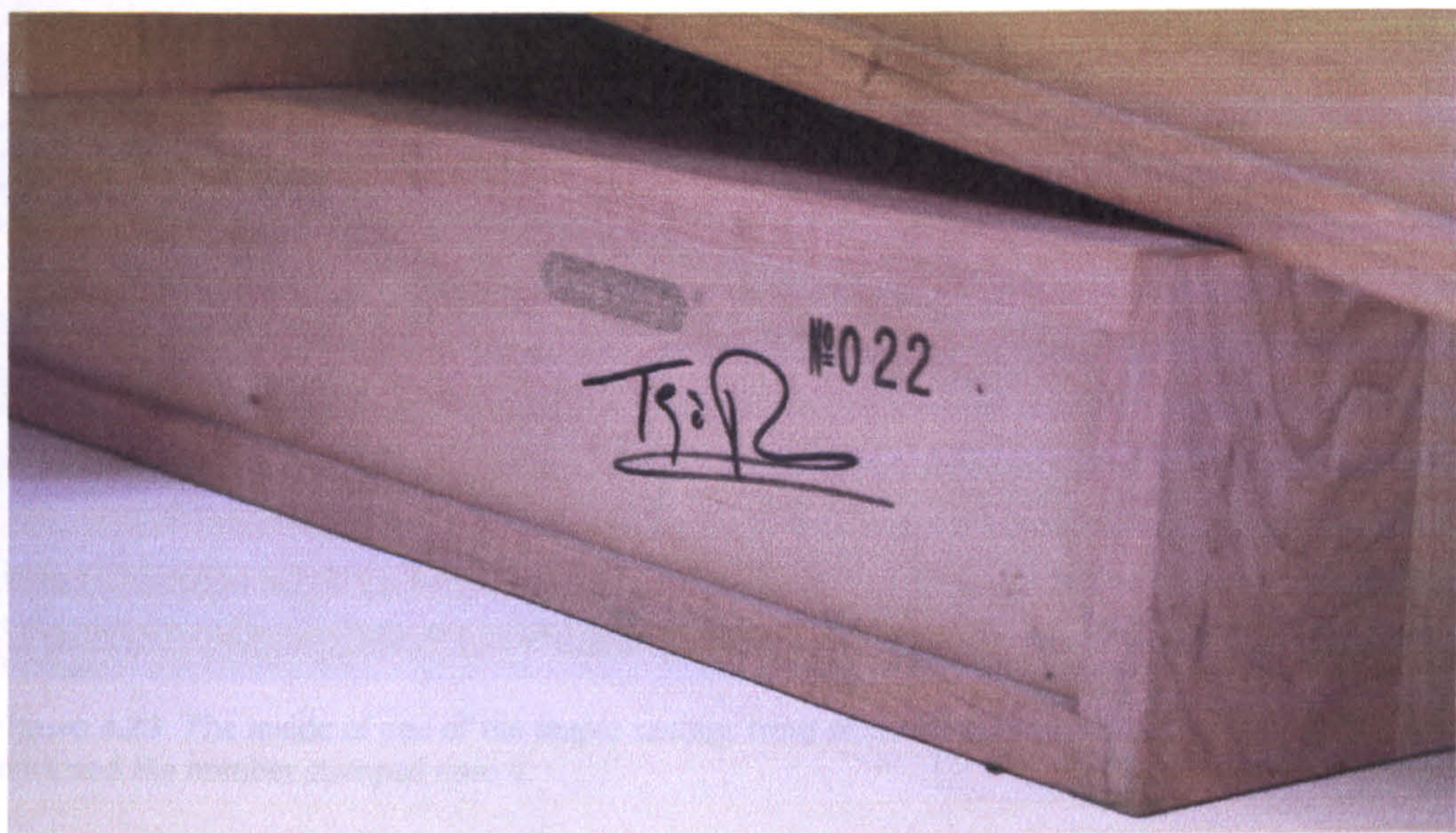


Figure 4.22 The reverse of Edition No. 22 showing Remy's signature

Secondly, and perhaps more tellingly, here it also serves the purpose of conferring some authenticity to the assemblage. This is particularly important when we consider the object's existence as a commodity, for let us not forget that it is made up of components which in the main could be sourced very cheaply, if not for free. Similarly each element, all the drawers and their casings, have been stamped with the edition number and a blue cartouche marking it as 'Droog Design' (see Figure 4.23). Such features act to reassure the nervous buyer that what they are acquiring is an important piece of contemporary design and not, as appearances might suggest, a pile of old tat held together with a belt. This then, combined with its existence as a multiple original in the dialogical matrix of the channels of culture, meant *You Can't Lay You're your Memory* was becoming a very important object.



Figure 4.23 The inside of one of the maple casings from edition no. 22 in the V&A bearing the Droog mark and the number stamped onto it.

To celebrate the creation of its 100th edition in 2007, the jewellery designer, Ted Noten, designed a ‘secret’ drawer for Remy’s design (Figures 4.24 & 4.25). In a block of polyester resin he encased what he thought would be in a very private draw: a gun, a string of pearls, a ring and a line of cocaine. This implies a certain type of user and it is a long way from Crusoe’s island. It could be suggested that this is meant to be an ironic statement, but this does not seem an adequate response. The addition of this very obvious secret drawer could be said to collapse some of the mystery. The uncanny uncertainty of what is in the drawer is denied as its contents are revealed. It ceases to be a private store of any kind. The drawer has no front, even when closed the contents can be seen, and the object is displayed with the drawer open. Therefore the piece would have appeared to have completely changed in its character. But fame can do that.

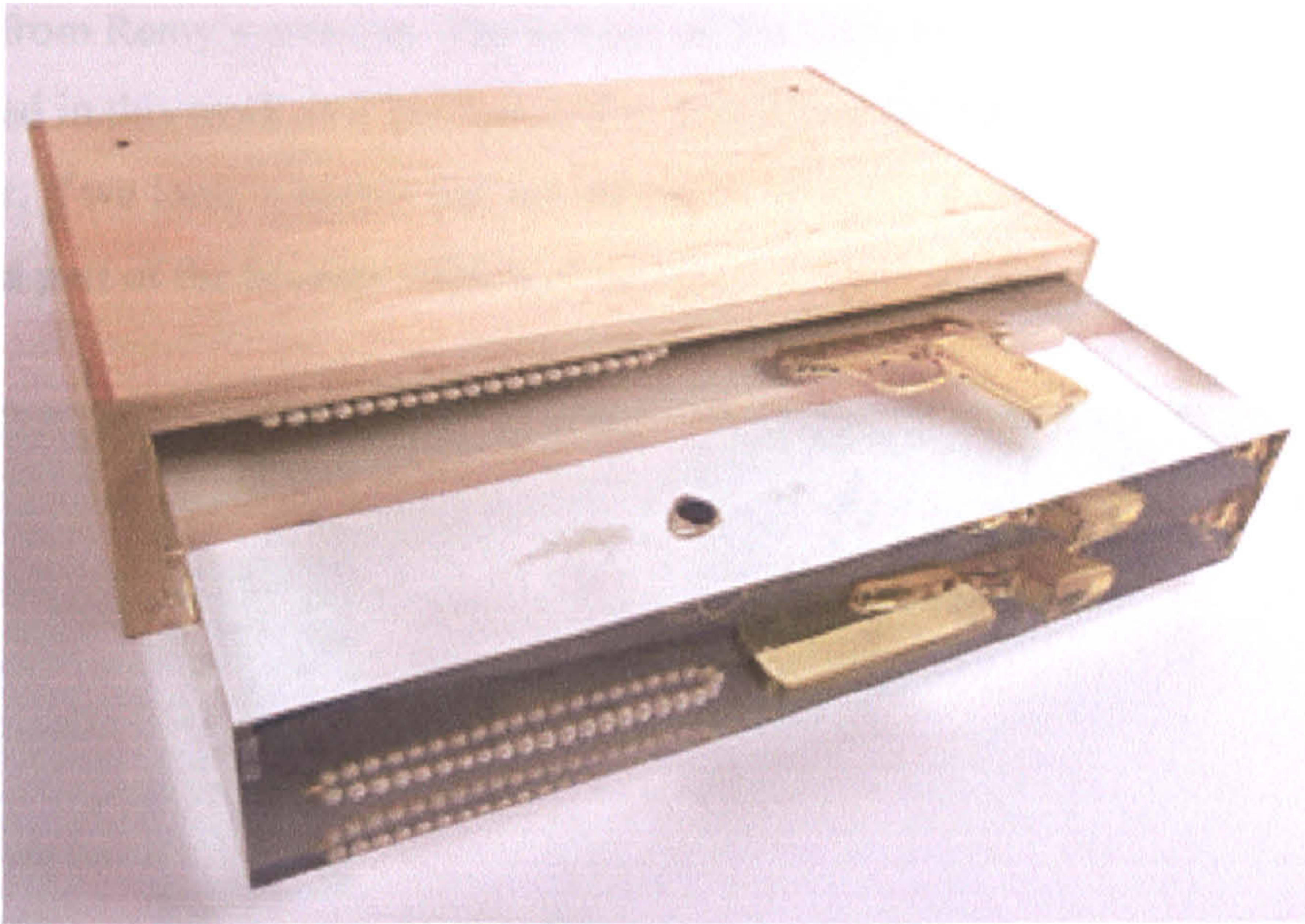


Figure 4.24 The Ted Noten 'Secret Draw', polyester resin and found objects, 2007

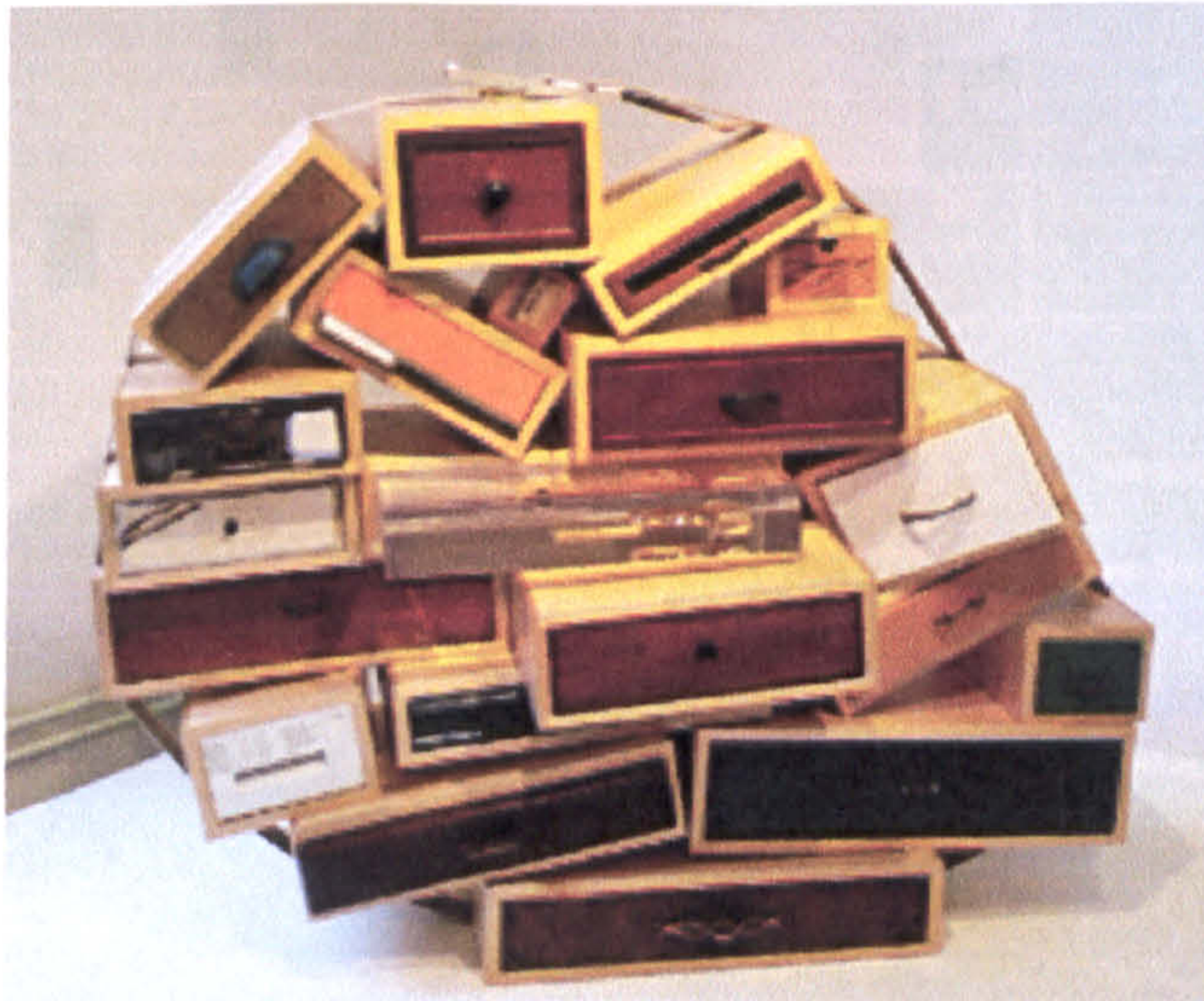


Figure 4.25 The Ted Noten 'Secret Draw' in situ, 2007

Homage?

In 2006, to mark the 15th anniversary of Remy's design, the Czech designer Jaroslav Jurica of Hubero Kororo Design Group created the *Drawerment* storage system for Dutch design house Demakersvan (Figure 4.26). Here the found drawer fronts are present, but the grid has reappeared and the units from which the piece is made have escaped the strap and begun to fly up the wall. It is clear how *Drawerment* has been

derived from Remy's creation. The lineage of this piece is, of course, directly referenced in this work as it is presented as something created to relate to the original. However, if we look, it seems that the influence of Remy's design has moved out to become a part of the broader culture of design.



Figure 4.26 Jaroslav Jurica *Drawerment*, designed to mark the 15 year anniversary of *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, 2006

In a piece such as WIS Design's *Decades* chest of drawers of 2007 (Figure 4.27), for example, the designer has utilised Remy's central tactic of using the reclaimed drawers, but now they have been tamed by an unbroken grid which makes the piece respectable for the mainstream market. Betsky, in his discussion of Droog as a brand suggests that once it has become sufficiently embedded in the mediascape an object such as *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* starts to replicate in this medium

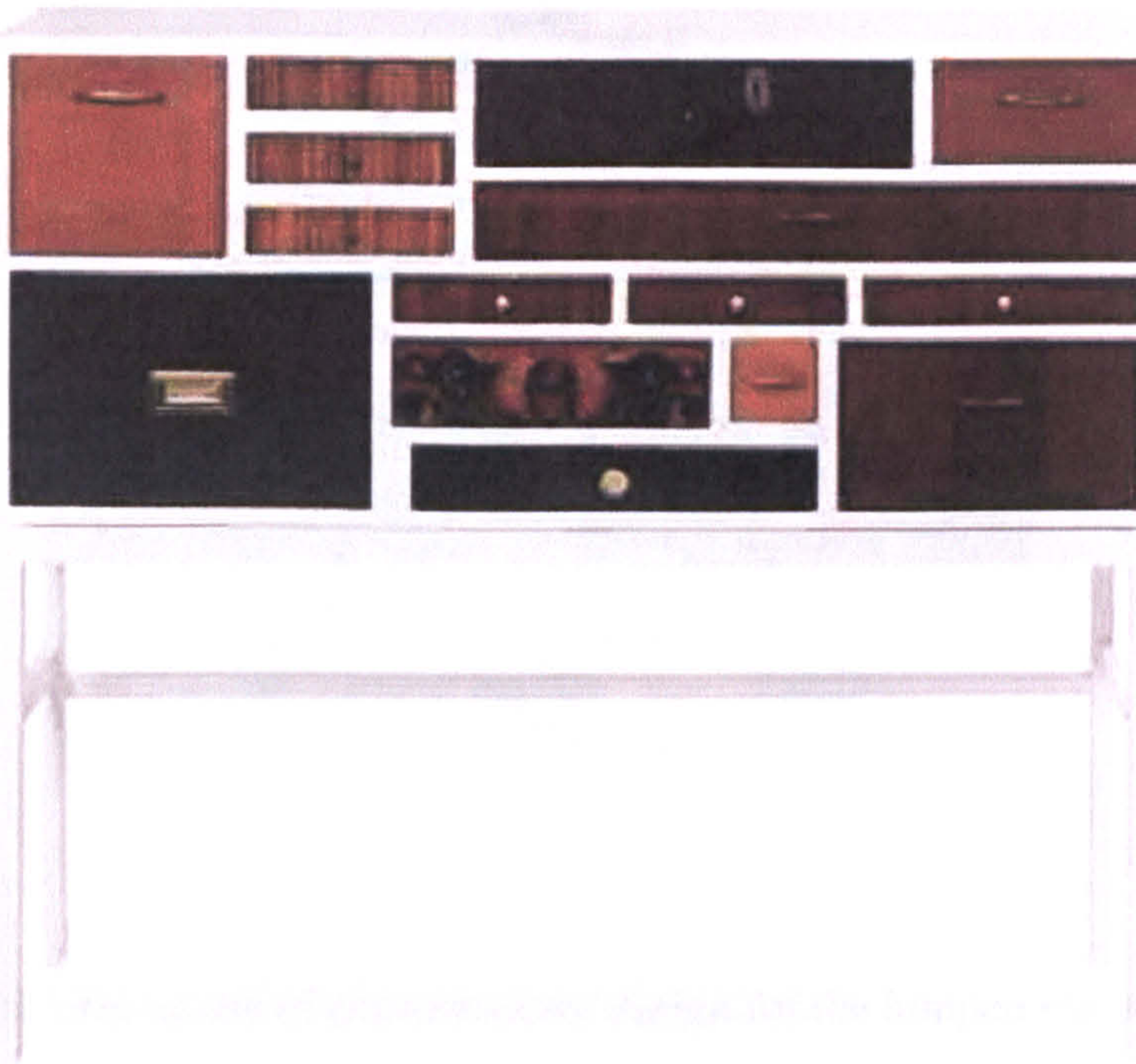


Figure 4.27 WIS Design, *Decades* chest of drawers, 2007

and in this way ‘a thing becomes a “meme”’ (2004a: 16), yet this appeal to an evolutionary mechanism for cultural transmission of forms and approaches does not seem convincing (Bronk 1999). In *Community* by furniture and interior designer Rob Southcott (2008; Figure 4.28) it could be said that the piece demonstrates what could be described as the persistence of form. This is not plagiarism, rather it is exemplary of the way in which a form can resonate through the channels of culture without resorting to questionable constructions such as ‘memes’. The website describes the piece thus: ‘A dresser made from “locally produced reclaimed lumber species assembled together in an abstract configuration,” *Community* embodies Southcott’s belief in diversity. Like a wooden mosaic, the furniture unites interesting and individually distinct pieces to make a statement about both harmony and humanity’ (iGreenspot.com 2010), and who are we to doubt this? Rather than being the theft of an idea it is more that a designer such as Southcott has used elements suggested by Remy’s design to allow him to examine his own concerns.

The construction depicted in the Ikea publication, *Single: The Pleasures of Living Solo* (Lombarda 2006; Figure 4.29) on the other hand, is theft. Here a large corporation has simply taken what they wanted from Remy’s creation for expressly commercial purposes. Gone are the carefully chosen, artfully aged drawers; instead



Figure 4.28 Rob Southcott *Community* 2008

we have the uniform lumps of contemporary design for the lumpen masses. The piece loses all poetic or structural logic (notice the small white unit on the left rests on nothing, it is only the strap holding it up. If anything heavier than a slim letter was placed in this cabinet the piece would be more than destabilised – it would probably fall apart). Yet while the ‘designers’ of this piece have sacrificed much of the point of Remy’s initial project, the very existence of this image demonstrates the way in which the solid object created by Remy has been flattened into its sign-value to circulate in the mediascape. This is not the persistence of form, it is an example of the way in which anything interesting, exciting or good is neutralised by commodity culture and sold back to us in a sanitised form.

The fact that the Ikea chest of drawers cannot function in a practical sense (rather than being at the limit of utilitarian function) designates it as existing wholly as sign-value; its imagistic function becomes its only function: this was only ever meant to exist as a picture. One of the reasons for this is that the primary way in which Remy’s chest of drawers is experienced is as a photograph. Therefore design as a process or the object as a thing are excluded by the life of the object as sign. The Ikea image was never meant to be a suggestion for how you may live with your objects, it is an appropriation of the perceived cultural capital which is thought to have accrued to Remy’s piece through its circulation as a sign. Again the object is reduced to its sign-value to allow it to function within the political economy of the sign (Baudrillard 1998). This can then be said to be a feature of what Hal Foster has



Figure 4.29 The Ikea version in *Single: The Pleasures of Living Solo*, Rotolito Lombarda

called the ‘general “mediation” of the economy’ whereby ‘the product is no longer thought of as an object to be produced so much as a datum to be manipulated - that is to be designed and redesigned, consumed and reconsumed’ (Foster 2002: 21-22). It is within this political economy, then, that much of the biography of *You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory* has been played out.

Playing Vegas

When the Droog outlet opened in Las Vegas in 2010 it was featured on KTLA’s ‘5 Days of Vegas’ (You Tube 2010; Figure 4.30), and the hyper-active overly enthusiastic presenter, Allie Mackay, discussed the wares on sale with Droog’s Vegas representative, Sheldon LaPierre. The exchange went as follows:

Mackay: This is a place called Droog and its basically art installations from the Netherlands?

LaPierre: That is correct.

Mackay: Tell me a little bit about this piece that we’re looking at here.

- LaPierre: This is called *Chest of Drawers*, it's by the designer Tejo Remy and what the designer does is he sources yard sales for the used drawers and then he has a master craftsman in the Netherlands build these beautiful encasements around them and then he arranges them in this sort of random, this sort of random way and pulling it together with this burlap strap.
- Mackay: So, not only is it a work of art it's functional, you can put things...
- LaPierre: It's completely functional, it's called *Chest of Drawers* and it's meant completely to use, as one would a bureau or whatever in their bedroom or a show-piece in their foyer.



Figure 4.30 '*Chest of Drawers*' appearing on KTLA's 5 Days of Vegas, 2010

They did not even get its name right. Or maybe in its Las Vegas incarnation this has become its name. It is certainly a long way from Crusoe's island. In the shop space with its eerie floor lighting this is the *unheimlich* turned up to the point where it is overpowering. Finally *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* seems to reside in the 'hysterical house' but not as place of strange beauty and unsettling affect, but as the very soul of Benjamin's space of phantasmagoria (Figure 4.31). If, as Benjamin suggests, for Baudelaire the prostitute was one of the central motifs of modernity whereby the commodity takes on human form in shape of the sex-worker, then *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, has the presence of 'the uncanny eroticism of the

inorganic’ (Benjamin 2002: 63). So we see it, shorn of its name, posing simply as *Chest of Drawers*, lolling over the rail of this modern-day arcade, touting its wares.

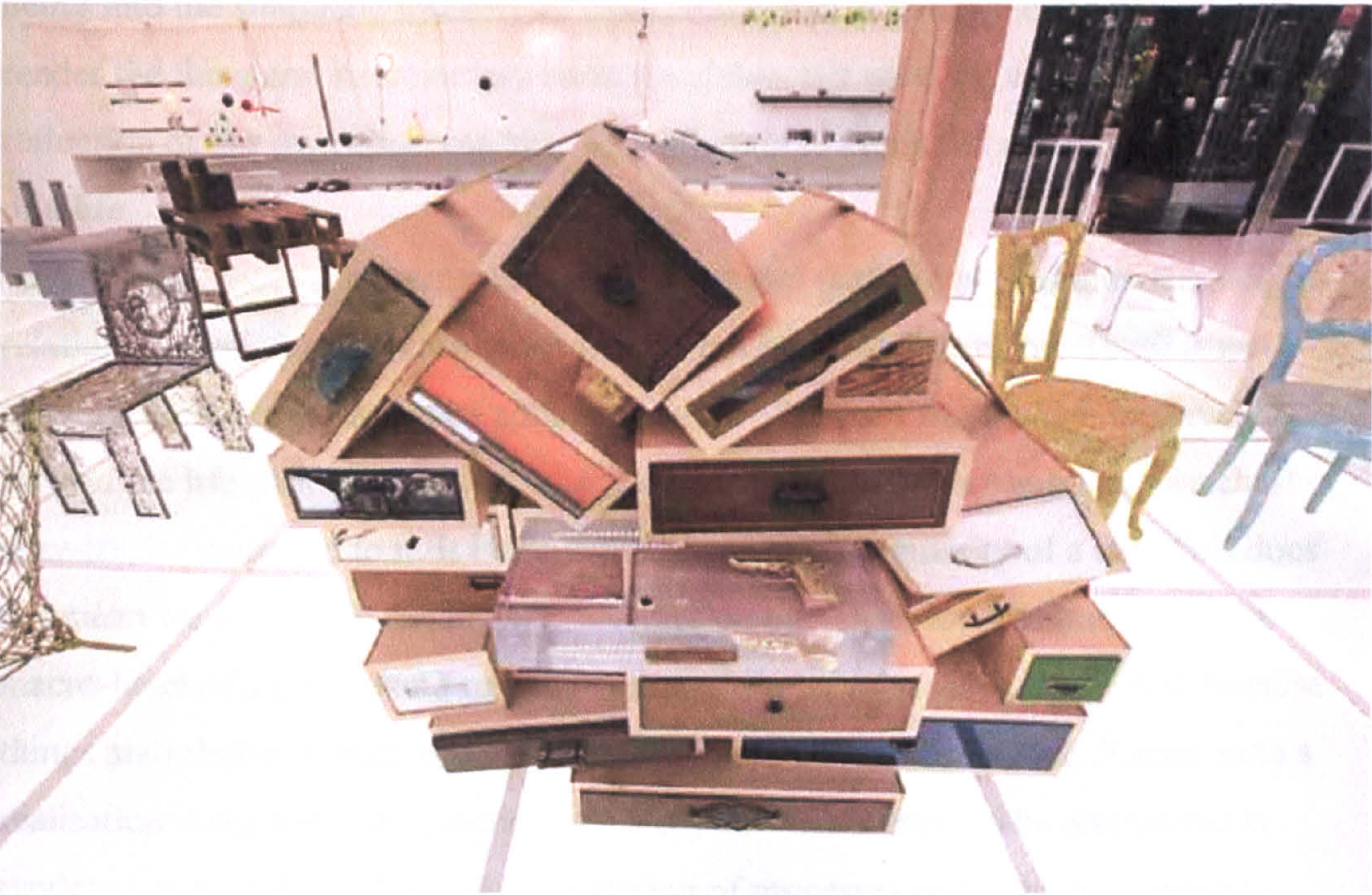


Figure 4.31 ‘*Chest of Drawers*’ touting for business in Vegas, 2010

Conclusions: A Life Story

You Can’t Lay Down Your Memory is one thing, in that it is one singular design, but as has been demonstrated, it is also multiple and multivalent. Not simply in that it exists as a series of material iterations in the form of different editions, but in that it has become different things as it has moved through its life, as it has manifested in changing contexts. An individual object that exists in series or as part of a network is manifold. Though it is recognised as another iteration of the same thing, this does not mean that there is a unity to the elements that constitute it. Until the very end there are never any conclusions, any final statements, in the story of a life. Perhaps even then none can be definitive, as it is impossible to know the ongoing effects and legacy of any existence.

So what is the story of how *You Can’t Lay down Your Memory* went from being a student graduation project to being in a gallery at the V&A? If an object can be said to have a social life then the telling of this story involves the extraction of a

comprehensible narrative from the messy discontinuities and disparate trajectories that go to make up its actual existence in space and time. However, it is then important that this should not collapse the myriad interconnections and contingencies of its being into the simplistic linearity of cause and effect. Yes a tale can be told, we can render the thing and its trajectory understandable, but what we see is as much the reflection of our own concerns, the filter of our own times and needs, as it is the truth of a life.

Any object's movements in both space and time are not to be understood in relation to some form of absolute Archimedian external dimension. There is no privileged position that can be adopted outside of history from which to view it. Instead the life path of the thing, whether this is a sentient human being or a chest of drawers, is immanent to it. It is the expression of the singularity of a life. This does not mean we must abandon history, whether on the micro-level of one life or the macro-level of a culture or a milieu, to some form of relativist despair. Just because things are relative to each other does not invalidate their importance. Rather such a realisation invigorates the practice of history as what is there to be discovered is rendered as a vital and dynamic intersection of processes with which to engage. Things have actually happened; moments were inhabited and have had consequences; the past, the present and the future are connected. What becomes important is not to discover the truth of such events, but to see the structural imperatives that entangle them for us in the now.

Remy's creation began life as a graduation project. He made it, as the poor student he was, from the materials he had to hand, as an imaginative exercise in the construction of the accoutrements of a life he perceived necessary for his modern castaway. These possibilities realised are written into the script of the piece. This apparent moment of origin, the intention of the maker and the conditions of production, have not ultimately set the meanings the piece can contain or transmit. Rather they have created parameters within which the work can move as it transitions through its life-course.

It was not inevitable that the design should have been taken up by Droog, or even that Droog should have existed at all. A few different corners turned by the protagonists and the history would have been altered beyond all recognition. Everything exists as the material record of its contingencies. Yet it did become part of Droog. In this process the organisation and the object became inextricably entangled

as their trajectories were intertwined. No *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory*, no Droog as we understand it; no Droog and the chest of drawers could possibly have ended up languishing in the corner of a studio, disassembled: just another storage problem for a struggling maker.

Ramakers's tactic of marketing Droog as though it were a band meant that the products it promoted became celebrities of a sort. In 1991 few could have predicted the celebrity driven culture we now inhabit, yet this is the world into which the object was moving. At its inception, a virtually universal structure with the capacity of connecting most of the world via electronic communication, allowing information to flow effortlessly around the globe, was the stuff of science-fiction. Yet this was the future that *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* was to come to be part of. The reproductive capacities of a society necessarily structure the possibilities of cultural reproduction, and the forms of cultural reproduction establish the nature of the symbolic value of things. This sets up a form of tautology in the operation of the political economy of the sign: that which we value appears in the media; to appear in the media is to be regarded as culturally valuable. Similarly, things end up in museums because they are deemed to be necessary to the collection in some way, yet being in such institutions serves to further validate the import of such things. In this way circulation becomes significance; the feedback loop recurs. It is in such a circumstance Remy's creation has lived its life.

The beginning and the end of the narrative we started with, *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory's* existence as a student project and its presence in the V&A, are arbitrary stopping points, historical zero-points that allow a story to be told. The sequential nature of what is then constructed, its apparent being as a series of discrete units, as beginning, middle and end, is actually an effect of that narrativising, not its true course revealed or discovered. As has been shown, the narrative can be extended back to include its precursors, as selected from the dialogical matrix in the service of the story. It can be made to be part of design history, it can be rendered the very essence of 'Dutchness', yet these will tell us more about the nature of the construction process than it does the truth of its place in history.

What then becomes important is to not believe in these zero-points as an external reality, but to understand how they have been used to render a history, to reveal its dynamism and its politics. This is therefore to conceptualise a relation to the world of things not as the potential of unearthing the truth of the past, but as the

revelation of the flows of the now in which all historical understanding and experience is generated. As shall then be demonstrated in the next chapter, this then makes explicit the need for us to understand the material existence we inhabit not as a static relation between pre-formed knowing subjects and inert inactive objects, but as the effect of dynamism, interaction, movement and flow.

Moving Furniture



Figure 5.1 The plastic monobloc chair

The plastic monobloc chair (Figure 5.1) is made by extruding molten polypropylene into a mould at 220 °C, creating a product which comes out in a single piece, hence the name. Millions have been made since they were first introduced to the market in the early 1980s and a new one comes off a production line somewhere in the world every seventy seconds. Originally designed by Vico Magistretti in 1967

(Designboom.com 2010), now over one hundred companies world-wide produce versions of the one-piece plastic chair (Thiel 2006: 11) which share the central characteristics of legs, a seat and a back but which can differ in minor variations, such as the shape of the back-splat and the presence or not of arm rests. It could be described as the definition of mass-production: it is cheap to make, easy to transport, profitable for its producers and functional for its users; it is light, strong, stackable and washable. In many ways it could be seen as a triumph of Modernist design; it is a solution to a problem that fulfils a need simply and efficiently. It also effortlessly expresses its functionality through its form.

As one of furniture's archetypes, the chair has experienced a peculiar position in the history of design. Its very ubiquity makes it a privileged site of intervention, for as Anne Massey notes it is the very 'taken-for-grantedness' of the chair that makes it worthy of study as 'No other object characterizes the impact of modernity with such clarity' (2011: 7). It fulfils a central function, in that it allows for sitting; it has architectural qualities that lend themselves to variation and exploration but it is also a product of a manageable scale. It has therefore been a site of experimentation for designers keen to test their approach to functional design at the same time as it has given them the opportunity to create a signature piece. The need for chairs as a part of daily life has also meant that the production of a cheap mass-produced sitting device has been a key goal of both ideologically driven designers and commercial manufacturers. The chair is such an essential element of the way we live that its production, dissemination and use can be seen as something of an index of the development of Western culture, particularly throughout the industrialised phase of modernity when, arguably, the making of cheap mass-produced chairs can be seen as the physical embodiment of the material and social values of the culture producing them.

As Edward Lucie-Smith pithily points out, furniture achieves archetypal status 'because a certain furniture-type establishes its fitness for a particular task to the point where no one thinks of changing it much' (1995: 138). This is the key to the chair's nature as an archetype. There is such a perceived congruence between its form and the task for which it is required that the two seem inextricably intertwined or entangled, to the degree that 'no one thinks of changing it much'. The key term here, then, is 'thinks', in that the object seems so much bound to its purpose or function that it comes to be beyond the realm of thought or cognition. Because we feel we know what

a chair is for we do not question its form because it appears to be fulfilling it so well. Yet this is based on an essentially tautological assumption about causality. The chair seems to be so well adapted to sitting, as practiced in Western culture, that its incitement to sit in this particular way appears to derive from the need to sit in this manner.

The simple white plastic monobloc chair is already a performative object. Nothing needs to be done to it to make it so (see Chapter 2). We have an emotional and ideological relationship with furniture, it moves us even if we do not realise this is happening. We seek comfort from the things with which we live and they function as symbols of who we believe ourselves to be, or wish to be. As Massey notes, 'The chair acts as a crucial cue to performativity' (2011: 8), in that it acts as a form of material interpellation inciting us to be in the chair in a certain way: to become a certain person in the sitting. Yet it is arguable that we tend not to be conscious of the way in which the material affordances of the device require that we sit in this particular manner to effect certain ends, which are specific to the particular qualities of the object.

To intervene in a found archetype such as the chair is to interact with form, but it is also to make an intercession into culture. As was demonstrated in the last chapter, any given object will transition between states in the progress of its biography, and this is as true of a cultural form as it is of the individual artefact. Therefore this chapter seeks to ask how design art interventions into this most ubiquitous of functional objects have altered its performative function, as it is demonstrated how this reveals the functioning of the ideological apparatus of performativity in our culture. In order to do this it is necessary to understand how furniture moves us, how it has an affective influence in its operation, but also how this is dependant upon the way in which it is itself in motion, as it flows through time and space as it carves its trajectories in history.

Intervening in the Archetype

In her project *White Billion Chairs*, shown at the Appel Gallery in Berlin in 2009, the designer Tina Roeder has taken thirty-three plastic monobloc chairs and drilled holes in each one (up to ten-thousand holes per chair), and then sanded them smooth to



Figure 5.2 Tina Roeder *White Billion Chairs*, found polypropylene monobloc chair with drilled holes, 2002-9

create a new artefact, one which takes its main form from its host but which has become changed in its effect (Figures 5.2 & 5.3). The act of drilling into the chairs has taken an absolutely mundane object and transmuted it into something else, as the holes allow light to pour through the previously unyielding plastic. Therefore not only has its form been changed, but in the process its cultural and emotional resonance has been altered.

It matters very much that it is the plastic monobloc chair into which Roeder has chosen to intervene. A chair such as the monobloc is now so ubiquitous in our culture that we hardly even notice the strangeness of its form, its marvellous nature.



Figure 5.3 Tina Roeder *White Billion Chairs*, found polypropylene monobloc chairs with drilled holes, 2002-9

As Baudrillard observes, ‘all such objects, with their pure outlines, no longer resemble even what they are; they have been stripped down to their most primitive essence as mere apparatus and, as it were, definitively secularized’ (2005: 16). Yet this means that we forget that the not only do we act upon the chair, but in interacting with it, the chair acts upon us. This is true of all objects, yet as one of the intimate parts of our apparatus of living the chair is actually, as has been noted, a highly specialised cultural event, a thing which offers certain forms of experience.

This is what makes Roeder’s intervention so resonant. The chair is a furniture archetype, it is one of the central types of everyday object with which we live. The plastic monobloc is an archetype of modern mass-manufacture, to the extent that it has almost become ubiquitous, whereby it almost cannot be seen because it seems to be such a fact of life in modernity. When Roeder drilled the holes in the piece she was practicing disjunctive design. Through the application of craft she has transformed the object from one thing to another (see Figure 5.4). The way in which this has been done then begins to point the way in which such disjunctive interventions operate. The monobloc has been carefully designed to be as structurally sound as possible, to make holes in it is to compromise this, which alters the chair from being an



Figure 5.4 Tina Roeder working on *White Billion Chairs*, 2002-9

instrumental piece of design into one which seems to offer a richer set of cultural readings which actually alters the nature of its function.

Does this then mean that what Roeder has created is no longer a chair as such, has it instead become a piece of art which is concerned with our relationship to the monobloc? As was discussed in Chapter 1, the use of the readymade in art is an act of ontological redefinition. Here the chairs remain chairs, their final purpose or *telos* has not been altered. Rather the way in which the chairs operate as they fulfil this has been reconfigured, in that the interchangeable multiplicity of the mass-produced has been obviated in the act of intervention. They may be exhibited in a gallery, but as design art they are still meant to be used. As it is design's relationship with use which defines it, it is therefore on the level of use which such practices must be discussed.

Sitting Comfortably?

How do we recognise a chair? From a common-sense point of view the answer would seem to be that a chair is an object that allows us to sit down. However, it must be asked to what extent design history, or even anthropology or ethnographic approaches,

have really considered the act of sitting in a chair, that is to say *being* in a chair. Design history, certainly, has often regarded the chair as more an object of contemplation than a site of such being (Meadmore 1979; Fiel & Fiel 1993; Bueno 2003; Czerwinski 2009). Where sitting has been considered, it has tended to be from a technical or ergonomic point of view that stresses the qualities of a chair as a more or less efficient tool (Cranz 1998; Byars 2006; Opsvik 2008). Yet, as has been discussed, sitting is a form of material interpellation, one whereby we negotiate an important part of our lives. That is to say sitting is much more than simply a material act, it has definite emotional and cultural dimensions that must be considered when attempting to understand how the nature of any given chair will affect the user.



Figure 5.5 Maarten Baas, *Plastic Chair in Wood*, hand-carved elm, 2008

To sit in a chair is to enter into a relationship between form and function on an affective level. That is in sitting we inevitably feel something about the nature of the act depending upon the type of chair used. The *Plastic Chair in Wood* is exactly what its title describes. Whilst taking part in a residency the Contrasts gallery in Shanghai in 2008, Maarten Baas contracted local craftsmen to hand-carve a facsimile of a plastic monobloc chair in elm. With this transposition the richness and elegance of the material and (by implication) the method by which it was fashioned seems to jar with a form that speaks so forcefully of standardisation and mass production. Here the nature of the material, (wood) and the method of manufacture (hand-carving) have been made absolutely subservient to a shape that derives from the formal predicates and limitations of another material (plastic) and another method of manufacture (moulding). It retains the same form and almost exactly the same utilitarian function, yet through transposing it into wood its communicative or signifying function has been recognisably altered, as has the nature of its performativity based on the affective reaction of the user.

The form speaks of reproducibility, of commonness, whilst the material and the way in which it has been made communicate a definite singularity. Walker has argued that if the intention is to make objects which may have an enhanced emotional resonance in order to promote longevity of use, a sustainable approach depends upon a certain congruence between the conditions of use, the method of making and the materials employed (2010: 52). In this object Baas is doing the exact opposite, in that, in Walker's terms, the 'various elements are not integrated into a unified whole, and a dissonance is created because of this lack of coherence' (ibid). This disjuncture between the method of making, the form and the materials therefore has an effect upon anybody encountering such a piece. However, Baas's intervention should not be simply seen as an aesthetic one. To sit in the wooden chair will be a qualitatively different sensory experience from using the plastic version. Not only will the touch and feel of Baas's chair be more sensually pleasurable than that of the monobloc, the give and torque of the structure will be different in each case. The two versions of the same structure can in this way then be said to inhabit markedly different places in the perceptual economies of our experience of objects. This illustrates the way in which we ascribe meaning and value to our material culture and suggests that through a piece such as Baas's the affective and emotional experience of using such an object will be markedly different to that of the mass-produced thing from which it has been

derived, not just in the way it appears, but also in the way that it functions on a more practical level. In such an object, therefore, the disjunctive effect of the design will enhance the affective qualities of the object through dissonance. Thus, in this register, the chair has been rendered an uncomfortable object.

Yet what do we mean when we talk about comfort? How do we actually tell if we are sitting comfortably? Here the concept of comfort appears to offer a point at which the material qualities of the chair and a certain emotional state seem to intersect. When asked what most people would want from a chair, what a chair's central functions are, most people would include comfort as a priority: that a chair should *be* comfortable. Yet it is not absolutely clear what this might mean. Indeed, Galen Cranz quotes Lueder in noting that there is 'no universally accepted operational definition of comfort' (in Cranz 1998: 112) and goes on to suggest that we have a problem with the issue of comfort because it may be that what she designates as its two components, support and freedom, are sometimes 'in conflict' (Cranz 1998: 112). Yet she is actually making assumptions about the nature of sitting comfortably, about how comfort is experienced.

In this model the overarching concept of comfort is being conceptualised as an absolute quality of the object: which is experienced by the subject in a certain way because of how the object has been engineered. When Cranz states 'Most disconcertingly, what ergonomics researchers recommend – support of the sit bones, not cutting under the thigh, support for the lower spine, etc. – never translates into chairs that all human beings describe as comfortable' (Cranz 1998: 112), it is telling that this should be 'disconcerting' as this demonstrates the limits of the mechanistic ergonomic approach to subject-object relationships.

As Elizabeth Shove notes, when defined as a quality of action rather than a physical attribute, comfort has to do with much more than simply the qualities of the object. It is 'to do with things,' but also crucially 'conditions and circumstances' (Shove 2003: 24). What then is clear is that sitting cannot be discussed as an abstract experience; we are always talking about sitting in a specific chair in a particular place at a certain point in history. As Witold Rybczynski notes, comfort is a cultural trope which changes as society changes. As he states, chairs are comfortable because they support the biology of the human frame, but also because they accommodate 'the postures of the time' (1986: 97). Posture could be taken to be an engineering question, one of seat heights and angles of recline, yet it also of course has another meaning in

terms of how one poses, as a form of posturing or the adoption of a role. Particular types of chair therefore allow not only for different kinds of sitting in a mechanistic sense, they also allow us to appear to be a certain sort of person as we adopt a pose, and as Rybczynski notes, different times require changing postures.

It could be suggested that the monobloc chair simply and efficiently solves the problem of comfort. However, from the experience of being in such a chair it is quite apparent that sitting in it is a dynamic experience. On a physical level the quality of comfort is constantly being sought out and mitigated by the sitter as they experience the chair. Yet until the process reaches a point of discomfort, it is unlikely that they will be aware of this. Similarly we feel comfortable in a chair if it is suited to the posture we wish to adopt: this is true not only of physical postures, but also social ones. In just the same way as we physically negotiate comfort, then, as a semi-conscious process, so we socially mitigate comfort through the way in which we interact with these things in the arena of everyday life. Yet this is an historical experience. Just as somebody sitting in a chair does not sit motionless throughout their time in the chair but moves and shifts, distributing weight and allowing for gesture, so historically speaking we are always seeking out furniture, the apparatus of living, that suits our required pose. Yet the codes of posture, both physical and ideological, are altering through time as we experience them. It is therefore not a surprise that comfort should be concerned with conflict as it is a point of constant negotiation between a self-conscious subject, social codes and the materiality of the world.

On an ergonomic level we might expect Baas's *Plastic Chair in Wood* to function in much the same way as its plastic model. The elm from which it has been carved will be warmer to touch and its greater rigidity will eliminate some of the annoying torsion which is such a feature of sitting in the monobloc, but its essential formal qualities, its seat height and pitch, the shape of the back and the like are identical. However, if we extend the idea of being comfortable in the chair to include its broader social life there can be said to be marked differences between the two types of object. For example, should you be offered Baas's chair to sit in, would you feel comfortable if everybody else was lounging in easy chairs? Your posture would not be the same, you would be at a different height; you might feel exposed and out of place. Alternatively you might feel higher than everybody else, superior, which may or may not be comfortable, depending upon what you required from the social

situation. Similarly, comfort is also concerned not only with sitting in, but being *with*, such things in a wider sense of accompaniment and ownership. In this regard it does not seem a problem to treat the £2 monobloc chair badly. It gets left out in the rain, it falls on its side in the garden, it gets dirty and few would care until they come to sit on it. It could then be asked if one might feel so comfortable behaving the same way with an object which has a four-figure price-tag?

Yet to what extent could these be said to be conscious apperceptions? It might be suggested that sitting in an expensive chair would be the more conscious activity, given that you might be aware all the time about how expensive it was: it would be a very conscious act. But this is a poor person's way of thinking. For the sort of consumer who would buy and use a limited edition piece of furniture such as this it is unlikely that this would be the cognitive or indeed emotional response. In such a situation the subject's relation to the price of the chair will be determined by the extent to which this is socially significant. Often to be wealthy is to be freed from concerns over financial economies of value, thus allowing other qualities to come to the fore. This then demonstrates a reciprocity of status and value between chair and sitter. It is therefore questionable the extent to which this would be a fully conscious process as such, rather it would be at the level of intensity; of the experienced but not fully integrated.

Clearly, then, as Baas's *Plastic Chair in Wood* illustrates, comfort as a concept extends beyond a technical ergonomic analysis of a chair. This is because it is not enough to understand the way in which the object has been designed to function, nor is it sufficient to understand the manner in which it has been styled to express its purpose. Rather it becomes necessary to understand the way in which such an object can and does actually function; this is therefore to begin to move towards an understanding of its function-*ing* as a quality of social and therefore historical experience.

The Point of Intervention

Martino Gamper's *Sonet Butterfly* chair (created as part of the *100 Chairs in 100 Days* project discussed in more detail in the next chapter) is an object that has clearly had something 'done' to it. The back of a monobloc chair has been carefully cut away and fixed to two moulded plywood seat units from other stacking chairs. All of the



Figure 5.6 Martino Gamper, *Sonet Butterfly* chair, found materials, 2008

elements are mass-produced and standardised forms, but the way in which they have been brought together is unique. Such a practice then mirrors the way in which the monobloc is used and modified in less rarefied circumstances, as can be seen in this example of a more everyday modification of the plastic garden chair that has taken place in a different economy of design and use (Figure 5.7).

With Gamper's chair, however, the meeting of the two chair-backs used in the base resembles the Japanese designer Sori Yanagi's *Butterfly* stool of 1956 (Figure 5.8). In recognising the allusion to the older design classic anybody coming to this object will gain the satisfaction which comes with knowing the codes, of getting the reference and in such a way will recognise themselves as a certain form of person; or rather such a reference interpellates the user into such position, it incites them to adopt this posture. The addition of the monobloc element then mitigates this reaction in its allusion to the everyday uses of the plastic chair.



Figure 5.7 A broken plastic monobloc chair which has been modified to extend its usefulness in Maputo, Mozambique



Figure 5.8 Sori Yanagi's *Butterfly* stool, rosewood and stainless steel, 1956

In the conjunction of the parts a moment of recognition beyond narrative historical reference can be perceived: we can intuit the realisation of the maker that these parts could be fixed together in this manner, the clarity of the construction then

makes it apparent that somebody has done this. In Baudrillard's terms we become 'fascinated by what has been *created*, and is therefore unique, because the *moment* of creation cannot be reproduced' (his emphasis; 2005: 81). The traces of the path the object's existence has taken are clearly visible: this is a thing which has transitioned from one state to another. It is an object which has manifestly passed through a very particular moment in time as elements of three objects have come together to make another at the hands of an intentional subject. This is manifest in the form the thing has taken, that it has passed through time in a certain way, yet it is not clearly apparent that this will be consciously registered even as it acts to define posture and the possibilities of being in this chair.

Modern life is contingent upon an agreed sense of time, and this depends upon the clock. The clock, of course is a certain conceptualisation of temporality. In her largely ethnographic study, the anthropologist Jay Griffiths gives many examples of ways of relating to time that are not our modern clock-based method. She points out, for example, that for the Hopi and Navajo people their conception is 'life in sundance time' (1999: 7), by which time is taken to be a quality of seasons rather than hours and minutes. This to their culture is a given, an underlying structuring element of existence which it is not necessary to register because it is such a fundamental quality of being. What becomes clear from Griffiths's exhaustive survey of mankind's differing relationship to time is that a culture's conception of time – how one moment is connected to the next and the way in which events are positioned in time – is intrinsic to its sense of itself (Griffiths 1999). For any conception of time to be of use, it must by definition be a shared sense of time; it must be a paradigm or epistemological constant around which the group can cohere. In this way time as an ordering principle underpins the paradigmatic structure of all cultures. Not least because the way we conceive of time and our relationship to it is the central underlying substrate upon which our conception of history and personal identity is based.

We live in an age characterised by ephemerality. Most of the things we use are not made to last. In Gamper's chair the obsolescent elements of discarded chairs have been brought together to create a new object, just as with Remy's chest of drawers in the last chapter. In this way such an artefact demonstrates on a material level the temporal attenuation of modernity. As Lash notes, time under capitalism is the reflection of the equivalence of the commodity form – that time is made up of equal,

homogenous and interchangeable units. In this reading Newtonian time is therefore seen as clockwork not simply because it is made of abstract units 'one tick followed by another at equal intervals' but because 'if you wind it backwards or forwards you come to the same point' (Lash 2006: 8). Certainly it can be demonstrated that we have a sense of the iterations of time, the beat of the heart, the electrical impulse passing across the brain, but it is a certain attitude to time that suggests that in consumerist modernity this is then a continual return of the same rather than an index of difference.

The form of the monobloc chair appears to speak of interchangeability; the process by which it has come about seems to suggest the equivalence of each unit, as though the physical were an expression of a law of equivalence. This masks the fact that each unit has a 'unique existence at the place where it happens to be... which determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence' (Benjamin 1979: 222). It is the physical trace of a particular life or biography.

Martino Gamper's intervention into the material structure of a particular monobloc in the *Sonet Butterfly*, demonstrates the existence of this singular object and its peculiar place in space time. Through cutting the back from it and conjoining it with two other seat units (which have transmuted into a base) the chair is severed from its apparent interchangeability, as both form in space and persistence in time. This monobloc cannot be wound backwards in abstract time. The change in its physicality wrought by a specific intervention embeds in its form the trace of its descent through history. This does not mean that to use it or encounter it is to therefore become conscious of it, quite the opposite, it is because such tropes are so embedded in our sense of what it means to encounter such things that this intervention can stimulate without coming into reason.

The Uncanny Temporality of Things

If a suit is left in a wardrobe for long enough it is likely that *tineola bisselliella* moths will lay their eggs in the textile host. As the larvae hatch they will then feed upon the fibres. Upon returning to the suit it will then be very apparent that what was once a fine piece of formal-wear has moved through time to become a horrifying remnant of the life of moths interacting with that of people. The owner is left with an uncanny trace of the interaction of the flows of people and beasts. In his evocatively named



Figure 5.9 Robert Stadler *Rest In Peace* chair, modified found chair, 2004

Rest in Peace chair (Figure 5.9), the Austrian designer Robert Stadler has nibbled away at a monobloc chair to create a patina that speaks of the action of some creature or disease. This is disturbing not least because such chairs are made from plastic. As Tom Fisher notes

Plastics cease to be pristine, and become evidently worn, in a particular way. They do not patinate; they gather dirt rather than ‘charm’, and then may elicit particularly strong feelings of disgust. When they are no longer an acceptable element in humanized nature, they perhaps are doubly *unnatural*. They are not trustworthy because they seem to make an issue of the margins of our bodies, and the manner of their ageing draws our attention to their margins. (Fisher 2004: 30)

So, in Stadler’s piece his intervention into the monobloc has rendered what appears to be wholly naturalised through ubiquity, ‘doubly unnatural’ by deliberately compromising its pristine nature and eliciting the sense of disgust that Fisher identifies. In doing so, therefore, the uncanny qualities of the object are stimulated as

it becomes less innocent, less 'trustworthy' because of the way its passage through time has been accentuated and exaggerated through the apparent attack on its material qualities. We know that plastic does not rot, yet, in his own words, Stadler has produced an 'artificially rotten' (Eyal 2009) chair. This is therefore an attack on our perceived boundaries between categories, our sense of the correctness and mutual exclusivity of particular states and modes of being.

Our understanding of how objects pass through time is constructed through, and depends upon, the material affordances made available to us by the way in which we live. As Benjamin notes 'During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well' (1979: 224). Or as Lash and Lury suggest, 'Mass products draw in the public at the level of the senses, and lead to the restructuring of then very conditions of experience, subjectivity and the body' (2007 : 133). Plastic is not meant to rot. If it is seen to do so it is disturbing. It has this uncanny effect on the level of a material disgust which accompanies such visceral transgressions; it is also a social anxiety which is stimulated, as the new thing we are offered, the piece of high design exhibited in the gallery or presented in the showroom, seems to be of a different order to that which we expect and demand. The things we buy are meant to be shiny and new, pristine and with the promise of a new life. To sell rotten things is then to disturb this.

In such a situation it can be argued that the apparent sequentiality of time is a key underpinning prerequisite for the consumer mode of subject-object conjunctions. One of the absolutely essential tropes upon which consumer capitalism depends is neophilia and the veneration of the new. As Susan Buck-Morrs notes, for Benjamin, this endless craving for the new represents modernity as 'the time of Hell' which

...deals not with the idea that the fact that "always the same thing happens" ... but on the face of that oversized head called earth precisely what is newest doesn't change; that this 'newest' in all its pieces remains the same. It constitutes the eternity of hell and its sadistic craving for innovation.
(Benjamin in Buck-Morrss 1991: 97)

One thing we think we know is that these newest things should always be pristine and intact when we buy them. Yet Benjamin detects within the craving for the new a

certain death-drive which fetishises the almost immediate decay of the aura of novelty implicit in consumption. For how long can a new chair remain new? As many commentators have observed (Schouwenberg 2000; Norman 2004; Chapman 2005; Walker 2010), the things we consume are now seldom made to age well. Often they are made available to us in such a way that they become obsolete long before they wear out. Therefore it has been suggested that if design is to be more 'sustainable' it is necessary to engineer objects in such a way as to make the materials and methods of manufacture appropriate to aging (Norman 2004; Chapman 2005; Walker 2005, 2010). In Benjaminian terms this could then be a call to invest such things with an aura which makes them sufficiently appealing to endure. Yet this is then to engage not only with methods and materials but their relationship to a conception of change and the passage of time. As the philosopher Andrew Benjamin has observed 'The complexity of the problem of the relationship between time and aura stems from the fact that solving the problem necessitates making substantial claims about the way in which the relationship between time and being has been structured' (Benjamin 1986: 32). Therefore any attempt to render the object more or less meaningful to achieve specific instrumental ends, such as enduring appeal, will necessarily depend upon the nature of the ideological apparatus being intervened in. It will depend upon *what* is being sustained.

Stadler, rather than creating a more sustainable object, has fashioned a thing that speaks of decay and therefore death. In making the *Rest in Peace* chair artificially abject he has created an allegorical object, a *momento mori*, which rather than looking forward actually appears to be a foreshadowing of its own decline and disintegration. It is a paradox of our culture that our craving for the new contains within it an intimate knowledge of its dialectical opposite, which is not oldness but decay. Benjamin quotes Paul Valéry

Novelty. The cult of novelty. The new is one of those poisonous stimulants which end up becoming more necessary than any food; drugs which, once they get a hold on us, need to be taken in progressively larger doses until they are fatal, though we'd die without them. It is a curious habit – growing thus attached to that perishable part of things in which precisely their novelty consists'. (in Benjamin 2002: 560)

When Benjamin argues that this new always remains the same he is observing the tendency, constituted by relating to things as commodity forms, to flatten everything

into equivalence and homogeneity where the ur-moment of the object is that of its display and initial consumption. This then homogenises the very act of existence as we appear to be held in a stasis point of commodity aesthetics even as we feel we move into each new moment. The plastic monobloc exists as a trope of constant potential newness: cheap enough to always be available. Yet this very quality is what allows it to collapse into abjection, as it appears to have little value in time. Stadler's chair by contrast has been made singular in time by its simulation of decay. It ceases to be available to homogeneous time and the iteration of the thing and becomes about duration. It is not simply another tick of the clock, another iteration coming off the production-line, another homogeneous moment in the endless dream-state of consumption. It is this thing, now, at this moment that shall never come again.

The *Rest in Peace* chair gives the sense of being an object which through decay is coming to the end of its life. This is then disturbing because it suggests ending, per se; it is a material expression of how moments in human time are not reversible. Bergson introduces the concept of duration (*durée*) as a term to describe the human experience of time as intensive and not available to be quantified as discrete elements within a homogeneity. Our conceptualisation of time as an undifferentiated medium through which we pass, he argues, is actually a product of a very particular representation of time and temporality. He states that to conceive of human experience as duration means to be entirely 'rid of the idea of a homogeneous medium or a measurable quantity.' And from this he concludes that '[b]y carefully examining our consciousness we shall recognize that it proceeds in this way whenever it refrains from representing duration symbolically.' (Bergson 1910: 105). Indeed Bergson's response to the problem of Zeno's paradox, whereby a flying arrow can be said to never reach its target because each element of distance can be eternally halved, is to state that motion is indivisible. The problem only arises when motion and time, that is, duration, are mistaken for the spatial metaphor that underlies them. This concept of duration is important because, as Bergson argues '[w]hat is duration within us? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity; a pure heterogeneity within which there are no distinct qualities. In a word, the moments of inner duration are not external to one another' (Bergson 1910: 226). If our inner sense of duration is made up of moments which are not external to one another then the world is made up of objects (or phenomena observed by the subject) which *do not* endure, because they are constantly

changing, because they are *emergent*. That is to say the persistence of objects in the world is a construct, a way of seeing things rather than an apperception of a reality to be grasped. Stadler's chair does not then shock us into realising this. It does not bring this into consciousness as such. Rather it changes the repertoire of postures which may be adopted in relation to it. It creates a reservoir of subjectivities that may be taken on in relation to it.

The plastic monobloc chair exists in the form it does because it is a material expression of an attitude to objects and their physicality based on what we believe time is and how it can be inhabited. It is made from a precious and finite resource, oil, over which wars are fought, yet such is our sense of a progression into empty time that this can be used up with hardly a second thought. This therefore does not reflect or symbolise our sense of consuming the moments of our lives, of selling our time for abstract value in a putative future to buy goods which promise newness but contain decay: it is of the same order, it is the same thing. As Bergson argues

In place of a heterogeneous duration whose moments permeate one another, we thus get a homogeneous time whose moments are strung on a spatial line. In place of an inner life whose successive phases, each unique of its kind, cannot be expressed in the fixed terms of language, we get a self which can be artificially reconstructed, and simple psychic states which can be added to and taken from one another just like the letters of the alphabet in forming words.' (Bergson 1910: 237)

So the endlessly equivalent nature of the commodity form is not simply mirrored in the nature of our existence. The seemingly continuous interchangeability things existing in time comes to constitute the self and any sense of the inner life of the subject in a material world, just as we come to find this in the quality of our experience. Stadler's chair then refuses this and baffles the well-worn reactive circuits we have developed. This does not then liberate us to perceive the abject quality in the fetishised newness of the commodity, but it does open up a space where something different can happen. This is because newness is a static concept, it is an imagined point that the commodity takes on in its biography, as it transitions between states. Decay is a dynamic concept. It is not so much a state as a process. This then suggests that, without our motive force, or even our sanction, things are *doing* things.

Active Things

In Marti Guixé's, *Stop Discrimination of Cheap Furniture*, an edition of ten monoblocs painted with this slogan (2004; Figure 5.10), we are assaulted by a crowd. The addition of the writing seems to give each chair a voice, so that where before we would simply have seen some plastic furniture, there appear to be a gathering of individuals with an issue they wish to confront. This disruption of the homogeneity of the unmolested commodity then means that a discordant rabble has been created. The injunction 'stop' is a straightforward interpellation. It is Althusser's policeman in the form of the chair. But here the policeman seems to be a very politically correct PC, in that we are told to 'stop discrimination'. At this point, however, the message wavers in indeterminacy. Its conjunction with the appellation 'cheap furniture' on one level gives the objects the character of the oppressed, the discriminated against. They become migrant workers, society's outsiders. Yet the poor grammar also opens up another possibility, that we should actually stop them discriminating, it becomes something 'of' them, part of how they are behaving.



Figure 5.10 Marti Guixé, *Stop Discrimination of Cheap Furniture*, found plastic chairs, paint, 2004

It is the uncanny that resolves the apparent tension between the known and the unknown – the almost known, the repressed and the recognised. Aldous Huxley, in *The Doors of Perception*, quotes C.D. Broad stating that ‘the suggestion is that the function of the brain and nervous system and sense organs is in the main *eliminative* and not productive.’ (Broad in Huxley 1971: 21). This is to suggest that we actually experience intensively much more than we are actually conscious of, that ‘the Mind at Large has to be funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and the nervous system’ (Huxley 1971: 21), and indeed Brian Massumi makes the same point that ‘Will and consciousness are subtractive. They are limitative, derived functions that reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed’ (2002: 29). We have an intensive experience of objects as things which act upon and through us, but we necessarily filter this out to allow us to exist in an apparently extensive world in which it is seen as vital that we are the only acting agents, the points of originary causality for what happens in our material world. As Latour notes, this emphasis on human agency as the point of origin of all power and action means that material objects appear asleep ‘like the servants of some enchanted castle’. When we break the spell, however, and realise the objects are actually active ‘they start shuddering, stretching and muttering. They begin to start swarming in all directions, shaking the other human actors, waking them out of their dogmatic sleep.’ (Latour 2007: 73). This then starts to look like a very disconcerting place to be.

There is a tendency to portray the subject as the actor, that we are the active ones in the material world while we are surrounded by inert objects. However, if we begin to see matter as active the situation actually starts to look terrifying. When Dunne and Raby exhibited their *Robot No. 4: The Needy One* (2007), this was a vision of an object that had emotional requirements that had to be attended to: it needed to be listened to and understood. This is, however, a very benign perspective, given the demands of the material in consumer capitalism. The materialist dream of being surrounded by objects as servants starts to look very much like a nightmare in which tyrannical things command our daily lives; the car that demands to be washed and endlessly repaired, the mobile phone that constantly clamours for our attention, the clothes that must be scrupulously maintained, the plastic chairs that must be carried from place to place as they command, indeed, that must be listened to and their opinions noted.

In consumer culture we are conditioned to believe that it is our free-will that drives us; that we make conscious decisions about the way we interact with things. This starts to look very much like the model of the sophisticated consumer proffered by the marketing and advertising industries. As Don Slater observes, consumer culture is characterised 'by the consumption of commodities...in which cultural reproduction is largely understood to be carried out through the exercise of free personal choice' (1997: 8). Therefore we are encouraged to believe that we are surrounded by things that we have chosen freely, rather than seeing such conditions as being the outcome of certain economic and cultural structures that are themselves the product of broader power relations. In consumerism the flows of culture become personalised and internalised. We are interpellated into a relationship with things which then has the appearance of having been deliberately chosen.

This is of course the curious nature of the way in which we are encouraged to interact with commodities. On the one hand we are sold them as powerful. The advert suggests that buying this car will make us virile or that purchasing the correct brand of washing up liquid will make us loved by our families. Yet it is also essential to the consumerist mythos that at the same time we are encouraged to believe that these objects become our servants, that the chain of action only leads one way: that we act upon them but they do not act upon us. As Haug notes, in consumer culture our actual physical experience of things 'springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally determined by exchange value – a complex of material phenomena and of the sensual subject-object relations conditioned by these phenomena'. So it starts to become clear that it is the nature of the commodity form that is actually constructing the very rational conscious subjectivity we think we bring to bear upon the material world. As Haug continues 'The analysis of these relations reveals the subjective element in the political economy of capitalism in so far as subjectivity is at once a result and a prerequisite of its functioning' (1986: 7). Therefore, any understanding of the way in which any given chair fits into the conceptual schema of the world will be structured by what Benjamin has described as the 'dream consciousness of the collective' (Benjamin 2002: 393). If any individual decides to go and buy a chair, whether it is the humble monobloc or Baas's expensive piece of craft, thus exercising their free personal choice, it is possible to argue that what they are doing is indeed none of these things, that the choice is not 'free' or 'personal' in any meaningful way, in that the subject in consumer capitalism is

constituted as an object, which is itself a product of certain material relations and ideological structures. As Slater observes:

Consumer culture promotes the false sense that subject and object, individual and consumer good, audience and culture perfectly match and are reconciled now, under present social conditions. In fact, this identification is true in so far as individuals have actually been reduced to objects themselves, to functional administered units within the systems of production and consumption. (Slater 1997: 122)

So in this conception rather than regarding the individual and the thing as discrete entities they are actually elements in a structuration of reality. We become the dreamer and the dream in Benjamin's sleep of capitalism (2002: 391). This then begins to point to a situation in which there can be no dividing line between subjects and the things they use and possess.

The Technique of Awakening

So, how do pieces such as these function? It could be argued that because of the very ubiquity of an object such as the plastic monobloc chair we no longer register it. It is one of those things that is so present that we do not really notice it anymore, it simply becomes part of the fabric of life and as such is not questioned, or even really brought into cognition. This means that we only really perceive its outline, that it is, so to speak, enveloped in Shklovsky's sack (see Chapter 1). His suggestion, therefore, was the application of *ostranenie*, defamiliarisation or estrangement that will then increase the difficulty and length of perception in order to prolong it, to make it richer and more productive (1925). It could then be argued that this is just what such pieces as have been discussed in this chapter are doing. That through the transposition of materials or the collaging together of elements, the artificial aging of a piece or giving it voice through plastering it with slogans, a common object such as the plastic monobloc is wrenched from its invisibility and brought into sight.

Yet to acknowledge that such designers are employing an alienation effect is not to regard the design art interventions discussed here as a form of Critical Design that 'asks carefully crafted questions' (Dunne and Raby 2002) and makes the user think, as such. Rather it is to suggest that the application of such an effect actually alters the nature of affect and modifies its possibilities. This is because it is not

enough to make the user aware of the presence of the plastic monobloc chair in the culture of modernity. What use is such knowledge in itself? Rather the modification of an object's affective possibilities will alter the conditions of possibility in which it can function, it will change its frame of affect.

This is therefore to discuss such interventions on the level of their engagement as intensive experience, as affect, first and foremost. To talk of a level of intensive experience that lies beneath conscious action may again appear to appeal to 'a pre-reflexive, romantically raw domain of primitive experiential richness – the nature in our culture.' Yet, as Massumi states, 'because volition, cognition, and presumably other "higher" functions are present... in that now not so "raw" domain' (2002: 29-30), so we begin to see that even in this apparently 'raw' state we are making decisions and acting. To discuss the unconscious as something which is radically pre-conscious is to suggest that it has an essentially primary nature that exists prior to and in priority over rational consciousness. What Massumi is arguing is that what we experience as consciousness may only be a small part of a much bigger edifice of reason and reasoning of which we are not aware; at the same time as there may well be a great deal of un-reason in what we have cast as the rational. This is therefore the realm of the ideological ordering of the potentialities of affect, structured by the material apparatus of our lives, and this is a point in which it is possible to intervene, as is evidenced in work such as that discussed here.

This is because such objects have the potential to refuse their allotted place in the schema of consumerist ideological apparatus. In this way they can be seen as dialectical objects, whereby the internal tensions of something such as the monobloc come to the fore. In the dream state of consumerism the object is a mute inert tool available to the consumer in the fulfilment of their desire. In the worked upon plastic chair this supine state is frustrated as the act, the voice, the affect, the power of the object to move us as it itself is in motion is amplified. For Benjamin then, in the unfinished *Passagenwerk*, this was an attempt to conduct an 'experiment in the act of awakening. An attempt to become aware of the dialectical – the Copernican – turn of remembrance.' (Benjamin 2002: 388). This then may superficially appear to correspond to the injunction that such design should make us think. However, this was not Shklovsky's suggested tactic, he rather proposed an expansion of perception not conscious cognition, and crucially Benjamin posits this 'awakening' not as a moment of psychological disruption achievable through the use of objects, but a project based

in an understanding of historical experience that will demonstrate how all objects are used, that is to say their conditions of use, within this ideological apparatus constituted by the consumer capitalist fashion system. It is not to react to the object, stop, think and realise how the object is functioning in relation to a given subjectivity. It is the alteration of the possibilities of affective response which then destabilises a broader economy of affect that casts the acting subject as the motive force in any such encounter.

In Benjamin's terms the act of awakening was to be a project predicated upon the recovery of the discontinuities and ruptures in the series of events which brings us to a particular moment. This is then to radically rediscover the possibility of change in subjects and objects, indeed in the conjunction which is the interrelation of people and things. Massumi notes that 'Change is emergent relation, the becoming sensible in empirical conditions of mixture, of a modulation of potential.' (Massumi 2002: 77). As was observed in Chapter 1, Nietzsche suggests that the historian looks backwards to such a degree that he also *believes* backwards (1979 [1889]: 25). This emphasises the way in which our tendency to connect moments together into rational narratives of cause and effect predicated on dominant mythologies smooth out the messy discontinuities of existence. It is a recognition of the historicising effect of ideology. Massumi notes that 'Post-emergence there is capture and containment. Rules are codified and applied. The intermixing of bodies, objects and signs is standardized and regulated. Becoming becomes reviewable and writable: becoming becomes history.' (2002: 77). However, to practice history and examine the nature of subjects and objects in time as a process of dialectics, of struggle and opposition, of power exercised and resisted, is to revitalize the human relation to things and each other.

In this way to understand that furniture (or any other category of thing) is in motion, in both time and space, is to recognise its volatility and the broader nature of change. It allows us to maintain events in their dispersion, in Foucault's terms. It can be argued, therefore that it is necessary to choose zero-points from which to examine the subject/object (thing) events in which we are implicated whilst explicitly acknowledging this activity. This then is to recognise a now which is not part of a seamless flow of history but a radical site of agency in terms of subject/thing conjunctions. It is to take a historical materialist position, in that matter is taken to have immanent form which is structured by the action of power.

Conclusions: Being Moved

It is not by chance that a significant number of examples of design art interventions into the plastic monobloc chair exist. It is because of its ubiquity. On one level it is simply because it is such an all-pervading part of our culture that it is readily available as a resource for designers who wish to work with found objects. That is, as a found object it is very easy to find. On another level, however, whether the designers realise it or not, it is also a material expression of the dominant values of our culture: it is cheap and disposable, it is one thing – the plastic garden chair – but it is seemingly endlessly multiple in its iterations. It is much used but little cared for and broken and discarded examples can be seen everywhere once you start to look. If the chair is a furniture archetype then this form of chair can be said to be archetypal of the consumerist manifestation of such a thing. This means that it is a rich site for material manipulation and subversion, and something as simple as Roeder's act of drilling holes can achieve this.

It is also a supremely functional item, to the point whereby it seems to exist purely as utilitarian function, stripped of any allusions to status or social signifying role. However, as has been demonstrated, this can never be the case. Any object is always implicit in a broader ideological apparatus. Even something as apparently straightforward as comfort, the seemingly neutral mechanical work of the chair, can be demonstrated to be implicated in its ideological positioning. As Baas's *Plastic Chair in Wood* makes explicit, even the simple transposition of material fundamentally changes the nature of its functioning, not just on the level of signification but in terms of practical use. This then lays bare the importance of what it is made from and how it has been manufactured in its unaltered state.

To intervene in an apparently complete structure such as the monobloc, as Gamper has done for example, is then to work with the material assumptions contained within such an object. The act of intervention uses as its raw material not simply the physical structure of the object, but its place in culture, its relational qualities and its potentialities of affect. Things seem to magically appear in the shops in consumer culture. If you were to buy a plastic chair and somebody asked 'where did that come from?' you would be unlikely to respond 'it was made in a factory by people working for wages who oversaw the extruding of molten polypropylene into a mould at 220 °C. It was then transported half way around the world to a retail space

where I exchanged units of abstract value for it and brought it home'. You would be more likely to say 'B&Q'. In such a way its descent is obscured, the object reified and it appears to be present as a fabulous relation between things rather than the result of a relationship between people. Gamper's intervention denies this. His act of detournment and invention renders the object as an emergent structure. Not simply because it has transitioned from one state to another through his manipulation, the chair carved up and re-used as a new form, but also because it is now to go on and function as a practical use-object in the performance of lived experience. Gamper's effect upon the chair refutes its apparent stopped nature as a complete and completed thing, just as his offering it for use emphasises its ongoing emergence as a contested and contestable thing.

We experience modernity as supreme temporal attenuation and the seemingly inert objects we encounter appear to validate the curious nature of material culture in consumer capitalism. That is we are persuaded that the way we live now is the inevitable outcome of a technological progress that fulfils eternal and pre-set needs in the provision of commodities to be consumed, such as the plastic chair that allows for sitting, just as we are constantly encouraged to see time itself as a consumable commodity, empty, homogeneous and endlessly available to be filled with the novelties of mass-production. So what is newest always remains the same, because the tautological operation of commodity culture declares that these things we are presented with fulfil our needs, despite the fact that these 'needs' are actually just as much the product of this operation as any material goods that may be manufactured. In this way we forget that anything else is possible, as in the shiny products of capitalism we seem to see our desires reflected as the source of these yearnings, the action of the commodity form is obscured in the constant now generated in the functioning of the apparatus.

In such a situation the creation of an object that seems to be decaying in a way it should not, such as with Stadler's piece, is grit in the mechanism. We are always promised the shiny and the new. All the adverts tell us this is what we deserve. Yet here we are offered the compromised, the abject, the thing breaking down. In this sense the perceived boundaries between categories so carefully nurtured in the age of the sophisticated consumer are transgressed and we feel uncomfortable. But this does not necessarily mean that we are shocked into a state of awareness. It does not mean that the object makes us think, thus preparing us for the transition into revolutionary

consciousness. If it was this easy people could just be told what the problem was and they could think themselves out of it.

Instead the operation of such design art interventions as have been discussed here is more subtle and nuanced because of the nature of the functioning of the ideological apparatus they inhabit. As has been argued, we experience our lives not as a sequence of discrete moments, but as a continuous duration. This is then to conceive of our relationship to the material not as a series of static encounters but as motion. On an affective level we are moving with objects, just as we are in a state of becoming, so are they. Therefore we are in a coexistent state of becoming with things; subject and object emerge together, as a monism that only becomes divisible when it is codified and put to use for ideologically determined ends, that is, when it becomes history.

The things we live with and through, therefore, cannot be separated from their context, except artificially in the process of critique. To do so, to attempt Benjamin's 'technique of awakening' is therefore not to discover the truth of an external material reality. It is to see the shape of the mechanisms we use to render a certain dimension of existence visible, and in the process remember that this is not the only form of life that is possible. Guixé's rabble of chairs is disturbing because it reminds us of what our affective experience constantly suggests, that we are not separate from things but part of a process whereby the world, me and you, us and them, subject and object, self and matter, is in constant motion as the dialectical tensions of being are played out.

In this respect the actions and interventions of design art seem to be fulfilling a role that has often been claimed for modern art: that it should move us, that in being experienced it should somehow leave us altered. Yet to what ends is this effect being constructed? In the next chapter the practices and outcomes of design art are compared to the way in which fine art functions in contemporary culture. The purpose of this, then, is to allow for a discussion of the ethics of design, what its moral purpose may be in a world that, far from constituting the fulfilment of the consumerist dream, has come to appear highly unstable and uncertain.

Swinging From the Chandelier: Art and the Ethics of Design

In an article in *The New York Times* in January of 2009, Michael Cannell, the former editor of the 'House and Homes' section of the paper, declared: 'Design Loves a Depression', arguing that the economic downturn is actually a good thing for the practice of design. In the piece he suggests: 'The pain of layoffs notwithstanding, the design world could stand to come down a notch or two — and might actually find a new sense of relevance in the process'. He then goes on to state that the ambition of Modernism was the democratization of design, whilst asserting that Ikea and Target 'have shown that the battle for cheap design can be won', and the challenge now facing designers is 'to coax us to a more efficient way of living' (Cannell 2009).

It is telling that Cannell clearly believes that the function of design is to provide us with this more efficient way of life. Indeed, he seems to be most exercised by the way in which a certain form of decadence appeared to be discernable in the design that proliferated in the boom years, and he seems pleased that '[n]ow, given that all those slick Miami condos are sitting empty in the sky, designers like the Campana Brothers, with their \$8,910 Corallo chair, and Hella Jongerius, with her \$10,615 Polder sofa, might have a harder time selling their wares' (2009). Here he appears to be referring to contemporary design in the way in which modern art has often been discussed, as though it were some form of confidence trick played on the public by cynical elite, who charge exorbitant prices for that which is practically useless and essentially meaningless. He goes on to note disapprovingly that in 2007 at the Milan furniture fair (the same year that as an attendee Sudjic observed that design seemed to have turned 'militantly useless'; 2008) Marcel Wanders, whom he describes as 'a Dutch designer known for arty provocations', threw a party at which

‘his work was upstaged by his girlfriend, Nanine Linning, who hung upside down half-naked while mixing vodka drinks from bottles affixed to a chandelier.’ This appears to have made Cannell very excited. He concluded that ‘Form followed frivolity’ and ‘Function was left off the guest list’ (ibid).

Murray Moss, the owner of New York’s Moss Gallery took against this. Calling Cannell’s diatribe ‘regressive and mean spirited’ he responded thus: ‘Design loves a depression? I can assure you that design, along with painting, sculpture, photography, music, dance, fashion, the culinary arts, architecture, and theatre, loves a depression no more than it loves a war, a flood, or a plague.’ Despite the fact that war has always tended to be a great stimulus to innovation, it is interesting to note how Moss is here positioning design as existing within the realm of the liberal arts of painting, sculpture, photography, music, dance and even ‘the culinary arts’, which he believes are concerned with people’s ‘emotional, intellectual, cultural, sociological, and political well being.’ He then goes on to ask: ‘When he says “come down a notch or two,” does Mr. Cannell mean that Design should retreat from its current expansive, ambitious, fearless, exploratory, guild-breaking, all-encompassing plateau, from its hard-won re-positioning in the Arts?’ (Moss 2009)

Of course, this is exactly what Cannell seems to be saying. That design should be seen as a practical way in which a more functional manner of living can be achieved; that frivolity exists in contradiction to function and characterising design as a form of artistic and expressive practice is essentially in opposition to its role of making the world more efficient. Moss disputes Cannell’s thesis that design thrives in hard times, by retorting: ‘No, it doesn’t. It tends to suffer, like any of the other humanistic disciplines. New ideas do not get championed or realized. Leadership turns to market-driven accommodation’ (2009). Yet here Moss appears to be rather ignoring the fact that he too unavowedly operates in a market. It seems that what he is saying is that design, when it is not backed by the economies of art, must operate at the level of being of service to industry and mass-production.

The illustration that accompanies the online version of Cannell’s article (Figure 6.1) would seem to exemplify the choice that the author seems to believe is before us in the face of an economic downturn. On the left is an Eames *LCW* plywood chair, which stands for the type of efficient Modernism for which Cannell is arguing. On the right is an example of the arty decadence that he believes defines the work of

those such as the Campana brothers (though it is not actually the chair mentioned in the article).



Figure 6.1 The Illustration from the online version of the *New York Times* article ‘Design Loves a Depression’ featuring a painted *LCW* chair by Eames and the *Vermelha* chair, by the Campana brothers

Here the simple functionality of the Eames chair is meant to contrast with the expressive excess of the more contemporary design. However, Cannell does not actually discuss the nature of the designs he mentions at all. There is no examination of materials, methods of making or the details of form and function. Rather it is the price of the objects coupled with what he believes is a wilful disregard for efficiency that appears to offend him so much. This is then wrapped up into the idea that such work necessarily represents a decadent luxury which (thankfully, he suggests) can no longer be borne as the world leaves behind the excesses of the economic bubble of the early twenty-first century.

It is worth noting, then, that one of the pieces to which Cannell refers directly, the *Corallo* chair by the Campana brothers (2004; Figure 6.2), though it is expressive and inventive in its form, could actually be seen to be an exercise in the use of materials, as the chair is made by hand-bending steel wire which is then coated with an epoxy paint finish. Yet Cannell does not appear to be interested in this. For him such expensive trash simply represents a form of moral degeneracy that Adolf Loos would have recognised (1908). Cannell concludes the article: ‘If Ms. Linning’s dangling from the ceiling was a cultural moment now passed, we can look forward to

others for an age in which beauty and austerity go together'. Here, Cannell seems to equate the furniture he describes with a semi-naked woman hanging from a chandelier, of which it seems he is quite sure that the reader will disapprove.

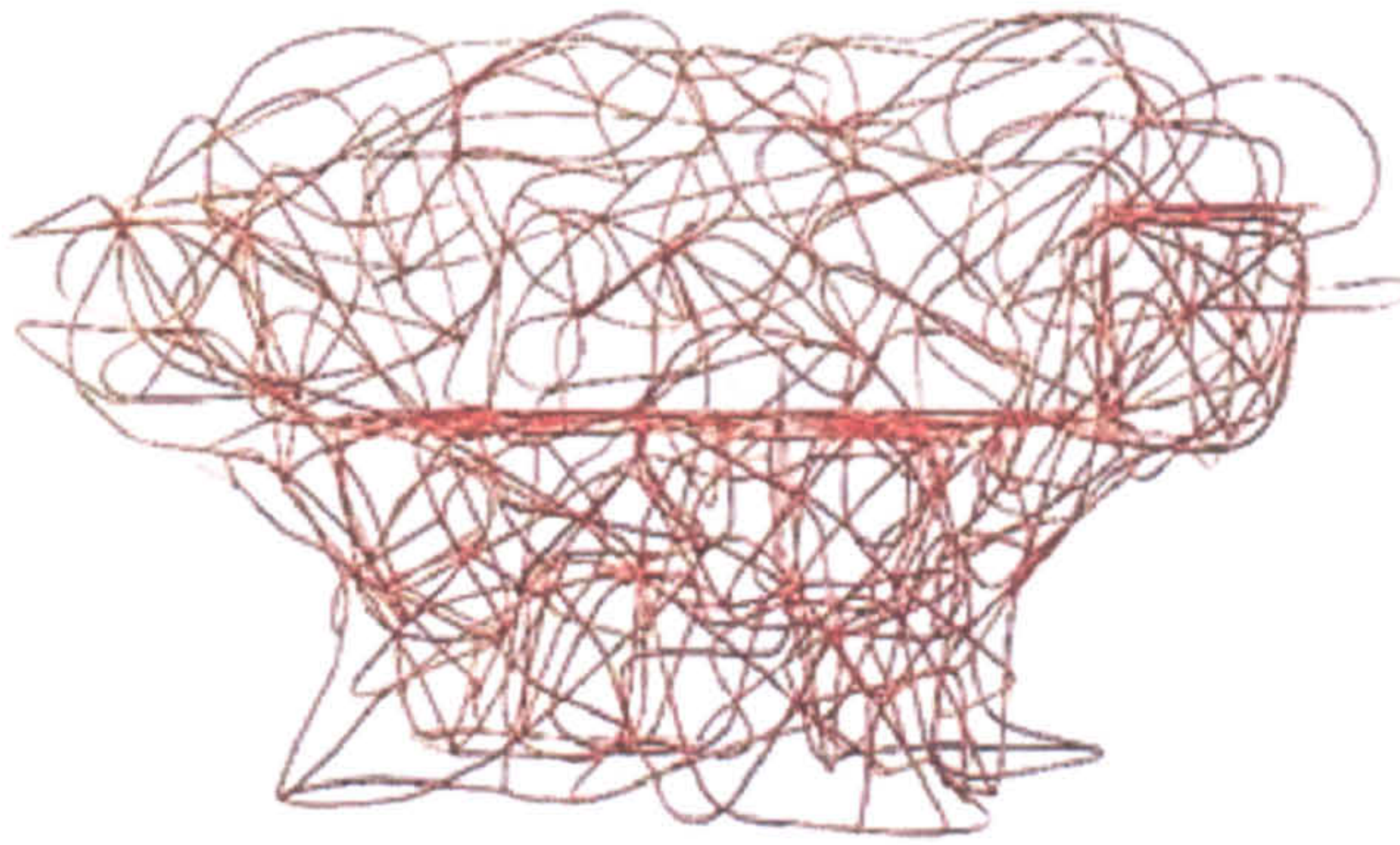


Figure 6.2 Campana Brothers, *Corallo* chair for Edra, hand-bent wire with epoxy paint finish, 2004

This exchange appears to illustrate the way in which the battle lines have been drawn now that what Cannell describes as the ‘economic boom’, and Moss as a ‘renaissance’, is over. Yet what it actually demonstrates is a tension at the centre of a debate about the ethics of design and aesthetics, as both protagonists appear to be working from the position that they can be seen to have a social role. Cannell is arguing for an aesthetics of austerity that will be appropriate to more straightened times. Moss is suggesting that a certain aesthetic fullness or expansiveness in design can cater for human needs in the way that he believes that art does. Both are working from suppositions about the role of the ethics of aesthetics in the creation of use-objects and the social function of creative practice, but they are actually united in the conviction that such endeavours are fundamental to what could be described as the health or well-being of culture. This then is not a disagreement about whether this is an ethical question, it is an argument concerned with the nature of the ethics involved. In this way it is not a reinscription of the nineteenth century antagonism between Aestheticism, as a doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake’, and the Arts and Crafts position that art should be socially useful. Both appear to buy into the latter. What is at issue is how this should be achieved and what aesthetics should be adopted in the process.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, the functionalist position here represented by Cannell can actually be said to be a form of aestheticism which promotes a certain romantic vision of asceticism as functionalist, which is arguably, in ontological terms, no different to that of the more florid register adopted in the design art approach championed by Moss. Both are expressive, it is simply that they each use different aesthetic modes in the manner of their expression; both functionalist design and design art can be seen as communicative, in that they are concerned with the production of objects that say something, they just do it in different ways. Similarly, both approaches are inevitably involved with the manufacture of performative things, in that they cannot help but produce material cultural events that interpellate the experiencing subject into certain ideological positions. What is really at issue, therefore, is the ethics that are seen to be implicit in the different methodologies, the aesthetics of the resultant artefacts and their presumed effects. This is then framed by both participants by design's supposed relationship to art. For Cannell the new austerity signals a welcome refusal of 'arty provocations' and the excesses he sees as being exemplified by the apparent lack of functional seriousness in the work, its exorbitant and excluding prices and the decadence of its makers, as represented by a semi-naked woman swinging from a chandelier at an exhibition opening. For Moss, the end of the 'renaissance' threatens the position that design has achieved as a form of art that can be exploratory, indeed even celebratory, as it serves the cultural and political well being of society.

Both protagonists, therefore, are taking positions as to the ethical nature of design, predicated upon assumptions about art's social function and design's relationship to such a discourse. Yet, of course, the ethical nature of artistic production is a highly contentious and contested field in itself. In this respect there was a clear sense in the early part of the twentieth-century that a central function of creative practice was an alteration of the conditions of daily life; that a function of design and art was to change the way in which people live on a day-to-day basis. The Bauhaus, for example, was founded on the principle of the unity of all arts, that fine art, craft and design could all inform and enrich each other; that there should be no distinction between artists and craftsmen, and that both should be working in the service of building a new society (Whitford 1985; Findeli 1994). In a less programmatic sense the Dadaists were also engaged in a confrontation with everyday life, as their montages, assemblages and interventions sought to challenge the norms

of a society they saw as having become deranged (Molesworth 1998). Similarly, as has been discussed in previous chapters, the Constructivist project in the aftermath of the October revolution in Russia was centrally concerned with the way in which art could be of service in the creation of a new everyday life, to the extent that in the spring of 1925 Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote in a letter home from Paris that the social function of artists should be the creation of use-objects that served the socialist collective, so that: 'Our things in our hands must be equals, comrades, and not the black and mournful slaves, as they are here' (in Kiaer 2005: 1). Though it is beyond the scope of this discussion to rehearse in detail the debates around the social role of art that have been conducted throughout the last century, it is suffice to say that this has then been a central subject of artistic discourse throughout this period. This chapter is therefore concerned with examining the current state of the practice of art and its relation to everyday life, as it is argued that through an understanding of the protocological structures made visible in such a relationship lessons can be learned which are applicable to an understanding of the ethics of design in the early twenty-first century.

This initially takes the form of an examination of the work of artists who can be seen to be manipulating the objects of the everyday within the gallery space, to demonstrate how the relation between subjects and objects is actualised in such practices. This is then compared to those who work within what has come to be termed Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2004), which is taken to be an assault upon the primacy of the autonomous art object and the affirmation of a tendency that stresses the import of human relations in the construction and operation of art. The ultimate purpose of such an investigation is to assess the extent to which it may be possible to talk about 'relational design' (Julier 2009: 97), and therefore to examine quite what such a proposition may mean for an understanding of the ethics of the practice of design in its broadest sense.

The Rematerialisation of the Art Object

In the UK the phenomenon which has come to be known as the Young British Artists (YBAs) began with the 1988 Freeze exhibition, curated by a young Damien Hirst. Though the show was presented in an old warehouse in a derelict part of London's

East End the protagonists were sure to produce a professional looking catalogue and invite the correct art world luminaries to the private view. Since this time artists such as Hirst have arguably come to represent this tendency, in British art at least, whereby art appears to take place in a hermetically sealed world where it can only really be seen to have value in relation to itself. This is not least because of the material and cultural setting in which art now appears to take place, but it is also because of a perceptible blankness to their work which tends to rely upon the use objects that are somewhat abject and often drawn from the repertoire of the everyday. Such an approach then, in Schouwenberg's terms, can be said to confront what she describes as 'the complacent museum visitor' with the product of their 'own banal contemplations' (2000: 5). It is worth considering the practices of these artists, therefore, as their tactics, particularly their use of found objects in the gallery space, can be said to illuminate a tendency within the institutional practice of art that relies upon a very specific relation between the producer (the artist) and consumer (viewer) of art in such circumstances.

As the critic and artist Brian O'Doherty notes, in the gallery '[t]hings become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them' (O'Doherty 1999: 14). This is to argue that the gallery, as a physical arena with particular material characteristics, white walls, carefully achieved lighting and a certain separateness from the conduct of everyday life, has the power to transmute objects into art; that in essence elements of daily life can be brought into the gallery and be experienced as art. It seems that for the likes of the YBAs this has become the default setting. Foster has argued that Warhol taught the art world through his technique of 'traumatic realism', whereby the impact of a mass-produced culture can be re-presented as art, that, '[i]f you can't beat it... join it. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is you might expose its automatism, even its autism, through your own excessive example' (Foster 1999: 131). Yet with artists such as Hirst this exposure of the 'autism' of consumer culture seems to take place as less a form of critique than a re-presentation of this mode of life.

In a piece such as *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* (1990-1; Figure 6.3) five plastic monobloc chairs have been arranged around a table upon which can be seen the remnants of a meal. This tableau has been placed in one side of a large glass vitrine. On the other side is a cumbersome metal barbecue, now apparently cold, whereupon lie pieces of meat gently putrifying. The flies that inevitably attend such a scenario

can only escape through a small hole between the two modules of the vitrine, allowing them access to the scene of the meal. Above the table hangs an insect-o-cutor, by which, at irregular intervals, the unfortunate flies are fried, when they fall down to add to a growing pile of tiny corpses littering the table.



Figure 6.3 Damien Hirst, *Let's Eat Out Doors Today*, mixed media installation, 1990-1991

This work then demonstrates a number of Hirst's concerns. Leaving aside the thumping metonym of the brief lives and sticky ends of the flies, it is worth considering the devices which Hirst has used to allow this work to function. In formal terms a number of methods have been employed to position the elements. The table scene is effectively a still-life depicting the structure of the archetypal idyllic outdoor meal. It is the set-up when we think of lunch outside, as this too has its ur-forms. Hirst has used the plastic monobloc chair, as discussed in Chapter 5, itself an archetype of a seemingly blank functionalism, to essentially stand-in for the people around the table. Yet he is employing a range of associations to animate his tableau.



Figure 6.4 Renoir, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, oil on canvas, 1881

The work of the impressionists can now seem so ubiquitous that we do not even see it, just as it can appear saccharine and somewhat clichéd, but this has of course happened through the passage of time, as what was once a revolutionary examination of daily life has become so familiar as to appear banal. Yet in this process the representation filters into the grammar of living. So, when Hirst reproduces the format of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1881; Figure 6.4) he is quoting both the representation of the act and its material expression, in that when we perform the drama of eating *al fresco*, to some degree or another this scene, of friends gathered around a table laden with food and wine, is what we try to reproduce.

In some ways the structural borrowing in the Hirst piece is striking: the roof of the vitrine echoes the struts of the canopy in the Renoir, just as the composition of the latter, with its division between the group at the table in the foreground and the section at the back, from which they appear separated, is recreated by the action of the divided vitrine. Yet, this is not to assert that Hirst was consciously influenced by the older piece, or that he is any way deliberately referencing it. Rather the installation exists in a world where the painting has come to be embedded in our sense of what constitutes the scene of an outdoor meal. Therefore it is not simply the reality of

eating a meal outside that is being represented, nor is it the painting that is being referenced: it is the relationship between the two which is being utilised in the construction of an assemblage that is intended to create a plurality of meanings.

The separation of the two halves of the vitrine acts to divide off the sphere of production, the barbecue and the genesis of the flies, from the realm of consumption, the scene of the meal and their death. Birth and death; work and consumption. A cycle that keeps going as long as there is enough raw-material and the power stays on. But the viewer is offered little purchase if they look for a critique or message in this hellish automaton. It is as though its maker has set it going and walked away, denying the possibility of definitive explanation and offering only the functioning of the machine as its own reason.

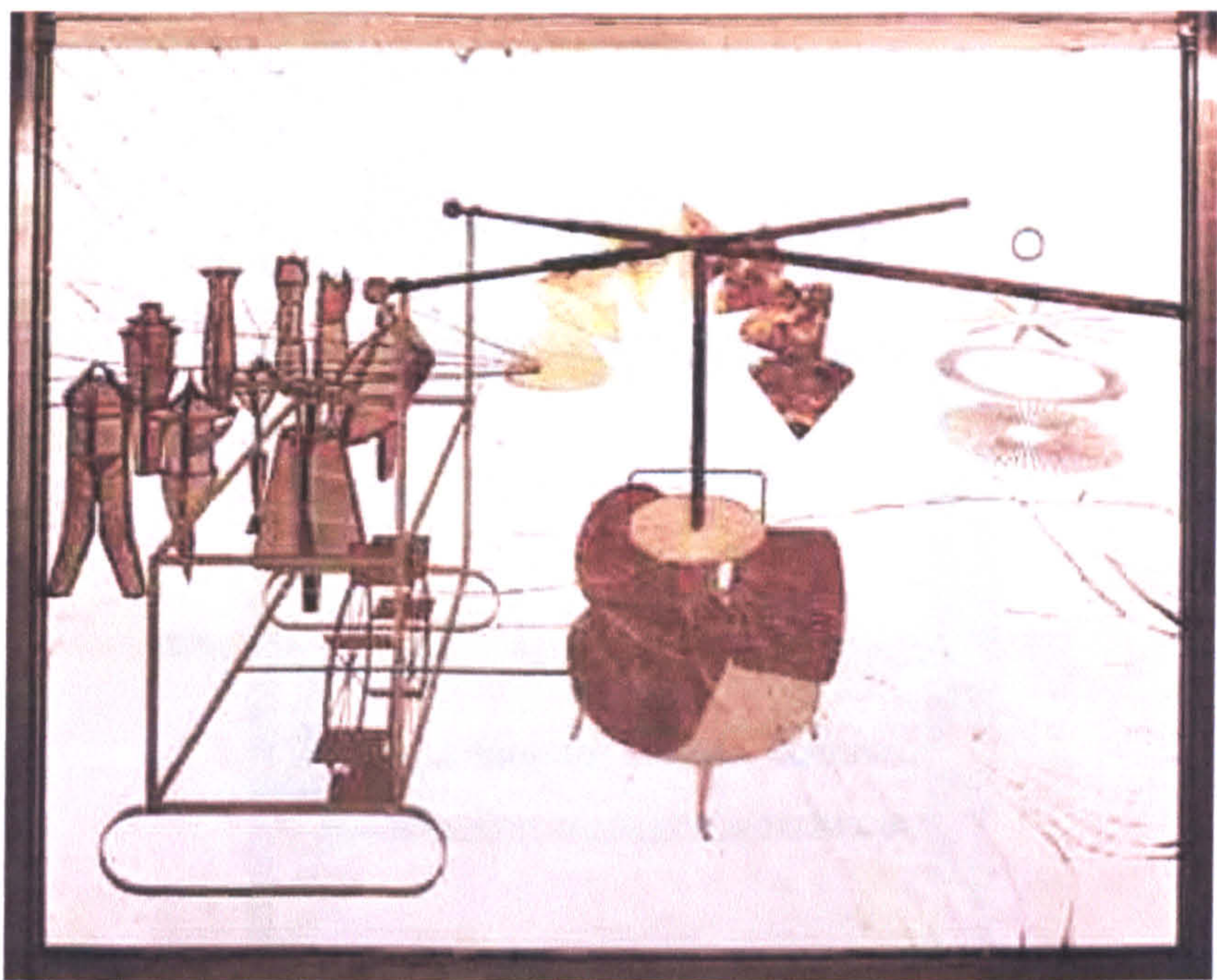


Figure 6.5 Marcel Duchamp, *The Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even)* detail, oil-paint on glass 1915-23

In the more esoteric referencing in Hirst’s work we see another derived technique, but one which is more internal to the circulations of the art world than the near kitsch of the impressionists. In the lower panel of Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* (1915-23; Figure 6.5) the strange mechanism of the chocolate grinder appears to forever emit its product for the unhappy bachelors, just as the barbecue produces the

flies. As Mink has observed, the *Large Glass* has been called a ‘love machine’, in that it is concerned with movement and what the elements generate in their relationships, but it could more properly be called a machine of suffering, as what it appears to actually produce is frustration (Mink 2001: 77). As the Berlin Dadaists used photo-montage to create conjunctions and juxtapositions that could generate political meanings, so Duchamp utilised similar methodologies to create absurdist and speculative machines for meaning making, but which then hinted at no final telos or ultimate cause beyond their own internal dynamics. This then made possible, later in the century, the blank presentations of Jeff Koons.



Figure 6.6 Jeff Koons, *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank*, mixed media, 1985

When Koons placed three basket balls in a vitrine and showed them as art, as in *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985; Figure 6.6) he was not, as may be suggested, working in the tradition of the unassisted readymade, rather it is the *The Large Glass* that can be seen as a more resonant precursor. This is because, like Duchamp’s later work, the action is caught in the glass, in two dimensions for the

older piece and three for the more recent, but they both essentially function to arrest the motion of that which they contain (figuratively for Duchamp, more materially for Koons). In doing so it means that, in Koons's piece, it is not the unadorned object which is shifted from one ontological category to another by being placed in the gallery, as with Duchamp's urinal or snow-shovel, rather it is an assemblage, whereby the frame of the vitrine has transmuted the balls into elements of an apparatus that creates meanings, because it is a thing in a frame in a gallery and we *know* that such things have meanings.

To present an object in a gallery is to define it as a form of art. George Dickie stresses the institutional nature of what we regard as art when he states that 'a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to an artworld public' (2001: 28). Danto makes the point that it is the setting in which we encounter cultural practices that allows us to make sense of them. He uses the example that a man standing on the street making elephant sounds and barking like a dog would be thought mad, but to perform the same act on a stage would provoke a different reaction (Danto 1981: 25). O'Doherty notes: 'In this context a standing ashtray becomes almost a sacred object, just as the firehose in a modern museum looks not like a firehose but an esthetic conundrum' (O'Doherty 1999: 14). That is, in the gallery the aura of the thing exhibited is stimulated.

Through a familiarity with such devices, Hirst's generation then realised the possibility of using such mechanisms in the production of art that used as its source domain the materiality and mediation of the everyday, but which offered the possibility of position without point of view, commentary without critique. Here the objects are more involved and didactic than in the rather polished interventions of Koons. Even without the dead flies, the scene presented in *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* is abject compared to that represented by Renoir. In the French painting we see happy young people eating, laughing, playing and talking outside a bistro. In the British vitrine we see a barbecue and a plastic table and chairs. The people have gone, seemingly replaced by their avatars, the endlessly reproducible monobloc furniture. Yet, there is no sense that the person experiencing this installation should feel anything specific, or indeed anything at all, about what they have been presented with.



Figure 6.7 Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, mixed media installation, 1998

In Tracy Emin's *My Bed* (1998; Figure 6.7) the author is uncomfortably present, but again as an absence. Through the use of the actual trappings of a bedroom, the indexical materiality of an event, we are presented with the elements of real life as meaningful components of a tableau. Indeed, as in the crime-scene it resembles, we are left in the role of detective, attempting to recreate events from the evidence and therefore, ultimately, reconstitute the author. Through the use of such personal things Emin establishes what Johanna Burton has called 'an instantly aggressive intimacy between the spectator and the work'. This methodology then establishes a form of enforced relationship between the artist and the viewer. As Burton continues

The artist attempts to build an allegiance with the viewer by suggesting that the artist and viewer are somehow similar, that they share experiences or emotions, and ultimately demanding that the viewer feel empathy in viewing the work. This technique relies almost completely on simplistic narrative, building stories and dialogue that the viewer can quickly apprehend but can hardly view objectively. If the viewer does not identify with the artist, he/she cannot really interact with the work. (Burton 2000: 20).

This is therefore a material interpellation into the world of the artist, into the art world. In accepting that this pile of stuff stands for Emin's experience, that it has communicative and emotional value, the viewing subject gains entry to the art world of which the producer is a part. In this way the objects used are established as meaningful, that is as the bearers of meaning, even as this coding is dependent upon this demand for empathy. This then to see the materiality of the piece as part of a sort of feedback system between artist and viewer; here the detritus of the lost weekend that Emin offers us therefore becomes metonymic of her suffering.

As the art critic Jacob Lillemose suggests, this is conceptual art, in that it concentrates on ideas and concepts, lines of meaning extend outwards in all directions of the object weaving through (an inferred) personal history of the artist, out into the media and our knowledge of Emin, embedded in what we know about art and looping back into the thing in front of us in the gallery to continue its motion in circulation. Yet this is certainly not dematerialised art. Instead it can be characterised as 'a transformation of art from being formally constituted as an object to be working conceptually with materiality' (Lillemose 2006: 120). The extent to which this actually represents a 'transformation' is questionable, given that this is actually a trope that has existed at least since the sixties (Krauss 1979), yet it is clear that this is art which depends upon material things, but this is a physical presence in which its conceptual status as taking part of the flows of meaning, through institutions, public discourse and media distribution, is immanent to its materiality. This is a tendency that has then been amplified by the expansion of the channels of communication in recent years.

This means that a form of art has developed that both depends upon materiality – Hirst's table and chairs, his meat and his flies, or Emin's bed, the condoms, the bottles and the soiled underwear – but which establishes its own context for the dramas played out, the narratives implied. This is not least because of its status as art. As Colin Painter argues, what we consider to be art is to a large degree that which is 'identified as the art of our time by the scholarly and pedagogic world of art and its institutions; taught in the fine-art departments of our art schools; supported by the Arts Councils and their related institutions, associated with the Turner Prize; included in more recent elements of the Tate Modern collection' (Painter 2002: 197). Through their inclusion in this circulation the status of these objects as art is assured, just as the viewer's status as the *consumer* of art is established.

Hirst's piece makes sense as a 'Damien Hirst', part of the bigger corpus of his work. Place any element in a different context and the unity of the message is disrupted. To find one of the chairs from *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* in a car park and you would not immediately recognise an element of an important art work, its physical presence would not signify this. It is only as part of a system of objects, as part of the seriality of Hirst's output that it can be rendered as meaningful. Similarly, the actual physical bed presented by Emin would have no resonance in a bedroom, even if it was so adorned. We would just see squalor. Rather it must be inserted into the ongoing narrative of Mad Tracy from Margate, her drama, which has been opened up, the threads unwound and woven into the mediascape, which then warps back into everyday life. As Lash and Lury observe:

Art is becoming 'a "structure", a platform... a "system". This recursive structure can "specify" itself. Such a system does not reproduce externally determined rules but instead produces the rules that will generate itself. To be self-causing in this way is to be ever-changing: its characteristic register is in excess of reproduction. Such open systems evolve and mutate by selecting information from the environment, from the reflexive description of selected information and then from its own communication. This is art as non-linear system, as a medium of flows.' (Lash & Lury 2007: 66)

There is a feedback loop created between the original(s) and the virtual. Through this process the aura of the object is not diminished. It is intensified. Things begin to glow with a strange light because they're plugged right into the system.

Amor Fati

There is obviously a politics going on here, there are political questions involved, but this does not seem very political art. Lash and Lury have suggested that 'The YBAs work in a world in which classical critique is no longer possible. There is power and politics at stake, but they do not take place through the classical route of critique'. Instead, they argue that what is at stake 'is a much more Nietzschean politics of affirmation: of amor fati, and the inescapable grain of the empirical' (Lash & Lury 2007: 73). Yet in Nietzsche's hands this *amor fati*, or 'love of fate' does not seem to sit well with the fretful objects offered up by the likes of Hirst and Emin. Nietzsche says:

I want more and more to perceive the necessary characters in things as the beautiful: I shall thus be one of those who beautify things. Amor fati: let that henceforth be my love! I do not want to wage war with the ugly. I do not want to accuse, I do not want even to accuse the accusers. Looking aside, let that be my sole negation! And all in all, to sum up: I wish to be at any time hereafter only a yes sayers! (1974 [1882]: 223)

Pieces such as *Let's Eat Outdoors Today* and *My Bed* seem to do something other than refuse to wage war with the ugly. Rather ugliness and abjection seem to be the actual subject, whilst the objects exist as a form of medium to allow these conceptual and emotional concerns to be presented. Yet, as this is art as recursive platform, there can be no position for critique or affirmation, only a constant circulation. This does not seem to be only saying yes to life or being able to only 'perceive the necessary characters in things as the beautiful'. Rather it appears to be a material expression of an anxiety that this can never be possible, that the 'necessary characters in things' have come to be subsumed into a constant flux of circulation, one which takes place in a particular context. This may be then to suggest that such examples of the contemporary art world have become divorced from the political concerns outside of their own milieu, as they turn inward and become involved with ever tighter spirals of meaning. As the curator Stephen Wright has argued:

By and large, when artworlders talk about what might be broadly described as art's 'use value,' they're bluffing. Anyone who believes that art, in any conventional sense of the term, by 'questioning,' 'investigating,' or otherwise 'depicting' some socio-political issue, actually empowers anyone to do anything about it, is actively engaged in self-delusion. (Wright 2004)

It may be, therefore, that as represented by gallery-based artists such as Hirst and Emin, the institutionalised art world can be seen to have absented itself from the process of examining or attempting to critique or affect everyday life as it has come to be essentially be about art. In such a situation it might be argued that design, as a practice intimately connected to life as it is lived through the concept of use, is then in a better position to engage with how we live. Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first-century Foster argued that the project intended to 'reconnect Art and Life... was eventually accomplished, but according to the spectacular dictates of the culture industry, not the liberatory ambitions of the avant-garde. And a primary form of the perverse reconciliation in our time is design' (2002: 69). He argues that 'design is all

about desire’ and goes on to conclude that ‘design seems to advance a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority – an apotheosis of the subject that is also its disappearance’, whereby he believes we are, quoting Loos’s words, ‘precluded from all future living and striving, developing and desiring’ (in Foster 2002: 72) in a culture that Foster describes as ‘the neo-Art Nouveau world of total design and Internet plenitude’ (Foster 2002: 72). This is therefore essentially to characterise design as morally bankrupt as it has come to be entirely in the service of satisfying consumer desire.



Figure 6.8 Campana Brothers *Banquette Chair with Pandas*, metal, canvas and soft toys, 2006

At first glance the *Banquette Chair with Pandas* (2006; Figure 6.8) by the Campana brothers may seem to support Foster’s assertion. This is exactly one of the ‘frivolous’ designs that Cannell so hated, after all. Here we see a large number of soft toys that have been connected to a steel and canvas armature to create the seat. This is not a functionalist chair. It is however, functional: it is possible to use it to sit down. What it does do is materially make manifest a form of over-abundance or excess. In many ways this does seem to be celebratory, but we are certainly confronted by the productive capacity of mass-manufacture. Similarly, the very plenitude of the piece seems to speak of an uncanny excrescence as the mute and staring bears tumble over each other. Presented in a gallery this piece would seem as fathomless as Hirst’s

plastic chairs or Emin's bed. Or rather in attempting to understand the piece, as a viewer, one would be left wondering what the artist was trying to say about this. However, when presented as design it can be argued that to a large degree because it is not wholly framed by the gallery – it may be presented in one, but the assertion is that at some point it will be used – actually a very different proposition is established, whereby the viewer is expected to project what it would mean to actually use such a thing. This would then not only be about contemplating the object in itself, but contemplating *being* with it in life as it is lived. In this way design does not simply demand that a viewer asks what the object is doing, as a consideration of poiesis, but how they as a user must act in relation to it, which is to make a judgement as to the nature of *praxis*.

This then begins to move towards an acceptance of the world. Not simply as a passive observer where nothing can be achieved, but more in Nietzsche's terms of perceiving the 'necessary characters in things as the beautiful' (1974 [1882]: 223). This is because in the grain of the empirical there are also wonders, perhaps not so much in the world of objects in themselves, but in the realm of things in use, as the result of, and a spur to, action. The challenge therefore becomes not to attempt to account for the relationship between the subject and the commodity object, but to be able to conceptualise the thing and its use, whereby being becomes acting and to act is always an ethical problem.

Studio Makkink & Bey's Cleaning Cupboard of 2008 (figure 6.9), was, like Baas's chair discussed in Chapter 5, created as part of a residency at the Contrasts gallery in Shanghai. Here the mundane task of cleaning has been re-imagined by taking a simple cupboard for the storage of cleaning materials and using Chinese silks and other luxurious materials to make the cabinet a sumptuous thing. This then really does seem to be *amor fati*, the love of fate, in that it is a material suggestion that even the simplest quotidian task should be elevated to something deserving of beauty. Contained within it is an irredeemable paradox. Since it is made of such high-status materials and because it has been created by Bey and his partner's prestigious design firm, it is clearly a valuable object. Yet we do not value cleaning, and we certainly do not value those who perform this task in our culture. So who would buy such a thing? The easy answer would be to say that this was never made to be used, that it is again really a designed object that is just an excuse to make a sculpture. Yet it appears too fully worked out, too resolved as a functional object, too full of connection to the

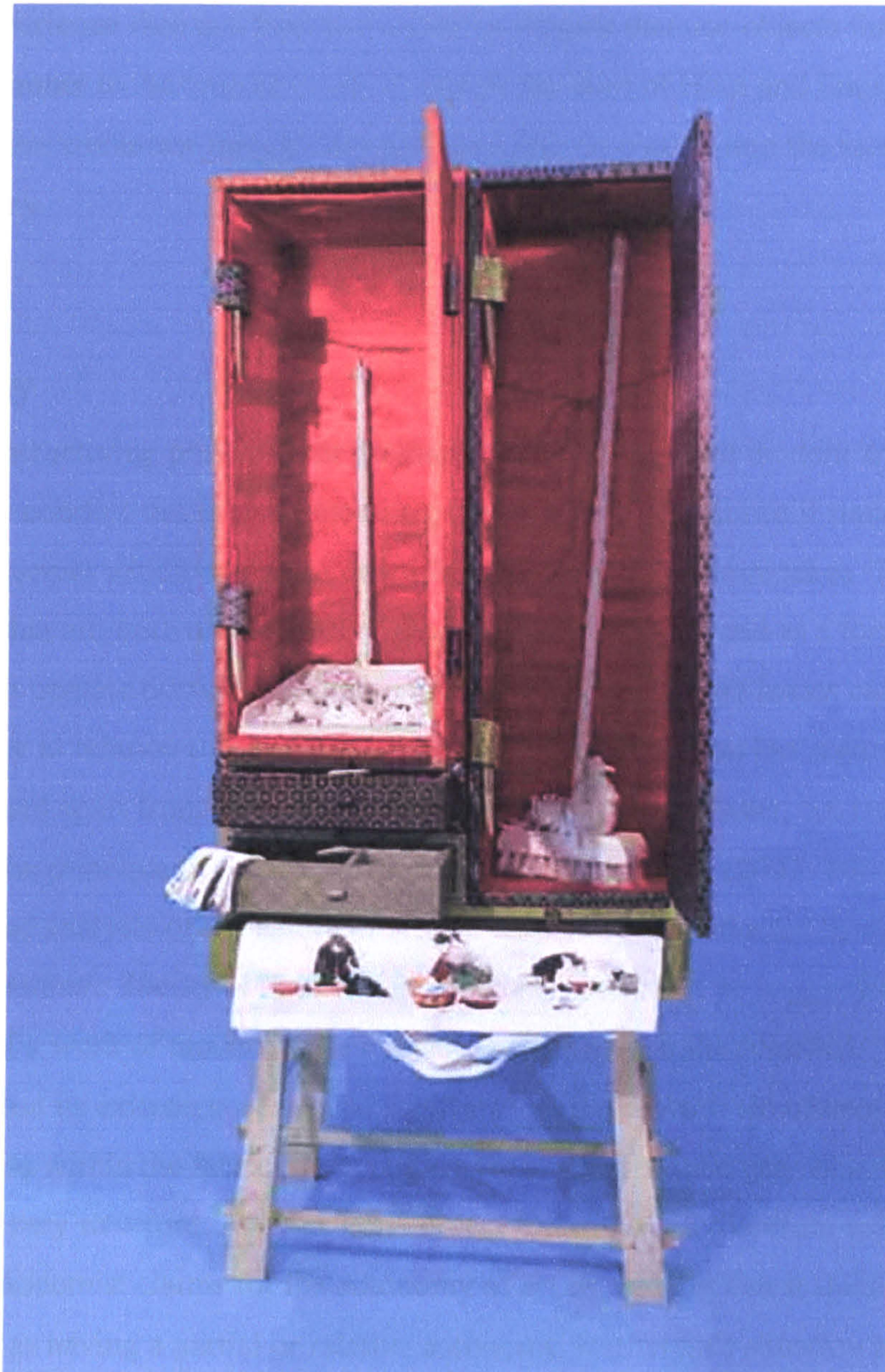


Figure 6.9 Studio Makkink Bey, *Cleaning Cupboard*, mixed media, 2008

actual everyday task of cleaning (in a way that Newson's *Lockheed Lounge* chaise, as discussed in Chapter 2, is not in relation to sitting), for this to be an autonomous work of art. Even if it is art when it's in the gallery, they really have made a cupboard full of cleaning equipment which cries out to be used. This therefore does not make any claim to be outside of the discourse of the creation of use-objects and critiquing it. It is not 'questioning,' 'investigating,' or otherwise 'depicting' (Wright 2004) the act of cleaning. Rather it is a physical suggestion as to how such an act might be alternatively carried out. Yet this is not to assert that design has a greater connection

to lived experience than art. Rather it seems to suggest that use-objects function in a different manner to the type of art produced by the likes of Hirst and Emin which claim creative autonomy through the action of placing objects into the rarefied space of the gallery.

Autonomy

One of the structuring principles or protocols upon which much modern art has been based is the concept that it is autonomous, that as a field of practice it stands apart from the interests which otherwise determine the form that culture takes. This is then to suggest that art, both on the level of the individual art work and as a form of activity, can operate outside of culture as a site of critique where issues can be worked through only in relation to its own existence as art. As Adamson has argued '[a]rt does not stand apart from history by any means, least of all its own; but intrinsic to its identity is the principle of freedom with regard to that history' (2007: 10). Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the nature of artistic autonomy is conducted by Adorno in his study *Aesthetic Theory* (1984 [1970]). In this difficult text he suggests that the condition of a work of modern art is radically split between the possibility of autonomy and its existence as a social artefact; that an art work simultaneously resists incorporation within the fabric of the culture from which it emerges, as it is itself a part of that very structure. As Alex Potts notes, Adorno is not therefore seeking to moderate Modernist claims for the autonomy of art by arguing that it should be understood as having a partial or relative autonomy. Rather art's situation as can be seen as 'radically paradoxical', in that on the one hand, it figures a 'possibility of autonomy denied by the administered world of modern capitalism' whilst on the other, 'as being immersed within a reality where sustained claims for subjective autonomy are only hollow illusions, or symptoms of an endemic social alienation and fragmentation' (Potts 2004: 1). Here then Adorno is suggesting that within the discourse of art a central problem is the claim made for the autonomous nature of art as a practice, which stakes-out a certain distance from the culture that it seeks to critique. As he observes, this leaves art in a position whereby there is an essential antagonism between this stance and the inevitable embeddedness of art in culture. As Buck-Morris notes, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth

century, bourgeois art ‘appropriated the imaginative discovery of new forms as its own territory, defined by the very fact of its separation from social reality’ (1991: 125). So, broadly following Adorno, it can be argued that this separation was productive, as it meant that art could resist the given state of things, allowing such autonomy to be the source of the utopian impulse which could be said to be intrinsic to autonomous art. That is, because of its dislocation from the materiality of the everyday, art could operate as a laboratory of alternative imaginings, even if this was situated in the broader political discourses of culture. For Benjamin, however, as Buck-Morris observes, whilst he did not entirely disagree with this, in his terms the autonomy of art can be regarded as ‘something of a hollow phrase in light of the tremendous creativity of industrial production which itself constantly revolutionises reality’s material forms’ (ibid). That is, in the present conditions the parameters within which any art can function will be determined by the organising principles of cultural production, no matter how it attempts to position itself.

What possibilities of autonomy are therefore available to the designer? In publicity material the organisers of the exhibition *Object Rotterdam* referred to the work on show as ‘Autonomous Design’ and described the show as ‘the place where the cutting edge between art and design becomes evident’ (Object Rotterdam 2010). Similarly Grace Lees-Maffei and Linda Sandino have argued that in contemporary design there has been a shift away from ‘the primacy of function to iconoclastic aesthetic experimentation’ which they argue mirrors an increasing bid on the part of makers for ‘autonomy’ (2004: 211). Yet it is not really made clear what this autonomy should consist of in relation to design, or how it is to be achieved.

Rosalind Krauss has argued that it was in the 1960s that the problem of artistic autonomy had to be confronted. She argues that at this time ‘the ontological labour of the modernist artist was to define the essence of Art itself’ (Krauss 1999: 10). As she notes: The specific mediums - painting, sculpture, drawing - had vested their claims to purity in being autonomous, which is to say that in their declaration of being about nothing but their own essence, they were necessarily disengaged from everything outside their own frames.’ However, there was a problem, in that such a striving for autonomy was to a large degree driven by a perceived need to resist the commodification of art, yet ‘[t]he paradox was that this autonomy had proved chimerical, and that abstract art’s very modes of production – its paintings executed in serial runs, for example, - seemed to carry the imprint of the industrially produced

commodity object, internalising within the field of the work its own status as interchangeable and thus as pure exchange value' (1999: 11). That is, the very forms of the creativity of industrial production that Benjamin identified had come to fundamentally structure the nature of artistic output. One way in which art, to the extent that it can be regarded as a unified field of practice, reacted to such a situation was therefore to retreat further into its own world and its autonomous relationship with its own concerns and history.

The art critic, Harold Rosenberg, observed in the late 1960s: 'The anxiety of art arises not as a reflex to the condition of artists, but from their reflection upon the role of art among other human activities' and he goes on to suggest:

It is an objective reflection of the indefiniteness of the function of art in present-day society and the possibility of the displacement of art by newer forms of expression, emotional stimulation and communication. It relates to the awareness that art today survives in the intersections between the popular media, handicraft and the applied sciences; and that the term "art" has become useless as a means for setting apart a certain category of fabrications.
(Rosenberg 1982 [1966]: 16)

In this way art as a practice becomes 'contingent upon recognition by the current communion of the knowing' and the art work is revealed as an 'anxious object' (ibid). Anxious, that is, because its role is not clear in a world where the sanctity of art as a specialised medium-specific practice has come into question. The works referred to here as design art can similarly be described as anxious objects, for the opposite reason, that what was once simply a chair or table has been inducted into the gallery space and the wider economies of the art world and therefore has been forced to take on the weight and associations of art.

In the summer of 2009, at the same time as *Telling Tales* was being shown at the V&A, the exhibition, *Design High* was presented at the Louise T. Blouin Foundation in west London. In the former the work on display was placed into context through the use of the conceit of situating them in different themed rooms. This was done because, according to the curator, Gareth Williams, to place design in a traditional white-box gallery space strips away context (2010). In *Design High* the exhibits were presented in just such a white-cube setting: the space was an archetypal gallery-space, the pieces standing alone with nothing to clutter the viewer's aesthetic experience of them. Indeed, at the entrance a notice instructed the visitor 'Taking

photographs of the art works is not allowed', further keying the viewer into the way in which the pieces are meant to be perceived. This is problematic for the exhibition of design, as such a field of practice is fundamentally concerned with human interaction in the material world, which then becomes 'muted', according to Williams, if the work is placed in a traditional gallery space as this is to 'make it all about itself and its own internal dialogue' (to the author 2010).

The primary effect, then, is that these objects immediately take on a certain sense of significance and importance. They gain the aura of art. In such a situation the protocols of the art setting have the effect of focusing the attention of the viewer on those characteristics of the work that are the most art like – in this case the communicative and expressive elements of the design. Maarten Baas's *Treasure Chairs* (2005), for example, were according to the designer created as a technical exercise in the creation of functional objects from found materials (to the author 2010). Taking scrap wood from a number of commercial furniture manufacturers in the Eindhoven area, he used the material to make a range of chairs. Each one of these could then theoretically be produced in series, as the off-cuts from the industrial process would remain the same. Regarded in this light such an experiment appears very much within the discourse of industrial design, in that it can be viewed as relating to issues of mass-production and the appropriate use of materials to create commercially viable goods. When placed in the gallery setting, however, the objects then appear to have become something else: design which functions as art (see Figure 6.10).

Seen in a gallery context, Baas's chairs immediately take on the aura of meaningful and expressive objects of contemplation. Indeed, they cease to be chairs and actually appear to become a form of art work which seems to consider 'chairness' and questions of production. This happens because the cultural context of the gallery means that certain codes of reading or protocols of interpretation kick-in as soon as an object is exhibited in this way. Not least is the manner in which the experiencing subject is encouraged to relate to the thing presented. Given its art setting the tendency is therefore to look for meaning – to attempt to decode the intentions of the author. It also historicises the chairs as it places them into a broader discourse of 'important' design.

One thing that this suggests is that far from being a condition which can be achieved or inhabited, autonomy is actually a dynamic condition rather than a pure

ontological state. There are varying degrees and registers of autonomy. Each act, object or event, each *thing*, will be varyingly autonomous depending upon the way in which it is placed in relation to the discourses of power; that is autonomy is contingent on the politics of dialogics. To some degree it is clear that designers wish to place their work in a gallery setting because this will focus attention upon it and draw out its most art like qualities, thus raising its status and, by implication, that of its creator or author. This could then be seen as a form of ‘gallery envy’ whereby those who are ‘only’ designers wish to elevate their status to that of the artist.



Figure 6.10 Maarten Baas *Treasure Chairs*, scrap wood, 2005

However, this is also indicative of a trend within design, rather than simply delineating the relationship between the discourses of art and design. In this way it can be argued that the autonomy that designers are striving to establish is that of the *role* of the artist. Rather than wishing to be at a distance from culture, it seems that what is now demanded by designers is the opportunity to be self tasking, to originate self-set briefs and explore their own concerns without being restricted by the demands of working to order for an organisation or a specific client. This is not, therefore, to attempt to be outside of culture, rather it is an effort to find a place within a culture of

designing and making that is not controlled by the dictates of industry. According to the English designer Gareth Neal, he has always attempted to make objects that speak of their time, and the fact that he creates limited edition furniture gives him the freedom to create *in the same manner* as an autonomous artist (to the author 2010). The German designer, Julia Lohmann, makes a similar point when she observes that exhibiting in a gallery space gives her a scope for experimentation that is not to be found in the commercial design world (to the author 2010). As Williams has observed, ‘this is about the independent statement whereas industrial design is involved in a huge, matrix, a process where the designer is a kind of manager, who manages the expectations of different other bodies, either the marketing department or the technical department or the market itself’. Instead it can be argued that in this sense, ‘autonomy and design is an interesting counter-culture’ (to the author 2010). Yet it should be noted that whilst the design object in the gallery in essence borrows the autonomy created to maintain the art object, the practice of design becomes functionally autonomous in the way in which designers have attempted to become self-tasking individuals. Yet even as these designers are asserting themselves as authors, as Bourdieu observes, this attempt to become the author producer who is thought to create the value of the piece suppresses the question of ‘who authorises the author, what creates the authority by which authors authorise’ (1993: 76). Therefore though designers gain status and contingent freedom through such a process, this is in spite of the fact that this autonomy is purchased at the price of coming to be governed by the protocols of the art world.

Relational Aesthetics

Despite the foregoing examples, it would be reductive to say the least to take a loose group such as the YBAs and claim that they represent the totality of the art world. They are instead perhaps exemplary of a particular economy of art, one that is centred upon objects – as has been noted, for all their debt to conceptual art such artists are almost aggressively materialist in their output – but which also fetishises financial value and exists very much within an art world setting. There are, of course, other economies and systems of production and exchange in the making and reception of art.

The French critic Nicholas Bourriaud, who has done most to write the term into art history, defines Relational Aesthetics as ‘[a] set of artistic practices which

take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent or private space' (2002: 113). This is therefore a repudiation of the autonomy of the artwork, whereby relational art is conceptualised as dependent upon the contingencies of its context, its relation to the audience and the social connections formed within this entity; whence this audience is envisaged as a form of community, no matter how transient this may be. Gerard Mermoz argues that Bourriaud's analysis is useful because 'it redefines the status of the work from that of an autonomous object and authorial statement expressing and embodying the artist's truth, to that of an open platform onto which artist and public negotiate possibilities of meaning and being' (Mermoz 2006: 7). A central problem with such a definition, however, is this term 'open platform'. It appears to suggest that relational practice can fully remove itself from the protocols of the art world. Yet if such practices are to be received as art, this is not entirely possible. Rather it seems that such 'open' practices actually redefine the works relation not just to the viewer, receiver or consumer by recasting them as participants, but also to the conventions of the art world context in which they happen. That is relational art does not escape protocol but modifies how it works within it.

Rather than describing where the art happens as ■ gallery, a developing tendency within curatorial practice has come to adopt what Claire Bishop describes as a 'laboratory paradigm' (2004: 52). Such curators, most notably Bourriaud but also Hans Olbrich Obrist, Maria Lind and Barbara van der Linden, promote the idea of the institution as 'laboratory' because it describes a space in which experiments can be conducted, it is also claimed as a neutral term apparently un-touched by the art world and free from the associations of the word 'gallery'. Bishop suggests that this approach developed because of the rise of a particular type of work in the 1990s that was promoted as 'open' or 'incomplete'. Yet she notes that such work actually seems to derive from a misreading of poststructuralist theory whereby rather than the '*interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux' (her emphasis; 2004: 52). In this regard Bourriaud has argued: 'Artistic practice appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns' (2002: 9). Yet in adopting such a position he appears to want it both ways: he suggests that their status as art protects these 'experiments', at the same time that they are somehow radically open to the 'real' world. As Bishop observes, venues such as the

Baltic in Gateshead, the Kunstverin in Munich and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris use terms such as ‘laboratory’ or ‘art factory’ to signify their difference from the more traditional object based galleries or museums whilst giving their project spaces ‘the buzz of creativity and the aura of being at the vanguard of contemporary production’ (2004: 52). Yet as Benjamin observed, the practice of art will inevitably be contingent upon the nature of the protocols of cultural production of the larger society in which it occurs (1979 [1936]). In this way it is not difficult to see how the approach exemplified in such practices is actually contiguous with a commercial experience economy: how it appears to offer an open-ended possibility for encounter, but actually supplies a tightly scripted opportunity for affective experience.

Throughout his treatise on Relational Aesthetics, Bourriaud repeatedly name-checks a number of artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, and Jorge Pardo, whom he argues are representative of the tendency. Rirkrit Tiravanija is an artist of Thai/Canadian parentage who is based in New York. He is known for creating what can best be described as installation performances in which he uses the gallery space to cook Thai food that is then consumed by the audience. At the *Untitled (Still)* event, for example, in 1992 at the 303 Gallery in New York (Figure 6.11), the back-room work of the gallery which would not normally be seen by the public was moved into the exhibition spaces, while a make-shift kitchen was erected in the offices from which Tiravanija made the food and served the public.



Figure 6.11 Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Untitled (Still)* mixed media installation performance at the 303 Gallery, New York, 1992.

This is a certain economy of exchange, one predicated on the protocols of the institutional discourse of art. Tiravanija's work gains a strategic autonomy, but at the price of its place in the everyday, the material substrate of existence. Bourriaud informs us that 'The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is now achieved in the invention of individual and collective vanishing lines, in those temporary and nomadic constructions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations' (2002: 31). Yet the power of such work is diminished and controlled by its very bargaining for autonomy as art.



Figure 6.12 Rikrit Tiravanija *Untitled*, mixed media installation performance 2002

Bourriaud cites Althusser's concept of the 'materialism of encounter' which he describes as 'random materialism', an endlessly open form of interaction 'which has no pre-existing origin or sense, nor Reason (sic), which may allow it a purpose' (2002: 18). This appeal to Althusser's late writings on the encounter depend upon what the political theorist Panagiotis Sotiris has described as 'a conception of the solitary and unstable political gesture that more often than not fails to bring around the desired encounter and leaves no other choice apart from either some form of voluntarist decisionism or just waiting for the unexpected' (2006: 8). Tiravanija argues that the artificiality of the art setting allows him a certain freedom because he suggests that 'It is possible that there is more space for things to happen within this exchange because it is never "really real" but another fiction' (in Weintraub 2003: 105). This is not, however, a space of endlessly open play. It is a space in which things are *in* play, but there are certain rules to the game which are set by its

designation as art, as defined by where and how it operates. However, just because Tiravanija has not produced a liminoid space devoid of rules, but a liminal one, whereby rules pertain but are outside of the dominant protocols of the wider society (Turner 1982), this does not mean that such practice should be disregarded. What can be learnt from such a situation is that in relational art the artist cedes at least tactical control to the other participants. The artist may establish the situation but cannot completely control what may transpire. He may cook the food, but whether and how the other participants eat it is up to them. They will be controlled by the protocols of the space and the experience, that is strategic norms will determine their actions to some degree, but they are given the opportunity to act. It is this possibility of action, of praxis, contingent though it may be that makes the relational model useful here.

Bourriaud is keen to stress that in his analysis relational aesthetics is not simply an approach to art which is essentially interactive or that involves participation. Rather he believes it to be a means for positioning such practices within a broader cultural context. In this way the relational turn in art is characterised as being a response to the increasing virtualisation of the life and economics brought about by the development of networked culture. Indeed as George Galloway has noted: 'The emergence of distributed networks is part of a larger shift in social life. This shift includes a movement away from central bureaucracies and vertical hierarchies toward a broad network of autonomous social actors' (2004: 33). Yet it is not clear that the actors of the art world are actually as autonomous as the proselytisers of the open system argue, for as Rancière argues, 'aesthetics has its own politics, or rather its own tension between two opposed politics: between the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all' (2006: 83). That is, by being presented *as art*, relational practices can 'do' the politics of interaction only at the expense of being at a remove from its everyday manifestations; the act is absorbed into the protocological structure of the institutions of art. Yet, what then of the politics of 'art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art'? It may then be that it is through understanding design art as a form of relational design that it can be understood in such a political register.

Relational Design?



Figure 6.13 Martino Gamper, *100 Chairs in 100 Days*, found chairs, 2007

In the project *100 Chairs in 100 Days* (2007; Figure 6.13) the furniture designer Martino Gamper spent two years collecting abandoned and unwanted chairs from around London. He then reconfigured the components into new forms, one a day over one-hundred days.

This was on one level an exercise in construction, an experiment in the manipulation of material affordances, in that in each chair the components have been carefully collaged together. We can see physical rhyme, juxtaposition, tension and compression in any one example (Figure 6.14). Yet each piece then relates to the others as a part of a series. In this way they then refer further to the system of furniture production, even as its more conventional nature is refuted. Though the assemblages are hand-made the components are fragments of a system of mass-production. The fact that they are made from found objects then relates to where the raw material was located, the network that is the sociological context of London.



Figure 6.14 Martino Gamper, examples from *100 chairs in 100 days*, found chairs, 2007

The construction of the pieces within a given time-frame has the effect of constituting a particular temporality in the production of the work. The methodology employed, that of assemblage from found elements, as has been discussed in the previous chapters, actually establishes each element as part of a broader temporal economy by demonstrating how artefacts transition between states in their biographies. Given the entirely contingent nature of the assembled nature of these objects, for all their presence as part of a series or network, each one is then asserted as being entirely and fundamentally unique in space and time.

This is not least because the chairs are presented not simply as reflections upon use but as functionally usable things in their own right. As functional objects they make it possible for those who use them to perform actions. To emphasise this Gamper held an event during the *Wouldn't It be Nice... Wishful Thinking in Art and Design* exhibition at Somerset House in London (2008), whereby he then cooked and served a meal to members of the public seated on his chairs. The comparison with Tiravanjia's practice is therefore too compelling to ignore. Tiravanjia is adamant that it is not the objects that constitute the art: it is not the cooking pots or the food, but the sociality of the event (Weintraub 2003: 105); it is not the material elements that form the art but the social contingencies they make possible. For Gamper the event was clearly a way of bringing the material things into the social, it was an exercise in use,

even though it took place in the context of an exhibition. Therefore these exist not simply as use-objects that are somehow art objects, rather they exist as material spurs which facilitate relational possibilities which can only be actualised in use.

Celia Lury suggests that the individual subject's relation to any given object is always to some degree dependent upon their relation to the object world of which the thing in question is a part. This relation can then, in Lury's schema, be understood as a 'network, a series, an ensemble, a closed or open system', which then poses the question as to 'whether and how such series, ensembles or systems have the capacity to be self-organizing – or at least whether and how the kinds of reflexivity that are produced in, for example, the series or the network, have properties or capacities which need to be acknowledged' (in Julier 2009: 97). Therefore any object can be conceptualised as being determined by the protocols of the system in which it is implicit. Yet within such structures it is only through the dynamism of relational interaction between all of the actants that the potentialities of the object, or rather the dynamic thing, are played out.

In this respect Lury refers to Knorr Cetina's concept of the 'unfinished object' that is completed through use. Therefore, to understand design as relational is to conceptualise, in Lury's terms,

[T]he relationship of the unfinished object to an environment or ecology in which the individual human user is not the only or even necessarily the most important element of the environment. The 'user' might thus be understood variously: as some kind of collective, mass, assemblage or ecology (including other objects and the natural environment). And of course the notion of unfinished-ness directly introduces the notion of temporality – thinking the future of the object as something to be considered as implicated in the present of the object (in Julier 2009: 98)

The 'future of the object' will then be determined by the reflexive possibilities of the context in which the object is found or encountered. In Gary Hustwit's documentary *Objectified* Fiona Raby states 'We love show rooms, because what is a showroom? You go in there, around Ikea, and you imagine this in your home... you project yourself into this other space. You could have it at home'. However, Anthony Dunne then adds the observation that 'when you walk into a gallery you don't imagine the sculpture at home and how it's going to impact on your life. But you walk into a shop whether its electronics or furniture or a car showroom, and you do imagine yourself

experiencing this thing and enjoying it.’ He then continues by arguing that when they create what they call ‘conceptual products’ they are ‘hoping that people will imagine how that will impact on the way they live their lives’ (in Hustwit 2009: 01.07).

However, as Dunne himself is noting here, it is clear that the context of the shop or showroom is demonstrably different to that of the gallery. Different protocols of behaviour and projection are imposed in these types of location. By coding something as design, whether by naming it as such or creating something that is obviously a functional and functioning use-object, a user is always to one degree or another implied, as is the act of use. Yet to place design in a gallery is necessarily to bring it into the protocols of a certain type of art. What is useful, then, about the relational turn in art is the extent to which it demonstrates how, even though such actions can never be liminoid and entirely outside of protocol and ideological definition, the unfinishedness of things, the need for a user to bring the object into play, suggests the possibility of praxis and therefore change.

Recent discussion of relational aesthetics has created a new sensibility which is attentive to questions of situational politics. This has meant that designers have been able to increasingly smuggle the tactics of art into their practice. Yet, because they remain use-objects, the viewer is interpellated into the action of the piece simply through the assertion that this is such a type of object. Wright suggests that things that borrow from the tactics and competencies of art but are not presented as such have a certain power because they are less visible *as art*, and this ‘impaired visibility’ may well be inversely proportional to the work’s political potential, ‘since it is not partitioned off as “art,” that is, as “just art,” it remains free to deploy all its symbolic force in lending enhanced visibility and legibility to social processes of all kinds’. In this way such things can then become ‘a form of stealth art’ which can infiltrate ‘spheres of world-making beyond the scope of work operating unambiguously under the banner of art’ (Wright 2004). This therefore becomes a site of political action, of praxis.

The Politics of Need

In 2000, as part of the *Do* project discussed in Chapter 2, Thomas Bernstrand designed a lamp that was actually meant to be swung from (Figure 6.15). The fact that this is possible, however, does nothing for its functionality as a lighting device. Yet it

is not clear exactly what Bernstrand has made here. Is it a chandelier that one can swing from, or a swing that lights up? If it is the latter is there anything morally wrong with making a toy, something that is made to be played with?



Figure 6.15 Thomas Bernstrand, *Do Swing* lamp, brushed steel with polyurethane shades, 2000

In the disagreement that opened this chapter it seems to be Cannell’s position that in more straightened times design will be stripped back to what we need, what he sees as functional design, and the unnecessary ‘frivolity’ of communicative and playful design art, such as Bernstrand’s light-fitting, will wither away. In this sense he is adopting what may be described as a problem solving approach to the practice of design and in effect asserting that such a position is morally superior to approaches which he believes to be decadent. This instrumental attitude to design has been described by Alain Findeli as a methodology that regards any environment as essentially being in equilibrium. Therefore any disturbance of the system that such an environment can be said to constitute is therefore identified as a ‘need’, and is as such ‘a potential problem for the designer’ whereby the intervention of such an actor will consist of proposing a ‘solution’ to the problem ‘thus re-establishing the equilibrium

of the system'. This is then to propose that the role of the designer lies in 'ending' the problem. For Findeli this is a reductive model because of its static nature, in that it relies upon an assumption of ending *per se*. He therefore suggests that the role of the designer should actually be conceived as one who intervenes in the state of a system and, rather than ending the problem as such, creates another state, and therefore another set of possibilities, thus suggesting that it is necessary to abandon the ideal of systems as being in equilibrium in favour of 'a dynamic conception of systems' (Findeli 1994: 57). In this way it can be seen that Cannell's position depends upon a very narrow ideologically determined understanding of what we need, that is here reduced to that which is efficient and consequently functionalist in its aesthetics.

The question that occurs in such a situation is, however, efficient in doing what? As was discussed in earlier chapters, we do not 'need' most furniture in any absolute sense. As Jesse Tatum has observed the idea that it is possible to rationally work out functionalist needs from a scientific basis is itself an ideology which disregards the fact that any such analysis will depend upon what is selected as the evidence from an ultimately underdetermined body of data. As he states 'we tend to proceed along singular developmental paths as if only one technology were possible. We ask: "What is the most efficient?" or "What is the most cost effective?" and imagine that such a narrow technical analysis can guide us to the best answers' (2004: 69). In such a situation, therefore, the appeal to efficiency or cost-effectiveness actually masks the fact that deciding what is or is not necessary, what counts as 'frivolous' and what is a 'need' is in actuality an ethical question. As Findeli notes, 'choosing the technological mediation is a matter of ethics, not technology; in other words, designing an artifact is acting in the field of ethics, not of technology alone' (1994: 59). In this way all design is a question of ethics, and this is one reason why it is so vital to break down the subject/object dichotomy, which seems to presuppose that objects can be divorced from their context and considered 'rationally' in abstraction from their actual occurrence.

One reason why the relational turn is valuable in the understanding of design is because it operates as a counter-balance to a reductivist rationality that claims to know what is necessary in some absolute sense. The really useful point which can be drawn from relational aesthetics is that although the author can create the conditions in which action takes place, they cannot fully control the outcomes of that action. Yes, the broader protocols and ideological categorical imperatives will structure what is

possible, yet the scenario is predicated upon the involvement of the subject in its object. So it becomes clear that in understanding design as relational it is necessary to conceptualise each new condition to which design is applied as being entangled in a wider system of systems that, in being dynamic and emergent, will always have a unique structure of interrelation and consequence that includes the experiencing subject. So, in Findeli's terms the result is that 'the ethical decision must begin anew for each individual case (there is no universal truth, each case is particular, subjectivity is constitutive and necessary)' and therefore 'the ethical decision always requires total moral engagement on the actor's part' (1994: 60). In this way relational design accepts that each and every situation is dynamic and therefore unique. It denies the interchangeability of moments, it refutes the action of the commodity form and declares this situation to be generated by its relational qualities, that must then be weighed by the designer as the final end, cause or purpose of the act of designing is proposed.

Nanine Linning, the 'semi-naked' woman whom Cannell so derides in his article is an internationally recognised choreographer and performance artist (Daily Icon 2009). In the performance *Happy Hour Chandelier* to which he refers (Figure 6.16), she hangs from the light-fitting, designed by her partner Wanders, for twenty minutes wearing a rather modest silver bikini, presenting chocolate mousse and champagne to the crowd gathered beneath her. Is this then morally wrong? As is demonstrated above, the answer to such a question cannot be answered in the abstract, it must be judged within the context in which it is presented and in relation to the broader network of contingencies in which it operates.

For all that Moss is championing a form of design that is often expensive and only available to an elite, it is perhaps this that may be judged ethically questionable, rather than the idea that fun is somehow essentially impermissible in a more economically straightened era. Indeed, now that the days of easy credit and seemingly endless economic growth are over, it may be that we need such ways of being in the world more than ever. The decision as to whether this is the case is then a moral one, it is a question of ethics as to what design should be for *in this specific situation*. There can be no absolute answer outside of lived experience, it is a choice that the actors must make and for which they must then take responsibility. As Findeli concludes:

This implies that we take into account the values that control our rationality and our acts and intentionality and that we consciously choose to set them in a hierarchy, giving sufficient attention to the conditions peculiar to each case, fully aware that this choice will have to be justified eventually. This is precisely what is meant by assuming responsibility for one's actions and having confidence in one's moral judgment (1994: 66).

In this way no specific aesthetic can be deemed morally wrong in itself, it is how it is applied and for what reasons that are the problems that must be addressed, and these are necessarily ethical, and therefore political questions.

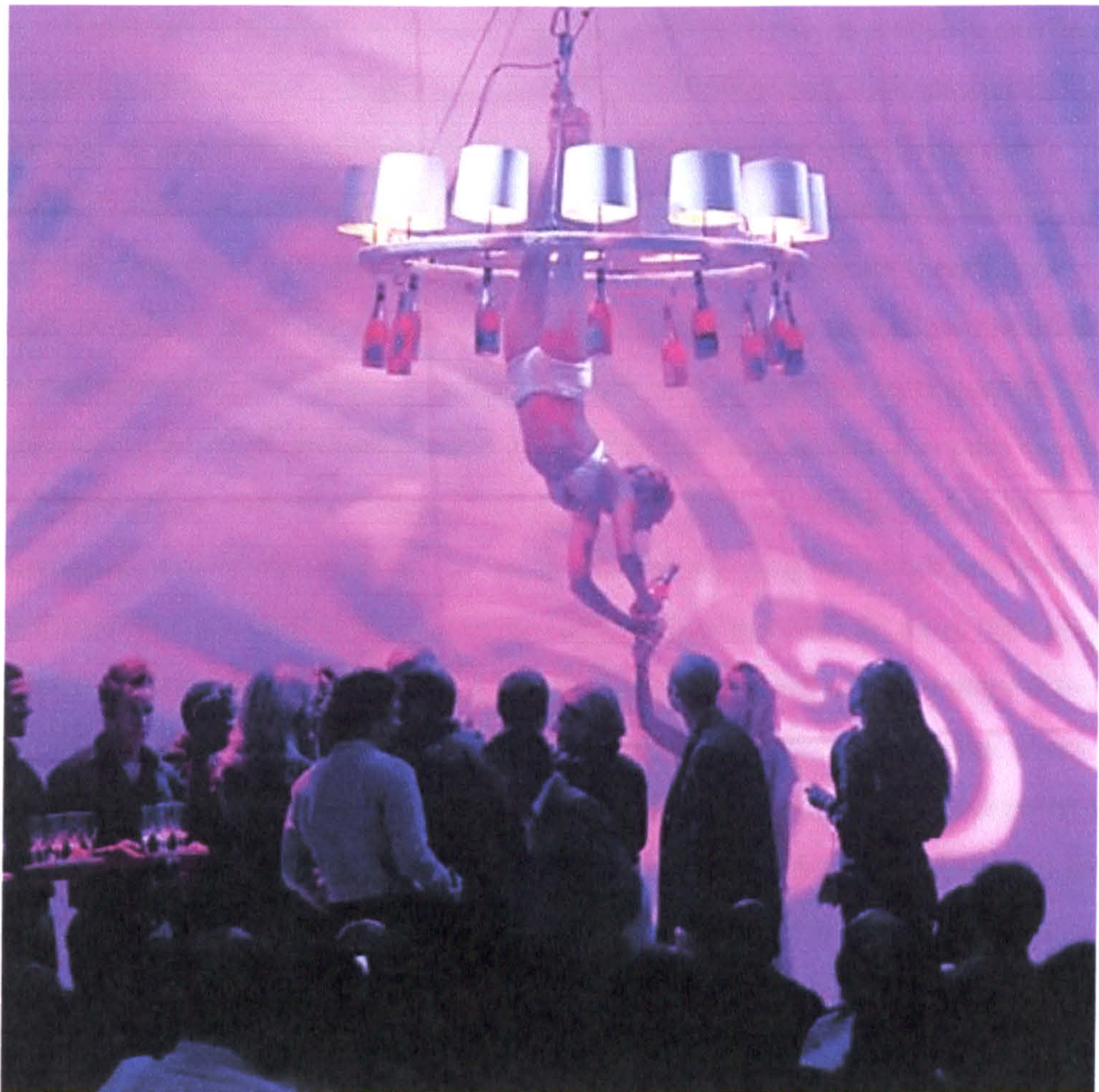


Figure 6.16 Nanine Linning and Marcel Wanders, *Happy Hour Chandelier*, mixed media performance, 2009

Conclusions: Design Art as Praxis

As has been demonstrated, Cannell's and Moss's spat can be understood as a discussion about the ethics of aesthetics. Cannell can essentially be characterised as

reinscribing the position taken by Loos a century earlier, that the unornamented and unadorned simplicity of functionalism is the morally superior position. Surely, in an age when the money has dried up and the environment is increasingly unable to deal with humanity's excesses, it makes sense to create design that fulfils our needs as simply and efficiently as possible? Yet, as has been argued, this relies on the idea that we can simply and efficiently identify such needs, that all furniture and the use-objects we employ have narrow functions that are concerned with servicing on a mechanistic level the most base requirements of life. Human culture, however, is much more complicated than this.

To be fair to Cannell, and not to let Moss off the hook, it probably can be said to be morally indefensible, in an age when we collectively face such enormous challenges, to spend thousands on a chair or a light fitting for your living room. Similarly if your only objective is to create such things so that they can be sold to rich people who buy them to make themselves look good and feel better then this is difficult to defend. If all designers are doing is creating things that allow the likes of collectors such as Brad Pitt to own objects which make them feel cutting-edge, then they are doing worse than wasting their time. Yet just because designers are caught up in such economies does not entirely invalidate what they are doing. As has been demonstrated, one of the reasons why designers are charging very high prices is to allow themselves to make a living whilst creating objects which do more than simply allow us to survive. In order to operate as autonomous makers who are more than merely the servants of mass production, they have had to enter an economy of art which is concerned with making things exclusive and excluding in the guarantee of their value (as discussed in Chapter 2). This does not mean, however, that what they produce is essentially immoral or unethical in itself. Rather it is to observe that economies of manufacture, distribution and consumption have their own protocols that demand certain things from their participants.

It is not inevitable that furniture as the servant of fantasy, play or pleasure should reside in the role of provisioning the rich with props for their particular drama. In the institutional discourse of art actors such as Hirst and Emin have become such well known figures because they have been playing a game, funded by the likes of Charles Saatchi, that fetishises the art object in the gallery setting, the economic value of such artefacts and the role of the artist as some form of distant genius, different from the likes of you and I. This construct then relies upon the action of the media and

the flows of communicational culture for its operation. Yet it is manifestly not the only game in town. Apart from this version of the art world is a whole raft of actors who will probably never make any money from their work (indeed who often subsidise its creation with their own limited funds) and of whom most people will never hear, but who make what they do for the love of it, because they believe that it has some intrinsic value in itself. Practices such as relational art, though it has been firmly inducted into the art world, also offer alternatives which suggest a way of looking at creative practice that moves beyond the sterility of the static object, which is consumed by the inert subject, and begin to point towards, albeit contingent, models of interaction and social entanglement that may have radical potential for the way in which we relate to materiality and each other. Relational aesthetics has its faults, but it does demonstrate the way in which every situation is unique and determined by the participating actors and the web of social interaction in which it takes place.

Bourriaud makes the error of thinking that only a certain type of art does this. In actuality what it reveals is that *all* art does this, that gallery forms such as that of Hirst and Emin actually create the fiction of autonomy to allow them to continue in a certain manner, and this is not the only way art can be.

In the strange and speculative objects of design art it may be that a possibility of a new ethical model for making is to be glimpsed. One of the redeeming features of such work is the improvised and low-tech aesthetic that is often adopted. What then may be really powerful about such pieces is the implicit suggestion that *anybody could make this*. Therefore it can be seen as a challenge. It can be described as a call for all of us to begin to consider our material world not as the finished result of distant processes, but as the raw materials from which our own environment can be constructed.

If all that work such as that of the Campana brothers or Bey or any of the other designers discussed in this thesis represents is a new form of plaything for the rich who can afford it, then it is probably ethically reprehensible. However, if it can be demonstrated to expand our understanding of what is possible in terms of what is made, why and how, then it has a political value that extends beyond its current status as a form of conspicuous consumption. Critical design that remains in the gallery has already answered the question of what politics it is involved with – it is that of autonomous art. It is neutered even before it starts. Yet designed objects, as things that really can be used, and which stake a claim to a part in life as it is lived, have the

power to demonstrate that there are more forms that use-objects can take than simply having to adhere to an often dubious instrumental efficiency and cost-effectiveness that is peddled by manufacturers such as Target and Ikea. It teaches us what might be.

Therefore to understand design as relational is to propose that in establishing what we or anybody else needs it is not possible to create an absolute hierarchy, built upon a foundation of technological efficiency and its concomitant aesthetic of functionalist asceticism, for which art, or indeed frivolity or play, is an optional supplement. Instead such a conceptualisation of the role of design is to understand that the making of things is always a political act, that the correct form and functionality of any given object will depend upon ethical and therefore political decisions that are made as to what it is for and how it is to allow for action. In creating things that do not just 'work', that is function in a reductive sense, or attempt to make us think, in an ineffective effort at criticality, but that involve us in the action, that demand effort from us in our engagement, that require the alteration of behaviour, a new world becomes possible. And if it is one where not only does everybody have what they need to survive but they are also provided with the apparatus to make their lives in a joyous way, where not only do we have the basic tools for existence but people also swing from chandeliers and hand out food and drinks, where life is as much about play and pleasure as it is about scraping by, then I, for one, would welcome it.

Conclusion

The historical conditions upon which Design Art depended ceased to exist on September 15, 2008. This was the date upon which the American bank Lehman Brothers filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection precipitating the beginning of a cataclysmic financial crisis, the effects of which have only really begun to be felt. The reason why it is possible to be so specific as to when this happened is because Design Art (in its capitalised form) was the brand name, coined by a salesman, for a type of product: idiosyncratic use-objects, mainly furniture and domestic products such as chairs and tables, wardrobes and lamps, made in limited editions, exhibited and sold through galleries and auction houses and collected by rich patrons in the same manner as fine art. This trade, therefore, developed in a very specific context which ended at precisely this point, even if many of the participants have still to realise this.

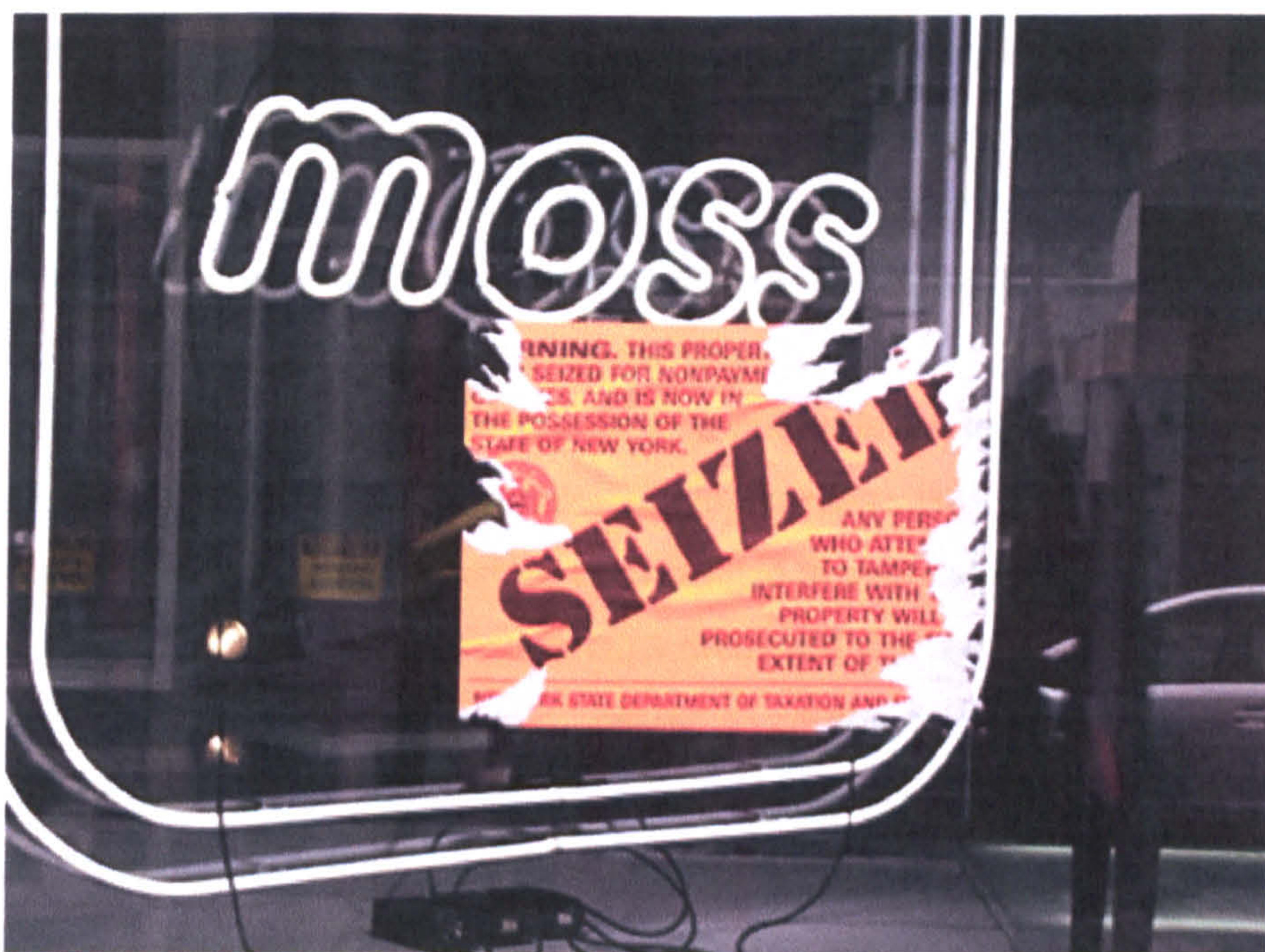


Figure 7.1 The seizure notice on the door of the Moss Gallery, November 5th 2010

On the morning of November 5th 2010, Murray Moss may have had some sense that the chain of events which began with the banking crisis had finally filtered through to his part of the matrix of culture, when he discovered that his gallery in New York had been seized by state officials for non-payment of taxes. In responding

to enquiries as to whether the company was going bankrupt Moss was adamant that this was a bureaucratic error (Core77.com 2010). However, the statement later issued by M. W. Moss Ltd. suggested that the store was indeed in need of financial restructuring if it was to survive (blog.archpaper.com 2010). So, trading in such goods has not ended. Philips de Pury, Sotheby's and Christies still sell contemporary design. The Moss Gallery is still open, the Carpenters Workshop Gallery continues to trade, Vivid in Rotterdam recently moved into a smart new gallery space. The designers involved are still making, showing and selling their work. Rich people are still buying objects that demonstrate their wealth and discernment. Less rich people are still consuming things that they feel represent an aspect of their personalities. Yet something has shifted. The mood has altered. The world that allowed such things to develop in their specific historical form has ended. A lot of people seem very keen to believe that this is a wobble, a blip, that after a little restructuring and reassessment soon equilibrium will be restored and everything will return to normal. Growth will resume, wealth will keep being generated from nowhere and the party can continue. This is not the case. Neo-liberal consumer capitalism will continue for some time, that much seems certain. But nobody quite believes in the same way they did, and this is crucial. Because our relationship to the commodity form that structures our society and underpins the essentially theological nature of our trust in the value of objects, depends upon belief. Without it, it cannot survive.

Commodity culture represents a very specific relation to objects and its operation has depended upon a particular ideological apparatus which has been in place throughout modernity, yet which has changed dramatically in the past two decades. When Droog first exhibited in 1993 the world was a very different place. Throughout the 1990s Droog Design pioneered an approach to design that was as much about branding and public relation as it was about sourcing inventive and engaging products and bringing them to the market. It was for this reason that Ramakers and Bakker essentially promoted Droog as an entity rather than the designers as individuals. The work was always presented as Droog first and foremost, with the actual designers being credited only on a secondary level. This worked very well for a while; it could indeed be called 'the spirit of the nineties'. Yet to maintain this in an age of information and the expansion of the market for high design meant being able to move beyond being the marketers of useful things with character, and the establishment of this type of product as an exclusive form of consumption on a par

with contemporary art. Perhaps because they had been so involved with the production of things that were genuinely meant to be sold to and used by the many, this seemed to be beyond the organisation's scope. It did not seem to sit easily with the brand they had developed. In the early twenty-first century the field was therefore left open for the auction houses and the gallerists to really drive the selling of high design to those who had previously collected art as a way of completing their lifestyle as the consumers of such forms of cultural capital.

It is no accident that the really big money has been made in relation to named individuals such as Arad and Newson, since collectors and investors like to be sure that the value of their equity is guaranteed by being based on a recognised brand. In the economy of art that has been colonised by design, this then happens through the designation of a genius individual to whom the work can be attributed and whose identity authenticates it. In this way, and through the mechanisms that accompany this process, such as the limiting of editions and gallery exhibition, for example, the aura of the chairs and tables they buy is assured. So the material thing is located in relation to its abstract existence, its reputation and value.

Communicative Objects

Yet, throughout the boom-time, as the super-wealthy bought their very expensive chairs and tables, what the work is actually communicating seems to have been if not ignored, then at the very least obscured. The gallery is a controlled space in which it is possible to experience at a remove the uncanny horror that accompanies the vitalism of objects in consumer culture. The autonomy that was carved-out by modern art to allow it distance to conduct a critique has been exploited by artists, such as those represented by the more venal wing of the YBAs, as the higher end of institutional art has become a recursive feedback loop feeding on its own corpse. In the gallery this is safe enough because the meta-proposition that this is *only* art neutralises any deeper effect. One can go and stare at the charnel house of consumer culture, nicely tamed behind its barrier, enjoy the frisson of 'critique' and then reward oneself for consuming such culture with coffee and a nice piece of cake in the café. When it resides in the gallery this is just the mechanism that design art occupies, and if it were to remain here such things would hardly be worth discussing.

There is, however, another dimension to such work, one which its presence in particular financial and symbolic economies of art masks but cannot quite contain. This is the proposition that this is genuinely design, that it really will come to be used. Even if this is only present as a hint, a hardly grasped intimation, it essentially alters the ontological position of the commodities on display. This is because there is then the implication, no matter how deeply concealed, that these things can enter everyday life. That they can and will be used and, because of what these things are, the methods used in their construction, the forms they take and the contradictions they contain the possibility of such use is *disconcerting, destabilising*. It suggests a form of life that is qualitatively different from the one we have been sold.

When thought of as design art (without its capitals), this type of design can be identified by both the tactics adopted in its creation and what it is actually communicating. Of course there are many objects that are simply conventional everyday things marked-up by being made in marble or other precious materials. There are also essentially traditional highly crafted objects that occupy a position that would have been recognisable in the eighteenth century, whereby the rich patronised craft ateliers. However, there are other categories of thing which appear to have only really developed in the recent conditions of modernity.

Domestic use-objects created from masses of standardised repetitions of the same thing, to the point that the gibbering incontinence of mass-production seems to be coalescing into its own self-generated forms; the waste and detritus of a world of ultimate availability becoming new and re-entering consumption as it refuses to go away and die as we were promised it would; the old and the out-moded, that should lie derided in a elderly relative's attic, requiring to be used as it metamorphosises into life; the things that we were convinced were our mute and attentive servants shuddering into action as they demand their place in the home; memories of ways of being, echoes of other forms of civilisation and material knowledge returning from their repression; new methods, materials, techniques and technologies yawning and stretching as they prepare for their time. Some are playful and full of delight. Others are disconcerting. All of this is there and it has come to be when it has because it could, because the conditions for its being have been created in this time.

When the Surrealists in the early twentieth century conceived of the hysterical house they did so from a position where the domestic interior had solidified into a carapace within which the bourgeoisie and those who aspired to their condition could

retreat from the world. This has now been penetrated by the channels of technocapitalism as it flows through such spaces with ease, gurgling in and out through screens and hand-held devices, welcomed by the bewildered and believing inhabitants as they search for meaning in the infinity in which they are implicit. In consumerism, the age of the brand, objects with attitude, the reified commodity has been given new life. In this materialist age we have more physical things than at any other point in history and we have never been so convinced as to their meaning, their import and their capacity to alter our lives. This they do, but not necessarily in the ways that we desire.

The things with which we live cannot help but communicate. They do not, however, necessarily say what their creators intended them to – sometimes they do, sometimes they do not – but always they are telling us of their conditions of production, they speak of the internal dynamics of the age in which they were made.

Performative Things

As has been demonstrated throughout this analysis, the dichotomy inherent in the commodity is the proposition that it is powerful, that it can satisfy our desires through its consumption, yet at the same time it is characterised as inert, that it is only human will which animates it into action. This is the mythology of the complete and completed product that magically appears in the marketplace. Concomitant to this is the perverse effect of apparently living in a reified material culture, whereby the possibility of action is conferred on objects whilst subjects appear locked into the inertia of a static now of consumption, unable to act in any way beyond the non-choices offered by consumerism as a mode of life.

The field of design art furniture and domestic use-objects, though it has been contained by being absorbed into a pseudo art world, has the potential to be a site of domestic creativity that can genuinely alter the conditions of everyday life. Though often its relationship to craft production, as is noted above, is that of the conventional position of craftspeople making things for the rich, a significant proportion of the objects that can be described in this way actually speak of the possibilities of a very human production – of the use of what is to hand, and the skills that are available, to make a life. Apart from that with which we physically adorn ourselves, such as clothes and jewellery, furniture and our domestic objects are the most intimate things

with which we live. It is therefore at this point that an intervention can be made if we are to construct a new everyday life – a *novi byt* – and these strange and marvellous things, these domestic creatures, suggest this through their form and their function.

At present many of the designs discussed here have a darkness to them, an uncanny quality, but this is actually the backbeat of our age, it is not something that is unique to design art, it is something that is *visible* in it. The nice shiny commodities we are encouraged to interact with have this quality hidden. Like an aging prostitute the wrinkles and the cankers are concealed beneath the slap. The slobbering grin denies the dentures and decay beneath the face turned to the punters. In design art this can be seen. All things that we interact with are performative. They hail us and demand that we become a new subjectivity in the process. Unfortunately this is usually the pre-packaged, death-denying onanist that is the consumer; at least design art is honest. In demanding we become its co-product we can see what the deal is based on, we may become clowns or rag-pickers, but this can be seen from the start.

The Boundaries of Function

Many of the things discussed are apparently absurd because they do not function efficiently. Yet when the factory is making guns, is not the most ethical position to be the poor worker, to let the sabot tumble into the workings and watch as the production line's serial logic is frustrated? At present the designers creating this kind of artefact seem to only be able to imagine that they can gain the freedom to make the sort of things that Ikea would be afraid to sell by asking for the crumbs from the table of the art world. Perhaps once we have realised that the game we were sold is over; that we are in a Wile E. Coyote moment, when his legs still flail furiously after he has run off the cliff and he turns to the viewer, a look of realisation and resignation on his face, that we are about to *fall*, then designers and makers will begin to realise their power. That in a deranged society drunk on mythical growth we shall all realise that there is more to life than some imagined efficiency.

At present the boundaries of function, what it means to be functional – for ways of living and being as much as for chairs and tables – are policed by those who believe that life exists to service capital. That all we can do is sell our labour and hope to be able to consume the tawdry devices offered to us. Maybe there is more than this.

Maybe we can imagine new ways of living. Not just in the abstract or in the non-space of the gallery, but materially in what we actually use, in everyday life as it is lived.

At the moment design art is all too often the making of baubles for the rich, who can be too stupid or too jaded to really see them. Though it is comforting to think of the way that the dark and the uncanny has been smuggled into the living rooms of the wealthy, on this level all such things really represent is the final act of the commodity. In this way design art can be seen as a final flaring up of the consumerist object just as a new mode of life ascends. The high-water mark has been reached, and the flood has begun to recede. This then has been the generation which has seen the material object burn at its brightest as the last of its fuel is consumed.

In these dialectical objects the mechanisms of our world can be intuited, even if only for a moment as a flickering intersection, and the full horror of what we have created, of what we are materially implicated in, can be grasped. This then does not lead to a moment of realisation, it is not a point at which we can see clearly and think our way out of the situation. Rather, as with all historical experience in the moment of its occurrence, before it is identified, codified and brought into the narrative, it is *felt*. It moves us, as we once believed art could.

So, then, in the use of what is to hand and an approach to making that understands that what is made will communicate *why* it was made; in a humanist approach to the material that sees all creation as an ethical question; in the creation of things that demand our engagement and cause us to act, and therefore show that there is the possibility that we can act in a different way, there is hope. By refusing to accept that the borders of what we do are fixed by the sterility of what serves the market and an approach to the material that sees endless consumption as efficient, it may then be that we find new purpose. In the communicative objects of design art, these things that wear their performativity on their surface, that shout and play and scream that there are other ways of doing things, it may be that we find not just a way to survive but a way to *live* that exists beyond the boundaries of function.

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Gareth Williams

Interview with the author, Royal College of Art, London, UK, 27th May 2010

DT: How long were you a curator at the V&A?

GW: I worked at the V&A from 1990 up to 2008 which is...18 years.

DT: And all that time you worked as a curator of contemporary furniture?

GW: No not all that time. I was an assistant curator or curatorial assistant in the first part and then I became involved in a few other projects, exhibitions, the *Brand.New* show, the architectural gallery interrupted my whole.... I was curator of twentieth-century contemporary furniture from about 1998, something like that.

DT: Right, it would be about ten years wouldn't it?

GW: About ten years.

DT: Why furniture? What took you into furniture, clearly you had quite a broad background.

GW: I had quite a broad background in the arts. I got a Drama and English degree and we were looking at twentieth century principally drama and stage craft, learnt drama and literature. I did an MA in Russian Studies which again focused on the Russian revolution's art history and social, political history. I wasn't really comfortable with art history, I felt it was all a bit too, too self referential. I found my way into furniture by accident, really by going through a general trawl through curatorial assistance for instance during the general application process and then the museum approached me and they invited me to go to work in the furniture department but I really didn't know anything about furniture at all. I really didn't know anything at all. But I did know about twentieth century '-isms', like modernism and a bit of Broadway. Actually it was design that I really liked. Had I known about design history that is what I would have studied. It was sort of a learning process that was about the real world. I didn't find twentieth century art particularly engaging. So that's how I found my way into furniture design. Also because prior to that, as a teenager totally on I was totally into the idea of being an architect... so that's how I came into this, not by designing furniture myself.

DT: That neatly brings me onto my next question. Which is abstract but I think we've got to start with it in some ways. What's your definition of design?

That old chestnut. Design? Well it depends on what way the wind is blowing doesn't it. I think is design. Everything man-made is design, a work of art is design. Design form giving. I think that

our contemporary understanding of what design is has something to do with this function or potential to function. It's to do with process, its manufacture, the process by which it was made. So design is something to do with making and something to do with use... something with the for potential of use. Obviously I don't think everything that's designed has to be utterly functional... So I have a very broad understanding, getting broader by the day actually, about what design is. Design is really a process I think by which people give shape to the things they want.

DT: With certain imperatives around use?

GW: Yes I think it has to... you have to get away from that. If you actually say that design no longer has a relationship with use, even if it is a tenuous one, then it just dissolves into all creative output. How do you say ...you can't say anything if it's all just 'stuff' that's made for no particular reason. So I think what forms the boundary with art is its relationship with function. Whatever that relationship might be.

DT: In that case, if for the moment we accept this term of design art...

GW: Do we have to?

DT: Well, the category of objects that seems to be appearing at a certain point. I'm wondering what you feel... when did you notice it, when did you start to think that maybe these objects that have got this relationship... that are working at this boundary, perhaps, that you talked about?

GW: I suppose if I really started thinking about it, probably about five years ago, perhaps a bit before then. I was working on *The Furniture Machine*, that book, which came out around 2005. But I was really looking more at production furniture then, but I was aware of the more ambitious, expressive pieces coming through, I think the really explosive stuff happened a bit later... Maybe I just became more aware. I hadn't really thought about design as artistic expression. I was aware of people like... Dunne and Raby, going back to 2000, even then they were talking about critical design and potential design, the word art hadn't yet entered the fray.

DT: Well of course you have got people pre dating that by some considerable time. Ramakers does make some specific points about the relationship to art and the dissolving of boundaries...

GW: She is really more talking about craft and the industry isn't she? I haven't read it for a long time. She suggests that somehow these designed objects are art?

DT: Quite explicitly, that it can be considered as such, though it's quite slippery, it moves in registers all the time. In the *Furniture Machine* you talk about the idea of manifestos.

GW: That chapter in that book was where I was thinking this is where I want to go next. It's about design and ideas. When I did that book there are different styles of chapters, there's one about looking at materials, techniques and how they affect the material qualities and engineering and how it is changing, then one about manifestos, the ideas and how they affect stuff. There's one about lifestyle, those one or two chapters, about manifestos and lifestyle, about that mediagenic type of design. I thought that's really interesting, there is something really emerging from there, and from that, I suppose, what's called design art developed.

DT: That's really interesting. You actually use this term again in the catalogue to telling tales, 'manifesto', an object manifesto. How can an object embody a manifesto? Is it possible? Can we actually see it in the thing, to what extent is the dialogue discussed put around it?

GW: I think it depends on the object. If the questions raised by the object are to do with its form or materials then it's its own discourse, well we have a discourse with it, I suppose, so it's about our understanding about what we're looking at, there are tons of manifestos of design, about performance. There's acres of Italian stuff, that have some agendas and making points and having

manifestos. That is in itself a new way of thinking about objects. I think that in the way I am using it in *The Furniture Machine*, it's the designers expressing their, *their* manifestos through their objects. It's this kind of authorship that I'm getting at. That people are making some personal statement about an issue or about... the nature of their view about objects or consumption depending on the object or a statement about us as a consumer in terms of what the object is. Julia [Lohmann] is great manifesto designer. Her *Cow Benches* are manifesto about her attitudes animals and animal production. That's a really nice example manifesto design, of how her *Cow Benches* are her manifesto about her attitude to design. I think I'm a little skeptical about sometimes what seems like a manifesto is actually a bit more PR from designers. Where there's not a body of work that seems to really hold together and it's really about promotion and the image and the *Wallpaper** photo-shoot...

DT: So to move on then from this, clearly you are thinking about these sorts of things in *The Furniture Machine* and that starts to develop into something that's going to be *Telling Tales*, at some point. You clearly had to start thinking of the way of putting stuff together, bringing it together. Did you see it as a show? Do you see it as an exhibition?

GW: Yes.

DT: Because of course there could have been the possibility of another book, it couldn't have gone just straight into a book

GW: I could see its potential as an exhibition with the spectacular character of the work but at that stage I was thinking a bit stuck and I wanted to write a book and I wanted to do a show at the same time and there was this thing called design art, this thing was in the air, there was this thing that we talked about called design art, and I thought we at the V&A ought to recognize we should do this. This is clearly within the remit of the V&A. It's claimed to be both design and art. Is that not the V&A? This is the kind of show... it's about aesthetics, it's about materiality, it's about uniqueness, rarity, it's spectacular, it's speaking the V&A language. Its not like trying to do a show about landmine devices or prosthetic limbs, they're very worthy parts of design, but it's not going to sit happily in the V&A. This thing called design art sits very happily within the V&A concepts.

So immediately we thought, 'What's it going to be?' Is it just going to be a show of pretty, expensive things? We couldn't do it. If you are going to do a show about it, you've got to be able to say something about it. You've got to be saying, you've got to be able to put some critical, tutorial, editorial angle on the things you have in it. It seems to me that it was lacking a critical or curatorial, and it seemed to me, and I'm sure that you will agree with this, there was no critical... at all... it was all a media, market driven evaluation which tended to be the only valuation. It's an economic barometer...

I was very anxious that we would then end up with a show of trophies. Which you can't... so how do you unpack... What do you say about these objects if the reason that they are there is that they are trophies. I wasn't comfortable about doing that. That wasn't the work that particularly interested me anyway, the work that really interested me was the Dutch inflection. The sort of, erm, formal experiments of the big design artists like Hadid, that sort of stuff didn't really work. I couldn't see a way to unpack that, I couldn't see a need to do that. So quite quickly the design art proposal we had we had to map it onto something, we had to fix it down... what part are we going to talk about because it's as long as you want it to be and as broad as you want it to be. So that's when this notion of narrative, of the fairy story, the way that I chose to look at those objects came about because I was thinking: 'if these people claim this design is art, how does it feel like art? Okay. So we'll look at art and linguistics to try and unpack it and see if it works.

DT: What was the process?

GW: It was a meeting I had with Ronald Parker who is the head of the contemporary team at the V&A. We had, thinking back a long time now, it was probably 2007... We got this provisional agreement

we were going to do this design art show but what was it going to be? We were sort of knocking around some ideas. Even in the meeting this notion of narrative and story telling came through. I mean the objects were already coalescing into these three groups, one about history, one about nature and one about death. So we worked something together and it all worked or fixed in these exhibitions. So immediately it showed to how you could shape the show into three sections, how you could shape the journey. It really did gel really quickly. I knew I wanted to work with Tord [Boontje], in that respect the show had to be really appropriate for it and so I had this idea for the Forest Glade, partly because of his show I'd seen in Milan, and I thought of how to do a sort of fairytale forest with hangings and things. And thought about re-using some of that to design the show but before I had a chance to see him I was introduced to the person who made the whole thing. I also knew it would be a great chance to work with Studio Job, and so I wrote to them, described the show and asked did they have some work that would be good, and they were working on the Robber Baron, and I thought, 'we're on to something now. I'm not just forcing work into brackets that I'd made. I seem to have come up with these brackets that other people were thinking of using similar ways of looking at things'. This seemed to fit so well into these three groups, particularly the first two, that I got this moment where I thought 'I know, fairy-stories, that's the one'. These things looked like they were from fairy tales.

DT: You weren't tempted to also include the likes of Dunne and Raby?

GW: It wasn't about not wanting to deal with certain designers but it doesn't come from the same place, it all generates in the same way, but it doesn't feel like it's doing the same thing. Yes they are small editions, yes they using elaborate materials and therefore there is sort of a market but aesthetically they are completely different. Their recent work is to do with the formal sculptural presence, it's not about the story telling.

DT: That leads me onto my next question, what was excluded? There are certain Droog products that might have fitted into this story telling... Tejo Remy's early work for example...

GW: Bit old. I wanted things to be more recent than that. In fact I just bought one from the Carpenters Workshop Gallery at the time. I didn't really... where could it go on my structure?

DT: That structure gives a wonderful coherence as an exhibition. Do you think it cost you anything?

GW: I had a budget and limitations on time and space... I don't think it's ever the last word on anything. It's only the fifty objects. Arguably there are things in there that shouldn't have been in there...

DT: Such as?

GW: I'm not prepared to say, but some things are more significant than others. There are greatly significant objects of their time which aren't in the show, aren't in the project. Another reason for our excluding the Tejo Remy pieces, for instance, was that they are made in rather large numbers. Over two-hundred. As well as the story telling narrative thing we wanted them to be after 2000. I wanted things that were either unique or in small editions. And that's quite explicit in platform of this project. We tried to be as picky as possible about the things that made it in, but we did bend it a bit. One of the things that would have worked really well and was in the book was the *Tree Trunk Bench*, but it turned out that was too big and turned out to be a nightmare. You don't buy the bench you buy the rights to make the bench and you have to get a tree trunk. So you have to get it at a certain time of year to make sure that the sap is down, and bark is dry, and you can imagine the conservation department, when you say 'Yes, we're going to bring this freshly cut tree trunk, and all its... contents... into the heart of the V&A' and they'd say 'No you're not!'

DT: In terms of the structure that you have given it... You must have seen Design High at the Blouin Foundation, things like Reinoso's *Spaghetti Bench*...

GW: It isn't natural enough to fall into... to be about nature. Its not ironic, really...

[...]

DT: You mention Surrealism briefly in the catalogue. [In the show] there are these Surrealist qualities, such as the marvelous nature of objects and the unheimlich, and yet you didn't go down into the Surrealism route? Why not?

GW: I think a lot could be said. It's not the last word. It came up in the readings in the book, I don't think for a show at the V&A it was a way, a way of thinking that needed to be pushed further. The designers don't really talk about Surrealism, do they?

DT: I'm sure they don't.

GW: It wasn't an overt reference point... Its got that kind of kookiness and the unheimlich, as you say, but its not there in what the designers themselves say. I didn't really worry too much about what they were saying they were trying to do, you get these statements from people, but hey don't know what they're doing. I prefer to go with what I think they're doing... To go back to the Surreal thing, I don't think I really understand enough about it!
[...]

I think it's more about the designer's wish to reconnect art with history. That seems to come through most when you talk to the designers. Weiki Sommers saying about her teapot, and she is very articulate about trying to reconnect a lot of her work.

DT: Is that a reaction to modernism?

GW: I think it is, yes. I think the big question that they are trying to answer is trying to heal a rift caused by modernism. Which is kind of interesting, looking at modernists thinking, it's kind of ironic looking at Freud and Benjamin and people from that moment. It seems to me that a lot of that Dutch and other stuff is referencing the pre-modern rather than Modernism, it's a direct attempt to try to heal a rift caused by modernism. Maarten Baas, he burns furniture from the 1850's. They refer to that moment, Jurgen [Bey], Hella [Jongerius] and the others take you back to the seventeenth century arts and pre-modernist forms. Everyone is skipping over that bit. It's something to do with history and continuity. To say that Modernism was not to do with history is completely spurious, Of course a Modernist design speaks of history, it speaks of Modernist history. We think of Modernism as quite close, it's quite contemporary and enduring, but it's not a rejection of history.

DT: Perhaps its quite a modern form of contemporary that has been taken up and promoted. Benjamin, for example talked about history, he's someone who's really mapping into that. So where does Surrealism fit into this? What about Dada? These things always seem to get forgotten because they do not fit neatly.

GW: Well, exactly. What are we talking about? At the end of the day it is personal views. Modernism is used very differently and often actually and completely out of context. You know, scratch somebody and they'll tell you a different version depending on what their interests are.

[...]

That reconnection, that's where it starts to connect. The narratives that I'm suggesting we carry with us as people and which we now seek through objects, is about reconnecting us to our paths, to ourselves, it's a force isn't it.

DT: Yeah you get a continuing a tale or story.

GW: Yes or a retelling.

DT: Yes. As with Benjamin and the idea of the story teller,

GW: Yes, cultural, universals which are universals which can be told and told and told until they kind of become...until we don't know where they came from. We don't know whether they are, whether they are our thoughts?

[...]

So in terms of certainly that project I would say there are various stories which are these traditions which are ways of describing our place in the world, our forefathers tried to understand how they fitted into this bigger system. And we keep telling the stories and fairy tales until they become utterly embedded in culture.

It's not an original thought, everything possible can literally become a story, it's these trajectories. So what I'm trying to do is plug into that. It worked with the structure of the show because you can talk about myth and fairytale and all this stuff to do with horror, the garden of Eden, and Then what happens to story telling over time the biggest change that happens to story telling is the printing which enables us to tell stories in an entirely different way. The stories that emerge over a long period of time become novels, by the eighteenth century, are descriptions of the material world and descriptions of recognisable individuals, albeit fictional people but they are real people, they are not everyman.

They're not metaphorical everyman type characters which the oral tradition, oral drama and all that oral story telling doesn't really differentiate people... so that's the beginning of a different tradition. Individuals moving through the material world so by the time you get to the end of the eighteenth century novel [...] When I discovered Hogarth I realized then the narrative description of the world as a metaphor for the human condition, that the depravity of the world mirrored the decrepitude of the morals of the person.

DT: So it's a material expression...

GW: Yes and so through that, design-objects carry meaning, as status-objects or lack-of-status-objects, they speak about the person who owns them or the user of them, that period was a very very material age... In depictions of it in the eighteenth or nineteenth century its all about are you up or are you down, life path and the value you accrue. Of course there's an awareness of the inner, of interiority but it seems to be increasingly expressed through the outer. So that seems to work quite nicely when you think about Studio Job, and the distorted forms as they seem to be parodying those values, and being ironic in a good Dutch way. So it all seems to be about something to do with status and undercutting it. In the end they are undercutting it. Which is exactly what Studio Job does most of the time. As they're doing with the *Robber Baron* thing, it's about wealth and power, but what is it doing, you can't get a grip...

DT: Yes it's endlessly ambiguous isn't it?

GW: Yes. So that interested me a great deal.

DT: Why did you decide not to... You talk about design art in the catalogue. You talk about all the exploratory panels in the beginning? Why wasn't it used explicitly in the title? You say in some ways you rejected it

GW: Because at the time I told him I was working on a project and developing it, so the media reaction to design art was changing and by the time we were getting close to the show, at least six months before the show, about a year because you have to name the book. We were worried it was going

to have fallen out, Alexander Payne had disowned it in 2007. The death knell... Alice Rawsthorn was dancing on the grave design art even then. By then I thought hmm better be wary, which is why I opted to call it 'so called design art'. I honestly thought .. I can write about this without saying whether I agree with it. I don't think, I didn't feel the need to be the, to own it, I didn't invent it after all. I didn't want the show or myself to be kind of tied to it as its dying? So I talked about it. I talked about whether we think its design art come together with fashion and then this... I don't care.

DT: Monstrously clumsy isn't it. That's one of the reasons I like it, because its so clumsy.

GW: Have you seen Alex Coles recent article in Art Monthly?

DT: Yes but of course he's quite specific that it's about art that refers to design doesn't he?

GW: Yes he's come the long way round. Even then I'm not quite sure what he understands. He certainly doesn't think much of the designers who we are talking about.

[...]

DT: This terminology does matter, though. The organizers of Object Rotterdam called it 'autonomous design'...

GW: These are generally self generated, self commissioned unmoderated by a client, except of course you've got Meta... most of the work that we are talking about, so called design art... it is self generated... this is about the independent statement whereas industrial design is involved in a huge, matrix, a process where the designer is a kind of manager, who manages the expectations of different other bodies, either the marketing department or the technical department or the market itself.... Autonomy and design is an interesting counter-culture.

DT: The moment you move from the process to the object, is it possible to be such a thing, an autonomous design object in the way that makers might claim that...

GW: Why not. Well it's craft isn't it. It's what craftsmen have been doing for millennia. They personally decided shape and form... Then they make it to their specifications, to their choice and the market will take it or leave it. If a client will pay for it, no matter how appropriate the market will find it. That's autonomous, that's still a production.

DT: What happens if you look at the biography of the object? This is one of the strategies that artists have used with your time with use of objects even if they are in the gallery. People go there and its separated from the world. Theoretically if I'd have made a chair would that chair, even if the most tenuous level. Is there at least, they're somehow projecting it into domestic interiors, space of use to

GW: That's why in telling tales we created a room' the white box 'it's a choice, but it strips away context, and I think design needs context... it's about human interaction in the real world. It's muted if you make it all about itself and its own internal dialogue.

[...]

DT: To bring this to a close then. Clearly the Design Academy [Eindhoven] and the Royal College have a profound effect here. To what extent are education establishments like this driving this kind of design?

GW: Well I think that we in education encourage the individual voice of the designer. If they so chose to be autonomous we will encourage that in a pupil if they want that.

DT: Thank you very much.

Julia Lohmann

Interview with the author at the Stanley Picker gallery, Kingston University, London, UK, 10th June 2010

DT: So first of all, what was your training as a designer?

JL: I did my Bachelor's. I studied one year in Germany which was a foundation. Very different in Germany you learn about life-drawing, compositional studies, things like that. Then I did my BA in graphic design. Then I did my MA at the RCA in Design Products.

DT: From my reading, I believe you originally ran away to Iceland and then what drew you back the RCA, why there? Because you ran away from advertising, didn't you?

JL: Yeah. I already applied to the RCA, I'd already got in before I ran away so I knew I'd come back to that. The RCA is amazing forum because people come from all different backgrounds. So that is a possibility for me, a possibility to do my BA in Graphic design and then say, actually, I challenge myself more than doing an MA in graphic design so I did it in product design and during my BA I had won the IF Design award which is a design award in Germany for Product Design, for Product that I did and I'd won the student award for product design. So I suddenly thought, hang on there, there's something there and why, you know, Product Design could be a possibility in the RCA so new to this, so why then. They look more for the conceptual side in the interview rather than categorize, you know, in a way that really kind of appealed to me?

DT: Right, okay, so you were sort of moving more in a material kind of direction? Was it the materiality of the...?

DT: Erm. No, I think it was...no, I wasn't. I still had to go for it. Thinking that if I'm brave enough, I'm going to do product design. Not because I really love products, when I stopped doing advertising and decided to apply to the RCA, I decided that, I thought that almost everywhere where there is an ad, I'd rather have no ad. The same doesn't apply to product. [You] can't say that almost everywhere where there is product I'd rather have no product. That's not true so no, I felt, okay, this is the right direction. I felt, I'm wrong at advertising for sure. Product design is great because there are great products. Not all products are great but there is the scope of making something really great.

DT: Right, so there's potential back in the world?

JL: Yes. I think the same is true for graphic design. I think there is fantastic graphic design. Its not that I ran away from graphic design, I really like that but I was never a straight forward graphic designer either. When I studied graphic design I created the content in the book. You know that *Maggot* portrait that I did? That is not graphic design. I created a whole book. Then I was marked on the layout of the book but really I did this on art project already. When I started graphic design I was never straight forward graphic designer and not a straight forward product designer either.

DT: Okay, good. That leads me onto the next question. It's a horrible question, I understand, but what's the definition of design? How do you understand it?

JL: I think there is function, for sure. I think function is a big part of it. However, I think function is a big part of art. They'd just rather not speak about it. If you think of a piece like Anthony Gormley with the white room [*Blind Light*] for example, I just spoke about it with a friend yesterday... its very functional in the emotion that it creates. Really a very pure emotion that creates very

immediately and if not, well it does that, you never speak of a function you speak of something so in a way, I define function as quite an open, very wide term.

DT: That's actually to describe an effect. I do wonder if ...

JL: That effect is called function.

DT: Well, function could be broken down into many different aspects, I think.

JL: You probably know more about that than I do but I know.

DT: I don't know...

JL: The traditional way of defining function is to make a chair to be sat on.

DT: Yeah.

JL: Well I'm asking whether it's really not to just sit on a chair. Why do so many people try to solve this problem of sitting? Surely we all sit quite comfortable already? What else can we ask of an object? I'm trying to get emotion of what function can be. For example, think of the *Cow Bench*. It has two functions. One function is yes, you should be able to sit on it. The reason why this is very important for me is not because I am concerned that people have a place to sit to watch *Eastenders* but because I'm referencing an object that is made to be sat on. So it's important that it stays in the same area, so its important that you can sit on it.

My main function for this object and I have no idea whether function is the correct term, I think it should be because I think I want to stretch the term to fit, is that I want to make people reflect. So the main function of that object can be fulfilled without you owning it. You don't even have to sit on it. Its better if you sit on it or you can see it but you can even see a picture of it and you go back to your own couch and you go back to you own and you see your shoes and you suddenly make that link that you'd previously not made. So in a way my main function of that object is to encourage a reflection. So when I get asked about functionality, especially if I talk in Germany, you know you have this industrial designer from the audience who say 'yeah but how about functionality deh deh deh' then I say 'yes, but its highly functional for what its made to be'. And this is in a way, as I work as a designer, I deliberately make it function in that way but an artist doesn't make their object function in that way. In that way of how you reflect it. I think for me, in a way, that is ground that designers are encroaching on and that artists are defending but they don't really defend it because they don't really say that there is a functionality. They kind of are scared of function in a way.

DT: I have some strong ideas on this. I don't want to lead you in my direction just yet, but later in the conversation I really want to come back to this point because it's key to make. You said, I think people are picking up on that idea, you said that if you do something in a gallery space (I think you're absolutely right on this) that of course if you don't use it, I mean, you've said that people could say 'okay, crazy artist' that effect the gallery has because that's what they are expecting and then you went on to say that other people would say 'how would that work in my living room?' [...] I'm wondering to what extent are you actually conceptualizing the user. Are you thinking about that living room when you're creating it? Do you have an idea around the user for example?

JL: I'm thinking about myself, my own emotions. In a way I'm never taking a subject that I'm not guilty of. Like I couldn't now work with.... I don't know. I'm taking something where I am.... in a way that's deliberate, that's more deliberate. I'm not thinking, oh, it should go into so and so houses. I'm thinking the topic I chose should be one where I am questioning my own deeds, where I'm doing something with everyone else. At the same time there is this little part in my head where I'm thinking, 'This is not really right the way we all accept how it's done'. So I am with everyone else. With the cow, I don't make it for the people who then buy it. Yes, I need the people who then

buy it because I need to sell and supply but they are not specifically made for them.

DT: Right. I'm sure they're not commissioned for an individual, I'm just wondering to what extent is it important that this goes into a living room? Do you actually think of this object, maybe *Lasting Void* for example...

JL: No, it's not important that it goes in the living room. It's just important that people imagine that it will... you know, that it has that reference to the living room.

DT: Right.

JL: You know, for example, was the *Cow* more important than with the *Lasting Void*? The *Lasting Void* is a little over, over the border. The *Cow* is really sitting really very uncomfortably totally on that little edge and shaking in the wind.

DT: Yeah, it's definitely demanding to be in a domestic situation in terms of its... well, to be sat on!

JL: I have one and I sit on it. I really enjoy sitting on it as well. I really wouldn't want to miss it at the moment its in Japan so I am missing it.

DT: Right. Okay. This is something I was interested in, there's another one where you mentioned you sold one and I think it was one of your house mates who was very upset because they'd got to know the cow...

JL: Belinda?

DT: Yeah, I'm fascinated by that experience, what's it like to sit on one?

JL: It's amazing because it's already made into see it because you read it. I'm reading a book at the moment about child psychology and there's one thing in there that I think 'wow, this is really interesting'. There are two brain cells, not really brain cells but metaphorical brain cells, because they say if you learn something, if you learn... in psychology if you learn something like a way to behave its almost like you programme a brain cell for that behaviour. So he speaks about parents who live in symbiosis with their children, meaning that they see the children as a limb of themselves,

DT: As an extension to themselves.

JL: As an extension and don't allow the children to be their own, live in their own right. What he says that the children are that they are only, like for objects you have the brain cell, you have like the psychological understanding of an object which you have first. Everything is object around you, you just have yourself and object. Then only later to think there is a distinction and suddenly you learn 'Hey no, there are objects and there are people'. So you learn how to treat the people differently and I guess people will also be animal. I don't know, I guess that would fall into that. You teach your children... If you have the little book or whatever and you learn this, you learn this distinction and then some children dysfunction and don't really learn that.

But I thought how interesting because I think this is exactly one thing the cow does. Not that you can't really do with anything else. If you read it as something in between, a hybrid in between an object and an animal. You do have that if you have children they run up to it and pat it and they go like 'Ahhh', they really have this like, emotional response. And adults are the same. Some people don't want to sit on it because they find it, they just don't want to. Other people when they sit down they go... asking for permission to stroke the animal and really feels very much like an animal when you sit down on it. It feels very much, I mean I use hard foam. It feels very large sitting on it and already when you see it, you think it's really big although it's a sofa, its very small for a sofa, but you read it as an animal. You see this and you think 'wow, this looks very big

animal to be in my room'. Emotionally, you can if you don't, maybe its both brain cells going 'Oh, I know this!' I don't know. There is something when you have both kind of responses to that.

DT: Right, so creating an irresolvable dichotomy because you are seeing it as both at once

JL: That's a very nice way! (Laughs).

DT: No, it's fascinating. So clearly you're... these things are meant to do something. They are meant to have an effect. You aren't just creating another sofa for the world. There's of course your famous exchange with Mendini...

JL: Have you read all the things? You've read the one's on my website?

DT: I've read what he said and your response.

JL: Yeah. He wrote me another letter after that.

DT: Oh right, okay.

JL: Saying he understands now.

DT: Right. I sort of gathered that and erm... He shook your hand very nicely I believe.

JL: He sent me a bronze statue or sculpture he had.

DT: Which I think is interesting in itself. Because he's clearly just responded very immediately to something he had seen and made what is quite an understandable sort of ... you know, to expect people, designers to be cynical, which I think a lot of people do. He's reacted to it as though you were making it cynically. In your response you said that designs of stuff should stop us becoming numb, numb to the world.

JL: Yeah.

DT: And instead prompt us to re think how we lead our lives. Is that possible?
Can design do that?

JL: I hope so, I very much hope so.

DT: How is it possible, how can it do it? I mean if you take something like the *Cow Bench*, it's a very clear statement. Would it be possible for more mundane objects to do this? Does it have to be so psychologically challenged?

JL: No. I think every object has the potential to do that in a certain way. Objects do that anyway, they do in other directions. Objects like a remote control, teach you that every object shaped the way you think about the world. It's just in which direction is more of a question I guess. You know like remote control teaches you that you are in charge, you are sitting there, I come to you basically. Maybe that is the difference, that maybe design, I don't know, I'm just thinking about it now but maybe design doesn't work on making life more comfortable for people. For years design has always kind of gone for like make it more comfortable, more comfortable. Maybe we've reached a point where design can often make even a bit uncomfortable. Maybe this is time to say right, we are too comfortable. Now where do we go from here? Let's just make something that questions that.

That does go back a bit and for that, yes its possible in a kind of mass produced object but its difficult because of course people don't really know that this is what they want. They might not want to. They might not want it in their area so I guess that's where then a gallery space can come

in to do something like this. To make something that is a little bit uncomfortable but to not force people to have it in their living room or in their life everyday but to see it and to take something away from it without having to have it constantly. I'm not sure. I think essentially design as we understand it, like industrial design is definitely at the moment the part of the problem not part of the solution of where we are going. It definitely needs to be part of the solution. It has many attributes that make it fit for being part of the solution.

As a designer you learn amazingly how to think, how to connect dots, how to take a problem and spin it around, spin it back and look at it from different angles. You learn things, you learn skills, creative skills learnt. Quite special. In a lot of disciplines you learn to dissect little things and look very intensely in one point and see one point but as a designer you learn how to take it, spin it, make connections to totally different things come back with a way of thinking that I think we can use to find solutions rather than be part of the problem. And being part of the problem I mean produce more and more and more and try to sell, try to flog stuff to people. Indiscriminately, as long as they buy it, we're happy which is a very cynical way of putting it but a lot of have done that. Not every one.

[...]

DT: Do you think there is a danger of putting things in a gallery space?

JL: Yes, definitely.

DT: Right, okay, what's that then, what's the danger?

JL: I think the danger is, I mean what I said, why it's great to have the bench as a design it might get lost. You know, if people read the design then they go to the next step then they think... art gallery crazy stuff, then you've lost that. I think design has, the one thing that design has, err, one really strong point design has in favour of art is that it reaches people in that space. If you entirely leave people's spaces then you are endangering yourself to overdo it on one point. So in a way I think that the gallery and museum is a dangerous space for design. As much as a dangerous space I've found to be.

Very much it is an environment where you get fed, you have your life and nuh nuh nuh nuh... but its not the natural habitat. Not straight away. Not exclusively. But it can be there and it can be very good for it to be there, you know, for, until there is a natural habitat or until you can say okay great... If it doesn't loose all the ties it can be really good for it to be there, but it still has to be, in some respects, understood with reference to design. Or it has to hop back on or it has to go really quite far so it can go into art maybe. Or something else maybe. It is a little bit like an animal reserve.

DT: Right... it's a wonderful image! The gallery is like a zoo for design...

JL: Yeah but it is also in a way it's well known. There is a big benefit, there's a really great benefit of the gallery.

DT: So what's that? What are the biggest benefits?

JL: The biggest benefits are that you can do things that reflect upon design that are really quite far out, that are entirely new that you can't, that you wouldn't get a manufacturer to say 'Oh wow great, because its quite far out!' They can reach a bigger distance in thinking with your objects by having a space in which you can put them and therefore people can start discussing them and people can understand them and they can feed back into what industrial design does. So for that it's really fantastic because you can just move quicker if you have that space. It's very like getting numbers back up on wolves or whatever, you know?

[...]

If you have an endangered animal, you breed it in captivity because you can just get it further and then you can get it out again.

DT: Right. So we can extend the metaphor. It's about a space of safety?

JL: It is a place of safety where you can breed, you can nurture it. In a way you can go quicker, you can do something more radical, you can just push it further. Then when it's pushed it can trickle back, it can feed back and you can do other things to produce something. Already something normal something like straight forward industrial [design] can take years sometimes, one year or two years but if you try to produce something radical people won't even look at you, they'll say just the tooling will cost me so much, blah blah blah so they won't take the risk. Anyway, the consumers wouldn't buy it because it's not something... I mean... You can have a radical thought that you can put much better in a piece that's only a unique piece or done ten times. People can read the thought much clearer in that piece than if you water it down, water it down until it is marketable.

So in a way, going back to function, it can fulfill a function much better if it's a one unique piece in a gallery setting that it will encourage people to think in that direction. Because it can be more radical, it can be more 'out there'. It's like the buildings of the, how you call them, Arch... you know, like the architects that never built anything.

DT: Oh, Archigram and the like?

JL: Yeah. it's a bit like that you know, who don't have the constraint of actually, okay, wall thickness, blah blah blah, static and you can just really go out there and say, this is the proposal, this is fantastic and this could work. Then people will get excited by it and people will go back and have a huge influence but maybe none of your buildings will be built.

DT: But of course there's the danger that, erm, about the safety of the gallery. Because it exists in a gallery, people can go in, look at it, leave it in the gallery in their heads.

JL: Yep. So in a way you can't cut the ties totally. You have to have some leverage. You have to be able to then ... you know, if you are too far then people will say crazy, this is totally cut off from what's happening in the real world. So somehow you have to build a bridge. You have to somehow do something that is really far out but still have reference to the real world or have reference to what's going on to make people who are in that industrial world see a connection and even think in that direction. Otherwise people will say, okay or whatever.

DT: Ah, it's fascinating. Almost a balancing act between inside and outside the gallery. *The Catch*, that strikes me, I mean I haven't seen it in the flesh, but it strikes me as a work of art. It's using objects that had practical functional use but from the image, clearly that's not something you can use.

JL: No.

DT: So with that, would you say your moving completely into the gallery space that's an object that can only work there?

JL: In the way it is now, yes. I could of also said I am going to use the boxes to make some things but it's not as easy as that because it wouldn't have worked that way. I mean I was thinking of going back but then I had a different... I didn't want to speak... I guess with the leather objects I wanted to speak about something that is designed specific about how we as designers and consumers use material that's why it was a design piece. It was important that it's a cow bench. A sofa basically. Already with the *Lasting Void* I'm questioning something that we also use the animal but its more about the meat industry, more about something that is not as related to product design therefore it

wasn't as important that it worked as well a product. With the Lasting Void it's the same, I'm questioning something how we use marine-life just to sell ourselves but how great.

[...]

DT: At the symposium for *Telling Tales* you said something I found very interesting. You said [the *Cow Bench*'s] main function was its narrative. Would you have used the word narrative before you went to the symposium? Before you went to that exhibition? Were you using that term before?

[...]

JL: In a way for me, in a way a lot of this higher designer is criticised for being elitist which for many years design was supposed to be for the masses. Designers have concerned themselves with making things accessible for the masses. Suddenly here we come doing these eighteen thousand Euro *Cow Benches* and suddenly you think, ah, hang on, this is not for the masses. So this is my way of saying no, it is but it's not in the same way as a leather couch. A leather couch you have to go in to use it, to use its function. It encroaches thinking without you owning it. The ownership has been cut out in a way.

DT: Right. This is an interesting problem for me because you went on to say that everyone can experience its main function based on the picture. And of course its an object that most people will have experienced in mediation. Is that a problem for you? It seems to be that there... Isn't there a danger this is an object that has become mediated?

JL: No, not at all. I don't think so. I think this is where the gallery comes in. I think it's great. Yes it would be better if all people would see the piece in the flesh. That would be better. It would be even better if in the gallery they could sit on, make a complete experience from. There again we have another part of the gallery. They can't really allow you to sit on it because mostly they just loan the piece. It would be great if they have, for example, a collection where you could actually sit on the piece and get experience them fully. Maybe that is something which should be pushed. In a way, if it's in a magazine, the more people that see it, the more people will... They will start to think about them, they may not have thought about before. A link, a connection. So in a way I'm reaching my audience. I don't... why, where do you see the danger?

DT: Well, I'm wondering if that is quite a literary approach to objects, to the thingyness of things. I'm just wondering if there's a danger that people start to think they've got the message through seeing it...

JL: And they don't have it because they only get the feeling when they sit on it

DT: Right

JL: A lot of people have that.

DT: So you sit on it...

JL: Yes. That danger does exist but you can't really avoid it. If you want to reach people you never going to reach everyone anyway. I'm not going to make it cow parade and put a cow in every city. I could have done but if I want to reach people, yes, there is a danger you don't reach them as well. You know, either you reach a lot of people but then you can't really control... Or you reach few people and then you can really reach them better.

It is a problem sometimes, I have people to come to my talk for example now I gave one in Camberwell, and they said 'yes' they had read and saw pictures of it before, and found it a bit gorey and didn't really understand the depth of the photo's,' but now that I speak about it, they get it. So yes, that danger is there but I can't really eradicate it because I can't speak all the people. I

don't want to be there saying 'you have to...' but in a way, you can understand the *Cow Bench* on different levels. So if people see it and they see it as a beautiful object, fine. Like children, they see it and they think 'oh yeah, wow! Big cow, can I ride on him... and deh deh deh'. But then you can go deeper and deeper. Maybe you see it first and you think of it on one level and then you see the next time or think again and you suddenly reflect differently. So I don't mind that I ... I actually think the fact that it's beneficial a natural form that everybody will find. It's really like wading into the sea on something, you can start in terms really quite shallow... It's a beautiful form, really nice leather, it's whatever, and then you can go deeper and deeper about it. Every time you think about it you find something new.

DT: So would you be happy if a rich person bought it as a beautiful object and simply enjoyed it as a beautiful object

JL: Yes. Totally

DT: And at no point reflected upon it's leather nature and it's cowness

JL: I would hope that he would at some point.

DT: Ahh.

JL: But I don't for example, one woman who wanted to ask me whether I would upholster it in Loius Vuitton leather and then stencilled leather with all the holes that Loius Vuitton has or something, she has a hide or something, I said no because it wouldn't have added anything. In a way the concept isn't for that, that's also why I still make them by hand and not mould them or something that would make much more sense. It's important that they are all unique. They all have their own personality. There are some magazines where you think... well... what's the point? But then at the same time with these magazines you can reach people, you can reach people that you can't reach with an art magazine or you can't reach that wouldn't go to a museum. So I think it's great, opening it up.

[...]

DT: What I'm very interested in, in terms of this relationship to function that you've talked about. An object to me for it to be design, it must have utilitarian function. If you say we've made a chair, we have to be able to sit on it. If you can't sit on it, it isn't a chair. Or a bookcase, you must be able to put books on it at some level otherwise we've just got an art object, we've got something created for whimsy. You can then start to talk about symbolic functions, which I think is in some ways is what you are talking about when you said it's communicative power of the object.

JL: But why is the function symbolic? I don't know, why the symbolic function?

DT: Because this is something that the object is for...

JL: But it's not tangible?

DT: Well, for example, a sofa you can sit on but the sofa also says: 'I am of this social class; I am a relaxed person or I am a very formal person' So it's communicating something. An idea that I am developing and am very interested in is something I call 'performative function' This is what the object does in terms of what the object does to the person using it. This is why the *Cow Bench* fascinates me in terms of what it must be like actually to sit on that time and time again. I'm wondering how much of that is important to you... A photograph can capture symbolic function quite clearly because you are symbolically saying 'Hey look, this was a cow'.
Would you prefer it...

JL: No but I think you have the performative function. You would have that as well if you see a

photograph.

DT: Right.

JL: I mean I think you would. I'm not sure whether that distinction of that.... Perform yes because you perform when you sit on it so in a way yes. You then touch your own wallet or you then link back to your own leather goods. We all live with leather. Maybe the leather we have doesn't have to have the shape of the cow anymore to then combine with the image of the *Cow Bench* that you have in your head is the same function.

DT: Ahh, right. Okay.

JL: And in a way instead of you having the cow you have your leather shoe or you have your leather pouch or whatever and if you make this connection, that's the question whether you make that connection. If you succeed in making that connection then suddenly your wallet becomes that leather object.

DT: Almost like symbolic function. The communicative quality is lighting up the rest of the world.

JL: That's a very beautiful way of putting it.

DT: Somehow illuminating these other objects.

JL: Yes. That's why it's important. I mean I'm speaking specifically for the leather sofa. Although there is something about the room in the *Bloom Lamp* as well. In a way that's how it links to the other things. So in a way, you don't have to have the cow. It sheds another light on the other leather objects. The room in the *Bloom Lamp* do the same but not with the ... but not with the... I mean, we don't usually use stomachs for it but further removed. With them I wanted to recreate that childhood moment that I remember from childhood, for my brother's children, that you get to eat meat before you understand that it is a dead piece of cow. So you almost trapped into liking something that you don't fully understand like we are everyday with the choices we make. We like something but we don't really understand the implications, it's hidden from us.

So I wanted to recreate that, therefore I wanted use a part of the animal that is so important on an everyday basis but I wanted to use it in such a different way that it is disguised in a way. So people come and say 'Oh wow, beautiful' and then they find out what it really is and they go 'ugh, disgusting'. It's the same kind of, like a honey trap really.

DT: It's clearly something you are playing with. I can't remember where, you mention this idea of disgust somewhere. You seem to be playing with that boundary between pleasure and disgust. Is that something you are consciously doing?

JL: I'm doing it because I have found it in myself. I eat the meat and then still, like with the stomachs or something, I think 'eww'. And then I ask myself, there is absolutely no logic to me finding the stomach disgusting or horrible. There is no logic to it at all. So that's where I start. I kind of think, what is it and what is it that I am feeling and why? It seems to be trained. It seems that it is something I learnt from society or something. Maybe before I got it wrong, maybe we all feel the same now but it's something really irrational and we're all kind of blinded by some irrational thought.

DT: That's interesting because that hooks sort of into a problem. You still get emotion. You're talking about this visceral reaction. Disgust is something that children's faces... happiness and disgust are two hard-wired... It's universal, it's something within us. Is there this danger that we create a design that makes people think but if you're not going in actually at the emotional level then it's all very well thinking about that because you said 'thinking' about cow's being killed, I can say to people, can make as many arguments as I like but as you say, if I've got a stomach here in front of

somebody, they're going to react in a very different way. Isn't the danger of creating objects to make people think...but they're never going to... Is thinking enough? I suppose is the question I am asking. Would you be happy if people just thought about it or do you want them to react more physically to it?

JL: That's a good question because there is lot of problems nowadays where people think about it lots but don't actually act on.

DT: Yes.

JL: So yes, it is a problem how to then get people to then act or react. I don't know whether you have to have that emotional response...maybe you do... I've been thinking of this as steps... whether the second step then follows... I guess it might be one of the reasons why. Well, it's one of the reasons definitely why this has succeeded quite well in getting people to think because there is a strong reaction and therefore it is getting character therefore it's being written about, it's been discussed. In a way if I was to do the same project about the use of plastic as whatever material, it would be quite devoid of that emotional response. It would be, just invalid probably because there is so much happening with other material uses but it wouldn't be carried that far as a thought or vehicle. So in a way yes, you need some... If you have an emotion it just makes it travel easier, makes it go further.

DT: I wonder if that means that thinking is actually the second step. Emotion comes first, there's an emotional reaction because of that...

JL: Probably, yeah. Yeah, yeah, might be, yeah. Well for sure, if you think of the level that you can understand the... The emotional level to the first level. Everyone has an emotional response to it. Everybody. I haven't seen a person who walks into the room with the leather sofa, like with the *Cow Bench* and not reacting to it on an emotional level. Whether they are two years, maybe three years or eighty, the emotional one is definitely the first.

DT: Fascinating actually, people react to sofas full-stop, in my experience. They're the theatre where you live your life, they pull very quickly. Interesting you mention this idea of comfort. This fascinates me in terms of what comfort *is*, because it can't be a quality of the object as such, it must be about a relationship between the user and the object. It fascinates me that if you think about 'is this a comfortable chair' the moment you sit like that, you are constantly negotiating. If we'd have video this, we'd be doing this [wriggles around] all the way through. This is what I mean about performative actually, because in linguistics 'performative' is not simply performance, performativity in linguistic terms is a statement that does something. So when the judge pronounces 'I sentence you to five years in prison' he isn't describing something he's doing something by saying it. This is why I'm interested in this possibility that the object acts upon us. If we start to think of matter as active, we don't just think of us as active in the world but everything is active. We're just another....

DT: You need to speak to one of my students, this makes more sense. He'd react with the entire energy... I just had a long tutorial with him yesterday and he's saying 'but the bench wants to be' and I'm saying 'no, the bench doesn't want anything, the bench is just a bench!' And he's like 'no, we have to give something back to the bench'. He appears to be fascinated by life, energy cycles in nature like the bees are getting something from the flower to pollinate and everything and he says we just take it take it take it so I want to create furniture that makes us... kind of remind us that it's not just about taking, that we give. It's about giving and taking.

DT: Sorry, I didn't quite get that, what do you mean? Where you were saying the bench wants something...

JL: No he was saying the bench wants something. I was saying it's just a bench. He was saying if I were the bench, I would want to be sat on. The bench is basically... you get up from the bench and

move...er...no. The bench is like this, like a caterpillar, like this. If you sit down it stretches out and moves to the side. So then it goes up again and then it moves. So every time somebody sits down on it, it moves. We had this big discussion about why does the bench want to move and he said the bench will move because it wants to find new people to sit on it. I said if the bench was an animal and somebody will sit on it here, it would want to stay here because this is where it once found a person and therefore it most likely step for it to find another person there. So we had this whole discussion about what the bench wants and doesn't want and finally I said the bench is just a bench. But it's interesting because you have the same... that's actually the core of his design, very hard trying to phrase it. It's the core, he just making it but it is exactly that, that giving and taking. What furniture makes you do, kind of makes you reflect.

[Julie then suggested the machine to be switched off and they chat about her questions]

Laszlo Rosnoki

Interview with the author, 12th July 2010, the designer's studio, Maastricht, the Netherlands.

Damon Taylor: Could you explain to me your background, your training as a designer, the academies you've been to?

Laszlo Rosnoki: Yeah, well I studied design at the Academy of Fine Art in Maastricht? First year of the studies is the general studies so you can look into all different design and art areas there are. After the first year you choose one specific direction where you specialize in one of these directions. I chose product design and this was the first three or four months where it was a joint course where you did product design or jewellery design. So we also had some education in jewellery design. I chose for the product design within the product design department and finished the studies in 2008 I think.

During the studies the students have to do also an invention and I did an invention as a video of the market stand in Rotterdam. While we were doing our studies there were also project weeks where guest lecturers were invited and we made one week projects involving very fast in one week some kind of product. Also in the last year of studies the graduation theme was some external lecturer looked over the projects of the work.

DT: Okay so why Maastricht? In the first place, why did you come here?

LR: Well I went to graduation exhibition of different academies, went to look at the Arnhem Academy, I looked here in Maastricht And also several other ones.

Okay I had been living in Arnhem? for a while and it was close by but when I looked at the difference of the work of the German academies and the Dutch academies I thought I would rather like go to Maastricht because it suited my thinking or my idea of design better than maybe not how they work but what degrees are like. I was more impressed personally and I thought I would rather like to do in the way like the Dutch academy do their education.

DT: In terms of that idea it is interesting that you talk about process and results. I need you to, just in a general sense... I want to get to quite specific objects in a bit but could you describe your design process. When you respond to a brief, in terms of research and in terms of conceptualizing a user, how do you go about it in practical terms, when you start off, what do you do?

LR: Two kinds of how I work. One is the work for clients who have an idea: Ok, we want to have something done. The other way is I can have my own ideas. And I work on my own ideas and make product which I've no client yet but which I feel very strong about I want to do this.

- DT: How do those sorts of projects come about? A brief from a client very often is...you're talking in effect about self-generated briefs. How does it happen, what is your personal process?
- LR: The personal process for the clients complete ideas, I listen to their, to the things they would like to have. They brief me with the details like what their idea of the product is and also about what they would like to see and it's always through personal conversations, getting to know the client, what he likes or she likes.
Then I research the company or the client. What has he done, what is the product range, where are they situated, what is their biography? So I get a better understanding of who the client is and also I do research for who the client would like to sell the thing to, so the client of the client.
- DT: Right, so you would rely on your understanding of who their clients are. Do you ever do any work of your own; for who would this design would be?
- LR: Well sometimes but most of the time for me it's completely different world working for a client and working for myself.
- DT: Okay we'll switch onto working for yourself. When you are working for yourself, are you conceptualizing a user?
- LR: I conceptualize the user in some ways but I don't want to give too many limits to who can use it or who will be the user. I think I'm doing the design and the people who are looking round maybe sit and think yeah, okay I like that and I want that. I sometimes have an idea whom could use different things but I don't want to limit the user too much. I have an idea who could use it but it's just for my own. I'm not making too many suggestions to people. Okay, this is designed for example a restaurant, or for a showroom or a hotel room. So I don't too much of these categories to limit something in a certain way.
- DT: Ok, that's interesting and sort of brings me onto the *14% Table*. Could you explain how that came about, what was the process, where did you start from?
- LR: Well the process of the *14% Table* was that I thought it was, researching architect. I thought what are things which are known by many kinds for a long time? And what are the things, what are which got heightened in some ways in design history? Many people know about furniture, example chairs are very, maybe the most well known part of the design history and also maybe the most remaining thing in the connotation. I think quite a lot of things. The chairs are kind of icon of design. Almost every famous designer did some chairs. I looked at chairs, tables and shelving. I just built in some way what makes a table or chair or shelving system
- DT: Can I just stop you there before we go into that. So we've got this selection process. We've got the table, the chair and the shelving, it strikes me that you haven't got the bed. Why was that not included?
- LR: This was a graduation project and I did three kind of very different products and also kind of had many questions, also I had to stop somewhere. I don't think that too many people know designers for beds.
- DT: So this concept of the archetype. Talk me through that a little bit more you use the word icon and you use the word 'questioning' which I find very interesting. What do you mean by the word archetype?
- LR: For example a table or a table or a table then some form which we use almost every table appears. I also thought questioning of what a table is. Well a table is a flat surface horizon which is a tradition. It is away from the ground and you can put things on it. Things are hold on the surface. This was basic idea of a table. This was the research I did first.

Then the title of my graduation work was *Questioning the Established*. These archetypes in this

definition, those I took and I started to play with them. For example the table: does a table have to have flat horizon surface? Can it be any other way but still retain its function?

I wanted to make a table which still keeps its function but where some part of the definition or some part of the typical archetypal characteristics are changed but you still recognize the archetype or what we present, that it's a table but it doesn't sit under the definition of a table anymore, well not perfectly under the definition but the function is still kept.

DT: And what would the function of a table be?

LR: Holding things which are put on it, on a higher level than the floor. It can be used for eating, working on, lots of different things. It can be really other uses of tables, example in western movies they throw all the tables to get away from the bullets so people can do with the table what they want. The main use or the main function is to hold things.

DT: I'm presuming there must have been experiments where you tried other ways of playing with function. Were there experiments that you rejected? Were there versions of this table? Were there perhaps other ways of playing with function that you tried and rejected?

LR: I thought this kind of flat surface I had tried, I want to change that. I want to make not a circle. I had lots of different ideas on how I could manage to have a surface but still keep the function of the table. There were a lot of other ideas how to do it.

DT: What were these other ideas? How were you going to try?

LR: The table was tilted but it had for example heart in it which when you put something on it that part tilted back into the right part so some part of the table went right again but just when you put something on it. These solutions I thought of, they were very technical.

Ok, how did I get the tilting off of the table or how will it work again in some way? I wanted the table really to be tilted so many of the technical solutions fell away, so that there really was no horizon surface in the table when it was used. I wanted to have it not really, not too technical and also not too technical looking because that would divert the viewer from the archetypal source. So I looked into the different ways. Okay I wanted table top to be tilted but I still want it to work so I had to think about different ideas: why don't the things which are on it fall down or slide down even if the table top is tilted?

I thought about different things, even magnets, I thought about some kind of pockets where part of this should go in so they don't slide off. I also thought about special dishes which take up the tilting of the table so that just the upper part of the dishes and the glasses would be alright on them and for anti-slip coating or magnet thing on the dishes. I went away from this idea of making special dishes and glasses for the table because I wanted that can be used also for completely normal dishes, normal glasses so that it sits a separate thing.

So I research about that, there was new material which they put on windows instead of curtains. This special material had kind of gecko effect on the glass surface but also on smooth surfaces. So I got that material so there was a solution how to connect the table top to the table cloth but dishes still slid down because the top of the table cloth was not anchored in anyway. So I had also to make some part of the table cloth where I wanted it to be used anti-slip so I made a silkscreen print, a special kind of silkscreen ink which prevent things from sliding down. In the end the table didn't work, it just works with the table cloth.

This table top is designed for dishes and glasses for eating but there could have been other table cloths made for other uses than eating. In the end there was both side of anti-slip on the table top so the table regained its original function but just in connection with the table cloth. Some parts of the table cloth I also left untreated so that things that are put onto those parts, they will slide down.

From this idea there are some very interesting effects also. I didn't think about also which came up later when the table was tested with the table cloth.

Example the soup: it makes a dish which is tilted, there can only be less soup in such a dish but the effect is you don't have to tilt the dish. It was a bowl dish, the bowl to get last of soup out of it. It even got a new function, the table. It's also good for diet because you can't put that much into your bowl. It's also good for drinking less because not that much of drink sit in the glasses. So there are some effects which were created just by tilting the table top and by changing some aspect of the definition or of the archetype.

DT: And the final version doesn't have a cloth on it does it?

LR: It has.

DT: Oh it's a thin cover over the top?

LR: Yes

DT: Right.

LR: Yes, you can take it off.

DT: Ah right. I assumed it was actually bonded to the object.

LR: No. It was not bonded so that's why it has anti-slip on the underside.

DT: Ok. When you were talking about it before, you then mentioned the idea of something being at the top of the table and a sense of superiority and somebody being at the bottom. When did that occur to you, when in the process did you start thinking about being at the top and being at the bottom?

LR: Actually I think that idea came up when the table was finished. I thought what implications does this table have for eating? For the communication between people, how the people relate to each other so I thought, ok, the one on lower part, well, that's perfect for longer chat. What is happening with the upper part, you can't use a regular chair for the upper part so I thought with these chairs I already start doing this process. I made the upper part of the table the height it perfectly fitting for a bar chair.

Bar chairs and the degree had a certain height so before I decided ok I want the table to be tilted in this percentage, I also decided how long it have to be in the right height in the higher part. When the table was finished I was just discovering things about the bowl of soup. I discovered it's kind of strange sensation when somebody is sitting lower than the other one. Usually the people sitting at a table they are the same level.

There are for example the things, who sits where and hierarchy but now this kind of hierarchy can also be established by sitting on the higher part and somebody sitting on the lower part. Sometimes in offices the bosses have higher chairs than the ones who want to talk with the boss so there is kind of superiority in that way but usually at the eating table there is no such thing.

DT: That's fascinating to me, that idea, the exploration of functionality. Thinking about through example and then through using it you come to realize it's about status. I take it you have eaten at it. You've eaten at the table with other people?

LR: Just once, very carefully and it was actually the table cloth, this table cloth was made for two people so actually there are two parts of the table that can be used, one on the lower side and one on the upper side. There could be a table cloth with more functional parts so that more could eat

but then there would have to be also chairs in between high regular chair and bar chair.

DT: It would also change the fundamental relationship between the pieces of furniture because at the moment you have a higher and a lower. I'm wondering what would happen. To me there is a sort of absolute simplicity of purity to the way that you're putting somebody high up there and somebody low down here. How would you feel about the people on side, rather than people looking up or looking down people would be on the side. How would that affect the nature of the piece, would it bother you?

LR: No, it wouldn't bother me but I think the idea of the table is communicated with this table top of just two persons. I think by just putting just two people at the table it's easier and simpler to get the idea or get the concept. It's most clear when there are just two parts otherwise it would get maybe too confusing. It would be possible to make a table cloth and it was for a small person if bought it. If somebody ordered it I could also do that but the clearest due of concept is I think with two people. When it is used its maybe more interesting with more people but when people just look at it then I think it's more interesting with just two people.

DT: Would it be enough for people just to look at it? I saw it in my life as the real object in front of me but I would love to have the experience of actually eating at it. Clearly it exists in representation on the internet, these different locations. Is it good enough? Are you happy for people to see it and get the idea?

LR: I'm happy. I'm happy if the people are here and think about it just for the effect. Then they also [get] more than effect. Even if the people just look at it for effect they immediately grasp the idea of a table and immediately grasp: 'But how can I eat? Can I eat?' No, it doesn't work then they think maybe glue on it then they think: 'No, it doesn't work'. Its very interesting to get different reactions and I like that. Some people just shake their heads and say: 'What is this for?' Other people start to think: 'I have table at home...', they are reminded [that] 'my table [is] not like that'. They may realize more concepts behind the more regular archetype table they have at home to realize more clearly what it is and how it works.

DT: You've talked about this idea of people generating surprise and amazement at a concept they've never seen before. Why, why do you want people to think about a table?

LR: Many people don't think about their table they are eating at. They just use the table and they never think about it.

DT: Why would you want people to think about a table, isn't a table just supposed to disappear into the background? Why get them to do it? What for?

LR: Many people don't think too much. Its one thing many people start thinking. Another thing is also to get a reaction out of them. Maybe get a smile on their face. So the table is kind of creating sometimes a smile, sometimes a bit of thinking, sometimes bit of more thinking. People also start to think about how could I use this table maybe.

I make an object or people's furniture which still has a function but function is not the main purpose of the design, there are certainly a lot more practical tables than the one I design but those tables usually don't get the reaction I get with my table so it's maybe a sort of more communicative table. The table is communicating with the people and also making some effect.

DT: Is it a limited edition?

LR: It is, because it's difficult to make and it's expensive. Takes a lot of time also because there's not so much demand on tables that have a tilted table top so that the people who buy it as a limited edition, they feel more comfortable with paying the price of the table it would cost anyway. Expensive to produce. Even really expensive tables which are sold usually are... Many of them are cheaper, there are some tables which are a lot more expensive but those are also more

conceptual tables not really intended for use, just for the picture they create.

DT: Ah. Lovely phrase. So if Ikea came to you and said they wanted to give you a billion Euros and put your table into production, how would you feel? Would you let them do that?

LR: I could do that. I would say no I didn't sell the table. I didn't make a contract with anybody who came to me for the full limited edition. So I could do that and I would feel comfortable because with a million I could realize a new project.

DT: That's the basics of my prepared questions of what I wanted to know. On a broader level, do you see your work as political in any way?

LR: Political? Maybe just in the centre of this hierarchy kind of thing, yes, it establishes a relationship between the person sitting lower and the person sitting higher. This hierarchy thing is also not always the best thing to sit at the higher part because when people misplace some of the dishes or bowls or glasses on the top part then they slide down to the lower part so the lower one gets more food! It's not that clear at the higher part that it's better.

DT: To me there are all sorts of things about actually how it can be used. This is why I've got this problem with the idea of seeing it. When you talked about it as a communicative object, for example... Right now this object is communicating to us but it's communicating through us using it. I'm just wondering: would it be more powerful for somebody to actually use your object rather than just see it?

LR: It would be more powerful but first people would have to take part to it. Secondly there is just one table. It has the function but if the people spill something then a new table cloth has to be made so that's not too cheap. I think it would be more powerful but the people would have to take the time to use the table and the people would also have had to pay for it.

If people would do that, I would be very fine, I would like that but chances that it gets really used by people are, I think, a lot less high than people putting thoughts on just to have a nice object in the room. So I would like it if people use it but I don't see the chances that it really gets used not too high. It would be fantastic!

DT: In some ways what you are describing is art practice. You are describing the creation of one off objects that are there for contemplation. Are you a designer or an artist?

LR: I would say both. Some of my designs are more going into the functional direction so they are more kind of real design. None of the people ever use it. Other work for me have no use at all but they are more just art. They have the use of communicating ideas and certain feelings but that is what art is also about. That is the function, some of the functions of art.

I don't just do furniture I also do some jewellery, some real objects that are just for viewing without any function. I also do objects for profession, some graphic design. One thing of this academy I learned to say yes. You don't have to say you are an area, there is no area there are no borders. You can look over your own area or thing what you want and do also completely different things if you have a good idea then you can just do it.

Of course it is more complicated because the tools or the how certain things are done I didn't learn at the academy so there has to be external confrontation or doing projects together with other designers or with companies who are specialized in certain fields I need for an idea I'd love to realize. So it's just like that.

I have ideas for really broad range of things and it's not benefit so I don't see myself just as a designer or just an artist or product designer. I am a designer sometimes doing art also. My profession is product designer but it's just one word.

DT: Finally, [...] some tables are very expensive are these just for the rich?

LR: Well. I think that the furniture I have created until now they are for those who can pay for them because they are expensive. They are for the rich or museums or maybe companies who have the money to buy them. At the moment I am working on another version of the *Split Chair* which will be rather secret because my idea there was also that people can share, people who don't have a lot of space. The first edition it is for the rich or for those who can afford it or want to afford it but I was also thinking about students who possibly use it. Students have small rooms or small flats and they could use the chair really good but the price of the first edition doesn't fit into the budget of a student. So I wanted to make this chair for people who kind of 'hey, I like that design but it's too expensive'. I really want the chair to be used. Somehow it's a lot different from the table. The table has kept its function but it's not that functional.

The chair I think is really functional and it has some added value to the chair and it's really practical. I think that's also lots more design than art but it also has bit of art which is art in it. Also concept behind it so it is both design and art I think.

DT: Thank you very much

Gareth Neal

Interview with the author, the designer's studio, Dalston, London, UK. 24th September 2010

Damon Taylor: Ok, first of all, if you could just explain to me what your background is, what your education was, as a designer

Gareth Neal: Erm, I, did, well I'll start with A-Levels shall I?

DT: Yep

GN: That's pretty basic. Well I did A-Levels, art, photography, erm, CDT or craft design realisation, erm, and then er, I went straight from A-Levels to doing a degree in furniture design and craftsmanship

Which was of course about making things, primarily. Erm, I left that, I worked for a couple of people for a short while, such as Rupert Williams, erm I then moved to Wiltshire to an art design maker called Fred Bear, and worked in his studio. I didn't work for him, but worked in his studio for, erm, about five years, but doing my own stuff. Trying to sell, make and sell. Objects that were sculpturally orientated. But, the course I did, I reckon you already know, was quite a traditional, making course, as opposed to the contemporary design course, erm, so I kind of rebelled against that while I was there, and made objects that I was into

DT: Mm-hmm, so why did you choose the, because it's a very traditional making course

GN: Mmm [yes]

DT: Why that rather than contemporary furniture?

GN: Well you know what, I just didn't have, I didn't have a clue.

DT: Right

- GN: About degrees, my A-Level tutors introduced me to that course and that course alone, I either wanted to be a war photographer
- DT: (laughs)
- GN: Or carry on my making furniture, and when you know, he took me to see the course I got quite excited because you know, there was a course that made furniture, I didn't even think about it
- DT: Mm-hmm, right
- GN: I was just like, didn't think about what other courses there were, other courses there might have been in the same building. I didn't even realise there was another furniture course within that, you know, within High Wycombe. So, he just told me it was the best furniture course in the country, and I kind of believed him because he was one of the best tutors that I, you know, we all have one of these tutors that really um, effects us, and Alan Truman was one of those and I just trusted him, that it was probably a good course to do, that it suited me, erm, I mean in hindsight, maybe I would have liked to do the contemporary course, but, at the same time when I think back, I don't know if it would have suited me at that time, I'm much more, they would have kind of wanted me to be much more channelled, and focussed, and usable, and so I wasn't bothered by objects being, either functional at that time,
- DT: Right
- GN: So I think the lack of education on design within the fine craft, actually gave me more freedom, than I sort of realised, you know, because they didn't really consider anything you could do what you wanted, you know, I mean I was one of the students that was always just in the sketchbook the whole time, they didn't tell you to have a sketchbook, you know it's not like as I teach like at Brighton, or like craft make courses, you know, developing ideas. I was just doing all the right things but without sort of realising it, you know, sort of madly into my sketchbooks, madly into drawing in the sketchbooks in the evenings you know, making models, developing sort of creative solutions and interpretations of craft related things, so, yeah
- DT: And so what, you said you rebelled there, so what...
- GN: Well I feel like I did, you know, just rebelled, you know, there was a lot of kind of, what I saw, really boring woodwork and there was really, they had no creativity, or not an awful lot of creativity in them, you know, great craftsmen, it was just frustrating you know, the lack of imagination of objects and it was like well, well look what you could do, sort of thing, and you know, yes I can learn what your doing, and I sort of, I picked up making fairly well I wouldn't say I as an amazing maker but I picked up making fairly well, and so, yeah, I guess, you know I was just young and, kind of perhaps at the right, you know, lots going on in the 90s, you know, out partying, having fun, you know quite a good, kind of time I think really, in terms of what was going on in, you know, breakthrough in music, and breakthroughs in this and that, you know, felt like I was part of it, and...
- DT: Right, ok, so what were those influences at that point?
- GN: I guess at that point I was going out listening to dance music an awful lot, and you know, going clubbing, and raving and you know all-night kind of things in town, moving in and out of town, going every weekend going up and down to things like that, it must have affected, possibly my mind, but also the erm, you know, the creativity, the creativity came from that, at the same time as travelling, and doing those sort of student-like things that you do in the summer holidays, so, you know I was sort of, I thought I was sucking up, or, this might sound a bit pretentious now, the more I think about it, it might not be the case, but you know, I was sucking up an awful lot of stuff around me, whereas a lot of people were just going home and working in their summers, and staying in their student digs and having an ale, you know, so, whereas I wasn't doing that...

- DT: I remember at Wycombe we had plenty of people who would happily sit and cut dove-tails for the rest of their life...
- GN: Yeah, I wasn't one of those, but, Phil Hussey and I can't remember who the other chap was, he, you know he was always very good because he wasn't really a furniture maker, yet he was quite in to kind of being exploitative and creative and quite encouraging of that, so he was quite good I suppose...
- DT: Mm-hmm. What about the other students, did you...
- GN: Well there was a couple of people that I really got on with, there was Michael Wainright on the course at the same time, and he, he desperately wants to be an artist, not even a craftsman really, he wants to be an artist, but he does use, you know he was a bit older than me at the time, I think he was probably I don't know, five or six years older than me, you know, he was a bit more knowledgeable about the arts scene, because of Brit-pop arts was bang on, you know, that was, the *Sensation* [exhibition] was, I don't know, it was a little bit after that but it was definitely, you know the Damien Hirst... You know, you know, Tracy Emin and all that, you know, they were all coming into, you know, it was all sort of happening at that time, so, erm, you know, and that definitely, you know, bounced through to a student at that time, you know it was such a powerful movement of art, so, I was sucking up a lot of that, and Mike actually introduced me to a lot of that, you know, so there was other students that, or specifically Mike actually, that was really taking note of what was going on in terms of the art world... you know, like, you know I wasn't so excited by John Makepeace, say, who would be your kind of classical, archetypal kind of celebrated craftsman, but you know I was more excited by you know, the work like, Tom Dixon or Ron Arad was doing at that time, erm, or Mark Newson, you know... with his chaise-longue just come out at that time, you know... you know, it was like, that limited edition stuff, you know or one-off sort of work, while I was working in wood, I didn't make, I didn't make any, I didn't pigeon hole myself into thinking because I work with wood I'm...
- DT: Woody?
- GN: Woody yeah, or I've got to follow this set of rules, or instruction, it's probably why so many of my objects have fallen apart, somehow, or I've encountered problems, because I'm always pushing what I can do with the material itself and how I work it, but um, yeah, so yeah there was Mike, he was good, and I think actually he was going in Frieze this year, so that might be quite exciting for him, for the first time, er... But er, yeah.
- DT: Ok, so um, in terms of your working process now, you've sort of grown out of that? Is it a case of do you generally work from a self-generated brief?
- GN: Erm, yes
- DT: So what's the process, how do you, I don't want to ask you 'where you get your ideas from?' But how does this come about?
- GN: Er, I don't want to guess, but for quite a few years, certainly when I was in Wiltshire, as opposed to London, I was very much trying to make objects have... talk about their time. I was aware that modern objects, or what I thought in my head were modern objects was an object that spoke of it's time.
- DT: Right
- GN: So, I always thought it should have a reference to that, you know, and to be an object of it's era then you had to pick up on what the era was around you, or feed from that, whether that be political, or creative you know, artistically, or, yeah, environmentally, erm, so, but in my, and I

guess that was where I was coming from with the objects at that era, almost ten years or that sort of ten year period, the sort of 90s to 2000, you know and I also felt like, also being young, and not recognized, I was shouting loudly with the objects, not necessarily the way to get attention. You know, an object is often over the top or over-indulged, so I guess, I learnt lots and developed, I did, do have sort of themes that have sort of constantly come and gone within the work, and come back to, and some of those were explored in that period. But in terms of my self-developed brief, I guess I only started homing more in on that after I got to London, set up a workshop in Hackney Wick, and I moved in to Hackney Wick in a studio space up stairs there, mixed with lots of artists. So I was suddenly fallen right in to the centre of the arts scene, and you know, shared the studio with Paul Noble and Georgina Star, and you know, he was having a show at the Gagosian, and it was all very kind of like, and Abigail Lane was opposite me, and you know, so it was a kind of like really, really creative, and at the same time, I guess I learnt a little bit more computer skills, because I felt like I was being restricted slightly by my, I could design ideas in the sketch book but to then take them from there to there, I couldn't do the journey in between. Erm, so I learnt a load of computer skills, and then I, I guess I realized how, my passion for re, or sort of accepting craft as an art form, or, or like celebrating the skill that I had of making something, suddenly became much more important, in a weird way, and then by suddenly going okay, I'm gonna celebrate what I do well, which is wooden stuff. I'd played with loads of other materials and stuff, erm, and go back to that, and then, you know, and make my mission in London, as there's hardly any wood workers in London full stop, was to sort of, put it back on the map. You know, and so, that started developing the theme of the object, which was the Anne table, which really kind of went kind of global in a weird way, and then, erm, and, the combination of the computers, the combination of the kind of re-interpretation of craft, also trying to try to make a statement about modern objects and kind of, you know, how sort of potentially boring they can be, you know, like the world of simplicity, is sort of beyond the point where you know, we can have a bit of decoration in our lives, and it doesn't hurt, you know?

DT: Yeah

GN: Alright you don't have to do the whole house with floral wallpaper and floral curtains and stuff like that, but you know used in the right way it can be really beautiful, so I guess that, an object was about forging that relationship between contemporary and modern, and craftsmanship, high-end technology, so it was all about the opposites, you know, even the make, even the way the object looked was, one side to the next, you know, the process was, you know, it was dove-tail keyed kind of rails inside, but the next was the *George III*, so I guess that was the object that sort of came about you know, I don't know if I sort of went about it in term of 'oh what's my agenda with my next design?' it was just I was designing stuff, and researching, looking, and I, it was sort of a mistake playing on the computer that came up with that kind of, saw something in a something and then went 'ahh...'

DT: Okay that's interesting, you started discussing the idea of, you were mentioning sort of themes, and agendas, but also talking about materials and research... Do you have a method, do you have something that you would think, oh well I can apply that system, or, you know, what would be, where's the starting point for you, or is that different for each project?

GN: Yeah, I guess it differs for each project, I suppose now, more recently since that, I have made that my clear agenda, that every object I'm doing is a reintroduction of a, potentially a craft technique, in a contemporary way, and that is the, bottom line of the narrative that, you know, the work that's produced is about, you know, but as a starting point I don't know... You know, books, exhibitions, libraries... you know whatever, certainly when I was in Hackney Wick, you know, it was really kind of, it was really rough and ready you know, before the Olympics started cleaning it all up, it still is really , but you know, that was quite influential, that area, in terms of being on the fringes of London, and life, I've become a little bit up-market since I moved here, but then I needed a workshop on the downstairs, so...

DT: This place is changing pretty rapidly isn't it?

- GN: Yeah, everywhere is, it's just, east is going nuts, and rents are going sky high, but luckily we got this place and it's quite a good landlord and it's a fixed rate, so, and I couldn't, although the building I was in is still there, and the guy, he used to be my housemate, he's still there, and George and Paul are still there on that floor, but you know the Olympics are a bit too much of a worry of what was going to happen to that whole area... And I'd sort of out grown the little workshop I had I suppose... Needed a bit more space.
- DT: How long were you there?
- GN: I was there till, I've been here about a year so, I was there maybe six years or something... Six years.
- DT: So the work takes place in the studio, are you constantly experimenting with the materials as you go or is it conceptual?
- GN: Yeah it is a relationship between sketchbook, computer, mock-up and model, and sample you know, new drawing, new scaling, sometimes it's really playful, sometimes it's more kind of engineering-like, but yeah it's kind of, yeah a little bit of a mix up of it all really
- DT: Right, so it's important to have this bit next to the workshop?
- GN: Yeah definitely, I mean I let, I have someone who does a lot of the making for me, over the last year or so, and I kept getting my, you know detaching myself, not intentionally, but just to make it work, keep everything going, erm, so I had less hands-on, but I'll go in there and do the messing around, which is I guess what I always wanted to do, and come up with an idea, and you can execute it, so um, er, yeah.
- DT: Okay, so how does that relationship work, are you simply working with, is the person you're working with just a technician who realises, or is it reciprocal?
- GN: He's got the skill. He's got the skills that I've got as well, you know, but he's better at that than me, in some respects, erm, I was always a bit chaotic in my kind of, you know, relationship with making something, he's got a kind of quite nice ordered, structured system of making, you know, in terms of my realisation of, I'm not just a community art project man, I've got to run a business at the same time, so it makes good sense to use my time wisely, and bring in labour to do the other stuff that other people can do... So I can carry on doing the stuff that other people can't do, or, so...
- DT: But in terms of that realisation, will he come back to you and say 'you suggested we put this leg in this way and it just can't be done'?
- GN: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, he'll come and go, or I'll certainly, he'll come in here and, say 'are we doing this the right way' you know, 'it would be better to do it like that', and we'd have a conversation, a debate about it, yeah often he'd be right or, or I'll put my foot down and say 'no, we're not doing it this way' there's a reason for it, and you know, erm, yeah he, he knows how to make things, and that relationship between maker and designer, or craftsperson and artist... because making something can just as easily, that's the craft aspect I suppose, will throw up an idea, you know or a process or train of thought, you know so with the Anne table, a lot of those little fins started smashing off, and breaking off, hence the next piece which was the *George* chest of drawers, so you know, or the criticism of not being able to see a table within the table, well we'll have a little bit of it there and then, you know, we can't be, you know, too lazy to look, have a bit, you know, so the realisation that I had to, had to be a little bit more obvious, you know, because like, again those ten years, of doing the other objects, you know, you must be an object, you know there was a reason, a story behind it that no one knew. So, you know you can't, and I guess that sort of, back to that why Brit art was so successful wasn't it, in a way, because people got it, it was quite easily

accessible... or I don't know, you might have your own thoughts on it, but I, I don't know I'm only using it as an example, but I realised that perhaps, to, the narrative needed to speak for itself, rather than me have to stand there and back it up, so when you looked at the object you understood it, and the *Anne Table* worked in that way when you saw the table within it, and also the *Georges*, and the objects within those series have, you know, have been readable like that, you know, so

DT: Right, that's interesting you used words 'talk', 'narrative', 'readable' – how does an object do that, is it possible, how does an object do these things?

GN: Er, well, I think that those objects, are you know, maybe all about you know, like the McDonald's symbol, or like the Audi symbol, you could, you know, look at a load of rings intersecting, and you know the word Audi is related to it, so it's like a branding exercise in a way, you know that those shapes relate to that word, I don't know how I know, no one ever taught me that, but I've been you know, it's been stuffed in my head, you know, through advertising and branding, and I guess that's the relationship with traditional shapes and traditional forms, and some elements of traditional design that they are in our heads too, like a cabriolet leg or a serpentine curve, or erm, you know architectural detailing on a building or a Greek column or a, you know there are so many of these things that we're surrounded by that we just absorb, perhaps in the UK rather than on the continent or other countries, so that interrelationship between those sort of shapes and forms can help somebody who perhaps isn't as creative or visual to read that object. Perhaps that's why *Anne* and *George* worked, is because they, everybody's seen one of those pieces of furniture, from a very early age, and they can go 'oh it's modern as well at the same time, oh it's artistic at the same time, oh it's creative at the same time', so they got it, so, you know, instead of me making some fantastically modern looking object, which I might have loved, or a selection of people might have loved... more people got it

Right in terms of getting out to an audience, and in business terms of selling an object, a lot of art buyers, you know, buying old objects, old paintings and modern paintings, just realised that they've got a modern collection of art on the walls, and were going into the world of design art, and they haven't got the rest of the stuff to compliment it. They've got a modern design car parked in the garage, they might have a, some sort of, you know, nice collection of antique furniture, or selection of bits and bobs, but they're not, there was a lack of harmony between their homes, where you have a, you know.

I delivered something to one person's house in erm, just by the Royal Albert Hall, in the Royal Albert Hall mansions on the top floor, they bought the bird stand table, and I went round there and was like, there was the most amazing collection of art work, you know, unbelievable, there's a few clients houses with a couple of nice pieces, but you know, they had a bit of everything, you know it was a proper collection, and then the furniture was just dire, you know, they'd obviously just made this realisation, that they've got a Giacometti and a, you know, a little bit of everything, you know, Picassos on the wall, they had, who's the English guy?

DT: Bacon?

GN: They had Bacon, they had the works, my eyes were popping out, it was like being in the Tate and you know, the furniture sat underneath it was all like, you know, really poor quality.

DT: What sort of stuff was it?

GN: It was like a high-end sort of Italian 80s production stuff

DT: Yeah, uh-huh

GN: Sort of a bit shiny, a bit glitzy, gold details on the ends of things, but, mass produced, to a certain extent, but would have been a lot of money, but..

- DT: Yeah, the sort of things you see in the main salon [at Milan]
- GN: Yeah, rather than something that was a one-off or a limited edition, so, it was a real, that's why perhaps design art, that's why it's working, because there's enough people out there with deep seated pockets who haven't done that yet, you know, so, you know, they're beginning to keep the choice pieces of the antiques, mix it up with the, you know, and it looks great, you know, but, I don't see the... the antiques sort of people got those objects as well, and that was a route in, in terms of going ok, here's a modern design I like, you know, it's like 'oh I can do this modern thing' you know, so, yeah.
- DT: And so do you work to commission then?
- GN: I, yeah, sometimes, yeah, I try not to do commissions.
- DT: Right
- GN: I say that, I don't get offered them that often, but I try not to do them because they're always a slightly watered down version of a concept that was, you know, that was the outcome of it, I went through all those other options and that was the best option, you know, and that was why I made it, you know, I don't want to do one like that because, you know, it's not going to look as nice
- DT: Right, what would the process be there, would somebody come to you and say I want X and then you would respond...
- GN: Yeah, the next job actually is a commission, and it's for a coffee table and I think it's going to look very nice, and that's based on the cut and grooved and smashed pieces and block series and, and yeah, I went to the client and they've got a very nice collection of stuff, but they were quite Arts and Crafts actually, in their kind of tastes, erm so, I realised they wanted, I could see what they would like, because they liked quite chunky, so, erm, they just said oh there's room, we've been meaning to get a coffee table for years, just come up with something.
- You know, like, the briefs are getting more open now, so you know, they just trusted me that I would, do the dos, and just come up with something, I didn't have to produce very much to convince them, you know, so, and er, it's going to be a lovely big four legged thing revealing something else, but not of any classical form, another shape within a shape, smashed away, it'll look good. That's the sort of, you know, I went there, I showed them some drawings, they came to collect and actually saw some of the piece that I'd done there, or seen my stuff in a book before then, so I got a call, so...
- DT: Right, I find it very interesting you talking about these things in situ, in people's houses, clearly your work is starting to appear in galleries and museums settings, how important is it to you that these things are used?
- GN: Erm, not so important, more important that they're purchased.
- DT: Right, ok yeah.
- GN: So, whoever purchases them, I don't know, but yeah sometimes a piece is, I know that the only person or only place it could go really would be a gallery, because some of them aren't useable. You know I made those pair of chairs, or like the *Annes*, you know they're good for nothing but a museum in a weird way.
- DT: Right.
- GN: So, you know I knew that, and luckily they sold to a museum, erm, but yeah at the same time it is nice to make, to do something for a client, or in a client's house and know that someone's going to

love it. Sometimes people buy stuff for investment, sometimes people buy stuff for...

DT: The use of the manufacturing technology, do you find it restricts you in any way, is, for example using CNC technology, is this restricting what you can do, to what extent does it limit you?

GN: It's just another tool for exploration, erm, it's limiting in terms of accessibility, and the cost of using them, that's the only thing that's limiting me with them, if I had a friend or a CNC machine myself, and someone said tech-it, I would be mashing it up constantly. But, again that interrelationship of not actually working with them, and the separate, the divorced nature of the process. It is probably limiting what I want to do next, you know. I've got things I really want to do, not necessarily with a CNC machine, but with high-end technology, and at some point it's going to start, at some point I'll get on with this next batch of work, but I haven't worked out why I want to do it yet, or what's important about why I'm doing this, I haven't started on it yet

DT: So you said there's a separation, is it really a case of you work out what needs to be done with that CNC router and you just send it off and somebody does it?

GN: Whether they can do it, and how can they do it, so there is a dialogue

DT: Ok

GN: I'd have to go there, and talk

DT: Where do you go? If you don't mind me asking.

GN: Well there was a company called CNC Router Projects, but they've closed down now. But the machines aren't that modern, they're 20 years old, they're just more accessible, they're cheaper to use because they've got old and other people have got them, it's the modern ones, I still can't get hold of, because they're still really expensive ones to use. I mean, I should really get into London Met or somewhere like that to use their kit but, I won't make it a priority.

DT: Right, but there is some form of dialogue in that you say, I'd like to do this, and they say no that's not possible...

GN: Yeah, but the original hand turning I did by hand, you know. It just took me hours. So, the first two or three, I can't really remember now, I did by hand.

DT: Wow, ok...

GN: Just raising and lowering the saw blade, it just took forever but I did it, you know, I think it took like five or six days to make like eight legs. So, yeah I mean that went on, but you know, it looked like something a C machine had made, so I thought I'd better get a CNC then, and talk to someone who could then do it.

[...]

DT: So, you've not, you've certainly not been involved in developing technology?

GN: No, but we did, no, no. But we did do something on the machine that hadn't been done before, in that it wasn't just a straight-forward router cut. We mounted a CNC, a blade on the CNC saw, so it wasn't the usual... You know, it was sort of like restrictive routing, you know where it could only go in straight lines, so, it was quite basic in a way, but using the technology, or CNC technology, because in a way, going back to that readability, if you just get something carved on a CNC machine to look just like something else, no one knows, do they, not if they've carved it by hand.

DT: Yeah, they're just looking at an object.

GN: You know, whereas going back to the dialogue of an object is important, as is the understanding of, you know like a brushstroke or a texture on a bit of artwork, you know, you, we're back to the readability. So you know, you go and make something look like, like, no one understands any more, in 2010, how anything's made, because they don't have any education in it, and they don't know, so, you know, you've almost got to be more obvious, or I discovered that I needed to be more obvious with what I did so that people understood that it was CNC made but also hand made, you know, because you get something that was, yeah, am I making sense?

DT: Absolutely, yes.

GN: I can't quite define it in a single sentence, but yeah.

DT: Well it sounds like you were talking about using the aesthetic of this technology... What it can do, do you feel as though you're exploring that now?

GN: Yeah, a little bit, I think actually, just having these conversations is, is why I like doing then, is that it's questioning me and makes me think more, and, yeah I'd like to explore it more and I'm there with a body of work, I've made another body of work that has explored a similar theme but not quite the same, and yeah I will return to it, and I just need, I do need to find that partner to have that kind of relationship with, that research based relationship with, you know, and if I can start erm, you know, using my research through Brighton and collaborating with a university and, you know, universities start realising the intellectual property of an object, rather than just valuing the written text that other people do, then, you know, and they can just value that object and all the outcomes that come from that object then I can build that relationship with somebody, with a university, perhaps with Brighton, with someone that has got a whole load of kit, then I can explore it a lot more, but the objects won't, you know, unless they're confined to higher end galleries and command even greater prices, you know breaking into the next realm of costs or sales bracket of objects, you know, it's harder and becomes smaller and smaller in the amount of people those galleries represent, you know that do know, that really, really, you know, premier league of sales, very small...

DT: Right

GN: So you know, once I've got myself in them then I might be able to go ok, well it's worth me investing ten grand now on a load of CNCing because I can potentially sell this object for forty or fifty thousand whereas at the moment, you know, that opportunity is not worth that risk. All the opportunities that are coming to me are not worth the financial outgoings to pull it off. I know it's really sad, that I've always tried not to, that it's never really been about selling stuff, but, or for many years it wasn't, but that's why I never had any money, so, erm, but you know, you get older, you get more outgoings you've got to survive, you've got to pay for the stuff, but yeah, to get a bit of freedom with a machine would be great

DT: Right, does that bother you then, that you're, you seem to be making things for the rich?

GN: Er, well I'm making stuff for myself, primarily, but yes, the only people that can afford it is the rich, and yeah it bothers me a little bit, but I don't lose sleep over it. There's plenty of people designing things for other people, you know, not the other people, erm, but you know, yeah it is slightly elitist, but at the same time, you know, there's a market place I suppose. I mean I am doing stuff for companies, so I am keen to kind of explore other, you know, avenues, and make some product based retail stuff, but it's not like they're knocking at my door, so, maybe a little bit, but, no it doesn't really bother me.

I'd like to make things, I'd like to design a tea cup for someone and I'd like to design a toothbrush, but those opportunities haven't come, and I'm not really chasing them, so if I really chased it, you know, Ikea do that too well don't they?

- DT: You quite comfortably used the word design art, would you apply that to your work?
- GN: Erm, I guess so, I'd like to think so, yeah, yes, that's always what I've been striving for, and now the design art market has turned up, and I've been in the right place at the right time, but I don't, my foot is in the door of it, but not fully, my foot is in the door of the design world, but not fully, maybe half my body's in the craft world. You know, so, erm, I'm just in none of them, in a weird way, or I'm oscillating between the three, but I'd like to say I was, and I'd like to do more stuff with those market places. And I'll be doing the Barclays er, design art fair this year, which coincides with Bigbies in Berkeley Square, I'll be doing that this year, and of course I do *Collect*, but that's more a high-end craft fair, but I'm, but I have been, yeah, it's more, I've always thought of it as, you know sculptures rather than, or sculptural rather than just a bit of furniture, so whether someone else wants to go 'Oh he's one of the design artists...' I don't know, but, it doesn't really matter does it, what anyone else thinks?
- DT: No?
- GN: Well it does, because you know, its one way, how you progress, but the best things are the ones that you just do for yourself, they're the really successful objects, when you're just doing it to please yourself. If I start trying to do something for someone else, or for another market place, I don't think the objects would be as good. So if I make something as good and someone picks up on that and it's from there or there design then that's great, so, and that's about the blurring between all of the disciplines and the breaking down of the boundaries, although there are, maybe the exploration of your paper might get to bullet point the philosophies of perhaps a craft maker and the philosophies of perhaps a designer and the philosophies of perhaps a design artist, and it would be great to get to know that, or for someone to really knuckle down on where those distinct areas lie, and what are those cross disciplinary areas, erm, well I guess a craftsman might always make it themselves, designer won't make it themselves, yet they'll use the, or understand the disciplines of the craft person and move that on quite quickly, and the artist will always be doing his artwork and that will be a, ok maybe that's a self indulgent expression of their inner something-of-others and then the designers will pick up on using that potentially, depending on, what kind of, your pallet of, decorative arts, you know, before the time when they all split up, all went their own way, I don't know...
- DT: Ok, you sort of touched on this, finally, what's your ambition, where do you want to go with this?
- GN: Well it's always been to sell something to the V&A.
- DT: Right
- GN: Simple as that, that's always been my ambition and that would be, that's it, you know, to be in a V&A collection would, you know, would be the... I would feel complete.
- DT: What's after that?
- GN: Well yeah I've always, maybe Museum of Modern Art in New York, and then you know, I get closer to those sort of goals, erm, but you know I'm still not there, it's a long old journey I've set myself, and, yeah I get closer, whether it'll ever happen I don't know.
- DT: Ok, I hope so, excellent, thank you so much.

Interview with the author at the designer's studio, s'Hartogenbosch, the Netherlands, 21st Sept 2010

Damon Taylor: Can you just explain about your training, where you actually trained as a designer?

Maarten Baas: You mean at the design academy? Well Jurgen [Bey] was one of my teachers, one of my main teachers. I don't know how much he taught me but anyway his influence was big. But in general I was really searching, it was really difficult to find my way at the academy. It was hard. I needed to find a kind of a balance. Yeah. I felt like, of course I can design what they want me, yeah, which will be okay, I mean I know how to present something but it can't be true that you are in a school for making another, I mean...

To present something if I designed this one, if you know just like well you present your thing on the white foam, then you have some pictures of the work in progress, how you came to it, then in three lines you describe the project, that's how you present it, you know?

And I felt like I can do that, but, why, why would I? I mean... So I was trying to re-invent the wheel and to present, for instance, in different ways which still made clear what I wanted to present but in a different way than to the traditional way.

And also with of course, the thing which I actually designed myself, I didn't want to follow the normal path. So yeah, that's of course a difficult way of searching things, searching for your own values, searching for answers, ways of doing it.

I had that kind of idea but I also didn't have that experience to bring it across and everything so it was kind of a struggle that whole academy time.

Also one bad thing about design academy I think is the system of you fail or you pass, and there is nothing in between, there are no retries or something like that.

So its really one thing, you have to do the whole thing and otherwise you're fucked.

If you pass, that's quite a problem. That means that you are, we work in trimesters and now even semesters, we had three months of work which was really you didn't get a point for it, or something like that, it was zero.

If you had gone on holiday for three months, that in terms of result how far you are in your studies and whatever, you really wasted three months, of course they say you haven't wasted it but I think that's a very hard system. I mean there's much pressure on that very moment of the presentation. Of course, they don't only see the presentation, they also see the whole process, but the other disadvantage is that you are judged by the teachers who are teaching you so sometimes, you have to start again. I want to make something which he at least likes, man, maybe, so you always got to bit of like grey nothingness.

And I still see it because I sometimes give workshops or sometimes I teach at the design academy and there's such a sort of dark democrat on top of everybody who so it's stress like 'the teachers don't like it' and 'fucking hell'.

My thing if I teach there is to really to try to make them relax like, that's what I teach at the academy, if I teach there. I really try to be a coach who's going together with the student, like 'come on, we're going to make something nice together'. Trying something, trying your best, I'm your coach, your advocate, your lawyer, I'm your lawyer for the other teachers if they are going to complain about this project, I'm going to defend you, that's the feeling I want to give to the students. But in general the students don't have that feeling, they really think that all teachers are against them unless they prove the evidence, the opposite. So, I also struggled for the same reason.

I also had Jurgen. Jurgen was a very good teacher. He was also very strict but at least was very

straight & very honest, that was clear. You could do a lot, and that's the nicest thing about the academy. You can find your own ways, I mean, it's an open institute and I was really active also in finding, even when I was with for instance Jurgen. When I had classes in another space, I asked Jurgen to give me feedback on my project and I needed some others to show the piece I was going to go to teachers to give me feedback. And then you hear ten thousand opinions and then you know, okay, well, I can't make something. I can't make something pleasing to stem their opinions so I should listen to my own opinion and then I kind of realize okay, well now I, normally you think that well, the teachers are saying this with so much confidence then that I have to believe it, or something like that. That's the truth, but then later on I discovered that no, if ten people say ten different things then there's not one thing I should follow, only myself. That was kind of a hard way to learn, that, well, in the end, I found out that in extreme. With it I followed my own path. So yeah, that's the academy!

DT: So it was after graduation that you really felt you found your own way?

MB: Erm, during graduation actually. My graduation project is *Smoke*, and that was really like focused. I'm going to do it all the way, like how I believe is good and I don't want to make something like maybe they wanted. I felt like, this is the way I'm going to do it & I'm going to do it all the way. So, erm... so yeah, that was the first project.

So graduating you need project which I'm still think, oh man, all the year focusing on only two projects and really focusing, all my friends, all my family, I told them like 'I'm not on planet earth for out the year, only graduating and everybody should support me, and many people do it like that. Now is the fucking moment to perform'.

It's very unique, I mean, when can you do that. No text forms to be filled in, no bills to be paid, really you only have your graduation. You have, okay some money, one-hundred percent focus and all your friends even are in the same focus. As soon as they enter your area then it becomes only about my project, and nothing else.

It's extreme and I quite like it, and yeah, it's just not really listening. There are so many things which are around as well, you can't focus on only one project, its impossible. So its nice unique project I think, graduation project. It's a pity students are insecure about it, waste that period actually, it's a great period.

I enjoyed it very much as well. School itself was struggle with the graduation, I was striving for the end... I really felt like 'oh man, 11th June, then I'm finished', but on the statement I was very positive and full of energy to go 24/7.

DT: Okay, perhaps if we can contrast, I mean I wonder what, you must get very bored of talking about *Smoke*... you must have talked about it an awful lot. What was the genesis for that project, given that you were moving away from almost what the academy was trying to do to you?

MB: Well, like how I work now, after my graduation is very intuitive, just make what I think is nice to make. It sounds little bit superficial but I know there are many layers in me who filter that so that it's not so superficial.

DT: Can you just describe that process a little for me? Do you have a set process? Do you have ways you use it? Do you start with an idea or do you start with materials?

MB: No, I never start with materials. I always start with a kind of picture in my head, like 'that's what I can use'. Yeah, the *Clay Chair*, looks like this, I just squeeze my hand, and then I'm going to think like today, do we have that kind of clay, how can we reinforce that? Sometimes I'm ending up in revolutionary materials which I'm not aware of, its not about that for me at all. Journalists are writing about 'wow, using this kind of material for furniture that's very unique'. But for me its like, whoa, even if it is very

ordinary material, I would have made it like that for me as well. It is not about the material. Anyway, that sometimes is the case.

So its often like, quite clear picture, like 'yeah, sweeper-clock, these people who are sweeping the floor, starting from the top... and twelve hours' and... all that stuff.

DT: So its visual...you actually get a visual sense?

MB: Yeah, I never work like, 'clock and what is time? And time it is sweeping and sweeping you are moving forward'...no, that's not how I work. That's really the way they teach at school. I work the other way around. I have an idea and I think like, yeah. I feel that is a good thing and then I'm going to check that with others and, what do you think? And sometimes you'd be very clear if you talk, think twice about it and end up with 'nah, that's not a good idea'. I check with my mates, my girlfriend, she is a very good mirror and Bas [Bastian Den Herder, his business partner] (he was just walking around here) which his name is not Baas, my name is Baas, his name is Bas, everybody is always confused. He was there, more on conceptual level I talk with my girlfriend, on a aesthetic level I talk with Bas. Bertjan Pot is a very good friend of mine. I always ask him, I'm like, hey I have an idea, what do you think? And if he thinks like, yeah, well... then I'm like...

DT: What would you ask?

MB: I just say...this is the idea... isn't it nice? Then I feel that Bastian has a much better general knowledge than I do. He says like, 'Ah, I've saw something like that before, you should watch this' or whatever. Sometimes you get somewhere. So yeah, I just talk with a couple of people, then I know that it's a... then I can feel confidence to go for it. Well, that's how it goes. Not always, I'm not always. Bastian is often in Rotterdam. I'm not always involving him but sometimes I am curious what he thinks.

Back to *Smoke*. Normally, my natural way of working is very good, I just think like, that's it, I don't know why but that feels good. And I think unconsciously, that has been through all kinds of filters and that's why I think of it because there's more than only that, that superficial idea that came through kind of soil of my experience, my general gut feeling.

That's very difficult to defend in the academy because they want reasons. I think the opposite because, like, once you rationalize something too much then it's not... I mean... for me, the essence of product and everything really means that you are touched by something, kind of by a non rational thing. The most beautiful experiences one has in life are non rational. Its not because of you can explain why this is in context because of that...no, its because its touching you on a level where we rate our heartbeat... I mean, beautiful music... or... whatever.

DT: What do you mean, touching?

MB: Just touching. More kind of an emotional. Kind of, well, somebody once said about the humour of Tommy cooper. Very straightforward humour, and he said 'that humour goes straight to your laughing muscles... your brakes are not in between' and that's what I mean. It just touches you right where it needs to be.

It's not like 'Ah, I like that joke because of...' you know, it wasn't funny and then you got to explain that joke. No, it should hit you or not, and if it doesn't hit you then it doesn't make sense to try it another way. With furniture it's like that as well. I want to have that instant feeling, that instant click what you have with a visual thing only can happen if you also don't...

The reason why it's beautiful shouldn't be the technique or historical context, that's a nice extra thing or so, some experts can also say yeah, also related to research is also nice, but in general I think that it should just touch you somehow.

DT: We'll come back to *Smoke*. I'm really interested in what you are saying here. Are you striving for

beauty? Do you ever want to disturb people? Do you want to upset them or is it good...

MB: I never want to upset people. That's a kind of a misunderstanding some people have. For instance Smoke is all very suspicious that I want to upset people. No. I never intend to offend anyone. I really do it with a kind of a pure intention to find beauty or to research something which I'm interested in. Not at all to say like 'I'm against Rietveld so I'm going to burn it!' Yeah, that was a little bit... What people didn't know about it yet, they heard about 'yeah a guy's, burning a Rietveld' had a lot of responses like 'what the fuck?'... 'why?' Or people who done it for something like 'I got a burn it', 'burning the bastards'. No, it was not about that at all. It was for me, indeed, like beauty, well, perfection or so. If you asked about what did you think was perfection? Answers like symmetry, smooth, strong, all those kind of typical things, that's a very rational way of describing perfection I think.

Since most designers are working, I think, in quite a rational way, like Apple, most people like Apple design. I think its nice, its well done, but it isn't really my thing, or so. Or most cars or so. Because it's very rational... like this is perfection or so. It's not that I want to make imperfect things, that's what most people say about my work or having various here or whatever, and its imperfect, that's nice because it's imperfect. I think it's not about imperfect because nature is full of imperfect shapes, if you would describe it like that. I mean, would you call a tree imperfect? Like "Ahh, that's a pity, that's a little bit to the left there, it should have been straight because now it would have been a perfect tree'. It would be like that.

No, because I really believe you can enjoy nature and children's drawings because it's another way of perfection. It's more emotional perfection in a way or whatever. At least, I don't blindly believe that perfection is symmetrical and that's why I was really, purely, with good intentions, trying to merge those two worlds. The rational world and the more irrational world. Like burning it and finding another way of beauty and showing that in another way, that's also beautiful.

So that was more about it. More directly related to what children do for instance. Would you say that this children's drawing is beautiful but a bit imperfect? And even if the opposite because of children. I never saw any ugly children's drawing. And everybody, Its a kind of a universal beauty because everybody thinks its a beautiful picture. Kind of a purity about it and whatever, I don't know but there are thousand of examples of very ugly adult drawings, so what's perfection and what's progression, or whatever? I mean its ugly what most adults are making. Or at least its not so universal anymore so why would you call it better than a children's drawing?

Also, why is it chair here as imperfect and why is it straight is more perfect? I mean, why? Course I understand why, I understand why you use the word imperfect but in fact it's not imperfect. That would be strange. Straight after Smoke, there was an article about Hella Jongerius, it may still be on my website. I never update my website. There was an article on Hella Jongerius in a Dutch magazine. It was very negative article, about the idea, kind of poverty, you can't make things perfect and so that's why you make them imperfect and call that the charm of it and blah blah blah. And I responded to it... as a 25yr old ex student.

Now I don't bother write all about all those theoretical descriptions of whatever I think. I think: write whatever you want, I'm going to build on my furniture, you know? That's my speciality.

But then because I also was still in the *Smoke* thing, I thought about it, I wrote a letter to that magazine. I said like 'Well, I don't agree with it, ah, it's another way of looking for another way of beauty. We are all thinking that beauty is the point in symmetrical, blah blah. But why it seems you don't really take it serious. You seem to see as a nice alternative, a nice side-step but actually this is wrong? And people are playing around? No, I don't see it like that, I see it like people are really researching something, another way of beauty so it makes sense.

He responded to me. He said, well, I don't know exactly how it went but in the end they published the whole thing as well because they thought it was an interesting description. But anyway, he responded to me saying: like, 'Yeah, but I'm not saying what's perfect, I'm only saying that if you make imperfect designs like what Hella Jongerius does, that's a kind of limit. But I'm not one to

tell you what's perfect'. And that's where I got him. I said like, 'Well, you're not saying what's perfect but you're already defining a little bit by saying "that's a bit imperfect"'. That's the exact point I make, its not imperfect! That's the whole thing I want to tell. That it's just as perfect as any other thing.

So, I'm not sure how we got onto this. Oh yes, if I'm looking for beauty or to upset people? No, I'm really trying to find beauty in my ways. I also in school, with Jurgen by the way, I felt like mostly if you design something... Jurgen gave assignment 'body language' in design and body language stuff like open, breathe, like do something with it. I felt like, oh, body language, you see, most products that are in shops and cars and everything, that would be the body language of a kind of über-man, like superman, always be proud how to present it and like that. Well, if we talk about body language, I wouldn't like to be on a party with only those kind of people because faults or blindness that people are different, and so I was finding all kind of examples... maybe I still have it somewhere... oh yeah, here.

This is my work. This was my work, its early and old, I don't know how good it looks now. Examples where products have a kind of sad body language.

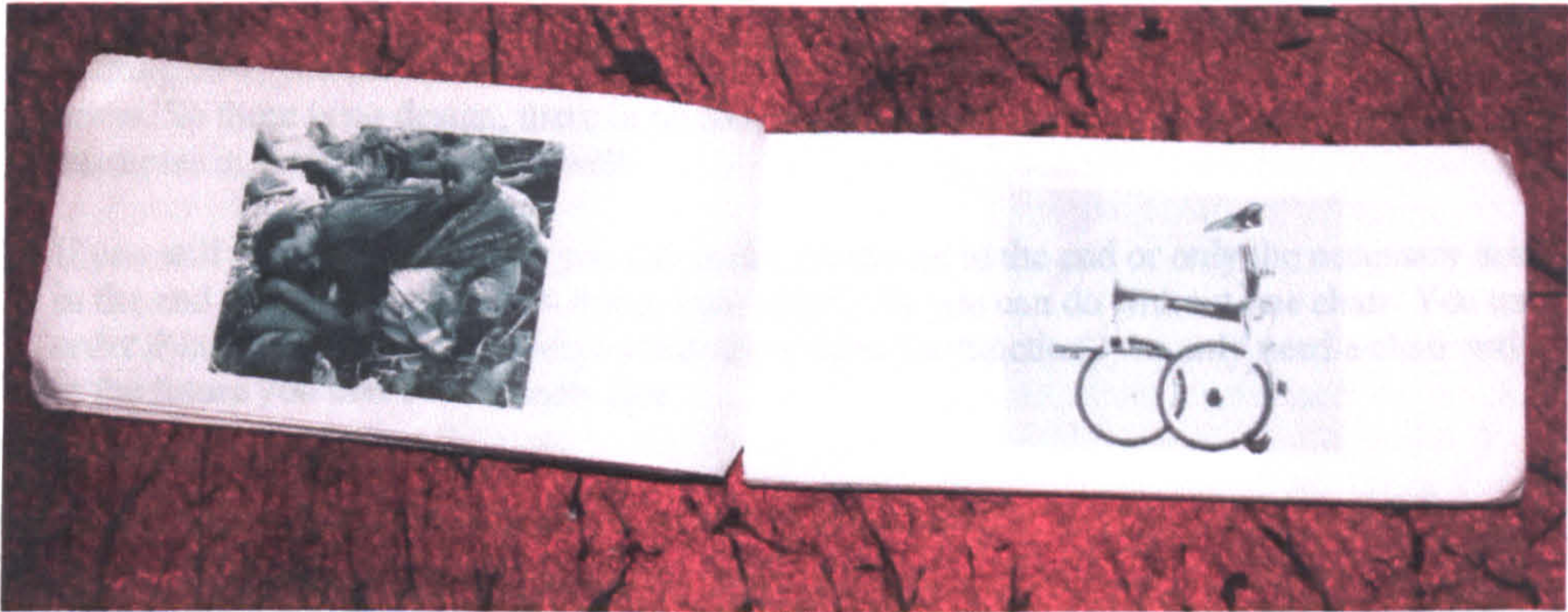


Figure 8.1 Maarten Baas, degree project from the Design Academy Eindhoven project, as shown to the author in 2010

DT: Oh yeah! Wow! Yeah yeah, very interesting. Its quite striking isn't it. I see what you mean

MB: How about this one... very opposite to that whole superman kind of thing.

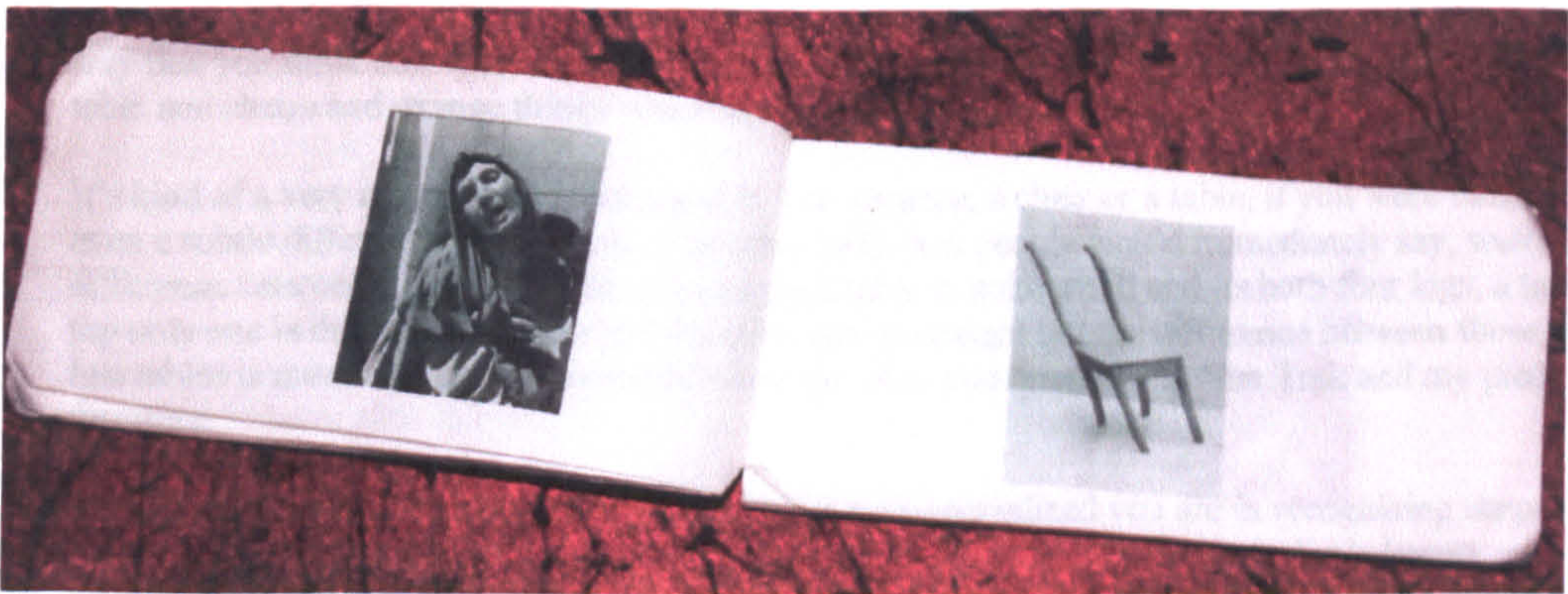


Figure 8.2 Maarten Baas, degree project from the Design Academy Eindhoven, as shown to the author in 2010

MB: So that is also something that you can still see in my products now. So yeah, I'm just trying to

find, indeed, to define beauty in another way. That is definitely something which is a part of my work. Also, I don't know if you know the series of the *Chankley Bore* which I'm made for Established & Sons?

DT: Yes.

MB: That was also something which I already did a little bit of design academy in another project. I just thought how strange it is that we make so many products and its kind of a 'form follows function' idea. Still whatever you make, even if you make quite a decorative table, it's quite common to at least think a bit logical about why it would have four legs. If a table would have fifth leg that would be very strange and people would say, like, 'Why is the fifth leg there?' Yeah, well, why is that whole table there? I mean the whole table is nonsense anyway, I mean if you want a table, you can find ten thousand things which can be a table. So to design a table is nonsense. Four legs are nonsense but the fifth one is going to be a kind of an over exaggeration of the table, but its just the same nonsense as the other four.

Also I felt like in general and also in design, things are getting smaller and smaller because of the technology. I getting a kind of a picture of a old gramophone with such a huge horn on it and that became a record player, and that became a CD player, until then MP3 player and actually it's nothing now, you can involve your telephone or maybe the tube in your ear or whatever, you know. So there is no design, there is no form follows function. There is nothing and many other examples is similar like that as well.

If you still want to have shape, you can make emptiness in the end or only the necessary things but in the end you can do your own thing, your whole life you can do without one chair. You can order things and whatever, so if you talk about form for function, you only need a chair and maybe in the future you don't even know that.

[...]

So, if you talk about form full of function, you don't need anything. So its bit strange to say I make a no nonsense chair! In Holland we have a new magazine, they advertise with it and say like "Magazine..the no nonsense glossy!" and I think like, well that's a better notion (laughs)...No nonsense glossy! No nonsense design is actually kind of similar with furniture.

So I felt like what if shape doesn't need to relate to the function anymore...how free can we go then? That's what I did in school and also for the *Chankley Bore*, which is very difficult because you don't have any reference anymore you can make whatever you want. That of course everybody thinks like, 'Oh yeah, that's like aliens', but that's because your mind works in such a way that you think that well, we have the category wooden furniture, category metal furniture, table and chairs and strange things which mostly look like aliens!

It's kind of a very naïve way of looking at it. For instance, a chair or a table, if you were to make even a subtle difference of this table or another table then people would immediately say, well, the difference between a baroque table and a modern table is quite small and its both four legs, a table top only one is different in things and the other one is straight but the difference between those two tables is much smaller difference between the alien you once saw in Star Trek and my piece of furniture.

Eskimos have a thousand words for white, its just how specialized you are in recognising shapes or recognising something. So in that way I felt I like to play with that idea of what's beauty or what's strange or how do you categorise things.

With the *Chankley Bore* I going to put in all categories, and you end up in category 'aliens', but I want to be free totally from material, from reference, from everything and that's quite difficult I feel.

- DT: Sure
- MB: Where to start, you know? That was also something, because I am still studying my finding beauty, also for me, finding beauty in another way or so.
- DT: So, to what extent, if we talk about that idea of finding beauty, you know, you talked about, said about touching somebody, to what extent do you think about the user? To what extent do you... are these made for other people, are you conceptualizing a user at the end of the process?
- MB: Yeah, well, in a very practical way, if I have an assignment and people say like, 'Hey, I want you to do like a table and it should be like this', then I work on it and I don't say 'fuck you, its about the concept!' No, if they want that, I'm going to meet their requests. For myself it depends a little bit. I can't shift on the line between functionality and aesthetic thing. Sometimes its beauty, functional. Sometimes its even not functional anymore, I can play a little bit on that line. I'm not just following on a path there. Sometimes I think part of the beauty is the fact that it works. I mean, somehow I think its stronger, the fact that you still can sit on *Smoke* chair, it's better than if the that I burn it away. So in that way I think also the clock really should tell real time, like clocks in time, otherwise I don't want them, not as much. Sometimes part of the beauty is the function. Its not that I am always stay on track to be always functional or to be always non functional. If its for a museum and I know they will never use it, then I think I can go a bit wilder on the shape maybe.
- DT: Right, okay, that brings me neatly onto the next question. I was wondering how important it was that people use these things. Some of your stuff does end up in the museums, would you be comfortable if that's all that happened with your work. Is it important that people use these things?
- MB: In that way I don't really think about it. I just make it and I see where it ends up. For me, the primary reason to do these things is for myself; that I want to make it. Sometimes the function of it is also just the picture which communicates my story in a way. Like the *Clay Chair*. I'm very happy that that's been published and people have seen it. That's also something. Then I don't really care if it ends up in a museum or in a private collection. I like that people are really using it but I like it just as much if it ends up in a museum... I don't really care. I have my own fun in making it and if people are understanding, it's nice. Then I can loan my studio a bit longer! (laughs).
- DT: So it's not that important that people are using it on a day to day level? You're not trying to affect people through how they are using it?
- MB: No, that's something that designers often say, that while there is a kind of a call for designers to bring a piece to all the people. What do they call it? Democratic job? Well, if people are interested in doing that, I'm fine with that, but that's not what I am striving for no. I really don't see the views of being in all living rooms. I don't get any satisfaction out of that; even the opposite sometimes. I think, I make once here and then it's going to be copied a hundred thousand times. I mean, why? I'm done with it.
- I like that I run my company and sometimes you have to do bit of concessions where you have to make a hundred of them to get out of the costs, of course, but for me that's kind of a natural balance between you make it, you have an idea, your creativity also is not endless and it takes a certain amount of time to make it then go onto next one.
- It's kind of a natural cycle and once you go into produce, it's out of my hands. I didn't do much mass products. I did it with clay and couple others but I'm not that keen on it. It's more, okay, of course I see a also challenge in that and of course I want to experience once that as well but it's really not... erm... the *Smoke* chair has been sold many many times and I see that all that is rationalised but its not that I think yeah, that's why I did it.
- DT: Right, okay, so for you it's not about the production process? It's more about the pleasure of

making?

MB: Yeah. I don't even make it so much myself. Just to have this farm here, all the pleasure of making the pleasure of creating that thing, even though I don't make it myself physically, but I make it and I present it that's for me. That circle round for me nothing being reproduced. I have a kind of an ethical problem with the mass production as well. So much material wasting on a product, it's out of balance I think. Here I think it is balance, we are putting energy in, we are using materials and even not eco friendly materials. We are just using whatever we need for making the pieces, but we do it on a small scale and that is... then you put as much energy in it as that can generate... that's in balance. Although that's a side step, this whole eco friendly bullshit, I don't really believe in that because that's a marketing thing anyway. Why would you make a chair out of eco friendly material if you are so eco friendly? Just don't make a chair, you know?

So, still I use very eco unfriendly materials but I'm much more eco friendly than any other paper maché kind of mass produced chair because they hundred dollar chairs being transported in trucks and planes, whatever. I just make ten eco unfriendly chairs, that's it! For me, that's the circle much more complete. That's how I feel.

DT: To what extent does it matter to you to actually make these things... to actually get involved in, you know, physically with your hands, the crafting? Or do you see your self as the generator of the ideas?

MB: I would like to make them myself but I'm just very non, erm, I can't make anything, I'm very clumsy.

DT: Really?

MB: Yeah. I could give out five minutes in the workshop and I am ashamed to be there. I really think like 'Oh no, I break things, I hurt myself, it goes wrong'. Its useless. So no, crafting myself is not the main thing. Crafting my people here is a bit more important but not the main thing. It's not that I go to make craft at work. My designs, I just don't like most the designs which are made in different ways. I never use the computer to design my piece. I only use the computer for some photoshop work and some emailing and internet but not... I don't have any 3D programmes on my computer. Not because I am against it but I just don't like the shapes which come out of it. I much more like it if I make a clumsy drawing. I give it to Bas and say 'Oh, what about this?' And we'll make it and I'm here everyday seeing the project and think like, 'Oh, bit like this, uh uh, could change, okay'. Then it gets into the direction I like it to be.

So that's what I mean. If the computer could do that for me then I also would be happy but just seems computer isn't made for that so then I do this way.

That requires people who are making it but it's not about the people who are making it, it's about the product and like and that the studio is working in a way that works. That's also a kind of holy thing for me because the atmosphere is nice, the people are enjoying what they are doing. For the product, I care for our product looks and I don't really care about that it's made by whatever it's made. That's even for marketing reasons it sometimes helps to say 'handmade in a studio' or 'made using clay' blah blah... Or it really is burnt. Yeah, it sells things so we sometimes use them if its more interesting than computer and things. For me, I'm done with it. I don't really care how the exhibition is made.

DT: Okay. Just to sort of wrap things up a bit. To go down the ethical path, your ethics, with things like the *Treasure Chairs*, because that's waste wood as far as I understand it, was that for practical reasons, for ethics? Why go and get all that waste wood? Why do that?

MB: It was first of all, the *Treasure* series is a nice in between steps from academy years and clay furniture. In academy I had to explain everything I did. Later on with clay furniture I didn't have

to explain, it was just a kind of naïve clumsy chair. So, but the *Treasure* is also a kind of naïve chair because I made it in five minutes, the prototype I made in five minutes by found pieces of wood and well, there it is. That kind of inspired how you would make it up, what you say, when you are building a shelter. So you make it with found materials, then you only know like, well it needs a roof so you go find a roof with whatever you can find. I was like, with that kind of attitude, if you could make a chair then all the spontaneity. So that was kind of a play philosophy in the *Treasure* chair but I still kind of had that academy feel. I felt like it would be very smart if you would recycle thing. I thought it was quite smart thinking reproducing that piece even though it looked like a very spontaneous made piece.

I could reproduce it because the waste was always made the same shape so I was making it with, ah, original piece I was making with waste from the factory and I added just percentage of waste to reproduce that original piece. I thought it kind of a clever thing. Later on I even wanted to get rid of that cleverness. I thought its nice, I still like that idea, make a serious as long as they are making same waste I can make same series from it. Later on I even stepped away from that. I really thought no, its just clay furniture, I don't have anything to tell about it. Its not about clever 'oh that's clever the materials you are using'. Yeah, it is but it is not about it. It's just the non smartness of it which is for me the beauty.

Treasure in a way, there was not from a point of view of using waste materials or something like that. It was not my main point. Also, something which I thought, ok, that's also clever, also the academy spirit still in it. Indeed also, you can use the waste but later on I kind of left all those ideas behind, I thought, no, as a designer you shouldn't suggest as if you are saving the world by using those kind of things.

Well similarly then with *Hey Chair be a Bookshelf* of course they were found objects gave me a genesis of that sort of idea. That actually was the most controversial thing which I made already on design academy. *Hey Chair Be a Bookshelf* was already... I made it for... It was nice because of the teacher. She said like the brief was to re use an existing shape, well, the most obvious example can be like a bottle or can opener or whatever and that was the brief. I found a bicycle steering thing and if you put it upside down two of them and table cloth on top, looks like a kind of baroque shape, nice. I actually really like, it's kind of boring, its nice found, especially this was in 2000 or something like that. Thousands of those kind of ideas like a typical Dutch design, which I like. I didn't dream I'd be like, yeah. I also find nice thing in which I can make. So, I leave behind, I'm now going to make what I like. I think I have the chair here which I made. (looks around for chair) There it is..that's the old chair out there!

What I did was I went to the flea market. I bought just whatever I could buy and I went home and then I thought it just like a tree, its beautiful. In a rational way of thinking you would move it maybe something like a tree. I thought like, well, I'm a human being so I can't grow like a tree, also can't let the chair grow as a tree. I have to make it by hand.

Suppose I would think as a tree, and I know that I am a tree and I don't want to be a tree, that I want to be a chair and I don't have the vessels or whatever to grow with but I have these materials to grow with. The only thing a tree knows is that it has to grow to the light. Tree has to grow to whatever... and I want to create that chair, that's my goal, this is the material. I totally didn't think of like 'Oh, a chair, should look like this...' no, I just thought of okay, so well, chair needs to have something strong to start with, ok, that's strong so it needs a structure...ok. And I was building it like that. Not thinking about how it looked in the end. Just what came in my path, how it grew so to say. Then I ended up with that chair, she thought it was ugly like hell!

And teacher was like its... 'oh, like you should do that table'. That was actually the first time I thought, 'Nah, I'm not going to follow the path of the teacher.

This goes where I feel it should go'. Also where I consult with Jurgen, I felt this was more of the kind of thing Jurgen would like. Indeed he supported me to go on with this one instead of the table. Which when I look back I think, yeah, of course you like that more than the table, then of

course you should do go with that one.

It was for me, still on the academy, it's a huge thing to do something against your teacher because of their opinion and they are going to judge you. Well, you feel, um, you're fucked. I really went for it like that, it was a kind of a challenge.

Later on I also made a kind of more later on, my chair being bookshelf.

That was the same thing and people were like, yeah, okay. Not really thinking about is it in balance with each other. No, just like, okay, bookshelf, now I need to go to the next bookshelf, I take it like that and the next one there.

So that's how I made that thing. That was really against her will. Later on, after I had *Smoke*, I made that thing and it was received very well by other people. There was one other teacher who bought that piece which was kind of a unique thing. That's funny if you are a student and one of the teachers buys your thing.

Also other students, often my way of working was much more appealing to other students than to the teachers. I can't imagine how there's kind of a generation difference in it or so. So once I presented it, it was appreciated by the other people so I knew I had a strong thing. The teacher also was working, was kind of a stylist, so he also used complications. So I already take complications with that thing and felt like, okay, I made something good there. So after *Smoke*, I graduated with *Smoke*, I needed to come up with a new concept and I felt like, okay, I still have *Hey Chair Be a Bookshelf*, which I can re launch now. So that a new version but with exactly the same theory so to say. So that's about it!

[...]

If you are just few years in design world you see that there is so much wasted energy in design world going around anyway. Everybody going to green parties in big jets and you thinking...there's something wrong here! As a student I could have probably thought that makes sense to make it a part of used materials. No, I don't think like that anymore.

DT: Okay, finally. What are your ambitions as a designer? What's still left to do? What would you like to do?

MB: I really don't know. That's um... Well I live my life anyway as how a tree grows. I just go to the light and see what happens. I never had really ambitions. Even until now I didn't ever had a goal. I really believe I should make clay furniture or *Real Time* and I just went for it. I thought yeah, if I should do it then I should make do it all the way and good. Automatically, well, as a result it has had a lot of success. I also responded to, yeah well, I got a lot of opportunities which I didn't want to say no to, which I did and when I did, I did it also all the way. So when I did it grew and looked as if I had a very sharp focus to be a designer with it, but that has never been the case. I just did what I felt I had to do all the way. So no, I don't have a specific ambition.

Its really, its, well with *Real Time* I kind of stepped away a little from design at all, that was more a theatre or film role. Jurgen actually, [...] Jurgen said that I should, while I was still in the academy, well he said you shouldn't be a designer, you should make films or something like that.

Yeah, this advise me to kind of move on as a designer. I thought it was funny because in the end he bought the sweeper clock for his wife. It really was most personal gift. He were like, hey man, good advice buy *Sweepers Clock*. He said come to the studio if want and then he said cheers to us and to the fact I was wrong when I said to you. Kind of a nice coincidence when he said like I shouldn't be designing that I should be filming and he's kind of right because when it became in the direction of film, he liked it so much that he bought it as present for his wife!

In a way he said well, cheers to the fact that he was right but I was like, in a way you are right because now I moved into film it's successful, I can imagine that maybe that's also the next thing. I'm thinking about it quite a lot lately. What's next. Normally next idea is there already before I've

finished one. I don't know.

I can seriously imagine that I will investigate film a little bit more. I've one idea which, I normally with design, I always have before I got ran over by truck, I need to do this, really kind of... I should have passed away before this I on planet earth. Like a passion and drive to make it. In terms of design, I don't really have that at the moment. I've always had that but its like, to go all the way. Now I don't have that anymore.

In film I do have one. I'm going to Australia but that's a long other story anyway.

I have an idea for art work in film. I don't know if that's a good thing or so but I feel that's what I should make. A nice little movie idea which I have. So indeed, if I would have to say now what was the next thing I really want to make? Apart from of course, I am doing my assignments, so that's a degree of challenge. That's nice and I'm really happy to have go in a museum. But this is really that special trigger and that's real so maybe its going in the direction of film. Or maybe something... I really don't know.

I have the feeling.....maybe I don't want to repeat myself like as a designer. There's nothing wrong with repeating. I like the fact that with a lot of *Smoke* people say you repeat yourself with *Smoke* but I think that I don't believe in that. I think like that there are many more new. If I made once a chair with *Smoke* and now I make a huge wall installation with *Smoke* then I don't call that repeating myself. I call it a kind of a new challenge. Why should I say no to the wall because I already made a chair? So in that sense I am repeating myself but...err...

I don't want...

Many designers are very nice, made very nice designs before they are thirty say. Made very nice piece when they were young and then they became a kind of a brand and they were just going more and more of the same. I mean I could go the same way. I could make a lot of money out of becoming my own brand. Making all kinds of sculpt clay designs and making one, you know.

Nah... I don't know.

So then I prefer not to go on designing again.

Sometimes I even think, probably your creative period of people in general is mostly under their thirties. Then after that you got kind of a wisdom which you can use in another way but the real essential creativity, I have a kind of theory that happens one year. Writers are often older and architects are often older because you need experience and creativity. Which is until you are thirty you don't have that experience but you are creative. After that you have the experience and the kind of critique. I have a theory that, I've past my thirties, I have expressed what I felt I have to express and maybe I shouldn't milk it out like Tom Dixon. Maybe I have to find other disciplines where I can do something or maybe I have to totally re- focus on another role and not as being always the guy who's always coming up with a totally surprising idea in Milan.

Maybe I can use my reputation or my qualities in totally different way, instead of always, yeah. Maybe that thing is finished. I'm really now in a kind of an in between period of searching for new. There's nothing really on the horizon. Yeah, maybe the table. I don't have any... what was your question... ambition. Yeah. Something like that.

DT: Okay. Excellent. Thank You so much.

Interview with the author, at The Bagel Shop, Witte de With Straat, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, 10th March 2011

Damon Taylor: So, first of all, what's your background, where did you train?

Jan Konings: I trained at the Design Academy in Eindhoven in the eighties. I graduated 1990. In the department of Gijs Bakker, he is the founder of Droog.

DT: So was he your tutor?

JK: He was Head of the Department. So I was graduated as an industrial designer specialized in furniture but I didn't make a lot of furniture in my career.

DT: In many ways what I'm most interested in the stuff you have been doing more recently with the stuff that I've seen but inevitably I'll need to ask you about Droog. You and Jurgen Bey created the bookcase [for Droog] and it was exhibited at the Gallery Marzee. Is this the first place that Renny Ramakers saw it?

JK: No, I don't think so. There were several places where it was in exhibition at that time.

DT: Was that as an exhibition or as something else?

JK: No, not as exhibition. The bookcase itself was exhibited in several places, one in the Marzee, in the gallery... And there was a compilation of the Arnhem school designers. It was not very much related to our work but it was all in the same exhibition and she was interested in the work, she want to do something.

DT: How did she communicate that to you? I'm really interested in the idea of what you as a young designer when someone comes along and says I want to exhibit your work. How do you achieve that?

JK: That was completely something else to what is happening now. If you are studying now even if you are not into the way that you are known, your work is known even abroad, everywhere. So it is very easy to exhibit your work and make it known to the world. At that time there was not that much. So some people were visiting the exhibitions at school. More important to have a picture at gallery or something like that to show it.

DT: So who organized the Marzee?

JK: It was organized by the owner of this gallery

DT: Oh, okay, so he just sort of saw your graduation work and sort of...

JK: Yeah. It was simple idea to show your work to a lot of people in the gallery. Ramakers formed this interest because she was also owner of *Industrieel Ontwerpen* and she was to publish about it.

DT: Oh she was owner of it?

JK: I don't know, whatever it was, I think she was editor and chief. The other thing was that she was looking for some years for a new group of people with a certain, with something in common.

DT: Right, this is what I've read, as you know it's unwritten, the real history of Droog you know, it just doesn't exist.

JK: Should write it ourselves...

DT: Yes. Exactly, this is why it's so useful for me. Timo [de Rijk]'s is the only article, have you read that article?

JK: Yes. I felt do my bit historical for him because it's not very known.

DT: Yeah, well this is it. This is why I'm fascinated. So did she...

JK: In a way its strange, it's not strange that you write your own history but it's strange that it's the only history.

DT: This is what really surprises me. It makes it really difficult for a scholar in my position because you go out and you read everything on the subject and it's all coming from the same angle. This is why I want to get clear... so she approached you and said...

JK: Yeah but what happens is that the husband of Ramakers who is in the pop music business. He was used to push young bands to a higher level. For example, he got this group of young musicians, Nirvana, the grunge, and by selling it like that, together as a group, that's a marketing trick.

But in design they didn't use this kind of technique and he thought it good to push a group of designers in same way as what we do with pop music. So of course, they're quite clever. She had to wait for new group of people with new ideas on design. When she saw this work at the end of the 80's, friend of mine, she needed get this group started with this work the same as they were doing with the pop music. That's the real start of developing that. Just the simple technique of pushing people.

DT: What do you think she saw that she liked in your work? Did she see something that she required?

JK: What was currently working with this group was the opposite to what was working before. This was completely different to what was before. It was related to her ideas of what Dutch design could be.

Then Dutch design in a more historical line that you can make the historical line back to the golden age of the 70's that you use everyday life and developing of common things. That you use very cheap materials and cheap techniques. So it fits into one story. The people who were working on it, they were not busy with this kind of story but that's what I was interested in. I think you know, Tejo Remy's work at the academy, it was based on Gulliver's travels. Robinson Crusoe. He was of the academy of art not of industrial design school.

For me the work was much more related with the work of [Rem] Koolhaas who was not very well known in the design world. Every architect of my age was completely inspired by his work.

DT: What were you inspired by with Koolhaas?

JK: His pragmatic approach to the world. His interest in the real world, in what's happening. That you try to understand what is happening in the real world and what you could do with it. Then it's also combined with materialism with Panamarenko and the Belgium surrealists. Combination is this pool of energy. At the design academy his work was not very known with the teachers who looking at neo-modernism, this kind of things.

DT: I find it absolutely fascinating that connection to Surrealism. It's something I've found myself anyway.

JK: In what way?

DT: In just looking at the work. Looking at the pieces... What was it like for you. Through reading

about the early days of Droog, you're a young man, you went to Milan. Suddenly everybody's talking about your work. Were you aware of this, did you realize?

JK: That's also big difference with now, students are very much involved what's happening with the world, interested in it, want to do something with it. Me, I want to do for myself, I'm not interested in this world. I was a bloke who didn't know what's happening in world outside. I'm the only world and not in the world of Milan. I was also not interested in being pop star or star at all.

DT: Now that is a difference!

JK: Yeah. So, I couldn't make a connection with this world and what I really wanted to do. For me it was more important to do project in public space and not in Milan. So at that time I decided to stop with it. Not that I don't like to make furniture or making these kind projects but the field was not the field for me.

DT: Ok. From what I can see of that part of your career you were making products of this and then you move away from products, why not go into the industrial design world? The modernist trait is to change things....

JK: Yeah but that was another complex at the beginning of the 90's. There was also in England, there was also this economic crisis and there was no work around. Normally everybody went to Philips or big companies. These companies were involved with the academy itself, people were teaching, there were connections you could do things there. In the beginning of the 90's there was no opportunity to find work in this world of design. There was also new thing where you could get subsidy on side.

Jurgen [Bey] and me got subsidy to start their own business and there is this direct link between this state subsidy and the way people felt their career. For me I can it's a case of the opportunity to do our Master Course ourselves and this state money and combine it with real projects, also in public space. So we took really a lot of time to experiment, to talk about it, to do all kind of things to train. After years I read about this 10 thousand hours you have to study and we did that in that time. I like this theory, it's very useful.

DT: Yeah, it's very good.

JK: You know about this?

DT: Yes absolutely. That's interesting. You are describing it almost as an inventor and that was your learning time. The subsidy gave you money to experiment?

JK: The subsidy gave us for one year but we used it for two years. So everyday we started with talking and debating on design but also all kinds of subjects. As we got work then we also combine it with doing experimenting and doing all kinds of research. So it's a very useful.

DT: Sounds like a good time.

JK: Yes, it's really good time. In a way I'm still doing it! After the project I'm doing, I also want to have time to experiment to think about it, read and write. I think its very powerful to the designer or artist that you got the time to think about and to work on things that are not necessary in the first moment, which could be useful after a while. I got my subjects to work on and in that way it makes no difference. That's why it makes no difference but your question was a valid thing.

DT: What I'm asking is how can you move on from products, objects, single objects, that traditional thing of design? You seemed to be moving from that to more immaterial things. Was that a slow process, was it a moment of realization, why did you do it?

JK: It was a real slow process and it's still slow process. You also had to rethink what you were doing at a certain time. In the end I don't know what I'm saying, but for me there was one moment, I spoken to you before about it, there was an important moment when I got out this interest in this theme park in the south of the Netherlands.

In the [there] you got the deck, like rollercoasters etc. In between there are small objects like a waste bin that people put their waste in but it's a [pet name?]. It has the design of a pet name. It says, paper here, paper here, paper here and you put it into his mouth and he say things. So what you see is that all day people are searching for rubbish (especially children) and you throw it in this er, man. But you got small pieces in between the bit that effects. In polls at the end of the year, the public mentioned these object as the most popular one, they really like them.

The name is in-fill attractions, so what is in between the attractions and it says something about not the object itself but mediating between the object and the user but also between the object and the landscape, the user and the landscape, the surrounding. The objects themselves are mediators.

They mediated and I think that's a very useful way of thinking about object. That they are always mediating between something else. So it not at all as a designer not at all what you are thinking. It not at all to design itself. You design something that is mediating but in this process of bringing this copy to your life. And that's a personal thing. But also it brings a story to your life. It is based on stories. Based on our culture. Everybody that goes there knows the stories. Or is familiar with the stories. The objects place would give it this idea that the stories behind it are know.

DT: Why is that so important?

JK: Because then people gets the feeling that everything is very close by. They are not against you but they are with you. They are not saying to you that you are not allowed to do this or do that but they invited you to do something. So they are applicating and animating and they are ...

If you are going with your family for example, these interjections, they make your family as a family, that it's a group. People like to go there. That's the shiny side of er... The other side is that it's also completely organized and ruled like our society.

DT: And in what way is it ruled?

JK: That everything is planned. There's nothing which is like for instant, it's what you see is the story... In a way we are very close by idea of this idea in our society but not now, it's not ruled that you have to do this or have to do that, it's animated. Animated is for me a possible thing because animation is bringing things to life. You might something alive by guiding people and its not that you... er... that's the opposite of you saying to people that you should do it like that, you have to stay in line, you are entitled.

DT: Is there a danger to it, could this, does it depend on who has the power in a situation like this? Yes, you are saying that gathering the litter is a very good thing but the whole park operates, the whole function is to take money out of your pockets. Is there a danger?

JK: Yes that is the danger. But that's also why there is a park and there's a difference with the world outside of the park. I try to make connection with the park and what's happening with the world out of the park In 20th century in Holland, everything was so organized that it seems like function like this park, more and more you could say that we lost control. In all kind of

DT: Where did the control go... if we lost it, where did it go?

JK: There's a lot of reasons. The world globalised, its too complex. Too many things are happening next to each other. I think its also some governments like to control things, for example, North of

Africa. These are worlds which we don't like to live. We like to live in a more... So it's not about controlling, you also don't want it completely chaotic, that also not working.

So we are making a very complex system. All kind of things next to each other. For example, I'm working here in Rotterdam in a neighbourhood. There are a lot of immigrants so if you are entering Holland and you want to stay here, there is a good chance that you will start in this neighbourhood. If you have some more money, you went to another place. You know this place?

DT: I do, I've stayed here.

JK: So there a lot of people from all kind of background. All kinds of backgrounds. And they don't know each other. What I saw is that this neighbourhood was made for people who work in harbour who had big dreams but there is no work out there. What people are doing when they live here is that they start doing all kinds of businesses in their home, small business. A kind of things. It's all this area. It's not known by government. Not that its illegal but its not known.

Normally you go to the chamber of commerce if you start a business or you go to the bank etc etc or you go to a housing situation for a house, all these kind of things are not working in this neighbourhood. People do it for themselves in this houses. So there are things happening in our society and we don't know about it. In a way, that's why I like the interior. In interior people could do what they like themselves. Its also what I like in design, can do by yourself. Really you can do new things. You can invite new things which people really like and could do new things with it.

Design is facilitating our basic needs in a better way than architecture or what urbanisim is doing. This urbanistic plan is fifty years old and its not working anymore. People are working with computers, the internet and doing all kinds of things which are moderated to how they want to live at this moment. I want to make a combination but also to make a basic plan that's fitting with those basic needs of people. I'm working it now for three years and I started it myself with more and more organizations are interested to join this. To do something with these ideas. Part of the process!

DT: The domestic interior, I see it as a key site of 21st century life. How do you map what goes on there because as you say, we don't know? So as a designer, as design research, how do you then go about trying to design that, how do you do it?

JK: Some things went strange there. I was asked to make an entrance for the city of Rotterdam. You know where it is?

DT: No.

JK: So I had to design that. What would you do? You could make something as the highway... I don't know. At the time I met this woman from the Congo in Africa and she was waiting in this area. If you are from Congo, you will definitely meet her, she helps you find a house, a job, also import food from Brussels, big community. I was thinking she is an influence in herself for this community. She was doing this by the book in her house. Besides her job what she was doing in a supermarket. She did this kind of work.

First thing I was doing was searching for other persons like she is. Persons who are important for a community which makes public space in herself as a person. Then I found more people are doing really interesting things in their houses. The only thing I could do was make it complete, one to another. That took me a year to know these people and to...

DT: So you were actually getting to know them, personally?

JK: Yeah, personally. From one to the other. Then I started to make pictures from the inside. To show what kind of circumstances these people are working, what their needs are etc. I was working

together with an artist who did images. Not made to feel like you are from the government but really questions which has nothing to do with er... No direct questions.

DT: Why did you do that, why use an artist and not a photographer or a...

JK: Because an artist is not dangerous.

DT: Nice.

JK: In this case. People, if you are from the government or from an outside association... People are also communication, if you write a letter or you said it to them nobody would answer it so you have to make other techniques. You know that I already made a hotel in the Hague? So I also started on a very small scale in this neighbourhood. Not for the hotel but as a way of an interest that you can make contact with people. That it can also start with doing business in this hotel. As somebody will, is doing something at home what will be a facility for the hotel so there is some money flowing with that. Then you got a deal. If its only want to another then you kind of communicate. You have to deal. You have to make business.

DT: That's really interesting.

JK: They are so in this kind of neighbourhoods these people are known with all kind of people who want some thing of them but nobody will give something. For me it is important there is a combination of wanting and giving. But then something could start.
[...]

So in this place I have to design the process to go to a resolve. I cannot go to a resolve and I know that it will take years and a lot of energy but for me its worth to do what I can. So that the picture really is an important part of it because its also good that you visualize.

DT: So you need photographs of their interior, of their work space. Tell me a bit about it. I'm fascinated. What.. Was there themes? Where there people working in a similar way?

JK: For the people are introducing something at home. For example, you know this chair of Marcel Wanders? Produced over there, inside of these houses. What you are thinking by working at home and producing something at home is that it is cheap or stupid work but it's high end of the market. So I like this combination of very low separation with very high end result. How does it come that its in this combination.

But also people will use their background, where they come from abroad, like this woman from Congo but also a woman from Brazil who imported dvd's and books from Brazil not only for the hotel but also to the rest of the world from internet by internet shops or shops related. The other thing is that people are not they don't got money, lot of poverty but also a lack of money and also knowledge.

So its for them its also difficult to start their own business and to do it like.. Also a lot of people who want to do something but it will not work. We are working on programme that you can help them to start a business with other people of the neighbourhood who have internet that you help those people. So you get small communities which are starting a business but they also coached by these people. Also people are volunteer and doing interesting things. Like a man sitting in background who is broadcasting television and he broadcast it on television during night because it is cheap to broadcast at night and he edit it on his balcony with two friends.

So these houses are too small. The plan of the neighbourhood is not getting anymore to these needs. I like the idea of the garage which we know from the studies in America; a space which is big enough to do something else then your daily things. Could be a hobby or something which is stupid to do but you know Apple, you look back at all these business all started in a garage. For a

society its important to have these kind of places.

DT: Fantastic point.

JK: A lot of things which are happening in this project are not related to my job as a designer. This kind of takes up all related so in the end I will focus more on this kind of things.

DT: So are you gaining... Is it public money that's paying you to do this or is it...

JK: It's a combination of things. What im doing in my project is I combine several projects into one. The public ask for then I donate around for something. I also try to find different person, different organizations and company who want to be involved in it. So the money is organized by ourselves.

DT: Do you have any help with that?

JK: Yeah.

DT: Do you have a business manager you work with or...

JK: Not specially a business manager. I working at my own so then I can... yeah, switch very easily. This kind of project you always have to work with on the people and organizations who are good in this kind of things. I'm not good in organizing.

[...]

DT: Yes and there is probably lots of people who want to be producers. With what you are describing, how important is the internet in these kind of structures?

JK: For some it's important. Working it on the internet it's one of the main motives behind the success of working it down globally. More and more people are working it at all kinds of places. It changed our way of working dramatically, the internet.

So also it's changed by the internet but more that people are too far to by it and sometimes also not interested in being connected by the internet to the rest of the world. So it's in that way its organized another way. They are connected to the world so there is a lot to do with globalization. A lot of Polish people, North Africa, Turkish people etc. So its not a way of network but the property is er..

DT: So how do they network?

JK: By... by meeting people in their real life.

DT: And that's an obvious answer, they talk to each other!

JK: For example, one of my main people which introduce me to a lot of people was the postman. He is interested in my film. A mediator. He is also an artist. So he also know a lot of people in the background.

DT: Yeah, that's really interesting.

JK: And you know that the background we swap with the classic postman, man who is there everyday, knows everything in the neighbourhood. In my street there is four postman and everyday there will be another one. People don't post anymore by letter, that has changed but those people are important.

Its about people in some places and have somewhere to go like shops or a place where you can

drink a cup of coffee. That's what we need, that kind of public space where people can meet. At the moment there is nothing. No facilities. Only a big mall, only big boxes.

DT: I'm very interested in the *Hotel Transvaal*. Can you just tell me how the project came about and how you started to approach it?

JK: The first thing was that there was a neighbourhood, it was planned on a big scale. If you plan on a big scale you also need to demolish it on a big scale. Understand they had to demolish 3000 houses and they want to rebuild 1200 houses. Huge operation and will take twelve years. In this time we got streets and blocks, houses, life. You could say that this part of the city is dead for the moment. There are still people letting. There are still shops out there, people want to make their money. Its quite a hard period to survive. I was thinking this instead of this period that you have to wait for it. At the time which is in between of the bigger but you see it as a living period, part of a living city which is very normal in the rest of the world. In this kind of area its not.

You convert it by putting programme in it which is working for this time. I was asked by artist organization who working up there doing projects, they ask me to make a facade for there temporary office in an empty house. Instead of making this new facade I presented them with an idea. They tell me empty houses make rooms. They like the idea and start working with me to make this real.

Idea was that you turn these empty houses into hotel rooms and you use only those facilities which you need for a hotel. Like place where you can have breakfast, do laundry etc etc but you already got them in the neighborhood, these shops and restaurants that you use them and make one big network. In the end you could say that the neighborhood as a whole is the hotel and the streets are the corridors of this hotel with the rooms in this house.

In the middle of the neighborhood you got a separate shop and that is reception. There is a woman who knows a lot about the route and to tell you where you can eat and where you can drink and where you can go to, she also brings you to the route. This works for three years. We ask artist who live there to furnish the rooms, we ask local shops to furnish the rooms and that's how it is working.

DT: Did it make money?

JK: It was not made to make money.

DT: Yes but did it make enough money to survive?

JK: Yeah. With a very small amount of money we organize six rooms in a weekend with a restaurant which will serve something. We provided the mail and the chief of the housing association and with people from the art etc etc. People can decide this is a good plan and I will continue with it. We had a dinner in this restaurant and it was just a question, do you want to continue with this idea or not and if you want to, how could we do it.

I was luckily rich television was interested in this news, so the nine o'clock news came with a camera. They filmed the project, because of that the mayor also wanted to say that he liked this project and he wanted to continue with it. We were in this restaurant having dinner, it was on television so of course we want to ask them if you want to continue with this project and they had no alternative. That's how it's working.

That's also what I like about being a designer because as one man, one idea, you can change this situation. Very complex. For me, its how could you design a project in this way that it can stay on its own and will work. For me the best part was that it was working. Two years ago you got this financial crisis and the housing association was a big part of that and they was suffering.

DT: Three years, that's really impressive, that's not just a little project.

JK: Yeah, it was working.

DT: So is that your ambition, is that what you want to do, change things through your design?

JK: Yeah. Its about making alternatives. It's about facilitating needs of this moment. What people want at this moment.

DT: You just said two things there. You said facilitating needs, what people need at this moment and what people want. Are they the same things?

JK: No, it's not the same. Its also not need but its could need. It's about what we could do. That's also what I like in the way that the tutors was invited. There was not a need for the tutors. They were just designers, people designing, inventing something. Seems at that time that it was quite super need that you make something which only get a form. That it was the start of something which nowadays its an important part of a lot of people in their daily lives. Its changed our behaviour what we could do with each other completely.

DT: Yeah. It's interesting how that ties in with what you say about animating. What that's done, like SMS messaging, originally it was engineers, then

JK: Yes, a by-product

DT: Exactly and it's completely changed the way we interact as human beings.

JK: Afterwards it seems people like the communicate very small simple.

DT: And not face to face. One of the best things about text is that you don't have to talk to anybody!

JK: (Laughs) That's what I do.

DT: Well, I always say, sorry I'm not coming! Things like that! It's brilliant but we didn't know we needed it. I mean, it's a problem isn't it because in some ways that's a bad but in other ways it's a good thing

JK: It's good.

DT: So what do you think designers need to do?

JK: That is a big question. For me I'm focusing on public space and a broader idea. It's about what is public in our time. How could you facilitate a public life.

DT: Thank you very much.

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