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## Editorial

The term design can respectively denote artificial objects to which uses are assigned, or a sort of artistic production or the stylistic elaboration of merchandise necessary for consumption. However, as this issue of *Mode de recherche* examines the designation of design, it will not adopt one definition as is usually the case. Rather than disqualifying the established definitions to replace them with new ones, the idea is to show that the very attempt to find a definition comes up against the difficulties that are inherent

to its nature and more broadly that of the future of production and consumption in industrialised society. Who, between the designer, design-lover, critic, industry figure, politician, user, teacher or academic is in a position to say what design is, or what it should be? To what extent do cultural and national differences enter in to the equation when trying to define design?

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# *Defining Design: between Use, Aesthetics and Consumption*

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# Cultural uses of the term “design” in French

Bruno Remaury

In his *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes* (Interviews on the lives and work of the most excellent ancient and modern painters), published between 1666 and 1688, André Félibien, Louis XIV’s historiographer and Secretary of the Academy of Architecture regularly uses the term “dessigner” to mean “dessiner” (drawing), a spelling that in the 18th century Furetière would have qualified as rare but still appears under the letter D in his dictionary a few lines before “dessein” and “dessiner”. In the same way, the pages in Diderot’s *Encyclopaedia* on drawing bear the legends “Dessein” – both words are based on the Latin *designare* that means “to represent in concrete terms” a term that passed in to Italian at the Renaissance as *disegnare*, literally meaning “to trace the contours of something” or figuratively to “form a project”. This double dimension is present at the origins of the word, that of “dessin à dessein”, a meaning that has been lost in the French but has remained in English from drawing to design.

As we know design is an Anglicism in French that appeared in France at the end of the fifties using only one of the three meanings of the English term design – as in the *Cambridge Dictionary* this term has three definitions which correspond exactly to that of “dessein” in French in the 18th century: it

denotes first of all the plans for a project (in the technical sense of the term), the intention and the motif. Design in the French meaning is in principle based on the first idea, that is to say a plan or project “to make or draw plans for something, for example clothes or buildings” while retaining a trace of the other meanings in the background. However, the term is much more interesting than its academic definition and the point of the reflection that follows is to show how the term design can simultaneously refer to a number of things – practices, objects or judgements of taste according to the context and also according to whether it is used as a noun or an adjective.

Point number one: the word is used for everything from the “Philosophy of design” to Braun’s advertising a clock radio as a “Radio-réveil design” for 19,99 in a supermarket catalogue not to mention Ikea’s self-proclaimed “innovative design” or “Les Puces du design” (The Design flea market) that takes place in Paris twice a year. Point number two: while the term has many meanings, it is nonetheless quite ambiguous and the term design is almost always used to valorise something. In other words, it has not (as of yet), taken on a negative connotation, and working in design is not considered pejorative as is the case with the expression in French “faire de la décoration” – that has since been replaced with “architecture d’intérieur” or more precisely by the term “design d’intérieur”, a slightly literal translation of the English term interior design. But this word whose contexts refer to a number of uses and the different interpretations in French of the term design is evidence of our link with the notion of an industrial aesthetic and common taste in terms of objects. So there are three interpretations that say the following: when we speak of design as a practice (“c’est le design”), referring to an object (“c’est du design”) or to qualify taste (“c’est design”).

## **“C’est le design”: design as a practice**

The main use of the term design is to define a certain number of practices that mainly come under the umbrella of what would have been the “applied arts” – precisely “dessins à desseins” (drawings to designs) – of which design is really just the industrial branch, that is to say, by playing with the term, an applied art, applied to industrial levels of production/reproduction and distribution, where the term “art appliqué” usually applies to craftsmanship. It is at this point that the term “dessin à dessein” gives rise to design: where the first term covers all of the applied arts from carpeting to door knobs the second retains from “dessin à dessein” the idea of someone who works in an industrial framework, in the studio of the engineer-designer or on an architect’s drawing board. We should also note that there is not, in France in any case, a notion of design in expensive jewellery, art books or stained glass window restoration but more an idea of creation or “artisanat d’art” (craftsman/artist) – a term that is on many levels a perfect counterpoint to design. The first characteristic of the term design in French is that it arrived at the moment when the object was developing an industrial dimension and where it was, as a result, conditioned by this.

However, at this stage, the use of the term is not innocent. The term design in French with no other qualifying term generally refers only to object design and more often, the interior of an object, or a utilitarian object – from the TGV to a coffee maker –, only very rarely covering the other fields of creativity or design in industry such as traffic lights, commercial scenography or clothes. And once it refers to a field beyond that of the utilitarian object, design is automatically used in tandem with another term to qualify the practice in question: graphic

design, environmental design, fashion design, interior design, web design, landscape design, textile design, etc., whereas in English the syntagmatic construction happens systematically and in English the terms industrial design or product design are used for utilitarian objects. The term design, when used alone in French to qualify applied creativity in industrial conditions (“Le design”), in fact only covers a tiny part, that of the object produced as a series. This is a revealing nuance of the status of design in the French creative field that introduces a hierarchical dimension to the professions: design in the French meaning subsumes all possible meanings of the word in favour of a unique notion, albeit limiting in the creative sphere of the design of industrial objects – that is to say the creation of utilitarian objects that include a “machinic” principle of functioning, either because they fulfil the role of the machine (a pair of scissors, a stool), or because they are themselves machines (a car, a food mixer). The others are not considered to be “du design” but “du design de”<sup>1</sup>.

As a result, the term design when used alone does not include “non-machinic” objects (a vase, a dress, a book cover), which leads to a classification between the apparently complex forms of the notion of design (as long as they have the machinic dimension) and the “simplified” forms that are purely ornamental and non-complex in appearance (even if of course this is not the case). This distinction between design and “design de” adds an implicit hierarchical dimension to practices that are nonetheless similar: the term design when used alone in French is the continuation of an “art de l’ingénieur” (art of the engineer), a notion that itself derives from the quarrel between mechanical arts and liberal arts in the 18th century. As a mechanical art brought up to the level of the liberal arts, this interpretation of design locates it, like architecture,

between art and technique, that is to say both a technique and an art form. Simultaneously an artist and an engineer, the “pure” designer can lay claim to the status in the “Leonardo-esque” tradition of the complete talent, as a “*deus ex machina*” in the literal sense. This is how we must understand the vague disdain among certain designers for their colleagues that do not deal with the constraints of the machine – whether they are graphic artists, fashion stylists or landscapers: the Millau viaduct, the Bubu stool, the Mégane car, yes; the logo of the musée d’Orsay, Chanel’s 2005 or the André-Citroën park in Paris, no.

To employ the term design only for “industrial design” or “product design”, is to prop up the hierarchy between the person who designs a machine (whether it be “to sit on”, or “to live in” as was often mentioned in the twenties, the founding era of the practice in France) and the person who designs an object that is just to be looked at.

All designers are not equal in the argument, and those who benefit from the term designer alone are implicitly credited with a dimension of accomplishment that he or she whose practice is qualified by an additional term (“graphic designer”, “fashion designer”, “interior designer”, etc.) lacks. This hierarchy is far from obsolete if we are to look at the way in which the figure of designer-engineer is mentioned relative to a designer-artist in the discourse on design – whether this comes from the designers themselves or from commentators. If we dig a little, we find the hierarchy that often exists between engineers between “hard” techniques and “soft” techniques, itself comes from a value system that has its roots in an ancient notion of materials. So underneath this implicit hierarchy between designers and “designers de”, there is also a hierarchy between different types of material, from metal – the Promethean material at the top of the ladder – down to fabric and

paper – simple matter rather than real materials without hold or substance right down at the bottom of the ladder.

Curiously thus the concept of the “Beautiful and useful”<sup>2</sup>, which was the motto for the followers of the decorative arts in the 19th century (“Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be *useful*, or believe to be *beautiful*” as William Morris said), found itself reduced by the definition of design in the first half of the 20th century. In fact, the decorative arts movement aimed to encompass all of the elements of everyday life – from architecture to the teaspoon via wallpaper and printed fabrics – with the idea in mind of a “synthesis of the arts” that bloomed in England with the Arts and Crafts movement and in France with the École de Nancy. French design thus retained only the industrial object from this vast movement, casting aside other fields of the applied arts which remained very much alive in other countries. Textile design that was important in France and England in the first two decades of the 20th century (as was the case with Russia’s Wuthemas and Germany’s Bauhaus), moved to Northern Europe and the other side of the Atlantic in the fifties while it became marginalised in France and with its close neighbours. The concept of “beautiful and useful” very quickly came to concern only the machine, even though in a broader sense, while other domains of the applied arts fell back on to arts and crafts, and besides the French “beau pour tous” movement in the sixties – like the work of Denise Fayolle and Maïmé Arnodin for Prisunic for example – the decorative object began to separate itself, in France in any case, from the notion of design it came from originally.

The origins of this split are diverse and varied, but it is probable that it happened mainly due to the divorce in the thirties between modernist theorists and their rejection of the “joli/pretty” – modernity, as we know,

made a huge effort to classify decor as a minor activity and the nostalgic defenders of traditional French “great taste”. As early as the forties the split was consummated between an internal ethic of function, yet again reinforced by the economic and production necessities demanded by the reconstructive effort after the war, and a France of Colbertian nostalgia that wanted to retain the heritage of the “bel objet” (the beautiful object). This divorce still has repercussions today as is evident from the tetchy relationship between the luxury object and the so-called “intelligent” object: the minute the French luxury product ventures into the field of design in terms of the form/function, it rarely manages to produce more than a cover (a crocodile skin IPod holder), or at worst a gadget (the champagne box that becomes an ice bucket). From the beginning of design in France in any case (or because of its beginning), French “great taste” demanded a distinctiveness in reaction against the democratic aesthetic of North American design, thus accelerating the separation between the product by the engineer/conceptor and the “object of taste” by the artist/craftsman. “Dessin” split from “dessein” and “beautiful and useful” became just a beautiful tool.

### **“C’est du design”: design as a noun in French**

Indeed, utility is at the heart of the contemporary meanings of the term design. What is useful in this version of the object as machine – and the intelligent machine? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince’s theory was that “It must be useful as it is so pretty”, but design on the contrary means that an object is pretty because it is useful, an equation between form and function that is doubtless one of the most important inherited concepts – and not the easiest to maintain – of the modernity of the object. Adolf Loos used to say that “beauty to us

means the highest level of perfection. As a result, it is not possible for an object that is not practical to be considered beautiful. The basic condition an object must fulfil to be considered “beautiful” is to conform to its finality”<sup>3</sup>. The finality not only took precedence over the form as we know but also, as the theory of design is voluble on the subject, is the very source of the form.

However, the theorists of function did not predict how this quite restrictive definition of design would end up dictating (and restricting) the field of objects it would come to designate. Let me explain: given that the term design in French is used to qualify a specific way of qualifying the object from a form/function angle and the finality of a machine-object, it is quite normal that it came to evoke through pure metonymy, the very object that results from it. The term design thus refers both to a practice but even more often to a range of objects that have in common the fact that they all conform to the “basic condition”, that of their “finality” to use Adolf Loos’ expression. To say “c’est du design” means to designate an object that claims a certain intelligence relative to a function far from the mere canons of being decorative and pretty. This goes for all public equipment (transport, urban furniture), consumer goods (cars, electronic goods, household appliances) but also and above all for furniture: design, through catachreses, can mean “an object that has been designed” and is used to designate the objects themselves as well as positioning a part of the range of products for the home, from Ikea to Capellini via the “Contemporaines” from the furniture company Roche-Bobois.

When extended to the field of the object, the term design in France ends up meaning – and this is not the strangest of its avatars – a “historical” style of furniture that came to be with the founders of the notion, whether

they be French (Le Corbusier, Robert Mallet-Stevens, René Herbst) or foreign (Josef Hoffmann, Charles Mackintosh, Eileen Grey, Marcel Breuer) and continued after the war, in particular with the Americans (Florence Knoll, Charles and Ray Eames), the Italians (Gio Ponti, Ettore Sottsass), the Scandinavians (Poul Kjaerholm, Arne Jacobsen) but also the French (Jean Prouvé, Pierre Paulin). This historical style stretches from the twenties to today while remaining quite restricted in style by its own characteristics – because at each stage it consorts with other styles that are generally neo-classic or stemming from the “bel objet”. So it is telling that in some Parisian auction houses there are two departments, the first known as “Arts décoratifs” that proposes furniture by “decorators” and cabinet makers up until the fifties and sixties (Jean-Michel Frank, Paul Dupré-Lafon, Alexandre Noll); and a second called precisely “Design”, that proposes furniture from the same era (and other more recent eras) but that were designed differently and as such appear different, from Gerrit Rietveld to Joe Colombo – both giving rise to separate catalogues and sales. Its as if the 19th century department of the same auction house decided to split into two separate sales, on the one hand, the one-off pieces from quality craftsmen like a piece by Jacob-Desmalter or a bowl by Froment-Meurice; and on the other objects that are also from quality craftsmen but produced in “series”, such as an earthenware piece from Hauchecorne, a Sèvres biscuit or a Meissonier bronze, incidentally referred to by the Goncourt brothers as “marvellous industrial art” – or was it “design” before its time?

We can smile at the lapses and see how trends mean that certain “decorators” in some sales become “moderns”, such as Jean Royère, or by the same token how certain “moderns” are categorised with the decora-

tors like Pierre Chareau. We should also point out that Anglo-Saxon auction houses such as Sotheby’s or Christie’s have one department only for the two “styles”, both being referred to as 20th Century Decorative Art and Design – a clear sign that the split between “decorators” and “designers” is truly a French one which brings us back to the dialectic heritage between mechanical arts and liberal arts mentioned above. The term design in French, in addition to being a practice, ended up designating an actual formal style (even sometimes referred to as “formalist”) which covers a defined family of objects – a family of objects that we can see how, in every era, has coexisted with other objects and that today refers less to an ethical principle (despite the fact that it does exist) than an aesthetic repertoire. This means we have events such as “Les Puces du design” and other events that propose “design antiques”, which is almost an oxymoron as the term design in principle is meant to evoke a certain contemporary element, even if this is not necessarily its vocation.

### **“C’est design”: design as a taste judgement**

This link to the contemporary has not disappeared, on the contrary, and if design as a noun refers either to a practice that is supposedly timeless – despite its relatively precise date of birth –, or to different objects confined to a certain “historic” time, design as an adjective (in French) refers almost always to the contemporary – or better, to the new, the current. This is the third and last but not least use of the term design in the French language, the one that is used to evoke a notion of the “now” that is both vague and generalised: to use the expression “c’est design” really means to say “it’s modern”, “it’s today”, even “it’s trendy”. In any case, that is the meaning to be gleaned from the passably invocatory uses of the

word when it is used to denote a product, from couches to alarm clocks, and whose marketing pitch (whether it comes from the brand, the retailer or the press) is the first to use. Design, in this context, is used not so much to describe the creative process or an aesthetic field but to categorise the object which benefits from the judgement of taste, strictly defined in the 'now'. In the end, when design is used adjectivally as in "c'est design", it takes on a certain flavour of the month aspect.

So this use of the term design in French, when it designates the "nowness" of an object, refers to the taste of the time. This is precisely what the titles of the Pompidou centres' exhibition *D. Day, Design d'aujourd'hui*, the special edition *Design d'aujourd'hui* from *Beaux-Arts magazine* or *Design Now* from Taschen are playing with. This "design of today", all mixed up together includes Christophe Pillet, Matali Crasset, Radi designers, Ora-ïto and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec to name five references often mentioned when the theme of "today" in contemporary French design is brought up – just like Philippe Starck was in the eighties and nineties. The flavour of the month in terms of a formal repertoire, this type of design refers to the "now" but established to the extent that it becomes a style that serves to qualify a place and time, which means probably that which will remain of French style from the first half of the twenty first century. To speak today of a "fauteuil design" (armchair) or a "canapé design" (couch) – whether they come from Ikea or from Capellini –, means implicitly that it is of this specific style, in tune with the moment.

But this taste of the day also gives rise to a look, meaning the visual aspect characteristic of fashion – "look du jour" that sometimes covers older objects in order to give them an up to date aspect and leads to logos or colour codes being revamped, a car

shape or a laptop being redesigned, to changing the packaging of a bottle of mineral water or a tube of lipstick. This use of the term design as an adjective is very much oriented towards consumer objects such as "sa nouvelle bouteille design" (the new "design" bottle), "sa nouvelle ligne très design" (the new very "design" line) or even "un look design" (a "design" look), that usually come from the marketing department, most often accompanied by the terms *nouveau* (new), or *dernier* (latest), or *tendance* (trendy). This category also includes all high-tech products (from mobile phones to vacuum cleaners), as well as packaging that is supposed to make a product appear up to date. This is not aimed at innovating the product so much as anchoring the product it wraps in the "air du temps"; this design is essentially a means to communicate: "this is of the now", just like fashion. This is what distinguishes design that means "what will remain of the era" we just mentioned – in theory, as one of the downsides of contemporary design overall over the past twenty years, is to have become a machine that produces communicative and narrative objects rather than really innovative objects, but that's another story. Whatever the case, this "look design", while it bases an object in the "air du temps" and in an image-based reality, also contributes to making it ephemeral to the detriment of the basic function of design which was to make "beauty last". It is still this concept of design that means that certain families of products, helped by "copycatting" find themselves with the exact same design at the same time: this has always been the case for dresses and bags but is also becoming true for mobile phones, vacuum cleaners, car chassis or sofa beds, with terrifying speed – which, we must point out has not always been the case. This "look design" has all of the advantages of the fashion trend (up to dateness, newness, provocation of desire) but also has all

of the faults (homogeneous proposals, low level of risk taking and rapid obsolescence). This paradoxical marriage between design with the notion of fashion doubtless give it more relevance to the era while at the same time wearing out what gives it a legitimacy, meaning the anticipatory and reformatory aspect of what it brings to the table. So these closer links to the question of dressing/wrapping that accompanies its unprecedented integration into the arsenal of marketing tools, progressively makes design a pure sign of the “air du temps” to the detriment of the formal approach of its origins.

So this “look du jour” has given rise to a decorative repertoire that is no longer truly “design”, that is to say an often overloaded and useless neo-modernist vocabulary aimed at “sounding modern” and which fill the stores – metal lamp stands folded in a zig zag position, chromed trompe-l’œil bolts, black triangular plates, green and yellow toasters with big red buttons, pushchairs calibrated like 4x4 jeeps, Goldorak-style hifi systems. This design is purely and simply a decorative repertoire aimed at making people consume “l’air du temps” with no other intentions or aesthetic, no aspirations in the form/function equation, and no intention to last over time. It could be termed in French as “Dessin sans dessein” (Drawing without design), as it constitutes pure ornamentation, paradoxically going back to what the origins of design were supposed to have dispensed with. These gratuitous shapes that are meant to be inspired participate in the strange final detour towards the useless and the anecdotally decorative. It is at this point that the paradox of the term design that has remained synonymous with the ethics of industrial design and simultaneously through its adjectivisation has become the very brand of its decorative and commercial bastardisation. The original split between the art of engineering and that of artist-

craftsman may be less pertinent than at the start of the 20th century, it is nevertheless undergoing a process of reconfiguration right in front of us in an unprecedented manner between the engineer and the advertiser between a design of research largely linked to technology that is concerned with the concrete finality of the object (of which eco design is currently one of the most interesting aspects) and a design of communication largely linked to marketing that deals with the immaterial finality of the object.

At the end of this quick reflection, we should point out that while evolutions in design have been relatively similar all over the consumer-based West, the use of the term in France depicts the situation much more clearly than in English where the term mostly denotes a practice. And while in theory in France the concept of design as a practice remains purely functionalist and industrial separate from the “bel objet”, the polysemic nature of the term design in French means that the repertoire of forms that the term designates (from “c’est du design” to “c’est design”) has slowly invaded the corners of its visibility regime and the aesthetic system of its objects.

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1. The only counter-example: packaging design that, even though it comes from graphic design has not been given a semantic pairing – in French we do not refer to “design de packaging”, perhaps because packaging is seen to be “machinic” and as such has functional characteristics.
2. Taken from the name Yvonne Brunhammer, the ex-Head curator at the musée des Arts décoratifs, gave to her book about the history of the museum (Paris, Gallimard Découvertes, 1992).
3. Adolf Loos, *Chronicle written at the time of the Exhibition for the Viennese jubilee* (1898), in *Puroles dans le vide*, Paris, Ivrea, 1994, p. 35.

# *On the borders of design: fashion and intentionality*

Emilie Hammen

In *Le pays fertile*, a book about the painter Paul Klee, the composer Pierre Boulez makes the following statement: “I am of the firm opinion that points of view from a totally different field can provoke a shock in our own way of conceiving the composition process, unleashing inspiration that might never have occurred had we remained in the same professional field”. Fashion and design do not differ radically: art applied to industry and the design process can be quite similar. But the fact remains that the two disciplines have radically different implications. When looked at a little more closely, we see an important gap between their structure and mode of functioning on the one hand, but also in the way the practitioners of each regard one another. Misunderstanding, disdain, fascination or even just ignorance: fashion designers and designers do not speak the same language<sup>1</sup>. So, to do a joint examination of the two disciplines might even lead to the epiphany evoked by Pierre Boulez. In an attempt to define the limits of design, taking fashion into account enables us to rethink a decoupage through simply studying the latter. The wealth of the transdisciplinarity suggested by the composer is not out of the question.

## Design and “dessein”

“Dessin pour un dessein”: we know that design is prompt to formulate and announce the intentionality of its acts. “Being a designer is not a question of giving a shape to a more or less stupid product for a more or less luxurious industry. For me design is a way of debating about life”<sup>2</sup> declared the Italian Ettore Sottsass. Beyond the decor and the surface, design subordinates its work of aesthetic shaping to an intention, a thesis. This attitude is part of a practice born from the industrial revolution and we can see the first signs at the very start. When in London in 1851 the first products of the recently born industry were exhibited in the Universal Exhibition, critics and artists were disappointed by the aesthetic mediocrity of objects that were trying to be the mechanical reproduction of craft objects. Redgrave’s opinion as early as 1853 was that “The best is that which sells best”, a theory corroborated by Engels<sup>3</sup> “Today, that which doesn’t make money is stupid, unsuitable or idealistic”. The greed of the industrial mentality eludes the issue of beauty or of good taste in order to concentrate on making a profit. In parallel, the first objections were raised to denounce the living conditions of the new working class. The promises of a better future, optimism and progress incarnated by machines proved to be under threat. The first industrial design sketches thus failed on an aesthetic, social and political level. So they were drawn with zero intentionality, if only that of pleasing the masses and to sell well, heralding the age of consumption carried by kitsch and junk. Due to these fruitless first attempts, at least in the eyes of the intellectuals, the practitioners, mainly William Morris, took a critical step back. They undertook the task of totally rethinking the basic links between art, man and machine. Thus, in the early days design grew with a

reflective approach, constantly questioning its *raison d'être* and participating in social, political and aesthetic progress. The action of William Morris was intended to counteract the double negative impact of the machine: to give man back his dignity and objects their beauty and their spiritual strength through the promotion of craftsmanship that took its references from gothic art. His refurbishment of the decorative arts enabled them to be “happy to work and from their happiness will come a noble and popular decorative art”<sup>4</sup>, and in addition, to reform modern society. The intentionality of design was thus rooted in a quest for the beautiful and fair.

But, by giving the craftsman back the dignity that had been stolen by industrialisation, by freeing him from the alienating machine, the theorist gave the figure of designer creative autonomy and authority over his project. The designer took back the control of the work he showed to the world and for which he earned the technical and aesthetic merit. As an *auteur*, he proposed a thesis of which he claimed to be the signatory and author.

This attitude was reinforced by the wish to reposition the decorative arts within the hierarchy of the arts in general. The modern project took on a global aspect when Walter Gropius joined William Morris by declaring in the inaugural manifesto of the Bauhaus in 1919: “The ultimate aim of all figurative art is the complete edifice”. The object became a proper part of the architectural project and as such became part of one of the most noble of the major arts. While Gropius encouraged artists to leave the Salons, he was also the person in the end that enabled the anonymous craftsman regain his name, as a final insult to the Academy. So, from the beginning, the designer gained a status, and his project gained a value.

## **Design and fashion design: the limits of a territory**

So, from the beginning, design constituted itself as the formalisation of an intention. The practice of the designer can as such be envisaged as a take on society from an aesthetic, social or political point of view. While for William Morris and his contemporaries, the term design grew up around the decorative arts, the constant emphasis placed by the Bauhaus movement on bringing together all art forms in the same modern movement reworked the territory of design. Today, in French, the Anglicism used to name the practice covers a broad reality.

However, what we are interested in here is a practice that, in French, only very rarely crosses over with the notion of design: fashion. The similarities are numerous at first glance. The fashion designer engenders a creative process the cogs of which are quite similar to that of the designer. To quote Andrea Branzi describing the modern craftsman according to Bauhaus “it is a specialised phase of the industrial process” that “uses machines in the creation of an experimental prototype, each phase of which is controlled and that the industry can then reproduce in unlimited numbers”<sup>5</sup>. Fashion designer and designer take in the present and take their inspiration from it so as to formally compose a product for mass consumption. The issues are the same in terms of technical constraints, as underlined by Branzi. They follow the manufacturing of a consumer product using machines and all possible technologies available.

But if the designer, through the historical constitution of the discipline, is the *auteur* of his work, who dictates the design of fashion? In other words, who makes fashion? We are tempted to answer, the fashion designer. But that would be avoiding a fundamental aspect of the discipline.

The fashion designer is not the allmighty nor is he or she an artist, and his or her role is not really to create fashion. If this statement seems a little over the top, we'll let Gabrielle Chanel be more precise: "Fashion is in the air, the wind carries it, or feels it coming, we breathe it in, it is in the sky and on the pavement, it is everywhere, it latches on to ideas, morals, events"<sup>6</sup>. So the art of the fashion designer is "light and quick to capture the *air du temps*", not to give free rein to unbridled creativity, as it should only act as a revealer of something that exists independently of the creative act. Where the designer affirms his or her role as an autonomous figure, master of the project, the fashion designer is subject to something. While the creative act is very much present, the issues are different: instead of articulating a critical propos or taking a stand, the fashion designer is obliged to seize the moment. In this way he or she is closer to the Baudelarian idea of "Peintre de la vie moderne" (Painter of modern life) incarnated by Constantin Guys. The "homme des foules" (man of the crowd), a knowing observer of his time, who absorbs the circumstantial beauty of his surroundings to materialise it in a garment, a shape. As Christian Dior said about fashion, it is "relative for each generation, determined by very general circumstances, war or peace, alliances, production flows, trade deals, discoveries, as much as any thinking or writing, if it is powerful, from any artist or writer"<sup>7</sup>. So fashion is made up of a multitude of signals, diffuse transitory and fleeting elements and it is the fashion designer's job to grasp them and grasp them instantly before they become obsolete. As Chanel reminded us "the more ephemeral fashion is, the more perfect it is". The intentionality of fashion can only be understood in a moving and versatile form: the second it stops moving, the second it is presented to the world, it is consumed and becomes out-

dated. This constant chase, the perpetual quest for a moment that one never attains brings it closer in a certain way to the philosophical apory of the present. Fashion exists only because it then disappears. When a fashion designer presents his or her designs, they sign their end: for an instant they are the more or less successful incarnation of the *air du temps*, they attempt to seize its meaning but by the time they manage to still it, the fleeting spirit is already elsewhere. When Chanel expressed the idea: "I only like what I invent, and I can only invent if I forget", the designer is correctly describing fashion as an order that is new each time and that is destroyed as soon as it is created and that does not take the existing into account.

It is versatile as it is linked to the perpetual fluctuations in the taste of the time, inconstant as short lived and lacking in perseverance in the continuity of styles, we can legitimately ask if fashion truly has an intentionality or not. Or, when we see how erratic it seems, who formulates the intentionality if the fashion designer merely captures it?

One thing is certain, in fashion there is a certain unity of the moment or the era, a unity that goes beyond any particular world or inspiration and their personal formal differences. "How do you explain that fashion designers, all working with jealously guarded secrecy all have so many points in common each season?"<sup>8</sup> asked Christian Dior. If fashion can be decoded through a multitude of heterogeneous signs carried by the *air du temps*, it is understood nevertheless as a homogeneous entity, a unique force that covers all. It is a form of strength, even power that all have to obey. "Its better to follow fashion even if it is ugly (...) No one is strong enough to be stronger than fashion" according to Chanel and Paul Morand. In addition, when Paul Poiret prided himself

on being dubbed “The King of Fashion” by the American press, he noted that the King reigned over all others, that he was more powerful than all of the greats of the world. So where does the immense power of fashion come from? “I should perhaps let you go on believing that I command and you only need to obey. It would be more flattering, but less exact” declared Poiret who went on to say, addressing his clients “I do not speak to you as a master, but as a slave who wants to know your most secret thoughts”<sup>9</sup>. Fashion’s power lies in the fact that it comes from us. It concerns us all and thus gathers together the common strength. Us as a people and as consumers, as Chanel reminded us, “The client is always right”<sup>10</sup>, underlining the univocal power of that commercial adage. We are fashion and if we don’t like it, we are the ultimate arbiters as to whether it suits our taste, our desires of the moment. So we are both master and slave to fashion and that is why fashion retains a political dimension, in a totally different manner than design.

In *Du Contrat Social*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau set himself the objective to find out if “there is such a thing as an administrative rule that is legitimate and safe”<sup>11</sup> in order to establish a social pact that would guarantee the good organisation of society and which would offer liberty and equality to the citizens. His pact is based on two things: the first is the need for each individual to accept to give up his natural freedom. This involves “the alienation of each associate with all rights to all the community” which would be made possible by the fact of each individual following this rule, “no one should make it difficult for others” and as such “each person giving to all, they give to no one”<sup>12</sup>. The second is that an individual gains their civil liberty in becoming a member of the “moral and collective corps”, member of a people and not just an aggregation of individuals.

So the pact relies on this form of voluntary alienation. An alienation that we find in the fashion system. If fashion comes from us, we could in theory put it together ourselves in our own “wild” way. But, and doubtless in the same perspective when constituting a people, we choose to renounce our free will. So we are thus all equal faced with this abandonment that both civilises and alienates us. We choose to hand over our “natural” decision-making power to a sovereign ruler. However, as Rousseau points out, the condition for the legitimacy of this sovereign power relies on the expression of will for the common good. This is clearly visible with the figure of the fashion designer who, as we see, is subject to this will that manifests itself in the *air du temps*. If he were to ignore this, he would lose all legitimacy and, as fashion is a business, his company would no longer be a viable proposition. However, if he serves the people, if he is capable of grasping what the people really want, then, as Poiret said “he will be rich and loved”<sup>13</sup>. In short, fashion can be seen as a place of dialectic between the despot-designer and the people-consumer. The people formulate the intentionality of the fashion plan but it remains the job of the designer to formalise it. Thus fashion is a power in as much as it gathers what Hobbes in the *Leviathan* refers to as the act of “transferring its right”, as the freedom to do or not to do, in other words Rousseau’s “natural” freedom. What is interesting for us in Hobbes’ theory is the notion of chains or bonds that he develops on this point to express the power of the bonds that unite men who have relinquished their rights. The writer underlines that these bonds possess a “strength that is not due to their own nature (as nothing is easier to break than the human word), but to the fear of the unhappy consequences of breaking them”.

On this very point, we can quote the

philosopher Alain, quoted by Christian Dior in his conference on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1955: “Fashion is thus a shelter”<sup>14</sup>. The designer explains that, in fact, man is vulnerable outside the shelter, outside fashion. He gives the example of an old woman dressed in the style of another time that inspires at best a smile, and at worst a feeling of sadness. In short, being outside fashion is to display a level of social maladjustment. When examined in the overall sense, only crazy people and marginal individuals are really outside. As such, fashion as a shelter is also fashion as the guarantor of social cohesion, of the unity of a people, as a bond. The “unhappy consequences” of the breaking of these links mentioned by Hobbes is that it leads to the break in the association of men and thus the failure of guaranteed peace. In fashion, it is the fear of finding oneself outside the shelter, of incarnating ridicule, of no longer participating in the “us” as a people. “It is better to follow fashion, even if it ugly. Moving away from it means becoming a comical character, which is terrifying”. Fashion thus concerns everyone and this theory is just as true today as it was fifty years ago. Thinking that fashion has disappeared because *haute couture* and the organisation of the fashion system that was part of it are no more is totally false. Just because the designer-despots, the great figures from Poiret to Saint Laurent are no longer with us, doesn’t mean fashion is any less tyrannical<sup>15</sup>.

### **Design and fashion: aesthetic and political issues**

Thus defined, the postures of designer and fashion designer are in opposition on two levels. The designer defines himself or herself as an emancipated figure in a position of transgression that analyses the social and political issues of the era and reflects on his project as a more or less utopian answer to

these questions. The fashion designer on the other hand is presented as the herald of a people of the present that reveals to his or her contemporaries exactly what they want to see. He or she needs to seduce and is looking for total agreement from the crowd. Strengthened through this global and globalising relationship with the people/consumer, fashion is thus capable of shaping the real. Through the formalisation of a new body, a new environment, it imposes its own pattern of the real and common experience. In short, fashion creates experience by formalising the crowd, by defining the aesthetic modalities of society.

Through its faculty for considering a global “us”, not merely an intellectual elite, fashion triumphs where design and its modern plan as an alternative force for change have historically failed. It promotes consumption on all levels of society and thus includes the working classes just as much as the bourgeois classes that the former tend to imitate. As Andrea Branzi says in *Casa Calda*<sup>16</sup>: “It is not society that must resemble a factory, it is the opposite. If there is a real identification between capital and the society, there must be a correspondence between it and the spontaneous content of society. Consumption shows how the spontaneity works; its constant renewal guarantees that of the production models and their endless progression toward an impossible utopia of well-being”. Fashion as the impossible utopia of well-being and the ideal of modern society while it promotes consumption for all?

But if fashion is seen as a place of cohesion and the common, design remains the only place left for doubt. Fashion finds its place in the necessity to adhere to the people’s wishes while design incarnates the possibility of choice and intentionality. Fashion enables one to be, to constitute the common and design opens a breach to exist. “Che Fare?” asked Enzo Mari recently reminding

us of the essence of design and its plan for the transformation of society<sup>17</sup>. “How to do it?” could be the answer from a fashion designer who doesn’t ask what he should be doing but how, and with what shapes. Envisaging one without the other leads to a dead end: instead of gaining the approval of the masses design and its utopias blend into the spirit of the times in tiny doses, fashion feeds off this spirit to formalise a present that design will then rethink.

Emilie Hammen

IFM, Design program, Class of 2009

1. The distance between the two disciplines is all the more evident when one practitioner attempts the other’s job: such as the rational clothes by Rodchenko or Thayaht in the twenties to the experiments by Italian designers during the seventies, we do not see fashion dealt with by a designer but more clothes being used as a pretext for a new design project.
2. Ettore Sottsass, 1981, founding declaration of the Memphis group.
3. Quoted by A. Branzi, *La casa calda*, Paris, Editions de l’Equerre, 1984.
4. W. Morris, “Les arts mineurs” (1895), in *Contre l’art d’élite*, Paris, Hermann, 1985.
5. A. Branzi, *op. cit.*
6. Paul Morand, *L’Allure de Chanel*, Paris, Hermann, 1996. The book gives an account of the exchanges between the author and Gabrielle Chanel during their Swiss exile at the end of the war. It is written by both of them and Morand’s pen reveals Chanel’s taste for cutting declarations.
7. *Conférences écrites par Christian Dior pour la Sorbonne, 1955-1957*, Paris, IFM-Regard, 2003.
8. C. Dior, *op. cit.*
9. Paul Poiret, *En habillant l’époque*, Paris, Grasset, 1998.
10. P. Morand, *op.cit.*
11. J.-J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat social*, Livre I, préambule.
12. J.-J. Rousseau, *Du Contrat social*, Livre I, chapitre VI.
13. P. Poiret, *op. cit.*
14. C. Dior, *op. cit.*
15. On this particular point, let us remember that Gilles Lipovetsky put forward the idea in *L’Empire de l’éphémère* that the “great system of ‘authoritarian’ exclusion of fashion for the last century has disappeared in favour of a more democratic fashion: that time has passed, the ‘dictatorship’ of fashion and the social shame of being out of fashion are no more, the new approach is open, without barriers and non

directive”. Of course fashion has become more democratic, but instead of making the threat of being unfashionable go away, has it not merely spread its sphere of influence to society as a whole and not just to the classes that can afford to buy haute couture?

16. A. Branzi, *op. cit.*

17. “Che Fare”, exhibition by Enzo Mari and Gabriele Pezzini, Galerie Alain Gutharc, Paris, January-February 2010.

# *The issues surrounding the qualification of design*

## **Interview / Catherine Geel**

Catherine Geel is a lecturer, critic and curator and is in charge of the History and theory of design course at the Ecole normale supérieure in Cachan and the Ecole nationale supérieure d'art in Limoges. She is also curator for the international festival Design Parade, associate curator at the Villa Noailles, head of design at *Archistorm* (an architecture and design magazine, Bookstorming) and has published *Pierre Paulin designer* (Archibooks, Paris, 2008), *An interview with Pierre Paulin* (Archibooks, Paris, 2008), "L'objet de l'amour et l'amour des objets dans la société hyperindustrielle" (The object of love and the love of objects in a hyper-industrial society) (in *Constituer l'Europe*, Bernard Stiegler, Paris, Galilée, 2005) and "L'ordre sans qualité" (Order without quality) (in *Fresh Théorie*, Marc Allizard (dir.), Paris, Léo Scheer, 2005). In this interview, Catherine Geel covers the question of the qualification of design not so much to try to outline a definition, one among many, than to attempt to outline both the reality and the necessity of its non-definition.

*Olivier Assouly: From what angle should we examine design, as an attachment to style, to the applied arts, to innovation, to engineering of conception and innovation, to a generalist approach to the different operations of concep-*

*tion, production and consumption? Is it merely a question for you or a presupposition that comes to light in practice for the designer or progressively through the analysis of objects?*

Catherine Geel: It's not something – use, consumption, art – that I see as a hierarchical ensemble as each notion includes several complex levels. The category of use, to begin there, is tough. As for the closer links between art and design the link is obvious, but not necessarily a very interesting parallel in terms of ambivalence, which is often the question asked and can be answered relatively quickly. The issue of consumption is extremely important today as it is difficult to really put a finger on it. I would tend to place use and art after consumption, a "moral" and "fair" consumption that necessarily includes the two other presuppositions, in favour of an interdependence more than a hierarchy which complicates the examination of design every time.

*O.A.: Have there been any successful attempts to qualify design? Who, among practitioners, the press, curators, collectors, amateurs and researchers has taken it on? I must confess that the practitioner has no real reason to try to theorise what he or she is doing, it could even lead to a block in the fluidity and effectiveness of his or her work.*

C.G.: We have to take on board the idea that the designer is a general practitioner and as such, like your local doctor, has some general relatively vague principles, that delicious shrug of the shoulders, but very precise particular practices. When he or she is presenting their work, describing their profession, activity convictions or positions, looking at a project, they always speaks in the first person like a GP who has, not the right, but the possibility to see things in their globality. One other thing, perhaps anecdotal but which seems important to

me, is that good designers are good observers of things in as much as they are concerned with use and consumption. In doing so, they know how to look in a general manner and in a precise manner, how things work, whether it is a gesture or a process, they are aware of how a factory works, what a material is made of, and then will explain a process of their own. As for the other categories, design scholars are few and far between but their numbers are growing. The press, collectors, dealers or curators are all opinion leaders and in the moment. They can talk about design and give a critical opinion, but they do not have the time or often do not have the knowledge to attempt to qualify the discipline. The market is open, whether in good shape or bad; they are there to do business, to make outrageous claims and play for territory. From my point of view it's quite good fun, not terribly intellectual but not without intelligence. The milieu is quite lively, ideas are thrown about but there is no real in-depth taxonomical debate besides the main categories of "decorative", "modern" and "post-modern".

*O.A.: You surreptitiously introduced the idea that there was such a thing as a good designer, as opposed to a bad one I'd imagine and what interests me in this distinction is that it is in some way a manner in which to define design. If there is partition, doesn't that automatically mean qualification?*

C.G.: The distinction is harsh at first glance. But design is a profession that is learned because methods and theories of conception exist – even if these theories such as Gestalt for example are no longer extensively taught. I would say that a mediocre designer expresses a method and the things attached to the method. Beyond the quality or the aesthetic pertinence of their creations, a good designer manages to

speak about their practice as a method of conception and manages to outline it clearly. In addition, history enables us to determine who was good and who was not. It is interesting that designers like to establish that they are good, but even more so they like to stake their claim in design history. This is worked on like a strategy and with great care, like the Bouroullec brothers who are building intelligent archives about their projects that aim to establish their position in the history of design. They are constituting a base of information and material as if in a position of exegesis relative to their work that will constitute a design historian's dream in the future. Whether or not history will remember them in 150 years is another question entirely but it might be interesting to observe the validity of such a patient and meticulous record. We won't be here to see it, neither will they, that is the strangeness of this profoundly human situation.

*O.A.: Independently of the narcissistic and strategic nature of this type of approach on a commercial level, it is nonetheless a modern attitude in as much as the producer takes on the role of the critic, the reception of the work, and at least criticism and evaluation are elements that are inherent to the work. What do you think, taking into account that what goes for art does not necessarily always apply to design? It is true that there is a point in modern art where the work is not just supported by commentary and the gloss of artists like Van Gogh or Gauguin; I would say that these words are an integral part of the work without which it is unintelligible. In a certain way, the words prolong the artistic fact, like for Kandinsky.*

C.G.: True, but this task was that of the critic and not of the designer himself. Nevertheless while Kandinsky or Klee, who both taught at Bauhaus, decided to pose as

theorists, or Mendini for the Italian designers who was, like some, a magazine editor, this is absolutely not the case for the Bouroullec brothers and the vast majority of designers who do not know how to produce writing and theoretical formalisation.

*O.A.: But, in design have there not been attempts at portrayal by the designer himself of his mission and objectives, that implicitly result in a qualification of design and a definition of his or her activity?*

C.G.: Yes, there have been and there will be more. I feel that there are constantly attempts to explain design by designers. These writings always hover over the question of design and this is what makes them so beautiful. The language is often generous, always intelligent and sometimes naive. It would be untrue to say that there have been attempts to qualify design specifically using the categories we mentioned at the start of use, art or consumption. The attempts are more in line with a statement and a possibility of action. For example, in the case of William Morris<sup>1</sup>, he talks about design, and through it a plan for society, but he does not address the users of design, the end-users. He addresses the workers, so he is not talking to the right people. The right people didn't hear what he had to say in as much as he described industry from the point of view of nature noting the destruction being caused by industrialisation, for example, a question that fell on deaf ears 120 years ago. In addition, Morris based his theories from the point of view of production on the edges of the categories of consumption, use and art, by bringing them together in an osmosis that is difficult to disentangle, even by Morris himself. I have always wondered who designers are really talking to. Sottsass said he was talking to other designers. Between peers, there is no need for definitions.

*O.A.: It is true that a design practitioner is under no obligation to formalise or verbalise what he or she is doing in a theoretical form, all the more since the topicalisation of his or her activity pushed to the limit could inhibit his or her ability to work. But this does not exclude the existence of a mode of reflection that is the practitioner's own that does not necessarily have to take the form of an academic or theoretical thesis. But I would like to get back to the idea that design does not simply produce merchandise, objects or services, but that it relies also on the underlying idea that everything it produces corresponds to a social need or even a higher aim for civilisation, in the knowledge that these objectives do not need to be announced as such but they are as if integrated, naturalised in his or her production.*

C.G.: Yes, this is the case for Morris, and was also for Werkbund, Bauhaus, Ulm and the Italian radicals. But all of these designers were preoccupied with handing down theory. For the majority this is not the case as most of the things produced by designers are commissioned, or come from a desire. In general, a designer produces for a manufacturer, an editor, according to a brief, to the demands of a marketing department and will as such make the design "stick" to the demands of the client and find the contextual justifications afterwards. In art history, a parallel could be drawn with the period where the artist was commissioned to paint a certain work. Herein lies the paradox of the designer between what he or she pretends to be and exactly what he or she contributes to. Today, in his own way the designer represents himself or herself, as does Olivier Peyricot for example, from whom I requested a piece on the subject, as a person who tends wounds, even a healer, a bit like in *Les maîtres fous*<sup>2</sup> (1953) by Jean Rouch a film in which the ethnologist films a trance. In a scene in the film, during a trance, individuals give the group all types

of accessories such as a dress or a hat. Designers are like the people who supply the accessories while observing certain types of behaviour that produce a certain context, managing to determine what is needed as a complement. This is quite a good definition of design, the role of the designer and design today is always going to be ambivalent – is the designer there for things to go the way they should or to influence the way things happen?

*O.A.: Is there a designer's tradition that involves presenting work in the light of ideas such as well-being, comfort, progress, happiness or even the social utopias of emancipation? I want to insist on this point in as much as I feel that the designer, overcome by consumption, often attempts to neutralise his rapport with the market in the name of functionalist or moral values.*

C.G.: Designers are not the ones who bring progress strictly speaking, they benefit from the transfers of technology, in particular military technology to the market, but they are the ones who give a shape – a beautiful shape – and as such see themselves as the adjuvant and one of the conditions necessary for progress. In addition, consumption remains the paradox of the designer: it is the designer's hell and the condition for his or her existence as a professional. It is for this reason that designers speak for themselves and not about the general situation in the activity. I think that it's extremely complicated for a designer to be very clear about his or her ambitions as a "designer". As for the question of utopias, this proves itself to be a much broader issue than the traditional question about use or consumption, but it is important in as much as it often analyses the market it wishes to remodel differently. This is the case of the, in my opinion, amazing studies by the Italians from 1965 onwards. Today, we could say that they tend

to repeat themselves a little but they remain excellent.

*O.A.: Why not establish a comparison between design and the cinema as it is also intrinsically linked to industrial production, organisation, distribution and commercialisation?*

C.G.: That's possible, but the objectives are quite different in as much as the question of the usefulness of what is produced is a real issue for the designer. While there are some interesting parallels to be made between craftsmanship – industry – commissioner – producer – distribution circuit – mass distribution, etc., there is a realm of fantasy available to a film director that distinguishes his role from that of the designer who tries to inject, and above all justify his position and his practices in the project.

O.A.: What role is played by institutions in the process of the qualification of design, with, for example the *Éducation nationale* (French educational system) undertaking the job of renaming courses and replacing the term *arts appliqués* with that of design ?

C.G.: Perhaps it is the *Éducation nationale* that uses the term best as they use it for anything and everything, independently of any theorising or reflection. For example the term "culture design" in schools for the applied arts also covers fashion classes, art history etc. due to the fact that there are few people specialised in the history of design. But I must admit that the *Éducation nationale* should address the issues of qualification and taxonomy given its position. Is it because it is in the *air du temps* that where I teach, at the ENS at Cachan, design appears to have taken over from the concept of applied arts? Not just for this reason happily. This change is relevant but at the same time it would have been interesting to try to examine the question of the lack of defini-

tion for designers and to attempt to establish categories.

*O.A.: However, does the passage from the term applied arts to design merely reflect the awkward or opportunistic use of the term, or does it reflect something more fundamental that is not covered by this lexical shift?*

C.G.: This question is all the more relevant if we read a text written by students at Cachan regarding the applied arts in reaction to an article that I had published in *Azimuts*<sup>3</sup>. In the article I wondered why students were not going to become actual design practitioners themselves, but just become teachers. In passing, historically in writing by designers there is a rapport between what they do and what they are trying to reflect on while doing it. But I remember that the answer written by students began by saying that they were not in the design department but in the applied arts department and that the term “design” was merely a name! They went on to add that they were teachers and unbelievably, as such, their role as teachers was to protect the school from the market! But we all know that the basic question of the applied arts and its schools is the industrial market and what action needs to be taken to work with the market. I feel they did not really understand the non-definition of design, or, that the definition of the applied arts was completely lost on them. We should note that the question of craftsmanship and skills is entirely different. There is definitely a level of confusion about the words, and the way in which Christine Colin establishes categories seems interesting to me, even though even though I feel that the real issue is that of design and the way things are conceived. Her thesis is superbly constructed which shows us that there are people in France of great quality that are reflecting on design and expressing the issues correctly. But I

must admit that I am undecided on the issue of the decorative arts as a global issue. I would like it to be treated in the light of our own specific tradition. By generalising, and failing to evoke this specific issue means that Christine Colin’s theory seems to be a little self-centred. For me, design is an Anglo-Saxon and Northern European concept. In this sphere, design does not pass through the tradition of the decorative arts, it was more a question of Craft and the beginnings of concrete architecture that was more Perret than Viollet-le Duc. It’s just not the same thing. Design did come from the diverging split between Arts & Crafts and modern conception but the two movements belong to the discipline. The French have a hard time understanding this. The Arts & Crafts movement is essential but is totally absent from the French dimension, to my knowledge. The lack of definition is not without interest even though it is more complex to envisage and reflect upon. If we do not accept this non-definition, we spend our time trying to find possible definitions for design, as is the case of all design books which inevitably begin with an attempt to find a definition.

*O.A.: So if we get back to the “re-qualification” rather than the qualification that now means that any common or garden interior decorator is now a “designer” apart from the fact that we have dispensed with the pejorative terms of “décorateur” in French for its reference to the superfluous and accessorial, is this shift significant from a certain point of view?*

C.G.: Between the terms in French of “décorateur” and “designer” there was the term “dessinateur de modèles” (model drawer) written on patents in the fifties that was not industrial aesthetician. As for the term “designer”, it only appeared in France timidly in the seventies. The term industrial aesthetician was first used in the U.S. in

product design. It corresponded to the realisation that style was a market necessity. Loewy's demonstration on toasters is evidence of this. Loewy came to the fore during the crash of 1929, proof that design flourishes in a time of crisis while we tend to think it needs a healthy economy to grow. Imagine two toasters, A and B. Loewy explains to the first company (A), why they are not selling better. He argues that with the same technical basic design, he can design a different cover that will mean they cost less to produce. The issue is not the style of the toaster, the cover of the toaster is the means by which they solve both style and process issues. The quality of the style is not in question, the aim is merely to make an aesthetic shape that will provide a solution. Then he goes to the other company (B) and tells them the same thing so as to create a level of differentiation. He ended up on the cover of *Time magazine* at the end of the forties with the title: "He streamlines the sales curve". In short, American design is completely at ease with its association with the market. And the big name American designers are those who insist on quality in production and not necessarily on style. An American designer such as Eliot Noyes, whose work is largely unknown, was the head of design for IBM from 1953 to 1977, and he had a fairly simple policy that is applied today in many corporations. He had an architectural policy for the firm's buildings and the question of graphics was handled by Paul Rand who went on to build the image of IBM. Noyes constantly used a mix of in-house and outside designers. He felt that it was his job to make products that sold well, that were simple to use and to very clearly accompany the development of access to knowledge through computers as we know that the aim in the fifties and sixties was the PC. Eliot Noyes sums it up rather well in his notes with the famous line "Good design is good business", not forget-

ting that all of this is closely linked to quality and refers to a certain manner or culture that could be termed traditional. Eliot Noyes was the son of an English professor, a Greek and Latin scholar, he was a student of Gropius and Breuer in Harvard and curator at the MoMA.

*O.A.: So what comes under the umbrella of the term quality as it is relatively elastic and pretty vague?*

*C.G.:* It means the quality of the production, of the products, the quality of the advertising of the products or of the typography; what we could refer to as "best practices". Today we could say that Olivetti and IBM proposed access to knowledge, Apple proposes access to entertainment. We can see that the categories have evolved regarding that type of knowledge or activity of each era. It is remarkable that the iPad's advertising now includes a consumer lying down having fun with the machine, watching films and holiday snaps while in the seventies, IBM would organise extraordinary exhibitions on mathematics or Thomas Jefferson. The question that is an issue for designers is really that of access or use. When consumption is linked to culture, the designer finds it easier to justify his work than when it is for sheer entertainment. But the question of access to culture is pushed to one side in favour of the question of consumption, leisure and identification.

*O.A.: Is it possible to establish a comparison between a design that is initially culture-oriented, even if utopian and early television when it generated a high level of hope and then illusions on its power for social emancipation?*

*C.G.:* We could basically say the same thing about the Internet at the beginning where

the hopes for emancipation faded. From there we can still see how a certain non-definition of design where things become clear when the container and the content are both designed, this is the case in the digital world and made the above-mentioned trifecta of Olivetti-IBM-Apple the most fantastic manufacturing genealogy of design. But they are only three companies out of all the industry that exists in the world, the example is the exception and cannot then be used to qualify the thing. Neither can automobile design, a vital industry, which in the end is really just the design of covers and the designers haven't managed to make the use evolve... Bucky Fuller had some amazing ideas but they never came to fruition.

*O.A.: To get away from the French situation, how is the issue approached abroad for the English, the Germans, or others?*

C.G.: In England, the designer is a practitioner, in his or her own domain such as a "fashion designer", "landscape designer" or even a "hair designer" for the hairdresser. Gilles de Bure often gives this example and it is quite apt. One belongs to the broad category of design with designers who define the shapes that surround us. And as such the person who works on your garden or your hair is also a designer. This reflects the broadness and non-definition of the thing, with design covering all objects from the teaspoon to the skyscraper. In that case, even the producer of concepts, the philosopher, could be termed a "thought designer" or a "concept designer".

*O.A.: What would be the take then on a recent, and in my opinion opportunistic and fairly fruitless extension of design into cooking as culinary design?*

C.G.: If we go back to the question of qualification, we realise that the people who are

interested in design are in fact in love with its indefinability. Today, to respect levels of expertise, it is the norm to qualify practices, interventions and the way in which the conception of these practices is defined. In fact, this will to define has led to the following question: is the design badly defined because the hierarchy of professions and skills could be better organised? This then refers us to what is happening in art schools on a European level where there is a leveling off of different types of professions and skills. In this case, the designer must fit a pigeon-hole, just like other professions, in order to then qualify the levels, or the practices. This is followed by the problems of the university and, following that research. We then come up against problems of norms and normalisation, where we have to make design fit in to the research budgets available for example to the ANR (Association nationale pour la recherche). We are now getting into a hierarchical system of things that make this profession a profession just like all the others. In parallel, still on the subject of the university, an entire field of reflection is aiming to organise itself so as to determine actions, practices and categories that will then be examined. And in order to examine it, a definition must be found for what a designer does. In addition, attempts to find a definition are useful in terms of an economic model, if only in terms of pay scales and fiscality. This is why the lack of definition was an opportunity for designers who wanted to move into other areas. For example the "food designer" comes under this with the non-definition that means that the designer is no longer just giving a cake a shape but elaborating new tastes like what Marc Brétillot unfortunately does as a generalist. Because I am a functionalist and modernist at heart, I like to think a chef presents his food in a certain way so as to organise what we are going to taste.

*O.A.: I would add, in agreement with you, that recognising the existence of the food designer is like thinking that the question of shape or presentation had never occurred to a chef before...*

C.G.: Independently of any formal pretension of the designer in the field of cuisine, it corresponds above all to a market as is obvious from the brochures from the establishment where Marc Brétilot teaches. It seems that food design and the possible formalisation of a field happens through the intermediary of the schools and training courses with possible career opportunities in mind.

*O.A.: We could possibly get back to the demarcation between art and design by putting forward the hypothesis that design plays on an ambiguity, a possible confusion, as if to increase its status and legitimacy using the aura of art...*

C.G.: Getting beyond the Duchampian gesture, I think it is absolutely logical or normal that there is a certain amount of collusion, or even collision between the two fields, as the vocabulary of contemporary art uses a vocabulary of production, as in "to produce a piece", and uses production offices that organise the work of, say, Xavier Veilhan or Jeff Koons. It is a question of production, not just because of the huge scale of the work of the two artists mentioned, but also because money must be found to produce the pieces. In general, we blame and insinuate that design takes over contemporary art spaces to gain exposure. But I think that fundamentally in the process of the conception of things in today's world and that contemporary art borrows much from its surroundings as it is in an industrial world. In addition, there is the market; contemporary art is a market that is part of the cultural industry and as such design has a

place, simply and legitimately. This issue was dealt with by the Italian designers, through the Radical design movement that showed that the modernity that claimed to create economic order only served to create liberal disorder. In this way the idea of the standard piece is false, while the idea of the little markets that will infiltrate through the general chaos is clever. In a context of interstices and little spaces, the role of the gallery takes on all its meaning; galleries consider that it is a specific, legitimate market that enables them to escape standardisation. In a certain way, design is smarter, even by virtue of its indefiniteness, it is nonetheless invited to contemporary art fairs and can take advantage of a captive and statutory market.

*O.A.: To finish up I would like to get back to the question of design and its attachment to a territory, a place and a nation as when we speak of Italian or Scandinavian design, that seem to form units. Is this really the case or merely an abuse of the language?*

C.G.: If any of it has any meaning it is in terms of the market. For example, Scandinavian and Italian design are constructions and groupings of producers with the politico-economic intention of presenting work abroad with an identity that is market-friendly. However, I do not believe in the idea of French design in as much as there has never been a concrete wish to build a market specific to French design. I would be surprised if you could tell me what are the specific stand out points of French design. National specifics are artificial constructions that result from quite intelligent economic policies on the part of producers and entrepreneurs that are created for fairs, triennials, salons, etc. For example, at the end of the war the Italians didn't have enough money to have separate stands so they decided to pool their resources and

present what became “Italian design”, well aware of the profit to be made from the situation. So from the beginning the identity was “created” by an economic situation. The same goes for Scandinavian design. I often say today that France is not a design country but a country with designers. Is that so bad? The question is really to understand why this particular way of designing goods is so misunderstood by French industrial, political and cultural institutions. There should be classes on the history of design in the engineering and business schools and not just as an example in marketing classes.

1. See “La société de l’avenir” (November 13th 1887) speech for the Hammersmith Socialist party in *L’âge de l’ersatz et autres textes de la civilisation moderne* (Paris, l’Encyclopédie des nuisances, 1996).
2. Watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YG63DIGSX98&feature=related>
3. This text is in number 34 of the magazine (October 2009).

# *Is French design siding with objects ?<sup>1</sup>*

**Benoît Heilbrunn**

It is paradoxical that French poetry, through the intermediary of Francis Ponge, managed to side with things while French design seems to have sided with images and signs, through being forced to deal with a sort of semiotic diktat and the hypertrophy of the figure of the designer. How then are we to describe, circumscribe or even approach the idea of French design? Is it even possible to define the characteristics of the French approach to design? Is it even possible to speak of French design or should we be talking about French designers? It would appear that this list of questions poses a certain problem as it is tricky to try to envisage common ground between the work of someone like Philippe Starck and that of Martin Szekely for example, or the work of Roger Tallon and that of Marc Sadler. If we are to believe what we read in mainstream magazines on the subject<sup>2</sup>, French design can be characterised by the “art of plundering the past to constantly reinvent itself”, or even, to quote the photographer Mario Testino we can recognise French design by its “blend of precision, ele-

gance and sophistication that always harbours an element of surprise, bold ideas and an impeccable ‘savoir-faire’”. However, does the same not apply to Italian, Swedish and Japanese design? Decidedly, whatever we say about it, design is always a question of balance between the past and the present, between stability and disruption.

For example, where should we go looking for French style? In recurrences? And what do we mean by French? Is it a question of the designer’s nationality, the culture he or she belongs to, where he or she trained, his or her influences or the brand he or she works for? Quite quickly, we see that the path is strewn with obstacles that prevent us from trying to outline a form of “Frenchness” in design, most notably in terms of style. Pinning down the identity (or at least the markers) of French design is problematical in as much as, as Nathalie Heinich says, “the concept of identity has no meaning unless it is envisaged as a construction and not as a substance: there is no such thing as identity per se, only diverse operations that can confer a being with a collection of relatively stabilised properties”<sup>3</sup>. Identity can only be understood as “the result of an ensemble of operations through which a predicate is attributed to an object”<sup>4</sup>.

Even more than “Frenchness”, it is the very idea of design that becomes an issue here. In effect, the understanding of the term is not the same according to whether or we are considering the strictly technical and professional meaning of the term, the representation given by interiors and furniture stores or the implicit way the term is understood by the general public. So, our approach to design (and all the more so to French design) will differ if we are considering the term from the point of view of the Saint-Etienne Biennale, the trendy design stores in the Marais district in Paris or a lecture in a design school. In addition, a

number of levels of observation can be envisaged according to whether we are examining the object, the process, the style, the designer, the brand or the common representation of design.

### **Brand vs country of origin**

In *Du style*<sup>5</sup>, a decidedly instructive piece of writing, Joan DeJean shows how the Sun King (Louis XIV), who in addition to being a charismatic monarch was the world's first ever fashion victim and unconditional fan of luxury and elegance, transformed France into a hub of refinement and prestige. By claiming for France – and more precisely for Versailles that was for a long time a cutting edge trend laboratory – the “savoir faire” and skills in domains such as diamonds, champagne, chic cafés, luxury boutiques Louis XIV managed to create what can be termed the “country of origin effect”, which meant a level of expertise that was recognised, specific and therefore exportable in areas reputed for excellence and as such naturally attached to France. Of course, the legitimising effect of national origin remains in place today in most of the domains mentioned above, but is it the case for what we have agreed to term design? There are certain icons of French talent in design. Take for example Seb's pressure cooker and toaster, Citroën's 2CV and DS, etc. We are obliged to admit that the majority of “design objects” attributed to France are architectural objects (such as the work of Jean Nouvel, Christian de Portzamparc or Philippe Starck internationally), or objects whose notoriety has been obliterated by the designer or the brand. Thus, today design is only attributable to a country through the (often joined) brand and designer – and this is not only true in France. Of course Nokia telephones and B&O hi-fi equipment illustrate respectively Finland and Denmark, but they are above all, emblematic represen-

tatives of global brands who have lost the beneficial effect of the country of origin due to the fact that they cross national borders with standard products that have rapidly become the prototypes of a global culture.

### **The designer as king**

So, design in France is not so much a question of objects or national style as it is of people. The preeminent factor of valorisation and legitimisation of objects is the designer's name and the fact that designers themselves increasingly tend to brand themselves in order to valorise their own “source effect” and market position. To be honest, what are the stand-out traits of design in popular culture if not the media savvy designers themselves (Roger Tallon, Philippe Starck, Ora-ïto, Matali Crasset)<sup>6</sup>, categories of objects (furniture, cars, interiors) and brands (Renault, Moulinex, Apple, etc.). In the same way that Paul Bénichou highlighted a form of sacralisation of the writer at the turn of the 18th century<sup>7</sup>, French culture, near the end of the 20th century, was all about the canonisation of the designer. However, while French culture has always managed to define groups in artistic fields such as painting (the symbolists, the Parnassians, etc.) literature (la Pléiade, the Nouveau roman, etc.), and in cinema (the Nouvelle Vague, etc.), it is much more difficult to operate this type of segmentation in the area of architecture or design where the names of the designers themselves take precedence over the “schools”.

Not only that, the level of diversity in object design that seems to characterise French design at first glance means that it is all the more difficult to outline an identity that would demand a definition shared by a broad range of stabilised, even institutionalised individuals. French design does not function collectively (unlike Droog design

in the Netherlands); it is essentially a *design d'auteur*, which entails the glorification of the designer whose work is essentially singular and personal. This results on the one hand, in incessant flirting between the function of designer and that of artist – to the extent that the design objects can often be found on sale in the museum shop where they are also on show as works of art – and on the other hand the primacy of individual style over collective style (whether it be national, regional, etc.). The function of the object is to render the style of the designer recognisable so that it is automatically attributable. There is also the double phenomenon of co-branding, where the object is valorised through the association of the prestige of the designer's name with the prestige of the brand (an approach originally developed by the Italian brand Alessi and since taken up by Philips, Moulinex, etc.). The name of the artist is often used as a trademark that highlights the singularity of the object and above all enables a price mark-up beyond what the brand alone would have been in a position to charge. This occurs to such an extent that the design is seen as the creative gesture of an artist who must brand and sign the object, scattering tiny crumbs of recognition through the design. The signature on the object is essential. So French design is triply a design of branding in as much as it is a design that serves brands, a design that transforms the designer into a brand and a design that demands that the designer use strong identifying markers so as to maintain a form of 'authorial' fiction. French design is both recognisable and media-friendly, thanks to identifying marks that are not those of a culture or a collective but the identifying marks of the *auteur*. The narrative of the object is thus often eclipsed by a narrative made up of scattered clues as to the designer's identity.

## Design, son of a pitch?

The late arrival in France of specialist design training courses while in other countries like the United States or England, dedicated design management courses were in existence for a long time means design in France is defined by default at the crossroads of decorative arts and industrial aesthetics. So we could think that design has remained quite close to the decorative arts and that for many people is really part of interior decoration, unlike other cultures (notably Nordic) where it tends more towards science and engineering. It must be said that the late development of design schools in France has only recently enabled the constitution of a structured field. Design was relegated to the category of the *beaux-arts*, and this obliterated the close links that have to exist between the formal and the functional. Because it was reduced to a merely decorative function, design in France suffered from its close links to categories of products that were visible and spectacular. Even though for a long time French culture remained impervious to pop art and the blend between popular and artistic culture, design illustrates the movement of the aestheticisation of daily life taken to the extreme in French culture. So a schism occurred between on the one hand, a form of design that works on life forms and is based on the efficiency of the object (illustrated by the work of Szekely, Dubuisson or Boisellier), and on the other, a flashier design based on the "spectacularisation" of the object (the work of Starck, Crasset, Garouste et Bonetti). So this still evident hesitation in French culture with regard to pop art has repercussions today on the social function of design. Rather than playing with a possible permeability between popular and artistic culture, in France design has remained (at least in the minds of the general public), a way of marking social

differences. Its close links to art are used as a lever to justify the higher price tag on the objects. As a result, its essential function is one of demarcation that ensures a certain visibility and a certain stability of the categories by which individuals are classified. This is why, in the horizontal logic that prevails in democratic societies, it is sure to have a long life as it remains one of the only means left through which social demarcation and the promotion of social identity is possible. As a result, one important social function of design in this context is to show that an object incorporates design through a rhetoric of effect and showing. In addition, while it may claim a societal role at times, the ostentatious character of French design inevitably brings us back to an economic model that valorises the object (1) through the joint effects of the fame of the brand and the designer and (2) through the emphasis on its aesthetic function. While Nordic design has often given precedence to ergonomics and the democratisation of the product (as can be seen by the success of Ikea), design in France is still seen (again in the minds of the general public) as a way of making objects more expensive. So design is seen to be a form of ruse – as is marketing even though nothing in their respective definitions would lead one to find this link – that corresponds perfectly to the etymological root of the word design with terms such as “mechanic” and “machine”, not forgetting that the Greek *mechos* designates a means to fool, a trap.

This ruse relies in part on a capacity to over-evaluate the aesthetic function of objects relative to their technical dimension. In this, one of the characteristics of French design is that it is seen by the majority of consumers to be synonymous with marketing. This means that only in exceptional cases (Martin Szekely springs to mind) is French design associated with substance; it is seen to be more founded on the metaphysics of

the effect. This is why, in France, design is seen as an advertising continuator. And one of the most remarkable characteristics of French design is its propensity to propose a mythical approach founded on the extreme difference between its form and its function, as if to remind us that the function of an object is but fiction<sup>8</sup>. Design signs the apology for branding founded on the pre-eminence of image over use. In fact, herein lies the ambivalence of a designer such as Starck who can proclaim “a product that gets to its end with a minimum of means” – “I like to get to the root of things” is something he repeats regularly – and at the same time shows a willingness to take the object away from its use by conferring on it “a fifth dimension, a depth that gives an ordinary object the possibility to say something else”<sup>9</sup>. It is this split between function and form, between use and image that enables the creation of an intrigue that draws in the consumer.

This is why in today’s post-advertising society; Philippe Starck plays the symbolic role that Jacques Séguela played in the France of the eighties. The object is treated as a medium that enables the designer or the brand to address the consumer directly. If French design is relational, it is not about the relationship between the end-user and the object; it is about the relationship between the designer and the consumer through the collusion, complicity and diversion that have made advertising so successful. It is, in fact, a form of advertising that aims to valorise brands through a particular medium, the object, the product. The object is not taken into consideration alone; it is a loud-speaker for the designer and the brand. This “marketisation” of design results in the corresponding glorification of the consumer and a permanent discourse on the benefits to the consumer (enjoyment, emotional satisfaction, possibility to show off, etc.) as the justification for

the innovation. This results in a design culture that considers the object in terms of a result and a sum of effects rather than a process of elaboration. Only very recently has the sports store Decathlon begun to display the technical backdrop of the products with in vitro tests and displays of products taken apart. This emphasis on the result produced rather than the act of producing is linked to the common disdain in France for the engineering sciences. As such, the object is reduced to effects of showing and ostentation that only serve to underline the hyper-investment in its decorative or emotional functions. Only in France will you find interior decor or furniture stores that are called Design stores. This showy culture of design is in fact summed up quite well in the very French expression: “ça fait design !” (that’s very “design”, where the term is used as an adjective) which, in the end, merely reduces design to its effects. So design is implicitly considered to be a visible, noticeable, even spectacular intervention that deals solely with the formal and colour-based aspects of objects, most of the time underestimating the technical and social issues that are at stake.

### **Hyperbolic effectiveness**

The metaphysics of presence imposed by such a strong culture of the object has a number of consequences. As it is often the result of the brand effect (whether this is a commercial brand or the brand incarnated by the designer himself), French design relies very often on a valorising and relatively spectacular conception of the effect of the product. This is why French design has often gone for taste over blandness, notably through the saturation of effects (diverting codes, coexisting contradictions, extreme semanticisation, etc.). We could almost say of design what Clément Rosset says about marketing, that it “aims to give perfectly

reproducible and standard objects a coefficient of distinction that grabs the attention and seems to make them sure to find favour with the public before they even begin”<sup>10</sup>. So the French concept of design is essentially Promethean, in as much as the designer is seen as a sort of magician capable of creating transformations and conferring power (speed, omniscience, safety, comfort, etc.) on the consumer. This means an inherent hyper visibility of the effect that tries to create a sort of domain of excess that defines itself not as real but as a supplement to the real, participating both in the “not like the others” idea and the idea of something “extra”<sup>11</sup> which is absolutely in line with the way French design is anchored in the decorative. So French design constantly plays on the *exomorphic* dimension of the object that signals a split from the accepted conventions. This is how design is considered a creative act and the designer is seen to be a cross between an artist and the all-mighty. The object is the means of showing uniqueness. So, fundamentally, the tropism of French design is discontinuity – relative to others, to the past, to the surroundings as the object must explode on to the stage as a contrast, etc. The effect is often considered as a result, both visible and spectacular. It throws up benefits that are directly perceived and appreciated by the consumer. It is in this way that French design is mythical in obedience, in as much as the myth is above all a narrative about origins. So while Scandinavian design places the object in its natural and human environment, French design plays more on the effects of rupture or reconfiguration. But how can we express this fundamental discontinuity if not as a form of dramatisation of objects?

### **The dramaturgy of the object**

If we think about certain cultures such as

the Dutch who take their concept of design from their pictorial heritage, we could probably conclude that the French cultural representation of the object is based in the theatre. Are not the effects of narrative, image, scriptwriting, and intrigue that are so characteristic of a certain type of French design a perfect metaphor for the theatre? French design envisages only the object, this leads to the importance of intermediate structures such as interiors magazines and so-called design boutiques. French design is that which transforms the object into an intermediary, meaning a subject. The object becomes an actor, it talks. It finally acquires the status of a character, which brings us to the notion of the actor product developed by Bertrand Barré to signify the active role played by design in the seduction process at the point of sale<sup>12</sup>. Actually a characteristic of French design is the way in which it works against the tide of the first, slightly forgotten meaning of the term. As Vilém Flusser reminds us, design means literally to de-sign; which means to remove the sign dimension from the object to give it, perhaps, a capacity for resistance that forms its ontological base<sup>13</sup>. French design is the opposite in a constant procedure of semanticisation that exemplifies objects. The object humanises itself as the market relationship becomes more dehumanised, due notably to the change in shopping habits (the progressive disappearance of salespeople in supermarkets, online shopping, etc.). It is not by chance that French culture gave rise to the hypermarket model and it is also that culture that gives objects a voice as if to overcome the dis-intermediation of the contemporary shopping process. This explains the importance on an economic and symbolic level of anthropomorphic objects in the French landscape. The theatricality is needed to give objects a voice. This is impeccably carried out by the various paratexts<sup>14</sup> used by a great number of French

designers to give their work meaning. This results in a form of extraneousness of design that wraps the object in a flow of words aimed at justification, explanation and valorisation.

### **The image trap...**

In-depth reflection on French design leads us to the possibility that it is perhaps easier to outline what it is not. While outlining Scandinavian or Japanese design is with the realms of possibility, it is simpler to outline the contours of a French philosophy of design by default, as if in opposition. It is perhaps possible to define the imprint of French design, indented, relative to its other. By clearly taking sides with image over use, is French design not now trapped by image? Has French design become for example the antithesis of the vision of the object deployed by Dutch culture. As Jean-Louis Schefer show us, Dutch painting is remarkable in that it renders objects “conductors” like the all-powerful flow of the low tide. The renewal of painting subjects that emblematised this culture is “an abandonment of the tragic base of European culture. This catalogue that has the good sense to clean up painting (...) is a private version of the great catalogue of culture, i.e. of all of the emphasis, all of the pathos of the great German Italian traditions, etc.”<sup>15</sup>. Is this not close to the metaphysical and symbolic clean-up that corresponds to the etymology of de-sign? This acceptance of substance and the optical cleansing of their individuality that leads to a form of equality of all things under the sun, plays essentially with “an attenuation of roles, drama and, we can see, the magnification of a social and community based virtue”<sup>16</sup>. The object is there to fluidify relations. It is discreetly efficient. It is a question of making human relations work. Roland Barthes says “Let’s look at Dutch still life: the object is never

alone, and never in the centre; it is just there, in the middle of other objects, painted between two uses, part of the disorder of the movements that seized it, then rejected it, in a word, used. What can be the justification of such an assembly if not to lubricate the eye of man inside his domain, and to slide the eye over objects whose enigma has been dissolved and so are nothing more than easy surfaces? The use of an object can only help to dissipate its capital form and on the contrary over bid on its attributes”<sup>17</sup>.

Nordic cultures of the object seem to have proposed another form of intelligibility of the object that enables it to express itself in ellipses and enigmas, by taking its effectiveness from discretion and not “looking” to have an effect. It would seem that the Nordic culture of design is more attached to transformation that, unlike an impact that is local and short lived, is always global and progressive – so it doesn’t stand out. So it is not noticed – we don’t see it working, we just see the effects. Instead of valorising the spectacular, of highlighting effort and risk, Nordic design is attentive to the discreet, recommends an effectiveness that doesn’t attack, doesn’t force, that is both without effort and without resistance. This leads to a grey efficiency running through things, that doesn’t stand out and is all the less remarkable as it is working. It is object design more than relations and a design of impact rather than fluidity. In opposition, French design culture derives from a logic of effects and as such of “against”. It follows the sort of deviant marketing that tries to mark the position of the designer and the brand by creating a sort of mental imprint in the consumer’s mind, leading to the importance of markers that can be attributed to the brand and/or the designer. While Nordic cultures have rinsed the object of its semantic dirt, French design functions essentially through semanticisation pushed to the extreme. Against the flow of this fluidifying power of

goods and uses, French design takes on the resistance included in the etymology of the word literally. An object is anything found on the road, what was thrown there (Latin *ob-jectum*, Greek *problêma*)<sup>18</sup>. The object is constituted on the aspect of resistance to the individual (as illustrated by the German *Gegenstand* that opposes beings of thought or reason), and sends it back to the subject. This form of resistance, in addition to the fact that it relies on a logic of effect more than on actual substance finally leaves the question of human relations to one side. But this is exactly the ethical issue of French design. Indeed, usual objects are “in intermediary functions (media) between me and others. They are not simply objective but also inter-subjective, not just problematical but dialogical. The question of the form to give them can thus be put in another way: can I give my projects a form so that they accentuate the communicational, the inter-subjective, rather than the objectival, objective, the problematical?”<sup>19</sup>. By emphasising the objective side, French design may have missed the inter-subjective factor altogether, which can only lead to a shrinkage of the free space due to the “irresponsibility of objects conceived solely for the attention given to the object itself”<sup>20</sup>.

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1. This article is a slightly modified version of the text “Quelques marqueurs du design français” (Some markers in French design), in C. Colin (éd.), *Design et designers français*, Éditions des Industries françaises de l’ameublement, 2007, p. 44-54.

2. *AD* 10 year anniversary issue, September 2010, p. 29.

3. Nathalie Heinich, *L’élite artiste. Excellence et singularité en régime démocratique* (The Elite Artist. Excellence and Singularity in Democratic Regimes), Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 175.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Joan DeJean, *Du style. Comment les Français ont inventé la Haute couture, la grande Cuisine, les Cafés chic, le raffinement et l’élégance* (Style. How the French

invented Haute couture, great Cuisine, Chic cafés, refinement and elegance), Paris, Grasset, 2005.

6. There is nothing to prove that the advertising campaign that depicted Pascal Mourgue lying voluptuously on couches he designed for a big name furniture company had any effect on his notoriety among the general public.

7. Paul Bénichou, *Le sacre de l'écrivain 1750-1830. Essay on the arrival of a spiritual lay power in modern France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

8. See the text by Armand Hatchuel, "Quelle analytique de la conception ? Parure et pointe en design", in Brigitte Flamand (dir.), *Le design. Essais sur des théories et des pratiques*, Paris, IFM/ Regard, 2006, p. 147-160.

9. Quoted in Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Starck*, Paris, Adam Biro, 1999, p. 21.

10. Clément Rosset, *L'objet singulier*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1979, p. 44.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Bertrand Barré and Francis Lepage, *Vision oblique*, Paris, Les Presses du management, 2001.

13. Vilém Flusser, *Petite philosophie du design*, Belfort, Circé, 2002.

14. We are borrowing the notion of paratext from Gérard Genette who defines it in the literary context as the "reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, verbal or not, like the name of the author, a title, a preface, illustrations (...) that (...) surround and prolong it, precisely to present it, in the habitual meaning of the terms, but also in the stronger meaning: to render it present, to ensure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption..." (Gérard Genette, *Seuils*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 7). In the present case all paratexts are different textual layers that surround and legitimise various objects: names of objects, legends, interviews, etc.

15. Jean-Louis Schefer, *La lumière et la table. Dispositifs de la peinture hollandaise*, Paris, Maeght éditeur, 1995, p. 20.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

17. Roland Barthes, "Le monde objet", in *Essais Critiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1964, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, t. I, Paris, Seuil, 1993, p. 1178.

18. Vilém Flusser, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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