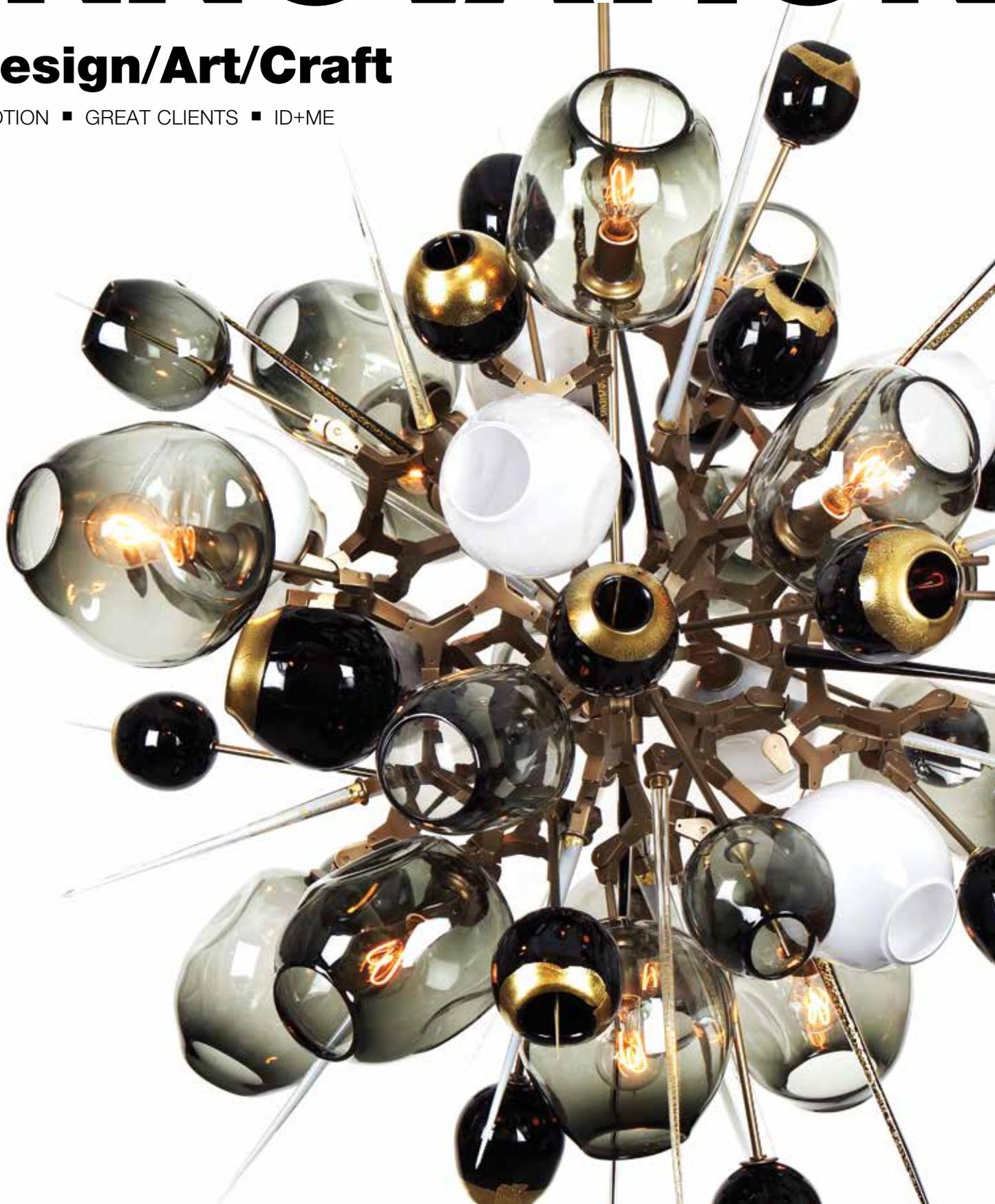


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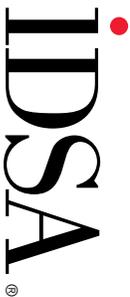
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Brian Ferry



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Annual Subscriptions
 Within the US \$70
 Canada & Mexico \$85
 International \$125

Single Copies
 Fall/Yearbook \$40+ S&H
 All others \$20+ S&H

The quarterly publication of the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA), INNOVATION provides in-depth coverage of design issues and long-term trends while communicating the value of design to business and society at large.

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By Louise Schouwenberg

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Louise Schouwenberg studied sculpture and philosophy. Since 2000 her focus has been on art and design theory and education. She has contributed to a range of books, including a monograph on artist Robert Zandvliet and a monograph on designer Hella Jongerius. She is course director of the master department Contextual Design, at Design Academy Eindhoven (MDes), and course director of the master program Material Utopias, at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam (MFA/MDes).

NEW HABITATS FOR DESIGN



COSMETIC SURGERY KINGDOM, 2013

Designer: Bora Hong

Bora Hong investigated the striking number of aesthetic surgery procedures in South Korea and linked the apparent longing for perfection to the aims of contemporary design. Like surgeons, designers create and modify everyday items to meet criteria of ideal beauty. To visualize this phenomenon, she transformed a range of discarded chairs after the ideal of a well-known design icon, the Eames LCW. Here the story did not end yet. One day an Eames chair got fed-up with its appearance and wanted to become a Maarten Baas clay chair; the design-surgeon fulfilled its wishes.

Every few years a persistent debate flares up within the design world on the assumed essence of the design profession. While one side believes the designer's essential task lies in finding pragmatic solutions to problems, debaters on the other side point out design qualities that reach beyond functionality, or that precede it, including the deeper meanings a design can carry.

The remarkable thing about this battle is that the hard-core functionalists and their advocates are venomously targeting those examples of, for instance, Dutch design (a field I am very familiar with), that have caused a furor internationally. The faultfinders state that many of these renowned Dutch design products are insufficiently subjected to the usual reality check: instead of proving their worth in the real world as usable products, they remain undeveloped prototypes that prove themselves foremost in the realm of visual art, where their lack of functionality is masked by a striking visual appearance and accompanied by inflated rhetoric on their supposed layers of meaning.

The criticism is fair. Many of these products owe their fame to things other than their user-friendliness or their problem-solving capacities. But are these strict requirements? Should a design meet every precondition for use and every production requirement from the industry before it can reveal its potential to the public? Is it really necessary for a design to prove itself fully as a usable product before we can speculate on its possible consequences of a more symbolic nature? This line of thinking would mean there is only one reality in which design can prove itself: the reality of the mass consumer market. And as long as this market fails to see the benefit of producing a design in large quantities, the design hasn't proved its worth.

Which products would survive such a test? Doesn't this mean that every innovative design would end up being binned before its time? Would the initial designs by Jurgen Bey, Hella Jongerius, Piet Hein Eek, Bertjan Pot, Maarten Baas, Christien Meindertsma and many, many other designers ever have seen the light? The tree trunk as a seat (Bey), the dinner service full of misfits (Jongerius), furniture made from discarded materials (Eek)—they did not rise



to fame because of their user comfort. What they did, most of all, was yield some striking photogenic images that appealed to the imagination when they were launched and that were at odds with conventions within the design world. As a consequence, they were picked up quickly by the international media and the museum exhibition circuit. Only slowly

did the public at large begin to see the extent to which these very designs were the signs of a change in mentality in the way we feel about consumerism, globalization, locality, the importance of context and industrial mass production versus skilled craftsmanship—a change in mentality that was beginning to become more manifest in other fields as well.

Multilayered Meanings of the Everyday

Innovators in design who are able to address the bigger social and cultural issues are rare among the more functionalist designers who respond directly to the demands from the market and who seek to innovate primarily in marketing and efficiency. Curiously, the same dynamic applies to designers who are engaged in the concept of social relevance, which, in these times of multiple crises, is gaining in popularity among designers and possibly even more so among design critics. Strictly speaking, social relevance is equally bound to the old maxim of problem-solving functionality. Yes, we should praise designers who extend the scope of their profession and who tackle, much more than before, social issues in the world. But it remains to be seen if real innovation is possible when the morally correct answers are already a given with the questions.

The designers who have offered new insights into our environment, who have changed our perspectives on the objects with which we surround ourselves every day (Gerrit Rietveld: “to sit is a verb”), who have made us aware



ENGINEERING TEMPORALITY, 2012
Designer: Tuomas Markunpoika Tolvanen

Tolvanen covered pieces of existing furniture with a fine web of rings made from steel pipes. After welding the rings he set fire to the original wooden items. The resulting objects resemble the fuzzy fading memories of the originals. At the same time they represent a striking mix of old and new, industry and handcraft, steel and lace. In our caring relationship with the material world around us, we define who we are. Why then are design objects usually perfect and bare no relationship to our human nature, asks Tolvanen. For his remarkable answer he took inspiration from his grandmother's disintegrating memories as she struggled with Alzheimer's disease.

of the sculptural value of the everyday objects that fill our private and public spaces and the subtle shades of meaning they hold—none of these designers allowed their imaginations to be bound by a limited and limiting definition of their profession. Among them we can situate the Dutch designers of the 1980s who were at the forefront

of introducing a probing, critical attitude to the profession and attained international fame with it. They were the so-called author-designers who adopted a method that until then was known primarily from visual arts.

Author-designers take their own fascinations as a starting point because they see design as a reflective practice, which contributes to a deepening of our insight into the relationships between man and the world. From this sense of being unbound, they formulate their research themes, involving every expert and domain that is necessary. Their approach to everyday reality—the domain where design is at home—can be a sociologist's, keen on studying humans interacting with their surroundings, or a psychologist's, with an eye for humble human needs, or the philosopher's, tackling the implications of new technology and new media for our views of mankind. Or they may choose the artistic perspective of the sculptor, the painter, or the all-encompassing perspective of the architect or the urban planner. While the market instigates a one-dimensional notion of the essence of design, a liberated profession will feel the responsibility to address the multilayered meanings of everyday existence.

It is the only way in which designers can do justice to the different meanings of the term “functionality.”

Practical use is only one of design's guises. Design is not only capable of solving everyday problems; like art, it is also capable of causing them and being aggravating, or confrontational, in a different sense. Design is a reflection of the way people wish to live and what kind of image they want for themselves. Design is able to make our lives more comfortable, and it is equally able to discipline our behavior, or inhibit it; just think of the rules of behavior implied in street furniture. The products around us are reflections of the era; the cultural, technological and social contexts from which they stem; and the contexts in which they function.

Expanding Domains

However, this awareness that design is a reflective practice bordering on other disciplines does not mean that the differences between the disciplines no longer exist. They are different practices with different rules, conventions and boundaries and each with different critical assessments in social and artistic spaces. In any design practice it's not helpful to deny the differences nor to imagine that the fields of design, art and craft can merge in all respects, as it would mean a denial of those elements of a discipline that contribute to its meaning and value, those elements that the French philosopher Derrida described as the *parerga*, the hors d'oeuvre, the outsides of a work. The *parerga* in art are different from the *parerga* in design, which are different from the *parerga* in craft.

To formulate this somewhat differently: the contexts of design, art and craft are that much different that forgetting about them turns the venture of all these professions into a mere play of visual likenesses in which styling and preconceived assumptions take the lead. Whoever aims to create crossovers, to cross borders, needs to know the

Note: Some of the content of this article was previously published in other articles by the author.

THE IDEA OF A TREE, 2008

Designers: Katharina Mischer and Thomas Traxler (Studio mischer'traxler)

In this project Mischer and Traxler have abandoned part of their usual role of designers. They have created the machine, but leave the outcome of the production to a natural phenomenon like solar energy. The mechanical process translates the intensity of the sun through a clever apparatus into one object a day. Each result reflects the various sunshine conditions that occurred during a specific day in a specific spot. Like a tree, the object becomes a three-dimensional recording of its process and time of creation.



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borders. The word “crossover” already points to this. In order to create, for instance, multidisciplinary cooperations in a sensible and effective way, one must know what we may view as the essence of each discipline and what we may view as the aspects that are inevitably linked to them. The frame and the pedestal, as well as the white cube of the museum, are linked to painting and sculpture. If one decides to take a functional object, a design, out of its usual context and put it on a pedestal, this has a meaningful consequence, which adds new meaning to the design and new meaning to the content of an exhibition. Both the designer and the curator can consciously play with these notions. Only then are meaningful innovations set in motion, as well as meaningful collaborations with experts from various disciplines.

Either alone or in collaboration with scientists and specialists from other professions, many members of the latest generation of designers are dealing with the implications of new production means, such as the effects of new media on

their changing roles as designers of products or designers of the tools with which users can create their own products. Some address wider social solutions, while others explore the relationship between humble human shortcomings and design interventions. Their research and their experiments open a new set of perspectives on the world that could only have developed within *this* profession, even though their scope reaches into other professions. Therefore, there no longer is such a thing as a natural habitat for design products (nor is there a natural habitat for art or craft), and there

is certainly no natural habitat for experimental prototypes or presentation models that may possess an independent value because they represent a new way of thinking or have a potential that fires the imagination. And therefore it is only just since the late 1980s that the avant-garde in design also features on those stages that once seemed reserved for visual arts, stages which are more inclined than the market to embrace experiments and visionary views and to open up a debate at an early stage. ■

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