TALES OF THE

Coinciding with the V&A’s ‘Telling Tales’ exhibition, Gareth Williams explains why today’s designers love narrative. Plus Hugh Pearman and Caroline Roux, on design art
To 'tell tales' is a phrase fraught with ambiguity, bearing meanings both innocent and deceitful. As children, we are told tales that enthrall us with imaginary vistas, but these stories teach us about moral boundaries and social expectations, too. Children also learn the effect of exaggeration and half-truths, and how to avoid blame by telling tales on each other. This behaviour is learned in early childhood but we take it with us into adulthood. Likewise, the designs discussed in this essay display an ambiguous and complex relationship to story-telling and narrative. We are never far from the power of language to shape the imagination, and this book (here extracted) about the design of objects is also a textual narrative. It shows how we can make stories from the things around us, stories that need not be accompanied by clear interpretations. It showcases work by international contemporary designers who make narrative an integral part of their finished objects, which often recall fairy stories, history, archetypes, rites of passage or life’s rituals. As exemplified by Dutch designer Wiel Koenen’s High Tea Pet, a teapot modelled on a pig’s skull and enclosed in a water-can for cosy, the function of these objects is evocative and symbolic rather than utilitarian. They seem to slip across an arbitrary and invisible line that separates design and art. Together, they make us think of something beyond the objects themselves: their narrative character bears associated meanings.

Narrative and stories are primarily oral and linguistic constructions. In his early 20th-century essay The Storyteller, Walter Benjamin argued that the tragedy of the modern condition was that people had become alienated from the organic quality of storytelling. In its most extreme form, this was
Exemplified by the trauma wrought by the insignificance of war. Some and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is an awareness all around when the wish to have a story is expressed. It is as if nothing seemed intolerable to us, the accent among our possessions, words taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. Stories, therefore, link us, but these links can be broken by violence. In this sense, the work of New York-based Binyon Partners entitled Building Disaster - a collection of well-known buildings that commemorate man-made disasters - are what psychologists might term 'tasteful' orphans in which different societies can be read and tested, and which allow us to tell tales once again to the face of terrible events.

Binyon also drew an analogy between traditional craft skills and the crafting of tales, making and telling, the object and the subject. The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the notion of work - the idea, the making, the vision - is itself an artistic form of communication, as it were. It does not convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It takes the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. The stories of the storyteller tell the story of the way the headstone of the potter changes the clay vessel.

The Dutch designer Hella Jongerius knows that the vase she designs tell stories. Though she herself is not the potter, she educates the making and the shadows of forms from the past: "Vases were originally meant to be used, of course, but like any useful object it has a potential that goes beyond functionality. The story is more above the object itself... Useful objects have a rich history. They are associated with references to specific contexts and moments in history. If you refer to that history explicitly, and include all the associations in a new story, then you are communicating something - and it's something about useful objects."

Binyon concluded that story-telling and making objects are aspects of the same activity. "In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a metaphor of his relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the new material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful and unique way."

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**But before this narrative begins we used to explore the context within it can be looked, and to establish key relationships. Twentieth-century and contemporary art practice has increasingly favored 'concepts' above 'form'; in the artist's exploration of ideas it becomes more important than his or her ability physically to construct them. Today more than ever, the patient's supporting statement is lived by the artists as a carefully costumed and intimate kind of art practice. Binyon's work in this area is not only visually stunning, but also conceptually rich. His furniture and interiors were conceived as actual objects of relative beauty, utility, not as representations of objects of utility. Binyon's own design thinking did not help, but maintained the old architectonic hierarchy. If a chair is a building is not functional, if it appears to be only art, it is fail. The art of a chair is not its resemblance to art, but a partly able redefinition of the art in art is partly the insertion of someone's interest regardless of other considerations. A work of art exists as itself, a chair exists as a chair itself. And the idea of what it isn't a chair."

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Hella Jongerius

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Design art: the case against

By Hugh Pearman

Design art is different design art. It cannot be both, therefore it is a term that does not need to exist.

"There are designers, there are artists. There are many designers who think they are artists - normally they are deluded - but not so many artists who turn their hands to design. This is because art is not the same as design, and the artist knows it."

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

So Anthony Caro once told me, matter-of-factly: "All art is a car." That’s it, exactly. Art permits us to see the simple act of the artist saying it is so. An artist could not say that a work of art was a designed object however the uses of the object, since it must have a function, might disagree.

A designer can be an artist, of course, in the same way that Y. S. Eiffel was a breaker who was also a poet. Design has to do with art, perhaps, but being with poetry. But at best it is more like sculptural architecture - having attraction of art while not itself being art. Nishio fish now have good roof haring, or the buffing old saying has it.

debate rather than design impose." One such work, entitled Project (2005), reconfigured the reception space and bookshop of New York's Dia Center for the Arts, and was conceived as an installation for a period of two years. Although Project looked like an interior makeover of the space, visitors were encouraged to regard it as an autonomous artwork or intervention and were not expected to judge it solely for its effectiveness as a design solution.

Another trend has been the revolt of craft practice against the constraints of a legacy closely associated with vernacular activities, traditions, technical conventions and even the requirement to make objects of utility. Craft has increasingly asserted the concept as being of equal importance to the 'material practice', heavily approaching the practice of making fine art.

And the market has responded accordingly, allowing (within some condescension) space for the craft object alongside (but somewhat lower down) 'real' art. There are exceptions that only serve to prove the rule, for example the work of potter Gregory Perry, who, by winning the Turner Prize in 2009, conquered the art world.

Perhaps surprisingly, a third trend, the so-called "aestheticisation of everyday life", has been brought about not by artists' quota, or craftmakers' virtuosity, but by designers' relationship with consumers. Design has always been open about its flirtation with capital and has never shirked its responsibility to the hand that feeds it. As Western society has become richer, and culture has become more sophisticated, design has willingly served it with ever-more products for consumption. As a result, designers of furniture, lighting, objects for the home and so on, have found themselves caught between the constraints of commerce, the ghosts of craft and the individuality of art.
Manufacturers selling to the saturated markets of the First World have turned to aesthetics and styling to differentiate consumer goods. This trend has not been confined to the elite or luxury products. It has been seen in the democratization of high-end contemporary design across the market, in much the same way as the high ideals of Modernist designers reached the mass market through product design in the 1930s. Henry Dreyfuss improved his signature into the moulded plastic vacuform flasks he designed, just as Todd Bouseulle translated his signature style into affordable Christmas decorations and gift products for the giant American homeware chain Target.

In the past, mass-market products have not necessarily enjoyed high-end design values, but this has now changed. IKEA promotes high-end design at low-end prices (see p.18 this issue), achieving both through economies of scale and distribution, and other design-led manufacturers must match improvements in design quality with associated savings in production costs. However, some of the designers discussed here reject the mass-production paradigm altogether. 'Producers make mass productions. We are not producers,' says Job Snelten of Antwerp-based designers Studio Job, who seldom designs for industrial-scale production. 'Designers are bailed when they make thousands of the same thing. But artists are bailed when they make a unique thing. I think the amount of copies has nothing to do with the creative value of the piece.'

Connoisseurship actively rejects populism. Makers' marks, labels and signatures (as well as distinctive signature styles), numbered editions, exotic materials, high-quality fabrication and documented provenances in credible collections are its ingredients. The connoisseur gains expertise and, crucially, is allowed access to rarity. Since the early 1980s, the secondary market - especially for mid-20th-century design artifacts - has grown hugely based on these values, until a storage unit designed by Charlotte Perriand, or a screen by Eileen Gray, is priced as if it were a fine-art object traded within the same market as blue-chip artists of the period.

Connoisseurship and rigorous design history also add intellectual value to design objects by applying standards of research and documentation to hitherto-overlooked works. These may be better than art at capturing the cultural moment of their inception precisely because designers design in tandem with, and in service to, society and culture, rather than making art for art's sake'. The cultural theorist Vilém Flusser wrote, 'The word design has managed to retain its key position in everyday discourse because we are starting (perhaps rightly) to lose faith in art and technology as sources of value. Because we are starting to rise up to the design behind them.' It was inevitable that objects designed by the likes of Perriand and Grey should become referred to as 'design art' once the model of connoisseurship, harnessed from the art market and art history, was applied to design.

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

These designers, often well-known names, are working more autonomy from the design-manager role prescribed for them, and more creative freedom than working to industrial briefs will allow. They realize also that art fairs are potentially more lucrative than design royalties will ever be. For these designers without the backing of galleries, small editions of self-initiated projects offer a way to produce their own work, giving access to collectors and the chance to build a media profile. It is no coincidence that they adopt from the art market the mechanisms of limited editions and the language used to describe collections, even when the idea of an artist's proof of a chair or lamp seems to stretch the notion to breaking point.
The designers who inhabited that space where craft and design intersected used to be known as designer-makers. Their protégés were Ettore Sottsass and Gaetano Pesce, and Italian designers of the 70s and 80s especially preferred contemporary practice. Alessandro Mendini, the venerable Italian designer and theorist, spectacularly attempted to fuse painterly techniques with historical design in his Proust chair. Today they are known as ‘design artists’, and their protégés are Ron Arad, Marc Newson and Zaha Hadid, whose rank is confirmed by their status within the art market, and among whose disciples number the brothers Campana and Bouroullec. By specifically producing limited-edition works, industrial designers and architects including Ross Lovegrove, Amanda Levete, Berber Osherby and Patrick Jouin have also engaged with ‘design art’.

Arad’s reputation is built on his innovative, singular, experimental and influential furniture, created in small editions over three decades. It embodies all the values demanded by a market built on consumerism. Hadid, one of a tiny coterie of ‘architects’ and the winner of the 2005 Pritzker Prize for Architecture, creates works of design that are ostensibly furniture but are actually miniaturised essays in her uncompromising, expressive architectural language. They bear no relation to product design, aside from superficial similarities in material and fabrication, and are most akin to abstract sculpture. Newson’s output is more limited in range and quantity, but is no less visually distinctive, and its rarity and panache no doubt contribute to the value ascribed to it by the market. These designers have almost completely disengaged with the design world for their most personal (and collectible) works, preferring to show at art fairs and with art galleries. Newson exhibits with the
Guggenheim Gallery in New York and Arad with London’s Timothy Taylor Gallery, alongside the painters Craigie Aitchison, Bridget Riley and Alex Katz. The contemporary art market has welcomed these designers as, relative to the cost of art, design objects remain affordable but no less distinctive. Yet in these early stages of the commercial boom in ‘design art’, designers of all calibre remain unknown quantities to art collectors.

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

Suddenly almost any object conceived within a spirit of enquiry and experiment can be passed off as ‘design art’, even if it barely registers as design. Within a few years, an entirely new ‘design art’ market has arisen as an adjunct to the mainstream market for contemporary art. Rich collectors have not invested much in design and rarely in craft—although there are markets for glass by Dale Chihuly and furniture by Wendell Castle. Launching the first ‘design art’ sale at Phillips de Pury & Company in New York in 2001, Alexandre Payne, a British-based director of design, described the category as ‘design that aggressively runs towards form and voids the boundaries between respected modernism’. He acknowledged the racist demarcation lines between art and design while simultaneously seeking to blur them. Some six years later, in Art Review, Mark Rappolt considered ‘What is “design art”? and concluded that it is nearly all about marketing. ‘The suggestion is that design art is about scarcity and the elite end of the market (as opposed, presumably, to the regular kind of product design that is aimed at the masses). It’s a type of design that’s not designed to work better, but to cater to a snooty audience.’

‘Design art’ can be defined in a number of ways, depending on your point of view. It can be seen as a mode of practice within a larger discourse on contemporary art practice; a creature of the arts and antiques market, based on conspicuous and market demand; or the creative outsourcing of a new generation of designers schooled in the discipline of design management but with the creative freedom of artists. Perhaps the most interesting and significant is in as much as contemporary art and craft, as well as conceptual designers subordinate materiality and functionality to symbolism and emotional resonance. Design may even have an advantage here because it is grounded in common experience, even if it is expressed uncommonly. London-based designers Dusse and Baby represent the paradigm of an intellectualised, critical, non-commercial, de-materialised and virtually de-aesthetised alternative to conventional design practice, a burst of fresh air blowing through the stagnant debates about the nature of design, art and craft.

Critical and conceptual design practice is as diverse and individualised as can be hoped for by a market that craves singularity and rarity...

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