Design, everywhere

Jean-Pierre Greff

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/124>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.124

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2010

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Jean-Pierre Greff, « Design, everywhere », *Critique d'art* [Online], 35 | Printemps 2010, Online since 01 April 2010, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/124> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.124

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Design, everywhere

Jean-Pierre Greff

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Midal, Alexandra. *Design : introduction à l'histoire d'une discipline*, Paris : Pocket, 2009, (Agora)

Le Design européen depuis 1985 : quelles formes pour le XXI^e siècle ?, Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, 2009

Charles Kaisin : *Design In Motion*, Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2009

Les Sismo, Antoine Fenoglio & Frédéric Lecourt : *l'objet du design = The Object of Design*, Saint-Etienne : Cité du design, 2009

Destroy/Design : collection du Frac Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Dunkerque : Frac Nord-Pas-de-Calais, 2009

Dessiner le design, Paris : Musée des arts décoratifs, 2009

Qu'est-ce que le design aujourd'hui ?, Paris : Beaux-Arts/TTM, 2009

VIA Design 3.0 : 1979-2009, 30 ans de création de mobilier, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou : VIA Valorisation de l'Innovation dans l'Ameublement, 2009

Who's Afraid Of Design ?, Saint-Etienne : Cité du design, 2009

- 1 Alexandra Midal's pocket-sized essay, *Design: introduction à l'histoire d'une discipline*, and the impressive book published by Citadelles & Mazenod, *Le Design européen depuis 1985: quelles formes pour le XXI^e siècle?*, propose two contrasting outlooks: for the former, a dense theoretical essay, developing the themes and reasons behind a history of design and its *mouvements de pensée* or 'shifting lines of thought' from its origins up to 1985, and intentionally devoid of all illustration; for the latter, a richly illustrated and prestigious publication, offering a comprehensive critical backward look at the *objects* and trends that have fashioned the identity of European design over the past 25 years. These two

novel books, which complement each other, are emblematic of the position now occupied by design in the aesthetic and intellectual field.

- 2 Prepared under the aegis of the Denver Art Museum and the Indianapolis Museum of Art, it is the intent of *Le Design européen depuis 1985* to “demonstrate both the ever more crucial place of design in European culture and Europe’s pride of place, forever being revived, in its worldwide destiny”. This exercise of geopolitical off-centering is rare enough for us to extol its persuasive character. Faced with this abundant and complex development of European design¹, Craig Miller involves himself in an exercise of aesthetic mapping that is as necessary as it is perilous². It is a question of “situating the multiform developments of European design of our day and age” on the basis of the two major intellectual and aesthetic movements which, if we go along with Penny Sparke’s analyses, dominated the latter half of the 20th century : modernism and postmodernism. This dialectic, conceived as an “interplay of actions and reactions woven by the continent’s design” singles out the eight movements which Craig Miller distinguishes (Postmodernism : Decorative design – Expressive design/Modernism : Minimal geometric design – Biomorphie design, etc.). No matter how useful and thorough this typology may be³, it ends up at an uneasy arrangement and an only partial decipherment. By putting at its hub the notion of style, an American obsession no less, and when, all the same, it strives to conceptualize and contextualize it, this ambitious but far too formalist approach to design objects is at pains to promote style as “the representative form of a period” in its most far-reaching implications. If style may be “a factor of recognition and belonging⁵”, its classifications “are more convenient than properly founded” and they do not take into account “the complexity of the creative approach⁶” of design and, still more, of the *movements of ideas* which underpin it. Once and for all, design is not a matter of style.
- 3 *Design : introduction à l’histoire d’une discipline* ends up by persuading us of as much. In adopting the precisely opposite footing to a history of forms and styles, A. Midal convincingly proposes a new genealogy of design. This originates in the “proto-design” of Catharine Beecher whose books dealing with the organization of household space usher in a functionalist line of thinking, but above all assume a two-fold feminist and abolitionist commitment. The book’s thread is the political function of design and the way it presents social transformation. If design has been doggedly exploited by the capitalist economy it is still the powerful vehicle of anti-authority awareness and involvement, a vector of subversive counter propositions and critical stances, as well as of new utopias. Midal presents a methodical demonstration of all this, from William Morris to the antidesign of J. Colombo (a pioneering figure for whom she admits a special affection) and Memphis, by way of the utopia of the designers of *Streamline*, functionalism and the modern movement. These markers are well known, and most have been dealt with in stalwart monographical studies. But the perspective they are given, as an uninterrupted sequence of criticisms and contestations of the models of thinking and the utopias of earlier movements, is what is original about this captivating history of design. Midal effectively foils any unilateral vision of design by exaggerating the dialectical tensions which underpin and enhance the movement : functionalism and objective neutrality of function versus decorative function and subjective, emotional and imaginary investment ; producing objects versus re-creating a system of relations

between subjects and objects ; real production versus fiction and utopia ; subjective promotion of an individual skill versus social stake ; use value versus symbolic and poetic function or “interpretive and speculative involvement rooted in politics”, etc.⁷. In so doing, Midal makes a decisive contribution to the development of a historiography of the particular aesthetics of design⁸, which is to say, autonomous, freed from its twofold subordination to the worlds of art and architecture, and conceived as a *special way of thinking*. Contrary to a history of objects, it is this history, already lengthy, many-voiced and complex, made up of misunderstandings, that the author manages to write, by unraveling, as she does, the threads of the plot with the perspicacious pen and the lighthearted pace of somebody who “is at one with their subject”. Her book pursues nothing less than a global aesthetics of design, put forward as a discipline in its own right, but also as a method of investigation and investment of reality, that is as intellectual as it is creative—that cannot be reduced to anything else.

- 4 The catalogue *Dessiner le design* offers active proof of this. This exploration of the drawings of twelve of today’s most important French and international designers establishes a convincing typology of their functions in design work. It invites readers to make a thrilling plunge into the heart of the processes of the designer’s research, invention and reflection, whose complex challenges, depth and exigency it confirms.

- 5 All these books barely leave room for the recurrent debates conducted over the last ten years about the contemporary inter-relations between art and design, which Midal looks at with a suspicious eye. It is true that this debate, which is rarely free of ulterior motives, has at times produced new interferences. Behind the discourse on interdisciplinarity there readily hides “the omnipotent traditional theory of intrinsic values (axiology) which puts art at its summit” and relegates design to the position of a somewhat compromised variant. The intrigues that have been woven over the last 25 years between art and design are no less enthralling. Made up of connivances and tensions, exchanges and appropriations, they encourage a mutual critical keenness, just as they appear to liberate art and design from their respective traditions in a celebratory way. *Destroy/Design*, a sumptuous catalogue produced by the Frac Nord-Pas de Calais, based on its own collections, gives us an overview that is as powerful as it is legitimate. Powerful because it is devised on the basis of objects, installations and artefacts which are often canonical, created by major contemporary designers and artists. Legitimate because this Frac was among the very “first French institutions to have emphasized the major role played by design in the evolution of daily life”, to be sure, but also in the reconfiguration of the contemporary aesthetic arena.
- 6 All these publications contribute to a *eulogy* of design, regarded as “one of the most lively disciplines in the present-day art scene”. Let us wager that they will mark an important stage in the dissemination of a culture of design that is still incomplete in France, and let us hope that, in so doing, they will encourage its recognition as a fully-fledged discipline, just like the visual arts and architecture. It is time to stop muddling them together in an invariably dubious way ; time, too, to stop cursorily pitting them against each other, and implicitly encompassing one within the other.

NOTES

1. This vitality results from the sphere of influence of the best design schools, whose role is underscored by the authors, and from various initiatives on the part of designers themselves, such as the creation of the Droog Design label in the Netherlands. The VIA (Valorisation d'Innovation dans l'Ameublement), has thus been playing a decisive role for the emergence and international reputation of French design for 30 years. The Centre Pompidou pays a much deserved tribute to it in the catalogue *VIA Design 3.0: 1979-2009, 30 ans de création de mobilier*, which, in the field of furniture and household objects, represents what is known as a summa.
2. This demand for a topographical, genealogical and typological arrangement of design, over and above the eclectic abundance of its object which saturates our perception of it, determines the numerical logic of the works presented. The Sismo Designers thus overlap four criteria—project/form relation, integration of techniques, readability of uses, social implication—in order to produce a reading grid of what design is in its diverse range of activities and objectives.
3. The only real lacuna in this very comprehensive overview is the absence of the experimental design of Dunne and Raby.
4. As aspired to by Wölfflin, whereas the modern-postmodern clash appears to transpose the one existing between classical and Baroque.
5. Braunstein-Kriegel, Chloé. "Géopolitique du design : nouveaux territoires, enjeux nouveaux", *Qu'est-ce que le design aujourd'hui ?*, Paris, Beaux-Arts/TTM, 2009, p. 70
6. Favardin, Patrick. "Le VIA, une évolution stylistique", *VIA Design 3.0, op. cit.*, pp. 42-43
7. We know how historiography is at pains to extricate itself from the age old dialectic between symbolism-criticism and the functionality-use group. Thus we find Emmanuel Tibloux whose introduction to the catalogue *Who's Afraid Of Design ?* and contribution to the latest *Azimuts* renew the axiology (theory of intrinsic values) which puts art in a position from which it surveys design. This latter adopts "a tendentially consenting position through research work involving forms and processes which puts the question of use in the foreground". Or when the "tendentially" becomes somewhat tendentious.
8. Without complying with it, her book enhances a very sound knowledge of Anglo-Saxon historiography, from Nikolaus Pevsner to Hal Foster (whose *Design and Crime* thesis she disputes), by way of Penny Sparke whose feminist outlook she adopts, while relativizing her analysis of the relations between design and consumerism.
9. *Le Design européen depuis 1985, op. cit.*, p. 7