Challenges for a critique of design

Olivier Peyricot and Cedric Scandella

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1825>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.1825

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

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

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2003

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Olivier Peyricot and Cedric Scandella, « Challenges for a critique of design », *Critique d'art* [Online], 22 | Automne 2003, Online since 24 February 2012, connection on 21 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1825> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.1825>

This text was automatically generated on 21 September 2020.

Archives de la critique d'art

Challenges for a critique of design

Olivier Peyricot and Cedric Scandella

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

La Critique en design : contribution à une anthologie, Nîmes : Jacqueline Chambon, 2003,
(Critiques d'art)

Écrits sur Starck, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2003

Philippe Starck : Starck explications, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2003

- 1 All of a sudden one or two books sporting the magic word “design” on the cover have appeared, but without ANY illustrations in them (MOST RARE). We are dealing with an anthology—*La Critique en design : contribution à une anthologie*—compiled and prefaced by Françoise Jollant-Kneebone and a pack hailing from the *Starck* exhibition at the Pompidou Centre: a transcription-minus the “er”s—of the major designer’s verbal diarrhoea—*Starck Explications*—flanked by a collection of “thematic essays”—*Écrits sur Starck*—theorizing about the said *grandeur*. Arranged in a certain way, these three books form a perfect prism for analysing the links existing, *or otherwise*, between design and the criticism thereof, critics and their designers, theory and practice, etc.
- 2 *Or otherwise*, because in the age of the cordless PC, design is still critique-less. “Which is not progress”, laments with an almost unanimous voice the colourful chorus of journalists, art mandarins, architects, sundry consultants, managers, and the like, summoned by F. Jollant-Kneebone in her book. Actually, if the eclectic choice of contributions attests to great intellectual casualness, the general atmosphere tends to be somewhat nagging: the word “design” seals the debate with its ultra-expanded definition, a definition whose restrictedness seems like the theoretical Grail, a definition without which many might wonder how to exercise their critical talent *in these conditions*. In a word, the matter is turning into a hunt for the semantic bogeyman. In no time, the beast is fingered: it is the designer, that incompetent theorizer, lost in his formal daydreams, thoroughly depoliticized, “especially young stars”, points out

the gallery owner Staudemayer. The journalist Gilles de Bure suggests, moreover, appraising the virtuosity of those scribbled about, in order to separate creative individuals from scroungers¹... Yet as contribution follows contribution, it is clear that it is the same fantasy of *ideal creation* and *pure idea* that sullies the pedestals of the social desire to consume, and mix innovation and communication, and the pedestal of the performances of method and profitability upon which design unremarkably perches... The frail critical joists of this 302-page house of cards are the contributions by researchers (Abraham Moles and Victor Alexandre), extradited via the critical pedagogy of the object. And one or two writings by designers. Time is frozen in 1980.

- 3 One or two writings by designers... Are they too few and far between? Translate them. Are they essential? Tot them up. What do they look like? Any number of things. A form comes into the world, so how are we to adjudge its topicality without, off the cuff, improvising a debate, without putting it to the test, and without imagining it ageing? A designer organizes these critical jousts as dreams, as a team, resorting to the form (the kind you make out), versus technique, with the mood of the times, against deadlines... Declared critical designers do exist (Enzo Mari, Dan Friedman, Christophe Marchand, Ana Mir, Andrea Zittel, Andreas Brandolini...); they place themselves deliberately in the trough of the contemporary history of design. But there is everything to be learnt about the others, be they past or active. So one of the only one to have identified this windfall is the researcher Alexandra Midal² who, by decoding the writings and interviews of the designer Joe Colombo, situates the birth of contemporary design (i.e. freed from architecture) in 1969! Big bang.
- 4 In France, though, there is an umbrella discourse, whereby nobody gets wet and beneath which others dry off in the shade: the discourse involving the “Starck case”, spokesman of the brand that has recently filled Beaubourg, not as a patron, but rather as a (street) entertainer. The quality of this show resided in the fact that there was nothing he was able to add to the unpacking of his little theatre, both conceptually deceptive and psychologically disappointing, supposed to not-represent his approach by means of (large) comic tricks–gilded droppings, white clown, statues of Caesar’s Palace, pig-pink missal... The good-natured strategy of design-man consists precisely in refusing the added value of the design discourse. Starck always begins a project, incidentally, by turning it down. For him, general ideas are more important than one-offs. By giving nothing–no handles in the debate, no experimental generosity in his dictation/book *Explications*–, Starck has had the best feedback from the definitively “deco-people” press. The *Ecrits sur Starck* are nothing more than reflections in the glass eye of beholden experts, with the exception of the essay by Valérie Guillaume, dealing with “illusionism” and “trick”. Above all, the designer’s word needs criticizing.
- 5 Where does the source of a critique of design flow? Forgotten at the very heart of the mercantile edifice, captured by a few magazines for enthusiasts (computer addict, custom car, hi-fi high-end, sports X-treme...), listed on the Internet (information/product platform occupied by the user himself). In these regions there reigns a primitive warmth suitable for the hatching of a feeling of critical expertise of contextualized design. How are we to link up these scraps of different approaches to objects in a single DNA, an all-encompassing theory? Let us mention the magazine *Wired*, which manages this by practising a total incorporation of high tech products and gadgets–interweave of leisure gear and work tools–in the editorial content. Their interfaces and their content are conscientiously evoked through their forms–objects

which are subjects that nothing isolates from the world any more. This faculty for producing a high tech critique in real time can be likened to the industrial development of contemporary design. Return via criticism to original creative engineering: no product beyond a thought and a technical feasibility. Let us mention the recent biography of James Dyson³, creator of the eponymous vacuum cleaner: his praxis clashes fiercely with techniques (of manufacture and production, but above all legal techniques). Problems of style are secondary. Let us quote Roger Tallon talking about “protoform-producing design”, “the instrumental truth of the object” and “a technical culture lacking” in our contemporaries.

- 6 What light best reveals the challenges of design? The light of a California sunset, in the Palo Alto hills, over a small group of over-equipped mountain bikers possibly including Steve Jobs (Apple CEO) and Jonathan Ive (vice-president of Apple industrial design): the critic ought to be there, sweating buckets so as not be sidelined. He is a partner in this technical thinking, sitting astride his Brompton⁴, endlessly relaunched with a shrug, every time those guys let loose an idea, one common question: how are we to make critique/design a STEPPED-UP thought/user experience?

NOTES

1. More worrying is the fact that quite a few contributors have succumbed to this schizophrenia : they say design but think *furniture* design (sub-sub-part of a micro niche with no economic stakes or social necessity in the overall production of objects)
2. Midal, Alexandra. “1969 : design année zéro”. *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, n°84, summer 2003, pp. 86-111. See also: Midal, Alexandra. *Antidesign : petite histoire de la capsule d’habitation en image*, Paris : Epithème, 2003
3. James Dyson : *dans la cour des grands*, Paris : Le Cherche Midi, 2003
4. Reyner Banham’s favourite foldup bike