

David Report

issue 7/June 2007

YOUR PATHFINDER INTO THE FUTURE

# Vulgarism





## Our keynote

### Foreword

The David Report Bulletin always has a design perspective, and issue 7/2007 is not an exception. This time we will take you on a trip into the ongoing convergence between design and art. It's a growing phenomena that interests us in several reasons, and we have invited special friends to add more wisdom into the field.

Enjoy the ride.

### Design is design and art is art?

Is design flirting with art, or is it art flirting with design? What is it that we see; a smart convergence between the two or an "easy" way to earn a buck and get massive PR, for both designers, producers and gallery owners?

The merge between design and art is not a new phe-

nomena and it has been discussed before. Our curiosity today derives from the fact that the market driven design-art style today boosts and gets lots of attention. We know by experience that everything comes and goes in various cycles; fashion, politic, names etc., the list is long. We ask ourselves if this phenomenon is the inner symptom of a confused design world desperately hunting for something new, or simply a waited and natural evolution in our contemporary lifetime? The market is not slow to react to the design-art whiz and capitalize on it.

So where is this phenomena going? Does it or doesn't it benefit the design and/or the art world? Below we are trying to explain and describe what is happening. We will also give the style a name. To get some further indication we have asked Oliver Ike, Giuliana Stella and Christian Geissbühler to give their views from their particular insights and standpoints.

## The seed-bed for the design-art

We at David Report are probably not the only ones that have felt a vacuum in the design industry during the first years of the new millennium. It has been like a collective search for something new. If we look at the past every decade had its certain style or -ism. Like the modernism in the 20s, the plastic excesses during the 60s or the minimalism in the 90s.

We have regularly since the late 80s been visiting the Milan Furniture Fair, the worlds epicentre of design. Our opinion is that the last couple of years have been poor in offering interesting and clever design. The kind of design that really makes a difference. Today a kind of sketchy design that doesn't really make sense is paramount. If you would like to be harsh you can say that parts of the Milan Furniture Fair has turned into a large amusement park which delivers entertainment to "design-tourist-sapiens", as our journalist friend Ana Domínguez calls them. It is obvious that this circus doesn't have smart user-orientated and functional design as first priority any longer. Today it is probably more about showmanship. Media could partly be blamed for the sprawly superficiality, as a result of their stressful hunt for news. If you would like to take part in the media hamster-wheel you nowadays have to imitate the fashion industry and preferably come up with spectacular new products several times every year. The fuzz around a, preferentially Dutch based, kitschy design style is a good example. It's like a convergence between design and art and at this year Milan Furniture Fair it was more visible than ever.

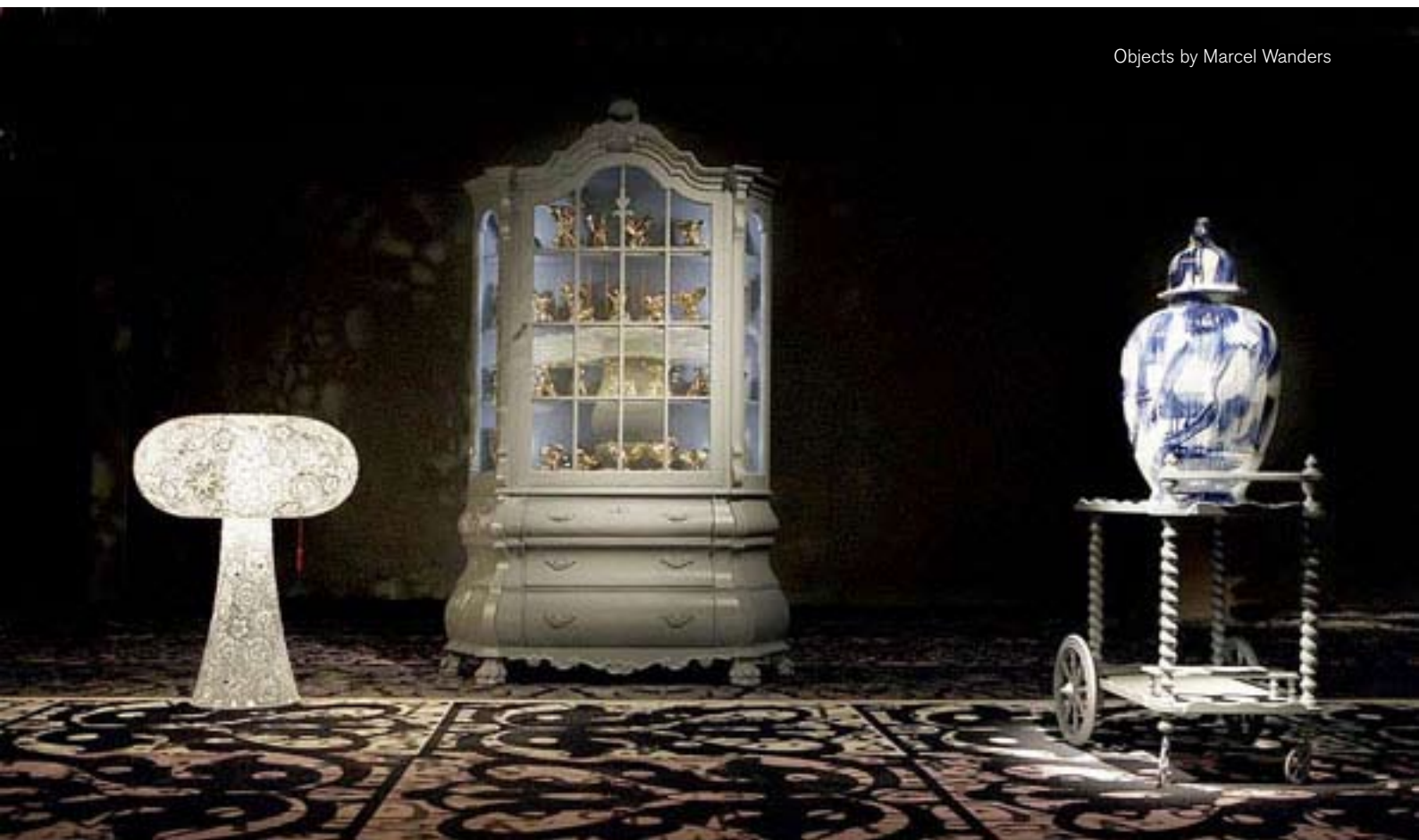
Teapots in super size, huge Pinocchio dolls in mosaic, porcelain horse heads and knitted dogs. It was almost like to travel in a time capsule back to the glory days of Piero Fornasetti or the Memphis group and the postmodernism. Visiting the shows of Studio Job, Jaime Hayon and Marcel Wanders, among others, almost makes you feel as if visiting Alice in wonderland or the wizard from Oz. Everyone seems to be part of the mass psychosis, the market is praising it, the press is writing about it and the consumers are gaping. It looks like a scene from the HC Andersen fairy tale The Emperor's New Clothes.

An adequate question to highlight is if we should call it design, art or design-art or if we have to invent a new category and word for these experiments. Some people call it neo-surrealism or expressionism-design, but we would prefer to refer to it as **Vulgarism**.

If we compare it to the postmodernism there is at least one big difference between the work of Ettore Sottsass and the others involved in the postmodernist movement from the 70s and 80s and the riders of the new Vulgarism; the lack of an intellectual standpoint and an impugning discussion. Where the former group of people were reacting against the dictates of modernism the latter are more or less just doing extravagant objects. A kind of design on dope.

Anyway - it is not an exaggeration to say that we are experiencing a boom.

Objects by Marcel Wanders





## Our producer friend says:

### Design-Art

The first time I read about a designer who analyzed the difference between art and design was in the book of Bruno Munari. He outlined that design for him has to have a **function** at its base in order to be called and considered as design. I totally agree with him on this. The recent phenomenon of so called "design-art" is for me a fashion that could not be more out-dated. It is neither design nor art, it is "*vulgar pollution*". Installations like the ones of the Dutch Marcel Wanders can only recall the worst excesses of postmodernism of the Memphis area in me. Why go backwards? People like Ron Arad at least experimented in the 90s with the borders of art and design. But he was the only one. Today every designer wants to jump on the bandwagon and make some *easy, fast money* in the role of the artist. I ask myself how the real artists must feel nowadays...

### Why do design objects fetch high prices?

If we currently look at the number one design auctioneer [www.wright20.com](http://www.wright20.com) in Chicago we can understand why certain design objects from designers such as Angelo Mangiarotti, Osvaldo Borsani or George Nelson get paid very significant fees by a selected circle of sophisticated collectors. Either the objects were made in very rare series by renowned craftsmen or manufacturers or these objects were revolutionary for their respective period in terms of materials used. As well the locations for which these objects were designed might give them a historical value. The rarity of these designed objects and the

galleries where they are sold should however not make people believe that these pieces are *art*. They are simply design objects that ended up to become important in the *history of design*.

### Where is the design going?

This is a question that is quite difficult to answer. An Italian manufacturer who does not want to be named recently at the *Salone di Mobile 2007* said to me: "As long as you have a buyer you can continue to do what you want". I find this statement astonishing and frightening at the same time. The market seems to manipulate the production companies entirely. In my opinion companies in the new millennium should be more conscious of ecological matters. Artek presented a beautiful chair of Bamboo in this direction at the pavilion from Japanese architect Shigeru Ban (one can feel the influence of smart designer Tom Dixon who is their new art-director). The new trend of trying to mix art and design as practiced at the Miami Basel fair reflects one more time the current fashion. If though a piece of these new designs, that, - as said before have nothing at all to do with contemporary art-, will attract the interest of collectors in 2020 or 2030 remains to be seen. Maybe some pieces of Vitra will, but then again it is because of the experimentation of new materials and not because the designer became an artist.

**Oliver Ike** is manager of the *IKEBRANCO* production company as well as consultant to various Swiss watch companies.



Objects by Studio Job

## The Vulgarism – as we see it

Relatively few designers make a big income from their profession. As for people in general (for good or bad) money is probably a strong motivation in their lives. Maybe that's why some of them are tempted to change sides and start to imitate the artists? The auction houses are of course happy. Now they are able to not only sell vintage pieces from the designers, they also invite them to do limited editions and one-off pieces. Philips De Pury new design gallery and Gagolian gallery (who recently made a bespoke exhibition with Marc Newson) both in New York are good examples. The new Thaddeus Ropac gallery "design line" with a Matali Crasset and Peter Halley exhibition and some parts of the second Vitra Edition are other examples. Another sign of our time is the new fair Design London which will take place parallel with Frieze Art Fair. It was revealed with a press release recently: "Design London is aimed at serious collectors, curators, directors, dealers and artists and it is hoped that it will also broaden the public's knowledge of the ever-growing contemporary furniture market. Design furniture is a new sector of the fine arts... Design London will coincide with Frieze, further underlining the synergy between art and design." The design journalists swallow the bait and reports about the Vulgarism in never ending articles. The market applauds and the wheel is rolling.

Time Magazine recently wrote about Studio Job: "Museum curators and gallery owners praise them as leaders in the hot Expressionist-design movement." At David Report we assume that a lot of design hotel owners with large lobbies in new-chick countries are praising them as well. Alice Rawsthorn at International Herald Tribune says likewise: "There is a commercial logic to the neo-Surrealists' madness. Sensation is a smart defence for European furniture manufacturers against their customers' boredom with the sameness of globalisation and aggressive competition from China in the mass market."

Some of the pieces in the design-art style are made in gigantic proportions. Let's quote Alice Rawsthorn again: "This seemingly nutty sizing is calculated to appeal to the art collectors who're splashing out on spectacularly impractical examples of design."

So - what is the Vulgarism, is it design or art? Or a merge between the two? Let's listen to what art curator Giuliana Stella has to say about the matter.



# Our curator friend says:

## Design-Art

It strikes me as strange that things that seemed to be implicitly obvious and clear for a long time, in truth aren't at all.

The people do not or do not want to, have any historical memory.

In the beginning of this new millennium, instead of taking with us the beautiful and great things of the last century, we are constantly developing more and more the "aberrant attitudes" of the 80s and 90s, years in which one started to think that all was "easy" and "to consume" with the maximum of indifference, favouring the arrogance of a "new wealth" and a "generation" that was convinced to do everything "in a hurry and instantly" with the maximum of return (in terms of profits...obviously!). See the period of the yuppies and DINKS etc....

## Manipulated markets

I am convinced that anyone who does serious research and experiments (in the field of art or design) does not have to redefine the terms of the issue at all.....but in my opinion on who is to blame, it's the "*market*" that by itself is moving everything in "*determined*" directions and in the end constructs a communication system that makes the "*nothing*" become "a part of history" and "*legitimizes it*" to its very own purposes of consumption. This in order to make everything fit within "*the rules*" that this very market "*creates for itself*" in order to become the absolute MUST of the moment for the "*avant-garde*".

If I think of the extraordinary moment of the Bauhaus and all the great instruction that it has left to us I remain truly astonished that we have to be taken backwards to a certain problematic of such an "*old*" world; for sure, things are never simple and every passage implies transformations within which a lot of things are mixed up; in the past surely as well the life was never easy for "revolutionaries" and "experimentalists" .... And every *real* artist can never rest on his laurels, if he does he will risk a loss of creativity, which is strictly connected to research and continuous growth.

## How to define art and where art is going

A while ago I was reading a very beautiful sentence in the preface of the book of Victor I. Stoichita, who is one of the most acclaimed historians of Art history. I remember it more or less like this: "Art, the true Art is like the Consciousness, the true Consciousness; it is always an overcoming of oneself." ...in a certain way I identify myself with a sort of restlessness that looks at things with a deep desire that it for mankind truly exists a possibility of "consciousness" and for me art is a form of consciousness that proceeds according to methods and languages that cannot belong to disciplines that have determinate purposes, specifically linked to precise functions; Art does have to be free of presuppositions in order that it succeeds to

form its own original way and that it gives a vision to other possible perceptions, to other possible "configurations". In my opinion it is not a coincidence that art always finds very special ties to the science of Mathematics etc.. I believe that the future of Art will be versus new "forms" of visions and perceptions of spaces that are more "dilated", more "different" and for "beyond"...

Returning to the problem design, I would like to come to the Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout, who in my opinion represents a somewhat bright and intelligent vision of the currently complex reality. Joep did start to produce design (furniture, objects etc..), then, as an artist, at a certain point he wanted to experiment with forms completely free of any functions and he started to do real sculptures like an artist. I met him during that period around 1994/95; a little later he formed a sort of "society" named Atelier van Lieshout, that produces art, design and architecture; the interesting thing though is, that despite doing all the three things, it results very evidently what is art and what is design, even though if they sometimes play with the ambiguity and with the extremes, but that is part of their research. This research never lends itself to please the market by doing what is functional or not; they have their own identity and "authenticity". An "authenticity" that I do not find at all for instance in the work of Marcel Wanders or of Philippe Starck. When Starck takes up a series of "suggestions" from modern art, like at the museum of Baccarat in Paris that I visited recently, they seem to me badly made copies of interesting works of contemporary artists and he inserts them in an "exasperated" and "pretended" context and in the end he does not even succeed to be consistently super-luxurious (like his work for Baccarat was intended to be).

However, in my opinion, even a designer who made somewhat interesting things in the past like Marc Newson for instance, cunningly lend themselves to the game of playing the artist, because first it increases their media presence and secondly they do not really have to force their brain – which in most cases does not work anymore like before - to really elaborate seriously other true designs. Because design is also research and innovation and like some artists play the designer, in the same way designer play the artists, if they already were successful in one way or the other to enter in the "*meshes*" of the system.

**Giuliana Stella** is teacher of history of contemporary art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome.

She at the same time work as a freelance art curator. In 2005 she organised in this function the first important exhibition of modern art at the Colosseum in Rome by the artist Gary Hill and she also co-organised the section "Aperto" with Achille Bonito Oliva in the Biennale of Venice in 1993.

## The luxury market and Design Miami/Basel

The luxury market is of course involved in the vulgar trend. The new online magazine *Luxuryculture* recently wrote: "Jaime Hayon is the latest proponent of design's new feel-good factor, creating artistic hybrids honed on human appeal. Hayon's magnificent setting resembles a Disneyland for the discerning design buff!" They refer to him as Willy Wonka in his chocolate factory, actually a quite good simile according to us...

*Luxuryculture* also writes about Studio Job: "Studio Job redefines design, instilling everyday objects with fine-art savoir faire and fairytale-like fables". They continue by saying that Job Smeets and Nynke Tynagel of Studio Job "exemplifies the current cross-fertilization taking place in art and design, creating autonomous works that are hard to categorise". Already a couple of years ago Studio Job made artsy pieces but was criticised as superficial. They have continued to work in the same spirit and suddenly they are in the middle of a boosting trend - design in the realm of art - or Vulgarism as we prefer to call it. Two important persons behind the Vulgarism explosion are the founders of Design Miami and Design Basel, Ambra Medda and Sam Keller. They offer a new kind of playground where celebrities are as important as the designers

themselves. Ambra Medda's own words in a recent *Luxuryculture* interview; "I think the celebrity aspect does add to the event... at the normal decorative art fairs you would not see Diddy, Beyoncé, Steve Martin and Keanu Reeves... I think it makes everyone turn around and think, 'Wow this is so cool!'" She continues: "There is so much attention now on limited edition design and it has allowed designers to respond to the trend in going completely crazy and creating these pieces of furniture which, in some cases, have lost their functionality". According to Ambra Medda there is a great demand for expensive on-off and limited-edition design-art objects and together with a couple of gallery owners Design Miami and Design Basel are among the most important compellers of the Vulgarism. We have heard that they also have plans for branches in China and Dubai, which is logical since these areas are full of nouveau riche people and consequently there is an interest for vulgar design-art. This way even more galleries will get the possibility to offer a spectacular scene where designers are invited to play artists and they certainly line up like marionette puppets. The wheels keep on rolling and money is the true engine.



Object by Marc Newson





## Is the Vulgarism a disservice to design?

There has been a lot of discussions lately concerning a possible backlash against design. A suitable question is if the vulgar trend boost is partially responsible for it? The blog Core 77 recently wrote: "This rising tide of disaffection tends to share two themes: a distaste for the superficiality of design's media-celebrity nexus; and a growing discomfort with design's role in generating 'useless stuff'. These two complementary critiques could be abbreviated as Anti-fluff and Anti-stuff."

Paola Antonelli, Curator of MOMA's Department of Architecture and Design says: "Design is treated as fluff and pushed to the lifestyle sections of newspapers."

Likewise we would like to quote a good designer friend of ours who refers to the Vulgarism as design for girl's magazines (no hard feelings towards girl's magazines though)...

Jaime Hayon, one of the fixed stars of the Vulgarism, sees himself as an artist, not a designer: "I think design can be much more like art. I work with intuition. If they say white, then I go black". It is an interesting quote. As a response to it we would like to bring forward an opinion from the British design council concerning the difference between a designer and an artist:

"Designers, unlike artists, can't simply follow their creative impulses. They work in a commercial environment which means there is a huge number of considerations influencing the design process. Designers have to ask themselves questions such as: is the product they're creating really wanted? How is it different from everything else on the market? Does it fulfill a need? Will it cost too much to manufacture? Is it safe?"

Maybe design is too important to play around with? The thought-provoking exhibition "Design for the Other 90%" at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City showed us that nearly all design made is targeted for 10% of the people on earth. Almost no design is made for the other almost six billion people. According to us the superficial objects of the Vulgarism is definitely not made for them. A lot of the fans of this hyperbolized design style will be found around the wealthy Gulf. The new Villa Moda store for Kuwaiti luxury fashion retailer in Dubai by Jaime Hayon and the proposed store for the same company by Marcel Wanders located in Bahrain are two good examples.



## Our architect friend says:

### ”Less is a bore” or ”Less is more”?

After brewing neo-art déco, neo 50th, neo 70th, rationalism, etc. at the end of the 20th century, trends superimpose themselves; what is the identity of the beginning of 21st century?

Nowadays creativity is conditioned by profit either in term of money or brand image.

Temptation is great to create exceptional and superlative pieces out of this mass production environment.

Where is the limit between and artist and a designer, Donald Judd creates chairs and Ron Arad created sculptures! It is still creativity and cleverness we are talking about!

If these two are missing we are drifting into the vulgarity.

**Christian Geissbühler** is architect SIA and used to teach architecture of the 20th century at the EPF Lausanne.

## Our windup

At David Report we believe in long lasting values as one of the best and most valuable sustainable solutions. Today we live in an overcrowded world that is melting. We are producing new stuff as if our resources were unlimited. We need to buy less but better products. We need to re-use and re-cycle. The maximalistic work of the Vulgarism is unfortunately something completely different. It's a blown up bubble of exercise in decoration offering only a hollow shell.

Tom Hedqvist, principal at Beckmans college of design in Stockholm recently tried to describe the climate of design in the 70s compared to today; "We did not design just for the fun of it. People were acting well-advised. Just like the over-consumption is reflecting our society of today".

Will the Vulgarism be something more than a small question mark in the history books? Will it just be a parallel to the rise and fall of the artist Mark Kostabi in the 90s? Designers have a responsibility and as Tom Dixon recently said in an Inhabitat interview "Design could save the world, for that to happen we have got to become more interested in the values that design can bring to solving problems". A good example of long lasting value are the iconic design classics, like the Ant chair by Arne Jacobsen. It's created by pushing the limits of production process and technology in combination with a true reflection of present time. The perpetrators of the Vulgarism are sadly doing neither.

Who will be the first to shout that the emperor is naked?

## Next issue

In next issue of David report bulletin, which will be out early autumn, we will dive deeper into the discussion about the Vulgarism. We will further on continue with our definition of styling compared to design and we will also compare the Vulgarism to another present design style called Neo-rationalism. Until then, relax, play, love...

## Our calendar

To not miss events in the near future concerning design, brand strategy, creative communication, trend forecast and future visions. Please visit David Report home page for a complete event calendar.

### Tällberg Forum

June 28 in Tällberg, Sweden

### New Designers

July 5 in London, United Kingdom

### Index award

August 17 in Copenhagen, Denmark

### Dwell on design

September 14 in San Francisco, USA

### Habitare 07 Furniture

September 19 in Helsinki, Finland

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