

## Design art and new craft: Who's zooming who?

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## ***Design art and new craft: Who's zooming who?***<sup>1</sup>

Katherine Moline, January 2007.

### **Introduction**

Fresh approaches to design emerging in *design art* and *new craft* present intersections between the conventionally distinct categories of visual art, craft, and design. In spite of their stated aim to cross-over disciplines, debates within *design art* and *new craft* characterise the term integration in different ways according to the value they attribute to conceptualisation, decoration, function, and context. While advocates of specialisation criticise hybrid design because they believe it produces only an homogenising blurring of distinctive practices, what is compelling in the new discourses is that although they intersect they are dissonant and serve to highlight the gaps between visual art, craft and design. While *design art* acknowledges the influences of design on art of the second half of the twentieth century, and *new craft* links craft with design's technology and distribution systems, both reveal the culturally sanctioned parameters of visual art and craft. Rather than blur the boundaries of the fields of visual art, craft and design practice, the concept of integration reveals a number of prevailing conventions that each field produces. By contrasting the specificities of each field integration creates new possibilities for design.

### ***Design art***

The phrase "form follows function", coined by Louis Sullivan, did not necessarily mean to suggest a determinist approach to design. As design historian George Marcus points out, Sullivan was actually expressing the view that form should express function, "rather than be determined by it."<sup>2</sup> This interest in the relationship between form and function reflects recent developments in design. However, the functionalist mandate, that design should be "bare of ornament; standardised; [and] machine-made"<sup>3</sup> is exactly what *design art* and *new craft* refute or question.

Art critic Alex Coles cites visual artist, Joe Scanlan's definition that *design art* is "any artwork that attempts to play with the place, function and style of art by commingling it with architecture, furniture and graphic design".<sup>4</sup> While some design artists are concerned with art that works with decoration, and some explore the political possibilities of contemporary art practice through design, according to Coles others "

sidle up to the issue on the sly while at the same time denying any relationship with it what so ever.”<sup>5</sup> In exploring these moves Coles works to recover the debates around decoration and politics in *design-art* as significant concerns for contemporary visual arts practice.

In describing the motivations of design artists, Coles considers whether design artists use design in the mode of the alternative avant-garde of the 1920s, for instance Constructivism, and aim to “change the way we live according to an ideological doxy,” or use design to decorate life, in the manner of Aestheticism of the 1890s. He proposes that in contrast to the implicit values underpinning vanguardism and aestheticism, respectively function vs. form, *design art* instead is concerned with “gently nurturing new ways of living in and around art and design that are as yet unknown.”<sup>6</sup> Coles argues that the facility with which design artists, such as Liam Gillick, traverse discipline boundaries and their associated media demonstrate that discipline boundaries are “often spurious.”<sup>7</sup> While Coles claims that it is puritanical to argue for the preservation of the specificity of visual art,<sup>8</sup> it can also be argued that insights can be drawn from looking at how the fields of visual art, design, and craft currently define integration. While definitions may implicitly privilege conventions of certain domains over others, and emphasize the specificities of one field in particular, juxtaposing fields also opens up new areas in practice between various domains.

Locating the conceptual concerns of *design art* in the distinctions that separated art and science in the late nineteenth century, Coles describes design as a ‘bridge’ between segregated poles of activity. For Coles this is why “the role that design plays is crucial to the vitality of the arts.”<sup>9</sup> Coles recounts the generally accepted chronology of design reform movements and considers *design art* in terms of the efforts towards integration in the Arts and Crafts Movement initiated by William Morris:

Making a case for handcrafted design, they perceived that the divisions between the arts of the ‘intellect’ – architecture, sculpture and painting – and those of the decorative – interior architecture, the crafts, were based on a false supposition.<sup>10</sup>

Coles links the Arts and Crafts movement to Gropius’ definition of the Bauhaus as “the unification of all creative effort ...in which no barriers exist between the structural and decorative arts,”<sup>11</sup> and attributes the demise of “the speculative aspects of design and decoration”<sup>12</sup> to widespread dissemination of the Bauhaus functionalist ethos. According

to Coles it was only in the 1950s when the U.K. based Independent Group, that included design critic Reyner Banham and visual artist Richard Hamilton, cross referenced art and design that these issues were revived in the visual arts. Coles argues that design's influence on visual art in the second half of the twentieth century was largely unacknowledged until the mid 1990s with the emergence of *design art*.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than propose that *design art* integrates art with design, Coles emphasizes that artists draw from the history of design reform to mobilize the agency of visual art in relationship to a wider range of concerns. For example, Gillick's appropriation of the military strategy of 'flexible response,' from the practices of the Cold War, is described as aiming to escape the constricting formulas of practice shaped by an overemphasis on discipline specificity.<sup>14</sup> For Coles, Gillick deployment of flexible response emphasizes that design is concerned with matters beyond mere style. As such Coles argues that Gillick's juxtapositions of decoration with political strategies within the context of visual art "provides a more ideologically complex picture of just one instance of the history of the interface between art and design."<sup>15</sup>

### *New Craft*

In contrast to the priority that *design art* ascribes to the integration of politics and decoration in the domain of visual art, the characterisations of integration in *new craft* present different perspectives. Practices in *new craft* are described by the founder of *ExperimentaDesign* Guta Moura Guedes, as "concerned with identity, autonomy, the need to bypass mass production and to respond to a society tired of constant neutrality."<sup>16</sup> According to Guedes, *new craft* denotes emerging links between design, craft, and "new technologies and new production and distribution systems."<sup>17</sup> Guedes maintains the distinction between craft and design practice, and attributes the emergence of *new craft* to questions about "how to react to the continuous massification of production in today's world, how to integrate local features into global systems."<sup>18</sup>

Reinforcing Guedes' assertion that *new craft* is a response to globalisation, Emily Campbell, Head of Design and Architecture at the British Council, presents four distinct threads running through *new craft*:

digital technology providing new tools and spaces for self expression; the marriage of local craft traditions to international design and production systems; the

evolution of new distribution networks outside conventional commercial channels; and the recycling or remaking of banal or industrial products into newly meaningful objects.<sup>19</sup>

In an example of how the concept of integration relies on polemical definitions that contrasts fields, Campbell echoes William Morris in the context of *new craft* by ascribing to design a stereotype that limits it to the pursuit of standardisation. Against this background Campbell casts craft in stark relief: “the idea of craft contained an intrinsic idea of personal meaning; and the idea of craft in design was gathering force because design so easily risks the banishment of personal meaning.”<sup>20</sup>

Campbell also emphasizes the benefits of entrepreneurial independence that *new craft* provides practitioners. She claims that because online communication environments are not limited to the established protocols of mainstream consumerism, they facilitate distribution directly from designer to the consuming public.<sup>21</sup> Campbell spruiks the new entrepreneurialism and the relations she believes it creates between designer, maker and consumer on the basis that it maintains local craft traditions, and provides economically expedient labour costs. Continuing in a distinctly Modernist framework, Campbell also privileges craft’s allegorical powers in its integration with design and claims that *new craft* objects present narratives that reveal the process of their manufacture as content.

While Campbell foregrounds the narrative potential of the handmade, curator Andreas Nobel distinguishes between what he calls “design-design” and “craft-based design.” According to Nobel design-design is “aesthetized modernism or aesthetized postmodernism” that is “predictable, romantic and escapist” while craft-based design presents a more complex view of the exchanges between nature and culture.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the views of Campbell and Nobel, *new-craft* practitioners present more divergent views of the relationship of their work to craft and design. Some prefer to differentiate craft and design by defining craft as an anonymous activity that follows prescribed formulas. They claim that their role as a designer is in the coordination of craftspeople, and that design is the activity where individual points of view are articulated. This reversal of the perspectives of Campbell and Nobel rely on stereotypes of craft as a contrast to design. Distinct to these contrasting perspectives of the relationships of craft and design, many practitioners claim more ambiguously that their work fits between a

continuum of craft and design.

## **Integration**

By removing the divisions between the properties of decoration and functionality within the domains of visual art and craft, *design art* and *new craft* implicitly re-evaluate design's parameters. While *design art* can be said to integrate functional objects in the visual art context of a gallery, or display the processes of design for the purposes of art, and *new craft* practitioners use design-industry materials and processes in place of the handmade, they share a reflexive attitude to integration within their respective domains of visual art and craft. In so doing they reconfigure function, decoration and use. In contrast, design critic Alice Tremlow recently claimed that the revival of decoration in design is a "stubborn celebration of uselessness" where designers reject the definition of design as an activity where "problems are 'solved' by following a sequence of codified steps."<sup>23</sup> While Tremlow broaches the nexus of design, decoration and use, considered within the wider frameworks described above, designs included in *Integration* may be more productively understood as more finely grained questions about the overdetermination of design methods based on a means-end rationality. Like practitioners in *design art* and *new craft*, practitioners included in *Integration* cross over conventional domains and explore contradictions in the domain of design. They challenge reductive definitions of design as a group of minor para-specialisations and test the parameters in which design takes place.

From one perspective, the word integration describes harmonious synchronicity and a resolution of the differences between art, design, and craft. From another, integration is negatively associated with consensual agreements that only reaffirm standard categories and their traditional hierarchical relationships. For example, the political history of the implications of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, that the term integration connotes is historically associated with totalitarian regimes. As such, the nuances of the word integration spin between a positive sense of inclusion, and a sense that there are always criteria for exclusion. That is, works that are not integrated, not total, might disintegrate and simply no longer be visible. However, with a critical eye to what may also be excluded, the works presented in *Integration* present possibilities for commingling specialisations and reformulating design to respond critically to emerging contexts.

The significance of integration is not that visual art, craft and design become equivalent in a homologous ‘lump’, but that the tensions between them keep in play the historical forces from which they emerged. Whether derived from the traditions of William Morris protesting the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century; or the critical comment prized in visual arts practice; or informed by the history of experimental design in Italian design of the 1960s; or the denial of any tradition at all, integration is an area where intermingling, contradiction, and fierce debate over the parameters and contexts of visual art, craft and design is most visible.

The different inflections that visual art, craft and design bring to their interpretation of integration informs the works included in the exhibition *Integration* and the questions they pose about the stereotypes of design that polarise function and decoration, conceptualisation and context. When plastic ornament becomes a potent symbol of interconnection, or paper becomes treasured jewel, integration raises many questions about convergence in the social and environmental contexts of design, and the social and environmental realities that design produces. Integrated design is not a quest for enhanced prestige through association with art, or with claims for autonomy, as many may suppose. It is a thinking through of: what it means to produce more ‘stuff’ in a teetering planet; how to make apparent issues that at first glance appear hidden; and how to address an audience living in diverse social conditions. From this perspective integrated design can be defined as reflecting on design’s imbrication in a domain that, like visual art and craft, is historically determined. What is specific to design is that by definition it delicately balances between domains, contexts, and perspectives. How these works demonstrate the differences and negotiations between visual art, craft and design is significant because they challenge expectations about the conventions of narrative, manufacture, distribution, decoration and function in the field/s in which they are generated. These integrated approaches reveal the intersections and the spaces still open between the domains of visual art, craft, design —overlapping and in-between the past and the future.

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- <sup>1</sup> Aretha Franklin, *Who's zooming who?* BMG Special products, 1985
- <sup>2</sup> George Marcus, *Functionalist Design: an ongoing history*, Prestel-Verlag, New York, 1995 p.13
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p.9
- <sup>4</sup> Joe Scanlan cited in Alex Coles, *DesignArt*, Tate Publishing, London 2005 p.14
- <sup>5</sup> Alex Coles *DesignArt* p.37
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.15.
- <sup>7</sup> Alex Coles "Liam Gillick and the Kenneth Noland Scenario" *Parachute* no118 68-83 Ap/My/Je 2005 p.78
- <sup>8</sup> Alex Coles *DesignArt* p. 8
- <sup>9</sup> Alex Coles "On Art's Romance with Design" *Design Issues* Vol 21 No. 3. 2005 p.18
- <sup>10</sup> Alex Coles *DesignArt* p.16-17
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid* p.17
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid* p.19
- <sup>13</sup> Alex Coles "On Art's Romance with Design" *Design Issues* Vol 21 No. 3. 2005 p.19
- <sup>14</sup> Alex Coles "Liam Gillick and the Kenneth Noland Scenario" *Parachute* no118 68-83 Ap/My/Je 2005 p.79
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p.82
- <sup>16</sup> Guta Moura Guedes "Preface" *My World New Crafts*, ExperimentaDesign, Lisbon, 2005. p.1
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.1
- <sup>18</sup> Guta Moura Guedes "Portugal in the context of My World New Crafts" *My World New Crafts* ExperimentaDesign, Lisbon, 2005. p.14
- <sup>19</sup> Emily Campbell, "My World: Make it your own" *My World New Crafts*, ExperimentaDesign, Lisbon 2005. p.8
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p.8
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.8
- <sup>22</sup> Andreas Nobel "Crispy: Craft based design from Sweden" *My World New Crafts*, ExperimentaDesign, Lisbon, 2005 p.59
- <sup>23</sup> Alice Tremlow "The decriminalisation of ornament" *Eye magazine: The international review of graphic design*, No. 58, Vol. 15 Winter 2005 p.25