

22. Anthony Dunne quoted in Christian Brändle, 'Dunne & Raby and Michael Anastassiades', in: King and Brändle, *Wouldn't it be nice* . . . , op. cit. (note 10), 163.

needs and desires, it can't create them. If our desires remain unimaginative and practical, then that is what design will be. I suppose in our projects we are hoping for a time when we will have more complex and subtle everyday needs than we do today. Our objects are designed in anticipation of that time. Patiently waiting. Maybe they are utopian.²² Measured against critical design's wild dreams, design thinking's rhetoric just sounds tawdry.

Middle Culture

Designers, Artists, Professionals

Camiel van Winkel

The opposition between high and low culture, between elite art and the culture industry, is a product of modernity. Historically the rise of mass culture must be linked to the appearance of the autonomous work of art. Each half of this pair can only be imagined in opposition to its 'other'. The split between high and low culture is more than a product or effect of modernity – you could say it is its foundation. To borrow a phrase from Boris Groys: 'Modernity is not only characterized, but even constituted by this split: in a sense modernity is nothing but this split.'¹ The autonomous work of art is inconceivable without its dialectical counterpart, its 'other': the heteronomous and the banal; the kitsch product; global mass entertainment. Before Beethoven and Balzac there was no such thing as kitsch. During the centuries of human civilization that passed before the autonomy of the artist was installed, mass culture didn't exist. It needed the technologies of mass communication, mass production and mass distribution in order to come into existence. Mass culture definitely is an industry, in every sense of the word.

Both the autonomous work of art and the culture industry were predicated upon social, economical and technological changes that followed the Industrial Revolution, the demise of the *ancien régime* and the emancipation of the middle classes. Walter Benjamin's intuition that modern reproduction technologies would forever end the realm of the contemplative, elitist work of art has proven unfounded. The relationship between the two forms is dialectical. Art and mass culture are each other's spinoff . . . each other's debris . . . each other's perversion . . . each other's disgrace . . . This is a mechanism that cuts both ways: art is a derivative of mass culture just as much as mass culture is a derivative of high art. Mass culture amounts to junk when measured

1. Boris Groys, 'Fundamentalismus als Mittelweg zwischen Hoch- und Massenkultur', in: Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters* (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997), 61.

2. Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture' (1979), in: Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992), 14.

3. Ibid., 15.

4. Boris Groys, 'Die Zukunft gehört der Tautologie' (1995) in: Groys, *Logik der Sammlung*, op. cit. (note 1), 87.

against the standards of high art, and similarly high art turns into junk when judged with the standards of mass culture. Fredric Jameson proposes 'that we read high and mass culture as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena, as twin and inseparable forms of the fission of aesthetic production under capitalism.'² They are like two continents drifting apart after having broken off from some legendary Gondwanaland.

The twin sister of mass culture is autonomous art; or, more specifically, autonomous *modernist* art. Jameson: 'From a historical point of view the only form of "high culture" which can be said to constitute the dialectical opposite of mass culture is that high culture production contemporaneous with the latter, which is to say that artistic production generally designated as *modernism*.'³ What does this mean for the situation in which we find ourselves today? Although we still admire and absorb the products of modernism in museums, libraries and concert halls, its ideology, its theoretical mainframe, is a thing of the past. The artistic and ideological collapse of modernism implies that mass culture – its dialectical counterpart – has also stopped being an identifiable entity. In many ways we have moved beyond the high/low division, and entered the cold, postmodern universe of cultural differences. Meaning is everywhere. Culture is an endless array of differences. Producing differences has become the ultimate meaning of life. The more culture is produced, the higher the number of cultural producers that claim to be different, and the smaller the differences become.

Culturally we live in a universe of *microdifferences*, as philosopher Boris Groys stated in 1996: 'The new ... is being produced ever faster and in ever bigger quantities ... because people increasingly understand what it means to be innovative. On top of that the techniques of today not only allow for the exact reproduction of originals, they also make it possible to automatically generate deviations from those originals ... Wherever you look today, it is all differences that you see.'⁴

Here is an example. In 1996 German artist Thomas Struth made a photographic work that represents a cemetery in the centre of Tokyo. The work is titled after the location: *Aoyama Cemetery*. There is an interesting formal play between the rectangular shapes of the gravestones and funerary monuments, and the tall office and apartment buildings in the background. Now if you do a simple search on a website such as flickr.com, you'll find that many photographers, both amateur and professional, have taken pictures on the same location. And some of their photo's look remarkably similar to the one made by Struth. They are variations on the same motif. Perhaps a comparison will show that Struth is the better photographer, and that his photograph is the most interesting. But still this case demonstrates that even intelligent, serious artists need to come to terms with the cultural imperative to produce work that is 'different'; and that in this respect they

are facing the same conditions as cultural producers working in any other niche.

High & Low

There is a complicating factor. What used to be high and low culture have equally become mere products in the hands of marketeers. In that respect they are interchangeable. Art museums and video game producers target audiences in ways that are more or less the same. The culture of marketing is a middlebrow culture – not high-brow nor low-brow but *middlebrow*. The M of *money* is also the M of *mediocrity*. The pervasive marketing of culture has further contributed to the blurring of boundaries between high and low. High and Low could be described as the treble and bass controls on a stereo amplifier: two buttons that cultural marketeers turn up and down, with a lot of flair and opportunism, in their never-ending quest for the commercial optimum – the best mix to match their sale strategies.

Recently *Junglebook* appeared as a series of supermarket promotion gadgets at Albert Heijn. Spend 10 euros and get 2 fluffy figurines for free. Soon we will see Bouvard and Pécuchet as mass-produced garden sculptures at our local garden centre. Where will this end? *Kafka the Musical*??

Yet how are we to criticize developments like these, if they result in more people getting acquainted with art and culture, albeit through a derivative spin-off? After all, that's perfectly in line with the educational ideology of museums and other cultural institutions. As a mode of self-legitimation, education is the bottom line for cultural institutions, when everything else has failed.



Thomas Struth, *Aoyama Cemetery 2*, Tokyo, 1996.
©Thomas Struth.

The real problem of high and low is the fact that we lack terms to define it as a problem. We no longer have an intellectual or ideological foundation to base such a critique on. This explains why for the cultural consumer of today, the issue of high and low is not an issue at all. Consumers have a right to their own bad taste, and they are proud of it. They have other things to worry about. In the twentieth century the middle classes became aware of an urgent need for a cultural identity. As the higher and lower strata inevitably converge towards some gravitational centre, the middle classes discover that they lack a set of recognizable cultural signifiers or markers that are theirs and only theirs. This lack of a cultural identity is a major source of social anxiety. The anxiety is suspended – not resolved but suspended – by continuously absorbing and compounding bits of identity from other (older) classes and social layers: tokens and accessories, jammed together to form an uncertain heterogeneous ensemble. Tattoos used to be the trademark of sailors and prisoners; now even sales managers and real estate agents have them. The middle classes have become obsessed with lifestyle. In fact the obsession with lifestyle is the main cultural trait of the middle classes today.

Contemporary fashion design is just a formalized version of this anxiety-driven middle-class quest for a stable identity. Each 'look' in fashion is like a contrived montage of social and class signifiers:

The bohemian-bourgeois hippie-gypsy colonial look.
The military outfit meets Rasta coffeeshop hangout look.
The riding boots with carpenter's pants and nipple piercings look.
The ripped jeans with vintage geisha accessories look.
The closet-gay executive asshole meets old-money property-owner look.
The Mao-costume with pearl necklace look.
The late November fox-hunting seventies disco look.
The punky fluorescent secretary look.
The Louis Quatorze trampy homeless look.

If mass culture is the culture of the masses, the middle, the majority, who could pretend *not* to be permeated by it? Mass culture is not something you can step outside of. It's inside us. It's inside you, and inside me. The high/low tandem may have once been an objective division of cultural production, but now it's all in your head. High and low are two emotions, two distinct emotions, two forms of desire – two opposite forms of mental saturation ... High and low are the cultural equivalent of *uppers* and *downers* in the drug department. And as everyone knows, the choice between uppers and downers is purely a matter of consumption, of consumer behaviour; the demand is strictly individual and may vary from moment to moment; the 'intake' has been stripped of moral qualifications.

If the Low is a *horizontal* state of mind, its opposite, High, is an emotional state related to the *vertical*. On the high end of the spectrum, there is the rush, a sensation of limitless energy, stimulation, euphoria. Your brain seems to expand, your sense of self dematerializes, you start to float, you no longer feel your own body. You are launched into a sublime void, a dematerialized universe. On the other end of the spectrum we find the low emotion, the cultural equivalent of a downer. It entails a slow move into 'dreamy nether regions' – the realm of relaxation, tranquillization and indulgence. This emotion is driven by the desire to give up all resistance and critical consciousness; to just follow the thick flow of bodily desire.

'Good Design'

Contemporary cultural production is determined by two general conditions. The first can be identified as *the regime of visibility*. This implies that nothing matters unless it has been clearly visualized. To be seen, to be noted, to stand out, to be different is the primary aim of any cultural or social act. Success equals visibility and visibility equals success.⁵

The second condition is *the dictate of professionalism*. Criteria of effective process management and good entrepreneurship increasingly dominate the cultural field. These general criteria of professionalism have become crucial for the recognition of quality in cultural production. Cultural producers are confronted with the imperative of effectiveness, competence, networking, efficient communication, audience targeting, rational budget management, total quality control, and so on and so on.

What does this imply for the realm of visual art? One implication is that, socially, culturally and economically, visual art is being pushed into the corner of *design*. It is not understood, and less and less accepted, why works of art could not have the same kind of direct public appeal and economic spin-off that the various sectors of applied art, such as fashion and industrial design, seem to have. Design stands out as a domain that bridges or transcends the dichotomy of art and mass culture. More efficiently than anything else, it brings together the realms of high and low. This explains why it has become an increasingly successful model of cultural production. Design makes the opposition between high and low culture seem obsolete. Everything becomes design in the sense that criteria of 'good design' are being applied to every single cultural domain.

Fundamentally, to use a phrase coined by Dutch design critic Hugues Boekraad, design is 'the quintessence of postmodern self-determination'. Boekraad says: 'The less we conduct our life in accordance with the precepts of tradition or inner conviction, the more it is influenced by professional languages and patterns of action and by categories of evaluation and observation. It is at that moment that designers make their appearance. The function of design – including the design of one's own life – has become so

5. Cf. Camiel van Winkel, *The Regime of Visibility* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2005).

6. Frederike Huygen and Hugues Boekraad, *Wim Crouwel: Mode en module* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1997), 189 and 192.

dominant that it can serve as a metaphor for post-traditional life. In the absence of prescribed forms, life becomes a quest for new forms.⁶ So the paradox is that the professional tools and languages of design have become central to the lives of professionals and non-professionals alike.

As regards the professionals, this image shows what they probably look like. It represents the Philips design department, as photographed for last week's issue of *NRC Focus* business magazine. The caption says: 'These individuals' task is to design products that make consumers happy and improve the quality of their lives.' I hope everyone hears the faint echo of Stendhal's *promesse de bonheur* in this job description.

In fact it is a very interesting group portrait. What you see here boils down to the corporate or 'lite' version of an avant-garde artist collective. The Philips product designers have been represented as a group of young, self-assured, metrosexual, ambitious and extremely focused team workers. They have surrounded themselves with all sorts of utensils for spontaneous artistic creation, ready to grab whenever a brilliant idea for a new Philips invention pops up. While pampered by the company, you can tell that on top of that these individuals are really the ideal employees of today, completely devoted to their work, utterly flexible, ready to prepare work presentations and answer e-mails in the weekend, as creativity knows no bounds.

My point is not that designers have become artists but, on the contrary, that designers provide the new role model for artists. Given the prominence of the criteria of 'good design', the notion of what a good work of art is has changed. A new consensus about what an artist is or does, what they can or should do, is being formed. This is partly the outcome of developments outside the domain of art, such as the successful rhetoric of the 'creative industry' and 'creative class', launched by Richard Florida.⁷ But similar impulses have come from within the art milieu itself. Movements in contemporary art of the last ten to fifteen years have actually contributed to this gradual redefinition.

So what exactly is the new consensus? Good art communicates with its 'users'; it is open and transparent. Good art is highly aware of its context and uses that awareness to responsibly create a 'place' for itself. More generally as well, it stems from a socially responsible attitude. Good art generates constructive communication between people. It avoids effects of alienation and estrangement. It does not impose any absolutes. It has a positive effect on a local community. It is interactive and brings out the best in people. It offers a unique experience. It generously accepts and stimulates an active response from individuals. Intended or not, these quality criteria move the work of art deeper and deeper into the rhetoric of contemporary design.

Of course, both among the general audience and in professional art circles you will still find the popular notion that art is

7. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).



Henk Wildschut, group photo Philips Design Department, 2008. © Henk Wildschut.

the domain of the unusual, the unexpected, the bizarre, the uncompromised, the domain where the mediocrity of everyday life can be overcome and transcended. But beneath or besides that notion one feels the presence of another kind of discourse, a discourse that increasingly gains strength, especially due to changes in the institutional and educational setting of art. According to this discourse, artists are educated, competent 'professionals' that aspire to learn and develop themselves all through their career. They have well-researched ideas and possess the ability to communicate and discuss those ideas. They feel responsible about the place and the effect of art in society. They keep themselves up-to-date with the latest developments in their profession. Of course they have a Master's degree and are thinking about doing a PhD ...

Applied Concept Art

If all this appears to be a relatively recent trend, it also happens to be the culmination of an older process. Ever since it came into being as a distinct genre, around 1970, contemporary art has been the domain of a paradigm or ideology that is remarkably close to that of design. In fact you could say that what we call *contemporary art* is nothing but the result of the conditioning of visual art by the two forces that I have identified: the regime of visibility and the dictate of professionalism.

Contemporary art is a kind of 'applied concept art' – a hybrid of *form* and *concept*, applied to a specific *context*. These terms – form, concept and context – together make up the fundamental

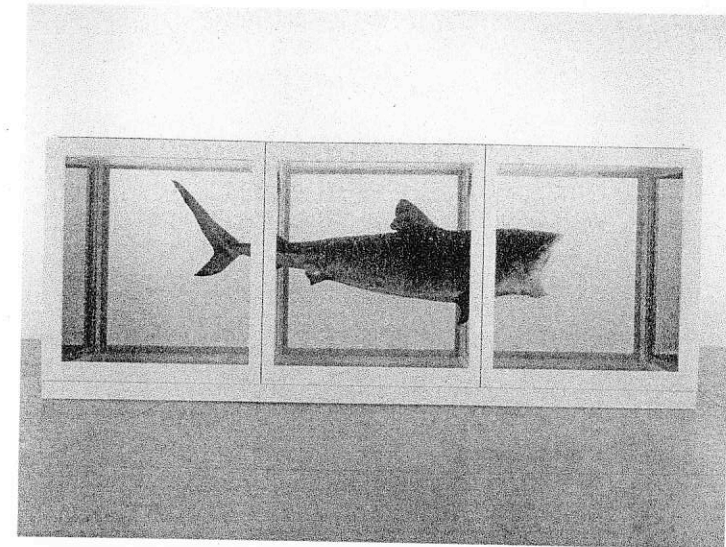
discursive triangle underlying the production and reception of art. The making of a contemporary work of art is a three-step process. First, an analysis of the context provides the artist with the specifications for the development of the concept. Next, the concept is executed and made to take form. And finally, the form is such that it can be productively applied to the original context. Just as in the case of the design professions, concept and execution are separate dimensions. The concept is primary; the execution may be subcontracted, handed over to assistants or skilled craftsmen, or done industrially, as long as the artist supervises the process, takes all important decisions, and determines the final outcome. In order to produce a work of art that is 'authentic' and 'authored', it is not necessary for the artist to do the execution, the material labour, him- or herself. This means that, at a fundamental level, works of art today are *designed* rather than just *made*. In contemporary art this has become so evident that we hardly think about it anymore. Conceptual art in the 1960s was already haunted by the spectre of design, as I have tried to show in my book *The Regime of Visibility*. Contemporary art is post-conceptual as a whole, in the double sense that it *comes after* and *is permeated by* conceptual art. The triangle form-concept-context essentially is a post-conceptual matrix that underlies the whole of contemporary art production.

Let's take a random work of art and see what the implications are for the measure of success in contemporary art: Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1992). Why is this such a successful work? You could almost say it is the quintessential model of success in contemporary art. I think anyone can tell you why it is successful. Here's why:

Its concept is simple.
It can be recognized from miles away.
Once you've seen it, you'll never forget it.
Whether you like it or not, it *works*.
It's great to take pictures of.
It has plenty of entertainment and spectacle value.
Anyone will feel addressed by it.
It's the trademark of its maker.
It's unpretentious *and* unbelievable.
It's unheard-of yet completely evident.
It suggests it is the universal symbol of ... something.
And the media love it.

It can hardly be a coincidence that these characteristics perfectly match the list of criteria for the design of a successful logo, as provided by Gregory Thomas and Earl Powell in their book *How to Design Logos, Symbols & Icons*.⁸ Thomas and Powell give ten criteria for the development of a successful logo. Let's go through them, while keeping Hirst's shark in mind.

8. Gregory Thomas and Earl A. Powell, *How to Design Logos, Symbols & Icons*. 23 Internationally Renowned Studios Reveal how they Develop Trademarks for Print and New Media (Cincinnati: North Light Books, 2000), 20.



Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Prudence Cumming Associates. © Damien Hirst.

Visibility: Will the logo stand out in its surroundings to provide quick and memorable identification?

Cross-media application: How well can it be used in a variety of applications?

Distinctiveness: Will it distinguish itself from its competition?

Simplicity and universality: Is the concept easy to identify?

Retention: Does the symbol give the viewer a sense of discovery and personal equity with the mark?

Effectiveness in colour and black and white: Does it work in technologies that are unable to display the subtle nuances of some colour patterns?

Descriptiveness: Does it reveal the nature of the company or product?

Timelessness: Will it last?

Modularity: Will the potential mark be adaptable to numerous applications?

Equity: Does the mark respect the 'age, use and recognition' of its predecessors?

Even if Damien Hirst might fail that final test, the criterion of equity, he still gets a score of nine out of ten ...

All this leaves us with the question whether there is a future for visual art as an autonomous discipline. Is there a way out of the current situation? Both art and the artistic profession will continue to develop – not in big quantum leaps, but slowly. These changes will always reflect the social demands and cultural aspirations of the period.

The artist-as-designer is a strong and highly contemporary format or model that will not lose its prominence any time soon. In fact it could be seen as the outcome of developments that already started in the early twentieth century and even has roots in the nineteenth century: the gradual collapse of the notion of a fine art métier, the growing obsolescence of the idea of the artist as craftsman, and the rise of the artist as 'professional without profession'. When seen in this light, the contemporary status of visual art as 'applied concept art' is the endpoint of a long process. At the moment I don't see any alternative for it, and the return to some kind of centralized craft or métier most certainly is not a solution. That road is definitely closed.

If the model of 'applied concept art' now starts to feel more restrictive and less productive than it has before, this says less about the model itself than about the way it is being implemented in the current socioeconomic order. I am referring to the increased pressure to consider the artistic occupation as a normal profession in compliance with general norms of professionalism and entrepreneurship. This restrictive application of the model is not inherent to the model itself.

There is one important thing to keep in mind: contemporary art will continue to have its own discourse, its own theories, its own frame of reference. Even when in form and appearance the differences between works of art and other cultural artefacts will have disappeared completely, there will always be the manic tendency towards self-reflection that characterizes the contemporary visual artist. Out of this self-reflection, possibilities may continue to arise to formulate alternatives to the dominant model – if only imaginary alternatives. More than ever the development of strong artistic discourse seems crucial.



Rick Poynor, Frederike Huygen and Camiel van Winkel.

Discussion

The discussion was moderated by Frederike Huygen, design historian and critic specialized in Dutch Design.

Moderator: One thing we seem to agree on is that design is also part of consumerism, visibility, identities, marketing and commercial interest. Most designers we are talking about are trying to escape those areas of working. Camiel, in your lecture you mainly seem to associate design with a process, a strategy, with professionalism, almost as if you think that design is a managerial skill. But what kind of cultural values do you think design is about? Could you perhaps clarify your own position?

Camiel van Winkel: I am trying to get away from the discussion about cultural values, and from the high-low opposition. For me as a critic it is no longer productive to think in those terms. Rick Poynor wants to prove somehow that design is not inherently instrumental. I think it is instrumental, and there is nothing wrong with that. Design is part of an industrial production process, and most designers work for clients. Design is an applied art form. However, I don't want to attach old-fashioned value judgements to that. In my lecture I proposed a few mechanisms

that could explain the success design has today, and I have tried to analyse how that influences the way we look at works of art.

Rick Poynor: There are designers who resist the notion of design as pure instrumentality. They look around for what seems to them a more workable model. Of course they look enviously in the direction of the artist. If you are trying to produce a kind of free autonomous work, where will it go, if not the gallery? The media which designers are adept at using present opportunities for all kinds of intervention and so does self-initiated work that makes use of an existing medium. So if a designer produces a book, well yes, this is a commodity, but it can have other purposes, other meanings, determined by the designer as a kind of author. I'm not suggesting that all design should aspire to do this, I'm simply saying that those possibilities exist and that they seem to be worthwhile as tools for reflection. This instrumental design we're talking about is the result of an abandonment of certain kinds of values. Is this not a worrying development? If art really cares about design so much, then at least we should address what design has been historically, what it thinks about itself and look at some examples of individuals who have tried to break with the norms. Camiel van Winkel's diagnosis in his

lecture is spot-on. The question is: Can we do something about it, and is it desirable to do something about it? That's where we should start.

Camiel van Winkel: The problem I have with your approach is that you overestimate the effect of critical designers. I feel you have come here tonight with the intention to gain support for the idea of a critical-intellectual base in the design community. Just like you I'm happy that that base exists, but I think it is fairly marginal in relation to other things going on in society; on top of that it relies exclusively on an art context. To focus on this critical segment is a way of turning your back against the mainstream of design, which sits comfortably in the middle between the 'design thinking' adopted by corporations on the one hand, and the critical designers on the other. This is particularly unsatisfactory now that a lot of design thinking already has permeated society via the mainstream. Whether you like it or not, that's an interesting fact that we need to look at.

Rick Poyner: It's undeniably interesting and I also agree that critical design is a marginal activity at the moment. So I talk about it in the spirit of frantically trying to fan the flames, which I think we need to do, to create the possibility of development. This is at least a moment, a critical moment, when some designers seem prepared to name themselves, organize themselves, and commit themselves to thinking about the purpose of design and all of that seems to me culturally useful. Why give in to defeatism?

Moderator: Why is it so difficult to get across the importance that design can have as a social agent, let's say something integrated in the real world with an added value that is not necessarily the nice bag, or on the other extreme, the designer as an artist on the gallery wall?

Camiel van Winkel: I have the impression that the two of you, as intellectuals, feel slightly embarrassed by the enormous social success of design as a form of cultural production. Art museums increasingly show design objects rather than works of art, because they have trouble finding audiences and with design that seems to be easier to achieve. Design objects always look nice, they have a broad, general appeal, and they are not difficult to explain. Of course, designers love to show their work in museums because it gives them a higher status. Still there has always been this bad conscience in the design world, which I think goes back to the basic fact that designers are not artists. They come from the same modernist Bauhaus tradition, but they lack the autonomy that artists have. Especially when their commercial success increases, the embarrassment grows.

Rick Poyner: I don't think there's a contradiction. Design is all around us, we do inhabit it and the designer, as the creator, shaper and contributor to that world, is absolutely implicated. But being in the thick of things means we have to be honest and open in our communication about the nature of own complicity. We have to make that visible. Now, of course, that is an idealistic and utopian notion in itself and in practice, from project to project, day after day as a designer, fantastically hard to do.

Kaja Silverman - The Twilight of Posterity

Now Media

Laura U. Marks - Aniconism