DESIGN ART:
An exploration of the blurring of boundaries between art, craft and design

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Abstract

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In this analysis of design art, past and present definitions of art, design and craft will be compared in order to inform the design art debate. How the importance and role of media and galleries in defining genres and values of work have added to and fuelled the debate, will be shown. Prototypes and one offs are commonly seen under the title of design art; it will be shown how innovation comes from this type of designing. The dissertation concluded that designers are seeking to meet the demand for unique objects, and as a result are finding their work overlapping with art. Art must re-invent itself for survival, and has done so by including both design and craft. As a result of this, has the status of craft has been lifted by being included in design art?
We are in a moment of time defined by change, hybridisation and exploration. One of the reasons for this is that design, like many other disciplines, is now changing to fulfil the new roles it faces: to keep up with new materials and technologies, to help make the world a better and more sustainable place, and to meet the demand for novelty.¹

One could say that design has traditionally been seen as about working to find solutions and achieve goals, all within a certain amount of restrictions. This can be dictated by materials, manufacturing techniques, price, function, design process, interface and technological systems; working in two, three and even four dimensions. Some designers could be working within the virtual realm of calculations and CAD programmes, while at the other end of the scale designers are in the workshop working and shaping by hand, like craftspeople did thousands of years before them. Then there are the designers who make objects that seem to have no function at all.² But much of the distinction between the applied and the design arts is breaking down, and different elements of art, craft and design are now being combined, resulting in today’s objects, some leaving the critics at a loss to which category to place them in.

When a new way of working comes along, it means new categories of products, new ways of selling them, and new words with which to talk about them. It has been generally accepted that design art generates a small number of high cost objects which sometimes have nothing to do with being functional. It can be questioned whether this is just ‘new’ design, a start of a new movement, a fashion fad, or simply art.³ The answer to this is something that will emerge over time depending on how the work is received. This dissertation will explore these blurring boundaries between art,

² Ibid.
design and fashion; it will strive to analyse why this debate is relevant to how we consume and understand design and art, and why, traditionally, we tend to place one above the other.

To begin with we need a basic understanding of design and art discourses. A designer, to Bruno Munari, is a planner with an aesthetic sense. ‘Certain industrial products depend in large measure on him for their success.’ For it is for the designer to find the best way to design an object that will then tempt the buyer to give up their money. To achieve this, the form must be appropriate to its function: from the material, from the most up-to-date production techniques, cost, and other psychological and aesthetic factors.

A designer is also seen as the super hero of solving problems, ‘the job of designers is to improve things.’ It is important for them to have good design awareness so that the quality of the design leads to a better product for the consumer. This also gives a sense of originality, as the solution to the problem might involve a new process, material, or a completely new object.

‘Designers tend to make things look good, there is usually a quest to appeal or to seduce an audience, and of course to make things look good, we use recognised visual codes, and those visual codes are normally and usually brokered by art, so art tends to broker our understanding of aesthetics, which then designers employ those aesthetics to appeal to us.’

Peter Saville suggests that artists set the norm of aesthetic values, which is then followed by designers. However this may not always be the case; design may be taking its lead from fashion, for example other design. Furthermore, certain design is now more independent from art; for example in the exhibition ‘Telling Tales’, industrial designers have created art like objects using narrative. It could be argued that this is an example of design leading art, which will be considered later in more detail.

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4 Munari, Bruno, Design as Art, (Editori Laterza, 1966) (pg 29)
5 Munari, Bruno, Design as Art, (Editori Laterza, 1966) (pg 30)
The term art, in the traditional sense, is used to refer to skill or mastery which is constructed by human artists. Many today wouldn’t be pleased with that term, as it can be questioned what skill or mastery comes with putting a shark in a tank, but that is a different kind of art. Like design, there are many different sub-categories, all with the aim of stimulating thoughts and emotions in the fellow human being, to push at the boundaries of any such definition. Conceptual art ‘... is to be savvy, reactive, dynamic, aware, timely, in constant motion, aware of fashion’, and to create any type of emotion from the viewer, sometimes even confusion, and it could be said that this is its function, but not to Hugh Pearman;

‘Works of art are by definition useless, in functional terms. A racing car is pure function. It is often beautiful. That is not the same thing as art... An artist could not say that a work of art was a designed object, however the user of the object, since it must be functional, might disagree.’

It seems that a common definition for art is that it is not functional, whereas design is expected to be useful. It is up to the user to decide what they consider to be beautiful, and this could include design objects that are desirable to them. Art is sometimes not beautiful, and perhaps this is in order to create a reaction and to push the boundaries of human acceptance.

According to Grayson Perry, ‘Contemporary art has become this baggy old bag; you can dump any old thing in and people say it’s art ... If you go to the Tate, every scrap of paper, every piece of poo – literally – is only made significant because it has a famous name attached...’

It seems that contemporary art is anything that an artist wants it to be, and success is due to fame; just having their name attached to it makes it art that is worth notice, regardless of its quality and depth. Sensationalism refers to the ‘Young British Artists’ who work with irony, diverse materials and exploration of contemporary experience. More importantly the artists, including Damien Hirst, are recognised as expert exploiters of the mass media. To be well known in the media is very

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9 Ibid.
13 Little, Stephen, ...Isms – understanding art, (Herbert Press, London 2004) (pg 140)
Figure 1. Installation view of ‘Cage sans Frontieres’ with ‘Even the Odd Balls’ chairs (2009) and ‘Lolita Chandelier’, (2004), Ron Arad.
typical of being an artist, and is a good omen that their work will be successful; for a designer though it has been rare to be well known within the homes of the consumer. Ron Arad, however, is a designer who has the fame of an artist, and his work has aspects of art within it, but is still functional. He has become one of the fathers of what is now known as design art; objects too functional to be full-fledged art and too sculptural and expensive to be considered real design.\textsuperscript{14}

The credit for the term “design art” has been given to Alexander Payne, the director of design at Phillips de Pury & Company auction house, in 1999:

‘I used the terminology back at the turn of the millennium to create a provocative and interesting concept for people to discuss and debate. It was very interesting to look at how design and art and architecture were fusing and melting into this one language and barriers were being broken down, lines where being blurred.’\textsuperscript{15}

He had hoped that by linking this term with contemporary pieces, such as prototypes, that buyers and sellers would have a better way of communicating with each other. However what this term met with was negativity from artists, designers, gallery curators, collectors, and importantly, the media. This led to Payne publicly retracting the term in early 2008. It seems though that the term is still in use to describe prototypes and one offs.\textsuperscript{16}

The prototype is the first of its kind, being a little rough and imperfect, but still the first clear example of the intended design idea. It is the phase between concept and series for industrial designers; from then on refinement is needed until the final design is reached.\textsuperscript{17} Prototypes are mostly handmade or individually machined; the main aim is to test structure, form or materials rather than aiming for perfection. However sometimes they reach a high degree of finish, so that from a collector’s point of view, a well-known prototype can be valuable and highly desired.\textsuperscript{18}

This then makes the desirable quality of the prototype more about originality, rather than perfection; like buying the original painting instead of the photocopy. The collectors at the higher end of the market have started to view prototypes of series furniture as investment opportunities,

\textsuperscript{14} Antonelli, Paola, \textit{Ron Arad No Discipline}, (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009) (pg 8-9)
\textsuperscript{17} Lovell, Sophie, \textit{Limited edition – Prototypes, One-offs and Design Art Furniture}, (Birkhäuser GmbH, Feb 2009) (pg 31)
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Figure 2: Beugel Chair by Gerrit Rietveld
putting them on the same level as handmade and one off objects. The Beugel Chair is a perfect example (figure 2); it was designed by Gerrit Rietveld, 1927, and then manufactured by Metz & Co in 1930. It is also called the curved armchair, but what is more important is that it is a very rare piece of design, with only half a dozen known to exist. One of the significant aspects of this design is that Rietveld was the first to make a chair where the seat and the back are made from one single piece. The appeal of this design lies in its history; it existed in a different time from today which can be a romantic thought. To own something that has played an important part in history, and would have affected future designers and buyers alike, is to own that time in history.

The definition of the prototype is changing; from collecting special pieces that were part of the mass production era, it has developed into collecting the now quite contemporary prototypes, from established or even young designers. This has led to some confusion with the meaning of ‘prototype’. Many designers still follow its true meaning and use prototypes in the development of their final designs. However there are those who use prototypes as sketches or pieces of sculpture that are more linked with creative concepts than with any sort of product; then there are designers who seem to do both.

Satyendra Pakhalé designs series production work for Magis, Cor Unum and Cappellini; he also does his own experiments with materials and processes. This has resulted in his B.M. Horse Chair and Ceramic Chair that have then made their way into the gallery market. He calls this work ‘studio projects’ and it can show the results of years of research. The Horse Chair took around seven years to get right, and involved many scale models and 3D CAD designs. However he is only willing to call the first piece, made to scale in the real material, a ‘prototype’.

For others prototypes are a way of expression and a marketing tool, in which a normally slow process of industrial product development can keep pace with a world that is forever hungry for novelty and innovation. The objects have become a vehicle for gaining media presence, which many hope will lead on to contracts with manufacturers or commissions by galleries to develop the idea further.

Figure 3: B.M Horse Chair by Satendra Pakhale Design Studio
It appears likely that a lot more skill and years of learning are required for good design, compared to conceptual art which expresses an idea. However conceptual thinking can also be seen within design which uses prototypes to express a possible idea, which then either gets taken to mass production or discarded. However some prototypes exist as objects in their own right; we have already seen an example with the Horse Chair, which was labelled as a prototype but is still present and continues to exist as a prototype. The difference is that the prototype is part of a process, and if it continues to a finished object, it has served its purpose. However people’s understanding of what these prototypes are for has changed; their value has been elevated due to a recognition of their originality, being one offs, and they are now seen as collectable. We are reminded of the qualities of art, and because each object is unique, it stands out even more so.

James Zemaitis, Senior Vice President and head of 20th century design at Sotheby’s commented that:

“Design, I think, has always been art. But in today’s market and in today’s media; and in recent exhibitions ... it’s really become a hotly debated issue. In the market, design is treated like art these days. Because if you are a famous designer like Ron or Mark, and you produce a chair that is not necessarily meant to be sit [sat] in, but meant to be displayed in a gallery setting, you are not trying to create this chair for the masses.”

Art and design discourse are easy to blend because they have the same concerns: context, production, and consumption of their object. However design art is not exclusively about design and art, but elements of craft can also be found within it. This is feasible as all three have the same fundamentals elements; there is overlap but also distinction.

Craft magazine 2003, asked ‘what is craft?’ considering how it differs on the one hand from industry and on the other hand art, and whether this is important. Only a few makers would consider the barriers to be significant. With craft and industry being used interchangeably by designers, who both make one offs and design mass produced objects, the term ‘craft’ is now ‘inadequate to summarise the collaborative, interdisciplinary diversity of the current practice.’

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The idea of ‘craftsmanship’ and ‘the craft’ are not as simple to define as they sound. As with art and design, craft has taken on many meanings to the point of breaking. But it seems that craft is mixed in with design to create design art, so this raises the question of whether it should really be design craft. Even though design is relatively new compared to craft, it seems that craft has been demoted in status. Just linking craft to a designer’s work could lead to insult, or there is an underlying feeling that the work is lacking in value. It could be discussed how these negative feelings that design related people have towards craft have arisen.\(^{27}\)

The broad definition of the word ‘craft’ is an activity with involves skill in making things by hand, originally derived from the old English *craeft* which means strength or skill.\(^{28}\) These meanings are values that creatives\(^ {29}\) would be striving for; however the mainstream meaning of craft has been reduced to a lower status. One could argue that this has occurred from people’s perception of the availability of craft, allowing the general public to become more involved, resulting in lowering standards. A lack of general knowledge about the role of craft within design has also added to this point. Craftsmanship was an underlying factor in the foundation course at the Bauhaus which brought the quality of experimental drawings, paintings, textiles, sculptures, ceramics and metalware to a higher standard. However even though this fact is acknowledged, it has been downplayed within design history.\(^ {30}\) The Bauhaus was all about forward thinking and planted the seed of typical design language; ‘fitness for purpose’, ‘making the form follow the function’, ‘out of the box’, and ‘exploration of aesthetics’.\(^ {31}\) Historically the fundamentals of design were based on the integration of craft, however in recent years it has been seen as separate.


Figure 4: Textiles/weaving by Gunta Stölzl who studied at Bauhaus, 1919-1923
‘The separation of craft from art and design is one of the phenomena of late-twentieth-century Western culture. The consequences of this split have been quite startling. It has led to the separation of ‘having ideas’ from ‘making objects.’ It has also led to the idea that there exists some sort of mental attribute known as ‘creativity’ that precedes or can be divorced from a knowledge of how to make things. This has led to art without craft.’

However, craft is starting to work its way back into the light with borders which are currently shifting between craft and design; having craft within design is now becoming more accepted in a positive manner. For example this can be seen in the work of Max Lamb who will be discussed later.

The development of technology within design has had a negative effect on craft. It can be argued that through losing craftsmanship there has been a loss of valuable knowledge,

‘Whatever our society may, or may not, have gained through its technological, political and social advances, when we are confronted with craftsmanship as superlative as this [Medici Mamluk carpet] we are compelled to admit what it is that we have lost. [Fuller’s italics]’

Through Paul Fuller’s comment we are reminded that even though the development of technology is important, it is equally important not to forget the skills that have been developed, as these will begin to die out with the last craftspeople that practice them. It can be argued that by forgetting these skills we will lose the ‘story’ that is attached to objects made by handmade processes. This argument could also be applied to losing cultural identity. Although craft’s involvement within design art could lead to its survival, especially if it is something creatives are keen to explore in an innovative way that keeps it resilient.

On the other hand, skills alone are not enough; Peter Dormer had stated that, ‘Skills are.....not recognised as being the content as well as the means of expression.’ The general public do not value skills over content because they do not see the skill in the first place, or the processes

involved in making that object. This then will limit the price that is placed on the work and so might explain why content is used to add more value to the work. A possible explanation of why these skills are not being learnt is that due to their perceived lack of value, less people will be willing to learn them. This, however, would alter if the skills, once learnt, where then added to or used in a new and exciting way; this happens within design.

Design is about critical thinking that makes you question what you have in front of you; does it do what you need it to do, does it meet the criteria, and more so at the moment, does it tell you the narrative behind the object? Craft is the continuation of processes and skill, with little forward development. Dormer believes that design and craft have never been separate, as the qualities of a designer are within the craftsperson too,

‘...you cannot divorce craft from design. The craftsman or craftswoman is as much a designer as any product designer: to make something requires choices regarding the structure and appearance of the object as well as a strategy for making it.’

This gives us evidence of why it is easier to blur boundaries when the two sides that are being mixed have the same basic properties as each other. This loose definition could be applied to any situation, which could then indicate that design or craft are involved in any practical making; however design also strives to be innovative. Dormer goes on to say that designers believe that the craftsperson is ‘expendable,’ which might indicate that his comparison is more to do with craft’s lower status; it seems likely that craft is equally as important as design, regardless of what designers think.

Helen Rees gives a more defined separation between design and craft by informing us that,

‘Design is more socially orientated than the studio crafts because designers are constantly thinking about consumers. The studio crafts are characterised by inwardlookingness because so many practitioners claim they are making (and designing) for themselves.’

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Figure 5. Turner Prize winner 2003, Grayson Perry with pots.
What Rees fails to tell us though is what would happen if these qualities came together as one way of thinking, and the kind of objects that would be made as a result. Design art objects appear to bring together these qualities, and by doing so have the potential to elevate craft to a higher status. Many contemporary designers would look upon themselves as explorers, testing the boundaries of the materials, processes and the medium. The product sometimes seems to be an afterthought, after the obsession of material exploration. Many would seem to be involving craft in one way or another to do this instead of using art’s common traits,

‘The advent of design groups such as Droog, Jam, El Ultimo Grito, and designers such as Carl Clerkin and Michael Marriot, who combine a design-craft approach to production and their aesthetic, seem to indicate a more profound interplay between craft and design processes than the material/status struggle of art and craft’.  

This indicates that designers are favouring to use craft ideals rather than to get tangled up with the art/craft status debate. By doing this designers like Ettore Sottsass have blended studio craft and design together to produce more ‘humane’ designs.

As seen, design and craft have a greater ability to mix together with no disturbance to the original groups. The arts and crafts conflict, however, demonstrates the friction found when craft has sought acceptance within the folds of art. An example of this was found when Grayson Perry, a potter, won the Turner Prize in 2003. Perry commented that the art world found it easier to accept his transvestite alter-ego than him being a potter. He ‘clearly identified the continuation of the institutional, perceptual and cultural distinctions between craft and art...’ and the lack of willingness for them to mix.

Perry, however, contradicts the category of craft by having a social context within his work. By taking different elements from different categories, it makes the viewer think about how they categorise people and their work. This is made harder, further blurring the boundaries, when these objects use numerous components from the different groups of art and craft. It could be questioned

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if a designer could ever win the Turner Prize; but the day that this happens will show a true breakdown in distinction, and categories between art and design, and it is important that these stay where they are. This is because objects of this nature would lose what makes them exciting as we would become used to them and so would be a topic that is no longer debate.

Anything with the status of art is potentially more valuable than a thing without that status. The value of art is kept high by protectionism. It gives creatives more opportunities for consideration for important exhibitions and public collections, as well as mainstream news media coverage and deliberation by critics. To keep this level it is important not to lower the expectations that the creative market are used to having of art and this has led to particularity about who this status is given to. Even though art and craft might seem the same they are in fact not;

‘For example, a lifelike painting, or photograph, is representational craft, but not art. Craft can be used in the service of art, to create art, but it is not art of itself. Representational crafts rely on a kind of magic to achieve their effect, but even when this magic is astonishing; it does not turn into art unless it moves into unfamiliar realms... Art is distinctively characterized by an encounter with the strange, the different, the unknown, the hidden, (and) the not-yet-thought-of.’

The idea of status comes from what Western culture value most, because of the high amounts of money that can be involved within art. This isn’t the only reason though,

‘Fine art’s symbolic value has consistently outstripped the cultural capital of craft and design, both of which have been conventionally invested with use value rather than conceptual distinction, based on the Western cultural primacy of the intellectual over the manual, content over form.’

Based on Western values, conceptual and symbolic aspects outweigh all others, placing fine art higher than craft and design. This is more because of art’s symbolic value than its actual use – design and craft tend to produce functional objects, and useable objects are seen as lower status.

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Craft’s lower status could be linked to a deep historical background that craft used to be a woman’s pass time and fine art used to be a male domain. Even though these gender roles are changing, it could be argued that the traditional status of art and craft has not changed. These points are worth considering when examining Design art’s status and how it fits in with art, craft and design.

The idea behind ‘design art’ has been discussed a great deal recently, as it is a topic that still puzzles the two worlds of art and design. It seems that many arguments are made to try and define this quickly growing category, but by the end we are still left in a cloud of confusion and considering a new set of questions. It could be questioned whether the continuing debate on this topic is one reason why interest is forever growing, as any publicity is good publicity. ‘Debate is essential to a thriving art market – if no one talks about it, no one buys anything.’

Considering a range of art and design figures, many have questioned what they believe design art is. To achieve this they dissect the title to understand what design is, and then what art is, then try and fit it back together again, but this has been fruitless so far. Many believe that art and design are two distinct areas with no in between, and that the two should not to be mixed. In an article Tales of the unexpected based on the V&A’s Telling Tales; fantasy and fear in contemporary design exhibition (2009) Hugh Pearman wrote:

‘Design art is either design or art. It cannot be both; therefore it is a term that does not need to exist. There are designers, there are artists. There are many designers who think they are artists -normally they are deluded-but not so many artists who turn their hands to design. This is because art is not the same as design, and the artists know it.’

This is quite a statement to make, as many designers wouldn’t believe that they were trying to be artists, but rather find what they are doing more interesting than the design label that it would normally be given. It is more about the experimenting that sparks the interest, not if it’s going to be classed as art or design. An example would be if a designer was exploring a new process and discovers a new way to do something, that then takes shape dictated by the new founded process.

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Max Lamb works in this way, saying that, "I don’t make a lot of sketches. The form comes from what the process makes necessary."  

It could be questioned whether the title design art truly fits the end result, and many would agree that it does not. James Zemaitis, director of the twentieth century design department at Sotheby’s New York, is one of them, ‘to me [design art is] a bastardisation. There’s art and there’s design and design can be marketed via limited editions like art, but it’s not an appropriate term to use.’

When the label of design art was first used in the creative world, it was used, abused, chewed up and spat out until it was worthless. Peoples’ perception changed over time and the meaning became lost; Caroline Roux debated in the same article as Hugh Pearman that:

‘In 2007, Mark Rappolt decreed in Art Review that it was all about marketing, ... while it took two writers in Elle Deco to misunderstand the phrase and declare that design was only ever about form and function so design art wasn’t design. Had they added ‘industrial’ before the word design, they might have got away with it.’

As mentioned earlier, Alexander Payne had retracted the term back in 2008, and since then nothing else has replaced it. Titles that could be a better description of what you would find within this group are ‘Limited Edition design’ or ‘Statement designs’, but the importance of the name can be questioned.

On the other hand, there are some supporters of design art who don’t think it’s the end for design and art as we know it. They see it as the start of something new, breaking free of boundaries to explore and discover new and exciting things. Allan Chochinov is one of them, in believing ‘this is an amazing thing,’ because much of the design work in this area is meant as ideas and stories of design, and not as mass consumables, which he see as ‘mass garbagable’. He is making a comment upon mass production objects as being less valuable, and implies that design art is a higher class of design.

In his book, *Design as Art*, Bruno Munari believes that, ‘There should be no such thing as art divorced from life, with beautiful things to look at and hideous things to use’.\(^5^2\) With mass production aiming at affordable design, some elements are deemed less important, so for example instead of real wood you have artificial wood.

Design art isn’t available for everyone due to the high prices; it can be questioned whether it should be seen as valuable just because a growing group of people are willing to pay. Even though a person has money doesn’t mean that what they buy would be classed as good design/art. So for example instead of real wood you have artificial wood. This shares common ground with the art world, and particularly Damien Hirst; *For the Love of God* sold for £50 million in 2007.\(^5^3\) The media and public always seem to react to the prices of the creative work; but because of the reaction to the price, the meaning behind the work tends to be overlooked.

There is evidence that design art is not a recent occurrence. In the mid-19\(^{th}\) century, Christopher Dresser made advances for industrial design; Caroline Roux however wrote that this would be in the design art bracket now. Looking back at the Aesthetic movement of the late 1800s, this was celebrated as the first movement from an artistic background to inspire an entire lifestyle, giving importance to art and the pleasure of beautiful things above all else.\(^5^4\) Before, we have seen designers believed to be acting like artists, in this movement artists worked on design. However this movement was also the start of the public fascination with the lives of artists that is ever prominent today.\(^5^5\) This style started to act on different areas of life leading to the manufacturing of furniture, ceramics, metalwork, wallpaper and textiles, with designs such as William Morris’s textiles capitalising on the public interest. The growth of industrial Britain made it possible for these newly designed products to be available for the aspiring middle class.\(^5^6\)

Figure 6 is an example of what would be called ‘Art Furniture’ within this movement, which shows an artist interlinking with furniture, but only in an aesthetic way. They haven’t created a new and

\(^{52}\) Munari, Bruno, *Design as Art*, (Editori Laterza, 1966) (pg 25)


\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid.
Figure 6: Art Furniture from the Aesthetic movement
artistic form, but rather used a typical shape and worked on it like a canvas, adding to it instead of improving it. Examples from this movement show that the interest in combining art and design is not new, but has developed over time. Contemporary art and design have developed, leading to a new class of hybrids. These are better in terms of successfully integrating art and design elements, and also use story elements. They are less literal in their approach; rather than painting on furniture the makers are concerned with the concept of the piece.

Other aspects that have added to the current debate have included consumers’ attraction towards skill and originality and how this has continued the developing interest for design art. ‘I think we have a natural connection to things made by hand’, commented Mathew Hilton,

‘People talk of the ‘individuality’ and imperfections which mark objects made by hand and make them special, but the difference between something which has those marks of individuality and of making and is beautiful because of them, and something bearing those marks and being just badly made is very, very, subtle.’

Craft gives the consumer the opportunity to have individuality from an object that is made from a highly skilled maker. The charms that come from this are that from making limited designs, each object will be slightly different. Hilton, however, informs us that the line between marks of originality and poorly made objects is very thin, and it can be questioned if this is something that has been hidden within design art; strong content or concepts could be used to hide a lack of skill.

As previously stated, craft was thought to be of lower status than design. It was reduced to a kind of occupational therapy to be practiced by many and mastered by few. However it is now growing in importance with the need for better understanding of craftsmanship, alongside material and design, in order to have a product that lasts longer and is of better quality.

An example of this way of thinking would lead us to Max Lamb, who previously designed for mass production, but this changed during his postgraduate studies at the Royal College of Art. Lamb felt that he couldn’t design commercially viable products, and so wanted to get back to the basics of understanding the materials and the processes first, which would then lead to the final design.

Figure 7: Max Lamb with Pewter Stool, 2006
‘Where I failed at university originally is that I was designing function and designing objects that sold function in clever ways. But when it came to the actual manufacture and selling I went wrong because I wasn’t designing objects that could be made very successfully.’

Lamb feels that a good understanding of the materials and processes is essential to be able to make and sell objects. This shift from theoretical design to a more hands on approach is something that is becoming common in the design world; although Lamb’s success story will not happen for every designer/maker. What this does show us though is the flexibility of the contemporary design path, where craft, skill, culture, process, materials, tools and technology can be recombined to give extraordinary results.

To create work that can be classed as innovative is to cross over the boundaries between different fields of knowledge and to step away from what we already know, to discover a completely new direction. These works are surprising and fascinating, and it is this that grabs the attention of others, giving them a source of inspiration for years or decades to come. This is what Max Lamb has been able to do; he has linked one concept to another. By understanding the processes of mass production, he then looked to find ways to replace the key elements with a different component. He is not the only one to be doing this, with many creatives trying to be different and stand out by crossing the boundaries. It can now be questioned whether terminology really matters, when most practitioners and consumers disregard categorisation; although there are others that are keen to keep to the distinctions. Distinctions are important as they give the maker an indication of how to value their work, and provide buyers with a social evaluation to ascertain its value. The public, who may have limited knowledge, rely on these distinctions to understand what they are seeing and the quality that they should expect; however these distinctions are subject to change, and continue to be discussed.

At the beginning of 2012, The Aram Gallery held an exhibition entitled, Send To Print/Print To Send, which showed designs that use 3D printing; not to make the typical prototypes, but final objects. Nothing seems out of the ordinary until you read an article by Wallpaper magazine describing the

exhibit as, ‘a collection of items by creatives who have used this cutting-edge technology not only as a means to an end, but to produce finished works of art’. 63

As with all things creative there is no right or wrong answer, just many people’s opinions. For one exhibit you have Wallpaper labelling the work art, and then on the other hand there are people on Design Boom commenting that ‘this is design’. 64 Design Week conclude that these ‘designers are pushing the boundaries of 3D printing today’. 65 This shows that the distinction between art and design has broken down, partly because people sometimes don’t know what they are truly looking at, and so make their own definition of what it really means; this then leads to confusion. With these contradictory messages, public confusion is understandable. Both magazines and galleries are likely to play an important role in giving direction when it comes to defining the art and design market.

Galleries and exhibitions are normally the starting point for the designer or artist to become successful. It is here that the media will discover a new designer, or ignore the work they see. Each collection can be placed within a certain genre; this could be fine art, contemporary art, sculpture, contemporary design, etc., and so now it can be questioned whether these galleries/exhibitions are showing these works because they exist and are growing, or if the designer is working in this way to get into the galleries/exhibitions. If this is so, this could be another factor contributing to the continuing growth of the design artist. 66

What galleries also aim to do is to give space to new and up-coming designers/ artists. Max Lamb was an example of this and now has his work in many galleries in London, New York, L.A. etc. Once a place reserved for art, galleries now find themselves invaded with contemporary design; but does


65 Gladicheva, Vesela, Design Week, Send to Print/Print to Send 3D Printing Exhibition (December 2011) http://www.designweek.co.uk/home/blog/send-to-print/-print-to-send-3d-printing-exhibition/3032469.article [accessed January 2012]

66 William, Gareth, Telling Tales – Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design, (London: V&A Publishing 2009) (p 7) This phrase, ‘Design Artist’, is used by Gareth William within the ‘Acknowledgements’ of his book. I would have been interested in the designers’ response, since many don’t like the title of ‘Design Art’ and only see themselves as designers. This might be because since they come from a product based background, they see art as being separate; maybe they think they are better than artists.
Private View Thurs 12th Jan 2012
6-8pm

Show Continues 13th Jan - 25th Feb 2012
Figure 9: 'Twist Loop' light by Assa Ashuach exhibited in Send to Print/Print to Send
design exist within a gallery? Max Lamb is listed in the Johnson Trading Gallery as being an ‘artist represented’ not a designer, and this might be what is confusing the media. However to make the work available to the right collectors, the gallery has to set the stage, and in a place where the name and price are just as important as the object, maybe the maker should be called ‘artist’. On the other hand there are trade shows that are full of design pieces, but after a while of walking around, everything seems to become blurred, nothing seems to stand out; the galleries have the ability to do this.

Galleries promote the idea of quality, so it is natural that a person would think that the work found in this place would be of great importance and worthy of attention. This would lead to more of the same style being made, if the designer/artist sees that people are buying and that there is a place that is willing to have their work. The gallery is going to sell work that is popular, as that means they will get more money. It could be said that these galleries are the today’s Medicis. The Medici family encouraged the rise of creativity in fifteenth-century Italy by funding creators from many different disciplines. With many families supporting people who showed talent in the arts and sciences, many started to break restrictions and traditions of the time. As the different disciplines interacted and learned from each other, it brought about the rise of a new way of thinking which led to the Renaissance. The two things which made this possible were money and the mixing of two different thought patterns to create innovation. However it could be questioned that if this continuously happens, that what was first seen as innovative will become the norm and so no longer new and exciting. Although this is not a negative point, for then the next generation of creatives will either return to the refinements of their set boundaries or break them completely.

Media hype certainly continues to bring design art to the attention of the public when it is continuing to bring new and exciting results, a new price label and more debates. Grayson Perry reminds us of the important of the media, “If you’re in the business of communication and images, then if you ignore the media-sphere you’re just cutting off your own foot.” It also brings to light the importance of names and the value they give to a piece of work. ‘Names matter because the

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names are there for a reason. Ron Arad, Marc Newson, Zaha Hadid are not just a marketing phenomenon, they are the best of their time.’ Richard Wright goes on to say though that he would ‘rather have the best work of a lesser-known designer than a mediocre example from a top-tier name. Quality is the goal.’\textsuperscript{70} However, it has become fashionable to own a piece of work that has been made by a famous designer, and so many more people are willing to pay higher amounts, putting design art in high demand.

Although this isn’t the only reason for the high price tag; Gareth Neal argues that when you only make limited-edition, one-offs or commission based work, that means that only ten are made of that design, so then the designer has to command the high prices to make a profit.\textsuperscript{71} Industrial design made it possible for design objects to sell at low prices, and now we have become accustomed to it. As art can’t be mass produced, no one makes a comment on the high prices that it sells at, but in the mind of the average customer, products have always been something they could buy and would be within their ability to own. The galleries and exhibitions, however, do not aim for this kind of market but cater for those that can afford it. As the design art market is growing, this then leads to more places that are willing to sell this work, and plenty who will buy it from them.

Galleries and exhibitions have a high level of influence within the market. This can mean that they can dictate to the consumer what the next fashion fad will be;

‘In a changing market, auction houses are more focused on finding clever ways of repackaging material that might otherwise get lost [in more general modern and contemporary sales]…’\textsuperscript{72}

By putting design art within galleries and exhibitions it is placing it more in the public’s eye and so design art gains more attention. This then leads to more shows and a higher call in demand for this work. The following are an example of this.

In 2007, the London annual art festival had its first selling design exhibition because of the growing interest in design art. What also came into existence in the same year was Design Art London, which

\textsuperscript{70} Wright, Richard, cited in Lovell, Sophie, \emph{Limited edition – Prototypes, One-offs and Design Art Furniture}, (Birkhäuser GmbH, Feb 2009) (pg 233)

\textsuperscript{71} Neal, Gareth, cited in Lovell, Sophie, \emph{Limited edition – Prototypes, One-offs and Design Art Furniture}, (Birkhäuser GmbH, Feb 2009) (pg 152)

was the creation of Patrick Perrin, of the Societe d’Organisation Culturelle, Paris. Wallpaper magazine wrote that it was ‘in direct response to the growing interest in viewing, buying and selling pieces of design as art.’³⁷³

Perrin wanted to ‘elicit debate around where one discipline ends and another begins,’ and to determine whether the two can be separated any more. This led to Perrin gathering twenty of the world’s greatest design galleries to display their favorite pieces. What is found from this exhibition is that it is more than age, fame and the collectability of a designer that will give a product design art status, rather than it being classed as simply design.³⁷⁴ Perrin’s take on the show is that,

‘what sets every piece in this exhibition apart from what you might see in a design fair is that nothing here is mass-manufactured: prototypes and one-off pieces have an inherent value beyond a product that’s one of 1000, made by a machine in a short space of time.’³⁷⁵

In 2009, Design Art London then upgraded into the Pavilion of Art & Design, with the aim of adding a stronger decorative art element. Even on their website their direction seems to have changed from design to an art angle; the collection is described on their website as, ‘the most covetable works of art within the genres of Modern Art, Design, Decorative Arts, Photography and Tribal Art from 1860 to today.’³⁷⁶ Having these kinds of exhibitions on annual show makes the idea more acceptable to the public, helping them to become used to the two being mixed together, and with every year the show is becoming more popular. However, it can be questioned how art has come back to be more dominating than design and that it is art first, design second. It is possible that design finds itself within a typical art setting, and under art characteristics, and that it will be forever suppressed by it.

Narrative is also a strong element within design art; it is the buzz word that the consumer wants to hear, and it is this phenomenon that is beginning to transcend fashion. They want to know who made it, how it was made, and the materials or resources that were used. It is something that you cannot get from mass produced objects, but unique or handmade designs are only a small part of the design world. Many contemporary designers would look upon themselves as explorers, testing

³⁷⁴ Ibid.
³⁷⁵ Ibid.
Figure 11: Fig Leaf by Tord Boontje
the boundaries of the materials, processes and the medium. The product sometimes seems to be an afterthought, after the obsession of material exploration.\footnote{Lovell, Sophie, \textit{Limited edition – Prototypes, One-offs and Design Art Furniture}, (Birkhäuser GmbH, Feb 2009) (pg 69)}

In 2009 for three months, the V&A held the \textit{Telling Tales; fantasy and fear in contemporary design} exhibition, which explored the idea of functional objects also having the ability to carry creative information, and this was based around stories. The work on show was made by designers who have no link to fine art and are more known for their industrial and product design.\footnote{Williams, Gareth, \textit{Tales of the Unexpected Crafts} 219 (2009) (pg 49)}

An example of what was on show was Tord Boontje’s ‘Fig Leaf’ wardrobe which comes from the idea of the fig being a symbol of fertility, which then links it to an oasis and the notion of the biblical paradise, and was inspired by the story of Adam and Eve.\footnote{V&A, \textit{Telling Tales – Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design} (2009) http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/telling-tales/ [accessed December 2011]} What makes this an exciting piece of work is that the stereotypical idea of a wardrobe has been reinvented and brought back to life, giving a fresh take on an old concept; it has been made that much stronger because of its connection to its background story. This continues on to give the design a feeling of uniqueness which is also fashionable at the moment. As individuals we want to have the feeling that we are unique, our own person; but as ‘unique’ people we find ourselves with the same furniture, clothes, books, etc. People are craving something more precious that goes beyond expensive materials and a company logo.

‘People are getting tired of mass-produced products that all look the same and that everybody else has got as well. Where are the soul and heart in these things? Where are the individuality and the history?’\footnote{Lisa Widén and Anna Irinarchos, WIS Design, in Lovell, Sophie, \textit{Limited edition – Prototypes, One-offs and Design Art Furniture}, (Birkhäuser GmbH, Feb 2009) (pg 56)}

It could be questioned whether this is why people find design art fascinating, for the work gives a sense of uniqueness that we all crave from time to time. Craft can be seen within this way of thinking, as much craft work builds up a story around it when it is created, from how it was made, where the materials come from, and the human interaction that is sometimes found; this makes each piece an one off. Libby Sellers believes this is what people want and that design art is the answer,
“I think designers are responding to the consumer and the market, and that’s definitely changed. Rather than the homogenised, globalised high street which is international, people want something which they feel is truly personalised, and I think that’s what this market or this agenda is going for or trying to satisfy.”

In a certain market design art is capable of doing this, but this is not affordable for everyone because of the price tag. However if it was made in mass production it could be possible that the making process will take it away from what makes it design art.

In conclusion, we have a clearer understanding of what design is when compared to art. Design is new, so hasn’t evolved as much as art to develop multi layered meanings and different levels of understanding. By formulating a definition of the separate elements, we can see which way of thinking has influenced design art. We can see the innovation that comes from design, and the idea of the object to be functional, and then there are the qualities that are founded in art; large amounts of money, being one offs, of higher status than plain design or craft, and it is something that people want to collect. Key prototypes have shown the blurring of boundaries, when it is first used for design to then exist as works of art. Although, in the name of specificity, purists wish for the distance between art and design to be preserved, when in an age of multimedia meltdown, art must not lose what is specific to it. Others would insist that for its survival art must evolve from its confinements. It must re-invent itself and it has done so to include both design and craft. Craft can also be found within design art; this has lifted the status of craft which has so often been kept separate from art, and moved it away from the idea of everyday craft. The significance of this is that the skills and knowledge that are found within craft will continue. All three, art, design and craft, have things in common which makes it easy for them to overlap, but they will each also continue to have strong distinctions.

Some creatives and consumers of contemporary work ignore categorisation, while others are keen to uphold the distinctions. People have strong views about design, craft and art, and so to give an opinion is to go against someone else’s views; but one must recognise that these liaisons are creative and have a powerful effect. Without these debates we would fail to understand that

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82 Coles, Alex, DesignArt, (Tate Enterprises, London, 2005) (pg 8)
‘collaborative, interdisciplinary diversity of current practice’\textsuperscript{83} gives us hybrid artefacts, which then makes discussions about the overlapping relationship between design, art and craft necessary.

The blurring of boundaries is a sign of the times, and the kind of culture that we exist in. What the market has to offer us today is a continuation of short lived gadgets soon to be replaced with a newer edition. With a changing market, designers are responding in many ways to what the consumer wants. People increasingly want objects that tell a story and have a strong character. It is different to anything else that they have seen before, and feels truly unique, and while people still have the money to spend, this group will continue to grow and expand. It is much more than a fashion fad, but a comment that people want more from the objects they buy; although these objects could easily be treated as investments for the future.

Galleries and exhibitions are the worldwide stage for showcasing what are considered important pieces of work, but they are sometimes labelled as ‘following the money’.\textsuperscript{84} However they also have the ability to convince the media and public that the work they show and sell is important enough for our attention. The new phenomenon of design galleries seems to be worth further exploration.

Galleries sit in the middle of the market and have the power to influence it, but are also dictated by it. On its own this could suggest that design art is just a fashion fad; however this is countered by its presence in past examples where creatives were exploring the boundaries. Contemporary design art is widely published in the media and the work is in high demand.


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