1. Introduction: Artist doing Design, Designers doing Art

Today, artists are becoming increasingly important players in the field of design. Similarly, designers have begun directing their work towards the art world. Certain works of art have come to look like “design” to such an extent that—when appearing outside the art gallery, art museum, or art journal—it takes a well-informed critic to identify the address and reference to the art world. Thus, at the recent Index Design Awards in Copenhagen, an art group, Superflex got nominated in the “work” category for their development of a soda brand, Guaraná Power! This project is supposed to enhance living conditions for guarana bean farmers of the central Amazon region by assisting them to reach an alternative market for their product after a soda manufacturer apparently made prizes on guarana beans drop 80% due to their market dominance and thus made business and indeed life difficult for the farmers. Superflex, an artist trio of mid-1990s graduates from the Royal Academy of Fine Art in Copenhagen, has not, however, any background in brand design or soda production whatsoever, and its other projects involve completely different kinds of media, such as the development of a biogas plant for nomadic farmers in tropical areas (Supergas) and a public participation system based on a virtual world for sharing visions for cities that are undergoing change (Supercity), etc. 1

Another Copenhagen-based group RACA consists of two recent design graduates who have specialized in discreet yet witty interventions in urban space. A public art project, The Directorate, mimics municipality service functions by an initiative that has gone slightly astray: Dressed in self-made uniforms in the bottle green colour of the Copenhagen municipality's urban outdoor furniture (benches, garbage bins, waiting huts for public transport, etc.), the group members make frequent service calls to the city's benches in order to furnish them with pairs of bottle green pillows after having announced the initiative in the local newspapers mimicking the municipality's logo and style sheet for similar public notices. 2 As design graduates, RACA demonstrate that they master the discipline of developing visual identities to organizations, yet obviously this—like their other projects—rather shows kinship with the art socially and politically oriented art scene of which Superflex forms part: This is, in other words, design in the context of art.
This paper seeks to explain why the field of design has become an attractive playing ground for certain wings in contemporary art, and what it means that certain products and concepts that “look like design” have been developed by artists and thus in a sense still should be taken for works of (Fine) Art, that is, as “art-as-design”, art in the context of design. And why is it that certain designers mimic the approach of their contemporaries of the art scene to work as designers in what seems to be the context of fine art, that is, design-as-art? What could be learned from the context of art on the side of design? Along with the treatment of the these questions, the paper examines the role played by the art critic and the researcher as concerns informing the public about the Fine Art context of certain design products and interpreting the contributions of artists to the field of design. The question is thus not only why artists contribute to design but also why critics and theorists either maintain, develop, or rejects these contexts of tradition when operating as curators or commentators on the sideline.

By the term “artists” I am referring here to agents with a primary background in and affiliation to the traditional institutions of Fine Art (e.g., having an educational background from an art academy, finding one's financial sources among traditional art foundations and private sources, drawing on traditional institutions for the exhibition of art, being the object for art historians, art theorist, etc.). Art history exhibits several projects within fine art that have been oriented towards the field of design; projects which more or less explicitly have been applying avant-garde strategies in order for Art to serve Life and to annihilate the distinction between the art world and the everyday life. Hence Peter Bürger's definition of the historical avant-garde, that is innovative avant-garde movements in art until World War II. The present paper concentrates on the re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies among artists emerging the mid-1990s and onwards, their direction towards the field of design, and in turn the orientation among certain designers to the world of art.

This re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies may be found among artists of the social relational and social art programmes such as Superflex which took a starting point in French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's so-called relational aesthetics, and to some extend also a predecessor, Joseph Beuys, in order to explore the social sphere as a material for artistic practice. The main question is here why this period sees a re-emergence of avant-garde strategies and how these strategies differ from the historical avant-garde which it obviously resembles but also distances itself from.

2. The “Condemnation” to Micro-Ethics: Design and the Relational Avant-Garde

What are the strategic considerations for artists today to involve themselves in design? How is the common context of art and design being constructed in terms of art-as-design? In order to answer this question, we should return to Bourriaud's seminal work from the mid-1990s, Relational Aesthetics (2001). 3 Relational aesthetics is a term coined by the author in order to designate a—still dominant orientation—on the art scene; a scene which is especially concerned with political and social matters—both in a literal, thematic sense and in terms of a formal level in the sense that artists find their artistic material, not in clay, glass, paint, etc. but in the social sphere, in relations among people. This, more conceptual dimension to relational art clearly resembles Beuys' idea of the social as artistic matter in a material sense (Sozial Plastik). One of the main reasons why design-oriented strategies have become important among artists of this scene seems to be the belief that design may have a more direct impact on the social sphere, on people, than Fine Art with its traditional institutions. This belief usually manifests itself by means of a very concrete involvement in cases with an interest taken in particular persons, particular
places, and particular living conditions. This focus on the particular distinguishes itself from historical avant-garde, which often subscribed to various ideological projects and thus typically were much more general in its scope.

Bourriaud seeks to explain the motivation for the approach to the particular with reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard who, in The Post-Modern Explained to Children, bemoaned post-modernist, post-ideological architecture by observing that it was:

condemned to create a series of minor modifications in a space whose modernity it inherits, and abandon an overall reconstruction of the space inhabited by humankind. (Lyotard, 1992; quoted by Bourriaud, 2001: 13; italics suspended).

Bourriaud, however, sees this “condemnation” as a “historical chance”; 'a “chance” [that] can be summed up in just a few words: learning to inhabit the world in a better way.' (ibid.) By intervening in particular living conditions, artists seem to stress the idea that their work makes a significant difference to other people's lives: That art, by means of design, may empower people. Hence the notions of micro-politics and micro-ethics which have often been used to characterize the particular ethos of the relational avant-garde.

Whereas such interventions may often be said to have a very narrow effect as it deals with particular, local places and persons, relational artists often compensate by means of communication, making use of the art world's traditional institutions (institutions of exhibition, criticism, theory, etc.) to present their work before a global art audience. Apparently, this communication between audiences, artists, and critics seems to imply the belief that although interventions only apply to particular cases, they do have a political significance that exceeds those cases and which often associate such interventions with a certain utopian character albeit a ideological foundation seem to be lacking. Bourriaud suggests the notion of micro-utopia to capture this idea. In his correspondence with Philippe Parenno, he claims that

Artistic practice … demonstrates our right to micro-utopia, the “dolce utopia” that Maurizio Cattelan were spoke of: a utopia without teleology, without grand speeches, one that refers to everyday life. (Bourriaud, 1995: 34)

The focus on particularity is about “little stories” rather than the so-called “grand narratives” of modernist ideologies.

One of the main reasons why the staging of particular cases seem to gain broader significance despite the apparent post-ideological, and hence thus non-teleological condition identified by Bourriaud and the preceding post-modernist critique is thus that these “little stories” are not just little stories. In Bourriaud's attempt to include a concept of avant-garde in the context of his relational art scene, he outlines a topology that draws on that of the avant-garde itself while sets the stage for a distinctly new role for the relational avant-garde artist:

Today's fight for modernity is being waged in the same terms as yesterday's, barring the fact that the avant-garde has stopped patrolling like some scout, the troop having come to a cautious standstill around a bivouac of certainties (bivouac de certitudes). Art was intended to prepare and announce a future world; today it is modelling possible universes. (Bourriaud, 2001: 13)
Although avant-garde as a category seems somewhat unfortunate among the scene of artists that Bourriaud describes (I shall return to this below in my elaboration on Superflex), he does himself recognise a re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies in the sense evoked by classical modernism, that is a sense to be associated with emancipation, enlightenment, and social engagement. Yet, the story of the post-ideological, relational avant-garde is a “little story” about artists and people; artists dwelling temporarily among people rather than distancing themselves from them in order to explore the borders towards unknown territories. The bivouac metaphor does not only outline a topology of the relational avant-garde, it visualises actually a possible plan for these type of art projects. Hence Swedish artist Elin Wikström, who brought a bed to a supermarket and stayed there for three weeks to explore the social relations developed by her actions (“What would happen if everyone did that?” (Sweden, 1993). This “little story” is thus not only a story; it is also model of what is possible in a particular case; a case which is given by being staged by the artist. What is important is not an underlying political agenda, but what actually happen when the artist does this or that, and what the artist tells afterwards. Hence the title of a major exhibition of relational art in the late 1990s; the “What if ..” at Moderna Museet in Stockholm (1999): What happen if we do this, what happen if we do that.

Described in these terms, relational art demonstrates a striking resemblance with strategies applied among designers involving user participation in design processes, and it would certainly be worth while to discuss whether the experiences gained within relational art may contribute to the understanding of participative methodologies in design. Still, this is not the aim of this paper. What I have been occupied with so far is how the context of design-in-art is constructed among relationally oriented artists; a context which is dominated by notions of micro-politics, micro-utopia, and the modelling of possibilities.


Art group Superflex is an exemplary case of artist operating in the context of design; artists who seeks to develop means—“tools” as they have it—in order to empower particular, exposed groups around the world: tropical farmers in Thailand (Supergas) and Brazil (Guarana Power!), elderly working class people in Liverpool, (Superchannel), etc.; artists who seeks to design means to “improve life” (hence the programme title of the first Index Design Awards).

Although Superflex explicitly distance themselves from a concept of avant-garde, it is difficult not to identify an avant-garde profile in the way they orient themselves towards the field of design to demonstrate a sincere interest in the technical, social, and political matters in which their projects are rooted. Still, at the same time Superflex' work should also be understood as an instance of design being addressed to the context of art, for Superflex is nonetheless an art group that draws upon the traditional institutions of the art world (i.e. education, financial resources, exhibitors, critics). It is obvious that this paradoxical structure of interests between the art world and the field of design should make the critic and theorist reflect a bit on the given traditions and actual construction of context. Is it really the artists who are playing a double game of art and design, or should the critic admit that so-called avant-garde strategies operating in art and design today should be seen in a context of “post-avant-garde”, in which it is no longer relevant to distinguish between the two and where the interest taken in given, political subject matters should be seen as significantly more important than the question of whether this is art or design. Rejecting explicitly any notion of avant-garde, Superflex seems to point in this direction. On the other hand, this group displays all the traditional signs of an avant-garde project: They “simulate” historical avant-garde (Russian futurism, Bauhaus principles).
while insisting on the opposite—an avant-garde project that resists the concept of avant-garde; “tongue-in-cheek avant-garde”.

The construction of context is thus a particularly urgent issue for the cultural reception of artists working in the field of design. As I have indicated, artists today are contributing significantly to the development of the field of design. This significance however cannot be assessed without developing an understanding of how artists are operating on a conceptual level in design, how they add value to designed artifacts, how they include the user in the development and presentation of a design, etc.; questions with all depends on whether their work should be seen as art or design, as design-as-art, or art-as-design, etc.

Endnotes


2 The directorate project is presented in the Projects menu on the group's webpage on http://www.raca.dk/, visited October 10th, 2006.


4 Cf. informal conversation with group member Jakob Fenger.

References


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