DESIGN AS EXCHANGE



Design values in globalism – the vitality of return and exchange

Here is my commentary on the design exhibition currently running at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam [Link]. My previous commentaries – [Link] [Link]

Design Column #4 The circle is round

‘The World is Deglobalizing at Breakneck Speed’ – so read the title of a long article in the *Financieele Dagblad* on 4 March this year. Over the last few decades there has been far-reaching globalization in which

different economies, politics and cultures have become increasingly interwoven at an international level. A widespread consumer culture brought about the scaling-up of our production processes and a worldwide distribution of labour. The international flows of money that accompanied this peaked in 2007.

In the article, the author Marcel de Boer describes the present downward spiral of economic growth. The article was published in response to a report – ‘Financial globalization: Retreat or reset’ – by a leading think tank, the McKinsey Global Institute. This report confirmed that international credit is at an end and that global flows of money have decreased by 60% compared to the peak in 2007. The financial crisis has meant that countries and companies post 2007 are now more often opting to look to themselves. In the first instance governments protect their own interests and become inward-looking, without examining the international impact of their measures.

‘Design Column #4 The Circle Is Round’ features four stories that provide a counterweight to this current tendency towards withdrawal and defence. In different ways the projects show that thinking in terms of

boundaries and linear developments is by no means always relevant. When doors appear to close, opportunities arise elsewhere. The 100 million tons of plastic waste that is congregating in the world’s oceans is not bound by national borders. Newer and bigger is not always better. Growth is cyclical; the circle is round.

It is an illusion to think that far-reaching ‘deglobalization’ could happen in the current system. We are all part of the same global system. The McKinsey report advocates reform, ‘resetting’ the present financial model, so that a more sustainable phase of the world economy can begin. The design projects take issue with this, suggest deeper insight into our contemporary global condition, and offer creative alternatives.

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the design projects

Maaike Roozenburg, Smart Replicas





Maaike Roozenburg, 17th-century teacups, porcelain, collection: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, photography: Maaike Roozenburg

In collaboration with Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and Delft University of Technology, Maaike Roozenburg made Smart Replicas of 17th-century teacups from the museum’s collection. CT scans were made of the original pieces and a 3D print was made of the scans to produce a mould for making a porcelain cast. A ‘smart tag’ carrying information about the object was then linked to these new cups.

This combination of innovative techniques brings objects from the past back to life. An object that has lost its original function now it is part of a museum collection gets a second life outside the museum’s galleries and repository. Modern technology makes the replicas ‘smarter’ than their pre-industrial predecessors – and they can be put to use again.

The project is part of a long tradition of copying, reproducing and sharing between the East and the West. Porcelain from China was imported on a huge scale in the 16th and 17th centuries, but it was not until the 18th century that a European geologist and an alchemist managed to ‘crack’ the recipe for porcelain so that Europe could make porcelain of its own. Smart Replica’s has been made possible by the EKWC, Mareco Prototyping en ARLab.

More information: [Link]

Studio Swine & Kieren Jones, The Sea Chair Project





Studio Swine & Kieren Jones, Sea Chair, plastic waste, collection: Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana, photography: the artists

The first ‘plastic soup’, effectively a floating rubbish dump of compacted consumer waste, was discovered in the Atlantic Ocean in 1997. Over the past ten years the area of plastic in the ocean has tripled.

This mass of rubbish gave Studio Swine and Kieren Jones the idea of converting fishing boats into plastic refineries. Instead of fish, the fishing boats would collect plastic from the ocean. This waste plastic would be converted into usable material. Every chair made from this material would have the exact polar coordinate of where the plastic used in it was fished up. In this project, craftsmanship, recycling and environmental protection come together in an ecological cycle. The project demonstrates that while a production process can cause waste, it can be just as good at cleaning it up and recycling it. Reuse in the future would push down the demand for new plastic and our output of waste would shrink, the depressed fishing industry would get a new boost and overfishing would decrease because boats could fish for plastic instead.

More information: [Link]

Dirk van der Kooij, Furniture



Dirk van der Kooij, Satellite Lamp, 3D printed recycled synthetics, collection: the artist, photography: the artist

The Dutch designer Dirk van der Kooij is interested in 3D printing, but found the scale of standard 3D printers too small. With an old computer-controlled robot arm as his starting point, he developed his own 3D production process in 2010, bringing a written-off robot from China to the Netherlands for the purpose. Van der Kooij values the lack of precision of this old-fashioned arm, and magnifies it in his design objects.

After the invention of the steam engine, the printing press, electricity and the internet, 3D printing marks a new phase for manufacturing industry. After years when industrial production processes were outsourced to China, new techniques like 3D printing are making shorter production chains profitable again.

More information: [Link]

Scholten & Baijings, Colour Porcelain





Scholten & Baijings, Colour Porcelain, porcelain service, purchase: 2012, photo: Scheltens & Abbenes, 2012

In the second half of the 17th century the Dutch East India Company exported enormous quantities of Japanese porcelain from the Japanese porcelain-making town of Arita to Europe and elsewhere. More than two centuries later the Dutch design duo Scholten & Baijings was asked to give Arita's porcelain trade a new boost.

They developed a service with a colour palette based on the traditional colours of Japanese Arita porcelain. The service was made in three ranges: Minimal, Colourful and Extraordinary. Each set has a different colour intensity and level of finish. Scholten & Baijings's recognizable modern style is combined in the service with centuries-old Japanese tradition. Whereas Eastern influences worked their way into the Western art world in the 17th century, the Colour Porcelain project reverses the process.

More information: [Link]

what matters in a connected world

We are connected in a global market, one dominated by financial transactions, as we

have come to know so well. Transnational corporations and agencies such as the International Monetary Fund can eclipse the sovereignty of nation states. Local cultural differences are effaced by the hegemony of Americanist media industries. The neoliberal argument for minimally regulated market mechanisms may have taken some serious knocks since 2007, but what are the alternatives? Left and right wing politicians, entrepreneurial capitalists and the leaders of Chinese state communism seem to disagree only over the details of how to set the market free to generate growth. Beyond such ideologies of market globalism we might cherish the values of international or cosmopolitan connection, or fearfully retreat within our borders.

We must surely agree with sociologists like Anthony Giddens who consider the process of globalization to be, at its root, the compression of time and space through transport systems, mass media, and especially information technology. Our shrinking world is one where greater distances are covered in shorter times, where communication has overcome physical distance, and so geographical borders and physical obstacles to establishing those all-important market relations are almost irrelevant, and everyone may share a yearning for essentially the same consumer goods and experiences.

Things certainly have speeded up and intensified, but we have long lived in a connected global world. Is time-space compression really the key to understanding our contemporary globalism? I think that the artifacts from these design studios support a deeper insight.

Maaike Roozenburg’s replicas, made through scanning, 3D printing and casting of porcelain teacups imported by the East India Companies in the sixteenth century, reach back in time. The artifacts combine then and now, the Netherlands and China, in their form and through electronically tagged stories of originals. They uniquely reenergize an everyday experience. Dirk van der Kooij has repurposed an outdated robotic technology, the pinnacle of a Fordist deskilled mass production line, an icon of outsourced manufacturing, to create extraordinary forms and textures, again for everyday life. Scholten & Baijings reconnect long-separated trading partners, traditional, millennia-old skills and technologies, modernist design and contemporary lifestyle. Studio Swine & Kieren Jones, conscious of a history of harvesting the sea’s resources as well as the recent pollution, reach out into the oceans to gather plastic waste to be transformed into artifact and use.

This is all indeed about the compression of time and space, but with a difference. Here design is about reaching out, recognizing connectivity through history and the past, reestablishing relationships, and returning home, enriched. Here design is about exchange.

What do I mean by this? What does this say about globalism today?

The temporary contract, offering this for that under minimal qualifications and conditions, has supplanted traditional and established institutions and relationships. I suggest that the key feature of today's globalism is the nature of the exchanges that take place within, yes, our shrinking world. Exchanges made simply for economic gain, financial transactions rooted in the commodity form need have no necessary connection to the material processes and cultural experiences that generate them. They are abstracted from their historical and geographical location: where and how you buy and sell is irrelevant. All that matters is loss or gain.

People have always shared and exchanged materials and goods, skills and experiences, knowledge and information, and thereby established relationships. Compression implies extension, reaching out to cover distance, temporal and spatial, to establish such connections. Such exchange has atrophied in contemporary globalism, because it has come to be characterized by disconnection and alienation, a draining away of its human richness and the necessary deep awareness of the qualities of things, their involvement in human affairs. So, while it may well augment the relationships established by exchange, information technology has become ubiquitous in order that its harvest of information about all of us in all of our doings might inform market decisions that are increasingly easy to distribute around the world.

globalism is the contemporary past

To be connected is to be human. Human interconnection has spanned the globe for millennia. The compression of time and space is a long-term set of processes that have made us who we are.
The human species and its ancestors went global at least twice in deep prehistory with waves of migrations out of an African homeland and aided by technology and culture. Trade routes connected the empires of ancient Europe, the Near East, and

Asia. And, of course, our modern globalism has its origins in the explorers of the Renaissance, merchant adventurers and colonists who followed them to the East Indies and Americas, state sponsored systems of trade and exchange of rare goods, manufactures, slaves, raw materials, organized by imperial ambition and the likes of the East India Companies. Exchange has always been about power, the appropriation of the work of others, taking rather than giving in an inequitable transaction, even unto death. It has always entailed tensions between centers and peripheries, cycles of change and development as the core of an empire, for example, slips from prominence and those on the margin rise to power and influence.

The European Bronze Age three thousand years ago was connected throughout by experiences of travel and venture, when a northern traveler to the Mediterranean south, who we now might call a warrior hero, would recognize the fine goods of their host, their weaponry (the same swords to be seen carved on rock surfaces in Scandinavia), the amber beads from the Baltic north, the fire dogs roasting dinner, the knife that cut the meat, the habits, the manners, the aspirations, the stories told. At the heart of these experience were processes of extension and compression, of reaching out and returning home, of meeting others in conversation and in the exchange of goods and gifts, learning and sharing and returning home or moving on. These relationships were established through the exchange of goods. Such a sharing of lifestyle and life experiences across distance and across the generations offered stability, a set of reference points, worlds of meaning within which one might act.

The shape of these experiences and stories is still with us, evident in the forms of narrative that we enjoy so much in movies and novels, and indeed according to which some may measure and judge their own lives today—quests for achievement and recognition through travel, gain and loss, and return. It is in this sense that it can be said that to be human is to be global. We have been here before. The past is with us still as the aftermath of these processes of reaching out and return, exchanges through time, the persistence of relationships established millennia ago, even back to when people spread out from Africa across the world. Just as Maaike Roozenburg’s replicas explicitly and transparently compress hundreds of years into a moment of raising a cup.

This is to affirm the necessity of an historical awareness, not of what happened in the past, but of how the past endures. Because this is what it is to be human.

Things can witness this persistence, and design can conjure up the ghosts of the past.

Sometimes, even often, all this is forgotten in a particular and narrow globalist vision focused upon the abstract transaction happening in the here and now.

design values – against the *tabula rasa*

A chair made of *waste* plastic, a pollutant; *copies* of museum pieces; *revival* of an outmoded aesthetic; furniture made by an *obsolete* impersonal technology. The modernist celebration of the abstract has, until recently, meant that copies, waste products, second hand, outmoded, pre-used, recycled materials and goods like these have taken second place to the pristine and new, the supposedly fresh and original. Design has often aspired to begin with a clean slate, *tabula rasa*, starting from first principles (rather than what just happens to be around—historical contingency), with form following function, or an aesthetic rooted in abstract geometric form. Under the familiar notion of designed obsolescence we have become accustomed to consumerist cycles of purchase of innovation and upgrade in an emphasis upon the experience of purchase and consumption rather than goods themselves and the vicarious lives they join, augment, complement, or contradict.

These design projects have rejected the *tabula rasa* and immerse us into a messy mixed-up world in which the past persists in the everyday, and is the condition for vital, living artifacts that tell of human stories. And this is even possible through the clean minimalist forms of Scholten & Baijings Colour Porcelain. Messy and historically mindful does not necessarily mean old, worn, patinated, uncontrolled, disordered. I am also very appreciative of the way that making and material are celebrated and made transparent—the automated manufacture of porcelain cups and Dirk van der Kooij's furniture, the harvesting of plastic and the extraordinary agglomerated texture of its melted and moulded forms.

design as return and exchange

Design here reaches out, contracts exchange, and returns displaced. Dirk van der Kooij's robot arm is a displacement of what would be discarded, from Chinese factory to Dutch design studio. Translation and transformation is central to this exchange process, as this becomes that, as a form or material comes to mean something new, as what has been becomes something new again through reconfigured

connections and associations.

Studio Swine and Kieren Jones conceive of harvesting the plastic of the sea. On the one hand this is a horrific vision, of millions of tons of garbage in the oceans, polluting and corrupting. The suggestion that this may be scavenged as raw material is a prospect of metamorphosis and transformation, positive and productive. It is almost alchemical. There is a visceral intimacy to the process, scavenging along a beach, with its weather, smells of sea life, rotting weed, picking through the flotsam and jetsam. And then the heat of the furnace to melt and to mold the plastic for a chair that brings the distant ocean into the domestic environment.

Could this not be seen as a gift that obliges reciprocity? Giving back to the world in which we are so embroiled?

These projects embody the positive, rich, human qualities of imitation and improvement, of reworking materials and things, as clay, metal, plastic are transformed and enter into living relationships with us, following us in our lives, lending character to our experiences, augmenting as prosthetics, by manifesting memory and the past, what should not be forgotten, the interconnection of extension and intimacy, stories in the lives of things through distant times and places, brought into our everyday experience.

This is the human potential of globalism, as ever.

Return, reuse, recycling, replication, repurposing—this is revitalization, even reincarnation.