

Experimental Jetset

Interview with Lucienne Roberts//2005

01. Education and inspiration

All three of us studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam. Marieke [Stolk] and Danny [van Dungen] graduated in 1997; Erwin [Brinkers], who was in another year, graduated in 1998. At that time, Linda Van Deursen was definitely a very influential person; she was one of our favourite teachers. She still is very inspirational to us.

The artist Richard Prince also had a huge impact on us. We were introduced to his work through Linda. We especially liked his 'joke paintings'. We remember that seeing these paintings, displaying a few simple sentences in Helvetica, was really a breath of fresh air in a time when graphic design was more about layered compositions, techno- and grunge-typography, and clogged lay-outs.

Prince's work (not only his 'joke paintings', but also his 'gangs', his grouped photographs) showed that it was possible to analyse/deconstruct pop-culture, but without the 'deconstructivist' aesthetics so fashionable in graphic design around that time, and that we disliked so much. His work had a hard and cool 'punk-minimalist' sensibility that we responded to. (Some people assume our work to be heavily influenced by Swiss late-modernists such as Josef Muller-Brockmann and designers like that, but actually we only learned about these designers quite recently. Richard Prince had a much greater influence.)

We were also inspired by Bob Gill. In the library of the Rietveld Academy we discovered a dusty copy of *Forget All The Rules You Ever Learned About Graphic Design – Including the Ones in This Book*. Gill's work had an immediate impact. What impressed us most was his consistent use of the 'problem/solution' model. It's a dialectical model that some might find outdated, rigid, one-dimensional, didactic, archaic. To us, the problem/solution model is beautiful. Of course, it has a tragic side, as every solution only brings forth more problems (and besides, we all know there is no such thing as one perfect solution). But it is exactly this inherent tragic side which makes this model so beautiful and useful to us.

Last but not least, there is Wim Crouwel. What interested us most is the fact that, in his work, form and approach are the same. There's an idiosyncratic quality in his designs: his work is highly systematic but highly personal, organized according to his own logic. From the smallest logo to his body of work as a whole, his pieces are systematic worlds in themselves.

To be confronted with such systematic work is quite powerful; it's ecstatic and disturbing at the same time. To feel your own logic clash with another logic,

to be suddenly drawn into another rhythm, another rationality, a different set of rules: it's a profound experience, causing you to see the world with different eyes. Crouwel's work can certainly trigger experiences like that. (It is often thought that design, to have a subversive potential, has to be unexpected, irrational, rebellious; anything as long as it's not 'boring'. We very much disagree: in our view, it is consistency, and an iron logic, that can really throw you off your feet, and change your way of thinking.)

02. Modernism and functionalism

Whether we consider ourselves modernists or not is an impossible question. The answer would depend completely on the definition of Modernism one employs.

For example, there's the idea of Modernism as a very defined, historical classification, starting, let's say, in the 1850s, peaking around 1910, and rapidly fading away after that. That's quite a feasible definition.

Another definition would be the more 'Habermasian' idea of Modernism, as something yet to be fulfilled, linked to the notion of modernity as a project that started with the Enlightenment. That's also a very plausible definition.

In between these two definitions, there are hundreds of others. And since we are torn between all of them, it's quite difficult for us to answer this question.

What we do know though is that we aren't functionalists (in the common use of the word), as we aren't just interested in the 'narrow' definition of the word 'function'. To us, a chair isn't simply something to just sit on; it also functions as the embodiment of a certain way of thinking. This 'broad' definition of function is actually closer to early than to late modernism.

To give a simple example of this, in the brilliant *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, Reyner Banham shows that Rietveld's arm-chair is in fact a highly symbolic structure. The design of the chair cannot be simply justified as being 'functional'; the chair is also a statement about the infinity of space. This is something we're quite interested in: the function of design as an embodiment of ideology.

03. Aesthetics and utopia

We are firm believers in the utopian dimension of design. It's something we're absolutely convinced of. It's our main drive. But we aren't sure if this utopian dimension can be found in utilitarianism, or social messages. Those particular forms of engagement can be strong sources of inspiration for the designer, and in that sense they certainly play an important role, but they often lack a real dialectical potential. In our view, a true utopian design should change people's way of thinking, not just their opinions.

If we are indeed living in a fragmented society (and we believe we are) then

perhaps the only way to shock us out of this alienation is to counter the fragmentation of society with the wholeness of design. In that sense, the utopian dimension is to be found in the internal organisation of the designed object, its inner logic. Which brings us back to the idiosyncratic quality of Crouwel's work mentioned earlier, or the example of Rietveld's chair as an embodiment of ideology. You can define it in many different ways: Herbert Marcuse speaks of 'the aesthetic dimension' (in a very good essay of the same name), you can also refer to it as the dialectical dimension, or the critical dimension, or the inner logic, or the internal whole. In our view, these are all names for the same thing.

We recently stumbled across a quote by the artist John McCracken, who said 'I've always felt that it was possible that a piece could change or transform reality, or the world. A work being so tuned that it somehow alters the constitution of things.' This almost musical idea of 'tuning' is precisely where we locate the utopian potential of design. (We know this probably sounds hopelessly idealistic, but that's exactly what we are).

To elaborate on this last remark, we see the work of minimal artists such as McCracken and Donald Judd as profoundly political. The modularity in the work of Judd is especially subversive. Modularity, which is the repetition of standard units, always seems to point towards the idea of infinity; after all, repetition is a phenomenon that suggests a movement 'ad infinitum'. And in our view, it is exactly this idea of infinity that has the potential to shock us out of the alienation of the everyday. It is no wonder that some of the most radical artworks share this sense of infinity, and therefore possess the subversive potential to let us see the world in a different way.

Interestingly enough, we think it is precisely his modularity (and not necessarily his attempts to produce furniture) that caused Judd to touch the world of design. To put it boldly, we think that design, intrinsically linked to diverse processes of repetition (serial production, graphic multiplication, etc.), is closely related to the modularity of minimal art.

04. Advil and Excedrin

Graphic design is enormously important to us. It occupies every minute of our lives. We have to admit that every single thing that we do, even when seemingly unrelated to graphic design, we immediately try to place in the context of graphic design. Watching a documentary on TV, listening to pop music, taking a walk, going to a rock show, teaching, hanging out with friends, even sleeping: it all becomes part of the design process.

Recently, we wrote a short text for UK graphic design magazine *Grafik*, to answer their question '2004: How was it for you?'. In that text, we wrote that 'since we started in 1997, the usual rhythm of weeks, months and years

gradually disappeared. We're now marching to the beat of deadline after deadline. The only constants are the daily pressure to perform, and a steady diet of Advil 400 (against common headache), Excedrin (against tension headache) and Maxalt (against migraine).' [...] But we still think it is worth it. We're living a world that seems dominated by postmodern tendencies (movements such as neo-conservatism, right-wing populism and religious fundamentalism). Working in graphic design, a discipline born out of modernism, gives us the chance to explore values and themes that we can't find anywhere else. For us, there is a lot of consolation to be found in graphic design. In our opinion, 'the only way to shock us out of this alienation is to counter the fragmentation of society with the wholeness of design'. This is not just a rhetoric statement; for us this is quite personal. The practice of graphic design is also a way to shock us out of our own alienation.

05. Design and art

We don't see graphic design as art, but we do see art as a form of design. Although it's hard to define art, it's not difficult to define its context: there exists a clear infrastructure of exhibition spaces, galleries, museums, art magazines, art publishers, art history, theory, etc. Art can be seen as the production of objects, concepts and activities intended to function within this specific infrastructure. In our view, this production can certainly be seen as a specific form of design.

Speaking about art and design, it's interesting to see how the view on the relationship between art and design changed during the course of modernism. Striving towards a synthesis of art and design was quite an elementary characteristic of early modernism, quite possibly its most defining one. Early modernists such as László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky were absolutely driven by the idea to unite art and the everyday; the idea of art, not as an added, decorative layer, but as something fully integrated in modern life. While late-modernists, such as Crouwel and the late Rietveld (as opposed to the early Rietveld) were (and in the case of Crouwel, still are) radically against such a synthesis of art and design.

In the conclusion of 'Theory and Design in the First Machine Age', Banham seems to suggest that the late modernists more or less sacrificed the early-modernist ideal of synthesis in favour of late-modernist matters such as functionalism and utilitarianism. Which is an interesting thought to say the least. In our view, there is certainly a necessity to restore the historical, modernist link between design and art.

Experimental Jetset, 'Interview with Lucienne Roberts', *Drip-dry Shirts: The Evolution of the Graphic Designer*, ed. Lucienne Roberts (Lausanne: AVA, 2005); revised version, 2007.