

Joe Scanlan

Please, Eat the Daisies//2001

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Long before John Pawson thought of disguising a sock drawer or Martha Stewart ever dreamed of stuffing a pea, Thorstein Veblen could have told you how expensive something useless could be. Born in Wisconsin to Norwegian immigrants in 1857, Veblen left the family farm for Carleton College before attending Johns Hopkins, Yale and Cornell, eventually settling at the University of Chicago, where he taught economic theory and socialism while editing *The Journal of Political Economy*. It was there that he wrote his first and most famous book. *The Theory of The Leisure Class* (1899), in which he elaborated such lasting concepts as pecuniary emulation, conspicuous consumption and honorific waste. Time and colloquialism have assimilated those concepts as 'Keeping up with the Joneses', 'If you've got it, flaunt it', and *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Not a mere class satire, however, *The Theory of The Leisure Class* also delves into the economics of things themselves, and how their aesthetic merits increase in direct proportion to their apparent uselessness. As Veblen described it, conspicuous waste doesn't necessarily imply that the more ornate an object is the more aesthetic value it has, since an eye for technical proficiency and labour also figured into Veblen's accounting of beauty. Contrary to his contemporary Adolph Loos, the Austrian architect and author of 'Ornament and Crime', Veblen understood that the elimination of ornament from architecture did not necessarily mean a reduction of waste. Since Modern architecture's machine aesthetics required not only the elimination of ornament but also the elimination of that elimination's evidence, Veblen knew that the labour required in fabricating an absence of ornament could be more excessive than ornamentation itself.

We have been pining for Veblen lately because his innate skepticism of all things useless might shed some light on the current trend of design as art. Design art could be defined loosely as any artwork that attempts to play with the place, function, and style of art by commingling it with architecture, furniture and graphic design. A short list of current practitioners, from the obvious (Jorge Pardo, Tobias Rehberger) to the vague (Heimo Zobernig, Gregor Schneider) would also have to include Angela Bulloch, Liam Gillick, Jim Isermann, Joep van Lieshout, Roy McMakin, Regina Moller, N55, Franz West, Pae White, Andrea Zittel and Joe Scanlan. Such distinctions only matter to the extent that the place and function of each artist's work might suggest where their interest in the idea of design as art lies. For Pardo, it is the perpetual reproduction of style; for

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Schneider, the erasure of memory; for White, the luxury of self-employment; for Zobernig, a ruthless economy of means. Such classifications are slippery, though, since we could talk just as well of amnesia in relation to Pardo's retro-aesthetics or luxury in relation to Zobernig's particle-board decadence.

What seems crucial to design art in all its forms is that some sort of slippage occur between where art is, how it looks, and what it does. In contrast to the institutional critiques of Michael Asher or Louise Lawler, design art does not call attention to the place and function of art in order to question its cultural authority. Rather, it attempts to expand the accessibility of art by contriving other, more pragmatic ways of engaging its reception and use. Where institutional critique hopes to disrupt the illusion of cultural authority by revealing the mechanisms that buttress it, design art hopes to democratize that authority by providing mood lighting and comfortable chairs. Institutional critique is based on argumentation; design art on salesmanship.

Design art frequently presents itself in direct competition with the commercial fields from which it borrows – architecture, interior design, graphic design, industrial design – and thus runs the admirable risk of being expended just like any other consumable object or style, soiling art just as Veblen soiled economics by introducing real-life contingencies. In its most successful and radical forms, design art pits one human impulse (consumption) against another (preservation) by incorporating a utility in the art object that threatens its physical well being. As good design art plays itself out over time, our desire for beauty and utility coalesce in such a way as to confuse our motivations, making the avoidance of use and the destruction of beauty seem at turns both sensible and perverse.

This can be fun and informative. Unfortunately, much design art does not function well enough to follow through on its promises, a shortcoming that tends to cancel out whatever compelling, self-destructive impulses the design art object has. Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Living Units* are so materially cumbersome and ergonomically cruel as to be laughable as anything other than art. Whenever you see one it always looks a little too shiny, as if no one had ever cared (or dared) to interact with it, let alone actually 'live' in one. And while this is probably fine with the people who own them, a lack of wear is a serious flaw for any artwork that proposes use value as a fundamental aspect of its radicality.

Veblen's theories are helpful in this regard, since he believed that the extent to which an object fails to be useful only enhances its value as art. According to the laws of conspicuous waste, beauty's most basic trait is a lack of utility. For a person, this means the avoidance of any and all productive labour; for an object, it means the elimination of all useful applications save for the pecuniary distinction of uselessness. The more time one devotes to pointless endeavours,

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the more beautiful those endeavours become, and so too the pecuniary reputability of those people who produce, admire and own them. By Veblen's logic, art is the ultimate pointless endeavour and thus one of the most flattering things a person can be associated with, since its presence always implies the ability to waste huge amounts of time on something that has no ostensible use.

Whatever is interesting about design art, then, depends not on how well it performs its apparent function, but on how well it performs the function for which it has been consumed. As we know, regardless of whether you're buying Star Trek paraphernalia or a Duchamp readymade, there is a ratio between intended function and symbolic function that determines any object's market price, a mechanism that invariably removes that object from the dangers of circulation when it reaches a certain escalated value. Over time, the practical appeal of utility gives way to the appeal of pecuniary distinction, and such three-dimensional objects as womb chairs and *passtücke* [Franz West's 'adaptives'] take on the character of two-dimensional rarities. There is a monetary value at which any functional object gets flattened into the world of signs, accruing the meaning not of its function but of what that function's social value has come to represent. To update Wittgenstein, the meaning is not the use, but the price.

The rub between a desire for broad social value and an insistence on refined aesthetics has been felt ever since John Ruskin and William Morris launched the Arts and Crafts movement in the nineteenth century. Ever since, from the Wiener Werkstatt and the Bauhaus to Gustav Stickley and Charles and Ray Eames, the moral obligation to impart good sense on the masses has prevailed, however practically useless or prohibitively expensive that aesthetic cultivation might be. From the beginning, Veblen questioned the therapeutic value of the Arts and Crafts movement by exposing the economic contradictions of its naïve social agenda – doubts that are no less valid concerning the socio-economics of design art today.

Thus, Zittel's *Living Units* – or Rehberger's performance frames, or Pardo's bedroom suites – do not fail to be useful as much as they prematurely commit to one value system to the exclusion of all others, thereby demonstrating a faith in institutions and an impatience with the public that contradicts whatever transgressions their works aspire to. In other words, they become art. Ordinarily, that would be a compliment. In this case, it's not, since the inherent uselessness of Richard Artschwager's or Sol LeWitt's work, to take two examples, is acknowledged in the way their sculptures are constructed and displayed. This is especially true for Artschwager, whose *Table With Pink Tablecloth* of 1964 is clearly about the appearance of being furniture rather than the function of being so, although his sculpture very well could be. Because Artschwager truncates the idea of 'table' by sealing off its negative space, the fact that his sculpture could

still support a gimlet or a scrabble board seems a practical bonus rather than an ergonomic limitation, regardless of what someone might have paid for the piece. (Complicating this further, collectors in Chicago who own a Robert Rauschenberg dog bed have allowed their Weimaraner to use it for the last ten years.) By comparison, the inherent uselessness of most design art is not made apparent in either its construction or its display, making its eventual ergonomic failure a rather annoying (and expensive) bait and switch.

Therein lies our disappointment with the idea of design as art. No matter how much we admire the perversion of creating useful objects whose value nonetheless stems from the pecuniary distinction of their uselessness, invoking design and function as a foil for making art betrays a troubling lack of nerve. We harbour a philosophical disappointment in the professional double standard practised by design artists themselves, whose need for art to appear useful – without the risk of being so – strikes us as timid and sad.

In 'Pecuniary Canons of Taste' – the best and funniest chapter in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* – Veblen traces the history of the manicured lawn back to mankind's shepherding days, to the root of the esteem that accrued to any shepherd whose pasture was evenly grazed. Having given up our agrarian ways and moved to the village, which became the city, which became modernized, which became industrialized, and which caused us to crave the countryside again – the manicured lawn developed into a lavish, useless object that harkened back to the pecuniary reputability of our shepherding ancestors. Within this concise social history Veblen saves a bit of contempt for a certain strata of the aspiring classes who, having achieved their sufficiently manicured lawns in their sufficiently reputable suburbs, can't stand to see the grass go to waste. So they put deer and antelope statues on their lawns to give them at least the appearance of being used. Today, design artists have become those people.

Joe Scanlan (with Neal Jackson), 'Please, Eat the Daisies', *Art Issues* (Los Angeles, January/February, 2001) 26–9.