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It takes a switch to turn off the spotlight

*by Giovanni Innella with Paul Rodgers and Nick Spencer
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When asked which of the objects he designed was his favourite, Italian design maestro, Achille Castiglioni responded, “The object I’m proudest of? A switch for an electric lead I designed thirty years ago with my brother Pier Giacomo. It was produced in large numbers and bought for its formal qualities, but no one knows who made the design...”

What Castiglioni was talking about can, in a positive sense, be defined as design anonymity and utilitarianism. Navigating through magazines, websites and festivals, anonymity nowadays seems to be the designer’s greatest fear; while the designer’s relationship with utilitarianism is ambiguous – is it their biggest ambition or their biggest oversight?

From tables to cars, vacuum cleaners to telephones, or lamps to lighters, conventionally, design is concerned with enriching people’s lives whilst at the same time thinking of products that function more robustly in those lives. If you attended one of the thousands of design schools around the globe, you have most likely been trained to think of the production of goods that would remain on the outside of magazines and exhibitions. High producibility, high tangibility – but visibility within media spheres, next to nil.

Meanwhile, the world of design – that same world which designers and design students contemplate, which inspires their thoughts and held up as an example of “good” – moved in the opposite direction. Rapidly, so rapidly, that it disappeared. Disappeared to the touch, but not to the eye. On the contrary, the design world has become increasingly visible in the cultural, but also consumerist context of the media and exhibitions where design is represented.

The attention given to the representation of design has grown considerably in the last 10-15 years. Popular design website, Designboom.com has recently reported the number of monthly readers to be 4.2 million; and its competitor, Dezeen.com, already in 2008 counted over 2 millions unique visitors to their site. Other data supporting the magnitude of the media growth around design can be found in figures from the Furniture Fair of Milan. The presence of journalists between 1995 and 2010 has increased fourfold, while the number of visitors doubled, reaching the considerable amount of 348,000 in 2008. Conclusively, design is experienced more and more through both media and exhibition circuits.

In this context a certain type of design has affirmed its existence and built its legitimacy, freeing the designers from the constraints of the factory – supermarket – function of use sequence and its related implications. Not having to think about optimization of industrial productions, transportation of large quantities of goods and the satisfaction of thousands of users is surely a relief for any designer. However, such a shift leads to other issues that still need to be addressed. If the contexts have changed, then the cycle of production – distribution – consumption has remained the same, simply passing through media. This rerouting has led to the visual consumerism we experience daily, and also to an economy that – especially for designers – works on slightly different principles than that of mass production of goods. This design has been labelled in a number of ways. Names like conceptual design, gallery design,

showroom design, author design, DesignArt, signature design are not convincing to everyone, although they manage to define this slightly-different design ethos to an extent. In essence, what has gained the greatest media attention is the exclusive design of one-off pieces and small editions, and works that are hard to access physically.

The increasing visibility of these designed artefacts in our media-driven modern culture have at the same time led to the abandonment and loss of function of those artefacts, in favour of conceptual processes and experimentation with materials. That is, the main function often appears to be the representation of such goods and the media profile of their creator.

Indeed, designers consistently populate the mediated environs of festivals, magazines and blogs. They develop precious content for this circus. Undoubtedly they have pushed “the norm” of the field to a point where it’s quite usual for a designer to make his or her debut by designing objects that could exist only in publications, exhibitions, galleries and the houses of a few collectors. These designers operate in this context for a relatively long time by building up their high media profile.

What the media profile represents is unclear and arguable: on the one hand, one could see it as a certificate of quality, something stating the fact that that designer and his or her work deserves recognition and attention. On the other hand, anybody familiar with design media and events knows that often visibility is offered almost to anybody able to two-dimensionalise their design into appealing visuals or make them into sexy exhibition-only pieces – pairing it always with some descriptive text.

So while industrial designers have learned how to compress bookshelves into flat-packs, these media-certified designers have mastered the process of flattening their pieces into the format of images. Nonetheless, both types of designer are optimising the distribution of their design and addressing consumers directly, whether as users or viewers.

Through the media, design has succeeded in addressing and reaching a far larger audience of viewers, readers and visitors, but ultimately failed to maintain the dialogue with industry as it used to. During a lecture at the Design Academy of Eindhoven in 2007, Gijs Bakker – designer and co-founder of the conceptual design institution Droog – concluded by admitting that he did not know why big companies were not approaching Droog to develop products together. This crucial question remains unanswered. The added value brought to industry by this kind of design seems unable to go beyond that of material for inspiration. While the aesthetic and ethic influence of conceptual design on the media-world of larger productions and sales is evident, its active involvement remains very limited. And what is also limited is the recognition on both an economic and cultural level received from that industry.

The budget that companies could have spent on experimental design research seems now to be invested on marketing activities such as trend forecasting. The exclusive design we are talking about becomes fodder for trend forecasters and the like, who carefully monitor it. If you have doubts about this, next time you are at a design event, ask around for business cards. It will be like browsing the yellow pages under the section headed “Trend Forecasters”. As a consequence, design magazines have become mash-ups where the line between advertisements and content is extremely blurred, evidencing the conceptual and aesthetic permeability between the two worlds, while the two economies remain miles away from one another.

The exposure of design to media developed a vicious cycle in which media attention begets more media attention. A luxurious stage is set up under the spotlights, starring Brad Pitt offering a walk-on cameo in the role of “the buyer” – leaving us all with the suspicion that in such a mediated context even the act of

the purchase could be fictitious. This suspicion reaches the point where we might legitimately wonder whether the value of Mark Newson's Lockheed chair, should be attributed to its creator's role within the industry or to Madonna singing and rubbing up on it in a music video – an act which magically granted auctioneers' dizzy wishes as if it was Aladdin's wonderful lamp.

Spotlights have certainly made design more visible, but not more transparent or understandable. It is hard to identify who really has the role of attributing cultural and monetary value to artefacts – artefacts that have an increasingly loose relationship with the real world as they seductively flirt with the ubiquitous and glittering world of media.

Additionally, auction bids cannot serve as a guarantee of value, as we surely ascertain that good design exists in the realm of 1\$ as well as in that of 1,000,000\$. In the first realm we can detect reliable sources to determine, or at least discuss, quality and value, in the second however, such sources are harder to identify. Let's be honest: a consumer review in the 1\$ realm often has more content and critical analysis than a post in Dezeen.com, which in most cases consists of a press release cut-and-pastes straight from the designers themselves.

Credibility is indeed what seems to be lacking in the soft-hued light of the photography shoot. Paradoxically, in the age of one-off works and limited editions what seems to be rare are not design pieces, but rather a critique on those pieces. A critique launched from the outside, would surely add credibility to the scene, and indeed there has been much debate on the topic. Visual communication critic Rick Poynor, almost one year ago entitled his article on Frame Magazine "Designers need critics", where he observes the progressive disappearing of design critique in the last 50 years. However if such a change hasn't happened hitherto, maybe we should start asking ourselves why doesn't design want a critique?

The increasing presence of design in media (and media in design), the proliferation of design-related events and the growing number of affluent visitors to them, has generated a complex industry. The intangibility of new goods as exhibition pieces and images allowed design to enter a world based totally on communication. Here the complex of object, image, text, concept and context constitutes the final product – forewarning the circular pattern of interchangeable roles between designers, publishers, curators, auctioneers, event organisers: the curator is also a trend forecaster, the publisher is a commissioner, the editor is a seller and the designer is compelled to act as a PR agency. In such a system design roles are continuously re-defined, often creating voids between competences and apparent – or actual – conflicts of interest.

Flexibility is however, in the nature of design. It has long since been this way and this perhaps the reason why design never really developed a structured critique. The critical view has traditionally come out of the relationship with industry and design's impact on the "real world". There is surely a good reason why investments in design collectibles such as the Prouvé's, Sottsass's, Scandinavian modernists' are considered "safe". The fact is that these creators have proved valuable within the solidity of the industrial and architectural contexts, which can credibly support their most experimental and visionary collateral activities. Missing the solid ground of the real world, other design products started behaving as a kind of para-art organism. Borrowing contexts, monetary figures and sometimes roles from the artworld, these organisms still lacked the foundation that allows art to exist beyond market logic. Such a foundation in art is provided by a well-established discourse and a strong network of institutions, for design, this distinction from the real world of society and industry cannot be taken for granted.

Perhaps it is in the gap between the production industry and conceptual design, where lies the space for a useful, original design critique. At this very moment, the much-hoped design critique should become a

binding agent between the cultural nature of design and the broader industry, which cannot be restricted to galleries, nor can it rely on the disappearing public funds. Ideally, such reflexivity would reveal the real value of the designers to both the audience of design aficionados as well as the representatives of the industry, and not just the media industry.

Talking to young designers that regularly show at exclusive venues in Milan and other festivals, they admitted their aim to create connections with firms and institutions there. Hopefully, these connections would bring commissions for larger editions of new products, innovative services, public space improvements and other projects. Unfortunately, under the glare of the spotlights it is hard to see beyond the pieces on show and such connections don't seem to happen for them. Yet the quality and ability of those designers is proved by their awards, nominations, publications and participation to exhibitions. They are good designers; they simply operate in a context that has detached itself from the one that is actively industrious. If you add to these ambitions the yearning for a solid context providing new economic stability, then you get the picture of a design that needs and wants to prove beneficial for the people and not just Brad Pitt's living room.

Media helped design to explore its boundaries and introduced it to many interesting characters beyond itself. We know Brad and Angelina are generous and socially-engaged people, but now that governments have reduced their support for design, relying on those nice celebrities to adopt the many young practitioners out there might be a boundary not worth crossing.

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