

## What are they good for?

What is the potential of knowledge, art, material, and means and which act is correct?

By: Freek Lomme

Through the exhibition Design Real, Serpentine Gallery guest curator and designer Konstantin Grcic, intends to highlight industrial qualities. He makes a plea for the industrial, as a potential to create meaningfulness.

Industrial qualities are often neglected, both by an artistic, avant-garde elite distrustful of the industries, and by most people, to whom this specific knowledge simply doesn't stand out. The industrial therefore moves within a sphere of relative anonymity. Industrial products are rarely known as such, because many products are meant to serve in the chain of production itself and therefore never reach the public, or because the designer or design does not raise any public interest. Besides this, the technical potential and knowledge that these products have to offer are not available publicly.

Despite its relative anonymity, industrial design produces an immense part of our material and immaterial world, as Design Real rightfully claims: it has a tremendous impact on the material form of our lives: on the work floor where we co-operate within one part of the chain of production, or outside the work floor, where we are living our lives - supposedly - to the fullest. Anywhere we work, we work with hardware and software, wrapped into user-friendly interfaces, within an elegantly designed chassis with sound and soft edges. We utilise and use, in a frenzy, whatever we need or think we need.

So, there is indeed this gap in our cultural horizon. This gap is called industrial potential. Its spirit and face absent from our daily reality. Grcic literally puts them back in our face, in the Serpentine Gallery. Grcic is convinced of the potential of the industrial. After all: the industrial toolbox - its knowledge and instruments - plus the matter to be processed - raw material or semi-manufacture - constitutes the framework for a vocabulary that can be developed. When this language would be well articulated, a reality enters the process of becoming. In other words: we enrich ourselves whenever able designers effect technological progress. According to Grcic, design is an evolutionary process, and, more specifically: 'Design is really a process of evolution rather than invention. It's more about re-working them, refining them.'

Tentative act.

The issue stated above is evidently relevant. Nevertheless it lacks nuance. In his plea for the potential of industrial design, Grcic pronounces what exists: industrial knowledge and industrial matter. Within this spectrum, the designer is able to make small evolutionary motions. In the end, Grcic considers the industrial to be the means of the designer, the industry the result. He accordingly acts within a status quo. Grcic does *not* elaborate on what could exist. Fundamentally, he's a conservative proclaiming a design of the radical middle.

So, what is Grcic's position as producer, as creator? Design Real goes beyond the tendency of artists becoming designers, as described by Alex Coles in Design and Art. However, he does not address the question what kind of target might be realised through means and effect, the theme I addressed in the research and presentation series Desarting. Grcic discusses the value of industrial potential but does not elaborate on what the resulting act could be or should be.

By operating within the framework of the Serpentine Gallery, Grcic clearly relates himself to the artistic domain. He makes a claim within the Serpentine Gallery, proposes an end result. In the accompanying publication he states his relation towards artistic production. 'What distinguishes a product from an artwork is that while the artwork may be shaped by society, politics economics or environmental issues, the design product is conditioned by these realities in a much more objective way.'

As a result, according to Grcic, design is meant to bring the industrial to perfection. The aim of design is not cultural but much more technological, situated in the perfection of the product. He accordingly describes the results of such an endeavours with denominations as 'the best', 'most functional' and 'most advanced'. Grcic aims for - that much is clear - a rationalisation based on a mere technological notion. This technological notion is his objective. Subconsciously, this is the objective of his proclaimed industrial potency. He postulates this paradigm through rhetorical concepts such as 'intelligence', 'good for what they are', 'meaning beyond object', 'first of their kind', 'best of a type', 'most radical' and 'preferred ones'.

As he himself states, the designer is more objective as the artist. I would like to call this a fake rationalisation. It reduces the 'should' to something tentative, something limited and weak. As a creative product of the radical middle he elaborates on what is already known so as to denounce the prophecy, the progressive. He polishes a paradigm and shies away from the paradigm change.

The result.

Let's return to the presentation, taking place within the immaterial artistic context of the Serpentine Gallery. As a location for and of progressive production, the Serpentine Gallery might actually disavow itself, because it allows Grcic' conservatism. Simultaneously, the exhibition takes place within a material artistic context. Grcic displays the work without decoration, shows in-your-face anonymous industrial design, semi-manufacture and end product alike, equipped to serve the production of consumption. To him, the physical form is a rationalisation of a technological notion. In the material context of the gallery, they become pure form. Sometimes even sublime. A battery, an extrapolation of a mobile phone battery utilised in cars, is indeed a great black cube. A new taillight for a car is indeed tremendously futuristic... Nevertheless, this play of form is not new to visual arts either. Take for example the return of the sculptural fore-grounding of form, the colour and the matter in itself as, for example, in the highly visual work of Rachel Harrison and, popular in the Netherlands and Belgium, the work of Tamara Van San. This type of work focuses on the sculptural, material element through unmediated visual power: exorbitant colours and shapes. These works don't mean anything, do not relate to anything of a 'should' and therefore present a fake, rhetorical presence of form: images for a zap culture.

In a material sense, Design Real is a carefully targetted visual precision bombing to liberate the artistic of its weaknesses. Targeted via pedestals, resulting in an elegant, serene presentation of objects. At a first glance, this seems to be a category mistake, falsely combining propositions belonging to either applied or liberal arts. The outcome points out that they are both dealing with similar issues of signification; both of them deal with the struggle between material potency and immaterial act: the playroom concerning progressive production.

Design Real

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Serpentine Gallery  
Kensington Gardens  
London W2 3XA  
United Kingdom

Literature:

1. Design and Art, Alex Coles (red.), 2007. MIT press, Cambridge, U.S.A..
2. Desarting, Freek Lomme (red.), 2008. Onomatopee, Eindhoven, Nederland.
3. Design Real, Rattee and Larner (red.), 2010. Serpentine/Koning books, London, U.K..

Freek Lomme is a freelance writer and curator. Recent design related exhibitions curated by him included Laughing Prohibited! for Onomatopee and Take on me, take me on for the Van Abbemuseum, both in Eindhoven. In 2008, he curated Desarting, a bottom-up research and presentation project, mapping the applied and liberal arts.

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