Towards a Theory of Performative Design:

Writing about Design and Designers since 1990

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Contents

Abstract

Three monographs and two chapters in edited volumes are submitted for this PhD by Publication. All cover aspects of contemporary design practice since about 1990 in the areas of furniture and related product design, ranging from industrial mass-production to craft and so-called 'design art'.

The introduction explores the context in which these works were written and published and establishes the author as a non-designer design expert, with knowledge about design practice but without design skill. This special position was established by my role as a curator of contemporary design in a national museum collection, and later as an academic. I examine how my perspective affected the ways in which I could write about design; as a privileged 'gate-keeper' to the domain of contemporary design practice, as a design historian, as a curator with a duty to interpret my subject for a broad non-specialist public, and as a specialist tutor of student designers. Therefore the main thrust of the PhD is established, which questions how to write about contemporary design practice.

The methodologies for each published work are examined. Although they share common ground in a broad consideration of designers' practices since about 1990 and the reception of their works by various markets, each was written from its own perspective. These vary from an emphasis on the design industry and its machinations, to a consideration of how the contemporary art market's values have affected the production and distribution of one-off and limited

edition design works, to a study focusing on the designers themselves and how their works are sometimes co-opted as agents of cultural diplomacy.

Further reflection and theorizing about these works draws upon Actor Network Theory to establish structural relations between the subjects of the works – the contemporary designers – and myself as a non-partisan, but nevertheless complicit, commentator. With Nigel Whiteley and Kenneth Ames I seek to repudiate the constraints of 'design history', preferring a more plural and encompassing category of 'design studies' where diverse theoretical and structural influences can be brought to bear on writing about design. To this end, I propose a new theory of Performative Design, drawing on the linguistic 'speech acts' of J.L. Austin and John Searle, and the identity politics of Judith Butler, as a mechanism or lens through which we can interpret certain contemporary design practices.

Introduction: Writing about Design

I am not a designer. I have never been trained to design and I do not aspire to design anything myself. Yet the practices of contemporary design fascinate and engage me, and I have built a career by learning about them. When I consider innovative materials or techniques, the work of a particular designer, or the design industry's latest societal or environmental preoccupations, I cannot simply ask myself 'How would I have designed this differently?' or 'What would be my own design reaction to this constraint or opportunity?': I am not a designer and cannot make these responses. I find myself in a special situation where I am saturated with design *knowledge* but lack both design *skill* and a personal design *agenda*. My non-designer status, therefore, affords me objective critical distance on the practice of design, and my reactions must be based on value judgments drawn from disciplines other than design practice, such as design history, the history of technology, sociology, anthropology and semiology.

The works submitted for this PhD are how I have tried to understand design and designers. My overarching research questions should be understood in the context in which the submissions were written. Several of the works were produced when I was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum seeking ways in which to interpret and present new design thinking and innovations to a broad public. By necessity a curator is reactive to ideas and outcomes generated by others: curated exhibitions and collections bring together existing works to create new narratives. I moved to the Royal College of Art with the express

intention of getting closer to the source of design: to be less *reactive* and more *proactive* (while still maintaining my special status as a non-designer design specialist). Some of the works submitted here were written from this perspective.

This PhD, therefore, considers how to write about design in different ways as a non-designer, as each work arose from a particular perspective and knowledge base. I sought to find my own distinct voice and authoritative point of view about design, not through *doing* it but through *writing* about it. Privileging myself as a non-designer outside design practice, nevertheless I went to great lengths to penetrate the design process in order to better understand it. So while the PhD is textual – it is about how to write about design – it also considers the subject from the point of view of perspective, knowledge and authority. By placing myself close to the heart of my subject – design practice – I am forced to question my impact on that practice, since critical distance from a subject still requires an interaction with the subject matter and the imposition of a point of view: it cannot be neutral. I am referring to curatorial and authorial accountability: what is *excluded* from the canon of design established by museum exhibitions and publications is as interesting as what is *included*, as are the judgments made for and against it.

I address the issue of perspective and responsibility by drawing on Actor Network Theory, notions arising from the histories of design and technology, and by applying the concept of performativity to design practice. By casting myself not as a design practitioner but as a design interpreter, disseminator, or

communicator (all of which require in-depth design knowledge) I must consider the relationship between the different fields and domains these roles imply. Design is not a linear process of inception (by the designer), communication (by the, marketer, curator or author) and consumption (by the market): rather, each operates on and influences the others.

The relative roles of the actors and actants in the formation and dissemination of design ideas is usefully examined by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who considers the interrelation of *domains*, *fields* and *creative individuals* in creative practices (Csikszentmihalyi 1996/2013). He regards domains as sets of symbolic rules and procedures defining knowledge. A narrow and well-defined domain would be mathematics, or sub-domains within it such as algebra or calculus. Design is a broad domain containing numerous disciplines (or sub-domains) that are arguably governed by shared conventions. 'Domains are in turn nested in culture, or the symbolic knowledge shared by a particular society, or by humanity as a whole' notes Csikszentmihalyi (1996/2013: 28), and with this in mind certainly it is possible to regard design as a society's symbolic knowledge expressed as culture.

The *domain* in which this PhD resides, therefore, is design. Csikszentmihalyi explains how a domain merely gives a meta-context for creative practice but this is honed by what he calls the *field*.

> 'The second component of creativity is the *field*, which includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. It is their job to decide whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain. In the visual arts the field consists of art teachers, curators of

museums, collectors of art, critics, and administrators of foundations and government agencies that deal with culture. It is this field that selects what new works of art deserve to be recognized, preserved and remembered.' (1996/2013: 28)

In these words Csikszentmihalyi succinctly defines my roles within the domain of design, as a curator and subsequently as a writer, lecturer and tutor. My writings about design are the output of a designated gatekeeper of design, bestowed with authority to contribute to the construction of the canon of design because of membership of the art establishment, in the form of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the academy, in the form of the Royal College of Art.

Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi describes different types of fields, both reactive and proactive (1996/2013: 43). A reactive field is conservative and does not encourage or desire innovation. On the other hand, a proactive field actively encourages – even demands – novelty, innovation and creativity, not necessarily for their own sakes but perhaps for another motive (Csikszentmihalyi cites the influence of wealthy patrons seeking to aggrandize Florence as important catalysts for the flowering of renaissance art and architecture in the city). Previously I described curating design as a reactive activity, and teaching design as proactive, but I can also contextualize many of the works in this submission within the domain of museology (rather than design) in which case a proactive quest in the field of new curatorial models and subjects greatly influenced the texts. I was seeking ways to gain critical distance on contemporary design practice *as it was happening* (rather than with the conventional benefit of historical hindsight), in order to contextualize it in the museum system. Duncan Grewcock has also thought about how to do museology differently.

'Recognising and working with a partial and shifting understanding of the world informs the emergence of what one can term 'the relational museum'', he writes. 'The relational museum emerges through varying attempts to re-imagine the contemporary museum as connected, plural, distributed, multi-vocal, affective, material, embodied, experiential, political, performative and participatory' (Grewcock, 2014: 5). Within fields, Csikszentmihalyi identifies creative individuals who must understand and operate within the conventions, symbols and procedures of the fields and ultimately the domain itself. In the terms of this PhD, these are the designers and manufacturers: the actors on the stage of the design industry that my works have explored. As will be seen, their networks share many of the same attributes as Grewcock's 'relational museum'.

The American studio furniture maker Peter Korn has expanded on Csikszentmihalyi's ideas of domains and fields by considering three contexts in which it is possible to participate in creative activities (Korn, 2015: 147). First person participation is the exploration of creative ideas oneself (through making, in Korn's terms). Second person participation is interaction with the ideas of others through a direct response to the things they have made. Third person participation is the engagement with another person's creative ideas at a remove, perhaps through published accounts or pictures of their work. The shifting perspective of the three levels of participation, from intimate and personal to remote and public, map onto the shifting perspectives of Csikszentmihalyi's creative individuals, fields and domains.

To reiterate: I am not a designer, so I cannot have first person experience of design practice. My activities as a curator and design tutor are broadly in keeping with Korn's definition of second person participation since my exhibitions and texts have been reflective responses to the primary design works made by others. Moreover, it is possible to categorize the outcomes themselves as evidence of Korn's third person participation since they are sites within the fields of design and museology where the activities of first person designers are interpolated and re-presented for a general public, at a remove from the original designer through the gatekeeping activities of the curator or author.

Alternatively, I can consider whether I have been writing from the point of view of a design historian. Design history is still a relatively new discipline that emerged from art history by the 1970s. Much has been written about the formation of design history as its own discipline and its relationship to other related historical and sociological theories and methodologies including the history of science and technology, and the study of material culture (Fallan, 2010). But over two decades ago Nigel Whiteley was proposing a shift away from design *history* to a more multi-dimensional idea of design *studies*, which he regarded as 'an infinitely more appropriate term for the plural histories and myriad activities, approaches and methodologies that involve human-made products and images' (Whiteley, 1995: 40). For Whiteley, design history's origins in a rather purist, modernist, Pevsnerian consideration of design for its own sake was enlivened in the 1960s by a shift of emphasis to regard design as an active agent of popular culture, greatly influenced by the writings of Reyner Banham. Design history shot through with popular culture served to

democratize the subject matter of the discipline and suited the reappraisal of anonymous designs as well as mass-produced commodities. But it did not provide tools to consider design as part of the history of economics, business or technology. However semiology, derived from Roland Barthes, greatly influenced design history because it supplied tools for regarding the meanings of objects and both their symbolic and functional purposes. However, Whiteley cautioned design historians against being seduced by theoreticians from other disciplines (for example, an over-reliance on Baudrillard and Heideger), especially those philosophers and semiologists with a tendency to reduce everything to 'text'. This is because 'conventional design history, to its eternal credit, usually was written in direct, simple and intelligible language' (Whiteley, 1995: 41).

Whiteley wanted to expand design history to the broader field of design studies, but Kenneth Ames (2000) questioned 'why even define oneself as a design historian? Why be identified by a label or confined by a discipline?'. His enquiry arose as he considered the relative freedoms of anthropologists such as Daniel Miller 'to follow enquiry wherever it leads without worrying about disciplinary boundaries'. 'There is a lesson to be learned here for those who agonize over whether the material they study is called art, craft or design. It really does not matter. Such distinctions only put blinders on intellectual enquiry' (Ames, 2000: 75). Problematising about the boundaries between art, design and craft is familiar and well-worn territory to curators of contemporary practice like me, who are trained to think in terms of crisp taxonomies, so Ames' breezy side-stepping of the need to think in these terms, in favour of

studying objects and the people who use them, is refreshing. While I am not an anthropologist, it is liberating to think of how my writing about contemporary design might contribute to the expansive domain of material studies, within which resides the history of design and design studies.

Whiteley's pluralistic definition of design studies emphasizes the role of design as an agent of social activity and change, operating within complex systems but described in 'direct, simple and intelligible language'. On reflection I feel this was an effect I was seeking with books such as *The Furniture Machine*, the methodology of which I shall discuss in greater length subsequently. Suffice to say, at this juncture, that I identify myself as part of a broader design *studies* community more than as a member of a narrower group of design *historians*. Largely this identification may arise from my prevailing subject matter, which is not historical *per se* but design as it is happening in (relatively) real time around me. It also permits my special status as a non-designer design specialist: neither a practitioner alongside designers nor a *bona fide* historian, but something of a hybrid.

Positioning Statement

I have titled this thesis 'Towards a theory of performative design' because it is
not a summation but a reflection on my progress towards a new design theory. It
is part of a longer trajectory of examining design practice and working with
designers and the design industry over a period of twenty-five years. Along the
way, as the prior publications I have submitted attest, I have tried different
methodologies and approaches to thinking about design writing. But my enquiry
into the nature of design practice has not only been framed by published works.
It has also been formed by curatorial practice as alluded to in the introduction to
this thesis. In this section I will describe curatorial projects and other published
work not discussed elsewhere that provide context for, and have contributed to,
the gestation of performative design theory.

In 2000 I co-curated, with Sorrel Hershberg, the V&A exhibition *Ron Arad*
Before and After Now. Ron Arad was in his ascendancy as a major
internationally significant designer, who had moved from the avant-garde
margins of the London design scene to the centre of the design establishment.
We installed Arad's work on a 'blade of light', a mirrored plinth that sliced
through the centre of the V&A from the main entrance to the central garden.
Ron Arad was one of the first industrial designers to create finished works with
3D printing (rather than use the technology for prototyping purposes only, as it
was originally conceived). We included many of these objects in the exhibition
together with a working 3D printer making scale models of Arad designs. Here,
design and making was being performed live and in real time in the museum's

galleries, imploding the familiar distance between the visitor and the object's fabrication: this was not just simply 'recent work' by Ron Arad, it was being created right in front of the visitor.

On reflection, Arad's early 3D printed works captured principles of performative design. The public act of fabrication stripped away any mystique of how the objects were made and (in a performative sense) both demonstrated and justified their existence. Searle identified repetition as a characteristic of performative statements: Arad's computer generated designs could be endlessly fabricated as identical simulacra. He reinforced this idea with one vase *Not Made by Hand, Not Made in China* for which the digital file was destroyed after its fabrication, preventing its replication. For Judith Butler performativity is embedded in the act of creating and performing a visual identity that may draw upon social or aesthetic codes. For *Bouncing Vase* Arad designed an animated computer simulation of a bouncing spring that could be freeze-framed at any moment in the sequence of the action to generate a unique form for fabrication that was both unique yet sequential, connected formally and aesthetically with its neighbours yet having its own independent form. Moreover, in a performative sense, each vase captured the active and dynamic moment of its own gestation.

At the time of this exhibition I was unaware of theories of performativity but the immediacy of creation evoked by Arad's 3D printed (and other) work captivated me and contributed to the development of my ideas about performative design. I was able to explore Ron Arad's work and influence, and

the work of other designers who foregrounded the method and moment of fabrication (for example Gaetano Pesce) in *The Furniture Machine*. An interest in revealing the processes by which objects are made is also evident in the book, but elsewhere I had also focused on and celebrated the fabrication process, for example a case study of Jasper Morrison's Air Chair. 'It takes just four minutes to make an Air Chair and its near-instantaneous appearance from a single mould solidifies the plastic at a moment in time' I wrote, recalling Roland Barthes description of plastic as 'less a thing than a trace of a movement' (Williams, 2003: 239). In *The Furniture Machine* I included an image of the theatrical moment an Air Chair emerges from its mould (Williams, 2006: 91).

The immediacy of the creation of contemporary design works lay at the heart of my V&A exhibition *Milan in a Van* (2002). Our concept was to bring back new products and prototypes from their launch at the Milan Furniture Fair for immediate display in the V&A, conflating as much as possible the time between the design and fabrication of the works and their presentation at the museum. The fabrication date of 2 April 2002 was inscribed on one work we chose in Milan (a shelf unit by Gaetano Pesce); less than three weeks later, *Milan in Van* opened at the V&A on 21 April. The speed of selection and display of the works in the exhibition raised museological issues about critical values: how did we know we were selecting the right things? I addressed this by selecting works from the leading manufacturers and designers who I considered would be presenting the most significant and influential new products, and by working closely with them in the run up to the furniture fair to ensure they would participate in our project. The newly launched BBC4 channel sent a crew to

follow us around Milan and record the process of making the exhibition; itself a performative act. Much of the preparatory research, and many of the objects we collected in Milan, found its way into my subsequent book *The Furniture Machine*.

The Furniture Machine, Furniture Since 1990

2006, London, V&A Publications, 176pp, ISBN 10 1851774947

Judy Attfield drew attention to the (sometimes confining or negative) effects of publishing paradigms on writing about design:

> 'What sustains the stereotype that design history's main concerns continue to be the ideal object, the style of the decade, century etc. and the designer as hero, is much more to do with publishers' conservative insistence on the clichéd view of design as classified under the 'visual arts' and ultimately, even more pragmatically, on which shelf the bookseller places 'design history' titles. It is extremely difficult to subvert the pervasiveness of a classification system that lends design history a particular identity by locating it alongside books on the 'decorative arts' or 'antiques' as if it belonged there naturally.'
> (Attfield,1999: 374)

In many ways my first substantial sole-author book, published in October 2006, echoes almost all of Attfield's stereotypes: I wrote about furniture in terms of masterpieces or 'ideal objects' (many of which I had championed for acquisition by the Victoria and Albert Museum, not least of which Jeroen Verhoeven's *Cinderella* table of 2005 that graced the slip-jacket); I discussed the period in terms of a battle of styles during the fifteen or so years covered by the book (with chapters devoted to 'Appropriation', 'Neo-Functionalism' and 'Neo-Pop'); and I punctuated the book with profile spreads of leading practitioners fully in line with Attfield's stereotypical heroic designers. Moreover, my role as a curator caring for part of the national collection of furniture automatically positioned me – and the book – within the broader context of the decorative arts and antiques (and not inconsequentially the period covered in the book matched my curatorial career to date, which began when I

joined the Department of Furniture and Woodwork at the Victoria and Albert Museum as a Curatorial Assistant in October 1990).

Attfield was right to point out the constraints of this position, but in my defense the book was structured in order to bring some of the latest innovations and developments in international furniture design to a broad, rather than an academic audience. And my ambitions for it stretched beyond conforming to stereotypical approaches to the subject. Yes, the book included discussion of styles and leading designers as an approachable authorial mechanism to explore the subject (quite in keeping, I think, with Nigel Whiteley's call for design historians to write directly, simply and intelligibly (Whiteley 1995:41)). But I prefaced the whole book with a discursive introduction titled 'The Changing Landscape of Furniture' in direct reference to the seminal *Italy, the New Domestic Landscape* exhibition at MoMA, New York, in 1972. In this essay I positioned contemporary furniture design as part of a very complex set of systems and conventions, phrased concisely by the designer Michele de Lucchi:

> 'I mainly work for industries. I cannot judge my work but I always try to bridge human need and companies' conveniences, ecological consciousness and business, philosophy and market research, progress and investment limitations, art and functionality, beauty and comfort, freedom of choice and production limitations, experimentation and concreteness, sensuality and technology, optimism and economic crisis, education and consumerism, happiness and a stressful life, contemplation and speed, intimacy and status, domesticity and public relations…' (Horsham & Sapper, 1998: 75 / Williams, 2006: 6)

This rich mix of conceptual and physical constraints seemed to me to be the actuality of experience for many furniture designers and together comprised the machinations of the furniture industry, alluded to in my book's title. Therefore,

although *The Furniture Machine* can be viewed as a celebration of leading-edge contemporary design during a tight fifteen year timespan, it aspired to unpick a complex design industry by revealing networks of designers, manufacturers, technological and material innovations, socio-political and economic influences and manipulation of markets.

How did I propose to marshal this extensive and wide-ranging material? My principle resource was a vast collection of trade literature collected over many years by myself and others at events such as the annual Milan Furniture Fair, and catalogued and filed in the archives of the V&A's Furniture and Woodwork Department. This extensive resource gave me detailed information about furniture, designers and manufacturers, but also must be read with a pinch of salt, conceding that it is the glossy and idealized output of marketing departments and public relations consultancies. I could also draw on my extensive network of designers, manufacturers, critics and journalists, and fellow curators for information and opinion. Together the trade literature and the network of actors in the furniture design industry gave me my data and was my primary source.

I also submerged myself in the secondary literature documenting the period, most notably the leading design and architecture magazines and periodicals. I re-read entire runs of *Blueprint*, *Abitare*, *Interni*, *Ottagono*, *Intramuros* and *The International Design Yearbook* to gain an overview of the arcs of taste and preoccupations of furniture design during the period since 1990. The process was akin to time-lapse photography or film that reveals patterns and forms not

readily visible in real time. For example, I could identify the career arcs of designers from the first critical mention of their work to their ubiquity and sometimes their decline from view. Preoccupations such as a conceptual interest in appropriation, re-use and irony could be traced from Dutch origins with Droog Design to dominance of design debates internationally. And the various iterations of eco-design, sustainability and recycling could be seen moving increasingly to the mainstream until vanishing into the generally accepted standards for all manufacturing. In a sense this exercise was an analogue form of content analysis that could have been undertaken digitally by scanning the texts for search terms to establish patterns and frequency.[1]

I sought the impartial and authoritative authorial voice of news reportage by basing my narrative in cited sources and empirical observation, yet I also wanted to populate the book with numerous voices by diverse actors from the field, and the text is woven by their opinions and criticisms. My writing style was informed by the way I had been taught to curate: I sought objectivity and authority based on detailed research and evaluation of evidence. Re-reading passages a decade later tells me another story. At times I seem eager to criticize and pass judgment if works do not fulfill criteria I have set for them in the book. For example, the chapter 'Design Manifestos' (pp.118-131) examined critical and conceptual design practice by designers including Dunne & Raby, Richard Hutten, Front and Hector Serrano. Yet I could not avoid the principle thrust of the whole book, which was an examination of the commercial furniture design

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[1] A rich and complex literature for the history and methods of content analysis exists, for example Krippendorff, K. (2013) *Content Analysis, An Introduction to its Methodology*, 3rd Edition, London, Sage. However, as a research methodology it lies outside the remit of this study.

and manufacturing industry, epitomized by major Italian players such as Cappellini and Edra. In relation to these avant-garde manufacturers I appeared to find conceptual designers lacking because they seemed to be pretending to design prototypes for industry while actually constructing media-friendly, attention-seeking PR exercises. Somewhat judgmentally I concluded 'Conceptual design, therefore, can sometimes be merely a witty idea dressed up as a clever social commentary or philosophical musing when it is neither' (Williams, 2006: 128). Far from being independent and avant-garde, I determined that much speculative design is in fact symptomatic of a furniture design industry in thrall to the media and fashion-driven 'lifestyle industry'. In retrospect my cynicism about the ambitions and intentions of speculative and critical designers may have been skewed by my focus on commercial furniture, and I did not allow myself to appreciate their works on their own terms.

By attempting to reflect the voices of a broad variety of actors involved in contemporary furniture design, from designers and manufacturers to critics, fair organizers, journalists and curators, I wanted to create a holistic overview of the industry. Their problematic mutual interaction and influence (and mine with them) is summed up by Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law who questioned 'How is it that actors (people and organisations) are both shaped by, but yet shape, the context in or with which they are recursively implicated?' (Bijker & Law, 1992: 10). The overlapping interests and influences of the varied actors are like a rhizome diagram describing the domain of furniture design. Deleuze and Guattari (2004) describe a rhizome as a non-hierarchical and non-linear network in which change to any constituent part effects the character of all the others.

Moreover, a rhizome can be entered at any point. Elsewhere John Law (1991) suggested the best way to write about society and technology is to 'follow the actors', in emulation of Bruno Latour, but he admits this invariably means following the big and the powerful; the heroic designers identified by Attfield. The tension between the inevitable draw towards descriptions of heroic designers and a genuine interest in unpacking the quotidian reality of contemporary furniture design, mediation and consumption runs throughout this book.

Actor Network Theory, arising from the writings of Bruno Latour, John Law and others, can be applied to networks of people, things, and social forces in order to unpack them. None are privileged but all acquire their attributes in relation with each other. By examining the interconnectedness of all parts of the network, it describes a kind of relational materiality. Therefore in the context of this study we may say that the designers' styles and outputs are formed in part by their access to technologies, the demands of the market and their field of influence within the domain of furniture design. In *The Furniture Machine* I carefully noted how and where networks of designers intersected, and with which technologies and manufacturers. I also recorded networks of object-actors through stylistic comparisons of furniture, or material similarities. What is more, John Law tells us '… entities achieve their form as a consequence of the relations in which they are located. But this means that it also tells us that they are *performed* in, by, and through those relations' (Law, 1999: 3-4). From this point increasingly I regarded designers and their works as performers of roles in a variety of contexts, and later in this text I introduce a theory of

performative design practice where Actor Network Theory informs the inter-relation of these actors and actants.

The Furniture Machine, furniture since 1990 evidently had international appeal as, shortly after publication in 2006, I was invited by Maria Savostianova, the editor-in-chief of *Interior+Design,* a leading Russian interior design magazine, to give a lecture and book-signing in Moscow. The lecture was staged in October 2006 at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture and during my week-long trip my hosts organised many meetings with Russian design journalists as well as a private tour of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts and a personal guided tour of seminal constructivist architecture in the city by Dr Sergey Nikitin, a Professor of Architectural History at Moscow University.

Telling Tales, Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design

2009, London, V&A Publishing, 128pp, ISBN 978 1 85177 560 6

The final chapter of *The Furniture Machine* alluded to the increasing prevalence of collectible and one-off high design furniture and the emergence of a so-called 'design art' movement in the early 2000s. But I did not expand this theme until the book *Telling Tales, Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design* and its accompanying exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2009. If the previous book attempted a sweeping overview of the breadth of the contemporary furniture design industry, this book had a much narrower focus but mined its subject much more deeply.

Both the exhibition and book were inspired by the sudden wealth of extraordinary one-off and unique works by designers appearing in the market in the early- and mid-2000s. However, all critical appraisal seemed dominated by discussions of market values which was unsurprising since the 'design art' moniker was coined by the art market and particularly by the auction houses to fuel demand. It was not possible to stage a museum exhibition to discuss the works in terms dominated by the financial value of connoisseurship like an auction: instead, I sought other critical means to examine the works.

The introductory chapter to the book discussed the history of storytelling as a cultural activity and prefaced the further content with an exploration of the origins of 'design art'. I traced the schism that gradually emerged between fine art, craft and design that resulted in some designers finding themselves 'caught

in a pincer movement between the constraints of commerce, the ghetto of craft and the individuality of art' (Williams, 2009: 18). I described how the influence of the art market and other pressures led to the designer-makers of the 1980s becoming design-artists in the 2000s, often with detrimental results. 'Suddenly almost any object conceived within a spirit of enquiry and experiment can be passed off as 'design art', even if it barely registers in any fundamental test as design (functionality, for example, or appropriate use of resources)' (Williams, 2009: 23). Acknowledging the market's influence on the creation and mediation of the works, nevertheless I also tried to regard them critically using tools from art and design history, linguistics and literary theory, and sociology, hence the emphasis on the narrative qualities of the selected works. Ultimately I concluded:

> ''Design art' can be defined in a number of ways, depending on your point of view. It can be seen as a mode of practice within a larger discourse on contemporary art practice; a creature of the arts and antiques market, based on connoisseurship and market demand; or the creative outpouring of a new generation of designers schooled in the discipline of design-management but with the creative freedom of artists. Perhaps the third definition is the most interesting and significant. Just as in much contemporary art and some craft, critical and conceptual designers subordinate materiality and functionality to symbolism and emotional resonance. Design may even have an advantage here because it is grounded in common experience, even if it is expressed uncommonly.' (Williams, 2009: 25)

Springboarding from the somewhat reflexive and circular contemporary discussions about whether design was the same as art (explored by, amongst others, Alex Coles in 2005 and 2007), my quest was to consider whether certain

works by contemporary designers where imbued with narrative possibilities; whether, like art, they could tell tales. On reflection, I could have applied Actor Network Theory (ANT) because, as Kjetil Fallon points out, 'ANT is concerned with how artifacts, or nonhumans (as well as human actors), act as mediators, transforming meaning as they form and move through networks', which amounts to the same thing (Fallon 2008: 68). Madeleine Akrich coined the term 'product script' to describe how designers and manufacturers inscribe their objects with meanings, and how intentionality is communicated through encoded messages to other actors in a network:

> 'Designers thus define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science and economy will evolve in particular ways. A large part of the work of innovators is that of *"inscribing"* this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a "script" or a "scenario".' (Akrich, 1992: 208)

Script Analysis is the process of decoding the script embodied in an object to identify its origins and intentions, and those of its progenitor, the designer. My script analysis of the objects in *Telling Tales* showed me they had been encoded with meanings drawn from a complex network of motifs from shared cultures, histories and belief systems. This is analogous with Akrich's 'inscription' of objects by their designers but also requires the active participation of exhibition visitors (or consumers of products) in a co-relational network.

To achieve this I constructed a complex tripartite theoretical structure for the book and exhibition that contextualized a selection of contemporary design works (mostly furniture, ceramics and lighting) with historical references to the

development of storytelling. In the first section furniture that seemed primitive in materials, techniques, or stylistic references was discussed with descriptions of the earliest stories as creation myths and fairy stories. Stories were seen as expressions of spiritual quests and rights of passage, helping to explain the communicative power of the objects in my selection. The second section focused on designed objects that referred ironically to grand classical traditions. I contextualized these with discussions of the birth of the modern novel and narrative print series by Hogarth and others in the eighteenth century. Here, storytelling equated with approximations of realism and descriptions of the material world, which the objects appeared to acknowledge, parody and intentionally undercut. The third and final group of objects referred to fear, anxiety and death, and was discussed in terms of the rise of psychoanalysis, interiority and the traumas of the modern age.

This complex structure was its own narrative, stretching from birth to death, from creation myths through depictions of worldly wealth, to invocations of mortality.

> '*Telling Tales* is not simply a chronicle of contemporary design. Rather, it aspires to a narrative structure itself. The objects are grouped in three chapters dependent on their predominant character, and each chapter is analogous to a different stage in the development of narrative forms. Together they also form their own story. The protagonists are the designers, or perhaps the objects they have designed, and the tale is itself a metaphor.' (Williams, 2009: 15)

Unwittingly, my conclusions seem to concur with both Actor Network Theory and Script Analysis.

My structure provided an original discursive framework about how stories are told and what it means to tell stories, in which to regard the works of contemporary design in a new light. Despite Nigel Whiteley's invocation for design historians to avoid the trip hazards of too much theory (Whiteley, 1995:41), I drew on diverse literary and theoretical sources, including Mieke Bal's narratology, discussions of fairytale traditions by Marina Warner and Jack Zipes, Walter Benjamin's description of 'the Storyteller' and Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp'. Since the objects I had selected were chosen principally for symbolic rather than functional values, I was also interested in regarding them in semiotic terms as signs and symbols, or thinking of them as fetishes. 'The feature that characterizes a fetish is that its function is always over-determined', commented Judy Attfield, reviewing Patricia Spyer's book, *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places*. She could have been describing any of the extraordinary and contorted objects in *Telling Tales*. 'Conventional design studies can only really deal with functional objects and their static symbolic representation' (Attfield 1999: 376). She asserts the inadequacy of conventional design historical procedures while seemingly supporting Nigel Whiteley's more pluralistic definition of design studies. Like *The Furniture Machine*, *Telling Tales* drew on conventional design history approaches that privilege designers and describe their terms of form giving, but discontent with writing objective reportage I explored how my subjective authorial point of view could construct the narrative. For example, defining Julia Lohmann's *Lasting Void* stool (2007) in terms of Freud's theory of the death drive was my interpretation and contextualization of the work, not specifically the designer's point of view. Similarly, I drew connections between Tord Boontje's *Fig Leaf* wardrobe

(2008) and the bible story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which was not specified in the designer's original intentions. And I drew comparisons between the despoliation of Maarten Baas's fire-damaged *Smoke* mirror (2007) and the symbolic disarray of interiors depicted by William Hogarth in *Marriage à la Mode* (1745) via Edgar Allen Poe's essay 'Philosophy of Furniture' (1840). By weaving diverse theories, sources and comparisons into my narrative, and sometimes drawing closer to or back from my principle subject matter (the contemporary design objects at the heart of the exhibition and book), I sought to show multiple ways in which designed objects can carry universal narratives and tell stories about commonly shared values. The designers in the show generally embraced my interpretation of their works when I approached them for exhibition loans and images for the book. Some, such as Constantin Boym, were enthusiastic for my proposition that their works could be read as part of storytelling traditions. Job Smeet used the request for a loan as leverage to fabricate a set of the Robber Baron furniture and was insistent all five pieces were included. No designers declined to take part.

Perhaps my structure was overly complicated, but it gave me three clearly differentiated groups of objects, each one chosen for its highly developed symbolic value and story-telling potential, that worked together to tell a meta-narrative (our own journey from the cradle, through life, to the grave). The cyclical conclusiveness of this structure I found very satisfying. The book enabled me to explore my varied sources, theories and comparisons at considerable length, where this was not feasible in the exhibition. I chose to style the exhibition as a sequence of thoroughly immersive and distinctive

environments, augmenting the groupings of objects with sound and lighting effects, to create a heightened, magical, story-telling space. Despite the originality and complexity of the project's conceit, nonetheless the ideas chimed with the general audience for contemporary design at which the exhibition was aimed. Even though the designers and their fantastical and excessive exhibits were largely unknown to the general public, nevertheless the exhibition attracted 165,000 visitors in its three month run, forty-five per cent higher than the Museum's own projections. The accompanying book sold out before the end of the run.

By the time the *Telling Tales* exhibition opened in July 2009 the global financial crash had occurred and the 'design art' market had greatly diminished. The exhibition was widely reviewed in the national and international press. In the *International Herald Tribune* Alice Rawsthorn praised my 'excellent analysis of the market's rise' but also felt that '*Telling Tales* can be read as an obituary for the heady early days of 'design art', although, with luck, it might also lead to useful redefinitions. Should the most fantastical exhibits be dubbed 'design' or 'decorative art'?'. Her criticism returns us to the desirability of avoiding typological or disciplinary boundaries, previously discussed with reference to Judy Attfield, Nigel Whiteley and Kenneth Ames, instead taking a multidisciplinary approach to examining objects and their contexts.

Of all the works submitted for this PhD, *Telling Tales…* had the greatest impact in terms of review coverage, because the book was associated with an exhibition that enjoyed the full support of extensive V&A press and marketing

activity (a selection of press coverage is listed in Appendix 2). Several critics

agreed with Alice Rawsthorn that the exhibition book-marked the end of

'design art', and generally they were appreciative and complementary. The film

director Ken Russell, writing in *The Times*, understood my intentions and

described the show as 'Tales of innocence, experience and freefall. A sensual

pilgrim's progress through modern re-imaginers of Rackham, Doré and Blake.'

Of the book specifically he confided 'I ploughed through the curator Gareth

Williams's rich book on the exhibition, sweat forming on my brow. Art

criticism can be so hyper-intellectual that it makes my teeth ache. Still, I bet

he'd be good company for a cup of tea in the Garden of Eden of his exhibit,

sitting on those flyaway scissor-cut chairs – perfect for a Wonderland mad tea

party. We could pour from the exhibition's pig-skull teapot.' He concluded, 'To

drift through the hologram deck of this fairytale exhibit is my idea of good sex.'

Philippa Stockley of the *Evening Standard* praised me as 'a very good writer

and theorist who has identified a strand in contemporary design and

persuasively argued it with 50 pieces', while Ossian Ward of *Time Out* enjoyed

the 'brilliant' catalogue and Geoff Shearcroft of *BD* (Building Design)

commented 'Curator Gareth Williams has produced an excellent book'. The

exhibition was described variously as 'intriguing' (*Financial Times*), 'mind-

blowing' (*Independent*), 'fabulous' and 'startling' (two articles in the

Guardian), and '… the best show of surrealism so far this century' (*Evening

Standard*). In contrast, Richard Dorment of the *Telegraph* wrote 'As maddening

a show as I've seen this year, *Telling Tales, Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary

Design* at the V&A is not to be missed … That I hated it is neither here nor

there; it will be remembered for years to come.'

Among the most unexpected responses to the exhibition was a member of the public who wrote to me about the exhibit shown on the promotional poster, *Do You Hear What I Hear?* by Kelly McCallum. The work is a taxidermied fox into the ears of which the artist has inserted gold maggots. The correspondent told me that, far from a fiction, 'There is a real disease called myiasis in which animals may become infested with the larvae of flies. Apparently it is not unknown in veterinary practice and rather disconcertingly it also occurs in humans as well.' As a researcher into myiasis 'I would like to urge you to help raise the profile and awareness of a very distressing disease by releasing the exhibit in postcard form.'[2]

Alongside the exhibition we ran schools' workshops with the designer and maker Gareth Neal (represented in the book and exhibition) that attracted 120 students, and gallery talks that I led were filled to capacity (up to 75 visitors each).[3] The V&A organised two symposia to coincide with the book and exhibition, on 18 September 2009 (*Furniture Futures: V&A Biennial Symposium*) and 16 October 2009 (*Telling Tales: Narratives, Concepts & Contemporary Furniture*). The latter, which I introduced and convened, featured specialist speakers including Jack Zipes and Justin McGuirk as well as designers featured in the exhibition such as Tord Boontje, Job Smeets and Julia Lohmann. Interestingly, the designers tended to favour biographical descriptions of their practices and careers rather than grapple with the theme of

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[2] Karen Clarke, correspondence with the author, 24 August 2009; author's papers.

[3] V&A Project Team evaluation minutes, 2 October 2009; author's papers.

design's narrative possibilities at the heart of the project. Job Smeets used his time to show a pacey presentation of his entire portfolio – over 400 images – while intoning the biblical Book of Job and playing classical music!

The success of the exhibition led to many invitations to lecture about its themes, for example 'Narrative in Design' at ECAL (Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne), April 2009; 'Can Objects Tell Stories?' at Camberwell College of Arts in November 2009 and again at the London College of Communication in February 2010; and 'Behind the Looking Glass', reflections on Matt Collishaw's 'Retrospectre' installation at the British Film Institute, May 2010. In September 2010 I lectured about *Telling Tales…* at the Northlands Glass Centre annual conference in Lybster, Scotland, and in the same month I developed the material about design art for a paper given at the Museums and Galleries History Group Annual Conference at Leeds University around the theme of 'Museums and the Market'. Finally, in November 2012 (three years after the book had been published), I gave a paper about '*Telling Tales*: curating design art in the museum context' at an invitation-only symposium about Curating Craft organised by Professor Jorunn Veiteberg in Bergen, Norway. Damon Taylor of the Technical University Delft gave a paper 'Exhibiting Design Art: Telling Tales and Design High', comparing different curatorial strategies in the two exhibitions, at the 39th Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians at Reading University, 12 April 2013 (the same conference strand where I first presented my paper 'Contemporary Designers, Cultural Diplomacy and the Museum Without Walls' that led to the final published chapter of this PhD submission).

21 Twenty-one, 21 Designers for Twenty-first Century Britain

2012, London, V&A Publishing, 192pp, ISBN 978 1 85177 678 8

Shortly before the staging of *Telling Tales* I had left the V&A to take up the post of Senior Tutor, Design Products at the Royal College of Art. As previously stated I intended this move to take me closer to the source of design practice and to enable me to be more proactive (rather than reactive) in my relationship with design. In 2010 I was approached by Mark Eastment, Head of V&A Publishing, to write a book about contemporary design practice to accompany a forthcoming exhibition *British Design from 1948: Innovation in the Modern Age*, curated by Christopher Breward and Ghislaine Wood, scheduled to take place as the Museum's contribution to Olympic celebrations in the summer of 2012. I was not involved in the exhibition in any way, but my book would contribute to a comprehensive publishing offer accompanying it. Mark showed me an existing V&A book as an inspirational template: Susannah Frankel's *Visionaries, Interviews with Fashion Designers* (V&A Publishing, 2001). Frankel's book collected together previously published interviews to form a series of illustrated designer case studies. As the title suggests, a degree of stereotyping designers-as-heroes was deemed acceptable. My book, therefore, would take a similar approach with case studies of designers working in my field who had come to prominence in Britain since 2000. It was an awkward brief for a somewhat celebratory book arising from the predetermined exhibition context and the publisher's template.

I was inspired by *10x10*, published by Phaidon in 2000, that showcased work by one hundred international architects, selected in groups of ten, by ten architecture critics. I was drawn to the simple and genre-non-specific title as well as its promise of a 'multi-voiced project' (Baird & Constantinopolous, 2000: 5). The case study format would allow me to give voices to a number of designers. With *The Furniture Machine* I had emphasized the furniture design industry, its products and commercial markets, and with *Telling Tales* I had looked at objects and their symbolic meanings; with this book I wanted to focus attention on the designers themselves. This marked a change of perspective toward my core research subject, being design since 1990. This time I wanted to concentrate on the designers as actors in the drama.

My experiences at the RCA had brought me into close contact with a far broader range of design practices than I had been permitted access to as a curator of contemporary furniture at the V&A. The Design Products programme at the RCA, founded by Ron Arad in 1998, prided itself on producing multidisciplinary independent designers, grounded in but not restricted to industrial product and furniture design. I wanted to celebrate and explore this plurality of design approaches in the selection of designers for my book.

Early proposals for the book included case studies for twenty-five designers, based on an estimated word-length of just 25,000 words. However, as I worked up my list and sought advice and comment from a number of colleagues and peers whose opinion I valued (such as Emily Campbell, formerly Head of the

Architecture and Design team at the British Council), I was able to edit this to twenty-one designers, giving the book a neat 21:21 synergy (akin to 10x10).

I qualified my selection of 'designers of furniture and products, who design for industrial production, or whose practice relates to product design, even if they work more for galleries than for the mass market … not because I think the furniture and product design sector is more interesting [than, for example, fashion, graphics or architecture] but because it is the area of design with which I am most involved.' (Williams, 2012: 8). I determined to describe 'design in Britain' rather than 'British design', because so many of my subjects were born elsewhere and had chosen, in Deyan Sudjic's term, to be 'British by choice rather than by birth' (Sudjic, 2009: 7). This introduced a major new theme to the work (further explored in the later chapters submitted for this PhD): the nature of national design and the role of designers in creating national identity.

My extended introduction was subtitled 'Design as Cultural Diplomacy' because increasingly I became interested in how so many of the designers I was studying operated within the sphere of exhibitions and cultural commissions celebrating and promoting notions of 'Britishness'. A large section of the chapter was constructed as an historic survey of the relationship between contemporary designers and political policy in Britain since the mid-1990s, from the rise of 'cool-Britannia', through the Millennium Experience, the activities of the British Council and other exhibition-makers, to commissions for World's Fairs and festivals such as the Olympics. I looked at a range of sources from government reports to press coverage and personal recollections

(such as Stephen Bayley's *Labour Camp: The Failure of Style over Substance*, an excoriating account of New Labour's handling of the Millennium Experience). I also discussed the characteristics of contemporary designers and their businesses (largely based on Design Council research and my own experiences of the designers) and prevailing concepts influencing their practices, for example notions of interdisciplinarity and hybridity. The introduction was intended to outline the broader contexts in which the case-studied designers operate.

I grouped the twenty-one practices according to network patterns or similarities of practice. El Ultimo Grito (Roberto Feo and Rosario Hurtado) came first because theirs was one of the longest standing partnerships, and I followed them with some younger designers, many of whom they had taught, to emphasize the importance of lineage and networks between contemporary designers that is often untold. Moreover, there was a shared preoccupation with materiality and craftsmanship in this group. This was followed by a group of designers working principally in industrial design and furniture for commercial production. The next group were connected because in different ways they 'engage with the digital realm rather than designing tangible products for the mass market. To a lesser or greater degree the remaining designers act like artists, or are artists who engage with design.' (Williams, 2012: 9).

Books must have some form of structure and on reflection it interests me that I returned to conventional typologies of craft, design and art that I had questioned in *Telling Tales*. Perhaps this was also an unconscious response to my former

career as a museum curator, and to the publishing paradigms identified by Judy Attfield that beset writers about design.

I successfully applied to the RCA Research Office for a small grant that allowed me to employ two research assistants, Zofia Trofas and Rachael Crabtree, recent graduates of the V&A/RCA History of Design MA programme. They were charged with building files of secondary research for each designer, such as published interviews, biographies, citations and lists of works. Collation of this raw data, under my direction, greatly speeded the process of writing the book, which I could undertake sequentially in discrete sections. For the sake of variety, but also to emphasize the voices and opinions of the subjects, I strove to find several different models for the case studies, all of which were required to be more or less equal in length. Many of them drew on published interviews to gather the voices of the designers and their critics. Most of the profiles attempted to summarize their career paths and highlight major career achievements, but also to create an impression of the prevailing preoccupations of the designers.

To punctuate the text I formatted four case studies (about twenty per cent of the total) as interviews by sending these designers lists of 'provocations'; intentionally provocative questions based on my research of their work and the direction I wanted to take with it in the book. I chose Fredrikson Stallard (Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard) because their work intersects with art and craft and I wanted to draw out some of their motivations. As an example of my provocative questioning, I asked them:

'We encounter your work most frequently in the context of prestigious gallery exhibitions, exclusive private commissions, or in high-profile corporate commissions where design can be said to be an adjunct of public relations. Is it fair to say that you see your work in terms of 'premium design', and as part of a luxurious and elite context? Is this intentional, and have you consciously steered your career in this direction? Or is it simply that you make work you want to make and this is where it lives?' (Williams, 2012: 156)

The question was based on empirical observation of their work and an understanding of the context in which it was placed. However, while in previous works such as *The Furniture Machine*, I had generally held back from drawing conclusions, in this instance I used my evidence to construct certain heightened hypotheses about the designers that could be seen as provocative as it invited strident responses. This generative technique could be said to be journalistic rather than academic, but it was undertaken consciously and with the intention of enabling each designer to voice their point of view (designers, like artists and musicians, are frequently reluctant to speak about their work, preferring their work to speak for itself).

The book was illustrated with a wide variety of images, generally supplied by the designers, of a broad spectrum of design output and in many different photographic styles. In order to give the book design a consistent rhythm, and to emphasize that it was primarily about the designers, not their designed works, I commissioned portraits of each designer or studio from the London-based Czech photographer Petr Krejcí, all shot in the designers' workspaces in similar styles and consistent lighting conditions. Also consistent was their presentation in the opening spread of each case study accompanied by a pithy quote from the

designer that summed up their approach to design, drawn either from existing interviews or their responses to my provocations.

In the next section I will discuss how theories of performativity, adopted from linguistics and identity politics, have begun to coalesce in my mind as a theory of performative design. These ideas were nascent at the time I wrote *21 Twenty-one* but a brief application of these notions to some of the book's content would be worthwhile. James Loxley asserts that performance is an essential aspect of the human condition. 'If performance matters,' he wrote, 'it is because it is in a crucial sense infrastructural: it is fundamental to the constitution of our social and cultural world' (Loxley, 2007: 154). He goes on to quote the anthropologist Victor Turner; 'If man is a sapient animal, a toolmaking animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*' (Turner, 1987: 81). Glithero (Sarah van Gameren and Tim Simpson) design installations and products that overtly record the moment of their creation: in a sense they are 'self-making'. 'We're always trying to capture this moment when something becomes what it is from nothingness, so we're trying to create that moment in the purest gesture', they say (Williams, 2012: 148). Their words recall the geographer Nigel Thrift's description of practice as 'thought in action' and Duncan Grewcock's further observation that 'thought-in-action highlights the moment, the event of becoming, its *performance*' (Thrift, cited in Grewcock, 2014: 12). Not only are Glithero's works themselves made as performances, such as *Running Mould*, a poured plaster bench made in situ in Z33 Gallery, Hasselt, Belgium in 2010, the designers routinely make beautiful films recording their processes. Other designers in my book perform

the creation of their work in real time, on stage (for example Martino Gamper),
or introduce time as a presentational component (rAndom International,
Troika). Performativity is open to numerous definitions and refinements,
including the performance of personal identity, as demonstrated, for example,
by rAndom International's *Self Portrait* temporary printers, 2010. Quite
differently, design duo Doshi Levien explores the identity of the Indian
subcontinent in their product designs. This PhD is titled 'Towards a Theory of
Performative Design' and as such it is still a 'theory-in-progress' that I am yet
to fully resolve.

After *21 Twenty-one* was published in 2012 I lectured widely about the subjects
raised by the book, such as the relationship of contemporary design and cultural
diplomacy, including at Falmouth University (17 January 2013), and the
University of Greenwich (13 February 2013). Picking up the book's prevailing
theme of designers' cultural agency, Maria Kuzmenko, the reviewer for
Wallpaper*, commented that 'Williams's book reminds us how much design –
and the conversation about design – has become to ideas of what contemporary
Britain (metropolitan Britain, at least) is or should be [sic].'[4]

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[4] Kuzmenko, M., *Wallpaper*,* www.wallpaper.com, 1 May 2012, retrieved 23 January 2016.

'Curating Emerging Design Practice'

2013, in *Museums and Higher Education Working Together, Challenges and Opportunities*, Boddington A., Boys J. & Speight C. (eds.), Farnham, Ashgate, pp.91-101, ISBN 9781409448761

My chapter in this peer-reviewed academic book originated as a paper delivered at a conference organized by CETLD and the Victoria and Albert Museum 1-2 July 2010 titled *Learning at the Interface, Museum and University Collaborations*.[5] The premise of the conference was to explore connections and synergies between university and museum education but I was more interested to explore how emerging design practices that defy traditional taxonomic classifications are treated by museums (the organization of which are predicated on such taxonomies). In order to keep within the conference's remit I chose two works by recent graduates of the RCA as case studies, examining how they were conceived as 'masterworks' within an educational context and how their meanings were transmuted when they were shown in different contexts, including in various museums. Both examples were conceptual designs that responded to industrial design in different ways. Once again, I was approaching the subject of design by exploring its context and the perspectives of the various actors (in this case, the work of emerging designers produced for one context and transferred to another). In the conference paper I grounded my theoretical considerations in Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin, 1955), and began to explore for the first

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[5] The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD) was a partnership between the University of Brighton, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Royal College of Art and the RIBA between 2005 and 2010.

time J.L. Austin's notion of performativity (Austin, 1962). Since the editors largely removed these reference points from the published chapter it would be worthwhile reintroducing some here.

J.L. Austin (1962) and John R. Searle (1969) considered how linguistic 'speech acts' are their own action, for example the statement 'I do' said in the context of a marriage ceremony, rather than linguistic descriptions of non-linguistic actions. A characteristic of performative statements, for Austin, was their repeatability, a point that connects with Benjamin's consideration of the nature of photography as a mechanical, reproducible art form. Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker (1995) expanded this notion to encompass the creation and expression of personal identities through appearance and behavior as well as through use of language, notably in counter-cultural expressions of gender such as drag. Performative design practice, therefore, encompasses the spectacle of identity affirmation, often delivered through time-based media: performativity and personal identity are enmeshed at the moment an identity is stated. The first case study was a work by Jen Hui Liao, a Taiwanese designer, titled *The Self-Portrait Machine* (2009). It was a complex device, combining robotics and digital image scanning, capable of drawing portraits. However, the portraits could only be completed with the collusion of the sitter who was strapped into the mechanism. Moreover, *The Self-Portrait Machine* drew a portrait over a short period of time as a public spectacle. The device can be described as performative because it enacts its own purpose to create the portraits. The performance of drawing the portraits is the performative act: the mechanical metaphor for Austin's 'speech act'. In this

sense *The Self-Portrait Machine* is performative in that it creates portrait

simulacra of identities. In the chapter I discussed whether the content of *The*

Self-Portrait Machine is the machine, or the portraits it draws (ie, is it a tool to

make art, or a work of art in itself?), and the effect on our understanding of

different contexts in which it has appeared. Once again, our objectivity in regard

to the designed work, and our understanding of it in relation to our

comprehension and expectations of the context in which we encounter it (in a

degree show, for example, or in a museum), are central.

The second case study was of a well-known work by Thomas Thwaites titled

The Toaster Project (2009). Thwaites undertook to replicate a low-cost toaster

from scratch under his own devices, as a commentary on the complexity and

ubiquity of industrial products, and of our misunderstanding of their true values.

The result was a barely functioning simulacrum of a toaster but drawing on Jean

Baudrillard's observation that simulations prove the power of their opposite, I

concluded that it needed to be so in order to create the sense of critical distance

from the original artifact it simulated. Thwaites made films of his expeditionary

process to source the materials and master the techniques necessary to construct

his toaster. In a performative sense the project was an expression and

performance of Thwaites' own constructed identity as much as a genuine

attempt to make a working toaster.

Put another way, Thwaites was pretending to make a toaster. John Searle

differentiated between pretending as deception or lying, and pretending as play-

acting. 'To pretend to be or to do something is to engage in a performance

which is *as if* one were doing or being the thing and is without any intent to deceive … Now *pretend* is an intentional verb: that is, it is one of those verbs which contain the concept of intention built into it. One cannot truly be said to have pretended to do something unless one intended to pretend to do it' (Searle, 1979: 65; cited in Loxley, 2007: 66). Guileless though he may appear to be in his films, nevertheless Thwaites was fully aware of the pretense of his endeavour, just as Jen Hui Liao must have been aware of his machine's pretense of drawing portraits equal to those of human artists.

My conclusion - that complex conceptual design projects conceived to demonstrate students' mastery in higher education contexts are very difficult or even impossible for museums to accommodate intellectually, taxonomically and practically – was largely undermined prior to the chapter's publication because the V&A acquired one of my case studies, Thomas Thwaites' *Toaster Project*, for its permanent collection!

Leaving aside the premise of the essay to consider the relationship of museums and higher education, and considering these case studies instead as examples of performative design practice, it is tempting to conclude that both projects (in their own different ways), employ performative ideas to pass critical comment on mass-production. James Loxley draws together the 'speech act' and machines:

> 'If machines are understood not only as the tools of human purposes but as means for producing standardised outputs according to repeatable and regular sequences of operations or moves, then the speech act considered in its conventional aspect might claim some

affinity with the machine. Such a comparison perhaps seems a little strained or outlandish: if so, we should remind ourselves that this definition of the machine encompasses not just obviously technological processes but also activities we might consider more abstract, like the basic computations of a calculator or even the more advanced procedures of a game of chess'. (Loxley, 2007: 91)

Or, indeed, the mechanical production of portraits, or the simulation of a consumer product such as a toaster.

'Contemporary Designers, Cultural Diplomacy and the Museum Without Walls'

2016, in *Design Objects and the Museum*, Farrelly E. & Weddell J. (eds.),

London, Bloomsbury, pp.97-104 ISBN 978-1-4725-7722-1

The most recent text in this submission also originated as a conference paper, delivered at the Association of Art Historians annual conference at Reading University, 12 April 2013, in a strand titled Design Objects and the Museum (also the name of the subsequent peer reviewed book). I wanted to continue considering ideas about the relationship of design and national identity that I had begun in the introduction to *21 Twenty-one*, but expand discussion beyond design in Britain. Somewhat twisting the conference strand theme to my own ends, I couched my discussion in terms of André Malraux's notion of 'the museum without walls' (published in *The Voices of Silence*, 1953), to permit a study of designers' activities as cultural agents of diplomacy in state sanctioned and quasi-public spaces. Malraux was discussing how the reproduction of art in photographs made art accessible beyond encounters with original and authentic works confined in museums. On reflection, I can connect this chapter to my previous work (particular the chapter 'Curating Emerging Design Practice') because, like Benjamin and later, Baudrillard, Malraux was concerned with the inter-relation of *originals* and *simulations*, and concomitant questions of *authenticity*, all of which inform definitions of performativity.

I drew heavily on Paul Greenhalgh's history of World's Fairs, *Ephemeral Vistas* (1988), for historical background to contextualize consideration of designers'

input to twentieth- and twenty-first-century Expos, and events such as the London Olympics. I was able to draw on material about specific contemporary designers originally collated for *21 Twenty-one*, in the form of testament from Troika about the studio's contribution to the British Pavilion at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. My experience as a tutor at the RCA also led me to original material from Mauricio Affonso, one of my students who participated in the Olympic opening ceremony. Therefore, the chapter drew on design history techniques (analysis and interpretation of historical events) as well as a more anthropological approach recording designers' varied activities and opinions.

Conclusion

I began work on *The Furniture Machine* in 2004 and this PhD is submitted in 2016. In the intervening twelve years my perspectives have shifted as my roles have changed, and increasingly I became aware of different literary stances and ways of writing that could enable me to gain critical distance on contemporary cultural production. In this respect, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's definitions of domains and fields of specialism helped me understand how I have approached writing about design. At different times I have attempted neutral reportage based on filtering evidence gathered from diverse sources (as in *The Furniture Machine*), extrapolation of literary theories into the domain of design (*Telling Tales*), and generative and investigative interviewing (*21 Twenty-one*). Two overarching preoccupations have emerged; the ways in which designers and design have agency within cultural diplomacy, and the first inklings of a theory of performative design. These are both ways in which certain design practices can be re-considered; the first in terms of context, intention and output (ie, where in the world the design work is intended to operate), and the second in terms of how practice is generated, presented or interpreted (in that performative design theory represents a set of conceptual tools with which practice can be critiqued). Neither is completely resolved in the works submitted for this PhD but both approaches offer great capacity to expand design studies from design history.

By regarding designers as cultural diplomats I drew attention to design's role as an agent of social and cultural change. I expanded this point in my book *Design,*

an Essential Introduction, published in conjunction with the Design Museum in 2015 (Williams, 2015). Here, not only designers but also consumers actively engage with design and design thinking: I posit that in a sense we are all designers because we engage with design through our consumption. This broad-based study used design history techniques and case studies, as well as thematic chapter structures, to explain the many impacts of design in the modern world, with special emphasis given to socially beneficial design like medical innovations and projects for the developing world.

From 2012 I researched the literature and theories of performativity and began to assemble a working list of design works and practices that seemed to conform to it. By the summer of 2013 I had developed this material into a broad proposal for an exhibition and accompanying book with the working title of *Right Here, Right Now: Design, Art and Immediacy*. I have divided my material into four subsections that each reflects an interpretation of performative design. Since all linguistic performatives are reflexive acts (in that they embody and justify themselves, rather than describe other actions), it is logical to order my material under a series of reflexive headings: Self-Generated; Self-Operated; Self-Obsessed and Self-Evident.

Self-generated works capture and celebrate the moment of their creation: their inner workings and the dynamic motivation for their creation are made clear and foregrounded. These may include Ron Arad's *Bouncing Vases* previously mentioned, work by Glithero (Williams, 2012: 148-155) and Anton Alvarez's *Thread-Wrapping Machine*, (Williams, 2015: 93).

Self-operated works are those that incorporate time and action as materials, for example Jen-Hui Liao's *Self-Portrait Machine* (Williams, 2013) or rAndom International's *Temporary Self-Portrait Machines* featured in (Williams, 2012: 113). Like performative language, performative design celebrates endlessly repeatable actions such as those embodied in mass-production, or performed by actors in Cohen van Balen's moving image project *75 Watt* (2013).

I categorize works as self-obsessed if they conform to a definition of performativity by Judith Butler and others that sites it within the realm of identity and gender politics, where the display of identity is tantamount to the creation and ownership of that identity. Onkar Kular and Noam Toran's use of cinematic techniques and tropes to generate design works fits here (Williams, 2012: 132-139), as do artists such as Gillian Wearing and (from the 1970s), Martha Rosler, who create fictional personas to act out identities. This group moves design practice close to performance art and incorporates moving image.

Lastly, self-evident works are those that embody their method and moment of construction, for example Max Lamb's active making methods and Martino Gamper's public performances of making furniture (Williams, 2012: 48-55, 164-171), and Maarten Baas's films of people in motion to create the changing face of a clock in real time.

The working titles and definitions of my sub-categories of performative design are still fluid and overlap, needing further refinement and consideration (for

instance, the groupings around 'self-evident' and 'self-generated'). While much of the material I have gathered towards an exhibition and book about performative design originated in the published work discussed in this thesis, I have assembled much more besides. Aside from a single lecture at Sotheby's Institute of Art, and a forthcoming paper at the annual Design History Conference in September 2016, I have not yet been able to take this work forward.

Performative design is a flexible and inclusive theory that allows multiple readings and connections between works and ideas, just as its origins in linguistics have inspired thinking in philosophy, gender studies and identity politics. This thesis has afforded me an opportunity to reflect upon and consolidate my thinking towards a theory of performative design, but there are as-yet unexplored avenues concerning the relationship of design practice and performance, theories of performing, and the relationship of time to design and performance practice. Moving forward, my ambition is to generate a tighter and more informed exhibition and book project proposal, based on the groundwork I have completed already. This may entail seeking research funding to support a research hub around the theme of performance, performativity and design. The interdisciplinary character of performative design is both a strength and an opportunity that would benefit from the constitution of an advisory group drawn from specialists and experts across art and design disciplines, and other disciplines informed by notions of performativity.

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Appendix 2: Reviews of *Telling Tales, Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design*

NB the reviews chiefly addressed the exhibition, rather than the book.

Previews

Liz Farrelly, 'Tall Tales', *Design Week*, 02 July 2009: 14-15

Maev Kennedy, 'Design Nightmares, V&A takes a look at dark side', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2009

Nicole Swengley, 'Narrative Forms', *Financial Times*, 11-12 July 2009

Reviews

Helen Brown, 'V&A's Telling Tales show gives furniture a fairytale twist', www.guardian.co.uk, 17 July 2009, retrieved 20 July 2009

Emma Crichton-Miller, 'Tables (and baths) of the unexpected', *How To Spend It*, *Financial Times*, 20 February 2010

Emma Crichton-Miller, review, *Prospect*, July 2009: 8
- 'The objects in this show … take function as merely the starting point for extended forays into fantasy, history and cultural anthropology.'

Charlotte Cripps, 'Strange objects of desire', *The Independent*, 14 July 2009

- The exhibition 'takes visitors on a mind-blowing journey through furniture, lighting and ceramics, all inspired by the spirit of storytelling.'

David Crowley, review in *2+3D* magazine, Poland

- 'The most compelling exhibits in 'Telling Tales' can be understood as a kind of psychological diagnosis of contemporary consumerism.'

Polona Dolzan, review and interview in *SlashStroke* magazine, www.slashstrokemagazine.com/issue_002/story_16.php, retrieved 12 March 2010

Richard Dorment, 'Telling Tales at the V&A is a show that crackles with wit', www.telegraph.co.uk, 7 September 2009, retrieved 10 September 2009

- 'As maddening a show as I've seen this year, Telling Tales, Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design at the V&A is not to be missed.'
- 'That I hated it is neither here nor there; it will be remembered for years to come.'

Kirsty Hartsiotis, review, *Society of Decorative Arts Curators*, nd

- 'But it was thought-provoking and I thoroughly enjoyed the exhibition experience. I came away from it with more questions than when I went in – but maybe that is a good thing, after all, maybe the best return of all is the start of a new journey.'

Edwin Heathcote, 'Once upon a time, there was a designer…', *Financial Times*, 17 July 2009

- 'In attempting to tie the exhibits to familiar stories, the curator, Gareth Williams, implies that there is a desire for real objects that tie us to the specifics of place and, through tales, to time. But too often these things descend into whimsy. Design's cultural resonance derives from its relationship to the ritual of everyday life as it is lived, from the history and evolution of use. The objects here, as the show's title implies, have a different meaning: they aim to mislead or at least provoke. When objects are removed from the realm of the useful, they cease to be design. But do they become art?'

Hettie Judah, review, *Art Review*, issue 37, December 2009, www.artreview.com, retrieved 8 December 2009

Alice Rawsthorn, 'Honoring the Heady Days of 'Design-Art', *International Herald Tribune*, 13 July 2009

Ken Russell, 'No home should be without these seductive fusions of art and design', *The Times*, 21 July 2009

- 'Tales of innocence, experience and freefall. A sensual pilgrim's progress through modern re-imaginers of Rackham, Dore and Blake.'
- 'I ploughed through the curator Gareth Williams's rich book on the exhibition, sweat forming on my brow. Art criticism can be so hyper-intellectual that it makes my teeth ache. Still, I bet he'd be good company for a cup of tea in the Garden of Eden of his exhibit, sitting on those flyaway scissor-cut chairs –

perfect for a Wonderland mad tea party. We could pour from the exhibition's pig-skull teapot.'

- 'To drift through the hologram deck of this fairytale exhibit is my idea of good sex.'

Geoff Shearcroft, 'Tales of the expected', *BD (Building Design),* 14 August 2009

- 'Curator Gareth Williams has produced an excellent book.'
- 'In the context of the world's largest collection of the decorative arts this exhibition presents a small group of contemporary designers' aspirations to overcome a century of modernist functionalist rhetoric and continue the tradition of telling stories through designed objects.'

Philippa Stockley, 'Surreal Hits the Heights', *Evening Standard*, 15 July 2009

- 'The curator, Gareth Williams, is a very good writer and theorist who has identified a strand in contemporary design and persuasively argued it with 50 pieces.'
- '… the best show of surrealism so far this century.'

Ossian Ward, 'The V&A unveils its big summer show', *Time Out*, July 30-August 5 2009: 37

- 'This page has been devoted to the phenomenon of 'design art' before, but never has such a convincing display been mounted in London. 'Telling Tales,

Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design' is a bit of a mouthful, but the proof in this pudding is in the eating and it's a heady confection for sure.'

- 'Beyond 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' theme-parkery there's a true engagement with the complex nature of these objects and how their ugly or ostentatious aesthetics seem to frustrate the very purpose of furniture or domestic usefulness. The definition of 'design art' is everywhere: when function is not of sole importance, the artistry takes over, cleverly interweaving work-a-day familiarity with visual ideas that challenge such normality.'

- 'The selection by Gareth Williams is not uniformly satisfying, but the brilliant catalogue explains the pull of these objects.'