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Designers for a Day: Sculptors Take a Turn

By Roberta Smith

The world is full of objects, more or less interesting. I do not wish to add any more." Sometimes, this vow of aesthetic chastity, made by the Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler in the late 1960's, makes a lot of sense. "Design Is Not Art: Functional Objects From Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread," at the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, is one of those times.

This informative and bracingly contentious exhibition is definitely worth seeing, despite its being overcrowded yet cursory. A survey of furniturelike sculpture and sculpturelike furniture by 18 well-known Minimalists, Post-Minimalists and post-Post-Minimalists, it fills the second-floor galleries of the Cooper-Hewitt with a discordant display of chairs, tables, bookshelves, couches, lamps, rugs, glass and china. It is billed as the first exhibition in an American museum to focus exclusively on functional or semifunctional designs by visual artists..

As a debate about whether, or when, art is or is not design, this exhibition refuses to take sides. The different aesthetic positions reflected in its objects are seconded in the artists' statements arrayed on the walls. Donald Judd intones that art and design fulfill two entirely different purposes. Scott Burton seems to argue against the distinction, stating that contemporary art is taking an increasingly "relative," or physical, relationship to the viewer: "It will place itself not in front of but around, behind, underneath (literally) the audience in an operational capacity."

Richard Tuttle states sagely that "a great designer has to know everything while an artist doesn't have to know anything." John Chamberlain neatly finesses the gap by simply redefining the word functional. And the subversive Austrian artist Franz West, represented by a plain wood table and two chairs that come with rolls of colored duct tape (they are to be decorated by the owner or, in this case, the public), essentially blows everyone out of the water. "It doesn't matter what the art looks like but how it's used," Mr. West states.

The show offers further evidence that the boundaries between art's mediums, disciplines and levels have eroded strikingly since the early 1970's. Specifically, it illustrates that the Minimalists' emphasis on real space, literal materials and factory production helped open the border between art and design. Better still, it raises all kinds of interesting questions, both ethical and aesthetic, about the different roles played by art and design — and by artists and designers.

Given all these benefits, it may be a small price to pay that "Design Is Not Art" can set one yearning for some Huebleresque restraint and occasionally make the blood boil. At many junctures, it looks like a very expensive home furnishings store, aimed at people

with several homes, time and money on their hands, and an infatuation with big-name artists.

There are some notable exceptions, starting with Judd, who presides over this exhibition the way Picasso would over a survey of Cubism (sorry, Braque). Judd's designs are so numerous that one assumes that the show's organizers, Barbara Bloemink, the Cooper-Hewitt's curatorial director, and Joseph Cunningham, an independent curator, would have rather done a retrospective of his furniture. But even Judd's efforts, with their Puritan uprightness and plainness, have flaws, especially where the chairs are concerned. I would wager that Judd himself spent more time seated in one of the capacious, relatively forgiving Morris chairs he owned than in his own designs.

Exceptions by other artists include several endearingly quirky lamps by Mr. Tuttle, the great Post-Minimalist tinkerer, and a pair of simple side tables by Joel Shapiro that reiterate in functional terms the checks and balances of his sculptures. Mr. Chamberlain's big block of foam, carved with foxhole concavities and covered with a parachute, is one of the more wonderful fusions of sculpture, couch and comfort.

The lines of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings translate well onto crystal tumblers. But his folding screens remind us that his use of real walls is a chief attraction of his art. Jorge Pardo's globular glass lamps, with their glowing blushes of color, are beautiful. I would be thrilled to come across them at Target.

But in many ways the exhibition stresses that the divide between art and design is unbreachable, at least from the artist's side. Artists can do whatever they want in their art; such liberty is the point of the activity. Design involves a kind of selflessness and a complex awareness of the givens: the human body and its needs, social space, the laws of gravity, the means of production and the demands of the marketplace.

There's an old saying that you don't know what people are really like until they have a lot of money. This exhibition suggests that you don't know an artist's true sensibility until he or she takes on a design project. Just saying yes may be the first sign of trouble. For example, as an artist Mr. Tuttle is known for sculptures and paintings of beguiling modesty and wit. As a designer, however (lamps aside), he can be authoritarian and even sadistic. Such is the impression conveyed by a suite of large-scale, thronelike divans and chairs whose high backs, being just heavy wood frames, are nothing but thin air. Sitter, beware: it's the emperor's new couch. These and an outsize chaise longue resemble unusually robust relatives of Robert Wilson's stage-set chairs, two anemic examples of which are also represented in the show.

Dan Flavin, whose fluorescent light installations are one of the cornerstones of Minimalism, proved that anonymous industrial objects can be used to personal, exultant ends. Yet the nicely shaped and colored china he designed has a face decorated with nothing but his signature. Richard Artschwager's sculpture, which you could say depicts furniture with almost exquisite brevity and lightness, turns wasteful and extravagant in an actual monumental folding chair involving a great deal of cowhide and burl wood.

The show makes possible a couple of revisions. Much of Burton's work is not withstanding the test of time. His metal "Two Curve Chair" might provide a nice bounce if one could sit on it; otherwise it veers too close to bad abstract sculpture. He is at his best embellishing and tweaking familiar, even classic designs, as suggested here by his variations on the traditional lawn chair. Their surfaces are of impractical cream-colored Formica, whose dark edges nonetheless make the pieces look like three-dimensional drawings. The square top on the central panel of each of their backs conveys an eerily figurative uptightness.

At the same time, the show suggests that Burton's work may be one of the starting points for an expanding stratum of artists, in roughly the same 30's-and-40's generation as Mr. Pardo or Ms. Whiteread, who have effectively fused art and design. Their numbers include Andrea Zittel, Josiah McElheny, Dan Peterman, Tobias Rehberger, Joe Scanlan and Francis Cape; any of them could have been included in this show. Ms. Zittel, especially, is missed.

And then there is the show's heavy-duty leitmotif: Judd, whose furniture looks better and better. An artist who seriously considered becoming an architect, Judd had a deep interest in objects of all kinds and a wide-ranging, potentially total design vision. His concept of visual wholeness and integrity — truth to materials, self-evident structure — helped revolutionize sculpture in the 1960's, but it often translated even more brilliantly into his best functional objects.

In the end Judd may be remembered less for his sculpture than for his complementary activities as a thinker, writer, collector, designer, interior designer (if not decorator) and architect, all of which are memorialized in the utopian living and display spaces he created in Marfa, Tex.

In particular, his furniture bends and takes into account the human animal in a way that his sculpture doesn't. You could say it brings out his warm and fuzzy side, such as it was: it is more accessible, or "relative," as Burton would have put it. But Judd's furniture also uses space more complexly than does most of his sculpture, while being visually more porous, more full of open volumes. The furniture is also rife with ingenious structural economies and reversals, like his open-ended bookcases, or surprisingly useful additions, like his double-decker desks, tables and beds.

My main complaint about Judd's furniture, and almost everything else in this show is that it is beyond the reach of most pocketbooks. You would think that anyone who has endured the rigors of becoming an artist, much less an acclaimed and successful one, might want to give back to society by designing something that is not only a pleasure to look at and use, but also inexpensive to produce and own. The only instance here of such clarity and economy is a particularly stately example of Isamu Noguchi's influential rice paper and balsa wood Araki lamp from 1957, featured in an antechamber foyer to the show.

If a thing can't realistically be produced and owned, or if it doesn't improve an existing form, it may be art, but it's hard to call it design. Artists too often approach design as a form of play, a chance for self-indulgence. To paraphrase Huebler: The world is teeming with luxury goods, most of them completely unnecessary. Why add more?