



## Collecting

### On form and function

Edwin Heathcote reports on radical changes in concepts of design over the past decade and more



*Enignum II dining table (2010) by Joseph Walsh at Sarah Myerscough gallery at PAD*

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It is 10 years since the launch of the Pavilion of Art + Design (PAD). In that time, ideas about design have changed radically, but the changes have a longer history. Almost a century ago, the modernist revolution in design represented the end of the decorative arts. Instead of the ornamented objects that cluttered Victorian houses, the halls of the country manors and Belle Époque vitrines, the things we actually needed would be so exquisitely tailored to their function and be such a pure expression of that need that everything else would appear superfluous. Apart from perhaps a few striking abstract paintings on the walls, decoration would disappear. At least, that was the high-minded idea.

In some ways we are now, finally, living the modernist dream. Middle-class homes are stripped of kitsch, and kitchen extensions to Victorian terraces are executed in glass and steel minimal modernism. When, earlier this month, Apple boss Tim Cook launched the

new iPhone 7, that cipher for the technical perfection of modernity, the most radical element of the design was subtractive — the stripping away of the headphone jack socket. That, give or take the inevitably improved camera, was about it.

And in that seductively smooth slab of hardware resides both our design destiny and the paradox of contemporary consumption. Jonathan Ive, Apple's head designer, has been so successful in reducing our immediate world to the tiny screen of an iPhone that he has arguably brought about the collapse of design. Apple's desirable devices might now contain our libraries, record collections, photo albums, address books, diaries, toys and games, fitness and health monitors as well as being our windows on to the world, replacing phones, TVs, hi-fis and the landscape of stuff that we once surrounded ourselves with — and all of which needed to be designed.

Whether we think of LP covers or Dieter Rams's beautiful Braun turntables, shelves of books and lovingly compiled albums of photos, these devices have made all of them redundant. It's true that Apple has brought brilliant modernist design (of exactly the type espoused by Rams, who is Ive's hero) into our hands. The iPhone and iPad, with their intuitive swiping, pinching and poking, are magical moments of pure modernity. But it is equally true, as evidenced by the latest iPhone launch, that we are reaching the end of industrial design as we once understood it.

And what is the result of the implosion of design as the black screen swallows everything up? Counter-intuitively, it is the explosion of design. Not as the Bauhaus pioneers imagined it, as an arm of industry, but rather as what is referred to as a "cultural practice".

A century after the beginnings of modernism, design is being reinvented as a post-industrial art medium. London's inaugural design biennale, for instance, is a show about the application of design to the world's bigger issues. London, which regards itself as something of a design capital, is by no means the first: Gwangju, Istanbul, Ljubljana all got there earlier. But the London biennale opening was timed to coincide with the London Design Festival, of which it is the sister act, and just before PAD, Frieze and the myriad art and design openings and satellite events that happen around them. And just as the design fairs and biennales are planned to coincide with the art events and shows, the languages of design and art are blurring.

It is a progression that has been evolving since the 1960s when radical designers created products based more on ideas than on use. Already in 1968 designers were rebelling against their own institutions: that year's Milan Triennale, for example, was shut down due to the vehement activism of radical designers protesting against the profession's subsumption into the capitalist system. And ever since there has been an alternative, radical wing of design unwilling to submit to the demands of the market.

That political edge might have faded since the radical student politics of the 1960s, but the recent confluence of various factors has led, arguably, to a new rebellion against consumerism. The first is, in a way, the collapse of the three dimensions of product design into the two dimensions of the screen: the iPhone phenomenon.

The second is the angst about the destruction of the environment and the realisation that the world probably has enough chairs and lamps already. When the head of Ikea's sustainability unit admits we have reached "peak stuff", the time is probably ripe for a reassessment of the amount and type of products we consume.

And finally there was the emergence of what became known as "design art", the curious hybrid that has blended the languages of sculpture with the apparent functional demands of design. This created an in-between field of objects that were neither art nor design, yet appealed to the emerging market for sleek, spectacular interiors determined as much by aesthetics as by functionality.

This latter mongrel condition of art and design is a paradox. The emergence of "useless" design — statement pieces made for impact, spectacle and perhaps to make a particular conceptual point is, in a way, a reaction to peak stuff. If we all already own the items we actually need for everyday life, what is left except spectacle? What was once product design has moved into the space inhabited by fashion, art, jewellery and the other industries based on display rather than use. Many products of design art can be used — lamps, chairs, rugs, chandeliers and so on — but that is never their principle concern.

One corner of this new medium is not only uninterested in function but actually opposed to it. Whether it's Marc Newson's £2m Lockheed Lounge sofa or Rolf Sachs's Tailor Made felt chair — both designs that are impossible to sit on — design art concentrates on meaning rather than use. It is a reaction to an exponentially exploding world of products.

And it has flowered into another, yet more rarefied theatre — the emergence of "conceptual design". This is a medium for expressing concern through the language and techniques of design without pandering to the demands of function or use. The results might be something as apparently useful as Brodie Neill's beautiful, terrazzo-like Gyro table displayed at the London Design Biennale and made from recycled plastics found in the ocean — a piece made to provoke consciousness of impending environmental catastrophe. Or they might lead to something as ethereally elegant as Mathieu Lehanneur's "Liquid Marble" installation, a piece which takes in ideas about translation, the digital and the idea of surface.

The result of all this is a fragmentation of design that can be confusing but also liberating. What was once seen as something between a profession, a craft and an art which mediated between products and people is now a medium in its own right — the medium is the message. Design was once conceived as an applied art, the auctions of modern design were once labelled in those terms and museums like the V&A were established as didactic repositories of applied art.

Now it has become something else. The new Design Museum in London and the V&A are planning and mounting design shows about ideas and narratives rather than objects and processes, while some of the upcoming fairs celebrate the aesthetic heights of which design is capable. Everywhere, design is being transformed. And designers now have the

opportunity to use the platforms once enjoyed only by artists — the biennales, the exhibitions, the fairs and the major institutions, to communicate through their work.

The question is, do they have anything to say? The iPad is up against PAD. Can the design profession, which has stripped the ultimate medium down to the minimum, reimagine itself as a mechanism with which to redefine our relationship to the world? Or is it still too attached to the world of beautiful things from which it came?

## **Pavilion of Art +Design**

Now celebrating its tenth year, PAD continues to extend its reach into a particular way of collecting. Its slender selection of just 66 stands present an eclectic crossover vision: design, decorative arts, modern art, photography and tribal arts intersect and interact, with an emphasis on the collectable as well as the fashionable and even the functional.

New this year within the marquees in London's Berkeley Square are 14 new exhibitors. Categories include figurative art (at Dumonteil, from Paris), furniture since 1940, and design jewellery (at Hemmerle, from Munich); the Hong Kong-based Gérard Lasés, with art from the Asia-Pacific region, stands out among the predominantly European line-up.

*PAD, Berkeley Square, London W1, October 3-9. [pad-fairs.com \(https://www.pad-fairs.com/\)](https://www.pad-fairs.com/)*

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