

Performance/Process

By Marcus Fairs

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An explosion rocks a tranquil, snow-dusted copse somewhere in rural Sweden, leaving a modest crater. In England, a young man attacks a block of expanded polystyrene with a hammer. And in a lock-up garage in the Netherlands, an antique sideboard is doused with petrol and then ignited with a blowtorch.

These acts of violence are also acts of design, since each gave birth to a functional object. Swedish design group Front, the protagonists of the detonation, used the crater as a mould for their Design By Explosion chair. English designer Max Lamb hacked his Polystyrene Chair out of a cubic metre of foam with a claw hammer. Maarten Baas, the fast-rising star of the Dutch design scene, made his name with his Smoke series of flame-grilled design classics.

They are just three examples of the emerging tendency for designers to create form not by sketching or modelling but through events, thereby treating the design process as performance.

This is territory that artists explored long ago, of course – from the action paintings of Jackson Pollock to the “shooting paintings” of Niki de Saint Phalle, who coloured her giant sculptures by tying on paint-filled balloons, then firing guns at them.

But in design this is a new phenomenon, driven by designers’ increasing willingness to breach disciplinary boundaries, by their boredom with the aesthetic and moral cul-de-sac of Modernism, and by the ease with which their kinetic exploits can be broadcast on movie-sharing websites and the fast-proliferating, QuickTime-enabled design blogs.

Such telegenic acts of creation confirm that the design process can be as pleasing – or as provocative - an aesthetic experience as the designed object itself. As avant-garde design enters a new, post-functional phase – in which the cultural or emotional value of an object is equal to, or even greater than, its functional value – so designers are liberated to pioneer such new routes to form.

No longer are designers hidebound by twentieth-century dictums such as “Form follows function” or “Less is more”. The design process is no longer a rigorous quest for perfection; it no longer involves diligent toil with pencil and paper. Instead, designers such as Front, Lamb and Baas telescope the sketch, model, working drawing and prototype stages into a single act of pyrotechnic alchemy; in the case of Front’s detonation, the entire design process took just 0.4 seconds.

Dutch design house Droog opened the door to this approach to design in the nineties, with their insistence that, besides having a use, every piece should tell a story, so that

the object became a vehicle for a narrative. But when the design process becomes live theatre, objects start to tell the story of their own creation.

Fire is the preferred catalyst for many of these new action designers. Pieke Bergmans' Design Virus project involves dropping white-hot gobs of molten glass onto furniture by other designers – a process that is beautifully captured on films that Bergmans shows alongside her work. The fact that the resulting collisions of glass, timber and steel could nominally serve as flower vases ensures that Bergmans' work remains design, rather than art.

But animals too can be the protagonists: Front have let rats loose on wallpaper to nibble patterns and used rabbits to dig moulds for lamps; while Tomas Gabzdil Liberty of Studio Liberty co-opted 40,000 bees, who spent a week making his honeycomb vase. Called *With a Little Help of the Bees*, the fragile beeswax vessel was one of the highlights of the Milan furniture fair this April.

Other designers are more poetic in their approach, such as Stuart Haygarth, whose dawn scavengings on Dungeness beach in England produced the raw materials for *Tide* - a chandelier consisting of hundreds of plastic objects gleaned from the shoreline that is both object and documentary.

And young Dutch designer Joris Laarman encapsulates the current shift in demand away from homogenous mass-produced goods towards customised or one-off objects in *Limited* – a “transitory production line” that produces a series of unique ceramic vases that deteriorate in quality as the mould wears out.

British designer Tom Dixon was one of the first to realise how the production line could be subverted to theatrical effect with *Fresh Fat* – a project that involved hand-weaving the warm, soft sausages of plastic oozing out of an extrusion machine into chairs, tables and bowls. Dixon launched the range in 2002 with live events in both London and Milan, in which other designers and the public were invited to create their own unique *Fresh Fat* objects.

And in his most celebrated piece, Max Lamb cast his *Pewter Stool* directly into the sand of a beach in Cornwall, heating the metal over an open fire and pouring the bubbling fluid back into the terrain from which it once came. He thereby imbued a simple item of furniture with a sense of place and drama, both of which are immortalised in Lamb's compelling documentation of the event.

In many ways, this marks a return to the pre-design era, when artisans worked directly with materials, using intuition to guide them rather than a set of blueprints. After a century of separation, designers are reconnecting the design process with the manufacturing process and in the process rehumanising both. Explosions, rats, rabbits and bees are merely the potters' wheels and lathes of the YouTube generation.

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