

Blurred Boundaries
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“Technology / Craft: Style and Process in Contemporary Design” by William Hanley

“Functionalism / Expressionism: The Role of Subjectivity in Design” by Libby Sellers

“Nature / Artifice: Intelligent Design Today” by Barbara J. Bloemink

“Digital / Mechanical: Design Process and Products after the Digital Revolution” by Terry Riley

“Limited Edition / Mass Production: Where Will It End?” by Aric Chen

Design Miami/ invited five of our favorite design experts to address recent developments in contemporary design through a set of polar oppositions that have historically conditioned our understanding of design products and processes: technology vs. craft, functionalism vs. expressionism, the natural vs. the artificial, the digital vs. the mechanical, and the rare vs. the mass produced.

In our recent Modernist past, design was conceptually defined largely by its adherence to functionalism and mass production. While handcraft and studio production have always inspired exceptional design work, the chief aspirations of most designers remained focused on standardization and machine manufacture. Such aspirations delineated the design profession throughout much of the 20th century, and categories of creativity outside of this definition were generally considered something other than design.

Since about the 1970s, however, the story has become increasingly more intricate. Time-honored boundaries within design practice and expression have blurred, and today, the term “design” encompasses a much wider variety of objects. Design has moved away from a strict functionalist definition, and many of the most influential designers are producing objects with limited functionality and close ties to conceptual art.

As the scope of design expands, the old dichotomies break down. Today, numerous designers exploit state-of-the-art technologies, while others are returning to handcraft, and still others combine these approaches. One is just as likely to see cutting-edge design expressed through a disciplined, rational scheme as through an ornate, eclectic free-for-all. New forms have arisen as a result of the digital revolution, while breakthroughs in biology, genetics, and other scientific fields have afforded designers unprecedented opportunities to mimic, harness and improve upon the natural world. The old emphasis on mass production has taken new, paradoxical dimensions with the rise of the limited edition.

These short essays invite the reader to reflect on the complexity of current design practice and expression, offering five perspectives from which to view the objects exhibited at Design Miami and understand the ubiquity of design in our world today.

Wava Carpenter, Director of Culture + Content, Design Miami

Technology / Craft
Style and Process in Contemporary Design
William Hanley

Designers often find inspiration in the very tools they use in the creative process, employing the cultural weight of production methods to make conceptual gestures. Examples of this are everywhere, but the use of method as a design element is particularly evident when it comes to designers working in two sharply distinct styles.

On the one hand, we have designers who playfully engage with technology and the novel forms it makes possible. With a public increasingly interested in innovative technologies and digital culture, designers in many different fields readily base the form of their work on the applications and limitations of the very technology that facilitates its construction. The botanical forms in Joshua Davis' vector graphics reference the recognizable palette and curvature specific to the illustration software in which they were created. And impossibly abstract furniture, such as Zaha Hadid's well-known *Aqua* table, references its own hi-tech fabrication processes.

Then there are those with a contrasting reverence for the handcrafted look of antiquated tools and vernacular techniques. These designers employ the homespun look of traditional techniques in many different kinds of work. Variants of hand-lettered type have been an obsession of vanguard design firms in the graphic world for years, while crochet and sometimes crude embroidery have long shown up in couture. But more than simply using craft as a decorative flourish, a passing reference to antiquated techniques or an affront to mass production, some designers, such as Fernando and Humberto Campana (who made their *Favela* chair to evoke the improvised look of shantytowns in Brazil) often employ the look of handcrafted work to conceptual or even narrative ends.

Both stylistic approaches illustrate recent preoccupations among designers—and in design culture at large; but a useful binary is never very stable, and these dueling trends are no exception. Many designers, working in fields from lighting to ceramics, have begun employing a rough-hewn look alongside digitally influenced abstraction, mixing the style of unrefined craftsmanship with AutoCAD aesthetics. Such work is sure to be among the most exciting at this year's Design Miami.

William Hanley, a Brooklyn, New York-based journalist and critic, is an editor at LTB Media.

Functionalism / Expressionism
The Role of Subjectivity in Design
Libby Sellers

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of functionalism is "that the design of an object should be governed by function rather than aesthetics". Yet in our super-saturated global economy, this 20th-century mantra of form following function – one which renounces all ornament and personal expression in the pursuit of so-called 'design integrity' – has lost its validity. This isn't to say that the mandate has completely expired; it simply needs updating to embrace a 21st-century interpretation of function. For to deny the role of the expressive and subjective in design today is to deny the designed object one of its primary functions – to forge an emotional rapport with the end user. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, a chair is a chair is a chair – there is limited scope to improve its basic use. Yet to quote the Finish designer Eero Aarnio, "A chair is a chair is a chair, but a seat does not necessarily have to be a chair."

Due in equal measures to the glut of choice, globalisation, increasing advances in technology, and the speed of international media communication, designers today are veering away from the ubiquitous mass manufactured and mass marketed product. Instead they seek to imbue industrially produced objects with individuality and narrative – characteristics that both engage design in a dialogue with the traditional values of art and add extra function (value) to their designs.

Consequently, design with narrative – design that accommodates any or all technological, material, social and personal histories – inevitably elevates the practice above its conventionally held perception as a minor or low art. It engages design in a critical debate appropriate to the critical creativity of its practitioners. And as observers – we look forward to watching the debate evolve.

Libby Sellers is a curator at the Design Museum in London. Her recent exhibitions have included the first UK retrospective of Australian born designer Marc Newson, an exhibition on the British graphic designer Peter Saville, the annual Designer of the Year awards scheme and the Eileen Gray retrospective. A graduate in design history from the Royal College of Art's joint MA with the Victoria and Albert Museum, Libby also works as a freelance journalist and lecturer.

Nature / Artifice
Intelligent Design Today
Barbara J. Bloemink

The natural world – its appearance, materials, and laws – has returned as a dominant subject in contemporary design. During the last few years, what traditionally were considered oppositions (natural vs. artificial, real vs. virtual, human vs. computer) have fallen away in significance. The result is a proliferation of futuristic design work modeled after natural forms and processes, from biomorphic structures and intelligent behavior to adaptive functional traits.

The appearance of living things has served as inspiration for manmade objects since the earliest signs of human creativity; today, however, advanced biomimicry is determining the form of many designers' work at a much more fundamental and significant level. When used in conjunction with design, biomimicry can serve as a kind of reverse engineering, with designers studying and copying natural organisms in order to replicate their various processes and functions. The Nike Free Shoe, for example, resulted when a group of Nike designers spent time exploring the physiognomy of the human foot, and visited a zoo, sketching and studying the natural movements of animals.

With the rise of advanced computer technology, designers have moved beyond mere appearances to imbue products with actual behavioral capacities. The manufacturers of iRobot, for example, are working to design "personality" into their Rumba and Scooba robotic floor cleaners, often resulting in the formation of an emotional "bond" between robot and user.

Natural organisms continually evolve and adapt according to their environment, rejecting what does not work. While never claiming an organic model, the phenomenon of Apple's iPod exhibits biological characteristics of rapid mutation and evolution. Similarly, Greg Lynn's product designs are created with the aid of his celebrated software programs, which enable a virtually endless series of unique variations, all visibly part of the same "family."

The continuing trend towards emulating and replicating nature and its functions in various areas of design indicates that the day may not be that far in the future when many topics of science fiction are no longer "fiction," but real areas of both science and design.

*Dr. Barbara Bloemink is the Curatorial Director of Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, where she has organized exhibitions such as the groundbreaking *Design ≠ Art: Functional Objects from Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread*; *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser*; *Yinka Shonibare Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection*; and *Fashion in Colors*. She is currently one of four curators organizing the 2006 National Design Triennial: *Design Life Now*, opening at Cooper-Hewitt in December.*

Digital / Mechanical
Design Process and Products after the Digital Revolution
Terry Riley

It is interesting to recall that not much longer than twenty years ago the device that we now call a “lap top” or a “desk top” was frequently referred to as a word processor, a high-powered typewriter, more or less. Before that newcomer to the office environment made its debut, places where people designed and/or made things were as varied as the activities they supported. While many of these different types of work places retain a unique character, for a great number of people today, designing or making things means sitting before a keyboard and a screen. The results of this revolution are, however, quite varied.

In many instances, the computer is used simply as a pair of more efficient digital hands, replacing the mechanical hands that created the modern world. The products, whether they be clothes, books, or furniture, are often nearly indistinguishable from their pre-digital predecessors. In other instances, the products appear fundamentally new. Their forms are clearly suggestive of the seamless and complex modeling that is the realm of the computer rather than the machine. But close inspection reveals that the influence of the computer has been limited to the form alone, the production being mechanical or, even by hand.

Scale is an issue here. In the field of architecture, the computer often generates while construction remains stubbornly Newtonian. The digital revolution appears most complete in those areas of design and production where the only hand work is found on the keyboard itself, where the act of designing is also a command to produce. While this unprecedented fusion of two previously separate worlds is now commonplace on a smaller scale – computer-designed computer chips being made by computers is a good example – its ultimate impact on architecture and design is still unfolding.

Unbridled faith in progress has proven to be dangerous, yet it appears to me that there is little reason to think the next twenty years will not bring as much change as the last.

Terence Riley is Director of Miami Art Museum. Former Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, he has maintained an architectural practice with John Keenen since 1984. Keenen/Riley's work has been published and exhibited widely.

Limited Edition / Mass Production
Where Will It End
Aric Chen

Perhaps we've succeeded too well in bringing "good design" to the masses. How else can we explain the current craze for limited editions, whether sneakers and jeans or Ron Arad chairs? They are a response, of course, to a market overflowing with goods; the consumer aspires to individuality and wants what others can't have. But, in limited editions, we can see a novel phenomenon: It's as if the industrial age has retreated into the 17th-century *Wunderkammer*. Rather than disseminating a product to the greatest numbers possible, the function of a limited edition is, essentially, to be rare.

Rarity was not the goal of modern design as we commonly conceive of it. Indeed, mass production has created its own antithesis. Consider the work of young, conceptual designers like Tobias Wong, whose solid gold McDonald's drink stirrers and diamond-embedded rubber bouncing balls have made a satire of our decadence. There is nothing innately precious about an object, Wong seems to say, until value is arbitrarily applied to often ridiculous extremes. But while Wong illustrates the point using gold and diamonds—commodities coveted, in part, for their inherent scarcity—the scarcity of limited editions is artificially imposed.

It's a strategy most often associated with art, which begs the interminable question of where design ends and art begins. (Given our tendency to fetishize both, the answer might best be defined in terms of pornography. As a Supreme Court justice once famously put it: You know it when you see it.) For sure, it is a curious moment when design is increasingly rarefied (think Hella Jongerius vases) and art is going mass market (Takashi Murakami). Whether the two are merging is almost irrelevant. In the meantime, designers, galleries and manufacturers continue their cavalcade of new limited-edition products, and consumers can't seem to get enough. The limited edition, in fact, is fast becoming mass-produced.

Aric Chen is a design writer based in New York. He is currently a contributing editor for I.D., Surface, Interior Design and Absolute magazines and regularly writes for The New York Times, Art + Auction, Metropolis and others.