

On Its Own Two Feet

Dutch Design in 2018

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In the 1990s, Dutch design took off internationally under the appropriate title of... 'Dutch Design'. It was fresh, full of humour and above all universal. In addition, it turned out to be an ideal emblem for the notion of positive progress and untroubled globalisation. It was also a standard-bearer that gave the Netherlands an excellent opportunity to establish its profile. Small but beautiful. Personal creative development rather than mass production, and above all a harmless way of taking a leading position worldwide. In this regard, the representatives who propagated the Dutch Design way of thinking proved themselves the best ambassadors imaginable. With the gift of the gab, full of bravura, and mediagenic, such designers as Marcel Wanders, MVRDV and the DROOG design collective became internationally renowned. But how much is left of the Dutch Design legacy? What sort of design emerged from it and how does the latest generation of Dutch designers handle the body of ideas that Dutch Design dominated for all those years? And what remains of the irony and bravura? In this essay, I will try to find an answer to these questions by outlining the present Dutch design landscape.

Knotted Chair

If there is one object that has come to symbolise Dutch Design it is Marcel Wanders's 'knotted chair'. It was a chair made of knotted cord that was then inverted and suspended in a bath of special coating which, when dry, enabled the chair to retain its shape. The function of the chair was secondary to its form: it is not really comfortable to sit in. The object plays with the user, who is challenged to reflect on what a chair actually is, what materiality is, and how it is possible that a number of cords knotted together can make up a chair. It introduces a tension between the object and the user, whereby Wanders had only one message: anything is possible. And in this way the chair embodied quite precisely the spirit of the late 1990s. The Wall had fallen, communism was dead and buried, and scientists were predicting the end of time. Anything is possible!



Claudy Jongstra

By means of this chair, Wanders indicated that he wanted to go back to the idea of the old crafts. 'I wanted to make a product that did not seem industrial, a design that shows that it is made for someone with love, with the same sort of air as an old worn-out wooden cupboard. Knotting is one of the techniques by which you can achieve this craftsmanlike feel.' An industrial product in a craft guise. A project intended to evoke the suggestion of being old, worn-out and handmade, but which fools the user. For some designers this went a step too far. They were trying genuinely to return to the old crafts and use them as a source of inspiration for the development of their work.

Tactility

Claudy Jongstra launched her practice in 1996, the same year Wanders's knotted chair was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Jongstra studied fashion design and in her work with textiles tried to go back to such traditional crafts as carding, spinning and weaving. She wanted to bring every stage in the production process under her own control. From the herd of sheep whose wool she used to the colouring of her thread using dye plants from her biodynamic garden. Jongstra was one of the first designers to give priority to a sustainable production process: respect for nature, the use of exclusively local products and traditional craft production methods. In a clear break from the lightness, irony and globalisation of the Dutch Designers, Jongstra's tactile work radiated seriousness, contemplation *and* local sourcing.

This break, or perhaps it's better to say a turning away, from Dutch Design generated a lot of imitation. Nienke Hoogvliet (b. 1989) makes textile pieces based on the same sustainable principles, but adds a socially committed element by using her work to call attention explicitly to the vulnerability of man,



Iris van Herpen

society and nature. Nienke's designs are personal and poetic and are more than just a project. The products are traditional and sustainable, with a particular focus on natural materials and production processes.

Simone Post is another of these talented textile designers who dares to broach major social issues with considerable candidness. She uses a lot of residual material and waste in her designs, thereby imputing it with new value. But it is above all Jongstra's former trainee, Iris van Herpen (b. 1984) who has taken the most significant steps in the direction of the new tactility in Dutch design. Van Herpen became best known by taking Jongstra's sustainable methods as a basis, but combining them with modern techniques. Van Herpen has a pronounced urge to keep on experimenting, not shying away from the use of 3D printers, laser cutters and other modern techniques. Whereas Jongstra, Hoogvliet and Post remain close to the traditional design crafts, Van Herpen sees them rather as a stepping stone to continued and more contemporary experiments.

Innovation and techniques

This urge to experiment with new techniques also characterises another direction Dutch design has taken in recent years. Building on the tradition of technical innovation that was pursued for decades in Eindhoven, such young designers as Pauline van Dongen, Dave Hakkens and Marjan van Aubel have put this principle at the heart of their quest to shape the Dutch design of the future. In this regard, they fit perfectly into the prevailing trend in which innovation enjoys broad interest and is not reserved only for governments, industry and universities. Young, recently graduated designers can also be the driving force behind innovation. It is precisely their youthful zest, combined with high

media sensitivity, that can turn ideas on the drawing board into actual designs.

Van Aubel has concentrated on the use of solar cells in everyday designs. Her 'Current Table', a simple table for the living room, is composed of special solar cells that generate energy out of light. 'When developing new technologies, it is often only the technical advantages that are considered, and much less how people use or want to use the technology.' Van Aubel tries not only to design clever innovative products, but also to bring about a change of mentality. In her designs, sustainability, aesthetics and social change actually combine very well. Like that of Marcel Wanders, her work has in the meantime been purchased by the MoMA in New York.

Dave Hakkens takes the same direction with his Block Phone, a 'telephone made of bricks' in which users can replace parts themselves. This modular telephone might provide a solution to the increasing amount of chemical waste caused by the short lifespan of mobile telephones. Even before he had graduated, Hakkens's design had been purchased by Motorola, and other tech-giants are also developing similar models. The young designers are not put off by this, nor are they simply swallowed up. Pauline Van Dongen is also moving in this direction and applies her technological innovation to the fashion world. Using laser cutting, Van Dongen develops fabrics that change as the wearer moves. She is fascinated by the interaction between designer and material, but also between the design and the wearer.

Social Design

The third significant direction that several Dutch designers have taken is that of social design: design that is emphatically socially committed. In contrast with the happy-go-lucky mentality of the Dutch Design creators of the 1990s, social designers focus on thorny issues. The design process – which itself takes an original form – is as important as the finished product. In many cases the



Dave Hakkens, Phonebloks



Marjan van Aubel, Current Table



Above
Loes' Pullovers

Above right
De Tostifabriek

process is itself the actual product. Christien Meindertsma (b. 1980) spotlights such topics as loneliness, poverty and animal suffering, usually by means of research projects focussing on products for everyday use. In her project *Loes' Pullovers* – a joint project with the Rotterdam collective Wandschappen – she sought out the vital DNA of the Charlois district in Rotterdam. In her quest she came across Loes Veenstra, an unemployed older woman who spent her days knitting pullovers, amounting to 550 in the course of her life. Meindertsma did nothing more than wash, repair, document and display the pullovers. This drew a huge amount of media attention, not only for the designer, but of course for Veenstra and the poor conditions in the district. The sale of the pullovers – among others to the Japanese designer Issey Miyake and Queen Maxima – were to the benefit of Loes and the neighbourhood.

In this instance, the designer developed nothing more than the process, remote from any aesthetics, innovation or irony. The designer effaced herself and was entirely at the service of the message and the ultimate socially committed goal. This is design as a solution for social injustice. The same principle is employed in the De Tostifabriek project by the young Amsterdam designers' collective Jansen Jansen & Bachrach. The basic principle is extremely simple: what does it mean to produce a toasted ham and cheese sandwich oneself, from beginning to end? The product appears to be simple: a slice of bread, a slice of ham, a slice of cheese, but is this the reality? The designers of De Tostifabriek planted a field of grain for the bread in the middle of Amsterdam, and reserved a piece of land for two pigs and two cows, thereby trying to produce all the ingredients for a toasted sandwich themselves.

The project made the news several times and set things in motion in the city. People living nearby lay awake for nights on end because the cow was lowing ceaselessly after being separated from her calf. And later there was a great commotion about the slaughter of the pigs. What the project did above all was to reveal perfectly how far contemporary society is removed from the production of its own food. It shows the impact that the production of a toasted sandwich has on our ecosystem and sheds a new light on increases in scale in the agricultural sector, on urban farming and relations between man and na-

ture. Like Meindertsma, Jansen Jansen & Bachrach remain positive: the whole thing is presented with a smile. It is not an ironic smile, but one with a tragic undertone.

This tendency, which has become known as Social Design, has in the meantime firmly established itself in the Dutch design world. Even the original Dutch designers such as Droog Design and De Design Politie have launched large-scale social design projects. Droog has started the Socialcities.org project, an online platform that gives shape to the wishes of the city's inhabitants for the environment they live in. The accumulated data is intended to inspire the city's administrators themselves to take concrete steps. This project tacks between a bottom-up and a top-down approach to city building. Here again, the designer designs the process, not the finished product. The design studio under the name of De Design Politie, which achieved great renown in the late 1990s with its graphic work and its light touch, applies the same principle in its annual – since 2011 – international conference *What Design Can Do!*. Devised and organised collectively, and aiming at active participation, WDCD provides a platform for a large number of international speakers to talk about the social impact of design. Not design as frills, but as a way of thinking in order to tackle societal issues.

Social Design has taken off not only in the Netherlands, but worldwide too. It seems to have become commonplace for designers to be able to play a new part in society as game-changers. At the same time, critical voices are being raised that question this role. Can a designer actually play a social role? Isn't this idea too naïve in an era of religious terrorism and worldwide political instability? Aren't social designers claiming too much influence and isn't the whole movement little more than a case of the emperor's new clothes? After all, hasn't design always been social design?



What Design Can Do!



Yuri Veerman

Performative design

The real renewal in the design discipline is probably best expressed in the latest direction that Dutch designers have taken: performative design. In this case design is reduced to an action, something that is done, rather than what is seen. Even more than in social design, the emphasis is more on the design process than the artistic product. But whereas for the social designer the process is neutral, the performative designer actually seeks a dynamic process of dialogue in which the context, the technology *and* the spectators are seen as co-designers.

Yuri Veerman is originally a graphic designer and studies the representation of such large-scale phenomena as a country or population group. He focusses among other things on the significance and operation of symbols such as flags and currencies. For his work *Alarm Symphony* he transposed the Dutch national air-raid alarm sound into a composition for orchestra together with the composer Willem Bulsink. This work was a reaction to the culture cuts imposed by the cabinet of Prime Minister Rutten. The symphony was performed on the Hofvijver, a pool in The Hague, with the parliament building in the background. In addition to this performance, Veerman has previously made a name for himself with a play and a mini opera.

It seems that Maarten Baas is following a similar course. He made his name as a designer in the Dutch Design tradition with his luxury Smoke Chairs. However, in 2017 he surprised us at the annual Salone del Mobile with an art-like installation entitled *May I have your attention please*, in which he set up hundreds of loudspeakers, each in a different material and with different dimensions. The sound that emerged from them was of voices that were not quite distinct. The work was a critique of the concept of 'attention' and how it influences his work.

Although the work of the performative designers is definitely socially committed, the message (and the results) are less explicit than in the work of the social designers. The former are more like activists, but often with irony and humour. Their urge for renewal combined with a fairly light touch is actually very reminiscent of the Dutch Design of the 1990s. So is Dutch design returning to where it started?

There are distinct differences, however. Performative designers are constantly expanding the boundaries of the discipline, whereas the Dutch Designers of the 1990s were mainly concerned with stretching the limits of the product. When it comes to the current generation of designers you might wonder whether design is still the right word, when the designer may present a musical concert, an art installation or a mini opera. The traditional boundaries between the cultural disciplines are blurring fast, yet the mark of a Dutch designer is still distinguishable. What Veerman and Baas produce is very much conceptually driven and has a clear element of social commitment. Just like Dutch Design two decades ago.

So in spite of the various tangents and directions that have been taken, one can indeed say there has been a continuation of a specific body of ideas in the Dutch design sector. For two decades, Dutch Design has explored and developed. Such studios as Droog, MVRDV and De Design Politie are still engaged in free experimentation or have specialised in a single direction or theme. In the end it is Marcel Wanders who has remained most faithful to the original body of ideas found in Dutch Design. That said, he has gradually focussed more on the luxury market segment, but his designs are still characterised by a surprising and creative twist in the product. For several years in succession, he has been presenting his own versions of the classic Charleston sofa at the Salone del Mobile. He stood the whole sofa on end so that only one person could sit on it. A simple and amusing change which yields a seat that would be more at home in an art museum than in most living rooms. In Wanders's case, anything is *still* possible. ■

Translated by Gregory Ball



Maarten Baas, Installation Salone del Mobile Milan 2017