

IN *BEYOND THE NEW. ON THE AGENCY OF THINGS*, THEORIST LOUISE SCHOUWENBERG AND DESIGNER HELLA JONGERIUS EXPLORE THE LIFE AND AGENCY OF THINGS WHEN EXPERIENCED IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS. AS MEDIATORS, THINGS SHAPE OUR EXPERIENCES AND SHAPE WHO WE ARE WHEN USED IN DAILY LIFE. THE SAME THINGS ARE MERELY VALUED FOR THEIR STYLISTIC NEWNESS WITHIN A COMMERCIAL CONTEXT, WHEREAS THE MUSEUM SEEMS TO BE AN IDEAL PLACE FOR GRASPING THE MANIFOLD CULTURAL MEANINGS THAT HIDE IN THE OBJECTS ON DISPLAY. IN A MUSEUM VISITORS CAN DETECT WHICH DESIGNS REPRESENTED CULTURAL INNOVATION WHEN THEY WERE CONCEIVED AND HAVE NOT LOST SIGNIFICANCE EVER SINCE. INCLUDED ARE A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THINGS AND OBJECTS, AND A HYPOTHETICAL CONVERSATION BETWEEN LOUISE SCHOUWENBERG, HELLA JONGERIUS, AND THREE VOICES FROM THE PAST: ANNI ALBERS, WALTER GROPIUS AND JOHANNES ITTEN. GRAPHIC DESIGN BY IRMA BOOM.

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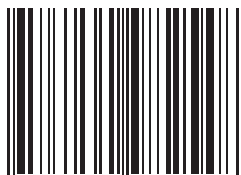
# BEYOND the NEW on the Agency of THINGS

Louise Schouwenberg & Hella Jongerius

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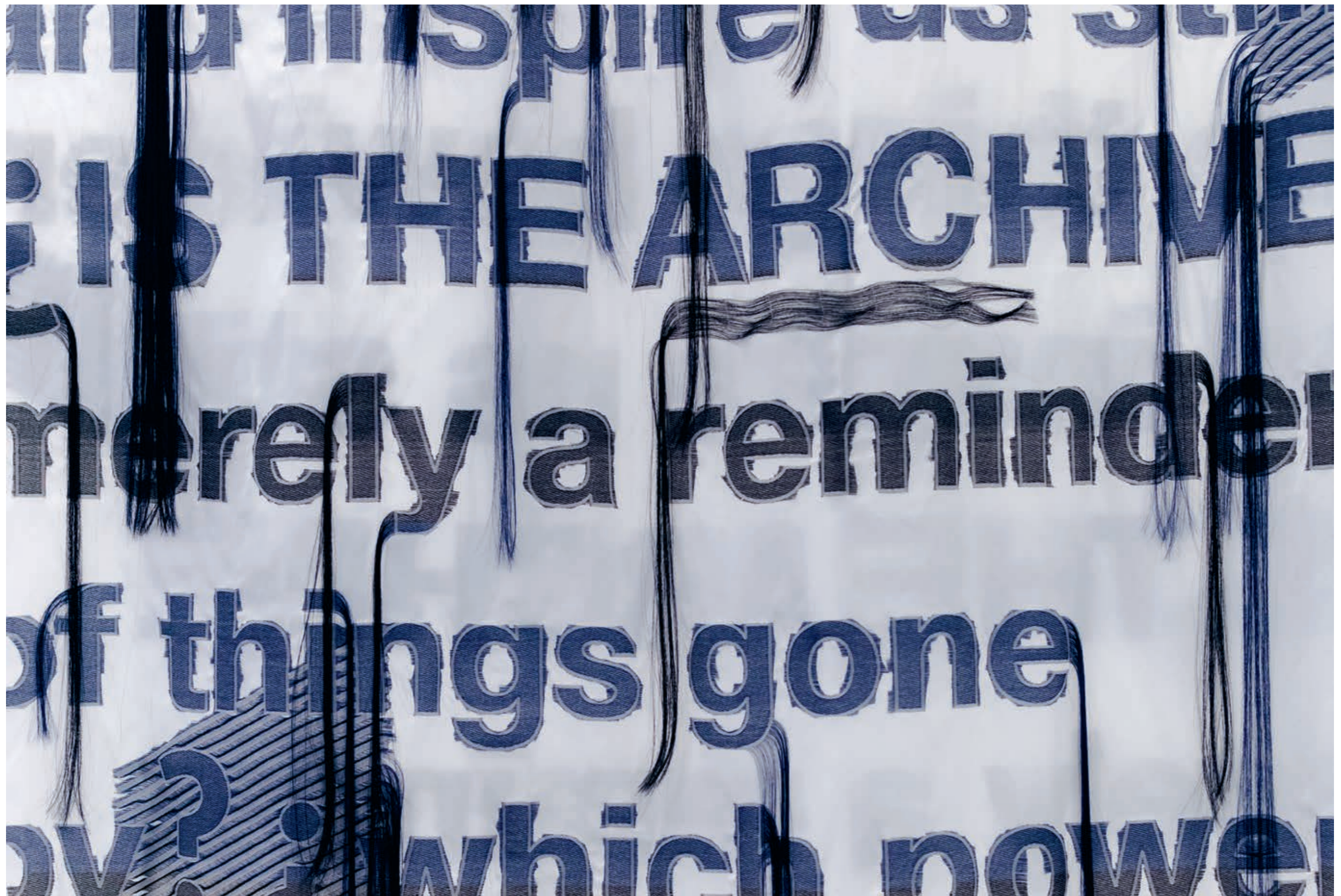
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... in spinning ...

... IS THE ARCHIVE ...

... merely a reminder ...

... of things gone ...

... which power ...







## A CABINET

LOUISE SCHOUWENBERG

In the early 1960s, my parents bought a heavy oak cabinet. It initially represented a period of anxious aspirations, followed by deeply felt disappointment, and finally a phase in which the mere memory of it lingered on in my strong resistance to a bourgeois lifestyle. ¶ In the lead-up to the purchase, the cabinet took on mythic proportions. The wall-sized piece of furniture would not only solve all our family's storage problems, but would also ennoble our house with its beauty and appeal and its undeniable show of (modest) wealth; my parents had to save for years to buy it. When my parents visited the houses of family and friends at that time, they subjected any cabinets present to an unusual degree of scrutiny. Back home, they invariably emphasised that our cabinet would, of course, be bigger, more beautiful and, crucially, much more useful. ¶ They ordered brochures from interiors shops and department stores, compared cabinets and prices, and slowly but surely arrived at a final choice. The savings grew steadily and when the realisation of the long-cherished dream was in sight, my parents headed for a German furniture store. They returned from the trip with evident self-satisfaction: they had been treated with great respect, and the extremely friendly sales assistant had asked good questions and offered useful tips before inviting them to make a definitive selection. No, they couldn't and wouldn't show us a photograph; we would see in a few months which item they had chosen. It was now being made to measure. ¶ On the day the cabinet arrived in a gigantic truck in our street, it attracted much attention from the neighbours and passers-by, as everything out of the ordinary did in our small village in Limburg. With great expectations, my parents looked on as the components were carried into the house, where they were skilfully and efficiently assembled by the muscular truck driver and his colleague. ¶ The final result was quickly visible, and just as rapidly my parents' inflated expectations were burst like balloons. The colossal thing turned out to be a monster,



Bruno Munari, *One comes home tired from working all day and finds an uncomfortable chair*, 1944  
 'One comes home tired from working all day and finds an uncomfortable chair,' said Bruno Munari, and let himself be photographed in a range of different postures. Seeking Comfort in an Uncomfortable Chair is an ironic provocation to the design establishment, which in seeking to reinvent variation after variation thereby ignores the basic requirement of 'comfort'. The series of 14 photos and accompanying text was published in *Domus* 202 / October 1944).

a veritable *Fremdkörper* in our interior. The measurements had been taken correctly and although the cabinet did fit between the walls, ceiling and floor, my mother voiced everyone's shock when she cried, 'It seemed so much smaller in the warehouse!' Indeed, in the monumental spaces of the warehouse, surrounded by other huge cabinets, ours had seemed well proportioned. Imposing certainly, but still very much on a human scale. In our house, however, it felt terribly awkward, to say the least. ¶ In this mood of crisis, we, the children, had the clever idea of placing the sofa with its

back to this alien object. We sat for several minutes next to each other on the sofa with an endearing consensus – rare in my family – and enjoyed the cabinet-free view. This moment of relief soon gave way to the realisation that it was almost impossible to avoid looking at the thing. It remained *the* eye-catcher upon entering the room and would always remain at least partly visible from any position. ¶

Instead of immediately throwing it out and replacing it with a new one, as people would today, we simply had to live with it. And so the cabinet remained with us for many years. The strange beast gradually became a familiar presence, like an especially ugly yet indispensable extra member of the family. Thankfully, over time we hardly noticed it any more. ¶ Once the memory of the huge expenditure, saved-up-for over so many years, had ebbed away, we began, hesitantly at first, to joke about the cabinet and my parents eventually fantasized about attacking it with a saw. Almost twenty years after the purchase, a handy uncle reduced the cabinet to acceptable proportions, using the remaining parts to make small bookcases for the guest rooms that had once been the children's bedrooms. I can still remember the day, many years later, after the death of my parents, when the



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Mobili Capovolti / Upside Down Furniture* (1976), at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, UK, 2016

Artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, one of the best-known artists of the Italian Arte Povera movement (from the late 1960s to 1970s), uses a range of unconventional materials and *objets trouvés* for his artworks, most of which aim at bridging the gap between art, the artist, and the social reality in which they operate. Many of his works actively engage the spectator, as happens with *Mobili Capovolti*, which consists of a range of furniture items robbed of their func nostalgic surroundings; the reflections bounce back and forth, merging the furniture with their context. From the centre of the installation the visitor's image starts to appear in multiple reflections amidst the furnished room. As with other works of Pistoletto, the installation addresses the intriguing relationships between art and life, art and the public, and between reality and illusion, image and reflection.

things we were proud of; the closed parts would house the merely functional stuff and the secrets that were best hidden from visitors' eyes. In this respect it did its job adequately, but sadly, as we would soon discover, we did not have that much control over our lives. To the world outside, all seemed well, but we began to see the cracks in the glossy surface of the beautiful family group photo and recognized the irrational demons that lay in wait. This realisation would come to be embodied in that cabinet. In spite of, or perhaps because of, its inadequacies, it is fair to say that the cabinet played a major role in our lives and would forever remain in our memories. Its massive material presence in our house gave rise to rituals: elaborate ways of hiding, ignoring, or circumventing it. While its functional aspects invited certain interactions, its size obstructed other forms of behaviour and prevented the possibility of using the space in another, freer, manner. But, even more importantly, on a psychological level, the cabinet made me aware of being trapped in a suffocating lifestyle ruled by convention and the necessity of keeping up appearances. It made me aware of wanting to break free.

cabinet and the bookcases ended up on the rubbish heap. ¶ The story of the cabinet, and the immense role it played in our lives throughout my youth, floated back from the mists of my memory when I started to brood on the effect artefacts have on people's lives. ¶ Apparently, its meaning resided not solely in its function, in its problem-solving capacity – we were indeed able to store an abundance of items in it – but apparently we had anticipated more satisfaction, greater happiness even, and certainly more prolonged pride at the display of prestige and wealth it represented (any pride at our good taste had evaporated the minute the thing arrived at our house). The use value of an object is but one of many we attribute to it. Our cabinet sheltered numerous meanings. We had projected much more onto it than its basic utility. ¶ The cabinet's ability to organise our lives was also

a source of considerable disappointment. Or should I say it did not live up to the abilities we had projected onto it? The idea was that our entire interior should fit within its rigid grid of compartments, thus giving the impression that our life was totally under control. The open parts would be used to display those









Helmut Smits, *Without Cabinet*, 2003

*Without Cabinet* displays the human obsession with collecting and the associated obsession of arranging all the collected things in a suitable order. What priorities do we set, and how to distinguish between things of value and things that are better kept out of sight of inquisitive viewers? Does a good arrangement imply division into categories – books together with books, files full of papers together with files? Must the categories be uniquely tailored to each situation? Can there be a cabinet without a cabinet, a storage system with neither a frame nor partitions? A cabinet that says something about the life hidden behind the façade? ¶ If one would pull a single book out of the carefully arranged stack, the order would disintegrate almost instantly into chaos. The cabinet is a reference to all other cabinets in which people categorize, arrange, display and hide their carefully gathered collections. By freezing these actions as a sculpture, Smits demonstrates the fragility of the human longing to define oneself in terms of material possessions. The deceptive glamour of first impressions is not infrequently an expression of the chaos and irrationality of real life.

of our relatives, neighbours, and friends. But this was not the whole story. If the cabinet represented the dreams that my parents projected onto it from the narrow confines of their middle-class aspirations, it also inspired rebellion among their children. Sooner or later all parents fall from the pedestal their children place them on. For me, this process of disengagement began with the cabinet's arrival. I became attuned to the pettiness of our social milieu and its associated tastes. As so-called 'social climbers', my parents were disproportionately fearful of making incorrect choices in clothing or furniture and disproportionately afraid of admitting this anxiety to others. I came to recognise those moments at which they put on their masks of respectable normality for the outside world and I thought I detected when they unthinkingly followed the conventions of their social class and lacked the courage to envisage and pursue their own dreams. The cabinet even took on a political significance

## WE ARE NOT ON TOP OF THE GAME

In the post-war years in the Netherlands, those things that had once been the preserve of the rich became attainable, with a degree of effort, for the middle classes, to which my family belonged, and soon thereafter for the lower classes. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by faith in the blessings of economic and social prosperity. Society as a whole was eager to display this prosperity, and also in the private domain. The idea of personal taste however turned out to be an illusion. In reality our choices were largely determined by class. The majority of people chose those commodities that fitted with the prevailing tastes and convictions of the social group to which they belonged. 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier', wrote Pierre Bourdieu in 1979. 'Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.'<sup>1</sup> ¶ My parents' carefully chosen cabinet differed only in its details from those

of our relatives, neighbours, and friends. But this was not the whole story. If the cabinet represented the dreams that my parents projected onto it from the narrow confines of their middle-class aspirations, it also inspired rebellion among their children. Sooner or later all parents fall from the pedestal their children place them on. For me, this process of disengagement began with the cabinet's arrival. I became attuned to the pettiness of our social milieu and its associated tastes. As so-called 'social climbers', my parents were disproportionately fearful of making incorrect choices in clothing or furniture and disproportionately afraid of admitting this anxiety to others. I came to recognise those moments at which they put on their masks of respectable normality for the outside world and I thought I detected when they unthinkingly followed the conventions of their social class and lacked the courage to envisage and pursue their own dreams. The cabinet even took on a political significance

when I understood better the extent to which the market has a grip on people's everyday lives. ¶ In everyday existence, within the seclusion of the domestic interior, people are usually unaware of their furnishings: the objects seem to comply silently with the uses we make of them. But the moment another person enters this private domain, the objects change their character and crawl out of their shell of utility. It is then that one suddenly notices their curious, illusory presence, pregnant with meanings and projections. It is then that they display to the eyes of the 'world' their beauty or their embarrassing lack thereof. It is then that an item of furniture reveals the prestige that its owner invests in it. After all, because objects are bearers of social meanings, they



Baccio Cappelli / Girolamo Ticciati, *Badminton Cabinet*, created by the Galleria dei Lavori, 1720–1732

Standing 386 cm high and 232.5 cm wide, this monumental cabinet is the greatest Florentine work of art of its period, as well as being one of the most important works of decorative art in general. Commissioned by Henry Somerset, the 3rd Duke of Beaufort, over thirty craftsmen took part in the labour-intensive process of creating it. It was probably never used to contain anything; its function was – and still is – to be a showpiece, a triumph of the very best artistry of its time. The materials used include ebony, lapis lazuli, agate, red and green Sicilian jasper, Volterra chalcedony, amethyst, quartz, and other superb hardstones. The clock face at the top of the cabinet is marked with a fleur-de-lys. Prince Hans-Adan II of Liechtenstein bought the Badminton Cabinet for a record £19 million in a sale at Christie's auction house in 2004. Since then the cabinet has been on public display at the Liechtenstein Museum in Vienna alongside the prince's other possessions.

automatically say something about their owners. As the philosopher Jean Baudrillard has noted, all purchases have their fetishistic side.<sup>2</sup> ¶ The accumulation of meaningful objects took on a great spurt in the second half of the twentieth century. The disappointment at the cabinet my parents had acquired was a harbinger of larger social

developments. The domestic interior has for some time been comparable to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Wunderkammer*: the Cabinet of Curiosities. Like the owners of these collections of rarities, contemporary consumers conceive their living space as an expanding universe to be filled with things with which they wish to be identified and through which they wish to present themselves.

¶ This universe of things is, of course, never complete, but requires constant additions and revisions; real products are never capable of meeting consumers' high expectations in the



Kostas Lambridis, *Elemental Cabinet* (after Badminton Cabinet, 18th century), 2017

In the run-up to finalizing his ornamental cabinet design, Kostas Lambridis played with the idea of calling it *Where are your socks Henry?* – They must be in the Badminton Cabinet. It was a humorous nod at the functionality of the object on which Lambridis based the design and execution of his own piece of furniture. Whereas the Badminton Cabinet can be opened, and might contain things, Lambridis' design represents what its forerunner truly is: an ornamental showpiece. In keeping with the contemporary, *Elemental Cabinet* is a showpiece of old and new production techniques, a mixture of valuable and valueless materials, including bronze, ceramics, embroidery, and melted old plastic chairs. Moreover, the cabinet playfully represents originality and reproduction, as both the moulds (taken from the original cabinet) and the casts are incorporated. Some parts consist of found raw materials, others testify to the craftsmanship that also characterizes the 18th century piece. As Lambridis puts it: ¶ There are two opposing forces that shape everything we do and have ever done. One force ascends and strives for immortality. It consists of the need to impose order over chaos, the will to create and to change. This force is represented by the Badminton Cabinet, an extraordinary, baroque piece of furniture from the 18th century, a perfect example of sublime vanity. The other force descends and wants to die. It is entropy, the resistance of nature, the laws of matter, the artistic humility of Robert Rauschenberg's *Dirt Paintings*. The *Elemental Cabinet* is the materialization of the collision of these two forces. It is the constant moral dilemma that the maker must always face.







## ANTHROPOCENE



Mark Manders, *Room with Broken Sentence*, 2013  
*Room with Broken Sentence* contains elements of Manders' earlier works, which comprise a growing 'Self-Portrait as a Building'. All elements of the installation, which he presented at the Dutch pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2013, can be read independently as well as combined with all other elements. The use of familiar and unfamiliar forms, some of which are derived from functional daily items and some from art pieces, as well as the use of materials in which nothing is what it seems to be – epoxy looks like clay, clay turns into brass and brass seems to be wood – creates a mystery that invites the onlookers to make up their own narrative, create their own self-portrait.

According to Beatriz Colomina and Mark Wigley, curators of the 2016 Istanbul Design Biennial, 'it is design that defines us, whether it's a shoe that ends up modifying the shape of the foot, or a cell phone that changes not only our hands but the way our brain functions.'<sup>6</sup> They are not the first to note that design has an active influence on our humanity. Their thought-provoking statement is an invitation to look more carefully at the things we surround ourselves with. Do they represent who we want to be? Do they communicate our values and convictions? Do we recognise ourselves in them? But questions such as these were nowhere to be found in Colomina and Wigley's publication that accompanied the biennial. The title *Are We Human?* implies that a judgement has already been made and it reads: the world is sick and so is our humanity. ¶ For years, scientists have been saying that we are now in the Anthropocene, a new geological era characterised by the enormous impact that mankind has on the planet, and in particular on its climate and atmosphere. The age of mankind is not a beautiful one. We have left too many fingerprints behind and seem to have no control over this process. Just as the title *Are We Human?* is not an open question, the term 'Anthropocene' is not a neutral term. Man is guilty. And it is abundantly evident which human activities have

landed us in this mess: far-reaching industrialisation and the inability to clean up all the waste created by industrial processes, a rampant capitalist system with its unquestioning belief in the free market, unbridled consumption that has transformed 'people'

into 'consumers', globalisation, computerisation, and the unstoppable race for technological innovation. Naturally, all of these factors are closely interconnected. ¶ Mankind is not only a creative race but also a destructive one, which threatens to destroy itself. That an accusatory finger is pointed at designers – 'it is design that defines us...' – and that designers themselves are given to frequent pleas of 'mea culpa' is easy to understand. In every sphere in which mankind has created a giant mountain of useless nonsense and an even greater heap of rubbish, designers have played a crucial role. This awareness has led to the schizophrenic situation of a profession that permanently oscillates between extremes. On the one hand, we have the thriving commercial design fairs that spew a fresh profusion of useless products into the world each year. And on the other hand, there are the design biennales that mainly present installations with alarming messages about the world that match precisely the convictions the visitors had before they entered: they are preaching to the converted. The same schizophrenia is apparent in design theory. Apart from notable insights and scholarly



Atelier Van Lieshout, *AVL-Workskull*, 2005  
 Which space offers the best conditions for focus and concentration? Where do thinkers work best? Within their own brain? *AVL's Workskull* ensures one can be shut off from the noisy external world. The title, the form, and the special use of materials and colour, are characteristic of Joep van Lieshout's oeuvre, which is never merely focused on functionality but also refers to meanings beyond use value.

publications that rarely or never reach beyond the bounds of academia, the design discourse is split between two camps. In monographs, glossy magazines, and the lifestyle pages of newspapers, we mostly encounter upbeat articles on design, written in marketing rhetoric. At the other end of the spectrum, at symposiums and in publications that accompany events such as the Istanbul Design Biennial, we mainly hear a story of hellfire and damnation. Naturally, this is an exaggeration for argument's sake which ignores people such as design theorists Rick Poyner and Alice Rawsthorn and curator and theorist Paola Antonelli, and a few others. They are clearly fascinated with the field, they love design, and they know a lot about it. In their publications, they contextualise new designs within the rich history of social, cultural, and technological developments. And

neither do they shun criticism where it is needed. But they are the exceptions to the rule. Most publications are either unbearably light or unbearably heavy. Where are the safe havens?



Atelier Van Lieshout, *The Original Dwelling*, 2015  
 A hybrid structure, which is at the same time an organically shaped sculpture of fibreglass, a primitive dwelling cave, and a luxury lounge, is designed to house real people, or in the words of Atelier Van Lieshout, "an imaginary tribe". The artist cum designer Joep van Lieshout often creates imaginative and provocative narratives, also designing the accompanying props. Some of these props spring from within the art world, others can be described as functional items. Their forms may implicitly question the modernistic language of contemporary furniture, but each one of them is fit to accommodate any future user.



RAAAF (Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances) and Barbara Visser, *The End of Sitting*, 2015  
 One of our daily behaviours – sitting for long stretches of time – is unhealthy, as medical evidence clearly demonstrates. *The End of Sitting* offers various affordances that encourage visitors to explore different standing positions within an experimental work environment.







## WE CAN DESIGN OUR WAY OUT



Where can we find a balanced appraisal of both the layeredness and meaningfulness of products *and* the potential dangers of the ways in which they are produced? From those who suggest positive solutions? John Thackara said it already in 2006: 'If we can design our way into difficulty, we can design our way out.'<sup>7</sup> While most scientists focus mainly on diagnosing the planet's worrying condition, some are prepared to venture an optimistic future vision. Environmental scientist Braden Allenby, for example, sees the earth as 'design space', which throws up both responsibilities and opportunities. He does not view the Anthro-



Martino Gamper, 'In a State of Repair', La Rinascente Milan, 2014

At the request of the Serpentine Gallery, London, designer Martino Gamper created the event 'In a State of Repair' in the galleries of La Rinascente department store. Members of the public were invited to bring their broken objects to the galleries in front of La Rinascente, where various craftsmen endeavoured to fix them. The storefront windows then housed accessories, shoes, books, toys, electronics, clothing, chairs, and bicycles as they underwent these processes of repair. The installation reveals a deep concern with how things are experienced by people, and celebrates the craftspeople who can help save items rather than seeing them thrown away as consumer society dictates.

pocene age as a disaster because he believes in mankind's ability to make optimal use of the enormous potential of technologies such as big-data analytics, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology.

We find ourselves in a new phase of evolution, and in order to survive, he believes, we must increase rather than diminish our dominance over nature by conceiving clever alternatives. The Breakthrough Institute, for example, a think tank with which Allenby is occasionally affiliated, fosters the ambition of modernizing the ecology movement through technological innovation.<sup>8</sup> ¶ Others are concerned mainly with products' afterlife and believe that a consideration of this aspect should be a natural part of the design process. Naturally, there are numerous recycling proposals that merely constitute 'greenwashing', the illusion of greener and more socially responsible production, but there are also good examples, in which the second, third, and fourth lives of a product are cleverly designed. Mankind is a destructive force, but we can also have faith in our creative potential. Our survival instinct is many times greater than our death wish. A remarkable new viewpoint comes from anthropologist Tim Ingold, who makes a plea for looking at material as process, at a material's capacity for change. In his view, we have focused too much on the ability to force a material to assume a particular form. Frozen in this form, when the object no longer functions, the material becomes 'waste'. But, Ingold argues, materials do not cease to exist once they have taken on a certain guise. They change, they age, and they acquire other characteristics that are only fully understood within the making process. This making process should therefore, he believes, receive

more attention from both practitioners and researchers. Ingold calls on academics within his own field to base their insights more on intuition and personal experience than on preconceived theoretical insights: "In the academic pantheon, reason is predestined to trump intuition, expertise to trump common sense, and conclusions based on facts to trump what people know from ordinary experience or from the wisdom of their forbears. [...] No genuine transformation in ways of thinking and feeling is possible that is not grounded in close and attentive observation. [...] ¶ In the study of material culture, the overwhelming focus has been on finished objects and on what happens as they become caught up in the life histories and social interactions of the people who use, consume or treasure them. In the study of visual culture, the focus has been



ling is possible that is not grounded in close and attentive observation. [...] ¶ In the study of material culture, the overwhelming focus has been on finished objects and on what happens as they become caught up in the life histories and social interactions of the people who use, consume or treasure them. In the study of visual culture, the focus has been

Martí Guixé, *Respect Cheap Furniture*, part of 'Chairs & Fireworks', HELMRINDERKNECHT contemporary design gallery, Berlin, 2009

on the relations[h]ips between objects, images and their interpretations. What is lost, in both fields of study, is the creativity of the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being: on the one hand in the generative currents of the materials of which they are made; on the other in the sensory awareness of practitioners.<sup>9</sup> ¶ CanAllenby, Antonelli, Ingold, Poyner, Rawsthorn, and many others who propose worthwhile solutions build a bridge between the unbearable banality of commerce and the unbearable gloominess of the critics? Perhaps. But there is yet another reality that deserves our attention. The optimistic babble of the marketeers and the doom scenarios of the theorists are silenced in the direct everyday interaction that people have with the things that surround them. To understand these things, we have to understand how people perceive themselves, and we cannot do that by posing rhetorical questions about our humanity. We might be able to reach

The monobloc plastic chair has a rather poor reputation. While it is probably the most used chair in the world, it is also criticized for its looks and materiality, which is reminiscent of the plastic soup to which each individual chair will most likely be delegated one day. But the chair has also inspired many creative practitioners, including artist Thomas Hirschhorn, who uses this component of mass production in many of his overwhelming installations, and designer Martí Guixé. Following his work *Stop Discrimination of Cheap Furniture!* (2004), Guixé has moved a step ahead in the defence of the monobloc chair, which now carries the equally polemical statement 'Respect Cheap Furniture!'

such an understanding if, together with the writer Marcel Proust, we explore the role that memory plays in defining our identity, or together with the philosopher Martin Heidegger, we examine how people's everyday experiences take place in the here and now, not only in the memory and not merely in consciousness.



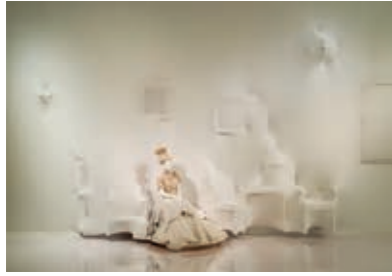
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Too Too - Much Much*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle, 2010  
As the title indicates, *Too Too - Much Much* was about quantity. The gallery rooms offered spectacular views of mounds of empty cans, evoking the daily consumption of all kinds of canned beverages and their contribution to the mountains of discarded, non-biodegradable packaging growing worldwide. Although the installation may be read as a commentary on mass production, consumption, and their consequences, the artist himself speaks of how important it is for people to take individual standpoints in their daily confrontation with their surroundings. How much energy do they derive from daily experiences in a world dominated by a superabundance of goods and images? With his often restated motto 'Energy: Yes! Quality: No!' the artist provocatively questions value codes of the art world, and disparages so-called political art for its narrowness and oversimplification. An artist must, in his view, fully dedicate himself to his work. As he puts it: ¶ Doing art politically means creating something. I can only create or fulfil something if I address reality positively, even the hard core of reality. It is a matter of never allowing the pleasure, the happiness, the enjoyment of work, the positive in creation, the beauty of working, to be asphyxiated by criticism. ... Through my work, I want to create a new truth beyond negativity, beyond current issues, beyond commentaries, beyond opinions and beyond evaluations.







## IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME



According to Proust, we are occasionally, suddenly, and coincidentally made aware of the past. Reminded of the interiors, the objects, the experiences, and the emotions associated with them. By some obscure means, the memories have attached themselves to objects. 'What intellect restores to us under the name of the past is not the past. In reality, as soon as each hour

of one's life has died, it embodies itself in some material object [...] and hides there. There it remains captive, captive for ever, unless we should happen on the object, recognise what lies within, call it by name, and so set it free.'<sup>10</sup> Proust's seven-

part novel *In Search of Lost Time* contains countless detailed descriptions of objects, interiors, and atmospheres. Life reveals itself in the inherent experience of time not through the intellect, not through knowledge, but through intuition and fantasy. Whereas the intellect is directed outwards and construes physical, measurable time, the inherent experience – intuition – knows *durée*, as is clear, for example, in the awakening of Proust's protagonist. ¶ "But for me it was enough if, in my own bed, my sleep was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness; for then I lost all sense of the place

in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke in the middle of the night not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness; I was more destitute than the cave-dweller; but then the memory – not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived and might now very possibly be – would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw



Dunne & Raby, *The School of Constructed Realities*, MAK Vienna, 2015  
With its contemporary design interventions, the MAK Design Salon #04 in the Geymüllerschloss in Vienna initiated dialogues with contemporary designers to induce new perspectives and interplays between historic ambience and current discourses in design. In 2015, designers Anthony Dunne & Fiona Raby were invited to present an intervention in the uniquely furnished study interior from the Empire and Biedermeier era. Thus their fictitious school entered a historical space to explore and teach 'unreality'. Dunne and Raby are known for their critical reflections on design and their speculations about future implementations of new technologies, not only by way of thought provoking texts but also via mysterious objects in which the past and the future seem to merge.



Scheltens & Abbenes, in 'Double Magazine', 2017  
This photo of an ordinary cupboard with a bulging duvet, speaks volumes about the secrets hiding within the usually closed linen cupboards in a bedroom. Photographers Maurice Scheltens and Liesbeth Abbenes are known for their stylized photographs, which tell stories beyond what the viewer immediately sees.

me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself. In one second I traversed centuries of civilisation, and out of vague images of petroleum lamps and shirts with open collars my individuality gradually recomposed itself with its original features."<sup>11</sup> ¶ Proust is often seen as a phenomenologist *pur sang*. According to the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski, 'If phenomenology really was the "secret longing of all modern philosophy" (Husserl), then one would have to describe Proust as embodying the secret longing of phenomenological philosophy.'<sup>12</sup> Phenomenology does not rely on assumptions, but explores things as they present themselves to our intuition. Edmund Husserl, who is generally regarded as the originator of phenomenology, rejected the history of philosophy that, in his view, had 'concealed' things by overpowering them with too many external theoretical constructs. He believed that reality should instead be given a chance

to show itself by means of unbiased observation. That which would then reveal itself was called the 'phenomenon'. A good example of the technique developed by Husserl, the 'phenomenological reduction', shows how a single 'thing' can manifest as diverse phenomena. Safranski again: ¶ "Just as there are many trees, so there are many kinds of being. Trees seen here and now, trees remembered, trees imagined. The same tree that at one time I regard with pleasure because it gives me shade, and another time from the viewpoint of the economic advantage of cutting it down, is not the same tree in these perceptions. Its being has changed, and if I examine it in what is called an "objective" and purely factual manner, then this too is only one of many means of letting the tree "be". Phenomenological reduction therefore brackets out the question of what the tree is "in reality" and examines only the different ways in which, and as what, it presents itself to consciousness,



Sylvie Zijlmans, *Your tears won't fall*, 2008  
Artist Sylvie Zijlmans usually works in collaboration with Hewald Jongenelis. Their practice ranges from paintings and sculptures to public art installations and social happenings. Much of their work deals with social absurdities and as such offers reflections on today's society. To back up their stories the artists often employ functional items, enabling them to play with references to real lives and the disturbing awareness that such lives can suddenly fall apart. The same themes recur in the meticulously staged photographs Zijlmans created, which seem to point to disruptive incidents having previously taken place. Problems such as global pollution and environmental destruction are reduced to a human scale. The scene depicted on *Your tears won't fall* is an image of a collapsing house that was once somebody's home. It contains many associations, such as the aftermath of a leaking ceiling and a flooded interior, the nightmare despair this might lead to, and the natural or man-made elements that have caused the disaster. The extraordinary clarity and detail of the photo pulls the viewer into an ambiguous reality.

or, more accurately, how consciousness stays with it."<sup>13</sup> ¶ Tim Ingold and Marcel Proust attempt in a similar way to Husserl to get close to the phenomenon through an uninhibited, intuitive, sensory approach, or at the very least through a memory of sensory experiences. How do people see, hear, feel, smell,



MacGuffin Magazine – *The Life of Things*, since 2015 (Editors in Chief: Kirsten Alger and Ernst van der Hoeven)  
The mysterious object in a thriller that sets the whole chain of events into motion – this is what Alfred Hitchcock called the 'MacGuffin'. With each issue based around one single object, *MacGuffin* magazine aims to be 'a platform for fans of inspiring, personal, unexpected, highly familiar, or utterly disregarded things'. The subtitle says it all: *The Life of Things*, this magazine pays tribute to our everyday experience of things and thus pays tribute to how we live our lives.

and taste the things that surround them? Proust adds a narrative to the things he describes, but that narrative does not assault these things as theoretical constructions would. He proffers no explanations. Instead, the reader is carried away on an unrestrained quest for experiences in the past. Martin Heidegger also attempts not to assault, or overpower, things with theoretical constructions and prejudices. He places consciousness to one side, as it were, and focuses directly on the everyday relationship between people and things.



Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936  
The story goes that this work was inspired by Pablo Picasso, who admired a fur-covered bracelet worn by Meret Oppenheim and casually remarked that one could cover anything with fur. Oppenheim chose to cover a cup and saucer, which would become one of the most imaginative of Surrealist artworks.

Alexandre Humbert, *Object Interview*, 2017  
The title *Object Interview* refers to a collection of one-minute videos in which designs converse with each other regarding their existence. The first interviews were shown at Palazzo Clerici in Milan, during the Salone del Mobile in 2017, where Design Academy Eindhoven presented 'DAE #TVClerci', curated by Jan Boelen. Humbert, himself a graduate of Design Academy Eindhoven (where he studied at Contextual Design), contributed with surprising narratives derived from talking objects – for some a scary premonition, for others a lively new take on the life of things.













## Hypothetical Conversation

What is design? What is innovation in design? What roles do artefacts play in people's lives? Hella Jongerius and myself have engaged in many stimulating discussions in recent years, the main lines of which have circulated as "conversations that might have taken place". The first time we descended into the underground storage depots of Munich's Die Neue Sammlung in January 2017, voices besides our own began infiltrating our dialogue, contributing different standpoints and different visions. Our dialogue turned into a hypothetical conversation with some of the giants of the design profession on whose shoulders we humbly stand.

**LOUISE SCHOUWENBERG** I felt a bit claustrophobic plunging down to the museum's cellars in that huge steel lift. I have no idea how far we have descended, but it must have been quite a few floors. It's a descent into the underworld – a shadow world of things that have become engraved in our memory by seeing them over and over again in books and exhibitions. The trip down in the lift goes along with visiting the archives depot, like sinking into the dimly lit corners of one's memory.

**WALTER GROPIUS** I was already down here, waiting for you next to the Bauhaus archives. I admit, I feel flattered that your generation seems keen to preserve our designs for posterity. But I am disappointed to see them interspersed with so much rubbish.

**LS** One could argue that it's necessary for historical completeness.

**WG** Historical dead-ends, you mean. Some so-called designers produce so much junk. Sure, this is a storage facility, but still...

**HELLA JONGERIUS** I don't think an archive needs to be complete. What counts is the quality of its contents. Surely a museum can make those choices.

**LS** The Bauhaus was one of the most important design movements, but it wasn't the only one.

**WG** The Bauhaus has stood the test of time. Not all design movements can claim that.

**HJ** These treasures of the past have all been plucked from their original contexts. At first you see them only as isolated objects; and the Die Neue Sammlung has over 100.000 of them in depots like this. But once you start exploring the cellars, going from one huge storage room to another, you begin to see connections between them. I'm impressed by the sheer quantity and diversity of Die Neue Sammlung archives, but I'm also aware that most museums in the world collect exactly the same design items. Works of art are unique; museums may collect the same artists but the collections are always different. This doesn't apply to design, however. I already know the historical design collection of Die Neue Sammlung almost like the back of my hand, so my main interest has been in recent additions to the collection.

**LS** The first impression you get is that everything is scattered around at random. All the same, it's possible to discover historical connections, and these in turn refer to wider historical developments. When Arts and Crafts designers worldwide were still clinging to the craftsmanship idiom and denouncing mechanical production, the Bauhaus started experimenting with combining all art forms, soon thereafter embracing the industrial revolution. Then the formal vocabulary of functionalism became more and more austere. And then the Italians launched their cheerful abundance of form. All those products are harmoniously ranged together on the storage shelves.

**HJ** Still, some products have had a greater influence on the design profession than others. It's not something that you necessarily notice here in the archives. We are still living in the wake of modernism in design. I notice every day how much the modernist form idiom has become the norm. People think of it as "timeless design". Consider the iPhone – can a design get any more modernist than that?

**WG** It's only right that modernism was triumphant and I'm glad the Bauhaus played a part

in it. What I miss is the energy that went into the products that are now in the archives. And, naturally, I particularly miss the vitality of the designs that are familiar to me, as I watched them being made. When I look at them, I can recall all the preparatory drawings as well as the lively discussions and heated arguments that led to the designs you can see here. Don't forget, there were some heavy hitters walking around in the Bauhaus! My first aim was to attract artists who shared my mentality, so as to turn the Bauhaus into a centre of artistic work that would challenge the reactionary forces prevailing in those days. That meant I had to bring in some strong personalities. As a result, the like-mindedness I first sought quickly vanished. Johannes Itten – popular as he was with the students – was prone to categorical statements. Paul Klee may have had less influence as a teacher, but he made quite an impression with his analyses and theoretical arguments. Wassily Kandinsky was notable for believing in a curious mix of irrational spiritualism and strict analytical thinking. Oscar Schlemmer, the man of reconciliation and also of ambivalence, was quick to criticise the strong emphasis on crafts in the Bauhaus. They were quite some characters!

**HJ** If I'm correct, Schlemmer was also in favour of a closer relationship to industry.

**WG** He remained above all a fine artist. László Moholy-Nagy went further in his keenness to embrace industry; he proposed getting rid of painting altogether. You can imagine the reactions.

**LS** And the Albers?

**WG** Josef Albers was an artist of modest reputation when he joined the Bauhaus, but he soon proved himself a dominant pedagogue with pronounced views on art education.

**LS** And Anni Albers? All the names you have mentioned were of men!

**WG** There were plenty of female students at the Bauhaus.

**LS** But women had few real opportunities in the Bauhaus context. That's why practically none of them were appointed as "form masters".

**WG** Excuse me, I didn't come back from the dead to talk about that! I remember the workplaces where the designs were made as though it were yesterday – the tools, the machines, the skills! The Bauhaus had its roots in Arts and Crafts, which hoped to re-establish a connection between fine art and craftsmanship, and which revived the medieval model of masters and apprentices. At first we adopted that model for the Bauhaus too. But it wasn't long before we began trying to come closer to industry, with the intention of making good design accessible to people at large. The designs we prepared and fabricated in the Bauhaus workshops aimed to represent modern life and the architecture needed to support it. The faces I knew in those years come back to me, now that I walk around among the fragments of their oeuvres – the architects, artists, and designers, like me all ghosts from the past.

**HJ** I feel humbled by an archive depot like this, surrounded by the icons of modern design history. It's hard to imagine what our culture would be like without them. What reasons could I have for adding anything else to this fabulous collection? What possible motives can I think of for increasing the already huge abundance of products?

**LS** Misgivings like those seem to be rather widespread at the moment. The critics of our materialistic, consumer-oriented society are all too prone to sceptical comments like "how many chair designs does the world really need?" But is that a criticism that can be levelled at your work, Hella? Most designers occupy themselves with making minor formal improvements, with variations on existing designs. What you do, on the other hand, is to research new materials and new production techniques. Trust me, you add something important to the present-day design culture because you remain aware of the need for research and reflection. And you remain aware of the importance of seeing the bigger picture of design's role in society. In your case these are not just empty words.







HJ But a collection like this also makes me wonder what exactly my own contribution is. I enjoy the technical advances that are so splendidly visible in industrial manufacture and which reach a large audience. I enjoy the way there has been a continual evolution in product design. Look what happened to artefacts when soft plastics were discovered. Look at current developments of biodegradable materials. Innovations seem to follow one another helter-skelter. I'm jealous of those who lived through the early challenges of industrialization. The main thing I can do nowadays is to offer alternatives to the industrial tendency to go mad with efficiency and overproduction.

LS Some of the most recent innovations have taken place in the digital domain.

HJ That's not my area of expertise.

LS Not yet.

HJ I'd like to come back to the remarks you were making about the archive, Mr Gropius. I understand what you mean: there's a kind of vitality missing. The objects here lack a connection with real life. What did the people who made those products feel about them? How much did the design matter to their users?

WG Design is a part of life. That was one of our main credos. We formed a community with higher ideals, where living, working, and learning were closely interwoven. But it was more than that: we believed that the results of our efforts would play a crucial role in people's lives. Admittedly, when you look at an individual product, you can be forgiven for wondering how much part it really did play in everyday life. Few people used the tea pot designed by Marianne Brandt, for example, or her lamp design, which is included in the museum's archive. They were intended to be made serially by industrial methods, but it turned out that most of their components would require intensive hand-crafting.

LS Now I understand why so many Bauhaus designs are to be found in museum collections but not in people's homes.

WG All the same, the components of Brandt's geometrically designed tea and coffee service are all splendid examples of Bauhaus work. It's not a problem in my view if there are no real-life users of a particular teapot. The design has left traces in the profession's collective memory, and has been an inspiration to others. The avant-garde sets the tone; it gives a discipline a direction, even if it isn't widely understood. When I say I feel a lack of vitality or energy when I look around the depot, I'm not concerned about the user in this case but about the workshop, the place where the object first saw the light of day after countless experiments. In the archives, I miss the experimentation, the passion, the revolution that the objects set in train. And the research, especially. At the Bauhaus, we were trying to reinvent design and the last thing we wanted was to rely unthinkingly on a conventional form vocabulary and well-tried working methods.

HJ Design equals research. My practice consists almost entirely of experimenting in the workshop. It's there that ideas come. The best designers are known for their researching attitude. Just look at Konstantin Grcic, Jasper Morrison, Jurgen Bey, Bless, the Bouroullecs, the Campanas, and from the younger generation Bertjan Pot, Christien Meindertsma, Simone Post.

LS Martino Gamper, Dunne & Raby, Joris Laarman, mischer'traxler, Formafantasma.



HJ Indeed. And many others whose works testify of the preliminary research they undertook. At the start of my career, I took a special interest in ceramics and novel materials such as rubber. Later my attention turned to textile and colour. I see colour as a material, and I research it as such.

LS You've often said in interviews that dissatisfaction with products of the coatings industry prompted

you to go into colour research. What do you really mean by that? On the one hand you embrace the industry, while on the other hand you seem to loathe it.

HJ I felt that the industry's colour palette lacked the qualities I recognized from painting. I missed the nuances, the changeability and the multilayeredness that painters like Johannes Vermeer and Barnett Newman have shown us in their colour fields. Paul Cézanne!

LS Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, James Turrell, many more...

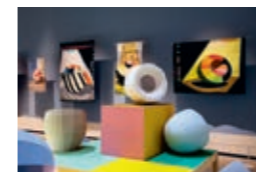
HJ You just don't find those subtleties in industrial recipes.

LS And you blame that on the many tests that the industry subjects its colours to, don't you? What the industry regards as innovation and quality, you see as its greatest weakness.

HJ The testing carried out by contemporary industry is fatal to quality. And I'm convinced it's also inimical to what users really want. I know that the industry has launched countless market research efforts to understand consumer wishes. But how can people express those wishes if they don't know the range of possibilities? The users – and I refer to them as users in preference to consumers – want beautiful colours whose appearance differs with the circumstances. What they don't need is hard guarantees that the colours will never fade.

LS So they have been duped into believing that immutability is a sign of quality?

HJ The goal of the industry is to make a profit, and the method is standardization. That's not the same as pursuing quality. As a designer, you have to persuade industry to develop an eye for certain qualities you've discovered in your research. And why should a company care about developing colours that give the same experience at any time of day? Not even our eyes work that way naturally. Our eyes have an incredibly clever system. The rod cells in the human retina deal with shades of light and dark, while the cones in the same retina allow us to perceive and distinguish colours. The cones don't work as well when twilight falls, with the result that we perceive colours differently; but the rods continue functioning as well as ever. As a result we see greater contrasts of light and shade in low lighting. The rods are particularly sensitive to light of around 500 nanometres wavelength, at the blue end of the spectrum in other words. So we perceive blue colours most clearly in dim light. That's the Purkinje effect, first described by a Czech anatomist of that name around the beginning of the nineteenth century. I don't know of any artist who has deliberately taken advantage of this phenomenon, but it strikes me that many works of art are changeable in appearance and the artists make no effort to suppress this quality – unlike industry, which concentrates on the immutability of colours.



LS You have plenty of predecessors when it comes to research into colour. How would you describe the difference between your outlook on colour and the colour theory that Johannes Itten developed at the Bauhaus, for instance?

HJ Itten wanted to have universally valid results. He sought objectivity, colours that would look the same in any circumstances; and these were actually developed by industry much later. But colours have mutability in their DNA, so to speak.

JOHANNES ITTEN May I join this conversation? I would like to clarify my position. It wasn't a subjective opinion that I happened to hold, but it was based on hard scientific research. I think your approach relies too much on chance and on personal taste. I have every respect for your own excellent research that has brought you insights that would have never occurred to us in those days. We did our best to perform verifiable, repeatable experiments. I don't think your own experiments are capable of being repeated, while still delivering important results. That's why I





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