Design as an Extension of Art Practice / Part 1
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On January 28th 2011, the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, California, in association with the Art Los Angeles Contemporary Art Fair presented a round table discussion with Los Angeles based Architect Peter Zellner, former MOMA curator Christopher Mount, Los Angeles artist Justin Beal. Led by Bay Area conceptual artists Eric Gibbons and Tom Borden of the Muistardeaux Collective. The discussion topic was "Design as an Extension of Art Practice." The event was conceived and organized by Helen Varola, curator/director, Design Loves Art programming at the Pacific Design Center, West Hollywood. Here is what was said:

PART 1: Design and/as Art

Muistardeaux Collective:

We would like to welcome you to the round table "Design as an Extension of Art Practice," a discussion on the relative successes and failures in the cross over or the grey zone, between art and design– the way the two are thought of and executed. Let's first introduce our speakers. Justin?

Justin Beal: My name is Justin Beal and I am a sculptor based in Los Angeles.

Christopher Mount: I'm Christopher Mount. I've been a museum director and curator. I worked at MOMA for fifteen years as a Curator of Architecture and Design, and I was, until recently, the Director of the Pasadena Museum of California Art. I've also been the Editor in Chief of ID Magazine, which no longer exists. I'm basically a design historian.

Muistardeaux Collective: We're the Muistardeaux Collective from San Francisco, California and Peter Zellner, is principal of ZELLNERPLUS , an architectural firm based here in Los Angeles. He's also a faculty member at Southern California Institute of Architecture where he co-coordinates the Future Initiatives program. So we can probably just jump into it but after having the discussion on our earlier conference call, it sounds like it would be interesting to hear you describe your definition of what design encompasses.

Christopher Mount: Well, design is really very simple. I don't know why it becomes such a big deal. Design is really anything you can use, anything that has a function. That's a Marxist way of looking at it, but basically a piece of art is something that doesn't necessarily have a function. That's a definition of fine art. It's pleasing and it's wonderful to look at and so on but you don't tend to use it as a tray, you don't get in it and drive to work like you do a piece of design. That's not to say that design can't be as beautiful as work of art, it's just that you also can use it. There are cross-overs nowadays and there are a lot of people, particularly artists, using design as a jumping off point for something else, for instance making tables that you can't necessarily use. Frank Gehry is a good example of somebody who is on the other side of that approach because he's an architect who makes roofs that look like sculpture.

Justin Beal: It's hard to argue with that definition.

Christopher Mount: Thank you! Finally someone agrees with me! I teach a lot and I have students who argue with me about this issue of what is design and what is art all the time. I have to tell them "no, you don't serve drinks on a Picasso painting. That's not a tray, even if you put drinks on it's still not a tray."

Justin Beal: I think , at least with my own work, where I engage design is in using the expectation of design's functionality in the art context– the way a functional object or an object that has some kind of purpose. Something that has different kind of set of associations or expectations than that of a traditional fine art object

interests me. How you can employ that presence that it has in the direction of art making to change the expectations of an art object is compelling. But it's important to still appreciate a clear distinction between the two realms. What happens when you drag one thing into the other? Or deny the functionality of it by calling a sculpture a chair then it's no longer a…

Christopher Mount: You can't sit on it. I had a friend who had a Robert Wilson chair that was made out of chicken wire and he had a big party and somebody thought they could sit on it, they sat on it and they destroyed it. It looked like a chair but it wasn't meant to be sat on so it wasn't really a chair. Right? I mean it's evocative of a chair but it's not a chair.

Muistardeaux Collective: Right. So where does that leave us in terms of design as an extension of conceptual art practice? What about pre-designed materials used in sculpture?

Justin Beal: What do you mean by pre-designed?

Muistardeaux Collective: Like something from Home Depot that has a function but you're rendering it non-functional by calling it fine art but it's loaded with prescribed content.

Justin Beal: Even more than prescribed content, I think there is some kind of physical relationship there then. If you walk into a room and there is a chair in the middle of the room you have a very different kind of haptic response to that chair than a similarly sized object. So somehow you establish a sort of sense of scale and a sense of physicality with a chair that you might not attribute to a stone or a sculpture in its simplest form. What is interesting to me is how that can contribute to work somehow. You feel differently standing in front of a table than you do standing in front of a sculpture in a traditional sense because we have a whole pre-programmed physical relationship to tables because we deal with them constantly. That to me is interesting. That changes the nature of an object because you understand it as having functionality.

Christopher Mount: It also depends on where you put something, where it is placed, and the context of where something is. I think of somebody like Jeff Koons who put vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas boxes. You know, those are works of art, sort of Post Pop or whatever you want to call them. They're works of art but they are also really just vacuum cleaners. I used to work at MOMA and MOMA was the first museum to place to an automobile on a pedestal and say, "Look at this not as an automobile but look at its lines look at its shape, enjoy it." When I was there I acquired a Jaguar E type, something John Elderfield, Head of the Painting and Sculpture Department at MOMA, said that was the most beautiful thing at the museum. He was absolutely convinced that the XKE was the most beautiful thing at the museum; it still didn't make it a piece of art, but you know, they are beautiful cars.

Muistardeaux Collective: Do you think in a way that goes a step beyond or transcends the question of whether that was intended in the design or not? For example, Walt Disney World is a classic example of grandiose and very elaborate design but also with an inherent element to it that in some ways makes all other art meaningless. The scope of it.

Christopher Mount: A great example is beauty is not always the designer's intention is what you're saying. There are some things like the Stealth Fighter that I would argue are beautiful. Those planes really are amazing objects but they're not designed to be beautiful, they're designed to avoid radar signals. A Formula One race car is one of those things that ends up being kind of beautiful in the way a dolphin is beautiful or a submarine is beautiful because the shapes work with hydrodynamics.

Muistardeaux Collective: Well where would you- in that mindset- put symphonic composition?

Christopher Mount: You mean about beauty?

Muistardeaux Collective: Well in terms of having structural integrity to design? You're following a form even if you are Sun Ra or Frank Zappa you're definitely following the form but you're also stepping beyond pure

function and giving it something that's intangible.

Christopher Mount: Well music is hard. I don't know if music has the same structure. There is a little more variety in what is beautiful or what people enjoy musically. We could all sit down and agree that something, more or less a work of art, is beautiful. If we had a Rothko here, most people would say "Yeah that's beautiful even if they didn't like Abstract Expressionism. A piece of music, Beethoven's, Iron Maiden…that's harder to judge or agree about.

Muistardeaux Collective: Peter, we just jumped right into the question of design as an extension of art practice but also conceptual art practice. The first thing that led us there was the definition of design. What is your definition?

Peter Zellner: I think at this moment design also has something to do with the monetization of the design act. It is important now to separate out the act of design, which is often conceptual or creative or sometimes disciplinary, from the commercialization of design acts. I say this because in the context of the art world it seems to me that design is being marketed as a commodity, an investment grade commodity, which just like art, can be evaluated and collected as something that delivers a return on an investment. This definition of design is very different from how the Bauhaus or the Soviet Avant-Garde conceptualized design as a populist activity. They thought of design for the people, or rather they believed that the design act brought some value to a society. I think that if you look at things like the Milan Furniture Fair you see that really it's a very big business these days and far more about pleasing elites that serving a broader public.

Christopher Mount: Well that's a whole other question. I still think that a piece of something that you use is a piece of design. But the market has become more wide-spread. People are looking to collect more and more things. Watch the Antiques Roadshow, everybody thinks that they have something worth a million dollars. Contemporary art has become so expensive that the next thing for people to look at is contemporary design.

Peter Zellner: Yes, but if you look at something like Shaker furniture you find examples of design objects that are designed within a community or a social setting, that have absolutely nothing to do with marketing. Some of it really just emerged out of a culture that had necessities. Those necessities were addressed through a communal discussion about what a chair was or what a table was or what a mirror stand was. Some of those Shaker objects are really beautiful but they were evolved in a culture that was largely religious and very particular about its practices, not as part of a secular marketing campaign. So, design is also a cultural practice, and I think it can be a social or even political practice.

Muistardeaux Collective: And then it ultimately gets exoticized, and thus the resistance to that kind of crossover.

Peter Zellner: Well, again I think first you have to separate out the idea of design as an activity versus design as the creation of an artifact. The artifact basically is the commodity object but the activity of design itself doesn't have to produce anything.

Muistardeaux Collective: Right.

Christopher Mount: Or it can produce something on a computer screen that is something or isn't something. Certainly, software is design but there isn't really anything there.

Muistardeaux Collective: As far as contemporary artists go, do you see many artists employing design in the fine arts?

Justin Beal: I would argue that it's not even a select group at this point. It's just something that has become taken for granted. Essentially, there was a moment at the beginning of Modernist sculpture when the sculpture came off the pedestal. At that point in the conversation any object was open to being a sculptural object and in the forty years since then there have been different actions taken in directions that conflated the two realms, sculpture and design. There are artists making design objects and marketing them as art- this goes to idea

of monetization that Peter is addressing. The way an object is sold is an important way of understanding how design is essentially a commercial undertaking. How we understand how these objects position themselves in relation to commercialism within the art world is important. For instance, consider how Franz West chairs are bought and sold and used as furniture objects in galleries or how Jean Prouve's is work being brought into the art world as art. All these things were made in series but are being sold in galleries as if they were singular one-off objects. The way this work has been bought and sold informs this discussion more so than the way those artists are addressing design or art.

Peter Zellner: Roy McMakin is a great artist who basically makes furniture as art that also passes as furniture. It's very good well-crafted functional furniture that also seems to be situated within an art practice.

Christopher Mount: You could also spend hours talking about craft. That's something in between.

Muistardeaux Collective: So you consider that to be a different beast altogether or somehow…

Christopher Mount: A vase is not a vase. There are plenty of craft vases. What is it Littleton? Littleton makes great vases but you can't get a flower in them. It's a piece of glass. Tom Patti sells his glass pieces for seventy to eighty thousand dollars. They're gorgeous. He blows them using a window glass that's kind of green. But, you wouldn't put a flower in a tiny eighty thousand dollar vase. Another example is Shepard Fairey. I think he is totally uninteresting as a graphic designer, totally mediocre. Yet he has a career in something in between, but no one is really willing to admit that he is just a mediocre graphic designer. I don't know what he is really. He's a poster artist but he's I don't know what he is.

Muistardeaux Collective: He's persistent.

Peter Zellner: I think there are a lot of individuals who pass or who cross and move from one discipline into another and somehow avoid the usual scrutiny. I could name a number of artists who make architecture that is deplorable. If I were to submit that architecture to a community if architects, it would not do so well. But in the context of the art world it passes. I could also suggest that there are a number of architects who make art that's also not so great, seen from the art world prespective. You know, Frank Gehry makes jewelry, but do I know if is it good jewelry? I really don't know but because of his aura and reputation I would say I like it. The reputation of the designer precedes the work. And if the reputation is good you are predisposed to like the work. So the jewelry he did for Tiffany has the aura of Frank Gehry all over it and so you don't look at it with the same lens that you might look at more generic jewelry design. This is the issue, when you start crossing over you start changing the lenses you use to view art or design. It is actually very interesting because suddenly you look at something and you realize that it has multiple readings.

Muistardeaux Collective: So would you say the same thing about John Waters and his paintings?

Peter Zellner: I don't actually know them.

Christopher Mount: Neither do I.

Muistardeaux Collective: Well, you can just imagine a John Waters painting.

Peter Zellner: I would imagine it would be cute.

Muistardeaux Collective: And his reputation would precede him?

Peter Zellner: Yes, for sure.

Muistardeaux Collective: And the idea that maybe design happens to be a pretty big part of the fact that anything crossing over into art starts to land on uncertain ground. Why is that?

Peter Zellner: A lot of artists have successfully transitioned to making films. Who made The Diving Bell and the Butterfly?

Muistardeaux Collective: Julian Schnabel.

Peter Zellner: That was a great film. So Schnabel passes as a really good filmmaker. I also think that some architects, for instance Tony Smith, make better artists. Smith was not a very good architect but he found his voice as a sculptor. Ironically I find his sculpture very inspiring architecturally.

Muistardeaux Collective: I think that's a good place to investigate. So why don't we talk about people that you get excited when you think about this question because they make you see it in a different way?

Christopher Mount: This is off the point but it's important for me because I just wrote a book on this Ted Norioka . He is a Japanese artist but he was really a poster designer. Norioka was most prevalent in the 60's, 70's and 80's. He was friends with Yoko Ono, friends with the Beatle- a major figure in Japan, a major cultural figure. What he created were posters, but they were not advertisements. They are things that sell in galleries. They are brilliant- he is like Murakami before Murakami.

Muistardeaux Collective: Right.

Peter Zellner: I like Andrea Zittel's work a lot. If I were to submit her work to the standards by which I would judge furniture design by a furniture designer, maybe it would not hit home for me. However, if I look at it within the context of her practice as an artist, and again I have to shift my perspective, then I can appreciate it. Then I think it is remarkable. So, one of the standards by which designers and architects judge things usually has something to do with the degree of virtuosity or accomplishment associated with the, let's say, eloquence of the object. Is it a beautiful chair? Is it well finished? Is it a well-made building? I think designers and architects have fairly conservative standards, I certainly do, about what a refined or eloquent object or space actually is. In general, if you make uncomfortably unresolved work like Frank Gehry did in the 70's, you get attacked and it is controversial. Gehry crossed the line into art with his architecture but then the artists yelled at him and said "Get back into your camp, you're an architect!" That was the whole Richard Serra-Frank Gehry dispute. That said, if I look at design by artists, or architecture by artists, I am usually comfortable allowing my standards to slip. Standards, that's a judgmental word right there, that's a pejorative. I will admit that I'm rather inspired by Gaetano Pesce. He was prominent in the 70's less well known in the States now. He made really sloppy work but it was really exciting. You look at that work now, especially in the context of some of the things that Frank Gehry or Greg Lynn are pursuing, then Pecse seems way ahead of the curve. This is largely because he was an artist who came at things like making chairs without any of the hang ups that professional designers, industrial designers, or architects would struggle with to get that sloppy. So that sort of freedom, I guess, is a part of art that is harder to capture in design or architecture.

Justin Beal: Pesce is a particularly good example in every way because his practice was designed to undermine fundamental things you take for granted in design; like creating serial editions of objects that are each unique. He's constantly trying to undermine the confines of design. Pesce will make a series of one hundred vases but each on will be different because they are extruded plastic denying the serialized production that you associate with design.

Peter Zellner: If you look at something like Roxy Paine's work, those SCUMAK drippy things, or Greg Lynn's more recent investigations and then you look at Pesce's work as a designer in the 70's you'll find very interesting alignments formally. I enjoy making those sorts of connections across disciplines.

Christopher Mount: I wouldn't want to live with Pesce's work. I could have one chair to look at but you wouldn't want to sit in it. I have furniture at home and my wife is always saying, "Why do we have that chair?" And I just say that I just like to look at it. When I was at MOMA, many years ago, we had this Braun toaster by Reinhold Weiss and it was just beautiful, just all steel. A lady wrote a letter to Arthur Drexler, the Director of the Architecture and Design Department and it said: "Dear Mr. Drexler, I saw that toaster, I loved it, I bought it, but

it burns my toast!!!! Every damn time it burns my toast! What should I do???" And he wrote her back and said: "Dear Madam, I suggest you take the toaster, put it in the living room and look at it. Buy yourself a GE to make your toast!"

Peter Zellner: That's a funny story. There are a lot of design objects that actually fail from a functional perspective. I have a Frank Gehry Superlight chair that is part of an edition. Mine is number 96 of 500. He did a very special chair for Emeco which is the aluminum chair company that made those really remarkable and very lightweight chairs for the Navy and now the very fashionable, Phillipe Starck versions of the same chair. Anyway, Gehry did his own aluminum chair and if you were to describe it is the most delicate idea of a chair you could imagine. It is literally just a sheet of aluminum that bends up and over and is folded at the corners. Then it is supported by two very slender bent U-shaped rods, just two, and those have a sleeve on them and the sleeve is actually glued to the interior fold of the aluminum sheet. I tried to sit in it and it broke. Now, I glued it back but I don't sit in it, I just like to look at it.

Muistardeaux Collective: It is sold as a chair?

Peter Zellner: It is sold as a Frank Gehry edition of 500 chair. Like a print. It is Frank Gehry's idea of what you can do to a chair to reduce its presence almost to nothing.

Christopher Mount: It's about minimalism. It's about the idea of a chair as opposed to an actual chair you can use.

Peter Zellner: It's a beautiful chair.

Muistardeaux Collective: You were pretty bummed that you sat in it.

Peter Zellner: Yeah, I felt like I just ruined my investment. I mean, it can be fixed but I think if you look at a lot of Gehry's furniture, there is a lot that is non-functional basically.

Muistardeaux Collective: Do you think that when you then take a step into architecture you can get away with a lot less?

Peter Zellner: No not really. Usually that's how you can get sued.

Muistardeaux Collective: Right!

Peter Zellner: Do you know Peter Eisenman? He's getting to be a senior figure in the American architectural community but he's still something of notorious bad boy genius. He designed the Wexner Center in Ohio back the 1980s. This was in the midst of his Deconstructivist phase and he basically rendered nonfunctional a lot of the art spaces in the museum. He did this by doing things like hanging incomplete columns in the middle of an art space. Eisenman called them columns. Rafael Moneo called them prisms because Moneo argued that a column must touch the ground to be a column. I think for Eisenman, however, the Wexner's hanging columns are more like ideological columns, maybe functionless columns or anti-design columns. As far as I know most curators hate working in that institution, and they hate the building but maybe that's a good thing.

Muistardeaux Collective: He took architecture to an emotional art form.

Peter Zellner: Absolutely, but he also said "fuck the program, why do I have to make a white box, that in itself is a prison for the artist, why can't I make something the artist has to fight with?" Now, the artists get up in arms because they don't like architects making spaces that conflict with, frankly, general commercial art hanging practices for lack of a better word, but at least the politics of design are on the table at the Wexner. That is my opinion is very laudable.

Christopher Mount: A house can be less functional. If he had done that in a house…

Peter Zellner: He did do it in a house.

Christopher Mount: Right. Then that's kind of OK, because you're living there.

Peter Zellner: He split a house and he basically put a hole in the bedroom, in the floor that was supposed to symbolize the unity between husband and wife.

Muistardeaux Collective: That's what you want in a house.

Peter Zellner: Maybe that is very functional, how it keeps the partners apart but together. Maybe that's better than a real divorce.

Muistardeaux Collective: And Eisenman is getting very good commissions…

Peter Zellner: Not really…I think that because of his tendencies he is far less commercially successful than some other less interesting architects. . Did you, by the way, know that his cousin is Richard Meier? If you look at their work it's actually very similar in some formal ways. They both sort of started with Corb but ended up very different. Like Hejduk, Graves and Gwathmey they were both part of the New York Five. The Five were called the Whites and they fought with the Greys (Giurgola, Greenberg, Moore, Robertson, and Stern) about basically high art architectural design purity vs. design populism and accessible design aesthetics. Anyway, returning to Meier and Eisenman, one of them basically pursued a viable commercial practice, but one that's also well regarded culturally. That's Meier. If you go to the Getty it's a beautiful thing and people basically like it. The other pursued a highly theoretical and philosophical architecture and largely has suffered commercially. If you go to the Wexner most people don't "get it." It's abstract and confrontational at the same time. Some hate Eisenman's work because it's not digestible but I would venture that in hundred years Eisenman will be the cousin we'll be talking about the most because his designs raise questions.