THE RULES OF UNRULY PRODUCT DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a research into the history of unruly design, which aims at finding theoretical background for the design of everyday things in a postmodern society. Unruly design is defined in this research as: all objects that are designed with the intention to undermine the existing design-paradigm of the functionalists. The paper will present the research background, research approach, and findings in the form of the first five design practices that have been identified as a set of ‘rules of unruly design’. These five rules of practice can be considered a toolkit for the contemporary designer to make meaningful objects.

Keywords: Unruly Design; Design History, Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Somewhere at the end of the 20th century, the focus of product design has shifted from primarily offering functionality, towards experience and emotion driven product characteristics. According to the theory of product phases, the design of mature product types will end in a phase characterized by extended segmentation, individualization or awareness (Eger 2007). In these states the affective, emotional, and abstract product values become important. For illustration, a recent advertisement for a Motorola cell-phone has literally nothing to do with making phone-calls anymore (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. D’Adda, Lorenzini, Vigorelli, BDDO (Milan) - “New MOTOKRZR K1 - Krazy Reflective” - advertisement campaign for Motorola [2006]; the image sells a fashion statement instead of a product with functionality.](image-url)

Within this development, the utility factor (Heskett 2002) of products becomes less important, in favour of their significance. For example, Lloyd & Snelders (2001), argue effectively that the (in)famous Juicy Salif was a relatively huge market success, due to its ability to associate its’ shape with a rocket (Figure 2). Such in spite of its rather limited functionality as a juicer.
Figure 2. The resemblance of Philippe Starck’s “Juicy Salif” for Alessi [1988] with the common cultural image of a rocket, by Hergé [1953].

At the same time, in the so-called postmodern society (Jameson 1991), the image of the product becomes more important than the product itself (Baudrillard 1994) as the cellular phone in figure 1 already demonstrated: making phone-calls has nothing to do with fashion, but in spite of this, the device is presented as part of haute-couture.

All together it has become clear that the functionalist idea of form follows function cannot play its central role in the development of aesthetics anymore, especially in combination with the increased importance of ‘visually anonymous’ electronics and information technology (Bürdek 1996; Drukker 2009) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. “Generic Keypad” by Naylor and Ball (2005). The product does not tell what it is. The iPhone has in fact taken this idea into reality by sharing its appearance exactly with the iPod.

When we can no longer infer the design of the product from its instrumental function, the contemporary designer has to look for other practices for the materialization of his or her ideas. The research into unruly design aims at identifying and explaining such practices. This paper will present the research background, context and approach. It will also present findings in the form of five practices that have been identified as a set of ‘rules of unruly design’.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The paper is part of a research into the history of unruly design, which aims at finding theoretical background for the design of everyday things in a postmodern society. Unruly design is defined in this research as: all objects that are designed with the intention to undermine the existing design-paradigm of the functionalists.

This intention to undermine the functionalist design paradigm is sometimes explicit, but also implicitly visible. In a series of designs, called “redesigning the modern movement”, Italian postmodernist Alessandro Mendini tweaked several modernist design icons very explicitly as a commentary on the underlying form-ideal (Figure 4).

Figure 4. “Redesigning the modern movement” by Alessandro Mendini [1978]: The addition to the classic “Zig-Zag” chair by Rietveld transforms it into a symbol of a design-ideal that is as dogmatic as a religion. The cross even can refer to church-benches, which are explicitly designed to sit uncomfortably, thus challenging the lack of comfort in the modernistic ideal further.

A more implicit example is the Rover bench by 80’s punk-designer Ron Arad (Figure 6). It has a lot of characteristics in common with the modernist design icon LC2 by LeCorbusier: it is a two-seater bench with thick upholstered black leather on an iron-tube frame (Figure 5). Despite this, its’ shape and associated meaning is entirely different, therefore effectively demonstrating the limitations of the modernist ideal of a unity of form and function.
After the eventual decline of modernism in design in the 1980’s the motto for unruly designing became “anything goes” (after Paul Feyerabend (1975): ‘the only principle which does not inhibit progress is anything goes’). This nihilistic motto did however, not provide much guidance for design practice. Common research about design history on this subject is therefore mostly limited to the role of design meaning. Through combining the theory of social semiotics, by Hodge & Kress (1988) and The transfiguration of the commonplace by Danto (1981), a frame of reference about the role of design meaning was made in order to compare the unruly designs over several decades. In this frame of reference the meaning of an object is formed through the associations that the object is eliciting in the context where it is evaluated by the viewer.

The viewer is than dependent on its’ own cultural background (or cultural capital) to interpret these associations. The Andries candle-holder by Dutch designer Marcel Wanders for example, can be seen as a clever design with a rim to catch dripping wax and a solid base to prevent tipping over (Figure 6). But to most viewers it will, in the first place, be seen as a wine-glass, up-side-down. Viewers with the appropriate cultural background (Dutch design history) will also recognize the name of the design as the surname of the designer of the particular shape of this wine-glass: Andries Copier.

From this perspective, the designs of George Nakashima, Andrea Branzi and Jurgen Bey in Figure 8 are all sharing the same idea: they make a comment on the relation between man-made cultural expressions and nature, with a combination of raw, found wood and smoothly tooled wood.
DIVERSITY AND UNITY

PERSPECTIVE
From this comparison the analysis was shifted to a design method perspective, and then it showed that there is just a limited set of design principles that stands at the base of somewhat all of this unruly design (Eggink 2010). This research thus presents a particular part of design history as a means of how to implement postmodern meaning into designs. This is illustrated by the product communication model of Crilly et al. (2004), where the design of a product acts as a transmitter for the designers intent at the one side, steering the consumer’s response on the other (Figure 9). The deconstruction of unruly design in this research then concentrates on the input side of the model, supporting ways to materialize the designers’ design intent.

BRIEF HISTORY OF UNRULY DESIGN
The most well-known groups in the identified unruly design history were Alchimya and Memphis from Italy (Radice 1984; Sato 1988; Hofstede et al. 1989). In Germany the ‘anti-modernist’ movement was called ‘Neue Design’, which showed resemblance with the English Punk (Huygen 1989; Erlhoff et al. 1990; Hauffe 1994). In the 90’s, the Alessi firm and Philippe Starck played a major role in developing the postmodernist design approach further and spreading the ideas on the market. Then, new recalcitrant designers altered their strategy. Renny Ramakers wrote: “The 1980’s have now produced a new generation of designers. Influenced by developments in architecture and by the Italian design groups Memphis and Alchimia, they are positioning themselves as artists more than ever before. Expressive qualities are for them the essence of design as well. But they are not production-oriented. The end product is simply the implementation of an idea.” (Staal et al. 1987) [p224]. The Netherlands played an important role in this so-called ‘conceptual design’ with the Droog label (Ramakers et al. 2006), making the author-driven design approach (Eggink 2009) of designers like Marcel Wanders and Tejo Remy world-famous (Teunissen and Zijl 2000; Antonelli et al. 2003).

In the end, the postmodernist perspective on product design, characterizing products by their meaning instead of their functionality, was already explored by the Surrealists, who wanted their dream world...
objects to serve as an alternative for the machine-like world view of the modernists (Figure 11) (Fanés et al. 2005; Wilk et al. 2006).

Figure 11. Salvador Dalí and Edward James, “Mae West Lips sofa” [1938]. A sensual form of anthropomorphism that was strictly forbidden in modernist design (Drukker 2007).

RULES

Placed in cultural context this historical survey has lead to a ‘history of unruly design ideas’ that formed the basis for identifying five common unruly design practices, bringing unity in this diverse field. Despite their unruliness, from a design method perspective, most of the researched designs are very alike (Figure 12). Although the designs look very different, on a higher level of abstraction, the idea that they incorporate is the same: through a combination of things that do not match, meaning is attached to the objects. A comparison of over 600 objects from the identified design periods resulted in five evenly divided groups of designs with a shared design approach.

The five resulting common design ‘rules’ are fairly simple: combine different interest domains; use inspiration from popular culture; incorporate form-complexity; make use of ready-mades, and; make use of uncommon material.

COMBINING DIFFERENT INTEREST DOMAINS

This rule means that two sources of inspiration are used to tell something about the object. As already shown in figure 9, Hans Hollein combined “tableware” with “warcraft” to tell something about the ritual of drinking tea, when he designed a tebservice in the shape of an aircraft carrier. Another example is the combination of “luxury” and “farm-side” in the Brouette seating-object by Oscar Dominguez of figure 12. In the same way the Tawaraya bed design by Masonori Umeda (Figure 13) combined interior design with the sports-domain to make a comment on the significance of the domestic appliance. The transformed boxing ring provides a cozy shielded space for sleeping, but on the other side emphasizes the idea of marital problems through the association with fighting.

Figure 13. Postmodernist designer Masonori Umeda combined “sports” and “interior design” in his “Tawaraya” bed [1981] for the Memphis collection.
USE INSPIRATION FROM POPULAR CULTURE
This is also a common denominator in unruly design, which is largely influenced by the publication of Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-brown and Steven Izenour in 1972 (Venturi et al. 1977). Their plea for the incorporation of images from popular culture, in order to communicate with the crowd was made salonfähig by the Italian postmodernists in the early ‘80s. After that it inspired a lot of designers to use icons of popular culture and even objects from the designers’ own personal interest (Figure 14).

INCORPORATE FORM-COMPLEXITY
This rule is mostly a reaction on the reticent, geometrical form-language of the modernists (Figure 15 and 16).

When executed well, the complexity also adds up to the internal functionality of the object, like with the Heatwave radiator by Joris Laarman (Figure 17).

Figure 14. Inspiration from popular culture: the “Mae-west lips sofa” of figure 11 was inspired by Salvador Dalís painting of “Mae West’s face that can be used as a Surrealist room” [1934-35] that was, as it says, based on the popular and sensual film-diva. The “Garriris” chair [1988] refers to the background of designer Javier Mariscal as a comic-strip author, and the “Ginza” cupboard [1982] by Japanese designer Masonori Umeda is inspired by Japan Tin Toy Robot culture of the ‘60s. The futuristic device on the right is Peter van der Jagt’s interpretation of a DIY battery drill [1993].

Figure 15. The “Dream of Venus” pavilion by Salvador Dalí at the 1939 World fair in New York. It was a rather extravagant design at the exhibition, which was dominated by streamlined modernism: ‘Only the violence and duration of your hardened dream, [would be able] to resist the hideous mechanical civilization.’ (Dalí 1939, cited.in: Fanés et al. 2005: p.185).

Figure 16. Design drawings for hifi consumer electronics [1980] by Michele De Lucchi. This cheery (and “unnecessary”) form-complexity became exemplary for the postmodernist designs of the ‘80s.

Figure 17. “Heatwave” radiator [2003] by Joris Laarman.
These complex shapes that refer to art-nouveau like Parisian balconies, provide a large surface area for efficient heat-exchange in a natural way. Denise Gonzales Crisp has rendered this combination of decorative shapes and functionality “Decorational” (Gonzales_Crisp 2009).

**MAKE USE OF READY-MADES**

This has also its origins in art. Marcel Duchamp was the first to present found objects in the art gallery as important artworks and he inspired the surrealist movement to incorporate existing parts in their designs (Figure 18) (Wood and Duits 2007). Later this evolved into a sort of collage-making (Figure 19).

Like with the form-complexity rule, the most interesting objects are conceived when the use of ready-made material adds up to the functionality of the product: the Wagenheberregal by Wolfgang Laubersheimer for example, are continuously adjustable bookshelves! (Figure 22).
The conceptual designers of the ‘90s were also good at this (Figures 8 and 10), and Peter van der Jagt made a doorbell that is transparent in its function, in particular by the use of the ready-made parts (Figure 23). It is common knowledge that crystal glasses make sound when you hit them and it is also evident that the two sizes of the glasses will lead to two different tones (“ding-dong”). Culturally the glasses are also clever because ticking a glass at a banquet is a way of getting attention from the guests, and getting attention is also the function of a doorbell.

Figure 23. The use of ready-mades in a doorbell by Peter van der Jagt called “Bottoms up” [1993].

MAKE USE OF UNCOMMON MATERIAL
The fifth rule is the most straight-forward. When one can identify a material that is mostly used for a particular product or function, one can come up with an opposite and try to overcome the practical consequences. Conceptual designer Dick van Hoff, for example, made a washbasin from felt, because normally these things are made of solid porcelain. The problem of the water-resistance was solved by impregnating the object with resin (Figure 24).

Figure 24. “Washbasin” by Dick van Hoff, from the 1996 collection of Droog Design.

The use of uncommon material mostly leads to commentary on the product category itself. Ron Arad made his Concrete Stereo in 1985 as a plea against the common black box designs of consumer electronics in that period (and still today!) (McDermott 1987) (Figure 25).

Figure 25. “Concrete Stereo” [1985] by Ron Arad.

The German Neue Design often used cheap materials as a commentary on the consumer society as a whole, and Des-in introduced uncommon material as a form of recycling (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Des-in (Jochen Gros) “Tire sofa” [1974] introduced the idea of recycling material (Bürdek 1996).
The conceptual designers of the ‘90s used the materials to give their designs more character. Like Piet Hein Eek, who started to use second-hand wood in his robust furniture designs and came to the conclusion: less refinement leads to more emotion and attractiveness (Fraser et al. 2007) (Figure 27).

Figure 27. “Scrap wood cupboards” [1990] by Piet Hein Eek.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

In all cases of the five rules, the definition of the functionality of a product is extended with emotional, cultural or personal aspects, sometimes at the cost of usability. Philippe Starck already stated, when he was confronted with critique on his Juicy Salif (Figure 2), that he did not design a malfunctioning juicer, but a “conversation piece” (Norman 2004). Memphis leader Ettore Sottsass called his inefficient Carlton bookcase a “room divider” (Figure 28). The doorbell by Peter van der Jagt is difficult to install on the ceiling and will collect dust accordingly (Figure 21). But the recognizability and self-explanation of the glasses will remain valuable. One can conclude that an intrinsic function of the unruly designs is to communicate a meaning. The primary function of “making juice” and “storing books” is sacrificed for the ability to communicate an idea. The utility of the objects is minimized in favour of their significance.

Secondly and more important, all the practices are based on some sort of association with the context of the products, defining the meaning of the object from the cultural background of the user, as explained in the paragraph about the research background. In coherence with the theory of mediation (Verbeek 2006), ultimately, the context and the product together define what the meaning of the product’s aesthetics will be. The appearance of the Carlton room divider forces upon us the association with a native American totem pole. But this is only true when the cultural capital of the viewer allows this association. In other words; when the viewer is familiar with this source of inspiration. Secondly the context of the object determines the unruliness of the design: it stands out from the archetype of the cupboard because the source of inspiration is not familiar to the viewer as a usable piece of furniture.

Figure 28. “Carlton” by Ettore Sottsass, from the first Memphis collection in 1981.

At the same time one can say that the essence of an object is formed by its context and use: the wineglasses that are used in the doorbell by Peter van der Jagt are not glasses anymore; they become “bells”. The glasses only remain glasses when they are used to drink wine. To paraphrase the famous picture of a pipe by the surrealist painter René Magritte: “Ceci n’est pas un pipe”; this is not a tobacco-pipe it is a mouth-candle-stick (Figure 29).
CONCLUSION

The conclusion in this research has two sides; a cynical one and a positive one. The cynical conclusion can be that the postmodernist experiment in itself has failed; although the idea was “anything goes (as long as it is not modernist)” it showed that postmodern design largely followed shared paths. So in the end unruly design followed its’ own rules.

The positive conclusion however is that the identification of the five rules of unruly design can support designers to understand the implementation of meaning into demand driven design practice, and therefore extends the possibilities for making meaningful objects. One can consider the five rules as a toolkit for designing meaningful objects in a postmodern society.

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