# The Applied Art of Art

**Is it necessary to have knowlege of design criteria and contexts in order to understand and interpret today's visual art? At the Documenta in Kassel and the Biennale of Venice it becomes clear that it is harder then ever to discern between autonomous and applied art.**



Toril Goksøyr and Camilla Martens, 'It would be nice to do something political', 2007. photo (montage): Max Bruinsma

A giant billboard fills the complete side façade of the low Scandinavian pavilion at the Giardini, the main location of this year's art biennale in Venice. Two pretty women seem to be in a conversation: "It would be nice to do something important", says one. "Something political?" the other suggests. They don't look at each other, but at us. They look sensual, seductive, distanced, just like pretty women always do on commercial billboards, designed to catch they eye of distracted urban passers-by. But there's no pay-off, no brand name, logo or slogan that invites us to buy something. And there's another odd thing. In front of the shining billboard sits a black man with a cap and empty eyes. An immigrant worker like so many in our rich part of the world. Next to his plastic stool is a bucket and wiper. From time to time he stands up and polishes the glass surface to an even more meticulous lustre. He embodies a sharp contrast with the luxurious looking ladies. Is it important what he does? Is it political? Does he have a choice? The work, by Norwegian artists Toril Goksøyr and Camilla Martens, *is* of course political, consisting of both the billboard and the black worker (one of a group of immigrants that will 'perform' this role continually during the biennale).

Interestingly, the work uses the iconography and means of commercial communication design. The slick photography, the perfect lighting, the dispassionate looks, all is vintage fashion photography, with matching neutral typography in tight text balloons. It is not the only work in the two major art exhibitions of this year – Venice Biennale and Documenta 12 Kassel – that uses not only the media, but the visual languages and public address of design. There is a kind of immediacy in this work, that is the hallmark of design – and at odds with the standards of autonomous art.

It is not a recent development, but the tendency becomes ever more clear: autonomous art which could be taken for 'design' were it not presented in a recognizable art context. In the art exhibitions in Venice and Kassel we see furniture and interior designs, product and lighting designs and architecture, but the most 'quoted' design context is that of graphic and communication design. A work such as Sophie Calle's, in the French pavilion in Venice, is actually a book laid out on the walls of the rooms, with a classic balance between photos, texts in various typographies and captions. One could argue that in this case it's not entirely fair to speak of a 'designed' artwork, since the aesthetic composition principles of art, exhibition design and book typography are related. But what if typography is a central element of the work's content? Take the installation by Russian artist Dimitri Gutov. In Venice, in the central exhibition in the Italian pavilion, a number of his paintings – oil on canvas – echo the typography of the Marxist inspired avant-gardes in revolutionary Russia. They could be activist's posters, or *agit-prop* as it was called in those days.
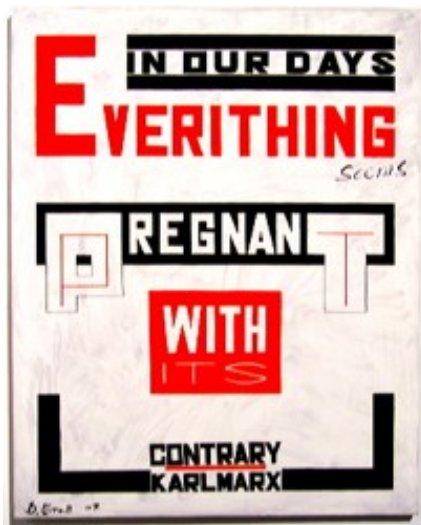


Dimitri Gutov, from 'The Karl Marx school of the English language', 20 paintings, oil on canvas, 2007

The texts suggest a slightly more complex relationship between content and form. In this form, the typography of Karl Marx's quote that "in our days, everything seems pregnant with its contrary" could have been drawn by a clumsy pupil of Rodschenko, but Gutov's version – and the art context! – immediately also provoke thoughts about the current *condition humaine*, in which nothing is certain. Witch is, of course, a blatant contrast with the old Marxist thinking, which *did* know everything for sure. Here art, this imaginative form of thinking about the world as it is and as it seems, and design, the cultural expression of

concrete functions, merge seamlessly. Similarly, in works by for instance Marine Hugonnier and Christine Hill – both in the Arsenale –, typography, graphic design and art come together.



Christine Hill, 'Minutes', installatie, 2007. Photo: Max Bruinsma

Hill's installation consists of large trunks filled with ordinary things – frumpy clothes, books, toiletry and office stuff –, and on the wall four posters in characteristic butchers' typography. One of them quotes the French painter Amédée Ozenfant, who states that art makes the ordinary extraordinary. The typography illustrates this, but also suggests the contrary: that the extraordinary is rather ordinary as well. Outside the context of butchers' adverts ('Today Fresh Tripe!') this kind of vernacular typography is almost always used in an ironic vein, and this work is no exception. It is a game with the cultural connotations of certain graphic and typographic conventions, which designers are also very familiar with.

Marine Hugonnier, 'Art of Modern Architecture (Homage to Ellsworth Kelly)', 2005 (detail)

Rather more complex is Marine Hugonnier's work. She pasted cuts from Ellsworth Kelly's book 'Line Form Color' on the front pages of an Arab newspaper. By alienating colourfield painter Kelly's abstract play of lines, forms and colours to the functionally abstract grid that is a newspaper page, Hugonnier mixes two visual systems, that of art and design. In graphic design, the grid is applied to forge a functional order and hierarchy between headlines, columns, boxes and photos. Line and colour strengthen this order. For the artist, what counts is geometrical balance, stable composition and visual tension. Which prevails in this work? In spite of the title, the essence lies in Hugonnier's choice of colours, those of the Palestinian flag. With this, she introduces a symbolic element, which connects well to the context of the newspaper – the headline reads: "Arafat returns to Palestine for his last voyage .. today." But this visual connection is completely at odds with that of the artist Kelly, who has always been resolute in removing any symbolism from art. By making two rhetoric systems collide, a new message appears, even if it's an ambiguous one. That, ambiguity, is of course a hallmark of art, but here it is essentially established by means shared by art and graphic design alike.

What concerns me here is not so much to show that contemporary art is actually a sub-category of design – which is, by the way, what I think –, but to point out that a knowledge of design criteria and contexts is often indispensable to understand and interpret art today. If only to see that both artists and designers make cultural statements, and often use the same methods, media and formal languages to do so. Of course, even if a work like Hito Steyerl's 'Red Alert'

consists entirely of industrial design (three Apple cinema displays), it clearly is thought from the vantage point of art. The work, in Kassel, is a contemporary answer to minimalist artists like Ellsworth Kelly, made in contemporary media. Still, it is interesting to realize that on these screens something entirely different can be shown as well, like three holiday snapshots, or three family portraits. Exactly this use of the hardware is *le dernier cri* in products designed for firms like Philips. You can picture them easily, in a fashionably designed interior.
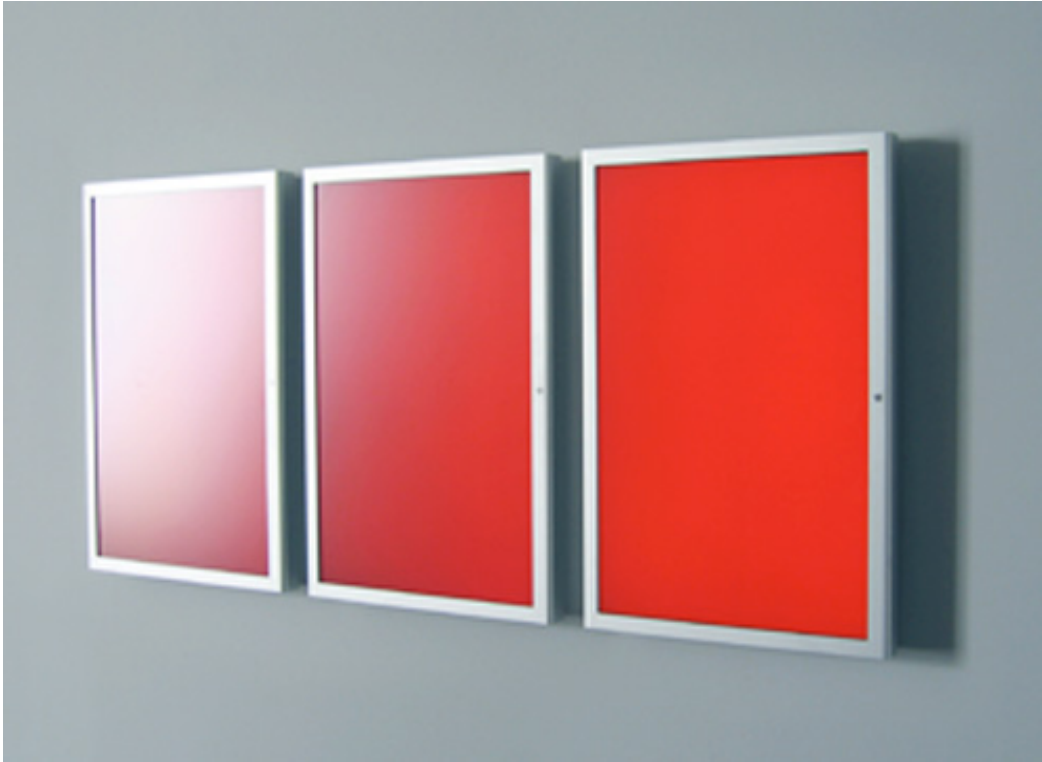


Hito Steyerl, 'Red Alert', 2007

The fact that Steyerl refrained from making neutral frames around his monitor colour fields, but left them recognizable as Apple monitors, invites this association. The forms, materials and media of art and design are merging. What remains of the difference between the two – art and application – is the reason why it's made and the context in which it is presented. That was different in the old days, when 'art' was directly connected to the object. A painting on canvas, made according to certain rules concerning composition, content and execution, was art. A painting on a wall in the street was applied.

Waltércio Caldas, 2007. Photo: Max Bruinsma

But what to think of the ethereal sculpture by Waltércio Caldas in the Italian pavilion in Venice? The glass, the stainless steel tubes, the strict formal arrangement, contrasted by the 'natural' stone – it is a combination of materials, forms and applications, which one encounters with great regularity in the pages of fashionable interior design magazines. The black square, of course, is an echo of Malevich's famous eponymous artwork – the ultimate painting, a *nec plus ultra* of art. One could argue about who was first with this constructive aesthetics, the artists or the designers, but it seems incontestable to me that this aesthetics meanwhile has no concern anymore for the boundaries between disciplines.
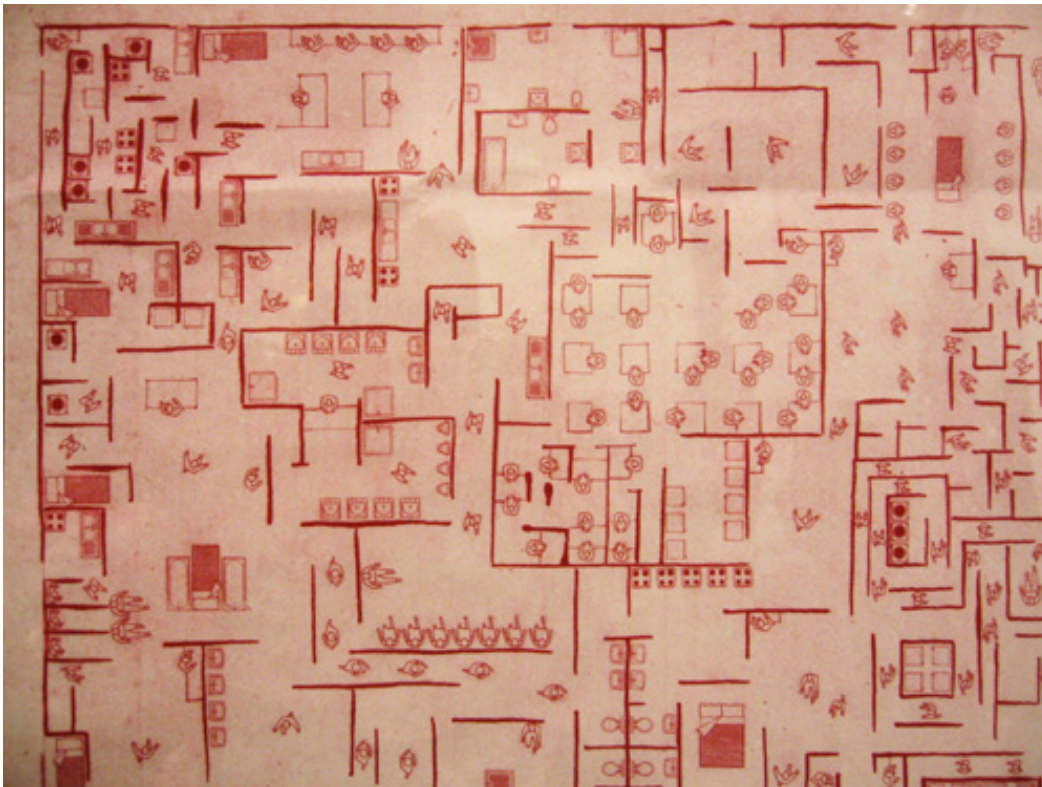


Léon Ferrari, 'Projetto', heliography 1982 (detail)

The figures and silhouettes of objects which Léon Ferrari uses (on show both in Venice and Kassel), are the same as the ones architects use form Mecanorma sheets to detail their plans with tables, bath tubs and people. The forms are used for a different purpose by the artist, but the means are the same as those of the designers, including the blueprint technique, so typical for architecture.

The time you could see whether an object was art or design by judging it's material properties is long gone. More and more artists and designers borrow from each other. And more and more, this is a unilateral process. Of course there are graphic designers who, as an ironic artistic gesture, render statistics as geometric paintings, or who make use of the associative ambiguity and layeredness so characteristic of art, but much more frequently artists take over the techniques and formal languages of their applied colleagues. A comic strip can be a graphic design or illustration, but also visual art. A poster can advertise a product or event, but also be an artwork. Of course, the formal languages which all of these expressions use are originally influenced by art, but in today's mass media of design, advertising, television and the internet, they have grown into a vast network of media and signs, which envelops both art and design. Even more, they have become a vast encyclopaedia of significations from which both artists and designers freely draw.

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