

Furniture and Function. Donald Judd vs Muller Van Severen about designing furniture

Abstract

In the extensive meaning of furniture design, functionality has been taken as a feature to define what belongs to that realm and what belongs, for example, to art. A long path, however, has been crossed since the modernist statement that *form follows function*. Nowadays, if it is still considered that a piece of furniture has to function, furniture design is not explained only by its functionality. The aim of this text is, then, to expand the discussion from arguments based upon the voice of three contemporary artists that designed furniture and art: Donald Judd (1928-1994), Fien Muller (°1978) and Hannes Van Severen (°1979) who founded the studio Muller Van Severen. If Donald Judd states that function defines furniture design, but argues about some similarities about the creative process, Muller Van Severen, who have aesthetical resemblances with Judd, look at furniture from a more holistic view, stressing its role in the construction of spaces and in the blurring of design and art borders.

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Muebles y Funciones. Donald Judd vs Muller Van Severen acerca del diseño de muebles

Resumen

En el amplio sentido del diseño de muebles, la funcionalidad ha sido tomada como una característica que define lo que pertenece a su área y qué pertenece, por ejemplo, al arte. Sin embargo, un largo camino se ha andado desde la declaración moderna de la *forma sigue la función*. Hoy en día, todavía se considera que un mueble tiene que funcionar, el diseño de muebles no se explica solo por su funcionalidad. El objetivo de este texto es, entonces, ampliar la discusión de argumentos basados en la voz de tres artistas contemporáneos del diseño de muebles: Donald Judd (1928-1994), Fien Muller (°1978) y Hannes Van Severen (°1979) quienes fundaron el estudio Muller Van Severen. Si Donald Judd afirma que la función define el diseño de muebles, pero discute sobre algunas semejanzas acerca del proceso creativo, Muller Van Severen, quien tiene semejanzas estéticas con Judd, observa el mueble desde una Mirada más holística, enfatizando su papel en la construcción de espacios y en el borde confuso del diseño y el arte.

Palabras clave:
Arte, diseño, función, muebles,
experiencia espacial

Introduction

A long path has been crossed since the modernist statement that *form follows function*.

In the 1920s and 1930s the discussion about design puts the core on the objectivity and efficiency, underlining its practical and ethical side. Design had to contribute to a more democratic world through its artefacts that besides being economic should be useful and long lasting. The spirit of modernism in design can be exemplified in the 'principles of production' established by Walter Gropius (1883-1969) during his period in the Bauhaus and in their rebirth in the *Hochschule für Gestaltung* in Ulm by the end of the 1950s. Like Gropius, Max Bill (1908-1994) stressed that a product should be designed with the most accurate technical skills in order to function perfectly. Otl Aicher (1922-1991), who was co-founder of the Design School of Ulm, also considered that design is a discipline that shapes the daily life world within a context with meaning for the human being and therefore cannot depend neither on the prerogatives of a consuming society nor on fashion tendencies. The things of design should give individuals solutions for the practical problems or situations of the life of each day. But other arguments have been added to the more pragmatic discourse about design. And then, next to *form follows function*, appeared another emblematic proposal as *form follows fun*. Groups like *Alchimia* and *Memphis* in the 1980s intend to overcome the functionalist and industrial constraints experimenting symbolically and poetically with objects that were displaying non-conventional forms, with solid, intense colours, irreverent lines and an ironic perspective about modernity. The approach of design to cognitive sciences will contribute to elaborate on *form follows emotion*. Donald Norman (1988; 2004; 2007) among others like Patrick W. Jordan (2000), Deyan Sudjic (1985; 2009), John Heskett (2002) stress that daily life is conditioned by the results of a good or a bad design and that emotions are an important variable to consider in the interaction between user and artefact.

For design studies the debate about interdisciplinarity and the epistemological autonomy of design is still going on and furniture design is part of this debate. Rybczynski in *Home* (1987) in the chapter 'Austerity' already argued that through the interpretation of a piece of furniture as a chair it was possible to evoke a system of ideas, meanings and values of an epoch: "Furniture tells all. Just as a paleontologist can reconstruct a prehistoric animal from a fragment of jawbone, one can reconstruct the domestic interior, and the attitude of its inhabitants, from a single chair" (Rybczynski, 1987, p. 204).

The Wassily armchair, designed by Marcel Breuer in 1925-26, is considered to be a classic. Like Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair of the same period, it exemplifies the ideals of contemporary chair design:

It is lightweight, it uses machined materials, and it contains no ornament. It is a structure of bent, chromed metal tubing, across which unpadded leather is stretched to form the seat, back, and armrests. (...) Its stark beauty is not derived from decoration, but from the explicit and structurally way the materials are combined – the tubing in compression, the fabric in tension. (Rybczynski, 1987, pp. 204-205)

A chair has a function, is useful, and is designed to seat and preferably to seat with comfort. So, the argument of functionality to the project is too short. If there are a huge number of chairs in the world, why does the designer insist to design more chairs? Because if society changes, the answers from design change as well:

While some designs strive for and achieve an authority which leads to varying degrees of longevity, even those deemed 'classic' have a limited functional and aesthetic appeal. Just as tastes change, so too other factors, such as expectations of comfort, vary from period to period and between different cultures. The inherent ephemerality of design, therefore, also accounts for the myriad solutions to the different functional contexts of the chair. (Charlotte and Peter Fiell, 2005, p. 8)

Designed objects unveil aspects of diverse order from daily life. Elizabeth Shove, in *The design of everyday life* (2007), states:

Ordinary objects are extraordinarily important in sustaining and transforming the details and the design of everyday life. (...) The normally invisible role of material objects and their significance for the accomplishment of daily routine is momentarily evident when technological innovations provoke or enable changes in how and by whom tasks are defined and accomplished, and in how people organize their time. Domestic appliances like dishwashers, microwaves and fridges have arguably redesigned the shape and meaning of the kitchen, and reconfigured the ordering and organization of domestic routines. (Shove et al., 2007, p.2)

Design is recognised as a discipline that adds value to a daily life. Design is not an abstract way of working. Ken Friedman and Erik Stolterman claim that design enhances:

“Industrial design, graphic design, textile design, furniture design, information design, process design, product design, interaction design, transportation design, educational design, systems design, urban design, design leadership, and design management, as well as architecture, engineering, information technology, and computer science” (Friedman & Stolterman, 2013: X).

Victor Margolin expands the scope of design, justifying that both immaterial and material products are designed products:

There is a value in a common term, because it brings everything back to designing, which is the activity of conception and planning. When we talk about the way a product affects an individual, we can find similarities between a material object, e.g. an automobile and an immaterial one, e.g. the code of income tax regulations. Each involves issues of use as manifested in complexity, access, interpretation, previous experience, learning time and relation to human well-being. (Margolin, 1997, p. 228)

However, the aim of this text is not to make a historical reflection on design studies but to focus mainly on the topic announced in the title: furniture and function. With the interpretation of Donald Judd's and Muller Van Severen's perspective on designing furniture the article intends to contribute to a comprehension of function as a paramount feature of a designed product in a

more contextual perspective, i.e., in the way a designed piece contributes to the creation of a global space to be experienced. Instead of remaining in the realm of the discipline of design, it was the authors' intention to discuss the contribution of that perspective from the angle of three contemporary artists that designed furniture: Donald Judd (1928-1994), Fien Muller (°1978) and Hannes Van Severen (°1979).

The approach is based upon existing literature and upon the comparison of the work and the voicing of both Muller Van Severen and Donald Judd facing function in their production.

The interest for that discussion was awaked by a closer interpretation of Muller Van Severen's work which led the authors to go back to Donald Judd's accomplishments in both art and furniture design.

Donald Judd, furniture is furniture

Judd and his contemporaries were most certainly influenced by the leading art critics of their time. Many artists in the 1960s did not exhibit their furniture and design objects unless these objects were part of an installation. Famous contemporaries of Judd –for example artists John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin and Sol LeWitt– also designed and manufactured furniture and other objects but they rarely had them exhibited (Bloemink, 2004b ,pp. 17-34). They drew a sharp line between their works of art and their furniture. According to Judd they “try to keep the furniture out of art galleries to avoid this confusion” (Judd, 1993, p. 21), i.e. the ‘confusion’ between art and design. Barbara Bloemink wrote: “Judd’s frequent, verbal differentiation between art and furniture was influenced by the tenor of the times during which he began designing furniture” (Bloemink, 2004b, pp. 17-34). Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), one of the leading art critics in the 1960s and 1970s, described the contemporary Minimalist Art as

“readable as art, as almost anything is today –including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper” (Greenberg, 1995, pp. 250-256). Greenberg denigrated the new Minimalist art work by describing it as “closer to furniture than art”, in that way defaming the Minimalist artists (Bloemink, 2004a, p. 38). These artists did not wish to be demoted to the status of furniture designer. The reason for this could be a prestige as well as an income issue. About the earnings of a designer Judd notices that “For both furniture and books the designer and the author absolutely receive very little” (Judd, 1993, p. 17).

So, artists were hiding the fact that they also designed furniture in order not to compromise their art work. Even nowadays, the fact that Minimalist artists in the 1960s produced furniture and design is not always known to the art public. Bloemink writes: “The design of furniture or functional objects was nevertheless considered to be inferior to the creation art” (Bloemink, 2004b, pp. 17-34).

Judd considered that forms of art and non-art have always been connected and that the separation is due to collecting and connoisseurship (Bloemink, 2004a, pp. 37-51). In art, the influence of art critics, theorists, connoisseurs and dealers has always been and still is significant. As Sarah Thornton states:

Art world insiders tend to play one of six distinct roles: artist, dealer, curator, critic, collector, or auction-house expert. (...) Being a credible or successful artist is the toughest position, but it's the dealers who, channelling and deflecting the power of all the other players, occupy the most pivotal role. (...) Great works do not just arise; they are made – not just by artists and their assistants but also by the dealers, curators, and collectors who ‘support’ the work. (Thornton, 2008, pp. xii-xiv)

The Judd Foundation describes Donald Judd as “one of the most significant artists of the twentieth century who’s radical ideas and work continue to provoke and influence the fields of art, architecture and design” (Judd Foundation, 2016). Judd obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Philosophy and studied art afterwards.

He started out as a painter and moved over to three-dimensional work in the early 1960s. Judd exhibited throughout the United States, Europe and Asia. He published theoretical writings on art and exhibition practices.

His essay *Specific Objects* (1965) is crucial to the analysis of the new art of the early 1960s. With his article, *It's hard to find a good lamp* (1993), he contributed to the discussion on the difference between art and furniture (Judd Foundation, 2016).

As a minimalist artist, Donald Judd made geometrically three-dimensional abstract work he called *Specific Objects*. These are objects that are neither paintings nor sculptures but always consist of three dimensions. In the essay, Judd writes:

Three dimensions are real space. That gets rid of the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors –which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art. The several limits of painting are no longer present. A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface. Obviously, anything in three dimensions can be any shape, regular or irregular, and can have any relation to the wall, floor, ceiling, room, rooms or exterior or none at all. Any material can be used, as is or painted. A work needs only to be interesting...Materials vary greatly and are, simply materials –formica, aluminium, cold-rolled steel, plexiglas, red and common brass, and so forth. They are specific. (Judd, 2005, pp. 121-122)

202

According to Michael Fried: “The enterprise known variously as Minimal Art, ABC Art, Primary Structures and Specific Objects is largely ideological... it has been so formulated by some of its leading practitioners” (Fried, 1998, p. 148). Judd for example states that:

The new three-dimensional work doesn't constitute a movement, school or style. The common aspects are too general and too little common to define a movement. The differences are greater than the similarities. The similarities are selected from the work; they aren't a movement's first principles or delimiting rules... Obviously, three-dimensional work will not cleanly succeed painting and sculpture. It's not

like a movement; anyway, movements no longer work; also, linear history has unravelled somewhat.
(Judd, 2005, pp. 115-116)

Judd worked with new materials. His early artwork often included found metal pieces. Later on, he used galvanized steel and iron combined with red enamel paint or plexiglas. In his minimalist art work colour did not have a specific meaning and all narratives were left out. The object as a whole and its relation to the surrounding environment was important. In *Specific Objects* Judd states: "It isn't necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one by one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting." (Judd, 2005, p. 122).

It was his goal to put an emphasis on the perception of space, volume, light, colour and materials as such as it is depicted in *Untitled 1988* (Fig. 1.), a minimalist object made of clear anodized aluminium and amber Plexiglas (Judd, 2016).



Figure 1. Donald Judd, *Untitled 1988*.

In the opinion of Barbara Bloemink: “Judd noted that these ascetic, geometrically abstract works shared a new sense of space and materials and offered the viewer a new and more active role than traditional art” (Bloemink, 2004a, p. 37). From the 1970’s until his death he also designed a large collection of functional objects and furniture, a fact that was not altogether known to the art public. Judd made a clear distinction between his *Specific Objects* and his furniture: “I am often asked if the furniture is art... The furniture is furniture and is only art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles and many things are art” (Judd, 1993, p. 21).

In the 1960s Judd was asked to design a coffee table. In his essay, *It’s hard to find a good lamp* he described the designing process. Judd tried to transform one of his artworks, a cube with a recessed upper surface (Fig. 2), into a table. By splitting the upper surface in two parts that slide over one another he created storage space. These sliding doors gave the object its new function as piece of furniture.

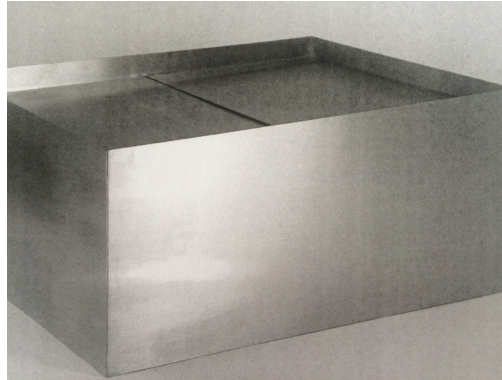


Figure 2. Donald Judd, Untitled (Double Coffee Table), 1970-71, stainless steel.

Nevertheless, Judd threw the table away because it was not functional according to him. After his coffee table experiment Judd started to design furniture for practical reasons.

In the 1970s he bought some buildings in Marfa (Texas) to install his own work and the art of other artists and he could not buy proper furniture there. The designs of his chairs, tables and bookcases are pure, simple, rectangular and perfectly proportioned. A few subtle variations on these characteristics create a dynamic tension. Judd worked with the interaction between order and freedom, controlled form and open space and he linked all this to functionality. He used a limited amount of shapes in repetition and executed them in three different materials: solid timber, plywood and metal. The interaction between colour and material gives coherence to the object.

“No interpretation is possible, the power of expression equals the functionality” (Judd, 1993, p. 7). A table is a table (Fig. 3) (Judd Foundation, 2016).



Figure 3. Donald Judd, wooden table and chairs in Judd's living and working space in New York.

Judd kept on differentiating between art and design verbally and he kept his functional designs hidden from the art public. That way he could create both art and design, using a shared language of form and materials but with different purposes: furniture is functional, art is not. Bloemink states: “As a young, ambitious artist, Judd would probably not have wanted to diminish the reception of his art with any potential confusion with his furniture” (Bloemink, 2004a, p. 38). He would design furniture for the rest of his life.

Muller Van Severen, furniture is art

Fien Muller is a photographer, her husband Hannes Van Severen a sculptor and together they are design studio Muller Van Severen. The Belgian design studio Muller Van Severen received the award *Designer van het Jaar* (Dutch for *Designer of the Year*) in February 2015 for their collection of design objects and furniture. This award is granted to a Belgian designer every year by the organization *Biennale Interieur* and the magazines *Knack Weekend* and *Le Vif Weekend*. The *Design Museum Gent*, *Centre d'innovation et de design au Grand-Hornu* and *Bozar* also support the award (Interieur.be, 2016).

Apart from furniture for domestic spaces they also design for office and cultural areas working closely together with architects in that process of creating interiors.

Until 2010 Muller and Van Severen had their separate careers as artists. Fien Muller is a photographer whose work refers to the classical still life to which she adds a contemporary twist.

She makes visual compositions of found objects against a neutral white background. These objects are pieces of everyday life, not chosen for their thematic importance or symbolic meaning but for their colour, texture and mutual relationships (Fig. 4).

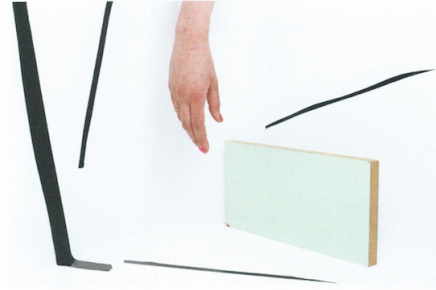


Figure 4. Fien Muller, Still life
with hand, 2008, print/plexi, 60 cm x 90 cm.

Hannes Van Severen is a sculptor who prefers to make larger, common objects like stairs and wardrobes to which he gives an absurd twist. The confrontation of his sculptures with the surrounding space is important to him (Fig. 5). He wants to create new perceptive landscapes with his installations (Meplon, 2014, pp. 164-166).



Figure 5. Hannes Van Severen, Staircases, 2010, wood, 350 cm x 200 cm.

In 2011 Fien Muller was invited by art gallery *Valerie Traan* to exhibit together with an artist of her choice. She asked Hannes Van Severen to second her.

Their furniture and lightning project gathered massive international attention; they get lots of requests for cooperation from architects and museums (Demeulemeester, 2015, p.68). What seemed to be a short walk on the borderline between art and design became something bigger very soon. Their work was exhibited in leading galleries and museums in London, Berlin, Milan, Copenhagen, Paris and New York (Znor, 2016). They decided to work in another medium than they usually did and designed a furniture collection. Muller and Van Severen had to finish the designs in only two months' time, they met the deadline. Since they were already a couple for nine years they perfected their synergy and dynamic over time so they could make decisions quickly. Amongst other things they refined an earlier piece that was created out of necessity while renovating their house. They needed some light above the kitchen table and there was no possibility to hang a lamp on the ceiling. So, they made a table with an arc lamp attached to it (Fig. 6) (Fraser, 2014, pp. 160-161).

Chris Meplon described the object as follows: "The graceful curve added to the stark, universal basic shape –the archetype– is a wonderful touch that provides an interesting vertical dimension". In addition to this the lamp also contributes with optimal illumination. The design combines functionality with aesthetic pleasure. (Meplon, 2014, pp. 164-166).



Figure 6. Muller Van Severen, table + lamp, 2011.

In their oeuvre balance is a key word: delicate lines and bold colours, transparency and fullness, geometry and exuberant colour variations, static composition and the suggestion of movement.

The couple is always looking for new forms of balance, new functions, new relations to the space, approaching functionality in an inventive way. They are fascinated by materials, the sense of colours and proportions (Gatz, 2016). Lately Muller Van Severen has been updating the visual language of their collection with materials and finishes they accidentally come across in art galleries, at flea markets or in hard warestores. Examples of this new use of materials are the combination of different types of marble in one marble shelf and the choice of colours in accordance with the health and safety colour-coding in their chopping boards.

The Muller Van Severen designs reveal a relaxed view on contemporary living: sharing a room without having to sacrifice individual space. Often various functions are combined in one object: sitting, storage, working and lighting (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Muller Van Severen, duo seat + lamp, 2011.

More than one person can use the object at the same time for different purposes. According to Max Fraser the collection displays a “romantic implication of togetherness”. Functionality is important, they fill in this requirement in an imaginative way. Muller and Van Severen put their designs to the ultimate test, they live with them to evaluate and perfect them (Fraser, 2014, pp. 160-161).

210

They both grew up in artistic families. Fien Muller’s father Koen is a sculptor that was surrounded by a family of antique dealers, a rather baroque environment. Hannes Van Severen gets his minimalist influence from his father Maarten, an interior- and furniture designer, and grandfather Dan, the abstract painter (Meplon, 2014, pp.164-166). Maarten Van Severen established his design studio for furniture and interiors in 1987. He embraced the minimalistic “less is more” ideology in the 1990s but he developed his own style. He became the first designer in Flanders who was known by the general public. His sons Hannes and David used to work together with him in his studio (Belemans, 2016, pp. 21-29).

These minimalist and baroque parental influences merged in *marble box* (Fig. 8), in which Muller Van Severen fuse exuberant materials with a minimalist geometric form. This object is part of their furniture project (Muller Van Severen, 2016). *Marble box* is an example of the transformation of a piece of furniture, when used by the owner to store books or all kinds of objects, into a work of art when not used.



Figure 8. Muller Van Severen, marble box, 2011.

Another example of functional objects that can be converted into art are the *Cutting boards* they designed in 2011 (Fig. 9) (Muller Van Severen, 2016). These carving boards are produced in polyethylene, used for cutting boards in restaurants or large commercial kitchens, a material that seems more like candle wax than plastic to the touch. This design also combines functionality with aesthetic pleasure: the owner is invited to participate in the art process by hanging the boards on the wall after they had served their purpose in the kitchen. He can create his own sculpture by doing so (Fig. 10) (Meplon, 2014; van der Lugt, 2015; Visualize us, 2016). As Meplon quotes: “Their pieces need to be both interesting sculptures and useful, functional furniture” (Meplon, 2014, p. 164).



Figure 9. Muller Van Severen, Cutting boards, 2011.



Figure 10. Muller Van Severen, Cutting boards and marble box, 2011.

The couple experiences no fundamental difference between the joint furniture design process and the process of making art separately. Their artistic background remains the most important, they look for new ways to make a piece of furniture more interesting in a sculptural sense, to connect it in a new way with the space it occupies (Meplon, 2014, pp. 164-166). While designing furniture they work in an instinctive, organic way and use simple techniques to

create simple honest forms (Fraser, 2014, pp. 160-161). Muller and Van Severen make three-dimensional, life-size sketches using standard metal profiles that enable them to create something immediately (Meplon, 2014, pp. 164-166). Fien Muller says: “We don’t languish over ideas. We’re evolving constantly, thinking, doing and making, all in the same breath” (Fraser, 2014, pp. 160-161). That quote summarizes their teamwork. All objects Muller Van Severen design fill the space in a free, playful and poetic way. These designed objects—when they are not used—can function as sculptures. They are in the space as art, they do not function, and they do not belong to the practical experience of the space.

Conclusion

Muller Van Severen and Donald Judd display a minimalist creative approach regarding the design of furniture. However, they have a different ideological view on the relation between a piece of art and a piece of furniture. Judd makes a manifest distinction between art and furniture. Art and design can share the language of form and materials but they are different. Judd claimed that neither the scale of art nor the intent of art can be transposed to furniture. Art has an aim in itself. A piece of art is independent of any practical objective. Design is inherent to use, design is inherent to function, which excludes the possibility to compare art and design. Judd still grants, however, that if the same person creates art and furniture there might be some similarities about the idea of form. Maybe Judd was thinking about himself and about his process of idealizing furniture and art. Muller Van Severen, on the other hand, considers that their objects can be art or furniture but the feature of function is also a border to define the object as art or as design. Therefore, they believe that design can become art at times when the objects are not used and are displayed in an expressive context like other objects of art. Another point to consider is that Donald Judd constantly felt the urge to make a clear distinction between his

art and his furniture. Muller Van Severen are neither concerned nor externally pressured by such issue. And still it is important to underline that the work of Muller Van Severen recalls a certain inspiration in Judd's aesthetics. Muller Van Severen use forms, materials and colouring that refer to Judd's work. The confrontation of the objects with the surrounding space is also as important to them as it was to Donald Judd.

The status of design in the contemporary society and its potential to contributing to human experiences is not the same as in Donald Judd's time. The question of function is still drawing a line between design and art, but a piece of furniture is not only meant to be useful and efficient.

It belongs to an expanded experience of living a space. In that way, the conception of Muller Van Severen is more tuned with the current holistic view on communicating and perceiving spaces and the role of furniture in its construction.

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214

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216

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