

clockwise from left
Two Curve Chair by
Scott Burton; Donald
Judd's Spring Street
Sink; Parzival: A Chair
with a Shadow by
Robert Wilson; Tire
Lamp by Robert
Rauschenberg; Judd's
Armchair (b48)



exhibition
art ≠ design

Just because artists occasionally make furniture on the sly, does that really mean we have to start rethinking the boundaries of art and design, asks Julie Taraska?

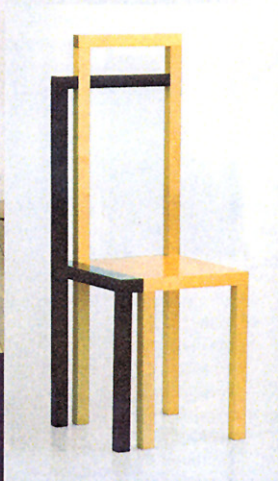
See that ≠? The curators of Art ≠ Design: Functional Objects from Donald Judd to Rachel Whiteread urge you to take note of it. As they explain: "At first glance, the central symbol [which, in a footnote, is credited to culture-maven-around-town Kurt Andersen] seems to entail a relationship where design is secondary to art. This is in fact NOT the correct definition ... [it] is properly defined as meaning 'not equal to, but not greater than or less than'" [their emphasis].

That fussy explanation sets the tone for the exhibit, which aims to debate whether design is art or not. The evidence displayed is functional, "designed" objects – furniture, lighting, tableware and rugs – created mostly on the sly by minimalist and post-minimalist sculptors and painters active from the 1950s to today; artists featured include Isamu Noguchi, Richard Tuttle, James Turrell, Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Barbara Bloom, Robert Wilson, and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Most of these works have never been exhibited.

The positions are laid out right at the beginning, where furniture by the show's three primary artists – Judd, Tuttle, and Scott Burton – is grouped in a suspiciously stark, white-walled room. Judd has his say first, his quote

declaring that furniture is furniture and art is art, and never the twain shall meet. Burton, with his background in the performing arts, feels a piece is conditional, able to be whatever the audience wishes. And Tuttle, dear Tuttle, first claims that "sculpture and furniture are different intentions" then backpedals, adding "one piece can satisfy each". Coordinating with these viewpoints is the artists' work: Judd's flimsy wooden desks, looking more Ikea than hand-made; Burton's gorgeous Two Curve Chair, part sculpture, part function; and Tuttle's The Nature of the Gun living room set, all squares and rectangles that borrow more than a little from Gerrit Rietveld and the Bauhaus.

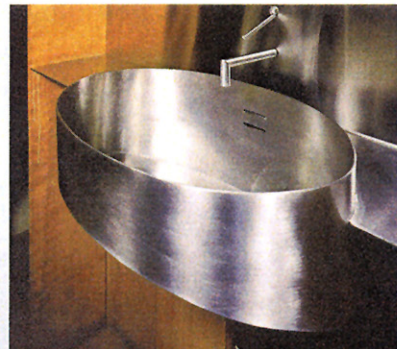
Set up in combinations, these pieces are meant to seem approachable; this is how they might appear in someone's home. But in the yawning room, they sit awkwardly, as if they arrived early to a party and now are waiting for the other guests to show up. But try to make their acquaintance and, bam!, a guard rushes over, points at the chalky lines on the wooden floor: please, step away from the work. So despite the purported debate, it's all a lure; here, the objects are treated as art first and functional second. Unable to be



used, they might as well be behind glass or mounted on the wall.

Exhibit co-curators Barbara Bloemink and Joseph Cunningham took pains to design the show so it would engage the public. On some levels, the pair succeed, particularly by including such seductive pieces as Judd's Spring Street Sink, a curvilinear basin that he used in the private quarters of his loft, and John Chamberlain's urethane foam couch, carved with a kitchen knife and covered with a silk parachute.

But as for the curators' art vs design polemic, it's a non-starter. Why would the average person – or anyone, save for academics and, unfortunately, curators – care under which headings these pieces fell? Bloemink half admits this, writing in the catalogue that categorisation of art is a Western conceit, and although the practice dates back to the Renaissance, there have been stretches of time when it hasn't been an issue. And you can add that aside from that, it has only been an issue in fine art: architects, for example,



don't have these multidisciplinary hang-ups, as shown by Charles Rennie Mackintosh's well-received Hill House Chair and Frank Gehry's Superlight Chair (and vodka bottle, and watch, and...).

So why examine this now? There is a historical background: post-war art critic Clement Greenberg, champion of things painted and abstract, was at his most influential when minimalism was getting under way; the show's older artists feared his denigration of functional objects would hurt the value of their other work. So they kept the former under wraps. But that was over 50 years ago, Greenberg is long dead, and some of the artists in the show were in nappies while he was still writing.

If the museum really wanted to dissect a timely polemic, it could have looked at design vs craft, or craft vs technology – that's where the action is. But instead, Art ≠ Design offers a chance to see some hitherto unknown pieces, some beautiful, some bland. But philosophically challenge you? No, not this time.

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, until 27 February 2005

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