



## Art in the context of design, design in the context of art

Troels Degn Johansson

Denmark's Design School, DK

<tj@dkds.dk>

volume 4 content  
journal home pag  
conference home pag  
copyright

abstract ° full paper

### to cite this journal article

Johansson, T.D. (2006) Art in the context of design, design in the context of art  
*Working Papers in Art and Design* ·  
Retrieved <date> from URI  
[http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes\\_research\\_papers/wpades\\_vol4/amafull.htm](http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research_papers/wpades_vol4/amafull.htm)  
ISSN 1466-491'

Today, artists are becoming increasingly important players in the field of design. Similarly, designers have begun directing their work towards the art world. Certain works of art have come to look like 'design' to such extent that—when appearing outside the art gallery, art museum, or art journal—it takes a well-informed critic to identify the address and reference to the art world. At the recent Index Design Awards in Copenhagen, an art group, Superflex got nominated in the 'work' category for their development of a soda brand, 'Guaraná Power!' ; a project which is supposed to empower guarana bean farmers of the Amazon region to reach an alternative market for their product after a soda manufacturer made prizes on guarana beans dump 80% due to their market dominance and thus made business and indeed life difficult for the farmers. Superflex, an artist trio of late 1990ies graduates from the Royal Academy of Fine art, has not however any background in either brand design or soda production whatsoever, and their other projects involves completely different kinds of media, such as the development of a biogas plant for nomadic farmers in tropical areas (Supergas), a public participation system based on a virtual world for sharing visions for cities that are undergoing change (Supercity), etc. (cf. [www.superflex.net](http://www.superflex.net)).

This presentation seeks to explain why the field of design has become an attractive playing ground for certain contemporary artist, and what it means that certain products and concepts that 'look like design' have been developed by artists and thus in a sense still should be taken for works of (fine) art. Along with the treatment of the these questions, the paper examines the role played by the art critic and the researcher as concerns informing the public about the fine art context of certain design products and interpreting the contributions of artists to the field of design. The question is thus not only why artists contribute to design but also why critics and theorists either maintain, develop, or rejects these contexts of tradition when operating as curators or commentators on the sideline.

By the term 'artists' I am referring here to agents with a primary background in and affiliation to the traditional institutions of fine art (e.g., having an educational background from an art academy, finding one's financial sources among traditional art foundations and private sources, drawing on traditional institutions for the exhibition of art, being the object for art historians, art theorist, etc.). Art history exhibits several projects within fine art that have been oriented towards the field of design; projects which more or less explicitly have been applying avant-garde strategies in order for Art to serve Life and thus to annihilate the distinction between the art world and the everyday life (hence Peter Bürgers definition of the historical avant-garde, that is innovative avant-garde movements in art until World War II). The present paper concentrates on the re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies among artists emerging the mid-1990ies and onwards and their direction towards the field of design. This re-occurrence of avant-garde strategies may be found among artists of the social relational and social art programmes such as Superflex who took a starting point in French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's so-called relational aesthetics, and to some extend also a predecessor, Belgian artist Joseph Beuys and his notion of Sozial Plastik, in order to explore the social sphere as a material for artistic practice.

This paper takes art group Superflex as a case of artist operating in the context of design; artists who seeks to develop means - 'tools as they have it - in order to empower particular, exposed groups around the world: tropical farmers in Thailand (Supergas) and Brazil (Guarana Power!), elderly working class people in Liverpool, (Superchannel), etc.;

artists who seeks to design means to 'improve life' (hence the programme title of the first Index Design Awards). Although Superflex explicitly distance themselves from a concept of avant-garde, it is difficult not to identify an avant-garde profile in the way they orient themselves towards the field of design to demonstrate a sincere interest in the technical, social, and political matters in which their projects are rooted. Still, at the same time Superflex' work should also be understood as an instance of design being addressed to the context of art, for Superflex is nonetheless an art group that draws upon the traditional institutions of the art world (i.e. education, financial sources, exhibitors, critics). It is quite obvious that this paradoxical structure of interests between the art world and the field of design should make the critic and theorist reflect a bit on the given traditions and actual construction of context. Is it really the artists who are playing a double game of art and design, or should the critic admit that so-called avant-garde strategies operating in art and design today should be seen in a context of 'post-avantgarde', in which it is no longer relevant to distinguish between the two and where the interest taken in given, political subject matters should be seen as significantly more important than the question of whether this is art or design. Rejecting explicitly any notion of avant-garde, Superflex seems to point in this direction. On the other hand, this group displays all the traditional signs of an avant-garde project: They 'simulate' historical avant-garde (Russian futurism, Bauhaus principles) while insisting on the opposite - an avant-garde project that resists the concept of avant-garde; 'tongue-in-cheek avant-garde'.

The construction of context is thus a particularly urgent issue for the cultural reception of artists working in the field of design. As I have indicated, artists today are contributing significantly to the development of the field of design. This significance however cannot be assessed without developing an understanding of how artists are operating on a conceptual level in design, how they add value to designed artifacts, how they include the user in the development and presentation of a design, etc.; questions with all depends on whether their work should be seen as art or design, as design-as-art, or art-as-design, etc.