

# kissing cousins

"ART'S ROMANCE WITH DESIGN" PRODUCES POWERFUL COMMENTARY ON POPULAR CULTURE BY ARTISTS. CAN DESIGNERS DO THE SAME?

By Rick Poynor

Anyone who **follows** the art scene will know that in recent years artists have become increasingly preoccupied with design. They long ago turned to many of the same techniques and media used by graphic designers—photography, typography, video—giving their work numerous similarities to commercial visual communication. Many artists also design things, though this is not always an aspect of their work that they seek to publicize. Donald Judd designed furniture. Lawrence Weiner creates posters for his own exhibitions. Japanese artist Takashi Murakami collaborates on fabrics.

This has been going on for decades. "High & Low," the landmark 1991 exhibition at MoMA, showed how, from the Cubists's collage to Jeff Koons's porcelain Pink Panther sculptures, modern art engaged in a continuous relationship and sometimes a dialogue with popular culture. How could it be otherwise? If art's subject was the modern world, then it could hardly avoid the mass-produced images and messages that shaped the visual environment of the street and the home. There might be a place for still lifes of fruit or abstracts with no content, but if art stopped there, it would cease to tell us much about the nature of contemporary experience.

What has changed is that art's focus on our designed reality has become increasingly overt. *George Hanson Critical Forum*, a new book from the Royal College of Art in London, refers to the tendency as "art's romance with design," and this description is apt. Design is seductive for everyone, including artists, who read the shelter magazines, dine in fancily-designed restaurants, and shop at the same designer stores as the rest of us. The more successful they become, the more they can



participate in the comforts and pleasures of the designer lifestyle. The society in which art is produced has evolved, and so have art's concerns and visual methods.

Not everyone is happy with these developments. A review of the latest Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, published in *The New York Times*, criticized the survey for being dominated by "designer art." "The problem with designer art," writes critic Ken Johnson, "is that it can be difficult to distinguish from everyday commercial art." He gives many examples of artists whose work fails to satisfy him, often making a comparison with some aspect of commercial design. Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs of pole dancers "might have

been commissioned by a slick magazine," while a project by filmmaker Yang Fudong would work as a clothing commercial.

Johnson acknowledges that designer art can be "bracingly provocative," but he finds a lot of it joyless and overcalculated, with a tendency for design to overwhelm the content. Even the best pieces are often more interesting to think about than to experience. "Designer art is ironic and strategic," he concludes. "It is not the product of a searching soul but of a critically articulate mind."

This is not a very probing explanation of what is going on in this kind of art, but it does throw up a couple of significant ideas. Johnson thinks that fine art should look different from commercial art, and that it

should be more concerned with soulfulness than cerebration. The problem for the artist, though, is that the media and communication landscape, in which design plays a part, is a much more powerful producer of imagery than art has been for years. Commercial communication has thoroughly absorbed visual strategies invented by pioneering modernist artists. At their most creative, pop videos, film titles, and TV ads can be as oblique, abstracted, and loaded with obscure symbolism as any avant-garde film from the '20s. Graphic design of the last 30 years exhibits an astonishing range of styles and tactics to engage audiences assumed, correctly, to be highly sophisticated.

There is a good case for suggesting that graphic design has exhibited rather more visual inventiveness than art during this period. It's no wonder that artists find themselves gravitating toward design techniques and devices of proven power, since these, rather than oil paint and brushes, represent the visual language of the day. What art critics never seem to acknowledge is that, on a purely visual level, the commercial arts tend to handle these things much better. Take artists's typography. It isn't usually very accomplished and, to the trained eye, this failure of visual rhetoric is enough to render an entire work of art creaky and suspect. Do they expect us to make allowances?

This leads to the second point about soulfulness versus cerebration. At a time when art's power to produce new kinds of imagery has been eclipsed by pop culture's, it makes sense for the artist to place more emphasis on a critical exploration of the subject. Hence, the "conceptual" nature of so much art produced since the '70s. Given that design is so



central to our culture, it's logical for design to be one of those subjects.

Here, the artist enjoys a real advantage over the designer, who sometimes moves toward a similar position on the art/design interface, but from the opposite direction. Discussions in the last decade about the autonomy of the designer, or the designer as author, always run into the problem of the client. Clearly, the only way to gain complete autonomy as a designer is to initiate your own work, but this seems to deny the essential client-serving role of design. If art people have tended to disregard the critical potential of design, it's because, from their perspective, the client's control rules out the possibility of any substantial agency on the designer's part.

"What artists bring to design is an interface with art that goes beyond the literal production of design and instead looks at design scenarios," writes British art critic Alex Coles in *George Hanson Critical Forum*. "Few designers have the flexibility within the briefs they are set to do this with any real commitment."

And commitment is undoubtedly what it needs. Graphic designers have made little headway in convincing culture's power brokers that their activity deserves critical attention, let alone that it can be an autonomous form of practice. Even designers are inclined to doubt it, and being a pro tends to win the day. So it's both exciting and disappointing to learn that the first book about designer art has been produced not by a design critic, but

This page and previous: Two works included in the Carnegie Museum of Art's 2004-2005 Carnegie International, an exhibition reflecting the current preponderance of design-driven art.

Previous page: Still from Yang Fudong's film *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest (Part 2)*, 2004, courtesy of the artist and Shanghart Gallery, Shanghai.

Left: Installation view of one of Philip-Lorca diCorcia's photographs of pole-dancers. Photograph by Tom Altany.

by an art critic. Alex Coles's *DesignArt*, a study of the relationship of art and design over the last century, comes out this spring. It will, of course, examine this interface from the art side, just like the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's "Design = Art" exhibition of functional objects, which only featured pieces designed by artists.

Shouldn't designers' work and thinking be central to such a discussion? While design has certainly moved closer to art, it has done this without much thought. If there was an overriding idea among young designers, it was that they had some kind of right to their own measure of self-expression. Looking at endless books of "designer art" published by designers in recent years, it's obvious that, while they possess exceptional technical skills, few have much to say about the role of design in society, or about anything else. This kind of designer art will not be taken seriously until it can show more evidence that it's the product of a critical mind. Even mediocre artists are educated to understand that without a set of carefully articulated personal concerns, they have no purpose making art. They need a high degree of motivation to pursue such a project, and this gives them the confidence to establish the terms on which they will collaborate in any partnership.

What might be possible if only we could marry the artist's sense of individual purpose to the designer's understanding of media processes and image-making techniques? It all comes down to the way that designers are educated, and to the kinds of expectation and speculation they are then able to weave around design. **P**

RICK POYNOR is a London-based design critic and contributing editor of PRINT.