From De Stijl to Dutch Design: Canonising Design 2.0
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From De Stijl to Dutch Design: Canonising Design 2.0

In 2017, tourism agencies, governments, museums, and design academies in the Netherlands are celebrating the centennial of 100 years of De Stijl and 25 years of Dutch Design. On December 9, 2016, the annual Dutch Design History Society symposium was dedicated to critically reflect on the production of such a centennial and design canonisation in general.

While De Stijl’s implied beginnings (1917) are relatively uncontroversial, the proposition that Dutch design originates from 1992 is much more so. This particular construction of ‘Dutch design’ as an avant-garde phenomenon that started in the 1990s with Droog design, and is today centred around the Design Academy Eindhoven, is a clear example of design canonisation at work. In this process, what comes to count as (good) design and the knowledge that surrounds it is produced, selectively, in line with specific (cultural, political, economic, etc.) agendas. However, this case also stands to indicate how today, the process of design canonisation is no longer solely determined by traditionally recognised authorities (museum curators, design historians, high-end retail venues, influential designers) but also by an unusually wide range of ‘non-expert’ actors (tourism agencies, politicians, funding agencies).

This dispersion of design canonisation is boosted further by digital and participatory social media technologies and platforms, which allow individuals and communities to generate a multiplicity of alternative ‘mini-canons’ that operate alongside, and relatively independently from, official or accepted ones. Yet, paradoxically, this proliferation of actors and multiplicity of canons does not necessarily herald the end of established canons. Indeed, the Dutch design ‘brand’ seems to become ever more established and entrenched. In what different ways do contemporary processes of design canonisation work, and what are the outcomes? What are the implications of this contemporary condition of ever changing canonisation processes for design historical knowledge? What repercussions does it have for traditionally acknowledged actors on the one hand, and for non-professionals on the other? Does it contribute to bringing into view the material culture of otherwise underrepresented individuals and communities?

The one-day symposium From De Stijl to Dutch Design: Canonising Design 2.0 aimed to reflect on questions relating to the workings and implications of canonisation processes – both traditional and contemporary, professional and amateur
– to knowledge formation and transfer concerning design. To reflect the contemporary condition, in which design canons and their corresponding knowledge are created through, and by, actors operating in widely diverse institutions, driven by a variety of agendas, the symposium unfolded in two parts; a more scholarly morning session, followed by an afternoon session in which actors from different perspectives would reflect on the daily practice of (the promotion of) Dutch design.

This symposium also marked the launch of the new website (www.designhistory.nl) with a new logo, designed by Birte Ketting. It was a symbolic moment to denounce our old logo (fig. 1), designed by Robin Uleman in 2010. As appropriate as this colourful De Stijl logo seemed back then, we now feel that a platform on design history should not be confined to canonised subject matters such as De Stijl. We aim to be inclusive of canonical topics as much as we are interested in subverting them.

The Dutch Design History Society is excited to present to you this special issue in which we bring together the different contributions from this symposium. This publication, structured in accordance with the symposium, begins with a word of welcome by Frederike Huygen, before launching with an introduction by Joana Meroz, PhD candidate at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Meroz is a board member of the Dutch Design History Society, and undertakes research on the construction of the idea of ‘Dutch design’ in the context of International Cultural Policy, 1970–2012. Following this, adequately reflecting our interest in critically reviewing processes of canonisation, the contribution by Ida van Zijl presents a canonisation case study. Van Zijl, who worked for over thirty years as a curator at the Centraal Museum Utrecht, elaborates on how, from its first public appearance onwards, the red and blue chair by Gerrit Rietveld became an icon of modern art, design, De Stijl, and even ‘Dutchness’.

Jeremey Aynsley takes us to Germany and discusses the canonisation of Bauhaus houses, which according to him, have, in some ways, received a disproportionate amount of attention. Aynsley analyses the different elements that contribute to the mythification of a legacy like that of the Bauhaus.

In her contribution, Alice Twemlow discusses more contemporary attempts at canonisation, with reference to digital design criticism located on websites and online media. Drawing on a variety of examples, she discusses what is considered to be design and focuses on the actors involved.
In their discussion with regard to what could, or should, be considered design, and Dutch design in particular, PhD candidate Cyril Tjahja and researcher Marlom Aguiar provide an interesting case study. They examine the *I Love SU* T-shirt. Based on the iconic *I Love NY* logo used in the US for tourism purposes, this T-shirt refers to the country of Suriname. Since its official introduction in 2010, the T-shirt has not only been extremely popular in its native Suriname but also among the Surinamese population living in the Netherlands. Challenging the fact that characteristics of ‘Dutch Design’ are usually essentialist in nature, and constructed top-down, Tjahja and Aguiar elaborate on the consumption of the T-shirt in the Netherlands, presenting an opportunity to challenge the established views on Dutch Design by providing an alternative bottom-up perspective.

Unfortunately, this special issue does not include the contribution by Gonçalo Falcão (Visiting Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon), who investigated the historiography of graphic design by analysing its most important books. According to Falcão, these books are extremely limited in representing the broad practice of graphic design, always focusing on particular countries and specific types of graphic design. His presentation made some interesting points but was not yet ready for publication.

Also not included here is the contribution by Anne de Haij, project manager Mondrian 2017 in the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. Her presentation regarding the museum’s collaboration with the Dutch agency for tourism (NBTC Holland Marketing) for the ‘100 Years of De Stijl: Mondrian to Dutch Design’ celebrations, elaborated on the motives, workings and tensions encountered therein. Regrettably, her talk proved too politically sensitive to publish.

By giving three examples of cultural diplomacy at work, Renilde Steeghs discussed the different roles and interests of design for international cultural collaboration from a governmental perspective. According to her, *if* it needs a label, the kind of design that is exported is characterised by a specific way of working together, which we could perhaps call ‘the Dutch approach’.

This issue concludes with three short statements by non-native Dutch designers, who reflect on (governmental) financial support and the implications incurred by their practice. How do such incursions effect the discourse surrounding design practices and the concept of Dutch design?

The aim of the symposium was to generate new academic knowledge regarding design canonisation, relevant to all actors involved in the processes. We are indeed confident that this symposium has contributed not only to a series of critical reflections on design history and its canonisation procedures, but also to the format of the symposium itself. To hear the designer’s voice within such a framework proved to be of great added value.
The Dutch Design History Society wishes to thank all who have contributed to this day and generously shared their thoughts and insights. We are particularly grateful to the Creative Industries Fund who financially supported the symposium. For providing us with the perfect venue to stage such discussions, we would like to thank the Centraal Museum for hosting us. We would also like to thank Natalie Dubois, Nadia Abdelkaui, and Idv van Zijl for their input, as well as Joana Meroz, who has been invaluable in informing the content of the programme.

We hope you enjoy this issue.

On behalf of the editorial board,

Frederike Huygen, Rosa te Velde, and Jan de Bruijn
A Note from the Chair of the Dutch Design History Society

Frederike Huygen

In 1921 Theo van Doesburg visited the Bauhaus where pupils and teachers such as Johannes Itten were dressed in monk-like, loose-fitting garments. He wore a pristine, white, tight-fitting American suit and matching gloves. As we know from letters, he did this deliberately, as a provocation to defy and challenge the Bauhaus and everything it stood for. His appearance symbolized a new approach to art and design, and he was the person embodying it. The careful consideration of his dress was intended to underline his story, as well as standing as a display of persuasion and intimidation. One could even regard it as a marketing tool, linking (a) personality to (a) conviction.

Van Doesburg was the grand promoter of De Stijl, a cure for the Bauhaus which he called ‘an artist’s hospital’, and his mission was to conquer the world. He was a manipulator and a highly media genetic figure, much more so than Mondrian who is currently positioned as the hero of 2017 in the Netherlands’ celebration of the centennial of De Stijl. In numerous exhibitions and manifestations, Mondrian and Dutch design will be linked. You can argue that neither stands for nationalism but for an internationalism, and that – accomplishing van Doesburg’s mission – neither requires promotion. However, the Netherlands is seeking to attract more cultural tourists while at the same time ensuring their dispersal; drawing them to cities and sites other than Amsterdam.

We were interested to know more about these mechanisms as part of a larger story regarding design and its reputation. Our second goal was to bring together different perspectives and practices: academia, museums, designers, marketers, and governmental promotion. How do all these different actors and policies interact and what kind of stories and perspectives are we talking about? In this special issue, you will find a compilation of the various contributions on this topic.

Frederike Huygen worked at the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum as a curator and is an independent writer and researcher on design. She published several books, teaches Graphic Design History at the University of Amsterdam and is a Fellow at the Wim Crouwel Institute. Huygen founded the Dutch Design History Society in 2008 and is its chair.
Introduction: The Canonisation of Dutch design

Joana Meroz

As we gather here, preparations for the celebration of Dutch design’s twenty-fifth anniversary next year are well underway. Some may wonder at the arbitrariness of Dutch design’s implied birthdate (1992 anyone?), but the point is for it to coincide with the centennial commemoration of De Stijl – Dutch design’s inferred forefather. For 2017, the year of *Mondrian to Dutch Design*, governments, tourism agencies, museums and academies, are collaborating towards numerous exhibitions and events combining the legacy of De Stijl with the work of contemporary Dutch designers. Whatever else Dutch design may be, cases such as this indicate that it certainly has become a reliable and coveted resource whose function is to advance multiple cultural, educational, political, and economic agendas. Taking the theme year *Mondrian to Dutch Design* as a starting point, this symposium aims to debate the idea of Dutch design and of national canons more generally as fixed essences and to reflect both on the relations that constitute them and on the effects of their operations. In this talk, I would like to open this conversation by briefly sketching some contours of the debate on the Dutch design canon.

So to begin with, what is Dutch design? Does the term refer to design in the Netherlands, so material culture produced in the country irrespective of the maker’s nationality?; design of the Netherlands, so material culture conceived by Dutch citizens irrespective of their location in the world?; and/or is it design for the Netherlands, in other words, material culture consumed in the Netherlands irrespective of provenance? Or does the term Dutch design actually refer to design that, in its perceived simplicity and conceptuality embodies and represents an ideal understanding of Dutch identity, even if this remains largely implicit? Can all of these things be equally considered Dutch design? Are there some characteristics

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2 This categorisation is inspired by, even if it departs from, Livia Rezende’s (2014) distinction between Design in Brazil, Design from Brazil, and Design for Brazil. Livia Rezende, ‘Historical Overview of the Concept of Modernism in Brazilian Design’, in *Brazilian Contemporary: A Round-table Discussion* (V&A Museum, London: unpublished lecture, 21 March 2014).
that make some objects inherently more Dutch design than others? And who is in
the position to make this arbitrary decision?

In addressing the question of what Dutch design is, rather than trying to find
essential properties of Dutch design – where it is made, by whom, whether it
embodies national characteristics, etc. – I find it more useful to instead look at
how Dutch design has been defined by different actors throughout history.³ In
other words, I find it helpful to think of the Dutch design canon as a discursive
construction. Rather than defining Dutch design in terms of any intrinsic char-
acteristics – where it is made or consumed, by whom, etc. – this implies under-
standing Dutch design as existing only because and only as long as people call it
that. The basic premise, then, is that no artefact, process or practice are intrinsi-
cally ‘Dutch’ or ‘design’ but are instead constructed as being typically ‘Dutch’
and as ‘design’ by discursive practices. This discourse has traditionally comprised
recognized authorities, such as curators, historians, influential designers, and
journalists – however, the constellation of actors empowered to speak in the name
of Dutch design is changing fast and is one of the issues this symposium aims to
debate.

In the Netherlands, a discourse on Dutch design can be traced back to the early
nineteenth century, to debates concerning the conceptualisation of the relation-
ship between the nation and industrial production surrounding national industrial
exhibitions. The last quarter of that century saw the search for a specifically
national style in the applied arts modelled after the so-called Dutch Renaissance
style of the Dutch Golden Age.⁴ This formed the base of what, around 1900, was
labelled the typically Dutch variant of Art Nouveau⁵ – with one of its best known
proponents, the architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934), today being
labelled ‘the godfather of Dutch design’ (fig. 1).⁶

In 1956, art historian Hans Jaffé cemented the reputation of De Stijl as a par-
ticularly Dutch contribution to modern art given its embodiment of the ‘Dutch

³ This definition of Dutch design as a construction instead of a natural essence is informed
by Javier Gimeno-Martínez’s (2007) differentiation between essentialist and constructivist
approaches to Belgian fashion and Kjetil Fallan’s (2012) differentiation between Scandinavian de-
sign as an actor’s and as an analytical category. See: Javier Gimeno Martínez, ‘Fashion, Country
(paper presented at the Symposium I: Modus Operandi. State of Affairs in Current Research on
⁴ Titus Eliëns, ‘De oorsprong van de stijlkamer’, in: Kunstzicht 40, no. 1 (1996): 40–1; ‘Nieu-
and Frans Leidelmeijer (eds.), Kunstnijverheid in Nederland 1880–1940, Bussum (V+K Publishing/
⁵ Ibid., p. 37.
calendar/berlage-godfather-of-dutch-design.
At a time when the Netherlands was deeply segregated into so-called pillars and when, according to anthropologist Pieter Geschiere, Dutch people identified first and foremost with their pillar and only secondly with their country, Huizinga famously argued that all Dutch citizens had one common identity and homogeneous culture he called the Dutch spirit. Huizinga characterized the Dutch spirit as constituted by a bourgeoisie expressed through love of freedom and democracy, a mercantile disposition, modesty and soberness, ethical and aesthetic cleanliness, tolerance and honesty, directness and individualism. In that the Dutch spirit is conceived as fixed and existing independently of the perception that individuals and groups may have of themselves, it can be described as an essentialist conception of national identity. Jaffé relied on the Dutch spirit to ‘explain the origin of “De Stijl” and its particular appearance’, for example proposing that De Stijl’s ‘aesthetic sterility’ was
the result of Protestantism’s rejection of exterior materialism.\footnote{Jaffé, op. cit. (note 7), p. 86.}

Soon after, this essentialist approach to national identity was used to explain the Dutchness of Dutch industrial design. In *Industrial Design from the Netherlands* (1964), graphic designer Pieter Brattinga provides an overview of ‘good’ Dutch postwar industrial design (fig. 2).\footnote{Pieter Brattinga, *Industrial Design in the Netherlands*. Minneapolis (Walker Art Center) 1964.} Brattinga explains that industrial design from the Netherlands is distinguished by its particularly Dutch characteristics, which likewise derive from ‘the inherent Dutch spirit’. Brattinga: ‘Jaffé’s observations, made in regard to De Stijl members, can be applied to most native Dutch designers and architects [...] the cleanliness, Calvinism and [bourgeois] public opinion, have had considerable, if subconscious, influence on the shaping of Dutch design.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1.}

In the 1970s, Dutch graphic design gained international recognition partly through the government-backed internationally travelling exhibitions *Dutch Design for the Public Sector I* and *II*, and in the 1990s, the Dutch organization Droog Design placed Dutch product design on the international map (fig. 3-5).\footnote{Frederike Huygen, *Visies op vormgeving: het Nederlandse ontwerpen in teksten 1944–2000. Deel 2*, Amsterdam (Architectura & Natura Pers/Stichting Premsela, Dutch Platform for Design and Fashion) 2008, pp. 345–6.} Droog made the case that although the projects in its collection were materially, visually, and ideologically diverse, they all emanated from a common, ‘typically Dutch’ mentality.\footnote{Timo de Rijk, ‘So-Called Craft: The Formative Years of Droog Design, 1992–1998’, in: *The Journal of Modern Craft* 3, no. 2 (2010); Damon Taylor, ‘Mountain Climbing in Holland: Writing “Dutchness” Into the Discourse’, in: Javier Gimeno Martinez and Fredie Floré (eds.), *Design and Craft: A History of Convergences and Divergences*, Weteren (Universa Press) 2010.} Ramakers and Bakker held that this typically Dutch mentality expressed the nation’s identity, which they characterized as rooted in the country’s seventeenth-century past and with echoes of the Dutch spirit: bourgeoisie and mercantilism, Calvinism and rejection of exterior materialism, tolerance and openness, individualism and independence.\footnote{See especially: Renny Ramakers and Gijs Bakker (eds.) *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties*, Rotterdam (010) 1998.} In the course of time, they argued, this Dutch identity was translated into the country’s material culture, a material culture whose attributes – sobriety, innovative creativity, and conceptuality – in turn embodied and expressed this Dutch identity. To Ramakers and Bakker, this correspondence between Dutch national identity and material culture was perfectly illustrated by the country’s modern and functionalist design tradition, starting with the clean aesthetics of abstraction, geometry, and primary colours of De Stijl. Droog established itself as the progeny of this venerable Dutch design lineage and in the process established Dutch design as the materialization of an essentialist vision of national identity.
Since then, some surprising things started qualifying for the Dutch design label. Dutch design exhibitions, competitions, and publications initiated both at home and abroad started including foreign designers (not only those trained or based in the Netherlands but also those abroad), courses on Dutch design started being taught internationally, and the new national design fund started subsidizing applications by non-Dutch parties for projects outside the country. Through such operations, the term Dutch design has been stretched. This ‘expanded field’ of Dutch design can be understood in terms of what political scientist Anthony D. Smith calls the delocalization of national culture in times of globalization. He argues that global culture is not rootless but comprises diverse, originally nationalized, but now highly mobile cultures.17

However, despite Dutch design’s apparent openness, global mobility, and increasing internal heterogeneity, the essentialist narrative of national culture underpinning it discussed above, where the so-called hallmarks of Dutch design (e.g. sobriety, conceptualism and irony) are explained as natural consequences of the so-called characteristics of the Netherlands, (e.g. Calvinism, the artificially constructed and densely populated Dutch landscape, the political ‘Polder Model’, social responsibility, commerce, and a shortage of natural resources and industries), has proven remarkably resilient.

Now, this unambiguous, stereotypical narrative of Dutch design is clearly an asset in the international cultural market, as it differentiates between and adds value to

otherwise nearly indistinguishable goods and services.\textsuperscript{18} Yet, an implicitly essentialist approach to Dutch design permeates much of the literature as well. This is manifested through the implicit assumption that the national context is the most – or even only – relevant explanatory context for Dutch design. Indeed, the vast majority of Dutch design historiography is characterized by state-centrism, which refers to the limitation of study to the borders of the country, where the exclusive focus is on national cultural, social, economic, and political contexts to the exclusion of transnational developments that may be as, if often not more, relevant to the understanding of the forging of the Dutch design canon.

So what are ways to attend to the Dutch design canon while at the same time going beyond it, or in other words, how can we be critical of it without reinforcing it? Social science scholars call the tendency to limit the explanation of phenomena to the horizon of the nation-state ‘methodological nationalism’.\textsuperscript{19} They observe a number of shortcomings associated with this approach, two of which are particularly relevant to the case at hand.

First, the limitation of the study of Dutch design to the borders of the Netherlands presupposes what historians Siep Stuurman and Maria Grever have called a ‘homogeneous people living in a geographically and temporally stable national space.’\textsuperscript{20} However, as they observe, rather than a self-enclosed entity, today the Netherlands ‘include[s] large numbers of citizens whose immigrant or minority families do not necessarily share a common historical experience.’\textsuperscript{21}

A second shortcoming of methodological nationalism, as constructivist scholars of nationalism have pointed out, is that nation–states are invented traditions rather than self-evident, perennial entities. As Stuurman and Grever argue, this implies that dominant national histories are actually contested fields of ‘competing national narratives linked to competing political agendas for nation-building,’\textsuperscript{22} and as such are deeply entangled in developments that transcend national borders.

This does not imply that national design histories have no place in design scholarship, but that it requires accounting for the heterogeneity of the country’s design cultures not simply by plugging in, or incorporating, designers or designed objects of foreign origins into the already established master narrative of Dutch design.

\textsuperscript{18} About the importance of stereotypical narratives of national identity in the context of the global cultural market, see: Christine Delhaye, ‘Van toefje op de taart naar basisingrediënt: internationaal cultuurbeleid in tijden van globalisering’, in: Boekman 21, no. 80 (2009): pp. 84–5.

\textsuperscript{19} Anna Amelina et al. (eds.), Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Research Methodologies for Cross–Border Studies, New York/London (Routledge) 2012.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 5.
On the contrary, it requires disturbing this comfortable narrative of Dutchness and design by taking into account not only national dynamics but also their connectedness with transnational dynamics and producing entangled histories that take account both of the movements of people, things, images, and ideas as these move across borders and of the processes of attempting to ‘nationalize’ and render familiar such otherwise putatively ‘external’ influences.

To conclude, a final reason why I’m partial to thinking of Dutch design as a discursive construction is that it implies that it can also be re-constructed, or in other words, that there is still room and cause to intervene in the direction Dutch design is taking. And in this, design historians, who are of course in the business of manufacturing discourse, have an active role to play. On the one hand, through revisionist histories that reveal the processes according to which reductive notions of national identity are created and become attached to a select number of practices, and on the other, through the formulation of new and more generous approaches to Dutch identity and material culture. So let us see in which future directions our histories today will take Dutchness and design.

Joana Meroz is a Design Cultures PhD candidate at the VU University Amsterdam and researches the history of the construction of the idea of “Dutch design” in the context of international cultural policy 1970–2012. She has published papers, exhibition and book reviews in academic journals and contributed to The Routledge Companion to Design Studies (2016). With Javier Gimeno Martinez she co-edited the Journal of Design History Special Issue ‘Beyond Dutch Design: Material Culture in the Netherlands in an Age of Globalization, Migration and Multiculturalism’ (2016).
The Dance around the Red Blue Chair

Ida van Zijl

canonise
[kan-uh-nahyz]
verb (used with object), canonised, canonising
ecclesiastical. to place in the canon of saints
to glorify
to make canonical; place or include within a canon, especially of scriptural works:
to consider or treat as sacrosanct or holy
to sanction or approve authoritatively, especially ecclesiastically
archaic. to deify

Introduction

When talking about canonising design, it is good to keep in mind the religious connotation of this verb and to realise that the act of canonising is not a neutral one. Therefore, I will begin with a chronological survey of the presentation and the appreciation of the Red Blue chair, which is closely connected to the historiography of De Stijl, trying also to grasp the intentions behind this story. In the end, we can hopefully discuss the conclusions one may draw from this phenomenon, to take forward in our own practices.

The Red Blue chair

The Slat Chair that was on the cover of the Christie’s auction catalogue of November 1986 was offered to the Centraal Museum in 1982 together with a military chair and two military stools (fig. 1). The chair was bought for 1500,- guilders and the stools for 1000,- guilders each. Although I cannot remember exactly how things unfolded, I remember these pieces of furniture standing in my living room waiting to be transported to the museum while everybody at home, including the
nanny, had a good laugh at the idea that such a bunch of firewood could be of the museum’s interest. It took some effort to convince the museum Board that we should buy them. The acquisition of the armchair was rejected because the museum already had a Red Blue one in the collection. In 1986, the armchair was brought to the aforementioned auction and sold for 110,200,- guilders. Why were the prices for Rietveld furniture rocketing that high in only four years?

Before coming to that, let’s first begin where it all started (fig. 2). Rietveld designed the chair in 1918 or 1919, and it was on view for the first time in an exhibition in September 1919, in Haarlem. More or less at the same time, the piece was published by Theo van Doesburg in De Stijl, and in an anonymous review in De Hollandsche Revue (fig. 3 & 4).¹ There is a subtle, but essential difference in the two entries. Both authors talk about a new form, but De Hollandsche Revue, which is remarkably unrestrained in its praise, mentions the combination of space, function, and material. The text says the following: ‘Where modern architects only simplify and more or less tighten up the old form, therefore always making variations on the old theme [and] staying within the limits of the traditional concept, here a totally new form has taken shape, as our time needs.’ Van Doesburg relates the chair to the function of sculpture in the new interior, and compares it in another article with the work of De Chirico. The chair was definitely recognized as an important design, shown in several exhibitions in Holland and abroad and

also published in a few international magazines, but mostly as a piece of furniture and quite a few times as an example for mass production and machine-made daily objects.²

**Barr and Sandberg**

We are still far from any sign of canonising this design. However, this changed dramatically in 1936 when Alfred Barr made his seminal exhibition and catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* (fig. 5).³ The text in the catalogue reads: ‘Among completed buildings, Rietveld’s house in Utrecht of 1924 illustrates the characteristic asymmetric composition of rectangles and, more important, the partition of space into volumes instead of cubic masses, the principle suggested in Vantongerloo’s sculpture of six years previously […]. Rietveld’s furniture for the house, like the chair […], shows again how the architects of the movement made practical use of the design elements of such abstract pictures as Van Doesburg’s *Cow*.’ From a pure art historical point of view, it is interesting that Barr assigned an important role to De Stijl in the development of abstract art, emphasizing that it was formed in Holland and laying the primacy on painting. Barr also stated that ‘Two elements formed the fundamental basis of the work of de Stijl, whether in painting, architecture or sculpture, furniture or typography: in form, the rectangle; in color, the “primary” hues red, blue and yellow.’ But equally important is his vision that the development of abstract art is closely connected with a political view. He ends his introduction with the statement that: ‘This essay and exhibition might well be dedicated to those painters of squares and circles (and the architects influenced by them) who have suffered at the hands of philistine with political power.’ The general impact of this book and exhibition

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fig. 5 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the development of abstract art, cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936.
can hardly be overestimated. Barr’s ideas have dominated the approach to modern art for decades and are in my view, the beginning of the canonisation of De Stijl.  

Here I will confine myself to the aspects that are relevant for the story of the Red Blue chair. Evert van Uitert made clear that Barr’s vision was shared by his admirer Willem Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and Hans Jaffé, curator in the same institute and the first professor of the History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Netherlands. So when, after World War II, the Stedelijk Museum tried to persuade the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York to hold an exhibition on Dutch modern architecture, this suggestion was met with disinterest; instead, they suggested organising a retrospective on De Stijl. Sandberg saw no problem with this and went ahead. This resulted in the famous De Stijl exhibition in 1951 in the Stedelijk Museum, where Rietveld took up the role of guest curator and designer of the exhibition lay out (fig. 6).

Five years later, in 1956, Jaffé published De Stijl, the Dutch Contribution to Modern Art (fig. 7). In 2014, Samantha Hoekema wrote a thesis entitled ‘De Stijl (1956) als

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4 It is a bit frustrating that I can only spend a few words on this topic, which is so important for our vision on De Stijl and Rietveld. If you are interested in further information, I can recommend the article by Susan Noyes and the inaugural address of Evert van Uitert, Het geloof in de moderne kunst [The Belief in Modern Art]: Susan Noyes Platt, ‘Modernism, Formalism and Politics: “The Cubism and Abstract Art” Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art’, Art Journal (1988); Evert van Uitert, Het geloof in de moderne kunst, Amsterdam (Meulenhoff/Landschoff) 1987. Carel Blotkamp disagreed fundamentally with the latter on this issue.

5 Ibid.

reactie op De Stijl’ (1951). Een onderzoek naar het proef-schrift van Hans Jaffé. Her research concentrates on the question: what was Jaffé’s purpose? She convincingly argues that, according to Jaffé, there were two things missing in the exhibition. First, that painting had the lead in the development of the De Stijl ideas, and secondly that De Stijl was the contemporary manifestation of a mental and moral state of mind in the Netherlands during and after the First World War. He also argued that the formal characteristics of De Stijl were related to the man-made nature of the Netherlands. Both suppositions still play an important part in the canonising of De Stijl. Hoekema thinks that Jaffé felt the need to publish this theory because in the exhibition only the formal aspects of De Stijl were shown, presumably because the form of the exhibition was not perceived as a medium suited to explaining the philosophical and mental origins of an avant-garde movement such as de Stijl. Further, she presumes that Rietveld as guest curator had to take into account the different wishes and opinions of the participants. However, I think she underestimated Rietveld’s stubbornness when it comes to certain principles or opinions. He strongly rejected the idea of a nationalistic origin of the stylistic aspects of De Stijl. He didn’t agree with Jaffé about this particular point and had undoubtedly no intention to illustrate it in the exhibition. Also, in Rietveld’s view De Stijl was not a finished period in art history but a quest for a new style for a society which was ongoing. The exhibition was, in his view, an opportunity to continue the line that was broken off. As a consequence of this opinion, he later added work by architect J.J.P. Oud and work of his own when the exhibition travelled to the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Rome.

Although there is a lot more to say on this subject, I have to cut corners here. Bluntly speaking, one can state that Jaffé won, and from that moment on the canonisation of De Stijl as typically Dutch – the fruit of our national history, our national culture and our wonderful national character – was a fact. It became

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8 Hoekema also suggests that Rietveld placed his work on purpose in the same room as the paintings of Mondrian and by ante-dating the Red Blue chair, claimed his position as a pioneer. Well, maybe I have too much admiration for Rietveld, but this supposition is something that doesn’t fit with my impression of his character.
common practice to compare the work of Mondriaan with the rectangular tulip fields, and, soon, the Red Blue chair came to be seen as a work of art, a three-dimensional Mondrian rather than a piece of furniture. 

The 1982 De Stijl exhibition

In the beginning of the eighties, a second phase began in the canonisation of De Stijl. It started with the 1982 exhibition *De Stijl 1917–1931 Visions of Utopia* organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, also on view at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden in Washington, and in the Netherlands in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the Kröller Müller Museum in Otterlo (fig. 8). This time, there was a big catalogue available for the public. Several authors shone their light on different aspects of De Stijl. But generally speaking, the view of Hans Jaffé was repeated in even stronger terms. For example, Mildred Friedman, curator of the Walker Art Center who took the initiative for the exhibition, wrote that Jaffé introduced the reader to the presumable origins of de Stijl, being the Dutch landscape, Calvinistic religion with its puritanism and iconoclasm, and the philosophy of Spinoza. Five pages further in the catalogue, Jaffé states that it would be wrong to regard the Dutch landscape as a latent example for the

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9 Anyway, at that time, the Red Blue chair was still a piece of furniture, albeit one with exceptional qualities. Like Giedion writes in his book *Mechanisation Takes Command*: ‘As in painting and architecture, it was necessary temporarily to forget everything and begin afresh. (...) These Rietveldian pieces are manifestoes.’ Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History*. New York/London (W.W. Norton & Company) 1969 [first published 1948], pp. 485–487.

paintings of De Stijl, but that there exists a common goal in the work of De Stijl and the striving of the Dutch people to master nature.

Instead of discussing or explaining all the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the national character of De Stijl was propagated in this exhibition and catalogue, let’s concentrate on its effects on the interpretation and appreciation of Rietveld’s work. It is remarkable that in the catalogue only four articles are dedicated to one artist alone or even a single piece of art: Mondrian’s Paris atelier, the Café Aubette designed by Van Doesburg, the famous Rietveld Schröder House, and the furniture of Gerrit Rietveld. The author of the last article, Martin Filler, characterizes Rietveld’s furniture as ‘[…] undoubtedly, part of the most original and important art of this century […], the Red Blue chair, his Berlin chair and his side table not only give a tangible summary of the philosophical doctrines of De Stijl, but more importantly […] the red-blue chair was proof for Van Doesburg and Mondriaan that a satisfactory work of art could be created in accordance with compulsory neo plastic belief in formal reduction, guided by an austere objectivity. […] This remarkable design can justly be called the central artefact of De Stijl.’

Voilà. Martin Filler was also editor of the lifestyle magazine House and Garden. He ends his article by mentioning that Rietveld’s first ranking in the history is also proved by the interest for his designs in the market. Well, we all know the cliché that in any Dutchman there exists a preacher and a salesman fighting each other. How lucky they must be when they can go hand in hand together in their praise of the Red Blue chair. One of the reasons why the price of Rietveld’s furniture escalated that high in the 1980s, at least the pieces that are generally called his ‘Stijl furniture’, is probably due to their being increasingly perceived, by the general public and museums, as pieces of art.
**De Stijl Canonised**

So here we are. The soil was prepared to give design a prominent role in glorifying our Dutch culture in a very broad sense. The best proof and in a way the end of this development was when the Red Blue chair became the representative of De Stijl, with the De Stijl being recognised as an avant-garde movement in design, in the canon of Dutch history in 2006 (fig. 9). It’s no wonder that quite a few artists and designers were and are still inspired by the Red Blue chair (fig. 10).

Commemorating De Stijl next year is again regarded as an opportunity, not only to celebrate the anniversary of this avant-garde movement but also to put the spotlights on Dutch Design and give a boost to international tourism. Although I feel a bit uneasy when I see how Rietveld, Dick Bruna, and ADO toys are thrown together on a big pile, just to attract as many tourists and museum visitors as possible, I can’t really explain why. I could or should be glad that so many people love Rietveld’s work. And what’s


the problem with people seeing other works when primarily interested in Rietveld? However, I don’t think it adds anything to the understanding of De Stijl, of Rietveld’s work, of Dutch culture or anything more significant you could wish for. Maybe I feel a bit uneasy because, again, De Stijl and Rietveld are used for purposes that have nothing to do with the original ideas of De Stijl or Rietveld. This time, they are not used by the preacher, but by the merchant.

Ida van Zijl worked for over thirty years as Design Curator and Vice-Director at the Centraal Museum Utrecht. She was responsible for more than twenty exhibitions and books on Gerrit Rietveld, Gijs Bakker, and Droog Design.
Bauhaus Houses and the Design Canon: 1923-2019

Jeremy Aynsley

Introduction

The focus of this paper is issues central to the reconstruction and display of iconic Modernist houses and how such issues complexify our understanding of the canonical reputation of the Bauhaus. Like the De Stijl movement, the Bauhaus can expect to receive much renewed media and scholarly attention as its centenary year of 2019 approaches. And like De Stijl, it holds pre-eminence in design history as a point when new theories and roles for design were realised by a remarkable set of actors. For its relatively short life of 14 years as a school in Germany, followed by the Chicago years, the Bauhaus has sustained what might be considered to be a disproportionate amount of attention. Indeed, arguably, its short life adds neatness to applying a narrative that suits re-telling and mythification.

By applying the term ‘canon’ to design, we can assume this involves a select set of figures, objects and movements that claim official status, receiving scholarly attention and entering museums and galleries. To do so, they conform to and meet certain criteria. As we know, critical theory, feminism, race theory and post-Marxism have all offered means of critique of the canon, questioning the basis on which it privileges certain histories – at worst, ‘dead white men’ or in the case of the Bauhaus, a site of high conservative modernism. Accordingly, in recent years, revisions in Bauhaus scholarship have also taken place, whether through questioning gender relations and roles at the school, challenging fundamental principles such as functionalism and universalism, or considering its diaspora of influence in a post-colonial context.¹

Before turning to the houses of my focus today, it is perhaps worth teasing out the structures that have been central for the construction of the Bauhaus within the design historical canon:

1) The Name – It begins with the word itself. When in 1919 Gropius chose to bring together the Grand Ducal Saxon Academy for Fine Arts and Grand Ducal Saxon School of Applied Arts State under the title (Staatliches) Bauhaus, his choice of word functioned on several levels. Beyond its literal meaning of ‘Build’ ‘House’ and its reference to Medieval guilds, it functioned richly as a sign, symbol, design, and what we today call ‘brand’. This proved effective in its lifetime and beyond, as testified by its borrowing by the now defunct UK post-punk band and the contemporary major German DIY Bauhaus chain store.

2) Then there are the Actors (principally male) who are the individual protagonists identified in the familiar narratives we encounter, engaging in the debates about art and technology, applied art or industrial design, and individual patronage or major complex architectural schemes;

3) The Manifestos – offering graphic immediacy and future soundbites;

4) The Exhibitions – promoting the school’s aesthetic philosophy;

5) Publications – self-publication as promotion, notably the Bauhausbücher written by staff and fellow travellers through which ideas travelled abroad;

6) The Journal – available for just an affordable 2 Reichsmark;
7) The Products themselves – however paradoxical they are or how much they qualify the claims made for them;

8) The subsequent curation in later years, essential for the longevity of the brand through archives and collections. Among the important steps of these was the exhibition organised by Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius and Herbert Bayer at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1938 – possibly the ultimate canonisation.²

9) The establishment of the Bauhaus Archiv, originally in Darmstadt in 1960 and Hans Maria Wingler’s magnum opus, Bauhaus, designed by Muriel Cooper at MIT Press; and subsequent developments in Berlin, Dessau and Weimar in the 1970s and 80s.³

10) Then there was the growing global interest in Bauhaus and Ulm legacies, as in the People’s Republic of China, shown in the exhibitions at Tsinghua University in 2010.

We might end with the plans for the new Bauhaus Design Museum in Weimar, along with the extension at the Bauhaus Archiv, both scheduled for 2019.

Haus am Horn

Turning now to my two case studies: the Haus am Horn in Weimar (1923) and the Bauhaus Meister houses in Dessau (1925–1926) have complex exhibition histories. In brief, my aim is to argue that prioritising ‘authenticity’ in their historical reconstruction has been key to promoting the canonical reputation of the Bauhaus. Located in former East Germany between 1948 and 89, their recuperation and entry into the Modernist canon was affected by political and geographical factors, far from smooth or straightforward. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German re-unification, the Bauhaus received considerably more attention. Symptomatic of this was recognition of its buildings in the award as UNESCO world heritage sites in 1996.⁴

The Haus am Horn in Weimar was originally built to coincide with the first major exhibition of the school, held in 1923 to justify to the city authorities that the school warranted continued financial support from the local government.

This was when Gropius re-oriented the school from an emphasis on individualistic arts and crafts thinking to more programmatic design.

After its exhibition in 1923, the house became widely known through publication, as subject of the third in the series of the Bauhaus books. The house was called an ‘Experiment’ or ‘Versuch’ Haus. Designed by Georg Muche, it was a single building intended for a married couple with a child and a daily, not live-in maid, and intended as a prototype for a settlement of new dwelling types. These were never realised, owing to continuing financial difficulties facing the school and the local authority, and neighbouring residents’ resistance to what was considered an alien building style. As Muche was not a trained architect, Gropius’s office took over the full preparation of the plans although a later record shows his attempts to disown this involvement. Its comfortable, leafy, bürgerlich setting, overlooking Park an der Ilm, forms a strong contrast to the usual image of Haus am Horn as an icon of technical modernity in representation: bare, austere and functional. The house was built using mortar and concrete blocks, under the patent name of Jurkosteine, then rendered white. Muche favoured standard industrialised materials that could be bought off the shelf by any builder. In the future, this would create significant challenges for curators and conservators involved in the house’s restoration.

The house was planned as a ribbon of rooms around a central room, leading from the hall to a guest room, the man’s bedroom, bathroom, lady’s room, child’s bedroom and playroom, dining room, and kitchen with walk-in cupboards. The central reception and living room and study, four meters in height, crucially functioned well as an exhibition space at many stages of its life. In tune with other modernist architects, Muche provided the equipment and environment for modern everyday life. The child’s room was provided with wooden units in primary colours to encourage constructive play. Particular attention was given to new technologies for the home. Lighting throughout was by innovative inset panels with rear reflectors, intended to avoid unnecessary free-standing or

Following the 1923 exhibition, the house was sold to a judge and became the family home for which it had been intended. This family extended it in what was considered a sympathetic way, adding a winter garden and terrace on the southern side. This was the last visually well-documented stage of the house before the period of National Socialism and World War II intervened. In 1951, with the stabilising political situation, the house became property of the GDR State and was used for much-needed emergency housing allocation. By the 1960s, art, design and architectural historical interest in the Bauhaus had grown in both East and West Germany. By 1971, active participants in this movement, Bernd and Marlis Grönwald became tenants of the Haus am Horn, Bernd being one of the GDR’s most prominent architectural theoreticians. Together, the couple took on the major task of renovating the house. So, for example, in the bathroom red and white plastic curtains by Malimo, a ‘Pop’ GDR design available in the 1980s. They combined examples of Bauhaus provenance furniture with their own self-build. Here, rattan furniture designed by Erich Dieckmann and Hirschfeld-Macke in the spirit of the house. In 1976, the Grönwalds took the important step of establishing the series of Bauhaus colloquia, drawing international visitors, largely architects, architectural historians and curators to the house. The guest-book is a roll-call of leading figures in world architecture.

With re-unification, the status of the members of the GDR architectural establishment came under significant criticism, so much so that in early 1991 Bernd Grönwald committed suicide in the house. Marlis remained the house’s custodian and curator, continuing to live there until more ambitious reconstruction plans took effect. The Haus am Horn was substantially restored in 1998–9 with the aim of returning its structure to its 1923 state. It is currently overseen by the Friends of the Bauhaus University of Weimar. Through this, a strong connection is established between house and school. The house is currently visited as part of an architectural walk, the Bauhaus Spaziergang.

The material legacy of the house between late 1920s and 1998 now has been
eradicated. As the guidebook says, ‘The model house was continually reshaped by its inhabitants. [...] Today, all modifications and accretions have been eliminated, all traces of well-intended improvements scrupulously erased, and no inhabitants are in sight.’ A question of the future curation of the house remains and it could be hoped that with non-invasive exhibition technologies, parts of the social history of the house might be told in future displays, along with the material fabric so important for its status as architectural monument.

**The Dessau Meisterhäuser**

The second group of houses, known collectively as the *Meisterhäuser* or Master Houses were built according to the designs of Walter Gropius in 1926 to accommodate the staff who had moved with him from Weimar to Dessau. With only three years separating the two schemes, the latter houses appear much more resolved as buildings. The detached house was intended for Gropius as director. The others, three double units, were for teachers László Moholy-Nagy and Lyonel Feininger; Georg Muche and Oskar Schlemmer; and Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee – an illustrious group. Although the period of residency by Bauhäusler was only up to 1932, when the Bauhaus was forced to close and move to Berlin, these houses hold such an important place in the construction of the history of the school it is these first years that form the benchmark for their interpretive reconstruction. In contrast to the Haus am Horn, the context for the Bauhaus master houses is other contemporary modernist buildings in the district, seen as the fulfillment of the ideal visionary complex, largely realised by Gropius and his office.

Even during their construction the houses were filmed and the houses became acclaimed through their extensive publication. In particular, Lucia Moholy’s images presented the houses in Modernist rhetoric of the New Photography with strong contrasts, heavy shadows and experimental points of view. From these largely black and white photographs, the buildings are coded as white abstract forms broken by asymmetrical fenestration, with acute angles of cantilevered balconies. Extending the concept of the house as *Wohnmaschine* or machine for living, their praxis was recorded in a film made by architect Richard Paulick, *Wie wohnen wir gesund und wirtschaftlich* (How we live in a healthy and economic way) in 1926. This often humorous performance of the house by fashionably-dressed Ise Gropius and her friend, shows her enthusiastically demonstrating its features, while the maid is depicted using the rationalised kitchen. The mythical status of these houses was therefore immediately established. Yet, we are also told that the masters hung curtains on the three-storey vertical staircase windows for the sake of privacy. They subdivided the larger rooms and built partitions, while Gropius’s

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9 Philipp Ostwalt et al., *Bauhaus Travel Book*, Cologne (Du Mont Verlag) 2012, p.49.
cellar was full of his other belongings to allow the upstairs to conform to the modernist ideal. Architectural historian Robin Schuldenfrei has described how photographs were re-touched to stress their austere modernity in ways that stressed their apparent functionalism. In one case, the marble sinks in the Gropius house were painted out to appear like standard fittings, more in tune with the machine aesthetic.

Official narrative now offered in the interpretations by the Bauhaus Foundation shows a marked bias, even hostility towards history of the GDR. Here, historian Winfried Brenne, ‘The GDR violently damaged this architecture, depriving it of any possibility of articulating itself outwardly. Within, these buildings were simply papered over, their historic context erased. The occupants recognized only their utilitarian value, and were insensible to their historical status.’

Colour has played an important role through its relative absence or presence during their reconstruction. After the briefest original flirtation with Agfa colour in the 1920s, ironically, the master houses entered the world of colour photography only to emphasise their neglect during the GDR years. Then, in the 1990s, colour became the defining feature of the houses. Newly re-discovered and restored, their colour was used to differentiate them from each other and dispelled modernist interpretation of the ‘international style’ as a black and white affair, as so often suggested by earlier publications in the aftermath of Postmodern critique. Conservation scientists, for example, discovered that the Feininger house held traces of 40 different paint colours, while the Kandinsky/Klee houses included as many as 200 between them. With the choice of seven houses to display, complementary curatorial strategies could be adopted for each. No house had an extant collection of furniture – it was therefore impossible to consider a period room approach. As a self-reflexive gesture, the renovation is now displayed in the stripped down basement of the main Bauhaus building in a gallery entitled ‘archaeology of the modern’. In certain instances, the material history of the houses was retained, as here, remnants of paint and flooring surfaces reveal the layering of changing taste.

In the early 2000s attention turned to the remaining unresolved sites: the Gropius director’s house and Moholy-Nagy’s house; both had been severely damaged in the final stages of the war. During the GDR years the Moholy house had been restored almost beyond recognition, while the ground plan of the Gropius house

had been retained by the Emmer family, who commissioned local architect Alfred Müller to add a traditional gable, windows and wall surfaces that conformed to standard GDR housing types. In discussions about their reconstruction, the choice was to conserve what remained; to reconstruct to an original notion of authenticity, or more controversially, to make something new, for which the phrase ‘Updating’ – Aktualisierung – the Modern was used.13

The winners of the competition were the Berlin-based office of Bruno Fioretti Marquez, whose concept they called – ‘precise uncertainty’ – ‘präzisen Unschärfe’. The houses opened in May 2014 to much fanfare. Reconstructed spatially on the original footprint to define the same physical form as the previous buildings, they are composed of grey on white surfaces with blank windows. Interpretation is limited to text and image panels, largely placed horizontally on the half-height dividing walls to avoid intruding on the architectural space – or by means of an audio-guide. The buildings’ monochrome surfaces create a sense of hovering that changes according to the natural and artificial light conditions. Their interiors reveal the three-storey structure and plain undecorated surfaces of polished concrete that act to provide imaginary space. In many respects, they work as palimpsests, with referents that are not materially present. As reconstructions, re-presenting sites of monument and memory, I think they can be placed in the sculptural tradition of an artist such as Rachel Whiteread.

14 Ibid., pp. 62–64.
Conclusion

The preservation of Modernist heritage such as the Bauhaus houses raises important political and economic questions. In the case of Dessau, Dr. Regina Bittner of the Bauhaus Foundation warned, ‘The reconstruction of the Masters’ Houses would [therefore] immortalise Dessau as a Bauhaus city, albeit with a form of architecture that would extinguish a variety of local identities in the name of an international style, and for which a small, crisis-riddled city in Saxony-Anhalt would pay the price.’14 One could suggest Bittner’s comment highlights the hazard for such houses entering the design canon. The Bauhaus houses, highly significant documents of architectural Modernism, continue to inform current practice, serving a global professional and academic community, while also operating as sites of cultural tourism. Current strategies for their display and interpretation do not reflect the recent material culture turn or fascination for everyday life which inform many other historic house museums. Instead, the case of the Bauhaus houses reveals how attention to the authenticity of material evidence and respect for their conception as innovative architectural monuments have been priorities for their care, conservation and display, in turn, reinforcing their canonical status.

Jeremy Aynsley is Professor of Design History and leads the ‘Internationalising Design History research cluster’ at the University of Brighton. His publications include Graphic Design in Germany 1890–1945 (2000) and Designing Modern Germany (2010).
The question I’d like to bring to this conference is this one: how is distributed design criticism and participatory curation reshaping the evaluative judgments by which the design canon is imagined, constructed and maintained, and what pressures does that reshaping put on us, as consumers, producers, and sifters of this canon?

The notion of a design canon became fused with the concept of ‘good design’ and its partner, ‘good criticism’, propounded by establishment institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Council of Industrial Design in the UK in the mid-twentieth century.¹ Etymologically, the term ‘canon’ can be tracked back to the classical Latin for a ‘measuring rule’, and to the Greek for ‘any straight rod or bar; standard of excellence’.² A canon of good design indicated an implicit consensus about what the measurements on this rule were, and the presence of a supporting infrastructure that included a belief in professional expertise and the desire and means for a shared central conversation.

Clearly, in those terms, the design canon would seem to be an anachronistic impossibility in today’s world of cultural relativism, the democratization of media, amateur enthusiasms and niche interests. On YouTube alone, there are 37 million videos devoted to the topic of design.³ It’s unlikely that the notion of an authoritative list of exemplars of design, with the critic and curator as gatekeepers to this list, still holds. Design history came of age as a discipline in the late 1970s right when establishment values such a design canon, which had tended to privilege a Western, male version of design excellence, were being questioned and reframed through the lenses of gender, post-colonialism, popular culture, and

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environmental impact. And yet, as the title of this conference of design historians attests, we still refer to it.

So where is this canon exactly? Perhaps its still at the MoMA, somewhere amongst the thousands of objects in the museum’s design collection, which was established in 1932. Or maybe it’s at the Stedelijk Museum, which has been collecting design since 1934. And yet, both these institutions, among others, are discussing the closure of their design galleries. Today you have to search out design from amongst the art and, as the Stedelijk’s website tell us, in the museum store.4

Younger design museums are turning to their audiences to help fill out their collections, and strangely it’s here we see the design canon surfacing.

For the inaugural exhibition at London’s newly re-opened Design Museum, people

4 ‘The Stedelijk is also a design museum, and our collection traces the history of design from 1900 to the present with furniture, ceramics, posters, jewelry, and other objects. Among our most cherished pieces are examples of Italian and Scandinavian design and, of course, work by Dutch designers. And if you’re eager for more, drop in at the museum shop, where you’ll find the latest work by Dutch designers for sale at prices to suit all budgets. There’s something for everyone.’ Stedelijk Museum Website, http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/visit-us/visit-our-world-class-collection#sthash.oOQdOQ3T.dpuf (accessed January 14, 2017).
were asked to contribute their favourite designed objects to make a Crowdsourced wall (fig. 1). What’s striking about the display of 200 nominated objects from 25 countries, is not how radical, tasteless, or anti-canonical these examples are, but rather how seamlessly they fit into the museum. Retailer and Design Museum founder Terence Conran has been grooming his consumers to his vision of design since the 1960s (when he opened his first Habitat stores) and his museum-goers since 1981 (when he and Steven Bayley initiated the Boilerhouse Project in the basement of the V&A museum and which grew into the Design Museum in 1989). He should be pleased with the results of the Crowdsourced wall since so many of the objects we see here, pinned like prize butterflies, reflect back the values of a Conranian canon. In the Wilkinson Sword orange scissors, the box of Swan Vesta matches, and the bulldog clip we see a continuation of his celebration of humble household tools and a particular brand of everyday British modernism. Meanwhile the Chemex coffee maker and the Exacompta green marbled document file are descendants of the more sensual and exotic accessories Conran sourced from Europe. Together they represent the enduring legacy of what a profile of Conran on the Design Museum characterizes as the ‘aesthetics of utility’.

Of course, the Design Museum shaped the public input with their leading questions, such as ‘Of the objects you own, which do you feel is the most practical?’ and ‘What object do you find most beautiful?’. It has displayed the results on a unifying white grid of tiles, thus de–emphasizing and assimilating the heterogeneous potential of such contributions, and both returning them to the graph paper of the drawing board – to their perfect embryonic states – and to the graphic grid of the double page spread of a magazine where box-freshness is celebrated as a virtue. But even so, it is remarkable how many of these publicly nominated objects are design establishment approved, and have been at least since the 1980s: items on show include a Sony Walkman, a Coca-Cola can, and the Olivetti Valentine typewriter, all of which had been presented in 1980s Boilerhouse exhibitions. The Design Museum display doesn’t seek to understand why people chose these things and what they might look like in use, in the wild, but rather the museum has sought to neutralize any difference between them and what’s already in the museum – or the shop for that matter.

And this is typical of other crowd-sourced exhibitions and publicly voted competitions, which, as they are currently configured and presented, tend to echo the values of those that are curator-led and juried by experts (just like the musical definition of canon, where a melody is imitated by one or more voices at fixed intervals of pitch and time). Seeking to engage with the crowd is an admirable

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ambition for today’s design museums, but true public participation is still inhib-
ited by the strictures and structures of curators and exhibition designers, and thus
remains untapped; design museums, it seems, are still clinging to their canons.

So what about the written word on page and screen? Is there more to be gleaned
from the online media landscape where we don’t have John Pawson buildings to
demarcate separation between crowd and curator, and where boundaries between
them and us, good and bad, are much more fluid. Here, colourful commentary on
the designed environment, ranging from consumer products to playgrounds, golf
courses, prisons, and public plazas written by consumer-citizens on sites like Yelp
and Tripadvisor, exist within the same continuum as those published by profes-
sional design critics.

The reviews that go beyond the standard fare are those that use tools in the
design critic’s repertoire, but especially those that evoke worlds in which absurd
products, like a laptop tray that attaches to your car’s steering wheel or a banana
slicer, make some kind of sense. The author Geoff Dyer has given the label ‘imagi-
native criticism’ to the mode in which he wrote a collection of semi-fictional riffs
on the lives and works of jazz musicians. Instead of merely describing saxophonist
Lester Young’s ‘wispy, skating-on-air’ tone, for example, Dyer paints a picture
of everything that he imagines having led up to that tone: the untouched plates of
Chinese food in Young’s hotel room, the non-ringing phone, the gins with sherry
chasers, his porkpie hat and cologne bottles on the bedside cabinet, and the con-
densation on the hotel window as he gazes across Broadway at Birdland.

In the preface to his book But Beautiful, Dyer writes: ‘Before long I found I had
moved away from anything like conventional criticism. The metaphors and similes
on which I relied to evoke what I thought was happening in the music came to
seem increasingly inadequate. Moreover, since even the briefest simile intro-
duces a hint of the fictive, it wasn’t long before these metaphors were expanding
themselves into episodes and scenes. As I invented dialogue and action, so what
was emerging came more and more to resemble fiction. At the same time, though,
these scenes were still intended as commentary on either a piece of music or on
the particular qualities of a musician.’

I’ll give you three examples of Amazon product reviews that exemplify the princi-
ples of imaginative criticism, as described by Dyer.

This is a self-washing, self-flushing cat toilet (fig. 2). Moved to share his experi-
ence of the product with other potential customers on Amazon, NA ‘Cat Lover’
from Tampa, Florida, began his review like this: ‘Cat Genie takes the small
unpleasantness of daily cleaning the litter and it saves it up and releases that

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unpleasantness as one big unscheduled, unpleasant inconvenience every week or
two. You may be pleasantly awoken in the middle of the night by the repeating
three beeps of “there’s poo and hair in the hopper”. You will become more famil-
 iar with your cat’s feces every day as the cat genie gently fills your home with the
aroma of baking excrement.  

Here is a T-shirt adorned with three airbrushed wolves howling at a spectral
moon (fig. 3). The reviewer, B. Govern, exploits our familiarity with the traits of
the demographic he supposes would be likely to wear such a T-shirt: “This item
has wolves on it which makes it intrinsically sweet and worth 5 stars by itself, but
once I tried it on, that’s when the magic happened. After checking to ensure that
the shirt would properly cover my girth, I walked from my trailer to Walmart with
the shirt on and was immediately approached by women. The women knew from
the wolves on my shirt that I, like a wolf, am a mysterious loner who knows how
to “howl at the moon” from time to time (if you catch my drift!).”

And this is the unfortunate Bic product ‘Pens for Her’ which has generated a whole
slew of deliciously acerbic feminist reviews (fig. 4). One, by Jessica Trapp, begins:
‘My husband bought a box of these for me. I was SO excited that, finally, I would be
able to write after watching him do it for all these years. My excitement turned to
tears when I realized that they do not come with paper—for—her. Please, BIC, con-
sider making some feminine paper products so I can use my new pens.”

Even though it functions as a bustling bazaar, visually the Amazon site is devoid

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R32RN0APNFZAUM (accessed April 23, 2016).
DXZHQ26YX/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000OE20LU (accessed April 23, 2016).
10 Jessica Trapp, ‘There’s a glitch’, Amazon, 2012, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/customer-
reviews/R1Y8K982U44R3W/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B004FTGJUW> (ac-
cessed January 14, 2017).
of any images of people, or the circumstances in which its goods might be used. User reviews provide the disembodied objects with human context – verbal *mise-en-scènes* – in which they can be imagined more vividly. The reviews use satire, characterization, and scene-setting to entice the reader into a very particular world and then, by providing enough convincing detail, they persuade the reader to stay. The detail reassures the reader that the authors have actually used and reflected on the product in question – that they actually care. In the case of the CatGenie, it is the way NA Cat Lover notes the *three* beeps of the machine’s alarm; with the T-shirt, it is the accumulation of brands and entities that accessorize the T-shirt wearer’s lifestyle – Mountain Dew, Walmart, crystal meth, and the courtesy scooter. And with the pen, it’s the author’s mention of the dots above the i’s manifesting as hearts.

Online product review software also includes a function that allows a user to rank other people’s reviews. On Amazon ranking is determined only with the criterion of ‘helpfulness’, a quality that was clearly selected for the way in which it impels one to practical action – and specifically, the act of consumption – rather than contemplation. On Yelp, the choice is ‘useful, funny, or cool’, a triumvirate abbreviated to UFC in Yelp-shorthand.

Terms like ‘usefulness’ and ‘helpfulness’ can be seen as descendants of a modernist, instrumentalist stock of vocabulary used to evaluate design, which include such terms as ‘utility’, ‘function’, and ‘purpose’, and which have, over time, seeped over into the evaluation of design criticism itself.

The readers of online product reviews are also invited to comment on them and to add their own reviews in response, creating a kind of self-aware metadiscourse around the practice of online reviewing. The Three Wolf Moon T-shirt review has garnered thousands of responses and new reviews that emulate the style of the original. And a narrative poem that channels Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Raven’, written about Tuscan Whole Milk 1 gallon, has spawned its own meme of reviews. One reader remarked: ‘After reading a few hundred, I had to compose my own. I still check the site for new reviews’.

In some ways, the work of these online reviewers represents not a deviation from the true enterprise of professional design criticism but, rather, a logical extension of

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a democratizing impulse that, for many of its pioneers, has always been at its core. Ever since the early 1950s, when product design criticism emerged as a genre in its own right alongside the industrial design profession, design critics have said that one of their main goals is to enable their readers to perform their own criticism.

In fact, in at least one case, it worked out exactly like that. In 1958, Judith Ransom Miller, an Industrial Design magazine reader and mother of four boys with large feet, sent in a manuscript of an article about the experience of being a consumer of socks via the Sears Roebuck Catalogue. Ralph Caplan, who was editor at the time, published the article and later hired her as the magazine’s West Coast correspondent. In framing her socks article in the magazine, Caplan observed: ‘Here was a consumer who had something to say to designers, and could say it. In the belief that consumers should be heard as well as sold, I.D. dispatched a letter saying, “OK, you win. Who are you?” The answer: “I am a catalog consumer with a clinical turn of mind, interested in catalog merchandising as a means of modifying the design of some industrially produced goods, and as a vehicle for influencing the quality of consumship.”’

The British design critic Reyner Banham, writing in general-interest magazines such as New Society and New Statesman, made his subject matter accessible and his critical process visible, with a view to empowering the casual observer to comment on their own designed environment. In a 1983 essay, ‘O Bright Star’, about the design of a sheriff’s badge, for example, he described his research and evaluative process step by step, from the moment the decoration of the badge excited his curiosity, and he identified ‘the problem of who designs sheriffs’ stars’, through his dogged tracking of the source of its design and manufacture via libraries, police authorities, a factory’s pattern shop; and finally to his realization, as the result of an overhead telephone call, that the badge was, in effect, designed by the Acme Star and Badge Co. secretary.

Another writer committed to the transparency of the critical process and the democratisation of design criticism was Jane Thompson, who coedited Industrial Design magazine in the late 1950s and pragmatically analysed washing machines, cutlery, and cars, drawing as much from her experience as a user of these products as from her connoisseurial training at Smith College and the MoMA. Thompson believed her critical writing of the period was about ‘trying to explain something so that the other person can have an opinion or evaluate it as well as you’. This desire to open up the mechanisms of design criticism has contributed to its current

precarious and contentious position on the blurred continuum of online media.

Design criticism is, by necessity, more self-aware of its proximity to the marketplace, its complicity with commerce and consumerism, than are other critical genres like art or literature. Amateur design criticism, located at the heart of the biggest online marketplace, illuminates and typifies many of the issues that are now central to the ways in which criticism’s status and identity is being reshaped in the early twenty-first century. They include the differences between review and critique, recreation and professionalism, populism and elitism, instrumentalism and contemplation, production and consumption, as well as the role of ethics, consumerism, the nature of work, and time.

Today, design criticism is uncertain about how and where to gather its publics, and for what ends. Professional criticism’s relevancy as a gatekeeper has been usurped by the irreversible realities of an instantaneous publishing landscape where, as Clay Shirky tells us, ‘everyone is a media outlet’.\(^{16}\) Now that our reading predilections are monitored so relentlessly, we signal our endorsement of certain pieces of design criticism, and the worldview they represent, not just with each comment, ‘share’ and ‘like’, but also with each page view, and even with our search terms. We trawl our daily streams, retrieving images, messages, tweets, videos, and links, and reconstructing these fragments into customized and personalized feeds. We aggregate our customized design criticism from the millions of users’ perspectives on products, appliances, interiors, and services as well as from in-depth, reporting-based essays about designers and design ideas, in general interest publications like *The New Yorker* or *The Guardian*, from documentaries on Vimeo, podcasts on 99% Invisible, from lectures, community meetings, protests, and from scholarly peer-reviewed papers on Academia.edu, for example. Despite the eclectic sources of this new reading-viewing-listening-participating experience, ultimately its distinctions are smoothed over and flattened, a tendency which MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte had in 1995 prophetically dubbed the ‘Daily Me’, and which results, troublingly, in our being exposed only to content we are already inclined to agree with.\(^{17}\)

Our ability to discern the various textures of the authors’ voices, the political and ethical worldviews of the commissioning agents, and the contexts of ongoing conversations and reference points – which were once all more evident when criticism came in a publication-shaped package – has been traded in for the seemingly ideal conditions of instantaneous, accessible, popular criticism currently being


\(^{19}\) Brian Thill, *Waste*, New York (Bloomsbury Academic), 2015, p. 25.
conducted across three billion interconnected personal microcultures.

In my conception of design criticism, critics operate at the very brink of the landfill site, salvaging some products from its depths, but also hastening the descent of others through its condemnation or indifference.

Like the contractors and scavengers who amass, and comb through, Victorian London’s rubbish heaps in *Our Mutual Friend* – hoping to find treasure in the ‘Coal–dust, vegetable–dust, bone–dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust, – all manner of Dust’, so design curators and critics amass and comb through the looming detritus of contemporary society, temporarily arresting the progress of products, on their journey from factory to junkyard, and diverting them toward a spot–lit, white plinth or a glossy, double–page spread. As the creators of the 2014 Landfull project remind us, ‘The value of a product is always in flux between appreciable, transient, and rubbish states’. Two practices – sorting and extraction – which are highlighted in their video, that imagines an alternate near future in which people comb the tideline flotsam and jetsam gleaning for worth, become the essential skills of our time.

Today, therefore, just like Dickens’ dust mound denizens, and the many design critics that have followed them – Victorian design reformists, post–war taste anaesthetists, environmentalists and Drop City communitarianists, junk merchants, urban beachcombers, bloggers, American Pickers, and Yelpers – it is we, the public ourselves, who must be the sifters, and not just of designed products, but also of what Brian Thill calls our ‘endlessly accumulated tabflab’, the constantly updating, linking, tagging, and streaming piles of our daily digital detritus.

As we are increasingly charged with the responsibility to create and curate our own canons, based not just on excellence and aesthetics, but taking into account new and more urgent measurements such as repairability, sustainability, and social impact, we must be critical of the algorithms that seek to determine our preferences. On our screens but also well beyond them in our streets, schools, studios, museums and meetings, we must continue to make, identify and use the kinds of design criticism with the potential to enrich the ways we think about design, to diagnose symptoms of harmful and wasteful practice, conduct informed salvage missions, and then illuminate paths to recovery.

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The I Love SU T-shirt

Cyril Tjahja and Marlom Aguiar

Introduction

Nowadays, the variety of messages, quotes, and logos that appear on T-shirts has become enormous, embodying different messages, philosophies and ways of self-expression. This is not a recent phenomenon, however, using T-shirts to communicate specific types of information dates back to the late 1940s when T-shirts were used to display political slogans. In the 1960s, commercial logos and other types of designs started to appear on T-shirts as well. Although other items of clothing have been used to convey certain messages or information, the T-shirt can be considered a special case. Diana Crane notes that ‘unlike the hat in the nineteenth century, which signalled (or concealed) social class status, the T-shirt speaks to issues related to ideology, difference, and myth: politics, race, gender, and leisure.’

The I Love SU T-shirt, most probably based on the I Love NY logo used in the US to promote New York City for tourism purposes, changes the topic of adoration to the country of Suriname, instead of the original North American city. Since its official introduction in 2010, the T-shirt has been extremely popular in its native Suriname as well as the sizeable Surinamese population living in the Netherlands, where it is worn mostly, although not exclusively, by Dutch citizens of Surinamese descent (fig. 1). The I Love SU T-shirt can therefore frequently be seen on the streets of Amsterdam and other Dutch cities, especially in the warmer months of the year.

In this article, the values and meanings of the I Love SU T-shirt among the Surinamese population in the Netherlands, and in particular the Bijlmer area of Amsterdam will be explored. Comparing the T-shirt’s original connotations in Suriname, in order to determine to what extent the I Love SU T-shirt could be considered as an example of Dutch material culture, and therefore Dutch Design, instead of an accessory worn by Surinamese ‘immigrants’.

How Dutch is Dutch Design?

The notion of ‘Dutch Design’ (with capital ‘D’) has its roots in the beginning of the 1990s, when designers such as Jurgen Bey, Tejo Remy, Jan Konings and Marcel Wanders started to design objects which were not only characterised by limiting the considerations to its form but also highlighted the importance of the function and meaning behind the object. Dutch Design has since then taken flight, with many more young Dutch designers being featured in international design magazines and books. In most (Dutch) design history books, the characteristics of Dutch Design are usually described as critical, ironic, and conceptual (or intellectual), and characterised by the designers’ social and ethical responsibility. In addition, Dutch Design rearranges familiar objects into new objects, through which a ‘better world’ can be created. These characteristics are based on properties which are arguably inherently Dutch, such as the country’s flat rectangular landscape, the tradition of co-operation (the so-called ‘polder model’) and its Calvinistic roots.

This perspective on Dutch Design can be considered as a top-down essentialist view, in the sense that the Dutch culture, which is supposed to be the underlying factor in Dutch Design, is singular, static, and evolved from a continuous history, mediated by the government. Moreover, the essentialist perspective tends to

emphasise ‘high’ (official) culture over ‘low’ (popular and vernacular) culture. The main problem with this view is that it does not take into account that The Netherlands is, in fact, a multicultural, super-diverse country, comprised of various other nationalities and ethnicities other than the ‘autochthonous’ (ethnic) Dutch. Therefore, so-called ‘allochthonous’ (non-native) Dutch designers who do not fit the criteria described above will most likely never be included in anything labelled ‘Dutch Design’ and the same goes for the material culture of the allochthonous population of The Netherlands.

This tendency is also reflected in the selection of the finalists and winners of the Dutch Design Awards (DDA), one of the most important design awards in the Netherlands. Considered as the highlight of the annual Dutch Design Week (DDW), the awards are intended to recognise ‘the very best of Dutch design in different categories’. In this open competition which has been held since 2003, a shortlist is compiled by a selection committee from which an international jury will ultimately decide on the winners. In addition, the DDA organisation states on its website that it ‘actively promotes Dutch design and the finalists (inter)nationally’.

However, an analysis of the DDA archives of finalists and winners from 2003 until 2014 (table 1) shows that virtually all individual designers who have achieved the status of finalist or winner of a Dutch Design Award are autochthonous Dutch (162 designers, 95%), whereas the percentage of allochthonous Dutch designers who managed to do the same is extremely low (2 designers, 1%). This number is in stark contrast with the actual percentage of the allochthonous population in the Netherlands, which is 21%. Strikingly, the number of ‘foreign’ designers (not born in the Netherlands) who were either a DDA finalist or winner is almost 4%, of which two-thirds has graduated from a design school in the Netherlands. Furthermore, one DDA winner was not born, educated nor ever based in the Netherlands.

This brings into question to what extent the DDA represents a truthful image of Dutch design(ers), as it appears that a designer is most likely to win the award if he or she is autochthonous Dutch, or to a lesser extent, if he or she is a foreigner who received design education in the Netherlands. The chance for an allochthonous Dutch designer to win a Dutch Design Award, however, only seems to be a fraction higher than someone who does not have any connection with the Netherlands at all (regardless of the fact as to whether the latter should have been

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eligible for a DDA in the first place). As the organisation behind the DDA and DDW plays an important role in the promotion of Dutch design, both in the Netherlands and abroad, it too contributes to the promotion of the essentialist view of Dutch design, be it deliberately or unintentionally.

Therefore, a more truthful and representative way to approach the subject of Dutch Design would be a constructivist approach, in which the concept of ‘Dutch Design’ would be considered as being constructed as a discourse. In this approach, the identities of nation states are not assumed to be static, but variable, depending on historical, cultural, political, and social contexts.\(^\text{10}\) By using Dutch material culture as a starting point instead of Dutch ‘Design’, a more realistic image can be obtained in which all inhabitants of the Netherlands, and not only the autochthonous Dutch, are represented, and to which all Dutch citizens can relate to.

Examining the consumption of the *I Love SU* T-shirt in the Bijlmer area of Amsterdam, in which almost half the inhabitants claim Surinamese descent, presents an opportunity to challenge the established views on Dutch Design by providing an alternative bottom-up perspective, potentially leading to a reconsideration of what is commonly accepted as ‘Dutch’ or even what is considered ‘Design’.

In the next sections, the history of the Surinamese in the Bijlmer will be discussed in brief, followed by the background and origin of the *I Love SU* T-shirt. Subsequently, possible reasons for the Surinamese to wear the T-shirt in the Bijlmer will be elaborated on. These hypotheses were tested by conducting a questionnaire. In conclusion, the findings will be analysed, discussed and placed into the broader context of the Dutch Design discourse.

**The Surinamese and the Bijlmer**

Following Suriname’s independence in 1975, many of its inhabitants migrated to the Netherlands, its former coloniser. The Dutch government, assuming that the Surinamese would be exuberant with their newly obtained independence and would therefore remain in Suriname, were confronted with an unpleasant surprise. Between 1970 and 1980, almost 300,000 Surinamese came to the Netherlands, which was almost half of Suriname’s total population at the time. The Dutch government, ill-prepared for the massive influx of new arrivals, placed many of the new immigrants in affordable social housing in a newly built area in the southeast of Amsterdam known as the Bijlmermeer, usually referred to by locals by its short form, the *Bijlmer* (fig. 2). Whereas the percentage of Surinamese in Amsterdam lies around 9% of the total population, in the Bijlmer the Surinamese are the largest ethnic group, making up around 40% of the population in the area, followed closely by West-African immigrants (around 30%).

Various *I Love SU* merchandise can be found at the Bijlmer outdoor markets and during Surinamese festivals such as *Kwaku* and *Keti Koti*, many Surinamese can be seen wearing the *I Love SU* T-shirt, which is particularly difficult to acquire in the Netherlands and usually has to be bought in Suriname itself.

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The origin of the I Love SU T-shirt can be traced back to Suriname, where Dresscode, a Surinamese company and clothing store, first designed and produced the I Love SU T-shirts as a way to promote patriotism among the Surinamese youth. Since its opening in 2007 in Paramaribo, the capital city of Suriname, the Dresscode store soon grew and became well-known throughout the whole country. On 25 November 2010, the I Love SU brand and campaign were officially launched on the 35th anniversary of Suriname’s independence. An I Love SU music video featuring three local top artists Audrey Bakrude, Enver Panka and Kolonel, preceded the launch and became immensely popular due its large amount of airplay and support from local companies. By 2014, Owru Yari Royals has become the official association of companies and sponsors that support the I Love SU campaign along with the current seven official dealers in Suriname.

The T-shirts usually feature the I Love SU wordmark or display a derivation of the Suriname flag or its colours. Indigenous people, important buildings and local currency are often used as an inspiration for the varied designs. The I Love SU T-shirts are designed digitally and simultaneously printed and die-cut on vinyl, from which the wordmark is peeled off and printed on the T-shirts using a heat

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Aside from the T-shirt, the I Love SU campaign is underpinned by a philosophy which stresses certain nationalistic values: loving your country and striving towards unity and development; working hard towards development on the nation’s economy; keeping your country clean; encouraging your youngsters in their many creative talents; helping all those in need (poor, sick and disabled); promoting the nation’s most unique assets: its flora, fauna, and variable cultures.

Moreover, by wearing the T-shirt, the wearer commits him- or herself to respect and uphold the underlying I Love SU philosophy. Peter Waterberg, a well-known local celebrity who also functions as spokesperson for the brand, noted: ‘[…:] I believe it is a great way to express love for your country. That’s why you should be very aware of how you act if you have on this shirt. This shirt also stands for keeping your nation clean. You can’t be littering and wear this shirt.’ Waterberg’s thought is shared among many of the local population in Suriname, who realise that wearing the T-shirt comes with a significant sense of responsibility. T-shirt wearers whose behaviour does not conform to the I Love SU philosophy are therefore often frowned upon in Suriname. These sentiments are summed up by Waterberg in another interview, stating: ‘It is more than a T-shirt, there is also a thought behind it. If you don’t mean it, don’t wear it’.

### Beyond the T-shirt

After the T-shirts’ success, a great variety of additional I Love SU merchandise was developed. The I Love SU brand now features umbrellas, hats, caps, bags, stickers, gift-cards, jerseys, belts, slippers, key-chains and wallets, among others. If needed, the logo can be printed on any textile or surface for promotional purposes. Since 2011, Surinamese and tourists alike can even have their picture taken in front of a massive concrete I Love SU monument, designed by local

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17 Ibid.
artist George Struikelblok and situated at the entrance of Fort Zeelandia in Paramaribo. Keeping true to its own philosophy, the I Love SU brand maintains a strong presence at national day events and festivals, supports environmental and social causes, and is active in a variety of social media. Official brand profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube contribute to the brand’s popularity and visibility by sharing brand endorsements by local and international celebrities, new songs and videos associated with the I Love SU campaign, as well as updated information regarding events organised or supported by the I Love SU brand, which has led to the brand being especially popular among the young Surinamese. The T-shirt’s popularity has also led to the production of copies and fake versions. The web-based company spreadshirt.nl is currently selling a variety of I Love SU products, although it makes use of different typography and does not have any approval or relation to the original Surinamese brand.

**The I Love SU T-shirt in the Bijlmer**

The success of the I Love SU brand in Suriname has spread to the Netherlands as well, with many Surinamese in the Bijlmer area of Amsterdam wearing the T-shirt (fig. 3). However, do the Surinamese in the Bijlmer wear the T-shirt for the same reason as the Surinamese in Suriname? Are they aware of the I Love SU campaign with its underlying philosophy which sparked so much debate in Suriname? In case the Surinamese in the Bijlmer are not aware of the I Love SU philosophy, what could be their motivation(s) to wear the T-shirt in the Netherlands? In this scenario, there could be several possibilities; one explanation could be that the Surinamese in the Bijlmer are wearing the T-shirt as a reaction to the recent rise in nationalistic sentiments, which has recently been occurring separately in

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the Netherlands as well as in Suriname.23 Another possibility would be that the Surinamese are wearing the I Love SU T-shirt to distinguish themselves from the other immigrants in the Bijlmer.

To explore these possibilities and to determine why the Surinamese population in the Bijlmer wear the I Love SU T-shirt, a questionnaire was constructed, consisting of eleven questions in which the possible reasons described previously were each represented in at least one of the questions. In addition, the question ‘Are you aware that there is an I Love SU campaign in Suriname’, measured whether the respondents’ motivation for wearing the T-shirt was the same as those who wear it in Suriname. Nearly all questions could be answered by a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’; the only exception was the question ‘why do you wear the I Love SU T-shirt?’, which was open-ended and could have multiple answers per individual respondent. Noting the super-diverse population of the Bijlmer, additional variables such as age group, sex and ethnicity were included to account for differences within the Surinamese population.24

The surveys were conducted on several separate occasions around and inside metro stations, shops, malls and markets located at three different neighbourhoods in the Bijlmer: Amsterdamse Poort, Ganzenhoef and Kraaiennest. Random passers-by, shopkeepers and market stall owners were approached by the interviewers, who filled out the respondents’ answers (anonymously) on a standardised scoring sheet. In addition, visitors of the Kwaku Summer Festival, an annual festival in the Bijlmer area aimed at the Dutch-Surinamese population, were asked to participate in the survey as well. Special attention was given to the (under)representation of certain groups by deliberately approaching potential respondents on the basis of their age group, sex or ethnicity, in order to have a more representative sample population.


Results

The total sample population consisted of 37 respondents, of which 57% were male and 43% were female. 36 respondents (97%) were originally from Suriname or were of Surinamese descent, 1 respondent was from the neighbouring country of Guyana. The majority of the respondents (49%) were of Creole ethnicity, followed by the Hindustani (35%) and the Javanese (16%). Although all respondents were interviewed at the Bijlmer, only 22% actually lived in the area. Other respondents were in the Bijlmer for work, shopping or other leisure activities, such as visiting the Kwaku festival.

All 37 respondents were aware of the existence of the T-shirt; those who were not, were excluded from the survey. 65% of the total respondents owned at least one I Love SU T-shirt, 26% stated that they would buy one if they had the opportunity and 11% did not own a T-shirt and had no intention of buying one. 88% of the respondents between the age of 12-35 (68% of the total sample population) owned at least one T-shirt. In contrast, respondents aged 35 and above were much less likely to own a T-shirt themselves (44%). They did, however, buy the T-shirts to give as presents or souvenirs to (grand)children or relatives in the Netherlands.

The reasons given by the respondents when asked why they wear the T-shirt were not limited to one answer and can broadly be categorised into four categories: national pride or patriotism (58%), fondness of the design (38%), souvenir (13%) and collecting purposes (4%). 92% of the total respondents were not aware of the I Love SU campaign in Suriname, although they were all familiar with the T-shirt. 51% find it important to be identified by others as being Surinamese. 35% of the respondents indicated that other Surinamese wear the T-shirt as a status symbol. 95% of the respondents had no objection to non-Surinamese people wearing the T-shirt.

Discussion and analysis of results

Ever since its official launch during the celebration of Suriname’s Independence Day in 2010, the I Love SU T-shirt has been popular both in Suriname and in The Netherlands. The fact that earlier that year Suriname’s national elections were won by the ‘Megacombinatie’, a collaboration of four political parties which has a strong focus on the creation of one united Suriname, might be the momentum the I Love SU campaign needed to gain massive popularity among the Surinamese population.25

The awareness of a collective Surinamese identity appears to be a recent phenomenon, as the various ethnicities that make up the Surinamese population tended to be ‘pillarised’ according to their respective ethnicities. Although there does not seem to be a direct collaboration between the Surinamese government and the I Love SU organisation, the government still continues to reinforce the message of unity among the Surinamese in presidential speeches and government websites.²⁶

However, the I Love SU T-shirt, originally an integral part of the I Love SU campaign, seems to have taken on a different meaning after its arrival in The Netherlands. No longer symbolising the values of the I Love SU campaign, the T-shirt seems lost its original significance and, in the Dutch context, gained a far more superficial meaning, especially among the younger Surinamese, who are the ones most likely to wear the T-shirt both in Suriname and the Netherlands. These ‘youngsters’, aged between 12 to 35 years old, all of which own at least one T-shirt, stated that they wear the T-shirt to support or promote Suriname (55%), because they like the design (27%) or received it as a souvenir (5%). Strikingly, 92% of the respondents within this age group were not aware of the original I Love SU campaign, which was the same compared to the total sample population. 56% stated that they found it important to be recognised as a Surinamese, which is slightly higher compared to the total sample.

These findings seem to support the notion of a (growing) collective national identity among the Surinamese in the Bijlmer, although there does not seem to be a strong indication that it is a direct reaction to Dutch nationalism, nor does it appear to be an attempt to distinguish themselves from other immigrants in the Bijlmer. Furthermore, the fact that the I Love SU campaign was largely unknown among the Surinamese in the Bijlmer makes it unlikely that it was influenced by the recent rise in nationalism in Suriname, at least not in a direct way.

Therefore, the most likely scenario would be that the T-shirts, which are popular and widely-known among the whole population in Suriname, regardless of age or ethnicity, have been brought to the Bijlmer as souvenir items, usually by (grand) parents or other relatives, losing most of the original embedded nationalistic message. Instead, the T-shirts are worn by the Surinamese youth in the Bijlmer, who, unaware of the campaign, convey only part of the message (the love or pride of Suriname), without the original connotations and underlying meanings.

As there have hardly been any official events promoting the I Love SU philosophy and allowing direct interaction with the prospective audience in the Netherlands, with the exception of a single appearance of the brand during the Kwaku festival in 2012, awareness among the Surinamese Dutch regarding the I Love SU

campaign in the Netherlands is close to none. The connection between the original campaign and those who wear the T-shirt in the Netherlands appears to have been largely lost.

In hindsight, the actual reason why the Surinamese in the Bijlmer wear the T-shirt was less important compared to the fact that they were not aware of the I Love SU campaign. The T-shirt’s embedded message of social responsibility expressed by wearers in Suriname seems diluted in the Dutch context, where the item is often seen as a fashionable piece of clothing with a design to which wearers can feel related to. In addition, the fact that an unofficial version of the T-shirt, featuring a slight variation in typography, is offered and sold in the Netherlands by a Dutch T-shirt web shop shows that there is an audience willing to buy the shirt just for the sake of its graphic design.

In the Netherlands, the I Love SU T-shirt seems to have undergone a process of domestication by the Surinamese Dutch wearers. In the same manner humans have domesticated animals, technology and artefacts can be ‘tamed’ as well. This process is characterised by a change and adaptation which is a mutual co-production; the user modifies the artefact to best suit their needs and desires, and, in turn, the artefact changes the user’s behaviours, feelings and attitudes, creating new patterns of use.27

Closely related is Anna Calvera’s observation of the fact that ‘contents, forms and meanings of ideas, theories and knowledge are transformed by their users – just as the domestication with products’, a process which Kjetil Fallan terms as the domestication of ideology.28 In this sense, the loss of the original meaning of the I Love SU T-shirt can be understood as a process of domestication of ideology as well. Upon arrival in the Netherlands, the T-shirt is appropriated by the Dutch Surinamese, who transform the original collection of values and ideas associated to the T-shirt to suit the local situation. As many of the T-shirt’s embedded values are not communicated in, or applicable to the Dutch context, wearers have attached their own meanings and values to it.

Although the T-shirts have been designed and produced in Suriname, the fact that they are consumed in the Bijlmer as well and have taken on a different meaning signifies that the T-shirts have become part of the material culture of the local Surinamese. Furthermore, as nearly all Surinamese in the Netherlands possess the Dutch nationality (98%) and are therefore Dutch citizens, their material culture

28  Ibid., Fallan 2013, pp. 99–100; Anna Calvera, ‘Local, Regional, National, Global and Feedback: Several Issues to Be Faced with Constructing Regional Narratives’, Journal of Design History, vol.18, no.4, 2005, pp. 371–383; Fallan hereby notes that ideally the domestication of ideology should be reciprocal, which was not originally stated by Calvera.
should also be considered as Dutch material culture.29

As stated previously, the essentialist notion of a canonical, unchanging and everlasting Dutch (Design) culture automatically excludes any contributions or material culture from all other nationalities and ethnicities that make up the super-diverse Bijlmer area. Instead of focusing on ‘iconic’, autochthonous Dutch Design(ers), ‘foreign’ designers educated in the Netherlands or even foreign designers with no apparent connection to the Netherlands promoted under the flag of ‘Dutch Design’, the construction of a Dutch cultural design history, where all material cultures of all the different cultures and ethnicities which constitute the Dutch population are represented, would give a more realistic perspective on the design and material culture in the Netherlands. Judith Atfield notes that ‘design is just one aspect of the material culture of everyday life’, and as the I Love SU T-shirt is part of the material culture of Dutch (Surinamese) citizens, it should be considered Dutch design as well (lower case ‘d’ intended).30

**Conclusion**

In this essay, the established views on what constitutes Dutch Design were challenged by examining an artefact which is part of the material culture of a group of allochthonous Dutch citizens, the Surinamese. The I Love SU T-shirt, expressing the love for the country of Suriname, has become extremely popular in Suriname itself as well as the Netherlands. Part of an I Love SU campaign in Suriname, wearing the T-shirt comes with an implicit obligation to support the campaign’s philosophy, which stresses certain values such as unity among the different ethnic groups, taking care of the environment, assisting those in need and supporting local talent.

The Netherlands is home to almost half of the total Surinamese population, of which a sizeable amount live in the Bijlmer area of Amsterdam. This essay has shown that the meaning of the T-shirt has changed in the context of the Bijlmer; the I Love SU philosophy, which in Suriname is intertwined with the T-shirt, seems to have lost most of its strength, losing most of its embedded nationalistic message, especially among the younger Surinamese in the Bijlmer. The fact that the meaning of the T-shirt in the Bijlmer differs from its original meaning in Suriname, supports the argument that the I Love SU T-shirts worn by the Surinamese in the Bijlmer have become part of their local material culture by the

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process of domestication of ideology. As nearly all Surinamese in the Netherlands possess Dutch nationality, their material culture should therefore be considered equal to Dutch (autochthonous) material culture.

The Dutch Design movement in general does not recognise any contributions made by non-native Dutch (allochthonous) citizens or designers. Based on a top-down essentialist approach to (design) culture, it does not take into consideration the multicultural, super-diverse population of the Netherlands, nor their material cultures. Furthermore, design should not be seen separate from material culture, which is the common perception, but instead be seen as an extension or variation thereof. As the *I Love SU* T-shirt is part of the material culture of the Surinamese in, among others, the Bijlmer it therefore should also be considered Dutch design (with lower case ‘d’).

Instead of viewing Dutch Design in the traditional sense, as a movement based on essentialist characteristics, an alternative approach to Dutch design or material culture might be a (multi)cultural Dutch design history, which will include the design and material cultures of all inhabitants of the Netherlands, regardless of nationality or ethnicity. Such a cultural design history could be realised in an on-line environment, such as a wiki, where all contributions are considered equal without having to distinguish between ‘design’ (both lower- or uppercase ‘d’) and ‘material culture’. It would provide the Netherlands with a realistic representation of its culture, one which all Dutch inhabitants can identify with and be proud of.

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Design from an International Perspective

Renilde Steeghs

Why is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs involved in promoting culture and design abroad? What does it contribute to the position of the Netherlands and the Dutch cultural sector? I will not talk so much about policies, but I will present three very different cases, to give you an idea of the sort of projects we have been involved with in the past years.

The first example is of the Dutch peacekeeping force called ‘Minusma’, in Gao, Mali, one such base of the hundred others around the world. What do these camps leave behind? What is their material legacy? They used to leave behind tons of concrete and other materials, but nowadays all the peacekeeping operations are obliged to have a zero footprint; everything that is brought in has to be taken out unless the buildings or the facilities contribute to the local infrastructure.

In 2013, I was approached by Malkit Shoshan, an architect originally from Israel. At that time she was a fellow at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam and worked at Delft University. She has been involved in researching design within the context of war and peace for many years. Part of her research centred on international UN camps, peacekeeping forces; for which I shared contacts of people who had been involved in peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan. I put her in touch with a number of colleagues of the Defense Ministry working in engineering and, having led a few workshops with them, Shoshan produced two internal publications for the Ministry of Defense. Het Nieuwe Instituut then decided to put this project forward, as their submission for the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennial in 2016. Key to the project, is the way in which it seeks to suggest ways in which one can formulate a legacy that actually contributes to development, to security, to both local people and the military, instead of these camps being disconnected from the local population as is so often the case. Through our contacts, Malkit Shoshan visited Goa in Mali and was able to develop the project further, extending the project at the UN Headquarters too, as part of the campaign for a Dutch seat in the UN security council. Next, Shoshan will return to Mali to begin implementing a number of improvements made to the design of the camp together with the engineers. The results will be presented at the Future Force Conference in The Hague, on the future of peacekeeping (February 2017).
Across all of this, we didn’t spend a penny. All I did was put her in contact with some colleagues. The priorities of the defence engineers are to be operational and be safe. The camps are capsules of the western world in a totally different environment: in the middle of the Sahara where everything comes and goes via an airlift. Her goal was to improve the integration between the design of these kinds of camps and the local environment. In this way, we actually added a fourth ‘D’ to the so-called 3-D approach: Defence, Diplomacy, Development, and, newly, Design. To allow all four to inform and guide a peacekeeping operation is an interesting notion. In light of the very strict procedures and budget of the peacekeeping forces, such striving for integration is not something that can be achieved overnight, but this new approach is something our engineers really have taken on board.

The next project is *Rebuild by Design*, which dates from a few years back but is still on-going. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, which impacted the Northeastern coast of the US, the Dutch offered technical and organisational support to the rebuilding taskforce. President Obama’s Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force launched the innovative *Rebuild by Design* competition for which Henk Ovink, who currently holds the position of Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Netherlands, was an adviser. He set up a ‘movement’, as he refers to it; namely, a process in which design, technical progress, and the knowledge of the local people were brought together to design preventative solutions for future flooding in several areas. The programme received a positive response in the US; not only because of the technical knowledge which was brought in by architects and engineers, but also due to its entailing working together in multidisciplinary teams that involved local people. This is coined as the ‘Dutch approach’. I am not sure if ‘Dutch Design’ is followed by ‘the Dutch approach’ and if it exists. But in my opinion, this stands to illustrate that the quality of the kind of design we export and promote lies in its facilitating a certain way of working, rather than in the final product itself.

The project received much publicity in the US. Partly down to the Netherlands reputation as *the* country for water management. In a way, this came to galvanize the idea of the ‘Dutch approach’, which is of course happily embraced and promoted. It was a collaboration between many actors; my colleagues at the Embassy and Consulate, for example, contributed to an exhibition at the National Building Museum in Washington, titled *Designing for Disaster*, featuring the aforementioned project. Further, this was added to by debates and expert meetings, and was successful. Another success was that in the *Rebuild by Design* competition, six out of ten of the teams included Dutch architects and engineers, resulting in contracts for many Dutch companies.

The third case I will present to you is of a totally different kind. What you see here is a presentation of porcelain (fig. 1), designed by Scholten & Baijings, and a number of other Dutch designers for porcelain factories in Arita, Japan. Again,
as with the project of Malkit Shoshan, the Dutch government had nothing to do with the initiative. During the Salone in Milan, 2012, Scholtens & Baijings met designer Teruhuro Yanagihara, who works at one of the Arita’s porcelain factories. Together, they created a collection which was successful. When working there, they discovered that the Arita porcelain factories were in serious trouble. Like in Europe and elsewhere, it is no longer common for people to buy large porcelain services anymore. A whole branch of craftsmanship is endangered in this area.

The first collaborative collection they made inspired the province to look into ways to revitalize the city and its surrounding areas, inviting more designers to help stimulate cultural exchange. In doing so, raising a discussion as to whether culture and cultural industries can be used as an instrument to revitalize the economy in certain areas. While there are indeed some good examples, such a method cannot be relied upon in terms of consistently leading to fundamental change. Although the Dutch embassy in Tokyo and Dutch Culture in Amsterdam were invited on board the project by Scholten & Baijings, it was largely their own initiative.

In this case, what you see is that the meeting in Milan during the Salone, which, concerning the ‘design of things’ is a wonderful place, led to a great many other projects. It is very difficult to measure the impact of the project, to monetize it, or to report on the results, but we do see that a lot of goodwill, initiatives, and collaborations have stemmed from it.
Traditionally in the discussion about international cultural policies in the Netherlands, two approaches prevail. One is to promote the interest in the cultural sector and the design sector; to help the sector to increase talent development or earning capacity. The other approach is more closely associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and more instrumental in nature. In that case these types of projects are harnessed for promoting your image abroad, for building bilateral relations, for economic diplomacy, and trade promotions. Frequently, surrounding such an approach centred upon self-benefit has been a debate as to whether it is ‘allowed’. It is an approach that is commonly perceived as not okay. However, off the back of the three examples raised, I would argue that every good project has both elements. In choosing to support a project, its intrinsic quality should be the first criterion, as the best guarantee of impact. The project should be well rooted in the Netherlands as well as abroad, and there has to be a genuine local interest.

In deciding whether to finance – and here I am always talking of ‘microfinancing’ – the project, the first criterion is the presence of a strong counterpart (an institution or a partner) in the hosting country. As said, the embassies are always financing the local institutions rather than Dutch ones, because in our experience that is more sustainable. There is very little governmental money circulating within international cultural policies. We don’t ever initiate projects ourselves.

As nice as it looks, my position is not on stable ground. Even though 25 years ago the Dutch parliament decided that there should be an Ambassador for International Cultural Cooperation, funding is really an issue. We see a tendency in current political discussions to hold international cultural cooperation as accountable for detracting from national cultural funding, as a consequence of the strong budget cuts implemented in 2012–2013. To me, making that distinction between national and international is largely artificial, but it is a discussion nevertheless. I hope my successor can continue this type of work.

Until December 2016, Renilde Steeghs was Ambassador for Cultural Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before that, she worked as a diplomat in Zagreb, Moscow, and Brussels, heading the unit for International Cultural Cooperation.
Emergent Nature-Cultures

Thought Collider is an experimental, critical design and art research studio based in Amsterdam, comprising the work of Susana Cámara Leret (ES) and Mike Thompson (UK), exploring alternative experiences motivated by emerging technologies. Such work is usually realised through active collaborations with scientific and cultural partners, spanning various mediums and themes, so as to stimulate other ways of knowing within the epistemological production of knowledge, through self-initiated art and design-led investigations set in various research domains.

Over the years, Thought Collider’s practice has frequently been supported by specific awards and programmes aimed at fostering collaborations between art, design, and science. The Bio Art and Design Award stands as one such example, enabled by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), ZonMW (Medical Research Council) and cultural partners including MU Artspace and Waag Society. Participating in these initiatives has reinforced a personal research methodology, while developing long-lasting relationships with particular Dutch scientific and cultural institutes, extending the studio’s network and practice into various domains. Furthermore, the studio’s self-initiated projects have been facilitated by organisations such as the Creative Industries Fund, supported by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). Placing emphasis on interdisciplinary projects that seek to deepen, and innovate within, emergent culture. Stichting DOEN’s Social Design programme pursues a similar line, aimed at supporting socially inclusive projects. These funds have facilitated the realisation of several long-term, transdisciplinary research projects such as The Rhythm of Life, in collaboration with Leiden University, or The Institute for the Design of Tropical Disease, alongside the Laboratory of Entomology at Wageningen University Research.
Placing art and design at the core of scientific research has allowed a critical focus on the cultivation of science as culture, characterised by an inclusion of the wider public as active contributors within the realisation of these explorations. Such an approach resonates with the scope of cultural institutes such as Waag Society: Institute for Art Science and Technology or Media-matic, promoting the development of a series of talks and workshops aligned to their on-going programmes. These activities, have often been paired with the studio’s link to educational institutes, including Design Academy Eindhoven, Technical University Eindhoven and Willem de Kooning Academy. As a result, Thought Collider’s work is typically in dialogue with a community of DIY practitioners, educators, students, and researchers, fostering quick, hands-on investigations from the promotion of these experimental activities within the cultural domain.

The support of Thought Collider’s practice by the aforementioned governmental organisations and cultural programmes has therefore served to inform a personal, experimental research methodology, concerned with an in-between position; rethinking existing relationships between differing world views, the studio’s work challenges the ‘two cultures’ paradigm (as coined by British scientist and novelist Charles Percy Snow in his 1959 Rede Lecture at the University of Cambridge), through the design of hybrid artefacts and interfaces concerned with exploring emergent nature-cultures. Thought Collider’s practice thus aligns to a growing community of international practitioners, offering a plurality of views to the changing landscape and definitions of Dutch Design.

Susana Cámara Leret is an artist and designer. Together with Mike Thompson she founded Thought Collider: a critical design, research, and art studio.
At the beginning of our career, receiving financial support from different institutions and funds meant that our work could start out with a more ambitious vision. We did not have to be profitable commercially from day one, and could instead explore bigger questions relevant to the design discipline and society at large. This permitted us the time to develop more complex and far-reaching answers to said questions in the form of our evolving body of work; seeking out relevant answers that can be applied in a cultural as well as commercial context. The subsidies enabled us to conduct basic research instead of applied, allowing us to develop entirely new approaches to existing problems, and to build up new types of expertise.

Our work has been promoted as, and falls under the umbrella of, ‘Dutch Design’, given our participation in activities organized by Dutch organisations, through
being featured in Dutch publications, and, at the most basic level, through simply residing in the Netherlands. That meant being able to take advantage of a certain brand or identity which instantly commanded attention with press, curators, and companies, and giving more visibility to our work than we would have otherwise received. Next to this, it also meant a certain ideological freedom in our work, which was accepted and understood more easily, rather than under the identity of another country’s design identity. In this sense, it gave our work a certain degree of freedom and space to seek new directions and competences.

Mario Minale is a product and furniture designer with an MA degree from Design Academy Eindhoven. Studio Minale–Maeda, established in 2007, produces commercial objects, projects and limited editions. Their interests include craft techniques and industrial production, as well as the contrasting realities in the information age.
The development of my organisation was considerably influenced by the support I received from a diverse range of Dutch and other European organisations. A turning point was my being selected for the Vienna Design Week (VDW) in 2015, following the launch of Migrationlab and the ‘Welcome to The Living Room’ (WTTLR) project in Vienna, Austria, a few months earlier. My participation at the VDW encouraged me to consider space and how to use it in a new way. Together with local partner Verein08, we co-created a public Living Room with migrants, refugees, tourists and Austrian locals in the Brotfabrik, Favoriten, Vienna’s largest urban district transformed into a cultural centre having operated previously as a bread factory, predominantly comprised of an immigrant population. The participants built part of the Living Room during a workshop performance curated by Alice Stori Liechtenstein. Including Sedia wooden chairs, personalized with fabrics and paint as influenced by their cultures. The entire living room functioned as an installation during the festival. For ten days we invited migrants, refugees, visitors and locals to join us in a series of workshops, cultural events, and performances on migration issues with this setting as a backdrop.

Support from the Netherlands-based European Cultural Foundation (ECF) in 2015 during the Idea Camp programme, and through the Idea Camp Grant in 2016, enabled the project to develop even further. In 2016, we introduced co-design workshops prior to each Migrationlab WTTLR event, in which local communities work together on creating their own Migrationlab Living Room in their neighborhoods and cities. We organised activities in Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam, conducting research which sought to rethink public space and build inclusive communities through the organization of WTTLR experiences.
Additionally, in 2016 we received support from Stichting DOEN via BankGiro Loterij FONDS, resulting from our participation at the ‘Experts Meeting Migration Matters’, organised by Stichting DOEN and Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam, December 2015. Partnering with Rederij Lampedusa, we programmed a series of four Migrationlab Living Rooms on an Egyptian fishing boat called Mr. Friday, which transported 282 refugees – mainly Eritreans – from Egypt to Lampedusa, Italy in 2013. All the financial support made it possible to significantly consolidate our WTTLR concept, and for Migrationlab to grow as an organisation.

At Migrationlab, migrants, refugees, and locals become designers as they work together on co-creating these spaces of encounter through co-design workshops and setting up the actual Migrationlab Living Room. A variety of design elements inspired by different cultures are created or re-used to bring to life our Living Rooms. We also work with professional designers coming from different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, at Migrationlab, we definitely can’t talk about ‘Dutch design’. Rather, we talk about ‘inclusive design’. As a result, our work received generous media coverage, and Migrationlab continues to be visible in different media around Europe and The United States. To name a few: Alice Rawsthorn, renowned design critic and New York Times contributor; What Design Can Do (Netherlands); Seattle-based design magazine ARCADE; The Guardian; Radio FM4 Austria; Nordens Tidning (Scandinavia); Realitatea TV (Romania).

Laura M. Pana is a social entrepreneur, facilitator, speaker, artist, and founder of the non-profit organisation Migrationlab. Her work focuses on co-designing public living rooms in cities across Europe, where migrants, refugees, and locals reimagine how to acknowledge, communicate and relate to each other.
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