

Arts, Crafts, Industry – and the Unexpected

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ORIGINALITY AND THE UNEXPECTED

After 9 months of having set up The Ornamented Life studio, I have come very up-close and personal with the joys and perils of production and reproduction of objects, and my challenge is now to find a way in which the production method becomes intrinsically necessary for the meaning and use of objects. I am interested in exploring the frontier between an object that comments and questions its own existence, and an object that is simply made for use – what is it that defines an object as belonging to one field or the other? And what is the role of the creator in all this? Is it maybe the manner of creating a piece that defines the context and the relationship between the subject and the object, rather than the piece itself? For example, what happens if a plate is created by being given the same sort of attention as a performance (in which every movement and thought of the artist creates the piece), or as a sculpture (in which the qualities of the material are thoroughly used)?

I am looking to extricate as much meaning as possible from the interaction between the choice of production method, as well as from all of the steps of production of an object, and thus to fully use the intrinsically embedded symbolic and practical possibilities present. So questions arise about the different ways of making objects, which traditionally have been categorized in three different ways: arts, crafts, and industry. At first, in a conventional way of looking, it may seem that art is something you practice alone in the studio, and industry is something that others do for you. However, by exploring what distinguishes one production method from the other, a maker can use these different languages in order to create in the manner of each production method. By understanding the consequences resulting from the choice of process, it is possible to adjust production method to suit the conceptual demands of the project. So the question becomes: what is it that distinguishes art, craft, and industry from each other? Is it perhaps the quality of the response of the maker to the unexpected?

ARTS

By making a singular piece, the maker is continually reacting on the basis of whatever it is that happens in front of him - the unexpected - without prejudging or calculating the value of it. The unexpected can either be of his own intentional making or not, such as the mark of a brush stroke in a watercolour which remains there and cannot be altered regardless of how the maker feels about it. Or it can be a given, such as the cracks in a plate.

Independent of whether the maker likes it or not, the unexpected is fully accepted as the intrinsically necessary partner in making an art piece. The unexpected always has to be integrated into the work, and it can never be thrown out or put aside without at the same time doing away with the entire piece.

This is the artistic challenge: to be continually reacting on the spot, without premeditated designs and plans of action. Of course an artist builds through time a vocabulary and grammar of his language that he uses to respond to the unexpected. So that in time the artist doesn't need to first figure out how to mouth a sound, but can rely on lessons learned

in the past. But the more aware and focused the artist is in the present response to the unexpected, the more flexible and creative his responses, the wider and more surprising, and more idiosyncratic his language becomes. In this way, quantity does come before quality: in order to achieve quality, the quantitative lessons learned in past conversations accumulate to become an ever more perfected set of tools which the artist can use in his next encounter with the unexpected.

This is then one way of thinking about originality, in which the work originates in the very, very specific and personal response of the artist to the unexpected, to such a degree that it would be unthinkable for another artist to respond in the same way. This is not to say that the end-result might not look the same, since it is a well-known fact that throughout history many of the developments in science and art were arrived at simultaneously by people with no contact whatsoever to each other. It seems that things float in the air sometimes, and since we are part of the world and the air breathes in and through us, we become part and expression of whatever it is that is floating in the air. But two similar-looking end-results might still both be completely original since they originated in the conversation between each of the makers and the unexpected.

This is not a very easy way to determine the originality of an art piece, or even if it is an art piece at all rather than a re-chewed memory of a conversation gone before. But originality is present only in the process of its making, and cannot be determined afterwards simply by looking at it. Only the maker can know whether his creation is an authentic artistic process or not.

CRAFTS

In producing pieces in a crafts method, the maker controls the unexpected to a certain extent. The unexpected is neither given free acceptance and integration into the pieces as when the maker is producing a piece in an artistic way, but nor is the unexpected completely rejected. Crafts imply the production of a certain quantity of similar pieces, it is a half-way approach between art and industry – it neither produces unique pieces, nor does it strive to reproduce identical clones in large quantities. In order for a series of similar pieces to be produced, it is unthinkable to give each piece the same sort of individualized attention as in the arts. Not only due to practical restraints such as time, but also because it is not the intention behind making such a piece. The very idea of a series suggests a similarity between the objects composing it. If each object were to be dealt with in the above-described artistic approach, they would each necessarily become too different from each other in order to belong together in a series. Therefore an exterior imposition of limitations determining the degree to which the unexpected can play a role is intrinsically necessary to the crafts process.

Crafts imply repetition rather than variety; repetition in the material used, in the form, in the method of production, and in the response of the maker to the unexpected. The maker creates a range of possible responses to the unexpected. When it is not possible to use one of his pre-determined responses, the piece, and the unexpected, are thrown away. The craftsman has to be able to use one of his known responses to the unexpected for the piece to be acceptable, rather than reacting spontaneously.

In order for the craftsman to excel in his craft, he must deliberately choose from a range of possibilities and concentrate on one, or just a few. He either inherits or develops this choice, and then goes on to elaborate it to his chosen/able level of perfection. Perfection

or the quest thereof implies repetition and practice of the range of chosen materials, techniques, and responses to the unexpected. Once these have been mastered to the acceptable degree, the craftsman may spend a very long time, indeed the rest of his life, using the same range of choices, making the same object or slight variations thereof as long as the skills required for them stay the same.

In the crafts, the unexpected is tolerated up to a certain point as something unavoidable which may happen from time to time and which must be accepted as part of the work and not as a fault. Much of what defines a craftsman is his ability to control the degree to which the unexpected plays a part in his work. The unexpected can appear in many different ways throughout the crafts process, and can either be induced by the maker, or received by chance: it can be an unknown variation in the prime material which results in unpredictable consequences, it can come from a variation in the efficacy of his tools, it can come from a slight variation in the hand-making process involved, and it can come from a different degree of acceptance of the end-result.

INDUSTRY

Up until very recently, the unexpected didn't exist in industry. There wasn't even a maker as such to respond to the unexpected that wasn't there. The processes required for the production of an object have been separated to such an extent that they have become more independent actions to be carried out rather than what can be called a process (pressing a button or turning a screw can't really be thought of as processes). The consequence is that all the different steps of production are carried out by different people, without any one really being directly responsible for the object. Thus the designer of a product is basically uninvolved with its creation. This means that if something unexpected happens during the production of the object, the one actually making the object has no way of knowing how to respond – how to remain faithful to the unknown intention of the designer? The only possible response of the maker to the unexpected then is to throw it away, and try to make sure that the next object ends up looking as it should. He has no power to deal with the unexpected and remain faithful to the goal of production by altering his response in a way that would suit the purpose of the object.

For most of industrial history, industry stripped the actual maker of the object of the power of responding to the unexpected. This has been the defining character of industry: since the maker is not the designer (visionist/dreamer), the unexpected during the process of production cannot be incorporated in the work to any degree without running the risk of losing the purpose of the object in the first place. In industry there has been no maker, no process, no unexpected, no response. In consequence, there have just been identical end-results.

However, one of the interesting recent developments in industry is precisely that designers are looking into how to incorporate the unexpected in the production process so that mass-produced goods can have a certain uniqueness. Certain materials and production processes make this possible, most notably in the ceramic industry. Examples of this can be seen in the works of designers such as Hella Jongerius who glorifies the imperfections present in industrial processes, as in her B-set tableware. Each piece is unique due to the imperfections that can spontaneously occur during the process of making.

There are other designers who attempt to intervene in industrial processes so as to create "individual mass-produced" pieces. One example is the work of 5.5 Designers. They

take mass-produced pieces and in one project pour gold-luster in and out of pieces and re-fire them. In another project they take ceramic transfers that are usually carefully applied in assigned places, and instead allow the transfers to randomly land in the pieces. The result is that although the form of each piece remains the same, by using the decorative elements in another method, each piece looks different, and in this way is “unique”.

These two examples raise some questions about the relationship between designer, industrial processes, the unexpected, and authenticity. The novelty of Hella Jongerius’s B-set is not achieved by intervening with the actual making of the piece, but by a new way of accepting and appreciating the unexpected warping that can spontaneously occur during the traditional manner of making porcelain plates. By fully knowing a material, its characteristics, and every single part of the making process, Jongerius allows the process of porcelain to run its natural course, and the result is an authentic conversation between the designer, the industrial process, and the unexpected. Jongerius understands where the unexpected may occur from within the material and processes and all she does is allow these characteristics to come to light by showing their intrinsic beauty rather than by judging them as mistakes. By so doing she highlights a very special characteristic of porcelain and its processes that are usually hidden behind the ascetic quality control of industries.

Since you cannot anticipate the unexpected, the power of producing pieces that seem to inherit contradictory characteristics (industrial perfection and artistic uniqueness) lies in authentically using both characteristics, not by willfully imitating one for the wish of effect. What’s interesting is when you can find how and at what point the industrial process produces unique pieces and highlight that moment, before they come out all looking the same.

This brings up the very serious question of authenticity and honesty in the making of a piece. A good example of this is seen in the Japanese cult of ceramic bowls. The Japanese tea ceremony wholly focuses on highlighting the importance of being fully present in the actual moment. The bowls that were searched for use during the ceremonies were bowls that were also made in keeping with this same spirit, that’s to say, pieces that also highlighted the importance of the actual moment. The bowls that were most appreciated were the bowls that registered in its soft clay the actual moment of its making: the centeredness of the maker in turning the clay, the cut of the wire at the bottom of the piece, the impressions of the fingers while lifting it up. Much that we would consider to be imperfections was seen as beautiful registrations of the moment of the making. In order to satisfy such a high demand for such ware, many “fake” bowls started being made: bowls in which the marks of the fingers, and variation of glaze were purposefully created as an imitation of the unexpected.

Regardless of whether or not it is possible to see the difference between two bowls made in these different ways, this same sort of question of authenticity is raised by this new development in the designer trying to find in the industrial process something contradictory to its very nature. As tempting as it may be to show the charm of imperfection by consciously applying it at the end, isn’t it much more intriguing to concentrate on finding the precise moments in the industrial process in which the pieces are naturally and spontaneously all unique and different, such as Jongerius does in her B-set tableware? In this way one is using all the possibilities of the industrial method. And if the interest lies in the individual handling of each piece, then maybe one would be better off concentrating on the possibilities present in a more artistic approach to making objects. For truly surprising results come from knowing how to coax the inherent and surprising individual characteristics forth from within the industrial shell, and not by superficially imposing imitations of the unexpected.