

Daimler

Art Collection

Minimalism and Applied I

Objects for real and imaginative use

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

September 21, 2007 – January 27, 2008

Renate Wiehager

Foreword

Few 20th century objects other than Gerrit Rietveld's *Rot-blauer Lehnstuhl* [Red-Blue Armchair] dating from 1918–23 have so permeated our consciousness that the view we take of them determines our assessment of a thing's 'value'—usefulness? beauty? functionality? or: furniture? sculpture? three-dimensional image? The rational form and primary color scheme of Rietveld's original combined with the Utopian view of removing the boundaries between works of art and items for everyday use revealed a vision for the ideal design of the world around us. Anyone sitting down in the *Armchair* was 'released' from the senseless pragmatism of industrial society, instead being 'elevated' into a world postulating the congruency of beauty, usefulness and humanity.

Two of the younger artists in our 'Minimalism and Applied I' exhibition take Rietveld as their starting-point for relocating—one could also say: earthing—Rietveld's Utopia for our day. Nic Hess's reconstruction of the *Rot-blauer Lehnstuhl* gives it a majestically high back and fixes it to the floor with tapes. Richard Merkle's *Wandstühle* [Wall Chairs], like Rietveld's chair, make the functional elements visually intelligible by allotting them colors, but at the same time shift pure functionality towards a minimalistic pictorial language. Seats as objects that can possess both useful and aesthetic elements are one characteristic of the exhibition. First of all we have two 20th century classics, Max Bill's/Hans Gugelot's 1954 *Ulmer Hocker* [Ulm Stool], and three tables designed by Donald Judd in 1987. But the show also includes an outstanding contemporary designer, Konstantin Grcic, using his black upholstered chair

D

A C

called *Chaos*, 1999: Georg Winter has given the Grcic chair a bolster and provides users of the ensemble with a monitor as a medium for contemplative thought.

Three artistic approaches—Zobernig, Zittel, Shirayama—address coming to terms with American Minimal Art in the 1960s. Zobernig's eight colored plastic foam cubes, originally designed for his *UTV Fernsehstudio* [UTV Television Studio], can be positioned in the space like a minimalist sculpture by Robert Morris, but when placed on one side they produce an unconventional seating landscape. Andrea Zittel's *A-Z Pit Bed*, tailor-made for the collection in 2001, is an equally unmistakable and irresistible invitation to sit down, read, talk. Zittel has moved Judd's Minimal furniture further towards the present day. Ultimately the most recent reference to Minimal Art—to John McCracken in this case—leans against the wall in the form of the beer bench with luminous color accents by Meg Shirayama, born in London in 1980. The names of Bill and Judd have already identified the presence of classical artists in the 'Minimalism and Applied I' field. They are joined by the artists Stankowski, Arakawa, Liberman and Albers, designers Noguchi and Krenchel, and the architect Renzo Piano, whose designs connect up with his master plan for Potsdamer Platz. We are showing one of Bill's reduced linear pictures, as well as applied objects. Anton Stankowski, who first revolutionized graphic design from Zurich around 1930 and then from Stuttgart until his death in 1998, but was also always present as an artist, is introduced pars pro toto with his famous logo for the Deutsche Bank, and also as a painter. Stankowski's long-term studio partner Karl Duschek also made his name as a graphic artist as much as a concrete artist.

Shusaku Arakawa, who moved from Japan to New York in 1961, is present with pictures from his 1960s conceptual-minimalist phase, alongside his visionary architectural designs, which he worked on with Madeline Gins from about 1970. Franz Erhard Walther is another artist who has made an impact with significant buildings as well as his action-related sculptures. Alexander Liberman moved between 'Minimal' and 'Applied' even in 1950s New York, producing large sculptures and paintings, but created the corporate image for American Vogue at the same time. Isamu Noguchi's biography links him to Japan and the USA. His rice-paper lamps are part of 20th century design iconography. The bowls designed by the Danish engineer Herbert Krenchel in 1953 are less familiar, but no less influential on the styling of post-war crockery's new look, and for contemporary design as well.

1953 is also the year in which another 20th century design classic came into the world: Charles Eames designed his *Hang it All* wardrobe specifically for children. Its brightly-colored spheres are intended to inspire very small children to tidy up. The young Berlin designer and artist Ruby Anemic translated something small into something much too big in 2006: his wardrobe is now 2 meters wide, and can be supplied to individual color requirements. A set of colors borrowed from Imi Knoebel's coolly colored 1990 *Grace Kelly (V-3)* painting were

D

A C

chosen for the Daimler Art Collection. The proportions of the monochrome color areas in Knoebel's Grace Kelly series were the model in their turn for Richard Merkle's *Wall Chairs*.

'Objects for imaginative and real use': our exhibition subtitle takes us to a set of works that address the imagination above all: these include a picture by the New York artist Sylvan Lionni that interprets a stadium graphic intended as a seating plan as an abstract pattern; the aggressive and dominant 'wool spider's web' by the Los Angeles based artist Krysten Cunningham; the young New York artist Danica Phelps's drawn diary codes; the minimalistic architecture adaptation, connecting up with Fred Sandback, by the Portuguese artist Leonor Antunes. They are all arguing on the basis of floating transitions: useful? beautiful? functional? Or: furniture? sculpture? three-dimensional architectural image?

D

A C

Minimalism and Applied – getting the sofa to match the picture too!

By the way 1

“Simplicity improves the beauty.” (anonymous) One of Le Corbusier’s buildings in the Weißenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart has recently been developed as a museum and is thus open to the public. It is partially furnished, and gives a pretty good impression of how modern life, restricted to essential needs—or in those days extended to meet essential needs—was imagined around 1920. The dominant idea is economy of space. The rooms are not lavish in size, but they are flexible. Subtle, functional tricks create adaptations very well suited to their purpose. Movable room dividers make it possible to vary the space available, and extra room is created by furniture that can be lowered, built-in shelves and storage facilities, and also by sliding windows, which eliminate protruding window leaves. In terms of square meters this is modest living, but elegant, on several levels. All the spheres of life like working, eating, resting etc. have their place, but still make their presence felt firmly. The many details and small solutions make an emphatic statement about the whole spatial program. From the light switch to the folding bed, everything is causally linked. And at the center of all this is the modern human being. Le Corbusier is one of the thinkers who prepared for this kind of conceptual life, not just designing a product, in this case a house, but also the lifestyle that lends vigor to his prototype.

‘Minimalism and Applied’ suggested itself to us as a logical title in relation to the Daimler Art Collection’s acquisition policy, and seemed to make sense in terms of exhibition practice in Haus Huth in previous years. We have pursued minimalist art tendencies in a variety of new contexts and from changing points of view. Choosing a title that assumes a certain ambiguity in each case, added to or juxtaposed with the theme to be examined, has become a topos over the years. This is not inconsiderable in the case of the current ‘Minimalism and Applied I’ show, as the exhibition is looking at nothing less than the relationship between art and design against the background of Minimalism, exploring the way they condition, penetrate and perhaps exclude each other. But when art and design are linked without restriction, this opens up a popular and thus imprecise exchange of clichés that can lead to a dizzying mass of connections. Anyone who has art has design, and vice versa. As part of a now unstoppable advertising campaign, mutual indispensability is asserted and assimilated into a lifestyle canon. It is easy to see that this serves a mercantile purpose.

The current lively interest in design has a number of causes. When people were liberating themselves from the static concept of functionalism in the early 1980s, and designing forms was no longer subject to the pressure of technical innovation, product and industrial design became more dynamic. Form no longer followed function alone, but emotion as well. Idea and experiment made headway. Solidity and technical finesse were no longer the only terms of reference. Vehicle design reproduces the forms and styles of models that have long been

D

A C

discontinued, and new cars were no longer subject to cd-dictatorship, the value for air resistance. Consequently models have shorter lives, as now even the production of highly sophisticated technical products is subject to fashion. Developing form no longer follows the path of general 'democratic' validity, but is directed at target groups. The making of distinctions and individualization are supported more than before—even in industrial mass production, following consumers' wishes.

Everything in the 'Applied Art' context has increased in number. This applies to exhibition areas for product design in state museums and also the quantity of specialist and lifestyle magazines devoted exclusively to this theme. The dense sequence of auctions especially for so-called 'design icons' and the prices they command, like the 'maison tropicale' created in 1949 by the French industrial designer Jean Prouvé, recently auctioned for 4.9 million dollars, offer impressive proof of this. Modern life in all its facets is becoming more and more stylized as an enhanced aesthetic experience. A generally increased sensitivity to what is good and beautiful, or claims to be, has reached a high level, and skilful marketing knows how to exploit this.

A younger generation of artists who are not necessarily part of the post-minimalist world explicitly and intricately addressed the phenomenon of 'design' in the 1990s. Triggered by a general demand for art to be more integrated socially—formulated on the evening of a banknote policy on the art market that has become completely uninhibited—, a newly imposed movement to removing autonomy is taking place. The exhibition business's 'white cube' is being removed or the institutions behind it and the artistic positions that are now committed are stating to redeem this demanded relevance in 'studies' and 'documentations'. Artists like Tobias Rehberger, Jorge Pardo, Stefan Kern or Liam Gillick are also making a start, at about the same time, but at a different socially significant interface. They design ambiances in the form of installations and create utility articles. Lamps, vases and furniture—applied items generally—now in particular seem less corrupt than canvas, paintbrush and bronze casting. Art has discovered itself as a service provider in various general shows: Rirkrit Tiravanija builds working coffee bars and cooking niches in exhibitions. Reception through use is the byword of this art, and the link with an earlier predecessor, Siah Armajani, is immediately established. Design object, spatial concept and work of art become one, one is fulfilled in the other. Now artists work with applied objects so that they can find a subject that still has organizing powers within them. This is something that art had lost in the mean time.

Applied art linked with the art of Minimalism has its own remarkably cogent connection. This applies both to the link with the Bauhaus and the 'Arts and Crafts' movement that was brought to modern perfection there. Donald Judd did in fact dispute the connection with the Bauhaus, but the influence of Bauhaus personnel who worked in the USA as teachers, such as

D

A C

Josef Albers, Marcel Breuer or Moholy-Nagy, on American Minimalism cannot be denied. The claim to applying an extremely reduced formal language to design products owes something to the ideas of the Bauhaus, whether as an arrogation or a consequence. The fact that some artists rejected traditional artistic materials in the early 1960s in favor of prefabricated industrial material is related, before any content, to the product designer's working approach when seeking out alternative forms. Artists working in the context of Concretism in Switzerland and southern Germany always took oscillating between free and applied art for granted, without question. Outstanding here are the convincing examples of graphic design and visual communication by Anton Stankowski and subsequently Karl Duschek. Max Bill reaches out even further. He developed objects and forms that are still valid today in architecture and in furniture and product design, and his free artistic work was successful quite independently of this. The same applies to Isamu Noguchi, at about the same time in Japan and America.

New media in museums and temporary exhibition contexts ask the question about appropriate presentation modes more insistently than traditional artistic media. As well as blackout facilities for projection, seating is needed for longer picture sequences or films. Many artists working in these media think about the ideal context for receiving their work at the same time, and design suitable fittings, benches, stools or lightproof dioramas. These include Heimo Zobernig's *Colorcube* seats, which he designed to furnish his *UTV television studio*, and the stools by Ina Weber are exactly reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Brillo-boxes in the way they are constructed. Georg Winter did not solve the problem himself, but used an armchair by Konstantin Grcic, which fits in perfectly with the installation as an elective relative. The large piece of oval seating by Andrea Zittel called the *A-Z Pit Bed* asserts confident, sculptural independence in terms of multifunctional but ambiguous possibilities.

By the way 2

"Opening bottles with one's teeth is always preferable to using even the most beautifully designed objects." (Thomas Kapielski)

The 'Gläsernes Eck' establishment in which an illustrious group from the extended Munich art scene gathered evening after evening was reticent in its furnishings. It was a simple beer house behind the Kammerspiele—and somehow served as its theater canteen as well—and in the immediate vicinity of glamorous Maximilianstrasse. Actors, artists, gallery owners, writers and curators sat there until late at night in large numbers, on plain wooden chairs and at equally plain tables, behind glasses of beer that glowed like amber-colored lamps. A spirited, creative and exalted group in an interior that was definitely minimalist. The only decoration on the wall was a picture by Herbert Achternbusch. And when the owners retired it was all over for the 'Gläsernes Eck'. Every attempt to lure the same crowd into the renovated, more elegantly

D

A C

furnished and prettified room failed miserably. It needed very little to feel good in the old surroundings, only what was absolutely necessary, and people were at one with themselves and their neighbors at table. Any extra accessories or decorative furnishings that it was subsequently felt necessary to add was already too much. Formerly you could be part of the whole, now you were just a guest. The old crew never came back, it was like visiting your successors as tenants in a home that used to be yours.

What has been said here shows that it was and is largely artists who have intensively and persistently addressed the applied art phenomenon. This led to impressive results, which we hope to present in this and two more exhibitions on the 'Minimalism and Applied' theme. But the reverse route, i.e. an architect or designer having major success amidst the fogs of free art tends to be the exception. For example, some good architects are also successful caricaturists. This, however, is an aspect that does not need to be dealt within this context.

One of the few people who moved from commercial to fine art without ever designing anything 'applied' was Andy Warhol. Warhol earned quite a lot of money within the 1950s for his commissions for adverts and shop window decorations, and bought works by young New York artists, such as Jasper Johns, for example. This did not make him accepted as he wished, but made him an object of suspicion. Robert Rauschenberg, who also decorated shop windows as a sideline, worked hard on keeping this quiet, so as not to compromise himself as an artist. It took some time for Warhol to gain recognition as an artist, and he remained an outsider to his 'colleagues' as someone who had arrived by illegitimate means. And not just in this respect: when his friend Henry Geldzahler was appointed as commissioner for the American contribution to the Venice Biennale, Warhol thought he stood a good chance. But Geldzahler went for Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, as he thought people would expect him to nominate 'proper' artists.

"The better a work is, the more various its aspects are," Donald Judd once pronounced. We do not know whether he wanted to apply that to his furniture program. His statement is certainly plausible in the context of this 'Minimalism and Applied I' exhibition. Judd's three tables represent the most important American minimalist, his approach and his artistic intentions. Judd's work stands for the Utopia of shaping life through an art that intended to give a picture of the ideals of democracy and equal opportunities by precise reduction of volume, body, space and light. Perhaps this Utopia was realized in Judd's furniture, architecture and urban concepts even more than in his art.

D

A C

(from the publication: 'Minimalism and Applied I. Objects for real and imaginative use',
Stuttgart/Berlin 2007, pp. 4-5; 11-13. You can purchase this book online.)

Daimler Contemporary

Haus Huth Alte Potsdamer Str. 5 10785 Berlin

daily 11 am - 6 pm

D

A C