

## **Interview**

**'When it comes to writing about design, almost everything still needs to happen'**

**An interview with Prof. Timo de Rijk on studying the ordinary**

**Timo de Rijk has been a professor in the Design Cultures Master's Programme at the VU University Amsterdam since the programme's establishment in 2010. He is also editor-in-chief of the bi-annual design magazine Morf, and has curated numerous exhibitions. De Rijk has written on subjects as diverse as Chinese restaurants, household appliances, the Dutch bicycle and 'gabber' culture. According to De Rijk, the future of the discipline is a promising one, he thinks: it is hardly necessary to cross the street before one encounters an infinite number of incredibly exciting research subjects. Ragna Manz and Rosa te Velde spoke to De Rijk about the importance of researching objects, about design cultures as a discipline, and on the future of thinking about products.**

*Artefacts looks at research departing from the object, and through an analysis of the lifespan of an object, tries to comment on larger cultural phenomena. To what extent is this complementary to existing research?*

About twenty years ago a number of scholars interested in design expressed the desire to move away from connoisseurship; from art historians who knew everything about glass from the 1920s, or French chairs. This felt so restrictive that a whole class of scholars — art historians like myself, but also geographers and anthropologists — rebelled against it, because we feel there is a lot more to say about objects than where they come from and what they are made of. The old art historical tradition places the 'author' (preferably a famous one) and his or her methods at the center. The use of the objects, the context, and the presentation are not considered. We went to great lengths with this method, writing design history about design without considering the object. Articles were published that didn't even feature a visual representation of the subject at hand, and an object's context became most important. *The Journal of Design History* is a good example of this; at the beginning of an article they might place a picture of a vase, a car, or a dress, but they would never return to it. I don't think you have to choose for one tradition over the other, but rather combine them. This issue of *Kunstlicht*, one could say, is a rectification of what we set into process twenty years ago, which is something I very much welcome.

*How does design cultures relate to material cultural studies and anthropology and art history?*

We have learned a lot from material culture studies and anthropology. However, the more ethnographical approach tends to ignore the design object itself. In the books by cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller you'll be hard-pressed to find many pictures. After two hundred pages you know everything about a table except what it looks like. And that is where we can improve on material studies, by not losing sight of both the object and the author. I think most anthropologists are not taught to depart from the object, or from what is being sold or used. Rather, they tend, and you could say this is a scientific approach, to think in processes, rituals, and meanings that

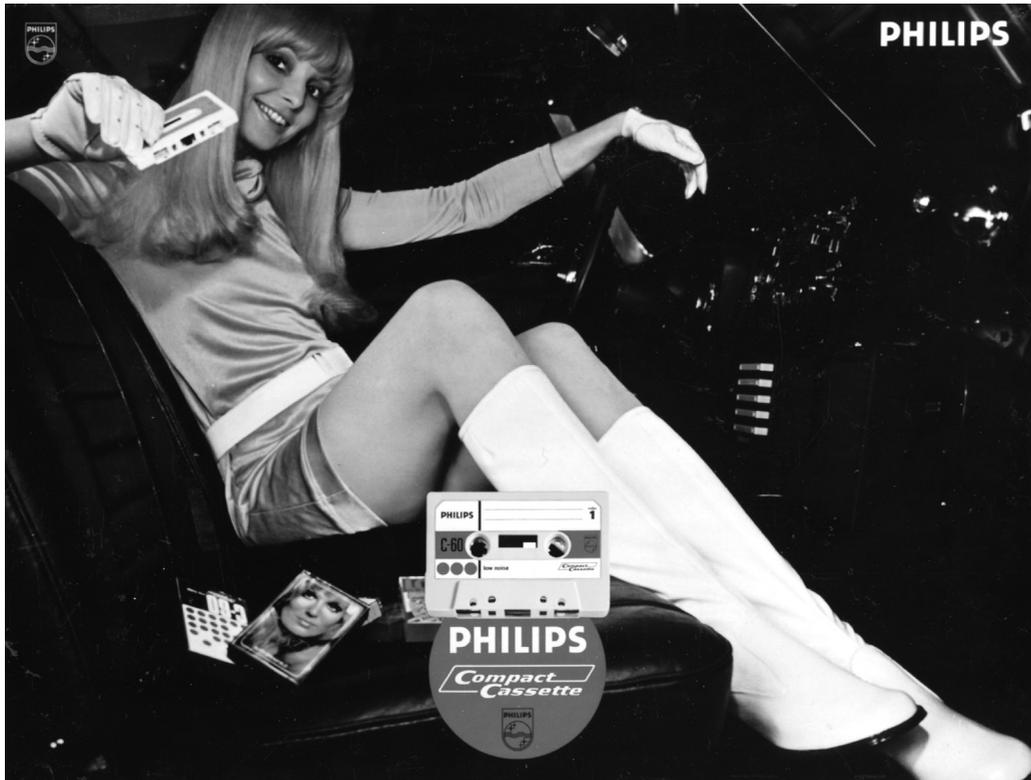


Fig. 1. Philips advertisement, approx. 1970. Courtesy Philips Company Archives.

people ascribe to the objects they use. Products and their designs serve to exemplify their research, rather than making it an essential part.

When you speak about the life of an artefact, you look at the production and very explicitly at the design, the product itself, the object. And that object acquires its meaning through its usage and context; the chair I'm sitting in might be the same chair as in the museum. However, it changes meaning when it changes contexts. But that doesn't mean the chair in my office is less important. Foregrounding the object is fundamental.

*Do you think research should be more about the object than its users?*

You can't put it like that. I think you have to find a balance, and that is different for every object. Some objects acquire meaning when they are used or as they provide a service. I once did a study into the cassette recorder, sort of as the precursor to the Walkman, as analyzed by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. Although he didn't define it as such, Hall was already using the production-consumption-mediation model (see page 4) back in 1997. His study is an incredible example of an object standing for so much more; in this case for the individualization of an era and the changing public space. Turning to the cassette recorder, one might wonder if its importance lies within the material object itself. You could say the compact cassette was a small-scale invention. But really it is a product that is central to a system that had, at first unintentionally, a huge influence on the music industry, but also on the distribution of, for instance, political messages. Some say the Islamic coup in the seventies in Iran was made possible by the cassette, which allowed for Islamic messages to be relayed from Paris. In India, the music industry was completely turned upside down, resulting in both an eruption of local music genres as well as the bankruptcy of some of the multinationals in the music industry, including Philips!

In other words, the cassette recorder and the compact cassette in themselves might be of little relevance, until you know what happened to them, how they were used by millions of people, the influence they have had on the course of history, etc.

*What does an object or subject need to have to become interesting research material?*

I am interested in subjects that house a form of morality. So, for instance, an object that dictates how we should behave. To start with, this includes all modern furniture. The modern interior and the study of it are exemplary for classical design history. Almost all design historians have at one point concerned themselves with 'The Interior' and in doing so were indirectly employed by a movement that advocated a 'civilization offensive'. I find the idea that people should buy modern furniture in order to become better people, and that this was the meaning of modern design at that time, fascinating. 'Standardization' is also remarkable: there are some products that manufacturers and consumers feel should never be revised. While our society is obsessed with the new, with change, innovation and fashion, there is simultaneously a desire for products to remain the same. This presents itself in various forms, such as wanting 'The Classic' version of a certain product. Paradoxically, the fashion industry makes the most money on designs that are not being changed, like the handbag of a certain design house that is sold as the classic design. The same applies to expensive watches and pens. However, this is in sharp contrast with the fact that our society demands new collections each year, and wants to buy new things all the time.

*How would you describe your approach to your objects of research?*

It's all about asking critical questions. That might be an open door, but a lot of critical questions have never been answered. And then it comes down, as Armando put it, to writing it down *deadpan*, as if you came from Mars. The production-consumption-mediation model helps to do that. You can and have to question everything. The seemingly ordinary becomes completely absurd. This leads to my favourite subject, the Chinese restaurant. The Chinese restaurant is of course completely insane. But we're totally used to it. Small towns such as Diemen, Zutphen or Assen have at least three of them. When you drive into such a town around six o'clock, there's a big chance everything will be closed, but you'll



Fig. 2. 'Nieuw Hong Kong', Deventer. (photo: Kunstlicht)

definitely come across one of those red-light signs with golden letters. Why is that and how do these designs come into existence? Subjects like these (such as the enormous variety of fake hair at hairdressers in Rotterdam) are at once so ordinary and so absurd that you forget to consider them as such. However, if you were to consider them, they can change the way we view our culture. I also really think that when it comes to writing about design, everything still needs to happen. All this cramped writing about designers that think of themselves as artists and present their work in museums, which, sure, I respect, it's really only such a small part of the world!

*How do you see the future of design cultures as a discipline?*

Very optimistically, exactly because of what we were just talking about. I don't have enough time, when I look through magazines, take a walk, or just contemplate what's going on in the world, to comprehend all the subjects, to connect and position them. I'm slowly starting to find it completely ludicrous that we continue to write about Dutch design in the sense of 'the history of the chair'. Or, even better, 'the modern chair', whatever that may be.

Design cultures has the possibility of developing into an integral discipline, but it can also be ransacked by other departments. If cultural anthropologists understood more about what we do, they could really benefit from our work. They are masters of methodology, and if they would only, so to say, add distinct visual components to their analyses, they would knock us right out of the playing field. But they don't. Besides that, necessary historical knowledge is also lacking.

*Design navigates many disciplines. Is this interdisciplinary character a strength or a weakness?*

It's a strength if you manage to maintain a sense of unity. Placing the object at the center of attention, like you are doing in *Artefacts*, is a way to hold things together. History as a discipline is also interdisciplinary. History has long stopped being just about Charlemagne or Napoleon, and instead also concerns itself with social, political and military histories. However, it has not yet included the study of visual material culture, and I think this is a big loss for the discipline. Why would you study political history but not how people have surrounded themselves with products? Which products were they and how did they come about? The cassette recorder was much more important than a prime minister like Colijn.

*How are scholars in other countries dealing with these issues?*

Although some research is being done in Germany and Brazil, it's mainly in the UK where design history as a discipline is firmly established. Javier Gimeno Martínez (Assistant Professor at the VU University) and I come from the British design history tradition that was spearheaded in the 1980s by, for instance, Adrian Forty (and his book *Objects of Desire*). In the UK there is quite a substantial group of well-versed professionals, so obviously the output is of a high standard. The scientification that took place in England resulted in internationalization, which is great, but it did, however, push us into a niche. Scholars publish in English, in an international journal that is read by a select group of people, and you can really only discuss the results with your international colleagues. We have lost a great part of our audience and the connection between science and museums is weak. That's a pity; we're talking about everyday objects that everyone encounters — why wouldn't we want to present our findings to a larger public, and, as a discipline, be accessible?

**During the making of *Artefacts*, De Rijk was appointed Professor of Design, Culture and Society: a joint programme of the Department of Industrial Design at Delft University of Technology and the Department of Humanities at Leiden University.**