

Neo-Kingly Things:
Contemporary Furniture in the Restricted Field

by

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Submitted to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

CONTEMPORARY ART, DESIGN AND
NEW MEDIA ART HISTORIES

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 2017

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Abstract

Since design's eighteenth-century advent, the worlds of art and design have made a habit out of convergence and deviation. In this contemporary moment of convergence, art has become increasingly relational and dematerialized, and design has moved into the space now vacated by art – a space of rarified objects. Focusing on the contemporary, limited-edition furniture spawned by the *art-design phenomenon* and its contextual culture of hyper-luxury, this paper explores how these objects function as tastemakers, informing and influencing how contemporary style can be understood and how stylistic themes are established – how meaning is conveyed through design's interconnected dimensions of form, materiality and style. Based on close observation of an entirely new aesthetic evidenced in these objects, this paper puts forth an emerging thematic typology which foregrounds the concepts of time and contemporaneity.

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Introduction

In 2016, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ("SFMOMA") acquired *Species II*, an armchair by Fredrikson Stallard (Fig. 1). Its acquisition by the museum was significant. It demonstrated the institutional recognition of the importance of what can be called 'art furniture' and it affirmed how these furniture forms speak to larger and prevailing cultural, social and aesthetic conditions. Constructed of polyurethane, rubber, fiberglass and polyester, the chair was designed and fabricated in 2015 as part of the duo's expansive (and expensive) *Species* series of sofas and chairs that were produced in limited quantities and editions in collaboration with London-based David Gill Gallery. Principal designers Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard often emphasize process in their work. With *Species II*, the fabrication process included hand-chiseling the polyurethane chassis, spray coating this base structure with a stabilizing rubber and, finally, applying what can be described as an 'upholstery' treatment. Also the result of a spray coating process, multiple layers of glass and polyester fibers form a liquid velvet cladding, made to adhere to what appears to be an impossibly textural surface. So completely does this liquid velvet cover the jagged peaks and troughs of the chair's rock-like face, that the appearance of the chair flawlessly covered in luxury upholstery fabric seems both logical and impossible. In colours ranging from deep, dangerous reds (evidenced in SFMOMA's piece) to regal purples, these thrones are far from typical in form, more closely resembling geological formations than furniture; either

oddly terrestrial or akin to an asteroid that has come crashing down to earth. Sculptural and forcefully expressive in form and character, *Species* – at once suggestive of a destructive force foreboding a dire, dystopic future – emphasizes form over function.

SFMOMA's decision to acquire the *Species* chair for its permanent collection occurred in the context of two related events. During January 2016, SFMOMA was nearing the end of a major expansion project that had seen its doors shuttered since 2013. Plans for inaugural programming were well under way. Included in the exhibition planning was the development of *Carve, Cast, Mold, Print: Material Meditations*. A curated sampling of chairs recently acquired by the museum, the premise of the exhibition was the range of new technologies applied to furniture manufacture that used minimal materials if not singular ones. Concurrently, the third annual installment of San Francisco's art and design fair, *FOG Design+Art*, was undertaken from January 14 through 17, 2016. Positioning itself as "a platform for contemporary design and art that shifts, morphs, and reveals itself through multiple forms and dimensions", the organizers have gone so far as to suggest that FOG "has become a focal point for the design and arts communities on the West Coast and further afield".¹ Established in 2014, the fair's first two years saw participants based solely in the United States. However, by 2016 the upstart fair had gained momentum with international galleries

¹ "About". *Fog Design+Art*. 14 June 2017. <https://fogfair.com/about/>

joining its roster. In keeping with other rarified design fairs such as *Design Miami/*, its sister fair, *Design Miami/Basel*, and *Masterpiece* in London², FOG features exhibition booths resembling proverbial white cubes, the curated objects on display representing what the participating dealers and tastemakers deem to be the most important examples of contemporary design. As such, FOG, like other such fairs uses the aesthetics of the museum as a strategy in elevating what is, at bottom, a commercial undertaking. To be sure, design fairs – a recent category of events which emulate art fairs – have, since the 2005 establishment of *Design Miami/*, emerged as the world’s most illustrious occasions for artisans and artist makers, supporting and perpetuating a system of elite consumption or what Deyan Sudjic has characterized as the “drooling pornography of collecting” (Sudjic 2009, 102). And as with art fairs, gala evenings, patron events and other special opportunities for collectors defined the glamorous opening of FOG.

Among the international participants at the FOG celebration was London’s David Gill Gallery which presented works from a number of artists in its stable including Cuban-American artist Jorge Pardo, the Iraqi-British architect and furniture designer, Zaha Hadid and British design duo, Fredrikson Stallard. Each year, FOG presents its

² *Design Miami/* was established in 2005, *Design Miami/Basel* in 2010. Both shows are the design-focused offshoots of *Art Basel*, the art fair staged annually since 1970 in Basel, and in Miami since 2002. *Masterpiece* was established in 2010. *Masterpiece*, like FOG, features both art and design.

Preview Gala as a fundraising event in support SFMOMA's exhibitions and education programs. In 2016 the museum held its Architecture+Design Accessions subcommittee meeting on site at FOG (Appendix A). Here, galleries were given the opportunity to present works for consideration for acquisition. David Gill Gallery successfully pitched *Species II* (with the details of the pitch not being made public). Soon after the chair was purchased by SFMOMA through a gift of the FOG Designers Forum.³

Opening on 14 May 2016, the *Carve, Cast, Mold, Print* exhibition included sixteen chairs by fifteen artists. Likely for reasons relating to the precise timing of the accession, *Species II* did not make the exhibition's final cut (indeed, no acquisitions made in 2016 were included), although its comparatively complex materiality may have been a factor. The chairs included in the exhibition were displayed on a single acrylic dais (Fig. 2), a surface area approximating 250 square feet (arguably an economic use of real estate in light of the 170,000 square feet of total display space at SFMOMA's disposal after its renovation).⁴ Recent acquisitions such as *Species II* indicate that the museum decided to bolster its much-respected design collection by focusing on contemporary furniture (objects that have yet to attain the status of design classics but

³ Also selected at this time as part of the FOG 2016 gift was Hella Jongerius's *UN Lounge Chair*. Michael Young's *Oxygen Chair* was acquired the previous year through the same fund, and was featured in the SFMOMA inaugural design exhibition, *Carve, Cast, Mold, Print: Material Meditations*.

⁴ Jill Lynch. "The New San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Opens to the Public on Saturday, May 14, 2016" *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*. 28 April, 2017.
<https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/new-san-francisco-museum-modern-art-opens-public/>

which represent in the eyes of curators, significant exercises in material culture). The diminutive scale of the exhibition, however, was regarded by some as a questionable indication of the institution's commitment to design. The exhibition featured several historically significant and modernist pieces including Charles and Ray Eames' *Walnut stool C* from 1960, Wendell Castle's plastic *Baby Molar Chair* from 1968 and Donald Judd's copper *Armchair* from 1984. Importantly, more recent works were given special priority in the exhibition. Designs by such studio artists as Front Design, Max Lamb and Marijn van der Poll were positioned in the exhibition in such ways as to affirm SFMOMA's critical interest with the idea of contemporary furniture. Designed and printed in 2005, Front Design's *Materialized Sketch of a Chair with a Rectangular Back* is an early experiment in 3-D printing, made from polyamide resin with ceramic filler. It was acquired in 2015 through SFMOMA's Accessions Committee Fund. Lamb's *White Poly Chair* from 2010 has been hand-carved from a block of expanded polystyrene – a material of choice for this artist – then treated with a protective, rubber spray coating. This acquisition (also through the museum's own accession fund) was matched with that of a related piece, the *Bronze Poly Chair*, gifted by the artist and his dealer, Paul Johnson of Johnson Trading Gallery. Designed in 2000 and formed in 2010, van der Poll's *Do hit* chair is both conceptual and performative, with some assembly required. Starting with a cubic steel form, the 'chair' comes with a sledgehammer, the consumer is encouraged – required if the chair is to be 'realized' and thus used – to hit the chair

into a suitable, customized shape. Like *Species II*, the *Do hit* chair embraces (and encourages, if not demands) destruction as an aesthetic theme. Acquired in 2011 (a gift of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts), this chair has been further validated by *Time Magazine*, voting it a “collectible design must-have.”⁵

The exhibition showcased pieces that express their material derivation as well as a particular construction process – a design vocabulary shared by *Species II*, and one that would have been at front of mind on the part of the curatorial team as it both planned the show and participated in acquisition selections from the FOG offerings. With a purported focus on material, the exhibition served to illustrate the broader picture of contemporary aesthetics, as well as reflect the character – ideological and social – represented in modern, later modern and post-millennial objects. Indeed, as Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher, the Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture + Design explained, the museum’s Architecture and Design department’s focus is on “works that have transformed the collective cultural landscape.”⁶ Fletcher’s suggestion that design has agency is worth consideration. Influence is bi-directional. Design is a product of its cultural contexts, with material objects performing as repositories of meaning, mirrors,

⁵ “Marijn van der Poll: Collectible Design.” *Marijn van der Poll*. Web. 3 Jul. 2017. <http://www.marijnvanderpoll.com>

⁶ “Architecture + Design.” *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*. Web. 3 Jul. 2017. <https://www.sfmoma.org/artists-artworks/architecture-design/>

as it were, that reflect the broader culture. This system of signification turns on the idea that expressive culture is the product of thought and the validation and perpetuation of thought. It is logical, then, that tangible culture (human made and human modified things) can also influence culture. The accession of *Species II* into SFMOMA's collection – with museum acquisition being a significant event in the 'life' of any object contemporary or otherwise – suggests that the work of Fredrikson Stallard was seen to represent in powerful ways the conditions and sensibilities of the era of its creation. Accordingly, its contemporaneity (to use Terry Smith's valuable term) invites consideration.

Species II is an example of radically 'new' production, contemporary in both its form and sensibility. There are, of course, many newly-produced objects that look old – that is to say, their style and form are imitative of something once contemporary but now historic, thus communicating such attributes as heritage, tradition or just unthinking continuity. They do not announce their status as contemporary objects as *Species II* does. All of these objects, however, use multiple semiotic mechanisms to communicate meaning. Form, materiality and style combine together to render the object a text that can be read. It is the stylistic dimension – the decorative, ornamental and arguably, the superfluous – that is the strongest communicator (and with no other function, decoration is exclusively semiotic). Style is therefore substantial and

significant. What does contemporary style communicate? What are its aesthetic themes? And, what broader cultural dynamics are reflected therein?

There exists within the broad, market-driven category of contemporary design a smaller culture of production, namely, elite, limited-edition furniture that seeks to straddle the line between design and art. A product of the design gallery system – with *Species II* being but one example of this – art furniture (for want of a better term) often functions more as provocative statements and ruminations on the idea of furniture than as utilitarian objects. These objects – the neo-kingly products of a culture of extreme consumerism and its particular iteration of the cult of *hyper-luxury* – are uniquely poised to articulate contemporary style currents, as both objects and their creators function as tastemakers, forging the ‘high style’ that trickles down to inform more quotidian design, as well as informing and influencing our understanding of contemporary style. Seeking to establish a stylistic typology – however incipient – of the emerging aesthetic themes evidenced in these objects, this paper proposes a conceptual binary of the past and the future, and argues that the strongest thematic threads relate to time; either expressing multiple temporalities, conjuring a speculative future (catastrophic or utopic) or looping back in time to the prehistoric. These emerging themes, as evidenced in this unique object category, are reflective of today’s consciousness – a zeitgeist for the new millennium.

Introducing the contemporary

The galaxy whose light I see now may have ceased to exist millennia ago, and by the same token men cannot fully sense any event until after it has happened, until it is history, until it is the dust and ash of that cosmic storm which we call the present, and which perpetually rages through creation.

George Kubler,
The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things, 1962⁷

As art historian George Kubler notes, the challenge of performing history on the present is marked by a lack of critical and mature distance in assessing the occurrence and implications of things. The benefits of historical perspective are real. In the context of the work of making sense of such issues as style and its development, it is a much easier task to look back at previous periods and clearly identify the decorative motifs and stylistic themes that characterize them – or at least, to create a coherent fiction. From a distance, these historical styles appear unified and it is possible to trace a linear, usually chronological path from one style to the next. No such perspective exists in the assessment of the contemporary. In matters of contemporaneity, the aesthetics of the present – Riegl's *kunstwollen* in its incipient stage – is still in formation and defies easy categorization. That most historical and stylistic periods were named after the fact suggests how the analysis of current or contemporary style requires a particular analytic approach. If anything, making sense of the contemporary is a highly contingent

⁷ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962), 18.

and speculative business. History gives perspective over time, constructing each generation's perception of the past. As design historian John A. Walker notes, "modern theorists examining a painting by Leonardo, for example, have the benefit not only of their own concretizations but all earlier ones; thus their understanding of the work is enhanced" (Walker 1989, 181). In the quest to understand the contemporary, there are simply so many fewer tools in the toolbox.

The issue of gaining sufficient critical perspective in understanding the contemporary is one challenge. The other is understanding the character, perhaps even essence, of the present. The contemporary is not just a too-close version of the same thing, but rather something distinct with its own defining attributes. The idea of the contemporary is tied to a shared acceptance of the relationship of time and its immediacy in the context of the past. It is a framing of time through the employment of chronological measurements of years and decades and the assumption that the character of the 'here and now' is unstable because its denouement has yet to be written. The idea of the 'contemporary' must also account for the social and the political. International relations, political theory, global economics, the sociology of multiculturalism and trans-locality not to mention recent, epoch-defining events such as 9/11 (2001), and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, as well as increased global wealth concentration, migration, connectivity and social media with its new forms of expression but also of surveillance, the casualization of the workforce and

environmental concerns (even impending catastrophe on many fronts), among others, contribute to a temporal condition that is complex and different in tone from postmodernism. All of these factors contribute to the formation of a Millennial zeitgeist, one to which contemporary design responds. Kubler refers to the issues shaping contemporary times as 'open problems'.⁸ This formulation of the present and immediate or recent past is given the moniker 'contemporaneity' by art historian, Terry Smith. Smith argues that these intense frictions create a "nearly universal condition of permanent-seeming aftermath – Ground Zero everywhere – yet also inspiring insights into adaptable modes of active resistance and hopeful persistence" (Smith 2008, 4). Key to Smith's conception of contemporaneity is the concept of periodicity, progress and participation. With a periodicity that parallels modernity and postmodernity – "isms" or eras, replete with distinct stylistic characteristics - Smith views contemporaneity as an appellation for an era (as such, it is already in the process of becoming historical and outmoded, at which point yet another word will be required to reference the present). While some of its individual, defining attributes may have been true during these preceding eras, it is the combination and convergence of these elements, and the resulting outcomes, that define contemporaneity.

⁸ Art historian George Kubler posits that by the second half of the 20th century, the problems of conventional symbolism had become 'closed problems', a phrase he coined to describe issues that contemporary artists are no longer *in* (Kubler 1962, 30).

A belief in progress was embedded in the modernist meta-narrative. As such, for those not left behind in time, time was singular and forwardly directed. In contrast, contemporaneity is a post-progress state; the singularity and linearity of time has been upset. "Multiple temporalities are the rule these days, and their conceptions of historical development move in multifarious directions." (Smith 2008, 5) This is effectively illustrated in the liberal historical borrowings – the mash-up culture – evidenced in some of today's elite furniture. The work of Italian designer Ferruccio Laviani, for example, who, in the visually frenetic *Good Vibrations* cabinet for Fratelli Boffi, offers multiple temporalities, thus foregrounding the contemporary condition of the plurality of time (Fig. 3). To be sure, contemporaneity has an entangled relationship with time; the two concepts impact each other. Smith argues that to be in time was optional in past eras – in particular, modernity's 'cultural imperialism' that displaced un-modern individuals and peoples into "past, slower or frozen time" (Smith 2008, 5). In contrast, participation is required in post-millennial society, mandated by the global spread and speed of communication in the information age; as historian Wolf Schäfer observes, the "sociotemporal world order is changing in favor of contemporaneity for all" (Smith 2008, 5, and Schäfer 2004, 103). Speed – or a reconfigured, technologically dependent understanding of speed – has become foundational in the contemporary

frame and the luxury of slowness is out of grasp.⁹ Today's limited-edition design exists in, and is influenced by, the conception of the contemporary thus provided.

Hybrid objects and their contexts

The ideology of design has been intimately bound up with problem-solving. Now we are being offered an entirely different category of object.

Deyan Sudjic 2009, 216¹⁰

...limited-edition work...moves design toward the meeting point with art, a trend now widely referred to as Designart, the impact of which on design is just beginning to be felt.

R. Craig Miller 2008, 36¹¹

Limited-edition luxury furniture exists at the confluence of art and design; however, this convergence is nothing new. Since the advent of design in the eighteenth-century, the worlds of art and design have made a habit out of convergence and deviation. In this contemporary moment of convergence, art has become increasingly relational and

⁹ Speed is not an exclusively millennial concern. In 1903, Georg Simmel argued that speed and dynamism made the city "the crucible of a new mental state" (Trentmann 2016, 211). In *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes identifies the accelerated pace of change as a defining characteristic of the modernist era. Speed was elevated to a source of inspiration for the Futurists (Marinetti, 1909), and continues to be explored today in *accelerationism*, a particularly millennial theory with its roots in Futurism and best articulated by Steven Shaviro (2015).

¹⁰ Deyan Sudjic, *The Language of Things: Understanding the World of Objects* (New York: Norton, 2009).

¹¹ R. Craig Miller, Penny Sparke and Catherine McDermott, *European Design Since 1985: Shaping the New Century* (London: Merrell, 2008).

dematerialized, and design has moved into the space now vacated by art – a space of rarified objects. These are hybrid objects; situated as they are at the intersection of art and design, and embodying characteristics from each, purportedly distinct category. This hybridity follows the postmodern tradition which saw the creation of hybrid objects that referenced both high and low culture.¹² Exploring the historical contexts of this confluence, along with its relevant terminology, provides the basis for a framework within which the characteristics that define these objects can be scrutinized.

These objects are hybrids, however, the term *hybrid object* is generic; there are many other object types which could also be viewed as such. Here are some more specific monikers to consider: star designer Marc Newson, speaking about the 2012 publication of his catalogue raisonné, *Marc Newson. Works* (itself a limited edition¹³), refers to this intersection as “the art-design phenomenon” (Deezen). Interestingly, it may be one of his pieces, the famous *Lockheed Lounge* from 1986,¹⁴ to which the

¹² Postmodernism saw the ideological jumbling of history, high and low culture, and seriousness and irony (the latter a reaction against the rational and prescriptive nature of modernism). As these hybrids have evolved during the intervening forty years, they have shifted from curiosities to fetishized objects.

¹³ *Marc Newson. Works* was published by Taschen (2012) and edited by Alison Castle. The Collector’s Edition, priced at US\$1,000, is limited to 1,000 numbered and signed copies, plus 100 artist proofs, each in a linen-covered slipcase. An Artist’s Edition was also published in limited quantities (100 copies). Priced at US\$6,000, it features leather marquetry on the cover and a Micarta slipcase designed by Marc Newson and Richard Allan.

¹⁴ Around the same time, wood-based work began to appear in limited edition by George Nakashima, Sam Maloof and Wendall Castle. Only Castle works within the design gallery system, while Nakashima and Maloof were best classified as craft or studio furniture makers.

categories of numbered edition, artist proof and prototype were first applied.¹⁵ This object type is also known variously as *art furniture* and *designart* (Miller, 2008, and Sudjic, 2009). Each of these terms address the unique positioning of certain types of contemporary objects as they relate to both product design and art, distinct from all other object categories.

The contemporary production of furniture that results from a collaboration between designer/maker and design gallery is generally known as limited-edition furniture, a term which references the size of its production run (generally in the range of two to twelve pieces). The term – along with the programmatic structure of producing numbered pieces in very small quantities, including one or more artist proof and prototype – is borrowed from printmaking, where it was first established during the nineteenth century. It is the limited nature of production – the announcement of rarity – that imbues these objects with status. The structure of the limited edition is further echoed by the existence of Fredrikson Stallard’s catalogue raisonné, published by David Gill Gallery in 2012 (far from encapsulating a complete body of work as is the norm for such a text, the timing of this publication marked a career trajectory shifting from ‘emerging’ to ‘established’ for these designers). This text (along with the Marc

¹⁵ Sudjic suggests that it was at the Sotheby’s 2006 sale of a *Lockheed Lounge* that these categories were first established (Sudjic 2009, 205). In *Why is a chair worth 2.4 million pounds?*, a 2011 essay by Lis Darby, senior lecturer at Sotheby’s Institute of Art, Darby refers to the various *Lockheed Lounges* auctioned over the years at Sotheby’s and Christie’s as “examples”.

Newson text from the same year) is among the first such publications for limited-edition contemporary design: rare documents for rare production. Even more so than the underlying furniture, here the catalogue raisonné is a further articulation of the current moment of rarity, where the object's use-value is subsumed by its aura. Rarity in production is echoed by rarity in distribution, which is most often singular (with producers having exclusive gallery representation). While directed toward William Morris's artisanal volumes Veblen's commentary from 1899 remains valid and proves useful in the assessment of contemporary and rarified furniture, "A limited edition is in effect a guarantee – somewhat crude, it is true – that this...is scarce and that it therefore is costly and lends pecuniary distinction to its consumer" (Veblen 2007, 109). The term 'limited edition' is used as another name for *designart*, although not always accurately; the work may instead be unique or bespoke, while sharing other attributes within the category.

In order to contextualize the evolving relationship between art and design, it is necessary to look to the past. To exist, design (meaning the conceptualization and material realization of something) requires a fractured production process. This fracturing – or division of labour – first emerged in France during the eighteenth century under the reign of Louis XIV, with the establishment of the state-owned, Gobelins manufactories of tapestries, fine furniture and other decorative objects (Raizman 2011, 13). It was here, in the context of handcrafted, luxury production, that

increased levels of skill specification required many individual craftspeople to contribute a singular skill to the making of an object, all under the direction of a *master* (today, the appellation 'designer' would apply). Prior to this incipient 'assembly line' production, neither design nor craft existed as separate qualifiers; objects were simply made. This division of labour accelerated in step with the process of industrialization during the nineteenth century – thus the creation of 'design' as a separate verb (then later, a noun) – a function distinct from making. It is here that the hierarchy of 'fine art' over the 'lesser arts' (that is, design – also referred to as the minor arts, the decorative arts and the industrial arts) begins to gain prominence. Reformers began to voice opposition to this development. In particular, William Morris was a proponent of 'unity of the arts', a position that sought to elevate the lesser arts to the level of fine art, thereby re-establishing their previously equitable relationship. In a similarly non-hierarchical vein, *gesamtkunstwerk*, loosely translated as a 'total work of art', was an ideology embraced during Art Nouveau (1890-1917 or thereabouts) and, in the contexts of the Deutscher Werkbund (1907) and the Bauhaus (1919), seen as an ideal for bridging art and industry.¹⁶

¹⁶ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Furniture: A Concise History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 162, and Mark Hinchman, *History of Furniture: A Global View* (New York: Fairchild, 2009), 616.

The twentieth century was polystylistic in this regard; while the modernists worshipped at the altar of functionalism (thereby once again, severing the connection between functional design and useless art), proponents of the more prevalent decorative styles (Art Moderne as one example) continued to link art and design, arguably with less ideological rigour than their nineteenth-century predecessors. First appearing in the late 1960s, postmodernism served to blur the traditional dividing lines between art and design, thereby changing the way in which work was commissioned, exhibited and sold (Miller 2008, 36). This set the stage for the establishment of design galleries and the consequent production of art furniture, beginning, in earnest, in the early 1980s. Pioneer gallerists included Yves Gastou, who established Galerie Yves Gastou in Paris in 1985 (after over four years at the *Marché Aux Puces*), and David Gill, who opened his first London gallery in 1987. The work of these two entrepreneurs with their radical aesthetic sensibilities essentially created the field. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the establishment of a great many new entrants in the field, including Galerie Kreo in Paris (1999), Johnson Trading Gallery (2000), Salon 94 (2002) and Friedman Benda (2007), all in New York, and Established and Sons (2005), Carpenters Workshop Gallery (2006), and Gallery FUMI (2008) in London, among others. In these key cities, the market for collectible, elite design has become well entrenched in the cultural landscape.

These galleries support a niche market of hybrid objects that are both quasi-functional and expressive; most simplistically, these are their defining characteristics. Function and expression exist on a binary and have an inverse relationship; as an object's function diminishes, its freedom of expression increases. In the everyday world of product design, it is the designer's role to solve problems – such as how to make *product "X"* faster, cheaper, stronger, or even more innovatively, flexibly or sustainably. Without a problem to solve, there is no call for design. The objects of this study are unique in their relative lack of design problematic. With dealer support (even collaboration), designers are mandated with fewer stakeholder or budgetary constraints. With more creative freedom, the results may be viewed as a purer form of expression. In the context of the *art-design phenomenon*, the pendulum is swinging ever closer to art, with 'design for design sake' modeled after 'art for art sake'. A defining feature of this art-like production is a turn toward uselessness. Indeed, functionality in this context may be viewed as inconvenient – inconvenient because if it is functional, it is not art. Inconvenient because function inhibits status. As Sudjic notes, "usefulness is inversely proportional to status. The more useless an object is, the more highly valued it will be" (Sudjic 2009, 168). Where freedom of expression increases as utility values diminishes, so too does status. The term *quasi-functional* is being used to accommodate the existence of some utility value, albeit significantly reduced, but also in acknowledgement of these increased symbolic functions.

These things being said, there is the question of how a diminished utility value is manifested in elite furniture production. Antwerp/Amsterdam-based Studio Job's *Robber Baron Buffet* (2013), for example, formed as a traditional cassone, is dominated by a hole blown clear through the carcass, rendering it useless as a storage piece. Similarly, in the *F* The Classics!* works for Italian brand, Fratelli Boffi (2012), Ferruccio Laviani replicated French Regency commodes in the style of Charles Cressent. However, Laviani's subversion takes the form of his having pierced the commode with sleek, conical holes, anomalies accentuated with saturated pink or blue. Here, the utility value as storage furniture is equally negated (Fig. 4). In his ongoing *Smoke and Where There's Smoke* series (launched 2002 and 2004, respectively), Dutch designer Maarten Baas has frequently aimed a blow torch at perfectly functional furniture – authentic icons in their own right, such as Gerrit Rietveld's *Zig Zag* chair (1934) – burning it to a crisp and creating the illusion (if not the reality) of sooty danger and structural fragility. This is a chair upon which one best not sit.

The *Species* sofa by Fredrikson Stallard is particularly illustrative of the growing negation of function in contemporary art furniture. Sharing the same materiality, fabrication and aesthetic as the *Species II* armchair, the sofa's overall physical dimensions are in the standard range for the category 'sofa', but there is little else about this piece that is standard. With no structural wooden chassis, the sofa – with its spray-coated surface – is not even upholstered in the traditional sense. This velvet-clad,

rocky crag offers the sitter little more than a precarious perch¹⁷. Designers Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard address the question of utility head-on, stating that “this is furniture, but not as we know it”.¹⁸ Furniture has always been a prop for the drama of life, but perhaps never more so than with *Species* is furniture experienced as a stage piece for a domestic setting.

Understanding the role of these objects requires consideration of their various dimensions, both literal and metaphoric. Literally, these objects are what they are – that is, furniture pieces such as chairs and tables, made by individuals for a given purpose; their status as ‘things’ is still functional. Their function cannot be separated from their form, regardless of whether they are called upon to fulfil such function (or even, if their form is well-suited for use). While all objects have a symbolic dimension, it is especially apparent in contemporary limited-edition furniture, where conceptual expression is foregrounded over what it actually is – its form and its purported utility. In this way, it is quasi-functional; it functions as a placeholder for furniture, which in turn, functions as art.

In 2008, Sudjic concluded *The Language of Things* with the prediction that this new hybrid object “is not one that is likely to do much in the short term to shift the

¹⁷ Having had the opportunity to sit in a piece from this series during a studio visit in August 2016, I can confirm that *Species* does not comply with traditional notions of comfort. It feels lumpy and relatively unyielding. Thus, if making these pieces is a type of performance, so too is ownership.

¹⁸ Fredrikson Stallard. Accessed August 15, 2017. <http://www.fredriksonstallard.com/archive/species-1/>.

relative positions in the social hierarchy of art and design. What it will do is fuel what may be a short-lived explosion of flamboyant new work” (Sudjic 2009, 216). Since its emergence in about 2005, there is no evidence of a slow down in popularity or production. Quite the opposite is true, with more design galleries being established and greater numbers of designers participating in the creation of these rare objects. What may have started as a novelty three decades ago has become an increasingly significant force; indeed, this is now the primary vehicle for the production of elite design. Just as production is further established, this is also true for consumption. Design has become a valid and increasingly important dimension of institutional as well as individual collecting, offering the wealthy yet another layer of object with which to garner cultural capital, and with which to feather their lavish nests. Far from being a short-lived oddity, it is clear that this category is here to stay – at least as long as the existence of concentrated wealth among the proverbial “one percent”.

Ever present, extreme wealth has influenced cultural production throughout history. That said, contemporary wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated, and even changing hands. By 2014, there were 492 billionaires in the United States, followed by 152 in China and 111 in Russia (McNeil and Riello 2016, 141). Wealth inequality is now most pronounced at the top: “The super rich turned into the mega-rich”, notes Frank Trentmann in *The Empire of Things*, “Between 1995 and 2007, the

four richest people in America more than doubled their wealth to over \$1 trillion” (Trentmann 2016, 434). Current levels of wealth concentration may be unprecedented, however this is not an entirely new concern; wealth and its expression in luxury production and consumption has been a target of criticism throughout history. Two of the pioneers in critical luxury studies – eighteenth-century thinkers Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) and David Hume (1711-1776) – both regarded luxury with ambivalence. In *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville acknowledged luxury as superficial and potentially immoral at the individual level, however viewed it as a positive force for prosperity at the broader societal level. Without it, the economy would suffer: “mercers, upholsters, tailors and many others...would be starved in half a year’s time, if pride and luxury were at once to be banished [sic] the nation” (Mandeville 1795, 42). Hume saw luxury as both harmful and advantageous to society, with his ambivalence extending to the level of the individual: “were there no demand for such superfluities, men sink into indolence, lose all enjoyment of life, and are useless to the public” (Hume 1741, 108 and Trentmann 2016, 101). At the dawn of the twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) revisited the matter in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), his socio-economic interrogation of the American wealthy. Forming such now-common concepts as conspicuous and vicarious consumption, conspicuous and vicarious leisure, and the canon of expensiveness, Veblen’s influential work casts a long shadow over all

subsequent critical luxury scholarship, including that of Pierre Bourdieu and most recently, Thomas Piketty.¹⁹

In *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty addresses the matter of wealth's changing ownership. Historically²⁰, little lip service was paid to the virtues of merit; there was no shame in being a *rentier* or heiress (indeed, Piketty cites the heroines of Austen and Balzac novels as evidence that investment income was the best case scenario). In contrast, starting during the 1970s and 1980s and trending upward ever since, today there is a cult of *hyper-meritocracy*, culminating in the 'supermanager', a category of worker who has justified stratospheric pay packets as deserved and socially correct – otherwise "only the heirs of large fortunes would be able to achieve true wealth, which would be unfair" (Piketty 2014, 264 and 417). Where historically, "a minority was chosen to live on behalf of everyone else" (Piketty 2014, 416), it seems that in this culture of *extreme meritocracy*, the wealthy actually deserve to do so. It stands that those who comprise the new centile (or more relevantly, the top thousandth) must distinguish themselves as a part of this elite group – and assert their

¹⁹ In particular, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) and economist Thomas Piketty's 2014 book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

²⁰ Specifically, Piketty draws a parallel between wealth inequality in the twenty-first century and that which occurred during the *Belle Époque* – a time, so named retrospectively (in sharp contrast with the years that followed, including WWI and the Great Depression) – that covers the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth centuries, the very time and phenomena to which Veblen responded.

exceptionalism – in their multitude of purchasing decisions and how they consume luxury in all aspects of their lives, including how they furnish their homes.

The objects that are the focus of this research are cultural artifacts existing in the broader context of hyper luxury. The term *hyper luxury* was first used in 2011 by the fashion industry trade journal *Women's Wear Daily*, referring to a phenomenon prompted by the rebound to the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and its ensuing uptick in wealth inequality, "because the word 'luxury' no longer suffices to describe the escalating tastes of the wealthy" (Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Washington Post*). It relates to products that are "rare, exclusive, of extremely high quality, often handmade and unapologetically expensive" (*WWD*, August 15, 2011). To date, this term has primarily been used uncritically, by luxury brands to better categorize and target this new market segment.²¹

Luxury is multifaceted and includes such features as quality, price, aesthetics and heritage, however the dimensions most relevant for this study are rarity and superfluity.²² Rarity is key to limited edition production. While designers and makers seek to distinguish their products through rarification, consumers – awash in an ever-

²¹ Hyper luxury may alternatively be referred to as 'metaluxury' or 'über luxury'. (McNeil and Riello 2016, 231)

²² In *The Concept of Luxury Brands*, Klaus Heine identifies six dimensions of luxury: excellent quality, very high price, scarcity, aesthetics/polysensuality, heritage/history and superfluosity.

increasing amount of *stuff* – are also seeking distinction. The cult of the rare appears to be expanding, intensifying and accelerating, and this extends beyond materiality. As luxury scholar Klaus Heine notes, “luxury is ever more associated with increasingly scarce resources such as self-determination, silence, and time” (Heine 2011, 22). Luxury is also superfluous; it supplies more than necessary – more craftsmanship, more technology, more decoration (all of which is superfluous), in turn supplying more material. While this can extend to utility, with luxury objects offering more features and enhanced functionality, this is rarely true for the objects of this study. Rather here, superfluity is related to uselessness, as the more these objects strive toward art, the less useful they become. As such, their very existence becomes superfluous yet indispensable in the context of elite consumption and the mechanics of social differentiation.

This brief history is offered to contextualize contemporary, luxury design. In art-historical parlance, connecting luxury with opulence is ‘old wine in old bottles’. At the turn of the eighteenth century, André-Charles Boulle was creating bespoke, luxury objects in the exclusive service of Louis XIV. *Boulle-work* not only required the exceedingly labour-intensive technique of marquetry (an elaborate patterning created in inlay of exotic wood veneers, shell, ivory or metals) carried out by exceptional craftsmen, it, like all luxury production, was made of the finest available materials. Historically, luxury material was a required component of the luxury object. That such

work announces 'luxury' is now so engrained in the collective psyche that it continues to resurface in contemporary design production; as in the case of Dolce and Gabbana's *Baroque Collection* of couture from 2012, where exclusive garments, constructed of elaborate brocade and lace in black and gold, deliberately mimicked Boulle casegoods. Similarly, the Sao Paulo-based Campana Brothers' *Numa* series of furniture from 2014 (Fig. 5) is a tongue-in-cheek exploration of old school, opulent luxury. Here, in an embodiment of extreme decoration, the gilded, bronze show-frames of sofas and chairs have been cast from a mélange of escutcheons and other decorative surface applications. In a further display of excess, the rabbit fur upholstery hangs loosely, its quantity – like its very substance – so much more than required.

Notions of luxury have evolved over time. In 1925, when the modernist project was well underway, Le Corbusier pronounced that "Trash is always abundantly decorated; the luxury object is well made, neat and clean, pure and healthy, and its bareness reveals the quality of its manufacture" (Le Corbusier 2000, 214). Le Corbusier follows Adolf Loos, a pioneer in the functionalist aesthetic, who in 1908 called for the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use (Loos 1998, 167). Neither Le Corbusier nor Loos rejected luxury, they were simply redefining it – both its aesthetics and material composition, the latter being machine-aged, accessible and infinitely reproducible. This is perhaps the first time that concepts are privileged over materiality as the locus of luxury. The postmodern reaction against modernism started in Italy, with

the radical design movements of the late 1960s, along with the theoretical work of American architect Robert Venturi, who, in his seminal book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), was critical of modernism's elitism, and called for the return of historicism and ornamentation – the very inclusions so adamantly rejected by the modernists. The furniture associated with postmodernism emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, it too, often eschewing traditional luxury materials – key examples are Frank Gehry's exploration of cardboard furniture such as the *Wiggle Side Chair* (1969-1972) and the *Beaver* series of chairs and ottomans (1980-1987), along with Ettore Sottsass Jr.'s work for Memphis Group (1981-1983), which explored everyday materials such as Formica. Here the ordinary, socially modest and the mundane were accorded high status by way of the creative work of elite designers.

Old ideas of luxury continue to be inverted today, with 'anti-luxury' being explored through debased materials – aluminum and plastics such as polystyrene and synthetic resin are dominant examples – as well as deformation and deskilling. In fact, rarely do today's producers of limited-edition furniture actively embrace opulence, with the Campana Brothers' *Numa* series being an ironic exception.²³ There is of course opulently luxurious furniture being produced outside of the design-gallery system, likely with a greater market share in economic terms but with a lesser sense of irony,

²³ Bourdieu suggests that there is no room for naïveté in the artistic field: "every gesture, every event, is... 'a sort of nudge or wink between accomplices'" (Bourdieu 1993,109).

and with less cultural capital. An example is the Portugal-based, global brand *Boca do Lobo*, an established purveyor of exclusive (and often, opulent) luxury that has recently jumped onto the 'hyper luxury' bandwagon with its "Private Collection" of personal safes and other objects. While acknowledging the existence of this type of luxury production, it lies outside the primary scope of this research – that being the restricted field of cultural production.

While seemingly serving a demographically miniscule, economically restrictive audience, luxury furniture has always been significant to art history, acting as an indicator of how culture is produced. The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, supplies a critical framework for understanding the space that elite furniture occupies.

Bourdieu's field theory specifies that the field of cultural production – while behaving relatively autonomously – is contained within the field of power, itself contained within the field of class relations. The field of cultural production can be separated into two sub-fields, those of 'restricted' and 'mass' production (Bourdieu 1984, 38). While a common characteristic of production within the restricted field is a disavowal of the economy, where instead the key goal is an accumulation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 75), this is not the case with post-millennial art furniture.²⁴ Bourdieu's disavowal

²⁴ This disregard for economic value is not even necessarily true for today's overly-monetized art market – examples include the factory-like production by Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst; and the emergence of art-based hedge funds and other financial vehicles – the likes of which Bourdieu had not seen when crafting his theory.

of the economy has been substituted with a *disavowal of utility*; recall that in many cases, what distinguishes restricted production is the prioritization of ideas over function, if not an out-right rejection of utility-value in favour of symbolic value.

The restricted field of production is populated by a network of tastemakers, influencers and gate-keepers. These include the museums and other collectors who sanction, and the gallerists who commission, promote, and restrict access. The *apparent* producer is the designer, however the work is being facilitated by the design gallery system and consecrated by collectors. Nothing imbues these objects with status as well as the institutional validation that comes with accession into museum collections,²⁵ but private collectors also play a role in the consecration process, as they help establish value by material appropriation (Bourdieu 1984, 78). Through acquisition, cultural capital is passed from producer to user, who now require this capital just to comprehend their own furniture – which today, demands a critical interrogation. As Trentmann observes, “Economic capital does not directly translate into cultural capital. Education is decisive” (Trentmann 2016, 466). Unlike overtly

²⁵ Museums – and design museums in particular – operate in the space where art and design intersect most overtly, where plinth and vitrine are the tools of recontextualization, making the everyday sacred and playing a key role in advancing the fetishization of designed objects and their designers. It is noteworthy that contemporary art furniture is designed for collections, this is part of its *raison d’être*. This was not the case before *presentism* (the cult of the contemporary), when historic artefacts were more likely to be colonized or otherwise appropriated for museum collections. Perhaps these contemporary objects are no more decontextualized in the museum than anywhere else.

branded luxury merchandise, limited editions are an understated luxury existing at the confluence of wealth and social capital and their recognition requires connoisseurship; “Luxury thrives on knowledge.” (McNeil and Riello 2016, 5, 230)

These things said, revisiting the example of Boca do Lobo is useful. It is positioned in the mass field (however elevated it may be situated therein) rather than in the restricted field. The opulent luxury evidenced in the products of Boca do Lobo is not a necessary requirement in the restricted field. Rather, restricted production becomes associated with luxury via its rarity – the inverse relationship between popularity and status (Bourdieu 1984, 39) – and above all, its consecration by other actors in the field. What occurs within the restricted field of cultural production wields influence over the greater field of mass production – it is the field of taste making, from where technical and stylistic innovation is opportuned and trickles down. Take for example, Boca do Lobo’s *Imperfectio* series of boxed sofas from 2016. Featuring ruched leather upholstery encased in polished brass that has been hammered and folded such that it resembles a crumpled gum wrapper, it is, according to the company’s description “the expression of imperfect aesthetic [sic], the appeal of that which is authentic art that is truer to life”.²⁶ *Imperfectio* occurs in the wake of restricted production such as Fredrikson Stallard’s *Gold Crush* from 2012 (Fig. 6), a table

²⁶ “Imperfectio” Boca do Lobo. Accessed June 11, 2017, <http://www.bocadolobo.com/en/limited-edition/seating-others/imperfectio-sofa/>

comprised of a crumpled piece of gold-toned aluminum contained within a glass box; here destruction is aestheticized. Whether this thematic thread continues downstream, further into the mass market, remains to be seen. However, given cultures of emulation, it is likely simply a matter of time before suburban living rooms look like 'high style' bomb sites.

Where consumers seek distinction through hyper-luxe and rare acquisitions, Deyan Sudjic argues that the designers participating in the restricted field are also seeking distinction from the pack. In his text, *The Language of Things*, there is an undercurrent that where design is everywhere it is nowhere; design as a discipline has been degraded to the point where designers have become 'surface decorators'. It is in this context that designers seek to distinguish themselves by creating high end, limited editions.

Toward a typology of contemporary aesthetics

"Typologies are attempts at distilling a more complex reality"

McNeil and Riello 2016, 231²⁷

These expressive and rarified objects employ a unique visual vocabulary. What do they look like? And how can their emerging aesthetic themes be grouped and understood?

²⁷ Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello, *Luxury: a rich history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

While the shelter magazines cheerfully offer their typologies of the moment (“today” being about *neo-boho*, a 1970s redux, a craze for hammered metal or whatever else), this exercise of categorizing and naming is obviously tentative and fraught. The concern about such taxonomic work is not simply because it amounts to voicing a prediction that the passage of time can easily prove wrong (the challenges of performing contemporary history being ever present), but also because in creating a hierarchy of importance based on category selection – in this case, aesthetic expression – more is being excluded than can possibly be included.²⁸

As a precedent of such a contemporary typology, R. Craig Miller’s contribution to *European Design Since 1985: Shaping the New Century* is instructional. Miller establishes a conflict between modernism and postmodernism in order to contextualize his typology: a postmodernist reaction to modernism, followed by a neo-modernist reaction to postmodernism, followed by a neo-postmodernist reaction to neo-modernism. It is within this concretized framework that Miller’s types are inserted – for example, “Decorative Design” is slotted within the postmodern tradition (including Philippe Starck’s early product designs, such as the *J. Serie Lang Armchair* from 1987) and “Neo-Decorative Design” within the neo-postmodern tradition (Starck resurfaces here with his *Louis Ghost Armchair* from 2002, an acrylic chair that he designed for

²⁸ Other systems of classification could be based on technique (where deskilling would be a central focus, along with craft and digital processes) or taste (where the emerging ‘ugly design’ movement would play a role). These are valid approaches for future research.

Kartell, the form of which references an oval-backed, Louis XVI fauteuil. This category of neo-decoration is marked by flexibility in style, modes of production and materiality²⁹, and is likewise populated by Hella Jongerius and Ferruccio Laviani). Claire Catterall (in her book review for the *Journal of Design History*) criticized Miller for his efforts “to impose a rigid structure on what is a complex and evolving story”. He acts, noted Catterall, “as circus contortionist, devising such categories as Decorative design, Expressive design...Geometric Minimal design, Biomorphic design...into which to squeeze the various designers...the curious old-fashioned curatorial urge to classify, categorize and order things mostly by their aesthetic characteristics” (Catterall 2010, 113). While Miller’s typology attempts to grapple with the complexities of contemporary stylistic trends, it ultimately feels forced. In contrast, this offering is a preliminary sketch of a typology, fluid rather than fixed. Additionally, while still using aesthetics as the focus for classification, it is not aesthetics as an end game, but rather, what they signify, that is central to this project – how are they illustrative of contemporary culture?

This typology is premised on the thesis that contemporary design is about *time*,³⁰ this is the strongest thematic current evident in the objects of this study, all of

²⁹ R. Craig Miller, Penny Sparke and Catherine McDermott. *European Design Since 1985: Shaping the New Century* (London: Merrell, 2008), 226.

³⁰ The strongest themes evident in contemporary design relate to time and exist on the chronological binary of past and future, however this is not the only ideological jumbling at play. There is also the

which reference the past, the future, or otherwise manipulate time's arrow to flatten, loop or reverberate time. Manifest in objects, these themes are reflective of contemporary consciousness – of our uniquely millennial relationship with time. The typology is presented below in three categories, each pairing a contemporary design practice with an aesthetic theme: Fredrikson Stallard (the Catastrophic), Ferruccio Laviani (the Temporal Riff/Rift) and Joris Laarman (the Digital-Ornamental).

Fredrikson Stallard: the Catastrophic

We intend to exalt movement and aggression, feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the slap and the punch.

F. T. Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*³¹

Futurism originated in an eddy of bourgeois art, and could not have originated otherwise. Its violent oppositional character does not contradict this in the least.

Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*³²

On London's Savile Row, at the tony flagship boutique of bespoke menswear purveyor Gieves and Hawkes, two unique works by Fredrikson Stallard are installed with pride of

binary of seriousness and irony, with designers such as Zaha Hadid representing the serious end of this scale, and the Campana Brothers representing the ironic. Rather than being a defining characteristic of contemporary work, this serious/ironic mash-up is an extension of the postmodern tradition.

³¹ F.T. Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism." *Guggenheim Museum*. Web. Apr. 8, 2016. <http://exhibitions.guggenheim.org/futurism/manifestos/>

³² Leon Trotsky, "Futurism" in *Literature and Revolution*. *Marxists.org*. Web. 12 Apr. 2016. https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch04.htm

place over mantels in two separate rooms. The *Avalanche* mirror (Fig. 7) is a “monumental relief structure” crafted from shards of mirrored glass, neatly contained in a pristine shadow box. The artist statement for this piece indicates the intent “to compose an abstract vision of the classic mirror deconstructed. With enormous energy, formed from chaos, organized and meticulously tailored to balance a state of flux between beauty and destruction”.³³ The *Avalanche*’s sister piece – the *Hurricane* mirror – is an energetic composition in crumpled aluminum. Themes of chaos, fragmentation and destruction are concretized in these mirrors (stylistic kinfolk, as it were, with van der Poll’s *Do hit* chair), impacting not only the materiality of the objects themselves, but also the world beyond, as they reflect it. These themes permeate through other works by these designers: The *Tokyo* table is a sleek, molded metal form, sporting just enough of a dent to suggest it may have been damaged during shipping. The *Gold Crush* table is comprised of a pristine glass box raised slightly on demure steel legs. The box contains a calculatedly crumpled sheet of aluminum. Functioning as a vitrine, the container adds heft to its contents, emphasizing its perceived value; but what is being showcased is detritus. As evidenced in this “end of days” aesthetic, destruction has become the height of luxury.

³³ “Archive.” *Fredrikson Stallard*. Web. 8 Apr. 2017. <http://www.fredriksonstallard.com>.

Patrik Fredrikson and Ian Stallard are UK-based designers firmly situated in the luxury market³⁴ (with a collaboration with David Gill Gallery forming a significant part of their practice); yet from this rarified position they interrogate the meaning of luxury via materiality, technique and the thematic dimensions of their work. Describing their work as 'performative', Fredrikson Stallard outline their approach: "It's about the beauty that comes from breaking things apart, of forcing them through a process" (Wallis 2016, 34). The resulting aesthetic appears to stem directly from the Futurist playbook – or that of its millennial revisiting, accelerationism. As a post-Marxist theory that seeks to end neoliberalism's stranglehold on the aesthetic experience, accelerationism posits that neoliberalism is best fought from within, using an accelerated form of its own methodology (Shaviro 2015, 2). It further argues that neoliberalism loves transgression, and adopts it so quickly that nothing can be transgressive (Shaviro 2015, 31). Here, what is speeding up is capitalism's colonization and exploitation of aesthetics, as well as all other aspects of life. This theory offers a lens through which to problematize rarified design, particularly work embracing seemingly transgressive themes such as speed, aggression and destruction; themes that both concretize the Futurist manifesto (now historical) as well as millennial concerns. These themes are threaded through

³⁴ Some examples of this deliberate positioning include participation in *Superyacht Design Symposium 2015*, as well as their 2014 retracing of the European *Grand Tour* in collaboration with luxury brands, *Jaguar*, *Burberry* and *Wallpaper**. ("News", fredriksonstallard.com, March 2015 and May 2014 respectively.)

Fredrikson Stallard's post-apocalyptic oeuvre. While Fredrikson and Stallard are self-consciously engaged in the restricted field of production, they are likely *accidental accelerationists* – but this in no way negates their participation. The above-noted Trotsky quote about the origins of Futurism is equally germane to today's rarified design; it "originated in an eddy of bourgeois art, and could not have originated otherwise."

Fredrikson Stallard is not alone in its employing catastrophe as an aesthetic theme. Notably, much of the contemporary work interrogating utility – such as the previously introduced works by Studio Job and Maarten Baas – also embrace destruction. French designer Vincent Dubourg takes destruction to yet another level. His *Inner Vortex* commode (2013) and *Nouvelle Zelande* series (starting 2009) appear as the moment of chaos frozen in time – an explosion or a hurricane – that causes his traditionally-crafted furniture pieces to deconstruct (Fig. 8). According to Dubourg, "the destruction is necessary for the construction of a new order".³⁵ There is also evidence of this theme playing out in luxury production in other disciplines. *Oops! I dropped the lemon tart*, the famed dessert by Massimo Bottura, features a mangling of ingredients artfully displayed upon a would-be shattered plate.³⁶ Expression of the

³⁵ "Vincent Dubourg". *Artsy.net*. 20 June 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/artist/vincent-dubourg#>!

³⁶ *Oops! I dropped the lemon tart* is featured at Bottura's famed, three-Michelin-star restaurant *Osteria Francescana* in Modena, Italy. Priced consistently with other desserts at €30, destruction carries no extra premium. (<https://www.osteriafrancescana.it>)

contemporary zeitgeist is clearly an interdisciplinary affair. Either ironic or sincere in manifestation, themes of destruction and catastrophe represent a dystopic vision of a singular, future time. In contrast, the following type aims to harness multiple temporalities.

Ferruccio Laviani: the *Temporal Riff/Rift*

All objects are temporal, but never more so than in the hands of Italian designer, Ferruccio Laviani, whose use of time as a conceptual framework reaches a fever pitch. Laviani riffs on history; he uses it as a source of content and inspiration. Laviani designed the *Good Vibrations* cabinet as part of his ongoing collaboration with furniture brand, Fratelli Boffi. This piece embodies five distinct temporalities: the first and most historical reference is classical in its massing, proportion, formal balance and some of its decorative motifs. The second temporal reference is the Renaissance lens through which the first is interpreted; the *dressoir* form and architectonic decorative motifs stemming from classical design (arches, columns, frieze and cornice). This is further interpreted through the more recent, Renaissance Revival style of the nineteenth century – a middling style in which craftsmen in Laviani’s native Italy continue to produce. While third in the layered and overlapping stylistic chronology,

this is Laviani's most deliberate historical reference; in choosing this iteration however, it is impossible to hush the style's ancestral voices. The fourth reference is the 'glitch' pattern reminiscent of a paused video, circa 1985. Here, the visual consequence of technological failure is rendered as decorative motif – while perhaps not as catastrophic as that evidenced in Fredrikson Stallard's works, it reflects a sociological disruption nonetheless. The final temporality is the digital present; referencing the imagistic consequences of decayed digital files and, subsequently, the aestheticization of digital infection found in glitch-based textiles used in contemporary fashion (the initial point of Laviani's inspiration, it is worth noting). The pattern is also expressed in the digital technology used in manufacture as well as the neo-ornamental practice of *wallpaperization* (Picon 2013, 29), whereby the line between object and image becomes blurred.³⁷

Temporal Riff/Rift names a type in formation – the "riff" referring to Laviani's playfulness, as he rhythmically scratches through time, and "rift" describing the subsequent temporal disruption. In the recent book, *Luxury: a rich history*, Peter McNeil and Giorgio Riello consider time as a luxury; the greatest luxury being the ability to play with time. "This playfulness between present and past is a luxury per se:

³⁷ Stephen Perrella notes that this blurring of the line between texture and image is enabled by computer software and allows for the texturing of any surface with any picture. Stephen Perrella, "Electronic Baroque, Hypersurface II: Autopoiesis" in *Hypersurface Architecture II* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 5-7.

call it a dream of immortality.” (McNeil and Riello 2016, 13) In this context, Laviani is situated at the forefront of luxury production.

Laviani is not the only designer exploring extreme temporality. Tuomas Markunpoika is an emerging Finnish designer whose *Engineering Temporality* series of limited editions starts with the premise that furniture is a repository of memory. He investigates what happens when memory fails. Made of pierced steel rings welded together to form traditional furniture forms, these chairs and cabinets are rigidly tangible, yet appear to be constructed more of vapour than solid (Fig. 9). Where Markunpoika’s dreamlike works present the illusion of ephemerality, this theme is being expressed quite literally in the realm of bio-design. An example is Eric Klarenbeek’s *Mycelium Project*, where furniture is 3-D printed using bio-material – mycelium, “the threadlike network of fungi” (Klarenbeek) – in combination with other carbon-negative materials that, once fully grown and dried, becomes a structurally stable and renewable material and one, significantly, that will degrade over time. The resulting chair, stool and table forms are skeletal structures in greyish-white, randomly decorated with bouquets of yellowish, mushroom-like growths (Fig. 10). Entirely relinquished by the designer, aesthetic control has been surrendered to time.

While Laviani finds inspiration in the historical, Fredrikson Stallard and other time-travelers look to the future. The late architect Zaha Hadid (d. 2016) has long been known for a futurist aesthetic, embodied in her perimetric architecture and space-age,

curvilinear furniture design. Yet for a recent series for David Gill Gallery, her utopic brand of futurism may be tinged with something dystopic. *Liquid Glacial* is an elegant and technically virtuous interrogation of matter, blurring the lines between liquid and solid (or perhaps, reminding us that what appears solid is not). While delicate in form, its name evokes another delicate matter – that of environmental fragility and the crisis of global warming. Here a chaotic event has been aestheticized, becoming a calm and meditative expression. Equipped with a claw hammer and large blocks of Styrofoam, the British wunderkind Max Lamb sculpts chairs and tables embodying what can only be described as a stone-age aesthetic. Lamb’s furniture – while historicist in a type of *The Flintstones* meets *Skara Brae* way – is about the aesthetics of extreme de-skilling and seemingly stone-age materiality and infers a circular chronology.³⁸ The future loops back to the primordial in this cartoonish expression of nuclear annihilation. Lamb’s work, like that of Fredrikson Stallard, embraces an aesthetics of the dire – but this is not the only possible result of a contemporary expression that focuses on time. In contrast, the temporal jumbling evident in the works of Joris Laarman results in a celebration of both technology and ornamentation.

³⁸ Located in Scotland and dated between 2000 and 1500 BCE, Skara Brae is one of the oldest and best-preserved stone-built, Neolithic settlements in the world, providing perhaps the best example of a stone-age aesthetic as evidenced in domestic furniture and interiors. “Skara Brae”. Encyclopedia Britannica. 27 August 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Skara-Brae-settlements>.

Joris Laarman: the Digital-Ornamental

Our first task at this point becomes to resist thinking of ornament as applied, as stuck on a bland surface afterward—to resist the thought of an underlying nakedness, and instead to see matter and ornament as mutually dependent.

Spuybroek 2016, 54³⁹

I never understood why functionality and ornament had to exclude each other.

Laarman⁴⁰

Long suppressed by modernism, ornamentation – in a non-postmodern way – is making a comeback. Ornament, or decoration (while not entirely synonymous, both terms refer to the superfluous and semiotic aspect of things), can be defined as *the outward manifestation of style*. It is the aspect of an object that relates to style rather than function, fabrication or material composition. Of course, the boundaries separating these categories can be blurred, as material can be inherently decorative (examples include the chromatic gradations and patterning of wood grains, or veins in marble), and an object's embellishment may serve a function, albeit not one of utility. Often thought of as a surface application, decoration is not so restricted. The architectural field is at the vanguard of this *neo-ornamentalism*, however it is also informing architecture's scaled-down sibling, furniture design. This turn is exemplified in the work of Joris Laarman, a Dutch designer who uses computerized algorithms to

³⁹ Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*. 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁴⁰ Joris Laarman, "Heatwave 2003". *JorisLaarmanLab*. 27 August 2017. <http://www.jorislaarman.com/work/heatwave/>

create elaborate decoration embodied in the very structure of his pieces – the modernist project may have sought to sever the bond between structure and decoration (with Le Corbusier declaring in 1925 that “modern decorative art is not decorated”⁴¹), but Laarman’s *neo-Gothic*⁴² project aims to rejoin them. The *Aluminum Gradient Chair* (2014) is indicative of this neo-ornamental approach.

Produced in an edition of twelve for Friedman Benda in New York, the *Aluminum Gradient Chair* (Fig. 11) has already found its way into a number of permanent collections, including that of the Vitra Design Museum. While aluminum is fast becoming a material of choice in twenty-first century furniture design (a return to the materiality of art *moderne* and its legacies in the 1940s and 1950s), this chair is unique in the cutting-edge technology it utilizes; it is entirely 3-D printed (laser sintered). The chair is a composition of cells; each cell is either filled solidly, empty (where it appears as a mesh with a grid-form outline), or somewhere between the two extremes, where the cell is partially pierced, exposing patterns of diamond and four-point star shapes. As the name *Gradient* implies, there is a progressive rhythm in the

⁴¹ Le Corbusier, “The Decorative Art of Today” in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European & American Writings, 1750-1940*, edited by Isabelle Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 213-218.

⁴² Heinrich Wölfflin (1886) and Louis Sullivan (1892) both saw ornament as the residual of form – an honest rather than arbitrary manifestation. As articulated by Ruskin (and revisited by Spuybroek), Gothic was a highly ornamental style that stemmed from structure in a purer manner than in other architectural styles. It is in this light that Laarman’s work could be viewed as neo-Gothic.

pattern as it gradually shifts from solid to permeable. The pattern thus created – the ornamental motif – is digitally originated. Far from being an afterthought, the ornament is written into the design program and established at the levels of structure *and* surface, rendering them inseparable. This inseparability of structure and surface is a defining attribute of Laarman’s digital-ornamental style.

Laarman pairs contradictory concepts in his work: ornament and function,⁴³ nature and digitization, inclusive and exclusive design (having designed for both open source and limited production). A key pairing evident in Laarman’s work is that of history and innovative technology: the past and the future. The past is referenced generally, in the resuscitation of ornament (a historical practice) implicit in the *neo-ornamental* turn, and more specifically in the Art Nouveau-inspired, sinuous lines inherent in Laarman’s work. Despite such historical reference, this high-tech, digital aesthetic is equally futuristic. Creating contrast and tension, the past and future intermingle in this work, forwarding the narrative of time – and time’s manipulation. As such, this is an iteration of the temporal mix evident in Laviani’s *Good Vibrations* – albeit with more subtlety and less playfulness in Laarman’s approach.

⁴³ Laarman’s 2003 thesis project at Eindhoven was entitled “Reinventing Functionality” and included *Heat Wave*, a modular and functional radiator in the form of Rococo decorative embellishment.

Conclusion

The thematic trends identified herein are a typology in progress, with time being the most prominent conceptual thread. Time is now accelerated, looped, reversed to primordial time or forwarded to the end of time. The established emphasis on a mastery of history as a luxury is shifting to the contemporary emphasis on a mastery of time. Time is a luxury, and having the cultural capital to play with time is a greater luxury. Will any of this solidify into a grand narrative or will the typology remain incomplete, these stylistic threads remaining just that? Fittingly, only time will tell. What is clear is that the object category of *designart* – while always rare and constituting a niche market segment – will continue to exist and influence, becoming increasingly entrenched in the cultural landscape, with its expressive function continuing to be prioritized over other functionality. As such, it will remain a particularly informative source of material evidence of the concerns and consciousness of the culture of its production.

The existence of these objects is not an entirely new phenomenon; a clear lineage can be traced back to the postmodern hybrid objects from which they have been evolving over the last four decades. While the very existence of this object type was once radical, today it is more closely associated with luxury consumer markets than any political agenda. Whether this fact supports an argument that we are currently witnessing the waning of the postmodern era – that indeed, it has not yet concluded –

is someone else's argument. That restricted production is luxury production has always been so, and the move toward 'anti-luxury' – the eschewing of fine materials and often, tastefulness⁴⁴ – is a continuation of the postmodern tradition. What is new, and a defining characteristic of today's elite production, is the prioritization of expression above all else.

While typically the role of the designer is that of a problem-solver, those participating in the restricted field of production are often freed from a specific design problematic; they are thus able to emphasize artistic expression. These designers are embracing the quasi-functional nature of their works: the notion of 'furniture' has become a jumping-off point, with the resulting production often serving more as provocation than utility. Utility-value and expression have an inverse relationship; expression comes to the fore as utility-value diminishes. Contemporary work is now defined by the extent to which it expresses, mirrors and communicates the millennial zeitgeist – one where time is a primary concern, as evidenced in these talkative objects.

The pieces explored herein represent the new avant-garde, they are inherently *pre-canonical*. As such, this cursory research is a "historian's construction" (Walker 1989, 62), to be validated or disproved only by time and future scholarship. This current research – truly a scratching of the surface – could be buttressed and

⁴⁴ What constitutes 'good taste' is a subject for separate debate. For discussion of taste, see David Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

elaborated upon in a number of directions: a further exploration of the relationship between luxury and materiality or a deeper dive into the role that ornament plays in contemporary design. The neo-ornamental turn has been an area of scholarly focus in the field of architecture, however this has yet to be fully explored in the decorative arts. The time-related themes identified herein are communicated by contemporary aesthetics; while noteworthy, it would be disingenuous to assert that this is the only (or even, the primary) dimension of neo-ornamentalism. This is a much broader topic deserving further research.

Perhaps the widest gap that this research has identified relates to individual collecting and consumption. In this realm of 'true' rather than 'branded' luxury, acquisition is typically a discreet activity; this makes researching the 'one percent' challenging. It is a rare collector who seeks publicity and gallerists, for obvious reasons, are protective of client privacy. One can speculate on how elite design exists and functions at this stage in the production cycle; the sources of private wealth that fuel its production and who are its end users (Russian oligarchs or Moroccan princesses?) – however it is mere speculation. Exploring this gap through primary research would be an important next step for a fuller understanding of these rarified objects that depend upon the long history of the design of furniture for use but which given contexts of their creation – unprecedented income disparities, annihilation fantasies, temporal

acceleration, and unfettered, opportunistic stylistic libertarianism – represent an ideologically and aesthetically significant development in expressive culture.

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Appendix A: SFMOMA Email Correspondence

The following correspondence took place between myself and a staff member in SFMOMA's department of Architecture and Design.

Date: April 11, 2017 at 3:00:01 PM EDT

Subject: RE: Species II Armchair by Fredrikson Stallard

Hello Sophie,

Species II by Fredrikson Stallard was first presented at the January 2016 A+D Accessions subcommittee meeting. This meeting is different than our usual format in that it takes place at FOG Design+Art, a contemporary design and art fair in San Francisco. A majority of the works presented for acquisition are brought by the participating galleries, and in this case, David Gill Gallery exhibiting *Species II*. There is usually little notice of what works galleries will be bringing so it is a lot of rapid fire research and conversations in the span of a few days.

The A+D Curators felt *Species II* was an important proposal for the collection for several reasons. The first being the material process of making the armchair (the sculpted and scooped rubber) reflects an interest in chairs that express their material derivation and a particular construction process. Concurrent to this meeting, we were finalizing our opening exhibitions for the expanded SFMOMA. One of the exhibitions, *Carve, Cast, Mold, Print: Material Meditations*, explored our chair collection in light of design and fabrication technologies using minimal materials. Though *Species II* was not included in this exhibition, the armchair had a similar vocabulary and spirit of this exhibition and think this was likely influential. Please see the attached install photo and wall text document.

Lastly, during the Accessions meeting, a reference was made to *Species II* being related to the art practice of Tobias Wong, from whom A+D accessioned a series of work in 2011. Wong's understanding as an artist practicing in the design world was compared to Fredrikson Stallard. Additionally, a comment was made in the presentation that *Species II* would likely feel at home if presented in a stark, white cube gallery.

All best,

From: Sophie Ratcliff
Sent: Monday, April 10, 2017 12:40 PM
To: Collections
Subject: Species II Armchair by Fredrikson Stallard

Hello there,

I am a Toronto-based scholar writing about contemporary, limited-edition furniture and the 'art-design phenomenon' in which it manifests. My research includes products designed by Fredrikson Stallard, the *Species* series in particular. In this regard, I would be extremely interested to learn anything I can about SFMoMA's selection of the *Species II* armchair into its collection, in particular why it was deemed an important/appropriate acquisition, what role it plays in the collection, etc.

Many thanks, in advance, for your consideration.

Best,

Sophie Ratcliff

Appendix B: Illustrations



Fig. 1.

Species II armchair, 2015.
Editions David Gill, limited to 12+ 2P
Polyurethane , rubber, glass fiber, polyester
35.4"H x 59.1"L x47.2"D
Collection SFMOMA,
© Fredrikson Stallard
Photo courtesy of David Gill Gallery



Fig. 2.

Installation view, *Carve, Cast, Mold, Print: Material Meditations*.
SFMOMA, May 2016.
Photo courtesy of SFMOMA.



Fig.3.

Good Vibrations cabinet, 2013.
by Ferruccio Laviani for Fratelli Boffi.
Prototype. Oak.
Photo courtesy of Studio Laviani.



Fig. 4

(w)Hole by Ferruccio Laviani,
F The Classics!* for Fratelli Boffi, 2012.
Brass, mahogany, marble.
35.4"H x 58"W x 23.6"D
Photo courtesy of Studio Laviani.



Fig. 5

Numa sofa, 2014
Campana Brothers for David Gill Gallery
Gilded bronze and rabbit fur
Limited to 3 + 1P
29.1"H x 92.1"L x 39.4"D
© Campana Brothers
Photo courtesy of David Gill Gallery



Fig. 6
Gold Crush Table, 2012
Edition of 8 + 2 AP + 2 P
Glass, gold polished aluminum and stainless steel

51" L x 39" W x 13.5" H
© Fredrikson Stallard
Photo courtesy of David Gill Gallery



Fig. 7
Avalanche Mirror by Fredrikson Stallard, 2014.
Mirrored glass, steel and glass.
66" H x 66" W
© Fredrikson Stallard
Photo courtesy of David Gill Gallery



Fig. 8

Vincent Dubourg, *Commode Inner Vortex*, 2013

For Carpenters Gallery Workshop

Aluminum

53.5" H x 59.8" L x 36.6" D

Limited Edition of 8 + 4 APs

Photo courtesy of Carpenters Workshop Gallery.



Fig. 9

Engineering Temporality cabinet, Tuomas Markunpoika, 2012

For Gallery Fumi

Steel, Edition of 12

Photo courtesy of Gallery Fumi.



Fig. 10

Myceliumchair, 2014
Mycelium Project 1.0
Eric Klarenbeek
Photo courtesy of Eric Klarenbeek.



Fig.11

Microstructures (Aluminum Gradient Chair)
by Joris Laarman, 2014
Edition of 12
Aluminum.
28.4" x 24.4" x 23.6"
Photo credit: Friedman Benda Gallery