It's Nice That

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George Lois by Jeremy Liebman


YOU
KNOW
MORE
THAN
YOU
THINK
YOU DO

"The challenge has always been to make something out of an object that's in the gutter."

A conversation between Martino Gamper & Francis Upritchard

PORTRAIT BY JONAY PLATOS

In March of this year, furniture designer Martino Gamper, sculptor Francis Upritchard, and jeweller Karl Fritsch collaborated on works for *Gesamtkunsthandwerk*, an exhibition which acted as a) an exploration of collaboration, b) a thorough investigation into various materials and crafts, and c) the starting point for further discussion on the necessity of creative pluralism. (A German word, *Gesamtkunsthandwerk* means "a total artwork in art, craft, design and architecture," and is an obviously appropriate title.) The three artists worked with a number of local craftspeople – the show was held in New Plymouth, New Zealand – to realise a huge number of works that blurred the line between art, design and craft. Shown in a domesticated gallery setting, the exhibition acted as a testament to their shared belief that good work is produced when idea and technique work in tandem.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in Hackney, London, Martino Gamper and Francis Upritchard discussed the exhibition itself, wider issues to do with hierarchies within art, and casting a huge piece of ginger in bronze...

Martino Gamper: So Francis, what do you think the work of an artist is?

Francis Upritchard: That's a very tricky question. I don't know. I know I make art, that I make it for myself, and that I find it very challenging. But I don't know why anyone else would want to look at it. For me, I look at other people's art because I find it inspiring – a feast for the eyes, I guess, like eating. But usually my interests have a lot to do with my own research – Bruegel, for example – things to do with what I'm trying to make, what I'm struggling with at a particular moment. But I'm not quite sure what someone who doesn't make art would do with art.

Your work is very connected to many different art forms – applied art, craftwork. In the case of *Gesamtkunsthandwerk*, it was very much about using other people to help you make the work. Do you think art is a more superior form in the sense that it asks more fundamental questions than applied art or craft or design? The thing about art is it's often broader. A weaver, say, is only really interested in weaving. She doesn't do drawings for her weaving. She doesn't do paintings to work things out. She looks at the books of other weavers and she looks at other weavings, but she doesn't tend to research in different ways. Some look at the landscape, of course, or something like that, but the weaver's craft is very connected to other crafts, and is a continuation of an existing line, whereas artists tend to jump around a lot more.

Do artists ask more fundamental questions about what they do, rather than what they're interested in? It's more experimental.

And the questions raised are different to those asked by people working in design or applied art. Maybe they are, although I never thought of it as a question. At the show I wasn't just working in collaboration with a weaver and a potter. I was also working with you and Karl [Fritsch], and you're both designers, or artisans, rather than fine artists. But you work in a way I see as being very similar to how I work – with a similar intent, a similar enjoyment and reverence for materials. And the ideas are similar. I mean, my work definitely has an intellectual side to it, but I always leave that in the background, and firstly work with materials. I try to make something that has an aesthetic – that follows the path I'm trying to make. And you and Karl both do that in a way that's very similar to how I do it. In fact, you probably work with ideas more than I do.

I always find that there are different questions asked by the three major arts... The three being what?

Design, art and craft. Where does architecture feature in that list?

Well, architecture sits within the design category. Art is seen as the one asking the serious questions. Design is there to answer everyday questions about functionality, style and so on. And craft is kind of a bit out there. It has more to do with material, with mythology maybe. I see there being a hierarchy between the three. Karl, in his practice, makes a lot of jewellery that can't really be worn, and you are making a lot of furniture that can't really be used, but those are the elements of your work I am interested in. When Karl's rings are so hugely massive they can't be worn, my interest stops, and it is the same when a chair of yours can't actually be sat on. I don't mind if it's uncomfortable, but as long as I can sit on it somehow I find it interesting. I like

it when you're in this weird in-between state of a chair that doesn't really make sense. But it's still a chair; you can recognise it very quickly and it contains a beauty. I think the three forms are asking different questions, but why there's a hierarchy I'm not really sure

One thing I look for in your work, and in this way your work is similar to mine, is the use of many found objects – abandoned, rejected objects we find in the street or at car boot sales. You're as particularly drawn to these objects as much as I am – where they come from, what they used to be. And it seems to me that these objects are a lot about our world, our society. They almost give you a better picture of the world than any new object would do. I find it really interesting that you never talk about your pieces in terms of recycling, because in design it's a very easy way to get attention. You could say: "I use this because it's good for the environment," but of course that is precisely not what you're doing. You, like me, are choosing these objects because they've got a patina of age. They have a style. You and I are both interested in what a particular style or aesthetic means. If you choose an object that comes with a style people already have a relationship with – a Ron Arad chair for example, that has a very 1990s or early 2000s feel – and you then place your own aesthetic on top, that's where it gets interesting. It's the real world, like you say, but it is your imagination overriding the real world.

And there are different reasons why you could use these kind of objects. Some of them you use purely for aesthetics, others because they communicate something outside whatever decade they're from – they communicate the use of the user, that kind of superficiality of consumption. Even though these objects seem abandoned, not used anymore in our consumption-heavy world, they are of use; because they are neglected, they talk a lot more than new products in a shop. I thought you weren't interested in that.

In the old stories? No, I didn't think you were interested in consumption, that sort of moral message.

I'm not, but I am interested in the way a piece leaves a house – the domestic environment – and ends up on the street, or on some dump. One of my favourite pieces of yours from the *100 Chairs* project is *Painters Mate, Thonet meets Jacobsen meets Thonet*, because you can really see the joining of two personalities. But even though there are two chairs joined together, it feels like a whole, like the chair of a painter in his studio and the chair of a painter at his home have been joined. I find the narrative really interesting. But less and less I'm using found objects because I really can't find what I want anymore. It feels like flea markets aren't what they were, although I find it hard to know whether flea markets are getting worse or I'm getting more fussy. Do you find that?

Yes. Flea markets aren't what they used to be. In fact, I lose interest in anything intriguing and weird that ends up in an antique shop for a lot of money. Because you have to pay?

Painters Mate, 19 May 2007. Thonet meets Jacobsen meets Thonet

Not because you have to pay. More because the object has already been liberated. It doesn't need me. It has a new sort of currency.

It has a new currency, yes. For me the challenge has always been to make something out of an object that's in the gutter, that's just somewhere in the street. It's not about recycling, it has more to do with value, about making something interesting out of something that appears to have no value left whatsoever. It's about stories and narratives – about re-telling that object's story. That's something else we dealt with in the show: we were saying: "Look at this craft. Look at the craft of New Zealand!" There's a lot of people making very good quality craft – people are spending weeks and weeks making ceramics and fabrics, but the prices people are paying for them is nothing; they're not valued at all. People don't know how to make fabrics anymore. People don't know how to make ceramics. It's just so strange – all this Chinese pottery being brought in, all this porcelain, everyone seizing cheap IKEA plates that'll do for everybody. So the exhibition was a celebration of craft, of the people, who are all a lot older than us, making this stuff.

We collaborated for this show, and for a previous show at Kate MacGarry Gallery, and we work together as part of Dent-De-Leone. But it seems we both have a very strong, individual approach to our work. What interests you in collaboration? Well, because I'm in my own ideas so much – because I'm following my own little path – I realise that forced outside influence is a really good way to inject new thoughts into my work. I met you having written to you because I loved your *100 Chairs* project, which I'd seen on a poster in New Zealand. I wanted to see the works, and we met and I saw you were doing something with these found objects that was progressive and beautiful and that resonated with my own work. I felt like you'd gone down a path I could have taken, but you'd done it so well I didn't need to go that way anymore. You'd sort of done the research for me. Like in a scientific experiment, it was as if you'd already found the solution, which freed me up to go other ways.

With the exhibition *Feierabend*, at Kate MacGarry Gallery, we tried to make work together with more adventure, and in a way I think it worked better with *Gesamtkunsthandwerk*, because we worked quite separately. You worked with Pam [Robinson], a felter, and I worked with Lynne [Mackay], a weaver making some rugs, and then it all fitted together so snugly. The things we did make together were very nice – those funny bagel-looking loops that Karl started and the crazy vases the three of us made together. Those were nice, but the overall show didn't seem like a collaboration as such.

We worked in parallel. Yes, it was more parallel rather than collaborative. I see myself more like a fan of your work. Someone with whom you can talk about ideas, but it's not really like we're collaborating. It's different. What did you get out of this parallel collaboration?

Images from Gesamtkunsthandwerk

Well, being in New Zealand was refreshing because I didn't have clients to work for and I didn't have commissions to work on. There was no one, just me. No one was watching.

Well, not that no one was watching, more that no one was giving me input in terms of a brief. As a designer you always have this kind of dichotomy between commercial briefs and those briefs you set yourself. It's very different for the artist. No one would ever give an artist a brief. It would be considered rude.

Very rude! You are given complete freedom as an artist. As a designer, a brief can be a very good thing, but it can also be very disturbing. The brief is similar to collaboration.

Yes, but a bit more intense. Working very much as an artist but still making furniture, making something applied, is what interests me. The fact that we play off each other's ideas, and that I also collaborate with similar crafts people, is very important. In fact, one of the most successful things we did at the exhibition was a quadruple collaboration between you, Karl, Jonathan Campbell, who's a bronze caster, and I. That stuff was quite weird – this crazy big piece of ginger cast in bronze. A lot of that was actually down to Jonathan – he made these beautiful funnels that took the bronze down to the ginger, but to Jonathan they existed because they were useful. He would have cut them off had we not told him to leave them on. So the piece had a sort of randomness often present within a found object – someone else had arranged the aesthetic, which I've always found very exciting.

Looking at your work, the very strong figurative work, it seems like the characters are playing a part in a kind of fantastic realism, almost a dreamscape. You capture them within a moment that seems part of a dream situation. They seem real, but also of their own world, their own space. The weird thing is I don't actually like fantastic realism as a literary genre, which I guess is the form in which it's best known. In fact, I find it quite irritating. I liked it when I was a teenager – I read Jeanette Winterson and Italo Calvino and things like it – but I very quickly grew out of it. Maybe I'll come back to it. I used to really love Gustav Klimt, and then I went to art school and I learnt to hate him. But while working at the Vienna Secession again last year, I really fell in love with the work again. I wonder how much of it is to do with fashion. It's terribly unfashionable to like fantastic realism in literature now, so maybe I'm just being silly. Maybe we're all just following fashions.

Upritchard, Francis: 'The challenge has always been to make something out of an object that's in the gutter', *It's Nice That*, Issue No.6, 2011