PORTRAITS OF DESIGN

Mediating Modernist Design Culture in a Museum Catalogue

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Abstract: *This paper explores the mediation of modernist design culture through a museum catalogue. By the expressive use of professional photography, the catalogue communicates particular views of design. Examining the consciously shaped channels that make up the visual and textual entity of the catalogue, I am keen to demonstrate how this medium is in fact also 'designed' to a great extent. The paper points out the great potential and mediating power of the catalogue in defining and shaping perceptions of design at a time when 'design' was still a neologism to most Norwegians. Conclusively, I look at the consequential blurring of materiality that stems from the expressive use of object imagery, while at the same time keeping in mind the materiality of the catalogue as a 'designed' object in itself.*

Keywords: *design, modernism, mediation, museum, exhibition, photography*

INTRODUCTION

In his 1988 book *Design History Australia*, Tony Fry calls for the study of "the mediation of a product – how, for example, it has been written about, illustrated, photographed, displayed, advertised" and he hereby underlines the great potential of mediation in the shaping of meaning (Fry, 1988). Following Fry's thought, this paper explores the mediation of modernist design culture through an illustrated museum catalogue. Keen to challenge the notion of the catalogue as a mere handbook and a companion to the exhibition, I argue that the catalogue expresses and reflects certain perceptions of design. Mary Kelly has observed that "the catalogue confers an authorship, an authority, on the exhibition events. [It] constructs a specific reading" (Kelly, 1996). By looking at the catalogue's illustrations, text and layout, I seek to demonstrate how these mediating channels are, to quote Grace Lees-Maffei, "themselves designed and therefore open to design historical analysis (Lees-Maffei, 2009).

As is often the case, my chosen catalogue ties in with an exhibition: the 1963 exhibition titled 'Norwegian Industrial Design' (NID) at the Oslo Museum of Decorative Arts. A catalogue can be a guidebook or a nice souvenir, however it can also affect the

understanding of an exhibition. As such, the exhibition catalogue easily falls under the museological field of study. Sharon Macdonald has pointed out that museums negotiate a nexus between cultural production and consumption (Macdonald, 1996). This echoes in Lees-Maffei's description of mediation as design history's "third stream, which brings together issues of production and consumption" (Lees-Maffei, 2009). The same can easily be said about catalogues; Kelly argues that "[c]atalogue and exhibition constitute what could be called a *diatext*, that is, two separate signifying systems which function together; more precisely, it is at the point of their intersection and crucially in their difference that the production of a certain knowledge takes place" (Kelly, 1996).

A key feature of the catalogue are the illustrations, in my case black-and-white photographs. As illustrations, these photographs symbolise the objects in the exhibition and thus they express specific notions of 'design'. Normally framed by the discourse of art history, photography is increasingly being viewed as central to the study of design and architecture (see Wilkinson, 1997; Moriarty, 2000; Simonsen, 2015). As Malene Breunig has shown, the wilful use of aestheticized photography can assign aura or value to mass-produced things (Breunig, 2012). Breunig's study of the photographic mediation of Danish design furniture closely complements my analysis in this essay.

THE 'NORWEGIAN INDUSTRIAL DESIGN' EXHIBITION IN 1963

What was to be the first exhibition of industrial design in Norway (and allegedly in the Nordic countries) took place at the Oslo Museum of Decorative Arts in November 1963. The exhibition showed over 260 examples of Norwegian industrial design, ranging from housewares to plastic leisure boats and jerry cans, along with examples of graphic design like labels and packaging, company logos and book covers. In his catalogue text, senior curator Alf Bøe claimed that the selection was meant to demonstrate "the extent to which modern industry bears the responsibility for shaping today's environment – how formal standards in industry and formal standards in our material culture have come to mean one and the same thing" (Bøe, 1963a). Bøe was chairman of the organizing committee and acted as the Museum's representative in the jury whose task it was to source and select the objects for the exhibition. Besides Bøe, the jury of four included one representative from each of the following: the National Federation of Applied Art (Landsforbundet Norsk Brukskunst), the Norwegian Group of Industrial Designers (ID-gruppen) and the Central Institute for Industrial Research (Sentralinstitutttet for Industriell Forskning).

It was Alf Bøe who initiated the exhibition (Engelstad in Bøe, 1963b). In his mid-thirties, he had been appointed senior curator only the year before. Bøe was an art historian by training, hard-working and ambitious, and had received wide acclaim on his treatise on Victorian design theory.[1] He was keen to demonstrate that the Museum should be concerned with modern industrial design. For decades, the Oslo Museum of Decorative Arts had almost exclusively focused its attention – and its scarce recources –

on the pursuit of documenting premodern or early modern periods of European and Norwegian history. Despite the fact that the original founding paragraphs stressed the importance of improving the quality of modern mass-produced goods, by the 1960's the Museum's collections and exhibitions were no longer aimed at contemporary design. Bøe's efforts suggest his ambition to restore the ties between the Museum and the industry.

Museum director Eivind Engelstad, however, was sceptical. In his foreword, he stated that "such an exhibition would help clarify the term [i.e. 'industrial design'] and would make it easier to form an opinion as to whether these objects belong in a museum of decorative arts" (Engelstad in Bøe, 1963b). Engelstad's views were not uncommon; rather, his conservatism reveals the scholarly heritage from art history that was still being seen as the *raison d'être* of the Museum and the field of decorative arts at the time. Some years later, Alf Bøe unsuccessfully applied for Engelstad's position. Bøe then went on to work as director for the Norwegian Design Centre (Norsk Designcentrum), where he remained until its closure in 1973. Meanwhile, in 1965, Bøe was elected president of the National Federation for Applied Art. In other words: Bøe's work on the exhibition tied closely in with his career path.

A CATALOGUE OF DESIGN – A DESIGNED CATALOGUE

Two catalogues were published to tie in with the exhibition. The main catalogue contained a foreword by the Norwegian Minister of Industry, Trygve Lie, and an introductory text by Alf Bøe outlining the properties and history of modern industrial design. It also contained a comprehensive, 264-page photographic presentation, showing all the items exhibited, complete with description, materials, measurements and year of introduction. The other catalogue was a mere booklet with a list of the exhibited items, the foreword of museum director Eivind Engelstad and a short introduction by interior designer Birger Dahl. Dahl was chairman of the jury and a member of the Norwegian Group of Industrial Designers, founded in 1955. In his text, Dahl stresses the scientific aspect of industrial design and underlines the authority of functionality – both with regards to aesthetics and quality (Dahl in Bøe, 1963b). From here on I will focus on the illustrated catalogue, but we will keep in mind Dahl's technocratic approach to design.

The illustrated catalogue

Considering the emphasis put on values like quality and functionality, it comes as no surprise to learn that the layout and design of the catalogue was entrusted to another professional designer: Hermann Bongard. Bongard's book design reflects the 'honest' modernist design aesthetic hailed by the likes of Birger Dahl, and his elegant cover graphics (**fig. 1**) ties seamlessly in with his other work pictured inside the catalogue (pp.

275-278, 292-293, 299-303). With Bongard's signature clearly visible on the front cover, the reader is reminded that the catalogue is in fact also the work of a designer.

This way, the catalogue not only serves as a guide to the objects on display; at the same time it becomes a designed object in itself, and thus plays a double role. If we choose to view the catalogue solely as a guide to the exhibition, we reduce the illustrations – the photographs – to mere representations of the objects. However, if we choose to see the catalogue as an independent narrative the illustrations take on a different meaning: they become primary sources from which to study the objects. Like portraits, the pictures convey particular perceptions of the sitter, of design. Like the mediation of the objects through the photographs, the objects in turn mediate 'design'.

Borrowing from literary theory, it is tempting to describe the photographic mediation as *paratext* (see Genette, 1997). Though originally denoting the phenomenon of text surrounded by different kinds of *epitext* (illustrations, quotes etc.), the concept can be useful in explaining the impact of the catalogue illustrations. In this case it will be the designs that constitute the *peritext* – the raw material – of the exhibition, while the visual mediation strategies, along with the captions and introductory text (and in fact the catalogue itself!) make up the informative epitext. Together, they form the powerful paratext; likened by Genette to a threshold, this theoretical space gives access to the semantic and visual message of the catalogue.

The photographs: Portraying the design object

Let us turn to the photographs. With a few exceptions, they were all taken by the renowned photographer Bjørn Winsnes. He worked regularly for the leading Norwegian design periodical *Bonytt*, a highly influential journal which in fact was the only real design journal in Norway at the time. Winsnes was most likely considered a natural or even desirable choice for the job. (It is also worth noting, however, that the choice of Winsnes ties in neatly with the overt 'professionalism' of the project.)

With a few exceptions[2], the objects depicted are common, middle-sized household items like furniture, lighting, glassware, kitchenware, plastic utensils and so on – objects that would be familiar to Norwegian consumers at the time. All of these objects are silhouetted against a plain background of light grey. In this stylized atmosphere we can discern little or no depth, no sharp shadows (and hence no light source), nor do we see any indicator of scale or of actual size. Some objects are depicted in pairs or multiples, either to suggest depth by overlapping objects of increasing size and clarity or to visually express a rotation of the object. These compositional strategies stress the object's formal qualities (**fig. 2**). Repetition can also be used to emphasize aspects of the object's function or to show it in different states of use; notable examples include the freezer with the door open and with the door closed, and the folding anchor in both its folded and unfolded state.

The possibilities of stacking are subjected to endless variation; like a series of neat balancing acts, the visual result owes more to formalist perfection than expressed functionality. The image of the standard furniture units (**fig. 3**) makes a powerful testament to the importance of aesthetics in this particular genre of visual design mediation. Strictly speaking, the image in question gives little or no clue as to how these standard units are *used*, how they are meant to be adjoined and combined – in short, how they are supposed to function. Considering the emphasis put on functionality in the texts by Bøe and Dahl, I find it striking that the objects' functional life is so downplayed.

Some photographs show fanciful repetitions of the objects that seem physically impossible. One example is the *Ero 5* conference chair (**fig. 4**), depicted both laterally and in a connecting line across the top of the picture plane. Most certainly, this illustrates the chair's ability to link together in potentially endless rows (note the visual cropping of the chair at each end). Still, it is interesting to note how the chairs seem not to belong to the same interior space; rather, the row of chairs seems to be afloat in mid-air, rid of any spatial connection with the singular chair in front. Similarly, the sewing table (**fig. 5**) is seen in sharp, schematic sideview, its circular tabletop hovering above it, pictured as if seen from above. Even more unsettling is the image of the *Twist* chocolates (**fig. 6**) balancing impossibly on top of each other. Like a bizarre formalist fantasy, the pictured objects appear to break free of any physical and gravital limitations. Absorbed by the picture plane, they instead take on an almost two-dimensional, blueprint-like appearance.

MULTIMODALITY AND BLURRED MATERIALITIES

Through these compositional and pictorial strategies, the photographs effectively withdraw the objects from the physical world in which they are designed, manufactured, stored, marketed and used. They cease to be 'things'; instead, they take on the appearance of visual art. The extreme decontextualization owes partly to the overall visual flattening that stems from using a greyscale palette and plain backgrounds. Of course, it should be noted that black-and-white photographs with neutral backgrounds is by no means an unfamiliar sight; as Moriarty has pointed out, it has been used extensively in advertising since the 1920s (Moriarty, 2000). Equally important is the objects' apparent disconnection from each other, from conventional interior spaces and, most importantly, from use. Nowhere do we see people operating the electric oven or pouring from the jerry can; the photographs fail to mediate real use. Function is reduced to a mere formalist idea of use, an imagined use that never actually happens. Rather, the objects seem to belong in an uninhabited world, a Neoplatonic 'ideal world' of design.

This problem touches upon the semiotic discussion of multimodality, the combination of different *modes* of communication in creating meaning. High modality equals credibility, and as far as images are concerned, this usually means naturalism, "as conventionally understood, 'photorealism'" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). Interestingly,

Kress & Leeuwen identify a series of markers that affect our perception of visual modality, among which we find both colour saturation, contextualization and depth. The absence of any one of these factors lowers modality. By being decontextualized, the authors maintain, "represented participants become generic, 'a typical example', rather than particular, and connected with a particular location and a specific moment in time" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006).

But what if 'generic' is to be desired? The description fits the photographs nicely: Greyscale, decontextualized and rid of depth – the association to a blueprint now seems justified. It resembles what Kress & Leeuwen call a 'Galilean reality', a mode of scientific realism that differs greatly from conventional photorealism. The dominant principle in these codings, they claim, is the 'effectiveness' of the visual representation. From a scientific-technical perspective, the pictures of the sewing table and conference chair suddenly makes sense: these are technical drawings. Like maps and anatomical drawings, we rely on them for their perceived technical realism.

The note on scientific realism calls for some reflections on genre conventions: Why depict the object in this way? One possible reason is to avoid comparison to advertisement imagery. It was already a bold step to exhibit contemporary industrial design in the Museum of Decorative Arts, and most of the objects were, after all, submitted by the manufacturers. On the other hand, the neutral backgrounds and fanciful compositions of the photographs also mimic the aesthetic of modernist visual art to some degree. The overt aestheticism of the objects could even be a modest attempt to bridge the gap between 'design' and 'art', as the Museum was an institution traditionally governed by art historians. Lastly, there is the possibility that the scientific-technical look was utilised to stress modernism's scientific outlook. On seeing the blueprint-like images, few would dare to contend the technical superiority of the modernist aesthetic.

Scientific realism notwithstanding, the multimodal reality of the photographs makes the objects appear ambiguous, especially with regards to materiality. What is in fact objects – functional objects, if we believe the catalogue texts – instead becomes images, technical drawings, visually perfect geometrical figures that embodies the virtues of modernist design. The low naturalistic modality of the photographs sets the objects apart from the material reality of the exhibition. It also makes the physical catalogue all the more striking in its materiality. The blurred materiality of the objects stems not only from their presence through photographs, but also from the powerful impact of the paratext that is the catalogue. As Mary Kelly has remarked with regards to visual art: "How is the work of art, reproduced as photographic image, *produced* as the artistic text within the system of the book? […] Obviously, there is the loss of material specificity – problems of black-and-white reproduction, aspect ratios, and so on – the characteristic homogenizing tendency of the book; but the difference between the reproduction in the catalogue and the original in the exhibition is not merely a question of photographic techniques. It is a question of particular practices of writing, of the gaps, omissions, and points of emphasis through which certain images are outlined and others erased. The authorial discourse

(organizer, critic or artist) constructs a pictorial textuality which pertains more to the readable than the visible" (Kelly, 1996).

CONCLUSION

In the 1960s, 'design' was still a neologism to most Norwegians.[3] Consequently, the 1963 exhibition 'Norwegian Industrial Design' provides a unique case that merits scholarly attention and analysis. With the exhibition catalogue as my lens, I have focused on the visual and textual strategies that shape the mediation of the design objects, primarily through the illustrations, the photographs. As a medium, photography is closely tied to notions of objectivity – a fact wonderfully underscored by Catherine Moriarty when she relates that the winners of the British 1959 Design Centre Awards were selected on the basis of photographs (Moriarty, 2000).

However, objectivity commands realism. As my analysis of the photographs has shown, the overt aestheticism and strong decontextualization of the objects owes more to scientific realism than to conventional naturalism, that is, photorealism. The picture of the sewing table, presented in first angle orthographic view, brilliantly illustrates this point.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to fully explain the aesthetic of the photographs. Their multimodality as images makes them dubious as objects. This mirrors Malene Breunigs analysis of the photographic mediation of Danish design furniture, where she states that "[the photographer] "displays the furniture not merely as material objects […] but as iconographic images. […] These images both portray and become aesthetic objects." (Breunig, 2012). As in the case of the 1963 catalogue, the materiality of Breunigs pictured objects is blurred by the fact that the images themselves take on aesthetic and artistic properties. Kjetil Fallan has pointed out that the Norwegian design discourse of the 1950s and 1960s relied heavily on the defining principles of artistic intention and quality (Fallan, 2007). The 1963 catalogue reflects these principles. Itself a product of design, it attests to the great potential and mediating power of its genre in shaping perceptions of design.

ENDNOTES

1. Bøe, A. (1959). *From Gothic Revival to Functional Form*. BA thesis. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
2. The exceptions are the four boats on p. 190-193 and the rolling gantry bridge crane on p. 308; these are all depicted in use. The three leisure boats (190-192) were nevertheless on display in the exhibition.
3. Common Norwegian words for design were 'brukskunst' and 'kunstindustri', i.e. applied art. Even though 'design' was used for the first time in a Norwegian article in 1946, the newspaper reviews of the 1963 exhibition stated that 'industrial design' was indeed a neologism to most people. The careful and explanatory use of the term in both catalogues further confirms this.

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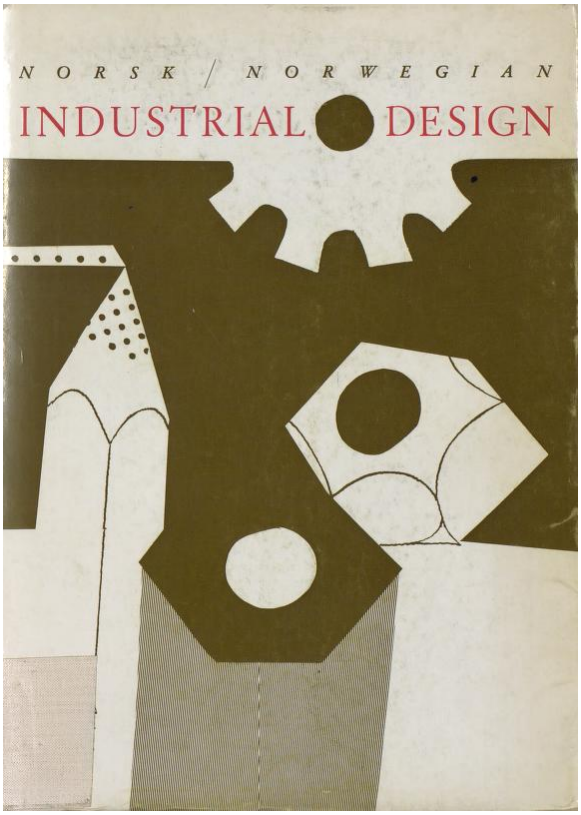

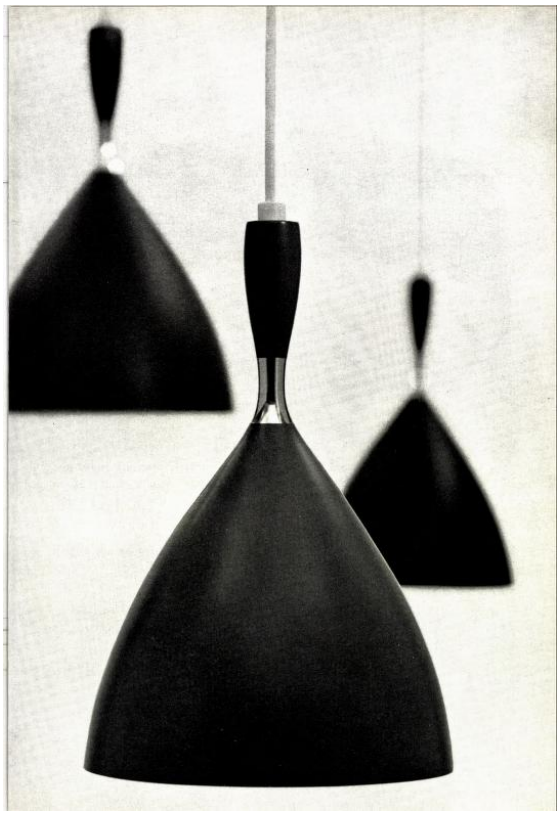

FIG 1: Catalogue cover. Design: Hermann Bongard, 1963.
FIG 2: Pendant lamp S710053, by Sønnico. Design: Birger Dahl, 1955.

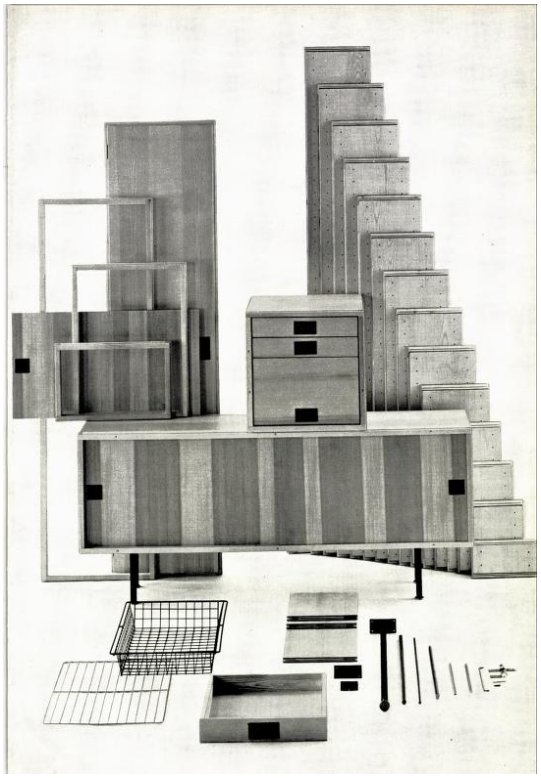

FIG 3: Standard units, "Modul 5-15", by Systemtre A/L. Design: Edvin Helseth, 1962.
FIG 4: Chair, "Ero 5", by Stål & Stil. Design: Stål & Stil, 1962.

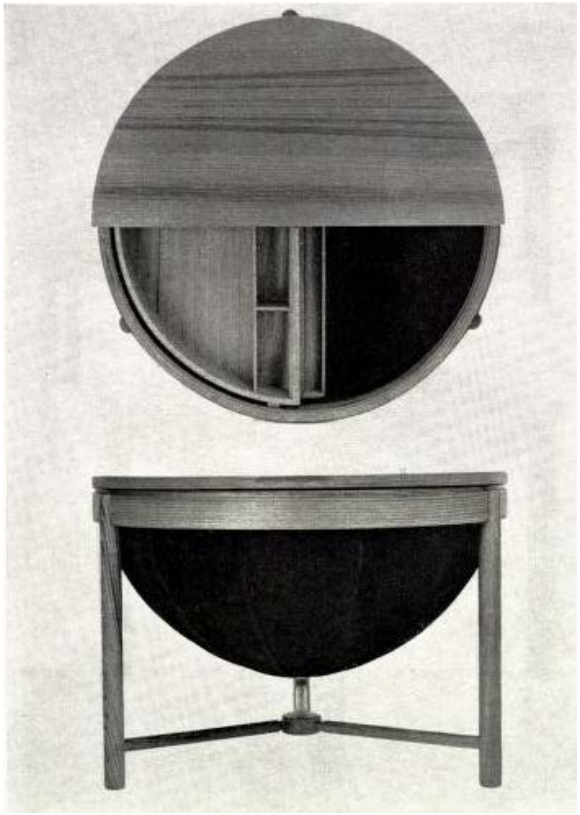

FIG 5: Sewing table, "Syclus", by Rasmus Solberg Møbelverksted. Design: Adolf Relling, 1963.

FIG 6: Confectionary, "Twist", by Freia A/S. Design: Eileen Riley and Trygve Lindeberg, 1958.