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7 Exhibiting New Cultures of Design

Representing the Cultural and Social Meanings of Design in Three Nordic Exhibitions

*Peder Valle, Sabina Maria Rossau and
Leena Svinhufvud*

The plot behind an exhibition can at times be just as important as the objects on display: This plot reflects an intention, which adds perspective to the exhibited and stimulates the intellectual capacity of the visitor beyond the simple – and often irrelevant – question of beauty.

(Bøe 1966, 14)

Though originating in an unrelated 1966 exhibition review in the journal *Dansk Brugskunst*, these words by Norwegian design historian Alf Bøe (1927–2010) are apt in capturing the qualities of institutional transformation traceable in three exhibitions studied in this chapter. Seeking to broaden the scope of design and strengthen its relevance to society, these three exhibitions all come close to embodying this overall ‘plot’ as Bøe describes it, each in a different way. They are: the *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition at the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art in November 1963; the *FORM 68* exhibition at the Danish Museum of Decorative Art in Copenhagen in May 1968; and the exhibition *Object and Environment (Esine ja ympäristö)* touring Finnish schools, libraries and other local exhibition spaces between 1968 and 1971.

The desirable luxury objects and furnishings of the post-war years encompassed by the ‘Scandinavian Design’ label were – and still are – an obliging category for exhibition formats based on aesthetic premises in museums and kindred organs. With the 1960s and 1970s increased attention to the expanded concept of design, its social meanings and activist potential, institutions of didactic cultural exhibiting were faced with a new challenge of communicating design as contemporary culture and as an element of social change. In national museums of industrial and applied arts, the traditional art historical practice of highlighting an aesthetic canon held sway, consequently leading to a retrospective approach. Conversely, within the exhibition activities of national societies and associations of craft and design, the commitment to advancing industrial export and domestic production were dominating and implied a demand for novelties and goods ready for mass production. In order to afford the general public a way of exploring the cultural meaning of design at eye level without addressing them as immediate consumers, the need arose for developing new curatorial strategies.

The three exhibitions studied in this chapter were not based on a consolidated understanding of ‘a new culture of design’ per se. They are not explicitly responding to a manifested new politics or social meaning of design and should not be studied as such. But each display a curatorial sensibility – unprecedented in their respective contexts – towards design as a subject matter to be conveyed by institutions and considered by the public in a closer proximity to everyday life, such as it is, could – or even should be.

The 1963 Norwegian Industrial Design Exhibition

In November 1963, the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art (*Kunstindustrimuseet i Oslo*) hosted the exhibition *Norwegian Industrial Design (Norsk Industrial Design)*. Claimed to be the first of its kind in Norway, and allegedly in the Nordic countries (*Morgenbladet* 1963), the exhibition showcased a hand-picked selection of high-quality mass-produced Norwegian design products, implicitly reflecting notions of Norwegian design as progressive and innately democratic. The fact that the English term ‘industrial design’ was kept untranslated in the Norwegian versions of the exhibition’s title and catalogue text attests to the apparent novelty of ‘design’ to the Norwegian public in 1963, and simultaneously marks its divergence from the established rationale of the applied arts movement.

The exhibition was an ambitious project that involved the support of the Export Council of Norway (*Norges Eksportråd*) and the Federation of Norwegian Industries (*Norges Industriforbund*), as well as the collaboration of the Norwegian National Association of Arts and Crafts (*Landsforbundet Norsk Brukskunst*) and the more recently established ID Group for Industrial Design (*ID Norsk Gruppe for Industriell Formgivning*). The latter’s formation in 1955 by a group of designer members of the National Association was motivated by the wish to acknowledge the complex, problem-solving character of modern industrial design and untangle it from the inherent aestheticism of the applied arts context (Fallan 2007). The ID Group went on to initiate the Norwegian Design Award (*Den norske Designpris*), established in 1961 by the Export Council of Norway and the Federation of Norwegian Industries, and whose winning objects – a grapnel, door handle, liqueur bottle, flatware and refrigerator – closely reflected similar ideas. That the 1963 exhibition also runs along the same lines should come as no surprise.

The exhibition consisted of 255 objects sourced from a wide range of Norwegian producers. The objects had been carefully selected by a jury consisting of four members, each representing one of the following: The Oslo Museum of Decorative Art – where the exhibition took place, the Norwegian National Association of Arts and Crafts, the aforementioned ID Group and the Central Institute for Industrial Research (*Sentralinstituttet for Industriell Forskning*). The museum’s representative in the jury was senior curator Alf Bøe, who was the original initiator of the exhibition (Engelstad in Bøe, 1963b). Bøe was newly appointed only the year before – 1962 – and had introduced the idea immediately after taking up his post at the museum. In his mid-thirties, Bøe was hard-working and ambitious, and his treatise on Victorian design theory had received wide acclaim (Bøe 1957). Keen to demonstrate that modern industrial design was of relevance to a museum of decorative art, Bøe set out to restore the ties between the museum and the field of industrial design.

The featured objects closely reflected the ‘design turn’ of Norway’s professional scene in the years running up to the 1963 exhibition (Fallan 2007). Whilst including traditional objects like armchairs, glassware and cutlery, the selection also consisted of less typical objects like telephones, electric switches and a chemical lavatory, making the curated totality of the exhibition a far cry from other more conventional presentations of Scandinavian household wares of the period, such as the celebrated travelling exhibition *Design in Scandinavia*, touring Canada and the USA in the years 1954–1957, and the 1958 Paris spectacle *Formes Scandinaves*. By extending the design term to technical and industrial goods, appliances, machinery and commercial packaging, the jury deliberately shifted the scope of the 1963 exhibition to allow for a renewed understanding of ‘industrial design’ as something reaching beyond the mere aesthetic discourse of the applied arts movement. Featuring more than just living room furniture, the exhibited objects carefully underpinned the idea of design as an overarching discipline in modern industrialised society, imbuing the modernist designs with an almost ‘positivist’ flair.

A catalogue and a booklet were published to tie in with the exhibition. The illustrated catalogue included a foreword by the Norwegian Minister of Industry, Trygve Lie, and an introductory essay by Alf Bøe outlining the properties and history of modern industrial design. It also contained a comprehensive, 264-page photographic presentation showing all the objects exhibited, complete with a detailed description of form and materials, measurements and year of introduction. The booklet, on the other hand, was mainly a list of the exhibits; however, it also contained a foreword by museum director Eivind Engelstad (1900–1969) and a short introduction text by interior designer Birger Dahl (1916–1998). Dahl was chairman of the jury and a central member of the ID Group. 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 we will turn our attention to the illustrated catalogue, keeping in mind Dahl’s technocratic approach to design while exploring the exhibition further.

In his essay for the illustrated catalogue, Alf Bøe explains that the selection of objects exhibited ‘demonstrates 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, 46). What’s more, on the preceding pages, Bøe programmatically declares that

[w]e want to promote a design policy in Norwegian industry which is based on legitimate demands, arising out of our way of life in modern society, and which tries to satisfy these demands through the production of goods which are both practical and attractive.

(Bøe 1963a, 45)

Using words like ‘practical’, ‘modern’ and ‘legitimate’, Bøe neatly outlines the new-found virtues of industrial design, as well as its aptness to the ‘modern’ condition. Notably, apart from his use of the term ‘attractive’, Bøe abstains from commenting on the very aesthetic and artistic issues which were defining traits of the applied arts tradition.



Figure 7.1 Photo from the exhibition *Norwegian Industrial Design* at the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art, November 1963. Photo courtesy of Nasjonalmuseet/Teigens Fotoatelier/DEXTRA Foto.

Picture perfect design

To believe that appearance was not important, however, would be a mistake: Both the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue bear witness to a stark, restrained aesthetic that permeates all aspects of the presentation. In the exhibition, the objects were placed on low podiums and along the walls, painstakingly arranged with almost grid-like accuracy, visually separated here and there by thin gauze-like panel curtains (Figure 7.1). A minimum of catalogue information was printed in bright lettering on a dark background, with the small, rectangular labels neatly following the grid-like layout. Though the objects were grouped thematically throughout the four exhibition rooms – household items and kitchen appliances, technical and industrial equipment, graphic design, furniture and lighting and, lastly, sports and leisure goods – the presentation is noteworthy for its marked absence of any contextual information. This is perhaps most critical when remembering that all the exhibits were in fact *utilitarian* objects, designed not primarily for display, but for use. Stripped of any reference to the intended use and hence function of these objects, the resultant ‘white box’ aesthetic of the exhibition rooms mimicked the scene of the modern art museum more than it did the presumed setting of the objects’ everyday use.

Similarly, the object photographs featured in the catalogue presented the exhibits less as utilitarian objects than as mere formalist exercises, portraying everything from kitchen appliances to plastic jerry cans as purely aesthetic articles with distinct visual qualities. Photographed against plain, white backgrounds, the different objects were

DESIGN
KITTELSEN & KVÆRK A/S, OSLO
FOR A/S GRANFOS BRUG, LTD.,
LYSAKER



Pakning for toiletpapir «Lindy». Cellofan. På tvers av rullen uregelmessige striper av fiolett, blå og klar cellofan. Fiolett etikett med utspart trykk. Rullen leveres i hvitt, gult og rosa. Br. 11,4 cm, diam. 9,5 cm. I produksjon fra 1962.

Wrapper for toilet paper "Lindy". Cellophane with irregular stripes of violet, blue and clear cellophane. Violet label with negative print. The roll is offered in white, yellow and pink.

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Figure 7.2 Facsimile of page 283 from the Norwegian Industrial Design catalogue, 1963. Photograph by Bjørn Winsnes of striped packaging for Lindy toilet paper. Photo courtesy of Ola Winsnes.

flattened, isolated and ‘cut out’, leaving it up to the reader of the captions to figure out their intended use, functions and material qualities. This was further enhanced by the eccentric compositional strategies that were applied to some of the objects. For instance, the standard furniture series were portrayed with their different units spread out and very neatly arranged, almost like a technical layout presenting the many different parts of a scale model kit. The sewing table *Syclus* was depicted, blue-print-like, with the table top as seen in bird’s-eye view, suspended in the air above a rendition of the same table as seen from the side. With some designs, such as Tormod Alnæs’ *Ponny chair*, the depiction of the chair alongside its components was of course intended to reveal the design’s constructional properties. For others, however, like the packaging for *Lindy toilet paper* (Figure 7.2) and *Twist chocolates*, the arrangements bordered on comical, sporting bits of confectionary balancing impossibly on top of each other. Recalling Bøe’s words, it seems fair to point out that these pictures reveal very little about the actual ‘practicality’ of the objects presented; rather, they serve as a reminder that the catalogue as well as the photographic presentation of the objects were themselves – effectively – designed.

Design virtues and the museum

Despite only being on display for one month, the 1963 *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition received much publicity and press coverage. Swedish critic Ulf Hård af Segerstad applauded the initiative and called it ‘an entirely impressive act by a devoted few, whose work will lay the foundations for a broad and quick renewal’ (Hård af Segerstad 1964, 44). He immediately goes on to present the founding members of the ID Group and praise them for having succeeded in ‘stirring up’ the Norwegian design debate. Reading Hård af Segerstad’s review, it seems clear that the ideals promoted by the likes of the ID Group were regarded as the future of modern design.

In the introductory essay, curator Alf Bøe explained the historical background of industrial design. Furthermore, he made an effort to connect the virtues of modern design to the original founding statutes of the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art, dating from 1876 and aiming to improve the quality of contemporary mass-produced goods. In other words, Bøe was seeking to link the modern endeavour for high quality in design with the original intentions of the Museum, thus building legitimacy for the exhibition project by means of retrospective reference. This is particularly interesting as the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art in the 1960s neither spent much curatorial time nor much of its scarce funds on collecting and exhibiting contemporary design objects – and indeed had not been doing so for many years. In his foreword to the exhibition booklet, museum director and Alf Bøe’s superior Eivind Engelstad found it apt to point out 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 or not these objects belong in a museum of decorative art’ (Engelstad in Bøe 1963b). Engelstad’s views were not at all uncommon in his day. Rather, his implicit suspicion towards industrial design reflects a scholarly heritage that left its mark on the field of design and decorative arts for much of the 20th century. Alf Bøe, on the other hand, was convinced of industrial design’s relevance to the museum. Some years later, he unsuccessfully applied for the position as the museum’s director, before leaving in 1968 to take up the post as director for the Norwegian Design Centre (*Norsk Designcentrum*). The first of its kind in Scandinavia, the NDC was modelled on the British Design

Centre in London's Haymarket (1956). The Norwegian Design Centre opened in 1965, the same year that Alf Bøe was elected president of the National Association of Arts and Crafts, but it was in fact founded two years prior, in 1963, while the *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition was still on display. Bøe stayed on as the Centre's director until its closure in 1973. It is thus tempting to note how his work on the 1963 exhibition ties neatly in with his career path.

When the Oslo Museum of Decorative Art celebrated its centennial in 1976, Alf Bøe briefly returned as curator for a touring exhibition on *Nordic Industrial Design*, later to travel to Finland (see below) and Denmark. Superficially, the exhibition appears to follow the 1963 exhibition in many respects, and the exhibition catalogue's foreword by museum director Lauritz Opstad symptomatically opens with a reference to the 1963 exhibition (Opstad in Bøe 1976). Once again, Alf Bøe authored the catalogue essay, in which he sketches out the main concerns and challenges for the modern industrial designer's work. Though maintaining that the museum's original statutes were still relevant to the ethos of modern industrial design, Bøe speaks more of the collaboration between the designer and other disciplines. Compared to his 1963 essay, history is also downplayed. Thirteen years on, it is worth noting Bøe's mention of the five design centres that were opened in Nordic cities between 1959 and 1967, of which only two were in operation by 1976. Similarly, he laments the unfulfilled plans for a proper designer's education in Norway, pointing out that the matter had been debated without result for twenty years (Bøe 1976). It is difficult not to discern a slight disappointment or *ennui* between the lines of Bøe's essay, contrasting sharply with the marked optimism of the 1963 exhibition. By 1976, the pressing awareness of environmental concerns and consumerist critiques had changed the wind, leaving both the design community and society at large with new and unprecedented world-views that made the old pursuit of 'good design' lose some of its currency. A few years earlier, design activist and educator Victor Papanek had travelled Scandinavia, publishing in 1971 his book *Design for the Real World* (first published in Swedish in 1970) that denoted a polemic point of no return for the traditional consumer goods industry (more on Papanek in Chapter ten of this volume). Furthermore, the impact of the international 1973 oil crisis no doubt contributed to the general perception of a society in disrepair. As for the Norwegian situation, it has also been remarked that the establishment of EFTA (European Free Trade Association) in 1960 and the discovery of the Ekofisk oil field in 1969 both accelerated the processes that would ultimately render the manufactured goods industry 'inessential' to Norway's national economy (Fallan 2007, 46).

The feeling of estrangement was more openly remarked upon by Bøe's Danish contemporary Viggo Sten Møller (father of Henrik Sten Møller, whom will refigure below). Writing in 1977, a year after Bøe's essay for the centennial exhibition, Møller states that: '[t]he situation in the Nordic countries is somewhat chaotic. The associations are facing difficulties [...] The designers are struggling and are making strange designs [like] inflatable furniture in plastic and paper [...] Today's situation calls for radical change' (Møller 1978, 82–85). Though a far cry from Bøe's understated dissatisfaction, Møller's polemic description reminds us that the curatorial and exhibitionary strategies that were developed for the 1963 *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition quickly took a hit to their appeal and relevance. Despite the attempt to establish a new canon of high-quality mass-produced Norwegian design products, effectively promoting Norwegian design as progressive and innately democratic, the

programmatic outlook from 1963 was soon supplanted by changed visions and revised realities. Intended to embody the new culture of design, the *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition eventually morphed into an image of the future that never was.

FORM 68 at the Danish Museum of Decorative Art

On 3 May 1968, the exhibition *FORM 68* opened in the Danish Museum of Decorative Art (*Det Danske Kunstindustrimuseum*, since 2011 *Designmuseum Danmark*) – hereafter the Museum. *FORM 68* was initiated and organised by journalist Henrik Sten Møller (1937–2019), a design and architectural critic at national newspapers *Politiken* and *B.T.* In Møller’s words, he was offered the keys to the Museum by Erik Lassen (1913–1997), director since 1966, in response to his critique of the Museum’s outdated scope and practice; a practice of allowing promotional organisations like the Danish Society of Arts and Crafts and Industrial Design (*Landsforeningen Dansk Kunsthaandværk*) – hereafter the Society – to dictate the premise of curating contemporary design. In his press announcement, Møller (1968d) stated:

The exhibition was made in spite. It is inspired by the dull and ever more mercantile displays by the Society. Exhibitions, that bring us the ‘good’ Danish taste, appraised until unconsciousness [...] I have created this exhibition because I believe we have been missing it. This I stated to Erik Lassen when he some years ago became director of the Museum. I wanted to force the museum to concern itself with what was happening here and now – and not only attend to the historical highlights, in which the museum is so plentiful as is [...].

The visual appearance of *FORM 68* is documented in archival photos and in the daily press descriptions. Scrutiny of these materials quickly reveals that any merit as a curatorial milestone lies not within the physical manifestation of the exhibit. Rather its significance is found in Møller’s own articulations of his intent in four central documents: Møller’s two letters to Erik Lassen mapping the exhibition concept (Møller 1967, 1968b); his introduction in the exhibition pamphlet (Møller 1968a) and his announcement of *FORM 68* published on 1 May in the leading newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* (Møller 1968d). Focusing on these four documents, this case study examines *FORM 68* as a discursive approach to curating the emerging cultural values in design. We begin with a brief account of the exhibition’s form and content.

FORM 68 presented works by ceramicist Erik Magnussen (1940–2014), illustrator Bo Bonfils (1941–2019), artist and Gobelin-maker Jan Groth (1938–2022),¹ architect Lars Ulrik Thomsen (1946–) and photographer Gregers Nielsen (1931–2002). Visitors were greeted at the gate by Magnussen’s human-sized sculptures, made of piled-up ceramic cones and half-spheres in bright blue and red. This unprecedented use of the museum front yard was celebrated in reviews, but inside, the curating was rather less surprising. In the smallest of five consecutive halls, Thomsen’s architectural sketches and models were respectively hung as a wall-frieze and placed on top of his tubular furniture prototypes. In the adjoining hall, more tubular furniture posed as podiums for Thomsen’s smaller items (cutlery, kitchenware, alphabet building blocks) and for ceramic tableware by Magnussen. More of Magnussen’s sculpture components were placed on low plinths, just elevating them off the floor, as was his prototype for the Z-down tubular chair. Groth’s vast black and white Gobelins were hung from gallery rails, directly

against the bare sand-plastered museum walls. So too were graphic posters by Bonfils. Sketches and smaller works by both Groth and Bonfils were shown in the museum's renowned mahogany display cases by Kaare Klint. The final hall was massively dressed in Nielsen's black-and-white photos by the hundreds. They were fixed in groups on forty-three frameless boards and hung frieze-like around the room and on freestanding room dividers. In between, more of Thomsen's seats and the Z-down chair were placed directly on the floor, thus suggesting a place to rest and contemplate the cacophony of photo narratives. The exhibition deployed no customised scenography; rather the works were arranged against the backdrop of the museum's naked floors, walls and ceiling. Re-using Klint's display cases, the overall look did not deviate much from the museum's regular appearance. If anything, the show would have seemed a bit bleak and un-curated, which was also suggested in the daily press reviews.

Protesting the commercial premise

The un-decorated, no-nonsense look of *FORM 68* served as a curatorial point. In the pamphlet, Møller (1968a) expressed his 'fundamental dislike of arts and craft (*kunsthåndværk*)' and his firm conviction that time would soon enough rid us of 'the vice of idolising frippery'. He declared that the exhibition was protesting the canonised craft of the day.

In press reviews, one passage from the pamphlet was cited or rephrased repeatedly, namely Møller's polemic testimony of inspiration: 'Every morning I open the door. Collect the milk carton from the staircase. Every morning I think to myself how it continues to be as ugly and impractical as ever' (Møller 1968a). This and the stated protest made more than one headline. In the pamphlet, Møller bluntly called out schools and associations that he found to be failing in their efforts to advance Danish design. 'Who is to blame?', he asked regarding the ugly milk carton, pointing also to the 'conscientious press and its pet child the consumer'. He flat out accused the Society of doing little more than parade how 'tame and trivial craft ha[d] become in craft's own little country' (Møller 1968a).

Møller's grudge with the Society was rooted in a profound concern with the commercial outline of its exhibition activities. The Society was part of a network that, through exhibitions and publications, facilitated the successful branding and export of Danish design – particularly carpentry furniture – in the 1950s. The success of the network rested largely on the heralding narrative of high quality resulting from a unique collaboration between cabinetmakers and furniture architects, which also led to price-points beyond average consumer level (see Hansen 2018 about the concept of Danish furniture architects and for an exhaustive account of the mid-century success of Danish design). In his pitch to Lassen, Møller (1968b) called it a 'moral' issue to promote young artisans working unaffected by the dominating mercantile premise. To this end, it was important to (1) afford each participant the room to show a full body of works and not just a few samples and (2) include sketches, experiments and 'flaws' since '[...] perfection can occasionally obstruct'.

These terms recalled the exhibition series *Danish Designers* (*Danske Kunsthåndværkere*) that Lassen himself had supervised up until his appointment as director. Between 1956 and 1966 the Museum had on nine occasions invited three to five designers from complementary areas (e.g. furniture, textile and product design) to jointly curate an exhibit of their own work – at their own expense. While early versions appeared

quite commercial (including price-tags and direct sales), exhibitions VIII and IX were much less, so as they integrated the sort of sketches and experiments that Møller was advocating – and he had indeed reviewed the series with praise (Møller 1965b).

In the pitch, Møller (1968b) stressed the importance of adding to the standard introductory data and portraits information about each artisan's method of working – from conception to materialisation. In this way of emphasising the creative process, Møller deployed a strategy that has since become principal in design curating, but which had previously, with few exceptions, been approached by the Museum in a more traditional understanding and normative appreciation of artisanal skills.

There were other aspects of *FORM 68* that escaped the traditional museum approach. Møller wanted to *force* the Museum, he wrote, to engage with what was happening 'here and now' in Danish craft and design, and as we shall see next by his selection of participants, he exceeded a style- or trend-based understanding of 'here and now' and challenged traditional narratives of the rationale behind Danish Design.

Practice on display

Magnussen, Bonfils and Groth each represented the typical participant for *Danish Designers*. They were classically trained and young but well on their way. Magnussen (a 1967 Lunning-prize winner) and Bonfils had both set up independent workshops upon graduating from the School of Arts and Crafts in 1960. Both had prestigious additional engagements, the former with the porcelain manufacturer Bing and Grøndahl and the latter teaching at the Royal Academy of Arts. Groth had studied traditional painting, but since 1960 he had been collaborating with the weaver Benedikte Groth (his wife from 1965 to 1985) on abstract black-and-white Gobelin tapestries. In 1965 they represented Denmark at the third Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie Lausanne, which marked an international turning point within the genre, breaking with traditional motives and techniques (Paludan 2003, 30–31).

The three shared an exploratory approach to artisanal expression that Møller found pioneering. Magnussen's dedication to mass-production rather than decorative studio art made him the ideal designer in Møller's view. The components for the *FORM 68* sculptures were manufactured by the industrial porcelain plant *Norden* that specialised in high voltage insulators. Møller (1968d) called it *industriekunst* (industry art) – as opposed to *kunstindustri* (industrial art), thus connoting the period's rebellion against high culture rather than the customary museum subject matter. Bonfils' advertising posters for Ole Palsby and the Danish Design Centre may seem curious in a display protesting mercantile design exhibitions. But Bonfils appeared in *FORM 68* as both a graphic designer and 'independent artist' (*fri kunstner*) with free-hand sketches, showing the range of his method first and foremost (Møller 1968b). Groth's work Møller simply found 'highly innovative', and to be sure Groth was part of the movement that repositioned Gobelin-making within art and design in the late 1960s.

Adding social context

Lars Ulrik Thomsen was the wildcard of *FORM 68*. Though young and unestablished, he had strong opinions on relating the social and designed environment. He had trained as a mason and architect, studied sociology, travelled Europe by bike and lived on a Kibbutz. Thomsen was driven towards architecture and design by his

vision of a simplified life in smaller communities, free from consumer goods and status symbols (Thomsen 1968). At *FORM 68* he presented a fully-fleshed utopia: Prototypes for democratic clothing, furniture, lamps and kitchenware; urban plans and architectural models – most notably his mushroom-like design for commune housing (Figure 7.3). His presentation included strategies for sharing resources and reorganising public institutions such as supermarkets, schools, churches, hospitals, museums etc. Literally a body of work spanning from the spoon to the city, as Ernesto Nathan Rogers famously phrased it, but in contrast to the Italian movement, Thomsen’s aim was not to elevate the status of everyday objects; rather he pursued the lowest consumer price above all else.

Møller included Thomsen for his strong social engagement, his creative use of waste materials and his earthbound ideas. Thomsen had an unaffected and pragmatic attitude towards the heralded Danish furniture tradition. He refrained from the category all together, using the term living devices (*bo-redskaber*) instead, and prioritised the democratic rationale of low cost above aesthetics or even comfort, which in his mind was an all too individual parameter anyway. If a chair was to be truly comfortable, Thomsen felt, it would have to be tailor-made to the user’s back. As this was unattainable in efficient industrial production, Thomsen had disposed of backs and armrests all together in his seating devices (Møller 1968c). Thomsen was indeed the antithesis of the ‘Conclave in Bredgade’, as Møller had mockingly called the Museum, referencing its location and normative approach (Møller 1965a).



Figure 7.3 Lars Ulrik Thomsen’s sketches, tubular furniture and mushroom-like model for commune housing exhibited at *FORM 68*. Photo by Ole Woldbye, courtesy of Pernille Klemp, Designmuseum Danmark.

The social impetus in Thomsen's work was underlined by Gregers Nielsen's contribution. Nielsen was a renowned pioneer in documentary photography. In 1964 he co-founded the Delta Photo group, honoured by posterity for its work on social issues in Denmark in the late 1960s. Nielsen exhibited roughly 200 portraits taken between 1962 and 1968 of ordinary people in common settings like the animal show, the meatpacking district or the village hall. Møller wrote in the pitch that Nielsen's 'natural photography [...] should usher us to the milieu that surrounds us, and with which we must commit' (Møller 1968b). Reportage photography, especially on fashion, was relatively commonplace in the Museum. In 1964, it hosted a jubilee show of Albert Eisenstadt's work, which in its black-and-white aesthetic was not far from Nielsen's. However, *FORM 68* included Nielsen's work not primarily for its artistic quality but for its testimony to the current – the here and now – way of living for a large part of the Danish consumer society that was never immediately addressed by the typical contemporary design exhibition.

Transforming museum discourse

In seventeen days, *FORM 68* had nearly 5,000 visitors and received an above average amount of press coverage, including the Society's moderately defensive response. In the Society periodical, Aksel Dahl refuted any claim to *FORM 68* transcending contemporary design exhibitions on account of it being visually and structurally too much in keeping with the *Danish Designers* series (Dahl 1968, 146). Dahl otherwise agreed with most of the reviewing press that the exhibited work raised important issues.

Henrik Sten Møller organised *FORM 68* from a position as critic – not curator. His contribution to design curating was not a clear-cut how-to as much as a how-not-to. It was not a ground-breaking visual spectacle with a self-explanatory message, rather its meaning had to be extrapolated from a dialogue that took place in only partially public writings. And it did not revolutionise exhibition practice overnight, either in or outside the Museum. Still, *FORM 68* offered a noticeable alternative to exhibiting contemporary design on the customary commercial premise of promotional organisations.

Displaying the work of Magnussen, Bonfils and Groth through the lens of sketches and technical experiments rearticulated their work as process rather than product. Audiences were invited to transgress their consumerist position and instead engage with design as a practice, especially regarding Magnussen and Bonfils, who were both known from commercial contexts. With Thomsen's work, Møller outlined a new museum practice of addressing the design of the present and the future rather than the past. Collectively, the work of Thomsen and Nielsen added the social context for design as practice and emphasised its potential for responding to emerging social issues and cultural values beyond traditional narratives of aesthetics, and unrivalled but also prohibitively expensive craftsmanship. *FORM 68* thus anticipated the social discourse of design that only a few years on gained momentum with the aforementioned work of Victor Papanek.

'Object and Environment' – citizen education with design

In contrast to Denmark and Norway, there was not an active design museum in Finland at that time. The design collection established by the Finnish Society of Crafts

and Design (*Suomen Taideteollisuusyhdistys*) in 1873, was packed in storage during the Second World War and the museum was not re-opened until 1978. However, the Society took other kinds of steps to represent contemporary design.

Playing with similar instruments as the *Norwegian Industrial Design* exhibition of 1963 and showing new, high-quality mass-produced design objects ranging from cutlery and scissors to door locks, the touring exhibition *Object and Environment* (*Esine ja ympäristö*) aimed at widening the arena for discussions about democratic ideals of design. This exhibition took design objects to Finnish libraries, schools and local exhibition spaces between 1968 and 1971. According to the Helsinki-based *Uusi Suomi* newspaper (6 June 1968), the goal of this exhibition with its 200 images, eighty slides and 200 objects was to offer something most essential that we all should recognise and be able to discuss. The carefully selected and displayed artefacts and black-and-white images depicted the evolution and cultural specificity of object design. Colour slides of contemporary everyday surroundings and utility items designed by Finnish designers and produced by Finnish industries were presented with the up-to-date Kodak Carousel projector. A local newspaper from Eastern Finland reported:

There are no luxury items in this exhibition, just essential everyday objects from door handles to chairs and plates to vehicles. The aim is to show visitors with these images and objects how design makes things more convenient, easier to use and cheaper through mass production.

(*Pieksämäen uutiset*, 26 March 1969)

The didactic exhibition texts informed visitors that three quarters of Finns lived in cities and urban areas and that the city is a designed environment. The slide presentation canonised catchphrases such as ‘Our daily surroundings are the result of thousands of overlapping solutions’ and ‘In Finland, the domestic artefacts started to change by the design activity in the post-war years. The everyday has become more cheerful. The designer’s work can be seen on the streets’. The tone verges on the ‘happy’ propaganda of socialism.

The overall message was to link design with functional products and daily environments. To illustrate this, there were images of using certain object types in different cultures and comparisons presenting how ‘design problems’ like sitting or cutting fabric have been solved at different times. There was no printed catalogue, but visitors could study the content with the help of a small leaflet containing texts by the curator of the exhibition, journalist and art critic Jaakko Lintinen (1933–). The exhibition design using light table structures for objects and standing panels for large black-and-white images was made by interior designer Esa Vapaavuori, and graphic designer Jukka Pellinen (1925–2011) stood for the stringent graphic design (Svinhufvud 2020) (Figure 7.4).

Object and Environment started touring in 1968. During the first year, it visited ten locations and reached a total of 15,000 visitors. According to the archival material, the exhibition was shown for example in the city of Savonlinna during the local Opera festival. It was also exhibited as part of the programme of the annual *Jyväskylän kesä* summer festival which, interestingly, that year hosted also Victor Papanek’s lecture about ‘the need for design in a tradition-bound society’ (*Kulttuuri-päivät* 1968, 9, 17).

Internationally, the year 1968 was a ‘crazy year’ of political turmoil and assassinations, resistance and student revolts, and Apollo 8. According to Finnish historian Henrik Meinander, many Finns look back at this year with nostalgia – it was when Finland was considered the most ‘Finnish’. Today, the student revolts live vividly in the stories, although many did not have anything to do with those historical events (Majander 2019). In the historical year of 1968, the geo-political status of Finland in the East of Europe founded the basis for politics. The President of the Republic, Urho Kekkonen (who stayed in that position from 1956 to 1982) was at the top of his power. Kekkonen drove a politics of national defragmentation. Despite the noisy resistance of the younger generation and students, a post-war ideal of uniform culture prevailed. On the other hand, people lived quite different realities. More and more families lived in urban apartment buildings with cosy sofas in their living rooms, while others still carried water to their house in the countryside. This was a time of massive structural change in the Finnish society. Transition from agrarian to industrial culture cut roots from many traditions and chores and during these years, a total of 40,000 Finns moved abroad each year, seeking a better livelihood, first and foremost to Sweden (Meinander 2019).

Finland was urbanising fast, and ways of consumption were changing. Increasing wealth and leisure time accelerated spending as well as production of consumer goods and services. However, the old agrarian idea of self-sufficiency prevailed in civic educational short films that were shown in movie theatres before television took over marketing. (Lammi 2009) These films promoted rationalisation of homes and an economical and frugal lifestyle and guided people to accept and appreciate industrial goods and at the same time, to internalise the notions of planning and saving. Around 1968 there were films about frozen food, bank savings, safe products of the cooperative market chains, and on industrially advanced production of furniture for the home.

The ways of life and the living environments were developing fast and exploded with the new ‘tele-communicational devices’. As Jaakko Lintinen encapsulates in the exhibition texts of *Object and Environment*, the world was closer than ever. ‘Technologised’ society was facing challenges like short life spans for consumer goods, acceleration of consuming, throwaway culture and the waste issues resulting from the use of artificial materials. On the other hand, new materials were seen as a necessity and for example, the use of plastic was considered a decisive solution. According to the exhibition narrative, the focus had been too much on history. Now design was created for functions that did not exist before, like computers. The topical challenge was the increasingly complex environment and the alienation of man from it. (See chapter 2 on the expanding and fuzzy discourses on environments.)

In the time of big changes, the role and impact of the designer were seen as very broad and the belief in the potential of professionals was strong. The spirit was that of techno-optimism: ‘Contemporary design should be seen as part of the activities that make it possible to create a functional and effective culture for the industrial society’ (*Esine ja ympäristö* 1968). Here the tone of voice comes very close to that of Alf Bøe, who connected the responsibility of shaping the contemporary environment with the activity of modern design industries (see above).

The role of design institutions

Jaakko Lintinen was recruited as curator of the *Object and Environment* exhibition by the director of the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design, H. O. Gummerus

(1909–1996) who was, in fact, the mastermind behind clever marketing of Finnish design industries in the Milan Triennials and other international exhibitions (Aav & Viljanen 2009). Lintinen had previously worked for the Finnish *Viikkosanomat* magazine which published photo reportages in the style of Life Magazine. He had written a special article for the magazine about the future, ‘Finland in 2000’ which was published in 1966. Lintinen recalls that in the article which caught Gummerus’ attention, he had written about icebreakers in the ‘naive happy faith of progress’ spirit of the time. ‘It was believed that designing better environments would lead to better people’ he recalls (Lintinen 2001, see also Kivirinta 2001).

Compared to many design exhibitions organised by the Society, the press clippings and correspondence showing negotiations with a variety of local and regional communities around the country, frame *Object and Environment* as a different kind of a promotional manoeuvre. The Society was at that time the main promoter of Finnish design industries abroad. It had been the key actor behind the international success story of ‘Finnish Design’ in the post-war years. What was the motivation of the Society to organise a touring exhibition for the ‘ordinary people’?

It seems that the immediate motivation was pedagogical. The documents state that there was a need to spread knowledge. Finnish design was internationally known, but in Finland, there were no educational materials on the subject for schools or for wider audiences. The aim was to give basic information related to the use of everyday objects – to provide ‘consumer education for design’ (Salokorpi & Runeberg 1969). In his opening speech of the exhibition in Helsinki, H. O. Gummerus stated that: ‘The exhibition strives to inform about the relationships and rational of the object world closest to man. It seeks to explain the background of design and the principles where it aims’ (Gummerus 1968). This kind of material was missing from schools and the educational field, and it had been anticipated also within consumer and adult education. In fact, the exhibition was executed with the support of the Finnish National Agency for Education (*Opetushallitus*) and included in-service training for teachers in the cities of Helsinki, Rauma and Jyväskylä. It can be perceived in the context of the developing egalitarian national schooling system, which culminated in the founding of comprehensive school in Finland in 1972.

In this show, there were no names of individual designers or companies mentioned although the objects and images were apparently loaned from or donated by design industries. Using the Finnish word ‘*muotoilu*’ in the texts instead of the English term was certainly a conscious choice. Since the mid-1960s, the concept of ‘Finnish design’ had been publicly attacked by the younger generation of designers. For a wider audience, the international term was not meaningful. ‘What is “design”?’ asked TV reporter and documentarist Hannu Karpo in the marketplace of Kuopio city in Eastern Finland in 1965. Representing the embarrassment of the common people before the unfamiliar concept, this documentary can be seen as one kind of design criticism (Karpo 1965).

For the Society, this was a time of redirecting activities. In 1965, the country’s only design school was detached from the governance of the Society, and in 1973 it became a state-supported institution with university status as the Institute of Industrial Arts (*Taideteollinen korkeakoulu*) (see chapter 8 on the political transitions of the school). During those years the Society participated actively in topical discussions about design education and the designer’s role in industry. The Society’s Yearbook published short research articles about contemporary design. In 1968, Jaakko Lintinen wrote

an analysis of contemporary industrial design. Based on a study about design research and its possibilities, it portrayed the role of a designer:

The problem addressed by an industrial designer is not 'shape' in the traditional sense. His activities in the product design team include combining a whole range of different information, consisting not only of technical, technological and economic data, materials and ergonomics, but also of the use of psychological and social research data. [...] An industrial designer is a new professional whose main task is to represent both the producer and the consumer. His main problem is to represent the human contribution in the product design process.

(Lintinen 1968; see also Sulonen 1969)

The Yearbook also gave voice to critical statements. Art historian Marika Hausen, who worked as a teacher at the Institute of Industrial Arts, wrote a biting anti-capitalist article about the new aims of design in the yearbook of 1967. Crushing the Nordic contribution to Expo 67 in Montreal she stated that present-day design does not meet the needs of the present day, which is facing major challenges such as global injustice and population explosion. Hausen writes:

Our Western way of life has included the right to make anything, the right to turn our backs, stating that it is not of our business, the right to overproduce, to destroy, to waste, to poison, the right to be short-sighted, to refuse to cooperate, to uphold the right of the individual over society, all the way. Today, we no longer have that right.

(Hausen 1967)

Critical voices were concurrently embraced also by other institutions. In 1968, the international seminar *Industrial, Environment and Product Design* funded by the Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA was organised in Suomenlinna, Helsinki, with Victor Papanek and Buckminster Fuller as invited guest speakers (Clarke 2013).

Regarding the role in front of the Finnish audience, it is good to keep in mind that the Society was, in fact, a membership organ for citizens, which organised, for example, annual lotteries. Domestic touring exhibitions were part of the programme going decades back and there were annual applied arts exhibitions in Helsinki organised jointly with the Finnish association of designers, Ornamo. Besides exhibition activity, the Society took up new didactic activities in the 1960s. A central image archive for design was initiated, collecting photos and slides from design industries and from individual practitioners, to be used by the media and in teaching. In 1968, the Society launched its first slide series on design to lend for teaching purposes, and for this, Jaakko Lintinen studied similar activities of *Svenska Slöjdföreningen* on a study trip to Stockholm.

The abjection of the national design collection and need for a specialist museum comparable to those in other Nordic design nations were expressed more and more empathically in the 1960s, when objects from the museum collection were also shown in exhibitions in Finland and abroad. The developments coincided with rapidly professionalising museum activities in the country. The curator of the Society's collection, art historian Seppo Niinivaara, made a study trip to Scandinavian design museums in

1966. Niinivaara was followed by Jaakko Lintinen in the curator's position, and these developments lead to the re-opening of the museum.

When the aforementioned touring exhibition on *Nordic Industrial Design* visited Helsinki in 1977, the exhibition was housed in Broberg's co-educational school, Korkeavuorenkatu 23. The exhibition anticipated the transformation of those facilities into a permanent design museum – which they also did a year later, in 1978. Reviewing the exhibition, art historian and art critic Leena Maunula notes that for the first time in decades, the domestic audience learned about current prospects in design. She argued that due to the lack of similar exhibitions the opportunities to learn about designers' efforts had been limited (Maunula 1977). There is another stance in the review which argues for the importance of linking contemporary design with the tradition.

Maunula points out that the names of Finnish designers whose works for the Nordic review had been selected by the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design were certainly unknown to the general public although their products – Valmet's tractor, Sisu's truck or a milk packaging and distribution system – were better known. According to Maunula, it was important that in the exhibition contemporary design was complemented by familiar market classics – 'good Danish furniture and light fixtures, Swedish glass and a lot of familiar goods from Finland from Aalto, Wirkkala and Sarp-paneva' (Maunula 1977). This gave perspective to the work of the designer and provided a good transition from the historical background to the present day, she stated.

How to exhibit a new culture of design?

The curators of the exhibitions presented here sought to address this question, whilst simultaneously grappling with the existing regimes of exhibiting and even thinking about 'design' that prevailed within museums and organisations. Terminology exposes the first sign of their struggles. Alf Bøe's use of the foreign expression 'industrial design' showed commitment to a novel approach to the subject matter. Jaakko Lintinen was aware that he was addressing an audience of commoners and avoided the English term in favour of the less suspicious Finnish word 'muotoilu'. And Henrik Sten Møller rather awkwardly scorned the craft-term without ever offering a qualified alternative (in later works Møller did adopt the design-term).

All three cases display the ambition to communicate design through the lens of 'use' and 'process' in addition to 'beauty', and the design profession as driven by social problem-solving. In the museum framework, Bøe and Møller each relied on a familiar visual approach to promote this new attitude towards the subject matter – arguably at the risk of adhering to the aestheticising museum premise. By including photographs of everyday life and use in different cultural contexts both Møller and Lintinen took steps towards overcoming the problematic issue of mediating design culture in a dissociated exhibition setting.

The three curators offered very different interpretations of the designer's role to the narratives of use and process. Lintinen emphasised the profession itself by leaving out the designer's identity. Bøe's scholarly approach listed designers and manufacturers on the same footing as material and formal object properties. Møller staged the designer personality at the very centre of his interpretation of design as process. Perhaps these differences of curatorial approach reflect the level of influence by the national societies of craft and design.

These were central to the realisation of all three exhibitions. In both the Norwegian and Finnish case, the societies acted as the organising unit and the average consumer was the uncontested target audience of the propagated message. In the Danish case, the national society, because of its promotional scope, sparked a counter position and motivated Møller – a newspaper design critic – to suggest a discursive approach to exhibiting contemporary design. In this sense, the addressee was the museum and the national societies rather than the general public, and the exhibition itself played the part of a critical tool, which relates this case also to the chapters in part one of this volume.

Using the exhibition as a changemaker or even a protest connects the three cases to an avant-garde aesthetic, offering individual and alternative responses to common or conventional problems. Importantly, the exhibitions can also be viewed as attempts to come to terms with the institutions' influential heritage, implying institutional criticism.

Note

- 1 Benedikte Groth, the wife and collaborator of Jan Groth, was accredited in the exhibition concept and in some press reviews, but she was not presented in the official exhibition pamphlet and is therefore not considered as an exhibitor here.

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