

**Gijs
Bakker
F08.**



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He could be called one of the godfathers of Dutch Design and certainly the one who put Dutch Design on the map. Gijs Bakker (1942), co-founder of Droog Design, is levelheaded about it all. Last year he left the ever-successful design platform after 15 years. Time for a new creative chapter. 'Life is marvellous. I don't want that to be ruined by something that is obsolete.'

**Droog Design
is Over.**



'Vienna, 1980. My wife, my son, and I were visiting a jewellery symposium there. There were posters in all the trams with the slogan: "Design is unsichtbar". They were referring to an exposition in Linz. We visited it on the way back. An enormous white tent on the bank of the Donau, crammed with design in the broadest sense of the word; post-modern architecture, car design, performance art, fashion, visual arts... One section with design pieces by Ettore Sottsass. Carpet made up of classic parquet flooring, finished with a chrome-plated steel border and placed under insipid Formica chairs in the most varied patterns. A lamp

Gijs Bakker
(1942, Amersfoort)

- early '60s Rietveld Academy and Konstfack Skolen, Stockholm
- 1965 collaboration with Emmy van Leersum (1966 marriage)
- 1993 Droog Design with design critic and historian Renny Ramakers
- 1996 Chi ha paura...? with Marijke Vallanzasca
- Design from jewellery, interiors, furniture, household appliances and items, to public spaces and exhibitions. For Polaroid, Artifort, VKB and Eno Studio, among others. His work is collected throughout the world and has received many awards since 1965, the last of which was the Benno Premesela Award in 2007, for his work at Droog Design.
- Since 1968 Teacher at the Delft University of Technology and the Design Academy, among others.
- Now guest-curator, jury member, lecturer, and head of the Masters Department (IM) of the Design Academy, Eindhoven.

with a myriad of bulbs. A bookcase from the Memphis collection that would later become an icon... The audacity! Fantastic! That kind of shock stays with you forever.'

He sighs. The exhibition meant a turning point for Gijs Bakker, conceptual artist and designer, and a cautious prelude to Droog Design, the design platform he would later start with Renny Ramakers. Droog Design is everything the cutting edge of that time, Italian design by Studio Alchimia and Memphis Group, wasn't: a return to the idea, the concept, averse from unnecessary decoration and exaggeration, but with an emphasis on originality and reclamation, all with a touch of irony. It was a new style that set off a shock wave in 1993 at the Salone in Milan, similar to the one Memphis caused at this Forum Design exhibition in Linz.

Intuition

Bakker is characterized by a curious mixture of level-headedness and absent-mindedness. These elements come back again and again, both in his personality and in his work. He approaches life with an almost childlike curiosity, despite his vast experience and all but encyclopaedic knowledge of art and design. His home-cum-studio, a canal-side house purchased from another Dutch design celebrity, Benno Premesela, is a striking example of the diversity of his interests: a jumble of styles, all tastefully arranged. 'Benno had a fantastic, free, and open spirit!', he calls from the kitchen with enthusiasm. 'In the eighties he had a kind of home-gallery in this room. Look at the cotton carpet you are sitting on. That was revolutionary in those days!'

Besides being a designer, Bakker is also a cultural entrepreneur and mentor. He was and is a decisive influence on the international promotion of Dutch design, though both his designs (jewellery, interior and industrial design) and his role as teacher and guest-curator (as early as 1980 he organized the exhibition Design from the Netherlands in Stuttgart, which toured Europe for four years, commissioned by the Office of Fine

Arts Abroad in, Amsterdam) as well as his collaboration projects.

His first collaboration was with his wife, Emmy van Leersum, whom he met in the early sixties at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, where they both studied jewellery design. Their conceptual outlook and raising the fundamental level of jewellery design made G+E (Gijs and Emmy) pioneers. Bakker: 'We were very different. She was functional and analytical in the step-by-step development of ideas, whereas I have a more intuitive approach. An excellent combination.'

Van Leersum passed away in 1984, when their son Aldo, now also a designer, was 13 years old. Bakker is keeping her legacy alive. 'Last year I organized a retrospective of our work and placed a series of sixteen aluminium bracelets, all slightly different, in a display case,' Bakker says. 'It felt as if she was looking over my shoulder and knowingly whispering: "Shouldn't you turn that bracelet the other way around?"'

Droog Design

A second important collaboration was with art historian and design critic Renny Ramakers. High-profile projects and exhibitions led their design platform Droog Design to become the driving force behind the movement that later became internationally synonymous with Dutch design. Bakker and Ramakers decided on collaboration during a group exhibition in pop temple Paradiso in Amsterdam. An upstairs gallery, on a regular Sunday afternoon, in early '93. Bakker was one of the exhibitors, Ramakers organized the event.

'It was snowing and it was cold, but all of Amsterdam was there,' Bakker recounts. 'The time was ripe, responses were good. I was planning on focussing public attention on some former students in a shop/gallery in the Via Serva in Milan, with ceramics, textiles and jewellery. Renny and I rashly decided to combine this idea with what was being shown in Paradiso.' They didn't harbour any illusions, but expected to see mainly 'indifferent

Dutch furniture salesmen,' as Bakker puts it. Dutch design didn't "exist" after all. But fate had something else in mind. With the arrival of Andrea Branzi – a group of young designers and press people in his wake – the exposition gained attention. The last three days there was quite a rush.



Within a few years Droog Design as a brand put the Netherlands on the map, with its razor-sharp sense of the spirit of the times and its selection and later in-house production of unconventional, conceptual work with a interpretive twist. And done by a new generation that gave renewed meaning to design with clever use of combinations and recycling. World-famous designers like Richard Hutten, Marcel Wanders, Jurgen Bey, and Hella Jongerius all started out with Droog. Bakker now considers Droog Design's current position as less influential. Last June, he decided to withdraw from the fifteen-year collaboration with Ramakers, to the dismay of many.

With the opening of a prestigious store in New York, he came to believe commercial considerations would push content further into the background.

The designer is glad it is behind him. 'I am working on a lot of new projects. Life is fantastic. I don't want that to be ruined by something that is obsolete. Droog Design is over. Something receives attention for some ten years and then is irrevocably surpassed by the next idea. That's fine; it gives young people space. Every generation has the right to express itself and to design their own products or environment.'

A career in chapters In spite of the diversity of his activities – design, teaching, lecturing, organizing exhibitions – Gijs Bakker's life is divided into clear-cut chapters of 15 years. Admittedly, they run more or less parallel to each other, but it is remarkable nonetheless: this marriage to Emmy van Leersum; the period of time he was busy with Droog Design; the working relationship and romance he had with Italian gallery owner Marijke Vallanzasca, with whom he started the successful jewellery label Chi ha paura...? in 1996. He is currently working on a long-term project in Taiwan. At the request of the Taiwanese Craft Research and Development Institute, he is developing a native design culture for the Taiwanese craft-industry, together with 17 young Taiwanese designers. Could this be an indication of what is to come for the next 15 years?

'Design is still all about flexibility and an open mind, just like in the sixties.'

The differences between the Northern European and Asian views of design fascinate him immensely. Here, as with Droog Design and at the Design Academy, he comes into contact with global thinking, something that has little to do with bringing Dutch character to Taiwanese design. What does it involve? A conceptual approach. Or rather, as Bakker puts it: 'conceptual design in context.' Here the context is Taiwanese culture. His findings are being presented in the Triennale in Milan, under the label yii (see page ...), featuring products made of bamboo, porcelain, and even brick, a material that the Dutch brought to Taiwan in the seventeenth century. Bakker: 'One young man built sculptural, organic implements out of it. Beautiful and innovative.'

One exception to his 'career in chapters' is the number of years the designer has been teaching: more than forty years. For some time now,

he has been head of the department of Masters of IM at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, a study programme that also has a strong impact on Dutch Design and for which there is fierce competition from students from all over the world. 'A lot is happening here, especially in the field of research. The market is changing; it demands more from designers than just a product,' he explains. 'This can limit them, but it can also simulate and inspire. The majority of the foreign designers we've attracted, both in Eindhoven and at Droog, have stayed in the Netherlands, because they've found a cultural and economic climate here that is without equal anywhere in the world. For the arts, this has traditionally meant that the government has found it its mission to instruct the masses and impart culture to them. Graphic design and architecture flourished in the 1920s and '30s, thanks to the active part the government played as patron. But product design was not yet of importance. Up until the '60s and '70s it was seen as nothing more than embellishment, strictly for marketing but without further purpose.'



Think global Bakker was one of the first in the Netherlands to realize that differences between art, design, and other disciplines could be done away with. And besides pioneer, he was also an advocate of "the concept". To say that he, as teacher and lecturer, could help the Dutch design world advance even further by propagating the "think global" concept, he finds too bold a statement. 'Precisely because we live in such a "global" world, the identity of the group you are a part of, in this case the Netherlands, has to be

defined meticulously. And you have to keep working at being of international significance. It is important that the next generation of designers doesn't casually assume the reputation of Dutch Design, but that they use it in a positive sense by further developing the quality of the work, such as making an even more creative response to technological developments. So much is about to happen! According to Tal, one of the IM Master students, everyone will have their own 3D-printer in a few years. What does that mean for the ordinary consumer? If I throw a party tomorrow and want to design my own cutlery and tableware, I can do that. That means is that every



About a high degree of curiosity and an almost professional development of your intuition. You have to listen to this intuition, to feel it, and to follow it, but also to cultivate it. It's a big job for the next generation of designers: to improve yourself, to improve your mind. But above all, to see, to see consciously.'

According to Bakker, the history of Dutch design is not the only advantage. He also considers the recent economic recession to be a blessing. 'Starting out in the middle of a financial crisis is fantastic!', he shouts. 'Everything is upside down! Two years ago there was no end to the insane amounts of money being handed out for design. That has a paralyzing effect on young people who have yet to start out in the design profession. But that has all been straightened out now. Things are now being looked at much more critically, and rightly so. This makes way for new creativity. Other, no less magnificent things are bound to happen.'

www.gijsbakker.com
www.chihapaura.com

The retrospective *Designers on Jewellery* can be seen in the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design (SFMC+D): twelve years of Chi ha paura...?, containing around eighty pieces by, among others, Ron Arad, Marc Newson and Gijs Bakker himself. Until May of this year.

Tom, Dick, and Harry cannot only design, but can actually make their own product. Furthermore, the synthetics used for these 3D-shapes will be recyclable. So my party-ware can be reused as a base material for something else.

'The consequence? Designers have to become even more inventive and think even more conceptually, because the context of our existence is changing. It's insane! Because if you forget that context, you become inflexible, you get sidetracked and then eventually it's all over. Future designers need to be aware of that. Dutch designers have an advantage: the Netherlands has made a name for itself in terms of design. In the past, I had to plead with manufacturers to get things done; now the door is wide open. Both domestic and foreign companies come here to shop for talent. This does mean that the next generation really has to know what's going on in the world. It's still all about flexibility and an open mind, just like in the sixties.

