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Viktor&Rolf
on the death of conceptualism

Ethnographic pursuit with Jasper Morrison. Copying in an age of mass production.
Eileen Gray in conversation. The frontier lands of food design. Fashion and feminism.
Thomas Tait's material dating. Operatic illustration with Klaus Haapaniemi.

Copying in the Age of Mass Production

For Disegno's first roundtable we invited a panel of design industry leaders to debate both the problems and creative potential of copying.

INTRODUCTION Deyan Sudjic
PORTRAITS Roman Beck

Roundtable hosted by ECAL with Alexis Georgacopoulos, director, ECAL; Eckart Maise, chief design officer, Vitra; Jonathan Olivares, designer, JODR; and Johannes Torpe, creative director, Bang & Olufsen.

The idea of the copy and of copying has fascinated us since at least the dawn of mass production. It touches on our most fundamental attitudes toward not just design, but how we see and understand the world around us.

It was in John Ruskin's mind when he wrote The Stones of Venice (1851-53) and concluded that there was hope in honest error, but in the icy perfection of the mere stylist, none (as his words were later paraphrased). Walter Benjamin in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936) explored the aura of a work of art that allows us to understand it as an original. Our attitude to the idea of the copy can be seen as both cultural and pragmatic. The original has life while the copy is lifeless, even sinister or parasitical; as witness popular culture's obsession with the clone. The copy undermines the economic value of the original.

We have been programmed to understand the idea of copying in negative terms, to see originality as a quality in its own right. Perhaps in some ways we see "copy" as a word that is even more negative than "fake". We are overfamiliar with the idea, attributed to Picasso, that "bad artists copy, great artists steal", but why should we privilege the idea of originality? As Mies van der Rohe had it, he would rather be good than interesting.

Mass production changed our relationship with the object. It cut the direct link between user and maker and introduced the role of designer. The economic model of production was transformed. Instead of a relatively low investment in tools but relatively high unit cost for objects made in small quantities, factories demanded high tooling costs but delivered low-cost objects of quality in huge numbers.

Which is the real Le Corbusier chaise longue, the one that Charlotte Perriand used herself, or one manufactured under license by Cassina? Which is the real Grand Confort, one with foam cushions, or one that is not made under licence but has feather-filled cushions like the versions you see in the old photographs? How many holes does a real Hans Coray aluminium chair have?

These are long and in the end somewhat fetishistic arguments. They have value if they cause us to learn more about the ideas and intentions of designers, and the strongest argument for the idea of legal protection for designers and their heirs is that it allows innovation to be rewarded and continuing investment to be made in new innovations. In the wake of the digital explosion, everybody from journalists to musicians are struggling to find ways to support themselves as they lose control of the distribution and consumption of their creative ideas.

This is an important issue, but ultimately not as important as the questions about the idea of the original that Benjamin raised. Against the background of the astonishing digital transformation of the last half-century, it is time to explore it once more.

Deyan Sudjic is director of the Design Museum in London. He co-founded architecture and design magazine Blueprint in 1983 and was editor at Italian architecture publication Domus between 2000 and 2004.

Roundtable, Lausanne
13 February 2015, moderated
by Johanna Agerman Ross.

Eckart Maise, chief
design officer, Vitra.

Alexis Georgacopoulos,
director, ECAL.

Picture courtesy
of Herman Miller, Inc.

How do you define copying?

Eckart Maise Copying is a real issue in our industry and is linked to the definition of what an "original" is. If something is mass-produced or reproduced in quantity, like in the case of industrial design, then our understanding at Vitra is that each and every model made by an authorised manufacturer in agreement with the designer – or with whomever took over from the designer if they are no longer alive – and which has the quality and detail that the designer intended, is an original. There is no difference between an Eames lounge chair[1] from 1956 – let's say the first one they presented on NBC's Home show and said, "This is our brand-new design" – to the ones that left Vitra or Herman Miller's assembly lines today. These are all originals. Some people would only regard the very first Eames Lounge Chair that the designers touched with their own hands as the original and think that everything else is a copy. But that's not what authentic serial production is about.

Also, the discussion about copies is often limited to the physical qualities of objects, which is only one aspect of it. You can have a copy that's perfectly made or you can have a copy that's crap. In the end they're both copies, because it was never the Eameses' intention to produce Fibreglass chairs with somebody in China, for instance. They never spoke to that producer and the people who make them have no idea what the designer wanted. It can never be the same product in terms of the details, neither in its intention, nor its non-physical qualities.

Alexis Georgacopoulos Speaking from an educational perspective, we try to push students to define their own language and create original things. The main question we ask students when they've designed something is whether they're sure it hasn't been done before. If they use terms like "reference" or "inspired by", then those should really be words, more than something that you can actually find in the physical aspect of an object. But on the other hand I have had cases where students come to me a year after graduating and say, "Look, I've found this designer who just did something which looks a lot like what I did a year ago." We look into these instances as much as we can and see who designed what first, but it's not easy. You can't just go and say to someone, "What you've done was designed after ours." There are ways of proving that, but it's a hugely bureaucratic and painful process.

Jonathan Olivares It's a complex issue and one of the things that often goes missing from the conversation is this idea of creative theft, which can be a really positive thing. Film director Jim Jarmusch said something like, "If something really speaks to your heart then the theft is authentic" and this kind of transferred knowledge is something that can get forgotten and lost in a creative economy. But pre-industry and pre-industrial production, anonymity and reproduction were the standard. Some craftsmen didn't even sign their products and there was a natural building of a design over time. Innovation would have been looked down upon, because these craftsmen worked in baby steps. So maybe every third generation of craftsmen would find a new way, but these changes were so subtle that you could see the evolution took place very slowly. With industrial production you see things change more quickly. There

are new tools and so authorship becomes an important issue. But even within that you still have this trajectory of progress over time.

So we've worked with companies where you're dealing with intellectual property [IP] and there are certain things which will make the lawyers come and tell you, "You can't do that, because that's what this other company is doing." But there are only so many ways you can make something stand up off the ground. It's like someone having a patent on something having four legs – the level of patents that actually exists is not that different to that. In Silicon Valley you can see that IP really slows companies down, because they have to dance around each other's ridiculous claims. I've seen certain computer programmes get worse and worse over the years, and you can tell that it's because they're having to forfeit functions because of patents. It can be really counter-productive. That's a level of copying I find interesting, especially when it comes to the evolution of furniture. There, you can trace a design back through its history and each succession of progress becomes like a stepping stone. I don't know if things necessarily get better, but they do draw on each other and push things forward. That's the nice, positive aspect of what we call "copying".

Johannes Torpe You could look at that in terms of sampling and the music industry, where people take small existing parts and prisms and create something new from them. The music industry didn't understand the meaning of sampling at first, but it's so driven by money that people will take any chance to get a piece of the cake. James Brown, for

instance, made a lot of money out of being sampled. The industry found an economic model to support that. But if you think about design, wealthy people want the real thing because they can afford it, but the remaining 95 per cent just want something that looks like the real thing and that's good enough for them. The aim of the designer should be to make something with sufficient sophistication that you can't copy it, something with so much integrity and originality that if you copy it, it becomes offensive. Take many of Bang & Olufsen's products from the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, when things weren't as deeply industrialised as they are today. Those designers looked much more at doing something beautiful, functional and simple.

EM Unfortunately, however, it's not easy to do a design with that character of sophistication. If someone wants to copy a physical product, it's pretty easy. And it's fine with me if someone says, "I'm going to buy this chair because it's cheaper." But then buy another chair; don't buy a copy of a chair where a designer, engineer and company have poured their hearts into realising it. Too many people just look at the physical qualities of a product, whereas industrial design is a discipline that enters our culture and adds to it. If we want designers to be able to make a contribution to culture, to be expressions of it and to drive it forward (which they might do by sampling or by working within a typology someone else created), then we need to protect their intellectual property and educate people about what it means; where it comes from; what the intention was; and what the non-tangible aspects of the design are. If you have no idea about those aspects, >
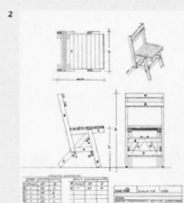
"It's not about replication, it's about the design industry taking the good parts of what's come before, readapting them and moving forward step-by-step."

Jonathan Olivares, designer, JODR.

> then of course you are tempted to go for a cheaper chair that looks the same. But if you're informed, then you know what the original can give you in terms of physical quality, but also in terms of emotional value and cultural value. That knowledge is very important. The discussion isn't about the physical product alone, it is about cultural values.

JT But there's a new reality that I don't think can be fought against. I do a lot of interior work for hotels in China and, as part of that, often design furniture pieces with a particular manufacturer. But if another manufacturer finds out, they will copy that and within a month my design will be everywhere. I could spend all my time fighting against that, or I could just design more furniture. And with the arrival of technologies like 3D printing, the problem is just going to grow. In 10 or 20 years we're going to have 3D printers that are so good you can print your own designer chairs.

EM But that does not necessarily mean printing a copy of an existing chair. Rather, we should work with designers to treat these new technologies as a different method of design, a different method of production, or a different method of distribution. There will be designers saying, "Here is my design, it is open for everyone to improve and change," which is an interesting idea, but it very much depends on the designer's intention. When a designer works on a chair for two or three years, it's not just those two or three years that have gone into it; it's also the 10 years of education they went through and the many years where they didn't make any money at all because they did not have anything in production. That has to be appreciated. If the designer still says, "This design is open," then that's a great model and there are a lot of opportunities with that. But if they say,

"No, I want to protect my intellectual property," we should respect that.

AG Open source isn't something new. If you think about Enzo Mari's Autoprogettazione[2] in the early 1970s, that was open-source in the sense that it encouraged people to take pieces of wood and make their own chairs, beds, cupboards and so on according to freely distributed blueprints. Open source has become one of the main issues in schools nowadays as everybody says, "OK, I want to make a 3D file that everybody can download." But that's a very romantic way of thinking about product design and in the end we still don't know how to work with that. We do, however, get a lot of examples where we tell students to look at a detail on a light or a chair and try to understand how it works in order to push the design forward. It's not about copying but about understanding how something is made and being able to add your own perspective to that. That's a form of learning by doing – seeing and understanding and being curious about how something is made. It reaches out to the master and apprentice relationship, which is very old. In ancient Greece or Rome you had a relationship where the pupil was doing the same thing as a master, but year after year adding their own details. But with our new, globalised world you lose all track of where something has come from. It becomes difficult to say, "OK, this originates from there and we can trace its development."

EM That's something that Jonathan has tried to do with his book A Taxonomy of Office Chairs, and which brings us back to the question of sampling that Johannes raised. If you take different headrests and armrests from office chairs, for example, then you can study their typology. You can take a good solution from an earlier armrest or headrest,

adapt it and still make the whole chair a very distinguished and distinct design of your own. In that sense it's not copying, it's sampling and a handing-over of knowledge. Transfer, continuation and evolution should not be prohibited by intellectual property laws, unless of course it is an innovative technical solution that is itself patented. But let's take the example of an office chair. If you took its base, its seat, its headrest, its armrest, its colour, and its detailing and logo, then that's a little too much sampling. That is not sampling anymore. That is copying.

JO With things like literature or art you can just call it plagiarism, because those disciplines are examples of pure artistic expression. But design deals with both artistic expression and function, and there's no going back in that field. Once man discovers electricity, there is no going back. And in furniture, once you've completely improved the organisation of an office, no one would go back to how it was before. The rest of the industry follows suit, and quickly too. So when we discuss copying in design we are often dealing with creative articulation and practical progress, and while these two are intertwined, our society and legal systems want to treat them very differently. And this contributes to the haziness of the issue.

If you look at the idea of an object and how the steps leading to a design are an evolutionary trail, one thing we realised in A Taxonomy of Office Chairs was that you have archetypes. So we tried to constrain ourselves to only finding the first instance (or getting as close as possible to the first instance) of a certain feature. Which is very difficult for office chairs, because things in that field get copied and copied. At one point we had a poster of copies of Ergon chairs.[3] We had 300 of them, and from 10 feet away they looked like 300 1976 Ergon chairs, but when you

took a step closer you realised these were 300 different Ergon chairs from 300 different producers. So we were really looking at the evolution of archetypes and in the vast majority of cases archetypes develop around the introduction of a new material. So you have the exact same design with wood; then with fibreglass; then it moves to cast aluminium; then eventually to nylon and so on and so forth. That somehow becomes a licence to adapt something and also provides a level of sincerity – you reinvigorate something that was done before – which is very different to what's happening in knock-off culture.

JT I'm interested in how an object is actually sampled or copied. You can see the process of copying in interior design as well, almost to the level of one-to-one replication. So the PuLi Hotel in Shanghai is a beautiful hotel done by an interior designer called Johannes Hartfuss, but there is another hotel in a small town a little way outside Beijing that is an exact copy of it. This hotel took the PuLi's lobby, its rooms, furniture – everything – and copied them. It's not been done in a precise way, but you can see that they simply copied the PuLi. And there's nothing you can do about that. But you could also look at 2001: A Space Odyssey,[4] where the ending scene has a room with a big, illuminated floor and very rococo furniture. It's a beautiful scene and if you have been to the bar in Philippe Starck's Hudson Hotel[5] in New York, you can see that Philippe sampled it. I'm sure he would never say that, but the spatial design of that movie has inspired so many people, myself included. That a film's design can inspire people is amazing, but how much can you sample or copy from something like that? It seems like less of an intellectual property question.

JO This issue of China and knock-offs comes up a lot and I have a real curiosity about what >

Johannes Torpe, creative
director, Bang & Olufsen.

Picture courtesy
of Muuto.

> will emerge from China's culture in terms of a strong design identity. I have to say that in furniture I have yet to see one, although maybe that's because my criteria are so steeped in my own culture. But the other day I was coming out of a meeting in Los Angeles and I saw a chair sat out in a courtyard. It looked like the fifth generation of offspring from a Chair One and a Vegetal chair, but I was curious about it because it had a real simplicity. I went over and it was cast aluminium and had some nice details, so I flipped it upside-down and there was a Chinese marker that I couldn't read. I sat down on it and was there for a good few minutes inspecting this thing. And somehow I left with the impression that this was a really solid chair. It somehow did everything you wanted it to do and it gave me a real feeling of this notion of apprenticeship; that strong design could be produced through a kind of attentive and decisive studying of existing forms. And again, this is how most design was made prior to the industrial revolution; craftsmen looked, studied and learned, and then essentially made very good remakes of whatever it was they had studied.

EM But what you describe sounds like a design, not a copy. Obviously there was an evolution that took place. Maybe it was like a hand-me-down copy; or maybe it was improved; or maybe there was sampling that turned into something new and specific. But there clearly was a design performance in it.

AG One thing that we say to students is that if you design something, show it. Develop an awareness around your design, because in a very abstract way that protects it and marks it: you did it first. Contemporary design today is produced at a crazy pace, with all these companies producing so many things. French,

Scandinavian, American – you don't know who has done what first, in the end. But students work on great projects and so they need to show them. Some of them say, "I'm in my second year and I've made this, but I'm afraid that someone will copy it if I show it." At that point in your education that's not the problem. You want someone to see it, get interested in your work and offer you a job. At a young age designers shouldn't be obsessed by getting copied. They should be more concerned with showing what their work is about in the best possible way.

JT That's a problem for everyone. Look at all the new manufacturers in Scandinavia, the New Nordics[6] as we call them. They all do such similar things now that if you took away the logos from their trade-show booths you wouldn't be able to see the difference – all pastel colours and a new chair and sofa and so on. I'm not trying to be offensive to these guys because I respect them for their business sense, but all their design has become similar and that's a problem for originality. Which makes me think about Arne Jacobsen, who really designed inside and out. If he did a building, he would also design a lamp and a glass and a stool for it. It was a way of doing something all-inclusive and it let him dominate manufacturers, because he could suggest product ranges through his projects. So in many ways his way of thinking became a way to effectively creatively direct a company. But now it's the other way around. A manufacturer finds out what sells and then makes lots of products along those lines. So a manufacturer says to a young designer. "OK, you have to do something like this. We buy products like this," and all these young designers are putting their lives into it, because they know what it means to have a chair in production. But I would like that

to change. We can't rely on letting manufacturers like the New Nordics spit out more and more plastic furniture, because that then takes control of the designs, and the designers just become tools for the movement. Designers need to take control of their work again.

JO There's a very dangerous situation happening where you have so many producers working with so many different designers that it all turns into a bit of a roadshow. As a designer you want to establish an area that you feel competent in, but which isn't so narrowly focused that you can't move comfortably between things. There's a tendency to really overspecialise, which is a problem that reminds me of those stories about birds that hung out for too long in the Galapagos, and suddenly a predator came along and they couldn't fly anymore to escape. As a designer you want to maintain a level of adaptability and feel comfortable in different contexts. You also want to learn about what already exists, so that copying can become authentic – in the Jarmuschian sense – and lead you to something original. And that's a really exciting and wonderful process to go through. So for the factory owners out there in the "Apple-C Apple-V" mode of copying, I would love to see them adopt a much more spirited form of emulation that results in things like the chair I saw outside the building in Los Angeles. All that took was for someone to bring themselves into the process.

EM If you take designs that have made a mark in history and use them to orientate yourself or study them to understand how they were made, then you're bringing yourself into the process. If you make an effort, then you make a contribution and that's something that design has always had. If you have the intention of adding something, then I wouldn't use the word "copying" anymore, I would use the word "reference". If you study something, or improve it, or use it as a base, then you

need to find another word, because copying has the intention of not doing that. Copying is about fraud; about taking the easy way and letting somebody else do all the work, so you can just get quick success for yourself and have an easy business. If you take something as a reference and make your own design from that, then maybe the result will be great, or maybe it will be a step backwards instead of forwards. But then I wouldn't call it copying.

AG It's about learning and looking at things, and understanding why something is considered a good chair and something else a bad chair. If you look at the history of copycats, you find that only things considered good are copied. People don't usually copy bad designs. But as things are referenced and pushed forward, it's good to have in mind that while you can be inspired by a chair from the 1950s, we're 60 years further on. It's about how you reinterpret that design with today's technologies, today's manufacturing processes, today's materials. It's not about replication, it's about the design industry taking the good parts of what's come before, readapting them and remaining relevant.

JO That reminds me of an amazing story that the artist Tom Sachs told me about one of his early artworks. He used to go to MoMA and spent a lot of time with a Mondrian painting there because he loved it so much. He was so into it, but of course he couldn't afford to buy it. So he went home and made a replica with duct tape.[7] He made it for himself and I'm sure it was a completely authentic reproduction. And I think that's fantastic. If you really love something go ahead and make it, but do it in your own way. ●
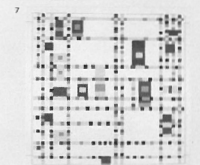
READING LIST

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