

Super flex: “Basically it’s a question of what art is capable of doing.”; Anna Rogers’ middle place of art and design as socio-economic activism.<sup>1</sup>

Donald Judd was often asked if furniture was art. Allegedly. However, whether the continual questioning was a fictitious addition to add colour to his politically loaded essay, *It’s hard to find a good lamp*, (1993) his response remains poignant.

*“The furniture, is furniture and only is art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles and many things are art. We try to keep the furniture out of galleries to avoid this confusion.”*<sup>2</sup>

The confusion around art and design remains. The problem is value. How value is assigned to art versus design, and the need of each economic system to preserve its own method of allocating value.

Anna Rogers’ creation of things; grids crafted out of paper to create coloured, erect hoops or painted on cotton in saccharine palette of orange and mauve, occupies a space between design and art, as art as design or design-art. As such, her work occupies a middle-place. She once told me a fellow classmate described her work as ‘namby-pamby.’. Elaborating that the works on paper she had arranged in the interior of a large cube, which could only be viewed by placing your head through a hole in the bottom, were “just drawings.”<sup>3</sup> Despite a lack of self-reflection over why these words emerged when discussing Rogers’ work, what the peer articulated was an observation of the subtlety, a muddling that can cause discomfort. In part, this is because she presents design as art, utilises design tactics to create art or displays her work using the principles of design. For example, she takes domestic items and craft as her material; tiles, fabric and thread. Through being interested in displaying “just drawings”, she is exploring the power and context of display.

As Judd explained in his lamentation for a good lamp was the concept of design art as a politically and socially loaded subject. Through merging art and design, Rogers is employing an historic language of structural exploration forged throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century and exploring the issues which Judd raises. When the Art and Craft’s movement applied the timely notion of the Aesthetic to the interior and domestic, they viewed the action as an extension of their socialist views, that has been traced by Joe Scanlan and others, as a predecessor to the work of “Weiner Werkstatt and the Bauhaus to Gustav Stickley and Charles and Ray Eames.”<sup>4</sup> Like these individuals, collaborations and movements, Rogers’ interest in creating ‘design art’ is due to a concern with value. In her studio, pinned to the wall, is the question ‘What is value?’, underneath which is written a list of answers and pondering. “Asset, Taste, aspiration, pop culture, community.”, are scrawled neatly as a reminder of her focuses within in the studio. This knowledge is essential for understanding Rogers’ work as her hatred of plinths and love of tiles are not mutually exclusive characteristics, but an articulation of her interest in ‘value.’; The relationship of value to her and her works position within socio-economic structures. She deliberately muddies and traverses these structures in a protest to her own locality and inability to escape said locality, exploring her

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Coupland, ‘Mad Scientist’, ArtForum, (New York, October 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Donald Judd, ‘It’s hard to find a good lamp’, Donald Judd Furniture Retrospective (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen/Munich: Villa Stuck, 1993), 7-21

<sup>3</sup> Audio from Wales in Venice, Recorded July 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Scanlan (with Neil Jackson), ‘Please, Eat the Daisies’, Art Issues, (Los Angeles, January/ February 2001) 26-29.

gendered, classed and educational position. One of her main methods of achieving this is her utilisation of design objects and methods to create work, positioning her aesthetic at the cusp of design's existence in a world of buying and selling.", and Art's immaterial-all-material materiality.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Rogers' hates what the plinth represents. She hates the idea that the choice to elevate her work from the language of domesticity and the interior, to that of the white cube, elevates, its value, raises its importance and worth. She would rather it sit on the floor, perch on the top of the wall and wait, for an audience to allocate its value by discovering it and assigning it their attention. Its fibres, its colour that edges slowly forward, to a song and a dance and a yell. In this sense, her curation is democratic; an empowerment of the audience to engage with a freedom, explore as they would in a home, public space, ultimately, a space they would feel agency or control over, which is very rarely a gallery.

This also draws parallels to the Art and Craft movements, the Art deco's prioritisation of every element in a room as of equal importance. In the Hall of Narcissus at Leighton House, a key example of the Art and Craft movement created by George Frederic Leighton, a mass of blue tiles "the full deep chord..... of sea-blue" synesthetically submerges the viewer, transforming the utilitarian and formal experience of a nineteenth century hall way into an intense, emotive expression.<sup>6</sup> Rogers' functions in a comparable manner by drawing details from every day environments, which she magnifies into artistic language; the base of a cup, the texture of embroidery or the repetitive pattern of tiling. As such, she has a similar occupation with the studio, the decorative arts, design and its social and political nature as the Arts and Craft's movement. She operates within a similar method of taking the utilitarian object or method, such as the tile, which value is predominantly assigned by its function and preservation and allocating it a feeling of intense emotion. This reflects methodologies and the environmental awareness of emotion and space that defines contemporary interior design shifts, in which, the original 'design purpose' of the object becomes deprioritised, invest in the object a nostalgia.

Equally, the materials Rogers uses connote a twentieth century history of artists rebelling against various societal structures. Throughout our dialogues, she often returns to "expandable foam.". This material is significant in our understanding of her practice as historically the squidgy-squelch of materials has been utilised by artists, like Oldenburg's furniture or John Chamberlain in his raw foam structures created out of expandable foam chairs to usurp the rigidity of the gallery space. Oldenburg created foam chairs, that illustrate the "bodies permeability to other bodies.". <sup>7</sup> By playing with the boundary of body and environment and confusing the hierarchical structure of man sitting on the couch, by creating an active response from the sofa. The active, response and unconventionality of materials is key to Rogers' work because she places emphasis on the audience's agency.

As such, arguably in material and display, Roger's work is art-design "In it's most successful and radical forms", because it "pits one human impulse (consumption) against another (preservation) by incorporating utility in the art object that threatens it's well being.". <sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the work of Anna Rogers' aims to follow in the tradition of rule-breakers, politicians and anarchists by questioning 'what art is capable of doing.'. <sup>9</sup> When she invited me to take part in an

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Rand 'Politics of Design' Graphis Annual, 1981 (Zurich: Graphis Press: 1981) 233-5.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Haweis, Beautiful Houses, (Lowe, Marston, Searle and Rivington 1882), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Graham, 'Art as Design/Design as Art', Museum Journal, no.3-4 (Otterloo, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Joe Scanlan (with Neil Jackson), 'Please, Eat the Daisies'.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Coupland, 'Mad Scientist', ArtForum.

experimental work documenting our communication, she singled out a phrase I whats-apped as the titular quote. “I don’t want a boyfriend, I just want to book bind.”, was significant, as our conversation marked out two social spheres; the professional and the personal as a connected interface, which we regularly negotiate between.<sup>10</sup> The work exists between the public and the private, like our position as artists, complicating our own ability to establish control and illustrating a vaster conversation on the mass data surrounding the individual, which is cultivated and controlled in vast inaccessible systems. This re-iterates the artist’s interest in documenting and destabilising structural systems. As a result, her choice to integrate design throughout, into and with her art can be read as an act of agency, control and power.

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Rogers, Emily Hartless, ‘I don’t want a boyfriend, I just want to bookbind.’, (2018).