BEYOND WITTINESS

Design steps out from the exclusive and the conservative.

"In recent years the (so-called progressive and for-ward-thinking) cultural design vanguard has shown its most conservative side. Furniture made of scrap wood, hand-spun blankets, forgotten vegetables on a menu board written in chalk. The crisis is ongoing and designers are taking us back to grandmother's time when everything was, after all, so much better. Far from the angry world of change."

This is how researcher, philosopher, and artist Koert van Mensvoort provocatively criticises designers for shying away from technology in his essay *Innova-tive Nostalgia – Designing the Future Referring to the Past*, published in the Dutch Design Yearbook 2013.

That may, at least to some extent, be true. However, the phenomenon cannot be seen at the Rotterdam Design Prize 2013 nominations: technology is an integral part in more than half of the nominated projects.

To this background the permanent design collec-tion of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, the host institution of the Rotterdam Design Prize 2013 exhibition, makes an interesting point of reference to the nominees of the design prize. The designs within the current permanent exhibition of con-temporary design are witty and humorous, in a way that is familiar to Dutch design. They are also very object oriented and analogue, which naturally may be due to the chronological nature of a museum collection. What is missing in the exhibition of the permanent design collection is the presence of technology in design beyond basic electricity used in a lighting fixture or a turntable.

Also absent in the permanent collection are pro-jects and ideas beyond the level of clever, design-er-oriented objects. A question rises: do these actually improve the environment or the experience of the user in comparison to the so-called more traditional, maybe even more practical, and more engineered objects around us?

The difference between the exhibition of perma-nent design collection and the Rotterdam Design Prize 2013 nominated designs is striking. As said, half of the nominated projects are tightly tied to the very latest technological developments. Also, the nominated projects are not only objects on display, but the absolute majority of them – from Temstem, an application to improve life of people suffering from hearing voices to PAL-V, a flying car that can contribute to delivering mail, food or medical resources to remote corners of the society, to Fairphone, which attempts to make the unethical production process of mobile phones ethical and transparent – are visionary projects and services that aim to improve the society or human life in one way or another.

The gap between the traditional idea of hedonistic, exclusive design and the nominations of the Rotter-dam Design Prize 2013 is vast as an ocean. So is the gap between the nominated projects and Van Mensvoort's critique about the conservativeness of current design.

A marriage between design and technology still sometimes appears gadgety and gimmicky. It can be an added layer of fun that wears out as the novelty fades or the technology becomes outdated or breaks down, causing the design to turn into one more electrical gadget in a mountain of e-waste. But at best, when combined with societal aims, the union of design and technology becomes the next level of the practice. Based on the nominated de-signs of the Rotterdam Design Prize 2013, Dutch design is about to reach that level.

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