

Alex de Vries

Art and design as communicating vessels - With Babs Haenen at The Frozen Fountain

Interview December 6, 2022

In part XII of The Encounter, Alex de Vries goes to The Frozen Fountain with Babs Haenen to talk to Cok de Rooy, who founded the shop at Prinsengracht 645 with Dick Dankers (1950-2018), about how art and design relate to each other as communicating vessels. 'Design and applied art are still two departments at the Stedelijk Museum,' he said.

Amsterdam's design shop The Frozen Fountain has been around for 30 years and has been the figurehead for integrally presenting art and design all that time. Designers asserted themselves as artists and artists revealed themselves as exceptional designers. One of the most important representatives of the confluence of free design and fine art is the ceramist Babs Haenen (Amsterdam, 1948). With her, I visit The Frozen Fountain to talk to Cok de Rooy (Boskoop, 1943), who founded the shop at Prinsengracht 645 with Dick Dankers (1950-2018), about how art and design relate to each other like communicating vessels.



Babs Haenen - Frosty Dawn, 2022.. turbulent vessel, photo Luuk Kramer

In the practice of the visual arts and design disciplines, numerous terminologies are used to distinguish hierarchically between different professional practices. Art, free design , project, design, handicraft, 'craft', 'skill', technology, media, sculpture, object, set, style, stylisation, styling, form and function are deployed on the one hand as delineated definitions, and on the other as loose designations to indicate the nature of the work of artists and designers.

Within The Frozen Fountain, all these aspects of art subjects are equally and coherently represented, but at the same time a qualitative distinction is instinctively made between art and skillfully made consumer goods.

Cok de Rooy: 'Even a well-made table can be artistic and what you call it is up to you, as far as I'm concerned, but you have to enter into a dialogue with it. What are you imagining?' is how I sometimes find myself talking to my Rietveld crate table. I was once on a jury that had to assess industrial design and we were looking at everything from our different areas of expertise, but suddenly we all held our breath and said, 'No, this is art, **that is outside the scope of this assignment**'. It's something you feel in your gut, and you see it right away. We immediately agreed on that. It turned out to be a proposal by Folkert de Jong. Look, when we started in 1992, *design graduates* still wanted to present themselves in galleries, but they wanted to make it clear that design was a 'skill', an ability. That's why we wanted to be called a shop. The design status of things is always an unclear factor. My view of art is that it is always a secret revealed to you.'



Babs Haenen - Bending the Walls, Pleasures and places, 2018, photo Luuk Kramer



Babs Haenen - 'Pubu' tile, 2014, made in China, 'Wad' tile, 1998, Ymere Cooperation



Babs Haenen - Design Collection 'Flow', 2012-2017, photo Satijn Panyigay

Babs Haenen who, as a ceramist, creates sculptures, 'turbulent vessels', design products as well as architectural designs, has developed a completely integrated practice over the past 50 years. Her vases took on landscape characteristics and became art-historical commentaries, her tiles became architectural building blocks, her tableware took on the nature of still lifes. Her design status has therefore become that of an artist.

Babs Haenen: "I did try to bring something new from my own work within that hierarchical terminology on art and design. At the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, I tried to introduce the concept of 'domestic art' with students, unfortunately without success. My work has a relationship with the interior."



The Frozen Fountain, Overview of the vases created in honor of the thirtieth anniversary.

The versatility and diversity of the engagement with the concepts becomes clear when we look at the 55 vases created to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of The Frozen Fountain. They are all statements by designers who have been significant for Dutch design over the past 30 years. If I were a museum curator or director, I would know it. I would buy up that entire collection as a high-quality summary of the quality of Dutch design at the turn of the century. Almost everyone who

matters is represented in this surprising, at once nimble and serious presentation of the ideas and skills of today's most important Dutch designers, from the master of graphic design Karel Martens to the 'glass beast' Bernard Heesen as Cok de Rooy calls him. And from the great lady of industrial design Hella Jongerius to the all-round designer Piet Hein Eek: all have blessedly responded to the request of Cok de Rooy, who has given their pioneering work a prominent place in his shop over the past 30 years. Those works were always shown in relation to each other and in combination with artworks that gave the context of Dutch design a wider appreciation, including internationally. One of the funniest entries is by Maarten Baas, who didn't submit a vase but instead delivered a handwritten punishment note with the repeatedly written sentence: 'Next time, I will start on my vase for Frozen Fountain on time.'



The Frozen Fountain, Joris Laarman, printed moss and sand.



The Frozen Fountain, Masha Volkova & Antoine Dauvergne, lime wood from Amsterdam tree.



The Frozen Fountain, Moon Seop Seo

Babs Haenen: “For as long as The Frozen Fountain has existed, it has been a design benchmark for me. As a born and bred **Amsterdammer**, I came there to see what was being made visible in my own city. Here you could see the work of Tejo Remi, Studio Job and Joris Laarman, Ineke Hans, Wieki Somers, and finally everyone who is significant in that field. I celebrated my seventieth birthday there with the presentation of my design collection ‘Flow’, featuring a sculpture and

tile designs. The day ended so tragically when, deep in the night, we received the news that Dick Dankers had drowned in Brazil where he was visiting his daughter.

The Frozen Fountain is a great ambassador for design, including ceramic designs. It was important for me to present my 'Flow' collection in the Netherlands there and to showcase two unique pieces in the current exhibition.”

Cok de Rooy: “The internationalisation is a development that I have seen develop slowly. The quality of Dutch design has developed in such a way that the Netherlands has become too small an area for that. The real successes are achieved abroad. There has been a growing interest in our shop from other countries, from Japanese collectors for example. The most recent development is that we are being asked to do the styling of interiors. We were not into that at the time, ‘styling’ was a term we were not associated with, we were in a different segment of quality design. Now it is one of our most important activities.

Including myself as owner, The Frozen Fountain is currently run by five employees, but we are nudging for an interior designer to complete the team. Alouette Beekman is the managing director, Stijn Mulder is in charge of art, Lisa Westenburg is in charge of procurement and Christian Pietersen is our multimedia design collaborator.”



The Frozen Fountain, Nienke Sikkema

Although The Frozen Fountain's ambition has always been concentrated on designers, Cok de Rooy and Dick Dankers have also displayed work by autonomous artists in their shop. In the current anniversary presentation, alongside the work of 3D designers, several walls are filled with 2D work by a variety of artists and designers, collectively showcasing how the integration of art and design can create a specific identity. This is purely focused on talent and quality. Cok de Rooy: "Recognising talent is always a quiet moment. It has to do

with someone making something that is a translation of the times, making it stand out and relevant to us. The same goes for the artists we show. I also have a large circle of friends and acquaintances in the art world through my wife, Yvonne Kroese. When I talk to a good friend of mine, a purebred artist, about his work in public spaces, about solutions in terms of installing them, he sometimes doesn't know where to start. 'I'm not a designer,' he says. Another artist we work with is Gijs Frieling. He has painted a vase on the back wall for the presentation of the anniversary vases. His paintings in interiors and on cabinets mix autonomous art and applied interventions. His collaboration with typographic artist Job Wouters gives his paintings a recognisable look. They bridge the applied art form of lettering and drawing and painting within interior design."

Babs Haenen joins Cok de Rooy in appreciating the work of Frieling and Wouters: "You can see that they are true makers and doers and that they master their craft. This has always been a requirement in my discipline to function at a high level. Through my advisory work for the former Premisela Foundation and my contacts with pioneers like Marjan Unger and curators like Marjan Boot and Ingeborg de Roode, I have always advocated strongly for the museum position of applied arts, as it was once called. Design and applied arts are still two separate departments in the Stedelijk Museum. Ingeborg de Roode is responsible for design and Amanda Pinatih for applied arts. Today, they are an integral part of the exhibition policy of the larger contemporary art museums. Schools like Bauhaus were the advocates of that.'



The Frozen Fountain, Pepijn Fabius Clovis, painted wood.



The Frozen Fountain, Piet Hein Eek

Cok de Rooy nuances that museum interaction between art and design: “Art is still distinct. We impulsively say, ‘That is art.’ If you turn the question around to ‘What is art?’, you end up in a jumble of answers, because we can never define it precisely.”

Babs Haenen: “At Art Basel in 2015, I saw an orange bowl by conceptual artist Rosemarie Trockel and the work of Sheila Hicks which was also exhibited at Design Basel. You see the boundaries fading.”

Cok de Rooy: “We don’t question where the boundaries lie. We accept it as it is. It doesn’t interest us. Independent people create something autonomous over which they have no control. It just happens, and you can translate its meaning for yourself. For us, the concept of ‘beautiful’ didn’t matter, it was about whether it was ‘good’. A designer wouldn’t design a ‘beautiful’ table. They made a table to see what a table was or could be. That conceptual approach was leading.”

Regarding the handling of interior design and the work of designers, Cok de Rooy sees a shift in the Netherlands. “The average Dutch person had no international interest in the fifties. They didn’t even eat French cheeses. In terms of home decor, we were much more modest than the surrounding countries. I think that’s

commendable. The biggest purchase for a Dutch person was a 'bedroom suite'; even the term is deadly. Then 'Goed Wonen' came along to tell us what was beautiful and ugly. That's why successful Dutch designers have always earned 95% of their revenue abroad. Now I see young expats coming into the store, young people with racing bikes in the hallway, buying cabinets for twenty thousand euros. They buy pieces that are not overly expensive, but it's still a lot of money. In our early days, we played a star role in bringing attention to interior design. We worked with a theater group like Alex d'Electrique, who created a spectacular painting machine with Henk Stallinga. Everyone flocked to it, but almost no one bought anything."

Babs Haenen: "I have always adopted that experimental approach to art and design myself. Before I went to the Rietveld Academy at the age of twenty-seven, I practiced dance expression. I just returned from New York, where I have an exhibition at the specialized Hostler Burrows gallery. There, completely different rules apply. It's mainly about placing my work in a relevant environment."

Overall, Babs Haenen and Cok de Rooy see a development where artists and designers, both independently and collaboratively, infuse life with qualitative energy, while simultaneously being questioned about their conceptual abilities and the concrete execution of those ideas.



The Frozen Fountain, Painting by Gijs Frieling, Vase Atelier Fig.