

Aldo Bakker: Rethinking Form

by Ernst van Alphen

In the course of the twentieth century two dogma's have become prevalent in the world of design: "Form follows function", and "you get what you see", meaning that an object immediately discloses how it was made and for what it can or should be used. The first dogma concerns the maker or designer of objects, the second one the viewer or user of them. The objects of Aldo Bakker violate these rules insistently. He always starts with a specific form that fascinates him. Through sketching and modelling he tries to understand and develop the form. Having understood the logic that defines that specific form, he begins to reflect on the possible meanings of that form. And very important in this respect is that function should not be conflated with meaning; function is only one meaning among other possible meanings.

The signification of form happens in the interaction between designed object and its user. With his objects Bakker stages scenes in which the user is engaged "in a seemingly ordinary act with possibilities and sensations that you rarely experience in everyday life". This engagement with form makes the user experience space, flow, time, and resistance. This affective awareness can also result in the discovery of its function, but not necessarily so. As design curator Jan Boelen observed: "For Aldo Bakker to function also implies making the user aware of the beauty, to astonish him or her. To sit, to lick, to function, to engage with a wide range of primal sensory experiences". As a result, the user gets much more than what s/he sees.

In Bakker's universe fascinating forms are never complex. But their lack of complexity does not mean that his forms are simple. These qualities are not opposed in the designs of Bakker. Take the pouring vessel *Alinetob* from 2014. This form is not complex in the sense that it is not composed; it consists of one fluent line. But as line it is not at all simple or basic. As form it is highly unexpected because completely different from forms we know. We know this kind of form perhaps as part of handwriting, but not as design object. It is unrecognizable, new, and original in the sense of without origins.

Bakker's designs have been compared to the sculptures of Brancusi and the paintings of Cézanne, because the work of these artists can be understood as searches for "primal form". This primal form is supposed to be natural and these artistic practices are then searches for lost origins. But in the case of Bakker's designs, there is no underlying form or system that generates his works as their origin. He is fascinated by specific forms, not by underlying, primal forms or systems. From this perspective his designs can be better understood in terms of what Donald Judd has called "specific objects". In his programmatic text "Specific Objects" he describes the shaped paintings of Frank Stella as follows, a description that also applies to his own specific objects: "The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another" (Judd 141). The relation between a specific object and 'real space' is of great importance to Judd, with the latter being modified by the former. Real space is not the context of the specific object; real space is shaped by the form of a specific object. This means that space is the medium of the specific object: the specific object's silhouette outlines space as volume.

Although Judd proposed the term 'specific object' in the 1960s as an assessment of minimalist painting and sculpture, it also provides a productive understanding of Bakker's design practice. At first sight this comparison between Judd and Bakker makes little sense because as a designer Bakker works by definition in and with 'real space'; painters and sculptors, in contrast, come from traditions in which space is not considered to be real, but illusionistic. But the fact that designers work in and with 'real space' does not mean that their objects make users aware of the dimensions in which design objects are handled: space and time. The wide range of sensory experiences evoked by Bakker's objects makes them exist in the dimension of 'real space' and 'real time'. This defines them as specific objects.

The objects Bakker designs can be categorized as sculpture, furniture, that is, benches, stools, tables, and pouring vessels. For the last category Bakker uses the neologism 'schenkers'. The Dutch verb 'schenken' is an ambiguous word, meaning to pour, but also to give. The noun 'schenker', however, only refers to a person who gives, not to a vessel that pours. But pouring is giving. That suggests that Bakker's neologism 'schenker' does not refer to the vessels that pour water, oil, vinegar, or salt, but to the forms that he gives to the world.