

Exclusivity for all

Bråkig collection by ArtRebels and Ikea

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Introduction

The following article addresses the issue of how and why the collaboration between the Danish design group ArtRebels and Ikea can be criticised.

Which message do we receive when a self-labelled “rebellious” group of young designers decides to collaborate with a giant of the marketplace? And not only a giant of the market but one that, despite the fame of commercialising democratic design in line with the Scandinavian values, notoriously exhibits an aggressive attitude toward the minor actors of the design sector, has frequently been the object of controversial disputes over plagiarism, and is accused of breaking environmental and ethical regulations (Bertilsson, 2014, pp.127-129)?

Should this decision by ArtRebels be considered a sign of abandonment of the idealistic attitude or evaluated positively as a new pragmatic course of the emergent Danish design?

As it is possible to identify a continuity between some of the above mentioned controversies and the Bråkig collection realised by ArtRebels, these aspects will also be discussed, particularly in relation to the ArtRebels' self-proclaimed firm intention to not compromise integrity in favour of business: in this respect the result of the collaboration appears even more mediocre. This discussion gives rise to the question whether it is nowadays realistic to envision a social role for the design when the surrounding society constantly faces difficulty in agreeing upon basic values. The answer is probably predictable but this suggests that the problem should be approached from a more critical

angle. Thus the more impelling question to address is not to which extent the new Bråkgig collection can be considered in line with Ikea's democratic character, but rather what democratic means and whether the time has now arrived to find a new label for low quality design practices. In this respect, Paola Antonelli, curator of architecture and design department at MoMa, in the documentary movie *Objectified* (Hustwit, 2011), points out that the expression "democratic design" should these days be considered inappropriate.

The Bråkgig collection - democratic exclusivity

The recent collaboration between the world's largest furniture retailer, namely Ikea of Sweden and a Copenhagen-based group of young Danish creative individuals, ArtRebels, has resulted in the development of Bråkgig (rebellious), a new limited edition product line to be distributed exclusively by a selected number of European stores, starting from February 2014.

Until recently, Ikea has gained its competitive advantage by implementing a clear and successful marketing strategy that combines cost leadership with differentiation, which has the indisputable merit to make modern design (or at least the cheap version of it) accessible to the lower and middle consumer segments. Thus Ikea's mission, inspired by the socially oriented vision of the Bauhaus, has been and still is, to spread the creed of "democratic design", as Marcus Engman, the design Manager at Ikea of Sweden, emphasises in a video that was released only last year (Ikea, 2013). In fact, on the company's website, we read that Ikea "brings good design to the many people by combining a just-right mix of form, function, quality and sustainability at an affordable price." ("Democratic design," 2013).

It is likely that such a strategy is now challenged by the globalised economy and by the extreme standardisation of the product lines. While this feature has been a major strength in the past, it might alienate customer segments that are more sensitive to (at least perceived) high design quality with a more exclusive touch and a less standardised/industrialised feel. This forces Ikea to focus its strategic efforts beyond the rhetoric of democratic design, and to react to the evolution of consumer preferences, similarly to other leading retailers, such as H&M, which in the last ten years has been collaborating with guest-designers on limited editions.

Another paradigmatic example of the strategies employed by major retailers is represented by Target, the American big box retailer and is well described by Christine Harold, professor in rhetorical criticism: “In order to adapt to change in consumption and pushing the boundaries and sensibilities of consumer sentiment”(2009), she argues that Target experiments with celebration of design by collaborating with guest-designers to be promoted through temporary pop-up stores, “cleverly lending an air of exclusivity to mass-produced fare.” (Harold, 2009). Thus Ikea's collaboration with ArtRebels is aligned to the trajectory traced by other retailers and following their example, the company has started to promote the concept of democratic exclusivity. “Buy them now... or never! Go in store or online now to pick up your own limited-edition pieces. Once they're gone, they're gone!” (“East meets West: Trendig,” 2013). With these words Ikea emphasised the exclusiveness of another recent limited edition, the Trendig collection that was launched at the end of 2013 and alluded to cross-cultural contamination between the Chinese craft traditions and the Scandinavian design, embracing the issue of roots and identity.

The strategy of *democratic exclusivity* borrows some tools from the luxury brands, such as artificial scarcity and shortage, which increase the perception of the exclusiveness of the product, and function as a leverage for the consumer demand, “by offering a very small number of items, making them available only for a reduced amount of time or just in special locations”, as explained by Lucie Scholz in her book, *Brand Management and Marketing of Luxury Goods* (2013, p.58). She clarifies the mechanism as follows:

As scarce goods are usually considered of higher value and are often very popular among customers, artificial scarcity leads to increasing demand, scarcity fuels desire, the grater inaccessibility the greater the desire (Sholz, 2013, p.58).

I argue that Ikea, with the launch of the Bråkgig collection, produced in limited editions and only sold within the European market and by enriching the products with that flair of uniqueness and references to the Scandinavian design identity, is clearly applying the aforementioned strategy of democratic exclusivity. In this way Ikea is attempting to target the local market segments that could divert their buying choices towards other brands, as a reaction to what is perceived as an excess of standardisation.

Considering for example Ikea's recent expansion in India, it is not unrealistic to envision a similar attempt by Ikea to gain the favour of the Indian young, metropolitan and rising middle-class segment, by establishing collaborations with some popular Bollywood designers, such as Manish Arora, as such strategies in general could help the new markets to familiarise with Ikea products.

Furthermore the limited edition strategy, being mostly a communication strategy, allows Ikea to capture the attention of various lifestyle magazines, which in return provide free advertising and brand promotion.

In fact, the international press, like for example Elle Decor Italy (Modigliani, 2014), has welcomed the retro-styled collection, for its pastel colours, the references to the Scandinavian tradition, through the use of natural wood and a wink to the classics of functionalist design, and for the decorative motifs recalling the '50s, such as the joyful Harlequin pattern, appeared in the fashion fabrics and in home decoration already in the years after the II World War.

The thin line between plagiarism and homage

It is well known that Ikea philosophy, in line with the Swedish attitude to innovation, is more inclined to evolutionary improvements of pre-existing solutions and ideas rather than revolutionising them. In this respect, it then seems that ArtRebels embraces the same approach as Ikea but, despite the promising name of the collection, they act in a rather uncritical way. This is particularly reprehensible if we consider that we are dealing with designers claiming that their mission is to show to the world that it is possible to do good business without compromising on integrity.

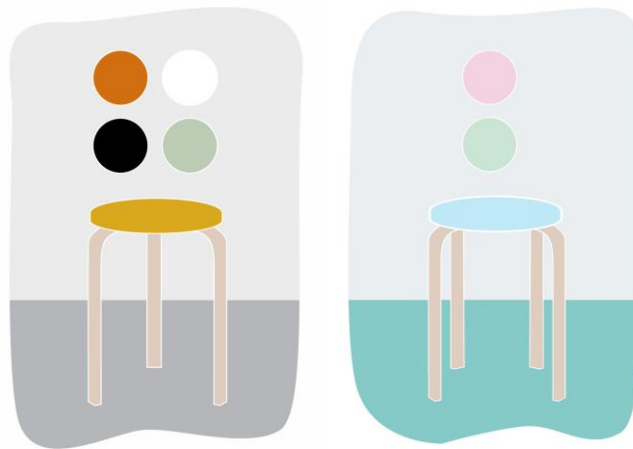


Stool 60

*Designed by Alvar Aalto, 1933 (photo credit ©
Artek)*

Surely the ArtRebels' Taburet, a reissue of the Frosta Stool, the popular Ikea's cult heavily inspired by the Stool 60 designed by Alvar Aalto in 1933 and still produced by Artek, does not break with Ikea's long tradition of plagiarism.

Considering that the Stool 60 is also manufactured by Artek in a four-legged version, the Taburet, the ArtRebels' re-styled stool, goes even further and is more than a simple homage to the famous multi-coloured series designed by Aalto in 1933, that was inspired by the colours he employed for the interiors of the Paimio Sanatorium in 1932.

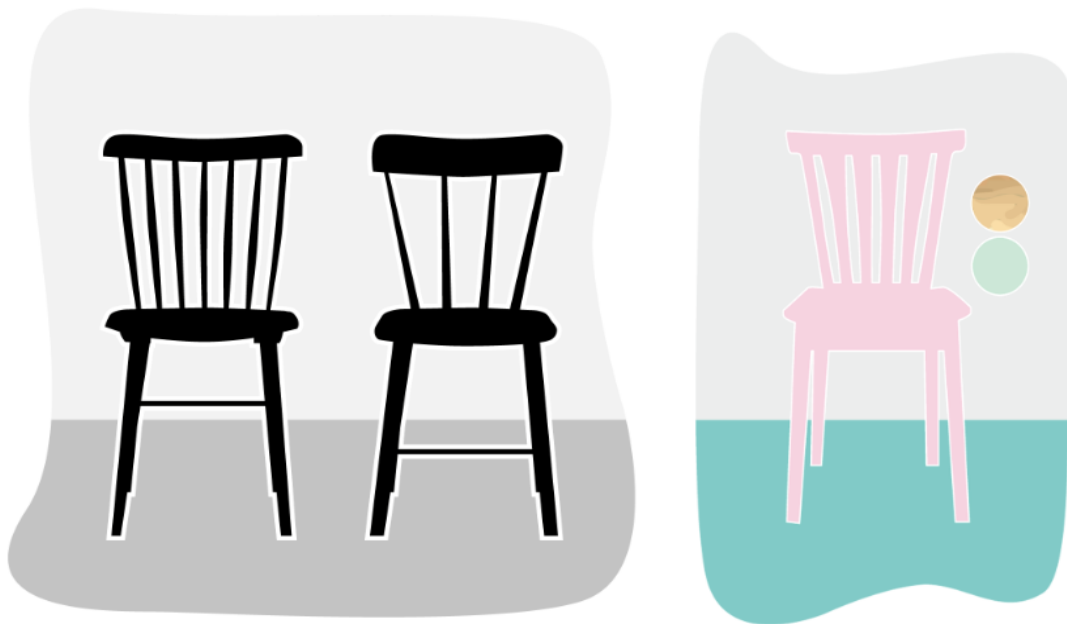


*Stool 60 (left) and Bråkig Taburet (right):
Spot the difference!
(self drawn sketches)*

Even though many cases might have been lost in the maze of intellectual property laws, Ikea has been accused in several cases of illegal copying, involving long legal controversies, being often officially charged with plagiarism and accused of illegitimate trading practices, for commercialising, under its label, design protected by copyright. The company has been compelled to compensate other manufacturers, as in some legal cases in USA and in Sweden, as reported by PMR, a British-American company for market information (“IKEA charged with plagiarism,” 2005).

The Bråkig reissued Frosta is not the sole “return of a cult” (Hotz, 2014). The Shaker-style dining chair, Olle by Nike Karlson, one of Ikea's most traditional pieces and today out of production, has been refreshed by ArtRebels in the new *ironic* version, where structural elements of the back have been flattened and transformed into a graphical sign, as if it was a shadow of a traditional chair.

It is also quite evident the reference to the 1950s Scandinavian design and craft golden age in the *homage* to the Zebra ceramics collection, signed by the Swedish designer Eugen Torst and produced by the company Upsala Ekeby Gefle during the ‘50s. This collection is unfortunately now available only on vintage design web stores at very expensive prices, as the craft company had to close down at the end of the ‘70s for an unfortunate, but quite frequent in the modern globalised economy, loss of competitiveness.



*From left: Shaker's Salt, Ikea's Olle and Bråkig Chair
(self drawn sketches)*



*From left: Zebra by Eugen Torst (1955) and Bråkig cups (2014)
(self drawn sketches)*

At the same time several contemporary Scandinavian and Danish brands, for example the more sophisticated Ferm Living that appeals to the middle-upper segment of the market, seem to be relying blatantly and almost harmoniously on the same colours and themes.

And it cannot be just a coincidence that the recent merchandise assortment and product range at Tiger stores, the Danish low cost prices retail chain, also shows an extensive use of the Harlequin pattern, in all possible sizes and colours declinations.

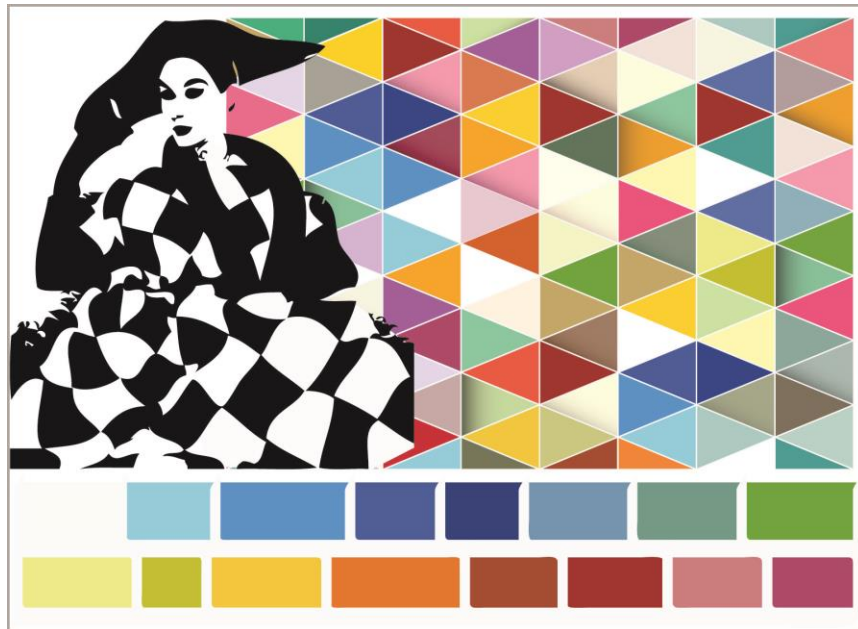
Trend forecasting or trend shaping?

I do not blame ArtRebels, nor Ferm Living, nor Tiger for having copied the design from each other. However, I do want to point out how rigorously, uncritically and almost religiously they are all prone to incorporate what the *modern oracles*, the trend research and forecasting agencies, have been preaching and dictating during the last year, for the season Spring/Summer 2014. Among these agencies, the trend forecasting website Fashion Forward Trends (just to mention one) in an issue of September 2013, informed the reader (i.e. the consumer) that, “staying true to fashion’s cyclical nature, it is time

turn back to the 50's. Almost recognized as the fashion print of the 50's, Harlequins are bringing the era back in the retro style.”(“Print inspiration – s/s 2014,” 2013).

To be precise this prediction was *secretly* circulated within the audience of professional users, including designers, and trend research agencies, one year (or more) before it was supposed to materialise, like for example on the professional website Patternbank which sells trend forecastings.

Similarly WGSN, the online trend *bible* that constantly inspires hundreds of designers and design students around the world, does not leave much space for colour smearing and suggests a range of pastel hues as the colour palette for the Spring/Summer 2014. This prediction seems to have been followed to the letter by the ArtRebels design team



*Freerly inspired by Fashion Forward Trends, WGSN,
Dulux trend forecastings SS 2014
(self drawn moodboard)*

By just taking a quick look at the website of Dulux, a major global company for wall paints, one will end up in exactly the same “visionary” predictions for the colour trends for the year 2014.

Along the same line and considering a more local level, the Danish Trend agencies, like the Pej Group, work actively as a product consulting firms, collaborating with many lifestyle companies, mostly based in Denmark, profiting from what is sold as sound and confidential information about trend-forecasting for the years to follow.

A question that comes to my mind then is whether and to what extent this mechanism that is ruling the lifestyle industry, is actually able to predict or to form trends. It is quite obvious that mass production in order to be profitable requires standardisation and uniformity of consumption rather than diversification and fragmentation of the demand.

On the other hand, the trend forecasting mechanism somehow assures an apparent change within predefined rules that prevents boredom, pleases the consumer and stimulates a constant upgrade of quickly obsolete wardrobes and home decoration but without threatening the assumptions and profitability of mass production, standardisation and uniform demand.

In this respect, with acute awareness already in 1944 Horkheimer and Adorno (1997, pp.121-123) warned against the products of the culture industry. According to these authors, while the consumers are given an illusion of freedom of choice, in reality the industry shapes the public's taste and obtains consensus on what must be considered desirable. The products of such an industry exhibit a few simple and conformist symbolic forms that can thus reach a wide audience. The taste of the consumers is thus *educated* by this mechanism, even leading to an effect of gratification, whenever a new trend is introduced which meets the consumers' expectations. This in return is a powerful source of all manifestations of consumerism; where the industry changes the few symbolic forms, and induces the consumers to buy new products, season after season.

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard goes beyond this argument, and states that,

commodities and objects (...) constitute a global, arbitrary, and coherent system of signs, a cultural system which substitutes a social order of values and

classifications for a contingent world of needs and pleasures, the natural and biological order.” (Baudrillard in Consumer Society, in Poster, 2001, p.50)

Baudrillard observed that in contemporary capitalistic societies, not only the production but also the consumption is disciplined and rationalised in order to favour the reproduction of the economical structure. The consumers are thus incapacitated to act as subjects, as they have been displaced from an economy of “real” commodities, to a “hyper-real” world of “self-referential signs” (as cited in Poster, 2001, p.6).

In this world the tasks of the marketing and the advertisement are not to convince the consumers to buy a product, but rather to convince them to be a part of a social structure, where the acts of buying and consuming are fundamental acts that indicate a social identity.

Thus the collaboration between the group ArtRebels and Ikea appears to be quite compatible with the scenario depicted by Baudrillard concerning the dynamics ruling the production and the consumption of objects in contemporary society and in no way shows any critical concern.

Past is always the big novelty of the year

From a commercial point of view, it then seems that the Bråkig collection follows ad litteram the Retro Trend of the year, and, in a simplistic manner, it combines proven and successful design, *inspired* by the Classics, with trend forecasting. What the ArtRebels have proposed seems to be the result of a more trivial and mechanical blending of safe ingredients from the tried and tested Granny's Recipe. Nothing more and nothing less, to ensure good sales performances and perhaps refresh the brand image.

The Danish marketing expert Martin Lindstrom comments on the somehow inflationary trend of the past:

One thing we can be certain of: Nostalgia is a fad that's likely to last forever. Perhaps this is why my Brandwashed study found that last year approximately 20% of new product launches –or relaunches – were cloaked in a sprinkling of nostalgic package design, advertising campaigns, and even websites. (Lindstrom, 2011)

It is not my intention here to blame the ArtRebels for dealing with *the Devil*. However the group seems to be so concerned to appear and be perceived as cool, that one feels a kind of discomfort towards this subculture that claims to represent a diverse way of thinking but is more interested in wall decoration than in street art. Considering their claims and the name of collection they have created for Ikea, one would expect, if not something truly *rebellious*, at least something little less aligned with the mainstream creed of what some authors, among them, the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, label as the “throw-away” society: “Are things thrown away because of their ugliness, or are they ugly because they have been earmarked for the tip?” (Bauman, 2013, p.3).

It seems that we live in a reality where is “today's novelty that makes yesterday's novelty obsolete and destined for the rubbish heap” (Bauman, 2013, p.4), and this is what is passed off by Ikea as *Democracy*.

In my opinion the meaning of democracy cannot coincide with the range of consumer choices, which the middle class can access, and it is not utopian to expect a reflection on this by all the actors operating in this field.

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