



## Art challenges life

### Description



Artists might have difficulty writing about art were it not for the useful  
Walter Van Beirendonck has continued to **challenge**  
creative vision (link). Here are some other obvious examples.

Banksy **challenges** British cultural identity with warped,

twisted versions of British icons (link).

For Tracey Emin, "My Bed" **challenges** the sexist attitude that makes a disordered bedroom much more shameful for a woman than a man. (link)

Wheelchair artist Sue Austin's underwater dances open up profound issues about methods of self-representation and the power of self-narration in **challenging** the nexus of power and control that created the "disabled" as other. (link).

Unbuilt avant-garde paper architecture also presents **challenges** and provocations. In his criticism of the designs emerging from architecture schools, and that win RIBA awards, Patrik Schumacher lamented that the student designs, and attendant films, digital animations and narratives are a provocation at best, but are not designs of spaces intended to frame social life. Rather, they are merely narratives and messages pushed by evocative imagery ([link](#)). There's confusion here about what art and design is for. For me there are three main relationships between cultural products and their audiences.

1. Such designs and works of art can provide **models**: this is how things should be. Emulate this.
2. They can set themselves in **conflict** with the way things are. Be disturbed by this.
3. They **disclose** the way things are. Use this as a tool to reveal something about the world.

## 1. Emulate this

Many artefacts function as **models**, as exemplars, and as prototypes. The artworks I've described act as models in suggesting that we all ought to feel free to plunder manga and pop-culture icons in our clothing, artwork and architecture, to take icons of Britishness less seriously, or people (women) needn't be ashamed to expose their private lives to others (via their unmade beds), and people branded as 'disabled' should feel they can take charge of their assistive technologies and be creative with them.

Modernist architecture of the International variety was intent of delivering ideas about the way things should be, and encouraged emulation. There's architecture that aims to provide appropriate and sensitive social and technological responses and solutions, and is of the kind that is intent on *framing social life* responsibly and effectively. Emulate that.

Emulation is too obvious as a sole motivation for art, and provides easy traps for would-be critics. It's easy to criticise something on the grounds that we really wouldn't want all our architecture or art to be like that. I don't suppose Beirendonck intends us to emulate his fashions as everyday work wear.

## 2. Be disturbed

But not all cultural products are there to be emulated. Disaster movies and crime fiction provide audiences with the frisson of terror, and expose them to shocks that they would not want emulated in everyday life. It's fair to say that Beirendonck's fashion and Banksy's graffiti art set up similar **conflicts**, and disturb people. Emin's bed verges on the disgusting, and seeing Austin strapped to aqualung and a wheelchair under water makes some people feel queasy at least.

The award winning student architecture that bothers Schumacher has something of this disturbing element, not least offending architectural and institutional sensibilities: using films instead of drawings, grey dystopian futures instead of optimistic framings of sociable life, refugee robots fighting in the dingy streets of Brixton, facilities for monitoring the growth of algae, storage facilities for people's memories, buildings that get played by the wind, etc. This is challenging stuff, but is the stuff of challenge enough?

## 3. Disclosure

I think the role of such works to **disclose** provides a more interesting, potent and widely applicable set of tools for cultural intervention. Here, a cultural product introduces itself as an alien object, designed to reveal something about the world, perhaps some aspect of it that is not seen or experienced in a new way.



It renders the familiar strange, bringing the everyday into

sharp relief. It may also influence, nuance or even create what we think the world is like.

So a cosy woollen jumper with a tank on it shows how wedded we consumers are to safe patterns and imagery. Or Banksy's wall stencil depicting a street rioter throwing flowers, a little girl in a red dress frisking a soldier, and a grenadier guard relieving himself on a brick wall each reveal something about the close relationship between illegality and cultural approval, nefarious acts and culturally sanctioned vandalism (as art), or something about the law, art, walls, public and private space, humour and agency.

An unmade bed in an art gallery reveals the artistry in chance arrangements of ordinary things. Seeing a wheelchair user on video under water reveals my own sense of control or lack of it, my own mobility, fear of drowning, etc. These might be aspects of ordinary life I'd just not thought about before.

What precisely is disclosed about everyday life by such cultural products, and to whom? Here interpretation comes into play. The effects of such interventions becomes the subject of reflection, analysis, argument and discussion.

## Design interventions

I've always favoured disclosure (number 3) as a way of understanding the role of cultural products such as buildings, drawings of buildings, films, artworks, and even technological devices. I think it accords more with Martin Heidegger's concepts of the disclosive nature of the work of art. More importantly, it's a useful way of thinking about architectural design as a process.

Here the artwork or speculative project reveals something about the world that is independent of the particular cultural intervention. For a designer or architect such interventions provide a very useful way of disclosing everyday practices (ie what people do ordinarily), which helps us understand the world better and differently, and hence can lead designers along the path to better, or different, design. If they are not there yet, outrageous, speculative design propositions are *on the way* to the design of reveal about social life,



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## Notes

- Heidegger explores the issue of disclosure in *Being and Time* (pp.261-263), as an issue of truth (*aletheia* ἀλήθεια). In *The Question Concerning Technology* he writes about the way technologies reveal something about the context in which they are situated. Some technologies are seen by Heidegger as enabling: fitting into a new and emerging pattern of human practices and revealing something about the environment in which they are situated. He presents the example of a bridge in relation to a river. The bridge reveals the banks and the character of the river through the way in which the bridge is reflected in the water and the way the pylons have to be built to withstand the river's flow.
- Also see work on the idea of objects as [cultural probes](#).
- See blog post [Design-led research](#).
- Also see [Heidegger on technology](#), [Computer images and realism](#), [What buildings want](#), and [Inconspicuous architecture](#).
- Also see Tracey Emin's page at [Artsy.net](#) (added 22 June 2015)



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1. Architecture

### Tags

1. design
2. disclosure
3. Heidegger

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