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COMD Theory

The Lockheed Lounge was designed by Marc Newson in 1988. Newson made the lounge himself over the course of a few months by hammering aluminum onto the fiberglass body. It has references to futurism and modernism, and while it is designed as a lounge, Newson describes it as “utterly unusable.” Regardless, it is in existence, and is known as one of the most important works of the late 20th century. Is it because it’s featured in Madonna’s 1993 music video, *Rain*? Probably not, but it’s exciting, different, and inspired much of the 1990s and 2000s design. Some would say that “it has become synonymous with everything that is great in design” –the Telegraph’s Henrietta Thompson reports Alexander Payne, Phillips’ worldwide director of design, as having said before the auction in which it sold as the most expensive design object by a living designer. But is it actually “synonymous with everything that is great in design”?

Newson was born in Australia and was previously trained as a jeweler and sculptor at Sydney College of the Arts before starting in design. Newson’s distance from Europe let him create a “unique design vocabulary”. “If I’d been studying design in Italy, I’d have found that tradition really stifling,” he said. “Coming from Australia, my design was self-taught and instinctive.” He had interest in the work of modern design, but he had visible influences early on that were more traditional. He has said the Lockheed Lounge’s ‘fluid metallic form [was] loosely’ based on the chaise longue he’d seen in reproductions of Jacques-Louis David’s neo-classical portrait of Madame Récamier.

Marc Newson himself said that the Lockheed Lounge is “utterly unusable.” Typically, a good design is something that has use, especially to the Constructivists. If you design a chair, it should have function in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. But this piece of furniture, the Lockheed Lounge, looks like it is functional – but you wouldn’t necessarily want to lounge and nap on it, it isn’t very comfortable. In spite of this, it shows an understanding of the human body and the object. The form of the object looks like it should follow the form of the body. The hammered aluminum along with the rounded form shows a sensuality there that goes with a modernist design. But as the function of the Lockheed Lounge is questionable, can it be considered design?

Many believe that the difference between art and design is that design has more of a societal obligation. Art does not have that obligation – art is typically created for the purpose of aesthetic, and while sometimes it does convey a message, there’s no obligation. The Lockheed Lounge was sold for £2.4 million in 2015. Some would say that, instead of the object being “synonymous with everything that is great in design”, it is now more out of touch than delivering any sort of meaningful contribution to the design world. On the contrary, as an art piece it does exactly as it should. It’s beautiful to look at, but the function is not there. Wealthy patrons are able to purchase it for an insane price, while everyone else is not able to use it, or even look at it. In Hella Jongerius and Louise Schouwenberg’s recent *Beyond the New* manifesto, they say,

"Industrial processes have greater potential than low-volume productions of exclusive designs, which reach such a limited market that talk of ‘users’ can hardly be taken seriously... Design ≠ Art. Good ideas in design require further development after they are

presented in museums as experimental, eye-catching gestures. Only then will they add meaning to the world of daily objects and reach a larger public.”

Newson only created 15 of the Lockheed Lounge – which is contrary to what Jongerius and Schouwenberg believe is good design. Newson has further created other furniture objects, with a much bigger reach (and more considered “good design”), the lounge is limited in its reach to who it specifically affects, according to Jongerius and Schouwenberg. The Constructivists would also agree that it is hardly good design (without taking into account aesthetics) – because while it looks good and in the 1980s really pushed the envelope with the design itself, there is no function. It’s more of a pretty piece of work to admire. You wouldn’t sit on it to finish your novel, or to watch television.

Marc Newson created an exciting, inspiring chaise lounge. It is widely considered the peak of design. A futurist design that inspired decades after it was created. But with no true function, only an incredibly limited made, and selling at an auction for millions of dollars, it cannot be said that it is “synonymous with everything that is great in design”.

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