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Choi Byung Hoon's Oeuvre - Creating a New Third Way between Art and Design

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I initially met Choi Byung Hoon during a trip to Southeast Asia, where he was introduced to me as a major contemporary South Korean designer. That his work was creating furniture, however, was not immediately apparent to me. It was only later that I was reminded of Isamu Noguchi's oeuvre, to whom the Vitra Design Museum had dedicated a retrospective in 2001. Indeed Choi, like Noguchi, seems to ignore the boundaries between sculpture and design. Common to both Asian artists are the reduction to simple outlined forms, the use of natural materials, the play with strong contrasts, and the great quietude their objects exude. In Choi's work, I am also fascinated with how he comes to terms with the confrontation of design-specific problems such as the questions of ergonomics or rationality. For example, how does one form a comfortable chair with legs, seat, and back made from a single piece of plywood? For me, the aspect that characterizes Choi's works overall is balance.

For the viewer, the question of balance is primarily perceived as tension between the recognizable elements of which a piece is constructed and composed: between the light, curved, floating wood and the heavy mass of unchanging solid material; between the positive form of an object and the negative form of its hollow spaces; and finally between art and design. The tension between expression and function in his work is so strong that the context, which as a rule defines whether something is perceived as art or commodity, largely recedes into the background.

Such interdisciplinary phenomena are increasingly under discussion in contemporary culture; precisely what concerns us is whether the field of tension is between art on the one hand and design or architecture on the other, because a palpable feeling of uncertainty about our area of action is taking place. In Choi's pieces, these tensions—between materials, forms or categories—never manifest a strained effect, but rather reflect a calm and natural one. In this respect, they very much resonate with the works of Noguchi.

Perhaps the differentiation between art and design, as Noguchi himself suggested, is indeed irrelevant and only stands in the way of a fully integrated perception, a complete understanding of objects in their entirety. I particularly encountered this "third way," which eliminates the distinction between categories, in the Far East, both in daily life and among the initiated. But here in the West, artists, designers, architects, and cultural observers have pointed out repeatedly that it is more productive and certainly more honest to see the art in design in addition to the practical benefits. Contemporary works by Humberto, Fernando Campana, and Jürgen Bey, which are treated in the context of design, reflect perception as much as works by Andrea Zittel, Ai Weiwei and other artists. At the heart of this discourse Choi Byung Hoon adds a powerful, lyrical voice.