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## Transnational Material Politics

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# Summary

Since the 2000s, ‘Dutch design’ has become a coveted resource used to advance multiple cultural, educational, political and economic agendas. But what *is* Dutch design? While a conceptualization of the relationship between industrial production and the nation can be traced back to the early nineteenth century, in the 1990s the Dutch company Droog Design placed Dutch avant-garde product design on the international map. Droog propagated the notion that Dutch design is typified by sobriety, conceptualism, irony, openness and experimentalism and that these characteristics are the natural consequences of Dutch national culture. It is this essentialist characterization that many still associate with Dutch design today.

Since then, some unexpected people and things started qualifying for the Dutch design label, with even foreign designers and their work being included in Dutch design exhibitions, competitions and publications. However, despite Dutch design’s global mobility and increasing internal heterogeneity, Droog’s underlying essentialist narrative of national culture has proven remarkably resilient. On the one hand, this narrative takes the form of cultural essentialism (where the emphasis is on explaining the origins, developments and characteristics of the Dutchness of Dutch design) or of state-centrism (where the focus is on national contexts to the exclusion of transnational ones).

To understand the development of Dutch design as a transnational practice that crosses national and political borders, this study interweaves scholarship on national

design, transnationalism and 'new materialism' into a 'transnational material politics of design' framework. 'New materialism' holds that, rather than being passive receptacles of social meanings, artefacts play an active and constitutive role in the production of cultural forms such as national design. New materialism thus acknowledges that materials and things have political agency rather than being neutral and docile embodiments of human politics. New materialism thereby challenges design historians to supplement their understanding of the social factors participating in the construction of national design with an investigation of the agency of materials, artefacts and physical settings in this process. Accordingly, the main research question this dissertation addresses is: 'Through what transnational political and material processes has Dutch design been construed as a national practice?'

To answer the research question, this study traces how the idea of Dutch design has been socially *and* materially constructed – over and over and each time differently – at the intersection of nationalizing imperatives and transnational networks. To render the national and transnational, social and material actors that have participated in the construction of Dutch design both visible and traceable, this dissertation's scope of analysis is limited to Dutch international cultural policy between 1970 and 2012. Taking place at the crossroads of national and transnational dynamics, material artefacts and human practices, Dutch international cultural policy provides a clearly delineated empirical realm in which to examine the construction of Dutch design. As case studies, four international exhibitions on Dutch design organized in the context of Dutch international cultural policy were selected.

This study makes two important contributions to the field of design history. First, it contributes to the development of a systematic theoretical-methodological framework for inductively and empirically studying the relationship between design and its transnational contexts from a new materialist perspective. While design historians agree on the necessity of a transnational approach to national design history, the application of such an approach to empirical material – as implemented in this project – is still scarce. This study consequently offers an original contribution to the recent programmatic research effort in the international field of design scholarship concerning histories of national design in the context of globalization. Second, this project is relevant for its use of a new materialist approach. While most research has focused on the role of discourse and social institutions in the constitution of national design canons, my project explores a more empirically grounded approach by also considering the material practices involved in the making of Dutch design. Indeed, in all four case studies presented in this thesis, material characteristics – of things, of the display design, of physical environments, of their interactions – emerge as pivotal factors in shaping different ideas of Dutch design over time.