

Provocateur Tobias Wong digests the familiar, expels it and serves it up again in a new guise, passing comment as he passes waste.

**PROTECT US
FROM WHAT
TOBI WANTS**

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'Whether his pieces are artworks or design objects, they are brilliant examples of experimentation.'
Constantin Boym

There are many things to talk about when you talk about Tobias Wong. There's the glory-hole ottoman he designed with a 30-centimetre shaft that is lined with pink mink and can be set to vibrate at five speeds, the lightest of which he calls 'tease' and the most vigorous of which he calls 'orgasm'. There's his ironic use of dog fur to create hats, gloves and shoes, because he saw New Yorkers treating their pets as accessories and figured he'd just eliminate the troublesome feeding and walking bits. There's his recent faux commitment to longtime (straight) design partner Carlos Salgado. And there's the now-notorious clash of Wong's romantic brand of cynicism with Karim Rashid's romantic brand of idealism in the form of a concealable gun, hand-cut from Rashid's post-9/11 monograph, *I Want to Change the World*. But at a time when America's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum is putting up a provocative exhibition called *Design Is Not Art*, Wong's work – culturally critical, occasionally manufactured, sometimes handmade, often humorous – seems to be evidence of a quiet, tectonic shift taking place between the worlds of art and design.

Wong announced his retirement from art and design in 2003, only several years into his career. He decided, for a New York minute, that he was going to drive trucks. I won't call Wong an out-and-out romantic, but only because he specifically asked me not to. What Tobi is, he likes to keep close. It's clear he's a workaholic, and he'll admit that he's both dyslexic and colour-blind. Without naming the colour, he'll tell you he's only a few shades shy of a black belt in kung fu. He nibbles instead of gulping when he eats, partly because his sense of smell is extremely

weak which, on the bright side, is preferable during August in New York City, where Wong has been based for the past seven years. At 29, he has the self-conscious grace and wicked sarcasm of a gay man living in a liberal pocket of a prudish country. A tiny blue square is tattooed at the centre of his chin and, on his right forearm, artist Jenny Holzer has scribbled a phrase that Tobi needed into permanence: *Protect Me from What I Want*. His business card reads: *Protect Me from What Tobi Wants*.

One of the several conventions under attack from Wong's work is the assumption that design objects perform functions that make them pedestrian, while art objects transcend function. Many people call it art precisely because it has no banal function – a simplistic, if not inaccurate, notion, since art has always been used to communicate ideas, propaganda and status; to nourish the imagination and the intellect; and, not least, to decorate. Perhaps it's more relevant to ask where the 'brief' originates. Only the naive would suggest that design is just art without ideas, or that art must be ugly to be smart. 'For the first time in a century, design is considered as cool and as interesting as art,' says Barbara Bloemink, Cooper-Hewitt co-curator of *Design Is Not Art*. 'Today, there is a tendency among young artists to not want to be limited by being defined as one or the other, artist or designer. And the way the public views design is not as distinct from art as it used to be. Now, some design sells for as much as contemporary art.' And some designers are earning celebrity status: Wong's renown was, perhaps, cemented by the t-shirt sold in a Brooklyn shop last year that read 'I fucked Tobias

Wong'. As people like Wong begin to blend art and design, we're reminded of the subjectivity and handiwork that is sometimes the foundation of both. 'Thoreau said: "It's not what you look at, it's how you see it,"' says Bloemink. 'It really isn't whether a shovel is a functional shovel or a work of art; it's how you choose to use it. The object isn't what changes.'

This is where Tobi Wong's sparkling shit comes in. Several years ago, Wong designed capsules filled with flakes of pure silver leaf which, when consumed, make one's stool shimmer, a reference to some of the more scatological experiments made during the halcyon days of conceptual art – with a twist that is all Tobi Wong: the union of the most intimate waste matter with a material that we consider precious. Some of Wong's work is *Post-It Note* simple, which is an abbreviated way of saying that first you laugh at its brilliance or its audacity or both, and then you wonder why someone didn't come up with that particular idea a long time ago. Chances are that someone did, however, and Wong is the first to admit it. He has coined two terms for his work. *Paraconceptual* is about reconciling cultural commentary with aesthetics, so that even those who don't want to dissect the concept can enjoy the object – objectively. The night before Philippe Starck launched his Bubble Club chair at Kartell, for instance, Wong launched *This Is a Lamp*, Starck's chair stuffed with light bulbs. This is one of Wong's readydesigneds, a Duchampian readymade à la Wong: In his eyes, the success of the lamp depends not on its original form, as a chair, but on the credentials that make it a famous piece of design. 'Tobi Wong is able to

look at conventional things, or at familiar design icons, and recontextualize them so they appear fresh and new. This ability is very dear to me,' says designer Constantin Boym who, like Wong, has designed products for Ray Coh's recent Conduit line. 'Whether his pieces are artworks or design objects – this issue is open to discussion and wide interpretation – they are brilliant examples of experimentation. They are about culture, about our society and its obsessions, and above all, they are often simply hilarious.'

Today, Wong says he doesn't believe in originality. He calls his work *postinteresting* because it derives from work he finds interesting. Derivative is no longer, necessarily, a dirty word. While allowing that the design and art markets are still chronically hungry for 'originality', he is happy to admit that he absorbs and digests everything around him and that his work is a byproduct of this digestive process. Having moved to New York to study sculpture at Cooper Union, Wong used to set up Crap Art stands in SoHo, selling pieces he'd made at school. At the butt-end of the internet boom, he sold 'dreams' (air-filled plastic bags) for one dollar apiece. He also made buttons from Burberry plaid and gave them away, free of charge. In using the buttons for a marketing scheme, Burberry counterfeited Tobi's counterfeit. 'The idea was that people were able to consume luxury without paying the price for it,' says Wong. And when the buttons began to appear on shopping bags, in magazines and on billboards, he saw it as his own exhibition, a way of proving that you don't necessarily need a gallery and it doesn't have to be expensive to make something interesting.

Previous spread: On the tarmac outside Eero Saarinen's Terminal 5 at New York's JFK Airport, Tobi Wong (1974) wears a tattoo handwritten by Jenny Holzer (2002) and his unauthorized Burberry Buttons (1999) later

copied by ... Burberry. In Tobi's hand, one of three guns (2002) hand-cut from Karim Rashid's book, *I Want to Change the World*.



This is a (counterfeit of a) chair. Wong is aware that U.S. law requires that he originate only one-third of a design in order to receive its copyright. His version of Chair No. 2 (2002), originally designed by Donald Judd in pine in

1979, is made from glass – a material Judd never used – bonded invisibly by means of a UV gluing process.



After he graduated, rather than renting a studio, Wong went to work in borrowed retail space. He camped out in Cappellini's New York showroom, stashing his Canadian passport in a pile of pillowcases and his tools in cabinets, using swinging carpet displays as partitions and storing sheets of plywood under display beds. ('It's funny where people don't look and how little they touch, even in a showroom,' he says.) He'll call it pragmatic – he funnels most of his cash into his projects – but there's a romantic notion about context that makes the circumstances surrounding his creative process an integral part of the final product.

Wong has never studied design and is not a product of the design world. His work is about how he reacts to the stuff around him. One of his strengths is an ability to absorb, and to respond pointedly to, culture and events. He addressed Mayor Bloomberg's ban on smoking in New York City bars and restaurants by designing smoking mittens, with a grommet to hold a cigarette, making the prospect of lighting up on a sidewalk in the dead of a New England winter less repellent. During a recent furore in the United States over same-sex marriage, Wong and Salgado came up with an inexpensive idea

for a satellite exhibit for the International Contemporary Furniture Fair: They sent out commitment announcements – after all, they are committed (creative) partners – and entered their names in the gift registry at mossonline. The products making up their registry served as a curated online exhibition of objects that had brought the two designers together. Wong's *I Want to Change the World* gun book was a reaction to both the insecurity imposed on the West by the World Trade Center attack and the naivety and hubris of the belief that design is capable of changing anything. 'When I first saw the gun, I had a

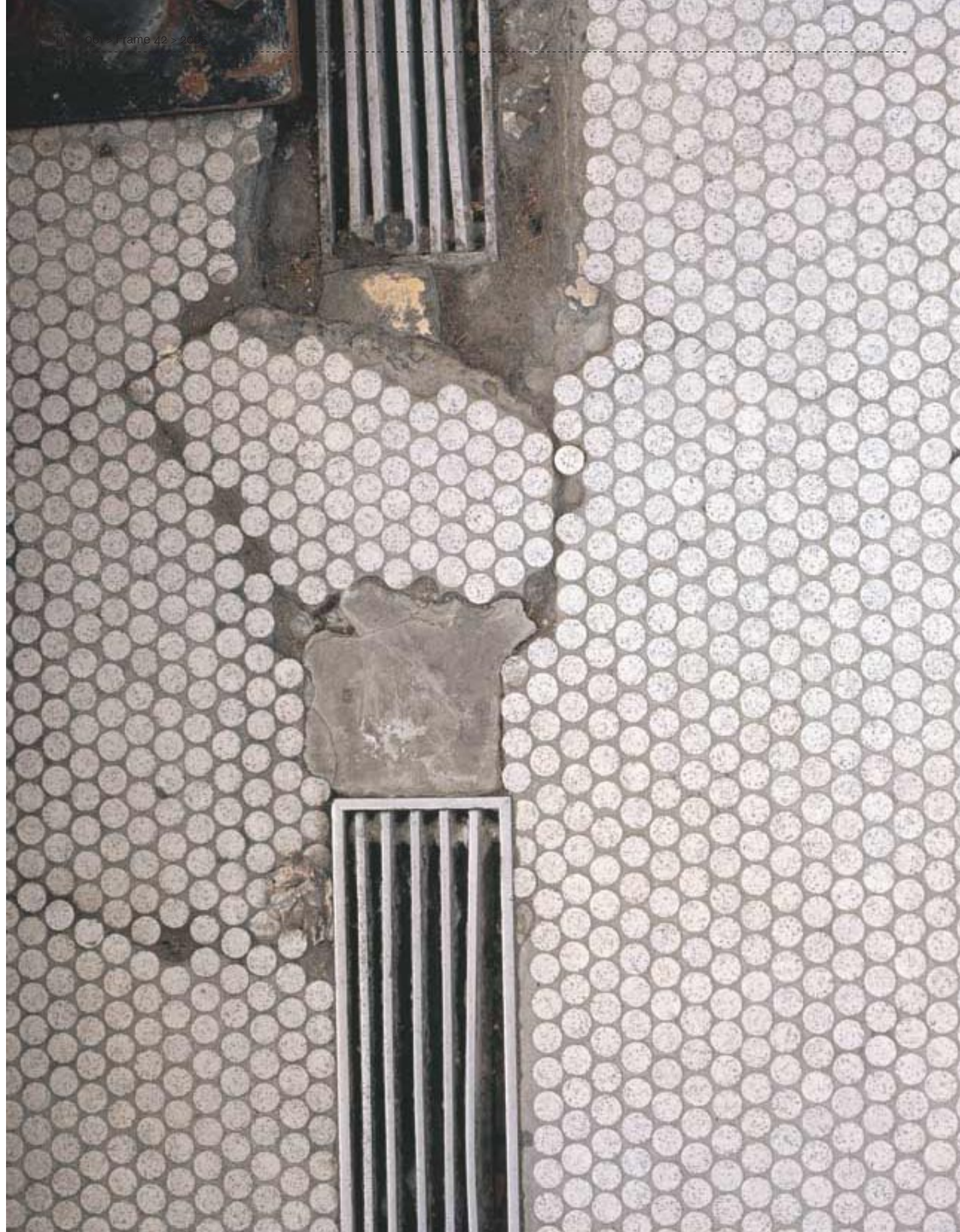
frisson of excitement mixed with anger,' says Karim Rashid. 'Art is a provocateur. Art can be slanderous, insipid, political, poetic whereas design must be more democratic, less provocative, more pragmatic, but hopefully experiential. Tobias's work borders on this line.' So who is being naive? Wong is using design as a vehicle for art and art as a material for design. Arguably, this type of work may be more capable of causing shifts than Wong is ready to admit.

Design and art may be discrete disciplines, but they overlap naturally, and the more we recognize both their similarities and differences,

Above: It's not what you look at – it's how you see it: Each piece of Wong's Mirror Puzzle (2003) has an identical surface, requiring players to match form rather than pattern. Also pictured: Box Cutter (2004), Disposable Mink

Lighter (2003), and Smoking Mittens (2003) – the grommet holds a cigarette.

Opposite: Who cares if no one notices? You know it's there: Wong's Solitaire Art (2004) features diamonds that can be embedded discreetly into wall or floor.





There's nothing new under the sun, and Tobi knows it. Wong's 'readydesigned', called Walter Wayle III (2001), is an infrared Lucite box over two metres high that holds a handless clock – and carries on where Alessi's discontinued Walter Wayle II left off.



In a dream, Tobi saw a way to survive in a post-9/11 world; today he sleeps safe and sound under his quilted bulletproof duvet (2004). Only the naive would suggest that design must be banally functional or that art cannot be.



Wong insists, the easier it will be to move between them. It is partly in acknowledging, or forging an alliance between, two contrasting ideas (shit + silver) that Wong creates some of his cleverer work. He mischievously combines elegance with humour, too much information with none at all, and an intellectual or moral puzzle with the injunction to just enjoy how something looks. He'll charge \$300 for a rip-away pad of 100 real dollar bills and give away other work free of charge. He'll create an object of exorbitant value and applaud when it's thrown in the dustbin. He has designed a pair of pearl earrings and a crystal chandelier dipped in industrial rubber that

can be peeled away if desired. His Hidden Diamond Rings have tiny gems set inside the band where no one can see them: Who else should care? he asks us to ask ourselves. Wong sees consumption as a vehicle for passing ideas to other people and over time, and for adding to them in the passing. For \$7,500 to \$25,000, you can have your purchase at the Troy store in SoHo wrapped in an original Warhol screen print and signed by Tobias Wong. Warhol, by all accounts, would have relished the idea. You can save the giftwrap if you like, but if you really don't give a shit, it goes into the bin because you've

understood: It's all disposable in the end. 'I'm not giving rich people luxury,' Tobi says. 'I'm trying to share ideas. Even a poor person can go: Wow, the concept is there. It's in my head. I own it.' (That said, anyone who has trashed their Warhol-Wong giftwrap, please raise your hand.) This winter, along with a number of international artists – including Vanessa Beecroft, Santiago Serra and Tom Sachs – Wong will transform the interior of Eero Saarinen's Terminal 5 at JFK Airport. You can ask if he's a designer or an artist until you're blue in the face, but he doesn't want to be clear on this point. 'I

think I don't tend to answer that question, because I just don't know what I am,' he says, crinkling his eyes so that you can't tell if he really doesn't know, or if he just doesn't want you to know what he knows or doesn't know.

Opposite: South Sea pearl earrings (2003) dipped in industrial rubber and Hidden Diamond Rings (2004, right of basin) with gems concealed under the band so that only you know how much he cares ... And if he doesn't care enough,

nothing cuts deeper than the Reverse Diamond Ring (in basin). Also pictured: skull charms (with assistance of P Mohr) and the 24-carat gold toy soldier pin by DUPD, one of a number of designs 'edited' by Wong.

Above: Eye-candy, a good idea and, whatever the price, disposable: Wong's Crystal Chandelier (2003), dipped in industrial white rubber, and a paper cup illustrated with cut diamonds for Ray Coh's 2004-2005 Conduit line.