



## THE GLASS HEAP CHALLENGE 2014 MASTERS

### Arnout Visser



Photo: Thijs Quispel

Since 1991, Arnout Visser has worked as a commissioned designer who also developed his own collection within the various disciplines of product design, furniture and interior design, illustration and graphic design. For these he employed ceramics, glass, plastics, water and other materials. When you meet Visser, the first impression is one of the ingenious, 'absent-minded professor', but his portrait reveals a humour which always breaks through while his eyes stay sharply observant. As legatee of the great polymaths –scientists/philosophers/inventors like Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Spinoza, Descartes, Hooke, Huygens and Van Leeuwenhoek, Visser is both an inventor and a glass designer. Like the last five luminaries listed, who all were glass grinders who developed lenses, microscopes, telescopes, thermometers, vacuum pumps, spirit levels or deepwater measuring instruments, Visser's nose is in the materials as he probes nature's laws. Investigating the properties of glass within the range of the optical, mechanical and physical phenomena, and its principles, his objects display awe and fascination. For this reason, Visser's objects are scarcely coloured and without adornment: the design is as basic and, as tense as it gets. Always, the first part of his design process is based in science and techniques which include an optical enlargement, light conduction, weight, the Law of Archimedes, balance, movement: Concept is form! Materials are reused, and revived, and the "form giver" literally translated from the Dutch word Vormgever became "form finder". Call it Neo-Conceptual Design—as understood by Marcel

Duchamp's followers—Visser's objects fit perfectly as indicated by his found objects, links with science, and practice of leaving his trace or 'handwriting' behind on new forms.

Another striking analogy with the earlier inventors and philosophers is Visser's commitment to working with other artists and designers. Joining design groups including Droog Design, Moooi, Marcel Wanders, DMD Den Haag, Designum, and working in projects such as Dutch Room in Saint Petersburg or Bushglass in Kenya, Visser discovered in these, the typical Dutch working atmosphere of brainstorming, group discussions, hard work, humour and the urge to make strong statements linked with powerful industrial design.

In 2002, in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, Simon Barteling and Arnout Visser presented their workshop results to Bushglass. As Rotterdam Design Prize nominee for 2003, Visser explained: "Mass production determines the market from the design but, meanwhile, we always demand more from a product; nice and functional are no longer enough. What we made was a series of designs with a different attitude and ethics, developed in a glass workshop in Kitengela, Kenya. There, in the middle of the bush, is a furnace driven on steam. This was, for us, the immediate reason to depart and to utilise all (im)possibilities on location. With limited means we have been working at a series of products in glass: from light shades to water carafes, from slab tiles to tooters. No stylized mass products but sturdy utility glass objects with character." In Kenya, Visser's ad hoc practice employed a fallen cactus as mould for a glass shade and used bottles were recycled into new objects with the remains of its former features. Even old spectacles, intended as souvenirs for third world developers, were molten material worked into a glass light.

Visser continued, "With a formal renewal of craft—the combination of crafts skills, technical possibilities, recycled materials, and artistic qualities—we brought together two worlds that have no knowledge about each other. To work together with colleagues delivers speed and energy, quality and pleasure and is essential to large and complex projects. When one works independently, then, it's pleasant to work together, to look in cooperation for quality and share risks." In conclusion, Visser summarized: "Mass production determines the market of design but at the same time we demand more from a product than beauty and function. These are not enough anymore. I work on products in which something is going on, a design with a story, a mentality or principle."

After studying at Arnhem's art academy Visser had already worked with metal and some glass. Then, in 1990, he studied at Domus Academy in Milan, Italy for another year of post academic study where he explored a more personal style. There, Visser's contact with that international group of students of twenty different nationalities was, he said, a very special experience. In the first months, Visser explains, "We received the assignment from 'design guru' Andrea Branzi to design 'objects for eating culture'. With plastic oil tubes and Plexiglas I made a model of Salad Sunrise then found in the Yellow Pages a small firm who could produce them, now, they are still in production for the collection Droog Design." In our conversations, Visser offered that "Working with technical glass blowers is great. In the Netherlands I collaborate with Ed van Dijk, who has good connections in the Czech Republic and my collection was able to slowly develop, since then." Explaining why he works in the Netherlands "I wanted to stay in Milan to work as free lance designer but my love for my wife drove me home to Arnhem where I have a studio next to my house where I collaborate with designers like Erik Jan Kwakkel, Simon Barteling and glass specialists like Ed Wilhelm and Ed van Dijk. Finally, Visser revealed: "Now, I am designing the mayor's chain for the city of Apeldoorn, working on several objects for the 10 years' presentation of Droog Design exhibited in München, this spring. In autumn 2004, we will exhibit in Lille, Cultural Capital of this year with Bush Glass and other work produced by the

glass factory ARC. Then, we are organizing a glass factory in Slovakia to produce building tiles and I am busy designing new works." Ad Demonstrandum: Visser's daily occupation is to be a creator in any sense of the word! Keep tuned!

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