

# When Is a Chair a Work of Art? A Bushwick Gallery Weighs In

In a furniture store, it's a chair. In an art gallery, it's a sculpture. But at International Objects in Brooklyn, it could be either, neither or both.



By Will Heinrich

April 13, 2023

Picture an object with a horizontal surface, four legs and a back that rises along one edge. In a design showroom, or a furniture store, you'd call it a chair. On the display floor of a typical art gallery, it might be a sculpture. But at International Objects, a gallery that opened last month in Bushwick, Brooklyn, you'll just have to ask.

"It's sort of impossible to define a design object against a sculpture without using market categories," a gallery partner, Matt Taber, said in the gallery's enormous showroom, a 10,000-square-foot space with dramatic Manhattan views.

"Or use categories," added Nate Heiges, another partner. Taber and Heiges, both artists, founded the gallery with Trang Tran, a director at Salon 94 Design, and Annaka Olsen, a graphic designer. The four had been discussing the overlap of art and design for years, aghast at how much interesting work was obscured by an overly strict separation of the categories. Taber and Tran, who are married, already run a smaller Bushwick gallery called International Waters — which has shown Heiges's work, and where Olsen helps out with branding — and they had begun to notice something in their studio visits.

“Almost every single artist we spoke to,” Taber explained, “was in some way producing design.”

Typically, though, the artists’ galleries wouldn’t sell such work, for fear of undermining their fine-art cachet. The group planned to start a website that would gather and market these artists’ design objects, as well as art made by designers. Their contention, essentially, was that artists and designers have always had similar conversations and worked in similar ways, and that keeping them separate no longer made sense.

“I feel like I’ve been having this conversation for the last 15 years,” said Olsen, when asked about the difference between art and design. “For me, it seems like, well, I’m over the conversation; we should just be putting on the program.”

Moreover, Heiges added, “The existence of the categories makes the blurring of the categorical line a fun and sexy project.”

But when the landlord of Heiges’s and Taber’s studio offered them space in a new building last year, they quickly shifted gears and began organizing “Local Objects,” an inaugural group show of sculptures, chairs, paintings, lamps and photographs by 89 artists and designers who work or have worked in New York. (“Local Objects” also includes a photo by Heiges and a couch by Taber, in what they call “the first and last time” they plan to exhibit their own work — when it comes to their role in the new business, they want to be crystal clear that they are gallerists.)

The show is meant to be a kind of snapshot of their extended community, and what it demonstrates is that while the boundary between art and design, like other genre boundaries, isn’t gone yet, it’s definitely moving.

Altogether the show encompasses a huge variety of takes on what it means to make an object, show an object, or use an object. I felt tempted to take a nap in a pile of hand-crocheted reindeer, by Wells Chandler, and I couldn’t resist checking my hair in a line of mirrored police shields, by Michael Joo, even as they made me wonder about my own complicity in police violence.

The way the contributors define themselves spans an equally broad range. Some, like Max Lamb, who cut a chunk of Delaware bluestone into a low but dramatic seat, are adamantly designers, not artists; others are artists dabbling in design, designers transitioning into art, or simply makers without labels. In the end, the way they’re all contextualized comes to seem like just another creative choice.

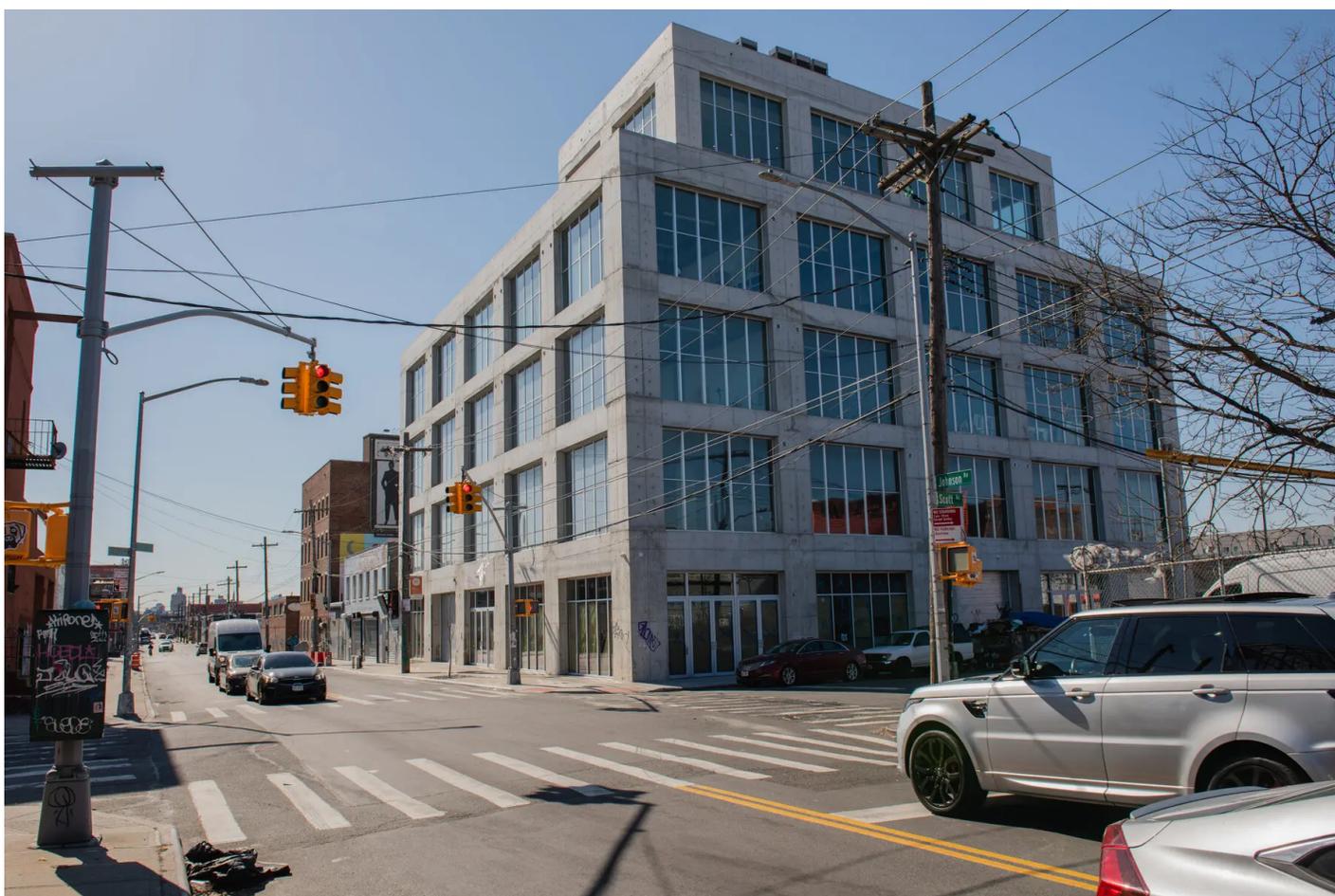


Despite their affable charm, each of Wells Chandler's hand-crocheted reindeer, 2014, is titled "Misfit." The blue lamp on the wall is by Neal Hollinger. George Etheredge for The New York Times

“You live with a light fixture,” Tran explains. “You can be a person who makes lights, or you can be a person that paints the light fixture. For us, the way that you come to that conclusion, or how you feel about it, is the same whether your end object is going to be a chair, a painting or a light.”

Asked about several plywood and powder-coated steel bar stools made by the sculptor Pam Lins, Taber revealed another, more commercial upside of the gallery’s conceptual flexibility. Placed alongside a room the partners are planning to use as a combination office and bar, the stools could work as gallery furniture — but were they for sale?

“Everything’s for sale,” he replied.



International Objects sits at the top of a building in Bushwick, Brooklyn. George Etheredge for The New York Times