

# “Auto-nom” – the car in contemporary art

Retrospective: an exhibition by the NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft Düsseldorf examined the question of how cars relate to art and artists. From 27th September 2003 to 4th January 2004, all 15 BMW Art Cars were assembled together in a public place for the very first time.

by Andreas Jancke



Since its inception, the car has been a firm fixture of the world of art – in every conceivable shape and form, in pictures, as stylized sculptures, in installations, as models or as furniture. The creation of art with cars and the application of art to cars has taken on a significant role in recent art history.

The countless examples range from 19th-century visionary drawings to critiques of the car as a mass-produced phenomenon in the 1950s, all the way to the automobile as an object of reflection for various art movements at the close of the last century. In the exhibition rooms of the Düsseldorf NRW-Forum, the “auto-nomous” aspect of the car in art was a recent subject of investigation.

### Exhibition at the Düsseldorf NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft

If one talks about the art of car production in the narrower sense of a manufacturer's design and technical ability to create a car based on design and vehicle concepts and the application of highly complex production processes, then art in relation to a car can mean commissioning an artist to take the product and rework it in his or her own style, to play with its symbolic power and to open up entirely new fields of interpretation.

At the NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft in Düsseldorf, the capital of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, an impressive exhibition recently endeavoured to showcase this relationship between fine arts, the everyday commodity commonly known as the car, the artist and his or her interpretation of the four-wheeler.

Playing a special role in the exhibition were BMW's Art Cars. It was the first time the complete range of these unique automobiles – 15 in all – was on display together. As an essential constituent of BMW Group Mobile Tradition, they are also regularly dispatched to a variety of exhibitions, events and motor shows. At the end of

Left: “Everything you look at looks back at you,” said Sandro Chia of the BMW 3 Series racing tourer he designed in 1992. Right: Alexander Calder's BMW 3.0 CSL marked the inception of the Art Car series in 1975.

last year, visitors to the “Auto-nom” exhibition were able to see for themselves the distinctive character of these vehicles following their creative transformation at the hands of leading artists.

In this exhibition, the NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft aimed to illuminate social issues and everyday phenomena such as fashion photos, architecture, design and media against their cultural background. But the real innovation was to be found in the exhibition concept. Its title “Auto-nom” (Auto-nomous) was not so much a play on words as a desire to underline the artistic originality involved in dealing with such a seemingly transparent yet ultimately highly complex object.

The maxim of the curators was that the automobile should not be experienced merely as a status symbol or a design product, as a construct or structure, nor as a piece of technical machinery or a means of transport.

### A different perspective on the car

Through a “different perspective on the automobile in modern and contemporary art”, according to the exhibition concept, the car should instead be exhibited as an independent object and the interplay of form and content pre-

sented in a thematically unusual way. In their works, the artists see the significance of the car as a formal and independent – in other words “auto-nomous” – object. If, as an ordinary means of transport, the car fails to convey this since it can no longer serve as an art object on account of its mass dissemination, it ultimately has to make its mark through variations of alienation and estrangement, by means of highlighting details or through particular deconstruction.

This manifestation of the car's autonomy is clearly no longer possible in traffic situations dominated by congestion and gridlock. It can only come

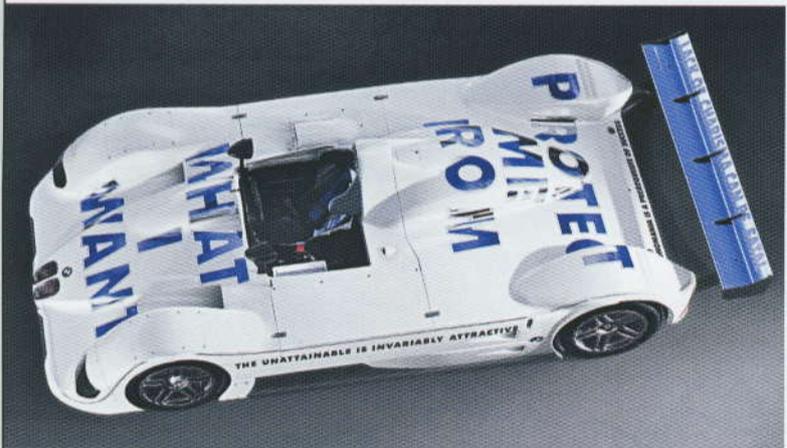
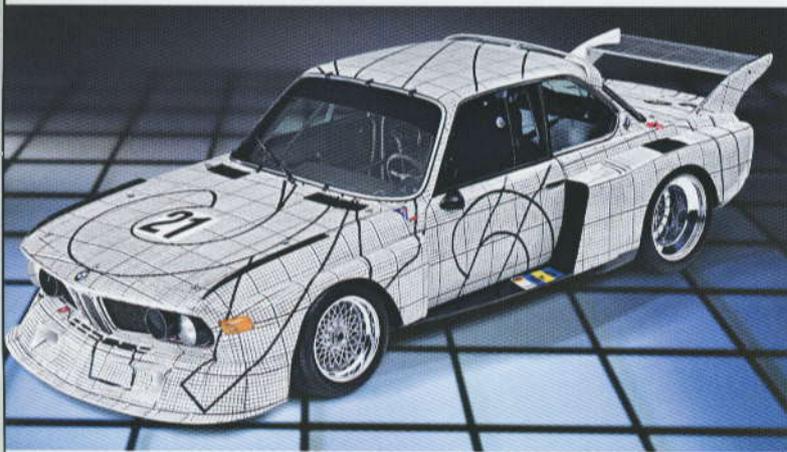


Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco used his artistic skills to reduce this Citroën DS to an undriveable single-seater.



into its own through the escape from routine and a relocation into an "art-ificial" space. This the exhibiting artists have succeeded in achieving primarily through segregation and a play with the obvious symbolism of the car.

The car, so say the ideas people behind this exhibition, takes on a broader meaning as a cultural asset by virtue of its associations with mobility and dynamism, but also with eroticism and power. It should be seen in contexts that take the viewer by surprise, presented in what appear to be highly unusual relationships that can even extend to the physical distortion of the art object itself.



Among the works on display at the exhibition were examples by famous artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Sylvie Fleury, Julian Opie and Erwin Wurm. The exhibits mainly comprised sculptures and installations, illustrations, photographs and videos from European and North American galleries and collections.

### BMW and the art of the automobile

In its 75-year history of car production, BMW has always produced vehicles of a particular worth and featuring innovative design. These progressive impulses also benefited the car manufacturer's involvement in the cultural sphere, where they stimulated artists in the 1970s to tackle the issue of automobiles in art.

The cultural commitment of the BMW Group today is expressed, among other ways, through the sponsorship of contemporary art. This involvement, which began around three decades ago, is a firm element of the social responsibility consciously embraced by the BMW Group. Constituting the spearhead of this involvement is a unique art collection: the BMW Art Cars.

### BMW Art Car Collection: "Art that sets the pace"

At the Düsseldorf exhibition, Art Cars by various artists, ranging from Alexander Calder and Roy Lichtenstein to Andy Warhol, Sandro Chia and Jenny Holzer, were assembled together for the first time last year. The 15 BMW Art Cars painted by well-known artists took up prominent positions in the exhibition rooms.

The history of these cars is as unique as the concept that gave rise to them in the first place. Since Alexander Calder first painted a BMW racing car back in 1975, each year saw more artists bestowing on BMW cars their own designs and imagery, which were seamlessly integrated into the style of their own oeuvre.

In the mid-1970s, French racing driver Hervé Poulain, in collaboration with BMW and his friend Alexander Calder, had suggested that his BMW 3.0 CSL be given an artistic bodywork design. For the American sculptor this request would turn into a serious artistic experiment since he saw himself faced with an existing design and, furthermore, had to take the technical brief into account.

That meant he was primarily able to alter the appearance of the car only through a creative application of colours. Yet that in itself allowed the car to develop a design of its own and, thanks to this novel concept and colourful execution, it became one of the most innovative "sculptures" of the 20th century.

With his racing car resplendent in bright primary colours, Poulain caused a sensation in the Le Mans 24 Hour Race and could be certain of attracting looks of amazement from spectators as he flew past them in his number 93 racing car.

Race cars as medium: the designs by Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella and Jenny Holzer (top to bottom) present very different interpretations.



In 1979 Andy Warhol was the first artist who, rather than applying his design to a scale model which would then be transferred to the original, applied paint directly onto the BMW M1. His colour scheme was designed to be a visual expression of speed.

The Le Mans circuit became the central "arena" for the Art Car experiment, since all the painted racing cars of the 1970s went on to battle for victory in the Le Mans 24 Hour marathon.

#### The list gets longer

Calder's CSL was so well received that work on the Art Car project continued. American artists such as Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein began to design their own Art Cars and sign them in prominent places.

Andy Warhol was the first artist to add his autograph directly the paintwork of the car, in this case an M1. Whereas the other artists had previously committed their artworks to a 1:5 scale model before the design was transferred to the actual car, Warhol insisted on painting straight onto the Art Car itself in 1979.

#### Art car with words

In the 1980s and '90s, further artists joined the ranks of the Art Car designers and BMW production models were also included. The last Art Car to date was another racing model which competed in the Le Mans marathon: the BMW V12 Le Mans sports racer, to which Jenny Holzer added maxims from her "Truisms" work in 1999.

With its Art Car Collection, the BMW Group is pursuing its goal of bringing technology and art together with a view to sparking new creativity from the tension between the two areas. It also endeavours to make the relationship between culture and technology transparent and comprehensible. This illustrious collection, moreover, is meant to exemplify the

cultural commitment of the company as a whole. In future, BMW Group Mobile Tradition will continue to be responsible for the safekeeping and exhibition of the Art Cars and will thus remain actively involved in this project. The aim, after all, is to keep these valuable four-wheeled works of art moving beyond this particular exhibition in Düsseldorf.

#### Artists at the exhibition

Peter Cain  
 Tamara Grcic  
 Jan Dibbets  
 Sylvie Fleury  
 Alan Graham  
 Jenny Holzer  
 Rita McBride  
 Christiane Möbus  
 Bertrand Lavier  
 Julian Opie  
 Gabriel Orozco  
 Robert Rauschenberg  
 Santiago Sierra  
 Stefan Sous  
 Frank Stella  
 Wolfgang Tillmans  
 Rubén Ortiz Torres  
 Carel Visser  
 Erwin Wurm

#### Artists of the Art Cars

Alexander Calder  
 Frank Stella  
 Roy Lichtenstein  
 Andy Warhol  
 Ernst Fuchs  
 Robert Rauschenberg  
 Michael Jagamara Nelson  
 Ken Done  
 Matazo Kayama  
 César Mannique  
 A. R. Penck  
 Esther Mahlangu  
 Sandro Chia  
 David Hockney  
 Jenny Holzer