

Originality Deconstructed: A New Traveling Exhibition from Be Original Americas

by Stefanie Schwalb

As counterfeit design continues to plague the industry, some key players have come together to shed a light on the issue and how to combat it. To commemorate the 10th anniversary of Be Original Americas, the organization launched its first traveling exhibition, “Originality Deconstructed.” Sponsored by exhibitors Lumens, FLOS, Louis Poulsen, Emeco, and Suzanne Tick, the show includes both physical and video works—the latter of which also features Bernhardt Design and Modern Metal Designs—and is comprised of disassembled elements, physical designs, and

raw materials. The program’s goal is to reveal the “how” and “why” of iconic designs and enlighten attendees on the production process, sustainability issues, the challenges of copyrighting designs, and the value of authenticity.

In tandem with the launch of the traveling exhibition, which took place at the Ace Hotel in New York City, a panel accompanied the opening reception on October 18th, with some notable participants. “Let’s Get Real: A Discussion About Counterfeit Design”—which was moderated by journalist and exhibition curator Adrian Madlener—featured



A traveling exhibition from Be Original Americas, “Originality Deconstructed” was launched at the Ace Hotel in New York City. Photo Credit: Little Comb Productions



The exhibit gives viewers a look at the key elements found in products, like components of FLOS light fixtures. Photo Credit: Little Comb Productions



At the opening reception, panelists Ann Petersen, Suzanne Tick, and Ricardo Nabholz discussed the widespread problem of counterfeit design. Photo Credit: Stefanie Schwalb

Ann Petersen, Director, Brand and Trade Marketing, Lumens; Ricardo Nabholz, Creative Director, TPG Architecture; and Suzanne Tick, CEO, Tick Studios, Creative Director of Luum Textiles, and collaborator with Skyline Design. The discussion centered around maintaining product and service integrity as brands continue to face an increase of knockoffs flooding the market.

“Design—like many industries—is getting wider exposure thanks to social media and other outlets, but that newfound attention can sometimes come with a catch,” noted Madlener. “A growing number of recognized

brands and manufacturers, as well as independent talents, are finding themselves under threat by forces looking to illegally sell cheap knockoffs of their most sought-after wares.” Part of this proliferation, of course, has to do with how the industry and society at large has evolved.

“A long time ago when many of us started this industry, we found out about products through the salesperson that came to your office,” says Nabholz. “Now young designers that are coming up are getting most of their information through social media. These counterfeiters use the actual product imagery from the main manu-

facturer, so you have to do a lot of due diligence to understand that this is somebody hocking a knockoff.”

While manufacturers have a valuable opportunity to promote products in a more targeted way, they must also be aware of what is happening on different platforms. “So, it’s important to educate consumers by creating content for them around what authentic means by showing imagery of chairs and other pieces with their stamp and authenticity labels,” Petersen noted. “I think there’s a responsibility and an obligation for retailers and manufacturers who have that audience to educate the consumer about why it’s authentic.”

Aside from potential financial loss, there are other challenges facing designers that come from being copied. “As creators, we have an opportunity to be really creative, just maintain the status quo, or be really destructive,” said Tick. “Mimicking designs is a destructive element that’s a collective consciousness getting lower and lower. It’s up to all of us individually to stand up to our clients, but also to constantly try to come up with new things, have a narrative, and while you’re developing things, look at boards of products that are already in the marketplace.”

And in terms of that product development, how does the correlation between ideas of sustainability, resourcefulness, durability, and authenticity come together, and for design, does this ultimately translate to less product in the market? For Tick, it does, and part of her process includes finding companies that are being creative with new fiber. “As textile people, new fiber development is taking back all of the garment waste, chopping it up, and creating new yarns. It’s bringing the yarn back, weaving it, and seeing what you can create out of a new material that has never been developed before.”

But for Petersen, there’s more to the story. “It’s a two-sided transaction. I think that we focus a lot on the people who are creating the copies, but again, the other side of it is about someone purchasing,” she noted. “So how do we continue to educate them at the most basic level about the fact that this is a copy of something and you should know why the authentic piece is better? It’s also about finding new angles and never feeling like you have told that story enough—because you can’t tell it enough.”

To counteract the counterfeit culture, the panel had a few different ideas on ensuring authenticity in some practical ways. When it comes to

design, Tick said that she always asks clients for the opportunity to deconstruct her team’s own products—the authentic product—to try to get to a better price point rather than have them take it and just throw it out. “Purchasing agents go to these mills that’ll knock off anything that you have,” she explained. “But this is all about

relationship-building. Every project that you work on is an opportunity to build a stronger relationship with people in our communities.”

In the e-commerce world, Petersen said that in addition to rejoining Be Original Americas last year, her company is always making use of its platform. “We reach millions of consumers



A weaving by Suzanne Tick, incorporating found materials.

officeinsight

and trade monthly, and what we want them to find is the stories of the people and making those personal connections to the products that they'll be bringing into their home," she noted. "That's the number-one thing that we can do in order to counteract counterfeit design. [By sharing] the story, the quality, the imagery of the stamp, or the certificate of authenticity that comes with it, they understand why they're making a purchase and why it matters."

Meanwhile Nabholz finds that there can be opportunity in social media as well, and there's some parallels to accounts like Diet Prada™ on Instagram. "People are drawing attention to these things and then letting the people in the comments eviscerate the offending party. They're not buying Prada or Balenciaga, but they care about the authenticity of it," he said. "There's also these smaller maker accounts

who have really loyal followings—people that are willing to put themselves out there. That's an opportunity to change the way you're engaging with social media and get people who may not even be able to afford to buy a product to care about it."

Petersen thinks that guarantee of authenticity is important for manufacturers since the value of longevity is a critical factor to consider. "When I started my career, I realized that our products were not labeled. That's something that you can take a photograph of and send to all of the people who sell your product so they know how to identify if it's authentic or not, and that lives with the product for the life of the product," she said. "Because one of the big selling points of buying an authentic product is the resale value. It's a heritage piece that you will hand down."

And yet the broader question still

remains: How can we as an industry alter the cultural mindset that deems knockoffs acceptable? Tick believes calling them out is one avenue. "Be as original as you can on the products you're designing, so that it's so obvious if someone is knocking you off."

Nabholz thinks that NFTs are an interesting example of a transaction type that could be used to sell furniture (or any object) as original while simultaneously maintaining its value on the secondary market. "It's permanently recorded, and you can never erase that transaction," he explained. "So you could mint one with every piece that comes off the line, and then that piece is forever connected to that thing, and that's completely open source in public."

With the New York run of "Originality Deconstructed" complete, the exhibit heads to Palm Springs in February and Los Angeles in March. ■



The exhibit can be seen in Palm Springs and Los Angeles in 2023.