



Dominic Meyrick
Principal, Hoare Lea Lighting

When is lighting a work of art?

Creativity is highly prized in lighting design and is often thought of as 'artistry', while recognised artists work with light, further confusing the boundaries between art and design. **Dominic Meyrick** studies the blurred distinctions

Understanding the relationship between creativity and engineering in lighting design and striking a balance between the two is challenging and raises the question of whether lighting design can be classified as art.

That question became a legal bone of contention in 2006 when London's Haunch of Venison art gallery received a full VAT tax bill for £36,000 after importing lighting and video installations by US artists Dan Flavin and Bill Viola. As sculptures, the pieces would be subject to just 5 per cent VAT. The gallery won an appeal at tribunal, but that decision has since been overruled by EC officials.

I used to think I understood the difference between art and design but now I am not so sure. Distinguishing 'Art' with a capital 'A' from mere technique is very difficult.

Recognised artists such as James Turrell and Vong Phaophanit evidently have used light much in the way other artists might use oils or acrylics. I suggest we can agree that their work might accurately be called Art with a capital 'A' and that it is informed by an engagement with contemporary aesthetics.

Now what about design? Definitions such as 'the process, techniques, or art of designing' are unhelpful, especially when they include the word 'art' with a small 'a'.

So let's look for clues further afield in film and TV. An acquaintance in this field describes the people she employs as 'creatives', rather than designers or directors. I think this is helpful, as she uses this word to distinguish between those involved directly in the production of film and television and those who

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generate the creative content. As in lighting design, film and TV creatives are from all manner of different backgrounds, and so a generic term is useful.

Another blurring I see is in the work of Tom Heatherwick. Design, architecture, sculpture? On the Cass Sculpture Foundation website, Heatherwick Studio is described as 'a 15-strong team, which includes architects, landscape architects, product designers and engineers'. So, technicians, then, rather than artists. Nevertheless the website is a sculpture website and decidedly in the realm of the 'Arty'. See what I mean? It's all very tricky.

Let's look at other blurrers of boundaries. Take the famous Tower of Wind in Yokohama by Toyo Ito and Kaeru Mende. Built to hide a ventilation tower,



it becomes, says Ito, a 'phenomenon of light' at night. Art, or just good lighting design? Then there is Yann Kersalé, who explores the relationship between light, architecture and location. Kersalé describes his work as identifying the "electrocardiogram" of a building – his way of describing what we might consider an 'aesthetic'. Architect or artist? And take the UK's Jason Bruges. What is Digital Fountain, his installation commissioned for Westfield Stratford? Art or design?

For my part I am neither talented enough to be an artist nor have the mathematical aptitude to attempt engineering. Content to be a 'creative' I became a 3D designer, then switched to lighting design. So is what I do art? Well, perhaps not. But I think I can claim to be engaged in the art of designing – does that count? ■