



NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

Department of Industrial Design

HOW PSYCHOLOGY IS APPLIED TO DESIGN:

A Contemporary Perspective

By

Mark Williams



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INTRODUCTION

Psychology and product design are two fields both born around the turn of the century, which have grown side by side. They offer neighbouring families of concepts that influence each other, and overlap with dozens of contrasting fields. Psychological, cultural and social forces determine whether certain products fail or succeed. If technology were the only influencing factor in a product's success, we'd all be sitting on lumps of polyurethane foam and every piece of electrical equipment would be either a black or white box.

But thankfully there are designers who take account of our emotional as well as our ergonomic needs. Design groups such as Alessi, Memphis, Studio Alchymia, and Mambo have become prominent during the latter half of the of the twentieth century. Their products are functional yet playful, featuring bright colours, soft contours and sometimes a toy-like infantilist style. These products will be discussed from a non-functional level, to see how they entertain or have some communicative value, by transference, signs, or the manipulation of emotions, all of which are based on psychology, as opposed to products which fulfil their functions, but do so in a bland, characterless way.

A true work of design must be moving, it must convey feelings, evoke memories, surprise and transgress, it must be able to make us feel more intensely that we are living the only life we've got, in short it must be poetic. (Alessi promotional brochure, 1989).

Poetry and product design may seem like strange bedfellows. But, when you consider that we live in a world where art tends to be confined to galleries, and poetry to libraries, and that the average westerner uses "between 10,000 and 30,000 different objects in the home, at work, and for leisure pursuits" (Perianen 1994 p.3), poetry is as necessary a design factor as material considerations or construction. Though not necessarily because of humanitarian worries on the part of the manufacturer, it is the designed 'shell' or 'sheath' of competitive products that gives a product life, and makes it more attractive to the consumer.

A lot of these lively design products are on the rebound from the harsh 'black box' designs of the Eighties, just as the bright garish designs of the Fifties were on the rebound from the deprivation and horror of two World Wars and the Depression. But by tickling the consumer's unconscious, soothing the ego and flirting with the libido, these products are more than a passing fad; they represent a new wave of psychologically sound products.

One cannot build life from refrigerators, politics, credit statements and crossword puzzles. That is impossible. Nor can anyone exist for any length of time without poetry, without colour, without love.

Antoine de St.Exupery (Papanek, 1971, preface)

'Form follows function' was a good dictate around the start of this century, when western product design tended to be self-indulgent and over-decorated, but that dictate was then taken to puritanical extremes, especially by the Bauhaus and later followers, to the point where products were becoming bland and featureless. Throughout the twentieth century, design has wavered between these two extremes, with variations such as form follows fashion, form follows form, form follows function stereotypes to form follows fiction. Constructed fictions have been the main selling angle of many products, such as certain detergents being kinder to dolphins, or certain wristwatches making the consumer 'sexier' or more in control of their life. And as any psychologist knows, constructed fictions are usually subconsciously related to the truth. Or as psychologists Peter Marsh and Peter Collett put it: products are principally a medium of expression, a way of saying who we are and where we belong in the social order of things. (Lambert 1993 p.56). Through psychological associations, consumers choose products which maintain their self-image.

These associations, and how they affect what people buy and why designers design what they design, will be discussed in the context of the marketplace. Particular reference will be made to associations having their origins in society or parental/ child/ primate sources, and how these associations affect

products at every level.

The way in which the unconscious mind of the designer can relate to the creative process will also be examined: how design needs a combination of logical reasoning and childlike day-dreaming in order to form any kind of breakthrough or 'Elegant solution'. There will also be discussions on how factors like sex, surface and colour fit in between the success of a product and the consumer's psyche. A number of products (typified by, but not restricted to Alessi) will be analyzed to see what makes them click with consumers; whether it's possible to be intellectually aroused by a wristwatch or spiritually nourished by an oven lighter.

If the designer can make something beautiful as well as useful, adding a touch of magic for good measure, then that is the perfection of the useful. Matteo Thun (Buck 1993 p.12).

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The depth mind can do things that the surface mind cannot do, it can encompass a complexity of relationships that is quite beyond the capacity of the surface mind. (Sutherland 1958 p.82).

Letting it go is what the whole game is. You put your finger on it and it slips away, right? John Lennon (Huth, Guitar Player 1994 p.47).

Industrial design involves thinking on many different levels: businesslike, analytical, creative, which require different states of mind and attitudes. With reference to the depth and surface minds, Ehrenzweig states that "Any act of creativeness requires a temporary, cyclical paralysis of the surface attention" (Sutherland 1958 p.81). The mind operates in oscillations of thinking, between the rapid everyday analytical level to the slower semi-awake level, and this is often where creative leaps take place, just above the even slower, submerged level of sleep and dreaming. For example, Finnish furniture designer Artek Oy states that "In addition to seeking a form by conventional means, illustration, writing and dreaming were an integral part of the design process". (Arnold, Form Function Finland, March, 1994 p.27).

Freud called these slower levels of thinking the 'Oceanic' state: "A return to the infantile state when the child's ego is not yet differentiated from the external world" (Sutherland 1958 p.81), or in other words, a repetition of the infant's feelings in its mother's arms. By suspending the surface mind, solutions derived from inherent knowledge can be arrived at. Just as personal problems cannot always be solved by reasoning, design problems cannot always be solved by logic. Inherent, or intuitive knowledge (which is the essence of poetry) is what makes certain design solutions 'beautiful', stemming from flashes of inspiration as opposed to being stilted and forced.

"Creative imagination seems to exist in all people... but it is severely diminished by the age of six"(Papanek 1972 p.136). The intuitive

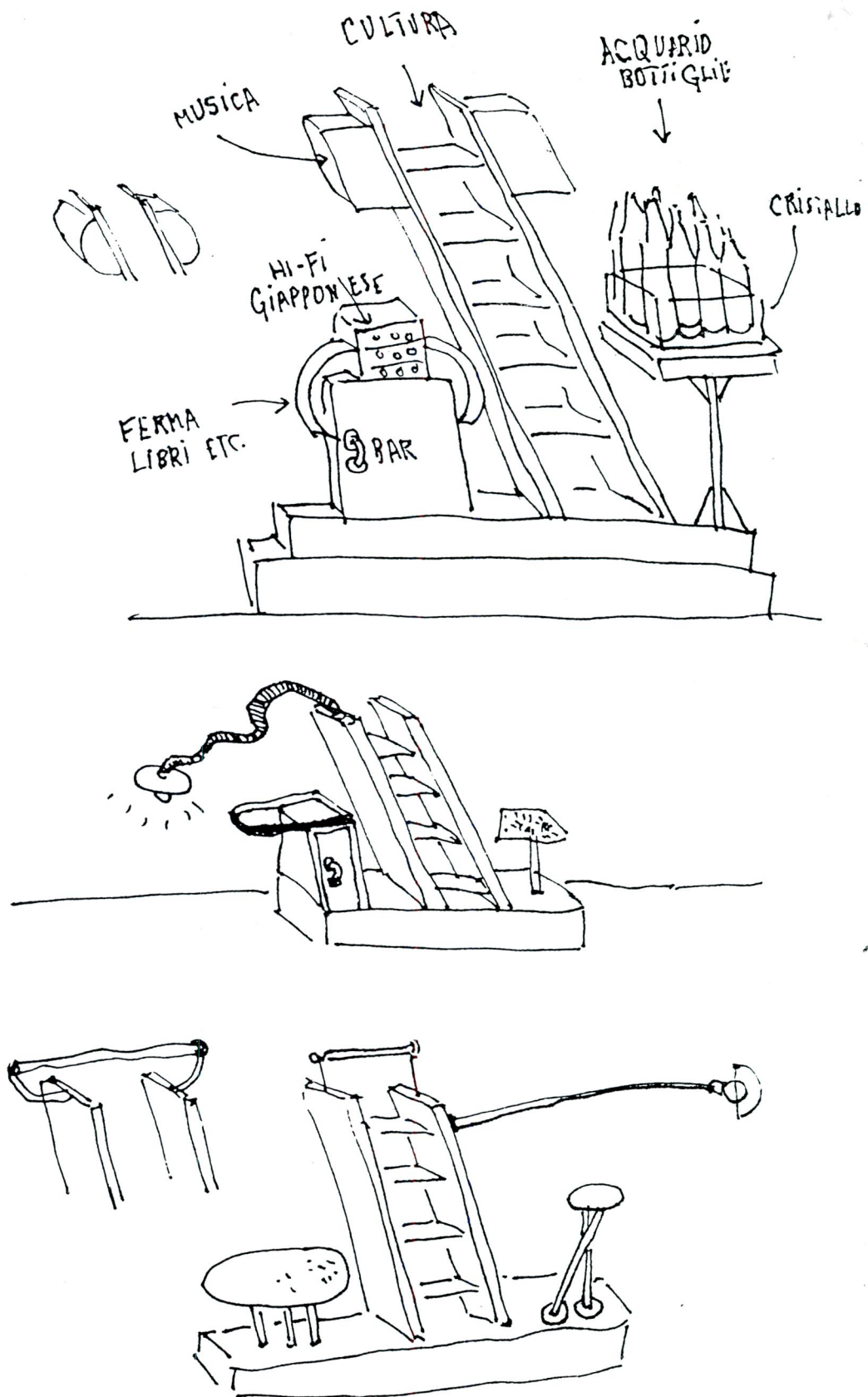
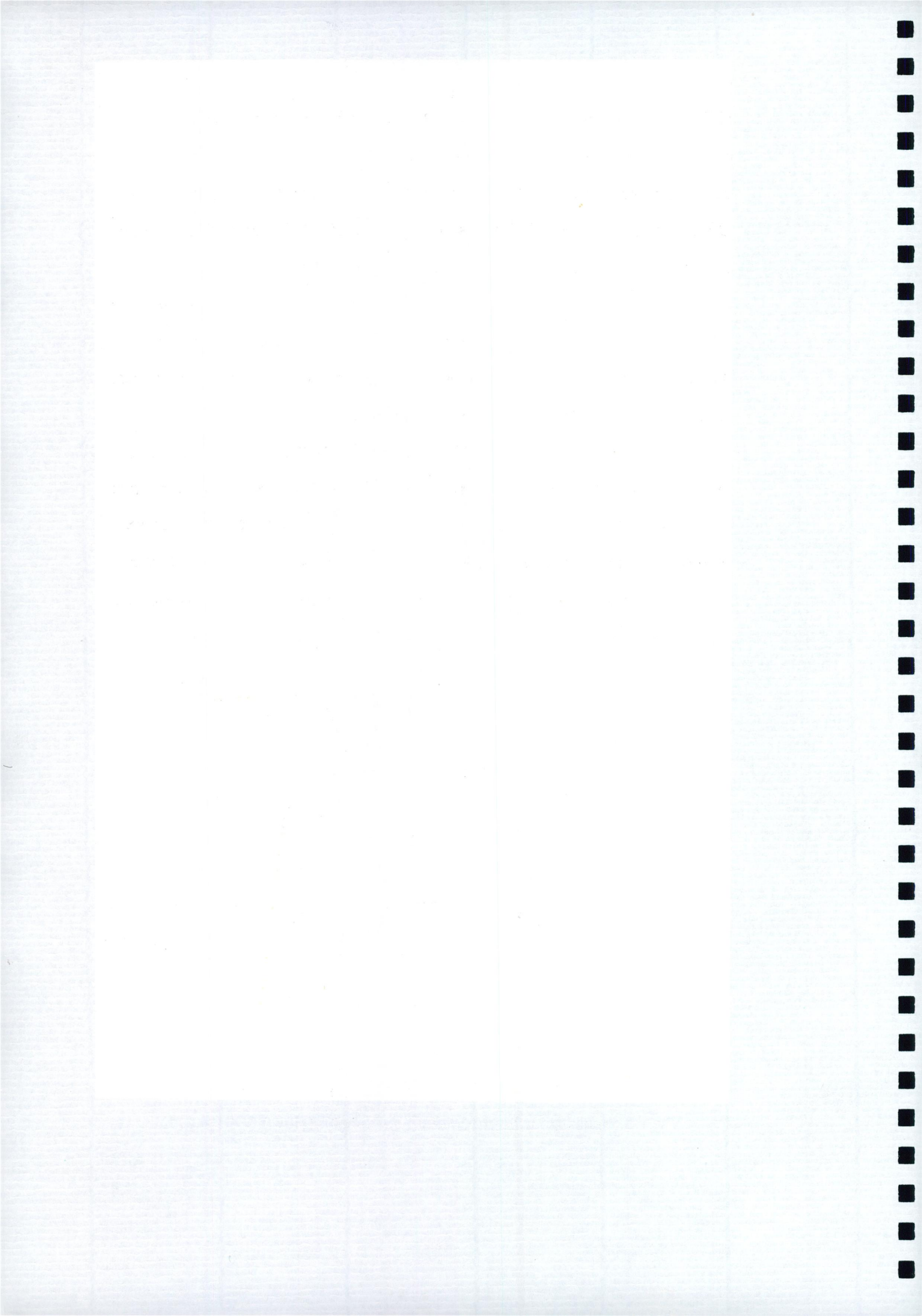


Fig.1 Sketches from Ettore Sottsass's notebook (Hoger 1993 p.211)



child-like approach can be seen in the sketches of Ettore Sottsass. (Fig.1).

Sottsass makes fun of his design process in the introduction to a retrospective of his work, which is done in the form of a primary school project, written in a childlike style- "I am an architect but mostly I do design" (Hoger 1993 p.1). Frank Gehry, another designer who has worked for Alessi, describes his design process as "Kind of naive and childish, it's like kids in a playpen....following the ideas rather than predicting where you're going." (Gabra-Liddel 1994 p.60). The designer and the 'inner child' is a common element behind much of the warm, fuzzy, and friendly designs which will be discussed later.

Whereas Freud considered the 'Oceanic' state to be child-like, Blake considered it to be female, "and which he insists must be given equal inheritance if there is not to be psychic sterility" (Sutherland 1958 p.92). Whether its inherent nature is female or child-like is academic, what does matter is that it is a state of being based on rest; meditation and yoga are one path, as is the time just before sleep.

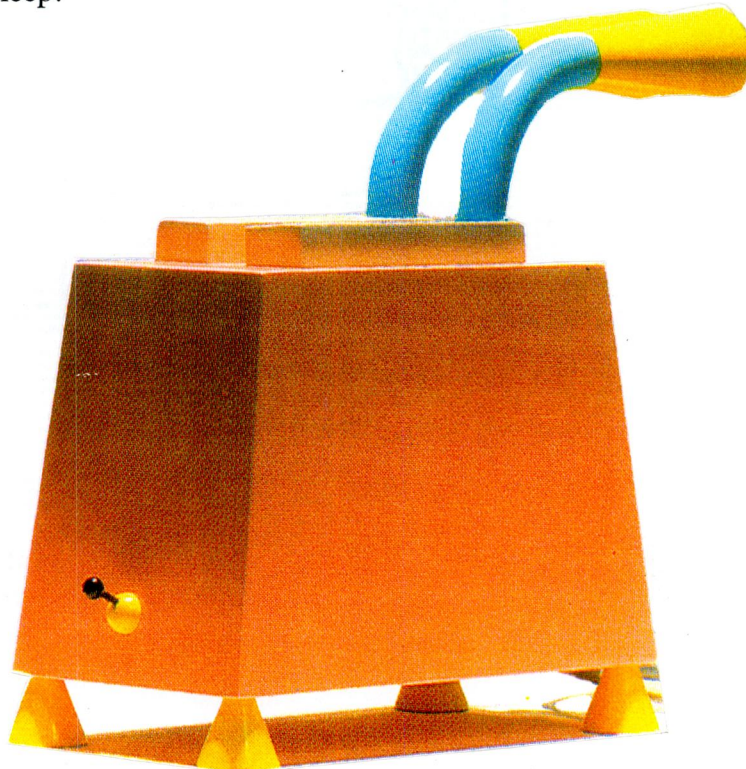


Fig. 2 Prototype toaster by Michele di Lucchi

The descriptions of inspiration in designers like Ettore Sottsass and Michele di Lucchi have been described as:

Instances of lightning inspiration, examples of awareness only possible in brain cells already prepared for a certain chemical reaction" (Radice 1985 p.36).

This leads us to conclude that the creative process is also dependant on training; that unless the mind in idea-receptive mode is an educated mind, then the 'Eureka' factor is not going to happen. This process can be seen in Michele de Lucchi's 1984 prototype toaster for Studio Alchymia, (Fig.2) as it combines 'playpen' forms with design professionalism.

Other creativity theories include Ehrenzweig's vision of the creative process as a "Primary psychic disintegration"(Sutherland 1958 p.94); in other words, conjuring up the popular image of the tortured artist thriving on anxiety, madness and death to produce works of art. As art is related to design, are these tortures related? It depends on the individual's psyche but it seems that creative 'fires', as opposed to creative blocks, are more inherent than learned. The individual designer must have some of that artist's fire, if he/she wishes to carry any kind of expressive original design through all the barriers of pre-planned production, market analysis and trend researching that can compromise an individual's vision. Many designers are content to churn out commercial fodder, what they think the public wants, the only thing that tortures them is deadlines.

There are also certain emotional blocks which inhibit the creative process, the first one being fear. Fear of failure, fear of ridicule, doubt, lack of self esteem are all weights which suppress the creative individual. They must be overcome if the idea is to be realised. But none of these blocks are inherent, they are learned, and as such they can be unlearned.

"Intuition is more important than intelligence" said Albert Einstein (Bauer 1992 p.122). So I would say, that in order to increase creativity, the normal state of mind must be suspended, and an open free-flowing childlike

state of mind must be achieved. The randomness of the oceanic state can lead to constructive accidents, thanks to the mind's "Gestalt tendency" (Sutherland 1958 p.80), ie. the tendency to see patterns even in chaos. When someone daydreams, their eyes 'glaze over': "This wide focus is indicative of the submerged mind's wide focus, not the narrow focus of ordinary attention" (Sutherland 1958 p.82). Or as Stone Gossard of the band Pearl Jam says: "For me musically nothing good ever comes out of being conscious about it" (Lane, Guitar World Feb.1994 p.33).

Whether by training, meditation, yoga, dreaming or possibly in the future designer creativity drugs, there are new avenues of creativity waiting to influence the design process. There is a need for new cortical associations or "To have both feet firmly planted on a pink cloud" (Papanek 1972 p.145).

UNCONCIOUS ASSOCIATIONS

There are no ergonomic/marketing theories that can guarantee the surefire success of a new product. Similarly, some people have trouble explaining why they like, say, one chair and not another. When Raymond Loewy and associates succeeded in designing a noiseless household fan, it didn't sell well until they changed it to bring back the humming noise. All because the average American "felt that a totally noiseless fan did not provide enough cool air" (Papanek 1972 p.145).

These are examples of unconscious associations (or the primary ideas of life) at work; whether they derive from society and culture or subconscious environmental/ childhood/ genetic sources, they are all linked with the survival of the species, and they all influence the world in ways most people are not even aware of.

For example , why are jeans so popular? Is it because they combine a multitude of unconscious associations, whether masculine (strength, labour, sport), of feminine (sexuality)? Or is it because they allow the wearer to instantly become an accepted part of the crowd? Jeans hold such a resource bank of potential meanings that they give the wearer the freedom to either express or hide his or her identity. Considering the paradox of Western ideology, that "The most widely held communal value is that of individualism" (Fiske 1989 p.3), this is probably the cornerstone of their appeal. They satisfy the unconscious desire to be somebody, without attracting attention.

Products with conflicting meanings is a theme which will be returned to later; how successful products have been developed by harnessing 'semantic chaos'.

Introverts have a lower threshold of external stimulation, and are more susceptible to conditioning and the internalization of social values and attitudes than extroverts - Eysenck (Dobson 1982 p.353)

This would lead us to believe that certain sections of society are more influenced by the advertising and marketing of products than others- "By the mechanisms of reinforcement, association, imitation and identification, he learns the attitudes which contribute to his social acceptance" (Dobson 1982 p.357). Likewise, low self-esteem subjects are easily swayed by the media and society, as they don't really value their own opinions. Such specimens of mental putty make up a marketing man's dream market: the kind of person that dreams of a world of imprisoning luxury, a world typified by emotional illiteracy and moral decay.

As he leaves I'm wondering what happens in the world of Tim Price, which is really the world of most of us: big ideas, guy stuff, boy meets the world, boy gets it. (Ellis 1991 p.384).

This world of imprisoning luxury was typified by the 'design' decade of the Eighties, but in the caring sharing Nineties there is a tendency towards less consumer abuse. Alberto Alessi speaks of 'good' objects; "Objects that do not alienate..... that encourage a development in the public rather than winking conspiratorially at its regression" (Gabra-Liddell 1994 p.127).

Though, just as animals mark their territory with urine, man will continue to mark his status with products. Competitiveness is the order of the day, because man has arisen as a primate predator, and as such he lacks the "Co-operative spirit that is present in such pack hunters as wolves" (Morris 1971 p.27). "Through objects, each individual and each group searches out his/her place in an order, consumer choice is a production of signs" (Tobin 1992 p.106). So it is that many products are directed at the rich, the 'wish we were rich' or the 'wish we were rich too but this is all we can afford' consumer.

Matteo Thun has said that "Design must have the greatest possible expressive impact, ie: the greatest possible communication value" (Radice 1985 p.45). So, through various associations, through colour, surface, and form, a product expresses the owner's character (or lack of it).

For example, these melamine trays by Guido Venturini for Alessi's 1994 Twergi collection, (Fig. 3) are expressive of either an individualistic, New World samurai type of personality, or of an extrovert fun-loving grown-up, still very much in touch with the inner child in them.

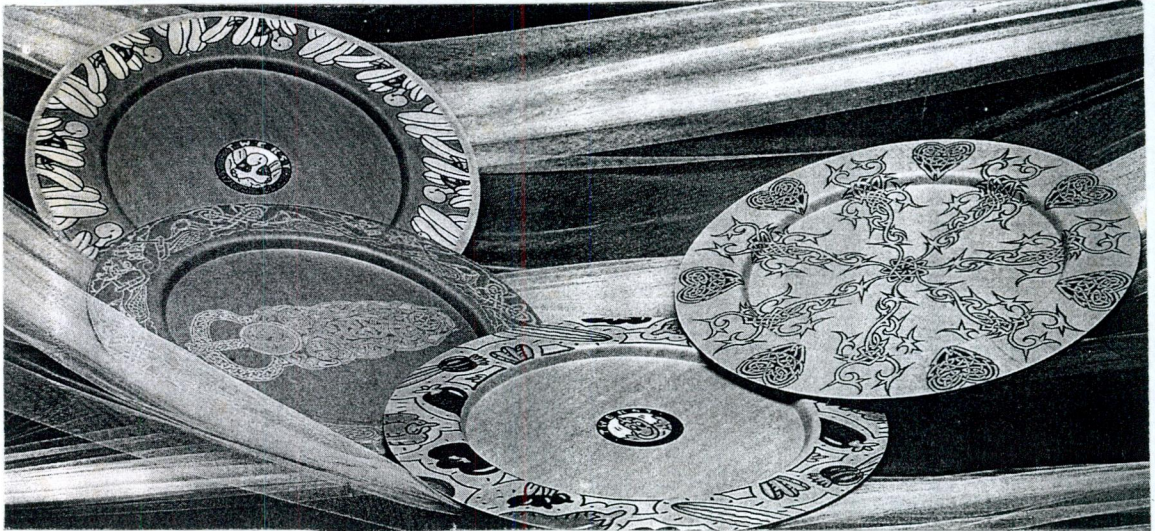


Fig.3 Melamine trays, for Alessi's 1993 Twergi collection, by Guido Venturini

The celtic patterns on the second tray are fairly obvious, but the patterns on the tray on the far right, are a mixture of celtic designs and Nineties tribal tattoo styles. By the simple use of the material (melamine) and surface decoration selected, Venturini has ingrained an ordinary tray with associations of alternative culture; from surfing to punk rock all the way back to associations of mythic, noble, free warrior culture. "Good design like alchemy, fuses together disparate ideas from different origins"(Forty 1986 p.221). The mind's gestalt tendency causes products like these to appear as one idea; many slightly odd new products succeed through large doses of deep down familiarity.

Pre-packaged lifestyles based on unconscious associations are the cornerstone of much mainstream design. Habitat, for example, provides "Packaged good taste for a young market that wanted to buy a complete lifestyle rather than just a suite of furniture" (Sparke 1980 p.86). A lot of this has to do with conformity, the whole idea of buying into a dream, which will be discussed later. But for now let us return to the origins of associations relevant to product

design.

The deepest rooted associations are those that are ingrained in our minds at the most primal level. These are things that were learnt before the first civilisations and societies began to exert influence.

The fundamental patterns of behaviour laid down in our early days as hunting apes still shine through our affairs, no matter how lofty they might be. (Morris 1971 p.36).

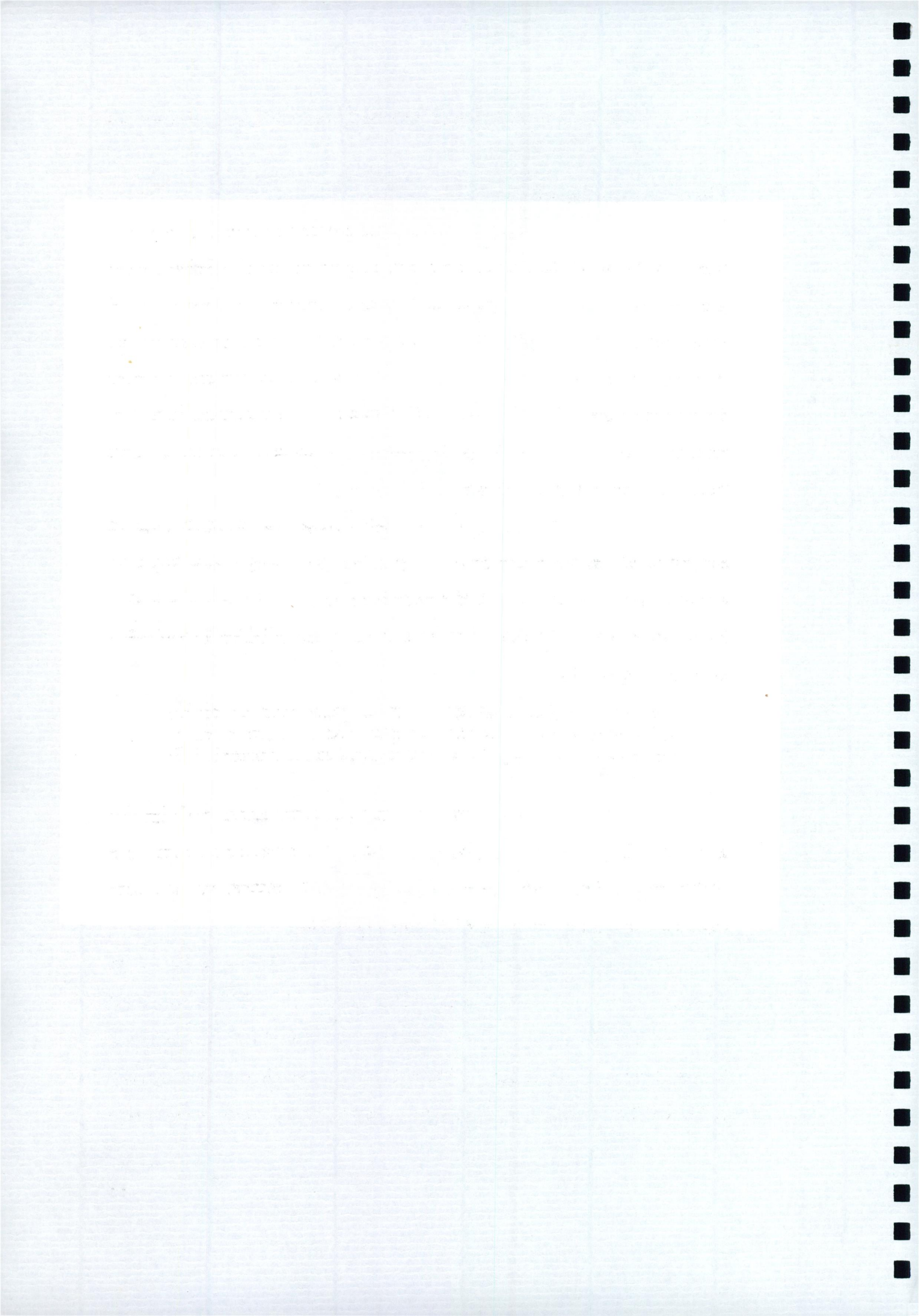
Just as a human laugh is descendant from the primate's sign for 'I recognise this danger is not real', so too is the human need for soft comforting products, a descendant from the primate need for security. Infants clearly show our programmed non-physical needs. In a test, baby Rhesus monkeys chose a soft towel surrogate mother that provided no milk, rather than a wire mesh surrogate mother that did provide milk, (Dobson 1982 p.334). This primal need for security is being satisfied by many 'warm, fuzzy' Nineties product design. (See 'Transitional objects' on p.40).

Similarly the success of products which have been put down by design's elite as 'ugly', can be explained by Hofstatter's attraction/aversion conflict theory (Buck 1993 p.94). When fire was first discovered, primate man would have been attracted by its warmth and visual effect, and simultaneously repulsed by its burning effect, causing the primal beginnings of fascination. Hofstatter has stated that attraction and aversion must be charged simultaneously for it to be effective. So it can be seen that Loewy's statement that "It is hard to sell something that is ugly" (Buck 1993 p.94) is in need of revision.

These chicken lamps, or 'Bibibibi' by Ingo Maurer, from 1990 (Fig. 4) are a good example of Hofstatter's theory in effect. They combine elements of kitsch (theoretically repulsive) with the "winsome charm of domestic pets" (Bauer 1992 p.86) (theoretically attractive). Like Venturini's trays, they provide elements of strangeness with deep rooted familiarities. Phillipe Starck defines the necessary amount of surprise in a product as about 15%, "Below this,



Fig. 4 'Bibibibi' by Ingo Maurer, 1990



the product will not have that bond of 'affection', above this percentage we can only assume that there is a risk of misunderstanding or rejection from the user" (Gabra-Liddell, 1994, p.100).

Primal associations are strongest because they have been present in the mind the longest. So naturally, after primal associations, those generated during childhood would be the next effective. But unlike primal associations, they vary greatly from individual to individual. Colours, for example, may depend on an individual's childhood experiences, as genderised colour differences are learned at this stage. But even then there are variations. "One may think that vivid pink is attention-getting and fun, or just tacky and cheap, often there is no middle ground." (Eiseaman 1983 p.165).

Education also affects associations; although a school curriculum reflects the society the child is growing up in, many people forget the role of the teacher. The teacher is like a stand-in parent, who interprets as well as imparts knowledge. All these factors have a bearing on an individual's relationship to products in later life.

Our psychological conditioning, often going back to earliest childhood memories, comes into play and predisposes us, or provides us with antipathy against a given value. (Papanek 1971 p.14)

Pop furniture, for example, is one branch of design that works off childhood associations, bean bags and bright plastic chairs appeal to the adult's inner child, which "loves everything which is mobile, endless, non-repeatable, inconstant, not blocked" (Sparke 1980 p.96).

Studies have shown that maternal deprivation can lead to "Delinquency and psychopathy in later life" (Dobson 1982 p.335). So does it follow that the more a mother loves a young designer, the friendlier and furrier his/her designs will be? A tenuous link perhaps, but if you look at the biography of Matteo Thun for example, you will see endearing family snapshots in between

his colourful designs for Swatch, Alessi and Philips. Likewise group shots of designers from Memphis/Alessi etc are often presented in a playful, humorous way that shows the family element behind these 'happy' designs. It is no coincidence that Italy is the source of much of Memphis/Alessi's design ethic, and is also a country where the influence of the mother figure is exceptionally strong. When Alessi collaborated with Phillips to create a new range of kitchen products, (Fig. 5), Alessandro Mendini spoke of "Maternal ideograms prevalent in Fifties design" (Gilgrish, Design week Oct.1994 p.9).

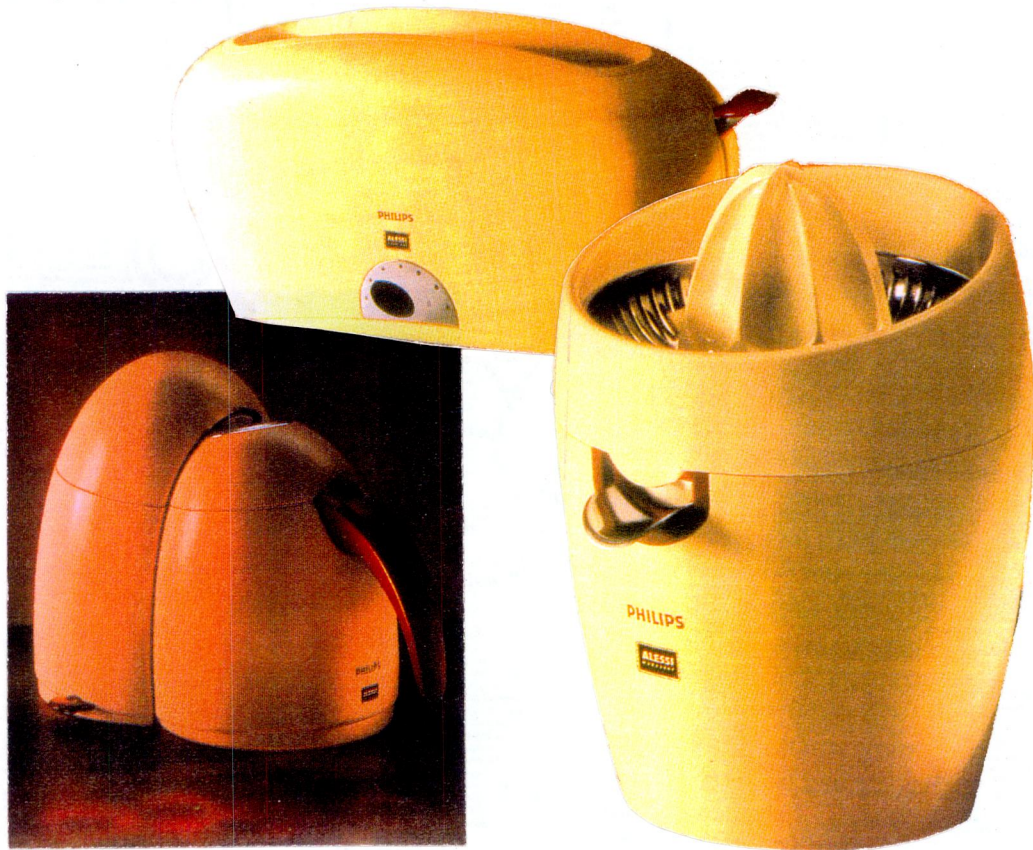


Fig.5 Alessi/ Phillips range of Kitchenware

The rounded stocky forms and colours which have fleshy associations (salmon pink, ivory, burgundy, etc.), change the image of domestic appliance as mother's servant, to domestic appliance as the mother. They also fit in with the image of the kitchen as heart and soul of family life, which typifies many Mediterranean countries.

Modern western culture and society exert influences on

product associations on a whole range of different levels. One example of such a cultural association working for a product would be the use of graphic equalizers on Walkmans. Walkman headphones have only basic quality, and yet they have controls which make minimal changes to the music being played- all because people are influenced by "The popular image of a recording studio mixing console" (Vickers 1989 p.14).

Another popular cultural association during the thirties was the streamline, a "Curved line recurring again and again, a line with a sharp parabolic curve at the end" (Grief 1975 p.35). It influenced the form of everything from coffins to pencil sharpeners, objects that would never be involved in any sort of wind resistance, all because America was seeing air travel, faster bigger trains, and the first land speed records for the first time. People had a desire for speed, and if they could not afford the thrill of the real thing, they wanted to experience it by proxy, through products. This 'product substituting for consumer's misperception of reality' trend continues today. Image makers, advertisers and product designers, are constantly trying to tap into the public's unspoken desires. For example, nouveaux riches wannabes who have never been on a horse's back, or the deck of yacht, buying polo shirts and naval sweaters.

Just as people may be attracted by certain associations, so too may they be repulsed. For example after World War Two there was a general backlash against the architectural and design movements of the Thirties "Because of its ambiguous relationship with Fascism" (Sparke 1980 p.66). Following this many designers looked more to Fine Art and sculpture for inspiration. Furniture and lighting design especially became looser and freer, so that it wasn't always immediately obvious that chairs were chairs and lights were lights. This flock of strange angels/light bulbs by Ingo Maurer for Flos, from 1991, (Fig. 6) is a fine example of design subverting itself by being presented in an artistic format. This change in attitudes was influenced by a worldwide

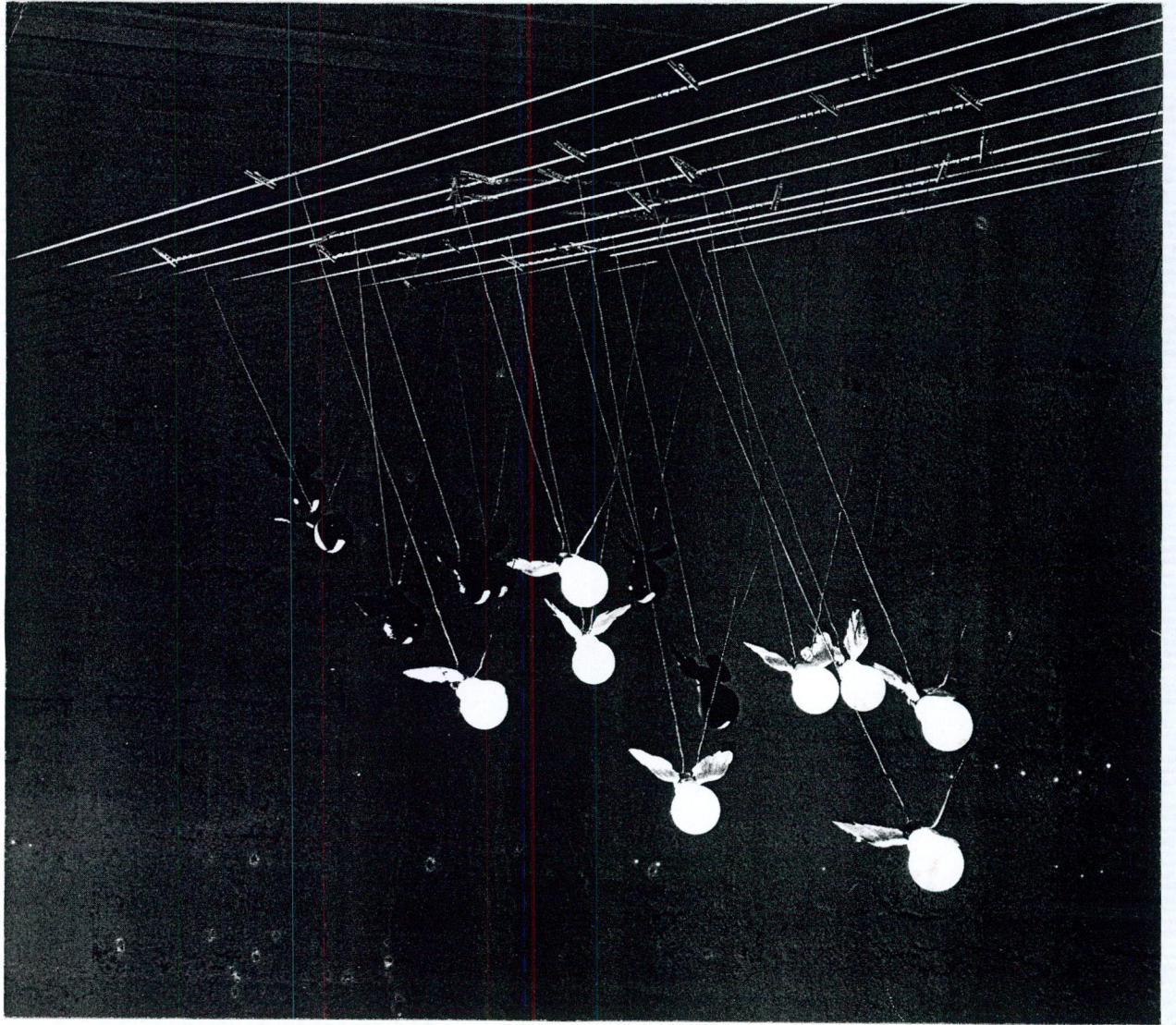
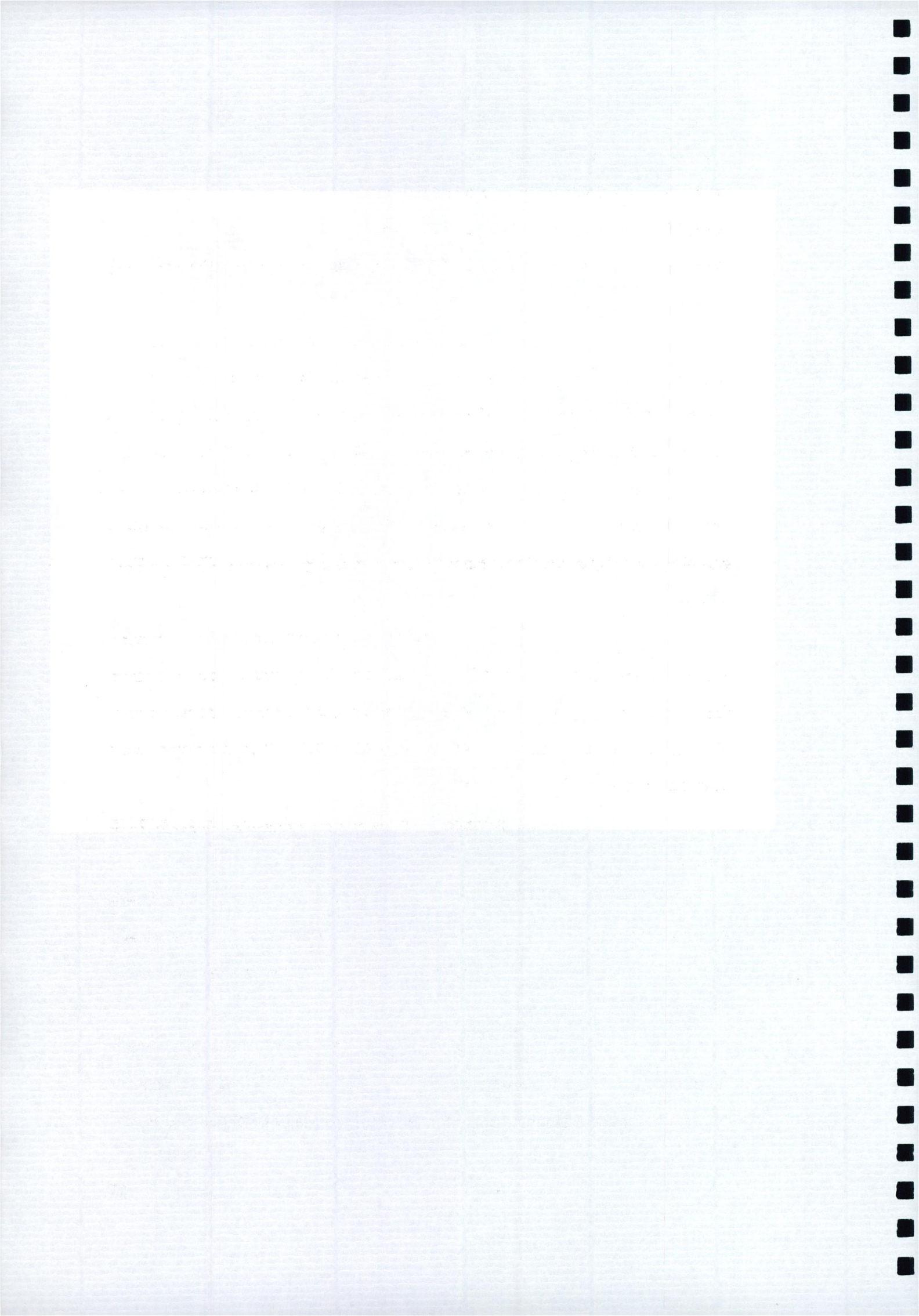


Fig.6 Lighting display for Flos by Ingo Maurer, 1991.



change in attitudes towards fascism. A World War was a large enough event to change attitudes on all levels. These levels have been categorized as:

:Affective - the feelings for an attitude object.

:Cognitive - what an individual believes is so.

:Behavioral - overt expression of attitudes in actual behaviour. (Dobson 1982 p.342).

Belief and attitudes are constructs on different levels, and in today's global village there are many more influences, dictates and dogmas on design now than there were at the start of the century. Even so, people are very slow to change long held attitudes. People prefer consistent information which backs up their worldview; when they are presented with information which does not, a dissonance occurs. For example "Consumers reduce dissonance when choosing goods by decreasing the attractiveness of the rejected item" (Dobson 1982 p.366).

Sometimes people just switch off totally when presented with views not consonant with their own cognitions: in a survey of new car owners (by Ehlich in 1957), 65% read advertisements about their own cars while only 40% read ads for other cars (Dobson 1982 p.366), thus satisfying their neurologically conditioned reflexes.

People today have adapted to consumer society, and have more experience of "negotiating their way through the forces of commodification" (Fiske 1989 p.26). The myth of 'the people's wants' was exposed in Fifties America where it was assumed that the people liked chrome, that they wanted tailfins on their cars, and yet compact foreign cars hit American sales hard. (Papanek 1971 p.168).

Images of the product world were not merely documentary; every product activates a feeling in the observer, "every feeling can be described as a change in the activation level of an organism" (Buck 1993 p.94),

whether it's pleasure vs. displeasure, stimulation vs. pacification, or tension vs. solution. Each response will be different for each individual, based on unconscious associations.

Accidentally even the lowly stylist may strike some common associational or telescic chord that makes the consumer wish to hang on to the product" (Papanek 1972 p.253).

CULT OF CONFORMITY?

There is an increasing tendency in the world to swamp individualism by denial of differences and the mass approach to problems in every walk of life. (Sutherland 1958 p.13).

Don't change your brand, don't listen to the band, don't gape, don't ape, don't change your shape, have another grape... (The Edge, in Gabra-Liddel 1994 p.85).

In psychological terms, conformity is adherence to the demands of the group. It does not mean conformity to a social status quo, but what an individual feels his "significant others" (Dobson 1982 p.299) require of him, a requirement to act the way they act, to subscribe (at least publicly) to certain views, and to buy what they buy, so that he can be readily identified by others as a certain type of person.

Dobson defines conformity under three headings:

- :Normative conformity- to go along publicly with the views of the group.
- :Informational conformity- look to significant others for how to respond to new stimulus, eg. a new product on the market.
- :Ingratational conformity- agreeing with significant others, just to get along with them.

Likewise non-conformity can be subdivided into:

- :Anti conformity- a 'rebel' who goes against the group for the sake of it, and is just as dependant on the actions of the group as the conformist.
 - :True independence- a free thinker standing by their own self-formulated beliefs.
- (Dobson 1982 p.299).

It would be true to say that conformity creates markets for products at all levels of society, from the twelve year old's 'must have' Take That album to the forty year old's 'must have' cellular phone. Conformity is the engine that drives the spinning wheel of consumer fashions and trends. As for anti conformity, that is another marketing tool to sell a different flavour of fizzy water, or a new brand of jeans. "Things must be designed to appeal to temporary fads,

fashions and the acquisitive instinct" (Papanek 1971 p.251). Likewise Penny Sparke says "most practising designers have, by simply following the brief set them, have pursued the more passive path of sustaining, rather than challenging the cultural status quo"(Sparke 1986 p.205).

Man has a basic primate urge never to leave the group; individualism was born from the conquering of this urge. Yet as man developed into an individual, the group developed into societies and developed conditioned repression to keep these societies patriarchal, heterosexual and monogamous. When this process of conditioned repression goes wrong, it usually results in either neurosis, or revolution. History has yet to see a working society made up of free thinking anarchists.

So how do products fit in with man's desire for individualism and society's need for conformity? The answer lies in limited production runs of goods and increased variety, so that the consumer can choose from an array of appearances, and be reasonably sure that their toaster/ coffee set/ cuddly toy is not exactly the same as the Jones's next door. This will be discussed more with reference to Alessi later.

Even in an extreme conformity-orientated culture like Japan where individualism is actively frowned upon, they have an exuberant variety of goods. There is an old Japanese proverb which states that "the nail that sticks out will be hammered down"(Evans 1991 p.92). Yet there is still a large variety of influences visible in Japanese product design, from ancient cultural traditions like grid patterns and miniaturisation, to blatant cultural shoplifting. Designers are learning that old Darwinian lesson that species which specialise are asking for extinction. They must adapt, improvise and overcome.

Improvising design groups like Memphis began with a "reckless desire to strike a blow against current circumstances, as well as against the weary 'good taste'" (Radice 1985 p.23) and were needed to make people more

aware of radical design. It would never become accepted into the mainstream of design, but they stirred things up enough to prevent stagnation of attitudes, styles and products. Deyan Sudjic makes an analogy between photography and product design, and their aspirations to high art status, "What had originally been seen simply as a skill became something else" (Sudjic 1989 p.17).

Subversive groups like Memphis, Mambo etc. are usually formed in reaction to, and not as part a dominant culture, (which would mean that there could never be a popular dominant culture).

SEX AND SENSUALITY



Fig.7 Illustration from 1994 Alessi catalogue

The fact that sex pervades through so much of our culture, that it is the basis for so much psychoanalysis, that so many designers are concerned with 'sexing up' products is because of our early development from primate to hunting ape (Morris 1971 p,57). As males would leave on hunting trips, there was a danger of sexual rivalry, so pair bonding had to be strengthened. This was the beginning of what our species now calls 'falling in love'. To ensure the

pair bond would last, sex also had to be made sexier; sex is a "Deep rooted biologically sound tendency of our species" (Morris 1971 p.58).

But as sex became sexier, there was still the danger to pair bonding that these sexual signs would arouse other members of the group. This was probably the origins of clothes, to cover up genitals, breasts or, in some cultures lip veils etc. The beginning of public 'body contact avoidance manoeuvres' would have begun around this time too; the development of an individual's personal space. For example, people in public, social or consultive encounters stay approximately 4 to 12 feet apart, whereas intimate friends interact at a distance of 0 to 18 inches (Dobson 1982 p.406). 'Keeping one's distance' basically evolved from a need to curtail sexual interaction outside the pair bond.

So where does all this fit in with products? Well, for starters there's the massive array of personal products aimed at the process of de-sexing and re-sexing ourselves. Women cover their breasts and then manipulate their shape with Wonderbras. Both men and women wash off their own scents and then replace them with the scent of some other totally unrelated animal species. "The anti-sexual nature of body de-scenting is far more than is required by medical care and hygiene" (Morris 1971 p.78).

The high sexuality of our species demands constant expression and outlet, if not in active sexual intercourse, then in a 'less involving substitute' (outside matings conflict too strongly with the pair bond). Institutionalised voyeurism has been developed to this end. Most entertainment media are concerned with this 'sex without sex'. Take the average UK Saturday night TV schedule, for example, from the 'Oo-er flirtorama' of Blind Date, to the chicks n' hunks n' swimsuit appeal of Baywatch and Gladiators, it is all geared towards the passive sexual observer, a mild titillation of the libido, but no further. Whether this leads to pacification, gratification or just increased sexual tension is another matter.

Many products are loosely shrouded with sexuality to increase their appeal. Cars for example, have been described as "Chrome plated cod pieces" (Papanek 1972 p.10), and the 'Le Sabre' car from the Fifties (Fig. 7) is a good example of automobile innuendo, (albeit unintentionally).

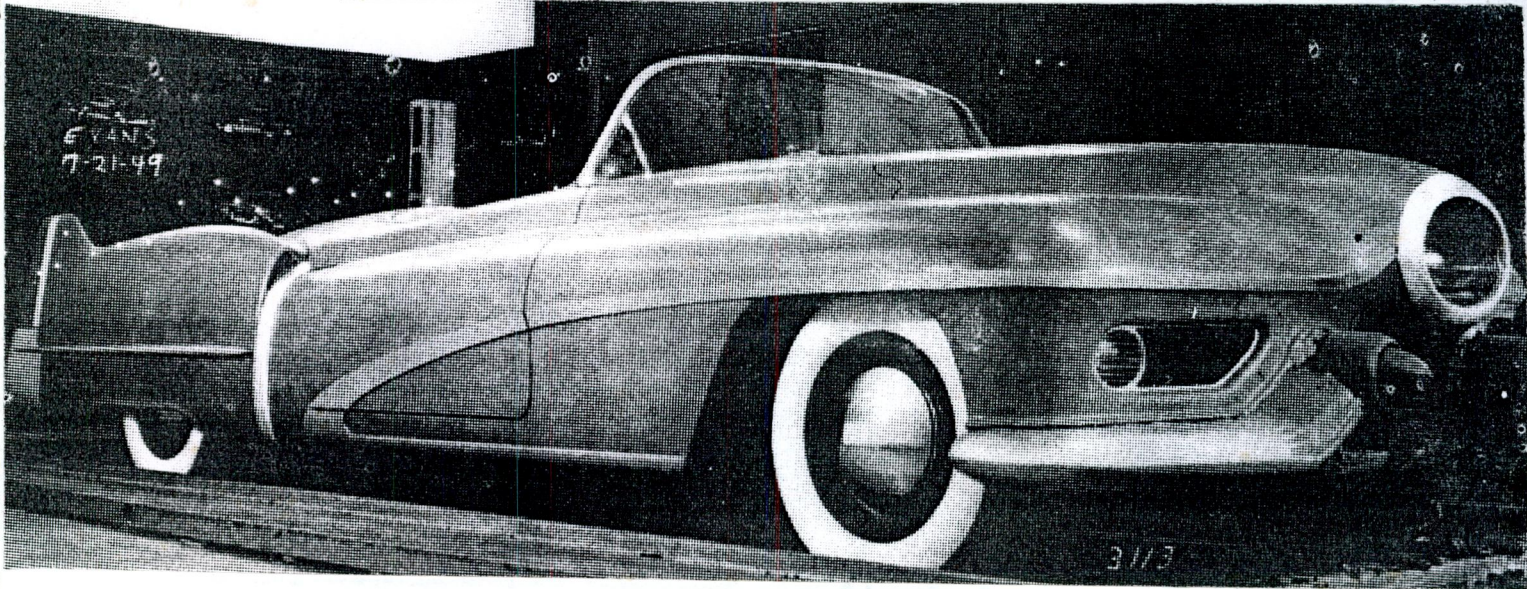


Fig.8 'Le Sabre'

Though it was based on the F-86 fighter plane, there is a feeling of sexual domination about it. "It had an extraordinary repertoire of ducts, scoops, vents, louvres and nozzles which realistically projected the designers fantasies about flight" (Bayley 1986 p.13). Psychologically speaking, they also projected the designer's fascination with orifices.

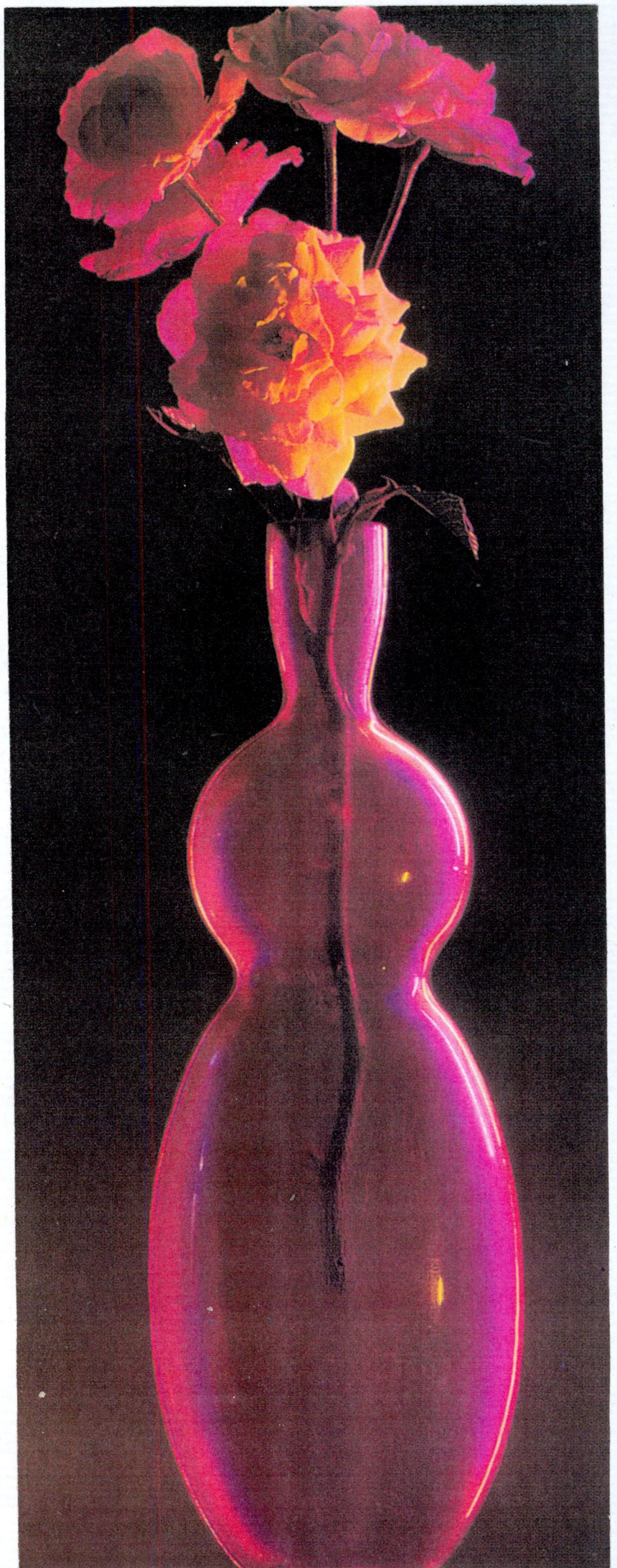
Besides cars, almost everything from deodorant cans to kettles has been 'sexed up' at some time or another.

As long as design concerns itself with.... sexed up shrouds for typewriters, toasters, telephones, and computers, it has lost all reason to exist" (Papanek 1972 preface).

Certainly, but that does not mean that imbuing products with a sense of sensuality, or a healthy dose of eroticism is wrong, as long as it's not overly tacky, or done with a sense of humour. As Franco Fornari describes it, an erotic code has pervaded the history of the Applied Arts, "at least since the times of ancient Egyptian and pre-Columbian cultures" (Gabra-Liddell 1994 p.12).

Take this plastic vase by Matteo Thun, for Memphis, from 1993 (Fig.9) for example. It is blatantly sexual, in its parody of the idealised female form, manufactured in a traditionally 'cheap' material, yet it still has an air of charm and innocence about it. This is design as a form of entertainment, which should always have a reason to exist.

Fig.9 Plastic
vase for Memphis,
1993, by Matteo
Thun.



COLOUR

Have you ever wondered why the interiors of fast food restaurants are usually decorated in a mixture of apricot, coral, brown, peach or orange? It's because psychologists know that these are all colours which react with our autonomic nervous systems to increase our appetite. Orange is a prime appetite stimulant, so much so that there is actually a colour defined as 'eat and run orange' (Eiseaman 1983 p.213). These colours work because the mind associates them with vitamins and sweet tastes.

The use of colour in design works along similar lines, and has similar origins, as the unconscious associations mentioned in chapter 2. Colour response is a primitive response, emotional rather than intellectual:

It is almost impossible to separate the 'seeing' of a colour from the 'feeling', because so much of what you see is based on what you feel. Colour reactions are influenced by each individual's personal experience. (Eiseaman 1983 p.135).

There are however, some colour reactions which are commonly held by everybody. Secure, repressed unemotional people do tend to go for drab and neutral colours, as opposed to the brighter dominant tones of more extrovert types: "Airlines have long recognized the importance of inspiring the confidence of the passengers, by keeping flight crews in darker power colours" (Eiseaman 1983 p.139), and costume designers always use "nondescript washed out tints on insipid powerless characters", Vicki Sanchez (Eiseaman 1983 p.135). Likewise, the colours a designer 'dresses' a product in, expresses the character of that product; Mendini's fleshy maternal kettles, or Venturini's acid coloured cartoon character tableware (Fig. 15) for example.

As has been mentioned, colour works on a biological level, even on colour blind subjects. Transmitters in the eyes pick up the information from visible radiant energy sources and transmit that information to the hypothalamus, pituitary and pineal glands (Eiseaman 1983 p.211). Even

insects go by colour: mosquitoes are more likely to go for someone in dark blue, red or brown than someone in yellow, orange or white. Colour can even neurologically influence taste- (lime flavoured orange coloured drinks taste orange) and affect muscles:

Screening out red light has a relaxing effect, people suffering from muscular tension and twitching might find relief by wearing green glasses. (Kurt Gloldstein in Eiseaman 1983 p.198).

Knowledge of the biological effects of colour has been put to many design users: at the Naval correctional centre in Seattle, U.S.A., a bright shade of pink (called Baker-Miller Pink) is used to lower blood pressure and decrease the aggressive tendencies of inmates in admission cells (Eiseaman 1983 p.200).

Besides the biological level, colours also work on the cultural level. For example, the Yezidis of Armenia curse their enemies saying "may you die in blue garments"(Eiseaman 1983 p.176). Yet in much of the world, blue symbolizes fair skies, constancy and love. Similarly in the West Indies, Madagascar and Bali death means departing for a better place, so cheerful colours are associated with it, while in the Western world, black and purple are considered mourning colours.

Colour is also dependant on an individual's age, - "red and yellow, are the favourite colours of children of all races" (Hanrahan, D'side Aug. 1994 p.19). "Older people choose darker colours because of the deterioration of the person's vision" (Gould 1989 p.11).

"I've always looked for the nonculturized colour in the colour of children" Ettore Sottsass (Radice 1983 p.122). It is these associations between age and colour, which give a sense of youthful energy and inner childishness to certain products created by Alessi/Memphis/Mambo etc.

SURFACE AND SWATCH

Historically, before the industrial revolution, it was costly to produce items by sawing, hammering, polishing etc. both in terms of time and human labour. After the industrial revolution these surfaces were replicated by machine, and the late nineteenth century design elite took it upon themselves to condemn ornamentation without function. One need only look to the 'white box' syndrome of kitchen appliances that still continues to some extent today, to see how the surface of a product has become an underused medium of expression. "People think of surface in terms of a material or sensory quality, not as a medium for bearing pattern or ornamentation"(Buck 1993 p.83).

"Intelligent surface design takes into consideration the laws of perception and the principle of totality in particular"(Buck 1993 p.96). In other words, the mind's "gestalt tendency" (Sutherland 1958 p.80) means we perceive the overall effect of a product's appearance, rather than focusing on details, so a complex surface pattern will only be 'quickly perceived' if it fits in with the gestalt of the product; if it is part of a more abstract whole. Many Memphis patterns, for example, have played an important part in the overall effect of the product. (see Fig. 10).

Memphis provided associations and communication through the use of surface. They took advantage of plastic laminate surfaces, as a metaphor for vulgarity, poverty and bad taste, then they turned this on its head by creating plastic laminate surfaces that were wild, innovative, and gave the impression that they had "always existed as part of the natural order of things, however weird" (Radice 1983 p.88). As opposed to cheap plastic laminates, that lamely try to imitate other surfaces like brick or wood panelling, their messages were always more "anthropological than decorative" (Radice 1983 p.36), meaning that they were more concerned with touching the core of the consumer, than with

any preconceptions about high art or the dictates of 'good taste'. Take this design by George J. Snowden and Nathalie du Pasquier for example-

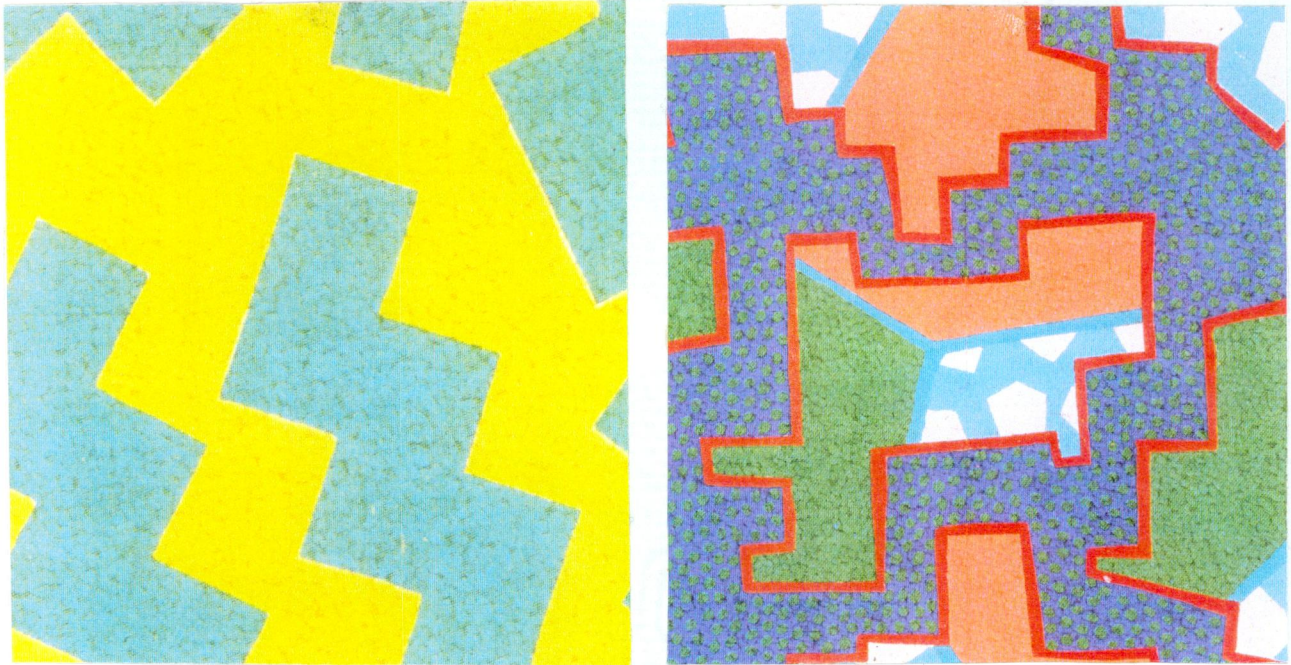


Fig.10 'Calculus' and 'Floating' by G.J. Snowden and N. du Pasquier.

As indicated in the first chapter, man's desire for individualism in a conformist world demands lower production runs and greater variety. Erich Kutsche has called "surface ... an effective instrument in order to counteract saturation tendencies"(Buck 1993 p.87). Swatch is a perfect example of a modular product which uses surface decoration to prevent market saturation. Fashion conscious consumers can have different models for different outfits and can keep themselves on the 'cutting edge' by changing watches whenever the new collection comes out. Changing swatches is marketed as changing personalities, as each watch expresses its own identity through surface decoration. And the accompanying advertising shows the consumer exactly which identity they are supposed to be taking on, whether a Hawaiian surfer, Barcelona night clubber or New York photographer. Swatch is one of a long line of post-war products concerned with experiencing things by proxy, (going back to Loewy's streamlined pencil sharpener).

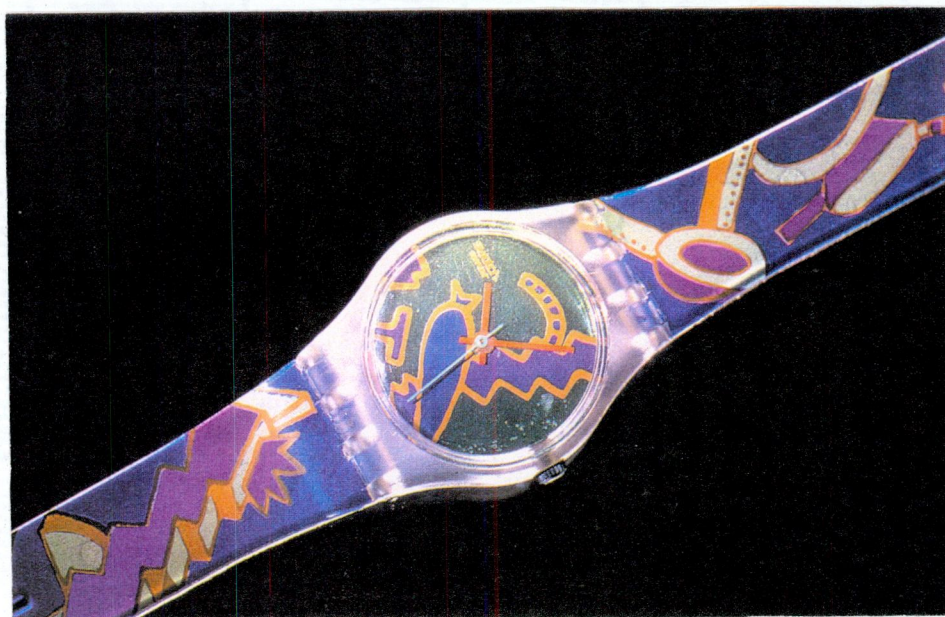


Fig.11 Extracts from 1994 Swatch catalogue

Swatch take their surface decorations from everywhere, and every period in time, in true Nineties global shoplifting style. From US sports graphics to European fine art, from the techno-cyberfunk future to Fifties beach style past, Swatch have been there, copied it, and put it on your wrist. Swatch have achieved what is termed 'quasi-positional goods status', ie they 'sort of' enhance social status, without being true positional goods, while still allowing for individualization through pattern variation.

In conclusion, by making surface more than just an afterthought in the design process, it can be used to broaden markets, fill otherwise unprofitable niche markets and "embrace notions of subjectivity, sensitivity and transcendence of the norm" (Erich Kuthe in Buck, 1983 p.109).

Fig.12 Thun's special wristwatch for Swatch, 1991.



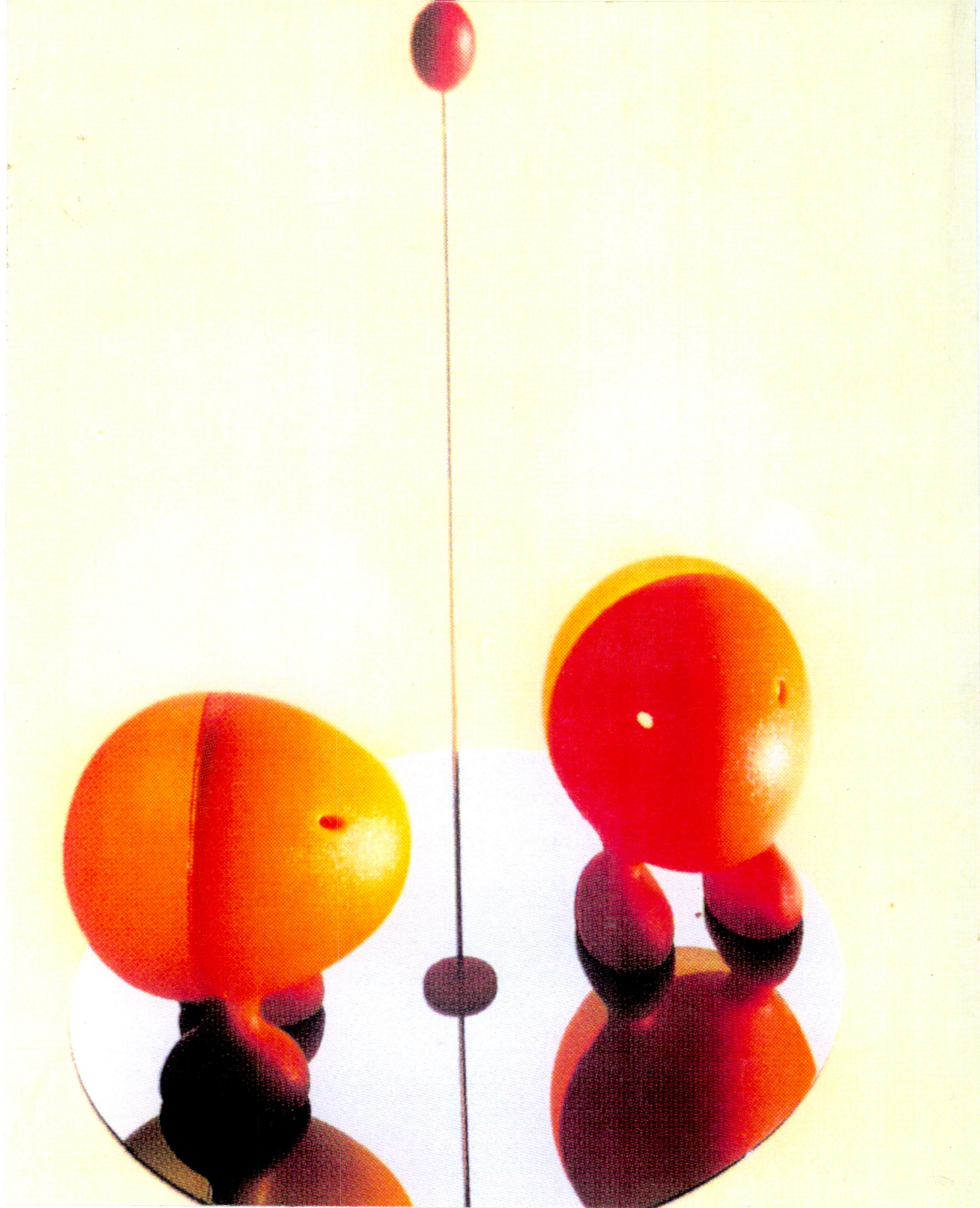
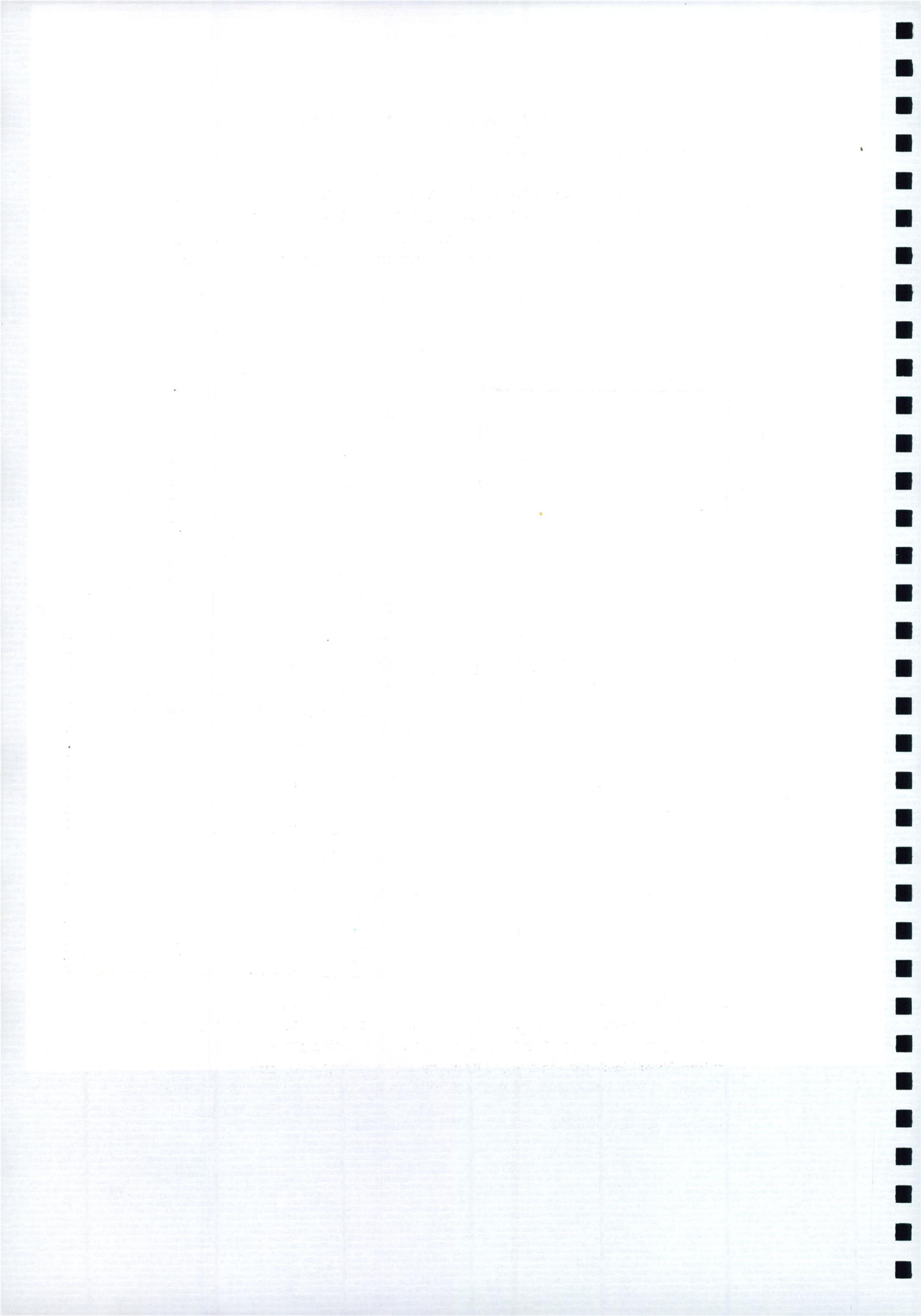


Fig. 15 Liliput salt and Pepper set with magnetic steel base and thermoplastic resin cruets. Design by Stefano Giovannoni 1993.



D'side p.18). People are no longer satisfied with something that only works, they want it to work and to be fun.

This is an evolution in design, and one driven by practicality. Design is a way to sell objects to people and designs are all moving towards semi-organic forms because of an emotional need"- Garrett O'Hagan, O'Hagan Contracts (Hanrahan, D'side Aug. 1994 p.19).

According to Laura Polinoro of the Alessi workshop, products before were "too authoritative and did not satisfy our most delicate, tender, intimate and affective demands" (Hanrahan, D'side Aug. 1994 p.20).



Fig.16 Examples of the Family Follows Fiction range, L to R:

- 'Christy' conical multipurpose sugar bowl with feet in thermoplastic resin by Christopher Dresser (1864), colours by Centro Studi 1993.
- 'Gino Zucchini' plastic sugar sifter, by Guido Venturini, 1993.
- 'Escargogo' snail dish with ceramic snails, by Stefano Giovannoni, 1994.
- 'Diabolix' polyamide bottle opener with magnetic stainless steel opener, by Biagio Cisotti, 1994.

Carl Rogers defines the two qualities most used by psychologists in treating patients, as "Empathy and unconditional regard" (Dobson 1982 p.390), as these qualities encourage the client to see him/herself more honestly and to be acceptive of their true selves. Designers should take note of these qualities when considering the interaction between consumer and product. Alessi's Family Follows Fiction range is not only charismatic and playful; it is also therapeutic and soothing.

These products are like adult versions of an infant's favourite blanket or soother, which D.W. Winnicott defines as 'transitional objects', objects which give the child comfort, by evoking the reassuring unity with his mother, "Enabling the mother to go out, while the child keeps her close to him symbolically" (Gabra-Liddel 1994 p.12). Alessi's Infantilist products allow the consumer to symbolically separate him/herself from the adult self, which provides a sort of therapeutic release.

"In a society in which the 'machine perfect' or even the 'fashionably pleasing' can be obtained with a minimum of effort.... other things become more valued" (Papanek 1972 p.42). Things like poetry, and irony. In relation to ideas like infantilism, which is a reaction against the machine; "People enjoy things which offend the aesthetic and cultural tastes of the class to which they objectively 'belong'" (Fiske 1989 p.59). When style is copied it becomes mannerism, when the whole concept of style is mocked, it becomes entertainment.

"For a text to be popular, it must utter what its readers wish it to say" (Fiske 1989 p.146). Likewise, popular products empathise with what the consumer wishes to feel. And if Alessi's infantilist products are anything to go by, consumers want to feel safe and secure in a childlike way, and don't want to take notions of style too seriously. (Even though, Alessi's market consists mostly of design aficionados, and people who normally would be concerned with style). Venturini and Giovannoni have taken the aesthetic of objects from a

toddler's playpen and have redefined it for the adult world. Other products in the Alessi range are more concerned with refinement and high class, but are somehow less inviting. There is an irresistible urge to touch and handle Venturini's and Giovannoni's products.

Similar to the way high fashion elevates styles from street level origins to the catwalk, Alessi are elevating toys to the executive level. It's all about crossing barriers, and mutating. By imitating toys, they are cornering a market, and evolving to survive along Darwinian lines.

Studio Alchemia, who have elements in common with Memphis/ Alessi etc., have defined some of their design directions as the following:

- :Think up the object according to it's image not it's function.
- :Avoid sharp edges.
- :Introduce an unexpected element (give a feeling of suspense).
- :Put dissimilar parts together. (Bontempi 1985 p.10).

These threads in adult radical Italian design are similar to threads in normal children's design globally. It was only a matter of time before the latter influenced the former: "Studio Alchemia was concerned with ambiental/ psychological issues (Bontempi 1985 p.61).

One would wonder why so much of this type of design is Italian. For a start, Italy historically stems from the Roman Empire, and the Renaissance, with a rich sense of being, culture and learning that they constantly draw from:

We have more fantasy, more culture and we manage better in the role of mediators between the past and the future - Giovanni Albera (Albera 1991 p.3).

In Italy there is more of a home market for artistically influenced domestic products. "They want to use art to have it close to hand, to experience the emotions of the museum while they are at home" (Albera 1991

p.13). On the international level, the 'Italian' aspect is part of the appeal; with the scale of modern civilisations "there is a need for talismans so that individuals can advertise their allegiance to national values" (Bayley 1986 p.9).

Ettore Sottsass believes it has more to do with theatre than museums or talismans. He says Italians see life as a stage play, with these products as props. -"Centuries of invasions, destruction and rebuilding have left them devoid of any certainty about life as a possible, real, trustworthy system"(Burney 1991 p.19). Certainly they are very theatrical in their everyday lives, and their chosen products provide a backdrop to these theatrics.

Also, the fact that Italian men, in general, are very close to their mothers may have some bearing on these childlike styles; we have already seen the 'maternal ideograms' of the Phillips/Alessi range, and discussed how boys with strong maternal bonds grow up to be goofy happy designers.

Finally, the fact that there are no design 'academies' in Italy is actually a plus. For example, the Politecnico di Milano houses 20,000 architectural students who will go on to use their discussion-based education to design everything from a spoon to a skyscraper, with a freer mind than many other students who have followed one particular school of thought. For example, many Italian architectural journals feature radical furniture design, reflecting the architectural background of the designers.

The Italians do not, of course, have a monopoly on free spirited artistic designs. On the other side of the world, in Australia, the Mambo company have an agenda to give "the pleasure from art back to people by using it decoratively in images that are vital and fun" -Dave Jennings (Wood, Design World #28 1994 p.71). Given that Mambo began as a surfwear company, much of their imagery and iconography is vibrant, colourful and defines their products with an attitude more so than an image. Their skull watch, for example (Fig. 17), combines elements of gimmicky children's toys with designer quality, kitsch and

a sense of humour. Like Alessi, Mambo have equal regard for two design dictums: Mies Van Der Rohe's "Less is more", and Robert Venturi's "Less is a bore" (Gabra-Liddel 1994, p.86), while bowing to neither.

"Popular culture is both positive and optimistic" (Fiske 1989 p.193), which clearly puts the products of Alessi, Swatch and Mambo into the realms of popular culture, into design in the Nineties, where the designer is more a synthesist than a specialist, and all primal needs are catered for.



Fig.17 Skull watch by Mambo 1993 (Design world #28 1994 p.71)

CONCLUSION - INTO THE WILD

PINK YONDER

For what the world needs more than anything else is lasting and properly functioning things, that are made with heart, feasible products that win their owners love instead of being thrown away. Tapio Periainen (Form Function and Finland, March 1994 p.1).

Through psychology, new technologies, and new ideologies, we may see a new generation of products that last not because they are especially durable or an 'instant classic', but simply because they have enough character to win the consumer's affection, the same way pets do. Alberto Alessi speaks of 'good' objects, "Objects that do not alienate ... that encourage a development in the public, rather than winking conspiratorially at it's regression" (Gabra-Liddel 1994 p.127). Obviously, Alessi sees a move towards infantilism as a development, rather than a regression.

While psychological profiles differ from individual to individual, and culture to culture, there is still a wealth of knowledge that can be used to make products more communicative and endearing to their owners in the future. It is hard to make concrete plans around intangible things like 'states of mind' and 'feelings'. This is where the conscious/ unconscious approach discussed in the first chapter comes in - an approach based on being mentally open, free flowing and childlike, so that the mind is more receptive to creative leaps, and to taking chances.

The insights of the social sciences, biology, anthropology, politics, engineering and technology, the behavioral sciences and much else, must be brought to bear on the design process- Victor Papanek (Papanek 1972 p.134).

We've also seen that new design can be accepted more quickly through the use of unconscious associations. By giving indirect messages to the consumer through the product, a sense of familiarity can be created.

Hopefully in the future, there will be a better balance between mainstream and reactionary design, through reactionary/ avant garde design's trickle down effect on the former. So that objects can go beyond signifiers of consumers identity, to satisfy the hidden needs for art and poetry. Mass production has not yet understood this, due to the fact that mass production is based on not taking risks.

"Not to take risks means products become more and more homogenous, which leads to market saturation" (Gabra-Liddel 1994 p.10). Many of the design groups covered in this thesis, have proved that taking risks can be profitable. By transgressing technical/ functional rules, socio-economic and marketing rules, and aesthetic/ communication rules, and combining these transgressions with a basis of psychological knowledge, future products can be made more innovative, more successful and ultimately more poetic.

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