DESIGN AS LANGUAGE

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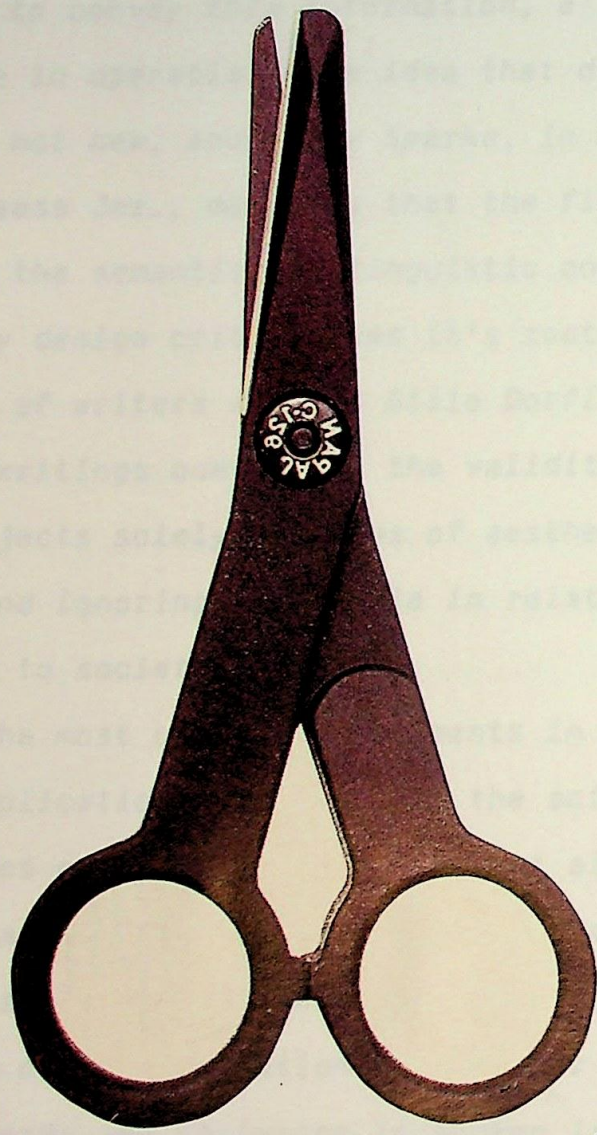
BY

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CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

"A so called industrial designer must be put in
the position where he is able to play his role
to the end, he must find space for discussing
the problem of the figure, the iconographic
catalogue, the problem of signs, of linguistic
destinies." (1)

In "Design in Italian Society in the Eighties", Umberto
Eco suggests that a person designs something for three
reasons; the first is that the object is meant to be
useful, in the sense that whoever uses it should be able
to make it work the right way, therefore materials and
shapes must be chosen so that the object can serve the
purpose for which it was conceived. Secondly, the object
should show what it's purpose is and how it should be
used. In a word, the product has a communicative aspect.
The scissors is a perfect example of this, as someone who
has never seen one before would probably still know what
to do with it. (Fig 1). Thirdly, an object has symbolic
functions: by this it is meant that the object must allow
for a host of meanings that allow the object to be used as
a mark of social status, power or beliefs. These symbolic
functions shuld not be thought of as something extraneous
to the object. For instance, besides getting it's owner
from A to B, a Rolls-Royce functions as a symbol of his

wealth and social status even when he is not using it, when it is packed outside his home or a hotel. A product must therefore serve it's purpose, declare it's function and communicate it's symbolic functions.

In order to convey this information, a language of some kind must be in operation. The idea that design is a language is not new. Penny Sparke, in her book on Design Futures her., maintains that the first real interest in the semantic or linguistic content of products, by design critics, has its roots in the 1960s in the work of writers like Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco, whose writings questioned the validity of defining isolated objects solely in terms of aesthetics and technics, and by examining objects in relation to other objects and to society.

One of the most important developments in this area has been the application of semiotics, the science of signs, which enables us to analyse the way all verbal and non-verbal systems of communication convey attitude to holistic. Semiotics allows a systematic approach so as to incorporate verbal and visual communication analogous to the manner in which we make meaning in spoken language. Roland Barthes:

"Now materials can artificially be endowed with meaning, we can therefore talk language.

Of course, speech is much more significant unit of systems, whether verbal or visual." [2]

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In order to convey this information, a language of some kind must be in operation. The idea that design is a language is not new, and Penny Sparke, in her book on Ettore Sottsass Jnr., mentions that the first real interest in the semantic and linguistic content of products, by design critics, has it's roots in the 1960s in the work of writers such as Gillo Dorfles and Umberto Eco, whose writings questioned the validity of defining isolated objects solely in terms of aesthetics and technics, and ignoring their role in relation to other objects and to society.

One of the most useful developments in this area has been the application of semiology, the science of signs, which enables one to take the view that all verbal and non-verbal aspects of culture, from postural attitude to buildings, are organised in patterned sets so as to incorporate coded information in a manner analogous to the sounds of words and sentences in spoken language. Roland Barthes:
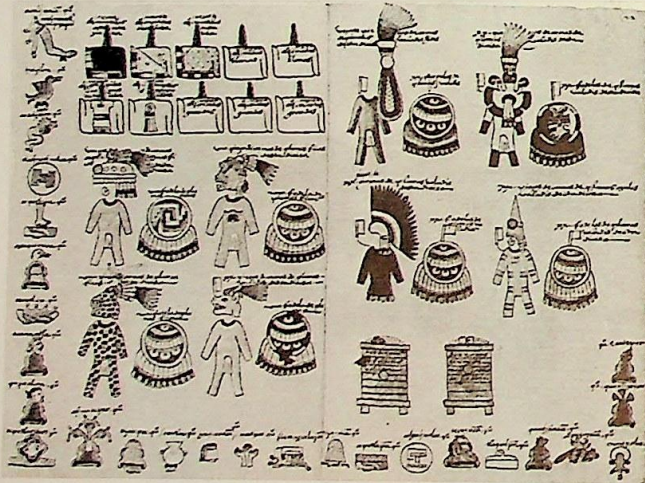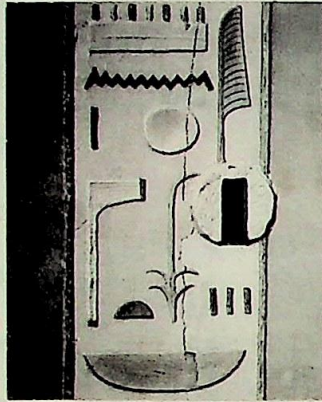
> "Any material can arbitrarily be encoded with
> meaning, we can therefore take language,
> discourse, speech to mean any significant unit
> or synthesis, whether verbal or visual." (2)

This generic way of conceiving language is in fact justified by the very history of writing; long before the invention of our alphabet, objects like the Inca quipu, or drawings as in pictographs have been accepted as speech. (Fig 2). Semiology postulates a relation between two terms, a 'signifier' and a 'signified'. The signified is the concept, or in the case of design, the function, and the signifier is the tactile, acoustic or visual image (which is mental), and the relation between concept and image is the sign (the word, or the product) which is a concrete entity. The sign is the associative total of a concept and an image.

But design is a two tier semiological system, one of which is staggered in relation to the other. The first is a linguistic system, and is the language the product is 'spoken in'. It is the sum of all the sub-functions which are expressed in the form of knobs, dials, supports, handles, surfaces and so on. In this system the product is equivalent to the 'sentence' in verbal language. At the second level the product is a single sign, and it is no longer necessary to consider the construction or details of the linguistic scheme, all that is important is the global sign. The language used at this level is a 'meta-language' as it speaks about the first. The product is a single sign for the symbolic function which may be anything from a mark of social status to an example of a design theory. As this larger sign system directly

involves all aspects of human life, it has caught the
attention of many writers, so quite a lot has been written
about it in relation to broader issues, from 'mythologies'
by Roland Barthes to the more recent 'cult objects' by
Dejan Sudjic.

This thesis deals with the linguistic aspect of
design, that is with design as a semiological system. This
involves the feasibility of such a system, of the
'speaking' of a product, since language is also a sign
system. I have established a link between the two so as to
make the discussion of the the parts of information which
can be conveyed, the linguistic devices the designer has
at his disposal and the way they can be employed, clearer
and hopefully more interesting.

2

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This thesis deals mainly with the linguistic aspect of design, that is with the first semiological system. This involves the fabrication of the sign system, of the 'speaking' of a product. As verbal language is also a sign system, I have drawn analogies between the two so as to make the discussion of the the sorts of information which can be conveyed, the linguistic devices the designer has at his disposal and the way they can be employed, clearer and hopefully more interesting.

2. VOCABULARY

"Every institutionalised culture possesses a
very precise catalogue of signs, ordered and
assembled to represent the most general meaning
that can be given to that culture. This
catalogue makes it possible to communicate
certain situations to express certain things and
not others." (3)

This "catalogue of signs" as Ettore Sottsass calls it,
is analagous to the vocabulary of words in spoken
language. But the 'words' in this case are materials,
textures and colours. Theoretically, at least, this
catalogue of signs is as large as, or larger than that of
any spoken language, since it includes every material,
texture and colour under the sun! In practice, of course,
the resources of an individual may be very restricted. For
instance, somebody who has spent a lot of time working in
the domestic hi-fi area might find, that on changing over
to the design of cookers and fridges, the 'words' he has
available to describe concepts such as 'knobs' or
'controls' are completely unsuitable.

Within a particular vocabulary there are many different
kinds of 'words', for example, a man's razor would never
sell if it was glossy pink as, in our culture, this is
understood to mean feminine; even though it is being used

to describe what is essentially a masculine concept.

Taboo words are not the only kind of words, though.
There are also archaic and modern words, words of native
and foreign origin, colloquialisms, slang and vulgarities.
Often, just as in speech, old words are combined with new
words to create an unusual effect, or to make a witty
comment about something. The avant-garde group Memphis,
for instance, use marble in a totally unprecedented
fashion. Usually it is treated with a certain degree of
reverence and generally assumes forms which reinforce it's
message of grandeur. But Sottsass and his group have used
it with common industrial materials such as zinc and
aluminium in irreverent forms, and the result is often
amusing or even shocking.

But removing archaic words from their natural context
to create a shock effect is a fairly untypical
application. More often that not, these words are combined
with other materials which express similar meanings, and
used to symbolise age old values and beliefs. The
'Nostalgia' watch by Sekonda is a typical example of this.
The concept 'watch' is described in old words such as soft
brown leather and gold, shaped into forms which suggest
the Edwardian times and it's values, even though such
watches were not commonly worn until the twenties (Fig.
3). Due to the expense usually involved in manufacturing
such authentic replicas, they are quite costly and so
become status symbols as well.

3

Another application for old words is found in
post-modernism, which in it's efforts to reintroduce
meaning into designs often borrows words from the past.
But where the use of these words in the creation of status
symbols requires that they be spoken with absolute
authenticity, the post-modern use is often characterised
by a slight distortion or exaggeration, almost as though
they were conveying their message with a nudge and a wink,
acknowledging that they are not to be interpreted as
genuine symbols from the past (Fig. 4).

The vulgar word is also an interesting one. These words
give emphasis and get immediate attention in almost any
circumstances, just as they do in speech. Only the very
skilful can use them and get away with it. As in written
or spoken language, vulgarities may eventually become
respectable words, for instance, the plastic laminates and
patterns of the fifties are often used by avant-garde
designers as a metaphor for vulgarity and bad taste, but
the immediate impact and decorative potential of these
materials has made them very popular among the new-wave
designers, and now, several years after their
introduction, it is quite acceptable to use these once
'vulgar' words in a kind of 'institutionalised' radical
furniture.

Slang words are very similar to vulgar words in this
respect. Slang as in speech is less formal than normal,
and takes the form in product design of materials like
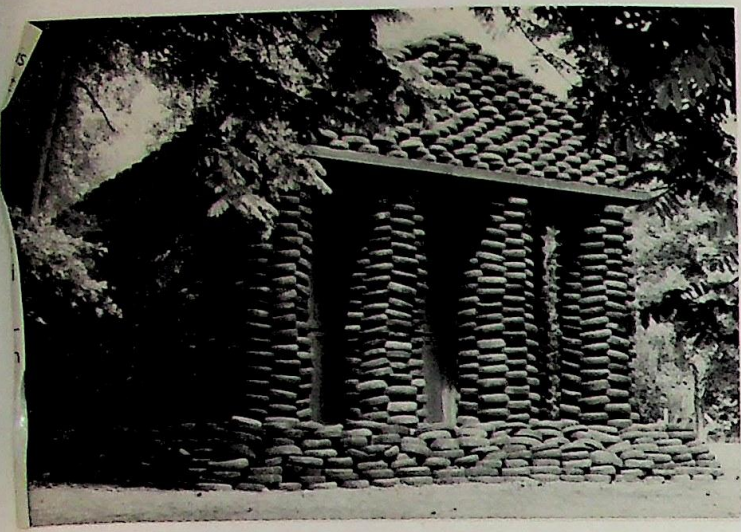
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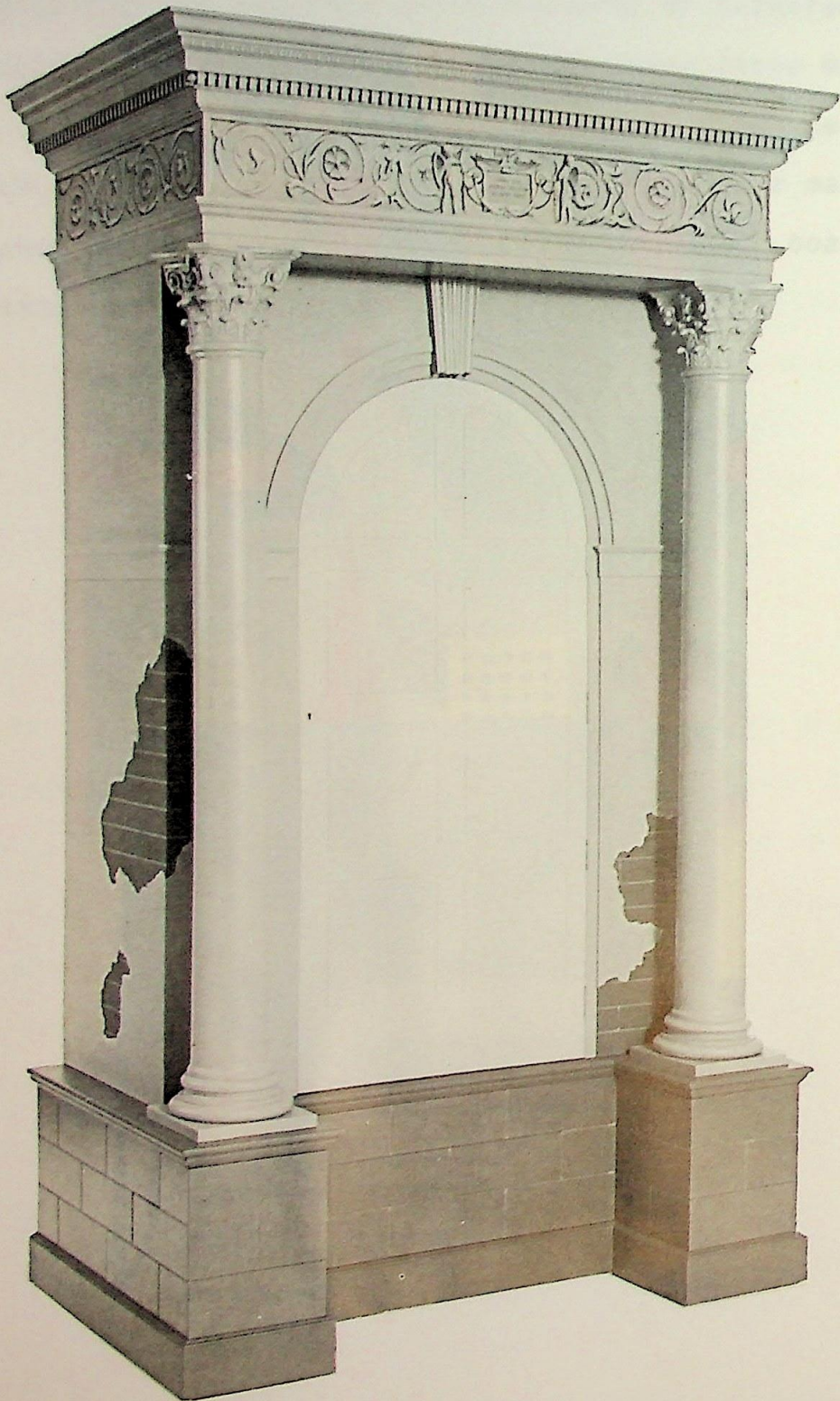
canvas, and coloured steel tubing, used in folding furniture. These materials were originally used in objects which needed to be light, rugged and very practical such as the original 'director's chair'. The image was assimilated into the mainstream language of design and used to express informality in the kind of furniture used in outdoor events or garden parties. Today these materials are used in furniture for both domestic and office use, which, if done originally, would have been like making a business suit out of denim and wearing it to a board meeting!

3. SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR

In spoken language, the syntax is usually regarded as the arrangement of the words relative to each other, and the grammar governs the effect the words have on each other. In product design, the grammar and syntax are used to compose the image or symbolic structure of the product.

This analogy between verbal and visual language can be shown in the following way. If the arrangement of words in a sentence or sequence is termed the syntax, and enables a message to be conveyed, the syntax of a product must be the 'basic structure' since it is this which defines how 'matter' will be distributed in space if all the sub-functions and symbolic functions of the product are to be 'signified' in a way that will allow the product to be used for it's intended purpose.

The grammar then, which is the relationship between words within a particular system, is concerned with making the words work together, or fitting them to each other, and in the three dimensional equivalent of the sentence, which is the object, the grammar must be equivalent to the construction, or how the different elements of a product fit together.

Traditionally, the 'syntax' and 'grammar' have been governed almost exclusively by technical and aesthetic criteria (within set economic criteria), but this notion is currently being challenged by design groups such as

Memphis. Memphis disregard the support structure as the basic structure of design and suggest that structure and decoration should be one thing. Usually grammar has been used to create a surface which is a single unit. Until four or five years ago people devoted all their energy to making surfaces homogeneous, associative and continuous. Today there seems to be a tendency to see a design not so much as a unit but as a sum of parts. This approach is exemplified in the experimental work of Memphis:

> "Objects are no longer designed from the outside
> according to a certain idea of structure; they
> are genetically engineered from the inside in an
> inverse process that adapts the final structure
> to the invariable logic of it's constituent
> parts." (4)

Memphis seem to use materials in a purely 'sensorial' way, almost as though they choose their 'words' not because of what they signify or mean, but because of what they 'sound like'. In the case of an object this means separating the signifier or object as a purely visual sensation, devoid of any meaning other than it's sensory effect (Fig. 5).

> "Technological materials are never quoted as
> technological symbols, but as textures,
> patterns, colours, densities, transparency and
> glitter. They are immediate and directly
> sensorial. They appeal more to physical

5
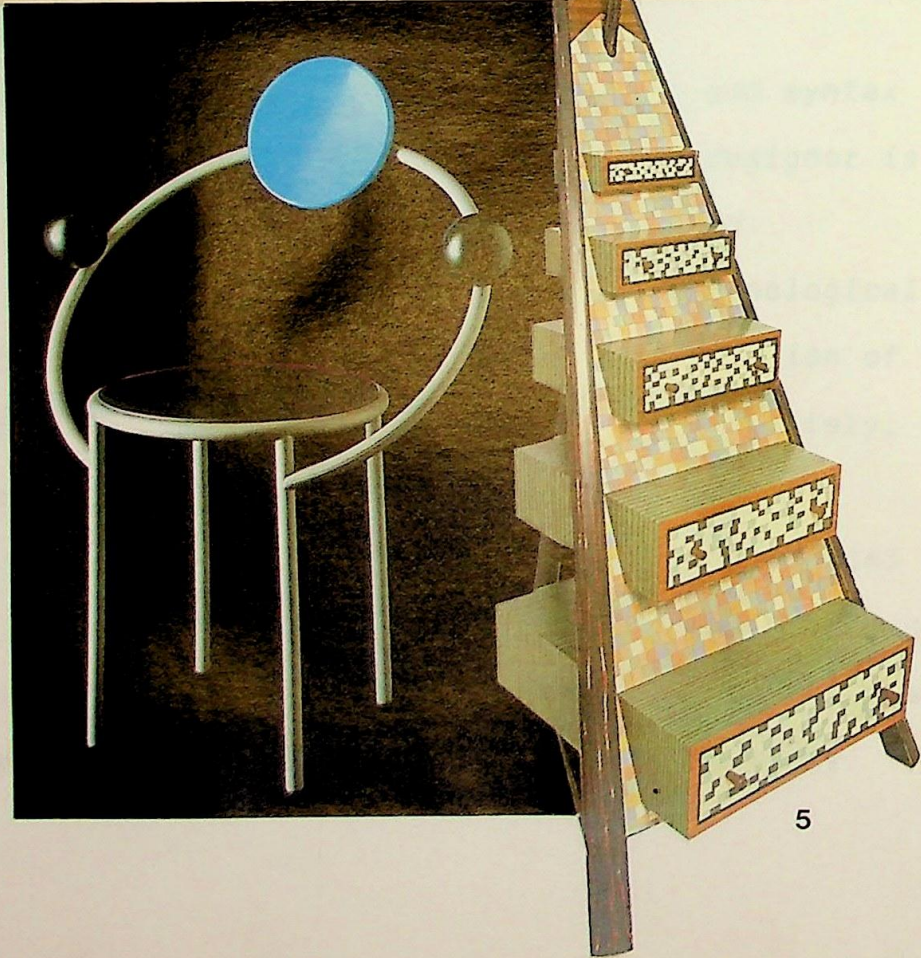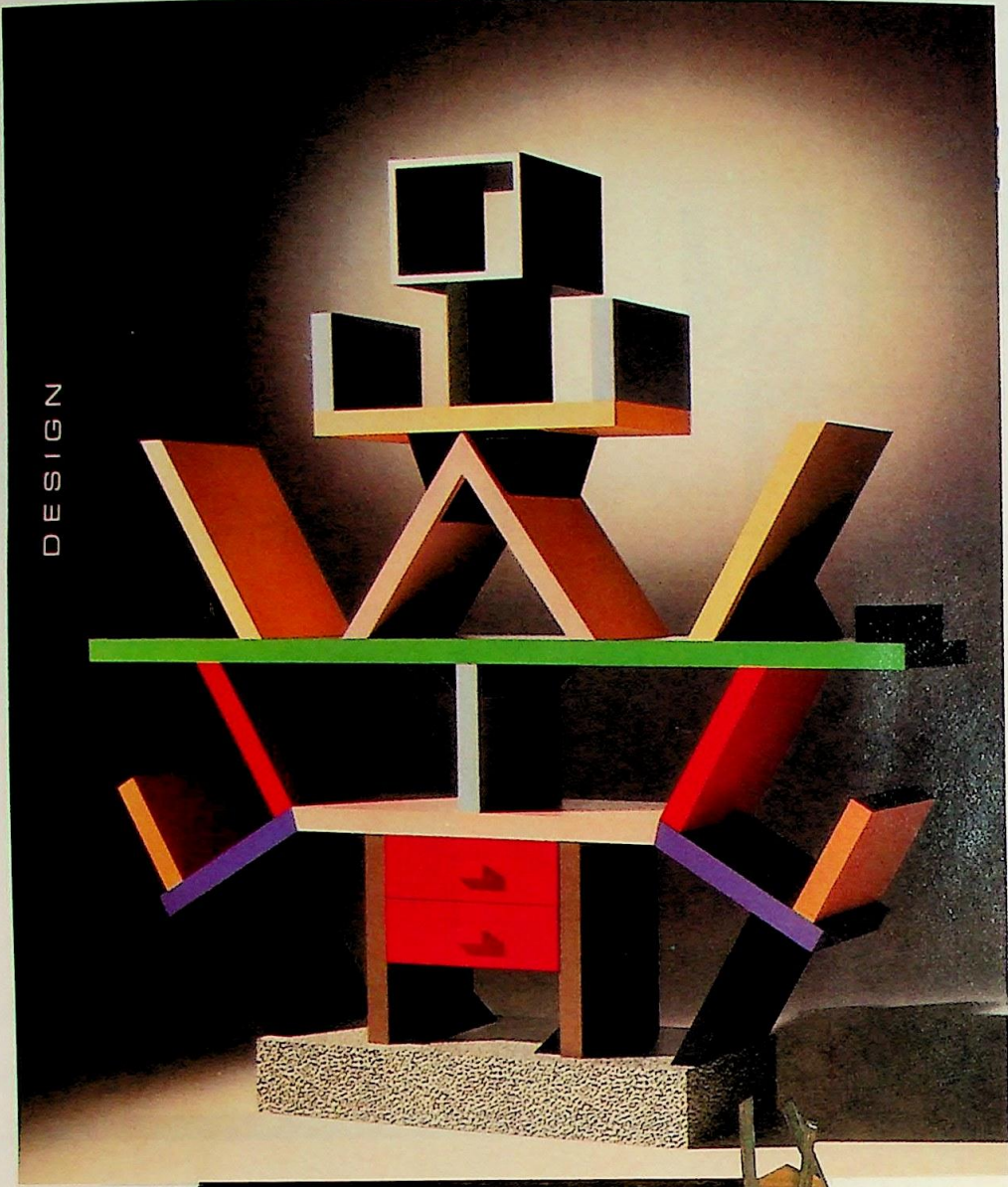
qualities than to the intellect. What matters is
the image, the design, the figurative force, the
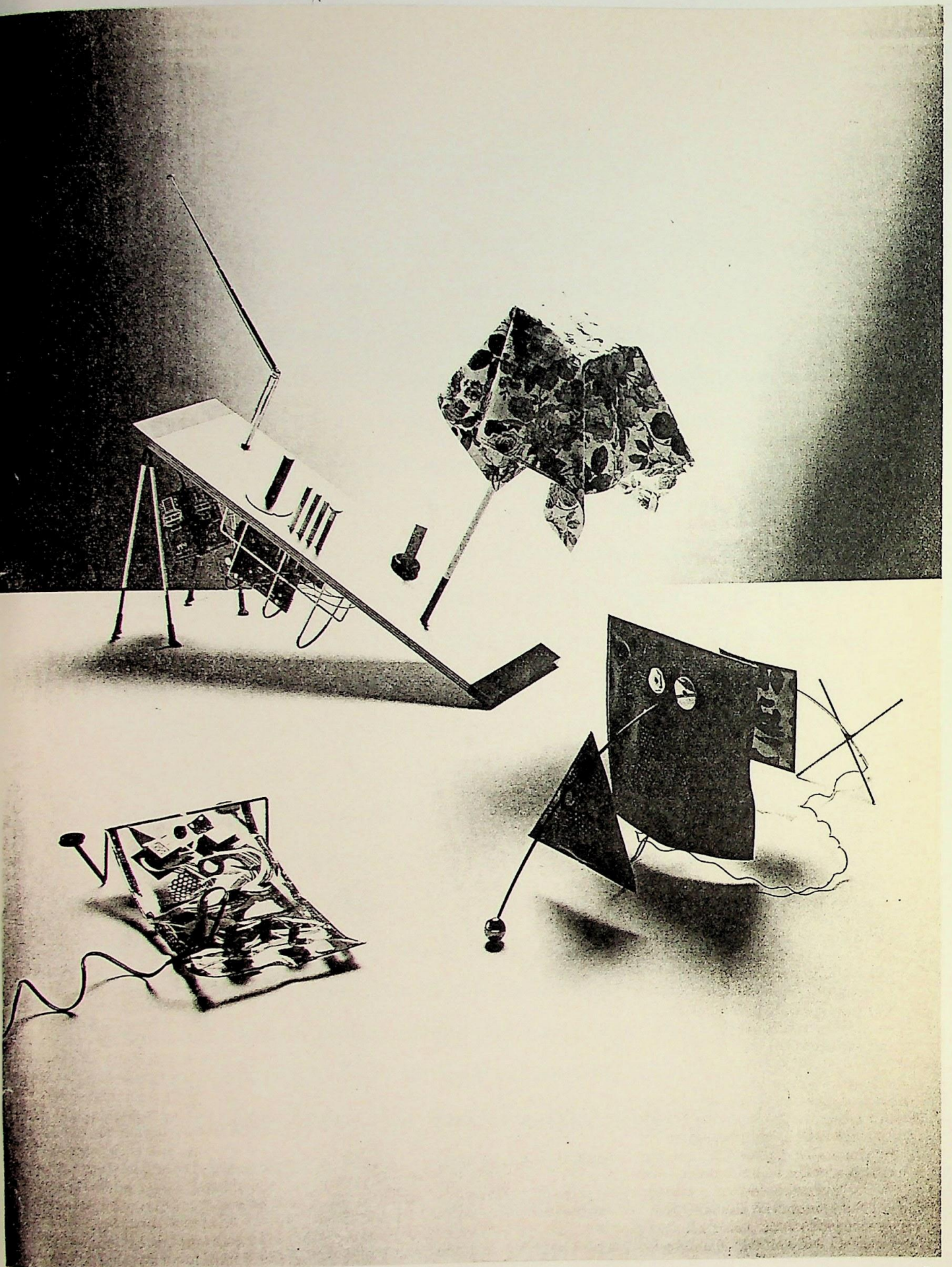communication." (5)

Syntax and grammar are used by Memphis to compose
arrangements which will enable the signs being used to
convey their sensory messages in the most effective way.

The work of the Memphis designers has some similarities
with that of Kandinsky, who spent most of his career as an
artist trying to find a grammar and syntax for his purely
pictorial language, which would enable him to build up
complex symbols from basic units of geometry. But whereas
Kandinsky hoped the images he created would touch off
man's soul and create emotional and spiritual responses
which would echo those in his compositions, Memphis intend
that their images be responded to in a purely
physiological way.

Of course, this freedom to explore grammar and syntax
is greater in products like furniture, as the designer is
really only subject to a few basic ergonomic and
structural rules. When it comes to the more technological
products, the only real scope for radical exploration of
grammar and syntax is in electronics. But unfortunately,
'electronic words' are as of yet still regarded as
unsuitable for public use, and so the textural qualities
of circuit boards and wiring, and the potential freedom of
composition are lost, hidden beneath cases which impose a
more or less standard syntax and obviate the need for

anything more than the most basic grammatical considerations. (Of course these boxes also protect the delicate insides of computers, but still...). So just as in computer linguistics where there are specialists who communicate directly with the machine in an abstract language called 'machine code', and others who translate this into a more accessible language such as 'Basic' or 'Fortran', depending on the user's needs, there are in the designs of electronic equipment, engineers and industrial designers. The engineers 'speak' the product in 'machine code' and the industrial designer then translates this into a language which is more suitable for public consumption.

But things are slowly beginning to change in this area as well. A producer designer named Daniel Weil uses the electronics inside radios to create strange assemblages, which demystify the radio. Although at first glance his work may appear similar to that of the Memphis designers, the similarity stops at the apparent arbitrariness of the objects they produce. The difference is that Memphis are concerned with emptying the sign of it's meaning, and appreciating a more or less empty image for it's sensorial qualities, whereas Daniel Weil is trying to transform the sign back into meaning. The work of Weil employs a regressive semiological system (Fig. 6).

4. ADVERBS AND ADJECTIVES

In speech, adjectives and adverbs are modifiers used to reinforce a message, and speech which uses a lot of adverbs or adjectives is regarded as decorative, and as can be expected, it is more difficult to communicate well in a highly decorative style, but when it is done successfully the result may be very impressive.

In his book "The Hot House" Andrea Branzi says that nowadays decoration ought to be seen as a system of information in it's own right, consisting of cultural information about the product, information on it's use and linguistic and visual information. Ironically, today, one of the most interesting and comprehensive uses of decoration can be found in the power tool industry, for example, the Black and Decker P80-20 designed by Ulrich Reiferscheid and Peter Paul Pioch (Fig. 7). The object itself is a pure symbol of rugged functionalism, and this message is reinforced by an elaborate system of signs and symbols culled from the heavy machinery industry. The proportions are generous and gently shape the rich, dark, textured 'matter' into a form expressing power and strength. The transition from one functional area to another is accentuated, almost to create the effect of rippling muscle under a tight rough skin. Symbols are used not only to convey information about performance and use, but also as decorative motifs.
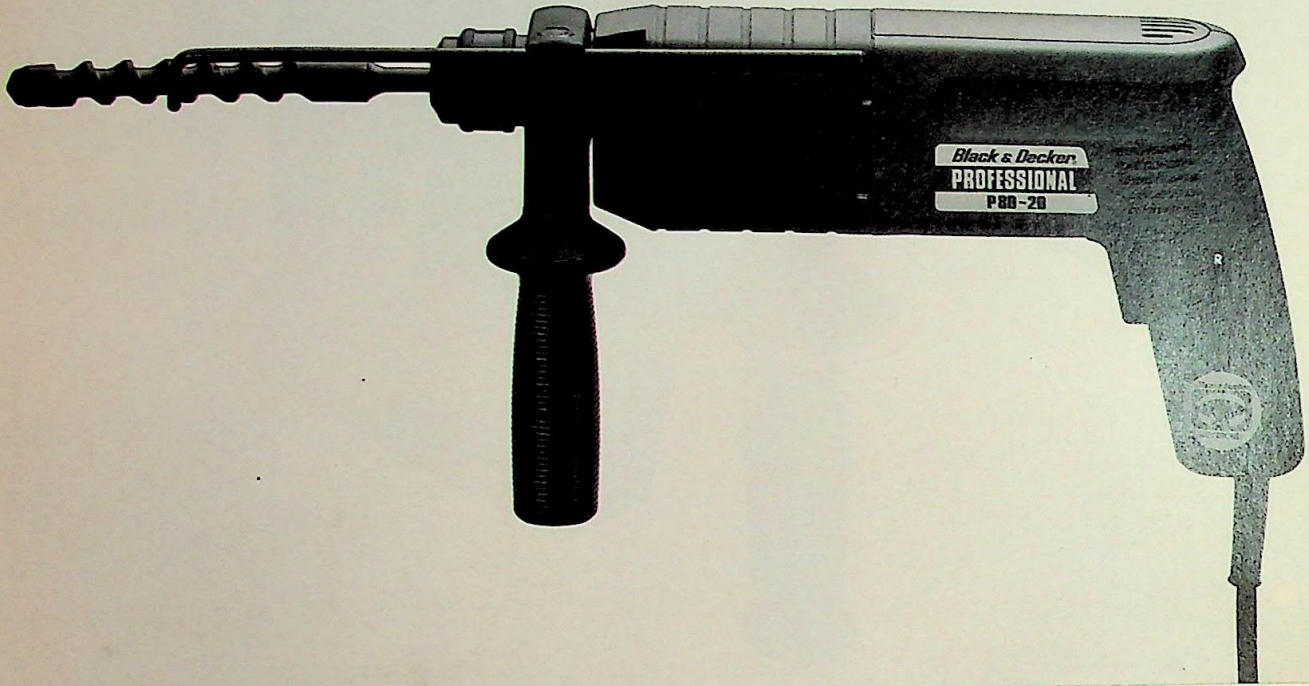
Sometimes parts of a product which were once functional and are no longer necessary are maintained as purely decorative motifs. What may have been meaningful symbols, reflecting current cultural, social and economic attitudes often end up as empty signifiers of wealth, power or taste (Fig. 8).

Indeed the Modern Movement began with a purge of decoration which meant getting rid of the encrustations of symbols and decoration which industrial civilisation continued to churn out in hollow imitation of a vanished craftsmanship. And today, even the worthy ideals of the Modernists reflected in their simple and elegant use of construction and materials has been abused and debased. It is now, itself, often used as a sign system symbolising long outmoded values.

> "New technologies cry out for re-assessment of this code for honesty of expression through materials...the case of the chair in the style of Louis XIV with the plastic legs, such a source of merriment to orthodox designers, now turns out to be perhaps the most correct use of this technology and of modern moulding machines!" (6)

As a result of this frozen state of thinking with regard to decoration, many of the methodological presuppositions on which design is based have shown themselves to be of more use in setting up limitations to

8
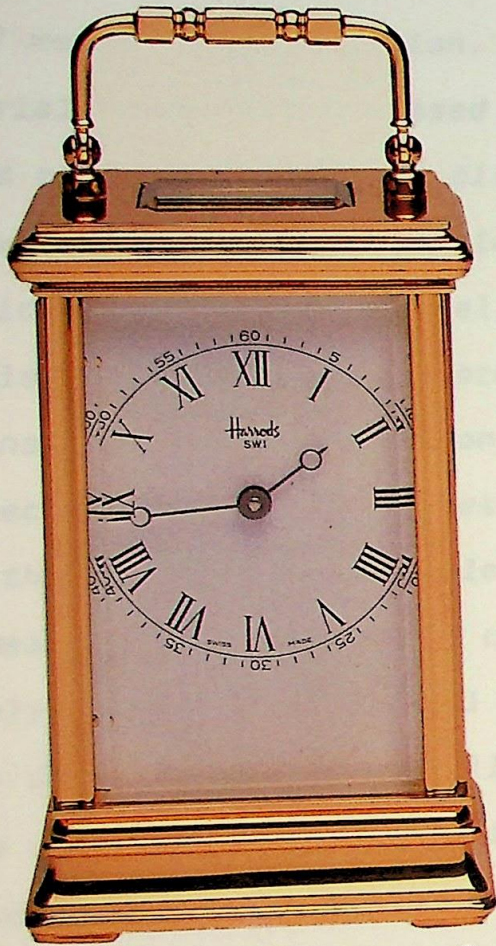
the formal choices open to the designer than in taking
advantage of all the expressive and constructive
possibilities of mechanised production. The profound logic
on which industrial production is based today can no
longer be called rational, except by distorting the
meaning of the word. The logic with which the machine is
built and by which it works is rational, and it's advanced
level of technology now permits an enormous range of
formal variations, including decoration. This means that
the 'state of necessity' from which design derived it's
rigid forms in the past has been completely eliminated,
leaving it to deal with it's outmoded code of composition
on an exclusively decorative and moral basis.

Indeed, what Charles Jencks has called 'Post-Modernism'
has gone a long way towards solving this problem. But
really, it is necessary to have common beliefs which form
the basis of a system of symbols which in turn can be used
as a source for rich and meaningful decoration which
reflects the fears, hopes and beliefs of our times.
Unfortunately, the only common beliefs which seem to be in
evidence today are firmly rooted in the past, and most
decoration takes the form of emblems and once meaningful
symbols, lifted from another age and grafted on to our
products.

Although there are several individuals exploring
symbolism, as Charles Jencks points out;

"The problem is adopting one's personal

interpretations of symbolism in such a way that
it can be more universally applied and
shared...this is the nub of the problem in the
late twentieth century, where it is difficult if
not impossible to find shared beliefs or
attitudes that are confidently held in common."
(7)

Therefore it is necessary to find a way of leading
symbolism away from a personal and private to a more
public realm, which so far is manifesting itself in
revivalism. Some hope is offered in the concept of
'semantic groups' which are sectors of society, not
classified according to location or income, but cultural
similarities such as traditions, beliefs and religion. By
designing products which seek out these groups, it is
possible to load them with very specific information rich
in meaning. In this way it is possible to avoid the
'semantic reductionism' most products undergo in order to
please as many people as possible. Of course the further
removed from the mainstream language of design these
products are, the fewer the number of people will be that
can fully appreciate them, but at least it would be
possible to derive decorative systems again which are
based on symbols rather than signs, that is, a symbolic
design rather than a 'signolic' one. The difference being,
that symbols are signs which have become fixed signifiers
for their concept, and so can be more easily understood,

they are firmly rooted in tradition. In a symbolic product
the function and ornament would relate to as many
different parts as possible and the many meanings could
produce complex resonances throughout the product.
Whereas, in a 'signolic' product, the signs have been
dissociated from their original concepts, and the vacuum
left is often filled in wih baser meanings dependent on
status, wealth or even just sentimental nostalgia.

5. CHANGING VOCABULARY

It is a well known fact that the appearance of a product does not have to change for purely practical reasons, so what are the other winds of change involved? Some people argue that it is a result of brainwashing by people or institutions with commercial interests. This could be termed the 'conspiracy theory', and suggests that the adoption of new forms for existing concepts is simply the result of a plot by greedy manufacturers and designers. But, in reality, most people do not change or update products just because they are out of date, so there must be other factors involved.

James Laver has said that modern fashions are but the reflection of the times, they are the mirror and not the original, and this could also be true of product design, albeit on a larger time scale (although fashion does directly effect some areas of product design). Generally speaking, words are acquired, used and discarded, just as in verbal language, because they meet our needs and express our ideas at a particular time. Three of the most interesting determining factors in the adoption of new 'words' for old concepts are technological advancement, changing lifestyles and originality on the designer's part.

For instance, in the case of the transistor radio, although it's function has more or less remained the same

for the last twenty years, technological developments have enabled it to take on many different images, resulting in many different 'words' being used to express the concept of 'transistor radio'.

In the early 1960s, the radio was a remarkably unified product, the only differentiation required was between the trannie trade and the rest of the radio business, and as the transistor had become associated with portable personal belongings, the 'words' which were used to express it's meaning were similar to those used for portable luggage, that is, black leather, straps and buckles.

During the 1970s the trannie had to compete with cassette recorders, cartridge stereos, car radios and digital clocks, and the trannie market itself had suffered a basic split with the advent in the U.S.A. of two kinds of pop music broadcasting, AM and FM. The FM radio became sculptural and boxy. The market kept on fragmenting, and a proliferation of 'words' were used to express the meaning of the by now numerous variations on the transistor due to new technologies and the possible integration of other features. On one extreme there was the Bang and Olufsen, which was so elegant you couldn't even tell what it was, and on the other, a whole range of objects pretending to be combined with recorders, pretending to be walkie-talkies, or large costume jewellery or abstract sculpture or even space equipment!

By the end of the 1970s, as technological progress took smaller and smaller steps, matt black or brushed aluminium boxes with a proliferation of knobs and dials, borrowed from the vocabulary of serious electronic equipment like medical apparatus and recording studio consoles became associated with the concept of 'radio' and in fact so did most audio equipment. Although this new technological catalogue of signs is still used to signify audio equipment, new words are once again being introduced. At this stage, technological advancement has slowed down to a reasonable rate, and the new influx of 'words' to the world of transistors is due to a new interest in what have been described as 'lifestyle markets', markets which target products at a particular group, such as young fashion-conscious teenagers, for instance.

Two of the most interesting images to be drafted into the 'trannie scene' are embodied in the Sharp QT50 and the Sony "Splashables" (Fig. 9). The Sharp QT50 is the more radical of the two, from a technological point of view it is a standard radio-cassette player, but it employs neo-fifties imagery to give it a fun look. The most striking aspect of it's appearance is the use of 'borax', which is a formal cliche employed during the forties by American stylists. It consists of bulbous steel or moulded plastic somewhat related to purely functional streamlining, and is normally enlivened by close horizontal and vertical striping, usually of chromium
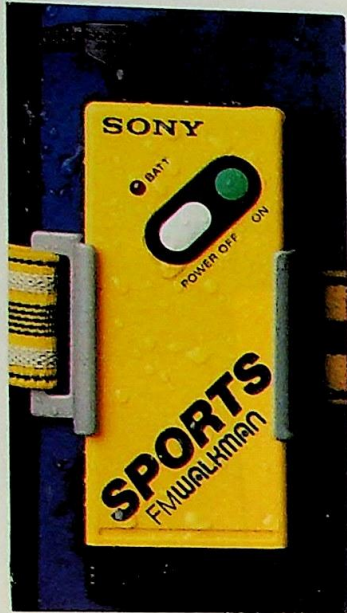
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plate. It's origins have been attributed by Reyner Banham to some of the early buildings designed during the twenties by the Expressionist architect Mendelsohn (Fig. 10). The original thinking behind the QT50 was that the public no longer needed to be reassured about the performance of their audio equipment, so it was felt that the hard edge matt black and silver boxes could be replaced by a more fun orientated pastel 'soft box'. Unfortunately, Sharp were wrong and the product has since been withdrawn.

The Sony "Splashable" range of products, on the contrary, is doing exceptionally well. This range consists of 'trannies', radio-cassette player and Walkman in bright yellow glossy plastic, with bright blue and black graphics and grey rubber sealing. The idea is that there now lots of people, in fact enough to constitute a market sector, who spend a considerable amount of their leisure time at the beach or involved in water sports, and that up until now they have had to use standard radios and risk damaging them through exposure to salt water or sand. The Sony range of products borrow 'nautical' and watersport signs to create super tough and smashing-looking fun products. For instance, the bright yellow is a traditional aqua sign as it aids location of lost equipment. The rubber prevents sand and splashes getting inside and at the same time introduces a new tactile quality to these products. The windows have metal bands arond them, which are not unlike

those on very early diving helmets. It is even possible to get a brightly coloured 'diver's belt' so as the Walkman or transistor can be worn whilst windsurfing or sailing. Although these products look as though they could be used at a depth of 100m or so, they are really just toys, but it is a good sign when large manufacturers start to introduce new words into the sign-catalogue of radios.Sometimes the idiosyncratic approach of an individual can lead to the use of new words to express old concepts. Daniel Weil is one such designer. His approach has been described as the rescuing of sad victims of 'follow-me manufacturing' and breathing new life into them. His work not only gives new life but also new meaning to radios. He does this by analysing and rethinking the form of electronic products, discarding what he refers to as the "aesthetics of the engineer and the marketeer". The most striking result of his approach in the past has been the exposing of components; treating chips and wires as words themselves, with their own expressive qualities. The consequence of this has been the demystification of electronics for consumers who were previously confronted with the bland and alien black boxes. One could almost say that he has laid bare the 'soul of the object'.

6. STYLE

The style of a product, or the way that the language is used to convey information about it's use or symbolic value is determined not only by the 'speaker' and his philosophy, whether it be personal, general or company policy, but more importantly, by the intended receiver of the message, and in what context it will be 'read'.

Often, if the style of an individual or of a company is exceptionally distinctive or elegant, it will create it's own niche in the market place. Braun, for instance, are now in this position (Fig. 11). Usually, though, the market-place determines the style of the product. For example, Sharp's recent attempt to move away from the 'serious' style of hi-fi equipment failed as the market was not ready and the QT50 has since been withdrawn.

Charles Jencks has suggested that society consists of two main semantic groups. Unlike traditional market classifications which are based on geographical location or income brackets, semantic groups are defined according to cultural similarities, such as religion and common traditions. Each semantic group has it's own values and fashions. The first of the primary groups consists of the lower middle classes and the stars of Hollywood, who place a lot of value on luxury, prosperity, dominance over nature and design crammed with vulgar, consoling and bogus affectations. The second group consists of intellectuals
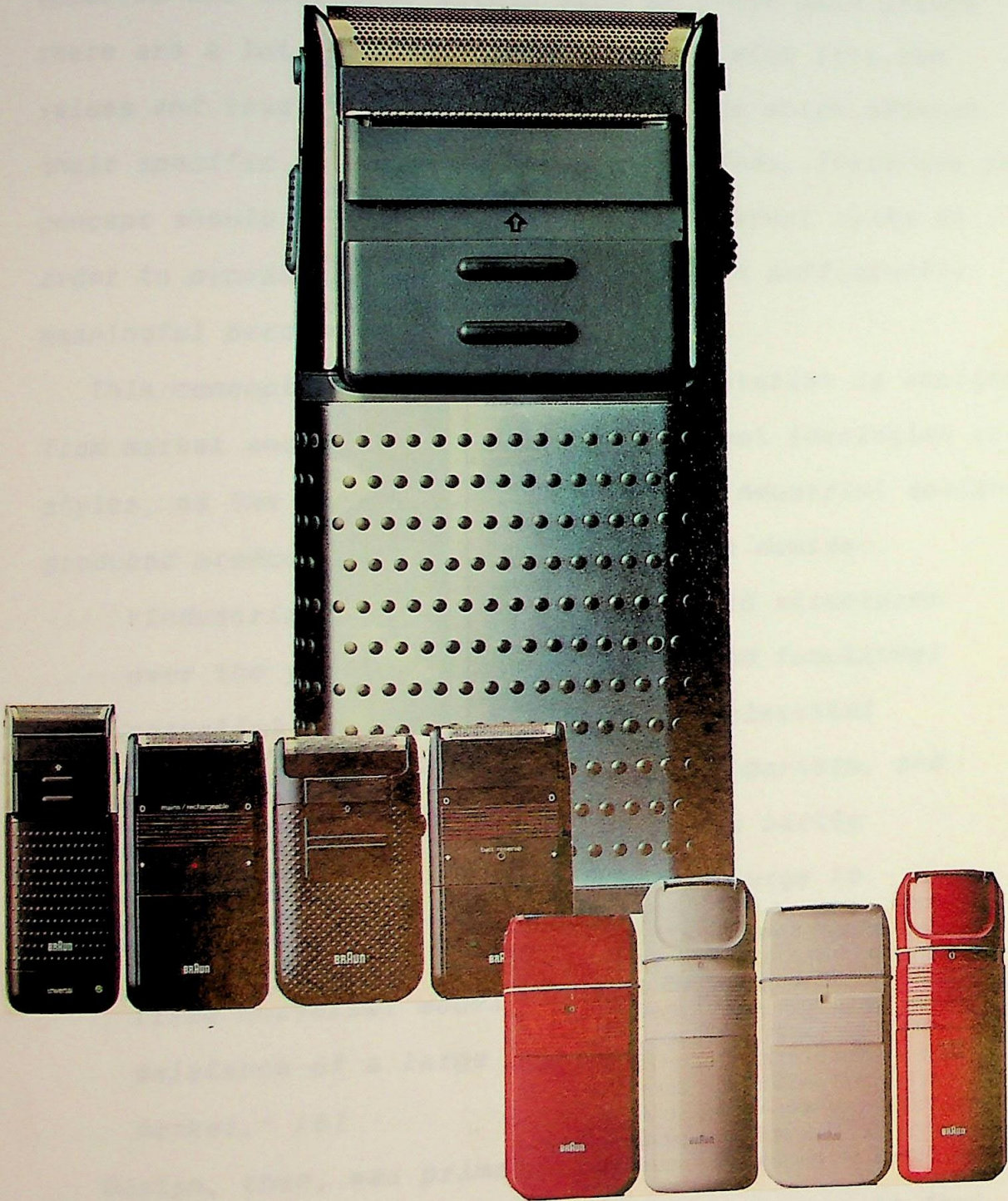
and aristocrats, and they prefer an austere lifestyle, in harmony with nature, more rooted in local tradition, reserved and intimate. Within each of these main groups there are a lot of smaller groups, each with it's own values and traditions, requiring products which address their specific physical and emotional needs. Therefore one concept should be expressed in many different syles in order to provide each semantic group with sufficiently meaningful products.

This concept or form of market segmentation is emerging from market and production conditions, not ideologies or styles, as the global market for which industrial design produced products in the past comes to a demise:

"Industrial design has imposed rigid structures over the years on the expressive and functional potential of objects themselves...classical design always referred to the mass markets, and these are now disappearing. This is partly because standardisation, with it's urge to transform different types of behaviour into fixed universal models, had it's roots in the existence of a large homogeneous international market." (8)

Design, then, was primarily involved in thinking up products which would satisfy everyone, whereas in fact they were unsuited to everyone. There were products which were indiscriminately promoted throughout the whole range

of the market. The new Ross radio is a typical example of this 'classic' approach which usually lends to a bland style devoid of any definite identity or character (Fig. 12).

Ross believed that the time had come for the 'trannie' to be reborn, and so design consultants Brand New were given a brief to

"Design a product that would look at home in any room, in any house, and could be bought by most age groups". (9)

This, of course, means that the product must 'say' the absolute minimum in the most attractive way possible. That is, the product must not send out signals or convey it's message in a manner that will appeal to any one semantic group; it must have global appeal, and thus assume a neutral image.

This task was made easier for the designers by the fact that their marketing information showed that most people do not retune their radios that often, so... all the controls could be neatly tucked away behind a little door. Traditionally, from the knurled chrome knobs of the sixties, to the plain brushed aluminium knobs of the eighties, the controls have always been one of the strongest 'identity' signs on an otherwise plain object, and now in one sweep, the Brand New designers have succeeded to finally eliminate the radio's main source of linguistic expression and in so doing, they have produced

12

another black, grey, white... box, a box whose only real
expression is in the form of large radii which are
suggestive of forties or fifties styling themes.

Already this product is appearing on shelves all over
Britain and apparently doing very well, and it has also
won the Design Council's seal of approval. All this
because of what it does not say! And meanwhile, the idea
that people want products for what they do say, slowly
gathers strength in the form of specialist retail outlets
such as Joseph, One-Off, or Astrohome. Admittedly, these
shops are extremely expensive and way outside of most
people's income, but they do indicate that there is a
growing interest in unusual products sending out very
strong messages.

> "...Our present society is characterised by the
> simultaneous presence of a variety of markets
> that correspond to different cultural groups,
> each with it's own specific behaviour, way of
> using language, fashion and traditions, and each
> with particular types of consumer requirements."
>
> (10)

Theoretically then, industry is freed from having to
devise a protection strategy that relies on the 'semantic
reductionism' that typifies 'classic design', and can
concentrate on producing products which actively select
their users, promote themselves to a particular social
group and which avoid apparently objective but

substantially anonymous qualities.

If a product's linguistic aspects are to be exploited to the full, design must take all the liberties offered by technology, using it's possibilities for new uses of language that can answer to the cultural needs of different social groups. And the resulting simultaneous existence of many different and strong styles could possibly help us to recover a system of ties and functions that cannot be explored in purely ergonomic or functional terms, that involve the user in his relationships to his environment from a wider cultural and expressive point of view.

7. SYMBOLS AND REFERENCES

Symbols and references can be used in visual language just as in verbal language to reinforce or clarify the meaning of a statement. All signs and most symbols and signals cohere together as sets. Their meanings depend on context, for instance, red and green lights mean stop and go, but only when they are contrasted one against the other and in their proper setting at a junction.

Unfortunately, in our society, the communicative potential of symbolism in design is rarely pushed beyond conveying practical information; whereas in many primitive cultures, utilitarian objects are endowed with symbolism and beauty and life and art are integrated. For example, in Africa, a chieftain's stool is at once a finely crafted ritual object denoting rank and expressing an animistic belief system, and an item of daily use.

But the situation seems to be improving with fewer and fewer people wanting the imagery of mass production in their homes, beyond the Japanese camera or sound system. There is a growing appetite for meaning, and emblems and symbols are actively sought to provide a sense of mental and aesthetic enrichment. So far, though, this desire for meaning has manifested itself in a renewed interest in craft products on the one hand, and a revival of past styles in product design on the other. But the interest in crafts is not just for contemporary pieces, but more for

those objects whose forms have been frozen, maintained by tradition and a belief that they respond to the exigencies of age-old needs rather than to fashions or induced needs. Innovation is out, and stability is in. But these objects are images, dissociated from their original meanings and removed from their relevant social, economic and cultural contexts which have merely become empty vessels, to be filled with new meanings, mistakenly taken to be the objects' original meaning. These objects which once symbolised the beliefs of an age, now merely symbolise a society that can't find meaning in it's own time.

But unlike craft products, there is no reason to believe that consumer durables from another age were any more meaningful in their time than ours are today. And this is the nub of the problem. Although our products have become technologically more advanced, they still have not started to answer emotional needs in the user. So if one accepts that there is now an appetite for objects which create some kind of emotional response, all our modern products have to offer over old products is contemporaneity. Whereas it is precisely because the old products are from another era that they are endowed with meaning in a modern context, although it is a sentimental or nostalgic one. The point is, that by being old, these products are emotionally more rewarding than contemporary products, which after so many years of development still cannot answer our emotional needs adequately.

In the last ten years or so, many Italian designers have been examining this problem, and the design group Memphis is the latest effort to try and find a meaningful way of using design language. They are trying to do this by treating an object as a communication medium, through which sensory information can be conveyed. One of the reasons why the objects which Memphis produce look so strange is that the designers not only refer to society's catalogue of signs, but also to signs which are as of yet uncatalogued, which they call "sexy signs". These are signs which no one has yet turned into symbols by charging them with meaning.

> "You don't relate them yet to anything or
> anybody and you can project new possibilities
> onto them right away". (11)

For instance, 'aseptic' materials such as printed glass, zinc plated and textured sheet materials, celluloids, fireflake finishes, industrial paints, neon-lights, coloured light bulbs and so on. These materials are never quoted as technological symbols but as textures, patterns, colours, density, transparency and glitter. They are immediate and directly sensual.

Much of the experimental work produced by Memphis has it's roots in some of the furniture produced by Studio Alchymia during 1979 and 1980, the most important of which were the Bauhaus One and Two series. In these two collections, Mendini, Branzi and Sottsass explored the

aesthetic possibilities of the mass environment,
exploiting the decorative potential of it's imagery. The
abstract patterns on the plastic laminated surfaces of the
bizarre sofas, bookcases and tables in these series owe
their origins to bland objects from the 1950s, or fine art
sources. Sottsass' contributions to this series were
optimistic pieces of furniture that simply echoed the
'non-cultural' environment of the 1950s:

> "So I have chosen textures like grit and the
> mosaics of public conveniences in the
> underground stations of large cities, like the
> tight wire netting of suburban fences, or like
> the spongy paper of Government account books".
> (12)

This enthusiastic appropriation of textures and
patterns from the everyday environment was accompanied by
an exploitation of banal man-made materials such as
airport rubber floors, plastic laminate and the galvanised
steel used on electrical appliances which is usually
hidden. These were being used as symbols of the
ordinariness of everyday life. Far from decrying the
tastelessness of the mass environment, Sottsass was
celebrating the ordinariness and honesty of the banal. On
one level he was stepping on the nostalgia band wagon, on
another he was opening himself to the force of popular
taste and integrating it into his personal vision of
design, which was later to manifest itself in the work of

Memphis.

In theory, this kind of symbolism makes excellent sense, but in practice the results are so unusual that most people find it difficult to accept and try to 'interpret' it, rather than merely opening their minds to it and leaving it create it's own sensory effect. Even designers have tended to ignore the ideology and adopt the most superficial aspects of it, making it's applications hardly more meaningful than the usual form of symbolism based on stylistic references to the past, especially as it is clear by now that it fosters commercial favour, particularly in the luxury goods sector (Fig. 13).

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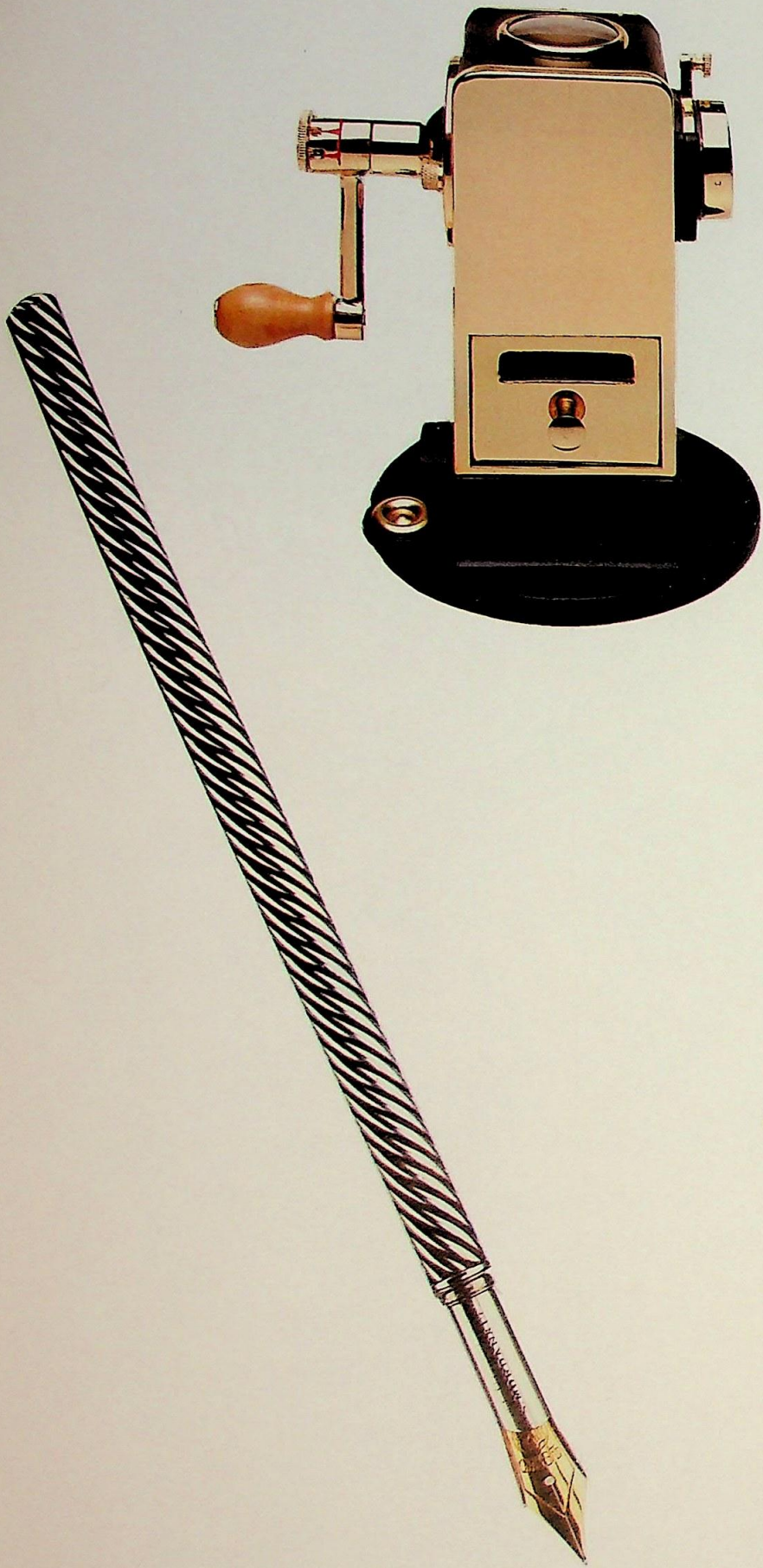
8. METALANGUAGE

When the way a message is uttered is as important as the object of the message, the language is being used as a 'metalanguage'. This means that it works on a second level which speaks about the first. In this way, products can be used to convey information on almost anything from design theories to social status. Umberto Eco calls this use of design 'identified design', which is the outcome of an expressed theory and of a practice in which the object aims to exemplify explicitly it's author's theory. The 'red and blue' chair by Gerrit T. Rietveld is a good example of this use of design language (Fig. 14).

Paradoxically, often in aiming to make functional objects, designers try to accentuate particular functions of the object, and instead of providing objects which communicate the way the product could be used, they produced objects whch communicate the design philosophy only. That is, the object does not say "I can be used like this", but rather, "I am a perfect design object". The metalanguage has been given priority over the language of the object.

During the sixties a designer called Gaetano Pesce was particularly aware of this problem, and the objects he produced - among them a giant lamp, a large squashy sofa (Fig. 13) and a strange bookcase with uneven edges - emphasise the
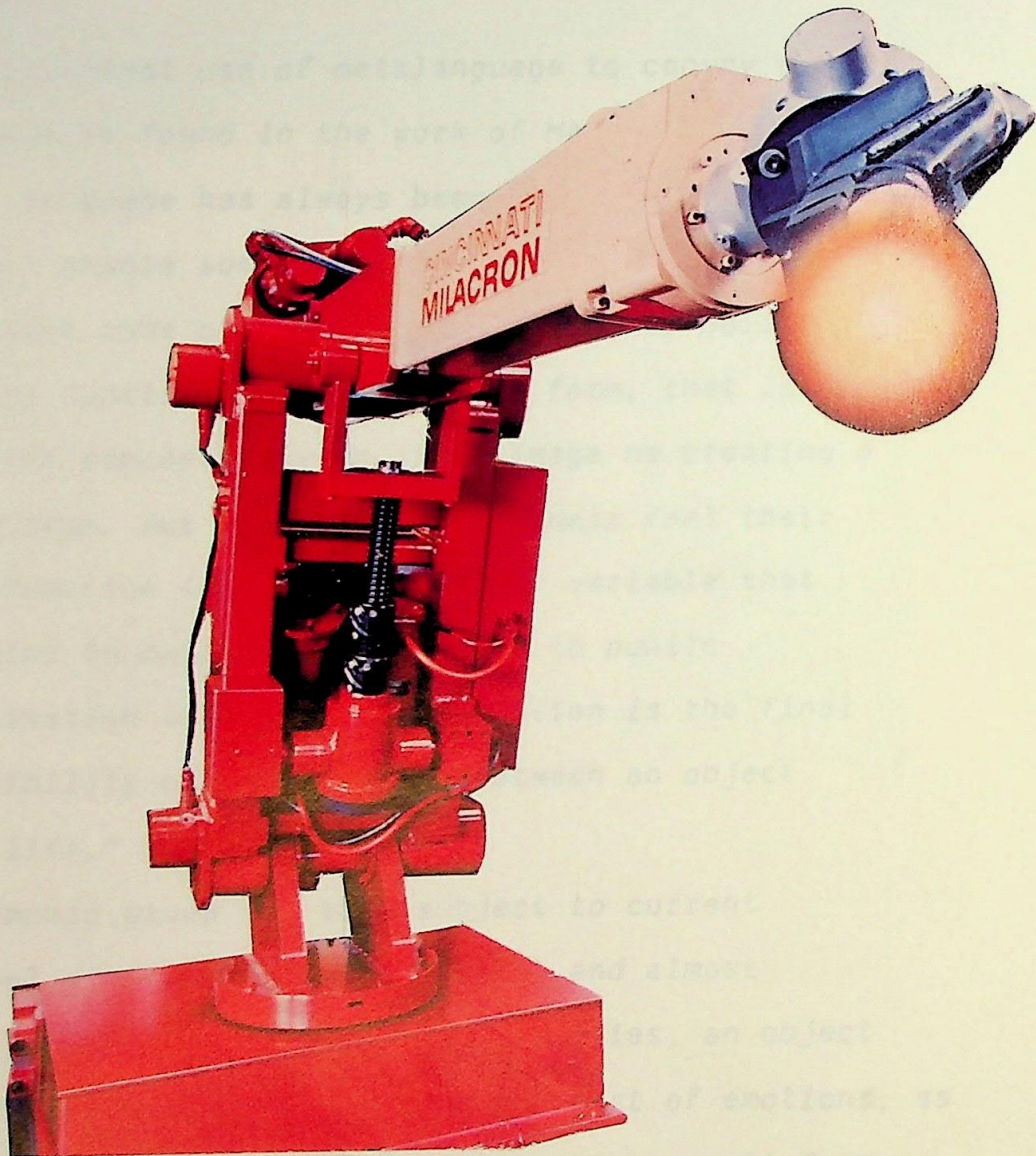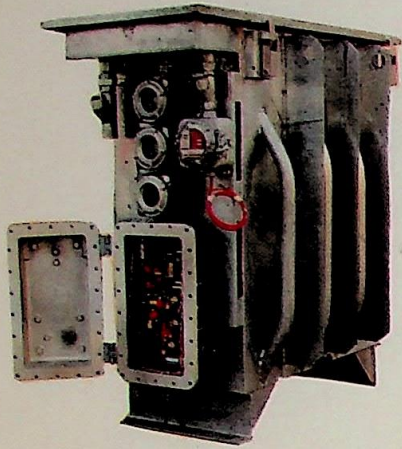
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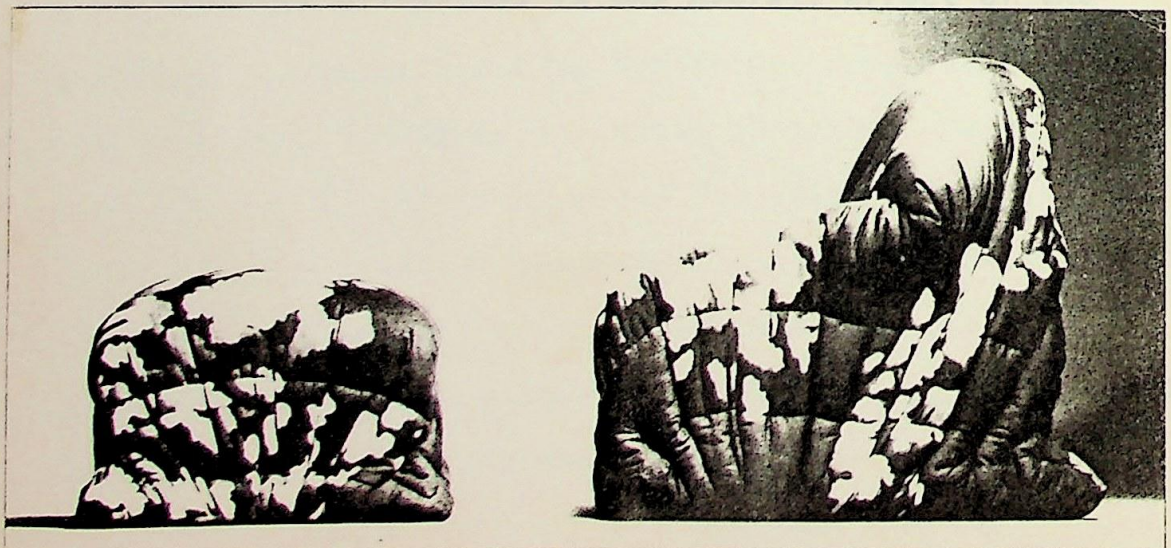
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"alienation of man and object and the
impossibility of communication between them as
long as consumption is the sole mediating
factor." (13)

He used distortion and exaggeration to turn the
language of the object into a metalanguage enabling him to
comment upon his observations. Rather than turning to
alternative media as many of his contemporaries did, Pesce
used the language of design to make its own
self-commentary (Fig. 15).

Aesthetic theories are not the only ones which can be
exemplified in product design. Machines, for instance,
express their designer's theory, albeit a technical one.
And the usually utilitarian use of language, with little
consideration for aesthetics, has come to signify, almost
as much as the actual elements of the language itself,
that an object is a machine (Fig. 16).

Economy is of the utmost importance in machine design,
but just as in spoken language, the use of colour can make
a significant difference to the overall effect of the
statement, without creating additional cost. Ettore
Sottsass Jnr. is famous for doing just this. On his ELEA
computer for Olivetti, he moved radically away from the
traditional concept of steel cupboards along the wall, and
created an object which became a piece of sculpture that
used mass, space and colour as raw materials. But his main
innovation was the introduction of colour to electronic

...as white and red, and the
... blue and yellow - which he used to
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... notes idea of a flower-vase or tea cup!

..., best use of metalanguage to convey
forces in the work of
Human language has always bro
types in the whole
form, that
language as itself a
... feel their
variable that,
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... in the final
... between an object
and life

The semantic value ... subject to current
... and almost
..., an object
... of emotions, as
... which result from
... materials which provide not only new
... specifications, but above all new semantic and
... possibilities, other modes of communication.

16

equipment - the external wall is white and red, and the
controls mauve, turquoise and yellow - which he used to
relate the parts to each other and to the whole. He felt
that as much thought should be given to it's aesthetic and
symbolic content as to that of a flower-vase or tea cup!
(Fig. 17).

The most recent use of metalanguage to convey design
theories can be found in the work of Memphis. The function
of design language has always been to express a concept in
signs which enable somebody to use it. Traditionally, due
to the strict code of the Modernists, it all boiled down
to defining function and giving it a form, that is,
defining the concept, giving it an image nd creating a
practical sign. But the Memphis designers feel that:

> "...function is a highly complex variable that
> relates to cultural conditions, to public
> imagination and necessity; function is the final
> possibility of the relation between an object
> and life." (14)

The Memphis group say that subject to current
ergonomical rules and to a few simple and almost
invariably schematic functional necessities, an object
exists as a system of signs, as a catalyst of emotions, as
a communication system. The products which result from
this theory use materials which provide not only new
structural possibilities, but above all new semantic and
metaphoric possibilities, other modes of communication.

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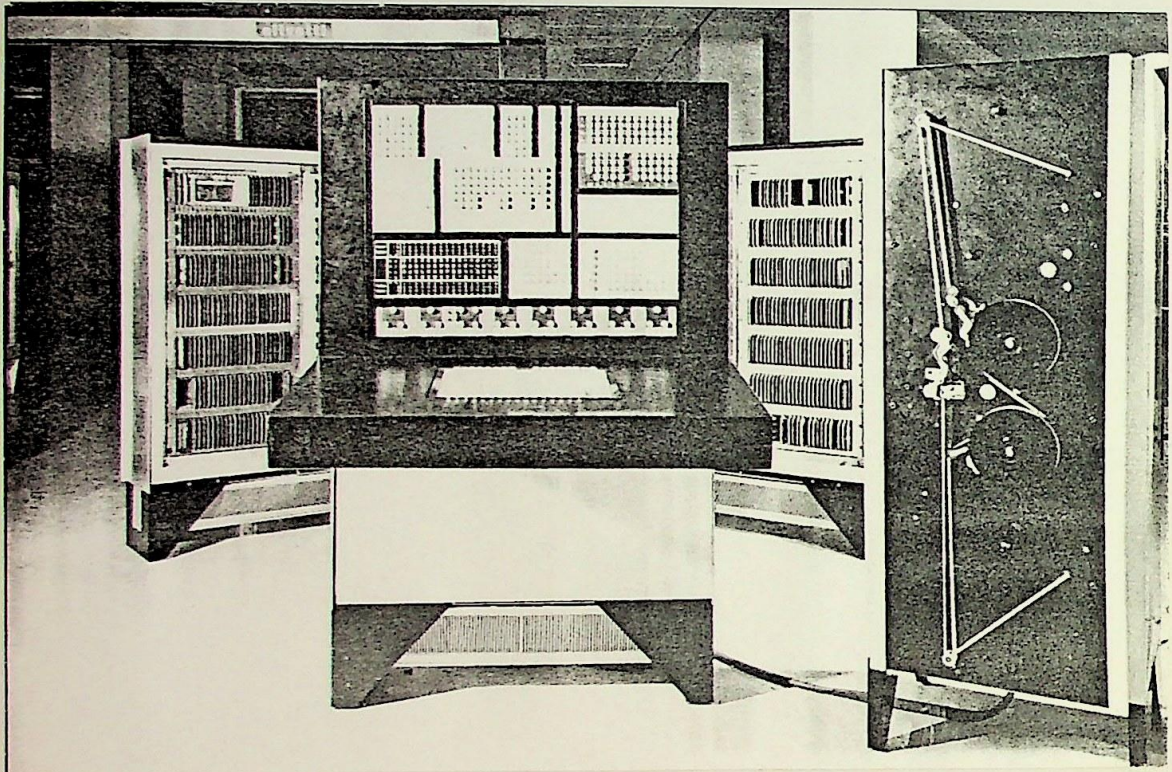
Memphis 'words' are selected, not only for practical
reasons, but also for their 'sound'. Each material,
texture or colour creates it's own visual sensation, whose
expressive potential need not be curbed by limiting it to
what is necessary for it to pour, support or stand up, but
to what creates the right visual sensation.

> "Hoffman often used precious materials like
> mother-of-pearl to draw lines. They were lines
> of mother-of-pearl, but they were essentially
> lines. If we use mother-of-pearl, we use square
> miles of it, because it is the mother-of-pearl
> that tells the story and not the line."(15)

Shape is not used as an end in itself, but as a way of
controlling the visual sensation of the sign being used.
These objects are all about communicating sensations,
achieved by the juxtapositioning of masses, materials and
volumes of colour and texture.

At the level of metalanguage, a Memphis object becomes
pure decoration, an ornament. Once the first message is
bypassed, all that is left is a visual sensation,
something which can be looked at and appreciated on a
purely physiological level. The colours, textures and
materials are the meaning, it is a pure image, whose
practical functions are almost incidental!

Exemplification of theories on aesthetics or
communication is a rather ideal use of metalanguage. Most
product design operates within the context of industry and

commerce, and metalanguage is often used as a way of communicating information about it's owner's social status or wealth, just as in speech a particular accent can indicate at what college somebody has been educated. But products have always been used by their owners to put across their wealth or status. Once when status was measured by individually produced possessions, it was the quality of the workmanship, and the preciousness of the materials with which they were made that counted. Now when we make do with mass-produced products available in an abundance that would have been inconceivable in any other age, rather different qualities have become important and often manifest themselves in 'cult objects'.

Cult objects are a product of this production line era. Design has taken the place that craft used to hold in determining the character of our possessions. These objects are designed and manufactured to perfection. Sometimes the creation of a cult object is still an unconscious process, but more often, in a period in which the visual language of design has become so widely disseminated, it is a highly self-conscious and deliberate business. The words of design language can sometimes, when spoken with sufficient skill, be used to fabricate cult objects or status symbols.

At the level of metalanguage, this enables people involved in image making to use the product as part of a larger sign system such as the advertisements found in the

'glossy magazines'. One often used technique is known as design-propping. In essence, this means leaving a suggestive-looking cult object somewhere in view on the set, or in the picture. A Le Corbusier chair, for example, or perhaps a Tizio light (Fig. 18).

The message that is put across is that the product being promoted, be it a brand of recording tape, video recorder or computer, is just as much a reflection of its owner's taste and distinction as the cult object whose company it is seen to be keeping. After a few months of intensive media coverage, both product and cult object start to look 'visually tired', as it is put with such delicacy - time, in fact, for the retirement of that particular design prop, and perhaps even a restyle of the product.

9. CONCLUSION

By dealing exclusively with the visual component of design language, this thesis only hints at the hidden potential of design as a really rich form of linguistic expression, since in reality a product or 'language object' must convey not only visual, but acoustic, tactile and kinesthetic information if it is to be used properly. This linguistic sophistication, as well as the fact that it is by its very nature guaranteed to be disseminated throughout society, makes it an ideal medium for communication. Yet the information conveyed by this complex communication system is still essentially practical, while the expression of more meaningful kinds of information is confined to what are essentially mono-sensory media within the domain of art.

In many traditional Eastern cultures this duality does not exist. Art can be expressed in the most humble object as well as in aristocratic or purely contemplative ones. But until this gap is bridged in our society, it looks as though the primary function of design language, the interface between man and abstract concepts of function, will remain one of utility.

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