

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

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By now we are all quite used to viewing mass-produced objects in galleries and museums. From the exotic to the ordinary, the designed product has found its place in the canon of curatorial practice alongside the poster, the painting, and the photograph. But product design exhibitions have an unsettling quality that exhibitions of other media simply do not have. Walking through a gallery of design objects most often feels disorienting and flat. The experience hovers somewhere between a Duchampian parade of ready-mades and a showroom for an in-flight shopping magazine. Why is it so unnerving to see objects on display that are also for sale in shopping malls? Why does it feel like a slow roam through a limpid, viscous solution?

Clearly, one part of the equation is that these objects do have a life outside the museum. The museum is, for the most part, a liminal space in which works materialize as if in a fictive universe. They are signifiers in a parenthetical world that has no signifieds. Additionally, as Walter Benjamin pointed out in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, museum-going has historically been a bourgeois parlour game where erudite

education refracts through undisturbed contemplation.¹ The contemplative object was marked by its aura, given to it by a combination of historical reference, classical technique, its placement within the gallery itself, and its unimpeachable uniqueness. He contrasts this with our modern condition of distraction, in which works of art must compete with the bombardment of colours and kaleidoscopic images that soak our electrified, commodified, sensory landscapes. We experience the world obliquely now, through our peripheral vision as much as through our other senses. Designed objects, unlike fine art, have a more mongrel pedigree. Each is, most importantly, one in a series of identical copies. There is no 'original' and there are no copies. Moreover, their displacement from our living rooms, their recontextualisation within the hallowed walls of the museum, elevates them to a loftier – albeit wobbly – position. But products never seem comfortable in their rarefied surroundings. They are more typically at ease on more prosaic stages like World Expositions (like that at Crystal Palace in 1851) and department stores, trade shows and museum stores. We do not ask much of them and they, in turn, are not expected to ask much of us. Their common-ness, humility and servility make them seem out of place in the thin air of the museum.

In a simplified sense, our consumption of design usually functions in two – occasionally overlapping – modes: use and beauty. When the object has a formal, compositional elegance or originality that approaches sculpture, we shift our lenses to appreciate it as art that is

accessible for the masses. It brings ‘beauty’ into the dull everyday. It elevates us. This is the world of Matali Crasset, Karim Rashid, or the Bouroullec brothers. Alternatively, we assess the object for its functional innovation. Design has improved the everyday by smoothing it, simplifying, or adding features to it. This is OXO Good Grips, MP3 players, or the Baby Björn. The holy grail, of course, is the combination of both qualities, and this is what makes the profession fetishize Apple’s iPod and the Miele vacuum cleaner, for example. Rarely does the design world consider the obverse side of these values, despite its greater presence. The product lifeworld is replete with failures, near failures, frustrating near misses, the ugly, the out of date, and the unusable. We live with these objects, we hate these objects, we cannot part with these objects. Design objects always arrive with a built-in promise of perfection and order. Clearly, our lives are more complex and much messier than this. Where, for instance, would Dunne and Raby’s *Placebo* project, which ensnares us in a game of psychological dependence and emotional ambiguity, fit into the Use/Beauty matrix?

There is, however, a small subset of design exhibitions that pose murkier questions. *Extra Ordinary* unearth design objects that are not pure commodities, that don’t dream of lining store shelves, but instead probe at our unconscious and enervate our comfortable categories of art and design, style and function.

“I challenge any lover of painting to adore a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”²

With this, the French philosopher and surrealist Georges Bataille perverts the relationship between the audience and the work of art. This useful turn of phrase reverses the polarities that objects and artworks have to the spectatorial gaze. It lays the groundwork for reconsidering that connection, and it makes manifest the full complexity of our polymorphous pleasures. Bataille was a rabid anti-idealist. He savaged attempts to repress or paper over our basest human drives. “Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations.”³ In contrast to the surrealists proper, whom Bataille considered to be guilty of elevating baseness as another senile ideal (and thus perpetuating idealism under another guise), base matter refuses to be recuperated for such noble purposes. Quite simply, it is useless and unassimilable. Its dumb, abject qualities force a bodily reaction (repulsion or attraction), not contemplation. Whereas a Platonic conception of form invokes a higher order ideal, Bataille’s base matter refuses such contemplative abstraction. It moves us. It is operational, not representative. As Yve-Alain Bois describes it, “it is neither ‘form’ nor ‘content’ that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both of these terms.”⁴ For Bois, that operand is *l’informe* (formless). The formless is “not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolisable theme, a given quality, as it is a term allowing one to operate a declassification [...] Nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it

is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery[...] The formless is an operation.”⁵

It is this operation that characterises many of the works in *Extra Ordinary*. The objects, when we can even call them that, are neither aesthetic nor utilitarian. They exceed our ability to assimilate them to the categories of use or beauty. Instead, they declassify use and beauty. This “self-storming of one’s own form”⁶ to borrow Denis Hollier’s phrase, confronts us as the disintegration of design’s own trumped-up rationale. The works destabilise us, disarming our ability to consume them easily. They lodge in our throat like a lump. The ‘extra’ in *Extra Ordinary* is therefore not an addition to the ordinary. It is not frosting on the cake of the ordinary. Instead, it is the intensification of the qualities of the ordinary. It is the revelation that the ordinary is much more charged, much more psychologically entangled, than we are led to believe. Design’s shiny promise of beauty, utility, and, ultimately, perfect order, are rendered laughable and transparent as strategies meant to distract us from the banal mishaps that mark our everyday lives.

Base matter hollows out the ideal like a termite. No matter how hard we try, we cannot elevate it, either, to nobler ends. There are three operations in particular that animate the projects in *Extra Ordinary*.

SMUDGE

FAT’s *Bathroom Sweet* is a curious and subtle object. It speaks the language of plumbing and bath fixtures, per-

fectly mimicking the fit and finish of conventional bathroom design. With echoes of Buckminster Fuller’s *Dymaxion Bathroom* and Atelier van Lieshout’s *Toilets, Baths, and Wash Basins*, it could also pass easily for any more recent attempt to create modular plug and play units for mass-produced housing. Its treacly pink color, generous bulges, and entwined necks, however, signal its dirtier intent. It parades its attachment to romantic love (showering and bathing together in a heart shaped tub) at the same time that it reveals the carnal, darker sides of the act of love. Romantic intimacy gets smeared with its excretions, and love and dirt exist side by side. It is the return of the repressed: the bodily fluids that drive the sex act come to haunt the sanitary and lovely. A similar unresolved dialectic characterises Enrico Bergese’s *Moonlight Lamp*. Bergese couples light, our most celestial domestic symbol, to a different order of domestic life, fertility. The firmament of the sky is cleaved together with the habits of the body. But the menstrual cycle is also a continuing record of infertility, of loss, and of excess. Unconsummated ova and their bloody reminder are sublimated into the loftiness of light, but they are never quite fully erased. The periodic reminder of earthbound bodies brings the light roughly back down to earth.

BALK

“The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar, routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates

with our moods.”⁷ Walter Benjamin wrote this to convey the power that the emerging technology of recording optics could have in slowing down our everyday, invisible moments into smaller, visible acts. By bringing to light these invisible gestures, Benjamin hoped the camera would illuminate an “unexpected field of action”. Whereas we so frequently associate the modern with increased pace and diminished deliberation, Smart Studios’ *DelayMirror* interrupts our pace, frustrating our ability to move smoothly from one task to the next. Moreover, by remixing the present with the just passed, the mirror reveals a halting, awkward world of gesture, pose, and half-conscious theatricality. It punctures the illusion that it reflects reality. The mirror reflects back the staging of the self, unsettling its performance. The same goes for Martin Creed’s *Work number 115: a doorstep fixed to a floor to let a door open only 45 degrees*. The work is sand in the works of daily life, not blustering and total in its challenge, but supplying continuous, low-level irritation. It nearly renders obsolete the functionality of the door itself, and it reminds us of that as we careen into it again and again. Both of these projects subtly remake and reframe the rituals and routines of the everyday. They introduce a hitch, or a hiccup into processes that design simply takes for granted as normal.

SEEP

Onkar Singh Kular’s delirious cutlery pieces look like brawling thugs in a line-up, missing teeth and other body parts. They are the dissolute cousins of a proper

spoon, knife, and fork. They interrupt the normal course of eating, certainly, but their much more obscene act is to dribble their contents all over the user. They are self-soiling. They reveal the act of eating for the beastly process that it can be. Their conspicuous inefficiency matches their rude behaviour. The project extends the same sort of invitation that Lizzie Ridout’s *Welcome Mat* does. It is an invitation to visit and to desecrate. The *Welcome Mat* is an exercise in Sysiphean futility, as it must be remade over and over, but it also spills its contents into the owner’s home, providing a constant source of dirt, dust, and decay. The projects disintegrate, haemorrhaging themselves and their contents. They almost do their jobs, but their inbuilt flaws handicap their utility. They leave behind only the mark of their own futility.

Designed objects rarely seem too comfortable in the fancy clothes of the museum or gallery. Despite their happy promise, the bright lights reveal their more humble origins as mass-produced consumer goods. In some ways, the wayward inscrutability of the projects in *Extra Ordinary* makes them a better fit. And while one might argue that that makes them closer to art than design, the opposite is true. Without their deep ties to the ordinary and to the everyday, without an outside referent, these works would lose their complexity. They challenge us precisely because they slip so seamlessly into our routines. They operate by revealing the balky, smudgy reality of our everyday life, a reality that most products strenuously strain to gloss over.

1. Benjamin, W. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 240.
2. Bataille, G. 'L'Esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions' in *Documents* 8 (Paris, 1930), p. 49.
3. Bataille, G. 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.; edited and with an introduction by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 51.
4. Bois, Y.A. *Formless: A User's Guide* with Rosalind Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 15.
5. Bois, Y.A. p. 18.
6. Hollier, D. *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. xii.
7. Benjamin, W. p. 238.

WHAT IS THE USE?

Ramia Mazé

"The world will only develop if people dream of a different world" *Andrea Branzi*¹

A century of design practice, research and criticism has explored notions of 'form' and 'function' in the things we live with everyday. In our daily lives, we are more (or less) aware of the intention or consequence of design to affect, improve or reform society (us) through the mechanisms of mass production and market forces. Nevertheless, in recent years, we have witnessed a dismantling of the Modernist housing and social projects and a transformation in the discourse about the role and scope of design. This 2005 Design Year in Sweden and in all the Scandinavian countries is a time for all of us to revisit the relation between design and form, between function and our daily reality. Reflecting on the extraordinary role of design in the everyday, we might rediscover design as a means of dreaming and speculating about our future world.

DESIGN IN ART

Recent acceleration of interest in design ideas and