DROOG DESIGN: SENSE AND EXPERIENCE

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CONTENTS

Figures...............................................................................................................................iii

Chapter 1: Introduction....................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Ettore Sottsass, An Introduction to Postmodernism ........................................... 8

Chapter 3: Creativity and Droog Design ............................................................................ 34

Chapter 4: Craft Modernized ........................................................................................... 59

Chapter 5: The Potential of Non-Design ......................................................................... 79

Chapter 6: Conclusion...................................................................................................... 99

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 103
FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Designed by Ettore Sottsass for Olivetti, Elea 9003, 1957. ......................... 10

Figure 2.2 Designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry A. King for Olivetti, Valentine portable typewriter, 1969, plastic, metal, rubber, made by Olivetti, Milan........... 12

Figure 2.3 Designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry A. King for Olivetti, Valentine portable typewriter casing, 1969, ABS polymer casing and metal parts, made by Olivetti, Milan................................................................. 13

Figure 2.4 Office Equipment Ad: typewriter: study and love, c. 1975, Kanasashi’s poster for the Valentine typewriter issued by Olivetti Corporation of Japan. .............. 15

Figure 2.5 Designed by Ettore Sottsass, “Container” furniture system/environment for the exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972, vinyl polychloride, felt, acrylic, made by Kartell, Milan. ............... 16

Figure 2.6 Drawing by Ettore Sottsass, “Container” furniture system/environment for the exhibition Italy: The New Domestic Landscape, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972. ................................................................. 17

Figure 2.7 Memphis (group), Tawaraya Ring with Memphis participants for Memphis exhibition, wood, metal, straw mats. ................................................................. 22

Figure 2.8 Ettore Sottsass, “Casablanca,” Memphis 1981, HPL Print laminate.............. 24

Figure 2.9 Michele De Lucchi, “Oceanic” lamp, Memphis 1981, metal...................... 27

Figure 2.10 Nathalie du Pasquier, fabric designs, 1981-82. ................................. 29

Figure 2.11 Ettore Sottsass, “Suvretta” bookcase, Memphis 1981, HPL print laminate. 31

Figure 3.1 Designed by Mario Minale, Red blue chair, Droog 2004, Lego bricks. ...... 37
Figure 3.2 Tejo Remy, Chest of drawers, Droog 1991, used drawers, maple. .......... 39

Figure 3.3 Tejo Remy, milk bottle lamp, Droog 1991, milk bottles, 15W bulbs. ........ 40

Figure 3.4 Tejo Remy, rag chair, Droog 1991, rags, steel strips. ......................... 41

Figure 3.5 Jurgen Bey, Lamp „Shade shade”, Droog 1999, two way mirror foil, existing lamp................................................................. 43

Figure 3.6 Onkar Singh Kular, 128 Pantone mugs, Droog 2003, bone china with sprayed glaze finish. ................................................................. 47

Figure 3.7 Maurice Scheltens, Table cloth „Tableau”, Droog 2005, photogram printed on cotton................................................................. 49

Figure 3.8 TOP: Gijs Bakker, Streched Yellow Brooch, Real? n. 355, glass, soda lime glass, gold plated silver. BOTTOM: Gijs Bakker, Real? n. 346, white gold palladium, topaz blue. ................................................................. 50

Figure 3.9 Djoke de Jong, drawing table, Droog 1993, MDF, schoolboard paint......... 52

Figure 3.10 Frank Tjepkema, „do break,” Droog 2000, porcelain, rubber, silicon. ....... 55

Figure 3.11 Marijn van der Pol, „do hit,” Droog 2000, stainless steel, hammer. ........ 56

Figure 3.12 Marti Guixe, „do scratch,” Droog 2000, lighting armature, black coating. .. 57

Figure 4.1 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Knitted lamp, 1996, PMMA, fiberglass. ....... 62

Figure 4.2 Marcel Wanders, Knotted Chair, 1996, carbon fiber, epoxy-coated aramid fibers. ................................................................................. 64

Figure 4.3 Designed by Marcel Wanders, Crochet Table, 2001, handmade crochet cotton, epoxy resin. ................................................................................. 66

Figure 4.4 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Vase „Ur’n”, 1994, Polyurethane (soft PU). .... 70

Figure 4.5 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Vase „Ur’n”, 1994, Polyurethane (soft PU). ... 72

Figure 4.6 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Long Neck and Groove Bottles, 2000, glass, porcelain, plastic packaging tape. ......................................................... 73
Figure 4.7  Hella Jongerius working on Long Neck and Groove Bottles, 2000............ 75

Figure 5.1 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Tree Trunk Bench, 1999, bronze cast of existing chairs, tree trunk.......................................................... 83

Figure 5.2 Designed by Marcel Wanders, Apple juice bottle, 1999, ceramic. ............... 84

Figure 5.3 Design by Front, Design by Animals—table, 2005, wood......................... 86

Figure 5.4 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Gardening Bench, 1999, hay, resin, leaves, bark... 88

Figure 5.5 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Gardening Bench, 1999, hay, resin, leaves, bark.. 89

Figure 5.6  Marti Guixe, Orienbaum candy, 1999, polar wood, candy, orange seed. .... 91

Figure 5.7 Designed by Puieke Bergmans, Crystal virus: Massive infection, 2008, table:maple, vases: crystal. ......................................................... 96

Figure 5.8  Joris Laarman, Half Life Lamp, 2010, glass, lamp, hamster cells. .......... 98
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

When Renny Ramakers, a Dutch design historian, saw the work by young Dutch designers who were using cheap industrial materials or found objects, like old dresser drawers and driftwood to create furniture, she felt it as a sign of the time and decided to bring some of these products together and present them as a common mentality. Remakers organized an exhibition in the Netherlands and Belgium in early 1992 in order to show to the world what she thought was a “clear break from the past”, a genuinely new approach to design. She sold so little she barely covered the costs. A year later, Remakers found out that Gijs Bakker, the product designer and professor at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, was planning to exhibit the work of his present and past students at the 1993 Milan Furniture Fair, she suggested that they collaborate on a joint show. They called the collection Droog Design after the Dutch word „droog”, which translates into English as „dry” as in dry wit, unadorned informality, and ascetic irony. „Dry” as that essentially Dutch inclination to „do normal” and at the same time critically investigate what you are doing and the way you do it. Today Droog makes exhibitions, gives lectures, initiates experimental projects, carries out commissions for companies, produces
and distributes projects, supervises the IM Masters course at the Design Academy Eindhoven, and runs a shop/gallery in Amsterdam and New York.¹

Due to its innovative contributions to the field, Droog is constantly featured in surveys of twentieth-century design. Another type of publication where Droog is prominent is in books of Dutch design. The Netherlands is one of today’s most important centers of innovation and experimentation in architecture, urban planning, industrial design, and graphic design, and both the government and the private sector have done an important job of promoting “Dutch Design” both as a label and as a platform for emerging professionals. Examples of this are False Flat: Why Dutch Design is so Good, Dutch Design: A History and the Premseala Foundation which is a design institute that produces lectures, debates, exhibitions and publishes Morf, the Netherlands' largest design magazine.

Droog’s designs and designers are featured in the discussion about the blur between art and design. These two disciplines are traditionally separated by just one word: function. Regarding „Design Art’ what should be put in a home and what in a design museum? Is it intended as a sculpture or a piece of furniture? Gareth Williams, the Senior Tutor of Design Products at the Royal College of Art and the former Curator of Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Furniture at the V&A Museum, in one of the key discussants of the integration of the practices of art, craft and design in contemporary design. Glenn Adamson’s Thinking Through Craft and Steven Holt’s Manufactured: The Conspicuous Transformation of Everyday Objects are important publications about

the role of craft in today’s design and manufacturing environment. Droog is a prominent participant in all of these discussions.

Writing and discussion play an essential role in Droog’s overall design project. For this reason, the design group has traveling exhibitions, publishes books and videos, and maintains a website featuring their products, projects, and experiments, in other words, their overall mentality. These publications have a heavy visual component but they are accompanied by text so that there is a story tied to the products presented. The head of all these writing projects is Renny Ramakers, a prominent art historian and founder of Droog. The fact that Droog’s most complete writings come from an insider adds an emotional, biased, and almost maternal quality to these texts. This is comparable to Barbara Radice’s role in Memphis. As Ettore Sottsass’ life-long companion, Radice, a journalist, was the principal voice of the design group. Seeing design through the lens of someone in love gives a very particular perspective on both the designer and the designs. I do not see this emotional component as an obstacle but as an interesting vehicle through which I can explore the value of the object for both the designer and the user.

Most of Droog’s designers do not stay in the group for long, but move on to continue with their own design projects. Droog functions as a platform and marketing tool for young designers to gain a name at the beginning of their career. On the other hand, prominent designers who already have a name of their own are sometimes recruited by Droog for specific projects, but these designers have an agenda of their own that includes but also goes beyond Droog Design. Examples of this are Marti Guixe, Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongerious, and Jurgen Bey. Moreover, these designers have also seen an important potential in writing for the promotion of their designs. For that reason, the
writings by these designers on the role of design are a crucial source to understand Droog.

In this thesis I will compare and contrast Droog Design with the career of Ettore Sottsass and the Memphis design group of which Sottsass was a founder. Like the experiences and designs of Droog, the life and work of Sottsass in his Memphis years is now treated as paradigmatic of postmodernism in design by historians and critics. A careful examination of the contrast in the role of the designer, the relationship between objects and people, and the purpose of design evident in the story of Droog and Sottsass will help identify and clarify both what is common to Postmodernism and what is distinctive about Droog.

The first chapter presents Ettore Sottsass and the design group Memphis as the paradigm of Postmodernism. This designer’s journey transformed the design profession thereafter. When Droog came into being, they had Sottsass’ fifty years of thought and reflection on the purpose of design. Sottsass journey begins as a designer for industry, trying to express the new democracy in material form. His design for the valentine typewriter took office equipment outside, inspiring young men and women to write poems among nature. He then had the need to get away and reflect on the purpose of constructing. He studies the relationship between objects and people, and in an exhibition at MoMA he argues that possessions weigh us down, a theme that continues to be explored by the designers that followed him. Memphis strives to make objects that are instruments of communication; their emphasis is on the present, and storytelling and the liveliness of objects are essential characteristics. Ultimately, Memphis embraces consumption and tries to design objects that are true to their time so that there is a
realization of one’s existence through the senses. Challenging conventions, storytelling, and designing a sensorial relationship between objects and users are Sottsass’ most important lessons to the design profession.

The second chapter introduces Droog and a series of definitions of creativity in the Postmodern world based on designs by this group. Creativity is no longer a matter of making, but a reorganization of what already exists. The six different definitions of creativity are ironic reproduction, reusing and reworking, reflections of the everyday world, recording, redemption and receptivity. In the Modern Era, the way designers envisioned their role and their place in the cycle of production and consumption shaped their understanding of creativity. The modern designer would strive to distill an object to its purest form, so that industry would produce it and it would last forever. Inspiration is abstract and there is never a specific user in mind. Creativity is an issue in this essay because of the way it changed with Postmodernism. Disappointed with industrial design at the end of his career, Ettore Sottsass proposed “deep simplicity” as a key aesthetic principle of objects and Droog became one of the followers of this mentality. In connection with this, I will explore the value of the normal and how, when one is conscious of it, the everyday becomes extraordinary. Renny Ramakers says she saw a “clear break from the past” when she saw the work by young Dutch designers, bringing her to the creation of Droog. This chapter, however, explores how Droog is also a continuation of Ettore Sottsass’ reflections on design.

The third chapter argues that craft in the Postmodern world is a way to work with modernity as opposed to resisting it. Unlike the Arts & Crafts Movement, Droog believes there can be a complimentary relationship between craft, industry, and technology.
Problem solving and problem finding go together in the experimentation with materials, since designers not only discover new possibilities but also open new questions as they submerge themselves in a material. It is a process where intuition leads the way. This opens up the possibility of criteria for evaluating design that goes beyond the formal and the functional. Like handling materials, the experience of the final product is not entirely rational. A designer can trust his/her intuition to decide what is the most natural, comfortable and familiar way to engage with a product. This chapter also presents two views on decoration’s comeback during Postmodernism. On the one hand, decoration can be understood as shallow and external and as a space where any style or combination of styles can coexist. On the other hand, decoration can be the most vulnerable representation of the essence of an object. The fact that both of these definitions are “Postmodernist” shows the ambiguity and multiplicity of this movement.

The fourth chapter explores the potential of designing less. Taking into account what is already there and its inherent qualities can lead to the most enjoyable designs. The role of the designer is to show an unusual point of view in order to highlight the everyday and the mundane. The designer creates relationships and experiences, as opposed to objects, so that his/her creations become a second nature to the place. It is a discovery of the potential latent in things. Finally, on the theme of decoration and its existence exclusively on the surface or beyond, I present a design by Joris Laarman where the decoration truly comes to life.

This essay is an attempt to understand two particular labels: Postmodernism and Droog. The role of the designer, the meaning of decoration, the definition of creativity,
and the importance of objects in our lives, are the themes that will lead to this understanding.
ETTORE SOTTSASS, AN INTRODUCTION TO POSTMODERNISM

Ettore Sottsass’s self-definition of what it means to be a designer evolves throughout his career, but the emphasis on human needs as the fundamental driver of design remains constant. In the beginning of his career during the postwar years, Sottsass was an optimistic designer who intended to redefine Italy as a new industrialized democratic country detached from its fascist past. As Sottsass’s career progressed and his reputation grew, he became the chief consultant designer for office equipment manufacturer Olivetti, a mainstream time in Sottsass’s career. Disenchanted with industrial design and the constraints of the market, Sottsass joins the group Alchemia, where he produced designs critical of the materialistic culture of postwar Europe. Between 1972 and 1978 Sottsass stopped designing and instead traveled and theorized about the purpose of constructing, culminating in the series of photographs known as Metaphors. In 1981, he returns to design with the foundation of Memphis, a propositive time for Sottsass since his designs were not simply a criticism but an alternative to the detached relationship between people and objects at the time. Memphis was the key point of Sottsass’s reflections about material culture, and it transformed the design world thereafter. Sottsass found an antidote to monotonous, mass-produced, disengaged design by challenging conventions, observing non-Western cultures, and revisiting history and
the past. Ettore Sottsass’s career sets the ground from which Droog and its design philosophy flourish.

Postwar Italy’s need to raise general standards of living, house the homeless, and bring material goods within the reach of everyone became the perfect breeding ground for the new generation of Italian designers. Seeking ways to express the new democracy in material form, the young designers paired up with emerging industries around Turin and Milan. The variety of new materials, including metals, processed wood, and plastic, became the means through which democratic Italy constructed a culture of optimism where material goods were at the reach of everyone. 2 This is how Sottsass’s describes the situation: “The manufacturers were different too. They were young industrialists, almost all of them anti-fascist that had entered their fathers’ businesses right after the war. They hoped that Italy could come up with something new, both socially and ethically.”

In 1957, Sottsass became the chief consultant designer for the Italian office equipment company Olivetti. The observation of users was the main source of ideas for the designs and the goal was to devise a more pleasurable work experience (fig. 2.1). According to Ronald R. Labaco, “the design innovations of the Elea 9003 were motivated by Sottsass’s concern with the physical, cultural, and psychological comfort of


Figure 2.1 Designed by Ettore Sottsass for Olivetti, Elea 9003, 1957.
the computer operators.” Sottsass improved the office environment by lowering the height of the computer cabinets so that the operators could communicate with each other. He also used color to differentiate between the various parts and to alleviate the visual monotony of the office space.⁴

On Valentine’s Day 1969, Olivetti introduced *valentine* (fig. 2.2) the bright-red, molded plastic typewriter that became one of Sottsass quintessential designs. About his product Sottsass said,

> It is called *valentine* and was invented for use in any place except in the office, so as not to remind anyone of monotonous working hours, but rather to keep amateur poets company on quiet Sundays in the country or to provide a highly colored object on a table in a studio apartment. An anti-machine, built around the commonest mass-produced mechanism, the works inside any typewriter, it may also seem to be an unpretentious toy.⁵

Plastics, which are lighter than metal, made true portability possible so that office equipment was no longer confined to the office (fig. 2.3). The name of the product, its seductive color, and the ad campaign created a novel association between an element traditionally confined to the office and something hip and young like Valentine’s Day.⁶ The result was an object that contributes positively to the space it inhabits. The *valentine* reminded the user of being outside, of playing and thinking creatively as opposed to the boredom that comes with work and an office environment. Sottsass’s original concept for the typewriter broke all associations with office. It featured only lower case type and no

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Figure 2.2 Designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry A. King for Olivetti, *Valentine* portable typewriter, 1969, plastic, metal, rubber, made by Olivetti, Milan.
Figure 2.3 Designed by Ettore Sottsass and Perry A. King for Olivetti, *Valentine* portable typewriter casing, 1969, ABS polymer casing and metal parts, made by Olivetti, Milan.
bell to indicate the end of a typewritten line, rendering it impractical for a business machine. This was not economically viable for Olivetti, so the only reminder of Sottsass’s impracticality is the lowercase valentine logo in raised lettering above the keyboard (fig. 2.4).  

Sottsass’s contribution to “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape,” an exhibition at the MOMA in 1972, criticized of the materialistic lifestyle characteristic of postwar society. He designed a series of plastic boxes or ‘containers’ that were equipped with all the machinery necessary to lead an efficient lifestyle (fig. 2.5). This included a stove, a refrigerator, a cupboard, a jukebox, a shower, and a bookcase. According to Sottsass, “the catalogue of needs grows or diminishes according to the culture of the ethnic group to which the user belongs, but the containers remain impassive. They have no formal link with the owner’s ethnic group. He will use more or less containers, own more or less boxes, and will finally resolve the problem in term of quantity rather than quality (fig. 2.6).”

Sottsass wanted to abolish any cultural reference furniture might have so that the user would feel so detached, so disinterested, and so uninvolved that the object would be of absolutely no importance to him. This would be an exaggeration of the current relationship between people and their material culture. Sottsass explained, “in this work of de-conditioning there was also the idea of de-conditioning in a vaster way, to shake off

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7 Labaco, Humanist for the Modern Age, 39.
8 Doordan, Catalysts of Perception: Material Considerations, 35.
10 ibid., 162.
Figure 2.4 Office Equipment Ad: typewriter: study and love, c. 1975, Kanasashi’s poster for the Valentine typewriter issued by Olivetti Corporation of Japan.
Figure 2.5 Designed by Ettore Sottsass, “Container” furniture system/environment for the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972, vinyl polychloride, felt, acrylic, made by Kartell, Milan.
Figure 2.6 Drawing by Ettore Sottsass, “Container” furniture system/environment for the exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972.
not only certain forms or furniture or their colors, but also, in general, the idea of possession and possessions, nostalgia and all the structures that led to nationalism, presumption, aggressiveness and so on.\textsuperscript{11}

Sottsass’s plastic boxes were a commentary on the way people live. He wanted to emphasize that the conspicuous collection of objects inside people’s houses did not contribute much to their life. According to Sottsass, people felt the need to continuously demonstrate status through their possessions, and their houses “were nothing other than cemeteries containing the tombs of their memories.” He proposed a new awareness of existence where memories are allowed to remain as memories, instead of being solidified into emblems. Memories can “become a sort of living plasma with which, day after day, [one] can always start over again from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{12} Sottsass plastic boxes were a critique of people having more possessions than they really need, and by abandoning everything every day, people could start their lives and relationships in a way that would be creative and positive.\textsuperscript{13} Sottsass advocated for a system that set people free by getting rid of extra baggage: “there is no doubt that, sooner or later, something will be done so that one can put on one’s house every day as we don our clothes, as we choose a road along which to walk every day, as we choose a book to read, or a theater to go to; as we daily choose a day to live, within the limits that destiny or fate impose upon us.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Ettore Sottsass and Museo Alessi, \textit{Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass} / (Omegna (Verbania): Mantova: Museo Alessi ; Corraini, 2007), 44.

\textsuperscript{12} Sottsass, in \textit{Italy: The New Domestic Landscape}, 162.

\textsuperscript{13} Sottsass and Museo Alessi, \textit{Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass}, 44.

\textsuperscript{14} Sottsass, in \textit{Italy: The New Domestic Landscape}, 163.
Sottsass also makes the point that the aim of this project was not to achieve a product, but to state and provoke ideas. Sottsass wrote,

If you approach [the pieces of furniture], you realize that hardly anything really “works.” You realize that no water flows through the pipes, that the stove doesn’t heat, that the refrigerator isn’t cold and so forth; you realize that no “product engineering,” (as they say in industry) has been done. These pieces of furniture, in fact, represent a series of ideas, and not a series of products to be put on the market this evening or tomorrow morning. So I hope no one will wonder how much they cost and where they can be bought, because obviously they are not priced, and they are not on sale anywhere.15

This statement is useful to understand how Sottsass thinks of himself as a designer at this point of his life. He is no longer a designer who abides the impositions of industrial culture, but one who is guided by the relationships between objects and people.16 He calls “[himself] a Theoretical Designer; just as there are theoretical physicists who think about physics. They don't make plans for getting to the moon. They think about what sort of physical laws a person going to the moon might encounter.”17

Disenchanted with consumer culture and designing for industry, Ettore Sottsass felt a need to “get away” between 1972 and 1978: “I felt a deep necessity to visit deserted places, mountains;” says Sottsass, “to re-establish a physical relationship with the cosmos, which is the only real environment, precisely because it can’t be measured, foreseen, controlled or known... it seemed to me that if anything was to be regained we would have to begin by regaining microscopic gestures and elementary actions, the sense

15 ibid., 162.
17 ibid., 24.
of one’s own position.”\textsuperscript{18} He spent this time thinking, drawing, writing and working on a series of designs he called “constructions.” They were studies of architectural language, reflections on the environment, notes on anthropology, analyses of what might have been the deep, primordial, sense of constructing—around and within life.\textsuperscript{19} According to Sottsass, “the sense of these Metaphors was that design does not necessarily mean designing a product, which doesn’t cost much, which sells in large numbers and brings a lot of money...I don’t care! I want to know what this product is and what effect it will have on people.”\textsuperscript{20}

It is interesting to acknowledge what a designer finds and does not find when he steps away from modern civilization. Although a great deal of his profession had been based on designing technology interfaces, one thing Sottsass did not find in his travels was technology. His interaction with non-Western cultures also meant a rediscovery of craft, traditional materials, and a new definition of his role as a designer: “Art, religion, architecture, and daily life in the Near East seemed so effortlessly intertwined that Sottsass saw it as a paradigm for how Western society should relate to the anonymous products of modern industry, and how he could help fulfill that role as a designer.”\textsuperscript{21} Sottsass’s career journey took him from the post-war utopian view of design, through great achievements and disillusions, to having time to theorize and reflect about his role as a creator. Ettore Sottsass, as a mature designer, came up with the idea of Memphis,


\textsuperscript{19} ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Sottsass and Museo Alessi., \textit{Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass}, 29.

\textsuperscript{21} Labaco, \textit{Humanist for the Modern Age}, 49.
the climax of his reflections about design.

In 1981, Sottsass returns to design with a group of young collaborators including Michele de Lucchi, George Sowden, and Nathalie du Pasquier to create Memphis; a collection of radical prototype designs for furniture pieces and decorative art objects (fig. 2.7). These Milanese architects and designers felt an urgent need to reinvent an approach to design, to foresee other environments, and to imagine other lives. Unlike Sottsass’s plastic boxes for the MoMA exhibition, which were conceptual and philosophical works, all the Memphis projects are “propositive, positive, non-critical acts.” This means that Memphis was not simply a critique of contemporary material culture, but a proposal of an alternative. In order to understand Memphis and the impact it had in the design world, I am going to explore four characteristics of the movement: the use of design as an instrument of communication, the concentration in the present, the importance of storytelling, and the liveliness of objects.

One fundamental Memphis idea is to make design into a sophisticated, conscious instrument of communication. Instead of thinking of design as a program of cultural regeneration capable of changing the world according to a rational design, Memphis concentrates in the expressive and emotional relations between man and objects. The object becomes a sign through which a message is conveyed. Barbara Radice, a journalist and member of Memphis, explains it as a “sort of Morse code of sensory

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22 Sparke, *Ettore Sottsass, a Modern Italian Designer*, 12.


24 ibid., 29.

25 ibid., 143.
Figure 2.7 Memphis (group), Tawaraya Ring with Memphis participants for Memphis exhibition, wood, metal, straw mats.
seductions transmitted to the body through physical messages (light, shadow, color, warmth, roundness, weight, thickness, fragility, etc.), rather than to the brain through cultural patterns.” It is a physical rather than an intellectual form of communication.26

When writing about Memphis, Barbara Radice uses scientific language and references to molecular biology, which charges the objects with vivacity and dynamism. This is how she describes color as a communication tool: “[color] works as an enzyme to catalyze chemical reactions, it generates nervous impulses that open new doors of logic in the brain, it is a sort of perceptive jogging, an aerobic for lazy or drowsy sensory cells. Like jogging, it requires commitment, determination, measure, enthusiasm, faith, and patience; and to serve a purpose, it must be used well.”27

Memphis embraces consumption and does not attempt to represent good taste or respectability. Memphis’s amorality and appeal to the senses create a type of communication based on seduction:

Their brand of communication consists in presenting an object that is attractive by virtue of its elusive, evanescent, consumable, perversely “useless” and consequently infinitely desirable qualities. Communication—true communication—is not simply the transmission of information (which in case of a product is always unilateral, from the product to the consumer). Communication always calls for an exchange of fluids and tensions, for a provocation, and a challenge. Memphis does not claim to know what people “need,” but it runs the need of guessing what people “want.”28

26 ibid., 142.
27 ibid., 121.
28 ibid., 186.
Figure 2.8 Ettore Sottsass, “Casablanca,” Memphis 1981, HPL Print laminate.
Memphis set itself in the present. The urban scene, suburbia, and pop culture became its models. One of the best examples of this is Memphis’s use of plastic laminates in furniture design (fig. 2.8). This fake wood decorated with sugary colors was already used in the tables and chairs of bars and coffee shops, ice cream parlors, movie theaters, and take-out restaurants, but no respectable person would have it visible in their living room. Plastic laminate’s metaphor for vulgarity, poverty, and bad taste was precisely the reason why Memphis was attracted to this material. It symbolized the opposite of elegance, prestige, and status. Moreover, plastic laminates allowed the introduction of surfaces decorated with patterns of the designer’s own invention. This material not only made the pieces of furniture unique, but it also made them true to their time.

Memphis also concentrated in the present by understanding design as a snapshot of time. In Sottsass’s words, “indeed, to imagine the Solutions, the Solutions, as nothing other than conscious travel notes, conscious momentary and provisional figures that can be envisaged during the great, mad, supersenseless journey of History. There is nothing else for the time being.” Memphis did not believe their designs were a solution for anything. It was a tentative approach, not a certainty. The design group embraced being a transient movement: “We are sure that Memphis furniture will soon go out of style.” Memphis was something so specific to its time that it would soon go out of fashion. The

\[\text{\textsuperscript{29}}\text{ibid., 35.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{30}}\text{ibid., 11.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{31}}\text{ibid., 141.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{32}}\text{ibid., 185.}\]
designs were “destined for total and immediate consumption, objects as intense as apparitions, as magic as curses, concentrates of existential lust.”

Memphis’s designs were not static or definite. A story is a section of somebody’s life, but this person’s life will evolve and continue beyond the story. Memphis’s designs function in a way similar to stories: “[the design] is not a definitive declaration, but a stage, a transitory moment, a container of possibilities, an unstable living form that evolves in time.” The objects also function as storytellers when they actively influence behavior. Memphis designs a function, not for a function. Sottsass explains it as the difference between thinking like a marketing manager and an anthropologist. The marketing manager will say the client is the population, the market, and they think they know what the market is and needs. On the other hand, a good designer, thinking like an anthropologist, knows that he doesn’t know, and he will give one possibility based on his own personal culture, patience, hopes, and political beliefs. The designer will construct a story, and hope that is attractive enough. In a way, the user does not know he needs the product until he is enticed by the story.

Memphis objects are designed and discussed as actual living beings (fig. 2.9). Michele de Lucchi, one of the members of Memphis, explains that modern designers devoted all their energy to making surfaces homogeneous, associable, and continuous. Memphis, on the other hand, saw design not so much as a unit but as a sum of parts. “We

33 ibid., 187.
34 ibid., 87.
35 ibid., 143.
36 Sottsass and Museo Alessi., Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass, 48.
Figure 2.9 Michele De Lucchi, “Oceanic” lamp, Memphis 1981, metal.
have almost come to study the cells that make up objects more than the objects themselves. Materials and decoration are cells of objects, and they are part of this process.”37 The patterns of Memphis decoration resemble organic images of the objects’ molecular structure. They are non-directional, homogeneous, repeatable, and abstract, similar to the patterns one would see through a microscope.38

Radice describes the work of Nathalie du Pasquier, Memphis’s most prolific pattern designer, as “enthusiastic, explosive, exalted, elated, and striking as neon in a tropical night. Thinking of them gives you creeps. Nathalie says that decoration lays bare the soul of things.”39 Once again, in order to bring the Memphis design to life, Radice uses both scientific and religious metaphors. The objects not only resemble cellular organisms, but they also have a soul (fig. 2.10). Moreover, “Memphis objects, by emptying themselves of meaning and charging themselves with enigma, go back to being ritual objects, propitiatory diagrams, ceremonial formulas. They offer life, not an explanation but a sense, arbitrary as it may be; the sense of life in self-contemplation.”40 Memphis was chosen as the name of the design group because it combined the past (the ancient capital of Egypt and “site of the great temple of the god, Ptah, artist among gods) with the present (the birthplace of Elvis Presley, the father of rock ‘n’ roll).41 Memphis is concerned with the present, the immediate experience of objects; but the relationship

37 Radice, Memphis: Research, Experiences, Results, Failures and Successes of New Design, 87.
38 ibid., 88.
39 ibid., 88.
40 ibid., 187.
41 Sparke, Ettore Sottsass, a Modern Italian Designer, 23.
Figure 2.10  Nathalie du Pasquier, fabric designs, 1981-82.
people had with their ritual objects in the past is precisely the type of mysticism Memphis wants to recreate in the future.

Memphis was held responsible for what was described at the time as a dramatic paradigm shift in the world of design.\textsuperscript{42} It was the beginning of something new: human centered design. Sottsass’s emphasis on the role of the user as an active participant in the design process, rather than a passive consumer, lay at the core of his renewal of Modernism.\textsuperscript{43} There are three key characteristics of Sottsass’s career that will serve as the framework through which I will discuss Droog Design: challenging conventions, the importance of storytelling, and the means to achieve a sensorial relationship with objects.

Re-inventing design requires unlearning and questioning conventions to determine if they are reasonable or not. The process is defined by observation. This is Sottsass reasoning behind his design of a slanted bookshelf:

Normally [bookshelves] are like this [sketches straight lines], but the bookshelves for Memphis are like this [diagonal lines]. But the fact is, even in a normal bookshelf, the books slant over to the side often, not always, but most of the time, and if you have books like that, they use the space best. Now I’m joking, and I don’t mean that this is more rational than that, but there are different possibilities (fig 2.11).\textsuperscript{44}

There is no functional advantage in storing books in a slanted bookshelf; the truth is the same number of books fit when the structure composed of straight lines. However, Sottsass bookshelf attracts attention to the fact that the traditional bookshelf is not the

\textsuperscript{42} ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{43} ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{44} Emily Zaiden, "Instruments for Life: Conversations with Ettore Sottsass," in Ettore Sottsass: Architect and Designer (London: Merrell, 2006), 123.
Figure 2.11 Ettore Sottsass, “Suvretta” bookcase, Memphis 1981, HPL print laminate.
only possibility. Moreover, the inclined bookshelf reminds the user that books tend to slant over to the side, and this is something the user already knows, but he does not think about it. Sottsass’s design invites the viewer to be attentive to the normal because once one is aware of it the normal becomes special.

Challenging conventions means designing based on observation of human behavior as opposed to cannons of status, elegance, and good taste. Sottsass wanted people to reconsider the relationship they had with objects. The plastic boxes of “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape,” invited people to discard those objects in their life that were there only as a sign of wealth and status. The plastic laminates in Memphis furniture demonstrated that there is no purpose in qualifying a material as vulgar instead of exploring its potential. “The basic suggestion that emerges from all of Sottsass’s work is not dissimilar to an Indian sorcerer’s advice to his disciple: to become a hunter and a warrior one must be fluid and unpredictable, distrust schemes and learn to disrupt systematically one’s own routines.”

Storytelling in design happens when both the designer and the user play a role in the experience of the product. The normal becomes special when design is used to enhance the rhythms, patterns, and routines of contemporary life. The entire marketing campaign for the valentine typewriter was based on inventing a new story for the use of office equipment. Like non-Western cultures, who have integrated artifacts into their spiritual rituals, Sottsass references popular culture in order to provide a metaphorical

45 Radice, Memphis: Research, Experiences, Results, Failures and Successes of New Design, 142.

46 Doordan, Catalysts of Perception: Material Considerations, 70.
continuum between objects and the mass of users.\textsuperscript{47} The product is sold through its story, and the user is invited to write a story himself through his use of the product.

Sottsass advocates for a sensorial relationship between people and objects. This entails a type of language that goes beyond the intellectual and the visual; it is an appeal to the senses, a physical language. Sottsass escaped design in the middle of his career because he felt a need to reestablish a relationship with the cosmos. Through the observation of non-Western cultures and the past he found that the most important thing was to understand the effect products would have on people. “I feel, for instance, a cosmic vibration when I enter the Parthenon or stand before it; I feel that there is something there...when I enter that temple, a feeling—let us say a metaphysical consciousness—seizes hold of me and I notice I am alive.”\textsuperscript{48} This realization of one’s existence through the senses is a natural, human, and universal type of communication, and that is what ultimate design ought to reach.

\textsuperscript{47} Sparke, \textit{Ettore Sottsass, a Modern Italian Designer}, 17.

\textsuperscript{48} Ettore Sottsass “Ettore Sottsass Drawings Over Four Decades, exhib. catalogue,” (1990), quoted in Labaco, \textit{Humanist for the Modern Age}, 47.
CHAPTER 3:
CREATIVITY AND DROOG DESIGN

When Renny Ramakers, a Dutch design historian, saw the work by young Dutch designers who were using cheap industrial materials or found objects, like old dresser drawers and driftwood to create furniture, she felt it as a sign of the time and decided to bring some of these products together and present them as a common mentality. Remakers organized an exhibition in the Netherlands and Belgium in early 1992 in order to show to the world what she thought was a “clear break from the past”, a genuinely new approach to design. She sold so little she barely covered the costs. A year later, Remakers found out that Gijs Bakker, the product designer and professor at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, was planning to exhibit the work of his present and past students at the 1993 Milan Furniture Fair, she suggested that they collaborate on a joint show. They called the collection Droog Design after the Dutch word ‘droog’, which translates into English as ‘dry’ as in dry wit, unadorned informality, and ascetic irony. ‘Dry’ as that essentially Dutch inclination to ‘do normal’ and at the same time critically investigate what you are doing and the way you do it.49 Today Droog makes exhibitions, gives lectures, initiates experimental projects, carries out commissions for companies, produces

and distributes projects, supervises the IM Masters course at the Design Academy Eindhoven, and runs a shop/gallery in Amsterdam and New York.  

The previous chapter outlined Ettore Sottsass journey from Post-WWII design to Memphis, an unprecedented experiment in design. Before showing the ways in which Droog is a “break from the past,” as argued by Ramakers, I would like show some ways in which Droog is a continuation or an expansion of the theories of: Ettore Sottsass. I am not arguing that Droog is based exclusively on Sottsass, or that he was the main influence. The comparison is relevant, however, because Sottsass in his Memphis years is a paradigm of postmodern design, and as such he represents design in the years preceding the foundation of Droog. Stylistically, Droog and the work by Sottsass are very different. At first sight, Droog designs are characterized by a sober and restrained aesthetic as opposed to the colored plastics and kitsch motifs of the Memphis movement. However, Sottsass designs were a reaction to Modernism’s overdependence upon the Western concept of rationality and its minimal recognition of the role of human emotion in the relationship between people and their material culture. I will use Sottsass’s accomplishments and definitions of design as the framework through which Droog is introduced.

Unlike Modernist design groups, Memphis was a non-ideological design consortium, which believed their designs were not a solution for anything. Although Modernist groups such as Bauhaus are not the immediate predecessors of Droog, the

51 Ettore Sottsass and Museo Alessi, Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass (Omegna (Verbania): Mantova: Museo Alessi ; Corraini, 2007), 15.
Dutch design group chooses to define itself as a reaction to such movements. This, in addition, aligns Droog with Memphis’s views on the role of design. In Ramakers’ words: “Humanity chose to go its own way, leaving the designers behind in their ivory towers. Utopian thinking has made way for realism.” Design is a marketing tool and it revolves around outward appearances and financial success. “Each of us consumes as eagerly as the rest. Not that this makes commitment an anachronism. On the contrary, our skin-deep, profit-seeking culture needs commitment more than ever. However, designing with commitment does not mean taking up an ideological stance or solving problems for the common good.” Like Memphis, Droog embraces consumerism.

Mario Minale’s Red blue lego chair (2004) illustrates Droog’s take on the Modernist design agenda (fig. 3.1). Minale makes the iconic Red-blue chair by Gerrit Rietveld commercially accessible by building it from Lego. Modernist designers were interested in creating timeless, classic, and iconic products that would last forever. Rietveld, for example, reduced the chair to its essence by using primary colors, straight lines, and pristine surfaces. The design is so “classic” that there is no reason why it would ever go out of fashion. There is not even a specific user in mind; no matter who you are, where you come from, or when you were born, this chair will fit your life. It was designed for a universal user. Droog’s designer Mario Minale, on the other hand, is not interested in transcending time through his design. For him, it is enough to comment on

52 Ramakers, Less + More, 15.
53 ibid., 8.
54 Sarah Hoyle and Anneke Moors, Human Touch, ed. Renny Ramakers (Amsterdam: Droog, 2006), 100.
Figure 3.1  Designed by Mario Minale, Red blue chair, Droog 2004, Lego bricks.
how we can create a classic product by our own means even if it will only exist as a small edition art project because of copyright issues.\textsuperscript{55} Throughout this essay, I will discuss creativity for each of Droog’s designers and for Droog as a whole. In Minale’s case I will call creativity \textit{ironic reproduction}.\textsuperscript{56}

Tejo Remy, one of Droog’s early designers, further explores the idea of design as a non-ideological acceptance of consumerism. As part of his final exam project, which became part of the Droog collection, he made a chest of drawers, a milk bottle lamp, and a rag chair (fig. 3.2, 3.3, 3.4). Remy’s project revolved around the metaphor of the island of Robinson Crusoe since the idea was to use only things that lay at hand.\textsuperscript{57} For the chest of drawers, he collected twenty old drawers. Keeping the drawers in their original condition, he constructed a timber carcass around each of them. Finally, he used a belt to bind them together. Creativity was a matter of \textit{reusing and reworking}. According to Sarah Hoyle, “Remy’s chest is a criticism of overstyling and the consumer mania that

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\textsuperscript{55} ibid., 100.
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\textsuperscript{56} Droog is concerned with utility, user-friendliness, and humility of objects, but the actual life of the objects is quite varied. On the one hand, there is the Droog lab which is free, unrestricted and exploratory, yet has a very ambitious mission: to define the next generation of global design. Outcomes of the lab find their way into Droog stores, publications, exhibitions, or client proposals in collaboration with the Creative agency. Minale’s Red Blue Chair is an example of such experimental designs. They are initially one-offs although they might exist as commercial products on a later stage. The designs that actually make it to real homes are expensive and can be qualified as luxury design despite their aesthetic humility. The cost of the products, the socio-economic profile of those who buy them, and the place where this design fit in social space outside of the gallery are beyond the scope of this paper. For those interested, however, Droog’s website (droog.com) might give an initial answer to these questions since all products are listed with a price and there is also information about the more theoretical designs under the “Lab” tab of the website.
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Figure 3.2 Tejo Remy, Chest of drawers, Droog 1991, used drawers, maple.
Figure 3.3 Tejo Remy, milk bottle lamp, Droog 1991, milk bottles, 15W bulbs.
Figure 3.4 Tejo Remy, rag chair, Droog 1991, rags, steel strips.
pervades the world. His deliberate improvisation is also a protest against the increasing complexity of the design profession."\(^{58}\)

Ramakers thinks the chest of drawers says something about over design and the problems facing the environment, but it also says something about cherishing memories.\(^{59}\) Along this line of thought, Gareth Williams, the design curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, argues that the most interesting type of recycling is “the re-use of ideas, memories and archetypes to give objects a sense of longevity: recycling conceptual values.”\(^{60}\) Recycled design objects like the chest of drawers are not luxurious or particularly functional, but it is their modesty and the humility of their execution that is their greatest lesson. “They are polemical objects that dare us to keep consuming wastefully.”\(^{61}\)

Memphis had no problem with its designs being a fad, going out of fashion, and being replaced by something newer. On the other hand, some of Droog’s designs like playing with the idea of memories in order to lengthen the lifespan of objects. Jurgen Bey’s Lightshade Shade (1999) consists of a reflecting lampshade around an out-of-fashion lamp (fig. 3.5). During the day the foil reflects the surroundings and when the lamp is turned on, it comes to life in its new skin.\(^{62}\) Bey re-skins and bandages up objects

\(^{58}\) Hoyle and Moors, *Human Touch*, 144.


\(^{61}\) ibid., 31.

\(^{62}\) Hoyle and Moors, *Human Touch*, 60.
Figure 3.5 Jurgen Bey, Lamp „Shade shade”, Droog 1999, two way mirror foil, existing lamp.
to heal their wounds and make them last another day. Through this process Bey gives the lamp a second life, creativity as reviving. Williams explains,

Bey’s objects are elegiac essays on the potential of objects to evoke our memories. He educates us to find beauty in imperfection. Longevity achieved through symbolic or emotional appeal is aside from the reuse of materials and recycling per se. Imbuing objects with expressive values so we want to keep them for longer is a mechanism for short-circuiting rapid obsolescence. The archetypal qualities of some of these objects (the bourgeois lamps in Jurgen Bey’s Lightshade Shade for example) are exploited because of their nostalgic resonance. They remind us of core values: that there is validity in memory and the past; that “new” is not automatically better than “old”; that content and purpose are as important as style and appearance.

Sottsass was concerned by the lack of connection between people and objects in the modern world: “We are always closed inside rooms and the rooms are full of objects, and we have created and keep on creating what you might call a consumer culture, because we have more than would really be necessary. What I have been looking for is a deep simplicity, which the object, the design of the object and its presence, can help you to achieve.” Today, there is a group of designers, including Droog, that are investigating the potential of this “deep simplicity” in design. Alice Rawsthorn, the design critic of the International Herald Tribune, calls it “quiet design”, and Jasper Morrison uses the term “supernormal” to describe products that are neither showy nor spectacular, just gently pleasing. These are objects that last for a long time and become better with use, which results in a relationship between the user and the object.

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63 Williams, *Use it again*, 28.
64 ibid., 29.
65 Sottsass and Museo Alessi., *Design Interviews: Ettore Sottsass*, 12.
Naoto Fukasawa, one of Japan's leading product designers, and the British designer Jasper Morrison decided to assemble a collection of products, which were similarly enjoyable to use and to look at without resorting to stylistic gimmicks. The show was called Super Normal and it was a long-overdue celebration of normality in design. Fukasawa gives an interesting definition of beauty, but a beauty that comes with use, not mere appearance:

Beauty can refer to form or shape, but in this case we’re thinking in terms of the beauty of the relationship between people, the environment, and circumstances. In other words it’s the echo of beauty that arises when we use something. Because the beauty of this relationship lies in the fact that people often use things in similar ways, in similar environments, and under similar circumstances. The beauty of the relationship is therefore naturally narrowed down to certain situations. For example, the way everyone holds a soy sauce dispenser when pouring is the same, and the action of pouring has become part of the atmosphere of enjoying sushi, so that a newer design most likely would not be able to recreate this atmosphere. I think that this beauty arises with the natural, unconscious use of something.

Sottsass believed in the importance of challenging conventions. This meant designing based on observation of human behavior as opposed to cannons of status, elegance, and good taste. This attentiveness to the normal is possible when the designer is not afraid to look at daily life as a source of inspiration. Jasper Morrison thinks Super Normal is a "kind of spirit of things which is both modern and old fashioned and which I think could be understood by anyone. They might not all be everyone’s idea of good taste, but then they are not objects that need to be judged in terms of taste. I think they


represent an advanced level of object precisely because they reject design as an issue of taste.  

According to Morrison, the essence of these Super Normal objects can be “understood by anyone.” When a design is based on someone’s interaction with the world, everyone else understands it by the fact that people often use things in similar ways. Ramakers takes this a step further: “Everybody understands it but nobody had thought of it earlier.” The idea behind the object’s concept might seem obvious, but its value lies in the designer’s realization of what is good in normal. An example of this is Onkar Singh Kular’s Perfect Cuppa Cup (2003). Using a professional color-scale Kular designed 128 mugs in the varying shades from beige to brown (fig. 3.6). These colors reflect people’s range of preferences in tea and coffee preparations. Droog loved the idea and chose eight shades to add to their collection. Kular’s design process shows the importance of observation. Everybody knows that tea and coffee can be different colors according to how much milk people choose to add, but no one had thought of making mugs out of this observation. The ordinary becomes extraordinary through attentiveness to the normal, and the existing is an important source of inspiration. Creativity functions as a reflection of the everyday world.

A successful relationship between people and objects results in storytelling. The product can be sold through the story, and the user is invited to write a story himself

69 ibid., 109

70 Ramakers, Less + More, 52.


72 Hoyle and Moors, Human Touch, 162.
Figure 3.6 Onkar Singh Kular, 128 Pantone mugs, Droog 2003, bone china with sprayed glaze finish.
through the use of the product. This is the potential Ramakers sees for storytelling in design:

The grand narratives have fallen silent. It is now the turn of the lesser tales. They speak of an involvement with the world around us, of passion and pleasure. These are not moralizing fables, nor do they preach universal truths. But they do dare to foreground other truths and even sound paradoxical at times. They are modest tales that everyone can understand, tales worth passing on. They won’t change the world but they do give meaning to our culture.\(^{73}\)

Maurice Scheltens, Tableau (2005) is a tablecloth decorated with the silhouettes of the aftermath of a dinner party.\(^{74}\) One can see the arrangement of plates, dishes and glasses. The cloth tells a story and reflects the atmosphere of the dinner through shadows of what might have happened at this table (fig. 3.7).\(^{75}\) Creativity in this product takes the form of recording. Instead of using a traditional white cloth, Droog offers someone else’s dinner story as the cover up for the table. The user will then have his own dinner experience with the Tableau as his canvas. The tablecloth serves as a reminder that many others have similar experiences every time they sit around a table to have dinner.

Gareth Williams organized an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum titled “Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design.” Williams believes that stories invest objects with meaning, giving them voices, histories and personalities.\(^{76}\) The design


\(^{74}\) Hoyle and Moors, *Human Touch*, 156.


Figure 3.7 Maurice Scheltens, Table cloth „Tableau”, Droog 2005, photogram printed on cotton.
Figure 3.8 TOP: Gijs Bakker, Stretched Yellow Brooch, Real? n. 355, glass, soda lime glass, gold plated silver. BOTTOM: Gijs Bakker, Real? n. 346, white gold palladium, topaz blue.
curator at the V&A used the metaphor of the enchanted castle to comment on luxury. Williams chose designers who satirize and transform our conventional taste for ostentation. By making ordinary and familiar objects seem extraordinary and unfamiliar, these designers invite us to reconsider our passive acceptance of what is normal or acceptable. Gijs Bakker’s set of jewelry called the *Real Series* was part of the V&A exhibit (fig. 3.8). Bakker, jeweler and founder of Droog, collected non-valuable costume jewelry and then hired a goldsmith to create miniature versions of those pieces using gold, silver, and precious stones. He then joined these two objects together into a wearable brooch or ring. Bakker used scale as well as materials to question what is real and what is fake in a piece of jewelry. These decorative forms were originally developed to express status, express our self-worth. Bakker’s jewels tell a story about the past, the present, and the ability or inability of an object to communicate its owner’s status. Creativity here is *redemption*, which functions as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, redemption is the conversion into something of value. In this case, the costume jewels gains value by being part of a Gijs Bakker piece. On the other hand, redemption means being freed from the consequences of sin. Being next to and mirroring the humble costume jewelry redeems the sin behind the luxury of gold, silver, and precious stones.

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77 ibid., 61.
Figure 3.9 Djoke de Jong, drawing table, Droog 1993, MDF, schoolboard paint.
The second type of storytelling happens when people share their personal stories through objects. This way the object gains the user’s meaning alongside those of the designer.\textsuperscript{81} Djoke de Jong’s Drawing table (1993) is painted with schoolboard paint so that people can draw on it with chalk (fig. 3.9). Brand new, the table is finished and simultaneously has not even started its life yet.\textsuperscript{82} Before use, this table is simply a green surface, but as soon as a child draws on it, the table comes to life through its newly acquired surface decoration. Both the designer and the user play a role in creating this object.

Sottsass advocates for a sensorial relationship between people and objects. This entails a type of language that goes beyond the intellectual and the visual; it is an appeal to the senses, a physical language. Droog’s collection „do create” spurs the product user into action. Creativity is characterized by \textit{receptivity}. The object is open and responsive to ideas, impressions, and suggestions.\textsuperscript{83} The exchange of information is no longer unilateral, from the product to the consumer. It is true communication where the product and the user inform each other. This is how Ramakers describes the „do create” products:

Most „do create” products are nothing special in themselves. In some cases they are not even attractive. They only come to life when the user activates them. It is the experience of completing, of one’s own creative input, of doing something with a product that normally speaking is just not done, like throwing a vase about, swinging on a lamp or thumping a chair…the sensation of acting. Rather than

\textsuperscript{81} ibid., 118.


\textsuperscript{83} \textit{The Merriam-Webster Dictionary}, 11\textsuperscript{th} ed., s.v. “Receptivity.”
being tacked on, the experience lies in the product’s intrinsic quality as brought to bear by the product itself.  

Peter van der Jagt’s ‘do break’ porcelain vase (2000) is covered inside with a layer of silicon rubber. After you have bought it you can smash it (fig. 3.10). The silicon holds the shards in place, and the owner then has a unique vase. Martin van der Pol’s ‘dot hit’ (2000) consists of a stainless steel cube and a hammer, which is supplied to finish the design of this chair (fig. 3.11). Using the hammer, the cube can be sculpted into the desired shape. Marti Guixe’s ‘do scratch’ lamp (2000) does not serve as a lamp until the user scratches the black surface with his personal choice of graffiti (fig. 3.12). The designers of these products are not designing an object, but an experience. Droog, therefore, is not simply selling furniture but the possibility for the owner of these products to act out of its comfort zone. Who would normally dare to hit furniture, scratch lamps, and throw vases to the floor? In Ramakers’ words, “A product is sold on the basis of the feeling it evokes.” That is exactly what Sottsass did with the valentine typewriter.

Not all objects talk to us the same way. The ‘do create’ products, for example, seem to be shouting for attention, just like the Memphis plastic laminate furniture did. On the other hand, there is “quiet design,” which is the way Alice Rawsthorn referred to the products in the Super Normal exhibition. There is no need for the object to shout. It is not mute; it is just quiet. Droog’s coffee and tea mugs were an example in this category.

84 Ramakers, Less + More, 65.
85 van't Spijker, Open Design, 57.
86 ibid., 56.
87 Ramakers, Less + More, 49.
Figure 3.10 Frank Tjepkema, „do break,” Droog 2000, porcelain, rubber, silicon.
Figure 3.11 Marijn van der Pol, „do hit,” Droog 2000, stainless steel, hammer.
Figure 3.12 Marti Guixe, ‘do scratch,’ Droog 2000, lighting armature, black coating.
Quiet objects are those that blend into daily life, while simultaneously enhancing the day-to-day patterns. Droog’s products range from those who shout to those who prefer to be quiet. Having a sense of presence and a relationship with the owner, however, is something they all have in common.

Aaron Betsky, director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute says, “Droog is a collection of the detritus of our culture, reassembled, rearranged, and repurposed.”

Rearranging things—establishing new connections and relationships among familiar things—is different from the traditional romantic concept of creativity as the calling forth into form of something new. The Latin prefix “re-” can either mean “again,” or “anew: in a new or different form.” This implies referring to the past and the existing and presenting it in a new manner. Like Betsky, I have used a series of “re-” words to describe creativity in Droog designers: reproduction, reusing, reworking, reviving, reflection, recording, redemption, and receptivity. These actions show that the designer took the everyday and the normal and transformed it into something extraordinary; something that is simple but no one had thought of before.


89 Doordan conversations

CHAPTER 4:
CRAFT MODERNIZED

William Morris advocated for a return to the way of life of the Middle Ages where labor was not simply a means to survive, but also a source of pleasure. He looked at traditional craft practices nostalgically; hoping modern production means had never existed. Droog designers Marcel Wanders and Hella Jongerius look at craft to inform design, but their works are completely set in the present; there is no intent to return to the processes of the past or a disdain for modern materials: these designers “confront craft techniques using new, high-tech options without a trace of cynicism.”91 In Manuf®actured, a survey of contemporary design, Steven Skov Holt studies the intersections of art, craft, and design and how the handmade and the mass-produced merge in contemporary design. Holt argues that each of the projects he explores marries a traditional craft with emerging materials and production techniques to create an entirely new take on a familiar object.92 There is a paradox here since the traditional and the emerging coexist in one object, and something familiar is suddenly new. As an extension of this paradox, I will argue that as craftsmen, Jongerius and Wanders associate


themselves with the past, the present, and the future to create a product that is a unique reflection of their time: “Craft is now frequently infused with highly conceptual thinking. It has become an abstract proposition in which ideas count—craft is now thoroughly and unmistakably contemporary.”

A few years back, the combination of crafts, technology, and industrial production was unthinkable since the very essence of craft is its handmade quality. According to Louise Shaumburg industrial products were being judged as superfluous, soulless, and disposable, but industry was quick to respond:

Manufactured products are now garnished with a sauce of craftsmanship, chic brands build in ostensible fabrication defects and random effects, and mass-produced goods are endowed with an aura of the unique object, an atmosphere of hand-knit sweaters and grandma’s recipes. Industry long trained all of its firepower on mass production, but now it is also capable of supplying products that are tailored to the individual wishes of its customers. (…) Industry has to match up with the “real thing” which it thought it had beaten long ago.

In collaboration with the Faculty of Aviation and Aerospace of the Delft University of Technology, Droog came up with Dry Tech, a project that explored a craftsman’s approach towards new materials. The choice of educational institution and the industrial associations are reminiscent of Bauhaus, the result, however, are not. The designers were invited to experiment with high tech fibers and the potential of combining systematic scientific research and studio experimentation. According to Holt, craft is still about what it was always about by “the integral process of making, the joy of


94 Schouwenberg, Beyond Nostalgia.

mastery, material exploration, secret but attainable knowledge, the mark of the maker, reference points to human scale, the kinetic relationship between hand and mind, and honest and sincere rendition.” The innovation in a project like Dry Tech, however, is the infusion of these craft-designed qualities into other creative fields such as industry and technology.\textsuperscript{96}

The results of Dry Tech were presented at the Salone de Mobile in Milan under the title “Plastics New Treat” (1996). Among the products shown are Hella Jongerius’ knitted lamp and Marcel Wonders’ knotted chair.\textsuperscript{97} Plastics with fibers are characterized by the functional quality of strength but they also have an unexplored aesthetic potential.\textsuperscript{98} According to Holt, “the leading edge of craft embraces technology and new materials, especially the often derided industrial workhorse—plastic. Plastic has allowed craft to break out of traditional boundaries into areas previously thought to be exclusive territory of art and design.”\textsuperscript{99}

When Jongerius first started experimenting with fiberglass in preparation for the Dry Tech project, she intended to design a cupboard. She realized, however, that the cupboard design would fail to exploit the material’s heat-resistant qualities. Instead, she opted for a lamp knitted from strands of glass fiber, which utilizes not only this material’s


Figure 4.1 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Knitted lamp, 1996, PMMA, fiberglass.
flexibility but also its transparency and heat-resistance (fig. 4.1).\(^{100}\) About the design process Jongerius explains: “It was quite difficult to find a knitting factory in the Netherlands that dared to work glass fibers. So I had to make all patches myself on the knitting machine. The bulbs press against the resilient glass cloth. That provides the lamp with a shape. The edges were reinforced with Perspex. Because of its high tech background I kept the form as flat as I could. It looks a bit spacy.”\(^{101}\) The form and function of the product depend on the inherent qualities of the material. The shape is defined by the contours of the bulbs, the main functional element of a lamp since it is the source of light. In a lecture titled “Art and the Beauty of the Earth” (1881), William Morris advocated for something very similar in the treatment of materials: “try to get the most out of your material, but always in such a way as honors it most. Not only should it be obvious what your material is, but something should be done with it which is specially natural to it, something that could not be done with it any other.”\(^{102}\)

For the Dry Tech project, Marcel Wanders made the Knotted chair (fig. 4.2), another example of craft technique applied to hard tech materials. Using a thread of aramid and carbon fibers Wanders created a rope, which he knotted into the shape of a chair. Then he impregnated it with epoxy resin and hung in a frame to dry.\(^{103}\) In this process, the essential properties of rope—flexibility, malleability, and strength—were

\(^{100}\) “Knitted Lamp,” Jongeriuslab.com, 2010.

\(^{101}\) Hella Jongerius for Eugen Huis & Interieur, November 1996 quoted in Droog Design (Firm), Simply Droog: 10 + 3 Years of Creating Innovation and Discussion, 182.


\(^{103}\) “Knotted Chair,” droog.com, 2010.
Figure 4.2 Marcel Wanders, Knotted Chair, 1996, carbon fiber, epoxy-coated aramid fibers.
both embraced and ignored.\textsuperscript{104} Wanders was able to give shape to the chair because it was still flexible, but he destroyed this property in the final stage of the design. About the knotted chair Wanders said: “I wanted to make a product that doesn’t look industrial, a design that shown that it is lovingly made especially for someone, with the same kind of aura as an old worn down wooden cupboard. Knotting is a technique with which you can achieve this artisan atmosphere.”\textsuperscript{105} This product was later industrially produced, but its appearance remained craft-like. Craft is a \textit{look} and if the industrial process is successful, the user should not be able to tell how honest its appearance is.

Wanders continued to explore the limits of “soft” materials leading to the Swiss Lace Table (1997). Using handmade textiles as raw materials, he defies the softness of lace by soaking it in resin and hardening it into the shape of a table (fig. 4.3).\textsuperscript{106} This is how Marcel Wanders describes the making of doily, the raw material: “Just as a snowflake is formed, one crystal deposited upon another, a crocheted doily grows through an accretive process—one knot built upon the previous knot until a perfectly symmetrical pattern takes shape. From a single string—knotted, looped, and twisted repeatedly—the intricate order of the doily emerges, bringing comfort to pattern seeking minds.”\textsuperscript{107} This says something important about repetition in craft. Some may think that doing something over and over is a mindless process. However, in \textit{The Craftsman}, Richard Sennett explains,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{104} Holt and Skov, \textit{Form Follows Ornamentation}, 139.
  \item \textsuperscript{105} Marcel Wanders in Eugen Huis & Interieur (November 1996), in Droog Design (Firm), \textit{Simply Droog: 10 + 3 Years of Creating Innovation and Discussion}, 183.
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Holt and Skov, \textit{Form Follows Ornamentation}, 139.
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Wanders quoted in Holt, ibid., 137.
\end{itemize}
Figure 4.3 Designed by Marcel Wanders, Crochet Table, 2001, handmade crochet cotton, epoxy resin.
Doing something over and over is stimulating when organized as looking ahead. The substance of routine may change, metamorphose, improve, but the emotional payoff is one’s experience of doing it again. There’s nothing strange about this experience. We all know it; it is *rhythm*. Built into the contractions of the human heart, the skilled craftsman has extended rhythm to the hand and the eye.\(^\text{108}\)

Repetition is necessary for the creation of the pattern, but the process of doing something over and over again is also a source of pleasure for the maker. The mind is in a state of perfect coordination with the hand, and through a melodic rhythm, the raw material is transformed into a piece of art.

Paola Antonelli, the design curator of the Museum of Modern Art, argues that Droog uses a crafts approach as a means to problem solving: on the one hand, “some advanced materials actually demand manual intervention, while some low-tech materials merely demand a crafts approach because of their special nature. Experimentation, be it in high- or low-tech, requires a hands-on approach.”\(^\text{109}\) Craft, therefore, functions as a tool to understand different materials. As a student, Hella Jongerius experimented with both traditional and high-tech materials, and similar to Antonelli’s argument, Jongerius views craft as a means to find new ideas through an active engagement with materials:

I am a firm believer in getting my hands dirty. I practically abuse the materials until I stumble into new ideas, new ways of seeing things. There is an incredible amount of intelligence in the making process itself. Trying to invent something by purely rational means rarely generates anything original, but working in my studio and pushing the envelope often yields surprises. So I let my materials and my intuition lead the way, and I put off looking for explanations to a latter stage.\(^\text{110}\)

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Jongerius explains that a crafts creative process goes beyond the rational. Sennett describes it as a “basic human impulse,” where there is “an intimate connection between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding.”\textsuperscript{111} A designer’s experimentation with materials becomes an immersion where thought and manual labor merge. Jongerius says she “stumbles” into new ideas and her “intuition leads the way.” The material gives her not only answers but also questions that she later translates into design ideas.

Through an anecdote, Jongerius explains design as an intuitive experience:

I saw a new ticket-vending machine at the railway station, a really efficient piece of equipment. That’s great. But one thing was wrong in my view: you have to choose your destination by going down a list from top to bottom. For some reason my head doesn’t like doing that. It wants to go from left to right. [Interviewer: Well that is a matter of design, isn’t it?] No, it’s psychology: intuitively knowing what’s happening to you when you see something. When I consider the fond way people treat old teacups, for example, I realize how people build up a bond with familiar things. I’m gradually accumulating a whole database of impressions and insights like that.\textsuperscript{112}

Design is intimately related to psychology. Good design is not judged in terms of purity of form or functionality, but on what “feels right.” Like the handling of materials, the experience of the final product is not entirely rational. Jongerius trusts her intuition to decide what is the most natural, comfortable, and familiar way to engage with a product. Jongerius’ success as a designer depends on her understanding of people’s behavior in relation to objects.

\textsuperscript{111} Sennett, The Craftsman, 9.

\textsuperscript{112} Hella Jongerius quoted in Schouwenberg and Jongerius, Hella Jongerius.
Jongerius’ Soft Urn (1994) is the perfect marriage between a traditional form and a modern material (fig. 4.4). The vase is shaped like an archetypal glass vessel giving the object an antique appearance. Jongerius chose this shape because it has proven successful throughout time: “An archetypal vase is, to me, round-bellied and has a narrow neck. They have been made that way for hundreds of years and for a good reason.” Jongerius uses poly-urethan rubber as the material, but just like a craftsman working with wood or clay, she wants the qualities of the material and the process to leave a mark in the finished product: “the scratches and bubbles in the material, and even the molding joints are left visible. In this way, the object communicates its complex and fascinating history to the user.” The Soft Urn tells the story of its production, but it also tells the story of the history of urns and vases. Droog’s designs emphasize tactility and individualization, intentionally departing from the authoritative perfection of Modern design. Jongerius believes useful objects have a potential that goes beyond functionality since their story can rise above the object itself: “Useful objects have a rich history. They are saturated with references to specific contexts and specific moments in history. If you refer to that history explicitly, and include all the associations in a new story, then you are communicating something about useful objects.”

116 Adamson, Thinking through Craft, 34.
Figure 4.4 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Vase „Urn”, 1994, Polyurethane (soft PU).
The Soft Urn, unlike most vases, is soft. This injects the product with a quality of surprise because the user is not expecting this when he picks up the vase form the surface where it is resting. About the sense of touch Sennett explains:

In the history of medicine, as in philosophy, there has been a long-standing debate about whether touch furnishes the brain a different kind of sensate information than the eye. It has seemed that touch delivers invasive, “unbounded” data, whereas the eye supplies images that are contained in a frame. If you touch a hot stove, your whole body goes into sudden trauma, whereas a painful sight can be instantly diminished by shutting your eyes. (...) Touch can be proactive as well as reactive.118

When people touch the Soft Urn, the texture, the weight, and the flexibility will take them by surprise (fig. 4.5). It is not too different to touching a hot stove; it is receiving a shock through your fingers that causes your entire body to react. The vase creates an explosive relation with the user through the sense of touch.

Like alchemists trying to transform common metals into gold, designers like to attempt the new and the impossible. For the Long Neck and Groove Bottles (2000), Jongerius tries to create a molecularly impossible vessel that is half glass and half porcelain (fig. 4.6). Due to the chemical composition of these two materials, they will not stick together.119 Ironically, despite the impossibility of their unification, both materials are based on earth—sand or clay—and both need heat to be transformed. In Jongerius design, glass colors range from light pink to deep bottle green and the ceramics come in dense, old-fashioned stoneware tones, giving them a touch of the past.120 The two

118 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 159.


Figure 4.5 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Vase „Urn”, 1994, Polyurethane (soft PU).
Figure 4.6 Designed by Hella Jongerius, Long Neck and Groove Bottles, 2000, glass, porcelain, plastic packaging tape.
porcelain and glass vessels are fussed together with pre-printed packaging tape (fig 4.7). Jongerius says she chose this bright tape because “otherwise [the designs] are too aesthetic. I like them to seem unfinished, like a sketch.”  

The experimentation with the properties of traditional materials culminated in the use of modern tape to tie them together. This work has references to the past, it is of the present, and at the same time provides conceptual models for future exploration; maybe one day these two materials will truly come together. According to Sennett, “the good craftsman uses solutions to uncover new territory; problem solving and problem finding are intimately related in his or her mind.” Jongerius’ Long Neck and Groove Bottles provide a solution that is an invitation for further experimentation; solutions are no longer the end but the starting point.

William Morris believed decoration enhanced the life of the user and of the maker: “To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is other use of it.” Morris referred back to the craftsmanship of the Middle Ages because the past came with an aura of authenticity and reliability. He wanted to return to a time when the objects produced and the conditions of labor were simply better. The surface of the designs, in the form of decoration, was important because it bore the mark of the hard labor invested in the making of the object. Decoration was honest and reflected only the

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121 ibid.
122 ibid., 22.
123 Sennett, The Craftsman, 11.
Figure 4.7  Hella Jongerius working on Long Neck and Groove Bottles, 2000.
true properties of the object. For example, when designing patterns for wallpaper, Morris emphasized the two-dimensionality of the surface instead of creating an illusion of tridimensional space. Decoration was true to the material, the technique, and the surface.

Modernism, on the other hand, strove to erase the mark of the craftsman. In Mies van der Rohe’s dictum “less is more,” “less” referred to less decoration, less evidence of the maker’s hand, less visible styling. Traces of craftsmanship in the end product were seen as a fixation with materials and antiquated production methods. William Morris would not be entirely against this decision regarding decoration since he thought, “if you have to design for machine work, at least let your design show clearly what it is. Make it mechanical with a vengeance, at the same time as simple as possible. Don’t try, for instance, to make a printed plate look like a hand-painted one: make it something which no one would try to do if he were painting by hand.” Modernist designers were not looking at William Morris as a source for the role of decoration, but the two would agree that ornament is unnatural in a machine made product.

Decoration made a comeback in Postmodernism. Droog Design displayed work at the 1998 Milan furniture fair under the title “The Inevitable Ornament.” According to Louise Schouwenberg, it was a title that showed that the designer could no longer ignore the “skin” of an object and hence the ornament. As a reaction to Modernism’s purity of form, “Postmodernism opened the floodgates to a justification-free flood of citation, decorative use, and general hype about references to the past. Meaning was no more than

125 Schouwenberg, Beyond Nostalgia.
skin deep, and styles could coexist with impunity.” This is saying that decoration is superficial, that there is nothing of value underneath the surface. However, Nathalie du Pasquier, Memphis’s pattern designer, says decoration lays bare the soul of things. Decoration is not shallow and external but the most vulnerable representation of the essence of an object. Hella Jongerius says, “If I had to put a label on myself (although I’d rather not), I’d have to describe myself as a postmodernist. At least, I definitely lack the discipline of Modernism. (…) I use lots of decorative patterns, and I quote my shapes from all over the place. It certainly looks postmodern enough.” I think Jongerius’s explanation of what being a Postmodern designer is about, is rather shallow, which perhaps is appropriate if one believes there is nothing beyond the surface of the object. However, I believe Nathalie du Pasquier’s understanding of decoration is more appropriate, even for Jongerius’ designs. When one looks at the Soft Urn, and how it displays its process of creation, the history of vases, and the potential of the material—all of this in the very surface—I don’t think of it as an agglomeration of quotes and references but rather the essence of the object exposed for our appreciation.

Memphis embraced the fact that their products would not last forever since they were designed for an immediate experience that would soon go out of fashion. Similarly, Jongerius believes her work belongs in the present day, and when she is asked if she would like to design something of eternal value, she answers: “Not at all. My admiration

127 Schouwenberg, Beyond Nostalgia.

128 Barbara Radice, Memphis: Research, Experiences, Results, Failures and Successes of New Design (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 88.

129 Hella Jongerius quoted in Schouwenberg and Jongerius, Hella Jongerius.
goes out to designs that fit the moment exactly, designs that are cool. I don’t give a damn whether my products are still of interest in ten years. Quality is perhaps something you can carry across different eras, but even the so-called classics can be placed in a particular geographical and historical context. Nothing is forever.”

Craft is used by Droog designers Wanders and Jongerius not as a means to return to the past, but as an exploration of the present that can lead to new inventions in the future. Rules have changed, and craft is no longer defined by its handmade quality. It is now an approach, a way of thinking simultaneously with the hands and the mind.

\[130\] ibid.
CHAPTER 5:
THE POTENTIAL OF NON-DESIGN

In *Less + More*, Renny Ramakers presents Bas Princen as an example of how “less” design can transform into “more” experience. For his thesis project at the Design Academy in Eindhoven, Princen designed nothing at all. Instead, he presented a series of photographs that at first sight seem to be shots of “non-places,” currently in vogue among photographers and artists. He showed people spending their leisure time at forgotten functional places, such as rubbish tips, military ranges and excavation sites.131 Louise Showenberg calls this the “art of non-design,” and it results in experiencing the space on your own terms since it was clearly designed for a different purpose. The suffocating pressure of a totally designed interior disappears.132 Princen wanted these photos to show the dynamic of the landscape and its hidden opportunities. Through observation of the phenomenon of “spontaneous infill,” he studied the difference between the value of spontaneous action and natural processes, versus the oppressive nature of an overdesigned environment and obstructive aesthetics. The actual design is brought to a minimum, and analyzing what is already there and its inherent quality occupies the

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greatest part of the design process. Continuing the exploration of the role of the
designer and the different notions of creativity, this section will show instances where the
designer surrenders design and gives up complete control of the process. As instances of
this, I will present Couleur Locale, a project where Droog chose Jurgen Bey, Marcel
Wanders, Hella Jongerius, and Martí Guixé to redesign a park in Germany. I will also
explore Martí Guixé’s understanding of design since he believes there should be no form,
but only function.

In 1999, Droog was asked to develop concepts for the restoration of the park
surrounding the castle of Oranienbaum, built by a Dutch princess of Oranje Nassau in the
17th century. The park is located ninety kilometers south west of Berlin, but there is a
strong Dutch character to the place due to the influence this princess had in the area. Her
contribution includes growing orange trees, and tobacco plants, setting up a glassworks
and a brewery, founding an orphanage, devoting herself to the education of the village
children, and employing Dutch dyke builders to turn the water of the River Elbe.
Although it was once a thriving village, Oranienbaum was deeply affected by the years of
neglect by the GDR, an effect that is seen, for example, in the dilapidated buildings.
Because of political reasons, there were no German-Dutch relations until 1989. Since the
fall of the socialist regime, however, the Kulturstiftung DessauWorlitz works to revive

133 Ramakers, Less + More, 75.

134 Droog Design (Firm), Simply Droog: 10 + 3 Years of Creating Innovation and Discussion, ed.

135 Renny Ramakers, "Act Local Think Global," in Couleur Locale: Droog Design for
Oranienbaum (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 19.
Dutch culture in Oranienbaum. In Renny Ramakers words, Droog was hired to “add a new contemporary cultural dimension, in a way which both respects the soul of the area, the enlightenment ideal and interprets it in a contemporary way.”

What struck the designers the most when they first visited Oranienbaum and the surrounding area was the large contrast between historic richness and the grey reality of today. Hella Jongerius says, “the whole place is covered in a grey blanket. I was given a very simple mission: restore the laughter.” With a focus on the human aspect, the designers strived to add a touch of joy to the region and design accessible products on the basis of local options. The purpose was to “come up with affordable, high-quality products harmonizing with the world of the park visitor, products which are commercially interesting and can actually be produced by the local people.” The use of local materials such as hemp, willow shoots, and poplar wood, was one way in which the designers tried to capture the special aura of this rich cultural landscape. Ramakers explains that the designs are not meant to be “regional only”: “They may have been

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137 Ramakers, Act Local Think Global, 22.

138 ibid., 19.


140 Ramakers, Act Local Think Global, 22.

141 Jongerius, Hella Jongerius, 43.

142 Ramakers, Act Local Think Global, 23.
inspired by the region, but if it is up to [Droog] they will be given an international
destination. Act local, think global.”

For Couleur Locale, Jurgen Bey decided that a fallen tree could serve as a seat
(fig 5.1). He added bronze classical chair backs to a fallen tree-trunk transforming it into
a proper piece of furniture. The garden bench is made with a combination of what is
already there and fragments of historical chairs, an interaction of culture and nature. As a
continuation of the concepts developed for Couleur Locale, Droog sells only the chair
backs because they believe it is ridiculous to transport trees when they are locally
available. The designer, therefore, is responsible only for a fragment of the product; the
rest is in the hands of nature.

Marcel Wanders gives the local apple juice a new bottle (fig. 5.2). Once the juice
has been drunk, the ceramic bottle can live its second life as a birdhouse. Products
often have a second-life, but it is usually the consumer who comes up with this new
function. In this case, however, the designer defines this second-life, making his product
relevant for longer. Wanders also designed a whole-meal orange loaf based on the
wooden crate in which the orange trees are planted at Oranienbaum. Each local baker is
supposed to bake his own bread in the special-design mould. By way of decoration, a
twig can be put in. Designing a product for others to produce is not rare for a designer.

143 ibid., 24.
145 Marcel Wanders, "Marcel Wanders," in Couleur Locale: Droog Design for Oranienbaum
(Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999), 52.
146 ibid., 56
Figure 5.1 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Tree Trunk Bench, 1999, bronze cast of existing chairs, tree trunk.
Figure 5.2 Designed by Marcel Wanders, Apple juice bottle, 1999, ceramic.
After all, an industrial designer surrenders his design when he turns it in for industry to produce it.

Giving objects a craft-like appearance is one instance of the current marketing notion of mass individualization. To achieve this, software is being used to automate change, or even randomize it if desired. However, computers remain instruments of control.147 As a commentary on this, Ed van Hinte argues that Droog Design has attempted to “unchain the process of production and to make it work in such a way that differences arise by themselves, to a certain extent by challenging the paradigm of industrial perfection.”148 This can lead to a design that is truly random and uncontrolled. Every year, Droog invites European designers who have graduated recently to present their work in Droog’s gallery. In 2005, Front, a design group from Sweden, showed the perfect example of a designer surrendering control over the appearance of his/her creation.149 They explored the idea of using animals as designers, Front says: “We asked animals to help us. “Sure we’ll help out,” they answered. “Make something nice,” we told them. And so they did.”150 One of the products was a table where the decoration of the tabletop was made by insects who ate out the design. The insects’ path becomes the pattern and the decoration of the table (fig. 5.3).


148 ibid., 159.


Figure 5.3 Design by Front, Design by Animals—table, 2005, wood.
For Couleur Locale, Jurgen Bey designed a Park Bench where nature defines the appearance and the life of the piece of furniture (fig. 5.4). About his design Bey says, “The garden is well looked after, all year round. Each season has its own colors, smells and waste. The hay of the summer, the pruning’s and leaves of the autumn, all of this can be used for non-durable furniture. Extrusion containers press the garden waste into endless benches, which can be shortened to any length (fig. 5.5). It is up to nature to decide when it is „reclamation’ time.”\textsuperscript{151} The design is in perfect harmony with nature as its birth and death are coordinated with the seasons. The bench looks different throughout the year, and although it eventually disappears, there is the promise that everything comes to life again in the spring; it is a cyclical design. Ed van Hinte thinks Bey’s choice of technology is poetic.\textsuperscript{152} The designer is able to communicate a strong message without being in absolute control of the color, shape, and duration of his design.

Discontented with material culture and our overdesigned surroundings, Martí Guixé faces the ultimate paradox for a designer: hating objects. He says, “I am a product designer, and I hate objects. But on the other hand I need to use them. That’s why, for some time, I’ve been trying to eliminate the object’s form and to design it as it were pure function.”\textsuperscript{153} Ramakers calls Guixé an “immaterial designer” since he prefers to make

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\textsuperscript{152} van Hinte, \textit{Form Follows Process}, 159.
\textsuperscript{153} Ramakers, \textit{Less + More}, 29.
\end{flushleft}
Figure 5.4 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Gardening Bench, 1999, hay, resin, leaves, bark.
Figure 5.5 Designed by Jurgen Bey, Gardening Bench, 1999, hay, resin, leaves, bark.
designs for food, an area where he can jettison the object.\textsuperscript{154} Paola Antonelli explains, “Guixé’s design inspiration is often the idea of a new behavior. The form is nothing but a container, a necessary ill.” In the study of new ways of processing, preparing, delivering, and eating foods, Guixé is always looking for a \textit{mandorla}, the sublime sense of satisfaction that results from eating. It is a powerful, yet dangerous element of his designs since it can be addictive.\textsuperscript{155} Through food, Guixé believes he can attract the user and then lead him to a positive action, this in turn, justifies the addiction. For Coleur Locale, for example, Guixé designed a transparent, orange flavored candy with an orange seeds and a poplar wooden stick (fig. 5.6). One eats the candy, plants the seed and puts the stick next to it as a warning that in twenty years it will grow into a tree.\textsuperscript{156} It is a way to activate sporadic and spontaneous reforestation just by spitting the seed once the candy is finished.\textsuperscript{157}

Because many functions supplied by the objects are irreplaceable, Guixé tries to see how these objects might lose their form but continue with their function. This is done using various systems. One of them is assimilation, where one object assimilates another so that one of the two might disappear. Marcel Wander’s apple juice bottle could be an example of this. Another system is socialization enabling the product to be found for free,

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 29.


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 51.
Figure 5.6 Martí Guixe, Orienbaum candy, 1999, polar wood, candy, orange seed.
requested or stolen.\textsuperscript{158} For Couleur Locale, Guixé designed a Portable Orange Peeler, a tool that promotes the idea of stealing oranges directly form trees at the Oranienbaum park.\textsuperscript{159} Guixé main concern was to reconstruct the relationship between the park and the people visiting it:

In Oranienbaum I noticed the boredom and the stillness of nature. And the peace that makes me nervous. A nature made only for looking, a big park were you can not interact like a big scenario. An out of time artificial vision of nature. In the project I was trying to think how to act with this „non communicative Nature’ with tools for „non aggressive’ action. Trying to make this nature usable, for fun, for movement, for relationships, for experience. I did some things which make you see nature from an unusual point of view, tools that allow you to take a piece of nature in the form of a picture, or smell, or a memory. I tried to make things to eat that could be a second nature of the area.\textsuperscript{160}

The park has the potential of those “non-places” where people have the freedom to act as they like because the place is not overly designed to define their behavior. What Guixé is trying to do is reactivate this potential in the park. Guixé has no intention to force people to change; instead, he proposes “intelligent alternatives by means of small mechanisms, sometimes in the form of information, sometimes as objects, sometimes as change in the attitude objects are viewed with. [Guixé does] not believe there is a perfect or ideal attitude.”\textsuperscript{161} This promotes change by persuasion, not force.

Not too differently from Sottsass, Guixé faces the paradox of feeling the need to express his ideas through objects although he tries to not possess them, considering them


\textsuperscript{159} Guixé, \textit{Martí Guixé}, 51.

\textsuperscript{160} ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{161} Rambaud, \textit{Interview to Martí Guixé}, 90.
unnecessary and even feeling a certain aversion towards them. Guixé observes a change in people’s relation with material culture throughout history that is extremely reminiscent of Sottsass thoughts on the same subject:

I am still interested in the function of objects, though I have no thing about possessing them. I believe that during the post-war (1950) the acquisition, possession and representation of objects had a social and moral value, so that with them you purchased happiness and (as with cars) in turn they made you free. Now however the situation is completely opposite, as possessions weighs you down and enslaves you to the fear of loss; you lose mobility and time, values in a society of constant change.

Sottsass’s plastic boxes for the 1972 MoMA wanted to abolish any cultural reference furniture might have so that the user would feel so detached, so disinterested, and so uninvolved that the object would be of absolutely no importance to him.

Sottsass explained, “in this work of de-conditioning there was also the idea of de-conditioning in a vaster way, to shake off not only certain forms or furniture or their colors, but also, in general, the idea of possession and possessions, nostalgia and all the structures that led to nationalism, presumption, aggressiveness and so on.”

According to Sottsass, people felt the need to continuously demonstrate status through their possessions, and their houses “were nothing other than cemeteries containing the tombs of their memories.” He proposed a new awareness of existence

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162 Martí Guixé quoted in ibid., 91.
163 ibid., 91.
165 Ettore Sottsass and Museo Alessi., Design Interviews : Ettore Sottsass / (Omegna (Verbania) : Mantova : Museo Alessi ; Corraini, 2007), 44.
where memories are allowed to remain as memories, instead of being solidified into emblems. Memories can “become a sort of living plasma with which, day after day, [one] can always start over again from the beginning.” Sottsass believed that by abandoning everything every day, people could start their lives and relationships in a way that would be creative and positive. Sottsass advocated for a system that set people free by getting rid of extra baggage: “there is no doubt that, sooner or later, something will be done so that one can put on one’s house every day as we don our clothes, as we choose a road along which to walk every day, as we choose a book to read, or a theater to go to; as we daily choose a day to live, within the limits that destiny or fate impose upon us.”

Along the same lines, Guixé highlights the importance of mobility and time in a society in constant change; we just cannot afford to be weighed down.

Antonelli tells us that Guixé is extraordinarily independent, the way an artist could be, from the limitations of conventional assignments. Even when he is working with traditionally corporate clients, he has been able to convince them of the mandorla’s marketing relevance. The difference between an artist and a designer is the way he wants his audience to interact with his creations. Octavi Rofes, a scholar from Barcelona, explains that designed objects try to be better than an everyday object, but at the same time they want to be one of them. Unlike art, design has the need to participate in the daily life of people:

166 Sottsass, 163.
167 Sottsass and Museo Alessi., Design Interviews : Ettore Sottsass, 44.
168 Sottsass, 163.
169 Antonelli, Introduction, 3.
An everyday object is not, in its present state, the same as a designed object, but we can consider that, through mediation of the designer, everyday objects will tend to become designed ones. Designer mediation is oriented to achieve the formal, functional or symbolic potentials of everyday objects, so, in a way, they can be regarded as unfinished design objects, or in other words, as a raw material waiting to be transformed by the designer’s activity. Moreover, it is possible to run this tendency in both directions: design objects will tend to become everyday ones, replacing old everyday objects as they are transformed by the designer. This is because the ambition of a designed object is not to be a singular one, admired as an exception in the way that a work of art is perceived from the detachment of aesthetic appreciation, but to take part in the repetitive and mostly practical activities that we describe as everyday life.\textsuperscript{170}

Designers’ concern with the tragedy of conspicuous consumption, the sense of detachment from objects, and the misuse of natural resources has led to a range of designs including criticisms, solution proposals, or a removal from the process of creation. There is a return to nature as a source of inspiration. Pieke Bergmans, for example, created the Crystal virus for Droog (fig. 5.7). Like real amoebas and bacteria, amorphous forms of liquid crystal invade the table, burning the table and leaving a black circle pattern on the wood. However, instead of being destructive, these shapes are friendly and can be used as vases. Although the work I will present here by Joris Laarman is not part of the Droog collection, I want to discuss it due to its connection with Radice’s writings on Memphis. The use of scientific language and references to molecular biology, which charge the objects with vivacity and dynamism, is present in Radice’s descriptions. When speaking of color, for example, she says: “[color] works as an enzyme to catalyze chemical reactions, it generates nervous impulses that open new doors of logic in the brain, it is a sort of perceptive jogging, an aerobic for lazy or drowsy

Figure 5.7 Designed by Puieke Bergmans, Crystal virus: Massive infection, 2008, table: maple, vases: crystal.
sensory cells. Like jogging, it requires commitment, determination, measure, enthusiasm, faith, and patience; and to serve a purpose, it must be used well.”

Joris Laarman takes this metaphor into reality. Obsessed with science, she created a lamp coated in genetically modified hamster cells that have been engineered to light up like those inside a firefly (fig. 5.8). The design is not simply inspired in nature, but dependent on it. The lamp’s cells run according to their own biorhythm, “charging” during the day and emitting light at night. “If products can be grown in a lab, we won’t have to use natural resources. It’s the most perfect production method there is,” Laarman says. Memphis’ decorations generated nervous impulses and chemical reactions in the viewer’s brain, a form of electricity in and of itself. Laarman decoration, however, produces real electricity through animal cells. It is a combination of having absolute control and surrendering it. The designer has reached the point where she can manipulate design on a cellular level, but at the same time she cannot control what used to be the simple on-an-off function in a lamp. What could be better to renew the relationship between an object and its user than having a design that is truly alive?

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Figure 5.8 Joris Laarman, Half Life Lamp, 2010, glass, lamp, hamster cells.
CHAPTER 6:
CONCLUSION

Because of his career in design, Ettore Sottsass became the paradigm of Postmodernism. Today, thirty years later, designers like Hella Jongerius call themselves Postmodern as well. Does the label mean the same thing for both? What can the label of Postmodernism contribute to the discussion of design and the general understanding of our time?

Although this is not the deepest, most philosophical or academic understanding of Postmodernism, I would like to conclude with what Ettore Sottsass and Droog taught me about our time. My conclusions are sensorial and impulsive, perhaps even Postmodern. If there is any purpose to the label, other than generalizing and categorizing, it is to use its ambiguity and multiplicity to make it your own.

First of all, there is no nostalgia for the past in Postmodernism. We are a society in constant change, always looking forward. Things are new for a millisecond and the only thing that is constant is change. As Guixe argues, mobility and time are essential values in Postmodern times, and for that reason, any possessions that weighs people down is negative to their existence. If everything is changing, why would anyone want to remain static?
Not only designers need to reconsider the relationship between people and objects. The sense of detachment and apathy towards the material world is not inevitable, it is a choice people make every day in the way they decide to live their lives. What is the fear of feeling? We still have a skin to transport nervous impulses throughout our body, why not use it. Every person has the responsibility of discovering the potential latent in things and in places. There is no reason to be passive; we are all designers.

Design resonates with personal experiences as we take something we find and transform it into our ideal space for relationships and experiences. The following story serves as an example of the design potential that lives in all of us. I grew up with my grandmother Lori telling me stories. Lori’s father was an adventurous Belgian who decided to move to Colombia to work in the banana business while Europe was in war. He married a woman from Bogota, the capital of the country. However, they did not live in Bogota but in a provincial town next to the ocean called Santa Marta since this place had the appropriate climate to grow bananas. Used to life in the capital, my great-grandmother thought Lori had to dress, act, and speak like a lady at all times. She would send her girl out to play in an impeccable white dress. Lori, however, loved being with friends, sports, and adventures. Supported by her dad, she started wearing pants. Despite her mother’s rage, this soon evolved to founding the first softball team in the country. Their practice field was an abandoned cemetery, where the tombstones conveniently marked the bases. This place has nothing to envy to a clean lawn with perfectly marked white lines, and in terms of the story, the baseball graveyard/practice field is truer to the Lori’s essence.
Lori had the option of living a designed life where everything was regulated and controlled, or simply living life. She chose the second as she explored her ability to write her own story through the relationships, the people, and the places she transformed. Fifty years later, her un-designed, rebellious ways became the actual tale through which her grandchildren would know her. Memories are immaterial, yet the most important possessions we have. This is what Sottsass meant when he proposed a new awareness of experience, where memories are allowed to remain as memories, instead of being solidified into emblems. Not all possessions have to be material.

The other label I was trying to understand was “Droog.” This is how the design group defines itself:

Droog is a brand and a mentality: design of products that do what they should and think about why they’re doing it in the first place: function? fun? wit? criticism? All of the above? Droog is a curatorial collection of exclusive products, a congenial pool of designers, a distributed statement about design as cultural commentary, a medium, working with cutting edge designers and enlightened clients, taking the production and distribution of its collection into its own hands, being unique in its conceptual and contextual approach towards design.\(^{173}\)

Droog’s definition is fluctuating and ambiguous, very Postmodern. Like Memphis, they embrace consumerism, and understand they are a brand. Droog says they design products that “do what they should do and think about why they are doing it in the first place;” it is a matter of taking the existing, reflecting upon it, and discovering why it is special. Regarding Ramaker’s statement about Droog being a “clear break from the past,” I would agree or disagree with this according to the definition of “past.” If it refers to Modernism, there is a break. However, if the past is understood as Sottsass career, I

think there is more of a continuation than a break. Droog is Postmodern in the sense that Sottsass was Postmodern, and due to the ambiguity of the term, I could even argue Postmodernism will never come to an end.
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