

Mario Gagliardi On Design

Which issues influence, which visions inspire, which contradictions trouble contemporary design? For the first article of this series (Whom is design to serve? – Design with/out industry), I visited Berlin, capital of Germany, former industrial powerhouse of Europe. At the “Designmai” show, there was a laudable concern for the socially excluded, regrettably together with an unwillingness – or insecurity – to convince. None of these concerns fettered “Design Miami / Basel” in Basel, Switzerland, my next visit.

Future, Past

The future: projection screen for ideals, canvas for hopes and aspirations, material for manifestos. The mere possibility of the future is the principal driving force for human endeavours. Thinkers from Plato to Francis Bacon created visions of the future where things should be better, communities more humane, and people happier, visions driven by human values. The absence of human values lead to visions of dystopian futures such as George Orwell’s 1984 or Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. The way the future – and the past – is used in visions unmasks the present.

At the beginning of the 21st century there are not many visions left. The word “future” is but a label, used most often as an ingredient of advertising slogans. What about the future envisioned through and created by design? This I went out to investigate at “Design Miami / Basel,” responsible for a design award called “Designer of the future.”

The fair, formerly called “design.05 Miami,” is existing since one year and imported to the Swiss town of Basel directly from Florida to coincide with “Art Basel,” which itself every year is exported to Miami. Last year the win-

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Mario Gagliardi vil i hvert nummer af inform lounge edition skrive om et selvvalgt emne under overskriften “Mario Gagliardi On Design”. Alle artikler vil være på engelsk.

Aqua Table, Zaha Hadid, 2005

Photos: David Sykes



ner was Zaha Hadid, this year the winner was a British company producing Zaha Hadid, an architect supposed to be “visionary,” “transforming our vision of the future,” even “bordering on myth.” The company having been awarded the “Designer of the future” label is “Established & Sons,” which, despite its name, has been in existence just as long as the fair – one year. Prominently on display: a table by Zaha Hadid.

From a usability perspective, the minimum requirement for a table which is sold as a “dining and conference table” would be that it has a surface on which to put stuff without the impending danger that whatever you put there slips into dints and holes. Most tables in existence today effortlessly fulfill this requirement. The “Aqua table” however features 3 dints in its flush surface which bring every wine glass to a fall.

When something obstructs its own conditions for being itself, something happens with its semantic condition -in this case, the table’s existence as “table.” In plain speak it would be a bad table, as it gives you a hard time using it. In Baudrillard’s terms it would be a simulacrum of a table – looking like one but actually not being one. It seems

to be even a double simulacrum: The Zaha Hadid Table is not really a table, and it looks as if it is not really by Zaha Hadid.

It looks like a cover version of Luigi Colani’s designs of the sixties, both in material and shape. The inspiration stopped however with the style. Colani started out as an aerodynamics engineer for Douglas, and his designs – revolutionary in the sixties and seventies – have been the result of painstaking investigations in aerodynamics and ergonomics. This table by Hadid, I assume, did not go through wind tunnel tests.



Aqua Table, Zaha Hadid, 2005

Photos: David Sykes



Aerodynamic Car, Luigi Colani, 1968

from "Luigi Colani Design," Inova Verlag, Zofingen

"Cover versions" are popular these days. The cover version started out early in the 20th century as a practice of recording companies. In order to participate in the success of popular songs from other record companies, they re-recorded the song with other musicians. The practice worked as buyers usually asked for the song, not for the name of the musician. The name is assumed to come from the effect that the newer remake "covered" the original in the sales racks. There are two effects with remakes: Firstly, people might not know that it is actually "covered" and think it is an original. Secondly, people might have heard -or seen- that stuff already somewhere, but, as human memory is not very persistent, forgot when and where. So it comes that reaching into the treasure chests of the already done can become a lucrative creative pastime.

The Aqua table now comes for US\$23.000. For that price it is, in the words of Phillips de Pury auctioneers, "somewhat less detailed in their design and are not hand sculpted and

layered." For more detailed, hand sculpted and layered, you have to get the second one of 2 prototypes, the first of which was auctioned off for no less than US\$297.000. In design, prototypes are usually meant to test an object so that flaws can be found. Here, the production version of the table comes, just as the prototype, with dints in the surface. The prototype's purpose seems rather be to create something more limited than the table which already is part of a "Limited edition" – limited-limited, so to speak, with the sales channel being an auction house.

Back to Luigi Colani. Colani at his time was, indeed, a visionary, and a controversial one at that, with many in Germany's design establishment opposing his ways and views. Despite that, Colani conceived designs for aeroplanes, helicopters, ships, toilet seats, beer glasses, bathroom carpets and futuristic cities in his typical biomorphic form language. Colani also presented energy-saving cars such as an aerodynamically optimized Citroen 2CV with a fuel consumption of 1,71 l/100 km in 1981, which together with many other of his energy-saving concepts never went into production. When Zaha Hadid deals with the same topic over 20 years later later, it looks remarkably similar to Colani's published concepts of 1983, both in structure and form:

Z-car, Zaha Hadid, 2005



Car studies, Luigi Colani, 1983
from "Luigi Colani Design,"
Inova Verlag, Zofingen



The "design of the future" presented is at least described in a futuristic manner. From the product sheet for the Aqua Table on architonic.com: "The user is invited to explore the forces of motion that created a form which seems to blur the relationship between its horizontal top and vertical legs...The asymmetrical, irregular tabletop's varying edges creates an ergonomic solid that offers endless relationship possibilities with its user and its environment." And, indeed, people dining at this table can "explore the forces of motion" of this not quite "ergonomic" solid when wine glasses slip into the dints which "blur the relationship between its horizontal top and vertical legs," and so the "endless relationship possibilities with its user and its environment" result in spilled wine and broken glass. Or about a Hadid chandelier, from the "Established & Sons" catalogue: "The exciting form of this Limited Edition chandelier was created using sophisticated digital modelling tools," while "the crystals are hand-threaded to the specifications of the computer-generated pattern." To give the upscale target market the

idea of both "hi-tech" and "crafts," the logic of design is turned upside down: Instead of spending design effort on devising ways for the smart and effective production of the object, the design effort is exhausted with creating an exciting form on the computer, while months have to be spent on the meticulous, handcrafted assembly of the object from 16,000 black crystals. This fits decidedly more into the times of Louis XV than to the post, post-post, or hypermodernity where Zaha Hadid is claimed to be.

Assuming that it would be a basic requirement for design that things actually work, her table is perhaps not really design. Is it art, then? For contemporary art, it lacks message and reflection such as, for instance, the "Fat Car" by Erwin Wurm, who also uses glossy surfaces, but for a critical comment on our times:



Fat Car, Erwin Wurm, 2001

Hadid's design might appear progressive, but it is in fact regressive, a future which is reboiled. What is, however, at a new level of vision is the marketing and PR. Limited editions are overexceeded by limited-limited prototypes created for artificial scarcity. Catalogue texts are made not to make sense but to create a cloud of emotional attributes. Prices are an implicit function of publicity, and only two things are imperative to be instantly and widely published: A hip name and exciting forms on photographs. Dents on table surfaces have that very advantage, albeit no other. And the prices ensure there is an narrative delivered, a story to be told about the thumping price and hence exclusivity of that designer piece. If design is supposed to have any social function, the resulting social function here, by virtue of its price tag, is that it reinforces and exaggerates the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Design has become hip, and it made it to be a topic for penthouse parties. But on that new road to hipness it has lost a lot of content. Brad Pitt allegedly said: "I'd like

to design something like a city or a museum. I want to do something hands on rather than just play golf." And the New York Times writes about the design ambitions of Lenny Kravitz: "To transform his Biscayne Bay house Mr. Kravitz sought out the mad, mod visionary of Danish design, Verner Panton." It is not at all bad that Brad Pitt finds design more worthwhile than golf, as he is reported to also narrate an upcoming TV series about sustainable design. It is also not bad that Lenny Kravitz finds Verner Panton "mad and mod," as long as he is aware that Panton was a visionary.

Design has become hip, but it arrived there in a sorry state. What is sorely needed now is to get content and context back into it, and what drove generations of designers from William Morris to Margarete Schuette-Lihotzky, from Marcel Breuer to Luigi Colani, from Verner Panton to Ettore Sottsass: humane vision.