

gredientes del *kitsch* tradicional han pasado a formar parte del propio diseño como actividad y como disciplina? ¿Cómo se explica, si no, la afectación y la consciencia de sí mismo que evidencian todos aquellos objetos que exigen ser reconocidos y valorados como hechos de diseño? O bien ¿cuáles son los rasgos distintivos que hacen que sean «de diseño» todos los objetos que, sólo por esta definición ontológica, son más caros? En algún sitio ha de estar más allá de los objetos del Barça, pues de lo contrario, como nos advertía Ramón Gómez de la Serna, habremos perdido el último reducto de cultura humana que residía en la cursilería más vulgar.

KITSCH '92: DIGNIFYING THE OLYMPIC SOUVENIR

In 1982, the year of the Soccer World Championship in Spain, Ricard Melet and I spoke of this sociological and artistic phenomenon and regretted not having organized some sort of event, an exhibition or a catalogue, on the many ugly—or kitsch, to use a more academic term—objects that had saturated the market for the celebration of this event. We had become used to the fact that sports, authentic mass phenomenon and one of today's great economical businesses par excellence, naturally generated kitsch objects. The normal wish to celebrate and remember an event such as this—especially if the good guys win, that is, our team—, the need to identify oneself and feel different, as a *tifoso* or a supporter, and the wish to show that one has been there in person, are all satisfied by means of emotionally standardized objects which, from the point of view of innovation, are not very different from the objects traditionally linked to other emotional expressions: graphic symbols, shields, flags and colours, elements that are easily applicable to any type of more or less utilitary support. If this is what happens in «normal» sports—soccer league, football Cups, ACB league, NBA championship, a good example is the number of visitors to the Barça museum— then the world championship was a clear manifestation of the international and cosmopolitan nature of this phenomenon. We were missing the opportunity of treating the kitsch phenomena in terms of design and seeing the differences still existing in Spain immediately after the political transition in relation to industrial objects.

Soon after, the nomination of Barcelona as the site of the Olympics was an opportunity, at least in theory, for recovering the idea and, in case of winning the nomination, a chance to do something in relation to the Olympic kitsch. The opportunity lost in the past no longer seemed so important. In fact, the Olympics themselves are slightly kitsch, with the background culture of the «body cultivation» of the eighties. The appearance of multiple souvenirs celebrating the Games and others promoting the city of Barcelona seemed almost like a promise. Given the cultural situation of the State of the Autonomies and the position occupied by Barcelona among the aspiring cities, it was obvious that neither bullfights, bullfighters, flamenco, guitars, sardanas, *espadenyes* (typical Catalan farmer footwear), *pa amb tomàquet* (typical Catalan bread with tomato, salt and oil), or too much Gaudí either, could be recurrent subjects for the new souvenirs. Spain already had a sufficiently consolidated external image which was uncomfortable and deformed in relation to the reality of the eighties, and that had nothing to do with what Barcelona wanted to portray. The presentation of the candidature to the members of the IOC had portrayed and spread the image of a modern, advanced, imaginative and efficient country; in other words, a dignified, serious and comparable image. The

challenge was therefore complex: how to make the souvenirs addressed to the assisting public? And the souvenirs for the citizens of Barcelona? Discussion was inevitable, although a kitsch image seemed further and further away from institutional politics. In order to see the result we had to wait until 1992 when the manufacture of toys, postcards and souvenirs began to take place.

After the Games, the possibility not only of making some sort of evaluation on olympic kitsch, but just merely reflecting on it, is an arduous task. Many things have happened and many more will occur but, as far as kitsch is concerned, the general feeling is one of disappointment. This does not mean that there is nothing ugly in the olympic city, that we have overcome bad taste and abandoned collective uncouthness, or that we reject all sorts of vulgarities: we have enough examples of these in everyday life, in the non-olympic city, in the communication media and in political life. But if we take a look at the olympic object system, we only see a preoccupation for shape, for the quality of the finishing touches and manufacture, the purification of colours, all saturated and primary, the predominance of white background, the equilibrium of the central box, the predominance of the romans without photomechanical deformations, the purity of the strokes and lines, the use of good materials without superficial ornaments valued according to the quality of their texture. The logotype, anagram, mascot, torch, uniform of the volunteers carrying the torch, as well as the scenarios chosen for the ceremonies that have taken place —Olympia, the Parthenon, Empúries— are all a complement to the praise of classical elegance, fine shape and the principles of good design —the same principles that the culture of design has contemporarily been doubting. Even the sunset during the arrival of the Olympic torch in Empúries (a romantic sunset that has been the chosen subject of so many pretentious moments all over the world), looked really nice on TV. Restraint, austerity, equilibrium and harmony are the aesthetic characteristics that have conformed the creation of the Olympic image of Barcelona, to such an extent that every single olympic product contains this restraint or soberness whether it be a pin, a T-shirt, a fan, a bag, a flag or a beach ball. A stroll down the Rambla serves to prove this. The scenery offered by the stores and stalls is diaphanous, white with a few specs of colour, it is even elegant. It's a lucky thing that in the past few months the blue and dark crimson colours of the Barcelona football team and all their authentic, natural and spontaneous kitsch paraphernalia have compensated the void left by the Olympic souvenir. In the face of these facts we only conclude that Kitsch is no longer what it used to be.

The first deception came with the mascot. By definition a mascot is a kitsch object, or at least it used to be in the classical concept of kitsch. It is mentioned in all anthologies of kitsch objects and is accepted as such. However, it is true that this definition does not include great publicity mascots such as the Michelin Bibendum, the Tio Pepe or the Netol, which have carried out their function without considerations for good or bad taste; but it is also true that mascots, whether they be stuffed animals, plastic or wooden toys, dolls for hanging under the rearview mirror of a car or drawings that can be serigraphed on lighters, pens or planes, respond to kitsch mentality, the same mentality that inspired Walt Disney and enabled him to be more than just a comic's creator. It

can be objected that this is not the mascot's fault but rather the way it is applied, but this argument is always suspicious —in fact, the Cobi has proved exactly the opposite—. In any case, the decision that no one ever doubted was that Barcelona needed a mascot, and this decision assumes kitsch behaviour from the start. But when establishing the rights by which the mascot had to identify with Barcelona and its Games as a differential factor, the challenge was difficult in a country with no collectively shared identity symbols which are at the same time homologable beyond our own frontiers —the fair at Barberà del Vallès and the symbiosis assumed between the identity signs of various autonomies are obliged points of reference.

Enough has been written already in relation to the Cobi, but it must be admitted that from the point of view of kitsch, it is a historical landmark. That is, it contains all the ingredients that are traditionally included in kitsch and, at the same time, all those that are in opposition to it. On the one hand it is a comic drawing, and comics will always be a product of mass culture no matter how much we intellectualize them and, on the other, it is a figurative drawing without a clear point of reference in which style predominates over any other aspect. It is even difficult to visualize in it the soul of a dog, even if we think of it flatly, trapped as it is in its two-dimensionality; but whether dressed-up or nude, immobilized with open arms or in movement, inflated or on a screen, Cobi is a rogue that has come to be dearly loved. The limitation of Cobi is, however, that it has not been able to be turned into a *falla* (cardboard figure made for burning during the Sant Josep festivities in Valencia) or a figure that one can call ugly, and even less that it is vulgar, and this means that the applications it is used for are rarely kitsch —in the case of the plastic key rings with pink Cobis, the inconvenience does not lie in the crafty correction of the Cobi but rather in the bad quality of the materials used and in the production; these two factors have nothing to do with the subject of kitsch and fall directly within the realm of badly done work.

For all these reasons it can be stated that one of the successes achieved by the COOB'92 is, no doubt, the aesthetic dignification of the souvenir. The operation, however, is not as new as it seems at first sight. The promotion of Carnaby Street during the sixties in the pop era, was carried out following a similar procedure. Who doesn't remember the postcards only decorated with a British flag? Or the tea cups, trays, posters, badges, plastic bags, scarfs, pens and pencils, all decorated with the English flag and its colours? Apart from pins, which are a product of today's fashion, the universe of dignified souvenirs is the same system of objects as it was then. Just as in the pop era, the Olympic symbols have been designed to become ornaments, simply decorative elements that are superficially applied to any type of support.

When graphic images implicitly carry with them the conditions for their application and the treatment of the immediate surroundings, the nature of the souvenir is determined by the brand image and its style. It is not surprising, therefore, that white is the predominant colour in the Olympic souvenirs; it is the background colour of the logotype and the paper on which a drawing like Cobi can evolve. If both symbols are open graphisms, that is, if they evolve on a uniform background without delimitations or frames —as is the case of the shields— the need for white surroundings is evident and the

overall result is invariably marked by the restraint and elegance of pure graphism. The design of the torch, as we have seen before, confirms this tendency. A symbolic element par excellence, the formal elegance of the torch makes it a monument which, in spite of being ephemeral like everything else related to the Games, nevertheless has the capacity to serve as an emotional memento. In this sense it is ironic that one of the most ephemeral objects of the Games, in the utilitarian sense, is the one designed to become more lasting and it would not be surprising that it turn into an emblematic monument of the Games occupying a space in any museum of high culture.

All this shows that the objects which traditionally reigned in the kitsch universe—that is, souvenirs—have been incorporated to the Games as a finality in themselves and turned into one of the protagonists of institutional design politics. However, this is not the differential factor—what, then, is the MoMA design objects store or the V&A?—but rather the approach to the souvenir in terms of design. A fact which is symptomatic if contrasted with the doctrinal debate in relation to design—a discussion that has taken place very often with the advent of uncomfortable chairs in the furniture sector during the decade of the eighties. Since times immemorial, design has been considered linked to questions of utility and beauty. Once beauty has disappeared as a rule, replaced by many other aesthetic categories fighting for equality, at least since the sixties, utility has not had much better luck and has been substituted for many uses and habits whose importance for the project has been put at the same level. When objects of use have been aesthetically and utilitarianly re-elaborated, turned into «design» objects, the souvenir, an object with no other utility than being the support of an image and its promoter, demands for itself a clearly recognizable utilitarian function which will channel the buying of the image and be the vehicle (in the kitchen, living room, dining room, or on the lapels of a suit) for the diffusion of an image that does not work well as a brand since it lacks products to which it can refer. In this situation maybe the only thing we can conclude is that kitsch is an obsolete issue that has been incorporated, not as a style but as a type of behaviour, to necessities and habits which, in a society dominated by classical or post industrial logic, are still satisfied by means of designed objects.

However, if we are to believe the recently deceased critic Abraham Moles and his tranquilizing words, according to which we all have «our little piece of kitsch heart», how will we satisfy it in the Barcelona Games? Banished from the universe of souvenirs, where is kitsch now? Could it be that the aesthetic and intellectual acknowledgement of popular culture made through radical design and the projectual experiments of the past few years turning bad taste, uncouthness and vulgarity into accessible aesthetic categories for the project from the beginning of the design process, has managed to make traditional kitsch ingredients a part of the design itself as an activity and a discipline? How else can we explain the affectation and self-consciousness of all those objects that demand to be considered and valued as objects of design?, or what are the distinctive characteristics of «design» objects which, just because they bear this ontological definition, makes them so much more expensive? Some place beyond the Barça objects for if not, as Ramón Gómez

de la Serna warned us, we will have lost the last redoubt of human culture dwelling in the most vulgar bad taste.