

I Would Prefer Not To Design It

Unlike a poem or a song, an object (designed and produced) and a space (designed and constructed) are invariably permeated by the power relations that have made them possible. For, regardless of the intention of the participating agents, designs cannot help but convey the values that sustain, justify and prolong the power relations that have facilitated their existence. With this in mind, especially in the case of the new digital technologies, designers, beyond simply offering a final solution, are increasingly concerned with controlling and influencing the parts of the production process where the social, labour and ecological implications determine, more than just the form itself, the ethical and political value of the design. And of all the political aspects involved in the design process, one holds particular importance: environmental conservation. The immediacy of the environmental crisis that faces us begs the question: what if, instead of coming up with new designs, we devise a way to not design? We cease to produce. There are many examples of this. After all, any product, no matter how small its ecological footprint, will always be pollutant if its purpose is superfluous and non-essential. Other cultures and time periods, such as the Japanese culture prior to the 1960s, demonstrate how some products we believe to be essential are in fact contingent and could quite easily not exist at all. Chairs are a prime example of this.

In the mid-1990s, the firm Lacaton & Vassal turned down a commission to design and rebuild the Léon Aucoc square in Bordeaux. The square was perfectly fine as it was. There was no need to redesign it. It would have sufficed to repaint the benches, replace the gravel and tend to a few ailing trees. Years earlier, in the mid-1970s, Frei Otto embarked on a never-ending administrative struggle to build a housing complex, the Ökohaus, which took until 1982 to complete. Here, too, the designer was taking a step backwards. Rather than prescribing the design of everything, which the inhabitants would invariably dismantle to suit their own needs, he *only* devised the structure, some of the utility installations and a system of accesses, leaving the residents to develop their individual house plans, including the facade (Figure 1).

Unlike a poem or a song, which are intangible, any object that has been designed or any space that has been constructed will invariably be permeated by the power relations that have made it possible. And while it may have a use or provide a service, having originated from a brilliant and perhaps necessary idea, an object that has been designed and produced marks a substantiation of a labour system, of a regime of exploitation and, above all, an irreparable threat against the health of the planet. It is therefore essential that we radically question its significance and necessity. Given that its impact will always imply a degradation of the environment, it is imperative that we

evaluate what it brings us. Once this assessment has been made, critical reflections such as that of speculative design should perhaps be reassessed and revised. And there is no time to lose. The countdown is made up of no more than two figures.

The debate in the 1960s about an object as apparently benign as the chair can serve as an example. After all, it is precisely through the chair that our peculiarly extractive nature takes shape.

CRITICAL CHAIRS

As part of the emerging critique of consumerist society, throughout the 1960s and a portion of the 1970s, there was a peculiar proliferation of chairs in the art world. Here are a few of them: *Hinge-Chair* (Raymund Abraham, 1971) (Figure 2); *Fat Chair* (Joseph Beuys, 1963); *Chair with umbrella and warning light* (George Brecht, 1969); *Chairs and beds* (Heinz Frank, 1971); *One and Three Chairs* (Joseph Kosuth, 1965) (Figure 3); the series by Alessandro Mendini (Figure 4) — *Chair Up There* (1974), *Sliding Chair* (1975), *Chair in the shape of a cross* (1974), *Landscape chair* (1971) and *Action IX* (1972) —; *Wearable Chairs* (Gianni Pettena, 1971) and *Kichka's Breakfast* (Daniel Spoerri, 1960).

KEYWORDS

Ecology, Capitalism, Chairs, Non-action, Non-projecting, Instruction, Body, Discipline.

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Fig. 1. Frei Otto. Ökohaus, Berlin (1982). Photo © Beate Lendt.

Critical art, to use the words of Daniel Spoerri, “focuses on areas which are often overlooked” (Taittinger 2007, 160). Thus, the centrality of the object of the chair in the Western cultural modes of living and producing becomes abundantly clear when viewed through this critical lens. Insofar as it is a commodity, the chair, aside from its use, is also a reflection of the identity of the person who uses it (economic status, aesthetic affiliation, ideological connotations, etc.).

Among the extensive array of critical chairs produced by the art of the 1960s, Andy Warhol’s *Electric Chair* (1964) (Figure 5) stands out in its own right. The punitive condition of the artefact that Warhol silkscreens renders any defence of its use obscene. To understand the critical dimension of this piece, it has to be viewed within the context of Warhol’s endless series of silkscreen prints devoted to the world of consumerism, featuring items such as Campbell’s soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles and Brillo detergent boxes.

Some of Warhol’s variations on the electric chair, such as *Orange Disaster* (1963), are clearly framed within his *Death and Disaster* series. These include car crashes, plane tragedies, race riots and even food consumption, as in the case of the funereal *Tunafish Disaster* (1963). Here, the motif is a newspaper article sensationalising the poisoning of two middle-aged sisters who died after consuming a can of contaminated tuna fish. Warhol’s series are all appropriated from mass-circulated media images. So it is the mass media itself which places a bottle of Coca-Cola, a car, a can of tuna or an electric chair on the same plane of moral reality. The sinister undertones in his depiction of apparently benign consumer goods alongside the scenes of mass destruction suggest that he viewed the electric chair in the same terms as any other commodity, i.e. that it is in the obscenity of its purpose that we are able to question its utility value, or artificially created wants, in the words of Galbraith (1958).

From a design standpoint, this should not be overlooked. If all need is created, rather than need, in the strictest Aristotelian sense of the word, we should speak of an orchestrated contingency to the advantage of the company that designs, produces and distributes the product. Thus, rather than a specific problem or a reprehensible practice, the system as a whole is put into question.

ALTERITY

The perception of the chair as a consumer object that embodies Western capitalist values comes across in Japan as a natural estrangement due to the cultural leap. In a text discussing the importance of the role played by the Bauhaus in the introduction of the chair in Japan, Anne Gossot (2007) emphasises that the popularisation of the chair, a symbol of modernity and cultural status, totally alien to a tradition that sits on the tatami, coincides with the nationalist escalation of militarism that led the country to war. As with Okanoue’s collage landscapes, the introduction of the chair in 1930s Japan brings disorder to the domestic space and undermines a tradition that is embedded in the environment.

From the Japanese perspective, it is perhaps through the chair, and the way it separates us from the ground, that the Western disdain for nature is most clearly manifested¹. While it is true that from the 1950s onwards Japanese designers increasingly went on to design chairs, we should not overlook the fact that a designer like George Nakashima, for example, who is often attributed as having “exquisite Japanese taste” when it comes to fusing modernity and tradition, was born and schooled in the United States. Or that another great designer like Yanagi

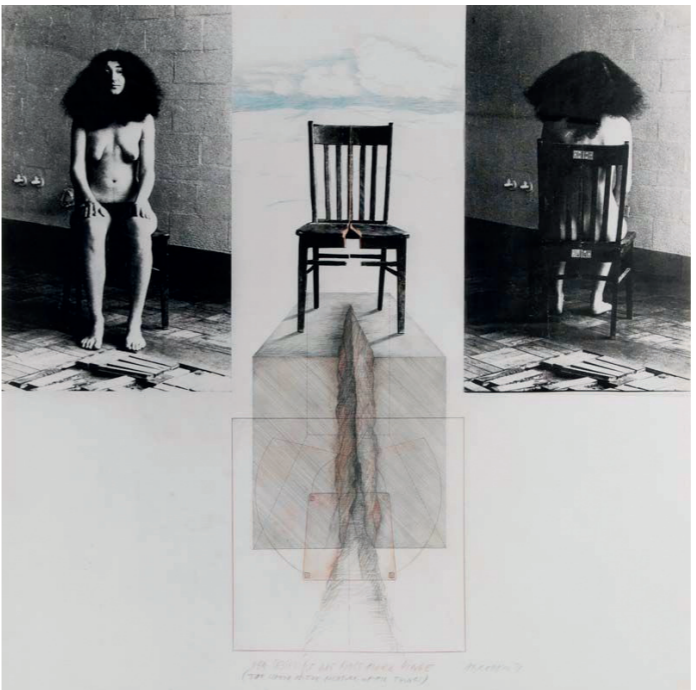


Fig. 2. Raymund Abraham. Hinge-Chair (1971).

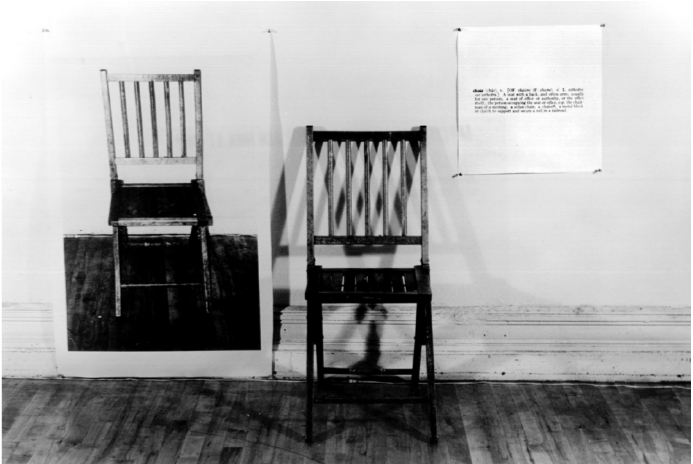


Fig. 3. Joseph Kosuth. One and three chairs (1965).

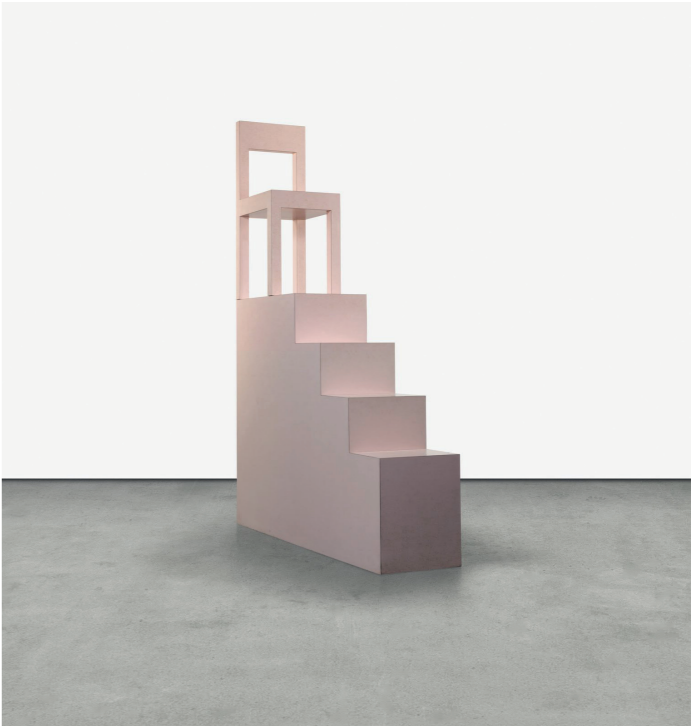


Fig. 4. Alessandro Mendini. Nonchair (c. 1981).

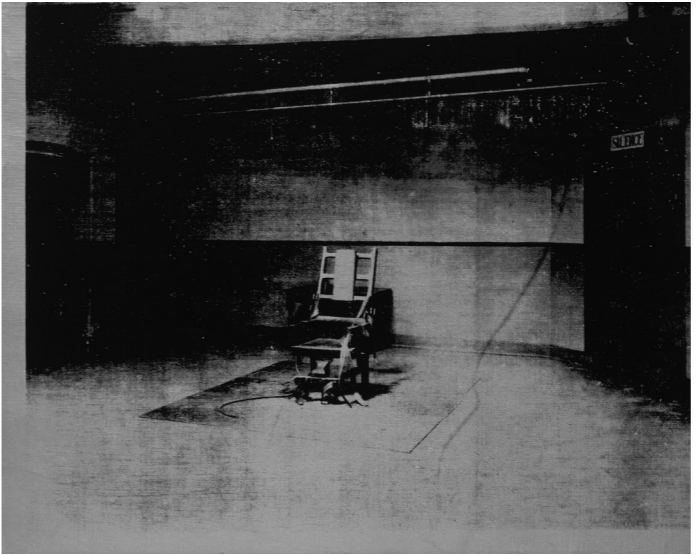


Fig. 5. Andy Warhol. Electric Chair (1965).



Fig. 6. Film stills from *Portrait of Madame Yuki* (Mizoguchi Kenji, 1950). Collage by Ramon Faura.

Sori (“true beauty is not made, it is born naturally”) was introduced to industrial design under Charlotte Perriand, despite being the son of Yanagi Soetsu². At any rate, it is worth bearing in mind that two of the most applauded works by both designers, Yanagi’s Butterfly stool and Nakashima’s conoid bench, while embodying a certain “Japanese sensibility”, nevertheless address a problem that did not exist in a pre-Western Japan, where even the emperor sat on the floor.

Indeed, for a culture that has spent centuries without chairs, the question is obvious: why not sit directly on the ground? Why invest time, ingenuity, materials and work in merely separating oneself 40 cm from the planet? Seen from a world in which no one sat on chairs, the “chair function” is not so much about sitting as it is about moving away from the ground, revealing a very specific way of being in the world: that of humanism and the Modern Project, in which the human is understood as something set apart, separate from and above everything else. Long before the atomic bomb or river turbines, the destruction of the planet begins with this seemingly inconsequential decision: not to sit on the ground, to rise above it, to disengage. It is telling how, in contrast to a Western space occupied by chairs, a Japanese floor in contact with the body can never be dirty.

ON OBEDIENT BODIES

In post-war Japanese films, the profound significance of a chair in a space, of its coercive presence, is evident (Figure 6). Granted, the way the characters conduct themselves is also shaped by invisible lines of power: morality, religion, customs and respect for institutions. But unlike Western interiors which are packed with objects, this underlying tapestry of relations is not reified in an object of consumption. Or at least not in an object that purports to be there for our convenience. The chair, in its apparent neutrality, serves both to accommodate us and to establish order. Like any technological device, it accommodates but also controls.

One only has to look at the way children are educated in the West. The chair, for them, is not so different from the rack or an orthopaedic corrector, taking on the role of a disciplinary apparatus on which the elders focus all their demands for blind obedience. “Sit properly” must be one of the most frequently repeated phrases made by parents in the West. Yet we are seldom told to “Walk properly” or to “Lie down properly”. While sitting reveals the docility of the individualised body, it also marks the starting point of the resistance to authority which is portrayed by young people in their ceaseless quest to sit in as extravagant a manner as possible.

Thus, the chair constitutes a double expression of dominion over nature: over the natural environment (elevating us above the ground) and over the natural body (regulating our movements). Be it a throne or a pulpit, these are means through which power can manifest and impose itself. Popes are painted seated; kings, standing. The chair generates codes of respect. In job interviews, interviewee and interviewer do not sit in the same way or at the same



Fig. 7. Gruppo Strum. *The Pratone Chair* (1966).



Fig. 8. Ugo La Pietra. *The Switch* (1970).

level. In the same way a subordinate cannot sit in front of their boss, a courtier cannot sit facing their king, or a waiter beside their seated customers. When it comes to sitting, the ritual of the Mass in its modern form verges on the absurd. “Rise, you may sit, rise.” For those who do not adhere to the instruction of the chair, there are other chairs, the electric chair, the lethal injection chair, the gas chamber chair, the *garrote vil*, the rack.

We learn to obey by sitting in chairs. We learn to obey through our consumption of chairs. And we learn all this as *individuals*, segregated in our own chairs. In its modern version, no other domestic object shows us more clearly the intimate-domestic space traversed by the logic of capital. There is only room for one person in the chair. Privacy is kept under control, inside the home. The chair introduced a political order into the intimate space long before the appearance of social networks. Bodies are arranged in exactly the same way in their supposed spheres of private freedom. It is no coincidence that in the late sixties and early seventies, years in which we witnessed the critical demolition of the extractive Modern Project, the object of the chair entered into a crisis or was questioned and other ways of sitting were devised. Here, for instance, the *Pratone Chair* by the Strum group (Figure 7) or Ugo La Pietra’s *The Switch* (Figure 8) spring to mind.

In former times, Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, for example, might not have questioned the provenance of the sumptuous ivory and luxurious ebony for his CR126 chair; he might even have overlooked the framework of colonial exploitation, the cultural and physical genocide of other cultures, ravaged so that, among many other things, he might sit in that chair. Not today. For every step we take, we must bear in mind that in our pockets, inside the ubiquitous smartphone we are all forced to plug in, we carry hundreds of deaths and massacres in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a former Belgian colony, which were required for the mining of coltan to take place and entail corporate profits (Pampliega and Anas 2018).

Perhaps we designers, rather than wielding tables measuring our ecological footprints and legitimising our ideas through climate graphs and statistics that no one reads or understands, ought to consider strategies of silence and productive inactivity. Pipe down and listen. Stop generating. Do nothing. Think, from a design standpoint, of an authentic and definitive “I would prefer not to”, following the wisdom of *Bartleby*³. To design ways, in the Pascalian sense, of remaining quietly in a room without doing anything⁴. Seated on the floor.

BIOGRAPHY

Ramon Faura Coll, PhD
Elisava, Barcelona School of Design and Engineering (UVic-UCC)

Ramon Faura Coll is a musician and holds a PhD in Architecture. He coordinates the Department of Social Studies at the Elisava School, where he teaches subjects related to design, architecture, the theory of technology and projects. He has taught at ETSAB, ETSAR and Di Tella in Buenos Aires. Between 2003 and 2006 he was editor-in-chief of the journal *Quaderns d'arquitectura i urbanisme*. He has curated exhibitions such as “Arquitecturas sin lugar” (2009) at the Arts Santa Mònica centre (Barcelona) and the 2018 FadFest on tourism. In 2019 his documentary *L'estat turístic* was screened at the Filmoteca de Catalunya. He has lectured at New York University, KTH Stockholm, the

Dresden School of Landscape Architecture and the ETSAM. He has published articles in a diverse range of media, including chapters for collective books such as *Enric Miralles 1972-2000* (2011) or *Culture in Tension* (2016) and three monographs: *Louis XIV in Royal Costume: The Decapitation of the mystical body* (2010); *The Versailles machine* (2014) and *Displacement and Ruin* (2015). In the field of music, he has released eight albums with a variety of groups (Yak 42, Macho, Le Petit Ramon and Azucarillo Kings). He has performed with Mick Taylor, The Sonics, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion and Sleaford Mods, among others.

ENDNOTES

1. An example of this is the story “Haturu no haka” (Amerika hijiki) by Akiyuki Nosaka.
2. Yanagi Soetsu founded the Mingei movement, which promotes the revival of traditional Japanese handicrafts.
3. On the philosophical and political implications of Herman Melville’s story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853), see Melville et al. (2000).
4. This is a reference to the famous phrase that opens Blaise Pascal’s 139th *pensée*: “Quand je m’y suis mis quelquefois à considérer les diverses agitations des hommes et les périls et les peines où ils s’exposent dans la Cour, dans la guerre, d’où naissent tant de querelles, de passions, d’entreprises hardies et souvent mauvaises, etc., j’ai dit souvent que tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre” (Pascal 1670).

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R. Faura Coll

M'estimaria més no dissenyar-ho

Traducció al Català

PARAULES CLAU

Ecologia, Capitalisme, Cadires, No-Acció, No Projectar, Instrucció, Cos, Disciplina.

RESUM

A diferència d’una poesia o una cançó, un objecte (dissenyat i produït) i un espai (dissenyat i construït) estan travessats per les relacions de poder que els han fet possibles. Més enllà de la voluntat d’alguns dels agents que hi participen, els dissenys són portadors dels valors que sustenten, justifiquen i prolonguen aquestes relacions de poder que els han fet possibles. Per això, cada cop més, i molt especialment amb les noves tecnologies digitals, els dissenyadors no només es preocupen de respondre formalment, sinó també de controlar i incidir en aquells trams del procés productiu en què les implicacions socials, laborals i ecològiques determinen, molt més que la forma en si, el valor ètic i polític del disseny. Entre tots els aspectes polítics implicats en qualsevol procés de disseny, n’hi ha un que té una importància especial: la conservació del mitjà. Davant d’un escenari de crisi mediambiental radicalment urgent sorgeix una pregunta: i si el que realment hem de dissenyar és la manera de no dissenyar? Deixar de produir. En tenim exemples. Al cap i a la fi, qualsevol producte, per poca petjada ecològica que deixi, sempre serà contaminant si el seu sentit és superflu i innecessari. Altres cultures i temps, com ara la japonesa d’abans dels anys seixanta del segle xx, ens mostren que alguns productes que pensem que són essencials, de fet són contingents, podrien no existir. Un exemple són les cadires.

ARTICLE

A mitjans dels anys noranta, l’estudi Lacaton & Vassal, que va rebre l’encàrrec de tornar a dissenyar i construir la plaça Léon Aucoc de Bordeus, va declinar l’oferta. La plaça ja estava bé. No calia tornar a dissenyar-la. N’hi havia prou que es tornessin a pintar els bancs, es reposés la grava i se sanegés algun arbre malalt. Uns anys abans, des de mitjans dels anys setanta, Frei Otto es va embarcar en una inacabable lluita administrativa per desenvolupar un complex d’habitatges, l’Ökohaus, que no es va acabar fins al 1982. En aquest cas el dissenyador també va fer un pas enrere. Abans de predeterminar el disseny de tot plegat, un disseny que els habitants enderrocarien invariablement per ajustar l’apartament a les seves necessitats, *només* va projectar una estructura, uns passos d’instal·lacions i un sistema d’accessos, en què cada veí desenvoluparia el seu propi projecte de casa, incloent-hi la façana (Figura 1).

