

Design on trial

Critique and metamorphosis of the contemporary object



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There is no slogan better known than the famous work by Adolf

Loos: *Ornament and crime*. But the ornament is not the only crime attributed to the object since the advent of the industrial revolution. Too many, cold, pointless, inert, ephemeral, indigestible, mute: anonymous objects as the result of the uncontrolled replication of machines; kitsch or consumerist objects; indigestible to the ecosystem insofar as they are unable to biodegrade; ephemeral because they are disposable; mute because they are lacking in any meaning or interactivity. The ideal trial to be conducted on the industrial object puts, sometimes randomly, a steel handle or plastic vase, a decorated chair, packaging or a neon bulb in the docks... deeming them to be severe indications of a crime against art or the soul, against ecology or civilisation, taste or imagination.

Starting out from this critique, at times somewhat harsh, focused on the industrial product, the essay highlights crucial turning points in the design culture that, in particular as from the 1960s, looks to be busy rethinking its very object to transform it profoundly. A new scientific imaginary, the influence of art, the environmental issues and technological evolution come together throughout the twentieth century to mobilise the traditional concept of "things", setting them out along the material/immaterial binomial. In this context, the discipline of design plays a major role, becoming the interpreter of the metamorphosis of the object that took place with the post-industrial age. Through twelve key words that encompass the response to a charge brought against the object, the book identifies a series of influential phenomena that today characterise design and, finally, discovers the only true crime that design can commit.

>> **Culture del design [Cultures of design]**, series directed by *Patrizia Ranzo*
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The series Culture del design seeks to listen to the different voices and multiple sectors that contribute towards the evolution of the system of objects. Design has not only given form to contemporary living but, through the dimension of the everyday, has had a major influence on uses and meanings of living, reaching the sphere of the private and the dimension of personal experience.

Differently to architecture, which is constantly supported by a theoretical apparatus needed to substantiate the “civil” role, design has mainly spoken through objects. On the one hand, this method that is partly “subliminal” has strengthened the strategic role played in society’s evolution, whilst on the other, after the great theorisations of modernity, a systematic, structured reflection has no longer emerged - apart from some contributions - that is able to follow and represent the continuous developments of the design project. We therefore need to go back to reflecting, paying careful attention to both the language of objects and the constellations of thought they represent. Culture del design offers texts that fall on two different fronts: theoretical essays seeking to make a contribution towards the statute of the contemporary industrial object and research that expands upon the design project scenarios. In these terms, design, visual communication and fashion represent intercommunicating sectors, but also unique viewpoints from which to observe the mutating landscapes of the contemporary project.

The series includes a section called Culture del design / words, which brings together and publishes original texts by contemporary critics and designers.

The selection of original works for publication is systematically evaluated by experts, according to a double blind peer review procedure.

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>> The research on the projects and iconographic selection relative to chapter 3 were carried out by *Francesca La Rocca* and *Chiara Scarpitti*.
Chiara Scarpitti also authored the following paragraphs: Living objects; Enigmatic objects; Thinkered objects; Formless objects; Connected objects; Bare nature objects; Mini ego objects; Neo material objects; Sensorial objects; Fetish objects; Dramatic objects; Absent objects.

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Diego Cibelli

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To Giulio, Gabriele and the right size of things



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1. The object on trial

Ornament and crime: there is no slogan better known than the famous work by Adolf Loos, who in 1908 sought to recall creative and intellectual forces and create a world of objects that was fit for the new productive civilisation. But the ornament is not the only *crime* that may be committed by the object after the industrial revolution.

The machine-produced object immediately polarises attention both positively and negatively, as the mark of a new era: promising, but at the same time dangerous. Since its dawn, the prospects and dangers it entails have constituted the uninterrupted subject of heated debate.

Too many, Inert. Ephemeral, Indigestible. Deaf. Rigid. Cold. Pointless. Anonymous objects because they are the result of machines; kitsch or consumerist objects; cold, because they are abstractly functional; damaging because they do not biodegrade; objects that are indigestible to the ecosystem's metabolism; ephemeral because they are disposable; objects lacking in meaning and interactiveness or that are intangible and elusive. Only by seeing just how many charges are brought, and how contradictory they are, can we explain the reason for so many different directions in contemporary design.

Some of the trends of multiform production in design we note today can be interpreted not only as the continuous search for new routes beyond functionalism, but also reactions to the myriad of accusations that have progressively "diluted" the solidity of the modern object, *softening it* to the extent that at times they risk *liquefying it*.

The object in the docks, oddly, must first of all answer to its fact of being a "thing". Through a revision of its essential characters, the very notion of object is in fact set to undergo major transformations with the advent of post-modernism. "The golden age of objects was the 20th century", Andrea Branzi observes¹. And this statement leads us inevitably to ask a question: so what about the 21st century? What is the object's status today? And what sort of object is today assigned to the competence of design?

> The suspect

The innovation represented by the industrial product as compared with traditional manufacture is seen as an element of such discontinuity to generate a cultural problem. The culture of design is an active part and indeed visible evidence, through its artefacts, of this social and intellectual climate.

Social and economic, aesthetic and technological matters all focus on the industrial product. It embodies hope, new prospects of liveability and democratisation of society, in particular the possibility that there should be a diffused quality in living by means of a more extensively accessible production; yet it equally well plays the role of *concrete target* of criticism directed towards industrial society, which, in taking on an ideological, political and philosophical dimension, struggles to find a material *object* onto which it can project itself.

Faced with the dissolution of the traditional links between the social and cultural fields, the reciprocal estrangement of technique and culture, the intellectuals immediately start to question solutions and models by which to overcome this *impasse* and the conflicts of the new industrial context. As Filiberto Menna notes, "the industrial revolution speeds up the process of uprooting the intellectual from the ranks of bourgeoisie, its class of origin, and causes the diffused attitude of suspicion that the romantic culture had taken on when faced with the new anthropological condition that was gradually taking shape"².

In relation to the technical object, in particular, positivist visions intersect with unconscious legacies that highlight the positive or negative nature of the *extraneous*: extraneous to the dusty world of the past, as for the Futurists, or extraneous to the warm nucleus of living, according to the most common approach. When reference is made to its mere nature of technical object, the industrial product can also simply be ignored, excluded from the outset from the debate on art and relegated to the

world without a soul of usefulness; as Gilbert Simondon observes, the technical object does not earn citizenship in the sphere of meaning insofar as it is considered to belong to a *lower level* of the world of things³. The emerging technical world is a new nature that starts to dominate man, able to inspire fascination and fear in those observing it, generated by a growing dawn of civilisation or merely by the blind, anonymous mechanisms of economic profit. A particular tendency is seen to assign the industrial object, and the whole of the new world of the artificial, a series of negativities: discordances and aporia, the reflection of a society that, struggling to keep pace with the repeated upheaval caused by industrialisation, for the first time ever looks at its products as though observing them from the outside.

In the pre-industrial world, the things that surrounded man were the result of a very slow historical evolution; the new industrial products appear to precipitate into the life of man from an unknown dimension. It is onto technical objects in particular – with the most experimental nature – that somewhat unsettling, yet appealing categories are projected; qualities that are almost supernatural, once upon a time assigned to magical objects only⁴.

In his 1884 meteorology conferences, John Ruskin had described the *storm-clouds* and *plague winds* of his times that he claimed had never been seen before, against which he juxtaposes the beneficial time of the pre-industrial age. Ruskin looks suspiciously on the same phenomena of nature, altered by the advent of the industrial age⁵. But it is the same suspicion that starts to hover over the whole of the new artificial world, the result of productive automatism, which will, in the next century, involve not only all the project scales but the whole of the cultural debate: from sociology to literature and from philosophy to the criticism of art. In this context, the culture of design prepares the instruments by which to give itself its own statute, to find a sense and collocation for its operations.

> The critique of the object

The ideal trial to be conducted on the industrial object puts a steel handle or plastic vase, a decorated chair or disposable packaging, an electric razor or neon bulb in the docks... deeming them to be tangible clues of a crime against art or the soul, against ecology or civilisation, taste or imagination. Forgetting, however, that even where evidence is crushing (and the *corpus delicti* exists by definition), the figure of the *crime* is often not correctly identified.

The declared aim of this essay is to find interpretative keys for some phenomena of contemporary design, starting out from a critique that in various aspects has been focussed on the industrial object. Substantiating the negativity of the modern object is a route that works backwards to understand what it is of the contemporary object that attracts us and why; and it is a way by which to imagine a new statute for design, starting out from the objects themselves rather than from clichés that sometimes risk only embalming the debate.

The universal dissemination of neutral, grey, cold products has, with the Modern Movement, been an expression of the desire to make an encoded quality accessible to everyone. The idea of a Modernity of harmonic propagation coincides with a vision that progressively extends the rationalisation of the factory and work to the whole of society. But an undeniably *hard* connotation goes hand-in-hand with the notion of industrial design: the object that comes from the factory, in common imagery, which has not yet been extinguished, is substantially thorny, made of steel, exact but arid, the result of impersonal machines.

The object is fatally accused, also because the same Modernity has introduced new values: the dynamics, performance, lightness, speed and sensitivity, all qualities that are exactly opposite the traditional inertia of things. Moreover, as Paolo Virno observes, in multiple moments of the culture, against the material and in favour of the immaterial, insofar

as spiritual, the most diverse concepts have been expressed. We need merely consider the Catholic tradition and its distancing from things and even from the body as a material that cages the soul. In general, *reification* has been subjected to furious denigration by the most varied schools of thought, with the basis that “what really counts in the experience of the human animal is invisible, intangible and interior”⁶.

The history of design, as a product of the machine, is no exception to these classifications: objects always incur the risk of being in themselves looked upon with suspicion by culture, on the basis of prejudice of their juxtaposition against the superiority of the spiritual dimension. It is the design idea to instead represent the matrix and essence of the object. An irremediable divergence puts the pure “liberality” of the artist-designer and the pure “mechanics” of the factory system face-to-face; on the one hand, the designer as demiurge creator of the immaterial matrix and on the other, the factory that reproduces thoughts in a mould⁷.

Moreover, we should not forget how industrial production will introduce the universal category of *goods* and design will often be identified with this dimension of the object, usually considered as the lowest level in the hierarchy of things. The same category of the spiritual, according to Ernesto Francalanci, to whom a great many cutting-edge historians and contemporary artists continue to refer, leads us to assume an “irreconcilable relationship between the material and immaterial and the persistence of a conception of a resistant, opaque, deaf and incomplete atomic world, to which a sense and a purpose is given through a thought that cultivates the sacred and symbolic”⁸.

This essay attempts to observe the contemporary trends of design, starting from the historic debate on the world of industrial objects; but specifically focussing on the profound review of the statute of the objects, transversal to all scales, which in the 1960s began investing the design culture: it is this latter we intend define as the *object on trial*. It is with post-modernity, in fact, that some movements and protagonists appear

to be able to understand the *charges* in a circumscribed manner, but above all start out from these to respond with a new design energy to prejudices that risk halting the evolution of design.

So why this reflection today? The cultural and technological conditions prepare us to grasp some of the most interesting fruits of the critique in question, probably because sufficient time has passed to allow for a prospective gaze; the undeniable vitality that characterises the design culture also drives us to better interpret what was the *metamorphosis of the object* in relation to both technological innovation and the new paradigms of science and art in the post-industrial era.

More specifically, however, we believe it is time to usefully rethink the current phase with reference to that critical work that saw the cutting-edge aspects of the 1960s and 1970s put new ideas and experiments out on the field that, only later was it understood, had grasped far more than their actual target. The utopia and apparent extravagances of movements born in very different contexts - like Metabolism in Japan, the Archigrams in England, Archizoom and Superstudio in Italy, the situationist groups like Haus-Rucker-Co., Coop Himmelb(l)au, UFO - we can today see them in a very different way: as prefigurations on the future of the project that needed time to mature and a *different technological level* in order to take on a proper meaning.

These cutting-edge figures raised original questions, opening up to unprecedented visions; above all, however, they proposed a *new object* for design: at times enigmatic and unhinged from theoretical assumptions but in any case an attempt to find a response to the crisis that risked wiping out a further evolution of the modern object. New Italian Design – with the phenomena of Alchymia, Memphis, the subsequent foundation of the Domus Academy and the confluence of very different designers – was to start out again from this basis towards the late 1970s, offering concrete answers and a new front of objects launched beyond the crisis. Its driving force does not stem from a disciplinary revolution limited to

the production of industrial objects, but rather from the renewed manner of interpreting both architecture and town planning and the canonic instruments of design; that is to say, New Italian Design would not have existed without the fully-fledged attack launched by the radicals on the aporias, the limits, the very *solid* nature of the object and all its scales⁹.

> A trial scenario

In talking about his travels in Yemen, Pier Paolo Pasolini describes a country that is “crystallised in a historic mediaeval situation: with tall, narrow red houses, featuring white friezes, like in a sort of rudimentary goldsmiths, amassed amidst a smoking desert and so clear as to scratch the cornea”. But above all, he sees, amidst all this “horrible expressive presence of modernity: a leprosy of poles of light planted chaotically – cement cottages and shutters built with no sense where once upon a time there were the city walls – public buildings in a scary twentieth century Arabian style and so on”.

He then adds: And naturally my gaze *could not help but rest* on other, smaller or even very poor things: plastic objects, cans, shoes and pitiful cotton items, tinned pears (from China), transistor radios”. The italics used by Pasolini is there for a reason: his gaze could not help but rest on these tiny details; indeed, it is the attitude of the director’s eye not to be able to ignore them, he claims. “In short, I saw a coexistence of two worlds that are semantically diverse, united in a single, Babylonian expressive system”¹⁰.

We can take this situation, extracted from its contingency, as the paradigmatic scenario of the “object on trial”. Modernity raises major questions over the possibility of having an environment in which the objects of the past and present live side-by-side, the small scale integrates into the larger one, as was naturally the case in the historic city; where the artificial

has not the style of an irremediable juxtaposition against nature. Design has worked to find the most varied answers to the request for a *meaning* for the world of industrial objects; it is a discipline whose very nature has not only decided to look where others did not even think to glance, but which binds its very identity to this attention to detail and the “smaller scale”.

It has, in fact, evolved also thanks to its awareness of being a part of that world of objects generated by industry and often considered as lacking in dignity in the system of meaning and somehow wishing to redeem it; of the fact that its name, “industrial design”, contains that adjective that marks a net break between two eras and condenses problems to which it is called to the front, to answer personally.

The words of Pasolini date back to 1975. A few years earlier, in 1972, Archizoom and Superstudio had introduced – as we will see in greater detail further on – the matter of the “destruction of objects”. Their cutting-edge, somewhat enigmatic designs, the empty spaces of certain projects, would later prove to be a very clear sign. The cry of alarm launched by Pasolini in the alienating scenario of the Yemen is re-echoed, in a very different context, in the hypothesis of wiping out the object put forward by the radical groups: it brings the two *landscapes* together in a shared concern over a Modernity that is unable to express an artificial world that is not approval or frozen meaning.

> Conciliation attempts

The inadequacy of the industrial object has traditionally been assigned first and foremost to its assumed lack of a “soul”. The mechanical, more aseptic methods used by the production chain, the distance determined between man and things as compared with the artisan process, are just some of the aspects responsible for this new condition.

In the early twentieth century, Ernst Block had reported “the technical coldness” that involves every scale of man’s environment, the danger of diffused anonymity as a consequence of the vastly serial manners used in modern production. Great Art and Great Technique should, he believes, ally to make the new industrial object more appropriate and return “depth to the ornament”; there is a territory between “the chair” and “the statute” that can be explored and that goes beyond mere function or simply contemplative art¹¹.

At the same time, design is also conceived as a remedy to the aporias of the new industrial world. As Fulvio Carmagnola observes, “modern design is born, in the second half of the nineteenth century, as a corollary of humanism and it offers itself up as a sort of reformism of beauty: the good form of the industrial object constitutes the attempt to remedy the evident failings of a serial nature, but it is also a sort of metaphor for a good life. The search for a good form involves a world where the conflicts of existence are conciliated in a reconciled relationship with the objects, which become tangible signs of a happy life, lived to the full”¹².

The Bauhaus is one of the most meaningful experiences of the search for a new alliance of technological and humanistic culture, just as its closure due to the affirmation of Nazism is emblematic. In actual fact, already in the second phase of management of the school of Hannes Meyer, interest starts to prevail for the disciplines considered most politically and socially influential, like architecture and town planning. Within the Modern Movement, although the scale of the industrial product is an important focus of research, it is in any case judged as a “lesser” dimension of design.

The work and thought of Alvar Aalto have been the incarnation of a Modernism that seeks a conciliation of history and innovation, nature and the industrial world: a Modernity without fractures, aimed at harmonically settling the tension between society and the individual, toning down any dramatic element of the project. But even as early as the start of

the 1950s, Aalto had ended up expressing his doubts over the results of International Style. “Perhaps, all things considered, the international standard is unable to produce culture”, he had said in one of his conferences, thinking of “products, types, forms that are all identical, distributed throughout the earth, from Helsinki to Detroit and from Moscow to Istanbul”. Dreaming of a home just like one dreams of a car, Aalto was to say, in itself contains the seed of destruction¹³. He believes that the solution is a rationalism extended to an anthropological dimension and the research for an internationalism that in any case considers the roots of the local culture.

The school of Ulm (*Hochschule für Gestaltung*, opened in 1955), as the ideal continuation of the humanistic project of Bauhaus, will go beyond its set-up still partly linked to the technologies of craftsmanship and will this time put the industrial product right at the heart. In seeking new routes by which to configure the world of technical objects, the Ulmians for many instrumental goods obtain an image that was and remains the unaltered matrix of certain types: from the razor to numerous machines for work, from the folding chair for entertainment rooms to the train, from the hydraulic connection for gardening to the telephone and from the airport seat to the car dashboard. Ulm is therefore a model that is still very much alive and present today, if we consider the reality of instrumental goods both for production and communication.

But the vaster attempt at conciliating industry and culture, made with great civil and spiritual strength by Ulm, waivers when faced with the charge that in 1968 very much involves the project too. The “dream of a world of goods ordered in a rational manner” as Stanislaus von Moos called it, fails to take hold in the newborn post-modern society that now hybrids different cultures and languages and is therefore interested in new qualities and values of objects. The fact that the culture of design could not be identified with the obsession for technical-formal precision, is expressed strongly by Ettore Sottsass: “My dismay – he writes in 1962