

Soft Design for Mushy Thought

We're forced to conform to the machines that are supposed to free us, and "rage against" is never on the menu of options.

BY GERMAINE KOH

We are living at a moment when the definition of things is open for negotiation, and design is after all a 'thing' open to definition. . . . Technology is allowing and in some sense demanding and promoting an embedded intelligence beneath the surface of our work. More and more, software carries the burden of expertise, liberating our energies for more ambitious objectives. The integration of intelligence promises and insists on the redefinition of work and design itself. —Bruce Mau, *Life Style*

[F]ormless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. . . . On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing, and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.—Georges Bataille, "Informe" in *Le dictionnaire critique*

Today, design permeates contemporary consciousness to an unprecedented extent, so much so that we now understand every aspect of daily life to have been engineered by design in order to advance some synthetic lifestyle, confirming the continued unfolding of our society as spectacle. In this age, in which we believe that all elements of our lived environment must contribute to an integrated image of ourselves as seamlessly packaged for performance, clothing advertises its functionality and electronic devices are essential accessories. I would argue that many of the personal props designed for "smart" contemporary lifestyles—pagers, PalmPilots, PlayStations, and such—are making us dumber, while pretending the opposite. Their

obliging contours and oversimplified instrumentality wish to signal that our energies are freed up to focus on "more ambitious objectives", but ultimately, this soft design is both ideological vehicle and apology for inarticulate thought.

These seemingly smart objects have actually evolved a lack of functionality. They are so highly specialized that users are left with fewer options for independent action or creativity. Agency and intellect are sapped from us by our faith in the instruments required to navigate the contemporary world. Personal organizers may be efficient in terms of data storage, but with a dual loss—of our own ability to think tasks through and of the information which doesn't conform to their programs. We are forced to check our independent thought in favour of a restricted menu of options and modified behaviours—a circumscribed interactivity.

Devices are now marketed which look like a cross between digital organizer, pager, and global-positioning sensor but which serve only to provide entertainment and tourist information for "destination" cities. These props undoubtedly fulfil the task of signalling a wirelessly informed way of life, yet they also forfeit a wider range of possibilities and lines of enquiry. Even the "full-function" relatives of such toys force their users to engage with them in very proscribed ways. Certain handheld computers, for example, even demand that one adopt a new script in order to enter data. Surely this is neither liberating nor empowering.

The physical counterpart to the limited programming of such gadgets is their softly "ergonomic" design, which invariably intends to signal their readiness to be fully integrated into users' lifestyles. At the same time, the apparent complexity and multiplicity of today's design is often the ideological outward face of a kind of non-linear despotism: these days one wouldn't dare think straight.

James Carl
 re:possession
 1991-1993
 salvaged cardboard



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Yet one could suggest that, by adapting forms to the human body, these engineered objects actually produce a limited range of motion: like the narrow range of behaviour ingrained by their programming, their amenable physical forms promote a kind of inarticulation rather than more vigorous activity. Ideologically, the apparently natural placement of keys and dials never gives one pause to consider whether the functions they represent are really so inevitable. In short, these "user-friendly" gadgets force an infantilization that is underscored by their soft and amiable bodies. Even the somewhat more open-ended physical interfaces of personal computers—machines whose functions have not yet been simplified into a single friendly task per button—recuperate the childish through their software design.⁷

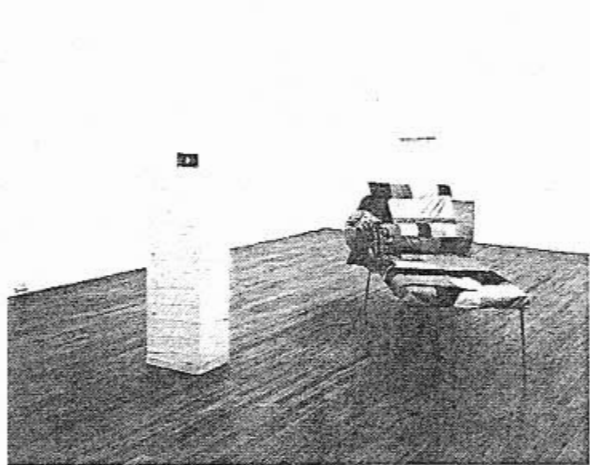
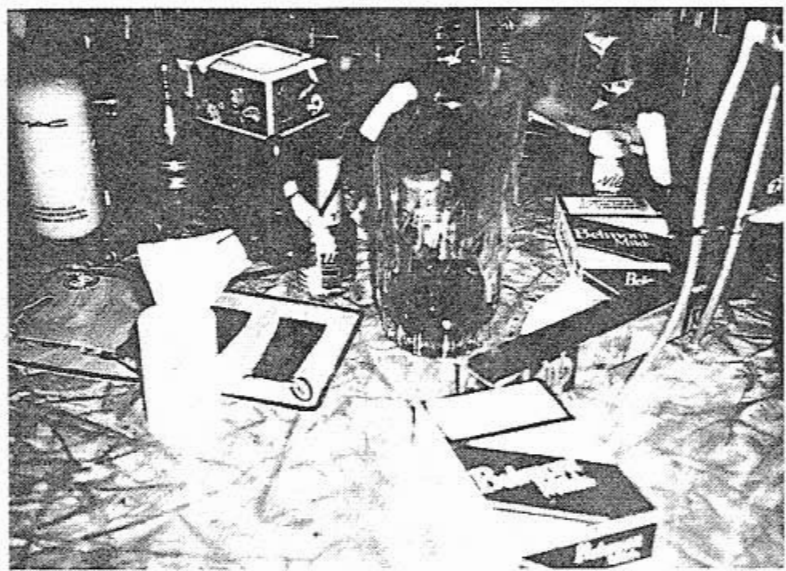
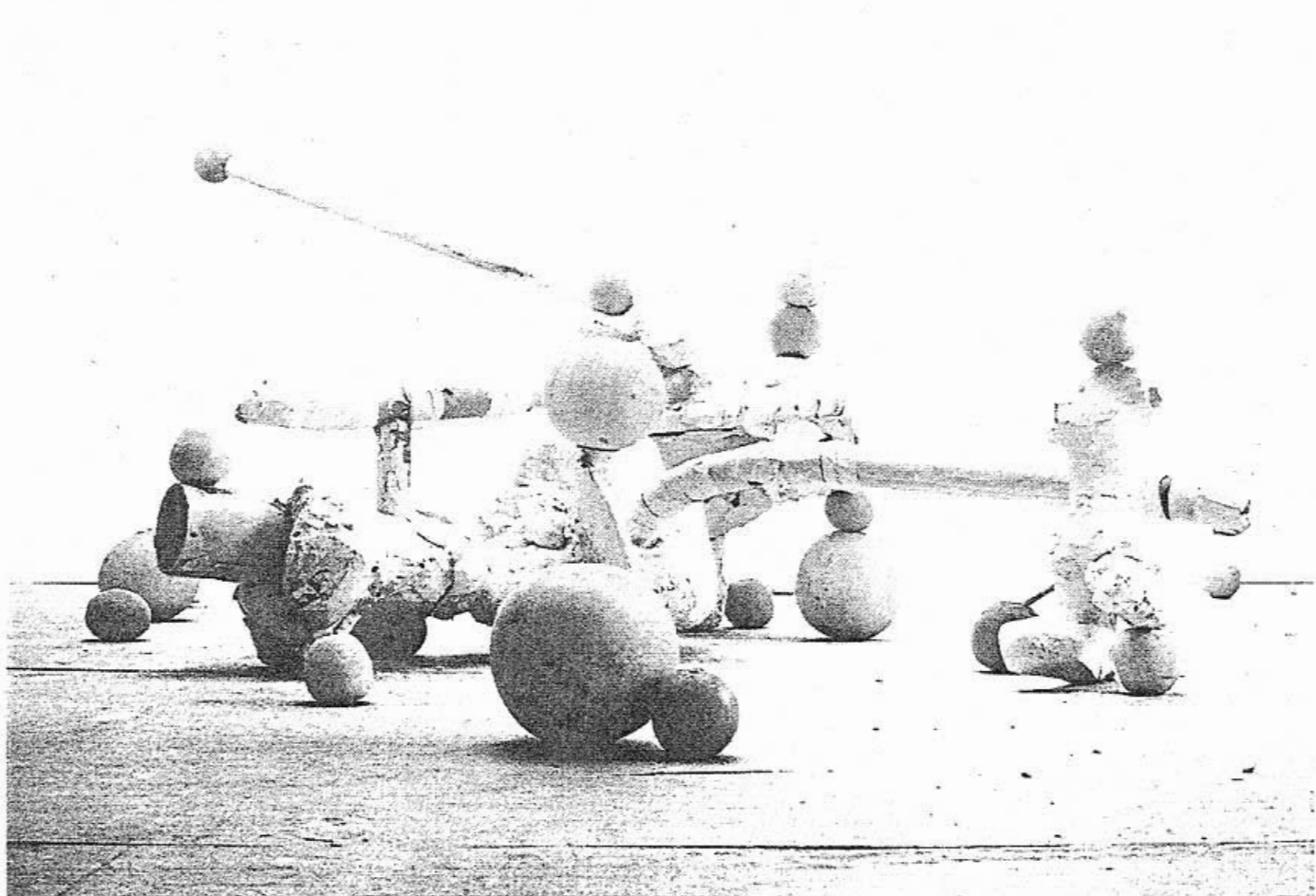
Thus the apparent functionality of these forms is ideologically misleading. We are assured that we are capable of the kind of non-linear layered thinking that is the new image of intelligence, while in fact we are losing the capacity for clarity. If we are not lulled into complacency, we are bullied into predefined functionalities, while being led to believe we are being liberated. We're forced to conform to the machines that are supposed to free us, and "rage against" is never on the menu of options.

We can compare the covert despotism of today's functional objects with, on one hand, the credo of functionality propounded by the Bauhaus and, on the other, the abject non-functioning of certain art objects. As a first coherent theory for the integration of design, work, and living, the goals of the modernist Bauhaus organization were as utopian as is

top
Hendrika Sonenberg + Chris Hanson
 Fruit Bowl (Apples, Oranges and Meisons)
 C-Print
 1998

bottom left
Damian Moppett
 Untitled
 Fuji Crystal-Archive print
 1999

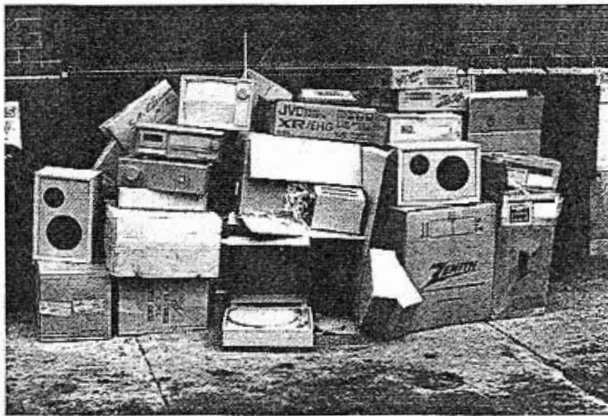
bottom right
Franz West
 Untitled (chaise lounge and moveable sculpture on pedestal)
 1994



left
Hendrika Sonnenberg + Chris Hanson
Fort #2
cotton, foam
1994



right
James Carl
unentitled
salvaged cardboard
1994



the faith now placed in design technology by so many. Both maintain a rhetoric of enablement and freedom through machinery, but the difference is in the degree of transparency envisioned. Whereas the Bauhaus aimed for a clarity of power relations through an equation of form and function, the same "embedded intelligence" designer Bruce Mau envisions for the tools of his trade wield an enormous unseen power when unleashed through the seductive interfaces of objects in the world. And with this programming power absorbed into the surface of things, is there any real hope for liberation through design?

Georges Bataille's classic antidefinition of the *informe* (formless) might also hint at a counterproposal for interactivity, one concerned less with styling than with a more direct reckoning with stuff in the world. "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks," began Bataille. "Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form." So, "affirming that the universe resembles nothing, and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." No pretense at tenderness here, only a stubbornly tangible proposition. A spider. Or spit. The options in Bataille's metaphor are thoroughly incommensurate, provoking a crude and unexplained collision of mind and matter. Perhaps this can serve as an imaginative model for a messier and more active engagement with things.

While the apparent gentleness of today's hyperdesigned gadgets entails, I contend, an increasing inability to formulate coherent independent action, the formlessness of certain artistic propositions derived from a precision of thought and embodied a social position of resistance to authority. I'm thinking, for example, of Lygia Clark's pliant objects, crafted as therapeutic tools, which promoted interaction through their manipulation. Mike Kelley has pointed out that his use of stuffed toys and craft techniques, usually interpreted in terms of trauma and abjection, were actually "about class aesthetics, and formal things that were going on and things about categorization."⁴ In other words, his formless materials were the working matter for a formal

intelligence making sense of the world. Even Robert Morris's scatter works, far from being the expression of authority that Minimalism is sometimes accused of being, were truculently anarchic and devastatingly open-ended.

There are also some art objects being produced today that might appear resolutely stupid, but whose failures to function actually, I think, force their users to be smarter, by refusing to have us check our independent thought, by stimulating rather than foreclosing enquiry. James Carl's cardboard replicas of consumer objects blankly turn the desire for machine solutions back upon itself. The impoverished stage sets of domestic detritus constructed and photographed by Damian Moppett or the lumpen vignettes by Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg are alternative visions of interior design. They appear as plausible models for some kind of lifestyle, but a rather artless one, one without designs. Or, contrast Charles Long's slick industrial forms for listening to Stereolab with Franz West's curious plastered-and-bandaged objects of indeterminate purpose. Long's accommodating blobby listening-consoles may be appropriate for the ambient character of Stereolab's music, and this is exactly the issue: the entire experience is proscribed, easy. On the other hand, the ambiguity of West's objects—perhaps accessories, perhaps implements, and certainly open—charges our encounter with them with an unsettling responsibility for assigning them purpose. Instead of embodying some ineffable "embedded intelligence", West's provocative objects require the actual application of active intellect in handling them.

In attempts to define the role of design, it has never been a metaphysical question about the nature of the world, but rather a political one about how everyday life is shaped. At issue now is who is in control of the lifestyles for which we are equipping ourselves. At stake is the need to preserve the immediacy of do-it-yourself artlessness in the face of seamlessly programmed instruments. What we need are fewer overprocessed toys, and more earthworms to squash. We need less style in our lives, and more stubborn stuff.

Germaine Koh would like to thank Christina Ritchie, Jenifer Papararo and Rosemary Heather for their comments.

NOTES

1. Bruce Mau, "What will be.com of us?", *Life Style* (London: Phaidon, 2000), p. 578.

2. Button-based graphical interfaces and operating systems with cutely (and redundantly) named parts like "Chooser" and "Launcher", or which always emphasize the comforts of home (as in "My Computer," or "My Documents"), presuppose that we are incapable of relating to anything not wrapped in the security of the familiar. This argument intersects with the battle between computer operating systems, with Linux/UNIX proponents championing their systems for the control they leave in the hands of users, as opposed to the resource-wasting and controlling Macintosh and Windows systems.

3. Georges Bataille, "Informe" in *Le dictionnaire critique* (*Documents 7*: December 1929). Translation from Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *L'informe mode d'emploi* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996).

4. Mike Kelley cited in an interview with Dennis Cooper, "Trauma Club", *Artforum*, October 2000, p. 126.

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