

Listeria

Justin Beal

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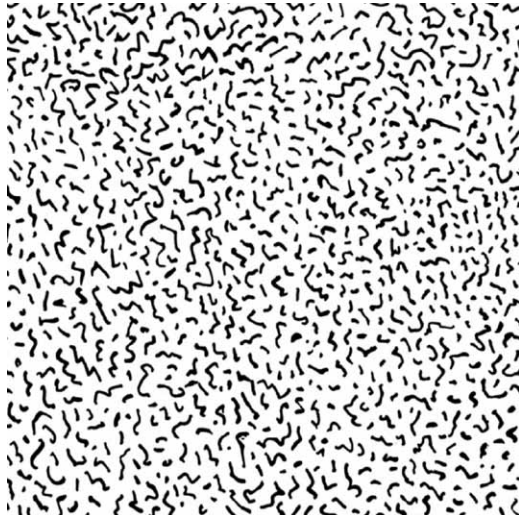
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Justin Beal in Conversation with Matthew Schum

May 2013



Ettore Sottsass, *Bacterio*, 1978

Matthew Schum: Let's begin with the Title of this show, *Listeria*. Tell me about your research into the food-born bacteria and its relationship to cantaloupe.

Justin Beal: Last year I made a series of cast aluminum cucumbers and cantaloupes. Both fruits had appeared in my work before. I suppose it is inevitable when approaching fruit as a surrogate for the body that you end up with two forms that have such an exaggerated metonymic and sexualized relationship to the human body. What had not occurred to me is how closely cantaloupes and cucumbers are related. I did not put that together until two outbreaks of *Listeria* occurred around the same time—one in Colorado came from contaminated cantaloupes and another in Germany resulted from contaminated cucumbers.

MS: There is also a connection in the title to Memphis, the architects and designers that grouped together in Milan beginning in 1981?

Yes, When I first began looking at Memphis, I wrote a piece for *Dot, Dot, Dot Magazine* about Memphis laminates. A lot of these patterns were appropriated from industrially designed materials, early computer graphics and scientific images of microorganisms. In fact the only Memphis laminate that is still in

production today is called *Bacterio*. At the time, I appropriated a pattern called *Lamiera*, named after the Italian word for sheet metal, and that pattern was incorporated into some sculptures I made—the similarity of the word listeria to lamiera interested me. *Listeria*, the bacteria, was named for Joseph Lister, a pioneer of antiseptic surgery who first introduced the idea of sterilizing surgical instruments to prevent infection.

Disease often comes up in my thinking about my work. I have written about Paul Rudolph, the American architect who died of mesothelioma caused by exposure to asbestos—an unrecognized toxin in a number of materials he experimented with throughout his career. The material he worked with literally killed him. This story exists in art history as well, of course, Eva Hesse being the most prominent example. It strikes me that this idea of exposure is deeply engrained in the mythology of the American architect, which I would argue is among the most mythologized of professions in this country. You and I spoke before about Peter Greenaway's 1987 film *The Belly of an Architect*. The protagonist of that film, Stourmley Kracklite, embodies the standard mythical attributes of the American architect in particular: delusions of grandeur undermined by perpetual dissatisfaction and

disfranchisement, very much in the mold of Ayn Rand's Howard Roark. Kracklite is saddled with a crippling obsession with his own deterioration. He is obsessed with the impermanence of his body and the failure of his organs, including his impotence and the potential of being poisoned. In the end, his paranoia accelerates his decomposition. Greenaway's story is allegorical, contrasting the permanence of architecture to the limitations of the corporeal. One of the first video pieces I ever made was appropriated footage of a scene where Kracklite counts out the length of his own intestine by measuring surgical tubing between his nose and his outstretched arm. To answer your question in short, I was very taken by the notion that entropy, disease and sexuality were the antitheses of architecture.

MS: I want to set-up the other side of your video. The centerpiece is a fruit dish, made for Memphis in 1982 by Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007) called *Murmansk*. Sottsass sought a visual language that could not be reduced to postwar Modernism. A variety of results followed, some were brash and ultramodern, some understated and immediate classics.

I can see why the *Murmansk* dish attracted you. It resembles earlier modern experiments that served

as diagrams for things that could be reproduced at seemingly any size—I am thinking here of Malevich's square compositions influenced by aerial photography or even Mondrian's late work influenced by Manhattan's urban grid. Similarly, *Murmansk* could hold its own almost anywhere, I suppose, whether it was built into a mountainside, placed on a Fritz Lang movie set or remade as a gift shop keychain.

Scale as a bodily component whose dimensions were discussed as microscopic above, but here relate to architecture and patterning with Memphis, I'd like to know how scale was rethought as design by Sottsass, in your opinion? Varying registers of scale are interchangeable in Memphis and in your artwork. For me the principle of scale as it can be detected and therefore remade as image was the entry point into the work for *Listeria*.

JB: As you are pointing to, this is a place where scale may become plastic. When you consider furniture that exists within a modernist history, but in opposition to functionalism, you move into a grey area where sculpture and furniture can co-exist, where the dialectic collapses. That idea has always been interesting terrain to me; a space where material is used deviously, structure is concealed, function follows



Untitled (Cucumber and Cantaloupes), 2012
Cast aluminum with nickel plating
20.5" x 12.5" x 5.5", 25.5" x 15" x 11" and 29.5" x 9" x 5.5"

form, and humor and poor taste win out over the gravitas commonly associated with modern design.

I first became interested in Memphis through Ettore Sottsass' *Superbox* prototypes for Poltronova from the early sixties before founding Memphis. These are large monolithic cabinets that appear functionless at first, like oversized decorated boxes, but are in fact cabinets with concealed hinges that refuse any indication of what function they might serve, or even how they might be deployed in a domestic environment. Scale in the case of the *Superboxes* is very hard to discern and because of that they propose something complicated. In this case a piece of furniture, a cabinet, forces a new read that undermines any straightforward interpretation of its function. This is a marked departure from the overt utilitarian aesthetic of functionalist design wherein the function is immediately legible.

This is what postmodern architecture tried to do: to obfuscate function, to refer to something outside of itself, to physically construct metaphor or contradiction. The fact remained, though, that it could never really work because a building is always a building first. You cannot make a truly abstract architecture. Buildings are bound by the literalness of

their function. However, back to your question about scale, an object can float somewhere between sculpture and furniture, between use value and artistic value and that idea informs a lot of the decisions I make in my own work.

It is hard to read a lot of Memphis work as furniture because its function is not obvious at first sight. I think that ambiguity is why their work has remained so relevant. The balance of form and function that is taken for granted as the aesthetic grammar of modernist design is totally upended. Use value is often concealed beneath a veneer of patterns and colors.

The *Murmansk* dish has an intentionally ambiguous use-value. It overreaches what is required of a fruit dish. It is both a sculpture and a domestic object. You are right about its scale when you say it feels monumental, which in a functionalist ethic that is ultimately quite puritanical and rather inappropriate for a fruit dish. It also disobeys the rules of mass-production in a way because it was designed with the intention of industrial production, but circulates in the more reified realm of fine art or high design. The piece in the video is the 271st dish to be produced.

MS: One other remark on scale, the remote port

city of Murmansk, Russia seems to be an example of an artist using a title that serves the purpose of distanciation. With that in mind, let's talk about the cantaloupes in the video in which you set *Murmansk* spinning. Placing fruit on the dish creates a contrast that stands in for the human figure, as far as I understand it. This contrast relates to general themes about the body and its sterilization as a representation found in images throughout art history, I believe.

JB: Well, yes, in the most general sense organic elements are often present in my work as stand-ins for the body. The fruits or vegetables function as surrogates for the occupant of the built environment, adding a sense of specificity and duration to works. These, again, are intended to address the notion of inevitable entropy and separateness that underlies any human interaction with architecture as well as Modernism's own inevitable failure to incorporate the human body in its plans. The inclusion of organic objects as stand-ins for the human follows naturally from a standard critique of modern design's denial of the human need to eat, digest, shit, etc.

The fruit is to the sculpture as the human is to the building. The corporeal is always at odds with the architectural. Buildings are inherently repressive,



Untitled (Orange Table), 2008
Sheetrock, aluminum, glass and oranges
27" x 20" x 20"

restrictive or disciplinary structures whereas people have very expressive unpredictable bodies. There is a lot of repression in my work, but there always needs to be an expressive element pushing back against that repression, whether that happens literally or thematically.

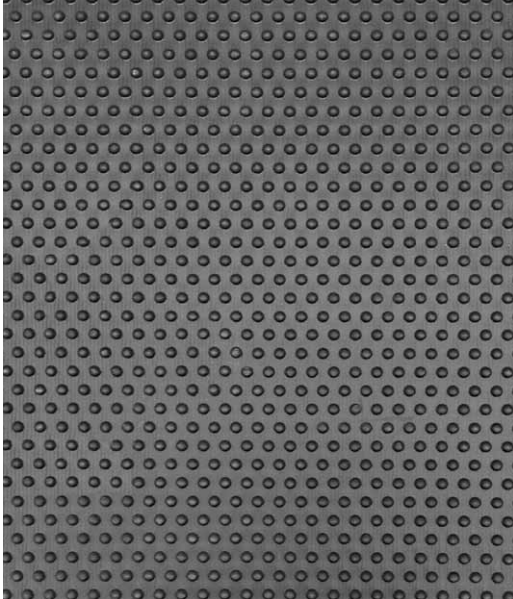
MS: We're dealing with awful stuff like potentially lethal strains of bacteria and the industrial design component would seem to play a disinfectant role. This is its heroic side. Yet visuals like the ones you appropriate from Memphis do their artistic work as imprints of innocuous little biomorphic patterns.

JB: Yes, they get pulled into a system and sterilized even while still referring to something outside of that system. These patterns represent entropy in a very antiseptic way. I suppose this is another example of the image taking precedence over form. I was in an airplane bathroom recently and the plastic laminate on the walls had a pattern that looked exactly like microscopic images of Listeria I had been looking at (something like the patterns on the inside of a security envelope). It is hard to imagine a more over-sanitized space than an airplane bathroom. There is a lot of writing about Modernist architecture that talks about the psychosexual charge of the white wall

(Mark Wigley's book, *White Walls, Designer Dresses* in particular), making the case that through its rejection of desire it paradoxically becomes sexualized. There is a similar sexual charge to the sterility of the plasticized and rubberized surfaces.

The rubber I am using in this show has a simple knob-top pattern that used to be manufactured by a small rubber company in Akron, Ohio. This spring, a big company bought that small company and they stopped production on this specific product. I bought the remaining back stock. So I now have this material that is no longer in circulation, but has a history as an obsolete industrial product. It is both generic and highly specific.

I suppose industrial design has a disinfectant relationship to everything, even more so than architecture. Every step in the process of taking a product from design to market has a sterilizing effect. I find that progression both fascinating and repulsive. It is such a tight set of constraints. Yet, it is also a system in which any anomaly has profound resonance. I think this may explain why I often produce work serially: I want to try to establish a set of parameters that allow for inconsistencies to emerge over multiple iterations.



Beal Knob-Top, 2013
Nitrile sheet rubber
Dimensions variable

This is where our previous discussion of the aleatory comes up again. Clearly, I borrow materials and references from architecture and design. I also, though, create systems where breakdowns persist in the governing logic of the material or the subject matter. For example, the plaster cast around cucumbers ensures that form governs the overall geometry and yet the organic quality of the cucumbers outlines the shape that the plaster takes. In the cast rubber pieces, the rubber expands and destroys the plaster mold every time. The result is that a unique form is required for each pour. Inevitably, the material influences the process. In the most recent series of work made with clear urethane rubber painted over polyethylene and clear mirror, the elastic recovery of the polyethylene stretched around the mirror defines the texture of the substrate. When the clear urethane rubber is painted on top of the substrate and mirror, it pools and collects in patterns that have as much to do with the dynamics of the material as the intentionality of the gesture.

MS: From gesture let's turn to morphology as it relates to motion in your recent work. What led you to the revolving fruit dish?

JB: I wanted to approach this video in a sculptural way.

This piece is not a narrative video. It is a document of a durational sculpture, without beginning, middle or end. It is filmed on a 64-gigabit tablet and shot in a single take until it uses the entire memory of the device, just under four hours in this case. I am interacting with the sculpture to varying degrees throughout that time. The viewer is not intended to watch the video in its entirety. It is just a different way of looking at an object. The rotation allows for that looking to happen in a more complex way than it might in a fixed frame image or sequence. There is also something about the *Murmansk* dish that lends itself to the rotating format. With its six-sided radial symmetry, it has no front or back.

In a studio visit you brought up the connection between the wrapping action used in the construction of the wrapped plastic pieces and the rotation in the video. That coincidence was not intentional on my part, but I think it relates to the use of wrapping. The wrapped works have a compressive energy built into them, as the accumulated centripetal force of me wrapping the panel. The polyethylene shrink-wrap holds the pieces together. There is captive energy in there. The rotation here is different, more like an unwinding.

MS: For me, Duchamp's "Rotoreliefs" spun on a phonograph came to mind. These allowed the readymade to blend with appropriated language as moving image. Did you have references in mind while you were making the video?

JB: I built the turntable for the video. It is meant to be a sculptural object in its own right, both an instrument of display and a tool for making the durational sculpture or video. It is a support for the object, not the other way around. In other words, the fruit dish is the readymade, though I think of it less in relationship to a readymade and more as a way of reframing the view of an object that is already loaded with a set of cultural associations. The melons are also readymades, in a way. I was thinking of the way the lemon functioned as a readymade in Hollis Frampton's film *Lemon* (1969) versus the more referential objects in Rodney Graham's *Torqued Chandelier* (2005) and *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8* (2003). There is also Simon Martin's remarkable film *Carlton* (2006) about a different piece of Memphis furniture. I would consider all of these films to have a sculptural approach to time-based media.

Selected works



Untitled (Pomegranate Chair), 2007
Powder-coated steel and pomegranate
26" x 18" x 18"

Lamiera, 2008
Aluminum and paper
42" x 12" x 12"



Homecrest, 2010
Steel, concrete, plaster and enamel
76" x 26" x 18"



Hot House, 2011
Plaster, cucumbers and aluminum
80" x 8" x 8"





Untitled (Middle Pole), 2012
Cast urethane rubber
65" x 49" x 4"



Untitled (Clear Mirror), 2013
Mirror, polyethylene and clear urethane rubber
64" x 48"



Untitled (White Shelf), 2011
Mirror, aluminum, plexiglas, polyethylene and enamel
48" x 36" x 4"



Untitled (Cucumber and Cantaloupes), 2012
Cast aluminum with nickel plating
21" x 16" x 12"

Joanna Fiduccia

Love From Ettore



Ettore Sottsass, *Murmansk*, 1982

Murmansk is a Soviet light cruiser: 17,000 tons of corroding warship, sold for scrap and then stranded off the coast of Norway. Murmansk is a Russian port city: the largest on the arctic coast, presided over by a 116-foot-tall concrete soldier. Murmansk is also a fruit dish, held aloft by six tubular legs crimped like a scissor-lift: cold, implacable, silver. Designed in 1982, six months after Ettore Sottsass and the other members of Memphis made their debut, Murmansk seems to turn away from the radically provisional furniture and the swaggering merchandizing of that first exhibition. Sottsass's fruit dish funnels the ancient *tazza* through industrial pipelines and automobile chrome, through Brancusi's gleaming bronzes and Man Ray's silver chess pieces, through Chaplin's and Warhol's factories. Yet it appears to end up where it started: as a luxury product made in spite of, or even against, Memphis itself.

Produced by the Vicenza-based silversmith Rossi e Arcandi, *Murmansk* was one of several Memphis silvers released that year. While the group's first exhibition included lamps and ceramics among the furniture pieces, the bourgeois appurtenances of their sophomore effort made those initial items

looks positively utilitarian. Peter Shire designed a teapot, Daniela Puppa and Nathalie du Pasquier, a pair of serving trays, Andrea Branzi, a cone-shaped sauceboat cradled in a silver twig. All the designers gave their works northerly names: Anchorage, Reykjavik, Labrador—polar zones for frigid material. These were remote cities, far from the industrial terms and communicative networks sought out by the group. For Memphis, wrote Barbara Radice in their 1984 monograph-manifesto, “an object exists as a system of signs, as a catalyst of emotions, as a representation of a cultural state... as an active presence, a reassuring wink—in other words, as an instrument of communication.”¹ What could be further from that than these capitals of an arctic frontier? Geographically and imaginatively remote, the silvers’ titles suggested not communicative agents or emotional catalysts, but exiles from a Victorian silver service, gleaming mutely in the rarefied Nordic air. For certain thinkers, however, up north in the cold was exactly where to find the most potent communication. In his “Essay on the Seasonal Variations of Eskimo Societies,” Marcel Mauss observed, “The winter settlement lives, so to speak, in a continual state of religious exaltation... In short, it is possible to imagine the whole winter life to be a sort of long festival.”²

1. Barbara Radice, *Memphis: Research, Experiments, Results, Failures, and Successes of New Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 143.

2. Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos. Étude de morphologie sociale” (in collaboration with H. Beuchat), *L’Année sociologique* 1904-1905 (Paris, 1906), 99-100.



Left: Ettore Sottsass, *Alaska*, 1982

Right: Andrea Branzi, *Labrador*, 1982

Mauss's research inspired a young Roger Caillois to see in this festival, a model for an ecstatic community that suspends the rule of economics and law—a true collective brotherhood. In a couple essays delivered in the late 1930s at the College of Sociology, a radical group of another stripe, Caillois noted with concern that the winterly collective debauch had given way to a modern perversion: the festival had been replaced by the vacation.³ Vacation, however, promised but an individualized escape that would only deepen social dissipation, and further obstruct the formation of radical collectivity. France had just passed into law the first paid vacations under the Matignon Agreements, and for Caillois, all seemed just about lost. Instead of the alternation between control and chaos that once governed human society—a rhythm that could respond and periodically dislodge the power of the state—he saw the machinery of capitalism replacing that potential with those little suspensions called *les vacances*, as politically empty as the word in its singular form. Without festival, the modern radical community would have to invent its own winters, occupying themselves with occult activities, or anxiously awaiting the terrible intensity of wartime as capitalism and fascism advanced in lockstep. (Their advance, incidentally, put Murmansk on the map, as it became

3. See Roger Caillois, "Festival" and "The Winter Wind," in *The College of Sociology (1937-1939)*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 279-303, 32-42. After the war, Caillois revised the 1940 text of "Festival" to include a grimmer conclusion: the counterpart to festival was not vacation, it was war.

the endpoint of the "Murmansk Run" arctic convoy, a notoriously treacherous route used by Allied forces to supply the Soviets). Yet when the war came, Caillois took his own vacation to Argentina. His trip outlasted the war.

If Caillois and the College's sacred sociology seems impossibly far from the desacralized design of Memphis, both groups nonetheless sought something similar: a communion—among people or objects—that would never come from anything clean, functional, complete, or harmonious. "Communication—true communication," writes Radice again, "is not simply the transmission of information (which in the case of a 'product' is always unilateral, from the product to the consumer). Communication always calls for an exchange of fluids and tensions, for a provocation, and a challenge."⁴ The aggressively aphonic patterns and impudent arbitrariness of Memphis design provided the challenge. The silvers were a limit case: luxury products, clean and cold, but surcharged with associations: an artisan (craft) production resembling the specialized (industrial) production of high-end design, mediated by basic industrial forms. On the bottom of Murmansk, Sottsass inscribed a final

4. Radice, *op. cit.*, 186.

complication: AMORE ETTORE SOTTASS. Now the dish would also be a token of affection, a love letter.

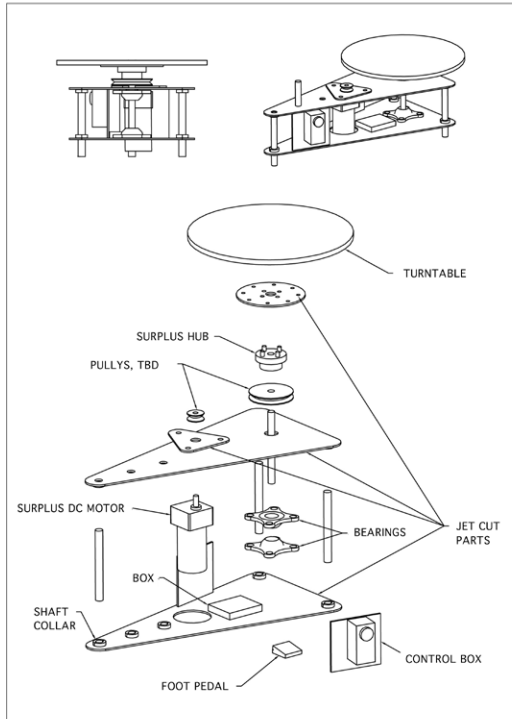
Twenty years later, Sottsass produced a second series of silvers for the gallery Paola Curti/Annamaria Gambuzzi & Co. for an exhibition he titled “20 Argenti Grandi,” or “20 Big Silver Objects.” The gallery published a catalogue for the exhibition, a spiral-bound book alternating schematic models of the objects, each named after an Assyrian emperor, with studio photographs. A handwritten preface by the artist explains his reluctance to take on the project of producing the silvers, seeing in them the conceptual trap that correlates quality with size. This correlation, he notes, is an immemorial one. In ancient cultures, massiveness served as an attempt to reckon with “the obscurity of the unknown, the dimension of the divine,” forces today lodged in invisible corporate interests and vast economic powers.⁵ The big silvers were intended to come to terms with these powers, matching their immensity with outsized bourgeois splendor. Yet Sottsass remained uneasy with this solution—the massiveness of Murmansk in its many guises come back to haunt him—and reasoned that he might temper his silvers with a delicate oriental

5. Ettore Sottsass, *20 Argenti Grandi* (Milan: Paolo Curti, 2002), 1

gesture: a couple orchid stems, a few oranges, a cantaloupe.⁶ Fruits and flowers, the end of winter, the melting of Murmansk’s chill. But also something else. In the photographs, blazes of color lick the surface of the silvers like ecstatic northern lights, turning everything cold and rich into a riot, a fest, a jubilee.

6. Asked how he felt about encountering his designs in other people’s homes, Sottsass replied, “I feel very desperate... If I design a vase, thinking that someone will put flowers in it, what I’ve found is that nobody’s able to put the flowers in it... You have to know what you are doing with how you place the flowers inside. It’s the same with putting fruit in my fruit bowls. You can only have two oranges or whatever.” Emily Zaiden, “Instruments for Life: Conversations with Ettore Sottsass,” in *Ettore Sottsass: Architect and Designer*, ed. Ronald T. Labaco (London, New York: Merrell, 2006), 117.

Murmansk Production Notes



Components:

Murmansk Fruit Dish

Designed by Ettore Sottsass for Memphis Milano in 1982

Produced by Rossi e Arcandi silver in Vicenza

Production # 271

Variable-speed custom turntable designed and fabricated by Justin Beal and Bryan Tjomslands

Total running time: 3 hours, 52 minutes and 18 seconds

Production diagram
Bryan Tjomslands, 2012

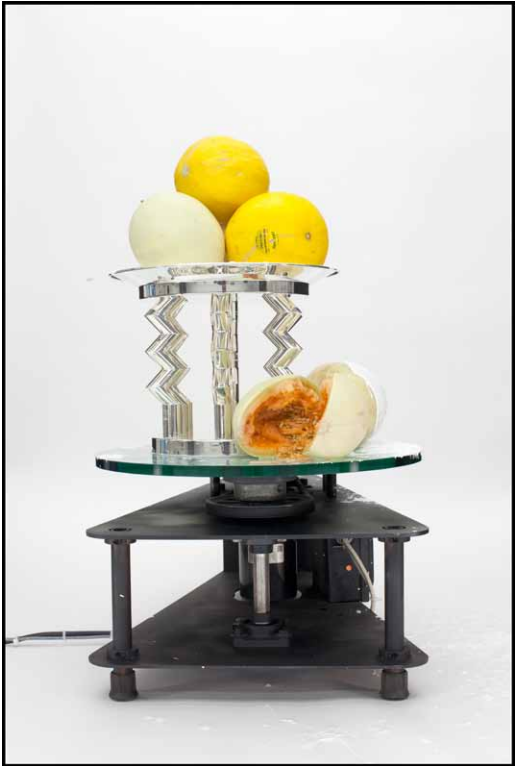
Murmansk Production Stills

Murmansk, 2013
HD Video
3:52:18

















Gaetano Pesce Interviewed by Justin Beal

Pesce Studio, September, 2010

Introduction

The landmark 1972 MoMA exhibition *The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* looms large over contemporary industrial design history. It showcased the work of young Italian designers such as Enzo Mari and Ettore Sottsass, as well as influential collaboratives including Superstudio and Archizoom. Like many so-called “landmark” exhibitions in other fields, *The New Domestic Landscape* included conspicuous oversights and sweeping generalizations, but in the most basic sense, the designers from this exhibition who still have cultural relevance, now often grouped under the vague rubric of “New Design,” each advanced strategies for dismantling the rigid structures and rules of modern functionalism. Mari’s text-based contribution to the show, for example, criticized industrial manufacturing by encouraging a return to language and the handmade, the early stages of Mari’s pedagogy of *autoprogettazione*. Sottsass’s *Superboxes* embraced decoration and destabilized the Miesian imperative of form following function, setting the stage for the influential group Memphis and the culture of postmodern design that came to define the 1980s. Superstudio and other less product-oriented

collectives introduced the notion of a counterculture to the realm of industrial design by shifting emphasis out of object manufacturing and marketing into a more theoretical realm. Gaetano Pesce (born 1939) was among the younger designers in *The New Domestic Landscape* show and was the only one to be included in the “Design as Commentary” chapter of the catalog, placed awkwardly between the two larger parenthetical groupings, “Design as Postulation” and “Counter Design as Postulation,” which contained the other thirty-one designers in the show.

Pesce’s work is most powerful not when it focuses on a broad political agenda, but rather when it reflects on the very processes and cultures that produce objects. First and foremost, Pesce’s cultural contribution is the showcasing of incoherence—a celebration of the flaws and imperfections that inevitably emerge within the manufacturing processes. The implied critique of the de-humanizing landscape of mechanical production, the alienation of the workforce that produces it, and the growing disconnection between design and production is often more poignant than the pointed political motives of specific objects. Pesce tests the limitations of mass production by constantly exploring the potential for a unique object to be produced through the channels of industrial

design, an approach he describes broadly with his neologism “aleatory design” (derived from the term “aleatoricism” for the use of chance in the production of art, more commonly associated with the Dada movement and French Surrealist writing). The results, more often than not, are series of objects that are industrially manufactured, but retain unique characteristics; the human hand remains visible and the defect becomes a generator of content. In this sense, the central idea of incoherence becomes the unifying characteristic of Pesce’s work—a consistency based on inconsistency. Declarative slogans repeat in Pesce’s writing: “repetition destroys the minds of people,” “the future is feminine,” “routine is bad for the brain,” “freedom is incoherence.” This fascination with the flaw as the creative catalyst of aleatory design emerges as the through-line of Pesce’s forty-plus years of work.



Gaetano Pesce, *Spaghetti Vase (Special L)* for Fish Design, 2007

Justin Beal: There is an idea that comes up frequently in your lectures and writings about the conflict between the feminine mind and the masculine mind. You describe the feminine mind as more open and more elastic. In an often-quoted interview with Peter Halley in *Index Magazine* you said that education teaches us to only use the rigid, totalitarian, masculine side of the brain and that innovation, therefore, will always come from the feminine side.

Gaetano Pesce: Yes. This is how I try to read what our time means. I believe that our time is represented by something liquid, in opposition to the past which was much more rigid, so the liquid being is much more feminine, the masculine is more linear more geometrical. First of all, it's not a question of man or woman, it's a question of a certain liquid brain that is able to think one way in a moment and another way in the following moment, that is the liquidity that I am talking about. Multi-disciplinary is very liquid because it allows you to be in a different way in a very short time. If I look to the history of art, I see individuals that are more or less the same for all of their life, which I think today is just not possible.

JB: Is that not also just an unfortunate part of the current market condition of the art and design world?

GP: A long time ago, a very important dealer in New York came here to see me and see if it was possible to work together and it was the guy who created Pop Art, it was Leo Castelli. I explained the way I was working. He explained the way he was working. He said to me, "I will invest in your work. I will make your work known, with a certain kind of characteristic, if you change your work." My work is never finished because I have to continue to make explanations. He asked me if I was able to maintain a certain characteristic and I said no. This is our time and we cannot be all the same. We cannot have a logo or an element through which we are recognizable.

JB: Yes, but looking around this studio, there is undeniable coherence. Is that just the coherence that inevitably emerges over time? I would argue that that emerges over time in any creative practice.

GP: You're right, there is, but it depends. Anyway, for sure, there is a certain line within my work. Also the fact that sometimes I work in fashion, sometimes I work with graphic design, sometimes with music or architecture or interior, which also leads away from homogeneity.



Gaetano Pesce, *Feltri Chair*, 1987

JB: In your own work there are continually strategies to make each object unique—you have articulated this as the idea of the “diversified series.” That approach interests me in terms of both this conversation and my own artistic practice because it opens up the space between design (as it is more conventionally considered) and the art object. Is that distinction relevant to you? Does producing design in such a way somehow make it closer to art?

GP: Let’s do this in another way. Art was always practical. If I think of Nicola Pissano, for example, he was making a statue because it was a way to represent something that the imaginations of people were not able to do. He was giving a service to people through an image. Painting for sure was a service because if you want to remember a person who was dying a portrait was the only way, the camera did not exist. Art has always had a double function, one that is really practical and eventually something cultural but that we don’t know.

Today this kind of role is more in the hands of design because what we do in terms of art is more for the elite—elites that are maybe in certain countries but part of the population of the world. Art does not exist, but design does because we use objects. So if

the question is about art as design. I don’t think I can properly answer, but the future will.

JB: Do you follow contemporary art? Or, rather, is the contemporary art world relevant to your work?

GP: I think I said in the lecture in Los Angeles I don’t go to museums. Museums of contemporary art, more or less, are all the same all over the world because the curators are not able to come up with an identity related to a place. The Museum of Modern Art in New York is the same as a museum in Strasbourg Germany or the Tate modern. It’s the same everywhere. If I am interested to know about a place I have never been before I prefer to go to a department store because it is there that I understand how people live. I think art, fortunately or unfortunately, is for a very small elite and, personally, I’m not interested in that.

JB: Does that give design the possibility of being more political than art?

GP: Sure, but art too could be very political. What design has that interests me is that there is a problem of language, a problem of material, a problem of promotion, a problem of manufacturing and



Gaetano Pesce, *Delila Chairs*, 1980

shipment. A lot of things are involved in the process of design. When you involve a place of production, like a factory where people are working, it is much more complex and complete. I am more interested in that. Also, I believe that art is still an expression related to a romantic time, a time that has been gone for a hundred years. In my opinion, really, I don't see why art is not taking care of the content of our time, which is very important.

JB: Is your implication that art, generally, is not achieving that goal because it is not reaching a wide enough audience?

GP: To represent our time we need a lot of things. What we call traditional art is not enough. Traditional art is done in a place, as you know, like a studio and if you are lucky there is a gallery that is interested. If you are lucky, from the gallery you go to a museum and the process is through. With the design piece you have to convince a boss or an owner to make something, then you have to convince the people there how to make it. After that, if there is involvement in a mold, you have to think how to make a mold, etc. So it's a much more complex process and when the process is finished you go into the world very fast and you touch a lot of people.

JB: But you have been outspoken about making a concerted effort to include all the people involved in that process in the final product. For example in the *Nobody's Perfect* series, you relinquish control to the people working in the factory to alter the final product through the process of making the object. Does delegating that responsibility then give the work some kind of political agency?

GP: Yes. I think it is very important also as a step in the evolution of the work that one day or another we have to stop asking the workers to repeat work without expression. I think, as everybody does, the workers in the factory have a lot to express and if we create the condition for them to do that, then we can create something important. I am convinced that everyone is an artist. The question is how to show it. Everybody has a capacity for expression, the question is how to put ourselves in a condition to express. As soon as we express, then we represent something: a piece of reality or a moment or something that is changing a phenomenon.

JB: A final question: You are often associated with a number of your Italian Contemporaries. I am thinking specifically with those of you who were included in the

show at MoMA in 1972, such as Enzo Mari and Ettore Sottsass, Superstudio, Archizoom, and others. During your lecture at the Hammer Museum, someone in the audience asked a question about your contemporaries and you made a comment about Ettore Sottsass specifically that I thought was interesting. You said his work is too decorative and not pushing boundaries. I always thought Sottsass's work, or more specifically his work with Memphis, actually used decoration in a pointed way to undermine the conventions of functionalist design.

GP: There was a very important collector in the United States who was collecting important works of art here during the '50s, '60s and '70s named Sydney Lewis, from Richmond Virginia. He collected Warhol, Oldenberg, Pop Art, Rauschenberg and then he was collecting my work and he was coming to visit me and slowly we became friends and one day I said, "Why don't you buy Sottsass' work, or Mendini?" and the answer was, "I cannot invest money in something that any carpenter can copy." So I think that is the right answer. They did invest in processes that are original, like me. With Memphis I don't think there is a lot of involvement in research—it's just academic. So, for that reason, I call them decorative.

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