

considerable time. As a result his designs are often made in limited editions. In this they fall into the genre of collectables, and his practice, or at least the one he most passionately pursues, is that of an artist. He has entered into design contracts with two manufacturers, Moroso and a mail-order house for mass produced commodity-based furniture, Trés Suisse. Yet the predominant issue here is the extent to which Newson's work readily, and seemingly unreflectingly falls into the category of elite design, whose primary criteria ultimately rests with canonicity and connoisseurship.

Newson speaks thoughtfully of an integrity to materials, of design as a communicating. Yet there is an unquestioning ease with which he, for example, solves a materials problem in weaving rattan, and thereby consolidates an aesthetic valency for the European or Japanese fashion world, precisely by the employment of Thai factory workers for their technical knowhow combined with cheap wages. This issue may be further discussed by looking at how Newson responded to a question I posed to him regarding the issues of internationalism and regionalism in design. I was interested to know if he perceived similar debates or moves in the field of design that one may locate in the field of architecture, concerning the oppositional practices of a late modernist internationalism or a critical regionalism, the latter being an attempt at architecture's response to the particularities of climate, culture and terrain, seemingly eroded by certain approaches to modernism.

Newson's response was interesting in that he saw design to be clearly a regional practice, rather than internationalist. He stressed the extent to which Italy dominates the world in defining the field of design and hence in setting standards and processes. He also stressed that Italy

is the most regional country he has ever encountered, and that design culture varies from one small region to another, just as it operates differently in Germany or France or Japan. I think, perhaps, one would want to debate this point, in the face of the overt internationalism of the design products from the major manufacturers, and even in attempting to account for the seeming border-crossing that Newson himself so easily achieves in his work in Europe, North America and Japan. To return to the example of the Thai rattan weavers, it would be a mistake to assume one is being critically regionalist because one employs Thai weavers to make rattan chairs, especially when Newson stressed the extent to which he had to impose his design sensibility on their understanding of making. The Thai weavers could not understand why Newson would want the underside of his chair woven, when it is not a surface readily seen or to be sat upon. This decision related more to Newson's concern with negative space, than to processes of making to be learnt from the particularity of the region of manufacture. In fact, the knowledge of making we could call here regional, or locally artisanal, was itself effaced for a standard and notion from elsewhere, indeed from

formal principles we associate with international modernist thinking.

In conclusion, I want to return to something I earlier quoted from Newson, again dealing with the locus of making and the made. Newson uses the word 'mystery' when discussing his design work, the making of more than readily meets the eye, and an object 'that can only be studied through a lot of investigation by the person that ends up having the thing'. Such an approach suggests the extent to which these objects exist beyond any simple domain of furniture; rather, they are to be thought in terms of a contemplative aesthetics. One critic from the design journal *Domus* has indicated that this suggests Newson's works have a 'moral intent... they are worthy of contemplation'. And Newson takes this seriously as well, suggesting that 'there's something I'm touching on which I can't really grasp at this point in time.'

One can see in Newson's design work, with a conscious design of interior spaces and outside appearances, a clear divide between interior and exterior. They inhabit, in a sense, different worlds.

We may think here of his signature table, POD, and the characteristics of the pod as organic form with outer shell and interior for habitation. The pod's inner lining is possibly more critical and responsive than its outer casing which we think of as resilient. There is a similar divide between different worlds in locating the locus of making and the made for Newson, divided realms of issues which themselves present contradiction. Put simply, on the one hand there is the domain of concerns Newson has in design and making, the question of integrity in materials and the play of design appearance, that play from virtual to negative space, what he

calls the mystery. And on the other hand, in its handing over to the 'owner', given the very locus of arrival of his work, it simply becomes the site or scene for cultural capital, the chic arena of designer proper names, and acculturated recognition of hallowed objects; in short, the twin characteristics of design canons and connoisseurs.

Possibly this is the path or point of destination which Newson has consciously mapped out. Crucial though, is that such a point of arrival of design itself closes off the possibility of approaching the question of design in other ways, indeed in approaching the redesign of design. And what is possibly most significant in Newson's work is that his design questions precisely this issue of other paradigms in design. The issue becomes, then, a more careful scrutiny as to who or what entity eventuates as that 'owner' he references, and in this there is presented a significant questioning of the destination of design.

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Pod Watch, 1986. Aluminium, neoprene rubber, Zeiss lens, Swiss movement. Edition of ten.

Designing the Future

TATIANA PENTES looks at two exhibitions which signal a shift in cultural focus to ecological matters.

'With everything I design I am thinking about the materials I'm using, the long-term impact they are going to have and what impact the actual production of those materials has or will have on the environment.'

Marc Newson



The EcoDesign Foundation's Entis Eidos exhibition and Bibelot's 'Eco' Original Furniture Design, both maiden exhibitions for their respective establishments, mark a concern for environmental sustainability — which has ever increasing currency in this post-industrial epoch.

In the west and the developing nations of the world, the growing consciousness of human impact on the environment, a threat to the healthy future of this planet Earth, is evidenced by shifts in government policy, entrepreneurial pursuits and now, in cultural production. When considering 'eco' design, we aren't merely defining the aesthetics of a genre or design category; we are discussing the building blocks of sustaining global life. In this context 'designing' signals something supplementary to innovative cures manifest in new technologies, and as Dr. Tony Fry espouses, design comes to mean re-designing our thinking design and practices.

Fry postulates the distinction between 'the natural' and 'the artificial' as a redundant opposition, precisely because 'the natural' is an invented category. Contrary to many populist 'green' environmentalists, he suggests that our understanding of 'the natural' is always mediated through human perception, and with regard to cultural or economic human 'needs' it is our perceptions which need to be questioned. At this point in time such desires are clearly at odds with the ecological 'needs' of the biosphere — a paradox because biospheric life means the ability of all life to survive.¹ But what of the poverty stricken, those oppressed by the scarcity of resources? In the vicious cycle of poverty people are forced into short term economic survival while long term environmental sustainability and the pursuit of its philosophy remains a bourgeois luxury.

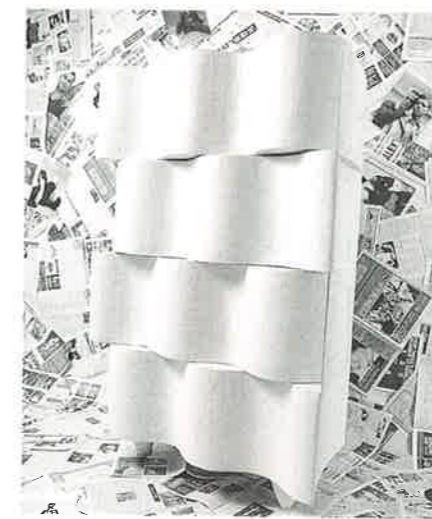
The EcoDesign Foundation's latest offering, Entis Eidos, is a collaborative Object and Image exhibition, showcasing inter-generational art, craft and design works that deal with the question of 'environmental solutions'. Dr. Tony Fry, director and co-founder of the EcoDesign Foundation and co-curator, described the exhibition as an inversion of the notion of 'exhibition' as we know it; a collaborative event between eco thinkers, artists, craftworkers and designers. The curatorial process for the event could perhaps be described as a microcosm

of the EcoDesign Foundation's fundamental operating principles of 'relational organisation - another kind of team work, a social ecology of creation...establishing different aesthetics of expressive information'. The curatorial process also confronted exhibitors with their own thinking and practices, a working through process that resonates in the works exhibited.

A hybrid of aesthetic forms, Entis Eidos crosses disciplines; the blurring of borders and the meeting of genres refutes the division between theory and practice. The unifying motif is ecological consciousness, articulated more through evocation than explanation, provoking us to consider our own selves as the inhabitants of a biospheric/technical/socio-cultural scape that is in ecological crisis.

One such provocative work, Arthur Koutoulas' *Lamp, Small*

Bowl/Container, Serving Tray, Soap Dish and Salt and Pepper Shakers, is accompanied by the text: Design, Political, Economical, Environmental, Emotional, Domestic, Aesthetic. The text sits directly beneath the horizontal linear installation of the five works sculpted from wood. Each word references the respective object, at the same time existing as unified body of poetic text. Koutoulas explains this conscious configuration as a way of constructing the interface between the objects and the viewer's gaze at eye level. This strategy, the legacy of 'billboard' advertising, here signposts objects as commodities that circulate in a market place. On a subliminal level, Koutoulas advertises the concept of ecodesign by calling attention to the way objects circulate in the economy and have value. Here we are confronted



Scott Whiteman's *Chest of Drawers* is made from water based glue, newspapers, water based tints and beeswax.

by the materials, the way in which Koutoulas forms these materials and their cultural and social significance. The work is a frank political and ideological statement about the design process, human 'needs' and the designed object's presence in our culture.

The sacred reference to Christian iconography in Seraphina Martin's piece articulates the contemporary art object as spiritually instructive and contemplative. Martin explores the use of Solar Plate etching as an alternative means of non-toxic printmaking. The icon of the sun becomes the enabling theme and the sun's energy the enabling device for the realisation of this work. Martin is 'also interested in how the contemporary human being often refers to ancient cultural icons, while our present environment is experiencing aesthetic erosion.'

Through the poetics of flight, Strange Attractor's *Air Pocket*, four installed sheath-like formations hovering above the gallery floor, look as though they might be constructed of melted down bug wings.



Kassandra Bossell and Shona Wilson as Strange Attractors, *Air Pocket*, installation of photocopied images on graf paper and tissue paper, each of four panels 1m x 2m, 1994.



ISM Objects (Celina Clarke and Simon Christopher), *Madame Ruby*, table lamp moulded from recycled plastics taken from discarded car parts. Available in clear, red or amber.



Bong Design (David Grainger and Brian Marshall), *Wave shelves*, Hoop Pine board, Tasmanian Oak veneer, coated with natural resin and lemon oil.

Strange Attractor's Cassandra Bossell and Shona Wilson have created sheaths that suggest an ambience of the sublime dream of flight, voluptuous desire, and flight of the imagination. *Air Pocket* follows their earlier projects addressing alternative energy usage—a micro-scaled wax city and a transportation invention, the *Solar Powered Bat Pack*. 'One of the initial dreams of any civilization is to fly.'² Here one can transcend the material world and the limits of human creation, to traverse a dream world of wax and ecologically responsible living. Strange Attractors add, 'The idea being to bring some of the eco-design inventions from Batmania into life-sized 3-D models, so that the achievement of ecologically sound lifestyles is brought closer to our perceived and believed reality.'

Neil Berecny's *Daffodil - The three grazers* re-invents the Polaroid battery pack, that has become waste, into the frames for Polaroid art.

Daffodil presents the formal beauty of the Polaroid encasing as a framing device, a reminder of the unharnessed energy that remains in the battery packs once the Polaroid film has been exposed. The Polaroid photographs detail the backside of a cow, referencing manure and the left over power of the battery packs as a metaphor for potential energy.

A piece for the eye and the ear, Tony Fry's conceptual time-piece—*A Hearing, Seeing and Saying A Reverse Technology: Conversely, A Contra-Machine For Perceptual Change And Writing That Manufactures a Time of Reading*—an installed clock-within-a-clock. Through an exploration of the aesthetics of temporality, this work signals the future as now. The eternal chimes and tick-tock resonate, enveloping the body of Entis Eidos works, marking the ephemeral characteristic of existence and designing the gallery as an acoustic space.



Arthur Koutoulas, *Lamp, Small Bowl/Container, Serving Tray, Soap Dish, Salt and Pepper Shakers*, constructed variously from plantation pine, nylon, air ply, scrimber, plywood, polished polystyrene, recycled film container lid, 1994.



Scott Whiteman's *Side Tables* are made from water based glue, newspapers, water based finits and beeswax.

MARKETING OBJECTS AS ECOLOGICALLY SOUND PRODUCTS

A very separate event, the 'Eco' Original Furniture Design Exhibition at Bibelot, a retail outlet and showroom, delivered some high design and high design names. The governing motif for 'Eco' was the concept of 'ecology', understood by co-curators, designer Peter Degotardi and proprietor of Bibelot Rick Wootton, to mean 'the science of dealing with living organisms in relation to their environment'. The liberating 'no parameters' approach became the undoing of this disparate collection of well-designed interior objects.

The high profile location of Bibelot on Sydney's prime retail stretch, Oxford Street, positions the products on show as exclusive. Fashion is the currency in these quarters and 'Eco' offers the well-heeled consumer a fashionable 'eco' statement. 'Eco' is the new



Peter Degotardi's *Priscilla, Queen of the Lounge Room* is influenced by Tejo Remie and can take on different aspects according to the material used for stuffing. Degotardi says, 'No piece will be the same'.

genre of object: the 'ecologically sound product' can be purchased by the ecologically aware consumer, a figure constructed through marketing rhetoric.³ Bibelot takes its place in the dynamics of creating desire for product and exerting an influence in the marketplace. Is this desire based on current trends or is it informed by an understanding of the effects of the products upon the environment? We have to ask whether these products '...increase or decrease the ability of life, all life, to survive'.⁴ The consumer relies on being informed by enterprise. When enterprise remains inadequately informed this 'misinformation' is passed on to the consumer.

The substantial ecological claim embodied by the 'Eco' exhibition's title itself evokes the style and the language specific to an environmentally aware politick, defining a space for furniture that signifies low environmental impact. While the general sentiment may contribute to

a cultural consideration and flagging of environmental concern, it is doubtful that the body of what is claimed as eco-objects in this display could significantly contribute to any ecological sustainability in real terms.

The furniture, not of the 'backyard' recycling genre, is positioned in a the clearly delineated domain of high brow, propped up by the rhetoric of the products being constructed of 'environmentally friendly' materials. But the rhetoric is generally vague and exemplified, for instance, by Degotardi's inability to explain the chemical constituency or manufacturing process of the 'Waterlily' foam that is said to fill his *Freddy and Francine* lounges. My own research reveals that Waterlily, developed by ICI in Europe, is a new type of polu-foam aerated with water rather than the polyurethane forming process which uses noxious CFC gases. Recently ICI England invited a number of international designers (although not Degotardi) to develop prototypes using Waterlily.

Rina Bernabei's *Squeeze Box Screen* and *Couture Low Rest* are a clever evolution from her *Desperate Design*, cardboard walls for glass cabinet draws, exhibited in Furniture 94. Bernabei crosses the public sphere to enter the domestic landscape of privacy and comfort. *Squeeze Box Screen* made from Plantation Poplar ply outer frame and Plantation Moranti inner frame, encases either two or three panels of cotton pleated fabric, and is supported by aluminium legs. *Couture Low Rest*, a cushion of recycled industrial felt and rope, highlights the origins and 'after life' of its materials. The reuse of industrial materials for domestic application, in particular human comfort, explores the bleeding of boundaries between public and private.

Peter Degotardi has produced an elegant totem of decadence with his *Priscilla, Queen of the Loungeroom* (a title which no doubt references the recent road movie, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, about a desert-destined bus oozing with two drag queens, a transsexual and their detritus of costumes, hundreds of them). Without dwelling on the remarkably anaesthetic characteristics of this plastic covered lounge stuffed with discarded clothes, one wonders how such an item could seriously find a home under the banner of 'Eco', or more precisely, even be recognized as having any environmentally sensitive connotations on any basis. The conserving principles of re-using and recycling the discarded has been hijacked in this case to produce an emblem of extreme excess.

Degotardi nonetheless takes a philosophical approach to design: 'Design is art...functional art...being a designer is like being a sculptor...like a hairdresser...hairdressing to me is a form of sculpture.' Wootton adds, 'Yes, but you have to have something saleable'. This is a radical position, indicating that Degotardi is re-thinking the strict distinctions between the art, craft and design disciplines. By referring to hair, a part of the human anatomy, and relating hair shaping to sculpture, the body becomes another material. Here culture is the stamp upon the body.

ISM Object's (Celina Clarke and Simon Christopher - recipients of the Artists and Industry Production Award and the Design Institute of Australia Merit Award 1993) have created some more modern products for inner-city living with their *Flat Stanley* plywood dining chair and *Flat Stanley* table which folds up flat as a pancake. But it is their table lamp, *Madame Ruby*, that is the shin-

ing star of this show. The translucent lamp 'is a light that was a light in previous life' made from recycled discarded car headlights (clear, red or amber). The lamp holds a torch to electricity, the motor vehicle, speed and urban waste. *Madame Ruby* is born out of collision of these industrial icons.

Chest of Drawers and *Side Tables*, designed by Scott Whiteman, is back to stone age basics, but actually this furniture is feather light *papier mâché* (newspapers, water based glue and beeswax). These pieces resemble cinematic props for a film about the archetypal caveman, playing with the Western construction of 'the primitive' and civilisation's desire to return to 'nature'.

Bang Design's *Wave* shelves perhaps expressed the most with the least. The well considered use of materials—Tasmanian Oak veneered board with natural wax finish—position Bang in 'Eco' territory with the use of resources that are naturally renewable: Tasmanian Oak (Eucalypt) is logged from sustainable yield forests and the Hoop Pine is plantation grown. As well, there is formal beauty in the wave shelving's invocation to the sea, and to water, the fluid of life.

The labour intensive techniques involved in producing most of these items define them as 'boutique' eco-design. The costs involved in production signal low production runs and their relative scarcity means only those privileged enough can have access to them. In essence, they contribute little to the project of ecological sustainment. But as indicated, some of the works have made honourable beginnings. It is questionable whether Bibelot was up to this exhibition. The curatorial process is more a statement of prestige and positioning than the creation of a space for exploring and promoting the cultural shift towards products with low environmental impact. The EcoDesign Foundation might have served as a strategic partner (or in the least, an invaluable resource) through Bibelot's curatorial process. Despite the weaknesses in this body of work, Bibelot is lifting the 'eco' profile and has contributed to the promotion of ecodesign, and the broader project of a raising consciousness about design in relation to the environment. In opening up this new exhibition space, they have put their money behind their vision to provide a forum of support for young Australian designers. Bibelot's next show is the furniture design of Adelaide's NPG: Michael Geissler and Stefan Kahn, followed by 'Pizza' (a-bitsa-this-a-bitsa-that).

'*Entis Eidos*' was exhibited at the EcoDesign Foundation's Display and Research Centre (DARC) in Sydney, 26 August to 16 September 1994. 'Eco' Original Furniture Design was exhibited at Bibelot in Sydney, 23 August to 6 November, 1994.

Endnotes

- 1 See Tony Fry, *Re-Makings: Ecology/Design/Philosophy*, Envirobook, Sydney, 1994.
- 2 Strange Attractors' Artist Statement in *Entis Eidos* exhibition catalogue, EcoDesign Foundation, Sydney, 1994.
- 3 See Anne-Marie Willis, 'Ecological Objects: Marketing Cultural Values' in *Object*, Summer 1993/94, pp 33-35.
- 4 Tony Fry, 'Against an Essentialist Theory' in *Re-Makings: Ecology/Design/Philosophy*, p 40.

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