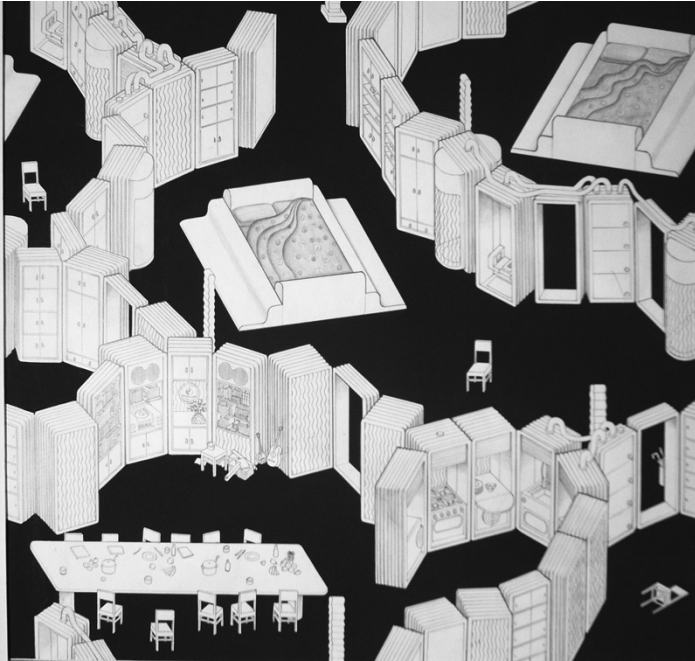


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DESIGN AS DISCUSSION: Ettore Sottsass and Dunne & Raby



Left: Ettore Sottsass, illustration for "Italy: New Domestic Landscape", 1972

Right: Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, "Placebo Project: Nipple Chair" 2001

"Design starts when it becomes the visual, physical, and sensorial representation of the existential metaphor on which we base our lives" Ettore Sottsass, 1983

"Design is existential and cannot ignore its complicated relationship to people and their mental lives" Anthony Dunne, 1999

These two statements sound strikingly similar: Ettore Sottsass and Dunne & Raby (the name of the partnership between Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby) are two designers whose interest lies more in contributing to a larger discourse rather than the traditional motivation to "solve problems". Both use the materials and process of de-

sign to make their statements, but writing is an inextricable component of their practices as well. They differ in their strategies to make these statements, and they inhabit different positions in reference to the larger design community and public.

Ettore Sottsass was born in Austria in 1917 but was raised in Italy (specifically Milan). He studied architecture at Turin Polytechnic, but went on to design office equipment, furniture, ceramics, jewelry, interiors, lighting, glassware, in addition to buildings. His career in industrial design began in 1959 at Olivetti, but an unique arrangement with Olivetti (to be permanently freelance but also engage with the company at a high level) allowed him to pursue projects with other companies, such as Poltronova and Alessi. He was heavily inspired by his travels, especially to India (for its sensuousness and spirituality) and the United States (for its popular and Beat culture). In 1981, he formed Memphis, a group of designers whose work made bold statements about the history and status of design. He passed away in 2007.

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby established their studio Dunne and Raby in 1994 in London. Both of them studied at the Royal College of Art, in the departments of Industrial Design, Architecture, and Computer Related Design. Now, Anthony Dunne is head of the Design Interactions departments of the Royal College of Art, and Fiona Raby also teaches in the program. Prior to their positions at the RCA, Dunne worked for Sony and Raby practiced architecture, both in Tokyo. Both are living and practicing today in London.

Both Sottsass and Dunne & Raby work to combat the bland or prescriptive modes of design, to create objects or environments that allow for poetic moments within daily life. Pleasure is a key emotion they attempt to evoke, though not the pleasure of complicit entertainment or rapid consumption. For Sottsass, design could provide a context for pleasurable experiences as well as reference personal pleasures. These pleasures are as much about social interaction and togetherness as they are about individual (existential) introspection: pleasure arises from the

freedom to participate in the essential life moments of love, loss, health, illness, birth, death, and so on. His drawings for "The Planet as a Festival" from 1972 imagine a world of only leisure activity, a world of pleasure that ultimately criticizes society's trust in technological progress. Dunne and Raby see pleasure as a wider spectrum of emotion than is currently explored by popular design. They use the term "complicated pleasure" to describe emotions that arise from primal human needs and are expressed most clearly in the formats of literature or film. They imagine that design, too, could adopt the genres of film or literature to offer those kinds of complicated pleasure. For instance, conditions of loneliness, deception, paranoia, hopelessness, and lust would be the subject of Design Noir (also the title of a book they have published). Both designers are skeptical of the pleasures that most mass-produced objects provide, critical of their shallow entertainment or encouragement of conformity. This skepticism manifests itself in two directions: Sottsass's work is celebratory of what pleasures humans can still experience, while Dunne and Raby use their work to create cautionary tales that point out the pleasures we feel uncomfortable about, or what pleasures we enjoy that might be at stake.

In a similar vein, both designers are skeptical about new technologies. Even though Sottsass worked for Olivetti, one of the earliest computer companies, he designed much of the equipment (such as the ELEA 9003) with an awareness of how a multitude of this technological equipment could impact the humans who work with it on a daily basis. His designs for Olivetti often use color and form to create a visual rhythm that might combat the otherwise monotonous nature of working with computers, realizing that the computers are part of a larger system rather than an individual object. Dunne and Raby have spent much of their careers speculating about the all-pervasive and potentially harmful electromagnetic spectrum. Many of the projects in their book "Design Noir" draw attention to the invisible "Hertzian" space that surrounds all electronic objects, and most of them offer ways to combat, subvert,

or transform this undesirable radiation.

New materials are an important aspect of both designer's practices, but not just for the sake of superficial experimentation, but as opportunities to expand the cultural associations of their designs. Sottsass designed several lines of furniture made of plastics and fiberglass, such as the Grey Furniture of 1970, which suggest that smooth grey plastic furniture might (besides look "futuristic") alienate us from the traditional attachment to comfort associated with the home. He also is known for developing and using plastic laminates on his furniture designs, especially in bright colors or patterns. Despite the inherent "surface" of plastic laminate, the thin veneers (when applied on all surfaces) actually cause his designs to feel like unified volumes, rather than arrangements of surfaces. Since the laminates cover up all signs of manufacturing or craft process, they open up new formal possibilities and call into question the value of one material over another. The solid shapes of color and pattern also speak to the look of early graphic visualization in the computer. Dunne and Raby, despite being critical of electronic products, often use electronics in a hacked or subverted way. In their project "Tuneable Cities" (1997), they equipped a car with a radio scanner that they reconfigured to tune into frequencies used for bugging devices and baby monitors, mapping zones of radio that cannot be sensed any other way. Electronics in this way offer tools to investigate these dark areas of our designed environment. Even more important is their use of biological material, which often illuminates the fragility of our own bodies and health. The "Evidence Dolls", which Dunne and Raby designed in 2005, are receptacles for the genetic materials of a woman's sexual partners, a vault for avoiding potential paternity issues. In this project the biological material is only a small part of the product, but it proposes a much more intimate engagement with a product than most products we encounter. A recent project, "Designs for an Overpopulated Planet: Foragers" imagines how molecular biology might allow a group of people to develop augmented digestive systems in order to consume foods that otherwise are

undigestible by humans. In this case, the product is a biological material, one that changes the concrete functions of the human body.

While both designers have embraced these new materials at the far edge of acceptance, they also take advantage of traditional materials' familiarity. Sottsass consistently worked with ceramics throughout his career, always citing clay's history: that it even pre-dates history, and as such our connections to it are especially primal. In Dunne and Raby's "Placebo Project", the eight placebo products were all made of MDF, which while not especially old, is so commonplace and neutral that it can almost serve as a non-material.

Dunne and Raby's "Placebo Project" (2001) and Sottsass's "New Domestic Landscape" (1972) both propose alternative ways of living, focusing on the human interaction with the object rather than the object by itself. The New Domestic Landscape was part of an exhibition of Italian design at the Museum of Modern Art. Sottsass designed a grey fiberglass module on castors that could contain a variety of furniture and appliances for the home. The modules could be attached or separated, arranged and re-arranged, stowed away or on display. Because each module takes up the same space and looks the same from the outside, no one domestic activity is valued over another. The cold, grey modules also resist any sense of human attachment, ideally so that the users can be more aware of their immaterial (emotional, social) attachments. Even though large numbers of people were exposed to his proposal in the museum context, there is no attempt to actually test these modules with real users. The concept comes to exist in images only, even though it begs us to wonder what our lives might be like amongst those grey modules. The "Placebo Project" also came to exist primarily in images, but after a round of field tests with real people. The Placebos were prototypes for objects that might help people combat the negative aspects of electromagnetic waves. Dunne and Raby built the objects and then posted ads to find "everyday" people who would adopt their prototypes for a month.

These periods of experiential testing ended with interviews, from which they pulled the most interesting comments and amplified those comments in staged photographs. While it is fascinating to hear about the truly unexpected results of these in-home experiments, it is hard to tell how much of the story is framed to confirm Dunne and Raby's pre-existing ideas about the objects.

Across all of their work, there is a definite challenge to "good" taste. Both designers often employ harsh, "raw" geometry that might seem crude compared to traditional design "refinement". In Sottsass's work, the forms are mostly created with solid volumes that demand attention through their strong composition and bright colors. Especially during his years with Memphis, this was also used as a send-up to the prevailing trajectory of furniture design. For Dunne and Raby, the raw geometry of their products give them an unfamiliarity that intrigues viewers, and an awkwardness that some might find endearing. The lack of "design details" could also be a strategy to avoid the 'persuasive' overtones of consumer industrial design. Dunne and Raby are searching for a balance of familiar and strange aesthetics to draw viewers into the deeper aspects of the object; Sottsass searches for a balance of familiar and strange aesthetics for reasons more attached to the market of his objects.

While Sottsass kept many young designers and followers around him, it was not within an academic or institutional context. Younger designers were either employees or partners, and it can be imagined that young people gathered around him to experience his mythical personality firsthand. Sottsass was not a fan of institutions. Dunne and Raby also have young followers, but it is much more connected to their roles as professors at the Royal College of Art. Their work almost always involves students or co-horts from the RCA, probably as a means of establishing the RCA as a pre-eminent center for their concept of "critical design". While both were prolific writers, Dunne and Raby use writing to set up the context and arguments for their beliefs, while Sottsass uses writing in a less formal, more poetic way: to express, rather

than to defend. Writings about Sottsass are much more personal, often referring to his demeanor, biography, and eccentricities. There is next to nothing to be found about Anthony Dunne or Fiona Raby's early lives or personal foibles. This could be testament to Ettore Sottsass's sweeping influence, extreme character, the fact that he is now deceased, or the dwindling archetype of the mythical design superstar. (or Dunne and Raby's own presumed paranoia about information and privacy?)

Barbara Radice used the words "transgression, tenderness, and amused detachment" to describe the perspective of the Memphis group, and this seems all too fitting for Dunne and Raby's approach as well. Both see the future as a risk: preferring to look at how things might go wrong or at least diverge, rather than continuing an existing trajectory. By providing enticing or haunting alternatives to the mainstream world of design and consumption, design can serve as a warning or a delight.

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