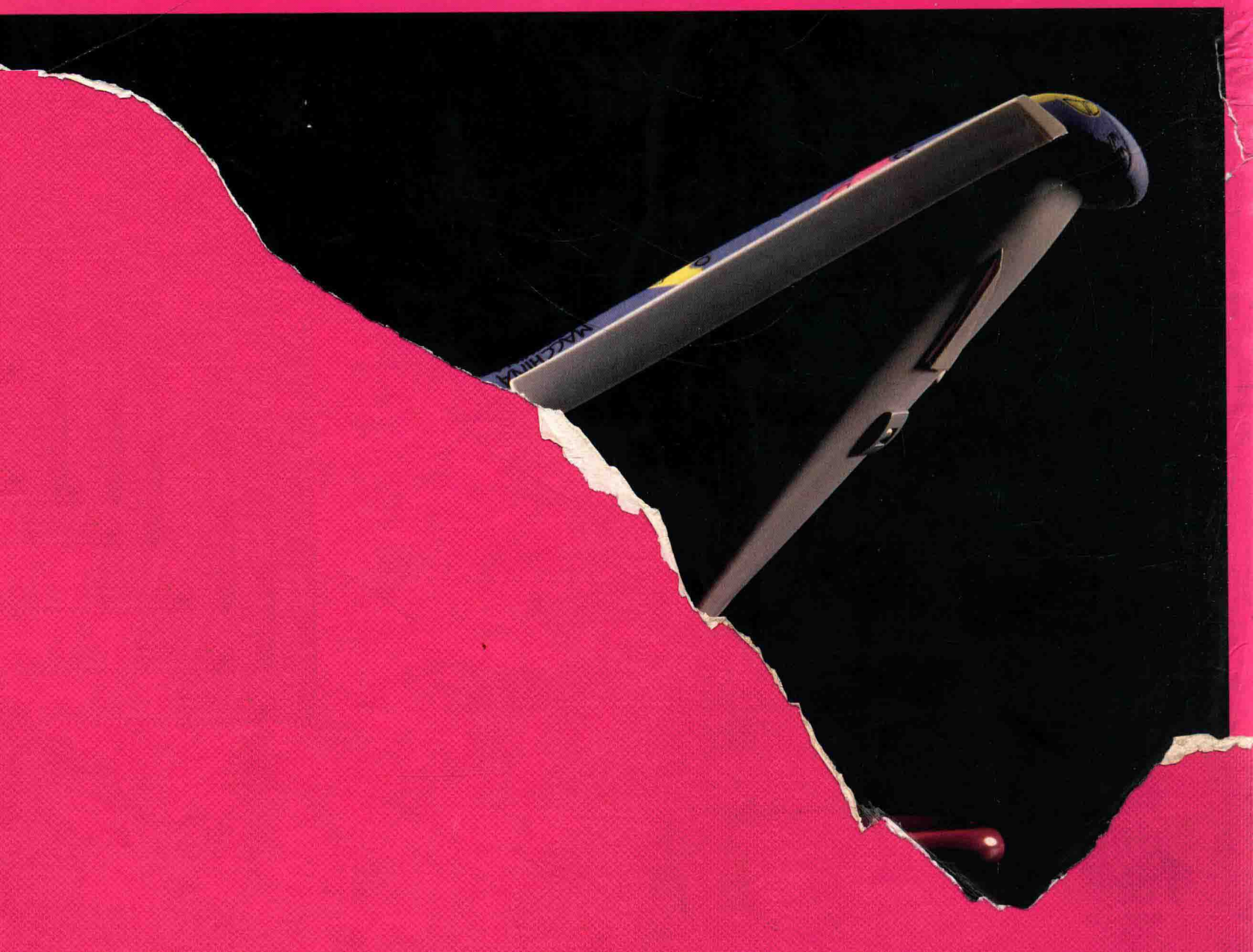


PRODUCT DESIGN

4



PRODUCT DESIGN 4

Compiled and Edited by Joel Sokolov



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I N T R O D U C T I O N

It's hard to imagine that for every one of the multitude of products we encounter, there is a product designer somewhere out there. Using the materials in their environments, 'primitive' designers saw their needs then created objects to make their lives easier and more productive. While this impetus still drives designers in their endeavors, it is a far cry from one aspect of the present state of product design. The era of products for product's sake – with the bottom line being whether the product can be sold – has arrived, and is still with us. On the other hand, innumerable product designers are creating innumerable products for a myriad of uses, old and new, and are diligently answering the needs of our daily lives with a positive view of the future. As we enter the '90s, the plurality of approaches to product design promises a lot of pleasant surprises. It's just those

surprises, which inspire us and open the way for new visions and new possibilities, that shape where we are going.

Product design is an international language. The challenge for product designers in the '90s is to take more responsibility for the products we design and their ultimate impact. We know we can design and build products intended only to be sold and trashed, as well as too many very destructive products. The '90s call for products with a social conscience. Whether a designer creates a one-of-a-kind product intended only to uplift the spirit, an everyday utilitarian object, or a very specific piece of medical machinery, attention must be paid to the way a product interacts and integrates with a greater environment. Product designers have the power to change the way people think, because products can

open new perspectives on the world around us. The products we use and surround ourselves with reflect us and comment on our customs and values. We are the products we use. We are advertisements for the products we use, just as they advertise us (“... If you don’t look good, we don’t look good...”). Whole generations have grown up and taken for granted products that were unimaginable in the recent past. As we continue to create new products and new needs for them, product designers will further explore the blending of technology, art and craft. Product design, like art, has the power to influence. Just as ‘conversational’ art can make us examine our values personally and as a culture, a product can have the same effect. Ordinary (and extraordinary) products have value and influence beyond their practical functions. This might be a simply latch key;

a solar energy panel that produces all necessary power without pollution, for free; a chair that makes you think about sitting a little differently; a cure for AIDS; or an easily programmable VCR. A well designed product can mean a lot.

PRODUCT DESIGN 4 represents only a small cross-section of the numerous and talented product designers out there. From every swizzle stick to sneakerphone to skyscraper, product designers are doing their best to fulfill our practical needs, while at the same time, surprise and inspire us with the inventiveness, quality and craftsmanship of their work.

Tabletop

CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY, we choose products that touch us emotionally for some reason; those which reveal a sense of life or humor, tranquillity or order, risk or unpredictability; those that help us make contact with what we value or miss most in ourselves, and in our lives.

The vessel provides an intimate format for me, partly due to the role it has played in man's history, but also because it allows a private conversation between me and the object. Patterns of growth and images I observe in nature become metaphors for what concerns me on a personal level: the fragility of new growth, displaying its resiliency and strength, by existing beside

fragments of nature past its prime; the perception of violence and beauty in the inevitable disintegration; the tenuous structure, resulting from age and stress, tenaciously surviving despite the withdrawal of nourishment. The symmetrical format provides an element of stability for me, an instinctively understood point from which I start my journey.

In the midst of a continuous effort to streamline the objects we use and the way we live with them, there exists a counterpoint: the seemingly ungainly, unpretentious object, which reminds us of the beauty of the odd man out.



Helen Shirk is a professor of Art at San Diego State University, but her design expertise has been recognized on a much wider scale.

Besides two Fellowship grants to the National Endowment for the Arts, her impressive list of exhibitions includes the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; the National Museum of Modern Art, Japan; the Schmuckmuseum, West Germany; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the American Craft Museum, New York; the Oxford Gallery, England; and the Musée Des Arts Decoratifs, Paris.

Ms. Shirk's designs have also graced the pages of the International Design Yearbook 4; Contemporary American Craft Art: A Collector's Guide; Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical; Kunst und Handwerk; Women Artists News; Metropolis; the San Diego Union and San Diego Home and Garden. She attended Kunsthaandvaerkskolen in Copenhagen, Denmark, and received an M.F.A. from Indiana University and a B.S. from Skidmore College.

HELEN SHIRK
Designer