

DESIGNING DESIGN

KENYA HARA

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Lars Müller Publishers

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DESIGNING DESIGN

KENYA HARA

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- 8 Li EDELKOORT
A DIALECT IN DESIGN
Dissecting Kenya Hara
- 12 John MAEDA
The Aesthetics of Invisibility
- 14 Jasper MORRISON
Message Received
- 19 Kenya HARA
Preface

1 RE-DESIGN

Daily Products of the 21st Century

- 22 Making the Ordinary Unknown
- 24 Art and Design
- 25 RE-DESIGN Exhibition
- 26 Shigeru Ban and Toilet Paper
- 30 Masahiko Sato and Entry/Exit Stamps
- 33 Kengo Kuma and the Roach Trap
- 38 Kaoru Mende and Matches
- 40 Kosuke Tsumura and Diapers
- 44 Naoto Fukasawa and Tea Bags
- 48 The RE-DESIGN Exhibition Travels the World

The Architects' Macaroni Exhibition
- 52 Food Design
- 56 Norihide Imagawa: SHE & HE
- 57 Tadasu Ohe: WAVE—RIPPLE. LOOP. SURF
- 58 Akio Okumura: i flutte
- 59 Kaoru Kasai: OTTOCO
- 60 Kengo Kuma: Semi Constructive
- 61 Atelier Zo: MACCHERONI
- 62 Kanji Hayashi: Serie Macchel'occhi
- 63 Mayumi Miyawaki: Punching Macaroni

2 HAPTIC

Awakening the Senses

- 68 Designing the Senses
- 70 The HAPTIC Exhibition
- 72 Kosuke Tsumura: Kami Tama

76	Shin Sobue: Tadpole Coasters	
80	Jasper Morrison: Wall Clock	
84	Toyo Ito: Gel Doorknob	
88	Panasonic Design Company: Gel Remote Control	158
92	Naoto Fukasawa: Juice Skin	162
96	Shuhei Hasado: Geta	
100	Events on the Skin	
104	Yasuhiro Suzuki: Cabbage Bowls	164
110	Shunji Yamanaka: Floating Compass	166
114	Matthieu Manche: Mom 'n Baby	170
118	Keiko Hirano: Paper Wastebasket	
122	Kenya Hara: Water Pachinko	
128	Masayo Awe: 800 Dots—Paperback Cover	174
130	Kengo Kuma: Cast-off Snakeskin Paper Towel	177
134	Reiko Sudo: Gazelles	184
138	Kazunari Hattori: Tailed Gift Cards	
140	Kenya Hara: Humidifier	
144	Sense-driven	
	The Progress of Technology and the Deterioration of the Senses	188
147	Spreading the World Atlas of the Senses	
3	SENSEWARE	
	Medium That Intrigues Man	
152	What Evokes the Senses	
	A White, Tense Material	
155	Communicating with Materiality	
	Architecture of Information	
156	The Field of Sensory Perceptions	
	The Architecture within the Brain	
	The Programs for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Nagano Winter Olympic Games	
	Designing Paper	
	Invoking the Memory of Treading on Snow	
	Signage System for a Clinic	
	Signage System for the Umeda Hospital	
	The Communication in Keeping White Cloth Clean	
	Katta Civic Polyclinic Signage System	
	Matsuya Ginza Renewal Project	
	Palpable Media	
	The Collaboration of Tactile Designs	
	Information as an Event	
	Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum: Visual Identification	
	Ripple-like Information	
	Swatch Group: Signage System for Nicolas G. Hayek Center	
	The Watch Hovering in the Air	192
	A Watch in the Hand	193
	Books as Information Sculpture	
	Rediscovering Books	196
	Information Is a Single Soft-Boiled Egg	198
	Information Sculpture	200
	Not Future but Present	201
	FILING	202
	im product Don't Talk about Colors	204
	Optimum	206
	Paper and Design	208

4 WHITE

- 212 White as a Design Concept
- 213 Discovering White
- 214 The Implicit Color
- 216 Escaping Color
- 217 Original Forms of Information and Life

5 MUJI

Nothing, Yet Everything

- 228 Visualizing the MUJI Concept
- 230 What Ikko Tanaka Passed on to Me
- 231 MUJI's Origin, MUJI's Challenge
- 238 Acceptance, not Appetite
- 240 World MUJI
- 241 Emptiness
- 243 Placing the Logo on the Horizon
- 246 Location—In Search of the Horizon
- 254 House
- 272 What Is Quality in Simplicity?
- 282 The Future of Design
- 283 Education of Desire
- 289 Fertilizing the Soil
- 292 MUJI: What Happens Naturally

6 VIEWING THE WORLD FROM THE TIP OF ASIA

- 302 Where All Cultures Are Accepted
- 308 Tradition and Universality
- 309 Recreating a Mature Culture
- 312 Waiting for What Nature Brings:
Gajyoen and Tenku-no-Mori
- 314 Reclaiming Japan's Quality in the World's Eyes:
Obuse-do Corporation
- 318 Unearthing the Meaning of Nothingness:
Mukayu
- 325 Identity Breeds Attraction
- The Expo That Might Have Been**
- 330 The Original Idea and "Nature's Wisdom"
- 332 The Practical Power of Ecology
- 335 Our Forest Vision
- 340 Technology: Closer to Nature with Each Evolution
- 344 Familiar Nature and Life Forms, as Characters
- 352 The Self-propagating/Multiplying/Breeding Media
- 354 The Never-ending Project
- The Beijing Summer Olympic Games
Symbol Design Competition**
- 356 The Pulse of Asia

7 EXFORMATION

A New Information Format

- 370 Making the World Unknown
- 372 Putting a Full Stop to Thinking
- 373 Acquiring Knowledge Is not the Goal
- 374 Making an Entrance for Curiosity
- 376 The Process of Making Things Unknown

Exformation—1 THE SHIMANTO RIVER

- 377 The Object of the Process
- 378 Field Research
- 380 The Projects
Simulations—If the River Were a Road
- 386 Footprint Landscape
- 388 Picking Up
- 390 The Shimanto River Cut into a Cube
- 391 Six Days Alone: The Document

Exformation—2 RESORT

- 393 After Clothing, Food and Shelter
- 395 Relaxation Time that Makes Sense to Everyone

Various Resorts

- 397 Vinyl/Stripes: Turning Tokyo into Vinyl and Stripes
- 400 Sleeping Outside
- 402 Soft-serve Ice Cream Machine
- 404 Loose Typography
- 405 Resort Switch
- 407 Exformation Continues to Evolve

8 WHAT IS DESIGN?

- 410 Hearing the Outcry
- 412 Two Origins
- 414 Decoration and Power
- 416 The Origin of Design
- 418 Integration of Design
- 420 Design in the Afternoon of the 20th Century
- 422 Standardization and Mass Production
- 424 Style Change and Identity
- 425 Thought and Brand
- 428 The Prank of Postmodernism
- 429 Computer Technology and Design
- 432 Radical Dash
- 434 Beyond Modernism

440 Naoto FUKASAWA
About Kenya Hara

442 Kenya HARA
Afterword,
or Perhaps, a New Serve

446 List of Works
464 Biography of Kenya Hara
468 Photographic Credits

Verbalizing design is another act of design.

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- 8 Li EDELKOORT
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- 33 Kengo Kuma and the Roach Trap
- 38 Kaoru Mende and Matches
- 40 Kosuke Tsumura and Diapers
- 44 Naoto Fukasawa and Tea Bags
- 48 The RE-DESIGN Exhibition Travels the World
- The Architects' Macaroni Exhibition
- 52 Food Design
- 56 Norihide Imagawa: SHE & HE
- 57 Tadasu Ohe: WAVE—RIPPLE. LOOP. SURF
- 58 Akio Okumura: i flutte
- 59 Kaoru Kasai: OTTOCO
- 60 Kengo Kuma: Semi Constructive
- 61 Atelier Zo: MACCHERONI
- 62 Kanji Hayashi: Serie Macchel'occhi
- 63 Mayumi Miyawaki: Punching Macaroni

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- 68 Designing the Senses
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76	Shin Sobue: Tadpole Coasters	
80	Jasper Morrison: Wall Clock	
84	Toyo Ito: Gel Doorknob	
88	Panasonic Design Company: Gel Remote Control	158
92	Naoto Fukasawa: Juice Skin	162
96	Shuhei Hasado: Geta	
100	Events on the Skin	
104	Yasuhiro Suzuki: Cabbage Bowls	164
110	Shunji Yamanaka: Floating Compass	166
114	Matthieu Manche: Mom 'n Baby	170
118	Keiko Hirano: Paper Wastebasket	
122	Kenya Hara: Water Pachinko	
128	Masayo Awe: 800 Dots—Paperback Cover	174
130	Kengo Kuma: Cast-off Snakeskin Paper Towel	177
134	Reiko Sudo: Gazelles	184
138	Kazunari Hattori: Tailed Gift Cards	
140	Kenya Hara: Humidifier	
144	Sense-driven	
	The Progress of Technology and the Deterioration of the Senses	188
147	Spreading the World Atlas of the Senses	
3	SENSEWARE	
	Medium That Intrigues Man	
152	What Evokes the Senses	
	A White, Tense Material	
155	Communicating with Materiality	
	Architecture of Information	
156	The Field of Sensory Perceptions	
	The Architecture within the Brain	
	The Programs for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Nagano Winter Olympic Games	
	Designing Paper	
	Invoking the Memory of Treading on Snow	
	Signage System for a Clinic	
	Signage System for the Umeda Hospital	
	The Communication in Keeping White Cloth Clean	
	Katta Civic Polyclinic Signage System	
	Matsuya Ginza Renewal Project	
	Palpable Media	
	The Collaboration of Tactile Designs	
	Information as an Event	
	Nagasaki Prefectural Art Museum: Visual Identification	
	Ripple-like Information	
	Swatch Group: Signage System for Nicolas G. Hayek Center	
	The Watch Hovering in the Air	192
	A Watch in the Hand	193
	Books as Information Sculpture	
	Rediscovering Books	196
	Information Is a Single Soft-Boiled Egg	198
	Information Sculpture	200
	Not Future but Present	201
	FILING	202
	im product Don't Talk about Colors	204
	Optimum	206
	Paper and Design	208

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- 212 White as a Design Concept
- 213 Discovering White
- 214 The Implicit Color
- 216 Escaping Color
- 217 Original Forms of Information and Life

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- 230 What Ikko Tanaka Passed on to Me
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- 238 Acceptance, not Appetite
- 240 World MUJI
- 241 Emptiness
- 243 Placing the Logo on the Horizon
- 246 Location—In Search of the Horizon
- 254 House
- 272 What Is Quality in Simplicity?
- 282 The Future of Design
- 283 Education of Desire
- 289 Fertilizing the Soil
- 292 MUJI: What Happens Naturally

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- 302 Where All Cultures Are Accepted
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- 309 Recreating a Mature Culture
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Gajyoen and Tenku-no-Mori
- 314 Reclaiming Japan's Quality in the World's Eyes:
Obuse-do Corporation
- 318 Unearthing the Meaning of Nothingness:
Mukayu
- 325 Identity Breeds Attraction
- The Expo That Might Have Been
- 330 The Original Idea and "Nature's Wisdom"
- 332 The Practical Power of Ecology
- 335 Our Forest Vision
- 340 Technology: Closer to Nature with Each Evolution
- 344 Familiar Nature and Life Forms, as Characters
- 352 The Self-propagating/Multiplying/Breeding Media
- 354 The Never-ending Project
- The Beijing Summer Olympic Games
Symbol Design Competition
- 356 The Pulse of Asia

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A New Information Format

- 370 Making the World Unknown
- 372 Putting a Full Stop to Thinking
- 373 Acquiring Knowledge Is not the Goal
- 374 Making an Entrance for Curiosity
- 376 The Process of Making Things Unknown

Exformation—1 THE SHIMANTO RIVER

- 377 The Object of the Process
- 378 Field Research
- 380 The Projects
Simulations—If the River Were a Road
- 386 Footprint Landscape
- 388 Picking Up
- 390 The Shimanto River Cut into a Cube
- 391 Six Days Alone: The Document

Exformation—2 RESORT

- 393 After Clothing, Food and Shelter
- 395 Relaxation Time that Makes Sense to Everyone

Various Resorts

- 397 Vinyl/Stripes: Turning Tokyo into Vinyl and Stripes
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- 402 Soft-serve Ice Cream Machine
- 404 Loose Typography
- 405 Resort Switch
- 407 Exformation Continues to Evolve

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- 412 Two Origins
- 414 Decoration and Power
- 416 The Origin of Design
- 418 Integration of Design
- 420 Design in the Afternoon of the 20th Century
- 422 Standardization and Mass Production
- 424 Style Change and Identity
- 425 Thought and Brand
- 428 The Prank of Postmodernism
- 429 Computer Technology and Design
- 432 Radical Dash
- 434 Beyond Modernism

440 Naoto FUKASAWA
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442 Kenya HARA
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464 Biography of Kenya Hara
468 Photographic Credits

A DIALECT IN DESIGN

Dissecting Kenya Hara

LI EDELKOORT

Chairwoman, Design Academy Eindhoven and
Trend Forecaster, Trend Union

He is a person of character. He is a tall man formed by rigor and exacting good taste. He is ageless. He acts as an agent of tranquility and is dressed like a priest in dark, apparently simple, yet superbly cut clothes, or on weekends, like a monk, in hooded sweatshirts over soft drawstring pyjama pants. He is an arresting person with piercing all-seeing birdlike eyes that observe the world from behind intellectual, round-rimmed spectacles. For an instant, you might mistake him for a Swiss modernist designer of the last century, all red and white and angular. Yet he is completely the contrary, all white and red, with a softer edge.

Precise and rigorous, he discusses design like a philosophy of life while continually shifting his awareness of the process, always with a work in progress somewhere, challenging and changing his own wisdom. He is both the timely delivery-boy of communication and the inventor of *exformation*, struggling and toying with acquiring knowledge and deleting excess in both disciplines.

He is a truly Japanese creator grown from shadows and darkness, his soul bleeding from the scars of recent history, concerned with the roots of his culture and the DNA of its design discipline, and promoting its existence in the face of the other emerging countries of Asia. Therefore, he focuses on the islands' own special values and strives for the survival of paper, print and recently textiles, infusing tradition with contemporary content.

He is inventing a dialect in design, blending global ideas with local and regional color and taste. He is an idealist when it comes to the identity of Nipponese culture. He becomes a samurai in his pursuit of nothingness, an acupuncturist to cure visual excess. He preaches contentment with emptiness and simplicity and sees Japan as an extreme hybrid that absorbs all other influences, neutralizing all chaos, huddling alone on the edge of



Asia. Being a utopian, he believes in a future without artifice, imagining a Japan that liberates itself from the bonds of the American and now Asian dream, coming to terms with a new economic and aesthetic maturity. Like kindred spirits, we both believe in a better world with spiritual and humanistic values.

He is literally in touch. He is a teacher of texture, a leader in the field of tactile experiences, inspiring colleagues and disciples to invent new textures and employ surprising matter, a feast for the fingers as much as for the eyes. Soft-fingered yet strong-willed, he has trained himself and a generation of designers in sensory perception, putting Japan at the forefront of the design of new matter with new touch.

He is a color escapist because he knows that by avoiding color, tactility can and will speak up. He designs in white to express snow, space, floating, trust and rest, to whisper. As if white had become the skeleton of his body of work.

Again and again, he will express and explore the joy of humble design in the life of the everyday. As a sculptor of basic things, he uses, in his major design projects, materials such as paper, cardboard and textile to convey honesty and reliability. He designs paper to feel like snow and embosses it to look like ice, he dresses signage in freshly laundered cotton and continues to use whites for wrapping, storage, ceramics and architecture, imprinted with the impact of red: red flame, red seal, red type, red sign, red heart, red dot...

This is the design of dignity, a whispered value system penetrating the human mind through all the senses. Emotion is tossed into the process by connecting the dots, by assembling the figurines, by connecting the past with the future and by fusing high and low technology, as in embroidering paper

to create new posters. The abstraction of paper and its timeless tranquility make him believe in a future when books will carry information with the appreciation and added value of touch, weight, smell and memory. For him, paper is food, white is a concept, printing is a process and design is oxygen.

As an architect of brand strategy in a truly contemporary and collaborative way, he teaches his clients to reconsider and redirect their image in a softer and almost more natural mode, more fluid too, with the whole process running like a river, shifting in perception silently, without any apparent effort. He pushes his partners to work with excellence and introduces them to the best thinkers, photographers and designers; he is a networker *avant la lettre*, stimulating his peers to ever newer explorations in the field of the design of emotion.

As a prophet in the wisdom of nature, he turns to small ideas and examples to let nature speak. He will transform the contemplation of a vast and empty horizon in order to invite us to experience freedom of choice and liberation from the bondage of consumerism, and he will imagine our own human hands as a vessel for drinking water, as if being the first and most perfect example of the discipline of design. He is in fact a perfectionist with an eye for the imperfect and the decayed, the depleted nature of things, the random beauty of the changing seasons as well.

Although he believes that foretelling the future (which is my profession!) is a futile occupation, he has, to my mind, a natural talent for it; he becomes an oracle when he speaks of our life in the 21st century and the task he lays before us is vast and all encompassing.

He sees the Japanese aesthetic and way of life as a role model for the Western world, with its modesty, symbolism, tradition and darkness, discarding overconsumption to experience another joy, the joy of being a