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Design as a Means of Conveying Postmodern Myths and Narrations

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ABSTRACT

In the 20th century the communicative link between an artist and a viewer was weakened or even completely lost. Modernist artists stopped showing the objective picture of the world and started to interpret it, losing the understandable for viewers mythical and narrative aspects of an artwork. New means of expression made this subjective image of the world even more incomprehensible for the general public, limiting art audiences to educated viewers and artists themselves. The same century saw the dynamic development of design, which began by decorating mass-produced tools and evolved into their aestheticization. The latest technologies and materials enable designers to realize almost any idea and so the tool's handiness has become inferior to its aesthetics and beyond-practical messages. More and more often design is used to achieve important pro-social aims, such as natural environment protection, energy saving or charity support. It can be concluded that contemporary design has regained the communicative link with the general public. Carrying beyond-aesthetic values, myths and narrations of our times, being an integral part of our everyday existence and a source of aesthetic sensations, it clearly exemplifies pragmatic aesthetics. The scope of designers' creative activity has widened to include areas such as the armaments or medical industry. As a result, design has been included in the research of numerous philosophical and social sciences.

Keywords: Art, design, aesthetics, philosophy of culture, mythology, narration, communication, aesthetic sensation.

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The literature concerning both aesthetics and philosophy of culture assumes that an artwork must be understood and interpreted by its audience. This is due to the fact that it belongs to symbolic culture in which actions and products are subject to comprehension and interpretation. They exist only when understood and interpreted, otherwise any form of experience or communication is impossible, which is true not only for art. My attention is focused on two traditional ways of thinking about art – the European one in which communication is considered to be its main function, and American, pragmatic one which emphasizes the process of experiencing works of art. Understanding is the link between them.

Today it is generally acknowledged that contemporary art is losing, or even has already lost its communicative contact with constantly decreasing audiences. However, it is impossible to offer one single explanation for such a process. Traditional academic art established communication by means of semantic content (mythical tales, still life, portrait, landscape etc), while it's contemporary form has broken the communication. One of the reasons is the fact that it has concentrated on finding new, purely formal means of expression, which are more and more difficult for a viewer to understand. Traditionally, means of artistic expression² were subordinated to the semantic message of an artwork and generally accepted composition rules were applied in both two and three - dimensional contexts. In modern art, however, either means of artistic expression have themselves become a favourite subject matter or the semantic message is interpreted in such a way that it is difficult to identify in an overdeveloped variety of such means. In the past the interpretation of an artwork was clear as its internal criteria – such as structure, generally known semantic meanings and ways of conveying them – were precisely defined. External criteria – stated by the audience – are, first of all, comprehensibility, the realism of presented semantic meanings, specific aura, simply the convention viewers are familiar with. The meanings were easy to understand since their illustrative character or artistic interpretation did not blur the clarity of the semantic layer, which was always superior to means of artistic expression. It was also easy to define the functions of art, both aesthetic and beyond aesthetic ones, which, among others, meant developing community spirit.

The invalidation of mythical content brought about the gradual loss of art communicativeness. At the same time throughout the whole 20th century, together with new technologies and materials, we observed more and more dynamic development of design. The term itself can be interpreted in a number of ways. In Italy, where it has existed since the Renaissance, it means both the idea, sketch, blueprint and the ability to produce the object. In France 'it refers to a certain state of mind, a way of approaching the concept of a new object. (...) Anglo – Saxons use it with reference to both craftwork and mass-produced industrial products. (...) In order to define the field more specifically they add an adjective and talk about *product design, graphic design, shelter design* etc.'³ Nowadays the meaning has become even wider and includes areas such as space aestheticization, visual communication or clothes. Designers provide users with useful objects – tools, which not only aestheticize our living space but also create a certain lifestyle and carry clear / comprehensible myths and narrations of our postmodern era.

Herbert von Einem⁴ (1905-1987), one of the eminent German art theoreticians and historians, states that art serves *vital functions* in the society only when it becomes a means of social communication. It happens when three decisive factors, that is the form, subject and function create the organic unity and then artworks are experienced and spontaneously understood. It is also Dewey⁵ who notices a similar triad: an artist conveying a message – an art object carrying the message – a viewer decoding the message.

² Means of artistic expressions include, among others, colour patch, contour, value, line, chiaroscuro, shape or texture

³ Guidot, R. (1997). Design 1940 – 1990. Wzornictwo I projektowanie. (Histoire du design 1940 – 1990) Trans. by J. Wiatrowski, E. Wolański. Arkady, Warszawa. p. 11, 12

⁴ Einem von, H. (1952). Fragen kunstgeschichtlicher Interpretation. Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

⁵ Dewey, J. (1939). Art as Experience. New York, Capricorn Books.

Weakening any of the three elements results in weakening the communication between the artist and the viewer. I believe that the process of gradually losing the clarity of message in the avant-garde art of the 20th century might also be associated with the shift of the subject of artistic and aesthetic programmes. An artist's 'vision' (although not always being a conscious process) is inspired by their own, individualized version of the culture they participate in. In Modernism means of expression were considered equally important, then were given priority over semantic content. While interpreting the reality, artists either distorted or invalidated the objective image in favour of means of artistic expression, abandoning the concept of clarity. At the same time, during the second avant-garde movement, new semantic, tautological content in the form of a patch, line, light, hue, rhythm etc began to emerge and constitute the main motif of an artwork substituting that of a landscape or portrait. The second part of the 20th century saw the introduction of new means of expression such as real space and time or an artist's body and new forms of artwork such as an action, a happening or an interdisciplinary artistic form.

Consequently, semantic and stylistic changes led to the loss of clarity of the message, the Intentionality⁶ of an artwork or its mythological content⁷. Senses have become hermetic and their recognition socially restricted. It is the artist who is of the first importance and not the artwork. More and more often the key to understanding the meaning of art is the biography of the author. What has become necessary is the narration provided by the artist, who has risen to the challenge creating not only an artwork but also the artist's myth formed and realized by the artist's actions, manner, public statements, often surprising or shocking. Such elements build a media image, which becomes generally recognized and, although often not connected with the content of artistic production, is supposed to attract viewers' attention. We start wondering which is more important – the artist or the artwork⁸. More and more often it is impossible to answer such a question and separate an artist's daily life from his work.

Art critics and theorists have taken on a new role of translators and interpreters teaching new meanings, forms and styles to make viewers competent enough to decipher the author's Intention. Art perception requires professional preparation and education. More and more often incomprehensible objects of art turn into luxurious and extremely extravagant goods or decorative elements. Obviously these two situations are not mutually exclusive. Paradoxically, an artwork reduced only to its decorative aspects becomes equivalent to the beautifying element of an everyday tool.

This comparison made me think of the history of design. It seems to me that the history of academic art develops in the way opposite to the history of decorating tools. If we assume that academic art progresses from the stage of communicating with the viewer in the sphere of above-practical values to the stage when it becomes a mere decorative element, that is a tool, then functional art develops in the opposite direction. Originating as an adornment enhancing the appearance of a tool it gains opportunities to autonomously convey meanings related to evaluative, above-practical ideas of contemporary existence and becomes pure art. It establishes communicative contact with the viewer and participates in the formation of a community. Spontaneously understood and experienced, with no professional or specific educational background required, it constitutes an element of everyday existence and a source of aesthetic sensations.

The myth of an artist is not the only one existing in contemporary art. The other one accompanies the rapidly developing functional art, which is linked with our everyday activity, practical thinking and

⁶ By intentional he means cultural, exhibiting semantic, stylistic or semiotic structure present in the collective experience of a given historical community, existing only in this community. Margolis, J. (1999). *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* Lectures in the Philosophy of Art. Pennsylvania State University.

⁷ Kołakowski, L. (1989). *The Presence of Myth [Obecność mitu]*. Trans. Adam Czerniawski. Chicago, London. May, R. (1991), *The Cry for Myth*. W. W. Norton & Company Inc.

⁸ Until recently mediality was an essential prerequisite for recognition in the world of art. Nowadays it is true also for other spheres of life. It is a worrying phenomenon as it refers to areas, such as science or politics, which traditionally were considered free from media influence.

acting or the handiness of tools. It is the myth of an object. The former could be observed as early as in the age of modernism, the latter, however, appeared only in postmodernist art – in the art of design. Its true sense and charm consists in the fact that, while making use of everyday handy objects, it attributes new meanings to them, disclosing their sometimes surprising values and functions. Postmodernist reality created by functional art provides a sense to our existence. It happens not only by fulfilling the needs of relatively small groups of users, but also by means of certain poetics, skillful and extremely intelligent usage of generally recognized symbols and meanings, by means of what Leszek Kołakowski⁹ describes as a cultural deposit, and Jerzy Kmita¹⁰ the area of beliefs shared by an artist and a user.

Leszek Kołakowski says that '(...) values inherited under the overpowering pressure of the authority are passed on in their mythical form, that is not as information about social or mental facts (..) but as information about what does or does not constitute a value'¹¹. He claims that myths, which teach us about what a value is, are necessary and unavoidable. The world of values and myths, the whole mythical reality described by Kołakowski is included in art as an artist's subjective values which he has either annexed or rebelled against. Participation in culture and art is the process of passing these values on to either a social group or individual human beings.

For J. Kmita¹² an artwork is communicative, and as such symbolic, in its character. However, it happens only when it is understood and interpreted and the process of understanding and interpreting always takes place in a given cultural context, which combines beliefs represented by an artist and a viewer. The agreement between them depends on the quantity or the size of the area of the beliefs shared. It seems that a product of an artist cannot be considered an artwork unless it is understood or interpreted in such a way that the attributed sense is intersubjective in character.

The larger the area of shared beliefs, the more effective communication between participants of a given culture. According to Jean-François Lyotard¹³ there is a difference between a myth, which refers to the past, and narration, which is a form of a story with the narrator either having participated in it personally or knowing it from actual participants. Narration refers to the present and is directed towards and influences the future. Existing in real time and commenting on everyday life, it may happen to anybody.

Lyotard notices that 'every narrator says he has many times heard the story he is telling. He was a listener and, in turn, the previous narrator once was also a listener. This is true for the whole process of passing on a story. It must be concluded, then, that the original narrators were the participants themselves. The time of the story when the action actually happened easily merges with the real narration time'¹⁴. Every repetition is both continuation and creation generating future behaviours of the listeners.

Examples, among others, can be found in the works of Philippe Starck, one of the most recognizable designers. Let us consider a few of them. Starck believes that with so many objects existing and the function of usefulness being fulfilled, there is no need to create new objects – tools. What he suggests are objects of a new type, objects – tools for new users i.e. anticonsumers of the third millennium. He believes that the functions an object serves are not only pragmatic but also symbolic and communicative, meant to create the poetry of everyday life.

⁹ Kołakowski L. (1989), *The Presence of Myth [Obecność mitu]*. trans. Adam Czerniawski. Chicago, London.

¹⁰ Kmita, J. (2007). *Późny wnuk filozofii. Wprowadzenie do kulturoznawstwa. (Late Grandson of Philosophy. Introduction to Cultural Studies)*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Bogucki. Poznań.

¹¹ Kołakowski L. (1989), *The Presence of Myth [Obecność mitu]*. trans. Adam Czerniawski. Chicago, London.

¹² Kmita, J. (2007). *Późny wnuk filozofii. Wprowadzenie do kulturoznawstwa. (Late Grandson of Philosophy. Introduction to Cultural Studies)*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Bogucki. Poznań.

¹³ Lyotard J. F. (1998). *The Postmodern Explained for Children: Correspondence 1982 – 85 (Postmodernizm dla dzieci. Korespondencja 1982 – 1985)*. Trans. by J. Migasiński. Aletheia. Warszawa

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 62.

Starck designed a cheese grater which he called *Mr Meumeu* (1992). It is a small container with a lid, in the form of a cuboid widening slightly towards the top with two handles which look like cow horns. The shape itself indicates the purpose, it is an announcement for a user. 'But the symbolism is most important, as Parmesan is made with milk, and milk comes from cows.'¹⁵ The lid, thanks to a magnet can be placed on a fridge and the gadget turns into a Parmesan holder which can be put on a table. If necessary, the tight-fitting lid prevents the grated cheese from getting dry.

Another kitchen utensil is the *Hot Bertaa* kettle (1987). It consists of only two parts -: 'the dynamic part (when you put it down in the kitchen, you get the feeling that it moves by itself), and the magic part (where and how can I refill this kettle?). There is no lid, you fill it through the handle. It looks rather simple, but there is a truly complicated system of valves inside.'¹⁶ This is another object which fascinates with its form and functionality. It is impossible to get burnt while taking the lid off as there is no lid. Starck used the contrast of dimensions, shapes, colours and textures between the only two existing elements – the body and the handle. The dynamic, shiny shape is absolutely unique, unlike any other kettle. The dynamism is achieved by the blue narrow oblique shaft piercing the oval, polished body with the vertical axis slightly deflected. If enlarged and situated in the open air, it would become an intriguing structure – a sculpture with metallic surface reflecting the surroundings, thus perfectly fitting in any kind of space. However, the greatest value of this utensil is its unusual, far from ordinary form combined with new technology, which results in certain poetry and magic being introduced to the kitchen. It demonstrates that new technology serves the user and not the other way round, which is a concept quite common in postmodern narration.

Another of Starck's products is *Pasta Mandala* (1987). This is what he says about it in the exhibition catalogue: 'How something interesting could be done with pasta? It's a 'Freudian' or regressive food, so we asked ourselves, what is the pleasure in eating pasta? (...) So we decided to make an empty space, to make pasta with a hole in it, a tubular pasta, but to prevent it from caving in we gave it a multidimensional spring, which means it never gets crushed. That way I sell 10% pasta and 90% air. I am happy and I don't get fat.' To prevent it from overcooking 'we created two 'reinforcements' which double the thickness. In other words, when the pasta is overcooked, this part will remain "al dente", will give it a spring and show the person not to overcook it the next time. Then we made some little grooves that help hold the sauce, but I'm not that bothered because I don't like sauce anyway. Then there's the symbolic level and also the communicative, so we go to talk to the doctor to find out what pasta is, and well, it's like bread only more balanced. Ah, it's more balanced, so I'll design it as a Ying Yang sign, the universal symbol of equilibrium. (...) It's all strictly functional, because all the fun in managing a project like this is simply to arrive at an un-stratified object, meaningless, a bearer of myths and dreams, but one that is even more functional than all the others. That's when you have to laugh, because we have arrived where the game starts to be played right to the limit'¹⁷. Creating pasta with a universal symbol, extra grooves to help hold the sauce, strengthening the structure to prevent overcooking but at the same time making it more flexible, all these seem to show genuine concern for both those who cook and eat the pasta and demonstrate a rare ability to create an image of a well-known everyday product. This kind of thinking and acting, far from being routine and schematic, is extremely creative but at the same time pragmatic. The pasta can be described using standard art terminology: author - Philippe Starck, theme – pasta, materials – wheat flour, water, salt, eggs, date – 1987. What should be mentioned next is the connection between the theme, shape and function, the consciously used means of artistic expression such as cylindrical shape, grooved surface with two extra narrow cylinders placed within the diameter, the easiness of operating the openwork design. We cannot ignore the natural colour of the material, which emphasizes the elaborate shape. It is worth remembering that, when cooked, the material becomes slightly translucent and changes its temperature, which creates an additional sensation for the user. Another aspect is the symbolism contained in the work and the universal message it conveys. Originating from Eastern culture the jing

¹⁵ Ph. Starck [in:] Starck. *Vanity Case ...*, op. cit., p. 53.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Ph. Starck [in:] Starck. *Vanity Case ...*, op. cit., p. 19.

jang symbol, used by Starck to reinforce the pasta from within, is understandable in every culture. This is also true for the unconscious archetypes of sensuality and sex – pasta – ribbon – snake, which only Freud made us aware of. The universal quality of the message lies also in the fact that almost all over the world everybody with a plate of cooked pasta in front of them will use it in the way the designer intended it to happen. It is the eclecticism of cultures and traditions making use of general human behaviours and consumers' preferences. It is a dialogue between the designer and users, appealing to their experience, knowledge, appetite and sense of humour.

Vase Mendini (1990) was created by Starck as one of a hundred of identically shaped vases. Alessandro Mendini – the artistic director of Alessi – sent the same vase to 100 designers and asked them to decorate it. Starck accepted the offer because of Mendini, an outstanding designer and design theoretician. 'I have the naive pretension of working in the long term but I decided that for fun I was going to work on it at that instant. The day Mendini phoned to ask me to participate was the day the Gulf War was declared. While I listened to Mendini, I listened at the same time to the radio. And I simply summarized the situation at the moment I was on the telephone. In other words, at the base I described the Nazi swastika that had damaged the Jewish people, who then put the Palestinian people in a disadvantageous situation, and we still live with the consequences to this day. This brought us to the fires of war and, at that moment, to the nagging doubt that President Khaddaffi might have atomic bombs or biological weapons. It was a graphic description of what I heard on the radio at that moment. This vase was really nothing to me, just a favour for a friend, but it was transformed by these choices into quite an important thing in view of the reactions it caused. In effect, the vase was immediately bought by collectors and the stock was exhausted in a number of hours. Those which Alberto Alessi wanted to keep for exhibitions were destroyed by both Nazi commandoes and representatives of the Jewish people who could not stand them. One can understand the similarity between the two logos.'¹⁸.

The vase, unlike any other object, is a form of narration, commentary on the social and political situation in the Near East. By covering it with symbols of contradictory ideas, which create the aesthetics of the object, Starck managed to graphically illustrate the conflicts existing in the Near East for years, since the Second World War until the present. It must be pointed out that all the symbols are visually interesting, complementing each other by contrast or harmony of lines and hues. Thanks to the usage of well-known symbols a new communicative dimension is added. The object demonstrates two aspects: one – the commentary on the contemporary political situation, the other – art as a beyond verbal language, capable of using well-known symbols and making them qualitatively different. Taking into consideration the fact that the vase is a porcelain urn machine made in Italy, Starck's decorations acquire new meaning. In the Near East cremation is forbidden because of religious reasons, so the communicative and aesthetic values of the object have been assigned a priority. Conflicts still exist so Starck's narration still remains valid.

Another object arousing astonishment and pleasure was an intelligent water bottle which he called *Glacier* (1990). It was commissioned by a man who had bought a glacier to be able to drink the purest water in the world and wanted Starck to make the most intelligent bottle in the world. 'A bottle that opens and closes automatically because (...) people are always on the go, walking or driving...'¹⁹. Today we all know various versions of plastic bottles which can easily be opened by pulling up a plastic movable top and closed by pushing the top down. In such bottles water does not go smelly or musty. Starck's transparent bottle has cylindrical shape narrowing towards the top to form a white cone with a movable, spherical top. The investor wanted the proceeds to help protect whales, not directly, but by taking over and closing down whale processing factories. What motivated him was not financial profit but whale protection and Starck gave him the project as a present, without any fee. The designer often emphasizes the importance of who commissions the work and their motivation, which influence his decision whether to accept an offer or decline it. He is ready to realize any dreams which are important

¹⁸ Ph. Starck [in:] Starck. Vanity Case ..., op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁹ Ph. Starck [in:] Starck. Vanity Case ..., op. cit., p. 17.

for himself or others, no matter how big – a house- or how small – an ashtray, a coin, a dumb-bell, a toilet brush, a watch or shoes – they are.

Similar examples can be found in the work of many other designers, including Polish ones. Maja Ganszyniec²⁰ made a bath stopper *Easy Plug* for people with reduced motor skills. It feels like a nice stone. Its handiness as a bath stopper has been invalidated by the aesthetics – its colour, matt surface, weight, irregularity and softness of the shape associated with natural stone. Its construction, with a load hidden inside, combined with water pressure ensures that it fits tight. A subtle hand gesture is enough to open it. Its shape resembles that of stones found on a beach and, shamefully hidden in our luggage, brought home from holidays. *Easy Plug* demonstrates the magic of sea stones even though it has never experienced sea water. Although created with physically disabled people in mind, it fulfills aesthetic expectations of many other users.

Anna Ostrowska²¹ designed a mug for the blind, which they can use unaided. It is constructed in such a way that when liquid is poured into it, its centre of gravity changes, which is accompanied by a characteristic sound – the click of a part of the cup bottom against the counter – then a blind person knows the mug is full.

The development of technical culture, new materials and technologies facilitated the realization of almost every conceivable design, with the priority assigned to aesthetic values but supplemented with the mythology of our post-modern era. Nowadays designers' work is transformed from artistic craft into art with a capital 'A', which means favourable conditions for the myth of an artist – designer to develop. Simultaneously, another post modern myth appeared – the myth of an object²². It is created around an object as a mass produced product, available to any average user. Functional qualities undeniably do matter, but it is aesthetic values that make us want the object or not. What appeals to users are simple means of artistic expression such as shape, colour, texture, line (contour) and skillful combination of these qualities. Intuitively we choose objects to our liking which fulfil our aesthetic needs and break the monotony and routine of everyday life, but also demonstrate semantic content and beyond practical statements creating new object space. We buy them because of their aesthetic qualities and above practical meanings as their level of functionality is generally the same. What is more, the semantic content of those objects – tools is open and provides the user with opportunities to build their own myths and narrations in two ways:

- by becoming a member of a group of conscious users choosing objects which can be recycled, are energy saving, made by a specific designer or company etc.,
- by wishing to become a member of a group of selected users who appear in media advertising campaigns, including famous people, role models, celebrities, but also ordinary people just like us.

Today affluence is not manifested by means of jewellery, fur coats or cars, it is demonstrated by possessing the latest technologically advanced electronic equipment, household goods or alternative architectural innovations etc. Often it is equivalent to using products of a specific company or designer. Everyday objects are handy, they make life easier and beautify the living space while also carrying beyond-artistic meanings. Using them is a source of pleasure. Having become a common feature of human existence, not only does the art of design aesthetize the surroundings, but it also influences our behaviours, shapes our conscience and develops the sense of togetherness. Developing the feeling of possessing a really extraordinary thing, it improves the user's self-esteem.

The choice of one specific object can also be conditioned by the realization of the user's individualized image of themselves. Advertisements make us want to identify with people they present by buying the

²⁰ <http://studioganszyniec.com/>

²¹ <http://graduationprojects.eu/pl/2004/Anna-Ostrowska>

²² Simultaneously with the process of creating artist mythology, in order to fulfil the needs of producers and marketing, advertising as a new form of object mythologization has developed. This process is not discussed in my paper.

goods advertised. Consequently, we can feel a member of a very special group of famous actors, sports personalities or very successful people. Possessing an object fosters self-creation and develops the sense of uniqueness and security.

Each everyday object is ergonomic and displays artistic values appropriated from academic art, which, thanks to the newest technologies, have gained a dominant position with the user's needs being of the highest importance. At the same time it is equipped with either a myth or narration understandable for the user.

Liotard and Barthes very accurately described the essence of creation of art objects, their existence independent of the author's intentions, new meanings attributed by viewers and also in every single case formulating rules and principles governing the artistic process. This is how contemporary design works. There are neither material, technological or stylistic limitations nor any rules which cannot be broken. It is a pure vision of a designer and the effect – the object functioning both as a thing and a tool - modifies our everyday existence and also us. All the above mentioned qualities of design produce synergies, for which theoreticians and historians of design use the term *added value*. Never before has art been so popular and available, in the sense suggested by Dewey and Shusterman, and aesthetic sensations triggered by everyday commonly used objects.

In the postmodern era we can notice the revival of the significance of artistic statements in the discourse on risks and threats facing the society. An outstanding German social philosopher Ulrich Beck says that the fashionable prefix 'post', while being the code of our times, demonstrates our helplessness towards the reality which we do not understand. Postindustrial, postmodern society is, at least for the time being, defenceless against the dangers resulting from technological and industrial development or excessive exploitation of natural resources. Beck wrote that '(...) an <<antimodernist>> scenario which is currently worrying the world – the criticism of science, technology and development, new social movements – does not contradict modernity, but is an expression of its consistent development moving beyond the concept of industrial society'²³.

Modern society has been evaluated from the perspective of economic and technological growth, or industrial production. Apart from these categories there are no other positive assessments of the degree of social development. The existing system of constant economic progress – the basis of the myth '(...) begins to revise itself through its own dynamics'²⁴

Production methods and principles of work organization are modified: '(...) the changeability of work time and place blurs the boundaries between work and non-work'²⁵. Advanced production brings about increased consumption. We have all become mainly consumers, who, in pursuit of the latest goods, substitute 'old' objects - tools, still in good working order, with newer, more spectacular ones. At the same time social awareness has increased. More and more often a consumer is a reflective user posing questions which concern global issues such as greenhouse effect, growing aggression resulting from economic inequities, threats connected with atom technologies or polluting natural environment.

Design can communicate not only aesthetic values but also beyond aesthetic, humanistic ones, which constitute one of concerns for intellectual reflection. The sheer opportunity to compare and point out shared ideas present in the conception of Ulrich Beck, for example, and in the works of the leading representatives of contemporary design such as Starck seems to form good grounds for hope that communication between an artist and a viewer is feasible. The most common statements (communicative function according to von Einem) generated by functional art are:

- fulfilling users' aesthetic needs by accepting their preferences and offering a variety of stylistic options,
- making monotonous everyday activities easier and more enjoyable with the help of objects,

²³ Beck, U. (2002). Społeczeństwo ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności. (Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity). Trans. S. Cieślą. Ed. J. Raciborski. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar Sp. z o.o. Warszawa.

²⁴ Beck, U. (2002). Społeczeństwo ryzyka..., op.cit., p.18

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 21.

- participating, through buying a product, in various programs, for example environmental ones based on recycling products and packaging,
- supporting charity organizations by buying specific products,
- demonstrating, by using specific objects, a certain outlook on life, for example concern for environment protection, preference for a specific designer or producer
- aesthetic values such as an interesting or intriguing shape, carefully planned colour scheme, texture, precisely and inventively developed detail,
- the latest technologies, materials and technical solutions used when making a product, affordable price or convenient form of payment,
- durability, reliability, long guarantee,

Although not included in the instruction manual, each of the above mentioned statements is clear for an average user without any intermediary in the form of art theory or critique. It is this spontaneous reception and understanding of functional art that is its major asset.

What definitely seems to be a cause for concern is the attempts to ‘museumise’ design, which, in my opinion, means the betrayal of the original idea itself. An everyday object exhibited in an exclusive art gallery might attract richer users, which seemingly increases the designer’s prestige through an excessive price or the uniqueness of the venue. It can be interpreted as an attempt to build the artist’s myth by museumising an object rather than by its universality, usefulness and aesthetic values. However, such steps turn out to be ineffective in view of ruthless verification of a product provided by aware of their rights and complex - free users in the context of everyday existence. In postmodern world the success of a design product is measured by the degree of its usefulness, popularity and technological modernity (using the latest technologies and materials of the best quality). Commercial success also cannot be ignored as the designer’s and producer’s profits develop their respective reputations. Through quality and popularity they build their brand name and myth. It seems that the greatest benefit of functional art is its pragmatism, the quality of being ingrained in everyday existence, without which it becomes simply a museum exhibit lacking in its original sense.

It is worth pointing out that not only have contemporary designers regained communicativeness with viewers, which was lost in the modernist era, but they have also established a dialogue building new postmodernist reality. Our age calls for efficient handling of postindustrial problems afflicting societies neglected in terms of economy or civilization and it is one of the essential requirements of modernity.

What I find truly important is the perception process of postmodernist art. John Dewey’s and Richard Shusterman’s pragmatic aesthetics, popular in America, favours the emotional model of participating in art, which emphasizes sensation, impression and direct experience. Anna Pałubicka²⁶ claims that avant-garde art of the 20th century as early as in the 1930s expected viewers to demonstrate intellectual reflection, the ability to analyse and interpret meanings, which required suitable cultural competence.

When buying everyday objects – an iron, a lemon squeezer, a bath stopper, a mug or a fridge – we have to demonstrate a set of competences. The basic are technical ones and refer to our knowledge how to use a tool. The beyond-practical ones mean the ability to identify and decipher senses determined by designers, favouring specific mythology and narration of our times, often referring to social beliefs,

²⁶ According to Anna Pałubicka, the European culture has been based on two thought patterns and two corresponding ways of participation in culture. One, originating from the ancient Greek tradition based on rational, cause-and-result model of thinking and dialogue, and the other based on Christian tradition accentuating the solemnity of sensations and emotions stirred by the revealed vision together with the authority of the person experiencing it. The above mentioned patterns generate two models of culture participation, one – rational, reflexive and intellectual, the other - emotional and intuitive. For centuries, one of the strengths of European culture has been the equilibrium between the two, resulting in both models actually existing in culture participation. More in: Pałubicka A., (2013), *Gramatyka kultury europejskiej, (The Grammar of European Culture)*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, Bydgoszcz.

traditions or current affairs. It may even be the name of an object –tool, a detail taken from the historical production process or tradition, as well as donating a part of the profit to charity or social projects.

All those beyond-practical aspects stir our emotions and may cause concern in our consumer choices. Design has become omnipresent in our lives not only by means of objects we use, constituting an endless source of sensations. Aestheticization of private space, taking into consideration a variety of users' preferences, is a standard procedure today. Similar rigours apply to public space although here the process of aestheticization evolves in such a way that it does not disturb but rather emphasizes the functional character and priorities of the space.

It can be concluded that design has restored the communicative and emotional bond with an average user. The process of art reception, although analysed along slightly different lines in American and European culture, adds to the variety and richness of human relations. The term 'design' itself has widened its scope to incorporate not only tools or everyday objects but also ways of space planning, visual communication, clothing etc.

It is worth noticing that today we observe a twofold tendency to limit consumption, with many designers being involved in popularizing the idea. One option is to create new multi-functional objects, substituting a number of them with one only; the other concentrates on recycling and reusing already existing objects and materials. The situation is genuinely independent of fashion trends and can be described as conscious consumerism or anti consumerism.

I have carefully observed the development of design. It has always been a synergistic effect combining the latest technology, aesthetics, Heidegger's handiness, mythology understandable for the user and narration containing pro-social content. Such beyond – verbal form of communication can be understood in many cultures. It shapes not only our space but also our awareness in a much more effective manner than words do.

I have taken keen interest in the effect of work of scientists, engineers and designers creating prostheses for physically disabled people, wheelchairs, means of public transport and other tools for weak social groups who, until relatively recently, were marginalized. It seems that the ubiquity of design in our everyday life is unavoidable and the potential for shaping the environment limitless. I suppose it will continue to develop dynamically making use of the latest technologies and materials or even stimulating further advances.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that designers' creative activities refer also to the armaments industry and other industrial productions of dubious usefulness. In this way design is no more restricted to purely aesthetic considerations and, as a result, it has been included in the scope of research of numerous philosophical and social sciences.

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