

Ann Maes :

## Visual pollution

**“Wouldn't it be useful to reduce  
the chaotic production  
of quasi-useful things to a bare minimum,  
so as to leave more energy in our  
overburdened society for fulfilling  
the essential human desires and needs?”**

Gerrit Rietveld (1958)

The visual pollution, wastefulness and enormous amounts of kitsch, junk and exceedingly ugly and superfluous products that surround us, is clearly insane. On the one hand, this phenomenon is rooted in the technical potential created by industry, which actually encouraged this kind of over-production and diversity; but, on the other hand, designers and conceptualizers are equally to blame. Vulgar love of lucre, shallowness, total indifference and producers lacking 'culture', vision and creativity, curb the production of original and sensible products.

The situation is a very sad one in view of the fact that the same amount of energy could be expended on making a perfectly acceptable and durable product instead of yet another polluter of images and environment! Not only ordinary kitsch belongs to the category of energy wasters, so does the elitist design kitsch that seems to constitute much of the fireworks of the internationally acclaimed designers. But there is more: what about that relentless production of 'redundant' design, like the useless, dust-attracting open CD-racks and all those trendy products with an ever-shorter life-span, whose only aim seems to be to add to an ever-growing mountain of refuse? Or, to quote Andrea Branzi, for years a defender of eco-design: 'We find ourselves in the midst of a jungle, and we seem to be completely lost. Starting from scratch may seem to be a drastic solution, but it is probably the only way of getting out of that jungle.'

It appears to be fashionable these days to be environmentally friendly, at the risk of using this attitude as a marketing tool to remain in the centre of attention. It stands to reason that any type of product development based on ecology is particularly valuable: natural and biodegradable materials, energy-saving production processes, recyclable products ... laudable, no doubt ! But shouldn't we, besides all this, take a closer look at the contents of each and every product? Isn't it possible to manufacture purely functional, qualitatively outstanding but simply and solely vital things? Things vouchsafed a long life and consequently showing much greater respect to the environment than all those trendy products that need recycling in no time at all, merely because the gilt has worn off the gingerbread. Many people pretend recycling does not require research, time, money and energy ... But who dares to say the recycled product is not even more damaging to the environment than the original product?

42 Wiggle Side Chair  
*Wiggle Side Stuhl*

**Material:** Corrugated cardboard.  
**Material:** Wellpappe.

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Timeless products would be able to recycle themselves, thus becoming second or even third-hand products. This, however, requires quality material at all levels: quality technique, functional quality and quality design. A simple, minimal design is not only more timeless than decorative and over-ornate styling, but it also builds a communicative bridge between the product and its users, with the added advantage of restoring visual peace and quiet to our environment. (And don't we all deserve this ?)

As long as industry fails to assume its responsibilities and agree to market sensible products, and as long as commerce fails to shoulder its share of the responsibility by buying sensible products, it will take a lot of additional, energy-consuming effort to eliminate and recycle the mountain of waste whose very existence could have been avoided.

**Ann Maes** (Belgium) studied interior architecture at the Academy of Applied Arts in Brussels and product design at the Academy of Industrial Design in Eindhoven. She is active as an industrial designer, journalist, lecturer, teacher and art director. Several of her designs have been awarded prizes, for example the Intercom Award, 1st Lighting prize at the International Biennial Interieur '84 Kortrijk. As a correspondent for the Italian magazine 'Abitare' and the Belgian publication 'Villa's', she promotes design and architecture from the Netherlands and other European countries, as well as from Japan.