

# “JUTE, NOT PLASTIC!”:DESIGNING AND CONSUMING NATURE IN WEST GERMANY IN THE 1970S

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## Abstract:

Against the background of the ecological crisis of the 1970s and the New Social Movements this paper looks at the relationship between the increasing fear of loss of nature and the development of alternative commodity culture. I shall argue that the increasing fear of the destruction of nature not only affected criticism of the consumer society, but also developed into a driving force for the design and consumption of nature. In so doing, I show how different ideas of nature and naturalness – which developed out of the protest against the destructive and alienating effects of industrialism and rationalism – became romantic and sensuous ingredients for alternative design and consumption in West Germany, when the criticism on Functionalism and the inhospitability of cities was at its height.

## MAIN TEXT

“It seems that there is an inner need to rediscover the natural, but which has little to do with Romanticism's virginal nature. (...) Rather than the dialectic opposites of nature and culture as antagonistic entities, they should be considered as peacefully co-existing” (Kotig 1977).<sup>1</sup>

This statement by the artist and writer Jan Kotik accompanying the exhibition *Neues Gewerbe und Industrie (New Crafts and Industry)* at the International Design Centre in Berlin in 1977 points to a key notion infusing the discourse on commodity culture during the 1970s – the changing meaning of ‘nature’. This discourse has been informed by the social and ecological crisis of advanced modern

societies and goes hand in hand with the 'greening' of the new social movements (NSMs). Against the background of these diverse protest initiatives and movements, including the ecology movement, women's liberation, the third world movement, and hundreds of civil rights initiatives, 'nature' became a central social and cultural value.<sup>2</sup> Following the student revolt of 1968, this development has been accompanied by the paradigmatic shift from class struggle to broader questions of social identity, including new questions of lifestyle with a high concentration on the exploitation of nature.<sup>3</sup> This shift has been shaped by new social needs and desires fused with fear of the destruction of nature, which has emerged at least since the oil crisis of 1973/74. The oil crisis drove home the message of the planet's limits, as was highlighted most strikingly by the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* already a year before.

The brown and raw-textured shopping bag bearing the words "Jute, not plastic!" ("*Jute statt Plastik!*"), became probably the most significant object within the search for an alternative consumer culture. (figs. 1, 2) This paper has the popular slogan in its title because it embodies the complex set of values underlying the symbolic protest made by critical consumer culture with affinities to the NSMs – ranging from a call for the replacement of synthetics with natural materials, to the increasing solidarity with

people in developing countries as expressed by the slogan's sub-line "Handmade in Bangladesh".<sup>4</sup> Though this outlines an international development, any examination of nature's revaluation in a West German context should take into consideration the admittedly ambivalent significance of industrial design, in particular of Functionalist design. Industrial design in this tradition was seen as an extremely important force for progress and wealth within post-war reconstruction, when German high quality standards and the "ideal form" were propagated abroad. This was one way of overcoming the Fascist past, but Germany was accused of causing the destruction of nature at the same time.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the alienating effects of rationalist post-war city-planning (famously termed by psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich as *The Inhospitability of our Cities* in 1965), such an exploration should take into account the growing protests against nuclear power and the threatening effects of forest dieback from the mid-1970s onwards. The slogan, "First the forest dies and then people" ("*Erst stirbt der Wald, dann der Mensch*"), became one of the buzz-phrases within the West German environmental movement and gives us an idea of the drastic effects of forest dieback for the Germans.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1 (left): A shopping bag made of jute bearing the words “Jute, not plastic!” (“*Jute statt Plastik!*”) and the sub-line “Handmade in Bangladesh”. © Jungwirth, Nikolaus and Gerhard Kromschroder (1994) *Flokati-Fieber □ Liebe, Lust und Leid der 70er Jahre*, Frankfurt: Eichborn.

Fig. 2 (right): Des-In, lampshade crafted of recycled jute, © Des-In / private collection of Beate Rosebrock.

Against this background I shall argue that the increasing fear of the destruction of nature not only affected criticism of the consumer society, but also developed into a driving force for the design and consumption of nature. As recently shown in projects such as the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Nature Design: From Inspiration to Innovation*, a more nature-oriented design repeatedly comes into fashion when the modern industrialized society feels in crisis (Sachs 2007). Such work, as well as my own research, point to recurring themes and motifs of nature and naturalness that are re-imagined and re-mediated through things. My research, which was carried out inside and outside the formal design world, underlines that such themes and motifs are not the mere products of designers and companies, but rather have been put to work through the making of things. I also understand design work as it was

described by the sociologist Tim Dant, that “[d]esigners are themselves immersed within the culture from which they learn their skills and develop their ideas, and it is perhaps better to see them as the mediators of the culture (...)” (Dant 1999: 140). My work, which draws on objects, texts and adverts, including the study of counter cultural magazines such as *Blatt (Leaf)*, *Plärrer (Bawler)* and *Pflasterstrand (Concrete Beach)*, points to the significance of a recurring range of themes and motifs, including: the nostalgic – with a remarkable foible for Art Nouveau ornaments and typography (fig. 3), a love of the forest with its trees, plants and animals (including a foible for all natural products from Scandinavia) (fig. 4), and romantic ideas about ‘exotic’ nature types of the Far East (fig. 5). Such motifs appear in advertisements by IKEA Germany, as well as the work of the progressive design-initiative Des-In, founded at the School of Design at Offenbach, as shall be explained later.



Fig. 3 (left): Cover of the alternative city magazine *Pflasterstrand (Concrete Beach)* (1976).



Fig. 4 (middle): Cover of the German edition of the IKEA-catalogue (1978/79).



Fig. 5 (right): Interior design suggestion in the magazine *Schöner Wohnen (Better Living)* (1976). The interior design includes Dorothee Becker's ginkgo-leaf sculpture. Within the limited space of this paper, I shall

draw on two sets of work that allow me to touch upon different themes and motifs and so paint a larger picture of underlying needs, wants and dreams as embodied in things: One is a set of adverts by DesignM as offered in the counter cultural magazine *Blatt (Leaf)*, including a work of the Munich-based designer Dorothee (Maurer-) Becker. The second is a selection of work by the Offenbach design initiative Des-In as presented at the exhibition *Neues Gewerbe und Industrie (New Crafts and Industry)* in 1977.

### Promises of alternative design and consumption<sup>7</sup>

The Munich city magazine *Blatt (Leaf)* with a tree in its logo set out to offer an alternative guide for survival in the “hostile” city from 1973 onwards (*Blatt* 1973: editorial statement). Besides news and reports, the magazine offered a variety of leisure and shopping opportunities, particularly for people with less money – a key concern of the counter culture in attacking high design. The programme addressed the critical young consumer with affinities to the NSMs circles. In 1975 *Blatt* advertised two products by DesignM, the first design firm of the well-known German designer Ingo Maurer (figs. 6, 7).



Becker, in interview with Martina Fineder, December 2010).

These words contain valuable remarks when investigating different ideas about the naturalness of objects. One of these involves the image of one of nature's most romantic phenomena – the dusk, the short time of the day when the world is beautifully coloured by twilight. Here it is the romantic imagination of a natural phenomenon that is re-imagined and re-mediated through the light of a lamp. Dusk and twilight are key motifs of Romantic poetry and painting, and are still one of the most popular motifs in advertising, love songs and romantic movies. The other valuable remark Dorothee Becker's description offers is the 'Easternization' of commodity culture in the 1970s, when non-western practices like Henna tattooing, meditation and the use of incense sticks became fashionable. The tea-ceremony and the use of incense sticks are part of the consumption of an idealized imagination of 'exotic' nature, a sort of naturalness, as sociologist Jackie Stacey describes, that "the West has lost and which can be brought back elsewhere" (Stacey 2000: 112). In *Global Culture/ Global Nature* and her colleagues point out that there are certain ideas of nature, certain ideas of naturalness, that are re-imagined, re-mediated and reworked into things.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, to quote sociologist Maureen Paterson, "[t]here is a particular way of nature that becomes cultivated, partly the res-

fantasies and daydreams concerning the natural world that we wish to buy into, and which are subsequently sold back to us in commoditised form, as advertisements, theme-parks and eco-friendly-products" (Paterson 2006: 141). Paterson draws here on John Urry's famous concept of the 'tourist gaze', including the 'romantic gaze', which is ascribed to the urban middle-class search for an individualistic, romantic encounter with nature. Urry also argues that these gazes are reproduced through things such as postcards, films and souvenirs etc. (Urry 1990). Such representations, no matter how topical they are, are influential in shaping our imaginations of a thing's origin and its relation to nature.

Postcards were used extensively in Dorothee Becker's artfully arranged shop windows of "Utensilo", her shop in Munich. These two images here are elements of one larger decoration. Both images provide glimpses of a balanced life close to nature, one in a traditional Japanese forest and the other in the untouched highlands of Tibet. (figs. 8, 9).





Figs. 8, 9: Details of a shop window in Dorothee Maurer's shop "Utensilo" in Munich, about 1976. © Dorothee Becker.

The first shows a woman dressed in traditional Japanese style and accessories on her walk through the Bamboo-forest. The second shows a woman (probably the mother) with two children sitting at a fireplace in front of an impressive mountain massif. Though different in theme, these postcards cast a sensuous and nostalgic gaze upon a life where Far East nature types are evoked and re-mediated. Together with other elements of the decoration such as dried plants and stuffed animals, the images provide a particular setting for the presentation of the things offered in her shop. They provide an environment that suggests tradition, authenticity and the existence of balanced nature-culture relationships. The design of the shop windows played a major role in expressing Dorothee Becker's idea of commodity culture – of "practical and beautiful" things, as her business cards suggests. To underline this way of thinking she uses the drawing of a cricket for her logo, an

insect she chose not only for its beautiful sound, but also its highly efficient locomotive system.<sup>9</sup> The fusion between the practical and beautiful has a longstanding tradition in western Modernist design and architecture. In this context Japanese commodity culture was a source of inspiration from the nineteenth century onwards, valued for its subdued elegance, simplicity and functionality as well as its respectful use of natural resources. In this context it should also be mentioned that the western idea of the 'exotic' Far East has also always been a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences", to use historian Edward Said's descriptions as quoted in the book *Global Nature, Global Culture* (Said 1978 quoted in Franklin *et al* 2000: 121).

#### **A call for more sensuousness in modern life**

"The West's bid" to reinvent nature", Jackie Stacey says, "is achieved through the re-contextualisation of practices, beliefs and commodities from non-western cultures." (Stacey 2000: 212) This involves idealized fantasies of particular natural settings, or the gaze onto certain nature-culture relationships, also the authentication of forms, materials and patterns as shown in the *Global Nature/Global Culture* book. This further nourishes fantasies and daydreams of getting away from the stressful every day, promising retreat for body and soul. This is a theme raised with the Des-In group's recycling work with tea-chests, originally used for overseas transport from the Far East to Western Europe (fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Des-In, tea-chest table, about 1975.  
© Des-In / private collection Beate Rosebrock.

Referring to their search for a new  
“sensuousness through ornamentation”  
(*Sinnlichkeit durch Ornament*) they stated:

“The typographic ornamentation  
“...is created here by divesting  
the waste materials used from  
their original context. The  
information that had a practical  
meaning during the tea chest's  
first use is no longer needed in  
this form. But its new effect is not  
just aesthetic, it tells us about its  
printing methods, the  
characteristics of its surface, and  
also about the goods that were  
transported within, about a  
particular production method,  
about a sensuous imperfection  
and about the restfulness and

balance promised by a cup of tea.  
Even if just intimations, these are  
aspirations towards a lifestyle”  
(Müller 1977: 23).

The tea chests described were used to make  
furniture like cupboards and tables as  
presented at the aforementioned New Crafts  
and Industries exhibition in 1977. These  
products unified the two main interests of the  
Offenbach design-initiative: one of these is  
their challenging response to German  
Rationalism and Functionalism. Within their  
search for more “sensuousness” and “fun” the  
group developed a distinctive ornamental  
vocabulary based on the recycling of everyday  
ornaments and pattern as found in  
information prints and designs on tea chests  
and offset-printing plates. This involved the  
call for the reevaluation of the ornament in  
design which challenged the Functionalist’s  
ban of the ornamental. The group termed this  
the “rich ornamental quality of poor  
material,” as described by Lothar Müller, one  
of the founding member students (Müller  
1977: 23–23). The use of recycled material is  
determined by their second key interest, or  
better to say, key concern: The response to  
the alarming *Limits to Growth*, that “*Hit us like  
a hammer!*”, to quote founding member  
Jochen Gros, a design professor at the  
Offenbach School of Design at that time,  
(Jochen Gros, in interview with Martina  
Fineder, April 2007).

The use of natural motifs by Des-In is crucial for my research. Their experimental work with used materials and the search for new ornaments also involves a revaluation of nature and naturalness. The work involved a series of lampshades crafted of used offset-printing plates. The 'old' plates still carry the printing-data and therefore provide rich sources of pictures, pattern, texts etc., in the group's conception were unders ornaments and pattern of the everyday designers selected plates with prints of beautiful landscapes (including dreami surrounding towns), (fig. 11) as well as of plants and insects. In this way natur put to work to fulfil the groups call for "sensuousness through ornamentation". Various things are particularly relevant exploring the relationship between the increasing fear of the destruction of nature and alternative commodity culture: one of their lampshades is made of a printing-plate and contains an advert for honey or an information print on a honey container. (fig. 12) A lovely illustration of diligent bees on their way back to the honeycomb evokes the idea of healthy nature in connection with the object. It also contains terms like "medicine", "whole", "nature" – a set of values promising health and balance through the consumption of this all-natural product. Here nature is re-mediated and represented through all-natural honey production. Since bees are known as extremely pollution-sensitive they were given the symbolic connotation of intact nature. At the same time the mass death of bees became

a herald of nature's destruction throughout the twentieth century. Immanent threats of environmental pollution caused by pesticides and herbicides seem to be in contrast to the "purity" of this German product guaranteed by the German beekeeper, as we are assured by the information on the printing-plate.



Figs. 11, 12: Des-In, lampshades crafted of used offset-printing plates, about 1976.  
© Des-In / private collection of Beate Rosebrock (left), private collection of Jochen Gros (right) .

At this point we might mention the special problem of discussing 'purity', 'German', and the promotion of quality in a national product in the environmentalist context. This is

grounded in the problematic historical relationship between nature conservation and the fatal National Socialist 'blood and soil' philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it can be argued that highlighting German natural quality emphasises the reassuring significance of a product's origin in a familiar natural surroundings; the all-natural quality guaranteed by the German beekeepers refers furthermore to the fact that in post-war years a good deal of the honey production was based on syrup of various sorts and not all-natural bee honey.

The bee honey lampshade, as stated before, belongs to a series of the Des-In group's work made of offset-printing plates. Working in an open initiative with a strong faith in the power of self-determination, decentralized production and handicraft, the work with the thin aluminium material offered new possibilities – putting it in their own words – for:

“(…) the development of complex, exciting, natural forms. Not least as a symbol of a new worth being assigned to nature and naturalness” (Müller 1977: 40).

The foldability of the thin material allowed the manufacturing of lampshades inspired by the “Butterfly” and the “Blossom”, both motifs

also provide names for the designs. I close now with the image of the lampshades arranged like a loose swarm of flying insects. (fig. 13) I use this image also to add a few notes on the Des-In group: The group was formed by 13 members of both sexes in 1973.<sup>11</sup> They split up only four years later owing to failed group dynamics. They had already created a furore in the year of their foundation with their first presentation of their concept of “sensuousness through ornamentation” by winning a design competition launched by the International Design Centre in Berlin in 1974, entitled Products and Environment.



Fig. 13: Des-In, lampshades crafted of used offset-printing plates, about 1976.  
© Des-In / private collection of Beate Rosebrock.

### Conclusion:

This exploration of the relationship between the fear of the destruction of nature and the search for an alternative commodity culture has used different objects and adverts to show how recurring motifs, themes and “gazes” onto nature and naturalness have been reworked, re-mediated and re-imagined

through the making and the consumption of things. To a certain extent, the motifs introduced in this paper embody romantically idealized ideas of nature. Within the search for more sensuousness in modern life, such ideas of nature are put to work to oppose the threatening effects of large-scale industrialism, Functionalism, Rationalism and the resulting inhospitability of the cities. The relationship between alternative culture and the 'romantic' is probably best explained by sociologist Colin Campbell's words as put in his illuminating study *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. He argued "that the world-view espoused by the counter-culturalist's could only adequately be described by the adjective 'romantic' (Campbell 1989: 3). Campbell accepted the 'romantic' as opposed to the 'rational' as sought by counter-culturalists of the 1960s and 1970s, but argued that there has always been a 'romantic ingredient' in modern consumption. He wrote: "For, if events in the 1960s and 1970s were to be considered as merely the latest manifestations of Romanticism, then it clearly needed to be understood as a continuing element in modern culture" (Campbell 1989: 4) Consequently, it would not be appropriate to declare the increasing use of romantic and sensuous motifs as an invention of alternative consumer culture of the 1970s; But it can be argued that the social and ecological crisis led to an increasing fear of the destruction of nature and furthermore to an increasing need to "rediscover the natural" (as put by Jan

Kotig), although the latter came to the fore with romantically idealized fantasies of nature and naturalness, which did not necessarily match with Romanticist ideals of virginal nature. Looking at the Des-In group's work as well as the work of Munich designer Dorothee Becker highlights the recurrence of motifs such as idealized fantasies inspired by the 'exotic' nature of the Far East and the use of plants, animals and insects as "a symbol of a new worth being assigned to nature and naturalness" to quote the Des-In group. The shopping credo "Jute, not Plastic!" which serves as an overarching theme for this paper, embodies this revaluation. It is therefore not only a call to combat the exploitation of nature, but a shopping credo connecting people with a similar world-view.

#### Notes:

1 Jan Kotig's text 'New Crafts' belongs to a collection of texts accompanying the exhibition Neues Gewerbe und Industrie (*New Crafts and Industries*) at the International Design Centre Berlin, November 2nd – December 31st 1977, composed by Kay Klockenhoff.

<sup>2</sup> There is a good body of literature on the development of the new social movements in Germany. See for instance Mayer, Margit and Ely, John (1993) *The German Greens: paradox between movement and party*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press; Giles, Steve and Oergel, Maïke (2003) *Counter-cultures in Germany and Central Europe: From Sturm and Drang to Baader-Meinhof*, Oxford/Vienna [et.al]: Lang; Faulstich, Werner (2004) *Die Kultur der siebziger Jahre*. Munich: Fink.

3 This shift is comprehensively discussed in Klaus Eder's article of 1990 'The Rise of Counter-Culture Movements Against Modernity: Nature as a New Field of Class

Struggle', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7(4): 21–47.

4 There would be a lot to say about this motif, about the slogans relationship to the first life aid campaign – organised by the Beatles member George Harrison and the musician Ravi Shankar for the refugees from Bangladesh at the beginning of the 1970s – to its meaning for the foundation of the philosophy of the German Greens which developed towards the end of the 1970s.

5 For a comprehensive study of the strong meaning of industrial design within post-war reconstruction see Betts, Paul (2004) *The Authority of Everyday Things: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

6 A detailed history of the environmental movement and the protests against nuclear power (in particular against nuclear waste disposal) in Germany is provided in Roth, Roland and Rucht, Dieter (2008) *Die sozialen Bewegungen in Deutschland seit 1945: Ein Handbuch*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus.

7 “The Promise of the Alternative“ is the working title of my doctoral thesis under the supervision of Prof. Elke Gaugele and Prof. Martin Beck at the Institute of Arts and Education, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. This paper is part of my doctoral research work.

8 In *Global Nature, Global Culture* Sarah Franklin, Celia Lurry and Jackie Stacey draw on the iconic images of the planet, the cell, and the foetus.

9 Additions made by Dorothee Becker in a phone call following the interview of November 2010.

10 See, for instance, Bramwell, Anna (1989) *Ecology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A History*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, and, Uekoetter Frank (2006) *The Green & the Brown. A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany*, Cambridge University Press.

11 The group was formed in 1973 by 12 students of the School of Design Offenbach and Jochen Gros, then a professor at the School of Design. List of members: Philine Bracht, Bernd Brokhausen, Ingrid Ute Ehlers, Klaus Gebauer, Michael Kurz. Eberhard Lacher, Irmtraud Hagmann, Lothar Müller, Beate Rosebrock, Dieter Rosenberger, Norbert Wagner, Michael Walz.

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