

THE DRAMATURGICAL CONCEPTION OF DESIGN BY JANUSZ KRUPINSKI APPLIED IN DESIGN THEORY AND PRACTICE BASED ON THE EXAMPLE OF ITALIAN RADICAL DESIGN AND THE MEMPHIS GROUP

AGATA ANTONOWICZ-TAMM
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY
AANTONOWICZ@GMAIL.COM

AGATA ANTONOWICZ-TAMM
JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY
AANTONOWICZ@GMAIL.COM

ABSTRACT

This paper is an elaboration of Janusz Krupinski's Dramaturgical Conception of Design, based on examples in Italian Radical Design emphasizing the Memphis Group. Initially, concentration focuses on the aspects of Radical Design which coincide with Krupinski's proposition. Next, I introduce the idea of Dramaturgical Design, that people act in relation to each other "dramaturgically" (J. Habermas), revealing themselves in a process of "self-presentation" or "self-display" (H. Arendt). Krupinski assumes dramaturgy in human behavior leads to the dramaturgical engagement of inanimate objects in the presentation. Not only are such objects used in the presentation, but due to their specific form, they may demand from their user a certain posture, a role, that is accompanied by a "reflection". The idea of this

"reflection is then elaborated within Memphis, along with a review of some other relations observable between it and the theoretical program of Italian Radical Design and its products. Summarizing all of the above with the fashion, seduction and consumption of objects, this work proposes them to exemplify a broader connection between Radical Italian Design and camp aesthetics.

MAIN TEXT

This paper is my elaboration of Janusz Krupinski's Dramaturgical Conception of Design, based on examples in Italian Radical Design and emphasizing the Memphis Group. I will try to

show that this conception may help us to understand how the idea of design as an enterprise socially engaged, was realized by Memphis and that it can be connected with camp strategy.

Krupiński, a contemporary Polish design theoretician, in his writings, discusses the ontological bases for design. He assumes that the basic relation in design is not the one between a man and an object, but a man-man relation, a “me-you” relation, to be precise. In such a relation, the existence of each human being assumes the existence of another one – each self is possible in front of another self. „To be”, in the human world, would then mean to be in the eyesight of another. This implicates that human nature is not so much social as rather dramaturgical (Krupiński, 1998). Krupiński assumes after Jurgen Habermas and Erving Goffman that human life is a scene where people appear to each other acting, as their nature signifies, “dramaturgically”; that is, „while being in front of others as their public, they reveal something from their ‘self’. They create ‘a certain image, impression’ while among their public” (Krupiński, 1993). The process in which the capacity for such a revelation of the self occurs can be described as “self-display” or “self-presentation” – two important terms that Krupiński quotes after Hannah Arendt. In the case of self-display, a person reveals oneself, like it or not, even if they are preoccupied with basic activities without actually having a conscious

influence on what they are revealing (Krupiński, 1993). In the case of self-presentation, „a moment of choice, intention and self-consciousness appears. People strive to ‘show their self (...) to reveal the I’” (Krupiński, 1993). But the knowledge of the self does not come from the fact that one has looked at their self already, and then decided what image to create of it; this image (the image of the self) „is developed in actions and expressions.” The self is not only developed, but it in fact *comes into being* in actions. Exactly in action, that Krupiński, after Habermas, distinguishes from a movement; in action, which belongs to the realm of culture, as opposed to movement, which belongs to the realm of physics. Krupiński suggests that objects as elements of the scene of life are also, „involved in this process of revealing the user to other people, they condition how the user is regarded in those people’s eyes” (Krupiński, 1998).

According to the author, dramaturgical action can be associated with specific objects, attributes or activities, like, for example, a pair of glasses. It seems that it is not so much the glasses themselves, but a vision defect as a condition, which forces a person to take a stance, to solve a question, such as: how am I going to present myself, which glasses will I choose (minimalistic, cat’s eyes) or will I put an effort by putting contact lenses on every day or undergoing corrective surgery to appear “natural” (which is also a style) (Krupiński, 1993).

Not only can such objects be used in presentation, but due to their specific form, they may demand from their user a certain posture, conduct, and eventually a role – sometimes theatrical. This concerns architecture and design as well.

Krupiński quotes Mikel Dufrenne saying: „Even if we act driven only by our specific needs, an architectonic monument obligates us to act a certain role. A monument does not only fulfill certain needs but it also creates a ‘theatrical behavior’” (Krupiński, 1993). It is the same with armchairs and chairs - they do not only extort a certain order or position from the limbs but rather obligate us to assume a posture. A posture, which is not a numb sprawling of the body mass but is accompanied instead by a “reflection”. But again, it is not a self-consciousness of someone looking at oneself from the inside, but the self-consciousness of a person who is thinking how is she or he going to appear in someone else’s eyes (Krupiński, 1993). By assuming a ‘posture,’ a person exposes themselves, conjuring an image that thereby they present to others – the spectators (Krupiński, 1998).

As this dramaturgical aspect is cited concerning Memphis in Krupiński’s works, my aim here is to elaborate on the idea of this “reflection” within Memphis, and review some relations observable between it and the theoretical program of Italian Radical Design. The concept of dramaturgy is observable in Ettore Sottsass’ statements in which he stressed the idea of presenting oneself through objects: „men and women adorn themselves (...)

to satisfy this subtle and slightly weird pleasure of being ready to present to others their ‘personal’ presence (...) to play our comedies and dramas; (...) to present ourselves in the best possible light”(Carboni, Radice, 2002). The possibility that furniture can, as an object, create a mode of behavior, was also suggested by Sottsass: „When Charles Eames designs a chair he does not design just a chair but the way of sitting, that is, he does not design for function, but he designs function” (Carboni, Radice, 2002).

Some aspects of the actual Radical Design statements also coincide with Krupinski’s proposition. Archizoom in their essay accompanying the 1972 MoMA exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* wrote: “we can’t let anyone else plan our private models of behavior”, thereby pointing out that human behavior is a conscious activity that can be controlled (or manipulated) by design (Ambasz, 1972). The way it was carried out involved a pure physical sensation or experience. We can observe that in the so called Pipers clubs that were created in Italy from the mid-60s where, as Andrea Branzi said, „a continuous flow of images, stroboscopic lights and a very loud stereophonic music” were supposed to make a subject “lose control of their inhibition in dance, moving towards a sort of psychomotor liberation” (Branzi, 1984) (1). Later on, the Primary Design movement also stressed sensual qualities in design, which are linked with the physical perception of space - that is, with its “bodily, direct consumption” (Branzi, 1984).

It also is worth mentioning the technological development in the 70s, when, thanks to experiments with plastic and compound materials, a surface (as such) gains a special importance. It becomes independent, a type of screen, or a skin, as Ezio Manzini called it. That also freed decoration, which now focuses on itself both sensual and symbolic qualities (Sparke, 1990).

According to Branzi, this „new hierarchy of perception”, in which senses and intellect became equal "instruments for obtaining knowledge about reality" along with the arrival of new media, gave rise to what Branzi called a "sensory revolution" (Branzi 1988), in which consumption of symbols became sensory and immediate. An important role in this revolution was played by fashion, which instead of being simply a "trend in taste" became "a shaping force in society", a "highly refined and specialized code" available for mass consumption (Branzi, 1988).

That is why the reflection that Krupiński is talking about, reflection that in the Radical Design's proposition comes out of pure physical and sensory impressions can be a social or cultural one.

This is as in the case of Memphis. Intensive colors and patterns, combination of different materials and textures, weird shapes, functionality that is hidden – all that encourages a potential user to stop, to touch and to explore. Barbara Radice, talks openly about seduction that takes place on that basic, purely physical level through the object's "useless", "consumable" qualities (Radice, 1994). In that sense also, Memphis resembles

fashion – in making a fuss, in attracting attention, in its pursuit to create a star-studded atmosphere that "people would like to identify with" – in other words, in searching for an audience (Radice, 1994). But a Memphis user does not remain passive in this procedure – though it is a manipulation. As Sottsass said: „It is up to each one of us to decide whether we are intense enough to undertake the reevaluations Memphis demands" (Horn, 1985).

Richard Horn, an American author, commenting in the mid-80s on Memphis sofas, pointed out how different they were from "traditional" American couches and chairs. "Traditional", meaning soft, plushy and cushy (Horn, 1985). These were sofas that were offering rest, a breather, and an escape from stress. A person could easily, maybe too easily, sink into this softness, indulging themselves into a state of laziness (note the English term for such a type of chair: Lazy Boy); or even powerlessness. It is rather hard to sit on such couch in a formal way. It may not be a coincidence that also Sottsass mentioned an „American vision of comfort" in this same vein (Radice, 1994). But comfort, as Krupiński also observed, is not a "quality of an object but of the body" and 'the body', as opposed to 'the organism', is culturally determined (Krupiński, 1993), just as the role that it assumes, consciously or not.

All this softness in the "traditional" sofa seemed to be necessary to provide a perfect environment for relaxation, or rather its most stereotypical embodiment which is hours spent on watching TV. What happens if we treat this vision as a universal

one, drawing it out to its logical extreme, can be seen in a movie *Idiocracy*, where a Lazy Boy chair is at the same time a toilet (2). Yet, we can also call it a dramaturgical, even tragic, situation – although more in a sense of self-display, because the element of self-consciousness is absent. Frito reduced himself to act in front of a TV.

If we now look at *Century* sofa by Andrea Branzi for Memphis we can notice that it is different from this “traditional” model: a sterile look, as opposed to an „inviting” one – lack of footrest, upholstery that seems hard, it actually all resembles a hospital bed (3). And it is not that it is uncomfortable but it seems like that in comparison with traditional ones. Actually it is not much different from standard seat furniture. But the very same fact that it can be called sofa or couch creates confusion just because of all that plushiness that this term entails. However, this sofa could also force us to assume a certain posture – a posture rather up straight, alerted even, posture that to me seems to restore the dignity to sitting and a dignity to relaxing. It indicates that lolling about on the sofa is not the only activity that this furniture can serve and that the comfort does not only mean sinking into softness. I am not saying that you can not watch TV for hours on the *Century* sofa – after all, even a toilet bowl can be used to wash olives, as Umberto Eco pointed out. But the very same idea that a piece of furniture can be freed from an imposed role that is ascribed to it frees also the user who is tied up to perform it. Please observe that the tragic comedy of the *Idiocracy* character

is based not only on what he is doing (watching a brainless TV show while urinating and defecating into a chair) but on the fact that he takes his lifestyle for granted – in other words: in the lack of reflection.

The presence of Memphis furniture alone is a statement making endeavor by the person who uses them (4). It creates an image of the person. As Richard Horn said: „by having a zany Memphis sideboard in your living room, you defuse the status and seriousness of that room” (Horn, 1985). But what actually is that status and seriousness? If classy minimalist furniture, or, as often happened, fake ones, are any indicators of it, than they are ideas as amusing and artificial as Memphis colors. And if so then why not to give it up anyway and at least be honest and free to choose what we like, even if it means kitsch.

Very often Memphis is accused of impracticality and most of all unavailability for the masses – and as a result, scarcely influential on these domains. Indeed, if we consider design as an object and measure its success in a quantity of sold items then Memphis will be by all means utopian. But it will be at the same time a very narrow understanding of design as well. Andrzej Pawłowski, a Polish theoretician, closely related with Krupiński and Victor Papanek, wrote in the mid-70s in the spirit of conceptualism that design “does not have to have a product in order to change the world” (Krupiński, 1998). To some extent then Memphis continues this idea of dematerialized design – here an object does exist,

it can be even industrially produced but due to many reasons it is unavailable, it acts conceptually. In that sense a problem of the physical owning of the object also loses its *raison d'être*. As Sottsass said: „A good design is like the possibility of going to the moon. Few people will have the opportunity to experience it directly but its existence will change the lives of millions” (Burney, 1991). Memphis then is not about getting new furniture but about the reexamination of the one that you already have. Here I also see a dramaturgy of this activism where a problem of creating “the better world”, a problem of change and freedom, of “mass creativity” is not a problem of more or less better designed objects, it is not even a problem of a society but a problem of a person, an individual and their posture, an attitude, that, lets stress it, is accompanied by self-consciousness, a posture that we assume not only towards Memphis sofas but towards all the furniture that we already have or will have. And if we consider Memphis popularity, its exhibitions, media coverage and that aura of a star we can assume that reaching a wider audience with that message was possible.

If we put together some Memphis features like fashion, seduction, irony and the consumable qualities of objects we can consider them as quite an attractive link between Memphis and camp. And indeed, often they are put together. However these features are rather superficial outcome of a similar strategy.

Camp can also be observed in Memphis in the context of the dramaturgical conception of design. It was suggested by Susan Sontag who said that „To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (Sontag, 1964). Also Mark Booth points out that camp is mainly a type of behavior that he calls self-presentation, a self-parody to be precise (Booth, 1983). So it can be understood in Arendt’s terms or as Krupiński’s action as it involves a moment of choice. A similar idea was presented by Esther Newton, who said that „camp inheres (...) in the tension between the person or thing and the context or association” (Newton, 1979). That gives us a much broader perspective to link it with Memphis, especially when we consider another feature common to both which is irony.

While parodying, camp adopts many features from that which is parodied. In the case of Memphis, it will be consumption, obsolescence and fashion – but these are not the same. This humor, as Esther Newton said, “does not cover up, it transforms” (Newton, 1979) This mocking of widely accepted norms and roles, this “parodying conversion of the ‘original’, as Judith Butler wrote, reveals that this original itself is nothing more than a parody of the *idea* of that which is natural and original” (Cleto, 1999) In this case then theatricality in a Memphis proposition reveals that the roles which objects force us to play are also artificial, that is – not universal and final. That is why in order to reveal this artificiality of the role (both the parodied and proposed) both camp and Memphis focus on the aspects that are visible,

physical, superficial, exaggerated and theatrical to show its obvious fakeness: there is only a surface, nothing beneath.

The fact that the core of the camp's nature is dramaturgy and play would also answer a question that may come to one's mind – is Memphis camping intentional? Such a distinction, as Fabio Cleto puts it, is “uncertain” because we are not quite able to “distinguish an intentional play from an unintentional one” (Cleto, 1999). Instead, both Memphis and camp have a different feature in common concerning action that could also lead us towards an explanation of how they work - both are performative acts. Both convert things ironically, they transform in the same way as Marcel Duchamp transformed a urinal into Fountain. What is more, this performative aspect is also present in Krupiński's conception. An object, as he writes, “defines the whole situation”, and it can change it just by its very appearance. And for a person to find oneself in a new situation means to “act and live in a different way”. By assuming a certain posture a person also assumes “an adequate point of view” and acts in its “spirit” (Krupiński, 1998).

Recognition of this power of transformation is then what I consider the most important outcome for Memphis design activism. Transformation in which the user gains this self-consciousness, and the possibility to realize that the roles we play are not definitive. Even if we can not eliminate them we can assume them consciously, and thanks to that, we will not be bound by them. This is where I think also the Memphis vision of freedom begins –

freedom that may not be easy since it involves a choice.

I am therefore presenting a link between the dramaturgical conception of design and camp, highlighting Memphis as the most picturesque but not the only example.

All transform physical sensations into a reflection, and treat life as theatre.

But while the dramaturgical conception stresses the importance of an individual who becomes a self-conscious being in the eyesight of another person by acting and using objects, thanks to camp we can see that it has a great subversive potential as well.

REFERENCING

Ambasz, Emilio, editor (1972) *Italy, The New Domestic Landscape, Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Booth, Mark (1983) *Camp*, London: Quartet Books.

Branzi, Andrea (1984), *The Hot house*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Branzi, Andrea (1988) *Learning From Milan*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Burney, Jan (1991) *Ettore Sottsass*, New York: Taplinger Publishing Company.

Carboni, Milco and Radice, Barbara, editors (2002) *Ettore Sottsass, Scritti 1946 – 2001*, Vicenza: N. Pozza.

Cleto, Fabio editor (1999) *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press.

Horn, Richard (1985) *Memphis*, Philadelphia: Running Press.

Krupiński, Janusz (1998) *Wzornictwo / Design. Studium idei*, Kraków: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych.

Krupiński, Janusz (1993) *Z-Wiednie. Ontologiczne podstawy designu*, Kraków: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych.

Newton, Esther (1979) *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Radice, Barbara (1984) *Memphis. Research, Experiences, Results, Failures and Success of new Design*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Sontag, Susan (1964) 'Notes on Camp', *Partisan Review*, available at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html> (last accessed 18/09/11)

Sparke, Penny (1990) *The plastic age: from modernity to post-modernity*, London: Victoria & Albert Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank dr. Ivan Zykov from College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Antarctica for his precious advice and the Jagiellonian University that together with the above mentioned University of Antarctica helped to fund my research.

ILLUSTRATIONS

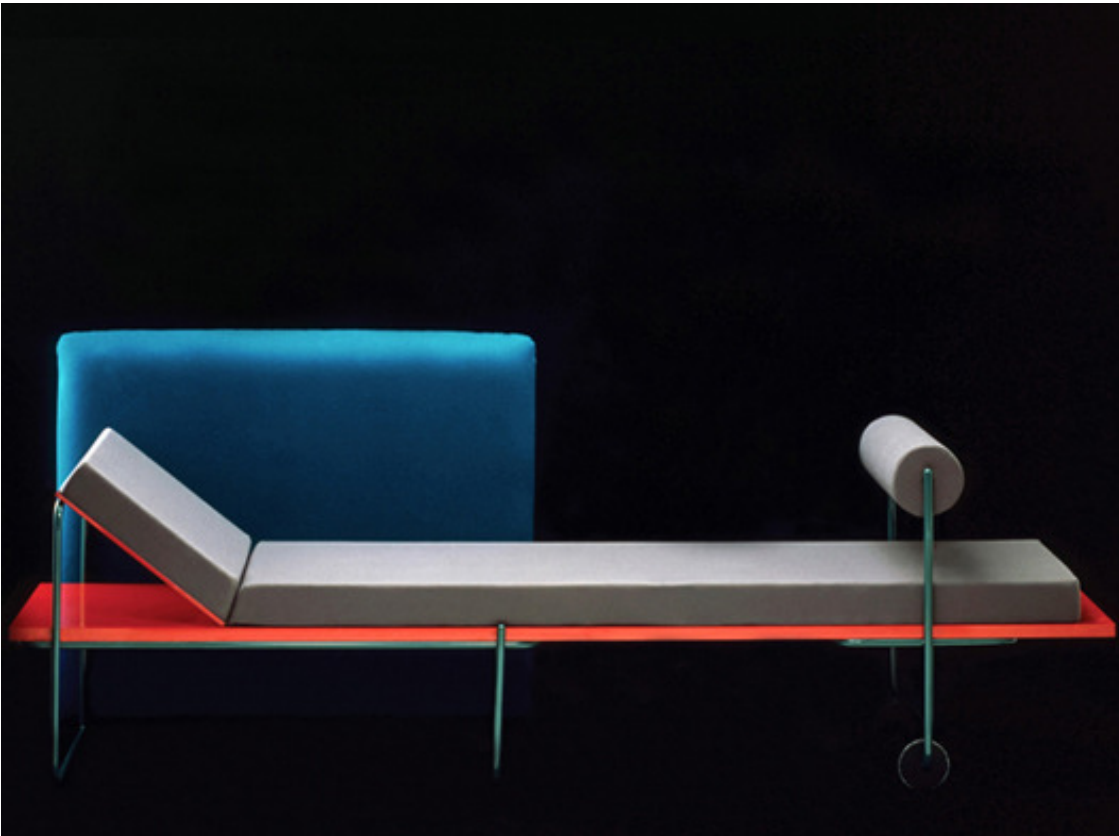
1. Piper club, Rome, source: www.only-apartments.com



2. Still from *Idiocracy*, directed by Mike Judge, 2006; Frito Pendejo, feat. by Dax Shepard,



3. *Century* sofa, Andrea Branzi, 1982, Memphis



4. Dennis Zanone's house with Memphis furniture, source: Memphis Milano, Flickr

