

In this exhibition an affinity becomes apparent between what is Super Normal and what has become archetypal as the result of a long design process. The history of a product, lasting anywhere from a century to a millennium, ultimately leads to the genesis of an object that conjures the picture we all see in our minds when we hear or read the word "chair", for instance. Morrison's Plywood Chair of 1988, produced by Vitra, certainly comes quite close to the archetype of a chair. But a closer look reveals differences: the gentle sway of the backrest; the intentional flaunting of the simple, flattened Phillips head screw; the surprising lightness of the chair; and not least the exceptional simplicity of its construction, which is clearly evident on the underside of the seat. Such properties distinguish this chair from a merely archetypal seating object, a quasi three-dimensional pictogram. The same is true of Naoto Fukasawa's "Déjà-vu" stool for Magis, whose form and proportions seem to be of almost rustic plainness. Here, too, it is the selected material, in this case aluminum, and the resulting reflections and lightness, that distinguish the stool. This stool spontaneously reminded me of Jeff Koons' Rabbit, in which the American artist transformed an inflatable toy bunny into a chrome-plated sculpture.

Fukasawa, too, converts an existing form, conventionally associated exclusively with a certain material (wood), into a Super Normal object, through his idiosyncratic choice of a new, unconventional material. And this is where the difference between the normal and Super Normal product becomes apparent: Super Normal refers to the normal – in the sense of adopting a familiar form and aesthetic – without being "normal" itself and merely availing itself of traditional shapes, materials or production techniques. It is precisely the conscious distance the Super Normal object maintains from its precursors that can become a subtle signal. The shape of Morrison's electric kettle for Rowenta, for instance, resembles an electrified jug – we recognize it instantly from everyday encounters with jugs or from Morandi's still lifes; we can operate it intuitively, and its grace coupled with super normality even manages to compensate for its technical deficiencies. (Rowenta's production was so shoddy that neither the process of turning it on nor the automatic shut off were as efficient as in much uglier specimens of this product type!)

The traditional sign repertoire of both Western and Asian design, we learn from this project, can become the signpost for contemporary and future generations of designers, but only if they are not under the sway of the superficial adaptation of formalities. All this has nothing to do with retrogressive design. Rather, Jasper Morrison speaks openly of the "loss of innocence" separating today's designers from the craftsmen and artisans of previous centuries. They manufactured objects for everyday use – a ladle, an axe, a saddle – without seeking to express themselves or their age, or even to hold their ground against the products of the

competition or forgeries. Yet Morrison and Fukasawa work for many large, international companies, without whose production and distribution facilities no industrial design would be conceivable. There is no question that these two designers are conscious of contemporary market mechanisms, marketing strategies and production conditions. Not even Super Normal design can take place in an ivory tower, or abandon itself to sentimentalities. It has to take the market into account in order to make an impact. But instead of resorting to cheap tricks or exalted gestures, that impact can only be achieved through sophisticated forms and details that clearly reveal the fruitful legacy of traditions and progenitors in design history.

In addition to anonymous design, such as the Swiss Rex peeler or a simple plastic bag, the collection includes design classics like Max Bill's wall clock for Junghans, the 606 shelving system by Dieter Rams, or Colombo's Optic alarm clock of 1970. With products by Newson, Grcic, Van Severen or the Bouroullec brothers, Morrison and Fukasawa also present the work of their own generation. Thus the selection does not simply celebrate "ordinary design," which engineers are so fond of organizing; it does not romanticize a certain decade of design or an idiom that typifies the products of a given country – and it does not focus on mere topicality, exclusivity, or the costliness of the products. The phenomenon of Super Normal is therefore placed outside time and space; both the past and the present of product design point in equal measure to a future that has long since begun. Quite obviously, the two men are not concerned with studies and utopian models: Super Normal is already there, out in the open; it exists in the here and now; it is real and available. We have only to open our eyes: Fukasawa and Morrison visualize it for us.

Almost exactly thirty years before the first Super Normal exhibition in the Axis Gallery in Tokyo, *Das gewöhnliche Design* (Ordinary Design) exhibition took place at the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, a center of German Jugendstil. At that time Friedrich Friedl and Gerd Ohlhauer presented bicycle tires, dowels, pocket tissues, bottle openers, file folders, and clothespins in the rooms of that city's Fachhochschule für Design. West German household wares of the seventies were declared to be objects of study. In his talk at the opening of the exhibition, Bazon Brock, Professor for Aesthetics in Wuppertal, said, "We must analyze and understand our contemporary everyday world as if it were the everyday world of a historical society. For example, the everyday world of Pompeii at the time of 79 B. C., when Vesuvius buried the city once and for all, thus preserving it for us." Explicitly selected to counteract the dominant role and overly solemn approach to Jugendstil in Darmstadt at the time, the 110 objects seem, at first glance, to prefigure the Super Normal project. However, closer observation reveals a different focus, namely, on the banality of the object world. There was hardly a single product in the collection that cost more than three to five Deutschmarks: with considerable wit and fines-

se, bathtub stoppers, paper plates, pencils, and beer bottles in display cases were set against the florally ornamentalized, precious Jugendstil furniture and lamps with their flowing forms and exalted gestures. Hence, location and date – Darmstadt, 1976 – played a decisive role in the exhibition, while the presentation of Super Normal by Fukasawa and Morrison carries the same message and force of expression in any country of the Western world by highlighting a subject matter that is as long-lasting as many of the selected products.

So why is the visualization of Super Normal necessary just now? To answer this, it is enough to visit a couple of department stores, supermarkets, trade fairs, and websites or to take a quick glance at lifestyle magazines and coffee table books. Everything that is superficially spectacular and pseudo-modern has long since become normality in product design: superfluous features, ellipses, dynamic curvatures, perforations, and pearlescent paint dominate today's styling. This applies equally to most cars (inside and out) as well as sports articles, stereos, clocks, and furniture – not to mention packaging design. In contrast, a few years ago Fukasawa designed a fluorescent yellow, upright container for banana juice with slightly browned edges reminiscent of the banana itself, but without imitating its typical bend. Its spout is even opened with the same hand movement used to peel a banana. Wouldn't it be super if such design one day became normal?

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