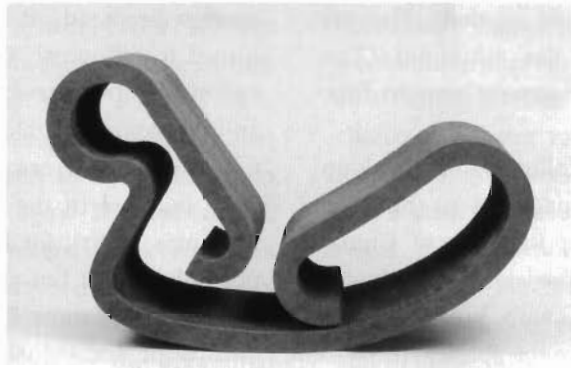


## Politics, Pluralism, and Postmodernism



15.4 Frank Gehry, Easy Edges rocking chair, cardboard, made by Jack Brogan, 42 in (107 cm) long, 1971–72. Private collection.

The 1960s did not spark social or political revolution as foreshadowed in campus riots in the United States and in Europe or the disruption of the 1968 Democratic Party National Convention in Chicago. As argued, however, by Arthur Marwick, British historian and author, the challenge of new viewpoints stemming from minority groups, whether women, blacks, gays, or students, produced more open-minded attitudes toward difference and the protection of individual rights.

In the U.S. Federal enforcement of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and widely broadcast demonstrations such as the 1963 March on Washington served to bring issues of racial equality to national attention. Also, Government initiative created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970 and the passage of laws aimed at reducing highway deaths through seatbelt laws and mandatory

manufacturer recalls on defective parts and systems eventually resulted from Ralph Nader's spirited challenge to unquestioned faith in corporate power. For almost twenty years, the oil crisis of the early 1970s and concerns for fuel efficiency and automobile safety produced lower speed limits (55 mph) on most of the nation's highways. Other legislation permitted abortion (*Roe vs. Wade*, 1973), required the reading of rights to individuals placed under arrest (*Miranda vs. Arizona*, 1966), and made divorces easier to obtain. On campuses, quota systems for the admission of minorities were abolished and the percentage of students able to attend colleges and universities began to rise through need-based and merit-based scholarships and loans. And finally in 1976, though long-overdue for many Americans, broad-based pressure helped to bring an end to the drawn-out war in

Vietnam, which had caused so much protest and anger both within the United States and directed toward the United States from its neighbors.

The 1960s also signaled the critical recognition of several co-existing cultural expressions in the areas of art and design, a situation sometimes referred to as Pluralism, in which no single approach to modernity dominated, and where the exchange value of all commodities overshadowed former distinctions between “good,” mass, and popular design. The situation accommodated, and even encouraged diversity, but only within an acknowledged common culture of consumption. Perhaps late twentieth-century Pluralism may be understood simply as the commercialization of diversity: the margins do not exist without a dominant mainstream, but the mainstream also demands the margins to nurture new markets. Thomas Crow has cogently summarized the situation: “The avant-garde is the research and development branch of the culture industry.”

Capital investment in business following the break-up of the Soviet Union, and trade negotiations between the United States and the Peoples Republic of China, reveals that economic expansion consistently dominates politics in international relations, with human rights serving as a bargaining chip to insure the political consent of congress on behalf of their broad-based constituencies. Scarcely more than a century ago, William Morris joined the Socialist League in protest over the British government’s support of Turkish interests in the Balkans, despite evidence of atrocities by Turkish soldiers against Bulgarian citizens. For dissenters such as Morris, Britain’s support was based upon economic self-interest rather than upon humanitarian concerns. Today, in general, the press and the public it represents readily accept that the United States’ foreign policy is governed by a convenient dovetailing between the concern for human rights and the exploration of new markets for goods and services. If in the end the interests of human rights are served through such compromise it is rarely due to the pressure exerted by fringe activism. This process tends to minimize differences between existing mainstream political parties, who continue to link, often uncritically, technology with economic growth and progress.

Within this framework acknowledging the hegemony of capitalism and equating progress with consumption

and economic expansion, a variety of perspectives on modern design co-exist, often symbiotically. This generally healthy heterogeneity reduces the dichotomy between a “cultural” modernism based upon standards and social responsibility, and an “economic” modernism governed by free enterprise and addressing the mass market that lent to the first two centuries of modern design history a particular kind of heroism, urgency, and vision. In the present context of inclusiveness and relativity, notions of reform, alienation, resistance, and subversion have relinquished a measure of their power to define what has been a vital aspect of the history of modern design.

Toward the end of the 1970s the pop-culture challenge to modern architecture and “good design” was becoming more widespread. At the same time this movement continued to relinquish the subversive political overtones it had in Italy and elsewhere in the later 1960s, and acquired an international high-end commercial cachet. In Italy, particularly in Milan, organizations espousing new directions were initiated in the later 1970s. Alchymia (1976) and Memphis (1981), for instance, included contributions of not only Italian but also Japanese and North and South American designers. The activities of Memphis and other groups or individuals designing ambiguous but less threatening interpretations of popular culture are often described as being postmodern, a term now commonly used among critics and historians, and even filtering into more general usage.

For design, postmodernism encompasses projects and forms that signal an end to the polemic between esthetically- or socially-directed design and commercially-motivated design that emerged as a strain of modernism in the early nineteenth century and that dominated design theory for much of the two decades following World War II. It may also be described even more broadly as an attitude through which various tendencies of modernism in design are deprived of their oppositional status or pretensions. Theoretically, postmodernism shares with mass culture a user-oriented approach to design that emphasizes multiple interpretations and meanings and often embraces the ephemeral rather than the permanent characteristics of the design enterprise, exemplified by connections with the improvisational, open-ended nature of performance art and the inclusiveness of popular art forms.

## Design and Postmodernism

The term postmodernism is also often found in conjunction with others such as post-industrialism and late capitalism, all referring to a culture in which consumption is the common subtext, emerging first in the early years of postwar affluence in the United States and spreading to Europe and other developed nations. Late capitalism signifies investment directed toward increasingly segmented (rather than collective) audiences, and a readiness of businesses to design, manufacture, and market products with increasing speed, responsiveness, and sophistication in a highly competitive environment, stimulated even further by an accelerated interactivity between design, manufacturing, and marketing through the use of digital technology. As an example, British design historian Nigel Whitely cites the success of the Swatch wristwatches first in Britain and then internationally in the 1980s, the result of inexpensive plastic materials and mass production, and an especially fashion-oriented approach to wristwatches to complement clothing styles (fig. 15.1). The ephemeral, almost disposable Swatch (the name combines the words “switch” and “watch”), manufactured by the Swiss company Eta beginning in 1983, targeted a young audience less likely to be influenced by the emotional attachments sometimes associated with personal objects and heirlooms.

Post-industrialism is another broad and useful contemporary term signaling that the heroic age of industrial mass production has been superceded by an increased emphasis upon the research, service, and communications sectors of economies and expanded creative efforts in fields such as product semantics rather than more traditional “form-making” associated with industrial design. In some traditional manufacturing industries, capital investment in



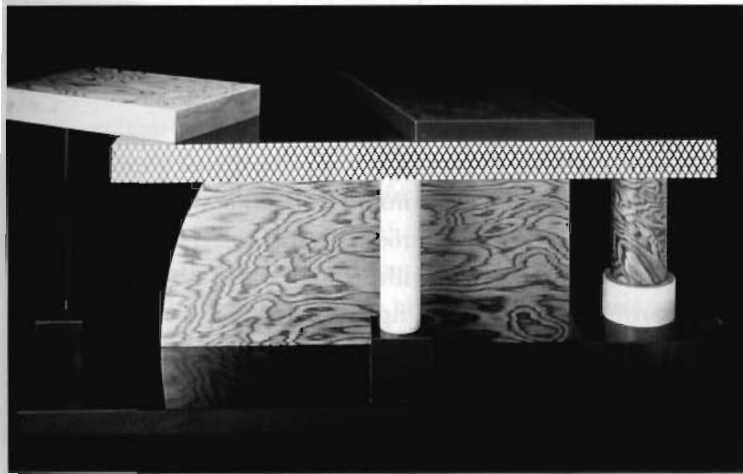
15.1 Wristwatch, plastic housing, approximately 9 in (23 cm) in length, manufactured by Eta, Switzerland, c. 1980–85. Photograph: Swatch Company.

robotics reduces the need for unskilled, assembly-line labor; even in high-tech companies, selective use of sophisticated mechanized equipment still requires elements of specialized craftsmanship to maintain quality and expand markets. In some ways an extension of human factors into the realm of communication rather than physical interaction, the area of product semantics deals with the interface of machines with human beings to break down barriers for understanding, use, and sales. Examples include the development of the mouse for desktop computers (see below, page 374), tracking devices for laptop computers, color-coding and other simplifications for the wiring of electronic connections for home stereo equipment, or diagrams accompanying personal computers and printers that permit virtually effortless set-up and operation. Emphasis upon the user also extends to accelerating product change through the introduction of small differences in similar products to create consumer choice and faster rates of obsolescence. An instance of the blurring between technology, progress, and consumption is described below with reference to the telephone (see pages 368–9), while the use of computers to generate patterns for machine-knit sweaters provides another instance of an acceleration of the interface between design and manufacturing.

Recent theory often refers to contemporary design as being “soft,” a term implying a number of related concepts, including the designer’s manipulation of virtual rather than real materials and forms via computer imaging in a more dynamic, interactive, and collaborative process, and emphasizing process rather than product. Nevertheless, “soft” design, linked as well to *software* and the digital age is often a metaphor for an esthetic sensibility that combines nostalgia for science fiction, past and present, near and far, in an exciting, fast-paced, seamless (if fragmented) image characteristic of contemporary culture in the information age.

## Postmodern Products

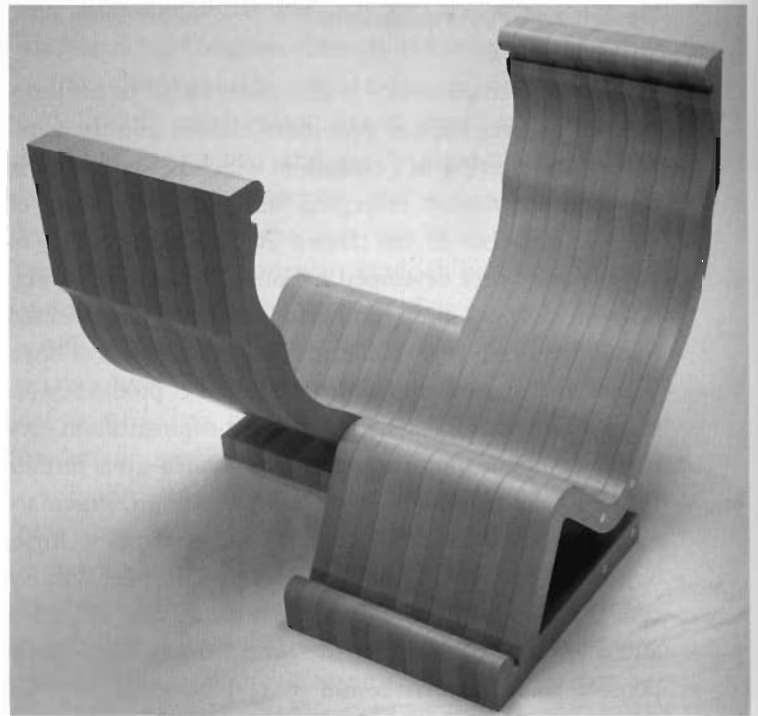
Postmodern design emerged in organizations such as Memphis, made up of industrial designers “liberated” from their contracts with particular companies, with the freedom to pursue directions beyond the parameters of “good design.” Postmodernism, or Pluralism, also was the



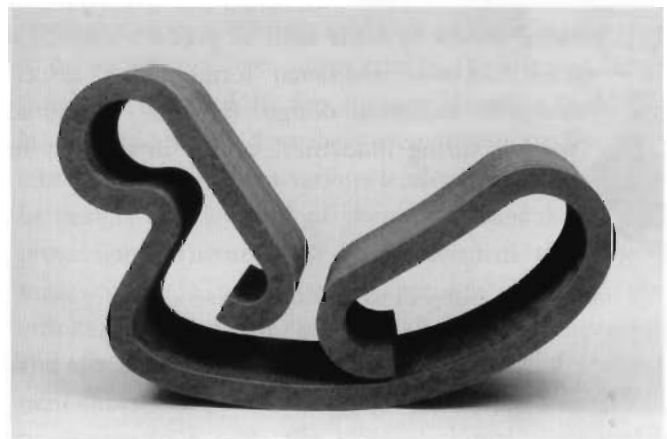
15.2 Ettore Sottsass, Jr., Tartar table, reconstituted veneer, lacquer, and plastic laminate, 30 x 75 1/4 x 32 1/4 in (76 x 192 x 82 cm), manufactured by Memphis, 1985.

overriding theme of the exhibition entitled *Design Now: Industry or Art* held in the German Architecture Museum in Frankfurt in 1989.

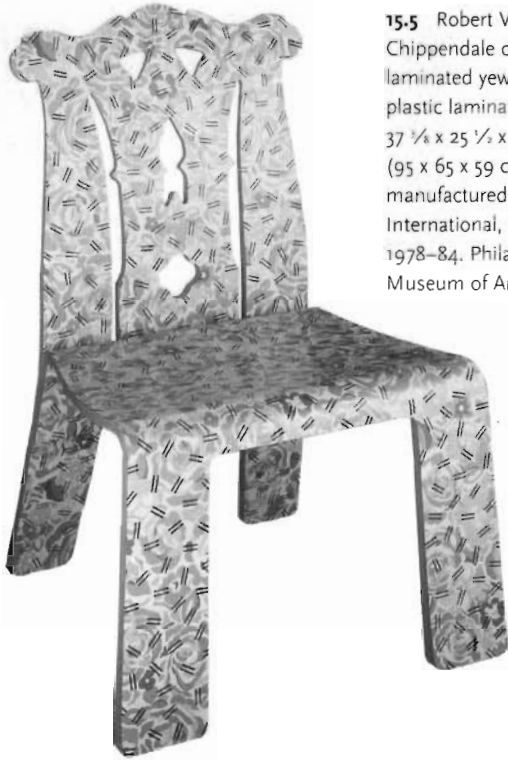
Ettore Sottsass, Jr., who worked under contract to Olivetti in the 1960s in the design of office machines and personal typewriters (see figs. 13.11 and 13.12), independently designed prototypes for furniture in the 1980s using industrial materials such as plywood and plastic laminates in bright colors and patterns. These examples made references to Hollywood-style historical set design, celebrating the sensory excitement of billboard advertising and rock music (Memphis is the home of rock icon Elvis Presley, immortalized in Warhol's silkscreen images and in the furnishings of the singer's own Graceland mansion). An example is Sottsass's 1981 Tartar table (fig. 15.2), whose laminated surfaces and juxtapositions of patterns recall Oldenburg's *Bedroom Ensemble* installation of 1963 or Wesselman's *Still Life Number 36* mural (see figs. 14.18 and 14.19). Memphis organized group exhibitions in Milan, and the Formica Corporation invited members of the group to design furniture using its new ColorCore product, a solid variation of the material that could be molded and cut, producing results such as Stanley Tigerman's *Tête à Tête* chairs of 1983 (fig. 15.3). Tigerman's abstract design bears some resemblance to architect/designer Frank O. Gehry's more experimental



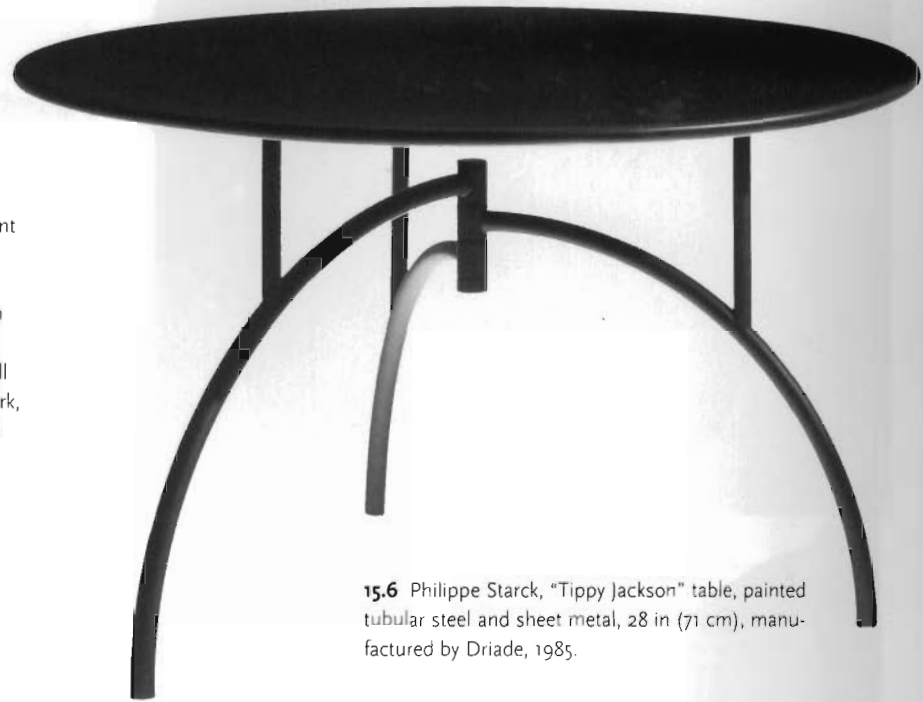
15.3 Stanley Tigerman, *Tête-à-Tête* double easy-chair, Formica and colorcore, 1983.



15.4 Frank Gehry, Easy Edges rocking chair, cardboard, made by Jack Brogan, 42 in (107 cm) long, 1971–72. Private collection.



**15.5** Robert Venturi, Chippendale chair, bent laminated yew and plastic laminate, 37 1/4 x 25 1/2 x 23 1/4 in (95 x 65 x 59 cm), manufactured by Knoll International, New York, 1978–84. Philadelphia Museum of Art.



**15.6** Philippe Starck, "Tippy Jackson" table, painted tubular steel and sheet metal, 28 in (71 cm), manufactured by Driade, 1985.

Easy Edges rocking chair made from laminated cardboard a decade earlier (fig. 15.4). High-end commercial interest in the new Pluralism is seen in Robert Venturi's series of chairs manufactured by Knoll. Venturi's Chippendale chair of 1984 appears to mock important tenets of modern industrial design, first in imitating an eighteenth-century style, second in using an industrial material to imitate an original design in a natural material (here made even more obvious through painting), and third by flaunting decoration rather than eliminating it or treating it as subservient to function. Indeed Venturi, who encouraged architects to think of themselves as "jesters," chose the chair as a focus, since it has been a paradigm of the very standards toward which contemporary designers direct their irony and through which they champion the "complexity and contradiction" of postmodernism (fig. 15.5).

French architect and designer Philippe Starck (b.1949) emerged in the mid-1980s with original furniture for

sophisticated clients such as fashion designer Pierre Cardin and French Prime Minister François Mitterand. He is in this regard the heir to the luxury French Art Deco tradition of Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, but using assembled industrial materials, employing simple, often abstract geometric shapes with elegant solutions to support systems and collapsibility for storage, as in his metal "Tippy Jackson" table of 1985 (fig. 15.6). The fashion connection is also a resonant one, for earlier in Part III we illustrated a bathroom by Armand-Albert Rateau for the apartment of Jean Lanvin, who also supported original and exclusive furniture and interior designs (see fig. 8.7).

The chair has remained a focus for postmodern explorations of new esthetic experience. Abstract shapes and flexible arrangements utilizing upholstery emerge in the work of German designer Holger Scheel and were featured in the *Design Today* exhibition of 1989, for instance, his La Matrice easy chair (fig. 15.7). Another direction



**15.7** Holger Scheel, "La Matrice" easy chair, wooden frame, high gloss paint, corded upholstery, silk covers, 74 1/2 x 70 1/2 x 85 in (361 x 254 x 216 cm), manufactured by Schurr, 1981.



utilizing industrial materials is Japanese designer Shiro Kuramoto's "How High the Moon" chair (1986, fig. 15.8), manufactured in Switzerland by Vitra. Perhaps surprisingly, the metal mesh construction is both strong enough for support and flexible enough for comfortable sitting. Yet "How High the Moon" does not seem to have been designed with sitting as its main or sole intention, as the lightness and transparency of its material, together with the precision of its curves and joints, exert an especially strong esthetic appeal.



**15.8** Shiro Kuramoto, "How High the Moon" armchair, nickel-plated steel, 28 1/4 x 37 1/2 x 32 in (72 x 95 x 81 cm), 1986, manufactured by Vitra, Switzerland; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In domestic wares, the Italian manufacturer Alessi has been active in promoting original design in silver. American architect Michael Graves (*b.1934*) designed the moderne-inspired tea and coffee service that featured polished-ribbed surfaces, ebony feet, ivory handles, and non-functional blue knobs (fig. 15.9), while Austrian Hans Hollein's (*b.1934*) coffee and tea service (fig. 15.10) recalls the geometric simplicity of Jean Puiforcat (fig. 8.19, page 153), here recalling the form of an aircraft carrier. Both designs appear in a section of the *Design Now* exhibition entitled "Micro-architecture," a reference to the resurgence of decoration and popular symbolism in many post-modern buildings.

While the political activism of Memphis participants was subdued in comparison with earlier counter-design activities of the later 1960s, other contemporary designers continue to employ elements of popular culture to raise political and environmental awareness. One direction for this activity has been the re-use of materials, seen for instance in Ron Arad's (*b.1951*) Rover chair of 1981, constructed from used automobile seats attached to a tubular metal frame. More complex in construction is Arad's asymmetrical "Big Easy Volume 2" sofa of 1988. This



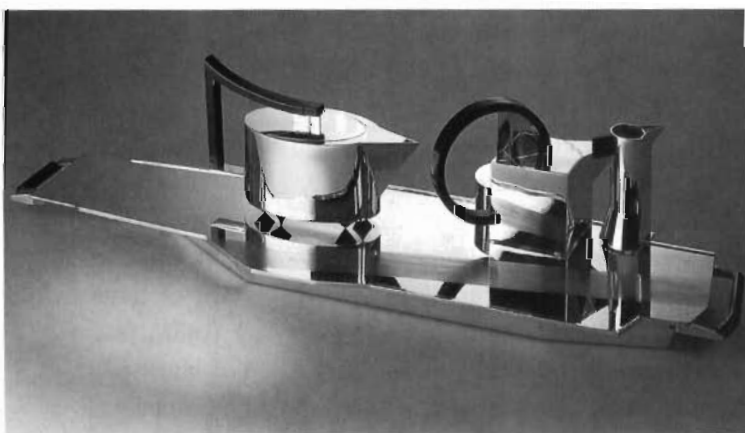
15.9 Michael Graves, tea and coffee service (prototype), silver, lacquered aluminum, mock ivory and Bakelite, tray 3 1/2 x 16 in (9 x 41 cm), manufactured by Officina Alessi, 1980–83, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



15.11 Ron Arad, "Big Easy Volume 2" sofa, stainless steel and steel, 34 1/2 in (87 cm) high, made by One Off, London, 1988.

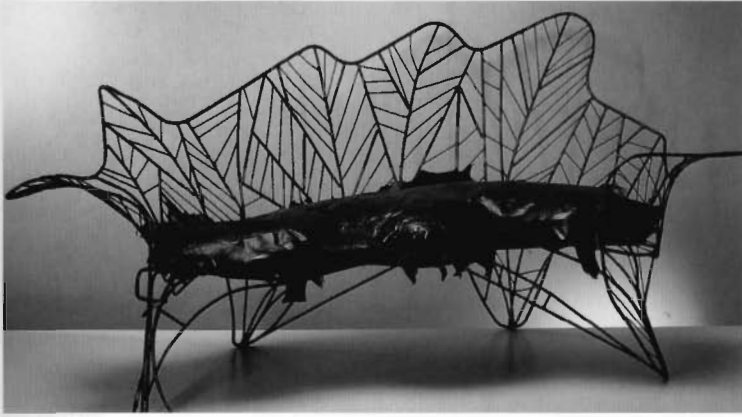


15.12 John Chamberlain, "Velvet White", painted and chromium-plated steel, 80 1/2 x 53 x 49 1/4 in (205 x 135 x 125 cm), 1962, Whitney Museum of American Art



15.10 Hans Hollein, five-piece coffee and tea service, silver, tray 1 1/2 x 36 x 12 in (4.5 x 92.4 x 31 cm), manufactured by Alessi.

piece consists of sheets of industrial steel cut, shaped, and painstakingly welded to conform to the contours of a traditionally-carved wooden seat and form of a heavily upholstered and well-worn sofa, bringing to the mind of the informed viewer the crushed metal sculpture of John Chamberlain, such as *Velvet White* (figs. 15.11 and 15.12), dating to 1962 and made from the wreckage common in automobile graveyards. Both examples focus attention upon the esthetic qualities of an industrial material in an



15.13 Bohuslav Horak, "Autumn leaf" sofa, steel, aluminum, leather, 76 x 36 x 28 in (9190 x 90 x 70 cm), 1988.

untraditional form or setting. Nuances of decay appear in other examples of furniture with environmental or ecological overtones, indicative of new meanings of discarded or decomposing objects. An example is Czech designer Bohuslav Horak's 1988 "Autumn Leaf" sofa (fig. 15.13). Such objects demonstrate ambiguities of intention and interpretation. Clearly this kind of furniture is not intended for mass production. Often the results seem contrived and undermine any possible desire to reach beyond a sophisticated audience entirely prepared to view such objects esthetically or as a form of socio-political commentary. And yet there remains an effort, in making references to banal materials and everyday experience, to stimulate reflection in the viewer and to question some of the conventional associations of commodity consumption and materialism.

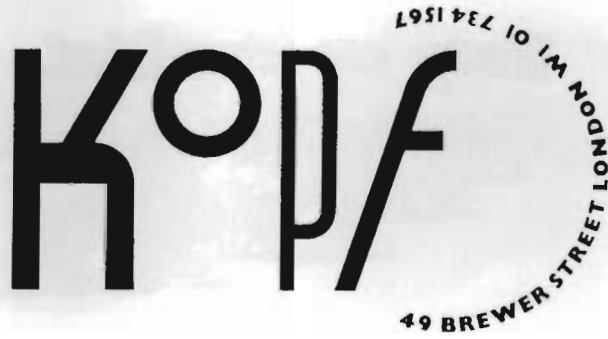
Despite museum exhibitions, commissions from companies such as Alessi or Formica to individual designers and groups such as Memphis, and the emergence of small galleries and boutiques that promote interest in the self-conscious complexities that lend meaning to contemporary experiments in furniture, the majority of furniture and other domestic products in the broad mass market owe little to the clever ironies of much postmodernism. While there may be reasons to think that the forms of many postmodern designers may yet reach a wider market, the belief that postmodernism's eclectic sources encourage a healthy tolerance for diversity in society is not without its critics. Uncertainty regarding the movement's inclusiveness or exclusiveness is ongoing, and in addition the whole issue of tolerance and liberation remains a

matter of debate: Robert Hughes, in *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (1993) found little cause for optimism, seeing instead a Balkanization of subcultures in the products of a culture obsessed with the delineation of difference rather than with commonality or quality. Marxist critics continue to lament the lack of forms of art and design that nurture the seeds of resistance, and the growing gap between developed nations and the Third World strengthens, for some critics, the need for a more thorough sense of social responsibility in design on a global scale. Cultural and technological disparity remains an undercurrent in envisioning the role of design in the future: efforts to lobby for the need for Internet access throughout the schools and households of the United States are typical of the ideology of progress, yet ignore the fact that a majority of the population in many underdeveloped countries lack a basic telephone service and call into question the meaning or reality of the term "global village."

### Postmodernism and Resistance

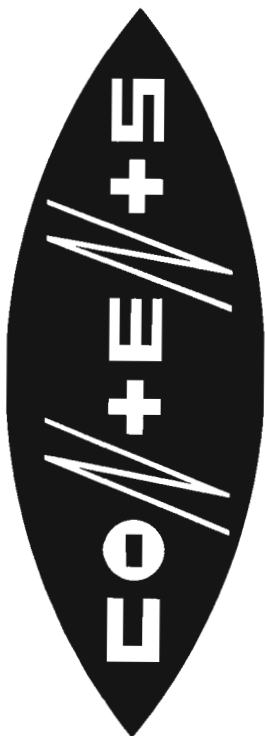
Another challenging aspect of postmodern culture surfaces in the behaviors, dress, and accessories associated with the punk movement beginning in the later 1970s and early 1980s. Aggressive, destructive, and uninhibited, the expressions of punk culture in music, poetry, and the visual arts simultaneously attacked mainstream culture with practices such as graffiti, and used highly commercialized products such as cosmetics and hair dyes to achieve exaggerated and provocative effects in personal appearance. In graphic design, punk culture found expression in the work of many artists, among them British-born Neville Brody (b.1957). Brody experimented with original lettering and trademarks that seemed to parody the uniformity and consistency of corporate graphics, as in the 1985 logo for a London hat company (fig. 15.14). His typefaces were used in magazines such as *The Face*, and were developed to convey moods and attitudes beyond the range of fonts available from foundries. Brody's *Industria* (1984) is a bold sans serif typeface with a combination of blunt rectangular positive and negative shapes and knife-edged terminations for a number of letters (fig. 15.15). Despite its strong geometric, consistent character, letters such as the lower case "g" stand out as being unusual (it looks more





15.14 Neville Brody,  
logo for Hat company,  
1985.

15.15 Neville Brody,  
Industria typeface,  
designed for *The  
Face*, 1984.



15.16 Neville Brody,  
Contents logo, *The Face*,  
no. 49, May c. 1980.



15.17 Neville Brody, record jacket for Cabaret Voltaire, 1980.

like a symbol of some kind than a traditional letter) and were used by Brody in expressive titles for the journal (fig. 15.16). In addition to typography and lettering, Brody used record jackets and music posters as vehicles for evoking an emotional response in the viewer, accomplished through photographs, photocopies, typography, and video-generated images. He intended to relate his covers and posters in some way to the content of the music, rather than to follow the mainstream music industry's tendency to emphasize the celebrity of rock stars through photography. To this end he employed images suggested or even provided by the musicians, and cultivated an array of techniques that avoided easy recognition or a consistent style. For a 1980 poster for the rock group Cabaret Voltaire (fig. 15.17), Brody juxtaposed a blurred image of a running man with a jet airplane against a blue background with black-and-white textured strips as lateral borders and within the central image. Photomontage, as well as the group's name (the Cabaret Voltaire, in Zurich, was a nightclub and meeting place for Dada artists and performers beginning in 1916) recalls the juxtaposed and manipulated images of



15.18 Advertisement for Philips' Tracer electric shaver, manufactured by Philips Corporation, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Dada posters and covers (see page 195) and the early influence of Dada on Brody's work. Yet the "CV" logo for the group is reminiscent of a corporate trademark and avoids a sense of direct borrowing from the past. In a similar fashion, Brody's imagery and comments about his work reveal the contradictory nature of the early 1980s in Britain. There is a desire to break away from the contemporary commodity culture that threatens freedom of expression, and yet the recognition that living within that culture forces compromises and acknowledges the limited and ephemeral ways in which artistic freedom functions:

On every cover I have done for Cabaret Voltaire, the dominant theme is decay through process, the loss of human identity that results from communication being transmitted through machines that condition,



15.19 R. Crumb, "Keep on Truckin'", c. 1970.

not serve, human interaction. Decay through process is also about repetition, and the loss of quality that you suffer when information is abstracted from its human origin....

Punk was about individual expression, and more than anything, it was a reaction against authority. It couldn't really describe itself as "independent" unless the authority was completely circumvented—which, for a very short time, it was. But as soon as the whole phenomenon was categorised as "the independent scene," this insured that it would become exactly its opposite.

The punk phenomenon belongs within the framework of postmodernism, complex in its relationship to popular culture, subverting but hardly rejecting the multiple signs and meanings of our commodity-minded world. An example of adapting the counterculture aspects of the punk movement to advertising for products usually characterized by brand standardization was the Philips Tracer electric shaver, also sold in a variety of colors and targeting a youthful market (fig. 15.18).

To the punk phenomenon in graphic design might be added illustrations for underground comic books by a number of artists including Robert Crumb (b.1943). Many images, such as Crumb's "Keep on Truckin'" (c.1971) with its striding foreshortened foot, reached a broad popular audience via bumper stickers and decals. Their origins, however, were in the very private and often scurrilous world of offbeat comic books, from where they migrated to record jackets and beyond (fig. 15.19).