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He probably wouldn't mind just being referred to as an industrial designer – plain and simple. Maybe there are a few other steps that deserve a mention too: his training as a cabinetmaker at the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Dorset (1985 to 1987), his degree in furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London and the following year as an assistant to Jasper Morrison, as well as the founding of his own firm, "Konstantin Grcic Industrial Design", in Munich in 1991. And the fact that he now works with a highly qualified team of six – that seems fine too. But then come the superlatives that don't seem to tally with this quiet, often darkly dressed man at all: Grcic is regarded as the most internationally famous German designer of our day; as one of the most successful and influential designers in the world; as an intellectual with understatement.

He only fits into pigeonholes like Neo-Rationalism or Neo-Purism in that he has always been guided by the classic modernist principles of mass production, simplifying aesthetics and an economical use of materials. Apart from that, Grcic has merely pursued his own style and always remained one step ahead of everybody else in the search for a new language of design, as Jasper Morrison says of him. His success started in the 90s with laundry baskets and other plastic items for Authentics; then came style icons such as the Mayday lamp (Flos, 1999), the swaying shelving unit Es and folding hat stand Hut ab (both for Nils Holger Moormann, 1999). Even his upholstered furniture for ClassiCon, the Chaos armchair (2001), shows more profile than volume. With Grcic, volume only stands a chance if it takes the form of a perforated hollow space (Osorom seating element, Moroso, 2002) or an outline (Diana side table, ClassiCon, 2002), for it is structures and construction that seem to interest him more than anything else. With its conical concrete foot, the chair_ONE die-cast aluminium chair (Magis, 2004) was actually intended for public spaces but went on to sell in its thousands as a sculptural lattice structure with seating function for the private loft. It was followed by the Miura bar stool (Plank, 2005), which softened the angular design

language of chair_ONE and covered it with plastic without forfeiting any of its filigree lightness. And most recently, Grcic has been in the news with his Myto cantilever chair (2008), developed with BASF for Plank. The stackable chair is made entirely of plastic (Ultradur® High Speed) and produced as an injection-moulded monoblock. It was immediately snapped up by the New York Museum of Modern Art for its permanent collection, where the portable Mayday lamp was waiting to welcome it. Grcic won the renowned Italian Compasso d'Oro award for Mayday back in 2001.

Since founding his own firm, he has been designing furniture, lamps and other products for companies like Agape, Authentics, Cappellini, ClassiCon, Cassina, Triade, Flos, Iittala, Krups, Lamy, Magis, Merten, Muji, Montina, Moroso, Moormann, Plank, SCP, Whirlpool or the Porzellan Manufaktur Nymphenburg. Konstantin Grcic feels committed to classic industrial design. Even though there is often something out of the ordinary about his products that seems to resist the commercial purpose, his excursions into conceptual or artistic work can be counted on the fingers of one hand and are most likely to crop up in galleries (like Missing Object for Galerie Kreo, 2004) or at charity auctions (Nose Jive Three Sixty for Luminaire, 2006). Phaidon published an extensive monograph of his work in 2006.

Further information: www.konstantin-grcic.com



Magis, chair_ONE (IMM09_DE1402_01)

Interview

Konstantin Grcic

“It's the pressure that produces creative solutions in the first place”

→ **Video Podcast**





Koelnmesse, Andreas Körner (IMM09_DE1401_02)

Konstantin Grcic

On German design and the connection between organicism and functionalism



Koelnmesse, Andreas Körner (IMM09_DE1401_03)

→ German designers are said to have a certain love of functionalism – not only in the engineering sector. Your form-finding – in chair_ONE, for instance – also seems heavily based on the ideas of construction and function. So would you say there is any such thing as “German” design, despite the global mixing of styles?

← I think German design has always been characterised by a certain attitude and a certain way of thinking. It naturally found a language of form that suited that approach and is an expression of the rational, the simple. It's compatible with this function-based way of thinking to design things with exposed aesthetics, aesthetics that can be read and make it clear how something has been made. Nor does this way of thinking conflict with a different approach to the design of forms, an organic approach for instance – but that's exactly where the chal-

lenge lies: in finding a form that enters into a logical connection with this way of thinking. This approach evolved over a long time and today constitutes a strong culture, it's the foundation that the training of architects and designers in Germany is based upon.

→ Today, is this tradition actually an advantage or is it more of a drawback?

← This way of thinking – questioning things and looking for simple, clear, convincing solutions – suits the age we live in. But there's probably a lot more freedom when it comes to translating it into forms, because nowadays there are a lot more possibilities for implementation.



Koelnmesse, Andreas Körner (IMM09_DE1401_04)

→ And how does this so-called “German virtue” of functionalism ally itself with the organic language of forms that has emerged together with the new technologies and design possibilities?

← The German car industry has made a pretty good job of it. Aesthetics play a particularly important role in this sector because they have to create desirability. If you compare BMW with Audi, Mercedes or Volkswagen, they’re all based on a very similar formula of German thinking, and yet they all find their own language of form. Kuka, the German robot manufacturer, is another fascinating example. Their robotic arms look really similar to human joints, bones and muscles, and not like a product from Fischertechnik, where you can see every little screw and cylinder. Kuka has found a language that is incredibly progressive and enters into a perfect symbiosis: it’s really cool engineering, German engineering prowess and precision – but it looks totally different.

→ Why doesn’t it work equally successfully in other areas – like architecture?

← In architecture, Jürgen Mayer H. is postulated as somebody who is giving German architecture a new identity. His achievement is also partly that he regards a building differently – more as an object and body and not just as an arrangement of functions. But if you compare him with Herzog & de Meuron, Foreign Office Architects or even Zaha Hadid if you like, they’ve also totally emancipated themselves from classic building geometry but, at the end of the day, they’re more complex. As a result, they build in a way that is more appropriate to the complexity that’s inherent in a building. But then again, I’ve never been inside one of his buildings.

→ How is design changing in general? Is there anything like a discourse about design and trends, maybe encouraged by tools like the imm cologne’s Trend Book?

← I think design has a great deal to do with evolution and everything is developing and changing in a very fluid way. These days there aren’t many trends that

give you the feeling: hey, that’s so new, I’ve never seen that before! It’s more a question of sudden connections, evolutions of different things, which then constitute something new. Of course there are always trends that come back, things that are taken up again. I don’t mean in the sense of retro, it’s just that you’re forever recollecting things that have been done before because they’re part of the evolution. They’re in your consciousness, and sometimes they get stronger again. It’s got something to do with a certain zeitgeist, but also with your own personal interests.

→ Right now there’s a tendency towards organic and round design. Your style is angular rather than round. Does a general aesthetic trend like that leave you totally cold? Or is a chair like Myto so completely remote from the trend because its form was partly determined by the properties of the material?

← I think everybody is pleased that materials have become such a dynamic issue in recent years. With the new materials and technologies, we really have been given new possibilities and a totally new medium for developing things. That was very important, and was immediately seen as a trend. But at the end of the day, it didn’t really unleash a revolution, not compared with the radical ideas triggered by such materials in the 70s, when they were *really* new. But even so, it did the whole field good. Personally, my work phases are determined very subjectively, they’ve got more to do with my own projects and a bit to do with a particular liking of mine. You devote a certain amount of time to something and eventually reach the point where you start looking for new orientation again. Then you might not be affected by external influences or external dynamics at all. It’s got a whole lot more to do with what you’re doing in your own cell, and it seems to me that, in recent years, we’ve been trying to get away from certain classic typologies. For my tastes, the simplicity, the minimalism that was so exciting and new in the 90s became mainstream far too quickly. In that phase I was far more interested in breaking down these clear ideas and typologies. Now I feel that, with Myto, we’ve reached a point where I would

like to do a totally simple, classic chair again. I'm interested in becoming very strict and very simple again, but being able to implement this simplicity in a different way, using the possibilities technology offers us.

→ Are the new technologies and design programmes that you used for Miura and Myto a help when it comes to strengthening your personal style or authorship? Or are they more like an aesthetic influence and a temptation to do something just because it's possible?

← Of course we use the computer a lot and it's allowed us to do certain things that we could never have done otherwise. Although looking back, it's amazing to think of all the crazy forms and complex things that were made in the past without using a computer. I don't really think it has any influence on my authorship. When it comes down to it, the ideas or the creative urge, my interest in forms and design, don't have anything to do with the computer. In the meantime, I've learned what the computer is capable of. It helps us assess processes that are a help when it comes to implementing certain ideas, or even make those ideas possible in the first place. But thinking has nothing whatsoever to do with the computer, it's your head that does the thinking. And anyway, our work is still very strongly linked with the physical, with experiencing the materials ourselves and going to the factories: what does this process really look like, what happens? Seeing the machinery and the material in deformation, undergoing processing. We can simulate or reproduce some of it here, or we build models out of really primitive materials. To me, that's the process that constitutes authorship in the end. This is where the actual intervention takes place, which really is based on thinking and, for me, still represents a physical type of work. The actual design, the concept, is translated into the physical. The computer might accompany the project from the word go, but it's only a kind of service provider, an aid that becomes more and more important the closer we get to the end and the fine-tuning, where the exact data and details are compiled. And not that much actually happens after that.

→ With your initial training as a cabinetmaker, you chose a very different path than the designers who are leaving university these days and have been working with computer programmes right from the start.

← Yes, that was always the question, and now it's gradually being answered: what will this generation be like, a generation that has spent its entire training working with the computer or even spent its entire childhood and youth learning to handle digital things and produce them themselves. I had expected a great deal more, I thought the upcoming generation was going to make us look like proper charlies and show us things that are quite simply beyond us. But I don't think that's actually what's happening. What's interesting is to suddenly see a generation of people who take the digital so much for granted that they don't consider it that important any more. Who ... can do it with their eyes shut. These people have an awareness of the physical, they're totally open-minded about it again, and that enables them to combine the two, the physical and the digital. That produces a certain power and quality, and is certainly also an advantage. I've got a couple of young people working at my firm, and I've seen one or two students, one of them from the ECAL in Lausanne and one from the academy in Stuttgart, who could combine the two media – the computer and the analogue, the physical – in a totally playful way, so that the one benefits from the other. That's something I find incredibly interesting right now. Designers with a background purely in digital designing have become extremely interchangeable because, at the end of the day, they all use the same software to produce pretty similar pictures. This medium has become so widespread that it's no longer anything special. A designer has to have very outstanding skills if he's going to succeed in this field, and it's more difficult to identify authorship because the programmes or software dictate certain rules ... and in the end, all these blobs look pretty much the same.

→ Is that reflected in today's product design in general?

← It's definitely alarming to see how suddenly it turned into a very generic language and how quickly



Koelnmesse, Andreas Körner (IMM09_DE1401_05)

a conception of furniture that was seemingly so tied to typologies can change. Something you sit on, let's take the chair, had – to put it simply – a seat, a backrest and, usually, four legs; and now there's another typology that appears to be just as widespread and self-evident: something you sit on is now suddenly a kind of peculiar volume. For me, a chair always had a construction and a structure. Of course that's also connected with what material it's made of and how it's conceived. To start with, the computer can ignore the question as to how something is built and what it consists of. First you design a form. And that leads to a totally different typology. If you look at the competitions today, you can attribute 80% of the stuff to this new typology and there are hardly any designs that take the construct as their starting point. That's interesting too – it just has to be done properly. But normally, there's no coherent translation of this form into a material. The question of the material also depends on who produces it and how they do it. And even though I don't think they should be uppermost, there are econo-

mic issues involved as well: of course we can manufacture anything – but what means, what resources is it made with and what do we end up with? Is it something we can saw up and burn or will it land on a hazardous waste depot? For me, that kind of consideration is always an issue.

→ So at what point does the question of design's social relevance arise?

← Design definitely has social relevance. This is where it gets really fascinating. There are different levels that it can be practised on. If it's a large-scale thing, the design of an object has to take the entire production site and cycle into account. But it starts with all the little firms I work with, who either have to strengthen their company or save it, or who just want to be efficient when it comes to the small details. Ever since we first started talking about modern design, good design has always contained answers to that kind of question. Not because the question was specifically asked – I don't



Koelnmesse, Andreas Körner (IMM09_DE1401_06)

think the Bauhaus gave a lot of thought to ecology, but it was still part of a way of thinking that was concerned with the simplification or modernisation of our world and our lives, with hygiene, with economy. Maybe facets like that were born of the aesthetics, but they were already there. Today, however, these issues have certainly become more pressing and concrete.

→ **And what kind of chance do you think Green Design has?**

← When it comes to Green Design, you could say that the most sustainable things are things we live with for a long time. And that requires us to *want* to live with them for a long time. We take good care of them, repair them, like to have them around. That requires them to be pleasant and attractive, it means they have to work. For me, Green Design sounds much too simple, it sounds like an ostensible formula or a specifications catalogue, and if you meet all the specifications, then it must be Green Design. And yet there are so many factors that can't be measured or evaluated clearly, but which we end up finding attractive and good. It's difficult to capture that with a concept like Green Design. But I'm not trying to dismiss the idea, on the contrary, I even think certain rules have to be laid down. That's the only way things are going to change. Politics and legislation have to play a very active part in it. If we're not forced to change certain things, we'll just carry on discussing it for ever, although of course there are always a few people who do it voluntarily ... No, we have to create certain laws in order to force a change in the way we handle resources.

→ **But surely the economic pressure won't be strong enough to turn this kind of sustainability idea into reality quickly enough?**

Exactly, the pressure has to increase. That's the only way we'll really change.

→ **What platforms would be necessary to encourage a productive design discourse?**

← Basically the trade fairs are very important for our sector because they bring all those involved together

in one place. A great deal happens at fairs because of this coming together, getting to know each other and taking part in a direct exchange. And of course as a result of seeing things. When it comes down to it, it's all about things, and you don't just want to see pictures of them, you want to see them physically, you want to see the original. That's why trade fairs continue to have a great deal of clout, even though there are far too many of them these days and you have to choose which one you're going to attend. You base your choice on different criteria. When it comes to the sector as a whole, Milan is the one date in the year that nobody wants to miss. The Cologne fair has always been a good counterbalance to Milan. Not only because of the timing, but because of the content too. It's worked out very well. Milan is the show fair, the place where new projects are presented. That's simply because the Italian manufacturers play such a major role in furniture design. Basically, not much has changed about this interaction between Milan and Cologne. The new products are shown in April, and it's still a huge effort to get the new products from spring ready for market by January of the next year. That's always been part of Cologne's importance: the things have always been ready in January, so to speak. Cologne has always been – and I don't mean this negatively – a sales fair. You see things in Milan and buy them in Cologne.

→ **And what about the content of the fairs and the urban setting?**

← Naturally the fairs' position on content, the cities and the ambience are extremely important too. Milan is certainly attractive, you go there in spring and it's a beautiful city, there are some incredible places and festivals and openings ... all that creates a special atmosphere in Milan. But Cologne has managed to do the same, Cologne has an atmosphere too. The Italians actually love Cologne: they can don their thick winter coats and go to the Pöfgen tavern or the Früh brewery. All those things are attractive to a foreign audience – but to me as well, I like going to Cologne because it's got a very good, authentic atmosphere. The city works well as

a location too, with the exhibition grounds on one side, and then the whole entourage wanders over the river to the city and its exhibitions, restaurants and so on. That's something you shouldn't underestimate, it plays an incredibly important role in terms of how important or attractive a fair's image is.

→ **But the Italians are no longer coming as regularly as they used to ...**

← I'm the wrong person to give you a perfect analysis of that, I just go there every year and realise how much I enjoy going there and what kind of impressions and experiences I take home with me. Cologne always has a good atmosphere, and then there's the aspect that you get to see concrete, real things there. I think that's very exciting, the fact that the products are shown with price tags hanging on them is all part of it. And then there's the off-programme in the city, the Passagen, which used to be pretty good and was part of the fair too. Unfortunately, it's exactly the same in Milan: it used to have a stringent programme that you could really see and take part in. In the meantime, these programme guides are much too thick, they list far too many things. It's got nothing to do with an off-programme any more, where you can discover things, go to good places and see some really interesting things as an antipode to the commercial side of things. I like the commercial side, I actually even prefer to go to the trade fair, it interests me. The commercial reality of how firms and brands present themselves. But the antipode to that has to be a cultural off-programme. Unfortunately, it's more like a load of relocated fair presentations by firms who think they'll get better conditions in their own, rented showroom than at the fair itself. I think that's a real shame, because firstly it makes the programme too big and secondly, the quality has become pretty mediocre in a lot of cases.

→ **What direction do you think this imbalance will take?**

← I think it will become more regulated again, I know a lot of firms are going back to the fair because it gives

them a much more concentrated audience, the attention they get is far more focused. And they've realised that this close competition, where one booth stands shoulder to shoulder with the next, is actually a good thing. That's a very positive development. But of course it only works at a good fair that creates the kind of concentration the trade visitors are looking for. A company goes to the fair and presents itself wall to wall with other firms, some of which are their competitors. I don't think any firm is afraid of that if it happens at a similar level, because it just multiplies the impact. When it comes to establishing areas of tension, the trade fair company has to have a lot of sensitivity and good instincts. Then it works well.

→ **The fair is now being curated in the new halls again too and has been structured according to design styles.**

← In other places, like the Design Post in Cologne, certain firms have got together so that they can present themselves outside the fair, in a more individual place than the stipulated fair cubicle. I don't think that works because the identity of the individual manufacturers doesn't come across. Moroso looks just the same as the firm 10 metres further on. The whole thing loses concentration and focus. Certain groupings of stands at the fair are so much more exciting again and I hope others will see it the same way when the setting is right again. But of course the fair has to offer a programme in the form of exhibitions or forums. What I think works very well and has really established itself is the d³ forum for young designers. I think the way it's done is better than the Salone Satellite in Milan, which has got too big and is sadly totally isolated because it's in a hall of its own, it's no longer part of the fair proper. Cologne does it better, it's smaller and I think the curation is stronger too. The format really benefits from that. This hall is very popular with the public too, and the colleges take it seriously as well. It's important for the students, and the manufacturers visit it too. It's really caught on.

→ I saw a recent panel discussion about art and design that you took part in and got the impression that, as a creative, you have very deliberately taken the road of a designer because there are concrete basic parameters in design. Are these basic parameters a bit like a foil for you, something like a team partner?

← It may well be that I felt intuitively drawn towards designers. Firstly in an apprenticeship that stipulates very clear structures and where you're told how things are done. From there, you go on to develop the first steps towards your independence. I realised that I can find a lot more freedom within a certain structure than in freedom per se. I used to work on my own a lot, and I didn't find it difficult because I'm more of a "loner", but these days I couldn't begin to imagine working without my team. Teamwork is good if everybody in the team has a clear role and contributes something, when the total is greater than the sum of the parts and doesn't just make things complicated or unclear – because I hate that. It's just like school and doesn't result in any benefit at all. It's the pressure that produces creative solutions in the first place. You turn a limitation into a possibility.

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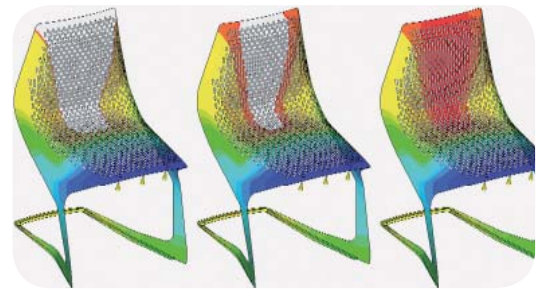


Photo: BASF; Plank; Myto (IMM09_DE1402_02)



Magis (IMM09_DE1402_03)



Merten (IMM09_DE1402_04)



BASF (IMM09_DE1402_05)



Magis (IMM09_DE1402_06)

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