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**ESCAPE FROM THE TYRANNY OF THINGS**

**Abstract:**

Today’s consumers are inundated with, and purchase, an overabundance of cheap non-durable goods. This essay delves into the darker side of consumerism by proposing that the ownership of too many objects is its own special kind of tyranny. While in some cases design helps to create and even perpetuate many object-related issues, a designer’s ability to recognize and covet quality items can also provide a model for more responsible consumerism.

**An Argument for Heirloom Consumption (or Keeping Stuff for a Very Long Time)**

Several months ago, I was asked by a journalist to comment on the excessive consumption of technology by designers. She wanted to know if there should be rules dictating how long a person is required to keep electronics and computer equipment. It occurred to me then that even though Americans consider themselves to be fiercely independent, most of us love to be told what to do. It’s easy to think that we are one certification or set of regulations away from reversing the negative impact that humans are having on the environment. The reality is both more complicated and nuanced. If a designer needs new equipment to complete a motion graphics piece about the destruction of natural habitat, and the piece results in large tracts of land being set aside for sustainable agriculture, then who would argue that replacing the computer hardware was unwarranted? The right balance of consumption and use of resources is more the stuff of personal responsibility and individual circumstance than it is appropriate fodder for regulatory authorities. That being said, there is no doubt that those of us residing in the developed world are consuming more than our fair share of resources, largely at the cost of those living in the developing world. The question remains, what to do about it?

During the last half of the twentieth century, the advertising industry became highly successful at shifting our cultural values and driving consumption with perceived rather than actual need. Millions of people have been convinced their brooms and mops are inadequate, just a relic of another, largely inferior, time. Ever ready, the advertising industry provided an answer in the form of catchy advertisements for Swiffer (wet and dry versions available). The device is sleek, has removable parts that need to be replaced, and requires a special solution or proprietary pads for top-notch cleaning―all the while providing a multitude of revenue sources for Swiffer’s parent company, Procter and Gamble. No doubt the commercials featuring tired looking brooms and sad mops are the work of a marketing genius. But imagine what would happen if persuasive marketing could be used to help shift consumers toward new patterns of ownership. Could the fetish of the new be replaced with the cult of the well-made?

In *Toothpicks and Logos: Design in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2003), John Heskett argues that a postmodern interest in ideas and meaning has been covertly appropriated as a way of creating and selling consumers useless, expensive, and exclusive goods that rarely fulfill an actual need. Luxury and our desire for it is nothing new, but what luxury means has been redefined and is now primarily about name-association and branding as opposed to fine materials and higher quality construction. After World War II, a burgeoning middle class meant not only more disposable income but also an explosion of aspirational consumption. Products became badges of social status and economic achievement regardless of how well they were produced. Decades before postmodernism came into being, David Pye, a Professor of Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art, blamed poor workmanship for a decline in the quality of the human environment. In *Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), Pye wrote, “In the manmade world [there is] a whole domain of quality that is not the result of design and owes little to the designer.” Pye lamented the loss of craftsmanship, which he believed included a respect for materials and quality―a respect that design, being separate from manufacturing, often lacked. Pye was an advocate for what he called the “workmanship of risk,” which is a way of creating things that did not rely upon predetermined materials and means. Pye’s system is the opposite of mass production where a product is created based on a series of planned steps and predetermined outcome. Instead, Pye suggests that the craftsman can work in a way that depends on “the judgment, dexterity, and care that the maker exercises as he works.” It is a system that requires one to work without necessarily knowing the end result and/or the exact way that one will achieve the intended goal. Rather than saying that craftsmanship is solely the purview of handiwork, Pye allows that mechanization can in fact produce quality goods, but argues that it too should be held to his standard of risk.

The Japanese have Iki, which after hours in consultation with several dozen Japanese students and four Japanese tutors, turns out to be almost impossible to translate into English. Generally, when it refers to an object, Iki (used as an adjective) denotes an essentially Japanese combination of function, concern for aesthetics, natural materials, and economy of means. One thing that the group of impromptu translators agreed on was that having Iki was a good thing. It lends value to objects, it can be used to describe both the very old and the brand new, and it transcends simple monetary worth. In her 2005 book, *The Uncommon Life of Common Objects,* Akiko Busch writes about seemingly ordinary products that carry cultural significance, including cereal boxes, a snowboard, a desk, and an Adirondack chair. These objects take on a dreamy, almost reverent place in our psyches and, like Iki, they have value and, in some cases, staying power.

That objects are richly embedded with meaning is certain. What is less certain is whether greater acknowledgement of this relationship might help us to become better owners and, therefore, better consumers. This is not a trivial point because objects have, for decades, been made to have finite lives. Manufacturers are terrified of what might happen if products were so ecologically and functionally well made that consumers wouldn’t need to replace them. The question of how to keep a viable economy going while using less weighs heavily on the mind of inventor and renewable energy innovator Saul Griffith. Coincidently, this same concern was recently raised by a Japanese designer of office furniture who, at a conference in Tokyo, begged an audience of designers, engineers, and activists to come up with a viable business plan to combat the monetary problem of built-in obsolescence.

Griffith, from whom the term heirloom consumption was borrowed, is an energy junky. He states the job of the designer simply: “It is to make us use less, allow the developing world to use more, while increasing everyone’s quality of life.” Griffith believes it will be necessary to reduce the embodied energy in objects if we want to keep the earth at a temperature that can sustain human life. In practical terms this will require designers to be more efficient and to make things either very lightweight or last ten times as long. Certainly our conception of products will have to change if we are expected to spend decades with them. Some companies and designers have already begun to explore what this new landscape for objects might look like. INAX Corporation, a Japanese manufacturer of tiling, building materials, and sanitary fixtures, uses the technique of backcasting to imagine future products that have a subtly different relationship to their owners. A bath that fills with warm foam bubbles gives comfort without wasting precious water, and the company’s concept kitchen provides the usual surfaces and fixtures along with built-in waste disposal, recycling systems, and an area for growing fresh produce.

Work shown as part of the exhibit *Design and the Elastic Mind* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City skirted the edge of what might be considered marketable products. Noam Toran, a lecturer in the Interactions Department at the Royal College of Art, created products to alleviate men’s loneliness by providing traces of their missing companions. Accessories for Lonely Men (2001) included a Sheet Thief, a pair of Cold Feet, and a Heavy Breather. Toran’s models suggest that designers can be tasked with providing comfort and by doing so may help to alleviate our compulsion to constantly acquire more stuff. Michiko Nitta, a student in the same department, explored both our obsession with objects and our desire for physical closeness with loved ones by creating wearable products made using vitro-cultured meat production technologies. Her concept would allow consumers to grow selected parts of their partners on their own bodies. The replica of a nipple or patch of living hair is designed to foster memory and human connection and provides psychological rather than physical sustenance.

[sidebar:

The Tyranny of Things

I am trying to rule over ten thousand things

which I thought belonged to me.

All of a sudden a doubt takes wings:

Do they... or could it be…?

A hard-handed hunch in my mind’s ear rings

from whence such suspicions may stem:

that if you possess more than just eight things

then you are possessed by them.

Piet Hein [end side bar]

The Danish poet, designer, and mathematician Piet Hein wrote of being possessed by objects in his poem *The Tyranny of Things.* Hein suggested that if one has more than eight objects, one ends up being owned by rather than owning the things in one’s life. These oppressive objects are a far cry from Akiko Busch’s refrigerator, backpack, and desk, all of which she writes about with such reverence and good will. The saving grace of Busch’s objects is the significance they have for their owners. Though even here, it is unclear whether her sons’ backpacks or new digital cameras will carry enough actual meaning and function to stand the test of time. The interchangeable use of the terms *want* and *need* has led people to think it is their god-given right to buy the products they desire. In the U.S., we work harder and longer than citizens of many other industrialized countries and yet we are no happier with the life that our riches have afforded. To the contrary, in a recent report by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), it was the Danes who were reported to be the happiest of the 18 most industrialized nations. And yet Hein, a Dane, grappled with the tyranny of ownership.

After visiting the homes of several European designers, I began to wonder whether they were onto something that the rest of us had missed. These people are connected by the fact that they work in design and little else. They come from different countries, speak different languages, and are from various generations, yet they obviously had something in common. First, they didn’t have very many things; and second, the objects that they did own were well designed, usually beautiful, and almost always supremely functional. My hosts all had a near obsession with the possessions they lived with. They knew the story of the designer, they could tell you why one tea kettle was functionally superior to its competitors, and they unabashedly reveled in the beauty of objects. While not rich, my friends seemed content with what they had. And I began to think, “This is what I want,” an escape from the tyranny of things. All of which was convenient since I live in New York City, a place where having less is often dictated more by the skimpy size of apartments than by any concern over excessive consumption. I have found the best objects are not necessarily the most expensive and knowing you will keep what you have purchased tends to mean you will buy less. Now my possessions and I know each other well, and our relationship is buoyed by the fact that we will be together for a very long time. I thought that sustainable consumption would primarily be achieved by denying oneself the pleasure of having things. Instead, I have found that smarter choices and a greater appreciation for real rather than perceived value can make me a happier consumer―and a less wasteful one.

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