

Shapes of the body. Anthropomorphism in modern design

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A chair in the form of a hand, a drinks cabinet shaped like a female bust, a cup like the head of a Black man, a sofa like sensual lips – these are extra(ordinary) functional objects the creators of which used one of the oldest methods of shaping an object on the basis of the anthropomorphising formula. The notion of “anthropomorphism”, explained by its etymology – a compound of the Greek *antrophos* = man and *morphe* = appearance – is defined today mainly with reference to philosophy, religion and linguistics as the attribution of human qualities to natural forces, natural phenomena and abstract concepts; of the form and behaviour characteristic of people to the figures of deities; and of both human forms and human qualities to still objects¹. Anthropomorphism is studied by scholars from many different disciplines; the rather considerable body of literature on the subject displays a multi-layered nature of interpretative perspectives. In art, anthropomorphism as a type of visualisation is seen and analysed in the rich and complex context of the concept of “figuration”², while when it comes to handicraft and modern design the interest of scholars in this issue is marginal³. I would like to focus on

¹ See, e.g. “Antropomorfizm”, [entry in:] *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii*, ed. A. Maryniarczyk, Lublin 2000, vol. 1, pp. 263-264; A. Horowitz, “Anthropomorphism”, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Human-Animal Relationships*, ed. M. Bekoff, Westport 2007, pp. 60-66 (<http://crl.ucsd.edu/~ahorowit/Encyclopedia-anthrop.pdf>).

² The issue of figure and figuration was the focus of the 54th national session of the Association of Art Historians. Conference proceedings include various research concepts relating to this problem. See *Figury i figuracje*. Proceedings of the 54th national session of the Association of Art Historians, Lublin, 20-22 October 2005, ed. M. Kitowska-Lysiak *et al.*, Warsaw 2006.

³ It is tackled mainly by scholars linked to schools specialising in the teaching of young designers, in which the problem of “anthropomorphism” is one of the stages in the education process. See e.g. C. DiSalvo, F. Gempeler, “From seduction to fulfilment: The use of anthropomorphic form

anthropomorphising actions in man-made, strictly utilitarian products, including historical artefacts and modern mass-produced articles. I will reflect on what formal and aesthetic changes accompany anthropomorphising activities today, what has influenced the nature of these changes and how their current status can be classified.

The history of anthropomorphism goes back to pre-historic times, to the emergence of culture. Many researchers believe that the first anthropomorphising attempts were triggered by the psychological need to “tame” and “structure” the outer world according to one’s own measure. These processes derived from rituals and were of a magic nature. Anthropomorphism in pre-historic times evolved gradually and was associated with the evolution of the perception of humans and their community as a separate entity. It was preceded by archaic organisations of social coexistence based on zoomorphism, which used metaphoric ideas including humans as creatures into a vast group of equal beings able to transform themselves. Important element of anthropomorphism included, in addition to the emergence of an anthropocentric perception of human-nature relations, aesthetic factors. Even in the earliest documented examples anthropologists and archaeologists stress the dual nature of anthropomorphism, which applies to the form, i.e. shaping of objects with recognisable human features – human-shaped objects – and to the non-material sphere associated with emotions, attitudes etc.⁴ At the same time we were also dealing with another phenomenon, which, especially from the perspective of modern anthropological reflection and the design objects in question – products of civilisation of the postmodern era – is particularly interesting, namely animism, which Ernst Cassirer called inner life of objects. The artefacts of the Palaeolithic man – the well-known examples of figural artefacts – are also connected to mythical anthropogenesis, i.e. a conviction that humans come from the earth matter, that they were formed by gods. These oldest artefacts also include, apart from magical/mythical products, objects which do perform these additional functions but also have specific practical purposes. The most numerous group among them – encountered in various cultures and periods – are burial urns. Their form was often anthropomorphised, to greater or lesser extent, which can be seen, for example, in the ash urns, so-called face urns, from the Iron Age (Pomeranian culture)⁵, Etruscan canopic urns or Peruvian urns. Leaving aside varied eschato-

in design”, [in:] *Proceedings of the 2003 International Conference on Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces*, Pittsburgh 2003, pp. 67-72; J. Choi, M. Kim, *Anthropomorphic Design: Projecting Human Characteristics to Product*, <http://www.iasdr2009.org/ap/Papers/Orally%20Presented%20Papers/Aesthetics/Anthropomorphic%20Design%20-%20Projecting%20Human%20Characteristics%20to%20Product.pdf> (access: 6 January 2012).

⁴ See *Estetyka w archeologii. Antropomorfizacje w pradziejach i starożytności*, ed. E. Bugaj, A.P. Kowalski, Poznań 2010.

⁵ A. Mierzwiński, “Pola popielnicowe — eschatologiczne aspekty antropomorfizacji metalurgii”, [in:] *Estetyka w archeologii...*, pp. 93-114.

logical contexts and burial traditions in the various cultures, we can talk in this case of a certain universalism of perceiving the human body as a container, and of a transposition of its shape to a vessel used to secure its earthly remains. When it comes to religious rituals, we can see a continuation of this trope in objects made with a view to storing precious relics, which in the Middle Ages often took the form of various fragments of the human body, for example the hand or the head – as was the case with St. Alexander's reliquary from the Stavelot Abbey (Belgium) or the Gothic herm of St. Dorothy from the former Town Hall chapel in Wrocław. It would be more difficult to say unequivocally when the anthropomorphising of utilitarian objects ceased to function only within the ritual-magical domain and began to emerge in new contexts, as objects which, by virtue of their form, came to be regarded as original and, consequently, desirable and worthy of note. It seems that this process first of all concerned ceramic and glass artefacts – manufactured in the Mosel region in the 12th century, in Siegburg or Westerwald, Germany, jugs with bellies decorated with human head-shaped designs, sometimes having additional elements like ears, were used as vessels during banquets. Zoomorphic vessels with similar functions were to be found already in antiquity. These forms from the sphere of the sacred were adapted in the sphere of the profane. Their role remained special – limited only to exceptional situations. Their task was not so much to introduce a comic element, but to amaze, surprise. They were seen as “curious objects”, i.e. curiosities. Marginal with regard to craftsmen's output, anthropomorphic objects were mainly intended to be admired, contemplated even. This is why we find information about their existence, for instance, in the inventories of the numerous *Kunstkammern* of the Renaissance or the Mannerism period. In addition to rare natural history specimens, biological curiosities, modern measuring equipment and works of art, they included elaborate vessels, like, for example, the *Jungfrauenbecher* from Dresden's Grüne Gewölbe collection⁶. The famous salt cellar by Benvenuto Cellini, commissioned by the French king Francis I, is an excellent example of the unique formula of anthropomorphic utilitarian object⁷. Its practical functions were camouflaged – what we see is an intricate, quite substantial (26 cm tall, 33.5 cm high, 5 kg in weight) sculpture group. A naked female and a naked male are facing each other – as we get to know the work more closely, we recognise the meaning of the at-

⁶ The *Jungfrauenbecher* were vessels comprising two elements: a female figure in a long dress with arms raised above her head (when turned “upside down”, the figure became a cup), holding a smaller, “pivoted” vessel. They were used during feasts by flirting couples: the task of the man was to drink from the cup without spilling the liquid in the smaller vessel. These vessels were a speciality of Nuremberg goldsmiths. See F. Kämpfer, *Becher, Humpfen, Pokale*, Leipzig 1977, p. 126, ill. 100; *Das Grüne Gewölbe zu Dresden. Führer durch seine Geschichte und seine Sammlungen*, ed. D. Syndram. U. Arnold, J. Kappel, München-Berlin 1997, p. 60, catalogue no. 65.

⁷ After a spectacular theft in 2003 and subsequent recovery three years later, the invaluable piece again was exhibited in the Kunstkammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

tributes they are holding and we know that we are dealing with a mythological story with an allegorical context. Our protagonists are Demeter and Poseidon, personifying the Earth and the Sea. Next to the goddess we find a miniature Ionic temple used as a container for the precious pepper, while the salt was kept in a small boat accompanying the couple. Such objects, which were to compel admiration both with their concept and the mastery of the workmanship as well as the use of precious materials, were often to be found on the tables of the high and mighty in those days. Soon they were quickly adapted for manufacturing, delighting the eye of less wealthy and less aesthetically sophisticated buyers. As ceramic and glass making techniques developed, craftsmen became increasingly capable of preparing models used to quickly produce and copy various objects, also mimetic – zoomorphic or anthropomorphic – in nature. In the 18th century the pottery manufactories in Staffordshire produced not only spice sets in the form of figural groups, but also popular jugs in the form of a seated sailor with a mug, the so-called Toby jugs, or other vessels, especially teapots hiding their function behind the figures of more or less exotic animals⁸. The effects of this growing “pauperisation” of anthropomorphism should be described as kitsch, one of the distinctive features of which is, according to Abraham Moles, its increasing antifunctionality, unsuitedness⁹. Kitsch, to follow the French scholar further, really flourished at the turn of the 19th century, when bourgeoisie became the driving force of and, at the same time, the main participant in civilisational change. The industrial revolution was accompanied by a steady degradation of artisan traditions, while at the same time aesthetes and intellectuals were stressing the need to create new norms of designing objects used by people in their everyday life. The first diagnoses and concepts of reforms that emerged in John Ruskin’s and William Morris’s circle pointed to a need to revive the lost traditions, which led, among others, to the birth of Art Nouveau, but was not without influence on a new formula emerging at the beginning of the new millennium, a formula that with time began to be known as industrial design. The definition of “industrial design” itself is problematic and this is not a place for presenting all the nuances associated with the origins and meaning of the term¹⁰. As a result of the mechanisation of the manufacturing process, constant technological progress as well as transformations in the distribution of goods, the modern system began to require specialist designers, who were expected not only to come up with an appropriate, aesthetically pleasing form of objects, but also to take into account the requirements of the technological process, economic, environmental determinants, etc. The pioneers of such activities, including Bauhaus and Werkbund artists, emphasised aspects relating to the prac-

⁸ See J. Miller, *A Closer Look at Antiques*, Polish edition, Warszawa 2001, pp. 89, 96-97.

⁹ A. Moles, *Psychologie du Kitsch*, Polish edition, Warszawa 1978, pp. 76-81.

¹⁰ The topic is analysed in detail by Józef A. Mrozek in “Historia designu a historia sztuki”, *Kultura Współczesna* 2009, no. 3, pp. 31-46.

tical use of both the designed objects and the machines that made them. Such a functionalist approach was to lead to the development of a new language of forms and rejection of superfluous elements like ornamental decorations. It was at that time that designers began to use ergonomic research analysing the relations between humans and objects they were using. Thus, the human body became a model for which objects were to be designed in a way that would make it possible to use its motor capabilities to their functional maximum as cost-effectively as possible. In this utopian vision of humans being harnessed to a regulated, technicised new world, there was no room, it seems, for anthropomorphism.

Yet the need to explore the human shape and its derivatives turned out to be very durable. Today, this is primarily the domain of pop culture, the land of kitsch or camp, overrun by hordes of gadgets. But it also appears in “upper circles”, promoted as original creations of inventive designers, presented in glossy magazines, sold in art galleries, exhibited in museums. A brief reconnaissance is sufficient for us to be able to notice new elements characterising the phenomenon in question and to establish the sources of inspiration. If in the past ideas associated with human-shaped objects concerned mostly ceramic, glass and metal artefacts, today they are explored primarily in furniture making. Some examples: a Belarusian designer working in Paris, Dzmitry Samal, presents prototypes of a collection entitled *Human furniture*, which, as he says, is intended to be a “a mix between the pragmatism and efficiency of the geometrical shapes and sculptural beauty of human body”¹¹; Peter Rolf, an Englishman with a flair for crafts, meticulously sculpts the forms of his furniture – naked female and male torsos¹²; Dejana Kabiljo’s Viennese study offers us bar stools and chairs covered by luxuriant hair¹³. Have we not seen that before? Of course we have – here are some clues: *The Burning Giraffe*, *Venus de Milo with Drawers*, *Ultra-Furniture*. These contemporary anthropomorphic concepts have their sources in the works of surrealists. In surrealism, the revived matter of objects played an important role. As Agnieszka Taborska rightly notes, “no other movement tried to restore to adults the childish faith in the magic power of things”¹⁴. The fascination or even fetishization of objects, which can be seen in artists from Breton’s circle, was based on a constant play with the norms of the philistine world combined with an effusive admiration for “found objects” discovered in its scenery. This trope set in the early 1920s by the surrealists, but also signalled by other types of avant-garde actions, for instance by Marcel Duchamp in ready made objects, was quickly absorbed by the world of advertising and fashion, which usurped the right to take control of the customers’ hearts and minds. Surrealist visions were put on sale by their cre-

¹¹ See http://www.samaldesign.com/pages/dzmitry_samal5.html (access: 6 January 2012).

¹² See <http://www.beautifullife.info/interior-design/contemporary-furniture-from-peter-rolfe/> (access: 6 January 2012).

¹³ See <http://www.kabiljo.com/design/design.html> (access: 6 January 2012).

¹⁴ A. Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni. Surrealizm*, Gdańsk 2007, p. 178.

ators themselves, with Salvator Dali – nicknamed sarcastically Avida Dollars by Breton – proving to be peerless at it. His 1934 painting *Face of Mae West Which May Be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* prompted an unusual commission given to the artist by his protector Edward James, who wanted five sofas shaped like the actress' voluptuous lips. The lips sofa has acquired numerous epigones – more or less successful. One of the first of them – today regarded as a design icon – was designed in 1970 by Franco Audrito's Studio 65. The *Bocca* sofa, inspired by the lips of another star, Marilyn Monroe, was to be a homage to the great master. He himself soon gave in to the temptation and in 1972, together with Oscar Tusquets, designed another sofa for a Mae West room in his museum in Figueras. The objective was to obtain a perfect imitation of moist, voluptuous lips, an effect that was to be achieved thanks to modern technology and synthetic fabrics. Yet it was not until 2004 that the design was completed, becoming mass produced (the materials used initially did not stand the test of time...) ¹⁵.

The emergence of new materials revolutionised furniture design to a large extent; from as early as the 1960s natural materials, including especially plywood, had to face an important competitor – synthetic resin, followed by more plastic “inventions”. The object which still serves as a “Sèvres model”, as it were, is a chair by the Danish designer Verner Panton, which began to be produced in 1967 (today it is manufactured by Vitra) – the first ever single-piece stacking chair made of polyurethane foam. Today new technology makes it possible to produce the most elaborate, sometimes very complex shapes. Many designers also enter into an artistic dialogue with the original made by Panton, for whom, importantly, one of the most important aspects was to design an ergonomically-shaped seat. The Italian Fabio Novembre proposes a return to the biblical roots — the chairs he designed, *Him and Her*, are imprints of naked human bodies ¹⁶, sensual, tempting, but also innocent and not knowing shame. In another design – *Nemo* – he uses a human face mask. However, not all designs are so aesthetically sublime – plastic chairs resembling a human skull are just one example of turpist anthropomorphism.

Another noticeable novelty in anthropomorphising experiments is an increased interest among designers in the organs hidden in the human body – more and more often the heart muscle, gastrointestinal tract, lungs and skeleton become models for various design endeavours. Obviously, the heart is the most engaging object of interpretation. Its symbolic potential – also by virtue of the fact that its conventional, time-honoured sign is such an important element of modern iconosphere – tempts with the possibilities of its (re)interpretation. Thien Ta Trung inscribed the shape of the heart muscle in transparent glass, turning it into a lampshade

¹⁵ See http://www.bdbarcelona.com/en/products/armchairs_sofas/dalilips_sofa.php (access: 6 January 2012).

¹⁶ See <http://www.novembre.it/design/him-her-2/> (access: 6 January 2012).

named *Blinding Love*, the idea for which, according to the artist, is for him an embodiment of the saying “For where your home is, there will your heart be also” (though initially it was to read: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” – Jacques de Morney)¹⁷. Eva Milinkovic has turned the heart into a vase or, rather, decorative form – the organic nature of this spindle-shaped blown form is stressed by the changing colours of the glass mass: vivid reds mixed with milky whites give the impression of gentle pulsation¹⁸. The heart can also be a form of a wall lamp (design by Tania da Cruz) – delicate light surrounds it with a starry halo, bringing to mind associations with the iconographic emblem of Christianity, the burning heart¹⁹. The heart can also be a salt cellar, which, according to the designers Anna Bormann and Selma Serman, will effectively remind us of the need to protect our own hearts, and this can be done thanks to just a single small hole with which this handy little object is equipped²⁰, etc.

In designers’ hands other organs, too, change into lamps, carpets, containers. The popularity of this trend can be seen in the fact that it was singled out at the international trade show “Maison et objet” in Paris, in 2009, featuring, for example, a traditional wingchair with untypical upholstery design (by AK-LH): a human shape filled with the arabesque of the blood circulation system, or lamps shaped like big eyeballs, vases shaped like earlobes. In this case, too, we should look for the sources of this new trend in modern art. The new approach to the body, corporality, physiology, which was manifested in various artistic projects from the mid-1960s onwards, sometimes simply entering the body-object relations (e.g. the brilliant works by Alina Szapocznikow), finds its commercial continuation today in modern design. Undoubtedly, one of the most basic reactions that these objects are to provoke in spectators is shock – in the excess of visual stimuli it is one of the most effective tools for attracting and holding attention. When we are “caught”, there comes a moment of aesthetic reflection – some will be disgusted by the anatomical concept, some will try to rationalise and describe the author’s intentions, other will see in such works a protest joke and ironic distance from the official formula of the technicised world of objects.

I would be inclined to look for the most interesting anthropomorphising projects among works of radical or utopian design – for in objects/designs sometimes entirely devoid of utilitarian features, sometimes deliberately squeezed into the framework of practicality, they point to the postmodern perception of the problem of the body, which has lost its integrity, oscillating towards a multi-aspect hybridisation. In Sam Barton’s designs these phenomena are combined – in *Clone Chaise* we see a silhouette of the human body the flat surface of which is covered

¹⁷ See <http://mocoloco.com/fresh2/2011/02/10/blinding-love-pendant-lights-by-periphere.php> (access: 6 January 2012).

¹⁸ See <http://www.tsunamiglassworks.com/products.php?pfid=33> (access: 6 January 2012).

¹⁹ See <http://taniadacruz.portfoliobox.net/gallery/4981/cuore-sacro> (access: 6 January 2012).

²⁰ See <http://www.bormannundserman.de/> (access: 6 January 2012).

by a fluorescent internal system. It comes to life, when someone approaches the object²¹. The human body as such also becomes a “material” – this type of actions is often part of the sadomasochistic aesthetics, for instance in works by Allen Jones or Jeff Gord²², it also appears as a variant without the erotic-sensual context in the photographic works of David Belazquez, who uses his own naked body to prefabricate a table, a bathtub, a bookshelf²³. What also becomes noticeable in this context is a phenomenon that runs counter to anthropomorphism – mechanomorphism of humans. To conclude, I should mention some issues I have deliberately omitted, issues which in themselves require a separate presentation and analysis, namely anthropomorphism associated with medical prosthetics and with the related, to some extent, field of objects of the erotic-pornographic industry, as well as the separate problem of shaping modern, multi-function robots (androids).

²¹ See <http://www.sambuxton.com/clone.html> (access: 6 January 2012).

²² Of course, such actions are outside design, are referred to as “forniphilia” and a manifestation of BDSM; they can be analysed as a manifestation of subversive sexual behaviour.

²³ See <http://www.elfotomata.com/pages/exposicion/135> (access: 6 January 2012).