

In the years since 9/11, an aesthetic of violence has taken root, expressed in lethal shapes and brutal production processes.

Are industrial designers finally getting critical?



Design Under the Gun

BY COLIN DAVIES AND MONIKA PARRINDER



opposite First conceived in 1997, Piet Houtenbos's refillable oil lamps have received widespread attention of late. The lamps are U.S. Army "dummy" grenades intended for military training, not combat, which are plated in gold or silver.

right Suck UK's 3Guns porcelain table vase (2003) evokes the antiwar gesture of sticking flowers in firearm barrels.





opposite Eduardo Sarabia's hand-painted ceramic vases from the installation *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate* (2005) employ Mexican craft for a commentary on drug trafficking.

this page, left Marijn van der Poll's *Do Hit* chair for Droog (2000), part of the group's *Do Create* collection, exemplifies an aesthetic of violence, though it reveals a greater interest in process than in politics. The piece is distributed as a thin-walled stainless steel box packaged with a sledgehammer. Buyers are invited to use the tool to beat the chair into shape.

this page, right The title of Ron Gilad's *Run Over by Car* vase (2002) describes its production method.

AT LAST DECEMBER'S ART BASEL FAIR IN MIAMI, the artist Eduardo Sarabia exhibited traditional ceramic vases decorated with naked women, marijuana leaves, smoking skulls, and automatic rifles. Through the use of a vernacular art form, the work investigated the world of Mexican drug trafficking. Like the English potter Grayson Perry's ceramics, which are delicately ornamented with scenes of child abuse, the corruption represented by Sarabia's vases lifts them beyond the world of homespun craft and into that of social critique. Indeed, a growing number of contemporary designs, many of which are mass-produced, reveal how social turbulence since 9/11 is being reflected back to us in the things we consume. An aesthetic of violence is on the rise, and the products that convey it are increasingly mediums for sophisticated meditations about our times.

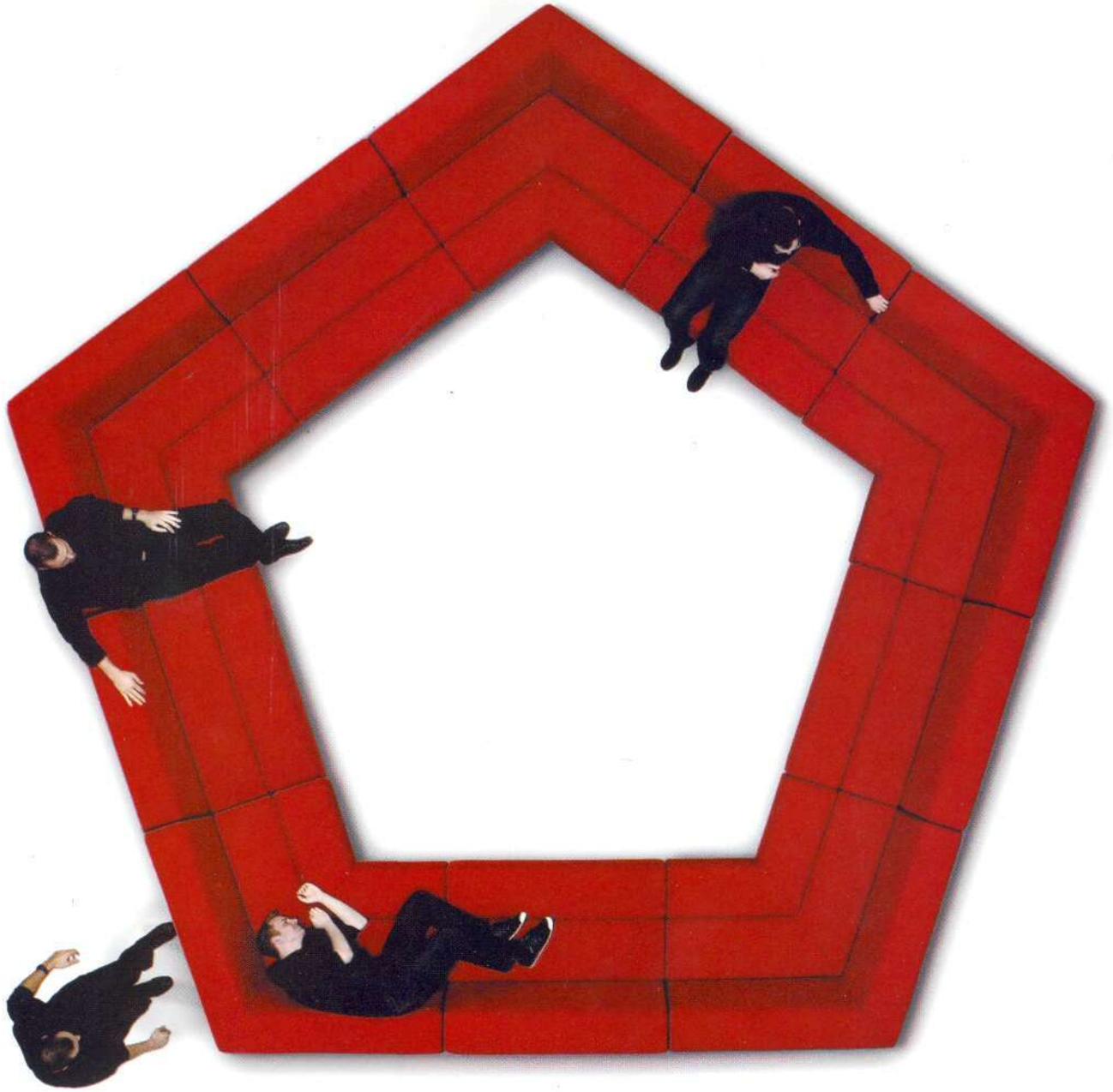
"Designers are in an explosive mood," Linda Hales recently observed in *The Washington Post*. "At the cutting edge, product designers are acting like artists. Their best works are generating emotional charges far beyond traditional notions of function."

Design's flirtation with violence is nothing new: World War II-era vases were created from the discarded casings of shotgun shells, and doorstops have long been formed from lumps of shrapnel collected from combat zones. A decade ago, Droog Design famously introduced brutality into the

home with its *Do Create* collection, which grew to include a hollow stainless steel box that owners bash into the shape of an armchair and a rubber-lined porcelain vase that gains character the more it is dropped.

Droog, however, was investigating process with these designs, not commenting on a global condition. Its savage production methods are currently echoed by the young Swedish group *Front*, which has molded a lounge chair from a dynamited crater and perforated a light fixture with bullets. Similarly, New York-based Ron Gilad's *Run Over by Car* vase, which has been in production since 2002, resulted from experiments with driving a variety of automobiles over 10-inch lengths of sealed metal tubing (a Mercedes sedan ultimately produced the most satisfying results).

In these unsettling times, the aesthetics of violence reflects an interest not just in the superficial patina created by abuse but also with neutralizing the tools of carnage. U.S. Army hand grenades have been converted into oil lamps by the New York-based designer Piet Houtenbos. Kalishnikovs are emasculated in Philippe Starck's gold-plated *Gun Lamps* for Flos. Ceramic casts of various armaments are packaged in luxury gift boxes by Dutch designer Elske van der Putten. And handguns are intended to hold roses in a vase produced by *Suck UK*, invoking the antiwar gesture of symbolically rendering a firearm useless by sticking a flower in its barrel. Though





opposite The Pentagon Sofa (2005) by Tobias Wong and Niels Bendtsen takes its primary inspiration from the building's outer rings, which were damaged on 9/11.

this page, left Dominic Wilcox's plastic War Bowl (2002) hints at an adult's disillusionment with childhood fantasy, though the UK designer himself is reluctant to say.

this page, right Else van der Putten conceived her Loved Ones series of elegantly packaged ceramic armaments as a 2004 thesis project at Eindhoven Academy. The objects "symbolize inappropriate paeans to firearms and all the ways in which gun lovers justify their possession and use of weapons," she says. She now distributes the objects herself.

critics charge that such designs are cynical exercises in shock value, one can argue that the point is to call attention to, not trivialize, the impact of lethal weapons. Says Dutch designer Remco Swart, creator of *Violence is the Motif*, a 2004 ceramic-tile installation illustrated with Iraqi women, babies, and gas masks: "Politics trigger me to give an answer to certain world situations, or to make them visual in my own language."

Nowhere was there greater evidence of design's awakened critical voice than in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Safe: Design Takes on Risk." Planned before 9/11, but postponed until last October, the show offered a snapshot of a post-9/11 world preoccupied by crisis. Its exhibits could be divided into three categories. There were proactive designs that compelled beholders to acknowledge our turbulent times. Tobias Wong's quilted duvet and rose-shaped brooch constructed from bullet-proof material, for instance, made inescapable allusions to urban dangers. In a second category were pragmatic designs for weathering perilous conditions, such as Derek Ryden's Blizzard Foil Blanket. And finally there were witty, ironic commentaries—visual one-liners—that included a huggable stuffed mushroom cloud by Dunne, Raby, and Anastassiades.

Beyond the exhibition, another example befitting this last group is London designer Dominic Wilcox's War Bowl. A nest of melted plastic toy soldiers representing French and

British troops in the Battle of Waterloo, the bowl preserves the artifacts of childhood war games, yet degrades them. In this ironic parable of lost innocence, the toy army of childhood fantasy is recycled into the more realistic representation of war as a grotesque heap of bodies. But Wilcox is himself reluctant to pin down a message. Unlike Swart and Wong, who issue firm pronouncements, he prefers to furnish the market with material for projecting its own social or political critiques. Gilad is equally coy. Asked about the violent birth of Run Over by Car, he says, "I am only a designer, but the impact of politics is inevitable, and a reaction in 3-D form is one result. The observer decides its connotation, be it political or aesthetic."

It may be that designers, accustomed to appealing to the broadest possible audience and to remaining in the background even when their products are widely recognized and consumed, still feel uneasy in the public, divisive role of critic. (Any such concerns could be misplaced. A salesperson at New York's Flos store recently insisted that far from being outraged, shoppers are happily buying Starck's much-maligned Gun Lamps.) More than ever, though, product designers are turning proactive by showing a willingness to offer unequivocal statements about violent themes in their work. Jerusalem-based Ezri Tarazi, for one, is candid about his efforts to create an "aesthetic you cannot ignore" and even might find "trou-



bling." His Baghdad Table for Edra is an assemblage of aluminium profiles composed to represent a stylized map of the Iraqi capital. The open weave of its materials is reminiscent of lace, but also of the lacerating shrapnel produced by explosions. Embedded in these allusions is a critical essay about Iraq's destruction and ad-hoc efforts to re-form it. But Tarazi was equally concerned with remaining true to his discipline—ensuring that the Baghdad Table works as furniture.

Like Tarazi's table, Tobias Wong and Niels Bendtsen's Pentagon Sofa is pointedly connected to recent traumatic events while honoring traditional design. Originally created for last November's International Exhibition of Design in Rio de Janeiro, whose theme was "Safety Nest," it takes its form from the U.S. Pentagon's three outer rings, the part of the building damaged on 9/11. The designers reworked this disturbing metaphor by conceiving the rings as "comfort zones supporting your back, arse, and legs," in Wong's words. They also took comfort cues from Alexander Girard's sybaritic 1960s-era conversation pit. The sofa is now in commercial production by the Canadian company Bensen.

Taken as a whole, designs of shock and awe represent a "dichotomy of comfort and demise," a phrase coined by the New York designer Alexander Reh to describe his Fully Loaded Chair. Exploiting the tension of this dichotomy through juxtaposed materials, he made the seat from

the polished brass tips of 450 spent 12-gauge shotgun shells; the colorful plastic hulls are visible from the back. Though inspired by the violent death of Hunter S. Thompson, who used a shotgun to commit suicide in early 2005, Reh was also influenced by post-9/11 "political thrashings" in design. "I realized that humor is less caustic than throwing blows," he says.

The unlikely pairings of grenades and gilding, guns and roses, defense headquarters and conversation pits, and even functional design and social critique would seem indisputable ingredients of the current aesthetic of violence. Yet any effort to define the movement in terms more concrete than "thrashings" maybe premature, Wong cautions. "I believe a post-9/11 sensibility exists," he concedes, "but I also think it's too early to determine what it is. Ten-plus years from now, we'll be able to look back and see what the true aesthetics were. For now, they are too subtle, or they're overpowered by works like mine that forcibly address them."

For his part, Ron Gilad questions what the designer-critic can furnish beyond an immediate supply of utility and beauty. "If one can design a vase that can serve as a catalyst for world peace," he says, "I will get re-circumcised." ★

Based in London, Colin Davies and Monika Parrinder are co-founders of www.limitedlanguage.org.

above Hunter S. Thompson's suicide by shotgun inspired Alexander Reh's Fully Loaded chair (2005). The piece represents "a dichotomy of comfort and demise," Reh says.

opposite Introduced at the 2005 Milan Furniture Fair, Ezri Tarazi's Baghdad Table for Edra represents a stylized map of the Iraqi capital in aluminum profiles. It was designed to make a political statement, but also to work as furniture.

