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DESIGN

Eloquent Ode to the Simple

By ALICE RAWSTHORN

It's an oddly shaped metal box with a very odd name — the LD3 AKE Unit Load Device — and is made from a grubby-looking aluminum alloy that is often scratched or dented. If you have looked out of an airplane window while waiting for take off, you're bound to have seen one, but probably didn't notice it.

Look again. Our lives wouldn't be quite the same without those grubby metal boxes, because so many of the products we use each day — everything from computers to cellphones — were once shipped inside them. Their odd shape was designed specifically to slip into an aircraft hold, just as some of their cargo will have been designed to fit inside them. Why? Packing products into the fewest possible boxes, and aircraft, minimizes shipping costs and hopefully causes (a little) less environmental damage by burning less fuel.

Those are the sort of things that the German designer Konstantin Grcic wants you to think about, the next time you spot those metal boxes. And why one is perched inside the Serpentine Gallery in London alongside several dozen other industrial objects, including a welding helmet, a car tail light, fishing tackle, an artificial heart and chairs.

Each of them was designed within the past decade and is featured in “Design Real,” an exhibition that opens Thursday that has been curated by Mr. Grcic as his paean to industrial design.

“People may see a flight container as a stupid aluminum box, but it's an important product of our times,” he said. “It's interesting to understand why it looks the way it looks and is made the way it is made, and to think about its impact on the economy and material world. The other objects have incredible stories too. I want people to leave the exhibition feeling as excited about them as I do.”

“Design Real” is the first contemporary design show to be staged by the Serpentine, one of London's most important art and architecture galleries. It is off to a good start with its choice of curator, who is not only unusually thoughtful, but arguably the most influential product designer of recent years.

You can see why in “Konstantin Grcic: Decisive Design,” a retrospective of his work that opened Friday at the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr. Grcic, 44, studied design in England before setting up a studio in his native Munich. His early products were in the studiedly simple style of fellow neo-rationalists, like the British designer Jasper Morrison. The turning point came in 2004, when he introduced Chair_One, a gawkily geometric aluminum chair, which was the result of his experiments with advanced design software.

Blunt, angular and almost ugly, Chair_One defined a new aesthetic and way of working for Mr. Grcic. He begins by making a paper model, then feeds its dimensions into a computer to finesse the design. All of his design decisions — shape, weight, texture and materials — are determined by what the object will do, not how it will look. The result is unapologetically technocratic, but with the human quality of having literally been shaped by his hands.

His gawky geometry is now widely imitated. Sadly, the copycats lack the coherence of his originals, but blaming him for them is a little like holding Le Corbusier responsible for every dilapidated high rise.

“Konstantin is a fearless designer,” said Zoë Ryan, curator of design at the Art Institute of Chicago. “He is not afraid to create work that is challenging, and can even be off-putting at first glance. It challenges us to rethink the objects we use daily.”

That’s what he hopes to achieve with “Design Real.” As Mr. Grcic admits, he faces a daunting task in following the most talked-about industrial design show of recent years, “Supernormal,” which was curated by two of his friends, Mr. Morrison and the Japanese designer Naoto Fukasawa. It championed the original modernist values of simplicity, efficiency and modesty. Mr. Grcic approved, but his exhibition focuses not on the elemental qualities of particular objects, but on their relationship to daily life: how their design was influenced by industrial culture, and has since influenced it. His approach is similar to that of Carsten Höller, Phillipe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and other artists in the Relational Aesthetics movement, who have also collaborated with the Serpentine.

Rather than exhibiting the most beautiful, innovative, eco-responsible or whatever product of each type, Mr. Grcic has chosen the most eloquent one. The computer is the XO1 educational laptop designed by One Laptop Per Child for children in developing countries. “I couldn’t show any other computer, not even an Apple, because the story behind OLPC is so strong,” he explained.

Similarly he chose the battery of the Tesla Roadster electric sports car over the vehicle because he was intrigued by how the recent investment in developing cellphone batteries has succeeded in producing one that is small and powerful enough to move a car.

Each object is identified by its generic name: “computer,” “battery” and so on. Visitors can find out more about them in the research space inside the exhibition and on the accompanying Web site, www.design-real.com, which may well steal the show.

Designed by Field Trip, it is packed with information on each exhibit, and plays a clever political role by enabling Mr. Grcic to explore the negative side of the things he is romanticizing. Take the “container” section, which covers the history of containerization and airfreight, the dumping of broken containers and their dire ecological impact.

Even so, “Design Real” is a love story about industrial objects. It is his passion for them that makes Mr. Grcic’s work so compelling, but his dazzling vision of design may seem nostalgic to the eco-savvy young designers, who have rejected the modernist fascination with material culture. They are more likely to question how we can justify churning out more metal boxes as unwitting pawns in the gas-guzzling airfreight industry, than to celebrate their secrets.

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