

Superflex The difference is not that great. We're also interested in the aesthetic value - something which actually is rather rare in this type of product. It would be theoretically possible for a designer to carry out a project such as this, but the difference is partly that we are able to and interested in posing questions - things not normally associated with a designers intentions. Our biogas system is only one of several aspects of our artwork - although an important one. We have produced a functioning portable sauna for nature lovers. It comes in a set with a simple user's manual. We also work with music and the production of CDs. We have, for example, created 'tool' CDs and developed concepts for musicians and Djs. Among others a CD with random animal sound for Djs to use as a component in their work. Superflex Music functions actually as a platform for different people to work with sound and music. For all these different projects, we have gathered economically significant skills and a network of contacts that are designed to realize our specific ambitions. [...]

Superflex, 'An Exchange Between Åsa Nacking and Superflex', *Afterall*, issue 0 (London, 1998).

Douglas Coupland Mad Scientist//2000



Five years ago I was having lunch at a friend's place in New York. There against a wall was a lovely curvy white moulded plastic chair, which I grabbed to sit on. My friend fairly lunged at me, yanked it away, and said, 'No! It may look great, but the damn thing's turning to dust. I had one of them shatter just last week.'

By the time Verner Panton's stacking chair was unveiled in 1967, other designers, most famously Charles and Ray Eames and Eero Saarinen, had tried and failed to produce a one-piece plastic prototype. It took Panton nine years, but he was the first to succeed, and the now-iconic Panton Chair remains his seminal work.

Back before the mid-1990s neo-modernist revival, the Panton Chair conferred an aura on its surroundings that was at once rare, expensive, delicate, and privileged, at the same time marking its owner as an educated and finicky soul, patiently willing to deal with ageing plastics of unknown half-lives. Now, two years after his death, Panton is obscure no more. Licensed reproductions of his chair (made of sterner stuff) have swamped the marketplace; miniature versions are sold in stores for use in dollhouses. About the only thing Panton Chairs seem to lack is their own cable-access TV show, though that's doubtless in the works. And for the designer's surge in popularity we have, in large part, the Vitra Design Museum both to thank and to curse: Until the middle of October, one can visit its comprehensive retrospective of Panton's work, which travelled from Well am Rhein this summer to inaugurate Vitra's new branch in Berlin.

Why the mixed feelings? Perhaps simple snobbery. There was something lovely about being one of the cognoscenti who kept the memory of Panton's work alive - idle daydreams of eating avocado wedges behind the lights at a London fashion shoot, c.1968 to the sound of Peggy Moffitt's left nipple teasing a Bolex shutter. There has always been a secret society of Panton admirers who respected his quest for genuinely new ways of living our everyday lives and his innovative use of space-age materials, all of them veneered with a signature blaze of colour (the swingiest maraschino-cherry red, fondue-set orange, General Electric green) that emitted just the faintest whiff of camp.

To his credit, Panton, who worked with Danish architect Arne Jacobsen in the early fifties, had little patience for traditional notions of what made a chair a chair or a table a table. One needed a place to put one's bum, but did the object one sat on really require legs? Panton's works hung from ceilings or seemed to sprout from floors and were made of foam or plastic or chromed wire; they



resembled very little of what had come before them. Panton lived in an era and place – primarily Scandinavia – where the word ‘modular’ always ended up in the same sentence as the word ‘future’. And his obsession with bright, bold circles and squares was so consistently mod and merry that one can only wonder if there’s been a mistake in classifying his output according to the programme and practices of fifties functionalism. That’s probably a moot point. His work is strong and alluring regardless of category. Had he chosen to operate solely as an artist, one imagines him faring quite well, perhaps fitting into the niche defined by Bridget Riley, Victor Vasarely and Yaacov Agam – all of whom, like Panton, are now experiencing reappraisals and revivals. Still, Panton’s graphic sensibility funneled itself into fabric design rather than fine art. His textiles, also to be found in the Vitra retrospective, are exquisitely produced and optically exciting and would not look out of place in any current setting. In fact, Panton’s influence is everywhere: Anyone who has ever spent time in an airport first-class lounge or hotel lobby built between 1965 and 1980 is probably all too familiar with his signature.

Ultimately many of Panton’s designs, while inspired, are impractical to live with. There is a famous image of Panton and his wife at home, setting up a weekend lunch in a room resembling the child-containment centre beside IKEA’s room of plastic balls. One senses that the Pantons are kind of pushing it to make the place look functional. But it is the stretch that ends up being the point. Visitors to the Vitra show can see for themselves that Panton was at his best when he was at his most impractical, and that his work, while timeless in many ways, is also strongly locked into a moment and place – a roundabout way of saying he was an excellent designer.

Douglas Coupland, ‘Mad Scientist’, *Artforum* (New York, October 2000).