

INTERVIEW BY STEVEN HELLER

A curator in the department of architecture and design at New York's Museum of Modern Art since 1994, Italian-born Paola Antonelli promotes design for the edification of the general public with exhibitions that unearth the new, rare, and arcane, as well as the humanistic aspects of design. Antonelli—whose first exhibition for MoMA, "Mutant Materials in Contemporary Design" (1995), received wide acclaim—most recently curated the exhibition "Workspheres: Designing the Workplace of Tomorrow" (2001), which focused on how technology and new work patterns will shape our future work environments.

Formerly a lecturer at UCLA, Antonelli, 40, received her masters in architecture at the Milan Polytechnic University (Politecnico di Milano), and currently teaches at the graduate level at Harvard's Design School. She has been a contributing editor at Domus magazine and design

editor at Abitare, and has written for Harper's Bazaar, Harvard Design Review, I.D., Metropolis, Metropolitan Home, Nest, and Paper. Her current projects include a book about foods from around the world as exemplars of outstanding design, and a TV program that offers a global perspective on design. Antonelli is also developing an upcoming exhibition for the 2003 Aspen Conference entitled "Safe," concerning design that takes on risk. Clearly not one to avoid a challenge, Antonelli is currently trying to get a Boeing 747 into MoMA's permanent collection.

In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, Antonelli was asked to discuss the effects of war on design and designers.

HELLER: What is the role of the designer during a time of war?

ANTONELLI: Designers should, by definition, be sensitive to what's happening to their fellow human beings, so it is hard to imagine that they would not be affected. There are some designers who are able to be directly useful—for instance, Shigeru Ban, who teaches refugees how to make temporary homes out of the materials at hand—or directly involved, like Ezri Tarazi, who designed gas masks for children in Israel.

On the other hand, these designers lead a parallel peacetime life. Designers who are concerned with the world around them just become more intensely preoccupied in wartime. Those who are not concerned to begin with—at least not in their professional life—are not as predictable.

Also, designers tend to be the cushion, the interface between people and major world events, so their responsibility is great, although their relevance might not be evident in the heat of the moment.

HELLER: Historically speaking, has there ever been a uniquely significant object of, say, product or industrial design to emerge at the height of a major war?

ANTONELLI: Not at the height of it—not that I can think of. Rather, it comes about just at the start of hostilities [when war production is still gearing up], or after hostilities end, when the war industry is idled and the innovations percolate into civilian life. The Eameses provide two great examples: their leg splints (before, commissioned by the U.S.) and their fiberglass chairs (afterwards, when a company manufacturing fiberglass airplane parts no longer knew what to do with [the material]).

I once attended a lecture by a very decorated mathematician from Vienna named Dr. Marchetti, who demonstrated with many sinusoids that when innovation in the military industry is at its peak—that is, at the height of a conflict—progress in the real world is at its lowest, while a few years later, the relationship is inverted.

HELLER: How did war alter the nature, indeed the purpose, of design in the 20th century?

ANTONELLI: Tough question. I am not sure I know how to answer without going out on a limb without a net.

War has always existed, and design has always existed. Anybody who is touched by a war will never be the same. And wars, on a macro scale, alter the economic and cultural balance of the world. Is World War II responsible for Armani's success because Armani could not have happened without a subtle and welcome cultural colonization from the U.S. that brought Italians to appreciate comfort in clothes? Is Japan such a stunning leader in design because of the enormous void in self-respect left behind by World War II, as Akio Morita hints at in his autobiography? We are not talking of butterfly, but rather of elephant effect here.

Yes, war altered design in the 20th century. Has it altered its highest, ultimate purpose, which is positive and constructive improvement? No, I don't think so.

HELLER: But would you say that it has altered priorities such that the resulting design has become more purposeful?

ANTONELLI: That happened before this [Iraq] war, as an effect of 9/11 and of economic crisis. 9/11 was the big wake-up alarm, and I think that designers' consciences have been more alert since then, like everybody else's. But mind you, I live in New York, so maybe I am projecting.

HELLER: I know this sounds simplistic, but when people are dying on battlefields, graphic and package design, or for that matter fashion and furniture design, seem like insignificant extravagances. Are they, in fact, insignificant?

ANTONELLI: Not insignificant, only temporarily less relevant. I do not believe what I saw written in a press release at the [2003] Furniture Fair of Milan—I will *not* name names—that in times of trouble, excess and luxury provide solace. That is ridiculous and akin to Marie Antoinette's brioche and Imelda [Marcos]'s shoes.

Still, people are dying on the battlefield every single day. They might not be Americans in Iraq, but you just have to move a little bit south and west to find amazing devastation. It would be hypocritical to don a jute sack and move into a barrel at the first sign of [hostile] activity.

My personal hope and call is for compassion and information. If you have to design a \$10,000 silk velvet curlicued armchair, so be it, but be modest and keep it in perspective. Make up for it somehow by being generous, loving of the world and of life, and useful. It would be great to find out that Philippe Starck indeed sends aid to [Congo]. It is OK also if this consists of objects that he designed, provided they are useful and working. (Actually, Philippe is much more compassionate than one would think; forget the armchairs.)

HELLER: At times of war, do we forget about pure beauty?

ANTONELLI: Beauty can indeed be solace, salvation, and redemption. Wasn't *The Pianist* about that? That's to say that "committed" design should not renege on beauty. [The inverse] is an old ideology that should never be allowed to return.

HELLER: In peacetime, designers adhere to certain esthetic and formal principles. Do you foresee a shift in these standards due to the war in Iraq?

ANTONELLI: After the big wars of the past, everything felt like it was starting anew. Winning nations adopted fresh, winning

images, which, in design, can be exemplified by the Case Study Houses program in California and the Low-Cost Furniture competition at MoMA, for instance. And even for the defeated, the necessity to get back on their feet was a powerful boost. Think of Japan and Germany and what they were able to make out of their defeat.

The wars of late, from the Gulf War to the wars in Bosnia and now Iraq, somehow feel different. I feel too [unqualified] to say why, although I have an idea. It just feels like nobody has won and everybody has lost. Triumphalism is a little out of place.

What could really have a consequence for design is the demoralizing situation in foreign affairs. War is a time of politics on fire, but it is everyday politics that has a deeper influence on design. Protest needs design.

HELLER: How do you design protest when, as in the case of Iraq, there was such a swift victory that liberated a besieged nation and, in turn, squelched dissent at home?

ANTONELLI: This war is going to have a long tail. Let me use a powerful cliché: The world is watching. Design will be in charge of conveying a great part of the expression of this feeling. I am currently working on the next edition of the International Design Conference in Aspen [in August], which is entitled "Safe: Design Takes on Risk." It will touch, more than marginally, on what the role of design could be, from architecture to graphics. Design is a moral and political force.

HELLER: Have you noticed changes in any areas of design with direct regard to the war in Iraq?

ANTONELLI: No, not really. Just less small talk, maybe. There is no discussion, chat, or conversation among designers where war is not mentioned. Thankfully. And there is no chance not to discuss the amazing distance that now exists between the U.S., or at least its official, elected representatives, and the rest of the world. Designers—the ones who I like—are very moral beings; they are engaged.

HELLER: Artists often hide behind their art. Can designers be oblivious to the state of the world in which it functions?

ANTONELLI: Nope, not possible. It would be like antimatter for designers.

HELLER: Is there anything in the Museum of Modern Art design department that you can point to as being born of war?

ANTONELLI: Yes, the Eameses' leg splint and fiberglass chairs. And innumerable objects made from innovative materials, all of our carbon fiber pieces, maybe even some of the toys, quite ironically. Many, many other things too. The military industry has spearheaded so many technical innovations. There are no weapons in the collection, but that would be too literal anyway.

HELLER: From a design curator's point of view, what do you think are the most positive and negative outcomes of this war?

ANTONELLI: There is no design curator's POV, I am afraid. I am not able to take that stand. History happens, and curators are just small conduits in the gigantic attempt we all make to find an explanation and make some sense out of it. Somebody should help me understand war and the meaning of life, first and foremost.

HELLER: What do you think is the most profound design to support America's war effort?

ANTONELLI: The American flag?