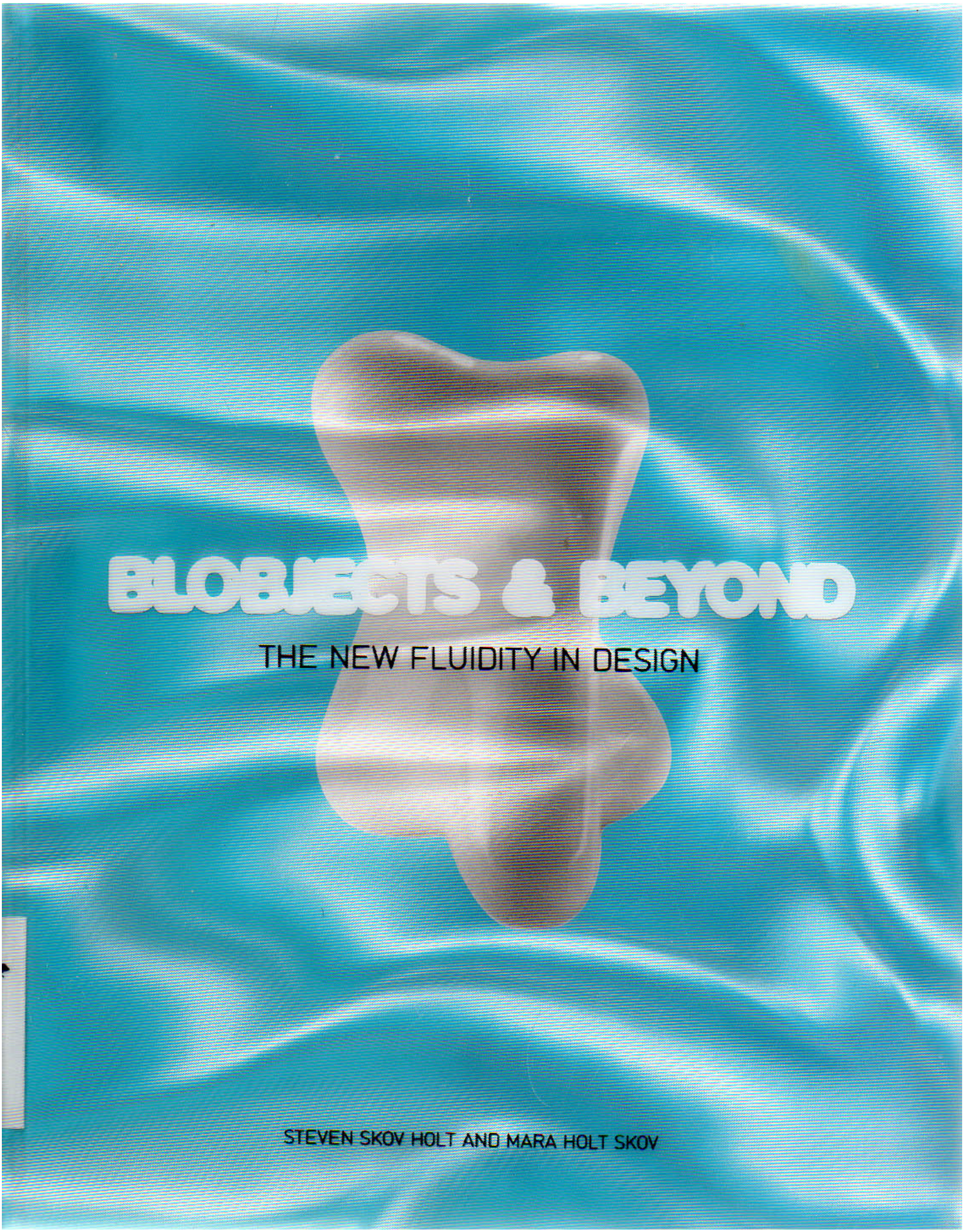

BLOBJECTS & BEYOND
THE NEW FLUIDITY IN DESIGN
STEVEN SKOV HOLT AND MARA HOLT SKOV

THE BLOBJECT BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

STEVEN SKOV HOLT AND MARA HOLT SKOV

Lockheed Lounge 1986–88 (designed 1985)

Design	Marc Newson for Pod
Materials	Riveted sheet aluminum over fiberglass, rubber
Size	25 x 35 x 60 in.

Appearing when it did, the Lockheed Lounge's *blobby shape evoked a whole cumulative history of associations. It looked "embryonic," but also Surrealist. In juxtaposition to the high tech aerospace associations of its construction it rendered in "natural" form the "unnatural" aspects of technology which softer shapes—evoking as they did biology and craft—had long seemed to oppose.*

Phil Patton, email to Steven Skov Holt, April 5, 2004.

In 1986, a never-before-heard-of designer and self-confessed airplane nut named Marc Newson achieved immediate global celebrity status based on a single piece of furniture. Amazingly, it was shown at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney, Australia, not in one of the powerhouse design centers of Milan, Tokyo, London, or Paris. Known as the *Lockheed Lounge,* it was a riveted aluminum chaise longue that looked "like a giant blob of mercury," as Newson put it [Alice Rawsthorn, "Newson Takes Off," *I.D. Magazine,* March/April 1997, p. 74], and it caught everyone's attention—even if they did not know what to make of it. Built of fiberglass covered with thin sheets of aluminum, the *Lockheed Lounge* appeared to embrace a powerful contradiction: even though it was handmade and riveted, it conveyed an unnerving sense of fluidity. This was a blobject before there were blobjects—a proto-blobject that extended its legs forward just as surely as a groping amoeba extends its pseudopods.

In name and image, the *Lockheed Lounge* was an homage to streamlining. After all, Lockheed was the aerospace company that had produced aviation icons such as the *Constellation* airliner and the *P-38* prop fighter (which later inspired the first automobile tail fin), not to mention more recent icons such as the *SR-71 Blackbird* and *F-117 Stealth* fighter. But at the same time, Newson's chair also parodied streamlining, making it look like an exhausted source of imagery. Despite the romantic flight of highlights that washed across its polished aluminum surface,

the *Lockheed Lounge* was practically unsittable and resolutely immobile, as hopeless of flight as a rock. It was a stick in the eye to the whole half century of design tradition that took inspiration from streamlined aircraft and aerodynamically efficient rockets. As a final twist, Newson later confided that he had spent weeks laboriously hand-hammering the dozens of rivets into the chair's improbably shaped fiberglass body.

In that sense, the *Lockheed Lounge* was a stunt, a brilliant PR gambit, as well as a wonderful practical joke. But its notoriety demanded an encore. Was Newson a one-hit wonder, or a real visionary? In response, he developed a shape he dubbed the "orgone." It was a pure-form blob that was swollen at stem and stern, a vessel waiting to be filled with meaning and purpose. But it was a form that could be stretched, flattened, torqued, and turned to produce an almost endless variety of shapes. The orgone has proved to be Newson's ideal form—curvy and appealing, yet mysterious and flexible—the beginning of a signature form language that he continues to riff off to this day.

One of the first of the orgone concept–based forms to be produced, the *Embryo* chair takes the essence of the *Lockheed Lounge* and squeezes it into a brightly colored neoprene wet suit. The *Embryo* chair seems to have sprung whole from Newson's childhood memories of Australia's north coast and his dreams of astronauts, airplanes, and space stations; it continues to this day to epitomize futuristic design.

< **Embryo chair** 1988
Design Marc Newson for Idée
Materials Tubular steel, polyurethane, neoprene
Size 33 x 35 x 31 in.

[The Embryo chair] was one of the first pieces where I hit upon a discernible style. There's an obvious symmetry, and the interior is as important as the exterior. I came up with the idea of upholstering it in wetsuit fabric, because the colours were so strong and I was seduced by the texture. It seemed very Australian.

Marc Newson, quoted in *Mark Newson*, Booth Clibborn Editions, London, 1999, p. 27.

Earlier that decade, Hartmut Esslinger and his firm frog design were creating their own design language—a complete system of proportions and radii that was determining the look of Apple products. For Esslinger, this was not an instance of "form following function," but rather of "form following emotion." Esslinger and frog design were pioneers in expanding the physical and psychological possibilities for exuberant, expressive form. Their designs were typified by a heightened sense of proportion, an increased use of color, and an emphasis on conceptual and technological possibilities. As this approach gained currency in the late-1980s design world, "form follows emotion" also came to be known as "soft tech," a term that first flourished in the 1970s when ecologist Amory Lovins used it to refer to renewable energy resources. Regrettably, the designers using the term soft tech did not make a knowing connection to earlier eco-advocacy.

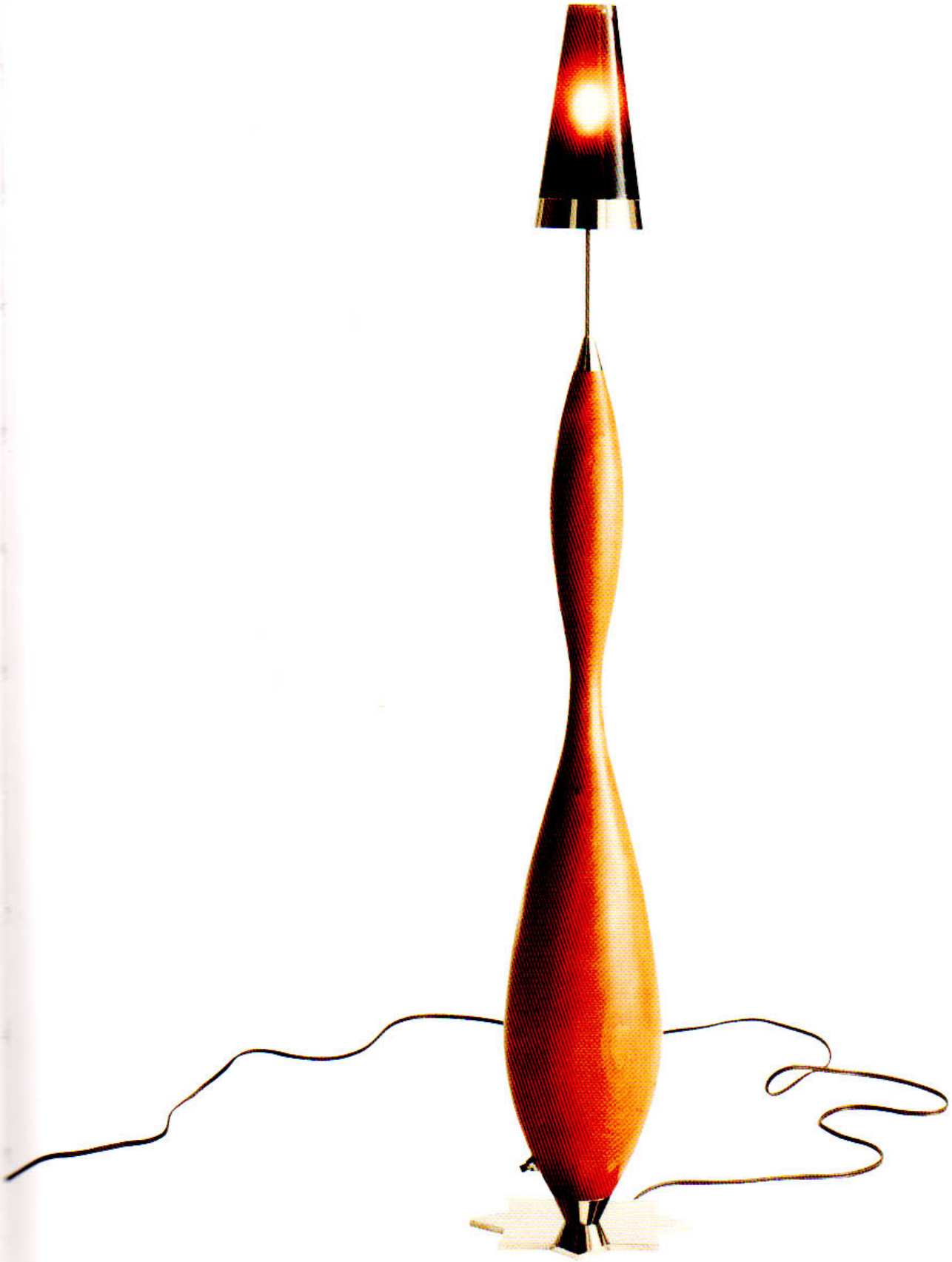
Karim Rashid has also created a group of trademark forms, which appear throughout his work. The capsule, the hourglass, the free-form blob, and the asterisk are all in his kit of parts, lending a consistent message to everything he touches. Early suggestions of these forms are apparent in the lighting and art furniture he created in the late 1980s. In particular, the *Farrago* lamp has an attenuated hourglass curve, a pointy, star-shaped metal base, and a quirkily disproportionate shade—"farrago" accordingly means a hodgepodge, or collection of ideas. Although he may have begun with a farrago, Rashid has spent nearly two decades refining his forms and his design message. The results are unmistakable. He is now considered to be the prolific leader of the international blobject phenomenon—fitting for a designer who is Egyptian-born, Canadian-raised, Italian-influenced,

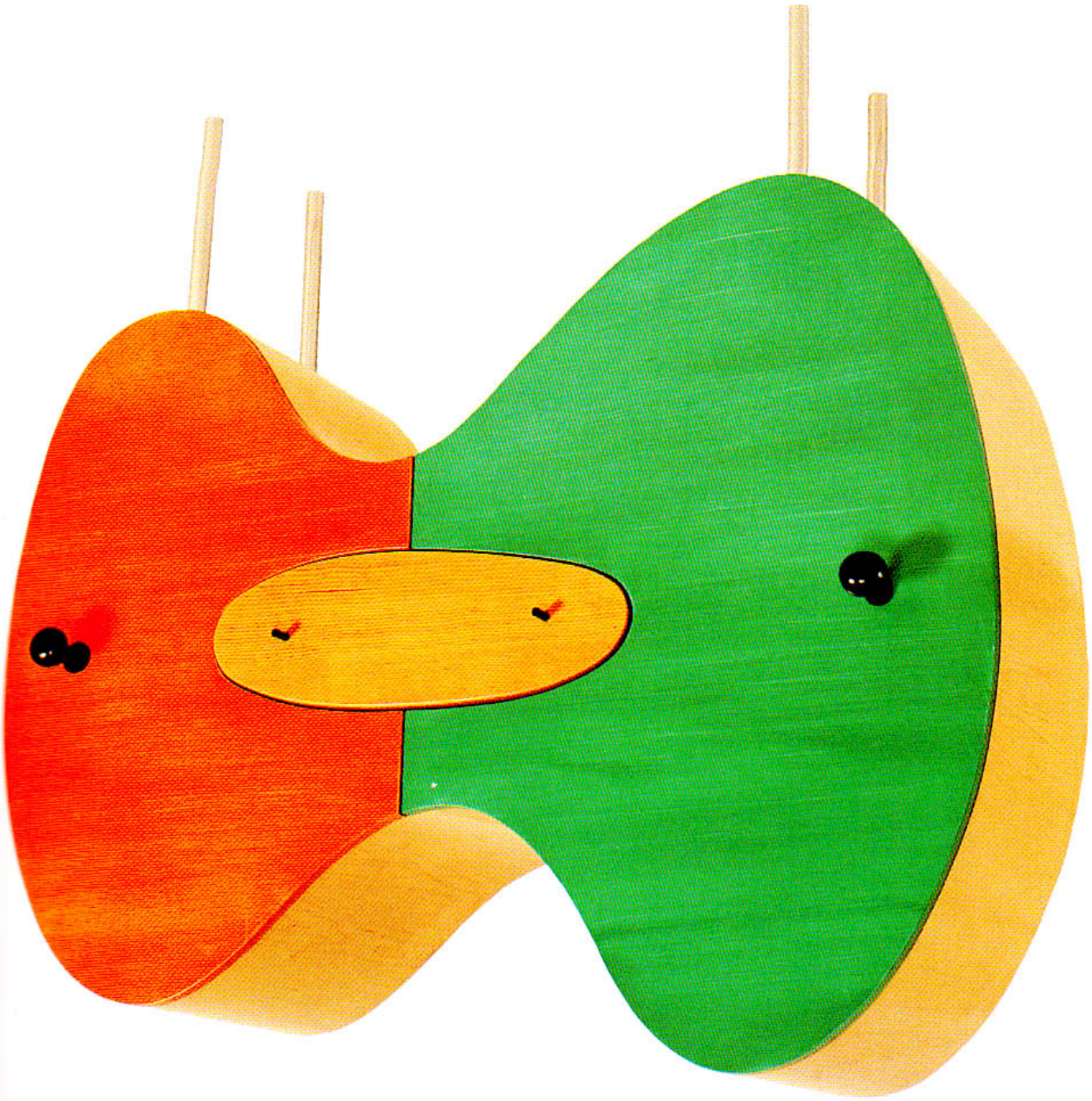
> **Farrago table lamp** 1989
Design Karim Rashid
Materials Cherry wood, nickel-plated steel, black glass
Size 36 in. high

Not so long ago, technological products — cameras, hi-fi, kitchen equipment ... were hard-edged, serious, aggressive, studded with buttons. They looked engineered ... it was cameras, some of the biggest offenders, that were among the first to signal a new tendency. The body of the Olympus XA was smooth, pebble-like, comfortable in the hand and in the pocket, a sculptured skin that concealed a rigid skeleton. Richard Seymour and Dick Powell, compulsive phrasemakers, call this tendency "soft tech."

Rick Poynor, "Product Design: Soft Tech," *Blueprint*, July–August 1988, p. 28.

> **frollerskates** 1978
Design frog design for Indusco
Materials Plastic, steel
Size 15 x 10 x 5 in.





The New International Style ... draws upon the Eastern world as well as the Western world, the Southern as well as the Northern. The New International Style draws on African, Indian and South American visual cultures. While it recognizes the triad of Japan, Europe and America (USA), it aims to move beyond it toward something greater in scope.

Steven Skov Holt, "Chaos, Clarity, Post-Credibility and the New International Style," *Innovation*, Summer 1988, p. 5.

and New York–based. His media-spanning work has resulted in objects as diverse as soap dispensers, chairs, paintings, perfume bottles, conceptual installations, fabric, lamps, DJ tables, carpets, and more; his influence cannot be overestimated at this point.

Although the one-of-a-kind *Farrago* lamp and other early Rashid projects were largely produced in isolation, they took place amidst a much larger explosion in the area of furniture. In Milan, ventures such as Memphis and Studio Alchimia were redefining the terms under which chairs and tables, lighting, and domestic products could be made, used, and discussed. In the United States, American art furniture was happening seemingly everywhere across the country. But it was at its most vital in New York. The city was the cynosure for a generation of painters, sculptors, designers, and architects who were all positively charged with the desire to see furniture function as a kind of laboratory for design experimentation. Although still radically underappreciated to this day, American art furniture offers an alternative visual track to what most designers think is possible and what most manufacturers think is permissible.

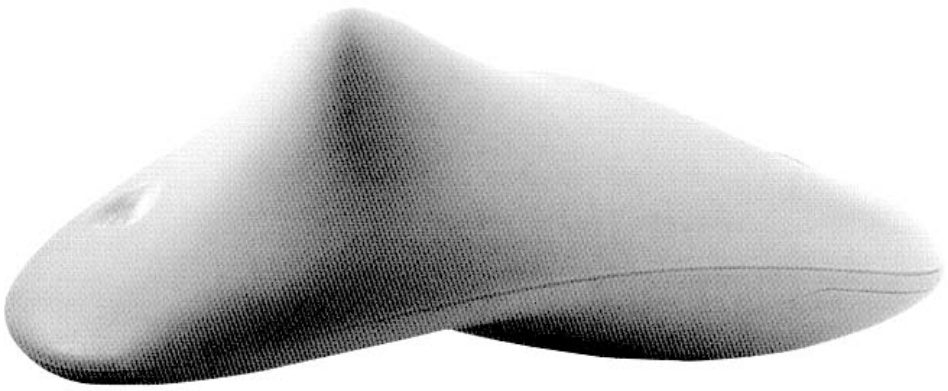
< **Otto cabinet** 1990–91
Design Lyn Godley, Lloyd Schwan
Materials Bent plywood, stainless steel
Size 49.5 x 50 x 15.5 in.

It always felt a little unsettling to think of ourselves as designers because when we began all of this, designers were more like mechanical engineers, there was not much art about what they did ... Even Giulio Cappellini, head of the Cappellini furniture company, said we were really artists, not designers. Today I would agree with him. My view [is that] art has come off of the pedestal and into our daily living.

Lyn Godley, email to Steven Skov Holt, May 14, 2004.

Godley-Schwan was one of the art-design hybrids that worked between the one-off world of galleries and exhibitions and the volume demands—and cash-flow crunches—of actual furniture production. A husband-and-wife team, Lyn Godley and Lloyd Schwan created a series of well-built but whimsical furniture such as the *Otto* cabinet in the early 1990s. Manufactured in bent plywood, the *Otto* still had a planar, two-dimensional quality to it—as if their sketches for the piece had come to life in the workshop. It presented an ambiguous message, appearing new and modern while also containing a multiple-layered series of historical references to 1950s and 1960s style.

> **Moosk radio** 1996
Design Philippe Starck, Jérôme Olivet for Alessi
Material Polystyrene
Size 3.25 x 5.75 x 8.25 in.



Newson's and Rashid's early work draws attention to the other examples of fluid form that were simultaneously emerging from the studios of international designers in the late 1980s—designers like Philippe Starck, Kenji Ekuan, Ron Arad, and particularly Ross Lovegrove. These designers appeared to be coming to the same aesthetic conclusions, a collective zeitgeist that could be compared to the rise of abstract painting in various parts of the world after World War II. As a group, their early curvaceous work signaled a move away from the strict modern box approach—the "whiteness & lightness and leanness & cleanness and bareness & spareness of it all" that Tom Wolfe famously railed against in *From Bauhaus to Our House* [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1981, p. 4]. In contrast, this new fluidity felt warm and pluralistic, rich and full of optimism.

By the early 1990s, other designers had begun to show the same impulse toward curvaceous design—even before they had the software tools to enable the quick creation of blobby forms. Much of this work came out of the United Kingdom, and reflected the ongoing British invasion that was occurring in design as well as other creative areas, including music, fashion, and cuisine. For example, Royal College of Art grads Lovegrove and Stephen Peart teamed up to design their fluid wrist rest, mouse pad, and lumbar support for Knoll. Significantly, the *Surf Collection* was one of the first designs created for the prevention of carpal tunnel syndrome and low-back pain.

... the Age of the Blobject, a period that began in the 1980s, when everything from the Ford Taurus to the Sony Walkman to the Tylenol caplet was designed with curved contours and swoopy silhouettes. Since then, blobjects, along with accepted standards for good design, have become more visually evolved. In the same way that the first generation of professional industrial design pioneers, in the 1930s, focused on streamlining objects ranging from pencil sharpeners to cruise boats, ... designers ... are hyper-streamlining everything from motorcycles and hairbrushes to sunglasses and computers.

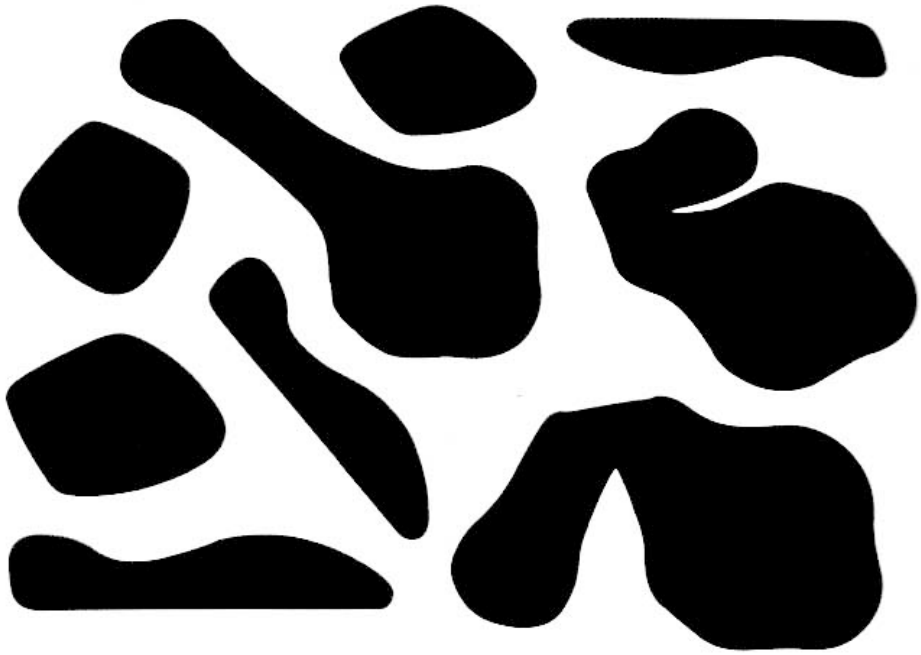
Steven Skov Holt, "Beauty and the Blob," *Design Culture Now*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2000, p. 24.

> **Surf Collection** 1994

Design	Ross Lovegrove, Stephen Peart for Knoll
Materials	Lumbar support: GEGET thermo-reactive polyurethane foam, neoprene, nylon, counterweight. Wrist rest, mouse pad: nylon upholstered polyurethane gel
Size	Lumbar support 2.5 x 30.75 x 2.625 in. Wrist rest 19 x 4.125 x 1 in. Mouse pad 19 x 9.625 x 1 in.

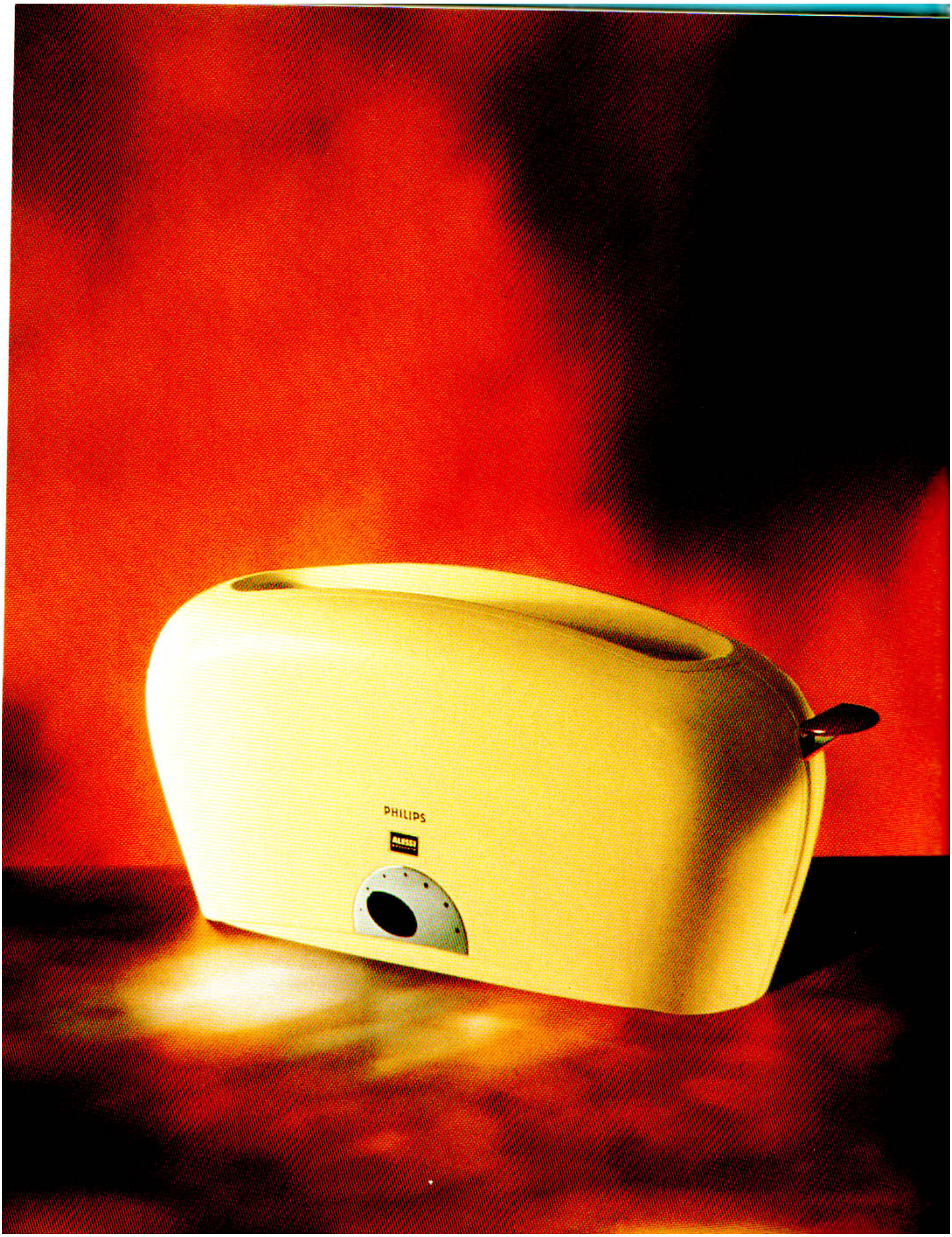
Lovegrove exercises a distinctly chameleon-like ability to be both outside and insider at any given time ... For one, Lovegrove is not English, he's Welsh ... he got his design degree at London's Royal College of Art, ... spent many years living abroad, first in Germany ... then ... Paris. So not only is Lovegrove Welsh, he is also truly a citizen of the European Union.

Andrea Coddington, "English Leather," *I.D. Magazine*, May–June 1996, p. 73.



> **Digitalogue font** 1992
Design Neville Brody of Research Studios
Material Digital font

British graphic designer Neville Brody explored the impact of digitization on text in his experimental 1992 typeface *Digitalogue*. Brody was already known for revolutionizing magazine design with his type treatments for *The Face* in the 1980s, but *Digitalogue* went a step beyond anything he had done up to that point. This was a Rorschach inkblot of a typeface, constructed lovingly from a series of blob components that were orchestrated into a beautiful, flowing series of letterforms that tested but never quite defied legibility. The *G* letterform alone comprises no less than twenty-five black blobs sitting atop a lesser but still significant number (nine each) of gray and blue linking blob forms. *Digitalogue*'s typeforms seem forever to be in the process of becoming, never just being, as they assemble and disassemble into focus—a result worthy of being framed and hung on a museum wall.


PHILIPS

A great product shift is sweeping the marketplace. Office equipment is out, consumer appliances are in. Hard-edged superpowerful technology is out. Comfortable, friendly technology is in.

Bruce Nussbaum, "The Best Product Designs of the Year," *BusinessWeek* (reprint by McGraw-Hill Company), May 25, 1998, p. 2.

On the domestic products front was *La Cucina Elettrica*, a joint exploration between Philips Electronics, the multinational electronics giant, and Alessi, the small but influential high-end Italian domestic products manufacturer, to rethink the benign appliances that sit quietly on our kitchen counters. The goal of the project was to create a set of "warm, poetic tools with no loss of functionality and with an enhanced humanistic character," according to Philips's Stefano Marzano in *La Cucina Elettrica*, the book that tells the story [Electa/Alessi, Milan, 1994, p. 211]. The result is a strange and wonderful cartoonlike family of blobby kitchen electronics—toaster, coffeemaker, kettle, and juicer—each with a distinct personality. The group would be further refined for actual production, but *La Cucina Elettrica* stands as a prime example of the kind of visionary thinking underlying the creation of blobjects.

< **La Cucina Elettrica domestic appliances** 1994

Design: Philips Design Team for Alessi/Philips conceptual exploration
Materials: Polypropylene, stainless steel
Size: Toaster 8.25 x 5.75 x 18 in.
Coffeemaker 9.875 x 9.625 x 14.125 in.
Juicer 9.5 x 6.25 x 7.25 in.
Kettle 10 x 6.25 x 9 in.

Up to this point in the early 1990s, architecture-based CAD (computer-aided design) software was limited, as it was based on Cartesian models that made no allowances for the kinds of curves designers increasingly wanted to create. In 1995, a typical design project went from being drawn by industrial designers in a 2-D software package to then being completely redrawn in a more robust 3-D software package used by mechanical engineers. The problem with such translations, even if the design work was imported directly into the engineering program, is that they lost the nuances, the subtle differences in shape, proportion, and detail that got the designers excited in the first place.

But eventually software was developed that empowered both industrial designers and engineers, and as it did, it caught up with the ideas for curvaceous and organic forms that designers wanted to explore. It did so in the flexible, algorithm-based modeling programs originally designed for the special effects and animation industry, which encouraged dynamic curves and shape-shifting forms. Software programs with functions such as Metaballs, Splines, Bezier Splines, and NURBS (Non-Uniform Rational Bezier Splines) have had an enormous impact on the industrial designers and architects who have embraced them. Form creation and modeling have become organic rather than orthogonal, facilitating the composition of unusual and asymmetrical forms. Architect Greg Lynn was one of the first architects to explore the use of Alias's Maya animation software as a new kind of form-generator for architecture, and he remains a leader in the drive to explore the medium as a liberating tool.

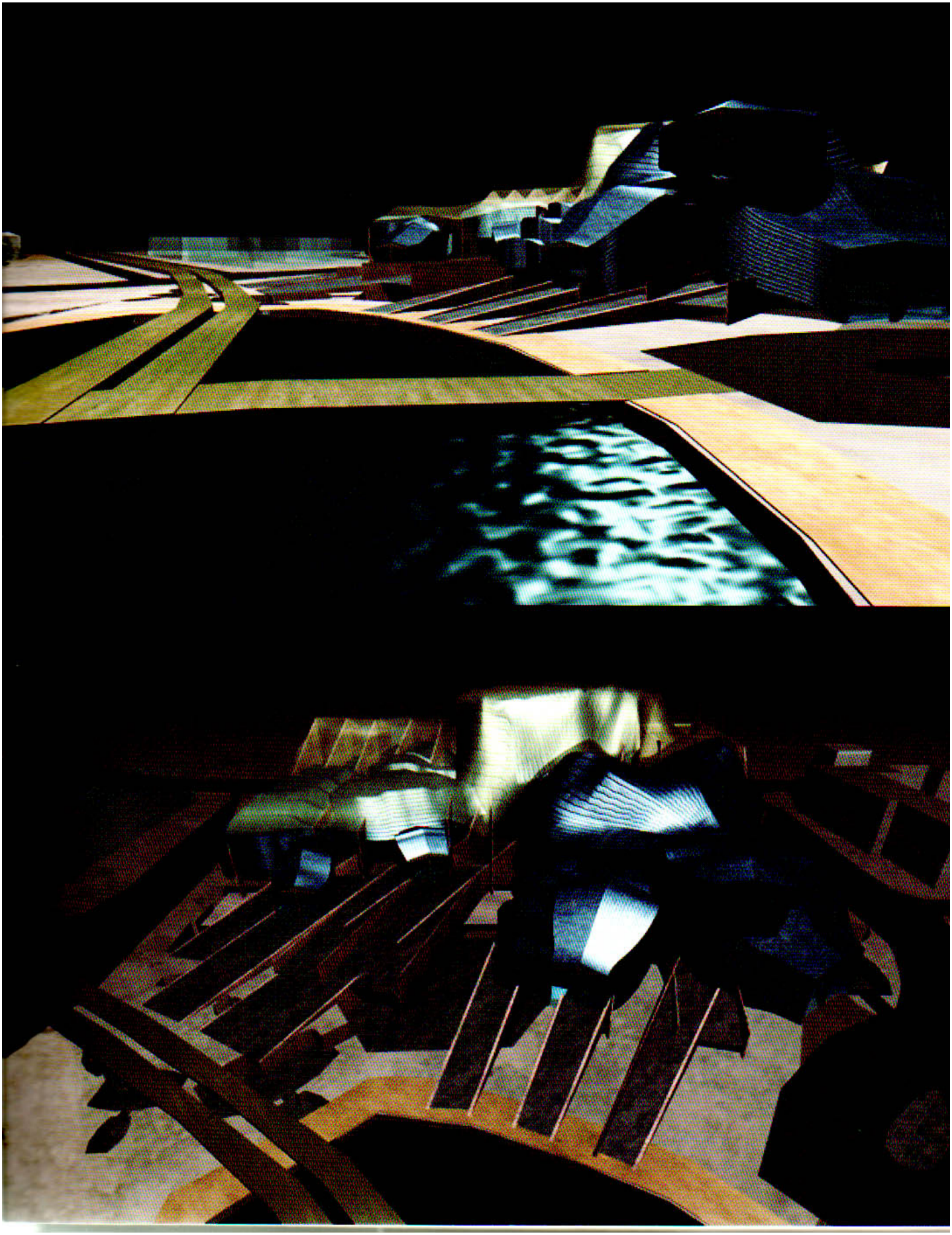
Not only was the software changing, so was the design of the computer itself. The typical beige box was slowly being transformed by colors, personalized details, and clever peripherals. But the beginning of the true revolution in computer design can best be seen in products such as Thomas Meyerhoffer's *eMate*, designed for Apple in 1996, a translucent portable computer aimed at the school market. At first glance its shape is suggestive of a fabric bag—a school book bag whose contents look as though they have shifted to the bottom. But from another perspective, unfolded and open, it recalls a wooden lift-top desk. Produced in brightly colored polycarbonate plastic, the *eMate* was about bringing play to education; the "e" in the name stood for "education," not "electronic."

> **H2 House** 1996
Design Greg Lynn FORM
Site Schwechat, Austria (unbuilt)

The death of the beige box is really the tip of the iceberg.... Computers of all kinds—desktops, notebooks, hand-helds, MP3 players and cell-phones—are embedding themselves deeper and deeper into our lives, and one of the things they have to do is dress better.

Paul Saffo quoted in Steve Lohr, "The Beige Box Fades to Black," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2002, p. E1.

> **e-Mate 300** 1996
Design Thomas Meyerhoffer for Apple
Material Translucent polycarbonate
Size 1.875 x 12 x 10.625 in.



Although the *eMate* signaled a bold direction and received a fair amount of attention, Apple as a company was floundering in 1996. It was suffering from a loss of vision, and its next steps were unclear until Steve Jobs re-assumed the CEO role. Of course, in retrospect, it is easy to see the *eMate* as essentially a study for the *iMac* and *iBook* that followed only two years later. Not only did the *eMate* lead to the *iMac* moniker, but its integrated handle created a model of portability, its translucent plastic prefigured the translucency of subsequent generations of *iMacs*, and the fact that it was delivered Internet-ready set high expectations for both Apple and PC users.

The introduction of the desktop *iMac* in 1998 signaled a banner year, perhaps even a tipping point for blobjects. That same year Volkswagen introduced the new *Beetle*, and Nike debuted its award-winning *Triax* watch (a new and wildly profitable category of merchandise). That year proved to be the beginning of a revival for Apple and VW, both of which were struggling to hold their markets in the mid-1990s. By employing design in such an overt and adventurous manner, both companies brought a much-needed freshness to their products, and essentially turned their fortunes around through intelligent use of design.

The *Beetle*, the *Triax*, and the *iMac* also all served as colorful symbols of the design-led surges of their respective companies—along the way capturing the imaginations, hearts, and emotions of consumers. The *iMac* was huggable, the *Triax* was show-offable, and the VW smiled both coming and going. With each, design was used as a way to express a higher level of care. How could one not be attracted to such products?

Optimism is a sound economic decision. Optimism brings in the corporate consultancies, the two-million-dollar book advances, the forty-thousand dollar lecture fees. Optimism sells.

David Remnick, "The Next Magic Kingdom: Future Perfect," *The New Yorker*, October 20–27, 1997, p. 216.

> **Nike Triax watch** 1998
Design: ASTRO STUDIOS, Nike Design for Nike
Materials: Injection molded plastic and elastomers, sheet metal
Size: 9.5 x 1.75 x .5 in.

> Design

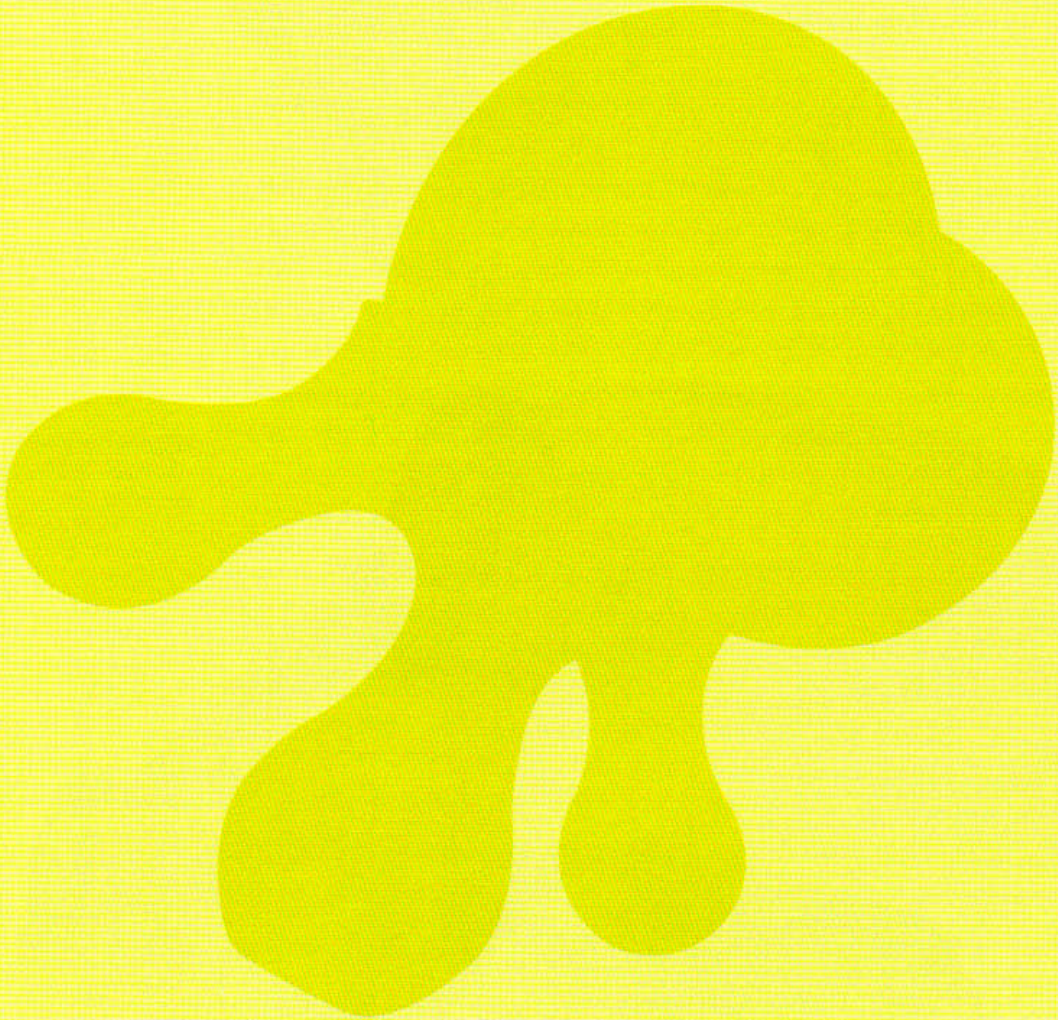
Volkswagen Beetle 1998
Jay Mays, Freeman Thomas of Audi/Volkswagen Simi Valley Design Center for Volkswagen North America

The new Beetle, says VW management board member Jens Neumann, is "optimism on wheels"... its rounded fenders and oversize oval headlights resemble a happy face in a sea of snub-nosed competitors.

Bruce Nussbaum, "The Best Product Designs of the Year," *BusinessWeek* (reprint by McGraw-Hill Company), May 25, 1998, p. 8.

By 1998, the blobject was no longer the just the evocative shape of choice for the individual designer or adventurous small firm. It had entered the corporate realm and now carried with it the support of other design disciplines, as well as expertise from other key corporate areas, including strategy, marketing, communications, and advertising. The blobject had become commodified and corporatized, and once the business world committed to it, it had the power to make it ubiquitous.

As illustrated by the *iMac*, *Triax*, and *Beetle*, the blobject has become a proven vessel for consumer engagement—and can be refined to achieve the highest levels of appeal and marketability. But it was not simply about a corporate takeover of a design language. There was something in the cornucopia-like fullness of the blobject's form that both mirrored the abundance inherent in American culture after World War II and made people instantly keen to its appearance. This combination made the blobject the ideal global ambassador for a world of consumers that wanted to believe in the best possibilities of the American Dream—not the now-mythical America of Ellis Island, equality for everyone, and hard work well-rewarded, but in the new America of supersized, near-effortless consumption.



BLOBJECTS

THE LOOK AND FEEL OF OPTIMISM

STEVEN SKOV HOLT AND MARA HOLT SKOV

< **Jube Jube lamp** 2001
Design Scot Laughton for Lolah
Materials Earthenware ceramic with glaze
Size 17 x 8 x 41.5 in.

The major design current as I see it, has been an emphasis on joy, exuberance, and optimism. What I see realized before me now is an image of the future as it was portrayed in the movies, books, and magazine articles of the sixties. The uniformlike clothes in bright colors, the weird gizmos in space-age shapes, the curved edges, the candy colors, the impossible structures, and the talking watches are all here.

David Byrne, "A Blip, a Blob, a Groove, and a Curve: Thoughts on Design," *Men's Journal*, September 2000, p. 106.

What, then, is a blobby object or a blobject? It is a product, graphic, building, or other form of designed object that brings together in one entity several of the following qualities: a pleasing plasticity of fluid *form*, a delicious sense of *color*, a chance to exist at any *scale*, a heightened sense of flowing *materiality*, and a powerful connection to our *emotions*, including a strong optimistic tendency.

Today's blobjects rely on the powers unleashed by the computer, particularly the software-based modeling programs that have encouraged new low-cost explorations in form making and new options in rapid prototyping and production. Across the various avenues of design, advances in building, molding, pixel capture, and materials technology have resulted in new creative possibilities for the look of even the most ordinary project. Yet while the new technological possibilities are wondrous, they do not solve the truly fundamental questions. Blobjects fail or succeed by doing what other epochal design solutions have done before them: by combining technological mastery with cultural expression.

That same combination of technological mastery and cultural expression produced the essential "rightness" of the streamlined shapes of the 1930s, the biomorphic shapes of the 1940s and 1950s, and the psychedelic, swirling shapes of the 1960s and early 1970s. Each provided the defining imagery of its era, a visually symbolic summary of what was and what could be—just as the blobject does for us today.

Form

A blobject is first and foremost an expression of pure *form*—a unified arrangement of matter held together by a rounded, curvy skin, housing, or enclosure. A blobject is defined by its quintessential fluidity, viewed from any perspective. Classic variations on the blobject's form are the hourglass, kidney, beach rock, and amoeboid shapes. A blobject can be as minimal as two egg-like volumes joined together by a simple membrane, as in the *Jube Jube* lamp by Toronto-based designer Scot Laughton. Here is lighting that hovers gracefully in the air while casting a gentle, blob-shaped pool of light. Reductive designs such as this seem natural for a furniture design group that grew out of a custom yacht manufacturing firm in an industry where design is celebrated for its restraint.

Or a blobject can be as complex as the undulating surface of Karim Rashid's designed-to-be-iconic *Blobject* chair, one of an extended family of projects with curve-friendly names like *Blibs, Blobs, Pods, Plobs, Globjects, Lobjects,* and *Mutablobs* (p. 231). The curvaceous forms that Rashid was struggling to get on the market in the 1980s and early 1990s were given new life as the power and availability of 3-D surfacing and modeling software caught up to his ideas, and Rashid's relentless work ethic garnered him increasing media attention.

> **Blobject chair** 1999
> Design: Karim Rashid of Karim Rashid, Inc. for Sandra Gering Gallery
> Materials: Automotive lacquer on fiberglass
> Size: 24 x 40 x 40 in.

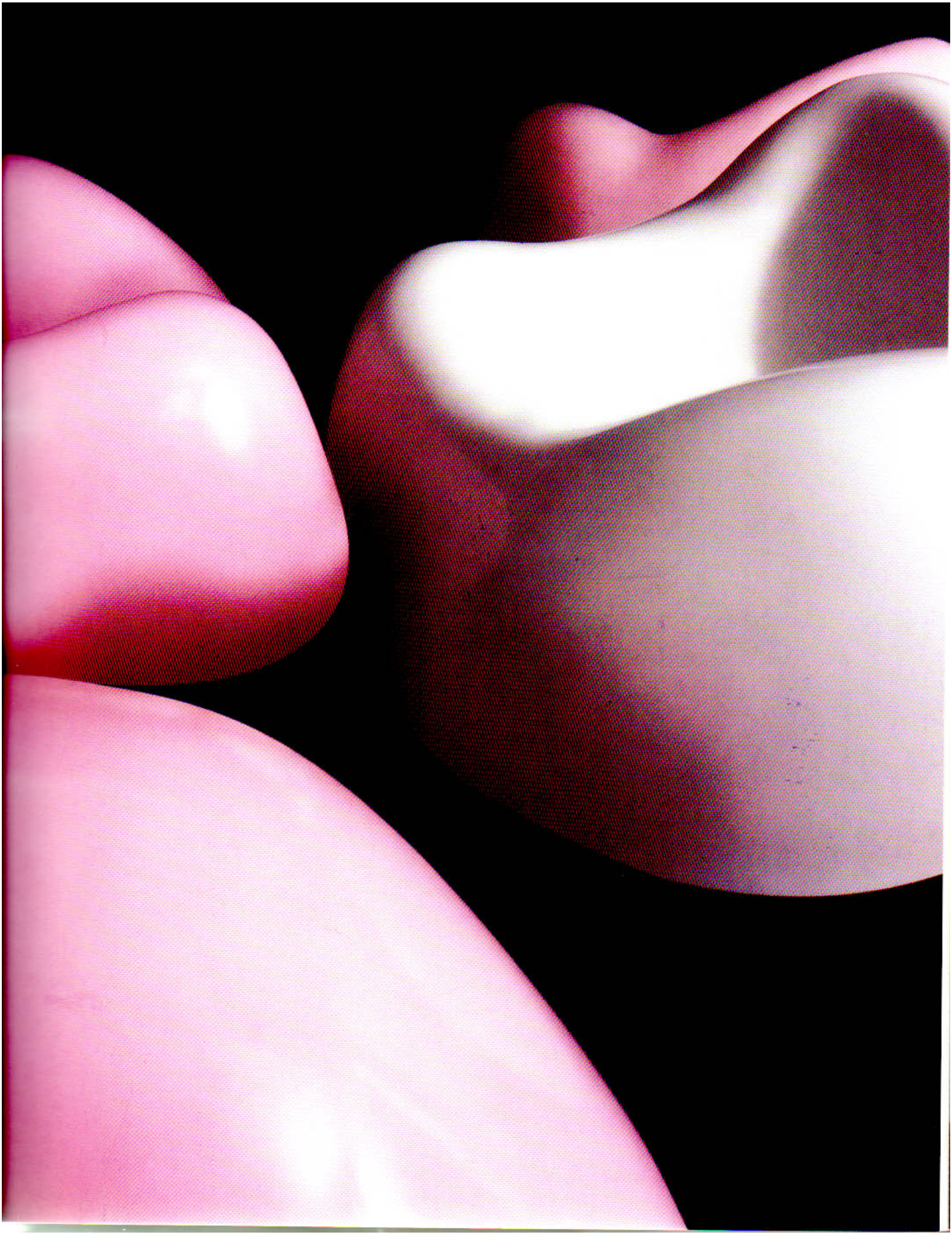
"Blobject" may sound like a comical bit of design jargon, but with a little coaching, one can learn to see that blobjects are thriving in fantastic numbers and littering the modern landscape. They are computer-modeled objects manufactured out of blown goo. They are rounded, humpy, bumpy creations.

Bruce Sterling, *Tomorrow Now: Envisioning the Next Fifty Years*, Random House, New York, 2002, p. 79.

We might now . . . herald in the present millennium with the words "Hurrah, hurrah for the friendly curve."

Eva Zeisel, *Eva Zeisel on Design: The Magic Language of Things*, The Overlook Press, New York, 2004, p. 208.

> **Wovo Servware bowl** 2001
> Design: Smart Design for Wovo
> Material: Injection-molded ABS plastic
> Size: 7 x 7 x 16 in.

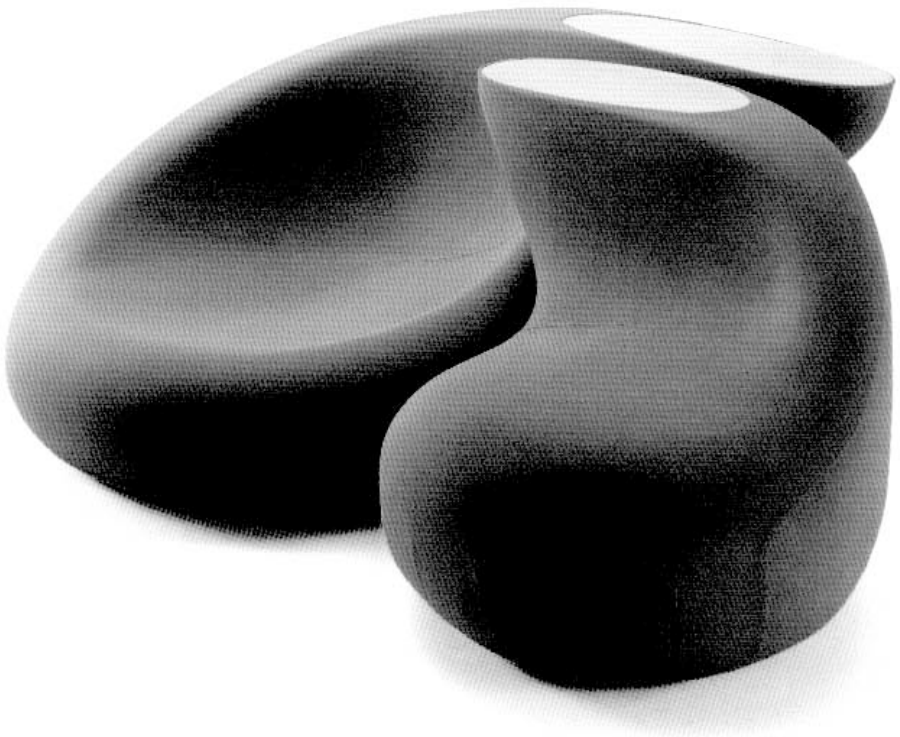


Color

A blobject is enhanced by the conscious, conspicuous, and delicious use of *color*—highlighting its form, material, and friendliness, and giving the design an emotional hook. A blobject can be one single, exuberant color, as it is in the bright-green *A.U.* chairs for Edra by Japanese design duo Setsu and Shinobu Ito. These chairs—a firmer and perkier take on the beanbag—offer an informal way of sitting that is set off by their supersaturated, high-contrast hue. Color can also be employed in an exciting, multihued manner, as it is in the *Colour and Form* animation for London's Design Museum created by London-based Saville Associates. Representing the opposite extreme of astronomy's black hole, the vibrant imagery employs every color in the rainbow in a swirling, pulsing formation that suggests emergence rather than disappearance—an appropriately upbeat, abundant, and attention-getting use of color.

Why are there not more buildings in the red of blood and barns? Or in deepest ochre, an ochre of wheat and corn and the setting sun, an ochre of force and quiet dignity? Or a tower in the green of pine? It would offend no one. People would dance.

Dave Eggers, "Technicolor Skylines," *Metropolis*, August-September 2002, p. 34.

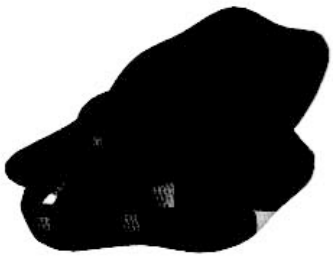


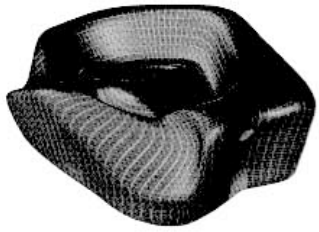
< **A.U. chairs** 2003
Design Studio I.T.O. for Edra
Materials Molded polyurethane foam, stretch fabric, leather, plastic base
Size: Small sofa 30 x 51.25 x 57.5 in. Chair 27.5 x 36.25 x 45.75 in.

< **Colour and Form animation** 2002
Design Saville Associates for the Design Museum, London, United Kingdom

Scale

Embracing the lessons encapsulated in Charles and Ray Eames's film *Powers of 10*, blobjects can exist and function at almost any *scale*. Just as *Powers of 10* moves from the personal to the cosmic and then all of the way back to the microscopic, blobject-like forms are evident inside our bodies and at the reaches of our built world. We can see the form language of blobjects in the way we have envisioned everything from blood cells (pp. 112, 214) to important new buildings including, Future System's Selfridges (p. 130) and spacelab's Kunsthaus (p. 185). In between the scale of cell renderings and urban emporia, a rich range of products, furniture, images, and environments offer further evidence of the degree to which blobjects are scalable across various contexts. A blobject can be a button detail on a cell phone; it can be the cell phone itself; it can be the table that the cell phone sits on; it can be the room environment that the table is in; and it can be the building that contains the room. In short, a blobject can take the form of anything "from a spoon to a city," in the formula first suggested by the Italian post–World War II designer Ernesto N. Rogers. The lesson is clear: a structure or form language that finds success at one scale—as blobjects do in relation to our bodies—has a greater chance of being successful at other scales and in other contexts.





A **Housings** 1999
Design Kolatan MacDonald Studio
Site Conceptual architecture studies

One way to get a grip on the blob aesthetic is to think of it as information-age ectoplasm. A proto-New Age attempt to square spiritual yearnings with scientific skepticism, ectoplasm was a metaphysical oxymoron: the imperial, materialized.

Mark Dery, "The Blob That Ate Design," *Interiors*, June 2001.

< **Rio portable CD player** 2003
Design newdeal design for Digital Networks
Materials Injected molded ABS plastic, TPU, co-molded urethane
Size 1 x 5.25 in.

A **S2 Sports CD/radio tuner**
2001
Design Sony Design Center for Sony
Material ABS plastic exterior
Size 6.5 x 17 x 11 in.

Materiality

A blobject is not just made of material; it celebrates its *materiality*—using water, bits and pixels, and plastic. As industrial design has led the way, it has often been plastics—and their inherent plasticity—that have defined blobjects. Nowadays, the plastic of choice is usually one of the new "polys": polypropylene, poly-carbonate, polyethylene, or polyurethane resin. Philippe Starck's polypropylene *Tooth* stool was created through the cost-effective manufacturing process of rotational molding; for comic good measure, the polypropylene was given a metallic sheen. Essentially a rounded caricature of a molar, the *Tooth* joins Starck's already sizable family of products that are not only useful objects but clever visual puns at the same time.

Marc Newson's polyethylene *Rock* doorstop is hollow, intended to be filled with a ballast of sand or water on-site, thus making smart, minimal use of materials. The genius of the *Rock* is that Newson and his manufacturer, Magis, have taken on the lowly doorstop—an object almost never deemed worthy of consideration by designers—and made it a form worthy of celebration. Reciprocally, Newson has demonstrated that blobjects can cheerfully take on even the most simple and banal of jobs and still result in a completely delightful design solution.

Modern materials change, especially in unforeseeable ways. They move, they create surprises, they have more possibilities than traditional materials. I realized that a new expression should integrate into recent technologies. Thus, the human body, which is constantly unpredictable, fuses with these equally unpredictable materials.

Germano Celant, "The Architecture of Sacrifice," *Gaetano Pesce: Multi-Disciplinary Work*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art/Peter Joseph Gallery, New York, 1991, p. 18.

< **Tooth stool** 2002
Design Philippe Starck for XO
Material Rotation-molded polypropylene
Size 17.25 x 15.75 in.

< **Rock doorstop** 1997
Design Marc Newson for Magis
Material Blow-molded polyethylene
Size 6 x 9.25 x 5 in.

Emotion

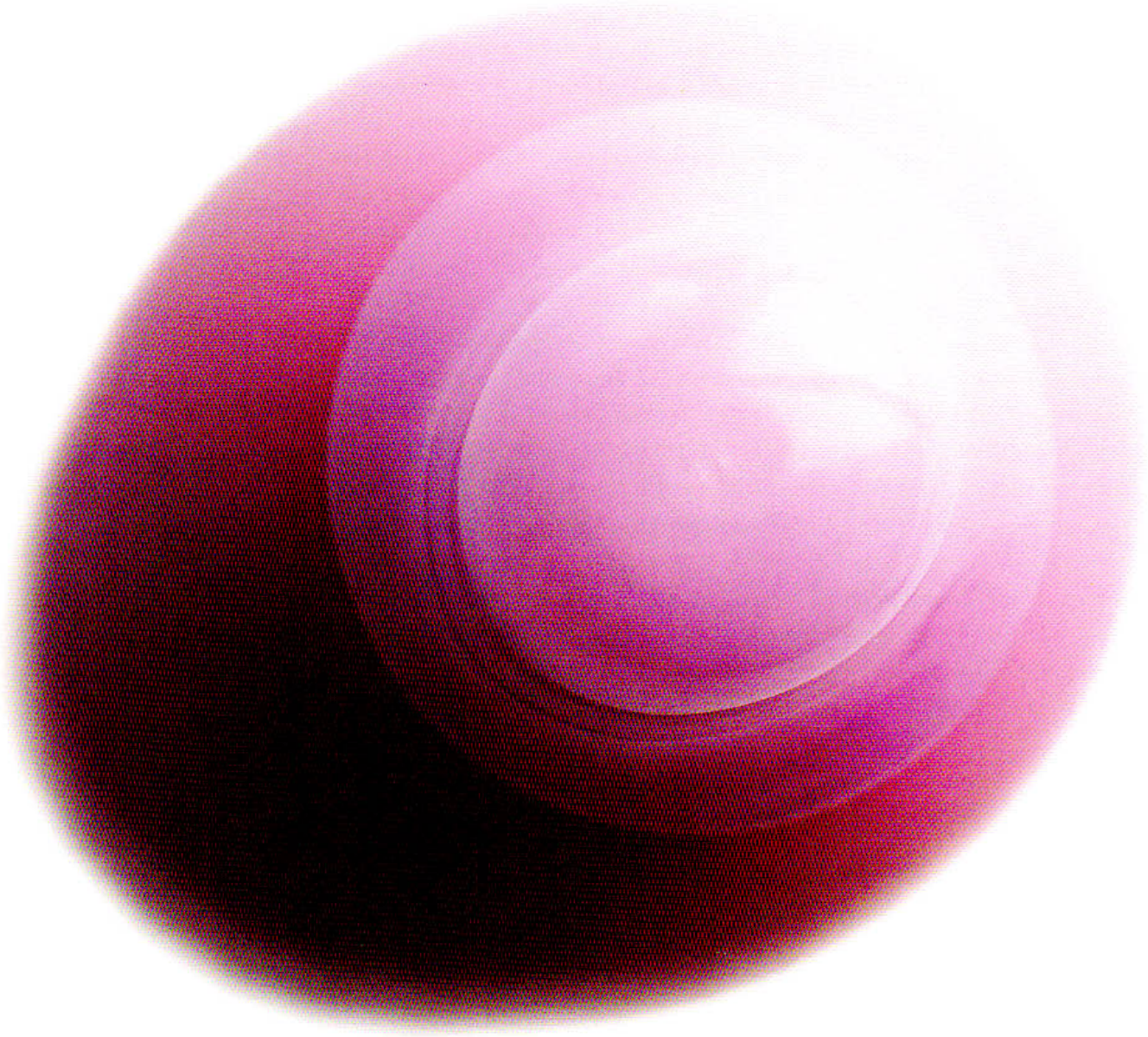
A blobject engenders *emotion*—an immediate visceral response to its exaggerated, caricatured, or otherwise exuberant form, abetted by its particular color and material. A blobject is optimistic, familiar, and welcoming; even the smallest blobject can project a larger-than-life attention-getting presence. A blobject is purposefully engineered, physically as well as psychologically, to appeal to our senses, our sense of self, and our appetites—either for companionship, nourishment, acquisition, sex, or fantasy. It is the first class of objects to be spontaneously designed by a myriad of designers around the world, all operating on a form-follows-emotion basis.

The soft forms and textures of the Philou shampoo and conditioner bottles designed by Yves Béhar of fuseproject seduce the emotions, appealing to no less than three of the five senses. Their curvy forms and gentle colors please the eye; their soft polyurethane material gives to the touch and feels generous and tactile in the hand; and their unexpected scent (permeable plastic!) hints at what's inside, wafting youth-oriented aromas (such as licorice, bubble gum, and banana) toward the consumer. Although originating in the pure geometry of a tilted-axis ovoid, the soft-focus, matte-finish bottles tap deep into the emotional unconscious, suggesting the fullness of a breast highlighted with a color-enhanced, high-gloss, nipple-like cap. A blobject archetype.

From the outside, the breast represents another reality, and one that varies in the eyes of each beholder. Babies see food. Men see sex. Doctors see disease. Businessmen see dollar signs. Religious authorities transform breasts into spiritual symbols, whereas politicians appropriate them for nationalistic ends. Psychoanalysts place them at the center of the unconscious, as if they were unchanging monoliths. This multiplicity of meanings suggests the breast's privileged place in the human imagination.

Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1997, p. 275.

> **Philou shampoo and conditioner bottles** 2000
>
Design	fuseproject for Philou
Materials	Low-density polyethylene, injection-molded ABS plastic, coated polyethylene
Size	5.25 x 3 x 2.5 in.



The most powerful emotional hook that a blobject has is its inherent friendliness. A blobject is always inviting, it encourages touch and interaction, and it responds with softness of form, material, and experience. It is more puppy than full-grown dog, more Teletubby than troubled teen. It asks to be held, even cuddled. A blobject such as the 1996 Vespa scooter redesign can be said to represent both the visual and the experiential epitome of childlike innocence, albeit an innocence with a more-than-knowing wink. In this sense, a blobject tells us something about ourselves and the way that our dominant adult culture turns to its youth subcultures for inspiration, validation, and hope.

As a result of our accelerated culture, the blobject as we now know it will undoubtedly undergo further permutations, but the method and the message behind it will endure. The blobject will always represent the fertile, hybrid moment at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another—a time when the bits and bytes of computer design succeeded in expressing the sensuality, fluidity, and optimism representative of the best parts of travel, exchange, and global culture. Blobjects reflect one avenue of possibility for finding new beauty, delight, and meaning in an increasingly linked, increasingly interdependent world that emerged not by plan but by a spontaneous and simultaneous evolution of *form, color, scale, materiality,* and *emotion.*

One way, I suggest, is to make sure that products are not just friendly towards their users but that, in a much more comprehensive sense, they become friends of the user. After all, we all like to be surrounded by our friends, the people who make us feel good, who help us achieve our goals: all-around enhancers of our lives. . . .

Stefano Marzano, *Creating Value by Design: Thoughts*, V+K Publishing, Blaricum, The Netherlands, 1999, p. 103.

> **Vespa ET2** 1996
Design Vespa Design Team for Piaggio
Frame Pressed steel and monocoque
Engine Otto cycle 2 stroke, single cylinder 49.4 cc
Size 43 x 28 x 70.125 in.