



Claas Eicke Kuhnlen  
Artist : Designer : Educator

## Artist Statement:

Modern life, it seems to me, is a fast paced game. It is the goal of the gamer to gain as many points as fast as possible, in the shortest amount of time and come in first in the glorified high score nearly everybody wants to be on. There is little time to sit down, relax, and reflect. Capitalism dictates that we must each do our job to the best of our abilities, sacrificing our own happiness. But for this sacrifice, our capitalism also has the cure. Through collecting and enjoying commercially available products, we try to regain the missing pieces of our lives that we sacrificed for our career. We try to substitute the lost elements within ourselves with artificially created products and cultural values, which society declares as desirable. The irony in this is that those artificial replacements only satisfy the artificial need imposed by capitalism itself. The cure turns into the disease. This is like a vicious circle.

When I first came to the United States of America I was struck by the strong differences between the European and the American way of life. Of course, capitalism is present in both cultures, but the differences in the way cultural values and modern capitalism influence and shape the population is very different between those countries. On each side, people buy products to consume and satisfy their needs. However, it seems that in Europe, people tend to enjoy more the act of consuming in a sensual way, treating it as a ceremony, while in the U.S.A., people seem to get satisfaction from the fact that they can own material articles. They wish to be able to buy the same products their next door neighbor buys. In America materialism dominates over sensual and ceremonial value and the socializing aspect of consuming a product together is fading away. I saw it as two worlds clashing – a conflict between traditional and modern life style, in which each side claims to provide the more humanistic way of life. It is a competition between quantity and quality. The geographical distance from Europe enabled me to step out of my own cultural circle. This made it possible for me to see my own heritage with different eyes and it also improved my ability to understand the American consumption culture.

This analytical playground quickly became the main interest in my artistic explorations. I arrived in the United States with the strong mindset of a modern minimalist. My academic education in Germany, had very strong roots in the Bauhaus philosophy. The main concern in my thinking was about the essence of an object and its formal aesthetic. Every element, which distracts or does not help to communicate the statement of the product needed to be eliminated. This is related to the European preference to enjoy rather depth and myth in a product or object in contrast to the U.S.A. in which the preference lies in the surface and appearance.

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With this strong customer-oriented design education, the ultimate goal was to deliver the product of the consumer's desire. Today's modern consumption is not focused on the satisfaction of a functional need but rather on an emotional fulfillment. It is obvious that in this context a designer has to understand the desire of a consumer and to which ideals the consumer would identify himself with. This explains why my education strongly focused on ignoring my own personal taste and aesthetic because I was not representing myself. In the surface and glamour orientated American culture the interest in quality food is missing, and even more the interest in enjoying it is not present. Even though Americans are aware of this trend nothing is being improved but rather increased through the habit of gorging on fast food. I gain much of culinary pleasure from fine foods. My inability to find those products, made me appreciate even more a few acceptable goods and reject and interest in quantity. This change towards enjoying even the simplest things was a desperate attempt to survive in this cultural vacuum I found myself in as a European.

Ultimately, this led to a disconnection from the commercial world, that I was trained to satisfy with products that were wanted but not needed. Instead, I started to gain an interest in creating visually complex, narrative objects, which relate to this consumer trend, but express a strong point of criticism to it.

At the beginning, I started to work with ordinary objects and topics like a salt and pepper shaker, which I gave a new visual face. I was interested by how people might react when they were presented with a product they could explore as a salt and pepper shaker, but which does not provide the expected purpose. Why would a designer spend so much time on creating a visually sophisticated design, which relates to a luxurious design aesthetic and market demands, when the product does not fulfill its purpose? In the case of the salt and pepper shaker, it hardly delivers salt and pepper.

This is the critical point in which the viewer will realize that the main point of the object is not its function to deliver salt, but to make a statement about the quantity orientated consumption. Those experiments build the foundation for my idea to incorporate ordinary everyday objects as a basis of my artwork. A focus on the trend of consumption distorting values, it became my MFA thesis theme.

Small sculptures such as my PEZ dispenser series or my flatware set, accumulate my recent body of works. The consumer related object conclusions playfully combine the symbolic meanings of those everyday objects together with my accusatory opinion. I prefer to express my critical statement through a humorous but serious way to communicate its social significance.



This is communicated through an approach of reduction and deconstruction of the original visual appearance, function, and expression of the common object. Specific elements are then recombined into a new entity. Through a formal approach, I try to provide a visual framework for my conceptual content. In my work, I incorporate ordinary objects of our daily life, such as pills, cigarettes, PEZ dispenser and coffee cups. This selection is made because those products are examples of our consumption of mass produced articles. All those elements and their specific meanings and values are layered on top of each other to create a visual density and, at the same time, provide recognizable cultural references the viewer can relate to.

The found and fabricated objects function as a bridge that the viewer can understand, bringing new, but recognizable, meaning to the combined objects. This familiarity between these objects and the observer brings an implied understanding of the meaning behind the object combinations. By engaging the viewer in interpreting the objects function together with the objects artistic expression, I can create an element of surprise, recognition, familiarity, and understanding.

For example, the coffee set talks about the lack of good coffee and the consumption tradition found in Europe. The used coffee products like coffee cups, creamer, and sugar packs are all from a British Petrol gas station, which markets their coffee product under the Wild Bean Premium Coffee name. Not only was attention put into a graphically interesting package design, but furthermore, was also a product mission defined which expresses a touch of premium coffee. This should attract, convince, and bond customers to this brand. It is important to understand that a gas station advertises a premium product. In this context it is important to understand who those customers are. Obviously the customers who buy this coffee are not interested in the premium coffee and the joy it could provide, but rather interested in satisfying the need to buy and consume just coffee for a very low price. However they still feel themselves attracted to the value of the value this coffee brand should represent. As it is a tradition in the U.S.A., the bigger the cup, the cheaper the product – an evidence of the focus on quantity. The coffee will be bought, while the car refuels, and consumed while the car is driven, without any special focus on the excellent smell and taste. The well-designed coffee cup and product branding is a sad example of today's commercial perfection to sell customers a low quality product with a high quality design and consumers buying this strategy.

In opposition to this contemporary commercial esthetic and design I created a silver frame work which suggests a contrast not only in material value but also in a traditional value. The selected shapes are influenced by historical references reflecting a traditional esthetic.



Coffee and specifically a silver coffee set was only accessible to wealthy people in the past. This value is further underlined through an intensive and time consuming surface texturing. It reminds about the ceremonial affect and socializing aspect of the coffee session and the time the user dedicates to this celebration and sensation.

Small interactive elements are included in those objects. For example the sugar pack holder comes with a very small sugar spoon, suggesting to only use a small amount of sugar while a sugar package is made for quick dispensing. The cream server can quickly be equipped with a new plastic creamer package or the paper coffee mug replaced when they are used up.

This forms the irony in my products. I provide a high-class end-product, which only serves this disparity. This service is the hidden criticism in my work, which affects the viewer on subliminal level. My sculptures are monuments to consumption. I generate this work in order to create an awareness of the problems I see within this culture. The humor in these objects helps me to understand myself and the western culture in which I now live in.

