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The Ego Has Landed
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In terms of product design, the marketing strategies Klein highlights can be felt in design philosophies like 'Psycho-Aesthetics' from California-based RKS Design. This model of design links anthropology, aesthetics, and hierarchies of consumer desire. Ravi Sawhney, RKS Design's president and CEO, describes Psycho-Aesthetics as a potent cocktail in which design reflects consumer expectations and the visual stimulus of a product that taps into the unconscious of the buyer. Contra Changing Rooms, design itself - and the ego of the designer - is subservient to the need to make connections with consumers. Such is the spirit of the times, perhaps.

"What we're starting to discover," says Sawhney, "is that it's not how you feel about the product, it's how the product makes you feel about yourself. We had a number of products that we've intuitively designed over the last few years that kept hitting home runs. We analyzed what we were doing and found we weren't falling in love with our own design work as much as were falling in love with the consumer who would be the recipient of our design work. We love the consumer more than our esoteric, cutting-edge, avant-garde design."

Is this, in reality, where early 21st century design is at? Should designers just accept that the function of design be entirely subsumed by consumer culture? Should they fall out of love with design itself, and learn to love the 'recipients of their products'? "Every time new ethnical issues come up, it's worth reflection," insists Laguinia, before adding a dose of realism: "It's worth putting your all into it - if only because you get the press coverage if you come up with products that address those issues. But in our designs, we will try and integrate what we've learned, and what we've learned often comes out of the media, as well as through our own research."

It's worth remembering that journalists are as implicated in the whole web as any corporate doyen. The profession has something in common with that of the designer: media rhetoric reinforces the bogus concept that anyone can stand back and look at things in a supposedly more objective manner than everyone else, and that the agenda is reported, not created. "The media has to move from one topic to another," argues Laguinia. "For better or worse, the topic over the past year has been branding. It's on its way out now, and organizations like the Design Council are hard at work making inclusively the topic of the day. We don't know which will be the next big topic." But despite being wise to the ephemeral nature of media obsessions, Laguinia agrees that No Logo sparked an important debate. "The discussion over branding has grown our sense of what industrial design does."

Similarly, Ravi Sawhney applies a business pragmatist's edge to design ethics. "I've seen in the last ten years that the consumer has become increasingly informed and critical of design, and unforgiving of designs that aren't economically, environmentally, and socially responsible. Again, it's not about the product, but how the product makes them feel about themselves. If they are naturally responsible, they are not going to want to associate themselves with a person or object that disconnects from that." Might ethnical discourse, in the end, just form yet another marketing dollar? As the late American comedian Bill Hicks described it - another way of differentiating products for consumers while the rhino charges on, casually spraying shit over our ideals?

"We will always push to make products renewable and to design in the longevity of products," says Sawhney. Why? Because of commercial logic. "It makes sense to the consumer. Why buy disposable designs today, when for a little bit more they can last for years? Our challenge is to make sure they can perceive those benefits and justify the purchase."