

What was Philippe Starck thinking of?

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We argue, using Philippe Starck's Juicy Salif lemon squeezer as a case study, that the personal creativity of a designer forms a necessary condition for a design's success. It does not, however, form a sufficient condition. We critically examine the implications of Adrian Forty's contention that 'no design works unless it embodies ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended'. We conclude that rather than looking to ideological factors for a sufficient condition of design success, it is better to look to descriptions of engaged use (and mis-use) of products.

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Keywords: industrial design, marketing, design precedents, creativity

Adrian Forty, in the last chapter of his book *Objects of Desire*¹ and after sustained commentary on how design necessarily reflects wider concerns within society, presents an argument about the process of designing in which he seeks to de-emphasise the 'creativity' of the designer, and emphasise the 'material constraints over which [the designers] had no control'. According to Forty our (mis)conception of what designers do arises from two directions. First, from experiments 'studying the empirically verifiable connections between what designers think and what they do'. Secondly, in the 'tendency of designers, when asked about design, to describe [...] the creative steps *they* have taken, *their* ideas about form, the constraints under which *they* have operated and *their* methods of working.' (italics ours). Here, Forty has in mind not only monographs written by well-known designers, but also case studies reporting what designers have said about their design process. 'Design has come to be regarded as belonging entirely within the realm of the designer' Forty writes, and this has had pernicious consequences, particularly in design schools where students learn to indulge what Forty refers to as 'the myth of their own omnipotence'. Designers describe their work as if they had overall power, at the expense of neglecting ideology as a determinant of design. Forty concludes that: 'no design works unless it embodies ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended'.

1 Forty, A *Objects of desire*
Moffat, London (1986)



It is these ideas that, although to some degree harnessed by designers, ultimately lie outside their control.

This raises a question that could do with resolving: does personal creativity provide either a necessary or sufficient condition for attributing success to a design object? Following from this is a question about the relationship between the intentions of the designer for a particular design and the ideas embedded in the public consciousness. There are, then, two strands to Forty's reasoning, the first is the idea that another designer could conceivably come up with similar results. The second is the attribution of the design's success; is it to the intentions of the designer (in which case there is a good argument for omnipotence) or to cultural or ideological factors in the consuming public (in which case there is a good argument for impotence).

These issues will be taken up in the present paper by using a 'hard' case study having four key characteristics. First, it concerns an original design with no obvious precedent. Secondly, it is a design simple enough to have been created by one person autonomously (and is not, at least in principle, the product of combined social effort). Thirdly, it is a design considered successful in terms of number of units sold. Finally, it is a design having a distinctive three dimensional form together with a specific and singular purpose.

The case that we have chosen to deconstruct is Philippe Starck's *Juicy Salif* lemon squeezer, a product that has so far sold over 550 000 units, at a steady rate of 50 000 a year since its launch in 1990. We shall discuss, using this case, whether personal creativity forms either a necessary and perhaps even a sufficient condition for the design being considered successful. We also discuss whether ideological factors—what Forty refers to as ideas embodied in the product and held in common by the people for whom the product was intended—could provide a sufficient condition for a product's success. Before we look at our case study we first consider the idea of an 'omnipotent' designer.

I The omnipotent designer

A great many studies and interviews of designers focus on the decision-making or reasoning that happened during a design process. Some studies look at the reasons that certain decisions were made, and the ideas that came up during the process²⁻⁵ while others have focused on the cognitions and/or sketches and drawings of the designer⁶⁻⁹, piecing together thoughts 'thought aloud' with actions performed, to reveal the overall character of the design process. Design process here refers to that period of time before

2 Roy, R 'Case studies of creativity in innovative product development' *Design Studies* Vol 14 (1993) 423–443

3 Cross, N and Cross, A 'Winning by design: the methods of Gordon Murray racing car designer' *Design Studies* Vol 17 (1996) 91–107

4 Lawson, B *Design in mind* Butterworth Architecture, Oxford UK (1994)

5 Moulton, A 'A lifetimes experience of engineering innovations: successes and failures' *RSA Journal* Vol CXLV (1997) 10–13

6 Lloyd, P A and Scott, P J 'Discovering the design problem' *Design Studies* Vol 15 (1994) 125–140

7 Dorst, K *Describing design—a comparison of paradigms* PhD Thesis, Technical University Delft (1997)

8 Schön, D A *The reflective practitioner* Temple Smith, London (1983)

9 Cross, N, Dorst, K and Christians, H *Analysing design activity* Wiley, Chichester UK (1996)

a design product is produced, in most cases before even a detailed drawing is produced.

An example of this approach can be found in Robin Roy's paper *Case Studies in Innovative Product Development*² in which he discusses the creative processes by which a number of well-known designs have come about. Most famously is the case of James Dyson and his dual cyclone vacuum cleaner. Roy writes:

Dyson established the basic technical feasibility of his idea by testing a simple cardboard model cyclone fitted to a conventional vacuum cleaner. Dyson then considered the commercial potential of his invention before attempting to develop it.[...]

This innovative design was an upright cleaner that did not clog or lose power as it filled with dust, was easy to empty and had a built-in retractable hose to provide the functions of a cylinder vacuum cleaner. Its design involved Dyson's combination of skills as inventor, engineer and industrial designer.[...]

He deliberately designed the product to be coloured pink to emphasise its innovativeness and made the cyclone enclosure transparent so that customers would be able to observe the swirling dust particles.

Roy's descriptions of Dyson's creative process are clearly couched in terms of Dyson's intentions about the product. The suggestion is that it was Dyson's skills that were *responsible* for such an innovative product; that, amongst other things, he *deliberately* coloured it pink and made the cyclone transparent. This, Roy is implying, is what has made the design a success; Dyson's innovative solution to the problem he set himself, together with his 'never say die' character, his skill at doggedly chasing down a solution, and his ability to coolly consider the commercial potential of his design. A clear-cut case of omnipotence.

Roy's description of Dyson is by no means an isolated example, and the underlying assumption of all studies with a designer at their centre seems to be not only that the thoughts and intentions of the designer matter, but that they can lead us to better understand how to solve design problems more creatively and effectively. What we are looking for, in this respect, is *good* designing, or at the very least a way to distinguish good designing from bad designing. Our conception of good designing (and the implication of 'good' here is successful, whatever that might mean) lies in finding a good (i.e. demonstrably better functioning) solution to an identifiable problem.

There are two problems with this approach. First, if it is not possible for

the designer to reveal what they are thinking of for much of the design process, as some studies seem to suggest^{10,11}, then we are not able to rely on what we understand as their thoughts and intentions as a way of determining the success of the design (and by extension the effectiveness of their design process). Could we be basing our intuitions about successful design only on plausible accounts of the design process? Secondly, how can we explain the success of products that either don't achieve an obvious 'function', or don't appear to function any better than existing similar products? We turn now to our case study: Philippe Starck and his lemon squeezer.

2 What Philippe Starck could have been thinking of

Let us for one moment take the risky step of believing Philippe Starck. According to his own account of how the design for his lemon squeezer *Juicy Salif* came about, what happened was that: 'once in a restaurant, this vision of a squid like lemon came upon me, so I started sketching it...and four years later it became quite famous'¹². After a bit of historical delving into the life of Starck, we can begin to build up quite a plausible account of why this 'squid-like lemon' was significant to Starck, and not to the other people who were eating the squid in the restaurant that night:

In the mid-1950s the little Philippe often likes to fall asleep under his father's drawing board as he works at the job that will occupy his whole life: aircraft design¹³. When his father is out of the room the little Philippe often sneaks a peek at his work and he dreams about flying away in his own little aeroplane. In his teenage years—his father now gone—he continues to like modern things; flight was (after all) a modern thing in the 1960s. He likes looking forwards too; to the future, and to science fiction. His favourite films of the time include *Forbidden Planet* and *Godzilla*. He reads nearly every book of his favourite author Phillip K Dick¹⁴ and every now and then passages stick in his mind:

Studying the pin, Paul went on: 'one can easily understand this reaction. Here is a piece of metal which has been melted until it has become shapeless. It represents nothing. Nor does it have any design, of any intentional sort. It is merely amorphous. One might say, it is mere content, deprived of form'¹⁵

Philippe likes looking at Sci-Fi cartoons¹⁶, and he spends much of his time re-drawing characters and objects from comic strips (Fig. 1), particularly the spaceships (Fig. 2), which remind him of his father. He likes looking backwards too, but always with an eye on the future of history. The idea of organic evolution fascinates him¹⁴.

10 Lloyd, P A, Lawson, B R and Scott, P J 'Can concurrent verbalization reveal design cognition?' *Design Studies* Vol 16 (1995) 237–259

11 Liddament, T 'The myths of imagery' *Design Studies* Vol 21 (2000) 589–606

12 Carmel-Arthur, J *Philippe Starck* Carlton, London (1999)

13 Aldersey-Williams, H 'ID' *Starck and stardom* Vol May/June (1987) 46–51

14 Nobel, P 'Starck realities' *Metropolis* October (1998) www.metropolismag.com

15 Dick, P K *The man in the high castle* Vintage, New York (1962)

16 Morgan, C L *Philippe Starck* Universe, New York (1999)



Figure 1 The world under attack by aliens¹⁷

- 17** Wells, H G *La guerre des mondes* (illustrations by Jacobs E P) Dargaud, Brussels (1946)
18 Raymond, A *Flash Gordon* (Vol 1:1934 -1936) Futuropolis, Paris (1987)
19 Starck, P *Starck* Taschen, Cologne, Germany (2000)

Now in his mid-thirties, early-middle-age Philippe has found success as a designer. Not without controversy it must be said, but this has helped to define his ‘star’ personality. The top companies want to work with him. He gets a commission to design a range of kitchenware from Italian household goods manufacturer Alessi. After meeting Alessi he takes a quick break on the Italian island of Capraia. In the evening he ambles along to a local restaurant—a pizzeria called Il Corsaro¹⁹. As he sits waiting for his food to arrive he turns the problem of the lemon squeezer over in his head. He thinks about a conventional squeezer and sketches the form on the restaurant place mat (Fig. 3). He puts his pencil down, the food has arrived—baby squid. He skewers one with a fork and just as he is about to put it into his mouth he stops, looks at it, and realises that this is the solution to his lemon squeezer problem.

Figure 2 A rocket from the French cartoon strip of Flash Gordon¹⁸

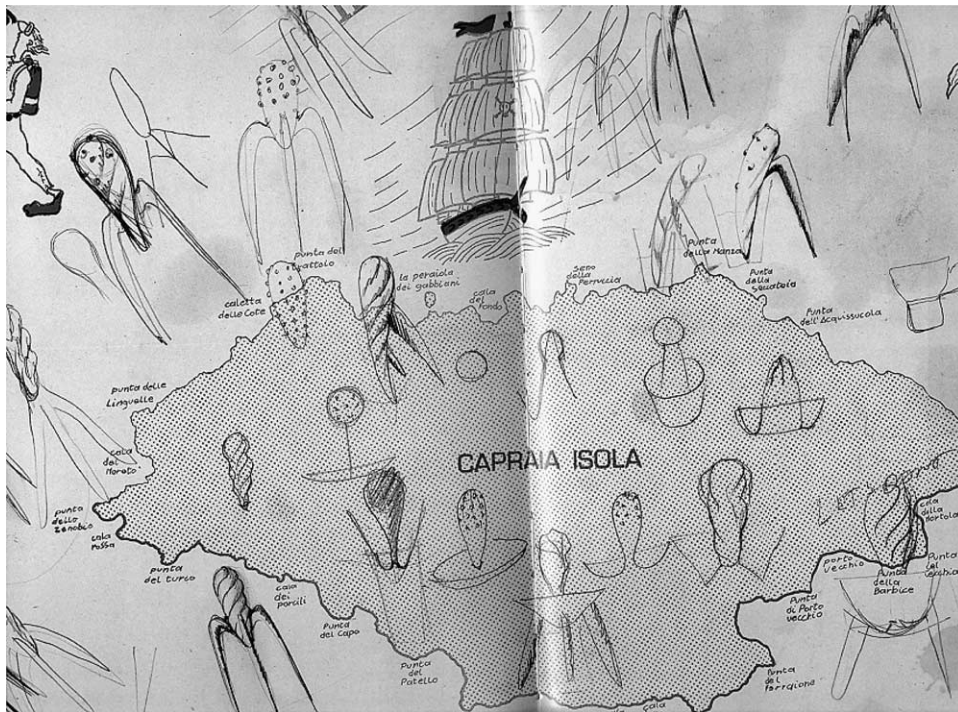


Figure 3 Table mat showing Philippe Starck's original sketches for what was to become the Juicy Salif lemon squeezer¹⁹. Note Philippe Starck draws with his right hand and the sketches generally seem to follow an anti-clockwise path from the bottom right

He starts to sketch, there and then. 'If I'm quick', he thinks, 'I can design this before the primi piatti'²⁰. First he tries to make a conventional lemon squeezer out of a squid, but then he realises that won't really work. The squid begins to evolve—Philippe has always been interested in evolution—into something with legs, but he doesn't like it. It seems to be dragging,

20 Cooper, M 'Philippe le roi' *Blueprint* November (1985) p. 48

injured almost. He keeps going, eating while he sketches. His sketches abstractly remind him of the old comics he used to read. He recalls the words ‘merely amorphous’ from some book he read, he can’t remember where. Things begin to gel in his mind, and from the dragging creature emerges a lighter, three-legged form. Like one of the spaceships he used to think about jetting up to space in. He likes the form, it’s ‘working’. He puts down his pencil, makes an approving noise, and starts his tiramisu. The next morning he phones Alessi ‘I’ve got a lemon squeezer for you’ he teases. Of course there are a few details to work out, exact dimensions, what material to use, how to get the juice out of the lemon efficiently. But these are all sub-problems; someone else can solve them. The main problem is solved.

The design is made. Philippe likes it, it’s what he intended. But people begin to criticise it. They say that it doesn’t work. It doesn’t fulfil the function of the lemon squeezer, they argue. ‘Look! the pips get squeezed out along with their juice, who wants to chew on a lemon pip when you’re enjoying a paella?’ Philippe is used to criticism, he thinks for a while, straightens his story, and then says:

Sometimes you must choose why you design—in this case not to squeeze lemons, even though as a lemon squeezer it works. Sometimes you need some more humble service: on a certain night, the young couple, just married, invites the parents of the groom to dinner, and the groom and his father go to watch football on the TV. And for the first time the mother of the groom and the young bride are in the kitchen and there is a sort of malaise—this squeezer is made to start the conversation.²¹

This description of designing puts Starck firmly centre-stage, as do many other descriptions of design processes. It is couched in terms of the genius narrative: a memorable solution occurring very quickly; almost a gift from God. With very little apparent effort an exquisite artefact is produced. It is a plausible account rather than an actual account, but what if it were true? Would it explain anything? It certainly doesn’t tell us why the design has been successful. Perhaps all it does tell us is that designers draw on their experiences, that they play with form, that they then have to interpret the form for us in telling us how it realises a certain function. What such an account does do is explain the significance of this object to this one person, the designer. It doesn’t, indeed cannot, explain the significance of this object to all the other people that ‘consume’ it in some or other way.

21 Starck, P ‘Starck speaks: politics pleasure play’ *Harvard Design Magazine* Summer (1998)
www.gsd.harvard.edu/desarts/

Although, of course, not impossible, it is highly unlikely that another designer could have come up with a design similar to Starck’s. Not in terms of form, of course, for it is relatively easy to find precedents for

Starck's *Juicy Salif*. The difficult step is to imagine this basic raw material—science fiction, cartoons, evolutionary theorising—expressly being applied to the particular problem of squeezing lemons (or, if we are to believe Starck, creating conversation). Clearly the form itself is not original, but the form realised as a lemon squeezer could be. Maybe this much alone might allow us to attribute Starck's personal creativity as a necessary condition for the design's success. The question then is whether it could also form a sufficient condition.

3 *The death of the designer?*

We are now in the year 4000, the name of Philippe Starck long since forgotten. In such circumstances, with the designer, and his intentions, long dead, we might try to account for the success of the product (longevity being another characteristic of success) in terms of what we thought the designer's original intention could have been. This leads us, however, into a logical problem. The original intention/s about the product must be something prior to, and independent of, the finished product, but an explanation of intention will always be related to the finished product. [Note 1] An explanation of prior intention will at best be a plausible account of the process.

Alternatively, as Forty¹ and his precursor Giedion²² might argue, the mere fact that the product exists says more about the people that buy and use the product than the original intentions of the designer. The consumption of the product might be considered as: 'a labour of appropriation [where] the consumer helps to produce the product he consumes, by a labour of identification and decoding, which [...] may constitute the whole of the consumption and gratification, and which requires time and dispositions acquired over time'²³. The function of the product becomes that of 'marker' for a set of values and ideas with which informed consumers align themselves²⁴. Since the *Juicy Salif* was made at a time when Alessi products were typically gifts²⁵ this alignment implies a gift giver, a receiver, but also a possessor²⁶, and can lead to various progressions of relationship formation, like strengthening, affirmation, or possibly, in Starck's example of 'daughter and mother-in-law,' confirmation of a lack of connection²⁷.

In these processes there may well be a role for the designer as celebrity endorser. As Putnam and Poyner²⁸ say about the *Juicy Salif*: 'what one is buying, of course, is ... a little piece of Philippe Starck'. But, again, this possible endorsing role of famous designers says nothing about their intentions. It only says something about the way that they are represented in the media for: 'without typecasting, they [the celebrity endorsers] have no meanings to give'²⁹.

22 Giedion, S *Mechanization takes command: a contribution to anonymous history* Norton, New York (1948)

23 Bourdieu, P *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (translation Nice R) Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA (1984)

24 Douglas, M and Isherwood, B *The world of goods: towards an anthropology of consumption* Penguin, Harmondsworth UK (1980)

25 Hancock, M., 'Moderate anarchy' *Design* September (1990) 52-61

26 McCracken, G 'Culture and consumption: a theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods' *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol 13 (1986) 71-84

27 Ruth, J A, Otnes, C C and Brunel, F F 'Gift receipt and the reformulation of interpersonal relationships' *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol 25 (1999) 385-402

28 Putnam, A and Poyner, R *The international design yearbook* Thames and Hudson, London (1992)

29 McCracken, G 'Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process' *Journal of Consumer Research* Vol 16 (1989) 310-321

How does this ‘labour of appropriation’ make products more useful or more appealing? One could argue that products bring a kind of story to people’s lives. Take the familiar ergonomic problems of the video recorder³⁰, the standard explanation of this is that the video recorder is a poorly designed product, but equally that means it is possible for the consumer to discover things about the video recorder years after it has been lying on the floor flashing the time at 0:00. The same reasoning applies to computer software. One finds out about the software, and what the software can do, as one uses and explores it—with or without the manual. Often one is surprised in finding out about doing something that one never thought the software could do. These little discoveries give us a pleasure that was not present when we first used the product. We might feel that the product is ‘offering up its secrets’ to us. The converse of this is that when the product mis-functions in some way (either by design or by accident) we feel let down. But this mis-functioning only adds to the plot of the story. It is possible to think that a product mis-functioning could be an important component of our developing a liking for it, or at the very least forming a relationship to it. Nicolson Baker in his novel *The mezzanine*³¹ writes about his relationship with sugar ‘tube’ packaging:

What sugar-packet manufacturer could have known that people would take to flapping the packet back and forth to centrifuge its contents to the bottom, so that they could handily tear off the top? The nakedness of a simple novelty in pre-portioned packaging has been surrounded and softened and made sense of by gesticulative adaptation (possibly inspired by the extinguishing oscillation of a match after the lighting of a cigarette); convenience has given rise to ballet; and the sound of those flapping sugar packets in the early morning, fluttering over from nearby booths, is not one I would willingly forgo, even though I take my coffee unsweetened.

It is this developing relationship with a particular product that clearly gives value to the consumer. Equally it is a relationship that cannot be determined—and hence intended by—the designer. But why buy the product in the first place if one is unable to know what this value might be before one is engaged with the object? Forty maintains that people are buying into ideas that the product somehow expresses, embodies, represents, or symbolises. It is, however, debatable whether this historical explanation of what the design ‘came to symbolise’ can account for actual purchasing behaviour directly after the initial product release. There may be other, inchoate, reasons for buying a product. This brings us back to the argument against the personal creativity of the designer determining design success: ‘no design works unless it embodies ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended.’ In the next section of the paper we return to the Starck lemon squeezer, considering what it might have

30 Norman, D A *The design of everyday things* Doubleday, New York (1990)

31 Baker, N *The mezzanine* Granta Books, London (1989)

embodied and expressed, and whether this might provide us with a sufficient condition for its initial success.

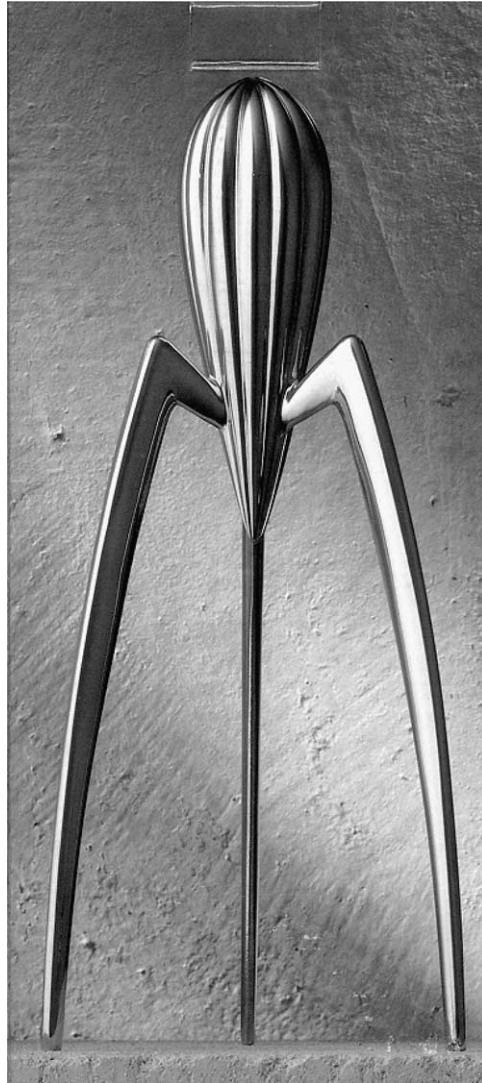
4 What the lemon squeezer might embody and express

The lemon squeezer is made from cast, polished aluminium, it has a diameter of 14 cm and a total height of 29 cm. The form consists of an upward facing teardrop body, 14 cm in height and with 12 evenly spread, shallow, vertical troughs around its circumference to allow the squeezed juice to run down its length. The body is supported by three legs, one every 120 degrees around the body's circumference and fixed about 4 cm up from the tapered end of the teardrop body, precisely on one of the shallow peaks either side of two troughs. Each leg consists of an upwardly angled 2.5 cm 'thigh', a well defined knee point, and a 'lower leg' descending 21 cm in a shallow, slightly outward running, arc. There are three small, black, rubber feet inserts at the bottom of each leg.

The lemon squeezer comes with user instructions and a diagram of use. It should be placed on a stable surface and a glass should be put under the body. One hand should hold the object firm by gripping one of the legs, the other hand should squeeze the halved fruit by putting it on the rounded upper surface of the teardrop body and making slow rotating movements back and forth. The juice will then collect in the glass standing underneath. The squeezer should be rinsed immediately after use.

There are a number of aspects to consider about the lemon squeezer. The first is the material it is made from: aluminium. Compared with steel, aluminium is a modern metal, one that has associations with aircraft, with lightness, and with anti-corrosion. The lemon squeezer won't rust away, it has a feeling of permanence about it. This permanence is emphasised by the temporariness of its rubber feet. The user instructions rather apologise for the fact that the rubber feet will wear out, noting that new ones can be bought should they do so. The feeling of the object's permanence also comes from the method of making the squeezer: casting. It is a simple, traditional technique, that sometimes produces imperfections, but generally works well. Strong things are usually cast. Industrial revolutions were founded on cast iron as an industrial material. The modern material is, then, underpinned by a traditional technique. The result is a monument, standing with the 'power' graphic perspective of socialist realism. This is also how it is presented on the packaging: a photo taken from a low angle (Fig. 4). One could easily imagine it as a huge object, out of all proportion with human scale.

Aluminium as a material has been said to give a feeling of 'nostalgia for



*Figure 4 Original
photograph for Juicy Salif
packaging (copyright Alessi)*

the future³², and there are other features of the lemon squeezer that one can associate with a future imagined from the past. Chief among these is its rocket or spaceship associations. Not with rockets of the present, but with old-style rockets, like those of Soviet inventors (Fig. 5). At the time rockets promised an exciting, high-tech future of space exploration, a long way from war-torn planet Earth. This 'future of the past' feeling is maintained by the streamlining of the squeezer's body (a teardrop being a good aerodynamic shape). Starting in the thirties and continuing into the fifties streamlining made everything look modern, and the metaphor of streamlining, speeding unhindered towards the future, became a metaphor of social

32 Nicols, S *Aluminium by design* Harold Abrams, New York (2000)

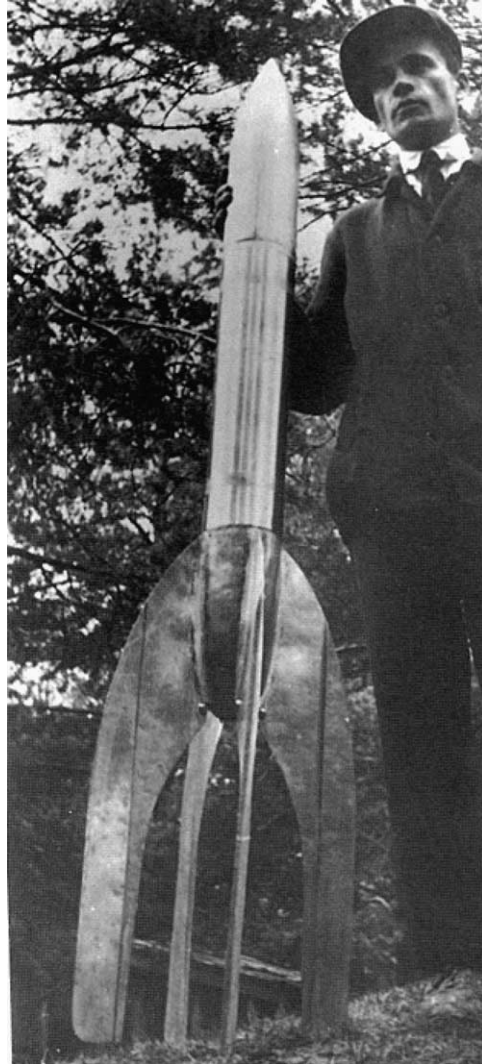


Figure 5 Soviet rocket from the 1930s, designed by Ivanovich Polyarny³³

and technological progress²². In the late 1980s streamlining might just be thought of as retro, but it could also be taken as ironic, especially as there *is* actually a fluid moving over the surface of the lemon squeezer, albeit not at a speed that streamlining would help at all.

What could a monument in a progressive, social realist style mean? An ode to the socialist ideals of the then crumbling Soviet Union? It's certainly plausible though there are also less monumental aspects to the lemon squeezer. Its tripod configuration combined with the long legs and the top heavy form gives a feeling that the squeezer might easily tip over, and indeed it takes only an angle of around 10 degrees for the squeezer to

33 Ordway, F I (III) and Liebermann, R *Blueprint for space: science fiction to science fact* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC (1992)

become unstable. Could we find here the embodiment of a monument just about to topple? The Soviet Union perhaps, which did finally topple in 1991, or the eighties commitment to rampant capitalism, that didn't.

One might also read a certain sexiness into the object, the raised legs suggesting can-can images of the Follies Bergere, and the exaggerated length of the lower legs recalling the portraits of Vargas (Fig. 6). Additionally the lemon juice dripping off the body is reminiscent of micturation. [Note 2] Why have this suggestion of sex in the kitchen? It could be argued that by the late eighties, cooking had come to stand for a traditional, restrained sense of pleasure, whereas sex had come to stand for more liberal, and less restrained values towards pleasure. In Peter Greenaway's 1989 film *The cook, the thief, his wife and her lover*, food is enjoyed by a wealthy pig-like thief who constantly preaches survival values, while his wife flies away to the more nobler pursuit of sex, aided by a liberal cook. This, against the backdrop of national campaigns to control the spread of Aids. People were being forced to think realistically and publicly about



Figure 6 Vargas legs
(copyright Alberto Vargas)

promiscuous sex. A sexual object might express a liberal attitude towards sex.

We have, then, a number of possible ways to construe the lemon squeezer as an object that expresses or embodies ideas. We have the idea of permanence, the idea of ‘a past future’, the possibility of irony, the idea of instability, and of sex. A sexy, Soviet, statue; a morality tale for the over-spending consumer: beware of fixed, top-heavy systems, for they may be toppled. And these, we have tried to show, might have been ideas running around people’s heads during the social and political situation of the late eighties (when the lemon squeezer was produced) and the early nineties (when it was introduced into the market).

This is a potted historical sketch, certainly, but a sketch that puts the lemon squeezer in some sort of historical and political context able to suggest why the ‘ideas’ of certain groups of people might chime with the expressive possibilities of the lemon squeezer and go some way in explaining its success. It is a suggestion that makes no attempt at all to take into account Philippe Starck’s professed intention for the lemon squeezer, instead trying to work from the ‘facts’ of it’s form, construction, and function towards the values and ideas prevalent in the society of the time. Unfortunately it is rather unconvincing. This is because as a historical and situated account it provides a ‘reading’ of history with little explanatory power across large differences at the cultural, or even individual, level. One could say that such a reading is almost as ‘creative’ as the design itself.

5 The fate of the designer: omnipotence or impotence, life or death?

We started this paper with two contentions of Adrian Forty. The first was that the success of a design could not be entirely due to the personal creativity of the designer. The second was that ‘no design works unless it embodies ideas that are held in common by the people for whom the object is intended’. Taking the two hypotheses together we set out to find out whether personal creativity could be considered a necessary or sufficient condition for a design’s success. To this end we took Philippe Starck’s lemon squeezer *Juicy Salif* as a case study. First looking at it from the viewpoint of Starck’s creativity, then from the viewpoint of what the lemon squeezer might embody or express in wider terms. We concluded first that it was unlikely that any other designer could have come up with the particular form that Starck did *as* a lemon squeezer; good evidence for us attributing Starck’s creativity, or at least his personal background, as a necessary condition for its success. Secondly, we suggested that the argument for the lemon squeezer embodying the zeitgeist in some way—and

its success being attributable to consumers sensing (and wanting) this embodiment—was a little shaky.

So does it matter at all what Philippe Starck thought when he sat in that Italian restaurant just off the coast of Tuscany and started to sketch? The evidence would suggest that he sat down with the intention of designing a lemon squeezer—an object to squeeze lemons that is—and probably do it provocatively and with some style. The lemon squeezer clearly does squeeze lemons, however badly some people may think it achieves this. It does also start conversations, Starck's professed intention for the design; this paper is testament to that function. Could these simple intentions be a sufficient condition in accounting for the product's success?

We argued earlier that the actual intentions about a design must logically exist prior to the existence of any particular design. The intention to design an object to squeeze lemons must certainly precede the design of any lemon squeezer, but the intention to design a 'conversational object' doesn't necessarily have to (otherwise the object would be called a 'conversation starter' and not a 'lemon squeezer'). It would seem that 'starting a conversation' is more of a description of the products *actual* functioning than its intended functioning. Yet this kind of description used to justify a design might go a long way in accounting for the success of a design. This is because it is a description that can encompass the idiosyncratic use, systematic mis-use, or multiple uses of a product. These are the stories that emerge about a product once a consumer lives and engages with it. All Starck has done, we suggest, is observed how his product is *actually* used, and turned that into his realised intention as the reason for its success. But such a description is never something he could intend to produce in the design object since not every consumer will experience the lemon squeezer in its 'social lubricant' function. If a lemon squeezer does start a conversation it is because of the manifold associations, symbolisations, ideas, and evaluations it produces, and how these reveal themselves during the ongoing interaction with the product, not by the design of a single individual.

This conclusion is also that of Stanley Fish³⁴ and Roger Scruton³⁵. Both argue, rather differently we might add, that consumers choose a product with the abstract aim of that product fitting their way of living (Fish), or goals in life (Scruton). And this abstract aim cannot be given in advance since the product initiates the process of realising those aims. The success of the product, then, only comes about through the consumer's engagement with that product. The idea of the omnipotent designer may actually turn out to be useful for the consumer in realising those aims—in shaping the engagement with the product—but this omnipotence derives from a different source than 'merely' solving a demonstrable problem through design.

34 Fish, S 'The unbearable ugliness of volvos' in **S Fish** (ed.) *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech. And it's a Good Thing Too*, Oxford University Press, Oxford UK (1994) pp 273–279

35 Scruton, R *The aesthetics of architecture* Methuen, London UK (1979)

The irony of all this of course is that, in questioning the omnipotence of the designer, the name of Philippe Starck has appeared in this paper 27 times. If we wanted to kill off the idea of the omnipotent designer, we've certainly been going about it a funny way. This contradiction alone should make us alive to the possibility of a design's success in some way encompassing the idea of the omnipotent designer. The main conclusions of our analysis suggest that we should conduct our search for the reasons of a particular design's success by looking for descriptions of engaged use that contradict, ignore, but sometimes support the original intentions of the designer. [Note 3] And of course these descriptions can come from the designers themselves, it is just that they shouldn't be misconstrued as evidence for omnipotence, only as another drop in the ocean of consumer experience.

In summary it could be argued that a designer's personal creativity does form a necessary condition for a design's success, but it will never be a sufficient condition. For that we would need to take into account, not the ideas present in a particular society as Forty has suggested, but the personal creativity of the consumer to use or misuse the products that they buy. There is certainly skill in designing, it is just not a magical skill, and not a skill that extends past the completion of the design into its consumption.

6 *Discussion*

(Discussant: Linden Ball, Department of Psychology, University of Lancaster, UK)

LB: You're interested in the causes of design success and you seem to attribute this to three causes. Firstly, the creative designer or individual 'hero'. Secondly, you talk about the notion of some kind of zeitgeist or ecological context, you take the late eighties and early nineties as an example. Thirdly, is the creative user (or the creative misuser). I would like a stronger feel for what you describe as necessary and sufficient causes, especially the role of the creative designer which you seem equivocal about, you seem to arrive at the idea of the creative user / misuser of the product and I'm not sure where that fits in exactly.

DS: The first aspect, the creative design process started from the idea of designers having intentions about the way a product would be, but that shifted into the idea of the personal history of the designer. It is also partly to do with the sort of data that you're looking at. When you look at historical data you see certain things, like the role of the media, and you think should we attribute it to this or attribute it to Starck, or maybe the ideas held in common by people? So then my definition of what is creative

genius turns into personal history: can we attribute it to anyone's personal history, or can I maintain that nobody else but Starck could have come up with this idea? I think you need personal history to understand the success of the lemon squeezer, I think it is a necessary condition. For the second aspect, the ideas held in common, you often get the feeling that there's a lot of guesswork involved, and that perhaps you shouldn't interpret so much. That's why we came up with alternative explanations for the design—in terms of user inventiveness and cultural capital.

LB: Are there any other causes of design success beyond the three you have identified? Could, for example, involving the user in the design process be a sufficient condition for success? And how much can you generalise from this specific case?

DS: I think a lot depends on the type of market that you are designing for. User involvement would obviously benefit architects, but I think in this case user involvement would have been problematic. It would be difficult for users to express why this is a better lemon squeezer than a much cheaper one, certainly in terms of function. On the other hand there is no doubt about the remarkable success of this squeezer. I think the manufacturers, Alessi, introduced an idea of how to consume a certain thing, and a kitchen utensil with certain sexual connotations was a very good thing for them

Questioner 1: I actually wonder who has been more creative in this process, Philippe Starck or Alessi.

DS: It is true that in the early nineties Alessi was changing its attitude to putting products on the market, a more commercialised way, but I think that this is one of the items that they produced with a sense of 'design masterpiece', following very much in the tradition from the mid-seventies onwards with, for example, Richard Sapper. I think that Starck has as much to do with the lemon squeezer's success as Alessi in this particular case. Later cases I'm not so sure.

Notes

¹ David Hume in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*³⁶ asks exactly the same question about inferring the nature, and intentions of the designer (in Hume's case a putative God) from the qualities and functioning of the artefact (in Hume's case the world). Hume, writing in the mid-eighteenth century when attacks on creationism had to be veiled in irony, argued that it 'might' be impossible to infer either the nature, or the intentions of the creator simply by looking at the characteristics of the artefact.

² The name of the lemon squeezer, *Juicy Salif*, would appear to derive not from the name of a character in a Phillip K. Dick novel, as many of Starck's other designs have, but from the French word for saliva, *salive*.

³ See also Meikle³⁷ for similar arguments.

36 Hume, D *Dialogues concerning natural religion* Oxford Paperbacks, Oxford UK (1779)

37 Meikle, J L 'Material virtues: on the ideal and the real in design history' *Journal of Design History* Vol 11 (1998) 191–199