

## Exhibition Review

Ezra Shales

### *Safe, Design Takes on Risk: The Museum of Modern Art*

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Paola Antonelli, Curator; and Patricia Juncosa Vecchierini, Curatorial Assistant

*Safe, Design Takes on Risk* exhibit catalog  
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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Safe, Design Takes on Risk* explores stress in the human mind more than in physical materials. The three hundred artifacts that curator Paola Antonelli and her assistant, Patricia Juncosa Vecchierini, have assembled brim with ideas worthy of greater evaluation but are, for the most part, clever intellectual exercises and not tangible solutions for public welfare. The pace of the exhibition is abrupt, jumping from terrifying global issues to ironic conceptual knickknacks. Scheduled in the summer of 2001, the project embodies a post-9/11 intellectual paroxysm of episodic flirtation with multiple quandaries. As in the nightly news, we lurch from the problems of tent cities in New Orleans and armored vehicles and unarmored pedestrians in Iraq to "good news" and cheerful inanity. In this shuffle, the practice of design becomes unclear and ambivalent.

The curators exploit the spaciousness of the new sixth floor designed by Yoshio Taniguchi (planned in 1997 and completed in 2004), including several tents and shelters of large size, nylon dirigibles, a car, and a small, unmanned helicopter. The objects organized thematically around the essentials of "Shelter," "Armor," and "Emergency" arouse provocative questions about contemporary life. "Property," "Awareness," and "Everyday" are themes that make the show buoyant but detached from the urgent concerns of real emergencies. After ascertaining that the "safe" use of a credit card is really an issue of privacy more than self-preservation, the curators choose to blur these differences. The uneven rhythm created by alternating



Terracotta vessel for filtering unsafe drinking water,  
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between ironic gags and shrewd engineering fails to produce any resolution in the exhibition. For instance, the display of several variations on the *hijab* are intended to suggest a global outlook, but Dutch and Israeli designs reinvent the headscarf as sportswear and a bulletproof fashion accessory. These glib objects were intended to represent cultural difference, but also can be interpreted as making light of multicultural conflict.

To keep up with the exhibition, one must be willing to alternate seeing between safety as an accessory and a necessity. In the section labeled "Everyday," a terracotta vessel designed for wide distribution in Bangladesh to filter naturally occurring arsenic from drinking water is above a cardboard coffee cup sleeve to protect a recreational coffee drinker on the move (presumably American). The comparison between the danger of imbibing arsenic and the discomfort of handling a hot cup of Starbucks coffee seems to undermine any idea of safety as a universal value. The absence of a dialogue between the two objects makes their collision mildly embarrassing and slightly surreal. Whether the installation presentation numbs or highlights cultural and global differences depends on your subjective viewpoint: either reading is possible. The contrast of value systems is deliberate. The lack of transitions and surfeit of contrasts are consistent tactics in "Safe," whereby curators float multiple balloons to encourage visitors to "think global"—albeit small, incremental moment—and to engage in acerbic but ambivalent exercises in political dialogue.

In my opinion, the intellectual heft of the objects would emerge from a more informative context and a more lengthy comparison of designs. The Bangladeshi water filter is one of the simplest technological gadgets in the show: a hand-modeled terracotta urn with a contrasting resplendent green plastic spigot. The stout form with its sagging, lopsided lid is a humanitarian effort of merit. Similar designs are being made by several organizations, and engineers are still trying to solve the problem of bacterial growth within the terracotta filters. Large-scale communal water purifiers probably are the appropriate long-term solution, especially considering the cultural resistance to the tabletop filters (which villagers know are prone to bacteria), but this information is nowhere to be found in "Safe." The absence of a didactic context makes it very difficult to agree or disagree with the selection of designs. In the case of the landmine removal equipment on exhibit, gear that is site-specific, appropriate for arid roads in Afghanistan or muddy ones in Vietnam, is acknowledged to be "good design."

"Good design," a phrase MoMA popularized fifty years ago, is used by Antonelli to praise the artifacts in the accompanying catalog.<sup>1</sup> Her lack

of irony or quotation marks is enigmatic. Thirty years of critics pondering the phrase's culturally constructed meaning does not perturb Antonelli's criteria of innovation, progress, and originality. Three other essays by Phil Patton on cars, Marie O'Mahony on materials, and Susan Yelavich on "nesting" maintain an upbeat but superficial analysis. Patton points out that Matisse made a painting from looking out of his car window, but the fact seems quite irrelevant to the big world of design outside of the art museum's confines. The catalog also contains a transcribed interview with Cameron Sinclair, founder of Architecture for Humanity, the one instance where objects get knocked about by a critical terminology. Although a minimum of concern with context weakens the claim of "good design" in the three other essays, Sinclair convincingly outlines the troubles in imposing design on the developing world, and criticizes solving problems from a distance. His advocacy of social responsibility stands out in the catalog. In general, the essays analyze safety in terms of physical comfort, aesthetics, and the habits of a leisured consumer class. The theme of "Property" asserts the importance of ergonomic pillows, high-tech business cards, and thousand-



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Michael Rakowitz's *paraSITE homeless shelter* (1997) far right, Martine Roiz de Azca's *Basic House* (1999) with video dramatization, and Stephen Augustin's *Watercone* water collection device (1999)  
© 2005 Matthew Septimus, photographer.

dollar baby carriages. Other, more urgent, local issues that somehow were overlooked include the asthma epidemic among New York City children, and environmental racism in designating toxic industrial sites, but the safety of the working poor and the high mortality rates of the outer boroughs are neglected. Here, too, a shortcoming is that the exhibition alternates between addressing the Third World and Fifth Avenue, and skips over everyone in-between.

The comparison in "Safe" of temporary homes devised for the homeless, now a standard design school exercise, is representative of the show's lack of clear criteria. One example, the inflatable "Urban Nomad Shelter" (2004) by Cameron McNall and Damon Seeley, is a bright, jubilant, apple-green structure, more suited for suburban backyard child's play than asphalt and cement. The romantic name and color of the "Urban Nomad Shelter" articulate an "iPod aesthetic"; not the predicament of the penniless. Another inflatable intended for the same function, the "paraSITE homeless shelter" (1997) by Michael Rakowitz, is a clear plastic tent that harnesses hot air discharged by many large office building exhaust vents. The use of hot air in "paraSITE" is a poetic metaphor for the discrepancy between the poor and the rich. Navigating the distinction between polemic and pretty design is left to the discretion of the viewer. Similar urgent political discourses are acknowledged with a gesture, but explored superficially. Temporary housing gets no more complicated than the evidence of sleeping bags. These are props more than designs, addressing public policy more than physical, material, and mechanical conditions.

While the artifacts with use-value are clearly examples of design, the others are difficult to classify. The curators have gathered a grand assortment of fanciful projects about stress management by young product design students. For example, a "Huggable Atomic Mushroom," a sickly-sweet ironic recapitulation of Claes Oldenburg's 1960s soft sculpture, embraces the sophomoric and trivializes the serious, but has a raw dynamism (to the point that Antonelli uses it as an opening salvo in her catalog essay). MoMA has not welcomed so many neophytes for a long

time, and the open-door policy is liberating after the staid atmosphere of the fine art galleries. Numerous youthful absurdist gestures, such as the "Huggable Mushroom," are more cute than cunning, derivative of fine art, and represent nostalgia for the translucent plastic clothing and inflatable architecture of the 1970s. Warhol's silver cloud pillows are transformed into a six-foot, shimmering, reflective chamber, absurdly titled "Basic House." Several artifacts relate to "classics" in MoMA's design collection, such as the subtly altered Arne Jacobsen Series 7 and the Thonet chairs, customized with "antitheft" devices to fasten purses. The plastic "Blow Chair" (1967) on MoMA's second floor, designed by Jonathan De Pas, Donato D'Urbino, Paola Lomazzi, and Carlo Scolari, is one of the inspirations for the inflatable "Urban Nomad Shelter" (2004) by McNall and Seeley. These parallels reinforce the Museum's authority. The unmanned Schiebel Camcopter in "Safe" invariably recalls the 1957 Bell and Howell helicopter downstairs, a dramatic signature display in both the old and new museums. The choice of a Pininfarina as the representative of the "safe" car hits a note that is clearly self-congratulatory, because it is the only car brand in the permanent collection. These self-referential artifacts promote the importance of MoMA as a historic institution.

The exhibition's passionate praise of both bric-a-brac and humanitarian inventions reminds one that the definition of design in the contemporary art museum remains broad and porous. Currently, public interest in design is at a high point, and exhibitions emphasizing fashion, style, and aesthetics have been crowd-pleasers. Design shows at MoMA have tended to address aesthetics in lieu of the contexts of consumption and ideological crises. However, "Safe" calls to mind how MoMA used photography in the 1940s and 1950s. Instead of being reminded of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.'s exhibitions of "good design," visitors learn about humanity as a motley but universal struggle as Edward Steichen portrayed it in "The Family of Man" (1955). Steichen sought to generate humanitarian goodwill and show "how alike people were in all parts of the world."<sup>2</sup> Posing photography as objective truth-telling, he effaced its physi-



Raul Cadenas Secoitree (2004), a medusa head of surveillance, foreground right, and Koiatan/MacDonald Studio's INVERSABrane, invertible building membrane (2005), at left.  
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cal attributes by juxtaposing mural photos and eight-by-ten-inch gelatin silver prints. "Safe" also dilutes the idea of design, even as it expands it, by emphasizing sentiment as a method to arbitrate "good design."

An improved installation would have been one simple way to make this exhibition more clearly focused on design in terms of materials and their responsive qualities to the variegated human context. The Museum has created a disappointingly untouchable display. There are no tactile experiences—not even one fabric sample. On both of my visits, the guards were busy trying to stop visitors from fingering the goods. The lone interactive oddity that occupies center stage is the "Securitree" by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna, a steel tree diagram whose limbs terminate in many surveillance cameras. It allows visitors to see themselves being watched. Although the curator describes Osuna's tree as a "cognitive map," it seems an absurdly upscale version of an electronics store window, and alienates and isolates the senses as much as it engages them. Minor tactile interactions would have been more simple and satisfying. Perhaps a playpen for visitors to role-play with Andrew Oliver's "GIANTmicrobes," stuffed animals that are enlargements of viral bacilli and bacteria, would have proved popular. The blue common cold, taupe cough and dark brown HIV-AIDS, and vermicular ebola virus are anthropo-

morphically transmuted into cuddly darlings, and sold in the gift shop, but not available to be touched in the exhibition. "Safe" is a holiday show for our moment: in it one can easily falter from pondering disaster to buying ebola as a stocking stuffer.