

Women Only: Design Events Restricted to Female Designers During the 1990s

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Introduction

In order to explore the promotion of gender in the practice of design, this paper will analyze two case studies in detail, specifically a contest and an exhibition in which participation was restricted to female designers. The Creole Project/Memory Containers Contest was organized in 1990 by Centro Studi Alessi (Alessi Research Centre-ARC) in Milan.¹ The exhibition was *La casa que ríe* (The Laughing Home), which represented Spain in the 1994 *Abitare il Tempo* furniture fair in Verona, Italy. These two examples were not organized by feminist-related organizations and, consequently, the promotion of female designers was not their principal goal. It is precisely for this reason that they are extraordinary examples for illustrating the mainstreaming process of originally feminist demands in the practice of design.

This article seeks to study the "marriage of convenience" between feminist rhetoric and the language of both marketing strategies and national representation. To achieve this goal, I will first explore the difficult negotiation between the "ideal" and the "real" reasons for this union, and, secondly, the cohesive element that made this fusion possible. As I will argue, only an "experimental" allure could link these two concepts. The aim of this research is to study the implementation of positive inclusion, as well as to analyze it as a "symptom" of a new social sensibility regarding the gender issue, without defending or condemning it. The question of whether or not the application of affirmative action policy is suitable will not be evaluated in this article. That discussion might be relevant when addressing "which" strategy is best for promoting gender equality. In this case, however, what is being addressed is "how" this normalization process is evolving.

The main purpose of this article is to extend the debate on feminism from the theory to the practice of design through a detailed examination of these two examples, in the hope that it might bring about further research on this topic in the future. In other words, this is not a revision of the history of design from a feminist point of view, but rather an evaluation of how feminism has acted as a springboard for female designers during the 1990s.² This article will

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- 1 In 1998, the ARC moved from Milan to the village of Crusinallo, the location of the Alessi Company headquarters.
 - 2 Recent revisions of the history of design have been undertaken by, for example, I. Anscombe, *A Woman's Touch: Women in Design from 1869 to the Present Day* (London: Virago, 1984); J. Attfield, "Form/FEMALE Follows FUNCTION/Male: Feminist Critiques of Design" in J.A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design* (London: Pluto, 1989); C. Buckley, "Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design," *Design Issues* 3 (1986), 3–14; P. Sparke, 1995 (see note 5); *Design and Feminism: Re-visioning Spaces, Places, and Everyday Things*, J. Rothschild, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); *Female Designers in the USA 1900–2000: Diversity and Difference*, P. Kirkham, ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

consider general approaches along with personal experiences. It is a multilevel study whose aim is to take a more “on the ground” analysis of the phenomenon.

Mainstreaming Feminism

The word “feminism” and its derivatives did not appear in either the catalog of the *Creole Project* or in *The Laughing Home*, even when the positive inclusion on behalf of women could be interpreted as a consequence of originally feminist demands. To explain this omission, one might point to the traditionally male-dominated cultures of both Italy and Spain as the main reasons. However, hiding the feminist origin of the events or just softening them is not unique to these two projects. In a recent article, Judith Attfield mentioned that the Women’s Press insisted on deleting the word “feminism” from the title of the second edition of her book *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women, and Design* in 1995.³ This fits in with the general trend described by the same author as the debilitation of the political aim of feminism in its encounter with postmodernism.⁴

Penny Sparke summarizes the scholarship on feminism and postmodernism as follows: “Most agree that while the challenge to cultural authority opened up a space, the lack of a political agenda in post-modernism meant that it could not ultimately be harnessed by feminists seeking to overthrow hegemonic culture, and to inject their own culture into the gap.”⁵ Postmodernism questioned hegemonic discourses, but did not present any alternative. Neither feminism nor any other peripheral discourse made any attempt at hegemony. Instead, they remained as peripheral as they always had been, and only partly validated their discourse. Consequently, they gained visibility, but had to adapt themselves to political correctness. The result was a new stage in feminism, called either post-feminism or Third Wave feminism.

The late 1980s and early 1990s are considered to be the beginning of post-feminism. This new stage of feminism is described as a reaction to 1970s feminism. Janice Winship has defined post-feminism as a popularized, de-politicized, common-sense version of feminism.⁶ Tania Modleski has defined post-feminism as the appropriation of feminist ideas for non-feminist ends, and it is this definition that most certainly would seem to be applicable to this analysis of how the *Creole Project* and *The Laughing Home* articulate feminist discourse.⁷ Feminism at the beginning of the 1990s called Third Wave feminism,⁸ like post-feminism, makes reference to a mainstreaming of previous feminist theories. Imelda Whelehan has portrayed this generation as those who “feel obliged to construct their own identities in opposition to what they see as the worst sins of Second Wave feminism—stridency, man-hating, joylessness, and

- 3 Jacinda Read deals with similar omissions in her article “Popular Film/Popular Feminism: The Critical Reception of the Rape-Revenge Film” on the critical reception of the films *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991). [Accessed in April 2005. Available from: www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/popular_feminism.htm].
- 4 J. Attfield, “What Does History Have to Do with It? Feminism and Design History,” *Journal of Design History* 16:1, (2003) 77.
- 5 P. Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 224.
- 6 J. Winship, “A Girl Needs to Get Street-wise: Magazines for the 1980s” *Feminist Review* 21 (1985): 25–46 and J. Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987).
- 7 T. Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist” Age* (London, Routledge, 1991).
- 8 See *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, S. Gillis and R. Munford, eds. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

bad clothes.”⁹ These authors agree that post-feminism is the result of the mainstreaming of an originally political theory, the doctrine of which has now been depolarized.

This mainstreaming can be interpreted as either a failure of the “real” 1970s feminism or a natural evolution of feminist principles. The first account is reflected in comments such as this one by Summer Wood: “The result has been a rapid depoliticizing of the term and an often misguided application of feminist ideology to consumer imperatives, invoked [...] for the right to buy all manner of products marketed to women, from cigarettes to antidepressants to diet frozen pizzas. It seems that, if you can slap a purple or pink label that says ‘for women’ on a product, choosing to buy it must be a feminist act.”¹⁰ Instead, Charlotte Brunsdon, considers post-feminism simply to be post-1970s feminism rather than non-feminism.¹¹ Both positions convey the controversy surrounding the current status of feminism, and suggest that feminism is not rigidly fixed or easily identifiable. This often leads to contradictory and contested territory: on the one hand, a perception of post-feminism as the failure of feminism’s original ideals, and, on the other, as the logical consequence of a mature stage of feminism. My general position is that the popularization of feminism, that is, the dissemination of feminist ideas into all dimensions of ordinary life, is a welcomed phenomenon.

Before going further, some analysis should be made of the idea of stereotyping feminism, which might easily be associated with “extremist” theories, something similar to that expressed in the earlier quote on the “worst sins of the Second Wave feminism.” Like any stereotype, it ignores the various interpretations and evolution and, instead, bases itself on radical viewpoints. However, during the period in question, the 1990s, gender issues became increasingly widespread and visible in numerous fields, from politics to academics.¹² Gender studies, equal opportunity, and domestic violence became common terms when addressing diverse issues related to gender. Specifically in the field of design, different strategies to highlight the work of female designers were developed: organizations created exclusively for female designers, shops where items were exclusively designed by women, special issues in magazines, e-mail lists about female designers, and design groups composed entirely of female designers.¹³ In this vein, feminism became Janus-faced, with one face being negative and referring to a more fanatic discourse, and a positive face that had an aura of progressiveness. Both the *Creole Project* and *The Laughing Home* had to deal with both inseparable senses. Moreover, the necessity of taking certain measures to achieve a gender balance had become increasingly widespread during the decade. Nevertheless, the beginning of the 1990s can still be considered a starting point.

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- 9 I. Whelehan, *Having It All (Again?)* (Paper given at the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC] seminar series on new femininities at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences [LSE], November 19, 2004.) [Accessed In April 2005. Available from: www.lse.ac.uk/collections/newFemininities/firstSeminar.htm].
- 10 S. Wood, “Freedom of ‘Choice’: Parsing the Word That Defined a Generation,” *Bitch* 124 (Spring 2004). [Accessed in April 2005. Available from: www.bitchmagazine.com].
- 11 C. Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997).
- 12 For an analysis of the attachment of ethical values to consumer goods, see G. Williams, “The Point of Purchase?” in *Brand New*, J. Pavitt, ed. (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2000), 184–214.
- 13 See Association of Women Industrial Designers (AWID) [www.awidweb.com]; “Bust-ed: The Unusual Gift Shop” [www.bust-ed.co.uk]; *Inca 2* (August 2000) [www.idsa-sf.org]; Pixelsurgeon’s issue on women in design [www.pixelsurgeon.com/pages/feature/womenindesign] or the creative group “The Women’s Design + Research Unit (WD+RU)” composed by Teal Triggs and Sian Cook, founded in 1994.

Creole Project/Memory Containers

The first case study was carried out in 1990, and organized by the Italian design-led manufacturer Alessi. That year, the Centro Studi Alessi (Alessi Research Centre-ARC) recently had opened, and its director, Laura Polinoro, organized the first project called *Creole Project/ Memory Containers*. The contest was divided into two phases. In the first phase, one hundred and twenty-five female designers under the age of thirty were invited to present their reflections on the theme of “archetypes of the offering of food and the rituals surrounding it.”¹⁴ Afterwards, a jury selected some of these reflections to continue on to the second phase, in which the reflections and ideas were transformed into actual objects to be produced by Alessi.

Organizing a contest with international participants was not new for Alessi. In the 1980s, the company organized the *Tea and Coffee Piazza* project for a group of well-known architects, who were invited to create coffee sets to be later made in a limited-edition of ninety-nine, and exhibited in museums and art galleries.¹⁵ Design-led companies have used the point of purchase and the museum indiscriminately as two places to promote their products. Guy Julier has described this phenomenon as the blurring of the distinctions between the design object, as curated in the museum, and the design object as displayed through retail.¹⁶ This strategy has been inserted into a broader process of “historicizing” newly created design products, and has been implemented by other companies such as Vitra, Knoll, and Cassina.

But why a contest restricted to participation by only female designers? Alessi had never worked with female designers before, apart from the re-edition of Marianne Brandt’s work into the “Bauhaus” collection. Alberto Alessi remembers, “We had a kind of responsibility to at least try to do something [...] we had also the feeling that a female sensibility could add some new faces to the projects, open to new softer and more discrete approaches. And also those females would be more prepared to design objects that at the end are mainly used by women.”¹⁷ Two remarks are useful for giving a wider focus to this argumentation. Grace Lees-Maffei locates the origin of these ventures in conversations between Alessandro Mendini and Alberto Alessi about “publicity and marketing for the brand.”¹⁸ In addition, Michael Collins recounts a turn in the commercial strategy of Alessi as a consequence of the 1987 recession. One of the objectives was an attempt to capture “the lower, youth cultural element of the market.”¹⁹ In order to achieve this, Alessi needed to add different values to their luxury products. As Collins points out, the actions taken by the company were: increased research, diversification of their material base (towards plastic, wood, and ceramics), compromises with the environment, and positive inclusion in favor of women.

14 Available from: www.alessi.it/special/container/text.htm (Accessed in June 2003).

15 In this project, Alessandro Mendini invited well-known architects to join him in designing coffee services. The project was started in 1981, and presented in 1983. The participants included Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Charles Jencks, Richard Meier, Alessandro Mendini, Paolo Portoghesi, Aldo Rossi, Stanley Tigerman, Oscar Tusquets, Robert Venturi, and Kazumasa Yamashita.

16 G. Julier, *The Culture of Design* (London, Sage, 2000), 72.

17 Alberto Alessi e-mail to the author, June 17, 2003.

18 This project follows other occasional series by Alessi in which international talents were invited en masse to participate. In “Alessi d’après” (1972–1977), five European artists designed tabletop sculptures and, in 1980, the *Tea and Coffee Piazza* convoked twelve international architects to design tea and coffee services produced in limited editions of ninety-nine. Grace Lees-Maffei, “Italianità and Internationalism: Production, Design, and Mediation at Alessi, 1976–96,” *Modern Italy* 7:1 (2002): 37–57, esp. 47.

19 M. Collins, *Alessi* (London, Carlton Books, 1999), 18.

Figure 1

Left: Cecelia Cassina's fruit bowl *Helmut* (Italy);

Right: Clare Brass's container *Kalistó*.

Photographer: Santi Caleca.



The main aims of this contest were to enrich the gender balance of the Alessi designers, and provide Alessi with a more suitable image to cope with the cultural shift of the 1990s. To achieve this goal, the *Creole Project* presented a package that included youth, gender, and multicultural aspects. These factors caused Alessi to distance itself from previous collaborations which were done exclusively with well-known architects in the 1980s.

Participants received a project briefing that put the accent on “creolization.” This was meant to be an exploration of ancient cultures to create new products. The briefing invited the designers to explore “the primitive sense understood as a new spatial representation, extroverted forms, symbolic sense, the object understood in its magical projection.”²⁰ Inspiration might come from geographical or personal memories.

From the one hundred and twenty-five submissions, only nine projects were selected to be developed: three bowls, one container, three trays, one chafing-dish, and one oven-to-table dish (Figure 1).²¹ The designers were paid in royalties, and the projects were presented in an exhibition and a catalog in the spring of 1991. The catalog contained five texts written by the organizers, including Alberto Alessi and Laura Polinoro. While this was the first ARC project, the texts either presented the ARC or explored the symbolic and functional duality of objects, mainly through the analysis of old typologies. The catalog was illustrated in particular with aboriginal objects (mainly from non-Western countries) and a few 1950s Tupperware parties. While the illustrations seemed to compensate for the low representation of these countries among the participants, the Tupperware was paradoxically the only explicit reference to the feminine. Of the one hundred and twenty-five participants, one hundred and twenty-one (ninety-six percent) came from Europe, Japan, and the U.S., and only one from Turkey, one from Australia, one from India, and one from Argentina. Africa was not represented.

20 Project briefing “Operazione: Contenitori di memoria” (Internal documentation, before March 1990, first of eleven pages, in Archive Sandra Figuerola & Marisa Gallén).

21 Able (Lisa Krohn's) tray *Effigy* (United States); Clare Brass's containers *Kalistó* (United Kingdom); Cristina Capelli's and Laura Gennai's tray *Swing* (Italy); Cecelia Cassina's fruit bowl *Helmut* (Italy); Carla Ceccariglia's tray *Cri-cri* (Italy); Susan Cohn's (Workshop 3000) bowl *Cohncave* (Australia); Joanna Lyle's bowl *Chimu* (United Kingdom); Sandra Figuerola's and Marisa Gallén-La Nave's hot-dish holder *Diablo* (Spain); and Maria Sanchez's hotplate *Brasero* (Argentina).

This coincides with the major markets for Alessi products: its top market in terms of sales volume was Italy, followed by Germany and Scandinavia. Alessi sales are lower in France, Britain, and the United States. Australia has been a growing market for Alessi, but sales in Africa are negligible.²² On the contrary, the participants' nationalities contrast enormously with the briefing, which aimed to explore geographic memories, explicitly the "African, oriental, Celtic."²³ This resulted in an "orientalist" view of remote cultures made by mainly Western designers.

The catalog explored many aspects: anthropology, semiotics, consumption, fetishism, Japanese culture, and even the Last Supper. Equally relevant as the issues explored are the topics that the text overlooked. From the two hundred and eighty pages of the catalog, only the Italian version of Laura Polinoro's text mentioned very briefly that the *Creole Project* was meant to showcase female designers.²⁴ This reference was lost in the English translation, generating the possibility that someone reading the English texts exclusively would never find any evidence that the project was restricted to female designers, apart from the female names of all of the participants. This gave the impression that this fact did not respond to a criterion, but rather to a coincidence. The same is still true today when visiting Alessi's Website. In contrast to the complete documentation that accompanies the other projects, the exclusive participation of female designers in the *Creole Project* continues to be omitted.

There are two possibilities for consideration: either showcasing only female designers involves an issue that does not deserve further explanation, or this fact of positive inclusion has somehow faded from sight. Concerning the first possibility, it can be pointed out that organizing this contest for only female designers already is a statement in itself. Indeed, it represents a great opportunity for young female designers worldwide to achieve recognition. In this vein, the organizers may have thought that giving further explanation was simply not necessary. We can compare this example to the *Tea and Coffee Piazza* exhibition in 1983. There, only male designers were invited, and yet no one felt it necessary to justify this fact. Why should this example be different? The *Creole Project* example indeed is slightly different. In the *Tea and Coffee Piazza* project, the designers were not invited because they were male, while in the *Creole Project*, the gender of the participants was a crucial point of the project. Subsequently, the lack of reflection on it deserves questioning.

A second explanation points to either a conscious or unconscious veiling of this issue. If we study this exhibition as a message, it appears to be a multilayered one. Multiculturality, symbolic values of objects, and gender are present, but not equally addressed. The first two are approached from a theoretical point of view, and positively included as the nucleus of the message. These two subjects are prioritized and act as a curtain for the feminist issue. Presumably,

22 Grace Lees-Maffei, "Italianità and Internationalism: Production, Design, and Mediation at Alessi, 1976–96," 51.

23 See Project briefing, 1.

24 *Rebus sic...* [cat. ex.], L. Polinoro, ed., Crusinallo, Fratelli Alessi Omegna (F.A.O.), 1991, 23.

the feminist issue remained visible to those who were “curious,” but conveniently camouflaged for those not-so-receptive consumers. Alberto Alessi and the company’s team have been friendly in answering my requests for documentation; however, they have repeatedly refused to provide any new information as to why the participation of female designers was omitted from the catalog.

Positive inclusion was present as a fact but not “verbalized” in the texts and, therefore, ignored as a substantial component of the project. The invitation to female designers, as explained by Alberto Alessi, was a way of compensating for the overwhelming percentage of male designers who had worked for the company.²⁵ It is surprising that the catalog evidently omitted mentioning that only women were participating. Even when mobilizing one hundred and twenty-five female designers worldwide, this feminist approach was not openly addressed. This fact combined a strange mixture of presence and absence.

Analyzing the construction of the feminine in this specific contest through the pieces would be arbitrary. The designers got a specific briefing related to the commission where materials, typologies, sizes, and inspirations were fixed. The typologies included: the bowl, the container, the tray, the chafing-dish, and the oven-to-table dish. The materials were stainless steel (thickness: 0.7–0.8 or 1 mm) and eventually plain glass, plastic, or oven ceramics as complements. The topic was “creolization” as explained above. The participants were not specifically asked to reflect on femininity in the same vein that the male designers of *Tea and Coffee Piazza* were not invited to reflect on masculinity and, therefore, searching for either female or male features would seem equally superfluous in both cases. The author does not believe that certain gender features are objectively identifiable in a design piece. And if they do exist, then this could be the central subject of another study. In the second example, *The Laughing Home*, the feminine is the topic of reflection and, therefore, it will constitute a better opportunity to analyze the construction of feminine images into the objects.²⁶

The Diabolic Piece

One of the selected objects in the *Creole Project* contest will be studied here in order to provide a vision of the contest from the point of view of the participants. Among the nine selected pieces, the oven-to-table dish was designed by the Spanish duo of Sandra Figuerola and Marisa Gallén (Figure 2). It consisted of a cooking pot covered with a stainless steel cover, which was thought to solve a practical problem and to create a utensil which was suitable for both cooking as well as serving the meal. During the cooking process, the pot normally gets spotted. Consequently, the food normally would be moved from the cooking pot to another vessel suitable for serving at the table and, during the transaction, the food might get cold.

25 See F. Sweet, *Alessi: Art and Poetry* (Lewes: The Ivy Press, 1998).

26 There are culturally constructed elements which are regularly pointed to represent the feminine taste—certain colors, forms, and typologies. In many cases, they were the inspiration for the furniture pieces in *The Laughing Home* exhibition.

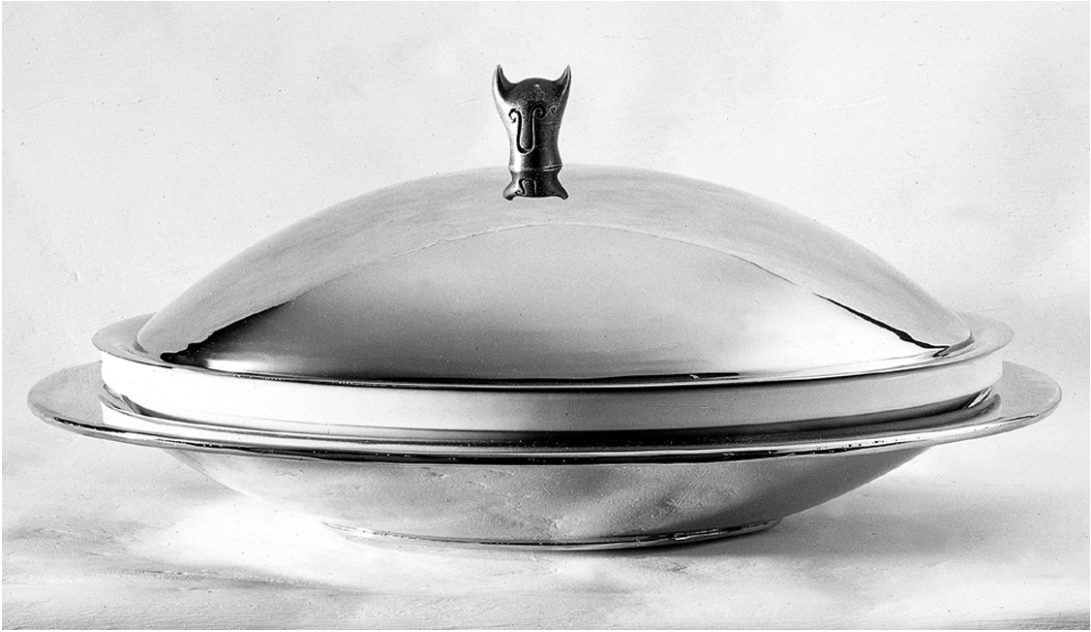


Figure 2

Sandra Figuerola and Marisa Gallén's oven-to-table dish *Diablo*.
Photographer: Miro Zagnoli

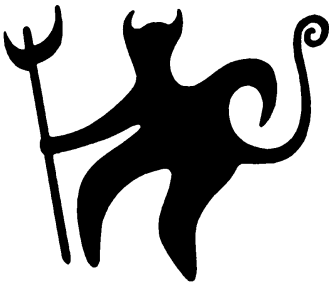


Figure 3

Sandra Figuerola's and Marisa Gallén's logo for Alessi Research Center.

In this example, the stainless steel holder covers the ceramic oven utensil, acting as a "second skin" which allows it to be sumptuously placed on the table and, at the same time, keeps the meal warm. The handle on the cover represented the head of the devil, and acted as the central concept of the project. The designers chose the devil because of its rich symbolic value in Western culture, embodying the sin of gluttony.

This experience definitively marked Figuerola's and Gallén's careers. In those days, the designers made up part of the group La Nave, which was composed of eleven people, only two of which were women.²⁷ Their proposal was presented as a small, carefully worded book. Texts on food and rituals accompanied the devil, which was transformed into all kinds of kitchen and tableware. Before submitting their proposal, the designers received contradictory opinions from their colleagues, who preferred a spectacular presentation in big panels as opposed to an intimate one in a little book. Finally, Figuerola and Gallén trusted their own judgment. The fact that their project was finally selected was much more than a professional victory for the designers. Sandra Figuerola remembers it as "one of the impulses on a personal and professional level which made me become conscious that we could also say something in the design world. It made me realize that we were doing it well."²⁸ Moreover, ARC's logo came out of this contest, even though this had not been planned. The organizers appreciated enormously the graphics of Figuerola's and Gallén's project, and the devil was spontaneously adopted as the ARC logo (Figure 3). In 1994, these two designers were asked to coordinate the next case study.

27 J. Gimeno, "La Nave: How to Run an Anarchical Design Company," *Journal of Design History* 15:1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 15.

28 Sandra Figuerola, interview with author, November 4, 1999.

The Laughing Home

The second case is the Spanish participation in *Progetti e Territori*, a cultural exhibition within the *Abitare il Tempo* furniture fair (Verona, Italy), where every participating country exhibited an original vision on design. The Spanish Association of Furniture Manufacturers and Exporters (ANIEME) commissioned Figuerola and Gallén in 1994 to act as curators of their proposal. After their Italian experience, the designers suggested putting on an exhibition composed of women only. The management board accepted the idea. As with any form of preferential affirmative action, the potential for negative reactions always exists. However, that did not happen on this occasion; neither the ANIEME board nor their colleagues or the press object.

Nine female designers were invited to join the project. In addition, the designer of the catalog, its photographer, and the writer all were women. The organizers had little trouble choosing the participants, since the gender balance of Spanish industrial designers was overwhelmingly masculine. The participants designed twenty-one pieces of furniture, which clearly crossed over the borders of industrial design and craft. For the most part, they were unique pieces, and not produced on a large scale.²⁹

This time, the focus on women was widely explained. One of the texts was even titled “Why Women?” The curators encouraged women to talk about an environment traditionally managed by women, but created by men: the home. The passive, traditional relationship of women as consumers was turned into an active, creative relationship as designers. Women were constantly handling masculine models. However, this exhibition was aimed at creating feminine models, which necessarily reflected the traditional knowledge of women within the home.

The exhibition was divided into living spaces. Instead of conventional, architectural rooms, they responded to daily abstract necessities. The traditional codification of spaces was broken up to achieve more flexible results. This ideal dwelling was composed of seven spaces: receiving, playing, eating, beauty, loving, rocking, and reading (Figures 4–8). Indeed, the spaces made references to categories of secondary importance in contemporary functional architecture such as: sociability (receiving, loving), personal care (beauty), intimacy (reading), motherhood (rocking), and childhood (playing). Each contained three pieces of furniture that defined the room.

As mentioned above, here femininity played a central role in the exhibition. The designers were invited to reflect on it and, consequently, the pieces exposed the visions of the participants. The way the designers handled the feminine component ran in two, different directions:

29 Only the rocking chair designed by Nancy Robbins was produced on a large scale, after removing the feathers at the back side from the original design.



Figure 4 (top left)

Space for receiving: M. Gallén's occasional furniture; N. Tubella's hall-stand, and G. Ruiz's frame. Photographer: Concha Prada.

Figure 5 (top right)

Space for beauty: S. Figuerola's screen, M. Gallén's mirror, and M. Gallén's toilet chair. Photographer: Concha Prada.

Figure 6 (left) Space for loving: M. Durán's candle holder, G. Ruiz's sofa, and T. Tomás's vase. Photographer: Concha Prada.

Figure 7 (right)

Space for rocking: S. Figuerola's wardrobe, M. Durán's cradle, and N. Robbins's rocking chair. Photographer: Concha Prada.

Figure 8 (bottom right)

Space for reading: S. Figuerola's armchair, N. Robbin's lamp, and M. Durán's bookcase. Photographer: Concha Prada.



Figure 9

The different spaces formed a circle.
The weathercock stood in the middle.
Photographer: Concha Prada.

30 Indeed, if we compare *The Laughing Home* (1994) to its predecessor *Carmen* (1993) we notice the continuity between the two exhibitions concerning the celebration of craftsmanship and feminine motifs, even when *Carmen* had no post-feminist approach. See *Carmen* [cat. ex.], (Valencia, ICEX/ANIEME, 1993).

1. Celebrating the elements traditionally linked to feminine taste: colors (especially pink and red), motifs (flowers), typologies (toilet chair), and daily references to femininity (Figure 5). For example, the bookcase "A" takes its shape from the most feminine letter in Spanish (Figure 8). The majority of the feminine nouns end with an "a," as opposed to the masculine nouns ending mostly with an "e" or an "o."
2. Appropriating negative clichés of woman by transforming them in an ironic way. The original ideas behind the designs included prejudices, instability, body cultivation, and inactivity. For example, the weathercock, which is used in current language as metaphor for the ever-changing character of women, was placed in the middle of the installation (Figure 9). The hall-stand took the name "90-60-90" as a reference to the "perfect" measurements of the female body (Figure 4). The vase took the shape of a woman responding to a contemptuous Spanish expression "the woman-vase," which is used to describe women as decorative objects and meant to be beautiful but silent (Figure 6). The sofa by G. Ruiz is called "Broken Heart" ("Corazón partido") as a reference to the extreme sentimentality of women (Figure 6).

Both positive and negative visions of women were either celebrated or satirized. The celebration of the feminine features can be interpreted as an exercise in giving visibility to certain feminine features which design, and certainly modern design, had suppressed such as: decoration, colors, patterns, and craftsmanship. This is a reflection that already had begun with the postmodern designers at the beginning of the 1980s, and that here acquired a feminine character. Thus, from a stylistic point of view, femininity did not bring any novelty to ongoing, postmodern design. On the contrary, feminine forms comfortably occupied the place postmodern design had prepared for them. In other words, the feminine taste in the pieces lost its capacity for presenting a statement, which would have been potentially more controversial in other formal contexts, but not in late-postmodern design.³⁰ Likewise, the appropriation of the negative clichés about women shared the postmodernist preference for irony as a medium to digest dominant discourses. From a semantic point of view, the pieces exemplify Penny Sparke's description on postmodernism, and the impossibility of its ever substituting dominant cultural authority. In this vein, the mostly ironical furniture pieces constitute an attempt to overthrow dominant discourses by including them in a peripheral discourse, but without providing any alternative to occupy its place. Indeed, irony implies a "soft attack," which, on the one hand, exposes the dark sides of the enemy but, on the other hand, fails to annihilate it. Similarly, postmodern design

questioned modernism, but did not nullify its basic foundation. The organizers were more concerned with the written texts than the formal approach of the pieces. The conflicts appeared when those funding the project revised the catalog. A fragment from the opening text: "The Happy Home" was considered "inappropriate." It began by exploring the traditional relationship of women and the home, and followed more critically:

[...] But besides, in a disturbing way, this "queen of the home" is also its prisoner. Reduced to the domestic environment, this world concerns too concrete a space, too straight, where human relations are limited and where there are no decisions to make beyond the routine.

Enclosed in that world—often kind and rich but always oppressive and limited—only remains the window to be able to see, although from afar, more extensive horizons: lands that cannot be experienced with one's own body but that can always be traveled through with the imagination [...].³¹

The institution that commissioned and funded the project, ICEX, decided to omit this fragment, arguing that it might export the "wrong" idea about Spanish women.³² This description did not seem to fit the new image of Spain, which had experienced a new national branding since the beginning of democracy.³³ Presumably, a country so intimately linked to machismo as Spain should want to be represented with equality between the sexes. It appears an unavoidable collision between a politically correct national representation and a reflection on gender and domesticity. This fragment surpassed the political correctness of a postmodern critic and introduced a "controversial" political component into the celebratory event. Far from being a problem for the curators, they agreed that the fragment should be eliminated. This fact can be considered a Second Wave feminism "intrusion" into a Third Wave feminism initiative, which was consequently rejected unanimously.

The Feminine as the Extraordinary

In the examples mentioned above, the (post-) feminist approach involved some elements that proved unsuitable in the end. Positive inclusion inevitably points out a real, existing discrimination towards minority groups and, consequently, it had both a convenient and an inconvenient side. It contributed by offering a progressive halo for the projects but, at the same time, was the ultimate confirmation of a bitter social difference. The *Creole Project* and *The Laughing Home* were two celebratory occasions which could not have been eclipsed by any shadow of unease. There were two mechanisms for toning down the feminist component: first, both examples omitted the word feminism,

31 Unpublished original text. T. Simó, *La casa que ríe*, 1994. Archive Sandra Figuerola and Marisa Gallén.

32 Marisa Gallén e-mail to the author, June 13, 2003.

33 J. Hooper, 1995, 165ff.

and second, in the first example, positive inclusion became linked with other marketable values (multicultural character and youth). The “bitter” connotations of positive inclusion were filtered out.

Until now, we have stressed the aspects of discord that separate these two marriages of convenience. Now we will see the cohesive elements that made them possible. As we have seen in the *Creole Project*, the positive inclusion served to reach a wider sector of the market. In *The Laughing Home*, the proposal of the curators could convey the progressive, Spanish national identity. Reading Sparke also sheds some light on understanding other mechanisms that acted as cohesive elements:

The very act of putting a mass-cultural object into a museum transformed it instantly into an item of high culture and, by implication, extended the modernist canon to include it. This process of masculinization expanded apace through the 1980s such that by the end of the decade, the postmodern design project had lost its power to validate feminine taste.”³⁴

Thus, the feminist demands were nullified in both cases. First, validation of feminine taste through design had lost its power at the end of the decade, and, second, the fine arts references injected the events with the anesthesia of the extraordinary. This recourse was widely utilized by Alessi, and reached an even higher point in the example of *The Laughing Home*, where the displayed furniture did not even have to wait to become a museum piece, but were already born as such. The aura of fine art acted as a cohesion factor but, at the same time, restrained the collaborations with women to the realm of the exotic and extraordinary.

Conclusion

Italy and Spain experienced a successful spread of postmodern design during the 1980s and, subsequently, a celebration of “feminine taste”: ludicrousness, figurative forms, crafts, colors, and patterns, all of which called in question the maxims of modern design.³⁵ This fact, together with the increasing presence of ethical values in commodities (green products, Fair Trade goods, ethical investment funds, etc.) made the beginning of the 1990s the perfect formal and ideological period for launching these two events. A close examination of these two cases shows how the result is the product of the interaction of the different actors, namely organizers and designers, within the cultural context rather than the responsibility of any one of them.

Nevertheless, the particular achievements of these two initiatives cannot be ignored. Both experiences constituted real opportunities for female designers and respond entirely to the advances of feminist demands—even when the “source” was omitted. The *Creole Project* offered designers Figuerola and Gallén the opportunity to

34 P. Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, 232.

35 P. Sparke, *Italian Design, from 1870 to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) and *As Long as It's Pink*.

reassert themselves over their more experienced colleagues. They experienced a great advance in their careers, and it later led to a new opportunity for female designers in 1994. Obviously, feminist demands had their effects.

What role did these two actions play? Were they a starting point in the participation of female designers in Italy and Spain? Or, on the contrary, were they a logical consequence of the extension of feminine taste during the 1980s? After years of technological predominance, the playful, colorful objects conquered the most visible place of Italian design in the 1980s. Inscribed in this wave, Alessi can be said to have epitomized the spread of postmodern design in Italy and abroad.³⁶ The 1990s brought a new sense that made Alessi change its commercial strategy: new markets, new materials, new designers, and new sales strategies. The *Creole Project* initially declared that one of these aims was to compensate for the gender imbalance of Alessi's designers, albeit with nuances. It was ostensible enough to catch the attention of press but, at the same time, eclipsed the fact that this contest was created for female designers. This ambiguity illustrates both the reluctance and enthusiasm awakened by the post-feminist accounts into the feminist framework.

Spanish design experienced a similar postmodern "feminization" during the 1980s. Therefore, the pieces in *The Laughing Home* offered little formal controversy: they fit perfectly into the formal vocabulary of the 1980s. On the contrary, the postmodernist Spanish female designers connected later to the more rational and unadorned style of the 1990s. *The Laughing Home* did not succeed in promoting a feminine style, and maybe this was never its intention. It followed the path already opened by postmodern design and, consequently, they faded away together in the second half of the 1990s. Hence, *The Laughing Home* can be considered a final expression of a period rather than a new future for feminine objects.

But on the other hand, positive inclusion has been the basis of further design initiatives. During the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, similar initiatives have taken place. Two recent examples of positive inclusion on behalf of women are the Clara Porset Design Prize for Mexican design students which, in 2005, celebrated its twelfth presentation, and the show "Scenes from Home" at the Belgian "Interieur" Design Fair in 2004, which showcased the work of six female designers. In this vein, both *The Creole Project* and *The Laughing Home* certainly can be considered forerunners with regard to initiatives leading to the mainstreaming of feminist demands into the design profession.

36 Grace Lees-Maffei, "Italianità and Internationalism: Production, Design, and Mediation at Alessi, 1976–96."