

LIGHTER WITH 82 FUNCTIONS

Our Man Flintⁱ was a man who didn't care much for gadgetry. He preferred to use his natural cunning, guile and poorly choreographed karate moves to overcome his foe's dezinformatsia. I mean why would he rely on technology, the guy had 17 degrees from varying universities and could speak 45 different languages. Oh, and had won 5 Olympic medals. He was a fairly exceptional super-spy with the unexceptional first name of Derek. Having said all that, he did like to technologically elaborate a little on some of his more mundane possessions - watch, clock and in particular his cigarette lighter. "82 different functions" he says, deadpan... "83 if you wish to light a cigar". He was a man of his time.

The 1960s legacy I lust after, and I mean that in the strongest possible sense, belongs to the designated 'classics' of furniture design - the Panton chair or Colombo's Universale. These objects awaken a sense of idealism, of newfound material and newfound possibilities. They have become archetypes to be aped and parodied in their own right. Now these objects are not gadgets, or at least not in the sense of being a novel contrivance - there was Modernist purpose and integrity behind their aesthetic as well as function. I must also point out that I am not alone in my love affair; in fact I find myself surrounded by artists, designers and friends who share a hankering for these products.

But, most of us don't actually own an original or even a knock-off version, the later being some sort of sacrilege in the first place. It would seem the more successful legacy, in terms of volume consumed, is that of the gadget. Living on as strong as ever and pouring out of every TV shopping channel and mall, their explosion in availability has been inextricably linked to the technological boom that grew from the 60s. From the first cassette tape recorder, the Phillips E3300 (1962) and the GPO Trimphone (which, when first produced

in 1965, you couldn't own but only rent from GPO for a few extra shillings) we now have devices that do both and also do them far better. Multi-functionality is exotic, I only need think of my Casio Databank watch from the 80s to remind me of that. It didn't quite have 83 different functions, but high street technology now is only a thin veneer of separation away from allowing the emulation of our favourite super spy.

As we continually outlay for this glossy exterior, the past turns from satin to matt. Old technological and mechanical objects become redundant, a word that seems contextually apt in a world where I fear for my job. Being made redundant doesn't necessarily mean failure...or at least that's what I am telling myself in preparation. But like me, the world changed around their existence without control. Of course, there were some truly fantastical failures of the 60s that never went anywhere (illuminated tyres anyone?) and are deservedly redundant. But objects doomed to failure in conception and still carried into physical form, definitely endear themselves to me. I imagine the warehoused, lonely prototype; so near, so close and yet so far from being just right, becoming instead the physical relic of an abandoned or failed idea.

Ignoring function for the pleasure of oddity and concept allows me to imagine objects being formed through an ethos of romantic heroism. By wildly abandoning the rules in pursuit of seemingly unachievable goals, bold experimentation could be, and perhaps was in the 1960s, intrinsic to the development of an entire culture. And of course, to experiment, one has to accept potential failure(s) in the process - I was first told this in the chemistry classroom but it remains just as true within art production. The borderline is a fine one and if anything, art more commonly flows between the polar extremes of success and failure, giving each art object its own narrative. I agree with Harald Szeemann, in that 'failure is a poetic dimension of art'ⁱⁱ. Considering unrealised potential in

poetic terms certainly does help nullify the harshness of words like error, rejection and incompetence.

But back to Derek Flint, as you see this man didn't fail (thanks to that trusty cigarette lighter I might add). No soppy, poetic weakness would allow for the axis of evil to succeed and more importantly, his machismo to take a beating. His confident aura remained stoically shatterproof. Unlike him, I am fully aware of my own ineptitudes - not only when working with my hands to produce an art object (somewhere between head and hand a synapse must be misfiring) but in the way I struggle with the tension of potential failure. The problem is I actually want things to be precise. In these instances I look for a gadget, tool or machine that can rescue me but I also try to remember sentence 32 of Sol Le Witt's 1969 Sentences on Conceptual Art, 'Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution'. I'd like to think my shortcomings are endearing and complicit with the very nature of art. But then I would say that, I'm a man of my time.

Text by Mark Selby

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ⁱ Our Man Flint (1966) Directed by Daniel Mann (starring James Coburn)

ⁱⁱ Winklemann, J. (2001). Failure as a poetic dimension. A conversation with Harald Szeemann. Available at: http://www.jnwnklmnn.de/szeem_e.htm