



Taku Satoh: (Cover) "The Invisible Designer" Text By Maggie Kinser Hohle Portrait by Kazumi Kurigami Satoh believes in minimalism in an age of plenty. By reducing his designs to their bare essentials, he increases the product's meaningfulness.

"RMK's 'delicious skin care' focuses on the power of food. RMK, careful about ingredients, usage and comfort, needed simple, easy to handle packages, while making ample use of food ingredients' colors," says Masae Tsuji, CEO, e'quipe, Ltd.

Japan is at the forefront of developed consumer nations—and on the way to a hell of overconsumption. Taku Satoh is most concerned with the way the world is maturing—beginning with Japan (fuels and resources dependent). He thinks that markets, economies and products could evolve to take consumers to a new height, in which objects might reveal design that is meaningful, rather than just newer. Satoh's designs are part of this evolution and have begun to change the way consumers look at the stuff they accumulate.

As a junior designer at Dentsu, the largest ad agency in Japan, young Taku Satoh created ad campaigns and logos on demand. But in 1983, he and his friend Masataka Hosogane, who was a copywriter in the agency, made an unprecedented, unsolicited presentation to the company Nikka for its Pure Malt Whiskey. The problem wasn't the ads, the two said, but the fact that the product and its packaging didn't appeal to any one in their age group. They had to go back to basics. On a visit to the plain brick Nikka factory in the southern prefecture of Miyagi, far from Tokyo, they stepped off a train into the scent of whiskey. They met the brewers and sampled the product, trying to define the object without the obfuscation of an image that had atrophied over the years. They managed to create a whole new image for the whiskey.

When Satoh tackled Nikka's problem, whiskey was an old man's drink, sold in faux cut-glass decanters. It was a popular "bottle keep" product at bars, where little plastic tags hanging from the bottles identified the bar's regulars. Any late-middle aged man ensconced in a suburban home was likely to have a bottle on display in a break-front. He and his buddies would sip whiskey, savoring the image of the substantial, long-lasting bottle more than the product. Satoh, 27 at the time, couldn't find a thing to like about the whiskey.

He was lucky: the economic boom had given the younger crowd a sense of entitlement, and a lowered tariff had reduced imported whiskey prices; younger couples could afford to drink whiskey on a regular basis. Satoh figured they wanted to drink at home, in city apartments without breakfronts and other such status symbols. Satoh defines consumers as "people with lives," and always tries to take their lifestyles into consideration in his designs. About half of the people he wanted to reach were young women, so he devised a bottle light enough in styling and weight for a Japanese woman to carry comfortably. To encourage familiarity, rather than awe, Satoh's bottle holds a drinkable 500 milliliters, rather than the usual macho 750. Its simple graphics are calculated to recall, as he says, "the unrefined character of the rural factory and its surroundings, which wasn't expressed by the company's previous bottles." It helped that at the same time the so-called "no-name" Muji brand store chains had already opened the market to the chic appeal of simplicity. An artless-seeming rusticity was conveyed by an ostensibly slap-dash printing job on the label, the plain brown box, and an enclosed brown paper wrapper and sticker for impulse gift giving. The bottle's label can be easily removed with soap and warm water, thus also removing its specific identification as a whiskey bottle. Once denuded and emptied, the plain-necked vessel (there are no screw-top threads) inspires the customer to fill it with any number of other commodities, such as coffee, pepper, or pasta.

Satoh flies high when describing the intense "emancipating" effect a product can have on the "person with a life" when it is so easily demoted to non-product. He says "invisible design," in which the design and the designer are not overly evident, lets the consumer place the object in his own lifestyle rather than being ruled by some image forced upon him by the manufacturer and its ads.

Satoh's real point is that for a postmodern, hypercapitalistic market like Japan's—which leaped into the age of avarice before anyone had time to think—design's next step has to be even more reductive. At first the Nikka people didn't care for Satoh's bottle: "It looks like an I.V." It's a bottle for some noxious poison. Who would drink something out of this? Fusion (in this case, medicine bottle plus decanter) was a ripe idea for the '80s, though, and Nikka's Pure Malt

Whiskey became a huge hit. Satoh never went back to the agency.

It's the "noughts" now, and Japan is in its deepest recession since the war. As in any time of crisis, all non-essential objects and decoration are questioned. Satoh's father, a graphic designer himself, put the seed of this idea in Taku's head way back in the '60s, when Japanese manufacturers first began to diversify. Satoh wasn't the only one who had a hard time figuring out what the differences among products were, the superfluous elements vs. the essentials.

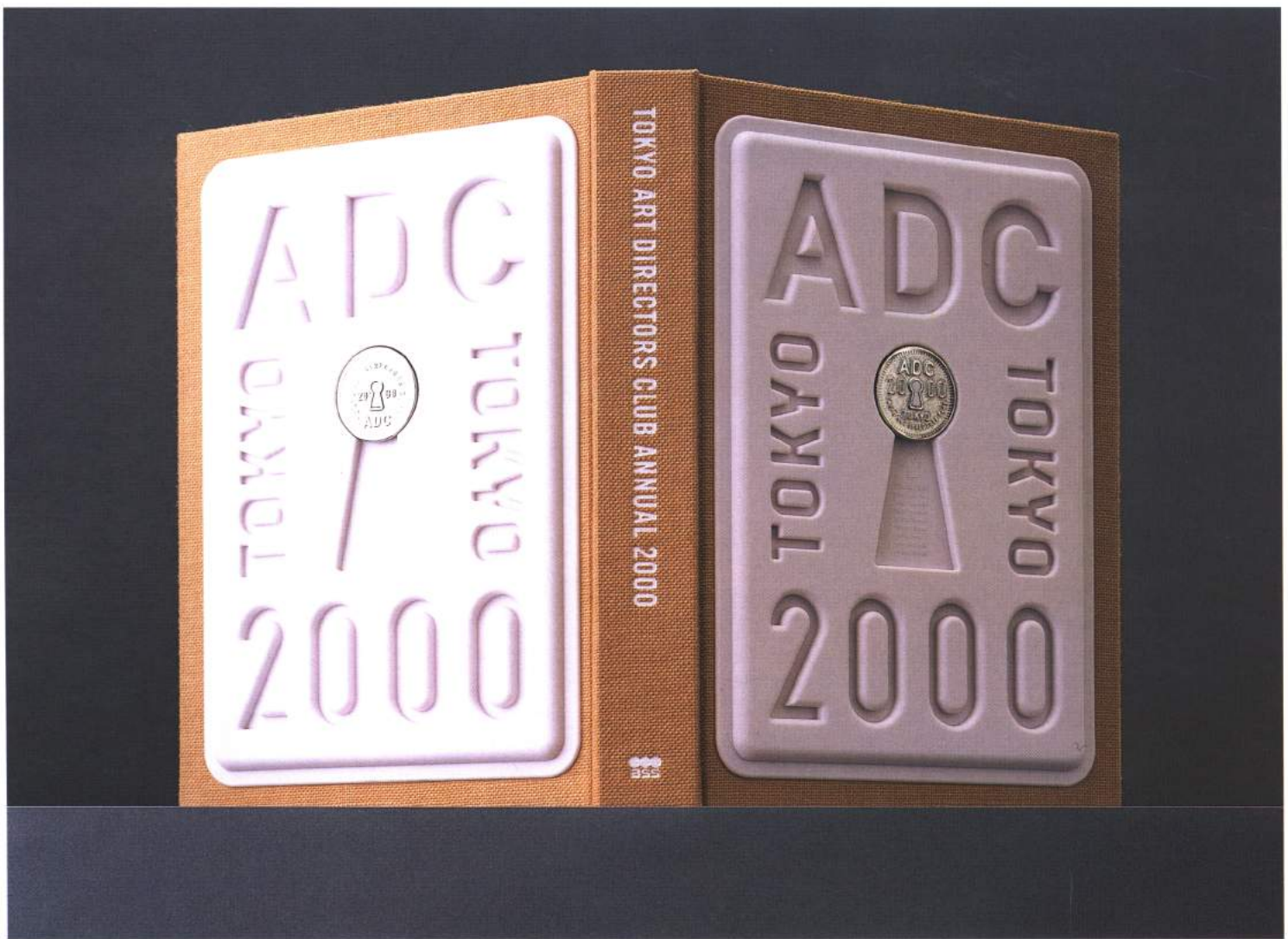
"When I was about 12," he recalled, "I had a little epiphany. At the time, it was really popular to 'automobile-ize' your bike with all kinds of accessories: rearview mirrors, brake lights, turn signals. Even grown-ups did it. So as my allowance accumulated, I put on all these accessories, one at a time. I took that bike to the point of no return. Then I faltered. 'What next?' One day, I took everything off, even the fenders and the kickstand. I reduced that machine to the very minimum at which it could still be a bicycle. The only things left were the frame, the gears, the wheels and the handlebars." It was then that Satoh experienced the thrill of designing and the invigorating search for essentials entailed by design. "A bicycle is beautiful," I thought to myself. Up until that point, I don't think I would have used the word 'beautiful.' My father once said, "In times of abundance, reduction is also good design."

Satoh has been declaring that vey sentiment loudly lately, using whatever venues are open to him. He asks, "Where is the meaning in an object?" In 'redesign' commissions, which often come Satoh's way, the identification of meaning is crucial, because once a product is known in the homogenous Japanese market, a mistaken identification of its essential qualities can confuse a product's design and obliterate its hard-won identity.

In 2000, Satoh was asked to redesign the package for the lime-mint version of Xylitol, a candy-coated chewing gum manufactured by Lotte, of which 250 million packages are sold annually in kiosks and convenience stores. It was a great hit. But along the way, Satoh realized that because most of the elements were already predicted (think "bar code" and keep looking), he was making only superficial decisions. Satoh believes that designers and consumers aren't aware that every product is comprised of "a layering of design solutions."

He says his part in this design was minimal, but the discovery and exposition of these layers soon became another project. After redesigning the gum package, he created an exhibition, which was held at the Design Gallery (founded 1953) in Tokyo's Ginza Matsuya department store, which then toured to Osaka and Fukui. He divided the project into 23 elements of the design and its influences, each with its own immaculate presentation behind Plexiglas. He began with the history of chewing gum, went on to the concept (Xylitol was a gum that didn't cause tooth decay, which led to using a metaphor involving dental health products such as toothbrushes and floss), explained the use of the typeface for the English text, Zen Old Minchou, which was chosen to evoke the cleanliness of Northern European countries, presented the identifying Xylitol "molar" mark, and even explained such details as the photo-electric sensor mark that tells the cutter where to slice the outer packaging material. The final segment identified the ingredients of the gum. Satoh then recorded this information in Japanese and English in a 68-page book, which in itself is a redesign of a traditional form; the "bag-bound" book (pages of delicate, translucent washi paper folded back upon themselves into a sewn spine). Satoh imitated this with a less expensive commercial paper and mechanical staple binding.

Satoh has found an interested audience for his analysis. Two more exhibitions will complete what has grown into a series at the Ginza Matsuya. Coming next are Fuji Film's Utsurun Desu disposable camera and Takara, a popular toy manufacturer, Rika-chan. Satoh's exhibition and book are fascinating not only in themselves, but also because they ask us to consider reduction's place of in an age of plenty, and furthermore, the designer's reflection in an era of graphic regulation.



Credits & Comments

Cover Portrait of Taku Satoh by Kazumi Kurigami.

Pg.72 Barber Sign, 2002. Design: Taku Satoh. Photo by Kazumi Kurigami. Personal Work.

Pg.75 Tokyo Art Directors Club Annual (bookcover shown), 2000. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designers: Taku Satoh, Ichiji Ohishi, Shino Misawa and Takehiko Shibamura; Client: Tokyo Art Directors Club.

Pg.76-77 Tokyo Art Directors Club Annual (posters), 2000. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designer: Taku Satoh; Photographer: Kazumi Kurigami; Stylist: Masato Okamura; Client: Tokyo Art Directors Club.

I am a member of the Tokyo Art Directors Club (Tokyo ADC), and in 2000 I was invited to oversee the entire art direction of the Club. Aside from the traditional annual yearbook (pg. 75), I produced a 2-meter-high ADC machine (see pg.156). It looks like a jukebox from the '50s, and the front buttons bear the names of members of the Club. A computer is built in, and when a button is pushed, information on the member is displayed on a small monitor. Both sides have a speaker for audio announcements. This machine appeared in an old- and filthy-looking state in the poster (pg. 79). At that time, I did not reveal that this machine was actually brand new. It looked so outdated that people just thought it was an old, found jukebox. The newly-made machine had been stained with removable, water-soluble paint. The yearbook completed in December had a medal attached on the cover page. When this medal was inserted into the ADC machine, information on three members could be obtained. At the award ceremony, the cleaned, shiny new ADC machine appeared, and visitors played using the medals. Tokyo ADC has a 30-year history, and this machine appeared as if it had been made around the time the Club was established. My concept expresses a Tokyo ADC constantly searching for new ways to communicate.

Pg.78-79 Bolty (cosmetic package design), 1999. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Creative Director: Minoru Shiohara; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designers: Taku Satoh and Kazutoshi Amano; Client: FT Shiseido Co., Ltd.

Pg.80 and pg.81 (1,4) RMK Skincare Series (cosmetic package design), 2000. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designers: Taku Satoh and Shino Misawa; Client: e'quipe Ltd.

I was responsible for the design of the RMK skin care line, which is a brand of "Rumiko," a makeup artist in New York. As the product included ingredients extracted from fruits that are effective for the skin, I expressed the notion of fruits by using colors. I mainly used P.E.T. material for the container, as it is recyclable and can clearly show the color of what is inside. I suggested a design based on a slender form, because of Rumiko's sharp impressiveness. A consumer uses basic skin care products repeatedly, unlike makeup, so simplicity seemed to be an obvious direction. The product shouldn't be something consumers become tired of after they buy it once. A ring was put on the bottleneck for the cap, which is sometimes seen with a classic-type glass bottle. A good balance was achieved, so the product would not appear too novel, by

incorporating a classic factor to the new vertical product form. I felt that being too minimal introduced a sense of exclusivity, which can narrow the sales target. An important point in design for a mass production product is to emphasize the potential of the manufacturer. Designing is like translating: the designer should not change what is meant but should discover what is appropriate for the brand. This product series has continually sold well at department stores.

Pg.81 (2,3) (Cosmetic Package Design), 2001. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designers: Taku Satoh and Shino Misawa; Client: FT Shiseido Co., Ltd.

This is a low-priced product group sold at drug and convenience stores. The series began with shampoo and then developed into hair care products. Because low-priced products come and go in the market rapidly, their design has also become less significant. I designed the dark blue exterior package to suit the content which, despite the low-price, targets adult women. In stores, the products have shrink film over the package, and a copy of the product explanation is attached. When the product is used at home, the shrink film is removed, revealing a simple-appearing product. This method is commonly used in Japan to convey information about the product content to consumers while buying, and to present a clean-looking image after it is taken home.

I always begin by saying to a manufacturer: "A design can be something to keep or to throw away - which do you want?"

Pg.82-83 Lotte Green Gum (Package Design), 1994. Design: Taku Satoh Design Office; Creative Director: Yoshiharu Obata and Tokihiko Kimata; Art Director: Taku Satoh; Designer: Taku Satoh; Client: Lotte Co., Ltd.

These gums have been marketed longer than any other brand in Japan, for nearly 50 years. They are popular items found in convenience stores. I worked on renewal of the design for these products about 10 years ago. At that time, 40 years after release of the gums, they were the iconic products of the manufacturer. Lotte became synonymous with chewing gum in Japan, and the company had a 60% share of the domestic gum market. In the re-design process of an old product, I had to determine what should be kept and what should be changed. The past design of Coolmint Gum was an illustration of a penguin on ice looking up at the night sky, with a whale in the background, and the lettering of Coolmint. I thought about how chewing gums are displayed at store counters, and realized that more than one side can be seen—usually two sides can be seen at once. I considered two sides as the front, and separated the illustration from the lettering, to accommodate each on one side. That way, I could simplify the design of each side. With such tight grouping, most products are difficult to see, so it was necessary to simplify the product information, as much as possible. The whale was eliminated and was replaced by five marching penguins. The five penguins all look the same, but on careful inspection, there is a small difference in one: The second penguin is waving his hand. As such, the package itself was designed to function as a communication tool. And people who notice this then think there must

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GINZA GRAPHIC GALLERY / 2000.7.3 (MON) - 7.26 (WED)
CREATION GALLERY G8 / 2000.7.3 (MON) - 7.28 (FRI)
DDD GALLERY / 2000.9.8 (FRI) - 10.12 (THU)

2000 TOKYO ART DIRECTORS CLUB EXHIBITION

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