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Come Together

Whether re-making found furniture or organizing a makeshift 'Trattoria', **Martino Gamper** produces ad hoc solutions for living *by Emily King*



Chairs from the series '100 Chairs in 100 Days' 2006-7

Martino Gamper creates extraordinary points of contact: a generic outdoor seat in the tight embrace of a bourgeois dining chair; polystyrene-filled, stretchy nylon straining against a Thonet frame; transparent, inflated turquoise plastic, strung across curved wood. In 2006-7, he made 100 chairs in 100 days, all from pre-existing parts – furniture, vehicles, musical instruments, lights, toys and various other odds and ends – nailing, splicing, sticking, tying, jamming, welding, draping and balancing these disparate materials into a set of uncannily characterful seats. First shown dotted around the substantial drawing room of a large Victorian terraced house in Cromwell Road, west London, they had the air of characters in a Saul Steinberg cartoon, though the party appeared to have begun before you had arrived.

Writing in the ensuing publication, *100 Chairs in 100 Days and its 100 Ways* (2007), Gamper describes the chairs as 'a three-dimensional sketchbook' and 'a collection of possibilities'.¹ He has considerable craft skills, despite the project verging on the anti-craft; its speed and spontaneity couldn't be further from mainstream design's faith in the idea of perfection through repetition. 'I wanted [...] to demonstrate the difficulty of any one design being objectively judged THE BEST', continues Gamper. At the Cromwell Road exhibition, faced with his hundredfold reinvention of the chair, detached evaluation of individual pieces was tricky, but playful assessment threw up personal favourites. *Cathedra russa* (4 August 2006) appears stunted, but is a useful resting place for a drink; *Un-stable* (2 September 2007) is beneficial to core muscles; and

Olympia (2 August 2006), with its complex and delicate supporting mesh of bent wood rings, is simply lovely.

In terms of the forms of his 100 chairs, Gamper adhered to influential 20th-century designer Achille Castiglione's dictum: 'start from scratch'. His methods, however, followed rules he had established from the beginning of the project. Using only material found on London's streets or donated by friends, he constructed each chair in a day. Moving well beyond the lazy cliché of noticing beauty in the abject and everyday, Gamper took things that were ordinary or sad and actively reworked them into a set of engaging objects. It would be a mistake to ally his commitment to speed and gestural slapdash with carelessness. Although made quickly, the chairs demonstrate an extreme formal virtuosity.





Opposite page:
Totem
2008
Melamine-faced
chipboard and re-used
furniture elements from
the Nilufar collection

Above:
Two stools made as part
of *If Gio Only Knew*
2007

Above right:
If Gio Only Knew
2007
Performance at Design
Miami/Basel
using furniture designed
by Gio Ponti for the
Hotel Parco dei Principi,
Sorrento



Below:
Chairs from the show
'Martino with Carlo
Mollino'
2005
Reclaimed Carlo Mollino
chairs from the Lutrario
Ballroom, Turin

Before turning to design, Gamper studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna under Michelangelo Pistoletto; Arte Povera is an obvious reference point for his work. While acknowledging the link, he stresses the importance of context: challenging the hierarchy of materials in Italy in the late 1960s was a pointed political gesture, but in early 21st-century London it is necessarily a more diffuse, ad hoc affair. Looking back on '100 Chairs', Gamper claims that the project was driven largely by pragmatism; his desire to design objects coinciding with his limited access to funds. It was a state of affairs that the project itself served to change: the reception to the chairs was ecstatic.

Since '100 Chairs', Gamper has reprised the process a few times, although the value of the raw material increases with each iteration. Staged as a live event at the 2007 Basel design fair, *If Gio Only Knew*, involved the reconstruction of a collection of furniture designed by Gio Ponti for the Hotel Parco dei Principi in Sorrento. Although the pieces were damaged and not particularly good examples of Ponti's work, the project ruffled feathers. For some exhibitors, the objects that Gamper was breaking down and remaking were too close for comfort to those being offered for hefty prices on nearby stands. As with '100 Chairs', *If Gio Only Knew* has a distinctive, quirky beauty; the objects are as recognizable as Gamper's work as they were Ponti's, yet the affront was palpable. Unlike with Arte Povera, it's quite difficult now to offend anyone on general grounds of taste, but you can certainly cause a ruckus by questioning more specific value systems.

In 2008 the designer re-modelled some Carlo Mollino chairs from the Lutrario Ballroom in Turin that had been dispossessed by Mollino's estate after years of unsanctioned

repair – which Gamper chose to keep hidden. More broadly, the idea of performance in design – a commonplace in fairs and galleries since the launch of Design Miami/Basel in 2005 – seems to have run its course. Significantly, design performance is not performance in the sense associated with art: rather than a piece in itself, it tends to be a representation of process. Rarely as keen-edged as Gamper's Ponti routine, these 'live design shows' have allowed designers to claim gallery space and render their worth believable, but are prone to diminishing returns. Responding to the threat of performance ennui (both his own and that of his audience), for his contribution to the Belgian gallery Z33's show 'Design by Performance' earlier this year, Gamper took the opportunity to learn woodturning from a master craftsman. It was an inversion of the norm: rather than exposing a skill, he demonstrated his lack of one.



While Gamper's urge to perform may have weakened, his appetite for a more everyday form of on-the-spot design – cooking – remains as strong as ever. Since 2003 he has been making dinners for a network of friends in a variety of custom-built settings under the loose title 'Trattoria al Cappello'. Rather than events that generate objects, these meals are motives for designing new things. Encompassing makeshift sinks and work surfaces, among the more context-independent objects are the *In Vino Veritas* coaster, a tri-circular piece of die-cut leather that buffers the table from three glasses in one; a hand-blown glass jug in the shape of a plastic water bottle; and a series of large metal ring holding sets of pierced cutlery for easy distribution along a communal table (the knives, forks and spoons were bought in bulk from an airline that, post-9/11, was required to use plastic).

The 'Trattoria' started in the Hat On Wall Bar in London's Clerkenwell, where the lack of cooking facilities made the bare-bones design approach a necessity, but over the years the unbroken line of production – from basic equipment to food on the plate – has become more pronounced. Assembling tables from irregular panels of reclaimed teak, oak and poplar, and soup from watermelon, oil, lemon, vinegar and ginger (his abiding culinary





obsession), Gamper handles his materials and directs his workmates with precision. That the events feel spontaneous and relaxed (the name 'al Cappello' was originally derived from the bar, but now wherever Gamper lays his hat is his restaurant) belies the detail of planning and execution behind each one. His food is getting better and better, which goes to show that the craftsman's practice of perfecting through repeating still has benefits – particularly when it comes to our stomachs. His handmade pastas, both soba noodles and tortellini, are reaching new heights of melt-in-the-mouthness and his signature pudding – green tea-sprinkled tiramisu – is a triumph of bitter-edged sweetness.

Gamper likes to design for situations and locations that he is familiar with. As well as cooking for his friends, he makes furniture for their exhibitions, events and homes. (Full disclosure: I have been the beneficiary of his creative generosity more than once). Gamper's first mass-produced product, a rotation-moulded, plastic stacking stool, came about almost by accident. Originally created for use at community events in the small park and handstand at the centre of Arnold Circus, a turn-of-the-century housing estate off Shoreditch High Street in east London, it was not designed to move beyond that mini-orbit, yet it has since found a place in a number of other settings. Early stools came in shades of green, but later editions are available in colours across the spectrum. Chances are a crop of them has popped up in an arts space near you.

At present Gamper is involved in making more conventionally conceived mass-produced objects for the Italian company Magis; as a result, he's had to turn his usual process around. Instead of responding to an immediate furniture need, he is working with the company founder, Eugenio Perazza, to foresee or even create a position in the long-term furniture market. (Magis is the company behind Jasper Morrison's now ubiquitous *Air Chair* from 2003.) Perazza is one of an increasingly



Before turning to design, Gamper studied sculpture under Michelangelo Pistoletto; Art Povera is an obvious point of reference for his work.

Clockwise from
top left:
Martino Gamper at
the Culture House
dinner, London
2009
Relay Cutlery cluster
2008
Found cutlery

Aqua Naturale
Vase
2010
Hand-blown glass
Aqua Minerale
Water jug
2008
Hand-blown glass



rare breed of socially-engaged furniture entrepreneurs and he commissioned Gamper to design a chair in metal wire with the partial aim of keeping a particular northern Italian wire factory in operation. The designer came back with the delicately organic *Vigna* (2010) – a pretty solution, if not in keeping with the oddity of balance and surprising mix of solidity and lightness that are associated with Gamper's work.

Shown in Milan this March, *Vigna* has since been the subject of an intense exchange of sketches, specifications and samples. The goal is to manufacture the perfect product at the right price, which, in the world of Magis, is under 100 euros. For Gamper, it is something of a return to the beginning of his design career in the mid-1990s, when he spent a period at the Milan office of his former design professor, Matteo Thun. For a couple of years, before going on to study for an MA at the Royal College of Art in London, he spent his days in a large studio working on products, furniture and interiors.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the Magis project, Gamper is also working toward an exhibition at the Galleria Franco Noero in Turin. Housed in an extraordinarily narrow 19th-century building known as the *Fetta di Polenta* (Slice of Polenta) that still bears the traces of its inhabitation by one of Italy's best-known *roués*, it is the kind of curious, anecdote-dense environment that Gamper relishes. His ambition is to occupy the extremities of the building's bizarre proportions on all of its seven above-ground and two underground floors.

Working for both Magis and Noero suggests a breadth of identity that might seem confusing; it is, in fact, characteristic of fleet-of-foot designers for decades. Thinking of design's more mercurial characters, several pieces of Gamper's reclaimed furniture bear a shadowy likeness to the work of established Italian radicals such as Ettore Sottsass or Andrea Branzi, not simply in terms of surface or texture, but in proportion and manner. A few years back, Morrison and Naoto

Fukasawa coined the term 'Supernormal' to describe a range of internalized design forms – a set of shapes that we accept without question. Perhaps Gamper's instinctive reference to the design forms since the late '60s implies that he – and, on some level, we too – have also absorbed a range of apparently more confrontational shapes. It is perhaps an overstatement to say that Gamper's work will become the new normal – but it possibly opens the way up for the Superradical.

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1 Martino Gamper, *100 Chairs in 100 Days and its 100 Ways*, The Aram Gallery, London, 2007 p.82 (The book was designed and edited by Gamper's long-term collaborators Abäke, and recently reissued in a small-format edition by Abäke's publishing venture, Dent-De-Leone.)



Top:
Arnold Circus stools
2010
Rotation-moulded
plastic

Right:
Photograph and
drawing of the Vigna
chair commissioned
by Magis
2010
Metal frame and
plastic seat