

A New State of Mind

On Michael Anastassiades, craftsman

Michael Anastassiades's view on the meaning of craft can easily be likened to that of sociologist Richard Sennett's. The commitment to the integrity of his work is absolute. Believing in the totality of the object, its purity of vision, its internal and external power, Anastassiades's creative intentions are somewhat other than those of the typical designer. It would indeed be more accurate to call him a contemporary craftsman. The objects that he produces are so simple as to border on austere, composed of high quality materials that are thoroughly luxurious and sensuous, with a perfect finish.

THOMAS GEISLER



MEDITATION STOOL, 2006

Facing page:
MICHAEL
ANASTASSIADES
The piece in the picture is called Shooting Star, from the exhibition Reload The Current Page, the artist's homecoming show in Cyprus.
Photo: Stelios Kallinikou

Meditation can, of course, be practised anywhere, not just on a worn-out foam-rubber yoga mat. Looked at superficially, a marble meditation stool might appear vulgar to some. However, it is the metaphysical quality of Michael Anastassiades's works that lures us into a new state of mind.

Richard Sennett's seminal book *The Craftsman* teaches us a great deal about the interplay between head and hand and how important this symbiosis has become, especially through the digitalisation of many creative occupations and the de-materialisation associated therewith. "Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practise and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding", states Sennett, who comprehends the 'craftsman' as not only someone involved in traditional handicraft professions, but practically every creative worker, whether manager, programmer, or designer.





1



2

RELATED SPHERES

Michael Anastassiades has been a yogi for more than 20 years. He studied with great masters like K. Pattabhi Jois (who was also a guru to Sting and Madonna) and has himself been a teacher of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga for a long time. He has "always been open to alternative practises". After qualifying in straightforward civil engineering at Imperial College London and then studying industrial design engineering at the Royal College of Art (with colleagues Tord Boontje and Tom Lloyd of PearsonLloyd), he discovered yoga. He recalls that back then he felt out-of-place in mainstream product design, and in Tony Dunne found a like-mind and a mentor. The latter's influence can be seen in Anastassiades's diploma work Message Cup (1995), a conical beaker into which a personal message can be spoken, promptly stored, and replayed when the receptacle is turned upside down. The interaction with objects, and resulting social dimension, is proverbially coined in his work Anti-Social Light (2001) – a light that goes on only in the presence of people. This social aspect interested Anastassiades, particularly in the early days, as is noticeable in the collaborative projects he did with design conceptualists Fiona Raby and Tony Dunne – the latter of whom, at the time (at the RCA), was in the process of developing interactive design as an alternative course to industrial design. Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories (1998) or Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times (2005) are examples of speculative objects, produced as a result of an intensive collaborative exchange between the three that did not attempt to provide design solutions but to pose crucial design questions. Parallel to this, Anastassiades was practising meditation

Michael Anastassiades seems to be the epitome of a craftsman in Sennett's sense, because he is a master of his metier in the practise of design and he handles materials and techniques with consummate skill, while also transferring his mental powers onto the form of his objects. The quality of design and the finishing of objects is a top priority – or even an obsession, something he himself admits. This demands discipline of concept and craftsmanship. Perhaps his works stand out from the masses of design objects precisely because of this – because we hunger for intellectual and tangible nourishment, now that digital or digitally produced 'fast food' makes us feel surfeited and almost physically ill. Consuming, too, has to be disciplined, and here Anastassiades's formal, ascetic objects seem to offer us beneficial nutrition and well being.

MESSAGE CUP, 1995 (1)

ANTI-SOCIAL LIGHT, 2001 (2)

RUSTLING BRANCH; WEEDS, ALIENS AND OTHER STORIES, 1998 (3)

with equal intensity. He remembers that some of his friends even feared losing him (i.e. his design talent) to spirituality. "The ascetic exercises for body, mind, and soul have honed my awareness and have also schooled me as a designer. It's not quick success I am interested in, but solid work, conscious development, and evolution", he counters, describing his mantra.

TOOLS OF MEDITATION

The tranquillity and serenity with which he says this is also radiated by his objects. The most perfect geometrical forms are the circle and sphere, and these occur time and again in his works. In the Hindi language of Sanskrit, the symmetrical mandala signifies 'circle, arc, sphere', standing for meditation, relaxation, and concentration, and is a symbol of healing, wholeness, and unity. Thus, Anastassiades's

Beauty Mirror (2010) is not a self-evident tool for optical disciplining, but rather reminds us to look at our inner beauty. So it is fitting that the untypical material of the mirror – gold and nickel-plated stainless steel – itself forms a patina and does not shine forever if not polished. Also, the functionality overtly ascribed to Ball Vase (2006) as a receptacle for flowers, unfolds solely in the interior as a point of concentration in which the entire private universe of a home is reflected in the ball. In the installation Time and Again, conceived by Anastassiades for the Geymüllerschloss (a part of the MAK in Vienna) on the occasion of its 2012 Design Salon, the designer distributed many of these balls throughout the building, like an over-dimensional trail of pearls, creating distorted reflections of the Biedermeier interior and effecting its rediscovery in concentrated form. He achieved a similar concentration-effect prior to this in Kinetic Light 2 – Golden Pendulum



1



2



3



4

HIDE AWAY FURNITURE, 2005 (1/2)
HUGGABLE ATOMIC MUSHROOM,
2005 (3/4)

Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times, a collection of prescription products, reflecting emotions such as the fear of a nuclear holocaust or of the unknown (including alien invasion and abduction)



1



2



3



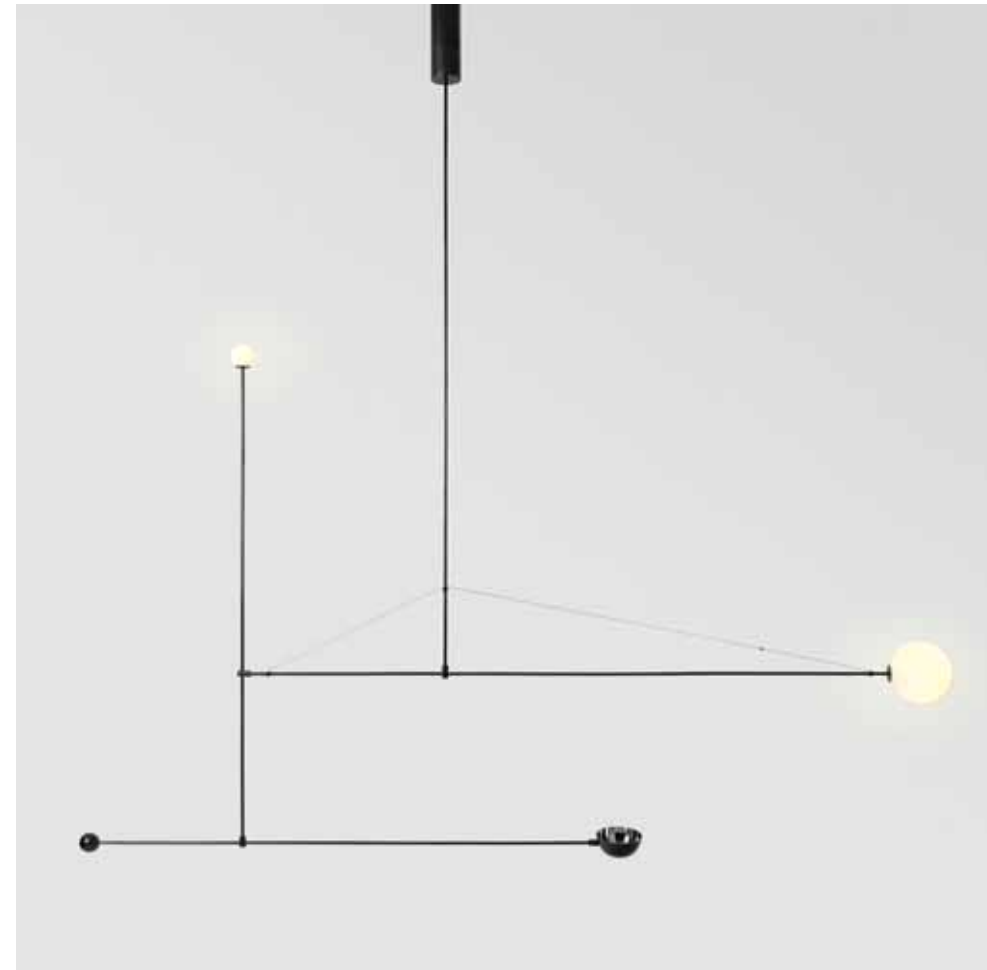
4

BEAUTY MIRROR, 2010 (1)

TIME AND AGAIN - MAK, 2012 (2)
Photo: Ben Murphy

BALL VASE, 2006 (3)

KINETIC LIGHT 2: GOLD PENDULUM -
V&A, 2010 (4)



1



2

(2010), a pendulum of light for the Norfolk House music room in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, which transported its observers well-nigh into a trance. "Psychoanalysis, whereby the pendulum also plays a role for Freudians, is likewise one of my fields of interest, as is acupuncture as an alternative medical practise", he adds.

FINDING THE BALANCE

Anastassiades's series of kinetic chandeliers and light objects, Mobile Chandelier (2008), made of matte-black brass rods and blown-glass spherical lamps, with metal half-shells or discs for balancing the weight, are masterpieces of handcrafted precision. Filigree constructions, precisely positioned like acupuncture needles, play games with gravity and statics. The balancing act in the object transmits tension to the surrounding space and to the observer. A banal light source thus becomes the plumb line to a new, atmospheric configuration. Anastassiades consistently maintains this standard in regard to the impact brought by his objects, by way of the conditions – limited and unlimited – that he has placed upon himself and that he exercises across the world with select manufactures from India to Europe. Recently he has also applied these to serial products developed for producers, such as String Lights and IC Lights for Flos, presented last year for the first

time at EuroLucce during the Salone del Mobile in Milan. Proud of his entrepreneurial independence as a designer with his own editing strategy, he says he didn't seek the collaboration, but with CEO Piero Gandini he immediately had two persuasive supporters – his design colleague Patricia Urquiola and design entrepreneur Murray Moss.

So much restraint and understatement need practise! Some of the lighting objects designed by Anastassiades give the impression of imitating figures from the Sun Salutations yoga cycle, like the lamps Tip of the Tongue (2013) and Get Set (2013), their opal glass spheres poised between positions of extreme tension and total equanimity. It almost seems as if he performs these positions himself as a preliminary yoga exercise – at least in spirit – before materialising them into brass and glass.

SEARCHING WITHIN

Anastassiades describes one of his recent projects, an exhibition in his home country of Cyprus, as a 'coming to terms' after having left the island for London in 1988 – for the simple reason that nothing existed there that motivated him, uplifted him. Reload the Current Page, at the Point Centre for Contemporary Art in Nicosia (from January to April 2014), was a tentative confrontation with a country hovering be-



3



4

MOBILE CHANDELIER NO. 1,
2008 (1)

STRING LIGHTS, 2013 (2)
Launched at the FLOS store,
Milan 2014

GET SET, 2013 (3)

TIP OF THE TONGUE, 2013 (4)



1



2



3

KEEPIE UPPIE, 2014 (1)
From Reload the Current Page
Photo: Marios Taramides

JIBUTSU-SEKI, 2014 (2)
From Reload the Current Page
Photo: Filip Motwary

MIRACLE CHIPS, 2013 (3)
Courtesy of Henraux Foundation

tween economic crisis and Mediterranean beauty, between political disruption and familiar warmth. The confrontation for Anastassiades became an inner search for making peace with his homeland. He found it important to create new works that brought him back to his earlier conceptual thinking, especially on this complex occasion, particularly because his pieces in shiny brass might attract attention as luxury articles, on account of their exquisite materiality. Next to thoughtfulness, the materiality of these new objects – partly made from Cypriot elements like sandstone and volcanic rock – is the very quality that generated the energy of this very personal work.

The naturally refined, heavy materiality of his Meditation Stool (2006) also endows the object with an aura of 'grounding' and 'serenity in oneself' – in order to attain consummate unity and perfection, the marble hemisphere needs the human being to centre on it, physically and spiritually, in the Lotus position. Anastassiades is not only a master of his craft in the spirit of Richard Sennett, but also a wise man who by the power of his work guides us to another level of thought. Thus, it is not surprising that a few overenthusiastic followers conjectured with some amazement – causing him to smile – that, together with manufacturer Henraux, he managed to bend Tuscan marble (!). The installation Miracle Chips (2013), meanwhile, tells us more about Michael Anastassiades's refined sense of humour, one that prevents him from taking himself too seriously – unlike some other (design) gurus. He hasn't any intention to change the world through his works, and yet, it is awe-inspiring how he manages to break through thought patterns. <

michaelanastassiades.com