

Monobloc – On the World Chair

Jens Thiel
www.functionalfate.org

During WWII, a pilot of the Japanese Air Force crash lands on the island of Borneo and is severely injured. Locals of a nearby village save his life. 60 years later, in memory of their kindness, the former pilot, today a professor emeritus, donates one million Yen (about 9,000 US\$) to the village. The locals go shopping: two diesel powered generators, tent canvas, pesticide, and 1000 white plastic chairs.

On 1 April 1991, Detlev Rohwedder, the man responsible for privatizing the East German economy and thus one of the most important economic leaders of the time, is shot dead in his Düsseldorf home by a member of the left-wing terrorist Red Army Fraction. One of the last political murders of the RAF in Germany, the complete list of the evidence consists of three empty bullet cases, a pair of field glasses, a blue towel, and a plastic chair.

In April 2004, Islamic extremists kidnap American businessman Nicholas Berg and, after four weeks of holding him hostage, they behead him. The video documenting the gruesome act shows the bearded victim clothed in orange overalls and sitting in a chair. Soon after the footage became available on the internet, discussions in weblogs and forums begin about the possibility of the CIA's responsibility for Berg's assassination. Primary evidence of the alleged conspiracy includes the white plastic chair on which Berg last sat. The very same chair, some claim, is recognizable in snapshots taken at Abu-Ghraib prison.

The conventional, nearly traditional, often white plastic chair is without a doubt the most successful piece of furniture produced by our culture. In Boston and Bangkok alike, these chairs appear on private balconies and cafe terraces. For political rallies in Cuba, one of the few places in the world one might imagine still free from their omnipresence, they are lined up in seemingly endless rows. The Metropolitan Art Museum of Manila allows a good

dozen visitors to contemplate the fate of the gladiators in Juan Luna's large-format painting „Spoliarium“ – sitting in Monoblocs. In many African countries, these chairs are an important component of many a felicitous funeral. They have made their presence felt in rogue states too, where there isn't even a local Coca Cola subsidiary. Possibly, the population of plastic chairs outnumbers the world's population. Our memories of a world without them are vague or even nonexistent.

The awkward name “Monobloc(k)” (with only slight orthographic variations in English, just as in French, German, Turkish) is owed to the simple fact that the furniture is fabricated from a single piece of plastic in just one work step. Still, it never fails to astonish us to find it nearly everywhere in the world. Its outstanding characteristics easily explain its success: it is light, stabile, and stackable – and in this way, a true space saver; it is washable and weather-proof, nearly impossible to destroy, and yet it can be very comfortable. However, decisive to its worldwide triumph is its cost. The very idea that one can buy a chair for the price of a slice of pizza would have been an inconceivable promise to previous generations.

The plastic chair, with all of these qualities, is by far the best furniture piece of all human creation - and by far the most unloved.

The popular white of the Monobloc invites one to use it as a screen for projecting one's own interpretations of the world. Those interpretations may take many directions, depending on one's preconceived notions.

One can easily arrange the plastic chair in a phalanx of culturally pessimistic phobia to substantiate fears of overall cultural decline. There the Monobloc sits awkwardly alongside the TV and the automobile. The loose alliance of do-gooders in the world -- whom we also owe gratitude for a great number of other unfit visions -- have little respect for this patio chair, first and foremost because it is made

of plastic. Therefore, it is inherently evil and should be replaced post haste by something naturally grown. Neglected is the fact that a contemporary wooden chair off the factory line today will rarely last 10 years – and a Monobloc might well exceed that age. Even the fact that it is recyclable seems to be purposefully ignored.

Today, when we utter Roland Barthes's sentence: “the fashion of plastic is evidence of the development of a myth of imitation” (from his essay “Plastic,” published in 1957 in *Mythologies*) we are forced to envisage unconvincing products such as a

desk calculator equipped with wooden buttons or a vacuum cleaner made completely out of metal.

A further popular association evocative of the Monobloc is



that of the so-called “throw-away society.” However, as furniture, no one purchases the Monobloc for one-time-use only. Although the purchase cost is slight, one doesn't throw them away simply because the effort necessary to acquire new ones is greater than the effort needed to put them into storage until their next use. Rather uniquely, it would seem that the plastic chair has developed its very own strategy against fickle fashions and technical obsolescence. Despite the fact that numerous new models have entered the marketplace each year, the old ones were never replaced. The Monobloc, once acquired, will not be substituted by one of a better technology or different style. The lifespan of the chair is essentially the same as the lifespan of the material itself. To find an object with similar characteristics in even a moderately well-to-do household would require a lot of time and effort. One ends up with little more than an opened pack of copy paper and a screwdriver in the hand.

Considering its global presence and because it is undoubtedly industrially produced, the Monobloc also seems a suitable representative of a greater mistrust in the economic and social order of the world: the chair as an instrument of recolonization. Many who have sat in these chairs in some dusty third-world cafe will have arrived at this thought. This doesn't make the thought more potent, for we will see that the Monobloc is less a part of the international trade carousel than other goods. It would be extremely unlikely that the chair in which you recently sat in Tanzania stems from Europe or North America, or even from a local subsidiary of companies based there, even if the model is identical to those you have sat in before. And if you have cultivated this suspicion, then it is high time to consider which goods --besides baskets and coarse wooden toys-- are presumably produced in these poorer regions of the world.

On the other hand if your objections are rather derived from assumptions that the West forces its cultural beliefs onto Third World countries, other questions come to mind: should people there be sitting in elaborately

decorated carved furniture they have made after their long hours of work in factories or in the fields? Or would we prefer to see them sitting on rough hewn blocks only because we love to get a taste of exotic indigenous culture when we travel? Do we really wish to deny the people in the Third World the right to buy a cheap and reliable piece of furniture according to the same criteria that we have

reserved for ourselves?

Even without having to sing a paean of praise for cultural or economic globalization, we easily recognize that these objections to the Monobloc are nothing but our own obvious post-colonial prejudices. In a nutshell, almost every popular claim brought against the Monobloc proves to be more decadent than enlightened.

The paradox of the Monobloc is that it is a global piece of furniture that is, however, locally produced. Because of its cost structure, manufacturers in Western countries are protected from otherwise fearsome global competition. By far the most important cost factor is the polypropylene which is traded on international markets at by and large uniform prices. The use of manpower has been reduced to a minimum in the completely automated process, and the price of about 100.000 US\$ for appropriate injection-molding equipment varies only slightly all over the world.

The granulated polypropylene is fed into the machine's horizontal barrel automatically. The plastic pellets are mixed with talcum and lime in order to lend the material a better stiffness and a more pleasant surface feel – and to save input costs. In the barrel this compound is heated to around 220°C and melted into a homogenous, viscous mass. Through its rotational movements, a screw inside the barrel presses the material into an elaborately constructed steel mold that describes the negative form of the chair. The forces necessary to keep the mold closed during the process are enormous. To prevent the material escaping from the mold a clamping power of no less than 1.000 tons is needed. If the hydraulic clamping mechanism lay in a vertical instead of a horizontal position, then it could carry the weight of a thousand small cars. The parts of the ton-heavy mold are allowed only thousandths of a millimeter tolerance.

When the sharp inner edges of the super-precise steel block are worn

source: www.functionalfate.org



(monobloc – on the world chair / jens thiel)

off after about a million injections and material starts swelling during the process, the mold is sold at a fraction of the initial price in poorer regions. Further millions of chairs are being produced in countries where consumers find the little plastic skins at the rims acceptable. A Monobloc identical to our recent purchase will soon populate Ghana or Russia.

In the mold, the work piece is cooled until it hardens, and usually a robot-arm takes the chair and stacks it in with the other finished products. The entire cycle takes no more than 60 seconds. About 500 chairs can be completed in an eight-hour shift, and in the case of uninterrupted production, more than half a million pieces could be manufactured in a year on a single machine.

With a technology like that, labor cost advantages can not offset the costs resulting from transport over long distances. A 40-foot container holds about 2,500 Monoblocs stacked on pallets. Shipping it from Shanghai to the US Pacific coast or Rotterdam would increase the price of the chair by roughly one US Dollar or Euro. Taking into account the current wholesale price for a Monobloc of about five US Dollars, the Western manufacturers have no reason to be frightened of Asian competitors.

for a moment the “look-at-me-I-am-designed” stress exerted by all this stuff from upmarket apparel stores and museum shops.

Of course this strategy soon revealed shortcomings. To make the chair seem more comfortable, its back was heightened although low back chairs are no less convenient and offer a more pleasant appearance. This additional material had to be economized in other parts in order to comply with the desire for ever lower prices expressed by buyers and consumers alike. A solid, stable plastic chair demands no less than 2.5 kilograms of polypropylene, nevertheless Monoblocs are now made that weigh barely 2 kilograms. Savings can be made by reducing the quality and thickness of material or the extension of the piece’s surface area. The chair has suffered badly from these strategies since they result not only in awkward shapes but also in an unsatisfactory torsion elasticity. Sitting in one of these chairs, one is in constant fear that the piece is distended enough that it is eventually about to break.

But even erroneous paths are well-worn as long as they lead to the realm of the cheap. Years ago I observed customers of a home-improvement store in the process of selecting Monobloc chairs: they passed among the various groupings, discussed the choices briefly and soon decided



source: www.coolbuzz.org

chairs combining aluminum legs and fish-like plastic seat shells.

Over recent years, municipalities worldwide have proceeded resolutely against the Monobloc. Since 2003 the Swiss capital of Bern governs unambiguously: “Full plastic furniture with no textile covering is not permitted.”

as well as economically superior to any other seat. It has become the essential world chair, the only furniture that all people have in common in one way or another. The Monobloc is the pride of efficiency of our industrial society that has made life easy and free of peril. As an anonymous product it has asserted itself for a long time in an economy where almost every commodity is subjected to arbitrary branding, way out of touch with the product’s actual benefits. Meanwhile the Monobloc’s white appears to be more honest than that of the early iPod models. With all these achievements, the chair should have earned our love.

Instead of abandoning the Monobloc to the owners of beach bars and trailer park homes, we should welcome it into our homes. Combined with an ample table, for instance from early Scandinavian modernism, this arrangement will lend our lush apartments an air of unexpected easiness. Also, the chair should not be excluded from the photos we make when traveling. To find it in remote places is not a curse of globalization but instead testifies to a reality that grants us the opportunity to go there in the first place. To refuse the Monobloc is not proof of superior judgment but only a denial of reality.

The plastic chair has become immune to taste and this makes it even easier to use it to express a style of one’s own. Simply choosing a particular chair is enough to ennoble us. Another strategy would be to modify the plastic chair such as what the Swedish design team Front did for the interior of the Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm in 2003. By simply padding white Monoblocs with black leather, Front achieved a stunning result, recontextualizing the chair. While the original Monobloc is what Jean Baudrillard called “a series”, with manageable effort “a model” is created with markedly increased quality which forcefully questions our established preconceptions. Since Front’s seminal re-phrasing, more than a hundred designers and artists have taken on the Monobloc and put the artefact into new contexts.

We may easily join these revolutions - or instead calmly lean back in our plastic patio chair, giving all these intellectual exertions a rest, and rejoice about stuff that is just there, that is plain and simple and works. ■

Earlier versions of this essay were first published in: Art Review, London, April 2006, pp. 58 – 61 and Der Freund, Kathmandu, May 2005, pp. 6 - 13



Photo by Moi of Ra

Nevertheless the profit margins have shrunk considerably. When the Monobloc started its world conquest in the early 1980s it cost about 50 US\$, now it often sells at a tenth of that price.

While straightforward designs not unlike the classic rectangular chair dominated the 1980s, the Monobloc has now emerged in quainter shapes. The complex design of an injection molded chair remains more the domain of engineers than of designers. The design has to obey technical limitations: properties of the raw plastic material, its flow paths in the mold, velocity and pressure of the injection are all critical to the process. Thus often the engineers and the marketers of a plastic furniture manufacturer will sit down and conceive new models. With the Monobloc, design is given a vacation, thus relieving

on the cheapest of them all. Hardly anyone tested the chairs out. If they had, the differences in comfort and steadiness between various models would have become immediately obvious. Moreover, the appearance and conduct of the shoppers did not make the impression that the design of the newly acquired furniture had any relevance for their decision to buy. When I visited the store again last summer, the Monoblocs were gone and had been replaced by tropical hardwood furniture, most likely from illegal logging.

In fact the Monobloc is imperiled and in urgent need of our attention. Sales figures in Europe and Northern America have been declining for years. Hardly any new models are now being introduced. Customers increasingly opt for wood, whose origin can scarcely be tracked, or

Likewise the situation in Copenhagen, Manchester, Helsinki, the Slovak capital Bratislava or in Californian high-tech center Mountain View is hardly different.

The repugnance the Monobloc evokes has helped to create outlandish alliances. While the urban elite desperately strives to merge coziness with copies of Bauhaus designs, the customers of Wal-Mart, on the other hand, have always disdained unpadded furniture. A pact to lock out the Monobloc, however, is quickly agreed upon between both troops.

We have reached a time where the pragmatic plastic chair in the First World is in urgent need of our help to survive. The chair is functionally