

Play at Work

NEW DESIGNS FROM RICHARD HUTTEN

Play forms in design can be a poisoned chalice of a game. Play is such a subjective arena to perform in that the odds of an object falling flat on its humour(less) face are pretty high. Dutch designer Richard Hutten likes to play, and with his new best friend 'tradition' he is producing a series of works that are a library of conceptual layers.

Text by Walter Bettens

Homo Ludens Richard Hutten is almost one of Holland's best export products. Almost. Since his graduate days at the Design Eindhoven Academy in 1991 the man has filled a few books with his body of work. Or should we say: body of play. Hutten likes to remind us that it was he that introduced Johan Huizinga's essay Homo Ludens to the Dutch design scene in his post-student days. Now it has become a favourite source to quote from. Just passing 40, Hutten remains as playful as he was when he joined the Droog movement in 1993 as one of the key players.

In 2008 Hutten is playing with tradition - as he calls it - in a few new thoughtful projects that he's lifted the lid off. During Milan's Salone in April he presented his Layers project, a limited edition collection of handmade furniture pieces, assembled in his Rotterdam port-based workshop. The title is not a non sequitur, and so remarkably refers to building in layers, placing emphasis on both the manual and conceptual context. Booktable gives the game away. Here a 'book composition' translates into a kind of office table, alluding not only to the different physical and mental layers, but also to the memory of an object.

Booktable, as part of the Layers collection, consisting of staples of books, 2008

Facing page:
Richard Hutten in his office, around his neck the Loop Memory Key (2GB) by Kikkerland
Photo: Walter Bettens





Another project Hutten recently co-founded is NgispeN, a collaboration between him in the role of art director together with the historic Rotterdam manufacturer Gispen and Moooi-man Hans Lensvelt, under the title - you've guessed it - Playing with Tradition. Their launch during Interieur 08 in Kortrijk, Belgium, shows (for the time being) mainly existing and renewed products from Hutten, such as the Gispen Hutten's Table Sofa, the Berlage Chair, the Layers Table and his variation on the Sottsass Chair, on request by Ettore Sottsass (in 2000) - but for the first time in production. According to Hutten, Michael Young and Jerszy Seymour have also been invited to reinterpret the Gispen spirit with new designs soon to follow.

Meanwhile he is also working on a witty carpet collection concept with a limited edition of eight, witnessing his first Kilim-like hand-knotted flat rug entitled - yes - Playing with Tradition and manufactured by I+I. What's left of anno 2008 promises to be a full creative catalogue for Hutten, with a lot of time spent playing with tradition and associated friends. But besides being playful, Hutten can be very firm when it comes to the essence of meaningful design: 'one of the most important aspects or features of a product is its functionality. That's why I became a designer, and not a sculptor or an artist. But the function of a design has to be the beginning, and never the goal. Comfort is not the only thing. It's all about what you're adding as a designer. It could be a story, a technique, the choice of material or the form. A new product has to be meaningful, if not, it is superfluous.'

On the other side of the world, that the man comes perilously close to being Big In Korea is borne out by the plan to open a Richard Hutten Design Academy in Seoul, where he will develop the school complex (with architecture office MVRDV) and also determine the educational programme. Almost, because unfortunately the project has been put on ice. #

www.richardhutten.com

Sottsass Chair, developed in 2000 on request of Ettore Sottsass and covered with a laminate of the Swiss, now for the first time in production at NgispeN, 2008
Photos: Walter Bettens

Facing page:
Playing with tradition, produced by I+I, 2008
Hand-knotted woolen carpet, limited series of 8, dimensions 200 x 100cm