

# The Essence of Things

## Design and the Art of Reduction

Alessandro Mendini, Lassù, 1974





Toshiyuki Kita, Ceremony Space, architectural elements, 1986

## The Essence of Things Design and the Art of Reduction

Against the background of the current economic and financial crisis, minimalism has seen a resurgence as a design buzzword. In most cases, what is meant is reduction, expressed as an interest in the minimum subsistence level and the demand for a new spirit of modesty. At heart, however, the discussion revolves around phenomena that have influenced design, and in particular industrial design, under varying premises since its incipency: the decisive impetus for a reduced formal vocabulary provided by the rationality of mechanical production and the important impulses received early on from examples of Japanese aesthetics as well as from its dialogue with abstract art.

While the introduction asserts a nearly universal desire of our intellect for the simplest possible solution, the exhibition subsequently seeks to identify the motifs, motivations and strategies of reduction in design. In so doing, it concentrates the tremendous breadth of the theme on tendencies in furniture design as a proxy for everyday culture and as an expression of our attitude toward the world. Various aspects of manufacture, function and form and finally ethical perspectives are presented. In addition, numerous accompanying exhibits combined with a wealth of images suggest the transfer to other areas of design.

The exhibition documents how a restriction to the essential can be a response to economic needs as well as to elite and intellectually laden standards. It demonstrates the parameters and strategies of industrial design but also describes the exemplary function of such designs in which high-quality materials are subjected to meticulous processing. In the simplification and concentration of things, which is one of the key messages of this exhibition, special attention is paid to each and every detail.

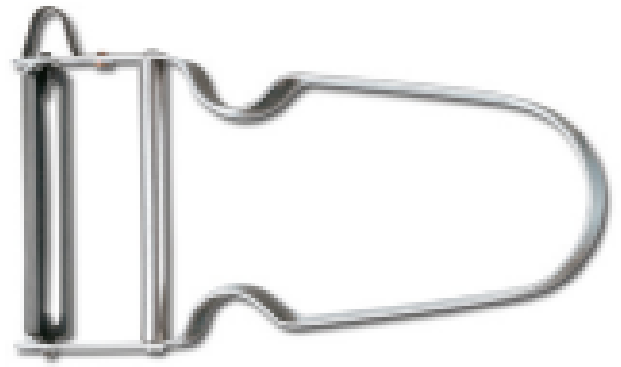
The exhibited objects include some 70 furniture pieces and working models of furnishings, 15 lighting objects, a film by Charles and Ray Eames and an architectural model of their home and studio, a prototype of the Citroën 2CV, the Ceremony Space designed by Toshiyuki Kita, 16 reproduced posters as well as about 70 smaller articles of daily use.

The exhibition rooms contain four large-format slide projections with many sample images from the disciplines of graphic design, photography, painting, sculpture, architecture, landscape architecture, product design, fashion, food design, stage design and technology. In addition, quotations printed on the walls reference key concepts of prominent designers.

All twelve object groups following the prologue are accompanied by short introductory texts as well as illustrated additional texts. This documentation is condensed in the form of a narrow band on the walls of the exhibition rooms. A leaflet handed out to visitors contains all the technical explanations and background information on the exhibits.

## Prologue

The exhibition starts off with a surprising selection of everyday objects: Examples from a variety of contexts – from a hand axe to a bath sponge and toy blocks up to multipack-rings for tin cans and a Smartphone – illustrate the fundamental need for efficient design. The overview is accompanied by an introductory text and a projection of representative images from the cited disciplines from art to technology.



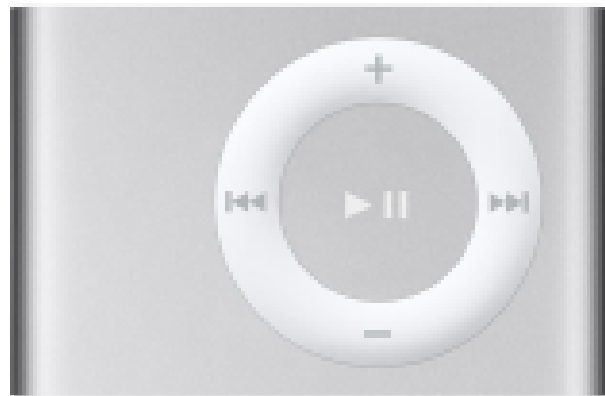
Anonym, Sparschaeler (peeler)



Handaxe, Stone Age, approx. 40.000 BC



Oscar Tropolowitz, Nivea Creme, 1911



Sir Jonathan Ive (Apple Chief Designer), ipod shuffle, portable MP3-Player, 2008

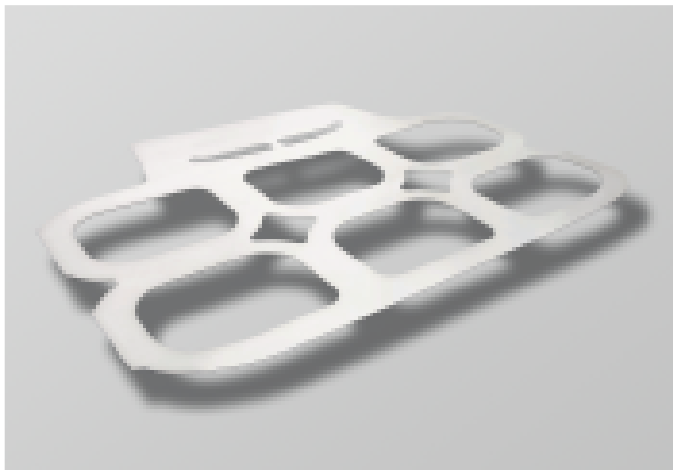
The second part of this prologue continues with a room of silence featuring minimal impressions to calm visitors and sharpen their senses: an installation consisting of the Ceremony Space by the designer Toshiyuki Kita and projected photographs by the artist Hiroshi Sugimoto.

Hiroshi Sugimoto, from the series "Seascapes (1980-2003)", projection

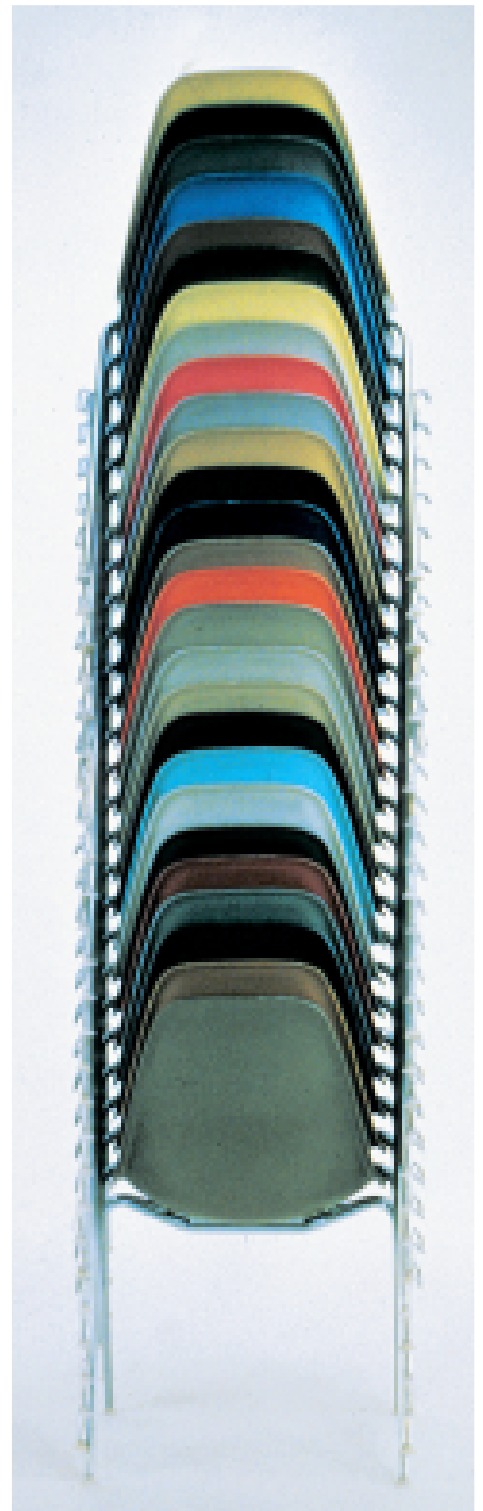
# Production

## 1. Process:

The systematic presentation of the theme begins with economic aspects of production. Working models of the fibreglass chair from the estate of Charles and Ray Eames and a film by these pioneering American designers, documenting the full complexity of the design and production process, attest to the effort and skill needed to arrive at the simplest solutions.



Jules Poupitch, Multipack-rings, 1958



Charles and Ray Eames, stacking chairs, 1954



Charles & Ray Eames, Plaster form for welding up shell, 1950

## 2. Unity:

The economic interest in manufacturing a complete object in just one step is illustrated by a series of furniture pieces in different materials, each developed from a single two-dimensional surface or as a monoblock. As in most of the following groups, this section shows both early and recent examples of furniture design, complemented by lighting and other interior objects.



Gaetano Pesce, Golgotha chair, 1972-73



Gerald Summers, chair, 1938, Makers of Simple Furniture Ltd., London



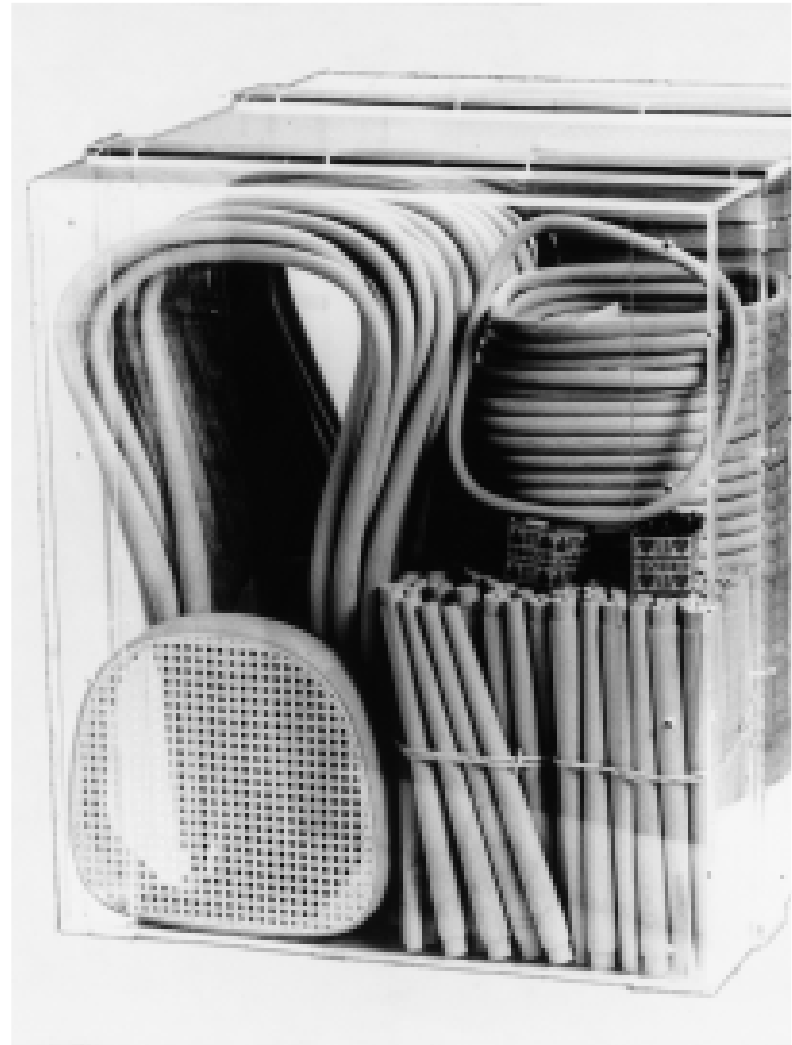
Shiro Kuramata, "Oba-Q", 1972, Ishimaru Co., Ltd., Tokyo



A. & P.G. Castiglioni, stool no. 220, "Mezzadro", 1954-57

### 3. Inspiration:

A form of economy seldom discussed in connection with design occurs in the realm of problem solving: in ingenious ideas that shorten otherwise complex and drawn-out procedures. Good illustrations of this type of reduction are objets trouvés and processes in which existing objects are interpreted and used in new ways.



Thonet brothers, transport crate of 1 m3 containing 36 disassembled chairs No. 14

### 4. Logistics:

Especially in an industrial context, it is important to plan products to minimize outlays for packaging, transport and storage. These considerations also include the manufacture and delivery in components that can be individually assembled (as modules) by the retailer or end customer.

## Function

### 5. Compaction:

In a variety of different areas, design is concerned with the need to accommodate as much as possible in the smallest feasible space. Examples range from a cleverly devised folding cot from the year 1800 for the Royal House of Hanover that looks like a design for the Barcelona Pavilion to Le Corbusier's multifunctional block of wood for the Fondation Franco-Brésilienne in Paris up to the modern-day laptop.



Anonym, travel bed from the royal house of Hannover, approx. 1800



Sir Jonathan Ive, Macbook Air, 2008

### 6. Lightness:

While maximum weight reduction can be of essential and even existential importance in sports, the military and means of transport, furniture design often adopts the maxim as an opportunity to experiment with different materials, though such explorations – such as garden and stackable furniture or mass seating – can also yield thoroughly practical applications.



Alberto Meda, "Light Light", experimental chair, 1986



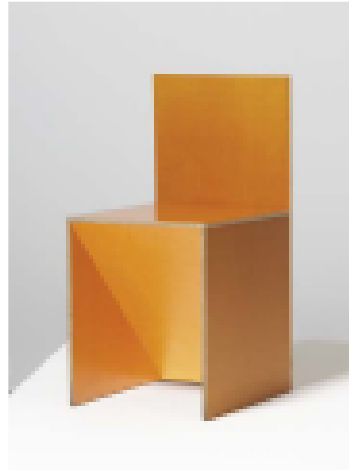
Andre Lefebvre (Ingenieur), Citroen 2CV, prototype, 1939



## Aesthetics

### 7. Geometry:

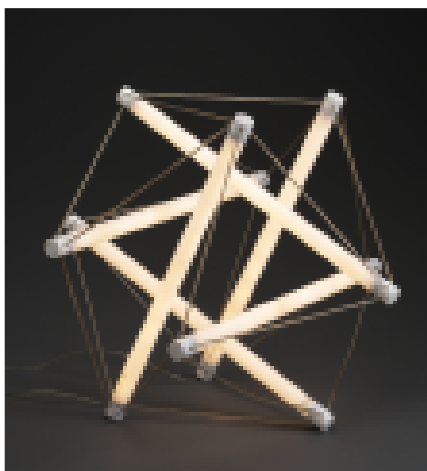
Going back to the first advanced civilizations, the logic of construction and conditions of efficient fabrication have led us toward orthogonal forms. For modern design, Euclidean geometry became a guiding principle, particularly in terms of the anonymity, serial production and rationality of industrial production as well as in the discovery of the classical architecture of Japan and its exposed, stringently orthogonal constructions.



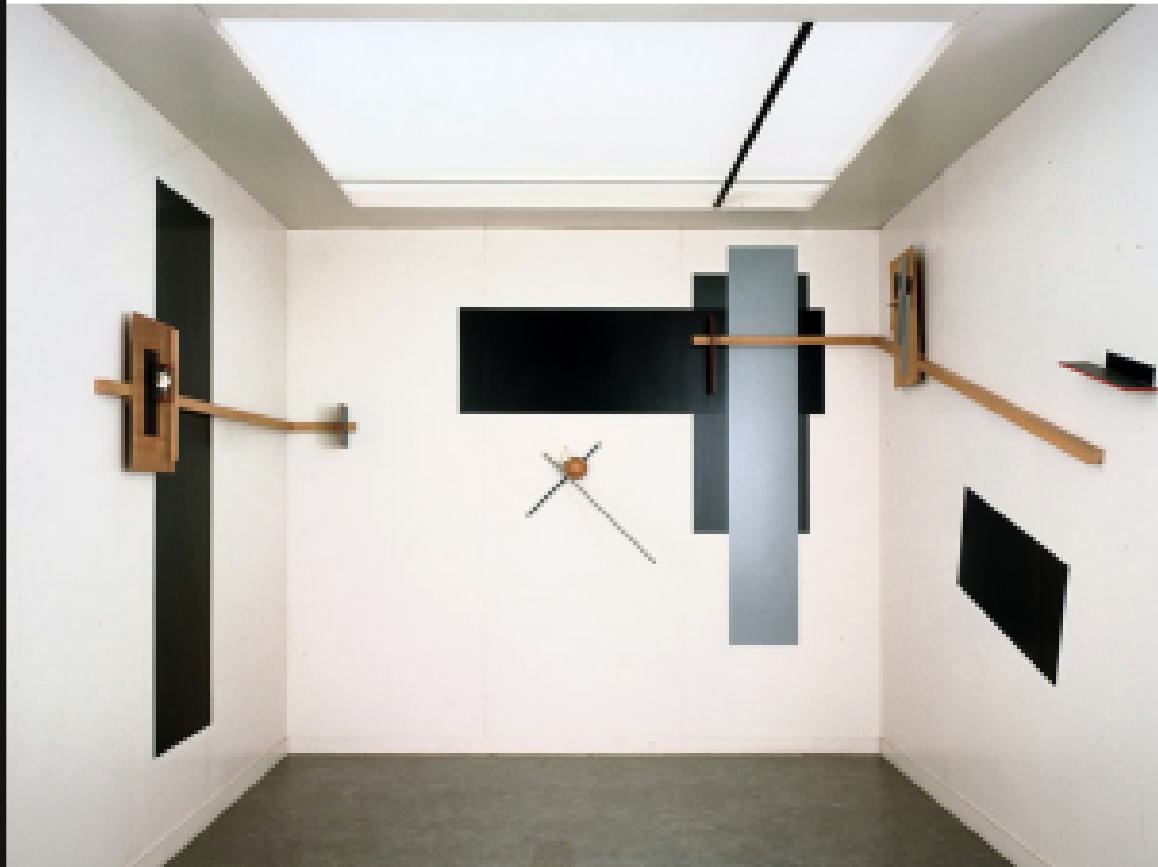
Donald Judd, Chair #84/85, style no. 7, 1997



Gerrit T. Rietveld, "Roodblauwe stoel", armchair, 1918



Peter Hamburger, Ingo Maurer, Light Structure, 1983



El Lissitzky, Prounenraum 1923, reconstruction 1971

## 8. Abstraction:

As the link between function and the individual, an object must reconcile its intended purpose with our physical and intellectual requirements. To achieve this, design frequently makes use of shapes and design processes derived from nature. With such means of abstraction, it looks for the most universally applicable solutions for users and usage.



Heinz & Bodo Rasch, "Sitzgeiststuhl, 1927



Arne Jacobsen, stacking chair, no. 3100, "The Ant", 1952

## 9. Dissolution:

Technical advances have spurred our imagination to try to overcome matter and perform functions solely with energy. In many areas, especially in the media, this is already reality. With furnishings meant to render physical functions, the idea is expressed in the economic use of increasingly efficient materials and an attenuated visual presence.



A. Waterkeyn (Ingenieur), "Atomium", architecture model, approx. 1958



Tokuji Yoshioka, Honey-comb, 2001



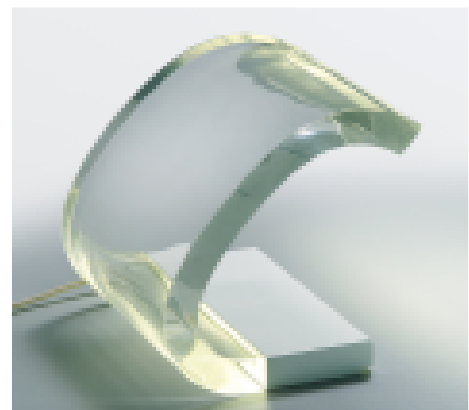
Naoto Fukasawa, "Chair Acrylic", chair prototype, 2007

## 10. Transparency:

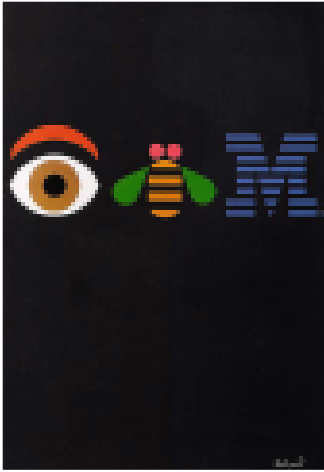
The free-flowing transition from one area to another and between interior and exterior has been a guiding tenet of modern design going back to the early architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. Since the Bauhaus, the omnipresent use of glass has made transparency a virtual synonym for the freedom of the spirit. In light of their increased invisibility, objects are no longer perceived as physical bodies but solely through their function.



Wilhelm Wagenfeld, tea service, 1930-34



Joe C. & Gianni Colombo, desk lamp, no. 281, "Acrilica", 1962



Paul Rand, Eye-Bee-M logo for IBM, 1981

## 11. Sign:

Each thing is a bearer of messages. The art of its reduction consists not least in finding a lowest common denominator. In this way, the object becomes a sign that at the same time ideally signals its function.



Verner Panton, "Panton-Chair", experimental chair, 1958-67



Anonym (for Philips), loud speaker, 1926



Anonym, rocking chair, 1876-80, Shaker's, Mt. Lebanon, New York, USA

## Ethics

### 12. Model:

The desire to formulate the very idea of an object often arises from an ethical stance: Things are to be liberated from any evidence of vain individuality and variations are traced back to their archetypal form as the ballast of history. Yet reduction to essential properties also stems from practical motivations where it involves a steadfast concentration on function or where Typenmöbel (standardized unit furniture) is defined for universal use. The model purged of all randomness, excess and defects for mass production is the prototype.



Max Bill, Hans Gugelot, "Ulmer Hocker", 1954



Andrea Zittel, ZA 1997-002, "A-Z Escape Vehicle", 1996-97



Sybold Van Ravesteyn, table lamp, 1926

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, USA, 1951



### Short facts:

Exhibition space: 400 – 800 m<sup>2</sup> (4000 – 8000 sqft)  
141 objects, plus numerous digital slide shows and large  
format prints  
Transport volume: approx 160m<sup>3</sup>  
Available: Oct. 2010 until 2013  
Exhibition fee: upon request

Vitra Design Museum publishes a catalogue for this exhibition  
with c. 130 pages. The catalogue comprises the illustrated  
essays by the following authors:

Mathias Schwartz-Clauss: Design and the Art of Reduction  
Dirk Baecker: Society and the Reduced Design  
Martin Hartung: Man as the Measure of All Things?  
Wiebke Lang: Heroes of the Everyday

In total the catalogue comprises c. 160 mostly coloured  
illustrations. All exhibits will be illustrated in full colour.

### Contacts:

Vitra Design Museum  
Charles Eames Str. 1  
79576 Weil am Rhein, Germany

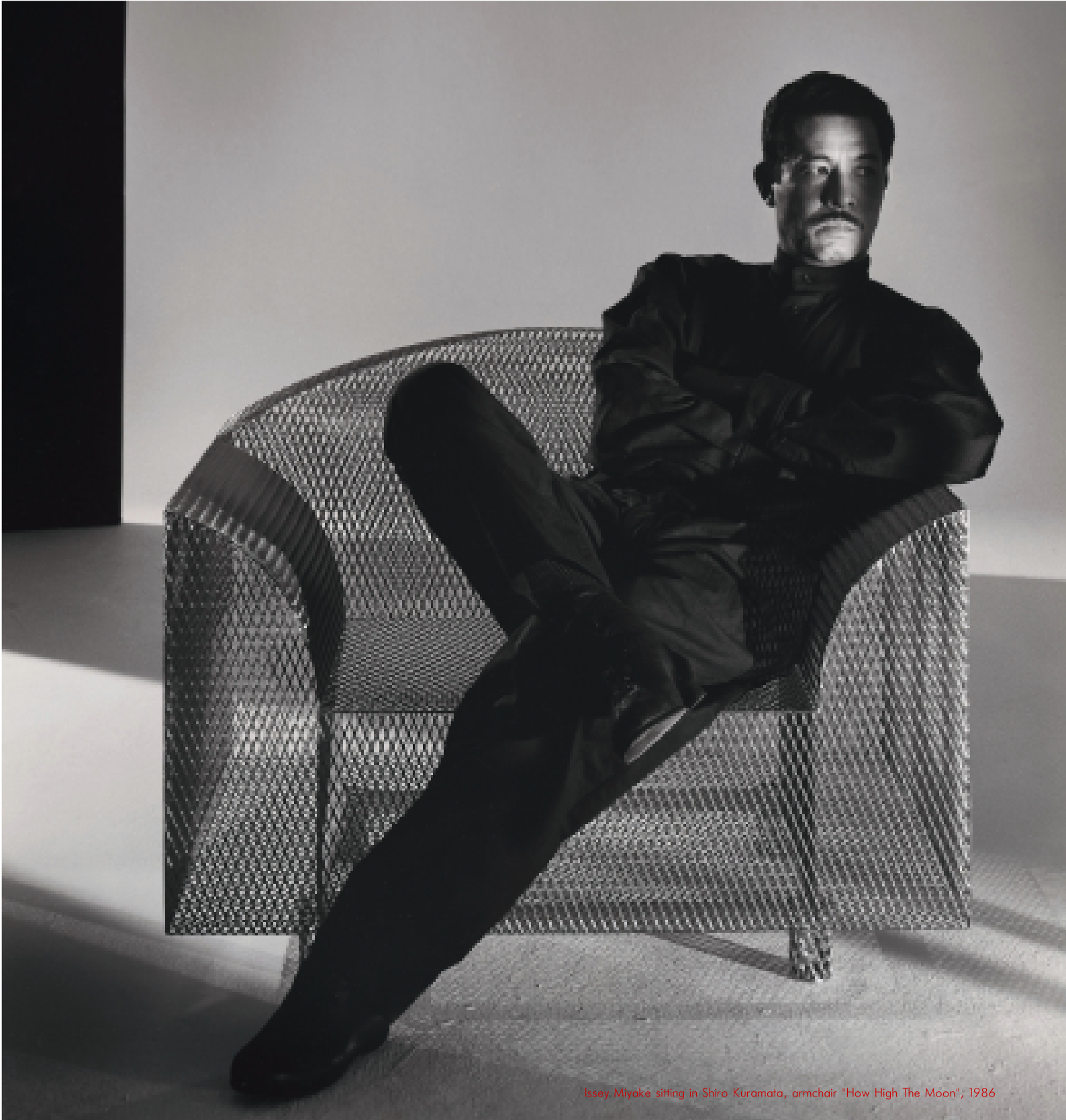
### Content:

Mathias Schwartz-Clauss  
Senior Curator  
Fon: +49 7621 702 3582  
Fax: -4582  
[mathias.schwartz-clauss@design-museum.de](mailto:mathias.schwartz-clauss@design-museum.de)

### Exhibition tour:

Reiner Packeiser  
Head of the Exhibition Department  
Fon: +49 7621 702 3729  
Fax: -4729  
[reiner.packeiser@design-museum.de](mailto:reiner.packeiser@design-museum.de)

Isabel Serbeto  
Exhibition Coordinator  
Fon: +49 7621 702 3729  
Fax: -4729  
[Isabel.Serbeto@design-museum.de](mailto:Isabel.Serbeto@design-museum.de)



Issey Miyake sitting in Shiro Kuramata, armchair "How High The Moon", 1986