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SUPER NORMAL

INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER **NAOTO FUKASAWA**
IS RESHAPING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH
TECHNOLOGY THROUGH HIS UNADORNED,
FUNCTIONAL AND QUIETLY BEAUTIFUL WORK.

MULTI-AWARD WINNING DESIGNER
NAOTO FUKASAWA HAS SEEN THE FUTURE, AND
ITS INTERFACE IS REFRESHINGLY SIMPLE.

It's not just that his products have sleek, barely-there proportions or the luxurious sheen of high technology. It's that they function in such an intuitive way you wonder how you ever put up with other appliances, cluttered with buttons and bleeps and LED displays.

He's a career industrial designer with a portfolio spanning three decades of impressive work. But since launching the electronics and homewares brand plusminuszero (± 0) in Tokyo in 2003, Fukasawa has emerged as one of today's most sought-after international designers. Clients as diverse as B&B Italia, Hitachi and Lamy have commissioned him. New York's Museum of Modern Art has included one of his designs in its permanent collection. And he has won more than 50 design awards, including the American IDEA Gold Award and the British D&AD Gold Award.

The inspiration for Fukasawa's appliances, furniture and accessories comes from his keen observations of the minor dilemmas of city-dwellers. When he sees ordinary people fumble around makeshift surfaces, receptacles, knobs or light sources in the attempt accomplish ordinary

tasks, Fukasawa designs products that afford simplicity to these actions.

There's his umbrella for plusminuszero, for example, designed in 2003 with Chie Noda: its notched handle allows weary commuters to rest their shopping bags while standing at the bus stop. The Ash chair for Muji (2004), whose profile mimics that of a matching bed, gives the user an impromptu bedside table; and his vacuum cleaner for Hitachi (2001) has a belly that glows red when full, "as if it's eaten too much", in the designer's words, eliminating the need to manually check the vacuum bag.

And judging from the whimsy of these designs, the softly spoken designer wants us to see the funny side of our material needs.

"With Naoto ... you get a sense of organic seamlessness from object to person to the world that is almost magical," says Paola Antonelli, curator of architecture and design at MoMA, who has tracked Fukasawa's progress since 1990. "I'd rank him among the world's five best designers, because of the elegance of his thought process and his solid training as a designer."

CONSTANTIN MEYER



THIS PAGE An 'Ideal House' setting featuring Fukasawa designs such as the Cloud sofa, 2006, for B&B Italia. "I wondered if I could do away with some of the weightiness and create a sofa that had no sense of blockiness and which has a subtle tension to it," Fukasawa wrote. Also pictured: Shelf SL66/1, 2006, B&B Italia; Wan floor lamp, 2005, Yamagiwa; Binan System floor lamp, 2006, Danese; wall-mounted CD Player, 1999, Muji; Bincan System table, 2004; remote control for 22V LCD TV, 2003.



ABOVE RIGHT Fukasawa's 8-Inch LCD TV, 2003, designed for his own brand, plusminuszero, is an LCD TV shaped like a cathode-ray tube. "It's not about making things thin just because you can," the designer says. CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT CD Player, 1999, Muji, inspired by a wall-mounted ventilation fan; Muku table, 2005, Driade; stone-shaped Ishicoro mobile phone, 2002, KDDI; Shelf X, 2005, B&B Italia.

HIDETOYO SASAKI

Fukasawa's emergence as a solo force came at the relatively late age of 40, after years of designing in-house for Seiko Epson in Tokyo and maverick industrial design firm IDEO (then ID Two) in San Francisco.

Born in 1956 in rural Yamanashi, he had revealed an early knack for art. "I loved making things," he explains. "My father worked for a small electronics firm and I was fascinated by electrical cables and tapes; things kids wouldn't normally play with." He laughs: "I'm the kind of person who sees a real vitality in a roll of tape. As a kid, I would unroll them and then try to roll them back up."

He didn't yet know the meaning of 'design', but one day a Porsche drove through his town. "I thought it was beautiful, and not just from a boyish obsession with cars."

THE SIMPLE LIFE

After studying product design at Tama Art University and graduating in 1980, he was hired by Seiko Epson. He spent the next eight years there designing watches and printers, working to a challenging 1:1000 scale. "That really shaped my foundations in form-making," Fukasawa recalls.

If his Japanese training had given him depth as a designer, then the following decade in America was to give him breadth. In 1989 he joined ID Two, working with an international team of product designers and engineers on sports watches, computers and heart-pump controllers.

"In the US, I learned to approach things logically and simply. I saw that design is really a solution to a problem. San Francisco has a very people-friendly environment: the cultural mix is well-established. It wasn't serious like Japan, where you always had to wear a suit. It was an intelligent working environment."

Fukasawa began questioning flamboyance in product design, and grew attracted to notions like 'affordance'. Coined in the 1970s by psychologist James J Gibson, the term describes how forms in our environment 'afford' certain actions – the way a low fence invites one to sit on it, for example. He also revisited the Japanese word *bari* (meaning 'flexed' or 'taut'), and began designing more according to relationships – the 'push' and 'pull' of forces between products and their surroundings.

As Fukasawa explains in his new monograph, *Naoto Fukasawa* (Phaidon, 2007), the outline of a





LEFT Wan is a Japanese word, meaning 'soup bowl'. It is, aptly, the word Fukasawa has chosen to name this lamp he created for Yamagiwa. These lamps have iron powder within their walls, enabling them to be angled to illuminate any direction. OPPOSITE Anyo children's chairs, 2006, manufactured by Driade from polyurethane foam and pile fleece. Fukasawa wanted to design a chair for toddlers that looked and felt like a cuddly toy.

design is “determined by all the various factors that make up the environment, including human emotions and behaviour, time and light and air; [it is] in flux.”

The book provides a very readable account of these philosophies and the engineering and imaginative skills that have inspired some 100 Fukasawa products and a handful of art pieces.

Of his celebrated wall-mounted CD player for Muji (1999), now archived at MoMA, Fukasawa explains that one day he was watching a CD spin around. “The image of these rotations reminded me of the motor-driven ventilation fans found in kitchens,” he writes, describing how he envisioned a CD player that also incorporated a pull-string switch, and the process of prototyping a device that operates on that guilelessly simple principle. He goes on to reveal why he’s interested in products one doesn’t notice – like his recent bathroom wall light for a major Japanese manufacturer, indistinguishable from the surrounding tiles when switched off.

“I have the strange sensation that Naoto has gone through some kind of barrier, that he thinks

in a world that hasn’t yet arrived for the rest of us,” marvels designer Jasper Morrison, who collaborated with Fukasawa on the ‘Super Normal’ exhibition series in the UK and Japan.

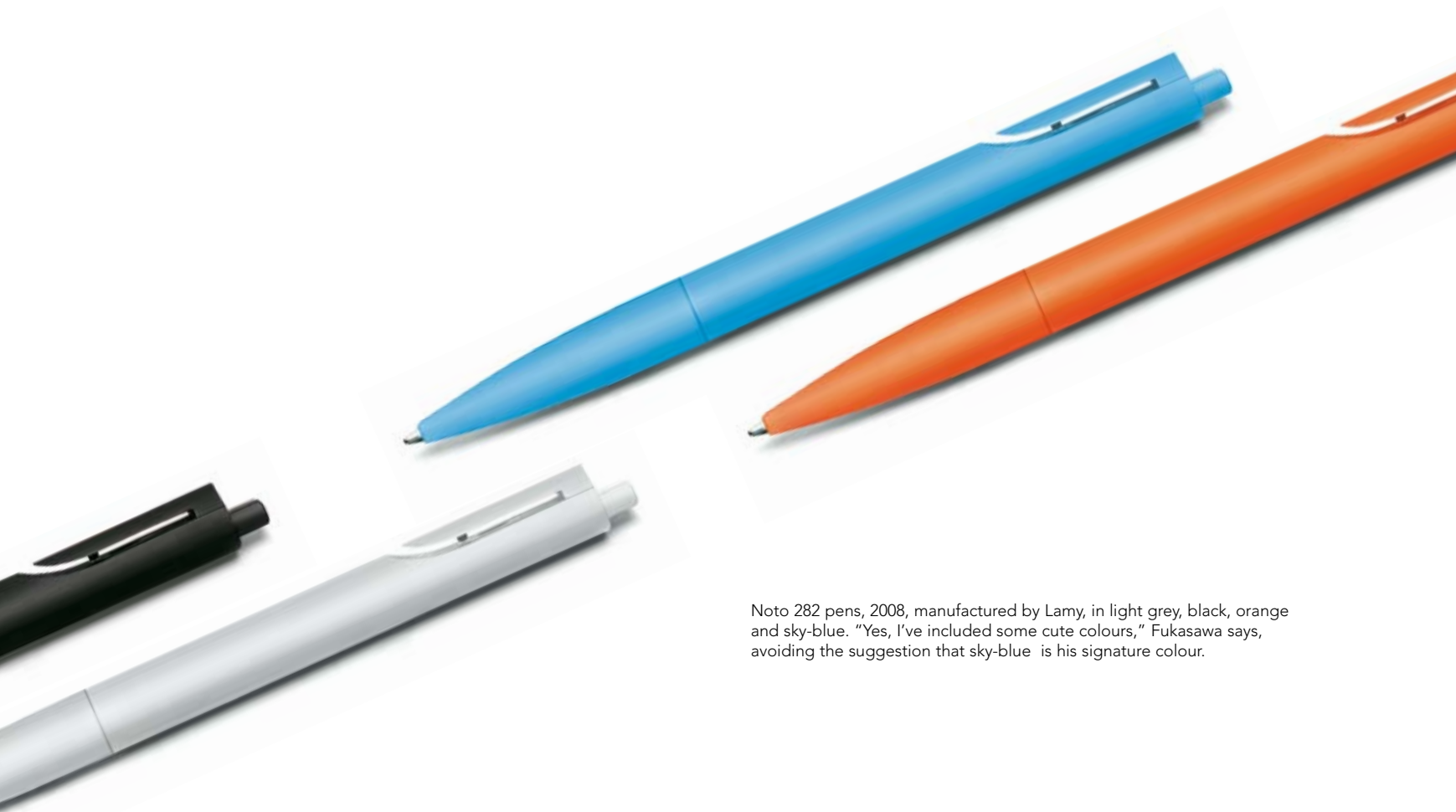
In the decade since returning to Japan – founding IDEO Tokyo in 1996, and plusminuszero in 2003 – Fukasawa has grown in stature as a design figure. He has a professorship at two universities and is co-director (with Issey Miyake and Taku Satoh) of the new 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT museum in Tokyo. For some 10 years, he has also led the ‘Without Thought’ series of workshops, to encourage intuitive thinking at Japan’s big-name manufacturers.

“The energy generated by these workshops could potentially overturn Japanese design completely,” comments organiser Takashi Kawashima, “ridding Japan of accusations that its products are well-made but boring.”

As if in response to this growing public role, the designer increasingly cherishes his solitude. Weekdays are a non-stop flow of clients and projects, but on weekends he retreats to a peaceful spot in the mountains, where he has built a rough



COURTESY EUROLUCE



Noto 282 pens, 2008, manufactured by Lamy, in light grey, black, orange and sky-blue. "Yes, I've included some cute colours," Fukasawa says, avoiding the suggestion that sky-blue is his signature colour.

hut "with a simple, childish shape". But he never switches off. "I don't escape who I am, even there. I might not be with clients, but I always immerse myself in what I do." Lately he has been gathering rough stones to make a low, crude wall there.

VANISHING ACT

At the time of writing, Fukasawa was preparing for the 2008 Milan Furniture Fair and expanding on his Déjà-vu furniture designs for Magis. He had also completed a pen for Lamy, its three-edged profile and considered weight giving it an optimum ergonomic grip and a shape he describes as "simple, strong, familiar".

The Noto ballpoint pen came about after Dr Manfred Lamy contacted Fukasawa directly in 2004. Several designs emerged from their collaboration. With its minimalist self-suspended clip and matt all-plastic finish, the pen has a no-nonsense practicality befitting the "plus, minus, zero" mantra: more function and less embellishment for a beautifully balanced result. A slightly weightier version, the Noto 283, features a matt silver-lacquered tip. The pen will be released in May.

Next on Fukasawa's agenda is a vision to remove many modern-day conveniences from sight altogether.

He is developing new-generation floors, walls, doors and cabinets with in-built sensors and controls. "There's a proliferation of oversized appliances like plasma TVs at the moment, but in the future these will become incorporated into walls. Music systems and air-conditioners will cease to exist as separate units," he explains.

It will be a boon for a designer passionate about designs that fit our natural behaviour. But what will happen to Fukasawa's beautiful watches, phones and lounges?

"They won't disappear," he says reassuringly. "We'll always need things like tables and chairs. But I'll be able to concentrate on designing the actual environment between people and things." If Fukasawa has his way, we can expect a very seamless built environment in the near future.

Naoto Fukasawa is published by Phaidon Press and distributed by Bookwise International, RRP \$A99.95. Available from good book stores.