

Under a Blazing Sun

It's present at weddings, furnishes balconies and it plays an integral role in cafes, government offices, at PTA meetings and even at memorial services. The monobloc chair got its modest start in the international arena, but the success of the local version produced by Keter Plastic has exceeded even its creators' expectations. What does this chair say about Israeli culture? We asked the experts

— MERAV PEREZ

“At one end, raw, telluric matter, at the other, the finished, human object; and between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit, hardly watched over by an attendant in a cloth cap, half-god, half-robot.”

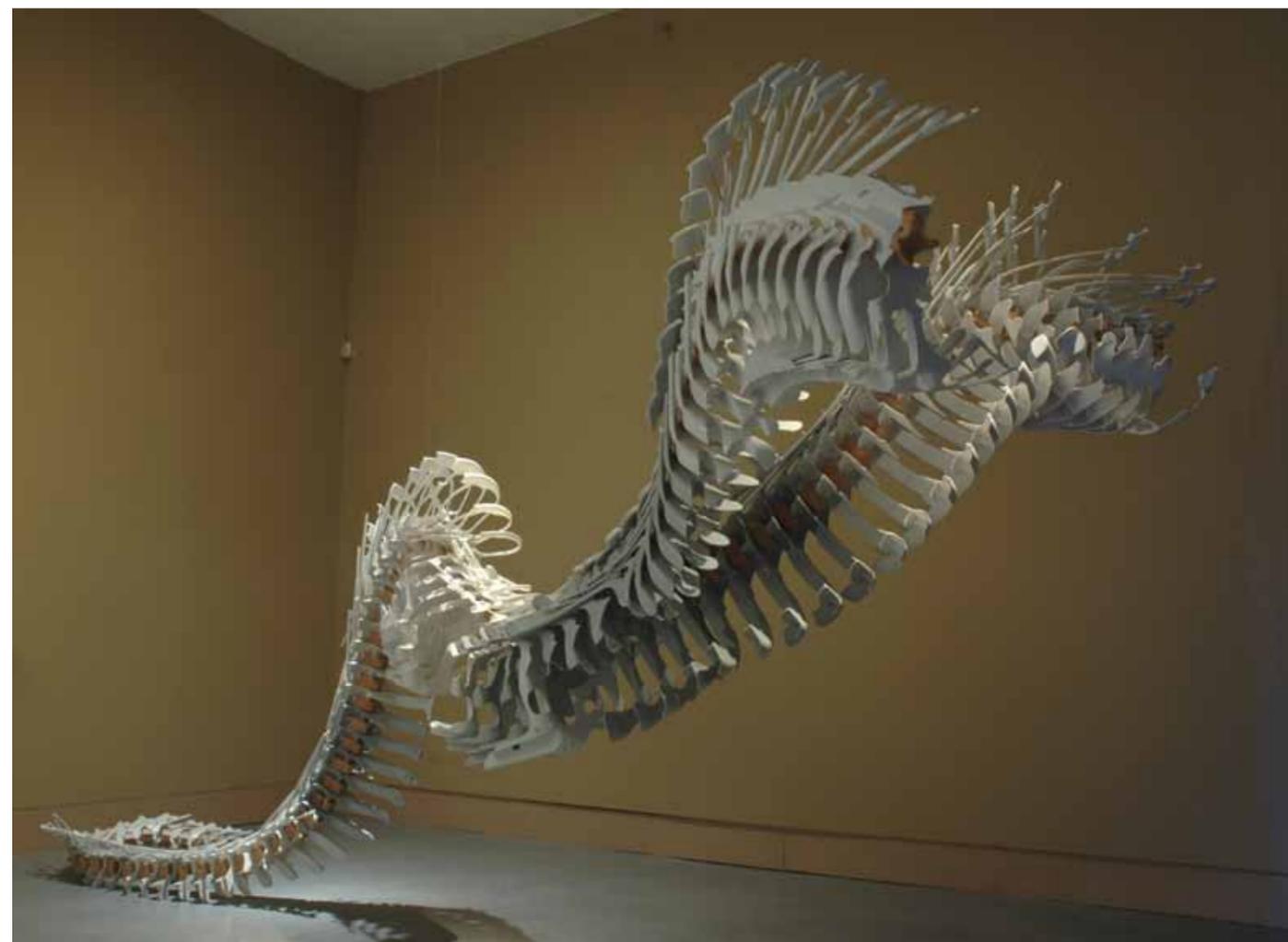
Roland Barthes, “Plastic,” in *Mythologies*

Plastic monobloc chairs are the world’s most widely distributed and sold industrial furniture item. Each chair is molded as a single unit in a process that lasts no more than 20 seconds. They cool and harden in the open air, and are then stacked one atop another. In an article devoted to the international success of this chair prototype, Jens Thiel suggests that the size of the monobloc chair “population” has already exceeded that of the human population. Thiel argues that monobloc chairs have introduced such a dramatic change into our everyday environment that, “Our memories of a world without them are vague or even nonexistent.”^[1] In an Israeli context, the sentiment expressed by Thiel appears to be an indisputable fact. Israeli stores sell hundreds of thousands of simple plastic chairs every year – a striking figure relative to the size of the local population. More than any other product, monobloc chairs are consumed in Israel across cultural, social and political divides society. Such chairs are omnipresent in Israel: They are used to furnish army and police facilities, local municipalities, kibbutzim, beachside restaurants and conference rooms, and even make an appearance at public assemblies. They can be spotted on the terraces of private, middle-class homes, at demonstrations and at mourning receptions in Arab villages, as well as at beachfront weddings. Much like a religious organization, supplying and controlling its believers’ needs from birth to death, so too the plastic chair has been an inseparable part of Israeli life – and is present at marriage ceremonies, on domestic terraces, at PTA meetings, in cafes, at government offices and even at memorial services for fallen soldiers.

Yet despite its incredible success over the past three decades, little has been written about the local monobloc chair, and its history has never been told in full. White plastic chairs, white shutter walls, sun-heated water tanks (and, in certain areas in Israel/Palestine, the separation wall) shape and determine the appearance of the local landscape, yet are largely absent from the discourse on design. Instead, local designers and scholars prefer to focus on international trends, to nostalgically study past styles or to forecast future trends. And, yet, their immediate surroundings are overtaken by functional, modular, cheap, simple objects that are rapidly cast in plastic or concrete, and that are capable of withstanding the rapid deterioration processes imposed by the country’s harsh sunlight and political climate. Despite the seemingly marginal cultural status of this chair, it has inadvertently succeeded where many critical, open-ended design objects have failed – by enabling its users to integrate it into a range of different narratives. Indeed, its situation in a cultural no-man’s-land has enabled the monobloc chair to become an icon that is both quoted and reinvented in art and design works; it has been transformed into a quintessential signifier of local material culture; and it has come to represent a range of practical concerns, outdoor life and the blurring of boundaries between exterior and interior. Its low cost and availability have made it an object that can easily be manipulated and adapted for various uses. Indeed, its naked appearance seems to call for some kind of intervention – for some form of cover or cushioning, if not for a more sweeping transformation.

The Sagol Family’s Gamble

During the 1960s, when the price of oil was low, various international designers and



companies toyed with the idea of creating a monobloc plastic chair. The pioneering models designed during this period were all distinguished by innovative silhouettes that paved the way for the later, mass-produced models. In 1960, the Danish designer Verner Panton presented the first models of a cantilevered plastic chair. The silhouette of these chairs was based on new structural principles, which became possible with the elimination of the traditional constraints related to working with natural materials. However, seven additional years elapsed before various technical difficulties were resolved, and the commercial production of monobloc chairs began.^[2] During that

same decade, the design of other plastic chair models similarly exploited the material’s inherent qualities. In 1965, the Italian designer Joe Colombo created the “4867” plastic chair for the Italian company Kartell.^[3] This chair, which appeared structurally stable and strong, was not cast as a single unit, but was rather composed of five different parts – a seat and back cast as a single unit, and four legs that screwed into it. A year later, at the 1966 furniture exhibition in Cologne, Helmut Bazner presented a plastic chair model that set a new standard for multi-use stackable chairs. Bazner’s Model No. BA1171 was to be the first mass-produced monobloc chair. In order to strengthen its legs, Bazner

inverted the structural and visual logic typical of stable wood or aluminum chair legs, setting the legs at a wide angle. This angle, together with the chair’s light weight, enabled it to be stacked into piles; even now, 35 years after its creation, this silhouette is still typical of most monobloc chairs.^[4] By the early 1980s, companies in both France and the U.S. began producing commercial, anonymous models of plastic chairs at prices that did not exceed the price of a fast-food meal. Millions of such chairs have since been sold worldwide. In Israel, the story of the monobloc chair is almost entirely identified with the international success story of the Keter Plastic company. The Israeli version of the monobloc

Image
Uriel Miron / *Cryptozoid Zoological Skeleton*
2009
Photograph by the artist

Previous spread
Lahav Halevy / *Memorial Day, Rabin Square*
2007, Nokia Classic photo-image

[1] Jens Thiel, “Monobloc – On the World Chair,” *Design Miami*, No. 17, December 1-5, 2010, p. 6

[2] Michael Tambini, *The Look of the Century: Design Icons of the 20th Century*, London: Dorling Kindersley, 1999, p. 65.

[3] Catherine McDermott, *Design Museum: 20th Design*, London: Carlton Books, 1999, p. 130.

[4] Editors of Phaidon Press, *Mass Production: Products from Phaidon Design Classics*, Volume 2., London: Phaidon, 2006.

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has become a source of local pride, and has achieved a much more central position in everyday life than its European or American counterparts. Keter executives have ascribed the chair's success to the local climate and related lifestyle, which involves spending long hours in the sun, entertaining on open terraces and in gardens and engaging in outdoor activities. Plastic furniture requires little maintenance, and is lightweight, easily stackable and extremely cheap. Moreover, its simple appearance enables it to function as a neutral background for different, and even contradictory, purposes.

Keter sells more than one million plastic chairs a year, with the basic Club style, which has been in production since the early 1980s, still topping the sales charts. In Israel alone, 300,000 units of the Club chair were sold in 2010. In contrast to many other commodities, whose manufacturing has been outsourced to the Far East due to lower production costs, the monobloc chairs are still manufactured locally, since their production process is entirely automated. These chairs are made of an extremely cheap, environmentally friendly and easily recyclable material called polypropylene, which is composed of oil residues. The material's degree of purity determines the quantity required to produce a stable, high-quality chair: the purer the material, the less of it is needed to produce a single chair. The first Keter chairs weighed three kilograms. Today, according to Zvi Zak, the CEO of Keter's outdoor furniture division, the use of top-quality crude materials has resulted in the production of stable chairs that weigh no more than two kilograms.

Although the monobloc chair's omnipresence in Israeli life is now taken for granted, in the early 1980s its production was a serious gamble on the part of the Sagol family, which

owns Keter. According to Miki Ganor, the industrial designer who created the first series of Keter chairs and tables, the company's initial marketing survey concluded that there was no point in investing in the development of plastic furniture. The survey seemed to indicate that Israeli consumers preferred wooden garden furniture, and would not introduce plastic furniture into their homes. Yet Keter's directors continued to believe in their new initiative, and decided to go ahead and launch a collection of plastic garden furniture.

Ganor, who designed the successful chair models Club, Dalia and Carmel, which all share a similar silhouette, reveals that the design of all three models was based on a similar chair produced during that period in France. Ganor's studio prepared a series of sketches, one of which served as the basis for the initial model. The design process proceeded quickly. According to Ganor, Keter CEO Sami Sagol was blessed with strong intuition and a good understanding of products: "He saw the model, told me to add two centimeters here and take off two there, and that was it. The manufacturing process began." The first chair designed by Ganor had armrests, and the height of its back was determined by the number of chairs it was possible to stack in a shipping container. Later on, Ganor's studio designed a variation on this model that had no armrest, and which was the basis for the successful Club model that is still sold today. The basic silhouette has since undergone numerous modifications: Keter's poolside chair, for instance, is similarly based on the same model. As Ganor laconically describes it: "We just took it and chopped off its legs."

Keter Plastic's basic series of chairs was designed for outdoor use. Despite the negative

conclusions presented by the company's initial market survey, it was adopted by Israelis with such enthusiasm that many consumers chose to bring the chairs into their homes and to use them as dining chairs. Indeed, a 1986 Keter advertisement stated: "This coming spring, Keter promises a cheerful, colorful new line of chairs, which will bring their garden furniture into the home." While the sweeping success of plastic chairs led municipalities throughout Europe to draft municipal by-laws that require plastic garden furniture to be dressed with cloth covers,^[5] in Israel the bare plastic chairs made their way undisturbed not only into gardens, but also into the domestic interior. Ganor himself was not surprised by this local phenomenon, and reveals that as a young man, he himself used monobloc chairs in his kitchen. Ganor believes that the success of the local monobloc chair stems from its low cost and highly efficient design, its suitability to the local lifestyle, and the fact that: "It has no pretensions. It's a truly popular chair." Ezri Tarazi, chair of the Bezalel School of Arts and Design's M.A. program in industrial design, and founder of the D-Vision internship program offered by Keter, similarly believes that the basic model's enduring success stems from its low cost and efficient design: "The Club is a basic, minimal chair, as opposed to a minimalist one. You couldn't possibly produce a cheaper chair. Nor could you produce a more minimal chair without using expensive plastic to support the weight it bears." Tarazi believes that the widespread use of this chair, and its introduction into Israeli homes, are telling of the local cultural attitude toward aesthetics more generally: "Local culture does not put an emphasis on aesthetic concerns, and vernacular Israeli taste is quite informal. When presented with a cheap chair, Israelis will buy entire stacks

[5] Thiel notes that, since 2003, municipal by-laws prohibiting the use of plastic garden furniture without cloth coverings have been passed in Bern, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Bratislava and additional cities. See Thiels, fn. 1 above, p. 16.





of it. Such chairs, however, have no enduring cultural life, and will be disposed of instantly if a better option comes along. This attitude is related to the culture of fluorescent lamps, which are just as common in Israeli kitchens and dining room areas. They create the wrong mood and make the house look like a corridor in a government office building, but they are cheap. The white Club chair both literally and conceptually inhabits the same spaces as these fluorescent lamps. In a deep sense, Israeli culture is about an inherent lack of authenticity. Israelis vacillate between being in denial of their origins in an attempt to create a new kind of Israeli identity, and the longing for the lost authenticity of Jewish life in Poland or Iraq. This ambivalence

does enable us to forge an authentic visual culture, so that Israeli authenticity is in fact an embodiment of an eclectic lack of authenticity.” During the 1980s and 1990s, Keter focused on improving its manufacturing processes. Over the past decade, following the worldwide decline in the sale of plastic garden furniture, the company has recognized the importance of original design and development. Tarazi disputes the accepted view of monobloc chairs as inferior design items: “The first and most famous monobloc chair was designed by Verner Panton for Vitra. To this day, no other designer chair has replaced this cultural icon. A monobloc is not necessarily a bad design object. The local plastic industry has focused

on improving manufacturing processes, and Israeli experts on this subject are the best in the world. The Israeli industry has managed to overtake entire sectors of the plastic product industry, and Israel now boasts the highest possible level of expertise in producing such objects. At the same time, it is only over the past decade that Israeli companies have come to recognize the importance of design as an important value.”

Endless Transformation

The local consumption of plastic chairs has a rich and complex story. The stark, sterile appearance of the monobloc chair described by Tarazi has led both artists and designers to domesticate, personify and disguise it in

various ways, and even to melt it down in order to re-create it. Approximately half of the Keter Plastic Club chairs sold today in Israel are white, a third of them are green and the rest are produced in a range of bold primary colors – red, yellow, black and blue. Designer Eitan Sharif’s proposal for the work *Plaza Hotel* (2001), for instance, was born after he discovered, to his astonishment, that Keter’s red chairs were exclusively produced for the country’s Arab sector. Sharif’s proposal, which was submitted to the Ministry of Tourism, centered on a daily intervention in the southern façade of the Tel Aviv Plaza Hotel, which is located on the city’s seaside promenade. As Sharif wrote in his proposal, “In Israel, white chairs are manufactured for the Jewish population, and red chairs are manufactured for the Arab population. My proposal [...] is for an interactive project involving the daily replacement of a certain number of the white chairs on hotel terraces with red chairs, in accordance with the number of Palestinians killed in the territories that same day.” This proposal, which never received a response from the Ministry of Tourism, clearly reveals that the simple, cheap, secular monobloc chair becomes highly charged once it enters the consumer arena and is integrated into local life. Moreover, nuances that would appear marginal in other cultural contexts, such as the color of the pigment mixed into the plastic, may become highly explosive when they acquire a certain national or class affiliation.

Ronen Kadushin, an Israeli designer who lives and works in Berlin, has explored the option of covering and domesticating the cold, sterile plastic chair. In contrast to Israeli consumers, who have brought this piece of garden furniture indoors without cushioning



it, Kadushin’s work *Open Source Chair* (2003) is based on an open source DIY concept, which enables anyone to attach a stretch of carpeting to the monobloc chair, thus transforming it into a semi-upholstered chair. Kadushin’s concept is based on the assumption that monobloc chairs of one kind or another may be purchased today throughout the world, alongside stretches of soft, flat material resembling wall-to-wall carpeting. His project exists as a pattern file that may be downloaded from the Internet, printed and used, with the addition of different colors and finishes. Kadushin believes that, despite the simplicity of this process, which does not require sewing or complex preparations, the resultant object has added value: “It still comes with some ‘design’ feel: Quirkily asymmetric, the hole on the side referring to the Eames’ 1949 Dove chair – a simple, elegant addition to the plain plastic chair.”

Artist Uriel Miron uses the white monobloc chair as a basis for the creation of sculptures that gradually evolve over the course of the work process. Miron’s works involve the creation of skeletal structures, an imaginary anatomy, and artificial fossils, yet his use of Keter’s monobloc chairs is not based on structural considerations alone: “It’s important for me that the hybrid, seemingly mythological figures I create will be composed of everyday materials that are part of our quotidian landscape,” he explains. Since 2006, Miron has been presenting works that build on the various qualities unique to these chairs. For instance, the work *Rak B’Smachot* (Hebrew for “only on joyous occasions”), exploits the stackable structure of these chairs to create bodies undergoing various forms of metamorphosis. These bodies are at once singular and multiple, and are marked by processes of addition or subtraction.

The sculpture *Cryptozoid Zoological Skeleton* (2009), which contains about 300 plastic and wooden parts, is composed of a single stack of chairs, which Miron transformed into vertebrae resembling a spinal cord. The plastic parts used in this work were all sculpted out of identical chairs, whose back left legs form the connecting point between the different vertebrae. In the series “Seating Arrangement” (2009), one “group portrait” features four chairs crowded together in an area measuring 1.20 x 1.20 meters. The chairs appear to be clinging to one another as they teeter on the verge of collapse, and seem to have been reduced to their own skeletons. Miron cuts away at the chairs and removes almost their entire mass, while using the remaining structure to delineate a three-dimensional drawing in space.

Keter’s monobloc chairs are similarly dismantled and transformed into sculptural objects by the artist Alice Klingman. Klingman, however, does not cut or stack the chairs, but rather melts down defective chairs and treats them as crude matter, as if the plastic’s bold primary colors were a series of paint tubes. For the series “Philosophy of a Chair” (2008–09), Klingman brought these defective chairs into her studio, where she redeemed them by transforming them into art objects that conduct a dialogue with the tradition of automatic painting. In the chapter devoted to plastic in his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes that, “More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation.”^[6] Klingman melts down the plastic chairs and dissolves their forms. This process contributes to the chair’s status as a cultural icon, while neutralizing its multiple cultural associations; once it is melted down, even the red chair reassumes its status as nothing but a simple primary color. →

Image

Uriel Miron / *Rak B’Smachot*

2006

Photograph by Meidad Suchowolski

More than any other product, monobloc chairs are consumed in Israel across cultural, social and political divides

Ronen Kadushin / *Open Source Chair*

2003

Photograph by Baruch Ben Yitzhak

[6] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Annette Lavers, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1983.