Ettore Sottsass - 'The sense of things'
film van Heinz Bütler 2002

**Filmvertoning over leven en werk van Etore Sottsass, die OndernemershuisAlex51 tezamen met productontwerper / interieurarchitect Maurice Mentjens mag organiseren.
Na afloop van de filmvertoning zal Maurice Mentjens informeel met ons van gedachte wisselen over Sottsass, die hij jarenlang als vriend gekend heeft.**

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Alex Battalaan 51, Maastricht
Deze activiteit is voor ieder gratis toegankelijk

Ettore Sottsass, Born 14 September 1917, Innsbruck, Died 31 December 2007 Milan.

It would not be difficult to find yourself living a life shaped almost entirely by Ettore Sottsass, the greatest Italian designer of the last half century, who died on Monday in Milan. So many of the things that you touch in the course of an ordinary day could bring you into an intimate physical connection with his work and his constantly inventive mind. At home, the bed you sleep in, and the bath that you soak in, as well as the taps, and the door handle that you turn, and the door itself, could all have been designed by him. So could the dining table, and the book shelves, and the kitchen furniture. At work, there are plenty of Sottsass designed desks and chairs to choose from. The carpet on the floor, and the lights that you read by, as well as the partitions, the light switches, and the storage system could all have been designed by him too.
There are knifes and forks and spoons and glasses and plates and cups that go on selling in their thousands all designed by Sottsass. The watch that you tell the time with, and telephone, you use, are - assuming you are happy with a land line - bath potential Sottsass designs. And if you happened to live in Milan, even the airport that you can't help but use, has a Sottsass interior, though Malpensa is not it has to be said, the most successful of Sottsass's projects. AII of these, and countless other artfacts large and smalI, from television sets, to precious glassware from fashion shops for Esprit, to calculators for Olivetti, are all the product of Ettore Sottsass, and his team, the most productive, and one of the most influential design studios Italy has ever produced. We live in a world which values the useless ahead of the useful, which celebrates art, untainted by the least hint of utility, above the ingenuity of design that is burdened by function, and creates a cultural hierachy to match. It was perhaps the greatest achievement of Ettore Sottsass's long and remarkable career that he made this distinction irrelevant. He was interested not in making objects that sell because they look pretty or seductive or precious. What he wanted to do was to find ways to give the every day objects that we all use, some sort of meaning. He wanted to show that they are not just banal clutter, but are shaped by creative intelligence and an understanding both of how they are used, and how they are made.
When most people are thinking about retirement, Sottsass reinvented himself as the father of post modernism in design, by starting the Memphis movement in 1981 an explosion of colour and energy that was a revolt against complaceny and conventional good taste. Memphis was a joyous, entirely un bossy manifesto for design as an emotional expression. It was also an attempt to bite the hand that fed it by gently satirising designers. Design is, in the end, about making us want to buy more things, and Sottsass at heart , always deeply subersive, was highly ambivalent about that. Memphis put Sottsass at the centre of an international group of architects and designers that have moved on to build their own careers around the world, from Johanna Grawunder from America, and British born James Irvine, to Michele de Lucchi who is perhaps the most successful of the new generation of designers in ltaly.
Throughout his life, Sottsass managed to pursue two parallel careers. At the same time that he was working on the mass produced, trying to give some sense of dignity to the mundane, he was also creating ceramics, and glass, and limited edition furniture pieces that had the emotional intensity of art.

The design world has become fixated by youth, and by the merciless pursuit of the next big thing, But age had no effect on Sottsass, despite his sardonic hooded bloodhound eyes, that had a certain sadness in them. With the English designer Chris Redfern, he was still running a busy and active office that was doing creative work right up until the end of his life. Ernest Mourmans his galleriest exhibited a powerful new collection of limited edition objects last year. Not the most remarkable fact about the exhibition that the Design Museum in London staged to mark Ettore Sottsass's 90th birthday last year was that Sottsass designed it himself with restrained elegance.
Sottsass showed that it was possible to understand design as a cultural as well as a technical issue. When he designed the Valentine portable typewriter for Olivetti with Perry King, he was able to turn a piece of office equipment, into a desirable object by understanding that there are emotions involved as well as ergonomics in the way that we use and understand our possessions. Sottsass made the Valentine out of bright red plastic, with twin splashes of vivid orange for the spools: turning it from a machine into a kind of toy. As he put it himself, the sort of thing to keep lonely poets company on Sundays in the country. Four decades later, Jonathan Ive did the same for Apple, with the I Pod, turning technology that grew out of office equiprnent into a desirabie posession. Sottsass, like his fàther, also called Ettore, saw himself first and foremost as an architect. Almost all ltalian designers trained as architects, and too many of them want to go back to designing buildings, even though they are manifestly better sticking to the scale of cutlery and chairs. Sottsass was an exception, in that he really was a highly gifted architect, even though he was entirely outside the mainstream. Sottsass knew everybody, and worked everywhere.
He even managed to build an apartment in the unlikely setting of the Albany in London for Johnny Pigozzi. At the other end of the scale he designed a golfresort for the Peoples Liberation Army in China.
Sottsass was born in Innsbruck in the dying days of the Austro Hungarian empire, educated in Turin, and moved to work as an architect in Milan before being drafted into the Italian army. As a young officer he took part in Mussolini's invasion of Montenegro. After the Italian collapse he and his men walked home to Milan.
He worked brietly in America for George Nelson, an experience that gave him an edge when Olivetti wanted some transatlantic expertise to give shape to their first main frame computer, the Elea. It was a measure as much of Olivetti's open mindedness, as Sottsass's own skiIls that he could find himself moving from making folded metal umbrella stands to working on Italy's most advanced piece of high technology in just ten years.
What Sottsass brought to the exercise was a way to make the software designers, and the engineers, more than a random piece of functional equipment. In Sottsass's eyes a machine as big as a house that could think needed to be treated with respect. He gave it a character and a personality. Sottsass is the last survivor of the generation of designers that dominated Italian design for half a century. It was Sottsass who trained the generation that will succeed it.
Sottsass is survived by his second wife, the writer, Barbara Radice.

Deyan Sudjic January 2 2008 The Guardian