

**Bruno Ninaber van Eyben —
Industrial designer**

Bruno Ninaber van Eyben is an industrial designer who produces and distributes his own products. His work is included in many important collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, while his designs feature on guilder coins and Dutch euros. In 1985 he co-founded the design consultancy, nlpk. He has worked from his own studio in Delft since 1997.

**“Discovering
simplicity —**

Every day I work with matter, but what I have learnt through my work is that form is not just a material quality. The true shape of an object is determined by the space that surrounds it.

An object is never what it actually is, it's what you think it is. You always want something from it: you may want to take care of it, perhaps you don't like it and you want to throw it away. Each object has its own atmosphere, created by your memories and expectations of it.

I think that when you make objects you have to focus on how they fit into the composition of life. A chair is only a chair when you sit on it, the rest of the time it just takes up space. The challenge is to create something that performs its task well and doesn't get in the way.

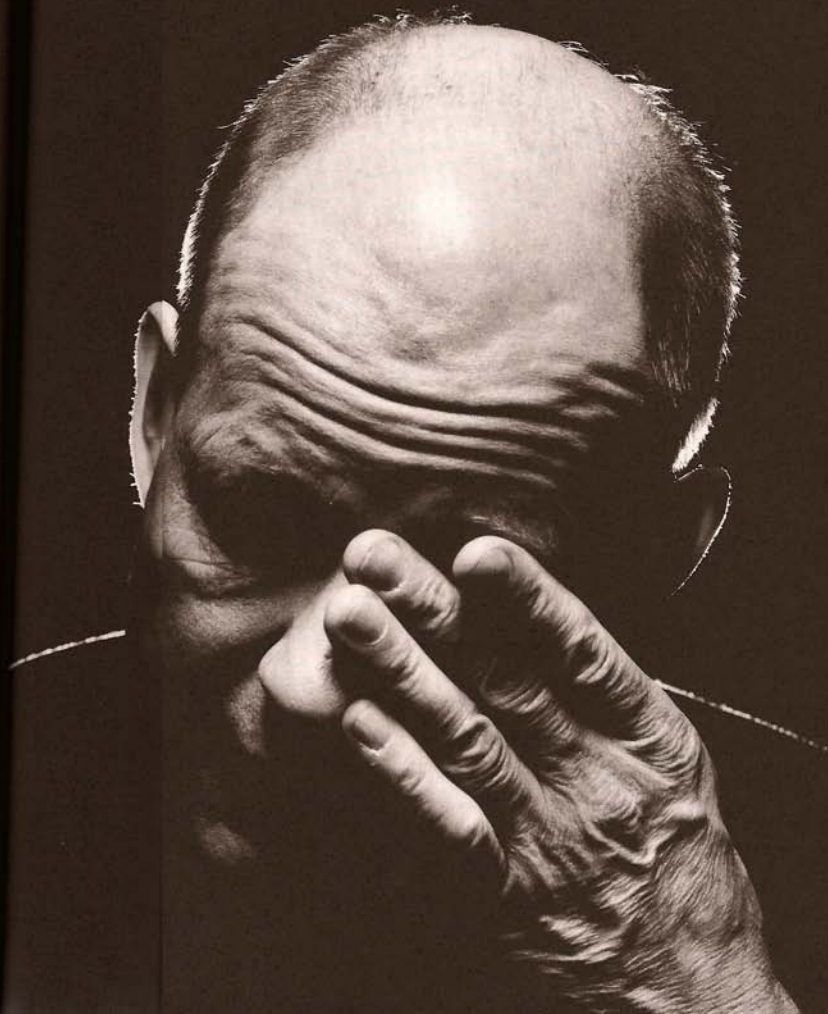
Invariably, I find that simplicity, paring down to essential qualities, is the right approach. Simplicity always delivers the greatest surprise, because it is then that an object's essence is at its most vivid. Discovering that simplicity is a complex process.

I don't mean the simplicity of minimalism; that speaks only about the object in itself. For me, what works counts for more than what looks good. Objects are activated by use and that's what I like to bring to the fore.

You find that in nature. Flowers may be beautiful, but the reason is not aesthetic, it's practical. It's through understanding the rationale for a product that you give it an autonomous form, one that isn't subject to the vagaries of fashion.

You get enough information to create a design whenever the questions you ask are the essential ones. Recently, I was with students who were making a floating playground. They constructed rafts and then attached an old bicycle to move them around. I suggested they study the motion of water. If you look at nature you won't find a fish with a propeller on its back, the fish itself is the propeller.

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“Ultimately,
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Like flowers, most products are designed to seduce. Their sheen attracts and encourages us to buy. But with this comes the risk that we don't consider whether they are right for us or that when we own them we will feel let down.

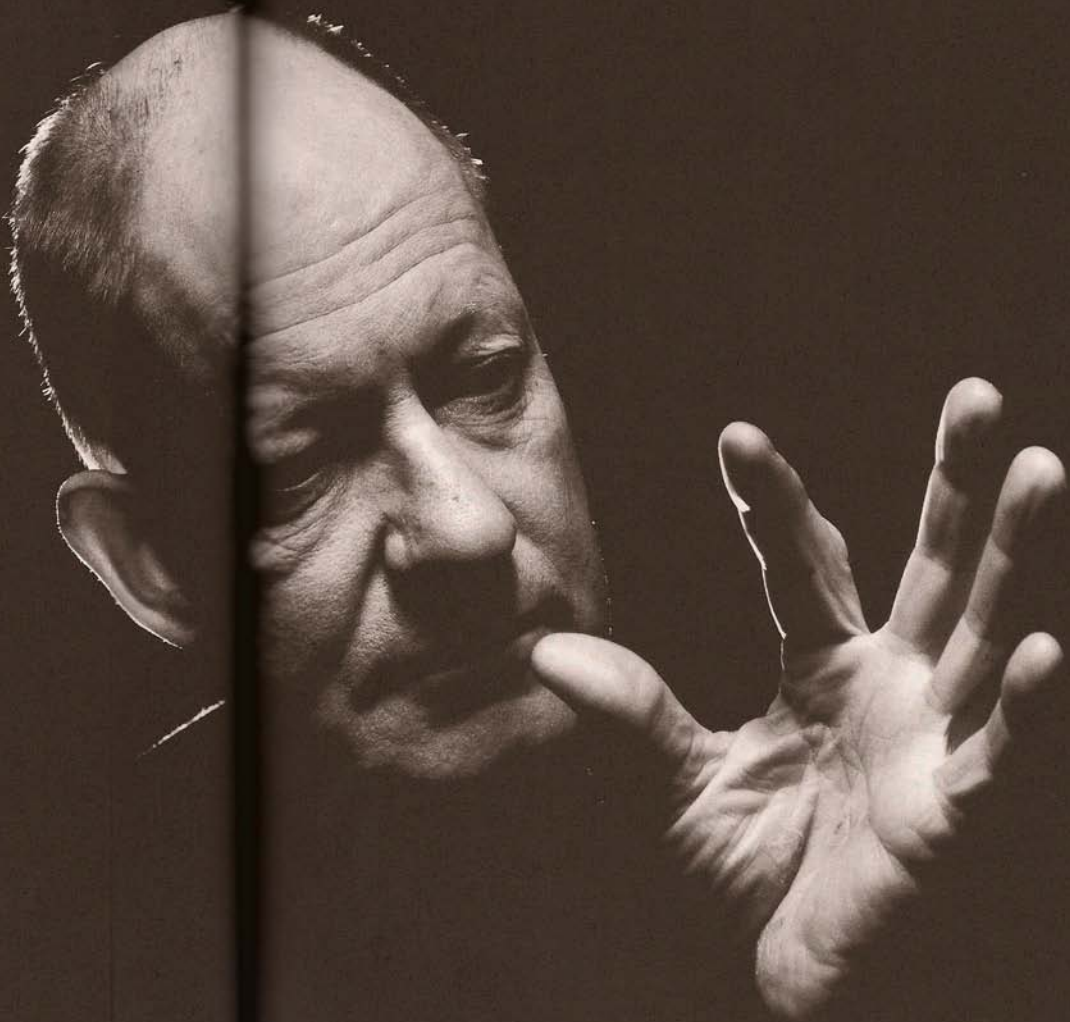
Badly made products are costly. Things that don't work properly take up a lot of energy. When your alarm clock doesn't wake you, the shower doesn't work and the toaster burns the bread your whole life is made chaotic.

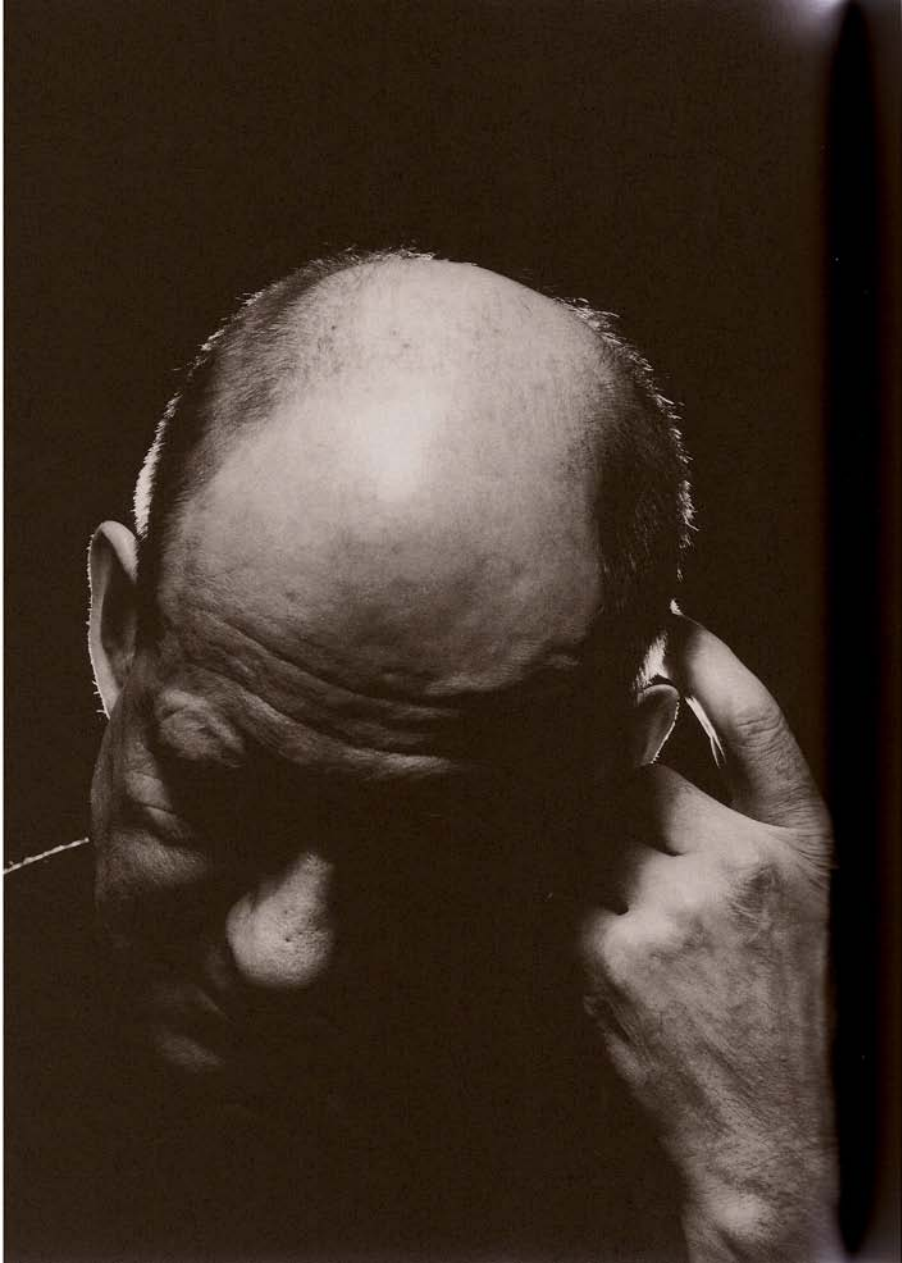
Living is all about interaction. We engage with our surroundings on many levels: by applying our minds, our energy, our creativity, the information we have — all these things. An object only plays a small role, but we are surrounded by a lot of objects. Together they have a huge influence.

The way we relate to an object changes over time. There's a mental process involved. It can be characterised as a life-cycle with three basic stages.

First, there is an engagement period. You discover a new product and wonder whether to get it or not. Then you buy it, and while it's novel you are often thinking about it. There comes a point though, and this is the second stage, when the object is just part of everyday life. It does its job and you barely notice it. In the end, bits fall off and it starts to go wrong. During this final, decaying phase the object demands your attention again.

The first and the final stages take up a lot of energy. The middle stage is by far the most convenient. Ultimately, the best products are the ones that become invisible.





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Ideally, each stage of the cycle should be given time to run its course, but business likes to emphasise the desirability of its products to speed up the selling process. This leads to fast consumption. People succumb to the charm of a product, discover it doesn't fit their needs and then swiftly get rid of it. It feeds a culture where disappointment and aggressive behaviour become the norm.

I try to get away from that speed. I don't advertise. I prefer people to be able to take the time to discover if one of my products is really right for them. Then they can make it part of their own world instead of having to participate in the values of someone else's brand.

Construction-wise I consider myself a true inventor, but invention doesn't always have to be about materials. It also takes place in the social sphere.

To understand what you want from an object, I have to understand you and discover how you might want to interact with it. Objects are hard, material things — it is action that brings them to life. Implicit in every object is the recognition that in even the smallest act there can be a powerful ritual.

Some objects I make relate directly to rituals. While these have symbolic importance, they also have a practical use. Balancing these two attributes is a delicate task. Guilder and Dutch euro coins should represent the country but they are also there so people can buy things. A giveaway item should be useful for the one who receives it, but it is also meant to initiate conversation.

When I was asked to design the medallion for the Erasmus Prize, I attended the ceremony. What struck me then was that this highly prestigious event seemed devoid of any symbolism.

I included some apposite words written by Erasmus on the sash of the award. That text was incorporated into the ceremony and it has helped to endow the occasion with a substance it didn't have before. Objects can have that kind of influence.

I don't run with society and that allows me to observe people working. I can say, 'hey, there's an easier way. I can help. Let me create a tool for you'. Mine is a privileged position. Society gives me food to live on, in return I watch and I serve it.