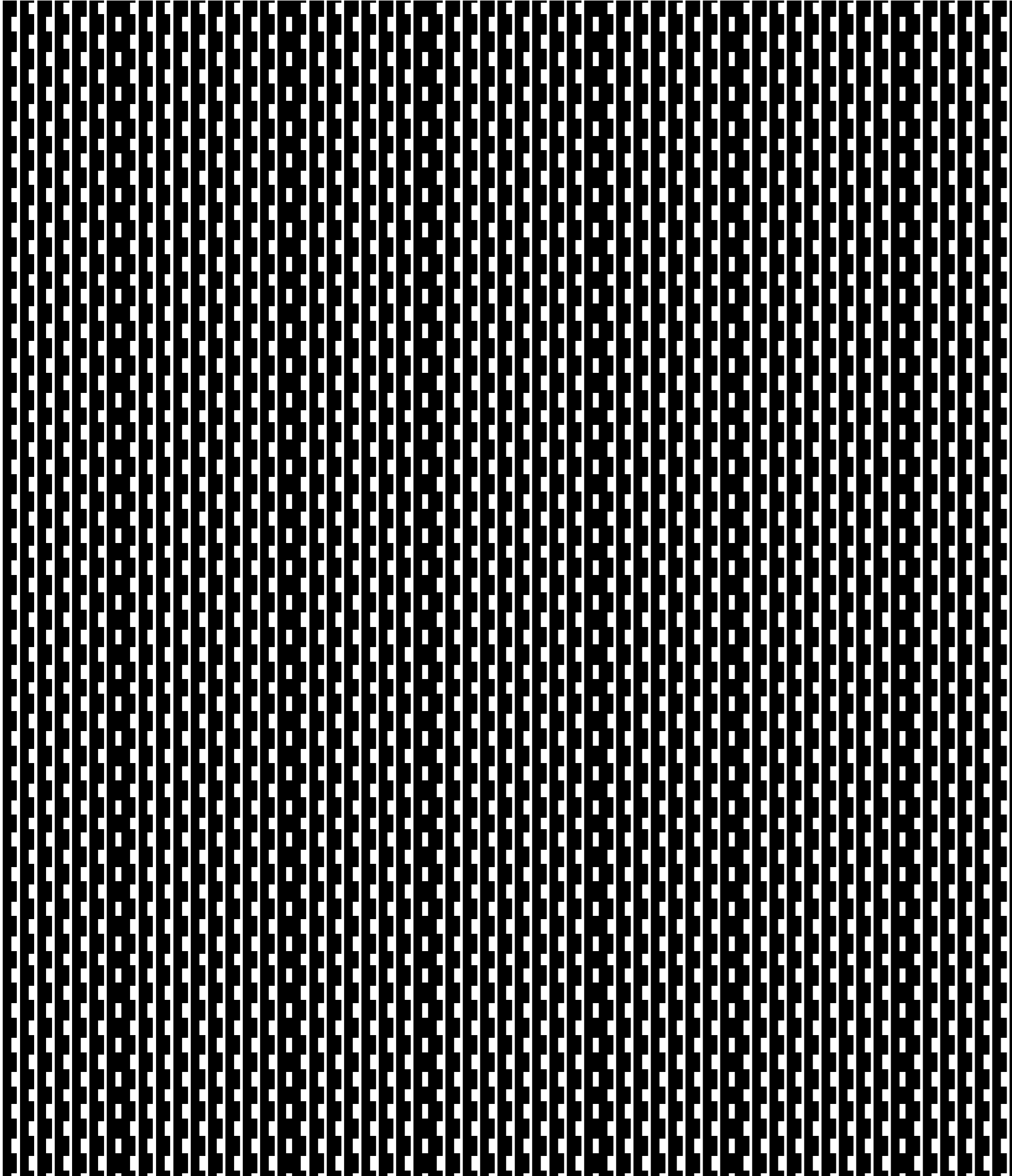


POSTMODERNISM

STYLE AND SUBVERSION, 1970–1990



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Edited by Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt

V&A Publishing

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Constructivist maternity dress, 1979. Worn by Grace Jones (detail of pl. 4)

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CURATORS' FOREWORD

It may seem strange or even perverse for a large public institution like the V&A to tell the story of postmodernism. After all, this 'style' and the ideas that gave rise to it were explicitly antagonistic to authority. Postmodernism's territory was meant to be the periphery, not the centre. Its artefacts resist taxonomy, and its episodic cadence defies the orderly impulse of the historian. Yet exhibitionism was also a defining characteristic of postmodernism. Postmodern objects were often designed with their own mediation in mind, and circulated rapidly through magazine covers, music videos and mainstream feature film. Alessi's production of limited edition silver tableware in the 1980s, for example, was in part aimed at curators. The collection was sold directly to institutions eager to present the roll-call of postmodern architects through exhibition-friendly objects.¹ Postmodernism was often made with its own museumification in mind, and was supremely self-regarding in its methods, often circling back on its own tracks (pls 1 and 2). In reproducing postmodernist objects in this book, and placing them on exhibition plinths under hot lights for the viewing pleasure of thousands, we feel we are making them right at home.

Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970–1990 follows several other major V&A exhibitions that have tackled the 'grand narratives' of twentieth-century style: Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Modernism amongst them.² Yet we consider our project to be unique within this series; given the slippery nature of postmodernism and the toxicity still associated with that word,

our venture might well be seen as a fool's errand. The assertive title we have chosen, with fixed and tidy dates appended to it, certainly does not seem to be getting into the spirit of the thing. Why begin in 1970 when many of our protagonists (Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, Tadanori Yokoo, Ettore Sottsass) had made their key 'departure' works before that date (works that are found in the book and exhibition anyway)? Why close in 1990, years before the substantial impact of postmodernism had manifested itself upon vast swathes of China, India and the Gulf States? Singapore, Beijing and Dubai are arguably more postmodern now than Milan and London ever were.

So the choice of our 20-year span may be artificial. But it is also deliberate. By attending in detail to this fast-paced period of time, we can assess the phenomenal range and penetration of postmodern practice. Milan and London in the 1970s – not to mention New York, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Berlin and Sydney – would not have recognized their 1990s selves. The boom-bust turbulence of the postmodern moment left society, industry and even individuals' sense of selfhood fundamentally changed. From the 'years of lead' (as the 70s recession was known in Italy) to the 'designer decade' of the 80s, the economic policies and effects of late capitalism (to use a more specific nomenclature, Reaganomics and Thatcherism) were in a way the engines of postmodernism. But it was also powered by radicalism and resistance, which were established before inflationary culture took hold.

Right: 1
Tadanori Yokoo,
A la Maison de M. Civeçawa
(*To the Shibusawa House*),
poster for the Garumella
Company, 1968. Silkscreen.
V&A: E.43–2011

Far right: 2
Tadanori Yokoo,
The Great Mirror of the Dance
as an Immolative Sacrifice,
poster for the Garumella
Company, 1968. Silkscreen.
V&A: E.44–2011



Our choice of dates is also meant to focus attention on the period immediately prior to the arrival of the World Wide Web (publicly available for the first time in 1991). Postmodernism was a pre-digital phenomenon. Yet one of its greatest distinctions was its anticipatory nature. Even though the arrival of the Apple Mac in 1984 started to transform graphic design, postmodernism was first achieved by conventional methods – paper, scissors and glue – and distributed by print, post and fax. The products and images of postmodernism, however, presaged the non-space of the screen and the clicking, hopping and surfing rhythms of hypertext. As Paul Greenhalgh says at the end of this book, postmodernism stands in relation to our own moment as the Steam Age did to its own oil-powered future.

Thirty years after the apex of the postmodern episode, it seems high time to sort out exactly what happened. Before plunging in though, it is worth mentioning three things this project has *not* tried to achieve. A first proviso: this is not a history of art or literature. As curators in a design museum, we have given ourselves permission to use paintings, sculpture and novels as an accompaniment or adjunct (much as our colleagues in other institutions tend to use chairs and teapots). Having said this, we have gladly exploited the fact that artists and writers in this period were very attentive to the language of design. Graphics in the work of Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer; commodities in the sculpture of Ai Weiwei, Ashley Bickerton and Haim Steinbach – these played a key role in eroding disciplinary lines between fine art and design, anticipating today's more fluid creative landscape (pl. 3). We include them here, partly as a way of indicating postmodernism's contribution to that relaxation of categories, and partly as a helpful commentary on the course of postmodern design. The latter motivation has also prompted us to engage in the quintessential postmodern tactic of the untethered quotation, pulling apt phrases from fiction, lyrics and theory.

Secondly, we have taken our subject to be postmodernism rather than postmodernity in general – that is, a set of intentional design strategies, not the overarching condition that made them possible.³ We have not tried to write the history of Chicken McNuggets or nouvelle cuisine, for example, or shoulder pads or cocaine – though these examples of 1980s material culture could justifiably be described as postmodern. While we have tried to be acutely aware of shifts in attitude to history, identity and money over the course of these two decades (which social theorist David Harvey memorably

summarized with the phrase 'time-space compression'), our emphasis throughout has been on design practice.⁴

A third, and final, note: the reader will not find anywhere in this book, or the exhibition it accompanies, a single handy definition of postmodernism. Recently, the critic Louis Menand noted that 'postmodernism is the Swiss Army Knife of critical concepts. It's definitionally overloaded, and it can do almost any job you need done.'⁵ We recognize this flexibility as a strength, and do not believe that postmodern practice was ever carried out with precise parameters in mind. Our attempt has therefore been historical rather than definitional. We have tried to clearly set out, for the first time, the key practitioners, objects and techniques that make up this fascinating passage in design history. Doubtless any other curators would have picked a different path through the wreckage. But though we would make no claims about the definitiveness of this project, we would stand by its usefulness – the usefulness of assembling a postmodernism that is more than the sum of its many parts. Despite the seemingly vast literature on postmodernism produced in the 1980s and 90s, little that has been written on design extends beyond the standard survey text or hagiography. With a few exceptions in recent years, histories of postmodernism are surprisingly scarce. As curators, then, we started with objects, examining the whole circuit of design from production, through distribution and mediation, to consumption.

Like Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, we have tried to uphold the values of both/and, not either/or. Postmodernism was both an extension and intensification of some aspects of Modernism, and a conscious departure from it. Moreover, its practitioners consciously played these two aspects against one another. They resisted classification, even running from the label 'postmodernism' itself as if it had turned back to bite them (which, indeed, it had a tendency to do). Amongst the many artists, designers, architects, performers and makers we have spoken to in the course of organizing this project, very few embraced the term with outright affection. The kaleidoscopic structure of this book – our own single narrative, accompanied by a 'heap of fragments', essays that are multi-vocal and wide-ranging, addressing the particular, episodic and personal – is the means by which we have sought to accommodate this complexity. This work has been informed by theory, but has not been in thrall to it. It has embraced the interdisciplinarity of postmodern practice whilst respecting the specificity of genre. Above all, it puts design at centre stage.

Opposite: 3
Haim Steinbach, *supremely black*, 1985. Plastic laminated wood shelf, ceramic pitchers, cardboard detergent boxes. Private collection



POSTMODERNISM: STYLE AND SUBVERSION



4
Jean-Paul Goude and Antonio Lopez,
Constructivist maternity dress, 1979.
Worn by Grace Jones

You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?¹
—Talking Heads

In 1985, art critic Hal Foster wrote: ‘Postmodernism: does it exist at all, and if so, what does it mean? Is it a concept or a practice, a matter of local style or a whole new period or economic phase? What are its forms, effects, place?’²

By the time Foster posed these questions, there was no shortage of evidence of the forms, effects and place of postmodernism. Luxury tableware carried kitsch or historical motifs; TV advertisements were laden with ironic pastiche; public spaces bore the signs of ‘Disneynification’ or heritage styling; fashion had raided the dressing-up box to produce a mix of decadent looks. Nor was there a shortage of column inches devoted to postmodernism. Academics and journalists argued vociferously over its meaning. But what did this all add up to? If postmodernism was a territory, then it was contested. If it was a style, then that style was an agglomeration of all other styles. And by the time most people had heard of it, its demise had already been declared.

Foster might have added another item to his list of questions about postmodernism: ‘And what is it called?’ Postmodernism acquired an exhausting range of *noms de plume* and sub-genres: radical design, adhocism, counter-design, transavantgardism, neo-expressionism, radical eclecticism, critical regionalism. Similarly, the prefix ‘post’ was affixed to an assortment of social and theoretical constructs: one heard of post-industrialization, post-fordism, post-colonialism, post-disciplinarity, post-gender, even post-human.

The arrival of the ‘post’ signalled not only the end of grand narratives, but also the removal of certainty itself as a base of operations. Even at its peak in the mid-1980s postmodernism was hard to locate. Modernism had its manifestos and its schools, its camps and champions, and had been authoritatively claimed as a movement. Postmodernism, by contrast, was a collection of wry looks and ironic gestures. Modernists devised new windows on the world; postmodernists offered a shattered mirror. Modernism dreamt of utopian visions, which would transform society; postmodernism threw together a new look for a night on the town. Modernism declared itself to be beyond style (style was mutable, but Modernism was ‘universal’). For postmodernism, style was everything. Instead of authenticity, postmodernism celebrated hybridity. In place of truth, postmodernism had attitude (pl. 4).

But if postmodernism was just a pose, it could nonetheless be found in almost every genre of creative and philosophical practice. During the 1970s, various fields claimed their own ‘postmodern turn’ – in film, dance and literature, for example – which marked either the crisis or the exhaustion of the avant-garde, as well as a renewed interest in sampling or quoting from the past. Nor did postmodernism occupy a series of niches. Its near-instantaneous spread meant that by the 1980s, postmodern style could be discerned not only in a building, a teapot or a poster, but also in a haircut, a poem, a music video or a dance step.

Despite its disciplinary diversity, postmodernism achieved its greatest visibility in architecture.³ As Reinhold Martin has recently put it, architecture was postmodernism’s ‘avatar’ – the form in which it was most frequently encountered.⁴ As theory followed practice, early and influential formulations used architecture as a rubric to define postmodernism’s terms of engagement.⁵ Graphic design, the applied arts, fashion and styling, film: all were discussed in parallel to buildings as a way of understanding their own postmodern tropes. Architecture’s ‘postmodern turn’ became the blueprint for other disciplinary histories: Rejection of high Modernism? Embrace of the popular, the ‘low’ and the kitsch? A prioritization of surface over depth, style over structure? Use of quotation, metaphor, plurality, parody? Check your work against Michael Graves’ 1982 Portland Building and see (see pl. 208, p. 230).

Postmodernism also inhabited the peripheries of practice, often finding its most effective projections through the lenses of gender, race or identity politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is one aspect of postmodern practice that did not take its lead from architecture. The postmodern reassertion of certain genres was a political act: the reclaiming of sewing and china-painting, for example, in the feminist artist Judy Chicago’s landmark installation *The Dinner Party* of 1974–7; or quilt-making in David McDiarmid’s *Disco Kwilts*, c.1980, ecstatic, sensual works celebrating the multi-ethnic club culture of 1970s Manhattan. Alongside such unique, one-off projects, postmodernism was favoured

by those involved in short-run, batch production, often with a high degree of artisanal involvement. Postmodernism came to the fore in genres such as furniture and interiors, glass, ceramics and metals in the late 1970s in Italy, and its influence spread across the world at an eye-watering pace. Late capitalist, post-fordist service culture could meet localized, specialist and traditional forms of production, shake hands, and do business. Postmodernism produced its own sort of subversive entrepreneur: post-punk British designer-makers fusing fashion, music and design; radical Italian and Spanish designers claiming the attention of family-run manufacturing firms; as well as more isolated figures like Pieter De Bruyne, single-handedly forging a pop historicist style in Belgium, or the Atika group in Prague, weaving together post-industrial aesthetics with Czech folk and surrealist traditions as a protest against a stultifying state-socialist culture (pls 5 and 6).

However, to understand postmodern design at its furthest extent we need to explore the more generic world of consumption – or over-consumption – that it engendered. For an image of this commodity-saturated world, it would be difficult to improve on the following passage from Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), which describes the apartment of the novel's main character, the fashion- and technology-obsessed serial killer Patrick Bateman:

Over the white marble and granite fireplace hangs an original David Onica. It's a 6x4 foot portrait of a naked woman, mostly done in muted grays and olives, sitting on a chaise longue watching MTV, the backdrop a Martian landscape, a gleaming mauve desert scattered with dead, gutted fish, smashed plates rising like a sunburst above the woman's yellow head, and the whole thing is framed in black aluminum steel. The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame) ... A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. A glass top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa, with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke ... An Ettore Sottsass push-button phone [rests on a] steel and glass nightstand next to the bed.⁶

In this environment Bateman carries out the daily activities of a postmodern subject, reading his copy of *USA Today*, washing down his copious intake of pills with Evian, drinking grapefruit-lemon juice from a Baccarat St Remy wine glass, and listening to the new Talking Heads album. Easton Ellis' novel exemplifies the condition of postmodernity in its most terrifying form: consumed by self and status, and utterly lacking a moral compass. How *did* we get here? To answer that question, we need to return to an earlier imagining of death than the one presented in *American Psycho* – the death of Modernism itself.

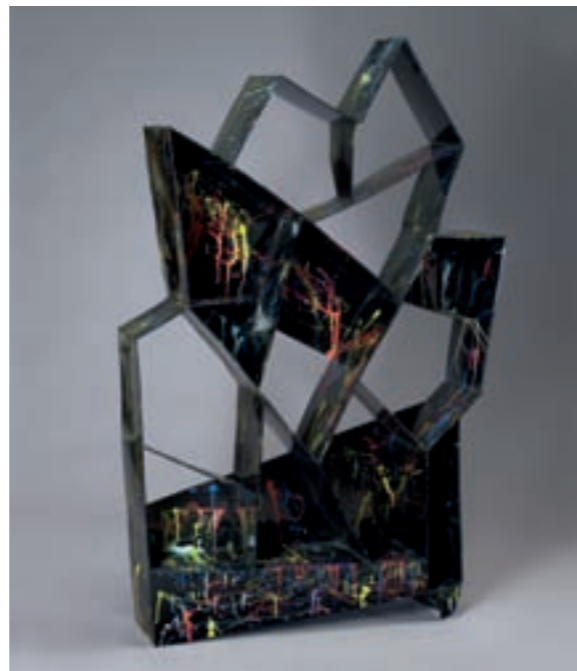
Last Rites

Let us then romp through the desolation of modern architecture, like some Martian tourist out on an earthbound excursion, visiting the archaeological sites with a superior disinterest, bemused by the sad but instructive mistakes of a former architectural civilisation. After all, since it is fairly dead, we might as well enjoy picking over the corpse.⁷ —Charles Jencks

In 1978, the Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman produced a small photomontage entitled *The Titanic* in which Mies van der Rohe's 1956 Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology (Tigerman's alma mater) is shown capsizing in the smooth waters of Lake Michigan, frozen for a moment before its plunge to the depths (pl. 8). The death of Modernism had been proclaimed on countless previous occasions, most memorably by Charles Jencks, who located the moment to 3.32p.m. (or thereabouts) on 15 March 1972, when the notorious and crime-ridden Pruitt-Igoe modernist housing project in St Louis, Missouri, designed by Minoru Yamasaki in 1951, was dynamited (pl. 9).⁸ Tigerman offered a more protracted farewell to the supposedly unsinkable certainties of the Modern Movement (see Emmanuel



5 **Pieter De Bruyne**, *Chantilly* chest, 1975. Chipboard, lacquered in black, white and blue with section of historic furniture in ebony, partly gilded. Design Museum Gent (80/297 1/1)



6 **Bohuslav Horák (for Atika)**, *Labyrinth of Autumn* bookcase, 1987. Sheet steel and enamelling. Uměleckoprůmyslové Muzeum v Praze (Museum of Decorative Arts), Prague

7 **Alessandro Mendini**, destruction of *Lassù* chair, 1974




8 **Stanley Tigerman**, *The Titanic*, 1978. Photomontage on paper. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois (1984.802)

9 **Overleaf: 9** **Minoru Yamasaki**, Pruitt-Igoe housing project, 1954–5. St Louis, Missouri. Demolition began at 3.32p.m., 15 March 1972

Petit's discussion of this on p. 124). Like a giant ocean liner set on its course, Modernism's turning circle had proven too wide to avoid impact with any obstacle fixed on its horizon.

Several years earlier, in 1974, in an empty industrial plot of land next to a furniture factory in Italy, the designer and impresario Alessandro Mendini poured gasoline over a chair of his own design, set it alight, and recorded the resulting funeral pyre for the cover of his radical architecture journal, *Casabella* (pl. 7). *Lassù* (meaning simply 'above the ground') was not so much a modernist chair as a platonic one – the kind a child might draw, of the most basic construction but mounted on steps like a throne. Its cremation underlined its ritual purpose: 'Its mass [was] reduced to ashes, and these were gathered; its life was closed with a rite: it passed from an object to a relic, from matter to memory.'⁹ Mendini's projects at this time were Duchampian tributes to life's absurdities: a concrete suitcase for one's journey to the afterlife; a cast bronze desk lamp resembling a fossilized Bauhaus design; a transparent plastic chair full of soil, meant to invoke the basic human act of sitting on the ground – all graced the covers of *Casabella*.

Each of these gestures marked a moment in the long trajectory of dissatisfaction, beginning in the early 1960s, with the commercial and institutional mainstreaming of the Modern Movement. Tigerman's sinking of Mies was a 'killing of the father', as well as an attack on the academic hegemony of modernist architecture in America (enshrined in schools like IIT). Mendini's nihilism signalled an endgame, played out in Italian Radical Design in the late 1960s and early 70s. It staged the death of the 'beautiful objects' of Modernism, which had seamlessly and uncritically taken their place within the commercial nexus. Architectural Modernism in the post-war world, it seemed, had become detached from its early socio-political agendas and instead established itself as the style of choice for both corporations and the state. Reliant upon an exhausted faith in technology and a sterile vocabulary of industrial functionalism, Modernism could no longer claim legitimacy, relevance, or radicality. Nothing looks as dated as last season's future. Attempts in the 1960s to inflect the modernist utopian project with pop culture (by counter-cultural

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a city, likely St. Louis, Missouri, showing a dense urban landscape with numerous multi-story buildings and a network of streets. The image is in a dark, monochromatic color palette, possibly black and white or a very dark blue. A prominent quote is overlaid on the left side of the image in a bold, pink, italicized sans-serif font. The quote reads: "AFTER ALL, SINCE IT IS FAIRLY DEAD, WE MIGHT AS WELL ENJOY PICKING OVER THE CORPSE". Below the quote, the name "CHARLES JENCKS" is written in a smaller, italicized, pink sans-serif font, preceded by a horizontal line.

***AFTER ALL, SINCE
IT IS FAIRLY DEAD,
WE MIGHT AS WELL
ENJOY PICKING
OVER THE CORPSE***

— CHARLES JENCKS

architectural groups such as Archigram, Archizoom and Superstudio) were derided as naive and anachronistic, a fetishization of technology.¹⁰ Some of the most fervent attacks came from those who had themselves been participants. Jean Baudrillard, briefly a member of the French architectural/philosophical collective Utopie, turned his critical eye on the false consciousness of modernist architecture: 'Utopia is a luxury good, blinding us with its splendour.'¹¹

Declarations of the many deaths of Modernism did not emanate from any fixed point, but rather from various quarters where architects and designers found themselves struggling to determine the relevancy of their practice both within, and in opposition to, the Modern Movement. But what were the alternatives? For some, the solution was to re-engage with the past, either through historicist architectural styles or by the exploration of the *experience* of architecture through ideas of place, memory and archetype. To elegiac effect, radical architects depicted modernity in ruins; Arata Isozaki's *Reruiened Hiroshima* (1968) and Ettore Sottsass' *Planet as Festival* (1972), to name only two such imaginings, showed 1960s Space Age megastructures that had crash-landed onto a devastated or primordial earth.¹² For Isozaki, 1968, the pivotal year of political upheaval, brought Modernism to a dead-halt.¹³ As Martin has put it, the 'unthinking of Utopia' became a central tenet of postmodernism.¹⁴

Road Trips and Gas Pumps

The alternative to the harsh responsibility of remaining faithful to the modern tradition lies not in pluralism, but in the open, courageous suicide proposed by Pop architecture, rejecting all cultural models, all open or closed orders, and returning to the primordial chaos, to triviality and artifice. Whoever decides to abandon the modern movement can choose between Versailles and Las Vegas, between sclerosis and drugs.¹⁵
—Bruno Zevi

For the Italian Marxist critic Bruno Zevi, abandoning Modernism could only result in a terrible choice between the binary poles of history and the vernacular, the highest art and the very lowest, grandeur and banality. In the eyes of architects like Charles Moore, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, however, that choice was a false and unnecessary one. All were in favour of 'both/and', rather than 'either/or,' in Venturi's famous formulation.¹⁶ What was needed was a structure for the systematic analysis of both Versailles and Vegas (and, for that matter, the Campidoglio in Rome, A&P Parking Lots and the Miami Beach Modern Motel), which would allow them to be understood as phenomena of architectural communication.¹⁷ Most American architects encountered the monuments of the past, in Rome, Athens and Venice, through the words of historians like Rudolf Wittkower, Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully.¹⁸ Some got to Europe to see for themselves. (Long before his Damascene trip to Vegas, Venturi had spent two years in Italy as a recipient of the Rome Prize, awarded to architectural students by the American Academy in Rome.)

Moore found what he needed in his native California. His concern for a sense of place in architecture (as an embodiment of memory and history) took in Californian-Spanish, neo-colonial and Beaux-Arts architectural styles as well as local adobe architecture, suburban tract housing and the pseudo-public spaces of Disneyland. Moore advocated 'an architecture of inclusion', talking about the Piazza San Marco in Venice and the Madonna Inn, a tourist destination in San Luis Obispo, California, in (almost) the same breath (pl. 10).¹⁹ The Inn, an exuberant pastiche of styles described by Umberto Eco as 'Archimboldi builds the Sagrada Familia for Dolly Parton',²⁰ was for Moore a moving and exhilarating 'architecture for the electric present' that gave its all and connected with the user in doing so.²¹ The Madonna Inn exemplified the 'triviality and artifice' predicted by Zevi, and fulfilled the definition of kitsch as 'falsified nature' supplied by Gillo Dorfles in 1968.²² It was both Vegas *and* Versailles. The same went for Disneyland, which Moore was prepared to settle for as a latter-day version of civic space, saying: 'Curiously, for a public place, Disneyland is not free. You buy tickets at the gate. But then, Versailles cost someone a great deal of money, too. Now, as then, you have to pay for the public life.'²³

The mythic roots of early architectural postmodernism, it seemed, lay in such thrilling encounters with this world of popular 'low' taste, often experienced from behind a



10
Alex and Phyllis Madonna, the Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo, California. Opened December 1958
© Macduff Everton/CORBIS



11
Las Vegas Strip, 1966. Photographs by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown

Overleaf: 12
Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in the Las Vegas desert, 1966

dashboard. The road trip had already been designated a modern rite of passage by writers like Jack Kerouac and Hunter S. Thompson. Route 66, Main Street and the Las Vegas Strip became familiar tropes in the literary accounts of the period, as did endless desert drives through California, across the Mojave Desert and down to Mexico, punctuated only by stops at service buildings along the route. From the Beat poets to Bob Dylan to Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters (immortalized in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* of 1968), the 1960s counter-culture took trips through a landscape of heightened contrasts – desert sun and neon light, hot rods and cacti, empty horizons and giant billboards – vistas often enhanced by psychotropic drugs. The architecture of signage, exemplified by the gas stations along Route 66, was immortalized in Dennis Hopper's 1969 film *Easy Rider* and inventoried by Ed Ruscha in his own road-movie-style artist's books, such as *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), a continuous folding strip of Los Angeles building façades photographed from the back of a pick-up truck. Ruscha's deadpan documentary method, with its lack of hierarchy and anthropological attitude to the urban landscape, had much in common with the image-making and research methods of Venturi and Scott Brown, working on their own inventory of the landscape of Las Vegas.

Vegas, with all its excess and pastiche, was the paradigm of rampant consumerism and celebrity.²⁴ Glimpsed from a heat-hazed highway, the billboards, gas stations and one-night-stop motels on the approach to the city seemed to announce a new kind of architectural order (pl. 11). The sensory overload experienced by the Vegas visitor was captured by Wolfe in his hilarious account for *Esquire* magazine in 1964: 'Las Vegas (What!) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!', which evoked, above all, the competitive noisiness of the city's signage. Wolfe put it succinctly: 'Las Vegas is the only town in the world whose skyline is made up neither of buildings, like New York, nor of trees, like Wilbraham, Massachusetts, but signs.' Vegas fitted the hybridity and vitality that Venturi had called for in his so-called 'Gentle Manifesto' – *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, written in 1962 and published in 1966. This levelling of cultural distinctions between high and low and his embrace of 'messy vitality over obvious unity' was borne out in Venturi and Scott Brown's socio-anthropological study of Vegas, carried out in the late 60s and published, with Steven Izenour, as *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972. The book presented the Strip deadpan, in the manner of Ruscha, but also investigated its implications for urban planning in general.

Much of this was the contribution of Denise Scott Brown, who had taken a diversionary route on her way to Vegas. Born in South Africa and educated at the Architectural Association in London, she met Venturi at the University of Pennsylvania, where both were students of Louis Kahn. Whilst at Penn, she studied urban planning with social scientist Herbert Gans, best known for his case study of 1950s suburbia, Levittown.²⁵ When she went to teach at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1965, she became interested in the way that West Coast cities 'seemed to hint at a new architecture for changed times'. She recalls the 'aesthetic shiver', composed of both 'love and hate', for an environment 'as beautiful as it was ugly'.²⁶ She invited Venturi to co-teach with her at UCLA, and then to join her on a road trip to Vegas (pl. 12). Arriving in a rental car along Route 91, the neon signs and blatant advertisements for the pleasures of the city shocked them into a new evaluation of the communicative power of the built landscape. She recalled, some years later: 'Dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we were both jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins.'²⁷

Precisely because it was not overlaid on top of pre-existing urban patterns, the pop-up architecture of Las Vegas offered an unadulterated version of American vernacular: the effects of unregulated development in an automotive age. Just as the pioneers of modern architecture in the 1920s had found a new order in industrial forms (steam ships and aeroplanes), Las Vegas offered a recalibration of architecture. The city had evolved a new kind of symbolism, designed to be read while the body was travelling at 35 miles an hour, so that buildings acted as billboards, and parking lots as public piazzas. *Learning from Las Vegas* was an argument for the power of semiotics over space, assessing the visual architecture of the 'big sign and the little building'. But the book was neither a celebration nor an aestheticization. They were well aware that the Strip could be seen as sensorially deafening, as Wolfe had put it, and also aesthetically bankrupt, part of what critic Peter Blake acerbically referred to as 'God's own junkyard'.²⁸ Yet they asked the question: 'Is not



Main Street almost all right? Indeed, is the commercial strip of a Route 66 almost all right? What slight twist of context will make them all right?²⁹

Americans were not the only ones hitting the road in the 1960s. The Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass, Jr took an extended trip around India with his first wife, the literary translator and editor Fernanda Pivano, in 1961. He later described the journey as a search for origins and an exploration of the sensory (rather than the rational) terms of existence; India expanded his understanding of the connections between objects and the rituals of daily life. The colours, forms, language and mystical references of Indian culture reverberated in his work for decades to come. They were fused with a heady embrace of the pop and beatnik impulses of the 1960s, which he encountered on trips to the United States, crossing paths with the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Neal Cassady and others (connections made through Pivano, translator and friend to the Beat generation).³⁰ These encounters came about after Sottsass was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness in 1962, on his return to Italy from India. The intervention of his friend and employer, Roberto Olivetti, arguably saved his life, as Olivetti paid for Sottsass to fly to Stanford University in California for specialist treatment. From his sickbed, Sottsass began a journal with Pivano, which they titled *Room East 128 Chronicle* (after his hospital room), largely as a means of keeping in touch with friends. The journal, hand-collaged and manually printed, offered updates on Sottsass' treatment and observations on American popular culture. Convalescing, Sottsass joined Pivano in San Francisco for a time, where she was working with Ginsberg.³¹ The libertine tendencies of the Beat generation, their experimental lifestyles, fascination with Eastern mysticism and nomadic attitude to life, all influenced the course of his practice in subsequent years.³²

On his return to Italy, Sottsass channelled his newfound interests into a series of ceramic works. The first, entitled *Ceramics of Darkness* (1963), and subsequent collections (*Offerings to Shiva*, 1964; *Tantric Ceramics*, 1968; and *Yantras of Terracotta*, 1969) employed a system of cosmological signs that allude to meditation, the relationship between the individual and the universal, and symbolic sexual union – all drawn from an amalgam of Hindu and Buddhist traditions. This fascination with non-Western culture offered a way out of the strictures of modernist practice which was rooted in the sensorial, and which he also equated with the easy pleasures of life encountered in America. These thoughts culminated in a collection of large-scale ceramic works shown first at the influential Sperone Gallery (known for exhibiting Pop Art and Arte Povera) in Turin and then Milan, and collectively titled *Menhir, Ziggurat, Stupas, Hydrants and Gas Pumps* (pls 13 and 14). In his series of lithographs *Planet as Festival* (1972–3), he imagined buildings which, like his ceramics, were containers for the pleasures of life: 'super-instruments' in which to take drugs, have sex, listen to music and watch the stars, in the form of Aztec temples, Indian shrines and giant teapots. In the series entitled *Indian Memories* of 1973, these temples shrink to actual teapots once more. Sottsass' objects are high-grade hits of signification, extracted from his imaginary planetary landscape and compressed to the scale of tableware (pl. 15).

Years later, Sottsass recalled his zest for life, rediscovered after his near-death experience, which had motivated the production of the works:

I want to concentrate on life, I want to bring it into my mind, I want to make a bonfire, a signal, a pole, a pivot, a center, a mandala that will make me concentrate on life, I want to build myself a colossal phallus, dear Shiva, my friend, with an orange flower on its head, around which to stop or travel or sing songs like the saints of Nepal that fly over the valleys, or play gigantic trumpets, or cultivate gardens or scatter seeds, the seedman's and mine. I want to make myself a filling pump where I can fill up forever on 4-star fuel, fill up my veins and set them alight. I want to build myself a temple to deposit biscuits in, immense plates of meringues and cream for the gods of sleep.³³

Sottsass' use of the symbolic languages of India did not mark a wholesale rejection of Western consumerism, but rather a re-calibration of his understanding of the relationship between people and things. He was struck particularly by the associative values of American goods, and how these were played out in Pop Art (Paolo Thea refers to Sottsass' idea of 'semantic charge' around certain objects).³⁴ His 'menhirs and gas pumps' were containers for the pleasures of the everyday, as well as monuments to life's absurdities; receptacles for



13
Ettore Sottsass, *Totem of Palo Alto*, 1962. Ink and pastel drawing on paper. Private collection



14
Ettore Sottsass, *Totem*, 1967. Ceramic with pedestal and threaded attachment rod. Private collection



15
Ettore Sottsass, *Study for Tea Pot* (rendered by Tiger Tateishi), 1973. Graphite and self-adhesive letters on paper. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1308.2000)

contraceptives, cigarettes, drugs, memories and ashes. Like his compatriot Mendini, Sottsass was beginning to redefine the terms under which design could be seen to operate. Back in Italy, he too found himself at the centre of a movement that came to be known as Radical Design (or Counter-Design). According to Sottsass, Mendini and others of their generation, design could be provocative and conceptually challenging; it could address social norms, market imperatives and assumptions of taste in critical ways. Radical Design had all the hallmarks of an avant-garde call to arms: 'We want to bring into the house everything that has been left out,' proclaimed the group Archizoom, 'contrived banality, intentional vulgarity, urban fittings, biting dogs.'³⁵

Radical Design was a product of hard times. For Italy, the 1970s were the bleakest decade since the war: a time marked by intellectual crisis, a wave of domestic terrorism and severe economic recession. 'My personal view of the future is mainly pessimistic,' said Mendini in 1976. 'I belong to those groups of people who have not torches to throw their beams into the future.'³⁶ As industry suffered, both designers and manufacturers devised novel means to subsist. Radicalism appeared in the guise of the group Global Tools (active 1973–6), a collective that saw itself as a kind of incubator for design outside of commercial constraint. Almost everyone who was ever associated with Radical Design in Italy took part – Mendini, Sottsass, Gaetano Pesce, Ugo La Pietra, Riccardo Dalisi and Andrea Branzi, to name a few. Together they sought to reconnect design with essential themes such as the body, basic skills of making, communication and survival.³⁷

Though Global Tools was partly motivated by frustration with the lack of commercial opportunity, it was also strongly anti-consumerist. Most of the figures associated with the group were politically on the left, and were profoundly suspicious of late capitalist society (despite designing products for its markets). Believing design to be an instrument by which social change could be achieved, they largely ignored the collusive nature of their profession. Some saw the contradiction. Italy's foremost Marxist critic, Manfredo Tafuri, argued in his 1973 essay 'Architecture and Utopia' that the inevitable fate of modern architecture and of the avant-garde was to collapse into the very system it professed to critique. Tafuri could see no way out of this crisis. The utopian project was unsustainable, and competing modes of practice, which had risen up to challenge the rationalist basis of Modernism, were merely cul-de-sacs in its ongoing development:

The 'fall' of modern art is the final testimony of bourgeois ambiguity, torn between 'positive' objectives and the pitiless self-exploration of its own objective commercialization. No 'salvation' is any longer to be found within it: neither wandering restlessly in the labyrinths of images so multivalent they end in muteness, nor enclosed in the stubborn silence of geometry content with its own perfection.³⁸

Tafuri's criticisms were aimed at bigger fish than the Italian design radicals, but he did single out Sottsass' work for its 'erotic exhibitionism'.³⁹ Here he put his finger on the designer's conflicted position, caught between his commissions for industrial firms and his role as *agent-provocateur* extraordinaire. Indeed, despite his close and symbiotic relationship with firms like Olivetti, Sottsass himself spoke in jaded terms about the state of professional design:

Now that I am old, they let me design electronic machines and other machines of iron, with flashing phosphorescent lights and sounds which could be cynical or ironic. Now I am only allowed to design furniture which sells, furniture – they say – of some use, use to society – they say – so they sell more – for society – they say – and so I am now designing things of this kind. Now they pay me to design them. Not much, but they pay me.⁴⁰

This tone of weary cynicism would not last, as we shall see. The harsh experiences of these years would eventually propel Sottsass towards Memphis, a design experiment in which the commercial and the conceptual merged. But in the 1970s, architecture was the main platform on which the discourse of postmodernism developed in critical and academic terms – not only in Italy, but in the United States, Britain, France and Germany as well.

The Presence of the Past

I am very fond of ruins. [T]hey're what's left, all that is granted us by the unknown ... of thoughts, of plans, of hopes.⁴¹
—Ettore Sottsass

From our twenty-first-century perspective, it is perhaps hard to imagine why the use of past styles in architecture would provoke such antipathy. Why would an exhibition of nineteenth-century architectural drawings in a modern museum be denounced as an act of sacrilege? Why might use of a seemingly innocuous stylistic idiom be taken as an act of daring provocation? Yet the architectural discourse of the 1970s was littered with such arguments and schisms. Whilst the revival and re-use of historical styles was a component of postmodern practice, it was generally distinct from historicism as such – the continued veneration of classical or Gothic architecture. The architects of the postmodern era employed history, but knew they could not ignore or unlearn the statutes of Modernism. They ran the gamut from academicism to parody, some applying complex coding to their evocation of past styles, others displaying a slap-happy delight in the plundering of a rich box of stylistic tricks.

Critics were divided. From the Marxist perspective of Tafuri, for example, postmodernism was less about the death of modern architecture (it had died already, he thought) and more about the impossibility of meaningfully replacing it, at least until society itself changed. '[N]othing remains,' said Tafuri, 'but to gather around the hearth to listen to the fables of the new grannies.'⁴² The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, speaking after the opening of the first architectural Biennale in Venice in 1980, denounced its international roll call of postmodernists as an 'an avant-garde of reversed fronts', who had 'sacrificed the tradition of modernity in order to make room for a new historicism'.⁴³ In Habermas' view, Modernism was not dead, only temporarily exhausted. Its progressive vision could be renewed only through constant critical appraisal, not evasion and retreat.

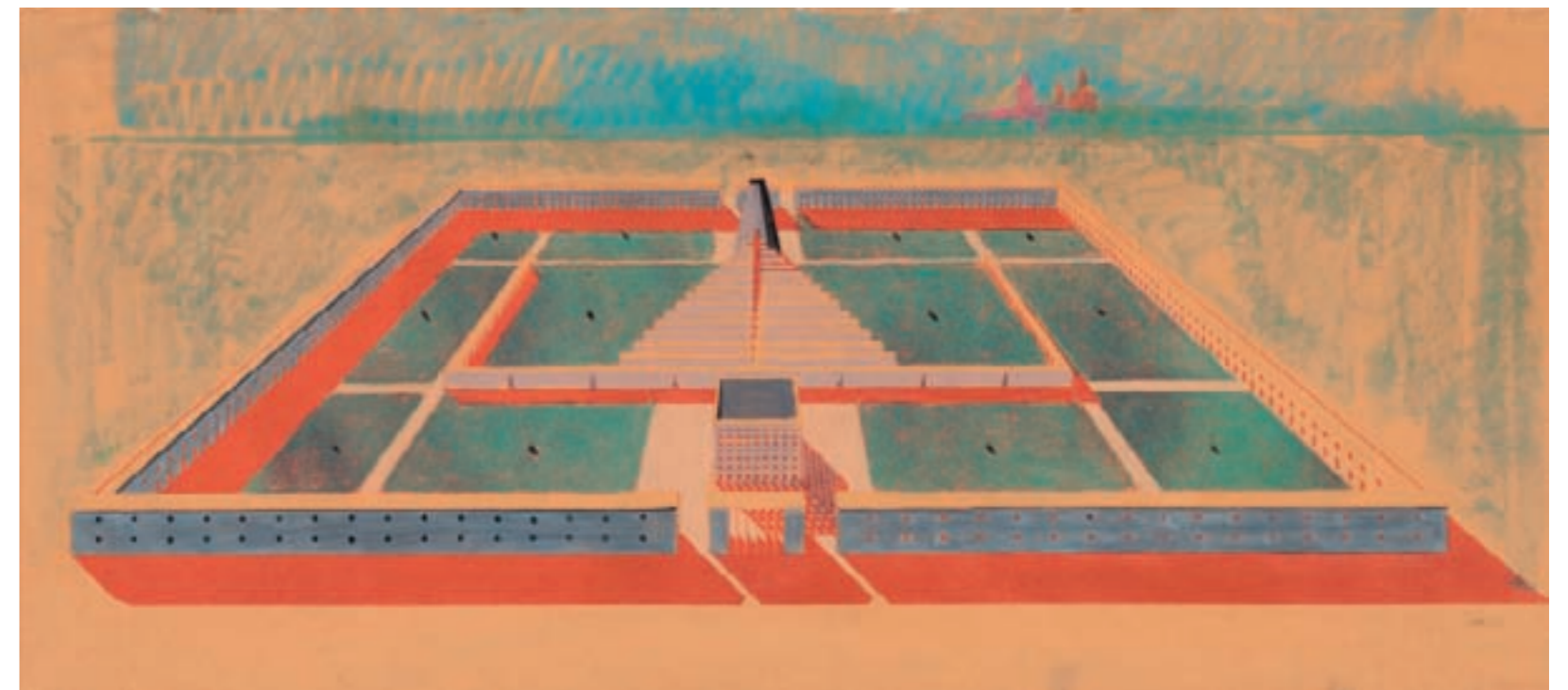
Other writers were intent on repositioning the relationship of Modernism to history, by establishing the presence of the past that existed within modern architecture itself. Historians like Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully both drew parallels between classical precedents and twentieth-century figures such as Le Corbusier and Mies van de Rohe.⁴⁴ Rowe's 1947 essay 'The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa' was a formalist analysis of the commonalities between the classical and the modern (specifically Palladio's Villa Malcontenta and Le Corbusier's Villa de Monzie), and was to have an abiding influence upon the revival of formalism in architecture in the 1970s. Scully's landmark study *The Shingle Style* (1955) analysed formal and spatial developments in nineteenth-century domestic buildings in a way that argued against the functionalist reading of architectural history. Scully, not surprisingly, became an early champion of Venturi and Scott Brown, in whose work he recognized the legacy of this American tradition. These ideas took root in academic institutions, first in the United States (Rowe at Cornell and Scully at Yale), and also in the pages of architectural journals, as historians were called upon to debate the future of modern architecture. Scully went head to head with the writer Norman Mailer in the pages of *Architectural Forum* in 1964, defending modern architecture against Mailer's charge that it was ruthlessly totalitarian and intent on destroying the past.⁴⁵ Whilst Scully argued for a more sympathetic view of Kahn, Frank Lloyd Wright and other leading American moderns, the basis of his position in the 1960s was to call for a more contextually aware modern architecture. As this new generation of architectural historians were well aware, context was everything.

Context was one reason for the stir created by an architectural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1975. MoMA, a champion of avant-garde architecture since the 1920s and a bastion of modernist orthodoxy, took the unexpected step of staging *Architecture of the Ecole des beaux-arts*, a spectacular exhibition of drawings from the nineteenth-century tradition of neoclassical academicism. As historian Felicity Scott has written, 'The exhibition became a notorious landmark in architecture's turn toward postmodernism, a notoriety exacerbated by its presentation within an institution that had both codified modern architecture as the "International Style" [in] the 1930s and sponsored its ongoing legacy.'⁴⁶ Both the tradition of the beautiful architectural drawing (rather than



16
Aldo Rossi, *L'Architecture Assassinée*
(*Architecture Assassinated*), 1975.
Etching. Deutsches Architekturmuseum,
Frankfurt-am-Main (216–014–011)
© Eredi Aldo Rossi. Courtesy
Fondazione Aldo Rossi

17
Aldo Rossi, Aerial perspective of
cemetery in San Cataldo, Modena,
Italy, 1971. Crayon and graphite on
sepia diazotype. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York (Jon Cross and
Erica Staton, Digital Design Collection
Project, Luna Imaging, 1287.2000.
2002) © Eredi Aldo Rossi. Courtesy
Fondazione Aldo Rossi



the axonometric plan) and the decorative embellishments of the nineteenth century were restored to value by the exhibition. As Robert A.M. Stern stated the following year, it made it possible for New York architects of differing persuasions to 'begin to reweave the fabric of the Modern period, which was so badly rent by the puritan revolution of the Modern Movement.'⁴⁷

In the United States, this repurposing of architecture centred around two schools of thought. One group, identifiable as the 'New York Five', whose members had taken part in an exhibition of that name at MoMA in 1967, was comprised of Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier. Their work in the late 1960s shared a formalist commitment to the principles of interwar Modernism, and a belief in the artistic autonomy of architecture (a position later abandoned by Graves, but more or less maintained by the other four). Eisenman, the chief theorist of the group, argued for a 'post-functionalist' rather than postmodern turn, which would liberate modern architecture from orthodoxy and instead renew its avant-garde artistic principles. The group's adherence to Corbusian purity led inevitably to their being characterized as the 'Whites'. They were in sympathy with the view advocated by Rowe that Modernism shared with classicism some ideal principles of form and proportion. In the other corner of the ring were the 'Grays', a loose association of architects who favoured contextual and symbolic eclecticism: Robert A.M. Stern, Charles Moore, Alan Greenberg, Jaquelin Robertson and Romaldo Giurgola. They were supported by Scully, who had weighed in with his championship of Venturi and Scott Brown (honorary, if not actual 'Grays') and his revisiting in 1975 of his earlier 'Shingle Style' treatise – an essay on its contemporary relevance, cannily subtitled 'The Historian's Revenge'. The Grays eagerly laid claim to the Beaux-Arts show as evidence of the limitations of Modernism.

These intellectual battles over the legacy of Modernism and the future of architecture continued through the 1970s. There were as many commonalities between groups as there were oppositions: both Whites and Grays recognized the redundancy of late Modernism while acknowledging its early vigour. All parties recognized the inadequacies of a monolithic attitude to city planning, and the resulting denial of urban complexity and community. Modernism was now just one stylistic choice amongst many. And how many stylistic recoveries there were. The bouillabaisse of sources was cheerily described by Rowe, with only a soupçon of irony:

We will give a nod to Kaufman; we will give three muted cheers for the Stalinallee; we will adore the manifesto pieces of Boullée; we will (mostly) refuse to observe the built work of Soane; instead we will unroll a few hundred yards of neutral Adolf Loos façade, build a lot of little towers and stand around on top of them a quality of Ledoux villas, wave quietly but not too exuberantly to Louis Kahn ..., insinuate a reference to the metaphysic of Giorgio de Chirico, display a conversation with Leonidov, become highly enthusiastic about the more evocative aspects of Art Deco, exhibit the intimidations of curtains waving in the wind, and, then, gently warm up the ensuing goulash in the pastoso of Morandi.⁴⁸

The return to history that brought architectural historians into closer contact with practice also paved the way for architects to become historians and theoreticians. Italian architect Aldo Rossi, for example, published his influential study of urbanism and contextualism, *The Architecture of the City*, in 1966. Moore, influenced by phenomenology, published on the significance of place, experience and memory in architecture.⁴⁹ Venturi's visits to Rome provided the basis for his first published article, on the Campidoglio in 1953, and much of his observations in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Rome was a parallel that Venturi continued to draw upon: 'Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s,' he said, 'was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.'⁵⁰

Complexity was just one theme that united proto-postmodern discussions about the role of history in architecture. Another was memory and its proper symbolism. Rossi's approach to the city, for example, was elegiac: 'With time, the city grows upon itself; it acquires a consciousness and memory. In the course of its construction, its original themes persist, but at the same time it modifies and renders these themes of its own development more specific.'⁵¹ He contrasted the effects of post-war destruction and subsequent redevelopment with the persistence of recognizable fragments, which for him stood as landmarks to the 'universal and permanent character' of urban experience.⁵² He developed a language of archetypes and a typological system that reflected this theory, attempting to reinvest the city with meanings that had evolved over time. His iconic, primary forms – arcades, columns, cones and cubes – suggested an elemental language without recourse to explicit historicism (pls 16 and 17). Rossi extended this typology to include forms that suggest everyday objects like coffee pots, cups and bottles, forms that would reappear in his contributions to 1980s luxury micro-architecture.

A very different, but equally rich, symbolism was achieved in the building that many consider the finest of all postmodern architectural statements: James Stirling's Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart (1970s) (pl. 18). Designed with his partner Michael Wilford, the project exemplified a postmodern attitude in its handling of public space, circulation, historical reference and wit. Stirling had been briefed to provide a series of new galleries for an existing museum (the Alte Staatsgalerie, built in 1843), coupled with a central courtyard and a public passageway through the site – an element recognized as a democratic gesture of openness on the part of the West German government regarding their public institutions. Stirling placed an open-air rotunda at the centre of his addition. A pathway meanders through the layers of the design, the exterior portion of which consists of a series of terraces dressed with elements that allude to archaeological fragments, including a tumble of loose stones that seem to have been dislodged from the façade. As Reinhold Martin has pointed out, the building 'stages a narrative of passage without an end' – its access route 'slides' across the forecourt, meeting several dead-ends, and is deliberately displaced from traversing the centre of the courtyard, whereupon it 'leaks' out across the back.⁵³

The perceived authority of the public museum is countered by the indeterminacy of the visitors' experience. This ambiguity is heightened by the building's use of materials in combination – mostly pale sandstone and travertine marble, into which are sliced brightly coloured high tech elements – a snaking glass curtain wall with green steel mullions, blue and red steel handrails, doors and roof canopies. These overt references to high-tech Modernism (such as Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano's Centre Pompidou of 1972–6, or Stirling's own 1964 Engineering Faculty Building at the University of Leicester) were also inverted – the structural steel members serve a decorative function in their application over the stonework of the museum. With its many layered and fragmentary references,



18 James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates, Neue Staatsgalerie, 1977–84. Stuttgart © Richard Bryant/Arcaid/Corbis



19 Giulio Paolini, *L'Altra Figura (The Other Figure)*, 1984. Plaster, plaster fragments, plinths. Courtesy of Studio La Città, Verona



20 Ricardo Bofill, Les Espaces d'Abraxas, 1979. View of the Théâtre from the upper level of the Palacio. Marne-la-Vallée, near Paris. Photograph by Addison Godel

both general and specific, the building is collagist in nature: it incorporates Greek, Romanesque and Egyptian motifs, as well as quotations from Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin and Asplund's Stockholm Library (to name only two of the many sources). It was a perfect setting for artworks by the likes of Giulio Paolini, whose similarly theatrical essays in classical sculpture were shown at the Staatsgalerie soon after its opening (pl. 19).⁵⁴

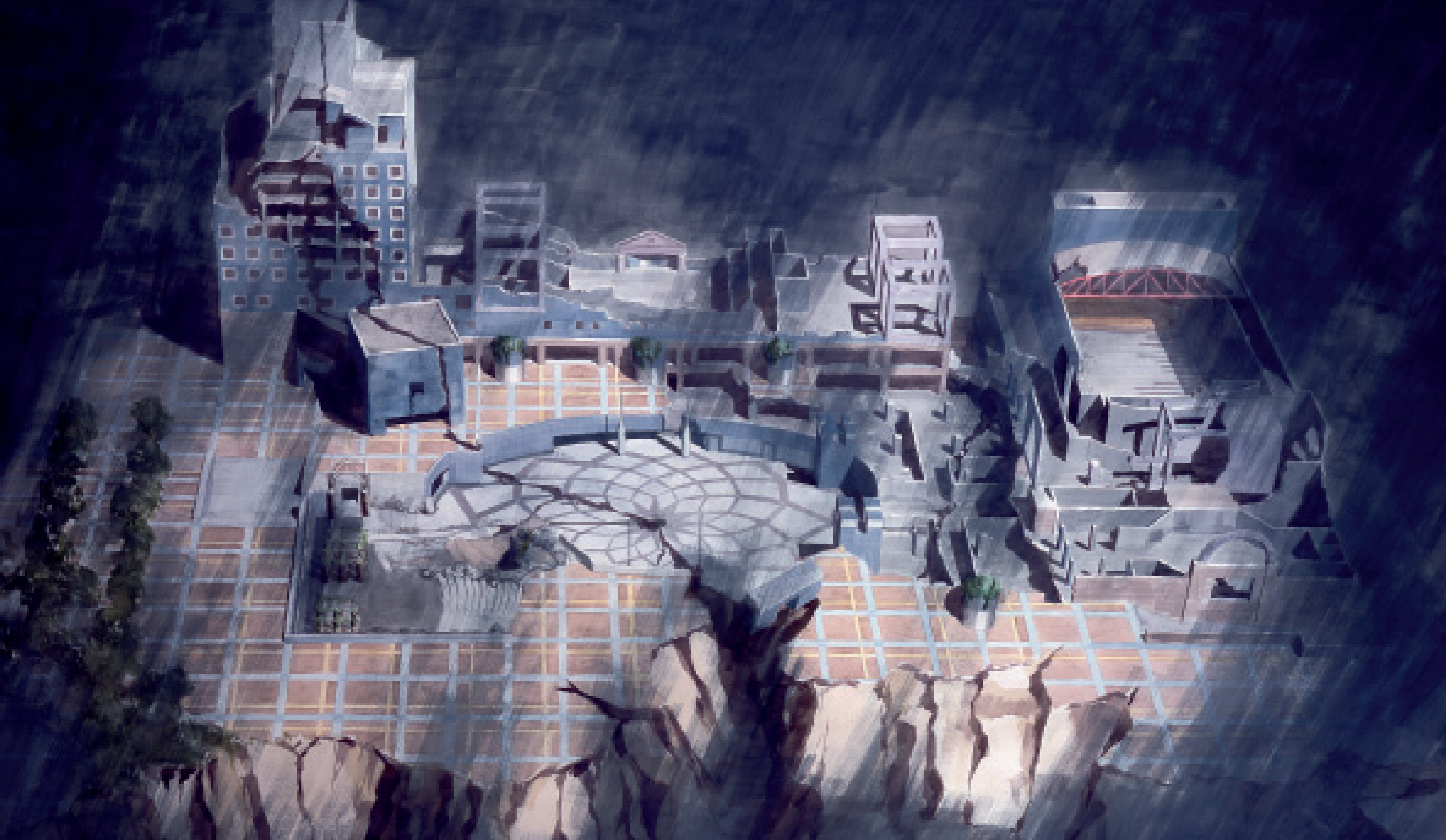
Another textbook example of postmodernist pluralism – not coincidentally, also centring on a public space – was Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans (1976–9) (see pl. 127, p. 117). Like Venturi and Scott Brown's early collaboration on the planning of South Street in Philadelphia, which recognized the architectural eclecticism and social diversity of its downtown location, Moore's Piazza was designed to reinvest an anonymous urban area with a sense of community and inclusivity. Unlike Venturi and Scott Brown, Moore could not draw upon the locale for direct visual reference as the site was surrounded by bland and anonymous modern buildings, and no public space akin to a square existed. So instead he opted for an audacious fiction inspired by the neighbourhood's predominantly Italian population. Moore sought to encapsulate the idea of Italy displaced: as the German curator Heinrich Klotz put it, 'The Piazza risks making the poetical statement "Here is Italy!" only to add immediately, with a sad smile "Italy is not here!"'⁵⁵ As Patricia Morton explains elsewhere in this book (pp. 116–19), the circular site (achieved by claiming space from an adjacent development site) is the basis for a stage-set-like accumulation of fragments which form a map of Italy, with a fountain in the middle of the space. All the classical orders, including Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Moore's own specially created 'Deli' order, are there in the colonnades. The Piazza d'Italia mixes memory and fiction, humour and sentiment. Moore plays games with materials, using *trompe l'oeil* and other visual tricks (the stainless steel columns are smooth, for example, but an effect of fluted marble is achieved by courses of water running down them). Instead of the monumentality of a formal square, the Piazza declares its own cultural hybridity, with a neon-decorated arcade and casts of the architect's own face (spouting water) in place of classical deities or putti. This personal joke amongst the layers of more generally accessible visual puns and references exemplifies the postmodernist idea of double coding. Most users of the square could not be expected to recognize Moore, and even fewer would have known that his doctoral research had addressed the relationship between water and architecture, a subject on which he could conceivably have 'spouted' for some time.

Audaciously, Italy was also temporarily relocated to Japan by Arata Isozaki in his design for the centre of Tsukuba Science City, completed in 1983. Like the Neue Staatsgalerie, Tsukuba marked a prominent architect's decisive turn to postmodernism. It also reflected Isozaki's fascination with ruins – both the ruins of modernity (Hiroshima) and the more ancient ones of Rome – which he made explicit in a large-scale drawing showing the site as if it had already fallen into a state of decayed wreckage (pl. 22). Designed to take an overflow of population, and relocate in their entirety the universities and research facilities from nearby Tokyo, Tsukuba began life as a manufactured community.



21 Ricardo Bofill, Architectural drawing of the Palacio at Les Espaces d'Abraxas, 1979. Collage, graphite, marker and ink on brown paper. Museum of Modern Art, New York (379.1985)

Overleaf: 22 Arata Isozaki, *Tsukuba Town Centre in Ruins*, 1979–83. Watercolour on paper. Deutsches Architekturmuseum, Frankfurt-am-Main



Isozaki himself found the commission to fill this 'vacant lot' to be oppressive: 'Upon first encountering this desolate textbook-designed modern city, I knew it was not the kind of place where I would want to live.'⁵⁶ His proposal was an elaborate piece of artifice, in which he superimposed Michelangelo's design for the Campidoglio in Rome in the central forum of the complex, but reversed its topography, so rather than being found at the high point of a hill (as in Rome) it is sunken into the well at the centre of the plaza. The building seemed to collapse upon itself: an unusual example of postmodern architecture as outright social protest.

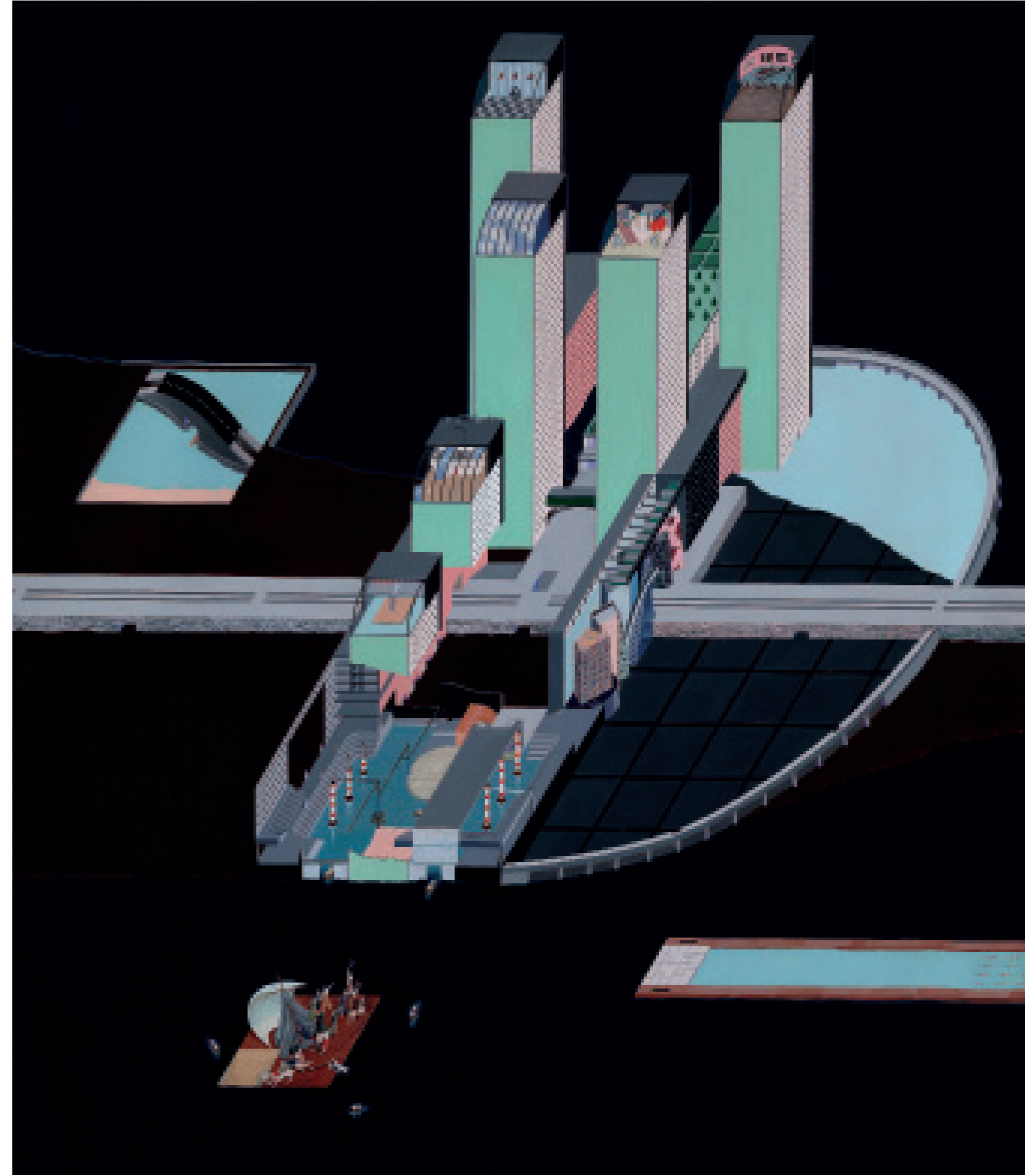
A similar principle of reversal was employed to spectacular effect in the forbidding and enigmatically titled *Les Espaces d'Abbraxas*, a public housing project by the Spanish architect Ricardo Bofill (1979) (pls 20 and 21). Bofill's office, the Taller de Arquitectura, found great favour with the French authorities in the 1970s, leading to a number of major commissions for public housing. *Les Espaces d'Abbraxas* is in the dormitory new town of Marne-la-Vallée, on the suburban train line out of Paris (appropriately adjacent to the eventual site of Euro Disney). Bofill employed the language of the Baroque in a monumental composition, which is organized around a number of 'closed' theatrical spaces and forms: the Palacio (a housing block of 400 units), the Théâtre (another block of units, arranged around an amphitheatre) and the Arc (a triumphal arch of apartments, set at the centre of the amphitheatre). The complex is dressed throughout with monumental Baroque fragments: friezes, colonnades and columns modelled in the negative. Bofill claimed his use of a hierarchical, 'noble' architecture for public housing was a direct inversion of historical and social values.⁵⁷ The stage-set qualities of the site were highlighted when it was chosen as a location for Terry Gilliam's 1985 film *Brazil*, his postmodern take on George Orwell's *1984*.

The cinematic possibilities of postmodernist symbolic architecture were also realized by Rem Koolhaas and his partner Madelon Vriesendorp. Koolhaas' 'retroactive manifesto', *Delirious New York*, was published in 1978, illustrated with Vriesendorp's anthropomorphic imaginings of skyscrapers cavorting in bed and the unlikely adventures of the Statue of Liberty (pl. 23). At the end of the book, Koolhaas offered a little tale entitled 'The Story of the Pool'. The setting is Moscow, 1923. A student, inspired by the visionary architecture of his day, designs and builds a floating swimming pool. Enthusiastic architects discover that by swimming in synchronized laps, the pool can actually be propelled backwards, enabling it to travel anywhere by water (pl. 24, see also pp. 136–9). The utopian thinking that inspired the pool, however, falls under suspicion as the political situation in the Soviet Union worsens in the 1930s. The architects decide to use the pool as a means of escape, by swimming in unison to America, dreaming of their vision of a futuristic society of skyscrapers and airships. But in order to do so, they must swim away from where they want to get to. They finally reach Manhattan in 1976. They see the skyscrapers, but are disappointed by the bland and uncouth populace they encounter. New York, in turn, does not favour the arrival of the Constructivists. Modernism is over, and the pool an outmoded symbol of utopian ambition. Instead, the postmodernist architects of New York reward their colleagues from Moscow with a medal commemorating the passing of the historical avant-garde. Disgusted, the Constructivists swim off again, only to collide with a giant plastic replica of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, in use as a floating discotheque. 'The Story of the Pool' is a postmodern parable. Modernism swims backwards towards the future, where it collides with history. The tale is set against the backdrop of Manhattan, an urban testing ground for 'the splendours and miseries of the metropolitan condition': a place of congestion and delirium, which inspires 'ecstasy about architecture'; a vision without theoretical formulation, whose theory is simply that of *Manhattanism*. If Las Vegas is the city of depthless surface, Manhattan is the place of fragments, sediments and endless mutations, layer upon layer of which leave their trace upon the city.



23
Madelon Vriesendorp, *Dream of Liberty*, 1974. Watercolour and gouache. Deutsches Architektur-museum, Frankfurt-am-Main (186-008-001)

Opposite: 24
Rem Koolhaas and Madelon Vriesendorp, cutaway axonometric drawing of the Welfare Palace Hotel Project, Roosevelt Island, New York, 1976. Gouache on paper. Museum of Modern Art, New York (1209.2000)



Cut and Paste

Adhocism in its fullest sense is able to contain its opposites, since impurity is always a greater whole than purity.⁵⁸

—Nathan Silver

Despite the efforts of Charles Jencks and other supporters, who carefully parsed the variants of the new idiom, a wide range of architectural manners – Rossi's symbolic melancholy, Stirling's compositional sophistication, Moore's energetic post-Pop, Isozaki's informed criticism, Bofill's grandiose bombast, and sometimes even Venturi and Scott Brown's socially engaged contextualism – were often treated as indistinguishable. Often they were dismissed as 'pastiche', an imitative jumble of existing ideas. This accusation suggested that postmodern architecture was merely the spasm of a profession in its death throes. 'Irony', too – a word that is used more often, and more indiscriminately, than any other in relation to postmodernism – also underrates the achievement of the postmodernists, who were up to much more than a series of arch jokes at history's expense. The 1970s was not a period of defeat or cynicism among architects, but a radically expansive moment. In its years of emergence, postmodernism lived up to its ambition to replace a homogenous visual language with a plurality of competing ideas and styles.

There is, therefore, no single technique that binds together the architecture and design of 1970s postmodernism. Nonetheless, there is one method that the key players adopted to a greater or lesser extent: bricolage. This is a term that we might initially associate with fine art, particularly figures such as Robert Rauschenberg (pl. 28). Critic Leo Steinberg referred to the artist's assembled 'Combines' as being like the flatbed of a truck – as if the picture plane's job was just to carry whatever fell onto it.⁵⁹ Of course, Rauschenberg did arrange these elements according to a hermetic logic of his own devising. But this willingness to see his own expressive means as a constant compromise was in itself a postmodern, pluralist method. As American art historian Douglas Crimp wrote of Rauschenberg's work in 1980:

Rauschenberg had moved definitively from techniques of production (combines, assemblages) to techniques of reproduction (silkscreens, transfer drawings). And it is that move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist. Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.⁶⁰



25
Nathan Silver, *Adhocist* chair, 1968.
Steel gas pipe, plastic insulating foam material, wheelchair wheels, bicycle axles and bearings, auto bumper bolts, chromed tractor seat, paint.
V&A: W.37–2010

26
Charles Jencks, *The Garagia Rotunda*, 1976–7. Truro, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

27
Frank O. Gehry, *The Gehry House*, 1977–8. Santa Monica, California.
Photograph by Craig Scott



Crimp here suggests one way that we might distinguish between postmodern bricolage and earlier modernist collage (as in the Synthetic Cubism of Picasso, the ferocious Dada assemblages of Hannah Höch, or the films of Sergei Eisenstein), which it often resembles. Indeed, there are clear continuities between the two. For the modernists of the 1910s and 20s, 'cut-and-paste' technique was an expansion of formal and expressive means, and it might direct attention to the instability of language. The Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno suggested that modernist collage (or in film, montage) could be seen as a first step toward the death of the author: 'For the first time in the development of art, affixed debris cleaves visible scars in the work's meaning.'⁶¹ Yet this did not entail a radical 'undermining' of artistic authorship, or any sense that the avant-garde might need to be replaced with a new set of artistic values. Postmodern bricolage was a way to do just that, through an acute self-awareness about medium and mediation, and a radical openness to the world beyond.

As Victor Buchli notes in his contribution to this volume (pp. 112–15), the concept of bricolage was drawn originally from the writings of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In architectural discourse there was a clear lineage from his writings to a mature theory of postmodernism. The key figure here is Jencks, whose 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* did more than any other publication to popularize the term 'postmodernism', and fix it as a topic for debate. Five years before, he had adopted the figure of the bricoleur in *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, written in partnership with the British architect Nathan Silver. The book bridged the counter-culture of the late 1960s and Jencks' later formulations. (It could even be argued that his writing style, which patched together a far-reaching argument through an assemblage of closely observed architectural criticism, was *ad hoc* in method.) Silver and Jencks highlighted multivalence, fragmentation, and Lévi-Strauss's idea of bricolage as a practice that defined contemporary experience. Gracing the cover of *Adhocism* was a chair designed by Silver, assembled from the seat of an agricultural tractor, wheels from a wheelchair, standard gas pipe, and insulating foam (pl. 25). Unlike much Italian Radical Design of the early 1970s, Silver's chair was made with a practical purpose in mind. Needing a form of seating that could cope with the rough brick floors of his own home, he devised a rolling chair made from at-hand materials, and employed a local engineering firm to manufacture it to the cost of £30 (half of which went on the purchase of its four wheels). Its cover-star status was an afterthought.

Jencks also put 'adhocism' to use in his own home, the so-called Garagia Rotunda, which he built in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, in 1976–7 (pl. 26).⁶² The project was completed for a grand total of \$5,500, yet it was an ambitious building: a hybrid of the vernacular shingle style, Queen Anne classicism, modernist gridwork and learned classical references.



28
Robert Rauschenberg, *Estate*, 1963.
Oil and screenprinted inks on canvas.
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1967-88-1)



Opposite: 29
Wolfgang Weingart, *Kunsthalle Basel Kunstkredit 76-77*, 1977. Lithograph.
 V&A: E.473-2009

The plaster cast of a Medusa's head kept watch at one end of the building, the front door was marked with a twice-broken split pediment above the door, and of course the name was a nod to Palladio's domed Villa Rotunda. Jencks did all this on a shoestring budget, principally by using inexpensive stock millwork – doors, spindles, railings and finials, all bought off the rack – and a prefabricated garage, complete with a rolling door. The furniture, too, was built almost entirely from standard 4 × 4 studs. Jokes abound – apart from the 14 different hues of blue paint (homage to the skies and waters of the Cape), the only other use of colour is in the red-painted vertical elements used to carry the electrical wiring. Jencks' nod to De Stijl also serves as a handy health and safety warning. The Garagia Rotunda was knowing, and perhaps even academic, architecture, but it was also rough and ready. Jencks was not present during the construction, a fact he noted proudly in his writing about the project: his team of carpenters had been able to complete the house without supervision, or even detailed working drawings. This was a 'shed' aesthetic, created using cheap and easily obtainable parts. The house spoke the language of commercial building, not just symbolically but through its means of construction. It broke all the rules of modernist appropriateness, instead fulfilling all the principles of the *ad hoc*: speed, economy, improvisation, dissonance and multivalence.

On the West Coast, a related essay in adhocist improvisation was being explored in another architect's residence: Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica (1977-8) (pl. 27). Gehry started with an existing house, a typical family property with a shingled roof and brick chimney on the corner plot of a residential street. Instead of demolishing the structure he extended it, wrapping it in an enclosure made from chain-link fencing, timber siding, glass and corrugated iron sheeting. The original house penetrates the new, a solid square which looks as if it is pushing through its temporary and unstable surroundings. The cheapness, banality and provisional nature of the materials (the most common materials, found on any building site) give the house an unfinished appearance of technical and constructional imperfection. It was aptly described by Heinrich Klotz as 'an expressive rendering of improvisation, and of the temporary, the unfinished and the jumbled together, through narrative illustration.'⁶³

Adhocist strategies were also employed in diverse ways outside architecture. In graphic design, 'cut and paste' is given literal expression in the raw edges, glued overlaps and overlaid films assembled on the designer's light-box. In leaving these layers visible, the assemblage aspect of the designer's work could be exposed. The approach was pioneered by the Swiss graphic designer Wolfgang Weingart, who is widely credited for blowing apart the rules of modern typography. Rather than abandon the modernist framework, Weingart retained the grid in order to subject it to assault: pushing jagged images across its surface, obscuring or curtailing words, sliding elements and images out of line, as in his *Kunstkredit* exhibition poster of 1977 (pl. 29). This shuffling of fragments succeeded in creating a new kind of graphic space, and influenced the work of American designers Dan Friedman and April Greiman, who both studied under Weingart.

By its nature, bricolage relies upon the hand assembly of elements, and tends to bypass technical drawing. This made it a suitable idiom for craft artists in the 1970s, many of whom were involved in a palace revolt within their respective mediums. Over the preceding decade the crafts had undergone a paroxysm of avant-garde activity. Makers were now more likely to be trained in art schools than traditional workshops. Many sought to cut ties with functionalist design and traditional crafts alike, and instead forged links with contemporary sculpture. In California, the Funk movement (named after a 1967 exhibition in Berkeley, California curated by Peter Selz), along with a healthy dose of bohemian lifestyle, fuelled the visions of ceramists such as Richard Shaw, Ken Price, Ron Nagle and Adrian Saxe, as well as the prodigious furniture maker Garry Knox Bennett (see pl. 126, p. 114).⁶⁴ Makers like these brought exemplary technique to *ad hoc* combinatory practices, infusing their decidedly odd objects with a single-minded sense of purpose. The Swiss jeweller Bernhard Schobinger attacked his medium with even greater fury. Fuelled by the energy of punk and industrial music, his bricolaged works were nonetheless assembled with a connoisseur's care. The prospect of lacerated skin was just one part of the extreme glamour he offered his clients (pl. 30). Though nobody described these craft artists as postmodern at the time, in retrospect they were ahead of the game, already infusing bricolage with a refinement and intensity that would not be seen in other design fields until the 1980s.



30
Bernhard Schobinger, *Scherben vom Moritzplatz Berlin (Shards from Moritzplatz, Berlin)*, 1983-4. Antique crystal beads, television bulbs, Coca-Cola bottle fragments, silver and steel wire. Drutt Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2002.4062)

Apocalypse Then

Struggle, fracture and fragmentation are counter-images to that of the smooth surface of post-Modernism ... cracks that become faultlines, creating gaps that may yet prove fruitful openings for the emergence of new patterns and forms.⁶⁵

—Robert Hewison

By the late 1970s, it was clear that the energy required to depart from Modernism would be found in the very force of Modernism's collapse. The 'death of the author' bred a proliferating range of authorial and interpretive strategies.⁶⁶ Antipathy to narrow functionalism led to an explosion of formal creativity. Distrust of progressive, teleological models of history – 'grand narratives', in Jean-François Lyotard's famous formulation – authorized a style of disordered temporal fragments, in which past, present and future were folded into one another.⁶⁷ The phoenix-like promise of Mendini's burning chair was now realized, as the apocalyptic became an explosively generative idiom across every area of design.

The maestro of this approach was the singular Italian designer Gaetano Pesce, whose apocalyptic leanings had already become clear in 1972. In that year he assumed the role of archaeologist in his contribution to the landmark MoMA exhibition, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*. Challenged to present a vision of future living, he circumvented the expected role of designer by imagining instead the discovery of an underground dwelling of the late twentieth century, excavated by archaeologists in the next millennium. Driven below the face of the planet by total cultural collapse (what Pesce termed a 'period of great contaminations'), the inhabitants of this subterranean plastic world had retreated to a life of isolation and self-destruction.⁶⁸ All that was left were the fragments of their last traumatic days, a fossilized modernity that rendered the material signs of progress (plastic, technology) as a language of decay.

Pesce's fascination with the lifecycle of objects was expressed the same year in the *Golgotha* chair, a project for BracciodiFerro (literally, 'arm wrestle'), which was an experimental offshoot of the Italian company Cassina (pl. 31).⁶⁹ The design was an enquiry into the nature of 'poor materials' – a padded cotton sheet was soaked in resin and then suspended across poles so it could be sat upon. As the resin hardened, the chair permanently assumed the imprint of its brief occupant. Rather than assert the value of newness in an object, Pesce created a shroud-like chair at the mid-point in its cycle of use, a process that will lead to its eventual discarding. In a later variation on this theme, Pesce experimented with fixing an object halfway through its own making. His *Pratt* chair design was produced as a limited series in plastic (1983–4), each successive version using the same process of production, but captured in a temporal moment of development (pl. 32). The first chair in the set is frozen in a state of soft collapse, the third is strong enough to support a child, while the ninth and final one is hardened to the point of uncomfortable resistance for the sitter. Pesce's fascination with death and decay echoes that of Jean Baudrillard in the early 1970s:

From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.⁷⁰

Pesce's idea that an object might offer an elucidation of its own eventual obsolescence or decay was key to the postmodern strategies of the period. The tactic of designing objects that seemed hardwired to self-destruct was both an articulation of the problematics of Modernism, and a materialization of the punk slogan 'no future'. In Britain alone, the roster of designers working in the idiom was impressively diverse. In 1983 Ron Arad (with his business partner, Caroline Thorman) opened the shop One Off, in an old warehouse near London's Covent Garden, as an extension to their studio practice (pl. 33). Arad's business had initially been built on his ingenious use of scaffolding components to make furniture, using the Kee Klamp system (whose proprietary name aptly describes its function). The results included his 1981 *Rover* chair made from reclaimed car seats and tubular steel.⁷¹ Arad's essays in industrial materials, including the iconic *Concrete Stereo* of 1983 (pl. 34), were paralleled by the experiments of other young designers such as Danny



31
Gaetano Pesce (for BracciodiFerro), *Golgotha* chair, 1972. Dacron-filled and resin-soaked fibreglass cloth. Private collection. Courtesy Gaetano Pesce Studio



32
Gaetano Pesce, *Pratt* chair (no. 3), 1984. Urethane resin. Courtesy Gaetano Pesce Studio

33

Ron Arad, *One Off Shop*, design and production studio, 1984. London



34
Ron Arad, *Concrete Stereo*, 1983. Stereo system set in concrete. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (V 1166 a–d, KN&V). Photograph courtesy of The Gallery Mourmans (V&A: W.7–2011 exhibited)

Lane (who specialized in stacked and smashed plate glass), as well as André Dubreuil, Mark Brazier-Jones, Tom Dixon, and Nick Jones whose works in found objects and bashed metal were created within a collective entitled Creative Salvage. All across London, artists and designers were pursuing similar effects. The artist Paul Astbury fired scraps of clay and bolted them to cardboard boxes and other objects, covering the resulting constructions with lashings of paint, while Bill Woodrow cut into the sheet metal of white goods in order to transform them into representational sculpture (pl. 35). Graphics and fashion literalized the slogan 'rip it up and start again',⁷² with punk originators like Jamie Reid and Vivienne Westwood continuing to explore the possibilities of bricolage, and Malcolm Garrett and Zandra Rhodes following close behind.

Independent shops like Arad's One Off and Westwood's Nostalgia of Mud (see Claire Wilcox's essay in this volume, pp. 154–9) were essential to London's entrepreneurial, post-punk design culture. Not for the first time, of course; shops had been nodal connections between clubs, magazines and the music scene for at least two decades. Yet the proliferation of such establishments in the early 1980s was also a reflection of a new post-industrial economy. Former docks were being converted for new uses, whilst Covent Garden, finally vacated by its costermongers in the mid-1970s, was refashioned as a chic shopping district. Retail culture eddied out from there, claiming the warehouses and back alleys of the neighbouring area. Warehouses were repurposed as homes, offices and shops in ways that mirrored the reconfiguration of disused urban spaces in Manhattan, Paris and other cities. What had begun with ad hoc occupation by artists and designers continued with the rebranding of these districts as part of a luxury lifestyle. Inevitably, the aesthetic of these industrial spaces was the starting point for their reconditioning: there was a craze for ruined concrete, battered metal sheeting, scaffolding, exposed wiring and pipework. As well as scavenging the detritus of the industrial landscape, interior designers plundered multiple style cults: 1940s and 50s Americana, rock'n'roll, hip-hop and Japanese kitsch.

The dockland sites of London also attracted the attention of a young group of architecture students at the Architectural Association, led by their young tutor Nigel Coates.⁷³ The collective, which came together under the name NATØ (Narrative Architecture Today), combined the processes of architecture with those of film-making, photography, magazine editing and indiscriminate scavenging. Influenced by the French architect Bernard Tschumi, a more senior figure at the AA, they explored narrative strategies for understanding the multiplicity and layering of urban experience (pl. 36). Their starting points were clubbing, clothing and music cultures; they embraced the then novel term 'lifestyle' for its liberating potential:

We look for the overlap between the nightclub and the computer graphics screen. We note clothing and music as the initial vehicles for this meshing, both of which have managed to put expression into life-style. Meanwhile, in Albion decay and disorder are heaped onto one another: invasion, reversal, perpetual upheaval, self-examination, reality-as-fiction, enclosure, mechanical overkill.⁷⁴

NATØ manifested itself in a series of imaginative and speculative urban projects, brought together in their magazine of the same name, part fanzine, part manifesto, a bricolaged diary of visual and textual fragments. Through their projects, NATØ recast post-industrial Britain as Albion – a fusion in which the past and the present have hardened together like scar tissue. It was an aesthetic that closely matched the film-making techniques of another Docklands denizen, Derek Jarman. Coates and his NATØ colleagues envisioned a retreat for the film-maker, in the form of a sprawling archaeological site (pl. 37). The project was unrealized, but drawings showing Jarman as if he were a fragment of classical statuary remain.

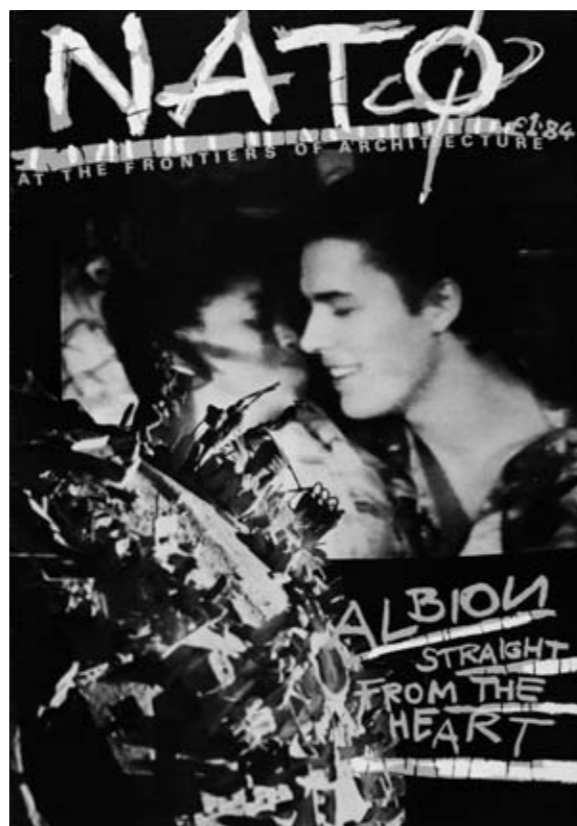
The dystopian aesthetic of the times found its ultimate expression in Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, set in an imagined Los Angeles of 2019: a teeming cityscape of dereliction and exhausted technology (pl. 61). The site was not a coincidental choice; LA was already associated with radical levelling, as Charles Moore put it, 'a model of the new unhierarchy' that had 'poured itself' across the landscape.⁷⁵ In the film it was presented as an amalgam of other cities, a stitch-up of Asian and Western urban fabrics evoking Shanghai in the 1930s, the street markets of Hong Kong, the neon scenography of Tokyo, and the Art Deco skyscrapers of Manhattan and Chicago. Garbage piles up and street gangs roam free. Darkness, rain and the electrical crackle of the lights are incessant. The city is cranked up to overload, crammed with detritus as if every future possibility has been grafted on to the remains of its previous iteration. There is an obsessive level of style-sampling in the film: Greek and Roman classical columns, Assyrian ziggurats and Egyptian pyramids; Soviet-style typography; 1950s automobiles, and *antebellum* interiors. The fashion styling is alternately 1940s and futuristic, and the narrative itself is an impure mix of genres: *film noir* meets sci-fi, a Chandleresque detective story with an electro soundtrack by Vangelis. Set designer Syd Mead summed it up: 'One of the principles behind designing this film is that it should be both forty years in the future and forty years in the past.'⁷⁶

The compression of past and present, time and space, were all part of the *modus operandi* of postmodern design. As *Blade Runner* demonstrates, they could be employed in the stylistic rendering of an anterior future – the future as it will have been. The architectural subversions of the 1970s had been a clear articulation of this position. And as James Wines shows in his contribution to this book (pp. 98–105), architects played out a kind of 'nature's revenge' upon the effects of modernization, such as the purposeful shattering of functional structures (see Wines' own series of stores for BEST Products, in which façades collapse and nature intrudes). As with Gaetano Pesce, burial and excavation were a means by which the symbolic nature of inhabited structures could be reasserted. The pre-ruined artefact, building, landscape or garment was a conscious strategy for designers like Pesce and Wines, Arad and Westwood, and film-makers like Scott and Jarman to historicize the future. This was yet another means of articulating the crisis in Modernism, replacing a teleological version of history with its archaeological equivalent. As Jarman put it:

My world is in fragments, smashed into pieces so fine I doubt I will ever re-assemble them ... So I scabble in the rubbish, an archaeologist who stumbles across a buried film. An archaeologist who projects his private world along a beam of light into the arena, till all goes dark at the end of the performance, and then we all go home.⁷⁷



35
Bill Woodrow, *Twin-Tub with Guitar*, 1981. Adapted washing machine. Tate. Purchased 1982 (T03354). Photograph by Edward Woodman



36
Narrative Architecture Today (NATØ), no. 1, 1983

37
Nigel Coates and the NATO group, Concept drawing for Derek Jarman's ideal home from the exhibition *Starchoice* at RIBA, 1984. Pastel and acrylic on tracing paper. V&A: E.1495–2010



The New Wave

Memphis appeared to many, especially to the young, not only as the ghost of hope, the omen of a renewal and mutation, but as the answer that not only was it possible to change but the change had already occurred.⁷⁸

—Barbara Radice

Not all was doom and gloom at this key moment in the development of postmodern style. Quite the reverse was true in Italy, where Radical Design had abandoned its former austerity. Polka-dot chairs, teapots with wings, lamps that roll around on the floor: these objects could easily have leapt from the pages of a cartoonist's sketchbook. But behind this seeming absurdity lay a very serious intent: to completely transform the space of operations for design. As we have already seen, groups such as Archigram and Global Tools, as well as individual practitioners like Gaetano Pesce, rethought their activities from the ground up in the early 1970s, creating provisional, difficult objects. In the latter part of the decade, this radical project went still further, abandoning the sense of a 'ground' entirely. The covers of magazines like *Domus* and *Modo* depicted the designer floating in free space, with no clear orientation (pl. 38). Political conviction, commercial imperatives, principles of form and function: all had been jettisoned. Even radicalism itself, the critical posture of the avant-garde, came to seem a distant memory. What was left?

That was the question confronted by the two principal figures in Italian design in these years, Alessandro Mendini and Ettore Sottsass, Jr. It is almost too easy to juxtapose the pair as occupying oppositional roles: the intellectual pessimist and the sensual optimist. What's more, each stood at the head of a group that reflected his persona. For Mendini, this was Studio Alchymia (or Alchimia). In 1978 he joined forces with Sottsass, Andrea Branzi, and the architect and designer Alessandro Guerriero, who had founded a showroom of that name two years previously. The aim of Alchymia was, as Mendini later wrote, to act 'ambiguously outside the design itself, in a state of waste, of disciplinary, dimensional, and conceptual indifference.'⁷⁹ Sottsass founded Memphis in what his partner Barbara Radice described as 'an act of friendly secession' from this nihilistic worldview.⁸⁰ The collective comprised his senior colleagues at Sottsass Associati, as well as several young designers whose work had the breathless energy of a three-minute pop song. The formation of Memphis in 1981 announced a more positive, forward-looking, and perhaps commercial phase of Radical Design. As Sottsass put it, 'All that walking through realms of uncertainty ... has given us a certain experience. Maybe we can navigate dangerous rivers, penetrate jungles where no-one has ever been. There's no reason for getting worked up. We can finally make our way with ease; the worst is over.'⁸¹ It is also possible, however, to overplay the distinction between the two groups. Despite the differences in rhetoric, they drew from a common palette of materials, colours and compositional techniques. Though Alchymia was strongly identified with the concept of banality, Memphis also employed materials that could be seen as kitsch, notably plastic laminates. And there was considerable overlap in personnel: Sottsass contributed to Alchymia, and Mendini to Memphis, while Branzi and Michele De Lucchi were involved in both projects (pls 39 and 44). In certain respects, Memphis was an extension of strategies first explored under the Alchymia umbrella.

So what were these strategies, and in what sense were they postmodernist – a word that the Italians themselves preferred not to use? First and foremost, if earlier Radical Design had emphasized direct experience, then Alchymia was all about its own mediation. This should not be surprising, given that Mendini had been operating principally as a magazine editor since he took over the helm at *Casabella* in 1970. He would go on to function in the same capacity for *Domus*, *Modo* and *Abitare*, as well as writing a regular column for *Artforum*, moving back and forth fluidly between the roles of designer, editor and critic. This gave him a ready outlet for the promotion of his own work and that of his colleagues (much as Gio Ponti had done at *Domus* decades earlier), and also set the methodological tone for his design activities. Both the literal cut-and-paste work of assembling a magazine in the pre-digital era and the more figurative editorial work of arranging other people's ideas were central to Mendini's approach with Alchymia. As he puts it, 'My experience editing magazines gave me an interest in seeing design and architecture as a bit like conducting an orchestra ... I don't always hold the last card; the cards are held by a lot of different people.'⁸²



38
Domus, no. 643, October 1983.
Designed by Giancarlo Maiocchi
(Occhiomagico)



39
Ettore Sottsass, *Le Strutture tremano*
(*Trembling Structure*) table, 1979.
Enamelled tubular metal, glass, plastic
laminated wood. V&A: W.8–2010



40
Alessandro Mendini with Prospero Rasulo and Pierantonio Volpini,
Rasulo, 1978. Painted wood, mirror.
Private collection

Though this position may remind one of the postmodern notion of the 'death of the author', in fact Mendini's editorial method was a clever way of extending his reach. At a point in his career when he lacked the patronage of large manufacturers, his neo-Duchampian strategy of 'redesign' – in which an existing thing was rearranged and/or decorated – was a clever and expedient way to make a charismatic, photo-ready object. By transforming an Art Deco chest of drawers into a jagged neo-Futurist collage, festooning a sofa with ornament derived from Kandinsky paintings, or simply adding little flags to a Gio Ponti chair, Mendini simultaneously mocked modernist art and design history, signalled his deep knowledge of that same history, and made obvious his desire to supersede it (pl. 40). His *Proust* chair of 1978 was the object that most successfully condensed these restless energies, at least to judge from its subsequent notoriety (pl. 41). It was another paste-up job: a title taken from literature, a form adapted from eighteenth-century Baroque furniture (albeit swollen to improbable proportions), and decoration swiped from a Pointillist painting by Paul Signac. This surface treatment was achieved through the ingenious means of projecting a slide of the painting onto the chair, and daubing paint onto its surface to match the dots.

The most explicit application of Mendini's strategy of design-as-editing was *Il Mobile Infinito* ('Infinite Furniture'), launched during the 1981 Furniture Fair in an exhibition space at the Architecture School of the Milan Polytechnic. Mendini's explanations of the project were grandiose, but also teasingly indeterminate:

Il Mobile Infinito is an attempt to obtain a non-mediocre result from a collection of mediocre conditions. Having said this, it is obvious that *Il Mobile Infinito* is not really furniture, but an allegory, an ex-voto, a metaphor of other problems, a pendulum



41
Alessandro Mendini, *Proust* chair,
1978. Wood and painted textile.
Private collection

held over the history of objects, a kind of banality carried through to its classical state. More than furniture, then, *Il Mobile Infinito* resembles washing forever hung out to dry, a library that constantly renews itself, a collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, an arms store, a flower shop with a florist throwing away the faded flowers, a constellation cast adrift between heaven and earth ... *Il Mobile Infinito* is chatty, ill, mysterious, fleeting, uncertain, dreamy-eyed (and attracts and collects in the pores of its skin the maximum amount of mental dust around it). *Il Mobile Infinito* is 'philosophical' furniture, a desert where everything seems to happen but nothing ever does, that does not exist because if it existed it would no longer be infinite.⁸³

In practical terms, however, the only thing 'infinite' about *Il Mobile Infinito* seemed to be the list of contributors to the project. Each part of each piece of furniture was designed by a different person: ornaments by Branzi, lampshades by Sottsass, handles by Ugo La Pietra, legs by Denis Santachiara, and so on. There was also an element of redesign. The interiors of the furniture were venerated with patterned laminates designed decades earlier by Italian modernists like Bruno Munari and Gio Ponti, and in one case Edvard Munch's iconic painting *The Scream* was appropriated as the face of a cabinet – an intensely expressive image of alienation rendered as harmless décor, like a museum-bought postcard tucked into a mirror at home (pl. 42). Though Mendini was the mastermind of this complicated scheme, he relied on his Alchymia colleague Paolo Navone to organize the manufacture of the furniture. The results shared not only the bricolaged quality of one of Mendini's magazine covers, but also the stylistic vocabulary that was already emerging as the postmodernist lingua franca: floating shapes in bright, solid colours; slick, obviously artificial surfaces; and intentionally awkward juxtapositions of linear and blocky elements.

Il Mobile Infinito was the most ambitious thing Studio Alchymia had ever done, and in many ways was the group's swansong. Though the group persisted for a few years, at least in name, another exhibition held at exactly the same time would definitively shoulder Alchymia from the spotlight. This was, of course, the inaugural presentation of Memphis, held at the gallery Arc '74 during the Milan Furniture Fair (the Salone del Mobile) in



42
Alessandro Mendini with Andrea Branzi, Ettore Sottsass, Mimmo Paladino and Francesco Clemente, Denis Santachiara and Ugo La Pietra, *Il Mobile Infinito* cabinet, 1981. Wood, paint and metal. Collection of Nick Wright and Swati Shah, London

43
Michele De Lucchi (for Girmi), Prototype toaster, hairdryer, iron and egg timer, 1979. Painted wood. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (V 951 a–c, e, KN&V)



44
Andrea Branzi, Labrador sauceboat, 1982. Electroplated nickel silver and glass. V&A: M.34–2010

45
Masanori Umeda, Tawaraya boxing ring bed, 1981. Memphis members from left: Aldo Cibic, Andrea Branzi, Michele De Lucchi, Marco Zanini, Nathalie du Pasquier, George J. Sowden, Martine Bedin, Matteo Thun and Ettore Sottsass

September 1981. There are many ways of approaching the tangled topic of Memphis, which was immediately recognized as a seismic disturbance in the design firmament. But perhaps the best route is through its individual contributors. Though they were understood as a band of like-minded *enfants terribles* – an impression that was fixed by the much-reproduced image of the Milanese-based members sitting in Masanori Umeda's tatami-mat boxing ring bed (pl. 45) – in fact the chemistry of the group was much more complex than that. Sottsass was obviously the leader. This was not only by virtue of his fame and charisma, which lent him by this time the air of a guru (he was 64 when Memphis was launched), but also because many of the other members worked as partners or staff designers in his firm.

Most influential among these, arguably, was the brilliant Michele De Lucchi, who had met Sottsass through the Radical Design group Cavart in 1973. He had already created convincing product designs in the postmodern style: a set of prototypes for the Italian manufacturer Girmi (pl. 43). These pastel-coloured, toy-like objects – stylistically related to the *Sinerpica* lamp he designed for Alchymia in 1978, and a coffee pot commissioned by Cleto Munari the following year – were intended to put a friendly face onto appliances that were normally functionalist and severe, like hairdryers and clothes-irons. Like the Memphis objects that followed, these were stage props for a hyper-real life. They anticipated the friendly, animated product designs of more recent years that have had such success on the market – even at the time, as De Lucchi said, 'everybody liked [them] but designers' – but they did not go into production.⁸⁴ They were, however, made famous through display at the 1979 Milan Triennale, and through photographic reproduction. De Lucchi would go on to be Memphis' most important furniture designer apart from Sottsass himself, creating (among many other designs) the group's biggest seller, the *First* chair (1983), which looked something like a diagram of an orbiting satellite.

Also drafted into Memphis from Sottsass Associati were four other members of the firm, each of whom had extensive practical experience of work with corporate clients like Olivetti. Matteo Thun was the scion of a well-to-do Austrian family, and had trained in Florence under the architect Adolfo Natalini (of Superstudio). He proved to be the most talented ceramic designer of the group, capable of satisfyingly resolving a complex semantic soup of zoomorphic, ornamental and architectural elements into a single animated form.⁸⁵ If there were any such thing as a 'typical' Memphis designer, Marco Zanini (not to be confused with the fashion designer of the same name) might fit the bill. He was the member of the group most engaged with glassware production, again apart from the prolific Sottsass, and also designed furniture and ceramics. Like De Lucchi, Thun and other members of the group, Zanini had come from the architectural scene in Florence, but was only in his mid-20s when Memphis was founded. For him the formation of the collective



marked a passage from 'the utopias and illusions of the academies of architecture in the seventies, to the reality of the designer's profession'.⁸⁶ Aldo Cibic was another relatively junior partner, with minimal aesthetic leanings uncharacteristic of the group. His principal contribution was to function as a project manager, ferrying drawings and prototypes back and forth between the group and various fabrication firms.⁸⁷

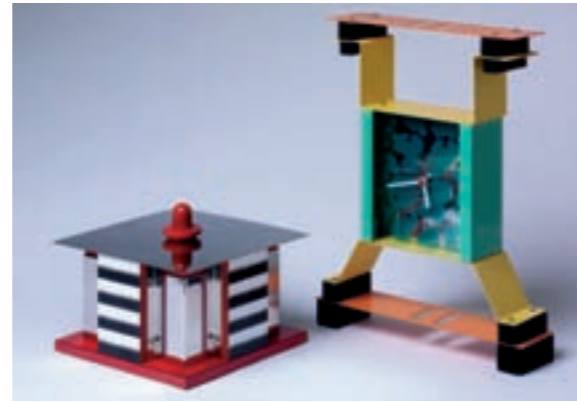
The fourth participating staff designer at Sottsass Associati, the British expatriate George Sowden, formed both a personal and professional relationship with one of Memphis' younger members, Nathalie du Pasquier. Only 24 when the group was founded, she nonetheless made a dramatic impact through her pattern designs for laminates and textiles, which bore the influence of her recent travels in Africa. Sowden, for his part, had been working on the Sottsass Associati account with Olivetti, specializing in electronics. He and Du Pasquier blended their expertise in an interesting Memphis spin-off project: *Objects for the Electronic Age* (pl. 46). This series of small domestic products – boxes, clocks, etc. – was meant to mark a theoretical transition between two phases in the history of design. As Sowden puts it, 'If mechanical design is about function, then electronic design will be about decoration' – because mechanical devices have substantive moving parts that must be housed in an exterior shell, but an electronic device can be any shape. This was the pair's key insight: 'Electronic age objects will be *anything*.' The two designers took up temporary residence at the Abet Laminati factory, quickly creating patterns and running them through the machines. This allowed them to produce very limited runs of a particular laminate for use on a particular design: 'one-off pieces made with an industrial process'.⁸⁸

Martine Bedin, a childhood friend of Du Pasquier's from Bordeaux, was another of the Memphis 'young bloods'. Her *Super* lamp is an excellent example of how the group absorbed the ideas of its participants (pl. 47). Bedin had thought up the colourful lamp on wheels several years earlier. After she attracted notice for an ornament-rich installation entitled *La Casa Decorata* at the 1979 Milan Furniture Fair, she met Sottsass, leading to an invitation to join Memphis. When Sottsass saw her drawing for the *Super* lamp he asked her about it, and she explained that she had wanted something she could take with her anywhere – 'I can carry it behind me, like a dog'.⁸⁹ This was just the sort of insouciance that he was looking for, and the *Super* became one of the stars of the first Memphis collection. Bedin (whose father was an electrical engineer) was given responsibility for managing production of most of the rest of the Memphis lighting as well.

In addition to the close-knit family of Italians and expatriates gathered in Milan, Sottsass also drafted a handful of international designers into the group, among them Michael Graves, Kuramata Shiro, Masanori Umeda and Javier Mariscal. This had the double advantage of lending the project prestige and broadening Memphis' aesthetic palette. Graves' neo-Art Deco *Plaza* vanity (pl. 210, p. 233), Kuramata's confetti-coloured terrazzo tables, Umeda's action-figure-like *Robot* cabinet, and Mariscal's animated *Hilton* bar trolley, leaning back as if it were rolling downhill at top speed, were all typical expressions of their designers' personal styles (pl. 48). In the Memphis context, however, they contributed to an impression of a shared postmodern project, a 'new wave' of design that would sweep all before it.

Just how far one could ride that wave is clear from the career of Los Angeles-based ceramist, sculptor and furniture designer Peter Shire, who was the figure from abroad who participated most enthusiastically in Memphis (pl. 52). Prior to his alliance with the group he had been known mainly for his teapots, essays in postmodernist bricolage that he had been making since the early 1970s. These looked completely non-functional (though he always ensured they could in fact pour well) and incorporated influences from Pop Art, California 'Googie' architecture, and surf and hot rod culture. Sottsass became aware of Shire's work in the unlikely context of the West Coast lifestyle publication *Wet*, which had run a feature on Shire in which he commented, 'My work doesn't even relate to my own lifestyle. I'm not much of a tea-drinker ... Actually my first impulse is to put Coke in teapots. I'm a big Coke drinker and I'd love to see Coke flowing out of the teapots and foaming on the ground.' (pl. 49)⁹⁰ Sottsass immediately recognized that Shire would bring to the group a welcome dose of humour and colour – what Barbara Radice later described as 'plastic color, hot dogs, sundaes, artificial raspberry colour'.⁹¹

After a get-acquainted trip to Milan, Shire set to work with his customary enthusiasm, not in his usual medium of ceramics but in metalwork and furniture. Among his first



46
Nathalie du Pasquier, *Gracieux accueil (Gracious Reception)* box, 1983. Wood, metal and plastic laminates. V&A: W.32–2010
George Sowden, *Heisenberg* clock, 1983. Painted steel and clock parts. V&A: W.22–2010



47
Martine Bedin (for Memphis), *Super* lamp prototype, 1981. Painted metal, lighting components. V&A: M.1–2011



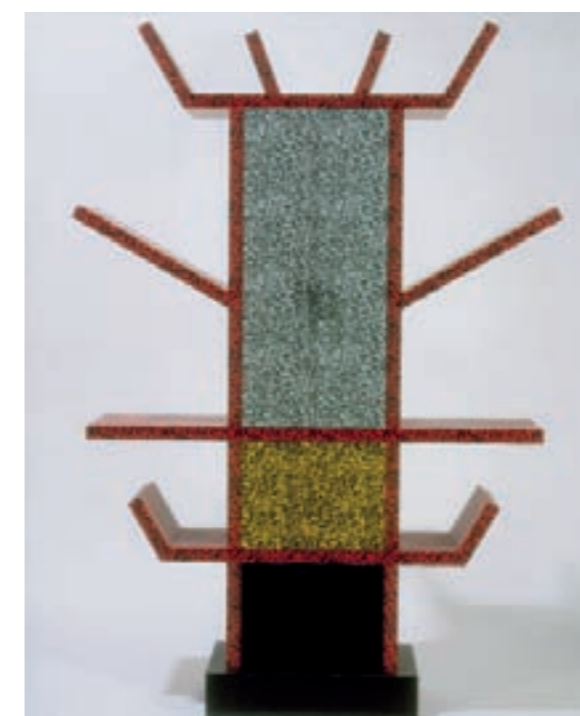
48
Javier Mariscal (for Memphis), *Hilton* bar trolley, 1981. Painted metal trolley with shaped crystal glass and industrial casters. V&A: W.15–2010

Opposite: 49
Peter Shire, *Bel Air* chair, 1982. Laminated wood and wool upholstery. V&A: W.19–2010





Opposite: 50
Cinzia Ruggeri, *Homage to Lévi-Strauss* dress, Autumn/Winter collection 1983–4. Double silk. V&A: T.20–2010



51
Ettore Sottsass (for Memphis), *Casablanca* sideboard, 1981. Plastic laminate over fibreboard. V&A: W.14–1990

designs for Memphis was the iconic *Bel Air* chair, which featured a brightly coloured beach-ball of a rear foot and an asymmetrical shark-fin back (pl. 49). Shire was thinking partly of similar forms used by the American sculptor H.C. Westermann, but also of the Stevens House by architect John Lautner, located on the ‘surfer beach’ in Malibu. Like all the early Memphis furniture, the chair’s title was taken from the name of a hotel – in this case, a five-star establishment in Beverly Hills. (Shire says he wanted to give it the more punning title *Bone Air*, as in ‘debonair’, but Sottsass preferred not to; he used it anyway a few years later, pl. 52.) This ‘branding’ strategy, originally Radice’s idea, was perhaps intended as a subtle joke about the limited run and craft production of Memphis objects, which inevitably made them luxury goods. But according to Shire the main purpose of the titles was to lend a sense of coherence, much in the manner of a thematic couture collection.⁹²

At the edges of Alchymia and Memphis, artists in other fields also flourished, such as the photographer Giancarlo Maiocchi, who designed a two-year series of covers for *Domus* magazine under the label Occhiomaggico; and the fashion designer Cinzia Ruggeri. If Memphis objects were like props for a stage performance, then Ruggeri provided the requisite costume. Her dress *Homage to Lévi-Strauss* (a reference to the French anthropologist) featured a bold zigurat profile and a vivid green colour, making its wearer a match for any Sottsass sideboard (pl. 50). Ruggeri also undertook futurist experiments with clothing, inserting LED lighting into the fabric or installing micro-ventilators that inflated the garments when they were worn.

As is clear from this extensive roster of participants, Memphis was in every sense a group effort – an alignment of pre-existing tendencies that lent credence to the fact that there was a ‘New International Style’, as the collective’s first promotional materials claimed. But, inevitably, Sottsass played the starring role. He was the group’s *de facto* spokesman, issuing proclamations like, ‘The only thing I know is that Memphis furniture is very intense and that it can only live with very intense people, very highly evolved and self-sufficient people.’⁹³ Sottsass’ prominence was further enhanced by the fact that the other ‘front person’ for Memphis was Radice, who wrote fiercely intelligent manifestos on the group’s behalf. It was Sottsass’ work that spoke loudest, however. He seemed to have boundless energy, working across more media than any other Memphis designer – furniture, metal, ceramic, glass, even a television – and producing the group’s most iconic objects. And like other members in the group, he seamlessly integrated his previous design approach into the new brand; as Radice put it, ‘almost all the Memphis ideas, in a less virulent, clear, and emblematic form, had already been in his work for twenty years.’⁹⁴

Yet it was precisely the emblematic quality of Sottsass’ Memphis designs that made them so devastatingly effective. His furniture, in particular, has assumed symbolic status as the *sine qua non* of 1980s design (pl. 51). The principal material used to make it was plastic laminate: cheap, artificial and dimensionless, a surface seemingly without inherent properties apart from its role of being a surface, a role which it performs without inflection. Memphis was funded, in large part, by Abet Laminati (it is only a slight exaggeration to say that Memphis served as a publicity stunt for the company) and Sottsass was not shy in putting their products front and centre. Away with your Modernism, Sottsass seems to say. This too is a possible truth about materials: sheer theatrical effect, only skin deep. Like other Memphis objects, his *Casablanca* and *Carlton* sideboards could be used in a domestic interior despite their oddly canted shelves (as Sottsass was fond of saying, books always fall over anyway), but they were made principally for the purpose of taking a photo. As Peter Shire has observed, ‘Memphis was *of* the media. There was never any problem with colour separations, it always reproduced true, because we were using synthetic colours in the first place. The priority was to go for the image. The difference was between its existing and not existing.’⁹⁵

So where did Memphis objects go, once they had been produced and reproduced? As so often in the 1980s, it is helpful to follow the money. Dealers played a key role in making the ‘new international style’ a reality; even projects as well capitalized as Memphis could not have succeeded without the support of a new retail environment, in which design galleries were styling themselves after their fine art counterparts. The New York gallery Art et Industrie was a pioneer in this regard. Its proprietor Rick Kaufmann leveraged early shows of Alchymia and Memphis to support the careers of several home-grown American furniture designers, all of whom approached their work as a form of sculpture.⁹⁶ The stable



52
Peter Shire seated in *Bone Air* chair,
c.1985. Photograph by Kevin LaTona

Opposite: 53
Howard Meister, *Nothing Continues
to Happen* chair, 1980. Painted birch
plywood. V&A: W.6–2010

included neo-modernists such as Forrest Myers, 'fantasy furniture' makers like Terence Main, and Howard Meister, whose *Nothing Continues to Happen* chair (inspired by images Meister had seen of the latest Italian provocations) became one of the widely circulated postmodern designs (pl. 53). The chair was hand-carved from MDF and then painted a flat grey to mimic ruined concrete: an emblem of disintegration reminiscent of Mendini's ritual torching of a similarly Platonic chair form several years earlier. This was a chair for looking at, rather than sitting in, and though it was published extensively in magazines and design books, only three were ever made. Art et Industrie's strategy was not necessarily very profitable – as Kaufmann puts it, 'Sales were a struggle all the way through ... that usually shows that you're doing something right' – but designs like Meister's achieved a level of exposure at odds with their availability.⁹⁷

Keith Johnson's firm Urban Architecture, based in Detroit until 1998, was another key conduit between Italian design and American buyers. Johnson got his start while working as an inner city loft developer in 'Motown' in the 1970s. This work brought him into contact with stylish lighting and furniture firms such as Artemide and Driade, and he soon shifted from importing products for his own buildings to acting as a dealer and distributor for the Italians. Johnson remembers cold-calling executives featured in *Fortune* magazine as a way of drumming up clientele (among the buyers he secured in this fashion was Asher Edelman, the noted corporate raider and arts patron who inspired the character Gordon Gecko in the 1987 film *Wall Street*, which also featured some of Meister's furniture). This bold approach to salesmanship led to his becoming one of the first to handle Memphis design in the United States, eventually becoming their sole American distributor in 1985.⁹⁸

Despite the efforts of middlemen like Kaufmann and Johnson, Sottsass never had any real intention of making money out of Memphis – he considered it a sideline and an antidote to his lucrative corporate work. Even the group's most famous pieces, like Graves' *Plaza*, Shire's *Bel Air* and Sottsass' *Carlton*, sold fewer than 50 copies over the course of the 1980s. Memphis, then, was never built to last. In its second year, 1982, Sottsass was already saying, 'I would be terrified to think that Memphis may carry on as it is for 10 years, or even only five.'⁹⁹ That proved to be about right. The collective did undergo several dramatic changes in tactics over its short lifespan, turning to a more luxurious set of materials for its second collection and then experimenting with mass production in its third (which included De Lucchi's *First* chair), all the while undergoing internal paroxysms at the implications of any form of commercial success. Perhaps it was inevitable that an attempt would be made to make Memphis profitable, given the enormous influence of the group in the marketplace of style. (As one design buyer reportedly said, when some of the young Memphis designers first paid a visit to London, 'My immediate reaction is that all this is



irrelevant to serious design. But, God help me, this lot is our next generation of customers.)¹⁰⁰ In practice, this took the form of a transfer of ownership. While other possibilities were debated, including ownership by the designers themselves, the original partnership structure (see Catharine Rossi's essay in this volume, pp. 160–5) was dissolved. In 1987 the Memphis name and the right to reproduce the designs were sold to the entrepreneur Alberto Albricci.

At around the same time, Sottsass announced that as far as he was concerned, it was over. Bedin recalls the scene: 'That created an incredible reaction – very Commedia dell'Arte, very Italian, though we weren't all Italian. De Lucchi, who has a very low voice, was screaming at him: "Ettore, you can't leave us!" But Ettore said, "It's like a love story. When you get used to it, you have to quit!"¹⁰¹ That was one way of understanding the unravelling of Memphis; the other was that the commercial sphere had bested this attempt to ridicule its own imperatives. You can almost hear Mendini's taunting words on the subject hovering in the background: 'What pleasure we get, what intellectual exercise, from this egotistic exploring of markets, catalogues, seductive shop-windows, advertisements, other people's houses ... the more you repudiate this immoral demon of temptation, the more it bobs up and wins again.'¹⁰² Yet even if its residual radicalism was drowned out by the ringing of cash registers, Memphis had a huge impact on design. It inspired many outright imitations and, more generally, a looser, more art-oriented, and above all more permissive visual language. Memphis showed that innocuous, domestic things – sideboards and teapots – could play a part in the hyper-real life of the postmodern subject: a life lived as if always on stage.

Synthetic Identities

Fame, gonna drive me insane,
like it drove you away from me.
Fame, all alone with my name,
even that don't belong to me.¹⁰³
—Grace Jones

Are you for real?¹⁰⁴
—Zhora from Blade Runner

Before theorists started to talk the talk – before Judith Butler anatomized gender identity as a performative act, and before Donna Haraway delivered her cryptic pronouncement that 'we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism' – performers of all kinds were already walking the postmodern walk.¹⁰⁵ Dancers and choreographers; art directors for sci-fi films, pop promo videos and style magazines; performance artists; drag queens; pop stars; disc jockeys; cabaret singers, partygoers, poseurs and nightclubbers: these were the unlikely authors of the first visualizations of postmodern identity.

In the 1970s diversity was a rhetoric within professional design practice, but not a reality. Even in the most radical architectural enclaves, where postmodern pluralism was embraced as a guiding principle, straight white men dominated the profession. Women such as Gae Aulenti and Denise Scott Brown faced routine discrimination.¹⁰⁶ Underground performance culture, however, was an entirely different matter. The roots of this 'scene' can be found in jazz clubs, illicit gay bars, and bohemian art culture, and most of its key innovators were female, gay, black, or otherwise 'other'. In this context alterity could itself be the basis of professional identity. The names said it all: Steve Strange; Klaus Nomi ('no-me'); Public Enemy. And yet, paradoxically, it was these apparently marginal figures who brought postmodern ideas their greatest fame. Performers in various disciplines brought techniques like quotation and self-referentiality to a much wider audience than even the most commercially successful designers of chairs, teapots and buildings. Over the course of a few short years, they managed to rewrite the rules of pop culture.

In many respects, postmodern performance strategies resembled those being explored elsewhere in design. Performers deconstructed and re-assembled. They worked in a language of pastiche. But to this basic toolkit they added further layers of complexity, combining visual style (dress, graphics and stage sets) with music, movement and words, fully realizing postmodernism's potential for interdisciplinary crossover. Most importantly, they drew explicit attention to the *mediation* of their own work, creating (in Kate Linker's words) 'shimmering synthetic appearances that flaunt their artificial origins'.¹⁰⁷ As we have



54
Jean-Paul Goude, Preliminary photograph for *Grace Jones Revised and Updated*, 1978. Photographic print



55
Jean-Paul Goude, Preliminary collage for *Grace Jones Revised and Updated*, 1978. Cut-up Ektachrome

Opposite: 56
Jean-Paul Goude, *Grace Jones Revised and Updated*, 1978. Photographic print



seen, being media-friendly was an important aspect of Memphis and other New Wave design, but that fact was left largely tacit. For performers, by contrast, the operations of stage and screen were a topic of obsessive interest. The means of reproduction, like TV and magazines, were taken up as primary content. As the literary critic Larry McCaffery noted at the time, this was a natural response to the postmodern condition:

This is a milieu of near-infinite reproducibility and disposability, a literal and psychological space that has been radically expanded by recent video, computer, digital, Xerox, and audio developments, by technology's growing efficiency in transforming space and time into consumable sounds and images, and by the population's exponentially increased access to cultural artifacts which can be played, re-played, cut-up, and otherwise manipulated by a casual flick of a switch or joystick.¹⁰⁸

For the most part, theorists of postmodernity were inclined to see this expanding empire as terrifyingly anti-human. (As Lyotard memorably put it, 'We are like Gullivers in the world of technoscience: sometimes too big, sometimes too small, but never the right size.')

¹⁰⁹ They portrayed the mass media as manipulative, its simulations tending to erode authentic experience and put in its place an all-conquering 'society of the spectacle'.¹¹⁰

But what if being spectacular is your primary objective? For some postmodern performers, acting out the part of a celebrity was an expressive act in its own right. As Rosetta Brooks, the editor of avant-garde style magazine *ZG*, put it, 'The poser is his/her own ready-made art object ... whose circulation is not the microcosm of the art world but the self-consciously constituted clique.'¹¹¹ While it might be possible to see such figures as tools of the 'culture industry', it is hard not to feel that when they hit the stage or screen, they were very much in charge. This is certainly true of Grace Jones, for example. After emerging in the late 1970s as the doyenne of New York's underground club and disco scene, Jones worked with her lover, the stylist Jean-Paul Goude, to fashion herself into an iconic, even superhuman character. Photographed in a maternity dress that looked like a Memphis sideboard, perched atop a Mendini-esque ziggurat, or appearing on stage alongside a phalanx of masked Jones clones, she exploited the vocabulary of postmodern style to devastating effect. The truest portrait made of her during these years was probably the cover of the album *Island Life*, fabricated by Goude out of many separate photographic fragments (pls 54–6). The resulting image showed her in a seamless arabesque – a potent, hyper-real action figure. (Will the real Grace Jones please stand up? Why would she want to?)

Jones might be taken as emblematic of postmodern performance, too, in the way her career progressed. She got started by playing in the New York disco scene, frequently to gay audiences. By the 1980s, she was at the top of the charts and starring in Hollywood action films. To some extent, this passage from the underground to the mainstream was the shape of postmodern performance in general. It first blossomed underground, a hybrid of glam, punk, funk and drag. Then, it moved through a great churning mill of clubs and fringe venues, breaking out into popular culture via large-scale engines of style like MTV (Music Television, launched in 1981) with unprecedented speed. To this day, the postmodern techniques of self-regard, irony and exaggeration form the bedrock of the commercial pop repertoire (witness Lady Gaga). This arc conforms to the customary course of stylistic diffusion, already explicated in 1970 by Alvin Toffler in his book *Future Shock*:

While charismatic figures may become style-setters, styles are fleshed out and marketed to the public by the sub-societies or tribe-lets we have termed subcults. Taking in raw symbolic matter from the mass media, they somehow piece together odd bits of dress, opinion, and expression and form them into a coherent package: a life style model. Once they have assembled a model, they proceed, like any good corporation, to merchandise it. They find customers for it.¹¹²

By the time of Dick Hebdige's 1979 book *Subculture*, Toffler's skeletal account of mainstream absorption had become the basis for a satisfyingly thorough analysis of the operations of style. The thinking went like this: as new ideas migrate from their niche or avant-garde position and then proliferate, at first through an 'in-crowd' and eventually via appropriation

and exploitation to a broader public, the potentially disruptive energies of the subculture are controlled, and the hegemony of mass culture is continually re-asserted.¹¹³ Whether this just-so story is ever valid is hotly debated by theorists.¹¹⁴ In the case of postmodernism, however, it is clear that it does not apply in at least one key respect: the processes of mediation and commoditization were factored in all along, so how could there be a moment of 'selling out'? Tricia Rose has made this point about the supposed commoditization of hip-hop music:

Hip hop's explicit focus on consumption has frequently been mischaracterized as a movement into the commodity market (i.e., hip hop is no longer 'authentically' black, if it is for sale). [But] hip hop's moment(s) of incorporation are a shift in the already existing relationship hip hop has always had to the commodity system.¹¹⁵

From this perspective, the disruptive potential of postmodern genres such as hip-hop were actually implemented rather than de-fanged when they were taken up by the culture industry.

Take another example: Leigh Bowery. An Australian-born club denizen, resident in London, Bowery fashioned himself into a 'living artwork' through extraordinary, body-distorting costumes of his own design and make. Alterity was at the heart of his activities. He was a front-man for the nightclub Taboo, contributed outfits to Michael Clark's radical dance company, and started a band called Minty which was notorious for, among other things, its graphic on-stage depiction of a birthing process (with Bowery in labour). In 1988

57
Leigh Bowery posing during a performance at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1988. Photograph by Nils Jorgensen/Rex Features



he staged a week-long performance at London’s Anthony d’Offay Gallery in which he displayed himself in a variety of costumes behind a one-way mirror (pl. 57). An object in a vitrine, he nonetheless looked at himself posing and therefore shared in the voyeuristic gaze of the visitor.

Clearly Bowery was not bidding for mainstream acceptance. Yet gradually his ideas permeated the worlds of cutting-edge fashion and art. Even before his death of AIDS in 1994 he was one of the most name-checked figures in London’s art and fashion worlds, and he is regarded today as something like a national treasure. At first this looks, again, like the defusing of an avant-garde gesture – initially shocking, eventually mainstreamed. But it should be remembered that, for all Bowery’s outrageousness, he was camera-ready from the beginning, and highly conscious that ‘image’ was his principal medium. Already in 1983 he was modelling his clothing at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts and in fashion shows, and he appeared on catwalks and on television throughout the decade. The same year that he appeared at the Anthony d’Offay Gallery he staged a similar performance in the window of a Japanese department store, demonstrating his indifference to the distance between art and commercial venues. Even for this most seemingly indigestible of radical performance artists, finding an audience and holding its attention was a constant preoccupation – in some ways, the point of the whole exercise. Bowery’s intelligence as a designer and performer was premised on the infrastructure of fame.

Another fascinating instance is the case of ‘voguing’. This concept was made famous by Madonna, the queen of pop, in 1990:

Ladies with an attitude
 Fellas that were in the mood
 Don’t just stand there, let’s get to it
 Strike a pose, there’s nothing to it
 Vogue¹¹⁶

The term had perhaps been drawn to Madonna’s attention two years earlier, when it was adopted by the omnipresent subcultural gadfly of postmodernism, Malcolm McLaren, for his single ‘Deep in Vogue’. The song was a tribute to the drag queens of New York City, such as Paris DuPree (a kindred spirit of sorts to Grace Jones), who had invented voguing a decade earlier. According to disco historian Tim Lawrence, African-American transvestites would flip open a fashion magazine – not necessarily *Vogue*, but it was a popular choice – to a random page, and adopt whatever pose they found there.¹¹⁷ It was one way of ‘throwing shade’ (displaying attitude) on the dance floor. So when Madonna hit No.1 in the pop charts and got herself into fashion magazines yet again, she was returning the practice to its origins. Voguing was always already mediated.

Postmodern performances are almost always built around these recursive effects. The music video for the 1980 song ‘Fade to Grey’, by the pop group Visage, is typical in its attitude, though superlative in its realization (pl. 58). The band’s singer, Steve Strange, is first shown plunging from a town car into a scrum of fashionistas (a nod to his real-life activity as impresario of London’s Blitz Club). Photographers gather around him and his beautiful young male companion: he is the centre of media attention. Then we ourselves are looking at him, in close-up. He stares back, eyes wide in deadened astonishment, pseudo-Cubist make-up dividing his face. Moments later he is broken into fragments through montage: an eye and a pair of rouged lips, patches in the darkness slowly coalescing into a face. Then, true to the song’s title, he fades away into nothing. Meanwhile, Strange sings of alienation:

One man on a lonely platform
 One case sitting by his side
 Two eyes staring cold and silent
 Show fear as he turns to hide ¹¹⁸

He presents himself as a postmodern subject: an object of constant fascination who is only a cosmetic shell, an identity formulated through a process of disintegration. Strange’s impassive voice and mask-like face recall, too, the ‘deadpan’ methodology that Denise Scott

Opposite: 58
Visage, *Fade to Grey* album (UK release), 1980. Make-up by Richard Sarah, hair by Keith of Smile, clothes by Judith Frankland, photograph by Robyn Beeche. V&A: E.231–2011

59
Devo, *Freedom of Choice* album (USA release), 1980. Photograph by Joep Bruijnje. V&A: E.230–2011

60
Kraftwerk, *The Man-Machine* album (German release), 1977. Artwork by Karl Klefisch, photograph by Günther Fröhling. V&A: E.48–2011

Overleaf: 61
Blade Runner, 1982.
 Directed by Ridley Scott



Brown and Robert Venturi brought to Las Vegas. This studied neutrality of style – detached, a little artificial – was common in 1980s pop. Bands like Talking Heads and Eurythmics delivered vocals, conventionally the most expressive aspect of rock music, in a flat monotone. Musical inflection was now located not in the singer’s voice and lyrics – what the song meant – but rather in the song’s mediation, how it worked: its technical fabrication through samples and synthesizers, and its subsequent distribution through recordings, videos and live performance.¹¹⁹

The American band Devo was exemplary in this regard. Their name was derived from an apocalyptic theory of ‘Devolution’ developed by founders Gerald Casale, Bob Lewis and Mark Mothersbaugh while they were students at Kent State University in the early 1970s. Casale writes:

There’s no question that we exhibited post-modern trends before we knew of the label. Our Dadaist send-up of the modernist idea of progress and technological utopia was at the core of the Devolutionary aesthetic that we so stridently advanced. We attacked the thin veneer of certainty posited by what we saw as a gang of illegitimate authority (cops, preachers, TV hucksters, psychologists, etc). We asked the seminal question ‘Are We Not Men?’ and gleefully proclaimed the answer.¹²⁰

By the time they hit the mainstream in 1980 with their album *Freedom of Choice*, Casale and Mothersbaugh had designed a sophisticated ‘fashion/anti-fashion’ look composed of silvery Naugahyde suits and vacuum-formed headgear (the iconic ‘Energy Domes’) (pl. 59). Whether they were on stage, in magazines, or starring in videos broadcast during the first years of MTV, Devo projected an unnervingly ‘post-human’ quality.¹²¹

In Germany, a similar approach was being pursued by Kraftwerk, who emerged from the experimental electronic music scene in Düsseldorf in 1970. Appropriately for a band whose name translates as ‘power plant’, they fully embraced the idea of technological determinism. (Asked about their instrumentation, Kraftwerk’s Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider would reply, ‘We play the studio’, rather than guitars and keyboards.)¹²² For their 1978 album *The Man-Machine*, they re-fashioned themselves in the image of their own ‘robot pop’ music, having themselves depicted as androids on the neo-Constructivist record sleeve and in music videos (pl. 60). On one track, the group intoned:

We’re functioning automatik
 And we are dancing mechanik
 We are the robots ¹²³

At the press launch for the album, they appeared in person for only five minutes, allowing most of the event to be handled by four inert showroom dummies. Kraftwerk was an early and unusually extreme example of the performer as completely synthetic creation. They were early adopters of an important postmodernist motif, which might be termed the ‘authentically inauthentic’ subject.¹²⁴ The idea is perhaps best known from *Blade Runner* (pl. 61) which features characters called ‘replicants’ who are physically and mentally superior to humans but are in fact commodities, fabricated by a corporation to provide free labour. Poignantly, one of the replicants, Rachel, is unaware of her own status as an artificial life form. Her tragic, amnesiac, and completely constructed identity is a template for the postmodern condition.¹²⁵

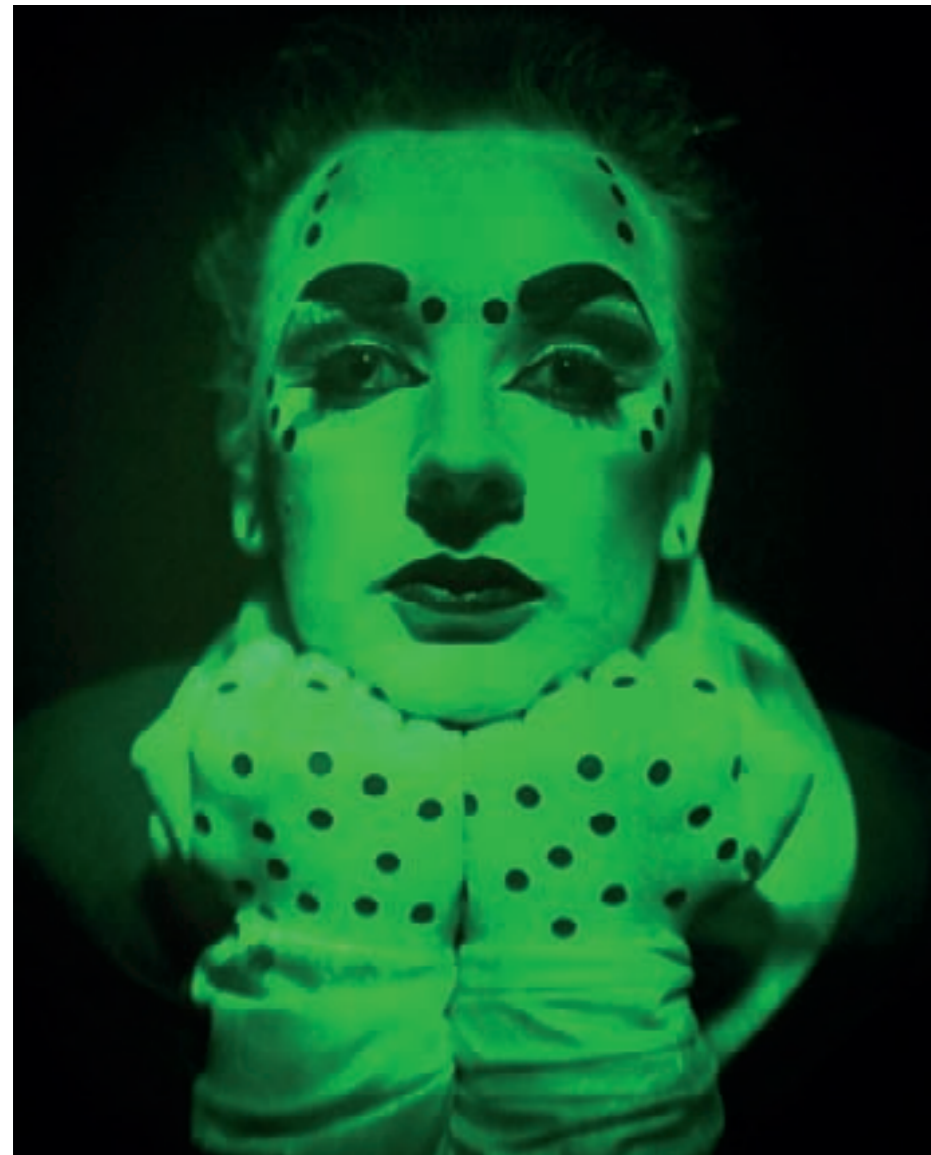
In New York City, the performance artist Laurie Anderson was engaging with a similar range of ideas. But if groups like Visage and Kraftwerk were radically reductive in their approach, she used ‘deadpan’ as a springboard, creating a dazzling repertoire of synthetic effects. Anderson’s work resists both disciplinary categorization and easy understanding. It is wilfully scrambled and indeterminate, but also politically committed and poetically evocative. (As the Marxist scholar Marshall Berman once put it, she is ‘ironic, maybe quixotic, but the more determined for all that’).¹²⁶ Anderson is above all a storyteller, but her tales are invariably non-linear. She has noted that ‘language can be very fragile – it can be used in so many different ways’, and she fashions her persona out of fragments, as if her words and music had fallen to the floor and she were picking up the pieces.¹²⁷ Stray bits of media broadcast, political speeches and the sweet nothings of lovers are all set to a



dizzying soundtrack of jazz, classical orchestration, Steve Reich-style minimalism, and transcendent chorale. Her lyrics, too, occupy a tonal never-never land, caught somewhere between a public address announcement, deconstructivist theory and modernist poetry. In the song 'From the Air,' for example, Anderson imagines her anonymous addressee as a postmodern subject in freefall, and in need of consolation. Whether she provides it or not is not obvious.

Put your hands over your eyes.
 Jump out of the plane.
 There is no pilot.
 You are not alone.
 Standby.
 This is the time;
 And this is the record of the time.¹²⁸

The identity that Anderson projects is at once multiple and, as is suggested by the cover of her album *Big Science*, a completely blank screen, ready for projection (pl. 62). She processes her weirdly persuasive speaking voice through a vocoder (or voice encoder, a device invented in the 1930s to transmit encrypted messages over the radio). This artificial means



62
Laurie Anderson, *Big Science* album (USA release), 1982. Art direction by Perry Hoberman, design by Cindy Brown, photograph by Greg Shifri. V&A: E.229–2011

63
Richmond Holographic Studios (Edwina Orr and David Trayner), *Boy George reflection hologram*, 1987. Silver halide on glass © Richmond Holographic Studios (Edwina Orr and David Trayner). Courtesy Jonathan Ross Hologram Collection, London

allows Anderson to shift fluidly among various 'modes of address', each of which seems to signify a different stereotype, a different perspective on the world.¹²⁹ Out of all this, though, arises a powerfully unified artistic vision – an act of synthesis encapsulated in the punning title of Anderson's sprawling 1983 masterpiece *United States*.

Anderson's work, with its eclectic bricolage of performance disciplines, is all about assuming different guises – a fragmentary persona built around a teasingly unknowable core. Her work might be considered a polymorphous, staged equivalent to Cindy Sherman's rather more focused photographic project *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80). With their combination of specific narrative and absent identity, these images are an inevitable reference point for postmodernism in art history (pl. 65). If Grace Jones and Jean-Paul Goude used a single image to assemble an identity from parts, Sherman achieved the same end through an open, fragmentary series. Nor is there a huge gap between the work of Pictures Generation artists – that is, Sherman and her conceptualist colleagues such as Richard Prince and appropriationist Sherrie Levine, so-named for a group exhibition of 1977 – and the popular image-making that they mined so effectively (pl. 64). Fashion photography in this period often employed the same combination of quotation and impending violence that one finds in Sherman's work.

And how different, really, are a Sherman film still and the portrait of Boy George, Steve Strange's friend and fellow Blitz Club habitué, taken at the Richmond Holographic Studios in 1985 (pl. 63)? This may seem a strange comparison, juxtaposing as it does a benchmark of post-conceptual art with an apparently frivolous image destined for the gift shop market.¹³⁰ Yet David Harvey's concise description of Sherman's work could apply equally to both images: 'They focus on masks without commenting directly on social meanings other than on the activity of masking itself.'¹³¹ In each case, identity is shown in the process of its own construction from raw material. It consists entirely of pre-existing codes. If anything, the hologram of Boy George is the more eerily synthetic of the two portraits. It shows the pop star posing coquettishly in the garb of a clown, decorated all over with polka dots. Even in reproduction the photo has an unearthly quality, but in person, the hologram projects a powerful sense of non-space. Boy George floats in an undefined 3D void, and no matter where we stand in front of the glowing green image he stares right through us. His look recalls Jean-Claude Lebensztejn's memorable description of the postmodern gaze as 'calm and blank', seeing everything in its field of vision but withholding all judgment.¹³² In an image like this, disillusionment creates its own kind of magic.

64
Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 1983. C-type colour print. V&A: E.334–1994 © Richard Prince, courtesy Gagosian Gallery





Style Wars

Unlike all the other genres of music, there are no boundaries to hip-hop. We can lyrically describe and talk about anything we want to. Musically, we could use almost anything. We don't have to sing in key. We don't have to have a bridge or a chorus. It doesn't matter. This particular style of music ... is it.¹³³

—Grandmaster Flash

If one were seeking a single metaphor to bind together postmodern performance culture, a good choice might be 'sampling'. The sample resembles the historical quotations that are used widely in postmodern practice. Just as in architecture, reproducing a pre-existing fragment of a sound, image, or text creates a layer of temporal complexity. Past and present sit side by side in unresolved juxtaposition. But as Ulrich Lehmann argues in his contribution to this volume (pp. 178–81), sampling is also distinct within postmodern technique, in that it 'is a means by which technology enters into the very core of the artwork'. This observation has particular force within reproductive media like recorded music, video or film, where the replication of a copy is essentially indistinguishable from the original. This implies that the technique is anti-material, but actually sampling was still achieved through strictly manual means in the 1970s and 80s. The electronica artists (Brion Gysin, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Brian Eno) and reggae and hip-hop innovators (Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa) who pioneered the techniques of sampling and mixing were all working with their hands. They painstakingly assembled loops and entire compositions from bits of tape, or mastered the difficult art of turntablism, by which a DJ mixed two (or more) records on the fly to create a unified composition. Like breakdancing and graffiti, turntablism lent itself to head-to-head competition, or 'battling' – it was part of the hip-hop repertoire of stylistic warfare. A benchmark recording was 'The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel' (1981), which ran for an astonishing seven minutes, and consisted of nothing but manipulations of vinyl (including recognizable snatches of mainstream hits by the likes of Queen and Blondie) on a trio of turntables. It announced the possibility of a completely unprecedented musical form – new because every bit of it was recycled.¹³⁴

For graphic designers, this 'cut-and-paste' method was not a metaphor but a literal description of practice – and it was equally crafty. April Greiman's collaborative work with Jayme Odgers may look as though it was done using Photoshop, but it predates that software by more than a decade (pl. 68). It was actually laboriously clipped out and pasted down in the manner of a collage, and then photographed to create a unified image, which could then be reproduced through offset printing. It is not surprising that Greiman was among the first graphic designers to turn to Macintosh computers when they were introduced in 1984 (a moment marked by a celebrated advertisement created by *Blade Runner* director Ridley Scott, inspired by George Orwell's dystopian predictions for that year). As Umberto Eco once put it, 'lying about the future produces history',¹³⁵ and like many postmodernists, Greiman was ahead of the curve – anticipating the possible aesthetic impact of technologies that did not yet exist.

Sampling was primarily a formal concern for Greiman and Odgers, not a way of indicating common cause with other practices. But many other graphic designers of the New Wave generation had a much more intimate relationship with performance genres. This is especially true in the music industry. Before the advent of the CD and the Internet, graphic pieces such as record sleeves, posters, magazines and flyers were important promotional mechanisms. It is useful to think of these designs as applying, in two-dimensional form, the aesthetics of sampling and active contradiction that one finds everywhere in postmodern performance. Peter Saville's groundbreaking record sleeves for New Order, for example, took advantage of an anarchic working environment at Factory Records (founded but not exactly led by Tony Wilson, and connected to the iconic postmodernist Hacienda nightclub, designed by Ben Kelly) to transform a youth commodity into a 'radical object'. Partly because Factory was so unprofessional, and partly because New Order had lost their charismatic leader, the troubled singer Ian Curtis (frontman for the band's previous incarnation Joy Division), Saville had a completely free hand. No one objected to his designs, even when they included no title, no image of the band members, no clear



66
New Order, *Power, Corruption & Lies* album (UK release), 1983.
Design by Peter Saville (FACT 75)



67
New Order, *Movement* album (UK release), 1981.
Design by Peter Saville (FACT 50)



68
April Greiman and Jayme Odgers, Cal Arts (California Institute of the Arts) poster, 1978. Four-colour offset lithograph. V&A: E.1498–2010

relationship to the music within. In place of these standard elements, there were only quotations and cryptic codes. Saville was a voracious consumer himself, who surrounded himself with used books and other source material, and the imagery he swiped was rather esoteric. One New Order sleeve was based on a still life by Henri Fantin-Latour; another on the graphic work of Futurist designer Fortunato Depero (pls 66 and 67). Neither was an obvious point of reference, but both resonated with the times nonetheless. Fantin-Latour's flowers found a fashion-world parallel in Scott Crolla and Georgina Godley's ironic use of chintz, while quoting Futurism allowed Saville to simultaneously evoke and undermine the avant-garde's breathless pursuit of the new.¹³⁶ Alongside these sampled images were bars of colour, which simultaneously referenced the graphic's nature as a reproduction (they looked like proofing strips) and functioned as an intentionally illegible language. Each square of colour corresponded to a letter of the alphabet in a system of Saville's own devising. It was an example of postmodern play, as well as a gift to New Order's cultish audience, who thrived on the sense of being insiders.

The graphic designer Vaughan Oliver enjoyed a similarly attentive audience in his work for the label 4AD, which produced post-punk bands like the Cocteau Twins, Modern English, and the Pixies. Founder Ivo Watts-Russell gave Oliver free rein in developing the graphic identity of the label. He responded with a body of work that is remarkable for its visual density and consistency, featuring quintessentially postmodern tactics like erratic typography, cut-and-paste visuals, and appropriated imagery. Though they used more or less the same techniques, Oliver and Saville make an instructive contrast, suggesting the aesthetic range of postmodern graphics: the sensual, Dionysian expressionist and the cerebral, Apollonian conceptualist. Even when using found images, Oliver sought to achieve an air of mystery and ambiguity – as in his 1985 sleeve for the band Colourbox (pl. 69). While it seems to be a piece of custom-made bricolage, the image is actually a Japanese printer's 'make-ready' sheet – that is, a piece run through the press to absorb excess ink in advance of the production run. In this case, there is a collision between two banal pop images: a fashion shoot and an advertisement for peaches. It was unusual for Oliver to leave his material completely untransformed in this way. Typically, he cut apart and layered his appropriated images into a suggestive palimpsest. But in this case the work seemed to have been done for him by happenstance. It was also appropriate to the band, which was one of the first in Britain to use sampling. Unlike Saville, whose practice was premised on self-aware gamesmanship, Oliver always tried to form an explicit and embodied tie to the music he was representing, in this case 'the manipulation of something already existing, something ephemeral and throwaway'.¹³⁷

The use of appropriation by designers like Saville and Oliver marked an important moment in the proliferation of postmodern technique because it was distributed to a massive audience via the echo chamber of the post-punk music scene. New Wave and hip-hop, with their limited recording equipment, DIY musicianship and street-style clothing, were documented by a proliferation of handmade fanzines and flyers. As these musical genres came of age, intermingled and reached a wider listenership, the graphics that supported them did too. They became glossy, both literally and figuratively. The 'zine gave way to large-format, post-punk style bibles like New York City's *Bomb* (edited by



Far left: 70
i-D, no. 28, The Art Issue, August 1985. Styled by William Faulkner, design by Terry Jones, photograph by Nick Knight, featuring Lizzy Tear



Left: 71
Ryūkō Tsūshin (Fashion News), no. 196, May 1980. Styled by Hideharu Kanno, photograph by Shingpei Asai, art direction by Tadanori Yokoo

Betty Sussler), *New York Rocker* (edited by Andy Schwartz and designed by Elizabeth van Itallie) and *Fetish* (designed by Doublespace Studios); London's *i-D* (edited and designed by Terry Jones, with the declared purpose of 'finding fashion at its source, and [giving] credit to the new ideas born on the streets'),¹³⁸ *Arena*, *Blitz* and *City Limits*; Tokyo's *Ryūkō Tsūshin (Fashion News)*, designed for a short time by Tadanori Yokoo; and the unforgettable *Wet: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing* (a California publication, needless to say, edited by Leonard Koren and designed by a rotating cast including Greiman and Odgers) (pls 70, 71 and 72). These magazines unleashed the complete battery of postmodern graphic techniques on their eager young audiences: cut-and-paste graphics; the use of registration marks and colour bars as found ornaments; hand-drawn, quasi-legible type; a New Wave palette of colours, often in vivid juxtaposition with stark (and cheaper) black and white; and above all, a free-for-all of sampled content. Often it was impossible to tell whether a given bit of graphic information, text or image, was appropriated or not.

The Face, founded by former *New Musical Express* editor Nick Logan, was the quintessential example of these postmodern style guides (pl. 74). As its name suggests, the magazine was completely in tune with the postmodern fascination with the façade. But this is not to say it was superficial, especially once Neville Brody was brought on to give the magazine a spiky, intricate design identity. He brought his punk-era affinity for 'cut ups' to *The Face*, creating typography from manipulated, mixed and matched bits of Letraset. He violently cropped both text and images, sometimes near the point of illegibility, and certain motifs were repeated and abstracted over several issues so that attentive readers could follow the gradual transformation – an ingenious exploitation of the magazine's serial character. Yet even as Brody's graphics took on autonomous life, and the slogan 'the world's best dressed magazine' appeared on the contents page, *The Face* remained receptive to the contributions of other photographers and stylists. The result was a cocktail of visual stimulants that readers could navigate as they wished. As Brody put it, '*The Face* had two narratives, the writing and the design. We wanted people to be their own editors.'¹³⁹

Thematically speaking, the constant collision of forms could not have been more appropriate. Though *The Face* was all about personal style – subject matter that would have seemed frivolous in other places and times – that topic had become deeply politicized in 1980s London. Not for nothing did Brody emblazon the *New Socialist* with the title 'Style Wars' when he was asked to redesign the magazine (pl. 73). In the wake of the subculture-strewn 1970s and at the heart of Thatcher's 80s, style was a key cultural battleground. One index of this fact is the vituperative criticism that was launched at *The Face* not from the right, but the left. Dick Hebdige took aim at the magazine in his 1988 follow-up to *Subculture*,



72
WET, no. 20, September/November 1979. Design by April Greiman with Jayme Odgers



73
New Socialist, no. 38, May 1986. Design by Neville Brody

74
The Face, no. 69, January 1986. Design by Neville Brody, photograph by Jean-Paul Goude, featuring Grace Jones

Overleaf: 75
The Face, no. 33, January 1983. Design by Neville Brody

a book entitled *Hiding in the Light*. Though he conceded that the editors at *The Face* were impressive innovators, he was deeply alarmed by the slippage between editorial, advertising and art direction that made the publication distinctive:

The Face is a magazine which goes out of its way every month to blur the line between politics and parody and pastiche; the street, the stage, the screen; between purity and danger; the mainstream and the 'margins': to flatten the world. For flatness is corrosive and infectious ... To stare into the flat, blank *Face* is to look into a world where your actual presence is unnecessary, where nothing adds up to much anything anymore, where you live to be alive. Because flatness is the friend of death and death is the great leveller ... Advertising takes over where the avant garde left off and the picture of the Post is complete.¹⁴⁰

A similarly damning conclusion was reached by another partisan of the 1970s punk scene, Jon Savage, in his 1983 article 'The Age of Plunder'. It was an early statement of an argument that would become more and more commonplace over the course of the decade: that postmodern quotation was an admission of creative paralysis, a form of surrender.¹⁴¹ Savage placed an even more political spin on this issue than Hebdige had: 'This nostalgia

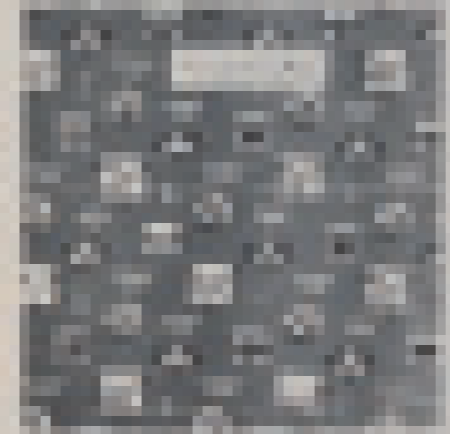


Il nuovo movimento artistico italiano, che si è sviluppato negli anni Settanta, è stato influenzato dalle avanguardie storiche e dal futurismo. Questo movimento ha cercato di rompere con le convenzioni artistiche tradizionali e di sperimentare nuove forme espressive. Gli artisti hanno utilizzato materiali e tecniche diverse, come il collage e il ready-made, per creare opere che riflettono la complessità della società contemporanea. L'obiettivo era quello di coinvolgere lo spettatore e di sfidare le sue percezioni.



Il movimento artistico italiano degli anni Settanta ha cercato di rompere con le convenzioni artistiche tradizionali e di sperimentare nuove forme espressive.

THE AGE OF PLUNDR



Il movimento artistico italiano degli anni Settanta ha cercato di rompere con le convenzioni artistiche tradizionali e di sperimentare nuove forme espressive.

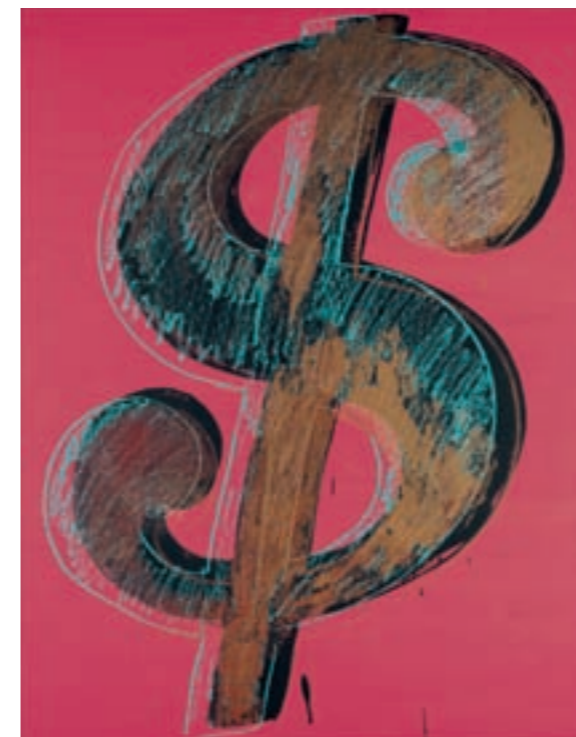
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transcends any healthy respect for the past: it is a disease all the more sinister because unrecognized and, finally, an explicit device for the reinforcement and success of the New Right.¹⁴² This was another case of postmodernism eating itself; for the article was published in – where else? – *The Face*. Brody, in laying out the spreads for the essay, was not shy about including his own peers as targets for Savage's ire – including his former colleagues at Stiff Records, the graphic designers Barney Bubbles, Malcolm Garrett and Peter Saville. The act of 'plunder' that anchored the opening spread was Saville's straight lift from Futurist design discussed earlier, directly juxtaposed with the original (pl. 75). Brody thus entered into the fray, supplementing Savage's commentary with one of his own. It was a curious form of brinkmanship; while his own work rarely included that kind of direct appropriation, he certainly participated in the general postmodern practice of fragmenting and deploying pre-existing styles. Savage's critique could easily have been read as a condemnation of the very magazine that published it. In his heartbroken concluding lines, it seemed clear that he was speaking to *The Face's* editors and readers alike: 'The Past is then turned into the most disposable of consumer commodities, and is thus dismissable: the lessons which it can teach us are thought trivial, are ignored amongst a pile of garbage ... What pop does, or doesn't do, ceases to be important'.¹⁴³

Whether that was true probably depended on who you were. For Savage, who had experienced the glory days of punk firsthand, the New Wave years seemed a rapid slide into vacant consumerism. But for those a little younger, or working at a different end of the industry, the early 1980s were the glory days. Every kid making a mix tape, decorating it and passing it on to a friend was articulating the postmodern shift in music culture.¹⁴⁴

76
Big Money Is Moving In, from the Changing Picture of Docklands, series 1, 1981–4. Original photomontage and digital remastering by Peter Dunn © Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project



77
Andy Warhol, Dollar Sign, 1981. Synthetic polymer paints and silk-screen inks on canvas. Private collection. Photograph Christie's Images 2011 © DACS London

The righteous purity of punk's nihilism had given way to a situation of general pastiche and commercial experimentation. At the professional level, new careers emerged: pop stylists, video makers, independent producers, and art directors. Styles were created from whole cloth, with (of course) a winking acknowledgement of the artificiality of that process.

One example was Buffalo (see pp. 182–5), a true style without substance, which was promoted heavily through *The Face*. It centred on the pastiche stylings of Ray Petri, who found inspiration in everything from reggae (Bob Marley's song 'Buffalo Soldier' inspired the name of the look) and mod styles of the 1960s to *noir* films and Scottish kilts. Vivienne Westwood fashioned a couture collection in tribute to Buffalo in 1982, the same year that Malcolm McLaren got in early on the commercial exploitation of hip-hop with his song and video 'Buffalo Gals'. A group of models and musicians gathered around Petri, including fellow stylist Judy Blame, producer Cameron McVey and singer Neneh Cherry, who would hit it big with the hip-hop dance track 'Buffalo Stance'. In the accompanying video (1989), Cherry appears within a sliding bricolage of turntablists, computer-generated images, floating texts (including the question 'Know what I mean?' translated into four languages) and Buffalo-styled dancers, all against a constantly shifting backdrop of lurid neo-psychedelic patterns. Despite Cherry's reiterated claim in the chorus that 'No moneyman can win my love/It's sweetness that I'm thinking of', her primary ornaments are a massive pair of gold earrings and a single matching '\$' hanging from her throat. Call it a dollar sign of the times.

Big Money Is Moving In (pl. 76)

Money doesn't mind if we say it's evil, it goes from strength to strength. It's a fiction, an addiction, and a tacit conspiracy.¹⁴⁵
—Martin Amis

Do you really think this is *your* city any longer? Open your eyes! The greatest city of the twentieth century! Do you think *money* will keep it yours? ... Come down from your swell co-ops, you general partners and merger lawyers! It's the Third World down there! Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians, Hondurans, Koreans, Chinese, Thais, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Panamanians, Filipinos, Albanians, Senegalese, and Afro-Americans! Go visit the frontiers, you gutless wonders!¹⁴⁶
—Tom Wolfe

In 1981, as if to greet the new decade, Andy Warhol created one of his signature silkscreen paintings. It featured a big, beautiful dollar sign (pl. 77). Ever since the heady days when his studio, the Factory, had been the epicentre of New York chic, Warhol had been a poster boy for postmodernism. He was obsessed with surface, and his paintings seemed to be unmatched as depictions of the pervasive, affectless flatness of the commodity sphere. As he put it in his memorably titled book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 'all the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it'.¹⁴⁷ He might just as easily have been talking about money.

For many in the art world, Warhol had been a big disappointment. His early Pop works had been those of a gimlet-eyed observer, a new type of realist who held up a mirror to American mass culture. But in 1969, he had founded the magazine *Interview*, which gave him a chance to indulge his chatty, cliquish side, and in the late 1970s he became one of Studio 54's most prominent habitués. By the 80s, he seemed to be little more than a society portraitist, churning out identikit images for anyone who would pay for the privilege. In a transparent bid to regain art world attention, he initiated a collaboration with the hot young graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. The art press immediately saw that this alliance was more like a corporate merger than a meeting of the minds. A *New York Times Magazine* article about the rise of marketing in the art world used Basquiat as a case study, and opened with a vignette of him chatting amiably with Warhol, Keith Haring and Nick Rhodes (of Duran Duran) at the restaurant Mr Chow's over 'plates of steaming black mushrooms and abalone', drinking kir royale (pl. 78).¹⁴⁸ This was Warhol's milieu now: not the Factory, with its inspired freaks, but the nightspots of the glitterati. Instead of deepening his artistic vision, he was cashing in.

But then, Warhol had never been about depth in the first place, and for those who thought that ‘face value’ was not necessarily to be despised, he was still very much in the frame.¹⁴⁹ Among those who still took him seriously was Fredric Jameson, one of the few major theorists of the 1980s who analysed specific works of art and design. For a generation of critics, artists, academics and students, Jameson’s article ‘Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984; expanded to book length in 1991) seemed to capture the condition of postmodernity better than any other text. And Warhol was central to this account. Jameson was fascinated by the artist’s billboard-like images: they ‘ought to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, one would certainly want to know why.’¹⁵⁰ He found Warhol’s glittering series *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980–1) to be particularly unnerving. He saw in them an art that was not only completely in thrall to commodity, but also thrilled about that fact. The paintings, he wrote, have ‘a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration, explicitly designated by the title itself, which is, of course, the glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt sand that seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us.’¹⁵¹

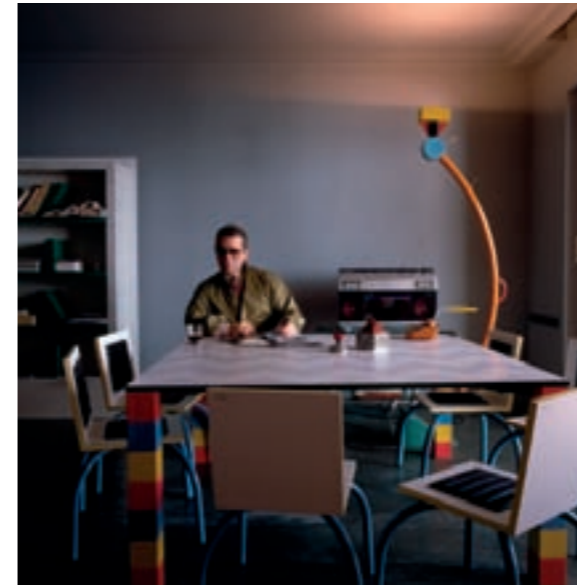
Exhilarated, or critical? Commodity, or commodity critique? Both/and. This was the dichotomy that ran right through postmodernism in the 1980s. As we shall see, Jameson identified a similarly vertiginous experience in architecture, but had he written a few years later he could scarcely have avoided mention of another artist: Jeff Koons. While Jameson found in Warhol a ‘waning of affect’, Koons was too full of love for comfort. His iconic sculpture *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* (1988) put the changeling pop star on a pedestal – literally – and rendered him in the gilt-edged white porcelain of a Meissen figurine (pl. 81). The contradictory energies of postmodern celebrity were certainly there: a black man turned white; the human face (already surgically altered) turned into a hard, smiling mask; and even, in a detail that might have been drawn from the pages of Haraway’s ‘Manifesto for Cyborgs’, a weirdly familial relationship between human and animal. Yet all these conflicts were resolved into an object of supreme, hermetic perfection. In a self-portrait of the same year, published as an insert in *Artforum*, Koons gave himself his own makeover (pl. 80). Presiding over a gaggle of school children, he was flanked by sinister slogans – ‘exploit the masses’ and ‘banality as saviour’. But with his teen idol looks and beguiling smile, and the word ‘mentality’ tilting upwards encouragingly behind his head, he came across as a bearer of the true word. Squeaky-clean, benevolent, powerful and disturbing, Koons seemed to have stepped out of the back room of the art world, where all the secrets were kept. A new religion of commodity art had arrived, and he had appointed himself its redeemer.

Of all the anxieties that attended this blithe celebration of banality, the one that cut most deeply was the same prospect Hebdige had glimpsed in the pages of *The Face* – the possibility that they marked the end of the avant-garde. Koons himself was unusually explicit on this point; as he put it, ‘I was telling the bourgeois [sic] to embrace the thing that it likes, the things it responds to.’¹⁵² That was in direct contradiction to the modernist tactic of shocking the bourgeoisie, of course; but if the avant-garde was a thing of the past, what would the future hold? One possibility was that art would now operate according to the dictates of fashion, which would mean relinquishing art’s critical autonomy. It is striking how many artists of the 1980s adopted not just the appearance but also the context of advertising, placing their works on commercial billboards or poster displays (see pl. 249, p. 285), as Keith Haring did with his subway drawings – an honest attempt to reach an audience that lacked any prior involvement in contemporary art.¹⁵³ But such an entry into the commodity sphere had an unsettling corollary: it might mean that art would henceforth be propelled not by ideas, but by money. Koons’ provocations aside, the booming art market of the 80s seemed to be settling this question of its own accord.¹⁵⁴

Equally telling was the fact that the world of fashion responded in kind, claiming the status of an avant-garde, but without the dimension of radical social critique usually implied by that phrase. As discussed in Claire Wilcox’s essay in this volume (pp. 154–9), the Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, and to a lesser extent her peers Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto, were received as prophets of postmodernism on their arrival in Europe.¹⁵⁵ But Paris fashion also had its own postmodern figurehead, as outré and glamorous as Kawakubo was monkish and austere. This was Karl Lagerfeld. With his dramatic black cape, aviator sunglasses and fluttering Japanese fan, he was a high camp German in the heart of France. He had been an early adopter of New Wave design, filling his flats in Monte Carlo



78
Jean-Michel Basquiat in his SoHo studio, illustrated in ‘New Art, New Money’, *The New York Times*, February 1985. Photograph by Lizzie Himmel



79
Karl Lagerfeld in his Monte Carlo Memphis-furnished apartment, 1981. Photograph by Jacques Schumacher



80
Jeff Koons, from *Art Magazine Ads*, originally published in *Artforum*, 1988–9. Photograph by Matt Chedey © Jeff Koons

81
Jeff Koons, *Michael Jackson and Bubbles*, 1988. Ceramic, glaze, paint. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California (91.1) © Jeff Koons. Purchased through the Marian and Bernard Messenger Fund and restricted funds

and Paris with Memphis furniture and photo blow-ups by Helmut Newton (pl. 79).¹⁵⁶ A German magazine described the scene: ‘He sits at ease at his little building-block table – in a khaki green cotton suit, handmade glasses and hand-sewn shoes, his grey-flecked hair drawn into a tight ponytail, coated in his own sharp “Lagerfeld” scent – and gazes round his new surroundings with amusement. The only thing missing is a robot to clatter along the marbled rubber floor and serve its master a Coca-Cola in a plastic cup.’¹⁵⁷ Lagerfeld had been a freelance designer for over two decades, noted particularly for his work for the brand Chloe, when he took on the job of chief designer at Chanel, the most hallowed brand in Parisian fashion, in 1982. Coco Chanel had died in 1971, and the label had slipped into the doldrums since. It was badly in need of a revamp, and this is exactly what Lagerfeld provided. Out went the sober restraint and elegantly unified ensembles associated with Chanel. In came tight miniskirts, swags of gold jewellery, and above all the interlinked double-C logo, which Lagerfeld plastered over everything: handbags, shoes, belts, fabrics. The ultimate modern brand in fashion had been postmodernized (pl. 82).

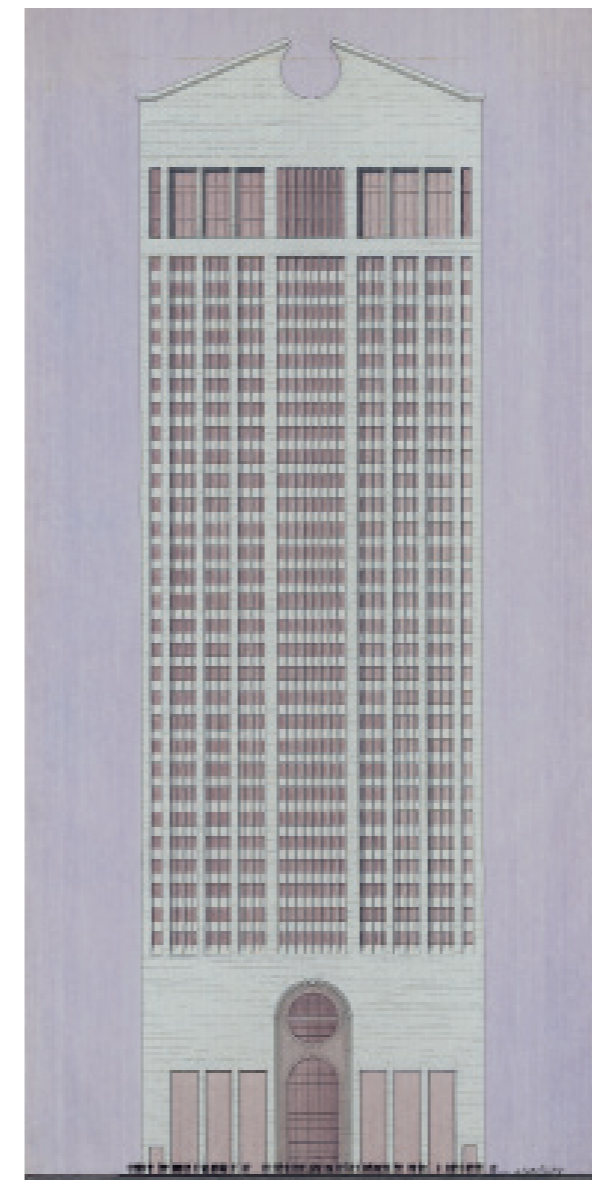
The volte-face that Lagerfeld performed at Chanel found its architectural equivalent in the unlikely form of Philip Johnson, who had for decades been America’s most tireless promoter of high Modernism. All the way back in 1932, he had co-curated the Museum of Modern Art’s landmark exhibition *The International Style*, and his best-known building was his own residence, the Glass House (1949), a highbrow exercise in modernist clarity. Those who had paid close attention to Johnson over the previous decades might have detected a gradual turning in his thinking. In 1961, he commented: ‘How long ago it was that Goethe said the pilaster is a lie! One would answer him today – yes, but what a delightfully useful one.’¹⁵⁸ His interiors for the Four Seasons Restaurant (1959) in New York and for the New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center (designed 1964) had been glitzy, almost kitsch. They looked like, and were perhaps inspired by, Hollywood film sets.¹⁵⁹ And as recently as 1975, Johnson had confessed to postmodernist relativism in a lecture at Columbia University: ‘It takes moral and emotional blinders to make a style. One must be convinced one is right. Who today can stand up and say: “I am right!” Who, indeed, would want to?’¹⁶⁰

But none of this prepared the architectural community for the AT&T Building (designed 1978, completed 1984). With its Chippendale top, arched entryway and pink granite detailing, the skyscraper was a return to the ornamental historicism that Johnson himself





Opposite: 82
Karl Lagerfeld (for Chanel), Ensemble,
 c.1989. Photograph by Karl Lagerfeld



83
Judith Grinberg (for the studio of Johnson and Burgee Associates),
 Presentation drawing of the AT&T Building, 1978. Ink, graphite and ink wash on tracing paper.
 V&A: E.522–2010

had helped to banish, seemingly forever (pl. 83). There was no denying that it was the work of an informed architect, with quotations from Palladio, Brunelleschi and New York Art Deco. But the building hardly seemed scholarly, or even gentlemanly. It was a provocation and sure enough, many people hated it, none more than the spirited critic for the *Village Voice*, Michael Sorkin, who fumed, 'the so-called "post-modern" styling in which AT&T has been tarted up is simply a graceless attempt to disguise what is really just the same old building by cloaking it in this week's drag and by trying to hide behind the reputations of the blameless dead.'¹⁶¹ From this perspective, Johnson's Chippendale ornament, high above the city streets, seemed an emblem of lofty detachment from the real job of architecture. Posed on the cover of *Time* magazine with the model for the building cradled in his arms – as if he had just given himself an award for Best Architect – he seemed a capricious giant, gleefully visiting incoherence on America's cities (pl. 84). (Johnson's other projects of the time, designed with his partner John Burgee, included Houston's step-gabled Pennzoil Place and Pittsburgh's neo-Gothic PPG Place.) The magazine *Progressive Architecture* argued that Johnson's defection to postmodernism lent 'a kind of dignity and stature to the movement which, in large part, it heretofore lacked', and Mendini was quick to welcome him as an ally, describing him as 'at once the last architect of the epoch of the Masters, and the first of an epoch without Masters.'¹⁶² But many others hated the AT&T Building, not only on stylistic grounds but also because it so effectively put architecture in the service of corporate identity. As Jencks noted, it was at once the first major postmodern monument and 'the grave of the movement to detractors.'¹⁶³ At the age of 78, Johnson had demonstrated that it was never too late to sell out.

As shocking as it seemed at the time, Johnson's embrace of corporate postmodernism was a bellwether for the architectural profession. In 1980, Leo Castelli held an exhibition in New York frankly entitled *Houses for Sale*, in which the designs of eight architects were offered directly to any client who would have them.¹⁶⁴ Another of Manhattan's gallerists, Max Protetch, had success selling renderings by architects like Aldo Rossi and Michael Graves, who produced skilfully finished presentation drawings, often for projects that remained unbuilt. Such schemes were originally motivated by a lack of building opportunities in a down market. But as the 1980s arrived, their meaning shifted. The circulation of renderings as art commodities now signalled the transformation of architecture into a name-brand enterprise. As Robert A.M. Stern observed at the time, the popularity of drawings represented a departure from modernist architects' preference for scale models rather than renderings, which were often seen as 'tarted-up drawings expediently conceived for presentation (that is, selling) purposes.'¹⁶⁵ For the postmodernist architect, however, the persuasive quality of a beautifully made presentation drawing was completely desirable. A flat rendering was a perfect medium to capture not only the ornamental surface of the postmodern building, but also its iconic qualities.

Over the ensuing decade, buoyed by this rhetoric of the architectural image, the 'starchitect' became a fixture on the urban scene. Newly moneyed patrons, both corporations and private individuals (such as the famously tasteless but vastly rich Donald Trump), offered architects a chance to realize their ideas, and also to become famous – all the while placing new constraints on their work. You would never know it from the key journals of postmodern architectural theory at the time, such as *AD* or *Perspecta*, but architecture in the 1980s was above all a service industry. Buildings cost money, and lots of it. From a corporate client's perspective, the architect's most important job is not to incite debate, but to create value: to provide return on investment. Postmodern technique proved to be a perfect means to that end. As Magali Larson noted in 1993 in an important early analysis of 80s corporate architecture, 'If what is desired is a new image, minimizing risk compels the client to "style" the building superficially – the massing, the façade, the lobbies, the skin – while keeping the routine invisible and the costs down.'¹⁶⁶

As for John Portman's Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, which Fredric Jameson famously analysed in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as a spatial manifestation of postmodernity – well, you really have to see it in person. Even Jameson admitted, 'I am [at] a loss when it comes to conveying the thing itself.' The hotel ought to be easily navigated: it is structured around four evenly spaced elevator towers, and the plans helpfully posted around the building seem relatively straightforward. But then you look up – and down (pl. 86). Crisscrossed by escalators, lined by ramps and shops and cocktail bars,



Opposite: 84
 TIME, 8 January 1979

and furnished with an indoor lake, the atrium of the Bonaventure is indeed astounding in its scale and complexity. Jameson saw this Piranesian space as a sealed environment, a world unto itself, filled with pure movement. As proof he pointed to the exterior of the building, with its 'curiously unmarked entrances' and its sheath of mirrored glass that reflects the surrounding city, dematerializing the mass of the hotel behind a play of reflection (pl. 85). If Johnson's AT&T Building was an arch joke writ large on the skyline, Portman's Bonaventure was something much more total. This architecture 'does not wish to be a part of the city,' Jameson argued, 'but rather its equivalent and replacement or substitute'.¹⁶⁷

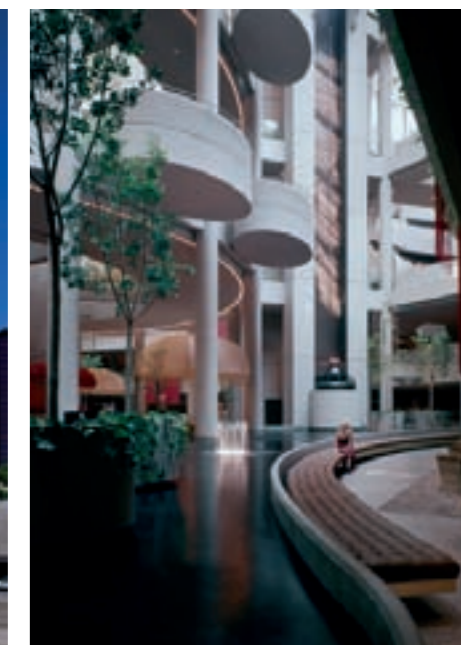
With three decades of hindsight, however, this claim can be called into question. Despite Jameson's characterization of the Bonaventure as hermetic, the hotel is today one of the most photographed places in Los Angeles, appearing in movies, television shows, commercials, and even hip-hop and rap videos. Far from being invisible within the urban fabric, the refractive structure has proved remarkably durable as a media icon. And though Portman would probably agree with Jameson that kinetics were in some sense the subject of his architecture, he would certainly reject the accusation that this makes him a postmodernist. The material vocabulary of the Bonaventure – glass curtain walls and formed concrete – is in fact quintessentially modernist, and the building lacks any of the applied décor that an architect like Michael Graves might have employed at the time. Thus, the intentions that lay behind the hotel (and its subsequent reception) would at least complicate and perhaps contradict Jameson's interpretation. This suggests something of the complexity that surrounds corporate architecture of the 1980s, which was only rarely a manifestation of postmodernist style, even if it did inhabit the broader 'condition' of postmodernity.

Jameson's discussion of the Bonaventure is now remembered as the paradigmatic text on postmodern corporate architecture, but the powerful critic for *The New York Times*, Ada Louise Huxtable, was equally influential at the time. Faced with the historicism of Philip Johnson's various projects, she made no attempt to hide her revulsion:

If the sources are diverse, the results suffer from a certain sameness; rarely do these eclectic exercises coalesce into an architectural statement with the authority of the examples so blithely exploited. Their so-called playful use of history is heavy-handed, their paper-thin pretensions misfire, no matter how solidly enclosed or dazzlingly surfaced ... these buildings are simply not clever enough. The problem is not that they fail to say the same thing as the buildings they crib from – that is neither possible in today's world nor their avowed intention – it is that they say nothing at all.¹⁶⁸

Right: 85
 John Portman, Westin Bonaventure Hotel, 1976. Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Dennis O'Kane © John Portman & Associates Archive

Far right: 86
 John Portman, Westin Bonaventure Hotel (atrium), 1976. Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Alexandre Georges © John Portman & Associates Archive





87
Koyaanisqatsi, 1982.
 Directed by Godfrey Reggio

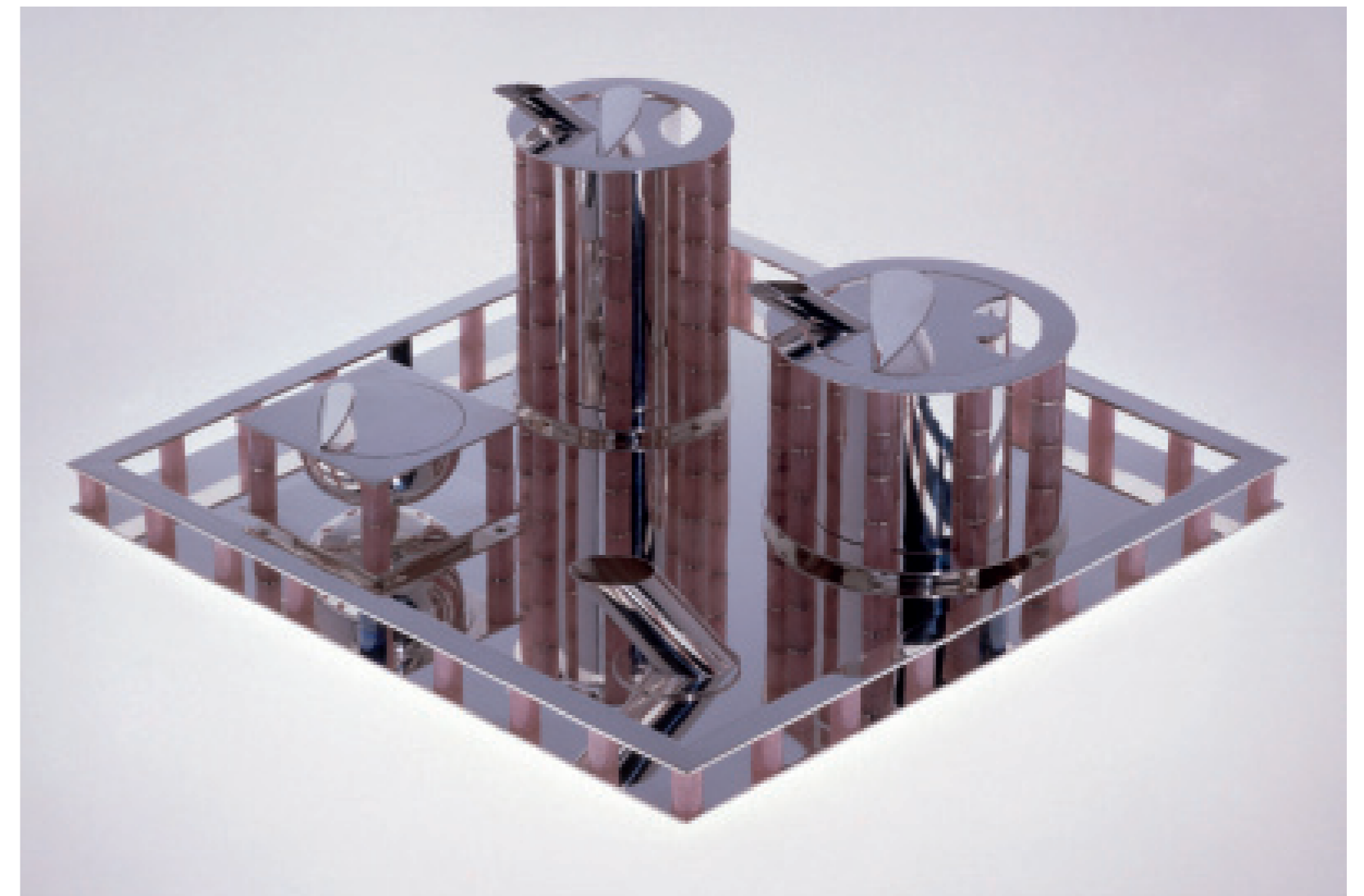
The tricks with mirrors and other real materials performed by corporate globalization produce the illusion that there is an illusion: the illusion that their materiality is illusory, unreal, dematerialized ... [This] describes what a new stage in commodity fetishism might actually look like: the inability simply to look at something directly, rather than attempt to see through it. This mode of distraction draws us in even as it keeps us out.¹⁷³

Fredric Jameson, who serves as Martin's jumping-off point throughout much of *Utopia's Ghost*, went so far as to argue that the transition away from classical city layouts and toward *Blade Runner*-like sprawl spelled an inevitable end for style as a relevant concern for architecture (see pl. 61). In a discussion of bubble-economy Tokyo, he noted that it was hard to see 'how any specific building would ever stand out in this kind of fabric, since it is a bewildering, infinite, endless series of built things, each of which is different from the next'.¹⁷⁴ The inside of the Bonaventure thus becomes a template for the built environment at large; it is movement that now has meaning, not static form. This idea of the postmodern city was also captured in popular culture, as in Godfrey Reggio's 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi* (pl. 87). With its obscure, portentous title (Hopi for 'world out of joint'), *Koyaanisqatsi* was yet another 'postmodern denunciation of the culture of postmodernism'.¹⁷⁵ Its stop-motion footage of faceless office workers coursing like water through the streets and train stations, down escalators and into mirrored office buildings, and its hectoring musical score by Philip Glass, presented the postmodern city as completely dehumanized and alienating – but captivating all the same.

Among the points made by Huxtable, perhaps the most incisive was that postmodernism's embrace of difference, once it was processed according to the exigencies of profit margin, was actually producing an urbanism of soul-crushing homogeneity. The style became merely routine over the course of the decade, as one city after another sprouted a crop of skyscrapers festooned with second-hand, flattened ornament and sheathed in dematerializing reflective glass. When it opened in 1982 – just before the AT&T Building – one could make a case for Michael Graves' Portland Building as a provocative intervention into a modest north-western city (see pl. 208, p. 230). But it was not long before its stage-set quality – like four billboards clapped together at the corners – quite literally wore thin. The building was built on a shoestring budget for a civic client, and it is in shockingly poor condition today. It would be unfair to blame Graves for the inadequate execution of his design, but the paint peeling from every surface of the Portland Building nonetheless lends credence to Charles Jencks' perceptive observation that Art Deco-style postmodern ornament often did serve a sort of functionalist purpose: 'to hide faults in construction'.¹⁶⁹ In his widely read condemnation of superficial postmodern architecture, 'Towards a Critical Regionalism', Kenneth Frampton enlarged on this point. Buildings had become so 'universally conditioned by optimized technology' that architecture was now limited to either a pure high-tech system, speaking of its own functions, or the use of a 'compensatory façade' to cover up system building. The Portland Building, he wrote, was both.¹⁷⁰

As postmodernism proliferated, it seemed to prove that historicism – while it could be a vivid interruption into modernist urban fabric – was merely insipid when applied in broad strokes, as at Ed Jones' massive complex at Mississauga near Toronto, Quinlan Terry's Richmond Riverside development in Surrey, or the toy town community of Celebration, built by Disney in the 1990s.¹⁷¹ Not that the problem was limited to questions of style. Denise Scott Brown directs our attention away from that plane of architectural thought, and toward the question of social responsibility (see pp. 106–11). She charges that 'PoMo' architects abandoned 1960s ideals of social responsibility and instead decided to 'license indulgence' (echoing David Harvey's concise statement that 'postmodernists design rather than plan').¹⁷² Her position finds common cause with Reinhold Martin's ambitious revisionist history of postmodern architecture, *Utopia's Ghost* (2010). Martin argues that the reflective and ornamental character of buildings themselves, and the endless debates about those stylistic choices, all served to disguise an underlying truth about corporate architecture in general – its literal extension of power in space:

88
Mario Bellini, tea and coffee service (or piazza), 1980. Silver, rose quartz, lapis lazuli. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1988.191.1–6)



Living in a Material World

The acquisition of an image (by the purchase of a sign system such as designer clothes and the right car) becomes a singularly important element in the presentation of self in individual identity, self-realization, and meaning. Amusing yet sad signals of this quest abound.¹⁷⁶

—David Harvey

However one settles the accounts of 1980s postmodern architecture, it is undeniable that the decade witnessed the rise of a new ‘trophy building’ mentality. Richard Bolton, taking note of the sudden appearance of architects in advertisements for such products as Hennessy cognac, argued that ‘the architect is a plausible spokesperson for luxury products because the architect is a member of the corporate class. He already speaks for the system through his own work – the building is just one more luxury commodity.’¹⁷⁷ This made for a natural alliance between architect-designers and the manufacturers of high-end domestic wares, and also opened up opportunities for a new form of middleman, the ‘design editor’, who had no production capacity but rather brokered relations between architect-designers, craft workshops, interior designers, and retail outlets or galleries.¹⁷⁸ These entrepreneurs functioned rather like producers in the film or music industries, investing in projects and then trying to maximize profit.

The practice of design-editing emerged first in Italy, where a strong craft base and a well-established design press made the prospect feasible even before the economic boom. The first company to work in this way was arguably Danese, founded in the 1950s, which produced tablewares and domestic furnishings by a range of designers such as Bruno Munari and Enzo Mari.¹⁷⁹ But the strategy was expanded and perfected by Cleto Munari, an aesthete and collector from Vicenza, who founded his eponymous luxury goods company in 1972. Though Munari, like Danese, worked mainly with modernist designers such as Carlo Scarpa and Gae Aulenti, he occasionally produced objects reflecting the new stylistic ideas coming out of Milan. A coffee pot designed for the firm by Michele De Lucchi in 1980 shared the palette and cartoonish, Art Deco styling of the designer’s Girmi prototypes; and in the same year, the otherwise unimpeachably modernist architect Mario Bellini designed a tea and coffee ‘piazza’ for Munari in the historicist style then being explored by Paolo Portoghesi at the Venice Biennale (pl. 88).

A few years later, Munari launched his most ambitious project. He worked with an international all-star list of designers, including De Lucchi, Peter Eisenman, Isozaki, Shire, Sottsass, Stern and Zanini to produce a collection of postmodernist jewellery (pl. 89). The project strategy resembled that of Memphis, and included many of the same players (including Barbara Radice, who wrote a promotional book about the collection). But if Memphis had held luxury at arm’s length, only teasingly acknowledging it through such devices as titling, the Munari jewellery was an emphatic entry into the production of aristocratic *objets d’art*. In a sense the project was customized to an Italian design scene where ‘the shock of Memphis had worn off’, as critic Deyan Sudjic wrote in the inaugural edition of *Blueprint*, leaving as a main attraction fashionable parties with ‘relays of white-gloved waiters, decked with chains of office, dispensing champagne, mountains of *langoustines*, baby octopuses, risotto and blueberries to brawling crowds of elegantly tanned ladies wearing great chunks of brass around their necks and wrists.’¹⁸⁰

By the mid-1980s, seemingly every country boasted at least one design-editing firm chasing this upscale market: Swid Powell and Sunar in America, Néotu and XO in France, Anthologie Quartett in Germany, Sawaya & Moroni in Italy, Akaba in Spain. In Japan, the designer Kuramata Shiro depended on his colleague Takao Ishimaru to subcontract work in acrylic, metal and other materials. In all of these cases, entrepreneurs with expertise in sourcing and marketing helped architects and designers to realize their ideas. This distribution of design agency was another means by which postmodern style proliferated into the marketplace. The commoditization was even more explicit in the case of large-scale manufacturers, who began in the mid-1980s to commission architects to design postmodernist products, very much in the manner of the smaller ‘editing’ firms. These alliances might seem improbable, given the way in which they brought together purposefully indigestible design ideas with mass distribution. But even if the objects failed to sell, they



89
Michele De Lucchi (for Cleto Munari), necklace, c.1987. Yellow and white gold, black and white onyx, green agate, turquoise, emeralds, sapphires, pearls. Private collection



90
Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (for Knoll), Chippendale chair with *Grandmother* pattern, 1984. Laminated plywood. V&A: W.21–1990



91
Formica Corporation ColorCore exhibition, retitled *Post Modern Colour*, a Boilerhouse project at the V&A, London, 1984. View from left to right includes Stanley Tigerman’s *Tête-à-tête* chaise longue, Lee Payne’s *Neapolitan* and SITE’s *Door*. Photograph by Mark Fiennes



92
Aldo Rossi (for Alessi), tea and coffee service (or piazza), 1983. Electroplated silver, enamel and glass. V&A: M.57–1988

Overleaf: 93
Oliviero Toscani, United Colors of Benetton poster, 1992 (detail). Colour offset lithograph on paper. V&A: E.2170–1997

might attract attention to the company and establish its design credentials. They were loss leaders at worst, and might just bring unexpected success.

It was on this basis that the storied American furniture company Knoll (which, not unlike Chanel after the death of Coco, had been flailing about, unsure of their direction following the retirement of the visionary modernist Florence Knoll) invited Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown to create a new line for them. Today the pair look back on this episode somewhat ruefully. As Scott Brown puts it:

We were overjoyed that Knoll wanted and paid for the project, but we had thought we were helping to produce, in early Modern terms, cheap but good objects lovable for the ‘masses’. [But] they were using us to rub off on their trade objects, to brand and rebrand themselves ... as if we were a *recherché* book of poems published by a large press to polish its image rather than to sell.¹⁸¹

Even so, the chairs are quintessential postmodernist objects, extensively reproduced then and since, perhaps because they speak so directly of the architects’ eye for form and pattern (pl. 90).¹⁸² The cut-out plywood chairs, partly inspired by the example of Alvar Aalto’s furniture, were ingenious adaptations of their interest in façades and historical ornament, processed through a mix-and-match system of cheerful cartoon profiles based on historic styles (Chippendale, Sheraton, Art Deco, etc.). With their wide, flat fronts and completely linear side view, they are like design drawings unfurled into space. They are adorned with patterns drawn from vernacular and high style sources – most famously, *Grandmother*, a floral print borrowed from ‘Fred’s grandmother’s table cloth’ and overlaid with ungrandmotherly black hash marks. (‘Fred’, the New York architect Frederic Schwartz, was a young employee of Venturi and Scott Brown at the time.)¹⁸³ The backs, however, were left plain – as Scott Brown puts it, they were ‘decorated in front and shed behind’.¹⁸⁴

At the same moment that Knoll was working with Venturi and Scott Brown, the manufacturer Formica decided to follow in the footsteps of their Italian competitors Abet Laminati, who had been intimately involved in the production of Memphis. Formica had a new product to sell, called ColorCore, and it is telling that they first chose to promote it through architect-designed furniture. Traditional laminates had an unsightly black line around the edge of each sheet, a tacky-tacky, obviously fake quality that Sottsass and the other Memphis designers had enjoyed. As the name implies, however, ColorCore was patterned or coloured all the way through its depth. This meant it could be used rather like a hardwood veneer – either applied to a surface directly, or stacked, glued, and then sawn, carved, finished or even inlaid. This was a clear instance of the original orientation of postmodern design, toward kitsch and surface effects, giving way to the values of quality workmanship.¹⁸⁵ Formica launched the new product at the NeoCon Furniture Fair in Chicago in June 1983 with an exhibition entitled *Surface and Ornament*, curated by the company’s creative director Susan Grant Lewin (pl. 91). The selection of architect-designed furniture, including contributions from Gehry, Moore, SITE and Tigerman, was shown again in New York, then alongside Memphis in Milan that autumn, and in London the following year.¹⁸⁶ Gehry’s contribution was particularly ingenious. Snapping a piece of ColorCore between his hands, he exposed a jagged edge that appealed to him. He undertook a series of lamps that exploited this literally deconstructive technique, as well as the translucency of the plastic.

For its next act, Formica engaged the New York gallery Workbench, operated by Bernice Wollman and Judy Coody, to organize several independent furniture makers to experiment with the material. The result was *Material Evidence: New Color Techniques in Handmade Furniture* (1985). This was arguably the most successful privately sponsored craft project of the decade, despite the fact that the makers found ColorCore difficult to work – hard, but also brittle and easily chipped.¹⁸⁷ Whereas the architects had left the fabrication of their designs to Formica, skilled craftsmen like Garry Knox Bennett, John Cederquist and Judy McKie explored the technical qualities of ColorCore in a way that architects never could, exploiting its potential as a carving medium, sandblasting or polishing it to produce a varied surface, and stack-laminating it into complex constructed forms.¹⁸⁸

Knoll and Formica achieved a certain degree of prominence with their editing projects, and in both cases successfully breathed new life into their long-established brands. There were plenty of other companies who tried the same trick: postmodernists were hired to

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.





94
Michael Graves (for Moller International), Mickey Mouse Gourmet Collection, 1991. Stainless steel. V&A: M.29 to 32–2010

Opposite: 95
Swatch watch USA poster, 1984. Offset lithograph. Design by Paula Scher. Paula Scher/Pentagram

make handbags (Martell), wristwatches (Swatch), crystal decanters (Swarovski), shopping bags (Bloomingdale's) and wall clocks (Lorenz). But by far the most famous of the postmodern editing jobs was the Alessi Tea and Coffee Piazza collection, launched in 1983 simultaneously at the Brera Gallery in Milan and the Protetch Gallery in New York. This 'micro-architecture' project was instigated by Alessandro Mendini, and ultimately involved 11 international architects including Graves, Hollein, Jencks, Meier, Portoghesi and Venturi. Aldo Rossi's contribution became the most iconic: a flag-topped tabernacle that bespoke hermetic preciousness (pl. 92). The influential German curator Volker Fischer, based in Frankfurt, was among the few who took this manoeuvre seriously. He argued that the 'iconophilia' of the tea and coffee piazzas represented a welcome incursion of 'a more consciously cultural attitude to the design of everyday products'. In a memorable formulation, Fischer predicted that form would now follow fiction, not function.¹⁸⁹

If buildings were already like trophies, operating according to the dictates of a corporate symbolic order, then the scaling-down of an architect's ideas did not necessarily represent an act of trivialization. Yet the Alessi services undeniably marked the culmination of a shift away from radical prototypes and toward luxury objects. Indeed, it could be said that these tabletop trophies were more a sign of things to come than the buildings made by the same architects. As often when confronted with postmodern excess, Sudjic was moved to satire, noting that Graves' silver tea and coffee set 'will cost you rather more than getting a house built to his plans'. But he also added, presciently, 'Can Michael Graves designer bed linen, sun-glasses and jeans be far behind?'¹⁹⁰ In fact it was only a few years before Graves became a kind of franchise in his own right, applying his postmodern idiom not only to Disney's buildings but also to a tea kettle and accoutrements crowned with the ubiquitous mouse ears (pl. 94). His later work for Target, though produced long after the heyday of postmodern design, continued the process, bringing pastel colours and cartoon shapes to middle-class homes across America.

Graves was unusually prolific as a muse to the corporate class, but he was hardly alone. Now under the direction of Aldo Cibic, designers at Sottsass Associati were kept busy designing stores for Esprit, founded by self-styled 'image director' Doug Tompkins, who had emerged from the counter-cultural scene in California that also produced Peter Shire, April Greiman and *Wet* magazine. *Blueprint* aptly described the company's approach as 'fashion retailing that has passed the age of innocence. Every aspect of the chain is handled with as much care as if it were being watched over by corporate identity consultants with a battery of identity manuals.'¹⁹¹ Swatch developed their brand in close consultation with Mendini, and commissioned one of the most recognizable of all postmodernist graphic designs – Paula Scher's wholesale quotation of a 1934 Constructivist poster by Herbert Matter (pl. 95).¹⁹² MTV was often identified as a mainstream delivery system for postmodernism; its



96
Arata Isozaki, Team Disney Building, 1989–90. Orlando, Florida. Photograph by Victoria Slater-Madert



rapid-fire superficial barrage of style statements quoted the counter-cultural tropes of the 1960s even while 'divesting them, for commercial reasons, of their originally revolutionary implications'.¹⁹³ Even its logo featured applied paste-on ornament, much like Venturi and Scott Brown's chairs for Knoll. Benetton pursued a more provocative tactic, hiring the photographer Oliviero Toscani to create print advertising with highly charged documentary-style and still life images (pl. 93). This was an unusually bold use of the postmodern technique of quotation, in which profoundly divisive issues such as AIDS deaths, race relations, refugees and Third-World conflict were appropriated as the raw materials for brand formation. Was this a progressive use of media power to engage in mass activism? Or was it rather a case of unprecedented cynicism, in which any content, no matter how upsetting, could be made to serve the interests of a middle-market clothing company? Nothing could show more clearly how a corporation can absorb adjacent critique, and render it instead into technique. Benetton shows how subversion – even when self-inflicted – can serve as an ideal corporate strategy.

A similar quandary arises concerning Disney, at once the most reviled and beloved of entertainment companies, not to mention the most active corporate patron of postmodern architecture. Back in 1972, Venturi had offered the then-unthinkable opinion that 'Disney World is closer to what most people want than what architects have ever given them.'¹⁹⁴ By the mid-80s, not only his and Graves' firms but also those of Isozaki, Gehry, Rossi and Stern were working for the company.¹⁹⁵ And they were taking the jobs seriously. Some of the buildings that resulted, like Graves' spectacular double hotel the Swan and Dolphin, or Isozaki's masterfully collaged Team Disney Building (complete with mouse-ear gateway), rank among their designers' best work (pl. 96).¹⁹⁶ This meant, in turn, that the architects were open to criticism. Books like Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1975), Louis Marin's *Utopiques* (1984), Richard Schickel's *The Disney Version* (1985), Michael Sorkin's *Variations on a Theme Park* (1992) and George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) all used Walt and his company as both symbol and instance of everything that was manipulative in late capitalism. For these critics, Disney was a 'degenerate utopia', whose offer of an apparently harmless escape into Fantasyland was actually 'a sort of amnesic intoxication, born of the triumph of forgetting over memory and of effect over cause'.¹⁹⁷

But to some other observers, particularly those who sympathized with postmodern practice, this hard-line opposition rang false. The music critic Greil Marcus portrayed academic attacks on Disney as a sort of hysterical blindness: 'What they mostly produce [is] polemical, ideological, or merely self-congratulatory ... they can hardly be bothered to investigate which rides are fun and which aren't, let alone why.'¹⁹⁸ Steven Fjellman, in his subtle book *Vinyl Leaves* (1992) – the title evoking the Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse, a monumental simulacrum – also tried to distance himself from the chorus of alarm around Disney. Fjellman was quite happy to confess his attraction to the Magic Kingdom: 'I love it! I could live there. I love its infinitude, its theatre, its dadaisms. I love its food, its craft, its simulations.'¹⁹⁹ In the book, he attempted the difficult balancing act of acknowledging both the awe-inspiring power of Disney World and the genuine pleasure it brings to consumers. And in this respect, he probably approximated the ambivalence with which many people, including designers, regard the company (pl. 97). On the one hand, it is easy to see Disney as an epicenter of corporate power and control. On the other hand, it is a space apart, a heterotopia, premised on the temporary realization of total happiness, as in the (borderline racist) 1946 Disney film *Song of the South*:

It's the truth,
It's actual
Everything is satisfactual²⁰⁰

How exactly should one feel about that as a general condition of life?

That's yet another question with no easy answer, of course, and perhaps the best way to grasp the postmodern consumer experience of the 1980s is as an amusement park thrill ride: a disorienting, high-speed passage through places formed by and through the workings of capital. Like Disney World, this experience of dynamic identity formation projected a powerful, but illusory, impression of totality.²⁰¹ In hindsight, it is clear that the postmodern



97
Wendy Maruyama, *Mickey Mackintosh* chair, 1988. Painted maple wood.
V&A: W.10–2011. Photograph courtesy of Pritam & Eames



98
Betty Woodman, *Arezzo*, 1984. Glazed earthenware. Courtesy of the artist and Meulensteen Gallery, New York



99
Alison Britton, *Big White Jug*, 1987. Hand-built and painted earthenware.
V&A: C.233–1987

world of commodities was only in its nascence in the 1980s; we have witnessed a dramatic global expansion of its techniques in the two decades since. But for many, the brandscape already felt all-encompassing. This was, after all, the designer decade, a time when seemingly anything could profit from the magic of a brand name: designer jeans (Jordache), designer water (Perrier), designer drugs (Ecstasy).

Surface Effects

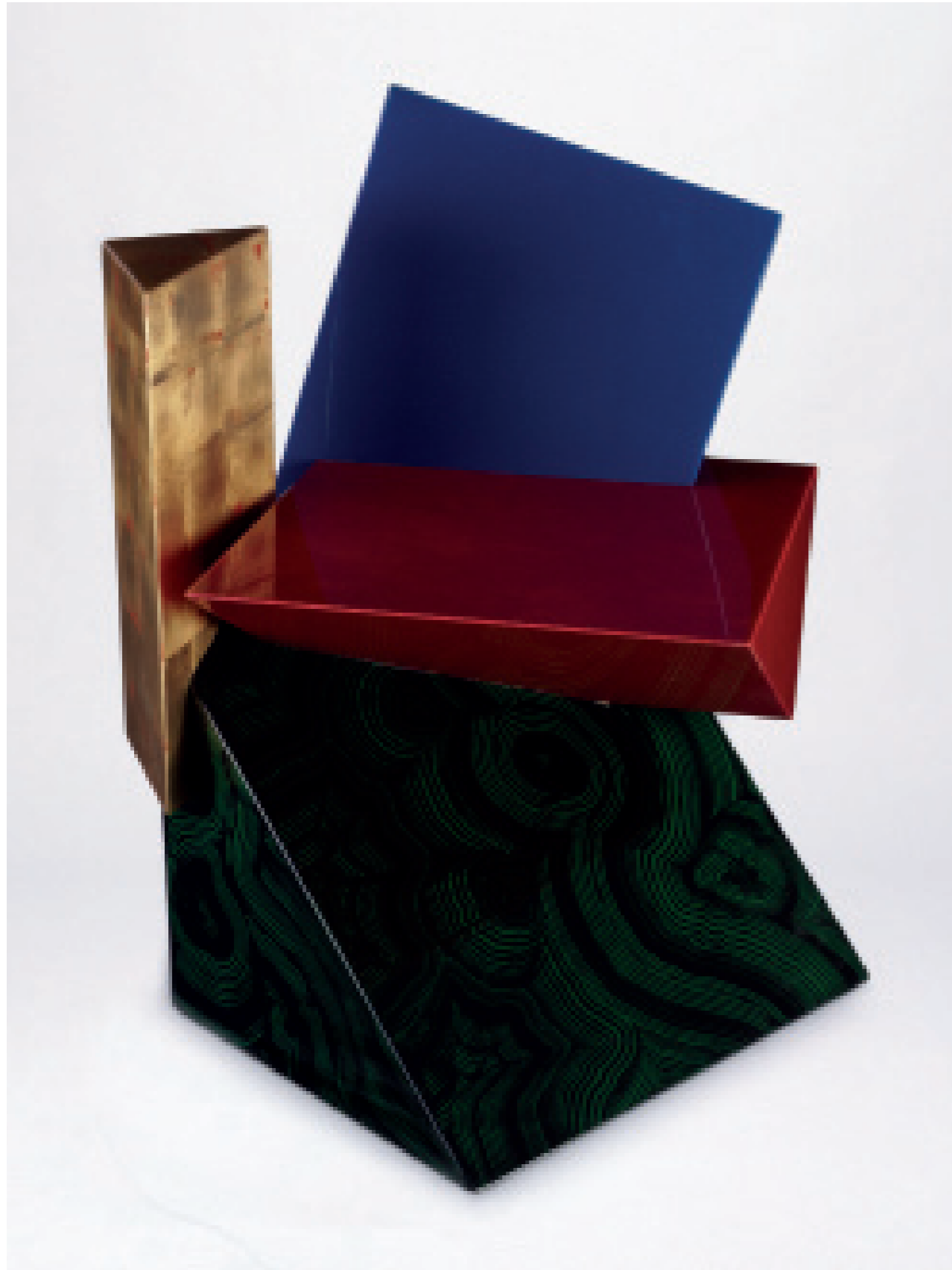
The simple attachment of the right name to a product or an interior has a measurable economic value. It's not simply a matter of kettles or pasta, there now seems to be no aspect of life which is free of the designer phenomenon.²⁰²

—Maurice Cooper

So one read in *Blueprint* (founded 1983), one of a host of new lifestyle magazines promoting the flow of new designer goods. Like the Italian magazines that Alessandro Mendini was busily editing (by the 1980s, he was working on *Modo* and *Domus*), or the publications of the Condé Nast empire, or the metastasizing colour supplements of Sunday newspapers, the whole world seemed to be turning inescapably glossy. Even Neville Brody, the *enfant terrible* of British graphic design, had an abortive turn as a design consultant for the bubble-gum teenage magazine *Mademoiselle*. It was, as he observed, 'the sort of thing that American magazines love to do, the big splash, the smell of money burning'.²⁰³ It is hard, indeed, to find a single area of the creative arts that was not obsessed with the prospects and problems of commoditization.

The pervasiveness of money culture is attested by the degree to which even the least capitalized areas of cultural production became dominated by talk about money. Take, for example, the crafts. One might expect that potters, furniture makers and metalsmiths would have taken one look at postmodernism and run the other way. The traditional associations that craft has with authenticity, depth and tacit knowledge are all directly counter to the period fascination with superficiality. But in fact, craftspeople were among the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of postmodern technique because it allowed them to express longstanding discomfort with the substance of their own work. Craftspeople had been treated as second-class citizens within the arts throughout the post-1945 period, and already in the 1960s many makers were embracing exaggerated decoration, anti-functionality and absurdity as a way to address their own status.²⁰⁴ Of particular note as precedents for postmodern craft are West Coast Funk ceramics, led by satirists such as Robert Arneson and Howard Kottler; and the Pattern and Decoration movement, which was partly fuelled by feminist artists' interest in historical women's work. P&D (as it was known) found expression across many media, particularly ceramics (Betty Woodman, Joyce Kozloff), textiles (Miriam Schapiro) and furniture (Kim MacConnell) (pl. 98).²⁰⁵ Like the radical Italian design of the same period, these objects drew from a language of decorative art but were intended as provocations in the manner of an avant-garde.

In the 1980s, this ongoing inquiry into the politics of craft intersected with the growth of new, dynamic markets. The result was an expansion that was both commercial and discursive. As prices rose, craftspeople engaged in lively, self-critical debates whose terms were often drawn from the art and design school cultures in which most of them had been trained. The pages of *Crafts* magazine in Britain amply catalogue the way that the postmodern culture wars could turn local. On one side were the artists: ceramists like Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll, Jacqueline Poncelet and Richard Slee; metalsmiths like Michael Rowe; furniture makers like Fred Baier; and jewellers like Caroline Broadhead, Susanna Heron and Pierre Degen (pls 99 and 100). Every one of the traditional craft media was turned inside out in the process. As the critic Martina Margetts, who edited *Crafts* from 1978 to 1987, puts it: 'It was an assault on convention on every front.'²⁰⁶ This generation of troublemakers and experimentalists was embraced by adventurous souls such as the Crafts Council's founding director Victor Margrie and its curator Ralph Turner. Controversially and rather bravely, given that it depended on government funding, the Crafts Council enthusiastically supported the most avant-garde activity and distanced itself from tradition.²⁰⁷ Some observers were delighted. Rose Slivka, formerly editor of the American magazine *Craft Horizons*, professed herself bowled over by the new jewellery coming out of Britain:



100
Fred Baier, *Prism chair*,
 designed with technical
 assistance by Paul McManus,
 1982 (made 1993). Lacquered
 MDF in four finishes,
 including gold leaf
 (re-lacquered 2009).
 V&A: W.13–2010



101
Gabriele Devecchi, *Equilpiemonte*
 coffee pot, 1983 (made 2009). Silver
 with wooden handle. V&A: M.15–2010



102
Adrian Saxe, covered jar, 1985.
 Porcelain, raku, stoneware, lustres.
 V&A: LOAN:AMERICAN FRIENDS.581–2011

It is in orbit around the body, a galaxy of planets whirling on their dervishes. Jewellery is now a body cage and a mind expander. Not only are the materials no longer precious, they are anti-precious. They are the modern synthetic materials – neoprene, fibreglass, plastic tubing – of post-industrial life and extraordinary consciousness.²⁰⁸

But not everyone was so impressed. Conservative voices (given ample space in *Crafts* magazine by Margetts, who was a progressive but also an ecumenical editor) attacked the newfound pretensions of the artisan. As in architecture, postmodernist ceramics and jewellery attracted unusually vituperative critique. Theo Crosby, one of the principals at the leading design firm Archigram, came to the conclusion that the new tendencies were so much sound and fury, signifying nothing: 'When I look at the Crafts Council shows I am filled with despair at the smartness, the uselessness of the products.'²⁰⁹ Critic Peter Fuller was equally incensed by the 'sterile pretension' being promoted by the Council, which he saw as motivated by the sinister belief 'that a better world can only be established by the eradication of every manifestation of aesthetic life, and of all the preconditions necessary to nurture it.'²¹⁰ Even Peter Dormer, a key critical supporter of the new direction, thought it important that craft hold on to its roots: 'It would be as well if those who promote or attend to the welfare of the crafts understood its conservative heart; I believe it is this which accounts for the potency of the crafts now, a potency which can be summarised in one word: consolation.'²¹¹

But fewer and fewer craftspeople were interested in staging such a holding action. They were rushing headlong into the postmodern condition, and for them the prevailing concern with commodity status was particularly acute. Just as the modernist avant-garde had tried to retain a distance from the market, so studio craftspeople had sought to remain unsullied by the brute forces of supply and demand. This ended in the 1980s. In England, craft was reframed by the Thatcher government as a type of 'small business', with all the attendant political implications of that phrase. For a field often caricatured as a hippie counter-culture, the sudden infusion of money made a huge impact. In the United States, first studio glass and then other media were swept up into the luxury trade, driven by galleries, large-scale selling fairs, private collectors, ambitious museum exhibitions, and glossy magazines such as *World of Interiors*.²¹² Some craftspeople, like Wendell Castle, Dale Chihuly, John Makepeace and Albert Paley, thrilled to the possibilities of individual entrepreneurship. They forged links with dealers and private collectors that were (of course) not only lucrative, but also enabled them to drastically expand the scale and vision of their careers. Others worked behind the scenes, collaborating with interior decorators to execute private commissions for wealthy clients.

The luxury turn in the crafts played out very differently according to geography. In Japan, craft already enjoyed an unusually high status thanks to its historical connections to tea ceremony and associated collecting practices; the government actively recognizes and funds artisanal work through its 'living national treasure' programme.²¹³ Postmodern style and quotations were integrated into this milieu with seeming ease. In Italy, similarly, historicism and refinement came easily to makers. The Italian silversmith Gabriele Devecchi, for example, created postmodern versions of an eighteenth-century coffee pot form common to the Turin area. Though everything about these objects was a pastiche, from the collided shapes to the punning titles, the execution was immaculate (pl. 101). Devecchi's son Matteo, who helps to run the firm today, suggests that 'silversmithing was already postmodern. Every day, you make the same coffee pot you have been making for 200 years. There is no evolution.'²¹⁴ In America, which lacks such a deeply embedded artisanal culture, historicism was inevitably a more assumed pose, and it came with a more cutting edge. Craftspeople in the United States made exquisite objects, but many seemed to writhe in discomfort at the idea of luxury. Richard Mawdsley fashioned extraordinary neo-Baroque presentation cups, which look richly ornamental from a distance but prove to represent desolate American Midwestern water towers at close range. In ceramics, Adrian Saxe appropriated the materials and motifs of French Sèvres porcelain to make biting comments on contemporary culture (pl. 102). In the Netherlands and Germany, meanwhile, a strong academic base helped conceptualism to flourish, particularly in the field of jewellery – an ideal medium to explore questions of value. Some, like Dutch jeweller Robert Smit, outlined a defence of traditional materials like gold, while others

parodized the instinct for display – as in Gijs Bakker's rendering of a court necklace in cheap, flat PVC plastic (pl. 104).²¹⁵ The German jeweller Otto Künzli asked his clients to sport gold frames from their necks, a chain of threaded Deutschmark coins, or a lapel pin in the form of a single, huge gold ingot marked '300g, 10.5 oz'. It was fake, of course (pl. 103).

Wonders Taken for Signs

Superficiality has depth if understood and accepted as the profound difficulty of human life.²¹⁶

—Alessandro Mendini

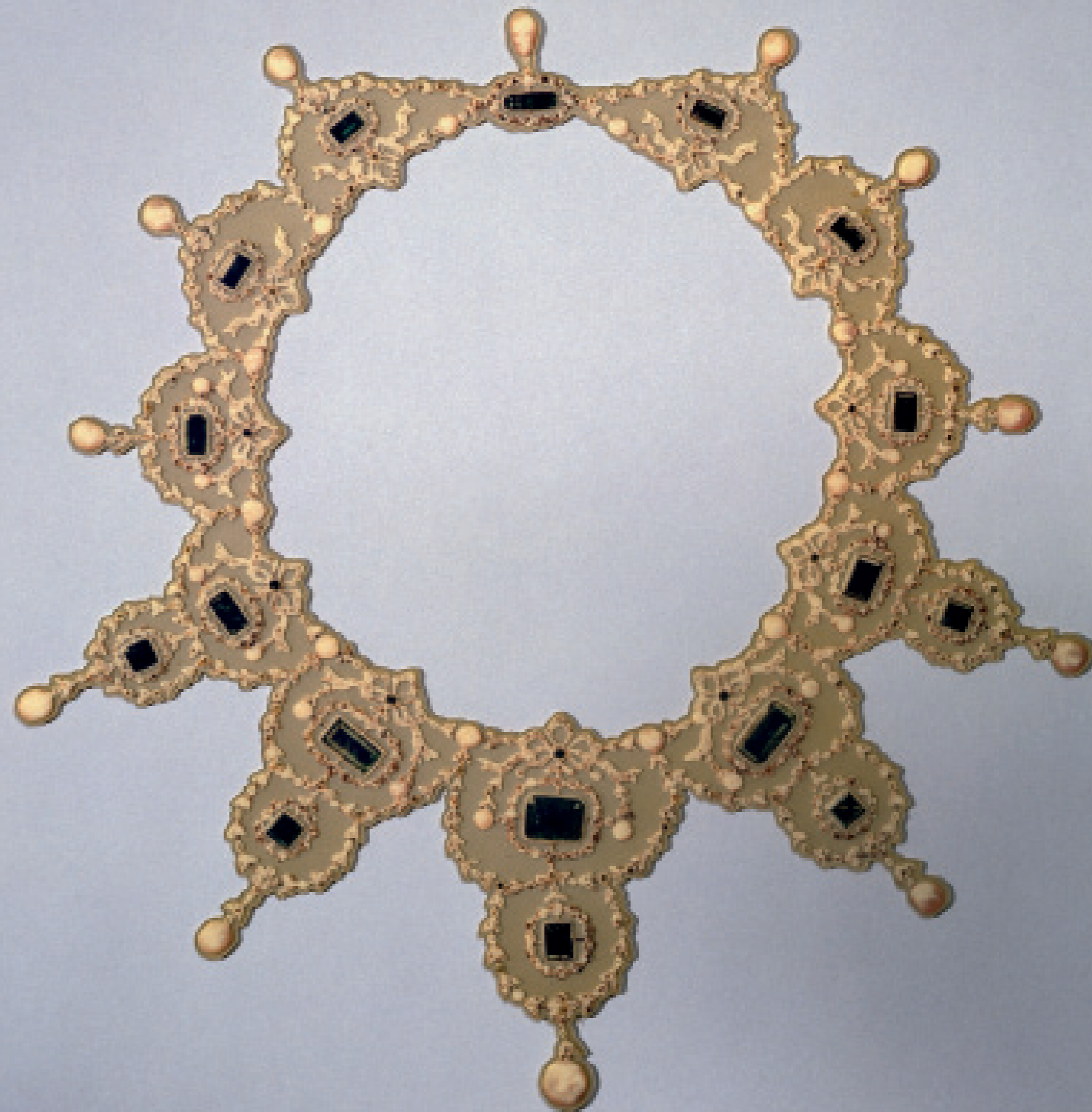
In all areas of creative practice, then, there was an inversion of polarity as the 1980s wore on. The postmodernist's position was no longer that of a critical outsider who lacked a ready public. Distribution was now beginning to drive production, not only in economic terms, but also in determining the preoccupations of designers and makers. Fine artists felt this too, and the most lastingly relevant works from the 80s and early 90s are those that draw on design as the most appropriate language to confront postmodernity. This is why rather than the neo-Expressionist paintings by Julian Schnabel and Anselm Kiefer, it is the Commodity Art works of Koons, Sherman and Warhol, as well as Ai Weiwei, Peter Halley, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, Allan McCollum, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton and Yasumasa Morimura that speak to us most strongly from this era (pls 106 and 107). All of these artists directly faced the nature of their own works as goods to be bought and sold. But they did more than that; they also saw commodity status as a raw material, like paint or clay: a medium in which they could operate.

This was the highest, but also the most tragic state of postmodernism. The dramatic collision between art, design and money had many negative consequences, not least of which is the skewed understanding it imparted to the present. The late 1980s saw a consensus form around postmodernism, still shared by many, which ignored its expansive and liberating qualities, and instead saw it as a shell game – at best derivative and caustic, at worst the new clothes for an empire of corporate greed. In fact, though you are reading about postmodernism right now, there's still a good chance you hate it – if not the ideas, then the look of it. And if you don't, your parents almost certainly do. (All that plastic laminate, those clashing colours and disjunctive forms – who could live with it?) Postmodernism never asked to be loved, to be sure, but whatever aggression it put out into the world has been repaid in full. Jürgen Habermas was among the first to voice opposition, finding in postmodernism a dangerous turning away from the Enlightenment project of creating and extending a liberal, consensus-seeking public sphere.²¹⁷ Feminists were early in launching a critique too, rightly pointing out that postmodernism's vertiginous doubt of any stable truth had conveniently arrived just when women were starting to lay claim to equal discursive status. As Rita Felski asked, 'How can feminism justify its own critique of patriarchy, once it faces up to a pervasive legitimation crisis that corrodes the authority of all forms of knowledge and reveals truth as nothing more than the reuse of power?'²¹⁸ From a post-colonial perspective, too, postmodernism's emphasis on play and doubt has sometimes been seen as a callow abdication of responsibility. 'Postmodernism preserves – indeed enhances – all the classical and modern structures of oppression and domination,' wrote Ziauddin Sardar. 'Those enslaved by poverty and those trapped in an oppressive modernity do not have the luxury of postmodern freedom of choice.'²¹⁹ For many living outside the Euro-American enclaves of postmodernism, as Nigerian author Dennis Ekpo put it, postmodernism looks like 'nothing but the hypocritical self-flattery of the bored and spoilt children of hyper-capitalism.'²²⁰

Even the practitioners documented in this book, the very people who formulated the style and the subversive strategies of postmodernism, tend to dislike being called postmodernists. Those who have at some time or other renounced the title, either in published statements or in conversation with us as curators include Ron Arad, Mario Bellini, Denise Scott Brown, Frank Gehry, Hans Hollein, Barbara Radice, and even Ettore Sottsass and Robert Venturi, whose comments on the matter could hardly have been more definitive: 'I don't consider our group Memphis to have anything to do with Postmodern at all'; and 'I am not now and never have been a postmodernist and I unequivocally disavow fatherhood



103
Otto Künzli, 300g, 10.5 oz ingot pendant,
illustrated in *Crafts* magazine, no. 71,
November/December 1984



Opposite: 104
Gijs Bakker, *Pforzheim 1780* necklace,
1985. PVC-laminated photographs,
gold leaf, precious stones. Drutt
Collection, Museum of Fine Arts
Houston (2002.3593)

of this architectural movement.²²¹ Many other designers and architects, if the question is put to them, just smile warily, and perhaps invoke Groucho Marx (who famously refused to be a member of any club that would have him). The same holds for whole geographies of design culture. In Europe, especially Italy, postmodernism is often defined in narrow terms as a principally American architectural style employing a historicist classical vocabulary. According to this version, Portoghesi's 1980 Biennale was a one-off event, Michael Graves is the kingpin of PoMo, and Radical Design is a continuation of the modernist project. In America, conversely, postmodern design is often spoken of as a largely European phenomenon, emblemized by the work of Sottsass and his fellow Italian radicals. And everywhere, there are doubters who consider the whole thing a charade, which has no reality outside the books of theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Charles Jencks.

Alessandro Mendini is one exception. When we put the question of postmodernism's legacy to him – is it still with us today? – his reply was simple: '*Claro. Sono ancora qui, non?*' ('Sure. I'm still here, aren't I?')²²² What does it mean to stand up for postmodernism now? As a master of indirection, Mendini would seem unlikely to provide the answer to this question. But a self-portrait of sorts that he contrived may be as good as we can hope for. It is not a painting, or even a chair, but rather a three-piece suit, printed with the logos of all the companies that Mendini worked for – Abet Laminati, Alessi, Artemide, Driade, Domus, Interni, Memphis, Vitra, and the rest – alongside those of multinational corporations such as Ford and McDonald's (pl. 105). Mendini thereby styled himself a true company man – like a Formula One car, plastered with its sponsors' brands, or perhaps an animated version of Ashley Bickerton's sculptures, which included the logos of various art world power brokers (pl. 106). By the late 1980s, corporations were in the driver's seat, treating prominent architects and designers as the engine of their own project of self-fashioning. But as marketing directors were already learning in the 1980s, the most powerful effect of any commodity is often outside its creator's control. Mendini's self-branding gesture is his way of acknowledging the true conditions of professional design, in the pocket of his patrons, but is also a suggestion that brands too can be the material for bricolage. They are, to invert a phrase of post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha's, 'wonders taken as signs' – entities of superhuman economic and cultural force, reduced to the level of communicative ornament. In the process they become manageable, even as they retain their power. When we claim a brand as our own, we give ourselves permission to articulate our own complicit position in mass culture.²²³ If practitioners – and indeed, the rest of us – do not want to admit to being postmodernists, that may be because it is uncomfortable to do so. But maybe a little discomfort is what we need.

What has struck us most as curators is the range of ways in which the questions posed by postmodernism remain open to this day. This has to do not only with the relation between commodities and systems of power, but also the other themes charted in this book: the proper use of history, the interactions of identity and mediation, the use of found objects of all kinds within creative work, and lateral movement across disciplines. The postmodern surface afforded the exploration of all of these issues in depth, and they remain central to design discourse. Since 1990 we have seen huge changes in design, the rise of digital technology above all. Unsurprisingly, many new ways have been found to describe design and its social role – network theory, mass customization, risk society, liquid modernity, viral advertising, 'Design Art,' etc. But in many ways these catchphrases are refinements or recapitulations of postmodernist discourse, not departures from it. The term itself may have gone out of fashion, partly no doubt because of sheer exhaustion brought about by overuse. Equally, the rhetorical points to be scored by declaring an end to postmodernism must be considered. Donald Barthelme wrote an imaginary letter to a literary critic that began 'Yes, you are absolutely right – Post-Modernism is dead' all the way back in 1975, and French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has proposed the end of postmodernism and the inauguration of a new dispensation, which he calls Altermodernism, as recently as 2008.²²⁴ Evidently postmodernism's death is its most lasting feature. But once postmodern fragmentation is introduced as technique, it can never be got rid of. As Zygmunt Bauman memorably put it, 'The modern crusade against ambivalence and the "messiness" of human reality only multiplies the targets it aims to destroy.'²²⁵ Thus postmodernism always has been, and is still, an endgame, an ongoing gambit in which the apocalyptic impulse serves as an entry into the new.²²⁶



105
Alessandro Mendini with Kean Etro,
Logo suit, 2004. Photograph by
Carlo Lavatori



107
Ai Weiwei, Han Dynasty Urn with
Coca-Cola Logo, 1994. Painted Han
Dynasty urn. Private collection, USA



106
Ashley Bickerton, Commercial Piece
#1, 1989. Anodized aluminium, wood,
leather, acrylic paint, rubber. Courtesy
of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin
Gallery, New York

If postmodernism never goes away, despite the repeated claims of its foreclosure, what does its future (which is of course our present) look like? The most obvious way to approach this question is to think about 'globalization', another term that has achieved currency since 1990, and which perhaps more than any other idea conveys a sense that we have entered something discrete, something post-postmodern.²²⁷ It will not have escaped the reader's notice that the geography of this project is essentially Euro-American, with Japan as an exception that proves the rule, and the majority of the objects it documents are the work of white men. Furthermore, as mentioned above (and in Arindam Dutta's essay for this volume, pp. 270–3), the presumption of a 'universal' postmodern condition is astonishingly Eurocentric. All the same, postmodernism has itself demonstrably 'globalized' since 1990. In the past two decades, major postmodernist art and architecture appeared in Cairo, Singapore, Shanghai, and almost every where else where capital accumulates (pls 107 and 108).²²⁸

More important than this matter of stylistic diffusion, though, is the fact that contemporary globalization itself is best understood as a postmodern phenomenon. As Mike Featherstone has written, 'On the global level, postmodernism not only signifies a revival of the interest in the exotic other, but the fact that the other now speaks back.'²²⁹ This suggests that today's asymmetries of power can still best be viewed in terms of postmodernism, in both a positive and an oppositional (that is, anti-postmodern) sense. We want to pursue this claim, in a rather limited way, by focusing on one exhibition: *Magiciens de la Terre*, which was staged in 1989 at the Centre Pompidou and the Parc de la Villette in Paris. This situated the project within two buildings whose relations to postmodernism were complex, the former being a late modern structure by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano, whose overstatement of functionalism tipped into colourful expressionism, and the latter a deconstructivist complex by Bernard Tschumi. What made the event controversial, however, was not the architectural setting, but rather the curatorial premise. Curator Jean-Hubert Martin and his colleagues set out to present a universal picture of contemporary art, which included blue-chip conceptual artists from Europe and America alongside wood carvers, metalworkers and painters from Africa, India, the Australian outback and other 'marginal' spaces.²³⁰ The project has recently, and aptly, been described as the moment when 'the international art market was awakened to the potential riches of another period of global colonisation, of what then would have been referred to as "the other".'²³¹ Though the divide between occidental artists and '*les autres*' was in some ways clear and absolute, Martin argued that they all drew from a common wellspring of human creativity:

All of these objects, from here or elsewhere, have one aura in common. They are not simple objects or functional tools. They are meant to act upon the same mentality and the ideas from which they are born. They are receptacles of metaphysical values.²³²

A perhaps surprising aspect of *Magiciens de la Terre*, given this emphasis on spiritual authenticity, was its emphasis on 'salvage culture' – just the sort of bricolage that Jencks and Silver had celebrated all the way back in 1972 in their book *Adhocism*, but now more explicitly in the context of the global movement of commodities and images.²³³ Many of the Euro-American artists included operated in this way – whether it was British sculptor Tony Cragg's assemblages of plastic junk, German painter Sigmar Polke's pastiches of pop and historical motifs, or French conceptualist Daniel Spoerri's neo-primitivist masks made from disparate found objects.

Two of the most resonant figures in the show were African artists whose objects also seemed the products of globally-inflected bricolage; in fact, their work looked uncannily like postmodernist design. These were Samuel Kane Kwei, a cabinet-maker from Ghana, who had been making sculptural coffins since 1951 in the shape of automobiles (pl. 109), fish, houses and cameras; and Bodys Isek Kingelez, from Zaire (Congo), who in 1977 had begun fashioning imaginary visions of Kinshasa. Kingelez's models, made of painted cardboard, looked for all the world like the creations of a New York architect (pl. 110). After Kane Kwei and Kingelez were showcased at the Pompidou, other institutions lined up to celebrate them: the Museum for African Art in New York, the British Museum, MoMA, and the definitive postmodern museum in Groningen (designed by Mendini) all exhibited one or both artists. Jean Pigozzi, a Geneva-based venture capitalist, worked with the assistant

curator from *Magiciens*, André Magnin, to form a groundbreaking collection of contemporary African art that included both Kwei and Kingelez.

It was not only the style of these objects that made them register; they also spoke to the status-obsessed art and design world of the 1980s. Kane Kwei drew on longstanding pageant customs but also marked the passage of new foreign goods into his community (Teshie, a suburb of Accra), and his work spoke directly to the ambition of his clients. It was an echo of that key postmodern preoccupation, the construction of the self through commodities, even though the motivations and symbolism of the objects were local in character: 'These extravagant coffins are chosen by the deceased's family, most often according to their social background or their profession. A lion for a traditional chieftain, a Mercedes for the boss of a fleet of taxis, a chicken for a mother with a large family.'²³⁴

Kingelez's architectural models were also a hit with the postmodern set. A few years after *Magiciens de la Terre*, his work propelled Ettore Sottsass into a paroxysm of rhetorical flight that echoed the exhibition's transcultural vision:

The memories of Bodys Isek Kingelez are those that are possible, maybe even those that are foreseeable, to a traveller who leaves an ancient, dark, tiring, fierce world of African nature and finds he's being aroused by, that he's falling in love with, and understandably so, that part of the Western modern landscape, in fact that part of the American landscape that is most brightly lit, most colourful, noisiest, most artificial, most 'anti-nature,' the very part that is precisely 'history-less,' the part that is projected to reassure everyone, to transport everyone, if possible, toward happiness, toward a total Existential blessing. Aren't Las Vegas, Miami, Atlantic City, divine places, blessed by good fortune, placed where time doesn't exist, places without history, places to dream, rainbow places, places with tall plastic palm trees and celestial breezes?²³⁵

Sottsass gives himself permission to forget the real context of these objects' production – which he caricatures in terms drawn from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) – and instead see them as monuments of a transcultural postmodernism, devoid of history but filled with happiness. One can detect this strain of multivalent idealism throughout the reception of Kane Kwei and Kingelez, and indeed all the 'other' work in *Magiciens*: a range of conflicting and conflicted responses that combined old-fashioned exoticism, well-intentioned universalism, and a shock of recognition, all fuelled by self-projection.



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Ahmed Mito, Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt, 2000. Cairo



109
Samuel Kane Kwei, Mercedes-Benz Shaped Coffin, 1993. Enamel paint and wood. Contemporary African Art Collection, Geneva. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva © Samuel Kane Kwei

The exhibition was, in other words, postmodern not only in its content but also its attitude. Martin and his colleagues staged a globalist gesture that was nonetheless exquisitely self-regarding.

For many observers this was the worst kind of false hybridity. In her scathing critique of *Magiciens*, the art historian Annie Coombes wrote a passage that is worth quoting at length:

In the same way that bricolage superficially reproduces the qualities of [modernist] collage but smoothes over the fracture that collage retains, 'difference' as an analytical tool can simply revert to the pitfalls of the older cultural relativist model, concealing the distances between cultures while affirming that all are equal. The chasm is too great between the actual experience of economic, social, and political disempowerment, and the philosophical relativism of postmodernism's celebration of flux and indeterminacy as the product of the mobility of global capital. We need an account of difference which acknowledges the inequality of access to economic and political power, a recognition which would carry with it an analysis of class and gender relations within subaltern and dominant groups, and would articulate the ways in which such differences are constituted, not only in relation to the western metropolitan centres.²³⁶

Coombes issues a tall order here, probably one that no exhibition (not *Magiciens*, and not the present exhibition either) can fulfil, at least on its own. What is most striking about her criticism, however, is the fact that it is itself framed in terms of postmodernism – by being against it. Like its intermittent demises, postmodernism's inadequate claims of universality are a gift that keeps on giving. Or to put it more seriously: attending to difference still requires the flux and relativism of the postmodern position. It is only as a rift in an otherwise undifferentiated, connective field that the particular becomes political, rather than simply descriptive or constraining. Here it may be worth remembering the words of one last theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha, who wrote in 1987: 'Difference is an ongoing process; like authenticity [it] is produced, not salvaged.'²³⁷ From this perspective, postmodernism's engagement with the global, as embodied in such events as *Magiciens de la Terre*, is worth holding on to precisely because it is so objectionable. Postmodernism's self-presentation as a difference machine may be fraudulent, but at least the apparatus is there for all to see.



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Bodys Isek Kingelez, Zaire, 1989. Paper, coloured and decorated cardboard, polystyrene, plastic. Contemporary African Art Collection, Geneva. Courtesy CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva © Bodys Isek Kingelez

Conclusion

Whenever I get this way
I just don't know what to say
Why can't we be ourselves like we were yesterday?²³⁸
—*New Order*

When choosing a director for their video *Bizarre Love Triangle* (1986), the pop band New Order turned to Robert Longo. At the time, Longo was just on the cusp of a brief stint as a video-maker, but he was also one of the hottest contemporary artists in New York.²³⁹ Another member of the so-called Pictures Generation, he was probably best known for his *Men in the City* series. These life-sized, full-length figure studies were based on photographs in which men wearing suits were captured in the throes of a mysterious convulsion (pl. 111).²⁴⁰ Were they dancing? Had they been shot at close range (by a gun, as well as a camera)? It was impossible to tell, and of course that was the point. Like so many other postmodern poseurs, his figures were at once ambiguous and ecstatic.

In the video that Longo made for New Order, this indeterminate motif is adapted into the key image accompanying the chorus. As we hear Bernard Sumner singing the lines 'Every time I see you falling/ I get down on my knees and pray', we see well-dressed bodies floating in an endless freefall against the backdrop of a blue sky (pl. 112). The sequence emblemizes the condition of the postmodern subject, adrift in frictionless space (and it is even more haunting now than it was when conceived, given our memories of corporate employees plunging from windows on 11 September 2001).²⁴¹ Wrapped around the tumbling figures, during the verses, is a world of quickly changing imagery, which seems to have been assembled from found footage but was actually shot on location in New York. The subject matter sometimes recalls the urban flux of *Koyaanisqatsi* – escalators, industrial architecture and crowds on the move. At other times Longo surveys the technological infrastructure of the song itself, in shots of reel-to-reel tape, scrambled footage of the band in performance, and black and white televisual 'noise'. Occasionally, as in Laurie Anderson's performances, the video becomes suddenly and unexpectedly poetic. Fireworks light up the night sky, and a child runs through the city, scared, clutching a doll to her chest. And then, toward the end, there is an inexplicable rupture, unlike anything you expect to find on MTV. A (very) short film-within-the-film, shot in black and white:

Woman: I don't believe in reincarnation, because I refuse
to come back as a bug or as a rabbit.
Man: You know, you're a real 'up' person.

This brief exchange could be taken as a joke about the idea of the 'post-human', then gaining ground in academic and subcultural circles. Plastic surgery, breast implants, steroids, crash diets, mood drugs, genetic engineering: all these developments had given rise to the idea that identity was now something manufactured, and hence as much a question of control and manipulation as any other form of consumption.²⁴² The man's rejoinder both satires this world of self-creation, and refers obliquely to the pervading idea of postmodern identity (those floating figures might be seen as permanently 'up'). But even this interpretation is probably too literal. As the video's rapid-fire images flash back across the screen, it's clear that the sheer experience of media fragmentation constitutes the real message.

In the spirit of Longo's flickering yet revealing video, we now turn to a kaleidoscope of views on postmodernism. The territory we have laid out here, in this long introduction, will now be remapped from the beginning. We have invited 39 authors to deliver short essays on a subject of their choice. The resulting multivalent perspectives capture not only the complexity of postmodernism, but also its incommensurability. We hope each of these essays will take you closer to a particular moment, practitioner or idea; and also that, taken together, they will constitute a compelling story (but definitely not a grand narrative). A few of the authors are leading figures from the period: architects James Wines and Denise Scott Brown, graphic designer April Greiman, dancer and choreographer Matthew Hawkins, curator Wolfgang Schepers. Among the contributing historians are some who lived through the period and helped to shape it, like Charles Jencks and Rick Poynor. But for most of our

essayists, looking back at postmodernism means looking back at their own youths. Some were children in the 1970s and 80s; others were in university or graduate school, having these ideas laid out before them when they were hot off the press. It is the same for us as curators. One of us was born in 1967, the other in 1972, and our first encounters with design history were conditioned by the insights of postmodernist theory.

It would be naive to suggest that such generational affinities play no role in the history of ideas, and this is one explanation why, after a period in which postmodernism seemed to have been exhausted as a topic of discussion, it is now back in vogue. But there are many other reasons why this project seems to have come along at the right time. We have curated this exhibition during a period of sudden economic distress, which makes the recessionary decade of the 1970s, the 'bubble' of the 80s, and the crash years that followed, all feel uncannily familiar. We have also conducted our research at a time when many postmodern practitioners are seeking to consolidate their own legacies – a good time to gather collections and recollections alike. And, of course, there are all the arguments to be made about the ongoing importance of postmodernism, both as a historical subject and a set of unresolved intellectual provocations. The history we have set out here should help us to understand the permissive, fluid and hyper-commodified situation of design today. Even so, these issues are subsumed under our own personal relation to the period: the sense that when we look back at the years from 1970 to 1990 we are looking at the moment of our own formation. And this will be true of many, if not most, people who read this book. Why can't we be ourselves like we were yesterday? Because like it or not, we are all postmodern now.



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Robert Longo, *Untitled (Joe)* from the *Men in the City* series, 1981. Charcoal and pencil on paper. Tate: Presented by Janet Wolfson de Botton 1996, London (T07177)

Overleaf: 112
Robert Longo, stills from *Bizarre Love Triangle* video for New Order, 1986

