



# PERV ERSE FURNI TURE

**Perverse Furniture**  
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Artspace  
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**PERVERSE FURNITURE: INTRODUCTION**

by Sarah Fritchey

Most viewers will relate to this exhibition, because furniture is something that we all know and use. Moreover, we have all experienced an emotional attachment to at least one piece of furniture in our lives, be it a family heirloom or a piece that represents who we aspire to be. For me, it's my parent's perfectly worn black leather Eames Lounge Chair and Ottoman with a rosewood shell, an object that my brother and I secretly spun on as children until the chair toppled. Cash poor, I went on to purchase a cheap replica of this chair in my late 20's, and I lived with it for 5 years before studying its design philosophy.

Furniture is a vehicle for personal connections and frequently a silent carrier of artistic traditions. It tells stories of inheritance, ownership, craftsmanship, technique, mastery, life, death and creation. Passed from maker to distributor, buyer to curbside, or kept within a family for generations, it connects us to the earth, machines, industry, our built environments and our own stories through a network of environmental, economic and cultural transactions. As my co-curator Aude Jomini shows in her essay that follows, furniture can be a vehicle for protest and radical experimentation. It can wage wars against dominant power structures, pushing innovations into the vanguard. As this exhibition demonstrates, furniture can be harnessed to blur the lines between disciplines of art, design and architecture. It can take the form of sculpture, installation, painting, photography, performance, video, social practice, dance, sound, drawing and virtual mayhem.

A connection point for many of the artists in this show is their robust exposure to technical training, which they received before, during and after art school. Esteban Ramón Pérez was the son of an upholsterer who grew up fixing chairs before attending Yale. Graham Anderson worked as a cabinet maker after graduating from Cooper Union. Bernadette Despujols received a five-year degree in architecture before attending Cal Arts. Jessi Reaves worked for an upholsterer after studying painting at RISD. Bob Gregson has authored and illustrated books for teachers that mix art and games, and Crystal Heiden has worked for an organic garlic gardener and an industrial metal fabricator. The list goes on. No two artists in this show have the same upbringing, went to the same school, or followed the same life path. Yet they continue to explore the interplay of concept, form and utility in design, while manifesting objects that shirk practical use.

In many ways, the works in this show express the jack-of-all-trades skill sets that contemporary artists must command to financially sustain their practices and find employment, even after they graduate from art school with a higher degree. The relationship between employability and the professionalization of the artist under the academy is a fascinating one, and it plays a central role in this show, which is organized to coincide with the 100th Anniversary of the Bauhaus.

As Aude Jomini describes in her essay that follows, the Bauhaus prioritized training that would allow its students to contribute to the mainstream workforce as soon as they graduated. While this focus was not explicitly articulated in the 1919 founding manifesto, the school's founder and director, Walter Gropius, made this clear in 1923 when he focused the curriculum on the merging of art, craft and industry. Under Gropius, students were exposed to the inner workings of factory settings, global distribution networks, sales room aesthetics and tactics, and designs that could keep pace with the accelerated speed of supply and demand under mass production.

The roots of the professionalization of the arts in the United States can be traced back to the reception of the Bauhaus vis-a-vis the recruitment of its faculty members into teaching positions at Black Mountain College, Yale, Harvard and elsewhere in the 1930's, but even further back to the birth of the American liberal arts curriculum. In 1862, two years into the Civil War, Congress passed The Morrill Act under Abraham Lincoln, granting each state 30,000 acres of land for each member it had in Congress, and requiring that 90 percent of the gross proceeds be used for the endowment and maintenance of the colleges and universities teaching agricultural arts, mechanical arts, and other subjects, including military training. In effect, the Act extended the possibility of higher education to the masses, solidified the role of the federal government in the field of higher education and brought students of the vocational arts and the fine arts under the same roof and into shared classroom settings. Over the next few decades, American universities developed higher degree granting programs and tracks for specialized research in non-traditional disciplines, including the fine arts.

By the 1920's, American art schools reflected a Bauhaus model in their desire to produce artists who were prepared to enter the workforce and contribute their learned skills to a growing industrial economy. In 1928, journalist R.L. Duffus published a six-year report on the status and changing face of the American art school, titled *American Renaissance*. Duffus spoke highly of Yale's curriculum in particular: "It is expected that [the artist] will be ready to begin a career, and need not waste precious years in fumbling and experimenting. Yale's artist will be able to make paintings and sculptures for architectural commissions, to produce modes and illustrations and to design goods for the home and office, as well as their packages and their advertisements." He also speculated that a distinctly American art had begun to emerge, led by two pioneers, "One is the college or university professor who sets up standards by which we can tell the difference between good art and bad art [sic]...The other is the sound craftsman who teaches his pupils how to do necessary things beautifully." The connection between a Bauhaus and American mentality by the late 1920's is undeniable, as is the power of the language to communicate the relevancy of the professional artist.

Given the tradition of manifesto-writing under Bauhaus and the modernist avant-garde at large, Aude and I invited the artists in *Perverse Furniture* to write personal manifestos that might foreground their voices within the context of this historically-looking show.

We offered the manifesto as an unmediated space where artists could declare the aims and stakes of their practices, chief concerns, or stage rebellions. Some artists rebelled, refusing our invitation. Others submitted slightly tweaked versions of their artist statements. A third group dug in and contributed original texts that punctuate the show with small provocations. Due to this range of responses, the show is not a smooth ride and we celebrate this.

If I were to contribute a curatorial manifesto for this show, I would investigate the homogenizing effects that the long-term professionalization, standardization and specialization of the arts have impressed on art workers today. My impulse to pen this manifesto relates to a hesitancy that I sometimes sense from artists to write freely and polemically about their practice, as well as a reciprocal hesitancy from curators to overstep their boundary into a place of artistic production. I understand too well from experience this feeling of being tongue-tied, as well as the hesitancy to tap into a place of personal joy or honesty to produce writing. But at the same time, I ask, is this not where good writing comes from? In art school, we are trained to master certain language, a set of histories and theories, to be specific about the ways that we frame our practices, and sometimes we lose or disguise our more messy selves. At its core, my manifesto asks the question that drives my curatorial practice-- in the arts, who speaks? How is this power maintained? And if artists are not the ones at the podium declaring the aims and the stakes of their practice, who is? and to what ends?

In the essay that follows, Aude Jomini points to some of the ways in which students or artists can also find a platform for their voice, even when they occupy marginalized positions. To paraphrase a section of Aude's essay, Anni Albers found freedom as a student of the Bauhaus through the ethos of learning by doing. Embracing this instruction, she was able to articulate the activity of design in writing; her practice as an ever-changing exploration of material. To this day, Albers is celebrated for her contributions to textile design, and was the first woman weaver to have a solo show at MoMA. I am grateful to Aude for pointing to Albers's story, and for addressing the questions of gender, agency, self-worth and professionalization. In the show's planning phases, Aude stipulated that we would not rehash well-trodden narratives around the U.S. reception of Bauhaus. We have maintained a healthy distance by including artists who, like Albers, pursued their own adventurous paths. Aude's essay sketches the details of the school's lesser known ghosts, shorter lived players, and a bevy of design studios and collectives who rose up against modernist ideals in Italy in the 1960's and 70's. Her vision is flexible, feminist and exuberant, and she situates *Perverse Furniture* in an arena that might be wildly scaled up or down, without editing or limits.

#### **Works Cited**

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## PERVERSE FURNITURE: MAKING LIGHT OF INHERITANCE

by Aude Jomini

### perverse (adjective)

1. willfully determined or disposed to go counter to what is expected or desired; contrary.
2. characterized by or proceeding from such a determination or disposition: a perverse mood.
3. wayward or cantankerous.
4. persistent or obstinate in what is wrong.
5. turned away from or rejecting what is right, good, or proper; wicked or corrupt.

### INTRODUCTION: WEIGHT OF THE BAUHAUS

*Perverse Furniture* was organized by Sarah Fritchey and myself out of our joint cross-disciplinary passions. Our mutual obsession with the show's themes rose out of many heated arguments, gesticulations and shouting sessions over a period of two years. This storm was further activated by a desire to respond, in our own way, to the 100th anniversary of the *Bauhaus*, celebrated this year ubiquitously by institutions worldwide. Our desire to connect with the larger discourse of such a multivalent and unresolvable influence as the *Bauhaus* became for us -- artists, designers, New Haven residents -- a challenging and exciting opportunity to acknowledge its specific, local and personal inheritance.

Given the wealth of scholarly research on the topic, I had no intention of attempting to repackage its history, nor the sufficient authority to do so. But as I revisited its founding principles, I was struck too hard by a feeling of being haunted. As a student of both a School of Design and a School of Architecture, the entire foundation I am stuck upon is indebted to these same old principles: I started to interrogate how much I took for granted. This text is an open vessel -- an attempt to share with you the fragments of nuanced richness which I found along the way, to offer these scraps for further use, or mis-use. I promise no smooth ride.

The heroic, the playful and the experimental. A school, playing as a collective like a symphony with a soul... Did I ultimately learn something from all that? *Benedetta Tagliabue*<sup>1</sup>

As encapsulated in "My Bauhaus: 100 Architects on the 100th Anniversary of a Myth"<sup>2</sup>, the school's influence on generations of designers, artists and architects expresses in as many ways as there are lenses to reinterpret Walter Gropius's original founding *manifesto*.

1 'My Bauhaus: 100 Architects on the 100th Anniversary of a Myth' (see bibliography)

2 'My Bauhaus', Same as above

To page through the publication, meditating on the influence of the school, is to tap into infectious and generative codes that have continued to propel us to *make things* as if our collective future still depended on it. The pretext of such a multi-faceted entity's anniversary is dubious to many, even seemingly perverse, as a cause for celebration.

Is it worthwhile to investigate why we still care?

We should ask whether the Bauhaus is completely irrelevant today. All leftist experiments have so far failed because capitalism seems to be stronger—perhaps because it satisfies our most primitive human instincts. [...] the success of Ikea shows that what remains of the Bauhaus legacy are mainly its material elements.[...]

Would a contemporary version of this school be conceivable after all... A school that counters our fragmented reality with the image of a society that knows how to unite individual demands with collective expression?

*Andre Kempe, Oliver Thill*<sup>3</sup>

The Bauhaus school, a flexible program with an open-end, was oriented toward utopia, yet conceived as an *experiment* by its founder:

I think the Bauhaus idea is very much utopian. Step by step we tried to realize it, [...] a group of people can, laboratory-like, work on such an idea, and come to a certain understanding, which then has an effect to go out and radiate into other parts of this world. *Walter Gropius*<sup>4</sup>

This heavy legacy of ambition remains full of generative misunderstandings. Negative results of functionalism, combined with the failures of modernism to create life-changing solutions at the city scale, are loosely associated with Bauhaus principles. Its proponents are blamed for subsequent failures of utopian ideas in New Haven, in the United States and elsewhere.

As Bauhaus masters and former students migrated to the United States after the Nazis shut down the school, they carried along the school's inherited *Sachlichkeit* ideals<sup>5</sup>. These modernist principles of functional design continued to evolve, and took on varied interpretations in the new landscape. Walter Gropius, recorded for the school's 50th anniversary on the record *Bauhaus Reviewed: 1919-1933*, reflects on the popular misunderstanding of the meaning of *functionalism* as it was adopted by the school. He attempts, in an accented english with a heavy german cadence, to elucidate the nuance of this principle within the Bauhaus:

We tried to develop ...a *science of design*, all objective things out of the physiological and psychological life of men; which are objectively true for you, and me, and everyone else... Anything we do...we have to study the human being using that.[...]

3 From 'My Bauhaus: 100 Architects on the 100th Anniversary of a Myth'

4 Gropius, Walter. 'Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933', audio recording

5 Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory' (see bibliography) - refers to functionalist ideals based on measurable principles and efficiency

That is the starting point, not this or that *aesthetic* idea. This is the true *functionalism*. We have been misunderstood so very often. It was said that *functionalism* [was] mostly practicalities, and all the emotional things are kept out. This is not true. We had thought that *functionalism* is also a psychological affair. *Walter Gropius*<sup>6</sup>

Despite misinterpretations, what legacy remains from the Bauhaus today is beyond *international style* or any political ideology aiming at collective utopia. The pedagogy of its foundation course, along with the laboratory of the workshops, remains very much alive for those who *make* or *design* today.

The Bauhaus's 'objective' principles of *design through making* followed a specific medium's properties, while eschewing prescribed "traditional" or "professional" attitudes. This combines both material and critical engagement, as drivers for design. Anni Albers never ceased to promote these ideas, specifically in relation to weaving, in her written texts<sup>7</sup>. As T'ai Smith explains in her riveting work, "Bauhaus Weaving Theory":

What emerges [from Albers' writing] is a conception of medium as a space for active learning. By disregarding traditional methods, the students set out in their self-education to "lay a foundation for a work which was oriented toward the future. Functionalism in the weaving workshop [was] not a dead end of utility, according to her narrative, but a way of developing new capacities for understanding and rethinking the role of textiles in the modern world. The aim was to "listen" to the material rather than force one's authorial agenda on it. In such an activity, the medium is no readymade stamp, and designing doesn't have to be "form imposed on the material." Designing rather becomes a method of engaging with material—a space of action—like weaving.<sup>8</sup>

Direct engagement with material brings unavoidable entanglement with a specific craft, its tools and its methods -- through making, assembling, and finally, *building* ('Bauen').<sup>9</sup> It is also a fundamental test of scale. It remains the reason for Rhode Island School of Design's student assignment to "*make a chair*" in the mandatory foundation year:

The chair must be made at the correct scale. The chair must perform its designated *function*. The chair must be made from.....*cardboard*.

The preparatory curriculum of the "Vorkurs" was developed at the Bauhaus by a divisive master, the swiss Johannes Itten. Both revered and hated, "Itten had something demonic about him"<sup>10</sup>.

6 Gropius, Walter. 'Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933', audio recording

7 Albers, Anni; with Fox Weber, Smith: 'Anni Albers: On Weaving'

8 Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design'

9 Droste, Magdalena; 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition' (see bibliography)

10 Droste; 'Bauhaus' same as above

Once he resigned, Josef Albers succeeded him in the role; we associate the principles of the foundation course with the latter's teachings. Itten's influence, however, remains embedded. Itten's affiliation with Mazdaznan meant that his curriculum remained closely aligned with the spiritualist doctrines of the sect, translating a spiritual program into aesthetic practice<sup>11</sup>:

The initial Bauhaus curriculum thus adopted a decidedly spiritualist rhetoric, even if its approaches and aims remained incoherent. Next to Gropius's goal of building an architectural Gesamtkunstwerk and medieval guild, there was Itten's pedagogy involving the choreography of chanting, meditation, and vegetarian diet.<sup>12</sup>

Itten's course mixed Mazdaznan with Montessori techniques, with the ultimate goal of "developing inherent gifts through a guided process of free and even playful activity and self-learning, bypassing the intellect in order to reach what is conceived to be [the student's] natural, unlearned, creative center."<sup>13</sup> For Itten, who was a painter, art-making was the way there, but the concept of *play* and *individual* discovery remained central.

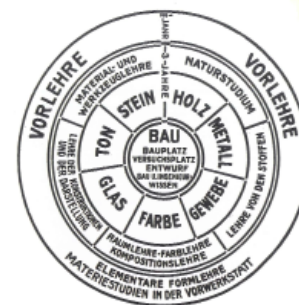


fig. 1: VorKurs curriculum based on materials; fig. 2: Josef Albers course in session (from Droste, 'Bauhaus', see bibliography)

While Johannes Itten's curriculum had focused on individual development and free play of expression, Albers completely reordered the course to begin with *materials*, as directed by Gropius. The latter's position, couched in the rhetoric of collective intentions, was born primarily of the material necessity of the times. Gropius had first aimed to marry art with skilled handicrafts; then to join art with industry. This mixed legacy still forms the basis of most art, craft and architecture schools today.

11 Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design'

12 Smith: same as above, see bibliography

13 Smith, same as above.



fig. 3: Studies from Josef Albers course, fig. 4: Itten color wheel (Droste)

### MODELS FOR INDUSTRY: NO MORE DISCIPLINES!

I realized that there was no Man anymore who was able to design, invent a new chair and make it, so I had to bring in two types of teachers into the Bauhaus. One for the technique and one for the form, and they are married. These two in each workshop...marrying the technicalities with the artistic qualities of the individual". "My idea was always the model making-- that they should really prepare models which were useful for industry. [...]  
The designer should know the process of how things are made; so he should be schooled first to understand the machine and the whole process of industry. Walter Gropius<sup>14</sup>

The *total-work-of-art* thus produced would abolish boundaries of specialized division of labor, ultimately giving back control of industrial means to the artist. The forced marriage of art and industry would return *Man-as-designer* the control of his tools, and the mastery of all trades and crafts. Architecture represented the logical end-post; the *total-work-of-art* would be the integrated, logically structured and efficient *building*.

Regardless of any misgivings about the merits of *efficiency* as a design principle, the Bauhaus's dynamic commitment to cross-disciplinary work remains very much of use. Direct experimentation with materials and *thinking through* their specific properties were central to the school, as was a collective work ethic.<sup>15</sup> The idea of the laboratory-like *workshop* remains important. From *maker-spaces* to *startup-hubs*---experimental studios as modes of work are prevalent--not only in architecture, but within institutional, commercial and industrial organizations desiring to innovate. The ideal of marrying art to industry and, further on, to science and technology, is alive and well. This cross fertilization is spreading in universities, replacing disciplinary expertise and field specialization.

We must destroy the separations between painting, sculpture, architecture and design and so on. It is all one [...].There is no real barrier of meaning between a painting or the other things of our environment. Walter Gropius<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Gropius, Walter. 'Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933', audio recording

<sup>15</sup> Droste, Magdalena; 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition' (see bibliography)

<sup>16</sup> Gropius, Walter. 'Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933', audio recording

According to T'ai Smith, Gropius was attempting to resurrect an idealized model of "medieval craft guild as a messianic artistic community," to renew society by sweeping aside divisions between disciplines. In reality, the school was split into factions, and it was anything but harmonious.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the fundamental oppositions that arose along the way are relevant grounds for this story's regeneration.

A feud erupted in 1923 between Walter Gropius and Johannes Itten on the issue of commercial contracts. Itten, and others, questioned the Bauhaus's direct involvement with industry.<sup>18</sup> Commissions had been central to Gropius in private practice before the founding of the Bauhaus, and he understood how potential customers, trade associations, and industrialists may yield contracts, providing financial independence to a fledgling school in a shifting political climate:

The Bauhaus in its present form *will stand or fall* depending on whether it accepts or rejects the necessity of commissions<sup>19</sup>



fig. 5: Johannes Itten, fig. 6: Bauhaus student in Dadaist costume (from Droste, 'Bauhaus', see bibliography)

<sup>17</sup> Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory' (see bibliography)

<sup>18</sup> Droste, Magdalena; 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition'

<sup>19</sup> Droste, same as above



Because of the disagreement, Johannes Itten withdrew in 1923. Aligned with the expressionists who themselves “espoused a return to an anti-materialist preindustrial age, and identified artists as the spiritual leaders of the modern world, he pronounced that “one must decide either to produce personal, individual work in complete opposition to the commercial outside world, or to seek an understanding with industry.”<sup>20</sup>

Itten considered the highest aim of the Bauhaus education “the awakening and development of the creative individual, in harmony with himself and the world. *Harmonious Man* was also the goal of the Mazdaznan philosophy”<sup>21</sup>. His resignation cleared the way for a focus on “the creation of new products to suit industrial requirements”. Thus the setting was fully reframed for a new goal: “Contemporary design for industrial production, coming to terms with the *Age of the Machine*”:

The ideal was now to conceive well-designed *Baukasten* (modular prefabricated building systems) and *prototypes* for industrially fabricated household items, like upholstery and curtain fabric or metal teapots and lamps.<sup>22</sup>



fig. 7 From Droste, Magdalena; ‘Bauhaus - Updated Edition’

## A TANGENT AGAINST PROGRESS: RADICAL DESIGN IN ITALY

After its closing in 1933, many Bauhausers emigrated, and further tested Bauhaus ideas in the United States. Their practices were newly remade on this testing ground. Modernism’s rhetoric of functionalism, or *Sachlichkeit*, married well with American values. A general belief in necessary *progress*, and in the *scalability* of fundamental design principles came to influence not only architecture, but city planning.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, T’ai: ‘Bauhaus Weaving Theory’

<sup>21</sup> Smith, same as above.

<sup>22</sup> Droste, Magdalena; ‘Bauhaus - Updated Edition’

According to anthropologist and social theorist Anna Tsing, the need to demonstrate *scalability* is closely related to the idea of *progress*, both in scientific and economic terms:<sup>23</sup>

The expectation of *scaling up* is not limited to science. Progress itself has often been defined by its ability to make projects expand without changing their framing assumptions. This quality is “*scalability*.”

Scalability...is the ability of a project to change scales smoothly without any change in project frames. [...]

The connection between *scaling up* and the advancement of humanity has been so strong that scalable elements receive the lion’s share of attention.

The *non-scalable* becomes an impediment. It is time to turn attention to the non-scalable... Anna Tsing <sup>24</sup>

The Bauhaus’ march towards *progress*, aided by industry and scientific advance, was not espoused by all within its ranks. This accelerating drive has been questioned since, and provides further cause for critique or protest.

In 60’s and 70’s Post-War Europe, engaging and playful responses arose against *progress* and rigid functionalism. A number of Italian designers and collectives skillfully harnessed furniture as their chosen medium for this protest and exploration. Later known loosely as “Radical Italian Design”<sup>25</sup>, groups such as ArchiZoom, Studio 65, Gruppo 9999; and later, Alchimia and Memphis among others, embraced cross-discipline practices while addressing social issues head-on. Their projects confronted the tensions inherent in art’s alliance with industry and technology.

“Memphis—Impossible without the Bauhaus! We were fed up: Our clients from the industry wanted the ‘grey Bauhaus mouse’... A Bauhaus misunderstanding – Form follows function – Function follows boredom – predictable moulds... We commissioned ourselves in a kind of cellar theatre – Not always logical... De-axial, colourful objects—Filled with emotion—Beyond functional standards... Form followed a new function—function followed emotion—An emotion that would have never come about without the Bauhaus.” Matteo Thun<sup>26</sup>

These groups, propelled by political upheaval in a time of economic turmoil, were galvanized by their common inheritance of Bauhaus schooling and Modernism; their reactionary stance was at times in direct dialogue with the school’s ideals. Reacting against capitalist “progress” and countering prevailing norms, they penned their own *manifestos*, formed their own divergent schools, and subverted inherited principles which had promised a cleaner, simpler or improved life for all human beings through functional design. They used furniture as their weapons of critique.

<sup>23</sup> Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt; ‘The Mushroom at the End of the World’ (see bibliography)

<sup>24</sup> Tsing, same as above

<sup>25</sup> Didero, Maria Cristina; ‘SuperDesign: Italian Radical Design 1965-75’ (see bibliography)

<sup>26</sup> ‘My Bauhaus: 100 Architects on the 100th Anniversary of a Myth’ (see bibliography)

As Maria Cristina Didero explains in *SuperDesign*, “it was a time of positive turbulence also on an artistic level. Creativity became a way of expressing theoretical and political positions through instinctive acts and performances.” The Radicals “designed and produced objects – often in small editions- and most of these pieces were intended to be strongly irreverent, audacious, and controversial, with the overarching aim of breaking with the past.”<sup>27</sup>

A sentimental relationship.....Naturally, like nearly every architect today, I too am the progeny of the Bauhaus movement. I loved the Bauhaus, and then I fought against it, and then I loved it again. [...]  
On several occasions, I created projects with a direct reference to the Bauhaus, especially during the period of the Alchimia group in Milan.”  
*Alessandro Mendini*<sup>28</sup>

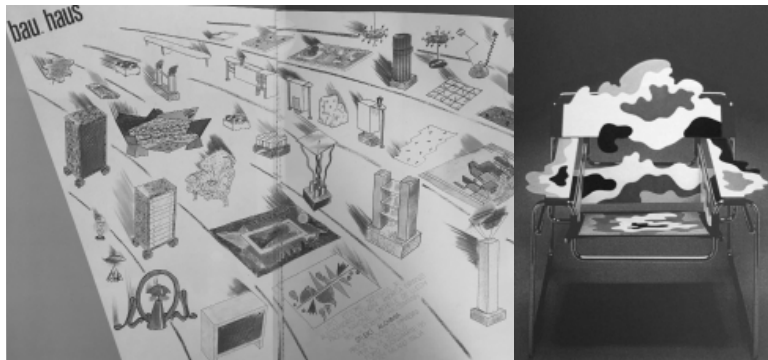


fig. 8-9 Bauhaus furniture line (from Sato, 'Alchimia')

fig. 10: Mendini intervention on Wassily chair (from 'My Bauhaus...', see bibl.)

We have got to rediscover ourselves. Alchimia works on the values –generally regarded as negative—of weakness, absence and death, which are nowadays understood as things existing side by side with what is exterior, solid and violent, and which should therefore be removed. [...] For Alchimia, disciplines are of no interest when considered within their rules. On the contrary, it is important to survey the wide open spaces that lie between them.  
*Alessandro Mendini, The Alchimia Manifesto, 1985*<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Didero, Maria Cristina; 'SuperDesign: Italian Radical Design 1965-75'

<sup>28</sup> 'My Bauhaus: 100 Architects on the 100th Anniversary of a Myth'

<sup>29</sup> Sato, Kazuko; 'Alchimia: Contemporary Italian Design'

Alchimia believes in despecialization, in the hypothesis that “confused” methods of ideation and production must go hand in hand, where craftsmanship, industry, computer science, contemporary and non-contemporary techniques and materials can be mixed.[...] For Alchimia, objects must be both “normal” and “abnormal”. Their ordinariness makes them flow together into everyday reality and into the need for humdrum standardization, whilst their exceptional character removes them from habit and connects them with the need for the unexpected and the accidental, for difference and transgression. *Alessandro Mendini, The Alchimia Manifesto*<sup>30</sup>

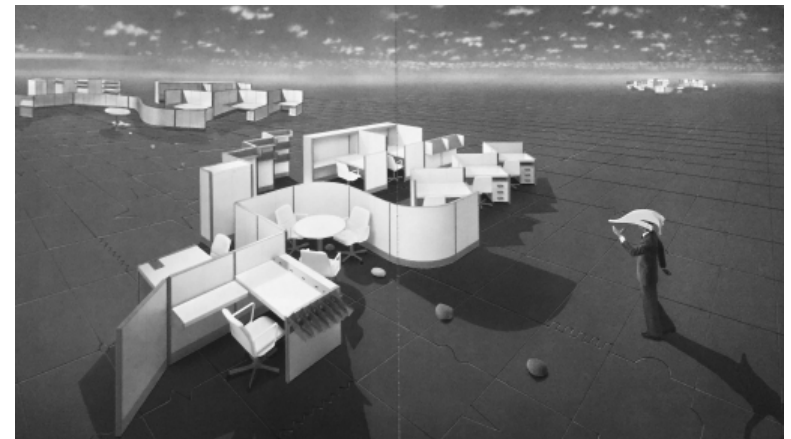


fig. 11,12 Alchimia “advertisements” for their furniture line (from Sato, 'Alchimia')



<sup>30</sup> Sato, Kazuko; 'Alchimia: Coontemporary Italian Design'



Enzo Mari, another Italian artist, engaged with furniture-making in a different way, albeit also as critical practice. His project from 1974, "*Autoprogettazione*"<sup>31</sup> which translates literally from Italian as '*self-design*', was a pseudo-manual of "models" for essential furniture, easily made, with widely available wood parts and simple tools, using only direct additive techniques of nailing boards together. His project, intended as *critical exercise of making*, for anyone willing to try, promoted direct engagement with materials and objects as intervention, through the "self-creation" of all needed useful implements for one's purpose. He writes of his initial intent:

How is it possible to implement the deconditioning of form as a value and not strictly corresponding to content? The only way I know of (...) is that it becomes possible only when critical thinking is based on the practice of work. The way should therefore be to involve the user of a consumer item in its design and creation. The only possible way to start being free from such deeply rooted conditioning is by actually touching the different contradictions of the work. Enzo Mari<sup>32</sup>

Mari writes again in 1983, looking back in a new edition, about the misinterpretations that arose from this experiment: he was accused of attempting a romantic "return to nature" and of harboring a fetish for the *naïve object*. He was attacked for material wastefulness arising from his over-structured "designs". But these *models* had to be *accessible to all*, regardless of skill, location or education. While his project questioned the typical user's ability to make value judgments, he admitted:

"Obviously, objects must be produced using machinery and the latest technology. This is the only way to get good quality and economical items."[...] "It is crucial to socialize the implications of modern technology, and this ought to be done really making the best use of technology and not proposing the use of an archaic technology."<sup>33</sup>

This was not a *kit-of-parts* approach, as the "designs" demanded nothing more than locally available basic cuts of raw materials, pieced together in the most direct, simple and *additive* manner.

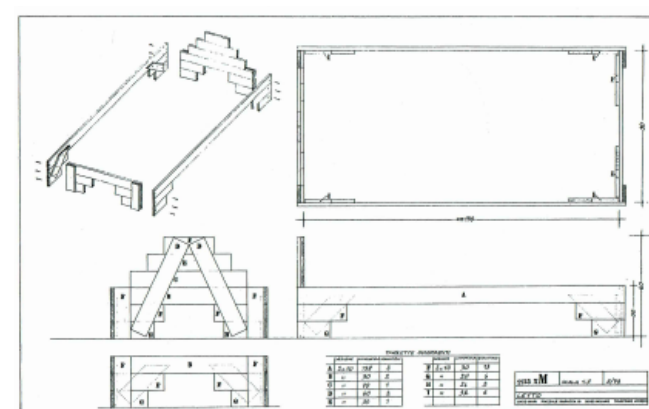
Expression came freely; from *stacking-up*.



fig. 15,16 Enzo Mari - Designs for furniture



fig. 17 Enzo Mari - Table (from "*Autoprogettazione*")



31 From Enzo Mari; '*Autoprogettazione*' (see bibliography)

32 Same as above.

33 Same as above.

Meanwhile, the Italian group Superstudio also engaged in rebellious acts of design against Modernism, through a subversive use of domestic objects. Furniture and objects became agents inciting alternative modes for society. Indeed, "the sorts of objects they intended to produce should "inspire action" and thus help to activate the user to take full ownership over his or her living conditions. The best way to do this was to produce intentionally *disruptive objects*, ones that get in the inhabitant's way [...] Thus, with a series of overwhelmingly and intentionally *gauche objects*, produced in the late 1960s, Superstudio used *bad taste* as a weapon against modernism's staid interiors."<sup>34</sup>

Our problem is to go on producing objects, big brightly-colored cumbersome useful and full of surprises, to live with them and play with them together and always find ourselves tripping over them till we get to the point of kicking them and throwing them out, or else sitting down on them or putting our coffee cups on them, but it will not in any way be possible to ignore them. They will exorcize our indifference. *Superstudio*, "Evasion,"<sup>35</sup>

Superstudio's use of scale-less and meaninglessly replicable graphic grids, across variable dimensions, took a direct aim at abstract *De Stijl* design principles, which had become a symbol for Bauhaus identity.<sup>36</sup> Pushing the *scalability of design* to its logic end-game, gridded type-forms, first conceived as functional objects (such as their "Quaderna" furniture), subsumed rooms, cities, landscapes and, ultimately, the very fabric of our entire environment.

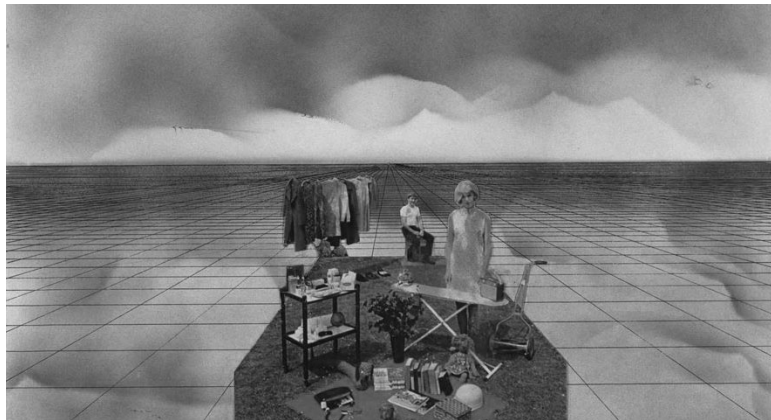


fig. 18: *Fom Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (see bibliography)

<sup>34</sup> Elfline, Ross K.; 'Superstudio and the "Refusal to Work"' (see bibliography)

<sup>35</sup> Lang, Peter and Menking, William; 'SuperStudio: Life Without Objects' (see bibliography)

<sup>36</sup> Droste, Magdalena; 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition' (Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin)

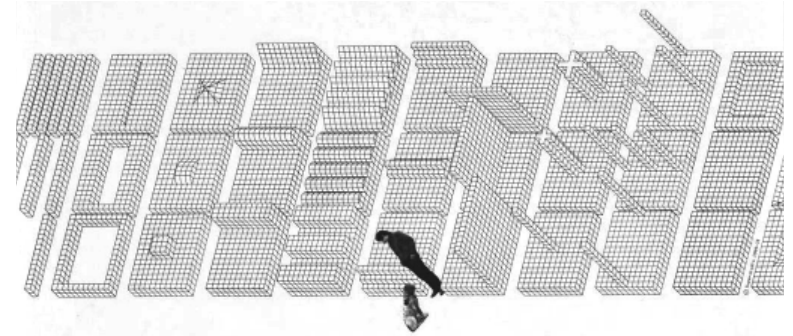


fig. 19, *Fom Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (see bibliography)

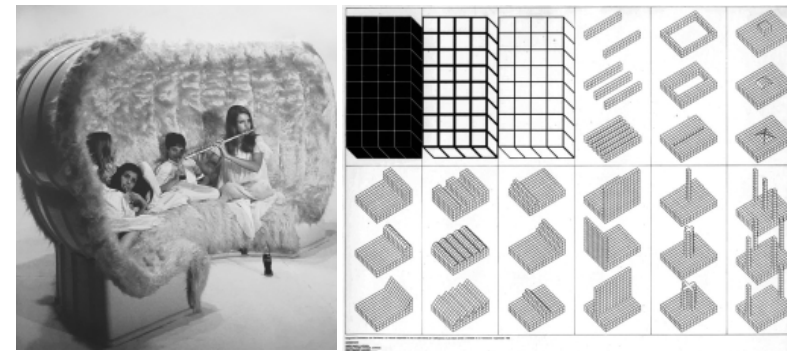


fig. 20,21 *From Superstudio: Life Without Objects* (see bibliography)

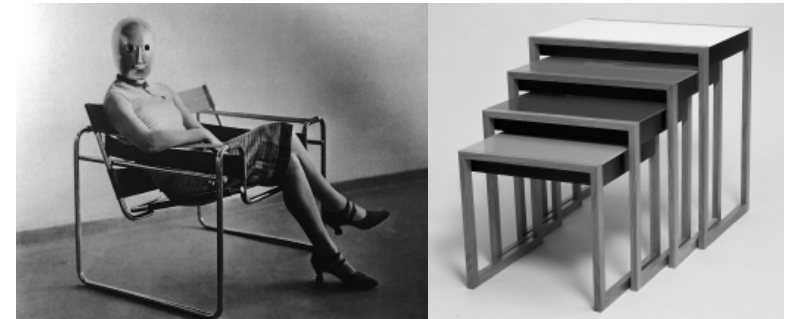


fig. 22 Wassily chair with student at the Bauhaus, and fig. 23 Josef Albers nesting tables; *From 'Bauhaus', by Droste* (see bibliography)

## BAUHAUS FURNITURE: SCALING TOWARDS ARCHITECTURE

So why foreground *furniture*? Why should it be willfully *perverse*?

As a design object, *furniture* stands out as the icon of a functional object *par excellence*.

Driven by direct physical constraints and dimensional relations indivisible from its user, a *piece of furniture* remains a direct embodiment of the link from design and craft to material. It forces the spatial abstractions of architecture into the real business of physical experimentation. Unlike the scale of architectural elements, the scale of furniture better lends itself to experiments in mass production, providing a testing ground for the role of prototypes in industrial production.<sup>37</sup>

Despite his commitment to integrate arts with craft and industry and break down disciplinary boundaries, *architecture* remained for Gropius the ultimate goal of the Bauhaus (thus the highest art by implication): "the final aim of the Bauhaus [...] was architecture"<sup>38</sup>. Thus students witnessed a gradual progression toward a curriculum entirely centered on architecture, first in Dessau and culminating in Berlin in 1933. Other disciplines, seeking to prove their worth and necessity, were forced to become subsumed within the rhetoric of this architecture.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, *furniture* offered a tantalizing potential to make a greater impact at the level of mass production. The furniture workshop, run by Gropius himself for a time, seems to have been one of the first to accept the need for standardization, as it focused on typologies, *kit-of-parts* and *replicable systems* showcased at trade fairs and ultimately patented.<sup>40</sup> While Gropius pursued contracts with industrial firms, fueled by new workshop inventions and the incorporation of the Bauhaus, the system of *prototypes* was not always successful. A lasting partnership with industry proved difficult. Attempted alliances with large commercial firms also failed to give the school the financial independence from the State that Gropius was ultimately seeking.<sup>41</sup>

In some cases, egos prevailed over collective needs. Despite protests from Gropius, for instance, Marcel Breuer registered the patent for his tubular steel chairs under his own name,<sup>42</sup> depriving the school of the subsequent licensing revenues, and ultimately undermining its future survival.

37 Droste, Magdalena: 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition' (Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin)

38 Gropius, Walter. 'Bauhaus Reviewed 1919-1933', audio recording

39 Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

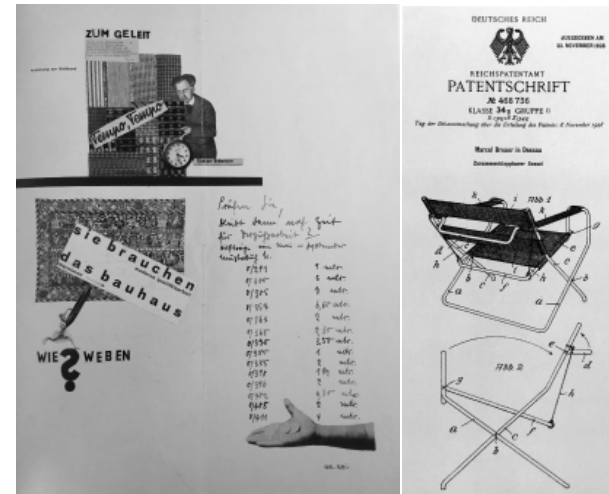
40 Droste, see above.

41 Droste, see above.

42 Droste, see above.

Meanwhile, in the weaving workshop, refusal from the students to perform to industrial demands, combined with political upheaval, economic turmoil and internal rifts, left prototypes intended as "models for industry" stuck, existing somewhere in the experimental space between sculpture, theoretical exercise and handicraft. T'ai Smith pointedly calls these experiments "*speculative weaves*":

One might accurately call these experimental samples "*speculative weaves*." Just as Albers imagined a future practice for Bauhaus weaving, a fantasy in which craft and industry could come together, these objects picture a *future state* of textile prototypes still unachieved..... Rather than realizing a utilitarian goal, these *proto-prototypes* can only signal the fantasy of a future mode, a function not yet achieved. They are, as woven stuff, what might simply be referred to as "*things*": the results of experimentation that are sufficient neither as objects for human use nor as works of art.<sup>43</sup>



►► Grete Reichardt: Collage 'You need the Bauhaus', 1928. She criticised the large number of orders in the weaving workshop and asked: "Is there any time left for experimental work?"

fig. 24, fig. 25 From Droste, 'Bauhaus' (see bibliography)

To be *perverse* is to refuse to perform as intended.

Can furniture be rebellious? Haunted? Embodied? Radical? And what of furniture that just does not perform its *intended function*? What of objects with too much personality--- broken ones, defunct tools, ripe to be *misused* in new ways?

43 Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

By exploring the meaning of furniture and design objects in this context—we interrogate renewed positions in material engagement beyond aesthetics, towards *another, unknown, unfathomable* architecture.

Between objects, our bodies and our environments, there exists a *gray area*. Phyllis Baldino, in the series “*Gray Area Series*” and “*the Unknown Series*”<sup>44</sup> investigates the possibility of this zone of indeterminacy, making use of physical acts of conversion through intimate and direct acts of violence done to simple common domestic objects. To *disassemble* becomes a form of making, too. The ensuing works grow mysterious personalities and haunt our psyche despite their casual air of *bricolage*.

“This ‘Gray Area’ series reveals that opposites can be the same. Something is what it is and is what it is not, simultaneously.” Phyllis Baldino<sup>45</sup>



fig. 26, 27: Excerpts from Baldino's 'Gray Area' series, from artist's website

Franz Kafka once pinned down the power and anxiety behind such an entity. At once part and whole, his “*Odradek*” is neither inert nor wholly determinate. All that remains from the encounter with *Odradek* is a lingering desire for understanding a seemingly invincible *other*, mixed with the utter impossibility of pinning *the thing* down.<sup>46</sup>

At first glance, it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. [...] One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it; nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind; the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished. In any case, closer scrutiny is impossible, since *Odradek* is extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of. (...)

44 Work shown in context of ‘Cut-Up’ exhibition at Franklin Street Works in 2016

45 From artist's website: <https://phyllisbaldino.com/>

46 Kafka, Franz: ‘The Cares of a family Man’ ; short story

Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children's children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful».

Franz Kafka, Cares of a Family Man

While some makers and craftspeople may continue to seek integration through processes of design based on *reason, intuition and function*; others are more actively questioning areas outside pre-scripted disciplinary boundaries, asking what might constitute a *functional* or *useful* object or tool, and *for whom*.

“*Perverse Furniture*” foregrounds such artists. They actively antagonize conventional notions. Furniture's status as a *craft*, or design object---and thus definitively *not art*--- has never been truly in question. Cross-disciplinary projects are numerous; yet discourse on the importance of boundaries and medium specificity are still well embedded in contemporary criticism and theory. Greenberg and McLuhan *still* keep coming up.<sup>47</sup>

The artists in the show tread beyond the comfort of disciplinary territory, in order to engage in critical dialogue. They conduct open explorations. Are any of these works still *furniture*? The line is at times purposely fuzzy. Some artists in the exhibition, such as Jessi Reaves, have in past invited viewers to actually use their pieces<sup>48</sup>, further complicating the works' relationship with audiences in institutional settings. Where this disciplinary line is drawn, or erased, is where the excitement lies.

It is not furniture alone, but also *furnishings* which can take up new roles and become re-loaded with potential. Seemingly harmless, domesticated, subordinated, *feminized*;<sup>49</sup> these elements exist in an indeterminate region between substrate, ornament and architecture. This is the left-over ‘FF&E’<sup>50</sup>, or extra *stuff* that inevitably *falls off* after ‘New Living's *architecture*’ is picked up and shaken vigorously upside down:

“the now classic interiors of the masters' houses [...] are highlights in the history of “New Living”. Clear pictureless walls and expansive windows with large glass panels created generously sized rooms containing just a few choice items of furniture. Space and furniture seemed to mutually reinforce the effect of the other, and at the same time maintain a delicate equilibrium. These interiors were presented as hygienic, easy to maintain, practical and functional. The whole, however, was a sophisticated art form which made life itself a work of art. To fulfill their toil in everyday life, furnishings had once again to become simple and cheap.”<sup>51</sup>

47 Smith, T'ai: ‘Bauhaus Weaving Theory’; i.e. Smith still discusses Greenberg & McLuhan

48 Jessi Reaves showed work that could be sat on in 2017 Whitney Biennial

49 Smith, T'ai: ‘Bauhaus Weaving Theory’

50 FF&E is architectural parlance; stands for Fit-out (or Furnishings), Furniture & Equipment

51 Droste, Magdalena; ‘Bauhaus - Updated Edition’ (Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin)

## **GENDERED FURNISHINGS: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WEAVING WORKSHOP**

When it came to the design of interiors, modernist ideas of *new living* promised a future of clean possibilities, yet these visions were never truly open-ended. Gender norms were reinforced in multiple ways. T'ai Smith's thorough exploration of the weaving workshop's history and context provides us with an elucidating lens through which we may glance further nuances of irony and subversion within this discourse.

More than any other discipline, the products of the weaving workshop were seen as subordinate, *feminized* and thus *lesser and* subservient. According to Smith, Adolf Loos's "Ornament and Crime," situates the applied arts and ornament in a homologous relationship to femininity and *degeneracy*. "[...] The initial *absence of 'professional' affiliation*, combined with a lack of a theoretical armature, made weaving a (feminine) distraction"<sup>52</sup>.

Now that *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or 'new functionalism' governed the proper use of textiles in architectural space, all textiles were forced to be subservient to architecture<sup>53</sup>. Architecture had transformed into a backdrop for modern man in motion. It no longer had any use for the comforts of plush domesticity and its *degenerate* soft furnishings:

The "cool persona" of *Neue Sachlichkeit* culture, found in the literature and social discourse of the era of mechanical reproduction, only ever "passes through." Space is not occupied but rather traversed, as "points of rest are provisional: the waiting room, foyer, railway compartment, subway, elevator, bus stop, reloading depot, planning office..... So just as "dwelling in the old sense," as Benjamin says, is replaced in the early twentieth century by an "architecture of transparency," and obsolete plush fabrics are replaced with hygienic, easily washable, and durable ones, so too the model of authorship and subjectivity—now the engineer or the modern consumer—is uprooted, roving from place to place.<sup>54</sup>

Smith reminds us that this *cool persona*, "although anonymous, in fact is decidedly *male*." "The cool persona— with its "metallized" body, measure of distance, and codes of conduct—is not possible for the other sex."<sup>55</sup>

Armed with written theories and manifestos about her craft, Gunta Stölzl, along with Anni Albers and the students of the weaving workshop, struggled continuously against these limitations. They managed to subvert the

<sup>52</sup> Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

<sup>53</sup> Smith, Same as above.

<sup>54</sup> Same as above.

<sup>55</sup> Same as above.

predicament, despite constant threat of being subsumed by other disciplines. They were nevertheless still forced to accept the general lack of due attribution of authorship. In 1922, the weaving workshop was in fact one of the sole successful sources of income for the Bauhaus—finally fulfilling the promise of revenues from industry that Gropius had been seeking, in order to achieve freedom for the school. But this did not suffice to raise the status of the weavers. According to Smith, it is telling that "despite (or because of) their economic success, the weavers continued to occupy a *low status* within the school's hierarchy of media."<sup>56</sup>

Textiles in general continued to occupy a lower rank, as qualities of *flexibility* and *adaptability* were associated with inferior feminine traits, and not yet seen as sources of value in design:

Flexible textiles in architecture would, perhaps, be too functional— far too lacking in a distinct form of their own. The language of functionality within the discourse of the *Neues Bauen* [New Living], no matter how diverse, could never quite accommodate the textile's profound adaptability.<sup>57</sup>

Awareness of gendered hierarchy in a school promoting '*objective principles of design*' sheds clear light on hidden value judgements that insidiously re-order the constellation of crafts. As the "*total work of art*" turned out to be architecture, it perpetuated gender bias within the field, assigning value to certain crafts while eliminating others.

Years later, the Italian collective Alchimia would subversively address this gendered system, proposing entirely alternative worlds of future *Bisexual Architecture*:

Farewell to masculine projects. The architecture of the future is bisexual. "Bisexual Architecture" challenges those typical traditional projects in the sphere and history of the architecture of various schemes, of the establishment, of control, integrity and power.

Impossibility in architecture is presented here in the form of a vocabulary which is contradictory both to the logical act of construction (a male attribute) and the biological act of construction (a female attribute).

Mendini predicts that there will be nothing monumental, savage or wildly exciting about the architecture of the future. Neither will it be either completely functional or aesthetic. Instead, it will be poetic, ambiguous, sexual and confusing. It will be androgynous..." from *Alchimia*, Kasuko Sato<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

<sup>57</sup> Smith, Same as above.

<sup>58</sup> Sato, Kazuko; 'Alchimia: Cocontemporary Italian Design'



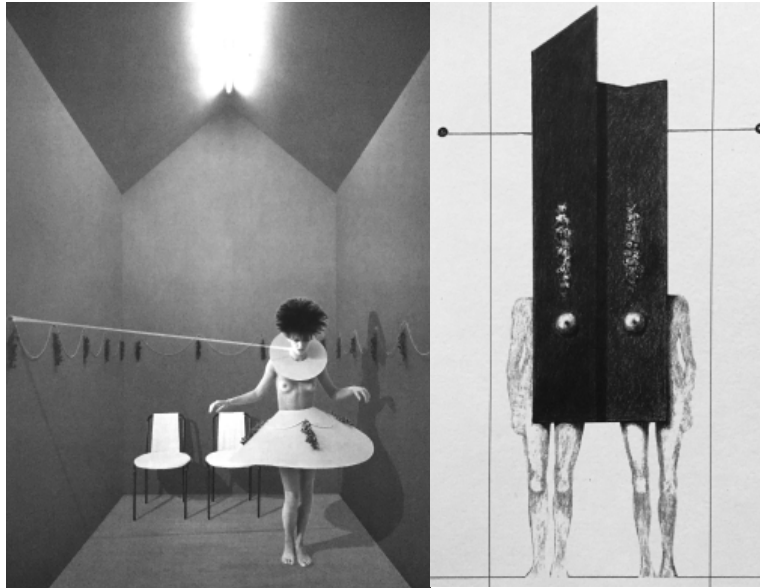


fig. 13, 'Bisexual Architecture', fig. 14 'Furniture as Clothing' <sup>59</sup>  
Alchimia project images (from Sato, see bibliography)

T'ai Smith points to the fact that the Bauhaus weavers had *no choice* but to continuously justify the existence of their workshop, in order to survive in each iteration of the shifting curriculum. Gunta Stolz's theoretical writings on weaving, in particular, managed to retain legitimacy and meaning for her medium. However, her discipline was forced to take on the discourse of another medium in order to retain a role within the demands of *progress*: first *painting*, then *architecture*.

"The fabric must meet the demands of mobile and economic living— able to be folded into a small space and put away in a drawer, used as a curtain or convertible wall divider. This would be important for the modern dwelling, whose requirements were determined by strict limitations on space" <sup>60</sup>

Smith points out the fact that the weavers subversively "did a fine job of beating Gropius and Behne at their own rhetorical game. In their (gender-neutral) discussion of functional purpose and architectural form, Gropius and Behne [had] provided no discussion of *adaptability* and *flexibility*, terms that the weavers would use to identify the specificity of textiles. With the weavers' description of a textile that *out-functions* cement-and-steel buildings, their theoretically defined "adaptable" object significantly challenged the formal parameters of functionalism."

<sup>59</sup> Sato, Kazuko; 'Alchimia: Coontemporary Italian Design'

<sup>60</sup> Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

"Textiles have a uniquely integrated relationship to architectural space, helping to define it subtly or more obliquely, but their functional applications are so variable that their identity as an object is also conditional. As things with relatively "mobile" and "adaptable" functional parameters, as the weavers' theories would express, fabrics are difficult to pin down. Thus as the language of architecture came to frame the weaving medium, fabrics were incorporated into the building as surfaces, and their sachlich (objective) identity became less clear. " <sup>61</sup>

I want to specifically examine this "*less clear*" adaptability; an *ambiguity* born of the need for survival. It is this quality which may constitute the ultimate strength to guide the way forward. The forced transfer of a medium's specific material properties (or specific discourse) grafted onto the language of another discipline; a medium's ability to become a carrier for some *other* craft; its material collapse in the encounter with unwanted rigidity; its openness to *customization* or *interchangeability*: all of these qualities will doubtless be of great use in our future journeys. <sup>62</sup>

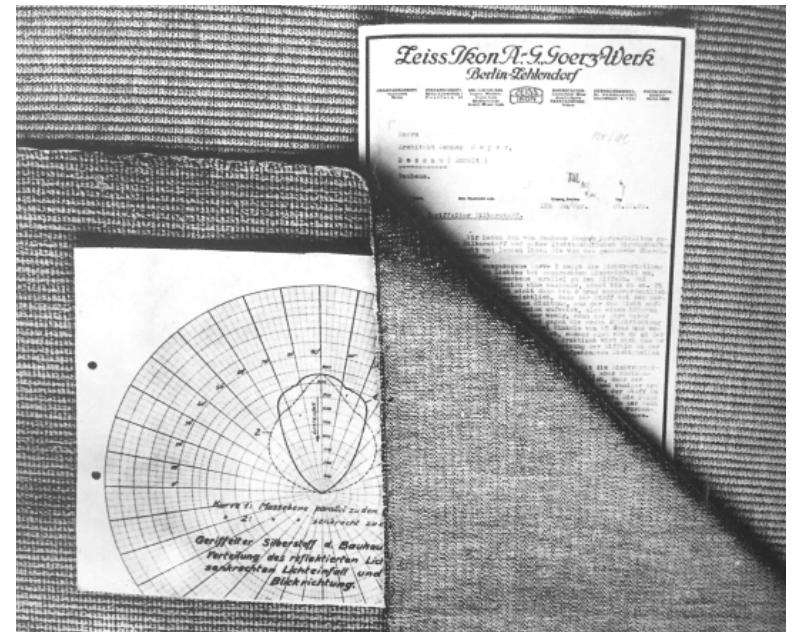


fig. 28: Anni Albers: Diploma fabric 1929/30 (from Bauhaus, by Droste, see bibl.)

<sup>61</sup> Smith, T'ai: 'Bauhaus Weaving Theory'

<sup>62</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin speaks of carrier bag as the generative device in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction"; in *Dancing At The Edge of the World*; Donna Haraway foregrounds this as a fundamental tool of feminist world-making in her latest work 'Making Kin' (see bibliography)

## A MANIFESTO FOR AMBIGUITY

"Ambiguity is an accuracy signal" Tim Morton<sup>63</sup>

What power exists in *objects* that relate to our body; objects that *complete* us.... our daily experience, our comfort, our *domestic* needs? To use is to need, to potentially abuse, to *mis-use*, to tear apart. What makes these things most *useful*, not only as *tools for living*, but as sensual effects, as aesthetic prostheses for deep introspection or soul-searching play?

Things used daily may well stand-in for us, but they may also suddenly become abject as they accumulate, carrying our hopes and our anxieties. What happens when our most familiar companions become alien, unrecognizable, mysterious, some-how *other*?

Like protesters at the gate, with the verve and playfulness of their predecessors responding to modernism, works in this show are purposely positioned to stand in the face of New Haven's own Modernist utopian experiment. New Haven, the *Model City*<sup>64</sup>, was harnessed by proponents of Modernism as a *prototype* itself, and this has left a tangible rift in the urban fabric.

Rather than directly examining the historical remains of past design interventions, we search for an alternate re-treading of local domestic territories, strewn with seemingly benign every-day objects. This may yet yield alternative points on the chain-link fence from material to building, city plan to infrastructure; all the way to the ecological scale.

Exploration of divergent scales forcibly overlaid playfully lends moribund ideologies with the necessary emotional angst, social or political asymmetry, zonal indeterminacy and utter confusion of the unresolved themes of the Bauhaus. In New Haven, and elsewhere, it is this productive ambiguity of things not belonging together -- like *apples and oranges* -- yet existing together as a collective entity, which we celebrate and seek to interrogate.

Can the negative fallout of our own *Model City* experiment be averted in the future, if we do not actively interrogate the limits of *scaling up* design principles?

One artist in the exhibition in particular, Meredith James, harnesses perspectival scale shifts in many of her works to provoke us on this topic.

In her world, skewed beyond the power of architectural gravity, a whole city might just reside inside an innocuous *Trash Can*<sup>65</sup>.

If the architectural elements of our urban habitats are our common scalar references, they are quickly jettisoned in the bin of our surprised laughter. This city feels more like home.

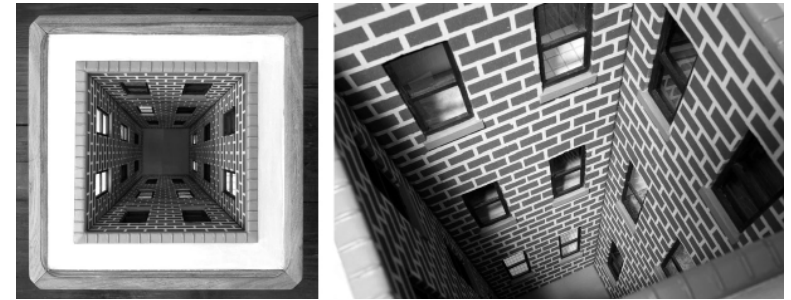


fig. 29,30 Meredith James, 'Trash Can' from artist's website

Contemporary philosopher and theorist Tim Morton underlines the fact that our manufactured idea of *home* (*oikos*) has turned into a oozing puddle of eroded and now porous boundaries. We are no longer able to contain, and much less keep out, the *hyper-scale* and looming threat of the ecological entities that enfold us.<sup>66</sup>

In dealing with the reality of ecological *mesh-like entities*, at once scale-less and out of time, we cannot claim to *make worlds* of designed unity with recognizable functions. These cannot invite intuitive or "natural" interaction<sup>67</sup>. We have to engage directly with the consequences of our controlling urges. No designed formal utopia of 'order, clarity, integrity, abstraction'<sup>68</sup> can cleanse us of the *precarity*<sup>69</sup> of our entanglement with ecology, with other species, with objects and with each other.

Our primary concern for the future has shifted towards this haunting toxicity, towards resurgence among ruins, under the specter of ecological collapse. Can a new understanding of material properties arise; structural, or utterly *other*? Can familiar forms and typologies be made relevant anew, in this unfamiliar predicament?

The dissolution of the "natural" gives us license to mine the already ruined, the extra-natural, the tangled mess of our surroundings, loaded with contaminated materials and corrupted ideals, thus reinstating some new forms of inner logic, crucial discourse, or alternate material integrity.

63 Timothy Morton talk atThe RSA, Streamed live on Jan 29, 2018 on the occasion of publication of his book 'Being Ecological' (see bibliography)

64 See separate section of the exhibition and writing at the end of this booklet for Jason Bischoff Wustle's extensive work on this topic.

65 See artist's website at <https://meredith-james.com/work>

66 Morton, Timothy; 'Hyperobject' (see bibliography)

67 Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt; 'The Mushroom at the End of the World' (see bibliography)

68 Albers, Anni; 'Anni Albers: On Weaving - Expanded Edition'

69 Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt; 'The Mushroom at the End of the World' (see bibliography)

## **PERSONAL ATTRACTION: ABOUT THE WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION**

Gropius, Breuer, Mies... the loud voices of the Bauhaus have had their due. Yet it is the hidden seeds of quieter voices that have carried us this far. Can there be a new type of manifesto? One that remains coded, shifty, utterly silent, or purposely time-released? The works in this exhibition do this work... they speak, quietly yet insidiously, and for themselves.

A fitting accompaniment, Chris Ruggiero's 'mix-tape' proposes a journey into the inner life of objects. A *play-list* is a form of aggregation of distinct parts fit for this disjointed storytelling. The progression shifts out of focus, as well-tread themes lodge just below our conscious attention. Insidious indeed, a twisted story emerges, built of everyday object as its main protagonists. It dissolves upon looping. *Macabre cabinets* taunt us, with the undeniable allure of monsters in closed coffins, only to become jukeboxes or sexy *leatherette-settees* as soon as we tune our attention away. "Look into your future...How long shall I live??.....Till Dawn" (from song *The Cabinet*)<sup>70</sup> In this cabinet of curiosities, are sex, humor, and death not also fundamental design principles?

Jeff Ostegren's cabinets of corporate archaeology unearth materials across two completely divergent scales--- the chemical and biological dimension, and that of politics and industry. Touching on toxicity, as well as commercial product development, his video "*Color is fundamentally involved in the making of culture from the human body*" conjures up fundamental design elements only to investigate the literal territory of their chemical makeup and their use-value within a very specific industry. By refusing to divorce abstract material properties, such as *color*, from the physical entanglement of a political and economic framework, Jeff reveals to us a different set of hidden values remapped onto the materials' sensory effects. The two divergent scales must somehow coexist in this sacred topology. This is not new, Merleau Ponty and phenomenologists were eloquent in pointing out that the same color on a different object would yield a widely different perception, despite having the same light wavelength. Fundamental qualities become infected by the objects to which they are attached.<sup>71</sup> To uncover the buried history of an industrial corporation such as Bayer, and expose its weaknesses, its mundane dreams and its aggressive motives as a form of alien religion, conjures up a new kind of sacred contamination.

<sup>70</sup> Excerpt from Chris Ruggiero's 'Mix-Tape' notes: "Das Kabinette "The Cabinet:" we learn of a mysterious wooden cabinet and a deranged doctor who takes a subject's body from her/ his control. " See link to Chris's full playlist for this exhibition on ArtSpace's website.

<sup>71</sup> Graham Harman discusses Merleau Ponty, in from "Intentional Objects for Non-Humans" (available online) and several of his public lectures.

Pastel foam expands out of utilitarian beige cabinets. These are *work-station systems*, full of artificial substance mired in chains of industrial production. Jeff's objects take on sets of values that do not operate on the human level. Their beauty arises out of unresolved toxic baggage, unfurling playfully beyond any natural perception.

Graham Anderson's work in the exhibition, another cabinet, alights disciplinary boundaries, thwarting us in our pursuit of the art object. A skilled cabinet-maker and furniture designer in addition to his formation as a painter, Anderson is no stranger to disciplinary skill-sets and medium specificity. Here, he presents both sets melded in one object. He does not, however, seek integration of his fields of expertise. Instead, he bravely puts forth a forced pairing of two specific categories meant to be kept apart, exposing in the process the alliances of objects in our narrow interiors. Domestic needs are an undeniable end, even for a painting. The abstracted space of the discipline does not shield its use as mere decoration in a collector's home. His cabinet performs the dual function of protection and obstruction. The psychological purity and abstract value of a painting are both put on display and kept at bay safe within. Without the discomfort of crouching, the well crafted cage of the painting allows the viewer only a partial glance—adding a dimensional layer and further frustrating the viewer's presence in the space of the gallery. *Which is the art object?* Purposely re-installed with different paintings inside each time, this paired-work muses on what happens to objects after a transfer of ownership. Even paintings may become used in unintended ways. With this holder and partial display pedestal, Anderson exerts control as he acknowledges his lack of agency. This is a house, for a painting. There is a drawer for your keys in there.

Hosted by a doll-house impersonating an *A/V cabinet*, Nina Yuen's video, trades elements with this mode of display. Her medium, video, always remains vulnerable to its context and display conditions. This sensitivity comes through as a challenge and a method for her practice. A private performer, Nina is an artist who records and edits herself, dealing with gender and the psychology of narcissism. The viewer is struck by a certain empathy in her work, yet Nina's awareness and control of this quality is the core of this power. She forces appropriated fragments of found culture or collective understanding into new personalized monologues and actions, both utterly vulnerable and empowering. Her willful misuse of texts, domestic objects, images and familiar concepts injects life into the most unlikely or mundane material. A stubborn belief in earnest self-play and performance through critical appropriation channels the utopian tension of "*a therapy that doesn't work*"<sup>72</sup> in which we decide to believe in anyways:

<sup>72</sup> Yuen, Nina. Nina Yuen: The Appropriated Self, The First Stop Podcast, 2018: Audio recording

"[the therapy] is not successful in any way...It's about its own futility and the reason why these non-logical, somewhat unfinished seeming, very knotted spaces full of gaps and grey area is the best way to deal with them—because these are not issues human beings will ever solve in any way." *Nina Yuen*

By twisting collective issues to fit her own very personal ends, she explores alienation. Yuen acknowledges the limitations of generalizing any collective, choosing instead to fragment and complicate through selfish and embodied introspection.

Through another introspective lens, Brian Galderisi addresses the undeniable seduction of surfaces as he makes use of everyday objects, domestic cast-aways, and their images for new kinds of empowerment. Willful, playful enactments of pleasure and nudity, sensual actions of bodies in unlikely public settings will require their own objects of desire...broken tools for *really* living. What remains of the furniture in Brian's "queer sanctuary" has a past and a private agenda, and it will not be used in the manner intended by its designer.

Robert Chase Heishman and Megan Schvaneveldt videos use moving household objects as stand-ins and protagonists in the theater of their video sets. These artists both have fully separate practices and live in different places, however they come together occasionally and purposefully to collaborate on these recorded performances; playful moving paintings that mis-use mundane and domestic objects. Their props are simple, and the transitions are physical, yet there is gorgeous lightness and unexpected magic in every instant. Like a changing underpainting study, in the hand of an undecided maker, these images interrogate the nature of studio practice, and the secret lives objects play in our imaginations and in correspondance with our close collaborators.

In "Sit", Juliana Cerceira Leite expresses the collapse of boundaries between humans and their useful tools, through a material mapping of movement in time. The encounter of a chair with this *other*, no single point, but instead an accretion of trails and tracks, recalls the repetitive labor of skilled workshop men and women around their apparatus and tools. We cannot help but meditate on the fact that our invisible actions and repetitive practices—small yet numerous gestures—reverberate in time and affect all around us, on multiple levels. Her "chair" is not a chair at all, and it must travel dragging the weight of its own floor along with it.

Bob Gregson, addressing the tension of the continuum between play, voyeurism, and surveillance, presents us with the only functional piece of furniture in the show. his rocking alcove, designed for turning one's back to a partner in conversation, is simultaneously playful and disconcerting. Gregson has a long history of wandering into private territory to seek out Modernist homes scattered across Connecticut. These taunting private

glass prisms hold our fascination as symbols of the architecture of the future. It is his narration of the particular stories of people within that tantalize us, inviting further desire for a future yet unfulfilled, blocked to all but the few hidden within. We personalize, we project what we think we see in the refractions; through personal meandering, we look for indirect ways to form community.

Crystal Heyden creates dream-like assemblages that stand as instructions for devices rooted in an imaginary 'out-there'. But this is a 4th nature<sup>73</sup>, a 4th dimension.<sup>74</sup> Heyden's imaginary contraptions exhibit a simultaneous awareness of structural demands and an ease to break free. Light, seemingly flimsy structures may form unlikely, trap-like, unsafe conditions out of combinations of innocuous objects. For Crystal, these are at times instruments for objective data gathering, measuring our changing landscape. She is no stranger to industrial workshops in her role as a metal fabricator contracted to a large defense client. A security clearance may bind her under a code of silence. The light expression of her works belies their potential uses. Blueprint-like, with careful scripted specifications, her drawings playfully hover over this conflict; they seem to plot escape routes. Her sculptures, composed intuitively of linear elements, materialize as three-dimensional drawings. While they are direct as drawings, they embrace a seeming lack of strength and impermanence; they have the nimble air of organic beings. Unlike Enzo Mari's exercises, Heyden's sculptures, in their multi-directional leanings, are clearly far from over-structured, or steady, in appearance. Yet they remain standing as they lean over and thus show us a way to step lightly, gently remaining unnoticed by greater powers. Above it all, she exhorts us in her manifesto: "*Don't be afraid to fuck up.*"

A skilled craftsman, Esteban Ramón Pérez's addresses upholstery, a family legacy, as the renewed seat of belonging and cultural connection for a hybrid racial background. Upholstery's subservient and anonymous position in the Bauhaus constellation of crafts is obliterated. These carefully seamed sculptural maps of skins are far from obedient to any architectural frame. Made of scraps and tossed remnants from his family's commercial workshop, they surpass the scale of architecture. They breathe; detach from the walls; define their own borders. The space of *sewing* and *piecing* fabric, a feminized discipline, expands its seams and opens up to allow for divergent roles, carrying into the folds the load of communities threaded together by inheritances. Hides again become skins, worn with the richness of crafts passed down.

73 Anna Tsing speaks extensively about the concept of first, second and third 'nature' in her work in relation to progress, industry and capitalism in "The Mushroom at the End of the World" (see bibliography) —these are the nuances of interest to the topics at hand.

74 See Crystal Heyden's 'manifesto' in exhibition which references the space of drawing as "a 4th dimension"

Bernadette Despujol reclaims the space of upholstery as well. Using actual furniture to give the Bauhaus its due, she takes control of Breuer's iconic chairs. She pushes their subordinated caning to the fore in vengeance, as feminine protruberances and incarnations are reinscribed onto the efficient design of the originals. As she grafts her own code into, and through, the caning, she remaps her personal agenda onto the subjugated *stuff* of feminized crafts. The appearance of an abundance of hair (itself used at times as stuffing for furniture, before the ideal of modernist *clean "New Living"*<sup>75</sup>) appears as a system of pattern following the upholstery's logic, taking on new power, inciting both fear and empathy. This upholstery is no longer quiet, pliant, or flexible. It refuses to perform a subordinate role within a greater symphony of parts.

Johanna Bresnick's sculptures, shaped of shipping boxes which her husband loads, "stuffed and bound, leaking and rattling"<sup>76</sup>, collect into a slouching city, within the *Model City* that was New Haven, its recollections of unattainable seminal architecture forms now brown, uneven, lumpen and softened. Stoic channels; an ode to modernist prisms forced backwards through the rough paper-craft of architectural model-making. A domestic conversation at cross-purposes, Johanna's *softer-city* trades scales with the logistics of safely invisible containers, exchanged by truck, out there in the night. They might be models of past ideals, or models of future ruins; their hopes of perfect creased corners and invisible walls abandoned along the way, only to be imbued with a much, much more powerful beauty of their own.

Kyle Kearson's care and directness with materials – here the craft of brick-making -- re-enacts collective racial and social traumas embedded in the city's roads and architecture. Bringing up the ghosts of slavery and the invisible hands who paved the grounds under our feet, he presents us with a *carpet* that addresses *Freedom*. A universal idea, charged or neutered by overuse and political appropriation, *Freedom* becomes again a new a tool of empowerment. Bricks can make foundations; bricks can be thrown through windows in protest.<sup>77</sup>

Anna Tsing, a social anthropologist and theorist, wrote about *Freedom* in her research about communities of mushroom pickers. In her deeply caring account of human (and non-human) narratives, she unearths why communities still rally around the idealized or misleading promise of "*Freedom*", though the concept means wildly different things to each member of varied groups:

Freedom/haunting: two sides of the same experience. Conjuring a future full of pasts, a ghost-ridden freedom is both a way to move on and a way to remember. In its fever, picking escapes the separation of persons and things so dear to industrial production.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Droste, Magdalena; 'Bauhaus - Updated Edition' (Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin)

<sup>76</sup> See Bresnick's manifesto for the exhibition.

<sup>77</sup> See Kearson's Manifesto for the exhibition.

<sup>78</sup> Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt; 'The Mushroom at the End of the World' (see bibliography)

In the shadow of misunderstandings and conflicting ideals, a collaborative assembles, each member of a marginalized group seeking meaning for his or her own elusive *freedom*. Those assembled trade and infect each other's opinions through their needs and remembrances of the past. This is Tsing's concept of the *latent commons*:

Without central planning, immigrants and refugees hold on to their best chances to make a living: their war experiences, languages, and cultures. They join American democracy through that single word, "freedom." [...] Assemblages, in their diversity, show us [...] the "latent commons," that is, entanglements that might be mobilized in common cause. Because collaboration is always with us. [...]

Kearson intentionally merges, in his words, "two contradictory concepts: the principle of freedom and the lack of authentic freedom". He invites the audience to collectively handle the bricks, and question for themselves the undeniable reality that "certain people have to fight for the right to exist, never mind be free."<sup>79</sup> To quote Tsing again:

Latent commons are not good for everyone. [...] The best we can do is to aim for "good-enough" worlds, where "good-enough" is always imperfect and under revision. Latent commons don't institutionalize well. [...] The latent commons moves in law's interstices; it is catalyzed by infraction, infection, inattention—and poaching. Latent commons cannot redeem us. Some radical thinkers hope that progress will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons. In contrast, the latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble.

Robert Narracci's *Chair#2* is a ghost. It is a talisman. Unearthed and rediscovered, it re-emerged from a Duggal scan of an old negative, from the data surface of an obsolete medium, saved-as an obsolete file format. In Narracci's words "the Bauhaus "radically changed the idea of chair from an overstuffed object into a thought exercise".<sup>80</sup> Originally a sculpture, *Chair#2* now hovers above and beyond that linear trajectory; like an explorer on a scientific mission lost beyond an event horizon, it has lingered too long in an unknown territory of archival technologies; and come back mysterious -- grainy, corrupted; haunting our impossible dreams of "erotic entanglement of human bodies, space and movement, time and memory."<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt; 'The Mushroom at the End of the World' (see bibliography)

<sup>80</sup> Same as above.

<sup>81</sup> Excerpt from Robert Narracci's 'Manifesto' for the exhibition.





(image from Rob Narracci's manifesto)

Jessi Reaves's sculptures are born of a forceful re-making following their own set of rules. The objects take on new personalities and solicit attention in any space they inhabit. Oozing anxiety, vaguely recognizable yet completely reoriented, benign yet specific objects assemble into undeniable presences. That some may still act as furniture is not a reassuring proposition; rather, it becomes a provocation for any passer-by. These attitudes will not be ignored. Jessi's work in this show, titled 'Night Cabinet (Little Miss Attitude)', is composed of remainders of cabinetry, fully obscured by a tightly fit black garment of silk and zippers. Expertly seamed to fit a difficult assembly of parts beneath, this *onesie* stretches and slacks in ways that reveal its construction and the unknown cavities between. While the fabric forms the mysterious outline of a shape-shifter, unknowable, described as 'punk', this is not a *loose-fit*. It is the very specificity of the components and their decided joinery, paired with the gaps just under the garment which yield the mystery of this misfit.

Like Walter Gropius or Gunta Stölzl's shifting manifestos for the Bauhaus<sup>82</sup>, this is shape-shifting born of necessity: the necessity to craft only the things needed, with materials close-at-hand, making the best of any personal situation. This *shape-shifter* is an opportunity for reinvention, even redemption.

For a month I was punk, I remembered all my drunk  
Younger days in a daze, I would spend my empty days  
For a week I was weak, I was humbled on my knees  
Pray to God: "Make it stop, Help me find some relief"  
For a year I was queer, I had conquered all my fears  
Not alone anymore, But I found it such a bore - Bradford Cox<sup>83</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See other sections of this text for expanded description of this

<sup>83</sup> Deerhunter, lyrics from song 'Punk (La Vie Antérieure)'

## IN CONCLUSION...

The artists in this exhibition explore rich possibilities by harnessing the mundane and, in the process, calling for the reconsideration of our domestic space. Their creations rethink bodies, unravel embedded utopias, and turn their noses at structures of power. They unlock hidden fuzzy zones in our mysterious interior landscapes. They break down boundaries, between our tidy furnishings and the viscous mess of our bodies, sparking extra-natural encounters arising from unavoidable entanglements with *everyday things*.

Apparitions of tired dualisms may rear up, only to resurface as malformed unities, no longer comprehensible to be co-opted by existing ideologies. These *things* just *refuse* to resolve. Pure-craft prototypes, broken tools for living, partial wholes....sticky, unfurling, perverse objects that offer to become potential carriers of our collective future. In the encounter with these works, one lingers with questions, but below the surface, there is laughter; there is hope.

Most people live in places more to be ignored than to live in, in places of transit, prisons, transitory exiles or cubic boxes with no memories, it becomes logical to think of magical objects, capable of creating personal and differentiated microcosms, objects with a poetic function, freedom-flags of joy, happy choices taking into account one's heart's desire...And at the same time to produce objects according to reason, objects designed to remain as examples of present day archaeology, objects which will last, hard and immobile, shining and simple, and at the same time complex and ambiguous, because built of the materials of memory.

Superstudio, June 1970



fig. 32: Quaderna table by SuperStudio, (from Zanotta)

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## EXHIBITION POSTER (FOLDED INSERT)

"Image of Chair #2"  
by Robert Narracci'

(Risograph, published by Aude Jomini for ArtSpace)

## **TOMORROW IS INEVITABLE: THE BAUHAUS AND NEW HAVEN**

*by Jason Bischoff-Wurstle*

In May 1919, the Bauhaus school opened in Weimar, Germany. Under the guidance of founding director Walter Gropius, the small institution became known for its guiding principle of combining art, craft and technology into an integrated form of architecture and design aimed at a better everyday life for all classes of people.

A generation later in New Haven, The first City Plan commission began with the consulting work of French-born Maurice E. H. Rotival in 1941. Rotival's plan was modernist in vision, inspired by Swiss architect Le Corbusier and his own service in World War I as a pilot which gave Rotival a special birds eye perspective in his planning views. The plan was a direct shift from the past, emphasizing high-speed travel by highways and air, and an orderly re-zoned adaptation of the 17th Century colonial city for its survival in the future. Everything in its right place versus the previous unstructured organic growth of city and infrastructure. As the Great Depression had worn on it was evident to leaders that not just New Haven but the United States as a whole would need to be reborn. Ultimately winning the cataclysmic World War II would bring that paradigm shift to our shores.

The Rotival plan would be reconstituted into the bedrock of New Haven's period of urban renewal from the 1950s to the 1970s. This period was marked not just by the election of a determined young mayor named Richard C. Lee, but the desire of Yale University to grow and expand its reach, physically and in academics. Their campus spread the across the city armed with deep pockets and the brightest young architectural talent in the United States. Working together and independently, the city and university enacted on a series of bold visions working to establish the 300 plus year old New Haven as a modern display of post war American culture.

Before the end of World War II, the New Haven Planning Commission released a self-published glossy booklet detailing the perceived needs and justification for radical urban planning and renewal. The city of the future would be best served by easy to access highways to ferry motorists in and out of the city core. The proposed arterial roads would form a ring around the ancient Nine Squares, and the campus of Yale University. The proposed highways predated Interstate 95 by 14 years.

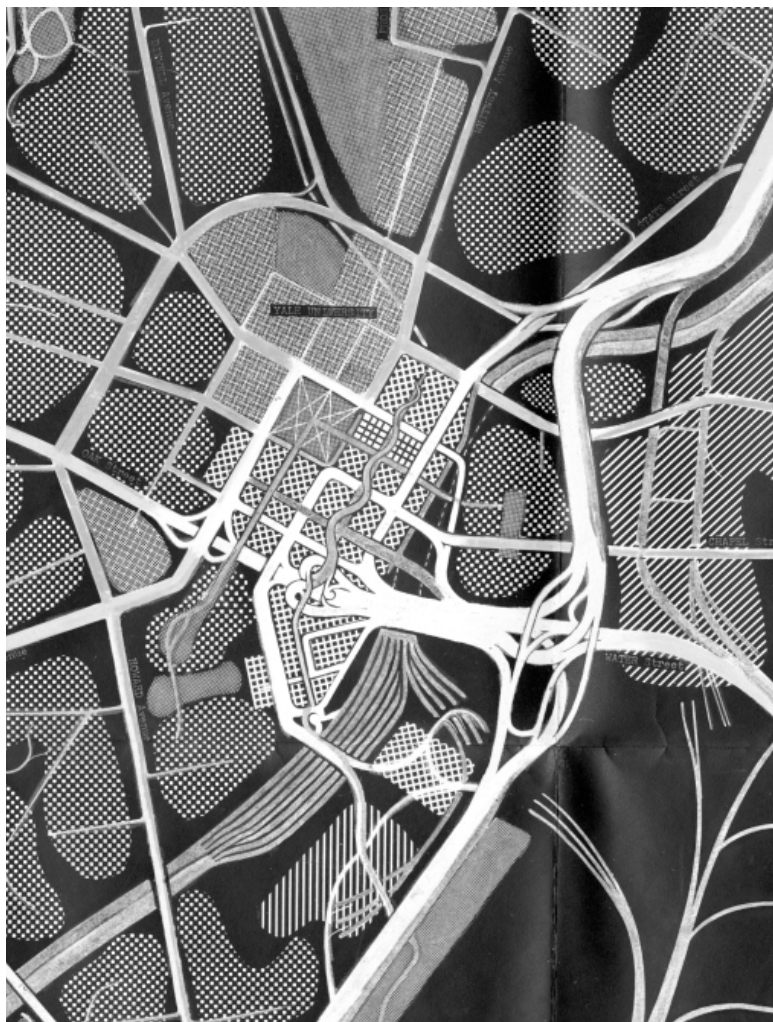
Fueled by the passage of the American Housing Act of 1949, which in a nutshell provided enormous federal funding for urban redevelopment and slum clearance (in New Haven's case was often combined with state and private interests as well) urban renewal moved ahead in full transformative force with the election of Mayor Lee in 1953. Lee understood with precision the nuances of procuring an unprecedented amount of funding (ultimately the most in the country) to set about reshaping the landscape and lives of citizens.

Lee was not alone in his vision of the future though. Across the New Haven Green, Yale President A. Whitney Griswold created a legacy of incredible Modernist patronage, recruiting THE premier architects of their time. Quoted as once saying, "I don't need a master plan I just need great architects," Griswold led an unpresented expansion of Yale's campus, sharply and often controversially breaking with the past. This was coupled with an embrace of the Avant Garde and new European masters in the schools of art, design, and urban planning.

The Post World War II American economy was increasingly a service industry that was no longer localized. New technologies, efficient transportation, the G.I. Bill and inexpensive mortgages were instrumental in suburban growth. New England cities suffered a loss at their cores of traditional specialized retail to sprawling box stores and strip malls with massive parking lots.

One hundred years later the residual spirit of the Bauhaus lives in the landscape of New Haven. During the period of urban renewal, former teachers, students and associates of the school had direct involvement in the redesign of the city. Their commitments to new modernism over the past brought their cutting edge experiments to the mainstream of the average New Haven resident.

Real time implementation rather than theory.  
For better or worse....



Rotival Plan hand colored "Organic Plan 1970" projection of movement and travel published in 1953, New Haven Short Approach Master Plan

## **ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION:**

***Graham Anderson***

***Johanna Bresnick***

***Bernadette Despujols,***

***Brian Galderisi***

***Bob Gregson***

***Crystal Heiden***

***Robert Chase Heishman and Megan Schvaneveldt***

***Meredith James***

***Kyle Kearson***

***Juliana Cerqueira Leite***

***Esteban Ramón Pérez***

***Robert Narracci***

***Jeff Ostergren***

***Jessi Reaves***

***Chris Ruggiero***

***Nina Yuen***

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From the curators:  
Sarah Fritchey, Aude Jomini and Jason Bischoff-Wurstle.  
New Haven, May 2019



artspace 𐀀