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ARTISTS ON POLITICS
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IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT AMERICA

$15.00

View of "Andrea Zittel," 2016. Floor, from left: *Linear Sequence #2*, 2016; *Linear Sequence #1*, 2016. Photo: Pierre Le Hors.

However, unlike the charmingly démodé *Whole Earth Catalog*–style arrangements from which they descend, which in their earliest manifestations featured bluntly utilitarian things like sinks and beds, these sleekly polished forms—powder-coated steel and aluminum, varnished wood, fiberglass, brass, and enamel, all in the service of hard edges and flat extensions—do not immediately announce their practical usefulness. Indeed, more than anything they suggest the spatial scenarios and furnishings of a certain species of relational aesthetics, in which the vocabulary of Minimalism provides the basis for a display language that draws equally on its conceptual groundings in spectatorial reorientation and its commercial deployment within the smartly restrained décor of late-modernist bureaucracy.

As if in answer to questions of day-to-day functionality—particularly in the case of the complex and rather opaque geometries of *Planar Configuration #1* and *#2*—Zittel also included large photographs of these arrangements in situ: two '40s-era cabins renovated by the artist, as well as the interior of her own home in Joshua Tree. (The desire to connect the gallery space with the domestic environment was also evident in the two large, hanging textiles that were included; woven in wool and featuring an understated desert palette, they would be at home in any tastefully decorated southwestern hacienda.) There has always been a pedagogical flavor to Zittel's project, its products figuring at once as objects and object lessons—in self-reliance, resourcefulness, sustainability, a certain modest mode of living. But because the dual character of these new works was so explicitly articulated—there supporting a laptop or a lamp; here isolated, off-limits—they didn't so much challenge the distinction between art and life as dilate it, suggesting that their supposed variability as objects may finally lie less in their native forms and concepts than in simple issues of context.

—Jeffrey Kastner

Pierre Paulin

GALERIE PERROTIN

If the most primordial purpose of a chair is to keep your butt off the ground, then Pierre Paulin's 1967 *Tongue* chair is an abject failure. This icon of 1960s design, which was recently on view among a handful of Paulin's most famous works at Galerie Perrotin, is something closer to a cushion than a proper seat; the undulating form suggested by its name leaves its user in a semi-reclined posture, with his or her posterior separated from the floor by only a few inches of foam padding.

This arrangement is the result of Paulin's singularly audacious decision to eliminate the legs, along with any visible structural frame, from his design. The legs of a chair are like the columns of a building—its most obviously tectonic elements, the parts that emphasize its status as a construction engineered to carry a load and resist the force of gravity. As such, legs are often given a place of honor in a chair's composition, their importance formally and visually exaggerated: Think of the prominent, angular steel blades of a Jean Prouvé chair (which echo the structural ribs of his prefab buildings) or the taut steel bars supporting Mies van der Rohe's famous Barcelona lounges (plated with the same polished chrome as the columns in his iconic Barcelona Pavilion). Paulin's *Tongue* follows an entirely different logic, more sculptural than architectonic. Using a novel technique of wrapping an internal metal frame with foam rubber and then skinning it with stretch fabric, he produced a chair that appeared not to be an assembly of parts but rather a single, unitary form.

And what a form it is. Paulin possessed an extraordinary sculptural sensibility, and this chair's sophisticated, multidirectional curvature still looks high-tech, almost futuristic, today, seeming to have more in common with the most complex forms generated by new computational design tools than the simple two-dimensional curves that occasionally enlivened modernist design. And if much iconic modern furniture—Prouvé's is perhaps the most obvious example—dramatized its technical dimensions as a response to the practical problem of holding up a body, Paulin's chair seems to have abandoned such matters entirely, existing in a world of pure form, unconstrained by considerations of weight or material.

Yet the *Tongue* chair was more than just a flight of formal fancy; by leaving the restrictions of gravity and construction behind, Paulin seems to have been seeking another kind of freedom, too. A chair that places the user's body on the ground is literally laid-back—his furniture establishes a casual disregard for hierarchical arrangements that is both formal and social. This ad hoc quality was even more explicit in two of the other pieces on view: *La Déclive*, 1966, a sort of a giant chaise lounge, big enough for multiple occupants, that can be reconfigured at any angle from flat to vertical by playing with its adjustable spine; and *Tapis-siège*, 1970, literally a "carpet-seat" formed from a padded surface, sections of which can be folded up or down to accommodate various seating or lounging arrangements. Produced in Paris in the years immediately preceding and following the events of May '68, these designs offer a powerful reminder that the physical position of our bodies is often inherently political, just as a shift in our position vis-à-vis the bodies of others can articulate not just new spatial relationships but new forms of collectivity.

There remains, of course, the question of whose body is allowed to climb onto Paulin's furniture. At Galerie Perrotin, the answer was no

View of "Pierre Paulin," 2016. Wall and floor: *Diwan* rug, 1992. On rug: *Tongue* chairs, 1967. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

one's, as, in a gallery context, the chairs were inevitably presented more as sculptures than functional objects (the sole exception was *La Déclive*, which supervised visitors could sit on after wrapping their shoes in protective booties). Eventually, if these pieces are used at all, it will be by someone who can pay dearly for the privilege, never mind the fact that Paulin had explicitly envisioned them as "anonymous" objects, designed to be cheap to produce and to be sold in huge numbers. Ironically, the current surge in demand for Paulin's furniture is driven largely by a celebration of the strikingly sculptural qualities of his work, even as this interest inevitably suppresses their equally powerful social dimensions: a sobering reminder that no matter how firmly a design object seeks to physically ground itself in our social and political reality, the economic framework we construct around it in turn can effortlessly lift it back up out of reach.

—*Julian Rose*

Stuart Davis

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

If awards were given for best wall text at an exhibition, this year's winner would be the placard inscribed for *Fin*, 1962–64, from "Stuart Davis: In Full Swing" at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. (The show, curated by Barbara Haskell and Harry Cooper, was co-organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, where it opens on November 20). As one read along, things swiftly took an unexpected turn: We learned that on June 23, 1964, Davis watched a foreign film that concluded with "*Fin*," the French equivalent to "The End," and decided to add the word to the painting he'd been working on before bed. He suffered a stroke later that night, dying on the way to the hospital. Aside from the strange coincidence of scripting one's own sign-off in a final piece, what's notable here is that Davis worked until the day he died. That the tape that he used to mask his canvas's edges is still present indicates the show's own looping circuit of energy—the end is unfinished—as much as the continuous processing of material and idea that made Davis among the most influential of American artists.

Stuart Davis, *Fin*, 1962–64, casein and masking tape on canvas, 58⅞ × 39¾".

Despite a great fondness for Paris, Davis was an American painter through and through, and he has long been heralded as the godfather of Pop art. In his early paintings in the 1920s, of newspaper headlines, Lucky Strike tobacco packs, labels from cigarette papers, and such objects as a bottle of Odol mouthwash, Davis made still lifes of everyday subject matter that marshaled advertising's graphic boldness and Cubism's sophisticated tweak of quotidian life. This interest was further polished in four canvases from his important "Egg Beater" series, 1927–28, given proper breathing room on their own wall, in which he constantly reworked a still life of an eggbeater, a rubber glove, and a fan that he'd nailed to his table into an almost architectural diorama of geometric, pastel-hued abstraction. As the exhibition title suggests, Davis was a huge fan of jazz music—he was famous for playing records at full volume in his studio—and, as has been often noted, his working style borrowed the improvisational line and rhythm of this American genre. He also embraced American politics, fighting for unionizing artists and contributing to many leftist publications. (He was a prolific and often witty writer.)

But what "In Full Swing" underscored more than anything else was the electricity running through these canvases. On a radio show in 1940, Davis commented, "An artist who lives in a world of the motion picture, electricity, and synthetic chemistry doesn't feel the same way about light and color as one who has not." Often he was quite literal about the rush and hum of the wired world in his incorporation of lightbulbs, telephone poles, appliances, and bright cityscapes, as suggested by *Arboretum by Flashbulb*, 1942. In *Electric Bulb*, 1924, we see why Philip Guston, who shared a studio for a time with the older artist, was such a fan: Davis makes the spherical glass jagged, its reflection into geometry, and its shadows into line.

The energy of that line is on vivid view in *Summer Landscape*, 1930, a harbor scene of Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Davis had a seasonal studio for more than ten years. He takes an American scene that we might associate more with the pathos of Edward Hopper or Marsden Hartley and plugs it in. The line becomes a dozen things at once in this painting: the electric squawk of a telephone wire, seagulls, waves, to list a few. (He adds a tree like a painter's palette with daubs of white, black, and blue for good measure.) His final study for *Radio City Music Hall Mural*, 1932, made me wonder why more people weren't getting Stuart Davis tattoos.

He was constantly rewiring his own work, too, recycling motifs and experimenting with seriality and repetition, a process that is well served by this exhibition's design. One of his last paintings from 1963–64, a collaged reworking of an earlier motif, has the wonderful title *Blips and Ifs*, which sounds like what it is: spots of light on a screen, jazz syncopation, weird experimentation—unflagging suppositions in Davis's dialogue with himself and, thankfully, the world.

—*Prudence Peiffer*

Caitlin Keogh

BORTOLAMI

Like that of many painters seeking to replicate the conditions of our hypernetworked moment—its recombinatory and citational visual culture, and the material disconnect between the depths of seemingly infinite information and the flat, hard reality of a screen—Caitlin Keogh's methodology is something of an ahistorical exquisite corpse. Her work brings to mind a multitude of art-historical references: She appears to pull her sharp but voluptuous line from Jean Cocteau's fashion illustrations from the 1930s; her dismembered figures from the dolls of Hans Bellmer and Cindy Sherman; and her flat, bold colors from the sign painting of James Rosenquist and John Baldessari. But Keogh seems to owe most to the Chicago Imagists—who brought awkward, seamy humor to a similar admixture of sign painting, commercial illustration, and surrealism—and in particular to painter Christina Ramberg. Like Ramberg, Keogh postures the severed hands and torsos of anonymous women against airless grounds. But Ramberg's women are sadomasochistic, complicit in their own fragmentation: bound and warped by textiles and boned corsets. Moreover, they are textured and fierce. Keogh's bodies, by contrast, seem helpless.

The result of Keogh's art-historical bricolage is like psychoanalytic clip art in a palette of vintage Hermès. It is unclear, at first, how, precisely, she is updating the concerns of Ramberg or Sherman, aside from reminding us that, yes, despite the internet's democratic promises,