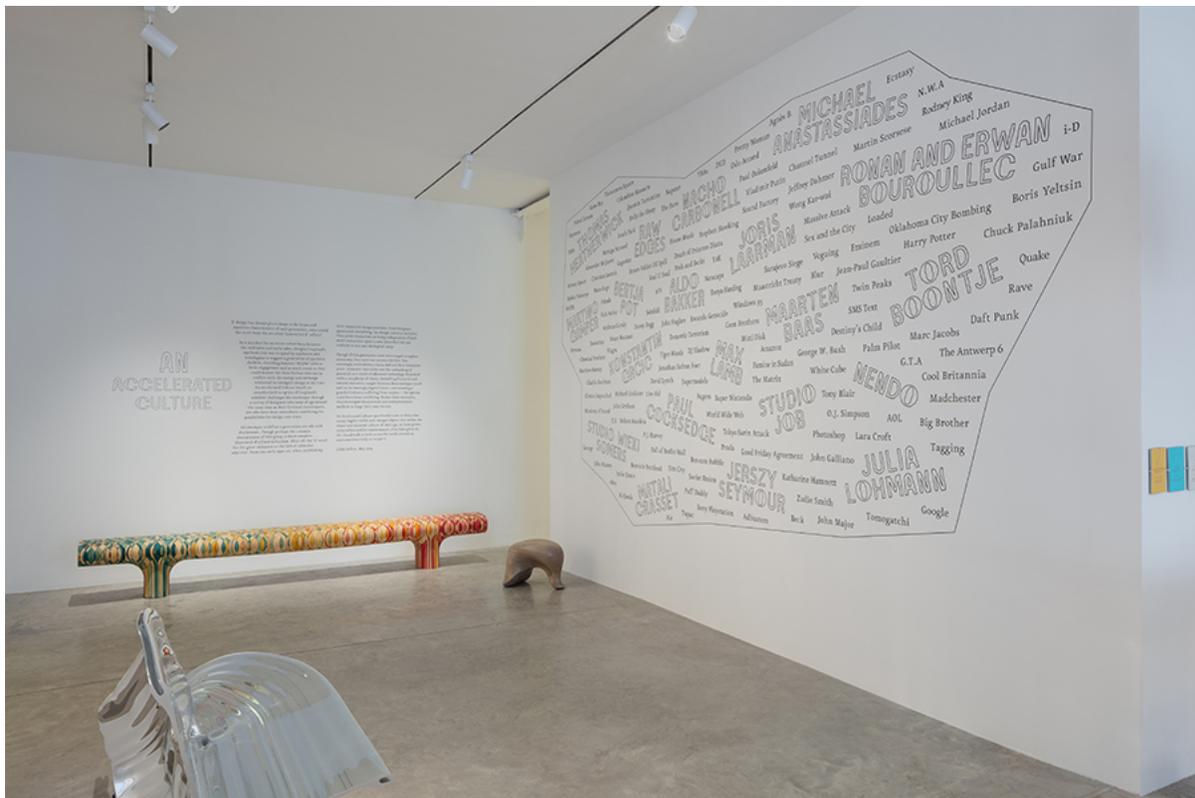


METROPOLIS

Capturing the Design Spirit of Gen X

The exhibition Generation X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture at Friedman Benda explores the shared ideas and narratives of Gen X designers, including Konstantin Grcic, Michael Anastassiades, Julia Lohmann, and more.

Jesse Dorris | May 9, 2019



Photography by Timothy Doyon, courtesy Friedman Benda

In his 1991 novel, *Generation X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture*, Douglas Coupland coined the phrase architectural indigestion, “the almost obsessive need to live in a ‘cool’ architectural environment.” It’s a kind of aesthetic gout, caused by consuming too much “simplistic pine furniture [and] matte black high-tech items” too quickly. Maybe the generation in question (those

Dorris, Jesse. “Capturing the Design Spirit Gen X,” *Metropolis*, May 9, 2019.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

born from around 1965 to 1980) wasn't a group of slackers as so often slandered. Maybe it was just trying to digest things.

The x in Gen X was an exhausted shrug from a cohort denied power by youth-obsessed Baby Boomers, who instead willed them a world of invasive technology, ecological collapse, and spectacular terrorism—and told them consumption was the answer. Hence the gout. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Twin Towers, the market recast that 'need' as self-care and self-expression, all put on maxed-out credit cards.

Curators Libby Sellers and Brent Dzekciorious see something else in that x, though: a blank canvas. They argue that this generation invented a new set of rules as a way to seize power. It didn't drop out as much as opt out of industries it felt were soulless, and then built its own. The result can be found in the pair's *An Accelerated Culture* survey at Friedman Benda in New York City, for which Sellers and Dzekciorious pulled together fairly recent but representative work from designers at each end of Gen X, from Konstantin Grcic's elegant accumulations of marble to Nacho Carbonell's nervous shelters.

Bespoke signage at the exhibition entrance by Studio Frith sets the scene. "We kept saying that things were 'in the ether'," Sellers says, and so the curators commissioned Studio Frith to design a non-chronological cloud of influences: ISDN, NAFTA, N.W.A., Y2K, a backdrop for the swarm of designers' names in a handcrafted typeface. "It really illustrates that awkward transition between analog and digital," she says. A playlist of artists like Goldie, Everything but the Girl, and Saint Etienne fills the gallery with the sound of similar transitions.

Dorris, Jesse. "Capturing the Design Spirit Gen X," *Metropolis*, May 9, 2019.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



Photography by Timothy Doyon, courtesy Friedman Benda

When entering, New Yorkers needn't linger by the gimmicky Thomas Heatherwick near the front; when it comes to macho, theatrical dominance of material, at least the Paul Cocksedge rolled steel sculpture has some poetry. More illuminating is Michael Anastassiades' floor lamp Shooting Star, which turns that "simplistic pine" into an uneasy meditation on stock prices; or his eerie collaboration with Dunne & Raby, in which a mushroom cloud from a 1957 Nevada Test Site becomes a huggable toy, perfect for exposure therapy to fears of mass destruction.

That piece is part of a series called Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times, which would make a terrific show subtitle. Work like Maarten Baas's charred-and-preserved Rietveld chairs and, especially, his melancholic masterpiece Real Time Sweepers' Clock are utterly fragile and anxious. Julia Lohmann nearly steals the show with her witty, heartbreaking Sigger Cow bench, which mummifies a bovine form of wood and foam within hide. "She set precedents that, 15 years later, people are just starting to take on board seriously, in terms of one's relationship to materials," says Sellers. "We get squeamish when we look at a slaughtered cow, but we're happy to sit on one."

But this isn't the louche punk of, say, Damien Hirst. Instead, it's a focus on the what of what was around them. It was a way to, as Sellers puts it, "take

Dorris, Jesse. "Capturing the Design Spirit Gen X," *Metropolis*, May 9, 2019.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

design to commerce” without simply feeding the beast. “There had been a quite rigid approach to design before them,” says Dzekciorius. “With modernism and minimalism, it had been very rational. This generation saw more opportunity to be expressive.”



Photography by Timothy Doyon, courtesy Friedman Benda

Public arts funding, Sellers says, not only enabled that generation of designers to study without the crushing black hole of debt, but provided money to set up their own studios right after graduation. “It accelerated their career paths,” she notes. “And access to computer-controlled production processes accelerated their design, so they could take fully-fledged prototypes to clients and brands.” Which meant they needn’t waste time waiting around: the work of Bertjan Pot, for example, focuses on the material (and commercial) possibilities he discovered in rope and yarn while fiddling during conference calls. They also didn’t waste time arguing about form-versus-function, choosing instead to ignore it. Matali Crasset’s totemic ‘metaforms’ are building blocks that charmingly build little besides good will—no small thing. Others, like Joris Laarman, ditched the debate entirely; the flamboyant good looks of his scrolling radiator actually increase its functionality. And Tord Boontje’s tribute to his daughter in the shape of a botanical table suggests that form could support both narrative and décor without devaluing either.

How deflating then, that Coupland’s “obsessive need” today props up a never-ending buffet of fast-furniture served at all-you-can-eat Instagram

Dorris, Jesse. “Capturing the Design Spirit Gen X,” *Metropolis*, May 9, 2019.

FRIEDMAN BENDA 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001

FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

accounts. And meanwhile, as Sellers notes, “The fairs are full of material studies around how designers are going to save the world,” Sellers says. “That’s a commendable place to be, and designers must have the chance to respond to social, political, and environmental issues. But it feels like that’s all they are allowed to do now.”

Design doesn’t have to be nutritious to be digestible. Yet we now expect young designers, instead of following their muse or intuition, to instead do the work of city planners and global governments. Coupland depicted a generation demobilized and demoralized by impossible expectations. Who’s the slacker now?

