

## Postmodernism. Style and Subversion 1970–1990

by Renata Pompas, Italy

The video of the seat in shape of a stylised throne, destroyed by fire, is "Lassù", the performance of Alessandro Mendini (1974) which symbolises the death of Modernism,. This powerful image welcomed the audience in the first room of the "Postmodernism. Style and subversion 1970-1990" exhibition", which had arrived at the MART Museum in Rovereto, (TN, Italy), from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This exhibition allows for some considerations upon our recent past, our present, our near future and their visual expressions.

The two curators– Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt – have set the period of their research between two main dates: the 70s which were the birth of many radical design experiences, and the 90s, which marked the birth of the World Wide Web. Having said so, they have no intention of saying that postmodernism ended in 1990. Instead, they state that the style survives in its EPIGONI, mainly outside Western countries, in the Gulf countries, Singapore, Beijing and Dubai.

But what is Postmodernism? Despite the fact that the two curators refuse to give a definition, I may attempt to summarise what emerges from the exhibition, the written works, replenished with references, documented and problematic.

Postmodernism is, or was, an international style which rose in opposition to the functionalist and optimistic ideas of the Modernism style. A style grounded on the abolition of all hierarchical distinctions between high and popular culture, on the mix of styles, genres and disciplinary borders, on the liberation from rules of good taste and functionality.

A movement came into existence out of an anti-dogmatic and interdisciplinary ideological boost, in order to arrive to a hedonistic and consumerist celebration of the pure style: meant without content. The exhibition is wide-ranging and sets the parable of Postmodernism in its historical context (between the 70s to 90s), displaying what was happening not only in architecture and design, but also in fashion, music, dance, media: hence, in movements that vary in ideology but similar in style.

Thus, for example, the mix up of the significant signs in design is compared with the birth of the transgender performers; the cut and paste and bricolage of architectural styles is associated with the hip-hop sampling and its commercialization

through MTV; the nihilism of designers such as Gaetano Pesce, Ron Arad and Tom Dixon, is drawn alongside the punk outfits of Vivienne Westwood and of Kei Kawakubo; the fascination for the surface, the exhibitionism and the kitsch in architecture is juxtaposed to the 'banality of the art' in pop art, as in the Jeff Koons' work.

The curators of the exhibition do not spare criticisms. Speaking of the "AT&T building" (1978) designed by the architect Philip Johnson - who went from being a seminal promoter of Modernism in the USA to become the conceiver of an historical skyscraper surmounted by a Chippendale- they stated: " At the age of 78, Johnson had shown us that it is never too late to sell oneself. A 'critical text' in the true meaning of the word, after too many years in which cultural production oscillated between a cheerful attitude and a slavish transcription of press releases.

This was a stimulating, fun, accurate and provocative trip between the several expressions of a style that has yet to be abandoned.



Lassù-Mendini- photo by Anna Colnaghi

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