

Dan Friedman: Radical Modernism by Dan Friedman with essays by Jeffrey Deitch, Steven Holt, and Alessandro Mendini. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994. 223 pages. 183 color plates, 24 black and white illustrations.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

When I present Dan Friedman's work in my design history survey, I introduce him as a Swiss revisionist. After all, he went to Basle, studied with Wolfgang Weingart, was married for a time to April Greiman (of "I feel typography" fame), and likes Helvetica. His new book, however, makes clear how limited that characterization is and how much more there is to Dan Friedman than his revision of Swiss modernism.

The cover is the first giveaway. The flush left Helvetica letters of the title hover uneasily above a photograph of Friedman from behind, his shaven head tilted back, its rotundity flanked by the tips of his ears and topped by the end of his nose. Dan Friedman is using the Russian Formalist poetic device called *ostranene* or "making strange." His head looks like a lemon with slits in its sides. The typography is day-glo orange—a color that must have Emil Ruder turning over in his grave. The brazen color is repeated on the spine where it serves as the ground for the august Yale University Press logo designed by Paul Rand. Clearly, Dan Friedman has something up his sleeve.

His book—a treasure trove of his graphic design, furniture, and art—documents his voyage of self-discovery. The author has traveled far from his Ulm/Basel days to the carnivalesque atmosphere of Lower Manhattan. The late Keith Haring was a good friend and collaborator as are and were various photographers, fashion designers, and artists. The book is filled with work that reflects this milieu. One of my favorite projects is Friedman's catalog for Haring's first exhibition at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in 1982. The magenta cover with a three-eyed Haring cartoon face on it leads into a series of spreads, variously printed on white or yellow stock, that vary text, full-page photographs of the artist, and reproductions of his work in a visually compelling sequence. The Haring catalog is modest, however, compared to other examples of Friedman's 'wild style,' which is best exemplified by his splendid multicolored screens whose angular shapes, mask-like surfaces, and extravagant ornaments evoke a strange mix of New York day-glo culture and African tribal art.

Friedman tells us more than once in this book how limiting it is to do only one thing. He notes that

Premature specialization in schools perpetuates a similar isolation in practice and works against the hybridization that is increasingly desirable in real professions.

His multifaceted career, however, is not without precedent in American design culture. Charles and Ray Eames moved from architecture to furniture and then to films and exhibitions, the office of Massimo and Lella Vignelli has combined a strong graphic design practice with projects for dramatic furniture and showrooms, and Milton Glaser, whose grounding is in illustration as well as graphic design, is known for some outstanding restaurant interiors and an entire theme park, Sesame Place.

The graphic designs of Massimo Vignelli and Glaser have maintained their hallmark signature over the years and their projects in other fields have also extended this easily recognizable identity. But Dan Friedman's path differs from his predecessors' because the changes he has made in his work are so extreme and appear to be closely bound up with deep changes in his own life. Friedman has refused to let a single aesthetic strategy dominate his work. Even his early typographic projects such as the logo and posters for the New Haven Dance Theater combine mystery, ambiguity, and playfulness with a strong sense of order. This commitment to structure is less obvious in later projects such as his "Mutant Chair," made from pieces found in the garbage, or the expressive cabinets and tables he designed for Neotu in Paris but nothing Friedman does ever lapses into visual chaos.

He calls his design philosophy, "radical modernism" which he defines as "a reaffirmation of the idealistic roots of our modernity, adjusted to include more of our diverse culture, history, research, and fantasy." His approach is eminently reasonable and certainly responds to the mix of tastes, styles, and ethnicities, that have asserted a presence within our emerging vision of global culture. It is only the old soldiers of the modern movement and their devotees who refuse to see this.

New York and Milan have provided fertile soil for Friedman's talents as a furniture designer to flower. Unlike his graphic design, which remains rooted in his German and Swiss training despite the intense and expressive quality that he now brings to it, his furniture quickly took its place in the tradition of Italian *radical design* created by such groups as Archizoom and Studio Alchymia. While Friedman has found manufacturers for some of his pieces in Italy and France, he pushes beyond the constraints of multiple production to produce many individual pieces as well. It is these pieces such as his "Primal Screen," (1984) made of fiberboard, raffia, and rope, that best show us the outer edge of Friedman's cultural sensibility. "Primal Screen," makes strong reference to African tribal rituals, as evidenced by the four separate pieces which suggest both headdresses and personified dancers with

raffia skirts. The forms are varied and the colors intense. The pattern, however, is strongly based on geometric shapes, the one vestige of Basel that this project retains. "Green Screen" (1984) combines a mask made of pieces of wood painted in green, red, yellow, and black, with an enlarged Smurf head. Despite the eclectic formal and semantic elements in these screens, Friedman remains a master of visual syntax based on a severe system of order.

As much as order is a part of his system, however, Friedman gets frustrated when there is too much of it. In his Citibank identity program, done while he was associated with Anspach Grossman Portugal Inc., he tried to push the expressive possibilities of an international bank's identity by providing opportunities to vary the scale, layouts, and colors of different projects. In one of the essays on Friedman in the book, Jeffrey Deitch, a former art curator at Citibank, notes that some of the older managers resisted Friedman's design and preferred to give out their old business cards instead. In an essay of his own, "Life, Style, and Advocacy," which was published in the *AIGA Journal*, Friedman lamented the subordination of modern design to corporate demands. He expressed his admiration for older designers like Armin Hoffman, Paul Rand, and George Nelson whom he saw as fusing their design practice with a personal lifestyle.

That goal has intensified for Friedman and accounts for his disillusion with corporate design. His own attempt to fuse art and life, however, does not at all follow the model of his mentors. Friedman's definition of "radical modernism" has led him to explore areas of culture that are far beyond the bounds his mentors found acceptable. This exploration is particularly refreshing in light of the hard line positions taken by Rand and Vignelli, two men who should be more open to the work of young practitioners. Rand argued in his last book, *Design, Form, and Chaos* that graphic design and politics are two separate spheres while Vignelli, who unabashedly asserts his leftist credentials rails ad infinitum against the sea of chaos and kitsch that surrounds his tight little island of purity. Neither position has proved attractive to younger designers who are immersed in political issues from AIDS to homelessness and are eager as well to engage more intensely with the rich and diverse visual milieu that is emerging from the closer contacts among the peoples of the world. At the same time, Friedman's quest to merge art and life must certainly fall on sympathetic ears among younger designers. We clearly live in a moment when the need for a strong personality to confront and assimilate the extremities of contemporary experience is essential.

Even a seasoned avant-garde designer like Alessandro Mendini, who for years helped to define the outer edges of Italian design culture while also editing some of the culture's most influential magazines such as *Domus*, *Casabella*, and *Modo*, has written enviously of Friedman's ability to function as "a spatial actor in the universe of himself." This remark was

prompted by Mendini's visit to Friedman's apartment on the 15th floor of a Greenwich Village high-rise, which Friedman has made into a visual laboratory that has changed many times since the early 80s. In this book, the apartment interior, seen in various incarnations, functions as a set of semaphores to mark Friedman's personal transformations. The intensity of this kaleidoscopic space inevitably recalls Kurt Schwitters' incredible *Merzbau*, the never-ending wooden sculpture that the German artist constructed over many years in a room of his house in Hanover. Like Friedman, Schwitters did many things. He wrote witty poems and essays, created marvelous collages out of junk found in trash bins (a source Friedman plunders for some of his furniture), polemicized about typography and advertising, and supported himself with a graphic design agency. Schwitters' activity as an advertising designer is usually subordinated by critics and art historians to his work as an artist as if art history can't manage someone who also sullies his hands with commercial projects. This is a situation that Dan Friedman seeks to avoid.

Unfortunately, the problem of categories is still with us and has not helped us to understand Dan Friedman in all his fullness. However, this problem seems to be more American than European, which may explain why Dan Friedman has been so successful as an artist abroad. His furniture and ceramics have been produced in limited editions by Neotu in France and Arredaesse and Alessi in Italy and he has a number of collectors of his one off pieces in both countries as well as in Japan.

Mendini speaks of Friedman's projects in all media as "figurations of his own philosophy." We see a particular example of this in the catalogs that Friedman has co-edited and designed for a series of exhibitions curated by Jeffrey Deitch. In these catalogs—*Artificial Nature*, *Cultural Geometry*, and *Post-Human*—Friedman explores new relations between pictures and texts to address complex and controversial issues of contemporary culture. He engages with images in a way that makes greater reference to the work of visual artists like Barbara Kruger and Christian Marclay than to the traditional conventions of image use in graphic design. In fact, Friedman's reading of images and his layouts based on it is decidedly postmodern, rather than radically modern, in its use of irony and in his intention to undermine visual conventions. Both *Artificial Nature* and *Post-Human* address the blurring of boundaries between the modernist categories of nature and artifice, one of the crucial themes of contemporary thought. Friedman seems to support the postmodern position that the distinctions between these boundaries have collapsed. Such a position differs from the dialectical tension between order and diversity on which he predicates his definition of "radical modernism." It would seem, despite the wondrous transformations that Friedman has made in his life and work, that dialectics—the mutual

engagement of different positions—is central to his philosophy rather than a notion of total fluidity. Just as he does not abandon his Swiss training when he does his "wild design," neither does he give himself up wantonly to the polymorphous culture of Lower Manhattan. Friedman remains a man of reason who opens himself up continually to new experiences but then processes them within a personality that strives for coherence and order.

We see this tendency in the organization of his book which is neatly divided into sections that account for his different interests. Chapters entitled "Mental Furniture," "Wild Design," and "Customized Eclecticism" are all separated from his discussions of typographic theory and what he calls "Reasonably Coherent Systems." This separation into categories is part of Friedman's dialectical nature which he continually seeks to unify through different combinations of reason and wildness.

The adventure that Friedman narrates for us in this book is well worth our attention. His ability to construct a life from the overwhelming sea of opportunities around him is inspiring and reinforces the old argument that a designer's most important asset is the ability to think independently and creatively. Friedman has broken all the molds and has shown us that it can be done with excitement and a *joie de vivre* that in no way minimize a serious engagement with social problems and issues. This is a book about optimism and inventiveness. It should encourage others to break down the separation of art and life as Friedman has done.

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