# POSTMODERNISM

## STYLE AND SUBVERSION, 1970–1990

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**24 SEPTEMBER 2011–**
**8 JANUARY 2012**

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**Slide One: Title-**What is Postmodernism?

The word is notoriously difficult to define, though students may have some sense of its meaning: ironic self-awareness; style that includes historical reference; a turn to decoration and ornament. For the purposes of the show at the V&A, we have interpreted the term quite literally. Postmodernism is simply what happened right after the 'death of modernism' – that is, when modernism lost its position as the dominant style in European and American visual culture. The exhibition therefore looks at the moment when certain ideals about architecture and design – represented by Bauhaus objects, International Style buildings, simple and functional clothing, and the clarity of modern graphics and typography – were overthrown in favour of newly permissive, liberated, and expressive tendencies. Because postmodernism comes from this moment of rupture, it feels explosive even thirty years later. It opened up a broad but uncertain terrain, and designers and artists associated with the term tended to be interested in ambiguity and mediation (the reproduction and even the selling of things, not just the making of them).

Alessandro Mendini, destruction of Lassú chair, 1974. Photographer unknown

**Slide Three: Alessandro Mendini, destruction of *Lassú* chair, 1974**

The first step in the formation of postmodernism was an attack on what had come before. This instinct is well represented by this project by the Italian radical design Alessandro Mendini. He was the editor of the design magazine Casabella at the time. To He created an 'ideal' and very simple chair, a pure form, and set it on top of a set of steps, like a throne. This was a symbol of the perfect object. He then brought it to a stone quarry and set it on fire, capturing the process with photographs. One of these images (on the right in the slide) was used on the cover of Casabella - this was art direction, as well as design. The title *Lassú* means 'up there' and refers to the chair going up in flames. This act of destruction announces a new moment in design: like a phoenix, something is being burned but something new may grow from the ashes.

Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in the Las Vegas desert, 1966

## Slide Five: Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi in the Las Vegas desert, 1966

The American architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi are a married couple, and also principal partners in an architecture firm now based in Philadelphia. In the late 1960s both were teaching at Yale University. They brought their students to Las Vegas, the great gambling capital. This city of neon signs and rampant consumerism suggested to them a new kind of architecture – very different from the rational, steel and glass, geometric style of modernism. The casinos in Vegas were designed to be seen from a car – architecture at 35 miles an hour – and exhibited what Venturi called 'messy vitality over obvious unity'. Scott Brown recalled the visit some years later: 'Dazed by the desert sun and dazzled by the signs, both loving and hating what we saw, we were both jolted clear out of our aesthetic skins.' Together with their students, they completed a book-length study entitled *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), which argued for the power of architecture as a means of communication. They were well aware that Las Vegas (and more generally, American highways lined with shopping malls and gas stations) could be seen as overwhelming, but they also observed that this seemed to be what people wanted. So they asked: 'Is not Main Street almost all right? Indeed, is the commercial strip of a Route 66 almost all right? What slight twist of context will make them all right?'

Charles Moore & Urban Innovations Group (with Perez Associates) Piazza d'Italia, 1975-77, New Orleans

**Slide Seven: Charles Moore & Urban Innovations Group (with Perez Associates) Piazza d'Italia, 1975-77, New Orleans**

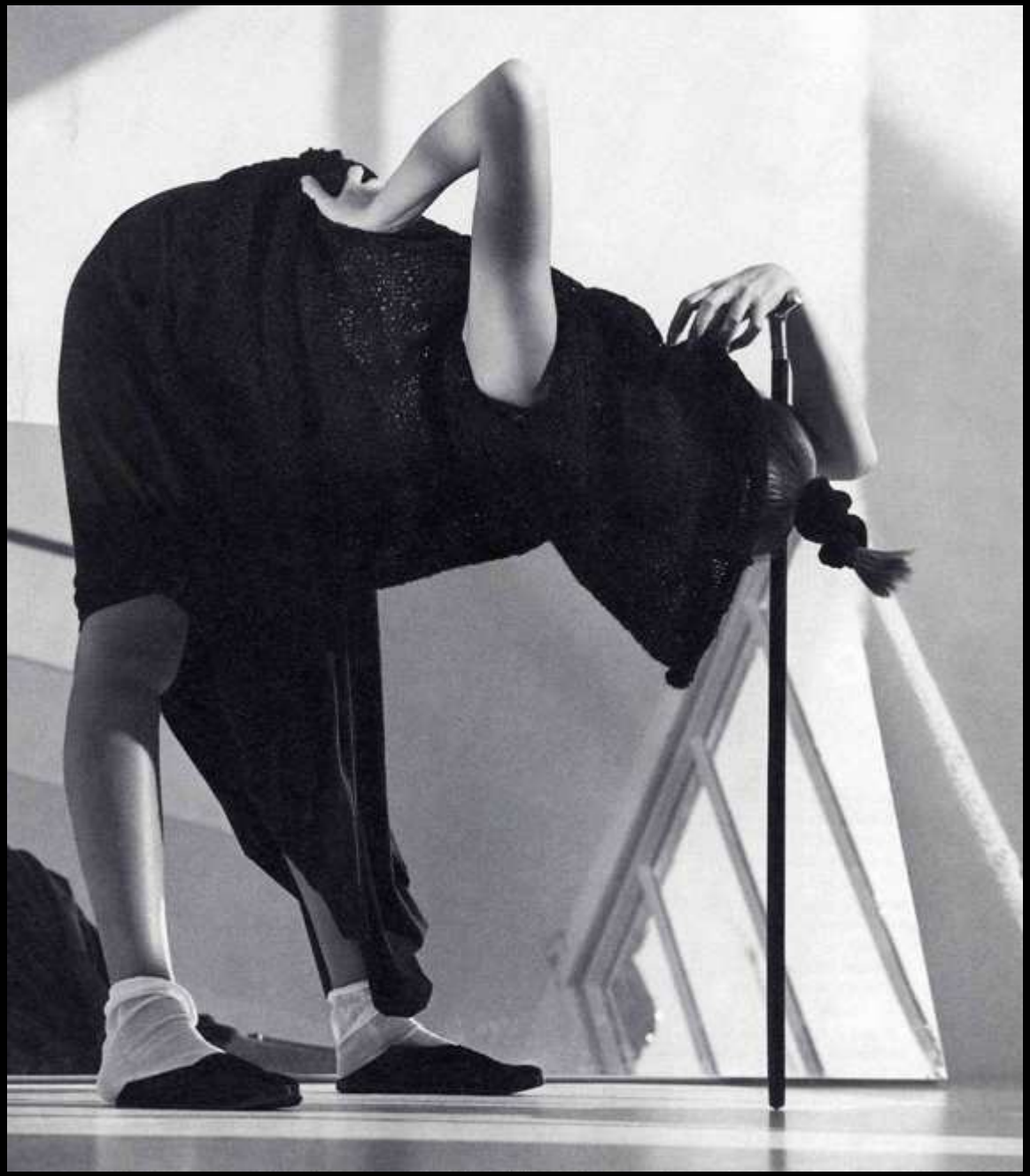
Once the attack on modernism was underway, the next logical question was: what to put in its place? Many architects answered this question not by looking to the future, but rather to everyday architecture of the present (like Venturi and Scott Brown) or else to the past. This was the strategy of Charles Moore, whose Piazza d'Italia is one of the key postmodern statements in architecture. It is more like a stage set than a building – an open public space lined with classically-styled fragments. It was designed to serve an Italian community living in New Orleans, which was part of the reason for the reference to the Roman past (there is also a fountain in the shape of a map of Italy). The design is also littered with inside jokes, such as water spouts in the shape of Moore's own face, and a newly designed order of columns (in addition to the classic Doric, Ionic and Corinthian) that Moore punningly called his 'Deli Order.' At night the space was lit by neon, like a Las Vegas casino. The Piazza d'Italia is a good example of the humour, colour, and personal eccentricity that typifies much postmodern design.

Hans Hollein façade, from the Strada Novissima, Venice Biennale 1980

## Slide Nine: Hans Hollein façade, from the Strada Novissima, Venice Biennale 1980

The term ‘postmodernism’ was first popularized by Charles Jencks in his 1977 book *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*. But it really became controversial in 1980, when the Venice Biennale included an exhibit entitled ‘The Presence of the Past’ in which various architects were asked to contribute the design of a façade. These were lined up, edge to edge, to make a sort of street (in fact it was called the Strada Novissima, or ‘extremely new street’). This unit of the façade was designed by the postmodern Austrian architect Hans Hollein. It is composed of six columns. The two on the side are the exiting columns that were already in the building, and between them is a kind of history of architecture in four parts. It begins at the left with a column covered in ivy – a reference to the Garden of Eden. Then there is a ruined column, representing antiquity (ancient Greece and Rome). Then a modern column in Art Deco style –based on a design by another Austrian, the early 20th century architect Adolf Loos, an unrealized proposal for the Chicago Tribune newspaper headquarters in Chicago. Finally there is another classical column, suggesting that the present involves a return to the past. In a little touch of Las Vegas, a  neon arc crowns the whole design. For the Postmodernism show, the V&A is reproducing this façade at full scale.

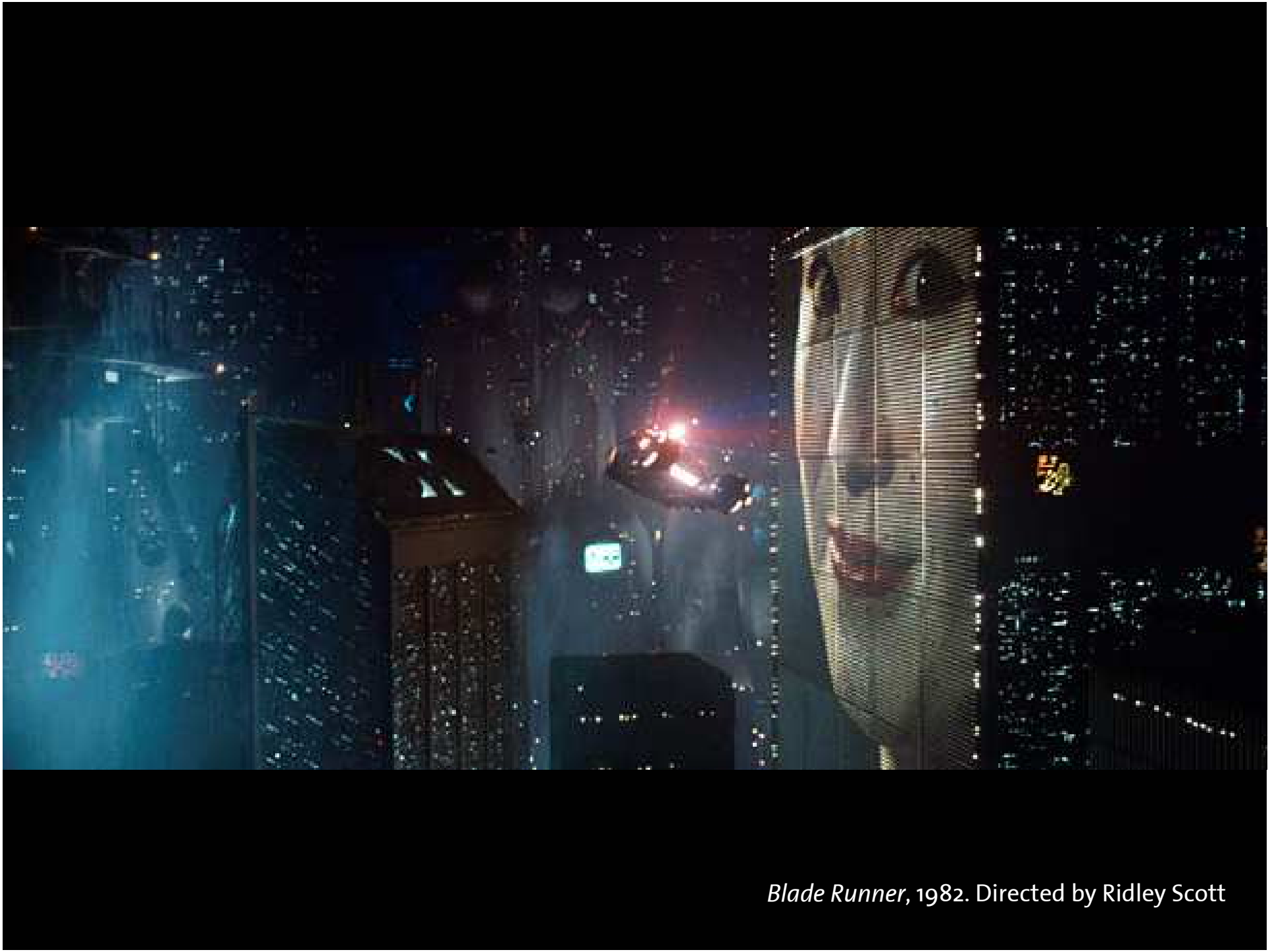
Ron Arad
Concrete Stereo, 1983



Ensemble by Comme Des Garçons, 1983

**Slide Eleven:  Ron Arad, Concrete Stereo, 1983**
**Slide Twelve: Ensemble by Comme Des Garçons, 1983**

Some of those who came of age during the destructive anti-modernism of the 1970s were inspired not by history, but the punk idea that ruined, smashed, and torn designs could be a new kind of fashion statement. Ron Arad, an Israel-born designer working in London, and Rei Kawakubo, a Japanese fashion designer working under the brand name Comme des Garçons, both epitomized this aesthetic but in very different ways. Arad's 'pre-ruined' *Concrete Stereo*, made of reinforced concrete and store-bought electronic components, looks like it came from an archaeological dig or science fiction film. It would have fit perfectly into a stylish loft conversion, which were popular living spaces in 1980s London. Kawakubo's black knitted garments, with their open holes and awkward shapes, were often described as 'post-human' fashion. They were aimed at a very self-conscious consumer in Tokyo (or Paris, New York and London) who might identify with the alienated, contorted pose assumed by the model in this 1983 promotional image.



*Blade Runner*, 1982. Directed by Ridley Scott

**Slide Fourteen: Blade Runner, 1982. Directed by Ridley Scott**

The ultimate postmodern film is Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, set in an imagined Los Angeles of 2019. This setting is a blend of Asian and Western styles, evoking the street markets of Hong Kong, the neon of Tokyo or Las Vegas, and the Art Deco skyscrapers of Manhattan and Chicago. The fashion styling is alternately 1940s and futuristic. Set designer Syd Mead summed it up: 'One of the principles behind designing this film is that it should be both forty years in the future and forty years in the past.' The storyline features Harrison Ford as a detective who hunts down wayward 'replicants,' androids with superhuman abilities. Some of these artificial humans do not know that they are synthetic – and are horrified to discover that their memories and personalities are implanted. The film uses this as a metaphor for the postmodern condition in general. The suggestion is that we are all 'manufactured' by the advertisements we see, the space of the cities we live in, the television shows we watch. Our very identities have become artificial.

Alessandro Mendini
*Proust* chair, 1978

**Slide Sixteen: Alessandro Mendini, Proust chair, 1978**

By the late 1970s, Mendini had moved on from the aggressive gestures we encountered earlier and had begun to explore a more expressive range of design. He founded a group called Studio Alchymia – the name is a reference to medieval alchemy and magic. This collective of designers produced strange and compelling objects, usually by transforming an existing object or combining several unrelated ideas into a single, surprising thing. The *Proust* chair of 1978 is a good example of this. Its title is taken from literature (the modernist novelist Marcel Proust); the form is adapted from eighteenth-century Baroque furniture (swollen to improbable proportions); and the decoration is swiped from a Pointillist painting by Paul Signac. This surface treatment was achieved through the ingenious means of projecting a slide of the painting onto the chair, and daubing paint onto its surface to match the dots.

Martine Bedin
(for Memphis)
*Super* lamp, 1981

Peter Shire
*Bel Air* chair, 1982

**Slide Eighteen: The Memphis Group, 1981**
**Slide Nineteen: Martie Bedin (for Memphis), *Super* lamp, 1981**
**Slide Twenty: Peter Shire, *Bel Air* chair, 1982**

The successor to Studio Alchymia was Memphis, a group led by Italian design Ettore Sottsass Jr (he can be seen in this image to the right – he's the one with a moustache). Memphis was the most influential postmodern design group, partly because so many people were involved but also because it became a media phenomenon when it was launched in Milan in September 1981. In addition to Sottsass, who was already 64 years old when the group was formed, there were many other Italian designers in the group (some of whom worked in his design office), as well as much younger figures like the French designer Martine Bedin, and international designers like Peter Shire, a Californian with a great sense of fun and colour. Bedin's *Super* lamp is a wonderful example of the wit and character of Memphis design – it is multicoloured and rolls around on wheels (she said she wanted a lamp that she could take around behind her, like a dog.) The exhibition features the original prototype for the lamp, recently acquired by the V&A from Bedin. It also includes one of Peter Shire's *Bel Air* chairs, which speaks of the California beach with its bright palette, shark-fin shaped back and beach ball foot. Memphis was featured in design magazines all over the world and its bright palette and use of plastic materials, patterns, and kitsch elements all were imitated widely.

Jean-Paul Goude
and Antonio Lopez,
maternity dress
for Grace Jones, 1979

David Byrne in the Big Suit, 1983

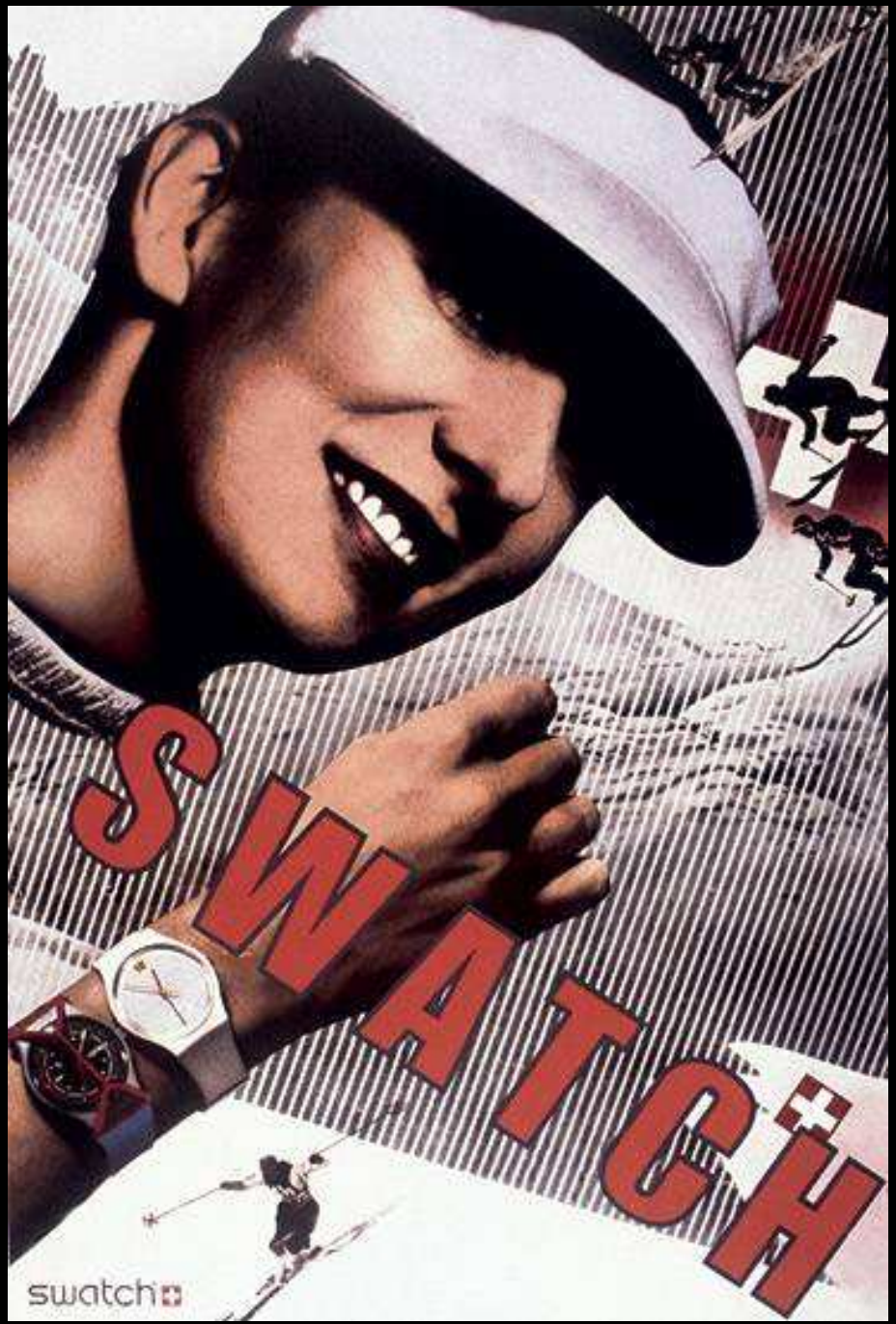
**Slide Twenty Two: Jean-Paul Goude and Antonio Lopez, maternity dress for Grace Jones, 1979**

**Slide Twenty Three: David Byrne in the Big Suit, 1983**

Though the ideas of postmodernism first emerged in architecture and design, the way that most of the public actually experienced them was through music and other forms of popular culture. The key messengers were celebrities such as Grace Jones and David Byrne – two very well-known pop performers who used exaggeration and self-referentiality to fashion their own public identities. In these images, Jones looks almost like a Memphis design – the dynamic shape was partly intended to hide her 'bump' because she was pregnant at the time – while Byrne wears an oversized suit (he wore it in the wonderful concert film *Stop Making Sense*, featuring his band the Talking Heads). Jones, Byrne and other 80s pop stars (including Madonna, Annie Lennox, Kraftwerk, Devo, and Boy George) took the ideas of postmodernism from the world of art and design and bringing it to a broad public, accompanied by an upbeat dance soundtrack.



Left, iD - The Arts Issue, No 28 August 1985
Right, Wet. The magazine of Gourmet Bathing – Religion Issue, No 20, September – October 1979




Paula Scher
Swatch watch USA poster, 1984

**Slide Twenty Five: Left – *i-D* No 28 August 1985 (designed by Terry Jones); Right - *Wet* No 20, September – October 1979 (designed by April Greiman and Jayme Odgers)**

**Slide Twenty Six: Paula Scher, Swatch watch USA poster, 1984**

Postmodern graphic design matched other disciplines at this time in using quotation, the combination of various clashing elements, colour and wit to get its message across. One of the most interesting things about these graphics is that they look like they were made using Photoshop or another digital design technique – but in fact, they were handmade using scissors and glue and then photographed to get a single reproducible image. These three examples show different contexts for postmodern graphic design. Published in London, *i-D* was a 'style bible' for club kids – rather like the *Face* – which documented the latest New Wave looks. *Wet* was published in Califiornia, and was subtitled 'The Magazine for Gourmet Bathers.' It was a counter-cultural publication which looked at the wild West Coast lifestyle of the time. The Swatch poster, by New York designer Paula Scher, is a good example of postmodernist appropriation. As you can see it quotes a much earlier design (1934) by the modernist Herbert Matter. The original is an advert for skiing holidays in Switzerland; Scher thought it would be appropriate and amusing to re-use the image to sell another prominent Swiss brand, Swatch, which sold postmodern-styled cheap watches mainly to a teenage market. This is a good example of the way that postmodern techniques – originally intended to be critical – began to be put in the service of companies in the 1980s.

*‘Money doesn’t mind if we say it is evil, it goes from strength to strength. It’s a fiction, an addiction, and a tacit conspiracy.’*

Martin Amis, 1984

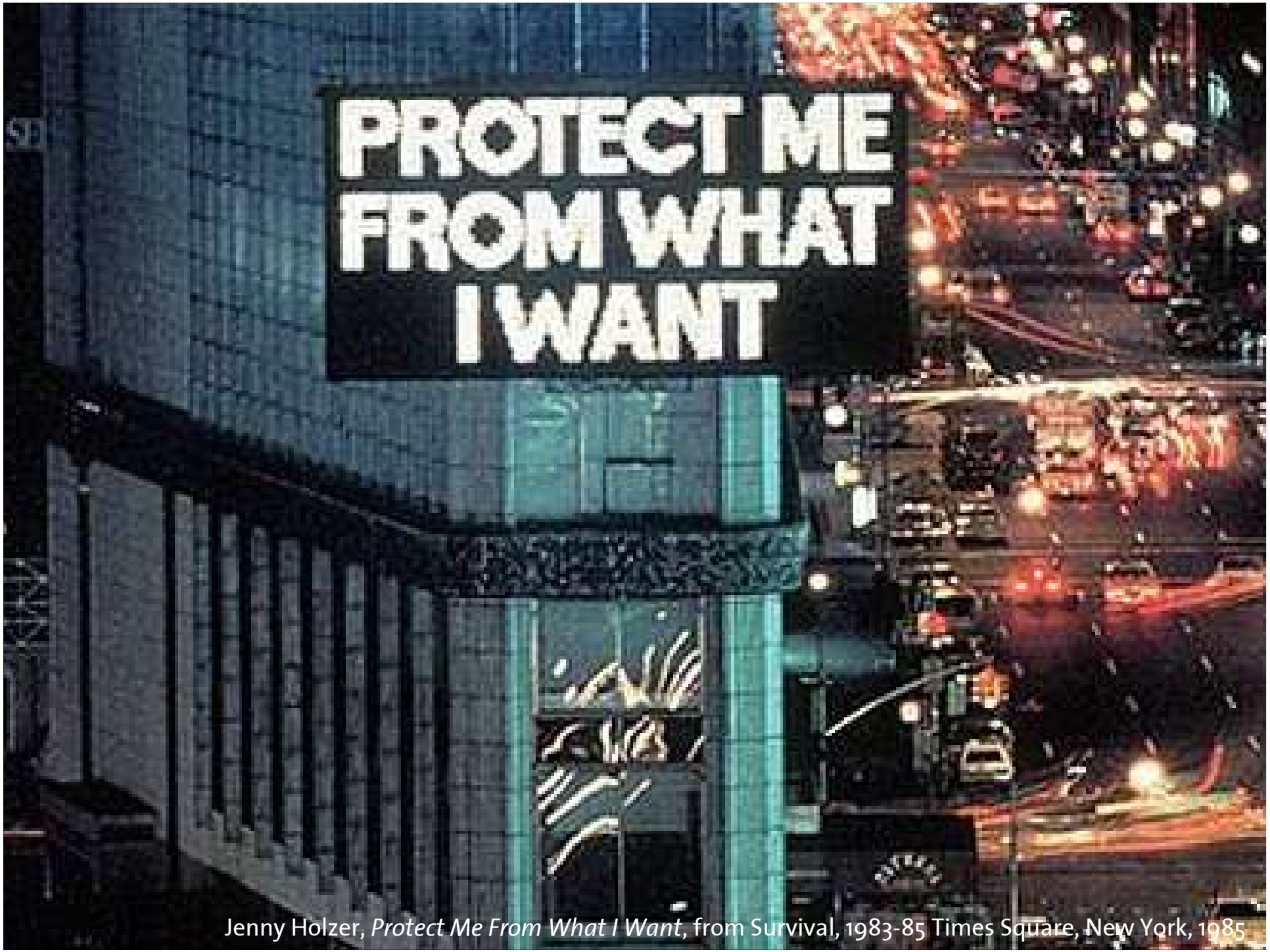
Andy Warhol
*Dollar sign*, 1981

Jeff Koons
*Louis XIV*, 1986

**Slide Twenty Eight: Martin Amis , Money , 1986**
**Slide Twenty Nine: Andy Warhol, Dollar *sign*, 1981**
**Slide Thirty: Jeff Koons, Louis XIV, 1986**

A key passage in Martin Amis's 1986 novel entitled *Money* reads: 'Money doesn't mind if we say it is evil, it goes from strength to strength. It's a fiction, an addiction, and a tacit conspiracy.' This idea of money as a living, sinister thing was also perfectly captured by certain fine artists of the 1980s, notably Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. Ever since the late 1960s Warhol had been a poster boy for postmodernism. He was obsessed with surface, and his paintings seemed like depictions of the pervasive, affectless flatness of the commodity sphere. One of his books was memorably titled *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*. Among those who took his superficiality seriously was Fredric Jameson, whose article 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984; expanded to book length in 1991) captured the condition of postmodernity better than any other text written at the time. Jameson was fascinated by Warhol's billboard-like images: they 'ought to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, one would certainly want to know why.' A similar thing could be said about Koons' stainless steel copy of a sculptural bust of Louis XIV, the 'Sun King' who ruled France in the 17th century. The original, by the Italian sculptor Bernini, is as confident a statement of power as one could find in art history. What was Koons doing by copying it in a 'fake' material (not silver, but a close visual approximation)? And why present his audience with the face of this authoritarian ruler – was it perhaps an odd kind of self portraiture, a tease about the power of art over its viewers? This combination of elusive meaning and visual glamour marks much of postmodernism's engagement with wealth and display in the 1980s.

Frank Schreiner (for Stiletto Studios) *Consumer's Rest* chair, 1990




Jenny Holzer, *Protect Me From What I Want*, from Survival, 1983-85 Times Square, New York, 1985

**Slide Thirty Two Frank Schreiner (for Stiletto Studios) Consumer's Rest chair, 1990**

**Slide Thirty Three: Jenny Holzer, Protect Me From What I Want, from Survival, 1983-85 Times Square, New York, 1985**

While Warhol and Koons seemed to delight in creating powerful images, other designers and artists were more explicitly critical of 1980s commodity culture. The German design collaborative Stiletto created the Consumer's Rest chair as a satire on the retail experience – it's made from a shopping trolley, and the implication is that it would be the perfect thing to sit in as you are wheeled down the aisle of your local supermarket. Jenny Holzer's billboard (installed for a few minutes on an advertising billboard in New York's Times Square) is more thoughtful, perhaps – it encourages you to think about your own desire for luxury and commercial goods.

Michael Graves, Portland Building, 1982, Portland Oregon

Michael Graves (for Moller International), Mickey Mouse Gourmet Collection, 1991

**Slide Thirty Five: Michael Graves, Portland Building, 1982**
**Slide Thirty Six: Michael Graves (for Moller International), Mickey Mouse Gourmet Collection, 1991**

No architect has been as consistently associated with postmodern style than the American Michael Graves. His Portland Building is a typical early example of his work. It looks back in history, not to classicism but rather to Art Deco. It is notable for the cartoon-like quality of the design – like four billboards joined at the corners – and the wit of the decorative scheme, which includes large areas of colour that imitate uplighting, swags of ribbon, and fluted columns, all paper-flat on the surface. The client for this vivid postmodern structure was, of all things, the public services department of the Portland city government. Though the budget was not very high, Graves' bold use of ornament made his name and he was able to win commissions to design for corporations such as Disney. His merchandised service for Moller, with its iconic mouse ears, exemplifies the way that postmodern humour became corporatized in the 1980s. Graves also designed whole buildings for the company, including the Swan and Dolphin hotels at Disney World in Florida.


Ai Weiwei, Han Dynasty Urn With Coca Cola Logo, 1994

## Slide Thirty Eight: Ai Weiwei, Han Dynasty Urn With Coca Cola Logo, 1994

The renowned Chinese sculptor Ai Weiwei is perhaps best known in London for his recent installation of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. Like many artists active today, he is a product of the postmodern moment, as can be seen in an early series of works, in which he painted ancient Chinese storage jars with a bold Coca-Cola logo. Equal parts decoration and defacement, this gesture was an early acknowledgement of global capitalism's entry into China. Given the historic value of the urn, it is an unusually shocking example of the postmodern technique of collaging together unlike elements to create a new, fragmentary object. To complement the Postmodernism exhibition, the V&A will hold a display entitled Ai Weiwei: Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000BCE-2010CE).

Robert Longo, *Untitled (Joe)*
from the *Men in the City* series, 1981

Still from music video for Bizarre Love Triangle
by New Order, 1986. Directed by Robert Longo

Slide Forty: Left - Robert Longo, *Untitled (Joe)* from the Men in the City series, 1981; Right - Stills from music video for Bizarre Love Triangle by New Order, 1986. Directed by Robert Longo

When choosing a director for their video *Bizarre Love Triangle* (1986), the pop band New Order turned to Robert Longo. At the time, Longo was one of the hottest contemporary artists in New York, best known for his series *Men in the City*. These life-sized, full-length figure studies were based on photographs in which men wearing suits were captured in the throes of a mysterious convulsion.[ Were they dancing? Had they been shot at close range (by a gun, as well as a camera)? It was impossible to tell, and of course that was the point. Like so many other postmoderists, his message was at once ambiguous and ecstatic. In the video that Longo made for New Order, this indeterminate motif is adapted into a key image. As we hear the lines 'Every time I see you falling', we see well-dressed bodies floating in an endless freefall against the backdrop of a blue sky. The sequence emblematizes the condition of the postmodern subject, adrift in frictionless space