

'Comfort in living is far more in the brains
than in the back.'

-Ellen H. Richards, *The Cost of Shelter*

COMFORT DISSIDENCE
Pol Esteve Castelló

The Spanish expression '*tirar la casa por la ventana*' means to overspend. Originally, it referred to the action of throwing unwanted furniture through the window after winning the lottery. The fortunate winners would dispose of old pieces in order to upgrade the house to their newly acquired status.

As the architectural historian Adrian Forty puts it, the home is the most potent factor of civilization¹. The home structures our daily lives, defines how we cohabit, and, ultimately, who we are. In 2016, the philosopher Paul B. Preciado inhabited a completely empty house in Athens. The home was scratched of any furniture. Such a lack of comfort offered him a space of liberation: 'It [was] an inaugural experience, an aesthetic experience: one body, one space'². At night, sleeping on the floor, his hips crushed against the wood. The feeling of his stiff body questioned his deepest self: 'Am I human or animal, from this century or any other one, do I exist or do I only have materiality in fiction'³. The removal of the bed, the sofa, the chairs, lamps, and tables 'suspended the techno-bourgeois conventions' of the home, he said. Body and space are confronted, and 'thus, face to face, the space and the body are not objects. Only social relations'⁴. At that moment, he was in a process of gender transition, from female to male, and saw the empty apartment as his own mutating body; it 'gives back to each gesture its inaugural sense, detains the time of repetition, suspends the coercive strength of the norm'⁵. The image described by Preciado of his transitioning body in an empty space becomes a powerful symbol of a struggling society. A society that inherited a constraining material culture built on puritan

ideologies and commercial interests. 'Ikea is for the art of inhabiting what heterosexual normativity is for the desiring body', as Preciado would say.⁶



Art Club 2000, *Untitled*
(*Conrans I*), 1992-93. C-print

In contraposition to the awakening hardness of the floor, the anesthetic softness of a cushioned interior. A picture from 1993 by the New York collective Art Club 2000 epitomizes, willingly or not, the space from which Preciado tries to deconstruct: a completely domesticated space emerging from a centuries-long process of furnishing that carried profound material and political consequences. A normative space resulting from a transnational project to spread comfort from the home to the city and from the West to the rest of the world. The photograph, *Untitled (Conran's I)*,⁷ shows seven members of the group lying around in a domestic interior. The shot, taken in a furniture shop, presents a comfortable version of Archizoom's No-Stop City. A series of domestic sets composed of sofas, armchairs, coffee tables, rugs, floor lamps, shelves, plants, and family portraits occupy a potentially infinite interior. The exterior is not visible. Only at the back does a window sieve the exterior light to maintain stable interior atmospheric conditions. Their bodies, dressed in casual clothes from an international retail company, are spread on the armchairs and sofas. Confined to their pieces of furniture, they tediously float in a sea of laminated wood. Their postures are relaxed; no activity is involved. They're in

proximity, yet their bodies don't touch. They don't seem capable of feeling anything. Their eyes are either closed or looking away, maybe searching to escape.

Through the historic transformation of the house, the evolution of society can be read. The photograph of Art Club 2000 synthesizes the hegemonic domestic landscape resulting from the technological developments and ideological entanglements of modern times. Since the eighteenth century, and in parallel with the birth of the nation-state, the Western house has evolved to make life more comfortable. While in the East comfort has largely been sought in internal equilibrium, in the West comfort is normally presented as an objective parameter that refers to a physical state of ease achieved in an unchallenging environment. In a comfortable space, the air, the lighting, the sound, the smell, and the solid elements provide bodily relaxation. In a comfortable space, activities can be developed with the minimum of physical effort. For this purpose, a series of technologies of comfort, elements from the scale of furniture to that of infrastructure, have been introduced to provide a regulable environment. Yet what at first sight seems like positive progress toward a life of ease was in fact an ideological and material revolution of perverse consequences. The expansion of the 'comfortable way of life' is a gendered history and a matter of class. A history of normativization. While in the Middle Ages people sat on the floor in a rather informal way, the development of modern and digital technologies of comfort has progressively indexed body gestures according to specific uses. The more comfortable the house and the city is, the more prescribed its inhabitants' behavior. Comfort is differentiated from wellbeing, happiness, and pleasure, as the latter may imply demanding and tiresome bodily activation. Comfort is translated into lessened sensual perception and imposes the equation: more ease = less feeling.

The architectural historian Sigfried Giedion claimed Rococo furniture 'created modern comfort'⁸. The Latin origins of the word 'comfort' originally meant 'to strengthen'. It's in the eighteenth century that it starts to be associated with 'convenience'. Parallel to this, after centuries of oblivion, ancient classic pieces of furniture were rediscovered. 'Typologically speaking, it was the return of a forgotten standard: To create a support for the body that would allow highly relaxed posture',⁹ says Giedion. Furniture was curved and modeled, with special care given to sensitive areas of the body. It sought 'brief transitory relaxation and gave a comfort quite different from the static repose of a bed'¹⁰. This renewed interest in external instruments for body relaxation soon met the technological race of the Industrial Revolution. In the nineteenth century, industrial production facilitated the introduction of movement. The reduced cost of a wide range of mechanical elements provided the most varied forms of adaptable surfaces, reclining and foldable furniture. The 'comfortables', a cushioned form of armchair, introduced the extensive use of springs in furniture to achieve a retractable contact surface. Moving mechanisms also brought the possibility of designing adaptable and adjustable furniture. From lounge to cradle, from bed to wardrobe, the objective of transformable furniture was to bring comfort to the smaller living spaces of the middle classes. From vertical to reclined, from high to low, adjustable furniture satisfied the full range of possible resting postures. Most standard furniture pieces that nowadays populate our everyday life were invented at this time.

The transition to the twentieth century meant the expansion of infrastructure for distributed forms of energy. In 1881, the first Exhibition of Electricity was celebrated in Paris, and, the year after, Thomas Edison built the first public electricity distribution system in London. Electricity deeply

transformed the household and the organization of labor. The electrons eliminated what differentiated the higher classes from the rest. Servants were to be substituted by mechanical appliances, and thus, supposedly, comfort was to spread to all of society. Electricity automated whatever was susceptible to mechanization, from architectural elements—like the first escalator installed on Coney Island in 1896—to smaller home appliances—toasters, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and an infinite variation of home appliances—started to be commercialized from 1910 onward. At this moment, America started to rival Europe in the production of new comfort technologies. According to the architecture critic Reyner Banham, this responded to ‘a shift of emphasis from exterior show in domestic architecture to interior comfort in domestic environment’¹¹. The objective was, in the words of art historian Alan Gowans, to produce ‘a perfectly sanitary, labour-saving house, one where the maximum comfort may be had with the minimum drudgery’¹². Yet the American lead, instead of bringing a progressive social transformation, brought back the most puritan of ideologies. The traditional family would become the locus of comfort. In fact, as the historian Adrian Forty shrewdly points out, the new electric appliances did not translate into less work, but into a displacement of work from servants to housewives. ‘The invention of the washing machine has meant more washing, of the vacuum cleaner more cleaning, of new fuels and cooking equipment, more courses and more elaborately cooked food’¹³. The electric-comfort revolution eliminated housework from the realm of the visible. The masculine half enjoyed a home where an army of machines commanded by a woman provided absolute comfort.

The domestic fight against dust, wrinkles, and rustic food identified new enemies after the Second World War. As the historian Beatriz Colomina wrote, propositions for the ‘modern

interior' shown at the 1964 New York World's Fair exemplified a new paradigm for Western housing as it responded to the tensions of the Cold War. At this point, the understanding of comfort expanded from the physical scale to the molecular one. The exhibition included 'The Underground Home'¹⁴, a model for a subterranean suburban house developed out of military nuclear shelters. The presentation brochure promoted the idea that delving 'a few feet underground can give man 'an island unto himself'; a place where he controls his own world—a world of total ease and comfort'¹⁵. In this buried home, almost all comfort parameters could be adjusted at will. The inhabitant had full control of climate—'create your own climate by 'dialing' temperature and humidity settings'¹⁶—atmosphere—'live in an air completely free of impurities'¹⁷—and sound—'all are gone with the turn of a switch'. Newly introduced technologies, like pressurizers and electrostatic precipitators, ensured absolute biological control in times of international instability. Moreover, the post-war collective paranoia was commercially very productive. The commodification of post-war fears transformed former military industries into homeware and automobile manufacturers, with the comfortable suburban lifestyle a consequence of such ideological and commercial endeavors.

The recent appearance of the digital, including the internet and its derived appliances, has added efficiency to the already existing systems. Digitalization entered the home and furthered the domestication of the city. Algorithmic logistics, from the internet of things to geolocated apps, optimize every aspect of our lives. Goods will be delivered to us, the temperature will adjust automatically to our metabolic needs, travel will always pass through the shortest route possible, and social interaction will happen from the sofa via a screen. The digital is here to prevent the expenditure of unnecessary energy and thus bring the techno-capitalist

project of comfort to its culmination. At present, the technologies of comfort have invaded all spaces, from the privacy of the house to the institutional. The architecture community has grown with the prescriptions of Ernst Neufert¹⁸, and the state has provided itself with legal structures to guarantee minimum standards of comfort. Building regulations prescribe formal and chemical requirements—from the dimensions of windows to the insulating properties of construction materials. But how did we get so far if we'd already been warned decades ago?

The philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse advised in 1967, 'I think we are faced with a novel situation in history, because today we have to be liberated from a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society.'¹⁹ Indeed, the convenience of techno-comfort is an addictive sedative, an all-encompassing venom that enchants our senses. As an antidote, Marcuse believed in the emancipatory role of body eroticism. Pleasure, often achieved through pain and sufferance, was seen as a liberating instrument against the constraints imposed by the material culture of comfort. Even earlier, in his 1932 novel *Brave New World*, the popular writer Aldous Huxley also warned us of comfort analgesia. Through the voice of one of his characters, he asked for action: 'But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin'²⁰. In other words, we don't want cushions; we want feelings. Otherwise, we risk living in what Giedion anticipated would become 'mechanized barbarism, the most repulsive barbarism of all'²².

The Spanish expression '*tener la cabeza bien amueblada*' literally means 'to have the head well furnished', but it actually means to have common sense, to be reasonable. The process of 'unfurnishing'—his own words—that Preciado's house and body went through in Athens was,

above all, a process of 'unfurnishing the head'. A new self-consciousness arises from the deconstruction of existing material relations. If for Preciado a 'lamp next to a bed is a marriage of convenience'²² and 'a table and a chair is a complementary couple that doesn't admit questions'²³, then a flat with one double room and two single rooms is a machine for the perpetuation of heterosexual reproduction, a constantly illuminated space is the medium of liberal economics, and a well-insulated wall is the fear of the other. In opposition, the empty room is a stage without a given plot, where one can create one's own character. There, discomfort becomes a weapon. Because an uncomfortable space can be a space of consciousness. An uncomfortable space can be a pleasurable space. An unstable chair is the perfect toy, steep stairs are an achievement, a cold flat is a reminder of our limits, and a too-small room is the place to become lovers. In front of the comfort regime, discomfort is dissidence.

1. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire. Design and Society since 1975*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1986, p. 207.

2. Paul B. Preciado, 'Casa Vacía', *El Estado Mental*. [online] (Last updated 9th of October 2016). Available at: <https://elestado mental.com/especiales/cambiar-de-voz/casa-vacia>.

3,4,5,6 Ibid.

7. Art Club 2000's photograph *Untitled (Conran's I)* was part of their first show *Commingle* in American Fine Arts, Co. in 1993. The show focused on the insignificance an ubiquity of the clothes store GAP.

8. Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History*, New York, The Norton Library, 1969, p. 317. Originally published in 1948.

9. Ibid., p. 310.

10. Ibid., p. 316.

11. Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-tempered Environment*, London, The Architectural Press, 1969, p. 95.

12. Alan Gowans, *Images of American Living*, New York, 1964, p. 407.

13. Forty, op. cit., p. 211.

14. The Underground Home was a product of the Underground World Home Corporation, based in New Jersey.

15. *The Undergorund Home New York World's Fair 1964-65* presentation brochure by Underground World Home Corporation, p. 2.

16, 17. Ibid.

18. *Architects Data*, a book published in 1936, by Ernst Neufert, provided spatial standards, with specific dimensions, to comfortably accommodate the body in space. Translated to 17 languages and re-edited in uncountable occasions it became a paradigm

of standardized architecture for minimum comfort.

19. Herbert Marcuse, 'Liberation from the Affluent Society', Lecture, 1967. Can be accessed: <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/>

20. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, 1932. Can be accessed: <https://www.huxley.net/bnw/seventeen.html>

21. *idieon*, op. cit., p. 715.

22. Preciado, op. Cit.

23. Ibid.

Exhibition works by

Andrea Branzi
Andrea Zittel
Adaptive Design Association
BLESS
Ettore Sottsass
Franz West
Gaetano Pesce
Guillermo Santomà
George Condo
Isamu Noguchi
John Chamberlain
Laila Gohar
Max Lamb
Marijn van der Poll
Michael Anastassiades
Nathalie du Pasquier
Nicola L
Peter Shire
Peter Halley
Richard Artschwager
Sam Stewart
Simone Fattal
Thaddeus Mosley
Takuro Kuwata
Nancy Grossman
Will Cotton
Wolfgang Tillmans



Sam Stewart and Laila Gohar

Baked by Millers & Makers

Loaf, 2020

Fiberboard, bread

40 x 38.5 x 42 in

101 x 97 x 106 cm

Edition of 5, 1 AP



Nicola L
Canapé Homme Geant,
c. 1970-1979
Gold vinyl
30 x 79 x 44 in
76 x 200 x 111 cm



BLESS
N°56 *Worker's Delight*,
Neckrestdesk, (*Special*
Neutra House edition), 2018
Wool, polyester,
goldpleated brass
51 x 22 x 35 in
129 x 55 x 88 cm



Simone Fattal
Standing Man, 2009
Glazed stoneware
15.25 x 3.25 x 2.5 in
38 x 8 x 6 cm
Woman Poet Sitting
by the Sea, 2004
Glazed stoneware
9.75 x 6.25 x 7.75 in
25 x 16 x 20 cm
Courtesy of the artist
and Kaufmann Repetto,
Milan/New York



Guillermo Santomà
Toilet sink, 2019
Porcelain plaster and lime
55.25 x 35.5 x 51.25 in
140 x 90 x 130 cm



George Condo
Smiling Young Woman, 2008
Oil on canvas
40 x 36 in
101 x 91 cm



Thaddeus Mosley
Untitled, 2018
Walnut
22 x 12 x 12 in
56 x 30 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist
and Karma, New York



Unknown
Ethiopian headrest
Wood
7 x 8 x 3.25 in
17 x 20 x 8 cm
Collection of Ford Weeeler



Michael Anastassiades
Biri Biri, 2014
Mouth blown opaline glass
11.75 x 6 x 6 in
30 x 15 x 15 cm
Edition of 8



Nancy Grossman
Snarl, 1988
Patent leather, wood,
paint, epoxy andz ippers
17.25 x 9 x 10.5 in
43 x 22 x 26 cm
Private collection, Courtesy
of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
LLC, New York



John Chamberlain

Couch, c. 1970

Polyurethane foam,
parachute cloth

36 x 72 x 72 in

91 x 182 x 182 cm



Marijn van der Poll

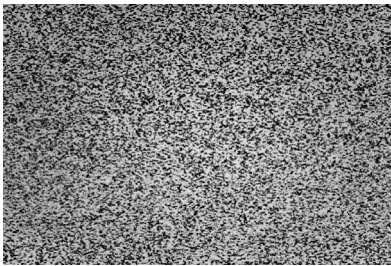
produced by Droog Design

Do Hit Chair, 2000

Stainless steel, hammer

39.5 x 27.5 x 29.5 in

100 x 70 x 75 cm



Nathalie du Pasquier

A Blanket for Two, 2019

Merino wool

70 x 80 in

177 x 203 cm

Wolfgang Tillmans

*Sendeschluss / End of
Broadcast III*, 2014

Inkjet print on paper
mounted on Dibond aluminum
in artist's frame

66.25 x 97.25 x 2.5 in

168 x 247 x 6 cm

Edition of 1, 1 AP

Courtesy of Gordon

Family Collection



Max Lamb

Tonalite Boulder

Chair #8, 2017

Raw and polished Tonalite
granite & bridle leather

22 x 22.8 x 25.6 in

56 x 58 x 65 cm

Courtesy of the artist and
Salon 94 Design, New York

Will Cotton

Cotton Candy Cloud Study

(Mona), 2004

Oil on linen

20 x 24 in

51 x 61 cm



Andrea Branzi

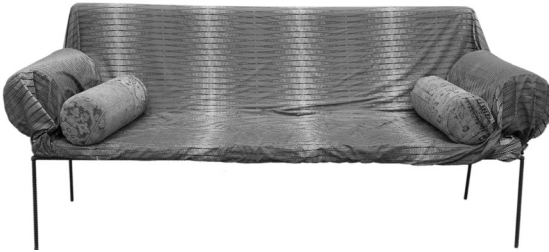
Produced by Studio Alchimia

Pigiama Armchair, bau. haus
collection I, 1979

Printed cotton

42 x 27 x 26 in

107 x 67 x 66 cm



Franz West

Divan, 2003

Metal, foam, linen, carpet, and fabric cover

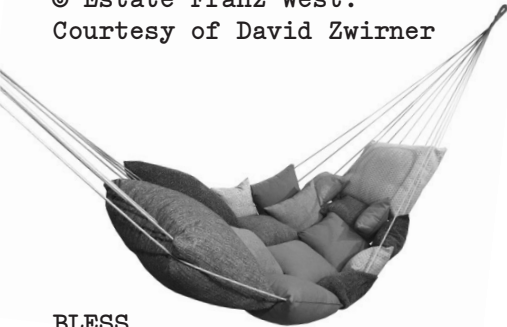
39 x 89 x 32 1/2 in

99 x 226 x 82 cm

Private collection © Archiv Franz West

© Estate Franz West.

Courtesy of David Zwirner



BLESS

*Nº28 Climate confusion
assistance, Pillow hammock*,
2005

Wool, polyester and cotton

16 x 240 x 48 in

40 x 609 x 122 cm

Gaetano Pesce

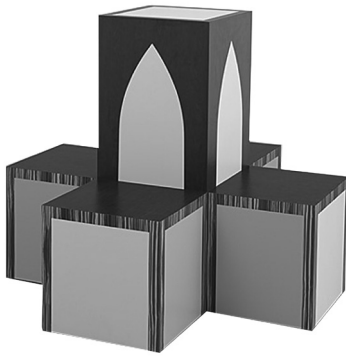
Produced by Bracciodiferro

Golgotha Chair, 1972

Dacron filled and resin soaked
fiberglass cloth

39.5 x 19 x 26 in

100 x 48 x 66 cm



Peter Shire

Oh My Cats, 2007

Steel and enamel

47 x 18 x 39 in

119 x 45 x 99 cm

Richard Artschwager

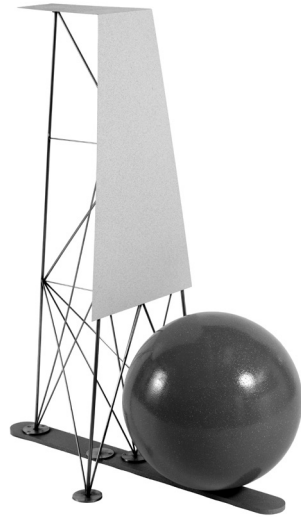
Chair 4, 2011

Laminate on wood

49.5 x 56 x 19.5 in

125 x 142 x 49 cm

Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery



Adaptive Design Association

Rocking Chair

Veltex, repurposed yoga mat,
Cardboard, wood, craft paper,
paint

Painted by Tayla Feldman

26 x 19 x 21.5 in

66 x 49 x 54 cm

Andrea Zittel

Linear Sequence #2, 2016

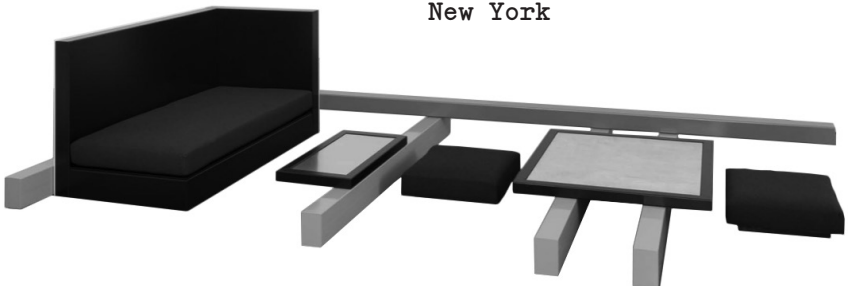
Powder-coated steel and
aluminum, tung oiled

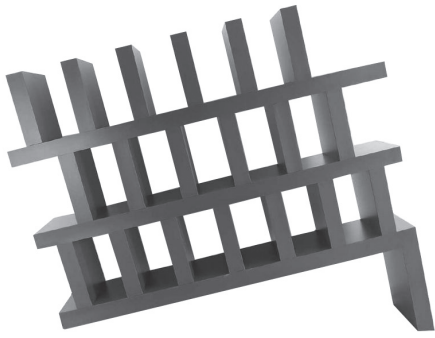
Birdseye Maple Plywood,
brass, 3 cushions

32.5 x 168 x 72 in

82 x 426 x 182 cm

© Andrea Zittel, Courtesy
Regen Projects, Los Angeles
and Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York





Peter Halley

Another Time, 2001

Acrylic, fluorescent acrylic,
pearlescent acrylic,
and Roll-a-Text on canvas

66 x 48.75 in

167 x 124 cm

Ettore Sottsass

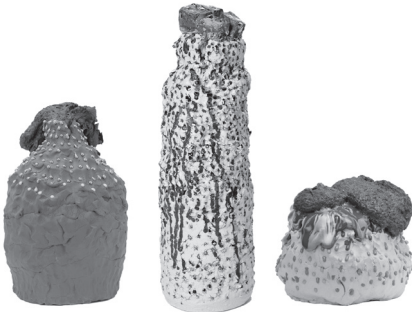
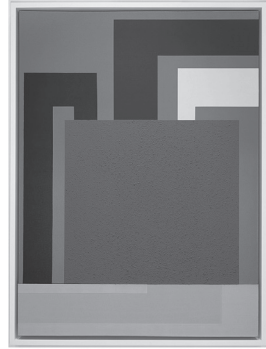
Bookshelf No. 18, 1994

Wood with blue
Formica laminate

65 x 78.75 x 15.75 in

165 x 200 x 40 cm

Edition of 6



Takuro Kuwata

Untitled, 2014

Porcelain

11.5 x 13 x 13 in

29 x 33 x 33 cm

Untitled, 2015

Porcelain, stone

17.5 x 11 x 11 in

44.5 x 28 x 28 cm

Yellow-slipped

Ishihaze pole, 2012

Porcelain, stone

27.25 x 9 x 9 in

69 x 23 x 23 cm

Courtesy of the artist and
Salon 94 Design, New York



Isamu Noguchi

Pierced Seat, 1982-1983

Hot-dipped galvanized steel

31 x 14 x 16 in

78 x 35 x 40 cm

Pierced Table, 1982-1983

Hot-dipped galvanized steel

21.75 x 36 x 37 in

55 x 91 x 94 cm

Courtesy of The Isamu Noguchi
Foundation and Garden Museum,
New York

C O M F O R T

A group exhibition
curated by Omar Sosa

January 9 - February 15, 2020

Friedman Benda
515 W 26 ST NY NY 10001
212 239 8700
friedmanbenda.com

© Text Pol Esteve Castellò
© Photographs courtesy
of the artists and
photographers
Proofreading Madeleine Willis

Omar Sosa would like
to thank the following people
for their help and support:
Andrew Zuckerman, Ford
Wheeler, Hans Christian Pham,
Ignacio Mattos, Jim Walrod,
Jeanne Greenberg, Kate Vogel,
Laila Gohar, Lelia Arruda,
Nacho Alegre, Marco Velardi,
Millers & Makers, Marc Benda,
Nicole Bergen, Ruth Lande
Shuman (Publicolor.org),
Sam Stewart, all artists and
galleries that kindly loaned
the work that made this show
possible.

Omar Sosa is a creative
director, editor and
publisher. In 2008, he co-
founded the seminal interiors
publication *Apartamento*,
defined by *The New York Times*
as 'The burgeoning indie
design movement's official
international look book.'
Besides his work in
Apartamento, Omar Sosa works
as a consultant for a number
of design, Fashion, lifestyle
and real state companies under
Apartamento's design agency
Apartamento Studios.

Pol Esteve Castelló is an
architect, researcher and
teacher. He is affiliated to
the Architectural Association
School of Architecture and
The Bartlett (UCL). In 2016
he founded the architecture
studio *GOIG* based in London
and Barcelona. His research
addresses the relationship
between body, space and
technology in queer spatial
practices.

'But I don't want comfort, I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.'

-Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

