





From dissected Eames chairs, to orchards made from neon tubes, **Martin Boyce** explores the dreamworld of Modernism *by Martin Herbert*

# All That is Solid

*For 1959 Capital Avenue*  
2002  
Powder coated steel,  
glass, brass, acrylic paint,  
Trevira CS fabric  
Installation view at  
Museum für Moderne  
Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

In 1925 four trees appeared in the Paris garden of Robert Mallet-Stevens. The brainchildren of brothers from Nantes, Joël and Jan Martel, they were five metres high, made of cement, executed in a Cubist style of jutting schematic planes, and destroyed some time after the closure of the International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts, for which they had been commissioned. Gone, they clung on a while as an eroding memory, a weak signal whose firmest physical form was a grainy black and white photograph. This was chanced upon, a few years ago, in an academic study of French Modernist gardens by the Scottish artist Martin Boyce. Here the trees saw a conduit, a way back.

It was to be a messy and protracted return: from the trees' point of view, it is still far from ideal. At first Boyce merely thought about them, at one point fashioning an icy orchard from neon tubes instead. Presently he remade in steel the quadrilateral planes that the Martels had used to imply branches and foliage, and suspended these discrete fragments in the form of a mobile. Objects are often metaphorical in Boyce's work, and

he has used this form before to suggest historical mobility. In making *Mobile (Hold Me Up and Stop Me from Falling)* (2003), for instance, he dismembered some battered Charles and Ray Eames chairs, stringing them up to resemble an Alexander Calder: classic Modernist design violently reconfigured, something to be displayed but not used. A copy of the original photograph of the Martels' trees sat beside this newest mobile in the gallery, measuring a gulf.

And then wholeness of sorts, and even a suggestion of agency. The Cubist trees were remade, approximately life-size, via grey-painted wood panels attached to fixed pillars, for Boyce's 2006 exhibition 'Electric Trees and Telephone Booth Conversations' (in the Frac des Pays de Loire at Carquefou, near Nantes). This still felt like limbo, but now the trees used their unitary form to possess other forms. As folded sheets of steel, the Martels' signature quadrilaterals shielded a handful of white fluorescent tubes which dimly illuminated the darkened, cavernous space (and were suspended from cables strung between the trees, which turned the latter,

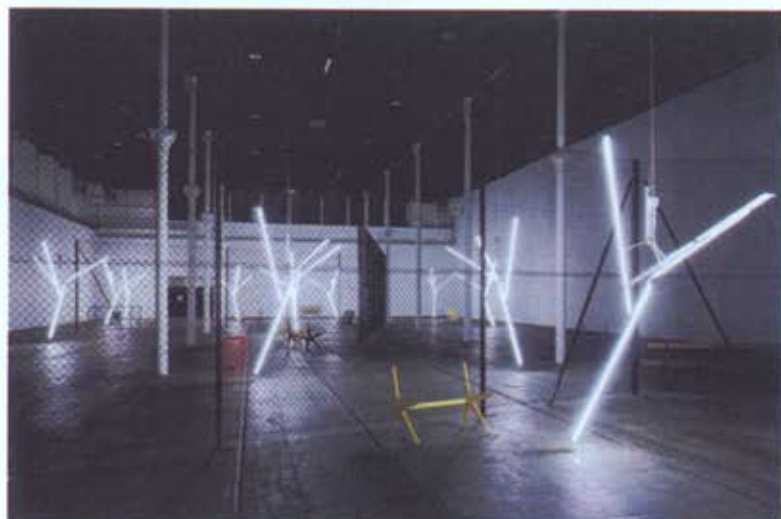
vaguely humiliatingly, into telegraph poles). Four-sided figures also formed the hoods of a trio of ersatz phone booths wherein more cold light nestled. Black and white graffiti on these current public landmarks asserted that they, too, are unwanted and teeter on obsolescence. The most badly attacked was freestanding and faced away from the viewer on entry, as if hanging its head in shame.

Finally, the roving quadrilateral infested the black-painted metal grid of a freestanding room-divider with an inset door. Marooned in the centre of the gallery, the structure was too small to have any function beyond signalling its own inconsequence. It was a symbolic filter, suggesting passage from one state to another. To the trees it suggested an outlet. Recently, Boyce made a similar-looking piece (though brightly coloured and more closely resembling a kids' climbing frame) in which the quads are turning themselves into an inchoate calligraphy, one whose interpenetration of language and design is weirdly reminiscent of Art Deco. These detached limbs are trying to speak.

If Boyce were ventriloquizing with them (and let's drop the gothic shtick at this point; obviously he is), he probably wouldn't have them mourn the loss of Modernism. His work is acceptingly transformative. In it things constantly turn into other things, propelled by dream logic, in an evocation of a modernity – and, beyond that, an earth-bound reality – where nothing lasts. Objects may remain as holdovers, but stripped of the ideologies that powered them. When they pop up in the twilight hinterland of Boyce's art, that loss of a necessary soul makes them look different too, and strangely changeable.

In the late 1990s, for example, Boyce began working with the modular, steel-framed storage units designed by Charles and Ray Eames in 1950. Unpopular on their unveiling with both homeowners and businesses, these of course enjoyed an exclusive after-life among design aficionados. On one level Boyce's brutal attentions to them bespeak a subjective conflict about both their current state and what an artist might do with such a freighted artefact. First he began removing panels and replaced them with ill-fitting plywood. Onto *Now I've Got Worry (Storage Unit)*, a 1997 work inspired by a description in Douglas Coupland's essay 'Brentwood Notebook: A Day in the Life', which observes the actions of O.J. Simpson's neighbours at the time of his murder trial, he hammered signs reading 'PRIVATE PROPERTY' and 'GO HOME THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE'. Later he assaulted their zippy Mondrian-coloured surfaces with white and black spray-paint, turning them dustily monochrome. These units are compounds of present and past; the hopefulness that gave birth to them is still discernible, but they have stepped, or been pushed, into a phantasmal realm of connoisseurship.

The absence of a capacity to be of use shows on the physiognomy of other contemporaneous works. Wounded, cornered, they're weirdly undead (a characterization that the artist likes to use about them); a guttering spark of what they were mingling with an air of inhuman threat. The balance is liable to shift from glance to glance. In 1998 Boyce took an Eames plywood splint (designed for the US navy in the early 1940s),



**Wounded and cornered these objects are weirdly undead; a spark of what they were mingles with an air of inhuman threat.**



**Top:**  
*'Electric Trees and Telephone Booth Conversations'*  
2006  
Mixed media  
Installation view

**Left:**  
*Now I've Got Worry (Storage Unit)*  
1997  
Mixed media  
185x126x43 cm



*Our Love is Like the  
Flowers, the Rain, the  
Sea and the Hours*  
2002  
Mixed media  
Installation view

snapped off part of its length and mounted it on the wall as *Now I've Got Real Worry (Mask)*. It resembles, by turns, African tribal masks and the punctured visor worn by the psychopath Jason Voorhees in the *Friday the 13th* films: a functional object rendered sadly inert, and something to obscure an aggressor's face.

Also in 1998 he began making wallpaper backdrops for his exhibitions that referenced the graphics and titles Saul Bass created for the title sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). In the American designer's hands credits zipped diagonally across a brightly coloured recessive grid like elevator cars on a skyscraper seen in isometric perspective; in Boyce's, this aesthetic turned queasy. The grid was leached of colour, typically turning white on black, and characteristically destabilized. *The City is of Night* (1998) saw it transform inexorably into a spider's web; in 1999's *When Now Is Night (Wallpaper)* an ill-matched pattern of grey lines behind it created a disorienting effect. The phrases Boyce suspended over them, meanwhile, dipped into a lexicon that could feel menacing or weirdly inviting. 'DISAPPEAR HERE',

beckons one. 'OVER YOUR SHOULDER', warns another.

When these backdrops combined with the distressed Eames pieces, the result approximated a *noir* psychosphere, a fragmentary and mutable shadow world in which objective truth is elusive. One work, *When Now is Night (Web)* (1999), a horizontal, ceiling-hung spider's web made from fluorescent tubes and hung from the ceiling, linked bright visibility with entrapment. Another text, 'FEAR VIEW' (2003), conflates two senses of 'apprehension'. Boyce's art rests on a notion that the changeability of things in the night – and the way that objects in dreams mutate when you try and look at them – might be truer to how things are. The object correlatives of Modernism melt into air and then come back, looking – or at least feeling – slightly different. Increasingly, he seems to suggest that this instability might be recouped in the services of something more multivalent and rewarding than lamentation or fearfulness.

Historical awareness, for instance. In 2002 Boyce made *For 1959 Capital Avenue*, in which a wall-text – 'PUNCHING THROUGH THE CLOUDS', Le Corbusier's ecstatic description

of skyscrapers – overlooked a few pieces of hybrid Modernist furniture made variously non-functional by Boyce. Dividing the room was a sheet of translucent aquamarine material, through which one could read the architect's words or look at the furniture. The sheet, it turned out, was bomb-blast fabric, designed to be draped over large windows in office blocks to prevent glass shards mutilating workers in the event of an explosion.

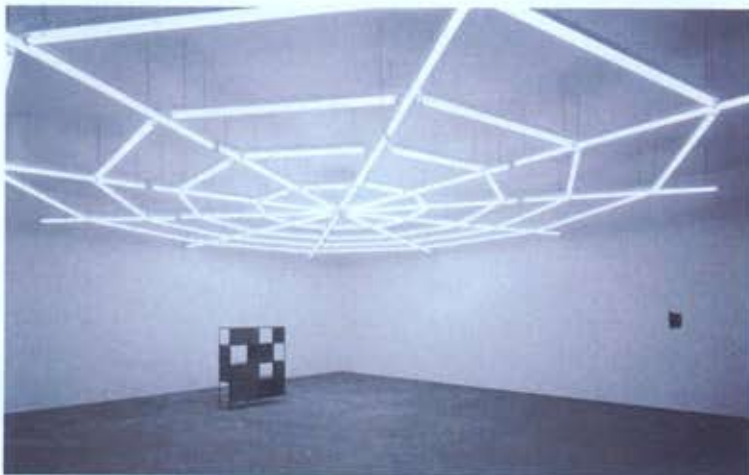
A real turning-point, however, was *Our Love is like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours*, from the same year. Shying away for the most part from loaded design references, this was a complex multi-part installation embedded in an atmosphere of perpetual dusk, and one that performed an extraordinary double-imaging. It comprised a loose draft of public space, complete with sops to nature, necessary amenities and quietly coercive architecture. Here, hanging inches from the ground, were the fluorescent-light saplings Boyce had produced after first seeing that photograph of the Martels' concrete harbour. Here, in a murky ambience created by deliberately dimmed and slightly yellowed lighting, was a black cyclone-fence enclosure



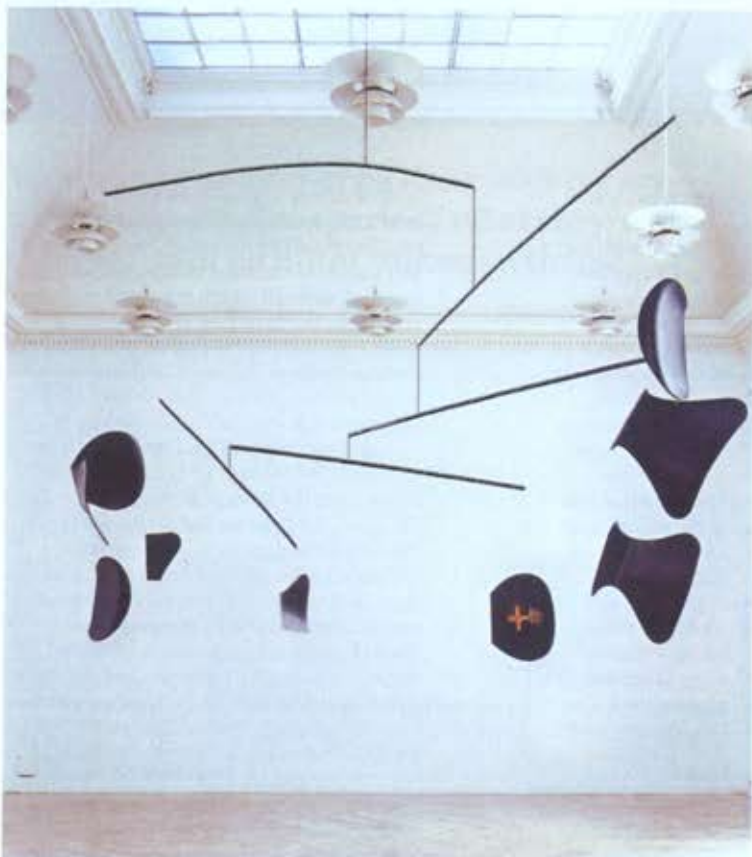
**Top:**  
*When Now is Night (Web)*  
 1999  
 Fluorescent lights,  
 powder coated steel,  
 painted plywood  
 Installation view

**Opposite:**  
*Dark Unit*  
 2003  
 Wood, steel, paint, Arne  
 Jacobsen Series 7 chair  
 Installation view

**Below:**  
*Mobile (Being With You  
 is Like the New Past)*  
 2002  
 Painted steel, wire,  
 chain, Arne Jacobsen  
 3107 chairs  
 Installation view



**Boyce's productions are not only generators of urban atmospherics but models of bittersweet recollections.**



- another symbolic prism that didn't so much block the view as pointedly modify it. Against the fence leant a powder-blue metal daybed frame reminiscent of Mies van de Rohe's Barcelona model; the two diagonal grids perfectly matched. Park benches were scattered around; some had lost their slatted seats and thus appeared consigned to a function-free existence. Rectangular park bins were warped into isometric perspective, matching that of the Bass-based projected text that built up and dissolved, block by block, on the wall. First impression: urban blight.

The text, however, read 'THIS PLACE IS DREAMING' - meaning, apparently, both that it is desirous of fulfilling the ambits of Modernism that underpin its forms and that those forms are in a fugitive, shifting state. One might say the same of the New Order song from whose lyric the exhibition's title sprang, and which mixes electronic hardness with a yearning, deeply human vocal. In glimpses it was possible to apprehend a quiet magic in Boyce's environment. It could appear, fleetingly, that public space had bent, its objects warped and intermingling, into an almost romantic fluidity. Different registers and references arose and flickered - from one angle you could have been on a film set; another view might have suggested some place you passed fleetingly in a car and barely saw. That it didn't quite hold together gave it the quality not only of dreams but also of a fuzzy conscious remembrance: the parts dangled apart, like objects on a mobile. What is apparent here, as in the later exhibition 'Electric Trees and Telephone Booth Conversations' is that while the location is positioned by Boyce as transfigured, it is also designed to work on the viewer's subjectivity and to open some long-closed, dusty boxes within it.

In a 2003 interview with Douglas Coupland, Boyce suggested that Modernist designs such as the ones that populate this model of public space were never meant to deliver Utopia; the latter, he guessed, was a form of inbuilt obsolescence. It may well be that a collective perfecting is impossible and that it is only in memories and dreams, for all their structural gaps and transience, that human happiness can really be accessed. In his sublime essay on Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin quotes the French novelist as saying that his sadness, for which his endless reanimation of the past was a palliative, stemmed from 'the incurable imperfection in the very essence of the present moment'. Analogously, Boyce's installations definitively shift one's attention from the seamless now to a fractured space where, as in *Our Love ...*, past, present and future intermingle, and crevasses open up between its formal aspects. In so doing, they reveal an ambition and generosity that go way beyond beachcombing the shores of Lake Modern.

The spaces that Boyce is configuring with such careful sketchiness are the stage-sets where we urban subjects play out our lives, the most powerful moments of which pass into our memories and light up our insentient nights. Compounding collective and personal nostalgias, Boyce's most ambitious productions are not - or not only - open-ended generators of urban atmospherics. They are models of (and enabling engines for) bittersweet recollection. Other than the wintry consolation that in life everything must change, what more do we have? When we lose our loved ones, they come back to us briefly in dreams. When we lose our collective ideals, they come back to us imperfectly as ghosts. And - if someone else works hard on our behalf, and we are quick and lucky - when we lose particles of our pasts, they come back to us in art. They are huge and sweet and weightless, and impossible to grasp.

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