

PRESSBOOK

Pierre PAULIN

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Julian Rose

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GALERIE PERROTIN

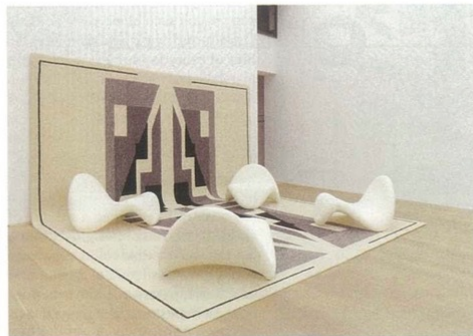
If the most primordial purpose of a chair is to keep your butt off the ground, then Pierre Paulin's 1967 *Tongue* chair is an abject failure. This icon of 1960s design, which was recently on view among a handful of Paulin's most famous works at Galerie Perrotin, is something closer to a cushion than a proper seat; the undulating form suggested by its name leaves its user in a semi-reclined posture, with his or her posterior separated from the floor by only a few inches of foam padding.

This arrangement is the result of Paulin's singularly audacious decision to eliminate the legs, along with any visible structural frame, from his design. The legs of a chair are like the columns of a building—its most obviously tectonic elements, the parts that emphasize its status as a construction engineered to carry a load and resist the force of gravity. As such, legs are often given a place of honor in a chair's composition, their importance formally and visually exaggerated: Think of the prominent, angular steel blades of a Jean Prouvé chair (which echo the structural ribs of his prefab buildings) or the taut steel bars supporting Mies van der Rohe's famous Barcelona lounges (plated with the same polished chrome as the columns in his iconic Barcelona Pavilion). Paulin's *Tongue* follows an entirely different logic, more sculptural than architectural. Using a novel technique of wrapping an internal metal frame with foam rubber and then skinning it with stretch fabric, he produced a chair that appeared not to be an assembly of parts but rather a single, unitary form.

And what a form it is. Paulin possessed an extraordinary sculptural sensibility, and this chair's sophisticated, multidirectional curvature still looks high-tech, almost futuristic, today, seeming to have more in common with the most complex forms generated by new computational design tools than the simple two-dimensional curves that occasionally enlivened modernist design. And if much iconic modern furniture—Prouvé's is perhaps the most obvious example—dramatized its technical dimensions as a response to the practical problem of holding up a body, Paulin's chair seems to have abandoned such matters entirely, existing in a world of pure form, unconstrained by considerations of weight or material.

Yet the *Tongue* chair was more than just a flight of formal fancy; by leaving the restrictions of gravity and construction behind, Paulin seems to have been seeking another kind of freedom, too. A chair that places the user's body on the ground is literally laid-back—his furniture establishes a casual disregard for hierarchical arrangements that is both formal and social. This ad hoc quality was even more explicit in two of the other pieces on view: *La Déclive*, 1966, a sort of a giant chaise lounge, big enough for multiple occupants, that can be reconfigured at any angle from flat to vertical by playing with its adjustable spine; and *Tapis-siège*, 1970, literally a "carpet-seat" formed from a padded surface, sections of which can be folded up or down to accommodate various seating or lounging arrangements. Produced in Paris in the years immediately preceding and following the events of May '68, these designs offer a powerful reminder that the physical position of our bodies is often inherently political, just as a shift in our position vis-à-vis the bodies of others can articulate not just new spatial relationships but new forms of collectivity.

There remains, of course, the question of whose body is allowed to climb onto Paulin's furniture. At Galerie Perrotin, the answer was no



View of "Pierre Paulin," 2016. Wall and floor: Diwan rug, 1992. On rug: Tongue chairs, 1967. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli.

one's, as, in a gallery context, the chairs were inevitably presented more as sculptures than functional objects (the sole exception was *La Déclive*, which supervised visitors could sit on after wrapping their shoes in protective booties). Eventually, if these pieces are used at all, it will be by someone who can pay dearly for the privilege, never mind the fact that Paulin had explicitly envisioned them as "anonymous" objects, designed to be cheap to produce and to be sold in huge numbers. Ironically, the current surge in demand for Paulin's furniture is driven largely by a celebration of the strikingly sculptural qualities of his work, even as this interest inevitably suppresses their equally powerful social dimensions: a sobering reminder that no matter how firmly a design object seeks to physically ground itself in our social and political reality, the economic framework we construct around it in turn can effortlessly lift it back up out of reach.

—Julian Rose