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50 TABLES

Innovations in Design and Materials

Mel Byars



PRO DESIGN SERIES

50 TABLES

Innovations in Design and Materials

Mel Byars

Introduction by
Sylvain Dubuisson

Research by
Cinzia Anguissola d'Altoé
Brice d'Antras

Drawings by
Marvin Klein

A RotoVision Book

PRO DESIGN SERIES





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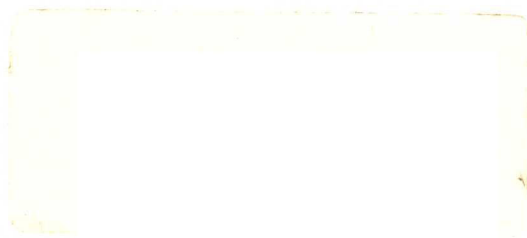
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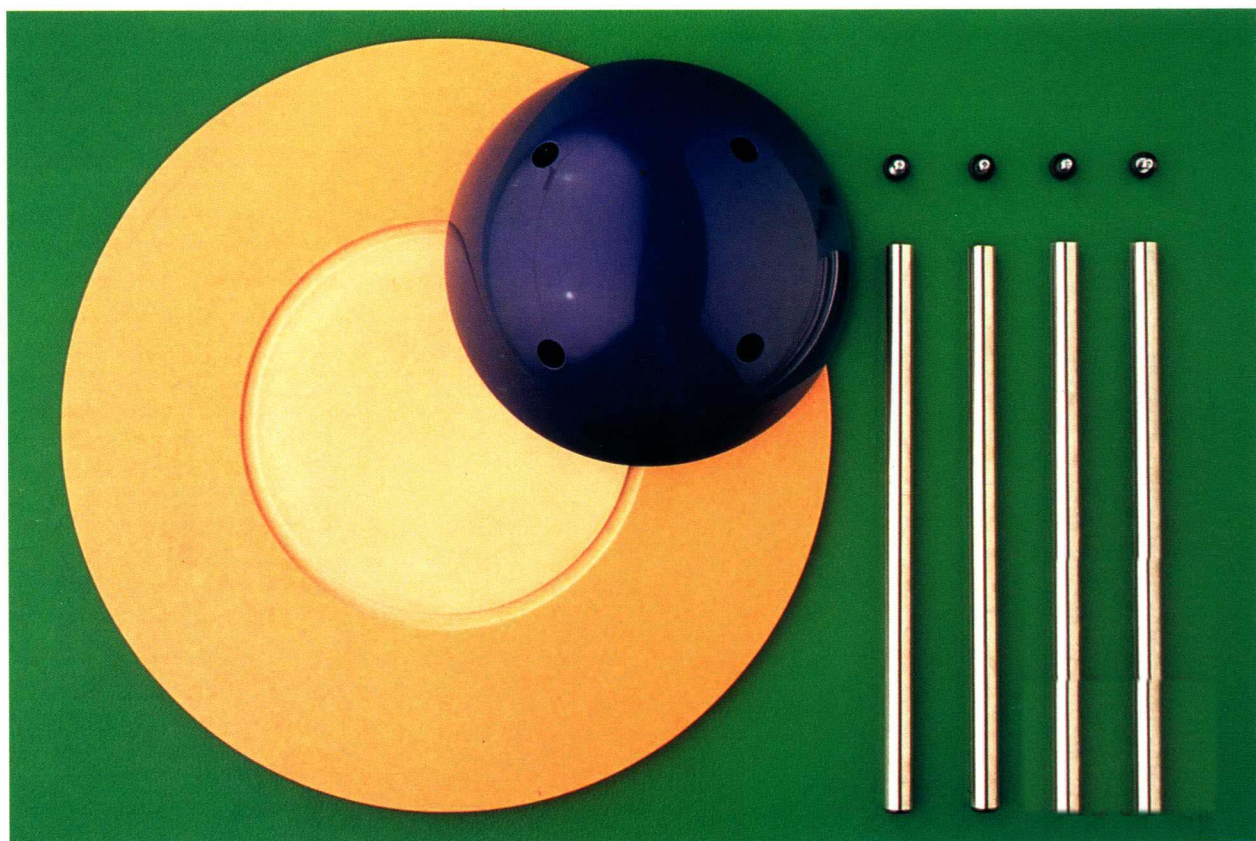


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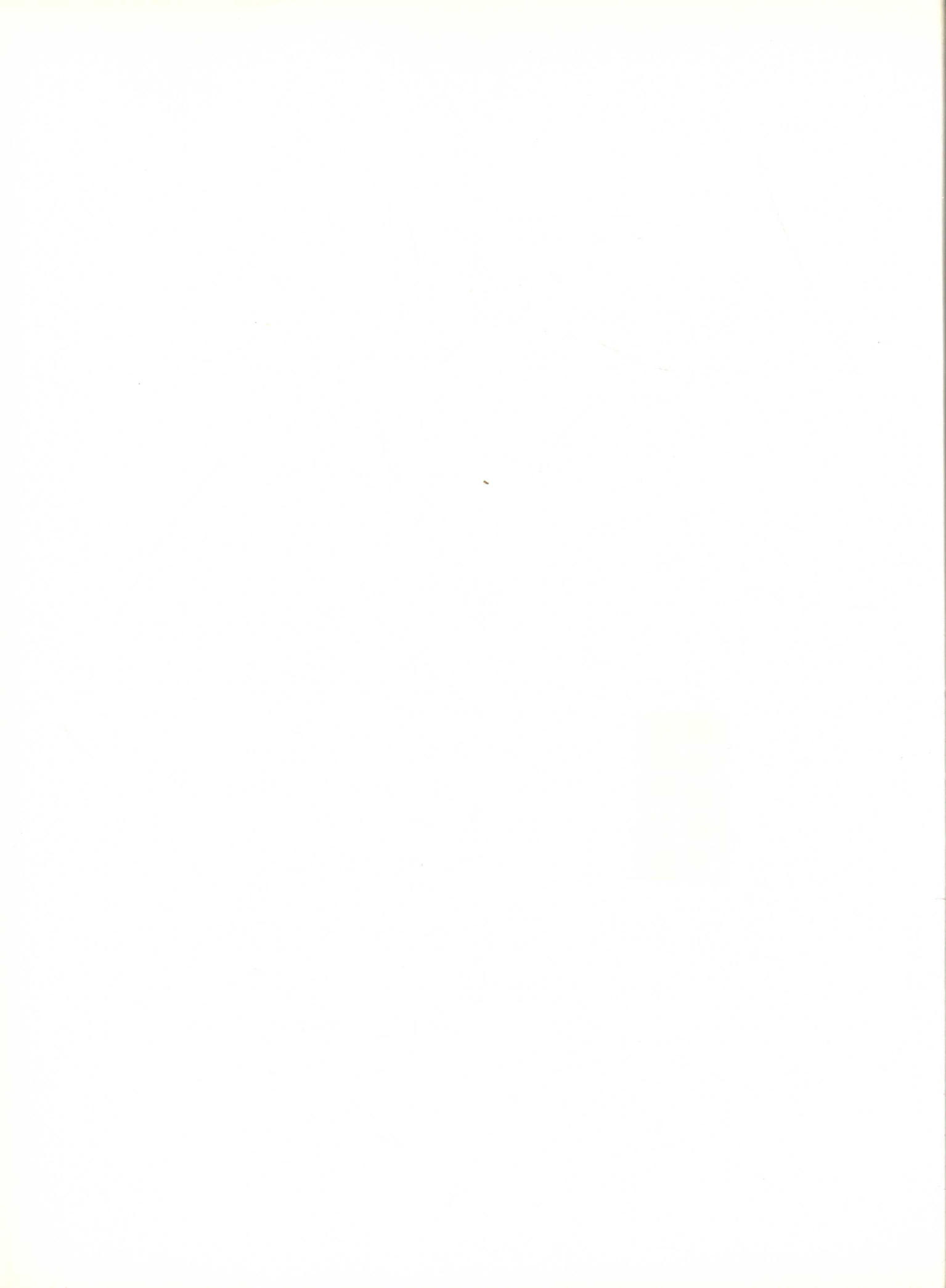
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Introduction: Reality vs. Virtuality

The table, as well as the chair, has become an irreducible part of the history of furniture production and likewise of our daily lives. In order to have some insight into the role and form of the table, let's contrast it to the chair which, besides being a highly functional object, has manifestations corollary to those of its users—human beings—and even to society as a whole. The less-demonstrative table plays a secondary role to the chair but is no less significant.

When we look at tables and chairs as archetypes (or ideal forms), their individual differences are obvious. The centuries-long continuity of their forms has made it possible for us to isolate the ideas we have developed for each one—a relatively readable schema engraved in our thoughts and variously incarnated in the production of different models through the ages.

Essentially the archetype which the chair embodies is a fundamental contradiction: the front legs reach only to seat level while the rear ones rise higher to become the back rest. This disparity gives rise to an essential ambiguity and, in another sense, the impurity of all chairs to which a great many designers have responded with varying levels of mastery and virtuosity. Attempting to diminish the problem, increase efficiency, and lessen the ambiguity, Modernists have attempted to resolve the contradiction by making chairs with stool-like characteristics: the seat and the back form a single unit, held aloft by a configuration of legs or a base of some kind. That chairs are an essential index through which an interpretation of society may be conjured is precisely based on this confrontation with their ambiguity—an archetypal ambiguity which is a manifestation of life itself, in all its complexity.

Contrarily, tables present an altogether different order. The archetype of a chair is obvious and simple: a surface is supported by a leg or legs or other device to raise it from the ground. There is no ambiguity here. The history of the table, past and present, may be read as infinite variations on a very simple theme to which all tables more or less refer.

Variations of tables have primarily concerned the technology called upon to make tables and devise their forms. The entire history of classical styles was bound to an unchanging tradition in skills, mainly in woodworking. The technology employed to produce a table for a king was the same as that used by, for example, the Shakers.

Exponents of the Modern Movement—motivated by extreme, utopian leanings—have tended to identify with the archetype, as attested by the work of Mies van der Rohe and the group Archizoom. However, the Modern Movement is today as much before us as behind us.

In the wake of the healthy confusion encouraged by Postmodernism, few people today are attempting to bring an element of clear-sightedness to bear on new, emerging products. Mel Byars is one of the few. Offering great originality and an exemplary concern for methodology, in this book he lays bare and dissects 50 versions of a wide range of tables. We may count on his vision to bring us pleasure through his elucidation.

Keep in mind that since the recent advent of the micro-processor, tables and chairs no longer have quite the same meaning as before. Electronics have irreversibly invaded our daily lives with increasingly efficient and ever-smaller objects. While virtuality has imperceptibly evolved into reality, tables and chairs still present their same, immutable characteristics: heights of 46cm for chairs and 75cm for tables continue to be unalterably linked to their use and to the body sizes and shapes of the users.

We might even think of the present as the age of confrontation between objects which originated as archetypes (like board games) and objects which originated in dematerialized forms (like computer games). To the extent that dematerialization follows technology's vertiginous progress, archetypes are beginning to look more and more archaic. And, as the real is erased and we are swept into the virtual, our need for the presence of the archaic is becoming more urgent.

A desire to re-establish a balance between the two has created the need for a tangible validation of our existence in the world we live in. And the more technology and communication contribute to making virtuality a worldwide phenomenon, the better we are able to appreciate the reality, for example, in the technical inventiveness of the tables chosen by Mel Byars. Could it be that the creation of variety is a reaction to the prevailing proliferation of dematerialization?

Sylvain Dubuisson
Paris



Foreword: Tables as Material Culture

Because chairs and tables are the most important pieces of furniture in any environment, *50 Chairs* was the obvious choice for the first volume in the Pro-Design series and, hence, *50 Tables*, the second. But it was with some trepidation that I chose to include a book on tables, regardless of their ubiquity.

My initial reticence was based on the unfounded judgment that tables in general, especially new tables, would not be interesting, indeed particularly boring. Therefore, why do a book that would be dull? Yet, ignoring my initial concerns and proceeding with the intension of preparing a book on tables, I discovered that I had been naïve, probably just ignorant. Much to my delight I found a wide range of tables that had been created by imaginative designers who, when put to the task, whether self- or manufacturer-assigned, had conjured a number of fascinating examples, including those that express the surreal if not impractical, those that voice serious and highly functional concerns, those that address green matters, and those that feature ingeniously manipulated materials.

A distinct effort was made to include examples by both male and female designers from all six continents whose work transcends the merely utilitarian use of new and traditional materials, resulting in the remarkable and the intelligent.

There are five basic kinds of tables: for dining, for work, for playing games, for handy convenience (like the coffee table and small side table), and for use while standing (like the buffet/hunt table and the console). They serve as evidence that the study of design must always focus on sociological, anthropological, political, and financial concerns rather than primarily aesthetic ones. The tables in this book that fold or breakdown speak of the scarcity of environmental space; ones in inexpensive materials concern frugality; ones featuring multiple functions illustrate the single service of one utilitarian object for many; and ones that appear to be simple may be essentially quite intricate while others that appear to be simple are indeed quite simple. And all of them have sprung forth, whether facilitatively or arduously, from the constantly probing minds of designers, not always serious nor solely playful.

The choices here are my personal ones, limited by the images and documentation which I and my assistants were able to collect from the generous manufacturers and designers who accepted our invitation to participate. There were certain other tables we wanted to include but were unable to get the necessary materials to fulfill adequately

the promise of the book: how new tables are made and what thinking goes into their realization. But, alas, we were able to satisfy the quota of 50 examples, including some intriguing ones suggested by my assistants and hitherto unknown to me.

This book purposefully does not contain a bibliography, designer biographies, or lengthy prose. The commentary, except this essay, is intensionally brief and has been laid out in a manner to make it quickly comprehensible, but hopefully the images perform most of the work of telling the story of each object.

I am schizophrenic about the books in the Pro-Design series, confessing that I am uneasy on the one hand and prideful on the other that the books emphasize the clever and artful exploitation of new and traditional materials, methodologies, and technologies rather than aesthetics. My discomfort stems from the backlash against the adulation of science generally and of technology specifically. The indictment alleges that the unharnessed pursuit of technological development for profit is incompatible with a respect for the planet. Thus, in part, the cries are that an ecological catastrophe has already happened. The reproach includes the romantic assertion that, while focusing on science, the enjoyment of nature is lessened.

As a response and not a pardon, I share an apocryphal story about Hermann Helmholtz, the 19th-century German physicist and anatomist. He was traveling in the mountains of Switzerland with some friends when a great storm arose. Helmholtz, being of a scientific disposition, assiduously began to scribble observational notes. His friends asked him if this rationalization of one of nature's great dramatic moments did not distract from its beauty, to which he rejoined that, on the contrary, the phenomenon became all the more dramatic and moving.

But, even so, the Pro-Design series does not concern the value of the Earth-helping or Earth-harming production and processes employed in the creation of the objects in the volumes but rather is offered as a report, and not a thorough one, on a narrow slice of our material culture as expressed during the last decade or so. But be warned; some of the materials used to make furniture, furnishings, and products, especially right now, may indeed be both harmful to the makers and to the users. In the production of fine art, sculptor Niki de Saint-Phalle, for example, can attest to the life-threatening effects of certain substances that give off toxic gases. The emission occurs not only when the substances are being manufactured but also



Foreword

up to four and five years after. A single case in point: particle board, which many of us have considered harmless, gives off highly toxic fumes.

There are no assertions here to suggest that anyone needs to purchase, own, or use the tables discussed. Probably no one does. And the book is not intended as an advertising medium for the products; nepotism was punctiliously avoided, although I and my assistants are friendly with some of the designers and the representatives of the manufacturers. I thought hard and long before including the "Corinthia" table system by the husband of one of my assistants. She merely presented the table to me along with many others without any special comment or urging. I could have omitted it without a reprisal. Neither she nor the designer knew of its inclusion until after publication.

The final selection of tables, numbered from one to 50, is arbitrarily grouped according to materials or some other distinguishing characteristics. While there is a rainbow of examples, the group is not necessarily representative of the state of the table today, only somewhat exemplary and then not widely so.

If the examples serve to amuse, enlighten, delight, provoke, or infuriate you, then we have done our job well. But be assured that bore you they will not.

Mel Byars
New York City



Wood



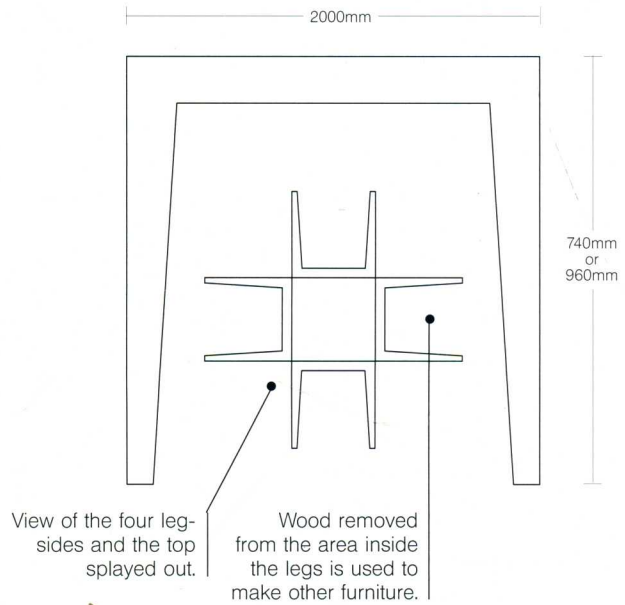
Table

Designer: Axel Kufus (German, b. 1958)

Manufacturer: the designer

Date of design: 1987

The most notable feature of this table is the elimination of blocks for reinforcement which would normally be added to the underside of a sparsely built, thin-framed table such as this one. The simplicity of its construction is complemented by the simplicity of the design itself: four leg-sides and a top. To decrease waste, the large pieces of wood removed to form the legs are used by the designer to make his "Stöck" chairs.



Plan view of the corners.

