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## Figures on a Stage

By Ellis Woodman

In an article, published in 1924, entitled *Furnishing a Modern Apartment* (The Abolition of Furniture), Adolf Loos proposes that the design of the domestic interior is best approached in accordance with a strict demarcation of responsibility. The architect's task should be limited to the provision of a shell in which all storage requirements have been accommodated by means of built-in cupboards. Wardrobes, sideboards and trunks are thus eradicated, leaving only furniture light enough for an individual to carry. The design of these elements should be left to the cabinetmaker - the one class of person capable of "making furniture that is as modern as our shoes and clothes, as our leather suitcases and automobiles." For Loos, the overly cultured architect lacks the automatic feeling for tradition, comfort and utility that characterises the cabinetmaker's work and marks him as a man of modern sensibilities. "Because Dürer designed clothes and shoes, Holbein jewelry, today's artists think they must do the same. But being a modern person means you know you can leave that to a shoemaker and tailor, to the gem-setter and pearl-dealer".

The Brussels-based gallery, MANIERA, maintains an approach to commissioning items of household furniture that runs in marked opposition to Loos's advice, in that it chooses to work exclusively with architects and artists. It is to be strongly suspected that, were Loos with us today, the fruits of these commissions would confirm his prejudices. While MANIERA's stable of collaborators are drawn from across the world and pursue a wide variety of formal directions, a common denominator is their profound awareness of the role of furniture as a cultural signifier. This self-consciousness frequently manifests itself in forms of ambiguity. In both Piovenefabi's monumentally building-like tables and stools and Studio Mumbai's explorations of the use of miniature bricks we encounter a marked

ambiguity of scale; in Anne Holtrop's *Wall Rack* - the plywood surface of which is painted to resemble jasper and scrub limestone - an ambiguity of material prevails; the enjoyment of Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen's precariously asymmetrical *Solo Chair* has nothing to do with comfort but much to do with its perceived instability; Jonathan Muecke's *ARC* invites a reading as both a functional light and a purely abstract form.

The model of modernity that these objects present is a very different one from that suggested by the anonymous, pragmatic equipment of the Loosian interior. Each is a component part of a highly theatrical *mise en scène*, a prop in the drama of the occupant's quest for individuation. For these designers, modernity is no longer the naturally emerging and uniform identity that Loos felt it to be but rather a fluid and necessarily ambiguous construction that each of us makes and remakes every day. Whatever practical function they serve, the objects that MANIERA commissions are first and foremost vehicles for the fantasies by which we discover our place in the world.













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## Colophon

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