

# Martin Boyce

## ► Andrew Bonacina

As the alienated protagonists drift out of frame towards the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's L'Eclisse (1962), the camera continues its listless journey through Rome's desolate suburbs. The landscape is suspended somewhere between ruin and renewal — haunted by the stories of its former inhabitants and lying in wait for those to come — while our lingering gaze transforms its objects and buildings into characters and props in narratives that remain unresolved. This landmark cinematic sequence often comes to mind when encountering the work of Martin Boyce. Seemingly suspended in a permanent twilight state, his installations describe landscapes permeated by an air of instability, or 'unstable landscapes' to use Boyce's words. The objects populating them provoke a double take on the part of

the viewer in the way that their forms are at once recognisable and strange. This spark of recognition comes from Boyce's appropriation of pieces of iconic modernist design including works by Jean Prouvé, Charles and Ray Eames, Arne Jacobsen and Charlotte Perriand among others. Subjected to various acts of distortion, twisted, burned and disassembled, Boyce's sculptural reconfigurations view these classic forms and the utopian ideals embedded in them through the lens of the twenty-first century.

In early works such as Now I've Got Worry (Storage Unit I) (1997), the clean and functional plywood surfaces of Eames shelving are replaced by cut-up bits of advertising hoarding bearing slogans such as 'Go Home' and 'Private Property', which contradict the democratic ideals at the heart of this piece of mass-produced furniture. In Suspended Fall (2005) parts of Arne Jacobsen's Series 7 chair are suspended from a simple metal mobile, making visual allusions to Alexander Calder's suspended abstract sculptures. Other works draw on everyday objects familiar to the urban environment. Hyacinths and Pages (2010) is a bright yellow cage-like construction resembling a metal rubbish bin; it leans to one side as if it has been involved in some sort of accident, detouring from Modernism's 'form follows function' directive. Gate (We don't meet here. We are always together first) (2004) borrows the motif of chain-link fencing in an abstract rendering of a metal gate, an image which conjures up the derelict and out-of-bounds areas of the city. By drawing on and distorting



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these pieces of utilitarian design Boyce directs our attention to the social codes and power structures embedded in the mundane features of our everyday environment, reflecting back on the way in which our own bodies are made to conform and adapt.

In his gallery-filling installations, Boyce's sculpture becomes notionally reinserted into the urban context from which it's extracted. Our Love is Like the Flowers, the Rain, the Sea and the Hours (2002) was the title of Boyce's monumental exhibition at Glasgow's Tramway. Chain-link fences bisected the space while benches in various states of deconstruction invited viewers to enjoy the landscape as they might a park or playground. Nature collided with the industrial in a forest of tree-like forms fabricated from fluorescent tube lighting, casting the space in a sickly and menacing glow. This meeting of references to the natural and man-made recurs throughout Boyce's work, its roots in a photograph the artist found of concrete tree-sculptures by Jöel and Jan Martel, made for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. Citing them as 'a perfect collapse of architecture and nature and the desire for the two to be compatible'

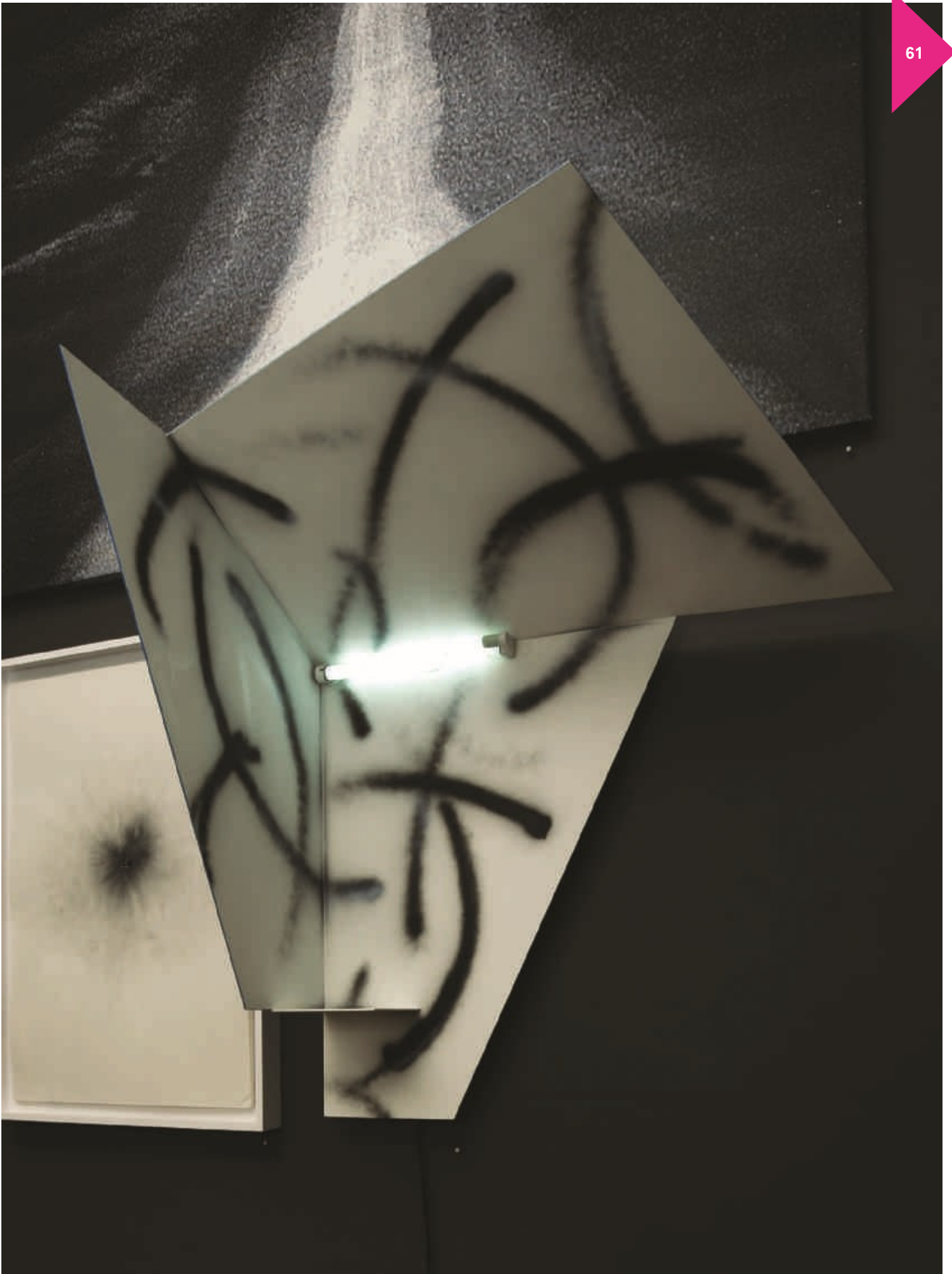
the sculptures' abstracted arboreal forms are echoed in his own illuminated tree sculptures as well as in numerous other works including phone booths defaced with graffiti and pillars inserted into the existing architecture of gallery spaces. A repeat pattern made using the Martel's tree forms also forms a graphic armature for an alphabet devised by Boyce.

Language and text underpin the construction of much of Boyce's work, from their poetic titles borrowed from literature, music or film to the use of words in works such as the series of ventilation grills which often punctuate the architecture of his installations, puncturing the hermetically sealed space of the gallery. Brief and illusive, the phrases appear as if they have been caught from the exhibition's ether in which narratives freely circulate. In the transformations wrought upon them, Boyce's sculptures are made to bear the weight of myriad histories and stories, transformed further still by the projection of our own narratives in a search for meaning among the ruins.

Previous page: Martin Boyce, Untitled (2010) and Hyacinths and Pages (2010) installed in The Shape We're In (London)

Opposite: Martin Boyce, Telephone Booth Conversations (2006)

**The Shape We're In (London)**



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