

Karim Rashid:
From 15 Minutes
into the Future

ONTARIO
COLLEGE
OF ART &
DESIGN

“If freedom were a form,” Karim Rashid once wrote, “it would be a never-ending undulating boundless shape that is in perpetual motion.”¹ Despite this quotation’s compactness, it brings together several ideas that are crucial to Rashid’s design philosophy: optimism, energy, unlimited possibility. Together, these themes sum up a view of the future as now, as a design project, and as an intellectual and aesthetic resource.

The title of this exhibit has everything to do with this buoyant view of whatever lies just around the corner. Over the last ten or fifteen years, movies and television shows have been set minutes into the future as a way of staging scenes that are imminent, unknowable and either weird (*Max Headroom*, for example) or terrifying (one thinks of *demonlover*). Rashid reverses this pessimism, his insistent, prodigious innovation grounded in an insatiable curiosity about what the future holds and a restless desire to help it realize its potential.

Hence his fascination with the blob that isn’t anything yet but that bursts with the promise of what it can become — the “blobject” that, as Steven Skov Holt and Mara Holt Skov point out in their recent book *Blobjects & Beyond*, finds its form in designs by Rashid, Scot Laughton, Marc Newson and others but was prefigured over the last 50 or 60 years in the art and design of people like Eva Zeisel, Henry Moore, Russel Wright and Eero Saarinen.²

¹ Karim Rashid, “Technorganics,” *evolution* (New York: Universe, 2004): 205.

² On the blobject’s promise, see Steven Skov Holt and Mara Holt Skov, “The Look and Feel of Optimism,” in *Blobjects & Beyond: the new fluidity in design*, Steven Skov Holt and Mara Holt Skov, eds. (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2005): 56–69; Phil Patton surveys its historical precedents in “Twentieth-Century Roots of Organic Form,” *Blobjects & Beyond*: 22–37.

The future carries the past inside it, just as the past contains the future, and one of our tasks might be to separate the histories that we should reject from those that we should continue, adjust or ironize, partly to locate gaps in the future that invention might fill. As Holt explains in his essay for this brochure, Rashid finds Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* an important resource in this regard; just how important is suggested by Rashid's outrageous Mglass Ego vase.

Representing Rashid's head as if spun in a circle, the vase pokes fun at the unbridled egocentrism of portrait busts by re-constructing the genre as empty-headed (it's a vase, after all) and blind. But this wit also has a direct target, since the vase (consciously or not) reprises Renato Bertelli's *Continuous Profile* — *Head of Mussolini* (1933), an emblem of *il Duce's* self-perception as modern, authoritative and monumental.³ (And we know where *that* ego trip led.)



MGLASS Ego Vase

³ Jeffrey Schnapp, "Heads of State," *Art Issues*, 24 (Sept./Oct. 1992): 28.

The wit of the Ego vase is unusually prickly for Rashid but its basic impulse — a twist on the familiar that encourages an adventurous imagining of the yet-to-come — runs throughout his practice and underpins the decision to invite him for the Professional Gallery's inaugural design exhibition. Since Rashid has built on his time teaching at OCAD during the early 1990s to become one of today's most influential designers, it made sense for us to mark his accomplishment with his first solo exhibition in Canada in nearly two decades. Beyond that, his straddling of professions (designer, architect, brand consultant, contributing editor) and his playful questioning of preconceptions dovetails with the Professional Gallery's goal to engage with contemporary art and design as a way of unsettling expectations of what a gallery can be.

ACME Icons Wallet, 2007



Many people have helped produce this show. Of course I'm indebted to Karim, but at his studio I'd also like to thank Michael Regan and Camila Tariki. It was a pleasure working with Steven Skov Holt on the essay for this publication. Karim's talk is part of the Faculty of Design lecture series; I'm grateful to Anthony Cahalan for facilitating this collaboration, and M.C. McCain for his support of this series.

– Charles Reeve, Curator

“I Want Karim Rashid to Change the World ”

by Steven Skov Holt

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Bitossi Totem KRB-03, 2006

I met Karim in New York during the late 1980s. He had come from Toronto to make a name for himself. I'd come from Rhode Island to do the same. Both of us, like eight million others, were going to make it big.

We hit the downtown scene, showing our early work at Gallery 91 in SoHo. Neither of us made it big. Before that, I taught at Parsons. Before that, I was at ID magazine. So I saw a lot of work and met a lot of designers. But Karim stood apart, precocious and bold with a real point-of-view. His Farrago lamp (1988) sticks in my memory, with its elongated hourglass body and tiny-hat lampshade.

That lamp hinted at the curves to come. But not mere curves. A whole new liquid form language. Envisioned in the 1980s. Developed in the 1990s. And propagated in the 2000s.

I cannot imagine how many airline, train, bus, limo, subway, and taxi miles that took. The number likely strains credulity. But there is no odometer when you pursue a dream. No speedometer for that matter.

Regardless of the physical miles, the conceptual distance he has traveled is enormous. He has gone from being "Karim Rashid, neophyte designer" to "Karim Rashid, global brand." Here in Toronto with "Karim Rashid: From 15 Minutes into the Future," he is back where it started. At least, for a moment...

This exhibition reminds me why I want Rashid to change the world. He cares, has big ideas, and is up for the job. His inspirations come from all over the global design-process map: the new plastics and molding technologies that sensualize his materials; the ever-increasing free-flow of people and ideas across borders and boundaries that animate his spirit; the actual spaces and experiences in the great urban capitals of the world that drive his creativity; and the visual vocabularies of 20th and 21st century designers like Luigi Colani, Joe Colombo, Verner Panton, Gaetano Pesce, Ettore Sottsass, Eva Zeisel, Charles and Ray Eames and, more currently, Ron Arad, Ross Lovegrove, Greg Lynn, Marc Newson and Philippe Starck .

One less known but equally important inspiration for Rashid, however, is *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, published posthumously by the famed Italian storyteller Italo Calvino.¹ Calvino's memos — each one word augmented by pages of description — provide a series of idealized literary attributes. But they also are valid as visual inspiration, and read much like common design properties of Rashid's projects: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency.

¹ *Six Memos* was intended to be delivered in 1986 as part of the famed Charles Eliot Norton lecture series at Harvard University, but Calvino died before he could complete the work. In fact the sixth memo was finished by Calvino's widow Esther. I was in New York when it came out in 1988 and was one of the few who read it, asking myself the same kinds of questions as Karim: How did Calvino's six literary properties relate to what was happening in design?

Six Memos = Six Guiding Design Principles

#1 Lightness

The gravity of existence has to be borne lightly, according to Calvino. And sure enough, Rashid's projects float on a light, easy breeze of optimism. His glowing curves and colors, his transparency and fluidity, speak to the upbeat, relaxed possibilities of his designs. As a problem-solving practice, design requires designers to affirm that their work is meaningful, that it can improve the world and our place in it. Rashid's declaration "I want to change the world" rests on the faith that he can change the world — that doing so remains possible.



Aitali K2 Ikon Chair, 2003



Umbra Um Chair, 2006

#2 Quickness

Action, Calvino believes, should be artfully integrated with contemplation; for Rashid, design should blur together and integrate our experience of an object with its form. The world of muscular making must be inseparable from the acquired talent of “thinking about thinking.” A palpable sense of quickness, movement and urgency underlies Rashid’s work — an accelerated mindset comfortable pushing things both further apart and closer together. Enabling the quickness on a physical level is Rashid’s proclivity for smooth, simple forms that seem to travel through space rapidly, with minimal drag. Digital tools also are rapid and efficient, enabling Rashid to work quickly and seamlessly. Having developed an infinitely adaptable fluid design language, Rashid can shift easily between ideas, objects, and materials while maintaining a consistent look-and-feel across the sizes, scales and scopes of his many projects.

#3 Exactitude

Clarity is key for Calvino; Rashid’s almost identical corollary is to sustain the precise, rigorous lucidity that has become his three-dimensional signature. Exactitude is Rashid’s hallmark. He is uncommonly articulate, as comfortable with words and ideas as he is with digital objects and the means to produce them. In his search for precise speech, he has created myriad compound words to elucidate his intentions: blobism, ² transconcepts, digitalia and designocracy; karimagologos, digipop, no-stalgia, futuretro and kasual engineering; infosthetics and technorganics. These neologisms help define the nuances of his highly developed form language. This archetypal form language of curves and blobs, nurbs and splines expresses a primal exactitude regarding anthropomorphic form-giving and a systematic confidence in his inventiveness within speech’s limits.

² While I may have been the first to coin the word “blobject” (in 1989) and to use it in print (1993), Karim was certainly the first to use it as a name for something he designed and subsequently the first to give the term its contemporary imagery — to show again and again in his projects how many potential variations on the blobject theme could possibly exist.

#4 Visibility

Rashid and Calvino both show concern with the visual imagination in their projects. But Rashid also embodies visibility and the visual imagination in his person, in how he constructs his composite image through his choice of clothes, accessories, hair style, glasses, jewelry, shoes, colors and so on. In the product design world, where one end of the spectrum wears Dockers and the other end dresses in black, Rashid stands out. He is unadulterated artifice, an attention-seeking, attention-getting foreground object of design, and a most visible and engaging professional figurehead. He lives design in every way possible, at every level of his existence — from his domestic environment, to the sounds and objects that fill it, to his self-designed iconic tattoos. (He famously began the new millennium by getting rid of his black garb and dressing only in white.) Like Rashid himself, the objectified objects that he designs are extroverted, experiential and engaging. Highly visible, they demand to be looked at and desired; they seduce us with their colorful confident curves, soft inviting materiality and teasingly reflective translucence.

#5 Multiplicity

For Calvino, multiplicity addresses the infinite possibilities open to artists and to society at large. Both groups can be inspired as well as humbled by the ability to communicate the possible, including the multiple scenarios that might still come to be. The fluid forms of Rashid's blobjects are inherently fecund and modifiable — one can imagine him reproducing them on a massive scale — thanks to the computer technology that creates them. Similarly, slight tweaks might be all he needs to scale-shift and shape-shift his objects into anything he wants — from a spoon to a city. To reach the largest possible audience without compromising his vision, Rashid's products also speak an infinitely mutable and reconfigurable global design language. Perhaps Rashid's connection to the music world (he has worked as a DJ) offers the best metaphor for his creations' easy multiplication and expansion. The sampling, stealing, mixing and mashing-up common to today's music gives Rashid a ready model for thinking expansively about the rich possibilities and infinite variations that Calvino had in mind when he wrote about multiplicity.

Bonoldo Skoop, 2005





Kundalini Bokka Lamp, 2004

#6 Consistency

An unfailing ambassador for his vocation, Rashid embodies what it means to “live design”. His message remains the same whether he is speaking to design collectors, colleagues, students or consumers. His synthetic sensualist approach to design allows millions of iterations of his soft, pleasurable and liquid way of giving shape, function and meaning to products and furniture. His has a consistency borne of everyday effort, and that effort exemplifies the Italian design master Ettore Sottsass’ definition of design. “Design is a way of talking about life,” Sottsass once said — words that could not ring truer for Rashid. ³

³ Sottsass, “Design and Theory: Two Points of View,” in *Design Since 1945*, Kathryn B. Hiesinger and George H. Marcus, eds. (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 3.

Calvino's aimed in *Six Memos* to lay the groundwork for a new way of looking at writing (or, as Sottsass would have us see it, a new way of looking at design and life). The memos laid out a compelling direction forward and now, 20 years later, we are almost exactly where Calvino envisioned we would be. Creative culture has become global. The qualities that Calvino predicted — lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency — have found their real-time visual expression in Rashid's projects and in the work of others. If Rashid had not arrived on the scene when he did to bring design into the future that Calvino envisioned, then (to build on an observation by Marisa Barolucci) we would have had to invent him.⁴ Design needed a rocket like Rashid to take off, to explode the boundaries of what was thought possible and to probe the further reaches of creative commitment. Thanks in part to his efforts, design is now a tool and a process, a noun and a verb, a way of better knowing one's self and the world. This is the fundamental necessity — and the first-order ecstasy — (not to mention the occasional burden) of being Rashid, and this is why I want him to change the world.

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Bitossi Totem KRV-03, 2006

⁴ Marisa Barolucci, *Karim Rashid* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2004): 7.

