



Apple Juice from the Tap: a Conversation with Martine Bedin

David Duvshani interviews Martine Bedin, one of the founders of the radical Italian design group Memphis, in Paris. Bedin outlines the practices of the legendary group, its impact on her work today, and the relevance of its positions to the current political, social, and economic arenas.

Conversation / David Duvshani June 18, 2019

Martine Bedin, born in Bordeaux in 1957, was one of the founders of Memphis Group, a design group active in Italy in the years 1981-1988. Memphis's first show was set up in Milan, in 1981, as part of the city's furniture fair, and it turned the group's members into rising stars in the design world at the time. Ettore Sottsass (1917-2007), a key person in organizing and founding the group, became a major figure in design and architecture following the show.

Memphis Group's design concept was radical and different from the prevailing ideas of the period – in their choice of colors and forms, and in their approach to the production and manufacturing of objects. They acted in a way that was contrary to the modernist-conceptual principles of functionality and total faith in progress. The practice, mode of operation, and visual style the group developed flowed from the attempt to resist the consumer society, industry, and mass production. They tried to come up with alternatives to the way the industry was operating in those days while questioning the modes of production and manufacturing and the traditional relationship between designer and manufacturer.

Their design was polychromatic, spirited, and childlike. The work process was intuitive, playful, motivated by fun. They refused to present a clear manifesto or a distinct ideology. Rather, they viewed design as a flexible, open-ended tool for delivering messages and searching for a social identity while being aware of the past and present of consumerist culture.¹

The group broke up in 1988 and its members went on to pursue new directions. Martine Bedin now lives in Paris and continues to work independently. I've met her recently for a chat about Memphis Group, which is experiencing a resurgence of popularity.

David Duvshani: Hello, Martine. Many critics associate Memphis with the Postmodernism that has risen in the early 1980s. What was your position regarding it?

Martine Bedin: It's very clear. Memphis has never been Postmodern, for a simple reason – Postmodernism, as developed by Donald Judd in the US, and which is also evident in the work of Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, and others, had meant reverting to the use of academic, institutional language. This was apparent also in buildings designed by Robert Venturi in Los Angeles, for instance, with columns quoted from Greek and Roman architecture. For us, it was nothing like that. We searched for influences and images in whatever was of no interest to anyone else and might be very creative.

For example, we were very influenced by Indian homes, of the middle-class mostly. People who were not rich, who built little houses in the suburbs of Chennai, in the Madras region: three- or four-floor buildings, housing about 12 families. Each family has a different window, with colors, motifs, and small sculptures. They would paint the buildings themselves, in a way that does not at all remind you of government or religious structures. We were hypnotized by it. Another example of a personal source of influence is the gardens near Bordeaux, where I grew up, or the fishermen houses in the area. There, too, people would paint the walls in bright colors and embed bits of ceramics and collages in them – a kind of art brut. What interested me in these houses was that they were forms of non-institutional, free and joyous creativity, full of colors and forms.



Interieurs, watercolors, 30x40cm, 2015.jpg



[1]Martine Bedin, Interior, 2015, watercolor, 40X30 cm
Courtesy of Martine Bedin

DD: So there were no influences, discussions, a view of what has been happening outside the discussions within the group and in Italy in those years?

MB: We were all in Italy before establishing Memphis Group. I arrived in Florence in 1977 and Memphis was started in 1981. Two major factors affected us then: we've all experienced Italy at the end of the Red Brigades era – a very difficult moment, the end of the Left, the oppression of the Left. But at the same time, what we experienced profoundly, and most significant for me because I had worked in Florence with [Adolfo Natalini](#) [2], was the Radical Architecture movement. It was a very conceptual movement, but not exclusive to Italy: [Archigram](#) [3] in London, [Walter Pichler](#) [4] in Vienna – they developed a practice inspired by Dada and took a radical position regarding the Industrial Revolution and the ever-growing consumer society. The standpoint and the visual language we developed were very close to conceptual design or conceptual architecture – something that didn't have a defined political or aesthetical function.

Obviously, we knew what had been happening around us, but Memphis, as Sottsass had said over



and over again, was based first and foremost on a great intuition – something childlike, cheeky, or naïve, not connected to the industrial, political, conceptual, or radical world. In fact, not really connected to anything around us. Sottsass was older, and he was important as a guide and in channeling our anti-establishment and anti-culture energy. We did things without any thought as to how we would explain them. It is as if you come home, turn the tap on to wash your hands, and apple juice comes out instead of water. It's a kind of miracle, exceptional energy, you don't know what to do with it. Above all, Memphis is this energy. And we never argue about ideology, about what needs or doesn't need to be done – we simply act, with no plan or pre-definitions.

We used to meet at Sottsass's with our sketches, drink wine, and whenever someone showed a drawing everyone would clap enthusiastically. We acted intuitively, according to whatever had come our way and what we had thought would be fun to do – for instance, a manufacturer working with marble came to us, so we thought about designing something in marble. Someone else suggested working with rugs, so we designed rugs. We had no future plan. We wanted to represent the world with more buoyancy, freedom, and folly. We believed it was important to get rid of functionalism and we never considered giving a form any function other than what we had imagined it needed to be. This is very important. So when people say that you cannot sit on the chairs or that you cannot put books on the shelves, because they are angled, to me this is an absurd reaction. Who determines that things can only work in one form? Who decides that some things work or are efficient, and some are not? Memphis never wanted to prove anything, to fight, or to demonstrate – only to do things our way.

[MartineBedin-MELO-2007-Production Martine Bedin.jpg](#) [5]



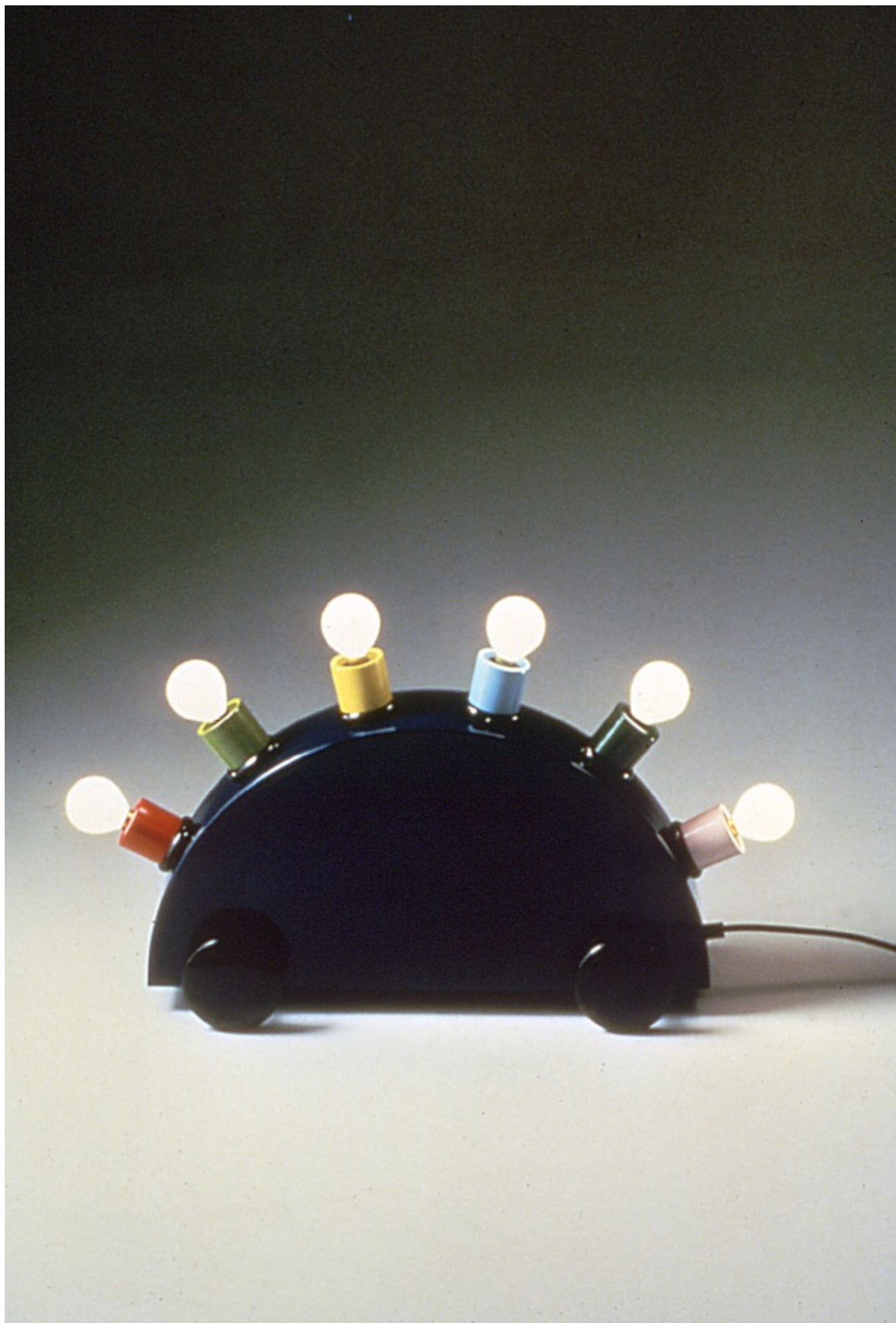
[6]Martine Bedin, Melo, 2007
Courtesy of Martine Bedin



DD: As a result of Memphis, Sottsass had become a sort of a guru for many architects and designers. Is it accurate to see it in this way? What was the internal hierarchy in the group?

MB: Sottsass was not a leader in any way. He couldn't run his own office – he was totally out of it. He didn't have a lot of money or work, but he had experience, charisma, and the ability to explain the world and his ideas, as you would expect from a philosopher or a spiritual figure like a priest or a rabbi. He had no authority over us, but he stood out in his maturity and his knowledge of the world. He spoke in a way such as I've never heard before, so I listened. But I drew my "[Superlamp](#) [7]" before I'd met him. One day he visited me in Paris and he wanted to look at my sketchbook, and he saw a lamp on wheels and got excited. I said, "here, you make it. Maybe this way it will see the light of day. I'd have to wait years if I do it on my own." This wasn't an isolated case. Sottsass connected with our energy because he needed it. He wanted to get out of the pessimistic conceptualism in which he felt trapped.

[MartineBedin-SUPERLAMP-1981-Production Memphis-Italie.JPG](#) **[8]**





[9]Martine Bedin, Superlamp, 1981, produced by Memphis, Italy
Courtesy of Martine Bedin

DD: Recently, Memphis has been experiencing a resurgence of popularity. The objects have become "vintage," and their influence can be detected in a range of ordinary products, as well as in museums and galleries. Something that began as an attempted kick at the establishment had now become inextricable from the consumer and aesthetic environment. Does this sadden you? Do you see it as the movement's failure?

MB: There are several issues here. First, everyone had forgotten a very basic thing about Memphis – that we never made unique or limited editions. The objects had never been numbered. There is an online catalog and you can order anything. And you'd be surprised to discover that the objects are not that expensive. So Memphis still exists as a company that produces objects. That has never stopped since the 1980s, but within its margins, there would be what often happens in art, music, and other areas: people speculate. When it comes to Memphis, it's often completely absurd, since the objects are not unique and can be re-manufactured at any time, but still, well-known gallerists sell our products for small fortunes, presenting them as "unique." To me, this seems a very dangerous thing.

One of our problems is that we hope people would select the furniture and the clothes they buy because they like them, and choose the music they listen to because they love it. The problem is that this is not always true. We all are subjected to propaganda that tells us what to want. It is very hard today to freely choose what we buy or do, regardless of social standing. When my students work on interior design projects, they search through many Internet sites; so when they write "comfortable sofa" photos of sofas pop up, always the same ones. Do they consider why they've found this sofa and not another? Who made it? Where does it come from? Is there a reason why the search always brings up the same thing? It's a vicious circle that's hard to break.

When Memphis started, we reversed the order of things - first, we'd make whatever we wanted, and then manufacturers would come to see us, and after a while, an industrialist had bought Memphis and never came to see or approve what we had wanted to produce. We could do whatever we wanted. The industry was working for us. But the group was finished the moment they came to our meetings and said that what we had been making was too expensive, too big, too hard to package – that's when we stopped, so as not to work for the industry, not to be dominated by it. So in 1988, the group broke up and people went their different ways.

But the standpoint has always been clear, and with time I believe in it even more. I'm convinced that we have to be anti-industry. That does not mean I don't use advanced technology, but I don't work with people whose only interest is to make money, even when it damages the environment and harms people. My own humble way to resist it is to refuse to take part in that world.

Another thing I'm struggling against is consumerism. People say to me that this is in contradiction with the fact that my objects are high-priced, but still my position is very simple – look at the amount of money a young couple spends of constant moving between apartments, buying cheap furniture at IKEA, and every time they move they leave it behind, and buy new stuff again, and again. It's a series of things that break or get tossed out, and over the years the money spent on them could have been invested in something of value that they would keep, while also giving value to the work of those who had made it. But today, the cheap stuff always wins, even if it's not as good, and craft no longer has value. I think it's a trap and the only way to avoid it is not to buy things.

DD: That's utopic, isn't it?

MB: On the contrary, it is something that people are slowly realizing. There is no other solution. This is also the moment when these things become political because, at the end of the day, anything that



we bring into our home is political.

[MartineBedin-CHARLOTTE -1987-Production Memphis-Italie.JPG](#) **[10]**



[11] Martine Bedin, Charlotte, 1987, made by Memphis, Italy
Courtesy of Martine Bedin



DD: Were you affected by the fact that you had been one of the few women in Memphis Group?

MB: This is a question I've been asked a lot and for years I've avoided answering. Nathalie du Pasquier and I were the only two women in Memphis, and there were only three of us in architecture school. At that time, to be the only woman in a group was not something we gave much thought to, we treated it as something completely natural. I did not feel deprived of rights or participation, I was not barred from going anywhere. My grandmother had wanted to go to school but was not allowed, so she went on a hunger strike and at the end they let her enter classes on condition that she wouldn't sit down and keep her coat on, standing in the last row. Many women had worked in the past and never got the recognition they deserved. This needs to be corrected, but it has not been my case.

DD: How do the encounters at Memphis affect you today as a teacher and a mature artist when meeting younger generations of artists?

MB: We never saw Sottsass as old, never sensed a generational gap. He was our equal in everything. Maybe it is the Mediterranean culture, where all generations live together, and at dinner time family members of all ages meet to eat and talk.

I started teaching very young, and most of my students were my age. It took them some time to process it but that didn't stop me from having a shared experience with them. What I learned from Sottsass's treatment of young people was to take their energy and lead it with them. Even at the most institutional school, in the end it is about encounters. If the group does something special the entire school becomes special. I also think that you cannot ever teach by existing principles. That has always been the way I worked. You must direct the students toward themselves, not toward what the teacher represents. My goal is for the students to find their own thing, and I make sure not to put myself at the center of this process.

DD: What about how the time when Memphis was founded is viewed today? The sense that it had been a miracle, that it is no longer possible for younger artists?

MB: This is Memphis as a phenomenon. This is more about trends, and how the period is being regarded today. You have to remember that when Memphis was founded, in the early 1980s in Milan, it had been a time of crisis: capital was being moved away, the lira lost its value by about 300%, the country was split between the continuously failing Left and the opportunistic Right. There was a sense of deep social collapse, which began in the 1960s. So why do people today remember it fondly? Maybe because we live in a dramatic political moment and there is no ideology anymore/left. Any idea that someone tries to suggest expires very quickly. But I think that socially, politically, and economically, the world in those years has been as hard and oppressive as it is today. We'll always be somebody else's sixties.

- [1.](#) To read more about the Memphis Group, see: Barbara Radice, *Memphis: Research, Experiences, Failures and Successes of New Design*, Milano: Electa, 1984

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