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Movable Feast

The daring furniture gallery Néotù was a cornucopia of contemporary-design delights, host to some of the top talents of the 20th-century and a launchpad for numerous notables of the 80s and 90s. A new exhibition serves up its most significant *chef-d'œuvres*

By Ivan Shaw



Pierre Staudenmeyer with Garouste & Bonetti pieces. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes

For those of us who were lucky enough to have had the chance to gallery hop across Manhattan's Soho neighbourhood at the very beginning of the 20th century's final decade, a key destination on any downtown art tour was the famed Leo Castelli gallery on Thompson Street. Castelli, arguably the most important American art dealer up to that point, displayed the works of many of the century's masters and, along with upstart Mary Boone,

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debuted the 80s megastar Julian Schnabel. In September of 1990, Castelli welcomed a new neighbour around the corner on Greene Street: Gérard Dalmon and Pierre Staudenmeyer's Néotù Gallery. Back in 1984, the duo had opened Galerie Néotù on Paris's Rue de Verneuil and quickly risen to prominence, exhibiting numerous of-the-moment designers. With the creation of a New York outpost, their impact crossed the Atlantic, cementing the pair's place as a driving force in the establishment of the era's leading lights.

Thirty five years later, on the 72nd floor of a newly opened sky-high residential building on the Upper East Side, this highly influential duo is being put centre stage once more. Curated by Galerie Gabriel's Nancy Gabriel and Sophie Mainier-Jullerot, who established *Mouvements Modernes* and collaborated with Staudenmeyer herself, *Néotù: The Visionary Years* not only celebrates his and Dalmon's legacy, but – thanks to the vision of interior decorator Michael Bargo – contextualises their work in the history of French Modernist design.



Gérard Dalmon and Pierre Staudenmeyer in their Soho gallery on Greene Street in 1990. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes

As far as Pierre Staudenmeyer (who died in 2007) was concerned, by the early 1980s 'contemporary artistic expression was reaching the end of an era: conceptual and minimal art had pushed the dematerialisation of the artwork to its extreme'; he and Dalmon 'felt disillusioned with what was emerging – mainly the return to figuration'. Holding the belief that contemporary photography and furniture design represented attempts to 'reconcile individuals' desire for a place in the world with artistic value', they made it their mission to establish the home as a site for artistic experiments. As Staudenmeyer put it: 'The very name Néotù is a manifesto; *néo-tout* – neo-everything'. The gallery's vision, he would go on to say, 'lay in the juxtaposition of existing ideas, an inventory of talent, and the search for coherence among the fragmented trends of contemporary design'.

As far as its economic strategy went, Néotù's founders wanted to distinguish the gallery from the 'dominant' Italian model of the early 1980s, which was, Staudenmeyer said, 'focused on fixed catalogues, industrial-scale production, and massive distribution investments', but failed to serve up a truly 'distinctive and successful offering'. Instead, the pair would look to the past for inspiration, finding it in the 18th-century marchand-merciers and, from the 20th century, Steph Simon and Galerie Lacroche.



Gérard Dalmon's Manhattan loft, where he settled while Pierre Staudenmeyer minded the Paris arm of Néotù, was formerly the 'VIP private room' of Area nightclub. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes



Like the rest of it, the dining area in Dalmon's loft teems with contemporary-design treasures, including, to the left, Dan Friedman's 1986 'Soweto' lamp. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes

In the course of all the exhibitions put on in both New York and Paris – ultimately more than 100 – over 16 years, the team at Néotù displayed works by around 40 designers. Of this group, four came to most vividly embody the gallery's vision: Martin Szekely, Garouste & Bonetti, Dan Friedman and Bořek Šípek. Also prominent were the works of Patrick Naggar and Pucci de Rossi.

Looking at these pieces today, one can't help but feel transported. Standing in front of the multicoloured 'Arc en Ciel' chest of drawers by Garouste & Bonetti, or sitting at Martin Szekely's 'Petit' desk, you can easily imagine the original owners playing 'Stop Making Sense' loudly on the stereo while getting ready for a big night at the Palladium in Manhattan, or at Le Palace in Paris, wearing the latest looks from Jean Paul Gaultier – who himself showed his first and only furniture collection at Néotù.



The silverware on the bed at Marithé and François Girbaud's Manhattan apartment, decorated by Néotù, rhymes with Garouste & Bonetti's 1992 'Cabinet Argente'. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes



A 1985 exhibition in the Paris gallery featuring, among others, the 'Wassily' table by Epinard Bleu, François Bauchet's 'Grand Lit' and Martin Szekeley's 'Pettit' desk. Photograph: Archives Néotù. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes



The office desk – complete with an inbuilt table lamp – created by Pucci de Rossi in 1982, still packs a punch alongside its matching chairs. Photograph: Peter Capellmann. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes

Luckily, as Nancy Gabriel explains, 'we now have all the invoices: we know where the pieces are and we know the families'. In France, it emerges, 'a lot of people still live in homes that were entirely designed by Néotù. And the owners have a lot of attachment to the pieces and to Pierre.' While Staudenmeyer oversaw the Paris outpost, Gérard relocated to New York, installing himself and his partner Joseph Savastano in a loft that was formerly the 'VIP encounters room' for the 80s club Area. After that, Néotù also took on commissions to design the Manhattan apartments for rocker Lou Reed and fashion designers Marithé and François Girbaud.

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The 1989 'Corbeille' sofa by Garouste & Bonetti sits among matching curtains. Photograph: Thibault Breton. Courtesy Mouvements Modernes

Reflecting on the lasting influence of Néotù, Gabriel asserts that the pair's aesthetic courage was critical to their success: 'They were exploring, experimenting... They flirted with bad taste before slipping across to the other side.' For his part, Bargo agrees: 'I think bad taste is very, very important in understanding good taste.' Occasionally embracing the former, he adds, is in his view what made the pair 'so radical in a really beautiful way'. It all ties in, they both feel, to the '80s moment' we're experiencing in the interiors world now: Bargo sees the artists that Néotù championed as the 'ancestors' of the work being done in 2025. 'When you see designers today displaying a truly personal, individual form of expression,' he says, 'this all stems from the innovations of the 80s movement. It's just that the technology has progressed.'

What's clear to the interior designer is how radical these pieces still are; after all, it's the most forward-thinking people in the art world today, he feels, that have most readily embraced the 80s resurgence. All the same, he and Gabriel are quick to acknowledge that humour is also an essential component to this work. 'These pieces really do make you smile,' Bargo remarks. 'They make you happy.'

'Néotù: The Visionary Years' runs until 17 October 2025 at Galerie Gabriel, New York. For more information, visit galeriegabriel.com

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