



*Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein: IKEA  
at CICCIO*

Norman Chernick-Zeitlin and Francesco Vizzini  
in conversation with Kari Rittenbach,  
August 2025

Kari Rittenbach:  
CICCIO always presents collaborations in its project space. But this exhibition may be the first reactivated historical collaboration. It represents one chapter of a project that materialized only once in New York, in 1996. How did you first learn about this work?

Francesco Vizzini:  
We had known Thomas Eggerer's paintings for many years prior to meeting him, from shows at Petzel and Buchholz. And we knew a bit about Jochen Klein's work too.

Norman Chernick-Zeitlin:  
We didn't actually know about their collaborations until the artist Nick Mauss recommended we look into it. We found the work pretty interesting right away, but didn't immediately have plans to revisit or recreate it.

FV:  
Thomas told us about a few projects the two did together, and when they briefly joined Group Material. Documentation from both *Market* (Kunstverein München,

Munich, 1995) and *Project* (Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh, 1996) were recently shown in an exhibition on Jochen Klein's work, *After the Light* (MACRO, Rome, 2023). That's when we learned more about Eggerer and Klein's *IKEA* project too.

NCZ:  
Thomas emphasized that the location of the installation was really important—the public-facing space of the Printed Matter store in Soho. So we discussed what it would mean to display the work in a domestic exhibition space that is also our home.

KR:  
Site and situation held special significance for artists in the 1990s.

FV:  
Printed Matter still organizes a series of window installations, a project begun by founding board member Lucy Lippard. At the time it was being facilitated by Julie Ault. Eggerer and Klein's intervention was a response to the store's Wooster Street location.

KR:  
Just as Soho was transitioning.

FV:  
It was the culmination of a transition from an industrial district inhabited by artists seeking cheap rents in the 1960s and 1970s into a high-end commercial retail hub. By the 1990s, the streets of Soho were filled with branding and advertising for furniture and design stores. That's what Eggerer and Klein were interested in addressing.

KR:  
In other words, the production of lifestyle. Although there was an IKEA in New Jersey when they realized their project, there wasn't yet one in the five boroughs. But the starting point for this project, collaboration, and approach goes back even earlier—to when Klein and Eggerer attended the art academy in Munich.

FV:  
They studied painting, but they were moving away from painting.

KR:  
In Munich they came into contact with art historian and curator Helmut Draxler, who was then the director of the Kunstverein. Klein and Eggerer both took his seminar in preparation for the exhibition, *Die Utopie des Designs* (*The Utopia of Design*), 1994. Klein contributed a catalog text on "Corporate Design, Identity and Culture," treating new methods of branding and advertising that opened up avenues for a critical analysis of images.

Klein and Eggerer also co-wrote a piece on designer Otl Aicher and the 1972 Munich Olympics. They afterwards continued writing together, expanding their sense of the field or perceptual landscape into the social and political dimensions of their everyday environment. Among other topics, they covered formal and informal uses of Munich's English Garden (1994), the talk show as a peculiar communication ritual in

American television (1996), and gay politics in the Clinton era (1996).

FV:  
Draxler had a big impact as they began collaborating. That is very much where the *IKEA* conversation starts.

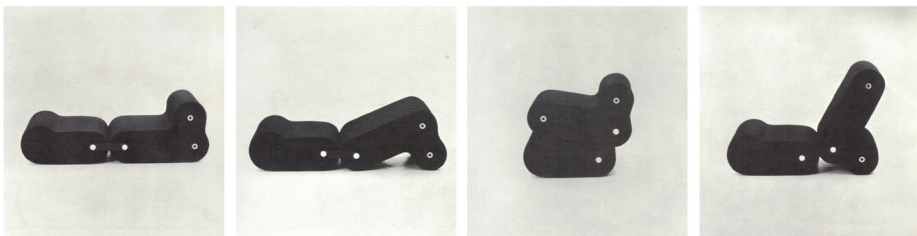
KR:  
Thomas has described how design was reintegrated into Germany after the war, considering the lost generation of the Bauhaus, and also in relation to Aicher's internationalist pictograms for the 1972 Olympic Games. IKEA opened its first store in West Germany in 1974. The discussions with Draxler for *The Utopia of Design* were inspired by the MoMA exhibition, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* (1972), which introduced many key figures who sought to effect social change through revised forms of living. The connection to IKEA can be seen through what is ultimately an appropriation of Enzo Mari's profoundly open approach to production.

FV:  
Yes, in particular, the series *Proposta per Autoprogettazione* (*Proposal for Self-Design*), published in 1974. For me, it's one of the best examples of radical and democratic design. *Autoprogettazione* included nineteen items of furniture—with blueprints, photographs, plans, and drawings—that people could build for themselves, even using found wood or scrap materials. The idea was to encourage critical reflection on mass-produced objects. So it wasn't just about the object of design itself, but about empowering users to understand design, and to become thoughtful makers rather than passive consumers. The series could be assembled by anyone with very basic tools and materials at home.

NCZ:  
The idea was that designers shouldn't only make objects for use, but also consider how to change society. That was part of their utopian vision.

In particular, modular furniture, which is made to accommodate multiple functions, reminds you that you can change the organization of your society or the organization of your life.

Radical designers wanted people to think beyond furniture to consider their wider social environments. IKEA took that model and used it to maximize profits, while suggesting a low-cost outlay as commensurate with democracy.



FV:

And it was a response to the rigid norms of modernism—a desire for adaptable living and a rejection of fixed standards. Joe Colombo's *Tube Chair* (1969) is a good example: four curved, cylindrical pieces that can be reconfigured into different chair forms—a chaise, an armchair, a bench. The user builds their own seating arrangement.

NCZ:

The MoMA show summarized these developments in Italy, including both conservative designers and their more radical counterparts. Enzo Mari contributed an essay instead of any design object. Ettore Sottsass presented an installation that was completely open in terms of possible uses—for storage or for living. It looked like oversized rolling suitcases. And he wrote a text on the dissolution of the object as something one might care about or want to possess, which derives from a left-wing critique of ownership.

FV:

When we look at IKEA, we can see how these anti-capitalist ideas were turned on their heads. For example: selling flat-pack objects people can assemble at home, that are modular and multi-functional but also cheaply made, easily breakable, and ultimately disposable.

KR:

Another important point to touch on is that both Eggerer and Klein were painters. The mid-1990s maybe parallels the current period, when there is a crisis coming in the market for contemporary painting. I also think a lot of artists are questioning how their work reflects their own social values, or how to better critique the values of the systems they're embedded in. Both Eggerer and Klein returned to the canvas, but it was this very particular moment in the 1990s when they started to work in more conceptual ways, together, and outside painting.

NCZ:

As I understand it, they needed to give time and attention to other modes of working by having the experience of being a different kind of author altogether. Once they graduated they both moved to New York in 1994.

KR:

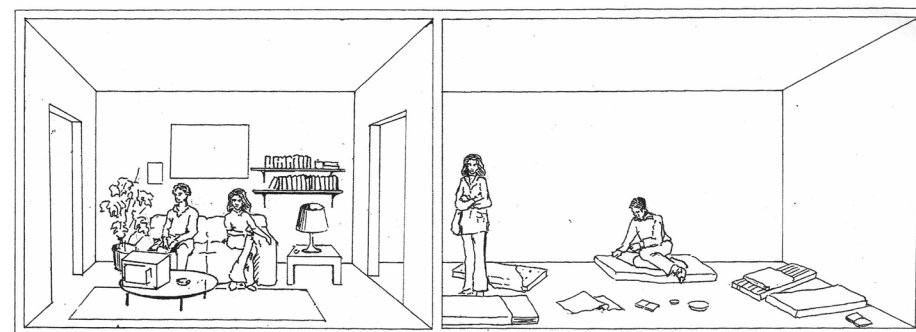
Klein had been painting the baroque interiors of opera houses, palaces, and theaters—essentially, the spaces of aesthetic experience. If I think about the background structures and isolated figures in Eggerer's work, it is easy to see how both were variously dealing with the organization of space.

FV:

In Thomas's paintings you see figures standing, sitting, lying down, or caught in choreographed groupings that feel both familiar and strangely detached. The settings often resemble institutional or public spaces—a gym, plaza, or some kind of transit area—abstracted just enough to feel open-ended. The *IKEA* project focuses on how design shapes social behavior—how things like furniture, layout, and spatial organization affect the way we live, move, and relate to one another. So the conceptual concerns do carry over.

KR:

Klein and Eggerer took part in two Group Material projects, including *Market* at the Kunstverein Munich.



FV:

The walls of the Kunstverein were stenciled with empowering slogans that had been taken from advertising campaigns. It was direct and critical, and tied into Eggerer and Klein's interest in design as a social language.

KR:

*Market* diagnosed the exploitation of subjectivity:

In order to create new markets, groups are identified, constructed in a blur of multiplication. Commonalities and divisions are structured, categorized and named. Today, businesses exhibit an unprecedented social suppleness in order to continually pro-

vide new commodity sites for individuals to describe and locate themselves.

These concepts also relate to your observations of how IKEA operates today. Perhaps we should speak more about what the show at Printed Matter was, and what CICCIO will present?

FV:

Eggerer and Klein made a wall drawing inside the store and an installation on its windowed facade. The window installation comprised a drawing on the glass itself, as well as large posters and additional smaller prints. Both the wall and window drawings showed interior sketches of two adjoining rooms in an apartment, but from two different perspectives, plan and elevation.

In one room, two people sit on a sofa. The other room is a squat situation—a mattress on the floor with two figures: one standing, one lying down. Both couples look quite annoyed with each other.

KR:

A perfect front for the terrorists' crash pad.

NCZ:

One of the posters has a quote from Stefan Aust describing the Baader-Meinhof group's cells, which were hidden behind bourgeois apartments.

FV:

That connection between function and “revolution” is important. The poster images were taken from the 1975 and 1977 IKEA catalogs and altered with layered text and quotations. One poster features modular seating that resembles a rolled-up mattress. It suggests a much more provisional kind of living. There is a quotation from Bernward Vesper’s posthumous, semi-autobiographical novel *Die Reise* (1977): “I was fed up. In place of revolution, reforms became sufficient. We bought ourselves new beds. You are right, the others were impossible.”



KR:

The German-language copy for this mattress-roll-chair-hybrid includes the suggestion that it is: “For people with less regard for status symbols than for irreproducible and fresh interior design ideas.” These catalogs were distributed during the height of the RAF. And Vesper was the former partner of RAF co-founder Gudrun Ensslin. He committed suicide well before the so-called German Autumn of 1977.

FV:

The juxtaposed messages provide a critique of how lifestyle aesthetics are marketed as freedom, even while they replicate social norms—such as the female model reclining in stocking feet. The smaller prints in the window showed radical Italian and minimalist Scandinavian designs from the same era that IKEA was outright copying. Pieces that still represent “good taste” and progressive design today.

KR:

Joe Colombo, Alvar Aalto, Eero Saarinen...

The mattress-roll object can be used as a daybed, sofa, or (from the original ad copy) a *Diskussions-“Ebene”*—a conversation platform. That even sounds like the title of a Liam Gillick artwork, which makes me think about the proliferation of neoliberalism.

FV:

That piece really borrows from Joe Colombo, whose designs imagined a different kind of future—modular, flexible, even communal.

NCZ:

The rudimentary utilitarianism of the mattress on the floor is also emblematic of anti-capitalism, activism, and subsistence living.

FV:

The radical design movements we’ve been discussing were reactions to authoritarianism, economic inequality, and capitalist exploitation.

Because they were working in the 1990s, Eggerer and Klein were looking back to that period of possibility, at what happens *after* resistance gives out. After the protests, after the revolutionary idealism. The *IKEA* project reflects that transformation.

Meanwhile, the version of democracy we’re left with today feels increasingly shaped by corporate interests—terms like “inclusivity,” “choice,” “freedom,”

and “empowerment” are filtered through a logic of profit.

NCZ:

When IKEA opened in West Germany left-wing terrorism was on the rise after the student movements of 1968. Eggerer and Klein were interested in how IKEA was selling an identity back to the politically engaged students as they were leaving the university and settling down to become professors, build families, and so forth. They were integrating into society, entering the *petit bourgeois*, but wanting to hold onto the democratic or left-wing values they still identified with. IKEA swooped in to sell them progressive good taste.

FV:

As a corporation IKEA works really hard to link itself to democracy. They’ve built their image on the idea that making (appropriated) design available to the masses is a political gesture. And it worked. IKEA is now the biggest furniture retailer in the world. All despite a record of human rights abuses such as repeatedly using prison labor in manufacturing.

KR:

Exactly. How do you restage a project like this in today’s context?

FV:

The main challenge was the translation of the site, from a storefront to a domestic environment. However that shift is also what drove us to recreate this work. So many corporate strategies do not arrive through catalogs or advertising in public spaces—they are already in our homes, our phones, the fabric of our daily lives. The storefront has moved inside.

KR:

IKEA does not even produce a printed catalog anymore. When did that stop?

FV:

In 2021. Most companies have moved away from printing due to the cost of

production and distribution. Now we’re dealing with a media ecology that’s totally changed. Everything has moved online. IKEA’s marketing strategy is focused on social media tailored to our personal lives.

Technology has changed drastically, but many of the issues Eggerer and Klein addressed remain the same, if not worse. Moving the exhibition into a domestic space is the key gesture for us—we are bringing the work into the place where these influences play out today.

NCZ:

We typically clear out the main room of our apartment for installs, but for this show we will arrange some of the IKEA furniture that we own among remnants from Eggerer and Klein’s project.

KR:

A living room, and a staging room.

FV:

There’s a lamp and a table that’s a copy of Saarinen’s Tulip table. Both were found on the street near our apartment. That disposability is also part of the IKEA model. It is very common to see the furniture abandoned on sidewalks here, then purchased anew for the next apartment.

KR:

There is also an online component of the show, accessible via QR code.

FV:

The code links directly to documentation of the original *IKEA* project in 1996. More than a viewing link, it’s also a means to contextualize the show to the phone and the domestic space of our apartment. Printed Matter’s site embodied the tension between alternative culture and commercial absorption in the 1990s, what Eggerer and Klein then described as “the retreat of the ‘revolt’ into privacy.”

We’re there now—only our homes have become part of the commercial

interface. The QR code bridges these two moments.

KR:

Someone could technically upload the show to the IKEA website, which showcases user-generated content of objects in real domestic spaces. Right?

NCZ:

Yes. IKEA has produced several UGC advertising campaigns in lieu of its illustrated catalog, as well as developing incentivized video games, and embarking on a social photography project with Annie Leibowitz.

KR:

My last question is about the location of radical politics today. We have been talking about the penetration of capitalism into private, personal, and domestic space, and the almost complete loss of public space. In the 1990s, it was still possible to make a distinction between public and private.

Eggerer and Klein parodied the new fetish for design by hinting that the 1970s bourgeois living room might really be a facade for extremism. Their rendering of the flop house accords with both mainstream stereotypes and the comedy of left-asceticism. The *IKEA* project was conceived thirty years ago, but returns us to important questions for the present and the coming years. After collective popular movements for progressive social change, is there always a corresponding deflection of radical ideas into consumer culture?

NCZ:

It is so much easier to buy something than to do the uncomfortable work of taking action or living in open opposition to the powerful.

KR:

Klein and Eggerer returned to painting, separately, the following year. Because Klein died tragically from HIV-related illnesses just after turning 30, in 1997,

there remains an openness to his oeuvre that embraces both social critique and a certain pleasure. Nick Mauss suggests Klein's "sense of continual reconsideration and incorporation of past concerns [in] the present, of keeping the object of contemplation turning in constant crisis" ultimately "poses a problem for ... airtight packaging."

One way to counter hegemonic corporate practices is by resisting such packaging. That is, by maintaining a heterogeneity of approach and intent, even number.

Front cover:

*Ikea*, 1996, invitation card, Printed Matter, New York

Interior:

Joe Colombo, *Multichair*, two-element adjustable chair, 1969  
Polyurethane covered in cloth  
27 ½ x 22 ¾ x 42 ½ inches (70 x 58 x 108 cm)

*Ikea*, 1996, detail of the installation

*Ikea*, 1996, mixed media, installation view, Printed Matter, New York  
Photo: Nancy Linn

Back cover:

*Ikea*, 1996, artists' statement facsimile

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein: IKEA*, CICCIO, New York, September, 2025

Typeset in IKEA Sans, a modified extra bold Futura typeface designed by Robin Nichols, and printed in an edition of 75

Design: Julia Schäfer  
Editor: Kari Rittenbach  
Special thanks to Thomas Eggerer, Tess Edmonson, Remsen Graphics and Printed Matter, Inc.

**IKEA**  
**Artists' Statement**  
**By Thomas Eggerer and Jochen Klein**

The window installation at Printed Matter treats "IKEA" as a subject, context and social space. IKEA is the world's largest, globally operating furniture company, having 121 branches in 25 countries on four continents. In 1994 one-third of IKEA's total sales were achieved in Germany.

The opening of the first IKEA store in West Germany in 1974 coincided with the peak of German left-wing "terrorism" in the form of the Red Army Faction. IKEA offered progressive design that would satisfy the desires of a new and rebellious generation. Indeed the 1970's could be seen as period in which the former protesters were integrated into society as a new academic elite, while a small part of the protest movement turned into a militant organization. IKEA furniture is an analogy of this social change; it describes the retreat of the "revolt" into privacy.

Design of the 1960's and 70's had moved away from the classical object towards the shaping of collective experiences -- many designers had tried to participate in the engineering of social change. This approach failed because of the inherent contradiction in any kind of "designed utopia".

The formal vocabulary of IKEA furniture was originally derived from the marxist-utopian interior design of Italy (Archizoom, Colombo) and rationalist-modernist Scandinavian design (Aalto, Saarinen). This vocabulary suited the progressive climate of the 1960's: ecological, participatory, democratic, anti-authoritarian, transparent, etc. So, IKEA stands for the altered and more open society in Germany after 1968; but also for the student movement's shift towards a new status quo.

During the 1980's and 90's design seemed to have revised its idealistic claims, and begun to cater to a affluent and indulgent lifestyle. The design object has become a sign of expertise in good taste. A development that is paralleled in New York by the socio-economic change of SoHo, where art and design present themselves as part of the same spectacle.

Our childhoods, growing up in West Germany in the 1960's and 70's, were furnished with IKEA. Still today IKEA mirrors cultural change. In its advanced marketing strategies, it shows again how consumer culture registers and appropriates criticism.