

karim rashid

pleasurscape



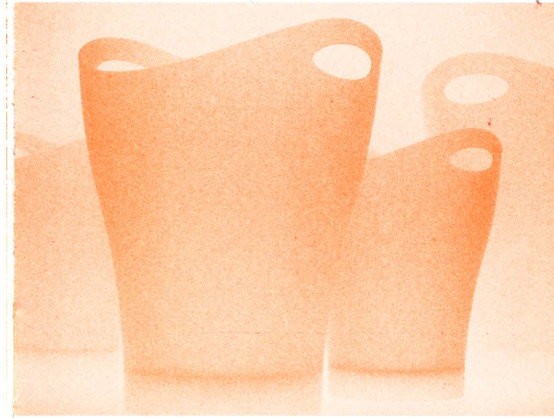
pleasurscape

25 january - 25 february 2001 rice university art gallery

> FOREWORD

Rice University Art Gallery presents site-specific installations that reflect the diversity and vitality of the best of contemporary visual culture. Thus, we were extremely pleased to commission a new work by designer Karim Rashid. *Pleasurescape*, with its provocative *sans-e* title, comes about at a moment of excitement and questioning in the art world, as increasing numbers of design exhibitions are mounted in museums and galleries across the country. At the same time, cross disciplinary symposia are asking the question "Is design art?" *Pleasurescape* spoke eloquently to this discussion, embodying Rashid's vision of a future where the question is, in fact, no longer relevant; one where art, architecture, and design join together as one fluid discipline.

Karim Rashid is a striking, 6 foot-plus exclamation point of a figure, who walked into the Rice Gallery one afternoon in November 2000, wearing a white suit punctuated by vivid orange running shoes. Those shoes were our first indication of the significance the color orange would assume in our lives over the next few months. Soon, gallery walls glowed from multiple coats of Wildfire Orange fluorescent paint; Rashid's bright orange Oh chairs sat clustered before an exhibition video, and cases of his signature



Garbino trash cans—in orange, of course—were stacked in our offices. Orange electrified the space with the same intensity that it lit these familiar household items. At night, viewed from outside, the building appeared to be aflame, while inside, the walls receded and the eye was drawn irresistibly to the pure white platform at the gallery's center. Visitors gravitated toward the installation, eager to sit, lounge, slip and slide on *Pleasurescape*'s slick, undulating surface. We would like to express our deepest thanks to Karim for—there is no other way to say it—the pleasure his work brought to so many viewers. We are glad to have been part of Rashid's *Pleasurnation*, and are grateful to Karim for making the Rice Gallery part of his ongoing creative investigation.

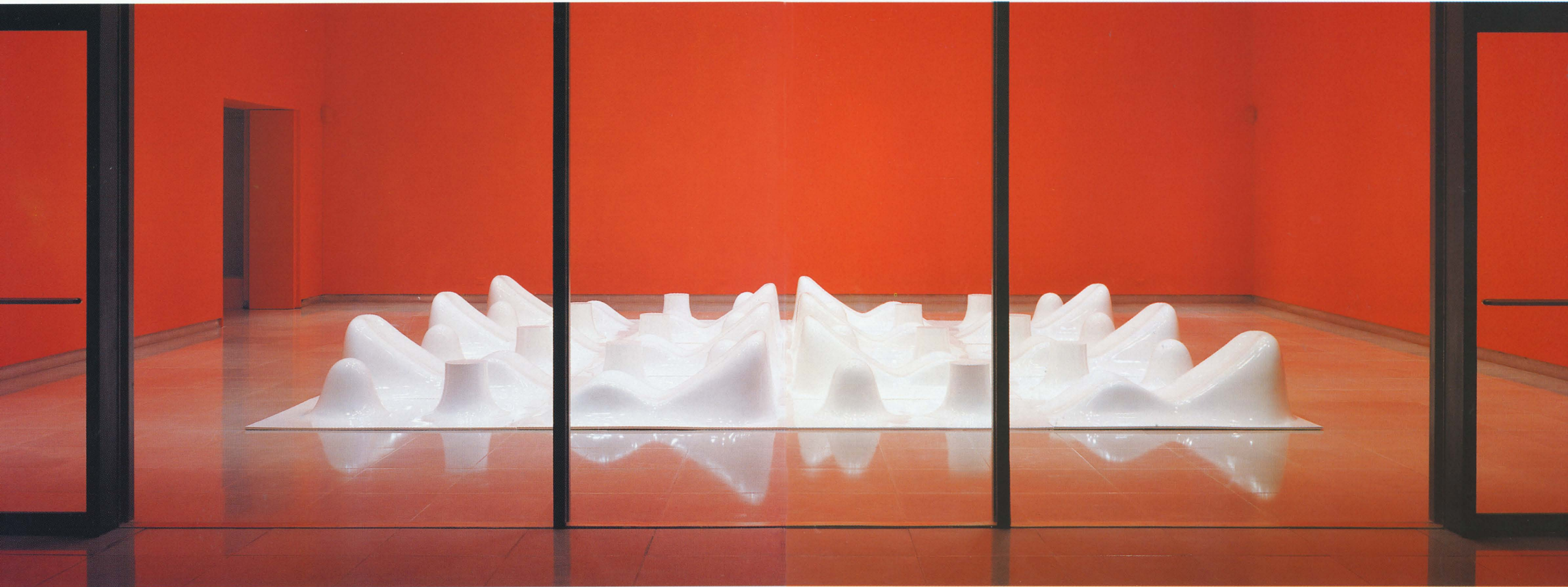
Very special thanks and admiration go to our friend and colleague Jennifer King. If timing is everything, Jennie's choice of Karim Rashid reveals her savvy sense of the moment, as well as

an acute awareness of design's importance in our daily lives. Her insightful essay situates design in a historical dialogue with the art of the last half-century, and artfully demonstrates the merging of disciplines in Rashid's work. We are grateful to Jennie for her original thinking, hard work, and her uncanny ability to make connections among people. Most of all, we thank her for opening our eyes to an exciting new world of beautiful, whimsical, and ingenious objects, and for revealing their relevance to contemporary art.

We are especially grateful to our Members and Patrons, whose consistent generosity provides the major exhibition support. Without them, none of this would be possible. Every Rice Gallery project benefits from the strong institutional support we receive from Gale Stokes, Dean of Humanities, and Becky Heye, Assistant Dean, and we express our deepest appreciation to them for their encouragement and unflagging commitment.

Kimberly Davenport
Director





Karim Rashid's Pleasurescape by Jennifer King

> SHAPE-SHIFTING RASHID

The title of Karim Rashid's installation for the Rice Gallery, *Pleasurescape*, rolls off the tongue with an easy ambiguity. On the one hand, the word *scape* is a synonym for *escape*, so one might think of *Pleasurescape* as a type of delightful retreat—an enjoyable getaway. But the word *scape* can also mean a *view*, used as a suffix when describing the characteristics of a particular vista, as in *landscape*, *seascape*, *cityscape*; in this etymological tradition, one could think of *Pleasurescape* as a discrete segment of the physical environment—a scene that might be captured in a photograph or a painting. Regardless of how you choose to interpret the title of Rashid's installation, the combination of the words *pleasure* and *scape* carries with it a certain seductive quality.

The suggestive ambiguity that results from the melding of seemingly disparate elements is abundant in Rashid's creations. His work is heavily populated with names and titles of his own contriving—neologisms like *softscape*, *plob*, *globject*, *pleasurtronics*. Just as these expressions combine otherwise



discrete words, Rashid's designs have a tendency to blend genres that are usually considered separately, such as furniture and sculpture, or installation and interior design. Viewing the range of *stuff* that Rashid has chosen to design—from traditional objects like chairs, tables, and sofas to the plastic domain of trash cans, coasters, mouse pads, and cigarette lighters—one could argue that his work smartly treads the line between the essential and the

gimmicky; it makes us question, through design, our basic material needs.

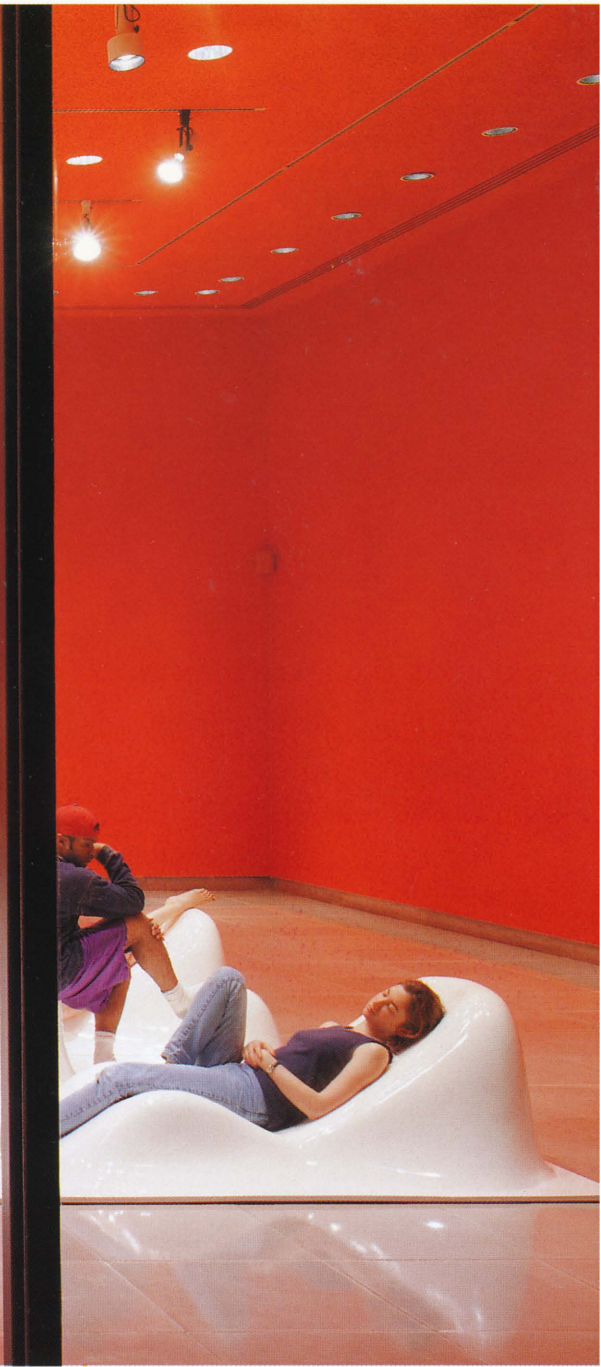
For the creation of his installation at the Rice Gallery, Rashid has assumed the guise of an artist with a chameleon-like ease. Indeed, it is the trait of effortless shape-shifting that exemplifies both Rashid and his work. Though trained as an industrial designer, Rashid moves comfortably between the realms of design and art; his creations, though found in retail stores and design showrooms, are rapidly making their way into art galleries and museum collections.¹ Rashid's interest in transcending the confines of traditional definitions is particularly evident in his work at Rice: during the early stages of *Pleasurescape*'s development, he alluded to the fluid movement between physical and conceptual realms that would appear in the final installation, writing, "*Pleasurescape* sets a stage for a non-stop amorphous plastic scape that denotes a world with no boundaries."²

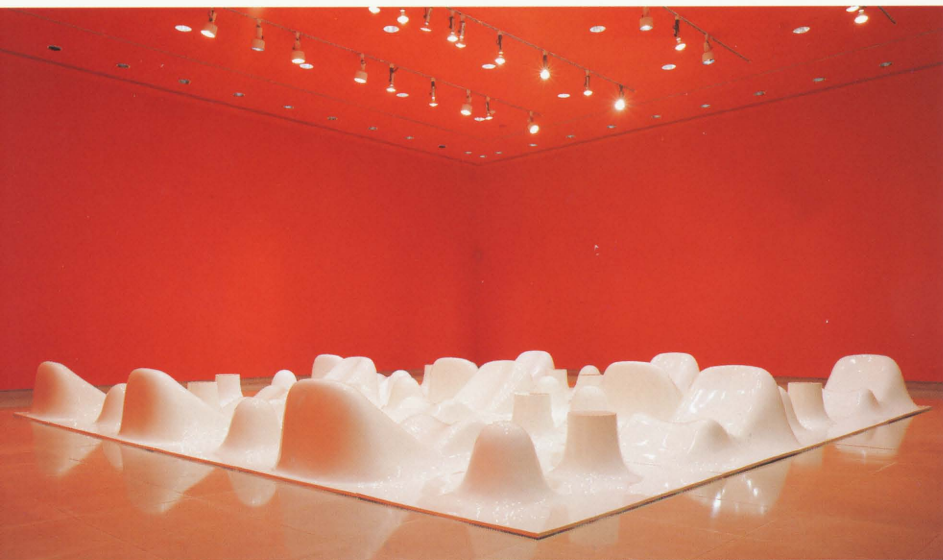
> THE INTIMACY, PUBLICNESS,
AND THEATRICALITY OF *PLEASURSCAPE*

"I am for art you can sit on," wrote Claes Oldenburg in 1961 in his now famous and much anthologized statement "I Am for an Art..."³ Today Oldenburg's statement, when recalled in light of the sitting, lounging, and socializing that takes place in *Pleasurescape*, serves as a reminder of the debt that contemporary installation owes to artistic developments of the 1960s and early '70s. It was during those decades that artists like Oldenburg, Allan Kaprow, Robert Morris, and Donald Judd—figures we now consider to be pioneers of installation art—first began to challenge the traditional relationship between the artwork and the viewer. In the work of these artists, art was no longer simply to be looked at; it could engage the body as well as the eye. The importance accorded to a work's scale in relation to its viewer was a major component of the new attitude towards three-dimensional objects; Morris described this phenomenon in 1966, explaining:

*The quality of intimacy is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself. The quality of publicness is attached in proportion as the size increases in relation to oneself. This holds true so long as one is regarding the whole of a large thing and not a part. The qualities of publicness or privateness are imposed on things. This is due to our experience in dealing with objects which move away from the constant of our own size in increasing or decreasing dimension.*⁴







Though Morris' observations may seem conventional to our postmodern sensibilities, at the time of his writing, such ideas were the source of great critical debate. In 1967 the critic Michael Fried derided the theatricality of situations that acknowledged the presence of the viewer, proclaiming, "the literalist espousal of objecthood

amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art."⁵

The assurance with which Rashid has embraced such notions of *intimacy*, *publicness*, and *theatricality* is clearly evident in *Pleasurescape*. Not only do the curvaceous lounge chairs, squat side tables, and amorphous swells of *Pleasurescape's* modules display an acute awareness of human scale, but the concept behind *Pleasurescape's* design goes beyond merely acknowledging the presence of the viewer—it seems to demand the presence of a *user*. The object/beholder relationship generated by the kind of physical interplay that *Pleasurescape* invites is astutely summarized by Morris' 1966 position on sculpture: "it is the viewer who changes the shape constantly by his change in position relative to the work."⁶

Viewer relativity may be one of *Pleasurescape's* most seductive features—a trait that is augmented by the Rice Gallery's special site characteristics. When seen through the plate glass that forms the gallery's front wall, the installation acquires a performative aspect in which lounging visitors appear to be subjects of display, alienated from outside spectators by the glass divide. Yet when experienced in close contact by those who have surrendered to *Pleasurescape's* fiberglass folds, the installation creates an intimate community of participants in which the slippery seats, orange walls, and ambient music promise to surround and envelop.

The enveloping nature of *Pleasurescape*'s multiple elements is a curious variation on those artworks that have historically used the *gallery space* itself as a medium for discourse. With the creation of *Pleasurescape*, Rashid seems to have both accepted and rejected the challenge to white-walled neutrality that installation art has traditionally represented—the situation that critic Brian O'Doherty described when he wrote in 1976, "With postmodernism, the gallery space is no longer 'neutral.' The wall becomes a membrane through which esthetic and commercial values osmotically exchange."⁷ Although *Pleasurescape* joins the ranks of installations that have breached the gallery-imposed separation between art and life, the environment is not so much a renegotiation of art's commodity status as it is a brief escape from the commercial realm of Rashid's product designs.

In O'Doherty's seminal essays on the ideology of gallery space, collectively published under the title *Inside the White Cube*, the critic described the classic modernist gallery as "the limbo between studio and living room, where the conventions of both meet on a carefully neutralized ground."⁸ A similar concept of *limbo* applies to Rashid's Rice Gallery installation, except that where O'Doherty referred to an artwork's temporary situation in the flow of objects between those who make art and those who buy it, *Pleasurescape* is stuck in a permanent state of in-between-ness, occupying a netherworld between museum, living room, and furniture showroom where the conventions of each are confusingly intertwined. Here, the museum is a place where the art can be touched; the gallery space is a furniture showroom where the chairs are not for sale; the white box is a living room that is nobody's home. In the attempt to situate *Pleasurescape*, we find ourselves floating among multiple realms.





> PLEASURSCAPE AND BEYOND

Karim Rashid says he wants to change the world.⁹ This ambition (described by one critic as “not ironic, just characteristically immodest”¹⁰) has provoked many to wonder whether Rashid is motivated by a sense of moral obligation or by a personal desire for individual celebrity. Either way, Rashid’s meteoric rise within the design community seems to suggest that such a goal may not be out of reach. “Inevitably,” Rashid writes, “our physical landscape will merge and connect. Object and environment, city and town, water and ground, highway to highway, being to being.”¹¹ If Rashid has his way, an environment like *Pleasurescape* may represent just a tiny sample of the world to come—a world, Rashid says, that he is developing.

1 Rashid is represented by Sandra Gering Gallery, New York. Among the numerous art spaces and museums in which he has exhibited are Deitch Projects, New York; John Weber Gallery, New York; Capp Street Project, San Francisco; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. By his own count, Rashid has over seventy objects in permanent collections.

2 Karim Rashid, e-mail to the author, November 12, 2000.

3 Originally composed for the 1961 exhibition *Environments, Situations and Spaces* at Martha Jackson Gallery, in New York. Republished in *Claes Oldenburg, Store Days: Documents from The Store (1961) and Ray Gun Theater (1962)* (New York: Something Else Press, Inc., 1967).

4 Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” *Artforum*, October 1966, p. 21.

5 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum*, June 1967, p. 15.

6 Morris, p. 21.

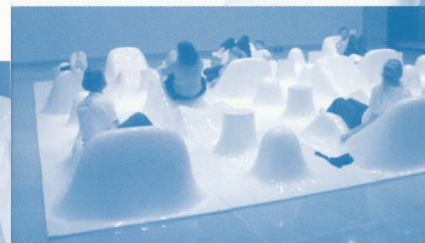
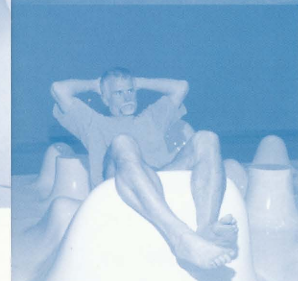
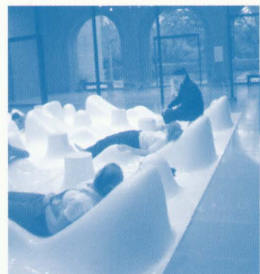
7 Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1976), p. 79.

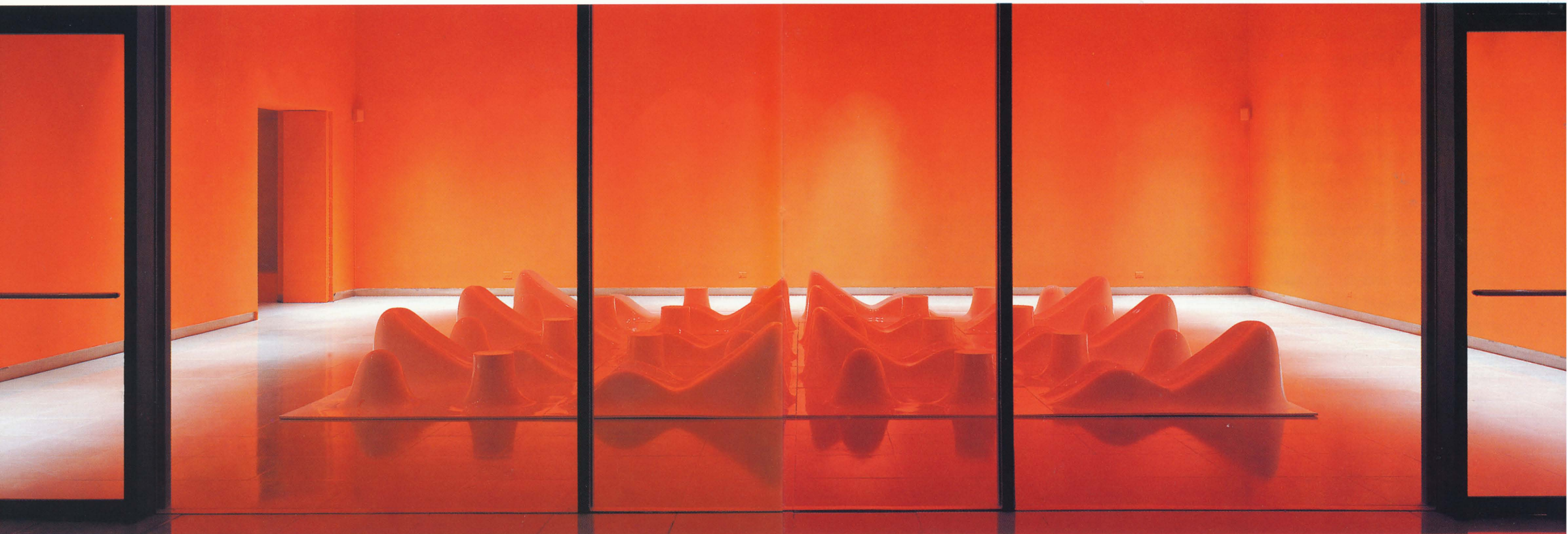
8 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

9 I allude to the title of Rashid’s forthcoming monograph, *Karim Rashid: I Want to Change the World*.

10 Belinda Luscombe, “The Poet of Plastic,” *Time*, July 2, 2001, p. 70.

11 Karim Rashid, e-mail to the author November 12, 2000.





> ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a genuine pleasure to thank the many people who helped to make this exhibition a reality. My greatest and most heartfelt thanks go to Kim Davenport for her giant act of faith in offering me such a wonderful opportunity. Her support and advice have been invaluable in ways that go beyond the scope of this exhibition. Likewise, I thank Jaye Anderton, Karen Rapp, and Greg Donner of the Rice Gallery, as well as Elena Wortham and Antonio Manega of Gazer Design Group, and photographer Tom DuBrock, for providing me with the rewarding experience of working with people I consider to be friends.

This exhibition could not have taken place without Karim Rashid's willingness to explore the intersection of art, architecture, and design within the walls of the Rice Gallery. I am grateful for the time he devoted to this project in the midst of his very busy schedule. Michael Regan of the Rashid Studio deserves special thanks for his endless patience and helpfulness.

Additional thanks for support of events and programs related to *Pleasurescape* go to Lars Lerup and Luke Bulman of the Rice School of Architecture, Carolyn Brewer of Sunset Settings, Patrick Phipps, Cindi Strauss of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the household of Cindi Strauss and Chris Ballou.

Finally, I would like to thank the following friends and mentors: Bill Camfield and Diane Dillon for their ongoing encouragement; Janet Landay for her guidance and friendship, Cindi Strauss and Brooke Stroud for their stimulating conversations about art and design, Mark Haxthausen and Michael Conforti for their support at Williams, and the many Houston friends—especially Tracy, Christian, Nicole, and Viv—who made my trips to Houston such a treat.

Jennifer King

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Karim Rashid was born in Cairo, Egypt in 1960. In 1993 he opened his design practice in New York City, where he continues to live and work. Rashid's product designs include the best-selling Oh Chair and Garbo Can, both produced by Umbra. He has also designed for clients including Nambé, Issey Miyake, and Sony. In 1999 Rashid received The George Nelson Design Award, given in recognition of the ten most creative furniture designers working today. He is the recipient of numerous other awards, including the Daimler Chrysler 1999 Award, the Philadelphia Museum of Art Collab Award, 1999, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art Young Designer of the Year in 1998. Rashid's work is represented in the permanent collections of major museums, and he has exhibited work at The Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and the Wexner Center for the Arts.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Guest curator Jennifer King graduated from Rice University in 1996 with a B.A. in Art and Art History. She served as the Visual Arts Coordinator at DiverseWorks Artspace, Houston, from 1996 - 1997, and worked as a Curatorial Assistant at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston from 1997 - 1999. She is currently in the Ph.D. Program in art history at Princeton University.

Pleasurescape, 2001
Courtesy of the artist
Commission, Rice University Art Gallery
Jennifer King, Guest Curator

Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the Rice University campus, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the Web at www.rice.edu/ruag

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Continental Airlines is the official airline of the Rice University Art Gallery.

Rice University Art Gallery Staff:
Kimberly Davenport, Director;
Jaye Anderton, Manager;
Karen Rapp, Curatorial Assistant;
Greg Donner, Preparator

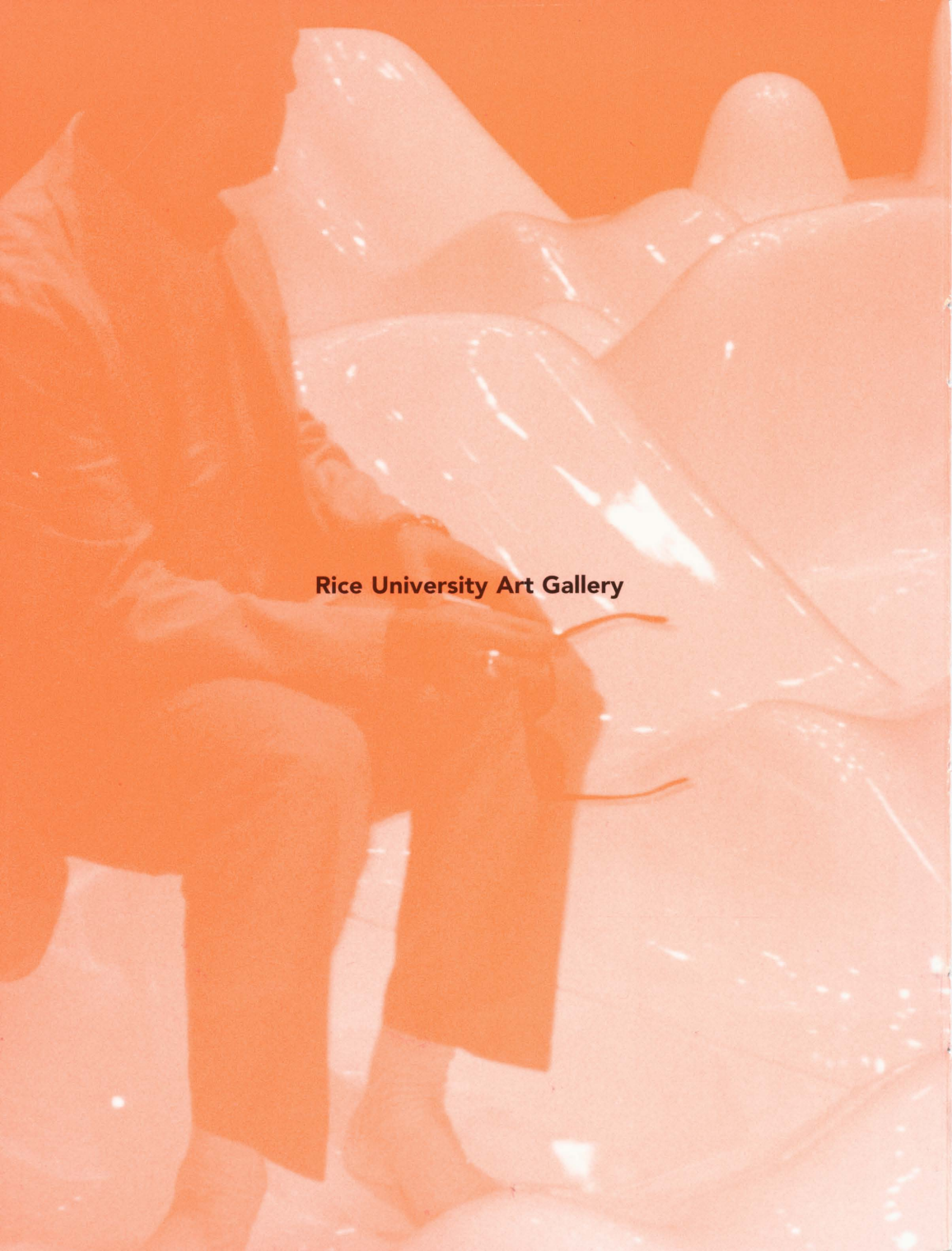
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Page 3: Garbo, Garbage Can, Umbra

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