

# DAMN<sup>o</sup>

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ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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# MR. FREEDOM

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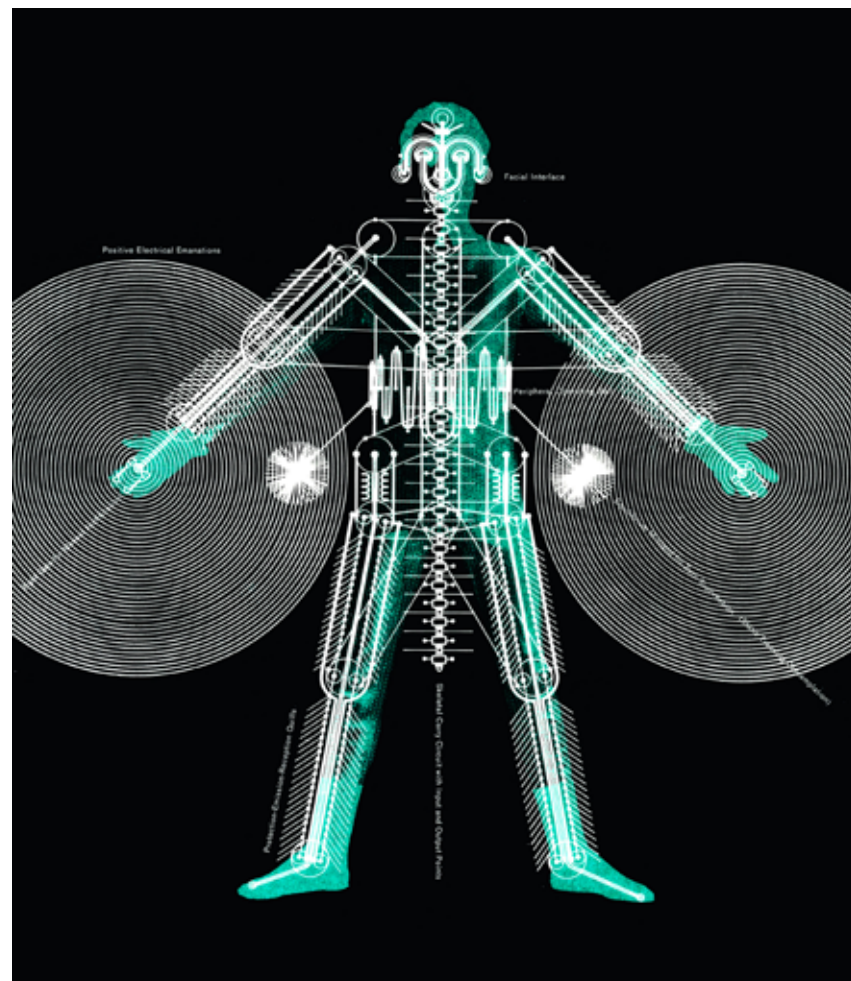
The delirious fictions of  
François Dallegret

'French architect François Dallegret imagines that soon most human activity will occur not on earth but in space (...) The artist of the future differs from his predecessors, however, in that he creates no material objects, such as paintings or sculptures, but rather makes environments in space, which induce a variety of specific sensory reactions in the people who enter them. Their reactions can be as general as a simple feeling of excitement, as physical as a feeling they are lighter (...) The medium, which the artist of the future uses to create his environments, is electric emanations (...) These emanations can be received by anyone who tunes in and as Dallegret says, "in this future everyone will understand the artist's intention. His intention will be to create all sorts of natural and supernatural feelings we don't know about yet. It will kill Descartes, this thing. And Braque".'

*François Dallegret's Art Fiction, Art in America, 1966*

TEXT

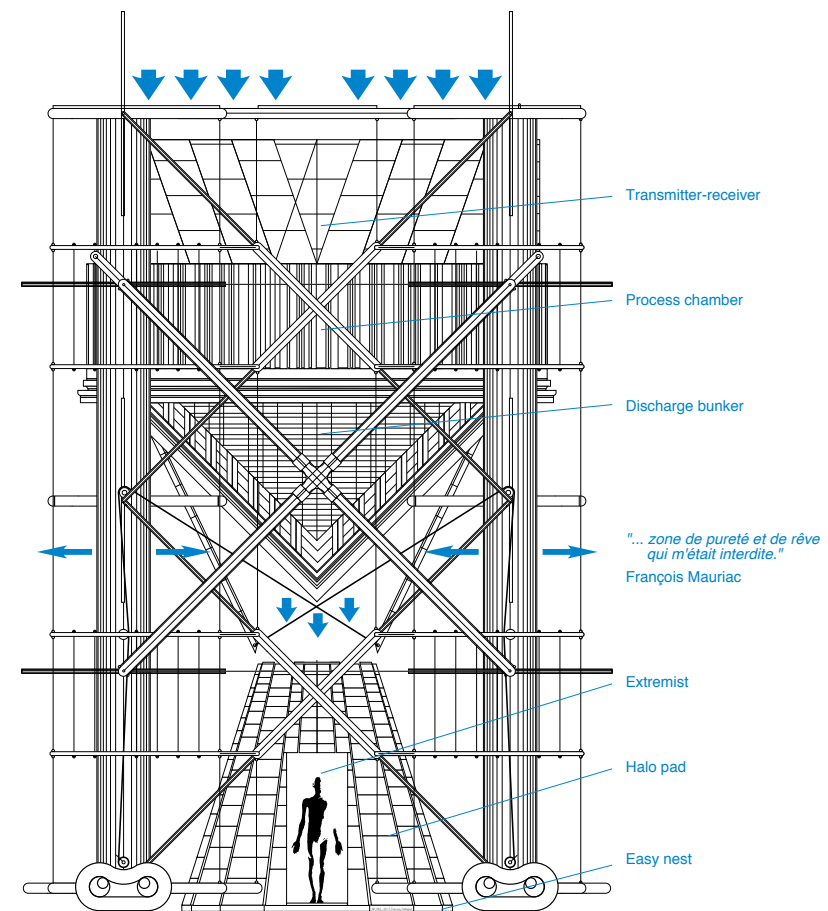
CRISTINA GUADALUPE GALVÁN



ARTIST IN COSMIC-OPERA SUIT, *Art Fiction, Art in America, 1966*  
This working outfit for creation, a sort of portable factory replaces not only the khakis and shirt worn by today's artist but also their studio. The 'electropuncture armour' greatly enlarges the mental and physical powers of the wearer.  
Exhibited at the 3rd Istanbul Design Biennial, ARE WE HUMAN?

French expat in the American continent, François Dallegret is like the architectural nemesis of photographer and filmmaker (and American expat in Paris) William Klein. Dallegret's world could have totally been a set from one of Klein's movies in the 1960s and 70s. And the one that immediately starts streaming in my mind is Klein's 1977 film, *The Model Couple (Le Couple Témoin)*. Here, an average couple is selected for their very mediocrity by the French government to represent the country in a futuristic experiment. They're subjected to non-stop surveillance and physical and psychological tests in an enclosed (and televised) space, all the time believing they are actually bettering society.

Yet whereas Klein is highly political in his social critique, Dallegret has always claimed to be completely apolitical, although his work and inventions nonetheless relish in the ironic. The elusiveness of his message and the diversity of his creations, combined with the photographic performing persona he has created, make Dallegret's work difficult to pigeonhole. As a science-fiction artist and architect, there is always something of the beyond. In his drawings from the early 1960s to the 80s, Dallegret built and invented a technological, sometimes absurdist, sometimes premonitory, vision of a future. Executed in a meticulous and distinctive style, this very personal universe of his – a future he imagined – is turning 3D today, a hypertechnological society no



VILLA IRONIQUE, 1983  
'Villa Ironique is an India ink drawing on acetate. The first of the Upside-Down World series, this drawing views the concept of the detached home from a "modern" perspective in which the residential function is expressed as a symbol of the technical -- the dream of a flawless performance, of guaranteed essentials.'



THE ENVIRONMENT-BUBBLE, 1965-2017, *Performa 17, New York*  
François Dallegret, *The Environment-Bubble: transparent plastic membrane inflated by air-conditioning output from a technological "totem" showing architecture as a fit environment for human activities. "A Home Is Not a House", Reyner Banham, Art in America (April 1965)*  
Photo: Cristina Guadalupe Galván

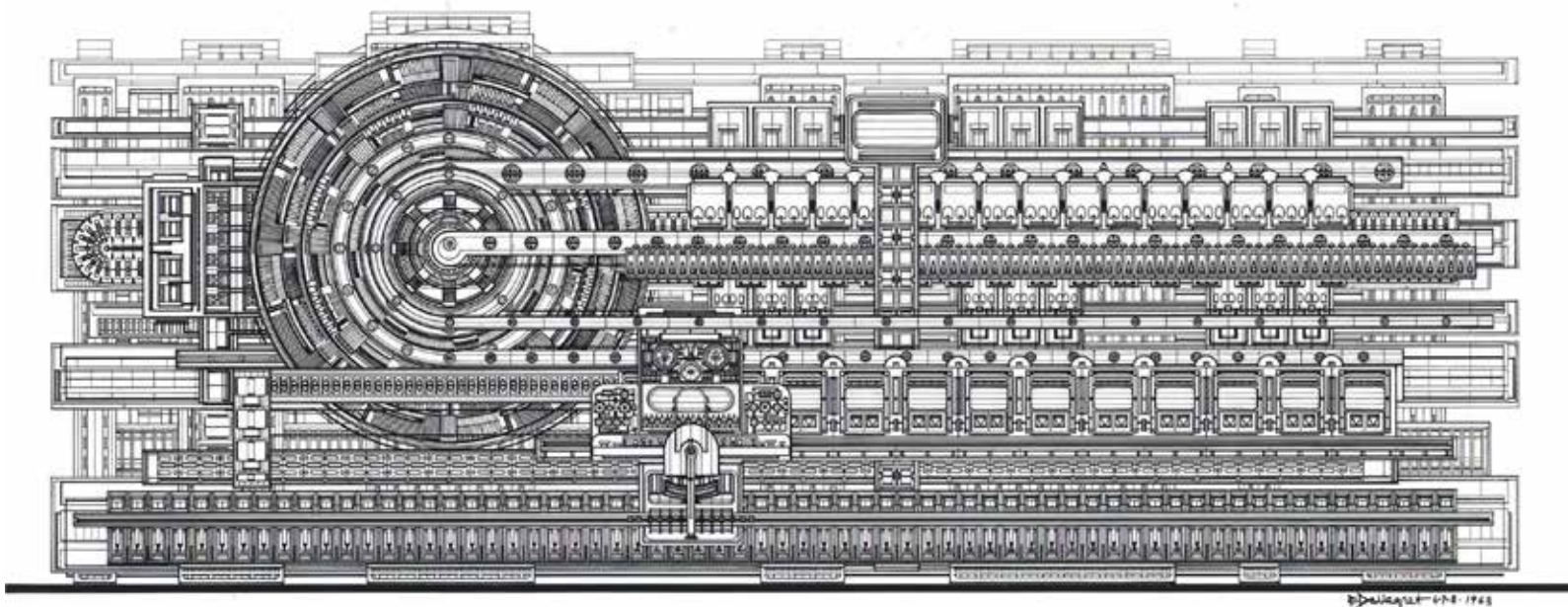


Reyner Banham visiting GOD & CO  
in his studio, Montreal 1973

longer a fiction. And this may go some way to explaining why, in the 21st century, he is finding a new audience. Especially among younger generations, compared to other utopians like Archigram and Archizoom, with whom he has shared a stage on numerous occasions, his status has been somewhat more rarefied. People and their ideas are not exempt from fashion.

DAMN° met Dallegret when he was in New York for the launch of his *Environment-Bubble* for Performa17, the latest edition of the performance art biennial. The 'Bubble' was initially a drawing from 1965 devised for the critic Reyner Banham's article *A Home Is Not a House* (for *Art in America*). Here it took on a different shape, roaming the city (including

Central Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park) as a space to host public dance workshops. The physical transformation was thanks to collaboration with architect François Perrin – also curator of Dallegret's first show in Los Angeles in 2016, *François Dallegret: The World Upside-Down* – and choreographer Dimitri Chamblas. At the time, he was also revisiting another past project, one he drew in 1983: 'It was my last drawing, *Villa Ironique*, a structure inspired from a silo.' To have the seal of authenticity, he is naturally appropriating a silo in the south of France to do the job for people interaction. And in March, his work will feature in the exhibition, *Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 - Today* at the Vitra Design Museum in Germany.



**LITTÉRATUROMATIC, 1963**  
Electronic machine for the re-invention of literature, using languages, styles, techniques, phonetics, etc. Single operator in motorized armchair carried on rails, working with earphones and TV screen simultaneously, and with electronic memories and brains. Choice of one or several simultaneous operating methods. Initial image is the subject; self-propelling words form thought. Words can be divided, reunited or rearranged to create new ones. Outbursts of words produce renewal of language. Final results printed on cards. (PS: cards are legible only to other machines.)  
Extract from Peter Blake, *Architectural Forum*, 1964



François Dallegret at his drawing board for Expo 67, 1966

But Dallegret's story begins in France. Laughing, he says, 'I started in France because I was French.' He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris for three years before dropping out. 'I supposedly suffered, because before '67, if you were trying to be an architect you had to go through all kinds of hurdles. For example, I was taken naked to walk up Boulevard Saint-Michel; they shaved my head in stripes as well - this was the tradition at the time. But the Beaux-Arts was also an incredible school; they trained you to be anything but an architect. So then I was ready to be anything but an architect.'

During this time in Paris, ensconced in his *chambre de bonne*, Dallegret started his elaborate signature drawings. Not only would he draw vehicles - he had a real passion for vintage motors - but also machines, rockets and other prototypical computer-controlled devices. They were all drawn with a Graphos pen and were made up of thousands of really fine straight Indian ink lines. 'Initially I worked on vellum, but later switched to acetate because you could just scratch off the ink when you made a mistake and then redo the line. I still have all the drawings. Acetate is not especially fragile and is easy to archive.'

He had a couple shows at the legendary Iris Clert Gallery. 'Iris was great, and a little nuts like me,' he recalls. The first show he did there in 1962 focused on a series of astrological automobiles. 'Iris was crazy about the whole subject, she even had her own astrologer, Elzine - it was a fashion at the time.' But despite the promising beginnings in Paris, it was to New York that he headed. 'After the show I had enough of Paris, and France,' he says. 'Paris was a bit of a drag, and it was wet and damp. So I packed my long suitcase and went on Le France. I was very sick on the boat, but one day I got out of my cabin and saw La Statue de la Liberté! This was 1963.'



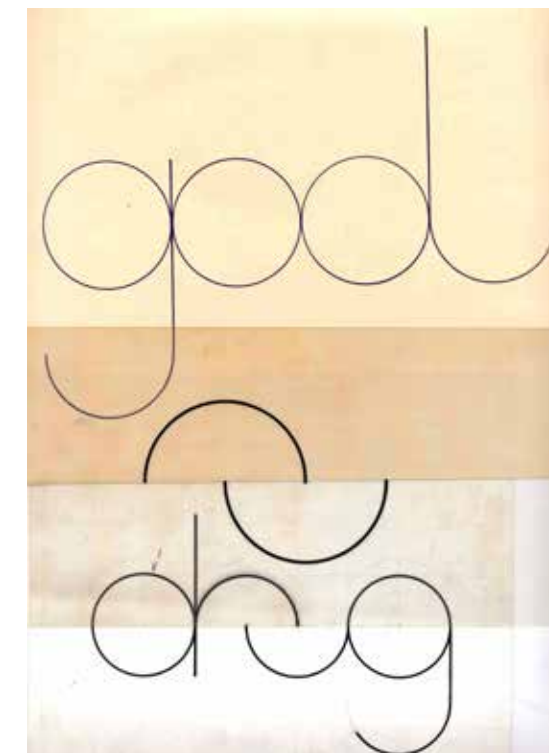
Book cover of the 60's *GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble*, 2011  
The Architectural Association, London

His stay in New York was brief but intense. With a few shows lined up from Paris and living in the Chelsea Hotel, one can only imagine. In the catalogue (*GOD & CO: François Dallegret Beyond the Bubble*, Architectural Association Publications, 2011) for his show at the Architectural Association in London, architecture and landscape historian Alessandra Ponte recalls that he used to drop in at Andy Warhol's silver loft, befriended Roy Lichtenstein, and that in general, he just loved to roam around the Village. He kept encountering the most amazing people, like Bernardo Bertolucci, albeit asleep on a floor after a party in an empty loft.

But an opportunity to go to Montreal materialised - this was right before Expo 67 - and because he didn't want to go back to Paris, he decided to go north. He has lived there ever since. When he arrived, the entire city was busy with Expo 67 and he was invited to participate. He also received his first architectural commission, Le Drug, for a pharmacist. 'On the first floor you had the pharmacy,' he says, 'and then in the basement a restaurant/café/discothèque, and the Labo Gallery, that I opened and ran for a while, showing Warhol, Lichtenstein, Paul Thek... I also designed another club at the time, The New Penelope Café, but only with scaffolding and safety lamps, as the client barely had any money.'



**LE DRUG, Montreal, 1965**  
Dallegret designed Le Drug with a nightclub as a clinically white, organically shaped grotto, termed 'underground architecture' by Domus and *Architectural Forum*. The stalactite-like forms were created in cement and painted with white epoxy. The name of the club - for which Dallegret also invented a logo - referred to the pharmacy but was of course also a playful allusion to the common chemically enhanced nightclub experiences of the time.  
Photo: Marc Lullier



LE DRUG, graphics, 1965  
Collection François Dallegret





THE NEW PENELOPE CAFÉ, Montreal, 1966-67  
Commissioned by folk-rock entrepreneur Gary Eisenkraft, Dallegret furnished the café with a scaffolding system to mount safety lamps and to create seats and tables from wood planks. Frank Zappa performed here in 1967.  
Photo: Jeremy Taylor



PALAIS METRO, Montreal, 1967  
Collage perspective

In the same period there is Palais Metro, a multiprogramme urban project - in a site now occupied by Montréal's Grande Bibliothèque - that planned to link the subway to the original Palais du Commerce (a vast hangar where people could go ice-skating), and be filled with retail and leisure activities; a sort of Fun Palace à la Cedric Price. A personal favourite of mine is the completely irreverent *Lit Croix*. The name says it all. He is crucifying the architect, right? And what about sex on the cross? Also, there's the *Cosmic-Opera Suit* from *Art Fiction*, a working outfit for creation; the *Kiik*, a stress reduction hand pill; costumes and art direction for the television series *2020 West*, a futuristic western that didn't make it past production; numerous graphic design identities; the *Spring Chair* (1967), one piece of aluminium that unfolds to be a seating device; or *ASS\_IS* (2007), another limited edition in curved and bent aluminium that suggests a lunar module.

LA MACHINE, Waddell Gallery, New York, 1966  
His pièce de résistance is La Machine, a huge magnificent whatzit that was first exhibited in 1966 at New York's Waddell Gallery. It consists of two 30-foot slabs of anodised aluminium supported at each end by 7-foot stanchions and resembling nothing else than a giant steeplechase barrier for superhorses. A bank of sodium vapour lamps shine onto 172 electric eyes in the bottom slab. If you pass your hand along the 6-inch gap between the slab you make music, or at least noise.  
Photo: Robert Otter

Since then, Dallegret has imagined and created a parallel universe a bit perverse at times, but always full of irony and fun. Somehow, from an early age he was fascinated with technology, but as he says, 'I had very little information, so I just drew things the way I thought they would look like.' This very particular vision has led to a huge portfolio of incredible drawings, and an array of projects or 'machines' that push the word diverse to its limits in their scale and function. There's *La Machine* (1966), which is made of huge aluminium extrusions originally produced for the French pavilion designed by Jean Faugeron and André Blouin at Expo 67. As he recalls, 'I knew the fellow who was manufacturing these very long structures. I went to see him a year before the Expo and saw them, and I thought that I could do something with it. I came up with *La Machine*, which was made of two sets of horizontal beams 30ft-long, and in between there would be a gap. In its interior, a continuous series of fluorescent lights made of 172 photocells would create sound when you put your hand in between the two structures, without touching anything, so the shadow of your hand would create a sound.'



KIİK, 1969  
Aspen Conference  
This enigmatic, barbell-shaped product is recommended by its creator as a 'hand pill' for 'breaking bad habits or starting good ones.' It also promised, using the hyperbolic language of sales, to 'cure bodily discomforts and mental obsessions.' First introduced at the 1968 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado, Dallegret's Kiik was also later sold in the gift shop at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. With its sleek, curvy body made of lathed stainless steel, Kiik was a pure and conceptual product in name, packaging, promotion, and philosophy - its ultimate function to be determined by the user, although its instructions suggested to 'spill on the carpet or in your other hand,' and 'fondle and manipulate to your heart and mind's "delight".'  
Photo: Justin



François Dallegret  
Photo: Cristina Guadalupe Galván

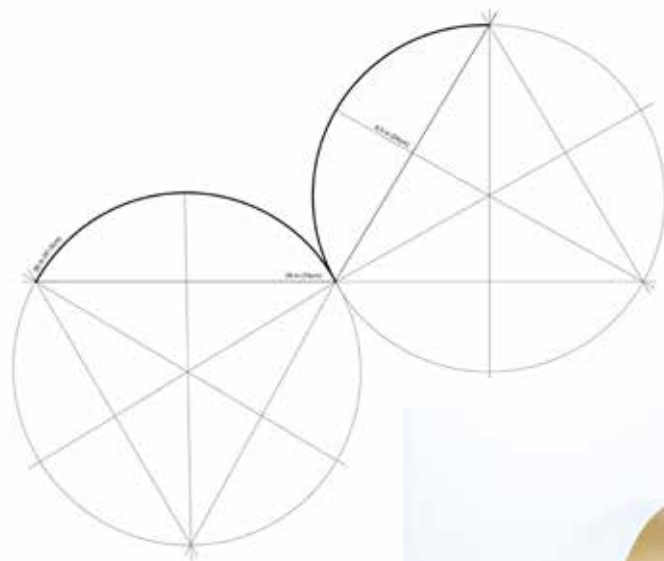


CHAISE RESSORT, 1967  
A machine is a contrivance whose related parts function in tandem for the performance of work. Unlike many chairs, which are static platforms, Dallegret's Chaise Ressort reacts against the sitter. The single sheet of formed aluminum relaxes and adjust to the user's weight and posture, a dynamic response in contradiction to its rigid appearance. 'Ressort' means 'spring'; the chair recovers its shape after compression. Albeit a simple engine, chair and body together convert force into motion. (Josef Hoffmann's adjustable armchair is a Sitzmaschine in name only).  
Photo: Shunk-Kender

So Mr Freedom, my last question would be, what's this relationship for you between art and architecture? 'For me it's the same thing. I work on projects that are supposedly artistic but architecturally inclined, and they are neither one. So they are in between somehow. I search for one "art impression" and find another "architectonic feeling" or vice versa, and today there are no limits mostly when words are part of the game.' So how would you define your practice? 'It is hard to pin down because it goes fast and in all directions like an UFO that flies for a surprise.' Yes, but there is a *fil conducteur!* 'Yes, but I am still looking for it actually...' (laughs).



2020 WEST  
Costumes with Gerald Potterton and Pamela Andras; preparing costumes for 2020 West, a TV comedy-adventure series created by Allan Hackney and Gerald Potterton, designed by Francois Dallegret, 1967.  
Photo: Jeremy Taylor



ASS\_1S, 2007-2017  
Limited edition of standard aluminium sheets 1/4 in. thick (0.6cm), folded in its middle and curved at both ends then blue, red, gold, silver and black anodised.

Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960  
– Today, Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany, until 9 September