

## Design

### Digipop

Karim Rashid  
TASCHEN £16.99 / \$29.00

US-based product designer Karim Rashid's last book was titled *I Want to Change the World*. So, naturally, his latest is about the world transformed – into something he calls the 'techno-rave new world'. He never really tells us why, and although it sounds like we're in for a dose of chemically-driven Aldous Huxley-style futurism played out to the rhythm of a thumpingly contemporary Euro beat, on the evidence of *Digipop* it looks more like Rashid stumbled across the future while flicking through the sample book from a 1950s wallpaper store (although there is a certain chemically heightened intensity to his choice of Day-Glo colours).

But you don't need to know anything about vintage wallpaper, Rashid's love of French disco or the fact that he looks and dresses like an extra from *Starsky & Hutch* (though a fair chunk of Rashid's 'superstar' status is down to the image he projects) to know that his idea of the future has a lot to do with the past. You get those retro vibes from the very first sentence of his introduction, when he picks a fight with Adolf Loos over the latter's famous 1908 essay 'Ornament and Crime', in which the Austrian architect argues that the ornamentation of objects is a 'criminal' waste of effort as it causes those objects to become obsolete according to changes of taste and style. In the age of information, ornament is how we communicate counters Rashid. And new digital technologies can allow ornament – smart wallpaper,

for example, that can react to its environment and display an ever-changing array of information – to adapt to the times. So far, so good.

Loos found facial tattoos culturally primitive, so Rashid opens up this gallery of pretty patterns with a series of heads covered in dingbats. Having branded the world of objects – with his signature chairs, tables, lights, carpets and interior designs – Rashid wants to brand people too. Thanks to nano-mechanics, he says, we're going to be able to 'fire up images on our body like smartattooing'. He never quite manages to say how such tattoos might replace things like speech.

The book's back cover features a photograph of the designer, smoothed out to give him a flattened, plastic look, with a green cross slapped like a cartoon Band-Aid onto his forehead. American rap superstar Nelly recently made a facial plaster into a fashion accessory so Rashid, America's design superstar, can do it too.

But where Nelly abandoned the accessory once he started becoming better known for that rather than his music ('It was becoming bigger than me. Everybody's asking about the Band-Aid and I'm like, "It's just a fucking Band-Aid. I tell you what, I'll just take it off."') Rashid seems to be of the opinion that such things – however meaningless – constitute the fundament of design. 'I started marking products with symbols in order to state I was the author,' he tells us, 'like when people carve their initials onto a park bench.' The opening spread of this volume features Rashid's signature 'Karim' presented as a digitally-rendered 1980s-style graffiti tag; and the remainder of *Digipop* seems to be an explanation of how he can apply his 'tag' to everything in sight.

The bulk of this book consists of patterned pages, reminiscent of Lucienne Day designs or Op art works. The message seems to be that Rashid keeps a soup of ornament on the hard drive of his computer (except for those times when art galleries like Elga Wimmer in New York get him to serve up a sample for an exhibition) that can be applied to anything, whether it be two-dimensional (a carpet) or three-dimensional (a chair). The designer's job, it would appear, is to stoke the fire of media hype (maintaining the value of his signature through books like this one) in order to make sure that the soup is always 'hot'.

I've no idea why anyone would want to live in an environment so completely tagged with someone else's initials. I've absolutely no idea why anyone would want to buy *Digipop*. But perhaps Rashid's true design 'genius' lies in the fact that he does. MR

