

Queen of the LIGHT

An epic retrospective of avant-garde visionary Nanda Vigo is long overdue, says *Baya Simons*

INTERIORS PHOTOGRAPHY BY VALÉRIE SADOUN



In a 2016 video interview, the late Nanda Vigo is asked how she would describe herself. “*Identificazione incerta*,” the 79-year-old Italian replies with a chuckle. “You can’t identify me.” “Architect?” she goes on. “*Reductivo*” (“it’s not enough”). “Artist? *Reductivo*. Designer? *Reductivo*. Pioneer? Maybe. Anyway – Nanda Vigo.” Confronted with her geometric neon, glass and aluminium light sculptures or the outer-space-like interiors that she conjured in her eponymous Milanese studio from 1959 until her death in 2020, it’s clear why she felt any one label was inadequate.

Vigo was a key part of the Zero group of artists who pioneered the use of light and motion as materials. She exhibited in Italy almost every year from the ’60s until she died, and moved in an influential circle that included Gio Ponti, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni (with whom she lived until his early death). But she remained in the shadow of her male contemporaries and was little known outside of design circles.

Nanda Vigo, the inner space, a new exhibition at Bordeaux’s Museum of Decorative Arts and Design (MADD), is the first major retrospective for the creative and an attempt to reappraise her reputation. Setting out to do justice to Vigo’s genre-defying vision, it brings together the many strands of her oeuvre, including her *Utopie* glowing red-neon corridor carpeted with an undulating crimson rug, which she designed with Fontana for the 1964 Milan Triennale, and the ’70s *Trigger of the Space* human-scale pyramidal sculptures inspired by spiritual spaces in Iran, India, Nepal and Mexico. There are also her signature fur-upholstered chairs and design objects, including her most famous pieces, the arched, chrome-steel Golden Gate floor lamp, and her *Chronotope* (Greek for space-time) rectangular structures, which layer textured glass with neon lights.



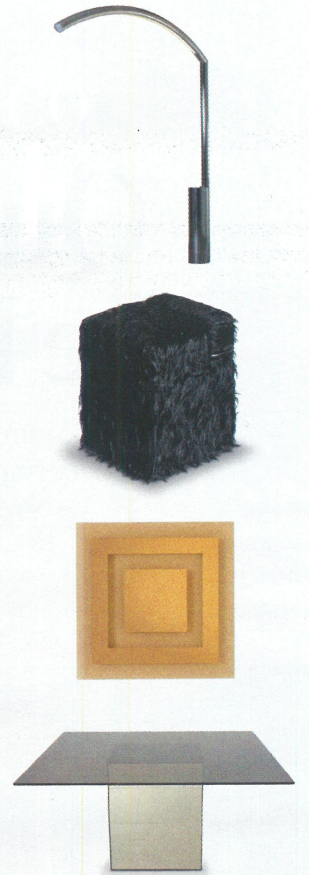
Above: Nanda Vigo on the cover of *Domus* magazine, 1984. Above left: her Milan apartment in 2014. Above right: part of *Nanda Vigo, the inner space*, an exhibition at Bordeaux’s Museum of Decorative Arts and Design

“VIGO WAS NOT LOOKING AT WHAT LIGHT DOES BUT AT LIGHT ITSELF”

“In this world where you have to focus on one thing, she got a bit lost,” says photographer Valérie Sadoun. “But she was *really* an architect, *really* a designer, *really* a thinker. She was not nostalgic. She was not living in the past.” Sadoun met Vigo eight years ago when she photographed her house, which she referred to as a “grotte” for

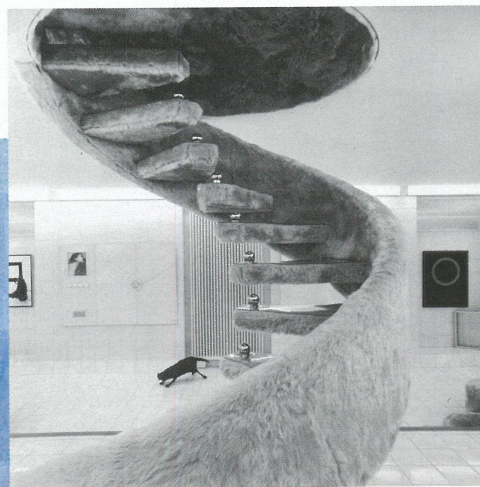
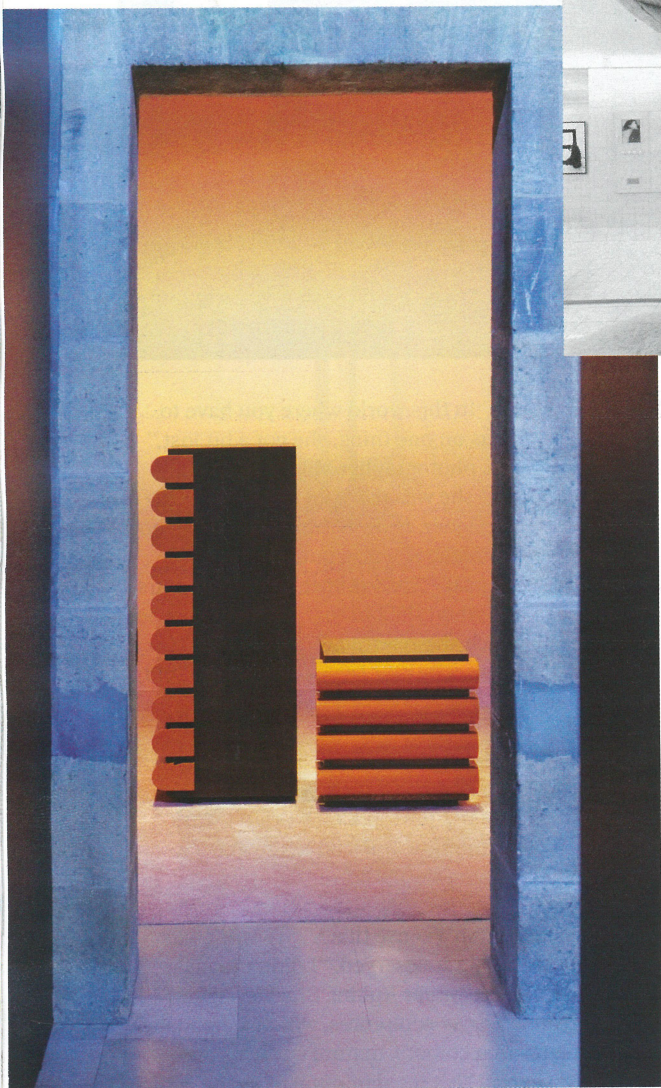
its mystical neon lighting. The pair struck up a friendship and she has become a leading cheerleader in the effort to re-establish Vigo’s name.

“She was not looking at what light does but light itself,” adds MADD director Constance Rubini of Vigo’s significance. Rubini was first introduced to Vigo’s work in the ’90s at a small exhibition at Paris’ Néotù gallery. She decided to commission the current institutional exhibition out of curiosity because she wanted to know more about Vigo, and from a sense that Vigo’s work was yet to receive the attention it deserved. “I didn’t realise how radical she was,” continues Rubini. She highlights the angular mirrored *Trigger* sculptures, which were made during the vogue for rich colours, natural surfaces and busily decorated spaces. “It’s the minimum of shape, which



From top: steel Golden Gate floor lamp, 1970, POA, nilufar.com. Mongolian fur Blocco pouf, 1971, £4,049. Andromeda mirror, 1974, £1,128. Blok glass dining table, 1970, £2,668. All three at 1stdibs.com. Below: Vigo's Milan apartment

Above: the Bordeaux exhibition is the first major retrospective dedicated to Vigo. Right: an interior designed by Vigo in 1968 for a house that Gio Ponti was commissioned to create in Malo, Italy. Below: Vigo's Storet chest of drawers and night table, 1992



architects that claim to be making a sculpture, and then there aren't any adequate exhibition spaces on the inside. I don't know if you've ever been," she said to her interviewer, "but looking at paintings uphill and downhill is absurd."

Inside the Bordeaux exhibition, QR codes transport visitors to the interiors that Vigo designed for the house Gio Ponti was commissioned to create in Malo: *Lo Scarabeo sotto la foglia* ("the beetle under the leaf") – one of her only rooms not to have been destroyed during subsequent renovations. White-tiled walls, a furry spiral staircase, hanging metal sculptures and glass doors looking out onto luscious greenery encapsulate Vigo's vision of "geometry, light, white colour and glass material", as Milanese architect, designer and editor Franco Raggi, who met Nanda in 1973, puts it. "The entire inhabited

"IT OPENS YOUR MIND. THAT'S WHAT YOU FEEL WHEN YOU'RE IN THIS WORK"

space is a kind of cold laboratory of white tiles with white fur intrusions." For Raggi, it's the beauty of the "hard/soft, hot/cold, light/dark, abstract/concrete opposition" that constitutes Vigo's creative legacy.

This defining interest in transparency and reflection can be traced back to a formative childhood

brings you to the maximum effect," she says. "In her radicality, that's what she understood: to create a big effect, you needed to get very focused and very simple. That's pretty strong because not so many artists get to this point."

Indeed, Vigo was disparaging about design that put "shape" over "effect", telling *Mousse* magazine in 2017 that the Guggenheim museum in New York was "disastrous – he [Frank Lloyd Wright] was the beginning of those

encounter, says Sadoun: "She said the epiphany came when she was seven, on the lakes of Como." Here, Vigo saw Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio, a modernist grid of glass windows built as the headquarters of the fascist party. "I had the same thing when I was going to this house, and seeing the way the light was treated," adds Sadoun. "We talked about light for hours."

The words "mystical", "transcendental" and "mysterious" are often used to describe the experience of being in one of Vigo's spaces, but the precise sensation is harder to articulate. "It brings you somewhere else – somewhere where you're curious about understanding what's happening," says Rubini. Standing among the *Chronotope* sculptures in the exhibition, "you can see the shape of people, but not exactly as you know it. It opens your mind; I think that's what you feel when you're in this work – that you're open-minded."

Sadoun also struggles to capture the essence of Vigo completely. "I wish I could tell you exactly," she says. "But what I remember is it gives you lots of playfulness and joy." ■ HTSI
Nanda Vigo, the inner space is at Bordeaux's Museum of Decorative Arts and Design until 8 January 2023



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