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At the Swiss Institute, a Survey of Eccentric Chair Designs

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In Eugène Ionesco's 1952 absurdist tragedy, "The Chairs," the last two survivors of an apocalypse speak to a group of chairs that purportedly have invisible occupants. That the vacant seats are not the only witnesses to the couple's suicide at the end of the play — the chairs in the actual audience being occupied by viewers — heightens the sense of lost promise. In those chairs lies the slightness of the distinction between useful objects and relics. "We are after the end of the world, in our culture and in our perception of stuff," says the Greek-Norwegian curator and architect Andreas Angelidakis, who conceived of the inaugural design exhibition at the [Swiss Institute](#) as a sequel of sorts to Ionesco's play: just chairs, no people. He credits his therapist with the reference. "These are not the key pieces of modernist design, but an eccentric selection," Angelidakis says of the survey, "Fin de Siècle," opening tonight. "I didn't curate it as museum overview, but as a casting director. Each chair was picked based on character, like casting actors."

Many of the chairs in the exhibition come from the same modernist time span as Ionesco's literature. For Angelidakis, these between-the-wars and mid-century chairs — from the likes of Charlotte Perriand, Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer — represent offerings to the altar of egalitarianism. That they are now deeply coveted (and accordingly valued) creates dramatic tension alongside more recent designs, some of which critique the very idea of function. "Modernism's failure was that it tried to produce a good thing, not necessarily a desirable thing," Angelidakis explains. Not all of the pieces in the show are intended for sitting, as in Alessandro Mendini's "objects for spiritual use" and Nacho Carbonell's cocoon of paper and chicken wire — for the fear of fallout, "a chair with a cave you can hide in," Angelidakis says. Arranged in small vignettes, and spotlit as for the stage, the chairs appear to create their own dialogue about the future of design. "With the Internet, the whole idea of what's new has shifted to mixing together what is there," Angelidakis says of the unconventional installation. "I'm always interested in ways of describing, 'What now?'"

"Fin de Siècle" opens tonight and is on view through Nov. 23 at the Swiss Institute, 18 Wooster St., [swissinstitute.net](#).