QUESTIONS OF STYLE

STYLE IS THE MAN HIMSELF. Today, the Comte de Buffon's ambiguous maxim is more resonant than ever: We live in a world in which nearly everything and experience is stylized, designed, tailored, customized. And the notion of style, whether "personal style" or received "look," has of course loomed large in the artistic strategies of the twentieth century, from early collage to post-paste. But never has it seemed so potent, so pervasive, or so charged as it does now.

Although style reigned in art histories as disparate as Vasari's and Riegl's, it was jettisoned in the 1970s and '80s as a retrograde and ahistorical paradigm. "Style" was tied to the myth of individual genius, to the mark of the connoisseur; it was identified with the supplementary and the merely decorative. But now those ancillary characteristics are taking center stage. Ironically, the rejection of style by various modernist avant-gardes merely embedded it all the more deeply in the art object—making it not the thing's surface but its very quiddity.

The accessories of style—including the supposedly superficial and contingent accoutrements of lifestyle, sartorial style, and anti-style—may be as operative and meaningful as the objects from which they have traditionally been purged. Aiming to take a fresh look at this connection between surface and substance, Artforum invited sixteen contributors—whose expertise spans the fields of art, art history, fashion, and design—to think through the matter of style, now.
I BUILT A DREAM HOUSE. I remapped an old house that I had dreamed about, struggled over, and wrestled with. I slowly nudged it and dragged it into something that could frame me and my stuff, and my work, along with my collection of nightmares and daydreams. The house did and still does look a lot like the house that Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner lived in on Long Island. It's clad in wooden shingles, like theirs, and has an upright posture characteristic of the classic nineteenth-century American house that also resembles the way I drew houses when I was a kid. It's on a quiet country road. It has a short porch, a side porch, and a brick chimney, a green grass lawn and a green roof. I live within a childhood drawing, and I tweak and modify the drawing to reflect the shifting conditions of my life. The house stirs expressionistically at the road during the day, in a frigid slumber, and snaps alive in the evening with electric lights, glimpses of bodies, and sounds.

There are no shutters hanging on the house anymore—removes them during the renovation and never put them back. I've been periodically selecting some and repainting them and reattaching them into my work. A few of the old doors and windows have been used as well and shipped out of the house and into the world to make a living. The unused toilet, the cast-iron radiator that sprung a leak, and a slew of furniture that had come into the house for practical reasons, or just to disclose and dazzle, have left the same ways numerous chairs, stools, mirrors, picture frames, carpets, lamps, and piles of books. The house, like me, sheds its skin from time to time in order to move on and in order to make room for an incoming palette (or new arrival) of people, places, and things. This array, which forms the bulk of my concerns, gets tangled with and pondered over, adapted and adopted, noticed or neglected, chosen or ignored. I'm not a hoarder, but I keep my clothes around for a while after I stop wearing them. I keep them and put them away until their age, or even, or their absence, or just the amount and state of my modestness makes them switch again and begin to describe the space between objects and bodies, between specificity and abstraction. My laundry list to date includes bathrobes, torn T-shirts, suits, pants, belts, fans, underwear, shoes, and several piles of socks. Like the architectural fragments and the cast-off furniture, the clothing describes previous intimacies and distances, some banal facts and some fantasies, and they somehow make up a practice. They've all been used, sat on, opened or closed, worn and worn out; they've reached the limits of their domestic tenure, stretched to the breaking point, even, then retrieved, revived, and somehow reconstituted into the considered formation of some thing. □

TOM BURR IS A NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST.