

Sicilian harvest festival, MENTAL HOSPITAL, sawdust,
ANIMAL BLOOD, soi-disant, preaching, prelapsarian,
NATURAL POLYMERS, autarchic, volatile, rampant,
delusional, NETWORK OF EXPERTS, playground, radical

Studio Formafantasma

words JUSTIN MCGUIRK
portrait JASON EVANS



On the third floor of a former mental hospital in Eindhoven, a sequence of poky rooms – once used as offices or treatment rooms perhaps – is filled with exotic objects: bowlfuls of solidified lava from Mount Etna, vases that could be the remnants of a lost Amazonian culture and several straw brooms of the kind you might find in an old farmhouse. Artefacts, in short, that couldn't be more incongruous to this setting. But then, the rent is cheap. Studio Formafantasma, the pair of designers who use this as their workspace, are following an established tradition. Graduates of the Design Academy Eindhoven, they, like many of their contemporaries, stuck around to take advantage of the only other asset this small, dull town has to offer: vast reserves of inexpensive space in abandoned factories, churches and, it seems, mental hospitals.

The postindustrial context of Eindhoven – the home of electronics giant Philips, whose production facilities have long since moved to Asia – is apt. Formafantasma's work elides the industrial. In 2009 they created a series of flatware and vessels called *Baked*, drawing on a Sicilian harvest festival tradition in which dough is baked into ornamental objects. The designers incorporated flour and other foodstuffs into the vessels, as if these products were merely a natural extension of eating. Much of Formafantasma's work has a bucolic quality, a rural innocence, if you take it at face value. It could easily be interpreted as nostalgic, and yet the designers feel they are projecting into the future. They use the word 'utopian'. But what lifts the work out of naivety is the tension between past and future – is this a prelapsarian memory or a postoil, posturban fantasy?

Studio Formafantasma's designers, it should be pointed out, are not Dutch. Simone Farresin, thirty-one, is from Vicenza, and his twenty-eight-year-old partner, Andrea Trimarchi, is Sicilian. They came to international attention with a small exhibition at Spazio Rossana Orlandi during last year's Milan furniture fair. The collection on show, called *Botanica*, consisted of a series of extraordinary vases and vessels made



WHAT LIFTS
FORMAFANTASMA'S
WORK OUT OF
NAIVETY IS
THE TENSION
BETWEEN PAST
AND FUTURE –
IS THIS A
PRELAPSARIAN
MEMORY OR
A POSTOIL,
POSTURBAN
FANTASY?

of defunct materials such as shellac and bois durci, a nineteenth-century preplastic made of sawdust and animal blood. To the untrained eye, these objects might have had the authenticity of tribal artefacts of some indeterminate ethnic origin – Amazon, sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea? But the culture they belonged to was a fabrication. Drawing on the history of natural polymers, the pieces illustrated a narrative about a world in which oil, and thus plastic, had never been discovered. This imaginary lost Eden might have degenerated into a preachy eco-message, but the objects themselves were too ambiguous, too captivating. Amid the excess of Milan – an excess of chairs, of business, of soi-disant innovation – *Botanica* belonged to some other world altogether.

Farresin and Trimarchi are of a generation of designers preoccupied with the idea of self-sufficiency. Theirs is not a world of globalised mass production but of craftsmanship and small communities. On one level, this boils down to simple pragmatism – they make things with their own hands or with craftsmen because they don't have the opportunity to design for industry. But on another level it is an ethos. Consumer products are not what they were for previous generations of designers – they no longer liberate, they merely accumulate. Hence the return to the idea of a form of rural subsistence.

This direction began with *Baked* but took more polemical form in 2010 with a project called *Autarchy*. Here the narrative was more explicitly about a community acting autonomously, producing everything with its own resources, in a closed circuit. The vessels themselves, made of flour, limestone and agricultural waste, pay homage to the craft traditions and resourcefulness of the Italian peasantry. *Autarchy* suggests a kind of Emersonian return to nature, but it might also evoke darker precedents, such as the autonomous zone AVL-Ville, briefly established in Rotterdam in 2001 by artist Joep van Lieshout, which implied a provocative withdrawal from society at large.



above:
Autarchy, 2010, Installation,
mixed media. Courtesy Studio
Formafantasma, Eindhoven

left:
Moulding Tradition, 2009.
Photo: Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy
Gallery Libby Sellers, London

overleaf:
Colony: Tripoli (Libya), 2011.
Photo: Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy
Gallery Libby Sellers, London



TRIPOLI



LA CASA COLONIALE
V. TRIENNALE DI MILANO



ARTICOLO 19

COLLABORAZIONE NELLA LOTTA AL TERRORISMO, ALLA CRIMINALITÀ ORGANIZZATA, AL TRAFFICO DI STUPEFACENTI, ALL'IMMIGRAZIONE CLANDESTINA

1. LE DUE PARTI INTENDONO LA COLLABORAZIONE IN ATTO NELLA LOTTA AL TERRORISMO, ALLA CRIMINALITÀ ORGANIZZATA, AL TRAFFICO DI STUPEFACENTI E ALL'IMMIGRAZIONE CLANDESTINA, IN CONFORMITÀ A QUANTO PREVISTO DALL'ACCORDO FIRMATO A ROMA IL 13/12/2004 E DALLE SUCCESSIVE INTESA TECNICHE. PER CUI, IN PARTICOLARE, PER QUANTO CONCERNE LA LOTTA ALL'IMMIGRAZIONE CLANDESTINA, I PROTOCOLLI DI COOPERAZIONE FIRMATI A TRIPOLI IL 29 DICEMBRE 2007.

2. SEMPRE IN TEMA DI LOTTA ALL'IMMIGRAZIONE CLANDESTINA, LE DUE PARTI PROMOVONO LA REALIZZAZIONE DI UN SISTEMA DI CONTROLLO DELLE FRONTIERE TERRESTRI SIRIENE, DA AFFIDARE A SOCIETÀ ITALIANE IN POSSESSO DELLE NECESSARIE COMPETENZE TECNICOLOGICHE. IL GOVERNO ITALIANO SOTTOPONE IL SENZO DEI COSTI, MENTRE PER IL RESTANTE SONO LE DUE PARTI CHIEDERANNO ALL'UNIONE EUROPEA DI PASSARE CARICO, TENUTO CONTO DELLE INTENSE A SUI TEMI INTERCORRELATE FRA LA GRANDE GIAMAHIRIA E LA COMMISSIONE EUROPEA.

“WE DON'T IMAGINE THE FUTURE LIKE THIS. IT'S COMMUNITARIAN, BUT NOT IN A RURAL WAY. OUR COMMUNITY IS ONLINE, A NETWORK OF EXPERTS AND FREAKS WHO ARE TRYING TO RECREATE THESE OLD MATERIALS”

“We started working on *Autarchy* just after the economic slump,” says Farresin. “It was a time when everybody wanted a more autarchic attitude.” Having witnessed the dangers of a volatile open market, then, Formafantasma had a response that was similar to that of many designers of their generation: the updating of a long-lost agrarian ideal. (Anyone familiar with the graduate work of the Design Academy Eindhoven of the last few years will recognise a consistently refined rural aesthetic.) “We’re looking at the past, but not in a romantic way,” says Trimarchi. “Sometimes there’s a nostalgic element to how our things look, but we’re more forward-looking.”

There is certainly a discourse that supports a return to localism and small-batch production and that rejects the dangers of rampant globalisation. Still, since Formafantasma consider themselves to be experimenting with ideas relevant to the future, is theirs a blinkered vision, or even a delusional one? Where are the megacities in this future? Where are the new technologies and high-performance materials? “It’s a symbolic representation, not literal,” says Farresin. “We don’t imagine the future like this.”

Nor do they literally advocate a withdrawal into closed communities. “It’s communitarian, but not in a rural way,” says Trimarchi. “Our community is online, a network of experts and freaks who are trying to recreate these old materials.” Their community of “freaks” includes a dentist who advised them on how to use shellac (once used to take teeth moulds) and a foundation in Naples called Plart, which specialises in conserving plastic art and design pieces. They immerse themselves in arcane practices in order to explore the alternatives to oil-based materials

but also to question the idea that plastic is a quintessentially modern material – natural polymers existed long before. By reviving archaic techniques, you could say that they are attempting to define a new modernity, one that is no longer in opposition to nature.

In some ways Formafantasma’s work can be read as a critique of a furniture and consumer-products industry that is rather set in its ways. It’s not just that industry is being incredibly slow to adopt biodegradable materials; often the way products are commissioned is based on simplistic notions of aesthetic desirability. Formafantasma are now being approached by manufacturers to design pieces for production, and you get the sense that the business methods don’t suit them. “Companies say, ‘Make us a proposal.’ They just want a sketch, a visual. But we need a context, we need a playground,” says Farresin. They don’t want to start by reassuring the manufacturer with a saleable form, they want access to a process. So what would a Formafantasma product be like? Bois durci on an industrial scale? It would be worth if for the shock value alone. Let’s see if the market is catholic enough in its tastes to accommodate faux plastic made of animal blood.

Thanks to such experimentation, their studio is one part natural history museum and one part laboratory. They are currently experimenting with melting Sicilian lava rock and using it to make glasslike objects. It’s an unconventional and difficult process, but in this case the material is more emotionally than technologically significant. “A lot of our work is rooted in Italian culture,” says Trimarchi. And while they were taught in Florence by two stalwarts of Italy’s radical design movement of

the 1960s and 70s – Paolo Deganello and Gilberto Corretti of Archizoom – they find connections in a more atavistic culture. For instance, they have made references to the *teste di moro*, the Majolica vases depicting Moorish faces, which have been produced in Sicily for a thousand years. Their own versions update that tradition, incorporating photographs of an African immigrant to Sicily – and an explicit reference to an ancient migration pattern that continues today.

The pieces were shown at the Libby Sellers Gallery in London in late 2011, along with a series of tapestries about the Italian colonial legacy in Africa. This political content sits rather lightly on top of their work. What is more compelling is their formal and material experimentation, and their ability to conjure a convincing object world that is neither slavishly the past nor brazenly the future. Like many young designers today – and unlike their predecessors of the 1960s and even the 1990s – they view the future with scepticism and caution. ‘Progress’ is delusional, and damage limitation is the reality. Formafantasma are genuinely talented – the only question is whether the rural craft fetish and the old-wives’-tale wisdom are serious proposals or fashionably escapist ones. •