

In conversation with

Formafantasma

Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin, the young Italian duo behind Formafantasma, have taken the design world by storm with acclaimed conceptual design projects at the London Design Fair; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, to name just a few. The practice's material explorations, which reveal hidden and often forgotten aspects of cultural and material history, have left a distinctive mark on critical contemporary design culture.



how to elaborate on this, because for us it was a very natural decision to work together. We have realised that it's not something that needs to be analysed.

DH: Do you work on multiple projects simultaneously, or do you prefer to complete one project before moving on to the next?

AT: It would be great to only work on one project at a time, but that's never the reality. We usually have a hierarchy of scales of work; rarely do we have a situation where we are working on multiple projects that have the same importance or scale at the same time. Sometimes there is a project that needs more time, so the scale of that project changes. Ideally, we try to construct our schedule or our working environment in such a way that we have differently scaled projects operating at the same time.

DH: You have said that *Formafantasma* does not have a style, and that you do not work that way. Can you explain this further?

AT: A lot of people see style in what we do, and we are happy it's there in this sense, but generally it's not our concern to work on style. A very important aspect of work, for us, is that moment we question the context we are working in. We almost instinctively come to ask why something is the way it is. This is very important for us – questioning why things are the way they are in a specific moment, and whether there's a chance to make something differently; not only for the sake of it, but also to discover other possibilities and potentials.

SF: In regard to style, sometimes we appropriate existing aesthetics, depending on what we want to say. When we are working on something, suddenly we'll realise we want to go in a different direction. This is something we never decide at the beginning; it comes from the process. In the beginning of our project about lava, for instance, the research and images were about organic design, while in the end the project went into a more Brutalist style of shaping because of the process of making. This is not something you can decide at the beginning. We like to improvise in the process – not everything is decided.

AT: We always say we know where we start but not where we are going to end up. In terms of style, there is always a moment when we are surprised at what a project is becoming, and that is what we find exciting.

DH: In many of your projects, there is a rich and evocative conversation between history and material and process. What do you look for when you start work on a new project?

SF: Context. We do not like starting from nothing. This sounds really banal, but whether we are doing a project for a company or a more self-initiated project, we do not like when people come to us and say, 'Do what you want'. That's not what we are looking for. When we start



a project, we really want to start from a context – from the past, from history.

AT: We do not feel the need to generate objects from a self-indulgent position, to create things from an expressive necessity. When we look at an idea, we need a context in which to refer to it. This could be a production or physical context, or it could be, as in the case of a commercial client, understanding our position towards what they do, which is fundamental for us.

DH: What prompts you to follow a particular path of research?

AT: We always begin by defining the context of a project. For a client wanting us to design something, we start by asking, 'Okay, why do you want this, is this really

important, or should we do something else?' Sometimes our reaction to a request shifts the context slightly. At other times we define what we are working on by drawing on experience, or by looking at a part of life.

For instance, *De Natura Fossilum*, the project we did with lava from Mount Etna, was based on a very personal and private experience

Above: *Salmon stool* 2012

Opposite: *Alicudi vase*

of landscape and locality in Sicily. We were fascinated with this location near a volcano which is not only a force of nature, but also an entertainment for tourists – it has all these layers of complexity. We find this fascinating and, you know, it's Mediterranean but does not look Mediterranean at all, and we wanted to question this, so that was where we started with the context of that project.

AT: Other times a client, such as Fendi who make leather goods, want us to work with their materials or the leftovers from their productions. For Fendi we said, 'We can do that, but we'd also like to implement your selection of skins with our own selection'. So, we shifted the request slightly to be able to better respond to their context.

DH: In *De Natura Fossilum* you translated lava and basalt from Mount Etna into a range of products and complementary photography and research materials. What does the production of broader projects, rather than a traditional collection of discrete objects, say about contemporary design?

SF: The world is getting more complex and you need more complex ways of constructing a body of work. We haven't yet had the possibility to present our research and results in a way that satisfies us. You need a lot of funding and further possibilities to do that.

AT: In *De Natura Fossilum*, we worked with our photographer to create a link with the locality that was our context. Ideally, it would have been good to also have a documentary, which would have shown how we developed the work in different locations with different expertise, but that was not possible.

SF: Also, we like to construct a body of work generally, not necessarily trying to squeeze all our ideas into one object, or to contextualise everything within one solution, because we do not like that and don't believe in that. It's almost as though you construct a body of work that offers a view, but it is more complex than that because you do not only work with one object, or with only one form, or with one material, or even with one point of view. It is more layered, possibly less clear, but we are okay with that.

DH: In your project *Botanica*, you used petroleum-free materials and pre-industrial materials. Where did the context for this project emerge from?

AT: It was a commission for the Plart Foundation in Naples, and while they were not particularly involved in the development of the work, their request was the starting point. They asked that we work with classical design and plastics, which was an interesting choice. The curator, Marco Petroni, came to us with this proposition and did not go for the obvious. He could have gone with a design that would suit Kartel, or someone like that. Because it was coming from the Foundation, we started by asking

what plastics actually are, and where and when the idea of plastics started. I say idea, because plastics are more than one material; they are integrated materials and plasticity is a material quality. So we looked back in time, which we think is always interesting because there is potential in that.

SF: We go back into history all the time, but not with a subjective attitude; actually it's almost the opposite. While we do not believe people lived any better before plastics, we are interested in going back in order to understand where things first started. It is amazing how petrol was discovered and used to make plastics, but at the same time there were other formalities and materials coming from animal and plant products, and these traditions are starting to return now; for example, the project in Russia where they are extracting rubber from the dandelion plant. This is something that is starting to happen again in universities, where they are rediscovering old techniques and old materials but giving them a contemporary finish. The approach we had in *Botanica* was to try and discard the 100-year history of synthetic plastic – we made a jump in time. We went back and gave a really new aesthetic to plastic that had never been done before.

AT: We were interested both in how the objects look and also how the material looks – there are a lot of different levels. We have nothing against plastics, because we don't like to have preconceptions about materials, but I think that particular project can be interpreted as offering a solution to plastics by looking back to these materials that have different possibilities. The objects take formal inspiration from the way we engineer the new aesthetics of materials. With plastics and with all engineered materials, it's interesting to see different aesthetics arise. Here we made synthetic materials look less disposable.

DH: Are you interested in dealing with the dilemmas of disposable culture, where materials are sourced from a world of limited resources?

SF: People are much more aware today that the Earth is limited. Also, with the cheap flights available now, you can travel anywhere and see for yourself that the Earth is limited. We are of a generation that is more aware of this fact.

AT: We could not really be aware of this limitation if the full scope of possibilities were not there. Although the fact you can travel the world in such a short time seems a banality, when you do it you really have





the sense, physically, that the earth is limited and that there are no more discoveries to be made. And that is a kind of horror, because all the histories, at least of Europe, have been founded on discovery. The age of discovery in the traditional sense is now over. A different approach to resources and space needs to be constructed.

DH: One area that remains largely undiscovered is the oceans, yet plastic is causing ecological disasters by entering the food chain. While we cannot blame plastic, the material, itself, do you think the problem is use of materials?

AT: As a designers we cannot afford to be moralists toward anything, not even toward materials, because it goes against everything we are interested in, which is also the reason we look back in time.

SF: There is nothing bad about plastic itself. It is more about how we use plastic, how we give shape to the material, how we give value to plastic. Plastic could itself become rare soon, because it is a limited material. Why should plastics have this throwaway aesthetic? Plastic should have the aesthetic of a rich and valuable material. How you use resources, and how you use aesthetics, are the ways you create value.

DH: If you can't be a moralist as a designer then how can design engage with ethical concerns?

AT: I see a difference between ethics and morality, and when I say we don't want to be moralist, I mean we don't want to impose points of view onto things. You have more responsibility within a profession than in

your private life. We don't want to tell others what they should be doing or how they should behave. It is our decision-making that is affected by ethical questions.

DH: Is making enriched design projects, and the way you present the complexities around your objects, a way to engage people in understanding these layered contexts in broader terms?

AT: Definitely. It is exactly that. You need to zoom out as much as you need to zoom in; you need to offer a view from afar, a view that is more comprehensive. That's what we are trying to do.

DH: You both completed your Masters degrees at the Design Academy of Eindhoven (DAE) and now live and work in Amsterdam. Do you see cultural similarities or differences between Dutch and Italian design practice?

SF: This is a question of contextual analysis. Italian design has been linked to industrial production, while Dutch design, particularly furniture design, is very different. Holland doesn't have such a permanent furniture production tradition, so this has led to different results. For instance, design in Italy is definitely linked to industrial production. In Holland it has always been something more connected to culture and art, and is even organised politically under the Ministry of Culture and Economy. I'm giving you quite a technical answer, but I think that's the best way of avoiding clichés and misconceptions about the two approaches. But, indeed, I do think this is a relevant way of reading into

different approaches – one that is strongly linked to industry and production, and another that has always been more about individual practices.

DH: Some writers have commented that your design work is targeted to museums and collectors rather than the general consumer market. Is this how you place your design research in the cultural sphere?

AT: I think that this is the status quo, and it is the reality of our work; however, we do not start any of our projects thinking about that. I think the work we have developed so far defines our position within the design discipline. But we are not specifically concerned about it. We do not ask who our audience is, or where will our work be seen.

SF: We are still a young studio and are using our projects as a kind of gym to understand our interests and points of view within the discipline. For sure, our work has a less commercial appeal, because when we start a project we never think about a specific market that could buy the work. This kind of work is more exclusive or collectable in nature. But that's not our main concern when we produce a project.

DH: You met each other in Florence while studying undergraduate degrees. What made you to decide to work together?

SF: Andrea is younger than me and we were in different years at Florence ISIA (Higher Institute for Artistic Industries). It was a university based on industrial design, but some communication design courses were also offered. Both of us did not appreciate the education system there, and when



we met we realised we shared a common interest and a common view. At first, I wouldn't say we were working together, but rather that we shared ideas; then we decided to apply to the Design Academy of Eindhoven (DAE) together with a shared portfolio.

DH: Did you go to DAE at the same time?

SF: We looked into several education systems in Europe, and considered both the Royal College of Art (RCA) and DAE, and we decided to apply with a shared portfolio basically on instinct. We were accepted by Gijs Bakker, who back then was the director of the Masters course we attended.

AT: In a strange way, while studying in Italy we were encouraged to work together, because the education system there was really focused on industry and they wanted us to construct ideas as a team. Some of the founders of the radical Archizoom Associati were teaching us in Florence, who come from a tradition where groups of designers work together.

DH: Can you tell us a little about Archizoom and their influence?

AT: It was the first design education institution in Italy. The founders of the Archizoom movement, Gilberto Corretti and Paolo Deganello, started in Florence and moved to Milan, but were both still teaching and exerting an influence at ISIA when we were there. When we started studying in the 1990s, the political situation was completely different and Italian design was completely different. It was only when we met and visited the shows at the DAE in Milan and later in the work of Droog Design that we saw a generation similar to ours.

SF: With a radical attitude.

AT: Yes, with a radical attitude.

Formafantasma will join leading craft and design speakers for the *Parallels* international craft and design talks program at the NGV, 17-18 September 2015. For more information visit ngv.vic.gov.au/parallels